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Fig. 10.1 Pre-Romanesque church of Temple Chaomhán, Aran, County Galway. View of the west wall and gable from the interior showing flat-headed doorway and putlog holes for scaffolding. (© Copyright Bernadette McCarthy)

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(10)
Buildings of Worship in Ireland, c.*950*–c.*1150*

TOMÁS Ó CARRAGÁIN

This chapter comprises a summary of current scholarship on ecclesiastical architecture at both major and minor establishments in Ireland in the period *c.* 950–1150. Rather than presenting new research, its purpose is to provide a brief overview to act as a point of comparison with the other contributions in the volume. While the effects of the Gregorian Reform are discussed, no consideration is given to the establishment of new monastic orders, for in Ireland the architectural impact of these only becomes evident at the end of the period in question: the first definite example of a cloister is the Cistercian abbey of Mellifont (Louth) founded in 1142.[1] Especially from *c.* 1000 churches were being founded in the Hiberno-Scandinavian ports of Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Limerick; and by *c.* 1100 Dublin in particular had a substantial number of churches.[2] Very few traces of these survive, however, and the ports are here dealt with only in passing.

Pastoral Centres

As in the preceding period, wood was the principal material used for the majority of churches throughout the early medieval period (*c.* 400–1169).[3] It is only from about 950 that a significant proportion of new churches are of stone. Initially these tend to be large churches at major sites built with the involvement of kings, such as Clonmacnoise Cathedral (Offaly) built in 909 by King Flann of the Southern Uí Néill.[4] From around 1000 onwards, however, and perhaps especially from the mid eleventh century, one finds mortared stone churches at less important sites, especially in certain pockets of the country, usually where building stone is readily available (Fig. 10.1).[5]

1 R. Stalley, *The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland: An Account of the History, Art and Architecture of the White Monks in Ireland, 1142–1540* (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 248.

2 H. Clarke, 'Christian Cults and Cult Centres in Hiberno-Norse Dublin and its Hinterland', in *The Island of Saint Patrick: Church and Ruling Dynasties in Fingal and Meath, 400–1148*, ed. by A. MacShamhráin (Dublin, 2004), pp. 140–58.

3 See T. Ó Carragáin, '*More Scottorum*': Buildings of Worship in Ireland, *c.* 400–950', in *Places of Worship in Britain and Ireland, 300–950*, ed. by P. S. Barnwell, Rewley House Studies in the Historic Environment, 4 (Donington, 2015), pp. 56–67.

4 C. Manning, 'Clonmacnoise Cathedral', in *Clonmacnoise Studies 1: Seminar Papers 1994,* ed. by H. King (Dublin, 1998), pp. 56–86.

5 T. Ó Carragáin, 'Habitual Masonry Styles and the Local Organisation of Church Building in Early Medieval Ireland', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 105c (2005), pp. 99–149.

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These are usually pre-Romanesque in style with a plain trabeate doorway in the west wall and lacking a chancel or decorative sculpture. Some of them probably date to the first few decades of the twelfth century, and therefore overlap chronologically with the first Romanesque churches built at more important sites from around 1100. It was only in the later twelfth century that Romanesque churches were built with any frequency at lesser sites like these.[6]

In some parts of Ireland parish formation was achieved in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries,[7] so while many pre-Romanesque churches were later converted into parish churches, they should not themselves be seen as indicative of the formal establishment of parishes. Having said that, there was already a system of pastoral care in Ireland, which was probably quite systematic and organised according to local jurisdictions,[8] and in many cases there is every reason to believe that pre-Romanesque churches were built with pastoral care in mind. Unlike many local churches in England, these churches stand at the heart of sites that were established hundreds of years before, especially in the sixth and seventh centuries. So many church sites had been established in Ireland by 800 that there was little need to found new ones in the ninth and tenth centuries; and indeed very few church sites can positively be identified as having been founded in this period. In some cases the sites were reputedly founded by a holy man or woman but that does not necessarily mean they were purely monastic in character, either when they were first founded or in the period under discussion here. The extent to which the residents at these places lived a monastic lifestyle must have varied considerably; and in any case monasticism and pastoral provision were not, of course, mutually exclusive. The idea that many of the extant pre-Romanesque churches at relatively minor sites had a pastoral role is supported by the fact that their solitary south windows are usually near the east wall, suggesting an easterly position for their altars also. If so, this suggests less room for complex liturgies (in contrast to the large churches at major sites with windows further west) and more room for the congregation.[9]

6 The most recent synthesis of the Romanesque in Ireland is T. O'Keeffe, *Romanesque Ireland: Architecture and Ideology in the Twelfth Century* (Dublin, 2003).

