# MAPS

## READING THE MAPS: A GUIDE TO THE IRISH HISTORIC TOWNS ATLAS

### JACINTA PRUNTY · H.B. CLARKE

an Irish
Redoubt

8 Battering Peices

4 Peices playing to
the Bridge

4 Mortar Peices

These Peices shot red hot Balls

4 Peices to dismount
the enemys cannon

A new
Irish
Fort

Iretons Fort

A ruin'd house an
Orchard

A house an Orchard

THE SHANNON

Our Army encampt

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# CONTENTS

## SECTION A: THE CONCEPT OF THE MAP

## SECTION B: CLUES TO THE PAST HIDDEN IN THE MAP

## SECTION C: TOWN LIFE

## SECTION D: KEY PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF TOWN LIFE

# FOREWORD

The main title of this guidebook is an intentional echo of the phrase 'reading the runes'. Runes have a dictionary definition of characters or marks that have mysterious or magical properties attributed to them. Maps have some of the same characteristics. To many people they have an air of mystery about them; they make extensive use of symbols and of conventions that need to be explained. They convey messages about spatial arrangments in a three-dimensional present and early maps do this in a four-dimensional past. Such maps may themselves date from the past or they may be reconstructions of that past. The word 'reading' should be understood in its widest sense: not only to take meaning from textual matter on a map, wherever that applies, but also to interpret the conventions, signs and symbols that map-makers employ.

Now that a critical mass of Irish Historic Towns Atlas (IHTA) fascicles has been published, together with ancillary works, the richness of the resource can be exploited. It can be done in a number of ways, using this guidebook to assist the process. To start with, the four main sections can be read as a series of conventional book chapters, divided by headings and generously illustrated. Then a stop-go approach can be adopted by re-reading individual units and answering the questions in the 'test yourself' boxes. This method would suit teaching environments on all levels. Finally research programmes could be devised on specific topics, using the material in this book as a starting point. To that end, the book includes suggestions for further reading in addition to the IHTA publications themselves.

As editors of the IHTA it is our belief that the geography and the history of towns and of town life in Ireland need to be better understood. It is also our belief that, made accessible to the widest possible readership, maps are a fundamental tool in that endeavour. In addition, many early maps are beautifully executed works of art. They deserve to be 'read' correctly for what they reveal about the past, as well as to be enjoyed as remarkable products of human creativity. Readers will discover that every Irish town in the sample has an interesting story to tell; the IHTA tells those stories through a balanced combination of maps and texts. Hitherto the stories were told individually; now they can be told collectively as well. In this guidebook every town, no matter how small in size or short its history, is the subject of at least one case study featuring part of, or an aspect of, its particular geographical and/or historical story. Reading the maps is a universal exercise.

Anngret Simms, H.B. Clarke, Raymond Gillespie, Jacinta Prunty
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# UNIT D.1

## The so-called 'monastic town'

When thinking about the origins of town life in Ireland, a common starting point is to observe that Ireland never became part of the Roman Empire and that, unlike in parts of England, the urbanisation of the island started at some point in the middle ages. Scholars are in general agreement about that, but thereafter the subject becomes more controversial. By the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., the most populous places were the greater monastic settlements, such as Armagh, Clonard, Clonmacnoise, Durrow, Glendalough and Terryglass. What were these places like?

First and foremost these monasteries provided religious services for their own residents – the monks (or as in Kildare, both monks and nuns), students and lay workers who were part of the monastery, and the pilgrims and other visitors who settled close by for a period of time. These different sorts of people were involved in arts, crafts and small-scale industries, precious examples of which are on display in the National Museum of Ireland and elsewhere. The monasteries served as centres of education and repositories of learning; the copying and illuminating of manuscripts were two of their most celebrated tasks. Their hospitals and guesthouses provided for the sick and the poor. They were also places for the storing of valuables, both lay and ecclesiastical, which made them attractive targets for Viking raids in the ninth and tenth centuries. The greater monasteries were busy places, where all sorts of skilled work were undertaken and a great variety of goods were traded.

