The Effect of Christianity upon the British Celts

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies both the spread of Celtic Christianity into Britain and the way in which the Celtic peoples reacted to the new religion. The study examines possible reasons for the Celts' acceptance of Christianity and examines the effect Christianity had on the beliefs of the Celts as well as on their daily lives. This paper looks at how Celtic Christianity manifests itself in the archaeological record, using evidence such as religious buildings, cemeteries, carved stones, and other forms of Celtic artwork that incorporate both Celtic and Christian aspects as documented in books and site reports. Descriptions and attributes of pagan and Christian artifacts from the Celts are also compared.

INTRODUCTION

Christianity was a powerful force that had great influence in Britain. This paper focuses on the influence of Christianity on the Celtic peoples of Britain and Ireland from the introduction of Christianity into Britain in the third century to A.D. 1100. The Celtic Church is explored in the form of its history, the similarities between Celtic and Christian beliefs, elements of Christianity found in Celtic beliefs and mythology, and evidence in archaeology. The archaeological aspect concentrates on identifying evidence of continuity from the pagan Celtic beliefs and practices to the Christian ones in an effort to show that Celtic Christians incorporated pagan Celtic practices and beliefs into their traditions rather than replaced them.

METHODOLOGY

I have researched the various forms of evidence of the Christian presence in Britain from its emergence in the third century to about A.D. 1100 when the Roman Catholic Church gained power over the Celtic Church (Allen 2004). I looked for evidence of elements of continuity between pagan Celtic and Christian beliefs. When Christianity came to Britain, I believe the similarities between pagan and Christian religions allowed for Christianity to be accepted by the Celts, who retained some of their pagan practices even after they accepted Christianity. I compared that evidence with elements of pagan Celtic artifacts, looking for evidence of continuity between pagan Celtic and Christian beliefs in an effort to understand why the Celts accepted Christianity and what happened after they did accept it. The types of evidence examined includes: artwork on illuminated texts, monasteries, cemeteries, Celtic Crosses, Christian inscriptions, elements of artwork (the eternal knot, animal motifs, representations of nature, etc), and other pagan images at Christian sites.

BACKGROUND ON CELTIC STUDIES

One of the earliest references to the Celts comes from the poem *Ora Maritima*, which was written by Rufus Festus Avienus toward the end of the fourth century A.D. (Cunliffe 1997). He quoted from a much earlier author of a sailing manual called *Massilliot Periplus*, thought to date to 600 B.C., mentioning a land occupied by a people called the Celts (Cunliffe 1997).

Many other Greek and Roman writers made references to or gave information on these Celtic peoples. Among these writers are Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, Plato, Aristotle, Pytheas of Massalia, Polybius, Livy, Pausanias, Caesar, Lucan, and Tacitus (Cunliffe 1997).

The Saints' *Vitae* or *Lives* are a major source of information about the history of the ancient world and the Middle Ages. These *Lives* are also our most important sources for social and cultural history during the Medieval Period. They supply scholars with information on such things as: details of daily life, food and drink, the organization of local rural and urban society, the impact of commerce, both gender and class relations, and occasionally they give specific dates for military and political history (Harsall 1996).

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw a growing popularity in establishing national prehistories in

Western Europe. John Leland collected data on the Celts while William Camden tried to explain the origins of Britain through his work, *Britannia* (Cunliffe 1997).

In the eighteenth century in Britain, a movement was led by William Stuckely to combine classical texts, ethnological analogies, and knowledge of the prehistoric monuments and artifacts to create a picture of the past Celtic peoples. Stuckely began writing a *History of the Ancient Celts*, which he never finished, but his volumes on Stonehenge and Avebury that were published ascribed the monuments to Celtic Druids (Cunliffe 1997).

Sir Barrington Windsor Cunliffe is a more recent Celtic scholar. His main interest is in Iron Age Britain and Europe, which has produced a number of publications. He has become an acknowledged authority on the Celts. Cunliffe's works include: *The Celtic World* (1987) and *The Ancient Celts* (1997).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE CELTS

The earliest Celtic cultures are known to have been in existence in Europe as early as ca. 800 B.C. during the first phase in Celtic history known as the Hallstatt period (Wood 1998), though according to Peter Berresford Ellis—a historian and known authority on the Celts—the first Celtic peoples arrived in Britain as early as ca. 2000 B.C., but no later than ca. 1000 B.C. (Ellis 1985). The last migrations of Celtic tribes into Britain then took place in the second century B.C. while the Belgic tribes were trying to escape pressures from Roman and German expansion (Ellis 1985). During the Hallstatt Period and the Iron Age, the Celtic world included areas from the Balkans and Bohemia to present-day southern Germany. The power of the Celts expanded in the centuries after 800 B.C. and by ca. 300 B.C., the Celtic world had spread its power to Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, parts of central Turkey, and eventually Ireland and Britain (Wood 1998) (Figure 1).

Celtic societies developed in different ways, responding to a broad range of geographical and historical circumstances. Some Celtic groups depended on trade while others relied on farming and stock herding. The focal point of Celtic power started shifting around the fifth century B.C. to a location where the Celts could make better use of Alpine trade routes that led to the Etruscan centers of Italy that were becoming more and more powerful during that time. This second phase in Celtic history was called the La Téne period and was characterized by beautiful forms of Celtic artwork. The Hallstatt period artwork had been characterized by simple geometric designs. The La Téne artwork, however, had a curvilinear style with intricate geometric designs and intensely stylized animal and plant motifs. It was during this time that Celtic civilization stretched to its farthest extent (Wood 1998).

Rather than being a homogeneous whole, the Celts formed a set of societies that were complex and varied in nature. The social and religious customs differed between Celtic groups and even the organization and nature of these groups were not the same. Certain Celtic peoples belonged to confederations that were rather large and loosely bound together while others were condensed into small units that were knit tightly together (Wood: 1998:9). Celtic societies were mainly warrior societies which were ruled by warrior kings, queens, and aristocrats. The Celts were a linguisitic group, not a racial one (Ellis 1985). Their language and culture were the only things that distinguished the Celtic peoples from the other peoples of Europe. However, language was not the only unifying factor among the Celts. A commonality in religion very effectively tied the various Celtic peoples together as well.

Despite the decentralized structure of Celtic society, an order of pagan priests existed throughout the Celtic world and acted as a unifying force for the Celts. This order of priests was the Druid order. They transcended the divisions of society, traveling from village to village and were so respected that it was a taboo among the Celts to attack a Druid. According to ancient Greek writers, Druidism was an ancient institution among Celts already by 200 B.C. They functioned as bards, interpreters of sacrifice, natural philosophers, intermediaries with the gods, and practitioners of magic and ritual (Ross 1967:53). "The Druids taught the continuity of life beyond the grave, which inspired warriors to bravery and to hold their lives in small regard." (Ross 1967:54). This was much of the reason why the Celts were described as recklessly brave by the Greeks and Romans who confronted them in battle. The Druids indulged heavily in sacrifice and even had the power to ban other people from taking part in sacrifices. To be banned from sacrifice was the most extreme punishment that could be leveled against anyone who disobeyed the Druids. Being cut off from participation in sacrifice meant being cut off from the favor of the gods and goddesses. The Druids claimed to understand the secrets of the gods and thus held great power over members of Celtic society (Green 1986:28). The coming of Christianity ended the supremacy of the Irish Druids. The legends gave St. Patrick miraculous powers by which could overmatch his druidic opponents (McNeill 1974).

