

Concepts of 'castle' and the construction of identity in medieval and post-medieval Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This paper has two parts. The first is a critique of the principles upon which traditional narratives of Irish castles are based, and the second a lengthy exploration of the relationship between castle architecture and two particular forms of identity. The aim of these reflections is to reposition the castle at the centre of thinking about self-identity in medieval and post-medieval society. They are offered as a demonstration of the power of cross-disciplinary inquiry in castle-studies, particularly when that inquiry is informed by contemporary theory in the humanities.

Key index words: castellology, narrative, gender, ethnicity.

Introduction

The publication of two authoritative books on Irish castles within the past four years (McNeill, 1997; Sweetman, 1999) represents a bonanza for students of medieval Ireland, and was a fitting end to a century which began with Thomas Westropp and Goddard Orpen debating the origins and affinities of 'motes' in Ireland, inaugurating in the process a rich scholarly tradition of castle-studies on the island (Ashe Fitzgerald, 2000: 67-73). Measured in terms of the information now possessed about individual castles and 'types' of castle, and in terms of the understanding of the socio-political contexts in which those castles were constructed and functioned, few could argue that castellology in Ireland has ever been healthier. Read alongside Harold Leask's *Irish Castles and Castellated Houses*, originally published in 1941 and still in print, these two new books suggest a consensus about which buildings are of greatest importance in understanding the history of this architectural genre. More critically, both books, and especially McNeill's, offer interpretative frameworks in which lesser-known castles can now be considered, and these frameworks are more sensitive and comprehensive than those which have hitherto been available.

This paper will explore some different avenues of inquiry into Irish castles. Although these buildings are generally discussed in the literature of the disciplines of Archaeology and History, the issues raised here belong equally at the intersection of Historical and Cultural Geographies. They can be summarised as the complex levels of 'legibility' of landscape artefacts (in this case castles) to past and present spectators, and the cultural uses to which these artefacts are put.

Historical geographers who allude to castles as part of the fabric of the cultural landscape tend, as Annegret Simms's recent review of settlement studies (1999) documents, to focus on types— mottes or tower-houses, for example— which occupy specific niches in time or in space, and which therefore illuminate problems of settlement history which are specific to those particular times and places. It is suggested here that castles can offer much more subtle and penetrating insights into landscape and *mentalité* in the middle ages, and that we can only

achieve such insights by challenging the essentialist principle which underpins the type of synthesis which was offered by Leask more than half a century ago and which has now been revitalised by Sweetman.

Contested in this paper, then, is the consensus that we know *in essence* what 'The Castle' was and what it did. Contested also is the consensus that our task is to collect the empirical data which expresses most precisely that essence. It is argued here that, just as the formative works in the historiography of castle-studies reveal in part the self-identities of their authors, the castles were themselves both communicators and manipulators of complex forms of identity in the medieval and post-medieval periods, and that their successful negotiation of this dual mandate was contingent in part on the capacity of their spectators to understand that these inert structures were active, not passive, participants in the construction and expression of identity. In adopting this perspective this paper intends to add another voice to the small chorus (Stocker, 1992; Coulsen 1996; Johnson, *forthcoming*) which argues that castles are far more complex expressions of medieval world-views than are accounted for by either 'military determinists' who see castles as primarily military structures, or by those castellologists who see the development of castle architecture as mainly the product of a creative tension between the opposing needs of domesticity and defensibility.

Traditional narratives about Irish castles

The story of castle-building in Ireland which enjoys consensus among archaeologists, historical geographers and historians can, even at the risk of misrepresenting individual views of some of the specifics, be summarised as follows:

1. The immediate pre-colonial (pre-1169) period in Ireland is marked by the adoption among a number of native Irish kings of the concept of 'castle'. The evidence is largely historical, and the understanding of this native incastellation is linked to the inference that this pre-colonial world was essentially feudal. None of the documented sites is known for certain to survive above ground-level, but analysis of remains at some potential sites and a small amount of excavation at others suggests that these 'castles' were earth-and-timber fortresses and that some of them were motte-like.
2. Most of the Anglo-Normans (or Cambro-Normans, Cambro-French, or Anglo-French, depending on which label one chooses to use) who incastellated their land-holdings in the early years of the colony chose forms of earth-and-timber castle. The motte and motte-and-bailey were the two most popular forms; most scholars argue that another type, the ringwork castle, was also used, especially in those settled lands in which the other two types are rare or absent. These earth-and-timber castles were not temporary: many of them continued in use throughout the thirteenth century, and some were still occupied as late as the fifteenth century.
3. The stone castles of the major Anglo-Norman landowners of the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries were generally very defensible. Many of the earliest examples possessed great towers (*donjons*) and curtain walls. The spectrum of design-types widens as the century unfolds to include what could be described as indigenously-experimental and English-origin types. In the middle and late 1200s circular towers were used to protect gateways and sometimes also to provide flanking fire along the side walls. Other castles possessed sophisticated domestic arrangements. One type of building, the 'hall-house', essentially a two-storeyed rectangular structure with an

entrance directly into the upper hall, is now being identified in increasing numbers and is assigned to the second half of the century.

