

CELTIC MONASTIC CHURCHES 5th- 8th Century

As the glory of monasticism waned in the East in the 5th c it waxed in the West, and drew much inspiration from desert monastics. According to an unchecked source, P. Phillipi (Lyons 1665) Bishop Palladius, whom Celestine, Bishop of Rome sent to guide the first Christians in Ireland in the early 5th c, had been a young monk in Byzantium, later moved to a monastery in Jerusalem, was permitted to visit the deserts of Egypt, and made a lengthy stay among the solitaries of Thebaid. Pachomius himself instructed him and other abbas who had several thousand monks under their care. Palladius tasted the holiness, industry and attractiveness of these colonies of heaven. Palladius enjoyed intimate fellowship with John Chrysostom, and was also a disciple of Abba Dorotheus.

The first documented communities in Celtic lands after the style of the desert Christians were established in today's France: by Martin in 360 at Liguge, near Poitiers and later at Tours; in 410 at Lerins, which became Europe's Holy Isle, and in 433 at Marseilles by John Cassian, whose two books were written there for the guidance of a community which Bishop Castor wished to establish in his diocese of Apt.

The Holy Isle of Europe

On this island off Cannes, southern France, Honoratus founded in 410 one of the first monasteries of Gaul, which was based on the Egyptian model. Lerins became known as The Holy Isle of Europe. Moral and spiritual perfection was the aim, in contrast to the laxity of many continental churches, yet it was more flexible than was general in the West. Once monks had learned self discipline through fasts, vigils and Bible reading, they were trusted to follow their separate callings as hermits. Lerins developed excellence in liturgy, including the chanting of praises, and in study, mainly of the Bible. It eschewed the artificial rhetoric of other schools. Lerins sent out a stream of Christ-like leaders, several of whom became missionary bishops at Arles and elsewhere. It attracted Britons, one of whom, Faustus, became its abbot, and, according to a late source, Patrick, who became apostle to Ireland and might well have brought over others to aid his mission in Ireland.

The Lerins model of the hermitage (also called Skete), whose members shared certain elements of the common life while preserving their own separate callings, was exported to the monastic church at what is now Lanilltid, in Wales, and to monasteries founded by Cadoc and Gildas. These two influenced Finnian of Clonard, so that this model was transplanted a second time to Ireland and became widespread in the Celtic hermitages which dotted these islands.

Colonies of heaven

Hilary disciplesd Martin (see the lesson on Celtic saints) the young soldier convert whose father was the Emperor's friend, and encouraged him to establish a monastic church as the hub of his Bishop's see of Poitiers. Hilary gave Martin a hut on his farm at Liguge. This became known as The White Hut, a centre for training clergy for mission at home and abroad, and was *muintir* (spiritual family) of the Gaulish Celts. It was also named 'The Place of Little Cells', because each brother who joined Martin's *muintir* occupied a separate stone or wood dwelling.

When Tours needed a new bishop the whole population carried Martin off to become their chief pastor. He refused to sit on the bishop's throne, and instead used a cow stool to show his identity with the poor and to inspire his clergy to emulate the humility of Christ.

Martin continued to live as a hermit, and recreated a *muintir* beside the river Loire (now Marmoutier). Each lived in their own cell, cultivated fields, instructed young people, taught agriculture, cared for the poor, maintained the 'courses' of praise, and copied the Scriptures, which were taken to unchurched villages. The clergy generally regarded themselves as under the Emperor, Constantius 11, who told the Council of Bishops at Milan in 365 'The Rule of Faith

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which I prescribe is my will'). and they mocked the humble ways of Martin's recruits. Yet just as Liguge had become the hub for the Diocese of Poitiers, so now Marmoutier became the hub for the Diocese of Tours.

Martin's example caught the imagination of Britons. In 397, or perhaps a generation later, Ninian stayed at Tours, and was inspired to establish the Community known as The Shining (or White) House at what is now Whithorn, in southern Scotland, and dedicate it to Martin. He arrived back in his native Galloway in 398 A.D., just twelve years before the last troops of the Roman Empire withdrew their protection of the native British from Anglo-Saxon invaders, and established a hugely popular Christian community at Whithorn, of which recent excavations have unearthed traces. In much of the Empire the monasteries became more formal, but Ninian's centre, and many that followed in Britain and Ireland, remained models of fellowship.

Ireland

Ireland was the first territory outside the Roman Empire to embrace Christianity. One ruling family after another embraced the Faith and gave prime estates to be used as a monastery. This became the hub of the tribal life. These early monasteries had no barriers, apart from a ditch for practical reasons. There was constant movement in and out by children, women, labourers. There were no imposing buildings. The abbot was thought of as 'king over kings', the bishop as 'a kin'.

These monastery churches were multi functional resource centres. They served as prayer base, drop-in centre, library, school, health centre, psychiatric care centre. They were open to outsiders. They related to the neighbourhood as guardians of local culture, affirming it whether it was vibrant or dying, though confronting certain bad practices such as wizardry.

