

ISSN 0791-1017

TROWEL

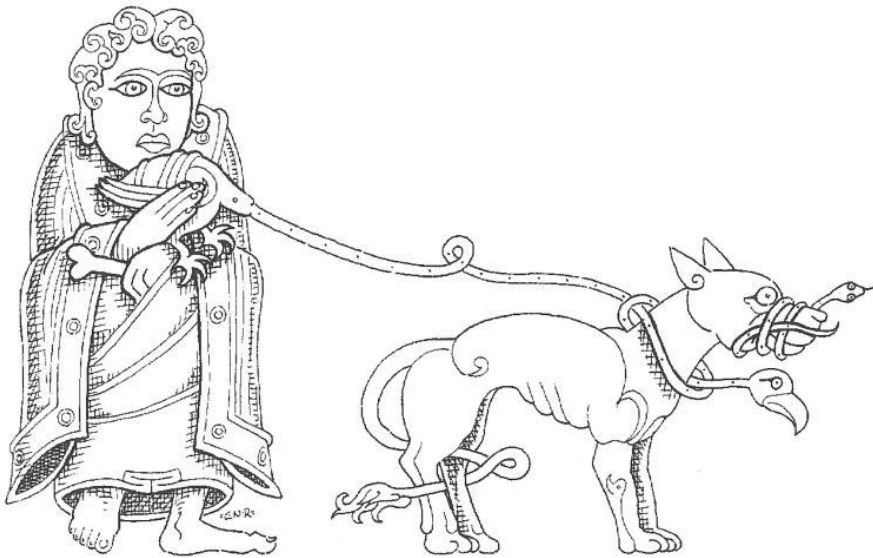
VOLUME V



The Journal of the
Archchæological Society
University College Dublin

TROWEL

VOLUME V



EDITED BY

CHRIS CORLETT

BERNARD GUINAN

CONOR McDERMOTT

SEAMUS TAAFFE

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN.

1994

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Editors' Foreword

The publication of this, the fifth volume of *Trowel* is very much a reflection of the range, quality and volume of archaeological research currently been undertaken by both students and recent graduates of the Department of Archaeology, University College Dublin. Since its inception, *Trowel* has functioned as a unique forum for the communication of the ideas, research interests and concerns of those with least access to traditional established publications. The huge increase in the numbers of students undertaking original research at post graduate level requires a similar expansion in the facilities available for archaeological publication, something that the various bodies and institutions with responsibility for Irish archaeology have so far, failed to address. *Trowel*, mindful of its own limitations, can only act as one vehicle in alleviating the publication crisis affecting Irish archaeology.

The publication of *Trowel* is not without its difficulties. Firstly, as a student journal, it is primarily the product of the collective efforts of a number of individuals which necessitates the support and backing of the student body. Its annual publication therefore requires the co-operation of an editorial team committed to its production. Secondly, the seemingly continual rise in printing costs each year presents a challenge, which has been successfully addressed to date. However, these difficulties should not, in any way be regarded as a barrier to high quality publication. The recognition which *Trowel* has received since its regeneration in 1992 is testimony to its developing role within the wider body of archaeological literature.

In this volume of *Trowel* a complete list of all theses of archaeological interest held in the universities of Ireland, north and south, is presented. This is a continuation of the process begun in Vol. 4, where the theses held in University College Dublin were published. This original U.C.D. list has been reprinted here to provide the most complete listing possible to be referenced in one volume. It is hoped that with the co-operation of the institutions involved annual updates will be published.

The editors would like to thank all those who played a major role in ensuring the appearance of this publication. We are indebted to the Director and staff of the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit whose continuing support and interest in the journal is graciously acknowledged. Thanks are also due to the individuals and institutions who provided the information contained in the thesis lists. The support of the Department of Archaeology and the Archaeological Society, University College Dublin is gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are extended to Dr Gabriel Cooney for his willing assistance, to Conor McHale whose acknowledged blend of artistic brilliance and eccentric wit is an essential ingredient and thanks also to Deirdre Daly.

Trowel in its present state owes much to the energy, dedication and vision of both James Eogan and Colm Jordan whose pioneering spirit enabled them to plunge into the undergrowth and revive the slumbering beauty that was *Trowel!* They retired in 1993 from the editorial board and we wish them well in all their future endeavours.

Chris Corlett
Bernard Guinan
Conor McDermott
Seamus Taaffe

Cover Illustration: Conor McHale esq.
Original Cover Design: Annaba Kilfeather.
Text: 12 Point Times New Roman..

