

De Bello Becco: a French foundation in the Boyne Valley

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Introduction

This paper discusses the history of the little known French Cistercian foundation of de Bello Becco near Drogheda, and the role it played in the commercial development of the Boyne valley and in the international maritime trade during the medieval period. The paper also presents the results of a recent geophysical survey and sets out a course for future investigation of the site.

Historical background

The Cistercian foundation of de Bello Becco, also known as Beaubec, a daughter house of the convent of de Bello Becco in Normandy, France, was located in the townland of Bey More, Co. Meath (fig. 1, ITM 709546 772877) (St. John Brooks, 1953, 148; McCullen, 2011, 383). There is no known foundation date for this monastic site but a grant by Walter De Lacy to the church of SS Mary and Laurence of Beaubec and the monks residing there on the lands in *Gillekeran* has been dated to after 1215 (Dryburgh and Smith, 2006, 23). This includes a further grant of a burgage in Mornington (*villa Marenari*) along with the liberty of a boat for their own use, free from tolls, customs and demands and freedom to access Walter De Lacy's lands to buy and sell merchandise. The placename *Gillekeran* suggests that this Cistercian foundation was on an earlier ecclesiastical site possibly associated with St Ciaran (www.monasticon.celt.dias.ie). The 1215 grant is alluded to in a confirmation grant by Henry III in 1235 (Sweetman, 1875, 341).

Walter De Lacy bestowed this relatively small grant of land on the Cistercians for the good of his soul, and those of their relatives and ancestors. The estate he had inherited from his father Hugh included lands in Normandy, which may account for his choice of a French abbey (Hillaby, 1992–3).

At Donnycarney in 1259 Geoffrey de Geneville made a further grant to the abbot and monks of Beaubec of forty shillings rent from a half a carucate (c.60 acres) of land in Kenles (Kells) (Public Records Office, 1900, 52). This was given with the assent of his wife Matilda de Lacy who was the granddaughter of the original grantor. The lands referred in this grant may be part of Kilmainham and Gardenrath in the

parish of Kells which was partly owned by Barnewall of Beymore in 1654 (Simington, 1940, 280).

Beaubec lay 5km south of the medieval walled town and port of Drogheda within the medieval Liberty of Meath (fig. 1). A stream runs by the presumed site of Beaubec on a north-east axis to join the river Boyne at Mornington. This area was at the centre of major land grants of Anglo-Norman sub-infeudation and was near Duleek, the caput of one of De Lacy's seigniorial manors (Graham, 1975, 226). It lay near the mouth of the River Boyne which was an important means of transport between the interior of Meath and the town of Drogheda at the river's lowest bridging point. Drogheda became one of the principal ports of medieval Ireland through which the agricultural and manufactured produce of Ireland, was exported (O'Neill, 1987, 44).

