

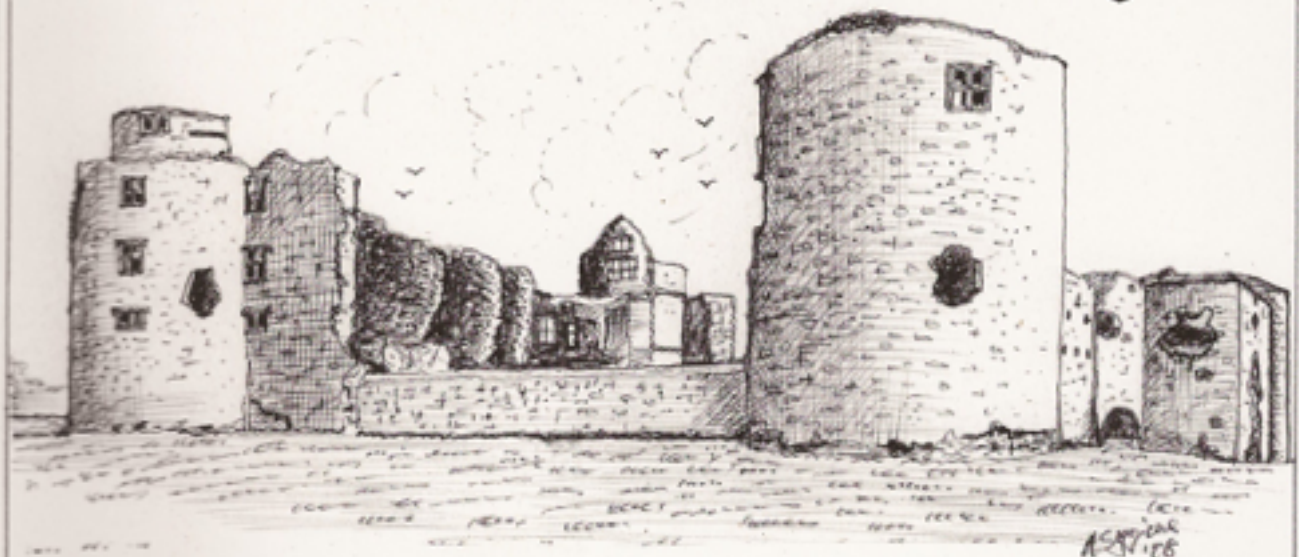


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Baslick Church: An Early Medieval Basilica in Co. Roscommon

Sam Moore

Introduction

Baslick Church is in the townland of Baslick in the united Roman Catholic parishes of Ogulla, Kilcooley, Killukin and Baslick, within the Barony of Castlerea, Co. Roscommon (Grid reference 171796/281868). The present church is medieval in date, possibly dating to the 16th century. The church receives considerable attention within the 7th century texts of the *Collectanea* by Tírechán but none of the early historical associations of an early medieval church being at the site are visible on the ground. The only suggestion of early medieval activity near the site are the presence of fragmentary rotary querns and iron slag from a bowl furnace found during recent conservation works (plates 2 and 3). The church and graveyard (RMP no. RO021-083) are located on the south end of a low

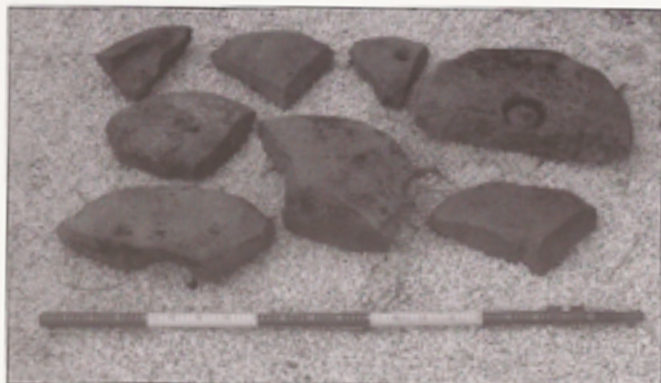


Plate 2. Example of fragmentary, unfinished rotary quern stones from Baslick.

