Inis Cealtra: Archaeological Investigations of the Monuments on the Island

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This summary account of the excavations on Inis Cealtra (Holy) Island on Lough Derg, conducted in the decade 1970-80, was written shortly before the author's death in 1998. The original text was later edited and prepared for intended publication by Professor Étienne Rynne.†

Introduction
In 1968 a joint committee, of Córas Iompar Éireann and of Shannonside Tourism prepared a report on the development and promotion of the island known as Holy Island, or Inis Cealtra (Inishcealtra), in County Clare (Illus.1). It recommended that the island be developed as a place of interest for visitors. Ruins of churches and other structures and artifacts on Inis Cealtra were in the care of the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland as a National Monument, and the report suggested that the Office of Public Works should carry out some works on these. In 1969 I sought the co-operation of the Director of National Parks and Monuments in a long-term programme of research, which might be coupled with conservation, on the monastic remains on the island. This was agreed. Archaeological excavation began in 1970 and was continued until 1980, work proceeding in every summer season in that period except for 1978. Conservation and repair were also carried out by the Office of Public Works.

The excavations were financed by State grants administered by the Office of Public Works, the allocation of funds being recommended by the Archaeological Exploration Committee (subsequently the National Committee for Archaeology) of the Royal Irish Academy. Many people worked on the excavations or helped in other ways, and these are listed in a forthcoming monograph on the island1 and also in the detailed report, copies of which have been deposited with the Department of Arts, Heritage, the Gaeltacht and the Islands, with the Royal Irish Academy, with the National Museum of Ireland and with the County Library in Ennis, Co. Clare.2 The report, of which this is a summary, was prepared with the aid of further funding from the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht (as it then was) on the recommendation of the National Committee for Archaeology.

Present-day Inis Cealtra
St Caimin's Church, so called by Macalister and in the Ordnance Survey letters, and by the people of the locality, is a building of several periods of construction. It was originally a single-celled building, with antae, in roughly coursed mortared stone, no doubt with a trabeated doorway. The remaining more westerly window in the south wall is of the first period of building, which is most probably of the time of Brian Boruma (see Illus. 2). A Romanesque doorway was later made in the west wall, and a Romanesque chancel was inserted between the eastern antae. At some much later time a bell-cote was

1 This has not been published (Hon. Editor).
2 All the finds from the excavation have been deposited in the National Museum, where the acquisition prefix for the site is E180. A selection of the more interesting and important finds is included here (Illus. 20-35).
contrived in the east gable, and the building was extensively restored by the Board of Works in 1879-80. In particular, much of the west gable was rebuilt and the doorway was wholly reconstructed from the ground up.\footnote{See Liam de Paor and Deirdre Glenn, ‘St Caimin’s, Inis Cealtra: Reconstruction of the Doorway’, NMAJ., 36 (1995) pp 87-103.}

Nearby, to the west and slightly to the south of this building is the Round Tower, which lacks its upper storey and probably was never complete. It may be contemporary, or nearly so, with the early part of St Caimin’s, being in similar masonry. To the east of St Caimin’s lies the burial ground known as ‘the Saints’ Graveyard,’ which has a rebuilt boundary wall of some original antiquity. Within are numbers of grave-slabs with inscriptions in Irish. There is also in the graveyard a small ruined building which is recorded as Teampal na bhFear nGonta (literally, ‘the Church of the Wounded Men’). This was extensively reconstructed, probably about 1700, but the original building, a Romanesque structure with square quoin-shafts, seems to date from ca. 1200.

Just to the north-east of the Saints’ Graveyard is the very curious small structure, recorded as ‘the Confessional’ in the Ordnance Survey Letters, which has been the subject of much speculation (see below and Illus. 12, 13). Just to the north of this area are the foundations of a two-roomed cottage. St Caimin’s Church stands at the eastern edge of a complex of earthworks, consisting of low banks forming small enclosures, with paths, trenches or drains between them. At the crest of the island, some distance to the west of St Caimin’s, is a D-shaped enclosure, marked by a bank with outer fosse. Within is a smaller enclosure, with the foundations of a tiny building, described in the Ordnance Survey Letters as ‘a very small chapel which is called St Michael’s’. The precincts within which this foundation is seen is called Garaidh MhicHiil.

South of St Michael’s is a small enclosure, marked before excavation by a bank on three sides and a masonry wall on the fourth, within which stands the small ruined church recorded in the Ordnance Survey Letters as ‘the Baptism Church,’ but named ‘St Brigid’s’ by Macalister. The building has an ornamented Romanesque doorway of the middle of the twelfth century. This, with its gable, had fallen in the early nineteenth century but was rebuilt by the Board of Works in 1879-80.

South of St Brigid’s Church is the largest church on the island, St Mary’s, originally built in the early thirteenth century, but much reconstructed subsequently. It has a west doorway with a slightly pointed arch and a simple moulding of early-thirteenth-century date. The lower part of a triple-lancet east window remains. This was obviously the medieval parish church. Its surrounding graveyard is nowadays used for burial, and no excavation was conducted here. To the south-east of St Mary’s is a well, recorded by the Ordnance Surveyors as ‘Lady Well’ and by Macalister as a ‘holy well.’

It is clear from the plan of the island (Illus. 3) that the dense distribution of superficial archaeological remains is confined to one quadrant of the total area. This also appears clearly in air photographs. Changes in lake level have taken place since early medieval times. Earlier changes seem to have involved a lowering of the water level, mainly perhaps because of the natural erosion of the exit channel by Killaloe. The construction of the dam at Ardnacrusha in connection with the Shannon hydro-electric scheme raised the lake surface to the extent that Holy Island lost about one and one-third hectares. The water level is now controlled from the power station.

Air photographs show a sharp shelving, at least in the eastern part of the island, a short distance from the lake shore. This may possibly represent a perimeter bank (as it would seem from the excavation of Area III). There appear to be several major sub-
divisions of the island, defined by banks radiating from the summit and forming large sectors. The visible antiquities are concentrated in the eastern sector. There is a resemblance to the Devenish pattern. Devenish, a much larger island, falls into two parts separated by an isthmus; that which contains the monastic remains is roughly comparable in size with Inis Cealtra. Devenish too has a history of modern large-scale pilgrimages, a focal hilltop enclosure with rath affiliations, radial divisions and small subdivisions, groupings of medieval buildings, and concentration of the monuments into one quadrant. But there is on Devenish a round or ovoid enclosure around the existing Round Tower, while the other stone buildings are on the circumference. No such pattern can be discerned on Inis Cealtra; but note the enclosures revealed by excavation at the north and to the southwest of Area V. The double banks, or roadways, of Inis Cealtra, seem to be somewhat unusual, although again there is something similar at Devenish.

The Excavations: general
The island is of limestone, drift-covered. It gives good grass and is used for grazing cattle. At the time the excavations began there was also a flock of feral goats, since destroyed. Traces of ridge-and-furrow cultivation were clearly visible in places, especially in the vicinity of the cottage. The humus overlay glacial drift ("boulder clay") and in general organic materials were very poorly preserved.

Excavation was conducted over ten seasons, beginning in 1970 and ending in 1980. There was no excavation in 1978. It was decided to begin with the investigation of monuments and areas on the periphery of the concentration of remains, and to examine first what seemed likely to be works from the later stages of the history of Inis Cealtra. Sites or areas, numbered in the order in which work on them was begun, in the field records were designated Sites 1-12 (an intended Site 11 was not excavated; so there were 11 numbered sites in all). For the purposes of the Report they have been re-designated Areas I-V. For the layout of the excavations, see Illus. 4.

Area I: the well
This area was excavated in 1970. The site is marked 'Lady Well' on the Ordnance Survey, 6"-to-the-mile Sheet. Macalister describes it as a 'holy well,' and says:

'It is a cylindrical shaft of masonry built with mortar. 6 feet in diameter. There is a recess for offerings in the south side of the shaft. The water is covered with duckweed and other growths.'

