

MONASTIC SITES IN THE WEST OF IRELAND

Michael J. O'Kelly, Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork.

The Monastery on the Skellig Rock. Probably the most spectacularly sited early monastery in Ireland is that on Sceilg Mhichíl (Skellig Michael in the Anglicised form of the name), a rock which rises 715 ft out of the sea 8 miles off the coast of Kerry. Sceilg means a rock, especially a high, steep, rock and in this case, the dedication to St Michael may well be ancient as there are many references to St Michael in early Irish texts, as for instance in the Martyrology of Oengus (Stokes, 1905). But there is no early record of the founding of the monastery or indeed of how it came to be dedicated to St Michael (Henry, 1957, 115). However, it is certain that the monastery was in existence in the eighth century for 'Suibni (Sweeney) of the Sceilg' is mentioned in the Martyrology of Tallaght written at the end of that century and there are records of its plunder by the Vikings on a number of occasions during the ninth century; on one of these raids 'Étgal was carried off into captivity and he died of hunger on their hands' (Annals of Innisfallen, year 824). The Annals of the Four Masters in 1044 record the death of Aodh Ó Scelice Mhichíl, while the Annals of Innisfallen refer to the same event as follows: 'Aed Scellic, the noble priest, and chief of the Gaedhil in piety, rested in Christ'. After this there are no more references in the annals. In the 12th century Giraldus Cambrensis mentions it in his Topographia Hiberniae.

The rock, which rises to two jagged peaks, is composed of calcareous grits and shales and there are veins of quartz which provided the material for the white crosses which are built in over the doors of the larger oratory and of cell A. The sea-pink vegetation, which is now the main growth on the rock, forms spongy mats that cover many of the scree and rock slopes. This is so thick in places that it may have been used as a sort of peat fuel by the occupants of the monastery. There are three landing points on the island and one or other of these can be used depending on the state of the wind and the sea. Nowadays, the east landing at Blindman's Cove is the one most used by boats, but recently a helicopter pad has been provided for the easier relief of the lighthouse. This has created a hazard for the monastery - visitors come in greater numbers, people who have no feeling for, or belief in, what the monastery stood for, and inadvertent and vandalistic damage has increased. From the three landing points, stone stairways led up from the sea to the monastery.

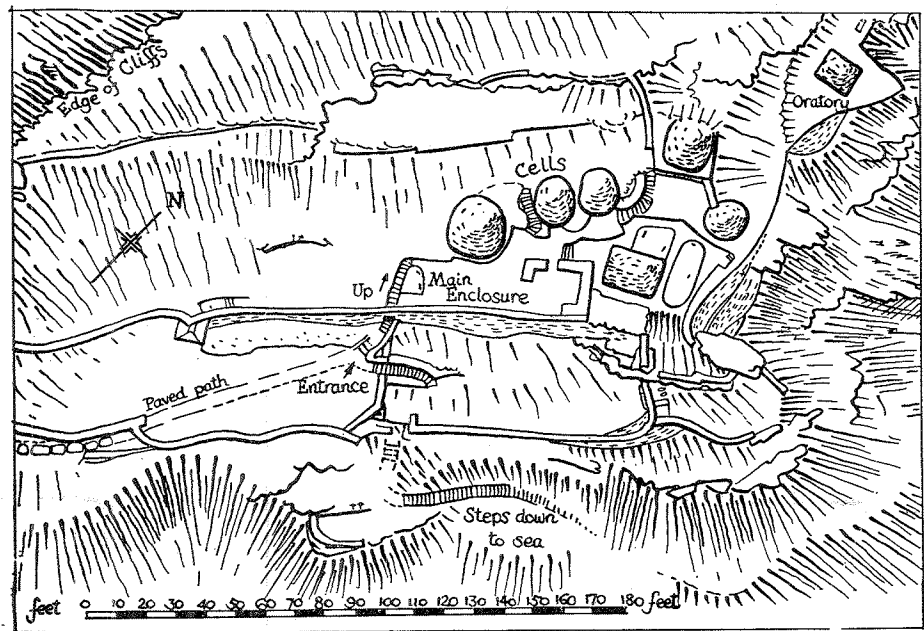


Figure 1. Sceilg Mhichíl (Co Kerry): Plan of monastic enclosures.

As the plan after de Paor (1955, 176, fig. 2) shows, there were six stone-built huts, one of which, cell D, is now ruined, and two oratories, both of small size. These are all dry-built and all have corbelled stone roofs. It is interesting to note that the 12th century church of St Michael, built with mortar, is now completely ruinous, while the mortarless structures still stand preserved (Fig. 1). The monastery is enclosed within a great stone wall, which also includes an area known in tradition as the 'monks garden'. In the innermost part of the monastery is the 'monks graveyard', an area marked by low slabs and crosses. No excavation has been done so that it is not easy to determine accurately the chronological relationships of the various buildings and features to one another. It can be seen clearly in some cases which house was built before which, but excavation is necessary to determine many points of great interest.