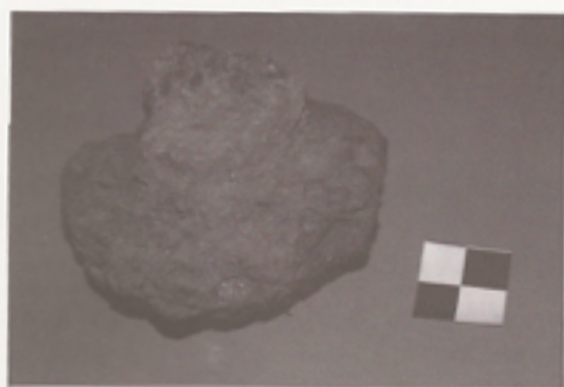


Plate 3. Iron slag found at Baslick.

but prominent ridge (between 80 to 90m OD) overlooking the Termon River, which flows to the east and curves around to south of the site. The Irish for Termon is *An Tearmann*, meaning 'place of sanctuary' or 'church lands'. The Termon flows for 5km to the south west where it joins the Frances River, which meets the River Suck another 3km to the west. There are good views in all directions except to the northeast. The land is undulating pasture with wet, marshy ground to the west and south alongside the river.

Sites in the vicinity.

A number of other archaeological sites are located in the vicinity, the nearest is a 312m long linear earthwork, classified as a mill race in the Record of Monuments and Places (RO021-09001), which runs from the north of the site and follows the length of the river appearing to terminate c.40m to the south of the site. The next nearest archaeological site is an enclosure (RO021-059) in Corlis townland c.800m to the north-northeast. Other sites in the vicinity include an enclosure (RO021-043) and earthwork site (RO021-044), both to the northwest in Cloonbard townland; a tumulus also in Cloonbard to the northwest (RO021-058); two bivallate raths in Corlis townland (RO021-045 and 046) to the north northeast; a linear earthwork to the east (RO021-060); a rath in Lissalway townland (RO021-061) also to the east; a standing stone (RO021-099) in Brackloon to the north-northwest; and a mound (RO021-100) at Corlis to the northeast (Fig. 1).

The Church

The present church is much altered. No architectural features, such as window or door surrounds etc., remain but a number of late medieval architectural fragments have been found during recent conservation work at the church. In the fabric of the north wall, prior to the removal of ivy, it had been thought that



Plate 4. Reused architectural stones and rotary quern in the interior north wall of Baslick.



Figure 1 Record of Monuments and Places Sheet RO-21. Baslick is no. 83..

there may have been a possible window or doorway in the interior of the north wall but due to prolific ivy growth this had not been discernable. However, following removal of the ivy this does not appear to be a doorway but reuse of available materials and these are not matched on the north wall's exterior face (plate 4). Their vertical arrangement and slightly arching appearance does give the appearance of a blocked doorway but none of the stones match in terms of dressing and one of the vertical stones appears to be a natural stone without dressing. An unfinished quern stone at the top of this arched arrangement of stones has similar dimensions to the other quern stone fragments found in the vicinity of the church.

The west gable is the sole fully surviving wall (8.27m exterior length x 7.4m high x 0.82m thick). A 17.4m length of the north wall survives and has a maximum height of 4.3m. Only 5.1m of the south wall survives, which has a height of 3.2m up to the base of the west gable on its west side and it 0.9m high on its east end. No trace of the east gable survives above ground level. The interior of the church is filled with various graves from the 18th century to the 20th century. The masonry is a double faced mortared wall of limestone averaging 0.84m thick. The quoins appear to have 16th century dressing and some of the larger masonry blocks may be earlier. There has been re-pointing done and evidence of plastic sheeting inserted in the west gable wall to prevent water damage and growth. This was possibly done by the Bord of Works, the OPW or the local authority at some stage before the 1940s (Sean Raftery *pers comm.*) The masonry is unevenly constituted, suggesting alterations. The last 1.7m of the east end of the north wall had

been roughly rebuilt after it collapsed and broke a late 18th century gravestone in the recent past. During 2008 the church underwent extensive conservation, the north wall in particular, after intrusive ivy growth had seriously compromised the fabric of the church. Ivy was removed and the north and south walls were partially rebuilt using traditional lime mortar.

