



Early Christian Ireland

History – Junior Cert

Quick Notes

Early Christian Ireland

1.1 Overview:

- Celtic Ireland had never been conquered by the Romans, but Britain had and when Christianity came to Britain it soon spread to Ireland also
- Early Christians in Ireland were either captured slaves or recent settlers – **missionaries** (come to Ireland to convert pagan Celts to Christianity) included **Palladius** and most famously, St. Patrick
- St. Patrick was captured from Wales in Roman Britain by Niall of the Nine Hostages and brought to Ireland as a slave in 431 AD – he escaped but returned after having a dream in which the people of Ireland begged him to return, he wrote an account of his life called the **Confession**, he did most work in **Armagh** and converted kings and nobles to Christianity because the common people would follow their leaders
- The change to Christianity was gradual – pagan kings are recorded in Ireland 100 years after St. Patrick and new Celtic religious festivals were often blended into earlier ones (Imbolg became St. Brigid's day, Samhain became Hallowe'en etc)
- The most important members of the Christian community at this time were **bishops**, each with his own area or **diocese** similar to already existing tuaths – they baptised new Christians, ordained new priests and took confessions and forgave sins

1.2 Early Monasteries:

- Some serious early Christians wanted to live lives of solitude, away from ordinary people, so that they could devote their lives to and pray to God – groups of these people formed communities which became Ireland's first monasteries
- From 500 AD onwards monasteries developed at places like **Clonmacnoise**, **Glendalough**, **Sceilg Michael** and **Clonfert**
- Early monasteries were rough and ready – **monks** slept in stone **beehive huts** with corbelled roofs and prayed in small **oratories**, monasteries were often walled and had ditches for defence
- As time went by and Christianity became established monasteries grew in number and in size and became less defensive in appearance

1.3 Monasteries:

- The head of the monastery was the **Abbot**
- Monasteries were often divided into sacred and non-sacred sections
- Sacred – main church, graveyard, high stone crosses, cell of the Abbot etc
- Non-sacred – **guesthouse** (for visiting **pilgrims**), **refectory** (dining hall), **scriptorium** (copying or writing holy books), workshops, stables, orchards, vegetable gardens etc
- Some monasteries had **water mills** for grinding corn for bread, some employed or had monks trained as **blacksmiths** to mend and make metal tools, **carpenters** to make ploughs, carts, wheels etc and **masons** to shape stone for buildings and high stone crosses
- Many monasteries had **round towers** – they served as **lookout towers**, **bell towers** to call monks in from the fields to pray, as **places of refuge** where monks could climb to a doorway several metres above the ground and then pull the ladder up after them or as places of **storage**
- Monks could read and write – in **Latin** – and often set up schools to educate local children
- Monks tried to atone for their sins through lives of hardship (**ascetism**), they wore rough **habits** and shaved bald patches into the tops of their heads (**tonsures**)
- Monks would rise at 3am for **Matins** and would also have **Lauds**, **Mass** and **Vespers** during the day

1.4 Artistic Achievement:

- Stonework – **high stone Celtic crosses** were often carved with scenes from the bible to teach Christianity to illiterate people, a famous example is St. Muireadach's cross at Monasterboice
- Metalwork – monks crafted beautiful **chalices** in silver, decorated with jewels, enamel or coloured glass and inlaid with **filigree** in gold or bronze, often in the La Tène style, a famous example being the **Ardagh Chalice**
- Reliquaries – these were storage vessels for holy relics (objects connected with saints) and were beautifully decorated with glass patterns called **millefiori**, a famous example would be **St. Patrick's Bell Shrine**

- Manuscripts – all books had to be copied by hand and many were beautifully written and decorated in colour in the La Tène style on expensive paper from calfskin called **Vellum**, the subject matter was usually the bible or the four gospels, the text would always be in Latin but sometimes the monks doodled in the margins in early Irish (including a poem about the cat **Pangur Bán**), a famous example would be the **Book of Kells**

1.5 Irish Monks Abroad:

- After the fall of the Roman Empire large parts of Europe descended into chaos – a time known as the **Dark Ages** – and Christianity nearly disappeared
- Because Christianity, learning and artistic achievement thrived in Ireland at this time, Ireland was often called the **Island of Saints and Scholars**
- Some Irish monks tried to preserve Christianity in Europe by travelling abroad and founding monasteries in France (Luxeuil, St. Columbanus), Italy (**Bobbio**, St. Columbanus), England (**Lindisfarne**, St. Aidan), Germany (Wurzberg, St. Killian) and Scotland (**Iona**, St. Colmcille)

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