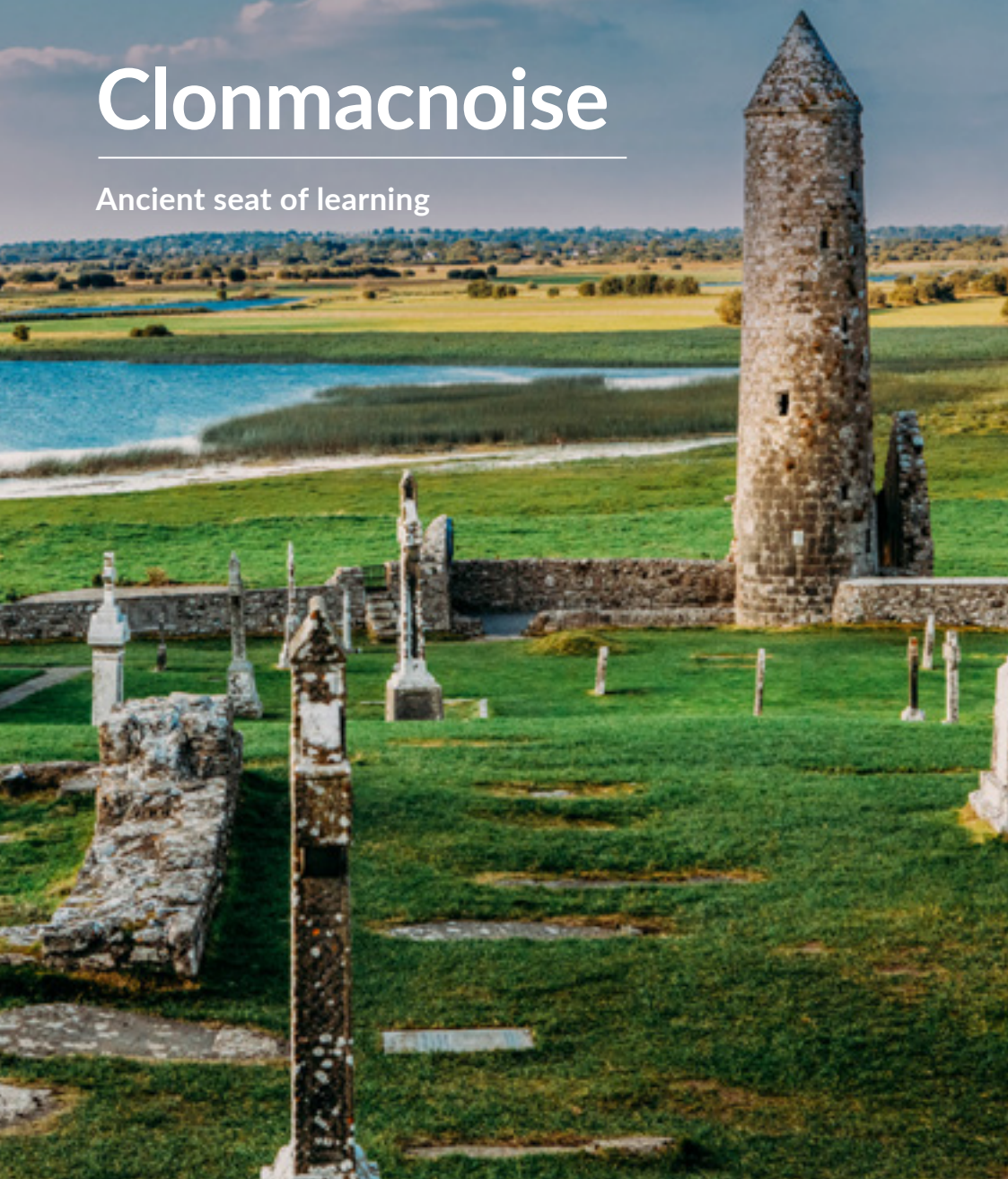


Clonmacnoise

Ancient seat of learning



OPW Oidhreacht Éireann
Heritage Ireland





The remains of the ancient ecclesiastical site of Clonmacnoise, south of Athlone, are among the most extensive of their kind in Ireland.