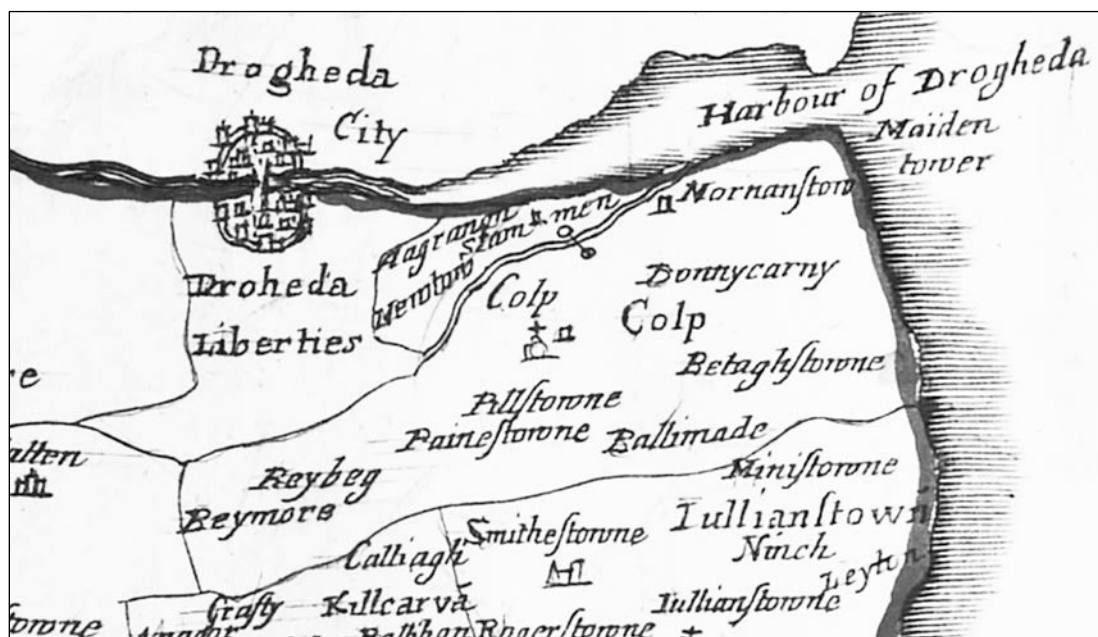


Fig. 1 The location of Beymore/Beybeg on the Down Survey map.

Beaubec benefited from its location near the mouth of a navigable river and on the edge of a rich agricultural zone in the Boyne Valley. From this base the monks exported goods to their mother-house in Normandy. On 13 July 1237 the bailiffs of Bristol were asked to return goods to the Cistercian monks at Beaubec that had been robbed and the culprits arrested at Bristol (Sweetman, 1875, 356-7). Again, in 1271, Roger, the proctor of the abbot of de Bello Beco, took fourteen sacks of wool and two sacks of sheep skins to be used in the clothing of the monastic community in the mother house in Normandy (Public Records Office. 1913, 595). De Bello Becco in

Ireland was flourishing in 1302 when it had to pay a tithe of 29s.4d, to the Diocese of Meath which placed it in a group of the highest valued churches in Meath (Sweetman, 1886, 262–5).

In the subsequent years between 1303 and 1328 the abbot of Beaubec became an absentee landowner. There are numerous references in the *Calendar of Patent Rolls* to the abbot residing abroad, presumably in the mother abbey in France when their house in Beaubec was run by representatives of the successive abbots who included monks and attorneys. In 1303 the abbot of Beaubec left Thomas de Brikeebek, his fellow monk and Robert Antesme for three years (Public Record Office, 1898A, 141). Between 1314 and 1315 his attorneys in Ireland were Ralph de Hermanville, his fellow monk, and Roger Kavene (Public Record Office, 1898b, 168). Again, in 1323, Reginald, abbot of Beaubec nominated John Malebraunche and Roger Cavene as his attorneys (Public Record Office, 1904, 263). In 1328 John, abbot of Beaubec nominated Henry de Longo Campo, monk and Wadinus Bray his attorneys in Ireland for three years (Public Record Office, 1891, 300).

During this period de Bello Becco was also renting commercial property in Drogheda town. The 1235 confirmation grant had given the monks freedom to buy and sell merchandise (Sweetman, 1875, 27) A deed from the early fourteenth century refers to a rent on a property in Dyer Street (Dryburgh and Smith, 2006, 21). This was a half burgage that ran down to the River Boyne. This interest in commercial development in Drogheda grew with the granting in 1332 of Beaubec and its lands to Furness abbey, Lancashire.

The monks of Beaubec had little room for expansion of their small monastic estate given that the lands in the immediate area were held by the Augustinian Canons of Llanthony Prima in Wales and Furness abbey, Lancashire (Simms, 1988). Documentary evidence indicates that the close proximity of the three religious houses, each vying for the same resources, resulted in considerable tension. In 1235 Richard de Godriche, prior of Llanthony Prima's (Wales) property in the parish of Colp, attacked the proctor of Beubec, Brother William de Bymington. Richard de Godriche had to pay damages for his actions (Dryburgh and Smith, 2006, 24).