CELTIC ACCEPTANCE OF CHRISTIANITY

History of Christianity among the Celts

The first signs of Christian presence in Britain were visible in the early third century AD. The martyrdoms of Aaron, Julian, and Alban can be dated to the mid-200s A.D. during the time that Christians were being persecuted

by the Romans. British bishops were documented as having been present at the Council of Arles in A.D. 314. This new religion came to Britain through Roman forces and administrators (Davies 1999). Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in A.D. 312, but has left few remains in military zones since the army probably remained largely pagan. Among the few conspicuous marks of Christianity during this time may be the destruction of the Mithraic temple, which had been carried out because some aspects of the cult were taken to be blasphemous imitations of Christian rituals (Muir and Welfare 1983).

Little is known about the character and quality of Christian life in Britain during the ancient period. A strongly Romanized church was in existence and was most prevalent among the Romano-British elite since they were the people most directly in contact with the Roman occupiers. The Edict of Milan marked a new period of liberation and security for the Christian Church after the persecutions of the mid-third century (Davies 1999).

The Romano-British church experienced its collapse in the fifth century and Christianity was then limited to the northern locations of Strathclyde and Cumbria, through Wales to Devon and Cornwall in the south (Davies 1999). After the defeat of Gaul, Celtic culture vanished almost completely from mainland Europe, remaining only in the far West in the glorious art and learning of the Christian Celts. St. Patrick's mission established Christianity in Ireland in the fifth century A.D. and over the next two centuries, the Irish sent out their own missionaries to Iona, Lindisfarne, Switzerland, and northern Italy (Wood 1998).

The written historical record for the history of Christianity in Ireland began with the entry for the year A.D. 431 in the Chronicle of Prosper of Aquitaine: "Palladius was ordained by Pope Celestine and sent to the Irish believers in Christ as their first bishop." (Davies 1999). It is reasonable to suppose that such a community of believers evolved through contact with the Celtic Church of Western Britain prior to the missionary activity of Patrick (Davies 1999).

Irish monasteries such as those at Kells, Durrow, and Armagh became centers for learning and the arts as the Christian faith prospered. Despite some disruptions caused by the Viking invasions of A.D. 700-900, the mingling of Christian, Celtic, and Classical civilization, which is now referred to as the Insular culture, remained a powerful force in European art and learning (Wood 1998).

We have our most numerous British sources of the early period from the Welsh Church. Spiritual inspiration for the early Welsh Church seems to have come, for the most part, from the monks of the Middle East through their counterparts in southern Gaul since the *Lives* of the early Welsh saints are full of references to the monasticism of the desert. The arrival of the Normans brought with them many practices of continental Christianity. In both Ireland and Wales, after the adoption of continental norms of religious life, the distinctive aspects of indigenous Christianity were increasingly confined to the sphere of vernacular religion (Davies 1999).

Continuity from Pagan to Christian Practices

Often it is assumed that everything must have altered quite radically for the Celtic peoples when the Christian religion was introduced to them (Pennick 1996). However, this was certainly not the case at all. Most of the saints, who were usually of the upper classes, were once druids. Many sacred pagan places were retained as Christian sites. Pagan temples became rededicated Celtic churches and churches were built on pagan places of worship. Pagan worship of ancestors continued with worship of founder priests and saints (Pennick 1996).

There were a few external changes that took place, such as the building of stone structures. Shrines acquired new names, along with crosses being put up with augmented iconography. Tribute was given to and accumulated in the church instead of being deposited in sacred lakes as had been done before with the pagan Celtic practice (Pennick 1996).

The pagan Celts always had strong ties to the land, believing that the land itself was a living being. They believed in the *anima loci*, or the "place-soul", which was the personality of a certain location (Pennick 1996). The most basic scared places for the Celts were natural places such as stones, springs, mountains, islands, and trees. When Christianity exerted its influence among the Celts, sites for places of Christian worship were selected using geomantic techniques that recognized the *anima loci* (Pennick 1996).

Most of the early Celtic Christians were simply the old class of druids in a new guise (Ellis 1985). In the earliest saint's *Life* that is still extant, St. Illtyd is referred to as being a
"druid by decent" (Ellis 1985:82). The majority of the early Celtic Christian churches, monasteries, and holy places have some sort of pre-Christian religious connection. During the sixth century A.D., for example, the foundations of the monastic schools in Ireland were created in place of the bardic schools (Ellis 1985). The occupation of a bard was a branch of druidism. Most of the early churches were built on circular sites – a continuation of the druidic practice—rather than in the rectangular patterns that the Romans used (Ellis 1985). An example of such a site would be the Knowlton Church, built within a prehistoric circular henge (English Heritage 2007) (Figure 2). Thus the sacred sites of the druids were not destroyed or avoided by the new Christian faith, but were instead utilized by Christian Celts.

Celtic pagans maintained the practice of hanging relics, (usually wool, string, ribbons, etc), in trees (Pennick 1996). This tradition was continued by the Christian Celts. Many Celtic saints used trees as stopping places and several *Lives* of these saints tell of instances where objects were hung in trees. Often, while traveling, Celtic priests would spend the night under trees and hang whatever valuables they had in the branches. This had a practical as well as symbolic purpose: the tree was to protect the traveler physically and at the same time the tree's spirits would be honored by the sacred objects that the priests hung from the tree (Pennick 1996). Since sacred trees were so important to the old Celtic faith, many Christian ceremonies, especially weddings, were held under such trees.

Natural and carved impressions in stones were also thought to be sacred places. Before he or she ascended his or her office, a chieftain would step on a set of carved stone footprints, symbolizing the entering of the rightful ruler into his or her post. Because most upper ranks of the clergy of the Celtic Church were drawn from the Celtic "nobility", the associations of stone footprints appear to have been transferred to the Christian clergy and there are many still-existing footprint stones commemorating certain acts of saints. These footprint stones exist in all Celtic lands (Pennick 1996). There is a set of footprints carved near a chapel of Keil, between Dunaverty Bay and Carskey in Kintyre, at a place that is reputed to have been where St Columa first landed in Dalriada (Pennick 1996). At another location, on a rock on the east end of Hollyhead Church in Anglesey, is a single footprint that is said to be of St. Cybi (Pennick 1996). There were also stone footprints of St. Ólann found on a boulder near St. Ólann's Well at Coolineagh, County Cork (Pennick 1996).

Other impressions reputed to have been left by saints includes knee and hand prints. The island of St Kilda at Portpatrick holds the knee and right hand impressions of St Patrick (Pennick 1996). There are traditions of body-prints formed naturally within the rocks of rivers. Celtic monks often prayed in rivers, holy wells, and underneath waterfalls. Perhaps this practice was the continuation of the Celtic druids' veneration of sacred waters. In a riverbed at Troedrauer in Dyfed lie the knee marks of St. Gwyndaf Hên on a flat rock in the River Ceri (Pennick 1996).

One Celtic saint in particular seemed to have had many sacred rock impressions dedicated to him. At Llanllyfni, St. Gredfyw has a rock bed, a rock seat, and a stone with his knee prints upon it. Other rocks also contain the marks of his horse's hooves and the mark of St. Gredfyw's thumb (Pennick 1996). The rock hoof prints are especially interesting because they are associated with royal horses, which were sacred to the Celtic horse-goddess Epona (Pennick 1996).

Another practice that the pagan Celts had was leaving stones on cairns. Cairns were usually situated atop hills and thus became stopping places for Christian pilgrims, who continued the tradition by depositing a stone on whatever cairn they happened to stop at or pass by. The Priest's Grave is a cairn near St Buonia's Well at Killabuoria in County Kerry that was frequently honored by pilgrims who would place stones on the cairn (Pennick 1996). The leaving of a stone was symbolic with leaving a part of the self behind. Directly related to this is the custom of putting small stones on Christian tombs and drystone altars (called *leachta*). Ancient *leachta* in Irish Celtic monasteries hold large pebbles, some of which are carved with sacred sigils (Pennick 1996). These stones were left to carry the prayers of the people who left them or as a votive offering (Pennick 1996).