He has no more to say about it. In 1970, when the area was investigated, there seemed to be little real local tradition identifying this as a holy well. There was some vague talk of cures for sore eyes, but it was also reported that this was not the 'real' holy well, or that the site of the well had moved. Coins were left by visitors rather than locals, and this appeared to be encouraged and exploited by the children of the vicinity. There was no name for the well, nor were there the usual rags left there – but some middle-aged-to-elderly people in the parish spoke of the custom of leaving offerings there in the past. However, it is clear from the Ordnance Survey Letters that the well featured in the pilgrimage, or 'pattern' rounds in the early-nineteenth century and indeed that the rounds began and ended there and concluded with drinking of the well water.

The well appeared before excavation as a cylindrical shaft of mortared limestone masonry set into the base of the slope down to the shore—just a few metres from the water’s edge. The diameter of the shaft was a little under 2 metres, and there appeared to have been one or two steps down to the well-water on the lake side, although damage caused by cattle had made it difficult to ascertain whether these were in fact designed to serve as steps or were merely collapsed masonry. A small niche, with slate soffit, served for offerings. Within, there was a shallow depth of water, 25-30 cm, which was weedy and unclean. A whitethorn growing on the upward slope at the lip of the shaft sheltered the well. A good crop of watercress flourished at the outflow.

Two 3m x 3m squares were excavated on the approach side. Various small objects were found in the turf layer, including coins. Under the turf there was a thick deposit of gravel, first coarse, then fine, then coarse again. A few objects and many animal teeth were found in this. Below, were some boulders and yellow drift: undisturbed subsoil. The gravel deposit covered what appeared to be a drain-inlet to the well at the front.

The objects almost all dated to the twentieth century, but a few extended the range back into the late-nineteenth century. Before this there was nothing, and the indications are that the main period in which offerings were made was ca. 1920-40. The well itself was pumped dry and excavated. Under the water there was a layer of black silt, with small objects corresponding in character and date to those found outside. Below this there was a bottom of grey-white leached clay, which soon gave way to the normal yellow-brown colour of the subsoil. The main water supply appeared to come from seepage through the wall. There was also a very small and weak spring; but the whole structure seems to have served chiefly as a pool for collecting partly filtered water flowing down the southern slope of the island. The gravel was a laid deposit, probably intended to filter surface drainage.

There was no evidence of medieval usage. The well structure was a modern construction, and the twentieth-century cult for which there was evidence appeared to be mimetic—and half-hearted—rather than traditional.

Area II: the Cottage
This was excavated in 1970. Foundations of a small structure were visible near the eastern shore of the island, north of St Caimin’s Church. Brash appears to refer to this—but certainly in error or confusion—as ‘the Baptism Church’, on which Macalister comments that:

> those who identified it as such were anxious to make up the number of seven churches; for the seven churches’ legend was told here as at Glendaloche and Clonmacnois, and is here as baseless as it always is.6

He himself suggests that the foundations are those of the ‘one house’ on the island mentioned in Bishop Rider’s report at the beginning of the seventeenth century. He reported that the bases of the walls were standing to a height of about 3 feet, rising in the middle (a central chimney stack with back-to-back hearths) to 5 feet.

The foundations, which were certainly those of a small dwelling, were further considerably reduced by 1970, when excavation was carried out in the area. The interior of the cottage was excavated, together with a small area around it. It was a two-roomed building, with back-to-back fireplaces, which had been constructed without foundations, the base-courses of the walls being laid directly onto the turf. The walls were of rubble.

6 Macalister, ‘History and Antiquities of Inis Cealtra’, pp 140-1.
No floor remained in the interior, possibly as a result of the ‘clearing-out’ undertaken by the Board of Works in 1879-80. It was clear however that the floor of the building had sloped steeply. Finds were few and, where they seemed to relate to the occupation of the building, not closely datable. They included from within the house fragments of iron door-furniture, and, from the exterior, part of an iron door lock. Some nails and fragments of iron bloom were found, mostly outside the building, but some within, in secondary position, however. There were also sherds of ‘delph’, glazed pottery and earthenware, mostly found outside the house and all above the old ground level in recent strata.

Fragments of cupric slag, animal bones and teeth and small amounts of burnt bone and charcoal were found in similar layers both within and without the building. Two fragments of querns were found within the house, one to the west of the fireplace, one near the south-east corner of the building, both at the base of humified soil, and six quern fragments were found at the west side of the house among the collapsed rubble of the wall. A whetstone was found within the house, east of the chimney, at the base of the humified soil layer.

This is not necessarily the foundation of the ‘one house’ of Bishop Rider’s account. A date in the eighteenth century is more likely, on the admittedly tenuous evidence of finds from the seriously disturbed interior and exterior of the structure. It was however a crude and humble dwelling and, once it fell into a state of ruin, was obviously used as a rubbish dump. In the close vicinity there were extensive traces of ridge-and-furrow cultivation, extending south into the northern part of Area V.

Area III: St Brigid’s Church

Excavation was begun in 1970, continued in 1971 and concluded in 1972 on the enclosure of St Brigid’s Church and part of the surrounding area. St Brigid’s on Inis Cealtra appeared to conform to a pattern observed in the layout of a number of early Irish monastic sites – that of the proliferation of small churches within separate enclosures. This is noticeable, for example, at Glendalough, where there is a central or focal group within a cashel wall (including the Cathedral and the Round Tower) while there are dispersed along the valley other enclosures, each with a stone church – Trinity, St Mary’s, Teampal na Sceilig, etc. Inis Cealtra, superficially, seemed to have a similar layout: Teampal na bhFear nGonta, St Mary’s, St Brigid’s, St Michael’s, each within an enclosure, and the apparently unenclosed St Caimin’s.

At St Brigid’s, within an irregularly quadrangular enclosure, there were ruins of a small single-celled church (see plan, Illus. 5). The building had few features. The west doorway, of three elegant Romanesque orders had been rebuilt (in 1879-80, see above). There were several minor errors in the reconstruction. The bases and jambs of the outer order were reassembled wrongly, and the outer order of the arch-ring was somewhat confused. A few fragments of a pelleted stringcourse or abacus had been assembled in the flaunching of the ruined wall above the doorway. The west wall stood to a height of approximately 1m. to 1.8m. above ground. There was the lower part of a widely splayed, apparently Romanesque, east window, and there was an inserted south window of about the sixteenth century. The east wall is known to have been blown down in a great storm on January 6, 1839. The north wall stood to approximately 1.2 to 1.8m. above ground. The south wall stood to approximately 90cm.

The church stands in an enclosure defined before excavation by a bank. The south and west, and part of the north and east sides of the enclosure conformed to a quadrangle. On

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the south side there was a narrow round-headed doorway or gateway (rebuilt, possibly back-to-front, in 1879-80), set in a stretch of masonry wall which appeared before excavation simply to fill a gap in the bank. The gateway had a simple moulding on the north (or inner) side. There is a similar moulding on the west doorway of St Mary's, which has a slightly pointed arch and dates from the early-thirteenth century. One of the moulded voussoirs from the gateway has been replaced by a plain stone but is itself (as Macalister pointed out)\(^8\) built into the gateway of the Saints' Graveyard, some hundreds of metres away.

The north, east and west sides of the enclosure boundary were defined by what appeared before excavation to be earthen banks with some stones. The enclosure itself formed an irregular quadrangle, measuring approximately 21m x 20m. It seemed to form a depression in the regular southward slope of the island, as if it had been partly dug out of the hill slope. It lies in the angle formed by two of the field banks which are a feature of the eastern part of the island.

The site was wholly excavated, as was the ground around it on all sides. Illus. 5 shows the extent of the excavated area. Excavation revealed complexities in the enclosure. The west, north and east sides were bounded by a drystone wall which formed the last stage of a series of enclosures. The wall, very poorly built, had been patched or repaired several times, especially on the east side. In part it ran along the crest of a clay bank, with stretches of external quarry ditch. Drystone paving had been laid along against the inner base of the rough wall.

