

BSc (Hons) Applied Archaeology SG446

4th Year

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Landscape Archaeology



Kilbarron Church (DG103-055) and its surrounding landscape.

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Landscape Analysis of Kilbarron Church (*Cill Bharrainn*) (DG103-055).and surrounding area.

Description of the site

Kilbarron church is a small ruinous building dating to the late medieval period. It is thought to have been built on the site where the 6th century church of St Barron once stood (National Monuments Service 2008). According to the venerable Bede early medieval churches in Ireland tended to be built of wood rather than stone (O'Keefe 2000, 128). If this was the case then any above ground remains would have been obliterated with the construction of the stone built edifice. Therefore, without geophysics, or further excavation that may detect valla the existence of the earlier church cannot be confirmed archaeologically (plate 1).



Plate 1: Kilbarron church looking west (B. Brennan 2013).

The little church is located within a gently west facing slope and surrounded by rolling pasture land in the townland of Kilbarron County Donegal, four kilometres northwest of the modern town of Ballyshannon (plate 2). The bedrock is middle carboniferous limestone (Ballyshannon limestone) with basal sandstone and shale (plate 2, and figure 1) (Holohan 2002, map 7). It is of ashlar quoin construction and the main type of stone that was used is sandstone rubble together with a shell mortar

all of which would have been acquired from nearby Donegal Bay (Allingham 1879, 115 and National Monuments Service 2008).

