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Lest the Lowliest Be Forgotten: Locating the Impoverished in Early Medieval Ireland

James W. Boyle¹

In early medieval Ireland (ca. A.D. 400–850), every person's rank in society was codified in documents and visibly apparent by their material possessions. Early Irish literature is overwhelmingly concerned with the negotiation of status, but it is focused primarily on the rights and responsibilities of the nobility and wealthy farmers. Those of lower status are often ignored, and it has been difficult as archaeologists to agree on what constitutes a lower class site or artifactual assemblage. This paper addresses these arguments and challenges the belief that the lowest members of medieval Irish society are invisible to archaeology due to their impoverished existence.

KEY WORDS: Ireland; medieval archaeology; artifact studies; status negotiation.

INTRODUCTION

Early medieval Ireland, defined between the arrival of Christianity (ca. A.D. 400) and the establishment of the Norse urban centers in the mid-ninth century, differed from much of Europe by its early adoption of literacy and lack of direct Roman influence. What emerges from the archaeology and historical documents is a society of hundreds of small kingdoms, with no urban centers and an economy based on the control of cattle. Social relationships were defined by a strict hierarchy in which every person's status would be immediately apparent through the clothing and dress accessories they displayed.

Far from being solely of interest to archaeologists and early historians, the early medieval period became deeply intertwined with notions of "Irishness" during the nineteenth century through the rise of militant republicanism and the

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development of the independent Irish state (Cooney, 1996; Sheehy, 1980). This fiery combination of political, historical, and archaeological material has deeply affected the practice of archaeology and at times has tinged studies of the early medieval period with a hazy sentimentalism for what has been lauded as “The Golden Age of Saints and Scholars” (see Cahill, 1995, for a recent manifestation of such beliefs). Irish archaeology has distanced itself over the last 25 years from such romantic views of the early medieval past, but a great amount of material obscured by this focus on the “Golden Age” remains to be investigated. The poor and enslaved of the fifth through ninth centuries certainly are one such case.

The role of poverty and slavery in medieval Irish society and its identification in the archaeological record remains a contentious subject. Important and widely read historical studies have often ignored it. Ó Cróinín (1995, pp. 109, 269) states that poverty simply did not exist on a large scale, and he dismisses slavery as a Viking introduction, boldly stating that “the institution of slavery, and its concomitant, a slave economy, remained alien to the Irish way.” Archaeologists have ignored the possibility of identifying poverty or stated simply that “low status individuals are undetectable” (Mytum, 1992, p. 136). Yet, like many assumptions regarding the archaeological visibility of marginalized groups, these ideas may be based more on a research bias that ignores difficult social issues than any archaeological data.

In this paper I reexamine the archaeological record of the early medieval period to determine if it is possible to identify low-status groups from previously excavated sites. Recognizing that poverty and slavery did exist in the early medieval documents and that the range of early medieval sites excavated to date is so great, I am convinced that archaeologists have uncovered evidence related to early medieval poverty, whether this was realized at the time or not. This work is, by necessity, both historical and archaeological in scope and draws from a set of data assembled to assess the nature of bone and antler craft production during the early medieval period (Boyle, in press).

HISTORICAL MATERIAL ON SOCIAL CLASS AND SLAVERY

Most of our knowledge of the social classes of the early medieval period comes from the surviving corpus of seventh- and eighth-century historical documents, a large, if varied, selection of law tracts, saints’ lives and epic poetry. This literature reflects a highly stratified society where personal and familial status were paramount in almost all social interactions. For the majority of Irish people, those engaged in farming, the levels of social status are well documented (see Charles-Edwards, 2000, Kelly, 1988, for the most comprehensive summaries).

Three primary divisions of society existed—lords, nonnoble farmers, and slaves. Lordly families controlled a large portion of the available capital in society, primarily by possessing large herds of cattle which were lent to nonroyal

farmers in return for loyalty and service. This patron–client relationship extended throughout Irish society and formed the bedrock of almost all social bonds and economic dealings (see Patterson, 1994). Farmers, who comprised the majority of the population, were broken down into numerous grades of status, with very detailed descriptions of their duties and possessions. Social mobility was possible within these divisions; the texts tell of nonnoble farmers who gain such wealth and prestige that their status is equal to that of the lesser royalty (Kelly, 1988, p. 37). It was also possible to lose status, primarily by being unable to fulfill the requirements of a loan or by violating the law. This could cause free farmers to fall into the rank of the unfree.

