

Title	Christianizing the landscape of Mag Réta: home territory of the kings of Laígis
Authors	Ó Carragáin, Tomás
Publication date	2018
Original Citation	Ó Carragáin, T 2018, Christianizing the landscape of Mag Réta: home territory of the kings of Laígis. in J Lyttleton & M Stout (eds), Church and Settlement in Ireland. Four Courts Press, pp. 60-85.
Type of publication	Book chapter
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Download date	2026-09-16 14:35:19
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18632

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Church and Settlement in Ireland

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Set in 10.5 on 12.5 point Ehrhardt for
FOUR COURTS PRESS LTD
7 Malpas Street, Dublin 8, Ireland
www.fourcourtspress.ie

and in North America for
FOUR COURTS PRESS
c/o ISBS, 920 N.E. 58th Avenue, Suite 300, Portland, OR 97213.

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A catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-184682-728-0

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Printed in England
by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

*For
Rolf Loeber*

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Christianizing the landscape of Mag Réta: home territory of the kings of Laígis

TOMÁS Ó CARRAGÁIN

Introduction

This contribution arises from the Making Christian Landscapes (MCL) project which was funded by the Heritage Council through the INSTAR programme.¹ The premise for the project was that the most promising approach to the complex processes of conversion and Christianization was an interdisciplinary landscape perspective focusing on fairly small areas. Nine areas were chosen within which all relevant strands of evidence were considered, including topography, land use, settlements, cemeteries, boundaries, landholdings and estates, routeways and pre-Christian monuments.² The work was carried out by academic and commercial archaeologists in collaboration with historians. The consistent methodology employed facilitated comparison between the study areas. Some of these were chosen for their outstanding field archaeology (e.g., Corcu Duibne, Co. Kerry), while others were chosen because of unusually good documentary sources. For example, Fir Maige, Co. Cork, has the richest documentary sources relating to early boundaries, topography and ecclesiastical organization in Ireland, and helps to illuminate patterns in other areas, as we shall see (below). In most cases, however, areas were chosen primarily because of pre-development excavations of churches, cemeteries, ‘cemetery settlements’, settlements etc., which have important implications for our understanding of the process of Christianization. In general we found that, once allowances are made for factors such as marginal land, most areas

1 Acknowledgments: This research was funded by the Heritage Council through the INSTAR programme and was carried out in collaboration with Anne Connon, Tara O’Neill and Nick Hogan. Thanks are also due to Ken Wiggins, Colm Flynn and Niall Roycroft for generously providing us with excavation reports. Any errors are the sole responsibility of the author. 2 Tomás Ó Carragáin, John Sheehan et al. ‘Making Christian landscapes: settlement, society and regionality in early medieval Ireland. Phase 1: 01 June – 05 December 2008’ (Report for the Heritage Council, 2008); Tomás Ó Carragáin, John Sheehan et al. ‘Making Christian landscapes: settlement, society and regionality in early medieval Ireland. Phase 2: 01 June – 04 December 2009’ (Report for the Heritage Council, 2009); Tomás Ó Carragáin, John Sheehan et al. ‘Making Christian landscapes: settlement, society and regionality in early medieval Ireland. Phase 3: 20 June – 10 December 2009’ (Report for the Heritage Council, 2010); Tomás Ó Carragáin and Sam Turner (eds), *Making Christian landscapes in Atlantic Europe: conversion and consolidation in the early Middle Ages* (Cork, 2016).

are characterized by a high, and fairly consistent, density of churches. Some study areas had higher or lower densities, however, and there were significant variations in density within most study areas, while the density of other known settlements, such as ringforts, varied much more markedly.³

This essay outlines some of the results of a study of Mag Réta and adjacent territories in Cos. Laois and Tipperary carried out by the author and Nick Hogan of UCC in collaboration with Tara O'Neill, then of Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd, and historian, Anne Connon, now of Ohio Dominican University. The study is particularly indebted to Anne Connon's historical analysis, other aspects of which she has published elsewhere.⁴ The area was chosen primarily because of excavations carried out in advance of the construction of the M7/M8 motorways of important cemeteries at Lismore, Killeany, Parknahown and Camlin.⁵ Usually core MCL case study areas correspond to a single local kingdom (*tríche céit*). Here, however, our interest in these sites led us to choose an area that incorporated portions of three separate regional kingdoms. Lismore was in Mag Réta, the home territory (*tríche céit*) of the kings of the regional kingdom of Laígis, while Killeany was just across the border in Cúl Buichle, another subkingdom of Laígis. Parknahown was in Áes Cinn Chuille, a subkingdom of Osraige, while Camlin was in Uí Chairin, a subkingdom of Éile (fig. 4.1).⁶ This essay, however, is focused solely on the Laígis kingdoms of Cúl Buichle and especially Mag Réta; Parknahown / Áes Cinn Chuille and Camlin / Uí Chairin are discussed elsewhere.⁷

Mag Réta comprises a rich plain occupying most of the baronies of Clarmallagh and Clandonagh (minus the sections in the Osraige *túath* of Áes Cinn Chuille) in south-west Co. Laois.⁸ Most of it is quite low-lying, though

3 Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Church sites and other settlements in early medieval Ireland: densities, distributions, interactions' in Nancy Edwards, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Roy Flechner, *Converting the isles II: converting landscapes* (Turnhout, Belgium, 2017), 457–92; see also Matthew Stout, 'The distribution of early medieval ecclesiastical sites in Ireland' in P.J. Duffy and William Nolan (eds) *At the anvil: essays in honour of William J. Smyth* (Dublin, 2012), pp 53–80. 4 Anne Connon, 'An historical overview of the four kingdoms involved in the Mag Réta study area' and Anne Connon and Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Identifying and characterizing ecclesiastical sites in the Mag Réta study area' in Ó Carragáin, Sheehan et al. 'Making Christian landscapes: Phase 2, pp 311–30, 331–441; Anne Connon, 'Territoriality and the cult of Saint Ciarán of Saigir' in Ó Carragáin and Turner (eds), *Making Christian landscapes*, pp 109–58. 5 Ken Wiggins, 'Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh / Lismore 1, Co. Laois. Final report' (Report by ACS Ltd, 2009); Ken Wiggins, 'Report on the archaeological excavation of Killeany 1, Co. Laois' (Report by ACS Ltd, 2009); Tara O'Neill, 'Parknahown 5, Co. Laois' (Report by ACS Ltd, 2009); Colm Flynn, 'Camlin 3 final report' (Report by V.J. Keeley Ltd, 2011). 6 Connon, 'An historical overview', passim; Paul MacCotter, *Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 2008), pp 181–3, 212. 7 Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish landscape, c.AD 400–1100* (forthcoming). 8 Diarmait Ó Murchadha, 'Early history and settlements of the Laígis' in P.G. Lane and William Nolan (eds) *Laois: history and society: interdisciplinary essays on the history of an Irish county* (Dublin, 1999), pp 35–62 at

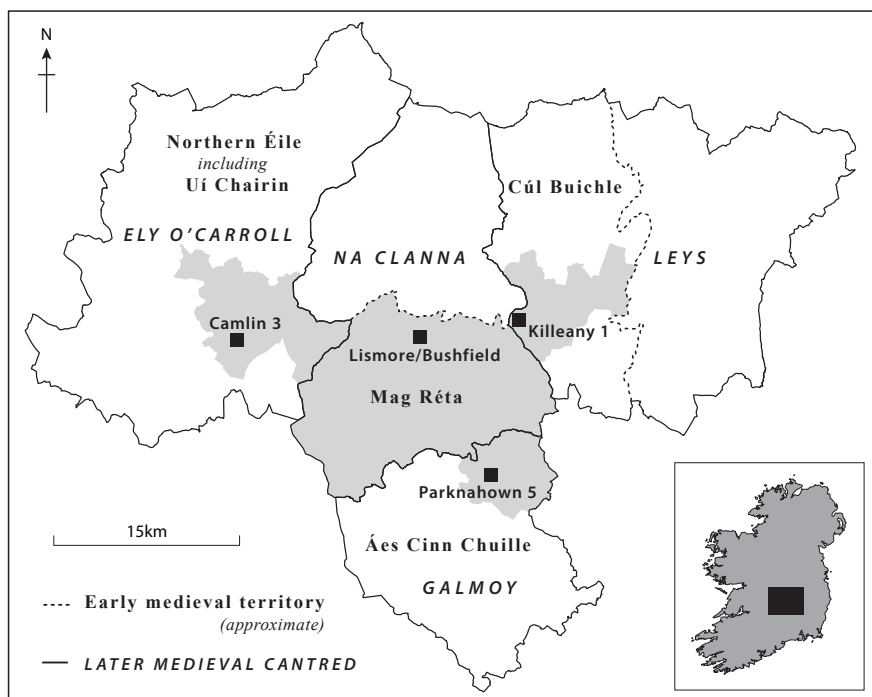


Fig. 4.1 Mag Réta and adjacent territories study area (shaded) showing the four excavated cemeteries and later medieval cantreds, most of which correspond approximately to early medieval territories. In two cases additional approximate early medieval boundaries are shown: Cúl Buichle comprised the western portion of the cantred of Leys and Mag Réta comprised the southern portion of the cantred of Na Clanna. Map by Anne Connon, Nick Hogan and the author.

there are some low limestone hills at the north, while other low hills, traversed by the River Gully, form a boundary zone between Mag Réta and Cúl Buichle at the north-east. There is a modest amount of bog, most notably Clonmore Bog in the south-west which, as one might expect, is characterized by a low settlement density. The most significant watercourse within Mag Réta is the River Erkina, which rises in the south-west of the *túath* and runs eastward through its southern portion, forming its boundary at the south-east. It was the late Diarmuid Ó Murchadha who, in 1999, identified this as Mag Réta: the previously unlocated home territory (local kingdom) of the Laígis Réta, over-kings of the regional kingdom of Laígis.⁹ The Laígis genealogies state that the

pp 38–40; Connon ‘An historical overview’, pp 317–18. It comprises the Co. Laois parishes of Donaghmore, Skirk, Kildellig, Aghaboe, Coolkerry, Bordwell, Killermogh, Rathdowney, Rathsaran and Lismore. ⁹ Ó Murchadha, ‘Early history’, pp 38–40.

