

Kingship and Architecture in 11th- and 12th- Century Cashel

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The Rock of Cashel is a limestone crag which rises majestically from the plains of south Tipperary. It is crowned today by a suite of magnificent ecclesiastical structures which were all constructed after AD 1101 (Fig 1), including the splendid Cormac's Chapel. It is for the latter that the site is most famous and, indeed, these structures form one of the most iconic images of medieval Ireland. Yet, while these buildings' architecture has justifiably seen them much discussed and debated, an issue which has not received adequate consideration, particularly in the context of the site's 11th- and 12th- century development, is the fact that the Rock of Cashel represented the focal point of the pre-eminent royal landscape in the province of Munster from at least the 7th century. Consequently, throughout the medieval period the Rock of Cashel was a place thoroughly conditioned by developments in the political landscape, and this paper explores how 'realpolitik' operated through the Rock of Cashel's development in the 11th and 12th centuries. In particular, excavations by Brian Hodkinson in the 1990s uncovered evidence for activity between the 6th and 12th centuries, including a number of different structures and associated burials (1994, WS 4). While those excavations remain largely unpublished some recent radiocarbon dating allows a re-assessment of the original interpretation of the site's development. This paper will suggest that the significance and symbolism of that evolution can only be understood when placed in the context of the struggle for supremacy in Munster and southern Ireland between two rival dynasties, the Uí Briain and Meic Carthaig. The structures and iconography of the Rock in this period reflect how dynasts of each group attempted to re-imagine and codify a royal ceremonial centre as a theatre for the political and ideological discourse regarding the issues which concerned contemporary 11th- and 12th-century society.



Fig 1
View of the Rock of Cashel from the north (Photo: author)

Dynastic background and historical context

Before embarking on an analysis of the excavated material it is first necessary to summarise the origins and political development of the groups who are responsible for the 11th- and 12th-century buildings and architecture for which the Rock is so famous. By the 8th century Cashel was a seat of paramount kingship and, within Ireland, second only to the venerable Hill of Tara (Co Meath). It was not only synonymous with Munster's over-kingship, it was intimately associated with a dynastic federation of peoples scattered throughout Munster known as the *Éoganachta*, a term denoting 'the descendants of Éogan'. As a provincial and territorial kingship the King of Cashel, normally a King of Munster, was suzerain over an area approximating to the complete modern counties of Tipperary, Limerick, Clare, Kerry, Cork, Waterford, Kilkenny and the southern portions of counties Laois and Offaly (Fig 2). Indeed, so powerful was this kingship that propaganda tracts commissioned by and for Cashel's kings advanced the idea that the King of Cashel should also normally be the King of Ireland, a proposition which reflects developments during the 8th and 10th centuries when Ireland was effectively divided into the rival spheres of *Leth Cuinn*, 'the northern half', controlled by the *Uí Néill* kings of Tara, and *Leth Moga*, 'the southern half', controlled by the *Éoganachta* kings of Cashel (Byrne 1973, 202–29; Dillon 1952; Hull 1941 and 1947).

The other major royal landscapes of early Ireland, such as *Emain Macha* (Navan Fort, Co Armagh), *Cruachain* (Rathcroghan, Co Roscommon), *Dun Ailinne* (Knockaulin, Co Kildare), *Uisneach* (Co Westmeath) and *Tara* (Co Meath), invariably portray their kingships as existing since time immemorial. By contrast, Cashel's own mythology and traditions of origin suggest that despite forming an impressive and arresting feature in Munster's landscape, it was only established as a seat of kingship rather late, sometime around AD 400, by Conall Corc (Hull 1947). That Cashel was in some respects different from early Ireland's other great ceremonial centres is borne out by the architecture and monumental iconography of its landscape being distinctly dissimilar from these others. These late prehistoric landscapes' apogee appear to lie in the middle-late Iron Age, reflecting their cultic function within institutions associated with constructing sacred kingship (Newman 1998; Gleeson 2012; Gleeson forthcoming). This has understandably

Fig 2
Map showing location of Cashel in relation to the c1100 petty kingdom boundaries and the extent of the provincial territory of Munster (after MacCotter 2008)

been seen as indicating that Cashel was established as a Christian seat of kingship. The name Cashel probably derives from the Latin *castellum*, indicating contacts with Roman Britain (Byrne 1973, 184), which led Aitchison (1994, 126) to suggest that Cashel was established as an ecclesiastical centre as early as the 5th century, a perspective also implied by Candon (1991).

While Cashel is unique in Ireland as the only royal site known to have had a church (Hodkinson 1994; Hull 1941, 949), and that from the 9th century some of its kings held ecclesiastical office, there is no evidence for an ecclesiastical presence on the Rock prior to the 9th century. Certainly, the symbolism of Cashel's inauguration ceremonies suggests an ideology of kingship that is eminently comparable to that at *Tara* (Gleeson 2012). The suggestion that Cashel represents an explicitly Christian institution, established as precisely such in the 5th century, not only implicitly constructs other royal landscapes as being inherently antithetic and diametrically opposed pagan sanctuaries, but is anachronistic, being based solely on mis-understandings of the Rock's development (Gleeson forthcoming).

Such perceptions are no doubt underpinned by the fact that in 1101 this great royal capital and centre of royal ceremonial was granted to the church by the King of Munster and Ireland, one Muirheartach Ua Briain. This heralded the transformation of the Rock from a royal fortress to a *sedes episcopalis*, the seat of the most powerful archbishopric in southern Ireland, second only to the Primatial See at Armagh.

From at least AD 700 the Rock of Cashel had been the capital of the *Éoganachta* federation (Gleeson forthcoming). During the 8th and 9th centuries the kingship of Cashel developed into a territorially identified lordship associated with authority over the province of Munster. Following the Battle of Belach Mugna in which Cormac mac Cuilleáin, the famous bishop-king of Cashel, was killed (908), the *Éoganachta*'s control over Munster waned, and in 964 the usurping Mathgamain mac Cennetíg seized the kingship of Cashel. Mathgamain was a dynastic ruler of *Dál Cais*, a group of obscure origins, who appear to have been originally known as *In Déisi Tuaisceart*, the northern branch of a federation of vassal peoples (*Déisi* means 'vassal') who were settled in the lands into which Cashel's kings expanded in the 6th and 7th centuries. They occupied a broad band stretching between Waterford, south Tipperary, north Cork, east Limerick and southern Clare (MacCotter 2008, 184–96, 215–8 and 245–9). The 'vassal' connotations of *Déisi* were, of course, unacceptable to a dynasty with grand ambitions, and so *In Déisi Tuaisceart* metamorphosed to *Dál Cais* (for these developments see Kelleher 1967 and Ó Corráin 1973).