The law texts detail multiple classes of farmers who did not possess all the rights entitled to free people. These people were not slaves, however, and were entitled to seek legal protection. The *fuidir* is a farmer dependent on a lord. He is not allowed to enter any legal contract himself and, thus, is considered an unfree individual (Kelly, 1988, pp. 33–34). In return for legal representation, the *fuidir* must perform any work the lord requests, but the *fuidir* is not considered a possession of the lord and may be able to purchase his freedom if he acquires significant wealth in the lord's service. Similar in status is the *bothach*, an intriguing rank from an archaeological viewpoint as the word essentially means “one who lives in a *both* (a type of hut)” (Kelly, 1988, p. 35). Few other ranks infer any type of living arrangement in their name, implying that the *bothach* may have been primarily associated with this type of dwelling. The literal meaning of this rank has rarely been acknowledged by archaeologists and certainly suggests that some of the poor of Irish society lived in unenclosed houses separate from the homes of free farmers.

If a family remained at the status level of *fuidir* or *bothach* for three generations, the members became *senchléithe*, a rank very similar to that of a later medieval serf (Brady, 1994, p. 129; Kelly, 1988, p. 35). These people would be attached to the land and were essentially possessions of whichever lord had power over the fields or mountains in which they worked. Yet, as natives to the kingdom, these *senchléithe* would have had a marginal status not granted to true slaves. True slaves, the lowest rank of individuals in Irish society, were most often prisoners of war or foreigners captured by slave traders. These unfortunate people had no legal status in society, although they could be quite valuable to their owners.

The importance of the true slave in Irish society is most evident in the use of the term *cumal*. The basic meaning of *cumal* is “female slave,” but it also refers to the highest unit of value in the Irish currency system, equal to three milk cows (Kelly, 1998, pp. 592–593). There is some suggestion that the use of the term to describe actual slaves decreased after the first few centuries of the early medieval period and the term came to be seen increasingly as an abstract value (Kelly, 1998, p. 592). Yet there are numerous instances in the law-tracts where slaves were traded to settle a dispute (Kelly, 1988, pp. 112–113). That female slaves were common enough to be seen as a form of currency suggests that slavery was

a widespread practice amongst the wealthier classes, and the continued use of the term reflects the lasting effects of this trade.

The documents do provide a wealth of data on the ranks and positions of the Irish poor, but they shed little light on the possessions and living conditions of such people. Early Irish law texts are primarily concerned with the protection of those with legal rights, and hence the poor and enslaved are rarely mentioned. Because of the focus on the higher classes of society, historians have traditionally said little regarding the role of poor farmers, serfs, and slaves in Irish society (Brady, 1994). Early medieval archaeologists have long wrestled with the demands of fitting their archaeological data into this documentary framework. The result has often been one of compliance with historians' views of the period—one where the poor and enslaved are rarely seen. While investigations of what constitute a high-status Irish site have taken place (Warner, 1988), there has never been a critical examination of what may represent a lower status artifactual assemblage or site type. The remainder of this paper will discuss the feasibility of such a study.

EARLY MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT

Two types of sites dominate the early medieval settlement record, the ringfort, and the crannog. Ringforts are the most numerous field monuments in Ireland, with more than 40,000 identified on the landscape today (Stout, 1997). In their simplest form, they consist of a circular area surrounded by an embankment of earth or stone which would have formed a space for the home and farmyard of a single family. Ringforts vary in size, but most are 25–30 m in diameter. Large ringforts with multiple embankments, referred to as multivallate forts, also exist. Crannogs are artificial islands constructed in lakes and used as platforms for houses, outbuildings, and working areas (O'Sullivan, 1998). Being somewhat divorced from the pastoral economy, crannogs are often interpreted as royal centers, feasting sites, and craft production centers instead of simple farmsteads.