The morphology or layout of these monasteries reflected the local topography, but also the ecclesiastical, economic and social divisions of the monastic world. A pilgrim arriving on the outskirts would first enter the *sanctus* ('holy place'), where the full range of humanity lived and worked. Travelling onwards the pilgrim would enter the *sanctior* ('holier place'), perhaps divided from the outer area by earthen banks or even a stone wall with a gateway in the case of Glendalough in its mature phase. This was a more select area where the monks themselves lived and studied in their cells. Finally he or she would cross into the *sanctissimus* ('the holiest place'), where the principal religious buildings were to be found. In this inner sanctum, often on a ridge or slight elevation, were the churches, the shrines, the house of the abbot or abbess, the high cross(es), the round tower and the cemetery. Here in the quiet heart of the monastic

settlement, where the silence was broken by the church bell and the chanting of the divine office, the core religious functions were carried out.

The big question is: were these great religious centres in essence towns? There is no doubt that they possessed some of the attributes of the towns of that early period elsewhere in Europe: a substantial population of residents, a range of craftworking activities and the provision of market places are the most relevant. The answer to this question depends partly on how one defines the word 'town', a subject that has led to endless disagreement. The most sensible approach is to think in terms of primary socio-economic function. Thus a village of farming folk exists primarily to produce food, and drink as a by-product. A town of craftworkers and traders exists primarily to produce and to distribute artefacts made locally and imported from elsewhere, with a support system derived from the rural economy. A monastery of monks and/or nuns exists *primarily* to provide the highest level of religious devotion and observance, with a support system shared to some extent with those of both the village and the town.

The greater monasteries were hybrid institutions, but they were primarily of a religious nature. Monastic tenants, or even the monks themselves, might work in the kitchen garden, manage the orchard and tend to a range of domestic animals. Monks undoubtedly practised the finer crafts of writing and illuminating books, whereas much of the other practical work was probably performed by laymen. Buildings of timber and stone were erected and maintained; materials for these had to be brought in from the surrounding countryside. The space allocated for trading was generally just outside the outer enclosure where there were two of them; that is to say, trading was seen not as a central activity but as a peripheral one. The core of every monastery was the principal church in the middle of the inner enclosure; religious devotion and observance were the primary activities.

It is a striking fact that none of the great monastic centres of the pre-Viking age listed above became a town in the middle ages. Instead, at different points in time, they decayed even as functioning monasteries and in the case of Clonard disappeared almost completely. What we see on a famous map of Armagh drawn in 1602 is not a decayed urban centre but a decayed ecclesiastical centre (Fig. 127). Despite its importance as a metropolitan church, as a principal focus of the cult of the national saint and as the burial place of Brian Bóruma, Armagh did not become a town until the plantation of Ulster in the early seventeenth century. It can certainly be argued that it had had urban potential before then, that it had been in effect a proto-town, but towns and proto-towns are different phenomena. Two case-studies may clarify matters further.

Fig. 127: *Armagh,* map 4, 1602, by Richard Bartlett. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland, MS 2656, extract.

## TEST YOURSELF

1. What were the primary functions of the greater Irish monasteries?
2. What did the double enclosure system imply in terms of economic function and social status?
3. What significance would you attach to the standard location of market places at the greater monasteries?
4. Is the concept of a 'monastic town' a valid one?
5. What do you understand by the term 'proto-town'?

# Kells

Kells is unusual in that we know precisely when and why it was founded as a monastery. The site was granted *c.* 804 to monks fleeing from the first Viking raids on the monastic island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. At that time the high-king of Ireland belonged to the northern Uí Néill dynasty based at Ailech not far from Derry, a place that had had regular contact with Iona. Kells lay in the territory of the southern Uí Néill, not on a navigable river and a fair distance from the open sea. It might have seemed relatively safe at that time, though once Vikings took up residence at Dublin in and after 841 that was no longer the case. The first church at Kells was completed in 814 and dedicated to St Colum Cille (Columba) in memory of Iona's founder. Another early building was presumably the scriptorium or writing office, since the famous Book of Kells is believed by some scholars to have been finished there. Other early features were the high crosses, including the Market Cross that dates from the middle of the same century.

