

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 8

COLMÁN ETCHINGHAM

The Irish 'Monastic Town':  
Is This A Valid Concept?



HUGHES HALL  
&  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hughes Hall was founded in 1885 as the Cambridge Training College (CTC) for graduate women schoolteachers. It is therefore Cambridge's oldest Graduate College, consisting currently of around 50 Fellows and some 400 student members, men and women, who study for doctoral or M.Phil. degrees or for the postgraduate diplomas and certificates offered by the University. We also have an increasing number of mature undergraduates in a variety of subjects. As a result, the academic community of Hughes Hall is now extremely diverse, including students of over 60 nationalities and representing almost all the disciplines of the University. Enquiries about entry as a student are always welcome and should be addressed initially to the Admissions Tutor, Hughes Hall, Cambridge, CB1 2EW, U.K. (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>).

An important step in this transformation came with the granting of Cambridge degrees to women in 1948: the CTC was then given the status of a 'Recognised Institution', the crucial first move towards integration with the University proper. The College took the name of CTC's charismatic first Principal, the celebrated women's educationist, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes. Apart from Miss Hughes's Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures.

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first and only Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College (and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon), 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982. The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. Each year's lecture will be published as a pamphlet by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic on behalf of Hughes Hall.

KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 9

COLMÁN ETCHINGHAM

The Irish ‘Monastic Town’:  
Is This A Valid Concept?



HUGHES HALL  
&  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

The Irish 'Monastic Town': Is This A Valid Concept?

© Dr Colmán Etchingham

First published 2010 by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic,  
University of Cambridge, 9 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP.

ISBN 978-0-9562353-1-2

ISSN 1475–9098

Set in Times New Roman by Dr Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Ms Elizabeth O'Hara,  
University of Cambridge.

Printed by the Reprographics Centre, University of Cambridge.

## **PREFACE**

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture was initiated as an annual event by Hughes Hall as the result of an anonymous benefaction in her memory and to mark the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. This benefaction came to the College as a result of an initiative taken by our Fellow, Dr Michael J. Franklin, Director of Studies in History and in Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic.

Each lecture will be published, both on the College's web-site (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>) and as a printed pamphlet, to coincide with the following year's lecture. Hughes Hall is grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for acting as hard-copy publisher.

Hughes Hall hopes that this academic initiative will make a significant scholarly contribution in those areas which fall within the research interests of Kathleen Hughes, and that the series will continue for many years. We are pleased that it continues to be a fixed point in the College's calendar.

**Sarah Squire**  
President  
Hughes Hall

## THE IRISH 'MONASTIC TOWN': IS THIS A VALID CONCEPT?

### *Introduction*

Kathleen Hughes's book *The Church in Early Irish Society* (1966) was for long the fundamental study of the subject. It was the culmination of a long-standing consensus regarding the essentially monastic organisation that supposedly distinguished the Irish and, indeed, the 'Celtic' Church. It was typical of Hughes's scholarly integrity that she herself initiated the modification or correction of a model that she had not previously thought to question. A paper published posthumously, in 1981, was entitled 'The Celtic Church: is this a valid concept?' She answered the question in the negative, maintaining that the evident importance of bishops, and of territorial jurisdiction, in the early Welsh Church, differentiated it from what she had continued to perceive as an essentially monastic pre-twelfth-century Irish Church.<sup>1</sup> Would that her rejection of the concept of the 'Celtic Church' had been heeded more widely, so that we should have been spared some of the vast body of wholly fanciful writing on the subject that has appeared in recent decades.<sup>2</sup> Among those who did heed Hughes, and built on her legacy were Richard Sharpe and the present writer whose subsequent work moved the scholarly debate on further, to the conclusion that describing the early Irish Church as 'monastic', without qualification, is quite misleading. This is true both from a theoretical perspective and taking account of the actual Irish evidence. Episcopal precedence, territorial jurisdiction and a pastoral ministry are not accounted for in the traditional narrative.<sup>3</sup>

This Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture is not concerned with such questions, however. It deals instead with another aspect of early Irish church history in which Hughes was interested, namely, the economic function of church settlements. Hughes treated of this in *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church*, a book jointly authored with Ann Hamlin and published early in 1977, only months before Hughes's death. Over the intervening thirty-odd years, it has become something of a commonplace, particularly among settlement historians and archaeologists, that 'monasteries' were urban or

---

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, 'The Celtic Church?'

<sup>2</sup> See Davies's endorsement of Hughes's critique, 'Myth of the Celtic Church'; that apparently unquestioning acceptance of the said 'myth' extends beyond adherents of such delusions as 'Celtic spirituality', into mainstream scholarship, is attested by Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Sharpe, 'Organization of the Church'; Etchingam, *Church Organisation*.

‘proto-urban’ settlements. Hughes’s comments, to which we shall return in conclusion, suggest she took a rather different view. In the light of the preceding observations, the reader may take as read this writer’s rejection of the first, ‘monastic’ element of the label ‘monastic town’, but no more of that. Our concern here will be with the second element. It is the intention to look critically at the supposedly town-like character of ecclesiastical settlements. In tribute to Hughes’s willingness to re-examine cherished ideas, the title of this study echoes that of her posthumous paper.

*The debate about the ‘monastic town’*

Let us consider first the idea of the ‘monastic town’, as it features in more or less recent historiography. Its currency is due chiefly to Charles Doherty, who made a case for the existence of such an entity in three papers published between 1980 and 1985. Doherty maintained that ‘monastic towns’ had markets, industry, and large, socially differentiated populations, that they functioned as royal capitals and had streets, houses and public buildings.<sup>4</sup> A historical geographer, Brian Graham, was soon moved to respond in spirited fashion, decrying what he saw as lack of rigorous definition and ‘overstatement’ of the case.<sup>5</sup> While some were quick and equally spirited in Doherty’s defence, Graham and others, in subsequent years, proposed very limited urbanization.<sup>6</sup> Taking stock, in 1996, Michael Ryan and the present writer independently endorsed Graham’s call for rigorous definition.<sup>7</sup> However, as Catherine Swift soon pointed out, there was widespread uncritical acceptance of ‘monastic towns’ as established fact.<sup>8</sup> Howard Clarke, originally critical of Graham, in 1998 acknowledged overstatement of the case for towns, even with reference to Viking settlement in Ireland. He followed Graham in applying to Ireland Wendy Davies’s picture of early medieval Wales: a picture ‘not merely of minimal urbanization but also of minimal trend towards urbanization’.<sup>9</sup> Also in 1998, Mary Valante turned her fire particularly on John

---

<sup>4</sup> Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’; ‘Economic History’; ‘Monastic Town’.

<sup>5</sup> Graham, ‘Urban Genesis’.

<sup>6</sup> Clarke and Simms, ‘Analogy Versus Theory’; Graham, ‘Analogy and Theory’; Graham, ‘Secular Urban Origins’; Graham, ‘Early Medieval Ireland: Settlement’; Mallory and McNeill, *Archaeology of Ulster*, pp. 205–7, 241–2, 264.

<sup>7</sup> Etchingham, ‘Early Medieval Irish History’, pp. 137–8; Ryan, ‘Some Archaeological Issues’, p. 162.

<sup>8</sup> Swift, ‘Forts and Fields’, p. 105, and writers there cited, to whom may be added Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry*, pp. 105–6, and Nic Aonghusa, ‘Monastic Hierarchy of Kells’, pp. 5, 9–10, 17.

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, ‘Proto-Towns’, pp. 340–1; Davies, *Wales*, p. 58.

Bradley's endorsement of the 'monastic town' model, but the impact of her intervention was reduced by errors and misapprehensions, noted by Bradley in a recent response.<sup>10</sup> More substantially, again in 1998, Swift insisted on the need to establish painstakingly the contemporary meanings of terms, both Irish and Latin, rather than settling for inaccurate and anachronistic definitions. She denied that Irish ecclesiastical settlements were in any sense 'towns' in the seventh and eighth centuries. In his recent re-entry into the lists, Bradley elaborated a case for Irish 'monastic towns', but allowed that they emerged only in the tenth century. He accepted implicitly Swift's point about chronological inconsistency in the writings of Doherty, which seemed at times to countenance 'monastic towns' in the eighth century, or even in the seventh.<sup>11</sup>

As regards definition, there are, as Bradley observed, two issues: what constituted a 'monastic town' and when did it emerge? Doherty's adoption, in effect, of what Graham called a 'multi-functional [...] mode of definition', invoking a mix of economic, social, institutional and morphological or physical criteria, was perfectly reasonable, in principle, and was also followed by Bradley.<sup>12</sup> However, the crux of the matter is the extent to which, and when, the evidence shows these criteria were met. Moreover, it would seem that the 'monastic town' model must stand or fall by socio-economic criteria. Distinctive economic activities, market and manufacturing or craftsmanship, and a distinctive class thus engaged, are surely necessary conditions for a 'town'. A 'town', if the description is to bear any useful meaning, must differ from a settlement entirely or predominantly engaged in agricultural production, distribution and exchange, and in which customary relations chiefly determined such activities. Accordingly, what follows in the present study is a critical re-assessment of the 'monastic town' model, focusing chiefly on the socio-economic evidence adduced for it.

Proponents of the Irish 'monastic town' have maintained that ecclesiastical settlements had regular commercial markets. The proposition, originally made by Doherty, is that markets developed from the *óenach*, often translated 'fair'. On this point, he stated that 'some monasteries adopted the tribal *óenach* from the eighth century onwards as a response to the need for local exchange'. This conclusion would seem to rest substantially on an interpretation of a single, late eighth-century reference, of which more below. A

---

<sup>10</sup> Valante, 'Reassessing the "Monastic Town"'; Bradley, 'Monastic town', pp. 325, n. 3; 328, n. 9; 337, n. 59; 342, n. 89; 347, n. 119; 348, n. 124; 354, n. 153; 360.

<sup>11</sup> Swift, 'Forts and Fields', *passim*; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', pp. 354–6.

<sup>12</sup> Graham, 'Urban Genesis', p. 7; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 325.



number of other references to *óenaig*, of a later date, were invoked in support of the proposition that ‘by the tenth century the *óenach* “fair” was a regular feature of activity at major monastic sites’.<sup>13</sup> We shall have to devote some attention to the evidence for the nature of the *óenach* in early medieval Ireland.

