

PLANTING NEW IDEAS: A FEMINIST GAZE ON MEDIEVAL CASTLES



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Introduction

The theme of the Château Gaillard 29 Conference “Vivre au Château” is very timely: studies of medieval castles have great potential to generate meaningful archaeologies, including biographies and life cycles as well as social meanings of architecture, landscapes and material culture. This article takes an inclusive (or feminist) archaeological approach to two castles in Ireland, offering an alternative to narratives of power or bodily prowess. The first is Adare, a large baronial castle located in mid-southwestern Co. Limerick, and the second is Lea, Co. Laois, found within the western borderlands of the Anglo-Norman heartland in Leinster. The castles are geographically distant but both form part of the ancestral landholdings of the Geraldines in Ireland. Different questions are asked of women’s daily life and their gendered roles, utilising excavation results, an ecological survey, as well as evidence from allegorical prayers, inscribed slates and studies of medieval gardens and relict plants. Explorations of daily life are important and play a crucial part in revealing how social values were constructed, enacted and reflected. In order to attend to the daily sphere, we must integrate people, places and things within our scholarship to enrich our understanding of the medieval world.

Feminist Archaeology and castle studies

Feminist Archaeology is not the study of women but rather an interrogation of the archaeological record to understand differences at a variety of scales, especially in relation to gender and other aspects of social identity². It endeavours to recognise how current knowledge and worldviews influence scholarship. Furthermore, it aims to tell stories of the past from a wide range of perspectives that accounts for varied and complicated lifeways. In doing so, it avoids reinforcing the grand narratives of warfare, male-power and status which do not account for life on a human-scale. Importantly, this highlights aspects of past lives or people that have received less attention because of modern political or gendered ideologies³. In practice, this can mean not assuming everything is male until proven otherwise and not projecting current gender ideologies or modern hetero-normative views into the past⁴. This is not about “filling in the gaps”, where women are inserted into pre-conceived male-narratives⁵. Finally, Feminist Archaeology advocates for practices that are inclusive – equal gender representation, open access publications, open forums for discussion and presence of many different voices. In this sense, there is much potential for change within castle-studies, including Château Gaillard⁶.

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2. CONKEY & SPECTOR 1984; SPECTOR 1991; GILCHRIST 1994; GILCHRIST 1999; CONKEY & GERO 1997.

3. HENG 2018; DOWSON 2000; VOSS 2000.
4. DEMPSEY 2019.
5. See TRINGHAM 1991.
6. DEMPSEY 2019.

Year	Female authors	Male authors	Total contributions
2016	12	36	35
2014	12	33	34
2012	11	36	39
2010	8	30	33
2008	8	30	33

Table 1 Gender imbalance in Château Gaillard publication.

Castle studies remain a male-dominated discipline⁷. The imbalance is prevalent within a broad range of publications⁸, including the last five Château Gaillard proceedings (see table 1). To criticise the continuation of such gender imbalance into the 21st century is simple – it is harder to disentangle the reasons behind this situation. Is it a legacy resulting from decades of studies that focussed on martial functions and contexts, which specifically exclude women?⁹ Alternatively, as Roberta Gilchrist has queried “are castles still seen as inherently masculine?”¹⁰.

Despite these issues, it is important to recognise that the discipline has changed – the study of castles has undergone a profound transformation in Britain and Ireland, in the past twenty-five years, moving away from the old military frameworks to explorations of “space” and “place”¹¹. This is also evident within Denmark and Sweden¹² but less so in Germany, Italy, France and Spain¹³. The new wave of landscape approaches and the spatial turn are characterised by a desire to move away from essentialist arguments that sought to determine castles as being or representing one single thing¹⁴. The ensuing debates have resulted in a more modernised discourse; however, the lived experience of a person in a castle remains under-explored¹⁵. This is especially true of the daily life of women or anyone who existed on the margins of society.

Despite the application of gender within archaeological research, castles are predominantly viewed from a male perspective of warfare, power and status. This can be seen in the way in which studies of women do not examine female gendered roles but concentrate on women who wielded power in the same way as their male counterpart. This results in the notion that these women are representative of all elite

women. However, this is problematic in the following ways. Firstly, it implicitly suggests that for women to be worthy of study or inclusion in narratives of the past, they must conform to a masculine world of political or economic power¹⁶. Secondly, it ignores the fact that these women effectively operated in the world as men. Finally, it creates a value system by which activities outside of the world of male power are considered to be of lesser importance in studies of the past¹⁷. The implication of this is that the only meaningful expression of identity was in the obtaining and wielding of power.

A feminist approach to castle studies avoids grand narratives to focus on the lived experience and the often overlooked maintenance activities of daily life¹⁸. These comprise the everyday aspects of living that can include estate management and administration, different forms of craftwork, food preparations and gathering or cooking, along with the bearing, rearing and socialisation of children, as well as care for the sick, elderly or infirm¹⁹. These activities were often gendered but that does not mean that they were only completed by women. Unfortunately, in castle studies gender still appears to equal women. Therefore, castle studies can benefit from employing feminist archaeological perspectives. It would result in a greater diversity of opinions, thereby expanding the limits of current knowledge. Importantly, a multi-vocal narrative of life in medieval castles would become commonplace, where people beyond the elite male would be accounted for.

