The 11th and 12th Centuries: The Irish Romanesque Period (Hiberno-Romanesque)

Monasteries

The tradition of building small, simple churches continued into the 11th century. Most new church buildings had a chancel attached to the nave, with a round-headed arch connecting the two parts. Round towers with Romanesque doorways are found at a number of monasteries. The layout of the monasteries did not change until European orders were introduced into the country in the 1140s. The Cistercian order built their first monastery at Mellifont, Co. Louth, in 1142 under the direction of Robert, a monk from Clairvaux in France; the first community of monks were all French (Fig. 5.1).

The Cistercian order had a standard layout for their monasteries (Fig. 5.2). The buildings were organised around a square cloister, with the church on the north side and the living and...
working areas around the three other sides. The new monastic communities seemed to appeal to the Irish, because there were 30 Cistercian monasteries operating by the year 1200 and many of the old monasteries had gone over to the Augustinian rule. The style of building in these converted Augustinian monasteries did not change much before the second half of the 12th century.

**Architecture**

Even though the technology existed to build round-arched doorways from the beginning of the 11th century, they did not become common for over 100 years. The traditional small door opening with inclined jambs and a large lintel must have had some important significance.

St Kevin's Church at Glendalough (Fig. 5.3), which has been dated to the end of the 11th century, is unusual in that a round tower is included in its roof structure. Its west door has a lintel with a relieving arch over it, which illustrates the point about lintels being a choice of style rather than technology.
Internally, St Kevin’s is barrel vaulted, that is, it has an arched stone ceiling, and there is a triangular space above the arch and below the stone roof. This type of stone vault and roof was not common at this time in Ireland, but there are a few examples at important sites, such as St Columba’s House at Kells, St Mochta’s at Louth and a few others.

The oratory of St Sennan was built at Killaloe, Co. Clare (Fig. 5.4), which was the centre of the Munster kingdom of the Ó Briains. This building is similar in structure to St Kevin’s, but it has no tower and it has a simple Romanesque doorway in the English style, which may be the earliest example of the Romanesque in Ireland. The largest and most elaborately decorated version of this type of structure is at Cashel, Co. Tipperary.

The Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise

The Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise was completed in 1167 by the same Derbforgaill who had been abducted by Diarmait Mac Murchada.

* **Form:** All that exists today are the ruins of a nave and chancel church. The doorway and chancel arch were reconstructed in the 19th century.

* **Function:** It was the main church for a monastery of nuns patronised by the kings of Meath.

* **Technique:** Deeply carved decorations on the arches contrast with low relief patterns on the pillars.

* **Decoration:**
  - The doorway has four decorated arches resting on pillars with chevron decoration.

Fig. 5.4
St Sennan’s Oratory at Killaloe, Co. Clare. This church, built completely in cut stone, may have the oldest Romanesque doorway in Ireland.

Fig. 5.5
The doorway and chancel arch of the Nuns’ Church at Clonmacnoise. The deeply carved arches contrast with the low relief on the pillars.
on both faces, creating a lozenge pattern down the outer edge.

- The second arch has animal heads with patterned faces holding a roll moulding in their jaws. The other arches have geometric patterns (Fig. 5.5).
- The chancel arch has some human and animal heads on the capitals, and the arches are carved with geometric patterns.

Sculpture

Irish sculptors combined European and Viking influences with La Tène designs, which had already been in use for hundreds of years. Geometric and animal interlace, high relief carving and plant forms formed the basis for most design. Repetition of designs and patterns and balancing of composition were more common than they had been in earlier work.

During the Romanesque period in Europe, sculpture formed a decorative element on architecture, but in Ireland almost the opposite was true. Buildings were smaller, plainer and without many architectural qualities, but the decoration was of a very high standard. The decorative carving just discussed under the architecture heading above could just as easily be called sculpture. Many of the design elements recur in the carving of high crosses.

High crosses

There is a gap of almost 200 years between the great period of Irish high cross carving in the 9th and 10th centuries and this final phase of development. Except for the cross at Drumcliff, the Romanesque crosses are very different in design and meaning. The figure of a bishop usually features, sometimes with a crucifixion or a Christ in Majesty figure. These crosses often mark the centre of a new diocese.

Drumcliff High Cross

The Drumcliff High Cross is an early example of this new series of crosses (Fig. 5.6).

- **Form:** It has many of the same features that the earlier crosses had, including a wheel head and tall base.
- **Function:** A high cross was a focus for prayer, a marker of the sacred boundary of the monastery and a visual aid for pilgrims.
- **Technique:** The cross is carved from two blocks of pale sandstone. A bead moulding surrounds the decoration on both faces, leaving a plain border around the outline of the cross.