As mentioned before, sources of water were sacred to the pagan Celts. Offerings were often thrown into waters to become the property of the Celtic deities. The site of Llyn Cerrig Bach, for example, contains 150 ritually deposited objects (mostly martial in nature) within a marsh that used to be a lake (Green 1994). Lakes and rivers were thought of as places of healing. Almost every Irish, British, and Breton tradition has a holy well named after one or more of their saints. It's clear that many of the holy wells existed well before the introduction of Christianity into the Celtic lands. Renaming these holy wells was a "monotheistic reinterpretation of the spirit that dwells within and guards the (often) healing waters." (Pennick 1996:68). These wells were usually natural springs that had buildings built over them for protection and into the Christian tradition, many of them were still believed to contain healing properties. Some wells reputedly sprang up when a saint was beheaded, such as the wells of St. Reina, St. Jutwara, St. Ludd, St. Noyala, and St. Gwenfrewi (Pennick 1996).

According to pagan Celtic beliefs, if a person were to go to certain sacred waters at the right time and in the right frame of mind, they might be fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of "the fish" and the unconscious would then open up to them. The archetype of this "fully realized human being" became Christ, who was symbolized by the fish by the Celtic Christians (Pennick 1996). This representation of Christ as a fish can be seen in the Celtic manuscripts. The fish was a Christian symbol that appealed to the Celts because of the Celtic association of the salmon with wisdom (Wood 1998). In the Celtic myth of *Culhwch and Olwen*, many different animals were sought out for information on where a man by the name of Mabon was located. The last and oldest creature to be asked was a salmon and because he was the oldest and wisest of the creatures, he was the only one able to give the location of the elusive Mabon. (Bellingham 1990).

The mountain was another aspect of the landscape that was scared to the Celts. Mountains were places of sun worship in pagan Celtic belief. Later, certain "mountains of light" were dedicated to St. Michael such as St.

Michael's Mount, St. Michael de Rupe on Brentor, and St. Michael's at Burrow Mump, Glastonbury Tor (Pennick 1996). Christian cosmology held that St. Michael's body was the sun and "his place in the company of archangels (was) like the sun in the congress of planets." (Pennick 1996:83). Michael's Mount and Mont-Saint-Michel are two holy mountains that are unique in that they are neither entirely in the sea nor on the land, since they are connected to the mainland by causeways that are passable only at low tide. During Celto-Roman times, Mont-Saint-Michel was an island-mountain Celtic solar sanctuary called Dinsul or Belen (Pennick 1996).

Man-made hills were another type of high place that was important to the Celts. There was a widespread custom in Celtic lands of building temporary hills to celebrate the harvest festival of Lammas that occurred on August 1 (Pennick 1996). Often a hole was left in the center of the hill to hold a flagstaff for a festival flag. Some Celtic crosses today, such as Muiredach's High Cross (Sullivan 2008) (Figure 3), can be found raised to above-ground level on stone steps, which seem to reflect the Lammas hill tradition (Pennick 1996).

Caves were places of inspiration for the Celts and were believed to be entrances to the Otherworld. There exists an incredible continuity in the use of caves for worship. Before temples came into use, religious ceremonies were held in caves. The remains of early monasticism still exist in some of those caves that are named after the saints who once lived and/or worshipped there. In St. Ninian's Cave near Whithorn, crosses can be seen carved into the walls and there are several stone grave markers present (Pennick 1996). Some other caves used by Celtic Christians include: St. Kieran's Cave by Loch Kilkerran, Cave of St. Moloe on Holy Island in the Clyde, and the cave at Caplawchy in Fife in which St. Adrian and his followers lived (Pennick 1996).

According to the Celts, islands were also sacred, being cut off by water from the unwanted physical influences of the mainland. Celtic priests sought isolation from the world and retained the Celtic pagan belief that evil spirits and magic would not cross water. Islands often served as either destinations or stopping points for pilgrims. Some islands contained many sacred loci, increasing the overall sacred power of the island. Iona, for example, had a cathedral, oratories, high crosses, a holy hill, holy wells, a sacred road, and a cemetery (Pennick 1996).

Similarities in Christian and Celtic Pagan Beliefs

There were several reasons for Christianity's eventual acceptance into Celtic society. One of them was the concept of the Trinity. The Celts had certain numbers that were special or significant to them. The number three was one of them. Gods and goddesses in Celtic mythology sometimes had three heads or took three different forms when they transformed and so on. One of the reasons Christianity was accepted was the concept of the Christian and Godhead being a Trinity, or three persons in one God. The fact that the Christian God took three separate forms, which were the Father (creator), Son (savior), and Holy Spirit (sanctifier), was also a concept familiar to the Celts since their own deities took different forms depending on their functions (Lloyd 2006).

The doctrine of immortality taught by the Christians was also a teaching that was similar to that of the Celts. The Celtic gods and goddesses were immortal, after all. In fact, the pagan Celtic religion was one of the first to develop a doctrine of immortality (Ellis 1985). Christianity taught that God was eternal and Christ's promise of eternal life to all believers was relatively readily accepted by the Celts because they were already used to the idea of an afterlife. The Celtic belief in an afterlife is apparent in looking at the various elaborate grave goods that were buried with Celtic peoples, such as those La Téne style artifacts found at the Fermanagh passage tomb burial (Foley 1988). These grave goods were meant to be used and enjoyed by the dead in the afterlife. The druids taught that death was only a changing of place. Life went on with all its material goods in another world. They believed that a constant exchange of souls took place between the two worlds so that when someone died in the other world, it would bring a soul to this world (Ellis 1985). Myths such as *Pwyll* and *Tristan and Isolt* also demonstrated such beliefs in an afterlife. Pwyll went to the Otherworld to fight Hafgan and came back only after he had completed his appointed task. Isolt promised she would join Tristan in the Underworld after he died and then promptly killed herself on Tristan's sword (Lloyd 2006).

Christianity in Celtic Mythology

Since Christianity was accepted by the Celts, The Celtic myths contain some Christian influence, though parts of the pagan Celtic elements still remain. Those pagan elements were some of the Celtic themes discussed earlier. Some Irish accounts of *Deirdre of the Sorrows* told the story with Connachar as Deirdre's father (Bellingham 1990). But it appears the Christians who recorded this myth presumed the relationship to be too incestuous and was altered in later versions.

The Children of Llyr is a tale that was heavily Christianized. The original ending had the swan-children living in a fairy world of perpetual youth. The silver chains that linked the children were tokens of their fairy status and they were allowed to re-enter the human world once those chains were removed. In the Christian ending, the children were turned back from swans to humans and were baptized before they died. The Christian version altered the end to

demonstrate the triumph of the new religion, keeping pagan elements in the rest of the story. After all, it was the ending that really mattered. The *Mabinogion* myths, however, didn't seem to be influenced by Christianization. *Pwyll* and *Branwen*, which are part of the Mabinogion, appear to contain no visible elements of Christian influence (Bellingham 1990).

The legend of *Tristan and Isolt*, however, is a story that had undergone many transformations over the years and it's not surprising that Christianization had its influence in reshaping the story, though the underlying pagan Celtic nature of the legend has never really been lost (Bellingham 1990). It is difficult to entirely Christianize or tame a story that deals with an adulterous love affair. Some scholars believe that the love potion was a post-Christian addition and it provided an excuse for the sinful behavior of Tristan and Isolt. But it is possible that this could be merely a Christian interpretation of an original Celtic feature since magical elements were common in myth and they reflected Druidic religious ritual (Bellingham 1990:99).

