

The Lordship of Meath and the Liberty of Trim, Ireland, 1172–1425

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Trim is located 40 km to the north-west of Dublin, on the banks of the river Boyne, one of the major natural route-ways connecting the inland plains with the Irish Sea. Well-drained by the Boyne and its tributaries, the land surrounding the town is relatively low-lying and flat, generally ranging from 60 to 70 m above sea level.

Trim lies towards the eastern edge of the largest continuous stretch of carboniferous limestone in Europe (Aalen et al. 1997, 7). In the countryside surrounding the town, this limestone bedrock is generally concealed beneath highly productive soils which are ideally suited to the cultivation of grass, but can also produce good yields of root-crops, cereals and vegetables. The area around Trim is among the best agricultural land in the country, for both pastoral and tillage farming (Finch et al. 1983, 51; Aalen et al. 1997, 18).

The name Trim derives from the Irish *Áth Truim(m)*, meaning ‘ford of the elder trees’, and it seems that one of the attractions for early settlers at Trim was the fact that they could cross the river at this point (Hogan 1910, 71). Prehistoric finds indicate that farming communities sought out the fertile lands on which to graze their cattle and cultivate crops, while the river supplied fish including salmon, trout and eel. An important communication route, the Boyne was also a source of water for washing, cooking and drinking, and a means of disposing of waste, while the shallows at Trim made crossing possible for much of the year.

The earliest known documentary reference to Trim appears in a ninth-century codex known as the *Book of Armagh* (Gwynn 1913). The narrative account, originally written at the begin-

ning of the eighth century, describes the foundation of the church at *Vadum Truimm*, ‘the ford of Trim’, by the British missionary Lommán, who was, according to the text, a nephew and disciple of Patrick.

Early medieval Trim was home to both ecclesiastics and scholars. At one time or another the religious community numbered abbots, bishops, *princeps* and anchorites, while its poets achieved high renown and its scribes kept records of political affairs and family alliances. The early Irish annals record the deaths of ecclesiastics, scribes and poets at Trim in the eighth and ninth centuries, as well as the burning of churches, while further information on the inhabitants of the site is recorded in genealogies and martyrologies. From all of the documentary evidence, it appears that Trim’s early medieval profile was at its highest in the eighth century. After that its significance gradually fades until the twelfth century.

The exact location of the earliest church remains unclear, although archaeological excavations at Trim Castle in the early 1970s uncovered the remains of a rectangular stone building stratified beneath the lowest levels of the Anglo-Norman masonry castle (Sweetman 1978, 131–133; 185). Since the building of the earliest phase of the keep occurred in the early 1170s, it is clear that the rectangular structure was built, and had most likely gone out of use, prior to that date (Condit 1996). The building’s rectangular shape, its east-west orientation, and the methods employed in its construction indicate that its function was ecclesiastical – perhaps it was a small church or oratory. That the castle was built on lands belonging to the church substantiates this view (Sheehy 1962–1965, i, no. 30).

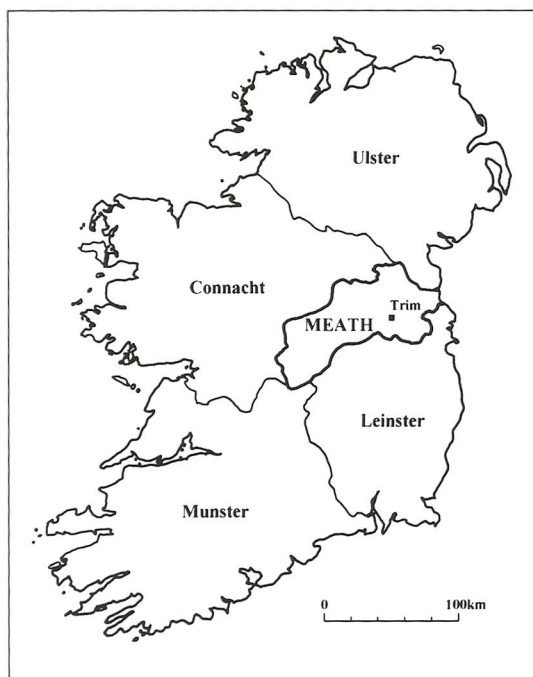


Fig. 1: Map of lordship of Meath.

