THE ARCHAEOLOGY
OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CELTIC
CHURCHES

Edited by
NANCY EDWARDS

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY
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CHURCHES

Proceedings of a Conference on
The Archaeology of the Early Medieval
Celtic Churches, September 2004

Edited by
Nancy Edwards

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FRONT COVER
St Seiriol's Church, Penmon, Anglesey
(Photograph courtesy of David Longley)

BACK COVER
Cross-slab, Relickoran, Inishmurray, Co Sligo
(Photograph courtesy of Jerry O'Sullivan)

For Charles Thomas

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Archaeology of the Early Medieval Celtic Churches, a joint Society for Medieval Archaeology and Society for Church Archaeology conference, was held at University of Wales, Bangor (now Bangor University), 9–12 September 2004, and was attended by over 140 people. The aim of the conference was to focus on new research on the archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches. First, the conference offered the opportunity for five papers to be presented which were the fruits of research by the four Welsh archaeological trusts on the early medieval church in Wales. These arose from work for the Cadw-funded *Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites* project (Part I). Secondly, the conference highlighted other new work on the early medieval church archaeology of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, south-west Britain and Brittany, focusing on both sites (Part II) and artefacts (Part III). Overall the aim was to build up a picture of new research and how it related to the current state of knowledge; to consider how such new research might change our interpretations and contribute to ongoing debates; and to compare and contrast the nature of the archaeological evidence for the development of the early medieval church in different Celtic areas.

Revised versions of all the conference papers are published here, with the exception of those by Derek Alexander, Rachel Butter, Ian Fisher and Andrew Johnson. Tomás Ó Carragáin's paper is on a slightly different topic to the original, which he had already agreed to publish elsewhere. There is one new paper by Richard Gem which partly arose from his talk at the church at Penmon during the conference visit. The volume begins with an introduction to set the papers in a broader context.

The conference could not have gone ahead without a grant from Cadw to enable presentation of the papers arising from the *Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites* project. Thanks are also due to the British Academy for a conference grant enabling several other speakers to attend and the University of Wales Bangor Welsh Institute of Social and Cultural Affairs which provided administrative support. Publication of the conference proceedings has been aided by grants from Cadw (for papers in Part I), Historical Scotland, the Society for Church Archaeology and the Society for Medieval Archaeology.

I would also like to thank all those who have offered their help and given their support in both the organisation of the original conference and in the editing of the papers for publication, particularly Stephanie Dolben, Sharon Franklin, Margaret Faull, Roberta Gilchrist, Linda Jones, Huw Pryce and Nicola Smith. Thanks are also due to the anonymous academic reader for their suggestions concerning the structure of the volume, Rebecca Brown the indexer, and to Samantha Green and Linda Fisher at Maney Publishing who have seen the book so efficiently through to publication.

Finally, this book is dedicated to Charles Thomas, a former president of both the Society for Medieval Archaeology and the Society for Church Archaeology. His book *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (1971) remains inspirational.

Nancy Edwards *August 2009*

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CELTIC CHURCHES: AN INTRODUCTION

By NANCY EDWARDS

APPROACHES

This book is about the archaeology of the early churches in Celtic-speaking areas of Wales, Scotland, Ireland, south-west Britain and Brittany. It focuses on the period *c* AD 400–1150 but also refers to later periods, where relevant. This book is *not* about either the 'Celtic Church' or 'Celtic Christianity'. The current popularity of the latter is partly inspired by perceptions of early Christianity and spirituality in the Celtic west and the archaeology of places like Iona (Bradley 1999, 189–235; Meek 2000, 1–121). Indeed, a recent visit to St Ninian's Cave at Physgill near Whithorn, Galloway, shows the continuing significance of such sites for modern pilgrims who place wooden crosses and inscribed pebbles close to the early medieval crosses carved on the rock outside (Figure 1.1). The 'Celtic Church', a term which implies uniformity of belief, practice, organization and culture amongst the early medieval Celtic churches, at least in the period before their acceptance of the Roman method of calculating Easter, was still in common use by respected scholars, such as Nora Chadwick (1961), in the 1960s, and even later. However, from the 1970s the term began to be questioned (Thomas 1971, 5–6; Davies 1974–75; 1992; Hughes 1981) as a result of an increasing understanding of the complexity of the evidence for the early medieval Celtic churches. More recently, there has also been a realization that different generations in the past have manipulated the concept of the 'Celtic Church' to suit their own contemporary purposes and debates, both religious and political, as for example, in the 16th and 17th centuries with the rise of Protestantism, and during the Celtic Revival in the second half of the 19th century with the rise of nationalism (Bradley 1999; Meek 2000; see also Guigon, this volume).

The archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches has its origins in the work of the antiquarian Edward Lhuyd (1659/1660–1709), who was the first to record many examples of early Christian inscribed stones and stone crosses during his extensive travels in Wales, Ireland, Scotland, Cornwall and Brittany (Edwards 2007b). However, an increasing interest is evident from the late 18th century onwards, with the rise

FIGURE 1.1   Early medieval crosses incised on the rock face at St Ninian's Cave, Physgill, near Whithorn, Galloway, with crosses and pebbles left by modern pilgrims. (Photograph: author)

of antiquarian societies in Scotland, Ireland and later Wales, as well as in the work of individual scholars. The emphasis was on the above-ground remains, the stone sculpture, churches and associated buildings, which were often ruinous and under threat, and early medieval ecclesiastical books and ornamental metalwork, including reliquaries which were now passing from the hands of the families who had been their hereditary keepers into museum collections (see Glenn, this volume). In Ireland, for example, George Petrie (1790–1866) (Sheehy 1980, 17–23; Murray 2004), recorded large numbers of early churches and stone monuments on his travels for the Ordnance Survey and wrote an important essay about the Christian origins of round towers as belfries (Petrie 1845; Leerssen 1996, 108–134); he also ensured that a considerable number of early Christian antiquities were acquired by the Royal Irish Academy. Later, as a result of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, early ecclesiastical sites began to be taken into state care. The archaeological remains of one such concentration of sites, on Inishmurray, Co Sligo, were the subject of a fine early survey by W F Wakeman, first published in 1887 (Wakeman 1892), which has remained the only substantial work on the early Christian archaeology of the island until the recent research and excavation by Jerry O'Sullivan and Tomás Ó Carragáin (see Ó Carragáin, this volume). In Scotland, Joseph Anderson's survey *Scotland in Early Christian Times* (Anderson 1881) may be seen as a landmark publication partly stimulated by the return of St Fillan's crozier from Canada to Scotland (Stevenson

1981, 158; see Glenn, this volume). It includes a discussion of the 'Structural remains of the early Celtic Church' and 'Existing relics of the early Celtic Church', as well as of the sculpture, comparing the evidence from Scotland with that of Ireland. Otherwise much of the research was concentrated on the production of *corpora* of the early Christian stone sculpture, not only for Scotland (Stuart 1856–67; Allen and Anderson 1903), but also for Wales (Westwood 1876–79), Cornwall (Langdon 1896) and the Isle of Man (Kermode 1907).

During the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries archaeological excavations of early medieval ecclesiastical and related sites in western Britain and Ireland were comparatively rare. In Scotland, for example, St Ninian's Cave, Physgill, where an early graffiti cross had been discovered in 1871, was cleared and a considerable amount of early medieval sculpture discovered (Maxwell 1884–85). In Wales there was an early excavation at Clynnog Fawr, Gwynedd. The floor of the *capel-y-bedd* ('chapel of the grave') of St Beuno, formerly the site of his tomb, which had been venerated until its destruction *c*1790 (Edwards 2002, 235), was dug up to reveal the foundations of an earlier stone building (Figure 15.1). The excavator, Basil Stallybrass, compared the remains with those of early churches in Scotland, Ireland and Cornwall, and tentatively, but wrongly, identified them as 'the actual foundations of St. Beuno's original chapel' (and therefore of 7th-century date) and 'in accordance with the general practice of the early Celtic Church' (Stallybrass 1914, 284, 282; see Longley; Pritchard; Petts and Turner, this volume). In Ireland, the fact that many early church sites were ruinous and had not always continued in use for modern burial, offered opportunities for a much more extensive excavation. At Nendrum, Co Down, where a fragmentary church and round tower were still extant, H C Lawlor uncovered three concentric curvilinear enclosures and large areas of the interior, revealing successive phases of domestic and other structures and areas of craftworking, as well as a considerable number of artefacts (Lawlor 1925). It has remained an enormously influential excavation, since this was the first time that archaeology had enabled the layout and development of a major early medieval monastic site to be understood.

