

# The History of the Monastic Site of Inis Cealtra, Co. Clare

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*The complex origins of the foundation of the early monastery on Inis Cealtra (Holy Island), in Lough Derg, County Clare, are discussed and the relevant rôles of Saints Mac Creiche, Colum and Caimín are examined in some detail. The history of the island monastery is outlined up to the large-scale excavations undertaken at the site between 1970 and 1980, a report on which will be published in the next issue of this Journal.*

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The history of the church of Inis Cealtra / Holy Island, in Lough Derg on the Shannon, goes back to the early days of Christianity in Ireland but its origins are most obscure. This reflects the obscurity of ecclesiastical origins in County Clare. There is no real evidence for any Christian presence in the county in the fifth century; for the sixth century we have only hagiographical myth and legend connected with Aran, Inis Cathaigh (Scattery), Inis Cealtra and a few other churches in the area. Inis Cealtra, however, was situated on the western edge of the 'monastic midlands', that region in which so much of the history of the beginnings of Irish monasticism was concentrated. Upstream, just across Lough Derg, was *Tír-dá-Glas* - Terryglass - on the Tipperary shore. On that side of the river too were Lorrha and Birr, and, farther east, Roscrea (see Illus. 1). Upriver were the great monasteries of Clonmacnoise and Clonfert. Downstream were *Tuaim Gréine* — Tomgraney — and Killaloe. The foundation of Inis Cealtra may antedate some of these, but they were all in their day monasteries of significant status.

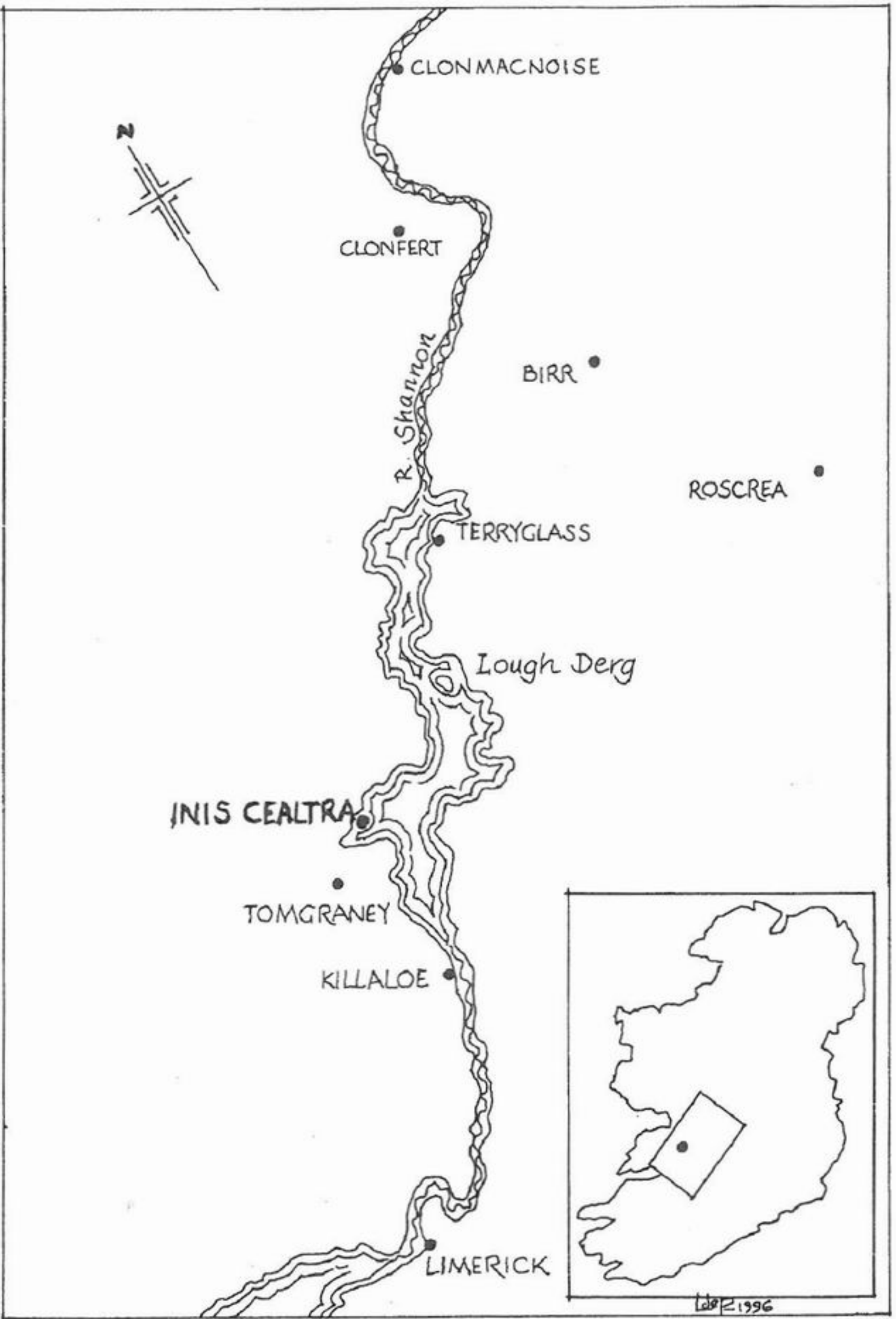
The earliest names associated with Inis Cealtra are those of mythological or fabulous persons. St Mac Creiche, whose cult is known from Kilmacreehy at Liscannor, and from Corcomroe,<sup>1</sup> is said to have spent some time on the island as a hermit. There is an account of his miracles in the Brussels MS 2324 (ff. 87-98), transcribed by Mícheál Ó Cléirigh in 1634 from a copy made for the coarb of Mac Creiche at Cell Mail Ódhráin (Killoran, Portroe, Co. Tipperary). It has a description of his anchorite's cell (which, however, was not located on the island, but in Cluain Í 'between Formael and Eidhnech', probably Cillín Formaoil—Formoyle—in Gleninagh, between Slieve Elva and Black Head in north-west Clare): 'This was the size of the structure, viz., four stones; to wit, a stone at the back, a stone at either side, and a stone in front'.<sup>2</sup> John Colgan, in his introduction to an account of a tenth-century St Columbanus of Ghent, refers to various anchorites and, turning to the early days of the Irish church, he lists Mac Creiche along with Kevin of Glendalough and Feichín of Fore.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>L. de Paor, 'St Mac Creiche of Liscannor,' *Ériu*, 33 (1979), 93-121.

