

and formal design. There is much to learn from and admire in this provocative, well-written, thoughtful monograph.

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***Churches in the Irish Landscape AD 400–1100.* By Tomás Ó Carragáin. Cork: Cork University Press, 2021. 520pp. €49/£45 hardback.**

For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the dominant understanding of church organization in early medieval Ireland—most notably shaped by the influential historian Kathleen Hughes—was that it was a largely monastic system. The Irish Church was thought to be led and administered by powerful monasteries and their daughter houses, in the absence of established diocesan and parish systems. Some historians queried the extent of pastoral care that was provided to lay communities beyond the borders of monastic estates, while others emphasized the importance of the *airchinnech* (best translated as “ecclesiastical land manager”) in the Irish ecclesiastical hierarchy and saw it as evidence of the “oddity” or exceptionalism of ecclesiastical organization in Ireland, compared to other territories where bishops dominated. This paradigm was thoroughly refuted by Richard Sharpe in a series of important studies, including his “Some Problems Concerning the Organisation of the Church in Early Medieval Ireland,” *Peritia* 3 (1984), 230–270, and his “Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland: Towards a Pastoral Model,” in the 1992 volume, *Pastoral Care Before the Parish*, ed. John Blair and Richard Sharpe (Leicester University Press). Sharpe’s argument was refined in more recent decades, most notably in numerous publications by Colmán Etchingham, although Etchingham too cast doubt on the extent to which pastoral care reached the laity in more remote communities, distant from any major ecclesiastical establishment. Most recently, Liam Breatnach produced an edition and translation of the fragmentary seventh-century legal tract, *Córus Bésgnai* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2017), which provides vital evidence for the regulation of relations between church and laity, including the provision of pastoral care.

Into this debate, which was largely informed by documentary sources, such as law tracts, hagiography and annals, and by arguments regarding the terminology of ecclesiastical personnel, stepped Tomás Ó Carragáin, who brought his vast learning and experience in landscape archaeology to bear on the question of church organization in early medieval Ireland. Ó Carragáin has published widely, and his previous monograph, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory*, published by Yale University Press in 2010, is a monumental study of early Irish church sites—not only their archaeology but also their ideologies, as expressed through their architecture—and is an essential read. This most recent monograph builds on Ó Carragáin’s previous work but offers something entirely new, and incredibly important.

Using a series of detailed case studies, Ó Carragáin explores the full diversity of church sites in early medieval Ireland, which is far more complex and extensive than has hitherto

been appreciated. He notes that many of the earliest churches (from the Conversion era up to c. 550 CE) were situated in or near royal residences or assembly sites. Some important churches were established further away from core royal land, in order that they could be granted more substantial estates, which were the source of their immense wealth. There was a political element to the location of these churches: as Ó Carragáin states,

Kings often retained considerable control over ecclesiastical estates, for the donor usually had the right to nominate the head (*airchinnech*) of the church. Granting newly won or disputed territory to a church helped a king consolidate control over it. The cults of the founding saints inspired devotion, helped defend polities and legitimize royal power more effectively than most of the churches established before 550, whose founders were often obscure. (279–280)

That being said, while there are numerous and significant insights into the relationship between royal and ecclesiastical institutions, one of the most important contributions of Ó Carragáin's study is to avoid focusing solely on the most powerful élites, and thereby to shed much-needed light on more modest churches and "the vital role played by people of middling status in shaping mainstream religious culture" (281). He delineates what he characterizes as "a flexible multi-tier hierarchy" (151), ranging from the major ecclesiastical centers (*civitates*), through community churches with important local functions ("middle tier"), to small local "public" churches, which he terms "lesser churches" (analyzed in chapter 4). These "lesser" churches, situated outside ecclesiastical estates, seem to have been established most intensively in the period c. 550–800, and created a patchwork of modestly sized churches that provided pastoral care to a wide variety of communities. As Ó Carragáin notes in the opening sentence of the book, "Between the fifth century and the ninth, several thousand churches were founded in Ireland, resulting in a higher density than most other regions of Europe, often higher indeed than in later and post-medieval Ireland" (2). This fact alone—bolstered by Ó Carragáin's detailed analysis and interpretation of the landscape archaeology—is a vital element in understanding church organization in early medieval Ireland. The monastic paradigm now lies in ruins, but Ó Carragáin has made an enormous contribution to building a new edifice: an image of the early medieval Irish Church that is complex, nuanced, and which involved all strata of society and permeated every corner of the island of Ireland. The implications of his work are manifold, and he has given those of us who work predominantly with textual sources much to consider and rethink.

Churches in the Irish Landscape is an absolutely beautiful book—substantial, heavy-weight (both literally and figuratively), and lavishly illustrated with color photographs, maps, and drawings. Given the cost of many academic monographs that have far lower production values, the book is also very reasonably priced. This book will be a wonderful addition to every institutional and personal library, and I will certainly be consulting it very frequently in the years to come. We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Ó Carragáin for this significant contribution to scholarship.

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