At some stage the monastery at Kells was laid out in the classic manner as a double enclosure, with the main church right in the centre (Fig. 128). Given that it was a high-status foundation under powerful patronage, it is a reasonable guess that the basic layout was established early in the ninth century. The first reference to the round tower is in 1076 and St Columb's House, a stone-built hermitage with a steeply pitched roof and located half way between the two enclosures, is documented at around the same time. Both could date from the previous century, but of this we have no proof. Otherwise monastic buildings are cited in texts of the early twelfth century. These include a refectory, a guest house and a granary belonging to a particular family, together with a stone causeway or street linking the refectory and the granary. So-called 'charters' mention the *margad Cenanndsa*, 'market of Kells', the market space being located due east of the ecclesiastical site and just *outside* the outer enclosure. The Market Cross was (until recently) situated at the junction of Cross Street and John Street.

This market and its associated cross are as close as we get to the notion that early medieval Kells had urban attributes. They were important, but literally peripheral – on the edge of the primary focus on religious devotion and obser-vance. They became central when Anglo-Normans took over in the 1170s and Hugh de Lacy, the new lord of Meath, made of Kells a manor protected by a motte-and-bailey castle. The known castle site at Kells was near the Market Cross, in the middle of the main convergence of roads, and Castle Street would remain the town's commercial core down to the late eighteenth century (Fig. 129). The medieval town wall enclosed a large area that included the whole of
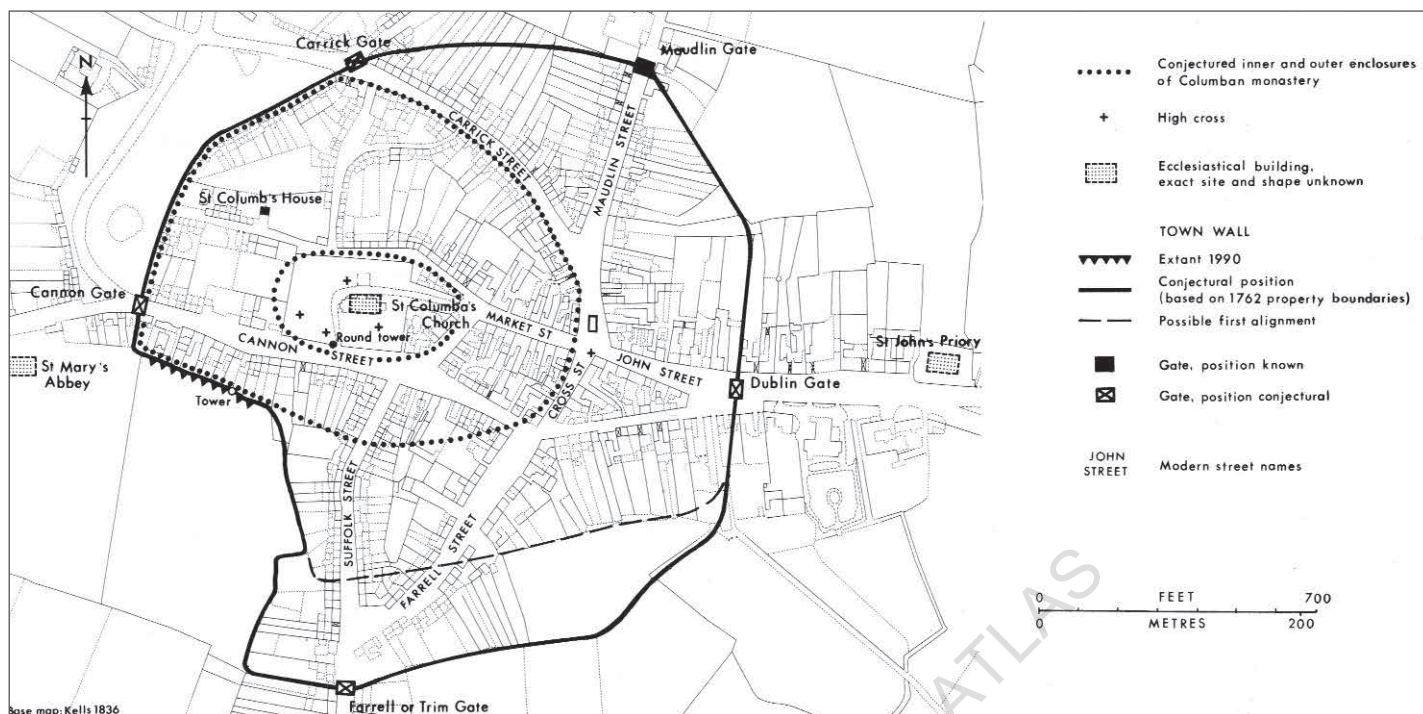
Fig. 128: *Kells*, fig 1, medieval sites.

