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The layout of Irish early Christian monasteries

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In an issue of the *Irish University Review* dedicated to the poet Richard Murphy, I described the ruined remains of the early Christian site on his *Ard Oileán*, High Island, Co. Galway, and published a reconstructed plan (1977, 55—61, fig. 2), noting that three elements, a cross-slab, saint's tomb and rectangular oratory, are located at the focus of this simple hermitage. In this it followed a pattern noted by Dr Françoise Henry (1957, 154—56), who pointed out that in the Iveragh peninsula of Kerry the oratory and its 'annexes' are whenever possible sited on a raised terrace or at least separated from the rest of the enclosure by a wall or a fence of slabs. She described these annexes of the oratory as 'a slab or a shrine-shaped tomb or some other kind of slab-tomb', suggesting an analogy with the *martyria* of the first Christian centuries, 'those small funerary chapels erected over the tomb of a martyr and later of some revered dead'.

Just as these elements, cross-slab, saint's tomb and oratory, are found at the focus of western foundations, I suggested that their equivalents are often found close together, usually in a more developed form, at the centre of the larger monasteries of the midlands and east, like Clonmacnois (1977, 66). From this it appears 'that the conjunction of oratory, cross-slab and founder's tomb was once common throughout the country, east and west, developing later into something more elaborate in the richer east, retaining its primitive cast in the ascetic and conservative west' (1977, 66—68). The inquiry is continued in this paper, towards appreciating and understanding the canons influencing the layout of early Christian monasteries in Ireland.

At first sight, plans may appear confused because of the proliferation of later medieval churches and more recent burials and grave-slabs. Perhaps for this reason the question has received little attention; though Macalister published plans of Clonmacnois (1909, frontispiece) and Monasterboice (1946, 18) he gave as his opinion: 'The most conspicuous buildings ... of which any relics remain, are the churches ... Of these there were several, scattered over the area of the monastic enclosure. The monastic settlements at Clonmacnois and at Glendalough have each a number of small churches, obviously of very different dates and *not designed to carry out any uniform symbolic or other scheme*' (1946, 16, italics mine).

Dr Henry, who presented plans of Nendrum, Duvillaun, Loher, Armagh, Glendalough, Dublin, Clonmacnois and Inishcealtra (1965, 52, 78; 1967, figs. 2—5; 1970, 37, 43) gave a rather similar opinion, perhaps surprisingly, in view of the insight quoted above: 'within the enclosure of the monastery, all sorts of buildings were scattered, *probably without much order*, one or two stone churches being surrounded by wooden buildings of various shapes' (1965, 91; italics mine).

Examination of a number of sites in the west suggests that the three focal monuments and the burials are arranged in a recurring standard plan somewhat apart from the domestic buildings of the hermitage or monastery.

The remains of the early Christian hermitage of Killabuonia (fig. 1b) are sited on a series of south-facing terraces about 300 feet above sea-level at the landward end of a valley opening to the Atlantic at St Finan's Bay, opposite *Sceilg Mhichíl* at the west end of the Iveragh peninsula in Kerry (Henry 1957, 102, fig. 18). On an upper terrace at the focus is the rectangular boat-shaped oratory, its doorway facing west into an open space. On the opposite, north-west side of this open area, 11 m away, is a circular *clochán* (stone-built beehive hut), its doorway facing that of the oratory. On the next terrace down, 7.6 m south-west of the oratory, is another *clochán*, its doorway opening beside the high retaining wall of the upper terrace; 6.4 m east of it is the short stone stairway leading up to the open area in front of the oratory. In line with the west face of the oratory and south of it, to the right as one ascends the steps, are a cross-inscribed slab facing west and a slab-tomb with a circular hole in its triangular west gable. The slab-tomb, traditionally regarded as that of the founder saint, appears to be regarded as a reliquary by pilgrims, who could see or touch the bones within through the hole in the west gable (Henry 1957, 101—04).