Within the boundary, the space around the church was free of burials. The church ruin, in the centre of the enclosure, measured 8.5m x 5m externally and had walls approximately 75cm thick. The Board of Works operations of 1879 had levelled the ground both within and without the church, but parts of the old surface of the period of the building remained relatively undisturbed.

Collapsed masonry was found on all sides of the structure. The east gable had fallen outwards, but remained more or less intact under a light covering of turf. The fallen masonry overlay a scatter of roofing slates, which were found inside the building as well as outside. Along the south side of the church, on the exterior, just under a light turf, there was a trodden surface with mortar splashes spilled by the masons building the church. On the equivalent layer in the south-western angle of the enclosure was a scatter of chippings from the trimming of the roofing slates, an operation which had been performed on the site. Plain red fragments, apparently from late paving tiles, were also found in this area. The whole enclosure appeared in 1880, when 'rubbish' was cleared, probably lowering the ground level.

The boundary of the enclosure was found to be complex. On the south was a mortar-built wall, probably of the early-thirteenth century. This followed, approximately, the line of the peripheral bank defining (it would seem) the monastic area. To the west, one of the main radial divisions which are a feature of the island's earthworks, extended north to south down the slope. This was sectioned and the profile is shown in Illus. 8. In the area immediately to the west of the enclosure of St Brigid's Church this earthwork, referred to below as 'the radial bank' (there was an accompanying ditch, to the west of the bank), was flattened and denuded, but from about 25m north of the enclosure it was much more clearly defined and steep-sided. Where it was denuded it appeared on the surface to veer to the west to avoid the north-west corner of the enclosure and to continue southward parallel to the west boundary.

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8 Macalister, 'History and Antiquities of Inis Cealtra' p. 119.
Excavation showed that in fact it continued without veering, to form the west boundary; but a shallower bank, referred to here as 'the secondary bank,' had been made parallel to the boundary to the west (see Illus. 5). Stains at the base of the secondary bank suggested that bunches of branches or brushwood had been laid along the ground to mark the line of the earthwork, the soil being then heaped upon them. Between the secondary bank and the radial bank – where this formed the west boundary of the enclosure – there was an irregular ditch. This was interpreted as being the quarry for the secondary bank. Shallow ditches were also found outside the enclosure to the south and east, and a deeper ditch to the south.

To the west of the church the enclosure boundary was defined by the radial bank, consisting mainly of upcast boulder clay, fairly steep in its profile and about 1m. high (see Illus. 8). On its crest had been erected a drystone wall, of two roughly built faces, with core-filling. In this area the wall had collapsed and lay as debris on the outer slope of the bank.

Within, to the west of the church doorway, there was an area of activity. A copper-worker's furnace was found, in the form of a pit in which had been constructed an ovoid structure of clay (Illus. 6), bearing small splashes of copper and traces of intense heat. A little to the south of this, within the south-western angle of the enclosure, was an area where slates had been trimmed. Numbers of roofing-slates (of the Killaloe variety) having been found in the collapsed material of the church roof, and the trimming-waste itself being in a layer which corresponded to that of the building of the church; it was inferred that the slates were brought upstream in a rough state, finished on the site, and then used for roofing.

A paved path passed, from the direction of the northern boundary of the enclosure, close to the west doorway of the church, and continued to the gateway in the south wall. This is interpreted as a path giving access to St Mary's Church. It showed no digression to St Brigid's Church, although it was on the level of the sill of its doorway.

The northern boundary of the enclosure was defined by a bank which was incomplete, being cut near the north-east corner by the excavation of a large irregular cesspit. With this bank was associated a deep V-shaped ditch, immediately to the north of it. The V-shaped ditch terminated at the west at a point where the western boundary bank began. At the eastern end its terminal was not clear, being obscured by the cesspit. On the eastern side of the enclosure a much shallower broad ditch ran south from the area of the cesspit, fanning out towards the south-eastern angle of the enclosure.

The stone cashel wall was itself complex. The southern boundary was a well-built wall, with mortar, and at both its terminals it ran under the drystone construction. It was much more regular than the walls of the other sides, built of coursed rubble, and less in overall thickness. It is interpreted as being contemporary with and connected with St Mary's. A low bank had been thrown up against the south face of this wall, composed differently from the banks on the west, north and east sides of the enclosure. Its upper part consisted of boulder clay, its lower of clay mixed with humus, and there was a shallow, irregular, flat-bottomed quarry-ditch immediately to the south. A layer of occupation material of 12th-13th century, date antedated the bank and ditch, and the lower part of this layer antedated the wall. The wall bore on a foundation of flat slabs resting on the natural ground surface. The gateway is round-headed, with shallow mouldings on the north side closely resembling the mouldings of the west doorway of St Mary's.

On the west, north and east sides, where it survived, the cashel wall was very poorly constructed, without mortar, of two leaves with a core of earth and rounded and angular
pebbles, mostly between 3cm and 10cm in diameter. The wall appeared to have two stages of construction, and on the east side showed evidence of two or more extensive rebuildings. Its lower courses consisted of more or less rounded stones of about 40cm to 60cm in maximum dimension, its upper courses of rubble masonry of flattish stones of about 30cm to 40cm in length. With the wall there was associated a paving which seems to have run round the enclosure immediately inside the wall, although only some stretches of it survived. At the north-east corner both wall and paving had been rebuilt more than once, and one stage of paving ran under the wall from exterior to interior. The wall is in part built on the fill of a shallow ditch which runs south from the cesspit at the north-east angle of the enclosure. In this area, at the north-east angle, a mass of occupation material was upcast against the cashel wall and overlay the north-south ditch. This material resembled that in the cesspit and appeared to be a 13th-century deposit, some of which had been redistributed. Below this, in the north-south ditch, a band represented a stratum which yielded material (where datable) of an earlier character.

West of the church there was an area of intensive activity, with numerous pits, mostly outside the enclosure. There was a large pit which had been repeatedly re-filled with clay and re-dug, with small hollows showing traces of burning and containing much charcoal. Two decorated querns (probably of the thirteenth century) and one broken in the course of manufacture were found in pits in the area. It would seem from these and smaller fragments that querns were manufactured here. A scatter of clinker and slag and other traces also suggested metal-working in the vicinity.

Evidence for iron-working in particular was found immediately north of the church, within the enclosure. No tuyères were found, but fragments of furnace-bottom in one pit north of the church, as well as quantities of clinker and bloom, suggested iron reduction in the area.

As well as stone-working, copper-working and iron-working, it was found that bone and antler combs were being manufactured in the vicinity — probably north of the excavated area. Fragments of complete and unfinished combs were found, as well as fragments of red deer antler from which comb blanks had been sawn. Among the bone-working debris (some of which came from the large cesspit north of the enclosure) were pierced conical objects resembling the toggles on duffle-coats and paralleled in the finds from High Street, Dublin, which are thought to be connected with leather-working. Associated finds of bronze stick-pins, coins and other objects suggest again that this activity was mainly of thirteenth-century date.

The interior of the church had been used for burial, almost certainly in the thirteenth century and perhaps later, at least twenty bodies being deposited. These were sealed by several layers of dilapidation, and by later sketchy deposits. One of the later deposits marked, probably, the herd’s shelter recorded as having occupied the east end of the building in the early nineteenth century. There were also traces of the occupation by the Board of Works men in the late nineteenth century, and cartridge cases (manufactured in 1919 by Kynoch’s of Arklow) indicated transitory use of the shelter of the ruined building, perhaps for training purposes by the East Clare Brigade of the I.R.A. during the War of Independence.

Two of the burials (which were examined in situ) were of women who died in childbirth. There were also adult males and immature persons represented. The burials were all extended, all but one lying cast-west, with the heads to the west. Finds with the burials included iron nails and coffin handles, part of a bone pin (for a shroud?) and a bronze decorated mount which appears to have been attached to an armlet of organic material
on the upper arm of one of the burials. This had ornament which would seem to be of late eleventh- or early twelfth-century character, which, since the burial can be no earlier than the late twelfth century, is interesting.

