



NENDRUM

English Translation

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County Down

The Site

Nendrum lies at the SW. end of Mahee Island, an L-shaped island close to the W. shore of Strangford Lough. Now approached by a twisting road and across causeways, until the last century it was reached only by fords or by boat. Some early island monasteries were isolated retreats, and Nendrum is certainly now a place of great peace and beauty, but in Early Christian times it was not at all isolated. It was within easy reach by water of coastal parts of Ireland and, further afield, northern Britain.

Traditions

Mahee Island takes its name from St Mochaoi. Annals record the death of Mochaoi at different dates in the 490s, but annals are unreliable at such an early date. The Tripartite Life of Patrick, written in about 900, tells how St Patrick converted the young swineherd, Mochaoi, and left him with a gospel and crozier. Nendrum may not have been a monastery in the 5th century; one suggestion is that Mochaoi was a missionary bishop with his base here. A well-known story may have its origin in the decline and revival of a very early foundation. Mochaoi went out to cut wood for a church and slept while a bird sang three strains, fifty years for each song. After this sleep of 150 years the saint, not aged in any way, returned to the monastery to find only the descendants of the monks he had known.

History

The picture is clearer in the 7th century. No excavated finds indicate occupation earlier than the 7th century, and from 639 onwards the annals record the deaths of Nendrum clergy fairly regularly, including bishops, abbots and a scribe. This suggests an active and probably populous monastery, and an early litany reports 'nine times fifty monks under the yoke of Mochoe of Noendruim', presumably at Nendrum and perhaps 'daughter' monasteries. Viking fleets were active in Strangford Lough in the 9th and 10th centuries, and we learn that in 976 Setna Ua Deman, abbot of Nendrum, was burned in his own house. The annal does not say it was by Vikings, but this seems likely. Excavated finds suggest that occupation of the monastery did continue after this catastrophe.

After his invasion of Ulster in 1177, John de Courcy established many monastic houses including a Benedictine foundation on the old site at Nendrum, dependent on the English Benedictine house of St Bee's in Cumbria and its mother-house, St Mary's in York. Apart from several land grants, little is known about this medieval foundation: it may always have been small and probably had a short life. The papal taxation of 1306 lists Nedrum as a parish church, and the few later references are to parish clergy, not to monastic life. At some time in the later middle ages parish worship

was moved to Tullynakill on the mainland and the island site was abandoned.

The site of Nendrum was forgotten until 1844, when William Reeves (later Bishop of Down and Connor) arrived in search of the churches listed in the 1306 taxation. On Mahee Island he was shown a 'limekiln' and recognised it was the stump of a monastic round tower with church ruins nearby. Reeves identified the site as Nedrum of the taxation, and as Oendruim of the earlier sources. Nendrum remained neglected and overgrown until 1922-4, when H.C. Lawlor and the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society carried out large-scale excavations and restoration. Unfortunately both were poorly recorded and present us today with difficult problems of interpretation. The site was in the care of Down Country Council until 1973, since when its care has passed to the Department of the Environment.

The Monastery

The site consists of three concentric enclosures defined by dry-stone walls, once high enough to provide serious protection against unwelcome visitors. From the carpark you enter the outer cashel, its walls enclosing some 6 acres but now only visible in a few places. Only part of this outermost enclosure is in State Care and its main features are a kiln and wall fragments. Little is known from excavation about the outer cashel, but there may have been a gate-keeper's hut and a guesthouse nearby. Early monasteries offered hospitality to travellers but kept them at a distance from the innermost parts of the site. The rest of the outer enclosure may have contained houses for monastic tenants and orchards, gardens, pastures and arable fields.

The middle cashel takes the form of a platform defined not by a freestanding wall but a revetment or retaining wall. In places this is surprisingly thick, up to 20 feet, perhaps the result of mistaken restoration in the 1920s. In the SW. segment of this enclosure is a series of circular and oval platforms which must have supported timber huts. Excavated finds suggest that these were workshops, including a bronze-smith's hut. Two of the foundations are close together and almost block a gap leading down into the outer cashel. This is not in State Care, but looking down from the middle cashel you can trace the line of the outer cashel wall by a change of slope. Excavation in 1922-4 uncovered an entrance in line with the middle cashel gap, leaving access to a small stone-built quay.

