

An Unrecorded Ecclesiastical Enclosure at Ballyallaban, Co. Clare

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The area of North Clare within the baronies of Corcomroe and Burren bears a rich heritage of Early Christian and Medieval monastic sites which, however, have never been subjected to modern study.¹ The purpose of this note is to draw attention to a newly recognised earthen enclosure in Ballyallaban townland and to suggest an ecclesiastical origin for it. It was discovered by the authors during their investigation of a 'cross and bullaun' which had been marked on Robinson's excellent map of The Burren.²

Description

The enclosure is situated on the fertile glacial deposits which run out from the base of the western slopes of Aillwee Mountain.³ Due to land clearance operations, the site is in

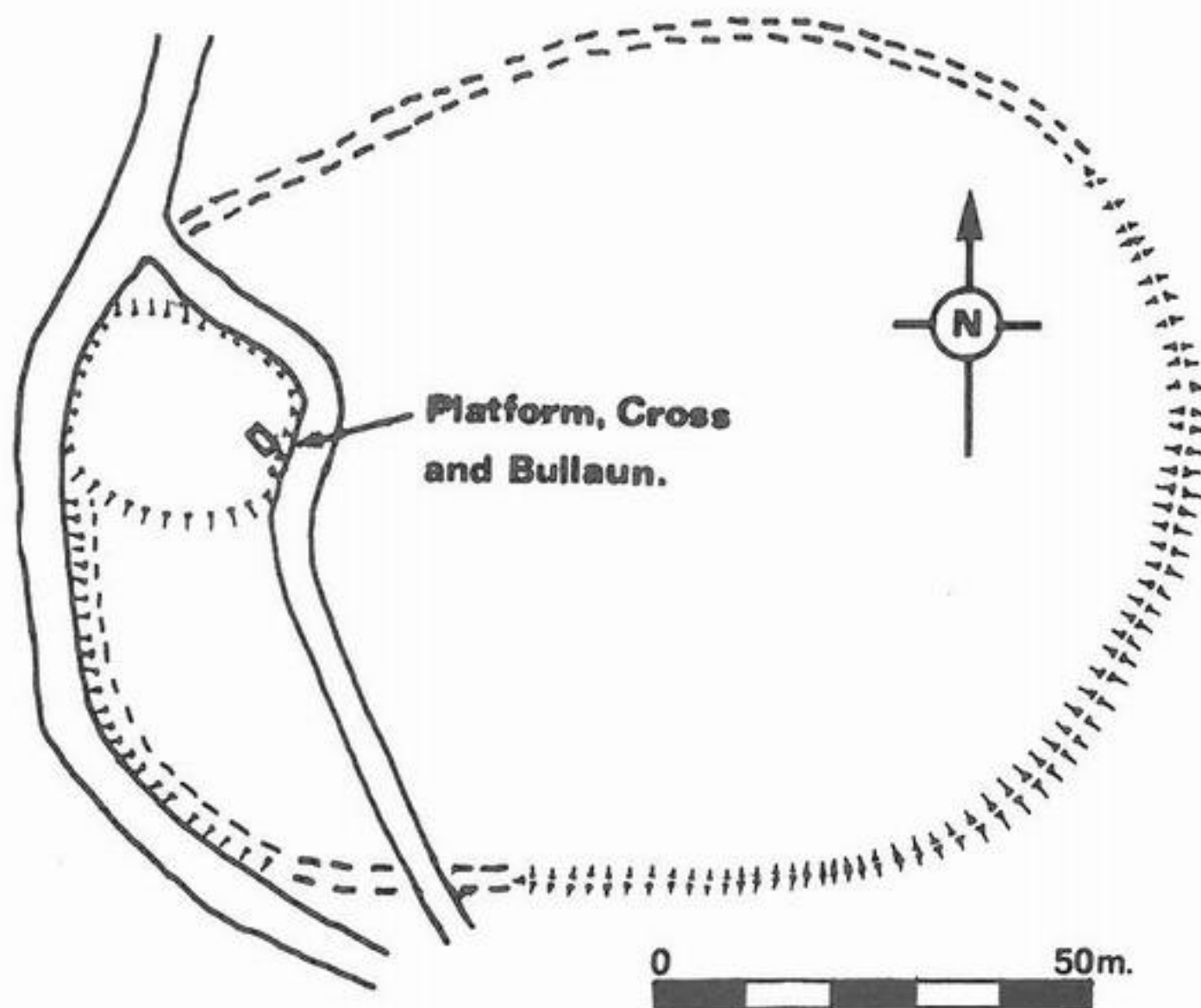


Fig. 1. Ecclesiastical enclosure, Ballyallaban, Co. Clare.