On my last visit there, I found on the surface of the 'monks garden' pieces of iron slag and furnace bottoms which show that iron smelting was done on the rock. Charcoal was the fuel used for smelting iron in early christian Ireland and it takes 12 tons of timber to make one ton of charcoal, which when made is a light but very bulky material. Imagine the difficulty of taking enough charcoal and enough iron ore out to the rock and the hard work involved in trundling these materials up the six hundred or more stone steps from sea level to the monastery. One would have thought that it would have been so much easier to smelt the iron on the mainland and take only the finished product to the rock.

The Monastery on Church Island, Valencia (Fig. 2). A small monastery about which we know rather more, is Church Island, near Valencia, also in Co Kerry (O'Kelly, 1958). This too is a sea-girt rock, slightly less than an acre in total extent though its habitable area is less than half an acre. It is a low rock and much more sheltered than the Skellig. Before excavation considerable portions of two stone buildings were visible - a rectangular oratory of Gallarus type the upper part of the corbelled roof of which had collapsed and a circular hut. The roof of this too had disappeared but the wall was built in the corbelled manner.

Excavation revealed the post holes of a small rectangular wooden building underlying the stone-built oratory, its axis having an angle of 85° (5° north of east). It was found that a group of thirty three inhumed burials which lay to the W and NW of it had the same orientation, the heads of the skeletons being at the W in every case. Eleven of these burials partly underlay the foundations of the stone oratory and were therefore earlier than the stone