At the main hermitage on the island of *Sceilg Mhichíl* (fig. 1d), the buildings are also on a series of terraces which run north-east and south-west, and the ancient enclosure had a focus similar to that of Killabuonia (de Paor 1955; Henry 1957, 121—27). Towards the east end of the main terrace is the principal ancient oratory, its tiny east light looking over the sea to the mainland. On the north side of the oratory is a platform with two upright cross-slabs; on its south side are two further cross-slabs. At the east side is the walled platform of the 'Monks' Graveyard', with several simple cross-slabs standing erect on it. The north platform may also mark early graves. Set into the terrace to the north and running west from the north side of the oratory are five *clocháns*, apparently the cells of the monks, those at the west and east ends a little apart from the others and somewhat larger than them. A space 10.7 m long between the door of the most westerly *clochán* and the west door of the oratory is now largely occupied by the much later St Michael's Church but can be presumed to be originally an open space analogous to that of Killabuonia.

One of the few monastic sites to be excavated in modern times is the enclosure at Reask on the Dingle peninsula investigated by Fanning (1981). A stone oratory with associated cross-slabs was found at the east side of the enclosure (fig. 2b). Here was the burial area of the monastery, as at *Sceilg Mhichíl*, there being 42 lintel-graves on a rough north-south line through the oratory, some of them earlier than the oratory itself. A slab-shrine sited north-west of the doorway of the oratory, built presumably to house an important early burial, was contemporary with some of these lintel-graves. Two postholes immediately to the south of this and in line east and west may have been part of an original wooden oratory. Reask may

thus document a development in which the presumed earliest wooden oratory is replaced by a stone-built one near the same site. A slab-shrine is among the earliest monuments in the immediate area and some of the cross-slabs found in this part of the enclosure may also belong to the earliest discernible phases of life in this monastery, which are dated to the seventh century at latest by the occurrence of imported Bii ware (Fanning 1981, 155). The oratory and almost all of the burials were separated from the rest of the monastic enclosure by a wall running a serpentine course roughly north-east to south-west across the enclosure. In the western sector were the living-quarters, two double *clochán*s and a third single one. The general resemblance to the apposition of oratory and burials, on the one hand, and domestic buildings on the other, at *Sceilg Mhichíl* and Killabuonia, is striking.

At Labbamolaga, near Mitchelstown Co. Cork, a similar group was recorded in 1845 by G. V. du Noyer and later published by Lord Dunraven (RIA MS 12 N 22, 1875, Vol. I, 26—36). The site gets its name from the Irish *Leaba Molaga* (Molaga's tomb, literally bed), which was in the south side of a small rectangular building with antae measuring 4 by 3 m externally, apparently a reliquary building of developed form (fig. 1a). North of this was a larger rectangular church with engaged pilasters on the façade and measuring 11.6 by 7.3 m; this had originally had a small stone finial 25 cm across. Between the two buildings and standing at the east end was a cross-slab with a cross-in-circle in relief on the west face and an incised Greek cross on the east. Both church and reliquary appear to be of late date, perhaps of the twelfth century, but they probably mark the position of an earlier group of simpler form.

Saint's tomb, church and cross-slabs are present in a similar developed form at St Molaise's foundation on Inishmurray island (fig. 2a), off the Sligo coast (Wakeman 1893). The principal church, *Teampall Molaise, Teampall Mór* or *Teampall na bhFear* stands apart towards the east end of the enclosure. Three cross-slabs stand in line with its west façade, two on the north side, one on the south. The open space surrounding the church was until the last century the burial-place of the men (Wakeman 1893, 50). Within this part of the enclosure and near the north wall is the tiny *Teach Molaise* (Molaise's House), measuring only 2.7 by 2.4 m internally, with a bench of solid masonry along the south wall, as at Labbamolaga, which is reputedly the burial-place of Molaise, the founder (1893, 42). As at Reask the area surrounding the principal church is separated from the rest of the monastic enclosure by a stone wall, beyond which is the so-called 'school house', the only circular *clochán* now visible within the enclosure. In front of the west façade of *Teampall Mór*, the principal church, is the only open space of any size in the whole complex. This arrangement of living quarters in the western sector beyond an open space and possibly an internal division in the enclosure appears also at Illaunloghan and Loher in Kerry (Henry 1957, figs. 16, 25) and at *Ard Oileán* (Herity 1977, fig. 2).

St Ciaran's foundation at Clonmacnois on the Shannon has a dispersed arrange-

ment not unlike that of Inishmurray on the remains of a series of east-west terraces near the west end of the present assemblage of monastic buildings (fig. 2c). At the focus is the cathedral, called the *Daimhliag Mór* (Great Stone Church) which can be assumed to be on or near the original site of the principal church.

