

Christianity in Ireland before St Patrick



It is part of our folklore that it was St Patrick who introduced Christianity to Ireland, yet it is known that St Palladius was sent to Ireland in 431 by St Celestine I Pope of Rome, as the first bishop of the Emerald Isle, with the task of administering the sacraments *'to the Irish who professed Christ'*. Some scholars have applied the term "Insular Christianity" to the early Irish Christian communities that may have arisen around the Irish Sea, while much of Ireland at that time was still overwhelmingly pagan, with most of the population practising a nature-based religion that was administered by druids.

What is less well known is that the early Irish Christianity - perhaps even before St Patrick - seems to have formed under the influence of the Coptic Church of Egypt and that the early Irish Church was quite different in its structure to that of Roman Church with its emphasis on hierarchy and legalism.

Reference to the Coptic origins of early Irish Christianity can be found in **The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee** - an early ninth century monastic bishop of Clonenagh (Co. Offaly) and later of Tallaght. It appears to date from the early 9th century. It has a litany, which, translated into English reads: *'Seven monks of Egypt in Desert Uilaig, I invoke unto my aid, through Jesus Christ.'* The early ***'Litany of Irish Saints'***, linked to **Oengas of Tallaght** (9th Century), refers to the burial of seven Egyptian monks in County Antrim. And the **Book of Antiphons of the Monastery of Bangor** (Northern Ireland), which dates from around 680 AD, contains a poem about the monastery regimen of which the following quotation is an excerpt:

<i>Domus deliciis plena</i>	<i>A house full of delights</i>
<i>Super petram constructa</i>	<i>Built upon a rock</i>
<i>Necnon vinea vera</i>	<i>And indeed the true vines</i>
<i>Ex Aegypto transducta</i>	<i>Brought from Egypt</i>

The domus or home, to which the poem refers, would seem to be the Coptic monastic organization born on Egyptian soil in the fourth century, and eventually spreading throughout much of the West. Another ancient text, the **Faddan More Psalter** is a 1,200-year-old illuminated vellum manuscript found in a peat bog in County Tipperary in 2006; it is Egyptian in style with pages made of papyrus, lending further credence to the story of a visit to Ireland by *'seven monks of Egypt.'* Another early literary source, the *'Stowe Missal'* (c750) mentions the desert monks and in particular, Anthony of Egypt in the following

prayer: *'May God protect us from the dangers of the desert, and may he grant us the grace of following the example of Anthony of Egypt.'* There is also a manuscript, written sometime in the eight century and kept in the British Library (Nero A11), London, which puts forth the theory that the desert monks of Egypt greatly influenced the behaviour and lifestyles of the Irish monks. In addition, author and historian, Archdale King, writes that *"firsthand knowledge of the Desert monks was brought to southern Gaul by St. John Cassian and that links between the Irish and Egyptian monks were particularly strong at this time."* King also mentions an Ogham inscription on a stone near Saint Olan's well in the parish of Aghabulloge, County Cork, which has been interpreted as reading *"Pray for Olan the Egyptian."* These references are a strong indication of Coptic influence on the early Irish church. In addition, an Irish monk named Dicuil, in his *'Liber de Mensure'* written in 825 AD, describes the pyramids in great detail as well as a precursor of the Suez Canal leading one to believe that visits were made to Egypt, perhaps by pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land. The *'Saltair Na Rann,'* (a psalter of quatrains) is an anthology of biblical poems attributed to Oengus the Culdee; it contains the *'Book of Adam and Eve,'* composed in Egypt in either the 6th or 7th century AD, and known in no other country except Ireland. Stefan Reynolds PhD, a Benedictine Oblate, suggests the possibility that Coptic monks who had been established in Spain may have moved on from Spain to Ireland following the Muslim conquest of Spain from 711 onwards. He considers that resistance of 'Celtic' Christianity to Roman reforms may have drawn them closer to Coptic influence.

Much of the early contact between Egypt and the British Isles is considered to have taken place before the Muslim Conquest of Egypt (640-642 AD). There is evidence of a trade route to the UK and Ireland through the Mediterranean. For example, in a passage of the life of St. John the Almsgiver, the Greek Patriarch of Egypt, 610-621 AD, reference is made to 'a vessel sailing from Britain to Alexandria bearing a cargo of tin.' This tin most likely came from Cornwall or Somerset, well known areas of Britain for tin mining. Bronze required nine parts copper to one part tin and it is possible that copper may have been exported from Ireland, including from Ross Island in Kerry, at the same time.

