The Architecture of the Cistercian Order in Ireland in the XIlth and Early XIllth Centuries.

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The Irish parish and monastic churches of the XIlth and earlier centuries which remain to-day are simple in form and usually of small dimensions. While many have no marked division into naves and chancel the majority possess it but none have either transepts or side aisles and the greatest internal width to be found in any of them does not exceed thirty feet. That large churches, probably of timber construction in most cases, once existed is certain; witness the description by the VIIth century scribe—whose nom-de-plume is Cogitosus—of Saint Brigid’s church at Kildare, “a very great temple” housing “a multitude of people of different order and ranks.” (a) This building was divided by partitions into three parts, two occupied by the faithful of the different sexes, the third apparently was the sanctuary. The description does not suggest that the church was anything but simple in its external form or that it had transepts or aisles. Probably the timber churches were simple rectangles: of the hall plan. Conceivably their roofs, if of wide span, received support internally by rows of wooden posts as we may conjecture was the case in the most famous Irish kingly hall, that at Tara.

With the introduction of regular monasticism by the great order of Citeaux there came to Ireland, for the first time it seems, the fully developed cruciform church plan with its chancel, transepts and chapels, nave and side aisles.

The new monasticism differed fundamentally from the earlier and native form. In the place of an association of monks dwelling each in his separate cell or hut round about the churches or oratories of the monastery the new rule called for closer grouping, an establishment in which all should dwell together in close association: one in which the church and residential buildings formed an organised whole, complete and self-contained. This is not the place to trace the development of the monastic orders and their buildings from the time of the promulgation in the VIIth century by St. Benedict of Nursia of his famous Rule “to institute a school of the service of God”; or to speak of that later Benedict of Aniane (ob. 823), the reformer who inspired the creation of the great Order of Cluny which spread so widely in the fair land of France from the Xth century onwards and in other countries as well, notably in England. It must suffice to say that from the Benedictines there sprang, at the end of the XIlth century, that other great Order observing the rule and life of the founder most strictly and to the letter: the order called Cistercian from the name of its first house, Citeaux, in Burgundy. Benedictines and Cluniacs had developed a type of building suited to their rules of life and service with churches notable for their great size and magnificence of decoration and equipment. The ideals of the new order at Citeaux were more austere; simplicity in everything, in all details of life, in worship and in building was fundamental. While the various buildings followed in their arrangement the same general plan as the earlier houses, greater severity of design prevailed in them. This was specially the case during the earlier period of the Cistercians whose buildings, indeed, never at any later time became remarkable for richness of ornamentation and decoration as did those of some of the other orders.

(a) Colgan: Trias Thumantuige, p. 523. Translation in Macalister: Archaeology of Ireland, p. 239.
Between 1143 and 1272 thirty-five or thirty-six Cistercian abbeys were erected in Ireland. All but eleven of these were descended from the first or mother house at Mellifont in County Louth, founded at the instance of St. Malachy with the help of his friend Bernard of Clairvaux, who trained certain of Malachy's servants in the strictness of the Cistercian Rule. Sixteen of these abbeys remain to us though more or less ruined. No one is quite complete. In some only the church or part of it still stands; in others but enough of the cloister and its buildings to indicate the extent of the whole establishment.

While no Irish abbey attains the great scale of the Continental or English buildings some, Dunbrody and Graignamanagh, or Duiske, for example, are none the less large buildings. Whether large or small, however, the plan lay-out of the Irish buildings adheres in all essentials to that characteristic of the Order everywhere. Individual abbeys differ in size and number of apartments and to a small degree in arrangement but the family likeness remains. In some of the Irish houses, indeed, it is not always easy, because of the ruinous condition of the buildings, to recognise the use of every part, but reasonably accurate conjectures can be made if the standard lay-out is kept in mind.

