

Medieval Houses in Brittany: Questioning Reconstructions¹

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First, some clarification regarding the title of my paper:

- ‘medieval houses’. I am no archaeologist, no historian, but (just) an ethnologist, so one might well question my right to discuss this subject;
- ‘questions’ in the plural (in the French title). I do not mean to question the ‘reconstructions’ (*reconstitutions*) of medieval houses produced by archaeologists, as that is not my area of expertise. However, as an ethnologist, some questions occur to me. I would like to share these with you, as the search for answers may enhance our understanding of these medieval houses in Brittany.

My presentation will be in two parts:

firstly, an assessment of the knowledge provided by archaeology;

secondly, I shall raise some questions about the way in which these past realities are presented today, with particular attention to the reconstitution of medieval houses in Brittany as they are presented in publications.

Medieval houses in Brittany

Of course, there are no longer any observable constructions from this distant period to be found in Brittany: the oldest dwelling places visible today date from the end of the sixteenth century. Our knowledge of medieval houses in Brittany is therefore mediated by archaeological research, a project that began in earnest in Brittany in the 1970s. At that date it was responding to a double expectation:

Firstly, of course, the expectation of archaeologists themselves. This interest in a new object must be placed in the more general context of a challenge to the ‘despotism’ of what might be called ‘classical’ archaeology; an archaeology that searched exclusively for the origins of our western culture in the civilizations of the Mediterranean basin: Egypt, Greece, Rome.

Therefore:

Since the twentieth century we have been more aware of the importance of the contribution of peoples known as ‘barbarous’, Iberians, Celts, Germans, etc.²

¹ This English-language version was produced to help workshop participants follow the paper as it was delivered in French.

² René Sanquer, ‘Naissance de l’archéologie médiévale en Bretagne’, *Archeologia*, n°97 (août 1976), 15.

The Director of 'Historical Antiquities' in Brittany, who, in 1976, thought this way, pointed out the relevance to the development of medieval archaeology at this time:

The dawning of regional awareness across Europe, and Brittany finds itself at the head of this cultural awakening. How could Breton archaeology fail to take note?³

He explains that archaeologists are no longer solely interested in vestiges of prestigious monuments, or spectacular finds, but also in searching for the material traces of the conditions in which the most modest and ordinary people lived.

Hence the emerging interest in medieval houses, an interest that converges with that of ethnographers. Without wishing to preach, I must at this point in my presentation remind you of the epistemological processes of ethnology which, in the same era, starts interrogating things closer to home. Until then, classical ethnology had questioned the distant, but now became interested in houses here, and in how these were lived in.

In France, this house was initially known as 'folklorique' in the 1940s, before the term was rejected in favour of 'traditional', which conveys a certain timelessness: the object of curiosity is a house outside time but which might for example be rigidly fixed typologically.

This interest led to remarks that many changes had taken place in 450 years of rural, or more precisely, peasant construction (I am referring to the Breton case), and that therefore the historical dimension needed to be taken into account. Historians of course took care of this, using archives to try to establish how the houses of the past were constructed and lived in; houses that in many cases are, or at least were not so long ago, still observable. The conjunction of a chronological approach with the observation of buildings threw new light on an architecture thereafter qualified as 'vernacular', which is concerned with constructions that used durable non-industrial materials, and required the help of professionals.

In order to improve our understanding of the materials, the way in which they were used, the evolution of techniques etc. the study of vernacular houses proposed a process not dissimilar to archaeology. This approach is useful to ethnology – useful but not sufficient. Ethnology is also concerned with the social and symbolic conditions of the production of and the use made of the building: e.g. ethnology does not only consider the technical effectiveness of materials, but also their symbolism (that is, not just the nature, position, or foundation of the cornerstone, but also the prayer or the placing of holy objects that went with it).

Finally, taking a diachronic approach proved essential in improving understanding of the 'traditional' house: this explains the ethnologist's interest in the discoveries made by archaeology about the medieval house, the house that immediately preceded those dwelling places that are still observable and in use today.

³ Ibid.

Archaeological research on the medieval house was very active in Brittany in the 1970s and early 1980s, to the extent that it has been said that:

We can be delighted that digs have been more numerous in Brittany than in many other regions of France.⁴

Research continues to this day, though it is less visible.

