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THE SWEATHOUSES OF IRELAND

THE DISAPPEARED FOLK TRADITION OF SWEAT BATHING

Abstract: Sweathouses are a type of vernacular sauna, unique to the island of Ireland. They represent a tradition of sweat bathing that existed on the island for at least three centuries, which has since been consigned to history. Their origins remain a mystery and to date, only one has ever been excavated. It is probable that famine in the 19th century was a key factor which contributed to the loss of this tradition, as it brought about enormous changes in the social and cultural fabric of the country. These monuments are poorly understood and are fading from the landscape, as well as from the public consciousness. This paper provides a brief overview of the current understanding of sweathouses, their morphology and distribution. It is proposed in this paper that folklore records can provide a deeper insight into people's relationship to sweathouses, why they were built and how they were used.

Keywords: sweathouse, Ireland, sweat bathing, archaeology, folklore.

INTRODUCTION

“The inhabitants of every town-land in the parish had their own sweat-house. Every Saturday the sweat-house was heated. One Saturday morning a large turf-fire was lighted in the sweat-house. The sweat-house was heated to a very high temperature. In the evening a person used to go to the sweat-house, close the door and remain there till he was literally “bathed in sweat”. The people of olden-times believed that by perspiring in such a manner rheumatism was prevented.”¹

This quote from the 1930s describes the use of Irish sweathouses. They are small, circular, single-chambered, dry-stone structures.

They are mostly found in isolated areas, such as meadows, pastureland, on the slopes of mountains or tucked away in wooded areas. Sweathouses are unevenly distributed throughout Ireland, with a sparsity in the south and an unusually high number in the northwest. (Figure 1.)

Their potential as a research topic is significant, given that it encompasses archaeology, ethnography, folklore and social history. The place of sweathouses in the patchwork of Irish heritage is not yet fully understood, with relatively little attention paid to them in academic discourse over the past two centuries.

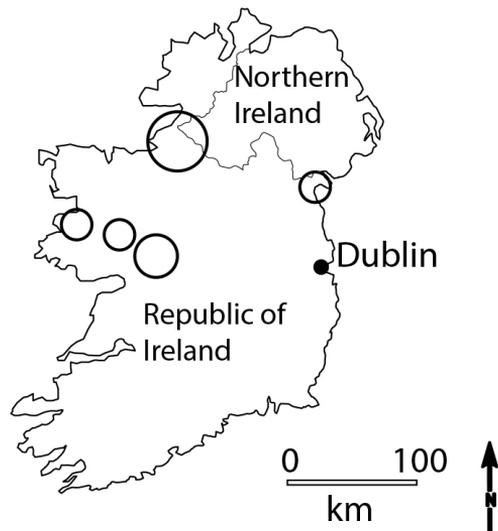
There are a total of 290 recorded sweathouses on the island of Ireland – 246 in



Figure 1. Exterior view of the sweathouse at Cleighran More, County Leitrim (SMR no.: LE020-005). This sweat-house is roughly D-shaped, has a lintelled roof and the entrance faces west. A seating stone is visible within the interior. This structure was conserved during the 1980s and it is situated in a public amenity area. This structure is only marked on the 6-inch Ordnance Survey (OS) maps. Photograph by Katie Kearns, 2020.

the Republic and 44 in Northern Ireland.² The Northwest has a high concentration of sweathouses, particularly in Leitrim, which has a total of 98. Counties that border Leitrim also have high numbers of sweathouses – Roscommon has 46, Sligo has 28, Cavan has 27 and Fermanagh has 23.³ (Map 1.)

Unfortunately, these figures do not reflect the true number of sweathouses which survive today. Taking into account structures which have been destroyed, remain unlocated, are no longer visible or were incorrectly identified, the number of sweathouses that survive on the island is much lower than the official number recorded. For instance, Leitrim presently has 47 surviving sweathouses in varying states of repair, which is less than half the total recorded for that county. This highlights that these structures are disappearing from the landscape



Map 1. The map of Ireland and circles represent the areas with the highest concentration of sweathouses and other, smaller clusters. There are sweathouses in the north and the south of the island, however, they are widely scattered and fewer in number. Drawing: Timo Ylimaunu.

and are in urgent need of adequate conservation.

This article explores the Irish sweathouse as an archaeological and cultural phenomenon and discusses what Irish folklore accounts can tell us about what these monuments were, how they were built and the reason they were used. Finally, sweathouses will be compared and contrasted with the Finnish sauna.