### *The significance of Early Irish óenach*

The case that ‘monastic *óenaig*’ were ‘fairs’, from which ‘markets’ emerged, turns on the translation of *óenach*. In one instance, Doherty rendered this word as ‘assembly’. Bradley, at one point, described it as ‘a political assembly, a market fair and an occasion for races and entertainment’. This latter appears to abridge and adapt a definition offered by Francis John Byrne: ‘political assembly, market-fair (which is the sense of Modern Irish *aonach*), and an occasion for general jollification [...] Games and horse-racing were an essential element [...] There is little doubt that these were funerary in origin and that the “fair” was held on the site of an ancient tribal assembly’.<sup>14</sup> This account has much to recommend it, as we shall see, and the significance of Byrne’s formulation regarding the meaning of Modern Irish *aonach*, in particular, seems to have been missed. As a consequence, it appears, Doherty and Bradley were otherwise content invariably to translate *óenach* simply as ‘fair’,<sup>15</sup> selecting a commercial connotation most conducive to the case for the ‘monastic town’. This seems to have been arbitrary and without regard to whether actual attestations of the word in Early (i.e. Old and Middle) Irish substantiate such a translation.

To translate *óenach* simply as ‘fair’ is also to overlook the misgivings of earlier writers, as far back as the early twentieth century, many of them scholars acutely conscious of the changing semantics of the word *óenach* in the history of the Irish language. These include Edward Gwynn, who stated that ‘the traditional rendering ‘Fair’ is misleading, and I regret that I have used it’. The compilers of the contributions to the Royal Irish Academy’s *Dictionary* observed: ‘commonly translated “fair”, though it does not seem to have been intended for commercial purposes’. Daniel Binchy, in a frequently cited paper treating of *Óenach Tailten* (‘the “Fair” of Teltown’, of which more below), consistently rendered *óenach* as ‘fair’, but also entered a revealing, if baffling,

---

<sup>13</sup> Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 81, ‘Economic History’, pp. 302–3; Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, p. 329.

<sup>14</sup> Byrne, *Irish Kings*, pp. 30–1

<sup>15</sup> Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, pp. 81, 83, ‘Economic History’, pp. 302–3, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 52, 67; Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 329–30.

caveat: ‘the translation of *óenach* by ‘fair’, its meaning in modern Irish, is inadequate and misleading, but to seek to change it now would probably deepen confusion’. Byrne’s reservations, in the definition just quoted, are emphasised by his putting ‘fair’ in quotation marks.<sup>16</sup>

‘Fair’ is the primary meaning of *aonach* in Modern Irish, but not of *óenach* in Early Irish, where ‘political assembly’ and ‘horse and chariot race-meeting with ritual associations’ are the prevalent connotations. Notably, *aige*, which, in the ninth- and tenth-century annals, denotes convening an *óenach*, has the primary meaning ‘act of driving, racing (horses)’. *Óenach .i. áine ech* (‘*óenach*, i.e. driving / racing horses’) in Cormac’s Glossary — an encyclopaedic dictionary of uncommon words, the core of which dates to about AD 900<sup>17</sup> — is not a scientific etymology, but it is powerful evidence for the contemporary understanding of the word in Early Irish. Early Irish legal provisions relating to the *óenach* focus on the question of indemnity against liability for injuries, caused by or to horses and chariots brought to the event. The *óenach* was an occasion at which there was a high likelihood of injury, both accidental and, no doubt, the result of rivalries on and off the race-track and, perhaps, also, in the political assembly, so that participation was at one’s own risk.<sup>18</sup>

Let us look at references to *óenach* cited by advocates of the ‘monastic town’, starting with the death in 800 of Ailill mac Fergusa, king of South Brega (in modern south Co. Meath and north Co. Dublin). He was thrown from his horse *in circio ferie filii Cuilinn Luscan* ‘at the *óenach* of the feast of (St) Mac Cuilinn of (the church of) Lusk’ (in modern Co. Dublin). Doherty correctly took *circius* here to be a Hiberno-Latin variant of Classical Latin *circus*, denoting *óenach*; doubts subsequently voiced by Valante are unfounded.<sup>19</sup> *Circius* is also synonymous with *óenach* in Latin and Irish variants of the name of *Circius* / *Óenach Colmáin*, held in *Mag Lifi* (‘the Liffey plain’, in modern

<sup>16</sup> Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* III, p. 471; *Dictionary*, ‘N–O–P’, column 103; Binchy, ‘Fair of Taitiu’, *passim* and p. 124, n.; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 99, 153, 320, 360–1, 391, 403, 458–9, used both ‘fair’ and ‘assembly’; Ó Murchadha, ‘Carman, a Proposed Location’, highlighted the *óenach* as a burial site and had little to say of its roles as assembly or race meeting and virtually nothing of ‘fairs’.

<sup>17</sup> Russell, ‘Growth of Cormac’s Glossary’, ‘*Dúil Dromma Cetta* and Cormac’s Glossary’.

<sup>18</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 811, 873, 876, 878, 888, 889, 916; AFM 956 (954); *Dictionary*, ‘A’, column 108; Meyer, *Sanas Cormaic*, p. 86 §1002; Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, p. 150; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 800; Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 81; *pace* Valante, ‘Reassessing the “Monastic Town”’, p. 11, *Dictionary*, ‘N–O–P’, column 103, l. 75, does, in fact, point to the occurrence of *circus/circius* as an equivalent of *óenach*.

Co. Kildare). The two forms occur in different manuscript versions of a genealogical passage that refers, cryptically and intriguingly (given the Classical resonances of the *óenach*, touched on further below), to a tale about a wooden horse.<sup>20</sup> *Óenach Colmáin* of 827 was ‘disturbed’ by a dispute between Muiredach mac Ruadrach, king of Leinster, and the men of south Leinster. At the *Óenach Colmáin* of 942, Fáelán mac Muiredaig, king of Leinster, was a notable casualty, when he was thrown from his horse to his death. *Óenach Colmáin* is presumably the same meeting as the *Óenach Lifi*, presidency of which, in 956, was usurped by the Uí Néill over-king, Congalach mac Maíl Mithig of Brega, who was ambushed and killed afterwards by the Dublin Vikings, at the instigation of the men of Leinster.<sup>21</sup>

Since the connotations of *circius* are evidently those of the Ancient Roman ‘race-course’ or ‘games enclosure’, ‘political assembly’ and ‘race meeting’ are obvious aspects of what is reported at Lusk in 800 and at the *Óenach Colmáin Lifi* in the ninth and tenth centuries: the presence of the king, doubtless convenor of the assembly and, on two occasions, the death of the king in a fall from a horse. On balance, it seems unlikely that Ailill (in 800) or Fáelán (in 942) were killed while actually racing. As was the norm in Ancient Greece and Rome, the Irish aristocracy evidently maintained professional racers, who competed in their names. *Uraicecht Becc*, a law text of perhaps ninth-century, or even early tenth-century date, numbers jockeys (*monaig*) and charioteers (*araid*) among the lowest of professional hirelings, who lacked any status independent of *caich oca mbíat* (‘those who keep them’). Eleventh- or twelfth-century glosses on this text indicate that jockeys and charioteers performed *isna háenaigib* (‘in the *óenaig*’).<sup>22</sup> The kings, Ailill (in 800) and Fáelán (in 942), therefore, unless, like Nero, they participated themselves in the races, were probably just victims of the general rough and tumble of the *óenach*, against which the laws, as we have seen, offered no redress, as a rule.

It seems that *Óenach Colmáin* of the Liffey plain, just discussed, was distinct from the *óenach* of Colmán, the saint of Lynally (near Tullamore, modern Co. Offaly), which lies well to the west of the Liffey plain. *Áenach Colmáin Ela* (‘the *Óenach* of Colmán of Lynally’) has been identified as a

<sup>20</sup> O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum* I, p. 230 (also noticed by Ó Murchadha, ‘Carman, a Proposed Location’, pp. 65–6).

<sup>21</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 827; AFM 942 (940), 956 (954); Orpen, ‘Aenach Carman’, pp. 33–7, was mistaken in doubting that there was an *Óenach Colmáin* in the Liffey plain, partly due to his confusing this *óenach* and *Óenach Colmáin Ela*, of which more below.

<sup>22</sup> Binchy, *Corpus iuris*, pp. 1617, ll. 12–13, 18–20 (= 2281, ll. 32–3; 2281, l. 35–2282, l. 11; 2333, l. 37–2334, l. 1; 2334, ll. 6–8); for the date of *Uraicecht Becc*, see Breatnach, *Companion to the Corpus*, p. 316.

'monastic *óenach*'.<sup>23</sup> In the *Triads*, a collection of legal maxims and distillations of wisdom dating to no later than the late ninth century, it is grouped with *Óenach Tailten* (of Teltown, modern Co. Meath), and *Óenach Crúachna* (of Croghan, modern Co. Roscommon), as *trí háenaig hÉrenn* ('the three *óenaig* of Ireland').<sup>24</sup> Of these, *Óenach Tailten* is easily the best documented, and can be expected to shed light, by extension, on the general character of the assemblies of Croghan and Lynamally that are grouped with it. Tírechán, the seventh-century hagiographer of St Patrick, described *Óenach Tailten* as an *agon regale* ('royal assembly'), using a Latin term ultimately derived from Greek ἀγών. About a generation later, the annals also refer to *Óenach Tailten* as an *agon*, in 717, when it was afflicted by a disturbance (*conmixtio*) that caused bloodshed among the assembled aristocracy.<sup>25</sup> The relevant connotations of the *agon* / ἀγών in these contexts are 'assembly (to view the games), arena, contest'. In 811, the church of Tallaght, Co. Dublin, embargoed the Saturday meeting of *Óenach Tailten*, in a dispute with the Uí Néill over-king, Áed Oirdnide, *coná recht ech ná carpat* ('so that neither horse nor chariot arrived'). The convening of *Óenach Tailten* by Uí Néill over-kings and its 'disturbance' on occasion by aristocratic feud, from the eighth century to the eleventh, are reported in the annals, revealing its significance as a political assembly.<sup>26</sup> Swift delineated the landscape and monumental features of the site of *Óenach Tailten*.<sup>27</sup> We may note that an eleventh-century poem on *Óenach Tailten*, by Cúán Ua Lothcháin, calls it *cluiche cáinte* ('a funeral game') and frequently refers to burial.<sup>28</sup> The *óenach* site at Croghan, of course, includes prehistoric burial monuments, as highlighted in a poem on Croghan to which Diarmait Ó Murchadha drew attention. Byrne's inference that the *óenach* originated as funerary games seems thoroughly justified, given the funerary or memorial aspect of the Ancient Greek games.<sup>29</sup>

*Óenach Tailten* was not far from the Patrician church of Donaghpatrick and the ninth- or tenth-century *Tripartite Life* of St Patrick depicts the saint blessing the *óenach* site. Patrician relics, and, probably, the bishop / abbot of Armagh, were present at *Óenach Tailten* in 789 and 831. In 831, indeed, a major 'disturbance' (*cumusc*) of the *óenach*, with many casualties, occurred in

<sup>23</sup> Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', p. 81; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 329.

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, *Triads*, pp. x–xi, 4–5.

