



## Forests and chases in medieval Ireland, 1169–c.1399

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### ABSTRACT

Irish forests and chases have been largely ignored by medievalists. Alongside parks and warrens, these were landscapes within which the elite sought to control not only access to hunting, but also to timber and woodland resources. The aim of this paper is to collate and review the evidence for forests and chases in Ireland in the period 1169–c.1399 and to examine the chronology of their creation, their ownership, uses and functions. The paper uses an interdisciplinary approach, combining historical, cartographic and archaeological evidence for past activity and provides an insight into these extensive medieval landscape features. It is demonstrated that in contrast to England, where forests and chases were important as elite hunting landscapes, in Ireland, they were most significant as sources of venison and timber and as a means of giving gifts and offices to high-ranking subjects.

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British medieval forests and chases have been the subject of numerous studies.<sup>1</sup> However, with some notable exceptions forests and chases have been largely ignored for Ireland, and even when these have been discussed, the focus has tended to be on woodland as a whole and its more recent history.<sup>2</sup> Alongside parks, which

have been the subject of recent attention, these were landscapes within which the elite sought to control access to hunting, along with control of timber and wood resources.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this paper is therefore to collate and review the evidence for forests and chases in Ireland in the period 1169–c.1399 and to examine the chronology of their creation and use, and their ownership and functions. The starting date is defined by the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in Ireland, while the end point is somewhat more fluid. In England and much of Europe the high medieval period has often been defined as finishing at the end of the thirteenth century, after which point it is usual to refer to the late medieval period. However, social and political upheavals in the mid fourteenth century have been seen as marking a more significant turning point in Irish history, with the decline in Anglo-Norman control over the island and the resurgence of the Gaelic Irish.<sup>4</sup>

Irish forests and chases were governed under the Anglo-Norman legal system, which was based on that of England.

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<sup>1</sup> N.D.G. James, *A History of English Forestry*, Oxford, 1981; C. Young, *The Royal Forests of Medieval England*, Philadelphia, 1979; J.M. Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves in Medieval Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1979; L.M. Cantor, Forests, chases, parks and warrens, in: L.M. Cantor (Ed.), *The English Medieval Landscape*, London, 1982, 56–85; J.M. Bond, Forests, chases, warrens and parks in medieval Wessex, in: M. Aston and C. Lewis (Eds.), *The Medieval Landscape of Wessex*, Oxbow monograph 46, Oxford, 1994, 134–144; J.C. Cox, *The Royal Forests of England*, London, 1905; R. Grant, *The Royal Forests of England*, Stroud, 1991; J. Langton, Royal and non-royal forests and chases in England and Wales, *Historical Research* 88 (2015) 381–401; J. Langton and G. Jones (Eds.), *Forests and Chases of Medieval England and Wales c. 1000–c.1500: Towards a Survey and Analysis*, Oxford, 2010; G.J. Turner, *Select Pleas of the Forest*, London, 1901; J. Langton, Forests and Chases of England and Wales c. 1000 to c. 1850, <http://info.sjc.ox.ac.uk/forests> last accessed 11 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> E. Neeson, Woodland in history and culture, in: J.W. Foster and H.C.G. Chesney (Eds.), *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, Dublin, 1997, 133–156; E. Neeson, *A History of Irish Forestry*, Dublin, 1991; N. Everett, *The Woods of Ireland: A History, 700–1800*, Dublin, 2014; P. Slattery, Woodland management, timber and wood production, and trade in Anglo-Norman Ireland, c.1170 to c.1350, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 139 (2009) 63–79; H.F. Hore, Woods and fastnesses, and their denizens, in ancient Leinster, *Journal of the Killenny and South-east of Ireland Archaeological Society* 1 (1856) 229–240; A.C. Forbes, Some legendary and historical references to Irish woods, and their significance, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section B: Biological, Geological, and Chemical Science* 41 (1932–1933) 15–36; T.P. Le Fanu, The royal forest of Glencree, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 23 (1893) 268–280.

