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Foundation of nunneries in medieval Ireland

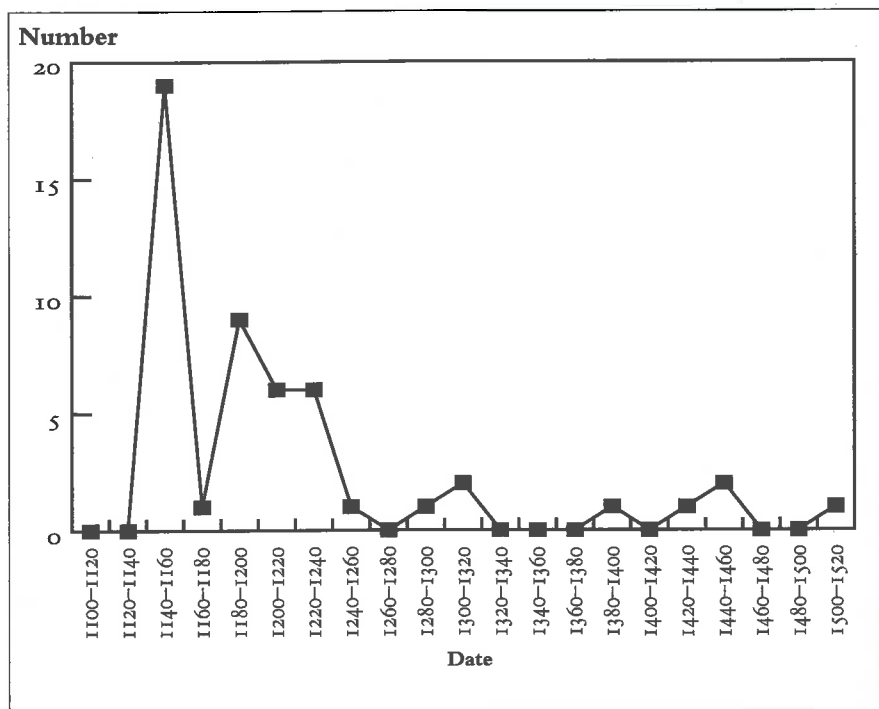
As well as the stone towers and large estates of monastic houses for men that dotted the landscape of medieval Ireland, there were also convents where women spent their lives in prayer and the work of God. The women who lived within convent walls were marked apart by their withdrawal from families and their communal life under religious vows, and were usually symbolised by their distinctive dress. Like others throughout medieval Europe these women entered religious life for different reasons – some through intense personal religious feeling, others because of family pressures or lack of alternatives. Medieval convents were usually founded to provide quiet havens of prayer for women, separate from the cares and concerns of the secular world. To maintain this separation from the world, convents needed sufficient resources to support themselves – land for growing food, domestic buildings and churches for prayer. These resources were given to religious women by founders who hoped to ensure safe, secure environments for the women in perpetuity.

In broad terms, there were four waves of foundation of nunneries in later medieval Ireland. The first rightly belongs with the early medieval period and includes those nunneries that survived the upheavals of the tenth and eleventh centuries and continued in some form until the later period. These nunneries do not have many common characteristics, although most probably adopted the Augustinian or Arroasian Rule by the late twelfth century. The second wave involves the foundations that occurred as a result of native twelfth-century reform. These houses were founded by Gaelic kings and planned as part of large-scale reorganisation of Irish monasticism. The third wave occurred when the first generations of Anglo-Normans altered the course of native reform, hastened changes to diocesan and parochial structures and redistributed conquered lands. The main characteristic of this wave was more individual Augustinian, Benedictine and Cistercian houses, founded most commonly by the second tier in the hierarchy of Anglo-Norman settlers. These foundations of convents, though fewer in number than the associated wave of male foundations, demonstrate that convents were an important factor in the colonisation of Ireland. The fourth and much smaller of the foundation waves involved the houses for women that were founded during the fifteenth-century reform movement that swept Gaelic Ireland and predominantly involved the mendicant orders.¹

¹ For full details of all convents, their affiliations, dates of foundation and dissolution, see

The chronology of these foundations (see Figure 2) shows important parallels with the foundation of nunneries in parts of England and France and is worth considering in detail. They also indicate significant levels of lay involvement in the affairs of the nunneries from their inception.

Figure 2. Rates of new convent foundations in Ireland, c.1100–1500



SURVIVAL OF EARLY CELTIC FOUNDATIONS

Women's monasticism prior to the twelfth century has left relatively few traces on either the landscape or the archival memory in Ireland. This does not necessarily mean there were few religious women, although it is probable that, as on the continent, there was a decline in monastic opportunities for women around the ninth and tenth centuries.² Women's monasticism only rarely surfaces in the earlier records in Ireland, and usually nuns are noted in passing in the records of other events. Although this could mean that they were few in number, it is also possible that nuns were obvious features of the mental and physical landscape of early medieval Ireland and not specifically discussed because they were not considered important to the concerns of the male monastic annalists and poets.³

Appendix 1. 2 Schulenburg, "Women's monastic communities, 500–1100", pp 261–92.
3 Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 169–75ff.

Some of these early nunneries have well-established histories, such as Kileedy (Co. Limerick) founded by St Ité, whereas others are believed to be early through local or antiquarian tradition. There are also references to early medieval nunneries that cannot now be confirmed.⁴ Again, this does not mean that they did not exist; merely that the records are particularly disappointing. Hagiography is a rich source for early church history in Ireland and there are records of nunneries in the hagiographical sources for which no other evidence exists.⁵ Some of these early nunneries have left their only traces in place names; generally names that include a component of *calliagh/callech* (nun/old woman) were associated with religious women.⁶ Although the dating of these place names is not completely reliable, in the anglicized areas of medieval Ireland place names that included *calliagh* were usually the property of nuns prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans.

There were several of the older Celtic nunneries in existence at the beginning of the twelfth century. One of the most significant was Kildare, founded by St Brigit in the fifth century. Its importance in the twelfth century is attested by the rather scandalised report of John Paparo, papal legate to Ireland in 1152, who decreed at the council of Kells that the abbesses of Kildare should no longer "take precedence over the bishops in public assemblies, for they had been accustomed to sit at the bishop's feet".⁷ Kildare was also of political importance, with Diarmait Mac Murchadha, king of Leinster, attacking the abbey in 1132/5, abducting and raping the abbess and then replacing her with a relative.⁸ After the conquest of the area by the Anglo-Normans, the abbey continued in reduced circumstances with Anglo-Norman nuns.

Other nunneries surviving to the twelfth century were smaller and have rated fewer mentions in the records. Not surprisingly, most of them were in areas that were settled least or not at all by Anglo-Normans. In Armagh the ancient nunneries of Temple Breed and Temple-na-Ferta, founded by St Patrick, continued quietly through the reform period until after the dissolution in the late sixteenth century.⁹ Another important nunnery in Ulster was Killeevy (Co. Armagh) founded by St Monenna in the sixth century, where nuns continued until they surrendered the abbey at the general dissolution in 1542.¹⁰ Killaraght (Co. Sligo) a convent founded in the early Christian period by St Attracta continued until the dissolution, leaving virtually no trace in the surviving archives.¹¹ Some later nunneries whose origins are obscure may have been re-established on older abandoned sites. Dedication to Brigit is probably a sign of

4 *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp 370–409, lists 41 sites of nunneries which faded before the eleventh century. 5 For example, the convent of nuns at Cloonburren, Co. Roscommon, see *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 315. 6 The derivation and range of meaning of *calliagh/callech* are explored in Ní Dhonnchadha, "Caillech", pp 71–96. 7 John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, p. 72. 8 *ALC* 1132 and *AClon* 1135. The deposed abbess was one of the Uí Failge. 9 Reeves, "The ancient churches of Armagh", pp 201–2. For summary see *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 312. 10 Reade, "Cill-Sleibhe-Cuillinn", pp 93–102. 11 *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp 320–1 gives a summary; see also Knox, *History of Tuam*, pp 273, 388.

early foundation, as nunneries were usually dedicated to the Virgin Mary after the twelfth century. The nunnery of St Brigit at Molough (Co. Tipperary) was founded in the early Christian period, when it was called Mainister Brighde, Molacha Brighde, or Mag Laca.¹² The surviving buildings date from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries with textual references from the thirteenth century, so it may have continued throughout the intervening years or the nunnery may have been re-established on the old site.¹³ Analysis of place-names has led historians to posit that the large and important nunnery of Kilcreevanty (Co. Galway) was probably established on the site of an earlier nunnery about 1200.¹⁴

There were also documented nunneries that survived the crises of the tenth-century disturbances but did not continue past the twelfth century. An important one was the nunnery of Clonbroney, founded by St Patrick and the eighth-century home of the reforming St Samthann whose vita is one of the few examples of hagiography of female saints which survive from medieval Ireland.¹⁵ The last abbess of Clonbroney mentioned is Caillechdomhnaill, daughter of Naonaenaigh, who died in 1163.¹⁶ This convent seems to have been under this family's patronage as the annals record the death in 1108 of another abbess of that family, Cocrich.¹⁷ The abbey's position in the borderlands around the early lordship of Meath, which were being subinfeudated and incastellated by Hugh de Lacy and his tenants, may have meant that it was no longer viable after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. It evidently failed to secure the patronage of any of the new settlers and there is no evidence that it was involved in the spread of the reformed Arroasian observance.

The places where women could practise a regular religious life under recognised vows were few in the early twelfth century. It is likely that some women lived quietly and anonymously as hermits on their families' estates or in their own homes, while a small number lived communally as nuns in recognized convents. This has parallels to the situation that Elkins has found in early twelfth-century England, where there were few nunneries available for women.¹⁸

THE TWELFTH-CENTURY REFORM

For women's monasticism in Ireland, as in other parts of medieval Europe, the twelfth century was a watershed marking an upsurge in women's participation in an invigorated monastic world. The twelfth-century reform movement saw great change generally in the physical and ideological landscape of the Irish church, with the reorganisation of dioceses and monasteries as well as concerted efforts to bring the aberrant practices of clerical marriage and lay patronage in

¹² "Life of St Declan of Ardmore", pp 62–3. *The Martyrology of Donegal*, p. 257, notes that the daughters of Cainnech established the house of Mag Lacha. ¹³ Power, *Waterford and Lismore*, pp 231–2. ¹⁴ Knox, *History of Tuam*, p. 280, as Craebhnata, the name element is a woman's name. ¹⁵ "Vita St Samthann", in *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* II, p. 258. ¹⁶ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 314. ¹⁷ *AFM* 1108. ¹⁸ Elkins, *Holy women*, p. xiii.

line with those of the continent.¹⁹ Concurrent with the native reforming synods was the introduction of new monastic orders – Cistercian, Benedictine and Augustinian – under the influence and patronage of kings such as Diarmait Mac Murchadha and Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, and churchmen, Malachy of Down (Máel Máedóc Ua Morgair), Áed Ua Cáellaide and Lorcán Ua Tuathail.²⁰ By the mid-twelfth century, when Malachy of Down returned from his travels in Europe fired with zeal to rejuvenate religious life in Ireland after the example of the monastery of Arrouaise, there were enough willing women for him and others to introduce the Arroasian rule to about nineteen nunneries.²¹

The Arroasian observance was a stricter and more contemplative version of the Augustinian rule, heavily influenced by Cistercian thought and practice and popular in the mid-twelfth century in England and northern France.²² It proved very attractive to Irish religious men and women and their patrons. This may be partly fortuitous in that the Arroasian rule attracted the obviously charismatic Malachy and he supported it strongly both personally and through his relatives and allies.²³ It may also have been because of the differences between the Augustinian and the alternative rules – principally Cistercian and Benedictine. The Cistercians were forbidden from taking donations in spiritual revenues, or rents, and so needed large tracts of land in outright donations, meaning they were expensive houses to found.²⁴ Historians have identified several factors in the appeal of the Arroasian Rule for Irish patrons. Donations of rents and tithes rather than large tracts of land were more attractive since these did not diminish family estates, which under brehon law were difficult for any except the head of the fine to alienate. The Augustinians may also have appeared well-placed to take up the mantle of parochial duties in the newly reorganised dioceses and emerging parishes, although there are now doubts about the extent of their involvement in parish duties.²⁵ The relative independence of the Arroasians may also have appealed. Since they were only ever loosely connected to continental motherhouses or to the chapters of the order, they were more suited to the complex dynamics of local lay politics than monasteries that were more strongly connected to the continent.²⁶ Other factors of the Augustinian order which emphasised their independence, such as flexibility in the choice of site and no

¹⁹ See the series of articles by Gwynn, *The Irish church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*.

