

# Pottery production in Ireland in the 12th to 15th centuries

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## Summary

*The following article presents an overview of the archaeological and documentary evidence for medieval pottery production in Ireland and places it within the context of similar studies in Britain, which shares Ireland's Anglo Norman heritage. The study period is defined by the arrival of the Anglo Norman settlers in Ireland in the late 12th-century, which marked the beginning of medieval pottery*

*production in Ireland on a large scale and concludes with its demise during the 15th-century. Although the Anglo Norman settlers in Ireland lived in the western limits of the Anglo Norman world their continued involvement with it politically, economically and culturally, an on-going connection is borne out by their material culture and pottery production tradition in particular.*

## Introduction

### A tradition of pottery production in Ireland

Ireland has a tradition of pottery production that dates from prehistory, throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age. The island was largely aceramic after this period, although some pottery was imported from the post Roman world during the early medieval period (Thomas 1981; Doyle 1996). Pottery was produced and used in neighbouring England and to a lesser degree in Wales from the Roman period but quantities were always small in the sub-Roman/ Anglo-Norman period. Pottery was never produced on a large scale in Ireland, the country being small enough to have sea and riverine access to most towns and villages to facilitate importing goods. The Viking age reintroduced limited pottery use to Ireland, via continental imports (Wallace 1981). The Norwegians leading the raids on Ireland in the 9th and 10th centuries were also a largely aceramic people and as a result the dominant vessel forms in Ireland remained those made from wood, leather and metal.

Medieval studies in Ireland show that although the Gaelic Irish had access to ceramic vessels before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, through small scale local production and imported pottery, they nonetheless favoured vessels of wood, leather and metal to ceramics. There is archaeological evidence for some degree of medieval pottery production in Ireland prior to the late 12th-century Anglo-Norman conquest, represented by the presence of locally made early medieval pottery types such as Souterain Ware (McNeill 1980; Ryan 1973; Ivens 1984; Armit 2008; McSparron 2009; Kyle 2011) and Crannóg Ware (Ivens 2001) found in the north-east of Ireland as well as the medieval pottery type Leinster Cooking Ware which

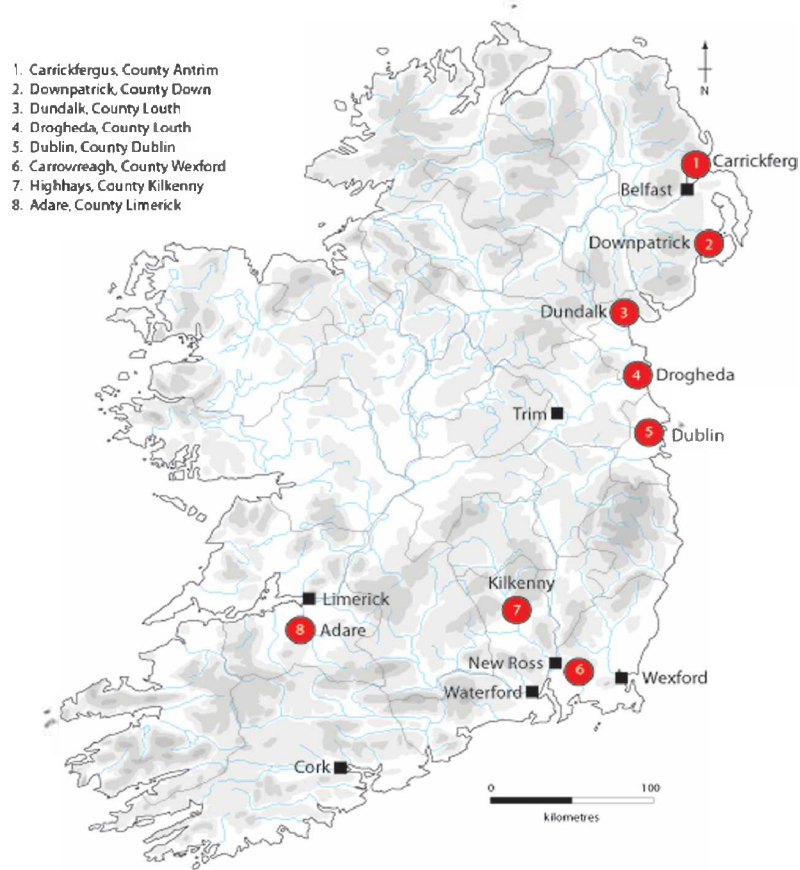
has been found in the east and south of the country in contexts ranging from the 12th to 14th centuries (Ó Flóinn 1988).

