

NOTE

St Munchin's and the Bishop's Palace

In 2002 the present writer proposed a model for the development of pre-Norman Limerick, which was later refined in 2009.¹ The following note is an attempt to refine that model further to include some factors not considered previously.²

When contemplating the development of Limerick, one comes up against two stories which are persistent but appear to have no grounding in the historical sources. The first of these is that St Munchin's church was an early church, which became the cathedral church of the Vikings, and the second is that Donal Mór O'Brien, King of the Dál Cais gave his palace to the church for the site of St Mary's Cathedral, in 1168 if the 800th anniversary postage stamp is to be believed.

St Munchin was an Irish saint, and this fact was not given due consideration when originally proposing the model. The Anglo-Normans had created the city parishes by c.1200,³ and the reason why they should choose an Irish saint was never really questioned. In the refined model in the 2009 article it was suggested that having taken over the city the Dál Cais had sited a palace compound adjacent to the Viking *thing*, somewhere in the northern part of what was to become the walled area of Englishtown. It is only recently that the writer has become aware of the affinity between the Dál Cais and St Munchin and that Munchin was effectively the O'Brien family saint.⁴ It is therefore proposed that St Munchin's church is originally the site of a royal chapel within the palace compound dedicated to that saint.

If one accepts this proposition then a further possibility arises. The Anglo-Normans arrived back into Limerick in 1195 or thereabouts, to displace the O'Briens. In the high and later medieval period the O'Brien centre was at Clonroad just outside Ennis in Co. Clare. Exactly when this transfer from Limerick to Clonroad occurred is not known, though Ó Dálaigh suggests a retreat from Limerick by 1210 based simply on the grant of Thomond to the O'Briens by King John.⁵ What is now proposed is that the palace compound lay to the north of King John's Castle and encompassed the areas now occupied by St Munchin's church and churchyard and the Villiers Alms-houses. With the abandonment of Limerick the Dál Cais did not want their palace to fall to the new regime and so donated the palace to the Church, which then used it as the medieval bishops' palace.

The evidence to date these events is contained in the Black Book of Limerick. Two inquisitions dated 1200-01 list St Munchin's with its appurtenances (the palace?) as lands belonging to St Mary's Cathedral.⁶ There is another document entitled 'Prohibition of

¹ B. J. Hodkinson, 'The topography of pre Norman Limerick', *NMAJ*, 42 (2002) pp 1-6 & 'The Medieval City of Limerick', in Liam Irwin, Gearóid Ó Tuathaigh & Matthew Potter (eds), *Limerick History & Society* (Dublin, 2009) pp 17-40; both in B.J. Hodkinson, *Aspects of Medieval N. Munster; collected essays*, (Limerick 2012) pp 31-38 & 3-30 respectively.

² This article has benefited greatly from discussions with Cathy Swift and Dan Tietzsch-Tyler.

³ From N. to S., St Munchin's, St Nicholas', St Mary's in Englishtown and St John's and St Michael's which became partly urban parishes with the later walling of Irishtown.

⁴ Noel Quirke, 'The problem of St Munchin of Limerick', *NMAJ*, 51 (2011) pp 21-26:25.

⁵ Brian Ó Dálaigh, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas, No. 25, Ennis* (Dublin, 2012) p. 1.

⁶ James McCaffrey, *The Black Book of Limerick* (Dublin, 1907) pp 25-9.

King John against erecting fortifications on the lands belonging to the Bishop of Limerick' which the editor dates to the period 1199-1203.⁷ The editor, however, does not appear to have noticed that there is a discrepancy between the title, which was added when the Black Book was compiled, and the content of the document. While John is called king in the title, in the actual text he is simply called Lord of Ireland, which puts the dating to before he became king in 1199. John was created Lord of Ireland by his father, Henry II, in 1177, but in 1189 he was also created Count of Mortain by his brother Richard I. John used both titles in his charters, for instance that given to Limerick starts 'John Lord of Ireland, Count of Mortain',⁸ so the absence of Mortain from the preamble of the charter to St Mary's is significant. The charter mentions Bishop Donatus, who became bishop sometime between 1186 and 1190 and died in 1207, so there is a possibility that the charter predates John receiving the Mortain title, however there is another possibility which is intriguing in the present context.

When King Richard returned to England from captivity in 1194, John was in rebellion against Richard but was quickly reconciled; however he was stripped of Mortain, which was not restored to him until 1195, just the time that the Anglo-Normans were making their presence felt again in Limerick. The document was signed in Rouen and while it is not possible definitively to place John in that city at this time, he was definitely in northern France and in all probability there. John and Richard met and were reconciled on 12 May 1194 at Lisieux while Richard is known to have spent Christmas of 1194 in Rouen, possibly in the company of his brother.⁹

In conclusion then it is suggested that in 1194-5, as part of their relocation to Clonroad, the O'Brien's handed their palace over to the Church as a last defiant gesture preventing its use by the Normans. The Church authorities, in the knowledge that the Normans would be building a castle, as they had done during their earlier incursion into the city in 1175, sought immediate royal protection for the palace compound from the possibility of it being built on. Shortly after, the royal chapel of St Munchin's gave its name to the newly created parish. If this scenario is correct then it is just feasible that Donal Mór O'Brien, possibly on his death bed, did donate his palace to the church, but it was not the site of St Mary's Cathedral.

Brian Hodkinson

⁷ Ibid., pp 38 & 173.

⁸ Maurice Lenihan, *Limerick; its History and Antiquities* (Dublin, 1866) p. 47.

⁹ Lionel Landon, *The Itinerary of King Richard I, Publications of the Pipe Roll Society, 51* (London, 1935) pp 93 & 100. Other instances of Richard in Rouen in 1195 are also listed.