<sup>25</sup> Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 132–3 §9.1; AU<sup>2</sup> 717.

<sup>26</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 717, 774, 777, 789 (see Swift, '*Óenach Tailten*', pp. 34–5), 791, 811, 827, 831, 916, 927; CS 1007 (1005).

<sup>27</sup> Swift, '*Óenach Tailten*', pp. 24–34.

<sup>28</sup> Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* IV, pp. 150–1, l. 44; cf. pp. 150–1, ll. 45–8; 152–3, ll. 89–100; 154–5, ll. 101–4.

<sup>29</sup> Ó Murchadha, 'Carman, a Proposed Location', pp. 65–6; cf. Best and Bergin, *Lebor na hUidre*, pp. 90–4; Murray, *Early Greece*, pp. 79, 83–4.

the presence of the insignia of both Armagh and Lusk, the church at whose own *óenach* the king of South Brega had been killed in 800. Relics of another saint came *ad ciuitatem Tailten* ('to the *ciuitas* of Teltown') in 784, though whether to the *óenach* itself is not specified. Incidentally, it is highly significant that *ciuitas*, commonly assumed to bear urban connotations, is here used of the thoroughly rural landscape of Teltown.<sup>30</sup> Church endorsement of the 'traditional' *óenach* of Teltown, a political assembly and race meeting with ritual associations, rebuts the claim that only an 'economic aspect' of *óenaig* 'survived' in and after the eighth century, under the auspices of 'monasteries'.<sup>31</sup> If *Óenach Tailten* (and *Óenach Cruachna*) were primarily political assemblies and ceremonial race-meetings with their origins in funerary or memorial rituals, is it not reasonable to deduce that the *óenach* of Lynally, likened to them in the *Triads*, was of a kind?

Of about the same date as the *Triads* is a reference in the *Tripartite Life* of St Patrick to the *óenach* 'beside' (Doherty), or 'of' (Bradley) Dunshaughlin, Co. Meath. A check on the passage cited for this supposedly 'monastic' *óenach* reveals, however, that its real import has been wholly misunderstood or misrepresented. The hagiographer narrates that, when Sechnall, saint of Dunshaughlin, was composing a famous hymn to his mentor Patrick, his concentration was disrupted by persons unspecified, who were *oc dénam óenaig inna arrad* ('conducting an *óenach* in proximity to him'). When, instead of desisting as requested, they began to mock him, Sechnall called on the earth to swallow them up, and it obliged: *ro sluicc dá charpat déacc díib fóchétoir* ('it swallowed twelve chariots of them immediately').<sup>32</sup> Far from being a commercial 'monastic' *óenach*, this anecdote of ninth- or tenth-century date<sup>33</sup> depicts a traditional *óenach*, characterised by chariot racing, which incurred the spoilsport cleric's wrath.

A second 'monastic' *óenach*, extrapolated from another reference in the *Tripartite Life*, must likewise be rejected. This is *Óenach Machae*, demarcated, it is said, by crosses, at one of which four chariots were brought to St Patrick. Of this Doherty observed that the 'site can hardly be equated with (Emain

<sup>30</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 784 (see Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* IV, pp. 417–18), 789, 831; Swift, 'Forts and Fields', p. 113; Swift, '*Óenach Tailten*', pp. 34–5.

<sup>31</sup> Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic*, p. 144, ll. 2869–72 (= Stokes, *Vita Tripartita* II, pp. 394–5).

<sup>33</sup> Doherty, 'Monastic Town', p. 67 — *Tripartite* dated 'c. 900'; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', pp. 329–30 — *Tripartite* dated 'ca. 830', doubtless following the assertion by Byrne and Francis, 'Two Lives', p. 7; but see Mac Eoin, 'Dating Middle Irish Texts', pp. 127–34, which suggests a tenth-century date.

Macha) Navan fort about two miles to the west of Armagh and must be quite close to the monastic town'. He gave no reason for this, but Bradley followed him in referring to 'Oenach Macha at Armagh'.<sup>34</sup> If their assumption was that the crosses demarcating *Óenach Machae* point to a location at Armagh, rather than at Emain Machae, this is belied, in principle, by the aforementioned evidence for ecclesiastical endorsement of *Óenach Tailten*. It is clear that *Óenach Machae* was, in fact, at Emain Machae. An eleventh- or twelfth-century poem on *Óenach Carmain*, noticed by Doherty and Bradley in another connection, refers to *Óenach Emna*, the subject of a prose tale that was recited at *Óenach Carmain*. Binchy considered *Óenach Emna* to be identical with *Óenach Machae*, originally, as he put it, 'the great fair of the Ulaid'. The origin-legend of Emain Machae indicates that it was, indeed, the site of the *óenach*. That it was distinct from Armagh is confirmed by an annal for 1103. In that year, the king of Munster and would-be king of Ireland, Muirchertach Ua Briain, proceeded from *machaire Aird Macha* ('the plain of Armagh'), where he had encamped for a week, *co hÁenach Macha 7 co hEmhuin 7 timceall do Ard Macha* ('to *Óenach Machae* and to Emain and round to Armagh'), indicating that the *óenach* was not at Armagh, but at or close to Emain Machae.<sup>35</sup> A location for a political assembly and ceremonial games at the prehistoric site of Navan Fort accords with evidence already considered for the location and function of other such *óenaig*.

There is mention of *trí margaid* ('three markets') towards the end of a poem on *Óenach Carmain*, in the late Middle Irish compendium of place-name lore known as *Dindshenchas*. With reference to this, Doherty remarked that 'by the eleventh century the words *margad* and *óenach* may be interchangeable'. Support for this has not been found in the poem or elsewhere, but it may stem from the assumption that *óenach* was chiefly a commercial 'fair'. The poem, perhaps, prompted Doherty to envisage 'the emergence of the fixed market out of the *óenach* at major church sites sometime between the tenth and the early twelfth century'.<sup>36</sup> *Óenach Carmain* was not a 'monastic *óenach*' located at a church site, however, but a secular assembly and ceremonial games of the men

<sup>34</sup> Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic*, p. 141, l. 2813 (= Stokes, *Vita Tripartita* I, pp. 238–9); Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', p. 83; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 330.

<sup>35</sup> Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* III, pp. 20–1, ll. 245–6; IV, pp. 308–11; Binchy, 'Fair of Tailtiu', p. 126; AU<sup>2</sup> 1103.

<sup>36</sup> Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', pp. 81, 83; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 329; the fifth stanza of the poem on *Óenach Carmain* (Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas*, III, pp. 2–3, ll. 17–20) at first glance seems to equate *óenach* and *margad*, but Gwynn's reading is against the manuscripts and the reading *margnaid*, although obscure, is supported by most manuscripts (*Dictionary*, 'M', column 64) and should be respected, on the principle of *lectio difficilior*.

of Leinster in the eleventh century, to which period the poem can be dated. The features of the *óenach* highlighted in the poem include racing and games,<sup>37</sup> with musical performances, and literary and learned recitations,<sup>38</sup> while funerary and burial associations are also prominent,<sup>39</sup> as is the image of a royal assembly,<sup>40</sup> with deliberation on legal enactments and perhaps tributes.<sup>41</sup> The markets are an after-thought, mentioned only in stanza seventy-seven of an eighty-one-stanza poem. This stanza is evidently not part of the original poem, since a *dúnad* ‘closing’ — the prosodic convention of concluding by repeating the opening phrase — occurs at stanza seventy-four or seventy-five.<sup>42</sup>

Granted that markets are mentioned only as an addendum to the poem on *Óenach Carmain*, their character is also curious: *marggad bíd, marggad beóchraid / marggad mór na nGall nGrécach / i mbíd ór is ardd-étach* (‘a market of food, a market of livestock / the great market of the Greek Foreigners / in which there were gold and fine clothing’). The reference to ‘Greek Foreigners’ is perplexing, but is, perhaps, an extravagant literary allusion to Viking traders in luxury goods. Doherty seemingly thought so, observing that the ‘poet’s description of this particular fair must have been based on the contemporary activity he saw in a Norse or monastic town’. Here ‘fair’ is (presumably unconsciously) substituted for ‘market’ of the poem. What prompted food and livestock to be marketed in an economy where one would expect agricultural production to be for subsistence or customary renders? Swift’s suggestion that food-renders were paid to the king, and those surplus to his needs redistributed by him at the *óenach*, is supported by evidence less positive than circumstantial. It is plausible, however, and, as she points out, markets of food and livestock could arise from the need to redistribute more or less perishable renders that could not be consumed there and then. Special attire, worn at an *óenach*, might explain the ‘market of [...] gold and fine clothing’.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* III, pp. 2–3 l. 8; 14–15 ll. 173–6; 16–17 ll. 181–92; 18–19 ll. 209–12, 221–4; 22–3 l. 286; 24–5 l. 309.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19 ll. 233–6; 20–1 ll. 237–68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3 ll. 9–16; 8–9 ll. 73–80; 22–3 l. 296; 24–5 ll. 297–304.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12–13 ll. 137–152; 14–15 ll. 153–164; 16–17 ll. 193–208.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19 ll. 213–16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3 l. 296; cf. pp. 2–3 l. 1; see *ibid.*, p. 480, where Gwynn argues that the third-last stanza is misplaced (which would locate the *dúnad* at stanza seventy-five); see also Ó Murchadha, ‘Carman, a Proposed Location’, p. 59; an earlier possible *dúnad* at pp. 22–3 l. 284 is less complete than that at pp. 22–3 l. 296, which repeats the whole opening line.

<sup>43</sup> Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* III, pp. 24–5 ll. 306–8; Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 81; Swift, ‘*Óenach Tailten*’, pp. 336–9.

Finally, we come to references to *óenaig* at Clonmacnoise, Glendalough, Lynally again, and Roscrea, extracted by Doherty and Bradley from later Irish saints' Lives and *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*.<sup>44</sup> These eleventh- or twelfth-century items are largely uninformative as to the nature of the *óenaig*, however. The reference to the *óenach* of Glendalough in a late Irish metrical Life of Cóemgen (St Kevin) alone gives any hint of what was involved. An assembly of the men of Leinster might be implied by its designation as 'glory of Leinster' (*cádhas Laighen*). St Kevin's promised blessing for anyone who 'shall dispense' (*dáilfes*) at his *óenach* is obscure, but perhaps implies hospitality or feasting. Secure passage to and from the *óenach* at Glendalough is proclaimed and law breaking there prohibited, echoing concerns about disorder in poems on *Óenach Carmain* and *Óenach Tailten*<sup>45</sup> and, indeed, in the laws, aforementioned.

