

Saint Columba as a Territorial Lord

Max Adams

St Columba's careers as a holy man and as a diplomat have rightly been the subject of much scholarly interest over the decades. His role as a territorial lord has received much less attention. Lordship was a cornerstone of Irish and British society in the First Millennium. By virtue of their loyalty and service to a king, secular lords held land for a life interest (his or theirs). That is to say, they were given the right to exact taxes in kind – food, materials and services – from those who lived on a defined parcel of land. Within that territory lords maintained a household of free and unfree dependants, fostering networks



Carrowmore High Cross, Inishowen. Excavations in 2013 revealed that the site had been in use from the late 6th century onwards – contemporary with Columba's foundation in Iona. The High Cross stood at the entrance to the monastery. (Photo – Editor).

of relations with their kin and other allies. Lordship was essentially competitive, so the wealthier and more powerful lords also maintained a warband, a sort of fictive family of companions – in Latin *comites*; in Old Irish *céilithe* – who rode with them on cattle raids, feasted and drank with them and swore loyalty to them unto death. The *comitatus* was fed and maintained from the renders of the lord's estate. Its ranks were drawn from the same dependent client families, reinforcing inalienable bonds of reciprocal debt and gift. The more successful a lord, the more followers he attracted, the more land he might rule over; the more generous he might be.

As early as the 3rd century AD pioneers of the monastic movement in the Holy Land, some of them former soldiers in the imperial armies, saw themselves as *milites Christi*, soldiers of Christ; and their followers were, rather like the secular *comites*, soldierly comrades. As their communities grew through endowment by sympathetic patrons and wealthy followers, so the saintly leaders of these communities began to behave, sometimes reluctantly, like territorial lords. Instead of martial glory, they won an eternal place in heaven by virtue of their miracles, humility, wisdom and through the sound management of their resources.

When the earliest Irish abbots and abbesses were given lands on which to found religious communities, they became a type of specialised lord, gathering the needs of their holy *comitatus* from the lands over which they had been given rights; maintaining their fictive family of priests, monks and lay supporters and, ideally, winning for their communities an enviable reputation for discipline, humility and good works. Like secular lords, spiritual masters attracted followers, usually from among their own kin, bound into the community by bonds of mutual loyalty and their shared veneration of the great holy man or woman.

Columba was first granted the island of Iona as his *territorium* by Conall mac Comgaill, king of Dál Riata, roughly modern Argyll. Its kings claimed rights over peoples on both sides of the North Channel, involving themselves with Irish kings, sometimes as allies, often as antagonists. Columba's cousin, Áed mac Ainmirech, was a contemporary ruler of the Northern Úi Néill; it was natural, therefore, that Columba would act as a broker

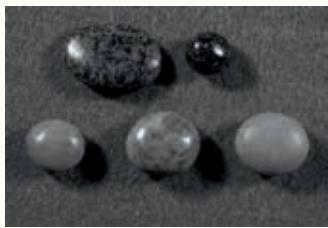


Royal Mail stamp issued in 1997 to commemorate the death of Colmcille. (Picture – Clare Melinsky, artist, and stamp design Royal Mail group 1997)

between the two. In return, he seems to have been granted lordship over other lands on which to found subordinate religious houses, expanding his territorial holdings and his *paruchia* just like any secular lord. His hagiographer Adomnán gives little detail on these other houses but we know that he founded a monastery at Durrow in County Laois and that at least two daughter houses of Iona were founded on islands in the Inner Hebrides: at Mag Luinge on Tiree and on the as yet unidentified Hinba – perhaps Canna or Colonsay¹. Brian Lacey has shown that, despite strong traditions associating it with Columba, the monastery at Derry was founded by a holy man called Fiachra. But he also suggests that a number of other early monastic sites: in Donegal at Gleann Cholm Cille, in the Hebrides, on Skye and on the western Scottish mainland, may have been founded by Columba or his immediate followers².

What can we say about how Columba acted as a territorial lord? Adomnán tells us that he was able to gather materials such as timber from a hinterland that was larger than Iona – including parts of Mull and Ardnamurchan. He appointed abbots to run his other monasteries. He intervened in and judged disputes; was able to seek protection for a fellow monk from a king in Orkney. In his Great House within the vallum on Iona he entertained both his holy companions and large numbers of visitors – his, as it were, religious clients. In one very significant way, however, Columba's lordship differed from that of his secular peers. Iona held its land in perpetuity, passed down through a line of abbots who were, by and large, drawn from Columba's own kin. They were thus able to invest in such cultural marvels as a scriptorium, a sculpture workshop and a mill. Such capital investment gave them a substantial advantage over potential religious and secular rivals and protected them, by and large, from predatory kings.