4. The fourteenth century, a period of endemic war and occasionally of famine and disease, saw a fall in the number of castles being built. The model of decline in this century and the assumptions which have generated it have been challenged (most eloquently by McNeill, 1997: 171-4), but there remains a problem of identifying significant numbers of new castles in the 1300s. The *a priori* case for placing the earliest examples of the tower-house, the dominant castle-type of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Ireland, in this century is very strong and is sustained by a certain amount of evidence.
5. The fashion for tower-houses breached all cultural and political boundaries in Ireland during the 1400s, and a number of regional traditions of tower-house architecture emerged. Although some of the tower-houses are very substantial structures, none was 'military' in the sense that the adjective is applied to many Anglo-Norman castles; the tower-houses are regarded as having been designed to protect their occupiers against felons and small raiding parties, and in this regard they are taken to reflect the nature of warfare in later medieval Ireland.
6. During the second half of the sixteenth century mullioned windows, exposed chimney stacks of considerable height, and gables flush with the main walls beneath, were provided to newly-built towers or were added to older towers undergoing refurbishment, thus rendering them less-military and more 'house-like' in appearance. Indeed, these features are understood to represent the beginning of the transition from 'castle' to 'house', a process hastened by the advent of artillery and the change in the nature of warfare which accompanied it. By the start of the seventeenth century newly-erected buildings with the visual characteristics of tower-houses had become increasingly rare, but domestic houses with provisions for their defence, principally gun-loops, signal the imminent appearance of the fully 'domestic house'.

Those who are familiar with castle-studies in Ireland will, of course, know this story or some not-too-different version of it, and may regard its re-telling here as an indulgence. It is, after all, a narrative which, even allowing for the different emphases which all castle-scholars bring to it, now has the buttressing effect of many years of observation and thought behind it; it might even be seen as a metaphor for a 'classic' thirteenth-century castle: it is so carefully thought-out that it can be defended from any angle.

But it can be contested, not because it is 'wrong'— the buildings are at least in sequence— but because we cannot be sure that either its plot or its trajectory would have been understood by those medieval people who erected the castles, lived in them, or observed them from afar. Close consideration of the narrative reveals that it is not *the* story of castles, but *a* story of the *construction* of castles. The three principal concerns at the core of the narrative bear this out: the first is with the establishment of absolute and relative chronologies both within individual buildings and within the *corpus* of castles itself; the second is with the establishment of the socio-political reasons for the particular balance between defence and domesticity in particular buildings and groups of buildings; the final concern is with the identification of the origins and affinities of the formal designs. The problem with this agenda is that it does not allow buildings to feature in the narrative once construction work on them had actually finished, except insofar as they influenced the designs of other buildings. In other



Figure 1: Roscommon Castle. The towers and adjoining walls of this castle were erected shortly before 1300, and new windows were inserted in the late 1500s. The centuries between these dates, as well as the period after 1600, are not discussed in the archaeological literature.

words, scholars stop talking about the actual buildings at precisely the time when they were ready to fulfill the functions for which they were actually intended, and were ready to be viewed and reflected upon by an assortment of spectators (Figure 1).

The problem of definition

Central to this discussion is the definition of ‘castle’. What exactly constituted a ‘castle’ in the middle ages? Andrew Saunders, in his introductory words to the publication of the Royal Archaeological Institute’s project investigating the origins of the English castle, defined a castle as—

“a fortified residence [of high medieval feudal societies] which might combine administrative and judicial functions, but in which military considerations were paramount” (1977: 2).

A more recent characterisation, and one intended specifically for Irish castles, has been offered by David Sweetman—

*The expression ‘An Englishman’s home is his castle’ may have some truth but what makes a true castle is its defences. Many so-called castles for instance in Scotland are merely ‘châteaux’ or grand houses of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and are not true castles because they do not have the defensive features of the medieval fortress. The castle is **essentially** feudal and is the fortified residence of a lord in a society dominated by the military (1999: 41; emphasis added).*

How accurately do these definitions reflect what ‘castle’ meant in the middle ages? The

key problem in trying to define 'castle' is that nothing is known of the word's spoken use in the everyday life of medieval people. It is known only as a written word. Indeed, what is known is a number of written words (such as *munitio*, *mota*, *fortalicium*, and of course *castle* itself), all of which are conflated to the single word, 'castle', in English translation. The medieval concept of 'castle' is preserved in the context of what are essentially literary genres, principal among them being historical documents. This is not to deny the reality in medieval lives of that concept, nor its every-day conversational use in the middle ages, but to stress that it now exists in transliterated forms which, when *read by us*, suggest that castles were material things—defensible buildings or complexes of buildings—which occupy particular geographical locations and which symbolise power and authority. The point is that ideas about gender or class or ethnicity may also have been deeply-embedded in the concept of 'castle', and that medieval people may have been made conscious of these issues by the nature of their engagement with the buildings, but that the reduction of all these ideas to a single word, and the communication of that word to us through textual sources, mean that if there were such multi-layered meanings they are now lost.

