

The Medieval Borough of Bunratty

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The Anglo-Norman colonization of South Clare resulted in the foundation of only one borough: Bunratty. This remained a substantial settlement until 1318 when desertion commenced in the aftermath of the Battle of Dysert O'Dea. The known structures within the medieval borough are described and an outline of the settlement's extent is suggested.

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The story of Anglo-Norman penetration of Thomond has already been chartered by Westropp, Orpen and Simms¹ and it will suffice here to summarise the main course of events as a prelude to examining the borough of Bunratty. By the close of the twelfth century the town of Limerick had been occupied by the Anglo-Normans and they had commenced the colonization of Limerick county. Even before 1199, it seems, Tradery, the district around Bunratty, was granted out to Arnold Keting and the "three cantreds of Corcovaskin" were retained in the hands of the crown during the early years of the thirteenth century.² Despite such grants, however, and others made in the 1210s, the Anglo-Normans made little attempt to settle Thomond and seem to have been largely content to allow the O'Briens to hold their lands in return for the payment of rent and services. In 1248, however, Tradery was granted to Robert de Muscegros and he proceeded to build castles at Bunratty and Clarecastle.³ By 1257 the O'Briens had begun to feel the pinch and they commenced to attack the settlers.⁴ By and large, the O'Briens seem to have succeeded in containing the Anglo-Norman settlement until the arrival in the county of Thomas de Clare, a younger brother of the Earl of Gloucester. Exploiting the maxim of "divide and conquer" he allied himself with one faction of the O'Briens and helped them to defeat the other. In the process he was able to colonize southeast Clare from Limerick to the Fergus and to establish sizeable settlements and castles at Quin and Bunratty.⁵ The success of de Clare's settlement and his overlordship of Thomond was such that it lasted until the defeat of his son Richard at the battle of Dysert O'Dea in 1318. In the aftermath of the battle the colonized areas were overrun and Anglo-Norman settlement in Clare seems to have fizzled out by the middle of the fourteenth century.⁶

The Anglo-Norman era in Clare, then, lasted less than a century, but in the course of

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¹T. J. Westropp, "The Normans in Thomond", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 21(1890-91), 284-293, 381-387, 462-472; G. H. Orpen, *Ireland under the Normans* (4 vols. Oxford 1911-20), iv, pp. 53-106; K. Simms, "The Battle of Dysert O'Dea and the Gaelic Resurgence in Thomond", *Dál gCais*, 5(1979), 59-66. See also C. A. Empey, "The Settlement of the Kingdom of Limerick", in J. F. Lydon (ed.) *England and Ireland in the Later Middle Ages*, Blackrock 1981, pp. 3-4 and fig. 3. L. F. McNamara, "An Examination of the Medieval Irish Text *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh*", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 8(1958-61), 182-192, is a valuable reappraisal of the most important Gaelic source.

²*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1171-1251*, no. 106; Orpen, *Normans*, iv, pp. 53-54.

³Orpen, *Normans*, iv, p. 60.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 65-76; M. Altschul, *A Baronial Family in Medieval England: the Clares 1217-1314* (Baltimore 1965), pp. 187-197.

⁶Orpen, *Normans*, iv, pp. 93-97; Simms, "The Battle of Dysert O'Dea", pp. 64-65.

that time they introduced the economic system which they had established elsewhere in Ireland, a system based on the manor, village and town. In Clare, however, the Anglo-Normans did not establish any centres which, properly speaking, could be called towns. Nonetheless at Bunratty a borough was established which, had circumstances been more favourable, might have developed into a town.⁷ The main purpose of the present note is to outline the size of this borough and place its main features on record, in the hope that it may heighten awareness of the site's archaeological potential. In recent years the construction of roadways through the medieval borough site has undoubtedly destroyed archaeological deposits and it is to be hoped that this situation will not be allowed to recur in the future.