Bones from the better-preserved burials were removed for examination. The following notes are based on observations made by Professor Éamon de Valera and his daughter, Dr Maire de Valera (later Delaney), at the time:

**Burial 3** A very shallow grave, overlying two round shallow pits with black stony fill. The grave contained the shaft of a bone shroud pin. The bones were decayed and fragmentary, apparently male.

**Burial 1** Strong bones, apparently female. This may have been a double burial, with burial 2, but burial 2 is the second or later interment.

**Burial 4** Possibly male burial, with strong bones.

**Burial 2** A male burial, about as tall as burial 1. Rather thick skull.

**Burial 5** A male burial, with notably thick skull and a twisted femur.

**Burial 13** A female burial, with healthy straight bones and good dentition. One of the last to be interred, cutting through earlier burials. There was a foetus at full term, in an apparently normal delivery. The foetal bones seemed rather large, but no definite explanation of the death was possible.

**Burial 8** A female burial, again with a foetus in the pelvic region, with the foetal skull collapsed over the left arm. Spinal disease was evident from the fourth lumbar vertebra. The pelvis was tilted, and the head of the left femur was slightly deformed. The pelvis would have been assymetric, causing death. The spinal disease was well established and the woman was fairly old, but with good dentition of comparatively unworn teeth.

**Burial 14** This was cut by the north-south burial. A male burial, with healthy bones.

Some finds from the area north of the church, including hollow-based flint arrowheads and stone axeheads, indicate that there may have been Late-Neolithic/Early-Bronze-Age activity in the area - probably occasional visits to the island by hunters.

Other finds of interest include an openwork bronze brooch-head, with animal ornament in 8th-century style, found in the primary silt of the V-shaped ditch running east-west along the exterior of the north boundary of the enclosure; a small enamelled fragment, possibly from a 7th- or 8th-century reliquary, found in secondary position; a grave-marker of sandstone with a fine incised Chi-Rho cross (early-7th-century), found in the drystone wall of the enclosure boundary; and a mass of chain mail (14th-century) which had been rolled into a ball and was found, corroded into a solid lump, as part of the core filling of the boundary wall.

**General conclusions on Area III were:**
(i) That the radial bank-and-ditch system extending south to this site from the central D-shaped enclosure, and the peripheral bank running into the southern boundary of St Brigid's Church enclosure, belonged to an early phase of activity on the island. Excavation was carried out in a cutting which sectioned the radial bank north of the church enclosure ('Site 8': see profile, Illus. 8).
(ii) That the V-shaped ditch along the north side of the enclosure and the broad shallow
ditch, possibly for drainage only, on the east side, may also have been features of an
early phase.

(iii) That the church of mortared stone was probably built about the middle of the
twelfth century, but was abandoned as a place of worship about the beginning of the
thirteenth century. It probably stood within an enclosure of earthen banks. It had a
slated roof, and the slates, brought from elsewhere, were trimmed in situ.

(iv) That the building of St Mary’s Church, very early in the thirteenth century, involved
a remodelling of the site, including the construction of a mortared stone wall which
now forms the southern boundary of the enclosure of St Brigid’s.

(v) That at this later stage St Brigid’s Church came to be used for burial, and its enclo-
sure and surrounding area for industrial activity. The church was still roofed.

(vi) That in time further remodelling of the site took place, to cater for the ‘patron’ pil-
grimage and the performance of ‘rounds’ by large numbers of people. The evidence of
datable finds suggests that the construction of paths linking different sites or
‘stations’ on the island began at least as early as the late 13th century, but that the
main development was much later. A drystone wall was made, around the enclo-
sure, with a roughly paved path along its inner face for pilgrims to make the round
of the station. In its later phases this wall is as late as the 17th (possibly the 18th)
century. The late phase includes the construction of a broad paved road which
connected St Caimín’s with St Mary’s.

(vii) That the large cesspit, at the northeast of the site, catered for medieval habitation
(mainly 13th-century) which was located south-west of the Round Tower.

Area IV: St Michael’s
Work was carried out in 1972 and 1973 on the site variously described as ‘St Michael’s
Church,’ or ‘Garraidh Mhíchil.’ Here there is a D-shaped enclosure around the summit of
the island, forming a focus for a system of earthworks (see Illus. 3). Near the centre of the
D was a smaller enclosure, just under 15m in maximum dimension (see plan, Illus. 9),
marked before excavation by a low stony bank. It proved to be roughly square and to
have two phases of construction. In the first phase it was defined by an earthen bank with
an external ditch. An un-mortared stone wall had then been added to the crest or inner
slope of the bank. Some remains of stone paving were found running along the inside of
the wall.

The enclosure had been used as a burial ground, exclusively for infants – almost all
new-born. It was customary to deposit in each infant’s grave a handful of quartz pebbles
and a long stone pebble (sometimes a whetstone, often broken, and sometimes a shaped
stone of phallic appearance). A very small mortared stone structure (2.5m externally) had
been constructed in the centre of the enclosure at some stage after burial had commenced,
and its foundation course remained. Finds of coins and other objects suggested that the
main range of the period of activity was from about A.D. 1500 to about the late 19th
century – but this may reflect pilgrimage rather than burial activity. The foundations of
the minute ‘church’, when removed, were determined to be late within this chronology.
It, with the secondary stone wall and paving, is interpreted as belonging to the late stage
of the development of the island’s monumental features to cater for the crowds per-
forming the ‘rounds’ on the great annual pilgrimage.

The larger D-shaped enclosure had, apart from its shape on plan, all the characteristics
of a rath, and sections through the bank-and-ditch show a typical profile. However, cutt-
ings made to ascertain if it had originally been approximately circular on plan, like the usual rath, gave a negative result. It was D-shaped by original design, and there was no evidence of occupation at any period. It is assumed to be earlier than the small sub-rectangular enclosure within it and to belong to an early phase of activity on the island; but this assumption depends on its relationship with the radial bank described in the account of Area III above.

Conclusions on Area IV
The purpose of the D-shaped enclosure on the summit of the island remains unclear. It was formed with a bank and external ditch resembling those of a rath, but appears never to have been occupied. Within the enclosure the smaller sub-rectangular enclosure was used as a burial place for infants and children. There was evidence of frequentation of this enclosure from the late Middle Ages onwards. A tiny rectangular mortar-built structure, referred to above as the ‘cell’ was constructed, without foundations while the area was in use for infant burial. It had a west doorway. It was paved internally with stone flags, and a coin of about 1500 came from below the paving.

Area V: St Caimin’s and vicinity
The ‘Confessional’
Excavation was conducted on an extensive area around St Caimin’s Church from 1972 until 1980, beginning with the ‘Confessional’ and extending north of the north wall of the Saints’ Graveyard, continuing with the immediate vicinity of St Caimin’s itself and the Round Tower, and extending south and west from the Round Tower.

The building known as ‘the Confessional,’ which Macalister suggested, on the basis of the description in the Life of St MacCreiche of his penitential station, might ‘with a fair measure of confidence’ be an anchorite’s cell,9 stood immediately to the north of the Saints’ Graveyard within a small enclosure poorly defined by a stony bank (see Illus. 11). The surface features of the enclosure were partly concealed by a scrubby growth. It was clear however that there was some paving immediately around the little structure, which had an outer walling of mortared stone, with a narrow entrance in the east end, enclosing and accommodating a curious structure of upright inward-leaning unwrought stones around a shallow cist-like construction of limestone flags (see plan and section 5, Illus. 12). Just to the east of the doorway, more or less on the axis of the little building, a heavy slab was set in the earth, with a ringed cross in relief on its upper surface and a slot in which an upright slab (perhaps a slab-cross) had evidently been set. To the east again, the much weathered base of a cross sat on the surface. This formal arrangement within an enclosure suggested that the building had some ceremonial purpose.

