

**LITERACY IN CONTEXT: THE ROLE OF LITERACY IN DUNBRODY  
ABBEY, CO. WEXFORD, IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

**Jean Price. Headland Archaeology Ltd., Cork, Ireland**

The role of literacy is so deeply entrenched in the social and religious way of life in Cistercian abbeys that it is visible in tangible elements of the religious order, in particular, in the architecture. This paper will briefly outline the establishment of the Cistercian Order in Ireland before discussing the history of Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford, in detail. These two elements will then form the basis for a discussion of particular literary practices in this one particular abbey as portrayed by the remaining architectural and archaeological evidence.

**The Cistercians in Ireland**

The Cistercian order came to Ireland in 1142.<sup>1</sup> They were part of a much wider European phenomenon of both Cistercian dissemination and Christian monasticism in general.<sup>2</sup> Although Ireland had a long and important indigenous monastic tradition, this differed quite dramatically from the spreading traditions of the continent that were now establishing themselves throughout the country. The Irish monastic tradition was tied to the communities in which the monasteries were present, with local families holding sway and often office within them.<sup>3</sup> While many of the Irish monks practiced an ascetic lifestyle, they often interacted with the local people. Continental orders often also established themselves within villages or towns, but tried to hold themselves outside of their influence (although the success of this was extremely variable). Cistercians were different from both the Irish monastic tradition and many of the European orders establishing themselves in Ireland at that time. They chose to establish their monasteries in the countryside, away from local influence, taking low value land and turning it into productive farmland.<sup>4</sup>

The Cistercians and other continental monastic orders arrived in Ireland with what was almost an entirely foreign cultural package, which did not always sit well within the local cultural landscape, frequently causing problems between the monks who

---

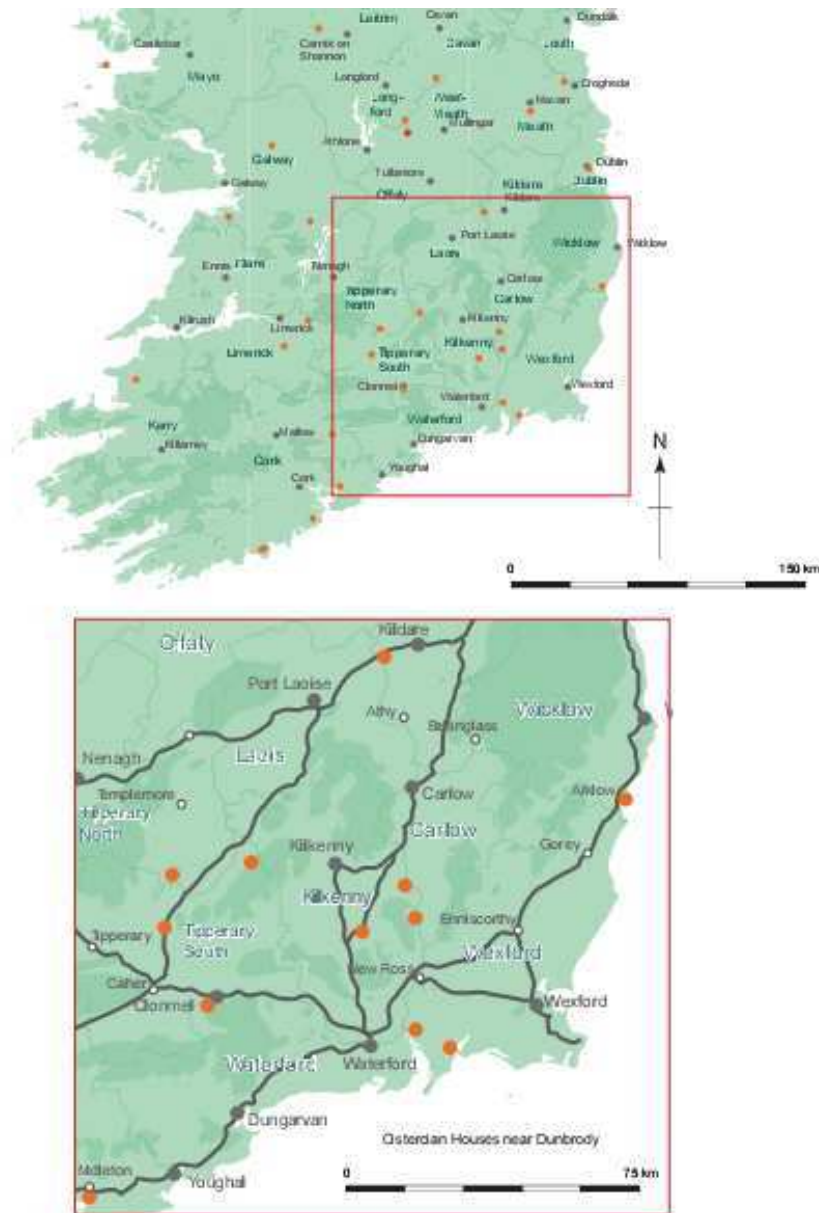
<sup>1</sup> R. Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland* (London, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