7 See, for example, K. Nicholls, 'Rectory, Vicarage and Parish in the Western Irish diocese', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 101 (1971), pp. 53–84.

8 See, for example, R. Sharpe, 'Churches and Communities in Early Medieval Ireland: Towards a Pastoral Model', in *Pastoral Care before the Parish*, ed. by J. Blair and R. Sharpe (Leicester, 1992), pp. 81–109; T. Ó Carragáin, 'Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Ireland: A Case Study of Fir Maige,' in *Churches and Social Power in Early Medieval Europe* ed. by J. Escalona and M. Shapland (Turnhout, forthcoming); though see C. Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland, AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999), pp. 239–89.

9 T. Ó Carragáin, 'The Architectural Setting of the Mass in Early Medieval Ireland', *Medieval Archaeology*, 53 (2009), pp. 119–54, at p. 137.



Fig. 10.2 Ruined round tower at Roscam, County Galway, with church in the background, looking out over Galway Bay. (© Copyright T. Ó Carragáin)

Major *civitates*

Compared to their counterparts in England and on the Continent the churches at the more important Irish ecclesiastical complexes were small, but there were a lot of them. Until the last decade or so of the eleventh century, they were all (as far as we can tell) simple quadrangular buildings. This was considered a sacred form associated with Ireland's most important saints,[10] so Irish clerics and patrons resisted the temptation of building more elaborate churches. The most important architectural innovation at these sites in the tenth century was the appearance of belfries (Fig. 10.2). The first reference to a round tower was at Slane (Meath) in 950 but Roger Stalley has suggested that the first one was built at Armagh earlier on in the century.[11] These structures should be understood in relation to the churches that stand beside them. One of the reasons they were built as freestanding structures, rather than attached to the main church as one finds in most parts of Europe, was probably in order not to compromise the sacred quadrangular form of the church.[12]

10 Ó Carragáin, '*More Scottorum*', pp. 64–5.

11 R. Stalley, 'Sex, Symbol and Myth: Some Observations on the Irish Round Towers', in *From Ireland, Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and its European Context*, ed. by C. Hourihane, Princeton University, Department of Archaeology and Art, Index of Christian Art, Occasional Papers, 4 (Princeton, 2001), pp. 27–48, at pp. 37–9.

12 T. Ó Carragáin, 'Skeuomorphs and *spolia*: The Presence of the Past in Irish Pre-Romanesque Architecture', in *Making and Meaning in Insular Art*, ed. by R. Moss (Dublin, 2007), pp. 95–109.

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This was not the only liturgically-driven architectural change evident at major sites. In contrast to major churches abroad, their main church seems to have had just one altar. This is one of the reasons why there is a proliferation of small churches at these sites. Like important ecclesiastical sites elsewhere, these sites needed dedications to a variety of local and universal saints, and they also needed a large number of altars so that private and votive masses for the sick and the dead could be celebrated concurrently. Irish clerics had pioneered the idea of votive masses for the dead so it is not surprising to find material expressions of this at major Irish sites, despite the simplicity of their churches.[13] By 1100 the most important sites had more than ten small churches, each with a single altar.

Though traditionally thought of as monasteries, sites like Clonmacnoise (Fig. 10.3) and Glendalough (Wicklow) were multi-functional sites with a resident bishop as well as an abbot and a diversity of other residents. The term *monasterium* is rarely used in the early Irish sources; instead the most common term for important ecclesiastical sites like these is *civitas*.[14] While this does not necessarily indicate urbanism or even nucleation, our early sources show that Irish sites were modelled on the great cities of Christendom, most notably Jerusalem and Rome. In developing these sites, Irish clerics and patrons were not influenced by the new architecture that was being developed for monasteries from the Carolingian period onwards. Elsewhere in Europe the general tendency at monasteries was to reduce the number of free-standing churches as larger multi-altar ones were built; and between the eighth century and the twelfth the cloister gained widespread acceptance as an architectural form intrinsically suited to the monastic way of life. In Ireland, however, the cloister does not make an appearance until the twelfth century. While the concentric enclosures that served to demarcate and subdivide important Irish church sites may well owe something to non-ecclesiastical ceremonial complexes such as Tara (Meath) and Dún Aillinne (Kildare), the models most commonly cited to explain this layout are the Levitical cities of refuge and Jerusalem itself.[15] At a few sites the positioning of churches with particular dedications in relation to the enclosure suggests that these features were intended to refer to the walls and churches of Rome. For example, at Armagh there are two reliquary churches outside the enclosure—the Ferta Martyrium and St Peter and Paul's—which may have been positioned to recall the position of the extra-mural martyrial basilicas of Rome.[16]

13 F. S. Paxton, *Christianising Death: The Creation of a Ritual Process in Early Medieval Europe* (Ithaca and London, 1990), pp. 78–87.

