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## Life and Death

*Written sources tend to tell us more about well-to-do members of the urban community, whereas archaeology also reveals the ordinary Dubliner, both in life and in death.*



Prior to the medical improvements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, life expectancy everywhere was much lower than nowadays. The highest rates of loss occurred in infancy and in early childhood (before the age of five), after which prospects for survival improved somewhat. Even so, English coroners' records of accidental deaths show that young people were often scalded fatally by cauldrons containing boiling water. In adulthood men were particularly prone to death (or serious injury) arising from casual violence linked to the universal carrying of knives, while women were always at risk during pregnancy and childbirth. Medieval armies were frequently decimated by dysentery caused by the drinking of contaminated water when on campaign. Drowning was a common reason why a person met with a premature death, for instance by falling down a well or from horseback when crossing a river. It may be assumed, despite the lack of direct evidence, that medieval Dubliners experienced these and other hazards of life in equal measure; the Black Death merely made a bad situation even worse than before.



## FINDS BOX

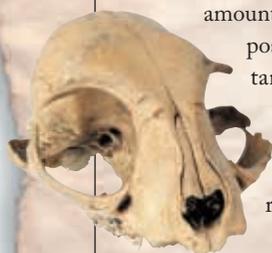
### Animals, Hunting and Fishing

Shells, bones and skulls were all recovered from the habitation levels of medieval Dublin. By quantifying the relative amounts of different animal bones from a site, it is possible to assess the typical diet of the inhabitants. In this way, we know that medieval Dubliners ate mostly beef, mutton and pork.

The tool marks on domestic animal bones are also an interesting source of information regarding medieval tools and butchery practices.

Of course, animals were not only valuable as a source of meat. Sheep were needed for their wool and cattle for dairy products and hides, as well as for pulling carts. Cats were bred for their soft fur during the Middle Ages and they also helped to keep vermin at bay. As today, dogs were kept for hunting, security and as companions.

Among the more unusual animal remains found in Dublin are a wolf skull and a vertebra of a whale. In the Middle Ages, wolves were hunted to such a degree that they are now no longer found in the wild in Ireland, having died out in the eighteenth century. The whale bone was probably imported to Dublin from Scandinavia for use as a luxury raw material for carving fine objects, though whales may also have been hunted or beached off the Irish coast from time to time. Fish and seafood (especially oysters, herring and eel) formed an important part of the medieval diet and fishing was a major part of Dublin's economy. Fish was preserved by air-drying, salting or pickling and was exported to the Continent in large quantities.



**Wolf, cat and dog skulls (left to right):** Three skulls found in thirteenth-century levels at Wood Quay. According to Anglo-Norman commentator Gerald of Wales, wolves in Ireland had their young as early as December because of the mild climate. He used the wolf as a metaphor for the 'evils of treachery and plunder', which, he wrote, also blossomed in Ireland 'before their season'.

## High Standards of Living

Merchants dominated the city council in the Middle Ages as a result of their leading socio-economic position. Other elite groups lived in the wealthier monasteries, such as St Mary's Abbey (Cistercians), St Thomas's Abbey (Augustinian canons) and Kilmainham Priory (Knights Hospitaller). Another wealthy house was Holy Trinity Priory, which was attached physically and institutionally to Christ Church Cathedral.

The most detailed record to have come down to us from medieval Dublin in relation to standards of living is a seneschal's (a steward or an official) account from Holy Trinity Priory for the years 1337–46. It shows in general that the Augustinian canons who served the cathedral for religious purposes and who lived in the adjacent priory were living a life of considerable luxury on the eve of the Black Death. Most of their food came from three home farms, at Deansgrange, Glasnevin and Grangegorman. The prior himself had his own dining table (costing 6s. 1d. when new) and he entertained important visitors in royal style.

Bread was eaten with every meal, either baked in the priory's bakehouse or bought outside in the city. Prepared dishes such as pies and pastries were often purchased in nearby Cook Street. Even breakfast was a substantial meal, consisting of bread, capons (castrated cocks), pastries, oysters, salmon, wine or ale. Dinner and supper often featured three types of meat or, on Fridays and during Lent, three types of fish. Eels and oysters were commonly eaten as well. Fruit and vegetables receive less attention on the account roll, but a limited range would have been available. Various herbs and spices were used for flavouring food, especially ginger, mustard, pepper and saffron.