were unwilling to accept and learn about the local people, and the local people who were sometimes unhappy with land being given away.



(Archaeological survey of Ireland websites; Headland Archaeology Ltd.)

### 1) Cistercian abbeys in Ireland – archaeological survey.

Cistercians had little trouble establishing themselves away from settlements in the Irish countryside (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> As they had less interaction with local communities compared to the other orders establishing themselves in Ireland at the time, they had fewer problems than other continental monastic traditions. They were often granted

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

land in the countryside that nobody else wanted and were often even welcomed into local areas for their ability to farm this land.<sup>6</sup> However, as they chose to live in such a disconnected way from the local communities, they provided little in the way of employment opportunities or financial betterment for the regions into which they moved. Dunbrody was almost certainly established for these reasons of settling in wilderness and stabilizing an area.<sup>7</sup> Due to their minimal interaction with the local communities, Cistercians caused less of a cultural upset than the more community-based continental monastic traditions.

Over time, Ireland saw the establishment of two main Cistercian parent houses which eventually came to operate within slightly different traditions. Mellifont Abbey was established in Co. Louth and became the parent abbey of many others throughout the country. This parent house and the abbeys it helped found came to be seen as the Irish tradition of Cistercian houses as it was more closely tied to the Irish ecclesiastical and monastic tradition.<sup>8</sup> This tradition drew heavily on local support and became politically active in the country.<sup>9</sup> It also led to weakened ties with the continental abbeys, leading to a 'lessening' of standards and several disciplinary actions being taken against the Irish abbeys.<sup>10</sup> St. Mary's Abbey was established in Dublin associated with the Anglo-Norman invasion and became the parent abbey for Cistercian monastic establishments following the continental tradition.<sup>11</sup> As such, it retained considerably stronger ties to the continental Cistercian abbeys, and therefore maintained stronger adherence to the rules of the order.<sup>12</sup> The two also differ somewhat in terms of architecture, with the Anglo-Norman abbeys staying closer to the Cistercian plan and showing clear English influences.<sup>13</sup>

Dunbrody Abbey (Figure 2) in Co. Wexford was founded within this second, continental tradition and was established in an area of the country that had strong Anglo-Norman ties, although Wexford had a well-established monastic tradition prior

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> I. Doyle, 'The Foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Dunbrody, Co. Wexford and its historical context' in *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, 14 (1992-3), pp 81-91.

<sup>8</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, pp 11, 14.

<sup>9</sup> B. Colfer, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', in *Wexford: history and society*, ed. K. Whelan, W. Nolan (Dublin, 1987), pp 65-101.

<sup>10</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, pp 15, 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

to this (as detailed by Breen 2006-7<sup>14</sup>). It was the first Cistercian Abbey in Ireland founded in this tradition, with twenty-two others following. The southern half of Wexford had been settled very early and successfully in the initial Anglo-Norman conquest period, requiring little fortification to maintain Anglo-Norman power.<sup>15</sup> Another Cistercian monastery, Tintern Abbey, was established in close proximity and in the same tradition as Dunbrody; this was an unusual variation in the Cistercian monastic pattern.<sup>16</sup> Monasteries were usually established with great distances between them because of the Cistercian requirement for isolation and the need for large tracts of arable land. Despite this, Dunbrody and Tintern were separated by just a few miles.