As a term *Éoganachta* appears to signify a belief in descent from a divine personage associated with the yew tree (Byrne 1973, 182), a symbolism codified in an aspect of Cashel's inauguration rituals that involved kindling a fire under a yew tree on the Rock's summit (Dillon 1952). Despite the fact that all the family branches of note during the early medieval period descended from Conall Corc, *Éoganachta* specifically signified descent from the prehistoric mythical progenitor Eógan Mar (son of Ailill Ólomm, 'Ailill bare-ear'). From the reign of Fedlimid mac Chrimthann (820–47), of the line of Conal Corc's grandson Nad-Fróich, succession within the *Éoganachta* federation became increasingly monopolised by the branch settled around Cashel itself, the *Éoganachta Caisil*, and specifically, the *Clann Fíngen* (of which Fedlimid was sprung) and *Cenel Failbe Flann* segments of that kindred. During the 11th and 12th centuries the *Meic Carthaig* or *Clann Carthaig* emerged as the principal

segment within the leading kindred of *Éoganachta Caisil*'s *Cenel Failbe* line. As the last great *Éoganachta* kings it was their most famous son Cormac mac Carthaig who commissioned the Romanesque chapel for which Cashel is so famous (for the rise of *Meic Carthaig*, MacCotter 2006; for Cormac's chapel, Stalley 2006).

The *Éoganachta* hegemony within Munster was extremely fragile, and for the most part it was inherently bound to control Cashel itself. Rights to the Rock, however, were closely guarded and proscribed through genealogical *schema*. It is important to appreciate that in this period genealogy was not a map of biological affinity, but a charter of political hierarchy, and ancestry was a barometer of purity and pre-eminence (for instance, Ó Corráin 1998). Thus, to disguise their lowly origins, and as a part of *In Déisi Tuaisceart*'s transformation to *Dál Cais*, a mythical Cormac Cas was invented and made a brother of Éogan Már (*a quo Éoganachta*), such that *Dál Cais* claimed an equal share in the kingship of Munster which had previously been an *Éoganachta* prerogative. This new pedigree proffered the kind of respectable antiquity and noble origins that a group occupying a powerful position were expected to possess, and more importantly, gave them equal claim to the kingships of Cashel and Munster.

Mathgamain became King of Cashel during the 10th century, at a time when the *Éoganachta*'s power was effectively in abeyance. In FJ Byrne's memorable phrase, he was not so much 'seizing' a kingship, as 'reviving one which had become moribund' (1973, 204). Indeed, it appears that *Dál Cais* had been a force to be reckoned with for some decades previously: Mathgamain's father Cennetíg was accorded the title of *rigdamna Mumhan* in his obit, meaning 'the makings of a king of Munster', which most likely signified a status of heir-apparent, and Mathgamain himself almost certainly inherited a powerful base (Kelleher 1967; MacShamhráin 2005). Ironically, the single most famous King of Cashel was not of the *Éoganachta*, but rather, was Mathgamain's brother, Brian Ború. While kings of Cashel had pressed their claims to island-wide authority in preceding centuries (Byrne 1973, 202–29), it was Brian who made this an undisputed reality. However, while Brian was undoubtedly an extraordinarily powerful and important king, and indeed, is recorded as fortifying Cashel in 996 (WS 1, AI 996), there is very little archaeological evidence for his actual reign. Nevertheless, so important was Brian that the leading segment of *Dál Cais* traced

descent back to him as the *Uí Briain*, ‘*descendants of Brian*’, and of course, Muircheartach Ua Briain, ‘*Muircheartach descendant of Brian*’, was of that line. It was Muircheartach who granted the Rock to the church which left the most lasting impression on Cashel’s landscape and kingship. Indeed, the biography of Brian Ború, *Cogadh Gáedeil re Gailib*, ‘*the War of the Irish with the Foreigner*’, which so expertly constructed the famous image of a pious Christian ruler who united a nation and defended his people from the depredations of the heathen Vikings, was actually written at Muircheartach’s behest in the early 12th century (Ní Mhaonaigh 2007; Todd 1867). The image of Brian that emerges from the *Cogadh*’s pages probably has a good deal more to say about Muircheartach’s self image, than it does about Brian’s career and the contemporary perception of him in the early 11th century.

Despite his achievements, Brian’s immediate successors were unable to consolidate the gains he made by securing the submission of the northern rulers, and it was not until Tairdelbach Ua Briain, Muircheartach’s father, acceded to the kingship in 1063, that *Dál Cais* actually again possessed firm control over all of Munster, allowing the necessary platform from which they proceeded to press their claims outside the province (Duffy 2006; Ní Mhaonaigh 2007). Tairdelbach laid the foundations in this regard, but his son Muircheartach was equally able, and in an extremely active career he designed and built a structure of ‘national’ kingship. During the late 1080s and 90s Muircheartach became in many respects the most successful *Dál Cais* king, and during the early 12th century he succeeded in securing the submission of all the kings of Ireland of note (Duffy 2006). Muircheartach’s rise to the status of King of Ireland in the decades either side of 1100 is the context for not only the literary flourishing embodied in the *Cogadh*, but also the tract known as *Lebor na gCert*, the ‘*Book of Rights*’ (Dillon 1962). This defines the reciprocal obligations of the King of Cashel and the tributes due to him from the vassal kings of all Ireland. It was probably written for the occasion of Muircheartach’s great early 12th-century hosting and circuit throughout Ireland (Candon 1991; for *Lebor na gCert* see the edition by Dillon 1962). In a similar vein, like Tairdelbach, Muircheartach is also known to have had close contacts with the upper echelons of secular and ecclesiastical society outside Ireland, and actively promoted the issue of church reform (Duffy 2006). This concern is most clearly testified by his presiding over

the reforming Synod of Cashel in 1101, where he gave the Rock over to the church. This reform fervour also extended to Muircheartach having a hand in convening the Synod of *Raith Breasail* which set out the new diocesan structure that corresponded largely with the boundaries of secular over-kingdoms. *Raith Breasail*, however, was convened on a mensal estate of the king of Munster and Cashel, near Borrisoleigh, in Co Tipperary, located within the territory of the *Uí Lugdach Éile*. Muircheartach’s concerns with church reform were, as Candon (1991) emphasises, intimately bound up with his attempts to be recognised as King of Ireland: the sole fount of secular authority mirrored in a united church that gravitated towards the primatial see.