<sup>3</sup> F. Beglane, *Anglo-Norman Parks in Medieval Ireland*, Dublin, 2015, 9–11, 88–89; Cantor, Forests, chases, parks and warrens; F. Beglane, Theatre of power: the Anglo-Norman park at Earlsparck, Co. Galway, Ireland, *Medieval Archaeology* 58 (2014) 307–317; F. Beglane, The medieval park of Maynooth, *Journal of the Kildare Archaeological Society* 20 (2015) 56–70; F. Beglane, Deer parks: lost medieval monuments of the Irish countryside, in: V. McAlister and T. Barry (Eds.), *Space and Settlement in the Middle Ages*, Dublin, 2015, 151–166.

<sup>4</sup> T.B. Barry, *The Archaeology of Medieval Ireland*, London, 1987, 168, 197; T. McNeill, *Castles in Ireland: Feudal Power in a Gaelic World*, London, 1997, 173; G.H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans: 1169–1333*, Oxford, 1911–1920, Volume 4, 157–159.

Generally, at that time, the law as it applied in England was deemed to be valid in Ireland, except in particular cases where legislation might be modified to suit the circumstances.<sup>5</sup> As with England, justice was locally administered through a series of manorial and county courts as well as courts held by those towns and rural areas with borough status and courts held by the exchequer. There were also ecclesiastical courts that had jurisdiction over certain matters and over offences in the 'crosslands' or church-held lands. Royal justice was administered by the courts of the Justiciar, the common bench and itinerant justices as well as special commissions.<sup>6</sup> A significant portion of the Anglo-Norman held regions of Ireland, particularly in the east, were governed as 'liberties'.<sup>7</sup> These were lordships in which the lord had much greater rights than in shired counties. He had administration and jurisdiction over all aspects of the liberty, with the exception of the 'four pleas of the crown': arson, rape, treasure trove and forestall or highway robbery. In the case of the liberty of Trim, now in Co. Meath, the lord even had jurisdiction over these. The chief officer of a liberty was the seneschal, and each liberty had its own separate system of administration and justice.

Compared to England, relatively few Irish medieval documents have survived. For example, there are no original records of shire government, and only isolated examples from liberties, with only two manorial court rolls surviving for the entire medieval period.<sup>8</sup> Documents were lost through various mishaps over the centuries, not least the Four Courts fire of 1922, in which large numbers of records were destroyed. All of this means that specific evidence relating to the judicial system within forests and chases is limited. What evidence has been identified in this project has been gleaned from published sources and calendars, although it is likely that other references are present in currently unpublished documents. Even less information is available regarding the attitudes of the Gaelic Irish to the specific imposition of forests and chases on the landscape as compared with the granting of lands that had previously been held by them. Occasionally individuals with Irish names are mentioned in documents as, for example, tenants of a manor, but this is often the extent of our knowledge. One thing that can be said is that throughout the later medieval period and up to the time of the Plantations in the seventeenth century, the uplands and woodlands were the stronghold of Gaelic rebels.<sup>9</sup> For example, in the later thirteenth century the mountains of the forested area south of Dublin provided a base for the O'Tooles to raid the more settled lands.<sup>10</sup>

Given the lack of study to date, the patchy nature of the historical and archaeological evidence and the importance of these landscape forms, it was felt that this topic could be best addressed using an interdisciplinary approach. Initially, a wide range of published documentary sources were systematically searched for relevant material.<sup>11</sup> From this, cartographic and place name evidence was used to identify the forests and chases referred to. Both

published and unpublished zooarchaeological evidence was of value in examining the role of hunting in the forests and of wild meat in elite diets. The paper first examines the origins and definitions of forests and chases, demonstrating their widespread existence across Europe, before focusing on Irish examples. It then looks at the locations, functions, administration and disafforestation of the forests. Finally, the paper concludes that while this landscape form was introduced by the Anglo-Normans, political and economic realities meant that the main functions of the Irish forests were slightly different to those in England. In Ireland, there was a focus on them as sources of venison and timber and as a means of giving gifts and offices to high-ranking subjects rather than as locations for elite hunting.

