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Excavations at Cormac's Chapel, Cashel, 1992 and 1993: a preliminary statement

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The excavations at Cormac's Chapel in December of 1992 and the early summer of 1993 were undertaken as part of the ongoing programme of conservation of the chapel by the Office of Public Works. Three areas were investigated (Fig. 1) and each area, for practical reasons, had to be dug in stages. The excavation was directed by the writer and was designated site 92E202 in the OPW excavation register.

The following description of the site was written during the winter of 1993-94 while the post-excavation work was continuing and is not intended as a definitive statement. The analysis of the skeletons, which may reveal interesting detail, has not yet been completed and some of the pottery crucial to dating the early contexts has yet to be identified with certainty. It is hoped that the suggested dating can be further refined later.

Area 1

The main feature in this area was the graveyard. It was possible to divide the burials into five distinct phases, four of which pre-date the building of Cormac's Chapel. Traces of a pre-graveyard stratigraphy, including five rock-cut post-holes, survive as small pockets which were too fragmentary to interpret in any meaningful way. Phase 1 of the graveyard consisted of three skeletons in rock-cut graves with an ENE-WSW orientation and, possibly, two others represented only by pairs of feet protruding from under the north tower. There were no artefacts found with the burials and no traces of a building upon which they might be oriented.

In Phase 2 there was a definite change in alignment. The twenty-nine burials lay more or less E-W and appear to take their orientation from a structure, interpreted as a church, which lay to the south in Area 3 (described in greater detail below). With one exception the burials were concentrated in the eastern two-thirds of the area, with a heavier concentration on the south side in by the building. There was a mixture of adult and children's skeletons and some were cut by the foundation trench for Cormac's Chapel.

Phase 3 was marked by another change in alignment with a return to that seen in Phase 1. The fifteen individuals which made up this phase were all children. There were two distinct concentrations, one in the NW corner and the other in the NE corner. It is believed that the burials were aligned on a section of wall at the east end which underlies the standing cathedral wall. This wall runs from the east section westwards for *c.* 2m, where it appears to turn northwards under the doorway into the cathedral. It has a slightly different alignment to the cathedral and is markedly different to the cathedral foundations further to the west. The wall is interpreted as part of a second church replacing the one seen in association with Phase 2.

It is not absolutely clear if Phase 4 of the graveyard is a separate phase or a part of Phase 3. The sixteen burials slot neatly between the two concentrations seen at Phase 3, but the major distinction is that they are all adults. On the south side several of the skeletons, including a stack of three, possibly within the same grave, are cut by the foundation trench of the chapel.



Cormac's Chapel was built at the end of Phase 4 but the area to the north continued in use as a cemetery.

Phase 5 contained forty burials which date from *c.* 1134 onwards. The cathedral to the north was rebuilt in 1169 and again in the 13th century on a completely different alignment to Cormac's Chapel but it is not possible to use either building to help to divide the remaining burials because both alignments seem to have been in use simultaneously. Phase 5 of the graveyard continued in use up until the seventeenth century when Area 1 was enclosed to become the sacristy of the cathedral. The building of the sacristy saw the truncation of the upper levels of the graveyard and the deposition of a rubble layer which is assumed to have been the foundation for the floor. At the east end a feature cut through the graveyard to the bedrock and backfilled with large stones is believed to be connected with the foundations of the east wall of the sacristy. The deposits overlying the stone rubble are modern.

Cormac's Chapel itself was seen to have been built in a foundation trench which rested on the underlying bedrock. The foundation was of the cut and fill type (*i.e.* the fill occupying the whole of the cut), but some attempt seems to have been made to place the stone in an orderly fashion. This was especially true in the corner between the tower and chancel, where large flattish stones had been deliberately coursed, presumably to provide a more solid foundation. The overlying ashlar walls sit on a one stone high plinth which is slightly wider than the foundations.

