

A WOMEN'S GRAVEYARD AT CARRICKMORE, COUNTY TYRONE, AND THE SEPARATE BURIAL OF WOMEN

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Carrickmore is a village about 10 miles E. of Omagh. It takes its topographical name from the rocky mass – a late intrusion of dolerite – which rises abruptly, dominating the valley of the Camowen river flowing W. through the low, boggy Omagh plain (Fig. 1). In the shelter of the rock, to the E., the Roman Catholic church and graveyard occupy the site of the medieval parish church and probably a pre-Norman church. The parish name is Termonmaguirk, from the erenagh family documented in the late Middle Ages. Its earlier name was *Termon-cumainig* (*Termon-conyn* and variants), and since the definition of dioceses in the 12th century it has lain at the NW. extremity of the diocese of Armagh.¹

The earliest reference we have come across is in the *Miscellaneous Irish Annals*: in 1195 'the churches of Tír Eóghain were plundered and laid waste by Ruadhri MacDuinn Shléibhe, king of Ulaidh. The churches of Domhnach Mór [Donaghmore], the refectory of Cruimthear Coluim, the church of Doire Loráin [Derryloran], and Tearmann Comáin were plundered, and the church of Díseart Dá Chríoch [Desertcreat] was burned'.² By the time of the 1306 ecclesiastical taxation *Termeconyn* was listed as a parish church. There has been an attempt to identify Termon with a church mentioned in the *Tripartite Life of Patrick*,³ but all the local traditions – and they are strong – are with St Columba. Clefts in the rock are known as St Columbkille's Bed and Well, and Manus O'Donnell's 1532 *Life of Columba* tells how 'in the place that is now called Termon Cumainig in Tír Eogain, he hallowed that place and left thereon the right of sanctuary thenceforth. And he struck three strokes with his staff upon the ground, and a well sprang from each stroke thereof'.⁴

Two-thirds of a mile SW. of Termon Rock, towards the SW. edge of the dolerite mass, is the small enclosure known as Ralignaman, from the Irish *Relig na mban*, the women's graveyard (O.S. Tyrone 6 in. sheet 36; grid ref. H 607721).⁵ It lies between 400 and 500 ft O.D., in poor land with rock very close to the surface and in places protruding. To S. and W. the ground falls away steeply to the Camowen river valley, and to SW. the skyline is broken by the Gortfinbar ridge, sharply cut towards its W. end by the prominent

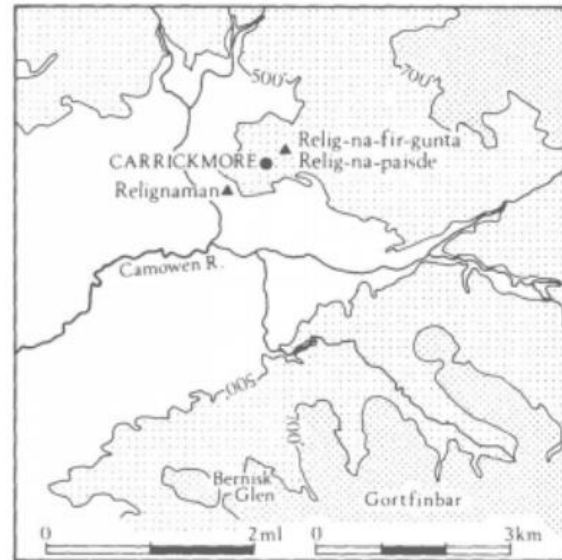


Fig. 1. Map of Carrickmore area.

Bernisk Glen. The rocky hill is of little use now except for rough pasture, but signs of old cultivation ridges near Ralignaman attest to earlier pressure on the land, perhaps in pre-famine times. A large area of rock has been quarried away immediately E. of the site, but quarrying will not proceed further westwards and the Department of the Environment has recently agreed to take the site into guardianship to be protected from grazing stock and presented for public interest.⁶

Ralignaman is a small, sub-rectangular enclosure measuring about 62 ft (19m.) across (Fig. 2, Pl. 1). The grass-grown, stony bank is between 5 ft and 8 ft (1.5 to 2.5m.) wide and 2 to 3 ft (0.6 to 0.9m.) high. In places wall faces can be seen, though they are mostly covered by tumble. A clear gap on the W. side, about 3 ft 3 in. (1m.) wide, is the original entrance. The gap to N. seems to result from the incorporation of the NW. side of the enclosure in a field boundary and is not an original feature. It seems likely that this was originally a squarish, stone-walled enclosure, but its present state indicates long neglect. The interior level is not significantly raised above the exterior,