On 14 December 1332 a licence was granted to the abbot and convent of de Bello Becco in Normandy to assign their manor and other possessions to Furness Abbey, Lancashire (Gwynn and Hadcock, 1988, 128). This was confirmed in 1333 (Public Record Office, 1900, 53) Furness Abbey had a presence in the area since the

thirteenth century. Walter de Lacy who was responsible for the original grant to Bello Becco had also granted neighbouring lands to the Cistercian abbey at Furness in Lancashire in in Mornington in 1234 (Hillaby, 1992–3, 35). Mercantile trading in Ireland led to Furness Abbey acquiring agriculture and commercial interests in county Meath. Between 1315 and 1402 Furness Abbey appears regularly on the list of permits granted as a purchaser and purveyor of grain in Ireland. They were allowed carry in ships and boats from Ireland the crops of their manors and granges for the sustenance of their convent and household (O’Neill, 1987, 21)

There must have been some confusion about their rightful ownership of the Beaubec lands because in 1336 King Edward III granted a licence for alienation in mortmain by the abbot of Beaubec in Normandy to Furness Abbey of the manor of Beaubec by Drogheda with certain lands and rents in Mornington (*Marinerston*), Kells (*Kenneles*) and Drogheda (*Drogha*) and a fishery on the river Boyne (Public Record Office, 1895, 224). The rights of the abbot of Furness to Beaubec was contested and confirmed to them in 1348. At this point, brother John de Cokerham died and the lands were temporarily in the hands of King Edward III. These lands were subsequently restored to brother Alexander, abbot of Furness (Public Record Office, 1905, 459). In 1376 Brother Roger de Lancaster, a monk of Furness Abbey, and Thomas Skynner, burgess of Drogheda, acted as their attorney in all pleas concerning the defence of their rights to lands of Richard de Preston de Beaubek in the manor of Beaubec in Ireland (Dryburgh and Smith, 2006, 30–1). This legal battle was finally resolved in 1380 in favour of John Ocokan, abbot of Furness, John Cokeram, Roger de Lancastre, Stephen John Oboltone and Rchard Oweltone, monks of the same convent. They had been accused and pardoned of the robbery of twenty-four plough beasts, eighty pigs, ten sheep, eleven oxen, seven cows, 80 acres of growing wheat, 80 acres of growing oats, an acre of beans, two acres of peas, and five acres of barley. They had also been accused and pardoned of the robbery of bedclothes, silver spoons, a basin and laver, two bowls, and a cooking pot (Dryburgh and Smith, 2006, 29).

Throughout the fourteenth century Furness Abbey maintained an interest in commercial property in Drogheda. On 10 November 1334 they received a *messuage* and six shops in Drogheda (in Meath) from Robert Normaud towards the sustenance of a monk as chaplain to celebrate divine service in the abbey church for the souls of the faithful departed (Public Record Office, 1895). On 20 February 1338 they

received two further shops in Drogheda (in Meath) (McNeill, 1928, 242). In 1351 a Charter of John Gibbes, John Bond of *Beaubek* and Richard Spenser, granted to the monks of St Mary of Furness, three further properties in West street, Drogheda (in Louth) (Mc Neill, 1928, 244)

A manorial extent for the grange of Colp in 1408 confirms that Furness Abbey had 4 carcuates of land in Beaubec (*Bewbek*) and a *burgagium* of 2 carcuates which was held with borough status in the immediate neighbourhood of Colp (Simms, 1988). Beaubec was the largest area recorded in this manorial extent of Colp and was only later subdivided into the townlands of Bey More, Bey Beg and Kiltrough in the Civil Survey 1654–6 (Simms, 1988). Simms (1988, fig. 15.7), presents a model of the manor of Colp in the fifteenth century showing Beaubec (*Bewbek*) as one of the separate townlands held by a free tenant surrounding the manorial centre which consisted of a parish church, the demesne farm, the house plots of those who held by burgage tenure and the tenants at will who were separate entities, and their settlements (fig. 2.).

