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Indigeneity and Animals in Medieval Ireland

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Archaeology & Destruction

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Abstract

Throughout the summer, I participated in the McDermot's Rock field school run by Drs. Thomas Finan, James Schryver and John Soderberg in an attempt to shed light on how indigenous Gaelic populations reacted to Anglo-Norman invasions in the 12th century in Ireland. The site is among those on the western coast of Ireland which largely evaded Anglo-Norman influence and can provide a look at how a Gaelic high status site would compare to one of Anglo-Norman influence.

The overall goal of the McDermot's Rock excavation is constructing an understanding of the lives of Gaelic lords and others of high status, a largely overlooked and under-researched group. Due to hundreds of years of teleological and colonial propaganda, knowledge of the lives of high status indigenous Gaelic peoples has been deemed unneeded. However, the Rock provides a unique and opportune look into these largely underrepresented lives.

My principal focus was an overall introduction to the field of archaeology and what day-to-day work looks like at an active excavation. Throughout the month, I learned the basics of how to properly contribute to an archaeological dig, from proper excavation techniques to the processing of artifacts and lightly touching on analysis and interpretation of said artifacts. Fable Gogis, Serkan Tan and I, under the guidance of Soderberg, worked primarily on the processing of bones post-excavation by drying, identifying and cataloging them in a computer database after returning from the work day on the dig site.

Throughout my time learning from Dr. John Soderberg, I heard him say "archaeology is destruction." This mantra gave me a unique perspective over the summer while excavating McDermot's Rock in Co. Roscommon, Ireland. The site is among the premiere archaeological digs in the country, as it could be integral to understanding the lives of Gaelic lords and others of high status. Previously, this group has been largely overlooked due to persisting discriminatory beliefs of Gaelic inferiority. However, continuous excavation of the site could reveal a more in depth understanding of what life was like for Gaelic individuals of high status. While Soderberg's belief "archaeology is destruction" is a completely sound one, my time working on the site has shown me archaeology is construction just as much as it is destruction. While we are literally deconstructing the site itself, we are simultaneously constructing an understanding of the lives of Gaelic lords in a capacity not previously done.

To fully understand the ongoing excavation of the Rock, it is essential to understand why this topic is so important. As Jarrett Lobell writes in "Inside a Medieval Gaelic Castle," "[s]cholars know very little about how the Gaelic kings lived, and what they do know derives primarily from Irish annals and other historical sources, many of which carry the bias of the Anglo-Norman rulers."[1] Since the twelfth century, historians like Giraldus Cambrensis have made the claim Gaelic kings did not build castles[2]. Cambrensis was among the first of many historians to portray the Gaelic peoples as primitive or backward because their society did not align with trends progressing on the European continent. They held the teleological belief where societies advance linearly and, subsequently, the Irish were lesser because their civilization was

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[1] Jarrett A Lobell. "Inside a Medieval Gaelic Castle." Archaeology Magazine, 2020. https://www.archaeology.org/issues/371-2003/features/8423-ireland-lough-key-medieval-castle#art_page3.

[2] Ibid

not identical to that of continental Europeans. This belief, along with the lack of archaeological

evidence to disprove the theory, has led to a lack of understanding of Gaelic high status sites.

While medieval French and English lords and kings showed power and status through castles

used to protect large quantities of material wealth, the same could not be said for the Gaelic. In

an article about *crannóga*, artificial islands frequently settled by Gaelic elite, Dr. Kieran O'Conor

analyzes the paradoxical nature of medieval Irish architecture. In his assessment, O'Conor notes

the conundrum of the "... mix of modernity and conservatism in later medieval Gaelic Ireland."[3]

The existence of buildings such as friaries and abbeys show the medieval Gaelic lords had the

resources and capabilities to make monumental architecture similar to that of continental

Europeans, but they were concurrently constructing buildings using their "archaic" methods.[4]

The blending of these two architectural styles caused great confusion amongst historians. The

presence of archaic buildings led Cambrensis to arrive at the conclusion Gaelic peoples were

barbarians living in wooden huts, not yet as advanced as those of continental Europe. However,