About 12 m south and 4 m east of its present façade stands the South Cross, made about 800, the only figured scene on its shaft or arms a Crucifixion on the west face. The same distance north, and similarly placed east of the façade of the church, is the so-called North Cross, a decorated pillar dating to roughly the same time, the east face of which is plain. One can envisage the west façade of the *Daimhliag* or its predecessor, about 800, as close to the line of these two decorated pillars which extended its façade by having their principal decorated faces looking on to an open space to the west; records tell of its erection and possible enlargement early in the tenth century (Henry 1980, 37, 45).

These monuments may have replaced earlier cross-slabs of the western type, like those at Inishmurray. Alternatively, new canons of siting deriving from a separate High Cross tradition may have influenced their siting. The eighth-century Ahenny High Crosses, which appear to be typologically the earliest Irish developments of the type independent in form of the stone cross-slab tradition, are sited close together north and south with their principal faces east and west; the base of a third cross to the east forms a triangle with them.

North-east of the *Daimhliag Mór* is a small stone building 3.8 by 2.45 m called *Teampall Chiaráin*, traditionally the burial-place of the founder (Macalister 1909, 141). In 1684, Bishop Dopping recorded that the saint's hand — it may have been enshrined — was kept here (O'Donovan 1857, 447) and early in the nineteenth century the twelfth-century crozier of the abbots was found here with a chalice and a wine vessel, a rosary of brass wire and a hollow brass ball (Macalister 1909, 155). This may be the *Teampall Bearnáin Chiaráin* mentioned in the Annals of Tigernach (s. a. 1077); if so, the word *Bearnán* may suggest that it housed a bell-shrine. It appears to be both saint's tomb and reliquary.

The Round Tower called O'Rourke's tower is apparently tenth century in date and stands at the edge of the terrace 30 m north-west of the west doorway of the *Daimhliag Mór*, its doorway facing that of the church. Its siting gives some idea of the extent of the open space in front of the *Daimhliag* in the tenth century.

The Cross of the Scriptures, a new and politically important development of the early tenth century (Henry 1980; Ó Murchadha 1980), with scripture panels on all four faces, was erected on a prominent position in this open space 12.5 m from the west façade. It marks a fundamental change in that it is to be viewed from all sides as a separate monument surrounded by space, rather than as part of a façade fronting an open area, as most crosses and cross-slabs up to this period appear to have been conceived. Its siting, form and figured scenes underline and confirm the existence of the area surrounding it as a public open space shortly after the year 900. (Pl. 1)

The open space at the west façade of the oratory or principal church of the early

Irish monastery is so widespread that it seems to have been established at an early stage, if not with the coming of Christianity. It appears to have been present at Reask (Fanning 1981, 155) about the seventh century, possibly even at the foundation some centuries earlier, and to have been an established feature of Clonmacnois by the time the North and South Crosses were erected, shortly after 800. Adomnán, writing his Life of Colum Cille a little before 700, describes a small open area called the *plateola* in the monastery in Iona within which the monks could walk (Anderson and Anderson 1961, 114). It was probably on ground that the monks had to cross to reach the church from their sleepinghouses (1961, 114, 528–9), so a layout like those of *Ard Oileán*, Inishmurray and Reask is probable.

A rather larger open space is implied by a passage in the same Life describing the visit of Colum Cille to the monastery of Conall, bishop of Cul-raithin (Coleraine), on his return from the Convention of Druimmcete near Limavady in Derry about 575. Conall had collected from the people of the plain of Eilne a large number of gifts, which were presented to Columba for benediction, laid out 'in the courtyard of the monastery' *(in platea monasterii strata)*. The story suggests a large area, possibly paved, which may be equated with the open area recognised above (Anderson and Anderson 1961, 114, f. 51a). Another passage relates how the brethren of Clonmacnois, hearing that he was near the monastery on his way from Durrow to visit, came from the fields on every side and joined those inside. They then passed outside the boundary of their monastery, accompanied by their abbot Alither, and meeting the saint led him with honour to the church on an improvised litter (Anderson and Anderson 1961, 215/6). This story suggests a space within the monastery large enough for the brethren to congregate in and possibly a processional way in front of the principal church, and thus accords with the archaeological evidence.