**A RESTORATION OF A CISTERCIAN HOUSE IN IRELAND circa 1200.**

![Diagram of Jerpoint Abbey]

**Fig. 1. Jerpoint Abbey: Conjectural restoration, bird's-eye view.**
THE IRISH CISTERCIAN PLAN.

Perhaps the most complete group of abbey buildings still standing in Ireland is at Jerpoint, near Thomastown, in the County of Kilkenny. It will serve as the basis of our study and for this purpose a plan based upon it with a conjectural restoration of

Fig. 2. Type plan of a Cistercian Abbey in Ireland based on Jerpoint.
the missing parts is given in Fig. 2 and will serve as a type-plan for this study. A bird’s-eye view of Jerpoint as it may have appeared at circa 1200 is presented in Fig. 1. This, however, was made some years before the ruins had been fully investigated and while it is not in all particulars accurate it is, in a general way, reasonably correct and will suit our purpose.

At Jerpoint the whole of the church (minus the south arcade and aisle of the nave), the lower part of the eastern range of claustral buildings, and some parts of the walls of the south range remain; the western range, as in almost all of the Irish houses, having disappeared. The type plan may be regarded as a reasonably accurate restoration, the disposition of its parts being in accordance with what is known of other Cistercian abbeys at home and abroad, keeping in mind the comparatively small scale of Irish houses. In the records of the Cistercian rule extant the most valuable key to the plan arrangement is provided by the account of the route of the Sunday procession which, starting in the church, perambulated the other buildings visiting each part in turn in a certain order.

There were buildings of mundane use—guest houses, schools, barns, and byres, brew-houses, bake-house, and granary, the almonry, etc., attached to the abbeys, and usually situated in the outer court or curia but in no Irish Cistercian abbey can there now be found any recognizable remains of them in the areas north or west of the main buildings where the curia was usually situated. To the east of the cloister buildings there was usually another building—the infirmary. This, except in two rather doubtful cases, has also disappeared from the Irish sites.

In the typical Cistercian plan the abbey church lay to the north of the cloister around which the residential buildings were arranged. There are instances where the cloister lies to the north of the church (notably at Hore Abbey, Cashel) and the reason for this departure from the usual plan would appear to be the existence of running water for the abbey drainage on that side only. The southward position had the practical advantage of providing a sun-warmed centre, not overshadowed by the high church building, for the life of the brethren, an important consideration in an establishment which, in the austerity of its rules of life, had few fireplaces.

So much for the general arrangement of the plan which is now to be considered in more detail, part by part.

THE CHURCH.

The most important and considerable building in the group is, of course, the church. Usually it is of earlier date than the other structures, its erection being undertaken as soon as possible after the foundation of the monastery what time the brethren lived in temporary shelters at or near the site.

It is cruciform, with a usually short presbytery or chancel to the east, north and south transepts—with one to three chapels on their eastern sides, two being the most usual number—and a nave with north and south aisles. In the first houses there was no belfry tower and the roof of nave and presbytery ran continuously from west to east over both in an unbroken line intersected only by the transept roofs, of the same height, running from north to south (see Fig. 1). The windows were in the east and west gables, in the south wall of the chancel, the east walls of the transept chapels, the gable of the north transept (and sometimes its western wall), the north aisle wall and in the clerestoreys over both aisles. The south aisle and to a lesser degree the south transept were badly lit, the latter receiving its light only from the windows of its chapels and one high-up in its wall. Arches spanned the openings to the transepts and another marked the entrance to the presbytery. Westwards from the crossing (the square space corresponding to the transept) lay the arcades between the nave and the aisles and, above the arcades, the windows of the clerestorey. It is a peculiar feature of Irish Cistercian churches that these windows are placed over the pillars of the arcade and not over the arches as is usual in other countries. (See Fig. 3).

About midway in its length the nave is divided into two parts by a screen wall or walls. In the cases where this is a wall carried to the full height of the building (as at Monasterncagh, Holy Cross, Coonmroe, etc.) it is usually of much later date than the rest of the buildings. At Jerpoint, however, the arrangement is less simple and more—though not completely—in accordance with the earlier practice which was to cut off a whole bay or even two bays of the nave by two or more walls or screens. On the
western wall stood the Rood and over the space between a gallery, the pulpitum. An altar stood against this wall with doors on each side leading into the enclosed space or retro-choir which had two altars placed on either side of a central eastern doorway. The retro-choir was the place where the infirm monks heard the service in which they were unable to take an active part.

