EARLY CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE OF IRELAND.

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Read at Meeting 19th March, 1901. [1]

In selecting the subject of the Early Christian Architecture of Ireland I felt that I was entering on well-trodden ground. Some may consider that the labours of Petrie, Lord Dunraven, Brash, Miss Stokes, and others had left little to be said upon the subject. While admitting the great value of Petrie's work, which must remain a standard authority, and the help which the works of the other writers have been to the study of the Architecture of Early Christian Ireland, still, since these were written, much additional information has been gained. A more intimate acquaintance with Italian art during its decadent period—from the sixth to the eleventh century,—increased facilities for travel, and the presence of that useful handmaid to archæology, the camera, have shed new light on many portions of the subject, which, had they been known to Petrie, might have removed some of his doubts in connection with the dates of early Irish ornament. For, though he believed—and rightly so—that much of the early Romanesque in Ireland was of a date anterior to the Danish invasion, his knowledge of the history of architecture in Europe at the period did not justify him in making what would, at the time, no doubt, be considered a rash proposition. Miss Stokes, appreciating the difficulty, claimed an almost complete development of

[1] This Paper was illustrated by about 100 slides, for which due acknowledgment was made to Surgeon George Fogerty, R.N., Hon. Sec., who prepared the greater portion of them; also to the R.S.A.I., Mr. F. J. Bigger, M.R.I.A., and Mr. Joseph Stewart, Hon. Treas., who kindly contributed. I have also to thank the Royal Society of Antiquaries, Ireland, for the use of the blocks to illustrate this Paper.

ornament and style from pagan to Christian times within the country, admitting the first Norman influence at Inniscaltra in the transition period—eleventh century. In this she claimed too much, while Petrie did not claim enough, for our early Irish artists. Miss Stokes in later years, after she had journeyed in Northern Italy in search of vestiges of our Irish saints, considerably modified her early views. In her introductory letter recording her journey she states [2]:—

> "I venture to hope that this visit to Bobio has not been fruitless, and that the results may cast light on certain questions relating to origins of art in the British Islands. The idea that the interlaced work which characterized the early Christian art of these islands originated here, and was carried hence by our early pilgrims and missionaries of the Scotic church, may be for ever abandoned. Certain varieties of such designs were developed in Ireland, as already stated, and if they were to appear in any part of the Continent, as has been observed by Canon Browne in writing to me on the subject, it would be on the tombs of the founders of Irish monasteries on the Continent, such as I shall now lay before you. But these Irish varieties do not appear on the tombs of Columban and of his followers at Bobio. The interlacings on these marbles are in no way different from those which overspread Italy in the period of Lombardic-Romanesque architecture, before the sixth and seventh centuries. It would be difficult to prove that any such designs prevailed in Ireland before the seventh century. They are not found on pre-Christian remains in that country, although they are in Italy, They appear to have been gradually introduced into Ireland along with Christianity at a time when this style still lingered in the south of Europe."

Still later we have another work published, "Cathedral Builders," by Leader Scott, in which the writer shows that in these centuries (sixth to the eighth) there existed in Como a guild of master builders living under the protection of the Lombardic kings, and known as the Comacine Masters, and that from this school architects and builders travelled over Europe, often serving as missionaries as well, and building churches in the Lombard style, using the interlaced ornaments characteristic of Irish architecture. This writer goes so far as to claim for this guild and its branches the development of architecture all over Christian Europe, including our Irish churches, round towers, and high crosses. This would, no doubt, be a very simple settlement of the question, if it could be satisfactorily proved. Unfortunately, as far as Ireland is concerned, sufficient proof is not forthcoming to justify us at present in

[2] "Six months in the Appenines," p. 11.

accepting the entire statement as correct. However, the work is most valuable, as it opens up a new field for inquiry, and shows that there is still very much to be learned about our early architecture.