In the mid-20th century, the study of early medieval church archaeology, particularly in western Britain, was dominated by C A Ralegh Radford (1900–98), who was responsible for survey and excavation at many early church sites, as well as writing about early medieval stone sculpture. In Wales, for example, he surveyed Ynys Seiriol and Penmon, Anglesey (RCAHMW 1937, 119–123, 141–144; see Gem; Pritchard, this volume) and excavated the *cell-y-bedd* ('cell of the grave') at Pennant Melangell, Montgomeryshire (Radford and Hemp 1959; see Petts and Turner, this volume). In Scotland his excavations were concentrated in the south-west and included both Whithorn and St Ninian's Cave, as well as Birsay, Orkney, and in the Isle of Man he excavated at St German's Cathedral, Peel (Radford 1950; 1956; 1959; Radford and Cubbon 2004). His most important excavations were, however, in south-west England at Glastonbury, Somerset (Radford 1978), and Tintagel, Cornwall. Nevertheless, his interpretations were often suspect, most notably at Tintagel, which he wrongly identified as an archetypal 'Celtic monastery' (Radford 1962), when it was in fact primarily a high-status secular centre which included a church site on the adjacent mainland (Thomas 1993, 67–81; Turner 2006, 57–59, 91–93). He was also

the main advocate of the view that Christianity in Roman Britain had only a minimal impact on the post-Roman west and, using the evidence of the early Christian inscribed stones as well as documentary sources, argued instead for the dominance of influences coming in from Gaul on both conversion to Christianity and the introduction of monasticism (Radford 1967; 1971, 8–10).

Also influential in this period was research on small ecclesiastical sites, particularly in Ireland, which were interpreted as early Christian eremitic monasteries (Henry 1957, 146). Many were located on islands, the most dramatic example of which is Skellig Michael, Co Kerry (de Paor 1955). On Church Island, Co Kerry, M J O'Kelly carried out a total excavation of the church, associated buildings and enclosure, uncovering earlier features which he interpreted as the original wooden church and the shrine of the saint. This site was to prove very influential, not only in Ireland (see Sheehan, this volume), but also across the Irish Sea in the excavations on Ardwall Isle, Dumfries and Galloway, and Burryholms off Gower (Thomas 1967; Hague 1974; see Pritchard, this volume).

Charles Thomas's (1971) *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* was of seminal importance because it is in this book that many of the concepts which have since dominated studies of the archaeology of the early church in Celtic Britain and Ireland were first articulated. Though the archaeological evidence predominated, Thomas embraced a multidisciplinary approach to examine the impact of Christianity on northern Britain in the 4th–8th centuries and incorporated comparative material from elsewhere in western Britain and Ireland. He began by demonstrating the continuity of the Romano-British church into the post-Roman period drawing on the evidence of the early inscribed stones. Based on the distribution of imported pottery, he also suggested that monasticism was first introduced into south-west Britain from the Mediterranean in the 5th century, and was subsequently reinforced from Gaul and perhaps Spain in the 6th. The layout of major monasteries and eremitic sites was then considered with the aid of field-survey plans. Thomas then turned his discussion to cemeteries, chapels and the commemoration of the dead. From this emerged the concept of the 'undeveloped [inhumation] cemetery', which straddles the period of conversion and may show elements of continuity with a pagan, prehistoric past; it may include a curvilinear enclosure and 'special' graves. Some, but not all, of these became 'developed cemeteries' through the acquisition of wooden chapels and other buildings which, from the late 7th century onwards, were gradually replaced in stone; many of these sites eventually evolved into parish churches. Thomas also considered the archaeological evidence for altars and the cult of relics, both corporeal and incorporeal, including slab-shrines to house disarticulated remains and their portable equivalents (see Bourke, this volume). He concluded with a discussion of the critical use which archaeologists might make of hagiography and place-names.

Since the late 1960s our knowledge of the archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches has expanded rapidly as a result of both field survey and excavation. This work has, for the most part, been concentrated in Scotland and Ireland, where sites are less likely to be encumbered by later churches and cemeteries still in active use. In Scotland, the Argyll *Inventory* (RCAHMS 1971–92), which included a volume devoted to Iona, served to highlight the wealth and variety of the visible field evidence,

as did surveys of similar sites and monuments in Ireland exemplified by those for Co Donegal and the Dingle and Iveragh Peninsulas in Co Kerry (Lacy 1983, 240–317; Cuppage 1986, 257–369; O'Sullivan and Sheehan 1996, 238–361).

Although rescue excavations and small interventions have played a significant role, research excavations, sometimes of large areas or complete sites, have predominated. Important excavations on major ecclesiastical sites in Ireland have been comparatively small-scale and may be exemplified by a series of rescue excavations carried out from the late 1960s onwards in Armagh, which have greatly added to our understanding of the topography, layout, chronology and economy of the site (Gaskell Brown and Harper 1984; Lynn 1988; Crothers 1999), and a similar series at Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (see King, this volume). In Scotland, though there have, for example, been piecemeal excavations at Iona (O'Sullivan 1998; see Yeoman, this volume), undoubtedly the two most important projects have been the large-scale, research-driven excavations at Whithorn, Galloway (Hill 1997) and Portmahomack, Sutherland, both of which (like Iona) have significant concentrations of early medieval sculpture. Those at Whithorn (1984–91), a site comparatively well documented in the sources because of its association with St Ninian, were located in the Glebe Field adjacent to the Priory buildings. The aim of the project was nothing less than to uncover the 'Cradle of Christianity in Scotland' (Hill 1997, ix) and the excavations have charted the development of a 'monastic town' and its associated cemetery, structures and activities from the 5th century onwards. Those at Portmahomack (1994–2007), which by contrast is a site apparently unmentioned in the documentary record, focused on both St Colman's Church and the adjacent glebe field, tracing the rise and fall of an important ecclesiastical settlement in the north-east (see Spall, this volume). In the Isle of Man excavations at St German's Cathedral on St Patrick's Isle, Peel, which uncovered an adjacent Viking Age cemetery, have also proved significant (Freke 2002).

The increasing number of excavations and other work on smaller ecclesiastical sites in Ireland and Scotland has resulted in a more complex interpretation of the roles of such foundations. In Ireland work has continued apace on island sites identified as monasteries, notably Skellig Michael (Horn *et al* 1990; Rourke 2002), Illaunloughan, Co Kerry (White Marshall and Walsh 2005) and High Island, Co Galway (White Marshall and Rourke 2000), but their continuing function as places of pilgrimage has also been recognized (see also Inishmurray, Ó Carragáin, this volume). Likewise in Scotland island monasteries on Inchmarnock, off Bute, and the May, in the Forth, have been investigated, both of which were linked with larger foundations nearby (see Yeoman, this volume). In some other instances, however, excavators have been less willing to assign a monastic function to small ecclesiastical sites which are not on islands, notably Reask, Co Kerry (Fanning 1981; see also Caherlehillan, Sheehan, this volume).

By contrast, in Wales and south-west Britain comparatively few excavations, apart from those of 'undeveloped cemeteries' (see Longley; Ludlow, this volume), have been initiated, mainly because most church sites of likely early medieval origin are still in use. Notable exceptions include the large cemetery associated with the

major early medieval ecclesiastical site at Llandough, Cardiff, which is also located close to a Roman villa, though whether there was any continuity between the two remains unproven (Holbrook and Thomas 2005; Knight 2005). Also of significance was the total excavation of the early medieval cemetery and small 12th-century church with associated curvilinear enclosure at Capel Maelog, Powys, a site which was abandoned at the end of the middle ages (Britnell 1990), and the re-investigation of the *cell-y-bedd* and associated burials under the walls of the remote church at Pennant Melangell, Powys, where the 12th-century shrine of the saint still survives (Britnell 1994; see Petts and Turner, this volume). In Cornwall excavations at St Materiana's Church, Tintagel, uncovered evidence for burial probably dating from the very late 5th or early 6th century and a stone church pre-dating the 12th-century building (Nowakowski and Thomas 1990; 1992).