Herstory: women, space and agency

My current project applies a feminist archaeological approach that focusses on stories of women, their gendered roles and parts of their daily lives at medieval castles²⁰. Essentially this means telling the stories of some medieval women through the things that they used, loved and cared about, in the places that they lived. This may at first appear to be straightforward, but there are two complex problems that must be overcome (perhaps explaining why explorations of aspects of daily lives are not more common). First, doing inclusive archaeologies is not easy; it requires a comprehensive knowledge of many aspects of the medieval world, including language and literature, as well as

7. DEMPSEY 2019.

8. *Ibid.*

9. PLATT 1982; LIDDIARD 2005; CREIGHTON & WRIGHT 2017.

10. GILCHRIST 1999.

11. HESLOP 1991; FAIRCLOUGH 1992; RICHARDSON 2003; THORSTAD 2019.

12. HANSSON 2006; OLSEN 2014.

13. CREIGHTON 2009.

14. SPEIGHT 2005; CREIGHTON & LIDDIARD 2008; *contra* PLATT 2007.

15. JOHNSON 2002.

16. BLUD, HEATH & KLAFTER 2019.

17. MONTÓN-SUBÍAS & HERNANDO 2018.

18. *Ibid.*; BATTLE-BAPTISTE 2011.

19. MONTÓN-SUBÍAS & SÁNCHEZ-ROMERO 2008.

20. Herstory is an acronym for “Holistic research into the story of buildings, objects and people in the high medieval period of Ireland, Britain and France from a gendered perspective”.

an understanding of medieval medicine, food, housing, agriculture and economy and all of the source material which goes with this. The second reason, which is more complicated, is that it is extremely difficult to talk about women in a past long assumed to be male²¹. Demands are made of gender scholars to provide evidence to prove the presence of women in a way that is not required of those who discuss the activities of medieval men²². Recent work concentrates on proving that women played a role at war; that they were on Crusade; that they were building and that they were ruling²³. Well known examples include Nicola de la Haye (d. c. 1217), who famously defended Lincoln Castle²⁴, or Isabelle de Fortibus (d. 1293), who held Carisbrooke despite political pressure from Edward I (d. 1307). A problem exists whereby these studies situate women within traditional male narratives: these roles are more typical of the ways in which men occupied their lives and would have been exceptional for most elite and ordinary women. It is not my intention to insert women into the male narrative; it is of greater interest to consider what women were doing in their own right, to consider female agency outside of male power. In other words to investigate the lived experience of women's gendered roles that remain underexplored: where these elite women prayed, where they gave birth, their peer friendships and how they managed their households, as well as other daily activities including weaving, spinning, embroidering, reading and gardening.

During the 12th and 13th century, broadly similar patterns of spatial arrangements were visible at castle sites across north-western Europe such as the emergence of the *donjon*, the separation of hall and chamber or even the presence of associated parklands²⁵. Using examples of English castles, Roberta Gilchrist argued that the chamber was a space where female agency was paramount²⁶ – a thought echoed by others²⁷. It has been demonstrated that the chamber often had direct access to a chapel, sometimes with its own private worship space such as at Pickering Castle, North Yorkshire. The chamber often had an associated *hortus conclusus* or enclosed garden, like those at Portchester, Chepstow and Goodrich in England, as well as Rhuddlan, Harlech, Kidwelly in Wales²⁸. Access to the chamber and garden may have required a complex journey through the castle *via* a series of interconnected floors and corridors often, coupled with traversing a number of inner and outer

wards such as at Chepstow. Could it be possible that the same pattern existed in Ireland of paired chamber and garden with a relatively processional access routeway?

Case study one: Adare Castle, Co. Limerick

As revealed during excavations, Adare Castle was constructed on a pre-Norman power centre comprising an earthwork that also contained a rare example of a mid-12th-century Gaelic-Irish masonry seigneurial hall²⁹. A contemporary historical account from the Book of Munster revealed Domhnall Mór ua Briain (d. 1194) as the possible builder³⁰. Adare Castle was the later *caput* of the Geraldines, a dynastic Anglo-Norman family. Throughout the medieval period it remained a key castle for other high-ranking nobles including Eve de Bermingham (d. 1226) and Geoffrey de Marisco (d. 1245), who will also be encountered at Lea Castle. The earliest historical reference to the Anglo-Norman manor at Adare was in 1226 AD, which related to a grant to hold an annual fair, but there are no explicit references to the masonry castle³¹.

The castle first developed as part of a D-shaped earthwork with a surrounding large ditch and river-fed moat (fig. 1). This later formed the inner ward, which was further enclosed by an external wall to the north-west with a single mural tower and a gatehouse to the south. Adding to the Gaelic Irish pre-existing hall, an Anglo-Norman aisled hall with services and a kitchen flanked the river to the south-east of the outer ward. The remainder of the outer ward is enclosed by masonry walling which has an associated ditch to the north and west and a gatehouse to the southwest. The River Maigue runs along the southern boundary of the castle and during the medieval period it was navigable from the Atlantic coast to c. 500 m from the castle (fig. 2). At this time, the settlement of Adare was substantial. It had borough status, a market and three religious houses: Trinitarian, Augustinian and Franciscan.