The development of the Rock of Cashel in the 11th and 12th centuries

The buildings that now crown the summit of the Rock of Cashel (Figs 1, 3 and 4) include:

- a round tower
- the famous Romanesque masterpiece, Cormac’s Chapel, which was constructed sometime after 1127/8 and consecrated in 1134 (see Stalley 2006 for discussion);
- a 12th-century high-cross (St Patrick’s Cross), possibly, although not certainly, contemporary with Cormac’s Chapel (Stalley 1985);
- a cathedral church.

The latter is a 13th-century structure which Roger Stalley suggests was never actually finished, and which was built in two stages in the mid-13th century (Stalley forthcoming). The Rock also has a documented connection with a group of Benedictines who were expelled in the 13th century by Archbishop David MacCerbhaill; he in turn founded Hore Abbey at the western foot of the Rock, as a Cistercian establishment with rights over the appurtenances, both ‘*spiritual and temporal*’, formerly held by that Benedictine community.

A story, first recorded c1301, records that MacCerbahill expelled the Benedictines due to a dream he had in which they were conspiring to cut off his head. Regardless of the truth of such a tale, given that MacCerbhaill was patron of at least some of the 13th-century cathedral which occupies so much of the crest of the Rock’s summit, he may have expelled the Benedictines in order to make room for his new construction (Diarmuid Ó Riain pers comm). On the

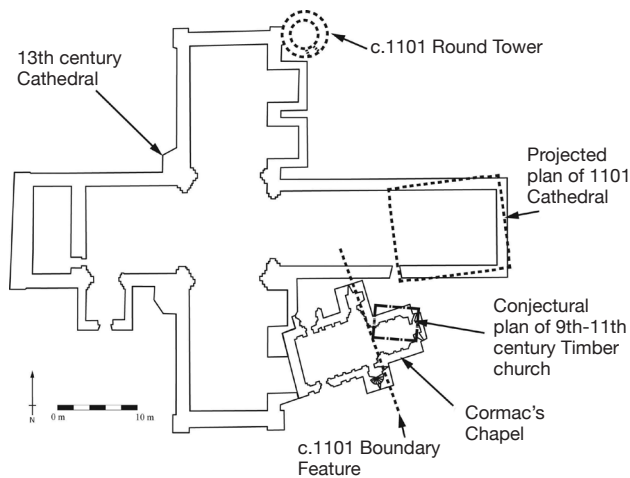


Fig 3
Schematic map of structures on the summit of the Rock of Cashel between the 11th and 13th centuries. Note the orientations and relationships between the 9th–11th century timber church, the c1101 boundary feature and Cormac's Chapel (author)

basis that a section of the northern wall of the extant choir holds no windows, Stalley has also hypothesised that there was another building in this area. This is supported by the existence of a 13th-century doorway here, and the presence of bonding stones projecting from the outer face of the cathedral. It is possible that this may have been because the chantry was located here. Furthermore, there is also a record of Domnall Mór Ua Briain building a cathedral on the Rock in c1170, presumably on the site of an earlier 12th-century structure. Currently, however, there is no archaeological evidence for where this stood or what form it took.

The excavations by Brian Hodkinson

Excavation in three areas was undertaken in the early 1990s by Brian Hodkinson (1994; WS 4; Fig 4). The first was within Cormac's Chapel and the other two in the space immediately north between the chapel and 13th-century cathedral; these have enhanced an impression of an extremely busy built environment. Hodkinson uncovered evidence for what he argued to be five phases of burial activity dating from the 5th/6th century up to the post-medieval period, as well as two early medieval churches. One church was a simple two-phase timber post-built structure located under the chancel of Cormac's Chapel. It appears that the south wall of this structure was excavated, and

very likely this represents an early royal chapel built sometime in the 9th century (1994, 173–4). The other pre-1134 structure was represented by the footings of a stone-built construction, upon which the 13th-century cathedral choir rests. This second excavated building is regarded by most academics as a cathedral church, constructed contemporary with the Round Tower to the north-west, both being built under the patronage of Muirheartach Ua Briain in c1101 as a part of the transformation of the Rock to an archiepiscopal see. This status was confirmed in 1101 at the Synod of *Raith Breasail* (Ó Carragáin 2010; O'Keeffe 2003).

Unfortunately, the excavations were conducted under difficult conditions and the phasing and dating of the site was based almost solely on the orientation of burials with relation to the various structures, with only very limited dating evidence available. Hodkinson originally identified five burial phases, with the first commencing in the 5th/6th century, and continuing up to the 9th century, at which point he suggested that timber church was constructed, which was contemporary with Phase 2. His argument for