The Jerpoint arrangement, the only survival in Ireland of anything more complicated than a single dividing-wall, seems to be a simplification of the plan described above. It consists of L-shaped screen walls enclosing two small altars but the very small length of the western part of the nave seems to preclude the existence of another wall and altar to the west.

Fig. 3. Nave arcade and clearstorey, Jerpoint.

Eastwards of this division lies the choir of the monks extending into the crossing space and enclosed on the north and south by low walls, called perpyn walls, built between the pillars of the arcades, and wooden screens beneath the transept arches. These screens were stopped short of the presbytery to leave entrances, the upper and lower entries, into the transepts. Against the perpyn walls and the screens were placed the wooden stalls of the monks returning north and south at the west end where were the seats of the abbot and prior facing eastwards.

Eastward again lies the presbytery—usually vaulted in stone, with the High Altar under the east window, the piscina and sedilia niches in the south wall and, sometimes, the tomb niche of the founder to the north of the altar.
The transepts, as has been said already, have chapels—often vaulted in stone—on their eastern sides and are of the same height as the church. In one instance, Mellifont Abbey, there are western aisles to the transepts, which seem to have been occupied by chapels. In the south-west angle of the south transept there is a stone stairway rising to the monks’ dormitory and called the night stairs, by reason of its use by the brethren in coming to and from the night offices in the church.

The western section of the nave was devoted to the choir of the lay brethren. It also was provided with stalls on each side placed against the perpynn walls which, however, stopped short of the western pillar or respond of the arcade to give access to the aisles from the nave. Night stairs from the lay dormitory seem to have been provided in some abbeys at the west end of the south aisle.

In the strict Cistercian rule observed during the earlier period of the Order, tall belfry towers of either stone or timber were forbidden but in later times this rule was relaxed and massive towers were erected, usually over the crossing and supported by pillars built within and overlapping the angles of the transept piers and bearing lofty arches on all four sides. Since this paper is not concerned with the later work, it will suffice to remark that the inserted XVth-XVIth century tower of Jerpoint is the finest Irish example remaining.

THE CLAUSTRAL BUILDINGS.

THE CLOISTER.

In almost all Cistercian houses the cloister (Claustrum), as has been said, lies to the south of the church between the south transept and its west end. It consists of a central space, the garth or court surrounded on all sides by four walks, ambulatoires, covered by lean-to roofs borne by arcing open to the garth. No arcade in stone of a really early house remains in Ireland and it would appear probable that the first structures were built of wood. The examples which remain, generally in a very incomplete state, are of various dates from the late XIIth to the XVth century.

The walks or ambulatoires were the main arteries of the buildings affording access under cover to every part of the abbey. The northern walk, facing southward towards the enclosed garth, was used less as a passage than as a space for study and contemplation and has been called the working cloister.

THE DORMITORY RANGE.

The eastern processional doorway in the south aisle of the church faces and leads directly into the east walk of the cloister along which are usually ranged the apartments which compose the eastern or dormitory range usually in the following order: the common cupboard (for the books, etc., used in the cloister), the chapter room, the parlour or slype, the day stairs to the dormitory and some rooms of uncertain use at the south end. The upper story of the range is the dormitory of the monks extending from the transept often to some distance southwards of the other ranges.

In the chapter room or house (domus capitularis), the largest apartment in the ground story, the whole body of monks met together daily. At each meeting a chapter (capitulum) of the Order was read, and faults were confessed and corrected. The chapter house was, indeed, after the church, the most important centre of the life of the house, the scene of all kinds of inquiries and conventual meetings and activities.