²⁰ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp 114–20; 146–52; Dunning, "The Arroasian order in medieval Ireland", pp 297–315. ²¹ He is credited with establishing 54 congregations of monks, canons and nuns. See *Visio Thugdali*, p. 155. Whether Malachy personally established or influenced this number of monasteries is not totally clear. See Preston, "The canons regular of St Augustine", pp 19–34. ²² For England specifically see Dickenson, "English regular canons", pp 71–90; Thompson, *Women religious*, p. 145, discusses the Arroasian observance in the context of English nunneries. For the Augustinians and Arroasians in Ireland see Dunning, "The Arroasian order in medieval Ireland", pp 297–315. ²³ Flanagan, "St Mary's Abbey, Louth", pp 233–4. ²⁴ Hennessy, "The priory and hospital of New Gate", p. 42 and Empey, "The sacred and the secular", pp 137–9. ²⁵ Preston, "The canons regular of St Augustine", pp 175–9. ²⁶ For discussion of this rather vexed issue, see Dunning, "The Arroasian order in medieval Ireland", p. 315, and Milis, *L'ordre des chanoines réguliers d'Arrouaise*, pp 338–77, esp. pp

requirement for a minimum number of religious, meant that relatively small endowments were acceptable.²⁷ It is also possible that the Anglo-Norman or at least the foreign connections of the Cistercians and the Benedictines made them unpopular with the Gaelic Irish.²⁸ Simms has recently argued, however, that the alignment of the Augustinians with the native reform movement was more important for the church in medieval Ireland than any direct split between Gaelic and English.²⁹ It is likely that while the reasons for choosing the Augustinian rule were complex and multi-layered, the potential for a meaningful role for the lay founders and their families was probably an important factor in the establishment of Augustinian houses.

Irish women seem to have entered the newly established convents enthusiastically in these heady years of reform. An obscure reference to the synod of Clonfert in 1179 indicates that there were women who were defying family opinion by joining nunneries. The obviously corrupt reference is: "no portion Canons should be sought of women their husbands still living".³⁰ Gwynn has interpreted this to mean that no woman should be admitted as a canoness while her husband was still living.³¹ This implies that at the height of the reform enthusiasm there were women wishing to join religious institutions who did not have their families' approval.³²

The increased numbers of foundations for women at this time are also seen in other parts of Europe, where a similar upswing has been noted by Venarde in his study of nunnery foundations in France and England, and by Elkin and Gilchrist in their studies of English nunneries.³³ Venarde has argued that the increase in women's monastic houses was associated with the great charismatic preachers and hermits who inspired hundreds of women and men to join religious institutions or to found houses where others might live the coenobitic life.³⁴ This situation has obvious parallels in Ireland with the influence of Malachy of Down in inspiring patrons and religious men and women to embrace the reform of monasticism.

One of the paradoxes of the rise in foundations of nunneries in the period is that it was a time of political and social uncertainty in both England and France. Venarde argues that it was this uncertainty that seems to have proved a fertile background for laity of the lesser nobility to express their piety by founding

36off; Empey, "The sacred and the secular", p. 139, and Barry, *Archaeology of medieval Ireland*, pp 157–8. 27 Robinson, *Geography of Augustinian settlement*, I, p. 45. 28 This is the reason suggested by Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture*, p. 110. 29 Simms, "Frontiers in the Irish church", pp 178, 190–1. 30 AClon. 1179. 31 Gwynn, *The Irish church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*, p. 138. See also Gwynn, "St Lawrence O'Toole", pp 230–1. 32 The term canoness had specific meanings in convents in Europe, especially Germany, see McNamara, *Sisters in arms*, pp 195–201, however women following the Augustinian and Arroasian rules in England and Ireland were usually referred to in contemporary documents as "moniales" or "sorers", see Thompson, *Women religious*, pp 145–56. 33 Venarde, *Women's monasticism*, see figure 6, p. 56, figure 9, p. 180, for the situation in England and for general discussion see pp 82–8; Elkins, *Holy women*, pp 45–104; Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture*, pp 36–62. 34 Venarde, *Women's monasticism*, p. 79.

monastic houses for women. He suggests that there was an element of perceived social advantage to making such pious gestures, a way of allowing a family on their way up the social ladder to make their mark both upon the physical landscape and in the minds of their contemporaries.³⁵ In contrast, when political stability returned in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the increased economic security and political harmony felt by communities made it paradoxically harder for nunneries to establish a toehold in the landed structures. Such broad analyses are by no means certain and Elkins suggests that it was the increased population and prosperity of the twelfth century in England that influenced the growth of monasticism in such a profound way.³⁶

Significant differences have been observed in the timing of foundation of houses for men and women during the twelfth century. Men's houses were usually established first. In England there was a wave of foundations lasting from about 1080 to 1110 for Benedictines and from 1130 to 1140 for Augustinian foundations.³⁷ Houses for women were founded about a generation or two later in both orders, with Benedictine houses for women founded in a peak around 1160 and for Augustinian around 1180.³⁸ The founders of nunneries in both England and France in this period tended to be lay and of the lower nobility.³⁹ This is also borne out by the backgrounds of the nuns themselves, both at this time and for later centuries.⁴⁰

In Ireland, the pattern of foundations was influenced by similar factors, as Venarde has found for England and France, although with particular differences unique to the Irish context. The twelfth century in Ireland was both a period of social and political upheaval and a time of centralization of power and reform within the church. Even before the political changes associated with the invasion of the Anglo-Normans in the late twelfth century, there were disruptive power struggles between warring Gaelic kings. Although there were some attempts at centralisation, the twelfth century was a time when alliances were shifting and political overlordship was not realized.⁴¹ It is in this context that Ireland experienced the influence of charismatic religious reformers, so that the will for ecclesiastical change was joined with a relatively fluid political landscape. Foundation of monasteries and convents was often associated with attempts to solidify political claims to land and territory. The later shift of resources from the

35 Venarde, *Women's monasticism*, pp 112–14. 36 Elkins, *Holy women*, pp xix, xx.

37 Robinson, *Geography of Augustinian settlement*, I, p. 24 for chart showing dates of foundation of male Augustinian houses in England, the peak is between about 1120 and 1140 with very few established after 1225. 38 Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture*, pp 40–1. See also the tables p. 37 and the tables listing date of foundation, filiation and rank of founder. The graphs in Venarde, *Women's monasticism*, pp 8, 12 and 180, show the rates of foundation of nunneries in England and France very clearly. 39 Elkins, *Holy women*, pp 61–2 and 94–7, has analysed the ranks of the founders of nunneries in the south and the north of England, whereas Venarde has looked at the ranks of the founders of twelfth-century nunneries in France. *Women's monasticism*, pp 128–9. 40 Oliva, *Convent and community*, pp 52–61; 221–9. Harris, "A new look at the reformation: Aristocratic women and nunneries", pp 89–113. 41 The literature on the political situation of Ireland just prior to and after the arrival of the Anglo-

kings of Gaelic Ireland to the new Anglo-Norman lords meant that large tracts of land changed hands and were then available for donation to religious institutions perceived to meet the needs of new lay landowners. These political and social upheavals show more in common with the strife-torn landscapes in England during the period known as the “anarchy”, in which a surprisingly large number of nunneries were successfully founded.⁴²

The Clonard group: the first Arroasian network of nunneries

At the end of the twelfth century there was a recognisable network of nunneries dependent on the convent of St Mary's, Clonard (Co. Meath), made up of three separate groups of nunneries founded since 1144. These groups were the Leinster group, the Clonard group and the Clonmacnoise group.

The reforming bishop of Airgialla, Áed Ua Cáellaide, was instrumental in introducing the Arroasian observance into the priory of Louth. He did this with the collaboration of the king of the area, Donnchad Ua Cearbaill, whose reform agenda included introducing the new religious orders into other monasteries in his territories.⁴³ As well as being one of the patrons of the new Cistercian monastery at Mellifont, Donnchad Ua Cerbaill founded an abbey for Arroasian canons at Knock and the monasteries for nuns and canons at Termonfeckin in 1142.⁴⁴ All these monasteries were then placed under the motherhouse of Louth.⁴⁵ Áed Ua Cáellaide also influenced Diarmait Mac Murchadha, king of Leinster, in the choice of rule for his monastic foundations. A group of nunneries under the Arroasian observance was founded in Leinster by Mac Murchadha between 1146 and 1151, including Kilculliheen, near Waterford, St Mary del Hogges outside the walls of Dublin, and the small nunneries of Aghade (Co. Carlow), Taghmon (Co. Wexford) and Lusk (Co. Dublin).⁴⁶ Together with the nunnery at Termonfeckin these were among the earliest to follow the Arroasian observance and may have been instrumental in ensuring the further spread of the order.⁴⁷ Certainly, the early foundations of the nunneries of St Mary del Hogges, Kilculliheen and Aghade indicate an unmet need for nunneries in the Dublin and Waterford areas. Lands once belonging to older abandoned nunneries were probably included in this reorganisation of women's convents in Diarmait's area of influence. Calliaghstown, included in the estates of St Mary del Hogges,

Normans is extensive. For a useful summary of the historiography of the period see Duffy, *Ireland in the middle ages*, pp 1–6. For the political alliances leading up to the twelfth century see Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland*, pp 272–92. ⁴² Venarde, *Women's monasticism*, p. 127. ⁴³ Smith, *Colonisation and conquest*, pp 16–18ff. ⁴⁴ Donnchad Ua Cerbaill's foundation of Termonfeckin and his patronage of Mellifont are described in his obit preserved in an antiphonary of Armagh Cathedral, T.C.D. MS 77, f. 48v. For translation and discussion see Lawlor, “The genesis of the diocese of Clogher”, pp 138–9. ⁴⁵ Flanagan, “St Mary's abbey, Louth”, pp 228–30 and Preston, “The canons regular of St Augustine”, pp 88–90 for discussion of this argument. ⁴⁶ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 325, for Taghmon. For the foundation of the house of Lusk see *Alen's reg.*, p. 49. For the foundation of Aghade see *Alen's reg.*, p. 293 and Flanagan, *Irish society*, pp 102, 125. ⁴⁷ Flanagan, “St Mary's abbey, Louth”, p. 233.

was originally the site of a nunnery. While the place name suggests nuns, there is no firm evidence of any later medieval nunnery, so it is probable that Diarmait annexed lands formerly used by nuns to his new foundation. If there were any nuns still living there at this time, they may have been transferred to Dublin. In 1837, Eugene Curry reported that “cartloads” of bones had been carried away from a field known as “chapel field” in this townland. He also discovered an old font being used as a water trough. He surmised from these finds that this was the site of the nunnery dependent on Hogges, though it is more likely that the church was used as a medieval parish church, as there are no other records of nuns at this site.⁴⁸

A further group of Arroasian monasteries for nuns and canons in the Meath area was established around 1144 when Malachy visited the area. The first of these was probably St Mary's, Clonard. It was founded under the patronage of Ua Maél Sechlainn, king of Meath, in association with Malachy, and in turn was probably made dependent on the Arroasian community of canons at Louth.⁴⁹