the outer enclosure of the earlier monastery together with commercial parts of the town to the east and south. It is to be doubted whether all of this was ever fully occupied by buildings. The parish church, still dedicated to St Columba, was the old monastic church that had been endowed with cathedral status in the diocesan reorganisation of 1152 but demoted by 1216. Thus the core of the medieval town was the castle, not the parish church.

Fig. 129: *Kells*, fig. 2, property valuations, *c.* 1663.
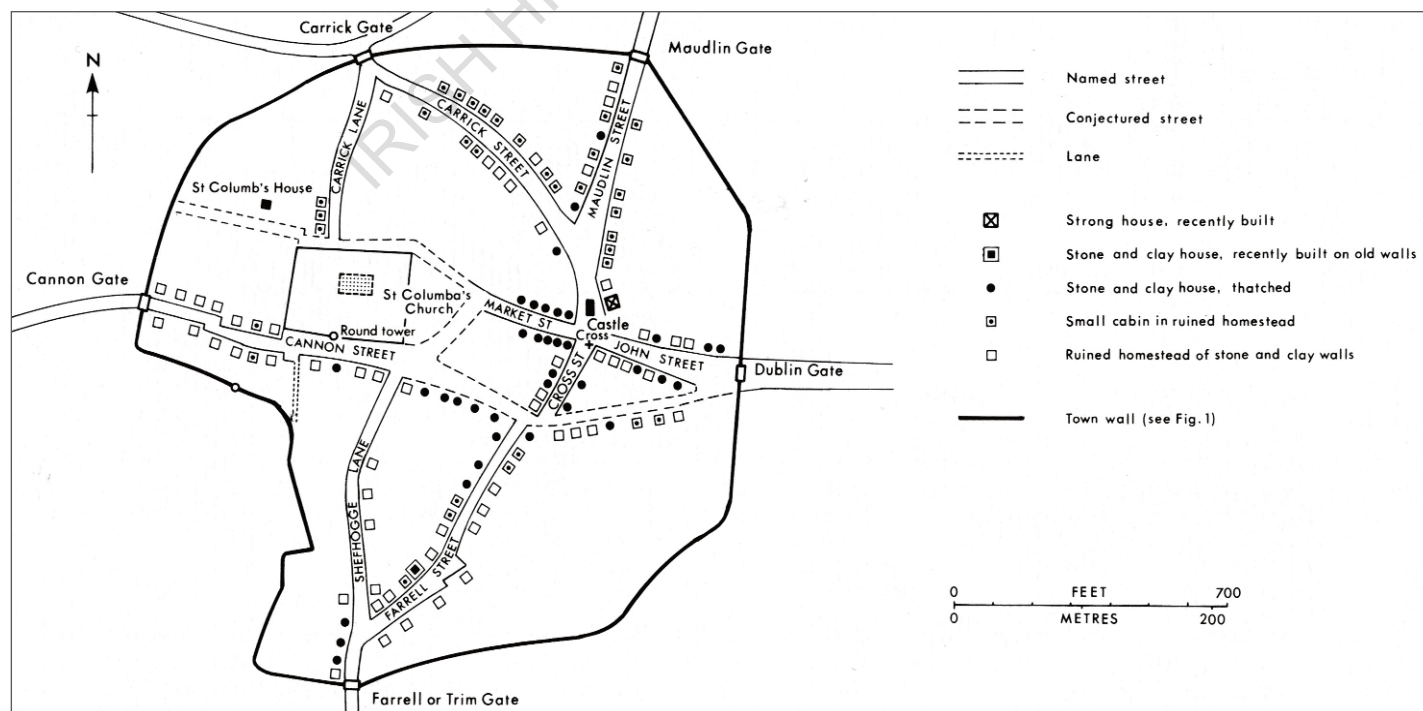
## TEST YOURSELF