Within the monastery villages there were clergy, lay monks and nuns with life vows, others with temporary vows, some who lived at home and others who were married. In some there was room for the extended families of monks. Most of the larger monasteries included *manaig* who married and farmed the land. These were not tenants but were within the monastic family. (i)

The major Celtic monasteries were not built, as were the eastern ones, far from the population. They were built on the main highways of sea and river and near large settlements; they were organised in order to penetrate the pagan world and to extend the church. To them visitors brought the news of the world.

The apostolic number of thirteen (Jesus plus twelve apostles) was thought to be the ideal number for a new monastery, but sometimes these grew into communities numbering hundreds. When they grew to such a large size the abbot could not be soul friend to every monk, so they allocated senior monks to be soul friends to a group of monks. We know this was done in the monastic city of Glendalough.

The monasteries provided a God-given framework of prayer, work and rest, reflecting the rhythms of the natural and the Christian year. They introduced written education to Ireland and became centres of learning. They were the main centres of hospitality. Some monasteries fed a thousand hungry people a day. The Celtic prayer to 'see Christ in the stranger' reflects their hospitable spirit.

In 55 Comgall founded a monastery at Bangor, northern Ireland, which became known as The Valley of Angels. Over 3,000 monks devoted themselves to the singing of Perennial Praise. Their praise book, the Bangor Antiphony, which is preserved in the Ambrosian library, Milan, says 'Let the many keep awake in community on a third of the nights in the year in order to read aloud from the Book and to expound judgement and to sing blessings all together.' In beehive cells, Comgall and his companions served God continually and taught the faith. There was scope for individual talent and skills side by side with the strong community spirit which found expression at meal-time in the refectory and again in the corporate worship of the stone church at the heart of this famous foundation. Some have seen here the

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germ of the later university life. The Rule of Bangor was soon to have a European reputation.

The churches founded by missionaries such as Columba in Ireland and Scotland, Teilo and David in Wales, and Aidan in England were regarded as extended families. Many Celtic monasteries had a sustainable local economy which was seen to benefit local people. Monasteries in Britain were not other worldly. Animals and children would wander around. At Anglo Saxon England's zenith monasteries were the nearest thing to a town. The lay people lived ordinary lives, but many attended monastery worship on Sundays.

It is claimed that these were unlike the later monasteries: each was distinctive, and exuded a sense of freedom and flexibility; they were less fussy about legal and organisational niceties. Later, pride of power and possessions replaced the continual repentance of heart, and sharing of goods.

Hermitage churches

The Hermitage (or Skete) was an alternative model to the central monastic church, and became widespread in Britain and in Ireland. These grew, unplanned, around hermits in remote places whose lives drew others to live near them. Around the hermitage of Kevin of Glendalough, Kevin grew up the seven churches of a monastic city. A Breton *Life of St Gildas* (ii) tells how his sister and two of his brothers established a Skete in a remote place. Each brother took it in turns to spend much of the day with his sister, sharing in the regular hours of prayer, Holy Communion, a meal, and no doubt in work or vigils.

Weaknesses

The attraction Celtic monasticism has for some post modern people should not blind us to its faults. The high motivation of the generations close to the founder tends to decline later. We can learn about faults of individual monks through the discipliness suggested for these in Penitentials. We can deduce that wealth accrued to both Irish and Saxon monasteries from records and archeological finds such as the Ardagh Chalice. The custom of handing the abbacy to the next celibate in hereditary line meant that authority was sometimes abused and the most prayerful people could be marginalised. Examples of this feature in the *Lives* of Samson and David. The 8th c Celi De reform movement in Ireland addressed this. The only hint of low standards in any of the Saxon monasteries established by Aidan's Irish Mission, as recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (iii) is his reference to the monastery at Coldingham founded by King Oswald's sister Ebbe where a taste for gossip and fineries perhaps developed. Later, however, as kings gave more land and properties to monasteries, they became a power base, and that power was sometimes used wisely at other times selfishly.

NOTES

- (i) Information about these is contained in Sheldrake, Philip, *Living Between Worlds* (DLT 1995) and Bitel, Lisa *Isle of the Saints: Monastic Settlement and Christian Community in Early Ireland* (Ithaca, New York 1990)
- (ii) *Life of Gildas* in Williams, Hugh (trans) *Two Lives of Gildas* (Llanerch Press 1990)
- (iii) Bede *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford University Press 2000)

WORK SHEET

REQUIRED READING

Hamlin, Ann and Hughes, Kathleen *The Modern Traveller to the Early Irish Church* (Four Courts Press, reprinted 2004)

Sheldrake, Philip *Living Between Worlds* (DLT 1995) chapter 3: Enclosing Sacred Spaces.

ADDITIONAL READING

Ryan, John S.J. *Irish Monasticism* (Four Courts Press 1992)

Bradley, Ian *Colonies of Heaven : Celtic Christian Communities* (DLT 2000 UK: Northstone 2000 N. America)

ESSAY

Making use of known facts, imaginatively describe a planned sixth century Irish monastery: what might the layout and a typical day be like, and how would different groups of people relate to it?

or

What were the strengths and weakness of the Celtic monasteries compared to the Roman-type monasteries?

or

What elements of the original sketes (hermitages) survived in the Celtic monasteries? Why and how are other elements changed and what are the results of these changes?

or

What relevance, if any, can early Celtic monasticism have for our society which is not settled, tribal or pre-technological?