The Topography of Pre-Norman Limerick.

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The foundation of the city by the Vikings and its likely original form are discussed. Subsequent changes under the Normans, during their initial occupation in the 1170s and after their return in the late 1190s, are outlined. An intriguing explanation for the prominent location of St. Mary’s Cathedral is suggested.

Mary Street, Nicholas Street and Castle Street form the backbone of the Englishtown today as they did in the high medieval period. The road links Baal’s Bridge to Thomond Bridge by skirting around King John’s Castle. None of these three features were present when the Vikings founded Limerick nor when the Irish took over power in the 10th century, so it is highly likely that there was an evolution of settlement pattern which resulted in the present familiar lay out. The following is an attempt to describe that evolution.

It is now known that the very first Viking settlement in the region was not on King’s Island but some way upstream at Athlunkard (Ath Longphort, ford of the ship encampment), where a base was set up for raiding along the Shannon. Only later, probably in the early 10th century, did the Vikings come to settle on King’s Island. The major attraction of this new site was its island location offering defensive qualities and a safe harbour. It is necessary to stress here that the longship was the most important mode of transport for the Vikings and that land routes were of lesser significance. One would therefore expect the primary settlement to be based around and focused on the waterfront rather than the land communication routes.

The series of archaeological excavations, which have taken place within Limerick since the late 1980s, have thrown little light on the Viking origins of the city. It is true that sunken-featured buildings were uncovered in excavations at King John’s Castle, but these are dated to the later Hiberno-Norse period of the 11-12th century. As yet no true Viking-age deposits have been revealed. The reason for this is that there have simply been virtually no deep excavations in the Viking heart of the city.

In order to answer the question of where that heart lay, one has to imagine King’s Island as it presented itself to the Vikings. It was probably more or less empty of settlement, the Abbey River, now canalised by George’s and Charlotte’s Quays, would have been much wider, while the Shannon shoreline would have been back towards the Cathedral side of Merchant’s Quay. Viking ships had a shallow draft and could be easily run up any sloping shore so the wide sweep from near Baal’s Bridge to Curragour Falls would have been immensely attractive, especially given the defensive qualities of an island location. Another factor to consider is that the falls are only navigable at high tide, so the island marks a convenient waiting or transhipment point. Loading and unloading did not need any complicated harbour facilities but took place on the foreshore. The core of the town developed, therefore, from around what in medieval times became the enclosed harbour.

From the outset the town was, in all probability, defended with a rampart. It is suggested that the area of this original enclosure equates roughly with the medieval St. Mary’s parish. Evidence to support this theory is found in the Civil Survey of 1654, which divides the city into three, the southern suburb now Irishtown, “The Body or Middle Ward” comprising of St. Mary’s parish, and a northern suburb comprising of St. Nicholas’ and St. Munchin’s parishes. So as late as the 17th century a perception of St. Mary’s parish as the true core of the city survived. This is underlined in the same survey, by the fact that St. Mary’s is the only truly urban parish within the city. St. Munchin’s and St. Nicholas’ in the northern suburb and St. John’s and St. Michael’s in the southern suburb all have rural hinterlands outside the walls. St. Mary’s does not.

The boundary of St. Mary’s parish runs at right angles across Nicholas St. the main axis of the Englishtown at Newgate Lane. Newgate is shown on several maps sitting astride the main street (Fig 1). Avril Thomas suggested that this may have been on the line of the original north boundary of the town, apparently without noticing the coincidence with the parish boundary. Claire Lane, in earlier unpublished work based on mapping the Civil Survey, concluded that there were east-west walls across the town at Newgate Lane. It seems therefore that St. Mary’s was a completely walled parish. Returning to the lack of archaeological evidence it is clear that most of the major excavations have taken place in the northern and southern suburbs, while some have been immediately outside the walls. There is only one excavation within the core which reached subsoil, this writer’s own work in St. Mary’s Cathedral. It can at best be described as keyhole surgery in respect of the earliest deposits.

![Figure 1 Extract from a plan of Limerick c. 1685 by Thomas Philips (Nat. Lib. Ms 3137/25) Note the internal wall and Newgate as well as earlier Main Street.](image_url)

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3St. Michael’s church was extramural, but the parish covered a small part of the Irishtown.
5Isabel Bennett (ed.), Excavations Bulletin, Bray, 1988 to date: yearly summaries of all excavations on the island of Ireland.
In the early days of settlement one can imagine the premium plots of land being those which offered easy access to the shore and the boats drawn up there. There would be ready access across property lines along the shore but more critically also across the other end of the properties where a road would develop. Development on the opposite side of the road would thus create a main thoroughfare and lead on to a series of parallel roads. This first thoroughfare is not Mary St.-Nicholas St., but lay between it and the river. It survives today only as Crosbie Row and Courthouse Lane, but several 17th century maps show it running the length of the town from Baal’s Bridge to Newgate Lane. While these early maps may not be wholly accurate in their detail, it is possible to trace the route on the early OS maps from The Widows’ Almshouses (Post Office Lane) to roughly Fanning’s Castle. What perhaps proves the hypothesis is that this route runs across the front of the Cathedral (or its precursor, see below), giving access to the main west door. (Figs. 1 & 2). Nicholas St. on the other hand virtually bypasses the cathedral and does not function as one might expect of a main street and deliver one to the entrance to what was the most important building in town.