Adare Castle is a complex and interesting site, especially owing to its past as a Gaelic-Irish power centre and subsequent appropriation by the Anglo-Normans. Highly tangible, evidence-based stories can be woven from its rich material culture. For example, a gaming piece was retrieved from a window embrasure in the southern wall of the Great Hall³². This brings to mind people playing together, tucked

21. GOODALL 2011; MACCOTTER 2016.

22. CONKEY & SPECTOR 1984.

23. MAIER 2004; O'KEEFE 2014; GRANT 2016.

24. WILKINSON 2007.

25. MEIRON-JONES, IMPEY & JONES 2002; DEMPSEY 2016; HALL 2018.

26. GILCHRIST 1999.

27. See JOHNSON 2001; RICHARDSON 2003; DELMAN 2019.

28. GILCHRIST 1999; GAVIN-SMYTH 2018; GUY 2018.

29. DUNNE & KIELY 2013.

30. *Ibid.*

31. SWEETMAN 1875-1886, vol. II, 214.

32. DUNNE & KIELY 2013, 132.

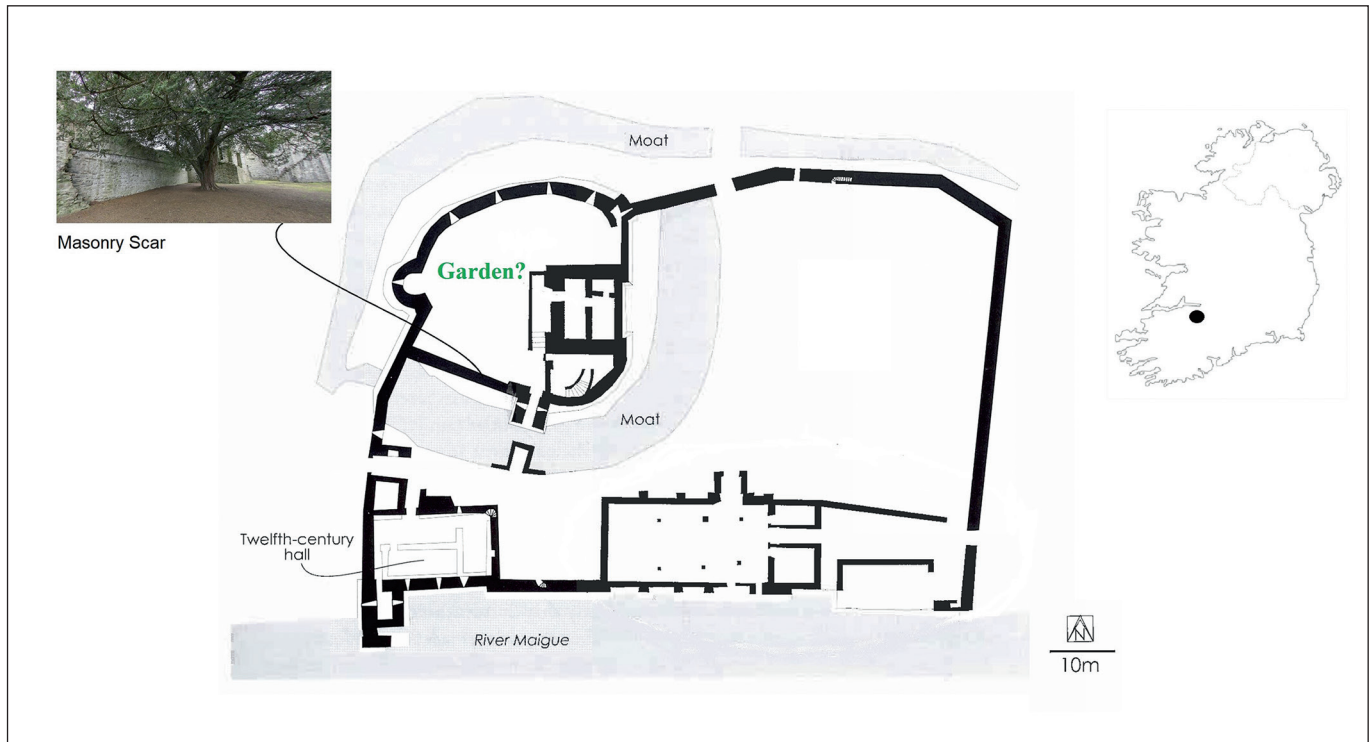


Fig. 1 Plan of Adare Castle, Co. Limerick (with map of Ireland inset). After O'KEEFE 2015.



Fig. 2 Adare Castle, Co. Limerick, from the southwest. Photograph K. Dempsey.

into the window seat beneath a large stained glass window, of which evidence also remains (fig. 3). There are other revealing finds – a wooden tuning peg for a musical instrument and gaming pieces³³. Of course, musical instruments are not uncommon, for example the Jew's harps recovered at Limerick and Roscrea in Ireland, at Castle Acre, Norfolk and Carrick Castle, Bute in Britain³⁴. These aspects of material culture can be understood as vocal. They speak to us of sights, sounds, culture and sensory experiences of medieval people in the castle.

To enter the castle at Adare, one must complete a number of journeys that both highlight and obscure parts of the castle at different times as well as directing movement and manipulating light. Entering as a 21st-century person, one passes along the north bank of the River Maigue, to stand waiting before the gatehouse. To the left, part of the moat and external walling are visible. Moving forward, you pass through the arched tunnel of the gatehouse, beneath a portcullis and out into the brightness of the outer ward. To the right, two medieval halls now obscure the river. Coloured glass once filled the window embrasures of these buildings. To the left the residential space of the chamber is visible within the inner ward, which is encircled by a wall with a gatehouse as well as a moat. From excavation, we know that a drawbridge was located at this junction. A modern bridge now stands in its place, but in the past it was necessary for the bridge to be lowered to allow passage over the waterfilled moat, and through the gatehouse. To access the space of the inner ward in the medieval period, one would dismount, leaving the horse to be stabled within the outer ward. The chamber momentarily disappears as you pass through darkness of the gatehouse to emerge into the inner ward where it reappears again – only once access had been gained. The inner ward, wrapped by a moat, enclosed by a wall – was a secluded space. Who was granted access? Was it only for the lord and lady and their immediate household? Or were visitors permitted?

