

The Island of Saints and Scholars



By about AD 530, Christianity had spread to most parts of Ireland. Holy men and women moved to quiet places to live. They spent their lives praying, **fasting**, working and studying. In this way, many **convents** and **monasteries** were set up all over Ireland.



Gallarus Oratory, Dingle

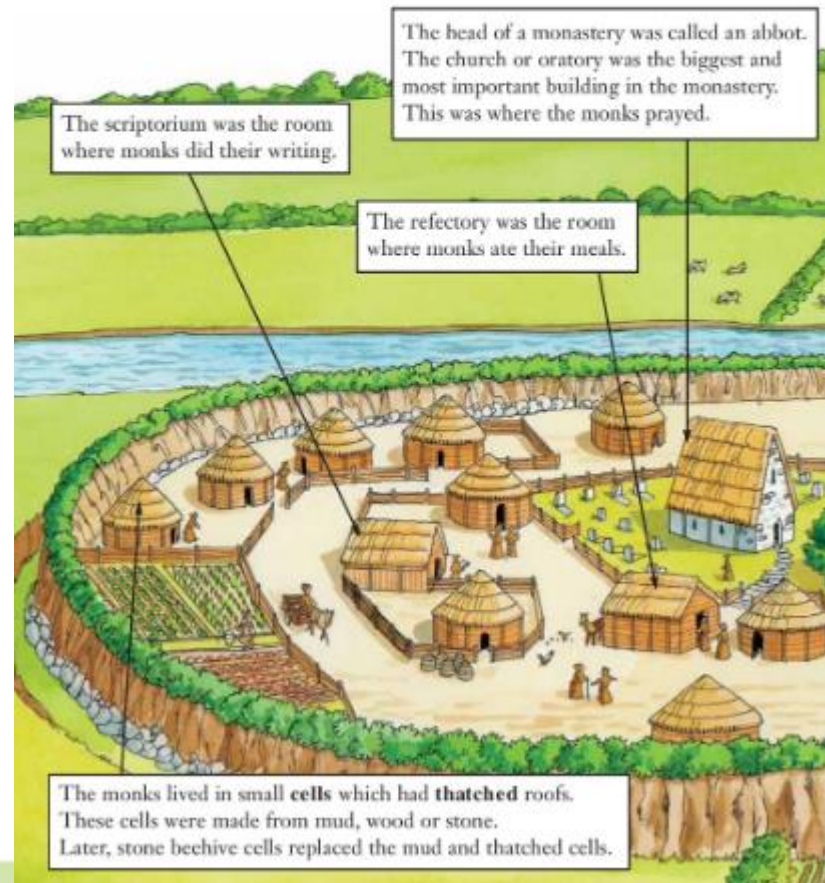
Some monasteries were built of stone. Their **ruins** may still be seen in places such as Clonmacnoise in County Offaly and the Gallarus Oratory in Dingle, County Kerry.

At this time, there were no towns and very few roads in Ireland.

People had to walk from monastery to monastery across fields or on mud tracks. More and more people came to live and work close to the monasteries. Soon the monasteries became like small towns.

Strand Unit: Early Christian Ireland

A monastery at that time was made up of a collection of small buildings surrounded by a wall of stone or earth.



Fact Folder

Two of Ireland's greatest treasures were found by children.

The Tara Brooch was found on the beach at Bettystown, Co Meath.

The Ardagh Chalice was found near Ardagh, Co Limerick.

The Derrynaflan Hoard was found near Killenaule in Co Tipperary.