Now I come more precisely to the promised summing up on what we know about medieval houses in Brittany. It is the existence of ‘deserted villages’, that is abandoned between the beginning of the twelfth century and the middle of the fourteenth century, that has made possible the excavation of house structures.

These villages have remained ‘accessible’ – in archaeological terms – for various reasons, such as:

- Some, on the coast, have been buried by wind-blown sand;
- The poor quality of surrounding land has meant that even the intensive agricultural methods of recent years have not affected it (e.g. no ploughing possible because of granite).

Fig. 1: An example of the traces left by a ‘deserted village’ at Plounéour-Ménez: measurements taken by theodolite allow us to see the structures of ancient houses.⁵

Many ‘deserted villages’ have been actively excavated, such as, in Finistère, more precisely in the Monts d’Arrée:

at Brennilis (Kerhaës-Vihan)⁶

at Berrien (Le Goënidou)⁷

and in the Morbihan :

at Guidel (Penn-Er-Malo)⁸

at Berné (Pont-Calleck)⁹

⁴ André Chédeville, Noël-Yves Tonnerre, *La Bretagne féodale. XI^e–XIII^e siècles* (Rennes, Ouest-France, 1987), p. 350.

⁵ Claire Prijac, ‘L’habitat déserté de Goarem-ar-C’hoz-Tier en Plounéour-Ménez: état de la recherche et travaux de préparation à une fouille archéologique’, *Bulletin de la Société Archéologique du Finistère*, CXXXII (2003), 91–107.

⁶ Michael Batt, ‘Brennilis. Kerhaës-Vihan: un village médiéval déserté’, *Archéologie en Bretagne*, n°21–22 (1978), 37–42; n°24 (1979), 18–22; n°28 (1980), 43–5.

⁷ Michael Batt, information notice at the excavation site where the remains were assessed.

⁸ Roger Bertrand, Mme M. Lucas, ‘Un village côtier du XII^e siècle en Bretagne: Pen-er-Malo en Guidel (Morbihan)’, *Archéologie Médiévale*, 5 (1975), 73–101.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Bardel, ‘Berné: Pont-Calleck, le village déserté’, *Archéologie en Bretagne*, n°21–22 (1978), 68–70, n°24 (1979), 17–18.

at Melrand (Lann-Gouh)¹⁰

at Plumélec (Kerlano)¹¹

Fig. 2: Localisation in Brittany of main ‘deserted villages’ that have been excavated

From the results of these excavations, we can deduce some of the characteristics of the medieval house in Brittany:

The plan

There are two types:

one rectangular, or even trapezoid (fig.3);

Fig. 3: Le Goënidou in Berrien.

the other oval or described by specialists as having either one or two ‘apsidal gables’ (fig. 4).¹²

Fig. 4: Penn-Er-Malo in Guidel: it was considered that such an oval plan was worthwhile because:

- i) for an equal perimeter it offers a greater habitable surface;
- ii) it does away with the need to deal with corners where gable walls or the walls under the gutters meet.

It is not a matter of regional variation, as both types of plan can coexist in the same place (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Lann-Gouh in Melrand: in one case, we can even see the transition from a rectangular to an oval plan.

The dimensions

The dimensions are in fact quite variable, the average being around 10m long and 5 to 6m wide.

For the two excavation results just shown, for instance:

at Berrien it is 13.75m by 6.5m

at Guidel it is 11.75m by 6.7m

¹⁰ Patrick André, ‘Un village médiéval breton du XI^e siècle: Lann-Gouh Melrand (Morbihan)’, *Archéologie Médiévale*, XII (1982), 155–74.

¹¹ Patrick André, ‘Le site médiéval de Kerlano en Plumélec (Morbihan)’, *Archéologie en Bretagne*, n°2 (1974), 27–34.

¹² Patrick André, Roger Bertrand, Michel Clément, ‘En Morbihan permanence d’un type d’habitat. La maison à pignons en abside’, *Archeologia*, n°97 (août 1976), 28–36.

The walls

They have no foundations.

They have two facings, with rubble-work inside, made of smaller stones.

The binder is a mortar made from earthy clay.

The width, according to excavation reports, is 60 to 80cm.

It should be pointed out here that this method was still used in so-called ‘traditional’ construction up to the Second World War, if we make an exception of the fact that a varying amount of lime was added to the earthy binder, which was in fact a type of granitic sand (in Breton *pri-tousog* ‘toad clay’); if we also make an exception of the wall height: in medieval houses, the height would have only been 50cm or so, though it is difficult to be certain, given the rocks and earth that have fallen on them since their abandonment. It is worth noting, though, that at Guidel, there is part of a wall still 1.2m high.