Ecclesiastical sites are another major component of the landscape, however they have received less archaeological attention than secular settlements, primarily because of their continuing religious significance. Other sites also show extensive early medieval activity including caves, reused Neolithic passage graves, souterrains (stone-lined underground passages), and unenclosed houses. These sites may have only fleeting evidence of early medieval occupation at times, while others are amongst the largest and richest sites discovered to date. The sheer number and range of sites have made it difficult to compare potential status differences, thus hindering discussions of the lower classes.

Structural analyses of early medieval sites have not been particularly useful in delineating class affiliations. Multivallate ringforts have generally been considered to be high-status sites, and certainly the trivallate ringfort of Garranes,

Co. Cork, and the bivallate fort at Rathgureen, Co. Galway, were quite rich in archaeological material. Yet, some single embanked forts, such as Garryduff, Co. Cork, and Carraig Aille 2, Co. Limerick, have revealed levels of wealth equal to any of the multivallate examples. Crannogs have traditionally been considered to be high-status sites, but recent investigations have proven this theory to be an oversimplification (Fredengren, 2002) and possibly the product of excavation bias. Other early medieval site types are just beginning to be analyzed in terms of status, and they represent such a diverse group that structural comparisons have been difficult.

A further difficulty in determining the status of sites is that there appears to be little difference in the size and shape of houses during this period. The best excavated examples of early houses are those from Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim (Lynn and McDowell, in press), and Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath (Bradley, 1993). Although both sites saw multiple rebuilding of their houses, the general house plans are quite similar. Each house was approximately 10 m in diameter, with double walls of wattle, a single doorway, and a stone-lined central hearth. While Deer Park Farms is interpreted as the ringfort of a substantial, but not rich, farmer, Moynagh Lough crannog is without question a production site for high-status metalwork and may also be the seat of a regional king (Bhreathnach, 1998). The average diameter of houses in ringforts is 6 m (Lynn, 1986, quoted in Stout, 1997, p. 33), somewhat smaller than the examples above, but within a reasonable range. The form of houses is strikingly similar at all manner of early medieval sites, making class distinctions based on structures all but impossible.

ARTIFACTUAL ANALYSIS OF EARLY MEDIEVAL SITES

In the absence of specific historic references, the only method of determining the status of an early medieval site is to examine the range of artifacts found during the excavation. More than 150 early medieval sites have been excavated in the last century, and at times this body of excavation data can be overwhelming. To facilitate a valid comparison between sites for this study of relative status, I have selected a sample of excavated sites based on the following criteria:

- Sites excavated since the early 1930s and the introduction of “modern” excavation techniques
- Greater than 15% of the total area excavated
- Soil generally favorable to organic preservation
- A primary habitation purpose. Cemeteries and unassociated souterrains are thus excluded
- Fully published or significant archival material made available

This process narrows the number of sites in this study to 49 and the breakdown of site types can be seen in Table I. These proportions compare well with the total

Table I. Types and Numbers of Sites Included in Sample

Site type	No. of sites
Ringforts	24
Crannogs	8
Ecclesiastical sites	5
Unenclosed house sites	3
Cave settlements	2
Other settlements	6
Total	49 (of 154 early medieval excavations)

number of excavated early medieval sites and thus is a representative sample. The three primary site types, ringforts, crannogs, and ecclesiastical centers, are well represented, but it is somewhat surprising that other settlements comprise 22% of the sample. These include houses unassociated with other sites, settlements in caves, shell middens, and wealthy production/trading centers such as Dalkey Island, Co. Dublin, and Dooley, Co. Donegal. Because these other sites represent such a diversity of types, they are difficult to directly compare with ringforts and crannogs, but they may be key to locating the lower classes during the early medieval period.

The range of wealth found in these sites is immense. At the extreme end are the crannogs of Lagore and Rathtinaun, where more than 1000 artifacts were recovered from each site, including precious metals, large amounts of bronze artifacts, evidence of the manufacture of all manners of crafts, and the presence of well-made weaponry. A handful of ringforts, such as Cahercommaun, Carraig Aille 1 and 2, and Garryduff, compete closely with the large crannogs in total number and richness of finds, but the majority of sites from this sample revealed little to no evidence of high-status occupation. At the opposite end of the scale, many small ecclesiastical sites, ringforts, and isolated house sites have produced fewer than a dozen artifacts.