<sup>2</sup>C. Plummer, *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica*, Brussels (1925), 'Life of Mac Creiche,' 7-96; see p. 53

<sup>3</sup>J. Colgan, *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, vol. 1, Louvain (1645), 238 ('Die Februarii, De S. Columbano Abbate, Gandavi sepulto.')



Illus. 1. Map showing location of Inis Cealtra.



According to the *Life* of St Colum of Terryglass, a 'certain old man by name Maccriche' was living on the island when Colum arrived there at the command of an angel.<sup>4</sup>

Mac Creiche, however, cannot be regarded as an historical character. It is unlikely that he ever existed in any shape that will have left a trace in history, still less in archaeology. St Colum of Terryglass is in a different category. His *Life*, as we have it, is fabulous, and no doubt draws on legendary and mythological lore for its episodes, many of them standard items of hagiography. His career, as supplied to us, in some respects doubles that of St Colum Cille. But he is associated, if only in legend, with that sixth-century monastic movement which was of considerable historical significance (even if it is obscure in detail) in the country at large and in the south-west midlands in particular.

According to his medieval *Life*, he was of royal Leinster stock, of the lineage of Crimthann. He was one of the pupils of that legendary teacher of abbots, Finnian of Clonard. He visited Rome and carried away from there relics of St Peter and St Paul, and at Tours, on his journey, he received relics of St Martin, who had prophesied his coming, and he placed them in a shrine of gold and silver. Then he went to Britain, where he converted pagans to the Christian faith; he returned to Leinster and was given a site called Ethar Gabul<sup>5</sup> for the foundation of a church, where he left his disciple Crónán, 'a foreigner'. Three other disciples attached themselves to him: Coimán of Enach Truim,<sup>6</sup> Fintán Moccu Echdach and Mocuime of Terryglass ('Mocuime of Terryglass'—Colum himself—is probably a misreading of 'Mocáeme', the form given in the notes on the *Calendar* of Oenghus for 13 December; the name of this third disciple, elsewhere in the *Life*, is given as 'Nadcáem'). His disciples wished him to settle at Glasnevin in Leinster, but he told them that place was designed by God for another, not yet born (Mobhí).<sup>7</sup> Then they came to Clonenagh, but left because of the crowds of people who attended them there. When they came to Slieve Bloom, they met a young cowboy named Sethne, dumb from birth, who spoke when Colum asked him to tell them their places of resurrection (*i.e.* the churches which they would found and in which they would die). The boy gave them this information. Colum sent Fintán to his enumerated place (Clonenagh), at which Nadcáem said:

"See — Fintán has reached his place. But what am I to do? Will I stay with you, as I dearly wish, or will you place me elsewhere?"

Colum said to him:

"Look to the west and see a lake stretching long and wide, on whose shore your city will be. You will be in the same city with me."

After this, Colum went to the province of Connacht, where he built a church named Tír Snámha in Uí Mhaine. He had other churches around Lough Derg—Aurraith, Tophilóc and Toim Bonden. But an angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: 'Rise and go to Inis Cealtra.' There he found the old man Mac Creiche, to whom the angel said: 'Leave this island and go to another place and be a monk there.' Which he did.

On the day Colum arrived on Inis Cealtra, according to the *Life*, the Lord made a feast for him. There was a lime tree (*tilia*) on the island, the sap of which filled a vessel, and this liquid had the potency and flavour of wine and honey. The motif of a solitary old man seated

<sup>4</sup>W.W. Heist, ed., *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, Brussels (1965): 'Vita S. Columbae abbatis de Tir da Glas,' 225-233; see p. 229.

<sup>5</sup>Addergoole, near Abbeylisk, Co. Laois.

<sup>6</sup>Anatrim, Offerlane, Co. Laois.

<sup>7</sup>This is a variant of a story told about another Colum, Colum Cille of Iona.



under a wonderful tree recurs in early hagiographical legend and probably has pre-Christian origins: the tree is a manifestation of the Otherworld.