14 Etchingham, *Church Organisation*, p. 457.

15 D. Jenkins, *Holy, Holier, Holiest: The Sacred Topography of the Early Medieval Irish Church*, Studia traditionis theologiae, 4 (Tourhout, 2010); T. Ó Carragáin, Review of D. Jenkins, *Holy, Holier, Holiest: The Sacred Topography of the Early Medieval Irish Church*, *Peritia* 22–3 (2013), pp. 412–16.

16 T. Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory* (New



Fig. 10.3 Aerial view of the core monuments at Clonmacnoise, County Offaly, from the south. (© Copyright Con Brogan, National Monuments Service, Dublin)

The ecclesiastics responsible for developing these sites in the period 950–1150 would have been conscious that the proliferation of churches was entirely consistent with these 'urban' planning principles established centuries before, for elsewhere in Europe groups of ten or more churches were usually characteristic of true urban centres. Some of these Irish sites experienced a degree of nucleation, but it is doubtful that they should be referred to as towns.[17] This conclusion is underscored by the fact that most of the churches which they accumulated were not proto-parish centres as one finds, for example, in Hiberno-Scandinavian Dublin, but rather served various religious groups. While they shared some characteristics with true urban centres and other central places, these sites were urban only in the sense that, for symbolic reasons, contemporaries equated them with the great cities of Christendom.

Haven and London, 2010), pp. 220–1.

17 C. Etchingham, 'The Organization and Function of an Early Irish Church Settlement: What was Glendalough', in *Glendalough: City of God*, ed. by C. Doherty, L. Doran and M. Kelly (Dublin, 2011), pp. 22–53.

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The Gregorian Reform

It is at major sites like these that we get the first architectural expressions of the Gregorian reform in the last decade or so of the eleventh century. Even then, however, reform ideas were adapted so that they did not conflict with more ancient planning principles. Reform arrived in Ireland *via* renewed links with mainland Europe and Britain during the eleventh century. For example a new network of Irish monasteries was established in Germany—the so-called Schottenkloster—and *c*. 1030 the Hiberno-Scandinavians of Dublin established a bishopric for themselves using foundation relics from Cologne. From the 1070s there was another impulse for change in the form of Lanfranc, the first Norman archbishop of Canterbury (1070–98), who wished to establish Dublin as Ireland's metropolitan under the primacy of Canterbury. It may have been at his instigation that Pope Gregory VII (1073–85) wrote to King Toirdelbach Ua Briain and 'the archbishops, bishops, abbots, nobles and other faithful Christians of Ireland' to offer his advice on 'any matters among you that seem worthy of our help'.[18] Both Lanfranc and his successor Anselm (1093–1109) also wrote letters to the high kings and bishops of Ireland, exhorting them to regularise practices relating to marriage and the ordination of clergy among others. Ireland's high king, Muirchertach Ua Briain, was initially supportive of Canterbury's involvement, but from about 1096 he decided to reform the Irish Church from within.[19] He convened his first synod in 1101 at Cashel (Tipperary) and that was followed by one at Raith Bressail (Tipperary) in 1111 which established a diocesan structure under Armagh, independent of Canterbury, that was to persist throughout the Middle Ages. It is at sites patronised by Muirchertach Ua Briain and his allies that we get the first architectural expressions of reform. Unfortunately his new cathedral at Cashel does not survive, but we have a double vaulted chapel at his local cathedral of Killaloe (Clare), and in addition he may well have been involved in the rebuilding of Glendalough around this time.[20]

Even at these major sites, most of the new churches built around 1100 (with the notable exception of that at Killaloe[21]) were devoid of decorative sculpture, so they are still 'pre-Romanesque' in that sense. The most notable change is the fact that most of them have an eastern cell: they are the first known examples of bicameral churches in Ireland (for a mid-twelfth-century Romanesque example see Fig. 10.4). The reason why Irish clerics and patrons finally compromised the quadrangular form which had

18 A. Gwynn, *The Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, ed. by G. Brien (Dublin, 1992), pp. 36–7.

19 M. Holland, 'Dublin and the Reform of the Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth centuries', *Peritia*, 14 (2000), pp. 111–60.

20 Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 242–52.

21 R. Gem, 'Saint Flannán's Oratory at Killaloe: A Romanesque Building of *c*. 1100 and the Patronage of King Muirchertach Ua Briain', in *Ireland and Europe in the Twelfth Century: Reform and Renewal*, ed. D. Bracken and D. Ó Riain-Raedel (Dublin, 2006), pp. 74–105.