    In general the rapid increase in the archaeological data for the early medieval Celtic churches has naturally resulted in greater opportunities for interpretation and synthesis. However, the comparative lack of visible archaeological evidence for the early medieval church in Wales, apart from stone sculpture, has tended to result in the breakthroughs which have been achieved being overshadowed by more dramatic discoveries elsewhere (Edwards and Lane 1992a, 2). But it has also led to the development of a multidisciplinary approach to facilitate the identification of church sites which have their origins in the early medieval period. The need for this approach was first articulated in the introduction (Edwards and Lane 1992a, 3–8) to the conference proceedings of *The Early Church in Wales and the West*, the primary aim of which had been to review recent work in Wales alongside that of Ireland, Scotland and Cornwall. It was further developed in an article (Edwards 1996) in *Church Archaeology: Research Directions for the Future*, which sought to provide a more general research agenda for church archaeology in Britain (Blair and Pyrah 1996). This approach aims to combine the critical use of contemporary, later medieval and antiquarian sources, as well as place-names and dedications, alongside the archaeological evidence in order to identify potential sites. This might include the presence of early medieval inscribed stones, cross-carved stones and more ambitious sculpture, early medieval relics such as bells (see Redknap, this volume), burials of early medieval type, curvilinear churchyard enclosures, later *capeli-y-bedd* ('grave chapels') and holy wells, as well as the topographical and landscape context of the site. This was influential in the development of the Cadw-funded *Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites* project.

AIMS

    This book is divided into three parts. The first focuses on Wales and in particular on the identification of early medieval church sites and cemeteries. The original conference in September 2004 marked the completion of the major Cadw-funded *Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites* project carried out by the four Welsh archaeological trusts. The papers in this section (Davidson; Silvester and Evans; Ludlow; Evans; Longley) focus on the most important results of that project, largely region by region. The main aim of the project had been to use a multidisciplinary approach to identify

and rank the evidence for potential early medieval ecclesiastical and related sites throughout Wales (see Evans, Appendix). In turn this would allow a co-ordinated strategy for the protection of the archaeological resource, enable the correct response to threats, such as church alterations, restoration and redundancy, and facilitate future research.

In order to set the results of the *Early Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites* project in a broader context, the original conference also highlighted a wide range of other recent research on the archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches. The papers in Part II therefore focus on the archaeology of early medieval ecclesiastical and related sites, as well as buildings, burial and landscapes, not only in Wales, but also in other parts of western and northern Britain, Ireland and Brittany. Themes include the identification of a hierarchy of early medieval church sites and their development and change over time, the archaeology of conversion viewed through the lens of the burial evidence, the origins and spread of monasticism, the rise of saints' cults and pilgrimage, the origins and evolution of stone churches and the Christianization of the landscape. The papers in Part III likewise take a broader geographical approach. They focus on aspects of monastic production and the economy, as well as on Christian artefacts, including reliquaries.

Taking the papers in the volume as a cue, the aim of the following discussion is to examine what we know and do not know about different aspects of the archaeology of the early medieval Celtic churches, to compare and contrast the evidence and, where appropriate, to suggest some avenues for future research.

A HIERARCHY OF SITES

Many of the articles in this volume, particularly in Parts I and II, touch on the variety of Christian sites, both with and without church buildings, in the early middle ages, their development over time, their different functions and their relationships with each other. These matters have also been of major concern to historians, but in this volume the emphasis is on how these different types of site can be identified on the ground and explored by archaeological means, including excavation. There are likely to be regional differences: for example, the Anglo-Saxon conquest of western Wessex in the later 7th century may have caused the centres of the British church to be abandoned (see Hall, this volume). Nevertheless, in general, there appears to be a considerable degree of similarity across Celtic Britain and Ireland and important comparisons have increasingly also been drawn with Anglo-Saxon England, particularly during the 7th and 8th centuries (Blair 2005).

At the top of the scale it is possible to trace the rise of major ecclesiastical sites during the course of the 6th and 7th centuries (see King; Spall, this volume). It has recently been suggested that we should see such sites as having three major interlinking roles, monastic, clerical/pastoral and seigneurial, though the emphasis on each of these is likely to have varied over time as well as from site to site (Etchingham 1999, 456–458; Blair 2005, 79–134). The most important, for example, Armagh, St Davids and St Andrews, were also the seats of bishops. These communities became, to a greater or lesser extent, 'central places' in the landscape, tied into patterns of local

and regional landholding and the exploitation of resources, as well as of patronage and reciprocity, both pastoral and economic (Blair 2005, 251–268).

In Wales major ecclesiastical sites or 'mother churches' of this type, which by the end of the period were known as *clasau* (Pryce 1992, 48–55), are now identifiable in most parts, despite the lack of excavation, and in some areas these have been linked to the pattern of regional sub-divisions known as *cantrefi* (see Davidson, this volume). In the north-east, for example, identification of major sites has largely been achieved by combining later documentary evidence with detailed studies of precinct enclosures and topography, as well as the extent of their lands or *parochiae* (see Silvester and Evans, this volume).

Hermitages were also a characteristic site type associated specifically with a more ascetic form of the monastic life. They were frequently located on islands and were often linked with sites on the mainland. In some instances the island hermitage may have been an ascetic offshoot of a more major site, as with Ynys Dewi (Ramsey Island) and St Davids, Pembrokeshire (James 2007, 49–51). In others, however, the island may have been the more important, as, for example, Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island), Gwynedd, which was associated with the Culdees and linked with Aberdaron on the mainland (see Davidson, this volume). Evidence from the May Island, Fife, where the earliest phase of the cemetery is made up exclusively of middle-aged and older men, may also have begun as a hermitage, though the emphasis doubtless changed and evolved as it steadily grew in importance as an ecclesiastical site and a place of pilgrimage; a similar scenario is also possible for Inchmarnock, Bute, and Inishmurray, Co Sligo (see Yeoman; Ó Carragáin, this volume).

The pattern of minor ecclesiastical sites is more complex and their origins, development and functions are more difficult to unravel. Many major ecclesiastical sites also had a number of dependent churches, one function of which was to provide pastoral care for their local communities. Some were daughter foundations but others may have begun as independent establishments which were later swallowed up by more powerful neighbours. Links between major and minor sites, which do not necessarily appear in the documentary record, may be visible archaeologically. For example, in Pembrokeshire, it is clear from the documentary sources that St Davids controlled not only other sites in the immediate vicinity, but also 'bishop-houses' further afield. Some of these links are supported by the distribution of stone sculpture and some sites, otherwise unknown, also have comparable monuments (Edwards 2007a, 10, 84–87; see Ludlow, this volume). The proliferation during the Viking period of sites (often later parish churches) with early medieval sculpture, such as cross-carved grave markers and sometimes more complex memorial crosses, is not only a feature of northern England, but also, for example, of the Gwaun Valley of north Pembrokeshire, Anglesey, the Isle of Man, and the Barony of Rathdown (Dublin/Wicklow) (Ó hÉailidhe 1973; Corlett 2003), and it seems probable that in these latter areas we are likewise witnessing the establishment of Christian graveyards, with or without church buildings, on secular estates. The same process on an ecclesiastical estate has been identified in the vicinity of Whithorn, Galloway (Craig 1991, 53–54), and may also be recognizable in the pattern of abandoned sites in the large parish of Nevern, Pembrokeshire (Edwards 2007a, 62).

Large excavations on minor ecclesiastical sites remain rare. Charles Thomas's model of the 'developed cemetery' still holds true for some sites. At Tywyn-y-Capel, Anglesey, for example, there was continuous use of the burial ground from the 6th century but, like Capel Maelog, Powys (Britnell 1990), the earliest evidence for a church building is probably 12th century (see Davidson; Longley, this volume). In contrast, Caherlehillan, Co Kerry, was established in the late 5th or 6th century and consisted of an enclosed cemetery with a 'special grave' (of the founder?), a wooden church and a domestic area from the start (see Sheehan, this volume).

PLANNING AND LAYOUT

The planning and layout of ecclesiastical sites incorporated an important symbolic dimension. It is well known that from the 7th century onwards in Ireland the ideals of the biblical city of refuge and the heavenly city (perhaps fused, at least initially, with earlier ideas about the pagan otherworld) were highly influential on the expected roles of major ecclesiastical sites. Consequently it has been argued that the planning and layout of such establishments, whilst also embracing practical concerns, reflected these ideals: 'a holy of holies at the core, around which were areas of sanctuary that decreased in importance the further they were from the centre' (Doherty 1985, 57). Today the sacred core of church buildings at Clonmacnoise dominates the site, but excavation has revealed both the 8th-century redevelopment of part of this area and the establishment of craftworking on the periphery; similar zoning is evident at Portmahomack (see King; Spall, this volume). In Wales (and south-west Britain) archaeological evidence is wanting, but Welsh sources, mainly of the 12th and 13th centuries, suggest a similar interest in the planning and layout of sacred space (see Silvester and Evans, this volume).