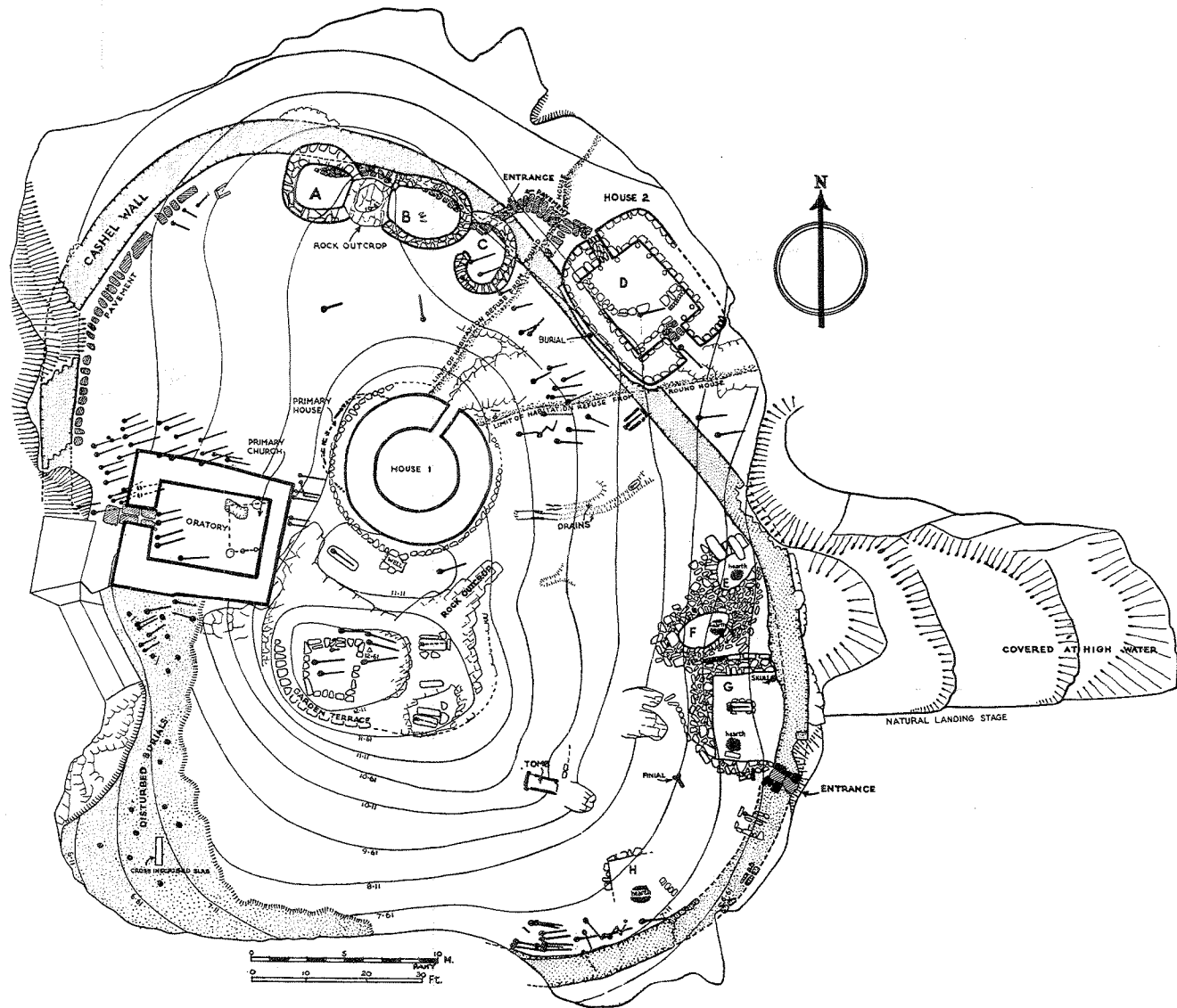


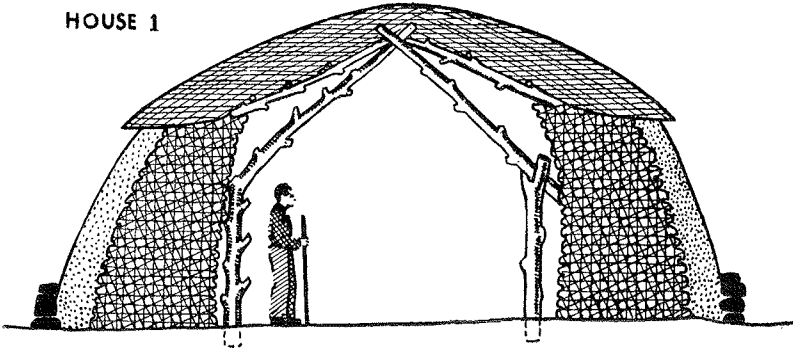
Figure 2. Church Island (Co Kerry): General plan.

building. It can reasonably be inferred that this group of thirty three burials belonged to the period of use of the wooden structure and this in turn suggests that it was a church rather than a domestic building. Furthermore, the soil cover on its floor produced none of the domestic refuse which was so prevalent elsewhere on the island. The wooden building measured internally 6 ft 6 in by 10 ft approximately.

Closely adjacent and to the E of the rectangular wooden building there had been a circular house, a part only of which had survived. The edge of its floor was marked by small stone slabs set on edge. Using the surviving arc, the diameter can be reconstructed at 20 ft approximately. Associated with it were some well marked post holes, and the surviving floor area was covered in winkle shells, animal bones, charcoal and iron slag. Not enough of the structure survived to enable one to envisage the original form of the house. It had been deliberately cleared away when the building of the round stone house was begun. It is reasonable to think of the primary circular house as being contemporary with the small rectangular wooden church, but no archaeological evidence came to light to show that this was so. The thirty three associated burials suggest that the church was in use for an appreciable length of time.

The rock of the island is diorite, and when the wooden church was to be replaced by the larger corbelled stone building, rather than use the local material, purple slate slabs sufficient for the entire structure were imported across a mile of sea either from Valencia Island or from Doulus Head, the two immediately local sources of this stone. The internal floor dimensions are 18 ft 9 in by 12 ft 4 in and the axial orientation is 95° (5° south of east), an orientation which differs from that of the wooden structure by 10° . It is interesting to note that at least six inhumed burials lay with their axes exactly parallel to that of the stone oratory and so the two periods of activity can be distinguished in the burials as well as in the buildings. Excavation showed that before the collapse of the roof of the oratory, its floor had been spread with layers of straw trampled in. As found, it looked like peat, but a botanical study of it showed that it consisted mostly of cereal straw of wheat and rye with an intermixture of grasses and weeds which would normally be found in association with the cereals. One may envisage, therefore, a straw covered floor when the oratory was in use, the layered structure of the deposit showing that it was renewed periodically. This material contained no evidence of domestic occupation - there was no food waste in the form of animal or fish bones or of shells.

HOUSE 1



HOUSE 2

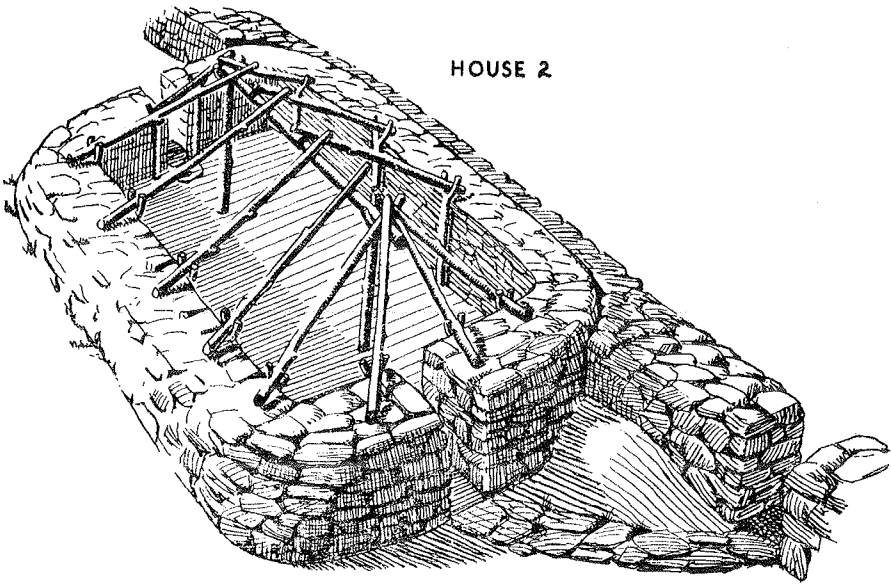


Figure 3. Church Island: Suggested reconstructions of the round and rectangular houses.