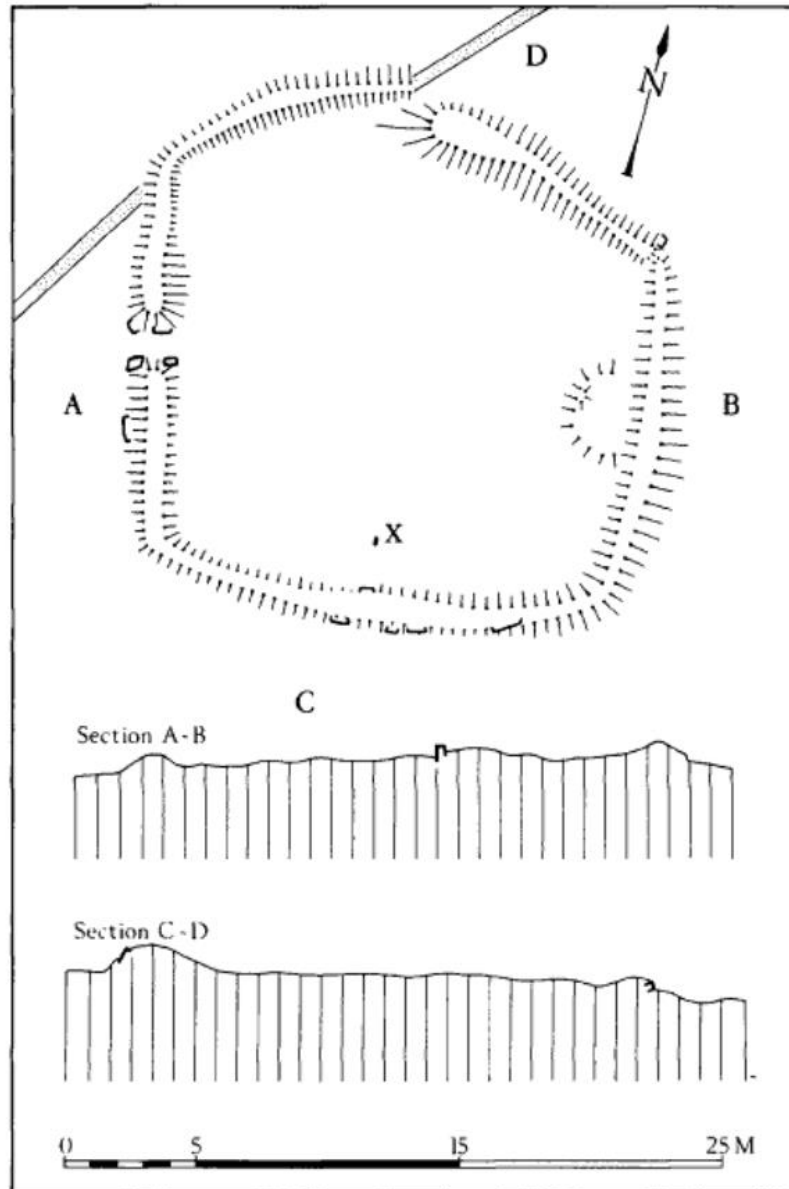


Fig. 2. Plan and sections of Rellignaman.

but the surface is irregular, with a large rock near the centre (visible in section A-B in Fig. 2), many small mounds and rough stones, some upright but mostly fallen. In the S. part of the enclosure, marked on the plan, is the only cut stone: a small sandstone slab, crudely shaped into a rough cross, 1 ft 6 in. high, a maximum of 1 ft 2 in. wide and 2 in. thick (Fig. 3; marked X on Fig. 2). On its E. side is a disjointed, roughly pecked cross, with two lines below suggesting a triangular base. The W. side is partly flaked away

but the remains of a simple pecked cross can be seen.⁷

In his fine 1857 edition of Adamnan's *Life of St Columba* William Reeves wrote of the 'nearly disused burying ground, called Rellig-na-man, or "the Women's cemetery"', and the local tradition is, that St Columkill directed a woman of bad character to be buried at a spot where the sound of a bell, rung in front of the funeral, would cease to be heard at his church; and that he left an injunction that the cemetery should never be entered by



Pl. 1. View of Relignaman from the SW. in 1966.