In the earlier Irish houses it is usually a quite simple and unornamented vaulted structure, sometimes of no greater width than the range of buildings of which it formed a part but in other cases projecting eastwards from them. The doorway is often an important feature, but the windows are generally small and, to our ideas, inadequate.

Next in order comes the monks’ parlour (auditorium juxta capitulum) a narrow room sometimes used as a passage to the graveyard and to the infirmary, which lay detached to the east or south-east. The parlour, however, was not always so used, a separate passage being provided beside it in some houses.

The day stairs to the dormitory in early houses usually came next, but this position is not invariable; there are three possible places (see "X" on plan, Fig. 2) for it. Uncertainty exists as to the use of the remainder of the ground story of the east range; while in some houses it may have been the infirmary, in others the novice house or the calefactory lay in this part of the building.
As to the upper storey of the range, however, there is no doubt; it was occupied from end to end by the dormitory of the monks, a long and usually undivided apartment. At the north end a door gave access to the night stairs descending into the south transept of the church and along each wall were ranged the beds, each near a small window. At the extreme southern end another doorway led to the garderobe or latrine (domus necessarium) through the lower part of which a stream of water, the monastic drain, was directed.

THE SOUTH RANGE.

In the southern range of the claustral buildings are grouped the apartments of more mundane use. At the western end, adjoining the dormitory range, the calefactory or warming house is usually, though not invariably, found for the day stairs was sometimes in this position and the calefactory was in some cases, as has been said, beneath the south end of the dormitory. This room contained the only fireplace in the earlier buildings, excepting that in the kitchen, and was the place where the monks might meet and converse for a time at certain periods of the monastic day. South of it there was a fuel house in a small courtyard.

The largest and most important room in the range is the frater or refectory of the monks. Where the cloister was of large size or wide from east to west there was generally ample space between the calefactory and the kitchen to allow the frater to lie parallel with the church, i.e., from east to west. In cloisters of moderate or small size the frater usually lies at a right angle to this direction and projects southwards from the range. A serving hatch or "turn" in the west wall connected the frater with the kitchen and at some point in one of the longer walls there was an alocve with its floor elevated and containing a pulpit for the monk whose duty it was to read aloud to the brethren as they sat in silence at meals. Outside the refectory door, in the cloister walk or in a separate building in the garth, was the laver or lavabo for hand washing before and after meals. The Mellifont lavabo is just such a separate building, octagonal and once of great beauty. While a round lavabo building once existed at Dunbrody, the most usual form seems to have been a long stone basin or trough set in a recess in the frater wall.

No Irish kitchen remains in a perfect state but its position in the western end of the south range, as is usual, is obvious in most cases. It does not seem to have been a very large apartment in any Irish house, perhaps because the simplicity of the daily menu of the Order did not demand a large space for the preparation of food. Being served by the brethren themselves, it was included in the claustral buildings and not as in some other Orders which employed lay servants, in a building detached from the main block.

THE WESTERN OR CELLARER'S RANGE.

Almost all but the most scanty traces of the western ranges have disappeared from the Irish houses. Some, perhaps, never had a permanent building, but in the majority of cases it certainly existed and in a few it was rebuilt at later periods. In it there was—usually on the ground floor at the south end next the kitchen and communicating with it—the frater of the lay brethren. Next was the entrance passage to the cloister from the outer court, while the remaining space was occupied by cellars and stores and the cellarer's business room. Overhead on the upper floor was the dormitory of the lay-brethren who had a night stairs at the north end leading down into the south aisle of the church.

This completes the description of the plan of the cloister and its buildings so much ruined but still recognizable in Irish Cistercian establishments, and it only remains to treat of the other features of the buildings of the early period in more detail.

WINDOWS.