The past two centuries of Ireland's history have been tumultuous. The 19th Century was marked by social and political strife, with the Great Famine of 1845–1851 casting a long shadow over Irish cultural memory. An estimated 1 million people died from starvation and disease, while approximately 1.5 million people emigrated overseas.⁴ The population of the island has not recovered since the Famine, which demonstrates that this was a watershed moment in Irish history. The late 19th century was punctuated by agricultural depressions and famine-like conditions⁵, as well as land agitation and agrarian violence, due to mass evictions of tenant farmers by British landlords; which came to be known as the Land War.⁶ Various Republican organisations proliferated during this period, advocating the use of physical force to achieve independence from Britain. Uprisings against British rule occurred in 1803, 1848 and 1867, which all ultimately failed but helped to galvanise support for the cause of independence, as the revolts were romanticised and the leaders martyred.⁷

By the beginning of the 20th Century, Ireland was on the precipice of great change. A cultural awakening had flowered with the setting up of the Gaelic League, which sought to preserve Ireland's language, culture, customs and sport.⁸ This movement inspired a later generation of republicans⁹,

who revolted against British rule in Easter of 1916, despite having little chance of success. The rebellion was over within a week and the leaders were executed by firing squad. The 1916 Rising was not overly popular initially, but the execution of its leaders led to a surge in public support.¹⁰ Following the electoral victory of Sinn Féin (the republican party) in the United Kingdom general election in 1918, the first Dáil (Irish parliament) was set up in January 1919.¹¹ On the same day, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) ambushed and killed two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary at Solohead Beg. The country gradually slid into the War of Independence (1919–1921). The war was relatively short lived; owing to the fact that the IRA were vastly outnumbered by British troops, had considerably less weapons at their disposal and many of the men within its ranks had little or no previous military training.¹² A truce was agreed in July 1921 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in December of that year.¹³ The Treaty was passed by 64 votes to 57 in the Dáil, leading to a stark divide across the nationalist political spectrum.¹⁴ Under the Treaty, twenty-six counties in Ireland would remain as a dominion of the British empire, among other terms that were viewed as less than favourable by many.¹⁵ The Treaty also dictated that the remaining six counties in the northeast of the country would remain a part of the United Kingdom, owing to a majority Protestant/Unionist population who identified as British.¹⁶

Following the ratification of the Treaty, relations between the Pro-treaty and Anti-treaty republicans broke down and a bitter civil war ensued, which lasted for just under one year and resulted in a victory for the Pro-treaty side.¹⁷ The Catholic minority in the newly formed Northern Irish state

were subjected to discrimination and civil rights abuses for decades, which inspired a civil rights movement which was, at times, violently repressed by the Protestant/Unionist dominated government.¹⁸ As **Lynn Warthow** correctly asserts, “With Catholics under complete civil and political oppression, a cycle of violence emerged in which Catholics and Protestants each turned to extreme paramilitary groups to further their political goals and retaliate against violence with the use of more violence.”¹⁹ This egregious period of civil unrest and violence, known as the Troubles, persisted until the Belfast Agreement of 1998.²⁰ By the end of the Troubles, over 3,000 people, mainly civilians, had lost their lives.²¹ The partition of Ireland has remained a contentious and emotional issue to this day and the civil war shaped Irish politics for almost a century afterwards. The Irish Constitution was written in 1937 and Ireland, formerly the Irish Free State, was declared a Republic in 1949.²²

The above account is in no way intended to be comprehensive, instead it aims to provide contextual information regarding the social and political landscape of Ireland over the past two centuries.

FOLKLORE AND MATERIAL CULTURE - THEORY AND DATA

Folklore can be understood as a part of folk culture, it depicts important aspects of different cultures. It illuminates the practices of everyday life and how to do things in the proper perceived order; henceforth, they can be known as the norms of the everyday life. Folklore is one research theory, as well as a methodology to study anthropologically different identities, as well as aspects of everyday life, social and cultural tradi-

tions.²³ These have been transmitted orally from one generation to the next for many centuries. One significant aspect of folklore is that it has been utilised as a means of popular nostalgia; of a longing for an idealised past, which may never have existed in the first place. By virtue of this, it has connections to nationalism in certain contexts, as a creation of imagined nationalities.²⁴

Mark Groover has suggested that as a discipline, folklore studies both material culture and non-material aspects of life.²⁵ However, **Charles Orser** separates folklore and folklife studies; folklife studies concentrates on the material culture and folklore on oral traditions. In Ireland, for example, there was calls to methodologically combine folklife studies and archaeology in the 1960s.²⁶ Hence, **Henry Glassie** has stated that material culture is not enough, it needs written words “that some of the reality will filter through”.²⁷ He continues that “no one can study culture, for it is abstract and invisible, a pattern in the mind that is revealed only in the fragments through action. We learn about people and their culture—politely, rigorously—from things that can be recorded, from words spoken, buildings built”,²⁸ and in our case, from sweat-houses. Therefore, folklore is an “oral testimony about things and the ways memory is articulated in relation to objects is clearly shaped by the way a memoirist interacts with an object”.²⁹ Hence, the living past is how it has been remembered; not how it is represented in historical or archaeological research.³⁰ Glassie has argued that historians rely “on the written word”, whereas informants rely “on the spoken word”;³¹ thus, oral tradition or oral history. **Laurie Wilkie** defines oral history as “individual memories of persons who have first-hand experience of people, places and events that are collected through

an interview process”.³² Oral histories can be used to reconstruct landscapes and how places have been remembered. However, memory is an ongoing process and thus it affects how people remember structures and places; which ones have meanings and are important to them, whereas other structures or places in the landscape might have been forgotten.³³ Oral histories reveal wider and “richer range of facts” for material culture studies than an archaeological date alone can do.³⁴ Hence, by using the folklore accounts and comparing sweathouses and saunas, our aim is to reveal the hidden and vanished meanings of Irish sweathouses.