Clonmacnoise (the Irish *Cluain Mhic Nóis* means the meadow of the sons of Nóis) was founded about 548 by St. Ciarán, the son of a wright or master craftsman.

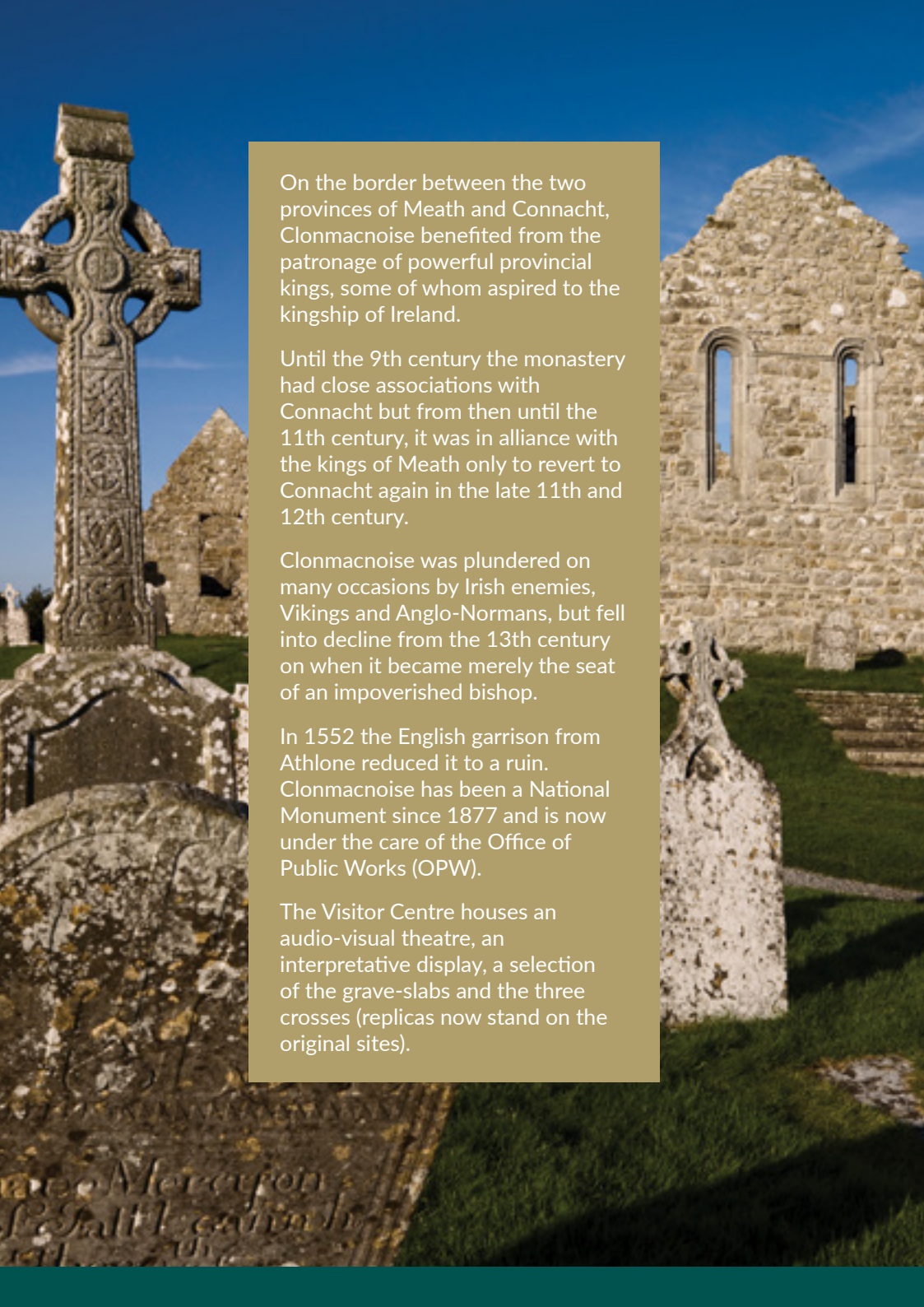
Situated on an esker ridge overlooking a large area of bog through which the river Shannon flows, its location in earlier times was literally at the cross-roads of Ireland where the north/south artery of communication, the Shannon, crossed the major east/west route way along the gravel ridges of the glacial eskers.