¹ See T. J. Westropp, "The Ancient Churches of County Clare, and the Origin of the Ecclesiastical Divisions of that County", *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* 22C(1900), 100-180, for an early account of these remains.

² T. D. Robinson, *The Burren: a map of the uplands of North-West Clare, Éire*, 1977. Reviewed in this *Journal*, 18(1976), 89.

³ The exact location of the site may be plotted on Co. Clare O.S. 6" Sheet 5, 59.8cms. from the western margin and 38.5cms. from the southern margin.

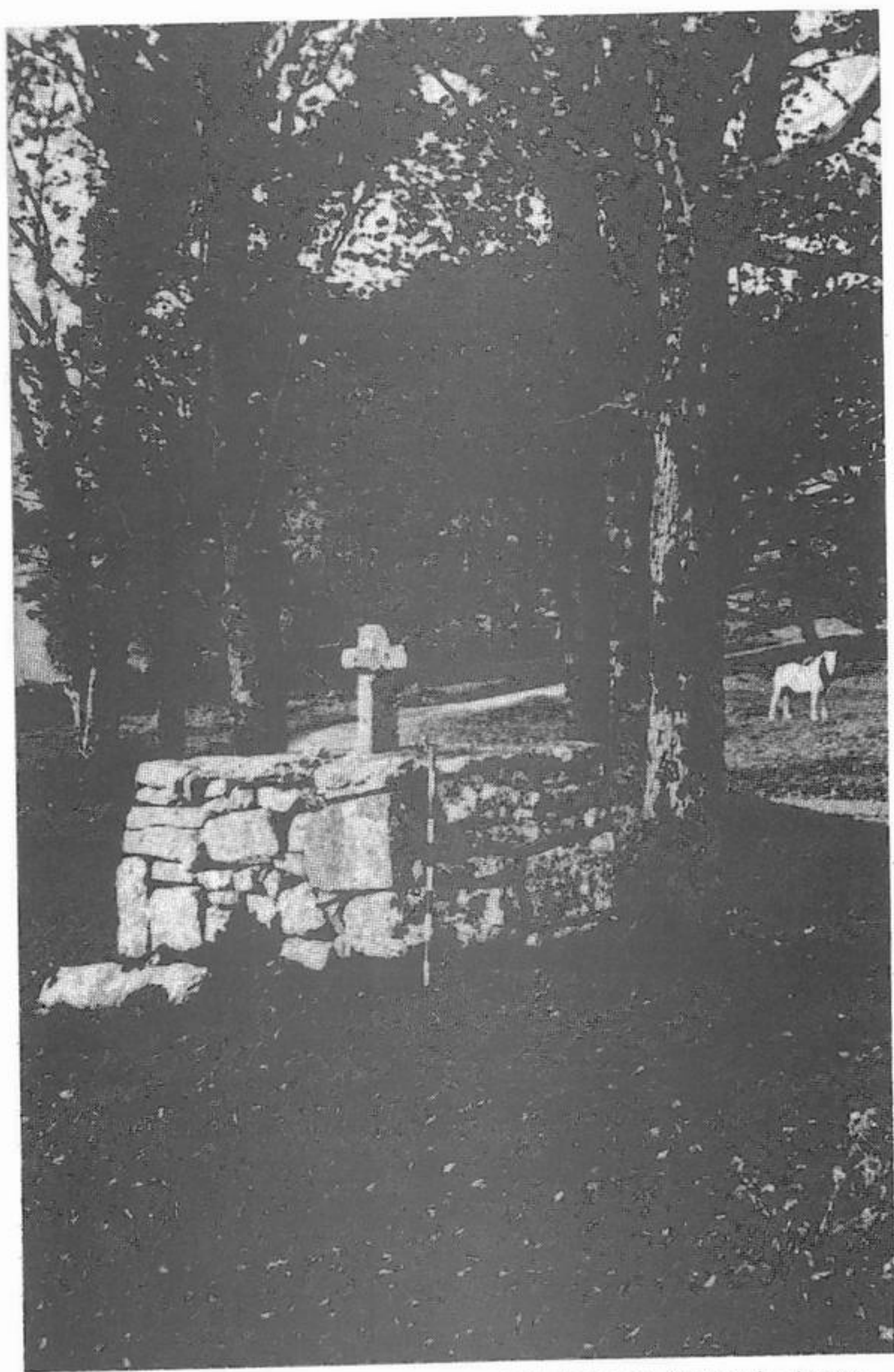


Fig. 2. Stone platform with 18th century cross, Ballyallaban, Co. Clare; scale = 1 metre.
(Photo: F. Moore)

an incomplete state of preservation. The bank on the northern, and on much of the southern and western, sides is much denuded. The surviving segment of the bank to the east measures approximately fifty metres in curved length and stands at an average height of one metre. To the south, traces of the bank survive only in places, but there this feature is highlighted by a line of trees which seems to follow the original curvature of the enclosure. To the north, no trace of the bank survives, but the curve of the enclosure is maintained in the present field boundary. At the western extremities the old road from Ballyvaughan to Lemenagh indicates the limits of the site by curving to avoid it.⁴ The maximum diameter of the enclosure is on the E-W axis and measures 130 metres; the N-S diameter is 95 metres. These measurements give an approximately oval plan to the site (Fig. 1). There is nothing to suggest that it was ever encircled by a ditch.