## Methodology and parameters of study

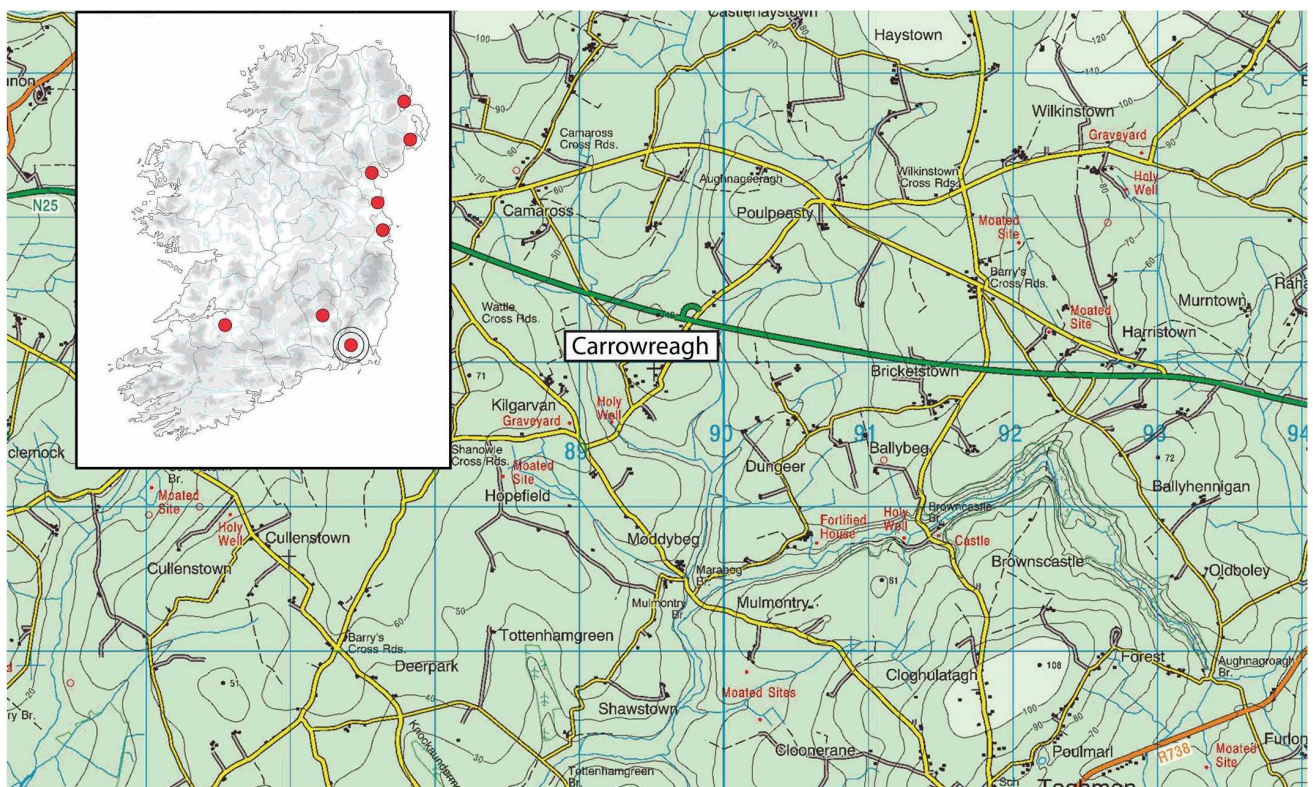
Many of the techniques and methodologies used to study medieval pottery in Britain are relevant to medieval pottery studies in Ireland due to the shared Anglo-Norman heritage of both countries. The methodology designed for this study builds on recent developments in medieval pottery production studies from Ireland, Britain and Europe to create a holistic methodology that examines pottery production within the unique context of 12th to 15th century Ireland (Musty 1974, 58; Moorhouse 1987; Mellor 1994; Gerrard and Marter 2004).

This study of medieval pottery production in Ireland includes evidence from all thirty two counties on the island of Ireland, as the modern political division between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland post-dates the medieval period. This research presents an overview of known pottery production centres in Ireland from the 12th to 15th-century; a total of eight sites in Ireland (Figures 1 and 2). The number of medieval pottery production centres in Ireland is significantly smaller than the 748 of their kind recorded in England (Gerrard and Marter 2004). The comparatively smaller number of pottery production centres in Ireland during the medieval period is largely due to the fact that large scale pottery production was absent in Ireland after the prehistoric period until the arrival of the Anglo-Norman settlers in the late 12th century, while Roman Britain laid the foundations for an enduring ceramic tradition in England.

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**Figure 1**  
Medieval pottery production centres in Ireland



**Figure 2**  
Location of site in County Wexford After Discovery Series scale 1:50000

## A typology for studying medieval pottery kilns in Ireland

Musty's (1974) study of medieval pottery and tile kilns found in Britain developed a detailed typology of kiln types based on the number and position of flues that is still in use today. All of the medieval pottery kilns excavated in Ireland to date are horizontal-draft double-flued kilns, Musty's (1974, 44) type 2, with various subdivisions based on their function and internal structure. This study proposes the following typology (Table 1) for description and interpretation of medieval pottery kilns in Ireland as a distilled version of Musty's (1974) well-established typology that still allows for the variation and flexibility that is represented within the archaeological record. The suggested typology denotes all subtypes 'a' as kilns

without a permanent internal structure, while all subtypes 'b' possess a central spine and all subtypes 'c' possess a raised floor. An overview of the location and types of known pottery kilns from Ireland is presented in Table 2.

## Culture and material culture

The arrival of the Anglo-Norman colonists in the late 12th-century rejuvenated pottery production in the island. This study employs the term 'colonist' to describe the Anglo-Normans who came to Ireland from the late 12th century in terms of the social and political aspects of their conquest and their imposition of Anglo-Norman power in Ireland (Frame 1981, vii; Smith 1999, 5). The term 'settler' is applied to the Anglo-Normans

**Table 1** Classification of medieval pottery kilns in Ireland

kiln type	number of flues	internal structure?	raised floor?	product	additional information	British examples
2a	2	no	possibly	pottery	no permanent internal structure	Chilvers Coton, Nuneaton
2b	2	yes	no	pottery	central spine, load stacked on floor	Ham Green, Somerset
2c	2	yes	yes	pottery	raised floor: central pedestal, arches, perforated skin	Lyveden, Northamptonshire
2d	2	yes	yes	pottery	longitudinally split central pedestal	Chichester