**Figure 2** Portion of the OS 14.7 inches to the mile survey 1900, showing earlier main street running from Fanning’s Castle to the Widows Alms Houses.
It was the arrival of the Normans that caused the main route to shift to the parallel one we are familiar with. The siting of the castle astride the old route forced the Mary St.-Nicholas St. axis into greater prominence and as a result it was necessary to insert Newgate into the circuit of the rampart. It is presumed that the etymology of Newgate is simply new and gate in the sense of a door/portal. This may sound obvious but it should be remembered that gate is also the Norse word for street which survives today in the street-names of York, e.g. Coppergate, while here in Limerick we have the presumably accidental usage of gate, in the sense of road, in Thomondgate. It is however the new element which is of interest here. The word can be used in two senses, comparatively to distinguish the new from the old one in a different location, or as a simple descriptive adjective for something that is novel. It is the former usage which is believed to apply here because the New Gate replaced an earlier gate closer to the river.

The old route, with its gate just up from the back door of the present City Hall, would have led out of town to the Viking thingplase or meeting place, somewhere in the area of the castle. The thing, where most of the administrative business of a Viking town took place, was usually situated on open ground just outside the settlement. In Dublin it was near Stephen’s Green; in Trondheim, Norway it was on sandbanks between the town and fjord.

It may be that this area to the north also acted as the market area. The annals give a distinct impression that there were two separate parts to the town. Under the year 1108, the Annals of Innisfallen has, “Luimneach was totally burned save the market place (marggad) outside”, while the Annals of the Four Masters for 1171 has “and he burned the market (marggad) and half the fortress (dún) to its centre”. The description in Cogadh Gaedheal re Gaillioth of the 968 sack of the city states “the fort and the good town [dún ocus in degbali].” Limerick is called a cattle-fort in the Annals of Loch Cé under the year 1200, “and they burned the bodhun of Limerick and Cáisleán Uí Conaing and many other places”, while reference to the same events in the Four Masters uses marggad to describe the town. With this in mind it may be worthwhile noting that none of the structures discovered under King John’s Castle have hearths, so the buildings are, quite possibly, not dwelling houses as such. Within Scandinavian society there was a tradition of travelling tradesmen as well as merchants, so we may well be looking at rented seasonal accommodation rather than permanent homes. Several of these buildings are dated by the site director Ken Wiggins to the period between the first arrival of the Normans and their return in the 1190’s, but at least one predates the ringwork castle of 1175. A possible stone roadway running up from the river is another feature dating to earlier than the ringwork.

The siting of the castle in the area of the thing may have been a deliberately political act, signifying the end of the old order and the start of the new. Excavation has shown that the Normans built a ringwork there at the time of their first incursion into Limerick in 1175, which was then superseded, by the stone castle we know today. The siting of the castle is unusual because it appears to have been outside the original walled area and only incorporated into the circuit when the northern suburb was enclosed later in the Norman period. The butt joint of the town wall against the southwest corner tower of the castle is the proof of this.

Thomond Bridge and Baal’s Bridges are both of Norman origin. Two works written from the Norman perspective describe the first assault on Limerick and both narrate the fording of the Abbey River. The Song of Dermot & the Earl stops literally in midstream with the Norman army half way

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9 A. Christophersen, Håndverket i Forandring (The Transformation of Handicraft), Lund, Sweden, 1980.
10 Wiggins, pers. comm.
across but notes the absence of a bridge and the fact that the city was walled. The *Expugnatio Hibernica* of Giraldus Cambrensis describes both the fording of the river and the strength of the walls but also takes the story forward to the capture and subsequent abandonment of the city. A recent contour survey of the Abbey River bed, carried out in connection with archaeological works for the Limerick Main Drainage has shown that the shallowest point is in the Baal’s Bridge area. A concentration of finds in the river-bed in this area also point to this as being the fording point. It is only at the time of the Norman withdrawal that a bridge is mentioned: “Just as they were leaving and indeed had scarcely crossed over the far end of the bridge they suddenly saw that it had been broken down at the other end…” It seems safe to say that the first, probably wooden, Baal’s Bridge can be dated to 1175. Dendrochronological dating suggests that its stone replacement was erected in the early 13th century.