Production: Chris Corlett, Bernard Guinan, Conor McDermott & Seamus Taaffe.

Printed By: INKSPOT LTD. Ph. 01-341193

Grant-aided by the Student's Consultative Forum.
Published by the Archaeological Society,
University College Dublin,
Belfield, Dublin 4,
Ireland.

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CELTIC MONASTICISM - A DISCIPLINE'S SEARCH FOR ROMANCE ?

C.J. Swift*

Beneath the mud-encrusted exterior of the average archaeologist, there beats the heart of a romantic. As a profession, we are attracted by the lure of lost tribes and societies, the life-style enjoyed by unknown civilisations, the worship and cults of forgotten gods. This fantastical element in our thinking is a fundamental part of the discipline; it provides the tension which keeps archaeology in its rightful position, linked to the outskirts of the humanities. Without it, we become the poor relations of the physical scientists, our suppositions unprovable and our data sets irretrievably corrupted through time.

An integral element in the romance of archaeology lies in the distinction between the intensely local nature of the primary evidence and the distant cultures which may have provided the impetus for regional development. Here the distinction between the measurable data and the overall interpretation is at its most clear-cut. The former can be analysed with all the necessary tools of systematic enquiry, the latter remains a matter for impressionistic assessment and the exercise of judgement. The long-standing arguments about diffusion versus independent discovery lie at the very heart of all archaeological studies.

The attraction of the unknown in explanation of the measurable is particularly apparent in the study of Celtic monasticism in Britain. The testimony of Bede to the holiness of early Irish clergy, the Ossianic reveries of modern Nationalists in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the lack of a widespread expertise in Celtic languages, have all combined to produce a highly-coloured portrayal of Irish missionary activity in Great Britain and its possible impact on the landscape. Unfortunately, however, it is a depiction which makes a stronger appeal to feelings of patriotism than it does to scholarship and it slips rapidly out of focus when subjected to detailed analysis. The residue which occasionally lingers in the minds of archaeologists can result in interpretations which seem unlikely to prove acceptable to the independent observer.

An example of romantic bias in favour of 'Celtic saints' can be seen in the development of the theory of curvilinear enclosures around ecclesiastical settlements in Ireland and West Britain. As a general maxim, this was first formulated by Charles Thomas who suggested that circularity in itself was of longstanding ritual significance (1971, 51-3). Together with evidence drawn largely from Françoise Henry's study of ecclesiastical sites in West Kerry (1957), this led him to stress the element of enclosure in his four-fold categorisation of what he termed "full monasteries" (1971, 27-38):

1. foundations in earlier secular forts
2. foundations which take advantage of natural isolation such as island sites
3. very large rectangular foundations such as Iona or possibly Clonmacnoise

*Cathy Swift is a graduate of University College Dublin and is currently carrying out research in Constance, Germany.

4. a very strange category (for which no archaeological evidence is cited) consisting of “all those where there is reason to suppose that a monastic enclosure (normally curvilinear) was constructed at or not long after the establishment was founded.”

This would appear to have been a largely theoretical position for its usefulness as an aid to analysing field evidence is limited. At approximately the same period, however, Thomas' remarks were complemented by an extensive aerial survey of the northern half of Ireland by Leo Swan, designed to identify the nature of ecclesiastical enclosures in Ireland. His identification of the relevant sites was arrived at through a list of the following features: “round towers, high crosses, monastic cells, monastic ruins, churches, church ruins, churchyards, children's burial grounds, holy wells and ecclesiastical place-names” (Swan 1971, 25). As a result of his survey, he noted that a large number of ecclesiastical sites were enclosed and he suggested that there was a general tendency towards D-shaped enclosures with single banks and towards oval-shaped enclosures with double banks (ibid., 55). In subsequent publications, Swan extended his conclusions to the point where large, roughly circular enclosures were, in themselves, enough to suggest a pre-Norman ecclesiastical origin for a site (e.g. 1983, 268). His ideas proved attractive and were incorporated into survey work such as that of Hurley (1982, 314), where the “most definitive” material evidence for ecclesiastical sites was the presence of circular boundary enclosures.

The conclusions of both Swan and Thomas were enthusiastically received in Britain, in particular by those archaeologists working in regions which were poorly documented in the historical sources and which might be thought to have been affected by Irish custom. Under their influence, the two theories have become amalgamated into an ever more concrete model. Deirdre O'Sullivan, for example prefixed her study of curvilinear church-yards in Cumbria with the remark: ‘There is no longer much doubt about the fact that most of the earliest Christian cemeteries, if they were physically enclosed at all, be they dug or cist, were normally surrounded by a circular or at any rate curvilinear boundary’ (1980, 242). This conclusion does not appear to have been affected by the results of her own study which indicated that only 30% of the curvilinear ecclesiastical boundaries which exist in Cumbria have independent evidence for pre-Norman origins (ibid., 253).