**Table 2** An overview of the medieval pottery kiln types uncovered in Ireland to date by type

site	type	kiln furniture	pedestal/spine	orientation
Downpatrick, County Down	2a	cylindrical props	no	north–south
Carrickfergus County Antrim	2b	none	central stone spine	north–south
Drogheda, County Louth K2	2b	none	central spine/pedestal	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K3	2b	none	central spine/ pedestal	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K4	2b	none	central pedestal	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K7	2b	none	central pedestal	north/north-west–south/south-east
Drogheda, County Louth K8	2b	none	central pedestal capped with large stone	north/north–west-south/south-east
Drogheda, County Louth K9	2b	none	central spine/ pedestal	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K10	2b	none	central spine/ pedestal	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K11	2b	1 fire bar	central stone spine	east–west
Dundalk, County Louth	2c	1 in situ fire bar, more associated with kiln	truncated	east–west
Drogheda, County Louth K5	2c	12 <i>in situ</i> fire bars, 4 fire bars in fill	central pedestal	north–south
Carrowreagh, County Wexford	2c	none	central pedestal capped with large stone	north-east
Highhays, County Kilkenny	2c	1 in situ fire bar, more associated with kiln	with large stone	–south-west
Drogheda, County Louth K12	?2c	fire bars associated with kiln	undisclosed at present	not available
Drogheda, County Louth K1	double flued truncated	none	central spine / pedestal	north–south
Drogheda, County Louth K6	double flued truncated	none	truncated	north–south

that followed the first colonists to Ireland and describes the economic, social and cultural nature of their actions (Curtin 2012). Archaeological and historical evidence indicates that the colonists in Ireland remained as connected to the wider Anglo-Norman world socially and culturally as they did politically. Twelfth- to 13th-century sources record the continued inclusion within court affairs of Anglo-Norman lords and their children after they had moved to Ireland (Frame 1981, 19–20). During the early 13th century, the Anglo-Norman colonists living in Ireland comprised one component of an aristocratic political network of regions and sub regions that centred on the Angevin court (Frame 1981, 20). The material culture of the colonists in Ireland, particularly their pottery, reflects their on-going connection with Anglo-Norman culture. In the same way that the Norman settlers who colonised medieval Wales and Scotland were followed there by potters who made English-style ceramics for their use (Hinton 2005, 50: Fig. 6.4) medieval pottery, using forms and decorative styles from contemporary England, was manufactured in towns and settlements associated with the settlers in Ireland during the 12th to 14th centuries.

The towns associated with medieval pottery production in Ireland were involved in trade on a local level and within the wider Anglo-Norman world that facilitated exchange in a wide range of goods including ceramics. Port towns on the east coast of Ireland, such as Dublin, Drogheda and Dundalk were ideally located to facilitate Anglo-Norman trade within the network of other ports operating around the Irish sea and in continental Europe, such as: Flanders and Gascony in France, the Hansa town of Gdansk, Iceland, Spain and Portugal (Bradley 1997, 26). Imported pottery from towns in England, such as Bristol and Chester, and south-west France reached the Anglo-Norman settlers as part of the importation of barrels of wine into Ireland. The documentary and archaeological evidence from Ireland, including the form and decorative styles of local pottery types, suggests social, cultural, economic and political connections between the populations of English cities such as Bristol to Dublin, Dundalk, Kilkenny and Wexford and also between Cheshire and Downpatrick, Carrickfergus and Drogheda. The settlers' on-going concern with contemporary material culture and technology in England is illustrated by the growth and development of pottery production in Ireland.

Although archaeological excavation has identified multiple examples of local medieval pottery types from Ireland only eight production sites have been identified in Ireland. Six of the eight known medieval pottery production centres from Ireland (Figure 1) were identified by excavation; the remainder were identified by a combination of documentary evidence, cartographic references and the discovery of pottery wasters. The majority of the medieval pottery made in Ireland was produced in or near Anglo-Norman towns or centres of administration from the late 12th / late 14th centuries. Examples of local medieval pottery

types identified by excavations in medieval urban centres include those from Cork (McCutcheon 1995; 2003), Dublin (McCutcheon 2000; 2006), Waterford (Gahan and McCutcheon 1997) and Trim (Sweetman 1978). The pottery from these sites was named in accordance with conventions of medieval pottery analysis that name a pottery type after the area in which it is found to be most prolific, with the suffix 'type' (eg Dublin-type). Once the pottery production centre is known, however, it is named as a 'ware' after the production site (eg Drogheda Ware) (Blake and Davey 1983, 39–40).

### Historical context of medieval pottery production in Ireland

The arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland in AD 1169 ignited a period of political conquest and colonisation, during which they set about overthrowing existing regional powers and creating a new strategic network of administrative and political centres in Ireland (Colfer 1987, 65). The Anglo-Normans conquered existing Hiberno-Norse urban centres such as Wexford, Waterford, Dublin and Limerick, as well as establishing new towns located adjacent to pre-existing centres, such as Hiberno-Norse Cork. They established major towns inland, such as Kilkenny, as well as smaller villages in eastern Ireland, many of which were given borough status to encourage colonists to move there (Barry 2000, 113). Widespread settlement of Ireland that was instigated by baronial families and fulfilled by the colonising peasants, artisans and traders cemented the Anglo-Norman position in Ireland (Frame 1998, 1).