The inner ward appears to have a substantial amount of unoccupied space to the west of the tower (fig. 1). Unfortunately, excavations were not carried out in this area. At Portchester, Castle Rising and Chepstow, England, there is spatial and historical evidence of gardens located beside the chamber, relatively private and not overlooked³⁵. One potential issue for the presence of a garden at Adare is a

large masonry scar in the wall face of the inner ward (fig. 4). It appears to represent the former presence of a wall walk or platform. It would be unusual to have a garden overlooked in such a manner. Instead, could this be evidence for hoarding that may have once capped the masonry wall? Rather than rendering the garden highly visible, it could make this space more secluded. Unfortunately, the association of castles and gardens has not been explored in Irish medieval archaeology³⁶. Little work has been completed outside of later examples such as Portumna Castle, Co. Galway³⁷ or Dunluce, Co. Donegal³⁸. Perhaps it is time to ask more questions of the evidence that is available.

The castle garden in medieval Ireland

The term “garden” features regularly in Irish historical records. Concentrating only on the *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland*, over 50 examples were noted³⁹. These ranged from high-status examples at Kilkenny Castle to those gardens lower down the social scale associated with manors:

*Extent of lands and tenements of the burgh of Kilkenny which belonged to Joan Countess of Gloucester and Hertford... There is a garden under the castle, the fruit with the herbage*⁴⁰.

*Whereof Ralph's wife holds one-third in dower, she has also of free marriage the other moiety of the manor with a mansion and garden*⁴¹.

It is unclear as to what exactly the term “garden” refers. Whether it was a productive centre for food to supply and supplement rural households or urban centres, a place that provided curative or medicinal plants, or a place of rest, play and display⁴². Given the relatively large amount and variety of references, perhaps all of these activities could be accommodated within any given garden, when accounting for varying degrees of social differences.

In the medieval world there was an abundance of literature that either featured or was set in gardens. A number of texts referred to the garden as a space of dubious

33. DUNNE & KIELY 2013, 121, 213.

34. MANNING 2003; WIGGINS 2016; COAD & STREETEN 1982; EWART & BAKER 1998.

35. GILCHRIST 1999.

36. REEVES-SMYTH 1999.

37. FENLON 2012.

38. BREEN 2012.

39. SWEETMAN 1875-1886.

40. *Ibid.*, vol. IV, 187.

41. *Ibid.*, vol. II, 28.

42. STANNARD 1986, 77.

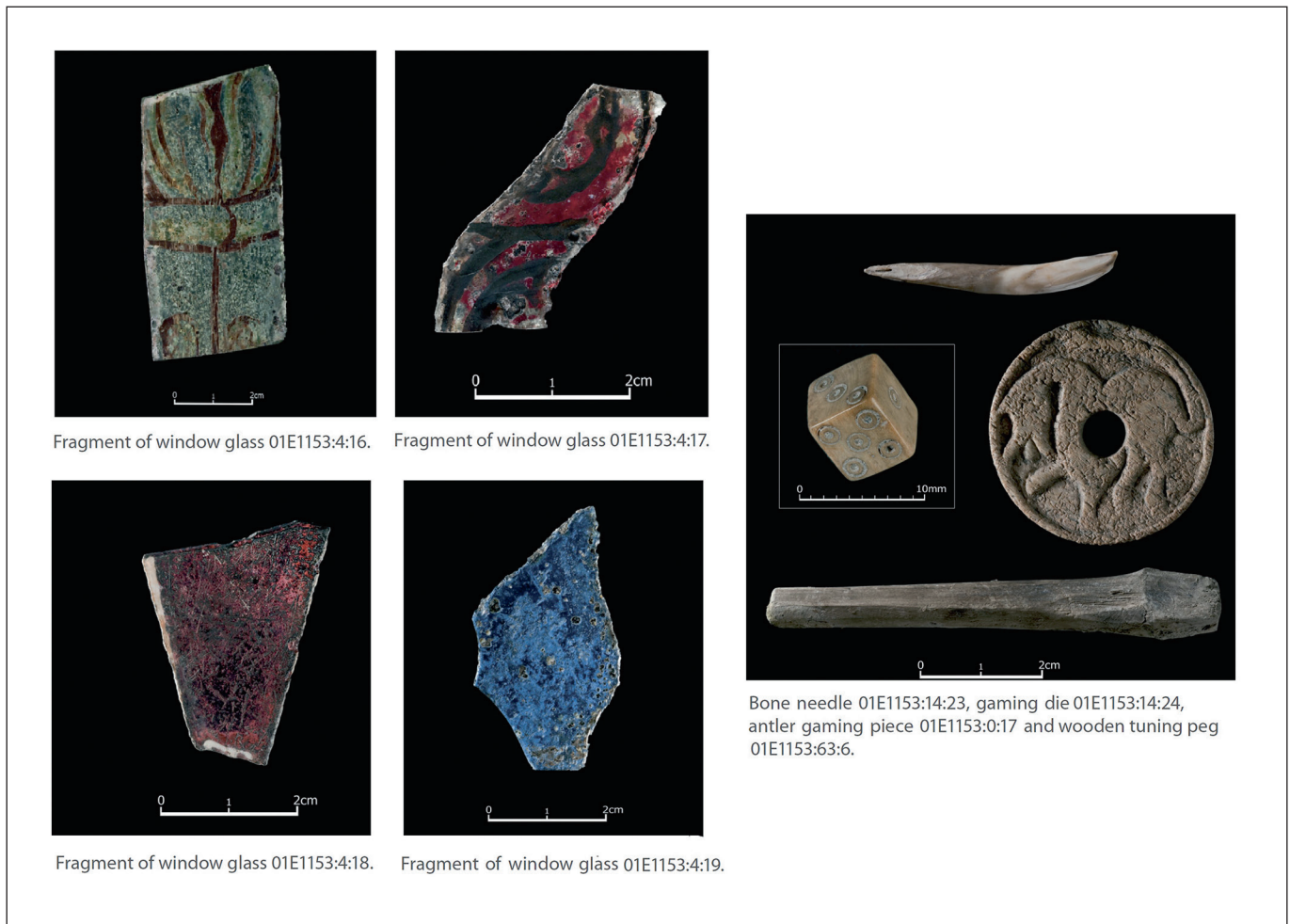


Fig. 3 Material culture from Adare Castle. After DUNNE & KIELY 2013.