Laigin placed the legendary Lugaid Láigsech here because of his strength in opposing Munster; in other words the kings of Laígis were placed in a buffer zone between Leinster and Munster. This, in fact, explains why Mag Réta was unidentified until recently: the area fell permanently to the Osraige in the later tenth century so most commentators assumed that it was always part of Osraige; in later medieval times it formed the southern half of the cantred of Na Clanna.¹⁰ The Osraige seem to have controlled it for one or two briefer periods in the seventh and eighth centuries, but Ó Murchada shows that it was the royal core-land of the Laígis Réta for most of the early medieval period, including the period that concerns us most: before the mid seventh century.¹¹

In contrast to some of the other MCL case study areas (e.g., Fir Maige, Co. Cork), the documentary sources for this area do not permit reconstruction of lesser territorial units such as ecclesiastical estates, districts (local *túatha*) and subdivisions thereof (bailte). The boundaries shown in the maps are those of later and post medieval entities (baronies and parishes) that sometimes correspond very broadly to early medieval ones; given the various boundary shifts during both periods, these maps provide only a rough approximation of the extents of early medieval territories. The same, of course, goes for the archaeological record, which provides only a very partial distribution of early medieval settlement and ritual sites. There is sufficient historical and archaeological evidence, however, for us to attempt a broad-brush interdisciplinary analysis, and to see whether we can identify correlations and contradictions between these two sources of evidence.

Conversion-period churches, royal sites and places of assembly

Some of the earliest evidence for church sites in Ireland comes from Leinster, including fifth-century foundations, such as Killashee, Co. Kildare, that may be associated with the mission of Palladius. A MCL study of the royal heartland of Leinster (what would later become Southern Uí Fáeláin) found that the earliest churches (Killashee, Domnach Mór Magh Liphi, Kilcullen) were close to places of royal power (Naas, Mullacash, Dún Aillinne and the assembly landscape of Carmain Liphi).¹² Given that the Laígis were important, albeit subordinate, allies of the Laigin, one might expect a similar

¹⁰ In later sources the area of Mag Réta was usually referred to as Mag Lacha, a region which possibly once referred to only the eastern half of Mag Réta. Together with Ua Fairchelláin (the area corresponding to the barony of Upperwoods which leaves its name in the civil parish of Offerlane), Mag Lacha was to become the later medieval cantred of Na Clanna (corresponding to the modern baronies of Clarmallagh, Clandonagh, and Offerlane). William Carrigan, *History and antiquities of the diocese of Ossory*, 4 vols (Dublin, 1905), i, pp 6–9; Connon ‘An historical overview’, p. 319; MacCotter *Medieval Ireland*, pp 182–3. ¹¹ Ó Murchada, ‘Early history’, pp 40–5, 47–8, 53. ¹² Paul MacCotter, ‘Reconstructing the territorial framework for ecclesiastical and secular power structures: a case study of the kingdom of Uí Fáeláin’, in Ó Carragáin and Turner (eds), *Making*

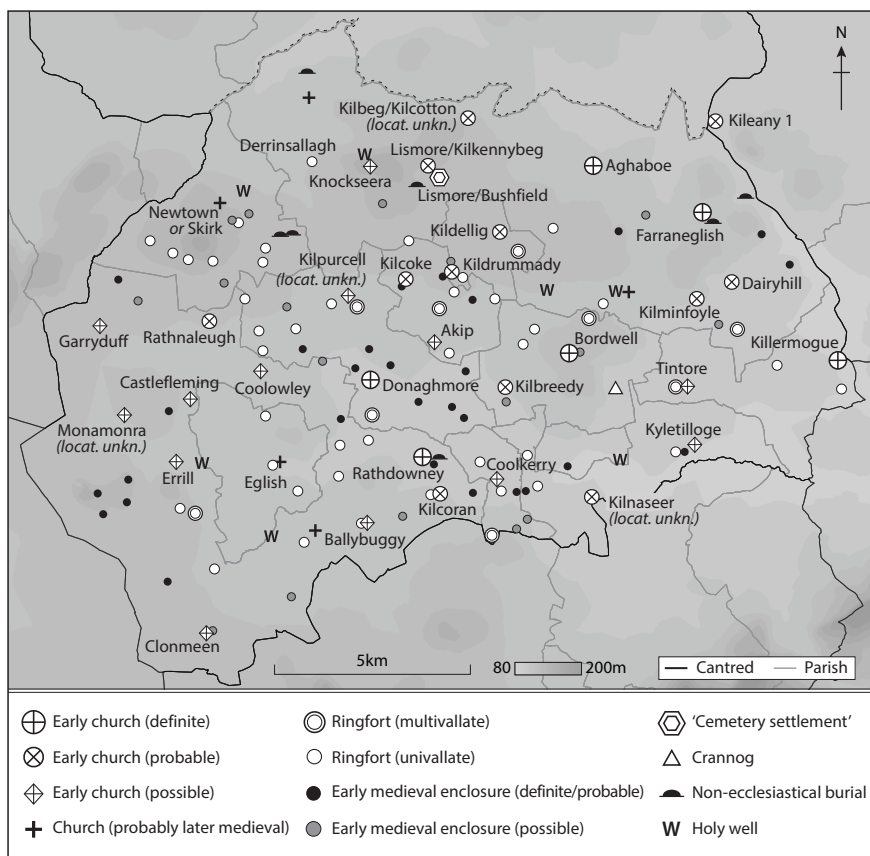


Fig. 4.2 Churches and other early medieval sites in Mag Réta. Burial monuments that could be prehistoric or early medieval are also shown, as are churches probably founded in the later medieval period. Nick Hogan and the author.

pattern here; and sure enough, the only two *domnach* church sites in the whole of Laígis are just beside each other in Mag Réta. The *domnach* place-name element is considered to indicate a fifth to sixth century foundation, and may often have been the first church in a territory, especially where it incorporates its name.¹³ Ó Murchada identified Donaghmore as the 'D(omnach) M(ór) Maige Réto' mentioned in the early ninth-century *Notulae* in the Book of

Christian landscapes, pp 55–74; Patrick Gleeson and Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'Conversion and consolidation in Leinster's royal heartland' in Ó Carragáin and Turner (eds), *Making Christian landscapes*, pp 75–108. ¹³ Deirdre Flanagan, 'The Christian impact on early Ireland: the place-names evidence' in Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds), *Ireland und Europa: die Kirche im Frühmittelalter/Ireland and Europe: the early church* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp 25–51 at pp 25–31.

Armagh, while less than three kilometres to the south-east, in an adjoining eponymous townland, is the village of Rathdowney, ‘the rath of the Domnach’ (fig. 4.2). He argued that this is a conflation of two sites in very close proximity to one another: *Domnach Eóchaille*, another church mentioned in the *Notulae*, and *Ráith Baccáin*, the *rigdún* or royal fort of the Laígis, which is mentioned in the *Tripartite Life of Patrick*, where it is stated that mass is said there every day implying the presence of a church.¹⁴

About 135m north-east of the parish church of Rathdowney, which is presumably on the site of *Domnach Eóchaille*, on the other side of the modern road, was a circular earthwork, 23–27m in diameter. While John O’Donovan had described it as a ‘small rath’, Carrigan says it was 2.4m high and flat-topped, and records that five cartloads of human bones were removed when it was destroyed around 1840.¹⁵ Sweetman et al. wonder whether it was an Anglo-Norman ringwork,¹⁶ while another possibility is that it was an early medieval raised rath, perhaps built in the ninth century when, according to the *Notulae*, *Ráith Baccáin* was rebuilt by Gáethíne, king of Mag Réta.¹⁷ On the other hand, even if it was built *over* a cemetery, it is hard to envisage so much bone being produced by levelling a raised rath. It is worth noting that churches in rath-like enclosures are unusually common in this area (below). This might, therefore, have been a subsidiary ecclesiastical complex associated with *Domnach Eóchaille*, or perhaps more likely an enclosed satellite cemetery without a church building. It is quite rare for early medieval burial grounds to produce such a large quantity of bone; most have less than 100 burials. There are exceptions, however, such as that at Mount Gamble, Co. Dublin, which produced almost 300 skeletons.¹⁸ It may be no coincidence that this, too, was very near an important church site – the Columban monastery of Swords – and may have been considered a satellite burial ground.