In 1195 St Mary's, Clonard, received papal confirmation of its possessions and this document makes clear that there was a group of thirteen nunneries dependent on Clonard at that time.⁵⁰ Since the nunneries of St Mary's Hogges and Lusk established by Diarmait MacMurchada and the nunnery of Termonfeckin are included in the 1195 Clonard document it is clear that at some point Clonard became the head house for this filiation of the Arroasian nunneries in the east of Ireland. Some of the nunneries were at older monastic sites, such as Kells, Trim, Durrow and Clonard itself. At Clonard the reformed Augustinian monasteries established in the 1140s were separate from the older monastic house and were dedicated to universal saints of the church – St Mary and St Peter.⁵¹ The houses at the other sites may also have been established in parallel with older houses, rather than replacing them. Although most of these nunneries are in the Meath and Dublin areas, there were also some included from further afield: Annaghdown (Co. Galway); Drumalgagh (Co. Roscommon); Clonmacnoise and Durrow (Co. Offaly). Annaghdown was traditionally the site of a nunnery given to Briga, the sister of St Brendan. There are no surviving records of the convent of Annaghdown between the sixth century and 1195, so it is not clear whether it had survived in some form or was a new establishment on the old site.⁵² These convents may have been small houses affiliated to Clonmacnoise at the time of Malachy's reforms,

⁴⁸ Ordnance Survey Letters, Co. Dublin, NLI Typescript, pp 40–1, also see Otway-Ruthven, “The medieval church lands of County Dublin”, pp 69–70, for details of the extent of the medieval parish of Calliaghstown. ⁴⁹ For the affiliation with Louth see Flanagan, “St Mary's abbey, Louth”, pp 231–2. ⁵⁰ Brady, “The nunnery of Clonard”, p. 6, for his identification of the place named in the confirmation as dependent nunneries. *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp 310–25 mentions other communications with Brady in their identification of the fate of these dependencies. The bull confirming the possessions of Clonard, in *Pont. Hib.*, I, pp 83–6. ⁵¹ Hadcock, “The origin of the Augustinian order in Meath”, pp 125–7 and Hickey, *Clonard*, pp 36–9. ⁵² Goaley, *Monastic ruins at Annaghdown*, pp 8–11. Wilde, *Lough Corrib*, p. 70, considered the ruins of the nunnery to be the oldest in the site of Annaghdown.

or established on land originally belonging to Clonmacnoise. The Ua Máel Sechlainn kings were long-standing patrons of Clonmacnoise and, along with the Ua Conchobair kings of Connacht, had been granted burial rights there in the early medieval period.⁵³ The earliest mention of the nuns at Clonmacnoise is in 1026, when a pavement was built from the abbess's garden.⁵⁴ There were also personal ties with St Mary's, Clonard, where Derbforgaill was a major patron. She was also granddaughter of Murchad Ua Maél Sechlainn's founder of St Mary's, Clonard, and sister of Agnes, Clonard's first abbess.⁵⁵ Ua Maél Sechlainn was consolidating his position in the diocese of Clonmacnoise at this time, and it is likely that the inclusion of St Mary's Clonmacnoise and smaller dependent nunneries (see figure 3) in the affiliation with his foundation at Clonard was part of these ambitions.⁵⁶ The nunnery at Durrow was probably associated with the male house of Canons at Durrow, where their founder Murchad Ua Maél Sechlainn and his wife chose to be buried. This would indicate that the nunnery at Durrow and then Killeigh remained dependent on Clonard.⁵⁷ The grouping of these nunneries in one affiliation may, however, have been predicated solely on the choice of rule and a desire to bring them closer together in a similar way to the affiliations in France at the time.

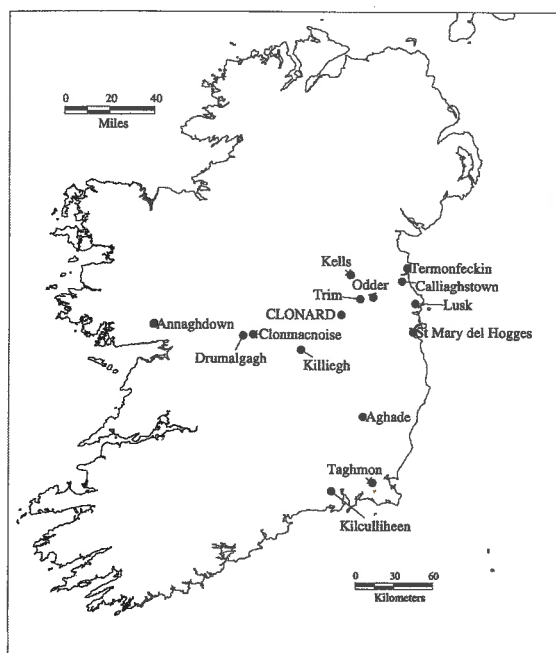


Figure 3. Clonard's dependencies in c.1185

⁵³ Kehnel, "The lands of St Ciarán", p. 13. ⁵⁴ *AClon*, 1026. ⁵⁵ The church in the nuns' graveyard was burnt in 1082 and it was 1180 when Derbforgaill rebuilt the nuns' church at Clonmacnoise, *AClon*. ⁵⁶ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp. 153, 158–67, details Ua Maél Sechlainn's place in the manoeuvrings for power at this time. ⁵⁷ For the death of

A feature of these convents' distinctive nature, their conscious break with the older Celtic monasticism and the way they embraced new reforms, was their dedications to St Mary. The introduction of dedications to the Virgin at this time was part of the wider upswing in devotion to Mary and is a good indicator of the foundation date of the convents, as it is extremely rare for churches or monasteries before the twelfth century in Ireland to be dedicated to any but native saints.⁵⁸ There is a poem to Colum Cille, which has been tentatively dated to the twelfth century and mentions the connection between virgins living in communities associated with Mary: "Mary exhorts them, Mary instructs them, she desires that her Son should have large communities."⁵⁹ It is possible that this refers to the numerous new communities that were emerging at this time and that must have appeared to have been filled with enthusiastic nuns dedicated to Mary.

Most of the Arroasian monasteries established in Ireland under the influence of the ecclesiastical reform were houses of nuns and canons living in proximity and sharing a church, a feature of the early years of Abbot Gervase of Arrouaise. When the observance spread outside France, the double structure was also incorporated in the early foundations in England.⁶⁰ Although traditionally double monasteries have been seen as something of an anomaly, practised on the Celtic fringes of Christian Europe and not tolerated for long within the mainstream of European monasticism, recently scholars such as Elkins and Gilchrist have argued that men and women living in proximity were a significant feature of twelfth-century monasticism generally in England and France and were not, as previously believed, influenced by the Celtic fringe. They argue that these double houses were a mainstream response to the reforms and enthusiasms of this period, with nearly 25 percent of nunneries founded at this time being also in some way double houses.⁶¹ This means that the double houses established in Ireland were at the forefront of ecclesiastical reform, although the resonances with older Celtic monasticism and its embrace of religious women and men living in proximity no doubt meant it was not a startling innovation. They were not without their critics, however, with that acerbic reporter Gerald of Wales describing the double houses of Irish Augustinians as scandalous.⁶²

How the relationships between the different Augustinian and Arroasian houses worked in practice in Ireland is obscure. Certainly the Arroasians in Ireland, as in England, seem fairly early to have relinquished ties with the mother house in Arrouaise, since before 1200 there were unheeded calls for the Irish to attend the general chapter of the order.⁶³ This does not necessarily mean that the observances were no longer followed, although Milis argues that the Irish probably dropped the separate observances of Arrouaise sometime in the

Murchad's wife see *AClon* 1137 and for Murchad see *AFM* 1153 and see Fitzpatrick and O'Brien, *The medieval churches of County Offaly*, pp. 98–9. ⁵⁸ O'Dwyer, *Mary*, p. 73. ⁵⁹ "Día mór dom imdeghail", cited in O'Dwyer, *Mary*, p. 74. ⁶⁰ Dickenson, "English regular canons", pp. 81–3, and Thompson, *Women religious*, p. 56. ⁶¹ Elkins, *Holy women*, pp. xvii–i and 55–60, and Gilchrist, *Gender and material culture*, pp. 38–9. Johnson, *Equal in monastic profession*, p. 7. ⁶² Giraldus Cambrensis, *Opera*, IV, p. 183. ⁶³ Milis, *L'ordre des chanoines*

fourteenth century.⁶⁴ Within Ireland, the ties between the daughter houses of Clonard probably continued to be active, although the evidence is scanty. At the death of Finola ny Melaghlen, abbess of Clonard, in 1286, she was described as “arch-abbess of Meath”, indicating that Clonard was still viewed as the motherhouse.⁶⁵ Canons from Durrow, Trim and St Peter’s, Clonard, all associated with St Mary’s, Clonard, as dependencies in the 1195 bull, represented the business interests of nuns of Clonard several times between 1282 and 1310, perhaps suggesting that there were still nuns in these houses then.⁶⁶ The links between the Clonard group and the prior of the Arroasian monastery of Louth were preserved for many years, because he claimed first right of presentation in the election of the prioress of one of the daughter houses, Termonfeckin, in 1418, and at the dissolution also held land and the rights to the vicarage at Termonfeckin.⁶⁷ However, when an election of the prioress of Termonfeckin occurred in 1535, the abbess of Clonard and Odder claimed the right of presentation, and presented in turn nuns from St Mary del Hogges in Dublin and Odder for the post.⁶⁸ This suggests that the links between the nunneries created in the twelfth century were still active in some way in the sixteenth century. Whether the links were used in any other ways except in the presentation of abbesses and prioresses is not known, although there is no evidence to suggest that they were completely redundant.

Killone and its daughter houses

Reforming Gaelic rulers also established the nunnery of St John’s or Killone (Co. Clare) and probably the dependent small nunnery of St Peter’s in Limerick. A fifteenth-century document that purports to be a copy of an earlier charter lists the possessions of the abbey of St Peter and St Paul at Clare Abbey, including Killone, and appears to represent the foundation of a network of Augustinian houses in the Thomond area under Domnall Mór Ua Briain in the latter years of the twelfth century.⁶⁹ Recent analysis by Marie Therese Flanagan has established that it is not a copy of a lost twelfth-century charter but a fifteenth-century constructed narrative of the foundation of Clare Abbey and its network of monasteries. The lands and resources mentioned in the ‘foundation’ charter were more probably those associated with the monasteries in the fifteenth rather than the twelfth

règuliers d’Arrouaise, pp 367–70 and see Preston, “The canons regular of St Augustine”, pp 81–3.

⁶⁴ Milis, *L’ordre des chanoines réguliers d’Arrouaise*, p. 370. ⁶⁵ *AClon.* 1286. She is identified as the abbess of Clonard by Brady, “Nunnery of Clonard”, p. 4. See also *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1252–1284, p. 511. ⁶⁶ 1282: Brother Walter, canon of the church of St Mary, Durrow *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1252–84, p. 436; 1286: Brother William, canon of St Mary’s Trim, *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1285–92, p. 109; 1288: Brother John, canon of the house of St Peter’s Clonard, *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1285–92, p. 177; 1295: Brother William, canon of the house of St Mary’s, Trim, *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1293–1301, p. 117; 1310: Brother Hugh, canon of St Mary’s, Trim, *Cal. pat. rolls*, 1307–13, pp 290–1. Brother Robert from the house of Navan was also used as a messenger in 1288, see *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1285–92, p. 184. The suggestion that there were still nuns at the houses of Trim and Durrow at this time has been made by Brady and cited in *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 318. ⁶⁷ NLI MS 13, f. 292. For the rights to the vicarage see Flanagan, “St Mary’s abbey, Louth”, pp 226–30. It is probable that the land and the vicarage were the property of the long-disbanded canons of Termonfeckin. ⁶⁸ “Reg. Cromer”, *Louth Arch. Soc. Jn.* 10 (1941–4) pp 177–8. ⁶⁹ Westropp,

century, and may indicate that the estates were substantially augmented around this time.