Constituted as this Club is, of various sections, I feel I would not be justified in entering at too great length here into the questions raised by any of these more recent publications, many of which are of a purely technical nature. Any labouring of these details could only be done at a sacrifice of much of the general history of the subject which I have set myself to lay before you, and which will prove more than sufficient matter for a single paper. In pursuing the study of this question of the genesis of ornament in early Irish architecture, the Photographic Section can render great assistance. Every trifle is important—a carved capital or moulding picked up from the *debris* of some ruined shrine often carries with it an interesting story which brings us back through centuries to the school at which the craftsman studied, or speaks to us, as it were, in the almost forgotten symbolism of the past.

Before entering on the subject, it may be well to consider what is Architecture. Architecture may be defined as ornamental construction. With the constructive or technic side of Architecture we are not at present concerned. That branch of the subject would recommend itself more to the profession. It is to the æsthetic qualities of the art, as we find it in Ireland, that we have now to direct our attention.

Ireland is the furthest western point of Europe, where the restless, roving Celt of early ages made a home, and preserved for the greatest length of time, some of his most striking characteristics. Ferguson states "the true glory of the Celt in Europe is his artistic eminence," and here it was that in the earliest ages the Celtic genius for art, as seen in her MSS. and metal work, appears to have reached the highest state of perfection. So much cannot be said of one branch of art—Irish Architecture; but of this I will quote the words of a great authority. Ferguson states (3) :—

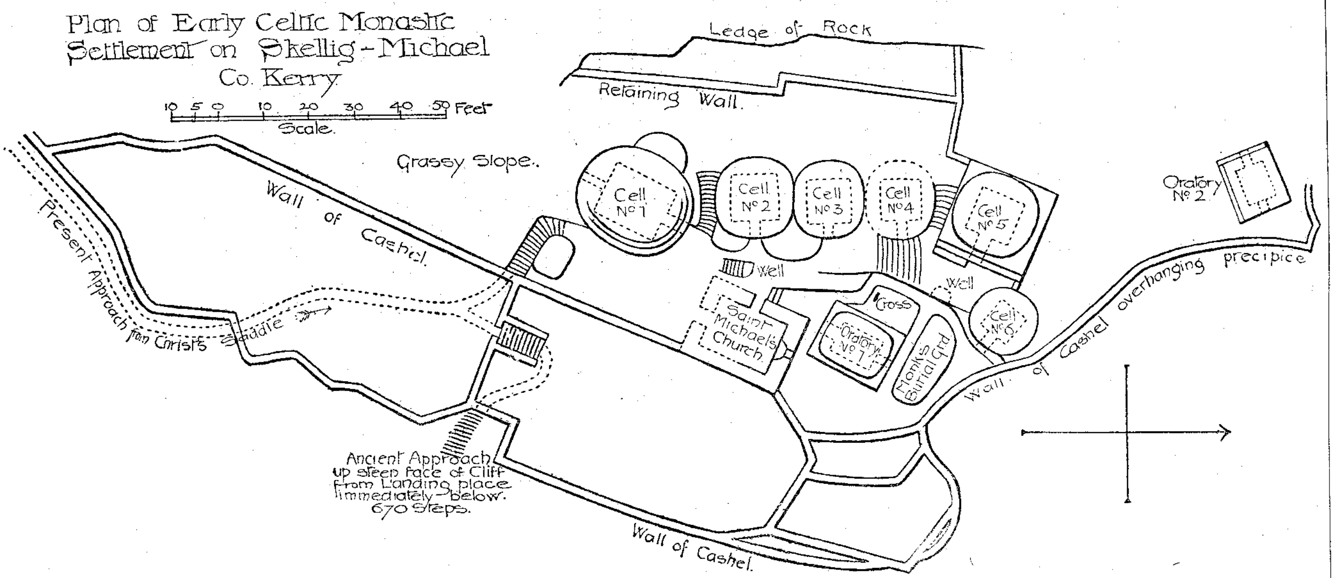
> "At a very early period the Irish showed themselves not only capable of inventing a style for themselves, but perfectly competent to carry it to a successful issue, had an opportunity ever been afforded them. But this has not yet happened. Before the English conquest the country seems to have been divided into a number of small States, whose chieftains occupied the scant leisure left them between the incursions of the Danes and other

[3] "Ferguson's Architecture," vol. ii, p. 226.