In any case the close proximity of two *domnach* churches to the caput of the kings of Laígis strongly suggests that the latter followed the example of their Laigin overlords by investing in the new religion at an early date, though exactly how early is unclear; Baccán of *Ráith Baccáin* seems to have flourished in the later sixth century, providing a *terminus ante quem* for Laígis Réta control of this area.¹⁹ Rathdowney seems to have lain within the district (local *túath*) of Mag nEóchaille and Ó Murchada argues convincingly that this was the ‘royal

¹⁴ Ó Murchada, ‘Early history’, pp 40–2; Ludwig Bieler, *Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 182; Kathleen Mulchrone, *Bethu Phátraic* (Dublin and London, 1939), p. 117. ¹⁵ John O’Donovan, OS letters, Queen’s County, 2 vols (1838 MS), i, p. 36; Carrigan, *History*, ii, pp 339–40. ¹⁶ P.D. Sweetman, Olive Alcock and Bernadette Moran, *Archaeological inventory of County Laois* (Dublin, 1995). ¹⁷ Ó Murchada, ‘Early history’, pp 41–2. ¹⁸ Edmond O’Donovan and Jonny Geber, ‘Excavations on Mount Gamble Hill, Swords, Co. Dublin’ in Christiaan Corlett and Michael Potterton (eds), *Death and burial in early medieval Ireland* (Bray, 2010), pp 227–38. ¹⁹ Ó Murchada, ‘Early history’, p. 45.

túath of [i.e., the royal demesne or core-land within] Mag Réta, with Domnach Eóchaille as its church'.²⁰ Presumably, then, Donaghmore (Domnach Mór Mag Réta: 'the great church of Mag Réta') was conceived of as the principal church of the kingdom of Mag Réta as a whole. While the extents of Mag nEóchaille are not known, it may be that the lands of Donaghmore were carved from it, for Donaghmore is surrounded by places with royal associations. In addition to Rathdowney to the south, there is Coolowley a short distance to the west (in Rathdowney parish), which takes its name from (*Cúil) Amhalghaidh, legendary ancestor of the Laígis Réta who was associated with Lecc Réta, a royal pillar-stone that possibly once stood here.²¹

Meanwhile the parish abutting Donaghmore to the east is Bordwell, from *Bordgal*, signifying a 'famous resort, gathering or assembly'.²² The eighth-century *Litany of Óengus* refers to the 'seven bishops of Bordgail'.²³ Given its proximity to Rathdowney, Bordgail may well have incorporated the principal assembly landscape of the Laígis. This is part of a wider trend, for in the first systematic study of early medieval assembly landscapes, Patrick Gleeson has found that many of them have conversion-period churches on or near their borders, a pattern with wide-ranging implications for our understanding of the process of conversion.²⁴ Given how commonly they are associated with kings, it may be significant that the only crannóg known from Mag Réta, indeed from the whole of Co. Laois, is in Grantstown in Bordwell parish.²⁵ It may have been close to, or indeed may have been a component of, the kingdom's assembly landscape. Among the finds retrieved from this site in the nineteenth century was a 'rude box' containing two small bones; one wonders whether these might have been human and therefore, possibly, relics.

The two *domnach* churches in Mag Réta are dedicated to Patrick, reflecting the claim in seventh-century Armagh documents, that Patrick single-handedly founded this network of early churches.²⁶ It may also be significant that there are also two churches dedicated to Brigit of Kildare within the royal core-land of Mag Réta. Brigit, of course, had emerged by the seventh century as Leinster's most important saint. In the royal core-land of the kings of Leinster, overlords of the Laígis, this is expressed by the fact that Kildare owned lands, and two associated churches (Oldconnell and Athgarvan), on the margins of Carmain

20 Ibid. p. 42. 21 Ibid. p. 43. 22 Charles Doherty, 'The use of relics in early Ireland' in Ní Chatháin and Richter (eds), *Ireland and Europe: the early Church*, pp 89–104, at p. 99; Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language (eDIL: <http://edil.qub.ac.uk/dictionary/search.php> last consulted July 2015); Placenames Database of Ireland (PDI: <http://www.logainm.ie/> last consulted July 2015); Ó Carragáin and Connon, 'Identifying', 379; Patrick Gleeson, 'Landscapes of kingship in early medieval Ireland' (PhD, University College Cork, 2014), pp 149, 768, 850. 23 Charles Plummer, *Irish Litanies: text and translation* (London, 1925), p. 70. 24 Gleeson, 'Landscapes', pp 147–59; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, 'Conversion and consolidation', pp 104–8. 25 W.G. Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland* (London, 1886), p. 208. 26 Flanagan, 'The Christian impact', p. 26.



Plate 4.1 Interior north half of Ballybuggy rath-like enclosure from the east showing the modern graveyard wall which bisects the enclosure (left) and a possible entrance defined by a pair of trees at the far side.

Liphi, Leinster's premier assembly landscape.²⁷ It may be no coincidence that, apart from Bordwell itself, the only church in Bordwell parish is Kilbreedy ('The Church of Brigit'), referred to by the great seventeenth-century hagiographer, John Colgan, as 'Kill-Brigde-Major', suggesting a site of some importance.²⁸ The other likely Brigitine foundation is Ballybuggy, probably the site referred to by Colgan as 'Kill-Brigde-Minor'.²⁹ This little church, of which no trace is now visible, stood in a rath-like enclosure in Rathdowney parish, not far from the royal caput (Plate 4.1). These dedications suggest that this royal landscape was prestigious enough for Ireland's most important churches, Armagh and Kildare, to seek to develop an interest in it.

Burial monuments, raths and enclosures

While we do not know the extents of Mag nEóchaille, the putative royal core-land within Mag Réta, it must have been in the south of the territory, centred on the caput of Rathdowney, an area which, as we have just noted, is characterized by a concentration of places with royal associations. Turning to the archaeological evidence, the first point to note is the paucity of late

²⁷ Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, 'Conversion and consolidation', pp 90–6. ²⁸ Carrigan, *History*, ii, p. 60. ²⁹ Carrigan, *History*, i, p. 5, ii, p. 342.

prehistoric to early medieval burial monuments (fig. 4.2). This is despite quite extensive pre-development excavation, which turned up just one burial monument at Parknahown in the adjacent kingdom of Áes Cinn Chuille (below), though some apparently unmarked late prehistoric cremations were excavated near the (later) rath at Derrinsallagh in the north of Mag Réta.³⁰ Burial monuments are found in considerable numbers in some other royal landscapes, such as Southern Uí Fáeláin, Co. Kildare, which was clearly already important in late prehistory.³¹ The paucity of burial monuments in the royal heartland of Mag Réta might possibly be due to poor visibility, for example as a result of local burial practices, or it might support the documentary evidence (above) suggesting that this was not a place of power with roots stretching back into prehistory, but was made one, due to political expediency, in the first century or two of the early medieval period. If so, we might speculate that Rathdowney was conceived of as a Christian capital from the outset, and that the *domnach* churches were founded as integral components of the polity at the time of its inception. Even so, we might expect evidence for more non-ecclesiastical burials, for many of those in Uí Fáeláin are fifth/sixth-century, contemporary with the earliest churches there (Killashee, Domnach Mór Magh Liphi etc). Indeed, their rarity elsewhere in Mag Réta potentially underscores the significance of the possible burial monument at the caput of Rathdowney, though as we have seen, the character and chronology of this destroyed earthwork are far from clear.

The south and east of Mag Réta are characterized by a moderate density of raths (earthen ringforts), the distribution of which is supplemented by that of enclosures (sometimes now destroyed) that may well have been raths or other enclosures of early medieval date. The majority of these are recorded as ‘enclosures’ by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland but systematic study of the 1st or 2nd Edition OS maps, other early sources and aerial photographs turned up a substantial number of additional examples.³² These were then categorized systematically according to the likelihood that they were early medieval raths but some other, larger enclosures that may be early medieval, were also included. There is a particular concentration of large (some > 100m in diameter) curvilinear enclosures in the portion of Cúl Buichle included in the core study area, especially in Derrykearn and adjacent townlands east of

30 A.M. Lennon, *Derrinsallagh 3, Co. Laois* (Report by ACS Ltd, 2009), p. 174. 31 Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, ‘Conversion and consolidation’, pp 83–96. 32 In the inner study area as a whole (primarily comprising Mag Réta along with small areas around Killeany, Parknahown and Camlin), 135 unclassified enclosures were identified in total. Of these two were deemed definitely early medieval, 48 were probable cases, 56 had some positive evidence supporting an early medieval date (morphology, diameter, landscape position etc), there were a further 25 possible examples. Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Identifying and characterizing settlements’ in Ó Carragáin, Sheehan et al. ‘Making Christian landscapes: settlement, Phase 2’, pp 461–2.

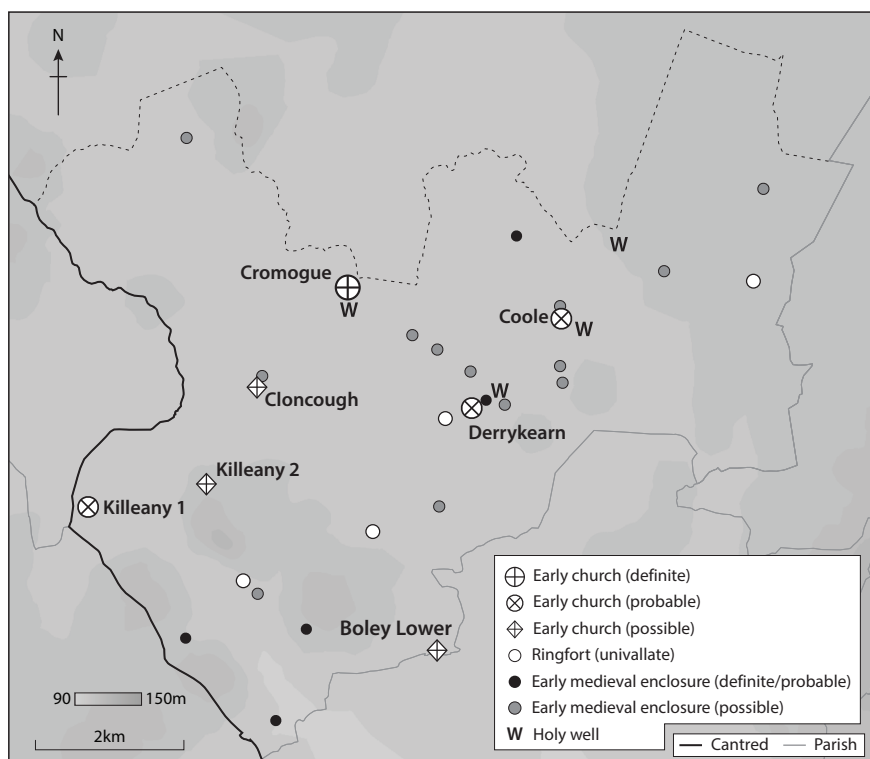


Fig. 4.3 The portion of Cúl Buichle within the core study area (i.e., the southern third of the parish of Clonenagh and Clonagheen). Nick Hogan and the author.