The Boundary Wall

The church is enclosed by a boundary wall delineating the graveyard. It is sub-oval in plan with the long axis running north to south and measures c.55m north to south and c. 40m east to west (plate 1). The only entrance is flanked by two mortared pillars 1.5m apart and accessed via an iron gate located to the southwest. This reasonably well preserved

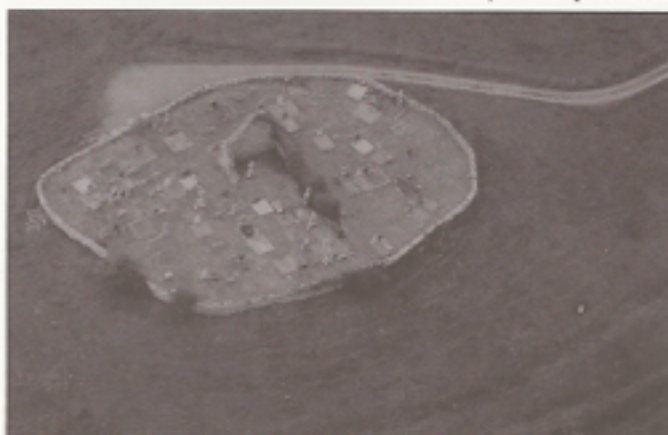


Plate 1. Aerial view of Baslick Church from the south. Part of the linear earthwork can be seen in the bottom right corner.

boundary wall is made up of a double-faced un-coursed wall of limestone surmounted by a line of irregularly set copestones. The limestone blocks are uncut and undressed blocks of varying sizes as are the cope stones, some of which are missing. It reaches an average internal height of 1m and average external height of 1.45m with a maximum height to the east-northeast of 2m. It is at its highest from north though to east to south where the ground falls steeply away towards the river. The inner face is obscured along its southern half where the level of the interior of the graveyard is almost level with the interior. It is 0.5m in thickness throughout. A large grained stoney mortar survives in part but has leached out in some sections. On the exterior of the wall the ground level rises c.1m from the south to southeast. This may be due to an archaeological feature buried under the wall. Due to the raised level of the graveyard this feature is not visible internally.

The Graves

Burials are evenly scattered throughout the graveyard, with the older burials being located within and south of the church. The north half has numerous modern burials though a number of older burials are present. There are a number of uncut and un-inscribed limestone blocks, averaging 0.3m in height, throughout the graveyard, many being visible on the west side. There are small to medium inscribed headstones with a number being 18th century in date. The tops vary in shape, with some rounded and some pointed. Most bear the IHS symbol. A number of these are leaning badly. There are only three flat table tombs. Two are within the graveyard, while the other lies just south of the entrance. This was recently partially cleaned and conserved by Dr Karena Morton. The examples inside are illegible, leaning and the upright supports on which they rested have collapsed. There are also a number of medium to large vertically set headstones, some surrounded by kerbing, many being surmounted by ringed-crosses. These are generally 19th to 20th century in date and a number have fallen and lie in fragments on the ground.



Plate 5. Example of un-inscribed cross (possibly 18th century) in Baslick graveyard.



Plate 6. Interior of Baslick church with Dillon grave from the east.

There are a series of unusually thin vertical flags set loosely into the ground, some are in the shape of crudely cut crosses (plate 5). They appear un-inscribed. The dates of these crosses are difficult to determine but could be possibly late 18th century. Lying within the church immediately inside the north wall, towards its east end is the remains of the Dillon grave, formerly earls of Roscommon (plate 6). It appears to be the only grave with iron work surround. There are many modern graves and headstones, mostly marked by polished limestone or marble uprights; almost all of which are surrounded by kerbing and generally are well maintained.

The Mill Race (?)

A 312m long linear earthwork, which runs from the north of the site and follows the length of the river, appearing to terminate c.40m to the south of the site, has been classified as a mill race but its morphology is unusual for such a feature. Both Mr Joseph Fenwick and Professor John Waddell of NUI Galway have suggested that this forms a linear earthen boundary ditch and may have late prehistoric or very early medieval origins (*pers. comm.* Fenwick 1997, 143). It is 312m long and varies from being 12m wide to 3m. It stretches from the south side of the bridge just to the east of the current access gate into the field where the church and graveyard are located and follows the length of the river, varying from 3m to 12m from the river edge, to just south of the graveyard (Fig 2).