It has been assumed in the past that the round stone house had had a corbelled stone roof (O'Hanlon, 1879, 111), but excavation showed otherwise. Underneath a layer of stone tumble from the wall-top was a layer of burnt thatch the seeds in which were oats. Oaten straw had therefore been used for the roof as it has been so used in Kerry well into living memory. It appeared that the roof had been destroyed by fire and had fallen into the building. Under this, was found a central hearth, the fuel for which was peat, clearly identifiable portions of which were found in and around the hearth. Also contained in the hearth were the partly burnt bones of food animals and fish and the shells of periwinkle and limpet. The animals represented were ox, pig, sheep/goat and small horse; the fish bones were mainly those of cod and ballan wrasse. A fourth cereal was represented here in the carbonised seeds of barley. It is clear therefore that the occupants of the island were well fed having had several kinds of meat, fish and cereals. Outside the house in the refuse were great piles of winkle and limpet shells as well as some oysters and clams. The meat and cereals must have come from the larger adjacent islands of Beginish or Valencia or from the mainland. Neither could have come from Church Island itself. Stone-packed post holes along the base of the wall confirmed that the house had had a thatched roof.

Outside the external base of the wall and 1 ft 8 in therefrom was found a built annulus of stones three or four courses high. The material lying between it and the house wall suggested that the annulus had been built as a revetment for the base of a built facing of turves placed outside the wall to make the house windproof. This practice has been suggested too for some of the cells on the Skellig rock. It is still done in Kerry to make windproof shelters for sheep on the mountains (Fig. 3). Just outside the back of the house, a well had been cut into the rock. This merely collected the rainfall run-off from the higher part of the island. In bad weather the well overflowed and flooded the house floor so that a drain became necessary. This was stone lined and covered with slabs and passed out under the door threshold.

A second stone house was built in due course near the NE edge of the island. This was rectangular and had a door at each end. It stood on the layer of refuse and food waste thrown out from the round stone house and this shows that its building was later than that of the round house. The round house continued to be lived in, because the refuse thrown out from it built up against the south wall of the rectangular house. The hearth of the latter again showed that peat was the fuel used and the food waste was