In the north-western quadrant of the enclosure is a platform structure built of large slabs on top of which stands a plain limestone cross (Fig. 2). Beside this structure is a bullaun. The bullaun (Fig 3), of millstone grit, is approximately rectangular in shape and

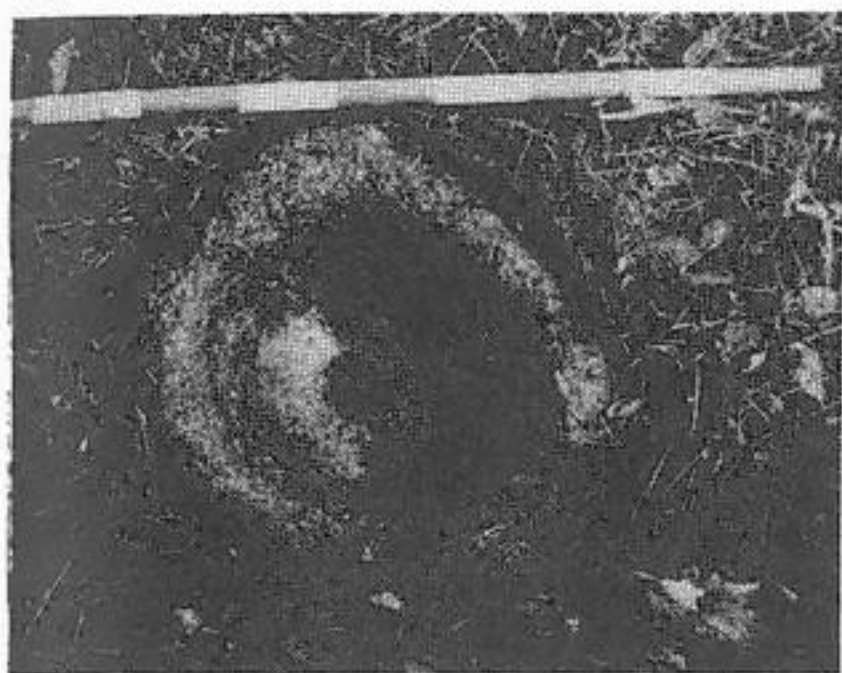


Fig. 3. Bullaun, Ballyallaban, Co. Clare; scale divided in 10 cms. (Photo: F. Moore)

bears a roughly hemispherical depression, 25cm. in depth and 40cm. in diameter. The platform on which the cross stands is rectangular in plan, measuring one metre by two metres, and rises to an average height of one metre. The cross has been cemented into position on its top. Both the stone platform and the bullaun are situated within a roughly circular area of raised ground, which has a maximum diameter of 25 metres. The western and northern limits of the raised area are defined by the encircling bank of the large enclosure, while the modern avenue which cuts through the enclosure skirts around this feature on the east. There are no other internal features on the site. In the

past, agricultural activity within the enclosure resulted in quantities of animal bones and oyster shells being unearthed. Human skeletal remains were also uncovered.⁵