After tabulating the artifact counts from these 49 sites, it is clear that sites with fewer than 50 artifacts make up the majority (67%, 33 of 49), while sites with greater than 100 artifacts comprise only 24% (12 of 49) of the sample. The median number of artifacts recovered was only 22 per site. While this sample awaits further statistical analysis to group sites by the presence of precious metals, number of bronze pieces and types of craft production present (see Boyle, in press), there are a number of general observations that can be made about these assemblages. Of the 33 sites with fewer than 50 artifacts, only 15% (5 of 33) have any evidence of bronze production, although 75% (9 of 12) of the sites with more than 100 artifacts show such evidence. Iron production is more widespread—there is evidence for it at all of the sites with more than 50 artifacts, but occurs at only 11 (33%) of the sites with fewer than 50 artifacts. Crannogs are generally quite rich in finds, but two sites, Sroove, Co. Sligo, and Deredis Upper, Co. Tyrone,

fall in the poorer two-thirds of the sample. Save for the large craft production center at Dooney and the trading site of Dalkey Island, all the nontraditional site types produced scant artifactual evidence and are in the bottom half of the sample.

An examination of the sites with fewer than 50 artifacts reveals a few interesting patterns in the artifactual remains. In general, iron and bone/antler objects predominate all of these collections and most are utilitarian objects, such as knives and kitchen utensils. Whetstones, spindle whorls, and worked flint are also very common. In addition to these strictly functional items, bronze and iron dress ornaments are found at 19 of these 33 sites (57%), and other personal objects, such as bone pins, combs, glass beads, and lignite bracelets are found at every one of the remaining sites. In fact, the most obvious artifactual connection among all of these possible lower status sites is the presence of items of personal adornment.

Brooches and ringed pins have been considered powerful symbols of personal status (Whitfield, 2001), and Mytum (1992, pp. 136–139) has posited that only free individuals in the early medieval period would have had permission or the economic ability to acquire and display such wealth. While few of the brooches and ringed pins found amongst these 33 sites are highly decorated or elaborate, their presence complicates the attribution of status to many of these sites and calls into question assumptions regarding the availability of such items. It is certain that bronze dress pins were not being manufactured at these lower status sites, so they must have been acquired from wealthier individuals through the client–patron system. This suggests that the inhabitants of these sites were operating within such a system and thus were free farmers, not impoverished serfs or slaves.

However, concluding that dress ornaments are markers of free status, as Mytum does, means that archaeologists have not located *any* homes of unfree people. This seems quite extraordinary considering the number of sites and the diversity of site types that have been excavated. I would like to focus the remaining portion of the paper on examining two sites and their relative levels of wealth to determine if distinctions of status can be made between poorer early medieval sites. The crannog at Sroove, Co. Sligo, and the houses at the Spectacles, Co. Limerick, are somewhat anomalous sites in medieval Irish archaeology, but I believe that a focus on traditional site types has made it difficult to ascertain the role of less conventional sites. It may very well be these types of sites in which we can best understand the meaning of early medieval poverty.

SROOVE CRANNOG, CO. SLIGO

Lough Gara on the Sligo–Roscommon border has an unusually large number of crannogs built in its waters. This has attracted the attention of archaeologists for decades, and during the 1950s a large survey and excavation program was undertaken by Joseph Raftery on the lake and in the surrounding rivers. At this time, Raftery excavated the crannog of Rathtinaun on the eastern side of the lake,

which revealed an extremely rich site with possible royal connections, closely comparable to Lagore, Co. Meath (O'Sullivan, 1998, pp. 118–121; Raftery and Raftery, in press). In the late 1990s, Christina Fredengren undertook a further study of the settlement on the lake and excavated a small crannog at Sroove on the opposite shore of Lough Gara from Rathtinaun to better understand the relationships between the lake's crannogs (Fredengren, 2002).

Sroove crannog is a small artificial island, about 15 m in diameter, and connected to the shore by a stone causeway (Fig. 1). The excavation revealed four construction phases. The first was simply the laying of the causeway, the second and third phases each saw the construction of a house on the crannog and were associated with domestic debris, and the last phase was the use of the crannog as a dedicated iron smelting site (Fredengren, 2002, pp. 220–243). Nine radiocarbon dates place the occupation securely between A.D. 660 and 1000. This crannog was appreciably smaller than most previously excavated examples, and during Phases 2 and 3 a single house occupied almost all of the crannog's space. This contrasts with most other crannogs, which often included houses, smaller outbuildings, and dedicated craftworking areas (see Bradley, 1993).