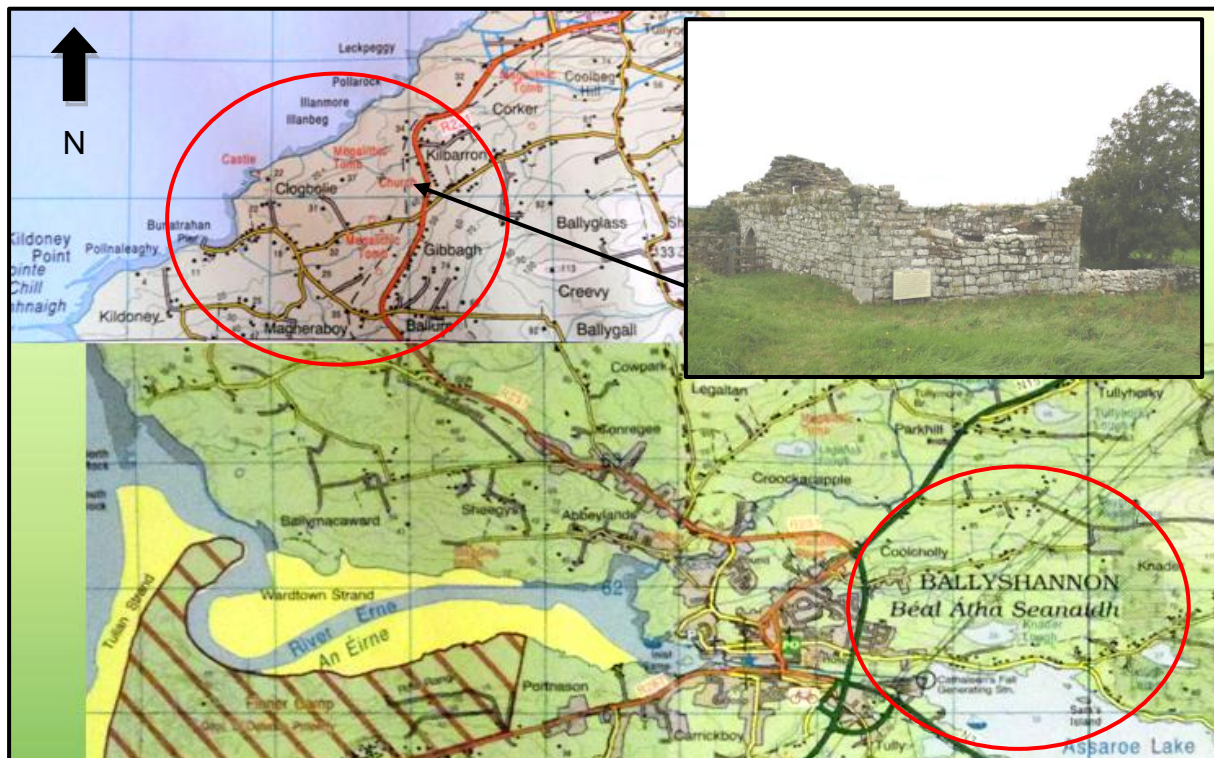


Plate 2: Map showing Kilbarron in relation to the modern town of Ballyshannon (OSI 1:50,000 discovery series). Inset, Kilbarron church (B. Brennan 2013).



Fig 1: Geology map showing Kilbarron church and Kilbarron castle (Symes and Mtchell 1888).

The edifice has two arched, internally splayed, door opes one centrally situated on the south elevation while the other is located close to the east gable on the north elevation (plates 3 and 4).



Plates 3 and 4: Kilbarron church door opes (B. Brennan 2013)

Although there is a very small rectangular, internally splayed, window ope high up on the west gable there is no evidence of a window ope on the east gable wall. Nonetheless this does not mean that no window existed as a substantial part of the east gable is missing. On the floor in front of the east gable wall is a large block of stone described in the RMP record as a collapsed stone altar (see plate 5 on the next page) (National Monuments Service 2008).



Plate 5: Collapsed altar east gable (B. Brennan 2013)

The interior of the church is simple and rectangular in shape, measuring 10.3 by 4.5 metres (National Monuments Service 2008). Abutting the north elevation is an enclosure described in the RMP as a "possible priest's residence" the interior of which measures 8.8 by 5.9 metres (ibid.). However, in 1879 Hugh Allingham described the area to the north of the church as being divided into small plots of land each separated by low dividing walls (Allingham 1879, 115 and 116). Probably with the purpose of keeping particular burials separate from other in the graveyard (ibid., 116). He also claimed that there were many headstones still remaining (ibid.).

Within the "priest's residence" are two rows of flattish stones covered in moss. This seems to match Allingham's description of the area, so it is possible that the flat stones are in actual fact tombstones. The church's simple plan and the absence of any decoration would have been typical of parish churches built during the medieval period (Barry 2003, 140). Since it was built primarily of sandstone with opposing north and south door opes it would indeed seem to have been built within the later medieval era (ibid.). In the *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* dated 1903 F. W.

Lockwood refers to the patchy remains of building foundations both to the north and west of Kilbarron church (figure 2) (Lockwood 1903, 115).