It seems likely that the focal monuments, oratory or principal church, cross-slab or High Cross, and saint's tomb, slab-shrine, reliquary or *martyrium* originally stood close to one another at the east side of this open space. Explanation in ritual terms is to be found in a passage in Bede's prose Life of St Cuthbert. Shortly before his death in 687, Cuthbert retired to a hermitage on the island of Farne, asking his friend Herefrid to bury him 'in this dwelling near my oratory towards the south, on the eastern side of the holy cross which I have erected there', wrapping him in a cloth and placing him in a sarcophagus provided by Abbot Cudda (Colgrave 1969, 273). Incidentally, the guesthouse of this hermitage was at the perimeter, as Cuthbert is described as coming from the inner buildings of the monastery to the guest-chamber (Cramp 1980, 11).

The hypothesis developed here can explain the layout of some Irish monasteries and the disposition of the principal buildings and monuments and the *platea* or *plateola* as well as the living-quarters within it. It may be useful in indicating the siting of buildings which are to be expected on comparative or historical grounds but which are no longer visible on the ground.

The ecclesiastical remains in the town of *Ceannanas Mór*, Kells, Co. Meath (fig.

3b), can be interpreted on the model of those of Clonmacnois. In the open space opposite the west doorway of the present church stands the Broken Cross, originally about 6 m high, a developed tenth-century Scripture Cross of the same family as the Cross of the Scriptures which is similarly sited at Clonmacnois. To the south, 25 m away, is the Round Tower, its doorway facing across the open space to the west façade of the church; beside it is the Cross of Patrick and Columba, related in style and iconography to Iona and Northumbria and dated shortly after 800 (Henry 1965, 138).

North-west of the west façade of the church, 90 m away, is St Columb's House, in its present form a stone-roofed building probably of the twelfth century (Leask 1955, Vol 1, 33—4). The name, as at Inishmurray, seems to imply the tomb and/or reliquary of the founder saint. All these sites are concentrated near the top of a low rise and the street-pattern between Carrick St. and Cannon St. to the north and south, and the Fair Green and Church St. on the west and east, suggests that they follow the original curvilinear outline of the monastic *vallum* which may have been over 300 m across (Henry 1967, 43). It was probably a considerable monastic town like Armagh. On the lower ground at the east end of Market St., immediately east of this street pattern, stands the Market Cross, possibly on the site of a market already established before the year 1000 which would have required a new open space just outside the confines of the monastery.

The remains at Armagh (fig. 3a) can be reconstructed with the aid of a plan made by Bartlett shortly after 1600 and from other sources (Henry 1967, 39—43, fig. 2). Near the flat-topped rise on which the main monastery stood was the oldest foundation of St Patrick, called *Na Ferta* ([Church of] the Relics). Within the rath, the enclosure on the rise, 240 m across, stood the *Daimhliag*, mentioned in the Annals before 800. Two other buildings, the *Sabhall* and the *Toi*, stood on the south side, the *Toi* parallel to the nave of the latest church and touching the south transept; apparently it had originally been a separate building. These two buildings were built of stone in 1020, according to the Annals. Over from the west door of the church to the northwest was the abbot's house, surrounded by thatched huts in 1600 (Henry 1967, 41). This may have been close to the original living-quarters of the monastery; in this general area, on comparative grounds, we should expect to find the Round Tower, mentioned in the same annalistic entries for 1020: Ard Macha was all burned, the great *Daimhliac* with its roof of lead, and the *Cloictech* with its bells ... (AU s. a. 1020).

Henry has fully outlined the evidence for the monastic town divided in *Trians* (thirds), estimated its population at up to 4000 in the mid-ninth century and referred to the High Cross at the gate of the rath on the west side, which was placed inside the cathedral in 1819 (1967, 42). This cross is similar to the Broken Cross at Kells. As it stood just outside the enclosure in a small open space between two of the *Trians* of the town, at the head of what is now Market St., it may have been a market cross, probably confirming the existence of a market here as at Kells (Doherty 1980, 83).