Location

Situated at Bun Ráite, "the mouth of the Ráite" [now the Owenogarney River] the site had considerable strategic importance throughout the Middle Ages because it controlled the passage of ships on the Shannon. The district around Bunratty was known as 'Tradraighe' or 'Traderry' and it is first mentioned in the twelfth century *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* which states that c.960 the Vikings of North Munster built a fort at 'Tratraighe'.⁸ This may well have been located at the site of the future borough but in the absence of excavation it is impossible to be certain.

Historical Background

The first evidence of Anglo-Norman settlement occurs just after 1248 when Tradery was granted to Robert de Muscegros.⁹ A castle was under construction in 1251¹⁰ and in 1253 he was granted the right to have a vill, with a weekly market and yearly fair, in his land of "Bunraty".¹¹ In 1277 the settlement passed to Thomas de Clare and, according to the fourteenth century *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh*, he filled it:

"with common English so many as by bribes and purchase, he was able to retain".¹²

By de Clare's time Bunratty had acquired borough status and it had become the most important Anglo-Norman settlement in Clare. No charter survives but on de Clare's death in 1287 an extent of the manor of Bunratty was drawn up which noted that the burgesses of the vill held 226 burgages, paying 131. 6s. annual rent.¹³ The extent also noted a

⁷There is the possibility that other boroughs were established. A document of 1574, for instance, states that Ennis, Quin, Clare and Bunratty were "in old times . . . good market towns and had English jurisdiction in them and were governed by portriffes and other officers by the authority of the King of England; but now they are all wasted and destroyed in a manner, saving the castles, and no part of the towns left but old houses of stonework, broken gates and ruinous walls", Orpen, *Normans*, iv, pp. 96-97, quoting *Cal. Carew Mss. 1601-3*, p. 475. For a definition of town in the context of Anglo-Norman Ireland see J. Bradley, "Planned Anglo-Norman towns in Ireland" in H. B. Clarke and A. Simms (eds.), *The Comparative History of Urban Origins in Non-Roman Europe*, Oxford 1985, pp. 417-420.

⁸J. H. Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, London 1867, p. 61 and p. cx, n.3.

⁹*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1171-1251*, no. 3126.

¹⁰*Ibid.*; Orpen, *Normans*, iv, p. 60; G. U. MacNamara, "Bunratty, Co. Clare", *J. Nth. Munster Archaeol. Soc.*, 3(1913-15), 228.

¹¹*Cal. Docs Ireland 1252-84*, no. 155.