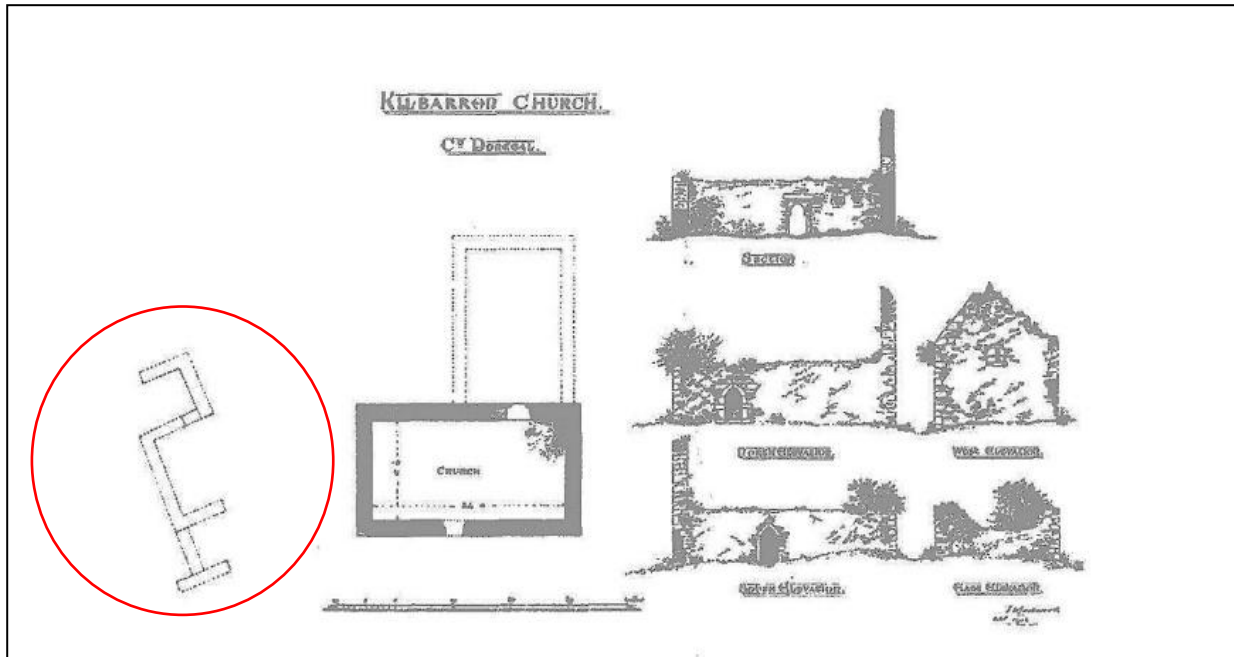


Fig 2: Plan and elevation drawings of Kilbarron church (after Lockwood 1903, 115).

Lockwood noted that these remains were detached from the church but felt that they were in some way connected to it (ibid., 115). A graveyard is not mentioned in this account of Kilbarron church (ibid.). An earlier description of Kilbarron Church comes from William Shaw Mason's Statistical Account or Parochial Survey of Ireland published in 1814 in which he describes ruins "enclosing an area little larger than a small town" hinting at the possibility that Kilbarron church belonged to a much larger ecclesiastical site (Shaw Mason 1814, 429).

To the north very close to the church is a children's burial ground (*cillin*) and this area was excavated in 1998 by Eoin Halpin. Although nothing of archaeological significance was found it was recommended that because of its closeness to the church it was a site that was worthy of further investigation (Halpin 1998). Children's burial grounds, or *cillins*, as they are also known were separate areas used to inter un-baptized infants, children or in some cases adults (Finlay 2000, 420). Until quite recently it was the view of the Roman Catholic Church that un-baptized infants and children could not enter heaven but instead would remain for eternity in a liminal place known as Limbo (ibid., 409). Accordingly infants from as far back as the

medieval period were interred on the periphery of early Christian graveyards or even prehistoric burial cairns (ibid., 420). In this particular instance the burial ground is absent from the 6" historical ordnance survey map though it does appear on the revised 6" cassini map and the 25" historic map indicating that it may have been of much more recent origin perhaps late 19th or early 20th century.