One day, when he was sailing from Inis Cealtra on Lough Derg with his disciples Nadcáem and Fintán, he saw Terryglass and stood up in the boat with a sigh, saying: "Would that this were the place of my resurrection!" Afterwards, on Inis Cealtra, as formerly at Clonenagh, he discovered again that too many people were coming to see him and so he moved to another island, in the Shannon estuary, called Inis Erc<sup>8</sup>. He told a woman in Tradraighe that the son in her womb would offer Mass for him on the day of his death. This was Luchtigern, afterwards his disciple until his death.<sup>9</sup>

An angel visited Colum on Inis Erc with a letter from his master, Finnian of Clonard, who was dying and wished to receive the Sacrament from Colum. Colum in response completed the ten-day journey from Inis Erc to Clonard in one day to tend to Finnian. Then he went to Cluain Í<sup>10</sup>, and stayed overnight there with an alumnus of his. He ordered a bath prepared in the morning, explaining that the day of his death had arrived. He invited his disciple Luchtigern to share the bath and his death, but Luchtigern declined. At this, a common layman, an unbaptized pagan, volunteered to do so. Colum and he duly went to heaven; and at that very moment, St Colum Cille, in distant Iona, said to his monks:

"Brothers, pray, because my colleague Colum has done a great thing: he has brought a barbarous heathen with him to heaven, without the work of penance, on the model of Christ and his thief."

Colum was buried in Cluain Í for a year (or seven years). Then Nadcáem wished to bring his body to Terryglass, but he feared the Uí Néill might seize it. So he had twelve wagons filled with grain and he hid the shrine with the saint's bones under the grain in one of them. Six wagons went the long way round through Leinster. Six went to Clonmacnoise directly through the Uí Néill country. While the wagons were at Clonmacnoise, the guesthouse there, three times in the night, seemed to be in flames, but wasn't. The abbot Oenghus<sup>11</sup> asked for an explanation, and Nadcáem told him about the holy body hidden under the grain. Oenghus went on his knees and said:

"We give thanks to God that you have brought this treasure to us. May it remain here with us always."

Nadcáem begged him not to keep the body, and after some saintly bargaining Oenghus permitted them to go on.

They found a vessel ready for embarkation on the Shannon, but, as they set sail, the Uí Néill crowded down the river bank, and one of them, Colmán *Modicus*<sup>12</sup>, seized the tiller. Nadcáem said to him:

"Let us go; otherwise you will drop dead at once and there will be no king in your posterity, and you will be carried to hell."

Colmán let go, and they sailed on to Inis Cealtra, where the body of Colum rested for seven years. For three days there was no nightfall on Lough Derg.

<sup>8</sup>This island cannot now be identified. It would appear that there was another island nearby; so it may have been in the small archipelago at the mouth of the Fergus.

<sup>9</sup>Elsewhere an ally of Mac Creiche. He is entered in the martyrologies at 28 April. The *Life* of Mac Creiche says that he was venerated at Tuaim Findlocha in Tradraighe. Crónán of Roscrea is also said to have been 'of Tuaim Findlocha.'

<sup>10</sup>This must refer to the Cluain Í at Clonard which was St Finnian's retreat. Note that Mac Creiche's hermitage was at Cluain Í, identified by his hagiographer as being in north-west Clare.

<sup>11</sup>Oenghus, the immediate successor of Ciarán, died in 570 (*AD*), at the same time as St Ita, according to the stories.

<sup>12</sup>Colmán Beg, son of Diarmait mac Cerbaill and brother of the Southern Uí Néill king Colmán Már. He died, according to the annals, in 587.



Throughout those seven years the Uí Néill besieged Terryglass, to see when the relics of Colum would be brought there. In spite of this, one night Nadcáem ferried the relics to Terryglass from Inis Cealtra. On that night all of Terryglass seemed to be on fire, and again, there was no nightfall for three days over Lough Derg. The Uí Néill were surrounding Terryglass, but one of their saints said:

"Let us abandon this effort. This is the place the saint chose; and here his body will rest for eternity."

The Uí Néill gave up their attempt to seize Colum's relics. Their efforts to hijack the body of Colum are paralleled in stories told of St Patrick, St Abbán and St Fainche, among others.<sup>13</sup>

Colum, who may have been the founder of the monastery of Inis Cealtra,<sup>14</sup> if he ever existed (which he probably did—although not in the character of his legend), died, we are told, *ca.* 549, of the 'Crom Chonaill' (the sixth-century plague which travelled westward across Europe, and is sometimes referred to as 'Justinian's Plague' because it spread from the East when that emperor reigned in Byzantium). The stories told of him, however would place him about a generation or so later than this in time. His successors were Nadcáemh, Fintán and Colmán Stellán. Fintán died in 606 (*AI*). Colmán Stellán died, according to the annals in 624 (*AU*) or 625 (*AI*), but Colgan puts him into the middle of the seventh century, calling him 'abbot of Inis Cealtra'<sup>15</sup> and identifying him as the presbyter Scellanus who is among those addressed in the letter of the Pope-elect John IV in 640 concerning the Easter controversy. In this Colgan is probably mistaken.<sup>16</sup> The *Lebar Brecc* notes to the *Calendar of Oenghus* give alternative successions of abbots 'of Terryglass and Clonenagh': '*colum natcaéim finntan colman stellae*' and '*fintan moeldub natcaéim*.'<sup>17</sup>

A separate foundation on Inis Cealtra, perhaps leading to a distinct monastic tradition, is attributed, round about this date, to St Caimín, reputed to be uterine brother of Guaire Aidhne, king of Connacht (along with a very large number of other saints, all of them children of the same woman, Cumman, daughter of Dallbrónach).<sup>18</sup> There are difficulties about the date of Caimín, as of Stellán. His death is reported in 654 by *AI*, but his name is listed among those attending the synod of Eas Dara (Ballysodare) said to have been convened by St Columba in the sixth century.<sup>19</sup> Caimín again can hardly be regarded as more than pseudo-historical: the traditions attached to him are fabulous or mythological. He may indeed be a double or shadow of Mac Creiche. Colgan, in the short account he gives of Caimín, writes that he has drawn upon *Acta* of that saint, attributed to St Dalbach<sup>20</sup>. However, he reports that these contained much 'fabulous and apocryphal' material which he has omitted.