The typical windows of the buildings in the native Irish style up to the end of the X11th century were narrow externally, having tapering jambs and round heads, spaying widely towards the interior. In the early Cistercian buildings the round-headed, "Romanesque," lights were retained but the more important windows were made of greater width. The tapering jambs survived in some cases (Fig. 4, a) and an external rebate, perhaps for a wooden frame, became common. Later the jambs were chamfered externally with or without the rebate. The wide internal splay was retained for obvious reasons: to give as much and as wide a spread of light to the interior as the narrow
external opening could afford. The larger windows (c.f., the west windows at Monasternagh, Fig. 5) were sometimes surrounded by bold mouldings and, in most cases, provided with labels or hood-mouldings carried round the arches. The pointed arch in windows appears near the end of the XIIth century.

The clerestorey windows of the naves were often placed above the pillars of the arcades rather than over the arches (Fig. 3), a peculiarity of Irish Cistercian buildings and of other churches within the Cistercian sphere of influence.

Fig. 4. Typical windows: (a) and (d) Jerpoint transept and clerestorey, (b) and (c) Monasternagh.

Fig. 5. Monasternagh Abbey: West windows.
Fig. 6. Capitals, Jerpoint Abbey. Upper examples from transept chapels, lower from east end of nave.

Fig. 7. Capitals: Baltinglass Abbey.
DOORWAYS.

Few early doorways remain but such fragments as are extant show that the round-headed doorways in several orders characteristic of the Romanesque style but much less elaborately decorated than the Irish examples, were usual.

ARCHES, PILLARS AND CAPITALS.

The eastern arms of the earlier churches precede in date the naves with their arcades which usually belong to the Transitional period (from Romanesque to Gothic)—the last twenty years of the XIth century—which is characterised by bluntly pointed arches (Fig. 3). In one notable example, however, Boyle Abbey, the whole south arcade of the nave has round arches though belonging to the late XIth century. These are usually plain and unmoulded but are surmounted by chamfered hood mouldings with or without an angular groove or bead above the chamfer.

While the end piers of the arcades are square in plan, the other pillars often alternate between round and square forms or modifications of the square, i.e., with engaged shafts at the angles (Fig. 3). Usually the pillars are short on the nave side, resting on the screen or perpyn walls already mentioned and are continued to the base at the floor level on the aisle sides, the perpyn walls being of less thickness than the pillars themselves.

The capitals are usually square with square abacæ—similar in section to the hood mouldings—(Figs. 3, 6 and 7).

The earlier capitals, generally those at the eastern end of the church in the presbytery and transepts, are usually scalloped and often much of the form which is characteristic of the Irish Romanesque, i.e., block capitals of small projection decorated with superficially carved ornament. This ornament, however, is simpler and usually cruder than in the native work, though reminiscent of it and the characteristic heads or masks do not occur at the angles; it is, in effect, a compromise between the English (“Norman”) Romanesque and the Irish traditions. While the block or frieze form of the Irish capitals allowed a great freedom in decorative treatment the scallops of the Cistercian capitals conditioned their decoration which, none the less, shows considerable variety of invention (Figs. 6 and 7). Undulating strap work decorated with beads, floral sprays much stylized, D-shaped and angular bands, leaves, etc., combined ingeniously, and all in rather low relief prevail in the earlier work, while the plain cap with many scallops is characteristic of the later work and of the less important parts of the buildings.

BASES.

The bases of columns and pilasters have the slightness of projection which is characteristic not only of the Irish Romanesque but of the English (“Norman”) work coeval with it; they do not, however, present the decorative features of the native style and the bulbous Irish base appears only once (Baltyglass, this journal, vol. 1, p. 18, Fig. 11, g). In the earlier work, as at the transept chapels at Jerpoint, the bases are made up of a number of rather small mouldings with small carved spurs at the angles, but in the later work they are plainly moulded, consisting of a small roll surmounted by a hollow curve, as in the western parts of the same church. Towards the end of the XIth century the base roll becomes bolder beneath a narrow fillet—at the base of the pillar—and a deeper hollow (as at Boyle Abbey): an approximation to the classical attic base which seems to have been the model for the Gothic base mouldings of the following century. The larger circular column bases generally have bold and simple spurs at the angles of the square sub-base or plinth.