These are interesting times to be a scholar of the early medieval period in Ireland. The unprecedented number of excavations conducted here over the past twenty years has produced a similarly unprecedented amount of data. Scholars could be at the cusp of a whole new understanding of the period, although there is much data to be digested and discussed first. An impressive number of the sites investigated during the recent infrastructural boom in Ireland have been published in various levels of detail, and many of them are of interest to early medieval scholars. So much so that it is becoming increasingly difficult, but thankfully not impossible, to keep up to date!

This collection of papers, edited by Christiaan Corlett and Michael Potterton, represents the third in the series, ‘Research papers in Irish archaeology’, following Rural Settlement in Medieval Ireland (Wordwell, 2009) and Death and Burial in Early Medieval Ireland (Wordwell, 2010). Both of these have already made significant contributions to our knowledge of medieval Ireland, and the present volume continues in this vein.

The volume contains a collection of reasonably detailed excavation reports together with a pair of more analytic, synthesising articles, with the focus on secular rather than ecclesiastical settlement. In terms of its detail it falls somewhere between the geographically widespread but yearly interim conference proceedings published by the National Roads Authority and the more in-depth region-specific volumes sponsored by the same agency. This makes it a book suited to only the keenest amateurs and to scholars already studying early medieval Ireland. It is certainly not an introductory text, and while there is a major gap in the
market for such a text, a large block of usable new data with detailed discussion of several key sites is always most welcome. It is large, amounting to 355 pages, with colour illustrations throughout — extremely important for portraying artefacts in print — representing good value for money. Almost every article also contains useful and well arranged series of diagrams, with the latest technology utilised to produce site morphology diagrams and computer-generated maps of the highest quality.

An important feature of this publication is the provision of a large number of radiocarbon dates. Before the recent phase of hyperactivity in Irish archaeology, only a relatively small number of radiocarbon and dendrochronological dates — from forty-seven sites as of 1997 — were available to scholars of the early medieval period. This meant that discussions of settlement form and patterning, and change over time often had to be based on potentially unreliable, and often vague, references in various historical, legal and hagiographic texts whose focus was on matters other than settlement. This understandably left any attempts at analysis and explanation resting on potentially unstable foundations, considering that more than 45,000 potentially early medieval settlement sites had been identified on morphological grounds by the mid to late 1990s, usually in the form of native enclosed settlements, more commonly known as ring forts.

At present, the number of radiocarbon dates available stands at roughly six times what it was at that point, and growing. The ongoing provision of more radiocarbon dates for site types associated with the period, both in this volume, in projects such as EMAP and new publications of other sites, has meant that the evidence for the period can begin to move out from being a potentially statistically insignificant blip little more than c. 0.1% of a potential dataset into more statistically meaningful analysis.
The collection of sites discussed here is not as geographically widespread as might be expected, although it does not really detract from the volume. It might also be argued that the distribution of sites included helps to redress the geographical imbalance of early medieval settlement studies apparent prior to the late 1990s. Up to then, the majority of the work carried out had been in eastern Ulster, with another smaller cluster of research in Cork and Limerick, with no absolute dates in several counties. Recent work has begun to redress this balance, this volume included, although it might be argued that a new imbalance is forming around Greater Dublin, a reflection of the focus of infrastructural development and regional population growth in Ireland in recent years.

Ten of the sites featured are in northern Leinster. These include the investigations of a souterrain at Tateetra, Co. Louth (Tracy Collins, Frank Coyne and Avril Hayes, with specialist discussions by Blaze O’Connor and Tomás Ó Carragáin); in Co. Meath, the crannóg at Moynagh Lough (John Bradley), and the complex multiphase series of enclosures and potentially agricultural features at Colp West (Donald Murphy and Kiltrough (Derek Gallagher) with contributions by Faith Bailey. Co. Dublin is represented by papers on the excavation of a series of corn-drying kilns at Darcystown (Judith Carroll), the enclosed settlement and potentially related landscape features at Lusk (Antoine Giacometti), the enclosed settlement at Ballynakelly (Ciara McCarthy), and the enclosed settlement, kilns and potentially related ditches at Glebe and Laughanstown (Matthew Seaver, with detailed specialist contributions from Penny Johnston, Lena Strid and Catherine Swift). Also featured are Fintan Walsh’s investigation of the enclosed settlement at Killickaweeny, Co. Kildare and, further west, Tim Coughlan’s excavations at the enclosure at Cappydonnell Big, Co. Offaly.
In southern Leinster, the partially excavated trivallate ringfort, itself overlying a prehistoric ring-ditch and overlain by a late medieval moated site at Baunogephlure, Co. Carlow, receive treatment from Emmet Stafford and Catherine McLoughlin, with an additional discussion of the pottery by Audren Gahan. In adjacent Co. Kilkenny, the bivallate enclosed settlement at Leggetsrath West is addressed by Anne-Marie Lennon and Robert O'Hara, with useful discussion of early medieval pottery by Ian Doyle and James Eogan. The ringfort at Lisanisk, Co. Monaghan, also investigated by Tim Coughlan, is the only Ulster site to be discussed. Its location, in the southern part of the county is such that it could be regarded as more closely related to the adjacent parts of Leinster rather than anything further north.

