

Monastic Ireland

In the year 431, the first missionary to Ireland was a bishop, named Palladius. He was sent by Pope Celestine, to "the Irish who believe in Christ." It would appear, that although the Irish of the time were basically pagan, there were some who practiced Christianity. However, within a year Palladius either left for Scotland, or died. The following year St. Patrick arrived in Ireland and began his conversion of the pagan people of Ireland. This work continued after St. Patrick's death and by the year 500 most of Ireland was Christian.

When a holy man went into a remote area to fast and pray, others would follow. Slowly small clusters of cells would spring up in these remote parts and monasteries were founded. Monasteries sprung up all over the land and soon Ireland was called the "Island of Saints and Scholars." Often, a local King or Chieftan would offer land as a site for a monastery or Abbey. Usually they were built of wood but in areas where wood was scarce stone was used.

Each monastery had a church, a dining hall where monks would eat, a guest house for travellers, a library for precious books and tiny cells where the monks would sleep. Each monastery had a school for the instruction, teaching the bible, latin and gaelic and other subjects like math and astronomy. These early monasteries became universities of sorts. Many of the monks were skilled in metalwork and created many wonderful pieces, some of which, are still in existence today, in our national Museums. Many fell into the hands of raiders, Vikings, who spirited them away to be sold for profits. Round towers were often built on the site for the protection of the monks during times of attack and local chieftans offered to defend them on these occasions. By about the year 1000 A.D. local chieftans sponsored the construction of beautiful crosses called "Celtic Crosses". Celtic crosses were huge, sometimes over 12 feet tall with detailed carvings of biblical events from the creation to the last judgement. There are many that have survived the years of erosion and periods of invasions. Many wonderful examples of these survive to this day.

These monasteries produced hundreds and hundreds of recognised saints. Many left for the continent of Europe to found even more monasteries afar, and to bring the word of God to other people in other lands. There were different types of monks. One such group were called Culdees. The Culdee movement were an order of monks who practiced a very strict, harsh existence, caring for the sick and poor. Celibacy was chosen by many holy men as a sacrifice thus devoting their life entirely to Christ. Still there is evidence that some abbots did marry. It is sometimes claimed that celibacy became mandatory for Latin-Rite priests only in the eleventh century; but others say, for instance: "It may fairly be said that by the time of St. Leo the Great (440-61) the law of celibacy was generally recognized in the West," However the Irish had a law unto themselves "the Brehon Law." **Dr Patrick Power, in *Sex and Marriage in Ancient Ireland***, points out that a Céili Dé Penitential does not order the excommunication and

expulsion of any member who was married or had a sexual relational but prescribes only a penance. There are numerous examples in ancient writings from Ireland where the lineage of the abbots clearly reflect an abbot being succeeded by his son.

The Norman invasion led to the establishment of even stronger ties with Rome. Although the Irish monks made such huge contributions to the church, Rome was not always pleased with the direction they were taking. Henry II was keen to have secular law predominate over the law of the church. In 1164, Henry II called archbishop Thomas Becket before the Royal Council. Becket, however, had fled to France. By 1170, the Pope was considering excommunicating all of Britain. Led by Bishop Arnold of Lisieux, the group of clerics offered that Becket could return to England without penalty and requested authorisation for Henry to invade Ireland. Henry II, was given a Papal Bull, by the newly elected Pope Adrian IV, to "civilize the Irish race". The following year Henry II invaded Ireland to curb Strongbows ambitions. The following year, at the Synod of Cashel, Co. Tipperary, Roman Catholicism was proclaimed as the only permitted religious practice in Ireland. For the next 400 years monasteries continued to expand and orders like the Cistercians, Dominicans and Franciscans established sister houses throughout Ireland. Throughout the monastic period there were in excess of 550 separate monasteries, abbeys, and friaries in Ireland.

The monastic period lasted in Ireland up to the reign of Henry VIII. Henry declared himself supreme head of the church in England and Ireland. Ireland possessed numerous religious houses that owned large tracts of land. Henry dissolved them (1536-1540) and transferred this wealth to new hands. Henry ordered the clergy to preach against superstitious images, relics, miracles, and pilgrimages. Latin rituals gave way to English.

As previously stated there were over 550 monasteries, abbeys and friaries in Ireland.

The following are only a few:

Durrow Abbey, Co. Offaly

The original monastery at Durrow was founded by Saint Colmcille, who also founded 26 other monasteries by the age of 25, including the Abbey at Kells. He founded Durrow in 553 and ran it until 563, when he moved to Scotland. During Colmcille's life and for centuries after his death, Durrow was a famous school. Durrow, and most other monasteries in the area, were frequently ravaged by the Vikings, but was not completely destroyed until the Norman invasion.

Durrow, originally called *Daru* (plain of the oaks) is the location of some of the only remaining pre-mediaeval oak in Ireland. The oak trees which line the fields to the side of Durrow Abbey are believed to run alongside one of the Five Roads of Ireland.

The Book of Durrow is possibly the oldest extant complete illuminated gospel from Ireland. The text includes the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is believed to date from the 7th century.

The Cross of Durrow is located here.

Glendalough Co. Wicklow

Kevin, was a descendant of one of the ruling families in Leinster. As a young man he visited Glendalough on numerous occasions. He was to return later, with a small group of monks to found a monastery there. His fame as a holy man attracted numerous followers. He died in about 618. For six centuries afterwards, Glendalough flourished and the Irish Annals contain references to the deaths of abbots and raids on the settlement. The Book of Glendalough was written there about 1131 A.D.