a living woman or a dead man. Devout women in old times used to request burial here, under the idea that none interred here would be damned; but this impression has nearly disappeared'. He added that 'outside the old parish cemetery of Termon there are two others, called *Relig-na-paisde*, "Children's cemetery", and *Relig-na-fir-gunta*, "Cemetery of the slain" ' or wounded men.⁸ A more recent source refers to a special burial place for suicides near Relignaman, and gives *Relig na Leanabh* (O.S. Relicknalániv) as the alternative name for the children's graveyard.⁹

It is clear, both from early written sources and records of practice in the last century and this century, that special provision has sometimes been made for the burial of particular groups. There were royal graveyards: at Armagh, for example, the royal heir of Ailech was buried in 935 in the 'cemetery of the kings' (*Annals of Ulster*). Slain men often died without receiving the last rites and there was clearly some reluctance to bury them in consecrated ground. This is well illustrated by a story in the *Life of St Mochoemog*. St Cainnech objected to the burial of a murdered man in the monastery: 'you ought not to bury that man, suddenly killed, amongst your monks'. By an elaborate device Mochoemog first buried the man in a far-off place, then when the murderer

died brought the slain man temporarily back to life, gave him the last rites, and buried his body with due honour in the monastery, whilst the murderer had the distant, dishonourable grave.¹⁰ Traditionally, slain men were buried on the north side of a church, always the less favoured side. One of the churches on Iniscealtra in Lough Derg (Clare) is *Teampull-na-Bhfear-ngonta*, the church of the wounded (or slain) men.¹¹

Allowing an infant to die without baptism was regarded as a serious offence in the early penitentials,¹² and the practice of separate burial for unbaptised infants is well documented throughout Ireland in recent times. Special burial was sometimes extended to others whose spiritual credentials were in doubt: suicides, shipwrecked sailors, strangers and idiots. Burial places included a spot just outside a cemetery, the north side of a church, a disused church site, a secular 'fort', a prehistoric megalith, the crossroads, a rocky cleft, and a special unconsecrated graveyard.¹³ These graveyards are known by several Irish names including *cillín*, *ceallúrach* and *cealltrach*. The Ordnance Survey map-makers in the 1830s do not seem to have marked children's burial grounds in the north as often as in some other parts of Ireland. But when local fieldwork has been done, like the enquiries made by Reeves and O'Laverty in north Antrim,¹⁴ these sites have

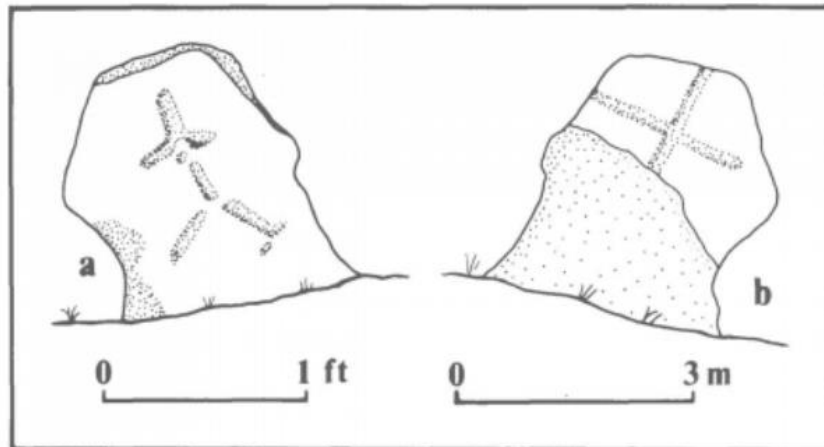


Fig. 3. Cross slab; a, E. face (measured); b, W. face (sketch only).

been found, and the recently published *Archaeological Survey of County Donegal* lists many caldragh and celluragh names and children's burial grounds.¹⁵

Separate burial for women, as at Carrickmore, is recorded far less often than for infants or children. This practice, together with the provision of special churches for women, raises several interesting questions. The best known example is probably Inishmurray (Sligo) where *Teampull-na-Bfear* (the men's church) and men's graveyard are inside the cashel but *Teampull-na-mban* (or *Teampull Muire*) is outside to the NW, with its women's graveyard and station of Mary nearby. Wakeman reported that 'it is universally believed by the islanders that if a woman be buried in the men's ground the corpse will be removed, during the night, by unseen hands, to the woman's [sic] cemetery, and vice versa'.¹⁶ In 1839 John O'Donovan, agreeing the names of the churches on Inchcleraun in Lough Ree (Longford) with local people, learned that the church S. of the main cluster was locally called Lady's Church or Templemurry and later writers have sometimes called it the Women's Church.¹⁷ On Inishglora (Mayo) one of the churches in the cashel is known as *Tempul na bfear*, whilst outside the enclosure is the women's church, *Teampul-na-mban*.¹⁸

