

THE MATERIAL EXPERIENCES OF ‘PEASANT’ LIFE IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN AND IRELAND (c. 1200–1500)

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The Material Experiences of ‘Peasant’ Life project seeks to encourage a comparative approach to the study of non-elite rural medieval lifeways in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. The project builds on the success of two other recent research projects: *Home is Where the Heart(h) is* (Dempsey forthcoming a–b) and *Living Standards and Material Culture in English Rural Households c.1300–1600* (Jervis *et al.* forthcoming), which examine the material worlds of non-elite rural communities in Ireland and England respectively. A key outcome of these separate, but related, projects, has been the recognition of a need to foster deeper inter-regional comparison between people, their things, and the settlements in which they lived. Both projects identified this lack of systematic inter-regional research as a major opportunity for future study. A workshop – supported by the Medieval Settlement Research Group – has been held to initiate the project, with the core aim of progressing beyond Anglo-centric understandings of medieval rural life, which have long dominated medieval archaeology.

Exploring material experiences

What do we mean by *material* experiences of peasant life? We use this phrase as a way of capturing the emotional and sensorial aspects of medieval life. We want to explore encounters between people, animals, plants and things in households. We believe that later medieval archaeology is uniquely placed to access these aspects of daily life, or lived experience, because of its comparatively rich material record (in the widest interpretation of that term). Still too often in medieval archaeology there is an over-emphasis on descriptive accounts or interpretations which do not engage with social questions. In this new project, we want to stimulate conversations around the following questions:

- How can we develop comparative understandings of material experiences of rural life, within and between different parts of medieval Britain and Ireland, that transcend national boundaries?

- How can we explore the material experience of an embodied space full of feelings, thoughts and desires rather than a dry architectural description or layered archaeological sequences?
- How can we explore embodied experiences of rural landscapes and their role in building memory and community?

The first step in addressing these questions was the organisation of a workshop at Cardiff University in June 2022 (Fig. 1). The event brought together experts from across Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England to discuss the current state of understanding and to explore some key themes which could underpin a comparative approach. Summaries of work in England (Ben Jervis), Wales (Sian Iles and Alice Forward), Scotland (Piers Dixon) and Ireland (Karen Dempsey) were presented. Subsequent papers explored how rural experience can be examined across different scales through the use of Portable Antiquities Scheme data (Mark Lodwick) in combination with landscape approaches (Arthur Redmonds). Two broader themes were then explored. The first, ‘Feelings of Home’, encompassed presentations on the archaeology of emotions (Eleanor Standley, Mark Gardiner) and play (Mark Hall). The second, ‘Living in the Landscape’, discussed skeletal (Sophia Mills), place-name (Richard Jones) and landscape (Sarah Jane Gibbon) evidence for material experiences, closing with an examination of peasant experiences of religious houses in Ireland (Tracy Collins).

The workshop was punctuated with discussions of the potential of comparative approaches and the key issues faced by the development of such approaches. A particular area of concern was the high level of variability in the quality and quantity of data. This issue need not be a barrier to carrying out broader comparative analysis, however, as it is, in itself, a pertinent topic to consider. Why are data so varied? Is it owing to variability in preservation contexts (land management or soil conditions), or is it related to variability in archaeological and mitigation practices? The latter factor is related to the impact of national heritage management regimes and approaches to development, which can prioritise certain geographical areas over others, and limit the possibility of

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*Figure 1 Workshop attendees discussing important issues pertaining to medieval settlement at dinner.
Photograph by Karen Dempsey.*

investigating certain types of sites or landscapes. Finally, there is the ongoing and longstanding variability in terminology which does not allow for easy comparative analysis.

More positively, a range of future studies or topics of interest were identified. Key themes discussed include:

- The relationships between people, animals, landscapes, plants, buildings and objects.
- The composition and practices of households, their fluidity and relationship to community.
- The relationship between rural lifeways and landscape character.
- Understanding why artefacts are often scarce on rural sites, and what this means in terms of variability in access to and understanding of objects.
- The identification of variability and the challenging of normative/typical narratives.
- The interpretation and understanding of 'blank' spaces in settlements as socially significant.

The workshop resulted in the emergence of a collaborative research network which we hope to continue to build in order to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and data. Building on the momentum provided by our two national research projects and recent MSRG activities (Rippon and Morton 2020; Wrathmell 2020), we want to engage further with the mass of data provided by development-led excavations. As a first step, we want to examine specific landscapes/geographical areas through a series of detailed case studies: for example, exploring the ties that might connect the practices and experiences of households and

their daily life in comparative landscape regions such as the Bristol Channel region, Solway Firth, the Humber, and the Shannon Estuary.

One particular point made at the workshop by Dr Alice Forward, was that there is a tendency to use particular 'classic' sites such as Wharram Percy (Yorks), West Whelpington (Northumberland) or Raunds (Northants) as 'benchmarks'. These unusually evidence-rich sites can often be treated as norms, against which other sites are measured. This bias results in an almost binary system of categorisation, in which these sites skew interpretation, leading to a negative view that different sites are impoverished. We believe that these are 'unreasonable benchmark' sites and want to challenge ourselves (and others) to disrupt our over-reliance on them. In addition to this, many of the commonly-cited settlement sites are typically in the English midlands, where, of course, many deserted medieval villages survive. But we have to look beyond this region, to decentre Anglo-centric narratives but also to rethink what is considered the norm. As demonstrated by the recent MSRG lecture series on infrastructure, we have never been in a better position to address these questions from a comparative perspective because of the proliferation of large road schemes and development-driven excavations. To realise this potential, we will continue to seek to open new narratives which move beyond those built on the evidence largely provided by a small number of major English excavations. Overall, in doing so, we will develop comparative understandings of medieval rural material culture and related social practices from Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England. This approach will result in a deeper and more nuanced understanding of medieval rural life, including aspects

such as material culture and settlement contexts. This speaks directly to Priority 4 of the *MSRG Research Priorities* (Wrathmell 2020) by focussing on areas which are comparatively under-researched, especially within Wales and Scotland. In sharing new, more wide-ranging evidence, the commonalities and divergences in everyday experiences of rural life will emerge.

Future steps

In order to achieve this goal, it is intended that the workshop will stimulate longer-term collaborative working in the study of the diverse material environments and related practices across medieval Ireland and Britain. This collaborative endeavour will result in an inter-regional overview of the material culture of rural communities, offering an important counterpoint to narratives of rural life which centre simply on England. This will provide a valuable contribution to a growing body of comparative work on the material culture of rural life across Europe (e.g. Jervis *et al.* 2016; Haggren and Rosendahl 2016; Fernandez 2018; Hotun and Kazymir 2020; Sawicki and Leva 2022).

We intend to continue the collaborations built during the workshop through future activities including collaborative publications, field visits and a session at a future conference of the European Association of Archaeologists, placing the Irish and British evidence into a wider context. Videos of the workshop presentations will be made available on the Medieval Settlement Research Group and Society for Medieval Archaeology webpages.² We welcome contributions to this effort from other researchers interested in furthering the aims of the project.

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² <https://medieval-settlement.com/>;

<https://medievalarchaeology.co.uk> (both accessed July 2023).