

WHITE ISLAND and INISHMACSAINT

English Translation



WHITE ISLAND

AND

INISHMACSAINT

County Fermanagh

The Churches of Lough Erne

Churches and monasteries were certainly being built in Fermanagh from at least the 6th century. They were especially densely concentrated on the islands and shores of Lough Erne, and as many as twelve early church sites are recorded near the lough. These islands may now seem remote, but in Early Christian times the Erne was a great highway, providing a route from the sea near Ballyshannon deep inland to Leitrim and beyond. The island monasteries were not isolated retreats but ports of call on this waterway. In the medieval period parish churches occupied many of these island and lough-shore sites, and some continued the tradition of hospitality to travellers offered by the early monasteries. In the middle ages the Erne was important as a pilgrim route NW. to St. Patrick's Purgatory in Donegal.

Most important of the island monasteries was Devenish (the subject of a separate guide-card) and like Devenish the churches on White Island and Inishmacsaint occupy the corner of an island, in both cases the SE. tip, perhaps enjoying some shelter from the prevailing westerly winds. White Island is an island of about 74 acres, close to the N. shore of Lower Lough Erne in Castle Archdale Bay. Inishmacsaint is 66 acres in area, and lies near the S. shore of the Lower Lough, off Ross Point.

White Island

Whatever the early name of White Island may have been, it is now forgotten. Its patron saint is unknown, and it is impossible to identify the site with any church mentioned in early written sources. But there is no doubt that White Island was the site of an early church, probably a monastery of some size. The corner of the island in which the ruined church lies is cut off by a bank and ditch, now weathered and unimpressive but originally the monastic boundary. Within it was the monastic 'village': as well as church and graveyard there would have been cells and workshops, barns and byres, gardens, pastures and fields, and perhaps a guesthouse for visitors near the shore. All these buildings were of wood, and nothing is left above ground now except the boundary bank.

The church (within a recent stone wall) is a small rectangular ruin, simple except for its fine S. door. This is a rare survival in the north, the only intact Romanesque door in Northern Ireland. It has carefully worked shafts with capitals and bases and a semicircular arch with projecting drip-moulding decorated with pellets. The details suggest a date of about 1200 for the door, and for the building as a whole. The door was largely taken down and rebuilt when the church was restored in 1928, when the tall narrow E. window was also partly rebuilt, pieces of a second window were set up on the S. wall, and a holy water stoup reset inside the door. The small slab set against the modern enclosure wall (W. side), found in 1958, is an Early Christian grave marker, with a lightly cut cross and short inscription, perhaps delmne though first and last letters are not very clear.

In 1959 a small excavation in the SE. corner of the church showed that the stone church was preceded by a timber structure of several phases, separated from the church by a period of disuse. It is tempting to speculate that this was an earlier, wooden church, burned in some catastrophe, perhaps a Viking raid, but more excavation would be needed to investigate this further. When the stone church was built in about 1200 it may no longer have been monastic, but used for parish worship (the parish of Magheraculmoney). Excavation also uncovered burned roof timbers on the church floor and the inner face of the S. door is reddened and fire-damaged. It is not known exactly when the church was abandoned, but it was ruined by about 1600, and one gravestone shows that burial continued to the 18th century.

The figures have gradually come to light since the early 19th century and have been much illustrated and discussed. Most or all were reused as building blocks in the church. One figure (3) was found as recently as 1958, and more may remain hidden. The figures are impressive in scale, in their powerful modelling, and in the individuality of the faces, despite an overall similarity. All stare fixedly forward. Eyes are usually round and brown prominent, mouths small, hands and feet very small. Most wear the long tunic with bottom hem and sometimes front seam, familiar from manuscript and metalwork illustrations of churchmen. The figures are numbered and described from left to right, as exhibited.

