MONASTERIES AS SETTLEMENTS

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On the Sunday morning following the open meeting of the Scottish Archaeological Forum, there was a seminar of a small group of people who are academically involved in the archaeological aspects of early monasticism. The seminar discussed the papers which had been presented, and the following pages reflect the conclusions reached by the participants. It should be stressed, however, that they are in no way minutes of that seminar, but are rather a synthesis of what was said - edited, expanded and doubtless distorted by the present writer. The headings of each section are those which seemed representative of the problems relevant to monasticism, though they are of course in many ways common to all settlement archaeology of the early middle ages.

Identification. Much of the discussion naturally centred on the definition of an early monastery, and on the difficulty of attempting to generalise about an institution which must have changed radically over half a millennium, in areas as diverse as Saxon Northumbria and the coast of Kerry, and sites as different as the Great Skellig and Whitby. Obvious divisions that could be made are between western and English sites; between ascetic and non-ascetic and between eremetic and 'urban' communities; and between sites in Romanised and non-Romanised areas. Historical definitions must ultimately be based on the ideology and concepts implicit in the foundation and functioning of each monastery; these may not have been at all clear-cut in practice, there being infinite shades from the sea-girt rock through a 'community of hermits' or an 'eremetic monastery' to the fully-developed monastic city like Clonmacnois. It was agreed that one of the most important historical problems to be tackled was the nature, geography and chronology of the concepts of monasticism; our old friends diffusion, migration and evolution duly made their appearance, not forgetting Mr Burn's 'Holy men on Islands' (1969).

There are many sites which, for at least part of their history, were clearly monasteries, in whatever sense the term is defined. Where such a definite identification can be made, it is usually based on the evidence of written sources, such as those of Bede for Northumbria, or in hagiographical or annalistic material for the west. Where such sources can be directly related to a site, or to buildings within it, at a certain period of

time, then the archaeologist may be confident of interpreting what is found in terms of the written evidence, as Professor Cramp has for Whitby, Wearmouth or Jarrow (p. 112-24) or Liam de Paor for Sceilg Mhichíl. There are, however, other places such as Iona or Burgh Castle (p. 36-45; 104-6) where, although there is every reason to think that there was a monastery on the site, attempts to interpret what was excavated in monastic terms met only with partial success. A third class of site is that for which there is little or no documentary evidence, but where the site location and the character of the buildings and other features leave no doubt as to the monastic nature of the settlement; the classic example here is Church Island (p. 3-11), whose total excavation by Professor O'Kelly is unique in the archaeology of monasticism.

There remains a class where there are neither impeccable documentary references nor archaeological remains which are incapable of being interpreted as other than those of a monastery. The classic example of such a site is Tintagel, where, as Mr Burrow suggests (p. 102), there is at least room for discussion. Yet Tintagel is quoted (e.g. Thomas, 1971, 25) as a type site for the early monastery in the west. There are many other places where interpretation as a monastery or as a secular stronghold is quite uncertain, in spite of a considerable body of evidence. At Cadbury-Congresbury, Somerset, five seasons of excavation (final report in preparation, see Fowler et al, 1970 for a preliminary report) have yielded evidence of banks, an entrance, several buildings, craft-working (bronze, enamel and iron), imported pottery of table-ware and amphorae second only to Tintagel in quantity, and much environmental and other evidence; yet we can still go no further than to say that this is a re-occupied hillfort. The site may be monastic, as Alcock suggests (1971, 219) but all evidence so far recovered would equally fit secular and even pagan models of many kinds; a similar ambiguity surrounds Glastonbury Tor (Rahtz, 1970), where the apparently decisive 'non-monastic' evidence of quantities of animal bones may have to be disregarded, in view of the evidence from Iona (p. 44).

Historians of early monasticism may have a clear model of a monastery, as discussed above. Are their criteria capable of being translated into archaeological terms? Can they tell us what a monastery looked like, and what features might be expected to be definable after a millennium or more? It is not enough to say for instance that there was normally a vallum monasterii since to an archaeologist such a feature will look (and will have been) very similar to the earthworks of a defended enclosure (if

indeed the monastic vallum was not in many cases an adaptation of a former defensive work).