Christ Church canons singing mass in the mid fourteenth century. Archbishop John of St Paul (1349–62) was responsible for building the 'long choir' at the cathedral. His main purpose may have been to provide a bigger space for choral singing.

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### Clockwise from top right:

Single-sided, thirteenth-century, polished antler comb found at Wood Quay.

Combs were of composite construction, and copper rivets held saw-cut teeth plates and decorated side plates together. Hundreds of combs and their manufacturing waste have been found in Dublin, suggesting they were mass-produced in zoned workshops.

Thirteenth-century shoe found at Wood Quay. Excavations at nearby High Street, where the majority of leather workshops were located, revealed a thick layer of fragments of worked leather, including over a thousand worn soles of boots and shoes.

Thirteenth-century ring brooches from Wood Quay. Such brooches were commonly used to fasten the slit at the neck of the kirtle or gown, or to fasten a cloak or mantle over the breast. The pins on both these brooches are slightly bent, probably owing to the weight of the cloth they were holding.

Fifteenth-century buckle and plate ornamented with an embossed griffin from Nicholas Street. In the Middle Ages every man wore a belt from which he suspended a knife and sometimes a sword. A buckle like this would have been a mark of the wearer's wealth.

### Dress and Ornament

During the thirteenth century, garments were fastened with stick-pins of bronze and bone and these came to light in large numbers at Wood Quay. Some of the bronze pins retained traces of gold, silver or tin, with which they were originally coated. Some are adorned with modelled heads of animals, birds or humans. Many of the metal pins found in Dublin were bent along the shaft resulting from their functional use. Besides pins, clothes could also be fastened with metal or bone buckles and brooches of various materials, shapes and sizes.

Brooches were worn by men, women and children from almost every class of society in Europe during the Middle Ages. They varied widely in form, but the commonest types from medieval Dublin are ring-brooches, disc brooches and cruciform brooches. Like the bone pins, they functioned both as simple, adaptable dress fasteners and as items of jewellery, worn for decorative effect.

Other, purely ornamental items were also worn as jewellery, such as necklaces composed of fine metal links or of large glass and amber beads strung together on a cord. The ownership and wearing of jewellery were important indicators of status and wealth in a hierarchical society. In the fourteenth century, legislation decreed that craftsmen and yeomen were forbidden to wear decorative items of gold and silver.



## FINDS BOX

### Games and Music

Medieval life was far more labour-intensive than life today because most jobs had to be done by hand. By dusk, most people were ready to retire to their beds after their evening meal. Holy days were often times for festivities and celebration, providing a balance between work and leisure. But how did people amuse and entertain themselves during their free time? During the Middle Ages, most of the population of Europe would have been illiterate. In the absence of the written word, storytelling was an important aspect of everyday life, serving a dual purpose by keeping local history and folklore alive, whilst at the same time acting as a form of entertainment. Other communal forms of entertainment, such as singing and dancing, served an important social function, but they are archaeologically invisible.

Additional activities that occupied the leisure time of people in the Middle Ages included playing board games and musical instruments. Although archaeological remains of this type are regrettably few, excavations in Dublin have revealed some evidence for both pursuits. Musical instruments found in Dublin include whistles made of animal bone and wood. Disc-shaped gaming pieces of antler are also in evidence, as are pegged examples, made of wood or bone, for use with a perforated game-board. A small stone found during excavations at Wood Quay bears scratch marks for an impromptu game of nine men's morris, which was actually a game called 'merels' played with counters by two persons. Only a few medieval dice of bone and ivory are marked out as they would be today, i.e. so that the numbers on opposing faces always total seven.

**Clockwise from left:**

Disc-shaped bone gaming pieces of Anglo-Norman type. Although they resembled draughts, such counters were probably used in a game known as 'tables' played with two or three dice. Draughts did not become popular until after 1500.

Thirteenth-century wooden harp peg from Wood Quay. The Anglo-Norman commentator, Gerald of Wales, remarked on the incomparable musical skill of the Irish people, especially with the harp and tympanum (early drum).

Stone game board from Wood Quay. The game of merels or nine men's morris was popular in the Middle Ages. It could be played on a simple game board, or a grid scratched into the ground. The purpose of the game is to get three counters (stones or wooden balls) in a straight row.

Thirteenth-century bone die from Wood Quay, for use in games of chance. The numbers are represented by dots ringed by small circles. The die is not numbered in the orthodox fashion.

Thirteenth-century whistle from Winetavern Street with a blowhole but no finger holes.