2) View of the exterior of the abbey

### **The Founding of the Dunbrody Abbey (Figure 2)**

Lands were granted to Hervey de Montmorency by Dermot MacMurrough, including lands in southern Wexford, including the baronies of Bargy and Shelbourne. These areas were confirmed by Richard de Clare (Strongbow). In approximately 1172 (there is some debate over the exact date due to the existence of two non-concurring

---

<sup>14</sup> A. Breen 'A Portrait of Monastic Wexford' in *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, 21 (2006-7), pp 147-170.

<sup>15</sup> Colfer, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, p. 15.

extant charters), de Montmorency granted the land to the monks of Buildwas Abbey in Shropshire for the foundation of a Cistercian abbey. This was also in part intended to pacify the area.<sup>17</sup> The land to the south of this was granted to the Templars,<sup>18</sup> with whom the monks of Dunbrody would come to have several land disputes.

Prior to any attempts to establish a community at Dunbrody, a lay-brother was sent from Buildwas to inspect the lands. This inspection resulted in an unfavourable account of the area and no further attempts were made by the Buildwas community to develop the lands at Dunbrody.<sup>19</sup> The lands lay unused and no settlement took place from England to establish a Cistercian house in the area.

In November 1182, Leonard, the Abbot of St. Mary's in Dublin, met with Abbot Ranulph of Buildwas to discuss the possibility of founding an Abbey at Dunbrody<sup>20</sup>. The result was an agreement between the two abbeys which gave St Mary's complete jurisdiction over Dunbrody<sup>21</sup>. Construction began on Dunbrody the same year<sup>22</sup> and it was consecrated by Herlewyn, Bishop of Leighlin in 1201.<sup>23</sup> Dunbrody remained affiliated with St. Mary's Abbey in Dublin until 1342, when disputes arose between the two houses.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Abbey's Functional Years**

Dunbrody became a very powerful and influential abbey during its functional years. It was one of the largest Cistercian communities in Ireland and held both wealth and political power. The lands at Dunbrody appear to have been equally split between arable and pasture with smaller parcels of woodland and moor. Sheep were likely the principal animals reared, with wool being exported in substantial quantities during the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Pigs, cattle, horse and poultry were also reared on a smaller scale. Economic activities from the Dunbrody estate such as corn milling (in tidal mills), fishing, bee-keeping and brewing were also occurring. At its dissolution in 1536,

---

<sup>17</sup> Doyle, 'The Foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Dunbrody', p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> G. H. Orpen, *Ireland Under the Normans* (Dublin, 2005), p. 121; Doyle, 'The Foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Dunbrody', p. 82.

<sup>19</sup> Colfer, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', pp 86-87; idem, *The Hook Peninsula: county Wexford* (Cork, 2004), p. 131; A Gwynn, *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (Harlow, 1970), p. 131; Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, p. 244; Orpen, *Ireland Under the Normans*, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> Gwynn, *Medieval Religious Houses*, p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> Colfer, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', pp 86-87.

<sup>22</sup> Orpen, *Ireland Under the Normans*, p. 122.

<sup>23</sup> Colfer, 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', pp 86-87; Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula*, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula*, p. 47.

Dunbrody's monastic estates consisted of 40 carucates or ploughlands which equates to about 13,000 acres<sup>25</sup>.