1 Cross-legged, probably female, with cape, grimacing face and puffy cheeks, perhaps symbolising temptation or the sin of lust. 2 Apparently sitting, the figure holds a rectangular object (book or shrine?); upper face damaged. 3 Standing ecclesiastic holds bell and crozier, symbols of abbot's or bishop's authority, perhaps an actual churchman, or Christ as 'Abbot of the World'. 4 One hand holds a staff, the other points to the mouth and a pouch-like object hangs at the waist: probably symbolising David the shepherd and psalmist. 5 With distinctive curly hair, the figure holds the necks of two part-bird, part-animal creatures; these may be gryphons, symbolising the dual nature of Christ, part human, part divine. A panel of broad-ribbon interlace on the right hand side of this stone creates the impression of a decorated chair. 6 Curly-headed warrior, wearing a penannular brooch and holding a small round shield over a short sword; interpretations include Christ militant and David the warrior. 7 A roughly blocked-out but unfinished piece, interesting in suggesting that the figures were carved on site. 8 (cover illustration) A single frowning head, with pointed oval eyes and flat ribbed cap or fringe, possibly later in date than the others.

The style of carving may have its roots in the pagan past, but there is no doubt that the figures are Christian and carried Biblical messages. Sockets in the heads and rough stumps under the feet suggest that the stones were structural members, to be set into something and support something else on their heads. The problem is to imagine how they were used, either singly or in pairs. Possibilities include structural supports in a church, in a large preaching pulpit, in a substantial shrine, or in the internal fittings of a church. They are unlikely to be earlier than the major figure-carved high crosses, and the 9th and 10th centuries are likely, before the abandonment of the wooden church. The figures were clearly of no interest to the builders of the Romanesque church, who used them simply as building stones.

Inishmacsaint

The name, Inis-maige-samh, means the island of the sorrel plain. The founding saint, Ninnid, lived in the 6th century and according to much later sources studied with Finnian of Clonard and was a contemporary of Ciaran of Clonmacnois, Molaise of Devenish and Aiden of Ferns, but these sources are too far from his lifetime to record more than traditions. One reminder of the saint's local importance are place-names, like Knockninny, the prominent hill beside Upper Lough Erne, and Tober Ninny, the holy well overlooking the Lower Lough. An abbot of Inishmacsaint, Fiannamail, was killed in 718, and the monastery is unlikely to have escaped harm in the Viking raids of the 9th and 10th centuries. By the time of the 1306 taxation list Inishmacsaint was a parish church, occupying the early monastic site. Rectors of the church appear in 15th- and 16th-century annals: the O'Flanagan family was prominent, and in 1426 Nicholas O'Flanagan held the rectory jointly with Devenish. A roofless church on the island is shown in a 1609-10 map, and it was probably still ruined in 1622, when there was a complaint that 'the old church standeth in an inconvenient place'. The Protestant population seems to have worshipped in Sir John Dunbar's church at Derrygonnelly until a new church was built at Church Hill in 1688, to be replaced in turn in 1831 by the present Inishmacsaint parish church at Benmore.

The church shows work of three periods. Earliest is the west part, which may represent a small, pre-Romanesque church, perhaps of the 10th or 11th century. In a major remodelling the W. door was blocked and a new S. door opened, and the church was extended eastwards to its present length. This may have happened in the early 13th century, by which time it was a parish church. There are two cupboards near the E. end, where the altar once stood. In the later middle ages the S. window was altered. No other windows survive, but loose architectural fragments remain from the missing features.

The cross stands just SW. of the church. It is tall, thin and rather plank-like, its two stones joined at the head with a mortice-and-tenon joint, visible in the break on the E. side. The head is of unusual form, lacking a ring and with the arms hollowed in very shallow curves. A third stone is missing to complete the top member: a mortice hole exists to hold it. In good light it is possible to see faint traces of rectangular panels on the ends of the arms and under the arms, but the general impression is severely plain. The cross is difficult to parallel and to date: between the 10th and 12th centuries seems likely, but it could be later.

St. Ninnid's bell, traditionally made by Senach the smith of Derrybrusk, was kept in the parish in the 17th century. By the 19th it was at Castle Caldwell, and it is now in the National Museum, Edinburgh.

Further reading White Island: D. Lowry-Corry and others, *Ulster J. Archaeol.* 22 (1959), 59-66; H. Hickey, *Images of Stone* (Belfast, 1976). Inishmacsaint: W. K. Parke, *The Parish of Inishmacsaint* (1982).

Other sites in and near Lower Lough Erne include Devenish, Killadeas graveyard with carved stones including an ecclesiastic with bell and crozier, and Caldragh graveyard on Boa Island with an Iron Age figure-carved stone.

Access White Island (grid ref. H 175600) is reached by boat from Castle Archdale Country Park. Inishmacsaint (grid ref. H 165541) jetty is just E. of the church. There is no regular ferry service.