Leask dated surviving buildings at both Clare Abbey and Killone to the first third of the thirteenth century.⁷⁰ Since the charter claiming foundation by Domnall Mór is not authentic, it makes more sense to credit Donnchad Cairprech Ua Briain rather than Domnall Mór with the foundation of both Clare Abbey and Killone.⁷¹ The inclusion of houses for nuns in this organisation of the spiritual resources of Thomond in both the early thirteenth century and later in the fifteenth, indicates that the Ó Briain family considered nunneries to be an essential feature of the landscape. Although there is no other direct evidence of connections between the monasteries, it is probable that the monks of neighbouring Clare Abbey provided spiritual support for the nuns of Killone and probably the staff for the parishes that were impropriated to it.⁷² It is also likely that the small nunnery of Ballynagallagh in Small County (Co. Limerick) was added to this group in the fifteenth century, when the area around it was overrun by Tadhg Ó Briain.⁷³

Kilcreevanty and its daughter houses

Another royal foundation was the nunnery of St Mary of Castasilva at Kilcreevanty (Co. Galway), founded by Cathal Crobderg Ua Conchobair, king of Connacht, in about 1200, initially under the Benedictine rule.⁷⁴ The records of its foundation give tantalising extra details on the choice of rule and the relationships between lay founder, episcopal overseer and the nuns. It is likely that members of Cathal Crobderg’s family were nuns at Kilcreevanty. Not only was this accepted practice throughout Gaelic Ireland at the time but also all the nuns of Kilcreevanty whose names are known were surnamed Ó Conchobair. It is necessary to remain cautious of assuming that members of the same family would automatically render support to each other, especially in the milieu of the Uí Chonchobair struggles for the kingship of Connacht. Certainly, it is probable that they did support their founder and kinsman, but they may not always have done so. The family name of the abbess at the time, Orata, is not mentioned, but the death of Duibhessa, daughter of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair and wife of Cathal Mac Diarmada, was recorded in 1230, and she was described as “a black nun”. It is possible that she had retired to Kilcreevanty.⁷⁵

The first surviving significant record of the convent is when the nuns changed their rule, first to Arroasian then to Cistercian, apparently causing a dispute with the archbishop of Tuam sometime between 1216 and 1223.⁷⁶ It is the resolution of this dispute, negotiated by Domnhall Ó hÉanna, bishop of Killaloe and papal legate in 1223, that has been recorded. The resolution

“Foundation charter of Forgý Abbey”, pp 78–9. ⁷⁰ Leask, *Irish churches and monastic buildings*, II, p. 63. ⁷¹ My thanks to Marie Therese Flanagan for discussing her dating and analysis of this charter with me. ⁷² Westropp, “Augustinian houses of Co. Clare”, p. 127. ⁷³ This scenario is argued by Ó Dálaigh, “Mistress, mother and abbess”, p. 61. ⁷⁴ For the bull confirming the possessions of Kilcreevanty see *Pont. Hib.*, I, pp 239–43. Ware gives the founder in *Whole Works*, II, p. 110. ⁷⁵ *ALC*, 1230; *AConn.* 1229. ⁷⁶ The changes are referred

involved the exemption of the nuns from the supervision of the archbishop of Tuam except for a triennial visit by him and the abbot of Cong, and the nuns agreed to return to the Arroasian observance.⁷⁷ The reason for the proposed change of order and the dispute between the nuns and archbishop of Tuam is not clear from the surviving documentation, although the complexities of the relationships between the Uí Chonchobair, the archbishops of Tuam, and the reforms in the church in Connacht are probably at the heart of the dispute with Kilcreevanty.

The nuns themselves may have wished to change their order. The Cistercians were popular with women in other countries and there were nunneries in England that followed the rule while never being admitted formally as members of the Cistercian affiliation.⁷⁸ Part of the problem with Kilcreevanty following the Cistercian rule may have been the contemporary disapproval from the Cistercian general council towards admitting convents of nuns to the order.⁷⁹ Cathal Crobderg himself was a supporter of the Cistercians, having founded the Cistercian monastery of Knockmoy in 1190, and retired there to die in the habit of the order in 1224, so it may have been his wish that the nuns of Kilcreevanty follow that order.⁸⁰

The other difficulty in following the Cistercian order was that these monasteries were exempt from local episcopal authority, including the levying of procurations and fees to episcopal funds. The reforming Augustinian prior of Saul, Felix Ua Ruanada, was consecrated as archbishop of Tuam in 1202 and did not resign until 1235. He was captured by a hostile member of the Uí Chonchobair, Máel Ísa, in 1216, however, and may not have fully retained control over the diocese from that time on. Felix Ua Ruanada, although originally Augustinian, ended his life in the Cistercian habit, and was also a well-travelled man and would have been aware of the developments within the Cistercian order outside Ireland.⁸¹ It may then have been his opposition to the plan that led to the dispute.

Felix was removed from the archbishopric and a rival set up in his place around the time the nuns successfully petitioned the pope to change to the Cistercian order.⁸² This rival, likely to have been an uncle of Ruaidrí Ó Conchobair, was then possibly archbishop at the time of the dispute with Kilcreevanty.⁸³ The problems with the different factions within the diocese of Tuam were complex and revolved

to in a later dispute with the archbishop of Tuam. See *Cal. justic. rolls Ire.*, 1307–13, p. 113–4. ⁷⁷ *Cal. papal letters, 1396–1400*, pp. 335–7. The abbey of Cong was Arroasian, and other witnesses to this agreement are canons from Cong and Tuam, also Arroasian. Dunning, “The Arroasian order in medieval Ireland”, p. 306. ⁷⁸ Degler-Spengler, “The incorporation of Cistercian nuns”, pp. 99–101. ⁷⁹ Although the Council passed legislation dealing with nuns in a manner suggesting their long-standing inclusion in the order in 1213, by 1220 decrees were passed forbidding more convents of women being accepted into the order. For general discussion of this see Thompson, *Women religious*, pp. 94–5. ⁸⁰ See *AConn.* 1224. ⁸¹ Gwynn, *The Irish church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*, p. 266, where he notes that Felix was present at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome. ⁸² The actual petition does not survive, only an exemplification of it dated 1400. See *Cal. papal letters, 1396–1404*, pp. 335–7. ⁸³ Felix Ua Ruanada, who was consecrated in 1202, was captured and made a prisoner by Máel Ísa Ó Conchobair, coarb of Roscommon in 1216. See *ALC* 1216 and Gwynn, *The Irish*

around attempts by the papal legate, with probable support of Cathal Crobderg, to usurp the power of the family of Uí Dhubhthaigh who traditionally held the bishopric.⁸⁴ It is also possible that once Felix was deposed Cathal Crobderg himself changed sides and eventually supported the rival archbishop rather than Felix.⁸⁵ It may also have been Cathal Crobderg who decided that the Arroasian rule was better for Kilcreevanty, as this would make it the mother house for the order in Connacht, affiliated with a significant number of smaller nunneries throughout the territory that Cathal controlled and wished to secure.⁸⁶ The abbots of the Arroasian monasteries of Cong and Tuam, who were also involved in the resolution, may have been unwilling to allow such a wealthy house as Kilcreevanty to pass to the Cistercian order and out of their orbit of influence.⁸⁷ Convents needed chaplains and other administrative personnel who were routinely supplied by the nearest monastery of the same order. In this case the nearest Cistercian house would have been the Uí Chonchobair-patronized house at Boyle, while both Cong and Tuam were much closer.

How the dispute arose is therefore not totally clear from the surviving evidence. The interests of powerful secular and ecclesiastical people were involved, however, putting Kilcreevanty on a course that it would probably follow for the rest of its history. Wherever the impetus for the change of rule originated, it resulted in a dispute with the archbishop which was obviously important enough for the papal legate to be involved and for there to be several communications with Rome over the matter. Despite the lack of a final explanation, the vivid and enduring connections between the convent, the founder and the wider ecclesiastical communities emerge as paramount.

Most of the nunneries affiliated with Kilcreevanty in the 1223 agreement were probably in existence in the twelfth century, some having been founded by Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, possibly with the support or influence of Malachy in the 1140s.⁸⁸ From the 1223 agreement it is clear that some of Clonard's dependencies had been transferred to Kilcreevanty. The convents were those at Annaghdown, Clonmacnoise and Drumalgagh, all in or near the archdiocese of Tuam. The transfer possibly occurred because of the changes to the political

church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, pp. 268–9 and also *NHI*, IX, p. 30, note 3. The exemplification of the agreement between the Archbishop and Kilcreevanty mentions that it occurred in the fifth year of the archbishop's consecration, which would suggest a date of 1216/17. See *Cal. papal letters, 1396–1404*, p. 337. This is either an error, or proof that the archbishop was not Felix but a rival, whose name has not been recorded. He is named as Florence in papal order to visit Kilcreevanty issued in 1321. See *Cal. papal letters, 1305–42*, p. 212, however all other references to him are as F. ⁸⁴ Simms, “Frontiers in the Irish church”, p. 195, and Gwynn, *The Irish church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries*, pp. 230–1. ⁸⁵ Simms, “Frontiers in the Irish church”, p. 195, suggests that Cathal Crobderg may have changed sides by 1216. ⁸⁶ For a summary of Cathal Crobderg's ambitions and the steps he took to secure his territories in Connacht, see *NHI*, II, p. 161. ⁸⁷ They are witnesses to the agreement. See *Cal. papal letters, 1396–1404*, p. 335. ⁸⁸ The convents at Ardarn, Clonfert, Derrane, were probably originally joint foundations of men and women founded by Toirdelbach Ó Conchobair in the 1140s. See *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp. 312 and 315, for suggestions that Malachy

landscape after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, or possibly because of realignments of territory between the archbishops of Tuam and Armagh.⁸⁹ The nunnery of Inishmaine is not mentioned in the 1223 document. Its lands, however, were included in the post-dissolution surveys, confirming that it was a part of the Kilcreevanty network.⁹⁰ There was an early medieval house of monks at Inishmaine, but there are no mentions of monks at this convent after the twelfth century, when the main portions of the surviving ruins were built, incorporating earlier structures.⁹¹ It is possible that the nuns from the convent at Annaghdown, which is not mentioned after the early thirteenth century, were transferred to a new foundation at Inishmaine soon after 1223, retaining their affiliation with Kilcreevanty.⁹²

The nunneries that were transferred to Kilcreevanty from Clonard were probably those originally affiliated with Clonmacnoise. While the kings of Meath were trying to gain ascendancy, these were affiliated with Clonard. After 1220, when the fortunes of the Ua Máel Sechlainn dynasty were rocked by the incursions of Anglo-Norman settlers, the Uí Chonchobair seem to have claimed them for Connacht. Other convents not mentioned in connection with Clonard were included in the Kilcreevanty filiation (see figure 4). Some of these convents, such as Cloonoghill, may also have been originally a dependency of Clonmacnoise.⁹³ Small nunneries founded later in the medieval period were also made dependent on Kilcreevanty, indicating that it continued to be recognised as the head of the Arroasian nuns in Gaelic Ireland. It is probable, for example, that when Walter de Burgo founded the small house of Annagh in the fifteenth century it was made dependent on Kilcreevanty.⁹⁴ The relationships between these daughter houses and the mother house are not made clear in any of the surviving documentation. In general, dependent houses were financially and administratively under the control of the mother house. There is, however, little evidence of how this worked in practice for the convents of Ireland. Since the lands and revenues associated with the daughter convents were listed as part of Kilcreevanty's estates in the sixteenth century, there were almost certainly some sort of administrative and financial ties that endured throughout the medieval period.⁹⁵

was influential in these foundations. ⁸⁹ Flanagan, "St Mary's abbey, Louth", p. 232.