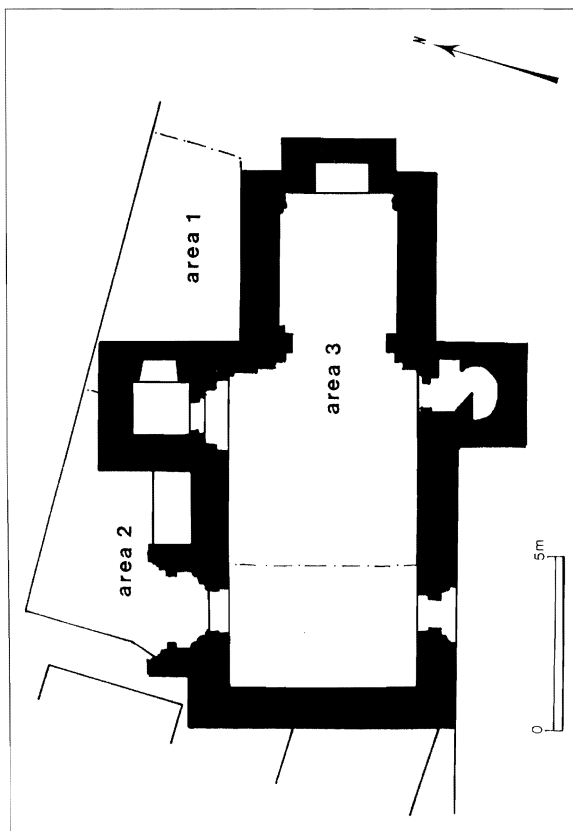


Fig. 1. Plan of Cormac's Chapel, showing the areas investigated.

Area 2

Area 2 had been extensively disturbed in relatively modern times, probably in an attempt to solve the drainage problem in this enclosed area. The whole area had been lowered, down to bedrock in places, to remove the original impermeable deposits and then raised up again to its former level with stone rubble. This work, which on coin evidence took place around the turn of this century, left only a narrow ribbon of original stratigraphy around the periphery of the area where deposits had been protected by the surrounding walls.

The earliest features were both rock-cut, one; a possible post-hole, lying partly under the cathedral wall; the other, an E-W linear feature, in front of the tomb niche to the east of the door. Overlying these was a featureless build-up of brown clay deposits topped, in a small

central upstanding area, by what appears to be a rough paved area. A skeleton with a NE-SW orientation of which only the legs remained was probably inserted prior to the paving, but exactly where it was cut from was obscured by later intrusive features. Charred grain was found in association with the paved surface.

A circular stone-lined feature to the north-west may be contemporary with or slightly later than the paving but the direct stratigraphic link was destroyed by the modern intrusion. The feature (Fig. 2) was cut c. 0.5m into the bedrock and rose to a highest surviving point, c. 1.45m above the base, in the north-west corner of the area. Its diameter narrowed from c. 1m at the top to 0.6m at the base. The feature sits in the angle formed by the cathedral transept and chancel and at that point was used as part of the cathedral foundations, but diagonally out from the corner it had been removed down to bedrock level.

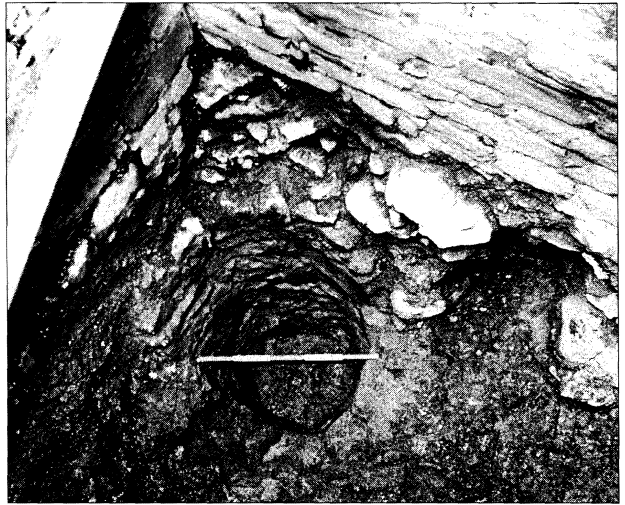


Fig. 2. Circular stone feature at the junction of the Cathedral transept and chancel, seen from the scaffolding above.

Unfortunately the feature had been emptied at the turn of the century and the sole fill was modern rubble. The feature cannot have been a well because it is far too shallow by comparison with the other well on the Rock. Nor, given the possibly associated charred grain, does it appear to have been a corn-drying kiln. A storage pit of some description is one possibility. Within the north doorway was a second stone-lined (Fig. 3) feature which again had been badly disturbed in recent times. This measured c. 0.9m E-W by 0.7m N-S and was c. 0.9m deep.

As the east side had been totally removed and the base of the feature was also missing, there were no finds within it to help determine its function. Its stratigraphic relationship to the chapel had been destroyed, but it is believed to have been inserted after the chapel was built. A close examination of the fabric at the base of the east side of the doorway shows that there have been some later alterations, with the use of limestone as opposed to the sandstone of the rest of the building, and the insertion of a narrow slab which may indicate the original lintel level of the feature. The feature is therefore interpreted as a large grave or shrine inserted into the north doorway.