### **Suppression and Decline**

The Abbey of Dunbrody was dissolved on May 6, 1536.<sup>26</sup> At this time, ownership of the lands and abbey passed to the Crown and were subsequently granted to Sir Osborn Etchingham.<sup>27</sup> Immediately after the dissolution of Dunbrody, raiding by the Irish laid waste to some of the lands surrounding the abbey.<sup>28</sup> From the 1630s, the Abbey lay derelict. Some reports do state that Cistercian monks remained in the Abbey and Titular Abbots of Dunbrody Abbey continued to be named until 1673.<sup>29</sup> Despite these reports, monks were unlikely to be resident in the Abbey. In 1642, Dunbrody was handed over to the Etchingham family who continued to hold the buildings and lands for several generations. The management of Dunbrody Abbey itself was handed over to the Office of Public Works by the Chichester family on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1895.<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 43-44.

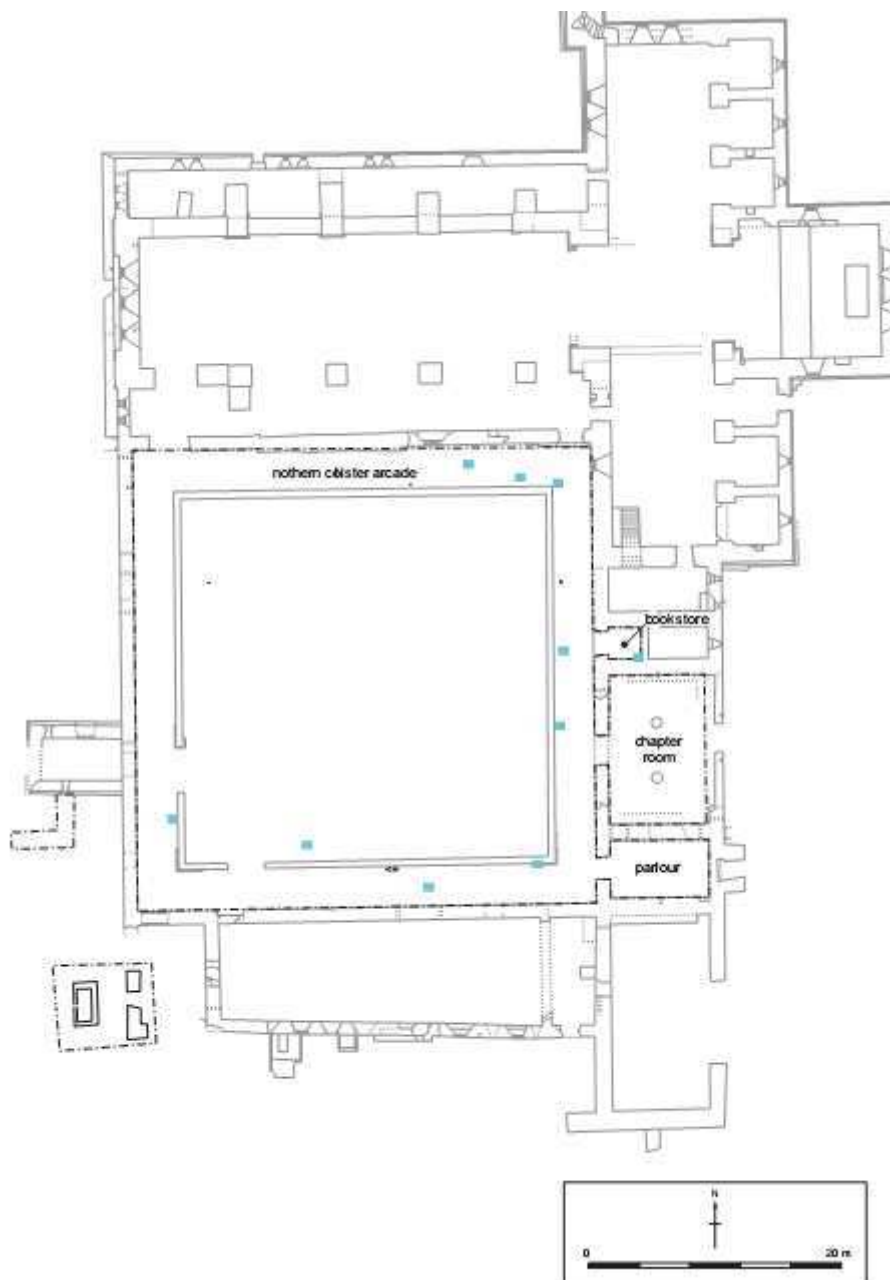
<sup>26</sup> C. Ó Conbhuidhe, *Studies in Irish Cistercian history*, (Dublin, 1998). p. 52; Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula*, p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Colfer, *The Hook Peninsula*, p. 68.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Gwynn, *Medieval religious houses*, pp 131-132; Ó Conbhuidhe, *Studies in Irish Cistercian history*, p. 239.