Oral traditions and collected records have been used to identify buildings and other architectural features,³⁵ the use and practices of the memorials,³⁶ conflicted pasts,³⁷ and, for example, local Irish customs and beliefs.³⁸ To help preserve Ireland’s oral traditions, the National Folklore Collection was established by the Irish Free State government in the 1930s. One of its finest achievements was the School’s Folklore Collection (SFC), in which primary school children across the country collected customs and traditions from their relatives, neighbours and other members of the community. The result was a vast collection of stories, customs, beliefs, ‘strange animals’, supernatural beings, weather lore and folk medicine. There are a myriad of articles and books relating to folklore on the island of Ireland, but the crucial difference between these and the SFC is that the latter has accounts written by people themselves and the material is unadulterated.

There are over one hundred accounts of sweathouses in the SFC. These entries provide a valuable and unique insight into how these monuments were built, why they were used and people’s relationship to them. The

accounts contain the names of the people who contributed material and are written in various local dialects, which humanises the material in a unique way. They also provide details of the age and occupation of informants. In our paper, we will combine the archaeological data with the collected information of Irish folk life traditions.

In recent years, **Aidan Harte** has contributed much to the study of sweathouses in an archaeological context. He conducted surveys in 2010 of sweathouses in the South of the country in the *Munster Sweathouses Project*.³⁹ This project combines detailed descriptions of individual sweathouses, plan drawings, surveys and the author’s own observations. Harte also published *An Teach Allais* in 2012, which covered sweathouses in Munster, South Leinster and South Connaught.⁴⁰ Harte spoke to local people and found previously unidentified sweathouses with the help of local informants, highlighting the importance of communicating with local people when conducting research on these monuments. One of the authors, **Katie Kearns** wrote her Masters dissertation in 2016, titled ‘*Understanding sweathouses in Ireland with special reference to County Leitrim*’, which was a general introduction to the archaeology of sweathouses, utilising folklore sources and her own surveys and plan drawings.⁴¹ In 2019, **Andrew Fairbrother** wrote his Masters dissertation titled ‘*Irish Sweat-Houses: An Experimental Archaeological Investigation and Study*’; which was the first study of its kind about sweathouses and illuminated much about the process of building and heating these structures.⁴² Aside from the works of Harte, Kearns and Fairbrother, many accounts of sweathouses were written nearly a century ago, in publications such as the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*.

Antiquarians such as **Anthony Weir**, **F.W Lockwood** and **P. Richardson** wrote about sweathouses in the early 20th century and their accounts, although somewhat homogenous, provide valuable information, as they detail some structures which were not marked on any edition of the Ordnance Survey maps and have since been destroyed; such as the structure at Assaroe, Donegal.⁴³ There are numerous newspaper articles about sweathouses and short accounts written in community heritage books, though the accuracy of these accounts tends to be varied.

A sweathouse in Cornacully, County Fermanagh was excavated in 2014. ¹⁴C dates were taken from a piece of wood that was inside a sod of turf (presumably used to heat the structure), which gave a calibrated date

of 1456 ± 40 B.P.⁴⁴ This unfortunately dates the turf and not the structure itself. Cornacully sweathouse is the only sweathouse that's ever been excavated, but unfortunately, this has provided little in the way of new information.

Much is known about sweathouses concerning their morphology, materials and current distribution. Numerous surveys have been carried out by government agencies such as the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, the Office of Public Works, the National Monuments Service, the Sites and Monuments Record and the Northern Ireland Sites and Monuments Record. However, little enough is known about people's relationship to sweathouses. It is proposed in this article that folklore records collected the 1930s can illuminate how people perceived this tradition.

IRISH SWEATHOUSES - STONE-BUILT SMOKE CHAMBERS

The Irish landscape is dotted with hundreds of thousands of archaeological monuments which have survived for millennia; owing to an enduring belief that these were inhabited by supernatural beings.⁴⁵ The symbiosis between archaeology and folklore in Ireland is unique and has enabled scholarly analysis of archaeological monuments; not just



Figure 2. Internal view of the chimney hole in the sweathouse at Lurgaboy, County Roscommon (SMR no.: RO002-037). This sweathouse was built between two boulders on the side of Kilonan mountain. The entrance faces south-to-south-east, the chamber is roughly D-shaped and the roof is lintelled. The structure is not marked on the 6-inch or 25-inch OS maps. Photograph by Katie Kearns, 2016.

as vestiges from ancient times, but as living things in the landscape that people are actively engaged with. The sweathouses of Ireland are more than just archaeological monuments; they are a physical manifestation of the folk beliefs and practices held by the people of the island.