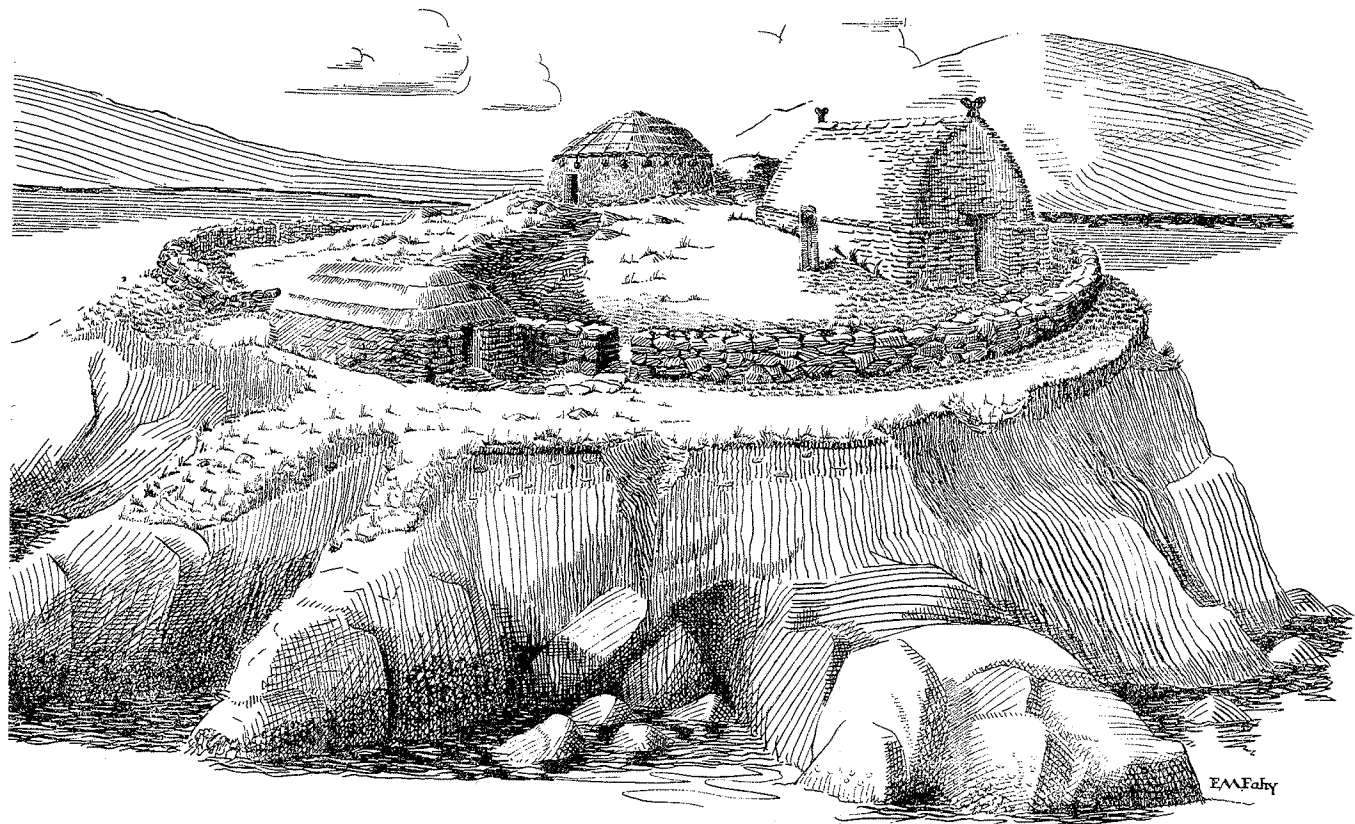


Figure 4. Church Island: Conjectural reconstruction.

made up of the bones of the same animals and fish already listed. The floor dimensions were 17 ft by 12 ft 6 in and the roof must have been of thatch, though no direct evidence of this was found as the house had not been destroyed by fire. The roof was supported on posts and rafters and the arrangement of the post holes suggested that it had had a hipped form (Fig. 3). Inside the south wall of the house a water-collecting pit had been cut 1 ft into the rock and lined with stone slabs. A stone built drain to carry off the overflow was sunk in the floor and passed out through one of the doors. The water so collected and presumably used as the domestic supply, was merely the seepage of rainwater from the roof and the surface water from the higher part of the island which had passed through all the domestic refuse thrown out from the round house. But more surprising still, an inhumed burial had been inserted into the refuse just outside the S wall of the rectangular house and directly outside the water pit; so that some of the water seeping into the pit, must have passed through the burial. The occupant of the house may have known of the burial for it was partly disturbed when the cashel wall was being built.

The last structure of the monastic period to be built was the enclosing wall. Such a wall was not necessary as a defence for the buildings - the surrounding sea was more than adequate for this purpose; but the wall would have been a protection against walking off or being blown off the edge of the island in wild weather. The wall survived for most of the circuit of the top of the rock, but it had been carried away where erosion of the edge of the island was severe. In the surviving part, two carefully built entrances were found - one at the E side opposite the best landing place - a projecting rock which formed a very good natural jetty; the other at the NW to give access to the enclosure from the rectangular house. A flag-paved pathway led from the NW door of the house through the opening in the enclosure wall to the W door of the stone oratory, clearly suggesting that the house was occupied while the monastery was still in use. Perhaps the wall was built merely to mark the area of monastic sanctuary, the area within which one was safe from pursuing enemies.

One of the most interesting features of the site as established by excavation was the building succession. First, the rectangular wooden church and circular wooden house followed by the corbelled stone oratory and round stone house; these followed in turn by the rectangular house and finally, by the cashel wall (Fig. 4).