⁹⁰ Knox, *History of Tuam*, p. 284. ⁹¹ Healy, "Two royal abbeys", pp 3–9. The suggestion that the male house continued into the thirteenth century is based on an obituary for Mailisa Ó Conchobair, whom *AFM* described as being Prior of Inishmaine. For explanation of the error of the Four Masters in this and proof that Mailisa was prior of Roscommon see Nicholls in "A list of the monasteries in Connacht, 1577", p. 39, n. 107, and pp 41–3. ⁹² This is the view expressed in *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 318, and Goaley, *Monastic ruins at Annaghdown*, p. 11. Goaley also suggests that the buildings of the nunnery at Annaghdown were converted for use by the Premonstarian canons. Kilcreevanty retained some land at Annaghdown; see Knox, *History of Tuam*, p. 281. ⁹³ Moore, "The cell of the canonesses regular of St Augustine at Clonoghill", pp 15–16. ⁹⁴ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 312. When Kilcreevanty was dissolved in 1543, its possessions included 80 acres in "Annaghe of the Nuns", Archdall (1786), p. 799. ⁹⁵ Preston, "The canons regular of St Augustine", pp 91–2, discusses the dependencies of Augustinian

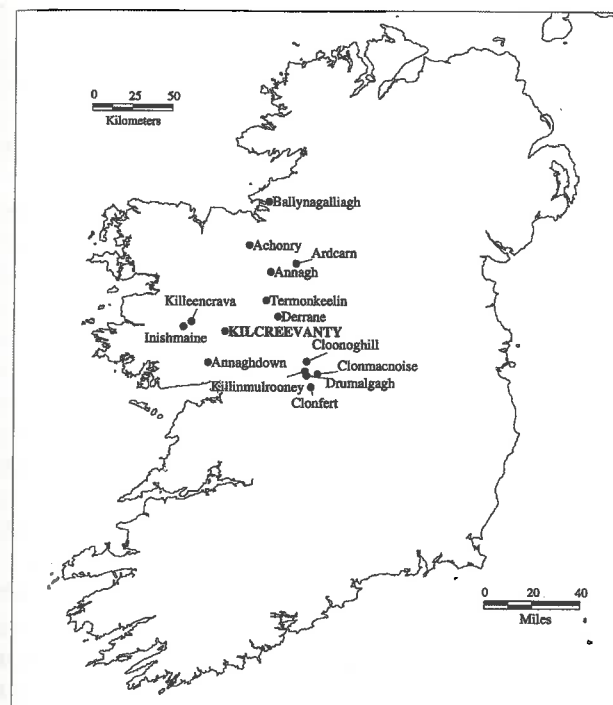


Figure 4. Kilcreevanty and its daughter houses, c.1223

Cistercian nuns in Gaelic Ireland

Malachy also introduced the Cistercians to Ireland and created a thriving network of Cistercian monasteries, many of which were dependent on Mellifont (Co. Louth). Some of these early foundations also included women. One of the patrons of Mellifont was Derbforgaill, granddaughter of its patron, Ua Maél Sechlainn, and she chose to retire to Mellifont dying there at the age of eighty-five.⁹⁶ Although this is not direct evidence for a nunnery at Mellifont, her residence there certainly proves that women were admitted in some capacity, even if only as noble lodgers. Further suggestion of the presence of nuns occurs in the early thirteenth century, when Irish Cistercian houses incurred the reforming ire of Stephen of Lexington.⁹⁷ He objected strongly to the admission of nuns into any of the Cistercian houses in Ireland, and strictly forbade the practice.⁹⁸

In 1228, the prior of Inishlough in Co. Tipperary launched his ambush against Stephen's representative from behind a hedge of the nuns' house adjoining the abbey.⁹⁹ Although Stephen did not mention any nuns here particularly, he did order the sale of the abbot's house "in the courtyard of the nuns at Mellifont". At

canons. ⁹⁶ *AFM* 1193. ⁹⁷ For the history of the revolt at the Cistercian house of Mellifont see O'Dwyer, *The conspiracy of Mellifont*. ⁹⁸ Stephen of Lexington, *Letters*, p. 211. ⁹⁹ Stephen of Lexington, *Letters*, p. 163, for the complaint about Jerpoint; p. 185 for the attack

Jerpoint he was more specific, ordering the removal of “the nuns’ monastery”, which was adjacent to Jerpoint, and that the nuns be suitably rehoused, ostensibly because of the complaints of Count Marshall and others. These rather laconic references certainly establish the presence of women at these Cistercian houses. They may have simply been houses where noble patrons could retire and die in the religious habit, or they may have housed women who had taken more formal vows. The mention of Count Marshall in the complaints against Jerpoint is interesting, suggesting that there was disquiet among Anglo-Irish patrons about the close proximity of nuns and monks.

NUNNERIES IN ANGLO-IRISH COMMUNITIES

The arrival of the Anglo-Normans and the resulting changes in secular property holdings and ecclesiastical structures affected the patterns of foundation and affiliation of nunneries in the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It is easy to overestimate this effect because, as Simms and others have pointed out, the process of reform among the Gaelic Irish – which had been started in the twelfth century – had long-lasting consequences which were not fully realised by the end of the twelfth century.¹⁰⁰ Within the ambit of the newly arrived Anglo-Normans, the ecclesiastical landscape was substantially reshaped. Parishes were established to fit the changed political landscape and to advance Anglo-Norman settlement. Another change in areas settled by Anglo-Normans was a shift in patrons and founders of religious houses generally. Many existing women’s houses were received well by the new lords of their districts, particularly those under the patronage of Mac Murchada, whose alliances with the incoming Anglo-Normans must have smoothed the path of acceptance for the nunneries formally under his protection. St Mary del Hogges in Dublin was made effectively independent of Clonard sometime after 1195, had its possessions confirmed and was the recipient of further grants of lands and rents from the Anglo-Normans. This is reputed to have occurred after the nuns proved their loyalty to the new regime by hiding Englishmen from the Irish during the reign of Henry II, with the result that they were rewarded by King John with the confirmation of their property and new grants.¹⁰¹ St Mary del Hogges was always well supported by the archbishops of Dublin, including Lorcán Ua Tuathail, the archbishop at the time of the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. This association may have meant that members of his family became nuns there.¹⁰²

by the prior of Inishlounaght (Suir) p. 185. ¹⁰⁰ Simms, “Frontiers in the Irish church”, pp 194–6ff. ¹⁰¹ BL Add. MS 4813, pp 51–2. ¹⁰² Ware reports that that Laurence’s sister, Mór, was “grossly ill-used” by her husband, Diarmait Mac Murchada, and found refuge in the abbey. She gave all her husband’s wealth to the nunnery and hid there for seven years after she left him, only emerging for the funeral of her brother Laurence, when she was recognised. No reference to this story is found in the vitae of Lorcán Ua Tuathail, and I have found no

Another nunnery founded by Diarmait Mac Murchada, Kilculliheen, received generous grants and confirmation of its holdings from King John, when Lord of Ireland, and was made independent of Clonard sometime between 1185 and 1195. The inspeximus of its original charter refers to A. abbess of all Ireland, almost certainly Agnes of Clonard. Therefore, at the time of John’s grant, around 1185, Kilculliheen was filiated with or dependent on Clonard. However, it was not included in the dependencies of Clonard made in 1195 and certainly by 1239, when the inspeximus was made, Kilculliheen is referred to as an abbey in its own right.¹⁰³ Requesting the inspeximus itself probably signals a substantial change in lay patronage, and it includes substantial grants from David FitzMilo made in or before 1239. David FitzMilo also granted land known as Addrigooole to Kilculliheen at this time. There are no references to the nuns of Addrigooole after this date, although the land was still in the possession of Kilculliheen at the dissolution.¹⁰⁴ This may mean that the nuns of Addrigooole transferred to Kilculliheen at the time of the grant or that they had died out sometime earlier. Carrigan suggests that FitzMilo’s donation of the remote area of land at Addrigooole indicates it was an ancient nunnery.¹⁰⁵

There were also new foundations of nunneries made by the Anglo-Normans. The foundation of monasteries has been associated by historians with the colonisation process, and these monasteries have been assumed to have been fortified and willing to defend their lands and interests from resisting Gaelic Irish.¹⁰⁶ Mapping foundations of Augustinian canons along with Anglo-Norman mottes shows that the spread of the Augustinian was contiguous with the spread of English settlers.¹⁰⁷ Nunneries are not usually considered in this process, but there were several significant convents established by the first generations of tenants-in-chief, which suggests that they were considered to have a place in the conquest of Ireland, probably more in cultural reorganisation of resources than in defence of lands.

These nunneries were founded relatively soon after the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, generally around 1200, at the end of the lives of the first generation of arrivals. This suggests that estates and manors needed to be organised and secured before nunneries could be considered. While the numbers of nunneries founded at this time are small compared with the number of men’s houses, two of the larger Anglo-Norman land holders did choose to found and build nunneries as their major contribution to new monastic foundations. These two nunneries were founded in Co. Kildare at Timolin and Graney, and both were situated close to the castles of their founders, suggesting that this proximity compensated for their relative inability, as religious women, physically to defend their houses.

medieval references to it. It has a romantic quality which makes it suspect, however Ware must have had older sources than now survive, so perhaps it has a medieval origin. BL Add. MS 4813 pp 51–2. For Mór’s marriage see Flanagan, *Irish society*, pp 101–4. ¹⁰³ *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1171–1231, p. 370. ¹⁰⁴ *Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, p. 204. ¹⁰⁵ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 312, and see Carrigan, *History and antiquities of Ossory*, II, pp 234–5. ¹⁰⁶ “Introduction”, *Reg. Trist.*, p. xxx. ¹⁰⁷ Duffy ed., *Atlas of Irish history*, p. 39.

The nunnery of St Mary at Timolin was founded about 1191 by Robert son of Richard Norragh, Lord of Norragh, who placed his granddaughter, Lecelina, as first prioress.¹⁰⁸ Robert had been granted the district thereafter known as the “Norragh” by Hugh de Lacy in his original sub-infeudation of Leinster.¹⁰⁹ His foundation of the nunnery at Timolin followed a familiar pattern of monastic foundations by the early Anglo-Normans which were typically Augustinian and situated close to the founder’s castle.¹¹⁰ It is possible that there were women living as religious in the area who were transferred to the new nunnery. The name, Timolin, or Teach Moling, house of St Moling, and often distinguished from the monastery of St Mullins as Techmolinbeg or the small house of St Moling, suggests an earlier Celtic foundation for at least the church.¹¹¹ On this evidence, there may have been a house of nuns here, or it may have been ecclesiastical land. There is a slight corroboration of the existence of nuns at Timolin prior to the foundation by Robert, son of Richard Norragh. The archbishop Alen, in his sixteenth-century survey of the diocese of Dublin, noted that the nuns of Timolin, like those of Grace Dieu, were originally without a recognised rule.¹¹² This may indicate nothing more than Alen’s disapproval of nuns, although it is also possible that the Augustinian rule was adopted at the request of Robert of Norragh, and that before that time the nuns’ community was considered by the episcopacy to be a more informal institution.

The priory of Timolin was close to the founder’s castle and endowed with the rectories of the churches on his lands.¹¹³ Timolin was also supported by Hugh Dullard, probably one of Robert’s tenants, with donations of the rectories of his land.¹¹⁴ Timolin acquired substantial estates with many rectories in its holdings, suggesting that it was the favoured monastic destination for the spiritualities from the lands of several of the Anglo-Norman settlers in this area. A number of these rectories were in the Wicklow area, never heavily settled by the Anglo-Normans and quick to return to control of the Gaelic Irish. This meant that they were later more liabilities to Timolin than assets. The donation of rectories in areas that were not completely settled indicates that, like monasteries, the new settlers conceived convents as part of the colonisation process.