<sup>13</sup>Muirchú, in the seventh century tells of a war between the (Northern) Uí Néill and the Airthir in contention for Patrick's relics: L. Bieler, ed., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Dublin (1979), 120. A similar conflict between the peoples of northern and southern Leinster for the bones of St Abbán is described in that saint's *Life*: W.W. Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, Brussels (1965), 273. For St Fainche, see Colgan *Acta Sanctorum*, 1.

<sup>14</sup>See J. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland*, vol. 1, *Ecclesiastical*, New York (1929), 385.

<sup>15</sup>According to the *Martyrology of Tallaght* (May 24), he died 'on Inis Cealtra.'

<sup>16</sup>Kenney, *op. cit.*, 221-222; Colgan, *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae*, 17, note. The letter was addressed: 'Tomiano, Columbano, Cronano, Dinnao, et Baithano episcopis; Cromano, Erniano, Laisrano, Scellano et Segeno presbyteris; Sarano ceterisque doctoribus seu abbatibus Scottis.' The source is Bede, *Hist. Eccles.*, II xix.

<sup>17</sup>Whitley Stokes, ed. *On the Calendar of Oengus*, London (1880), xc.

<sup>18</sup>Colgan, *A.S.H.*, 746-747.

<sup>19</sup>R.A.S. Macalister, in 'The History and Antiquities of Inis Cealtra,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 33, C (1916), 93-174, says that St Caimín attended the convention of Druim Ceat, but I can find no source for this. Colgan, in his account of St Farranán (*A.S.H.*, 336 ff.), describes the convention of Druim Ceat and follows it with an account of the other gathering, listing 'Caiminus de Inis Kealtra' among those present. But it is also Colgan who reports the relationship to Guaire Aidhne.

<sup>20</sup>Of Cúil Collainge in Uí Liatháin, in what is now Co. Cork.



He tells that Caimín, who 'shone about A.D. 640', wishing to withdraw from the world, betook himself to the island in Lough Derg known as Inis Keltra, 'on the borders of Thomond and the county of Galway'. When he had spent some years there 'withdrawn from human society', practising fasts, vigils, penance and heavenly contemplation, and fighting a hard battle against 'the world and the devil', the fame of his miracles and of his most austere régime began to draw numerous disciples in admiration and imitation of him. Because of the fame of its founder and the great number of holy men living there in peace, Caimín's island came to be counted among the most outstanding of ascetic communities and to be an asylum for fugitives, a city of refuge.

In this connection it is worth noting that Kuno Meyer cites a text which says that the three *athlaich* of Ireland were Enda of Aran, Colmán mac Leníne (of Cloyne) and Mochammóc (i.e. Caimín) of Inis Cealtra.<sup>21</sup> The term *athláech* referred to someone who had lived a sinful, usually violent or military, life in the world before embracing the monastic life in old age.

Colgan goes on to quote a story told by a glossator of the *Calendar of Oenghus*.<sup>22</sup> Cuimíne Fota, successor of St Brendan at Clonfert (who died, according to *AI*, in 661), and Guaire Aidhne and Caimín held conversation on Inis Cealtra, in which they described, each in turn, what they would wish to see filling the church of Inis Cealtra — gold and silver for Guaire, books and writings for Cuimíne, diseases and infirmities for Caimín.<sup>23</sup> Each of the three obtained his desire. In this passage the word *basilica* is used of the church—*utinam haberem tot sacros codices, quot haec Basilica capere posset*. The term is usually applied in Ireland to a church which housed relics brought from Rome (e.g. the *Basilica Sanctorum*, the church of St Sacellus near Cruachu, at Baslick, Co. Roscommon). And we are told in the *Life* of Colum of Terryglass, that he brought back to Ireland relics of Peter, Paul and Martin of Tours.

We have therefore accounts of three different saints (if they are not simply three variations on a single theme) each of whom is reported to have been in some sense the founder of Inis Cealtra. The *Lives* intersect and overlap, so that it would almost appear that Mac Creiche, Colum of Terryglass, and Caimín are versions or aspects of the same semi-mythical person. Inis Cealtra in its beginnings, however, appears to have had an emphasis on extreme austerity and a reputation for hermits. And it is connected with Terryglass and Clonenagh, east of the Shannon. With the figure of St Caimín, a Connacht connection is established. And, as suggested above, it may have had a reputation for housing major relics. It would also appear that the beginnings of the monastery may go back to the late sixth century (whether as a full monastery or as a hermitage).

At this time, after a long period of conflict and change, a new political geography had taken shape in Ireland which was to last, with modifications, for some centuries. In this geography, Inis Cealtra occupied a frontier position. Early in the sixth century, as a result of the Uí Néill expansion from the north-west, the rulers of Leinster, after prolonged intermittent warfare, had lost the broad midlands stretching across the country from the Liffey and the Barrow to the Shannon. The 'Southern Uí Néill' (represented by Diarmait mac Cerbhaill, who died in 565, and his sons Colmán Már, who died in 558, and Áed Sláine, who died in 604) had consolidated their position in that area. West of the Shannon, the other major branch of 'the descendants of Conn' — who retained the name 'Connachta' — was

<sup>21</sup>Kuno Meyer, *Contributions to Irish Lexicography*, vol. 1, part 1, Halle (1906), 150

<sup>22</sup>See also R.I. Best and O. Bergin, ed., *Lebor na h-Uidre, the Book of the Dun Cow*, Dublin (1929), 289-290; Whitley Stokes, ed., *Lives of Irish Saints from the Book of Lismore*, Oxford (1890), 304.