There is an odd swing in the line of the east side of the city wall near Baal’s Bridge, where the wall turns away from the main street to curve round back to the bridge. It is suggested that the original rampart-line ran directly to the river. At that time there was no bridge and so no need to defend it. It was only after the bridge was constructed that it became necessary to realign the defences to protect the bridgehead. The evidence for this is found in the *Expugnatio* where Giraldus suggests that there was space between ford and the walls. “In their efforts to repel, or rather to overpower him (Meiler Fitzhenry) the citizens met him with a hail of stones and missiles, both on the river bank and aiming from the city walls which overhung the bank” and “The enemy were driven into the city and Raymond’s men overran the walls”. A further indication of space between ford and town is the grant to Robert Sergeant in September 1199 of “4 burgages without the city of Limerick, two between the city & bridge on each side of the latter near the wall and two in the island towards the city near the bridge, wherever the bridge may be.” The wording is somewhat confused and difficult to understand unless one accepts that the original core of the town was much smaller. Then it can be read as two burgages, one either side of the road from the city to Baal’s Bridge, while the other two lay between the city and Thomond Bridge “in the island”; the confusion regarding the bridge being explained by the simple fact that there were two bridges. One has to remember that the king, in making the grant, was both unfamiliar with the town and reliant upon the descriptions of others.

The date of the first Thomond Bridge is less clear cut. The evidence outlined in the last paragraph suggests that it may have been in existence by 1199 while O’Keefe and Simington, in their major work on Irish stone bridges, conclude, on architectural grounds, that it dates to the end of the twelfth or early in the thirteenth century.

In any discussion of the early topography of the town it is vital to remember that the Vikings were pagan and the process of their conversion to Christianity by no means clear. The first Christians in town were probably a mixture of slaves and those Irish who had intermarried with the Vikings. Initially Christianity would have been peripheral to the religious life of the town. It is interesting, therefore, that St. Mary’s Cathedral has such a prime location. Tradition has it that Donal Mór O’Brien donated his palace to the church, some time in the 1160’s. There is no documentary source to support this while what evidence there is directly contradicts it. The earliest reference to St. Mary’s is from 1111 when Limerick was created a diocese at the Synod of Rathbreasail, while it must be assumed that Gille, who became bishop in 1106, had a church for his *cathedra*. So St. Mary’s had

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14 *Expugnatio*, pp 151 & 153.  
a half-century or more of history behind it before Donal Mór came on the scene. The mechanism of conversion is unclear but it is an acknowledged fact that it is often the case that pre-Christian sites were Christianised, e.g. St. Brigid's at Kildare or the numerous holy-wells. It may well be that St. Mary's was originally the site of a temple to Odin or some other god of the Norse mythology. The change to a Christian site may have occurred within the Viking period or been an enforced change when the Dal gCais took over in the latter part of the 10th century.

The other two churches of the Englishtown, St. Munchin's and St. Nicholas', both in the northern suburb are first named in inquisitions of 1201. Unfortunately no medieval fabric survives on either site so it is not possible to use architectural features as a dating tool. Whilst there is a local tradition that St. Munchin's is an older foundation, there is no reason to see either of them as anything other than products of the Norman ordering of the northern suburb.

In conclusion, therefore, the period between the return of the Normans c.1195 and the early 1200's saw major changes in the layout of Limerick, which gave us the medieval town as we know it. The two stone bridges and new castle were built, causing diversion away from the old main street. There was a realignment of the defences at the southern end of town around Baal's Bridge, while the enclosing of the northern suburb was under way together with its organisation into parishes and the provision of new churches. It is tempting to draw a parallel between these major changes and the urban regeneration of the late 1980s and 1990s, which has so transformed the city in recent times.

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19 J. McCaffrey (ed.), Black Book of Limerick, pp 27 & 28: T. J. Westropp, in his article on the Churches of Co. Limerick, PRIA, 25, (1905), p. 358 makes reference to the 1201 Inquisition as being on p. 109, which is incorrect. Westropp was writing before the publication of the Black Book and so his referencing is to the pagination of the original manuscript. There is a reference to St. Nicholas's on that page of the manuscript (p.116 in the published work) but it is not the one in question, the correct reference should be to p. 28 of the published work. In the Inquisition of William de Burgo the reference "ecclesiam sancti Nicholai cum eorum pertinentiis, ex donatione litteris vero Regis Mornonie", the king is taken to be Donal Mór O'Brien and therefore St. Nicholas predates c1194. In the printed version it is the places named afterwards which are read as being the donation of Donal Mór. There is an identical listing of place names in the Inquisition by Meiler Fitzhenry, p.27, where St. Nicholas is followed immediately by the place name Claronaedraign with no intervening reference to the king of Munster.