At Slane in Meath, the gable ends of what appears to be a slab-shrine stand east and west, 20 m south of the oldest part of the late medieval ecclesiastical buildings and opposite its west end. Wilde has published a sketch dating to 1849 and recorded that each corpse was laid beside this shrine for a short time on the way to its burial-place (1949, 158—9). If the open space at Slane was west of shrine and church, then in the arc west of this space would have stood the Round Tower recorded in the Annals of Ulster (s. a. 949, *recte* 950): the *cloictech* was burnt by the Vikings and the crozier of St Erc, the founder, and 'a bell that was the best of bells' were destroyed on it. (A similar monument at Kilranelagh in Wicklow, called the Gates of Heaven, may also be part of a slab-shrine; the coffins of all those buried in the graveyard were carried through it [Drury 1903, 296]).

The remains of St Kevin's monastery at Glendalough in Wicklow (fig. 2d) are in two main groups, an earlier near the Upper Lake, including the church of Reefert *(Rígferta)*, and a later on a series of terraces running east and west beside the present cathedral (Leask n. d.; Henry 1967, 45, figs. 5, 6).

South of the west façade of the cathedral *(Daimhliag)* is a plain granite High Cross. To the north-west of this façade, 15 m away, is the Round Tower, its doorway facing across the open space to the cathedral. Within a small rectangular burial enclosure on a lower terrace 27 m to the south-west is a tiny building called the Priests' House, traditionally the burial-place of some of the clergy of the district and possibly built to house some monastic relics (Leask n. d., 18); over the doorway in the south wall is a tympanum with a central, seated figure between two others who hold a crozier and a bell respectively, possibly a clue to its original contents (Petrie 1845, 264; Henry 1970, 183). An enigmatic feature is a blind Romanesque arch which dominates the outer face of its east wall framing a single tall window (Leask 1955, 160). If the building was a reliquary, perhaps even for the bones of St Kevin, the founder, can it be that this façade, oriented as it is towards the open space between it and the High Cross, was ornamented because pilgrims in the twelfth century were allowed to view or touch the monastic relics here, congregating at a gable wall decorated in the contemporary fashion, yet analogous to the simple west gable of the slab-shrine at Killabuonia?

In the twelfth century Ireland was opened to a stream of new continental influences which transformed the organisation of the Irish Church and the art and architecture of Irish monasteries (Henry 1970, *passim*). New housings for important relics were constructed under the patronage of new rulers including the O'Connors of Connacht, like the Cross of Cong and the Crozier of the abbots of Clonmacnois. Cormac MacCarthaigh's chapel on the rock of Cashel in the fashionable Romanesque style was begun in 1127 and finished in 1134; a doorway in this style was inserted into the *Daimhliag* of Clonmacnois; a completely new tower with elegant string-courses was built at Ardmore in Waterford. Stone-built reliquaries like those of Clones, Co. Monaghan, and Glendalough were refurbished or replaced by buildings in the new style. High crosses were made according to new canons and erected within the monastic enclosures at Drumcliff, Boho, Kilfenora,

Dysert O'Dea, Killaloe, Roscrea, Glendalough and Cashel; one was erected at the market-place of the O'Connor capital at Tuam, Co. Galway.

New churches, each with a diminutive round tower belfry, an adoption of a continental Romanesque feature, were added at the edges of the monastic enclosures at Temple Finghin, Clonmacnois, and St Kevin's Kitchen, Glendalough. Further churches were added at the perimeter of Glendalough: St Mary's and Trinity; St Saviour's, with its elaborate late decoration, at a new site east of the main enclosure. At Clonmacnois, stone churches began to be added, possibly under the stimulus of a growing pilgrimage traffic, in the twelfth century by local patrons, first Temple Dowling, Temple Uí Ceallaigh and possibly Temple Conor, disposed on the north, east and south sides of the *Daimhliag* but avoiding the open space at its west side.

In the early hermitages, the *plateola* or central open space appears to have had the special status of a claustral area private to the hermits themselves. This is implied in the story of Herefrid's visit to Cuthbert on Farne, who gave the customary signal to warn his close friend Cuthbert inside the hermitage that he had arrived. When the monastery grew bigger and the open space was no longer a diminutive *plateola*, the public apparently had access to it, as is implied in Adomnán's story about the gifts laid out in the courtyard of Conall's monastery near Coleraine. This is suggested also by the public nature of the Cross of the Scriptures and its inscription at Clonmacnois.