There are a number of features which may be listed similarly as characteristic of a monastery, and yet be individually capable of being interpreted in other ways. These are the church/chapel/oratories, cemetery or 'special' graves, shrines, leachta, cells and possibly a local cave or fougou. How many of these does a site have to contain in order to 'qualify', assuming positive identification of each? Can we affirm that any site with at least, say, four of such specified characteristics, may be accepted? Or that Glastonbury Tor or Cadbury-Congresbury, which have so far none of these with certainty, must be ruled out? Thomas has stressed (1971) that even what might seem to be the most obviously identifiable component, the church, can only be decisively interpreted as such by its altar; other factors such as associated burials or cemetery, nearby crosses and especially plan, may be interpreted in other ways.

Identification, then, is complex; each site must be considered on its merits; even in those cases for which a monastic element is certain for one reason or another, an open mind may be kept as to whether this is its sole function throughout the whole period of occupation. It must not be assumed that all features are contemporary. Some cashel walls, for instance may be centuries earlier than the monastic remains they enclose; their true date may only be ascertained by removal of the wall in part or in whole. In most cases, insufficient data is available from excavated sites to enable more than the most superficial interpretation to be made; this is because, with few exceptions, the excavation has not been on an adequate scale, or the material found has not been carefully enough recorded, or as in the case of Tintagel, not yet fully published.

Dating. Dating of post-Roman sites in the west is often vague, with areas of doubt extending over a matter of centuries. There are some dated inscriptions, more dubiously dated metal or stone objects or stylistic components of buildings, or written evidence which may indicate the floruit of sites like Jarrow, or termini post or ante quem based on 'foundation' dates or Viking destruction; in the last two cases the site may have had much earlier origins, and have repeatedly risen from its ashes. Only rarely are there stratigraphic or structural sequences, even more rarely with independently datable finds in them. Pottery has provided almost the only dating evidence. Romano-British pottery and imports from Late Roman contexts in the Mediterranean or SW Europe are assigned

dates by specialists such as John Hayes. These are based on dated contexts in distant places; even if these are correct (and Mediterranean archaeology can hardly claim to be in the methodological front line of archaeology) they can give no more than a terminus post quem to the contexts in which they are found in Britain, as the not infrequent finds of samian on post-Roman sites should warn us. Much more work is needed on the class A and B wares before the time-lag, if any, can be assessed. Even if Thomas is right about the essentially Christian function for these imports in the British context (1971, 23) (and he has few followers), they cannot be taken at present as evidence of direct and immediate contact with the East Mediterranean and its monastic influences in the late fifth century; nor can a single sherd dated to AD 550-600 in North Africa be used to define a Columban level at Iona, let alone to date a lime-burning clamp below it, (p.38). This sherd is indeed, in spite of Thomas's hypothesis, one of the very few of its class to be found on a monastic site (excluding Tintagel); most monastic sites excavated in the west have produced either no pottery, or 'E' ware, probably from SW Gaul, for which a generally later date than the A and B wares seems probable.

Although pottery must continue to be an important dating point, other independent scientific dating aids may in the long run be more useful. The combination of radiocarbon dating with dendrochronology is currently being used to date timbers to within a few decades in England; excavated timbers are rare on monastic sites (we badly need a waterlogged one!) but radiocarbon dates for any other material are likely to resolve some doubts, and thermo-luminescence and other dating methods may yet give even closer dates, when they have been refined.

In Northumbria, Professor Cramp is able to base her work on some good dating given by Bede and other sources, from which she can extrapolate backwards and forwards in site sequences and from site to site. This has enabled her, in collaboration with John Hurst, to define indigenous and imported pottery types in seventh-century Northumbria, which has had far-reaching repercussions in Saxon pottery studies over the whole of Eastern England. The seventh century in Northumbria clearly marks the advent of monasticism there in the sense of such sites as Jarrow and Wearmouth. How much earlier than this may be the 'Irish' sites in that area or further south? And what is the earliest date we can give to any monastery or to monasticism in the west? Thomas stresses that we need expect nothing before the end of the fifth century and that monasticism

does not seem an important factor when Gildas is writing (1971, 21-3). He suggests (1971, 27) that Irish sites by history and tradition are sixth-century in origin rather than late fifth. It is therefore hardly surprising that no excavated site has yielded unequivocal evidence of its being a monastery as early as this; one of the most important things which archaeology can hope to solve is the dating of monastic sites in the west of Britain, and in particular their relative dating in Cornwall, Wales, Ireland and elsewhere; and whether the sources of the movement are, as Thomas believes, so directly and swiftly the result of East Mediterranean contact in the late fifth or early sixth century, as exemplified in the pottery and buildings of Tintagel.