In sum, then, the evidence that the early Irish *óenach* had a commercial dimension is negligible, and translation of this word as 'fair' is unjustified. The connotations detected in the pre-Norman sources are predominantly if not exclusively those of a political assembly and race meeting associated with prehistoric burial sites. Several supposed examples of 'monastic' *óenaig* are not admissible. *Óenaig* at churches are no more detectably commercial than are other *óenaig*. Rather, political and ceremonial aspects of *óenaig* and their religious-cultural roots as funerary or memorial games suffice to explain both church endorsement of *óenaig* at traditional, non-church locations, and the tendency by churches to host *óenaig* themselves.

#### *Markets, silver and craft activity at church settlements*

There may have been market activity at church settlements, but the evidence is far slighter than has been supposed. Positive evidence for markets consists of only two items. One is an incidental reference to *margadh Chaissil* ('the market of Cashel') in the annals for 1134, reporting that horses were able to swim there when the site became very flooded by exceptional weather conditions.<sup>46</sup> A

<sup>44</sup> Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉreann* I, pp. 144–5 ll. 33–56; 174 §25; 178 §§30, 31 (= Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉreann* II, pp. 140 ll. 33–56; 168 §25; 171–2 §§30, 31); Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhel*, pp. 14–15 §15; Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', p. 83, 'Monastic Town', p. 67; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 330.

<sup>45</sup> Plummer, *Bethada náem nÉreann* I, pp. 144–5 ll. 33–52 (= Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉreann* II, p. 140 ll. 33–52, where there seems no warrant for his rendering *dáilfes* as 'shall spend'); Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* III, pp. 10–11 ll. 101–4, 117–24; 12–13 ll. 125–32; 14–15 ll. 165–8; 18–19 ll. 221–4; IV, pp. 150–1 ll. 57–64; 152–3 ll. 69–72.

<sup>46</sup> AT 1134.



second twelfth-century reference, in one of the ‘charters’ — actually transaction records<sup>47</sup> — in the Book of Kells, mentions cows seized in a dispute about land and brought to *margad Cenannsa* (‘the market of Kells’). Kells was a church settlement of long standing, whereas Cashel had been made over wholly to the church only in 1101, it having long been the central place of the kings of Munster. It is interesting that horses and cows are referred to in these cases, given the markets of foodstuffs and livestock in the addendum to the poem on *Óenach Carmain*, the suggestion being that such items were accumulated through other functions of the *óenach*. If markets at *Óenach Carmain* were no more frequent than the *óenach* — in the case of *Óenach Carmain*, only once every three years — why should we consider that such markets as are attested at twelfth-century ecclesiastical sites were ‘fixed’, or regular?<sup>48</sup>

Evidence adduced in support of the ‘monastic town’ has included Viking-age coin hoards, of tenth-century and later date, found at Irish ecclesiastical settlements. In his important analysis of Irish Viking-age silver hoards, Michael Kenny argued that they indicate two zones of silver currency among the Gaelic Irish. The zone between fifty and 110 kilometres from Dublin was one in which coin hoards and coin use predominated, while in the zone more remote from Dublin, coinless hoards and a coinless economy prevailed.<sup>49</sup> Tribute and reverse raiding of Viking settlements by the Gaelic Irish, as well as some level of trade, are possible routes by which such silver came into Irish hands. However, Viking-age silver deposits were not confined to churches, and are also found at indisputably secular locations, such as ring forts and crannogs.<sup>50</sup> No one, to date, has suggested that such places were even nascent towns. Doherty cited a verse of uncertain date, in an eleventh-century annal, which reports that generous measures of grain, wild fruit and nuts were purchased for a *pinginn* (‘penny’) at Armagh.<sup>51</sup> It is noteworthy, once more, that the purchases comprised foodstuffs. The reported transaction(s) obviously need not indicate a regular market at Armagh. Moreover, *pinginn* did not originally denote a coin, but a small unit of precious metal weight, 1/72 of an

<sup>47</sup> For the most recent, persuasive, analysis of the status of these documents, see Broun, *Charters of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland*, especially pp. 29–47.

<sup>48</sup> AT 1101; Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 18–21; Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 164–5; Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas III*, pp. 10–11 l. 120; 18–19 l. 216; see Doherty ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 83, and cf. Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, p. 330.

<sup>49</sup> Kenny, ‘Coin Hoards’.

<sup>50</sup> Sheehan, ‘Silver Hoards’, p. 175.

<sup>51</sup> Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 82 (but AU<sup>2</sup> 1097 is a later gloss, and does not refer to Armagh); ‘Monastic Town’, p. 67; Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 331, 345; AFM 1031.

ounce. The Book of Kells transaction records denominate prices (and in one case compensation) in ounces and *pinginne*. It is stated that such units were of both silver and gold. Since Viking-age coins were of silver, not gold, *pinginn* in eleventh- and twelfth-century Kells appears to have been a unit of precious metal weight so designated, rather than a coin. Coin hoards, while indicative of coin use and, possibly, trade at some (probably elite) level, do not identify markets, still less towns. Markets, in any event, do not require towns: witness Viking-age Man, which was characterised not only by a measure of trade, but by coin use and even a mint, in the eleventh century (and perhaps the tenth), but seems to have lacked towns.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, can we credibly describe as 'towns' places where evidence for ongoing market activity or resident traders is slim, to say the least of it?

Trade apart, manufacturing and a craftsman class, in a differentiated population, is a second necessary socio-economic condition for the 'monastic town'. Bradley surveyed the archaeological evidence for metal, jet and glass-working and comb-making at several church settlements. Doherty and Bradley highlighted an eleventh-century tale of an early tenth-century king of Leinster's unfortunate death, which occurred through his being impaled on his servant's spear. This happened when the king's horse shied at the sight of antlers placed outside a comb-maker's workshop (*ceardchae cíormhaire*) at Kildare. While it is tempting to infer a resident craftsman from the mention of his *cerdchae*, he might just as well have been an itinerant who simply set up shop in Kildare on the occasion of Brigit's festival or another crowd pulling occasion. It is scarcely safe to infer an economically significant class of resident craftsmen in church settlements from a lone anecdote, the point of which may be merely to warn the elite of how they might fall by the chance or opportunist act of a low prestige or contemptible person.<sup>53</sup>

The comb-maker was, indeed, a lowly person in early Ireland. An Old Irish law text, together with eleventh- and twelfth-century glosses, rank the comb-maker, leather-worker, chain-maker, turner and fisherman among the least prestigious of craftsmen, for they have status lower than a free commoner

<sup>52</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Farming*, pp. 593–6; Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 16–17 §III, 20–2 §V, 22–3 §VI, 26–7 §VIII, 30–1 §X (1, 2, 3), 32–3 §XI, 34–5 §XII (= O'Donovan, 'Charters in the Book of Kells', pp. 132–3 §III, 140–1 §V, 142–3 §VI; = Mac Niocaill, *Book of Kells*, pp. 156–7, 158, 159, 159–60, 162–3, 163–4, 164 — where he renders *pinginne* as 'penny-weights'); for coin use and minting in Viking-age Man, see Etchingham, 'Insular Viking Zone', pp. 179–80.

<sup>53</sup> FAI, pp. 166–7; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', pp. 336, 339, 347, 349, 354; Doherty, 'Exchange and Trade', p. 83, 'Monastic Town', p. 67; compare the killing of Glún Iairn, king of Dublin, in 989, *dia moghaidh féin i meisce* ('by his own slave, while drunk') (AU<sup>2</sup>).

or affluent farmer (*bóaire*). The point is made more colourfully in a passage that is common to an eighth-century law text and the ninth-century *Triads*. There, the *círmair*e is portrayed contemptuously as one who contends with a dog on a midden (*otrach*) for bones (*cnáma*), executes the curious feat of straightening a ram's horns (*adarca reithi*) 'with his breath, without fire' (*dia anáil cen tinid*), and intones an incantation upon a midden to draw up to the surface antlers (*congna*), bones and horns.<sup>54</sup> Behind the colourful rhetoric lie interesting historical implications. John Soderberg argued that a preponderance of red deer antler over 'post-cranial' (i.e. non-antler) red deer bone is a key marker of exploitation of deer for manufacturing, which he regarded as indicative of 'urbanism'. In this respect, he maintained that the faunal evidence from the New Graveyard at Clonmacnoise comes to resemble that from the Viking settlements at Dublin and Waterford only after AD 1100. He subscribed to 'monastic' urbanism but, it would seem, of the more cautious variety, invoked by Bradley, who favoured a late development.<sup>55</sup> However, the Old Irish legal evidence shows that manufacturers or craftsmen outside the Viking settlements exploited deer long before 1100, but that they used antler, horn and bone alike. This, together with the indications that they removed such raw material from general middens, surely complicates the interpretation of 'faunal assemblage' and requires one to establish the precise context of each such assemblage.<sup>56</sup> In any event, archaeological and documentary evidence for more or less specialist comb-makers, whose low legal status hardly bespeaks any great economic significance, can scarcely be said either to make or break the case for the 'monastic town'.

From a Kells record that a craftsman called Mac Áeda 'sold a "half-house" (*leth lainded*, perhaps a workshop)', it has been extrapolated that 'property-owning craftsmen are known to have lived at Kells in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries'.<sup>57</sup> Mac Áeda was a *cerd*, specifically a craftsman of gold and silver. *Lann* denotes a plot of land or a church site, perhaps a building, but not necessarily a house, in the general sense, for which

<sup>54</sup> Binchy, *Corpus iuris*, pp. 1616 ll. 22–7 (= 2281 ll. 1–9, 2333 ll. 10–17), 2220 ll. 5–7; Meyer, *Triads*, p. 16 §117.

<sup>55</sup> Soderberg, 'Red deer' (for which reference, I am indebted to Kaarina Hollo), pp. 168–71; Soderberg's characterisation of Clonmacnoise's 'final phase (eleventh through thirteenth centuries)' (p. 171) is presumably a slip and is at odds with his twice specifying 1100 (p. 170) as the beginning of this phase.

<sup>56</sup> In other words, is it from a more or less selective midden or domestic deposition, or can it be shown to reflect the detritus of a workshop, permanent or temporary?

<sup>57</sup> Bradley, 'Monastic Town', p. 336.

*tech* occurs in another Kells record.<sup>58</sup> *Lann* in yet another Kells document is associated with an abandoned ringfort (*athles*) and its *faithche* ('infield', 'precinct'), and perhaps means an outhouse or ancillary building.<sup>59</sup> There is nothing to show that Mac Áeda's 'half-*lann*' was a workshop. In the absence of specified location, there is no certainty it was even within the settlement of Kells itself, as much property mentioned in the Kells records was outside. By contrast with the comb-maker, however, Mac Áeda's profession of precious metal worker was among the highest prestige crafts in early Ireland, with status equivalent to that of a lesser aristocrat.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, he is the sole craftsman mentioned in the Kells documents, beside many strictly ecclesiastical officials, whether clergy, resource managers, scholars, or teachers. It would be hazardous, then, to extrapolate much from this single reference. Extensive excavation of a sizeable church settlement might change the picture, but, at present, it is not clear that craftsmen constituted a resident, and socio-economically (as distinct from culturally) significant class at church sites.