St. Laurence O'Toole, born in 1128, became Abbot of Glendalough and was well known for his sanctity and hospitality.

The destruction of the settlement by English forces in 1398 left it in ruin.

The buildings which survive probably date from between the 10th and 12th centuries. The monastery at the peak of its activity included workshops, areas for writing and copying, guest houses, an infirmary, farm buildings and dwellings for both the monks and lay people.

Clonmacnoise 548 A.D. - 1552 A.D.

Situated between the two provinces of Meath and Connacht, on the banks of the Shannon Rive and on top of Esker Riada, -a sand and gravel ridge left from the last Ice Age you will find one of Ireland's oldest monastic settlements. Clonmacnoise was founded in 548 by St. Ciaran, and soon became a major center of religion, learning, trade, craftsmanship and politics.



Clonmacnoise garnered support from the provincial kings of Meath and Connacht and was vassalated back and forth between them. In the late 11th and 12th centuries, allegiance reverted once again to Connacht. Religion was the central focus at Clonmacnoise, but it always had a large lay population and thus looked more like a town than a monastery. The earliest churches at Clonmacnoise were also made of wood, but from the 10th century onward they were built of stone.

The largest of the many churches at Clonmacnoise is the **Cathedral**, originally built in 909 by the King of Tara, Flann Sinna, and the Abbot of Clonmacnoise Colman. Rory O'Connor, last High King of Ireland was buried close to the altar in 1198. The **round tower**, was built in 1124 by Turlough O'Connor and O'Malone. It was struck by lightning in 1135. Like so many monastic settlements in Ireland, Clonmacnoise was plundered repeatedly by invaders, including the Vikings and Normans. It then fell into decline from the 13th century onwards until it was destroyed in 1552 by the English garrison from nearby Athlone.

Cross of the Scriptures, one of the finest high crosses in Ireland. Dating from about 900 AD, the cross stands 13 feet high

South Cross, It is thought to date from the early 9th century standing about 12 feet (3.7m) high.

The **North Cross** is even earlier, dating from about 800, but only the shaft and base survives.

Abbey of Kells, Kells, Co. Meath

The Abbey of Kells was founded in the early 9th Century AD, on the site of a former Irish hill fort. The monastery - named Mainistir Cheanannais in Irish - is most famous for keeping the 'Book of Kells' (an illuminated manuscript in Latin) from the medieval period until the 1650s. Kells Abbey was repeatedly raided by the Vikings.

The Book of Kells remained in Kells until 1654. In that year Cromwell's army was quartered in the church at Kells, and the governor of the town sent the book to Dublin for safety. The Bishop of Meath, presented the manuscript to Trinity College in Dublin in 1661, where it has remained ever since. It has been on display to the public in the Long Hall since the 19th century.

Mellifont Abbey, Co. Louth

In 1140, **Malachy**, Bishop of Down, invited a group of severe Cistercian monks from Clairvaux to set up a monastery in Ireland. Malachy so impressed by St. Bernard (founder of the Cistercian order) and his monks that he converted to the monastic life himself. Malachy was canonized a saint after his death.

A group of Irish and French monks settled in this site in 1142 and began construction in the traditional Cistercian style. Within a couple decades, before Mellifont's church was even consecrated, nine more Cistercian monasteries were established in Ireland. At its height, Mellifont was the mother house of 21 monasteries and as many as 400 monks made Mellifont Abbey their home.

After the Dissolution of the Monasteries under King Henry VIII, Mellifont Abbey was demolished and sold. A fortified Tudor manor house was built on the site in 1556 by

Edward Moore. This house was the site of a turning point in Irish history. After Hugh O'Neill, last of the great Irish chieftains, was defeated in the Battle of Kinsale (1603), he was given shelter here by Sir Garret Moore. O'Neill soon surrendered to the English Lord Deputy Mountjoy and was pardoned, but he fled to the Continent in 1607 with other Irish leaders in the Flight of the Earls.

The site of Mellifont Abbey and its manor house was abandoned in 1727

Abbeysrule, Co. Longford.

The Cistercian Abbey at Abbeysrule, in the picturesque valley of the River Inny, was founded in 1150, one of the first in the country, following rapidly on the success of Mellifont. The Abbey was founded by the O'Farrells, and survived a destructive fire in 1476 but was eventually closed by Queen Elizabeth I following the Tudor suppression of the monasteries. The land was granted to Robert Dillon, Earl of Roscommon. The adjoining graveyard contains the shaft of the only surviving High Cross in County Longford.

Inchleraun, Co. Longford.

During the early Christian era, St. Diarmuid, tutor of St. Ciaran of Clonmacnois, founded a monastery on Inchleraun. Extensive ruins of six churches survive, the remains of greatest antiquity being those of the church named after the founding saint. The site was plundered extensively by the armies of Munster during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway.

The monastery was founded in the 7th Century by St. Colman MacDuagh under the patronage of Guaire, King of Connacht, although, except for the tower, most of the present buildings date from the 13th - 14th centuries. The name Kilmacduagh roughly translates as "church of Duagh's son". This site was of such importance that it became the centre of a new diocese, the Diocese of Kilmacduagh, in the 12th century. The monastery, because of its wealth and importance, was plundered several times in the 13th century. The Reformation effectively brought the religious life of Kilmacduagh to a close.