![Fig. 5.6](image-url)
Decoration: There is a mixture of interlace designs and figure scenes all over the cross. A lion in high relief is superimposed midway up the shaft on the west face, and a monster is in the same position on the east. More traditional scenes, such as Cain killing Abel and an Adam and Eve scene, are also included. Interlace relates closely to contemporary metalwork and manuscript designs.

Other crosses

Romanesque crosses at Tuam, Roscrea and Cashel (Fig. 5.7) are badly weathered and damaged. They appear to have had a large high relief figure and areas of interlace designs. The design of the Christ figure on the cross at Cashel is similar in design to the Volto Santo, a wooden crucifix from the cathedral in Lucca, which is on the pilgrimage route to Rome. Small copies of this cross were sometimes carried by pilgrims who visited Lucca on their way to or from Rome, and may have influenced the design of Irish crosses.

A number of crosses survive in Co. Clare, the latest and most unusual of which is at Dysert O’Dea.

Dysert O’Dea High Cross

* Form: This cross has no traditional wheel head, though sockets at the ends of the arms may have held some further decoration (Fig. 5.8).
Function: This cross looks different from the traditional type. It may have had a different emphasis than the older crosses, possibly commemorating pilgrimage to Rome and the new diocesan system.

Technique: The cross is carved from two blocks of limestone set in a base. Figures on the cross are carved in high relief, contrasting with low relief patterns on the base.

Design: A figure of the crucified Christ wears a long robe in the style of some contemporary European sculptures. The figure of a bishop below Christ's feet has a socket at waist level, from which a separately carved arm once projected. Other surfaces of the cross are carved in low relief, with patterns and a few figure scenes. Viking influence can be noted in the design of the interlace patterns of snakes and animals on the base, which relate closely to designs on metalwork.

Irish Romanesque sculpture

In Irish Romanesque sculpture, whether on doorways and arches or carved high crosses, influences from England and Europe combined with the earlier Celtic tradition. Interlace patterns were modified through Viking influence into battles between fantastic creatures. Geometric patterns often seen on doorways and chancel arches had their origins in English carving, while high relief figures found on crosses or on doorways relate to sculpture from France and Italy. All these influences were brought together in this final phase of truly Irish sculpture, in which Celtic roots were still clearly visible, providing the harmonising element in the style.

Manuscripts

A number of books survive from the Romanesque period. Most of these books are interesting for their texts and associations rather than for their decoration, but there are a number of decorated books.

The few decorated books that survive from the Romanesque period mark the end of the true Irish manuscript. All that followed were written in Britain or Europe, or were copies of European models. Only rarely in the following centuries did an Irish decorated capital make an appearance in a manuscript.

The Liber Hymnorum

The Liber Hymnorum is an 11th-century book of hymns in Irish and Latin, kept at Trinity College Library in Dublin. It has decorated capitals with animal and plant forms painted in yellow, red,
CHAPTER 5 ONLINE MATERIAL: THE 11TH AND 12TH CENTURIES: THE IRISH ROMANESQUE PERIOD (HIBERNO-ROMANESQUE)

**Fig. 5.11** The shrine of Saint Patrick’s Bell. Cudulig O’Inmainen and his sons were the craftsmen who made this shrine box.

* **Technique:** All the traditional techniques of book making and decorating are used.
* **Decoration:** The script is regular and some background areas within the letters are coloured. The capital letters that began each Psalm are decorated with blue, purple, yellow and green against a red background (Fig. 5.10). Cormac’s Psalter is one of the most completely decorated texts surviving from this period. Decorated capitals and small animals appear throughout the text in a scheme reminiscent of the Book of Kells.

**Metalwork**

Most surviving examples of 11th- and 12th-century metalwork are reliquaries, which have probably survived because of their importance to the church as objects of veneration. Their hereditary custodians kept many of them until the

**The Psalter of Cormac**

The Psalter of Cormac includes some Continental influence, which might have been introduced through the Cistercian monasteries.

* **Form:** A codex written on vellum.
* **Function:** A richly decorated book of psalms that was probably made for display on important occasions.

* **Decoration:** The capital M at the beginning of a psalm is made up of a man and animals. The quality of the script and decoration is of a very high standard.

**Fig. 5.10** A page from the Psalter of Cormac. The capital M at the beginning of a psalm is made up of a man and animals. The quality of the script and decoration is of a very high standard.

green and purple. These colours are now faded due to the passage of time. The text is written in Irish majuscule across the full width of the page (Fig. 5.9).
19th century. Little else survives. Brooches, which were such a feature in earlier centuries, may have gone out of fashion. Although few examples of any quality survive, we know of the existence of chalices and decorated drinking horns from the accounts in the annals.