The resolution offered here to the question of definition is this: there is no correct definition. This conclusion is based on simple reasoning. If formal definitions of 'castle' circulated in medieval society it was because they were required for the successful functioning of the buildings, but we do not know what the defining criteria might have been: defensibility would certainly have been important, but can we be sure that gender, for example, would not have mattered? Such criteria could, like the styles of castle-architecture themselves, have shifted from one building to another, or from one locale to another, or from one moment in time to another. Such multi-directionality suggests that the search for a single definition which is appropriate to the entire *corpus* of so-called 'castles' is futile. In any case, the spectrum of building-types in the modern Irish landscape which are described as 'castles' suggests nothing more than an informal understanding of what constitutes the type; indeed, when, if not in the medieval period, could the appellation 'castle' have attached itself in common parlance to so many diverse secular buildings? It seems, then, that the search for a definition such as that offered by Saunders (see above), or the occasional use of qualifying adjectives like 'true' or 'serious' by scholars who believe them to be necessary (see the Sweetman quote above), represent unnecessary attempts to rein in this informality. The medieval world itself may, in other words, have had that very vagueness about the definition of 'castle' which some castellologists try to overcome.

The meanings of 'castle'

This scepticism about the potential to achieve a 'correct' definition of 'castle' certainly does not mean that it is futile to search for meaning in the concept of 'castle', or in the actual buildings themselves. On the contrary, all that is required for a castle to possess meaning is for there to be a spectator to bring meaning to it.

We might ask how deeply can we penetrate the world of the middle ages by standing in front of a castle and allowing it to be our guide. The building will always be silent, but if it communicates ideas to us about itself, about its erstwhile inhabitants, or about the world for which it was built, it does so because its physical form is seen as constituting a system of signs into which we, through our own experiences and interpretations of the world, are capable of reading 'meaning' (Eco, 1986).



Figure 2: Shanid Castle, county Limerick, with fragments of an early thirteenth-century polygonal tower standing on the summit of a large motte. Construction of this motte involved the movement of vast amounts of earth, and the castle may in part have 'worked' by impressing upon its spectators—natives and colonists alike—that its builders possessed the sort of power which could result in the natural landscape being manipulated so effortlessly. Some idea of the scale of the construction can be gleaned from the size of the figure to the extreme right of the picture.

Traditional narratives of Irish castles are based on a belief that we recognise the key signifiers in the *corpus*— hence we pay more attention to the shapes of gate-buildings than we do to, say, the designs of latrines— and that we understand them in ways that they were meant to be understood. It is assumed, for example, that the practical functions of many external parts of castles— machicoli, base batters, and so on— were defensive; in those cases where the practical effectiveness of such features can be queried it is assumed that, by their symbolising of military concerns, they were put at the service of ensuring that a castle's household felt protected. The dominant 'meaning' which is retrieved from castles, then, is power-related, with power implicitly identified as a force of economic or political/administrative coercion exercised by military might.

This interpretation is certainly not incorrect with respect to many, and perhaps even most, castles. But there are three general points which might be made here. First, we may know from written sources who built certain castles, and we may know something of their careers and resources, how do we arrive at the view that the expression of power was the purpose of the architectural signage of castles? Perhaps we recognise it at an intuitive level: a castle is a manipulation of natural resources and it intimidates us (and therefore possesses power over us) by its imitation of the extremes of natural landscape: a motte, for example, is natural material reconfigured to imitate an exceptionally-steep natural hill (Figure 2); a high wall or tower imitates a cliff, and we fear things dropping from the machicolations just as we fear rubble falling down a cliff; a base-batter on a vertical stone tower slopes in the manner of a talus or scree at the base of a vertical cliff.



Figure 3: Blarney Castle, county Cork: tourists line up to kiss the 'Blarney Stone', part of the inside wall of a machicolated gallery.

The second point is that power as a force of ideological coercion may be much more important in understanding castles than is generally acknowledged. Ideology features little in traditional castellology, but it is crucial, whether we choose to understand it as an expression of the world-view in certain social collectives, or, more significantly in this context perhaps, as the set of ideas (Royal authority as divinely ordained, for example) which help create and maintain social and political order.

The third point is that by allowing 'power' be the key word in interpretative discourses on castles we may be emphasising vertical social relations— in other words, distinctions between those who possessed greatest power and those over whom they held power— at the expense of lateral social relations. The castle-owning aristocracy of the middle ages was not a homogenous group which was polarised against a mass of disenfranchised people, nor was that latter population, particularly when organised as collectives (such as burgesses or village communities), powerless by virtue of its non-possession of castles.

The role of the spectator

Returning, though, to the relationship between architectural signs and their readers, these 'meanings', first of all, are intricate sets of ideas about the individual and the collective, and about the worlds in which both belong or of which both have experience. Secondly, the individuals and collectives mentioned here are not just those who lived at the time the buildings were constructed but include all those who engage with the architecture at some intellectual level, including modern spectators: 'meaning', after all, is not fixed at the time of construction but, as the poststructuralists remind us (see Leach, 1997: 283-390, especially



Figure 4: The donjon of Trim Castle, county Meath, during recent conservation work.