The 13th-century expansion and consolidation of the Anglo-Norman colony in Ireland, which is characterised by rural settlements such as moated sites and expansion of urban suburbs, brought about increased interaction and cooperation between the settlers and their Gaelic Irish neighbours. The gradual acculturation that resulted from this contact was accelerated by the withdrawal of English troops (Richardson and Sayles 1962, 49) and royal investment from Ireland in the 13th/14th centuries which isolated the settlers from the Anglo-Norman lordship. Even as the settler community in Ireland changed and integrated with the Gaelic Irish during the 13th to 14th centuries (Ó Hinnse, 174–5; Frame 1998, 11), they continued to consume locally-produced pottery made in the English style, imported Anglo-Norman pottery and chose to reject the Gaelic Irish tradition of using non-ceramic vessels. Recent studies, such as Blinkhorn (1997) suggest that pottery can be viewed as an indicator of identity, in this study it is perceived as an expression of ethnicity by the settlers through their habitus and the cultural practises it embodied. Shared habitus allows people, such as the Anglo-Norman settlers and wider Anglo-Norman population, to identify with each other (Bentley 1987, 173) and the objects that symbolise this connection represent

cultural practises and beliefs that underline the daily practises, experience and world view of those involved (Given 2004, 80; Jones 2007, 49).

The 14th century is characterised in the medieval history of Ireland by famine and death caused by plague, crop failure, epidemic livestock disease, harsh weather and warfare surrounding the Bruce invasion (AD 1315–18) and Gaelic Irish resurgence. These events significantly reduced the Anglo-Norman settler population (Lydon 2003, 141) and resulted in many social, cultural and economic changes including the demise of local pottery production traditions in the 15th century. Although there is evidence for some level of local pottery production continuing during the 15th to 16th centuries (McCutcheon and Meenan 2011), the archaeological record indicates that the majority of pottery vessels from this period were imported. As a result, the period examined as part by this study of medieval pottery production extends to, but does not include, the 16th century.

### Archaeological evidence for medieval pottery production in Ireland

The rural site of Carrowreagh, County Wexford (Tierney and Johnston 2006) represents one of eight known medieval pottery production centres from Ireland identified by archaeological and documentary evidence (Figure 1 and Table 2). The remaining seven known pottery production sites from Ireland are: Downpatrick, County Down (Pollock and Waterman 1963; McCorry 2001), Carrickfergus, County Antrim (Simpson *et al*, 1979), Dundalk, County Louth (Campbell 1997), Drogheda, County Louth (Powell *et al* 2008; O'Connell 2008), Highhays, County Kilkenny (Ó Drisceoil and Devine 2009), Adare Castle, County Limerick (Sweetman 1980) and Iveagh Markets, Dublin (McCutcheon 2006). The fact that five of the eight known pottery production centres from Ireland were discovered since the late 1990s indicates the timeliness of this research which has benefitted from participation in the sites current and on-going analysis and interpretation.

### Dating evidence for the transfer of potting technology in Ireland

The date ranges for known medieval pottery production centres in Ireland are based on scientific and stratigraphic dating of excavated pottery kilns and artefact typologies. Dating evidence indicates that the multi kiln site of the Old Mart, Drogheda, County Louth was the earliest site of medieval pottery production in Ireland, with Kiln Group 1 from Drogheda (Powell *et al* 2008, 129–130) in operation between the late 12th to 13th centuries. This date range means it was in operation at the same time as the kilns from Dundalk, County Louth

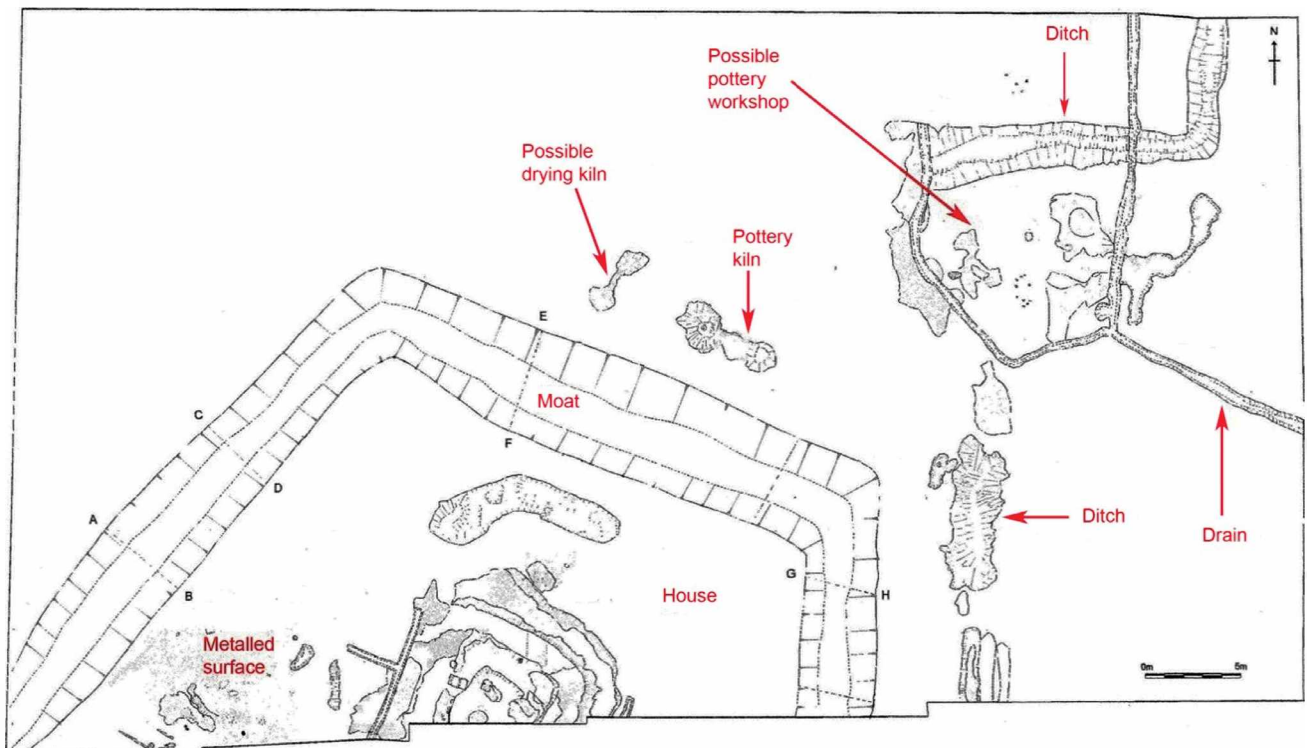
(Campbell 1997, 9; *ibid* pers comm), Downpatrick, County Down (Pollock and Waterman 1963; McCorry 2001, 123; Hounslow 2012) and Carrickfergus, County Antrim (Simpson *et al* 1979, 46; Heslip 1979). This suggests that kiln types 2a, 2b and 2c were in use contemporaneously and that medieval pottery production centres from this period are confined to the north and north-east of the Ireland.