the Nore (fig. 4.3),³³ an area that also includes two probable ecclesiastical sites (Derrykearn and Coole, the latter with possible traces of a 105m enclosure: Table 4.1), and possible indications on the 1st Edition OS of traces of a pre-modern field system. While the significance of this particular concentration is unclear, and their chronology uncertain, large enclosures such as this, in combination with excavated enclosed burial grounds ('cemetery settlements'), challenge the assumption that early medieval enclosures usually conform to the standard morphology of raths (i.e., c.25–50m in diameter), and blur the traditional boundaries between 'secular' and 'ecclesiastical' enclosures. Unenclosed settlements are hard to identify in this landscape: it lacks the unenclosed drystone houses found in the west, and the unenclosed (and

³³ These include c.120m, 95m and 50m diameter enclosures in Derrykearn, c.100m (albeit somewhat angular) and 60m enclosures in Foxborough, a c.115m enclosure in Mountfead and a c.60m diameter enclosure in Raheen, in addition to the possible c.105m ecclesiastical enclosure on its boundary with Coole.

indeed enclosed) souterrains found in other areas.³⁴ This means that the lower grades within early medieval society – those that did not have the right to enclose their settlements – are more elusive here than in many other areas of Ireland, though pre-development excavations have provided us with some possible evidence in the form of a kiln at Derrinsallagh 2 in Mag Réta and, in adjacent Uí Chairin, metalworking at Ballykelly, and buildings and kilns in the vicinity of the settlement and cemetery of Camlin 3.³⁵

Turning to potentially high-status settlements, reference has already been made to the only crannog in Mag Réta, at Bordwell. A significant minority of raths in south and west Mag Réta are multi-vallate, though these are not as common as in some other royal *túatha*, such as Eóganacht Glenomnach and the other royal *túatha* in Fir Maige, where clusters of multi-vallates have been interpreted as evidence for segmentation of royal and noble lineages.³⁶ Multi-vallates in south and east Mag Réta are more dispersed, often about three kilometres apart. This could be due to regional variation in settlements forms and patterns (the density of univallate raths and enclosures here is also less than in Fir Maige) and in how royal power was expressed, or it might also have something to do with the fact that, due to periodic Osraige expansion, Mag Réta lost its royal status for substantial periods in the seventh and eighth centuries, when the majority of ringforts seem to have been constructed.

Ecclesiastical sites: landscape context, character and density

Lesser church sites are quite densely distributed across Mag Réta, not least in the south and east. All possible medieval church sites were assessed and classified according to the likelihood that they are early medieval in origin (see Table 4.1).³⁷ Many of the classic archaeological indicators of an early origin, such as early ecclesiastical sculpture and pre-Romanesque churches, are largely absent from Mag Réta, presumably because wood and other organic materials predominated. As tends to be the case, especially in the east of the country, the vast majority of known early ecclesiastical sites continued in use during the later medieval period. Thus, what one normally finds at these sites is a late medieval church (either a parish church or chapel) surrounded by a graveyard, sometimes with traces of an earlier, curvilinear enclosure. In this area, because of their inconspicuous archaeology, the locations of church sites that were abandoned by the end of the early medieval period were often lost entirely. We can postulate this in the case of a number of townlands with ‘cill’

³⁴ Mark Clinton, *The souterrains of Ireland* (Bray, 2001), p. 34. ³⁵ Lennon, ‘Derrinsallagh’, p. 177; Liam Ó Séaghdha, ‘Ballykelly 1, County Tipperary’ (Report by V.J. Keeley Ltd, 2010); Flynn, ‘Camlin’, pp 621–5; Colum Hardy and Paul Stevens, ‘Camlin/Derrymore 1, Co. Tipperary’ (Report by V.J. Keeley Ltd, 2011), p. 116. ³⁶ Ó Carragáin, ‘Churches and social power’, pp 110–13. ³⁷ For the methodology employed in classifying churches see Ó Carragáin, ‘Church sites and other settlements’.

names with no known church site.³⁸ In addition, we can, with due caution, draw upon antiquarian work, especially that of Revd Carrigan, who is our sole source for the name and location of several possible sites.³⁹

Thirty definite or probable, and a further twenty possible, early ecclesiastical sites were identified in the core study area (primarily comprising Mag Réta along with small areas around Killeany, Parknahown and Camlin), which comprises 384km². In order to facilitate inter-regional comparison, when calculating church density in the MCL project, marginal land that was rarely used for permanent settlement is excluded. In this area no land in the area is too high for permanent settlement and there are no large lakes, so the only features that must be taken into consideration are raised bogs. While a small number of ecclesiastical sites, like Monaincha, Co. Tipperary, are sited on bog islands, the bulk of the area of these raised bogs is not suitable for habitation. Within the study area, Monaincha and Timoney bog have a combined area of c.15km², while Clonmore Bog is c.8km², leaving c.361km². Thus the area per definite/probable ecclesiastical site is 12km² (i.e., 3.5km between churches on average), falling to <8km² when 'possible sites' are included. This is comparable to most of the other MCL case studies, which were generally characterized by between 10km² and 20km² per definite/probable church. While the number of other known settlements per church varied much more markedly (in this case c.3.4 ringforts per church), the high and fairly consistent density of churches is striking and suggests that similar patterns of power and landholding influenced church foundation in many areas of Ireland.⁴⁰

The position of ecclesiastical sites in the landscape of the core study area (Mag Réta and adjacent areas: fig. 4.1) reinforces patterns already noted in some of the other MCL case studies. In particular, church sites tend to vary more in their topographical position than other settlements. They are more likely to occur at quite high altitudes: for example Knockseera and Bordwell, which are near the tops of hills. They are also more likely to occur on or near rivers, where one rarely finds ringforts (e.g. Ballyboodin on the River Goul and Killeany on the River Gully). Like the other MCL studies, this one does not support the idea that church sites *tend* to be sited on boundaries;⁴¹ rather it suggests that a minority of them were placed on or near boundaries, often for particular strategic reasons, but that the majority of them were not. For

³⁸ For a recent discussion of the antiquity of the majority of 'cill' sites see Ó Carragáin, 'Church sites and other settlements'. ³⁹ Carrigan, *History*, passim. ⁴⁰ Ó Carragáin, 'Church sites and other settlements'. ⁴¹ See for example Tomás Ó Carragáin, 'The archaeology of ecclesiastical estates in early medieval Ireland' *Peritia*, 24–5 (2014), pp 266–312 at pp 288–92; *pace*, for example, Harold Mytum, 'The location of early church sites in northern County Clare' in S. Pearse (ed.), *The early church in Western Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 1982), pp 351–61.

example, some, such as Bordwell and Aghaboe, are near the centre of their (later medieval) parishes. In assessing the relationship between churches and boundaries, however, two factors must be remembered. First, as emphasized above, the boundaries we have to work with are at best only approximations of their early medieval predecessors, which themselves were by no means static. Second, whether a church was considered to have been placed on a boundary depends a great deal on the scale of the bounded territory and the location (and therefore the perspective) of those who put it there. For example, if churches were placed on the boundaries of small districts (local *túatha*) as an expression of local rivalries, one might expect them to be placed precisely, as I have argued in the case of the ten churches within c.200m of the boundary of Túath Uí Chúscraid, a subdivision of Fir Maige.⁴² In the case of a larger kingdom with distant overlords, however, perhaps a church need not have been placed exactly on the boundary for it to have been perceived as a boundary church, especially because major kingdoms seem often to have been separated by boundary zones of marginal land rather than linear boundaries. We seem to have examples of this latter phenomenon here. As part of the present MCL study, Connon showed that churches dedicated to St Ciarán of Saigir were placed near the boundaries of the large over-kingdom Osraige (perhaps initially) as expressions of Corcu Loígde dominion over that kingdom and (maybe later) as expressions of Osraige dominion over territories it had conquered.⁴³ Within Mag Réta, three of these sites are reasonably close to its western boundary (Garryduff/Clonmeen: c.700m from the boundary; Monamonra: exact location unknown; and Errill: c.3km from the boundary), and much closer still to the western extent of cultivated land in the kingdom for the boundary zone here is characterized by extensive bog. Another site associated with Ciarán is sited on the upper slopes of Knockseera, the highest hill in the north of Mag Réta, not far (c.2km) from its northern boundary. These may have been founded when Mag Réta permanently came under Osraige control in the tenth century or, more likely, during one of the earlier periods of Osraige control in the seventh/eighth centuries.⁴⁴

As these examples illustrate, we cannot usually suggest a precise date for the foundation of a church. What little evidence we have, combined with comparisons to other areas with better archaeological evidence, hints that the

42 Ibid. 43 Connon, 'Territoriality'. 44 Connon suggests that sites dedicated to other, more obscure, Corcu Loígde saints may possibly have been founded at an earlier date when this group still dominated Osraige (i.e., perhaps before the mid-seventh century). Connon, 'Territoriality'. If so, it may be significant that the only possible example in Mag Réta is Kyletilloge, on its southern boundary with the Osraige kingdom of Áes Cinn Chuille, perhaps indicating the extent of Osraige dominion prior to their annexation of Mag Réta. Another site that might indicate this earlier boundary is nearby Coolkerry, which is associated with St Ciarán.