<sup>30</sup> 78<sup>th</sup> Report of the Commissioners of Public Works 1910, 16.



Plan of Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford (Headland Archaeology Ltd.)

### 3) Plan of the Dunbrody Abbey

#### **Excavations in the Abbey (Figure 3)**

In 1911, the Office of Public Works conducted an excavation that revealed the foundations of the lavabo within the cloister garth. Excavations in 2007 by Headland Archaeology Ltd on behalf of the Office of Public Works under the direction of Colm Moloney (ministerial direction E3686; consent number C111) re-established the

location of the lavabo foundations.<sup>31</sup> Excavations to determine the nature and depth of the medieval layer within the cloister and eastern claustral range which included the book room, the chapter room and the parlour were also undertaken<sup>32</sup> (Figure 3). External exploratory trenches were also excavated.<sup>33</sup> The following discussion primarily examines the book room and chapter room, while touching briefly on the northern arcade.

### **The Role of Literacy in Cistercian Life: a highly textualized community**

Cistercian religious communities were highly linked to religious and organizational texts and the locations in which those texts were read. Cistercian life was very controlled, each order closely adhering to the Rule of St Benedict and to daily established schedules. The day began with readings in the Chapter Room.<sup>34</sup> Other activities included working in the fields and prayer. Within the very controlled architectural plans of the abbeys, Cistercians were dependent on the texts they used to regulate their days. The Cistercians in Ireland in the Anglo-Norman tradition followed the same schedules, texts and architectural plans as their European brethren. The monasteries in the Anglo-Norman tradition were able to remain fairly uniform to the general Cistercian framework through the highly centralized annual Chapter meetings, although each Irish house established quite an independent character.<sup>35</sup>

### **The Cistercian Abbey Plan**

Cistercian Abbeys follow a very specific architectural layout: churches are located to the north, chapter rooms to the east, western ranges with few structures and ancillary buildings in the remaining spaces. In larger abbeys, buildings spread beyond this square plan to house a more numerous population of monks and lay brothers, but the central cloister area with the church, chapter room, etc surrounding it was

---

<sup>31</sup> J. Brigden, C. Moloney, J. Price, *Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford: Preliminary Report for Archaeological Investigations at Dunbrody Abbey* (unpublished client report, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> T. N. Kinder, *Cistercian Europe: architecture of contemplation* (Michigan, 2002), p.246; Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, p. 162.

<sup>35</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, pp 11, 15.



maintained.<sup>36</sup> Irish Cistercian abbeys, however, are generally of the standard design with fewer additional structures outside the main square of buildings. The vast majority of Irish examples conform to this very strict design layout.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Chapter Room**

The Chapter Room is one of the most significant rooms within Cistercian abbeys. This is the place where the abbey's inhabitants gathered each morning to have the Rule of St Benedict read aloud to them.<sup>38</sup> The Chapter Room was used almost expressly for literary purposes. Each day a portion of the Rule of Benedict was read aloud; when it was finished, it was started again so that each year it was read several times.<sup>39</sup> As the chapters were extremely variable in length, the book was divided into sections of an appropriate length. Additional literature was also occasionally read or distributed in the Chapter Room, and public confessions were made there.<sup>40</sup> Monks were encouraged to confess their sins as soon as possible and accept their penance. If another monk "confessed" on their behalf, the penance would be much more severe. Punishment included public flagellation, among others, meted out immediately after confession.<sup>41</sup>

