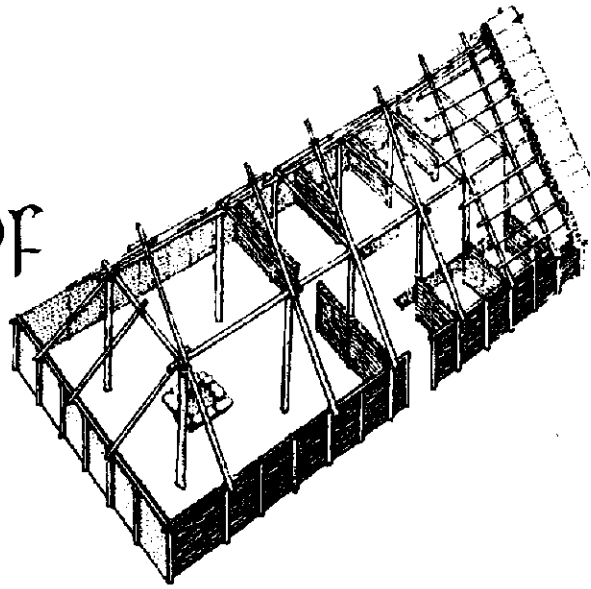


# Great Halls and Houses of Ireland's Chieftains



by I.A. Richmond

Much attention has been paid to the Romano British house of the type known as the 'basilican,' a long, barn-like building with a fairly broad central nave and a pair of side aisles, often bratticed off to form separate rooms. The building has often been described as a lower class building, but more likely was the primary residence of the British landowner, who merely grew out of it and used it as an outbuilding.

The object of this manuscript is to point out that in Ireland, there existed a very similar type of upper-class house. That actual remains of this type are unknown is largely due to the state of Irish archaeological exploration, for the house is clearly described in literature, delineated in manuscripts and carved upon monuments. The information from these sources forms a consistent whole, giving a picture as clear as that we had of the Homeric house, before the actual remains revealed its type in wood and stone. The sources which enable the recovery of the type are as follows:

1) The early Irish churches in stone, which copied wooden archetypes just as the Greek stone temple was based on timber buildings.

2) Reliquaries made like houses, modelled upon actual buildings in the same way as the hut-urns of Latium.

3) Literary sources including the *Fled Bricrend* (Feast of Bricriu), the *Suidingud Taigi Midchuarta* (The Foundation of the Mead Hall) and the *Crith*

*Gabhlach*, from the Brehon Laws.

4) The manuscript plans of the *Taigi Midchuarta*, the Mead-Hall at *Temair Breg* (Tara), contained respectively in the 'Yellow Book of Lecan' and the 'Book of Leinster.' (The first of these is the better version.)

These sources combine to attest a plan which was undoubtedly oblong. This would follow from the fact that there was a ridge-pole (*cleithe*). This ridge pole is a conspicuous feature in the little houses which form the finials of the high crosses at Durrow, Monásterboice, Clonmacnois and Termon Ferchin, and it appears again, beautifully carved and ornamented, on the Lough Erne shrine.

## Architectural Details

The main frame of the house was of timber beams, which required, during the building of Bricriu's palace, many men to lift them. The walls between the framing timbers were of woven wattles, coated with limed plaster, and sometimes there was something called *dit* inserted between every two wattles – a word provisionally translated as *weather boards*. At each end of the building, the two roof trees were crossed at their apex, and the ridgepole was fastened in the Y-rest thus formed.

This primitive arrangement survived as elaborate winged finials, derived from the decorated crossed ends, as seen on Russian houses. Two such stone finials can be seen on the churches of Iniscaltra

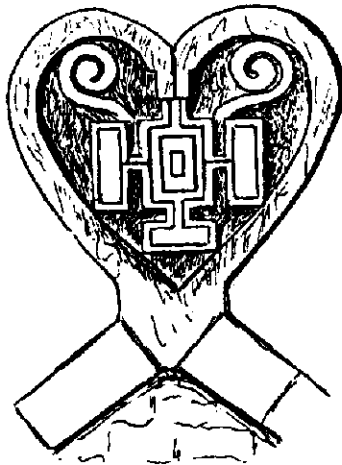
(shown) and Kilmakedar. In the "Book of Kells," they appear on the Temple of Jerusalem, where that building is drawn as an ornate Irish house.

The roofing was made of wooden shingles, poetically described as "birds' wings," and painted in different colours, as the shingles carved upon Anglian "hog-back" stones are believed to have been.

Finally, the house was entered by a main door at one end, swung upon posts ornamented with metal plates, ideally of decorated bronze, as at Bricriu's palace.

#### Interior Details

The interior arrangements are equally clear. The chief space was taken by a great hall, very like the nave of a Norse *stue*, and on each side there were petitioned bedrooms (*immdai*), containing one or more beds. At the mead hall of *Temair Breg* (Tara), built by Nuado MacFaelchu, there was a nave and four aisles, and the term *immdai* is also used for the separate compartments, in which different chieftains and ranks of society feasted. The type of house would not allow an upper storey, but sometimes there was a sort of loft in the roof, which was high-pitched and thus offered plenty of room. This loft survives in certain churches, and was used with great effect



**Top left:** Sketch of a typical hall/dwelling of Germanic Europe. The Irish great hall/dwelling would have a similar floorplan, but doors would be placed at the ends, not on the sides.