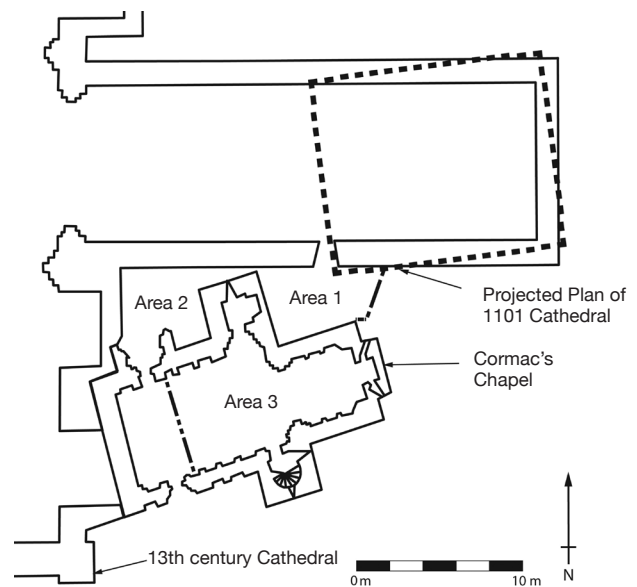


Fig 4
Plan of Cormac's Chapel showing the location of Areas 1, 2 and 3 that Brian Hodkinson excavated (author)

associating Phase 2 and the timber structure was principally the orientation of the burials. Phases 3 and 4 he felt to be contemporary with the c1101 stone cathedral, with Phase 3 consisting solely of children and Phase 4 of adult interments. Phase 5, however, was

contemporary with Cormac's Chapel, consecrated in 1134 but within which interment continued up to the post-medieval period. Hodkinson argued that following Phase 2 (the timber church associated with burials) which he hypothesised as being 9th/10th-century in date, there was a hiatus of activity during the 11th century that he associated with the seizure of Cashel and Munster's kingship by *Dál Cais* (1994, 173).

Radio-carbon dating of burials and its implications

While Hodkinson's phasing was based on the best available evidence at the time, recent dating of two burials from his Phases 2 and 5 by the *Mapping Death Project* (MDP) has suggested that the original interpretation of the site's development is no longer tenable (Fig 5). The dating of the burials nevertheless allows a degree of re-assessment for certain parts of the site, and opens new avenues of interpretation regarding developments during the period 1000–1134. In particular, these suggest that the possibility of an 11th-century hiatus is no longer sustainable.

The MDP dated two burials excavated in Area 1: Burial 387 in Hodkinson's Phase 2 (9th/10th-century), and Burial 88/361 in his Phase 5 (c1134; WS 4). With radio-carbon dating at 2 sigma, Phase 2 Burial 387 returned a date of cal AD 1033–1155, and Phase 5 Burial 88/361 a date of cal AD 1029–1155. In Hodkinson's scheme Phase 5 should date to after the consecration of Cormac's Chapel, providing a *terminus* of c1134 (1994, 174). Burial 88/361 only just falls within that range at 2 sigma, and indeed, according to

the original interpretation, Burial 387 (1033–1155), should be 9th/10th-century.

Regardless of the problems posed for the dating of Phase 5, more pressing here is the fact that both *MPD* dates, and principally that of Burial 387, indicate that there was no 11th-century hiatus, as Hodkinson supposed. Furthermore, as Phase 2 pre-dates the construction of the cathedral church in 1101, one can surmise that the interment of Burial 387 was an event of the second half of the 11th century, and by implication, the timber church still stood on top of the Rock at that date. The importance of this point will shortly be apparent.

Hodkinson argued that Phase 2 should date to the 9th/10th century largely based on an historical hypothesis that the timber church he excavated originated as a result of some of Cashel's 9th- and 10th-century kings simultaneously holding ecclesiastical offices. It is important to stress, however, that presently the archaeological evidence cannot date this timber structure more securely than saying it was probably constructed during the 6th–11th centuries. The inferences of some authors (like Candon 1991, 10–12) concerning the antiquity of the ecclesiastical element at Cashel are unfounded, and they appear to have failed to appreciate that the church functioned as a royal chapel. That the structure was, nevertheless, a construction of the 9th century, as Hodkinson reasoned, would appear to be supported by other evidence which indicates an ecclesiastically orientated re-composition of the Rock summit sometime in the first half of the 9th century.

Burial Number	Hodkinson's Phasing	MDP Dates	Gleeson
Primary burial phase	Phase 1 5th/6th–9th-century Pre-timber church		Possibly contemporary with 9th-century royal Chapel's 1st phase
Burial 387	Phase 2 9th/10th-century Timber church	1033–1155	2nd half 11th century Rebuild of timber church
Burials	Phase 3 children		Phase 3/4 1101–1134
Burials	Phase 4 adults		
Burial 88/361	Phase 5 Post 1134 consecration	1029–1155	

Fig 5
Table showing the changing perceptions of the Rock of Cashel dating

Documentary and finds dating of the timber chapel

Pursuing this argument in detail is beyond the scope of this discussion, but support for such an hypothesis is provided by two hand-bells and a fragment of a high-cross base which have been broadly dated to the late 8th to early 9th century (Bourke 1980; Harbison 1993; Ó Floinn 2001). The present author respectfully disagrees with the exact dating and contexts argued for by these studies. The timber church itself is mentioned in a passage contained in a text called *The Exile of Conall Corc* (Hull 1941, 949):

On that day, the swineherd of Áed, the king of the Múscraige, was tending his pigs. That night he said to Áed: 'I beheld a wonder today', said he, 'on these ridges in the north I beheld a yew-bush on a stone, and I perceived a small oratory in front of it and a flagstone [lecc] before it [At chonnarc doss n-ibair for carraic con acca daurthach bec ara belaiþ, lecc cloiche ara belaiþ side]. Angels were in attendance going up and down from the flagstone

'Verily', said the druid of Áed, 'that will be the residence of the king of Munster forever, and he who shall first kindle a fire under that yew, from him shall descend the kingship of Munster. (Hull 1941, 949)

This passage is actually modelled on the biblical episode of Jacob at Bethel (Genesis 28.11), which was alluded to in a Carolingian tract on the consecration of a church and altar (Byrne 1973, 186; Ó Carragáin 2010, 39–40; Repsher 1998, 53). This suggests that this church was a new construction around the time that *The Exile* was composed sometime between AD 800–850 (Hull 1941, 939). Thus, a 9th-century date range for the church seems tenable. Nevertheless, it is equally important to note that that recent evidence does not support dating the Phase 2 burials any earlier than the 11th century. The primary phase of burial, Phase 1, was suggested by Hodkinson to be 5th/6th–9th century, based primarily on the fact that B-ware pottery (imported late 5th–mid 6th century: see Doyle 2009) was found associated with an occupation surface. While there was a significant quantity of this material in that phase, the vast majority of it was found in later features such as post-medieval contexts in Areas 1 and 2 (Fig 4). The small amount that came from the early excavated phases may be more likely residual, and perhaps

became incorporated within a later occupation surface that is either contemporary with the timber structure or not much earlier than it (WS 4). The principal reason for suggesting this material was within a relatively secure early context was its association with the burials of Hodkinson's Phase 1, which were similarly argued as being earlier than the timber church because they were orientated east-north-east/west-south-west. On the other hand, the official but unpublished plans which the present author has consulted, describe an orientation for these burials that is not incompatible with their being contemporary with the primary phase of the timber chapel itself. Although admittedly very tentative given the nature of the evidence, the point of most relevance for the present argument is that, given that Hodkinson appears to have uncovered two sets of postholes associated with two phases of the timber church, the data is capable of supporting an hypothesis that the Phase 2 burials were contemporary with the timber church's second phase. Given that there is no archaeological rationale for placing any Phase 2 burials earlier than the 11th century it is possible that that burial horizon is linked to a re-building of the timber church sometime in the 11th century.