Christianization did not create entirely new myths among the Celts, but it did alter the myths already in place. Since the Celts looked to the characters in myths as role models and mimicked their behavior, a Christian influence in the myths would have encouraged a Christian influence to take root among the Celts. In some cases, Christianized Celts might have reworked a few of their myths to make them more complementary to their new religion. Thus it appears Christianity influenced the evolution of Celtic myth and then, in turn, the Christianized Celtic myths were used as teaching models for children and those Celts who still retained their pagan ways.

CELTIC CHRISTIANITY IN ARCHAEOLOGY

The Celtic contribution to European civilization is one, which is only partly reflected in archaeology. It largely stems from their religion and has its archaeological reflection in their art. While the Celtic Church didn't exist as a unity throughout the Celtic areas, it's possible to recognize a Celtic Christian ethos which embodies the less militant qualities of Christianity (Laing 1975).

Roman Christianity

There is very little conclusive evidence for Roman Christianity. Since the Romans ruled the Celtic peoples for a time, it is important to first look at the nature of Christianity among the Romans in Britain. There appears to have been a prosperous Christian community in the area of Hadrian's Wall – around Carlisle in particular. The evidence there mainly consisted of series of late Christian tombstones (Laing 1975). In the fifth and sixth centuries, there was a new wave of Christian activity in the Irish Sea province, growing directly from the Continent, especially from Gaul as well as from the eastern Mediterranean, although to a lesser extent. The evidence for this takes the form of memorial stones with continental formulae and imported pottery (Laing 1975).

Monastic and Church Sites

The distribution of early monasteries in mainland Britain coincided with that of imported pottery, which implied that there were continuing influences along the same lines of contact. "The earliest in Britain is almost certainly Tintangel in Cornwall and the extension of monasticism can be traced from Cornwall round the South Welsh coast in the years prior to 500 A.D., to Ireland in the sixth century and, by extension of the original Irish foundations, to the northwest of mainland Britain in the late sixth century. From the British areas monasticism spread to Northumbria in the seventh century." (Laing 1975:375).

The most valuable categories of evidence for Christianity in the Celtic areas of Britain were the monastic and other church sites as well as the contemporary documentary sources. Information could also be taken from memorial stones, references in later documentary sources, place-names, dedications, and portable objects (Laing 1975). In Silchester, for example, there is a building from the fourth century with a nave, apse, and aisles, which may have been a Christian church. It had been reburied beneath arable fields within the town walls (Muir and Welfare 1983).

By the fourth century, pagan and Christian symbolism had become intertwined. Hinton St. Mary near Sturminster Newton in Dorset has a central roundel of pavement that contains the image of the head of Christ, backed by His Chi-Rho monogram. Another portion of the mosaic at Hinton St. Mary shows the mythical Roman Belleophon, mounted on Pegasus to kill the Chimera. Through Christian eyes, this might be seen as the triumph of good over evil (Muir and Welfare 1983).

Generally, early Christian sites can be classified into monastic, cemetery, and chapel sites. Monasteries were usually enclosed by a *vallum monasterii*, which was normally an earthen bank with an outer quarry ditch serving as a spiritual and legal boundary line. In contrast to cemetery enclosures, it's been suggested that monastic enclosures were often initially rectangular. Two examples of sites with *vallum monasterii* are Clonmacnois and Iona, though at Iona the plan has been complicated by subsidiary earthworks from various dates. In contrast to these early

monasteries, there is another group in which the enclosure seems to have been of a circular plan. Examples include Inchcleraun in Ireland, Kirk Maughold on the Isle of Man, and Kingarth in Bute (Laing 1975).

The *vallum* was in some cases stone-built such as at Nendrum (Archaeology Data Service: Nendrum Monastic Site 2007) or Kingarth (Laing 1975). It's very likely that in a number of cases, existing circular fortifications were reoccupied. There is some documentary evidence for earlier fortified sites being handed over for such a purpose. The Roman fort at Caer Gybion on Holyhead was a gift to St. Gybi and the ruined Saxon shore fort of Burgh Castle, Suffolk, was given to St. Fursa (Laing 1975).

Island monasteries, both major and minor, were not uncommon. A classic example would be the remote site of Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry. Some other examples include Irishmurray in Ireland and Priestholm off Anglesey in Wales (Laing 1975). Promontories were sometimes utilized such as at St. Abb's Head, Berwickshire and the Brough of Deerness, Orkney (Laing 1975). A number of chapel sites in remote situations fit into the category of hermitages such as the chapel site on Pygmies' Isle off the coast of Lewis (Laing 1975).

The larger monasteries were enclosed villages that contained disorganized agglomerations of small buildings surrounded by their *valla*. Buildings varied according to function such as the cells of the monks, scriptorium, guest house, and refectory. Within the enclosure were plots of land and buildings associated with farming, workshops, and possibly a school. Living cells and public buildings were probably distributed at random inside the enclosure. It had several chapels instead of a single church, all relatively small. The larger buildings were rectilinear, whereas the smaller buildings were either rectilinear or circular. Up until the eighth century, buildings were normally made of wood (Laing 1975).

Until the seventh century, the tradition of building in Celtic-speaking areas was in wood, not stone (Laing 1975). Very little remains of those monasteries and churches that the early Celtic Christian missionaries built and the oldest remains are mostly of Norman construction (Ellis 1985). Some of those buildings that do still exist include St. Dogmael's Abbey, St. Govan's Chapel at Bosherton, and the teaching monastery at Llanilltyd—though there is little that remains of that monastery (Ellis 1985). Within the grounds of the Llanilltyd monastery stands a pillar with the Latin words carved into it: *In nomine di sunmi incipit crux saluatoris quae preparavit Samsoni apati pro anima sua et pro anima Iuthelo Rex et Artmali.* "In the name of God Most High begins the cross of the Savior with Abbot Samson prepared for his soul and for the soul of King Iuthael and Arthmael the Dead." (Ellis 1985:52). Excavations have offered evidence for timber oratories in chapels. The timber church was basically a product of native tradition in Celtic-speaking areas and the small timber oratories shouldn't be attributed either to a Roman-British survival or to an introduction from continental Europe (Laing 1975).

Since many of the early Christian religious buildings were constructed using wattle and timber planks, there are very few early ecclesiastical buildings still in existence. Many of the churches in Ireland have foundations dating to the sixth and seventh centuries A.D., but few of them remain without having been completely rebuilt (Ellis 1985). Skellig Michael, however, was built of stone and is the only complete Celtic monastery in Ireland that was rebuilt in later times, which lies eight miles west of Bolus Head in the Atlantic (Ellis 1985). The monastery was built in the sixth century A.D. and is perched on one of the highest point of the island. It contains six beehive cells and two oratories serviced by two holy wells and there is a small cemetery that contains the remains of stone crosses. (Ellis 1985).

Evidence for chapels comes mainly from Church Island, near Valenica, Co. Kerry in Ireland and Ardwall Island, off the coast of Kirkcudbright in Scotland. There are two phases that can be recognized at the Church Island sight in Ireland. The first is an unenclosed cemetery from the seventh century with a timber oratory, outlined by post holes, 6ft by 9ft (Laing 1975). There is a circular living cell nearby with some burials on either side of the oratory aligned along its axis. Phase two has the timber oratory replaced by a stone chapel in the early eighth century, 18 1/2 ft by 12 1/2 ft, which was partly built over the timber oratory and its associated graves (Laing 1975). The wooden hut was likewise replaced with a stone one and further burials aligned the new chapel (Laing 1975).