St Mary’s at Graney was founded by Walter de Riddlesford I sometime before 1200, with significant estates of land and churches donated by both Walter and his tenants and spread over the dioceses of Dublin, Leighlin, Ferns and Cork.¹¹⁵ Walter de Riddlesford I was one of the original arrivals with Strongbow and the

¹⁰⁸ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 325, “Rep. Viride, Alen”, p. 212. ¹⁰⁹ *Song of Dermot*, lines 3122–5, and see Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, I, p. 383, and Fitzgerald, “Narraghmore and the Barons of Norragh”, p. 243. ¹¹⁰ Carville, *The occupation of Celtic sites*, p. 57. Robert’s castle had been built for him by de Lacy in 1185. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, I, p. 356. ¹¹¹ Joyce, *Irish place names*, p. 116. ¹¹² Alen’s reg., p. 179. ¹¹³ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, II, p. 626. ¹¹⁴ Archdall (1786), pp. 343–4. ¹¹⁵ Brooks has argued that it was the first Walter de Riddlesford who founded Graney, as opposed to his son of the same name. Brooks, “de Ridelisfords”, p. 117. The confirmation of the original charter of Walter de

tenant-in-chief of a large area around Bray.¹¹⁶ He donated not only significant amounts of land close to his own castle, but also a large proportion of the spiritual revenues of his holdings including the tithes of the mills from his holdings in Bray.¹¹⁷ One of his castles was near Graney, possibly near the church of Kilkea, which was itself appropriated to the nuns of Graney.¹¹⁸ Other major landholders in the area also donated lands to Graney, including William de Carew, who was enfeoffed with Idrone by Strongbow. William’s nephew, another William, donated the advowson of the caput of his holding, Dunlecney, to Graney before 1207, along with lands there and in St Mullins.¹¹⁹ Graney was obviously the most important monastic establishment patronised by Walter. He organized his tenants to donate lands and rectories from their holdings and Graney remained the only monastic house on his estate during his lifetime. He or members of his family may have been buried at the convent. There survives one Norman grave slab from the convent and there were reports of other medieval slabs.¹²⁰ Although Graney was the most important monastery founded by de Riddlesford, he, like so many of the early generation of Anglo-Normans, also donated lands and rents to St Thomas’, Dublin, and St Mary’s, Dublin, while he and his wife founded the hospital of St John the Baptist in Castledermot.¹²¹ This pattern was in keeping with the first generation of Anglo-Normans who established monastic institutions to provide different services for the nascent communities being fostered by the settlers.

A number of rectories in Cork were donated to Graney.¹²² The donation of rectories so far from the convent is surprising, though not unprecedented, and may be explained by the family connections of Walter de Riddlesford. One of his daughters, Basilida, married Richard de Cogan before 1213 and the de Cogan had been granted substantial lands in Co. Cork.¹²³ They also held lands around Castledermot, possibly dating from this time.¹²⁴ The de Carew family

Riddlesford, *Pont. Hib.*, pp. 137–9. Geraldine Carville discusses the site and history of Graney in “Graney Convent,” *Hallel* 27(2002) 13–31. ¹¹⁶ *Song of Dermot*, lines 3094–9; and Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans* I, pp. 226, 369, 386. ¹¹⁷ The charter is examined in detail by Brooks, “de Ridelisfords”. ¹¹⁸ Orpen, “Mottes”, p. 248. Kilkea is one of the churches which was listed at the Dissolution commissioners belonging to Graney. *Extents Ir. mon. possessions* p. 24. ¹¹⁹ *Knights’ fees*, pp. 60–1. ¹²⁰ Harbison, “A medieval tombstone from Graney”, pp. 216–17; FitzGerald, “The priory and nunnery of Graney” p. 380, reports the destruction of a tomb slab in 1875 which had been used to cover the well of the Convent, known locally as Mary’s well. ¹²¹ “Rep. Viride Alen”, p. 206. *Chart. St Mary’s Dublin*, I, pp. 29–30; Reg. *St Thomas Dublin*, pp. 170–1. ¹²² *Fiantis Ire., Hen. VIII-Eliz.*, I, p. 35, lists five rectories in Cork which were part of the property of Graney. Also see Smith, *Ancient and present state of Cork*, pp. 66, 67, 69, 71. The foundation charter of Bridgetown Priory (Co. Cork) mentions lands of the nuns of Graney adjacent to its newly donated lands around Fermoy. The charter is dated before 1216. See O’Keeffe, *An Anglo-Norman monastery: Bridgetown priory*, p. 34. For full details of the landholdings of Graney and other nunneries see, Hall, “Women and religion”, pp. 357–83. ¹²³ Brooks, “de Ridelisfords”, p. 131; *Chart. St Mary’s Dublin*, II, p. 15 for Basilida’s marriage and Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, II, 45–46. ¹²⁴ Brooks, “de

also patronised Graney and held lands in Cork.¹²⁵ These connections suggest that it was through either personal connections with the de Cogans or Carews or through patronage from Walter de Riddlesford's daughter that Graney acquired the rectories in Cork. As with the donations to Timolin, Graney's administration of these rectories represents part of the cultural colonisation of the newly conquered lands of the Anglo-Norman settlers.

Another of the major Anglo-Norman settlers to establish a convent on his lands was Walter de Lacy, who founded the Cistercian nunnery of Loughsewdy or Plary in 1218.¹²⁶ Like the other nunneries founded by Anglo-Normans in the first generation or two, such as Timolin and Graney, this nunnery was established in close proximity to an important castle in the patron's holdings, in this case the castle of Ballymore. Walter de Lacy was a son of Hugh de Lacy, who had been granted the lordship of Meath in 1186. The adoption of the Cistercian rule for this nunnery is interesting, since there was an Augustinian male house, probably dependent on Tristernagh, about half a mile from the nunnery, and it would have been logical for the nunnery to follow the same rule. Indeed, it appears that the monks of the monastery undertook the pastoral and administrative care of the nuns.¹²⁷ The Cistercian rule may have been the choice of the nuns themselves, although in the absence of direct evidence of the first nuns this can only be speculation. The patronage of Cistercian houses seems to have been popular with the de Lacy family. There was a Cistercian monastery on the family holdings in England, and Carville has speculated that the name Plary, which was an alternative name for the nunnery, may be a corruption of the English name of this monastery – Plarton.¹²⁸ The de Lacys were also not among the donors to St Mary's Cistercian abbey in Dublin, preferring to patronise the Victorine abbey of St Thomas.¹²⁹ However, this does not mean that de Lacy would not choose the Cistercian order when founding a nunnery on his own land. Whatever the reasons for the choice of rule, the de Lacy family founded the nunnery and continued to support it over a number of generations.

The process of colonisation occurred later in the west of Ireland than in the east, and as part of that process a similar pattern of monastic foundations occurred there, again involving small numbers of nunneries. In Co. Limerick, on lands which were wrested from Gaelic control later than in the east, the rather obscure nunnery of St Catherine d'Conyl was founded in the first half of the thirteenth century by ancestors of the earls of Desmond. Although the cult of St Catherine became popular in Ireland this is the only church in medieval

Ridelisford", p. 132, note 86. ¹²⁵ McCotter, "The sub-infeudation and descent of the Fitzstephen/Carew moiety, I", p. 68. ¹²⁶ Carville, "Cistercian nuns in Ireland", p. 68. ¹²⁷ The nuns of Loughsewdy and the monks of Tristernagh are mentioned as sharing the presentation of a benefice in 1395 and 1397. *Cal. papal letters, 1362–1404*, p. 513, and *Cal. papal letters, 1396–1404*, p. 80. The lands of the nuns of Loughsewdy were absorbed into the estates of the monks by the dissolution, probably indicating that the nuns were no longer in residence. See *Extents Ir. mon. possessions*, pp 284–5. ¹²⁸ Carville, "Cistercian nuns in Ireland", p. 67. ¹²⁹ *Reg. St Thomas Dublin*, pp 11–12.

Limerick known by this name, so its dedication may represent a personal choice of the founder.¹³⁰ The earliest definite mention of the convent is in 1298, when in a survey made of the manor of Shanid belonging to Thomas FitzMaurice there is mention of land which Thomas's grandfather had granted to the nuns of "Okonyl".¹³¹ There is also an obscure reference to a Beatrice, prioress of St Catherine "de Balyelan", bringing to warrant Thomas Fitz Maurice in a dispute over eighty acres of land in Limerick in 1291.¹³² Although it is possible that Beatrice was from the small convent founded at Ballynagallagh, it is likely that the prioress would call on the patron to give warranty in any dispute. As Thomas FitzMaurice was the patron of St Catherine and not Ballynagallagh, it is probable that the priory mentioned is St Catherine d'Conyl. The cantred of Shanid had been granted in about 1215 to Thomas, son of Maurice FitzGerald, and was considered the "most ancient house" of the Desmond earls.¹³³ It was probably this Thomas's son, John, who founded the abbey.¹³⁴ The lands of St Catherine were all within the boundary of the FitzMaurice cantred of Shanid and the nunnery itself was built close to the Desmond castle at Shanid.¹³⁵ The founder's family remained patrons of the abbey and it was James FitzMaurice, earl of Desmond, who claimed the right as patron to inform the papacy of the scandalous living arrangements of the nuns in 1432 and probably had the nunnery suppressed.¹³⁶

St Catherine d'Conyl, then, follows the pattern of foundation of nunneries in other parts of Anglo-Irish Ireland: they were established towards the end of the first generation after conquest and they were not usually the first monastic houses to be established. These nunneries were situated close to the founders' castles and were supported by grants of land and resources from throughout the holdings of the founder. This indicates that the nunneries were a significant part of the reorganisation of land and ecclesiastical resources of the new Anglo-Norman settlers, and that their relative inability to directly defend their lands, as male monastics may have been able, was not seen as a definitive disability in their foundation. They were obviously considered to be a part of the cultural colonisation of the land that accompanied the spread of the newly founded monasteries throughout Anglo-Norman Ireland.

¹³⁰ Westropp, "A survey of the ancient churches in the county of Limerick", p. 469.

¹³¹ *Cal. doc. Ire.*, 1285–92, p. 259. ¹³² Calendar of common bench roll, no. 16, 19 Ed I (NAI RC 7/3), pp 26, 195. The convent dedication is given as St Mary on p. 26. The lands are named in the calendar, however they are not immediately recognisable as lands which later belonged to St Catherine d'Conyl. ¹³³ Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, II, p. 164. For further discussion of the sub-infeudation of Shanid and its acquisition by the FitzThomas see McCotter, "The sub-infeudation and descent of the Fitzstephen/Carew moiety, II", pp 97–8. ¹³⁴ John died at the battle of Callan in 1261. Lydon, "Land of war", *NHI*, II, p. 252. ¹³⁵ The later barony of Shanid was probably similar in boundaries to the old cantred. Wardell, "The history and antiquities of St Catherine's Old Abbey", p. 41. ¹³⁶ *Cal. papal letters, 1427–47*, p. 400. The nunnery is referred as suppressed in 1428, see "Obligaciones annatis pro diocesis Limiricensis", p. 111. Although this may not represent the final suppression of the convent, there are no references to the nuns after this date.

