

# Early Christian Ireland

**W**e don't know exactly when the first missionaries arrived in Ireland but by 431AD Pope Celestine sent a bishop to Ireland called Palladius. St Patrick also came to Ireland about this time and it is clear from his writings that Christianity was not yet then fully established. Christianity had a profound effect on the country, bringing with it not just a new religion but also the knowledge, learning and technology of the late Roman world.

Ireland is rich in early Christian remains, though none of the earliest churches have survived as they were all built of wood. Some of the characteristics of these wooden churches were later imitated in stone, which is evident from churches like that on St Macdara's Island off the coast of Connemara.

## EARLY MONASTERIES

From the beginning, Christianity in Ireland was organised from within monasteries which varied in size and importance. The remains of early monasteries at well-known sites like Monasterboice, Co Louth, and Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, give us some idea of their nature and layout.

Such places became centres of learning and scholarship and sent out missionaries across Europe. Important features of such large monasteries include round towers, high crosses and the monastic enclosure which marked the boundary between the secular world on the outside and the sacred world within.

Many lesser-known monastic centres which have faded from memory can still be identified using aerial photography, where their enclosing elements survive fossilised as part of existing field boundaries.

The round towers range in height from 20-40m with the entrance door high above ground level. Though associated in the popular imagination with Viking raids, the original name for these was *cloigtheach* (bell tower), which probably gives a truer idea of their purpose. High crosses are impressive tall ringed crosses standing on a broad base and often display biblical scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Clonmacnoise has the largest and most remarkable collection of cross-slabs in Europe, ranging in date from the eighth to the 12th century. These slabs are almost all made of sandstone and are elaborately carved with crosses – many asking for a prayer for the person commemorated. A small number of the best examples of these cross-

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.



**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:** St Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Co Louth; Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly; A Cross-Slab from Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly; St Macdara's Church, off the coast of Connemara.

slabs are currently on display in Clonmacnoise Visitor Centre.

Some aspects of the early church still retained strong elements of pre-Christian beliefs. Two examples of this are holy wells and bullaun stones. Bullaun stones are rocks or boulders in which circular depressions have been carved. Their exact function is unclear but many are associated with early monastic sites with local folklore attributing healing properties to rainwater collected in the hollow.

Some monasteries were important places of pilgrimage and many were located in remote areas. The best-known and most extreme example is Scelig Michael, off the coast of Kerry. Here a tiny monastery consisting of six circular stone huts and two oratories are perched on a narrow shelf over 200m above the sea. Scelig Michael is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996. Unfortunately, not all early



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monasteries have left such impressive upstanding remains. However, many old graveyards, especially those containing the remains of a medieval church and associated with a local saint, may in fact be much older and hugely important archaeological sites.

The early church has also left a strong impression on Irish place names. Words meaning "church", like *cill* and *teampul* were anglicised by the Ordnance Survey to "kill" and "temple". Churches in isolated locations were often referred to as "dyser".

Therefore, places like Kildare, Templemore and Dysert O'Dea derive their names from early church sites. For more information and details on local place names, the Placenames Database of Ireland can be consulted at [www.logainm.ie](http://www.logainm.ie)

**NEXT WEEK: EARLY MEDIEVAL FARMSTEADS**