The second kiln group from Drogheda was in operation from the late 13th / early 14th centuries during the same period as the early to late 14th-century kiln from Highhays, County Kilkenny (Karloukovski and Hounslow 2007) and possibly also the kiln from Carrowreagh, County Wexford (Beta 219125, Appendix 4; Tierney and Johnston 2006, 13). Unfortunately, the dates for final use of the group 2 kilns from Drogheda is inconclusive; production probably ended during the late 14th to 15th centuries (Powell *et al* 2008, 129–130) and the date range for the last firing of the Carrowreagh kiln spans the late 13th to early 15th centuries (Tierney and Johnston 2006, 13). Such broad date ranges make it difficult to make any more definitive statements about the kilns in use than it appears that kiln types 2b and 2c were dominant after the 13th century and that pottery production spread to the south of Ireland during this period. It is hoped that additional information from future discoveries of pottery production centres will increase the body of data for comparative analysis and facilitate identification of paths of technical dissemination in Ireland.

### Trends in medieval pottery production centres: location in the landscape

Medieval pottery production centres in Ireland have been primarily located in parts of Anglo-Norman urban centres (Downpatrick, Carrickfergus, Dundalk, Drogheda, Kilkenny and Dublin) or centres of Anglo-Norman administration (Adare Castle, Limerick) associated with 13th-century expansion of the colony. A common characteristic of these sites is their location in the town's western suburbs (Carrickfergus, Downpatrick, Drogheda, Dublin, and Dundalk) which are associated with phases of urban expansion, particularly during the 13th century. Similarly, the pottery production centre of Carrowreagh, County Wexford was constructed beside a moated site, a site type that has been interpreted as a defended farmstead (Colfer 2004, 91) associated with the 13th to 14th-centuries period of Anglo-Norman expansion into the hinterland. The pottery production centre from Carrowreagh, County Wexford is the only medieval pottery production centre (Figure 3) known in Ireland to exist within an isolated rural setting, lying approximately half-way between the Anglo-Norman towns of Wexford and New Ross (Figure 1).

Their common location in the west of towns could reflect Anglo-Norman ideas with regard to town planning rather than localised issues such as access