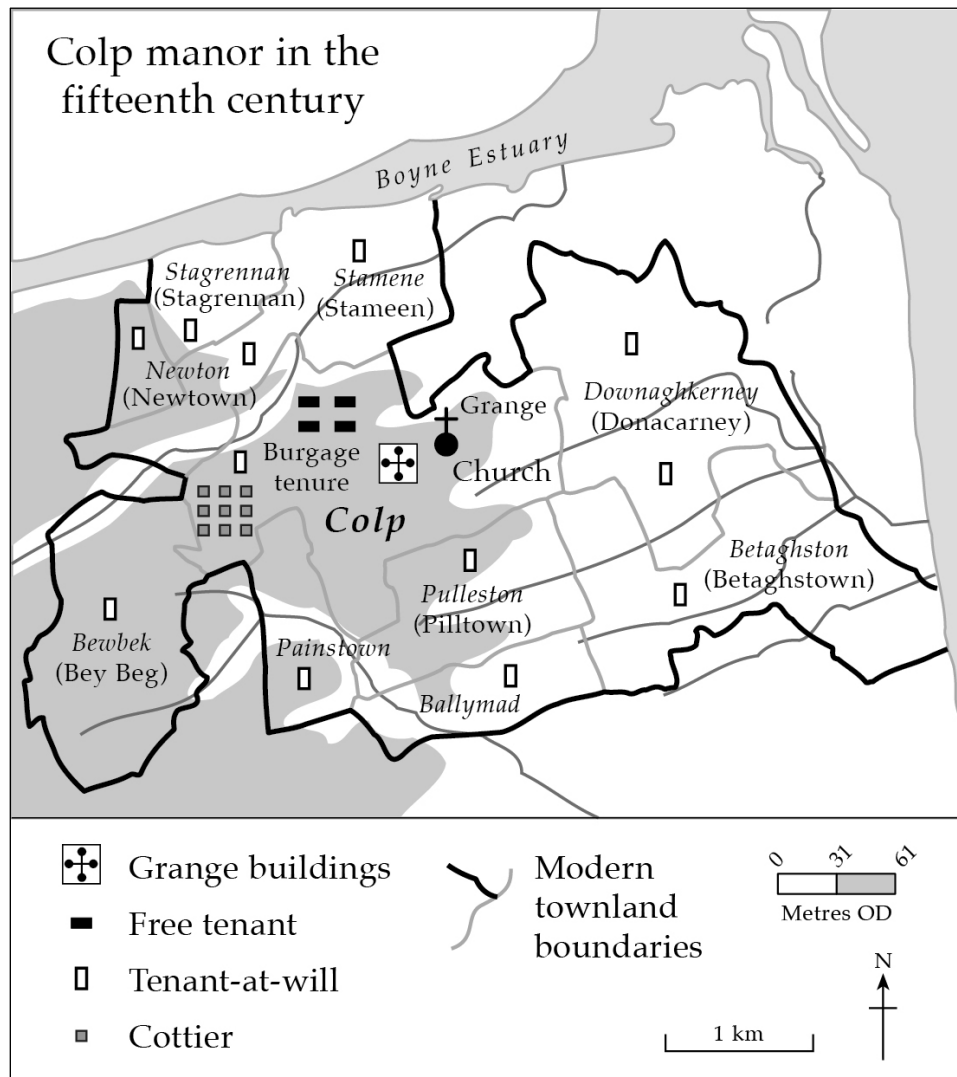


Fig. 2 The manor of Colp in Meath in 1408 (after Whelan, 2011).

The Cistercian Abbey at Furness held onto these lands right up to the sixteenth century and even enlarged their holdings in Meath and Drogheda. From the middle of the fourteenth century until the sixteenth century the abbots of Furness became absentee abbots in Ireland, as had the Norman monks before them. A fellow monk represented them as attorney in Ireland. According to the Patent Rolls for 11 March 1506 the abbot and convent at Furness were given a licence to hold onto their manors of Deanbek Major and Deanbek Minor even though they were absent landlords (Public Record Office, 1916, 446). After the dissolution in 1540–1, Thomas Cusack was receiver of the Irish possessions of Furness Abbey in county Meath (White, 1947, 319). Their holdings included lands and tenements in Beaubek, Mornington, Kells and two properties with a farm and a mill in Drogheda.