Plate 4.2 Kilcoran rath-like ecclesiastical enclosure from the south (c.50m in diameter internally). Aerial Photographs and field inspection indicate that it is somewhat less regular than the majority of raths. It is reminiscent of the small ecclesiastical enclosures of areas such as Corcu Duibne, Co. Kerry.

majority were founded by 800, though we cannot assume contemporaneity for the occupation of some may have been short-lived. Where the patron saint can be identified, they usually flourished in the pre-Viking period (Table 4.1). Sometimes toponymy or documentary evidence hints at the particular social, religious or economic roles that lesser churches fulfilled. Examples include Kilcoran, ‘The Church of the Shoes/Shoemakers’, which is just a kilometre from Rathdowney and must have been closely associated with it (Plate 4.2); Kilnaseer, ‘The Church of the Carpenter’; and Kilcoke, ‘The Church of Cócá’, a female saint (Table 4.1). More generally, the dense and, with the notable exception of the north-east (below), reasonably even distribution of churches testifies to the Christianization of the landscape.

A substantial minority of churches have possible traces of enclosures, that vary widely in size, though it must be emphasized that the evidence for these (often from early OS maps and aerial photographs) is often equivocal. The most important churches in the wider region – Seirkieran and perhaps Aghaboe, Clonfertmolua and Roscrea – have possible traces of some of the largest known enclosures in the country (< 400m in diameter). There are a further fifteen possible/probable ecclesiastical enclosures in the 90–200m range, the mean as suggested by Swan,⁴⁵ but almost as many (eleven) are

⁴⁵ Leo Swan, ‘Enclosed ecclesiastical sites and their relevance to settlement patterns of the first millenium AD’ in Terence Reeves-Smyth and Fred Hammond (eds), *Landscape archaeology in Ireland*, BAR 116 (Oxford, 1983), pp 269–80 at p. 274. Clonmeen (doubtful), Dairyhill (c.120m), Farraneglish (c.130m), Garryduff (c.150m, doubtful), Tintore (c.120m), Cloncough (c.100m or c.200m), Killeany 1 (180m), Kyletilloge (c.90m), Ballyboodin (c.90m),

less than 90m in diameter.⁴⁶ In what seems to be a distinctive feature of ecclesiastical archaeology in (though not unique to) this region, up to seven of these are within the typical range for raths (25–50m in diameter), and a few have been classified as such by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland. These include Ballbuggy and Kilcoran, the two church sites closest to Rathdowney, and this phenomenon might possibly help to explain the rath-like mound containing burials that once stood at the latter site (above; Table 4.1; Plate 4.2).⁴⁷ Notwithstanding the tentative nature of the evidence, the wide range of enclosure diameters evident in the area is significant because, while the predominance of small ecclesiastical enclosures in Corcu Duibne and some other areas of the west is well documented, they have not been widely recognized elsewhere in the country. While enclosure diameter may often have, very broadly, mirrored the importance of the site, on current evidence this was not always the case; for example, if Killeany was a church site it was a relatively minor one, but its enclosure is quite large.

Aghaboe was by far the most important church in Mag Réta (Plate 4.3). Its founder, Cainnech, later became patron saint of Osraige, but Aghaboe was founded in the sixth century⁴⁸ before Osraige took over this area, so it is possible that it was originally patronized by the Laígis. A site of this importance would have had a substantial estate and, while its exact extents cannot be determined, the settlement pattern around Aghaboe is strikingly different to that in the royal core-land, where there are far more raths and indeed a more even spread of churches. This contrast cannot be explained by environmental factors. By analogy with a similar, though more pronounced, contrast in Fir Maige, which also has better textual evidence, I have tentatively suggested that the settlement pattern around Aghaboe is indicative of an ecclesiastical estate,

Newtown (Kyleaderry: 130m, doubtful), Toberboe (140m), Ballycrine (c.95m), Monaincha (main site, c.100m), Monaincha (satellite site, 104m), Timoney (115m). ⁴⁶ Akip (c.30m), Ballybuggy (c.39m), Coolkerri (c.80m), Kilcoran (c.43m), Kildellig (c.65m), Kilminfoyle (c.70m), Momamonra (c.60m) Rathdowney (doubtful?: see above), Oldtown (c.40m), Parknahown (Rathkilmurray: 50m), Newtown (c.45m). ⁴⁷ Ballybuggy church and graveyard are described by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland (www.archaeology.ie: revised description by Caimin O'Brien, 2007) as occupying the south side of a *bivallate* rath but, while there is some evidence for a concentric exterior bank at the south, elsewhere the various earthworks (some of them linear) outside the principal bank are not really consistent with this interpretation. Alternatively, it may have been a *univallate* enclosure, subdivided with a church and graveyard in the south half, with related earthworks at the exterior. Other possible examples of churches in rath-like enclosures are Akip in Mag Réta and Newtown, Oldtown and Parknahown (Rathkilmurray) in Áes Cinn Chuille. Examples in adjoining areas include Rathurles, Co. Tipperary. ⁴⁸ Carrigan, *History*, ii, p. 30. While Ó Riain has questioned whether Cainnech was a historical figure, other historians, such as Richard Sharpe, are happy to accept that he was and that Aghaboe was founded in the sixth century. Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Cainnech alias Columcille, patron of Ossory' in Pádraig de Brún, Seán Ó Coileáin, and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds), *Folia Gadelica* (Cork, 1983), pp 20–35; Richard Sharpe, *Adomnán: Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1995), p. 262.



Plate 4.3 Aghaboe modern parish church and abbey ruins from the north.

perhaps one in which a significant proportion of farmers were essentially serfs with little control over the land they worked.⁴⁹ The enclosed burial ground with settlement/craft-working evidence excavated by Wiggins at Lismore was a specialized bloom-refining site.⁵⁰ It may have been located on the Aghaboe estate and may have had links with the subsidiary church of Kilkennybeg, just 400m to the north-west.⁵¹

Killeany: a lesser church on the boundary of Mag Réta?

The potential of excavation to transform our understanding of such lesser church sites is illustrated by Killeany, just outside the north-east border of Mag Réta, which was excavated by Ken Wiggins in 2005. This is one of the very few possible church sites to be extensively excavated during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ boom, as churches were generally avoided by developers and National Roads Authority engineers.⁵² Though no church was found, Wiggins has made a good case that this was an ecclesiastical site rather than a ‘cemetery settlement’ (i.e., a ‘non-ecclesiastical’ enclosed cemetery with associated non-funerary, domestic/craft activity), not least because, at 180m x 150m, its enclosure is on a scale usually only found at ecclesiastical sites, far larger

⁴⁹ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish landscape* (forthcoming). ⁵⁰ Tim Young, ‘Appendix 8: Archaeometallurgical residues report’ in Wiggins, ‘Bushfield or Maghernaskeagh / Lismore 1’, pp 291–308. ⁵¹ Ó Carragáin, *Churches in the Irish landscape* (forthcoming) ⁵² Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Foreword’ in Corlett and Potterton (eds), *The Church in early medieval Ireland*, pp vii–ix; Tomás Ó Carragáin, ‘Early ecclesiastical sites in Ireland: archaeology and architecture’ in Elizabeth Boyle (ed.), *A companion to the early Irish Church* (forthcoming).

than any non-ecclesiastical burial enclosure (fig. 4.4).⁵³ It was established in the sixth century, though the majority of radiocarbon dates were centred on the period 600–900.⁵⁴ There was also an inner ditch around the burial area (c.25m across), with an unusual entrance, formed from overlapping ditches, that ensured that people entered the site following their right hand – i.e., diesal – which was considered propitious in early medieval Ireland.⁵⁵ This entrance, and the gated entrance to the main enclosure, was located at the south-east of their respective enclosures. An unusual seventh-century burial, probably of a woman, was found in the passageway leading to the cemetery: 39 cut marks were identified on her bones, and she was the only burial in the cemetery to be buried prone⁵⁶; thus she was differentiated and excluded from the main community, perhaps for reasons linked to her violent death. A burial was also placed at the entrance to the larger enclosure. Only one third of the burial ground was excavated (perhaps explaining why no evidence for a church was uncovered), and about three-quarters of burials were adults with an equal number of men and women. One woman buried around AD 900 (c.800–1000 2 sigma) had a necklace of bone beads which may have had a devotional role similar to later paternosters.⁵⁷ Occupation evidence included several cereal-drying kilns (some post-dating the main occupation phase) and a large assemblage of animal bones (over 60% cattle). There was a moderate amount of iron slag from across the site (probably using bog-iron) and some ‘furnace bottom’ pieces, as well as evidence for smithing and some copper alloy working.⁵⁸ There was little evidence for permanent habitation in the form of structures or hearths. This may be partly due to low visibility construction methods and/or poor survival; in addition it is likely that a substantial portion of the large enclosed area was used for agriculture, with habitation confined to certain zones, perhaps partly outside the road-take.