Excavation began here in 1972 and was continued in the years 1973-6. The enclosure visible before excavation was shown to be defined by a drystone wall similar to those around St Brigid’s and St Michael’s and also of late date. It was decided at an early stage of the work to remove both the drystone wall and the ‘Confessional’ itself. The area of excavation was in due course greatly extended. The drystone wall was found to have been accompanied by a paving, surviving in part, which had run round the perimeter of the defined area, within the wall. This late enclosure however, unlike that around St Brigid’s, did not conform to any earlier enclosure, but was a development of the period when the whole site was being remodelled for purposes of the pilgrimage ‘rounds’ and when, in this part of the island at least, the earlier layout had probably long disappeared.

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from view. The ‘Confessional’ was shown, in its present form, to be of late date – about 1700 (part of a late seventeenth-century clay pipe was with a burial of part of an animal under the foundation of the outer structure) – but its present form was the last of a series of rebuildings.

These included at least two reconstructions of the stone platform, or podium, on which the structure stood. The recumbent cross-slab, with a slot for an upright slab, and the plain cross base, to the east of the ‘Confessional’, were aligned with the stone building, and the style of the relief ringed cross on the recumbent slab would suggest a date round the tenth or eleventh century for the alignment and presumably for one stage of the stone building. Occupation evidence from an almost circular ovoid fenced enclosure to the north of the ‘Confessional’ (see plan, Illus. 13) was for eleventh-century activity, which included bronze-working.

To the west of the ‘Confessional’ traces were found of a small timber rectangular structure (of similar dimensions to the ‘Confessional’) with a north-south orientation, and this too had, almost certainly, been rebuilt more than once. The successive wooden structures would probably have been of an earlier date than the early stage of the stone building (which appears to have replaced them), and, since there seem to have been several rebuildings, probably go back to a very early stage in the monastic history of the island. The small squarish wooden structure, built on a north-south axis, had traces of what had been a pillared portico on its southern (probably gable) end. It was aligned within a rectangular enclosure, which was marked by a stain suggesting a light close-set palisade or fence of wood. This in turn appeared to have been rebuilt more than once. Only the northern sector of it remained, the southern, and probably greater, part of the enclosure being overlain by the Saints’ Graveyard and its northern medieval stone wall (on the base of which a modern wall had been built). There were some very poorly preserved burials within the enclosure in the excavated area – sixteen could be traced, of which twelve were aligned with the rectangular enclosure and with the sequence of small wooden structures. The burials had normal Christian orientation, head to west.

Three phases of cultivation were marked by furrows. These stopped at the bounds of the rectangular enclosure, but the ovoid enclosure overlay them. One of the hearths within this enclosure was later than the main phase of cultivation, but the cultivation post-dated the more northerly burials. Later activity was marked by gulleys and drains, and there was a scatter of working-hollows and pits of uncertain date.

The ancient north wall of the Saints’ Graveyard was examined. No direct evidence of date was found, but the wall post-dated the activity associated with the rectangular enclosure, the true southern boundary of which probably lies well within the graveyard. As it was a matter of excavation policy not to disturb the burials within the Saints’ Graveyard, this investigation was not pursued: the chances that any traces of the early enclosures would survive under the burials was in any case felt to be slight. On the basis of the character of the masonry of the wall itself, the character of the arched entrance through its west side, and the style of the slabs and buildings within, it is inferred that the Saints’ Graveyard is unlikely to be earlier than the eleventh century, and possibly dates from the twelfth. Its boundary wall was rebuilt in the nineteenth century but the lower course of the medieval wall was retained.

The site immediately to the north of the Saints’ Graveyard is interpreted as that of an early shrine, no doubt Christian in origin but bearing a striking resemblance in layout to pagan monuments of the later part of the Early Iron Age in the West. What could be made out of the rectangular enclosure and its small wooden structure suggested that it was
modelled on the type of shrine, within an enclosure precinct (a nemeton), known from Gallo-Roman and Romano-British non-Christian contexts, for example the temple or shrine site at Woodeaton, Oxfordshire, or the pre-Roman example at Heathrow, Middlesex, England, or the sanctuary at Gournay-sur-Aronde, in France. Christian usage however had developed similar complexes, as Charles Thomas has pointed out.\footnote{Charles Thomas, The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain (Glasgow, 1971) pp 141-66.}

It seems probable that this was a shrine site from a very early stage in the monastery's existence, and that the original complex here consisted of a wooden porticoed cell within a rectangular fenced enclosure. It is not necessary to suppose that the shrine was pre-Christian; but it may have been modelled, as suggested, on a pre-Christian type of religious monument. In the comparable Celtic sites one or more pillars or columns (usually of wood, sometimes of stone) standing within the enclosure were a common feature of the complex. No trace of any such monument was identified at Iris Cevaltra; but only a part (and probably the smaller part) of the enclosure was available for excavation. But if it was, as seems probable, a cella memoriae, its model may have been somewhat different.

The original wooden cell, which was rebuilt at least once, was later replaced by the nearby stone structure to the east, which itself underwent rebuildings. This in its early phase is likely to be roughly contemporary with the original stone church of St Caimin, and with the Round Tower, and to represent the new phase of activity inaugurated by the patronage of the Dál gCais dynasty, perhaps after an interval of desertion of the island following the Viking raids of the ninth century, or the tenth. The rough structure within the frame of mortared masonry covered a shallow cist of thin stone slabs. This contained fragments of bone, both human and animal – if the contents had ever included ‘relics,’ these had long given way to a notional replacement.

The metalworking enclosure
North of the rectangular enclosure, traces were found of the slot of another light enclosure fence, this one bounding an area almost circular but ovoid on plan and approximately 23m in its greatest dimension. This appears to have been occupied from the early eleventh until the thirteenth century. In the eleventh century, bronze-working was done within the enclosure and stone ‘motif-pieces’ (smooth-faced stones or bones on which metal-workers’ patterns were sketched – perhaps more often termed trial-pieces) were found, as well as bronze waste and scraps of bronze with ornament in the ‘Irish Ring-erike’ style. There were one or more huts or bothies. The huts were extremely light and flimsy, almost like tents, and appeared to be similar to those at the site west of St Brigid’s Church. There were several hearths, one of which, south of the centre of the enclosure, occupied the centre of a small flimsy shelter. The traces of this hut overlay the stain of what appeared to be a larger rectangular structure. Debris found around the hut suggested that it had sheltered a bronze-worker in the eleventh century. Clusters of small post- or stake-holes and faint traces of other flimsy huts gave evidence of extensive activity in the area.

It seems that it was after the building of St Caimin’s (ca. A.D. 1000) that the round enclosure was formed to the north of the shrine area, but it does not seem likely that a community of any size lived here. It seems to have been occupied by one or more workers in ornamental bronze during the eleventh century, and there was some casual activity in later periods. Late activity included the digging of narrow trenches, mostly apparently drains.
The eastern slope
A broad sondage was made, running down the slope between St Michael's (Area IV) and Area V. This crossed the boundaries of part of the network of enclosures and paths which are such a feature of this sector of the island. No evidence of permanent habitation or occupation was found, but much of occasional activity, with numerous pits and working hollows. These were probably mainly late medieval, but associated finds were few. The enclosures which are the most notable surface features of the area were post-medieval.