<sup>23</sup>Aubrey Gwynn points out that this is based on St Paul, *Col.* i. 24, in Gwynn and Gleeson, *History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, 25.



also expansive, pressing down into the hills of the Burren. In Munster, the looser federation of dynastic kin-groups, the Eóganachta, whose royal centre was the Christian focus of Cashel, was expanding at the expense of Leinster and of older dominant groups all over the south and south-west. Their fighting client-allies, the Déisi, were pressing northwards into Clare into the territory of the Corco Modruad (whose champion Mac Creiche was said to be, although his efforts are portrayed as defending them mainly against the Connachta). These northern Déisi, who ultimately occupied south-eastern Clare, were later to be known as Dál gCais. In effect, Inis Cealtra lay between Munster and Connacht.

Stories of re-foundations of monasteries in the seventh century are associated with several sites in the midlands (e.g. Tech Theille and Rahan) and may reflect ecclesiastical territorial disputes of the time (which in turn reflect the political changes). This is possibly the case with Inis Cealtra.

Little is known of the monastery for some centuries. It may have been a dependency of Terryglass and Clonenagh. St Coelán, otherwise Chilenus, Colan or Coonlan, of Inis Cealtra<sup>24</sup> and Youghalarra<sup>25</sup> (ob. ca. A.D. 750<sup>26</sup>), to whom a metrical *Life* of St Brigid is attributed by Colgan,<sup>27</sup> had a cult at St Crónán's church of Tomgraney nearby. 'St Coonlan's *bachall*', the reputed staff or crozier of the saint, was in the possession of its hereditary keepers, the O'Hogans, until the early nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

The author of the metrical *Life* has been identified by Esposito<sup>29</sup> and Kissane<sup>30</sup> as the Irishman Donatus, Bishop of Fiesole ca. 829-76. A passage copied by Colgan, a blundering decipherment by some medieval scribe (perhaps from the Lough Derg area) of an exemplar he had difficulty in making out at this point, has given rise to a false notion that the monks of Inis Cealtra in pre-Viking times followed the rule of St Benedict. This idea may safely be dismissed.

The obits of two abbots of Inis Cealtra are recorded, Diarmait in 762 (*AI*) and Muchtighern son of Cellach in 785 (*AU*), suggesting that the island had an independent or autonomous monastic existence in the eighth century. On another island in the lake, Mucinis, not identified, there was a monastery or perhaps hermitage founded by St Riagaill. There are no other records of the pre-Viking period.

In the years after A.D. 837 (*AU*) Viking ships and fleets were active on the Shannon, and Inis Cealtra was plundered, its community being dispersed, according to *AC. Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* gives a characteristically colourful account of Tuirgéis's depredations at this time,<sup>31</sup> The Four Masters record the death in 898 of Coscrach *truaghán* ('the miserable'), an anchorite of the island. In 922 Tomrar son of Elgi, 'Jarl of the Foreigners', sailed up the

<sup>24</sup>R.I. Best and H.J. Lawlor, *The Martyrology of Tallaght*, Henry Bradshaw Society, Vol. 68, London (1931), 59 (July 29).

<sup>25</sup>On the Tipperary shore directly across the river from Inis Cealtra.

<sup>26</sup>In 551, however, according to *Annals of the Four Masters*.

<sup>27</sup>See the discussion in D.N. Kissane, 'Vita Metrica Sanctae Brigidae: a critical edition with introduction, commentary and indexes,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 77, C (1977), 57-192. Also: J. Kenney, *op. cit.*, 361; A. Gwynn and D. Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, Dublin (1962), 32.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas O'Connor, *Ordnance Survey Letters*, Tipperary, typescript edn., vol. 3. In his letter, written from Roscrea on October 21, 1840, O'Connor says that 'St Cunlan's' festival date is July 25 or 29; 'Some say it took place eleven days before 1st August.' He writes that the crozier is in the possession of 'a family of the Hogans.' Dennis Hogan, 'who is a tailor and lives in the townland of Craggane about one mile south-south-east from Youghal village. . . It is said that Dennis himself is in possession of this relic at present. It is described as being made of some kind of wood with a brass image on it.'

<sup>29</sup>Mario Esposito, *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (Jan. 1932), 129 ff.

<sup>30</sup>D.N. Kissane, 'Vita Metrica Sanctae Brigidae: a critical edition with introduction, commentary and indexes,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 77, C (1977), 57-192.

<sup>31</sup>J.H. Todd, ed., *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, London (1867), 12



river from Limerick and, according to *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, plundered Inis Cealtra and threw its books and reliquaries into the water.<sup>32</sup>

Rebachán son of Mothla, king of the East Clare dynasty of Dál Cais, was abbot of Tomgraney; he died in 934. The later king Cennétig son of Lorcán (who died in 951) and his sons Mathgamain and Brian Bóruma fought their way to the kingship of Munster and on the way established a firm control of Thomond. This rise to prominence of Dál Cais brought patronage to Inis Cealtra.