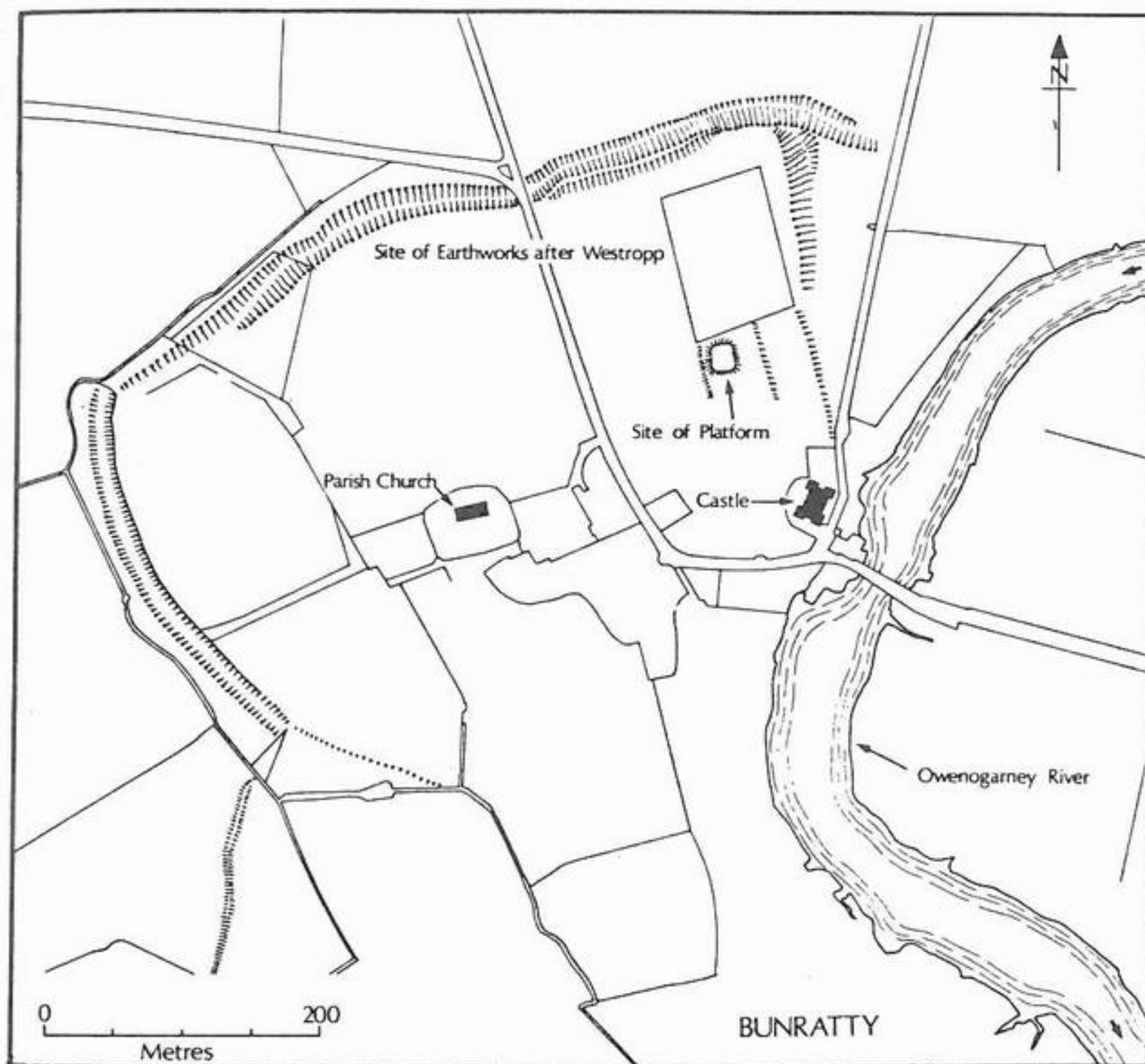
¹²S. O'Grady (ed.), *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* (2 vols., Ir. Texts Soc., London 1929), ii, pp. 7-8.

¹³*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1285-92*, no. 459, pp. 207-208.

hundred court, a shambles worth 3s. yearly, fairs worth half a mark yearly, a watermill, a fish-pond, and a rabbit warren.

Harbour

One of the most important factors in the siting of the borough was the presence of a harbour adjacent to the castle, on the Owenogarney river. The *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* contains a poetic reference to "Bunratty of the wide roads, oared galleys and safe harbour",¹⁴ and in describing Toirdhealbhadh Ó Briain's siege of the castle, it notes that he erected a plank bridge (*claidroichead*) "which spanned its sea-channel to the opposite shore", in order to prevent ships from gaining access to the castle.¹⁵



Illus. 1. Outline plan of Bunratty showing the principal medieval features.

¹⁴O'Grady, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 122.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 31.

Borough Defences

The borough was sited on a low hillock which Westropp¹⁶ described as being surrounded by marshes on the south, west and north. In the early decades of this century it was still isolated at high tides and it clearly formed a naturally defensive location. The borough was most likely situated on the high ground north and west of the castle. The *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* states that it was protected by:

“Broad-based high-crested ramparts, running from the stream [Owenogarney River] to the sea, [*i.e.* the Shannon]”.¹⁷

Westropp charted the possible outline of these defences which he thought were of Viking origin. He stated that the ditch was cut into the base of the hill and it left “a band like an outer ditch all round . . . 36 feet to 48 feet wide”.¹⁸ Much of the ditch along the north and west was distinguished only by a band of iris and rushes. No part of this bank survives today but the course of the ditch is still visible as a richer strip of grass. In the absence of archaeological excavation, however, it is impossible to be precise about the date of this feature.