Regardless of this particular issue, the MPD-dated burials make it virtually certain that the timber church still stood in the late 11th century, and probably at the point when Muirheartach Ua Briain granted the Rock to the church in 1101. Hodkinson suggested that Phase 3 consisted of two distinct clusters of child burial within Area 1, while Phase 4, a group of adult interments, slots neatly between the two child burial clusters. It seems, though, as Hodkinson himself admits (1994, 167), that a distinction between Phases 3 and 4 as different entities is misleading, and rather, it seems better to regard both as a single phase, here designated as Phase 3/4 which can be securely placed between 1101 and 1134. Contemporary with this conjoined phase was a wall excavated by Hodkinson which ran under the north and south towers of Cormac's Chapel, but extended north beneath the 13th-century cathedral (Hodkinson 1994, 169). This appears to have limited the Phase 3/4 burial area to the east, as the child burials of 'Phase 3' were laid out with their heads respecting its line. Hodkinson correctly interpreted this as a boundary feature, restricting burial and ecclesiastical precinct; but he also suggested that this boundary was in existence contemporary with burial Phases 1 and 2 (Hodkinson 1994, 173). Regardless of their actual date, there appears to be no solid evidence for regarding burial Phases 1 and 2 as associated with a

strictly de-limited area, *pace* Hodkinson. For instance, there were burials in Area 2 which were orientated north-east/south-west and likely to be early (Hodkinson 1994 169–70). Furthermore, the absence of significant evidence for burial phases analogous to Phases 1 and 2 in Area 1 can simply be explained by the confines of the area: a *cul-de-sac* between the cathedral and north door of Cormac's Chapel which was cleaned out down to the bedrock in recent times (Hodkinson 1994 169). Consequently, only a ribbon of early stratigraphy remained around the edges of the area at the time of excavation (WS 4). A pre-1101 date for the boundary fails to appreciate that the feature itself impinges upon the west end of the early timber church (Fig 3), evidence which may have been over-looked or dismissed due to the erroneous hypothesis of an 11th-century hiatus.

That there was no overlap in the use of the timber church and the c1101 stone cathedral located to the north-east can be demonstrated by the stratigraphy of the burials excavated within the chancel of Cormac's Chapel. These were contemporary with Phase 3/4 (1101–34) and the c1101 cathedral, and overlay part of the floor-plan of the timber church (WS 4). Thus it appears that the timber structure was dismantled, and a new stone church (soon to be a cathedral, if not already of that status) constructed on a fresh location to the north-east, contemporary with a round tower to its north-west. At the same time, a boundary feature defining these ecclesiastical structures and their associated burial precinct was constructed, the line of which is preserved under the later towers of Cormac's Chapel (Fig 3). All of these developments can be dated plausibly to between 1101 and 1134 and assigned to Muircheartach Ua Briain.

It should be noted, considering Muircheartach's grant was intimately associated with the reform of the Irish church, that he purposely decided not to build his cathedral on the location of the earlier timber church, as would be the norm in early Ireland (Ó Carragáin 2010). Rather, he chose to break with the past and its traditions by constructing the cathedral for the new episcopal see of Cashel on virgin ground within a newly defined precinct on the summit sanctuary.

The destruction of the earlier timber chapel seems to have been associated with several features: a rectangular setting of stakes set out internally against its south wall, and an ash spread and thick charcoal layer excavated by Hodkinson (WS 4). These contexts were all earlier than the burial phase and boundary feature associated with the laying out of Phase 3/4.

The positioning of stake holes and ash were internal to the structure, both being sealed by a substantial layer of charcoal which was observed throughout all the areas excavated. Although there is no indication of the interval between these events, they raise the possibility that the timber chapel was deliberately destroyed by being burnt to the ground in c1101.

A motif intimately associated with the inauguration rituals of Cashel's kings was an emphasis on the ritual of *tellach*, through which one took possession of kinland, in this case a territory, through a solemn ritual which culminated in the kindling of a fire (Casey 2009; Bhreathnach forthcoming; Gleeson forthcoming). If this timber church was still standing in c1100 then the most likely context for its destruction is the construction of the adjacent stone cathedral of c1101. It is highly unlikely that Muircheartach was not conscious of the ritual of *tellach* and its symbolism ('entry', a procedure which might establish an hereditary claim to land against sitting occupants). Indeed, regardless of that issue, given the temporal, spatial and political circumstances, it is possible that he actually ordered the venerable timber royal church – the hallowed symbol of *Éoganachta* kingship – to be destroyed by fire in a highly visible and symbolic act. If so, this represents a truly emblematic statement which can undoubtedly be connected to granting both the Rock of Cashel to the church and related to the geo-political developments in Cashel's landscape. Without a doubt these ritual acts not only deprived the *Éoganachta* of their ancestral home and ceremonial capital, they at once proclaimed Muircheartach's and the *Uí Briain*'s paramount authority as lords of Munster and Ireland.

Kingship, architecture and symbolism

By the 11th century the last remaining segment of *Éoganachta* of note was the *Éoganachta Caisil* who occupied a territory centering on Cashel itself. This stretched west as far as Emly, north to the Slieve Felim mountains, north-east to the River Suir around Thurles, east as far as the modern boundary between Cos Tipperary and Kilkenny, and south as far as the River Suir at Cahir (MacCotter 2006).