At the east end of the area the line of the north tower is carried across to, and in under, the cathedral wall by a cut feature filled with loose limestone rubble with a possibly faced west edge. This rubble does not appear to have been part of the tower foundation because it extends at least 1m beyond the end of the tower, which is much further than any other part of the chapel's foundations. It is believed, therefore, that the tower may be masking an earlier north-south linear feature.

To the west of the cut was a row of five graves, the northernmost of which lay under the cathedral foundations. These skeletons respected the line of the north tower and so are believed to post-date the building of the chapel but pre-date the thirteenth-century Cathedral. A sixth skeleton of similar date was cut by the rectangular stone feature. With the exception of the very

early skeleton Area 2 does not seem to have been used as a graveyard until after the chapel was built. It immediately fell out of use as part of the graveyard when the area became effectively a *cul de sac* after the cathedral was built.

Area 3

Area 3, like Area 2, had been badly disturbed in modern times, but instead of the wholesale disturbances seen on the outside that on the inside was more piecemeal. The worst destruction was in the area of the chancel arch where a later intrusion has removed the stratigraphic link between the nave and chancel. This feature may, however, be in part at least a robber trench and mask an underlying north-south linear feature, of which only a small trace survived continuing in under the south nave wall.

In the chancel were two parallel rows of rock-cut post-holes, with an orientation similar to that of the Phase 2 skeletons in Area 1. There were probably four post-holes in each row, although the exact number is debatable. The southern row is larger, deeper and slightly later in date than the northern one. Given the orientation of the skeletons in Area 1 the structure is interpreted as the south wall of a two-phase post-built church. (Fig. 4) The north wall was not located but is presumed to have lain in the area of the chancel wall.

The building appears to have been in existence for some time because there was a built up of c. 0.4-0.5m of deposits against the posts which stood in the holes. The building then fell into disuse and became part of the graveyard with the remains of at least six, and possibly eight, skeletons overlying the east end of the church. These burials have an orientation similar to Phases 3 and 4 in Area 1 and are believed to be aligned on the early stone church in that area. Several of the burials were cut by the foundations of the chancel and so are demonstrably pre-1127 in date.

The remaining deposits within the chancel were of much later date. A series of post-Reformation burials in wooden coffins, many equipped with elaborate iron fittings, had disturbed much of the stratigraphy and they were themselves badly disturbed by an indeterminate number of later intrusive features which had churned the upper 0.2-0.4m of deposits.

The earliest features in the nave were stake- and post-holes which formed no distinctive pattern. At a slightly higher level was a stony surface from which came a large quantity of animal bone as well as two sherds of as yet unidentified pottery. This occupation surface is believed to be roughly contemporary with the church to the east. A strange narrow linear feature, like a single ard furrow, cut the surface and ran from the



Fig. 3. The grave or shrine within the north porch, seen from the north door.

west section on a NE line to fade away by the chancel arch. The alignment of this feature differs totally from everything else on the whole site except the early skeleton in Area 2, but its function remains a mystery.

Overlying the early occupation surface was a c. 0.4m thick featureless grey-brown clay soil presumed to equate with the build up against the posts of the wooden church to the east. That layer was sealed by a similar featureless layer which at its highest surviving point was almost at the floor level of the chapel. With one possible exception the remaining features were post-medieval in date. Post-reformation burials were found across the nave but the density was less than in the chancel.

One burial stood out as slightly different from the rest and could possibly be of earlier medieval date on the basis of the different burial practice. There was no coffin and the feet, the only part of the skeleton remaining, were packed around with vertically set stones. A whole series of later disturbances had cut and removed extensive areas of stratigraphy and the whole of the upper deposits were heavily churned. There is a marked difference between the nave and chancel in that the nave seems to have been an open area which lay outside the pre-Cormac's Chapel graveyard.

Within the north tower the base of the ashlar facing was found to be at a similar level to that in the nave. A mortar layer which ran into the wall at that point is interpreted as the bedding for a floor which has subsequently been removed. Below the floor-level loose stone rubble foundations continued down to the bedrock. The blocked-up opening in the east side of the tower was found to have been a window which had been converted into a doorway by dropping the level of the sill. This is believed to have taken place at the same time that the new doorway and steps into the tower were inserted, possibly at the same time that Area 1 became the sacristy. The rubble from the window seems to have been used to build up the level within the tower to the top of the new step, which was also the same level as the base of the converted window.