Northmen in little wars among themselves. These were never of such importance as to yield glory to either party, though amply sufficient to retard the increase of population and to banish that peace and sense of security which are indispensable for the cultivation of the softer arts. Yet during that period the Irish built round towers and oratories of a beauty of form and with an elegance of detail that charms even at the present day. Their metal work showed a true appreciation of the nature of the material, and an artistic feeling equal in kind, if not in degree, to anything in the best ages of Greece or Italy, and her manuscripts and paintings exhibit an amount of taste which was evidently capable of anything."

I quote rather fully from this chapter, as it explains much of what we will notice in Irish Architecture. It affords the text on which any writer on the subject must enlarge. It has been said that "the history of its Architecture is the history of the country," and in tracing the progress of Irish Architecture, it is but a story of strife and vengeance and warfare. The artistic genius of the Celt was there, but the development of style was slow, and the ornamental accessories—generally the result of peaceful prosperity and wealth—are scant, and all bear evidence, when compared with the work of other countries, of the depressing influences which are written on the pages of our country's history.

The earliest examples of Christian architecture in Ireland, are the bee-hive cells or lauras of the early monks. Driven from the Roman Empire during the persecutions of Decius and Diocletian, many holy men took refuge in the deserts of Egypt, and there established that system of monasticism which played such an important part in the history of the early Church, giving to religion the names of Athanasius, Paul, Jerome, the Macarii, and a host of others. "These," writes Montalambert, "were the founders of that vast empire which has lasted to our own days—the great captains of the permanent warfare of soul against flesh—the heroic and immortal models offered to the religious of all ages." The end of the third century is generally accepted to be the period when monasticism was regularly established in Egypt. It grew rapidly, till in the end of the fourth century it was asserted that the monks equalled the other inhabitants. St. Jerome states that monks under St. Pacome, assembled at the annual gathering, numbered 50,000. These were Cenobites, that is to say, united by a common rule under an elected head called an Abbot, from the Syriac word *Abba*, father. The monasteries had their anchorites as well, men who lived away in the solitude of some lonely cell, often suffering extraordinary mortifications.


Plan of Early Celtic Monastic Settlement on Skellig-Michael Co. Kerry
10 5 0 10 20 30 40 50 Feet
Scale.
Ledge of Rock
Retaining Wall.
Grassy Slope.
Wall of Cashel.
Present Approach from Christ's Saddle
Cell No 1
Cell No 2
Cell No 3
Cell No 4
Cell No 5
Cell No 6
Well
Well
Saint Michael's Church.
Cross
Oratory No 1
Monks Burial Grd
Oratory No 2
Wall of Cashel overhanging precipice
Ancient Approach up steep face of Cliff from Landing place immediately below. 670 Steps.
Wall of Cashel.

SKELLIG MICHAEL—FRONT OF CELLS, LOOKING NORTH.

From Egypt the monks passed to Arabia, Syria, Palestine, and the islands of the Mediterranean—islands appear to have been the favourite retreat of these early Christian hermits. St. Honoratus founded his monastery at Lerrins, an island in the Tuscan Sea, in A.D. 375. St. Patrick is said to have visited it in 418 (4), and spent some years there and on other islands in the Mediterranean before starting on his mission to Ireland. Most probably it was from these islands that in earlier ages some monks from Egypt or the East, travelling northwards by the Valley of the Rhone, reached Ireland, and were the pioneers in that Christianity which existed here before the coming of St. Patrick.

