

Extended Sanctuaries or Girths

A call to other researchers

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For over a century there has been a steady development of scholarly attention to the subject of sanctuary, particularly in relation to medieval England (eg Mazzinghi 1887; Trenholme 1903; Cox 1911; Thornley 1924; Thornley 1933; Martin 1939; Rosser 1996). In the past few decades modern movements relating to sanctuary and asylum-seeking have tended to attract a much wider, popular interest. This modern awareness of the subject is often closely linked to specific churches or hostels used as refuges whose names for a time become well-known headlines, as was the case, for example, with Sangatte in the Pas de Calais. On the other hand, interest in medieval sanctuary and sanctuary-seeking appears to remain primarily rooted in historical and documentary research with relatively little attention evidently paid to its physical context and to its archaeological implications.

In the hope and expectation that this last generalisation is false, a principal reason for preparing a note in the news section of *Church Archaeology* is thus to seek out and make contact with others who are engaged in work on the physical definition of medieval sanctuary. Another reason is to draw attention to the special character of the extended sanctuaries of Scotland, known as girths, and to invite comparisons with those of other regions of the British Isles and continental Europe.

An opportunity to introduce this topic into an international setting presented itself at the 41st meeting of the Europa Nostra Scientific Council held in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2005 (Stell 2005). Reflecting the urgent concerns which surround the remarkable but largely redundant churches of Transylvania, the theme of that meeting was, appropriately, fortified churches. Few areas of Western Europe, including Britain and Ireland, have churches which possess such unambiguously defensive attributes (Perbellini forthcoming).



Fig 1 – Frithstool or ‘peace chair’, Torphichen, West Lothian: the stone which marks the centre of the medieval girth associated with the preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers. The hub of a girth of about one mile radius: it stands in the burial ground of the parish church which was rebuilt in 1756 on the site of the nave of the preceptory church (photograph: Geoffrey Stell)

A presentation on the relatively few Scottish ecclesiastical buildings that have real or apparent claims to be regarded as ‘fortifications’ was thus merged with a wider review of the notion of protection afforded by sanctuary in the Middle Ages. Particular attention was paid to the physical evidence associated with areas of special immunity known as girths, whose legal and early historical origins have been the subject of important previous work by Hector MacQueen and



Fig 2 – Refuge stone, Craigmailing, West Lothian; one of the five refuge stones which marked the girth of Torphichen (photograph: Geoffrey Stell)

Wendy Davies respectively (MacQueen 2001 and Davies 1996).

Girths extended over territories vastly greater than the usual right of sanctuary, with distances measurable in miles, not just paces or yards, and typically, they were also marked out by stone crosses, generally four, at points on the circuit (Figs 1 and 2). Scottish girths may have been analogous with the more extensive protected church territories in England and Wales (eg Beverley, Boslivan, Hexham, Padstow, Ripon, St Asaph), with *termonn* lands surrounding early Irish churches and monasteries (eg Armagh, Clonmacnoise, Kildare, Scattery Island), with the *minihi* of Brittany (eg around Tréguier). These were of variable parish size, some evidently enormous, for example St Denis, Paris, which claimed a large surrounding area of ‘protected space’, and with Catalan *sagres*, sacred places which embodied special peace for the church and surrounding houses.

How the spatial boundaries of such areas were actually defined and respected in practice, and how they had come to acquire these rights in the first place are among the many problems associated with such special ‘protected places’. Further research remains to be undertaken but in the meantime it would be good to hear from and compare notes with others who may be working in this field elsewhere in the British Isles and the European mainland.

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