**Figure 3**  
Plan of Carrowreagh moated site and pottery production centre After Tierney and Johnston 2006 Figure 5

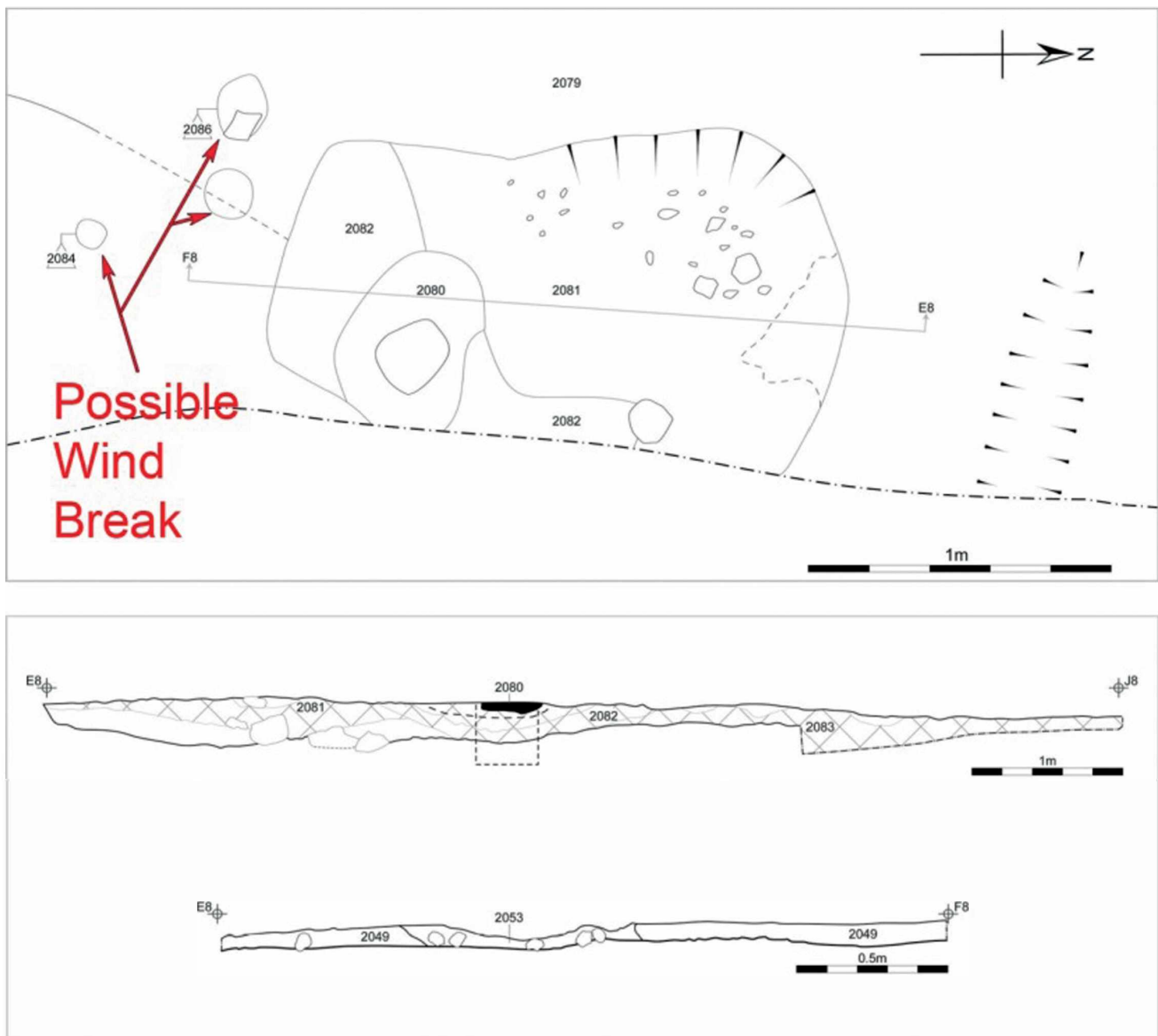
to materials and patronage. The practise of locating industrial activity and crafts in a specifically designated part of town was commonplace in medieval Europe as a sensible way of confining the noise, dirt and waste products associated with craft and industry to one area (Forster and Ratkai 2008). It also served as a means of confining the fire risk associated with kiln-related crafts to one area, often located outside the town walls. The medieval pottery production centres in Drogheda and Dundalk were located within the town wall, possibly a defensive measure due to the frontier location occupied by both towns which were under constant Gaelic Irish attack. Construction of Dundalk's town wall in AD 1305 post-dated the pottery kiln (last used during the period from AD 1170–1265), however, so that its relationship to the town wall was not a concern for the potters at that time.

### Complementary industry and craft at pottery production centres

A common feature of pottery production centres from Ireland and Britain in this period is their close connection to other kiln-related craft and industries, such as tiling, metalworking, baking, corn-drying and lime manufacture. Le Patourel (1968) suggested that medieval potters in England often worked as part time farmers, while Moorhouse argued that potters were also involved in metalworking, baking and woodcraft (1987, 181). It is difficult to say whether the

potters were involved in multiple crafts and industries or if they simply occupied sites in close proximity to other industrial sites within a designated industrial area of town. Co-operation between neighbouring craftspeople could have facilitated technical exchange and also reduced the costs involved in importing raw materials necessary for their trades, such as firewood, to their workshops. As discussed above, confinement of kiln-related industries such as cooking, metalwork, potting and tiling in adjacent extramural locations was a common sense approach to protecting the medieval cities, such as Dublin, from the threat of wayward flames (Keene 1990, 116). In Dublin, the area associated with pottery production was also associated with milling and watercourses during the medieval period that may have gone some way to counteracting the threat of fire posed by kilns in the area.

A craft worker with more than one string to his bow was more economically viable and there is evidence of diversification from the pottery production sites of Drogheda (Powell *et al* 2008) and Kilkenny in particular (Ó Drisceoil and Devine 2009). Although it should be noted that the large scale of excavation at these sites in comparison with others from Ireland most likely biased the evidence for additional activities at these locations. The pottery production centre at Highhays, Kilkenny indicated metalwork was undertaken onsite while evidence for cereal drying and baking was discovered on an adjacent tenement site (Figures 4 and 5; Ó Drisceoil and Devine 2009).