Religious and Lay Elements. One of the topics which caused most interest at the seminar was that concerning the relationship of the monastery to out outside world. Evidence of such contact is to be found not only in the interrelationship of monastery to secular society in an economic, political or even religious sense (as an opponent of paganism), but also in apparently conflicting or at least contrasting elements within the monasteries themselves. De Paor emphasized the relationship of areas of monastic to those of secular settlement and especially its marginal land; and their location (such as Inishcealtra) on the borders of kingdoms. Professor Cramp discusses (p.123) the importance of the royal patronage of and burial in monasteries, and of the donation of land such as that on which Whitby was built. Thomas (1971, 33) suggested a similar situation in the west, in that deserted forts, earthworks, hilltops or sea-girt promontories or islands were in the gift of local rulers, either through inheritance, or because they were marginal land. Professor Cramp also stresses (p.123) the need to see her monastic settlements against the whole backcloth of Saxon Northumbria. Even the buildings themselves may be parallelled much more in the regional and mainly secular tradition which found its highest expression in the royal complex at Yeavering, rather than as 'monastic-type buildings'. She does, however, point out the difference between the buildings which comprise the capital wealth of the monastery with the personal wealth of the secular ruler: Bede's personal wealth which he wished to bequeath consisted of pepper, incense and napkins (were the first two some of the long-distance 'invisible' imports which accompanied the amphorae and table-ware of Western Britain?). Professor O'Kelly discusses (p.12) the interdependence of Church Island with the mainland settlement of Beginish, and suggests that similar pairs or groups of sites may be definable.

Such relationships may be reflected in the details of the excavated site. A pagan cemetery may have preceded the monastic ones at Jarrow and several other 'Christian' cemeteries; family plots of external secular families may be present in cemetery plans; radial or other enclosure divisions which seem to be such a characteristic feature of Irish sites such as Kiltiernan or Clonard (Norman and St Joseph, 1969, 103, 114) may reflect service or even lay functions within the monastic complex; finds may reflect the economy or trading connections of the secular neighbourhood rather than of the monastery itself. It was generally agreed that monastic sites could not be studied in a vacuum. They must be seen as one aspect of the settlement pattern of the region; their location, excavation and interpretation are part of regional settlement studies. The study of monasticism can only be fully appreciated as an important feature of post-Roman society when the society as a whole is understood. It is for this reason that the present writer deplores the blanket label 'Early Christian' as applied to the period covered by these papers, which implies that the Christian elenents of settlement studies are paramount, drawing attention away from secular society and specifically from its pagan elements.

Trade, Wealth, Economy and Industry. One of the features of modern monastic archaeology is its greater interest in the economy of the early monastery and its environment. This is not entirely a popular development. As those who were at the Galway Conference of the Society for Medieval Archaeology will remember, Professor O'Kelly was almost alone in condemning the obsession with art-history, architecture and especially 'all those crosses'! His published work emphasises repeatedly the need to understand the technological and economic background against which even the most ascetic manifestations took place. At Edinburgh, he reminded us of the work that lay behind the making of an iron knife, and the significance of the presence of iron slag even on Sceilg Mhichil (p.3). The identity of the smiths was discussed. Were there monastic smiths serving a secular area, or vice versa; if the former, was he a lay-person as at Lindisfarne? Did smiths from larger monasteries go to smaller ones? Craft working in general, especially in metals, seems to be almost universal in sites of this period, whether monastic or secular, whether in wealthy lowland monasteries, on the remotest island off Kerry, or on Glastonbury Tor. Were monasteries self-supporting, or did they rely on contributions of food from local communities, as Professor O'Kelly suggests for Church Island/Beginish? The recovery of evidence such as the cultivation marks at Jarrow, the bone midden and the

production of agricultural lime at Iona, or even the finds of quern stones, is all too rare in the archaeological record, let alone the more elusive evidence of food residues, seeds, pollen and other environmental evidence, still largely the province of the prehistorian and 'settlement' archaeologist.