The finds from the two occupation phases were extraordinarily meager for a crannog excavation. As noted by Fredengren (2002, p. 233), most of the artifacts were personal decorative items—an iron ring from a ringed pin, five bone dress pins, an antler comb, bone beads, and fragments of lignite bracelets, all found in



Fig. 1. The crannog at Sroove, Co. Sligo, during excavation (from Fredengren, 2002, Figure 53, reproduced courtesy of Christina Fredengren).

and around the house. The other artifacts were limited to an iron knife, a small whetstone, a bronze stud, and a flint scraper. In general, this collection matches very closely with the average assemblages found on low-status ringforts.

Fredengren's interpretation of the site suggests a low-status dwelling, certainly when compared with Rathtinaun (Fredengren, 2002, pp. 244–245). She notes that the categories of finds from Sroove are not wholly different from the higher status crannogs (with the exception of weapons), and thus the same activities took place at both types of sites. The faunal remains recovered from the site support this, as the economic basis of the crannog does appear to be the same pastoral system practiced at higher status sites (Lofqvist, 2002). Simply, the inhabitants of Sroove seem to be poorer than those at Rathtinaun.

However, the relationship between Sroove and Rathtinaun remains unclear. This excavation proved for the first time that crannogs were not exclusively used by high-status groups, yet it is still not evident if Sroove represents the home of free farmers or unfree people. The lack of any evidence of craft production in Phases 2 and 3 rules out the use of the site as the home of a craft worker. It is possible that Sroove was the home of free farmers emulating the king at Rathtinaun by building a similar, if smaller, crannog. Certainly the construction of the crannog would have taken a great deal of time and effort and suggests that the builders would have been wealthy enough to organize significant labor. Alternatively, a small crannog can be viewed as an element of control, in which the crannog-dwellers' movement can be closely watched, their access to fields limited and their practice of crafts restricted. The meager finds from Sroove suggest the latter.

THE SPECTACLES, CO. LIMERICK

Unenclosed houses are occasionally found with early medieval occupation. Although rarely considered a primary site type by most archaeologists, there have been a number excavated in the last century, and they continue to be found, albeit sporadically. These houses are not of any uniform type and appear to have very different functions, often corresponding to their relationship with nearby ringforts or ecclesiastical settlements. Some of these houses, such as the aggregated circular structures located immediately outside the ringforts at Carraig Aille, Co. Limerick, were directly associated with larger medieval sites. Others seem to have little connection with traditional site types. The isolated coastal houses at Fanore, Co. Clare, and Beginish, Co. Kerry, certainly seem to be very similar types of sites, although both may be of a slightly later Viking period date (see Sheehan *et al.*, 2001). A small number of sites include houses with surrounding ditches but no banks, and at Millockstown, Co. Louth, this earlier configuration was altered in the seventh century into a classic ringfort (Manning, 1986). Whether this represents a widespread pre-ringfort settlement type requires greater attention.

In the site sample used in this study, three house sites are represented, including the coastal houses of Fanore and Beginish and the site known as the Spectacles. Seán P. Ó Ríordáin excavated the Spectacles, so named on Ordnance Survey maps due to their resemblance to a pair of eyeglasses when viewed in plan, in conjunction with two high-status ringforts at Carraig Aille (Ó Ríordáin, 1949). The site has few parallels and may represent the homes of farmers or serfs that did not or could not reside in ringforts. The artifactual remains from the Spectacles may then be a particularly important collection in identifying lower status assemblages.

The Spectacles consists of four structures with stone foundations associated with a number of ancient field walls (Fig. 2). Two of the structures interpreted by the excavator as houses are somewhat ephemeral, while the other two are clearly houses with hearths, one with round stone foundations and the other rectangular. The houses are located on a shelf of land overlooking Lough Gur, with steep rock faces above and below. This shelf is approached from the lake by a series of rough steps, and although not particularly far from the ringforts at Carraig Aille (approximately 1.2 km), these houses would have taken considerable time to reach from any nearby early medieval settlements because of the limited approach. Two other ringforts are located approximately 1 mile to the west of the Spectacles, and the possible crannog of Bahin lies directly across the lake. These houses thus lie in an intensively settled early medieval landscape, but one broken up by low-lying limestone hills and the lake itself.