CHURCHES

A number of articles in Part II are either devoted to aspects of church architecture or are otherwise concerned with excavated church buildings. In Ireland large timber churches on major sites are known from the documentary sources. However, excavations on minor sites have revealed a handful of examples, small ephemeral structures of wooden posts, sometimes with turf walls, as at Illaunloughan (White Marshall and Walsh 2005, 23–26, 34–35). That at Caherlehillan is particularly interesting, not only because of its early date, but also because of the features which shed light on its internal organization and liturgical arrangements (see Sheehan, this volume). In Scotland wooden chapels have been identified at Ardwall Isle (Thomas 1967) and Hallow Hill, St Andrews (see Yeoman, this volume), and in Wales possibly at Llanelen and Burryholms on Gower (Schlesinger and Walls 1996, 110–111; see Pritchard, this volume).

In Anglo-Saxon England masonry churches modelled on continental examples were a feature of many of the most important sites from the outset, but in Ireland they date mainly from the 10th century onwards and in Scotland there are no definite examples before *c*900 (see Manning; Yeoman, this volume). In Wales, despite the

almost total lack of evidence, one might also expect the advent of stone churches on the most important foundations at about this time, though the earliest surviving examples on both large and small sites are 12th century and in some cases at least, notably Capel Maelog, Powys, early medieval cemeteries only acquired a church building at this time (Britnell 1990; see Pritchard; Gem, this volume).

The existence of multiple churches on a site, which fulfilled different roles, is a characteristic feature of the more important foundations, not only in Celtic Britain and Ireland, but also in Anglo-Saxon England and on the continent. In western Britain, however, there is also some evidence of multiple churches on smaller sites (see Petts and Turner, this volume).

BURIAL AND CEMETERIES

Since Charles Thomas discussed the evidence for burial and commemoration of the dead in *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (Thomas 1971, 48–131), there has been a rising number of excavations, particularly of burials and cemeteries associated with 'undeveloped cemeteries', now usually interpreted as kin cemeteries, which span the period of conversion to Christianity. Cemeteries which 'developed' by subsequently acquiring a church and other structures, and those associated with later standing church buildings, have also been investigated. The results of work in Wales and Ireland are considered in this volume (see Longley; O'Brien), as are some important examples of early medieval cemeteries associated with the sites of early churches in Scotland (see Yeoman). Here research on early medieval burial should be a priority since the last major synthesis was over 30 years ago (Close-Brooks 1984; Alexander 2005, 106). Nevertheless sufficient burials and cemeteries spanning the period of conversion have been investigated to realize that there was considerable variety in burial practice with some identifiable regional differences. Long-cist cemeteries are typical of south-east Scotland, as at the Catstane, Kirkliston, Midlothian, and Hallow Hill, St Andrews (Cowie 1977–78; Proudfoot 1996); inhumations, often long-cists, associated with square- or round-ditched barrows, are found in parts of eastern Scotland, as at Redcastle, Angus (Alexander 2005, 94–110); and platform cairns, again associated with long cists, as at Lundin Links, Fife, are found in both southern and northern Pictland (Greig *et al* 2000).

In the context of burial, it should be remembered that, although Wales and south-west Britain were within the Roman Empire, whereas Ireland and most of Scotland were not, all of these areas adopted inhumation under Roman influence, but earlier practices continued to a greater or lesser degree and sometimes, as in Ireland, well into the Christian period. The nature and extent of continuity, if any, of cemeteries, such as Llandough (Holbrook and Thomas 2005, 41–42, 88–91), from the Roman period into the post-Roman centuries remains to be clarified. It is also important to reiterate that extended approximately east–west-oriented findless in-humations are not necessarily Christian and it is very difficult indeed to determine belief from such burials alone, though the presence, for example, of an inscribed stone with a Christian memorial formula, as at Kirkliston, Midlothian, is a definite pointer (Foster 2004, 78). Many conversion-period cemeteries include 'special graves', which

may well be more indicative of status than belief; likewise the reuse of prehistoric sites may have been linked to memory and the mythical past, land claims, and the upheavals of the sub-Roman period. The increasing power of the Church and Christian belief is made clear with the gradual adoption of burial associated with churches from perhaps the 6th century onwards, whether on new or 'developed' sites, sometimes marked by simple cross-carved grave-markers, and the elaboration of the graves of 'saints' (Effros 2002; see Sheehan, this volume). More radiocarbon dates from burials on individual cemetery sites and their increasing precision (see Longley, this volume) offer the possibility, not only of refining chronologies of specific sites, but also of comparing features with sites elsewhere.

SAINTS AND THE CULT OF RELICS

In Celtic Britain and Ireland, with the exceptions of St Alban and Julius and Aaron at Caerleon, local martyr cults were unknown. Instead, from the 7th century, it is possible to trace the rise of local saints' cults. The most important of these were those attached to and promoted by the major ecclesiastical sites, such as Patrick at Armagh, Brigit at Kildare and Columba at Iona, and, at a later date, David in south-west Wales and Petroc in Cornwall. Others, however, were very localized and were centred on the founders, whether lay, clerical or monastic, of more modest churches. In Brittany, too, the cults of local saints were important (Thacker 2002, 31–38; Padel 2002).

In Ireland from the 7th century onwards the bodies of some of these local 'saints' were translated and their disarticulated remains placed in shrines in the graveyard (Edwards 2002, 238–242). In the south-west at Illaunloughan, for example, three individuals were translated into two stone cists sealed beneath a stone gable shrine (White Marshall and Walsh 2005, 58–64), and at Caherlehillan it has been suggested that the 'special grave' of the founder was venerated from the first with the remains subsequently being translated into a corner-post shrine (see Sheehan, this volume), a form also found in parts of Scotland (Thomas 1971, 151–158; 1998). Portable gable-shaped wooden shrines for corporal relics, such as the 12th-century shrine of St Manchán, are likewise known in Ireland and possibly in Wales at Gwytherin, Denbighshire (see Bourke, this volume).

There is also a tradition of small stone shrine chapels, perhaps datable to the 8th or 9th centuries, on a small number of major sites throughout Ireland and at Iona. These are thought to have been built over the graves of the founding saint and to have housed associated relics (Ó Carragáin 2003, 130–138; see also Yeoman, this volume). In Wales founding saints seem to have lain undisturbed in their graveyards, but from the early 9th century there is evidence of churches being built over their graves (Edwards 2002, 236). A similar situation is suggested for Cornwall (Padel 2002, 341–347). This would also seem to be the origin of the tradition of separate Welsh 'grave chapels' (*capeli-y-bedd*), some later medieval or early modern examples of which still stand near the main church (Edwards 2002, 231–238; see Petts and Turner; Pritchard, this volume).

Evidence for small house-shaped shrines decorated with Insular ornamental metalwork of 7th–9th-century date is now known from Ireland, Scotland and Wales (see Redknap, this volume). These are of a type derived from the shape of Late Antique sarcophagi found on the continent, in the eastern Mediterranean and in Anglo-Saxon England. They probably once housed secondary relics, including pieces of cloth which had touched the graves of the martyrs in Rome (Youngs 1989, nos 128–132; Edwards 2002, 245–248). However, from the 7th century onwards, a distinctive form of the cult of secondary relics, which may have originated in Ireland, but developed steadily in all the Celtic areas, including Brittany, was based around the veneration and enshrinement of what were believed to be the staffs, bells and books of the local saints (Edwards 2002, 252–265). Many of these relics, such as St Fillan's crozier, from Glendochart, Perthshire, survived in the hands of hereditary keepers, and some of the Welsh bells remained in or close to the churches with which they were associated (see Glenn; Redknap, this volume).

ESTATES, CRAFTWORKING AND THE 'MONASTIC TOWN'

The major ecclesiastical sites at least acquired large estates. In south Wales the boundaries of some of these and the process of donation, initially by kings and later by laymen with royal consent, can to some extent be traced in the charter material assembled and reworked in the early 12th century by Bishop Urban in pursuit of the territorial claims of the Welsh diocese of Llandaff (Davies 1978; 1979; Davies 2003, 1–6). However, it has also been argued that research on later medieval monastic foundations and their estates can shed light on those of the early medieval period as, for example, at Margam, where the Cistercian house with its granges seems to reflect the earlier important ecclesiastical foundation and its satellites, evident in the distribution of a significant local group of stone sculpture (see Evans, this volume). In the north later documents and map analysis can also be used to try to reconstruct the *parochiae* of the mother churches, and hence, perhaps, their estates (see Davidson; Silvester and Evans, this volume).