Pagan Images at Christian Sites

Further evidence for continuity between the Christian and pagan traditions of the Celts can be seen through the presence of pagan images at Christian sites. St. Fergus's cemetery, located on the island of Inishkeen in Upper Lough Erne, contains the stone head of a Celtic divinity with antlers (Pennick 1996). This antlered image greatly resembles the horned god Cernunnos, whose form can also be seen on the Gundestrup Cauldron. In the churchyard of Caldragh we find another Celtic deity's image: a Janus figure with a stoup for water positioned between the heads (Pennick 1996). There is a Tau cross with faces on the upper side in the traditional pagan Celtic style at Rougham in County Clare (Pennick 1996). All of these examples are places in which the remnants of pagan tradition can still be seen in the context of Celtic Christianity.

Cemeteries

Cemetery sites could be either simple burial grounds without such associated features as chapels or founders' tombs or sites in which the burials were subordinate to the associated structures. Some cemetery sites may have developed from simple graveyards with the construction of chapels, living huts, shrines, and other features within the pre-existing cemeteries. Many cemeteries were intended as places of religious observance from the outset with the oratory or chapel being the key element with the graveyard being of secondary importance (Laing 1975). By the fourth century, the standard burial practice in Roman Britain was inhumation. In the early Christian cemeteries, bodies were for the most part simply laid in the ground or in a hollow worked out of bedrock (known as "dug graves"), in stone-lined cists ("cist graves"), or in stone cists with a capping of stones ("lintel graves") (Laing 1975: 380). Stone sarcophagi were rather rare.

Many of the earliest known Christian cemeteries were comprised of unenclosed groups of burials such as the one found at Cannington in Somerset or the long-cist cemetery at Parkburn in Midlothian (Laing 1975). The enclosed cemeteries were normally surrounded by a curvilinear *vallum* which symbolically separated the holy from the irreligious and the dead from the living (Laing 1975).

There is some evidence of continuity of burial sites from pagan to Christian times. Christian burial sometimes is associated with Iron Age funerary sites or Roman sites. The custom of distinguishing special burials with a circular surround also seems to be of prehistoric and Roman origins, as do the few early Christian burials that have rectangular surrounds (Laing 1975). Most early Christian cemeteries, though, were circular. Archaeology shows that among Celtic Christians, the burial-ground preceded the church (Allcroft 1930:II). For example, the Nendrum monastic site contains burials that predate the church there (Archaeology Data Service: Nendrum Monastic Site 2007). They didn't necessarily need a structural place of worship, but simply a meeting place. The traditional place of meeting for the pagan Celts had been either a grave or a symbol of a grave and thus Celtic Christians continued the practice by meeting for worship in cemeteries (Allcroft 1930:II).

Stone circles were also places of worship for the Celtic Christians and are often called *churches* both in Gaelic and Lowland Scots even though no actual church building ever occupied the site (Allcroft 1930:II). It is very possible that the early missionaries chose the rings of standing stones as places of worship because the pagan inhabitants of the region had also assembled there for ceremonial purposes. According to A. Hadrian Allcroft,

> Many ancient churches occupy precisely those sites, which would naturally be selected for barrows, and in very many cases it is yet possible to see beneath them the swell of an original barrow. The words *hlaw* and *howe*, elements in a long list of English parish-names point to the fact that the churches of these parishes are actually reared on barrows. Names like Kirkbergh, Kirkbarrow, and Chapel-le-How tell the same story, as probably do many names in *–bury*, and *–borough* (*beorh*, 'a barrow'). (Allcroft 1930:II:254). Circular sepulchral monuments – ringworks, cromlechs, and barrows – were called 'kirk' and 'church' because the original *circ* was a circular place of burial. (Allcroft 1930:II:276).

It should be noted that there was at least one difference between the way pagan and Christian Celts treated their dead. The pagans generally made their burial-places a rather large distance from the dwellings of the living. They visited the dead regularly at certain seasons and celebrated their memories with feasts and games, but otherwise kept their distance from these places of burial (Allcroft 1930:II). The new tradition that Christianity brought in was its tendency to share quite close quarters with the dead. The Christian Celts celebrated the memories of the dead with daily ritual and built their temples amongst the tombs (Allcroft 1930:II).

Over and over again, pre-Christian burials have been found beneath old churches and churchyards. There is a rather long list of churches that stand on or beside grave barrows. Excavations and documentary evidence such as the Capitularies have shown that for a long time Christians continued to bury their dead within the pagan barrows. For example, at Fimber, near Sledmere, an excavation revealed internments extending through the Bronze Age, Roman period, and Saxon period (Allcroft 1930:II). A churchyard was later built over these burials and a church was constructed over the barrow. Another example can be found in Sligo County, Ireland, where a Christian cemetery surrounds two pre-Christian cairns (Mount 1994). Excavations have also revealed Christian ornaments among pagan grave-furniture in Saxon cemeteries (Allcroft 1930:II).

Religion, with the Irish Celt especially (whether Christian or not), began with the grave in the form of a circular barrow. The oratory, which developed into the church after many centuries, was the outward sign of Christianity that was placed upon the old pagan symbol of mortality: the barrow circle. The fact that the building was constructed on a burial made the building sanctified. There was no sanctity where there was no burial and the greater the number of burials at a site, the greater the sanctity of the site (Allcroft 1930:II).

The church of Alphamstone in Essex is a good example of a church having been built over a pagan site (Allcroft

1930:II). The church was constructed over a stone circle while urns and sepulchral remains were discovered in the immediate vicinity. Many such churchyards have yielded implements of stone and bronze, some of them clearly elements of grave deposits (Allcroft 1930:II).

The pagan Celts had always looked towards the West as the place where the Otherworld lay. The West was thought of as the place of perfection because the sun moved in that direction (Ellis 1985). As Christianity made its presence known among the Celts, the newly Christianized Celts continued the practice of orienting the buried dead in an east-west fashion. The early Christian burials at Ardnagross, Westmeath with their orientation of heads to the west is an example of this internment practice (Eogan 1995).

Ogham

The Irish Ogham inscriptions are good examples of continuity in the Celtic Church. Ogham was a native Irish alphabet that was composed of sets short lines that stood for letters. These lines were drawn up to or crossed a base line, and those found on upright pillar stones were usually carved horizontally. It has been argued that the first inscriptions were carved in a language that was no longer spoken during the time of its use and that it was a sort of "religious language" that had been used by the druids (Ellis 1985). Early Christian symbols such as the Chi-Rho monograms (of the name of Christ) and the *Dextera Dei* ("Right hand of God"), appear at some sites together with the Ogham texts. There are 215 Ogham inscriptions in Ireland and 48 in England and Wales (Ellis 1985). Many Ogham stones exist within Christians sites, such as th the early Christian site of Templemanaghan, containing an oratory, various standing-stones, an ogham stone, and a burial ground and dating between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. (Ketchum 2005) (Figure 4).

The Celtic High Cross

The Celtic Cross is perhaps the best example of the link between pagan Celtic and Christian traditions. During the Hallstatt period, the continental Celts set up aniconic (symbolic) stones that appear to have been the forerunners of the later insular Celtic crosses (Pennick 1996). Some of these crosses were made in a humanoid form that resemble older representations of the Celtic Great Goddess. The head portions have the sort of x-pattern seen on later Cornish stone crosses, but date to almost a thousand years before the adoption of the cross as a Christian symbol. These humanoid forms also appear much later in Welsh stone crosses.