The most extreme example of curvilinear-enclosure enthusiasm is probably to be found in a study of the undocumented British church sites of the Welsh borders (Brook 1992). In this, elaborate and painstaking efforts were made to quantify the circularity of enclosures on a scale of 1 to 8 and the results were expressed in percentages and compared with other, less tangible, elements which might suggest an early origin for a site. Given the passing reference to the lack of evidence for settlement plans prior to the nineteenth century, together with the statement that approximately a third have altered in plan since that date (ibid. 79), one might question whether the results are worth such efforts. More importantly, the model of ‘Celtic saints’ stubbornly measuring out circles in opposition to ‘Saxon clergy’, building neat rectangles does not appear helpful; it would seem to place far too much emphasis on the ethnic origin of the residents and far too little on the topographical constraints under which they laboured.

The Thomas/Swan model was elaborated in a period prior to extensive field work within Ireland and represents preliminary attempts to classify the archaeological remains of pre-Norman ecclesiastical settlement in this country. As presently formulated, however, it suffers from a number of weaknesses which should be taken into consideration in any attempt to refine the theoretical position. The evidence provided by Norman and St. Joseph (1969), for example, indicates that enclosure was a common feature of Irish settlement forms and that to

focus on ecclesiastical sites in isolation is to give ecclesiastical boundaries a significance which they probably do not deserve. Non-ecclesiastical sites such as Tara, which appears to have been uninhabited but prestigious in this period, were also enclosed. Nor does the model take account of those ecclesiastical sites which are not enclosed although at least one of the relatively few excavated sites failed to find any trace of enclosure, despite the cutting of “numerous trenches” with the specific aim of identifying a boundary (Kendrick 1939, 5). Of the other excavated sites, the evidence from both Church Island (O’Kelly 1958, 75-77) and Armagh (Brown & Harper 1984, 109-161) indicates that where enclosures exist, they are not necessarily contemporaneous with the settlement which they enclose. There are even indications at Armagh that the dramatic trench which encircles the ecclesiastical focus was filled with industrial refuse and pits during the period of Armagh’s great political power in the early middle ages.

Moreover, the list of diagnostic features used by Swan includes material from all periods of ecclesiastical settlement; it seems, therefore, over optimistic to assume that the enclosures, as they appear today, necessarily reflect the constructions of a Pre-Norman period. The only large ecclesiastical enclosure to be surveyed *in extenso* in these islands is that of Iona where a complex system of earthworks has been identified. Despite excavation, detailed ground survey, aerial photography and geophysical survey, only one section (located immediately outside the graveyard) has proved datable and its connections with other earthworks remains unclear (RCAHMS 1982, 31-39). This section consists of a stone-lined drain of medieval date above a V-shaped ditch in which peat and brushwood provided radio-carbon dates focusing on the late sixth and early seventh century (ibid..38).

This early example of an enclosure associated with burials can be paralleled at Reask where Thomas Fanning identified an enclosure containing burials and suggested that it should be dated to the fifth to seventh-century phase on the site (Fanning 1981, 79-87; 157-8). In contrast, Ann Hamlin has pointed to historical evidence for enclosures associated with ecclesiastical habitations which were constructed as late as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at Derry and Armagh (Hamlin 1976, 354, quoting Annals of Ulster 1162 and Annals of the Four Masters 1266).

Finally, a problem identified by Gearóid MacNiocaill - if any - existed between ecclesiastical *Termonn*; thought to denote an area of sanctuary and the *Maigen Digona* (MacNiocaill 1984, 155; see also Ó Corráin 1987, 304-6). The latter is defined by Binchy as follows:

‘About the residence of every freeholder is a ‘precinct’, the extent of which varies according to his rank, called the *Maigen Digona*. This area is included in his ‘house-peace’ (cf. the *hausfrieden* of Germanic law), so that any grave injury inflicted upon another within its bounds makes the assailant liable for the honour-price of the owner in addition to the ordinary compensation due to the injured party” (Binchy 1941, 83). Does the similarity of this concept to that of ecclesiastical sanctuary have implications for the study of boundary enclosures?