Reassessing the evidence for trade and manufacture suggests that the economic case for 'monastic towns' is not as strong as its advocacy. Charges of 'exaggeration', 'overstatement' and 'urbanization by assertion', made by Graham, seem justified. Yet Graham was willing to concede that 'economically, there is [...] a case for monastic towns', based partly, it seems, on accepting Doherty's interpretation of the *óenach*.<sup>61</sup> As we have seen, however, some supposed examples of 'monastic' *óenaig* must be rejected, as must the inference that the *óenach* was a 'fair'. The evidence for market activity and traders at church settlements is slim, as is that for manufacture and a resident manufacturing class. Notwithstanding his trenchant critique of Doherty, Graham's judgement, just quoted, evidently erred on the side of leniency.

---

<sup>58</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 22–3 §VI (= O'Donovan, 'Charters in the Book of Kells', pp. 140–1 §V), 32–3 §XI (= Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 158 — where he renders *leth lainded* 'half of the enclosure' — 162–3).

<sup>59</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 16–17 §III (= O'Donovan, 'Charters in the Book of Kells', pp. 132–3 §III; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 156–7, where he renders *cona lanntaib* 'with its buildings'); this passage confirms Swift's conclusion that the *faithche* was a precinct, which could be adjacent to a rath or ringfort, and upon which ancillary buildings were located ('Forts and Fields', pp. 111–12, 114; Kelly, *Early Irish Farming, passim*, but especially pp. 369–70, favoured 'infield'); for *lann* see *Dictionary*, 'L', column 52; for *athles* see *Dictionary*, 'A', column 268.

<sup>60</sup> Binchy, *Corpus iuris*, p. 1613 ll. 9–16 (= 2277 ll. 36–42; 2329 ll. 29–36).

<sup>61</sup> Graham, 'Urban Genesis', pp. 3, 7, 8, 9, 12.

*Built form and general social functions of church settlements*

Let us digress briefly to consider some of the other, general social criteria invoked in support of the ‘monastic town’. Its advocates proposed the ‘urban’ character of the ‘monastic town’ on the basis of ‘public buildings’, including royal residences and administrative buildings, defensive enclosures and large numbers of houses. Doherty wrote of ‘public buildings and monuments — stone churches, round towers, high crosses, public open spaces and the abbot’s residence’ at ‘monastic towns’. Bradley also envisaged ‘public buildings’ and ‘a major administrative dwelling, such as the abbot’s house and / or a royal residence’.<sup>62</sup> It may be suggested, however, that these formulations also smack of the ‘overstatement’ of which Graham complained.

The entities categorised as ‘public buildings’ are, in fact, almost all strictly ecclesiastical structures, with the exception of ‘royal residences’. To assert that either these latter, or the ‘abbot’s house’, had a ‘major administrative’ function seems merely to beg the question, however. Royal residences in church settlements are likely to have been temporary, given the peripatetic habits of medieval royalty. As Bradley himself appreciated, twelfth-century kings of Mide are reported as having houses at Clonard and Duleek, Co. Meath, and also at Durrow, Co. Offaly, so that these cannot have been permanent residences. No ‘administrative’ function of these ‘royal residences’, or of the ‘abbot’s house’, that could qualify these church settlements as towns, has been demonstrated. Two of the Kells transaction records may hint at a possible function for royal houses in church settlements. These documents record exemptions for the church settlements of Kildalkey and Ardbraccan (both in modern Co. Meath) from royal exactions, the first in the early to mid-eleventh century, the second in the mid-twelfth. The exactions stipulated include tribute (*cís* and *cobach*) and military service (*fecht* and *sluaged*), together with *coinnem*, an obligation to billet the king and his retinue. As far back as the mid-tenth century, the annals for 951 record the exemption of Clonard from royal *coinnem*.<sup>63</sup> A royal house in a church settlement was doubtless where a king exacted *coinnem*, as a peripatetic seigneur consuming the produce of his

---

<sup>62</sup> Doherty, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 60, 64–6, 68; Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 325, 337–8, 351–3, 355; his conjecture that royal houses at church settlements predated the eleventh and twelfth centuries is borne out by a reference to a killing in Armagh in 870 *ante ianuam domus Aedho regis Temhro* (‘before the door of the house of Áed king of Tara’) (AU<sup>2</sup>), of which more below.

<sup>63</sup> Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, p. 337; Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 10–13 §I, 34–7 §XII (= O’Donovan, ‘Charters in the Book of Kells’, pp. 136–41 §IV, 142–7 §VI; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 157–8, 159); AFM 949; cf. CS 950, AC 946.

tributary church estate. It may be thought rather grandiose to cast such a function as 'administrative'. It is noteworthy that a royal house in a church settlement is first documented in a contemporary source as early as the annals for 870, which report a violent incident in Armagh *ante ianuam domus Aedho Regis Temhro* ('before the door of the house of Áed king of Tara'). Since, according to Bradley's more cautious chronology, the 'monastic town' emerged only in the tenth century, this particular 'royal residence' presumably does not earn for ninth-century Armagh the label 'monastic town'.<sup>64</sup>

The physical evidence cited by Bradley for the scale of ramparts at ecclesiastical settlements is certainly impressive, but is it justified to infer a 'defensive function', rather than a 'simple boundary of sanctuary'? Unless excavated, the value of this evidence is limited because it is undated, as Graham and, indeed, Doherty appreciated. Such ramparts might protect mainly against casual incursions by marauders, those pursuing fugitives, and even wild animals. Reports even in the more detailed eleventh- and twelfth-century annals are not sufficiently circumstantial to show that ramparts defended churches against significant military attack. Bradley interpreted a report that Muirchertach Ua Briain spent a week *a forbhaisi for Ard Macha* ('blockading / encamping against Armagh'), in 1103, as indicating that a rampart around Armagh provided a bulwark against the forces of the Munster king. As it happens, however, the same annal records that Domnall Mac Lochlainn, the northern king, spent the week *aghaid it aghaidh friu* ('face to face with them'). What is expressly reported in the annals as standing between Muirchertach and Armagh, then, was not a rampart, but a defending army.<sup>65</sup>

In any event, defence and demarcating sanctuary are not mutually exclusive, since a rampart obviously protected fugitives. Doherty proposed that 'one can speak of a town in the modern sense' only when ecclesiastical sanctuary was restricted, and the 'monastic city' subjected to 'secular law', and he suggested that some twelfth-century kings tried to achieve this. When Doherty wrote, however, a fundamental distinction between Irish 'secular' and 'ecclesiastical' law was widely assumed, whereas scholarship in and since the 1980s has exposed substantial common ground between the two.<sup>66</sup> Ecclesiastical sanctuary was not simply a sphere wherein religious taboos

<sup>64</sup> AU<sup>2</sup> 870; Bradley, 'Monastic Town', pp. 354–6.

<sup>65</sup> Bradley, 'Monastic Town', pp. 340, 342–4, 354–5; cf. Valante, 'Reassessing the "Monastic Town"', pp. 14–15, and Graham 'Urban Genesis', p. 11; Graham, 'Analogy and Theory', p. 63 n. 5; Doherty, 'Monastic Town', p. 53; AU<sup>2</sup> 1103.

<sup>66</sup> Doherty, 'Monastic Town', p. 70; for a convenient summary of more recent thinking on law, see Breatnach, 'Law'.

offered protection, or wherein a different law operated. It was, rather, a separate jurisdiction. A fugitive sought something like ‘benefit of clergy’, so that he might be amenable only to a church court. In pre-Norman Ireland, the jurisdiction of a church pertained both to churchmen and to all within a defined precinct (*terminus* or *termonn*) around an ecclesiastical settlement.<sup>67</sup>

In truth, one could readily turn Doherty’s argument on its head. It is arguable that vindication, rather than restriction of sanctuary enhanced the legal immunity or liberty of a church settlement. This could be seen as making it more, not less like a medieval town, at least in terms of its legal personality. Exempting churches from billeting, tribute and military service extended sanctuary in this sense, like the exemptions from seigneurial jurisdiction and levies that were granted by kings to later medieval towns. Unlike medieval towns, however, there is no evidence known to the present writer that Irish church settlements obtained from kings specifically commercial privileges, like a market or fair, or immunity from tolls or customs on trade. The exemptions mentioned in connection with churches are from customary dues and services and offer no indication of market-based activity. The difference, once again, appears to be economic function.

The remaining general social criterion for assessing the ‘monastic town’ is housing and population density. Elite buildings — including royal houses — apart, large numbers of houses, in terraces, with streets or paved ways, at church settlements that were internally sub-divided, are well documented, especially in the eleventh- and twelfth-century annals. Bradley usefully collected many of these references. As Doherty remarked, this evidence exists ‘because the annals become much more detailed from the eleventh century’. There are occasional earlier references to houses, such as that at Armagh, in 912, noticed by Bradley, and another in 921.<sup>68</sup> Do such houses in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, or, indeed, earlier, indicate a resident population, and of what size? As early as the seventh century, Cogitosus, the hagiographer of St Brigit, famously remarked of the settlement at Kildare that, although it lacked a *uallum* (‘surrounding wall’), *conuenientibus tamen in ea populis innumerabilibus, dum ciuitas de conuentu in se multorum nomen accipit* (‘nevertheless, countless peoples being gathered together therein, it then gets the name *ciuitas* from the assembling of many in it’).<sup>69</sup> Adding that throngs

<sup>67</sup> For brief comments on *termonn*, see Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, pp. 49, 158.

<sup>68</sup> Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 332–6, 339–40; Doherty, ‘Monastic Town’, p. 66; AU<sup>2</sup>, 912, 921.