Of partitions between the segments within that territory, the principal one divided the polity east-west at Cashel (MacCotter 2008). In the 10th and 11th centuries this group was so bound to Cashel that the title *rí Caisil* in the annals may occasionally refer to their local kingship rather than to Munster's over-

kingship as had been the custom through previous centuries (for instance WS 1, AI 1052.3). Despite the *Uí Briain's* dominance, this last great group of *Éoganachta* continued to be a force to be reckoned with in Munster (Kelleher 1967, 237–41), and one which clung to their ancient capital with extraordinary tenacity. Yet, by the 12th century, their power base had shifted south and west, with the Cork region emerging during the 12th century as the principal base of the last leading segment, *Clann Carthaig*. Paul MacCotter (2006) has argued convincingly that this shift was a direct result of an expansion by the *Uí Briain* in the last quarter of the 11th century, which saw an effective elimination of branches of *Éoganachta Caisil* from their ancestral south Tipperary patrimony, and an expulsion southwards. This implies that the *Uí Briain* were seeking to annex the south Tipperary plains into their over-kingdom of *Tuadmumu*, 'Thomond' (north Munster). That MacCotter's arguments place these developments within the time frame of Muircheartach Ua Briain's rise to prominence in Munster during the 1080s and 90s, and in Ireland more broadly in the first decade of the 12th century, is a point not without significance (MacCotter 2006, 63–6).

This raises the possibility that the hypothetical 11th-century re-building of the timber church on the Rock was connected with the continuing function of the Rock as a seat of kingship and inauguration within *Éoganachta Caisil*. This suggestion need not preclude Cashel being maintained as a seat of the provincial kingship. By way of analogy it is reasonable to invoke the situation of *Raith Airthir*, seat of the *Fír Cul Breg* in the early 9th century; this was located at the heart of the landscape of *Óenach Tailtiu*, Teltown in Co Meath, the assembly place of Tara's kings (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, AU 810; also Swift 2000). Indeed, *Raith Airthir* would appear to have been the residence of Tara's kings during that assembly.

Nevertheless, it appears that by the close of the 11th century, in his quest to consolidate his position within Munster, Muircheartach may have either engaged in, or escalated efforts to, expel the last remnants of powerful *Éoganachta* from their ancestral patrimony around Cashel itself. It may be no coincidence then, that Muircheartach maintained a house at Cashel in the 1090s (WS 1, AI 1092; WS 2, AFM 1092). This may have been connected to an evolving practice whereby submission, usually achieved through the exchange of hostages, was now enacted increasingly through the act of entering into a superior's house (Charles-Edwards 2009). There would be little chance of Muircheartach

giving up the *Uí Briain's* caput of Kincora (near Killaloe Co Clare) as his principal residence in Munster, and yet, whatever the possibility that the Rock's provincial function in the 11th century was principally symbolic, during Muircheartach's reign it appears that the Rock and its landscape re-emerged as a place of ceremony intimately associated with the constitution of supreme authority. This is the context for Muircheartach's grant in 1101: maintaining the ancient capital as a symbol of provincial (and probably national) authority, but ensuring that it could no longer be seen as a beacon of the old order and the traditions of that institution's incarnation as an *Éoganachta* dominated kingship. MacCotter (2006) has gone further and speculated that the grant has all the appearance of a pattern exhibited throughout the medieval period, in which recently conquered 'sword-land' was given over to the church to discourage re-conquest.

In this regard, one should consider the 1101 grant of the Rock which is recorded in the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Annals of Tigernach*. The Four Masters (WS 2, 1101.5) relate

Muircheartach Ua Briain made a grant such as no king had ever made before, namely, he granted Caiseal [Cashel] of the kings to the devout/religious [cráibdí], without any claim of layman or clergyman upon it, but the religious of Ireland in general.
(WS 2, 1101.5)

The *Annals of Tigernach* (WS 3, 1101.8) differ slightly in relating that the grant was to St Patrick and the *cráibdí*. Candon has suggested that a passage in *Lebor na gCert* which involves Patrick proclaiming that dignity and primacy should always be in Cashel. Moreover, he describes Cashel as '*Patrick's sanctuary and the principal stronghold of the king of Ireland*' (1991, 16), as an invitation by Muircheartach to Armagh, as Ireland's primatial see and caput of St Patrick's *paruchia*, to assume its rightful place at the head of a reformed national church in Ireland. Certainly, in this context, the *Annals of Tigernach's* suggestion that the grant was to Patrick would appear appropriate. If, however, *Lebor na gCert* was composed in connection with Muircheartach's great hosting (expedition) in the same year (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983, AU 1101), then it is important to note that the hosting is entered in the annals before the grant itself (WS 2, AFM 1101 and WS 1, AI 1101); thus, plausibly, as Candon argues (1991), the grant was

related to a concession being made to Armagh in order that its ecclesiastics would support Muircheartach's claims to be the supreme king of Ireland.

Indeed, it appears highly likely that from the outset Muircheartach intended Cashel to be a *sedes episcopalis*, subject to Armagh as it was when the diocesan structure was codified at the Synod of *Raith Breasail* a decade later (1111). Moreover, perhaps following earlier precedent, the cathedral church and ecclesiastical precinct on the Rock was most likely dedicated to St Patrick. The saint had been connected with the Rock of Cashel since the late 7th century, and that connection was given a theatrical aspect in the 9th/10th century *Vita Tripartita* episode involving the saint baptising Óengus mac Nad-Fróich (ancestor of Éoganachta Caisil) in which Patrick accidentally stabbed Óengus with the point of his crosier (Ó Riain 1997; Stokes 1887, 196–7).

In this regard, the 12th-century cross of St Patrick may be of interest. Although usually connected with Cormac mac Carthaig's patronage and the construction of the famous Romanesque chapel, if Ó Carragáin's surmise is correct (2010, 291) that in seeking to reclaim the Rock for the *Éoganachta*, Cormac mac Carthaig dedicated his chapel to his ancestor (the famous 10th-century Bishop-King Cormac mac Cuilleneain), then the association of the cross with Patrick finds an improved context in Muircheartach's earlier Patrician orientated re-composition of the summit in c1101. Exactly where upon the summit this stood originally is another matter and beyond this discussion's scope (Lynch 1983; Stalley 1985).