283-4, for a useful overview), is multifarious both synchronically and diachronically. As a simple illustration of this it might be noted how certain castles have been selected for conservation and presentation to the modern public. These castles in State care are generally those which are regarded as ‘important’ in the present, possibly for reasons of history but possibly also because other comparable examples are not so spectacular or well-preserved. This is not to question the legitimacy of preserving certain buildings at the expense of others, but to argue that the castles which enjoy this level of protection are those which possess the sorts of ‘meaning’ which are valued most today in this heritage-conscious environment, and that what they ‘mean’ to us is not necessarily what they meant to any spectator in the middle ages— (Figure 3). In other words, the ‘meaning’ of the architecture can and does change.

Different spectators, then, are led to think about different things as they view architecture. Using our own contemporary experiences to guide us, the kinds of thought which we can imagine medieval spectators to have had are ones which relate to their self-identities. A simple example is the Trim *donjon* of c.1200 (Figure 4). This building could simultaneously have communicated power and authority, or fear and alienation, thus reinforcing its spectators’ identities within a political context. Equally, the *donjon* could have reinforced Christian identities: for some, the lay-out of the building as a Greek Cross may have given the architecture a Christian *imprimatur*, while for others its very presence as a secular building on what had been Church-land may have meant a violation of a deeply-embedded tradition of such land being sacrosanct. Thoughts about ethnic identity, the sense of belonging to a people with a shared history and destiny, could also have been stimulated by the

building's association with a colonial power; indeed, few modern spectators would doubt that this is exactly the sort of reaction which it was intended to have.

Gender

One form of identity which is expressed in castle architecture but which is rarely the subject of explicit theorising in this particular field is gender. Where once this signified the state of belonging to one sex or another, it now embraces sex as expressed by social or cultural distinctions. Gender is, in other words, a form of differentiation which, like class or ethnicity, is socially-constructed: "gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (Butler, 1992: 17). By the same token, 'gender reality' can be understood as historically-contingent, since those social performances have temporal (historical) fluidity. Also, 'gender reality' is spatial: indeed, so successfully has multi-dimensional spatiality been explored with respect to women by feminist geographers (Rose, 1993; see also Soja, 1996: 107-25) that it can be claimed to have *de facto* truth for men also.

The identification of gender as socially-constructed implicates 'the castle' in broader cultural-theoretical and cultural-historical discourses than traditional castellology allows. Were we able to return to the middle ages we might find that among the messages conveyed to medieval spectators by castle architecture were ones which communicated power and status, and military endeavour, but we might also find that those spectators, in their own unconscious way, regarded those messages not as gender-neutral but as expressly masculine. Why? The patricentric nature of the inheritance of power in feudal society could hardly have encouraged spectators to imagine that the rituals taking place inside the castles were anything other than male-dominated. This in turn raises an interesting question: might the 'masculinity' of the castle itself have reinforced this patricentricity?

In this equation of Castle = Male we are speculating about how castles were 'read' from the outside by medieval spectators who had no access to, and therefore no real knowledge of, castle interiors. This speculation is encouraged by the fact that gender metaphors were used in descriptions and assessments of architecture from the Renaissance onwards, as Blondel's mid-eighteenth-century analysis of architecture confirms—

A male [mâle] architecture is suited to public markets, fairs, hospitals and above all, military buildings, where care must be taken to avoid small compositions—the weak and the great not going together. Often, thinking to create a male [mâle] architecture, it is made heavy, massive and gross—the word is mistaken for the thing

(quoted by Forty, 2000: 47).

The interior spaces of castles were themselves gender-referenced by those who used them originally, but here the dominant metaphor in the architecture might not have been masculinity. It seems that female quarters were located not at the peripheries of the castles, as the male view might dictate, but in the innermost spaces: in Orderic Vitalis's account of the taking of Lincoln Castle in 1141, for example, Ranulf of Chester and William of Roumare sent their wives to visit the wife of Lincoln's castellan and used the pretext of retrieving their wives to gain access to the most private *sanctum*, the very heart of the tower (Barthélemy, 1988: 411). Roberta Gilchrist has documented how, with respect to a number of English castles, women were positioned "symbolically and ritually ... in the most secluded spaces of the castle", and she has identified the female body "as a metaphor for the interior, protected spaces of the castle" (1999: 139; Figure 5). There is not the necessary textual evidence to



Figure 5: The upper chapel, Bunratty Castle, county Clare: this small private chapel, which is the more elevated (and more secluded) of two chapels inside the building, is traditionally regarded as a lady’s chapel.

identify certain spaces within Irish castles as unequivocally the domains of women, but the complexity of interior accessways in many great castles like Trim might be understood as having gender significance: those spaces which were made most secluded by the complexity of the accessways (and the actual distance that needed to be travelled through the castle in order to reach them) may well have been for the females within the household. Perhaps the “twisting passageways and mazes” in places like Trim can be understood as the places where “knights and maidens, creatures of the great outdoors, discovered ‘courtesy’ and where ... subtlety in the art of private living made rapid progress” (Barthélemy, 1988: 412).