Fig. 4 Inner ward masonry wall of Adare Castle featuring a large scar, facing south. Photograph K. Dempsey.

morality, such as presented in Chaucer's A Merchant's Tale, or a setting for covetous desire, when King David watches Bathsheba bathe in the Bible⁴³. Equally, there are allegorical tales and plays that overflow with references to the religious aspects of growing, gardening and nurturing which were culturally associated with the female body⁴⁴. This is represented in an excerpt from "An Irish Homily on the Life of the Virgin Mary" in the Yellow Book of Lecan, a 14th-century Irish manuscript.

*Is hi so in lughort rúntae forriatae hi frith in torad sain-
email shássas muinntir
talman 7 aingliu nume. Is hi in comrae inro taisced cisti
inna heccnae 7 innan
huile sualach 7 cainghním*

*She is the fruitful earth in which was found the wonderful
marvellous herb
which cured and healed every disease and sickness which
was in the world.
She is the mystical enclosed garden in which was found
the unique fruit,
which sates the people of earth⁴⁵.*

It is well understood that medieval women had an allocated role model in the Virgin Mary⁴⁶. She was viewed as a queen who resided in heaven; she acted as an intercessor and was also a mother who bore a son⁴⁷. Of note in the context of castles and gardens is the use of the words "magic herb" and "mystical enclosed garden". These, among others, are understood as metonyms for the Virgin's femininity or feminine capabilities. It appears that the embodied nature of the garden or its gendered implications were not lost on people in medieval Ireland.

How does this relate to the castle at Adare? It has been demonstrated that the inner ward was a somewhat private area that was accessed by a relatively elaborate process. It was a space that was enclosed in several ways – by water, by stone and potentially by timber, but also, by the social norms of a society whose social practices included secluding and protecting elite women⁴⁸. If we accept the possibility of a garden in the western area of the inner ward at Adare would the lady and her ladies-in-waiting have been in the garden together? Did they only grow and curate local plants

or were they importing different species, taking cuttings and sharing knowledge similar to monastic communities, as was referred to in the Losbombe Manuscript⁴⁹? To respond to these questions, it is necessary to move to the second case study of this article: Lea Castle, Co. Laois.

Case study two: Lea Castle, Co. Laois

Lea Castle is situated on the eastern borderland of the Lordship of Leinster. Richard de Clare, tenant-in-chief of Henry II in Ireland, granted the territory of Offaly to Robert de Bermingham (d. 1197). On his death, this part of the estate passed to Eve de Bermingham (d. 1226), at the time of her first marriage to Gerald fitz Maurice (d. 1204)⁵⁰. She retained control of it (in dower) until her third marriage to Geoffrey de Marisco (d. 1245) after 1211 AD. This same couple were also involved with Adare Castle.

The initial earthwork castle at Lea was likely constructed over a pre-existing Gaelic-Irish monument, just like at Adare (fig. 5). The earliest castle was eventually succeeded by a large masonry focal building comprising an almost square central block of three storeys with four large corner towers, followed by associated outerworks including a large twin-towered gatehouse and an extensive surviving masonry curtain wall, as well as many aspects of a relict medieval landscape (fig. 5)⁵¹. Lea, like Adare, also contains an inner and an outer ward. It is surrounded by a waterscape and wrapped to the north by the River Barrow. The chamber, the focal building of the castle complex at Lea, is very elaborate and its patterns of access are irregular. For example, the second-floor formal entrance is outside of the traditional first-floor location. This doorway is framed with square apertures that may once have supported a hanging timber bridge linked to a now much reduced forebuilding. To gain access, it was necessary for the lord or lady to climb a series of inner stairs until the third storey was reached. The person then emerged from the forebuilding to cross the timber bridge and through the doorway into the second floor of the focal building. This points to a very performative and processional entrance. The inner arrangement of space is equally unusual: along the north-western wall, a mural stair runs directly from first-floor to third-floor level. The first steps of the stairs begin beneath the putative chapel, located just north of the

43. HERBERT-McAVOY 2018.

44. MELLON 2008, 61.

45. Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1318, The Yellow Book of Lecan, col. 839.19-843.52.

46. HERBERT-McAVOY 2018.

47. MELLON 2008.

48. GILCHRIST 1999.

49. ZETTERSTEN 1967; HARVEY 1985.

50. DEMPSEY 2016.

51. *Ibid.*

formal entrance at second-floor level⁵². The upper level, the third floor of the chamber, once had elaborate fenestration comprising twin-light, trefoil-headed windows coupled with window seats. This space afforded expansive views across the very flat surrounding countryside.