If the interpretation of ecclesiastical enclosure is to move beyond a simple reiteration of the fact that they occur relatively frequently, then a more specific model, taking account of these and other points, will have to be created. It certainly does not appear that one can argue for early Irish missionary activity from the presence of a quasi-circular boundary.

In Scotland, the only part of Britain where there is relatively extensive evidence for a long-standing Irish ecclesiastical presence, there has been little attempt to classify the diagnostic

features of ‘Celtic monastic’ settlement. Where sites have been identified as ‘Celtic monasteries’, this has been done on an ad hoc basis, relying heavily on the testimony of local folk belief and possible Irish parallels (e.g. Simpson 1958, 118-119; RCAHMS 1946, 526). In areas where there is historical evidence for Irish missionary activity, place names from the early texts tend to be used in conjunction with field survey (eg. Crawford 1934, 202). It is only in a few instances that excavated evidence is cited; a rare example comes from the Brough of Birsay where Cruden (1965, 25) identified ‘Celtic’ settlement below an identifiably Norse layer.

It seems impossible to put forward models of settlement form where identifications are drawn from such heterogeneous sources, but it is worth noting in passing that enclosure is not overly stressed in Scottish publications. One might also note that the large ornate Class II slabs, which are thought to correspond in date and possibly in function to the Irish high crosses, are not found on sites identified as ‘Celtic’ or even ‘monastic’. Instead, they appear to be located by roadways or in modern parish churchyards. Given that at least one eighteenth-century Scottish landlord moved medieval sculpture to a point where passers-by could admire it, it is not clear what importance should be attached to this distribution (Pennant 1790, 225).

Another element in Thomas’ model of ‘Celtic monastic settlement’ which has struck a chord with some archaeologists, is the reference to island sites. Such a grouping has the advantage of combining the visual impact of sites such as Skellig Michael with the historical evidence for Iona, Lindisfarne and the island hermits of seventh and early eight-century Northumbria. However, it should be borne in mind that the names of many of the inhabitants of these islands - figures such as Cuthbert, Hereberht, Aethilwald, Felgild and Guthlac - were indisputably ‘Saxon’ in tongue, if not in culture (Colgrave 1940, 96-7; 124-5, 302-3: 1956, 88-9). One can best emphasise the necessity to refine the suggestion that the island sites invariably represent settlement by ascetic Irish saints by pointing to an instance of *reductio ad absurdum*. In one of a number of studies of island sites in the Orkneys, Roger Lamb wrote:

“Along the cliff-coasts of the Northern Isles there is a remarkable and little-known group of sites in the most ridiculous-seeming positions on high off-shore rock-stacks, on small inaccessible islets, and on precipitous headlands joined to the mainland only by dangerous knife-edged ridges...”

(Lamb 1973, 76)

“The idea of living on a stack, as an extreme form of self-denial, surely would have been in keeping with the ascetic ideals of early monasticism, particularly after the Culdee revival.”

(Lamb 1973, 84)

It seems difficult to imagine that archaeologists on this side of the Irish Sea would have much sympathy with the view that the inherently bizarre must, of its very nature, speak of Irish origins. Instead the crumbling nature of the most common geological strata in the Orkneys (Old Red Sandstone) and the dating of settlement on the stack of Downpatrick, Co. Mayo to a period before the stack was formed, suggest a much more commonplace explanation: the dangerous situation of these sites represents changes in the landscape after the foundation of the settlement.

In opposition to Lamb’s putative “Culdees”, one can point to the position of Lismore, located at the mouth of Loch Linnhe and probably documented in seventh-century Irish annals. (There is a problem in distinguishing between this site and that of Lismore in Co. Waterford).

The Scottish Lismore is ideally placed on the sea-lanes for Movern, Iona, Appin, Lorn and the Outer Hebrides as well as for controlling the route up the loch to Moray and the Cromarty Firth (MacDonald 1973). Although there were undoubtedly clerics who sought *deserta* (isolated dwelling places) in Scottish seas (Anderson 1990, i.6, i.20, ii.42), there seems no reason to believe that they were the only or even the most prevalent type of Irish cleric in this region.

The historical context of the Northumbrian references can also be used to infer more prosaic origins for island sites. David Rollason has pointed to the location of Lindisfarne, immediately off the coast from the royal centre at Bamburgh and has suggested that the island may even have provided the harbour for the royal Northumbrian fleet (Rollason 1987, 14-17). In relation to the smaller, more isolated sites, Claire Stancliffe has convincingly identified a seventh and eighth-century practice whereby important clerics would retire to such sites during Lent as part of their preparations for the Easter celebrations (Stancliffe 1989). This type of practice would appear, to be the explanation for the tiny eyrie on the south peak of Skellig Michael where the single inhabitant had to rely on rain for his water supply (Horn, White-Marshall & Rourke 1990). Although such rain was no doubt forthcoming, it seems impossible to conceive of a settlement of this type being occupied for long periods.