The Finds

The pottery from the site, while not great in quantity, provides an interesting assemblage. The medieval and post-medieval sherds come from disturbed contexts, though there is remarkably little of the latter considering the extensive disturbances dating to that period. A series of coarse unglazed red wares and a single sherd of reduced black ware are of the most interest. Some of this pottery was found in the lower levels and once properly identified should allow for more accurate dating.

There is, however, at least one sherd which has been positively identified as B-Ware, which suggests occupation from the 6th century onwards. There were two coins from the site, an English silver "short-cross" penny of the early 13th century and a Queen Victoria halfpenny which dates the disturbance of Area 2. Other finds include a kidney-pin, stick-pins, a bone crutch headed pin, spindle whorls, painted window glass, a parallelepiped antler die, comb fragments and traces of antler working.

Discussion and Conclusions

The discovery of four phases of burial and two churches pre-dating Cormac's Chapel means that, if one takes the formal handover of the Rock of Cashel to the Church in 1101 as the starting point for church building activities, a substantial amount of archaeological activity has



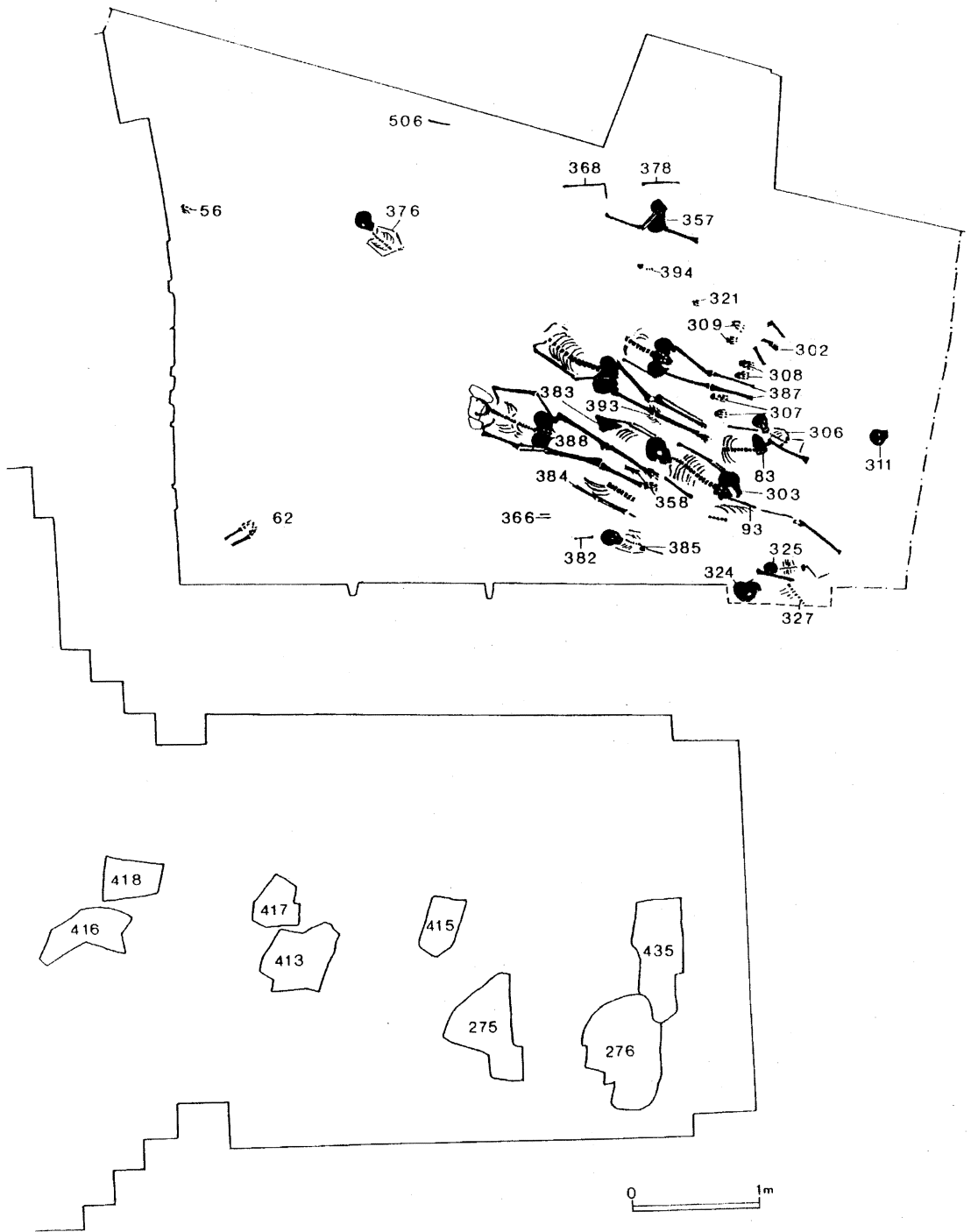


Fig. 4. Plan of Area 1 (above) with the interior of the chancel to show the early Church with its associated graveyard.

to be crammed into the quarter century before the chapel was started in 1127. There are, however, historical reasons for suspecting a possible earlier church on the site. The 9th and 10th centuries saw a number of Eoghanacht kings at Cashel who were also ecclesiastics and it is not unreasonable to expect that, in the circumstances, they might have had a church on the site (Byrne 1973, 213).