O'Conor offers a different conclusion. O'Conor points to the social implications of the castle

along with its practical use to generate a non-teleological opinion of the medieval Gaelic

peoples. As he writes, "... many castles were primarily erected as vehicles for social display,

rather than defence (although this was still important), and were often set within deliberately

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[3] Kieran O'Conor. "Crannóga in Later Medieval Ireland: Continuity and Change." Essay. In
Becoming and Belonging in Ireland AD c. 1200-1600: Essays in Identity and Cultural Practice,
edited by Eve Campbell, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, and Audrey Horning, 148–66. Cork University
Press, 2018.

[4] Ibid

manipulated landscapes".[5] To the English lords, the castle was a physical display of status and operated as a reminder of who was in charge. The Gaelic lords, O'Conor suggests, wanted to send a different message. It is entirely plausible, Gaelic lords instead sought to remind their people they followed the footsteps of those who came before and would uphold the traditions of the past. As an example, O'Conor cites Lydford Castle, Devon which was modified in the thirteenth century to look more archaic.[6] In Cambrensis' mind, this would be seen as evidence of a lack of Irish ability to produce modern architecture. But, by removing that colonialist mindset, it seems more likely the Gaelic lords were indeed attempting to maintain an air of antiquity to ease the minds of Gaelic people, scared of the incoming imperialists.

While O'Conor's argument brings a new perspective to the light, it is unfortunately unable to be backed by much archaeological evidence from Gaelic high status sites. This is why excavation at McDermot's Rock is so vital. The site itself was chosen for myriad reasons. Firstly, the rock is mentioned as an important site to any MacDermot claiming leadership as the MacDermots and O'Conors, a local clan, are recorded as fighting for control of the Rock in the *Annals of Loch Cé*.[7] Secondly, the Rock is surrounded by three important monasteries, fields for agriculture, a church[8], and a market town which may suggest a strong economy[9]. And thirdly, a geophysical survey from 2018 uncovered anomalies indicative of structures lying beneath the soil.[10] All of these in tandem led Dr. Thomas Finan and Dr. James Schryver to begin excavation on the site in 2019. The two were delighted to find the Rock is a trove of artifacts with medieval

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[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

[7] Thomas Finan, and James G. Schryver. "Castle Strategy and the Rock of Lough Key." Essay. In *Rethinking Medieval Ireland and Beyond,* edited by Victoria L. McAlister, and Linda Shine, 56–74. Boston, MA: BRILL, 2022.

[8] Lobell

[9] Finan and Schryver

[10] Ibid

remains lying only six inches below the surface.[11] The combination of relatively easy access to medieval remains and the Rock's status to the MacDermot clan make it a prime choice to excavate for those looking to uncover the mysteries of the lives of Gaelic lords.

My work began continuing the excavation process which began in 2019 and continued in 2022. After some preliminary reading and other preparation, four other Denison students and I traveled to the Rock to learn more about the archaeological process and build an understanding of not only the field as a profession, but its implication when understanding history. The first day was spent learning basic tasks like outlining a trench and measuring the height of different ground features before actually venturing out to the Rock. From there, we made it to the site and began preparing the area for excavation. Some of us cleared organic material from the tops of the trenches, while others began removing ivy from the western front of the outer wall. We then began the process of removing soil through mattocking, shoveling and troweling. With artifacts now being unearthed, understanding the labeling process became vital to maintaining the validity of said artifacts. With each bone I removed from the soil, I could hear Soderberg reminding me "archaeology is destruction"; a fact which is especially true when the archaeology is done incorrectly. Any artifact labeled incorrectly, lost or mixed into the wrong group, is now completely useless in the construction of knowledge and is purely an embodiment of the destructive nature of archaeology. Anything which could have been produced by that find is now lost forever, which made understanding contexts and the proper artifact processing procedure the most important part of the dig.