The Civil Survey 1654–6 mentions one stone house and some outhouses and cabins at *Baymore* and *Baybeg* which were owned by John Draycott of Mornington (*Mornanstown*) (Simington, 1940, 3). His predecessor was Henry Draycott, a prestigious Tudor official from Derbyshire and protégée of the Lord Deputy, Sir Anthony St Leger who came to Ireland in time to profit from the spoils of the newly dissolved religious houses (Barnwall, 1977). He had lands through his marriage to Mary Becke, daughter of Edward and Elizabeth Becke of Mornington that were formerly owned by the Cistercian Abbey of Furness in England. In January 1538 Becke received a grant of the lands of Furness which included 400 acres in Beymore. The Draycotts quickly integrated with the Old English community of the Pale and in 1641 John Draycott joined the Irish insurgents and was present at the siege of Drogheda. In the early part of the eighteenth century Bey More was sold to Thomas Pearson of Athboy (McCullen, 1989, 23). He landscaped the grounds and laid out trees which, according to D’Alton’s *History of Drogheda*, were ‘long admired’ (D’Alton, 1844). He also built a four-storey red brick house c.1720.

Site Description

The present remains of Beaubec at Bey More (pl. 1) are classified as a ‘gatehouse’ by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland (SMR ME020-031----). This gatehouse comprises a rectangular stone structure with a possible corner turret in the south-west. It is two storeys high and composed of roughly coursed limestone. A single light in the south gable at first floor is composed entirely of sandstone. In 1997 archaeological testing was undertaken at this building which was thought at the time to be medieval in date with later eighteenth modifications (Murphy, 1997A; Murphy, 1997B).



Pl. 1 Aerial view of the gatetower at Bey More (after Google Maps).

A single trench was manually excavated and a single course of wall was exposed (pl. 2). This lay directly on boulder clay. This wall was 1m wide with a footing along the east side. It protruded from the north-west corner of the upstanding building. A single handle sherd of thirteenth/fourteenth century pottery indicated a medieval date for the wall. It was interpreted by the excavator to be the remains of a medieval building that had been demolished in the seventeenth century or early eighteenth century. Various low banks and mounds are visible in the field around the structure. They form no coherent pattern and could belong to different phases of occupation.



Pl. 2 Photo showing foundations of medieval wall (Murphy 1997A)

In 2016 a geophysical survey was conducted by Joanna Leigh to determine the potential for further archaeological remains surrounding the gatehouse (Leigh, 1916). The resistance survey (fig. 3) had responses to the north of the gatehouse which are

indicative of structural remains (fig. 3, 1). These extend *c.*35m to the west and can be interpreted as internal wall features of a large building extending from the gatehouse. They are located south of buildings shown on the first edition OS 6-inch map. To the south are another series of responses that indicate the remains of another building (fig. 3, 2). There is a building shown here on the first edition OS 6-inch map. It has the same orientation as the adjacent field boundary and it is speculated that this field wall marks the western extent of the probable building. To the west the responses indicate a former boundary feature or drainage ditch (fig. 3, 3). In the south there are rectilinear and linear response that are typical of buried wall features (fig. 3, 4). A field entrance located to the south may indicate a former entranceway. An area of low resistance immediately to the west (fig. 3, 4) may be a robbed out platform or garden area (fig. 3, 5). Extending north from these is a series of parallel responses that probably represents former ploughing activity (fig. 3, 6).