Historical Context

To introduce Baslick's prominence during the medieval period one must consider the tribal groupings that made up Connacht (Fig.3). The name of Connacht refers to the descendants of Conn Cétchatach (Conn of the Hundred Battles) who were collectively called the Connachta (Charles-Edwards 2000, 36-8). The three principal septs of the Connachta were derived

order to establish Uí Briúin control over this church controlled by the Ciarraige Aí which was very close to the heartland of his kingship at Cruachu (Rathcroghan). The Ciarraige Aí responded to this by killing his son, the abbot Cormac, in AD 805 and Muirgius responded by laying waste to their lands. Muirgius won the favour of the church and in AD 811 Nuado, abbot of Armagh visited Connacht with the relics of St Patrick and Muirgius also developed strong ties with a number of important churches within Connacht, including Roscommon and Clonmacnoise (*ibid* 251-2). Another reference to Baslick occurs in the Annals when abbot Siedal, alias Sedulius, bishop of Roscommon died there in 816AD.

In Tírechán's text in the Book of Armagh, written c. AD 680, we are told that when St Patrick came to the lands of the Connachta a man called Hecaith gave his son Feradach to Patrick; that Patrick then took the son to Rome where he was trained and given the name of Sachellus. Sachellus then received from Patrick a portion of the relics of Peter and Paul, Lawrence and Stephen, which were in Armagh. Earlier, Patrick is said to have gone to Rome in AD 441 or 442 and brought back to Armagh from there relics of the Apostles Peter and Paul and of the martyrs Stephen and Laurence (McNeill 1934, 78). However, it is more likely that these relics came to Armagh during a series of interchanges of envoys between Rome and Armagh c. AD 629-40 and that a portion of these relics came to Baslick in the middle of the 7th century (Charles-Edwards 2000, 45). Sachellus became bishop of Baslick, c. AD 433, the main church of the Ciarraige Aí, where he deposited these relics. Another important figure ordained by Patrick was Céthach who was Patrick's principal bishop for the Uí Aillella and had his church at Cell Garad (Oran, Co. Roscommon). Both Sachellus and Céthach are both portrayed by Tírechán as important disciples of Patrick, but an unusual comment in the Book of Armagh indicates that they were admonished by Patrick for disobedience after they had ordained bishops and clergy without his knowledge and consent (Charles-Edwards 2000, 44; see Swift for detailed discussion 1994, 63). Patrick made them do penance in Armagh for this disobedience but he also said that their churches would never become important (*ibid*). This seems to suggest that Baslick was subordinate to Armagh. The relics of these saints (Peter, Paul, Laurence and Stephen), along with a cloth stained with Christ's blood and the bodies of some of the first members of Patrick's household were the most important relics kept at Armagh. Apart from Sachellus we are told that bishop Olcán of Dunseverick in Co. Antrim and the church of Benigus of Drumlease in Co. Leitrim possessed relics of St Peter and Paul (Doherty 1984, 311-3; Swift 1994, 65-6). It seems that Armagh's links with these churches reflect that they were sub-ordinate to Armagh.

Swift suggests that Sachellus may not have been bishop at Baslick, but it was Gaulish or Frankish bishops (de Paor 1996, 166) that were there and points out that the relics of Peter and Paul, Stephen and Laurence are not specifically associated directly with Baslick in Tírechán's work (1994, 66). However, the placename of Baslick, Baslic or the latin *Basilica Sanctorum* (the Basilica of the Saints) suggests that Baslick had important relics in its possession, for in north-western Europe in the 6th and 7th centuries the word *basilica* is used to describe churches with important relic cults (Swift 1994 66). Another point is