The site is just a few hundred metres from the border of Mag Réta, within another *túath* of the kingdom of Láigis: Cúl Buichle (figs. 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3).⁵⁹ The Láigis Réta were overkings of Cúl Buichle and two of their branches were based there by the eighth century.⁶⁰ Killeany probably derives from ‘Cell

53 Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, pp 205–8; Ken Wiggins, ‘An early medieval ditched enclosure with burials and cereal-drying kilns at Killeany, Co. Laois’ in Corlett and Potterton (eds), *The Church in early medieval Ireland*, pp 273–86 at pp 281–5. 54 Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, p. 10. 55 Jerry O’Sullivan and Tomás Ó Carragáin, *Inishmurray: monks and pilgrims in an Atlantic landscape* (Cork, 2008), p. 331. 56 Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, p. 210. 57 Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, Appendix 5; Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski, ‘Appendix 5: bone and antler objects report’ in Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, pp 409–15 at pp 411–12; Ian Riddler and Nicola Trzaska-Nartowski, pers. comm. 2013; cf. R.W. Lightbrown, ‘The jewellery’ in M.F. Hurley et al. (eds), *Late Viking Age and medieval Waterford, excavations, 1986–1992* (Waterford, 1998), pp 518–23 at pp 521–22. 58 Wiggins, ‘Killeany’, p. 217. 59 Ó Murchada, ‘History’, pp 36–7; Connon, ‘An historical overview’, pp 321–2. 60 Michael O’Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), p. 93.

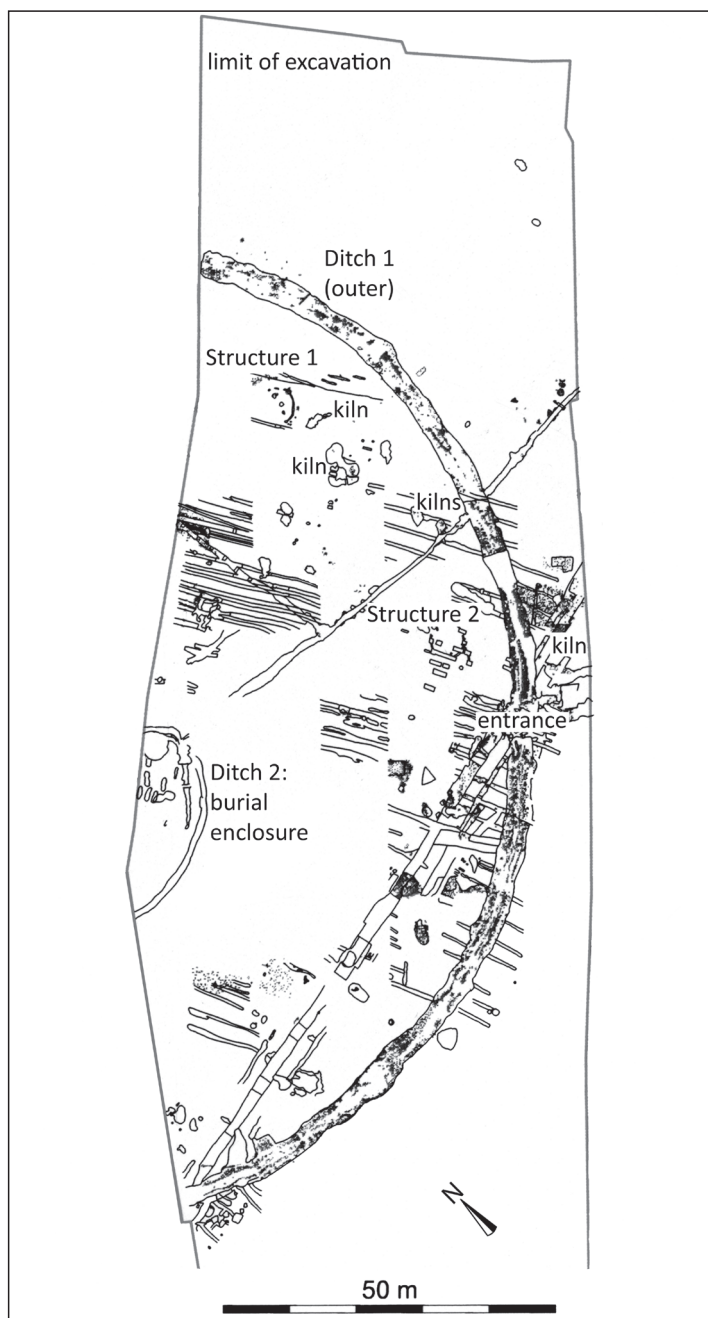


Fig. 4.4 Killeany 1 after Ken Wiggins 'An early medieval ditched enclosure with burials and cereal-drying kilns at Killeany, Co. Laois' in Corlett and Potterton (eds), *The Church in early medieval Ireland*, pp 273–86 at p 275.

Éine', and Connors has suggested that this was the Énna of the Laígis Réta who died in 570 or 577 as coarb of Clonmacnoise, a post he had held for 26 years, making him the immediate successor of saint Ciarán himself.⁶¹ He was clearly an important figure: one of only two members of the Laígis mentioned in the annals before the late ninth century.⁶² The excavated site was probably established during Énna's lifetime. Is it possible that he had established this site before acceding to the coarbship of Clonmacnoise? We can only speculate.

There was another cemetery of uncertain date and character at the north end of Killeany townland, 1.6km from the excavated site, on the banks of the Nore. It was uncovered during road construction in the early nineteenth century and is about 400m from a tower house, somewhat far to suggest that it was established simply as an adjunct to this castle. While no church is shown on early maps of the area (1563 map of Laois/Offaly; Petty's Baronial Map of Queen's County from *Hiberniae Delinatio*), the name Killeany is written near the castle rather than in the area where Killeany 1 was excavated. This raises the possibility that the 'cill' of the townland name refers to this second cemetery. It is equally possible, however, that the name migrated northwards in the later medieval period to reflect changing settlement patterns as Killeany 1 declined.⁶³ Toponymy indicates the likely presence of at least one early church in the area; and, on balance, the archaeology of Killeany 1 makes this the more convincing of the two candidates (Table 4.1).

Whether or not it was a church site, and whether or not it was founded by, or in honour of, Énna of Clonmacnoise, Killeany 1 does not appear to have been a very important site, notwithstanding its impressive enclosures.⁶⁴ Wiggins points out that the finds were modest, suggesting that the community was quite poor, or perhaps consciously eschewed flashy material culture for

61 Connors and Ó Carragáin, 'Identifying', p. 358; Whitley Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé* (London, 1905), p. 48; ATig 570; AU 570.2, 577.6. 62 Ó Murchada, 'History', p. 45. 63 There is no reference to the church in the Visitation of 1583. In the Ecclesiastical Taxation of 1302–6 there is a reference to the church of 'Kyllen' in the deanery of 'Leys' (*CDI*, ii, p. 250); however it is not known if this entry refers to our Killeany or to the very small modern civil parish of Killenny (barony of Stradbally, Co. Laois) in the western extremity of the deanery of 'Leys'. It may be significant that the 'Kyllen' of the Ecclesiastical Taxation appears at the end of a list of churches associated with the *eastern* end, i.e., the Clonenagh and Clonagheen end, of the deanery. Connors and Ó Carragáin, 'Identifying', p. 357. 64 'Killeany' is also referred to in the early modern English sources as 'Killenny', a place-name found in multiple locations in the immediate hinterland of the study area. 'Killenny' is the name of a later medieval/early modern parish now subsumed into the eastern half of the modern civil parish of Aghmacart approximately ten kilometres south-west from our site (see Table 4.1 under Toberboe or Killenny). As noted above (previous note), it is also the name of a very small civil parish in the barony of Stradbally, Co. Laois. If, as the variant spellings in the early modern sources suggest, 'Killeany' can be considered the same name as 'Killenny', then the frequency of its occurrence in the area may speak to the once thriving cult of a local saint. Connors and Ó Carragáin, 'Identifying', p. 357.

the sake of piety and asceticism.⁶⁵ This might also have been a factor in its relatively isolated position, in a boundary zone with no evidence for other early medieval settlements in its immediate vicinity (the nearest rath is c.2km away), so there is little evidence to suggest that this putative church had a pastoral role. Its position may, however, have facilitated longer-distance links with churches both in Cúl Buichle and across the border in Mag Réta, such as Aghaboe (c.4km to the south-west). The Down Survey map of Laois depicts two roads converging in this area, as well as a bridge across the River Gully at Gortnaclea.⁶⁶ If Killeany 1 was dedicated to Énna of Clonmacnoise, this would support the possibility that it had a good relationship with Aghaboe during the period of Laígis Réta ascendancy, for Aghaboe had close links with the Columban federation and, according to Adomnán, Columba was on friendly terms with the community of Clonmacnoise and with Énna's successor, Ailithir.⁶⁷ The decline of Killeany 1 in the tenth century may well have something to do with the fact that this was when Mag Réta was finally and permanently taken over by the Osraige, placing the site on the boundary between two, sometimes warring, kingdoms, rather than on an internal subdivision of Laígis.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Mag Réta illustrates a number of important trends that are also evident, to a greater or lesser extent, in some other Irish kingdoms.⁶⁹ First evident in the fifth to sixth century, we see the establishment of Domnach Mór Mag Réta (Donaghmore) and Domnach Eóchaille (Rathdowney) close to the main cluster of royal sites within Mag Réta, suggesting early investment by the Laígis Réta in the new religion. This picture contrasts with some previous landscape analyses of conversion such as Mytum's suggestion that the earliest churches were in marginal locations and that this indicated early ambivalence on the part of the elite.⁷⁰ A good case has been made that some *domnach* churches were early pastoral churches of particular local kingdoms in contrast to sites which originated as monasteries and whose founders were more likely to be revered as saints. Domnach Mór Mag Réta seems to fit this pattern. Though initially vital to their success, in the long run the position of a high proportion these churches so close to core royal land may sometimes have limited their

65 Wiggins, 'Killeany', p. 217. 66 Connors and Ó Carragáin, 'Identifying', p. 480. 67 Sharpe, *Adomnán: Life of Columba*, I, 3. 68 Wiggins, 'Killeany', p. 10. 69 Cf., for example, Ó Carragáin, 'Churches and social power', *passim*; 'Church sites and other settlements', *passim*; Gill Boazman, 'Hallowed by saints, coveted by kings: Christianity and early medieval social organization in Rathdown, Co. Dublin' in Ó Carragáin and Turner (eds), *Making Christian landscapes*, pp 21–54; Gleeson and Ó Carragáin, 'Conversion and consolidation', *passim*. 70 Harold Mytum, *The origins of early Christian Ireland* (London, 1992), pp 63–6.

potential for growth, insofar as they could only be granted a modest amount of royal land. They retained a distinct and important role within the local settlement hierarchy, however.