Because of their early hour of use, Chapter Rooms were located on the eastern transept of the cloister to allow the early morning light to be used for reading. Doors were not used on the western entrances so that lay-brothers could listen to sermons being preached and doorways were usually carved elaborately indicating the importance of the activities occurring within.<sup>42</sup> Chapter Rooms were also frequently set slightly below ground level with several steps used to enter the room.<sup>43</sup> The Chapter Rooms were vaulted, with two or more pillars in the centre supporting the arches.<sup>44</sup> Monks filed in and arranged themselves on benches around the walls.<sup>45</sup> This was a very different seating pattern to the church where the monks would have sat

---

<sup>36</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, as evidenced by plans throughout the volume.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland*, p. 162; Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 246.

<sup>39</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 247.

<sup>40</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 246.

<sup>41</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 247.

<sup>42</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 266.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 246.

facing towards the altar. This alternate arrangement indicates the different function and social role the room played. The monks would have sat ranged around the room facing inwards while one monk stood with his back to the east (to allow the light to shine on his reading material) facing the door, with their feet on foot rests that raised them up above the floor level.

The public role this room played in the lives of the monks and lay-brothers can be viewed as second only to the importance of the church in Cistercian life. The literacy activities undertaken in the room held special significance. The very act of public reading, of reading aloud in a community of highly literate men, instead of privately or silently interacting with literature outside of the church, indicates that it had an element of communal control and drawing together. The architecture of the types of rooms in which this occurred: the circular, less ranked seating pattern of the room,<sup>46</sup> the vaulted arches and the natural light, all create an intimate setting for the communal acts of reading, instruction and social penance. By tying together both behavioural instruction, in the form of the reading of the Rule, and behavioural control, in the form of public confession and penance, in one space, these two elements become inextricably linked. It also adds a considerable element of textualization to the social production of appropriate behaviour. The picture this setting creates, of an ecclesiastical literacy event tied to a socially controlling event, confined to a specific location within the architectural layout of the abbeys, demonstrates that the events occurring within the room and the social setting it created were of considerable importance within the Cistercian order.

The Chapter Room at Dunbrody is no exception to this in terms of the architectural remains evidenced in the archaeological excavations. The Chapter Room is located on the eastern transept of the Cloister and contains the remains of the pillar bases that would have held the arches (Figure 4).<sup>47</sup> The room also contained the remains of the foot rests and benches around the edges on which the monks would have sat each morning<sup>48</sup>. In two corners, the remains of the spring for the vaulted arches are still in evidence<sup>49</sup>. Slate tiles from the roof were recovered indicating that the room was well

---

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Brigden *et al.*, *Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford*, passim.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

protected from inclement weather (Figure 6).<sup>50</sup> This would not have been unusual in a structure of this size and importance at this time.



4) Pillar base in the Chapter Room

One interesting feature that was uncovered both during the 2007 excavations and the excavations undertaken by the Office of Public Works in 1910 was the presence of impressed ceramic floor tiles (Figure 5 and 6).<sup>51</sup> The most recent excavations provided evidence for two phases of flooring with the first consisting of slate tiles.<sup>52</sup> The second phase consisted of impressed ceramic tiles laid directly over the slate tiles.<sup>53</sup> These tiles were very prestigious items and were also extremely costly.<sup>54</sup> Their presence within the Chapter Room indicates that the Abbey gained wealth, either of its own or through patrons, which allowed them to place these status objects

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> E. Eames, T. Fanning (eds), *Irish Medieval Tiles: decorated medieval paving tiles in Ireland with an inventory of sites and designs and a visual index* (Dublin, 1988), p. 86.

<sup>52</sup> Brigden *et al.*, *Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford*, passim.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> E. Baker 'Images, Ceramic Floors and Warden abbey' in *World Archaeology*, 18/3 (1987), pp 363-381.

throughout portions of the monastery. Although the Church would have been by far the most significant and impressively decorated of all the structures in the abbey, and therefore the primary recipient of wealth, the Chapter Room was a significant enough room to have these objects placed there as well. The extent of the ceramic impressed tiles within Dunbrody is unknown as the other excavated areas of the abbey were already disturbed and any tile that may have been present was already removed.