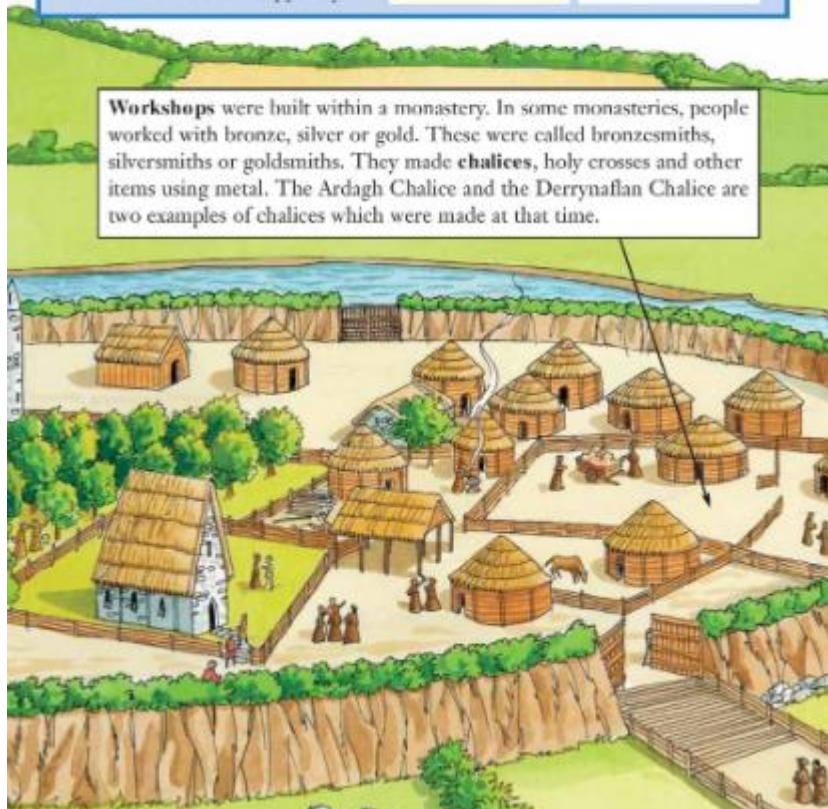


Ardagh Chalice



Derrynaflan Hoard

Workshops were built within a monastery. In some monasteries, people worked with bronze, silver or gold. These were called **bronzesmiths**, **silversmiths** or **goldsmiths**. They made **chalices**, holy crosses and other items using metal. The Ardagh Chalice and the Derrynaflan Chalice are two examples of chalices which were made at that time.



By about AD 700, there were many monasteries in Ireland. Here is a list of some famous Irish saints and the places where they set up monasteries.

St Enda at Inishmore in the Aran Islands
 St Ciarán at Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly
 St Finbarr at Cork City, Co Cork
 St Colmcille at Kells, Co Meath
 St Colmcille at Derry, Co Derry
 St Colmcille at Durrow Abbey, Co Offaly
 St Colmcille at Swords, Co Dublin
 St Kevin at Glendalough, Co Wicklow
 St Mobhi at Glasnevin in Dublin
 St Brendan at Clonfert, Co Galway
 St Brigid at Kildare Town, Co Kildare



Many monks became famous because of the books they wrote. Pupils came from all over Ireland and from many other European countries to study in Irish monasteries. The monks lived a life of prayer, fasting and hard work. They grew their own vegetables. They also looked after guests who visited them. The monks taught students to read and write in both Latin and Irish. Each morning, they got up very early to pray. Monasteries in Ireland were very busy places! Soon Ireland became known as the **island of saints and scholars**.

Fact Folder

Round towers were also called bell towers. Most monasteries had a round tower. Monks and local people ran to the towers when enemies were seen in the distance. Monks kept their valuable treasures, such as chalices made of gold and silver, in the round towers. The ringing of the bell called monks and people to prayer. It was also used to warn monks when enemies were coming. Some round towers were built over wells, so even if the monks could not leave the round tower during an attack, they would still have fresh water.





THE ISLAND OF SAINTS AND SCHOLARS ■

Some monks travelled overseas to other countries. St Brendan travelled to America, France and Wales. St Killian and St Fergal travelled to Germany. St Columbanus travelled to France and Italy. St Colmcille went to the Island of Iona off the coast of Scotland.

Key Vocabulary in this Chapter

Fasting: Not eating for a certain amount of time.

Convents: Places where nuns live.

Monasteries: Places where monks live, work and pray.

Ruins: Old, broken-down buildings.

Cells: Tiny rooms or huts where monks lived.

Thatched: Roof made of reeds or straw.

Island of saints and scholars:

The name given to Ireland long ago because of the number of monasteries and convents in the country.

Activity A

1. Where did monks in a monastery live?
2. In which room did monks eat their meals?
3. Name the biggest and most important building in a monastery.
4. What happened in a scriptorium?
5. Why do you think the buildings in a monastery were surrounded by a wall?
6. Why do you think most monasteries were built beside rivers?
7. Do you think people felt safer when they lived inside the walls of the monastery?

Activity D

With your partner or in a small group, find out if there is a monastery, old church or old ruin in your area.

1. In your history copybook, draw a picture of the building or part of the building as it looks now.
2. In your local library, find out all you can about the old monastery, old church or old ruin in your area.
3. Tell your class what you have found.

Activity E

1. Imagine you are a monk working in the vegetable garden when you see enemies approaching in the distance. In your history copybook, write your story and draw a picture about what happened.
2. Make a model round tower and paint it.

Activity F

1. Imagine you lived in one of the mud huts beside the monastery. Describe how your day was spent.
2. Pretend that you sailed with St Brendan and his crew to America. Write about the trip in your history copybook. Here are some words to help you.



sea waves storm fear lonely sad hungry
dark fishing land excited