

Urban sovereigns and territorial sovereigns – the castle and town of Kilkenny, 1200–1500

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The city of Kilkenny lies astride the River Nore in the south-east of Ireland. The placename *Cill Chainnigh*, in Irish 'Canice's church', provides clear evidence of the city's origin. The church dedicated to Canice was established on a hill overlooking the major fording point on the River Nore, later marked by Green's Bridge. Nothing is known of the form of the early church but an examination of the modern street plan suggests that it stood within a large enclosure, measuring roughly 300 m by 225 m and covering about 6.5 hectares. The surviving round tower dates to the late eleventh or early twelfth century and may well have been constructed when Kilkenny became the cathedral for the diocese of Ossory in 1111. The tower was built on top of an earlier cemetery containing the burials of both adults and children (Graves/Prim 1857, 121). The nineteenth-century discovery of antler tines near the cathedral suggests the presence of manufacturing activity, such as the comb-making that was carried out in contemporary Dublin and Kildare (Anon 1864–1866, 411–412). Archaeological excavations at the junction of Irishtown and St Canice's Place revealed a layer of pre-Anglo-Norman debris 30 cm thick indicating that occupation extended southwards from the ecclesiastical enclosure (Excavations 1997, 99). By the mid twelfth century the Mac Gilla Pátraic kings of Ossory had a residence at Kilkenny where they held court and in which a deputy acted during their absence (Orpen 1892, 95–105). The form and location of this residence is unknown – it may have been situated close to the cathedral. Excavations at Kilkenny Castle, however, have revealed evidence for bronze- and iron-working associated with a sod building

predating the initial Anglo-Norman earthwork castle (Murtagh 1993, 1108; Excavations 1992, 39). The excavations found no evidence, however, that this sod building was defended.

The Anglo-Normans were attracted to Kilkenny because of the presence there of a settlement that was the focus for both overland and riverine routes. That settlement, based around St Canice's Cathedral, was under the authority of the bishop of Ossory and it could not be sequestered or settled by the invading Anglo-Normans without invoking the wrath of the church. Partly for this reason but also because of the presence of an outcrop of high ground, strategically placed overlooking a bridging point of the Nore 750 m south of the cathedral, the Anglo-Norman castle was built down-river from the older settlement. The castle formed the southern boundary of the new Anglo-Norman town, which was built between it and the old ecclesiastical settlement, subsequently called Irishtown. The initial earthwork castle, uncovered in excavations by Ben Murtagh (1993, 1110) might best be described as a quadrangular moated site that closely followed the plan of the later stone castle.

Kilkenny formed part of the lordship of Leinster, acquired in 1189 by William Marshall when he married Isabella, the daughter of Strongbow, first lord of Leinster. In 1199, or thereabouts, Marshall appointed Geoffrey fitz Robert, Strongbow's brother-in-law, as seneschal of Leinster. In the course of reorganising the Leinster estates, fitz Robert gave the burgesses of Kilkenny their first documented privileges and fixed their annual rent at twelve pence, payable half at Easter and half at the feast of St Michael (29 September) (McNeill 1931, 73–74). Fitz Robert also appears to have

been responsible for building the earthwork precursor of the present castle.

William Marshall came to Kilkenny in 1207 at a time when the lordship of Leinster was in danger of breaking up. His response was to enlarge the settlement, strengthen the castle, and grant a charter aimed at ensuring the firm support of his principal Irish town. The initial Anglo-Norman settlement appears to have stretched only from the castle as far as the present James's Street but Marshall negotiated an exchange with the bishop of Ossory that permitted the enlargement of the town to the north (Berry 1907–1909, 124).

The castle was strengthened by the construction of an ambitious stone structure. It was of quadrangular plan with massive, circular corner towers and protected by a fosse, filled up during the seventeenth century but originally 8 m deep. The entrance was in the (now missing) south wall and during the nineteenth century, while constructing a service passage, the remains of the twin-bastioned entrance gate were recovered. Unfortunately it is not clear whether this gate formed part of the original 1207 plan or was an addition made later in the thirteenth century. This gate faced south and led directly to the countryside and the road to Waterford. It is not clear if there was a town gate. None was found in the course of excavation but it is possible that a small gate may lie beneath the present Parade entrance. Documentary sources indicate that this complex of buildings was enclosed by a towered enceinte wall, almost certainly with an outer fosse (Curtis 1932–1943, iii, 106–107).

The castle was the administrative centre of one of the most important Anglo-Norman manors in south-east Ireland and within it was a large hall where justice was dispensed by the lord of Kilkenny or his seneschal. By 1435 it was known as the shirehall and this piece of information enables us to locate the hall on the north side of the quadrangle (Curtis 1932–1943, iii, 114). The castle was also the site of an important gaol and there was a chapel, dedicated to St Mary (Carrigan 1905, iii, 248). Although the castle was the centre of a manor, it was purely an administrative centre and there was no farmland associated with it. The castle had to be supplied with foodstuffs either from the town or from outlying estate land. Adjoining the castle was an orchard, two gardens and several meadows totalling eleven

acres (Bradley 2000, 14). The castle park with its dovecote lay beneath the castle on the other side of the river Nore.

William Marshall's 1207 charter to the townspeople formalised the privileges of an existing settlement in which certain operational structures were taken for granted (McNeill 1931, 71–74). The concessions were designed primarily to protect the burgesses from arbitrary aristocratic or judicial pressures but they also provided tax breaks and benefits in kind while fixing a permanent rent. The lack of detailed regulations enabled the townspeople to develop the structure best suited to their needs and this process is exemplified in their 1231 decision to elect a principal officer, *le sofreyne*, and four provosts annually who, lest the lord of the town might feel challenged by such developments, "were to be profitable to the lord and commonalty" (McNeill 1931, 1). Subsequent burgage rents suggest that the population of the town was between 2200 and 4600.