Even so, the inner workings of Ionan lordship are obscure. To explore them one must look at more tangible parallels. Fortunately, a geographical model for Irish territorial lordship can be found in the Magh Tóchuir of Inishowen, the subject of several studies over many years³. The *maghs* of Ireland and their British equivalents – *Maes* and *Strath* – have been proposed as 'cultural corelands': cultivated, fertile plains based on river drainage



*Gaming counters at Carrowmore.
A set of radiocarbon dates
within the range sixth to twelfth
centuries from excavation of the
precinct boundary ditches at
Carrowmore confirms occupation
in the early medieval period.
(Photo – Lands of Eoghan).*

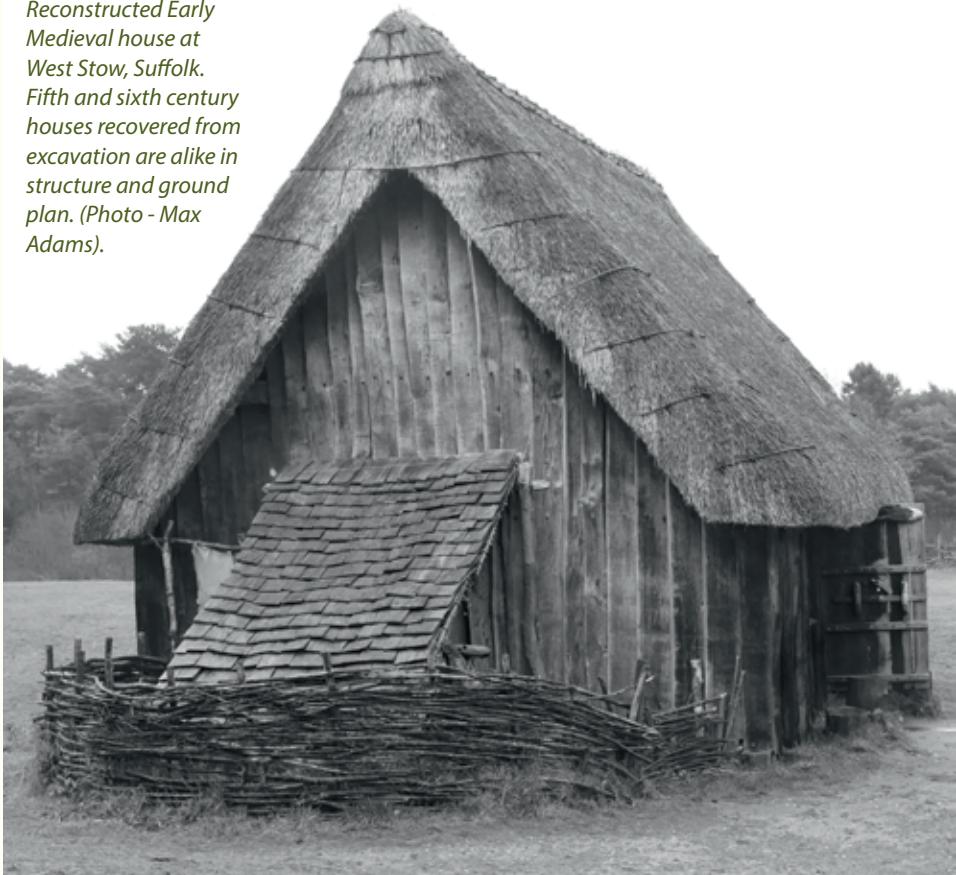
systems where prehistoric and Early Medieval settlements (raths and ringforts), standing stones, high crosses and the remains of monastic houses are concentrated evidence of coherent, probably tribal lordship. Magh Tóchuir, the Plain of the Causeway, drains central Inishowen into the Atlantic-facing Trawbreaga Bay. Four prehistoric hilltop enclosures look down on it and the landscape is littered with the monuments and settlements of its lords and farmers⁴. At its centre lies Carndonagh, the Domnach Mór Magh Tóchuir of the early sources, whose famous crosses displayed its élite status. Four more early monastic settlements ring the Magh Tóchuir: at Straid, Cloncha, Carrowmore and Culdaff, each one reflecting a tradition of ancient secular lordship rights over lands subsequently gifted to the church⁵. Geophysical survey carried out at these sites by the Bernician Studies Group

has demonstrated, in most cases, the former presence of circular enclosures, the buried signatures of monastic complexes (Straid is the exception).