1. What were the characteristic features of the layout of Kells as a major monastic site?
2. What does the Book of Kells indicate about life in a major monastery?
3. Which of these early features survived into the Anglo-Norman period?
4. What does the layout of the Anglo-Norman town tell us about the idea of a 'town' *c.* 1200?
5. Would it be more appropriate to describe Kells as a 'castle town' than as a 'monastic town'?

### Tuam

The story of Tuam is both similar to and different from that of Kells. In some respects it is more complicated, or at least less well documented. Three neighbouring locations are associated with the local saint, Jarlath, the principal one becoming a double enclosure system focused on the church known as Temple Jarlath (Fig. 130). The first monastic site lay to the south, at Toberjarlath ('Jarlath's well'), but this had been relocated to a natural gravel ridge on the south bank of the River Nanny by 1032. It is worth remembering that many of Ireland's greatest monasteries were situated on major route-ways, Kells being a classic case on the Slige Assail linking Connacht with the Irish Sea. Medieval Tuam came to be located at a focal point of esker trails and near a river crossing in an essentially low-lying landscape; such factors would have helped to determine the change of site. Another reason is the policies of a powerful local ruler at that time, Áed Ua Conchobair, who may have been anxious to promote the new site as a useful bridgehead in that part of Connacht.

In the case of Tuam, therefore, the double enclosure system dates probably from the eleventh rather than the ninth century. Its scale is considerably greater than that of Kells, the outer enclosure measuring nearly 500 m north–south and reflecting the patronage of Connacht's principal ruling family. In 1119 Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair became high-king of Ireland and it has been suggested that it was he who envisaged Tuam as a royal and an ecclesiastical showpiece. Using a reputed fragment of the True Cross, he commissioned the Cross of Cong as a splendid reliquary that may still be seen in the National Museum of Ireland. Thus Kells had its book and Tuam its reliquary. Then in 1127 Toirrdelbach ordered the outer enclosure to be extended towards the