The process begins with identifying a context–a numbered soil deposit of one specific soil type– and collecting artifacts from that context. These artifacts would be unearthed and placed in specifically labeled trays before being processed in the artifact tent. In the tent, artifacts

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[11] Lobell

would be separated into different categories like bones, organic material for dating, nails, other metals, whetstones, etc. The bones would be set aside for bone washing, while the rest of the artifacts were photographed and brought back to the cabins at the end of the day. Throughout the second half of the dig, students took turns sitting on the dock washing and setting out bones to dry before bringing them to the cabins as well. In the cabins, the bones would be placed in a bone drying rack to complete the drying process before being placed in tubs to go into storage and be analyzed later. When a context was closed, a context sheet would be filled out, detailing the specifics of the soil found in that context. Everything from soil type to frequency of deposits to color and size was recorded in the context sheet. Throughout the field school, all students would participate in all aspects of this process. Each would have the opportunity to trowel and uncover artifacts, process the finds in the tent on the Rock, wash bones, and fill out a context sheet. This meticulous process would ensure any future researchers would be able to pinpoint where artifacts were found in the trench as closely as possible. This level of precision aids in dating artifacts and building proper interpretations of sites. Without the process, archaeology would truly just be distruction without any production of knowledge and understanding of history.

Among the bones I uncovered on the Rock was a canine M1 which was remarkable for a number of reasons. Primarily, it was massive, measuring a length of 27.50 mm and breadth of 11.56 mm. Secondly, the M1 is one of few bones not belonging to a pig, sheep, horse, deer or cow found on the island. After the M1 was processed in the artifact tent and washed, Soderberg and I began the analysis process back at the cabins. The first step was confirming that our initial assessment of the tooth as a canine M1 was correct before going on to identify any landmarks on

the tooth. No real wear pattern was found, however, there was some dentin exposure on the highest central peak of the tooth.

The next step of analysis was understanding the role of dogs in medieval Ireland as we estimate the tooth was from ~1100 AD to 1400 AD. In his "The Dog in Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland," Finbar McCormick explains during the Early Christian period, between 500 - 1200 AD, there were only two categories of dog found in Ireland, small (shoulder height between 26-40cm) and large (shoulder height between 48-72cm) with nothing found in between.[12] In fact, McCormick writes "No dog bone from the Early Christian period is presently known from a dog whose size falls between these two groups while intermediate sizes are common during the post-Norman period, perhaps reflecting a decline in dog breeding standards during the latter period."[13] Archaeological evidence suggests the Gaelic people had strict dog breeding populations which did not mix large and small breeds to create a third, medium sized dog but this practice was abandoned after Anglo-Norman influence began spreading across the country. The canine M1 I found on the Rock seems to support this notion as the tooth is clearly from a sizable dog. While the size of the dog is unknown at this time, further analysis will be conducted to estimate the size, but the dog will most likely fall under the large dog category with the potential to be among the largest found.

The analysis of the site will continue now the excavation portion of the summer has concluded, but nothing definitive can be said thus far. The thousands of bones unearthed will continue to be identified and analyzed, potentially revealing a detailed look into what Gaelic lords feasted upon at high status sites. Non-bone artifacts will undoubtedly undergo a similar

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[12] Finbar McCormick. "The Dog in Prehistoric and Early Christian Ireland." *Archaeology Ireland* 5, no. 4 (1991): 7–9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20558375.

[13]Ibid

identification, analysis, and interpretation process to draw other conclusions about the daily lives of the Gaelic lords. Moving forward, these findings about the lives of Gaelic lords will hopefully join the academic conversation surrounding the historic interpretations of Gaelic sites from the likes of Cambrensis and other teleologically minded individuals. By establishing a sense of what it meant to be a Gaelic lord as opposed to an Anglo-Norman lord, more can be understood about their decisions to adhere to traditional architectural styles at high status sites while embracing modernity in surrounding buildings. Undoing the colonial mindset from the interpretation of Gaelic medieval sites is not a task easily accomplished, but continuing the construction of archaeological data on medieval Gaelic high status sites will arm academics with the knowledge necessary to make better interpretations of sites instead of relying on heavily biased antique findings. As much as archaeology is destructive force, it is also one of construction; allowing Gaelic people to use knowledge to retaliate against those who have discriminated against them for centuries.

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