The name for these monuments in the Irish language is *teach alluis*, which roughly translates as ‘house of sweat’.⁴⁶ Some variations of this term exist, due to regional differences in the Irish language. For instance, they are known as *toigthe alluis* in Derry, *ty falluish* in Tyrone and *teach-an-alais* in Sligo.⁴⁷ Harte postulates that this term has had a “long indigenous use” in Ireland, due to the absence of ‘borrow words’ and no great degree of variation in the term for these monuments.⁴⁸

Generally, sweathouses are small, single-chambered, circular in plan, have low, narrow entrances and are built using the drystone technique Harte has outlined five

diagnostic elements of sweathouses: the size of the internal space, the size of the entrance, an external covering of organic materials, the presence of chimneys/flues and the thickness of the structural walls.⁴⁹ (Figure 2.)

Internally, the internal diameter of a sweathouse chamber is typically between 1–2 metres. The internal height ranges from 1 to 1½ metres, meaning that someone of average height cannot fully stand up once inside. Externally, the height of these monuments generally falls between 1½ and 2 metres. The entrance passages generally have a lintel on top. These passages range in height between 0.5–0.70 metres⁵⁰ and are mostly between 0.45–0.5 metres in width.⁵¹ The purpose of the narrow entrance is to prevent heat from escaping while the sweathouse is being used.

Some sweathouses have a hole in the roof which allows smoke to escape, with a stone to cover it while the sweathouse is



Figure 3. Exterior view of the chimney hole of the sweathouse at Lurgaboy, County Roscommon (SMR no.: RO002-037). The stone in the left foreground was used to block air-flow and retain heat while the sweathouse was being used. Photograph by Katie Kearns, 2016.

being used (see Figure 3). Not every sweat-house has a chimney or flue however; some structures have gaps in the stonework, presumably to allow smoke to percolate out, such as at Cleighran More and Gubnaveagh (see Figures 1 & 4).

Some variation exists with regard to the internal shape and plan of sweathouses. They can be sub-circular, oval, sub-oval, rectangular, sub-rectangular, D-shaped and even polygonal in plan.⁵² There are double-chambered sweathouses as well, although these are less common. Examples of these are at Crosshill in County Roscommon, Ballyourane in County Cork, Anaverna in County Louth and Carrowmaloughlin in County Mayo.⁵³

Sweathouses mostly have either corbelled or lintelled roofs, although there are many structures roofed by flags, capstones and even cross slabs (see Figure 5).⁵⁴ The floors of sweathouses generally consist of tamped earth, flagstones or coarse paving.⁵⁵ Seating stones are found in many structures too and some still remain today, such as at Cleighran More (see Figure 1). The interior level of the floor is usually level with the exterior, presumably for ease of access and egress.

Generally, sweathouses are built using sandstone, although some have been built with mixed shales and granite.⁵⁶ According to Harte, 90 % of sweathouses are built using the drystone technique, with the remaining structures constructed with clay bonding or mortar.⁵⁷ Most sweathouses are built into hillsides, probably to preserve heat and maintain structural integrity. Gubnaveagh in Leitrim is an excellent example of a sweathouse built into a hillside (see Figure 4). Although, free-standing sweathouses also exist, such as the structure at Legeelan, Cavan (see Figure 5).

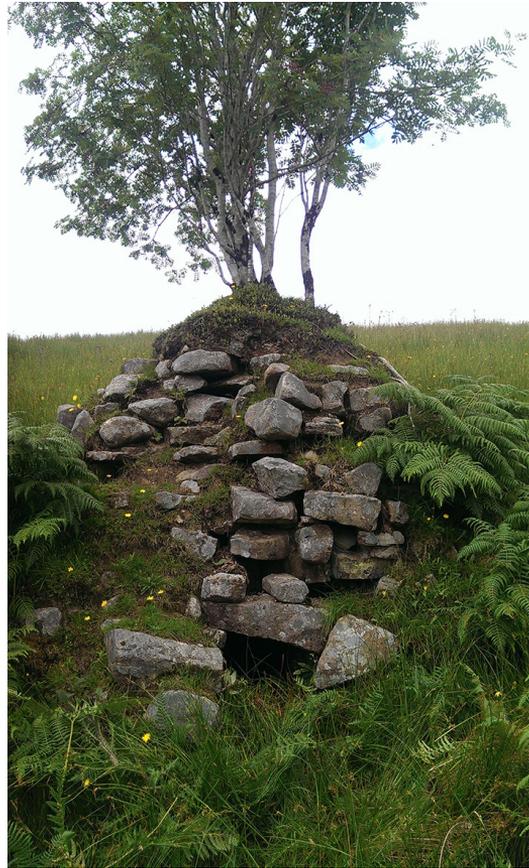


Figure 4. The sweathouse at Gubnaveagh, County Leitrim (SMR no.: LE021-001). This sweathouse was built into a slope, which is visible in the background. The east-facing lintelled entrance has collapsed, due to neglect and growth of vegetation. Gaps in the stonework above the entrance and on the top right may have allowed smoke to escape, instead of a chimney or flue. Growing on top of the structure is a young mountain ash tree. This sweathouse is only marked on the 1907 edition of the Ordnance Survey Ireland maps. Photograph by Katie Kearns.