Robert Ritner¹ writes that Egyptian-oriented monastic communities continued to exist in the British Isles as a tradition in opposition to Roman authority, and **St Bede** makes frequent references to their 'non-Catholic' practices. Likewise in Ireland, in contrast to the Western diocesan system, monasticism provided the main organisation of the Church, with the abbot or abbess being the highest authority in a given area, a practice which lasted at least until the twelfth-century. This was in contrast to the diocesan structure of the rest of the Church - in which the bishop is the highest authority - and supports the proposition that the development of the early Irish Church was influenced by the Coptic vision of Christianity rather than the Roman version.

While Christians had been persecuted by the Roman empire from its earliest days, Emperor Constantine changed that by tolerating Christianity as a religion, so that over time it came to be the religion of the Roman Empire. It is suggested that he saw the advantage of having a universal church for a universal empire; and during the thirty years of his reign, more change took place in the status, structure, and beliefs of the Christian Church than during any previous period of its history. Over that time, Christian leaders came to assume the rank, dress, and, increasingly, the duties of the old civic elite, changing fundamentally the character of the early Church which now became hierarchical, political and conformist in structure, tone and doctrine. By contrast, the Egyptian church - which developed in the city of Alexandria under the influence of the evangelist St Mark who was its first Patriarch - retained a more communal structure. The famous **Catechetical School of Alexandria** which was established before 200 AD, was the first great seat of Christian learning in the world through its Biblical and theological studies. Its founder was **Pantaenus** and he was followed by **Clement** and then **Origen**, both now regarded as Fathers of the early Church.

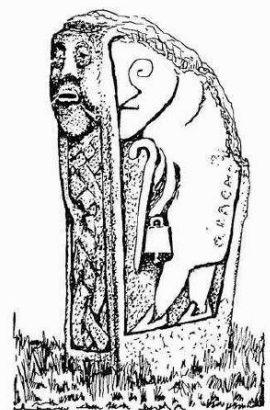
In addition to the Catechetical School, the other great gift of the Copts to the early Church was the **development of monastic communities**; with its later introduction to Europe such communities were destined to become the sole custodian of culture and Christian civilisation in the West during the Dark

Ages. The founding of monastic communities with their unique way of life is generally ascribed to Saint Anthony, the Desert Father, who died in 336 AD. Like St Francis centuries later, he is said to have been impacted powerfully on hearing it said in church one day that: *"If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven"* [Matthew 19:21]. Soon afterwards he is said to have crossed the Nile into the solitude of the desert, where he spent eighty-five years in increasing austerity and asceticism. Over time, settlements of solitaries grew up around him, as like-minded persons sought advice and orientation from him. Such settlements began to build up and multiply around other revered persons across the desert. Over time monastic communities developed on the broad understanding that each monk had a vocation to make himself or herself a useful human being to their monastic community; this came to include participating in labour to earn their daily bread, without losing sight of their intellectual advancement; and each monk was expected to participate in some communal devotions of monastic life.

There are many similarities across the Coptic and early Irish monastic traditions. Up until the Synod of Whitby in 664, the Irish Church calculated the date of Easter each year in the same way as the Coptic Church still does today. There are also many commonalities between Irish and Coptic monastic sites. Irish monastic settlements were often known as 'disert', the Irish word for desert – for example, the Irish name for the town of Castledermot in Co Kildare is 'Disert Diarmada' after the monastic settlement that had built up there. It is believed that the Irish monks, inspired by the lifestyles of the desert monks, sought out similar places of solitude in Ireland as their retreats. While there are no actual deserts in Ireland, there are places which afforded desert-like qualities, places that were remote and away from the everyday hustle and bustle. One notable example of this can be seen on the windswept island of **Skellig Michael**, a monastic settlement that sits about 11 kilometres west of the Iveragh peninsula in County Kerry, 600 feet above the wild Atlantic ocean, which was hewn from the bare rock by Irish monks in the 6th century AD. This is why the image on our Christian Meditation Ireland homepage depicts the stone cell hermitages on Skellig Michael.

The Irish name for the town of **Killybegs** in Donegal is **Na Cille Beaga** (the small cells) and the coat of arms of Killybegs Castle contains a beehive hut and a reference to St Catherine of Alexandra. St Anthony and St Catherine were most revered in the Coptic tradition. Another similarity relates to the use of beehive huts. Both Coptic and Irish monastic sites used beehive huts with corballed roofs – those in Egypt were typically built of mud and those in Ireland with stone. The monastic settlement on Skellig Mhichil is clearly similar in style and layout to Coptic settlements.

