

# The oldest church in Ireland's 'oldest town'

Brian Ó Donnchadha on a site that gives a unique insight into thirteenth-century Donegal

**M**agh Ene, the 'Plain of Welcomes', is bordered to the north and south by the rivers Erne and Drowes, both of which drain into the Atlantic to the west, while to the east it is flanked by the Dartry Mountains. On the northern border, straddling a ford over the River Erne, lies the town of Ballyshannon. In 2003, during the preliminary work carried out in advance of the Ballyshannon/Bundoran Bypass, a site was excavated that would give a unique insight into this town and its people in the thirteenth century.

The excavation uncovered 1,275 inhumations, as well as the two lowest stone courses of a subrectangular building foundation around which, to the east, south and north, the burials were arranged. This was a 'lost' cemetery, its existence unknown prior to its discovery during preliminary testing in July 2003.

## The site

The site lay at the base of a steep hill on a flat shelf of land on the south shore of the River Erne. The construction of the Caitlin's Fall hydro-electric dam between 1945 and 1950 transformed the river from a wide, relatively shallow stream to a narrow and deep man-made channel. Consequently the site, which would once have been on the river's edge, now sits almost 500m to the south. It is in the corner of a wide meadow, bordered by roads on the north and east sides. Two factors were instrumental in the quality of preservation of the remains: the soil depth found throughout the site, and the size of the burial-ground. During the course of the excavation sections of footpath were removed along the Eastport and Station roads, revealing further burials; however, test-trenches showed that the roads themselves rest directly on bedrock and no



further remains were identified. It is likely, therefore, that expansion of the burial-ground to the east and north was limited by the presence of rock and the absence of soil. The steep hill to the south may also have formed a natural barrier to the expansion of the site in that direction.

Unfortunately the area to the west of the site had been the location of a nineteenth-century house, which was demolished to its foundations in the late twentieth century. This demolition and ground-clearance work destroyed any archaeological features that may have existed there. As a result, there is no indication of the extent of the cemetery in that direction or of what may have marked its boundary. It is certain, however, that some delineating factor was present, because 1,275 separate burials were excavated in the small area, c. 50m x 30m,

now left within all these barriers. The site's location on the slope and base of a hill meant that soil depth varied between 200mm on the hill slope and 750mm at its base. Where the soil was shallow, single burials were the norm; as the depth increased, however, so too did the frequency of burials within a single plot, with later burials disturbing and sometimes all but destroying earlier inhumations, as the medieval grave-diggers made the most of the limited space afforded them.

## The burials

The burials, with few exceptions, were aligned on an east/west axis and comprised males and females of all ages. For the most part the remains were extended, often with the lower arms folded across the abdomen. This position and the shroud-pins recovered with some of the burials



Left: Simple extended inhumation.

Above: Example of a crouched burial.



from the decorative, in the form of simple wooden beads, to the overlooked, in the form of two second-issue (1281–2) silver long-cross pennies from the reign of England's Edward I, and the irretrievable, in the form of an iron 'bodkin' armour-piercing arrowhead from the chest cavity of one of the skeletons.

### Quartz crystal

Small fragments of quartz crystal were recovered from about two-thirds of the burials. The stones were deliberately placed in the hand of the deceased before the body was interred. These quartz shards were usually c. 400mm in length and unworked.



Furthermore, a deliberately built square, stone-lined box, c. 1m in length and breadth, was excavated in the south-

indicated that most remains were wrapped in a shroud and placed in a simple, shallow grave, scooped out of the earth and usually just sufficient to cover the body. While some of the graves contained more than one inhumation, most were single burials with few or no grave-goods. Two crouched inhumations were recovered, though no explanation could be found for this form of burial.

While all the burials were simple inhumations, one may have contained someone of note: a man with two 'ear-muff' stones placed on either side of his head to keep it upright. The remains of a carefully and deliberately constructed stone-lined circular hearth were found to the south of this grave and immediately beside it. Such proximity might suggest a relationship between the two, with the deceased's passing perhaps marked by the lighting of a ceremonial fire.

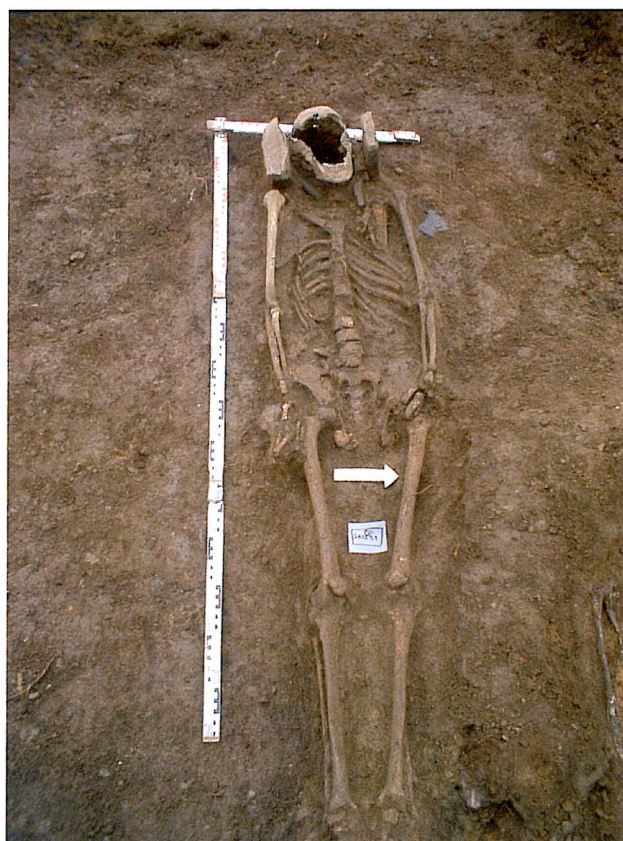
### Grave-goods

As one would expect in a Christian burial-ground, few grave-goods were recovered during excavation. Those that were ranged

Top right: 'Long-cross' pennies.

Above right: The decorated strap-handle recovered from within the 'church'.

Right: Extended burial with 'ear-muff' stones.



west corner of the site. This feature was surrounded on all sides by burials but no burials or archaeological features were found below it, indicating that it was constructed during the earliest phase of use of the burial-ground. It is possible that it originally served as a box-shrine, containing the sacred remains of the church's founder, but that at a later time these remains were exhumed, as was common practice, and re-interred elsewhere. At this point the shrine acquired a second function and became a depository for quartz crystals, as a deliberately placed

pile of seventeen shards were recovered from within during excavation. This clearly implies that the placing of quartz in the hands of the deceased was not a surreptitious local custom but rather an integral part of the funeral ritual, carried out with the willing cooperation of the clergy.

### The building

In the north-west corner of the site, 'L'-shaped stone foundation remains were uncovered. All but one inhumation respected these foundations, implying that

the building was present for all but the earliest burials. Its location within a cemetery, with burials placed against it to the north, south and east, would suggest that this is the remains of a church, perhaps Ballyshannon's first. Donegal County Council's NRDO altered the road design in this area in order to preserve these remains *in situ*, but a single test-trench was excavated north/south across the centre of the building. This yielded fragments of rough medieval local ware, including a strap-handle decorated with a crude 'cross' motif—possibly the remains of a vessel used during the celebration of Mass.

### Acknowledgements

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Left: Shard of quartz in the hand of one of the skeletons.

Below left: The south-east corner of the building foundations.

Below right: Box-shrine: the white stones visible are shards of quartz crystal.