Bishops were involved in the foundation of two nunneries in the heartland of English settlement and were part of episcopal plans to reorganize spiritual resources and revenues within their dioceses. Archbishop John Cumin of Dublin, the first English archbishop of Dublin, founded Grace Dieu (Co. Dublin) in 1195. The priory of Grace Dieu was probably founded on lands donated by Cumin from church lands and staffed with nuns transferred from nearby Lusk, one of the dependencies of Clonard. It is possible that the nuns of Lusk came under episcopal disapproval for lapses in their observance of their rule or that they were not following a recognised rule at all, as there is a late reference to the fact that these nuns, like the nuns of Timolin, were “originally claustral without a cloister and regulars without a rule”.¹³⁷ The church at Lusk itself was later appropriated to All Saints Priory in Dublin. Once the nuns had transferred to Grace Dieu, they were no longer dependent on Clonard. Cumin conferred several other churches on the nuns of Grace Dieu, including the valuable church of St Audoen inside the walls of Dublin. This, however, was taken away from the nuns by the next archbishop, Henry of London, and reallocated to the chapter of St Patrick’s cathedral, while the nuns received the church of Ballymadon in return.¹³⁸ This may have been in line with Henry of London’s reforming agenda and his desire to enrich St Patrick’s cathedral.¹³⁹

The nunnery of the Holy Trinity at Lismullin (Co. Meath) was another important nunnery founded by an Anglo-Irish bishop. The history of its foundation is slightly different from that of Grace Dieu because it was founded about fifty years later, after the ecclesiastical resources of the area had been reallocated. The site of Lismullin itself was probably already church property before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, as land at Lismullin was included in lands confirmed to the nunnery of Clonard.¹⁴⁰ By 1242, Richard de la Corner, bishop of Meath, had enfeoffed it to Avicia de la Corner, and she then used it to found the priory of the Holy Trinity at Lismullin.¹⁴¹ Since there are no further notices of the nuns at St Mary’s Skreen after 1195 it is possible that nuns who may still have been at this nunnery were incorporated into the new house at Lismullin. Richard de la Corner also gave other lands in Meath and Dublin that formed the nucleus of the priory’s holdings. He had arranged the transfer of some of these lands from other monastic institutions in the area. For example the lands of Dunsink were originally held from Hugh Tirrell by the priory of Little Malvern in England. A prior in the early thirteenth century enfeoffed the priory of St Peter’s Trim with these lands and Bishop Richard then acquired them for Lismullin.¹⁴² There was at least one lay donor at the foundation, and probably more because in a fourteenth-century

¹³⁷ *Alen’s reg.* p. 179. ¹³⁸ “Rep. Viride, Alen”, p. 194; *Alen’s reg.* p. 49, where Alen records that this action still rankled with the nuns of Grace Dieu three centuries later. “Liber Niger and Liber Albus of Christ Church, Dublin”, p. 315. ¹³⁹ Murphy, “Balancing the concerns of church and state”, pp 41–56. ¹⁴⁰ *Pont. Hib.*, I, 84, and see Hickey, *Skryne and the early Normans*, p. 111. ¹⁴¹ The earliest charters of Lismullin survive in London PRO C 66/277–2 and edited in “Unpublished medieval notitiae” pp 8–11. ¹⁴² “Calendar of common bench roll, no. 37”, (NAI RC 7/5) pp 355–8. See Hall, “The nuns of Lismullin”, p. 59.

confirmation of the nunnery’s holdings Richard Fitz John is also described as donating land in Powderlough (Co. Meath) at the foundation of the nunnery.¹⁴³

The foundation of Lismullin may have been part of Bishop Richard’s ambition to tighten his episcopal control over the spiritualities of his diocese that had been previously granted to other monastic houses, principally the Cistercian abbey of St Mary’s Dublin.¹⁴⁴ That there was disagreement over these arrangements is suggested by the compensation that was arranged for lost tithes and revenues to the abbey of St Mary’s when Lismullin was established. A papal indult was obtained which exempted the nuns of Lismullin from “setting aside any portion of the offerings made to their church when the founders have shown to the diocesan a fair exchange for the mother church, which the abbot and convent of St Mary’s Dublin hold to their uses”.¹⁴⁵ Lismullin’s position in the Anglo-Irish heartland of Meath with substantial estates helped to make it ultimately one of the most successful of the nunneries in the medieval colony of Ireland.

Convents in towns

Anglo-Irish families were also responsible for establishing nunneries in towns and villages. A Cistercian nunnery was founded in Down in the late twelfth century by the Bagnal family, probably on the site of the Celtic nunnery of St Brigid.¹⁴⁶ It may have later changed rule, as Anne Mandeville is recorded as the Benedictine prioress of Down in 1353.¹⁴⁷ Although little is known about this convent, it did continue until the early sixteenth century and the names of several of the nuns from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries are known.¹⁴⁸ The convent of St Mary’s in Derry may also have been re-founded on the site of an earlier Celtic nunnery, as there are references to both a “lady erenagh” in 1128 and then to the foundation of the convent in 1218.¹⁴⁹ The nunnery was described as Cistercian in the early sixteenth century with lands in and around the city of Derry.¹⁵⁰ Another small nunnery founded by an Anglo-Irish family was the convent at Killeigh (Co. Offaly). Alemand says that the family were the Warrens, while Ware only says that it was Augustinian.¹⁵¹ As the canons of the Augustinian house of Killeigh were dependent on Durrow, it is possible that the nuns of Durrow relocated there at this time.¹⁵² The nunnery was on the north side of the village, and was one of three religious houses that owned most of the land in the area between them.¹⁵³

Religious women who wanted to form a recognized monastic institution in the city of Cork in the last years of the thirteenth century had apparently

¹⁴³ *Calendar of inquisitions miscellaneous (chancery)*, 1348–77, p. 236. ¹⁴⁴ See Hickey, “St Mary’s abbey and the church at Skryne”, p. 149. ¹⁴⁵ Theiner, *Vetera mon.*, p. 86; *Pont. Hib.*, II, p. 317. ¹⁴⁶ St Brigit’s Down mentioned AU 1006. ¹⁴⁷ *Cal. papal letters*, 1342–62, p. 509. ¹⁴⁸ Its lands were incorporated into the cathedral of Down in 1513. Bradshaw, *Dissolution*, p. 37. ¹⁴⁹ AFM 1134. Ware refers to its foundation in 1218; see *Chart. St Mary’s Dublin*, II, p. 234. ¹⁵⁰ Colby, *Ordnance survey memoir of Londonderry*, pp 25, 208, 212–13, citing an inquisition of 1609 for the position of the lands of this nunnery. ¹⁵¹ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 321. ¹⁵² *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, pp 183 and 321. ¹⁵³ Fitzpatrick and O’Brien, *The medieval churches of County*

gathered around a recluse, Agnes de Hereford. This indicates a rather informal arrangement that was common in Europe at the time, when women wishing to live a religious life would become inspired by one charismatic person, often a recluse or anchorite, and would then form themselves into a community. At some point they often either sought official recognition or were pushed into doing so by church officials who believed that women in particular needed the security and discipline of one of the recognised monastic rules and the official guidance of a bishop or neighbouring abbot.¹⁵⁴ The official notices of Agnes de Hereford's proposed foundation of the convent of St John the Baptist were obviously the end result of a period of negotiation with the local land-holders for donations of land and income to support the new convent. It is probable that the nuns had already been living together for some time before 1297 when the first inquiry was ordered into the grants of land for the convent in preparation for the necessary license from the crown. The petition filed with the inquisition makes clear that the nunnery was not yet securely founded and did not have the resources to purchase lands.¹⁵⁵ The first inquiry found that the lands should not be granted as such a grant would be prejudicial to the crown's interests. The second inquiry, however, allowed the grants, noting that the lands were all "waste" – perhaps literally destroyed, no longer tenanted or merely given over to pasture – and the nuns and their patrons were expected to make sure that tenants made the land profitable or at least defensible. How far this was able to be accomplished is not certain because there are very few further references to the nuns of St John.

In the two inquiries, which mention slightly different lists of donors, the nuns were to be granted land and incomes of churches predominantly from the important Barry family of Cork.¹⁵⁶ Since Agnes's name is prominent in all the documents it is probable that Agnes was decisive in the impetus for the foundation. One of the donors was probably a relative of hers. John FitzGilbert, who donated a half carucate of land and the advowsons of two churches, was also known as de Hereford and it is possible that Agnes involved her relative and other contacts in order to acquire the land necessary to firmly establish her nunnery.¹⁵⁷ There were probably further grants to the nunnery, although the only surviving reference is to the almost certainly exaggerated tale of an "Armorican" who came to visit the nuns with a "lecherous design" and was constrained to give the convent £40 per year for ever.¹⁵⁸ Since this is a huge

Offaly, pp 85–8, and see the aerial view with sites marked, pl. 13; and the plan p. 82, and Kearney, *Killeigh and Geashill*. ¹⁵⁴ See, for example, Thompson, *Women religious*, pp 16–17ff. ¹⁵⁵ PRO London, c 143/36 no. 10, cited by Brand, "The licensing of mortmain alienations", p. 126, n. 11. ¹⁵⁶ The Barrys were descendants of the Philip de Barry, brother of Gerald of Wales the chronicler, who participated in the original conquest of Cork in the train of Robert Fitz Stephen. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans*, II, pp 41, 43; III, 119–20. ¹⁵⁷ McCotter, "The sub-infeudation and descent of the Fitzstephen/Carew moiety, I", p. 75, who notes that John Fitz Gilbert de Hereford held his lands from Gerald de Prendergast and Maurice de Carreu. ¹⁵⁸ BL MS Egerton, 1774, p. 74. There is no medieval source mentioned for this episode, only a reference to a *Mon. Hib.* by Thomas, which I have been unable to trace.

sum, the story is probably apocryphal. However, it may be a memory of some sort of attack on the nuns.

THE LAST WAVE OF FOUNDATIONS

There were other small nunneries founded throughout Ireland during the later medieval period. Most of these have left very few traces on the records or the landscape and may not have lasted long, but this is difficult to establish with any accuracy. Antiquarian scholars attribute Matilda de Lacy with founding a nunnery at Gageborough (Co. Offaly) in the thirteenth century. There are no other references to this nunnery, so it may have been a very small and short-lived house or it may have been the house of a hermit or anchorite.¹⁵⁹ A Fitzgibbon founded the small house of Ballynagallagh or Monasternicallagh near Lough Gur in Co. Limerick in 1283. The portion of surviving structure indicates that it was always small.¹⁶⁰ The area in which it was situated was taken over by Tadhg Ó Briain in the fifteenth century and Ballynagallagh was made dependent on the Ó Briain foundation of Killone; however, it probably retained connections with the monastery of Adare, another Fitzgibbon foundation. One of the Ó Briain abbesses may have lived there or had some connections with the nunnery in the late fifteenth century, as Renalda Ní Bhriain, abbess of Killone who died in 1510, owed money to the convent when she died, which was then administered by the monastery of Adare.¹⁶¹

There were also nunneries that were possibly founded at the instigation of women desiring to live pious and regular lives and inspired by the religious revival of the fifteenth century. The small house of Ballymacadane in Co. Cork is recorded as being founded by Cormac Láidir Mac Carthaigh, Lord of Muskerry, in 1450 or possibly 1472 for his relative Honor.¹⁶² With this sort of foundation it is often very difficult to interpret the evidence to ascertain where the impetus for a foundation originated. As Cormac Láidir also founded the Observant Franciscan house at nearby Kilcrea, this foundation is similar in pattern to other foundations by Gaelic Irish lords, who often founded several religious houses in their careers.¹⁶³ Ballymacadane may have been on the site of an earlier monastery that has vanished without any archival record. One commentator

¹⁵⁹ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, I, 56 and see *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 317. ¹⁶⁰ Westropp, "A survey of the ancient churches in the county of Limerick", p. 449, describes it as being a "very small building". ¹⁶¹ Her will is in NLI D 1978. The identification of the Inis Patraic, to which Renalda owed 20 marks, as Ballynagallagh is made by Ó Dálaigh, "Wife, mother and abbess", p. 61. ¹⁶² As with many of the small and poorly documented foundations there is some uncertainty about much of the history of Ballymacadane. Smith, *The ancient and present state of Cork*, p. 171, gives the date as 1450, whereas Hayes, "Ballymacadane Abbey", pp 141–3, citing "a roll in the British Museum" gives the date 1472. Both may be correct in that the second date possibly refers to enlargement or completion of significant buildings. ¹⁶³ Smith, *The ancient and present state of Cork*, p. 166.

believes the surviving ruins may be of an older date than fifteenth century.¹⁶⁴ However, since no archaeological work has been done on the site, it is not possible to be certain of the architectural evidence at this time.