Like medieval spectators, modern commentators and modern visitors stand outside castles looking in. We cannot see the households and their operations; we see the spaces in which the domestic rituals took place, but because we see them through the lens of the traditional military interpretation, the narratives that we construct around the functions and constructional histories of the castles tend to be androcentric. This tendency may ultimately have originated in the cultural and political environments of the Victorian men— and, with the sole exception of Ella Armitage in the early 1900s (Counihan, 1998), it was men— who laid the foundations for what had become the dominant narrative in castle-studies by the middle of the twentieth century, namely that in which the dynamic of architectural development is the increasing sophistication of systems of defence. It is entirely appropriate that such a dynamic should have been so seductive to scholars when castellology entered its mature phase in the third quarter of the 1900s and a little later: given their war-time experiences, sometimes in former crusader lands, castellologists like David Cathcart King (Perks, 1987) inevitably believed that the ‘best’ castles were the products of great military minds.

In light of this, it is hardly surprising that, notwithstanding the work of Gilchrist and others, the participation of women, either as wives or as members of households, has gone largely unacknowledged in accounts of castles. It is remarkable that the most extreme manifestation of the androcentric tendency in recent literature on Irish castles comes not from a male writer with an interest in matters military but from a female writer with an interest in medieval women. Despite a lack of good corroborating evidence for Ireland— and, indeed, in the face of evidence to the contrary in England (Woolgar, 1999)— McAuliffe has portrayed the women who lived in tower-houses, including of wives of noblemen, as exemplars of what might be regarded in modern Ireland as the traditional housewife: among many extraordinary assertions, she places “the smooth running of the tower house as a home ... within the sphere of the woman of the house”, and sees the wives of the various nobles and chiefs as having the responsibility for providing “good, comfortable lodging, and entertainment for their families, relatives, dependents, servants and guests” (1996: 153).

The fact that comparatively few women in medieval Ireland were builders or owners of castles might be offered in part mitigation for the lack of serious commentary on women in medieval Irish castles. But it is interesting, and surely revealing, that among those few women who were builders are some who are best-known for their breaking of gender stereotypes, either by their engagement in piracy, such as Grace O'Malley in western Ireland, or by their alleged violence, such as Rohesia de Verdun at Castleroch, county Louth (Killanin and Duignan 1967: 52, 163, 262). These particular stories suggest that 'the castle' is not a passive recipient of gender metaphors; on the contrary, if gender is socially-constructed, it seems that the 'castle' has played a part in its generation.

Shifting ethnicities

One form of identity of which the great tower at Trim is a representation *par excellence* is ethnic identity. It is identified as an 'Anglo-Norman' building, by which is meant that it was the work of a group— Anglo-Normans— which possessed 'some sort of self-identity or bondedness from others' (Gosden, 1999: 109). The use of the label 'Anglo-Norman' to describe the colonial population in late twelfth and early thirteenth-century Ireland, and to describe their castles and other landscape phenomena, carries profound implications. From the perspectives of architectural history and landscape history, it allows a *corpus* of material evidence in Ireland and England to be identified and gathered under one rubric, thus promoting a particular comparative context. But there is an issue here which requires deeper reflection: it is not the particular phrase which we use choose— after all, 'Anglo-Norman' is neither better nor poorer as a description of the colonists than, say, 'Anglo-French' or 'Cambro-French'— but the fact that we believe that single, overarching, ethnic constructs like 'Anglo-Norman' can be used meaningfully. As will be seen, this applies equally to 'Gaelic-Irish', 'Anglo-Irish' and to a host of other appellations for people whom are categorised broadly as native or alien.

We might allow that the construct of ethnicity expresses adequately, even accurately, the reality that groups of people have an innate or primordial bondedness, whether it is constituted in kinship, marriage, custom (which includes building-custom), or language. Siân Jones has demonstrated how ethnic identities are part of the *habitus*— “the implicit, unarticulated assumptions on which behaviour is based” (Layton, 1997: 200)— of population groups (Jones, 1997: 90). But the bondedness which is spoken of here is not static. If the

boundaries change for any reason, the ethnic identity changes. This idea may be significant in understanding changes in the patterns and processes of incastellation, as will be seen below.

A simple model of ethnic differentiation is used in scholarly literature pertaining to medieval Ireland. There are Anglo-Normans (or English as they would generally describe themselves) and Gaelic-Irish in the later 1100s and 1200s, and they are augmented in the later middle ages by a third, hybrid, group, generally called Anglo-Irish, which emerged out of the 'gaelicisation' of Anglo-Normans during the 1200s and 1300s. Such a model undersells the complexity of ethnic identity in several crucial respects.

First of all, that process of 'gaelicisation', which can be defined as a breaching of the boundaries of Anglo-Norman language and custom as they interacted with the Gaelic-Irish, suggests that the two parent groups in this equation were well-defined. But this might not have been the case. A process of ethnic reconfiguration had actually begun among the colonists almost as soon as they arrived: during the siege of Dublin in 1170 Maurice fitz Gerald is reported by Giraldus Cambrensis as asking—

"What are we waiting for? Surely we do not look to our own people for succour? We are now constrained in our actions by this circumstance, that just as we are English as far as the Irish are concerned, likewise to the English we are Irish, and the inhabitants of this island and the other assail us with an equal degree of hatred"

(Scott and Martin, 1978: 81).