This pivotal location contributed to the development of Clonmacnoise as a major centre of religion, learning, trade, craftsmanship and political influence. As the burial place of St. Ciarán, it has attracted pilgrims for nearly 1,500 years.

The site contains a number of churches varying in date from the 10th to the 17th century, a round tower, a castle, three stone crosses and a large collection of early grave-slabs.

With its large lay population, Clonmacnoise resembled a town rather than a monastery. All of the domestic houses and buildings of the community were built of timber and have not survived although traces of them have been found during archaeological excavation.

The earliest churches were also built of timber but were replaced in stone from the 10th century onwards. The settlement would have been enclosed, probably by an earthen bank, although no clear trace of this survives.



On the border between the two provinces of Meath and Connacht, Clonmacnoise benefited from the patronage of powerful provincial kings, some of whom aspired to the kingship of Ireland.

Until the 9th century the monastery had close associations with Connacht but from then until the 11th century, it was in alliance with the kings of Meath only to revert to Connacht again in the late 11th and 12th century.

Clonmacnoise was plundered on many occasions by Irish enemies, Vikings and Anglo-Normans, but fell into decline from the 13th century on when it became merely the seat of an impoverished bishop.

In 1552 the English garrison from Athlone reduced it to a ruin. Clonmacnoise has been a National Monument since 1877 and is now under the care of the Office of Public Works (OPW).

The Visitor Centre houses an audio-visual theatre, an interpretative display, a selection of the grave-slabs and the three crosses (replicas now stand on the original sites).



The South Cross

Also a ringed sandstone cross about 12 feet (3.7m) high, the South Cross is covered mostly with abstract ornament in the form of interlacing, fretwork, spirals and bosses.

It has a crucifixion scene in low relief unusually placed on the shaft rather than the cross-head itself. In style it appears to be related to the Ahenny group of crosses and could date from the early 9th century.

The North Cross

Only the shaft and base of this cross survive. The base is a reused millstone; the shaft, of limestone, is carved on three sides only with abstract ornament, human interlace and animals. The style has been compared with the Book of Kells and a date of around 800 is likely.



The Grave Slabs

Clonmacnoise has a very large collection of grave slabs dating from about the 8th to the 12th century, a small selection of which are on display in the Visitor Centre. These are carved with different forms of crosses and most have an inscription giving the name of the person commemorated.

The inscription usually takes the form OR (for OROIT) DO 'X', that is: a prayer for 'X'.

Temple Dowling and Temple Hurpan

These two churches are joined together. The western church is named after Edmund Dowling of Clondalare who extended it westwards and re-roofed it in 1689. The eastern part of Temple Dowling is in fact an early masonry church from about the 11th century which had antae (projections of the side walls beyond the end walls, which carried the roof over the gable ends) and was faced with large stones set on edge.

Its small original round-headed east window now looks into Temple Hurpan, an addition of c. 1700.



The Cross of the Scriptures

One of Ireland's finest surviving High Crosses, the shaft and ringed head were carved from one piece of sandstone around 900 AD. The cross, 13 feet (4m) high, stood to the west of the cathedral. Its surface is divided into panels with figured scenes.

The Crucifixion, the Last Judgement and Christ in the Tomb are Biblical in origin but the lowest scene on the east face of the shaft shows an ecclesiastic and a warrior holding a pole. This has been variously interpreted but may represent Abbot Colmán and King Flann who erected both this cross and the church now known as the Cathedral.

The badly damaged inscriptions on the east and west faces at the foot of the shaft have been convincingly reconstructed and appear to mention both King Flann and Colmán, who made the cross for him.