This tradition came to a close with the collapse of Eoghanacht power and their replacement by the Dál Cais in the mid-10th century. In this context it is interesting to note that there appears to be something of a hiatus in activity between the first and second churches. The build-up of deposits against the posts of the first church suggests a reasonable life-span for the building. However, it is the extension of the Phase 4 graveyard over the area of the first church which suggests that the site of the church had been obscured by the time the second was built. In other words there seems to have been a break in continuity, detectable in the archaeology of the site, which might reflect the historical record of a break in the ecclesiastical connection with the Rock of Cashel in the 10th-11th centuries.

The size and form of the first church is debatable and the detailed arguments for and against the different sizes would take up more space than is available here. However, the conclusion is that the church is *c.* 4.2m E-W while its N-S dimension must lie between 2.5 and 4m, which means that it falls within the known size range for such structures (cf. plans in Mytum 1992, 87).

A marked feature of the pre-Cormac's Chapel phases was that there is a clear division between the east and the west end of the site. West of the chancel arch and north tower there are no burials except the strange early burial in Area 2. No features which would demonstrate that there was any kind of formal boundary between the two areas were recorded in the early phases. However, in the later pre-Chapel phases there are some indications that such a boundary existed. To the north of the tower in Area 2 the cut feature with the stone fill may be part of it while further south there is the trace of the stone feature running under the south wall of the nave.

A further possible indicator of a boundary is the manner in which the Phase 3 burials at the west end of Area 1 all appear to be respecting an existing line. This introduction of a formal division between sacred and profane can be paralleled elsewhere such as at Reask (Fanning 1981). It may be no accident that the Chapel itself straddles this division, with the chancel for the clergy and the nave for the laity.

Taking the site as a whole, the following sequence is suggested. The dating of the early phases is, as yet, tentative.

Phase A. An initial possibly secular use of the site. This would include the stake holes in Area 1 and parts of the lower stratigraphy in Areas 2 and 3. There appears to be limited interment towards the end of the Phase with, in Area 1, the first phase of burial, and possibly the single early burial in Area 2. Suggested dating – 6th-9th century.

Phase B. A wooden church is established in Area 3 and the Phase 2 burials in Area 1 are orientated upon it. Further to the west the area is open and free of constructions but in Area 3 it was possible to identify a contemporary occupation surface. All the burials are restricted to the east end of the site. There was a substantial build up of deposits over the occupation surface and against the posts of the church. There is evidence of a possible hiatus after the initial flurry of activity. Suggested dating – 9th-10th century with a hiatus up to *c.* 1100.

Phase C. The wooden church has fallen out of use and has been replaced by a stone church lying under the present cathedral. Phases 3 and 4 of the graveyard were orientated upon this new building and the graveyard was extended further south into the area once occupied by the



wooden church. The western end of the site again appears to have been an open area, with possibly some paving in Area 2. The circular stone feature in Area 2 possibly belongs here. There is the possibility of a more formal division between the church/graveyard and the open area to the west being introduced, represented by the cut to the north of the tower in Area 3 and the remains under the disturbance in the chancel arch area. Suggested date – c. 1100-1127.

Phase D. The construction of Cormac's Chapel and its early use. The area to the west of the tower is taken into use for burial and Phase 5 of the graveyard in Area 1 begins. 1127-mid 13th century.

Phase E. The building of the present cathedral and continuation of Phase 5 of the graveyard in Area 1. The area to the west of the north tower now becomes an enclosed dead-end and is not used for further burial. The shrine in the north doorway of the chapel was probably inserted at this time. Suggested date – mid-13th century to c. 1650.

Phase F. Modification of Cormac's Chapel, insertion of new door and steps into north tower, adaptation of the window to a door and the building of the sacristy in Area 1. Phase 5 of the graveyard terminates with the building work. c. 1650.

Phase G. Use of the interior of the chapel for burials. c. 1650-1800.

Phase H. Modern disturbances 1800+.

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