Notable elite women such as Eve de Bermingham, Margaret of Lincoln (d. 1266), Agnes de Valence (b. 1250) and Joan de Munchensi (d. 1307) were associated with the castle, as evidenced by references in the historical sources; although, it is not certain if they ever lived at or visited Lea⁵³. Can it be assumed that if there was the potential for noble women at this high-status residence that there may also have been a garden? An initial study suggests that the most likely place – similar to Adare – is close to the focal building, skirting the southern edge of the river. From the third-floor chamber, where window seats and a surviving twin-light, trefoil-headed window remain – the garden would have been visible. The siting of this potential garden could be seen as problematic as it may have been overlooked from the arcaded wall walk along the inner ward wall (fig. 5). However, it is possible that wooden hoarding was erected along the wall to prevent household guards from seeing into the inner ward, perhaps like that at Adare. What other evidence is available to support the presence of a garden?

Relict medieval plants: an ecological survey at Lea

Pioneering work has been completed on relict plants from medieval monastic gardens and landscapes in Norway⁵⁴ and Iceland⁵⁵. In Ireland, a similar study was recently carried out at Bective Abbey, a Cistercian foundation in Co. Meath⁵⁶. These studies involve the examination of modern landscapes for the presence of plants that may have survived from or been used during the medieval period. This is complemented by documentary, architectural and archaeological research. It is becoming established as a novel way to gain insights into past communities' growing or cultivation practices as well as potential medicinal and dietary concerns. However, it cannot be stated with certainty that the relict plants were cultivated by medieval

people. Neither is it possible to know if these plants were tended *in situ*, gathered from the wild or were non-native at the time when they were imported into Ireland⁵⁷.

At Lea Castle, an ecological survey was carried out during the preparation of a Conservation Plan, which sets out a programme of long-term care for the castle and its immediate landscape⁵⁸. The survey revealed the presence of many plants, some common both now and during the medieval period, but also, some that are unusual to the area. For example, Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) is relatively common and easy to spot today across the Irish countryside. In the medieval period, it had many uses from acting as a flavouring for beer to being with rushes to create a fragrant floor covering⁵⁹. Similarly, nettles (*Urtica dioica*) are common perennials that favour high phosphate levels, they are often found near buildings, in hedges, gardens and woods⁶⁰. Nettles are included as a foodstuff in medieval cookbooks and it is possible they were turned into a soup⁶¹. Tufted Vetch (*Vicia cracca*), from the legume family, was also present at Lea. This has been accounted for in the archaeo-botanical record at many medieval sites in Ireland⁶². Historical sources record their cultivation in medieval England, being typically used as animal fodder⁶³. Other colourful plants noted were Silverweed (*Potentilla anserina*) and Lady's Smock (*Cardamine pratensis*), which were thought to have been used as a purple dye for cloth for ladies' clothes. Outside of these slightly more common examples, three possible relict plants stood out in the survey results: Yellow Wallflower (*Erysimum cheiri*), Greater Celandine (*Chelidonium majus*) and Navelwort (*Umbilicus rupestris*) (fig. 6).

Yellow Wallflower was recorded on the walls of the castle. It is not common in Co. Laois and it is native to the eastern Mediterranean region⁶⁴. The plant presents with bright orange-yellow flowers. These blooms are highly fragrant and it is thought that they were planted under window ledges with the intention of their sweet smell wafting in through the windows⁶⁵. It is possible to imagine that elite medieval people living here were happy to have these golden ripe-looking, perfumed flowers on their windows, as foul odours were believed to spread sickness⁶⁶. One also suspects that a window framed by yellow provided a great spectacle

52. DEMPSEY 2016.

53. *Ibid.*

54. ÅSEN 2009.

55. KRISTJÁNSDÓTTIR, LARSSON & ÅSEN 2014.

56. FOLEY 2016.

57. *Ibid.*, 560.

58. MACGOWAN 2015; see, also, CASEY 2015.

59. MACGOWAN 2015; HARVEY 1985; MABEY 1996.

60. *Ibid.*, 67; MANNING 2003, 131.