The likelihood that this speech is entirely a fiction created by Giraldus does not negate its significance as an expression of how, in their new situation, the colonists sensed that they no longer shared an identity with those who lived in their former homeland. Their ethnic identity was evidently shifting as a result of their relocation and the new challenges created by their interaction with the host population, the Gaelic-Irish.

Secondly, it would be wrong to imagine that Gaelic-Irish identity was itself static in the face of a colonial presence. Suffice it to say that the so-called 'Gaelic revival' of the fourteenth century was not a re-emergence of pre-colonial or non-colonial Gaelic-Irish culture, complete with its Christian values and its great literary and artistic richness, but the triumph of a Gaelic-Irish society transformed and enhanced by its knowledge of colonial culture and by its experience of partial colonisation. Its renewed interest in its own past, as documented by Katherine Simms (1987), was fundamentally intellectual: its heritage was mined for cultural accoutrements appropriate to its new situation.

Finally, 'gaelicisation' was not the only process of ethnic reconfiguration to blur boundaries. Steven Ellis, in one of the key texts in the historiography of historical revisionism, noted that in historical writing in Ireland the process of 'anglicisation' of the Gaelic-Irish, which he sees as manifest in the building of castles, the wearing of armour and the adoption of the military techniques of the invader, is not given the same stress as the 'gaelicisation' of the colonists (1986-7). This privileging of 'gaelicisation' over 'anglicisation' may be a consequence of nationalist desires, even unspoken, to counter the anglocentricity of the written testimonies about medieval Ireland. But there is an irony in that, and it merits the following digression before turning to the castles again.

The 'othering' of medieval Gaelic-Irish culture

Rather than glamorise and dramatisé, the historical discourse about medieval Gaelic-Irish society tends towards the sort of narrow, generalising anthropology in which deeply-buried cultural prejudices and stereotypes can usually be suspected. Many of those narratives about high medieval Gaelic-Irish culture which were written contemporaneously with its *floruit* and which inform much of our understanding about that culture were the work of observers from beyond Ireland's shores (see, for example, Mahaffy, 1914), and their testimonies have not been subjected to the level of textual analysis or discourse analysis which might insulate historians from inadvertent acceptance of their prejudices. This view is, to be sure, overtly revisionist, and selecting individual examples to support it may be rather invidious, but it is necessary. While Kieran O'Connor (1998: 97-98) has vigorously, and quite properly, defended the medieval Gaelic-Irish against any suggestion of "innate backwardness", it might be argued that his central thesis, which is that the Gaelic-Irish lords could respond to an invading army by "melting, with their herds, into the landscape", is so literal an acceptance of Henry Chrysted's later fourteenth-century testimony—"when they see any encounter that they might be overmatched, then they will depart asunder and go and hide themselves in bushes, woods, hedges and caves so that no man shall find them"—that it represents an unwitting acquiescence in Chrysted's stereotyping of 'foreign' Irishness. Even Kenneth Nicholls' overview of Gaelic-Irish society and economy, published in 1987 in the *New History of Ireland* and still invaluable as the only survey of its nature, presents the medieval Gaelic-Irish as an unfamiliar people. Consider, for example, his statement that patterns of Gaelic-Irish secular settlement in the later middle ages should "be seen in the light of a highly mobile population and of the flimsy and insubstantial nature of the typical Irish dwelling, which, representing a minimum of investment in either labour or materials, could be erected with facility and abandoned without regret" (1987: 403). Here, surely, is an instance of what Joep Leerssen describes lamentingly as the 'othering', the 'exoticization', of Irish society and culture in literary material relating to medieval and early post-medieval Irish identity (1996: 377). The statement may well reflect the facts as known about the houses, their physical forms, and their essentially temporary nature, but one could criticise it for conveying, in language not dissimilar to that of several contemporary foreign observers of the Irish whom Nicholls also quotes, the impression that lower social orders among the Gaelic-Irish lacked sophistication and technical acumen ("flimsy and insubstantial"), and that they possessed neither spiritual nor emotional bonds ("abandoned without regret") with any geographical place in which they were born or bred. The fact that Gaelic-Irish houses were comparatively simple structures should not lead us to believe that the social rituals which were enacted within them were any less complex than those which were enacted in the stone-built houses of colonists; equally, the apparent fluidity of the settlement pattern, which can be understood in terms of the nature both landholding systems and agricultural activity, should not disguise the bonds which pastoralists have with landscape and 'place' (see Newton 2000: 199-225 for a commentary on the relationship between landscape and culture in Gaelic Scotland, and O'Keefe, 2001 for Ireland).