**St Patrick’s Bell Shrine**

A number of pieces from the Romanesque period were inscribed with the names of the craftsmen who made them and the bishops or patrons who commissioned them. For example, Cudulig O’Inmainen and his sons made St Patrick’s Bell Shrine in their workshop in Armagh (Fig. 5.11).

* **Form:** A wooden box made to hold the bell believed to belong to St Patrick (Fig. 5.11). Finely cast openwork bronze panels are fixed to the outside of the box.

* **Function:** A reliquary made for displaying the relic of the saint. Rings fixed to each side of the reliquary would have allowed it to be carried in procession by a strap around the neck of its keeper.

* **Technique:** Beautifully cast and gilt openwork plaques, made to look like filigree, are fixed to all surfaces of the wooden box. The handle cover at the top of the box includes an openwork bronze cast of two interlaced birds (Fig. 5.12). Most of St Patrick’s Bell Shrine is as it was when it was originally designed, except for a few semiprecious stones that were added to the box in later medieval times.

* **Decoration:** The finely cast and gilt panels are in the Urnes style, a Scandinavian version of Irish animal interlace combining snakes and ribbon-bodied animals in a thin, linear style.

**The Lismore Crosier**

Other bell shrines, book boxes and crosiers survive, encased in elaborate metalwork.

* **Form:** A wooden staff encased in fine metalwork (Fig. 5.13).

* **Function:** Kept in memory of a respected bishop, it would have been an object of interest and prayer for pilgrims.

* **Technique:** The crosier is covered in bronze plaques held together by three cast bronze knobs. Cloisonné enamel studs separate panels that once contained filigree or cast decorations.

* **Decoration:** A row of interlaced dogs and monsters form a crest at the top of the crosier. Some of the knobs that hold the crosier together still contain panels decorated with plant and animal interlace. Other crosiers of this type survive, decorated in a variety of styles and techniques. All seem to have had a little box at the outer end of the crook, probably to hold the precious relic of a saint.

**The Crosier of the Abbots of Clonmacnoise**

* **Form:** An elaborate reliquary made of bronze plates enshrining a wooden staff. The crook is a simple horse’s head shape, in the Irish style (Fig. 5.14).
**Function:** A reliquary for a bishop's crosier.

**Technique:** A lot of metalwork techniques were used in making this crosier. Starting on the crook, there is a cast crest of dogs. The sides of the crook are inlaid with silver outlined in niello (a black substance made of a mixture of sulphur, silver, copper and lead sulphites). The upper knop (decorative knob) of the crosier has triangular insets made of copper with champlevé enamel. There are small blue enamel studs at the points of the triangles.

**Decoration:** The designs on the Clonmacnoise Crosier show Scandinavian influence in the style of the patterns, which relate to Ringerike and Urnes designs, though adapted into an Irish style. A pattern of ribbon-like snakes entwining with finer threads with spiral endings forms an interlace on the side of the crook. The elements of the interlace cut through each other rather than weaving under and over each other, as they did in earlier designs. About half of the original crest of dogs biting the rear of the preceding animal remains.

A grotesque face with an elaborate beard and moustache tops the reliquary box at the front of the crook. The little cast figure of a bishop was added in the 14th century.
The patterns on the knop are foliate and geometric designs. Below the knop are two pairs of cast animals. Their forelegs are entwined and they have spiral patterns on their chests and haunches, which were inlaid with silver and niello. Triquetra knots are formed by their tails, which end in an animal head. Paired animals like these appear on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise and on Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice.

The middle knop is decorated with a geometric interlace. Below this, the shaft tapers down to a ring with a point below it.

Other crosiers

Crosiers in other shapes also existed. The National Museum houses a tau crosier with a fine top consisting of a cast of two animal heads. An ivory crosier with a spiral crook found in Aghadoe, Co. Kerry, shows Jonah emerging from the whale (Fig. 5.15).

The Shrine of St Lachtin’s Arm

The Shrine of St Lachtin’s Arm is a well-preserved example of a type of relic once common all over Europe (Fig. 5.16).

* **Form:** It is 40cm tall, made in the shape of an arm.

* **Function:** It is a reliquary box made to hold the arm of the saint.

* **Technique:** It is made of bronze plaques held in place on the wooden core by cast rings. The hand is a separate cast. The plaques were inlaid with silver and niello, most of which is now lost. There are some enamel studs.

* **Decoration:** A ribbon interlace decoration of threadlike animals with open jaws decorates the plaques. The hand has some panels of filigree, silver nails and the gilded silver palm is decorated with foliage and tendrils. The bands that held the shrine together are decorated with interlace and some glass studs survive around the base.

*Fig. 5.15* The Aghadoe Crosier, carved from ivory, shows Jonah emerging from the whale

*Fig. 5.16* The Shrine of St Lachtin’s Arm
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