61. LUCAS 1959; LYONS 2015.

62. *Ibid.*

63. See CAMPBELL 2000, 228–230.

64. MACGOWAN 2015.

65. MABEY 1996.

66. RAWCLIFFE 2008.

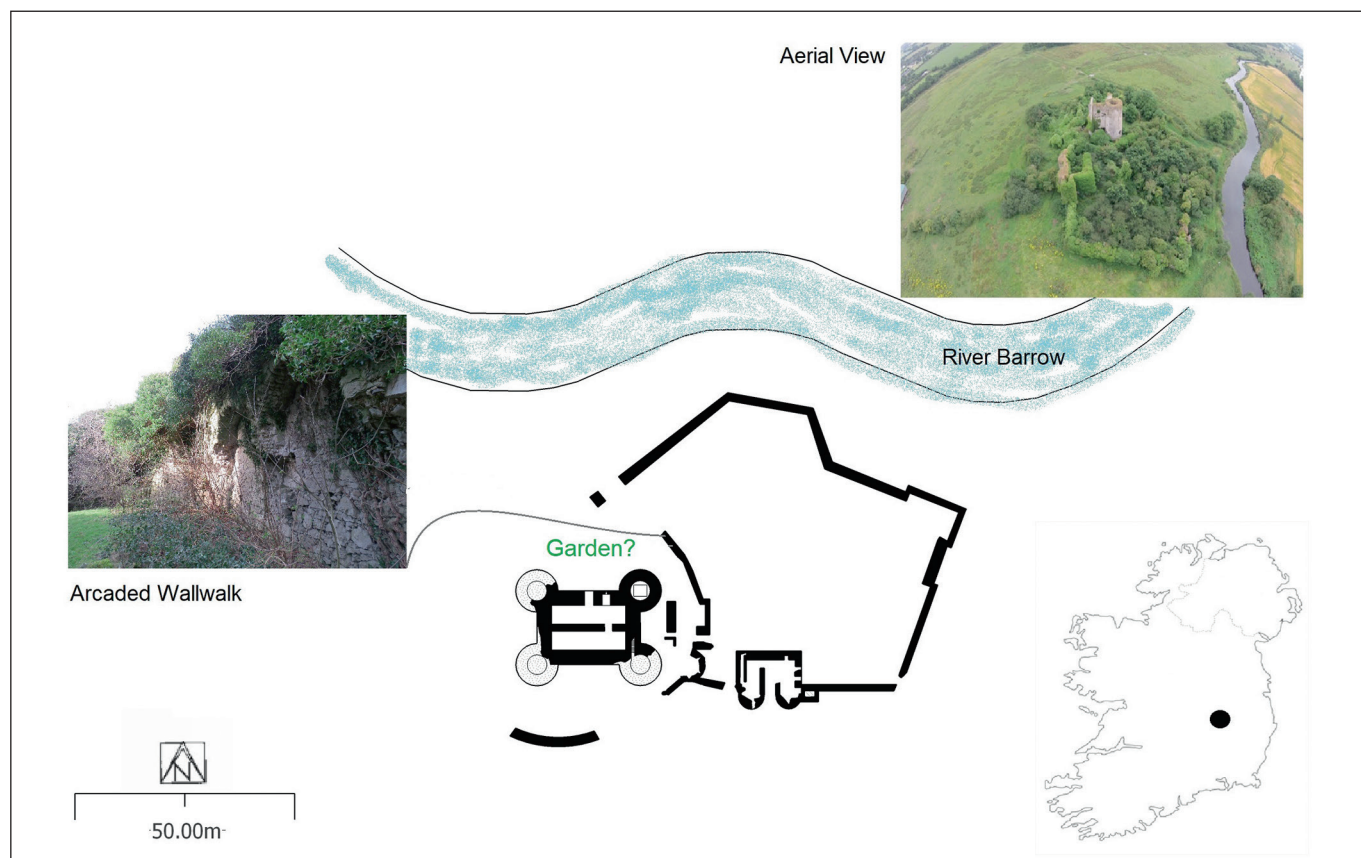


Fig. 5 Image of Lea Castle, Co. Laois, with inset images of arcaded wall-walk, aerial view of castle and location map. Photographs and doc. K. Dempsey.

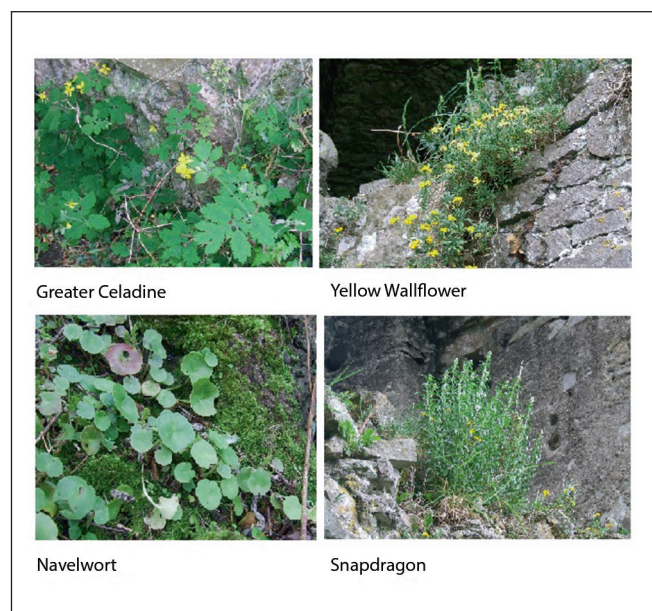


Fig. 6 Flower and plants from the ecological survey of Lea Castle. After MACGOWAN 2015.

for those who viewed the castle from the outside. Interestingly, yellow was a colour associated with women and bile in humoral theory; it was also considered important as it was the colour of gold and thought to have beneficent properties⁶⁷. Colour was incredibly important to medieval people: it signalled health and wellbeing as well as possessing an inherent morality⁶⁸. Taste and smell were also significant⁶⁹.

Greater Celandine was found in abundance throughout the castle-complex. Like Yellow Wallflower, it is a non-native species to Ireland. In fact, it remains rare in Ireland today: the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland mapping recorded only one other occurrence in Co. Laois at Rathdowney Castle⁷⁰. It featured frequently in old medicinal recipes⁷¹. Folklore associated the plant with curative properties for eyesight, although medically it is known to cause severe conjunctivitis⁷².

The final plant, Navelwort, also known as Wallpennywort, was found growing on walls of the castle. Despite being common elsewhere in Ireland, it is not often found in the Midlands region. This may be because it does not favour limestone. However, it was recently recorded by at another medieval site in Co. Laois – the Timahoe monastic complex⁷³. Folkloric accounts suggest this plant was grown on thatch roofs to act as a protective measure against lightning strikes and the resultant fire⁷⁴. Navelwort was also used as an ointment for burns and scalds⁷⁵. This dual apotropaic and healing function was not uncommon in the medieval world. Navelwort and a number of other plants common at Lea Castle are mentioned in part of a 15th-century inscription of a medicinal recipe on a medieval slate discovered at a church-site in the demesne of Smarmore Castle in Co. Louth (fig. 7)⁷⁶.