Many sweathouses have an earthen mantel or covering, but this constitutes only 19.5 % of all sweathouse sites.⁵⁸ These sweathouses can be compared to early saunas, which were subterranean structures dug into the ground;⁵⁹ known in Finnish as *maasauna* (earth sauna) – see Figure 6. However, the act of layering earth over



Figure 5. The free-standing sweathouse at Legeelan, County Cavan (SMR no.: CV004-011). The south-west facing entrance is made narrower by an accumulation of earthen deposits. The chamber is beehive shaped and is roofed by a single slab in the interior. This sweathouse is marked on the 25-inch and 6-inch Cassini OS maps. Photograph by Katie Kearns, 2016.

sweathouses has encouraged the growth of vegetation on top of the structures, which has caused many of them to become completely overgrown and collapse inwards.

The rudimentary nature of the sweathouse shares a parallel with the Finnish *savusauna* (meaning smoke sauna)⁶⁰ and the *maasauna*; the former was a small wooden building and the latter was built into the earth (see Figure 6). The *savusauna* had to be heated for several hours beforehand and they didn't have chimneys, so the smoke had to be cleared out before use.⁶¹ These structures are the original form of sauna that was widespread in pre-industrial Finland and as such, they are often referred to as 'real saunas'.⁶² The modern, electric saunas which are commonplace in contemporary urban settings are considered a pale reflection of the older, traditional *savusauna*.⁶³

To prepare a sweathouse, it was heated inside for several hours with a turf fire. Once the heat was sufficient, ashes from the fire were cleared out and rushes were spread

on the floor, providing a barrier between the hot stones and the person(s) using it. The person(s) would then remove their clothing, enter the sweathouse and perspire in it for approximately one hour. During this time, the entrance was blocked to retain heat, either by sods of turf, rushes or sometimes the clothes belonging to the person using it.⁶⁴ Water was then sprinkled or poured on the hot stones inside, which produced a steam effect.⁶⁵ In other instances, a piece of heather was dipped in water from a bucket and shaken on the stones in the sweathouse, in order to create steam.⁶⁶ This shares a similarity with creating the *löyly* in Finnish saunas. Afterwards, the person(s) would emerge and immediately immerse themselves in cold water, returning home thereafter.⁶⁷

Most sweathouses can fit 2–3 people comfortably at any one time, which limits their capacity for social and communal gatherings. The sweathouse's small size was probably for practical reasons – a small-

er structure meant that building it was less time consuming, keeping heat inside was easier and this also required less fuel.

Where exactly the Irish sweathouse came from remains a mystery, which adds to their appeal as an enigmatic jigsaw piece in Ireland's past. A theory has been put forward that Viking invaders brought the idea of sweat bathing with them to Ireland, when they invaded the island during the 8th and 9th Centuries.⁶⁸ This theory was disregarded by scholars, given that the majority of sweathouses are located inland, away from coastal areas where Vikings mainly settled. Harte pointed out that sweathouses are located in rural areas as opposed to urban settings and are completely absent in the areas of Britain where Viking raiders settled.⁶⁹

There are other things to consider regarding this, however. There are sweathouses on Rathlin island and Innismurray island; which were both raided by Vikings in AD 794, AD 795 and AD 807 respectively (Innismurray was attacked twice).⁷⁰ There is also a reference in the Annals of the Four Masters that the Vikings travelled inland to Roscommon after the raid on Innismurray island.⁷¹ This is substantiated by various references of continued Vikings attacks in Connaught, various Viking age artefacts recovered in the region, annalistic references to the use of an ancient route-way linking north and south Connaught and the presence

of a Viking citadel (longphort) and cemetery in County Sligo⁷². The latter was previously thought to have been an iron age promontory fort⁷³, but was reappraised in recent years by **Eamon P. Kelly** of the National Museum of Ireland.

Hence, there was considerably more Viking influence in the northwest of Ireland than previously thought, in light of recent discoveries which have led to a reinterpretation of the region's history.⁷⁴ Therefore, whether the Vikings introduced the concept of sweat bathing to Ireland is far from clear, but perhaps this theory should not be disregarded entirely.

Another postulation as to the origins of sweathouses is that missionaries from Rome who came to Christianise Ireland in the 5th Century brought the idea of Roman baths with them. However, this seems unlikely, given that sweathouses and Roman baths are entirely different in morphology and size.

A considerable number of sweathouses have corbelled roofs; echoing a construction technique used in Ireland since the Neolithic in passage tombs, such as Newgrange.



Figure 6. Finnish maasauna covered by an earthen layer. Photograph by Eino Nikkilä, 1931, Finnish Heritage (Museovirasto).

This may help to form a hypothesis that sweathouses could be of prehistoric vintage. However, in the absence of any substantial evidence, this link with the distant past remains tenuous. It is also unlikely that these structures could survive intact for millennia, given that many of them collapse due to vegetation overgrowth.