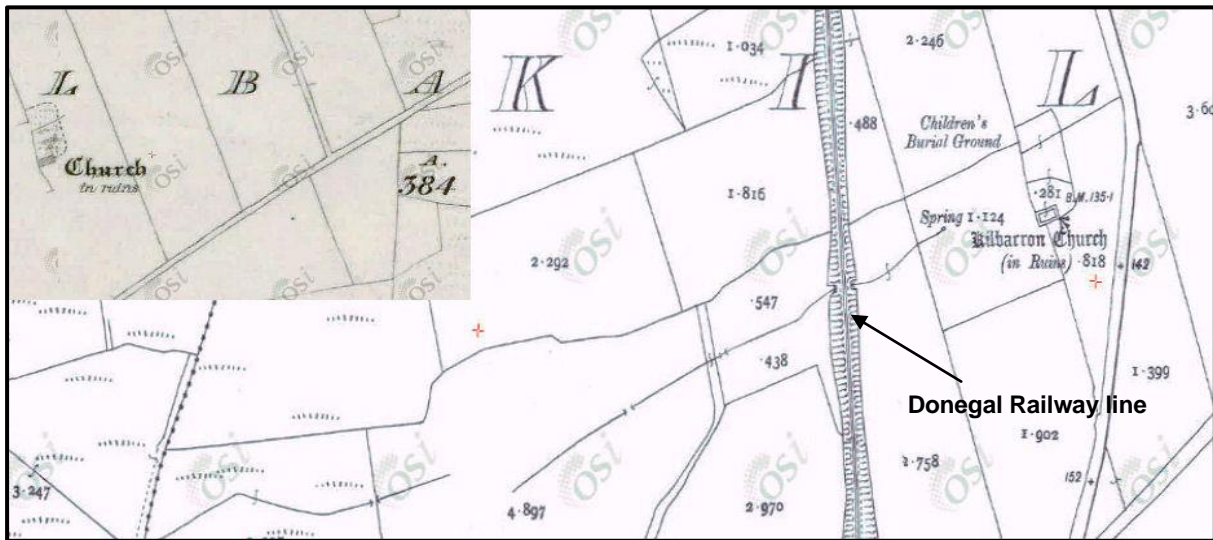


Fig 3: Main picture 25" historic map showing railway line running parallel to church and children's burial ground. The children's burial ground is not mentioned in the 6" historic

In his observations of the site in 1879 Hugh Allingham refers to the presence of an "artificial cave" outside the church (Allingham 1879, 115). He describes it as small with walls built of small stones and a roof constructed of flagstones (ibid.). The entrance had been blocked but he did not consider that it was in any way connected with the church and concluded that it was probably much older in date (ibid.). This "artificial cave" has been recorded in the RMP record as a souterrain (DG103-056002) located 150 metres from the church on its eastern side though no trace remains (National Monuments Service 2008).

Location

Kilbarron church is located in a coastal area 34 metres above sea level (1:50,000 OSI discovery series map). Donegal bay lies 1.25 kilometres to the west of the church and can be clearly viewed from the site. It lies on the 40m contour which runs from the north east to the south west. The land gently slopes to the sea in the west.

In the east the ground gently rises to the summit of Sheebarren near Creevy. The former Donegal Railway line runs parallel on the west side of the site and this can be seen on the 25" map (figure 3). On the eastern side is secondary road that leads to Rossnowlagh in the north and Ballyshannon in the south, across from this road are modern nucleated and dispersed settlements.

Surrounding archaeology and historical background.

The remains of Kilbarron castle are located 1.17 kilometres west of Kilbarron church perched on a cliff face (figure 4). The original castle was the residence of the O'Cleary's who were historians and poets to the O'Donnell chieftains (Lockwood 1903, 112).



Fig 4: The ruins of Kilbarron Castle (From Irish Penny Journal 1841, 225).

Michael O'Clery the chief compiler of the *Annals of the Four Masters* was born in the parish of Kilbarron in 1575 (O'Donovan 1849, xxii). The existing 15th century remains are thought to have been built by the three sons of Teige Cam O'Clery on an earlier edifice that according to the *Annals of the Four Masters* was burned down in 1390 by Donail son of Murtagh O'Connor (Allingham 1879, 34 and Lockwood 1903, 112).

The church is within an area that would have been of strategic importance throughout history and most probably prehistory due to its proximity to the coast and the Erne estuary. This is illustrated by not only the position of the castle but also two ringforts further south in the townland of Kildoney Glebe. Both of these are perched on the cliffs west of the church and north of a multi period burial cairn situated on a rocky outcrop in the townland of Ballymacaward (D6107-105). It is more than likely that the little church of Kilbarron was built by the O'Clerys as a way of honouring their masters the O'Donnells who in turn shared a common ancestor with Colmcille and Barron (Lacey 2006, 71-72). The building of the church may have been a way of establishing the connection with the *Cenel Conaills* through its re-dedication to St Barron, kinsmen of Colmcille and therefore linking land ownership with genealogy. The O'Clerys were also Eneraghs whose job it was to manage church lands (Begley 2009, 63). This is alluded to in an inquisition in Lifford in 1609 when Lughaidh O'Clery author of *Beatha Aoidh Ruaidh* was referred to as Enernagh of Kilbarron Church (ibid.).