that the Irish associated the term *basilica* with royal graves (Doherty 1984, 30; Charles-Edwards 2000, 45). The term seems to enter Ireland sometime no later than the 6th century (*ibid.*). Baslick could have been the location of the burial site of the kings of the Ciarraige Aí and we also have the reference to the king of Connacht, Ragallach mac Uatach of the Uí Briúin, being buried there in AD 649. An alternative offering for the origin of the name was noted by O'Donovan. According to him Sachellus' feast day was August 1st. John O'Donovan in the *Ordnance Survey Letters*, notes that 'the name baslic is a shortening of the Latin Baslica . . . but the Rev Mr Dillon P.P. of Ballintober says that the word is Bús-Leac, which, when interpreted is sepulchrum mortourum and laughs at my Baslica, perhaps he is right' (Flanagan 1927, 163-7). A flat-topped boulder outside the cemetery up to 1994 was known locally as "The Leac" and there was a tradition in the area that the rock was a sacrificial altar in pre-Christian times.

The work of Tírechán, in which Baslick features, appears to reflect the 7th political situation in Connacht. It seems that important churches remained independent of Armagh and that Baslick did possess relics during its control by the Ciarraige Aí up to the end of the 8th century when they succumbed to the rise of the Uí Briúin dynasty. Armagh saw the changing political situation in Connacht and began to support this triumphant dynastic group. Doherty (1984, 310) suggests that Baslick may have had relics in the 5th century and probably dates to this period. It was a central church for the Christian evangelization of Connacht being positioned adjacent to the pre-Christian centre of Cruachu (Rathcroghan) and the important site of Rathra (Fenwick 1997, 142-4). By the 7th century it came under pressure from the Uí Briúin who established control by the 8th century. Armagh came to support the Uí Briúin in order to gain authority over Connacht churches. Doherty (*ibid.*) goes on to say that the relics given to Sachellus by Patrick were actually ones donated to the Uí Briúin by Armagh, not in Patrick's time in the 5th century but in Tírechán's time in the 7th century. However, Swift (1994, 80-2) believes that Tírechán's motives were more complex than this and believes his writings were a direct attempt for the Uí Néill king at Tara to support and protect Patrician ecclesiastic foundations in Connacht and was not one directly promoting Armagh's superiority over Connacht churches.

Baslick's importance may have been linked to its location on the River Termon, a natural physical territorial boundary. The linear earthwork, as suggested above, may not be a mill race but could actually predate the foundation of the church there by a number of centuries in being a built reinforcement of this boundary. This earthwork may have been constructed in the Late Iron Age in order to control or restrict access across the river and its function may have continued into the Early Medieval period. A possible continuation of the earthwork at Baslick (RO21:60 (fig. 1)) occurs east of the site (Fenwick 1997, 143). Baslick became established as an evangelizing church in Connacht in the 5th century and its location by a territorial boundary in a riverine setting is common to many early ecclesiastical sites in Ireland. After the devastation of the Ciarraige Aí's lands by Muirgius mac Tommaltaig in AD 805 Baslick was subjected to a Norse attack when it was plundered in 846 AD. We hear nothing of Baslick in the Annals following this and it appears that its importance wanes from the early 9th

century. It becomes a medieval church by at least the 13th century and there is a reference to Gillen a naomh McArthur O'Brien archdeacon of Roscommon who died at Baslick in AD 1234. Parson Nicholas Steer was appointed to the confiscated vicarage of Baslick in 1623; and also received the parochial lands of Oran, Dunamon and Kilcroan following which the church seems to have been abandoned and fell into disrepair being subsequently used as a burial ground.

The importance of Baslick as an early medieval ecclesiastical centre is without doubt, however, nothing of this importance is evident on the ground. The presence of unfinished or broken quern stones, the iron slag from a bowl furnace and the possible linear earthwork suggests early activity on the site before the construction of a later medieval church. This later medieval church present on the site today has undergone considerable alterations and destruction and some late medieval architectural fragments indicate the presence of an earlier more elaborate church than the upstanding remains indicate. Further historical and archaeological research on the site is warranted including a topographical survey of the linear earthwork and possible geophysical prospecting to identify possible features associated with the early medieval church. It is hoped that in the future more information on this important Connacht church will come to light and that the conservation of the existing remains have been the starting point of future work.

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