Having said that, I would hesitate to consider these houses as ‘internal structures’, as some specialists sometimes say.

The openings

Given the lowness of the walls we would not expect windows, though the crumbling of the walls prevents us from being certain.

As for the doors, we are first struck by their width: often 1.20m, sometimes more: 1.4m, even 1.6m (in one example, in Melrand).

Perhaps this is to make up for the lack of light in a house without windows; perhaps to allow the fire to draw better; or perhaps for some other reason. (Note that in the ‘traditional’ house, the width of the door is three feet, that is, about 1m.)

The position of the door in the medieval house is marked by flat stones that act as a threshold, and by the existence of a grating that would take the lower strap hinge of the door.

Internal layout

The layout is arranged around an open and central hearth:

(i) open (fig. 6)

Fig. 6: Berrien. Limited excavation has allowed the hearth to be represented by a few flat stones placed edgewise

(ii) central, or almost central, as it is slightly out of line with the position of the entrance door (fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Melrand. The hearth: open and central

The fact that the houses are longer than they are wide, and that the door is usually situated in a guttered wall, makes for an arrangement of the house into two ‘ends’, either side of the central hearth. Excavations have revealed that these two ‘ends’ were not on the same level; one was higher, the other lower, and the difference between them could be up to 30cm or so. The higher one is situated near the hearth, this is the domestic part: excavations have in fact revealed charcoal and shards of ceramic in this part (fig. 8).

Fig. 8: Berrien. The current state of the site. The difference in level is noticeable.

The lower one is opposite.

How do we interpret this arrangement of the internal space of houses?

The lower end is probably the ‘bas-bout’, the ‘*penn-traon*’ of Breton houses: it is ‘low’, not only because it is distanced from the heart of the house (the hearth), just as we are distanced from the choir of a church when we are in ‘low’ in the nave, but it is ‘low’ because it is lower ‘topographically’.

This ‘topographical’ arrangement of the internal space of the house is attributed to the practice of housing men and their animals together.

This practice constitutes a classificatory criterion:

- Geographers of the French school have made it, following Albert Demangeon, a characteristic of houses known as the ‘rudimentary type’; the term itself tells us enough about the value judgement they appear to be making.
- For archaeologists it is a ‘mixed house’.¹³
- Ethnologists like myself refer to it as a ‘long-house’, without this having a bearing on the true length of the house, which could, in fact, be very short (fig. 9). (This is a taxonomy based on the point of view of the user, and borrows the terminology used in Wales, the *tŷ-hir*, literally ‘long-house’, with the hyphen signifying that it is a concept).

Fig. 9: Berrien: the house that is closest to the archaeological site, itself a ruin, is a long-house, as we can see from the holes in the ‘low-end’ inside.

This house dates from the beginning of the 1800s, as we see from the historiated lintel.

So far it seems we can be quite confident.

Difficulties arise when we attempt to represent elevations above substructures.

¹³ Michael Batt, ‘La maison paysanne du Moyen Âge en Bretagne: apport de l’archéologie et comparaisons avec le sud-ouest de l’Angleterre et le pays de Galles’, in Noël-Yves Tonnerre (ed.), *La maison paysanne en Bretagne. 2500 ans d’habitat rural* (Spézet, Coop Breizh, 2008), p. 68.

This brings me to my second point.

Reconstruction hypotheses

To my knowledge, two reconstruction hypotheses have been put forward, as drawings (figs. 10 and 11):

Fig. 10: One for Guidel (Penn-Er-Malo): the oval wall, the hearth open and central, the door.

Fig. 11: The other for Berrien (Le Goënidou): a bit livelier, with busy inhabitants. This scene is displayed on an information sign at the site.

However, these reconstructions raise a certain number of problems, to which I now turn (figs. 12 and 13).

Fig. 12: The first: at Guidel:

If we compare the results of the excavation with the reconstruction we will see that: the framework is very classically symmetrical – we might ask whether this would really have been familiar to tenth-century builders, especially since it is not quite clear what it is based on, since, during excavation, no second post hole was found. As the archaeologists themselves remark when describing the single hole discovered: ‘Its position is remarkable: it is situated at one of the points of the ellipse [the apse], which *suggests* (my emphasis) a second post hole at the other point of the ellipse, but which *it has not been possible to reveal* (my emphasis).’