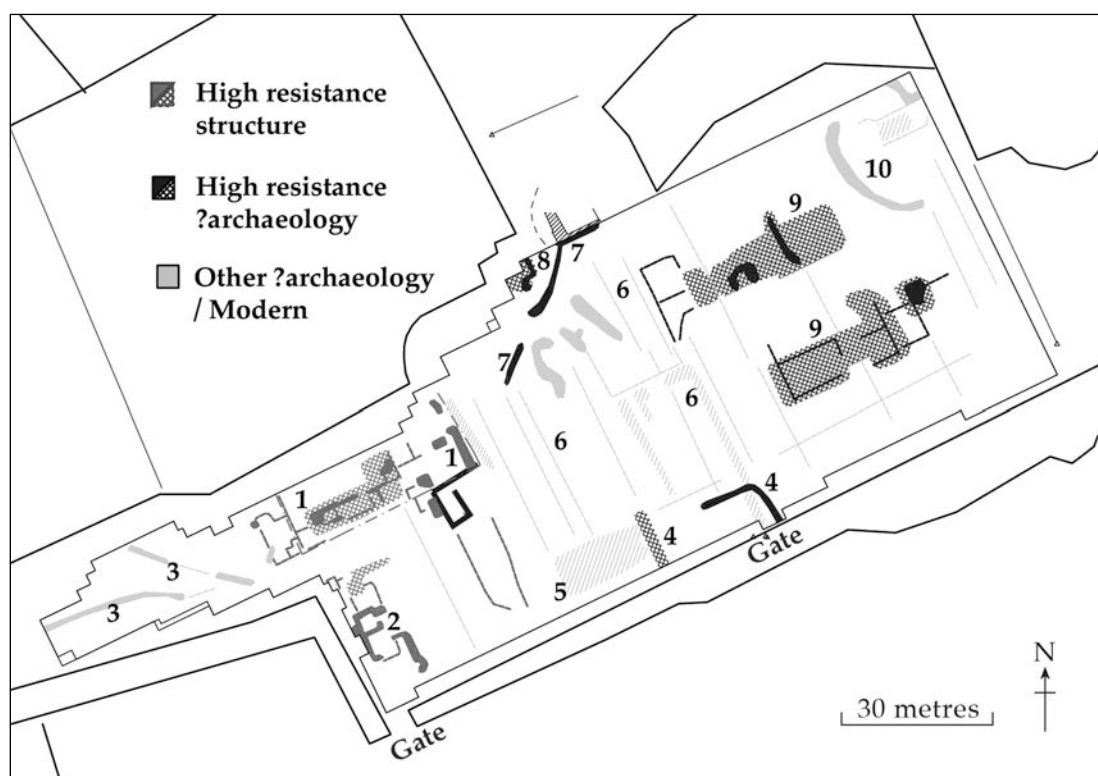


Fig. 3 Results of a resistance survey at Bey More (after Leigh, 2016)

The Gradiometer survey identified areas of magnetic disturbance which are typical of spreads of structural material. Some of these correlate with the probable building remains identified in the resistance survey (fig. 4, A). To the east two isolated responses may indicate large pits (fig. 4, C).