Round houses
Excavation was also conducted extensively around the Round Tower, beginning in 1974, while a smaller cutting was opened immediately north of St Caimin's Church. Numerous traces of structures were found, but the archaeological layers were very shallow in this area and most of the structures appeared to have been flimsy and ephemeral. Many rebuildings were evident. The shallow site was taken down in very thin layers, each of which was planned. A composite of the overlying plans revealed a maze of stake-holes, wattle-holes, post-holes and timber stains in the soil, together with other evidence of activity over a long period. There was evidence for the north-eastern quadrant of a round fenced enclosure south-west of the Round Tower. The fence appeared to have had a lean-to structure attached to it externally on the north-east, while within the area of the enclosure (but probably not related to it) there were traces of a large round house (just over 10m. in average diameter) internally sub-divided with straight partitions. The house (House 1) appears to have had a projecting porch on the south-west. It was not built with posts dug into the ground: there was an outer tegument which showed as a dark brown stain, with some wattle-holes, as from the light base timbers of a wattle or boarded structure, and within this slot, which defined the shape of the building, there were traces of massive posts (perhaps of 30cm. diameter or so) which were not sunk in the earth but rested on pads of some kind.

A similar house (House 2), of which traces were less well preserved, was identified outside the round enclosure, in the north-western part of the excavated area. Near the centre of the first house there was a large hearth (Hearth A). Under the hearth, slightly affected by the heat of the fire, was found a hoard of 21 very worn coins (Illus. 35). These had almost certainly been thrust under the ashes for safekeeping in some emergency. They were early Norman and included one coin of Stephen (1135-1154), the others were of Henry II (1154-1189). Excavation of the area including and around the first house revealed numerous features, obviously not all contemporary. These are indicated on the plan, Illus.14.

The earthen church oratory
The second large round house intruded upon a very complex pattern of post- and stake-holes, with other features, obviously representing rebuildings and other activities over a very long period. Making a composite plan (see Illus. 15) from the plans of a series of wafer-thin excavated layers, showed clearly that a main feature here was a rectangular building which had been reconstructed a number of times, not always quite with the same orientation. A sequence of three phases is distinguished in the plan, but there were more. Of these, the earliest was a structure whose orientation was exactly that of the twelfth-century St Brigid's Church. The interior of this structure was a trodden clay floor, a rectangle of approximately 5.5m x 4.1m. The four walls bounding this were defined by rows of wattle- or stake-holes, sometimes supplemented by continuous narrow wood-
stains, and deposits of redistributed boulder clay. The walls were just over 2.5m thick, and there was an entrance through the west wall. Close-set wattles appear to have been used as internal reinforcement for what were essentially mud walls.

This structure, with its broadly east-west orientation and its location, can only have been an earthen church or oratory. We have evidence for such in the writings of the seventh-century Bishop Tirechán. Rebuildings appear to have altered the orientation, firstly to an almost north-east – south-west axis, then to something much closer to east – west, almost the orientation of St Caimin’s. This oratory, or sequence of oratories, is almost certainly to be associated with the nearby enclosure and with burials which lay to the east of it. It probably represents the early phase of the monastery. Notes were made as follows on August 7, 1979, on the sequence of features showing at the site of this church:

1. Shallow ditch: the slot of the north wall of the church shows against the ditch. The ditch therefore appears to pre-date the church.
2. A stony circular feature, only half of which (a semi-circle) is showing: the clay floor of the church extends over this feature and appears later. The stony circle appears later than the shallow ditch.
3. Clay floor: yellow clay corresponding to the interior dimensions of the feature post-dates the ditch and the ‘circular’ stony feature which it overlies.
4. The ‘altar’: staining which was a clear rectangle last week. The stain is disappearing with further scraping and therefore is on the clay floor.
5. A shallow pit in the north-east corner of the church pre-dates the slot of the east wall of the church (which goes through it) and is below the clay floor.

In this vicinity there was also evidence of much later (twelfth-thirteenth-century) occupation or frequentation of this part of the site. Besides the large round buildings, smaller buildings of earth and wood had also been constructed, including some very light and flimsy structures similar to those observed in Area III and north of the ‘Confessional’.

**The Round Tower** (Illus. 14 and 17)

Burials were numerous immediately north-east of the Round Tower and north and west of St Caimin’s Church. These were shallow, with much disturbed and scattered bone. At first it was thought that some of these antedated the stone buildings, but close investigation of the superimposed burials showed that although they were crowded together close to the foundations, the interments in these positions had been made after the construction of the buildings. A small number of shallow burials lying some short distance to the west of St Caimin’s, however, and to the east of the mud oratory, appeared to be of an earlier date and may be monastic.

Excavation around the Round Tower was partly directed towards elucidation of the method of construction. Cuttings carried in to the base of the tower to provide a profile which might shed light on the building method showed, as had similar endeavours in the past, that this tall building had slight, or no foundation of the normal kind, sunk deeply into the earth. The tower had an offset or plinth near its base, but the rising wall below this was very shallow. Granted that a circular plan, such as that of the tower, combined with massive thickness of wall, provides its own stability; yet for a tall slender building such as this, not deeply sunk in the ground, to withstand Atlantic gales and storms (as any high building on Inis Cealtra must) it required more. Extensive excavation around the tower showed that in fact careful preparation had been made before it was built.
This consisted in the formation of something like what would nowadays be designated a 'raft foundation.' A large disc (roughly three times the diameter of the base of the tower, but slightly ovoid rather than perfectly circular) of puddled clay studded with small boulders and stones, was laid down, ringed by small drain-trenches, and in its centre the tower was built. A modern reinforced concrete raft foundation, however, would derive its necessary tensile strength from the mild steel mesh within it. Mud 'concrete', however thickly studded with pebbles or boulders, would not have the same advantage: it could not 'float' the tower on soft or swampy ground. The purpose of the careful preparation must have been to provide a level, dry, hard surface on which the tower could be erected with shallow foundations.

There was a short sequence of post-holes concentric with the tower on the north-west quadrant—but this did not continue round (see plan, Illus. 17). The postholes are tentatively interpreted as marking the lower end of a stairway which rose to the sill of the doorway. There was no evidence, apart from these post-holes, of external scaffolding. A thick-walled circular building like this would not necessarily have required it. As each course was laid the builders could comfortably have stood on it while they laid the next. Shearlegs and hoists would of course have been required to lift the stones. It remains possible that an internal scaffolding of some kind had been contrived. The accumulated debris within the tower was examined during the first Board of Works operations on the site, and nothing of significance was found in this material in the excavations of the 1970s.

A continuous slot separated the tower, skirting its 'raft' from the areas to the south-west and north-west of it. This seemed more like a narrow drain than the slot of a palisade and there was no indication of posts within it, but it appeared to be a dividing feature and is probably best interpreted as a trench within which a fence of some kind was set. This slot passed under the modern base of the small Inis Cealtra high cross (see Illus. 14 for site-plan of cross-base). A modern foundation for the cross had been laid by the Office of Public Works on which a 'Lincoln gate' type of cattle barrier had been contrived with sections of iron railing laid horizontally. When the foundation was removed it was found that there was a pit directly underneath the cross base, as if to receive some form of tenon. This antedated the slot which was related to the Round Tower.

**The Bullaun Stone**

Excavation was extended southward to include the bullaun stone exposed on the surface some 35m south-west of the tower (see plan Illus. 14). A cutting of 4m. square was opened around the bullaun in July 1977. When the sod and three superficial layers had been removed, several features were clearly defined, although the natural boulder clay subsoil had not yet been reached, the soil still being heavily mottled with charcoal flecks and burnt material. This soil was lightly packed as if redistributed and disturbed throughout. Along the northern and eastern edges of the cutting were what appeared to be pits, filled with stones at surface level. There was no hearth within the cutting. Along its southern edge the whole area was covered with dark subsoil containing large charcoal fragments. Cleaning produced a quantity of fine cupric slag. Features A and B were both patches filled with stones. B produced decayed cows' teeth and fragments and disintegrated bone as well as some burnt bone: it was plain that a cow burial had disturbed the whole area.

The cutting around this bullaun stone was extended in 1979, when a second bullaun stone was uncovered immediately to the south of it. Finds were numerous from the upper humus layer over the stone, including numbers of whetstones or whetstone fragments, iron bolts, knife-blades, fragments and nails, clay pipe fragments, fragments of roofing slates, burnt bone, mortar, slag and chert chippings. What seemed to be part of a stone
pestle was found, possibly to fit into the hollows of the bullaun stones. Both bullaun stones were in due course moved. The soil underneath contained some slag and bones and was flecked with charcoal.