Fig. 13: Now the second, at Berrien:

Here, the *raison d’être* of the holes revealed by the excavation is no longer even questioned.

Given the discrepancies I have just underlined between the results of excavations and the reconstructions that are proposed, some other hypotheses occur to me.

This brings me to ethnology:

Firstly, in order to approach the issue from a more generally anthropological point of view, using a comparative method, that is by searching elsewhere for elements that might improve our understanding of what is happening here.

Then, as a continuation of the first approach, I turn to ethnology more specifically to employ the regressive method of ethnohistory, which consists of finding in the present (usually via observations by informants) behaviours, practices and representations that can throw light on the silent traces left by the past (as is the case here).

The question raised is the following: what framework could there have been on these houses to support a covering that was certainly plant-based, since, just like the framework itself, it has left no trace?

In houses of the pre-industrial period, frameworks are all the same: they consist of pairs of crossbeams with a false horizontal beam joining their bases. But before the spread of this type of framework, were there other possibilities?

The existence of a central post allows an affirmative answer.

Therefore, a point of comparison can be provided by a type of construction named *pallazas*, and found in the Cantabria Mountains of Spain: these constructions in fact present a structure comparable to that revealed by archaeologists at Guidel, that is an oval plan, a single post, and so no ridgepole but, on the contrary, a rooftop out of line.

This poses another question: what was the role of the post, in this position?

To answer this last question, we can first take a functionalist approach, which sees cultural phenomena in exclusively utilitarian terms, practical and material advantages: this post clearly serves as support to the framework.

[That is] a perfect adaptation [...] to ecological conditions that have long remained the same.

The oval form [...] is linked [...] for the builders [...] to the need to establish a line that offered minimal resistance to the winds that came from the mountainous corridors of the Cordillière in the Cantabria Mountains: this brought a double advantage, not only did the thatch covering of these *pallazas* resist very unfavourable climatic conditions, but in particular the overall shape produces an aerodynamic movement that diverts the moving air around the guttered walls, no matter which wind is dominant [...]

This is the functionalist explanation given for the existence of a single post planted to support the framework; in the face of this technical fact we can also take a more culturalist approach, and interrogate for example the symbolic charge that a post so placed can have.

However, in the case of medieval houses, finding such information is obviously difficult: the information is no longer accessible, or indeed never was, because the possibility of a material manifestation of its existence was perhaps not envisaged.

It is at this stage that the comparative method and the ethnohistorical method can be called on.

To begin the comparative approach, I shall be using the work of Mircéa Eliade, especially *Le sacré et le profane*.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mircéa Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris, Gallimard, 1968 [1957]).

The action of planting a post, a cross for instance, is, according to this author, a gesture of ‘cosmisation’ of a space that was until then chaotic, that is a foundational act to make the space claimed symbolically viable. A prosaic translation of this would say it was about possession. What is true of a cross is also, in a way, for a flag, or a parasol.¹⁵

This post becomes a cosmic axis, an *axis mundi* around which the now inhabitable space is organized.

In many societies around the world, this is the role of posts; thus among the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, in Canada:

The *Axis mundi* [...] is the trunk of a cedar tree ten to twelve metres high, of which more than half rises out of the roof of the cult/religious house. It plays a key role in the ceremonies : it confers a cosmic structure on the house.

In societies that carry religious values, this ‘cosmisation’ is also a consecration which aims, by the act of planting, to establish a communication between the three cosmic levels: earth, land of the living, heaven, land of the gods, and the lower regions, land of the dead.

For us the case of the cross is obviously key.

That of the flag too, on condition that we expand the notion of the religious to include the sacred, for example in the context of the sacrifice of all those who have *given their lives* [my emphasis] so that the flagpole might be planted.

And even, finally, the parasol on the beach, if we consider the mission that the ‘civil law’ has entrusted to the head of the family, that is the protection of his family and his possessions?

In the medieval house, the central post was very certainly functional, but was it not at the same time a ritual pole?

What do we know of the following questions:

What wood was it made from?

How was it chosen?

How was it planted?

Was its positioning the object of a ritual?

Did it constitute a foundational act?, etc.