Castle-building among the 'gaelicised' and 'anglicised'

One could argue that the 'gaelicisation' and 'anglicisation' of the colonial and native populations respectively were self-dependent processes. Consider briefly here Fredrick Barth's argument (1969) that changes (or 'shifts') in ethnic identity could be effected

consciously and strategically by population groups for political or economic advantage, even survival. He used example of the Pakhtun (or Pathan), a people of western Pakistan and Afghanistan who, under pressure from their neighbours, the Baluchis, so adopted the characteristics of the Baluchis that they effectively transferred their ethnic identity. Barth's view of shifts in ethnicity as means by which population groups adapt to new circumstances may over-emphasise the voluntary over the coercive in explaining changes in the boundaries of bondedness within population groups. But the broad conclusion— that ethnicity is dynamic and has political, social and economic motivations and consequences— can be sustained, and is expressed today as 'situationalist' (see Geary, 1983 and Broun, 1999 for medieval case-studies) or 'instrumentalist' (see Bentley, 1987 for an overview) ethnic theory. Barth's view that acculturation was not a casual, barely-noticed, process but a conscious strategy for survival in unstable frontier areas is an exciting idea to apply to Ireland and to the phenomena of 'gaelicisation' and 'anglicisation'. It makes sense in frontier contexts if we think that the purpose of the strategy for each population group was not to actually change who they were but to make who they were less obvious. Acculturation diffuses tension by blurring the distinctions which cause enmity.

There must have been a mechanism by which colonists and natives in Ireland actually gained the sort of access to the opposing culture which would allow them to understand its elements sufficiently well to be able to adjust their own cultural practices. Social interaction through trade and other forms of economic dependency, and the reciprocation of ideas about social customs and practices— about *habitus*, in other words— may have provided that mechanism very effectively. By their very nature such exchanges transform both cultures, although not at the same rate or with the same intensity. Also, such transformations have physical manifestations in material and landscape artefacts. Castles must be included in the broad category of these artefacts.

The stronger participant in this equation of mutual dependency and transformation between colonial and Gaelic-Irish societies appears to have been the latter, if only to judge by the long currency of 'gaelicisation' as a model which expresses the capacity of native culture to subvert colonial culture. However, the available evidence suggests that Gaelic-Irish society clearly had the greater propensity to adopt traits of landscape and material culture from beyond its boundaries. Native culture, in other words, seems to have been more adaptive, and the corollary of this is that 'anglicisation' was the more powerful process of cultural alteration and ethnic reconfiguration.

Ethnicity and castles: 1169-1400

How is this conclusion drawn from the evidence of the castles? We cannot detect any direct influence of Gaelic-Irish culture on Anglo-Norman castles in the late 1100s and 1200s. There are certainly idiosyncrasies in colonial architecture in Ireland in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries— types of *donjon* (as at Trim) which are without parallel in England, for example— and these are effective metaphors for the separation of the colonists from those whom Maurice described as "our people", but there is no reason to think that the presence of the Gaelic-Irish had any contributory role in the making of this metaphor. Unlike Anglo-Saxon masons in early Norman England, Gaelic masons were probably not even involved to any great extent in the construction of colonial castles in Ireland (O'Keeffe 2000: 36), nor, it seems, were the castles designed to counter types of warfare particular to the Gaelic-Irish armies. By the second half of the thirteenth century colonial architecture, both



Figure 6: Lackeen Castle, county Tipperary, an early sixteenth-century tower-house of the O'Kennedy family.

'military' and ecclesiastical, had started to follow a trajectory of development in Ireland which was only distantly related to that in England; Tom McNeill has described a number of later thirteenth-century castles of diverse plan-type in Ireland as being in a "divergent tradition" from the contemporary European norms, noting that their departure from "the English pattern must be a matter of deliberate choice" (1997: 118). McNeill does not interpret these buildings in the context of the sort of ethnic divergence which is apparent in Giraldus Cambrensis's writings, but they again constitute an effective metaphor, and again there was no obvious contribution from the Gaelic-Irish to its making.

Ethnicity and castles: the tower-houses

All families of colonial stock, regardless of their time of arrival in Ireland or of their assumed level of 'gaelicisation', used tower-houses in the later middle ages. Indeed, the form probably originated among them, not among the Gaelic-Irish (O'Keefe 1996; 2001). The

adoption of the tower-house among Gaelic-Irish families (Figure 6) in the 1400s and 1500s (and possibly as early as the 1300s) was part of the 'anglicisation' process mentioned by Ellis (see above). Its adoption was probably of considerable import for Gaelic-Irish self-identity because it must have represented the appropriation of complex domestic rituals as well as of the structural form. To express this another way, the arrangement of rooms and accessways in tower-houses was fairly standardised, and this reflected the organisation of the household and its various customs or ritualised activities. If the formal origin of Irish tower-house architecture can be located in the colonial castle architecture of the pre-fourteenth-century period, it follows that these household rituals also originated there, and that when the Gaelic-Irish adopted the tower-house they also adopted some of the ways in which it was used.

How easily could the ethnic identities of tower-house owners be 'read' by medieval observers of the exteriors of the tower-houses? This is not easily answered because so little has been written about the 'language' of the tower-house exterior and its local or regional—and hence its political or ethnic—variability. It might be significant, though, that most of the tower-houses built in the 1400s and 1500s in the counties (or 'shires' as they were then) of the English Pale very clearly constitute a formal architectural group, and it is very likely that the consistency of exterior design helped define the 'separateness' of these lands and their inhabitants to those who lived beyond. Indeed, travellers in the direction of Dublin would probably have recognised these buildings as indicators of their entry into the Pale region, and in that respect the towers were powerful—and conscious—symbols of ideology and ethnic identity. The Crown's offer of a £10 subsidy to landowners of the Pale to encourage them to erect tower-houses of certain dimensions is particularly interesting in this regard. Even though there is some dispute about the significance of these so-called '£10 castles' in the historical evolution of the tower-house (compare McNeill 1997: 202 with Sweetman 1999: 137), all commentators share a literal understanding of the statute by which this subsidy was offered. Perhaps we could also interpret the offer more imaginatively: for a minimal financial outlay the crown sought to influence the designs of tower-houses within the shires, and to create a sense of obligation among those landowners who availed of the offer. In this way, the '£10 castles' may have been envisaged as a bonding agent of identity rooted to landscape.