## Origins and definitions

The first recorded usage of the word *forestum* or *forestis* is with reference to the Ardennes in AD648. Forests in the legal sense have been identified in a number of countries including England, Scotland, Wales, France, Belgium, Germany and Italy.<sup>12</sup> There is debate as to the origin and meaning of the word, although it probably comes from the Latin *foris*, meaning 'outside'.<sup>13</sup> Oliver Rackham thought that it meant 'tract of trees' whereas, by contrast, Chris Wickham stressed that it defined rights to the land rather than vegetation. Crucially though, in the seventh to ninth centuries, it was land 'in royal possession' and by the thirteenth century in both England and in what is now Germany the word related to 'land reserved for the use of the king, above all for his hunting'.<sup>14</sup> In early medieval Germany *Wildbann* or *eremus* land referred to desolate wilderness that was held by the king. Often these areas were subsequently declared to be forests, probably where pressure on land by colonising peasants resulted in the king choosing to preserve his hunting and timber rights over hitherto unused ground.<sup>15</sup> Within the forest the king was 'outside' the concerns and pressures of state and everyday life, in a place where his prerogative held sway. Therefore the forest, the venison and indeed the act of hunting took on enormous symbolic significance, and any violation of these was an act of direct opposition to the king himself.<sup>16</sup>

As elsewhere, the concept of a hunting reserve existed in England prior to the Norman conquest, although the complexity of the system at this early date has been the subject of debate.<sup>17</sup> The number of such reserves expanded to over six hundred during the later medieval period.<sup>18</sup> In Wales, there were over two hundred and fifty examples, of which only a few were royal forests. Many had been set up by marcher lords, who held their land as liberties, and

<sup>5</sup> Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, Volume 4, 41–44.

<sup>6</sup> P. Connolly, *Medieval Record Sources*, Dublin, 2002, 23, 30–31.

<sup>7</sup> K. Stringer, States, liberties and communities in medieval Britain and Ireland (c.1100–1400), in: M. Prestwich (Ed.), *Liberties and Identities in the Medieval British Isles*, Woodbridge, 2008, 5–36.

<sup>8</sup> Connolly, *Medieval Record Sources*, 30–31; Sparky Brooker, personal communication; P. Dryburgh and B. Smith, *Handbook and Select Calendar of Sources for Medieval Ireland in the National Archives of the United Kingdom*, Dublin, 2005, 230–241.

<sup>9</sup> H.S. Sweetman, *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland, 1171–1307*, London, 1875–1886, Volume 2, no. 156.

<sup>10</sup> J. Lydon, A land at war, in: A. Cosgrove (Ed.), *A New History of Ireland: Volume 2: Medieval Ireland 1169–1534*, Oxford, 1987, 240–274, 256–264.

<sup>11</sup> It is not proposed to give a detailed review of these here. The reader is referred to Connolly, *Medieval Record Sources*.

<sup>12</sup> C. Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European Social History, 400–1200*, London, 1994, 156, 160; Gilbert, *Hunting and Hunting Reserves in Medieval Scotland*; O. Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, London, 1987, 131; J. Langton, Forests and chases in Wales and the Welsh Marches: an exploration of their origin and characteristics, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 263–272.

<sup>13</sup> R.P. Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago and London, 1992, 69.

<sup>14</sup> Rackham, *The History of the Countryside*, 129; Wickham, *Land and Power*, 159–160.

<sup>15</sup> R. Keiss, The word 'forst/forest' as an indicator of fiscal property and possible consequences for the history of Western European forests, in: C. Watkins (Ed.), *European Woods and Forests*, Oxford, 1998, 11–18.

<sup>16</sup> W.P. Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual in English Medieval Literature*, Woodbridge, 2006, 46–48, 70, 143; Harrison, *Forests*, 69–81.

<sup>17</sup> Grant, *The Royal Forests of England*, 7–10; D. Hooke, Medieval forests and parks in southern and central England, in: Watkins (Ed.), *European Woods and Forests*, 19–32.

<sup>18</sup> G. Jones, A 'common of hunting?': forests lordship and community before and after the conquest, in: Langton and Jones (Eds), *Forests and Chases of Medieval England and Wales*, 36–67.

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