In 1142, the rectilinear cloister ultimately of Roman derivation was introduced by the Cistercians to Mellifont beside Monasterboice, implying a return to the kind of enclosed cloister arrangement documented at *Sceilg Mhichíl*, Killabuonia and *Ard Oileán*, though now on a much more organised and grander foreign scale. These Cistercians also built larger churches than the Irish had so far been in the habit of building. When large late medieval churches intruded into the old monasteries, as at Cashel and Ardmore, Waterford, the old native canons of layout were apparently abandoned.

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Fig. 1: A. Labbamolaga (after du Noyer), B. Killabuonia (after Henry), C. Illaunloghan (after Henry), D. *Sceilg Mhichil* (after de Paor).

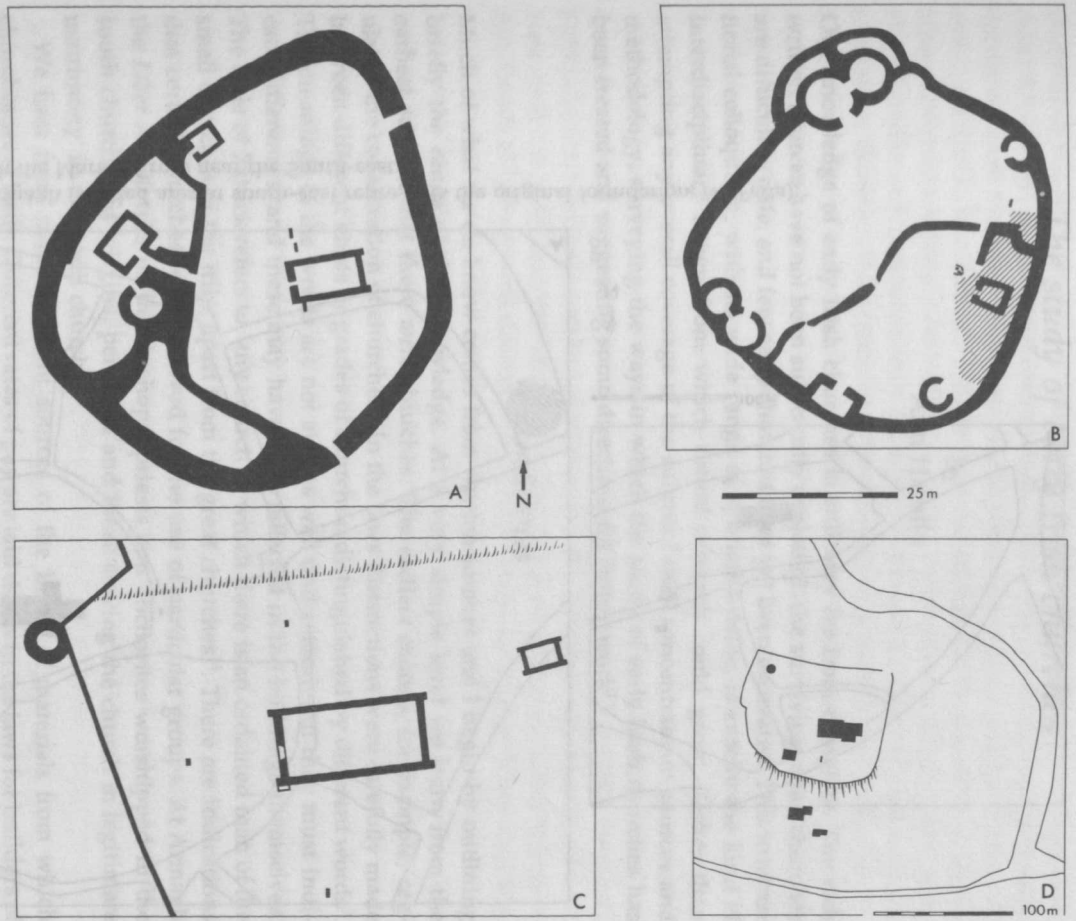

Fig. 2: A. Inishmurray (after Wakeman), B. Reask (after Fanning), C. Clonmacnois (after Macalister), D. Glendalough.

Fig. 3: A. Armagh (shaded area at south-east represents the original foundation, *Na Ferta*), B. Kells, with the Market Cross near the South-east.