<sup>69</sup> Doherty’s text, ‘Monastic Town’, p. 55; translation is that of the present writer; to gloss Cogitosus that Kildare ‘deserves the title “city” because of its population’ (Doherty,

came to Kildare for Brigit's feast day, Cogitosus plainly considered that this swollen, transient population earned Kildare the name *ciuitas*. *Ciuitas*, we may recall, in the eighth-century annals described Teltown, which was entirely uninhabited except, it seems, by transients at the time of the *óenach*. Some housing in later centuries at church settlements may have provided for transients, such as pilgrims or those attending an *óenach* hosted by the church. In any event, even numerous, permanently inhabited dwellings at a church settlement do not make it a town, rather than, say, a village-like population centre.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that, among the eleventh- and twelfth-century annalistic references that shed light on the layout of church settlements, there are several that conjure up a picture of a rural, village-like, rather than urban context. There is, for example, mention of a great autumn wind in 1015, which brought down a large oak tree located in *reclis Fingín*, an enclosure within the church settlement of Clonmacnoise. Clonmacnoise, which is one of the few churches for which such detailed annalistic references exist, figures significantly again in 1149, when lightning in January set fire to St Ciarán's yew tree and, although the fire was quenched, 113 sheep sheltering under the tree were killed. In the following year, 1150, aristocratic feuding claimed a casualty in the 'calf's enclosure' at Clonmacnoise.<sup>70</sup>

In summary, then, neither built form nor formal monuments nor the intermittent presence of kings in pre-Norman Irish ecclesiastical settlements can prove that they were towns. The key criterion must surely be economic function. One would need to demonstrate a shift from an overwhelmingly agrarian economy, in which exchange was almost exclusively customary and hierarchical, to one in which manufacture and market played at least a significant part. The emergence of a distinctive and socio-economically significant class of traders and craftsmen would be expected. While archaeology may change the picture, neither the existing evidence for craftsmen nor the possibility of some market activity can dispel the impression that major church settlements were, economically, almost entirely orientated towards farming, with an elite that appropriated the surplus product of an agrarian labouring class. Such trading and manufacture as occurred is likely to have

---

'Monastic Town', p. 57) does not do justice to the nuances of Cogitosus's remarks; Bradley noted that Valante 'overlooks' Cogitosus's reference to a *castellum* around the church, 'Monastic Town', p. 349 — cf. Bradley, 'Medieval Kildare', p. 31 — but this appears to overlook, in turn, Swift's distinction between the absent *uallum* and the present *castellum* (Swift, 'Forts and Fields', p. 108).

<sup>70</sup> CS 1015, 1050, AT 1149.



been very much ancillary to this overwhelmingly agricultural economic nexus.

*The Kells transaction records*

A single but most telling body of evidence must suffice, for present purposes, to drive home the point. This is the collection of transaction records written into the Book of Kells in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As Máire Herbert argued persuasively, with but one exception, each of these is a genuinely contemporary record of the transactions they report, contrary to the more sceptical view of their editor, Gearóid Mac Niocaill. It is important to dwell for a moment on the nature of these documents. Herbert did not question their categorisation by Wendy Davies as ‘Celtic’ charters, although Mac Niocaill did not consider them to be charters.<sup>71</sup> If they were charters, this would suggest a socio-legal context rather closer to that of the European medieval mainstream, of which urban settlement was indisputably a part. However, as Dauvit Broun has demonstrated, they are not charters, in the sense in which that term is generally understood.<sup>72</sup> They are not dispositive, that is to say, they are not instruments which, in themselves, actually transfer title to property. Rather, they are records after the fact, created as evidence that the transactions in question had taken place. Accordingly, the names appended are those of guarantors of the actual transactions, rather than witnesses of dispositive instruments.

As a body of records, this material is most telling for present purposes, because it covers the period from the 1030s to the 1160s, when Kells supposedly exemplifies the fully-fledged ‘monastic town’. As we have seen, advocates of the ‘monastic town’ model pointed to a *margad* (market) at Kells and to the presence of ‘property-owning craftsmen’. Moreover, ‘buying and selling of private property within the town of Kells’ were identified in a Kells record.<sup>73</sup> While not altogether without merit, each of these points again would appear to constitute ‘overstatement’ of the case for the ‘monastic town’. Together, they give a misleading impression of what the Kells documents both reveal and conceal about the economic and social fabric of the settlement.

On the specific points, firstly, it is quite unclear what was the nature,

---

<sup>71</sup> Herbert, ‘Charter Material’, especially pp. 61–2 (for the contemporaneity of the documents); Davies, ‘Latin Charter Tradition’, pp. 265–6; yet Mac Niocaill, from the first, implicitly, in entitling them ‘Notitiae’, and subsequently quite explicitly (*The Book of Kells*, p. 153), took the view that they were not charters.

<sup>72</sup> Broun, *Charters of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland*, especially pp. 29–47.

<sup>73</sup> Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 83; ‘Economic History’, p. 303; ‘Monastic Town’, p. 67; Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 330, 336, 348.

regularity and economic significance of a *margad*, mentioned only as a place to which Gairbéth mac Maíl Cháemáin, *fosairchinnech* (‘deputy erenagh’ or ‘manager’) of Kells, brought cows (*bú*) belonging to someone called Conaing, whose patronymic was, perhaps, Mac Suibne, and who may have been the *airchinnech* (‘erenagh’) of Girley, a church about seven or eight kilometres south of Kells, in modern Co. Meath. This incident was part of a dispute between the two about title to land (*ferann*). The cattle were brought there ‘as a pledge against illegality’ (*a ngill re indliged*), pledges in Irish law being an earnest of intent to submit to arbitration, or to pay a judicially determined compensation. There is no intimation that the cows were to be traded at the *margad*; rather, it seems they had been distrained and were, in effect, impounded there until the dispute was resolved, which it was by Gairbéth’s payment of three ounces of silver to his adversary, to secure title to the disputed land.<sup>74</sup> ‘Property-owning craftsmen’ is an extrapolation from the lone reference to such a craftsman, the precious metal smith (*cerd*) Mac Áeda, already mentioned.<sup>75</sup> As regards ‘buying and selling of private property within the town of Kells’, it must be admitted that the example cited is a rather unfortunate choice. It is a record of the purchase, in the late eleventh century, by Máel Martain Ua Breslén, the priest of Kells, of extensive land (*ferann*), comprising meadow (*lén*) and bog (*móin*), a disused enclosure or ring-fort (*athles*), with its ancillary buildings (*cona lanntaib*) and ‘infield’ or precinct (*faithche*). All were located, not ‘within the town of Kells’, but about fifteen kilometres southeast, near Donaghmore, Co. Meath, whose *airchinnech* (‘erenagh’) was a guarantor of the transaction.<sup>76</sup>

In order to account properly for the economy of Kells in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, we must acknowledge, first of all, what these transaction

---

<sup>74</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 18–21 (= Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 164–5); on pledges, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, pp. 164–7; Gairbéth’s office at Kells is specified in another transaction record (Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 30–1, §X (1) (= Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 163–4); the precise identity of Gairbéth’s adversary is not clear, due to obscurities in the text that are highlighted in Mac Niocaill’s second edition; Nic Aonghusa, ‘Monastic Hierarchy of Kells’, p. 11, identified Gairbéth’s adversary as the erenagh of Kilskeer, but the document seems to suggest he was the official of Girley; Herbert, ‘Charter Material’, pp. 69–70, was uncertain if this was a case of distraint, but what is reported suggests it was.

<sup>75</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 22–3 §VI (= O’Donovan, ‘Charters in the Book of Kells’, pp. 140–1 §V; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, p. 158).

<sup>76</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 16–19 §III (= O’Donovan, ‘Charters in the Book of Kells’, pp. 132–7 §III; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 156–7); O’Donovan (to which Doherty, ‘Exchange and Trade’, p. 83, makes no reference), identifies Donaghmore.

records do not tell us: they are silent about the run-of-the-mill socio-economic process that underpinned production and distribution at Kells, as at any other Irish church settlement. The present writer examined in detail elsewhere the relationship of a church settlement and its leadership, on the one hand, to its *manaig*, socio-legal dependants or tenants, on the other, as revealed chiefly in legal and hagiographical sources. While *manaig* seemingly comprised several socio-economic sub-categories, they can be described as bondmen of their churches and were, essentially, agrarian producers. The ecclesiastical elite appropriated the surplus product of *manaig*, in a mix of stipulated direct labour and customary payments, the latter sometimes cast as religious dues, such as tithes and first fruits of their produce and livestock.<sup>77</sup> This more or less predictable, customary and hierarchically pre-determined economic relation, although it was the economic lifeblood of settlements such as Kells, is not a concern of the transactions recorded in the Book of Kells. Rather, they detail unusual or discretionary transactions in agricultural assets, mostly land, between the church elite — notably clergy and ‘resource managers’, such as the erenagh — and involving, as donors, vendors or guarantors, the secular aristocracy of the surrounding region and beyond. Since these records are the best evidence for non-customary exchange at Kells in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, one must acknowledge that reflexes of either non-agrarian production or market activity are negligible.

Land (*ferann*) is the subject of most transactions, some of which, like the estate near Donaghmore, was at some remove from Kells itself. Such was Kildalkey *cona crích ocus cona ferund* (‘with its territorial boundary (?) and its land’), about eighteen kilometres south of Kells, and Ardbraccan *cona crích ocus cona ferund*, about eleven kilometres southeast of Kells, both of which were exempted from seigneurial levies, as previously noticed. A tract of bounded (?) land (*do crích et d’fherunn*) and another *ferond cen mess cen chlais* (‘land without tree-fruit or furrow’, i.e. pasture), both granted by Tigernán Ua Ruairc, king of Bréifne, seem to have been at some remove from Kells. So, too, appear to have been two localities, acquired by the eremitic or anchoritic community at Kells, and designated *baile ... cona muilind ocus cona fherund* (‘settlement ... with its mill and its land’), and *Ráth Drumand cona crích ocus cona ferand* (‘Ráth Drumand with its boundary (?) and its land’), to include also a *murbach* (‘breakwater’, here doubtless a riverside flood bank) and an *ithlann* (‘granary’). These were purchased from the ‘community’ (*muintir*) of Kells. The *margad* at Kells is mentioned in connection with a

<sup>77</sup> Etchingam, *Church Organisation*, pp. 363–454.

dispute about land (*imchosnam feraind*), which was on ‘the southern side of the way’ (*leith annes den belach*). Since *sráit* (‘street’) and *clochán* (‘paved way’) are used of a thoroughfare within Kells itself, as we shall see, and since the *airchinnech* of Girley, seven to eight kilometres south of Kells, seems to have had an interest in the land, perhaps the *belach* was outside Kells, though this is not specified.<sup>78</sup>

There are also several transactions involving property in the Kells settlement itself. Reference to the *dísiurt* [...] *cona lubgortán* (‘hermitage [...] with its herb-garden’), made over absolutely to the hermits or anchorites, carries no notably urban connotations, however. The orientation of a piece of purchased *ferann* in relation to a ford is explained, and boundaries minutely stipulated, including a *muilind* (‘mill’) and with mention of *Lochán Pátraic* (‘Patrick’s Pool’) and a location named *in Siofóic*, on the south side of Kells, the origin of Suffolk Street in the later town. The environment does not seem notably urban. In the 1130s, Colmán Ua Breslén, priest of Kells, purchased, for his sons and the hermit (*déorad*) Cellach, a tract of *ferann* within the settlement. Orientation and bounds are minutely (if not altogether clearly) outlined, as follows: *i lleth re proinntech d’ithlaind Ua Dornán; dá troigid ocus dá fichett ina drech i lleth fri clochán co ithlaind; .ui. troigid dano i lethait na sráti etorru ocus in proindtech; a fat imorro ó clochán co ithlaind Cuac cenmothá láthrach oentigi etorru ocus ithlu Chuaca* (‘beside [the] refectory to Ua Dornán’s granary; forty-two feet is its frontage beside the paved way to the granary; six feet is the width of the street between them and the refectory; its length, moreover, [is] from the paved way to Cuac’s granary, except for the site of one house between them and Cuac’s granary’).<sup>79</sup> Bradley noted this evidence of a ‘street’ at Kells between the refectory and a granary.<sup>80</sup> A six-foot-wide *clochán* or stone-paved way could certainly carry not only pedestrians, but a *carpat* (‘carriage, chariot, cart’). Noteworthy is that the buildings abutting the land were one house, two granaries and a refectory, reflecting, apart from the religious dimension, the predominantly agrarian economy of a settlement with a

<sup>78</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 10 §I, 34–6 §XII, 24 §VII.1, 2, 28 §IX, 28–30 §X 1, 2, 3, 18–20 §IV (= O’Donovan, ‘Charters in the Book of Kells’, pp. 138–9 §IV, 142–7 §VI, 128–9 §I; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 154–5, 157–8, 159, 160–1, 162–3, 163–4, 164–5; at pp. 162–3 he renders *clochán* as ‘causeway’ and *srát* as ‘way’).