Other regional groups of tower-houses may have been similarly understood among medieval spectators, and here the identities reinforced by the architecture may have been ones of kinship. But closer scrutiny of groups of buildings is required. It may be, of course, that the Pale was an exception. Perhaps identities were not intended to be 'read' in the buildings; perhaps the tower-house was in part a strategy for *disguising* identity in an age of acculturation; perhaps its very ubiquity might be taken as evidence that the strategy was successful.

Refashioning identity: a case-study

One of the many issues which have not been discussed here but which must be regarded as crucial in any assessment of castle-building and the construction of identity is the refurbishment of older castles at different stages of the middle ages. Matthew Johnson (1999; 2000) has shown how the sixteenth-century refurbishing or reconstructing of a number of older castles in England can be interpreted as conscious strategies of refashioning cultural identity. His thesis is that identities in sixteenth-century England were constructed around the way buildings—including older buildings like medieval castles—were *viewed* among the élite. A case-study is offered here as a demonstration of the potential for investigation of this matter in Ireland.



Figure 7: Ormond Castle, Carrick-on-Suir, county Tipperary.

Ormond Castle in Carrick-on-Suir, county Tipperary, was a building of the Butler family. It saw three major phases of construction between the thirteenth and late sixteenth centuries—a rectangular building of the thirteenth century had a pair of towers added to one of its long sides in the fourteenth or fifteenth century (when the family is regarded as ‘gaelicised’), thus giving it a new, symmetrical façade, and in the late sixteenth century a new building was added to its front, giving the architectural complex its third consecutive façade (Figure 7). The latter addition, the famous ‘Manor House’, is less a house than an elaborate portico (with returns which help define a small courtyard at its rear): the upper storey, which runs for its entire length, contains a long gallery, complete with a fireplace decorated with Renaissance motifs.

What is seen at Carrick-on-Suir are two major alterations to an old castle, each involving the making of a new exterior elevation. It is easy to imagine a visitor of *c.*1600 being shown through the castle, being told that the further back one goes from the front entrance the older the building becomes, and being encouraged to feel that the authority of the Butlers was legitimised in the gradual unfolding of the antiquity of their home.

The host for this imaginary visitor may have been Thomas Butler, the ‘Black Earl’ of Ormond, the patron of that part of Ormond Castle which is identified as the ‘Manor House’. Thomas had been reared in the Royal court in England and throughout his life he enjoyed a warm relationship with Elizabeth I. Maurice Craig, who astutely compared Thomas’s ‘Manor House’ with Burlington’s ‘villa’ at Chiswick, “another pleasure-building attached to a house which was already there” (1982: 114), has suggested that Thomas’s inculcation in the ways of the English Court must incidentally have familiarised him with English architecture. However, Thomas’s receptiveness to this tradition might not have been so passive or casual: the conception and design of the entire structure must, through its allusion to courtly architectural

tradition, have celebrated his association with Elizabeth as readily as the stucco portraits of her in the entrance vestibule and gallery. By pinning his new building onto the front of an older castle—a castle which already had a history of such augmentation—Thomas might even have been able to persuade his visitor that the architecture and portraiture did not just signal a new ‘anglicisation’ but a reconciliation with his family’s (and indeed his castle’s) origin in English colonialism.

Conclusions: rethinking ‘The Castle’

There is always a limit to how intimately a castle can be known without being able to step back into the middle ages, see the medieval world through contemporary eyes, view a building as it was then, and talk to and listen to the observations of others also viewing it. It never helps that few castles appear today as they appeared in the middle ages, and that fewer still have their medieval landscape contexts intact. But this should not restrict our enquiries to the traditional questions: how old? who was the builder? what are the formal comparanda?

Those questions reflect the traditional empiricism and essentialism in castle-studies: they reflect, in other words, the consensus not only about the need for the collection and processing of empirical data but also about which empirical data bring us closest to understanding the essences of the buildings. But deeper levels of inquiry are possible. These require us to recognise that we, as modern commentators concerned with understanding, are a part of the castles’ stories. We should not think of ourselves as scientists who collect data which lead to irrefutable proof or disproof of certain propositions about castles, but recognise instead that our world-views inform our collection and presentation of the data, our interpretations of the functions of the buildings (the military versus domestic debate, for example), and our judgements of the social and symbolic meanings of certain features (toilets and fireplaces, for example). These issues touch on a larger philosophical-methodological debate within the historical sciences, but one which hitherto has not penetrated Irish castle-studies very deeply. This paper has been an attempt to generate such a debate.

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