Domnach Eóchaille is particularly interesting because it seems to have been the principal church, not of the kingdom of Mag Réta, but of Mag nEóchaille, one of its subdivisions. Some other landscapes (in Kildare, Dublin, Tyrone and Monaghan) are characterized by clusters of *domnachs* that are far too close to each other to all have been the primary pastoral churches of whole polities.⁷¹ At the end of the early medieval period it seems to have been accepted that local districts (*túatha*) within a kingdom should have a designated principal church. This is expressed most clearly by *Críchad in Chailli*, a twelfth-century text that lists the '*túath* church' of each district within the kingdom of Fir Maige, Co. Cork.⁷² To some extent, this comprehensive system probably reflects relatively recent changes, and it would certainly be anachronistic to project it back to the early stages of Christianization. At the same time, it seems likely that some subdivisions of kingdoms had a principal church long before the twelfth century, though the role and character of such sites must have evolved over time. In any case, the evidence of Mag Réta indicates that *domnach* churches were more diverse in character and function than is usually acknowledged.⁷³

Second, this case study also illustrates the fact that the churches which seem to have possessed the largest coherent blocks of land tended to be established further from core royal land. In some cases, this may have been an important factor in their success. These include many of the great monastic sites established in the sixth and seventh centuries, as illustrated here by Aghaboe which was c.9km from Rathdowney (about the same distance as lay between Brigown and the capital of Eóganacht Glennamnach in Fir Maige, Co. Cork), and much further again from the royal demesne of its later Osraige patrons. The distinctive settlement patterns on their estates potentially provide insights about the socio-economic strategies pursued by these important churches. It should be emphasized, however, that even landed ecclesiastical sites could vary significantly in character, so we should not expect to find the same patterns on all ecclesiastical land.⁷⁴

Thirdly, there is plenty evidence for the establishment of lesser churches, both within and outside ecclesiastical estates, so that in this area by the end of the period – indeed probably by 800 – there was a church for about every 12km². The high density and fairly even distribution of these churches

71 Flanagan, 'The Christian impact', Map 4. 72 Paul MacCotter, 'Túath, manor and parish: kingdom of Fir Maige, cantred of Fermoy', *Peritia* 22 (2012), pp 211–48; Ó Carragáin, 'Churches and social power', p. 112. 73 The distribution and landscape archaeology of *domnach* churches is the subject of ongoing PhD research by Thomas Talbot of University College Cork. 74 Ó Carragáin, 'The archaeology' at pp 296–7.

testifies to the important role of lesser proprietors in the establishment and maintenance of minor churches. It is the most telling evidence against the argument that Christianization and pastoral care was largely confined to a paramonastic Christian elite living on the estates of major churches, and that the rest of the population was nominally Christian at best.⁷⁵

That is not to say that everyone was buried at church sites, however. The cemetery at Lismore illustrates that burial away from churches was perfectly acceptable. Nearby Kilkennybeg may have been established while these burials were taking place. Indeed this cemetery may have been on land that came into the possession of Kilkennybeg/Aghaboe in which case some of those buried there may have been ecclesiastical dependents. This is also illustrated by the nearby cemeteries at Parknahown and Camlin in adjoining kingdoms, both of which continued in use until the eleventh/twelfth centuries. When placed in their landscape context these excavated cemeteries lead us to rethink many of our assumptions about the process of Christianization. The slow adoption of churchyard burial can now be understood, not primarily as an indicator of conversion, but as one of the many changes, over the course of the early medieval period, in what being Christian entailed.

⁷⁵ *Pace* Colmán Etchingham, *Church organization in Ireland* (Maynooth, 1999), pp 249–70.

Table 4. 1 All known medieval church sites (and some possible medieval church sites) in the ‘Mag Réta and adjacent territories’ study area (cf. fig. 4.1) classified according to the likelihood of an early medieval origin.⁷⁶

CHURCHES IN MAG RÉTA

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Aghaboe	Aghaboe	Laois	232734, 185771	definite	St Cainnech. Columban links. Poss. encl. preserved in roads at east (400m diam.).
Akip	Rathdowney	Laois	228570, 181280	possible	Ath an Chip, ‘Ford of Treestump’? No trace of grvyd in Carrigan (ii, 253). No doc. refs. 1st Ed. OS/AP: circ. encl. c.30m diam.
Ballybuggy	Rathdowney	Laois	226610, 176590	possible	Ch., grvyd in S of 39m rath-like encl. Bullaun. Trad. a nunn. fd. by Brig. (Carrigan ii, 342). Colgan’s: ‘Kill-Brigde-Minor’?
Bordwell Big	Bordwell	Laois	232049, 180925	definite	Parish. Eccl. encl. St Furlinus/Fuillen (Carrigan ii, 59). Litany of Óeng.: ‘seven bishops of Bordgail’ (Plummer 1925, 70).
Castle Fleming (Giles)	Rathdowney	Laois	222250, 179800	possible	Grvyd (no trace) poss. the ch. of adj. tnld name: Kilmilan (?Cill Máelán) (Carrigan ii, 350; Logainm). Or ch. of LM castle?
Clonmeen South	Rathdowney	Laois	222866, 173756	possible	Monastic complex, holy well, nearby ch. and grvyd (5 acres) (Carrigan ii, 344). Few traces. AP: poss. curv. encl. (< 100m).
Clooneeb	Rathdowney	Laois	225478, 176394	no evid.	Parish absorbed by Rathdowney. Ch., rectang. grvyd.
Coolkerry	Coolkerry	Laois	230137, 177779	possible	Parish ch., ‘D’-shaped grvyd. c.80m diam. Castle nearby. Poss. Dísert meicc Ciluirn on River Erkina (Ó Murchada 1999, 43).
Coolowley	Rathdowney	Laois	224050, 180520	possible	Cúl Amalgaidha: royal name (main text). Marshy land. Nave-and-chancel ch., separate grvyd in rect. encl (80m x 50m).
Cuffsborough	Aghaboe	Laois	233590, 182550	no evid.	Orig. Ballygoodenmore. Aghaboe absorbed parish (Red Book of Ossory list). Holy wells in adj. tnlds.
Dairyhill	Aghaboe	Laois	236219, 182808	probable	2nd Ed. OS: ‘Kyle-cruttia’. Aghaboe absorbed parish. No trace of grvyd. Was within ‘D’-shaped area/encl. c.120m diam.
Donaghmore	Donaghmore	Laois	227003, 180310	definite	Domnach Mór Maíge Réta of Tripartite Life of Patrick (see text). Patrick’s Well. No early remains.

⁷⁶ Based on Cannon and Ó Carragáin, ‘Identifying’, with revisions. Abbreviations: AP: Aerial Photographs (usually OS orthophotos); BG: burial ground; BSD: Books of Survey and Distribution: Queen’s County (National Archives, Ireland MS); CGSH: Padraig Ó Riain, *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1985); eDIL: Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language (<http://edil.qub.ac.uk/dictionary/search.php>); GandH: Aubrey Gwynn and R.N. Hadcock, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (Harlow, 1970); HDGP: Padraig Ó Riain, Diarmuid Ó Murchadha and Kevin Murray, *Historical dictionary of Gaelic place-names, fascicle 3 (C-Ceall Fhursa)* (London, 2008); Kennedy 2003: Joseph Kennedy, *The monastic heritage and folklore of County Laois* (Roscrea, 2003); Lit. Óeng.: The Litany of Óengus in Charles Plummer, *Irish Litanies* (London, 1925); Mart. Doneg.: John O’Donovan, *Martyrology of Donegal* (Dublin, 1864); Mart. Óeng.: Whitley Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé* (London, 1905); Onomasticon: Edmund Hogan *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (<http://publish.ucc.ie/doi/locus>). INGR = Irish National Grid Reference.