Some of the earliest of these monasteries established near the Natron lakes, about forty miles from Cairo, are still in existence, and have been described by Curzon in his "Monasteries of the Levant." They all seem to have been formed on the same plan,—a number of cells grouped around a church, sometimes a church and oratory, or smaller church, and in other cases several small churches, all surrounded by a wall. The sites selected were in many cases almost inaccessible, as are many of the Greek and Coptic monasteries of the present day. In many cases the cells and church were of wood, but frequently of stone. One of the earliest examples of such monasteries in Ireland is Skellig Michael, an island about twelve miles off the coast of Kerry (5). There is no record of the date of its foundation. Ancient tradition makes it the burial place of Ir, son of Milesius. Keating describes it as since St. Patrick's time much frequented by way of piety and devotion. The earliest mention of it in the Annals is 812, and it is noticed up to 1044.

Elevated positions have always been dedicated to the Archangel, St. Michael. These dome-like structures formed of projecting stones, gradually meeting to be covered by one stone at top, appear to have been amongst the earliest type of habitation used by man. Hence we have *domus;* and as it is in the ancient tombs we find the remains of the first efforts at construction, so it is in the dome-shaped tombs of ancient Greece we find the prototype of the bee-hive hut (6). Though similar construction may be noticed in these early tombs, it does not follow that they formed the models for the construction of our early bee-hive cells. A great deal must be allowed for the evolution

(4) Lives of Irish Saints: O'Hanlon, Vol. iii, p. 514.
(5) This Monastery has been illustrated and fully described in "Irish Architecture": Lord Dunraven, Vol. i, and in the Guides of R.S.A.I.
(6) Ferguson's "Architecture," Vol. i, p. 234; Perrot and Chipiez: "Art in Primitive Greece," Vol. i, p. 332.

SKELLIG MICHAEL—SMALL ORATORY.

of the human mind, to which is due the great similarity which we find in the forms of early implements, and the construction of primitive habitations, in different ages and countries widely separated. Sometimes too much is claimed for human evolution. It may advance for a time until some distinct type or style is developed, which then becomes peculiar to the nation or people who adopt it. Thus we can trace the progress of Art in ancient Greece up to the invention of the Doric style. After that, where the Greeks were, there too we find the Doric. So it was with Roman art, the advance of which can be traced from an earlier civilization in Etruria on to its development under the Empire; and nothing impresses the Roman occupation of Britain so forcibly on our minds as the remains of Roman Architecture to be seen at Bath and other places. The evolution of the human mind takes direction from various influences, and so it was in Ireland, where its instincts in early times never evolved a classic capital, simply because the Romans never lived here. What the influences at work really were, is the subject for our consideration.

Next to this bee-hive cell in order of development comes the upturned boat-shaped oratory, a structure resembling the cell in construction, *i.e.*, being built without cement, the stones corbelling over so as to meet at the top, but the oratory is rectangular on plan, exteriorly and interiorly. As this structure formed portion of the religious establishments in Ireland, it may be considered as coeval with the bee-hive cell, though a distinct development in architectural style. Gallerus (7), near Dingle, is the best example of this class of oratory.

[7] Gallerus is in the most perfect state of preservation, of any of our boat-shaped oratories, hence it is generally mentioned as the type of that class of building; but Gallerus is a very advanced specimen of this style, and may date from a period much later than Temple Gael, or St. Brendan's, close to it, and others in Kerry. Though Gallerus is built without cement, all the interior jointing appears to have been made in fine lime cement, portion of which remains, and is very hard. The inside also, was finished fair with a pick or punch, the marks of which are quite visible on many of the stones. Hollows in the face of the stones, appear to have been filled up with a similar cement, as I have found small particles still adhering on such places. This would have secured a regular even surface on the interior. There is no evidence of the interior having been plastered, the stone work being without stain. Lord Dunraven, vol. i, p. 60, states :—"I found between several of the joints, a hard whitish substance, of which I have a specimen. This is caused by the water percolating through the stones." The stone is the greenish or purple slate of the Silurian system. To a building expert this cement has all the appearance of jointing or "pointing." It is strange that, if a deposit, it does not extend further through the stone work of the structure; but is confined to the inner face of the joints; nor has it increased with time, in fact it has almost entirely disappeared from the joints, and there is no trace of such a substance through the heart of the stone work. Brash states :—"there is no appearance of mortar in the walling."