The Spectacles excavation revealed a substantial collection of material. The total number of artifacts found, over 30, is quite high in comparison with many early medieval excavations. Notably, there are a large number of personal decorative items—two bronze pins, an iron pin, two bone pins, an antler comb, four lignite bracelets, and two colored glass beads. The predominate industrial

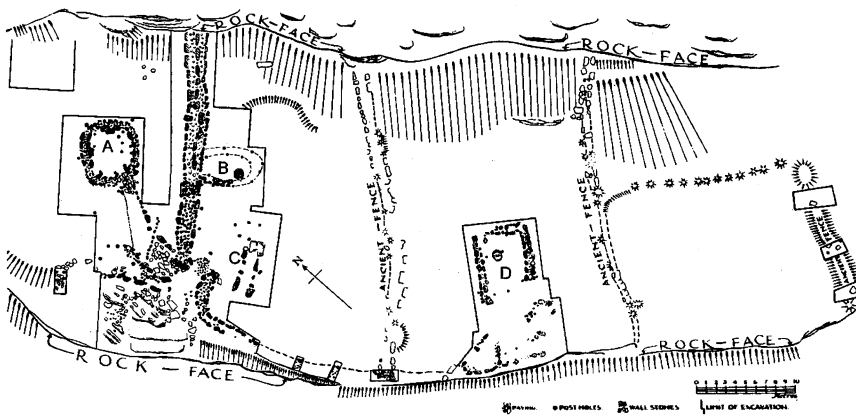


Fig. 2. The excavation plan of the Spectacles, Co. Limerick. The four houses are identified by letter (from Ó Ríordáin, 1949, Plate XII, reproduced courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy).

activity appears to have been cloth production, with 11 spindle whorls and 2 bone weaving shuttles found. Utilitarian objects included two iron knives, a number of whetstones, and a handful of worked flint (Ó Ríordáin, 1949, pp. 103–106).

A large faunal sample was also collected, yet the analysis was poorly performed and little can be said except that cattle account for 90% of the sample. This is an unusually high percentage of cattle for an early medieval site (see McCormick, 1983, 1991), but with no data regarding aging of the animals or body part frequencies, this fact alone does not strictly support any particular function for the site. In fact, one could argue that the presence of a large amount of faunal remains would suggest a settled occupation, or at least one provisioned with a substantial amount of food for an extended period of time.

Concerned primarily with describing the excavations of the ringforts at Carraig Aille, Ó Ríordáin (1949, p. 109) makes few suggestions regarding the past use of the Spectacles, and it has largely been ignored in descriptions of the settlement pattern during the early medieval period (see Edwards, 1990; Graham, 1993; Mytum, 1992). There has been some suggestion that the site may be the remains of houses used in early medieval booleying. Booleying is the practice of seasonal transhumance that was practiced until the nineteenth century in Ireland and is particularly associated with the movement of dairy cattle to wasteland or highlands for milking during the summer months (see especially Lucas, 1989; Patterson, 1994). Importantly for this paper, booleying is primarily associated in these documents with women and children, and in many cases, women of particularly low status (Brady, 1994, p. 131; Patterson, 1994, pp. 90–91).

The only excavated site generally accepted as a transhumance site is Ballyutoag, Co. Antrim, which has a very different form than the Spectacles and is located in a true highland area (Williams, 1984). Yet, Monk (1998, pp. 36–37) identifies numerous hut sites in Ferta Valley, Co. Kerry, as possible booley sites, despite locations of less than 1 km from ringforts. The Spectacles's proximity to other early medieval sites and generally low elevation does seem to discount their use for seasonal transhumance. However, as so few studies have discussed the actual mechanism of booleying, it is difficult to determine what may constitute a booleying site. It would be enlightening to determine how much time and effort was needed to herd cattle (or carry the milk) from a remote pasture and if it made more economic sense to create booleys where animals could be milked and cheese could be made in areas other than highlands.