South of Kilbarron castle and southwest of Kilbarron church, in the townland of Ballymacaward, is a multi period burial cairn (DG107-115) situated on a rocky outcrop overlooking Donegal Bay. The cairn is thought to date to the Bronze Age but the last burials interred there date to the 7th century AD which would make them contemporary with the earlier church at Kilbarron (O'Brien 1999, 61). Furthermore directly opposite the Bronze Age burial cairn on the other side of the Erne estuary in the townland of Finner are the remains of a megalithic passage tomb (DG107-106). According to Borlase's 1897 publication 'Dolmens of Ireland' there were five megalithic tombs not shown on the OS maps indicating a much richer ritual landscape in the 19th century (McDonald 2011, 26).

Prehistoric monuments in closer vicinity to Kilbarron church include a wedge tomb (D107-002) just 400 metres south of the church (plate 6 on next page) and 700 metres, to the west a court tomb (DG103-044) which is situated in the townland of *An Chlochbhuaile* and 1.2 km north in the townland of Coolbeg is another court tomb (DG103-040).



Plate 6: Kilbarron wedge tomb (After Cody 2002, 91).

A holy well known as St Barron's Well or rag well (DG103-052) is located 200 metres north of Kilbarron church. This has dried up and there is no further information regarding it (National Monuments Service 2008). However another holy well also connected to St Barron is located 3.34 kilometres south of Kilbarron church in the townland of Abbeyland near Ballyshannon. Although referred to as "St Patricks Well" in the RMP record it is also known as *Tobar na Bachaille* (DG107-043) or the "well of the crozier" (Mac Giolla Easpaig 1995, 175). It is described by Ordnance survey author Thomas Fagan as a "well of great antiquity" and a religious station that attracted both local and non locals around midsummer (ibid.). Approximately 400 metres north east of Kilbarron church is a bullaun stone (DG103-048) the RMP gives no further information regarding this.

Folklore and legend

Legend has it that Barron or Barrhind (there are numerous spellings) sailed from Kilbarron with his disciple Mernoc in search of the "great Western Isle", which may actually have been a reference to the otherworld of Celtic legend where the "dead

are said to meet the divine" (Monaghan 2004, 29; *Omnium Sanctorum Hiberniae* 2013). Instead, according to the legend they found America (*Omnium Sanctorum Hiberniae* 2013).

There is folklore surrounding the church itself related to buried treasure (Lockwood 1903, 116). In Irish folklore there are supposedly supernatural guardians guarding buried treasure and one of these is weather (O'Reilly 1994, 202-203). The story surrounding Kilbarron concerns two treasure hunters who met up at the church in the middle of the night with picks and spades (Lockwood 1903, 116). They began to dig in search of the treasure said to be hidden within the church (*ibid.*). Eventually they encountered a large stone but when they tried to lift it a huge gust of wind blew out their lantern and threw them to the ground (*ibid.*). The two men arose and fled in terror as a massive storm followed them home and dashed in their door (*ibid.*).

Discussion

The ancient 6th century church of St Barron upon which the later medieval edifice was built was founded by St Colmcille who appointed his kinsman St Barron or Barrfhind as bishop (Gywnn and Hadcock 1988, 388 and Allingham 1879, 19-20). Kilbarron church is very similar in size and construction to St Fintan's church in Sutton, County Dublin (Barry 2003, 140). St Fintan's church was also thought to have been built on top of the site of an earlier 7th century church (*ibid.*, 140). However St Fintan's is of 12th century construction while Kilbarron has been variously dated from the 14th to the 16th century (Allingham 1879 115, Lockwood 1903 and National Monuments Service 2008). Hugh Allingham states that Kilbarron church was connected to Assaroe Abbey (DG107- 044001) founded by the Cistercians in the 12th century and located in the townland of Abbey Island just over 3 kilometres south east of Kilbarron (Allingham 1879, 74 and National Monuments Service 2008).