Among the knights who landed in Ireland with Henry II in October 1171 was Hugh de Lacy, fifth baron Lacy by tenure, whose family originally came from Lassy, in Normandy (Orpen 1892, ii, 2601–6). The following April, as Henry was preparing to leave Ireland, he summoned Hugh and issued him with a charter granting to him the whole of the ancient kingdom of Meath, for the service of fifty knights (Mills/McEnery 1916, 6; 177). Meath was granted to de Lacy as a liberty – an area granted to a subject “to whom the king delegated a portion of his prerogative” (Wood 1932, 312). The terms of the grant, including an assurance to de Lacy of “all liberties and free customs which the king has or may have there”, created what was practically a palatine lordship. De Lacy was granted complete jurisdiction and cognisance of all pleas, including arson, rape, treasure-trove and forestalling, and he was entitled to appoint a chancellor, a treasurer, and other officers, and to have all appropriate seals (Wood 1932, deed IX). Nowhere else in Ireland was the king’s prerogative delegated to such a great extent.

The transformation of the ancient kingdom of Meath into a feudal lordship consisted of a *mélange* of change and continuity. Although it has been suggested that the de Lacy lordship of Meath was quite a new political identity, in that its boundaries did not exactly mirror those of any single earlier political unit, it is clear that

in most places the earlier borders were maintained, and that where they were not, the new frontier was shaped by geographical features and by existing territorial units (Bartlett/Mackay 1989, 31; Bhreathnach 1999, 16–17). Bhreathnach has argued that “far from entering virgin territory and creating a new landscape, the Anglo-Normans found [in Meath] an established pattern of territorial division and of settlement, an established structure of authority, no doubt with a concomitant system of economic distribution and collection of tribute or taxes, and an evolving, parallel ecclesiastical framework. Rather than ignore this existing polity, they proceeded to mould it according to their own administrative, economic and military structures”.

When de Lacy set about establishing control in Meath and securing his extensive lordship, it was done primarily through subinfeudation and the systematic construction of a network of fortifications (Graham 1980, 39–56). The most common form of fortification to be built in Meath was the motte, and these were positioned at strategic locations, usually on the richest agricultural land. Pre-existing settlement patterns within the lordship were also considered when sites to be fortified were being identified. The method of subinfeudation is also illustrative of the amalgam of change and continuity. In a number of cases, de Lacy granted to one of his knights a pre-defined land-unit, previously held by a local king (Orpen 1911–1920, ii, 85).

Another case of the superimposition of new order on pre-existing structures is de Lacy’s selection of Trim as the caput of the lordship. Monastic centres, sheltering traders and artisans, and built on fords and transport routes, were natural candidates for the administrative seats and strongholds of the fledgling feudal system in Ireland. The importance of Trim in pre-Norman times was clearly recognised by the new settlers and they endeavoured to turn this to their advantage. Trim was to become the administrative centre of Meath, with its focus of control and organisation at the castle, the construction of which must have got underway soon after Henry II made his grant to de Lacy. The establishment of the caput of the lordship at Trim was part of a recognisable pattern within the structure of subinfeudation, and many seigniorial manors in Meath were centred at locations which were (or had been)

either early Christian monasteries or important churches (e. g. Clonard, Duleek, Fore, Kells, Skryne and Slane). In fact, at Trim, the Anglo-Normans built their castle on land they rented from the church.

Much of what we know about the earliest Anglo-Norman fortification at Trim comes from the epic Norman-French poem known as *The Song of Dermot and the Earl* (Orpen 1892, ii, 3222–3241). Here it is said that “Hugh de Lacy fortified a house at Trim and threw a trench around it, and then enclosed it with a stockade”. It was long believed that this early fortification was a motte, but archaeological excavations have revealed that it was in fact a ring-work (Sweetman 1999, 4–5). The ring-work was quickly replaced by the first phase of the masonry structure, however, and two further phases were to follow in rapid succession. Strategically sited on a limestone outcrop on the south bank of the Boyne, Trim Castle is the largest and one of the oldest Anglo-Norman fortresses in Ireland. The curtain wall, which has seven towers and two gates, encloses an area of over a hectare. Projecting from one of the towers is a barbican which would have spanned the water-filled moat that originally surrounded the curtain wall. Apart from their defensive role, the massive walls formed a visible statement of territorial dominance, while the size of the keep was a reflection of the scale of organisation and administration that was necessary to control the lordship.

The castle was the hub of the liberty government, housing the chancery, exchequer and prison as well as functioning as the repository for all documentary records and as a home for the lord of the liberty and his family. Under the conditions of the grant of the liberty of Meath in 1172, Hugh de Lacy was entitled to appoint a chancellor, a treasurer and other officers to oversee the day-to-day government of this franchise (Wood 1932, deed IX). Although the charter does not detail what these ‘other officers’ were to be, one was undoubtedly a seneschal or steward. The seneschal was the chief administrative officer of his lord, advising him, managing his estates and presiding over the liberty court. The lord of Meath was also entitled to have a sheriff, whose main duty was as to execute writs issued by the chancellor.