An important object which originally stood within the enclosure was a finely

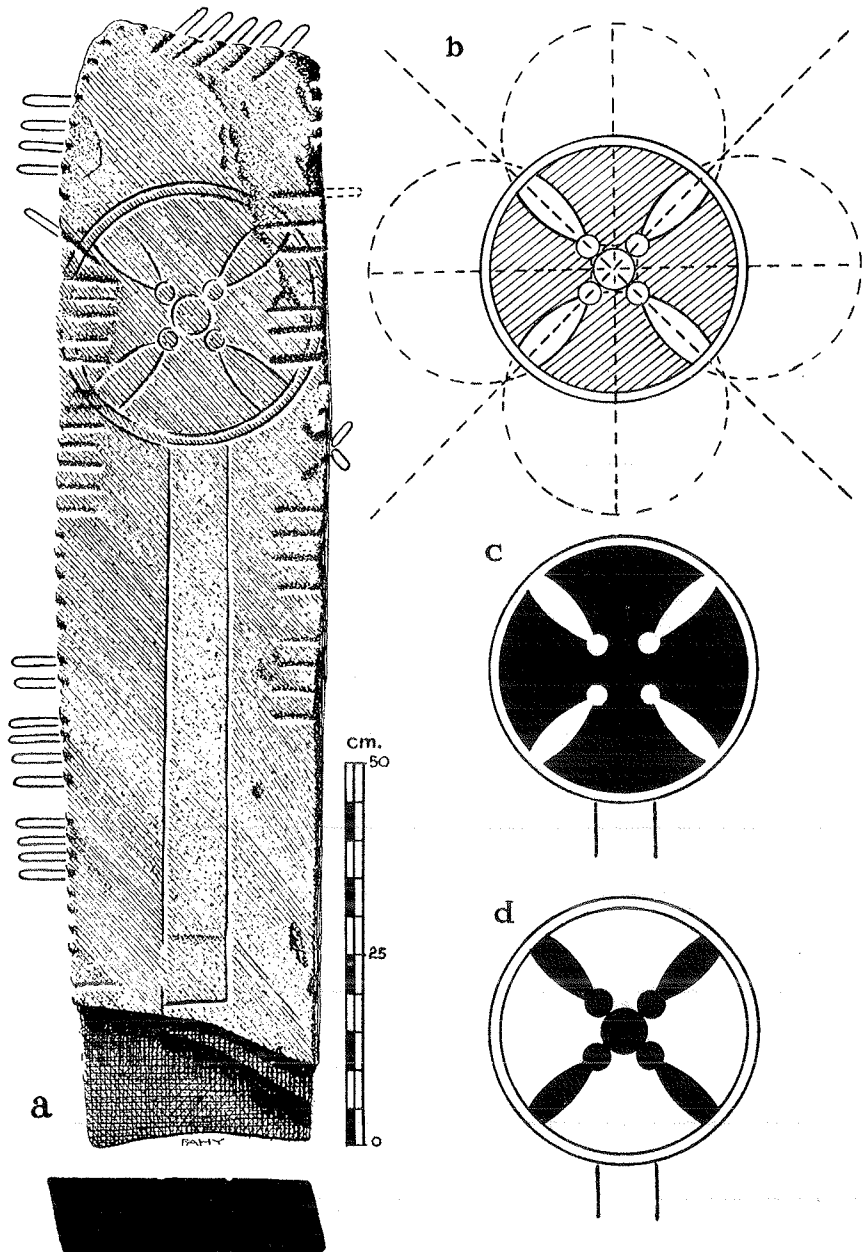


Figure 5. Church Island: Ogam-inscribed cross-slab.

incised cross slab, perhaps set up in the first instance to mark the founding of the monastery. When discovered, however, it lay over what appeared to be a late grave in a much disturbed and eroded part of the island. It had been broken from its base and in the course of the excavation, this base was not found on the island. The incised cross is in the nature of a flabellum, a device which occurs on several of the Irish cross slabs dating from the 7th century onward (Fig. 5). The cross is partly damaged by an ogam inscription subsequently added. The first two words of the inscription are clear and can be read without difficulty. They are Beccdinn Maci. . . The third word, however, presents some difficulty because the lapidary made a change or a correction in his work. The word can be read Rivvess or can be reconstructed to read Rittavvecass, both of which are deity names, the former perhaps equating with the Old Irish Ríacán or Réocán and the latter with *Ritavics leading to Rethach whence Uí Réthach now Íbh Ráthach, the name of the barony in which Church Island lies. In a very free translation one might render the whole as 'Man of little substance son of Iveragh'. Perhaps Beccdinn had been the holy founder of the monastery and had himself set up the cross-slab. After his death, one of his devotees may have added the ogam inscription in his memory. Certain linguistic features of the inscription Beccdinn, for instance, could have developed by the middle or second half of the sixth century; Maci could also have developed by the second half of the sixth century (Jackson, 1953, 143, 166-7), but archaic forms continued to be used in ogams into quite late times so one cannot use the inscription as a dating medium for the monastery as a whole. It may be that it had a beginning in the 7th century and that its primary phase ended in the 12th century.

Very comparable to Church Island is Ardwall Isle, off the SW coast of Scotland, excavated by Charles Thomas (1967) who in discussing my findings at Church Island suggests that I have been over cautious in the matter of date and that the timber oratory on Church Island might well belong to the early part of the 7th century (1967, 171). I am quite prepared to agree, and the features of the ogam inscription just mentioned should perhaps be accepted as supporting evidence for this date.

Another feature which lay within the Church Island enclosure on the slope to the SE of the highest point of the island was a cist or tomb made of slabs of slate. It had been fitted into a natural hollow in the rock but had suffered much disturbance and there was reason to think that its original form had been altered. This may well have been a slab shrine constructed to contain the bones of the founding holy man. Parallels for such are forth-

coming from several insular christian sites and indeed a rock cut hollow on Ardwall Isle may have been one such (Thomas, 1967, 141).