The interpreted inscription of Slate 8a reads:

*Plantago ... of les-wrt, & briscan leuis, & butter, & lic
lomis tong, & lithockis,
grunswill & rathel., suins-giche & peni-wrt of wallis, yolkis
of eggis & chikin-met....
& to ellir wudis red & rotting. Tac a plaster of netlis &
horsm[int], weibred & rib-
w[rt]....."*

*Plantain.....and meadowsweet, and briscan leuis(?),
and butter, and a lick(?) of
lamb's tongue and lettuces(?), groundsel and rathel(?),
swine's itch and pennywort*

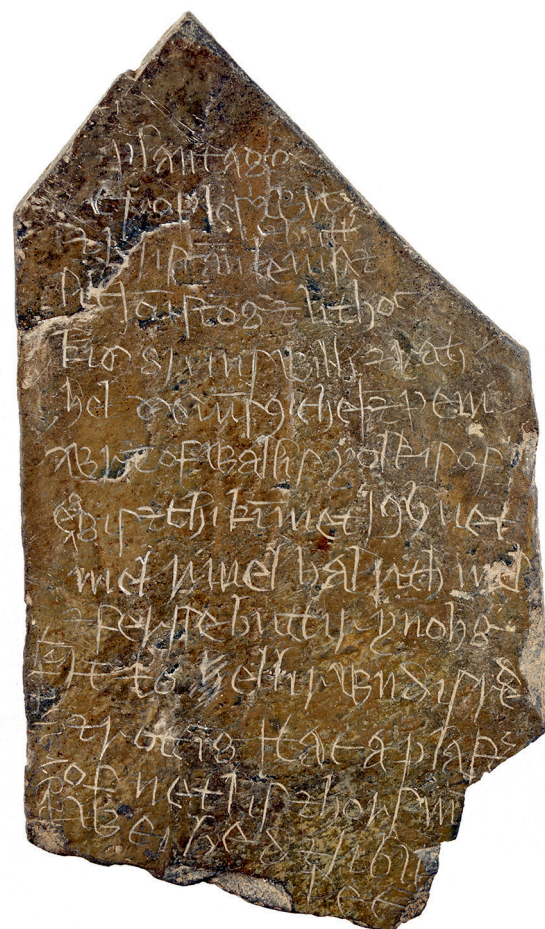


Fig. 7 Smarmore Slate (no. 1961:8a), with inscribed medicinal recipe. This image is reproduced with the kind permission of The National Museum of Ireland.

(navelwort), eggs yolks and chicken meat, and two elder sticks red and rotting. Take a plaster of nettles and horsemint, waybread (plantain) and ribwort⁷⁷.....

This particular recipe was likely copied from a medieval medicinal text⁷⁸. The recipe appears to be for a poultice to aid in the healing of wounds for humans as well as animals. Unsurprisingly, this indicates that medieval people were familiar with the medicinal properties of plants as well as

67. WOOLGAR 2006.

68. PASTOUREAU 1986; WOOLGAR 2018.

69. TYRES 2018, 56-68.

70. MACGOWAN 2015.

71. MABEY 1996.

72. MACGOWAN 2015; MABEY 1996, 55-56.

73. F. MacGowan, pers. comm.

74. MABEY 1996, 171.

75. *Ibid.*

76. BRITTON & FLETCHER 1990; BLISS 1965-1966.

77. *Ibid.*, 46.

78. *Ibid.*

having some knowledge of how to harness this. The rarity of these plants in this region of Ireland, coupled with their known medicinal uses, point towards their presence at Lea being significant. It is likely they are relict from the medieval period when they were deliberately planted for wellbeing and medicinal uses by communities who lived at the castle. It does beg the question as to who was practicing medicine using these plants?

A curated garden?

Women and gardens are intimately linked⁷⁹. The analogous language of growing/nurture/care shared between women, their bodies and gardens reveals this. From a religious perspective, allegorical praise poems such as the 14th-century homily to the Virgin Mary noted above employ a metaphorical fruitful garden in place of the female body. Looking beyond an obvious biblical example of the Garden of Eden and Eve to the allegorical Song of Songs which fuses women and the natural world “my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up. Thy plants are a paradise...”. Unsurprisingly, across the Abrahamic religions, gardens are viewed as symbols of fertility and renewal⁸⁰. In later medieval writing and imagery, particular plants and flowers took on meanings linked to chastity and devotion but also courtly love and romance⁸¹.

There exists a weight of cultural evidence connecting medieval women and their bodies with plants and fertility. We can accept that during the Middle Ages the garden had particular social meanings that were entangled with gendered roles of women. This does not mean that men were absent from garden-culture in the medieval period but that its nurturing and fruitful environment was a domain for

female agency. It is possible to imagine a space within a medieval castle where an elite lady, possibly with her ladies in waiting, tended and nourished the garden. Or at least, they had a space where they curated plants or added others, such as the importing of the Yellow Wallflower and Greater Celandine from Continental Europe. This seems to have been the case at two medieval castles in Ireland presented in this article, as indicated by the combined historical, literary, ecological and architectural evidence. This analysis allows for new questions to be asked about the lives of women beyond traditional male narratives of power, status or warfare. However, women spending time taking care of the garden is only the beginning of the story. We also know that women were active in healing, sometimes as herbalists, the most well-known being Hildegard of Bingen (d. 1179). If it was a lady's role to care for her household and ensure the wellbeing of her people, in emulation of the Virgin Mary, then the next question is: was it part of elite women's gendered roles to grow “mystical fruit” and cure using “magic herb”⁸²?

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79. SKINNER & TYRES 2018.

80. HERBERT-McAVOY 2018.

81. SKINNER & TYRES 2018.

82. DEMPSEY under review.

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