Other areas, generally west of the tower, contained numerous pits and working hollows. Iron nails were extremely numerous, and there were evidences of iron reduction (mainly in the form of blooms and slag) although, as in Area III, no tuyères were found, nor were there any recognisable reduction furnaces. One very deep trench or pit (labelled ‘Sigma’) was thought for some time to be a souterrain but excavation did not bear this out. Finds from these areas of activity indicated dates in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, although there were some earlier artifacts.

**General Discussion**

The excavations showed that habitation of one kind or another was virtually continuous on Inis Cealtra from a date round about A.D. 600 down to the nineteenth century. The island was apparently visited by hunters in Neolithic and Early Bronze Age times but there was no indication, in the areas investigated, of prehistoric habitation. Burial was practiced on the island probably from the beginning of monastic or eremitic occupation (i.e. from the early seventh century onwards) and this activity continues at the present day.

The evidence provided by the excavations for the monastic institution of Inis Cealtra is chiefly for the period from the tenth century to the end of the twelfth. The main radial divisions of the island, whatever their purpose, appear to go back to an earlier date, and a small number of artefacts, found in secondary position, clearly indicate ecclesiastical activity of the seventh and eighth centuries. These notably include the Chi-Rho-inscribed grave-marker and the enamel fragment. The bronze openwork brooch of ca. 800 was found in the primary silt of the early ditch bounding the St Brigid’s enclosure: this suggests that that ditch is not much earlier than A.D. 800; but it could, of course, be much later, and is likely to be coeval with the Romanesque church.

The occupation sites in the vicinity of St Caimín’s Church and the Round Tower were very shallow, providing therefore little stratigraphic evidence in section profiles. Excavation was conducted, however, by the removal of very thin layers of soil and careful note was kept of the horizontal evidence of stratification — observing which features cut through, and were subsequent to, which — and this made it possible to work out chronological sequences, at least roughly. It appeared that among the early features on this part of the island were the ‘shrine’ (so interpreted) to the west of the ‘Confessional’, some burials near the shrine, and the earthen oratory to the west of the Round Tower. A small group of burials to the west of St Caimín’s may also be early, and be those of monks.

The preparation of the ground for the construction of the Round Tower by the laying down of a stone-studded clay disc or platform sealed some artifacts and gave stratigraphic evidence consistent with a date of building of the Tower around A.D. 1000, although great precision was not possible. Some at least of the enclosures and light structures south-west of the Tower were earlier than this, but at least one of the large round houses was shown by the coin-hoard deposited under its hearth (Hearth A) to have been in use shortly after the middle of the twelfth century. This was a period whose activity was well attested in the area, and working with iron, at least, seems to have continued through the thirteenth century. This was probably an extension of the activity for which there was evidence of similar date west and north of St Brigid’s Church.

The superficial remains on the island provided their own evidence of sequence, and this was of course augmented by the excavation evidence. The Chi-Rho grave-marker is probably a work of the seventh century. A few fragmentary sherds of E-ware were found,
indicating that Inis Cealtra had some part, however small, in the wine trade (attested from a number of monastic sites) which probably came up the Shannon from its mouth. Some of the remaining, incised but uninscribed grave-slabs appear to date possibly from as early as the eighth century. The damaged high cross, of which only the shaft now stands in the base, the head having been fixed to the interior of the south wall of St Caimin’s, may be dated with some confidence to the ninth century.

The masonry is similar in the original (single-celled) St Caimin’s Church and in the Round Tower, and these may both be taken to date from ca. 1000. The inner large-stone construction of the ‘Confessional’ may be somewhat older. The formal arrangement which included this construction, a cross (of which only the base remains) and the recumbent heavy slab with a ringed cross in relief and formerly with an upright element, may be very tentatively given a suggested date about the tenth century. There was evidence for metalworking and other activity immediately to the north of this, and the oval fenced enclosure within which some of this activity took place was occupied and in use in the eleventh century. Some tillage and some burial were contemporary with this.

We have evidence therefore, both above and below ground, for monastic occupation from the seventh century onward, but for an intensification of activity, indicating probably both a large community and an increase in patronage, from the tenth century. It is likely that the monastic community was very small before the tenth century. The clear emphasis of the somewhat meagre written records on anchorites should be noted. But in the eleventh century there appears to have been a community of more than two or three on Inis Cealtra.

Then, in the twelfth century, there was much building activity. An ornamented doorway and a chancel were added to St Caimin’s. The little Romanesque church called here ‘St Brigid’s’ was built. At the end of the century, or the beginning of the thirteenth, ‘Teampal na bhFear nGonta’ was built. This is a small but unusual late Romanesque building, whose original character and purpose are not clear. The late Rev. Edgar Talbot suggested that the attested local name of this building may derive from the motto of the O’Grady family, who attempted to re-erify some of the monuments on Inis Cealtra at the end of the seventeenth century: ‘Vulneratus non victus.’ This is an ingenious suggestion, but it seems on the whole more likely that the name refers to the situation of the building at the north side of the ‘Saints’ Graveyard.’ John O’Donovan touches on the matter:

Some old residents remember having seen portions of an old church stand on the north side of the then burying ground, which is about the middle of the present, and it is curious to find few or no Roman Catholic graves to the north of where the old church is said to have stood, but several on the south, a circumstance that goes far to prove first, the situation of the old church, as the Roman Catholics of Ireland in the olden times never buried on the north side, which they called Taobh na bhFear Gonta, i.e. the side of the Wounded Men, but why I have never been able to learn, tho’ I have seen the prejudice against interment on that side in practical vigour all my life time.\(^{11}\)

At any rate the building was drastically remodelled, probably by the O’Grady family, perhaps to serve as a mausoleum or funeral chapel.

The ‘Saints’ Graveyard’ itself appears to have been laid out and walled in the twelfth century, or just before it, and the grave slabs \textit{in situ} within it are of twelfth-century date.

It seems likely that there was a monastic community on Inis Céalta throughout that century. The large round houses south and south-west of the Round Tower, of which traces of two were observed, may represent dwellings of the community at that time. It must have been some emergency in the second half of the century that led to the deposition of a coin-hoard under the ashes of a burning fire in the hearth of one of them.

The beginning of the thirteenth century saw a drastic change, and the building of St Mary’s very early in the century must mark the changeover of Inis Céalta from monasticism: St Mary’s was to be the church of a parish which extended to the mainland. There is evidence for a community at work on the island through the thirteenth century, making quern stones in quantity (presumably to be shipped along the river to markets elsewhere), cutting combs from antler and bone, and working in copper and iron. These activities are attested both from the immediate vicinity of St Brigid’s and from some distance to the east, nearer to the Round Tower. Finds of whetstones and rotary grinding stones, as well as quern fragments, were numerous, as were bronze stick-pins of the period.

The burials within St Brigid’s were of men, women and children. Such few objects as were found in the graves – plain bone pins, possibly from shrouds, and very simple iron coffin-handles – suggested medieval date, and the accumulation of material over the burials also suggested that they were pre-modern. The ornamented bronze plate found with Burial 9 appeared to have been pierced so that it could be sewn to leather or cloth and worn; it would seem, on the arm. The piercings, however, were secondary and it was probably an old piece, of unknown purpose, re-used as an armlet or talisman. Its ornament would suggest a date in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, before the building of St Brigid’s. The precise date of the burials therefore must remain uncertain. If the church itself went out of use with the building of St Mary’s, it came back into use at a much later date, for it has an inserted south window. It may therefore have remained roofed through into the early modern period and have fallen into final dilapidation only in the sixteenth century.