At several other early monastic sites there is a church dedicated to St Mary or associated with women at some distance from the main monastery, sometimes with an attached graveyard. At Glendalough (Wicklow), for example, St Mary's or Our Lady's Church stands in its own graveyard W. of the main monastic 'city',¹⁹ whilst at Clonmacnois (Offaly) the Nuns' Church is reached along a causeway running E. from the monastery.²⁰ At Lemanaghan (Offaly) a cause-

way runs from the church across damp ground to a small ruin known as the 'Abbey', traditionally associated with St Manchán's mother, St Mella. In local tradition mother and son met daily at a stone between the two buildings without speaking.²¹ The practice of separate burial for women is also recorded in Scotland. On Columba's Iona, for example, at least to the middle of the 18th century men were buried in Reilig Odhráin, whilst women were buried at the Nunnery, SW. of the main monastery.²² Separate burial is also recorded at Kingarth on the Isle of Bute.²³

We have not gone into detail over the dates of these churches and the written sources, but there can be little doubt that the practice of separate worship, and probably separate burial, for women does at some Irish ecclesiastical sites go back to the pre-Norman period. What lies behind this practice, for which we have gathered together the scattered and fragmentary evidence mapped in Fig. 4?

Clerics in the early Irish church were often married and in some great ecclesiastical families son followed father in high office. There were 'double houses' of men and women, like Kildare. The monastic tenants, the *manaig*, were married men with families, and there must have been women in and around many monasteries. But there was also a strong ascetic strain in the early Irish church, and Plummer pointed out that one of the ascetic characteristics of the saints whose Lives he edited was 'their rigorous avoidance of the other sex'.²⁴ At Kildare screens in the church divided the nuns from the priests.²⁵ The Life of Buite of Monasterboice tells how he decreed that the women's convent was to be built far away from his monastery to avoid all risk of scandal, whilst from the Life of St Ciarán of Saigir we learn that the women's estab-

lishment was too close, and scandal did follow.²⁶ In half of the monastery of Lismore women were not allowed.²⁷ Munnu received six virgins hospitably at his monastery and lodged them in the guesthouse – but then left the monastery to the women and took his monks elsewhere!²⁸ The care of cows and sheep was regarded as women's work, and these animals were apparently banished from some monasteries to avoid risk of contact with women. At Glendalough St Kevin had no milk for a foster child, 'because women and cows were far distant from his monastery', but a deer provided a miraculous supply for the child.²⁹ Plummer quoted another life in which the dire progression is spelled out: 'where there is a sheep, there will be a woman, where a woman, there sin, where sin, there the devil, and where the devil, there damnation'.³⁰ We can recall that St Patrick's *Lorica* seeks protection against the 'spells of women and smiths and wizards',³¹ and in the late 12th century Giraldus Cambrensis wondered at the mill and church at Fore which no woman could enter, and the island from which all female creatures were debarred.³² The penitentials deal in great detail with sexual misdemeanours, and it seems certain that the ascetic element in the church, probably always present but best exemplified in the late 8th and 9th centuries by the Culdees, insisted on chastity and strict separation of men and women.³³

Against this background it does seem likely that at some monasteries a separate church was built for use by women, whether a group of nuns or the lay womenfolk of the community, and its graveyard could have been used exclusively for the burial of women. It will, however, be difficult to test this suggestion by excavation. The investigation of the large graveyard at Gallen Priory in 1934–5 illustrated the problems of disentangling and interpreting an extensive and long-used cemetery,³⁴ and no large-scale excavation of an early Irish ecclesiastical cemetery has been published in recent years. Large-scale excavation will be needed to discover whether segregation between the sexes can be traced, or whether a graveyard catered for a mixed population of males, females and children.³⁵

Returning to our starting point at Carrickmore, we must ask what lies behind the provision of a special graveyard for women there, as well as for children, slain men and suicides. There are several possibilities. Rellignaman could mark the site of an early convent of nuns, distant from the main establishment at Termon Rock, though it must be admitted that the rugged terrain does not look inviting for such a settlement. This rocky spot could perhaps have been the site of a retreat,



