WALLED TOWNS

There were four major phases of town foundation in medieval Ireland, and these follow one another in roughly chronological order: first, “monastic” towns; second, Scandinavian towns; third, Anglo-Norman towns; and fourth, Gaelic towns of the late middle ages.

“Monastic” towns and Scandinavian towns developed in the tenth century, although both had earlier origins. From the late seventh century onward some ecclesiastical settlements performed the urban functions of harbors, trading places, and centers of iron-working and craft production, while in the ninth century the Viking invaders established permanent settlements at sites such as Dublin, which are described in the annals as longphoirt (ship fortresses). Nonetheless, little is known about these early settlements, and scholars are now agreed that towns in the sense of nucleated, densely populated centers, whose inhabitants were not engaged in primary production, are a feature of the tenth century and later.

The group of five Scandinavian port towns (Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork, and Limerick) established, or in some cases re-established, between 914 and 922 are important in this regard. Of these Dublin is the best known, and excavations at Fishamble Street revealed an organized urban layout from around 925, when the settlement was first enclosed by an earthen bank. About the middle of the tenth century the embankment was raised and an external ditch added, while around the year 1000 the earthen defenses were enlarged and crowned by a post-and-wattle fence, later replaced by a stave palisade. These were the defenses that witnessed the battle of Clontarf in 1014. A stone wall was built around 1100 and endured until the Anglo-Norman invasion, although the town had acquired extramural suburbs by that time. Within the defenses virtually all of the buildings were of wood and were constructed of post-and-wattle. The remains of over 200 houses have been excavated, and the town was essentially the home of craftsmen and traders. Dublin’s trading connections were extensive, and imported goods included silks from Byzantium and silver from the Arab world. The increasing status of the Dubliners and their identity as townspeople, distinct from others, is evidenced by a reference to them in 1127 as burgesses (burgenses). The archaeological evidence from Waterford is second only to that of Dublin. The same house types are evidenced, and they have also been discovered in Wexford and Cork, leading to the recognition that Hiberno-Scandinavian towns had a distinctive physical identity. Three houses of mid-twelfth century date have been excavated on the site of King John’s Castle, Limerick.
Ecclesiastical settlements were enclosed by ramparts from at least the seventh century, but it is not until the eleventh and twelfth centuries that these can be described as defenses. In 1103, Armagh resisted a week-long siege, while the surviving twelfth-century gatehouse at Glendalough suggests that it was also defended.

The Anglo-Normans founded some fifty new towns and established the urban network that still endures over much of eastern and southern Ireland. Although chequer plans, such as at Drogheda and Galway, are occasionally found, the predominant street plan was linear, with the marketplace located in the center of the street and with houses positioned so that the gable was on the street frontage. Access to the house was often by means of a side lane, thus giving rise to the laneways that still characterize towns such as Clonmel, Drogheda, and Kilkenny. The houses themselves were positioned on long narrow properties, known as burialage plots, which frequently stretched from the main street to the town wall. These plots, combined with an acreage of arable land outside the walls and common of pasture, were granted by the lord of the town to the incoming colonial heads of household, who were given the status of burgesses in return for the payment of an annual rent, generally set at one shilling. The earliest town defenses were earthen, such as the example from the 1190s found in the course of archaeological excavation at Drogheda. Other towns, such as Duleek, retained earthen defenses throughout the Middle Ages. Defenses of earth and timber could be every bit as strong and difficult to capture as stone walls, but from about the 1220s onward the larger towns began to replace earthen ramparts with mortared stone. Stone defenses were more expensive, but they were also more prestigious, and in medieval art and cartography they were depicted as the symbol of a town. Town walls served not merely as barriers to attack; they also enabled the control of movement to and from the town, and the town gates were important points for gathering tolls. Among the tolls collected was murage, a tax on all goods coming into the town for sale, which was levied in order to raise monies to pay for the construction of the town walls. At first the grants were short and simple, but by the mid-fifteenth century the lists of taxable commodities had become long and elaborate. Although town defenses fell out of use by 1700, some towns, such as Cashel, continued to collect murage until the 1960s. The new Anglo-Norman towns are usually characterized by having one parish church, by the location of the lord’s castle on the edge of the town, and by having religious houses and hospitals situated either just inside the town wall or outside the town completely.

In general terms the thirteenth century was a period of urban expansion and population increase, with extramural suburbs being a feature of many towns. By contrast, the fourteenth century was one of decline, brought on for much the same reasons as the contemporary desertion of villages. Some towns, such as Athlone, Rindown, and Roscommon, were abandoned completely. The fifteenth century was a period of consolidation, and it is not until the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century that expansion is again evidenced, when urban land once more became available for redevelopment.

The final phase of medieval urbanization, the development of towns such as Cavan and Longford in areas controlled by the Gaelic Irish, is still little understood. The towns copied their form and layout from the neighboring late-medieval towns within the Pale, and the townspeople seem to have profited particularly from the sale of horses and livestock to Anglo-Irish merchants. There is no evidence, however, that any of these Gaelic-Irish towns were walled.

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References and Further Reading


See also Anglo-Norman Invasion; Battle of Clontarf; Ecclesiastical Settlements; Houses; Viking Incursions; Villages

WATERFORD

Waterford is one of the major medieval ports along the east coast of Ireland, originally founded as a Hiberno-Norse urban center in the tenth century. Its original Old Norse name was Vedrarfjordr, which probably means “windy fjord,” where this inlet of the River Suir offered a safe haven for their ships. Indeed, it has been calculated that the quays of the city in the later Middle Ages could berth around 60 cargo ships. Thus it is hardly surprising that although Dublin remained the governmental and administrative capital of Ireland throughout the Middle Ages, it was ports such as Waterford in the Southeast that dominated her international trade. Throughout much of this period Waterford remained the largest exporter of wool, wool products, and hides, as well as the biggest importer of wines. It also became a significant entrepôt for French