As previously stated there are several megalithic tombs around Kilbarron church and within the wider landscape of this area of Donegal. Many prehistoric monuments have been appropriated by early medieval communities possibly as an attempt to establish some kind of connection with the past (O'Sullivan, McCormick, Kerr and

Harney 2009, 108). An example of this practice within the landscape that surrounds Kilbarron is the multi period burial cairn in the townland of Ballymacaward some four kilometres south west of Kilbarron church. The cairn dates originally to the Bronze age and is located on a rocky outcrop over looking Donegal Bay and the Erne estuary (O'Brien 1999, 60). In the medieval period this would have been a strategic fording point linking the west and northwest of Ireland (ibid.). Within the monument were a total of 14 early Christian burials, all women, the last of which has been dated to the 7th century (O'Brien 1999, 59). To the east of the burial cairn is a small freshwater lake known as *Lough Namanfin* (plate 7) (lake of the fair women).



Plate 7: Site location in relation Lough na mBan Finn (O'Brien 1998).

Elizabeth O'Brien who excavated the Ballymacaward burial cairn believes that it was an ancient boundary ferta used to bury individuals of some importance in order to reinforce ownership of a particular territory (O'Brien 1999, 61). She also believes that the women may have worshipped at the church of Kilbarron. It is likely that these women were members of the *Cenel Conaill* or *Cenel Coirpri* septs who were vying for power during that period (Richards 1999, 188). The practice of burying the dead in prehistoric burial cairns ceased during the 7th century when the church began to discourage people from burying their dead in the burial places of their ancient ancestors (O'Brien 1999, 61). In the townland of Kilbarron there are eight ringforts, seven of these are cashels and all seven cashels are within an 0.4km radius of Kilbarron church (see figure 6 on the next page).

