FIELD OF FIRE: EVIDENCE FOR WARTIME CONFLICT IN A 17TH-CENTURY COTTIER SETTLEMENT IN COUNTY MEATH, IRELAND

WILLIAM O. FRAZER

Abstract

Much of conflict archaeology is focused on battlefields and the material culture of military troops, but what about civilians caught up in warzones? Can archaeology contribute to our understanding of how such people fared during troublous times, and the manner in which political and social turmoil affected them?

By considering the recently excavated, late 16th–17th century A.D. settlement of ‘Cleglin’, this article will examine the evidence for wartime conflict: whether poor inhabitants were subject to violence such as armed raids and the razing of buildings; whether they were forced to abandon their homes for any extended period; and whether there is evidence for the occupation or billeting of soldiers, or for the enrolment of male inhabitants in militias. A more comprehensive—and historically accurate—conflict archaeology should not just scrutinize the evidence for overt violence, or it risks excluding non-combatants from such historical endeavour (except, perhaps, as hapless victims). Instead the material culture of certain related events associated with warfare—market price fluctuations, famine, plague—needs also to be considered.

At Killegland, scrutiny of household economies yielded some of the most profound and intriguing data: relating to wartime economy and risk-averse behaviour in agricultural practice.

Introduction

An aspect of the archaeology of conflict that has received less attention than the landscape archaeology of battlefields, or the material culture of military personnel, is nevertheless central to any concern with the history of violence: the experience of civilians in a warzone.

The usefulness of archaeology in addressing the history of the everyday, and the history of ‘subalterns’—oppressed, minority groups who are nevertheless dialectically fundamental to how dominant groups are defined—have both been emphasised many times before (e.g., McGuire and Paynter 1991; Mrozowski, Beaudry and Ziesing 1996; Frazer 1999a and 1999b; Saunders 2000; Mayne and Murray 2001). Perhaps the effectiveness of archaeologies of the everyday, of inequality, or of resistance has even sometimes been overstated (and certainly sometimes it has been dismissed). Despite this, there remains a genuine pathway of insight to past dispossessed groups via their material residues. Such insight derives from the necessarily non-discursive,
inexplicit nature of much human activity in circumstances where to behave otherwise might have unpleasant consequences (Scott 1985 and 1990; Frazer 1999a), but also it relates to the typical absence of these non-discursive concerns from textual historical sources, even in those rare instances when subalterns themselves have not been omitted from written documents. Travel down this archaeological pathway is perilous because the material culture of poor and marginalised people is usually scant, and therefore interpretive understanding may be fraught—less scientifically robust, more inferential.

The topic of this article is undoubtedly so—less robust, more inferential. It concerns the excavation of a late 16th-17th-century cottier settlement of poor farmers and labourers in east Co. Meath, Ireland (Figs 1–3, Plates 1–2), and the attempt to reconcile the apparent lack of material evidence for conflict from the excavation with the violence that—we know from other historical evidence—swept intermittently across this part of the Irish countryside in an ‘age of atrocity’ (Edwards, Lenihan and Tait 2007). This dilemma reflects a broader issue for conflict archaeology: that we consider the effects of such aggression on non-combatants caught up in wartime goings-on. However, to do so may require us to reframe our analyses to consider the various material ways in which a wartime economy—and not just overt violence—affect such people.

The context in which such work is being undertaken is an exciting one: there is a growing host of allied, complementary scholarship, especially in Ireland. Conflict archaeology is spearheading a charge within broader archaeological discourse to consider grim, oft-neglected, but central, aspects of human existence: strife and violence. In Ireland, post-medieval archaeology is beginning to garner the interest and statutory concern that it deserves, although the assault on statutory and political indifference in the Republic is far from over (IPMAG, the Irish Post-Medieval Archaeology Group, has been the ‘forlorn hope’ vanguard in this endeavour). IPMAG’s ranks include many archaeologists of Northern Ireland, where the significance of post-medieval archaeology, conflict archaeology not least, has never ceased to be politically charged: their experiences have been paramount in the advocacy for post-medieval archaeology in the Republic (see Donnelly and Hornung 2002). The recent formation of the Battlefields Project panel of experts is a promising development (Anon. 2007), and one hopes this may lead to the construction of a statutory bulwark for the protection and conservation of battlefields in the Republic that is landscape-based. Such a result from the Battlefields Project would be of great potential significance for Ireland, not only for the protection of battlefields, but because it would constitute a substantial reconnaissance into landscape-based—rather than site/monument based—legislation, and could