5) Ceramic tile *in situ*





6) Ceramic tile and slate roof tile

### **The Book Room (Figure 7)**

As abbeys began to own increasing numbers of books, storing them became an issue. Many Cistercian abbeys have a room devoted to storing the books they own, however they are not original features of the plan.<sup>55</sup> The development of book rooms can be attributed to the abbey coming into possession of more and more texts, both through texts becoming more accessible and through gifts received by the abbeys.<sup>56</sup> Although the cost and rarity of books declined with the advent of printing, they retained a certain amount of prestige and were still not cheap. Initially the small collections of books could be stored in a small area, such as on a bookshelf in the cloister.<sup>57</sup> As collections began to grow, books began to be stored under staircases and on shelves in the cloisters.<sup>58</sup> However, this again became an unacceptable solution as collections became increasingly larger.

---

<sup>55</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 244.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

Book Rooms began to be built into abbeys in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries once libraries reached this difficult-to-store level. As books were still valuable items, rooms could not be constructed to house them on the outskirts of the abbey. A solution was required whereby books could be stored within the abbey where they could be easily guarded and accessed when needed. The books were also required to be kept *inter ecclesiam et capitulum* or between the church and the chapter room.<sup>59</sup> To this end, the Sacristy was frequently divided into two, with the function thereby divided as well.<sup>60</sup> The section which adjoined the church remained the Sacristy, while the second half was converted to hold the abbey's book collection. Additionally, very large abbeys that acquired substantial numbers of books built libraries, frequently located in the western ranges.<sup>61</sup>

At Dunbrody, this model was followed exactly. The Sacristy is divided in two and the second half functioned as a book store. Whether or not this was an original design element of the abbey based on the later plans of continental abbeys is not known. Given the prestige and power of Dunbrody, it can be assumed that the abbey held a large collection of books that required housing. Dunbrody may have acquired such a collection after the completion of the eastern range, thereby requiring the construction of a special room to store books as so many other abbeys did.

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 343.



7) Exterior view of the Book Room

### **The “Scriptorium”**

Cistercian abbeys did not typically contain scriptoriums, areas for copying manuscripts, however many of them again developed a solution to this once one was needed. Continental abbeys were often able to find indoor areas suitable for scriptoriums, however, they moved as needs dictated and a standard was never established.<sup>62</sup> The northern arcade of the cloister was used to fulfil this function in the smaller abbeys that were unable to either modify other structures to house a scriptorium or to construct a new one altogether. The northern arcade was chosen to fulfil this function as it was the most suitably located. The northern arcade would

---

<sup>62</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 336.

have had the church immediately behind it and would have received the light from the south in the winter, allowing the copying of manuscripts to continue during all seasons.

There is, unfortunately, no evidence of the use of the northern arcade as a scriptorium at Dunbrody. No extant manuscripts have been noted, and this type of activity leaves little archaeological evidence. However, it is nearly certain that there would have been some type of dedicated area used for copying and writing as abbeys both generated a considerable amount of paperwork and many Cistercian abbeys were well known for their beautiful illuminated manuscripts.<sup>63</sup>

### **St. Thomas Aquinas**

One surviving book (Special Collections L.3.19) ascribed to Dunbrody is housed in the library at University College of Cork. A copy of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Compendium absolutissimum totius Summae theologiae D. Thomae Aquinatis, doctoris angelici : in quo universa eius doctrina partim conclusionibus quaestionum, partim vero argumentorum solutionibus, contenta proponitur ; accuratissime omnia quae vel in sacris paginis obscura, vel in gravissimis SS PP monumenta dubia, vel olim, & hodie ab hereticis in controuersiam vocata, admirabili cum breuitate & claritate explicans / auctore R.D. Ludovico Carbone a Costaciaro theologiae in gymnasio Perusino professore* that belonged to Brother Everard, the last named abbot of Dunbrody, is described as 'leather-bound with blind tooled rectangular panelling'<sup>64</sup> which eventually found its way into the Cathedral Collection of St. Fin Barre's Cathedral, Cork and from there to the library. It is a printed volume the contents of which were held to be particularly significant in the Church and within the Cistercian community. However, it bears little evidence of use: there is no marginalia or glossing present and it does not appear to have been much read. There is the possibility that the book was never actually in Dunbrody Abbey as it had been suppressed prior to the publishing of the book in 1638. Having belonged to the last abbot who was unlikely to have been resident in the abbey, coupled with the lack of use wear, the book unfortunately does not provide much evidence for what actually

---

<sup>63</sup> Kinder, *Cistercian Europe*, p. 362.