The form of the cross had geomantic (divination by lines and figures) connotations for the Celts before it was ever adopted as a Christian symbol. In fact, the Celtic Cross has a provenance in the earliest period recognized as Celtic, which was 600 years before Christianity began (Ellis 1985). There is a pillar-cross from the Hallstatt period in Kilchberg, near Tübingen of south Germany that closely resembles many of the later crosses of Cornwall and Ireland (Ellis 1985). Crosses exist in the diaper-carved work of Celtic memorials of the La Téne period (characterized by intricate knot and interlace designs). A fragment from Steinenbronn contains patterns that show up later in Irish Christian manuscripts and church carvings (Ellis 1985).

Megaliths were often Christianized in the early days of the Church by being marked with crosses. Some Ogham stones were reused as Christian gravestones, such as those at Port St. Mary on the Isle of Man (Archaeology Data Service: The Cronk 2007). The *Life* of St. Samson tells of how he carved crosses into a pagan stone at Tregeare (Ellis 1985). At Bridell in Dyfed, there is a ninth century A.D. cross that has been carved onto an earlier Ogham-inscribed standing stone. Well into the seventeenth century A.D., megaliths were still being converted into crosses in Brittany (Ellis 1985).

Peter Berresford Ellis offers an interesting interpretation of the continuity of the Celtic Cross from pagan to Christian times:

> In its fully developed form, the wheel-headed Celtic high cross is a version of the world's axis. It stands on a foursquare pyramidal base representing the world-mountain whose roots are buried in the earth. From the center of this arises the shaft, the axis proper. Close to the top is the Celtic cross itself. It is a sunwheel, reproducing a natural phenomenon observed occasionally in the skies when the sun's light, shining through ice crystals, is diffracted into a cross-and circle pattern. At the center of the wheel is Christ, the cosmic man. The cross is topped by a house-like form, the hall of heaven, the abode of God, resembling a Celtic reliquary. (Ellis 1985: 49).

The cross base, in addition to representing the world-mountain, could also hearken back to the Lammas Hill tradition of the pagan Celts, as discussed earlier. The axis of the cross, then, could represent the flagstaff that usually was placed at the center of the Lammas Hill. Several pre-Christian carvings depicting the sunwheel exist among pagan Celtic material culture. It has also been hypothesized that the circle represents the Celtic torc, a symbol of

authority and power. The Christian interpretation is that the circle is a halo, like those depicted in the Irish manuscripts. The world-mountain base, the axis, and the sunwheel were holdovers from the pagan Celtic beliefs and iconography, while the Christ at the middle and the hall of heaven at the top were added to the cross to form what we now recognize as the Christian Celtic Cross.

A Case Study of the Munster Christian Inscriptions

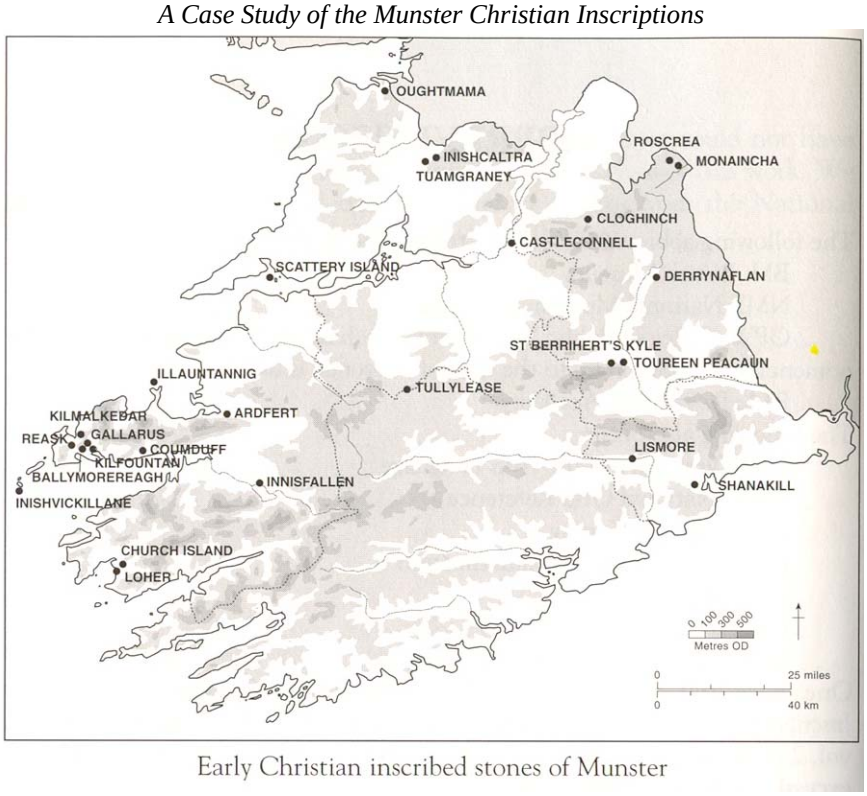

Figure 5: Munster, Ireland (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

Munster, Ireland includes the counties of Clare, Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Tipperary, and Waterford. This case study covers the early Christian period, A.D. 500 to A.D. 1200 (Okasha and Forsyth 2001). There are certain classifications of stones: pillars, slabs, and free-standing crosses.

Pillar stones are the earliest group of stones in Britain found with Christian inscriptions. They are tall, unworked (unshaped) natural stones, usually found standing upright. The main characteristic that distinguishes pillars from slabs is the thickness. Pillars have a thickness-to-width ratio of about 1:3 (Okasha and Forsyth 2001).

Slabs make up the largest group of inscribed stones and come in several different forms. Most slabs have crosses carved into them, ranging from simple to complex designs. *Early Christian Inscriptions of Munster* lists the following types of slabs: upright, small (with simple or no crosses), large recumbent, large plain (cross-less), and miscellaneous slabs. The thickness-to-width ratio of slabs is an average of 1:7 (Okasha and Forsyth 2001).

The script used on all the stones in this study have been incised, meaning that they were carved directly into the rock rather than carved in relief. Most of the stones from Munster contain a half-unical insular script, popular from the early eighth to early ninth century when insular decorative capitals were widely used in manuscript production (Okasha and Forsyth 2001). Old Irish, Middle Irish, and Latin were the primary languages used in stone inscriptions (Okasha and Forsyth 2001). The inscriptions written in Irish date from as early as the seventh or eighth century up into the twelfth century, reflecting the "development of the Irish language over this period from Old Irish (pre-A.D. 900) to Middle Irish (c. A.D. 900- c. A.D. 1300)" (Okasha and Forsyth 2001:36). Certain aspects of the inscription formulae give some indication of a monument's date. For example, the use of *bennacht* (blessing) indicates a date of A.D. 900 or later (Okasha and Forsyth 2001). Some of the names inscribed on the stones can also be used for dating. Formulae use has varied through the centuries and it can be taken as a general rule that the shorter texts will usually be earlier while longer texts will have a later date (Okasha and Forsyth 2001).

A number of the Munster stones contain a *Nomina Sacra*, the sacred names of God. These take the form of the monogram *ihs xps* (based on the Greek letters for the Latin form *Ihesus Christus*), found mostly on the eighth and

ninth century stones (Okasha and Forsyth 2001). The Greek *alpha* and *omega*, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet and also another name for God, has also been used as Christian symbols on stones, often associated with the sacred monogram *chi-rho* (the name of Christ) (Okasha and Forsyth 2001).

This case study will examine select stones from Okasha and Forsyth's *Early Christian Inscriptions of Munster* and attempt to show how certain aspects of these Christian stones demonstrate a continuation of Celtic traditions from pagan times. The dates, descriptions, and stone names given are those of Okasha and Forsyth, but the interpretations based off these descriptions are my own.