Among the Irish religious practices potentially derived from Coptic sources none has been so frequently cited as the use of the clochette or handbell by the mendicant monks. The use of bells, unknown in the dominant Greek Church before A.D. 900, is found in Egypt as early as the reign of Justinian. In Ireland, some of the earliest developed figure sculptures distinguish ecclesiastics by a handbell, e.g. on the Bishop's stone at Killadeas, depicted on the right. Also in the tonsuring of monks a divergence occurred: while the Roman tonsure involved shaving the top of the head, the Irish shaved across the forehead from ear to ear. In addition, different rites were employed by the Irish and Roman churches in the sacraments of baptism and episcopal confirmation.



The sceptre of St Anthony of Egypt was topped with the Tau cross rather than the traditional Roman crucifix. The Tau cross was so called because it is shaped by the letter 'tau' of the Greek alphabet which in its upper-case form resembles the capital Latin letter T. There would seem to be up to ten [examples of the Tau Cross left in Ireland](#). They are located at [Roughan Hill](#) in County Clare (this one is a replica; the original is in the Clare Heritage Centre in Corofin), Tory Island, Tawnagh in County Sligo, Kilmalkedar Monastic Settlement near Dingle (there are two here in the graveyard), St Begnet's Church Dalkey, Carrownaseer

North in Galway, Killegar in Wicklow, Ballypatrick, County Tipperary. There is another that originally stood on Church Island, Lough Currane, Waterville in County Kerry and is currently displayed in the Municipal Museum in Cork. It is also worthy of note that St Anthony and St Paul of Egypt are depicted on up to 60 Irish Crosses around Ireland, yet St Patrick appears on none.

In addition, The tau crozier, as known in Coptic Egypt, is crowned with two retorted spiral branches in the form of serpents, resembling the Greek custom but distinct from Latin forms. In Ireland the whirl or serpent motif on both sides at the top of the tau cross is commonly found both in manuscript illustrations and on carved crosses. Clonmacnoise, Kells, Monasterboice, North Cross Castlederrnot and Durrow crosses provide examples of this motif. There are two High Crosses on the monastic site at the foot of the Round Tower in Clondalkin. (While the National Museum of Ireland considers that the smaller of the two (see photo below) is a broken early High Cross, Niall Charleton, who submitted the photo considers that it may instead be a Tau Cross.



The ornamentation of the Book of Kells and other early Irish texts by Irish monks is complicated and difficult to reproduce. The technique used was developed in Alexandria in the early centuries of calligraphy, and was used here in Ireland to produce the great books of early Irish Christianity, suggesting a Coptic influence in the development of early Irish Christianity.

The presence of Egyptian-oriented monasticism in the British Isles during the fifth century was noted by Máire and Liam de Paor in their book *Early Christian Ireland* (1958) and it seems such communities were encountered by St Patrick who received his spiritual instruction in the south of France, at the monastery of **Lérins**. This great institution was founded by St Honoratus in 375, upon his return from Greece where he had become familiar with Orthodox Christian monasticism. Like many future, Irish monasteries, Lérins was situated on a small island. One of the great figures who had close ties to Lérins was **St John Cassian**, who was responsible for bringing the Desert tradition to Europe and whose work greatly influenced the development of the later monastic movement of the West, through **St Benedict** and others. In addition to the monastery at Lérins that served as an important link between the Irish and Eastern Churches, **Poitiers** in France was a further conduit of Orthodoxy to the West. Poitiers was the final abode of **St Hilary** (315-367) where he wrote a book dedicated to the 'Irish bishops'. This suggests contact between the Greek-speaking and Irish churches via France during the fourth century already.

Fr Laurence Freeman has drawn attention to the parallel between these earliest forms of monasticism - based on cells and clusters of lay people dedicated to exploring the spiritual dimension of their lives and their relationship with the Creator – and the community structure of the World Community for Christian Meditation. As the Church in our time continues to follow a patriarchal, hierarchical, mediaeval model of organisation, it seems that the ecumenical, community-based model of lay contemplative organisations may have a great deal to offer as an alternative way of living the Gospel, where the focus is on creating opportunities for rich and deep personal experience that draws us to live life with ever greater authenticity.



This article, compiled by Noel Keating, was inspired [by a talk by Alf Monaghan](#) to the Limerick Historical Society in 2019 in which he explores this question in some depth. It is informed by that talk and by the following online sources:

1. [Egyptians in Ireland: A Question of Coptic Peregrinations](#) (Robert Ritner)
2. [Orthodox Ireland](#)
3. [On the Trail of the Seven Coptic Monks in Ireland](#)
4. [The Copts and their contribution to Christian Civilisation](#)
5. [The Connection Between Ireland and Egypt](#)
6. [From the Egyptian Nile to the Emerald Isle](#)