**Above:** Carved roof finial from a stone church of Iniscaltra.

in the story of Bricriu as a vantage point to espy strife in the hall.

The 700-ft. long mead-hall at *Temair Breg* (Tara) looked much like the Great Hall at Bibracte: a nave flanked on each side by a pair of aisles. The nave was kept clear for hearths, torch bearing candles and service to and fro. The aisles were bratticed off into compartments for different social ranks.

#### Origins

The evidence shows that these were the only substantial Irish houses of which there is any tradition. Round huts certainly existed, and their use survived the pagan era in monasteries such as Nendrum and the Oratory of Gallarus, but these substantial buildings described were always rectangular.

It has been suggested that High King Cormac MacAirt, who spent his youth overseas during the Severan age, introduced the rectangular mead hall to Ireland on his return in A.D. 222. But it's more likely that the Roman contribution was to size, not floorplan, for the *Forrud*, or King's Seat, which was older than Cormac, was also a rectangular building. The hall at Bibracte also had the typical rectangular shape, suggesting that such buildings were part of the Celtic heritage, not borrowed from Rome.

#### Measured Evidence

Another notable link in the story of the Irish house can be found in the *Crith Gablach*, a legal classification of Irish society from the 9th century. It gives detailed information about eight types of houses, each one delineated corresponding to a type of Irish chief.

1) *Inchis*. The house of rent charge. A 17-ft. house of wattle, it has two doors, but no separate bedroom. Between every two beds there is a plank partition. The proportionate value of the property is four cows. In other words, the house is about twice the size of the ordinary wattle and daub hut. There is no separate kitchen.

2) *Og-aire*. The house of the young chief. A 19-ft. house, with a 13-ft. kitchen.

3) *Aithech*. The house of the tenant. A 20-ft. house, with a 14-ft. kitchen.

4) *Bo-aire fehsa*. The house of the distinguished stock-owning chief. A 27-ft. house, with a 15-ft. kitchen.

5) *Aire-Desa*. The house of the chief with tenants. A 27-ft. house with a 17-ft. kitchen. *Immdai*

are mentioned for the first time, and this house has eight of them.

6) *Aire-Tuisi*. The house of the leading chief. A 29-ft. house with a 19-ft. kitchen and eight *immdai*.

7) *Aire-Forgaill*. The house of the chief of testimony. A 30-ft. house with a 20-ft. kitchen. *Immdai* are omitted.

8) The house of a king. A 37-ft. house, with 12 *immdai*. The size of the kitchen is not specified.

This classification need not be taken as rigid, as it is no doubt a theorist's work, but it has a clear distinction behind it that suggests a rectangular form. Practice in the field suggests that the house-measure refers to breadth, because it is the only unit that would make a conspicuous difference between house sizes.

The house must be the aisled type, since it is built with wattle and timber framing. Without the intermediate support offered by the pillars of the nave, the frame would not support the weight of the roof, unless it was constructed of beams too large to be procurable by the everyday chieftain.

The word *ircha* or *aircha*, most often translated to mean kitchen, also means "back house" or "out-house," implying separation from the main building, but the fact that such a structure is never mentioned in the detailed list of separate buildings belonging to a chief suggests that it shared a common roof with the hall. It thus becomes clear that the second dimension given refers to the depth in the house allotted to this room.

The term *aircha* implies the front of the house, since it is cognate with *airchenn*, the frontal measurement of the Irish field strip. If this reading is accepted, the kitchen comes into place in the forepart of the house, while the hall and *immdai* lie behind, more secluded.

Whether the kitchen was at the front or back of the house its measurement must be related to the bays of the aisles, which in turn govern the size of the sided compartments. For example, the 29-ft. house has eight bedrooms and a 19-ft. kitchen. We allow that two bays of 9½ ft. make up the kitchen; we add one small bay for each of the eight bedrooms, and the result is a house 38 feet long in its private section and 19 ft. in the kitchen. This gives us an *Aire-Tuisi* house 57 ft. by 29 ft. square. The *Aire-Desa* house with *immdai* turns out to be 27 ft. by 51 ft. Reckoning houses without bedrooms on

the same principle, the other houses have the following measurements.

\* *Og-aire*: 19 by 39 ft.

\* *Aithech*: 20 by 42 ft.

\* *Bo-aire fehsa*: 27 by 45 ft.

\* *Aire-Forgaill*: 30 by 60 ft.

### Use of the Space

Whatever their precise proportions, however, the general type of these buildings is not in doubt. This architectural type is an old one, going back to Severan times at least, probably further. Readers may also be struck by the house's resemblance to Romano-British barn-houses. Take away the wall plaster, baths and mosaics, and the Romano-British structure could pass for an upper class Irish dwelling of the ninth century and earlier. May not these structures, as part of a Celtic heritage, have sprung from the same stream whose source was Central Europe? In Ireland, where carpenter had not yet given way to mason, it was to serve many generations as the finest product of the builder's skill: a chieftain's house.

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