Island of Inishcaltra

The site of the following two stone monuments is the island of Inishcaltra (Figure 6) , located in County Clare, Munster. The island contains the ruins of four churches: St. Brigid's, St. Caimin's, St. Mary's, and St. Michael's. Inishcaltra also contains a round tower, a cell, a holy well, and a series of earthworks. The slabs found at the church sites were laid out in rows closely packed together, with the head oriented to the west in most cases.

Inishcaltra 2: Free-Standing Cross

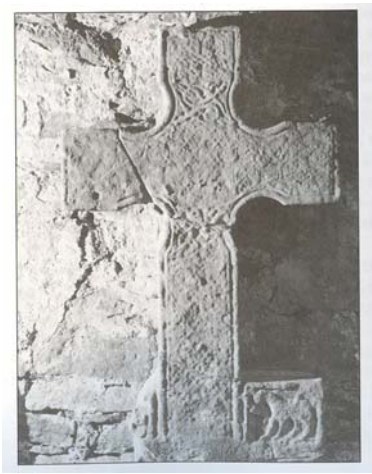

Figure 7: Free-Standing Cross, St. Caimin's Church (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

This monument is located within the ruins of St. Caimin's Church, cemented against the nave wall. The design patterns and the shape of the cross are consistent with the early twelfth century style, a revival from earlier centuries. The name Cathasach found on the stone has also led to a twelfth century date, of A.D. 1111. The surface is decorated elaborately with interlace design patterns. On the right panel is a quadruped (that could be taken to be a unicorn) with a human leg jutting out from its mouth.

Interpretation: The interlace pattern tradition, I believe, had been carried on from the La Téne period of artwork of the pagan Celts. As for the quadruped figure, the pagan Celts were well-known for their representations of animals on both their artifacts and in their mythology. Horses were especially favored as noble creatures, emphasized by the worship of the horse goddess, Epona. It appears that some regard for animal representation had remained into the Christian period and finds its manifestation in the carving found on this free-standing cross. However, the precise meaning or symbolism behind this horse-like carving is unknown.

ishcaltra 4: Large Cross-Slab

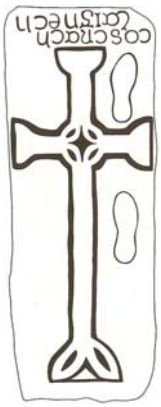

Figure 8: Large Cross-Slab, St. Caimin's Church, County Clare (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

This stone was found in the graveyard, probably *in situ* near the chancel of St. Caimin's hurch. It is a ringed Latin cross carved in false relief with semi-circular expansions at the rminals and two petals forming the bottom of the cross. The outlines of two shod footprints are cised to the right of the cross, one above the other. The text (Irish) reads *Coscrach Laignech* Cosgrach the Leinsterman), who might be identified as the son of Angid and Bishop of Killaloe, ho died in 1038. It has been suggested that the footprints indicate that the person commemorated ed while on a pilgrimage while on the island on which the monument was found. The prints may present his status as an outsider (made explicit by the use of *Laignech*, an ethnic label not found ywhere else in Ireland).

Interpretation: The footprints are the most interesting aspect of this particular cross-slab. In agan times, a Celtic chieftain-to-be would step on a set of carved footprints as a symbol of the ntering of his or her role as ruler. Stone impressions of footprints were reinterpreted by Christians marks left by the saints, still retaining the pagan Celtic belief in the sanctity of such marks. It is possible that the footprint carvings on this particular cross-slab represent an association with a saint or perhaps even hearkens back to the pagan tradition of marking the stone's owner as an authority figure of some sort. If Coscrach's father really was a bishop, then it is possible that Coscrach gained a prominent position in the church as well.

Scattery Island

This island is located in County Clare, Munster. Since early Christian times, the island has been an ecclesiastical center. During the sixth century a monastery was founded there by St. Senan, but was later destroyed during the Tudor period. The remains of the monastery today include a round tower, the cathedral, and three other medieval churches.

Figure 9: Large Cross-Slab, St. Senan's Church (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

Inis Cathaigh: Large Cross-Slab

The site name in which this stone is located is Teampall Seanáin, St. Senan's Church. The stone is a large recumbent (laid out flat) cross-slab, probably dating to the ninth or tenth century, lying apparently *in situ* a short distance away from the ruins of the church. The head of the stone is oriented to the northwest. The stone is incised with a Latin cross made from a two-stranded interlace design ending in triquetra knots at each of the cross's terminals. The first text reads, "a prayer for Moínach" and the second, "a prayer for Móenach tutor of Mogrón. Most people commemorated on slabs were identified only by their given name. The few that indicate relationship are written as being sons or grandsons of certain named people. This stone from Scattery Island is exceptional in that it identifies a person with a fosterage relationship.

Interpretation: The pre-Christian Celtic culture put great emphasis on fostering. It was a common practice for a child to adopt a set of foster parents in addition to his or her blood parents. These foster parents would usually have the responsibility of teaching the foster child a trade or skill and were thus greatly respected by the foster child. The mention of this fostering relationship found on the Scattery Island slab could indicate an echo of that ancient Celtic view of the important bond between a teacher and student; between a foster child and fosterparent. The use of the triquetra knots should also be noted, as they hearken back to the La Téne style of Celtic

Teampall Mhanacháin: Pillar

This site is located in County Kerry, Munster. It contains the remains of a stone oratory, the foundations of some dry-stone huts, a burial ground, and the remains of a sub-circular enclosure. Within the burial ground stand some cross-incised boulders and a few small slabs. The front of the oratory contains a tall ogham-inscribed pillar with two equal-armed crosses also carved into the stone.

Interpretation: It has been hypothesized that ogham writing was used by the pagan Celtic druids. The crosses carved upon the same stone were either carved at the same time as the ogham or later. If they were contemporary, that would indicate that perhaps some of the druids had been converted to Christianity and were still using their old writing system along with the new Christian symbols. If the crosses were added later, it was most likely the result of Christians wanting to put their mark on pagan monuments, indicating the dominance of Christianity over the old religion. Unfortunately, since the ogham inscriptions and crosses do not overlap each other anywhere (if they did, one would be able to tell which was carved first), it is very difficult to tell whether the crosses had been added later.

Knockane: Stone

The site of Knockane is located in the townland of Coumduff, County Kerry, Munster. The site comprises an area of open ground in the middle of the village of Knockane and is thought to be early Christian. At the site was found four sub-megalithic cists (the date of which is uncertain), most likely Bronze Age graves. The same site yielded a stone bearing a cross inscription with a *chi-rho* on the upper arm of the cross.

Interpretation: It was a common practice of the early Christians to meet at locations of burial for worship because places where bodies lay were considered sacred. Pagan burial places often served as such meeting places. Later, Christians began to build their churches and graveyards over pagan Celtic burials. The presence of the Christian symbol of the *chi-rho* and the cross in the context of possible pagan burials indicates that this site might have been such a Christian meeting place.

Innisfallen Island: Small Cross-Slab

The site is Abbey Church on the important monastery island of Innisfallen, County Kerry, Munster. The small cross-slab is a fragment of a carved stone, built into the church of the ruined Augustinian Monastery. Carved into the stone slab is an equal-armed cross enclosed in a circle. This cross-in-circle motif is quite common on the early Christian monuments of Ireland. The motif is mostly found on upright cross-slabs. This particular slab is probably

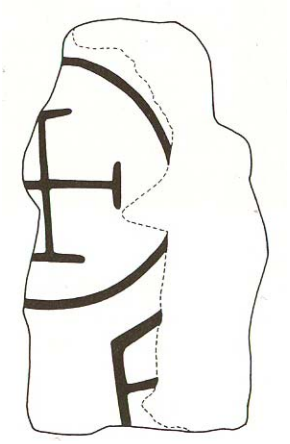

Figure 10: Small Cross-Slab, Abbey Church (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

from the seventh century, though could belong to an ornamental tradition that dates back to the sixth century.