In Ireland such ecclesiastical estates were worked by tenants known as *manaig*, perhaps the equivalent of *heredes* or *hereditarii* and later *claswyr* in Wales (Etchingham 1999, 463–465; Blair 2005, 255). The major ecclesiastical sites had large populations reliant on farming produce and other resources from these estates, such as the substantial amounts of timber required to construct the early 9th-century wooden bridge at Clonmacnoise (see King, this volume). In Ireland the extent to which the church was a driving force in the expansion of tillage (Doherty 1985, 55) is disputed. However, there is no doubt that ecclesiastical sites made use of the available new technology to process larger quantities of grain. For example, horizontal water-mills have been excavated at Nendrum and on High Island, which would have been a largely self-sufficient community, a complex system of water-management has also been preserved (Rynne 2000; McErlean and Crothers 2002).

Where substantial excavation has taken place, archaeology is proving increasingly helpful in the reconstruction of the wide range of craft activities and the developing economy of major sites such as Clonmacnoise and Portmahomack (see

King; Spall, this volume). Charles Doherty's (1985, 64–65) original concept of the existence of a 'proto-urban' complex at Clonmacnoise by the beginning of the 10th century is without doubt now supported by the archaeological evidence and an earlier stage of intense, often luxury craft activity is also indicated at both sites, demonstrating a substantial surplus, as well as increasing wealth and patronage. Furthermore at Clonmacnoise the discovery of Hiberno-Norse coins is one of the pointers to the evolution of a market economy, a situation which may be paralleled, on a smaller scale, in Wales at Bangor, where two 10th-century coin and silver hoards have been discovered, and also at some other major ecclesiastical sites (see Davidson, this volume; Dolley and Knight 1970). It has also been suggested that Whithorn had developed into a 'monastic town' by the 12th century, if not before (Hill 1997, 24–25).

THE WIDER LANDSCAPE

It is also possible to identify the Christianization of the broader landscape and alongside it the manipulation of sacred space. This incorporated both natural features, which might or might not be modified (Bradley 2000), and those constructed almost entirely by human labour. For example, in Ireland, it has been persuasively argued that Croagh Patrick, Co Mayo, and Mount Brandon, Co Kerry, both named after saints, were sacred mountains in prehistory which were transformed into early medieval sites of Christian pilgrimage (Corlett 1998; Coyne and Collins 2005). Likewise holy wells can be interpreted as the Christianization of natural features which may well have had an earlier sacred significance. For example, the well of St Winefride (Gwenfrewi) at Holywell, Flintshire, has no early archaeological features, but was first documented in 1093; hagiography describes how St Beuno restored Gwenfrewi's severed head to her body and a spring gushed forth where her blood had stained the ground (Charles-Edwards 1962; Wade-Evans 1944, 18–19). In Scotland caves and clefts in the rock, which came to be associated with specific saints, might also fall into this category of natural features. By the end of the early middle ages the rocky coastal scenery and its associated sites around St Davids had gradually been incorporated into a ritual landscape to enhance the cult of the saint (James 1993). Similarly, on Inishmurray by around the same date it has proved possible to chart the monumentalization of the entire island into a pilgrimage landscape set against the backdrop of the sea (see Ó Carragáin, this volume).

CONCLUSION

In Ireland both the contemporary documentary sources and the archaeological evidence are particularly rich and can tell us an increasing amount about the development, structures and culture of the early medieval church. In Scotland, although the documentary evidence is sparse, archaeology over the last 25 years has likewise rapidly advanced our understanding of the range of ecclesiastical and related sites and monuments and their functions. However, in Wales historical sources are also very limited and, with the exception of stone sculpture, the archaeological evidence, other than cemeteries, has remained remarkably elusive. This has contributed to a

continuing emphasis on site recognition and assessment rather than more detailed (and costly) archaeological investigation. A similar situation exists in the south-west (Preston-Jones 1992; Turner 2006).

Nora Chadwick's discussion in *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church* (1961) was dominated by the Irish and Columban sources and later by the testimony of Bede. The wealth of the Irish and Columban material compared with the sources elsewhere in the Celtic west and north was surely a factor which contributed to the erroneous concept of the 'Celtic Church'. Nearly half a century later the wealth of the Irish evidence is still dominant, but our increasing and more nuanced understanding of the evidence from elsewhere means that we should resist any continuing tendency to assume blanket similarity. Nevertheless, similarities in the Christian material culture and society of the Celtic areas of Britain and Ireland and the contacts between them in this period remain obvious. In the future a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on an expanding archaeological resource, which can be more closely dated using radiocarbon and other scientific means, together with environmental and technological analysis, offers an exciting opportunity. Such an approach will enable us to increase our understanding of the early medieval Celtic churches, their regional and chronological similarities and differences, and to compare that evidence with our understanding of the church in Anglo-Saxon England and on the continent.

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PART I

IDENTIFYING THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL CHURCH IN WALES

CHAPTER 2

IDENTIFYING THE MOTHER CHURCHES OF NORTH-EAST WALES

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By R J Silvester *and* J W Evans

The major churches in Wales in the early medieval period were the mother churches; the areas under their control were termed parochiae. *Early documents suggest these establishments might consist of several enclosures, that at the centre containing the church itself, the outermost associated with sanctuary. Mother churches were run by hereditary groups of canons (or* claswyr*) under an abbot (*abad*), and with the founder frequently lauded as a saint. They attracted grants of land and other gifts, and the saint's grave often became a place of pilgrimage with his/her relics the subject of veneration. Yet the documentary evidence is sparse and the picture of what a mother church was remains hazy. The physical form of the mother church is also obscure with neither surviving remains nor excavated evidence, though the existence of cruciform churches has been taken as a signal of their presence. In north-east Wales the precincts of some mother churches can still be identified, but it is with the* parochiae, *reconstructed using a range of sources, that we can make more progress and suggest the locations of several other putative mother churches that have previously gone unrecognized.*

This paper is in two parts: the first outlines attributes of mother churches primarily derived from documentary sources; the second examines the physical manifestation of the mother churches in the landscape of north-east Wales. Both really deserve more extensive consideration: the former because it is difficult to do justice to such a complex issue in such a short space; the latter because, though the discussion ranges across the historical counties of Denbighshire, Flintshire and Montgomeryshire, this covers less than one of the four historic Welsh dioceses. Bringing the two together, however, serves to emphasize that no single discipline can adequately embrace this important topic which lay at the heart of the early medieval ecclesiastical framework.

THE CONCEPT OF THE MOTHER CHURCH

Theoretically it should be easy to recognize and define the major churches of pre-conquest Wales. In practice, however, this is much more difficult. Nevertheless, sufficient documentary evidence survives, though largely of 12th- and 13th-century date, rather than earlier. The sources themselves are various, ranging from the *Historia Gruffud vab Kenan* (Evans 1977, 13–14), the *Vita* of St Cadog (Wade-Evans 1944, 121–123) and native law (eg Wiliam 1960, 23–24; Williams and Powell 1961, 43), to the retrospective observations of Gerald of Wales (Brewer 1863, 153–154; Thorpe 1978), but they enable the following scenario to be constructed.[1]

Native Wales, both north and south, was served by a network of churches, major and minor. The ecclesiastical district around a major church, known as a 'mother church' (*mam eglwys*), was large and probably commensurate with a secular unit of administration. In ecclesiastical terms the mother churches served *parochiae*. The term is used in its original sense of 'diocese' rather than in the later sense of 'parish'. Traces of these still remain in the survival of large parishes attached to known mother churches. There is also evidence of parishes being carved out of such earlier parishes (see below). Thus, their original function was as areas of pastoral oversight.

The physical focus of pastoral care and ecclesiastical administration was one or more relatively small and architecturally unsophisticated churches surrounded by a usually curvilinear enclosure, within which also lay the *mynwent* ('cemetery'). This plot might be distinguished by cross-carved monuments marking oriented graves, or other more elaborate sculpture. The enclosure might be surrounded by another known as the *corflan*, an acre in length, divided by walls radiating out from the cemetery boundary. This outer enclosure contained the dwellings and allotments of those who served the mother church in various capacities (Pryce 1993, 199–200; Jones 1972, 340).

Beyond this lay another larger concentric enclosure associated with sanctuary (Welsh: *noddfa*, Latin: *refugium*), the boundaries of which consisted of fences and ditches set by bishops (Thorpe 1978, 254). This area, which could enclose thousands of acres, sheltered not only those who had fled thither with their families for protection, but also their families and livestock. Their cattle ran with those of the church as far as they could go in a day until they came back to the fold at night (Wiliam 1960, 43–44). Indeed, the distance the cattle travelled traditionally delimited the area of refuge rather than any physical boundary.

