

Clonmacnoise

Seeing cattle grazing among the tumbled walls and birds nesting in the silent bell towers, it is hard to believe that this was once one of Europe's great universities. But Ireland's Clonmacnoise, quiet now to all but the rustling of the nearby River Shannon, was once the home of some 3,000 scholars, at a time when Ireland stood as the beacon of learning during Europe's Dark Ages. And while a trip to Ireland offers much in the way of fun, with singing, dancing, shopping and lively pubs, a visit to Clonmacnoise in County Offaly is a sobering journey into a history that is at once glorious and tragic.



Founded by St. Ciaran in 547, about two centuries after the conversion of Ireland to Christianity by [St. Patrick](#), Clonmacnoise served as a monastery and center of learning for more than a thousand years, until its suppression by the English King Henry VIII in 1552. But its proudest period was from the 6th to the 9th Centuries, during the time of European anarchy following the fall of the Roman Empire, when Ireland's scholars kept learning alive and Irish monks founded monasteries all over the Continent. Clonmacnoise became one of Ireland's most important cities, renowned not only for its scholarship but as a center for artisans, producing such masterpieces as the Cross of Cong, a bejeweled processional cross now in Dublin's National Museum, and the illuminated Manuscript The Book of the Dun Cow now in Oxford University Library.



Two high Celtic crosses demonstrate the sophisticated calibre of stone sculpture in medieval Ireland, and the remains of such buildings as the Nuns' Church and the Cathedral, dating from the 10th Century, are fine examples of early Hiberno-Romanesque architecture. The 67-foot high O'Rourke's Tower, built in 964 by Fergal O'Rourke, is remarkably intact, given the fact that Clonmacnoise suffered some eight raids by Vikings, a dozen more by warring Irish clans in the 10th and 11th Centuries, and subsequent destruction by English troops from the 12th Century through the Cromwellian wars of the 1640's. Also surprisingly preserved is a grouping of 200 carved grave slabs, lovingly restored and set along a wall near the tower like a gallery.

The historical significance of Clonmacnoise is apparent from the fact that it was chosen as a final resting place by such luminaries as King Turlogh O'Connor and his son Rory O'Connor, the last high king of Ireland, who was buried there in 1198. Another indication of the importance of the site is the fact that the Nuns' Church was ordered built by Derbhorgaill, Queen of Breffni, whose abduction led to the invasion of Anglo-Norman mercenaries that resulted in the first English colonization of Ireland.



Called "greater than kingdoms in its digniry," Clonmacnoise was the most important monastic site of Ireland's golden age of Christian learning. It is still a place of pilgrimage, with large crowds of the devout traveling to the site in September each year, despite its limited accessibility.

(written by Michael Quane & originally printed in 1991)

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