

The inspirational Island of Inishmurray: Archaeology

Information and Fundraising Event, 27th September, 2025

Introduction

There is a copy of this talk on the www.friendsofinishmurray.ie website under the Events section.

Overview

We will have a quick look at timelines that are relevant to Inishmurray island, background to surveys and excavations, a summary of some of the main findings and finally some linkages to Inishmurray that present with some interesting archaeological questions.

Some Questions for the audience:

- What year, to the best of our knowledge, was the monastery founded on Inishmurray?
- How many pilgrim stations are there on the island?
- What is the name of the townland in North County Sligo where there is a cross inscribed slab that has a similar (unique) design to some on Inishmurray?

Background to Excavations

Beranger and Bigari visited the island in 1779 They surveyed and drew some of the monuments on the island (see appendix 1 for more details).

The Board of Works carried out reconstruction of some of the monuments in 1880. Unfortunately, there is no record of what the monuments looked like prior to this work (see Appendix II for more details).

Wakeman was commissioned by the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland to survey the island in 1884.

In 1995 Rainer Berger published a paper “Radiocarbon Dating of Early Medieval Irish Monuments”. His work included dates for Teach Molaise, Temple Molaise and Templenaman (as well as buildings in Clonmacnoise, Glendalough and Skellig Michael, to name a few).

Prior to 1997, work on the island identified that some of the pilgrim platforms were vulnerable, including Trahanareear Leacht which was under imminent threat from coastal erosion. Following discussions, it was decided to record what was left of the platform and rebuild it some distance from the cliff edge. This work, carried out in 1997, was supported by the Department of Archaeology at University of Glasgow. Each remaining stone was surveyed and the leacht rebuilt 35 m from the coast. Jerry O’Sullivan was in charge of the excavation and John Corcoran of OPW had responsibility for the rebuild.

In 1998 the National Monuments Service commissioned an archaeological survey and conditional report of all of the monuments on the island. This work resulted in the identification of some new monuments and carried out a preliminary record of all the medieval carved stones (started in 1998 and finished in 2000). The survey report also suggested a series of rescue and conservation measures which resulted in an agenda of work for the next three years.

The survey on the carved stones identified a total of 96 cross-slabs and other miscellaneous carved stones. These include stones that are no longer on the island and stones that were previously recorded and are now lost.

Location of Carved Stones (Survey 1998 - 2000):

- 1 Alnwick Castle (Duke of Northumberland’s collection)
- 10 Irish National Museum
- 12 unknown
- 36 in situ - at Cashel, Leachta and Templenaman
- 37 in the Old Schoolhouse

Findings

Prehistory

There is some evidence of use of the island by humans prior to the foundation of the early medieval monastery circa.520 CE¹. At Ollamurray, excavations in 2000 revealed a number of prehistoric² artifacts including a fragment of a flint arrowhead and pieces of worked flint and chert. These appear to be Bronze Age in date (circa. 2500 – 500 BCE). These fragments were passed on to University College Cork (UCC) following the excavation. There is also evidence of two small pits which could be either structural in nature (i.e. post holes) or had been used for storage.

There are indications of a possible bronze-age cist burial to the West of Clashmore Harbour. In 1938 a local man – James Harte – found a burial site with collapsed slab stones that contained an ornate food vessel. This was followed by a brief survey of the area by an academic from Queen’s University who concluded that this indeed was evidence of pre-historic human presence on the island. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of the food vessel that was found is currently unknown.

There are also two small irregular settings of low kerbstones on the Northern side of the island which may be the remnants of barrow mounds. More work will be needed at this site to further investigate this theory.

Trahanareear 1997

Trahan O’Riain Leacht (this is what this station was called by the islanders around the time of the evacuation) is situated on the western edge of the island. The leacht presented as a drystone cairn enclosed by a drystone wall with a narrow south facing entrance. On the NW side there were the remains of a sub-circular cell and at the entrance is a small cairn linked by a loose rubble wall. This was possibly included so that pilgrims could complete a ‘rounding ritual’ as part of the leacht had been destroyed by coastal erosion and therefore prevented that ritualistic turning at the main feature.

Artefacts: fragment of glass jar found in primary wall core possibly 17th or early 18th C indicating episode of maintenance at this time. Other experts thought it might possibly be earlier (late Roman or Byzantine).

Soil analyses indicated that site was not used for permanent habitation – only tiny fragments of charcoal and other organic material were found.

¹ CE – Common Era / BCE - Before Common Era. Relates to the years before 1 Anno Domini (AD) - the birth of Jesus Christ.

