



Charlemont grant report

Recipient name:	Dr Karen Dempsey
Discipline and subject area:	Humanities and Social Sciences;
Amount and year awarded:	€2,451 in 2020
Title of project:	'Feeling Home': telling a digital sensorial story of medieval Irish houses.

Summary of findings:

Travelling to America to work with Prof Tringham (UC Berkeley), an expert in feminist archaeology and digital storytelling, was such an enriching experience. Our conversations, my learning through research and exposure to a different cultural-academic life has been very rewarding personally and professionally. My access, on a one-to-one, basis with a world leading digital archaeologist, gave me an unparalleled opportunity to explore and understand more diverse ways of engaging with archaeological evidence. This will have a lifelong impact on my own practice as an archaeologist but also in my understanding of feminist pedagogy which in turn will influence others as I continue through my career. Prof Tringham was an inspiring person to work with.

'Feeling Home', was created to work as an addition to my Irish Research Council Fellowship 'Home is Where the Heart(h) is'. In this Charlemont Fellowship, I wanted to develop a way to showcase the complex lives of medieval households by building on the material evidence. Working with Prof Ruth Tringham, this project, combines multimedia technology and sensory archaeology to interpret and imagine sensorial events that may represent those that occurred within the household in the medieval past. The overall aim was to show how we can 'deal with' the emotional lives of past people by engaging creatively with archaeology evidence. The point is not to develop a definitive account of the past but to show that multiple stories exist and can be drawn out from the material evidence from medieval households.

Over six weeks, I trained-through-research in the application of digital and sensorial archaeology to medieval households. This included daily one-to-one conversations with Prof Ruth Tringham as well as reading a wide range of new literature from anthropology and digital archaeology to film studies, alternative ethnographies and feminist epistemologies. In our discussions, and co-written collaborative article, we reviewed issues still present in archaeology regarding the prevalence of certainty and fear over accepting ambiguity. We wanted to move further than critique towards building, in other words, putting our ideas into practice. We believe all interpretations require imagination, and we wanted to show how our imaginations work in regard to archaeological evidence as well as the outcomes of that.

Together, we decided that the most suitable way to capture a sensorial past was to create first-person narratives that integrate the senses and emotions with the material record including plans of medieval houses.



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From this, we imagined one day in the life of a medieval household. We created a character-driven narrative that uses the archaeological evidence to highlight sensory experiences that are often denied to past people in archaeological accounts of the past. Based around the excavated evidence from two medieval houses at Cookstown and Boyerstown Co. Meath, these created fictional accounts, set over one day in 1280 AD, tell stories of everyday life centred on care and daily practices of (intergenerational) care of people, paces, animals and things. This also embraces the ambiguity of the archaeological record by telling evidenced based stories through (hyper)text, visual and aural media. These stories, capture the lives of four people, a kin group, who care for each other in a variety of ways. It emphasised the importance of the household and how it is central to medieval societies as a place of care, learning and production with all of the sensorial aspects of life that this entails.

This is significant. Firstly, disrupting dominant narratives that centre on broad scale rather than dealing with the microscale of daily life is feminist archaeology in practice. It serves to move away from stories that do not centre care or emotional bonds of people. It also signals that there are multiple ways to interpret the past rather than to try to claim certitude. Finally, we emphasise the daily life (emotions, feelings and imaginings) of ordinary people who are often left out of later medieval archaeology which prioritises accounts that centre historical figures or impressive architecture.

Key Achievements:

1. Enhanced my capabilities as a researcher in digital archaeological storytelling (an area which is undeveloped in Ireland)
2. Expanded my understandings of feminist pedagogy
3. Created long-terms collaboration links with Prof Tringham
4. Bringing new ideas and expertise back to Ireland





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Plans for continuing collaboration:

One peer reviewed paper with Prof. Tringham for Internet Archaeology. The frame and content of this has been created during my six-week Fellowship. Over the next year, we will continue to write, read and converse with each other in the final steps towards publication.

Four digital stories – with visual, aural and textual parts - for academic and public audiences. These four stories, are in MP4 format, and can be embedded with a webpage and will be shared through YouTube.

One planned collaborative digital humanities grant to begin to create an opensource platform through which archaeological databases can be engaged by audiences to produce narratives that allow for fragmented pasts. It aims to allow for the presence of ambiguity with the archaeological record but also show how through conservative evidenced based speculative leaps, it is possible to imagine a past full of the complexity human-animal-plant lives.

Published work and publication plans:

One paper for the Journal of Internet Archaeology:

In this collaborative article we want to talk about and show – through text, aural and visual means where our imagined worlds come from focusing on the material record of later medieval Ireland. We want to explore questions related to ambiguity: How do you go from the material record to recreating or imagining the practices of people in the past? Is imagining the same as inventing?

Dissemination and plans for future dissemination:

One paper at Theoretical Archaeology Group, Edinburgh December 2022.

One paper at IMC, Leeds 2023.

Collaborations and planned collaborations:

There were no additional collaboration with others as yet, but this project was only made possible by the excavations archive from decades of developer-led archaeology. In particular, my overall project is very reliant on the archaeological reports from state infrastructure projects led by the TII who have advocated and supported open access reporting, which make their archive available through the Digital Repository of Ireland.

Outreach and engagement activities:

Owing to restriction of travel during Covid 19 pandemic, I have only just carried out my Charlemont Fellowship (awarded 2020) during 19th June and 29th July 2022. But, there are two public outreach aspects I plan to pursue in the future:

1. Local schools project at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick. During the 1970s medieval houses were excavated in advance of the construction of a carpark at Lough Gur (Cleary 1982). These are important in the story of the local area as well as wider understandings of medieval households in Ireland during the thirteenth century. With the assistance of local arts or heritage council funding, I would like to work with students from a local school to think and talk about the medieval heritage of Lough Gur. As one permanent part of



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this outreach activity, we would chalk out the archaeological plan of the medieval houses, and subsequently paint the plan of the houses on the tarmac of the carpark. QR codes would then be embedded within this which would share the stories of four imagined medieval people who lived in these houses which have been created by myself and Prof Tringham during my time in Berkeley. This would have the effect of bringing together digital storytelling, art and archaeology as well as sharing knowledge through community engagement with schoolchildren and future generations, and reigniting interest in the archaeology of Lough Gur which has perhaps fallen from the national consciousness as an important site.

2. Blog Post for the RIA website. Medieval Archaeology and Digital Sensorial Storytelling. This short blog details the projects aims, methods and outcomes. It will also share the imagined stories created during this Fellowship so that they are accessible to all.

