In this admirable book, Tracy Collins wields a variety of theories to render a 'gendered archaeology' of women’s monasticism in Ireland, from the first foundations to the Dissolution. Collins moves adeptly between the Irish evidence and the context of women’s monasticism across Europe in the same period. Dismissing popular, outdated assumptions about life in nunneries—for example, the legend of ‘naughty nuns’ promoted by Eileen Power’s (1922) pioneering study of English nuns—she promises to ask five ‘new questions’ as an archaeologist, namely: What theoretical perspectives might help interpret the material remains of Irishwomen’s monasticism? What is the available archaeological evidence for the subject? How did medieval women religious construct their identities? Where were their communities set in the Irish landscape? What can the Irish evidence contribute to the larger analysis of female monasticism in pre-modern Europe?

Collins begins with a nod to early medieval nunneries, although her focus is on the period after AD 1100. References to women’s communities abound in the early Irish literature of the seventh through twelfth centuries, yet serial records, extended discussion and the material evidence are all sparse. Even what Collins terms the major monasteries of the early medieval period have mostly disappeared, and few known women’s monasteries have been excavated. What is more, and quite frustrating, nothing in the Irish archaeological record distinguishes male from female communities—in fact, many communities of the early medieval period were mixed gender.

Of the 51 known early women’s monasteries, only 10 endured or were revived into the later Middle Ages. Of the 65 known later medieval women’s communities, almost half left no material traces, and only 20, Collins estimates, were probably in use at any given time. Almost half of the new communities appeared in the twelfth century, when monastic reform was lively across the Continent. Some houses were founded by native men and women before the Anglo-Cambrian-Norman invasions began around AD 1170, but most were built by newcomers, who became wealthy with expropriated estates. Several maps help readers appreciate the distribution of convents.

Unlike earlier monasteries in Ireland, these houses belonged to transnational monastic orders, among which the Arrouasians and Augustinians were most popular (compare this to England, where Benedictines dominated, while Scotland and Wales favoured Cistercian rule).

Collins points out that there were no formal double houses of men and women in later medieval Ireland, unlike earlier Ireland and contemporaneous Europe. Some groups of women
lived adjacent to men’s monasteries, sharing churches and priests. Others may have been attached to parish churches. But even strictly female communities were not in isolated areas as many English communities were. Irish nunneries were built on the same variety of urban and rural sites as male monasteries, with the same access to patronage, family, lands, markets and waterways. Of course, in Ireland, ‘urban’ meant cities that were more like villages and villages that were more like clusters of farmhouses.

Collins argues that Irish religious women lived in contact with the larger world, despite Periculoso (the papal decretal of 1298 requiring vowed women to observe enclosure) and other injunctions to claustration by ecclesiastical management. Although religious women expected to practice enclosure, the term had a variety of spiritual, social and material subtleties. As Collins shows, no obvious physical enclosure existed at most women’s settlements. Instead, isolation from the world was a matter of spiritual intent and “space practised in place” (p. 25), as Collins puts it, drawing on Certeau.

Only a few exceptions remain evident, including St Catherine’s nunnery in County Limerick, which was the subject of Collins’s excavation and dissertation. The informality of most monastic layouts, which were quite varied in Ireland, reflects the re-use of older ecclesiastical sites, which also lacked cloisters. Collins suggests that the popularity of Augustinian communities (including Arrouasians), which did not require a specific arrangement of spaces or a minimum number of occupants, also contributed to the openness of women’s communities.

Collins proves that both women’s settlements and their churches tended to be simple and small. Without much in the way of architectural remains, it is difficult to say how nuns used any specific parts of monastic and church space. One of Collins’s ‘new questions’ is whether nuns used their space differently when they were alone than when joined by a male priest or local parishioners. Without any evidence for screens, chairs or pews, liturgical goods or cupboards to store them, it is a difficult question to answer. Collins suggests that the simple parallelograms of nuns’ churches had more in common with parish churches than those of male monasteries. Again, St Catherine’s is her case study.

Collins argues for the gendering of subspaces within Irish women’s churches (as Roberta Gilchrist did for English nunneries), yet her conclusions must remain tentative. Likewise, the formidable list of questions that Collins raises about daily life in women’s settlements—questions that archaeological evidence has helped answer for German monasteries, such as Kloster Wienhausen (Mecham et al. 2014)—remain unanswered, except by comparison with other European convents and male monasteries. While artworks, seals on documents, textiles, and personal devotional items might hint at women’s lives in German monasteries, almost none survive in Ireland. In general, there is hardly anything left of religious women from later medieval Ireland, not even bones; as Collins points out, this is because few women’s religious settlements have been excavated.

Nonetheless, Collins concludes that engendered archaeology offers the best method for investigating medieval religious women, as it reveals what documents do not. Irish religious communities were fluid and diverse in layout, structure and organisation, but not because of negligence or degeneracy, as might have been assumed by earlier scholars. Instead, women
were guided by their vows and religiosity, as well as their efforts to remain a vigorous part of society. As Collins acknowledges, the dearth of material evidence often makes her approach to Irish religious women a guessing game based on meagre remains and comparisons with nuns elsewhere in Europe. When it comes to suggesting areas of future research, Collins repeats a theme of the book: more sites of women’s monasticism must be excavated.

It is a little ironic that Collins’s book is the best state-of-the-field study, given the admitted lack of evidence for most of the author’s conclusions. This is not a criticism, but a comment on the lack of enthusiasm by Irish archaeologists and their funders for excavating women’s monasteries, which tend to be less rich in exciting artefacts and also difficult to find and access. Despite these hindrances, Collins does an excellent job of situating medieval Irish nuns in monastic Christendom. Her summaries of typical monastic experience are complete without being lengthy and her use of the Irish evidence is honest yet creative. Her familiarity with the literatures of monasticisms, be it women’s, general Irish, or other, as well as theoretical models, is impressive.

I hope that Tracy Collins will continue to dig up ambitious projects in future and will share the results with us in books as well-researched, conscientiously presented and loaded with visuals as this one.

References


Lisa M. Bitel
University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA
✉ bitel@usc.edu