Two sites from Munster include the enclosures at Curraheen, Co. Cork and the plectrum-shaped enclosure at Newtown, Co. Limerick, explored by Ed Danaher and Frank Coyne, respectively. Six sites in Connacht are also examined. In Co. Mayo, the focus is on the investigation of the enclosed settlement at Carrowkeel (Susanne Zajac with specialist contributions from Margaret McCarthy and Meriel McClatchie). At the other end of the country are Richard Gillespie’s excavations of the bivallate enclosure at Cloonaghboy and of the series of enclosures, souterrains, iron production features, pits and a potential round house at Lowpark. In Co. Galway, three more sites are discussed: a cashel with an annex and possible round house at Coolagh excavated by Colum Hardy, the ringfort with potential round house and other settlement features and evidence for a potential late medieval reoccupation at Mackney assessed by Finn Delaney, and the cashel with possible annexe, souterrain and cereal kilns at Carnmore West explored by Bruce Sutton.

One of the most important aspects of this collection is that it contains sites of widely varying durations of use, ranging from the short-
lived enclosed settlement at Curraheen to enclosed long-occupied multiphase sites such as Leggetsrath. There is also an interesting level of variance in site morphology, ranging from the crannóg at Moynagh Lough to the plectrum-shaped site at Newtown, irregular-shaped enclosures at Cappydonnell Big and Lusk, ovoid enclosures such as Cloonaghboy, and the more classic near circular enclosures at Mackney. Indeed it is worth noting that very few of the sites are completely circular, but all share similar features on a basic level and seem to have had similar functions both to each other and to more ‘classic’ ringforts. This might be hugely significant, as there are a great number of as yet unclassified enclosures throughout the Irish landscape, so it may be that even more early medieval settlement evidence exists than previously thought, and that our present understanding of settlement distribution might need serious reconsideration.

It should be noted that only one site in the present collection, the crannóg at Moynagh Lough, was excavated in order to answer research questions, although it was initially chosen due to its discovery and damaging rather than for more academic reasons. The other twenty development-related sites were excavated as a matter of more pressing necessity, the main aim being the preservation of as much information as possible in textual and pictorial form ahead of the destruction of the sites. Without descending into polemic, this can be a different proposition, as questions are asked of the data largely after excavation. Archaeology of this form must of necessity be empirical and inductive, as much data as possible must be collected, and due to the temporal constraints imposed by economic considerations, this must be done as quickly as possible.

In terms of information-gathering, large excavations ahead of large-scale schemes have a number of beneficial aspects. Ephemeral features related to larger sites that would probably have gone otherwise
undetected can become visible in areas stripped of topsoil and exposed to the elements for several months while those large sites are being excavated. This does not usually happen on research-orientated excavations, which normally are much smaller both in spatial focus and in the scale of operations. They are usually seasonal, with certain areas of sites opened for a number of weeks before being covered again. However, it should be noted that this long exposure can have non-beneficial aspects, what can be good for feature retrieval might not necessarily be good for the retrieval of artefacts, or for many aspects of microarchaeology. In addition, the practice of non-sieving of spoil on commercial excavations can also affect the number of artefacts retrieved on site. Therefore, perhaps more of a mixture of approaches might be necessary in future, as each methodology can provide complementary results when used in tandem across a number of sites.

As already noted, between them the sites provide a great deal of information. Some have been addressed in more depth than others. In some accounts greater space is given to discussion of portable material culture, human, faunal and plant remains. This might be due to varying amounts of each type of evidence and to the fact that post-excavation analysis of a number of the sites (e.g., Kiltrough) was still ongoing at the time of publication. It is to be hoped that these might receive a full, in-depth publication in the future. One criticism might be that the volume could have benefited from the inclusion of fewer sites thus making room for more indepth general discussion. There is a danger at times of getting caught up in specifics.

Two brief synthesising articles are included, and they are both thought-provoking in different ways. Teresa Bolger’s discussion of early medieval land tenure mentions the dangers inherent in archaeologists’ using ‘deceptively attractive’ historical sources such as Crith Gablach out of context should be read by every archaeologist using historical sources,
as accessibility does not mean suitability, without taking account of the debates on the nature of the evidence. It might be argued that this has been a frequent failing of medieval archaeology in general over the years. Another failing has frequently been the major lack of application of approaches outside of the conservative culture-historical and empiricist paradigms. In this respect, Aidan O'Sullivan’s short article discussing the praxis of daily life in an enclosed settlement is a most welcome addition. It is always good to see approaches from more recent archaeological thinking, and indeed from across the social sciences, being brought to bear.

In summary, the collection will provide present and future scholars with some concrete, usable case studies, both directly through their own research, and indirectly by contributing to the overall body of knowledge on early medieval Ireland. Along with the range of other volumes of excavation reports and projects such as the INSTAR-funded Early Medieval Archaeology Project, it is helping to ensure that the early medieval archaeology of the boom in Ireland does not go the way of so much English infrastructural archaeology: buried under a pile of difficult-to-access unpublished grey literature, and for this everyone involved must be especially commended, not least the editors of the current volume. By necessity, the volume is empirical, inductive, data-centred and relatively low on explanation, but that can come later. What is most important for the present is for the data to become available to as many scholars as possible.

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