<sup>79</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 14 §II, 20–22 §V (= O’Donovan, ‘Charters in the Book of Kells’, pp. 130–1 §II, 146–9 §VII; = Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 155–6, 159–60), 32 §XI (= Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 162–3; I follow Mac Niocaill’s reconstructed text, silently eliminating one or two inconsistencies and supplying length-marks; I depart from Mac Niocaill’s translation in some respects).

<sup>80</sup> Bradley, ‘Monastic Town’, pp. 340, 348.

plot of open land at its heart.

The document recording purchase of the *leth lainded* of Mac Áeda, the precious metal smith (*cerd*), was noticed previously. The *leth lainded* appears to be some kind of building and might be a workshop, as has been suggested, but, as also pointed out, since a structure called a *lann* is associated, in the record concerning Donaghmore, with a rural (disused) enclosure or ring-fort, it could equally well be an agriculture-related building. Its unspecified location probably indicates it was at Kells itself, as does the fact that the guarantors include none of the local nobility, who regularly appear in other records of property at some remove from Kells. Finally, a record of purchase of an *erles* ('enclosure, precinct') again does not specify location. *Erles/airless/airlise* can denote an enclosure around a secular residence, or a church precinct, more elaborate and extensive than a simple house-plot — for which *láthrach tige* ('site of a house') is used in the Colmán Ua Breslén record — like the rampart-enclosed precinct of a ring-fort. The purchaser and vendor of the *erles* are named, but not identified as officials of the Kells community, and may be local aristocracy, who are among the guarantors. Despite absence of specification, it is less certain that this property was, in fact, within the Kells settlement itself.<sup>81</sup>

All in all, one is struck by the exclusive concern of the Kells transaction records with land and other agricultural assets, and the impression they convey of an almost entirely agrarian economy. In that respect, they are strikingly reminiscent of far earlier records of transactions, written into the early ninth-century Book of Armagh, and dating originally to the eighth century. These records are much fewer and generally briefer than those of Kells, three to four centuries later. Yet what we are afforded are glimpses of remarkably similar dealings between the ecclesiastical elite, one involving a grant of land, the boundaries of which are set out in detail. Another passage records a purchase of land, comprising wood (*fid*), plain (perhaps quality land, *mag*) and (waterside) meadow (*lénae*), an enclosure or ring-fort (*les*) and a herb-garden (*lubgort*). Bullion payments are in silver and gold, and transactions involve sheep, pigs and horses.<sup>82</sup> One has the distinct impression of a thoroughly agrarian economic environment remarkably like that of the Book of Kells records, albeit many centuries earlier.

It is instructive to compare briefly the impression of the settlement and

<sup>81</sup> Mac Niocaill, *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais*, pp. 22 §VI (= O'Donovan, 'Charters in the Book of Kells', pp. 140–1 §V), 26 §VIII (= Mac Niocaill, *The Book of Kells*, pp. 158, 161–2); *Dictionary*, 'A', column 225 (*airles*), column 226 (*airlise*).

<sup>82</sup> Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, pp. 172–4 §§8 (2), 11 (2), (3), (4).

economy of Kells, derived from the eleventh- and twelfth-century transaction records, with some of the contents of an unpublished poem, apparently dating to the early twelfth century, which sheds light on contemporary Ostman Dublin. A version of this poem was included by Myles Dillon in his edition of *Lebor na Cert* ('The Book of Rights') but, unfortunately, he was content to rely, for the most part, on the inferior recension found in his manuscript of choice, the Book of Lecan.<sup>83</sup> This omits almost all the detail of present interest, which is confined to the version of the poem in the Book of Uí Maine.<sup>84</sup> Noteworthy, firstly, is a series of levies or tributes supposedly conceded by the Dublin Ostmen to St Patrick, and, of course, to his claimed successors, the heads of the church of Armagh. These were payable, it is claimed, in consideration of St Patrick having converted Dublin to Christianity, a thoroughly anachronistic conceit by the poet, of course, who was evidently a pro-Armagh propagandist of the early twelfth century.<sup>85</sup>

Among the levies said to be due to Armagh are a *screpull* ('scruple', 1/24 of an ounce) for every ounce of gold, a levy of seed and of mead. Also stipulated are 'a comb from every comb-maker' (*cír gacha círmair*), 'a shoe from every tanner' (*cúarán gacha súdair*), 'a vessel from every fine metalsmith' (*easgra gacha cearda*) and 'a scruple from every coiner' (*sgreaball gacha mhonadóir*). The poem refers to 'every trading ship that comes over the sea / to Dublin' (*gach long ceandaigh thig thar sál / go Áth Clíath*) and declares that Dublin owes 'a hooded cloak for every steered / captained ship' (*cochall gacha sdiurasluing*). Here we have the otherwise unattested compound *sdiuraslong* which, like the better-known *stiurusman*, contains the Norse loanword *stýr* ('helm, rudder'), in the latter compound denoting the function of helmsman and captain. The Norse word is, in the Dublin poem, compounded with the Gaelic word for ship.<sup>86</sup> These references

<sup>83</sup> Dillon, *Lebor na Cert*, pp. 114–19; for his choice of Lecan as principal manuscript, see pp. xxi–xxiv.

<sup>84</sup> The text used here is a transcript of the poem from the Book of Uí Maine, fol. 125vb52–126va4, circulated by Liam Breatnach in a seminar on the poem, in Trinity College Dublin, many years ago; length marks and translation are the work of the present writer.

<sup>85</sup> The composition of this stridently partisan statement of Armagh's claims in relation to Dublin is doubtless to be related to an incident in 1121, when, the Dubliners having dispatched their bishop-elect Grani to Canterbury for consecration, as had been their wont for at least fifty years, Archbishop Cellach of Armagh arrived to claim the bishopric of Dublin for himself. The ramifications of this for secular and ecclesiastical politics have been discussed elsewhere, including by the present writer (for references see Etchingham, 'Episcopal Hierarchy in Connacht', pp. 25–6).

<sup>86</sup> These points are to be found in stanzas 11 to 14 of the Book of Uí Maine poem, at fol. 126ra.

convey an impression of a settlement in which manufacture, precious metal currency and coinage, as well as transmarine trade, were important, although mention of levies of agricultural produce, in the form of seed and mead, should not be overlooked.

The continuing importance, for the economy of even Ostman Dublin in the twelfth century, of foodstuffs and agriculture-related commodities, is emphasised in references to a ‘levy and toll’ (? *cís is cáin*), said to be due to the Dubliners from ‘every Foreigner in Ireland [...] who is entitled to trade’ (*gach Gall an Éirind [...] do dlígh ceandaidecht*). The indications are of a classic medieval grant of trading privileges to the Dubliners, entitling them to toll their trading competitors, namely, the other Ostmen of Ireland. Yet the nature of the dues specified would appear to imply that trading in agricultural and subsistence produce predominated, rather than trade in goods manufactured by specialist craftsmen. Noticed are ‘a horse load of malt’ (*marclach bracha*), ‘a half horse load of salted meat’ (*leathmarclach saille*) and ‘two horse loads of firewood [...] with a quantity] of candles’ (*da marchlach connaigh [...] do coindlib*).<sup>87</sup> Clarke’s caution about the scale of urban development even in the Ostman towns, noticed in passing at the outset,<sup>88</sup> may well be justified.

### *Conclusion*

It should be reiterated that neither the evidence for craftsmen, nor the possibility of some market activity, obscures the overall impression created by the Kells transaction records. The economy of an Irish ecclesiastical settlement, even in the period immediately prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion, was orientated towards farming, with an elite that appropriated the surplus of agrarian labourers on a predictable, customary and hierarchically determined basis, and whose non-customary transactions concerned land. Grain storage and milling, rather than manufacture, is the most evident industry. There is no reason to think that the unique insight into non-customary exchange afforded by these records is atypical. What was true of Kells was surely true of other churches in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when the ‘monastic town’ was supposedly flourishing. The evidence assembled here suggests, rather, both ‘minimal urbanization’ and ‘minimal trend towards urbanization’ in late pre-Norman church centres. In *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church*,

---

<sup>87</sup> These points are to be found in stanzas 30 to 32 of the Book of Uí Maine poem, at fol. 126ra.

<sup>88</sup> See the section, above, on ‘The debate about the “monastic town”’.

Hughes affirmed that 'a monastery was a subsistence-economy farm'.<sup>89</sup> Granted that Irish ecclesiastical settlements cannot be accurately portrayed in exclusively monastic terms, her judgement as to the predominantly agricultural socio-economic role of such settlements nevertheless survives recent attempts to impose on them an urban model.

---

<sup>89</sup> Hamlin and Hughes, *The Modern Traveller*, p. 36.



## Bibliography

### Abbreviations.

- AC: Murphy, D., ed. and trans., *The Annals of Clonmacnoise* (Dublin, 1896); repr. (Lampeter, 1993).
- AFM: O'Donovan, J., ed. and trans., *The Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland [...] by the Four Masters*, 7 vols. (Dublin, 1856).
- AT: Stokes, W., ed. and trans., 'The Annals of Tigernach: Fourth Fragment', *Revue Celtique* 17 (1896), pp. 337–420; repr., 2 vols. (Lampeter, 1993).
- AU<sup>2</sup>: Mac Airt, S. and Mac Niocaill, G., eds. and trans., *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* (Dublin, 1983).
- CS: Hennessy, W., ed. and trans., *Chronicum Scotorum* (London, 1866).
- Dictionary: E.G. Quin, ed, *Dictionary of the Irish Language, based mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (Dublin, 1913–1976).
- FAI: Radner, J., ed. and trans., *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978).