‘St Michael’s’, on the low crest of the island, yielded no evidence of monastic use. The D-shaped enclosure had, apart from its shape on plan, the appearance of a normal rath, and this was borne out by excavation. No occupation material was found, however. Instead, the evidence was for the construction of a smaller enclosure within the D at a comparatively late date. This represented a phase of building on the island which may have begun as early as the late-thirteenth century but was mainly post-medieval. Rough drystone walls were erected to form small enclosures, and these were linked by equally rough paved ways in a network which covered the monastic quadrant of the island and was essentially (although it also probably served for the formation of small tillage plots and paddocks) a layout for the performance of pilgrimage ‘rounds.’ The smaller enclosure of ‘St Michael’s’, however, although no doubt it was one of the ‘stations’ visited and circled by the pilgrims, became an infants’ burial ground. Interesting deposits were placed in the burials: a long narrow stone, often a broken whetstone, and a handful of small quartz pebbles in each grave. This practice appears to have continued to a quite late date.

The drystone walls surrounding the ‘stations’ were so poorly constructed that they required occasional rebuilding, as was evident in particular in the enclosure boundary of St Brigid’s. Paths not only linked the stations; within each station enclosure a paving was laid along the interior face of the wall, no doubt to accommodate the pilgrims as they made their way seven times around each.

This, apart from continued burial, appears to have been the chief religious activity on the island in early modern times and on into the first half of the nineteenth century, until
it was suppressed by the Church. Burial continues to the present day, in the graveyard of St Mary’s, in the modern graveyard south of St Caimin’s, occasionally in the Saints’ Graveyard or within St Caimin’s itself. St Caimin’s, however, since the conclusion of the excavations, has been roofed by the Office of Public Works for use as a site museum, and no doubt burial within it will now cease.

The Inis Cealtra excavations therefore shed some light on the history of this particular monastic site, but left some questions unanswered and suggested some further questions. The layout of the monastic area, with its network of low earthworks, has in the past been thought to represent a feature of early monastic sites. This, however, was shown to be a comparatively recent development on the island. It must suggest that, for example, on Devenish, the similar network of low earthworks may have a similar history. And the small enclosures at Glendalough, including what has often been referred to as the ‘cashel’, are surely constructions made in fairly recent times to serve the function of ‘stations’.

Questions are raised also about the proliferation of small churches, often with their own enclosures, on a monastic site. There is a parallel again at Glendalough. This has been taken to be a distinctive feature of Irish monasticism as distinct from the Benedictine and similar Continental forms of medieval monasteries, as indeed, in some sense, it is. But it must be asked if this is a feature perhaps of a developed phase of the Irish monastic system, when mortared stone building had come into fashion. Is it, like the later ‘stations’, a manifestation of monastic development to cater for pilgrims? Is this ‘typical’ Irish development rather a result of the ‘secularization’ of the monasteries, so often referred to, rather than something inherent in the system? On Inis Cealtra, at any rate, such evidence as there is, is for the multiplication of church sites within a comparatively brief and comparatively late period. St Caimin’s church, it would seem likely, replaced a (frequently rebuilt) humber edifice about the year 1000, about which date the Round Tower was also built. And the Round Tower itself, a mark of prestige, an advertisement for the monastery, may well have been put up because the monastery was becoming involved significantly in the dynastic and religious politics of the end of the tenth century.

But it is not until the twelfth century that we find clear evidence of a multiplication of churches on the island. Inis Cealtra had earlier, it would seem, acquired a reputation for the rigour of its asceticism and in particular for the presence of hermits. While it was acquiring that reputation it would have been architecturally a great deal less impressive than it later became. Hermits are but little amenable to archaeological investigation. A retreat into a greenwood bower yields little to the excavator’s trowel. However, there was fleeting but persistent evidence in the course of the excavations for very flimsy structures, sometimes perhaps resembling nothing so closely as an upturned basket laid on the surface of the ground. They were there in some number, serving all sorts of purposes, no doubt, and reminding us just how much people in early historic times in Ireland worked in the open air, or with flimsy lean-to windbreaks and shelters from rain and wind.

There is, therefore, a bias in the evidence. The early centuries of the monastery of Inis Cealtra have yielded little to our investigations beyond a few artifacts. From the time when the monastery began to acquire the substance of patronage and prestige, the material information becomes more abundant. Archaeological evidence on the whole is less subject to the bias of selection and survival than is the historian’s documentary evidence: there is always pre-selection, governed by weathering, chemistry, differential decay and other accidents of the physical world but it is more random in its operation than selection by minds (as concerned, ever, to conceal as much as to reveal) committing words to parchment or paper.
Illus. 2  Elevations of original masonry, St Caimin’s Church

Measured by Brittain Hallett, Diarmaid de Néfia & Anna Brindle 1973
Illus. 3 Plan of island
Illus. 4  Layout of excavations
(Arabic numerals refer to field cutting numbers)
Illus. 5  Plan of Area III after excavation
(Arabic numerals refer to field cutting numbers)
Illus. 6 Plan of copper furnace in St Brigid's enclosure; St Brigid’s Romanesque Doorway at right edge
Illus. 7 Section profile: St Brigid’s enclosure
Illus. 8 Section profile: radial bank, Area III

Illus. 9 Plan of excavations, Area IV. Note D-shaped rath-like enclosure on island summit, with sub-rectangular enclosure (a children’s burial ground) within, and later (ca. 1500) centrally-placed ‘cell’
Illus. 10  Contour plan, Area V
Illus. 11  Area north of Saints’ Graveyard before excavation

Illus. 12  ‘Confessional’: plan and sections
Illus. 13 Area north of Saints’ Graveyard after excavation
Illus. 14 Area south-west of Round Tower after excavation: plan
Illus. 15 The ‘earthen church’: composite plan

Illus. 16 Section profile to Round Tower
Illus. 17  Area near Round Tower during excavation: plan
Illus. 18  Plan of area round bullaun stones
Illus. 19  Sample sections of pits
Illus. 20  Finds from Area III. 579: iron harness ring?; 575: bronze belt-buckle; 578: bronze pin-ring; 583: bronze buckle fragment; 595: bronze fragment; 592, 967, 962, 963, 964, 965, 966, 968, 970, 972, 971: bronze pins or fragments of pins.
Illus. 21  1117: bronze mounting strips with Ringerike ornament from the ovoid enclosure north of St Caimin’s Church; 573: head of bronze brooch with zoomorphic ornament from bottom of ditch north of St Brigid’s Church; 580: bronze mounting from Burial 9 within St Brigid’s Church
Illus. 22  574: fragment of an enamelled bronze mounting from Area III (St Brigid’s); 1044: bronze fragment and strip from Area III; 1115: bronze pin from Area V; 1116: bronze strip from lower fill of ditch, Area III
Illus. 23 981, 982: two antler combs from lower fill of ditch in Area III
Illus. 24  Objects in worked antler or bone: 22: motif piece from Area V; 984: needle from Pit 1, Area III; 1135: gaming piece from under late paving in Area V; 1039: needle from Area V; 1122: cone from lower fill of ditch in Area III
Illus. 25  989: sandstone grave-marker with incised Chi-Rho cross from collapse of late wall in Area III
Illus. 26  990: fragment of small decorated cross from Area III
Illus. 27 1111: Romanesque carved stone animal head from under collapse of east gable of St Brigid’s Church
Illus. 28  Upper stone of decorated quern from pit west of St Brigid’s enclosure, Area III
Illus. 29  Sample of iron nails from Area V
Illus. 30  Bronze pins: 1087, 1032, 1073, 1090, 1118, 1074, 1061, 1089, 1091 and 746 from Area V; 810 from Area IV (‘Site 12’).
Illus. 31  Whetstone motif piece from topsoil, Area V
Illus. 32 Rough stone with scratched motifs and letters (probably 9th century) from Area V
Illus. 33  1057: stone axe re-used as motif piece from under humus, Area V; 1059: grindstone from lower humus, Area V; 1058: stone axe from lower humus, Area V
Illus. 34  Upper stone of quern from lower topsoil, Area V
Illus. 35  Hoard of silver coins from under Hearth A, Area V