The Four Masters record two more obits in this period, those of Diarmait son of Caicher, bishop, in 951, and Máel Gorm son of Máel Cellaigh, abbot, in 967. *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, recounting the works of Brian Bóruma, says that he built the churches of Killaloe and Inis Cealtra, and the *cloictheach* of Tomgraney.<sup>33</sup> And in 1010 (*AU*) is recorded the death of Brian's brother Marcán, who was 'coarb of Colum mac Cremhthainn and of Inis Cealtra and of Cell-Dalua.' This entry suggests—apart from its clear indication that Dál Cais had moved into full possession of the island—that Inis Cealtra then was regarded as a foundation of Colum of Terryglass. It was at any rate, in the eleventh century, a Munster rather than a Connacht monastery. A tradition that the church of Dromineer, across the river, was founded but quickly abandoned by monks from Inis Cealtra, may again reflect territorial disputes.<sup>34</sup>

In 1033 (*AI*) Conn Ua Sinnaig, 'anchorite of Ireland', died on Inis Cealtra. Ten years later, according to the chronicle of Marianus Scottus, there died at Fulda, in Germany, another anchorite, the *inclusus* Anmchad, a monk of Inis Cealtra, who had been banished by his superior Corcram (*recte* Corcran—) for an offence against monastic obedience.<sup>35</sup> In 1076 (*AI*) Gormflaith daughter of Ua Focarta, died at Killaloe, and was buried on Inis Cealtra. She was the wife of Toirdelbach Ua Briain, who at the time of her death had gone a long way towards achieving recognition as High King of Ireland.

It was the Connacht-connected St Caimín who was to replace Colum in the local tradition of these later times. It was to him that an eleventh-twelfth-century fragment of a psalter now in the Franciscan Library in Dublin was attributed. Mícheál Ó Cléirigh obtained it from Flann and Bernard Mac Bruaidhedha, who lived in the *termonn* of St Caimín, and from Diarmaid Ó Duibhceartaigh; from them he recorded a tradition that the psalter was written by St Caimín.<sup>36</sup>

In 1111 (*AI*) Cathasach, 'head of the piety of Ireland', died on the island. He is described on his cross, which is now fixed to the inner face of the north wall of St Caimin's Church, as 'Árdsenóir Érenn.'<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that Cathasach was the contemporary of the

<sup>32</sup>Todd, *op. cit.*, 38

<sup>33</sup>Todd, *op. cit.*, 138-140

<sup>34</sup>A. Gwynn and D.F. Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, Dublin (1961), 88: 'Local tradition has it that the church was founded from Iniscealtra, but that the monks left the church before it was completed and that Mass was never said in it.'

<sup>35</sup>B. MacCarthy, *The Codex Palatino-Vaticanus*, Dublin (1892), 31-32

<sup>36</sup>Mario Esposito, 'On the so-called Psalter of Saint Caimin,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 22,C (1913), 78-88. See also Kenney, *op. cit.*, 646-647.

<sup>37</sup>For the significance of the Irish word *senóir*, see John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism*, Dublin (1931, reprint 1972), 271: 'Round the abbot stood the *seniores*, or elder brethren (in Irish *sruthi*, sometimes *senóri*), men who had grown old in the practice of virtue. Offices of authority were filled regularly from their ranks, so that the word *senior* in Irish usage suggests seniority and connotes the duty of obedience... The term *senior* in the sense which it bears in Ireland is common to the whole monastic literature of the West, as may be seen from the works of Cassian, where it appears almost on every page.' See also Aubrey Gwynn, 'Saint Anselm and the Irish Church,' in G. O'Brien, ed., Aubrey Gwynn, SJ, *The Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, pp. 99-100: '...the old Irish word *senóir* is an ecclesiastical term of ancient significance, denoting special dignity at a time where the normal hierarchical grades were unknown in a system which was still predominantly monastic.'



first two bishops of Killaloe (even before territorial dioceses were firmly established), each of whom had some claim to be regarded, in one sense or another, as the chief Irish ecclesiastic in his time. These were Domnall Ua hEnna (ob. 1098), himself described as 'Senior' in a letter addressed in 1094 or 1095 by St Anselm (consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in 1093) 'to the reverend fellow-bishops, Senior Domnaldus, Donatus and others in the island of Ireland who are eminent by pontifical dignity',<sup>38</sup> and Maol Muire Ua Dúnáin, who, as Gwynn has shown, was the first Irish papal legate. Ua Dúnáin, formerly Bishop of Meath, is described in a charter copied in the Book of Kells as *ind epscop Óa Dúnán .i. senóir Leithe Cuind*. It would seem he was chosen by the powerful king Muirchertach Ua Briain to replace Ua hEnna in Killaloe, and succeeded Ua hEnna also as leader of the church reform in Ireland at the beginning of the twelfth century. He presided, in his legatine capacity, at the Synod of Cashel in 1001, when that site was given by Ua Briain to the church. When the bishopric of Armagh became vacant in 1106, the abbot of that church, Cellach, came south to collect in Munster the dues of Armagh as coarb of Patrick; there, according to AU, he was consecrated Bishop of Armagh 'with the consent of the men of Ireland'.<sup>39</sup> The presence of the Armagh cleric Cathasach, 'chief senior of Ireland', on Inis Cealtra is probably connected with these events associated with the church reform.

The disconnected references are insufficient to sketch other than the most nugatory monastic history of the island; but they suggest that it continued to be regarded in particular as a place of retreat, penance—and burial—and that it had early achieved the reputation which caused it to be known in later centuries as *Insula Sanctorum* or 'Holy Island.'