<sup>64</sup> Catalogue entry for *Compendium absolutissimum* at <http://library.ucc.ie/search~S0?Xdunbrody&SORT=D/Xdunbrody&SORT=D&SUBKEY=dunbrody/1%2C5%2C5%2CB/frameset&FF=Xdunbrody&SORT=D&4%2C4%2C> [2008.12.01].



occurred in the abbey. Regardless, the book is still an interesting addition to the general literary and linguistic landscape of the abbey even though it does not provide much evidence for what actually occurred in the abbey. For that we are dependent on the archaeological evidence recovered in the rooms directly associated with literary activities as well as descriptions of these activities that survive from other abbeys.

### **Archaeological Evidence of Literacy Activities**

The evidence for the physical environment in which specific literary activities occurred in Cistercian life is well documented. By combining this with the evidence uncovered during archaeological investigations, a clearer picture of these activities is created. The highly textualized life of the Cistercian order was evidenced in the very architecture and plan of the abbeys they constructed. The importance of literary activities to, and within, the order held such high value as to be embodied within the fabric of their structures. As literary activities are extremely ephemeral in nature, uncovering archaeological evidence of their occurrence, even if it is only in the form of these architectural remains, is extremely rare. Literary activities were occurring in many places and being carried out by many people in this period, and many probably occurred within the abbey leaving no trace whatsoever. However, the importance of the specific events and items manifested itself in the architecture leaving clues as to their form and social perception. Whether literacy activities influenced the architecture or the architecture influenced the activities is unclear, however two things can be known. The first is that both the activities and the architecture were extremely important to the Cistercian order. The second is that by the time Dunbrody was established, both the architecture and the literacy activities were firmly established within the Cistercian cultural package and are in evidence at the abbey.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> The author would like to thank Colm Moloney and Damian Shiels for commenting on earlier versions of this paper; the excavation crew at Dunbrody; the OPW for supporting the excavations; and Julian at UCC Special Collections.

**Bibliography:**

BAKER, E., 'Images, Ceramic Floors and Warden abbey' in *World Archaeology*, 18/3 (1987), pp 363-381.

BREEN, A., 'A Portrait of Monastic Wexford' in *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, 21 (2006-7), pp 147-170.

BRIDGEN, J., MOLNEY, C., PRICE, J., *Dunbrody Abbey, Co. Wexford: Preliminary Report for Archaeological Investigations at Dunbrody Abbey* (unpublished client report, 2008).

COLFER, B., 'Anglo-Norman Settlement in Co. Wexford', in *Wexford: history and society*, ed. K. Whelan, W. Nolan (Dublin, 1987), pp 65-101.

COLFER, B., *The Hook Peninsula: county Wexford* (Cork, 2004).

DOYLE, I., 'The Foundation of the Cistercian Abbey of Dunbrody, Co. Wexford and its historical context' in *Journal of the Wexford Historical Society*, 14 (1992-3), pp 81-91.

EAMES, E., FANNING, T. (eds), *Irish Medieval Tiles: decorated medieval paving tiles in Ireland with an inventory of sites and designs and a visual index* (Dublin, 1988).

GWYNN, A., *Medieval religious houses: Ireland* (Harlow, 1970).

KINDER, T. N., *Cistercian Europe: architecture of contemplation* (Michigan, 2002).

ORPEN, G. H., *Ireland Under the Normans* (Dublin, 2005).

STALLEY, R., *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland* (London, 1987).