The chancery was the administrative centre for property grants, the drawing up of titles, deeds and agreements, and the repository for legal

documents including charters, grants and writs. Writs issued by the chancellor were stamped with an official, crown-approved, seal. The centre of the financial administration of the liberty was the exchequer. There, income was received and disbursed, accounts were kept and audited by designated barons, while the treasurer was responsible for paying the staff and looking after the records and books pertaining to the fiscal business of the lordship. Also attached to the exchequer was at least one chamberlain.

The liberty of Trim had its own escheator (Wood 1932, 315), an office that developed in England in the thirteenth century. The escheator was responsible for feudal revenues, and was therefore concerned with property rights, births, marriages and deaths, wardships and *primer seisin*. When a tenant committed a felony or died without an heir, the escheator was entitled to repossess or escheat the tenant’s fief. He would hold an inquisition *post mortem* on the death of a tenant and then act according to the findings of the inquiry, usually seizing the deceased’s lands into the lord’s estate.

An equally important member of the officialdom of the lordship was the coroner (Wood 1932, 315). The office of coroner was created in England in 1194, modified in the 1220s and spread to Ireland during the thirteenth century (Hunnisett 1961; Otway-Ruthven 1968, 179). The work of the coroner, or ‘keeper of the pleas of the crown’, entailed a number of responsibilities in the detection and prosecution of crime. Among these were the investigation of sudden or suspicious deaths, including the examination of the corpse, the summoning of witnesses and the recording of confessions. The office of chief sergeant of Meath is referred to from early in the fourteenth century.

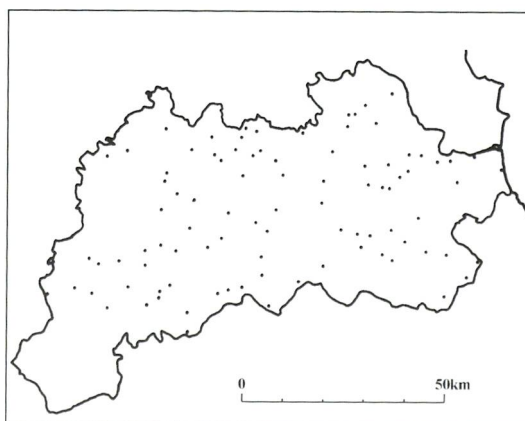


Fig. 2: Distribution of mottes in Meath.



Fig. 3: Projecting from one of the towers on the curtain wall at Trim Castle, the barbican would have spanned the water-filled moat that originally surrounded castle.

One role of this officer seems to have been to appoint jurors to the court of the liberty, but his principal duty was to collect the rents due to the king within the bailiwick or lordship. The office appears to have been farmed out – i. e. the incumbent of the office collected all of the money due to the crown, but only paid over a certain, pre-agreed sum to the exchequer, keeping the balance as his wage.

The system of Betagh tenure also operated in Meath. By this arrangement, a person held land from his lord in return for carrying out certain manual tasks, mostly agricultural work, on the demesne lands of the manor (Curtis 1936, 62–76). These tenants, or betaghs, were almost exclusively Gaelic Irish, and had a status roughly equivalent to that of the villein in England. Although they were not exactly slaves, betaghs were unfree, had no property rights, and could be sold or given away with their property (McNeill 1950, 139; Otway-Ruthven 1951, 1–13). The work they did for their lord did not exempt them from land rent,

and they normally paid the same amount as that paid by the other classes of tenant on the same manor (Otway-Ruthven 1951, 9).

Betaghs constituted a socially cohesive and distinctive section of society, albeit at the bottom of the social scale. They seem to have settled in discreet communities, cultivating particular townlands within manors, and holding the land in common (Otway-Ruthven 1951, 12). Responsibility for recording who had and had not carried out the requisite number of days' service and for ensuring that work was done efficiently fell to the 'sergeant of the betagh-ries' (Tresham 1828, no. 38).

In addition to the liberty administration, an urban government developed at Trim, with responsibility for the upkeep of the town, the collection of taxes, accounting to the exchequer and keeping the peace. By 1188 there was a *prefectus* (Gilbert 1884, i, 231), and burghesses who, by 1194, had been issued a charter granting them various rights and privileges (Mac Niocaill 1964, i, 74–75). The *prefectus*, or portreeve, was the chief magistrate of the town and operated in conjunction with a council, a clerk and various other officers.

Meath was one of the areas of Ireland most intensively settled by the Anglo-Normans. Here, they rapidly established a network of strategically sited fortifications, often selecting pre-existing settlements as centres of manors and as locations for market towns. Their domination of the territory derived from moulding existing structures on the one hand and imposing new order on the other. From the outset, they exercised control of the lordship through the implementation of an advanced system of administration. At Trim, an important pre-Norman settlement, they constructed one of the most massive castles ever built in Ireland, and established there a seat of government for the entire liberty. 800 years later, Trim Castle still dominates the town's skyline.

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