Fig. 4. Map of Ireland showing places mentioned.

based on the main church but at a distance, used for burial when it was abandoned. This explanation leaves the association with women puzzling, unless the retreat had housed a specially holy woman and women later chose to be buried there. It could have been the cemetery for the women of the community – the wives of the monastic tenants – but why should evidence for this survive at Carrickmore and not elsewhere? The early enclosure at Carrickmore has not been traced, but Rellignaman must be outside the area of sanctuary (the *termon*), so perhaps it originated as a graveyard for malefactors, like the murderer in the *Life of Mochoemog*. Or the enclosure could be of more recent origin, an unconsecrated graveyard built in a rugged, remote spot for special burials, though why specifically women? And there must be other possibilities. On present evidence and without excavation it does not seem possible to point to the most likely explanation. All those mentioned have their problems, but Rellignaman remains a fascinating site, and Carrickmore can boast the clearest example in the north of the well-attested practice of separate burial for different groups.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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2. Ó hInnse, S., *Miscellaneous Irish Annals* (Dublin, 1947), 74-5.
3. MacDermott, M. in *Seanchas Ardmhacha*, 2, no. 2 (1957), 433; Stokes, W., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (London, 1887), 1, 174-5. Donaghane is only 7½ miles WSW. of Carrickmore, a *domnach* church not firmly associated with a site in early sources.
4. O'Kelleher, A. and Schoepperle, G., *Betha Colaim Chille, Life of Columcille compiled by Manus O'Donnell in 1532* (Illinois, 1918), 127. At least five named wells are recorded at Carrickmore: MacDonal, T.D., *Dean Bryan McGurk* (Dublin, 1947), 27-8.
5. The O.S. anglicization is Relicknaman but we have preferred the form Raignaman as closer to the Irish. In what follows we have used the transcriptions from Irish in the sources quoted, involving some variety of forms.
6. Warm thanks are due to Mr John Haddan for taking the initiative and placing the site in guardianship.
7. The slab has not previously been published and we are grateful to Dr George Gillespie for drawing our attention to it.
8. Reeves, W., *The Life of St Columba* (Dublin, 1857), 283; the Bell of St Columbkil from this parish is in the National Museum of Antiquities, Edinburgh.
9. MacDonal, *op. cit.* in note 4, 29; Gillespie, G., 'Some place names in the parish of Termon McGuirk', *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 66 (1936), 299-300.
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22. *Argyll, Volume 4: Iona* (Roy. Comm. on the Anc. and Hist. Monuments of Scotland, Edinburgh, 1982), 150, 178.
23. Wakeman, *op. cit.* in note 11, 224-5.
24. Plummer, *op. cit.* in note 10, 1, cxxi.
25. Radford, C. A. R., 'The earliest Irish churches', *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 40 (1977), 5-7, or Thomas, C., *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain* (London, 1971), 145-6, for a different view.
26. Plummer, *op. cit.* in note 10, 1, 90; 1, 220 and 227.
27. *Ibid.*, 1, 197.
28. *Ibid.*, 2, 230-1.
29. *Ibid.*, 1, 250-1.
30. *Ibid.*, 1, cxxi.
31. Stokes, W., *op. cit.* in note 3, 1, 50-1.
32. O'Meara, J., *The First Version of the Topography of Ireland by Giraldus Cambrensis* (Dundalk, 1951), 42. Compare the practice in the Greek church, as at Mount Athos.
33. O'Dwyer, P., *The Spirituality of the Céli Dé Reform Movement in Ireland 750-900* (Dublin, 1977), 106-9. In a more wide-ranging treatment of women in early Ireland, Helen Hickey deals with women and the church, pointing out that the common Adam and Eve depiction on figure-carved crosses would have been a constant reminder of the fall. I am grateful to Mrs Hickey for letting me read her article in typescript. It will appear in *Irish Women: Image and Achievement*, ed. NiCuilleanáin, E. Women in the early Irish church are dealt with briefly in Hughes, K. and Hamlin, A., *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church* (London, 1977), 7-9, 68-9.
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35. The sample of excavated burials at Derry (Down) was small, but of seventeen skeletons, twelve were male, one probably and three possibly female, and one child: Waterman, D. M., *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 30 (1967), 53-75.