From an annal entry of 1091 (WS 2, AFM 1091) we know that Ua Briain had a house at Cashel, perhaps following an earlier pattern in which kings of Munster retained a residence there (Bhreathnach 2011, 146; Bhreathnach forthcoming). Based largely on this entry and a detailed metrological analysis of the buildings upon the Rock summit, Tadhg O'Keeffe (2003, 135–8) has hypothesised that this 'palace' was located on the site of the later archbishop's tower house at the western edge of the summit knoll. However, evidence adduced by Stalley (forthcoming) suggests this was built over a part of the 13th-century cathedral nave. The validity of this possible location is undermined by the fact that O'Keeffe failed to take account of either Hodkinson's published account of the excavations or the unpublished report (WS 4), as the lynchpin of his metrology, the 1101 cathedral church is given an erroneous orientation (compare Fig 3 with O'Keeffe 2003, 135–8). In any case, the Rock complex was

likely to have been much more extensive than just the summit, and probably originally included much of the land to the west around Hore Abbey, as well as the land sloping gently south to Cashel's Main Street. It is tempting to place the Ua Briain house upon the summit (*tech*, 'house', is the term used in the annals, making O'Keeffe's 'palace' misleading); but it must be stressed that it could just as easily be located anywhere within this larger area, and not necessarily on the top itself.

Nevertheless, the boundary feature excavated under the towers of Cormac's Chapel would, if projected north, have defined an area encompassing the Round Tower, and therefore there appears to have been a clearly de-limited ecclesiastical precinct which was established and defined *de novo* c1101. This might go some way to supporting Edel Bhreathnach's surmise (forthcoming) that in 1101 Muircheartach Ua Briain's grant entailed only

the guardianship of its [Cashel's] ecclesiastical quarter ...[handing it] over to cráibdig ['those following a rule?'] as part of the change of Cashel to a sedes episcopalis, the focal point of a metropolitan see.

Bhreathnach (forthcoming)

Whether or not the area west of this boundary feature should be seen as having remained 'secular space' is a moot point. Nevertheless, that the chancel arch of Cormac's Chapel appears to intentionally straddle this boundary feature, separating the laity from the clergy and perhaps perpetuating an earlier dichotomy, may indicate that the area to the west was in reality maintained as secular territory, and connected with the provincial kingship and its ceremonial in the years after 1101. This might suggest that Muircheartach's political aspirations to have a single Munster-based King of Ireland, and a single church, subject to the See of St Patrick, was mirrored in the symbolic geography and building programme undertaken on the Rock summit in the first decade of the 12th century: a space for the king to the west, and a precinct dedicated to St Patrick, that 'national apostle', to the east.

Despite the lengths that Muircheartach went to, the *Uí Briain* were unable to retain the kingdom that he had forged. In the wake of Muircheartach's failing health and subsequent death, the *Meic Carthaig*, now kings of Desmond (south Munster) re-emerged as a force to be reckoned with. During the reign of Tadhg mac Carthaig and subsequently his brother Cormac, *Clann Carthaig* re-claimed their provincial patrimony

and rose to national prominence, pressing claims to a prestige which had long since forsaken their house (MacCotter 2006). In this ambition Cormac mac Carthaig's 'realpolitik' mirrored that of his predecessor and *Uí Briain* nemesis, Muircheartach Ua Briain, in having had both an important literary and architectural dimension. For instance, Ó Corráin (1974) has demonstrated that *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaissil* ('The Battler of Cellacháin of Cashel'), is as much a Meic Carthaig manifesto as *Cogadh Gaedhail re Gaillib* was an *Uí Briain* propaganda tract (for *Cogadh* see Ní Mhaonaigh 2007) – such that the *Éoganachta* king glorified within, Celleacháin Caisil (d 954), was as much a doppelganger for Cormac in the former, as Brian Ború was for Muircheartach in the latter.

Cormac, however, reclaimed his ancestral home very conspicuously by commissioning the great church known as Cormac's Chapel (Ó Riain-Raedel 2006; Stalley 2006). The nature of the architecture, ornamentation and symbolism, contentious though it may be, is extensively discussed (O'Keefe 2003, 123–65; O'Keefe 2006). More important is the manner in which the building of the chapel itself was a *de facto* proclamation that a resurgent *Éoganachta*, led by Meic Carthaig, were reclaiming their ancestral home, from which they may only have been expelled during the preceding decades. In particular, the act of building the chapel may be read as connected to a fundamental re-composition of inauguration ceremonies and symbolism associated with the kingship of Cashel. Perhaps the key to appreciating the exact nature of this renaissance is contained in a passage incorporated into the *Éoganachta* genealogies, whose significance Edel Bhreathnach (forthcoming) has recently highlighted:

It is this wise that the kings of Munster should be elected: the twenty-four best chief counsellors in the two Fifths of Munster should choose him, as the German emperor is chosen, and he should be brought to the Stone of Cotraide in Cormac's great church and there proclaimed king, and be brought to Lis na nUrlann in Cashel and proclaimed there also.

Bhreathnach (forthcoming)

This passage is contained within the Book of Lecan (RIA MS 23 P 2), f. 181 v d20–32, and an alternative version is preserved in MS RIA C i 2, f. 44v. A number of published transcriptions appear to have erred in stating that the candidate is brought to both Leac Cothraige and '*teampull mór Cormaic*', two distinct

locations (Byrne 1973, 191; Ó Riain-Raedel 2006, 176; Fitzpatrick 2004, 178–9). Thus, the text as rendered by Bhreathnach actually implies that the inauguration stone of Cashel's kings was located *within* Cormac's Chapel.

The precise date of the passage is uncertain, but it would seem to belong to the 12th century. Ó Riain-Raedel (2006, 176–7) makes the reasonable assertion that the inclusion of the passage in the *Éoganachta* genealogies is contemporary with the construction of Cormac's Chapel (1127–1134), and moreover, an aspect of a 12th-century recomposition of inauguration ceremonies, such that Meic Carthaig kings of Cashel articulated an imperial aspect derived from some German archetype. That the passage states explicitly that the candidate was to be inaugurated after the manner of '*an t-imperarr Allmanach*', 'the German emperor', makes the architectural affinities of Cormac's Chapel and German structures like that at Regensburg highly suggestive (Ó Riain-Raedel 2006; O'Keefe 2003; Ó Carragáin forthcoming; Stalley 1981, 2006). For present purposes, the statement that the stone upon which Cashel's *Éoganachta* kings were inaugurated was at that point housed within Cormac's Chapel, is highly significant.