The possibility that *'fulachta fiadh'* (burnt mounds) were used as 'sweat-lodges' is becoming more accepted within archaeological discourse.⁷⁵ The term *'fulacht'* appeared in an Irish literary sources from the 17th Century, which described an outdoor trough filled with water for the purpose of cooking meat.⁷⁶ Traditionally, these structures were thought to have been solely used for cooking, but they may have been used for bathing, washing and dyeing clothes and even brewing beer.⁷⁷ These monuments are the most common field monument in Ireland and are generally defined as low, grassy mounds in a crescent or roughly circular shape.⁷⁸ Hence, there appears to be evidence for a form of rudimentary sweat bathing in Ireland in prehistoric times, but one cannot make any solid conclusions yet, until more evidence is unearthed and the information properly disseminated.

There was probably no exact moment when people stopped using sweathouses. It is largely agreed, however, that their use began to decline in the late 19th century.⁷⁹ A few theories have been put forward as to why this was, such as the introduction of medical dispensaries in the 19th Century; as sweathouses being in areas where modern medicine was introduced much later.⁸⁰

The decline of the Irish language after the Famine was significant.⁸¹ Areas where Irish was the primary language were worst affected by the Famine, as these were also the poorest parts of the country.⁸² Irish also

began to decline after the Famine because many people began to equate it with poverty, the majority of those who emigrated were native Irish speakers and the British colonial administration banned the language from being taught or spoken in elementary schools.⁸³ Hence, it is conceivable that the decline of the Irish language contributed to the decline of the sweathouse tradition, as information which had been passed down orally for generations had been lost. The huge loss of entire communities during the Famine likely contributed to the decline of customs and traditions, too.

At present, there are no literary sources or records that indicate of Irish immigrants having introduced the sweathouse to the North America during the 19th and 20th centuries. This is in direct contrast with Finnish immigrants to North America, who brought the idea of the sauna to North America with them – the sauna is a key signifier of Finnish-American identity.⁸⁴

SWEAT HOUSES, FOLK BELIEFS AND ETHNOGRAPHY DATA - DISCUSSION

A Finnish proverb says that “if a sick person is not cured by tar, liquor, or sauna, then he will die” – illustrating the universal concept of sweat bathing as a cure for many illnesses.⁸⁵ The most commonly attributed ailment that sweathouses provided relief from is rheumatism.⁸⁶ Other ailments that were supposedly cured by sweathouses varies; from sore eyes, gout and lameness to impotence and infertility.⁸⁷ According to folklore accounts, sweathouses were used to treat 'pains in the bones', pleurisy, lumbago, sciatica, fever, pneumonia and influenza.⁸⁸

Sweathouses were not the only places which had curative powers in Ireland, how-

ever. There are thousands of holy wells scattered across Ireland, as well as in Britain and mainland Europe.⁸⁹ In Ireland, each holy well is associated with a particular saint and an annual pilgrimage to one usually takes place on the relevant saint's feast day. For example, Saint Naile cured his followers, but when he became old and "reached the end of his life, the people asked if his curative powers, the powers of his faith, would endure. He stooped low, made the sign of the cross, and a silvery spring gushed miraculously from the stone. Naile promised that it would last forever, and the spring bubbles still in a well beneath a slab [...] It is strange because limestone is strange on low ground, strange because its waters are unnaturally bright—as strange as a river that runs against the hill, it is strange because it contains, perpetually, a cure for warts."⁹⁰ Hence, holy wells have a spiritual significance attached to them and have been places of pilgrimage for centuries.⁹¹

Water from holy wells has long been purported to contain curative properties, with this belief persisting to the present day.⁹² During a pilgrimage to certain holy wells, people would bathe in their waters, as they were believed to have both curative properties and 'preventative' properties, which can safeguard people from future illnesses.⁹³ Because of this, the holy wells offered "a public forum for the performance of individual religious experience."⁹⁴ Therefore, holy wells and sweathouses illustrate the symbiosis of beliefs and meanings which exist in the lived-in-world; in the use of wells, water, as well as the use of sweathouses and water as the steam. Holy wells remain a part of spiritual life for many people today and are 'living' monuments in the landscape – people visit them, recite prayers, spend time in reflection and leave votive offerings.⁹⁵ How-

ever, sweathouses have vanished from the lived-in-world experience; they only exist in archaeology, social history and oral traditions.