The Beginish Settlement. Church Island is connected by a sandbar to the neighbouring island of Beginish and for short periods at certain very low tides it is possible to walk dryshod from one to the other. Wind erosion of sand from Beginish began to reveal the tops of the walls of a number of houses, eight in all, six of them circular in plan, two rectangular (O'Kelly, 1956). Associated with them was a field system marked by stone-built fences. The best dating evidence from this site is a rune-inscribed slab re-used as a lintel over the door of House 1. The inscription read: Lir risti stin thina; Munulfr risti runar. In translation this reads: 'Lir erected this stone; Munulfr cut the runes!' Lir is an Irish name and so here we seem to have an Irishman and a Scandinavian co-operating in the setting up of the slab; and since it also has a small incised cross, one may presume that it was set up in a christian context. The language content here is Old Swedish and its form suggests a date for the building of the house of about 1100. It is difficult, however, to estimate a date for the beginning of the settlement and one cannot say therefore if any part of its life was contemporary with the monastic life of Church Island. Further wind erosion of the sand from Beginish revealed near the rectangular House 6, a bowl carved from chlorite schist fitted with an iron handle. This is clearly of Viking type (O'Kelly, 1961), and is the only example known from Ireland. It is paralleled by similar bowls from Norway carved from steatite or soapstone.

There are many such small monastic sites in the SW and W of Ireland and several of them have been recorded by Dr Françoise Henry in her studies of early Christian Ireland (1957, 1965). A feature of many of them is the great strength of the enclosing wall, a wall which in many instances is like the enclosing element of a fortress. In such cases its great strength raises the question whether the site did not begin as a fortress and later become a monastic site by donation of his residence by a king or chieftain to a persuasive holy man. Alternatively, the strength and impressiveness of the wall may have had in it an element of snobbery - the bigger the enclosing wall, the more important the monastery as was the case with the secular fort. In her recent book Dr Kathleen Hughes (1972, 164) points out that the ramparts around the king's fort were an indication of his status.

Oileán tSenaig (St Senach's Island), one of the islands in the Maharees

group on the N side of the Dingle Peninsula off Castle-gregory has a small monastic site on the very edge of the sea - indeed the waves have eroded part of it. Here three circular stone huts and a stone oratory are enclosed within a massive wall, 18 ft in thickness and built of massive blocks of limestone. But perhaps the most striking instance which survives in a comparatively intact form is on Innismurray island which lies off the coast of Sligo. Here a great cashel wall, built to an oval plan, surrounds the monastic buildings - fragmentary oratories, corbelled stone houses, altars and cross-slabs in profusion (Wakeman, 1893; Leask, 1955, 13). The wall has a lintelled tunnel-like entrance and on the inside are stone stairways which give access to the parapet walk. Why should such a great structure have been built on a sea-girt island? Was the cashel wall built as a fort like that at Staigue in Co Kerry, or Dun Conor in the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway or like the Grianán Ailech in Donegal? Excavation at such monastic sites has been minimal in Ireland and most of the questions which one asks about them must therefore remain for the present unanswered. A less spectacular instance is Temple Bryan near Clonakilty in Co Cork, where one can see a great oval earth-built enclosure marking the boundary of what must have been another such simple monastic establishment.

But remote monasteries are numerous in Ireland, many of them virtually unknown and un-surveyed. The Bishop's Rock on the coast near Kilkee in Co Clare is one such. This now is an island on which are the ruins of a corbelled oratory and a number of circular stone houses. At the time the buildings were in use it may be that what is now an island was the tip of a promontory since cut off from the land by the ever eroding Atlantic waves. Even more harshly sited is the Roilg Mór - the great cemetery - on Crogh Patrick, that high mountain quartz cone in Co Mayo, known also as 'St Patrick's Purgatory'. On the last Sunday of July a great pilgrimage goes to the top of the 'Reek' (the local name for the mountain) to hear Mass and pray for the intercession of St Patrick. The hardy souls go up the evening before and spend the night on the mountain-top hearing the Masses which are said continuously from midnight on Saturday and all day on Sunday. Just below the peak is a massive stone-walled enclosure within which a number of corbelled stone houses huddle together in a corner. Without excavation, no assessment of date is possible, but its similarity to other monastic sites suggests that it too must belong to the period of early christianity in Ireland. Another Mayo monastery is that on Inishglóire (which may be freely translated 'glory island') in the Atlantic off the coast of the Mullet peninsula. Here on the very edge of the sea is a group of

enclosures, stone cells and oratories about which virtually nothing is known other than their dedication to St Brendan the Navigator. It is interesting to see preserved here the intensity of the lazy-bed form of cultivation, widespread in Ireland before the famine of 1847.

Innismurray is remarkable for the number and variety of its cross-slabs. These are found not only within the monastic enclosure but also at altars and 'stations' throughout the island (Wakeman, 1893). Some of the altars are those strange structures where a number of rounded stones rest in hemispherical hollows and are known as 'cursing stones'. The rounded stones are carved with crosses and other decorative devices and when turned clockwise (deiseal) had the effect of a prayer; when turned anti-clockwise (tuathal) are said to have had the effect of a curse. One of the many slabs to be seen within the cashel is one on which the central device is an interlaced cross which has a pointed foot - a representation of a processional cross which could be set up anywhere merely by sticking its spike foot into the ground. The flabellum is also represented in the Innismurray carvings. Probably because the particular slab is small the handle is shown shorter than is usual. The edge of the disc is rendered as a band of Greek fret, the centre being occupied by an interlaced cross, now alas much weathered. There are also inscribed slabs in the usual formula - in one case or do coinmuisce, a prayer for Cumurisce, a name which might be translated 'hound of Murisc' - presumably a lean and ascetic man from the district of Murisc in Mayo.