In the course of the twelfth century, territorial dioceses were established, and these absorbed some of the old monasteries, which became, with their termon lands, diocesan parishes. Of this process, Dermot F. Gleeson wrote:

There can be little doubt that, wherever there was an existing coarbship with termon lands of an ancient monastery, these lands became a diocesan parish, of which, as we have explained, the coarb became the rector or *parochus*, even though he might be only a simple cleric or even a lay man. The very parochial names demonstrate this, e.g. Lorrha, Terryglass, Iniscealtra, Latteragh, Kyle, Roscrea, Dromcliffe, Rath, Dysert, etc., at all of which there was an extensive termon and a coarb family.<sup>40</sup>

This appears to have happened effectively to Inis Cealtra at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Gwynn has argued that, stimulated by the reforming zeal of Toirdelbhach Ua Briain and Muirchertach Ua Briain, the ecclesiastics of Killaloe organised it as a territorial diocese at a very early date, even before the synod of Ráith Bresail (1111). However, the material evidence (partly architectural—the distinctively Irish-monastic scatter of Romanesque churches—and partly in other features of the layout, such as the inscribed slabs in the 'Saints' Graveyard') suggests that Inis Cealtra remained monastic throughout the twelfth century. The stone church of St Caimin, for example—almost certainly built under the patronage of Brian Bóruma—was enlarged about 1150 or a little later, and the small church of St Brigid, which conforms wholly to the monastic pattern of building, dates from the second half of the century. Dermot Gleeson wrote that:

The area now comprised in the diocese of Killaloe had contained within it at least six of the very greatest and most notable monasteries of the golden age: Terryglass, Lorrha,

<sup>38</sup>See Gwynn, *The Irish Church in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, 99.

<sup>39</sup>See Gwynn, *op. cit.*, 116-122.

<sup>40</sup>Dermot F. Gleeson in Gwynn and Gleeson, *History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, 308-309.



Monaincha, Roscrea, Iniscealtra and Iniscathaig. To judge by the annalistic entries it seems probable that at all of these, save possibly at Monaincha and Iniscealtra, the practice of religious life in a monastic community had almost ceased by the twelfth century.<sup>41</sup>

According to AC, a convocation of clergy was held in Connacht in 1210, the Archbishop of Tuam presiding, which annexed the termon lands of the monastic coarbs and attached them to the bishoprics in which they lay. Since St Mary's, the medieval parish church on Inis Cealtra, appears to date from very shortly after 1210, it is possible that Inis Cealtra was in some irregular way subject to Tuam at this date.<sup>42</sup> This final transfer of the lands (with the coarbs) of the old Irish monastic system, however, may have taken place in Thomond at about the same date. At any rate, the church of Holy Island (known in later medieval times as *Insula Sanctorum*) became a parish church.<sup>43</sup> The family of Maol Omphile provided the incumbents over a long period.<sup>44</sup> The coarbs, in later times at least, were drawn from the local family of Daly. The earliest extant list of diocesan parishes in Killaloe is the taxation of 1302-06, when the parish was valued for taxation at 3 marks.<sup>45</sup> The church of the island appears to have continued to be a parish church ('to which a number of chapels are subject' in 1422<sup>46</sup>) until the Reformation.<sup>47</sup>

There is an interesting reference to the island in *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh*,<sup>48</sup> in a passage which tells how Brian Bane Mac Donall marched into Corcomroe to oppose Murtough O'Brien, who had deposed his brother. But Murtough mustered such a host against him that he retreated hastily, and advised his men to flee into Connacht, saying he himself would seek refuge on Inis Cealtra. He and his men threw away their armour when they fled.

How long the parish church on Inis Cealtra continued to function is uncertain; perhaps until the end of the sixteenth century. Then, however, it appears that the church roofs were stripped, along with other destruction. Bishop Rider in his visitation of 1615 says of Inis Cealtra, 'Cure not served, being an island and but one house'.<sup>49</sup> The local families of Daly and O'Grady were gradually displaced in the locality and the parish lands came into the possession of Richard Boyle, Earl of Cork, but were subject for a while to the fluctuating fortunes of the landlord families in the course of civil wars and confiscations or transfer of lands.

By this time the island had already become the scene of a great annual pilgrimage or 'pattern', which continued until the nineteenth century, when it was suppressed by the

<sup>41</sup>D. F. Gleeson, in Gwynn and Gleeson, *History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, 198.

<sup>42</sup>The Synod of Kells (1152) assigned the diocese of Killaloe to Cashel. See Sylvester Malone, *A Church history of Ireland from its invasion by the English in MCLXIX to the beginning of the Reformation in MDXXXII*, Dublin (1863), 18. But Inis Cealtra may have been subject to Tuam although it was in the diocese of Killaloe. T.J. Westropp, in 'The Churches of County Clare and the Origin of the Ecclesiastical Divisions in that County,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 22 (1900), 121, writes: 'Clonrush and Inishcaltra were assigned to Galway before 1610 (Speed's map)... It evidently took place gradually, as there is an Elizabethan map in the Hardiman collection (T.C.D. collection) in which Inishcaltra is shown in Thomond, and Clonrush in Galway. They are understood to have been restored to Clare in 1898 under the Local Government Act.'

<sup>43</sup>See T.J. Westropp, 'The Churches of Co. Clare, and the Origins of the Ecclesiastical Divisions of that County,' *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 22 (1900), 100-316.

<sup>44</sup>See D.F. Gleeson, 'The Coarbs of Killaloe Diocese,' *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland* 129 (1949), 167.

<sup>45</sup>Sweetman, *Ecclesiastical Taxation of Ireland*, 300

<sup>46</sup>Papal letters quoted by R.A.S. Macalister, *op. cit.* (fn. 20).

<sup>47</sup>D. Gleeson in Gwynn and Gleeson, *History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, 323.