GALLERUS ORATORY—EAST END.

Dr. Petrie was not very decided as to the period to which he should assign this type of oratory; he states (8):—"I am strongly inclined to believe that they may be more ancient than the period assigned for the conversion of the Irish generally by the Apostle, St. Patrick." The passage of the earliest Christian monks from the Islands of the Mediterranean to Ireland has been referred to already, and it is worthy of observation that on the Balearic Islands, which were also Phœnician settlements, and on which we know there were early monasteries, there are tombs built to resemble an upturned boat called Navetas (9), and in comparing these structures with the primitive boat-shaped oratory, the resemblance is too close to be the result of accident. Possibly these served as models for the oratories of these early Christians, to be used as their mortuary or "place of resurrection" as well.

In the Ordnance Survey Letters of Kerry there is an interesting letter from Petrie in reference to these oratories :—

21st September, 1841.

MY DEAR LARCOM,

The long peninsula of Corcaguinny, or the neck of land stretching into the sea west of Tralee, is the richest in remote antiquities by far that I have yet seen in Ireland, and it is a great pity that they could not be all accurately marked on the Ordnance Map, and the most remarkable of them be drawn with ground plans.

From a letter which I received from Burton this morning, who staid after me, I find that a valley of four or five miles in length, now nearly uninhabited, is covered over with these round bee-hive shaped houses, none of which had been observed by O'Donovan or the others. They are usually in groups of four or five each.

This letter is a capital one, and I will send it to you to read to-morrow. I must keep it to-day to reply to it. As to the boat-shaped house I do not know what to say, but this is curious that Salli describes the houses of the people on the African coast of the Mediterranean, built by the Phœnicians and Persians, as being of this shape the former being derived from their first houses, which were their boats turned upside down.

Wakeman will, however, draw some of the most remarkable of these remains, which will be of great service.

I had awful weather during my whole journey, and could not do a fifth of what I might have accomplished if the weather permitted.

Always faithfully yours,

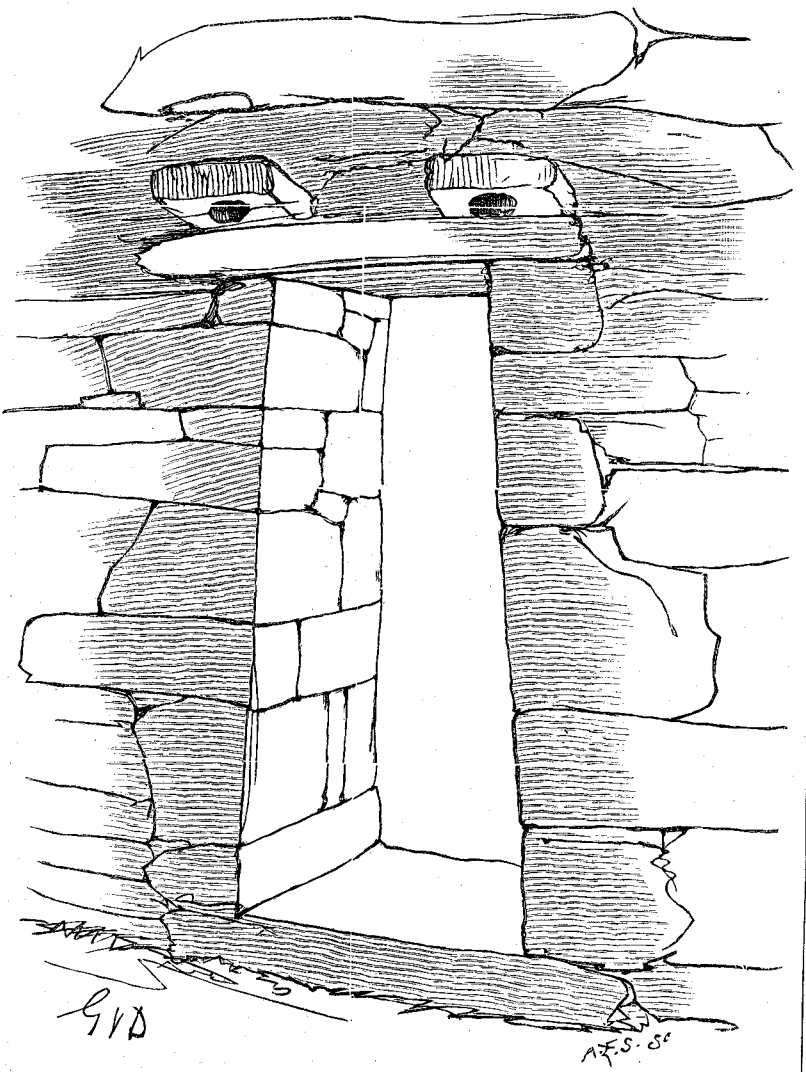
GEORGE PETRIE. (10)