Bishops may well have been responsible for setting the physical bounds of the *noddfa*, but did not, according to the sources (Thorpe 1978, 254), figure large in the administration of mother churches. These were staffed, administered and owned by a hereditary body composed variously in the sources of *canonici* or *claswyr*, and headed by an *abad* ('abbot'). It is not always clear from the same sources whether they were lay or clerical bodies. The expression *abadachlaswyr* describes the community and the abbot's relationship to it. That close association was not just corporate identity, nor a contemporary legal presence; nor indeed was it a case of the community being the physical lineal or collateral descendants of the founder, which of course they were. It was far more. Both *abad* and *clas(wyr)* together represented the founder of

the site. This was equivalent to the community being the incarnation of the founder in, and for, the world in which they lived.

The connection worked the other way as well for the realization that a founder was also a saint, although never formally canonized, led patrons to make gifts in the hope of accruing supernatural benefits, especially if they acquired the right to be buried near the saint's tomb. It also meant that transgressors would feel the force of supernatural sanctions against them, as the saint's *Vita* made clear.

When donors granted lands and food renders to the mother church and to the community, they did so to God and specifically, and sometimes by name, to the saint (Evans and Rhys 1893, xliii–xlv; Carr 1972, 208). When those who had taken refuge in the *noddfa* fought, either in the church, the cemetery, the enclosures around, or in the refuge itself, they were fined heavily: and the fine went specifically to the saint and was not counted as offerings to the church (Wade-Evans 1979, 114). Violence represented *sarhad* ('insult') to the saint. His (or occasionally her) honour had been impugned and besmirched, and adequate compensation had to be forthcoming.

Indeed, the founding saint was, according to the *Vita* written by members of the community, either of royal or aristocratic birth, a status laid aside in life in order to found a (usually) ascetic community, but which was regained and enhanced upon death and subsequent burial in the cemetery. Later the grave might become the focus of a *capel* or *eglwys y bedd* ('chapel/church of the grave'). Thus the saint was represented in the contemporary world, not only by his living embodiment, the community he had founded, but also by his grave, the symbol of his abiding presence.

Furthermore, the equipment the saint had purportedly used in life was also preserved at his church. Such relics might include his Gospel book, portable altar, pastoral staff and bell (Bramley *et al* 1994, 457, 460). Since these embodied the *virtus* of the founding saint, they were potent instruments by which his community and thus the saint exercised power in the contemporary world, for oaths were sworn on them and important transactions recorded within them. Such relics were often distributed among churches 'owned' by the saint as symbols of his presence, power and possession.

Mother churches that possessed such a range of relics, property spiritual and temporal, personnel and prestige needed an array of support systems and a considerable amount of delegation in order to function properly. This is implicit in the legal tractate which speaks of fines for fighting in the churchyard and *noddfa* (Williams and Powell 1961, 43). Should the abbot be neither literate nor in orders, then he was not entitled to the half-share of the issues of the church. One possibility is that, with the passage of time, the sacred aspects of the abbot's jurisdiction atrophied in favour of secular power. Another is that there was deliberate delegation or separation of functions.[2] The abbot's authority had originally encompassed lordship, discipline, liturgy, pastoral care, education and training. Two other officers took over the abbot's authority in two of these spheres: the *sacerdos*/*offeiriad* became responsible for pastoral care and the *doctor*/*athro* for education and training. This division sometimes led to misunderstandings on the part of (usually hostile) outsiders. The three officers shared half the revenues of the church, whether drawn through offerings to the altar, food renders or fines. There was also a fourth officer, the abbot's

deputy and putative successor, the *sygynnab* ('prior'), as, for example, at Llandinam *c* 1216 (Thomas 1997, 204).

There is, of course, a huge irony implicit throughout the foregoing observations. The clerics, *canonici/claswyr*, formed a hereditary corporation — indeed, individual offices as well as the *claswriaethau* themselves were hereditable and partible — and held property, but seemed to see nothing amiss in representing in the contemporary world a saint, whose lifestyle was absolutely different from theirs. According to the *Vita*, which they themselves had produced, the said saint was celibate, had forsworn riches, property and family rights for more heavenly rewards, led a ferociously ascetic and vegetarian teetotal lifestyle and was committed to a rule of poverty which was also binding on his community.

In reality, however, not a single one of the statements made above can stand unchallenged. The documentary evidence is very uneven in quality and ranges across several centuries. Even when that evidence is related both to onomastics and topography and associated with particular sites and named personnel, the picture is not as clear as set out in the scenario devised above. Notwithstanding the recurrence of an assemblage of a wide range of technical terms, often in association with named major churches, there is a fundamental drawback. Not one site identified as a mother church has produced a coherent account explaining to outsiders what a mother church actually was; and what a *clas* was in reality. The latter is an important point if only because of the use of the term by Radford (1963, 357) who confused the community with the church it served. When archaeology attempts to define the physical manifestations of the mother churches the picture is equally unclear, as the rest of this paper demonstrates.

IDENTIFYING MOTHER CHURCHES IN WALES

The distribution of early medieval mother churches has not changed materially since William Rees compiled his nationwide map in the 1950s basing it to a significant degree on what Sir John Lloyd had written 40 years earlier (Rees 1967, pl 27; Lloyd 1911, 229–282). There are some regions where the pattern of mother churches appears reasonably complete, and nowhere is this truer than in Gwynedd where their spacing is regular and every district has its mother church (Davidson *et al* 2002, 34; see Davidson, this volume, Figure 3.4). Yet there can be little doubt that Rees's map is incomplete. There are some regions of Wales where mother churches are remarkable only through their apparent absence, and within this wider picture, Gwynedd is exceptional.

Others remain to be identified, for there can be little doubt that the mother church was ubiquitous. That enclaves deep in the Cambrian Mountains, such as Llanymawddwy (Gwynedd), Llangurig, and probably Llansantffraid Cwmdeuddwr (Powys), functioned in this way demonstrates that even the most remote localities had their mother churches. There is also a widely articulated belief noted above that virtually every area that emerged as a *cantref* in Wales would have had a mother church, and perhaps every commote (*cwmwd*), the sub-division of the *cantref* (Knight 2004, 273). Rees (1967, pls 27–29) depicted approximately 140 commotes or undivided
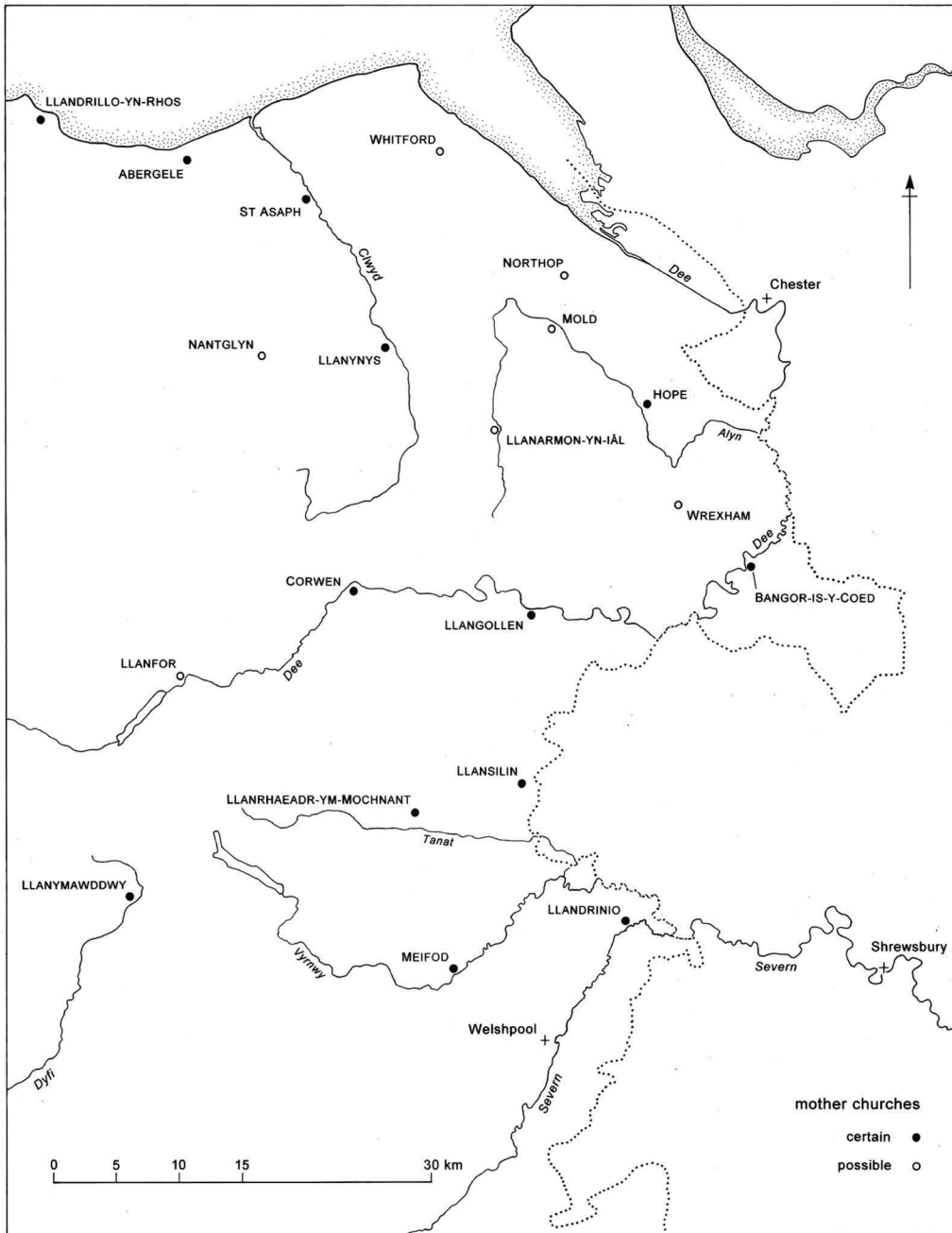
FIGURE 2.1   Confirmed and possible mother churches in north-east Wales.