Abandoned church buildings and lands were sometimes used for pious purposes, and some of these were for women who may not have founded lasting communities, but rather small places used for hospices or places of prayer. One woman who seems to have done this is Sawe ingen Oconnolen, who petitioned the archbishop of Armagh in 1456 for permission to live continentally and to keep a hospice in the church lands of Donoghmore.¹⁶⁵ No more is heard of this hospice and it is probable that it lasted only during the life of Sawe. Founders seem to have often wanted to establish nunneries for specific members of their families, or in one case as a sort of contingency plan, in the event that a female relative wanted to enter the monastic life. When the land was given to Cong abbey to establish a nunnery at Annagh by Walter de Burgo Mac William Oughter, the stipulation accompanying the donation was that any female member of his family who wished to enter the religious life could do so in this convent.¹⁶⁶ Walter must have felt some special spiritual affinity with the convent he founded, as he chose to be buried there in 1440.¹⁶⁷

The history of Franciscan nuns in medieval Ireland is very obscure. In 1316, six houses for Franciscan nuns in Ireland were reported to the chapter at Naples; however, in a list drawn up in 1384–5 there were only three mentioned.¹⁶⁸ These three have been identified as at Carrick-on-Suir, Youghal and Fooran. Of these the identification of Franciscan nuns at a house at Carrick-on-Suir rests on a tradition that the Elizabethan house of Thomas, earl of Ormond, at Carrick-on-Suir was built on the site of a nunnery of Poor Clares.¹⁶⁹ The history of the convent at Fooran (Co. Westmeath) is also extremely poorly documented. An inquisition in 1605 found that there were walls still standing of a house of nuns at “Farron McNeighon”, together with certain lands that had belonged to it.¹⁷⁰ As these lands were described as a parcel of the lands of the Franciscan friars of Athlone it has been assumed that the nuns were Franciscan as well.¹⁷¹

The house of nuns at Youghal has a slightly better documented history, even if it is more legendary than factual. The traditional history of the nunnery of St Anne’s starts with the Anglo-Norman foundation of the town, when a lighthouse was built and donated to nuns on the condition that they maintain the light. This supposedly was to deter attack on the nuns and the lighthouse by the

¹⁶⁴ MacCarthy, “Ballymacadane Abbey”, p. 13. ¹⁶⁵ *Registrum Iohannis Mey*, pp 336–7. This is possibly the lands which were in the hands of the Culdees of Armagh until the sixteenth century and the site of an early monastery. ¹⁶⁶ Archdall (1786), p. 500. ¹⁶⁷ Lewis, *Topographical dictionary of Ireland*, I, 29. ¹⁶⁸ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 309. ¹⁶⁹ *Materials for the history of the Franciscan province of Ireland*, p. 163, lists the rather thin evidence for this. ¹⁷⁰ Archdall (1786), p. 710. The full transcription is given in BL Egerton MS 1774, ff. 249–51. The land and the abbey were later granted to Francis Blundell, *Cal. pat. rolls Ire.*, Jas. I, p. 244. ¹⁷¹ *Med. rel. houses Ire.*, p. 317. This is not definite of course, but in the absence of any other evidence it is reasonable to assume that the nuns were Franciscan.

Gaelic Irish.¹⁷² A French traveller in 1644 described the convent by the sea and the remains of the tower from which the lights were shone.¹⁷³ When the old lighthouse was finally demolished in 1848, there was a small cottage connected to it on the land side, which was possibly a remnant of the nunnery or built from its ruins. Although it could not have been Franciscan from foundation, it is assumed to have been Franciscan at the dissolution as it was dissolved with the Franciscan friary in 1542.¹⁷⁴ The only other contender for inclusion in the meagre list of houses of Poor Clares is in Galway, where in 1511 Walter Lynch, one of its prominent citizens, gave his daughter a house near the church of St Nicholas which was afterwards known as the house of the poor nuns of the Order of St Francis.¹⁷⁵

LOCATION OF CONVENTS

The position of nunneries and their lands could have a significant impact on their later ability to manage their property and attract patronage. Characteristics of nunnery positioning that may have affected their long-term survival included the position relative to the founder’s or patron’s holdings, and the distance to water, mountains, roadways and other monastic houses. Like monasteries, rural nunneries in Ireland were almost all situated near water, although how this water was managed with mill streams and construction to facilitate water flows has not been fully investigated for nunneries, as it has for some monastic houses. Nevertheless the distance to water, whatever the means of water management, must have been a significant factor in the maintenance and long-term survival of nunneries.¹⁷⁶ The existence of mills, dependent on water flow and essential for grinding of grain for domestic use by the nunneries and their tenants, was also essential to the good management of monastic estates, and there is evidence of mills at many of the nunneries. Founders seemed to have been anxious to ensure that nunnery estates were equipped with all the facilities needed for good monastic and manorial management.

As with the monasteries, nunneries in Ireland were concentrated in areas of higher population, avoiding boglands and mountains that held potential dangers and difficulties. Although nunneries were probably in relatively secluded positions, these positions were usually within the reach of populous areas, suggesting that it was in these areas that the need for nuns and their services was

¹⁷² Hayman, *Notes and records of the ancient religious foundations at Youghal*, pp 40–1. ¹⁷³ Cited in “Notes to Archdall”, *IER* 8 (1872) p. 137. ¹⁷⁴ Hayman, *Notes and records of the ancient religious foundation at Youghal*, pp 41–2. In 1597, the lands of the Franciscans of Youghal included the site of the chapel of St Anne, “near the same town” see *Fiants Ire.*, Hen. VIII–Eliz. III, p. 295. ¹⁷⁵ Hardiman, *History of the town and county of the town of Galway*, p. 274. Mooney, “Franciscans in Ireland”, *Terminus* 11 (1955) p. 131. ¹⁷⁶ Carville, *Occupation of Celtic sites*, p. 29. See also Stalley, *The Cistercian monasteries of Ireland*, pp 33–5, for the importance of water for the siting of Cistercian monasteries.



Figure 5. Map showing all convents known after c.1200

felt and that resources were sufficient to support nunneries. Defining populous areas within medieval Ireland is usually based on patterns survival of mottes for the Anglo-Norman settler population and the distribution of raths for the pre-Norman and remnant Gaelic areas. Another indicator of population distribution is the ancient roadways that traversed Ireland and followed geographically favourable paths between mountains and boglands. When a map of the nunneries is compared with maps of mottes, raths and roadways, it is clear that nunneries, like most of the medieval monasteries, were founded within areas where conditions were conducive to settled communities.¹⁷⁷ The relative seclusion of both rural and urban nunneries, within populated areas, enhanced the ideology of claustration that was meant both to protect and contain nuns from the wider communities.

Examining the map of later medieval nunneries, it is clear that nunneries were not evenly distributed throughout Ireland. There are few nunneries in Ulster or the south-west of Cork and Kerry. Given the state of the surviving written records from these areas, some smaller communities may have escaped historical notice altogether. However, to some extent this pattern of convent foundations follows earlier church and monastic settlement patterns which avoided bogland or mountainous terrain and tended to follow secular settlement and communication routes. The topographically difficult areas of Kerry and Donegal, for example, did not support many Celtic monasteries, nor were monasteries attracted there after the twelfth-century reform.¹⁷⁸ It is not surprising, then, to find no nunneries in these areas. Nunneries in Ireland were built within reach of population centres and male monasteries, both of which provided personnel and support needed by groups of women living communally. Women in isolated parts of the west and north who wished to live religious lives would not have had the same opportunities for entering convents as women in more heavily populated areas of Connacht, Thomond and the Anglo-Irish areas of the east. Some would have lived under private religious vows and have escaped notice in the records. For others there would have been no other option but to marry and raise children as devout lay women.

Urban nunneries were also located in relatively secluded positions, in a similar way to nunneries in urban centres in England.¹⁷⁹ The convents in the towns of Dublin, Derry, Limerick, Armagh, Cork, Youghal, Waterford and Galway were all close to the walls or within them, but usually in a quieter part of the settlement. Kilculliheen, although close to Waterford, was across the mouth of the Barrow river from the town itself. In Dublin, St Mary del Hogges was built outside the walls in an area which has recently been described as having a "recreational" function within Dublin, set back from a major road and in a position dominated

¹⁷⁷ For a map of medieval raths with male Augustinian and Cistercian houses superimposed see Carville, *Occupation of Celtic sites*, p. 20. For a map of ancient roadways see *ibid.*, p. 24, map 10. ¹⁷⁸ See maps of Celtic monastic sites, boglands, and communication routes in Carville, *Occupation of Celtic sites*, pp 17–24. Also *Map of monastic Ireland*. ¹⁷⁹ Butler, "Medieval urban religious houses", pp 168–9.

by this convent, the priory of All Hallows and open land called Hoggen Green.¹⁸⁰ The Green had been an open area within the Viking settlement of Dublin and was where their open-air gatherings took place. The founder of Hogges, Diarmait Mac Murchada, may have chosen to site the nunnery and monastery here because of the existing open spaces and relative seclusion. The small nunnery of St Peter's in Limerick was located inside the boundary of the city, adjoining the wall itself, although the wall was probably built after the nunnery, so a deliberate decision was made to include the nunnery within the walls.¹⁸¹ The siting of the nunneries in Cork and Limerick within the walls of the cities may have been for practical defensive reasons, or it may have reflected their function in serving their local communities.

Nunneries were established in a variety of rural and urban situations throughout medieval Ireland. There were a handful which survived from Celtic times in areas that were not heavily colonised by the Anglo-Irish, but the majority of Gaelic Irish nunneries which operated through the medieval period had been established or re-established under the auspices of the reforming kings and bishops of the mid- and late twelfth century. These convents were established according to reform agendas that included male houses, and were formed into affiliations and dependencies by their founders. The twelfth and early thirteenth centuries saw the foundation of the Mac Murchad group of nunneries in his territories of Leinster which were eventually affiliated with the Clonard group of nunneries in Meath under the auspices of Ua Maél Sechlainn. The daughter houses of Clonard in Connacht changed affiliation in 1223, when they were made dependent on the Ui Chonchobair nunnery of Kilcreevanty along with numerous other smaller Arroasian houses throughout the Ui Chonchobair territories. In Thomond, a group of Augustinian monasteries were established in the late twelfth century that included the nunneries of Killone, Co. Clare, and St Peter's, Limerick. All these nunneries were founded by Gaelic kings and bishops under the reformed rule of Arrouaise or Augustine, their territories and dependencies were within the territories of their founders and they were obviously considered necessary ingredients to the vibrant reform of monastic culture, land and resources which occurred after the synod of Kells in 1152.

The Anglo-Norman advance, from the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, included foundation of convents and monasteries to hold the spiritual resources of the conquered land and to advance the English cultural colonisation. Although nunneries have not usually been considered by historians as having a part in this agenda, their foundation by several of the first generation of tenants-in-chief, and the transfer of considerable amounts of land and spiritual resources to their care, indicates that a healthy network of convents was a feature which the Anglo-Normans considered necessary in their new lands. Nunneries were

established close to significant castles of Walter de Riddlesford and Richard, lord of Norragh, in Co. Kildare, and FitzThomas, in Shanid in Co. Limerick. The first generations of Anglo-Irish bishops in Meath and Dublin also sought to establish well-resourced nunneries in their dioceses with the foundation of Lismullin, Co. Meath, and Grace Dieu in northern Co. Dublin. These, combined with the older Gaelic foundations of Kilculliheen, Co. Kilkenny, and St Mary del Hogges in Dublin, received substantial grants of lands and privileges of the new local lords, which mean that there was a string of well-endowed and substantial nunneries in the Anglo-Irish areas by the middle of the thirteenth century.

The upsurge in foundations and interests in monastic life in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Ireland mirrored a pattern occurring in England and France. In these three areas this was followed by a decline of both the economic and religious will to establish further monastic houses for men and women. In Ireland the religious boundaries once drawn by native Irish reform and Anglo-Norman political reorganisation were not easy to alter and there were few foundations later than the mid-thirteenth century. Another factor likely to influence the rate of new foundations was a decline in both economic support for nuns and the numbers of women willing or able to join nunneries. The ability of nuns to manage their estates under these changed conditions was dependent on the support which they could muster among the local lay communities, both as patrons of the convents themselves and as tenants for conventual lands. The next part of this book will analyse in detail the ways in which religious women managed their estates and the environments in which they found themselves during the troubled centuries of the later medieval period.

¹⁸⁰ For a modern reconstruction of medieval Dublin see, Clarke and Simms, "Medieval Dublin", *NHI*, IX, p. 37. Clarke has argued that this section of suburban Dublin was "recreational". See "Urbs et suburbium", p. 55. ¹⁸¹ *Civil Survey, Co. Limerick*, p. 441.