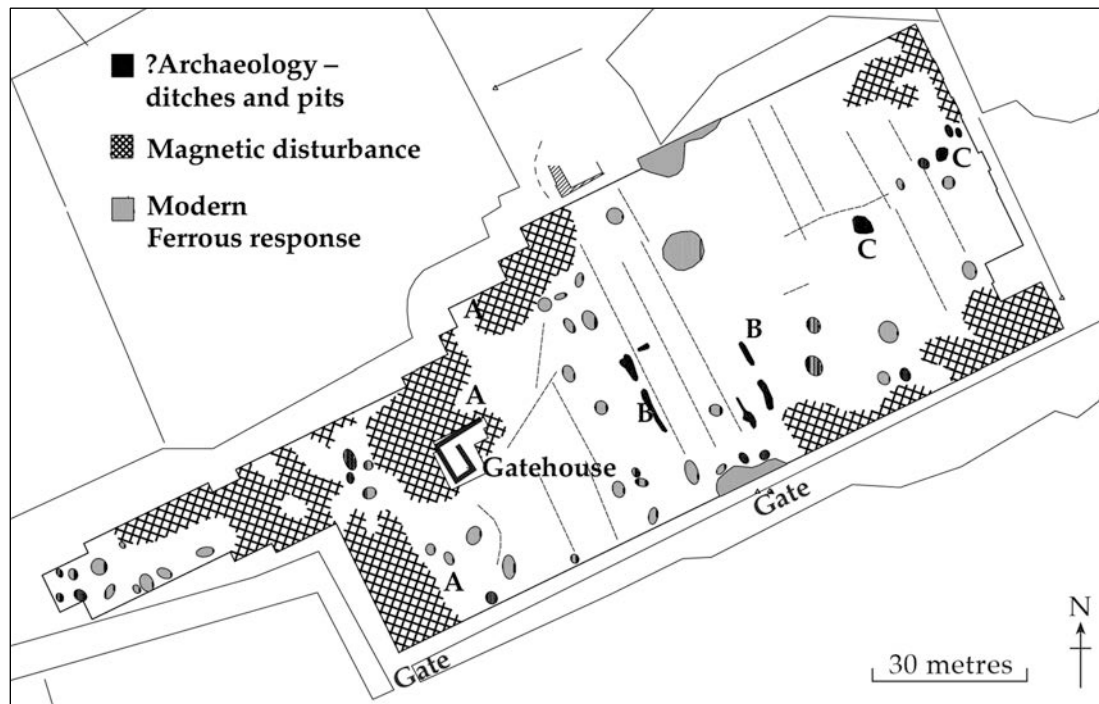


Fig. 3 Gradiometer survey at Bey More (after Leigh, 2016)

Discussion

The results of the geophysical survey at Bey More indicate that further buildings lie to the north and south west of the feature identified as a gatehouse. Those to the north are arranged in a regular linear pattern indicating that they may form one side of a courtyard. Given the relatively small scale of this Cistercian community at Beaubec it is likely that a grange farm, rather than a full abbey complex, developed on the site. Cistercian farmsteads or granges were usually large rectilinear enclosures bounded by multiple banks and ditches breeched by an impressive gated entrance. Some grange enclosures were replaced by a walled bawn such as those at Monkstown Castlefarm, Co. Dublin, Knowth, Co Meath and Milltown, Co Roscommon. Within each grange enclosure a nucleus of farm buildings were arranged around a courtyard like the Beaubec site. The gatehouse was an important feature of the Cistercian grange. It provided defence at the most vulnerable part of the enclosure, and charity work took place at the entrance gate (Stout, 2015). In Ireland, in 1228–9, Stephen of Lexington recommended that an almsbox be assigned to all Cistercian gatehouses and that the porter should show himself more merciful and humane towards the poor (O’Dwyer, 1982, 165). There are formidable gatehouses associated with the granges attached to St Mary’s Abbey at Bullock and Monkstown Castlefarm in south county Dublin.

Foundations of an impressive gate-house at the entrance to a grange enclosure was uncovered at Staleen in county Meath, which is on the Mellifont Abbey monastic estate (Stevens, 2008).

The 1215 reference to the church of SS Mary and Laurence indicates that there was a church on the Beaubec site. The celebration of mass was forbidden in granges up until 1255 when Pope Alexander authorised this for granges that were far from the abbey or the parish church (Ó Conbhuidhe and Donovan, 1999, 47). Despite official regulations, the custom had long been in existence in Ireland. Stephen of Lexington, during his visitation of the Irish houses (1228–9), prescribed a secular chaplain to be specially appointed to celebrate ‘Divine Service’ in the grange at Killenny, Kilkenny (O’Dwyer, 1982, 159). Architectural remains of the grange chapel were uncovered at Knowth (Eogan, 2012, 623). The style of dressing on the architectural remains indicates a church of thirteenth century date.

The results of the geophysical survey at Bey More support the evidence for locating the medieval foundation of Bello Becco to this site. Targeted archaeological excavation is now required to uncover the structural remains and layout of this thirteenth century site. There is even the possibility that these buildings may contain highly ornamental tiled floors given that the abbot of Beaubec in Normandy in 1210 was penalised for allowing his monks to construct pavements which exhibit ‘levity and curiosity’ (Graves, 1849, 86). Excavation has the potential to identify material evidence for its external contacts with their mother house in Normandy and with Furness Abbey across the Irish Sea. Imports such as Normandy Ware, has already been recovered from the excavations at nearby Colp West in 1999 (Murphy, 2001). Future investigations could also shed light on the type of farming that this monastic community practised and the range of agricultural produce the monastic farm exported from the Boyne Valley during the medieval period.

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