In some cases, the sweathouse was heated the day before it was used, with the fire being renewed and more turf added after some time.⁹⁶ Other entries from folklore accounts state that it was heated a few hours before use.⁹⁷ This process was described as a "hot job", which illustrates that heating these structures involved communal effort and some degree of hard labour.⁹⁸ Or this could be an introductory part of the sweat bath ritual – preparing it may have been just as important as using it. Heating up the sauna is a bodily experience, for example; as different kinds of firewood can affect the experience of the bathers. Heated stones in the sauna stove were sacred; as this was the central space of the sauna, similar to the positioning of fireplaces in the house.⁹⁹ The hearth had a central position in early Irish homes – "the fire was lit in the middle of the floor" and people gathered around it.¹⁰⁰

The length of time that people perspired within the sweathouse varies in both the literature and the folklore accounts. Some sources state that people would stay in the sweathouse for half an hour, while others state three hours; some entries even recall people staying inside all night.¹⁰¹ During the sweat treatment, sometimes people would place a cabbage leaf on their head to keep themselves cool and avoid headaches.¹⁰² While seating stones were common, some people used a wooden stool to sit on while sweating as well.¹⁰³ Thus, sweathouses were private, curative spaces. People sat in the darkness and they experienced the hot, steamy air surrounding their body; the sweathouse was a bodily experienced space.

One account recalls a 'sweat man', a professional 'bathmaster' who assisted people with the sweat treatment.¹⁰⁴ An entry from Donegal tells of a lady by the name of Old Martha Douglas, a healer who had a sweat-house on her land; she guided the patient through the sweat treatment (which lasted for 3–4 days) and "administered herbs" to them afterwards.¹⁰⁵ Martha kept her medicine a secret and it died with her;¹⁰⁶ demonstrating how easily traditional knowledge can become lost forever. The fact that these people were designated by their community to aid people in the sweat treatment illustrates that this process was taken seriously and perceived to be more effective when performed by skilled and experienced people. According to Glassie, folklore, stories, narratives and especially cures, pass inside the family, "from father to son, mother to daughter".¹⁰⁷

The folklore data also reveals a variation in construction materials – there are several references to sweathouses that had thatch roofs or were roofed with scraws.¹⁰⁸ Some entries recount structures which had mud walls, too; which indicates that not all sweathouses were built of stone.¹⁰⁹

There are various 'sweathouse fields' which are referred to in the folklore accounts, which indicate the place of the sweathouse within the physical and cultural landscape; for instance, in Corellstown, Meath. This particular sweathouse no longer exists, but it was located at a point where four townlands meet.¹¹⁰ There also was a 'sweathouse river' which enters the sea at Termone Bay, County Donegal. This sweathouse no longer exists, but the fact that a river was named after it demonstrates that it was important marker in the landscape to the people in the area.¹¹¹

While it was common to immerse one-

self in water after using a sweathouse, not everyone followed this practice. Many entries in the SFC recall that people wrapped themselves in blankets and went home to bed afterwards.¹¹² This suggests that immersion in water was a common part of the sweat treatment, but not an absolute necessity. There are some accounts of people taking a drink of whiskey or poteen after sweating, supposedly to "prevent getting cold".¹¹³ Notably, one entry states that: "It was the custom to take no food for about two hours after leaving the sweat house".¹¹⁴

The folklore accounts provide information about sweathouses that no longer exist and were not marked on any edition of the Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, which further illustrates their value as a historical resource. Glassie has stated that a local informant's "history and the history of the professors differ in that he relied primarily on the spoken word, they on the written word".¹¹⁵ The local history differs because it is mainly spatial; not temporal, as the academic past is.¹¹⁶ Due to the spatial nature of the local past, people experience their landscape differently; for them, the landscape contains narratives. These local landscapes have landmarks, structures, such as sweathouses, which were meaningful for locals;¹¹⁷ they were experienced spaces and landmarks.

The actual experience of using a sweathouse is rarely discussed in the literature or the folklore accounts. Thus, "oral histories paradoxically place things at the heart of memories while casting their meanings clumsily",¹¹⁸ therefore, deeper meanings of material culture, such as with sweathouses, have vanished into the mist of the past. Interpretations of sweathouses have been based solely on their practical function; they have not considered sweathouses as

an experienced cultural phenomenon or as a part of past worldview. The Finnish sauna was, and is still, the space where people clean themselves, physically and mentally, and, in the past, it was a space for the rites of the life cycle; especially for women.¹¹⁹ At the same time, it was sacred space for the family, for living members, as well as the deceased; the unseen spiritual elements of the family. The first and the last steams from the sauna stove were performed for the ancestors of the family and after the midnight, the ancestors and spirits had their turn for sauna bathing.¹²⁰ Thus, the sauna was an animistic space and every sauna even had its own supernatural being.¹²¹ Bathing and other activities all happened in the dark, black sauna; the walls of the savusauna were still blackened with soot.