A balanced assessment of British archaeological studies of 'Celtic monasticism' would also have to take account of the romantic attitudes to their material among Irish archaeologists. Coptic fabrics and the Gaulish fathers of Lerins have long been part of the background to Irish ecclesiastical studies while the identification of Mediterranean pottery and Greek porphyry in Ireland has added new ingredients to an already heady mixture (Thomas 1976, Lynn 1984). As yet, however, the implications of such evidence have not been fully absorbed into an archaeological model for ecclesiastical settlement. Instead we have our own western Nirvana, as represented by the apparently primitive and frequently undatable settlements on the Atlantic coastline. These are said to be inhabited by holy hermits, equipped with worn-out sandals and a sturdy *bachall*, who were viewed with enthusiastic reverence by the surrounding population. The image of such men is drawn from the moral treatises of medieval Christendom and their lack of particularity to the Irish scene is vividly illustrated in a text from the other side of Europe: Eugippius' Life of Saint Severin, telling of a man who worked on the borders of the Alps in the east of modern Austria:

"He often withdrew, however, to a secret abode, which the neighbours called Burgum, a mile away from Favianis, in order to escape the people who came in such numbers to see him and to draw nearer to God by uninterrupted prayer...He subdued his flesh by innumerable fasts; he also taught that a body too richly fed was soon to bring the soul to ruin. He never wore shoes at all; even in the middle of winter, which in those countries brings ice and severe frosts - he would always walk barefoot and thus gave an impressive proof of endurance" (Bieler 1965, 61-2). Archaeologically, the lack of widespread settlement or of industrialisation along the western coasts in later periods appears to have led to very long standing traditions of monument construction. Added to the simple nature of these edifices, their dating becomes extremely difficult. In 1958 M.J. O'Kelly was able to use existing building techniques to put forward an explanation for the cladding around an early medieval house (1958, 70) and in 1947 Françoise Henry compared the method of building a cist grave on Caher Island to "that still used for building tombs on the adjoining mainland"

(Henry 1947, 28).

Even the presence of early cross-slabs on such graves is not an infallible guide to their date. Specifically in relation to the apparent preservation of early tombs on Iniscealtra, Macalister pointed out that at Clonmacnoise:

“It appears that among the local peasantry these stones are regarded with a reverence well deserved but unfortunately for the study of Irish Art, taking the form of adapting them as tombstones or even of burying them with the coffin in newly-made graves”

(1908, vii).

Nor were such activities confined to the peasantry. There are accounts of Catholic missionaries of the Counter-Reformation who, arriving in the Hebrides after their training on the European mainland, created new monuments and amalgamated island customs into their teaching:

“In the Village on the South Coast of this Isle there is a Well called St Katherine’s Well; the Natives have it in great Esteem, and believe it to be a Catholicon for diseases. They told me that it had been such ever since it was consecrated by one Father Hugh, a Popish Priest, in the following manner: He obliged all the Inhabitants to come to this Well, and then employ’d them to bring together a great heap of Stones at the Head of the Spring, by way of Penance. This being done, he said Mass at the Well, and then consecrated it; he gave each of the Inhabitants a piece of Wax Candle, which they lighted, and all of them made the Dessil, of going around the Well Sunways, the Priest leading them; and from that time it was accounted unlawful to boil any Meat with the Water of this Well”

(Martin 1716, 277).

Historically, monuments resulting from such activities may reflect much older practices although we have no information on this point. Archaeologically, however, one must identify the structure described here as belonging to a late seventh-century or early eighteenth-century milieu.

Since this has largely been an outline of attitudes to Celtic monasticism from outside Ireland, perhaps one should leave the last word with the Continental scholars. In 1961, Ludwig Bieler wrote of the early Irish missionaries: “We must forgive them that they make rather loud propaganda for themselves” (1961, 16). To which the Swiss archaeologist Rudolf Moosbrugger-Leu replied with some ire (1971, ii 93): “It is not our place to forgive but to make a sober assessment of the facts!”

Acknowledgements

This paper draws heavily on my M.Phil thesis, *Irish Influence on Ecclesiastical Settlements in Scotland*, University of Durham 1988. I would like to thank the authorities of Collingwood College, University of Durham for providing me with the funding for that degree.

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