### General Bibliography

- Best, R. I., and Bergin, O., eds., *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin, 1929).
- Bieler, L., ed., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979).
- Binchy, D. A., 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara', *Ériu* 18 (1958), pp. 113–38.
- Binchy, D. A., ed., *Corpus iuris Hibernici*, 6 vols. (Dublin, 1978).
- Bradley, J., 'Archaeology, Topography and Building Fabric: the Cathedral and Town of Medieval Kildare', in *St Brigid's Cathedral: a History*, ed. R. Gillespie (Maynooth, 2001), pp. 27–47.
- Bradley, J., 'Towards a Definition of the Irish Monastic Town', in *Aedificia Nova: Studies in Honour of Rosemary Cramp*, ed. C. Karkov and H. Dominico (Kalamazoo, 2008), pp. 325–60.
- Breatnach, L., 'Law', in *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, ed. K. McCone and K. Simms (Maynooth, 1996), pp. 107–21.
- Breatnach, L., *A Companion to the Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin, 2005).
- Broun, D., *The Charters of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland in the Early and Central Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1996).
- Byrne, F. J., *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (London, 1973).
- Byrne, F.J., and Francis, P., eds., 'Two Lives of Saint Patrick: *Vita Secunda* and *Vita Quarta*', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 124 (1994), pp. 5–117.
- Clarke, H., 'Proto-Towns and Towns in Ireland and Britain in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking Age*, ed. H. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and R. Ó Floinn (Dublin, 1998), pp. 331–80.
- Clarke, H., and Simms, A., 'Analogy Versus Theory: a Rejoinder', *Journal of*

- Historical Geography* 13 (1987), pp. 57–60.
- Davies, W., *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1982).
- Davies, W., 'The Latin Charter-Tradition in Western Britain, Brittany and Ireland in the Early Medieval Period', in *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe*, ed. D. Whitelock, D. Dumville and R. McKitterick (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 258–80.
- Davies, W., 'The Myth of the Celtic Church', in *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, ed. N. Edwards and A. Lane (Oxford, 1992), pp. 12–21.
- Dillon, M., ed. and trans., *Lebor na Cert: the Book of Rights* (Dublin, 1962).
- Doherty, C., 'Exchange and Trade in Medieval Ireland', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 110 (1980), pp. 67–89.
- Doherty, C., 'Some Aspects of Hagiography as a Source for Irish Economic History', *Peritia* 1 (1982), pp. 300–28.
- Doherty, C., 'The Monastic Town in Early Medieval Ireland', in *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe*, ed. H. Clarke and A. Simms (Oxford, 1985), pp. 45–75.
- Etchingham, C., 'Early Medieval Irish History', in *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, ed. K. McCone and K. Simms (Maynooth, 1996), pp. 123–53.
- Etchingham, C., *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999).
- Etchingham, C., 'Episcopal Hierarchy in Connacht and Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society* 52 (2000), pp. 13–29.
- Etchingham, C., 'North Wales, Ireland and the Isles: the Insular Viking Zone', *Peritia* 15 (2001), pp. 145–87.
- Graham, B., 'Urban Genesis in Early Medieval Ireland', *Journal of Historical Geography* 13 (1987), pp. 3–16.
- Graham, B., 'Analogy and Theory: Some Further Thoughts', *Journal of Historical Geography* 13 (1987), pp. 61–3.
- Graham, B., 'Secular Urban Origins in Early Medieval Ireland', *Irish Economic and Social History* 16 (1989), pp. 5–22.
- Graham, B., 'Early Medieval Ireland: Settlement as an Indicator of Social and Economic Transformation, c. 500–1100', in *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, ed. B. Graham and L. J. Proudfoot (London, 1993), pp. 19–57.
- Gwynn, E. J., ed. and trans., *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, vols. III & IV (Dublin, 1913, 1924).
- Hamlin, A., and Hughes, K., *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church* (Dublin, 1977).
- Herbert, M., *Iona, Kells and Derry* (Oxford, 1988).
- Herbert, M., 'Charter Material from Kells', in *The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a Conference at TCD 1992*, ed. F. O'Mahoney (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 60–77.
- Hughes, K., *The Church in Early Irish Society* (London, 1966).

- Hughes, K., 'The Celtic Church: is this a Valid Concept?', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981), pp. 1–20.
- Kelly, Fergus, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin, 1988).
- Kelly, Fergus, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin, 1997).
- Kenny, M., 'The Geographical Distribution of Irish Viking-Age Coin Hoards', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 87 C (1987), pp. 507–25.
- Mac Eoin, G., 'The Dating of Middle Irish Texts', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 68 (1982), pp. 109–39.
- Mac Niocaill, G., ed. and trans., *Notitiae as Leabhar Cheanannais: 1033-1161* (Dublin, 1961).
- Mac Niocaill, G., ed. and trans., 'The Irish "Charters"', in *The Book of Kells, MS 58, Trinity College Library, Dublin: Commentary*, ed. P. Fox (Luzern, 1990), pp. 153-65.
- Mallory, J. and McNeill, T. E., *The Archaeology of Ulster: from Colonization to Plantation* (Belfast, 1991).
- Meyer, K., ed. and trans., *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin, 1906).
- Meyer, K., ed. and trans., *Sanas Cormaic: an Old Irish Glossary* (Dublin, 1912).
- Mulchrone, K., ed., *Bethu Phátraic I* (Dublin, 1939).
- Murray, O., *Early Greece*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London, 1993).
- Nic Aonghusa, B., 'The Monastic Hierarchy in Twelfth Century Ireland: the Case of Kells', *Ríocht na Midhe* 8 (1990-91), pp. 3–20.
- O'Brien, M. A., ed., *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae I* (Dublin, 1962).
- Ó Cróinín, D., *Early Medieval Ireland 400–1200* (Harlow, 1995).
- O'Donovan, J., ed., 'Irish Charters in the Book of Kells', in *Miscellany of the Irish Archaeological Society I*, ed. J. O'Donovan (Dublin, 1846), pp. 127–58.
- Ó Murchadha, D., 'Carman, Site of Óenach Carmain: a Proposed Location', *Éigse* 33 (2002), pp. 57–70.
- Orpen, G. H., 'Aenach Carman: its Site', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 36 (1906), pp. 11–41.
- Plummer, C., ed., *Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of Irish Saints*, 2 vols. (London, 1922).
- Russell, P., 'The Sounds of a Silence: the Growth of Cormac's Glossary', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 15 (1988), pp. 1-30.
- Russell, P., 'Dúil Dromma Cetta and Cormac's Glossary', *Études Celtiques* 32 (1996), pp. 147-74.
- Ryan, M., 'Some Archaeological Issues', in *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, ed. K. McCone and K. Simms (Maynooth, 1996), pp. 155–63.
- Sharpe, R., 'Some Problems Concerning the Organization of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland', *Peritia* 3 (1984), pp. 230–70.
- Sheehan, J., 'Early Viking Age Silver Hoards from Ireland and their Scandinavian Elements', in *Ireland and Scandinavia in the Early Viking*

- Age*, ed. H. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and R. Ó Floinn (Dublin, 1998), pp. 166–202.
- Soderberg, J., 'Wild Cattle: Red Deer in the Religious Texts, Iconography and Archaeology of Early Medieval Ireland', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 8 No. 3 (2004), pp. 167-83.
- Stokes, W., ed. and trans., *Vita Tripartita*, 2 vols. (London, 1887).
- Swift, C., 'Forts and Fields: a Study of "Monastic Towns" in Seventh- and Eighth-Century Ireland', *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 9 (1998), pp. 105–25.
- Swift, C., 'The Local Context of *Óenach Tailten*', *Ríocht na Midhe* 11 (2000), pp. 24–50.
- Todd, J. H. ed. and trans., *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (London, 1867).
- Valante, M., 'Reassessing the Irish "Monastic Town"', *Irish Historical Studies* 31 (1998), pp. 1–18.

*The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic offers programmes of study, at both undergraduate and graduate level, on the pre-Norman culture of Britain and Ireland in its various aspects: historical, literary, linguistic, palaeographical, archaeological. The Department also serves as a focal point for scholars visiting Cambridge from various parts of the world, who are attracted to Cambridge by the University Library (one of the largest in the world), the collections of Anglo-Saxon and Celtic manuscripts in the University and various college libraries, the collection of Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and Scandinavian coins in the Fitzwilliam Museum, or the rich collection of Anglo-Saxon artefacts in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. It is possible for the Department to host a small number of Visiting Scholars each year.*

*Information on any aspect of the Department's activities can be obtained by writing to: The Head of Department, Department of Anglo Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Faculty of English, 9 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP or by e-mailing the Departmental Secretary: [asnc@hermes.cam.ac.uk](mailto:asnc@hermes.cam.ac.uk)*

*Further information on the Department, on the Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Tripos, and on opportunities for postgraduate study, is available on our website: [www.asnc.cam.ac.uk](http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk).*

**KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES**

ISSN 1475–9098

1. David N. Dumville, *Saint David of Wales* (2001) ISBN 978-0-9532172-4-3 (0 9532172 4 8)
2. David Stephenson, *The Aberconwy Chronicle* (2002) ISBN 978-0-9532697-9-2 (0 9532697 9 5)
3. R. R. Davies, *The King of England and the Prince of Wales, 1277–84: Law, Politics, and Power* (2003) ISBN 978-0-9543186-9-7 (0 9543186 9 2)
4. Scott Gwara, *Education in Wales and Cornwall in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries: Understanding De raris fabulis* (2004) ISBN 978-1-904708-04-9 (0 9047080 4 8)
5. K. R. Dark, *Archaeology and the Origins of Insular Monasticism* (2006) ISBN 978-1-904708-15-5 (1 9047081 5 3)
6. P. Russell, 'Read it in a Glossary': *Glossaries and Learned Discourse in Medieval Ireland* ISBN 978-0-9554568-6-2
7. O. Padel, *Slavery in Saxon Cornwall: the Bodmin Manumissions* ISBN 978-0-9562353-0-5
8. C. Etchingam, *The Irish 'Monastic Town': Is this a Valid Concept?* ISBN 978-0-9562353-1-2
9. M. T. Flanagan, *Reform in the Twelfth-century Irish Church: A Revolution of Outlook?* ISBN 978-0-9571862-0-0
10. T. M. Charles-Edwards, *St Patrick and the Landscape of Early Christian Ireland* ISBN 978-0-9571862-1-7

Copies of these lectures may be obtained from the Departmental Secretary, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Faculty of English, 9 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DP; telephone 01223–335079.

**For a complete list of all available publications, please see our website: [www.asnc.cam.ac.uk](http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk)**