cantrefi in Wales, but no more than 55 mother churches, whether confirmed or assumed.

THE PHYSICAL FORM OF MOTHER CHURCHES

If our understanding of the documented history of mother churches is still emerging, particularly in the study of the evolution of these regionally important ecclesiastical establishments, their physical character is an aspect where relatively little work has been undertaken. There are three broad areas for study: the physical form of the mother church itself, the precinct which it is generally considered to have occupied, and the *parochia* over which it had control. It is the last of these, arguably, that may take us a little further in identifying the mother churches of north-east Wales.

It hardly needs stating that the morphology and appearance of the traditional mother church in its early medieval form is likely to be established only by fortuitous excavation, and there have been very few of these so far in Wales. Further, there is only one church — Presteigne, on the eastern periphery of central Powys — with fabric likely to be early medieval (or late Saxon) in origin (Taylor and Taylor 1965, 497).

Even if the possibility of fabric surviving from the 'golden age' of the mother church is remote, there is another aspect that demands consideration, namely C A Ralegh Radford's view (1963) that cruciform-plan churches of the 12th and 13th centuries provide a clue to the presence of former mother churches. His argument was that in the 12th century the still-surviving Welsh *clasau* adopted in their own churches the cruciform layout then being introduced by some of the monastic orders, modifying the plan to meet their own requirements, usually with both a short nave and chancel, but without a choir, in addition to the transepts.

There is no doubt that Radford's list of cruciform-plan mother churches in Wales is an impressive one: Llanbadarn Fawr (Ceredigion), Penmon and Holyhead (Anglesey), Tywyn and Clynnog Fawr (Gwynedd) and, in the area under study, Corwen (Denbs). Yet there are flaws in Radford's assessment, and within a few years of his publication doubts were being cast on his interpretation of this and other elements of a 'native style' of Welsh ecclesiastical architecture. Gwyn Thomas (1970, 96) pointed out that the equation of cruciform churches with former *clas* establishments held good only in some instances, and that there were other acknowledged mother churches, such as Abergele (Conwy), Aberdaron and Beddgelert (Gwynedd), where simpler forms of plan were retained, a list to which might be added Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, Llanbister (Powys) and Llanynys (Denbs).[3]

In 1966 Radford published a detailed review of Llansilin (Powys), a probable mother church, and claimed to have detected relict traces of a south transept surviving in the existing aisled structure. On paper the argument appears convincing, but a re-examination of the architecture has failed to confirm his structural analysis. There are also problems with the siting of Radford's 'lost' chancel, while a recent excavation (Evans 2003), though not entirely conclusive, failed to uncover any evidence of a transept on the north side of the church.

Radford (1963) also cited the cruciform-plan parish church at Llanddew near Brecon (Powys) as another mother church without, however, any historical corroboration. There is, though, nothing to confirm this elevated status for Llanddew, other than its function, seemingly irrelevant in the context of mother churches, as an episcopal palace for St Davids in the later middle ages; it would be surprising if such a status had gone unremarked by Gerald of Wales whose archdeaconry was based there late in the 12th century.

This does not exhaust the list of cruciform churches in southern Powys. Crickhowell is of cruciform shape, but the settlement that encompasses it is almost certainly a new town founded towards the end of the 13th century (Soulsby 1983, 119), and is certainly not a contender for a mother church. Crickhowell is proof that new churches, as well as refurbished, older churches, were built in cruciform style in the 12th and 13th centuries. Some of these were, or at least had been, mother churches, but there is no one-for-one correspondence. Legitimately, it can be asserted that the cruciform shape was adopted early in the later middle ages for churches which were important, wealthy, or met special requirements, and some of these may still have been served by *clasau* or their descendents. What cannot be claimed is that the plan form in itself is a signal of an earlier, mother church.

PRECINCTS

Although we may be unable to establish the form and appearance of the churches themselves, the precincts (or enclosures) in which they were established may be more recognizable as still functioning or relict features in the landscape, less prone than the churches themselves to complete removal. The work done in recent years on those cognate establishments in England, the minsters, exploiting a range of evidence, direct and indirect, provides useful guidance to identify both the precincts, together with their topographical setting, and the *parochiae* of minsters in different Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (Blair 1995; Hall 2000; Pitt 2003). Indeed, there has been a tendency to play up the similarities between mother churches on the one hand and minsters on the other in terms of their organizations and influence. What follows unashamedly borrows from techniques used on the English side of the border.

That mother churches lay within defined areas enclosed physically and, by extension, spiritually, is evidenced by the Welsh law tracts (see above), and there are numerous analogies from other parts of western Britain. But precincts were not unique to mother churches, occurring with other broadly contemporary ecclesiastical sites (Turner 2003, 54). The physical form of the enclosures is not easy to tie down and, indeed, there can be no presumption that in their morphology and size they conformed to any uniform pattern, whether curvilinear, rectilinear or even trapezoidal. These precincts contained one or more churches, domestic and ancillary buildings, and garden plots; there may have been concentric enclosures on the Irish model which were perhaps sub-divided in a more radial fashion.

There have been a few attempts to distinguish the precincts of Welsh mother churches in the past: Bangor (Gwynedd) (Butler 1979, 462; Longley 1995, 52; Edwards 1996, 56); Llanynys (Denbs) (Jones 1972, 346); Llandeilo Fawr (Carms) (Butler 1979,

461; Evans 1991, 246); Meifod (Butler 1979, 462) and Llanafan Fawr (Powys) (Victory 1977, 30); and Llanddewibrefi (Ceredigion) (James 1994, 407; Ludlow 2004). For none of these is the evidence wholly unequivocal. Others have been alluded to but without any attempt to define them, as is the case with Tywyn (Gwynedd) (Thomas 1989, 113). Studies of minster churches in England have utilized techniques of topographical and map regression analysis and emerged with a series of possible precincts surrounding minsters in regions as diverse as Dorset and Shropshire (Hall 2000; Croom 1988). Map regression analysis and urban morphology analysis are heavily dependent on good early cartography, but this is something that Wales is not rich in, with only limited early mapping prior to the second half of the 18th century.

Existing churchyards offer a lead. By far the most obvious is Meifod (Powys), the mother church of the *cantref* of Mechain. Three churches are claimed to have existed within the enclosure, including that of St Mary consecrated in 1156 (Pryce 2001, 263); there is also reputedly a now lost *clas* place-name a little to the north. The largest churchyard in the region at 2.00ha, it is broadly semicircular, abutting the terrace edge of the River Vyrnwy, where a stream ran along the base of that terrace, and constrained on the west where the same stream, now culverted, runs down from the hills (Figure 2.2). Cottage encroachments on the west and north-east have reduced its size, and its original extent was around 2.3ha, far larger than would have been required for the graveyard of a Montgomeryshire vill in the later middle ages. The church itself is cramped into the southern part of the churchyard and a large expanse of grass lies to the north, undisturbed by any obvious graves. Butler (1979, 462) suggested that there was even an outer concentric enclosure beyond the village, but the evidence cited is unconvincing.