One can imagine crawling into the sweathouse on one's hands and knees and perspiring in the heat, enveloped by complete darkness and silence. Emerging from the dark chamber of the sweathouse into the daylight and plunging into cold water could be reminiscent of rebirth. The concept of transformation, spiritual cleansing and rebirth is the focal point of Native American and Mesoamerican sweat lodge ceremonies.¹²² The subterranean nature of the sweathouse, and the early subterranean sauna (maasauna), may have created a symbolic connection between the person using them and the earth itself. In Native American culture, when one enters the sweat lodge, they are said to enter the womb of Mother Earth.¹²³ This is what **Kaarina Kailo** suggested – that sauna bathing created connections with subterranean powers, which were connected with the shamanistic worldview. The sauna was not only a sacred space for rebirth, but a symbol of fading life. She has also suggested that the sauna was

originally a shamanistic space to find advice from animistic powers.¹²⁴

Finnish saunas are sacred spaces; an old Finnish proverb says that “in the sauna one must conduct oneself as one would in church.”¹²⁵ Women gave birth in the sauna and the mother and the child lived in the sauna for a week or two after childbirth. The newborn child took their first bath in sauna and this was considered a holy rite. The spirits of the sauna witnessed the bath. Females washed deceased persons in the sauna and prepared them for their final journey.¹²⁶ Hence, sweat bathing in other cultures is deeply symbolic and rooted in spiritualism; therefore it is conceivable that sweathouses fulfilled this role for people in the past, too.

One should consider where sweathouses are located in the landscape; remote, often inaccessible areas, cut off from the rest of the world. Perhaps solitude was important whilst using a sweathouse, to create a sense of separation from the outside world; to be surrounded by nature. This echoes the experience of the ‘real’ sauna in Finland, as the sauna is built using organic materials, creating a symbolic link with the natural world.¹²⁷ In the words of Gaynor, “Finns’ love of nature and their quiet respect for the individual are echoed by the sauna”.¹²⁸ Glassie argued that experiences are true; this is it how things happened. Bodily experiences of the darkness, the hot steamy air, thoughts and indications of healing experiences; they become local knowledge and confirmed everyday thoughts.¹²⁹

Sweathouses blend into the landscape and are slowly being subsumed back into it. Perhaps there was a reason for this semi-visible quality; to protect the people who were engaged in using them, or to protect the structures from being interfered with. This

shares a similarity with the iron-age saunas of the Iberian Peninsula, which were built in positions which made them invisible, while being located in areas with high visibility; which created an “interplay of visibility and invisibility”.¹³⁰ It was argued that this interplay was “socially conditioned”, whereby these saunas were only available to certain members of the community,¹³¹ contrasting with the egalitarian ethos of the Finnish sauna.¹³²

This all suggests that sweathouses, like the sauna, had deeper spiritual meanings than previously thought. For instance, the sauna was perceived as a sacred space and the hot steam was understood as a living power; sweating and washing was ritualised and created a connection with spiritual powers. Thus, the folklore accounts “are more likely to contain the truth” and “that local stories appear in multiple versions” because “no single account, oral or written, could be perfectly true. People nod, forget, make mistakes.”¹³³ In any case, “oral expression of material meaning often illuminates the complicated intersection of emotion, experience, [...] and consciousness that shapes materiality and memory.”¹³⁴ Oral memories, which are passed from one generation to another generation, are stories and tales as one part of local and social memory. This kind of social ‘told’ memory can be active and “recycled within a period of 80–100 years”. This means that oral memories last basically three, sometimes five generations, “forming a community of shared experience, stories, and memories.”¹³⁵ Those deeper, spiritual elements of sweathouses might have been shared in the past, but today, locally shared folklore and oral memories unfold mainly the curative aspect of the sweathouse culture. Consequently, by comparing sweathouses to saunas, we were able

to shine some light on potential spiritual experiences of Irish sweathouses, which are now lost. Saunas were commonly used as a dwelling, whereas sweathouses were not. The sauna was the first building that settlers to an area first built, it was warm and served as a multi-purpose building. The same cannot be said of the sweathouse, primarily due to its size.

CONCLUSION

There is much uncertainty surrounding what sweathouses potentially meant to people in the past. It could be that they were built in sacred spaces and imbued with a special significance that has since been forgotten. Considering the spiritual importance of other sweat bathing traditions around the world, it is conceivable that sweathouses played a spiritual, as well as a medicinal role in people’s lives. While it is pertinent that one sticks to evidence and errs on the side of caution with such hypotheses, it is important to keep an open mind when considering the many possibilities that may exist.

The accounts in the School’s Folklore Collection have illuminated a myriad of different ways that sweathouses were heated, used and built. These regional specificities are largely missing from existing literature and thus demonstrate how valuable the information is within these accounts. Far from being a uniform experience of simply sweating and cooling off in water, almost every account of sweathouses in the folklore collection contains a unique variation of this practice. Most of all, sweat bathing inside the Irish sweathouse and in Finnish sauna, then gathering around the fire afterwards inside the house, created bodily, as well as spiritual experiences, at the same time.

By analysing folklore accounts and contrasting these enigmatic monuments with the Finnish sauna, some light has now been cast into the dark chamber of the sweathouse; but whether the chamber shall ever be fully illuminated, remains to be seen.

Acknowledgements: We are grateful for the useful comments of two anonymous reviewers. We wish to thank Professor Paul R. Mullins, Professor Vesa-Pekka Herva, Dr. Tiina Äikäs, and Dr. Titta Kallio-Seppä for their comments and discussions, and Mary Kearns, Hugh Kearns and Róisín Kearns for their advice and assistance. All errors are ours.

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