<sup>48</sup>Standish Hayes O'Grady, ed., *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* by John MacRoty Magrath, Irish Texts Society, 27 (1925), 82-84.

<sup>49</sup>Gleeson, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiqs. Ireland*, 129, 167. D. F. Gleeson, in Gwynn and Gleeson, *History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, 198.



Roman Catholic clergy. Assemblies of 15,000 people are reported in the seventeenth century.<sup>50</sup> In 1837 Lewis reported that 'the island is still a favourite burial-place and is much visited by pilgrims'.<sup>51</sup> Even after the suppression of the pattern (which is most fully described in the Ordnance Survey Letters) two of the island's graveyards continued to be used for burial, as they still are to this day.

We have a reference to Inis Cealtra in 1794, in a long poem by Mícheál ó Braonáin (who worked in Co. Roscommon as a scribe for O'Connor of Belnagare) on the River Shannon and its islands:

*... 'S an seachtmhadh céad do'n achair Chríostamhail  
Do chuir Naomh Caimín, triath be meisneamhail  
Seacht dTeampla s's Clogás árd le coimhneart  
A n-Inis Cealtrach a meódhan Loch Deirgeart...'*<sup>52</sup>

[In the seventh century of the Christian era Saint Caimín,  
a prince who was courageous, put seven churches  
and a high belltower by sheer strength in Inishcaltra  
in the middle of Lough Derg...]

The Ordnance Survey Letter on Inis Cealtra is dated Mountrath, November 19, 1838, and is by T. O'Connor (in the Galway volume), with annotations by John O'Donovan (in the Clare volume). O'Connor gives an account of the 'patron'.<sup>53</sup>

A guidebook printed 'for the Railway Companies' in 1853 refers to Inis Cealtra, with an illustration showing St Caimin's Church and the Round Tower. Its account is brief.<sup>54</sup> In 1863 a group of British tourists visited Inis Cealtra and they were shocked at the state of the island. In one of the churches there was a pig-sty, 'like the shanties in which tenants evicted by the crowbar brigades try to cover their heads', while cattle roamed over the unprotected burial ground.<sup>55</sup> Subsequently Rev. M.J. Kenny, P.P., Scarriff, obtained the co-operation of the landlord, Philip Reade, to have something done about this. The ruins and other monuments came into the care of the State as a result of the Church Disestablishment Act of 1869,<sup>56</sup> and in August 1878, Sir Thomas Deane, Superintendent of Irish National Monuments, came to the area.<sup>57</sup> Two years later it was reported that the Board of Works had repaired the cemetery attached to St Caimin's Church, while the Scarriff Board of Guardians was bound to do the same for the cemetery attached to St Mary's Church. Much more work was also done at this time.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>50</sup>Macalister, *op. cit.*, 109, quoting *Calendar of State Papers*, 240.

<sup>51</sup>S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, vol. 2, London (1837), 18.

<sup>52</sup>R.I.A. MS 23 B 27. Mícheál Ó Braonáin, *Príomhshruith Éireann*, Limerick (1994), p. 57, verse 233 — the translation is on p. 56.

<sup>53</sup>O.S. Letters (Galway), Vol. 2, 196-197, typed transcript.

<sup>54</sup>*Illustrated Hand-Book for Ireland*, London (1953), 152-153.

<sup>55</sup>*Munster News*, September 5, 1863.

<sup>56</sup>*The Irish Church Act, 1869* (the Disestablishment Act) transferred to the State a number of important ecclesiastical sites, the property up to then of the Church of Ireland, which by any reckoning rated as historical monuments. The old Board of Works took over the task of maintaining them, a task which it discharged for a long time simply by retaining an architect in private practice (Victorian architecture being a 'learned' profession in the sense that architects were expected to be familiar with the details of earlier styles and modes of construction) to advise on conservation works. The works were directed by clerks of works in the employ of the Board, who in turn hired masons and workmen.

<sup>57</sup>*Munster News*, June 26, 1880.

<sup>58</sup>*Munster News*, June 26, 1880.

Its antiquities have been very fully discussed in several accounts. The Ordnance Survey Letters have already been referred to. Richard Brash gave a detailed description, with notices of the historical references and with illustrations of the monuments, in 1866.<sup>59</sup> Westropp visited the island in 1877.<sup>60</sup> The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland, having taken over the island, had it inspected by Sir Thomas Deane 1878.<sup>61</sup> The Board then carried out works, and published a report, with drawings of the monuments, in 1880.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, in 1916, Macalister published a detailed illustrated account of the visible remains on Inis Cealtra, together with a thorough investigation of the historical sources.<sup>63</sup> A further detailed discussion of the island's early history was published by Fr Aubrey Gwynn in 1962.<sup>64</sup>

#### ABBREVIATIONS USED IN TEXT

AC	Annals of Clonmacnoise
AI	Annals of Inisfallen
ASH	Acta Sanctorum Hibernia
AU	Annals of Ulster

<sup>59</sup>Richard R. Brash, 'Inishcaltra and its Remains,' *The Gentleman's Magazine* (January 1866), 7-22

<sup>60</sup>T.J. Westropp, 'The Churches of County Clare...', 118

<sup>61</sup>File in the Office of Public Works, Dublin.

<sup>62</sup>*48th Report from the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland 1879-80*, Dublin (1880), 73, 'Appendix D'

<sup>63</sup>R.A.S. Macalister, *op. cit.*

<sup>64</sup>Rev. Aubrey Gwynn, S.J. and Dermot F. Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, Dublin (1962), 23-29.