Nine miles east and close to the English border is Llandrinio, located within 200m of the River Severn. It has not usually been recognized as a mother church; yet Guilsfield and Welshpool have been claimed as its dependent chapels and, from an admittedly later reference in the medieval period, so too was Melverley in Shropshire (Thomas 1913, 37). It was also portionary in 1291 and Archdeacon Thomas, the respected historian of the diocese of St Asaph who was at one time vicar of Llandrinio, remarked on its right of sanctuary (Thomas 1913, 153). Its churchyard now covers 0.76ha, the small church sitting uncomfortably almost against the southern edge of the churchyard while much of the ground to the north is devoid of marked graves. But this is only a portion of the original churchyard (Figure 2.2). At the time of the Tithe survey in 1841 the field immediately to the east was part of the churchyard, and earlier still, when the turnpike road was constructed in the later 18th century, it seems to have divided off part of the original churchyard: two fields to the north of the road are both known as the 'old churchyard', perhaps the same as the piece of glebe mentioned in a terrier of 1683/4 'containing two acres, enclosed heretofore out of the churchyard' (Thomas 1894, 51). Although it is not possible to define precisely the complete enclosure, a trapezoidal enclosure of some 2.6ha would not be excessive.

Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, a known mother church (Rees 1967, pl 27), is comparable. The churchyard has without doubt been truncated, the transgressor being the vicarage which, with its ground, spread in the late 19th century across a large subelliptical area abutting the Afon Rhaeadr, all of which, in the earlier part of the

SS Tysilio and
Mary's Church

Mynwent Gwyddfarch
(site of)

MEIFOD

SS Trinio, Peter
and Paul's Church

LLANDRINIO

St Dogfan's Church

Tanat →

St Michael's Church

ABERGELE

LLANRHAEADR-YM-MOCHNANT

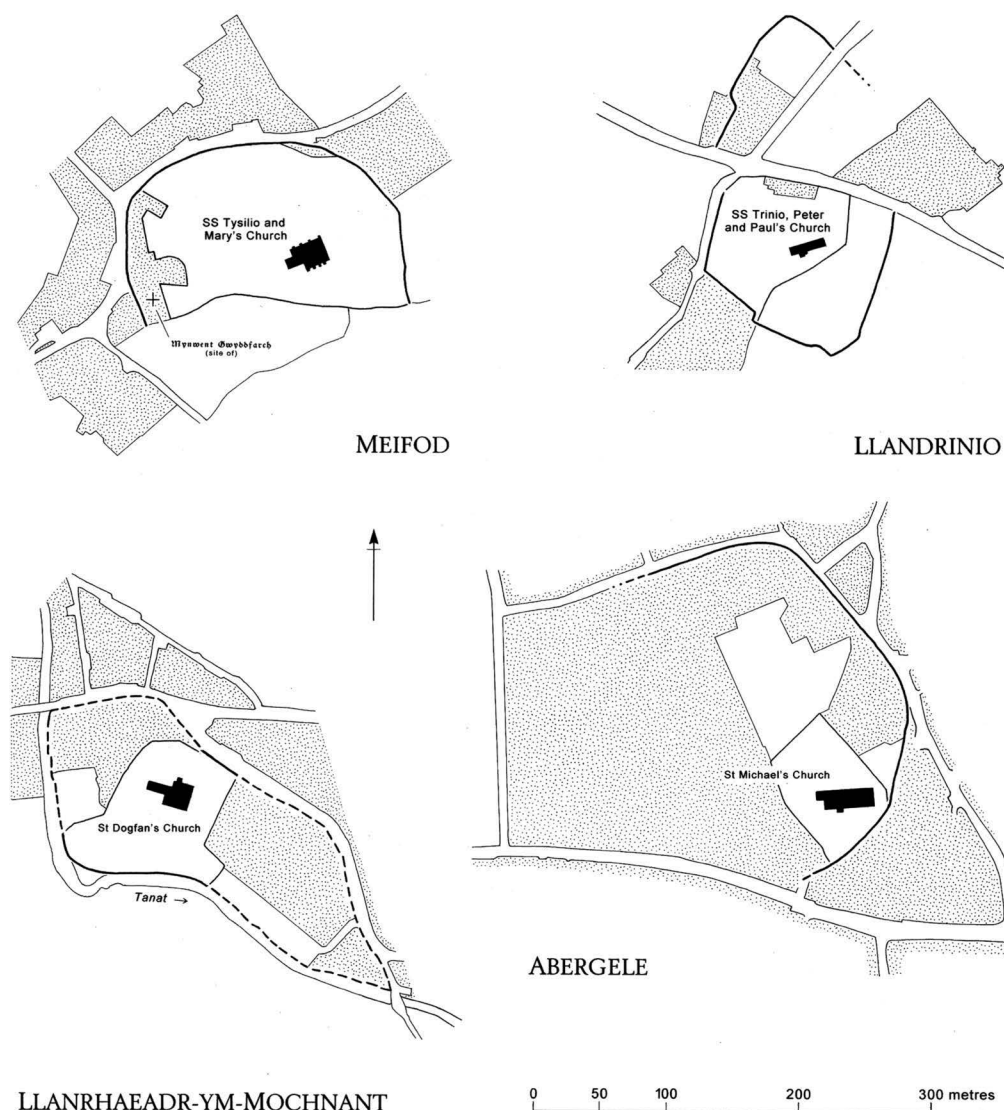0   50   100   200   300 metres

FIGURE 2.2   Possible precincts of four mother churches in north-east Wales.

century, was glebe land (Figure 2.2). On its northern edge the settlement developed
around the market place and what is now the main road arced around this larger plot
before dropping down towards the river.

Meifod and Llanrhaeadr were no more than small communities in the later
middle ages, Llandrinio seems hardly to have had any nucleation as far as can be
established. Large graveyards would have been unnecessary and there seems no
logical reason why any of these should have expanded to such large areas over the

centuries. Rather we must be looking at churchyard enclosures that were originally of such a considerable extent.

There can be no doubt that Abergele (Denbs) was a mother church. The death of a *princeps* or *abbas* was recorded here in 858, and the church there derived tithes and mortuary dues from other parishes in the later middle ages (Evans 1986, 76). In the 19th century Abergele had a small rectangular churchyard of about 0.56ha. However, a larger enclosure, of perhaps more than 9ha, can be argued on map evidence, although the full circuit cannot be distinguished (Figure 2.2). A large portion of that additional enclosure was termed *Cae y fynwent* ('Field of the graveyard') on the Tithe schedule. There may be other signs in Abergele's urban morphology. Streets converge on the area from the north-east and east, and are deflected or terminate; the market and core of the town lay to the south.

Another candidate is St Asaph (Denbs), generally believed to have been a mother church (Jones 1985, 46; Evans 1986, 78), though this has been questioned (Pearson 2000, 55). The cathedral and its precinct is evidently a later addition to the landscape of the Elwy valley, for St Kentigern's Church in its curvilinear churchyard lies close to the valley floor. St Asaph is one of those rare settlements with an early cartographic depiction, namely John Speed's map of *c*1607, that signals at least the possibility of a curvilinear enclosure, now followed by Cemig Street looping around the northern side of St Kentigern's Church, but lost on the south where the old bishops' palace stands within its own grounds (Butler 1979, fig 5). There is little here to confirm an early circuit, except that it probably preceded the High Street which undergoes a slight shift in alignment where it meets Cemig Street, just as the High Street also changes its alignment in curving around St Kentigern's churchyard.

How much of this, however, is truly convincing? With extant churchyards there are fewer grounds for doubt, but in relying on early mapping only, there is the danger of simply shape-spotting. The examples cited here are the most clearly defined in north-east Wales. There are, though, many mother churches, known or assumed, where the precinct remains wholly indefinable. At both Llandinam and Llangurig, two *clas* churches that lie in northern Powys, it is possible to visualize large enclosures of 13ha and 4.5ha, respectively, but rather more difficult to be convinced of their integrity, while further south at St Harmons and Llanbister nothing carrying any conviction can be identified.

Perhaps, however, this should be expected. Returning to the evidence for English minster precincts, it is frequently the same examples that are invoked on different occasions, and only in one or two areas, such as Dorset, has any attempt been made to examine the complete range (Hall 2000, 49). Indeed, the difficulties inherent in defining such areas are brought into focus by the fact that there are even a few minster precincts claimed as both rectilinear and curvilinear by different authorities, presumably using the same cartographic sources (Hall 2000, 66; Pearce 2004, 183). Employing the rigorous techniques of plan analysis pioneered by Michael Conzen (1960) is something rarely undertaken, and in many cases this may be impossible from the restricted evidence available for many of our smaller settlements.

Before leaving the precincts we should also be aware that there might be a second tier of enclosures, on an altogether larger scale. As indicated above there are sporadic references in the Welsh laws to mother churches having the right of sanctuary