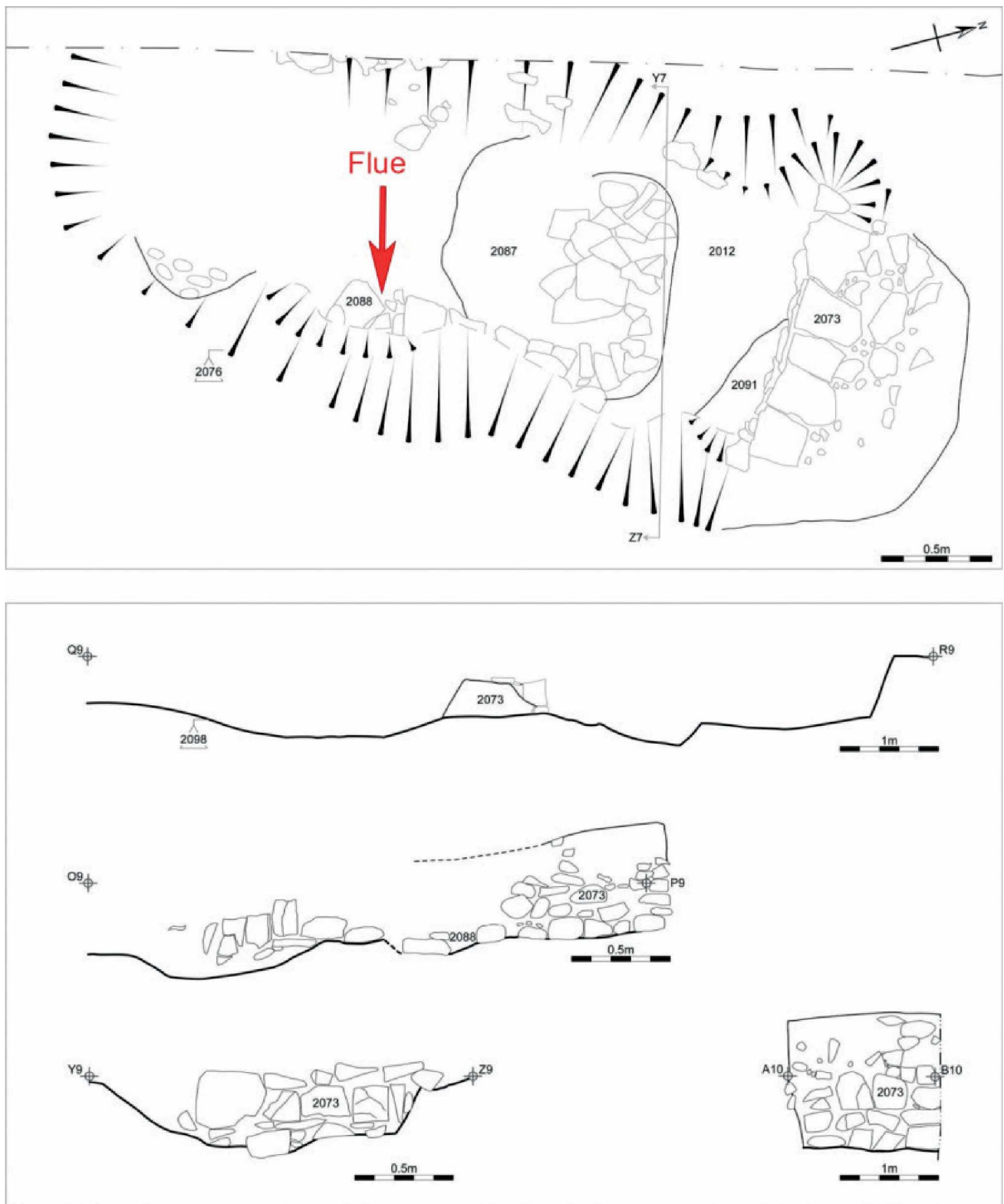


**Figure 6**  
Plan, section and profile of the bake oven from Highhays, Kilkenny  
After Ó Drisceóil and Devine 2009; figure 43

Similar structures from Raunds were used for crop drying (Johnston *et al* 1997, 20). Evidence from Lyveden suggested that some potters also worked as bakers and metalworkers during different phases of occupation onsite (Moorhouse 1987, 181). Further examples of medieval potting sites linked with metalworking were identified by Moorhouse and Le Patourel at sites in West Yorkshire, Harlow and East Sussex (Moorhouse 1987, 181).

The most industrially diverse site was unsurprisingly the multi-phase large scale pottery production centre from Drogheda. Activities such as metalworking, baking and lime production were undertaken on the pottery production centre (Powell *et al* 2008) in addition to medieval tile production across the street (Campbell 1985). The range of activity at the Old Mart is similar to that undertaken at the

medieval pottery production centre of Lyveden, Northamptonshire where evidence for baking and metalworking was uncovered (Moorhouse 1987, 181). Evidence from two medieval pottery production centres in Glapthorn, Northamptonshire suggests that the pottery kilns were used to burn lime between pottery loads, indicating further potential for diversity (Johnston *et al* 1997, 13). The ratio of sites with evidence for multiple crafts and a range of pottery production processes onsite to the number of sites investigated through larger excavation area underlines the potential for future discoveries in association with known kilns. For example, the cumulative results of multiple excavations in the region of the Old Mart, Drogheda suggests the potential scale of medieval pottery production centres and the benefit of large scale excavation in the vicinity of known sites.



**Figure 5**  
 Plan, section and profile of cereal-drying kiln from Highhays, Kilkenny  
 After Ó Drisceóil and Devine 2009; figure 41



## Conclusions

Pottery production on a large scale was reintroduced to Ireland as part of the cultural package that accompanied the Anglo-Norman settlers in the late 12th century and continued until the late 14th to 15th centuries. Current evidence indicates that pottery production in Ireland was associated with Anglo-Norman urban centres and centres of administration with the sole exception of the pottery associated with an isolated rural settlement in Carrowreagh, County Wexford. The settlers' on-going concern with contemporary material culture and technology in England is illustrated through the growth and spread of pottery production centres in Ireland. This paper is intended as an overview of the research themes and findings discussed in greater detail in my PhD thesis (Curtin 2012).