It is at this stage that ethnohistory can, perhaps, be brought in:

¹⁵ ‘Soudain, dans un geste fondateur, plantant son parasol comme un drapeau en terre conquise, il [l’un homme qui arrive sur une plage] instaure un centre’ [‘Suddenly, with the fundamental action of pitching a parasol like a flag in conquered territory, he [the man arriving on the beach] establishes a centre’], in Jean-Didier Urbain, *Sur la plage. Mœurs et coutumes balnéaires (XIX^e–XX^e siècles)* (Paris, Payot, 2002 [1994]), p. 351.

There is in fact a recurring element in the dispositions we have studied: the area around the hearth and the post hole (fig. 14); elsewhere, in medieval houses, the hearth is in a cavity that could be explained by a simple wish to protect the flames, but that could also be, finally, a means of access to the lower world; the smoke, on the other hand, rises to the heavens. Are the three cosmic levels, in this way, not put in relation?

Fig. 14 Comparison between Penn-Er-Malo at Guidel and a 'lodge' at Plumelin in the Morbihan, as it was in 1946 at the time of the Enquiry into rural architecture 1425, undertaken under the auspices of the 'Musée national des arts et traditions populaires'. It is a matter of comparing what is comparable: the lodge is not the 'heir' of the house at Guidel; the lodge, in 1946, is the home of rural people on the margins, which probably was not the case of the Penn-Er-Malo house at Guidel ten centuries earlier; nevertheless we note in each the proximity of the hearth and the post.

Certainly, in the 'traditional' Breton house, the hearth is no longer open, nor central: it is situated in the fire-place, which is itself in the gabled wall.

However, as it is today, this chimney has, in the representations of its users or earlier users, the characteristics of an *Axis mundi*; in fact it puts the three cosmic levels discussed by Mircea Eliade in communication.¹⁶

It is an opening on the heavens: its conduit, known as *toull ar chiminal* (chimney hole) in Breton is, thanks to the chimney stack, higher than the rooftop, that is higher than high! It cannot be a *toull* ('hole') other than in the heavens.

It also keeps in contact with the lower regions: it is said that a cavity is put there in order to hide treasure; strange hiding place though, if everyone chooses the same one! It is said also that the foundational act involved putting a live cat in the cavity, which then became its grave!

It is also the place of a possible contact between heaven and earth: does the Little-child Jesus, *ar Mabig Jezus*, not use this path when he brings presents to good children at Christmas, and that is without mentioning all the beliefs to do with supernatural beings in the Breton imagination (*bugel noz*, *paotred ar zabat*, *viltansou*, etc.), all of which are capable of entering the house by this route if we are not careful!

This is summed up in the idea of animal presence in the fire-place: if a cricket from the heart of the earth comes to sing there, or a swallow from the heavens makes its nest there, this is a sign that the house is blessed.

In conclusion, the importance of multidisciplinary questioning should perhaps be stressed. Because, what has been suggested about the hearth could also be relevant to

¹⁶ Cf. Jean-François Simon, 'La cheminée dans la maison bretonne traditionnelle: un haut lieu du sacré', in Gaël Milin and Patrick Galliou (eds.), *Hauts lieux du sacré en Bretagne* (Brest, Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, 1997), pp. 257–70.

elements of the frame. In this way, can we question the role of the second door that is often found walled up in excavations of the remains of medieval houses: is this, as is often suggested, an opening ‘condemned at a later date’?¹⁷ Other functions can be envisaged for it; it may have a selective use, for example, it could be used for removing a corpse from the house, after the fashion of the ‘Door of the dead’ which, in churches in Lower Brittany were used for bringing in the dead. This door could therefore have been walled up ritually, waiting for a new death?

If the site of Penn-Er-Malo at Guidel no longer exists, because it is buried under a campsite, that of Goënidou at Berrien (fig. 14) has been preserved to allow visits by the general public, just like the site at Lann-Gouh at Malrand (fig. 15); the latter has moreover been transformed into an experimental archaeological site, and has become a museographical space: ‘The village of the year one thousand’.

Figs. 14 and 15: Berrien: the presentation of excavation work to visitors at Malrand: ‘The village of the year one thousand’, museographical space.

¹⁷ Cf. Jean-François Simon, ‘La cheminée dans la maison bretonne traditionnelle: un haut lieu du sacré’, in Gaël Milin and Patrick Galliou (eds.), *Hauts lieux du sacré en Bretagne*, (Brest, Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique, 1997), pp. 257–70.