In these oratories and bee-hive structures the construction of the doors and windows with the sides converging, leaving the open narrower

(8) Dr. Petrie's "Round Towers," p. 133.

(9) "Dolmans of Ireland": Borlase, Vol. ii, p. 699.

(10) Page 527, "Ordnance Survey of Ireland, Antiquities County of Kerry. Letters, 1841."



DOORWAY OF ORATORY AT GALLERUS.

(Interior View.)

at the top than at the bottom, and which was common in the early Grecian and Etruscan Architecture, is the one feature which has been maintained all through the different periods of Irish Architecture, though dropped in the successive styles of other countries. The development of this style of doorway from its primitive stages is very interesting, as illustrated in Perrot and Chipiez's "Ancient Greece" (11). Originally a triangular-shaped opening, supported at the sides by light pieces of forest timber, a horizontal stay of timber was introduced later on to strengthen it. This in time became a stone lintel, and the sides were formed of stone instead of timber, the small triangular opening over lintel closed up, and in this manner the primitive-shaped door was developed.

The next stage of development is the quadrangular structure with upright walls and high-pitched roof, generally of stone, and called oratories and sometimes churches. There are some examples of a transition period. Kilelton oratory near Tralee has 2 feet 9 inches over the plinth or base vertical before the boat-shaped construction commences (12). Some of the structures on Innismurray, notably a section through the domed structure called the Schoolhouse, might be looked upon as transition types (13). Petrie identified these oratories with the Duirtheachs of the Annals, and the churches or larger buildings with the Daimhliag of the early writers. Literally Duirtheach or Dairtheach means house of oak, and as the earliest oratories were most likely built of wood, the name may have come to be applied to oratories generally, as it so appears in some glossaries. That there was an oratory or perhaps more than one attached to each monastic establishment in addition to the church is most likely. Curzon in his "Monasteries of the Levant" describes a monastery at Barlaam (14) "with a church and small chapel within the enclosure," and again another—Caracalla(15)—where