² The term Prehistoric refers to the period prior to the beginning of written records in Ireland – circa 400 CE and includes the Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age.

Three phases of development – earlier cell, construction of altar, maintenance of altar.

The finding of a post hole, would indicate that the development followed a common pattern in Christian architecture – wooden altars/tables/crosses being replaced by stone versions.

The inclusion of a cell in an early phase, possibly indicates that it was the site of a hermitage.

Within a few weeks of the excavation the monument was reconstructed 35 m from the cliff edge by personnel from the OPW.

Templenaman

The Women's Church (*Teampall na mBan*) is situated near the mid Southern coastline of the island and consists of a walled enclosure including a church, burial ground and cross inscribed stones. There is a leacht – known as Crossatemple – which is situated at the South of the enclosure. It is perilously close to the shoreline and in danger of being affected by coastal erosion as are some of the burials. Archaeological investigations of the women's church have revealed that it was probably built several decades after the buildings in the Cashel – circa the 1400's – (ref. Rainer Berger's investigations on radiocarbon dating of Early Medieval Irish Monuments).

The seaward wall of the cemetery at Templenaman has been claimed by coastal erosion. There is a small leacht known as Crossatemple situated at the south of the site. A few skeletal fragments were found prior to the excavation at the eroding cliff face. One of the proposals following the work is that in 20 years time the site would be reassessed particularly the condition of the leacht.

Fál an Mhuilinn (Mill Bank)

The remains of a horizontal mill have been identified. This is not a modern feature as there are no records of a mill on the island and no tradition of mechanical milling among the islanders. One artefact that was found was a fragment of 17th century pottery that would indicate the site was being used in the 1600's.

Recommendations include regular monitoring of the site and that the entire area be excavated in the future to fully ascertain its date and usage and that surviving masonry be reconstructed *in situ*.

Relickoran (Odrán's cemetery)

This is deemed to be a unique site in the Irish archaeological record. Dedication to Saint Odran is evidence of a Columban influence – as at Iona.

Relickoran consists of two drystone enclosures each containing a leacht. Whilst the name indicates a cemetery, there are no visible grave markers and the islanders had no traditions of burials here in modern times. The site is situated on the south of the island close to the shore and is experiencing ongoing erosion and storm damage.

Early NE/SW Graves (Phase II): On the Eastern side about 20 graves (shallow in nature) in total interpreted as the earliest in the cemetery and extended outside present walls. No human remains survived *in situ*. There was no evidence of shrouds or coffins or stone linings. (Phase I = natural soils). These are interesting as they are a similar orientation to the early Teach Molaise building.

More NE/SW Graves found (deeper, probably as not disturbed by later graves as outside the ‘modern’ perimeter). There were no human remains found here either.

W/E Graves (Phase III): around 40 of these burials were recorded, mostly within the drystone walls surrounding the leachts. One burial has been identified as an adult female dated to between 711 – 982 CE. Other bone fragments have been dated to 893-1148 and 1018 – 1209 CE.

With later W/E burials, still no evidence of shrouds or coffins but numerous small white, beach rolled quartzite pebbles were found – a common burial practice in early medieval Ireland. These were dated to between 11th and 12th centuries and others to 12th and 15th centuries and finally some to late 15th to early 17th centuries. Individuals were predominantly young or mid adults, mostly male, but there were some female burials also. The earliest datable remains were female.

Evidence of abandonment as a cemetery but maintenance and rebuilding in post medieval times as part of the pilgrim route.

Artefacts included glass beads and roughly worked stone discs all found in topsoil and probably associated with devotions at leachta (i.e. rosary beads). Fragments of clay pipes, pot sherds, red brick and lime mortar appear to be more modern in date.

Linkages

Staad

Staad Abbey and Inishmurray Island have a significant historical connection, with Staad serving as a mainland hostel and embarkation point for pilgrims traveling to the monastic settlement on Inishmurray. Staad Abbey, despite its name, was more likely a medieval church or a shore chapel, and its original purpose was to provide a place for

monks and pilgrims to stay and pray while waiting for a boat to the island. The name "Staad" is believed to derive from the Latin word *statio*, meaning a stage or station. This etymology perfectly describes the building's function. Pilgrims and other travelers who wished to visit the holy island of Inishmurray would journey to the coast near Streedagh and stay at Staad Abbey.

The site at Staad is also under threat from coastal erosion and a souterrain and lime kiln situated at the coastal edge have already been lost.

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jz3kDmkpsio> for more information.