Castle

The location of the original castle built by Robert de Muscegros has never been properly established. Excavations have disproved the suggestion made by MacNamara and Westropp¹⁹ that a raised platform north of the castle represented a motte. Hunt discovered that it was a mound of sixteenth century date and he suggested that the motte had originally stood on higher ground west of the present castle.²⁰ This theory is also unlikely, however, and it is questionable that there was ever a motte at Bunratty. The practice of building mottes had effectively ceased by the 1240s and if it was an earthen castle then it is more likely that it was a moated site or perhaps, a ringwork.²¹ It seems more than likely that the present castle stands on the site of the original one.

Bunratty may have been destroyed in the course of upheavals in the early 1270s when Brian Rua Ó Briain, King of Thomond, attacked the Anglo-Norman settlements.²² In 1275 Robert de Muscegros was forced to surrender the castle of Bunratty to the king “to be held against Irish rebels” until the restoration of peace,²³ and in 1276 de Muscegros reached an arrangement with the king under which Bunratty and Tradery were granted

¹⁶T. J. Westropp, “Notes on Certain Primitive Remains (forts and dolmens) in Central County Clare”, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 47(1917), 14-15.

¹⁷O’Grady, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 8.

¹⁸Westropp, *loc. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁹MacNamara, *op. cit.*, pp. 227, 256, 298 n.87; T. J. Westropp, “The Earthworks and Castle of Bunratty, Co. Clare”, *J. North Munster Archaeol. Soc.*, 3(1913-15), 315-316.

²⁰J. Hunt, “Bunratty Mound”, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 8(1958-61), 88-89; J. Hunt, “Bunratty Castle”, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 8(1958-61), 103.

²¹The latest documentary reference to the reconstruction of a motte is generally accepted as that relating to Roscrea in 1215 (*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1171-1251*, no. 2760). The Anglo-Norman fortifications associated with the invasion of Connacht, which took place after 1225, appear to have been stone castles, moated sites, and ringworks. See C. J. Lynn, “Some 13th-century Castle Sites in the West of Ireland: note on a preliminary reconnaissance”, *J. Galway Archaeol. Hist. Soc.*, 40(1985-86), 90-113; P. Holland, “The Anglo-Normans in County Galway: the process of colonization”, *J. Galway Archaeol. Hist. Soc.*, 41(1987-88), 85-86; B. Graham, “Medieval Timber and Earthwork Fortifications in Western Ireland”, *Medieval Archaeol.*, 32(1988), 120-125.

²²Orpen, *Normans*, iv, pp. 64-65.

²³*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1252-84*, no. 1167.

to Thomas de Clare.²⁴ The entry of Thomas de Clare onto the scene brought about considerable changes. He seems to have built a substantial stone castle²⁵ described in the *Caithréim* as “of dressed stone, girt with a thick outer wall, containing a roofed impregnable donjon and having capacious limewhited appurtenances”.²⁶ This account agrees well with a description in the inquisition taken on the death of Thomas de Clare in 1321:

“there is a fortress in which is a large tower, the walls whereof are sufficiently good, but not built up [to the top] nor roofed: near the tower is a good stone chamber with a cellar filled up with stones, and there is another chamber adjoining the same, a sort of ‘open space’ (*platea*) entirely covered over with planks; a stone kitchen, in which are a cistern and an oven, is joined to the chamber and the tower”.²⁷

From this it would seem that the castle had a large keep with outbuildings enclosed by a curtain wall.

The 1288 extent of the manor of Bunratty also refers to a watermill, worth 2s. a year.²⁸ This presumably was the same mill for which a fosse was dug and the pool enlarged in 1289.²⁹ The 1321 inquisition reported that at that date “the castle mill is inefficient and of no use save to the inhabitants of the castle”.³⁰ This indicates that the mill stood within the castle enclosure, or more likely on the Owenogarney river, adjacent to the castle.