Another aspect of monastic technology is that of building techniques, whether in stone or timber. Here the traditional studies have been of the extensive stone buildings, mainly of ninth-century or later date. Excavation techniques have only recently been able to recover the ground plans of the monastic architecture of earlier centuries, in wood or slighter materials. Here again O'Kelly has been a pioneer in his excavation of Church Island.

The problem of the imported pottery has already been mentioned. Whether we believe with Thomas that it was brought by pilgrims or imported to monastic centres for the liturgical practices of the Christian faith, being dispersed to secular sites as containers or souvenirs; or whether one sees the table ware and amphorae (and later Gaulish kitchen vessels) as luxuries, imports used by secular aristocrats and non-ascetic ecclesiastics, the economic implications of such long-distance trade must be faced. A good deal has been written about the transmission of ideas, artistic influences, manuscripts and saints by the ships that brought the pottery; but who organised the ships and their cargo? Several alternative hypotheses have been put forward recently: that the ships and their exotic cargoes were 'blown off course'; that they were the result of speculative voyages by captains or owners who hoped to exchange their rare oil, wine, dried fruit (dark age dates?) and other commodities such as silks and spices for valuable goods which could be obtained in Western Britain, such as gold, tin, lead, dogs, slaves etc; or that they came as a result of normal trade orders received from rich aristocrats or monasteries, in exchange for gold etc. Whichever of these explanations, or combination of them, is nearest to the truth, the presence of this pottery is one of the most remarkable phenomena that archaeologists have demonstrated, whose importance as site finds and as evidence of distant cultural connections has been fully underlined by Thomas (1971, 23-7). It is a pity that the monastic connections of the East Mediterranean A and B wares cannot be as widely demonstrated as that of the Gaulish E ware.

The wealth of monasteries has been discussed above in terms of their buildings, earthworks, crafts, and industry. We may add to these, as de Paor reminded us, not only the goodwill of the monastery in the eyes of local people, but also the profits of pilgrimage, which were exploited

so heavily in later centuries. Finally, as Dr Ralegh Radford emphasized, we must not forget the very wide variation in wealth and numbers of different monasteries, which makes any generalisations about their wealth and economy rather superficial, and leads us into the next topic of discussion.

Demographic Implications. The contribution of archaeology to demographic studies is only slowly being recognised. The evidence of cemeteries is obvious, and also, but with more limitations, that of settlements and buildings; more recently attempts have been made, mainly on the basis of ethnographic parallels, to determine how many people can be supported on a square mile of land of a certain terrain with given technological competence. All of these are relevant to monastic studies, but have hardly been explored. Historical evidence of population density was discussed at the seminar, such as that of the description of Kildare as a 'city' by Cogitosus, the hundreds of monks from Bangor who were massacred at Chester in 616, or the sober estimates one can make from Bede's descriptions of Northumbrian monasteries. Such references, whether general or specific are rare: the most exact estimate of all can be obtained from the famous early ninth century plan of St Gall, with its details of dormitory bed-spaces, grave-plots and the whole scale of its agricultural, industrial and other activities. But how relevant is the scale of a great Carolingian monastery even to seventh century Northumbria, or to Ireland?

Archaeological evidence has an infinite potential for the demographic aspects of monasteries. Examples were given of the sixty grave markers on Sceilg Mhichíl (were these all of monks? over how many centuries? what proportion of the dead were still visibly marked?) of the number of cells visible on Sceilg Mhichíl or on Gateholm island, of the obvious scale of the building provision at Whitby, Jarrow and Wearmouth; of the resources of manpower needed to construct the valla of places like Clonmacnois (Thomas, 1971, 29); and more generally of the likely food resources of the remotest sites, like Mr Lamb's 'horrid stacks' (p. 76), where local offerings can hardly have been expected. Barbara Noddle (personal communication) has suggested that the Columban settlers on Iona found a wooded island replete with deer, which they progressively de-forested and cleared of easily-obtainable meat, a conclusion she draws from the proportions and food-quality of the upper and lower parts of the midden.