Upslope from the huts is the school, a rectangular stone foundation. Excavation showed that it had a wooden and thatch roof and had been burned. Finds, including iron styluses (for writing on waxed tablets) and trial-pieces (flat stones on which designs and letters had been scratched) suggested that this was the monastic workshop or school. The purpose of the stone-lined hole under its SE. wall remains a mystery.

There are entrances to the inner cashel on the W., SE. and NE. sides. In this innermost enclosure were the most important buildings, church, round tower and graveyard, and our reconstruction drawing also shows the abbot's house there. The round-tower stump, recognised by Reeves, was restored by Lawlor. Originally it may have stood 50 to 60 feet high, built perhaps in the 10th century, and used as the monastic belfry and safe refuge for people and treasures in times of trouble. Perhaps the bell, illustrated on the cover, was rung from its top to mark the times of services. The church is ruined to a low level; the west gable and door are Lawlor's reconstruction. The western part, with its projecting side walls (antae), may date from the 10th or 11th century, while the eastern extension and small northern annexe belong to the Benedictine use of the site. Reconstructed at the church's SW. angle is a sundial, one of the ways in which monks measured time. The three main rays indicate the times of the three main services, terce, sext and nones, at 9.00, 12 noon and 3.00, and the intermediate line marks 1½ hour periods.

The carved stones were mostly found by Lawlor in the 1920s. He set them for safety in the rebuilt

W. wall of the church, and here they stayed until 1985, but they were showing signs of weathering and were removed for display indoors. Most must have been gravestones in the monastic cemetery, and there are several examples with the unringed cross with hollowed 'armpits', characteristic of Nendrum and nearby sites in Co. Down. There is also a stone with a compass-drawn 'marigold' design and a stone mould for making beaten metal lamps.

Outside the west door of the church was the monastic graveyard, extending also to N. and S. Several stone-built graves are visible, and running through them is a paved path, leading to the enclosure wall (its continuation along the wall is buried). SE. of the church are mounds where Lawlor discovered hurriedly buried piles of bodies, presumably the result of some catastrophe, and E. of the church in a rectangular walled area is another graveyard, this time from the Benedictine occupation.

What the visitor sees today are the stone remains of a late stage in a very long use of the site, from the 7th century (or earlier) until the 15th or 16th century. For the early monastic period, before the 10th century, a wide range of wooden buildings must be imagined, including a wooden church,

abbot's house, kitchen, refectory, living cells, workshops, guesthouse, door-keeper's huts and tenants houses, all forming a sizeable monastic 'village'. The reconstruction drawing gives some idea of what the site may have looked like in the 10th century: we show the round tower, church, school, and refectory built of stone but all the other buildings of wood.

Excavated Finds

Best known is the bell (cover illustration), found near the outer cashel wall. It is of iron, dipped in bronze, a characteristically Irish type, both useful and also a symbol, with the crozier, of an abbot's authority. The 1922-4 excavations produced a richer and more varied selection of finds than from any other Irish monastic site yet published. They ranged from everyday implements like knives, nails and pottery, through specialised craft equipment, including crucibles and moulds, to decorative objects, like brooches and pins. The stone trial-pieces with scratched designs, some accomplished, some quite rough, form a fascinating group. Most of the Nendum material is in the Ulster Museum, Belfast.

Further Reading H.C. Lawlor's *The Monastery of Saint Mochaoi of Nendrum* (Belfast, 1925) should be used with caution; much of his discussion is unsoundly based and misleading. An *Archaeological Survey of County Down* (H.M.S.O. 1966) gives a far more balanced account. A children's novel, *The Bell of Nendrum* (London, 1969) is by J.S. Andrews.

Other sites in State Care nearby include Mahee Castle, at the N. end of the island beside the bridge, built in 1570, Sketrick Castle, within sight to the S., Tullynakill Church on the mainland to WNW., Newtownards Dominican Friary, and Grey and Inch, both Cistercian abbeys, contrasting strongly with Nendrum in plan.

Access 6 miles S. of comber, reached by minor roads off the A22 through Ballydrain and across causeways (not suitable for very big coaches).