Fig. 130: *Tuam*, fig. 1, medieval sites.
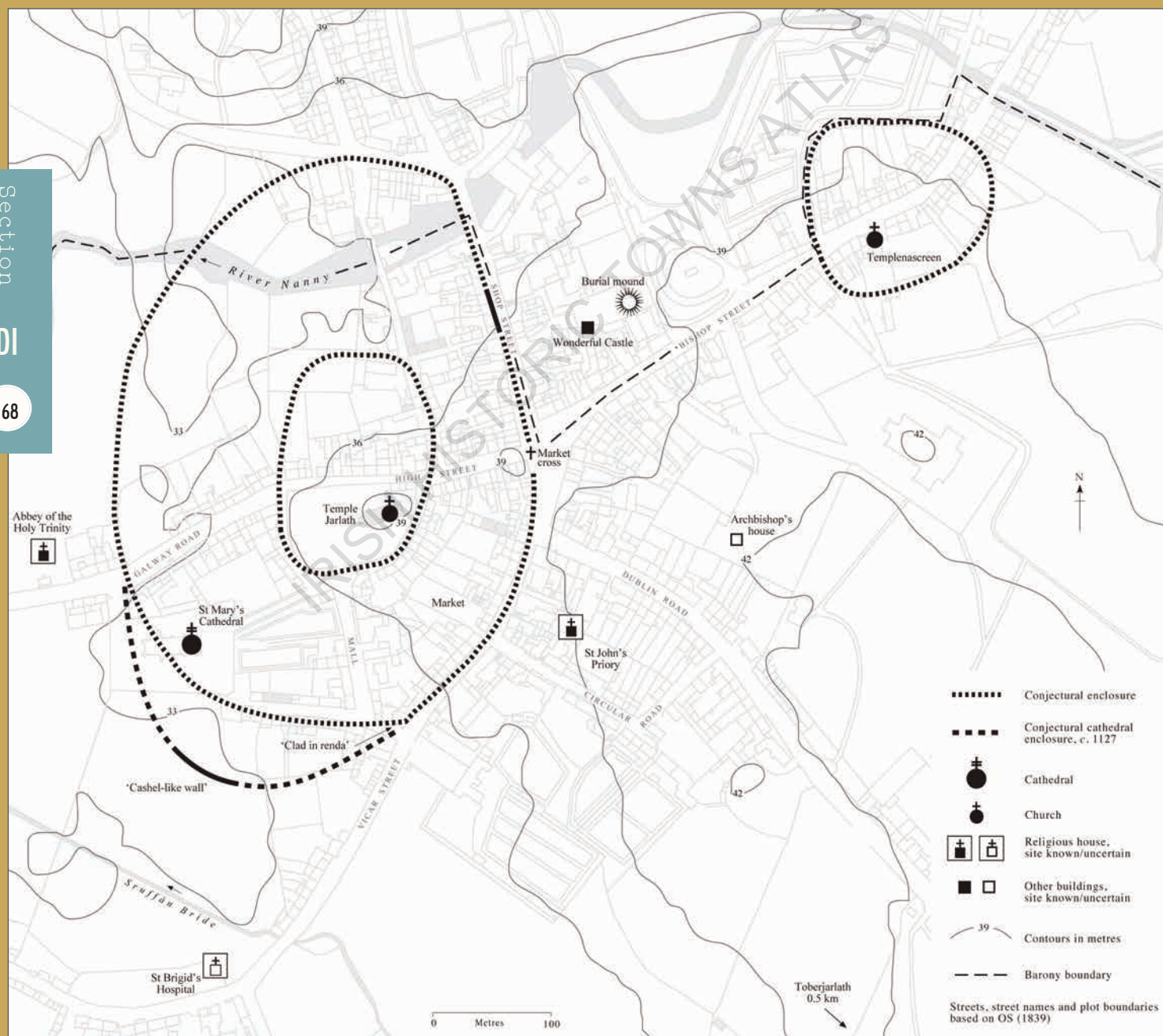
south-west, so as to enclose St Mary's Cathedral, the diocese having been established back in the year 1111. The power of royal patronage has been confirmed archaeologically, for 'a thick cashel-like wall' has been excavated due south of the cathedral. What may have been a short section of the same wall was once visible on the western side of Shop Street. Toirrdelbach then had a number of high crosses erected, one of which was a market cross on the eastern side, just as at Kells. The climax to all of this secular initiative came in 1152 when Tuam's cathedral was chosen (by Toirrdelbach) as the metropolitan church for the whole kingdom of Connacht.

But apart from a market space, peripheral as always, there was nothing specifically urban about Tuam at this stage. A major boost came in 1164, when Toirrdelbach's son, Ruaidrí, built a castle at Tuam just two years before he became high-king in his turn. So impressive was this royal castle that it became known as the Wonderful Castle. Disaster would soon strike, however, for in 1177 the Anglo-Norman adventurer, Miles de Cogan, led a force that used Tuam as a plundering base. Before that the inhabitants had destroyed much, including some churches, and had retreated with their cattle to the wilds of the hinterland. Then in 1184 at least part of the cathedral collapsed and the abbey church of the Holy Trinity to the west had to be used as a substitute. For the rest of the middle ages the signs are that Tuam led a rather fitful existence as a small town, constantly beset by warfare and by political instability. It would seem that the resources with which to build a proper defensive town wall were never found, the early twelfth-century 'cashel' structure continuing to serve instead.

## TEST YOURSELF

1. Why was a site different from the earliest chosen for the monastery at Tuam?
2. In what ways did kings influence the course of developments at Tuam?
3. How far does the known layout at Tuam conform to the standard monastic pattern?
4. Apart from the 'cashel-like wall', what else might archaeological excavation tell us about medieval Tuam?
5. Would it be more appropriate to describe Tuam as a 'castle town' than as a 'monastic town'?