Parish Church

The earliest evidence for the existence of the parish church occurs in 1256 when the priest Peter was appointed perpetual vicar.³¹ The 1288 extent of the manor noted that “the advowson of the church of Bunratty, with 10 adjacent chapels belonging thereto, is of the gift of the lord of Bunratty, and is worth £10 to the parson and vicar”.³² In the ecclesiastical taxation of 1302-6, however, the church was valued at only six marks.³³ The patronage of the church was apparently in Ó Briain hands by 1444,³⁴ and by 1463 the revenue of the parish was sufficient for it to be divided and a new parish formed at Kilnasoolagh.³⁵ The church was rebuilt in the early seventeenth century by Donnchadh Ó Briain, 4th earl of Thomond, who bequeathed in his will of 1617 “as much glasse as will glaze the wyndowes of the church of Bunratty newly edified by me”.³⁶ The surviving remains date to this time.

Decline of the Borough

Throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries Bunratty continued to be exposed to Ó Briain attacks. The castle seems to have held out against these but the borough, in spite of its defences, suffered. The *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* contains an account of a siege of Bunratty by Toirdhealbhaigh Ó Briain dated to 1305, but which actually seems

²⁴*Ibid.*, nos. 1202-4, 1223-4.

²⁵J. O'Donovan in *Annals of... the Four Masters*, 7 vols., Dublin 1851, iii, p. 428, n.l.

²⁶O'Grady, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 7-8.

²⁷MacNamara, *op. cit.*, pp. 249 and see also *ibid.*, p. 237.

²⁸*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1285-92*, no. 459, pp. 207-208.

²⁹MacNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 249.

³¹M. F. Sheehy (ed.), *Pontificia Hibernica*, 2 vols., Dublin 1962, ii, pp. 247-248.

³²*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1285-92*, no. 459, pp. 207-208.

³³*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1302-7*, p. 301.

³⁴A. Gwynn and D. F. Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, Dublin 1961, p. 432.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 300.

³⁶MacNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 226, n. 7.

to have occurred c.1285.³⁷ It notes that Ó Briain burned the “outer premises” and the “goodly town” before laying siege to the castle itself.³⁸ Toirdhealbhach besieged the castle again in 1298 but the siege was raised by the justiciar, John de Wogan,³⁹ and there seems to have been another siege in 1299.⁴⁰ In 1314 Bunratty was burned in de Clare’s absence by Muirchertach Ó Briain,⁴¹ and the most serious blow of all came in 1318 with the defeat and death of Richard de Clare at the battle of Dysert O’Dea. After the battle, Muirchertach Ó Briain came to Bunratty and, according to the *Caithréim*’s colourful account, found that de Clare’s widow had fled, leaving the town “deserted, empty, wrapped in fire”.⁴² That this did not happen immediately, however, is clear from the escheator’s accounts for 1318 which includes wages paid to “5 men-at-arms with 5 caprisoned horses, 12 hobelars and 78 footmen . . . remaining in the garrison of Bonrat Castle, to protect it and the parts adjacent after the death of Richard de Clare”.⁴³ Since the period covered by this account begins with the precise date of the battle, it would appear that this sizable garrison was de Clare’s own.

After 1318 the castle continued to be garrisoned and some reconstruction of the deserted borough was attempted. In 1321 an inquisition taken on the death of Richard de Clare’s son and heir, Thomas, stated that:

“the remaining houses below the precinct of the castle are delapidated and in ruins and cannot be reckoned as dwellings . . . the lands of the lordship are waste and out of cultivation for the past three years; neither are there any free tenants or others dwelling in Thomond . . . with the exception of a few dwellers in the town, who are beginning to rebuild in the same town which was burned and destroyed in the day when Lord Richard de Clare was slain”.⁴⁴