Fig. 10.4 Mid-twelfth-century bicameral Romanesque church of Donaghmore, County Tipperary. (© Copyright T. Ó Carragáin)

persisted until then was that, throughout Europe, eastern cells were taking on a new liturgical and symbolic significance. Previously eastern cells were often presbyteries, but increasingly they were reconceptualised as sanctuaries housing the altar. This was because of an increased interest in the idea that Christ became fully present in the Eucharist at the consecration. This had recently been brought into question by authors such as Berengar leading orthodox clerics, including Lanfranc, to place a new emphasis on the Real Presence.[22] Placing the altar in the eastern cell heightened the sense of mystery surrounding the sacrament, and the sense of separation between clergy and congregation that the Church was also cultivating in other ways at this time. The bicameral churches at sites like Glendalough show that Lanfranc's Irish correspondents reacted to this development quickly. Oftentimes the same churches are associated with large monumental stone altars reflecting the valorisation of the altar at this time.[23]

22 M. Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 18–19.

23 Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 192–7.



Fig. 10.5 (opposite) St Moling's Well, County Carlow: interior view looking west showing the water flowing through its (rebuilt) flat-headed west door. (© Copyright T. Ó Carragáin)

Baptism is another aspect of the Gregorian reform that finds archaeological expression. A strong case has been made that before now baptism often took place in the open at holy wells.[24] However, the reforming bishop, Gille of Limerick specified, *c.* 1111, that baptism 'ought to take place in the church unless necessity prevents it'.[25] At many sites, this may have encouraged the erection of baptismal fonts inside the main church. At a few sites, however, such as St Mullin's, County Carlow (Fig. 10.5), and Kilmacduagh, County Galway, there is evidence for freestanding baptismal chapels. Such structures struck a balance between the imperative, on the one hand, to move baptism indoors, and, on the other, to perpetuate the centrifugal pattern of development that had characterised these sites for centuries.

Finally, the most innovative of the new church types that appears around this time if the double-vaulted chapel, characterised by a lower round-headed barrel vault, above which was a chamber roofed with a corbelled vault or (in the later examples)

24 N. Whitfield, 'A Suggested Function for the Holy Well', in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, ed. by A. Minnis and J. Roberts, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 18 (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 495–514.

25 J. Fleming, *Gille of Limerick (c. 1070–1145): Architect of a Medieval Church* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 154–5.



Fig. 10.6 (**left**) Double-vaulted church of St Flannan, Killaloe, County Clare, from the west. At the interior, there is an inter-vault chamber between the lower round-headed vault and the upper pointed barrel vault. (© Copyright T. Ó Carragáin)

a pointed barrel vault (Fig. 10.6). The earliest example seems to be St Columba's House, Kells (Meath), which may have been built *c.* 1080–1094, while later churches in the same tradition include the much more elaborate Cormac's Chapel, Cashel, built *c.* 1134.[26] In some cases, there is evidence that these building housed relics and also perhaps the ascetics charged with looking after them. If so, they are, to some extent, a response to the ideas of reformers about the provision of proper accommodation for ascetics, and in particular recluses. At the same time, they perpetuated an ancient Irish tradition of housing relics in a dedicated shrine chapel away from the principal church, another example of the centrifugal principle that governed the development of the old Irish *civitates*.[27]

26 Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 255–91; T. Ó Carragáin, 'Relics and Recluses Revisited: Some Thoughts on Cormac's Chapel', in *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin,* ed. by E. Purcell, P. MacCotter, J. Nyhan and J. Sheehan (Dublin, 2015), pp. 326–37.

27 Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 255–91.

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Conclusion

It is striking that when Romanesque technology was adopted in it was used for the idiosyncratic 'special-function' subsidiary buildings, rather than for the principal church. For example, at Glendalough the main church was rebuilt around 1100 to act as the cathedral for the new diocese, but it was in a very conservative pre-Romanesque style re-using the doorway and fabric from its predecessor. Later in the century, some *civitates* commissioned principal churches with Romanesque decorative sculpture, but again they were very conservative buildings, usually with a main doorway at the centre of the west wall and sometimes with skeuomorphs of their wooden predecessors. The reason why these principal churches remained relatively conservative was because they retained an association with the founding saint, and indeed may have been considered relics of the founder. As these site sought to secure a position in the new ecclesiastical hierarchy that was being established at this time, they based their claims on the authority of their founders and expressed this by commissioning remarkably conservative principal churches, despite the fact that, in some cases, the same masons and the same patrons were also involved in the construction of new monastic cloisters on the peripheries of these ancient *civitates*.[28]

[28] Ó Carragáin, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland*, pp. 293–6.