Interpretation: The motif of the circle around the cross may have developed from the pagan Celtic tradition of the sunwheel, which can be found among Celtic iconography. Further examples of similar cross-in-circle motifs from Munster can be found in the appendix (Figures 11-14).

Reask: Burials

The site at Reask is an early Christian one, located in County Kerry, Munster. It was excavated in 1972 and 1975, revealing three phases of use. A radiocarbon date of A.D. 385 was assigned to the earliest occupation level, which was estimated to be between the fourth and seventh century. Bii ware sherds (Roman pottery) were found near the top of this level. The main feature of this earliest phase was a cemetery composed of 42 inhumation lintel and dug graves. These gra est in rows. None of their markers were *in situ* and most of the cross-slab collection was fou vicinity of the site. The second phase of occupation comprised the building of an oratory an(metal- and glass-working). The last and main phase brought together elements of burial, worship, and domestic activities and craftsmanship of a monastic nature. This last phase was dated in the range of eighth to twelfth century.

Interpretation: The main focus here is the orientation of the burials. These graves were set in an east-west fashion, similar to the pagan Celtic practice of orienting their dead towards the west where they believed the Otherworld lay. The tradition appears to have been continued by the Christians through their burials.

TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

The stunning manuscripts, which were created within a rather short period during the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., could be considered the most magnificent pieces of Insular Art. These manuscripts comprised the four New Testament Gospels in the Latin Vulgate. Portraits of the evangelists and scenes from the life of Christ appeared at various points in the text of the manuscripts (Wood 1998).

Many of the grave-slabs at monasteries contain decoration which illustrates the universal Celtism of the time. There was a striking similarity from the patterns, characters, and decorations on the stones to those of Irish manuscripts of the sixth and seventh centuries. Examples of these manuscripts would be the *Gospels* of St. Columba and St. Ceadda and the *Books* of Kells and Armagh (Allcroft 1930).

The illustrative designs that were integrated throughout the text drew on both Celtic and Classical tradition. The Interlace patterns, which were often combined with animal forms, reflected the spirals and shapes of La Téne carving, jewelry, and metalwork of centuries earlier. The colors and forms of animals and human figures may have been influenced by those found on Celtic enamel work of the later La Téne period. The eternal knot is characteristic of Celtic book decoration. Its origins lay in the plait motifs of the La Téne culture. For the Celtic Christians, the endless knot was an ideal expression of the boundlessness of God. The Book of Kells was perhaps the most spectacular of the surviving Insular manuscripts (Wood 1998).

Early Christian tradition viewed a variety of creatures as symbols of Christ and the evangelists. Given the Celts' associations between divinity and metamorphosis, the Irish manuscript artists had no trouble continuing this tradition of animal symbolism in the context of Christian themes. An example would be the belief held by the Celts that the flesh of the peacock was incorruptible, and thus the bird came to represent the eternal, resurrected Christ. Similarly, the early Church associated the gospel writers with heavenly creatures that appeared in the Bible. Matthew was symbolized by a man or an angel, but the rest of the evangelists were all animals. Mark took the form of a lion, Luke was symbolized as an ox, and an eagle represented John (Wood 1998).

CONCLUSION

Christianity was accepted by the pagan Celts, mainly because the similarities that existed between Celtic and Christian beliefs made it easy for the pagan beliefs to be incorporated into the Christian ones. Continuity of pagan practices through Celtic Christian traditions ensured that the old Celtic culture did not die out with the advent of Christianity in Britain. Celtic Christianity left its mark in the archaeological record in the form of monasteries, cemeteries, chapels, and inscribed stones, as Christianity spread over Britain. Christianity served to create a new culture in Britain that manifested itself in a unique combination of old Celtic art and new Christian symbolism. Pagan Celtic art and beliefs intertwined with Christian ones to form what we today refer to as Celtic Christianity.

APPENDIX

Figures

Figure 1: Distribution of Celtic Tribes throughout Europe (pre-Christian) (Jones 2008)

Figure 2: Knowlton Church and Henge (English Heritage NMR 2007)

Figure 3: Muiredach's High Cross (Sullivan 2008)

Figure 2: Ogham stones in early Christian cemetery, County Kerry, Munster, Ireland (Ketchum 2005)

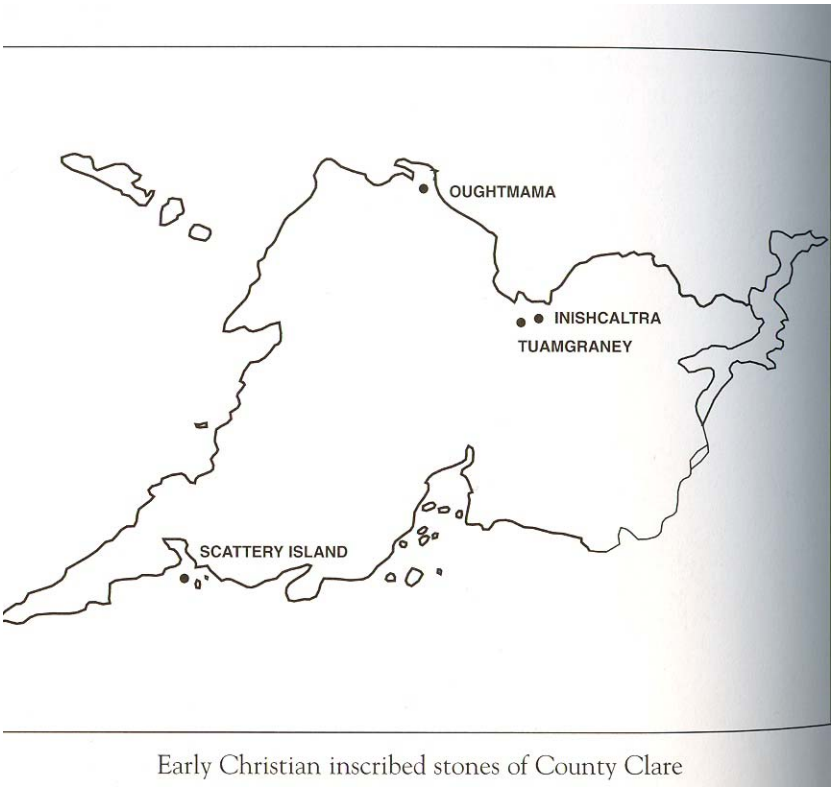

Figure 6: Inishcaltra, County Clare, Munster, Ireland (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

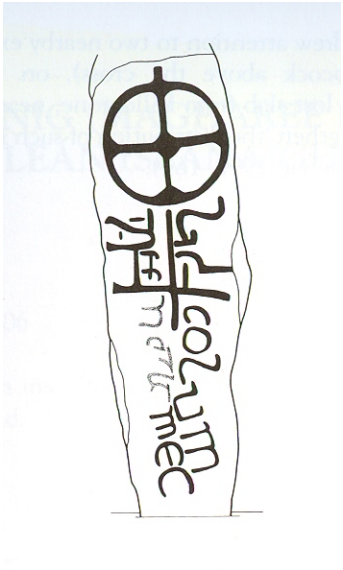

Figure 11: Cross-in-Circle, Gallarus site, County Kerry (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

Figure 12: Cross-in-Circle, St. Crónán's Monastery, Roscrea, County Tipperary (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

Figure 13: Cross-in-circle, Toureen Peacaun, County Tipperary (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

Figure 14: Cross-in-Circle, St. Carthage's Cathedral, County Waterford (Okasha and Forsyth 2001)

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