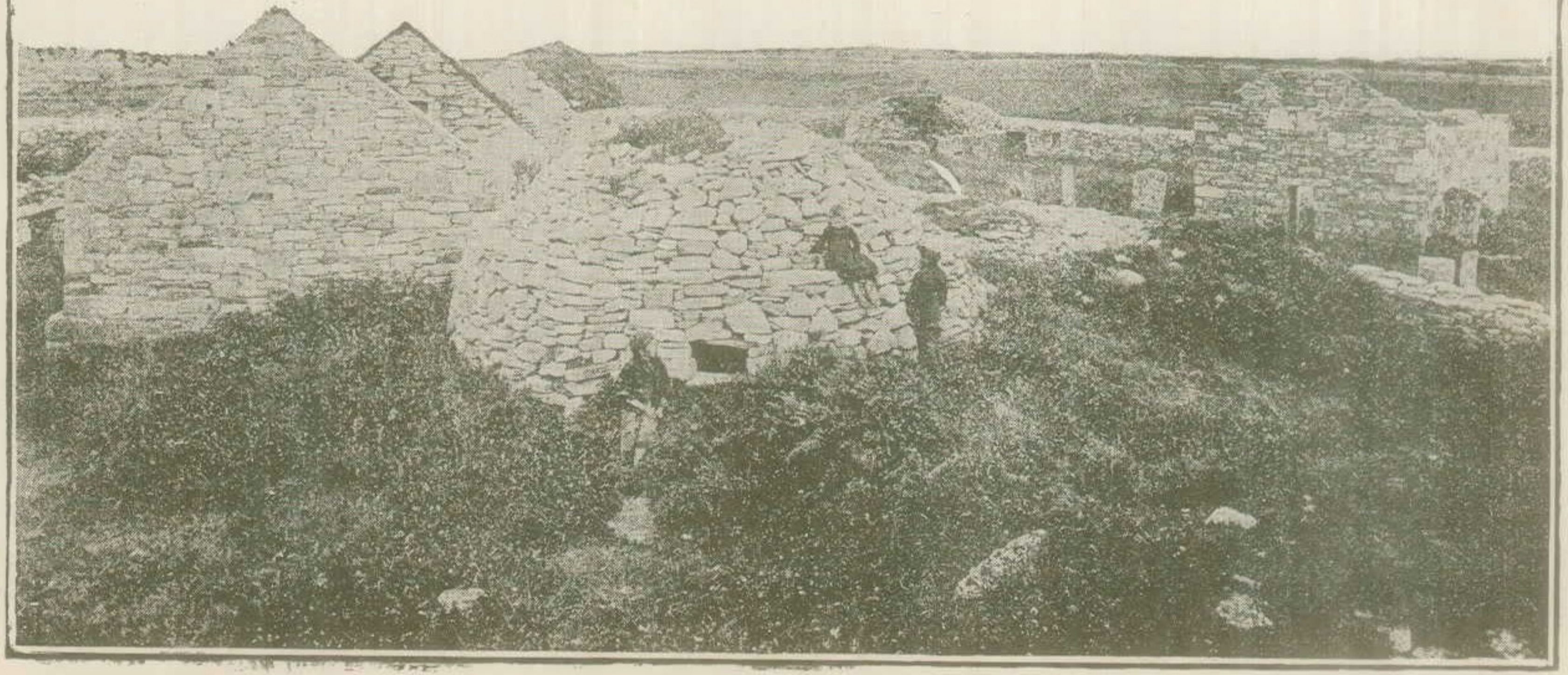
[11] Vol. i, p. 482.

[12] Kilelton is situated close to the junction on the Tralee and Dingle railway, a short distance from the main road. The oratory is said to stand over the grave of the Milesian princess Fas. In construction, workmanship and detail it is an advance on the other oratories of this type in Kerry. Christian oratories have been erected over pagan graves. See papers in Journals R.S.A.I., vol. ix, 4th series, p. 118; vol. vii, 5th series, p. 306, by Miss Hickson, and the writer, on Kilelton, &c.

[13] "Innismurray." Wakeman. R.S.A.I. 1892.

[14] p. 249.

[15] p. 313.



Teampull-na-Teinidh. Toorybrennell (the "Schoolhouse.") Teampull Moliase.