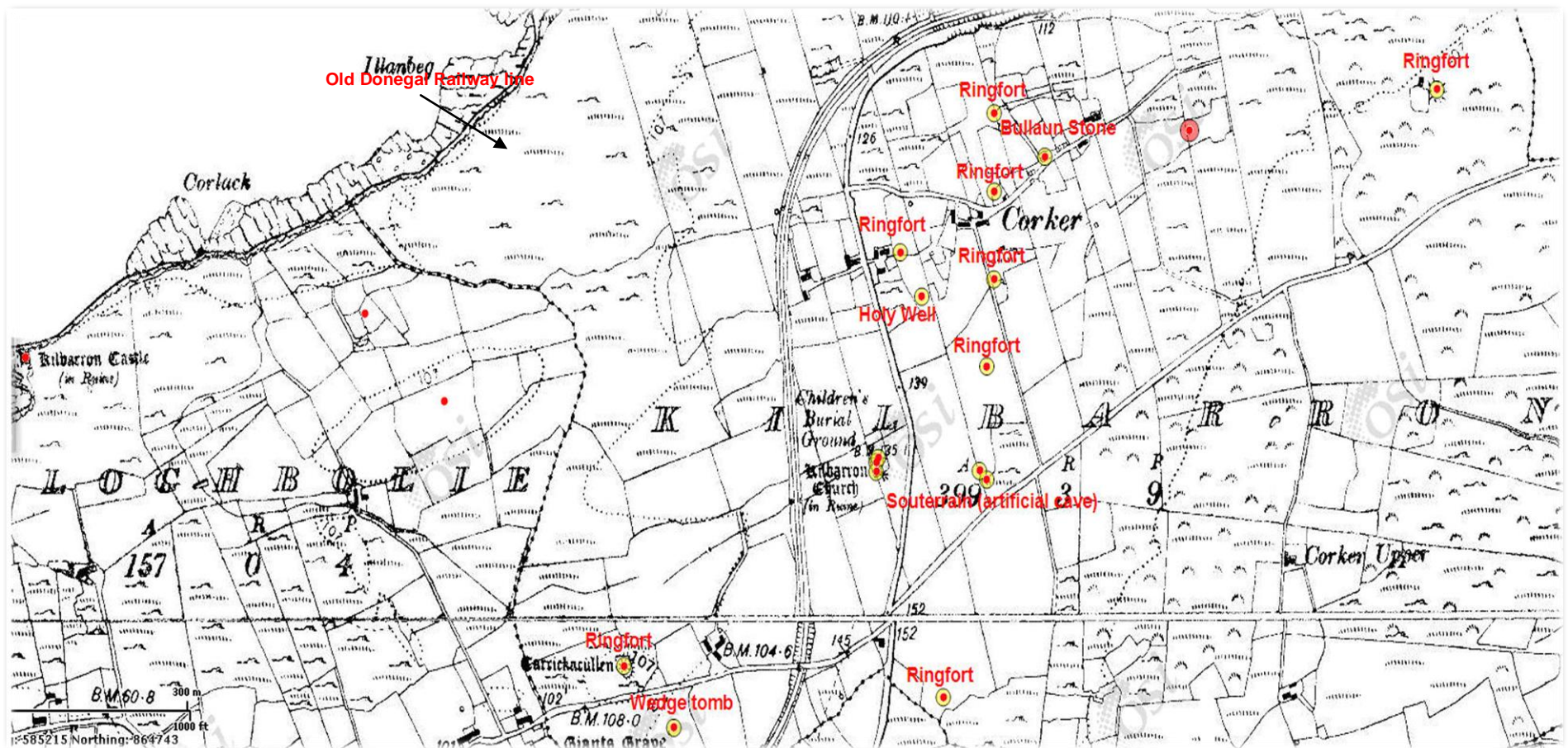


Fig 6: Kilbarron church surrounded by 7 ringforts and the old Donegal Railway Line (archaeology.ie 2013).

In his book *The Irish Ringfort* Matthew Stout states that early ecclesiastical sites tend to be located on low lying areas and that they are very rarely found 120 metres above sea level (Stout 1997, 100). He also states that in contrast ringforts are usually situated on higher ground and that monastic sites when they do occur near ringfort sites are usually on the periphery of the settlements (ibid., 100). Although Kilbarron church is less than 100 metres above sea level the very close proximity of this quite high concentration of ringforts would seem to contradict Stouts study. The ringforts also run in a linear line parallel to the old Donegal railway line and this could be further evidence for an ancient coastal route way and strategic corridor used by the *Cenel Conaills* (figure 6).

Interestingly accounts of St Barron and Maelduin, who may have been Barron's son, state that because of their devotion to prayer they could not farm the four townlands they had been given to set up the monastic site (Hayes 1998, 166). Instead they set their land to local families to run (ibid.). The church may have been used in the early part of the 17th century for occasional Protestant worship (Allingham 1879, 64). However Allingham believed that although the church of Kilbarron was connected with the Cistercian Assaroe Abbey its isolated location would have hastened its eventual decline (ibid., 74). He goes on to state that it probably became derelict long before an English settlement was established in the area (ibid.). Nevertheless the site is still visited today both by tourists and local people who have left votive offerings of coins and a glass statue of the virgin Mary within the wall close to the collapsed altar (plate 8).



Plate 8: Votive offerings left in the wall of the east gable.

Conclusion

Although now small and insignificant Shaw Mason's 1814 description of Kilbarron church hints at a much larger monastic site where the isolated edifice now sits. Certainly the ancient grave yards, holy wells, ecclesiastical ruins along with Neolithic and Bronze Age burial cairns indicate a ritual landscape that stretches far into antiquity.

It is also situated in what would have been a politically contested landscape from very early times considering its strategic position as a fording point and a boundary between the west and north west of Ireland (O'Brien 1999, 60). The ancient burial cairn at Ballymacaward may have been a territorial ferta with women of high status being buried there to reinforce ownership of the land (ibid., 61). In the mid 7th century the area was conquered by the *Cenel Conail* sept to which both Colmcille and Barron are said to have belonged (Lacey 2006, 71-72). O'Brien has postulated that the women of Ballymacaward may also have belonged to the *Cenel Conail* sept and this would also link them to Kilbarron .

In later conflicts the original castle of Kilbarron, just over a kilometre away from Kilbarron church, was burned down by the O'Connors. The castle was then rebuilt by the O'Clerys, historians to the O'Donnells who in turn shared a common ancestor with Colmcille and Barron (Lacey 2006, 71-72). It is therefore more than likely that the present church ruins were originally built by them as a way of re-establishing the connection with the Cenel Conails through the re-dedication of the church to St Barron.

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