Temple Melaghlin

A plain rectangular structure, Temple Melaghlin dates from around 1200AD.

A notable feature is the two-light east window with an internal moulded frame similar to other examples in the west of Ireland. It is associated with the Melaghlin family, the descendants of the kings of Meath.

Temple Ciarán

The reputed burial place of St. Ciarán, this tiny church is the smallest of all the churches at Clonmacnoise measuring only 3.8m x 2.8m internally. The original building is an early masonry church, probably of the early 10th century with antae and putlog holes for tying scaffolding through the walls. All of the south wall and the south half of the west wall are relatively modern work.

The foundations of Temple Kelly, built in 1167 to replace a wooden church, can be seen to the west of Temple Ciarán.



Temple Finghin

This remarkable Romanesque church, with a complete round-tower belfry attached at the junction of the nave and chancel, is situated at the edge of the graveyard closest to the River Shannon.

The tower is an integral part of the building which is thought to date from around 1160-70. The Romanesque chancel arch appears to have been damaged by fire at some stage and its present inner order is a later limestone replacement.

Temple Connor

This church is roofed and has been used since the 18th century by the Church of Ireland. The windows in the east end and the doorway are both in the transitional style indicating a 12th century date.



The Cathedral

The annals record that this, the largest of the churches at Clonmacnoise, was originally built in 909 by Flann Sinna, King of Tara, and Colmán, Abbot of Clonmacnoise.

The stonework of the original building, surviving mainly in the north wall, is of brown sandstone with deep antae and putlog holes exactly similar to that of Temple Ciarán. No other features survive from this earliest phase of the building and the present west doorway, in the transitional style between Romanesque and Gothic, dates from around 1200.

The original sacristy was also added to the south side of the church at that time. Around the late 13th century the entire south wall was rebuilt two metres in from its original line probably because of structural problems with the original wall.

The Cathedral was greatly embellished in the 1450s with the insertion of an elaborate vaulted canopy over the east end (now ruined), the insertion of the beautiful north doorway and the provision of accommodation with a fireplace above the sacristy. An inscription above the north doorway ascribes the work to Odo, dean of Clonmacnoise, who died in 1461.

The North Doorway is also referred to as the '*Whispering Arch*' and it was purposely designed this way as it was used as a Confessional.

The carving on the doorway is exceptionally fine and above it are three saints: Dominic, Patrick and Francis. The last high king of Ireland, Rory O'Connor was buried close to the altar here in 1198.

Site Map

- A** Temple Fingin & McCarthy's Tower
- B** Temple Connor
- C** O'Rourke's Round Tower
- D** North Cross
- E** Temple Kelly
- F** Exit to Nuns' Church (500m)
- G** Cross of the Scriptures
- H** Cathedral
- I** Temple Ciarán
- J** Temple Dowling
- K** South Cross
- L** Temple Hurpan
- M** Temple Melaglin



The Round Tower

Though missing a large part of its top, this is a fine example of a round tower or free-standing belfry so typical of Irish church sites. As is usually the case, the doorway, which here has a semi-circular arch, is well above ground level. It is faced with well-shaped rectangular limestone blocks and the annals record in 1124 that it was built by Turlough O'Connor and O'Malone, the successor of Ciarán.

It was damaged by lightning in 1135 and the present top, with its eight openings, is of a later date.

The Nuns' Church

About 500 metres to the east of the graveyard is the Nuns' Church. The main church is a fine Romanesque nave-and-chancel structure with a finely carved doorway and chancel arch both reconstructed in the 19th century. The annals record the completion of this building in 1167 by the infamous Dearbhforgaill, wife of Tighearnán O'Rourke. Part of one wall of an earlier church survives in a field wall a few metres to the south-east.

The Castle

To the west of the graveyard, and close to the River Shannon, are the remains of a strong castle built by the Chief Governor of Ireland in 1214. The main core was a masonry hall and courtyard; the surrounding banks would have been crowned by timber defensive structures. Its deliberate destruction may date from as early as 1300.