THE ISLAND OF INNISMURRAY—VIEW OF INTERIOR OF CASHEL.

several little chapels or rooms fitted up as places of worship lie around the central church. The resemblance between the eastern laura and our early monasteries has been already referred to, and here I feel tempted to refer to a similarity in the early churches. Dr. Petrie gives a translation of a description of St. Brigid's Church in Kildare from her life by Cogitosus as follows (16) :—

> "For the number of the faithful of both sexes increasing, the church, occupying a spacious area, and elevated to a menacing height, and adorned with painted pictures, having within three oratories, large and separated by partitions of planks under one roof of the greater house, wherein one partition, decorated and painted with figures and covered with linen hangings, extended along the breadth in the eastern part of the church, from the one to the other party wall of the church, which (partition) has at its extremities two doors ; and through the one door, placed in the right side, the chief prelate enters the sanctuary, accompanied by his regular school, and those who are deputed to the sacred ministry of offering sacred and dominical sacrifices. Through the other door, placed in the left part of the partition above-mentioned, and lying transversely, none enter but the abbess with her virgins and widows among the faithful when going to participate in the banquet of the body and blood of Jesus Christ. But another partition, dividing the pavement of the house into two equal parts, extends from the eastern (recté western) side to the transverse partition lying across the breadth. Moreover, this church has in it many windows, and one adorned doorway on the right side through which the priests and the faithful of the male sex enter the church, and another doorway to the left side through which the congregation of virgins and women among the faithful are used to enter. And thus in one very great temple a multitude of people in different order and ranks, and sex, and situation, separated by partitions, in different order, and (but) with one mind worship the Omnipotent Lord."

In Curzon's description of a Coptic monastery on the Nile, 200 feet high on the rocks of Gebel-el-Terr (17), called the Convent of the Virgin, the church in this monastery—which Curzon considers one of the earliest Christian buildings which has preserved its originality, and of which he gives a sketch plan—has transverse screens forming three sections, first the monks, second the male congregation, and third th women. And in a description of the monastery at Barlaam (18) in the Levant, he describes an altar screen thus :—

> "The altar or holy table is separated from the nave by a wooden screen called the iconostasis, on which are paintings of the Blessed Virgin,

(16) Petrie, 198-199.
(17) "Monasteries of Levant," p. 114.
(18) Ibid, p. 249.

the Redeemer, and many saints. The iconostasis has three doors in it, one in the centre before the holy table, and one on each side. The centre one is only a half-door, . . . the upper part being screened with a curtain of rich stuff, which, except on certain occasions, is drawn aside, so as to afford a view of the book of the Gospels in a rich binding lying upon the table beyond. The vestures are usually kept in presses in this space behind the iconostasis, where none but the priests and the deacon or servant who trims the lamps are allowed to enter, and they pass in and out by the side doors. The centre door is only used in the celebration of the holy mass. This screen of the present day, with its decorative paintings and side doors, recalls very much to mind the description of Kildare by Cogitosus in the sixth century."

The great number of these small churches or oratories of which the remains exist in Ireland, and the absence of any evidence of many large churches, is striking. This is due to a variety of causes. First, the Irish church was purely a monastic system up to the end of the eighth century—a primitive type of monasticism peculiar to Ireland (19), founded on the rule of these early Egyptian ascetics, cultivating a spirit of contempt for worldly show, and a severe simplicity in their life and actions, which is reflected in their architecture. Many of these monks were Anchorites, who fixed on some lonely spot and there built his oratory and cell, attracting worshippers around him by his sanctity and zeal in God's service. Others founded schools which became famous all over Europe, and from these depended lesser foundations and many smaller detached churches, and so the system spread throughout the land. There were bishops and abbots, but as regards the bishops no regular jurisdiction was defined by ecclesiastical authority until the twelfth century. The tribal system regulated society. Each tribe, covering an area about equal to our present barony, had its own churches and bishops. These tribes were constantly at war with each other, or as allies engaged in fighting other tribes. These quarrels frequently resulted in the destruction of the church or sacred shrines of the enemy. Under such social conditions the multiplication of small churches or oratories was natural, while the continued warfare and danger of destruction would account for the simplicity of detail.

(To be continued.)

[19] Montalambert states:—"Investigation will prove the development of the monastic principle in Ireland contemporaneous with, but entirely independent of the diffusion of Cenobitical institutions in all the Roman Empire, and through all the barbaric races."—"Monks of the West," Vol. ii, p. 390.