In other areas where in early times a monastic establishment must have existed, there now remains only a cross-slab dedicated in the folk memory to this or that saint. A particular example is dedicated to the female St Gobnait of 7th century date and now patroness of honey bees in the local folklore of Ballyvourney, Co Cork (O'Kelly, 1952; Henry, 1952). At Tullylease, a remote place in NW Co Cork (Leask, 1938) are a number of carved slabs and fragments of buildings. The best preserved of the slabs bears an interlaced cross which may be compared with that forming the centre of the carpet page, folio 268, of the Book of Lindisfarne. In addition there is an inscription: Quicumque hunc titulum legerit orat pro Berechtaire. The slab is thought to be of early 8th century date and to commemorate Berechter who, in tradition, was the son of a Northumbrian prince and who left England after the Synod of Whitby (664) with Colman, bishop of Lindisfarne (Leask, 1938, 104; Lionárd, 1953, 12; 1961, 154). At Kilnasaggart, Co Armagh, a pillar stone about 7 ft high, has an inscription in Irish which tells that 'this place has been given by Ternoc, son of

Ciaran-the-little, under the protection of Peter the Apostle' (Henry, 1965, 119). Miss Ann Hamlyn has excavated the surrounding area and found a number of graves, but there was no evidence of monastic buildings. The pillar stands near the ancient road from Tara to Emain Macha. Gallen Priory, Co Offaly (Kendrick, 1939; Lionárd, 1961, 146) said to have been founded in 492 by Canoc, son of a king of the Britons, is marked by a fragmentary church building and by several grave slabs. On one slab snakes or monsters are seen biting human heads, a motif well known though not well understood in Irish early christian art. It is exemplified in the Heilig (Stockholm) crozier-head and in the Book of Kells and elsewhere. It is well to remember that whether the Book of Kells was written and illuminated in Iona or in Kells or partly in both, the work was probably done in a building such as the round stone house on Church Island. And may not the Ardagh Chalice in all its beauty and the Moylough belt shrine (O'Kelly, 1965) both have come from workshops in similar places?

Bibliography

- de Paor, L., 1955. 'A Survey of Sceilg Mhichíl', JRSAI, LXXXV (1955), 174-87.
- Henry, F., 1952. 'The Decorated Stones at Ballyvourney, Co Cork', J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc, LVII (1952), 41-2.
- Henry, F., 1957. 'Early Monasteries, Beehive Huts and Dry-stone Houses in the Neighbourhood of Caherciveen and Waterville, Co Kerry', PRIA, LVIII, section C (1957), 45-166.
- Henry, F., 1965. Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to AD 800.
- Hughes, K., 1972. Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources.
- Jackson, K.H., 1953. Language and History in Early Britain.
- Kendrick, T.D., 1939. 'Gallen Priory Excavations, 1934-5', JRSAI, LXIX (1939), 1-20.
- Leask, H.G., 1938. 'Tullylease, Co Cork: Its Church and Monuments', J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc, XLIII (1938), 101-8.
- Leask, H.G., 1955. Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings, Vol. 1.
- Lionárd, P., 1953. 'A Reconsideration of the Dating of the Slab of St Berichter at Tullylease, Co Cork', J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc, LVIII (1953), 12-13.
- Lionárd, P., 1961. 'Early Irish Grave Slabs', PRIA, LXI, section C (1961), 95-169.
- O'Hanlon, J., 1879. 'On the Identification of St Malachy O'Morgair's

- "Monasterium Ibracense"', PRIA, second series I (1870-9), 107-113.
- O'Kelly, M.J., 1952. 'St Gobnet's House, Ballyvourney, Co Cork', J Cork Hist Archaeol Soc, LVII (1952), 18-40.
- O'Kelly, M.J., 1956. 'An Island Settlement at Beginish, Co Kerry', PRIA, LVII, section C (1956), 159-94.
- O'Kelly, M.J., 1958. 'Church Island near Valencia, Co Kerry', PRIA, LIX, section C (1958), 57-136.
- O'Kelly, M.J., 1961. 'A Stone Bowl of Viking Type from Beginish Island, Co Kerry', JRSAI, XCI (1961), 64-8.
- O'Kelly, M.J., 1965. 'The Belt-Shrine from Moylough, Sligo', JRSAI, XCV (1965), 149-88.
- Stokes, W. (ed), 1905. Henry Bradshaw Society, Vol. XXIX, 12-13, 123, 131-2, 197, 212-13.
- Thomas, A.C., 1967. 'An Early Christian Cemetery and Chapel on Ardwall Isle, Kirkcudbright', Medieval Archaeol, XI (1967), 127-88.
- Wakeman, W.F., 1893. A Survey of the Antiquarian Remains on the Island of Inismurray (Extra Volume of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland for 1892).