Whether the Spectacles can be interpreted as low-status booley huts is thus debatable. However, there is little evidence that this site would be in any way associated with high-status individuals. It is of course possible that the Spectacles was the home of a free and relatively wealthy family, but I believe that there are a number of arguments against this. The shelf of land on which the houses sit is a very poor base for a successful farm. The depth of the workable area is only 30 m and the wide portion of shelf only runs approximately 100 m before narrowing to a less-than-useful area. This space has then been subdivided by four ancient walls

into fields which are on average 20 m wide and 30 m deep, and three, if not four, houses occupy those spaces. This spacing is incredibly close for early medieval farm yards, and very little self-sufficient farming could have been practiced in such small areas. This shelf, while providing good views of Lough Gur, does not allow views over any other portion of the countryside because of the height of the rock wall rising on the east side of the site. Intervisibility of farms has been noted as an important feature of early medieval ringforts (Mitchell, 1986, p. 156; Stout, 1997, p. 20). It is unlikely that a farmer would desire to be cut off in such a way from others of comparable status, without a view of approaching enemies. Furthermore, the act of enclosure itself, the setting aside of personal family space behind a defensive wall, seems to be an important symbol of free farmer status (Charles-Edwards, 2000, pp. 107, 149). The Spectacles does not seem to fulfill any of these important status requirements. Yet, the artifactual assemblage is loaded with personal status items, as many as at Sroove, and begs the question of how to reconcile the unimpressive structure of the site with the notable collection of material.

CONCLUSION

Prior to excavation, the sites of Sroove and the Spectacles would have been assumed to represent sites of vastly different social status. Crannogs have long been considered to be the homes of royalty, while unenclosed houses such as those at the Spectacles have been assumed to be transient sites or affiliated with very low status individuals. Instead, the Spectacles revealed an artifactual assemblage that was, in some ways, wealthier than that of the crannog. This complicates our understanding of the medieval political economy. Neither of these sites is at the poorest extreme of excavated sites; amongst the 49 settlements studied here 15 ringforts had fewer artifacts than the Spectacles, as did 11 other sites. None of these poorer sites have revealed any artifacts that could be considered to be particularly high status, save for the occasional bronze ringed pin, and in all ways appear to be the homes of people less well off than those at Sroove or the Spectacles.

Were either Sroove or the Spectacles occupied by unfree members of society? At this stage of research, I do not believe that this can be answered definitively, but it is entirely possible. The form of these sites and the limited evidence for craft production implies residents with modest means, but much more comparative work needs to be completed. What this study suggests is that the access to status goods in early medieval Ireland may not have been as restricted as previously believed. Instead of the lower classes leaving few traces behind materially, the possessions of an unfree person may not differ much from that of a poorer free farmer.

The negotiation of status is always a dialogue and our models of what an early medieval *bothach* or *senchléithe* would have possessed may be dictated more by

our readings of the historical documents, documents written for and by the upper classes, than by the actual material remains. As the fortunes of families rose and fell in a volatile agricultural economy, where an overly wet winter or an outbreak of cattle disease could destroy much of one's wealth, formerly free farmers may have resorted to indenturing themselves to wealthier individuals. It is possible that their basic material possessions, items such as spindle whorls, knives, and lignite bracelets, may have changed little while their status in society fell. We cannot dismiss the fact that status objects like bronze ringed pins can be surreptitiously concealed, and formerly free individuals may have held on to their markers of social status now lost.

The real breakthrough in understanding the role of slavery in early medieval Ireland will come when we begin to identify work and living areas within high-status sites. The truly nonfree of Irish society, those of the lowest ranks, should be sought archaeologically in and around high-status sites. These people, the foreigners caught as slaves, the prisoners of war, and those formerly free farmers reduced to slavery through onerous debt, may have been closely attached to high-ranking households, laboring in and around the ringfort or crannog. This type of intrasite analysis has rarely been performed, and there is hope that modern recording techniques will allow this level of analysis on a number of soon-to-be published sites, such as Deer Park Farms and Moynagh Lough crannog. With this data and greater attention to the political and economic restrictions on "prestige" goods, archaeologists will be able to identify poverty and slavery in the early medieval period and provide great insight into what is now a poorly understood social state.

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