At Carrowmore, follow-up excavations in 2013 confirmed that the enclosure had been in use from the late 6th century onwards – contemporary, then, with Columba's foundation on Iona; and that its monumental stone cross once stood at the entrance to



*Reconstructed Early
Medieval house at
West Stow, Suffolk.
Fifth and sixth century
houses recovered from
excavation are alike in
structure and ground
plan. (Photo - Max
Adams).*



*Iona Abbey: the restored medieval complex lies above Colmcille's monastic church of the
560s at the heart of a watery world connected by trade, culture and politics and with close
associations to Derry and Donegal. (Photo - Max Adams).*



Magh Tóchuir: the “Plain of the Causeway”, Inishowen. A prehistoric and early Medieval cultural coreland, its landscape still bears the monuments of its kings, saints and other stone artefacts from the era. The picture shows Trabreaga Bay between Malin Town and Carndonagh which has a seventy-century High Cross, carved pillar stones, marigold stone, and a carved lintel beside the Protestant church. (Photo - Max Adams).



its enclosure⁶. Each monastic establishment must have been provided with sufficient resources: arable land to cultivate barley and oats, low lying improved pasture for cattle and access to rougher hill pastures where their sheep and cattle grazed in summer. Access to the abundant marine resources of Trawbreaga bay and the mineral wealth of the hills allowed them to accumulate surplus (evidenced by the presence of many souterrains) free from taxation, while the surety of freehold possession fostered investment in the sculpting of elaborate high crosses and in maintaining networks of alliance with churches further afield. In turn, Inishowen's ruling élite, the Cenél nEogain, found their own prestige enhanced by the status and wealth of their holy clients. One of these, Colmán Rímid, a

Dunadd: fortress of the Kings of Dalriata at the mouth of Kilmartin Glen, Argyle and Bute, Scotland. Its rocky summit citadel was an expression of temporal and divine power. Colmcille was the spiritual mentor of the Kings of Dalriata and visited the fortress before he settled on Iona. According to Adomnan's Vita Columbae, Colmcille had an audience with the King, Conal mac Comgaill. (Photo - Max Adams).



descendant of the eponymous Éogan and a late contemporary of Columba (scion of the rival Cenél Conaill), even produced a king of Northumbria. His daughter Fina bore a child by King Oswiu of Bernicia (642-670) and that child, Fland Fina, later known as Aldfrith, was England's first literate king (685-705).

Magh Tóchuir provides a highly concentrated model whose Columban counterpart was spread across a wide marine diaspora. Iona's landed wealth, political connections and reputation were such that they enjoyed access to Mediterranean exotica like wine and olive oil – perhaps even Egyptian papyrus⁷. Continental bishops visited, bringing tales of the Holy Land; and the records first written down there became the founding documents of the great Irish Annals. Like secular territorial lords, the abbots and abbesses of religious houses thrived by expanding the houses over which they ultimately ruled, wielding imperium or overlordship over subordinate abbots and abbesses. The greatest monastic *paruchiae* – those of Patrick, Columba and Brigit – were accumulated through a variety of processes, often involving miracles of one sort or another. Those saints' successes as territorial lords enabled them, also, to wield a spiritual *imperium* the equal of any overlord.

*[Author's note: I have set Columba and the Magh Tóchuir in a broader historical context in *The First Kingdom*, published by Head of Zeus in February, 2021]*

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- 3 T.M. Charles-Edwards, "Early Medieval Kingship in the British Isles" in *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms*, (London, 1989), pp. 28-39. M. Colhoun, *The Heritage of Inishowen: Its Archaeology, History and Folklore*, (Derry, 1995). B. Lacey, "Some large hill-top and hill-slope stone enclosures in County Donegal" in *Relics of Old Decency: Archaeological Studies in Later Prehistory*, (Dublin, 2009), pp. 499-505. C. O'Brien, M. Adams, D. Haycock, D. O'Meara and E. Pennie, "The Early Ecclesiastical Complexes of Carrowmore and Clonca and their Landscape Context in Inishowen, Co. Donegal" (*Ulster Archaeological Journal*, 2014), pp 72, 142-160.
- 4 B. Lacey, "Some large hill-top and hill-slope stone enclosures in County Donegal" in *Relics of Old Decency: Archaeological Studies in Later Prehistory*, (Dublin, 2009), pp. 499-505.
- 5 C. O'Brien, and M. Adams, "Early Ecclesiastical Precincts and Landscapes of Inishowen, Co. Donegal" in *Making Christian Landscapes in Atlantic Europe*, (Cork, 2016), pp. 160-174.
- 6 C. O'Brien, M. Adams, D. Haycock, D. O'Meara and E. Pennie, "The Early Ecclesiastical Complexes of Carrowmore and Clonca and their Landscape Context in Inishowen, Co. Donegal" (*Ulster Archaeological Journal*, 2014), pp 72, 142-160.
- 7 J. O'Sullivan, "Iona: Archaeological Investigations 1875-1996", in *Spes Scottorum, Hope of Scots: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1999), pp. 215-243.