Table 4. 1 (continued)

CHURCHES IN MAG RÉTA (continued)

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Eglish	Rathsaran	Laois	224590, 178150	no evid.	Parish church and grvyd dedicated to Nicholas (Carrigan ii, 66). Rath in same field.
Erril	Rathdowney	Laois	221959, 178142	possible	Parish absorbed by Rathdowney. Ch., grvyd, well, tree, dedicat. to Ciarán of Saigir (Carrigan ii, 346; main text).
Farraneglish Glebe	Aghaboe	Laois	235613, 184565	definite	Subsid. of Aghaboe. Ch., grvyd. 1st Ed. OS: poss. encl: c. 130m diam. 'Teampull na gCailleach Dub' (nunn.?) nearby: no trace.
Garryduff	Rathdowney	Laois	221959, 178142	possible	1st Ed. OS: Clonmeen grvyd. Curving road at N-E poss. encl. c. 150m diam. St Ciarán's holy well (Carrigan ii, 139).
Kilbeg/ Kilcotton	Aghaboe	Laois	locat. unknown	probable	Cell Chatáin. Catán: Mart. Doneg. 12 Dec, CGSH, 119. Adjoining tnlDs. Site was in Kilbeg (Carrigan ii, 130). No trace.
Kilbreedy	Bordwell	Laois	230460, 180110	probable	Colgan: 'Kill-Brigde-Major'. Ch., grvyd, holy well (Carrigan ii, 60). Near castle. Dedicat sugg. early origin.
Kilcoke	Rathdowney	Laois	227850, 182900	probable	Cill Chóca (Logainm). Female. Poss. Mart. Doneg. 6 June. Grvyd (Carrigan ii, 141; Kennedy 2003, 85).
Kilcoran	Rathdowney	Laois	228600, 177330	probable	Cill Chuaráin, 'Church of the Shoes/Shoemakers' (Logainm/eDIL). Rath-like encl. subdiv.: ch. in S, bones in N (Carrigan ii, 341).
Kildellig	Kildellig	Laois	230326, 184083	probable	Cill Deilge (Logainm). Dedic. Ernán, reput. broth. of Columba (Carrigan ii, 64). Ch. Curv. field to E: poss. encl. c. 65m diam.
Kildellig	Kildellig	Laois	229129, 183029	probable	Tnld. divis. 1.6km SW of Kildellig: Kildrummady, 'Church of Long Ridge' (Carrigan ii, 64). Site of grvyd. Ch. land (BSD, 142)?
Killermoge	Killermoge	Laois	239049, 180781	probable	Cill Dara Maí, 'Church of the Oak of the Plain' (Logainm). Parish Ch. Dedic. poss. Muccin mac Moche (Osraige) (CGSH, 31).
Kilminfoyle	Aghaboe	Laois	235417, 182380	probable	Cell Mhaoil Phaoil, 'Church of Máel Poil' (Carrigan ii, 58)? Map: grvyd in 'D'-shaped area c. 70m diam.
Kilnaseer	Aghaboe	Laois	locat. unknown	probable	Chill na Saor, 'Church of the Carpenter' (Logainm). Grvyd plus poss. nunnery, pillar stone. (Carrigan ii, 62). No trace.
Kilpurcell	Donaghmore	Laois	locat. unknown	possible	Poss. 'cill' name to be determined (Logainm). No trace or record of church site.
Knockseera	Aghaboe	Laois	226903, 185809	possible	Assoc. with St Ciarán of Saigir (Carrigan ii, 129–30). Ch., grvyd., holy bush.
Kyletilloge	Aghaboe	Laois	235358, 178576	possible	Poss. Cell t-Sillóg: Silloge, Sillán (CGSH, 265). Trad. of church (Carrigan ii, 66). AP: 90m diam. 'D' area on Oldglass boundary.
Lismore	Aghaboe	Laois	228459, 185814	probable	'Kilkennybeg', 'Little Church of Cainnech' (Carrigan ii, 131–2). Aghaboe absorbed parish. Ch., grvyd.
Monamonra	Rathdowney	Laois	locat. unknown	possible	Circ. grvyd, 'the moat' (c. 60m diam.), dedicat to Ciarán of Saigir (Carrigan ii, 350–1). No trace.

Table 4. 1 (continued)

CHURCHES IN MAG RÉTA (continued)

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Newtown or Skirk	Skirk	Laois	222930, little 184770	evid.	Parish church dedicated to Mary. St Molua's Well? Prehistoric henge immed. to S.
Rathdowney	Rathdowney	Laois	228240, definite 178280		Ráith Domnaig (Logainm), poss. ch. of royal demense of Mag Réta. Parish ch. Mound containing human bone (main text).
Rathnaleugh	Rathdowney	Laois	222800, probable 181785		Grvyd, holy well (Patrick), holy tree. Poss. ancient road. Down Survey: Kilklienagh ('The Bent Church') (Carrigan ii, 139).
Tintore	Killermoge	Laois	234961, possible 180117		Tigh an Tochair, 'House of the Togher.' Parish ch., grvyd. St Nicholas (Carrigan ii, 66). Castle, ringfort. AP: poss. c. 120m encl.
Townparks	Aghaboe	Laois	225404, prob. 187634	not	Chapel and gvyd. southeast of Borris castle. Later medieval chapel-of-ease?

CHURCHES IN CÚL BUICHLE (SOUTHERN THIRD OF THE PARISH OF CLONENAGH AND CLONAGHEEN)

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Boley Lower	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	240589, possible 185113		Ch., grvyd. 1563 map: 'Shancoe', 'Old Hollow'. 1st Ed. OS: 'Templeshankyll'. Both names raise poss. of EM origin.
Cloncough	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	locat. unknown	possible	Poss. Clúain Cua of the seven bishops (Mart. Doneg., 264; Onomasticon). AP: 2 poss. encl. (c. 100m at E tnd, c. 200m at W).
Coole	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	242270, probable 189558		'Killinec': 1563 map. Cell Chúile Dumha in Laigsis Chuile (HDGP, 154)? AP/ 1st Ed. OS: h. well, 'D' area (105m) on Raheen border.
Cromogue	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	239399, probable 189928		Prob. Clonagheen parish ch. Prob. 'Clúain Aitchen in Laigsis', Fintan Corach (Mart. Óeng., 76). Aithchein: Patrick's cook (CGSH, 11)?
Derrykearn	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	241052, probable 188367		Ch., grvyd. 'Kiltebrem': 1563 map. Derry: poss. 'Dáire [mic] Dimma', Colmán mac Dimma, near Clonenagh (Mart. Óeng, 238).
Killeany 1	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	235906, probable 187044		180m x 150m EM encl. with burial area excavated (Wiggins 2009 a; main text). Poss. a church site though no church found.
Killeany 2	Clonenagh and Clonagheen	Laois	237507, possible 187309		Grvyd. near castle on banks of Nore. 'Keleune' on 1563 map (no church shown). Poss 'Kyllen' of 1302-6 Taxation (main text).

CHURCHES IN ÁES CINN CHUILLE (AGHMACART PARISH)

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Addergoole	Aghmacart	Laois	233728, definite 175078		Etargabail: nunn. of Croinsech, Créd, followers of Brigit (CGSH, 113). Site prob. nr. Lime Kiln on OS map (Carrigan ii, 234-35).
Aghmacart	Aghmacart	Laois	233101, definite 174507		Achad Mic Airt, a chief-church of Osraige (ATig 1156). Tigernach (of Clones) of Uí Bairche of Leinster (d. 549) (AU; CGSH, 59).
Ballyboodin	Aghmacart	Laois	235577, probable 177118		'Keeloge': Cill Aedhgh (poss. Máedóc) (Carrigan 1905 ii, 229)? Ch. in curvil. gvyd. AP: poss. outer encl. at N-W (c. 90m).

Table 4. 1 (continued)**CHURCHES IN ÁES CINN CHUILLE (AGHMACART PARISH) (continued)**

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Castlequarter	Aghmacart	Laois	235498, prob. 174022 not	Near Culahill Castle. Chapel of Mac Gilla Pádraig lords of Upper Ossory. Depend. of Aghmacart (Carrigan 1905 ii, 230, 237).	
Newtown	Aghmacart	Laois	235331, possible 176412	Enclosure on Caar Hill: Cahir (i.e., Cathair) parish ch. (Carrigan ii, 228, iv, 369). 1st Ed. OS / AP: curv. encl. c.45m diam.	
Newtown	Aghmacart	Laois	236323, possible 176610	Kyleaderry (Cill 'a Doire?) reputedly a nunn. (Carrigan ii, 229). Ch. ruin. 1st Ed. OS: poss. ovoid encl. c.130m N-E x 50m E-W.	
Oldtown	Aghmacart	Laois	234101, possible 172474	Abbey' in rath (Carrigan ii, 234). AP: curv. encl. c.40m diam. Petty's map shows church around here. Nature of site unclear.	
Parknahown	Aghmacart	Laois	233839, prob. 173427 not	Bivall. rath (50m diam): 'Rathkilmurray'. Name poss. indicates assoc. with Aghmacart (Augustinian monast. of Mary).	
Toberboe or Killenny More	Aghmacart	Laois	237935, definite 175007	Killenny parish ch., grvyd. Cell-Fhinchí? i.e., Fainche of Mag Raigne in Osraige (Carrigan ii, 226)? AP: eccl. encl. 140m x 100m.	

CHURCHES IN UÍ CHAIRIN (CORBALLY PARISH AND TIPPERARY PORTION OF ROSCREA)

Townland	Parish	Co.	INGR	Early origin	Notes
Ballycrine	Corbally	Tipp.	211820, possible 185489	St Patrick's Well. 2005 OS AP: c.95m diam. enclosure.	
Cooleeshill	Roscrea/ Corbally	Offaly/ Tipp.	217986, definite 190744	'Kilkeeran' in 16th/17th cent. docs: Ciarán of Saigir. Ch., grvyd, lrgc. eccl. encl., holy well, bush. Possession of Monaincha.	
Corville	Corbally	Tipp.	215271, definite 188545	Corbally parish ch./abb. Sean Ros: first cell of Crónán of Roscrea. Monaincha community moved there c.1458 (GandH, 187).	
Monaincha (main site)	Corbally	Tipp.	216994, definite 188418	Insula Viventium, 'Island of the Living'. Augustin. from 12th cent. Bog island (c.100m diam), inner encl., Rom. ch., high cross.	
Monaincha (satellite site)	Corbally	Tipp.	216493, satellite 188379 site	Satellite site c.450m from principal one. Dedicat. to St Colum. Assoc with Céili Dé and/or women. Encl. 104m diam.	
Roscrea	Roscrea	Tipp.	213819, definite 189418	Major eccl. site founded by Crónán. Rom. church, round tower etc. Poss. albeit angular encl. in street pattern (<400m diam.).	
Timoney	Corbally	Tipp.	218515, definite 184542	August. house assoc. with Monaincha. Túaim Eabhna, 'Mound of Eabhna'? Molua suppos. died on mound. Encl. 115m diam.	