Comment

From the available evidence it would appear that this previously unrecorded site is, in fact, a monastic or church enclosure of Early Christian date. On morphological grounds, the approximately oval enclosure seems to indicate an early date for the foundation, as such enclosures were a common feature of seventh and eighth century Irish churches and monasteries.⁶ The presence of a bullaun stone on the site provides further evidence for an

⁴On the 1st edition of the O.S. map for this area (1840) the road from Ballyvaughan to Lemenagh is shown running straight across the foothills of Aillwee Mountain, through Ballyallaban and Berneens, and joining up with the line of the modern road some miles ahead on the plateau near Gleninsheen. A portion of the avenue to Ballyallaban House runs along this line but was later re-routed through the enclosure. The 2nd edition of the O.S. map (1916) shows that a new road avoiding the foothills has been built to the west, and that the older one had been abandoned.

⁵Information from the landowner.

⁶C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*. London 1971, pp. 27-43.

Early Christian occupation, as this artifact type is often associated with ecclesiastical sites of such date. The human burials may also date to this period. No particular orientation or grave-type was noted in connection with them, but they generally occurred in the central area of the enclosure. The oyster shells and animal bones may provide evidence for the more mundane aspects of monastic life during this period.⁷

There is no evidence, either archaeological or historical, to suggest that the monastery or church continued to function as such in the medieval period. It is generally accepted that a great many of the smaller Celtic ecclesiastical sites gradually fell into disuse and were abandoned between the mid-twelfth and the early-thirteenth centuries, due to the re-organisation of the Irish church on diocesan lines. Nearby Kilfenora was created a diocesan centre at the Synod of Kells in 1152,⁸ and this development may have resulted in the loss of patronage and the subsequent impoverishment of those minor ecclesiastical centres which were not granted parochial status. Another contributory factor to the decline of small monasteries at this time was the growing power, wealth, and influence of the newly introduced Monastic Orders, such as the Augustinians and the Cistercians, which sometimes annexed whole religious communities to their attractive rule, and would have gained the financial and political support of the local rulers. It is against such a background that one should view the apparent decline of the ecclesiastical site at Ballyallaban.

However, a number of features indicate the site retained some degree of religious importance, as portion of it seems to have been used as the focal point of a pattern⁹ and as a place of 'clandestine' burial. The circular raised area in the north-western quadrant of the enclosure has already been mentioned. This feature may be interpreted as a *cillín*, or children's burial ground, although no memory or record of its use as such survives today. However, when in the nineteenth century the avenue to Ballyallaban House was re-routed through the enclosure it skirted this feature, indicating that its purpose was then known. This, coupled with the fact that the cross and the bullaun are located here, strongly support the interpretation here offered. The cross, on analogy with similar examples elsewhere in the country, probably dates to the eighteenth century,¹⁰ and may have been erected to emphasise the sanctity of the site.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Davoren, of Ballyallaban House, the landowners, for permission to visit and record the site, and to Caitríona Ní Dhubháin for her assistance in surveying it.

⁷ The occurrence of these oyster-shells on the site does not seem to have been due to their use as a fertiliser (a practice discussed by A. T. Lucas in "Sea-Sand and Shells as Manure", in Garaint Jenkins (ed.), *Studies in Folklife: Essays in Honour of Iorwerth C. Peate*, London 1969), as the landowner informs us that they do not occur in the fields surrounding the enclosure.

⁸ A. Gwynn, and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses: Ireland*, London 1970, p. 83.

⁹ On recent visits to the site various small icons have been noted on the platform beside the cross. However, there is no existing tradition of any 'pattern' associated with the place.

¹⁰ We are grateful to Mrs. Heather King, M.A., for her comments on this cross.