The thirteenth century was a period of expansion and development, but the fourteenth century was one of decline. The town escaped the worst depredations of the Bruce Wars (1315–18) but it is unlikely that it emerged untouched by the famines of 1315–17, the smallpox epidemics of the 1320s, and the cattle plagues of 1321 and 1324–1325. The severest epidemic, however, was undoubtedly the Black Death, which arrived in Kilkenny in 1348 and was graphically described by the Franciscan, Friar Clyn. So many people died that there were labour shortages. Servants and labourers sought to exploit their scarcity value. The suburbs were deserted, chapels that had been built outside the walls were demolished and some properties within the town remained vacant for fifty years (Bradley 2000, 5). There is little evidence of any social interaction with the Gaelic Irish in the fourteenth-century town. The urban culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries remained vehemently hostile to the Gaelic Irish and viewed them as 'natural enemies'. It is typified by the case of 1344, in which the seneschal of Kilkenny ruled that because Adam Omolgan was an Irishman, his murder within the town did not have to be punished (McNeill 1931, 7–8). The harshness of these attitudes appears to have lessened somewhat by the late fifteenth century, when burgesses and craftsmen with Gaelic Irish names are found in Kilkenny. A

key factor in the Gaelicization of Kilkenny was the purchase of the castle and one-third of the town by James Butler, the third earl of Ormond, in 1391. This broke the contact with English-based lords and brought in a family that had built up a power-base by the skilful manipulation of the Gaelic Irish in the marches of Wicklow and Tipperary. To the townspeople ethnicity was significant as a badge of identity, but to the lord of Kilkenny it was lordship, and his status as ruler of diverse ethnicities, English, Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish, that was important. With the purchase of Kilkenny Castle, the town became the capital of the Butler lordship, amounting to over one million acres in counties Kilkenny and Tipperary. It was no longer administered by government officials as it had been in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but, in the words of the Ordinances of Fethard (c. 1430), Kilkenny formed part of 'one land (*patria*) under one lord', the earl of Ormond (Empey/Simms 1975, 185). During the first half of the fifteenth century the earls exerted a powerful local influence but this declined after 1452 when the political ambitions of the Ormonds prompted them to take up residence in England.

Throughout the fifteenth century, as a result of the Gaelic revival, Kilkenny was cut off from the royal administration in Dublin but the *Liber primus*, the oldest of the town books, demonstrates that Kilkenny remained a functioning urban community. It was a period of urban consolidation characterised by subtle social and economic changes, reflected topographically by redevelopment and rebuilding within the town. There is evidence of a demand for building space within the walls but no sign of suburban expansion while, during the second half of the century, both major bridges and almost all of the town gates, mural towers, churches and religious houses were modified or rebuilt (Curtis 1932–1943, iii, 106–107; 114; Bradley 2000).

The main Ormond line died out in 1515 but the Irish lands were successfully claimed by Piers Butler, a direct descendant of the third earl. Pier's cultural background combined both Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Irish strains and he was adept at making the best of both worlds. He established a grammar school in Kilkenny that, under the tutelage of Peter White, was to become one of Ireland's most famous colleges and he is credited with im-

porting Flemish weavers to make tapestries, carpets and cushions for Kilkenny Castle (Miller and Power 1979, 56–60; Carte 1786, i, 1). In addition, however, he levied the customary rights of Gaelic lords on his Anglo-Irish subjects who deeply resented it. In an inquisition of 1537 he was named as the lord of the town of Kilkenny, entitled to all of its chief rent which amounted to 18 £ Irish, but he was also denounced by the corporation for the exactions that he imposed upon them (Hore/Graves 1870, 109). While the services exacted by the earl may have been demanding, the outspoken condemnation of their lord by the corporation indicates that it had become accustomed to a certain independence during the half century of Butler absence. This incipient independence was linked to the development, from the late fifteenth century onwards, of an oligarchy of about fifteen families, in whose hands wealth and political influence were concentrated. The names of ten were grouped together in a well-known couplet: Archdekin, Archer, Cowley, Langton, Lee, Knaresborough, Lawless, Raggett, Rothe and Shee (Carrigan, iii, 74).

Some families were conspicuously prominent in public life. A member of the Rothe family, for instance, was sovereign on eighteen occasions between 1440 and 1544; the Archers held the position sixteen times between 1434 and 1544, while the Shees were sovereigns on seven occasions between 1493 and 1544. The control of these three families increased in the early sixteenth century, and between 1494 and 1544, only eighteen of the fifty sovereigns were neither Archers, Rotheres nor Shees (H. M. C. 1871, 259–260). Dynastic supremacy was perpetuated by inter-familial marriages and when the Dissolution of the Monasteries brought new land on to the market these families were excellently poised to take advantage of the speculative advantages that it afforded.

Conclusion

The role of the castle in the formation of medieval Kilkenny was a crucial one socially, economically, culturally, legally and topographically. During the thirteenth century the affairs of the castle dominated the town. The decline of government control in the fourteenth century and the acquisition of Kilkenny by the

earl of Ormond in 1391 led to a period during which the town was absorbed into the lordship of a private family. In the interests of that lordship the town had to curb its previous antagonism to the Gaelic Irish. The move of the earls of Ormond to England in 1452 led to the development of a more independent civic authority, but that independence was checked with the re-emergence of a powerful local lord in the early sixteenth century. In the period

under review, town and castle were opposed powers. The town, however, endeavoured to conceal its opposition, taking advantage of absentee lords to expand its role, but whenever there was a powerful resident lord the town remained subject to the castle. Kilkenny serves as a reminder that medieval towns, frequently interpreted as capsules of modernity within a feudal sea, were very much a part of the feudal framework.

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