There are a number of possible locations within the chapel where the stone may have been placed:

- possibly in the threshold to the north doorway (for which see Hodkinson 1994, 170–1);
- in the space underneath the unique four-post altar (for which see Ó Carragáin 2010, 177 and 285–91);
- or the area of blank space left of the chancel arch (see Fig 7);
- Alternatively, it could have been housed in the chamber above the chapel, accessed by an elaborate spiral staircase in the south tower (consider O'Keefe 2003, 138–45).

On the other hand, the *north* tower of Cormac's Chapel, which is accessed through an elaborate portal (Fig 6), but which has no other exit, has long been thought to have housed something of exceptional importance, usually assumed to be relics. Considering it is probable that *Leac Cotraide* was a flagstone, its original location is most likely to be in the space under the north tower accessed through the elaborate portal. Such a suggestion is given substance when taking into account the connection made between the early royal church and inauguration stone in *The Exile of Conal Corc*. If this was the structure excavated by Hodkinson,

then its (presumably) west-facing entrance would have been orientated approximately on the space now occupied by the entrance to Cormac's Chapel's north tower. This in turn supports the supposition that the stone was anciently in this location: that is, that it was an already extant monument incorporated from the outset as an integral component into the original plan and symbolism of Cormac's Chapel.

One of the more renowned aspects of Cormac's Chapel is its architectural idiosyncrasies, the obvious misalignment of the nave and chancel being the most frequently noted (Fig 7). It has been suggested that this was a consequence of other buildings being located close by (Henry 1970, 172–3), while Stalley (2006, 171) attributes the mis-alignment to the foundation trench for the chapel being excavated on the wrong side of a guideline, with the result being the southern wall of Cormac's Chapel is located too far north. The latter suggestion has the added advantage that had this been the case the chapel would have been laid out originally according to the ratio 1:2. Nevertheless, in a structure so redolent with symbolism, with such potent symbolic iconography, allowance might be made for the option that the mis-alignment be regarded as an



Fig 6
The elaborate portal entrance to the north tower of Cormac's Chapel (Photo: author)

intentional aspect of the original architectural design. If so, then the mis-alignment may have been constructed to draw attention to the large open area in front of the north tower, and indeed, along the north wall itself – a space which may have facilitated a procession during inauguration ceremonial.

Cormac's Chapel, as a political statement, reclaims the Rock of Cashel for the *Éoganachta*, and moreover, as a symbol of their kingship, in extravagant fashion. The chapel is orientated north-east/south-west, and that course might be regarded as a symbolic harking back to a north-east/south-west axis of royal ceremonial procession, intimately associated with cosmic principals and sacred authority, and imbued in the actual inauguration route of Cashel's kings (Gleeson 2012). The chapel was also purposely positioned so that the chancel arch straddled the earlier c1101 boundary feature which may have separated the secular and ecclesiastical (*pace* Hodkinson 1994). However, it was positioned in such a way that it included the whole site of the earlier timber church and the inauguration stone. In effect it was an attempt to invalidate the spatial dichotomy of Muircheartach's earlier scheme, while simultaneously proclaiming a previous *Éoganachta* ancestral legacy and reclaiming the whole summit as a place for that people's ceremonial. As such, Cormac mac Carthaig's political motives appear more clearly accentuated. This re-composition of inauguration ceremonies harnessed both old and new in the service of 'realpolitik', and moreover, united the core institutions of early medieval society, kingship and the church, in one building. This may be further emphasised by suggesting that the aspiration for Cormac's Chapel to incorporate such locations and symbolism necessitated that it be located precisely on this spot, orientated unconventionally exactly as it is, such that the idiosyncrasies of its architecture would be regarded as being not the effects of blundering architects or workmen, but rather a testament to their ability to compress such an elaborate structure into the summit's already busy symbolic geography.

Conclusion

Landscapes of kingship are thoroughly conditioned by the exigencies of the political landscape, and nowhere is this more clearly seen than in Cashel's development during the 11th and 12th centuries. The Rock was a place intimately associated with the exercise of power, with the construction, maintenance and challenging of



Fig 7
 Photo showing the mis-alignment of the nave and chancel of Cormac's Chapel (Photo: author)

authority and, as it had been so for centuries prior to Muircheartach Ua Briain's unprecedented 1101 grant, so it was for centuries after. The contrast between the development of Cashel and other royal sites in this period is truly remarkable. In some respects, the stasis within contemporary early medieval perceptions of places like Tara, when contrasted with Cashel's dynamic development into a 'Christian' capital during the same period, precluded the former ever having been granted to the church in the same manner as the latter was. The failure of Tara to endure as an actual seat of power during the high medieval period in anything more than a symbolic sense, was as much an effect of ideological inertia as it was due to the failure of its *Uí Néill* kings to maintain a firm grip on the 'high kingship's' notional 'national' authority in any real terms. While Tara continued to be re-moulded and re-imagined through poetry, mythology and literature, Cashel and its landscape remained intimately associated with the production of authority and it continued to be

physically re-composed according to the contemporary practice of kingship and society's needs.

Perhaps the most potent example of such renaissance is the possibility which Stalley (2006, 175) raises, that the paintings within Cormac's Chapel were actually created specifically for the occasion of Henry II's visit to Cashel in 1171–2. Kingship is, perhaps most pertinently in Irish accounts of it, a pre-eminently religious and sacred institution. Yet, such imperatives cannot deny that it was also a political one, and what this account has sought to draw out is the fact that while Munster's kings undertook specific actions and building programmes at Cashel for pious and benevolent reasons, these were principally aspects of 'realpolitik'. The nature of these developments on the Rock in the 11th and 12th centuries owed as much to discourses of power and place as they did to any esoteric or existential quality inherent in Cashel's landscape or ideology of kingship.

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