All such evidence is, clearly, potentially of great value in assessing the relative size and population of monasteries, and the extent of early monasticism in the demography of society as a whole. We must conclude with a warning given by de Paor. He reminded us that we may find evidence on the larger lowland monastic sites not only of the resident monkish population, but of provision for the periodic assemblies of thousands of people, comparable with the numbers who came to Olympia or Perachora for religious festivals, or who still come to Glastonbury or to 'St Patrick's Purgatory'. Nor can cemeteries be as straightforward a demographic guide as might be imagined. Even if graves are impeccably stratified in dated contexts, as may reasonably be assumed of the only cemetery totally explored (at Church Island), the graves may as well be of neighbouring lay communities as of monks; the desire to be buried in a holy place is only too well known, and a major destructive force in present-day Irish monastic sites.

New Archaeological Approaches. The final topic that the seminar discussed was the direction of future research. Some of the new methods and attitudes of archaeology have been mentioned in the preceding pages; further ones may now be discussed. The 'New Archaeology' has many facets, and this is not the place for a discussion of all the attitudes and approaches implicit in this term. One of these has already been hinted at - the need for a much more disciplined and precise approach to archaeological evidence. The use of models, whether 'hardware' or 'software', will not only help us to define exactly what we mean by such a term as 'monastery' as a historian or an archaeologist, but will enable us to analyse our own preconceptions in constructing a 'monastic model' or in our methods of excavating or interpreting a monastic site. Correction factors must be applied to compensate for the Christian bias not only of the written evidence concerning monasteries (and other aspects of contemporary society), but also for that of archaeologists who are attracted to monastic sites because they are 'Christian archaeologists' with a propensity to interpret sites or pottery in Christian terms.

Another aim of the 'new archaeologists' is to establish archaeology as an independent discipline; in medieval studies this means that archaeological evidence must exist in its own right, complementary to the written sources: 'history' will result from a combination of both. There is no room in this approach for the attitude expressed by a well-known professor (of history, not archaeology) that 'archaeology is an expensive

way of telling us what we know already', by which, one more than suspected, he meant that archaeological evidence that either contradicted or was irrelevant to accepted lines of historical enquiry was not worth having; it was only interesting inasmuch as it illustrated or complemented what historians already knew. The new approach would be to examine a monastic settlement in the same way as a prehistoric one, and to establish by every scientific means the total character of the 'cultural residue' uninfluenced by any preconceptions based on any 'historical model' of a monastery. Only in this way can an objective body of evidence be built up which can ultimately be integrated with that from written sources to extend the depth of historical 'truth'.

On a less theoretical level, new approaches are concerned with a wide variety of scientific techniques. Some, like the intensive field work of Messrs Lamb and Macdonald are hardly new, but are still much needed. They can be combined with techniques from the 'new geography', such as location analysis of the relationship of monasteries to each other, to offshoots, 'daughter houses' and to all other settlement sites. The vital role of air photography in monastic studies will be obvious to all who have read Norman and St Joseph's remarkable survey of Irish sites (1969).

Statistical techniques can be used for such enquiries as orientation analysis of buildings and graves; modular analysis of building dimensions; computerised analyses of charter, hagiographical, place-name evidence and epigraphic formulae (of Bu'lock in Thomas, 1971, 113, fig. 52). Radiocarbon dating and dendrochronology have already been mentioned, as has the need to increase the recovery of environmental evidence. There is crucial need to study the manufacture and origin of pottery by scientific study of its grits, as brilliantly developed by David Peacock; the geology of crosses and building stones; and the study of building and stone-dressing techniques.

Finally, the revolution being brought about by the development of excavation techniques was obvious to everyone. It is a long step from the digging of the richest of monastic sites, Whitby, in 'three levels', with the consequent massive failure to understand the significance of the finds and misinterpretation of the buildings (p. 112-3), to the current techniques of horizontal excavation which can reveal the slightest traces of wooden or turf buildings, 'shadow' burials, and

the attempt at total recording of all possible classes of evidence. The record of the modern excavation is more than merely a catalogue of what the excavator thought (or hoped) he had found; it must be a body of data of which any questions may be asked by other scholars now or in the future. Modern scientific excavation together with its concomitant of full publication can do much to advance our knowledge of all the topics introduced at the Forum, discussed so constructively at the seminar and published in this volume.

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