The same inquisition describes the keep as “not built up, nor roofed” and it suggests that the castle, like the town, was burned in the wake of the battle of Dysert O’Dea.⁴⁵ The attempts at reconstruction, however, must have been finally brought to an end in 1332 with the capture and destruction of the castle “which by the judgement of many was impregnable” by Muirchertach Ó Briain and MacConmara.⁴⁶ The castle was briefly regained from Irish hands and it was rebuilt and repaired by the justiciar, Sir Thomas de Rokeby, in 1353.⁴⁷ Its frontier position, however, is highlighted by the fact that in 1355-6, Thomas FitzJohn FitzMaurice was imprisoned in Limerick castle where he was charged with losing Bunratty castle to the Irish.⁴⁸

The history of the castle in the later Middle Ages is obscure. MacNamara suggests that the present castle was built by Maccon, son of Síoda MacConmara, chief of Clann Cuilén, who died c.1444, and by his son Seán Finn, chief from 1444-67.⁴⁹ It is not clear how, or when, the castle passed from MacConmara to Ó Briain hands. MacNamara thought that

³⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 233-4, 257.

³⁸O’Grady, *op. cit.*, ii, 31.

³⁹*Cal. Docs. Ireland 1293-1301*, no. 474, p. 223; *ibid.*, no. 521, p. 269.

⁴⁰MacNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 258.

⁴¹*Ann. Inisfallen*; O’Grady, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 73.

⁴²*Ibid.*, ii, p. 129.

⁴³*42nd Rep. Deputy Keeper Public Records Ireland*, p. 21.

⁴⁴MacNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶R. Butler (ed.), *The Annals of Ireland by Friar John Clyn*, Dublin 1849, p. 24; cf. J. T. Gilbert (ed.), *Chartularies of St Mary’s, Dublin*, 2 vols., London 1884, ii, p. 377.

⁴⁷Gwynn and Gleeson, *Killaloe*, pp. 335, 365; MacNamara, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

⁴⁸E. Tresham, *Rotulorum Patentium et Clausorum Cancellariae Hiberniae calendrium Hen. II-Hen. VII*, Dublin 1828, p. 64: no. 148.

⁴⁹MacNamara, *op. cit.*, pp. 263-264.

this may have occurred c.1500⁵⁰ but the fact that the patronage of Bunratty church was in Ó Briain hands by 1444 casts doubts on MacNamara's reconstruction of the castle's history.⁵¹

Conclusion

Bunratty was the largest and most important Anglo-Norman settlement in Clare. There is archaeological or documentary evidence for the presence of a parish church, market-place, seigneurial castle, harbour, watermill and borough defences, while the reference to 226 burgesses may indicate that the settlement had a population of close to 1,000 people.⁵² The hey-day of the borough seems to have occurred between 1276 and 1318 after which it appears to have been gradually abandoned. It is clear from Westropp's work that more upstanding archaeological features were to be found at Bunratty earlier in the century than survive today and this loss is to be regretted. Roads have cut great swathes through the borough site and, together with the construction of a hotel, have destroyed virtually all evidence of the borough defences on the north side. Given Bunratty's well established tourist potential it is to be hoped that archaeological investigation will precede any future developments within the area of the medieval borough.

Acknowledgements

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⁵⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 265-267.

⁵¹Gwynn and Gleeson, *Killaloe*, p. 432.

⁵²It has been suggested that the burgess numbers should be multiplied by a factor of five to give an estimate of the actual population. See B. J. Graham, "The Towns of Medieval Ireland", in R. A. Butlin (ed.), *The Development of the Irish Town*, London 1977, p. 45, but see also C. A. Empey's cautionary remarks on the reliability of burgess household numbers in his "The Anglo Norman Community in Tipperary and Kilkenny in the Later Middle Ages" in G. MacNiocaill and P. F. Wallace (eds.), *Keimelia: studies in medieval archaeology and history in memory of Tom Delaney*, Galway 1988, pp. 452-453.