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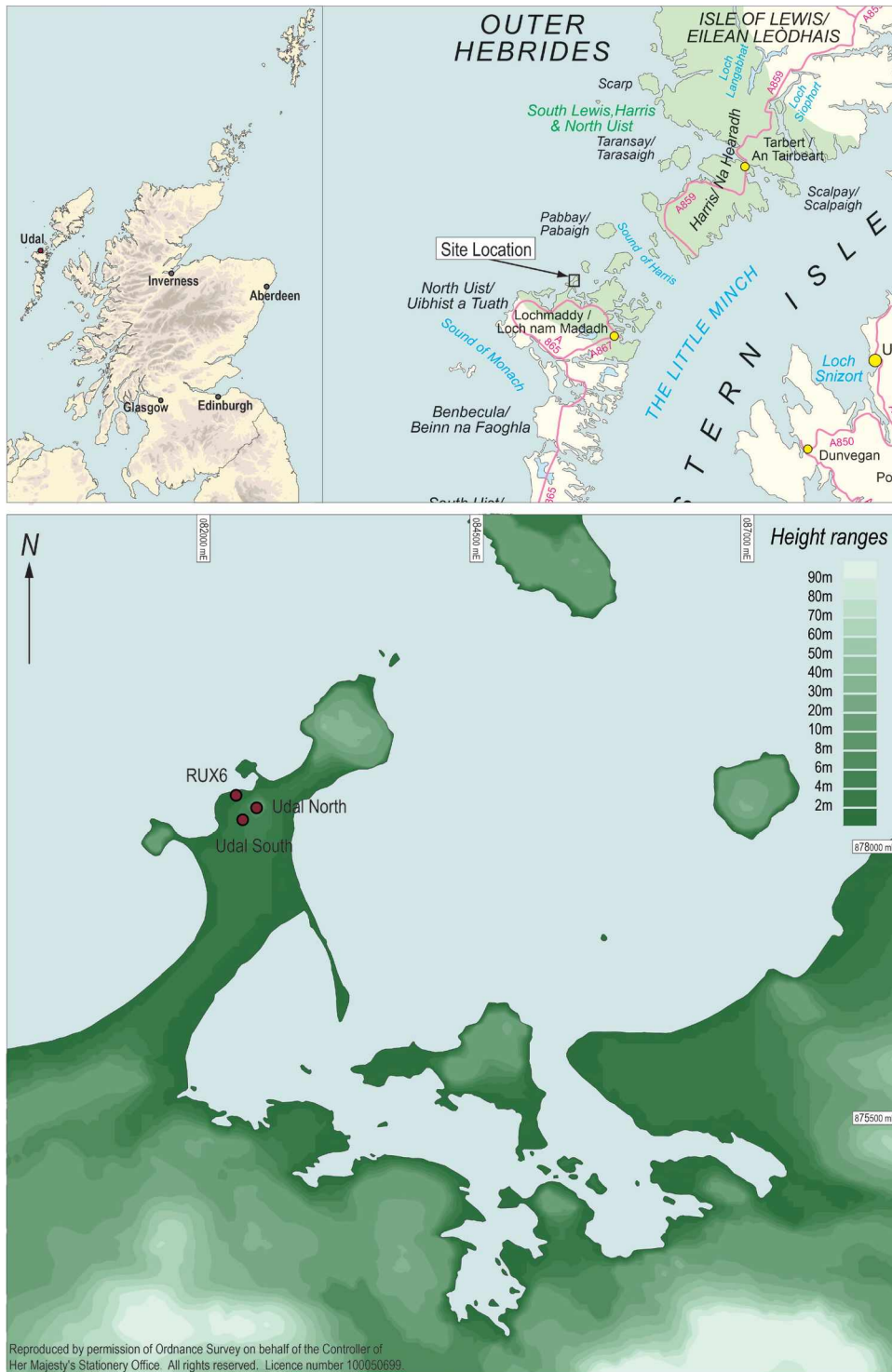
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## Résumé

L'article ci-dessous fait le tour d'horizon des preuves archéologiques et documentaires de la production de poterie médiévale en Irlande et la replace dans le contexte d'études semblables réalisées en Grande-Bretagne, avec laquelle l'Irlande partage le même héritage anglo-normand. La période à l'étude est définie par l'arrivée des Anglo-normands qui s'installent en Irlande à la fin du 12<sup>ème</sup> siècle, marquant les débuts de la production à grande échelle de poterie dans l'Irlande du Moyen-Âge, et se referme avec sa disparition au cours du 15<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Si les Anglo-normands installés en Irlande vivaient à la frontière occidentale du monde anglo-normand, ils continuaient à s'y intéresser sur le plan politique, économique et culturel, et la continuation de ces liens est attestée par leur culture matérielle, en particulier leur tradition de production céramique.

## Zusammenfassung

Der folgende Artikel gibt einen Überblick über die archäologischen und dokumentarischen Belege für die Herstellung von Töpferware im Mittelalter in Irland und stellt diese in den Kontext ähnlicher Studien in Großbritannien, das mit Irland ein gemeinsames anglo-normannische Erbe hat. Der untersuchte Zeitraum beginnt mit der Ankunft der anglo-normannischen Siedler in Irland Ende des 12. Jahrhunderts, was den Anfang der mittelalterlichen Herstellung von Töpferwaren in Irland in großem Ausmaß definiert, und er endet mit dem Niedergang der Produktion im Laufe des 15. Jahrhunderts. Obwohl die anglo-normannischen Siedler in Irland am äußersten westlichen Rand der anglo-normannischen Welt lebten, beweist ihre materielle Kultur und insbesondere ihre Töpfereitradition, dass sie weiterhin politisch, wirtschaftlich und kulturell mit dieser Welt durchgängig verbunden blieben.



**Figure 1**  
Location of the site Drawn by Fiona Jackson