Templecannon

The cross-inscribed slab at Kilmacannon in North County Sligo has potentially a strong connection to the monastic settlement on Inishmurray island. This link is primarily based on the nearly identical artistic style of the carvings, suggesting that the Kilmacannon slab was made by the same group of stonemasons who worked on Inishmurray. The carving includes a large central cross surrounded by four smaller crosslets, with all the crosses having a specific type of cusped, or butted, serifs on their upper arms. This style is almost identical to a specific cross slab found within the cashel on Inishmurray itself.

The slab was accidentally damaged in 2018 and the damaged upper part was removed and stored nearby. In 2000 Tamlyn McHugh and a team of archaeologists excavated the area to try and retrieve the remains of the base of the slab. Charcoal found in a sealed layer beneath the base returned a date of 725 CE.

While Kilmacannon itself doesn't show other evidence of a major monastic settlement, the presence of the cross slab suggests that it was likely a site of significance, possibly a hermitage, a 'grange' supplying produce, or a pilgrim station associated with Inishmurray.

Acknowledgements:

- Tru Lomax: many thanks Tru for your recollections and photographs

Sources and Further Information:

- Berger, R (1995) Radiocarbon Dating of Early Medieval Irish Monuments. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy
- Heraughty, P., (1982) *Inishmurray: Ancient Monastic Island*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press
- O'Sullivan, J., Ó Carragáin, T., (2008) *Inishmurray: Monks and Pilgrims in an Atlantic Landscape*. Cork: The Collins Press
- <https://voicesfromthedawn.com>

Many thanks for your attention.

Appendix I

Beranger and Bigari 1779

In the summer of 1779, the artists and antiquarians Gabriel Beranger and Angelo Maria Bigari visited Inishmurray Island as part of a seventy two day tour of Connacht. Their trip was commissioned by the Dublin Society and sponsored by Burton Conyngham, president of the Hibernian Antiquarian Society, with the purpose of documenting and drawing the antiquities of the province.

Background of the Artists

Gabriel Beranger (c. 1729–1817) was a Dutch artist of French Huguenot descent who settled in Dublin. While not a particularly skilled landscape artist, he was a meticulous and accurate draftsman, highly valued for his precise plans and drawings of ancient buildings. Beranger was a member of the Hibernian Antiquarian Society and a leading figure in documenting Ireland's historical sites at that time.

Angelo Maria Bigari (c. 1770–1796) was an Italian painter and stage designer from Bologna who also lived and worked in Dublin. He was employed at the Smock Alley Theatre, where he was known for his stage sets. Bigari spoke little English and Beranger had to communicate with him in French.

The Visit to Inishmurray Island

On June 24, 1779, Beranger and Bigari, along with their Sligo host and guide Lewis Irwin, set off for Inishmurray island. They were received with hospitality by the islanders, who mainly spoke only Irish. Beranger meticulously documented the layout and details of the cashel. Bigari, meanwhile, created more artistic and atmospheric drawings of the features on the island. Their drawings are considered the first serious archaeological survey of the site.

‘Restoration’ by Board of Works 1880

In 1880, the Board of Works (the predecessor to the modern Office of Public Works, or OPW) undertook a significant ‘restoration’ of the monastic settlement on Inishmurray Island, County Sligo. This project was part of a larger, nationwide initiative to assume responsibility for Ireland's national monuments, a duty that had been placed on the Board following the Church Disestablishment Act of 1869.

The work on Inishmurray, however, proved to be highly controversial and has been widely criticized by later antiquarians and historians. The Board of Works' masons, operating with a Victorian-era zeal for ‘improvement’ and an incomplete understanding of the site's original architecture, made a number of changes that were seen as damaging and historically inaccurate.

Key aspects of the 1880 reconstruction include:

- **The Cashel Wall:** The main monastic enclosure, a large dry-stone fort known as the Cashel, was a primary focus of the reconstruction. The Board of Works rebuilt parts of its walls, which are still several meters high in places. Unfortunately, in doing so, they created a new entrance where one had not existed before.
- **Arbitrary Placement of Stones:** The masons relocated and reused several of the early medieval engraved cross slabs and gravestones, incorporating them into the newly constructed walls and niches. This act was described by contemporary antiquarian William Wood-Martin as "wantonly transferring several early gravestones."
- **The Cursing Stones:** The famous "Cursing Stones" or *Clocha Breaca* were moved from their original location and later, some were removed from the island by the OPW for safekeeping.

The reconstruction drew the ire of antiquarians like Wood-Martin, who lamented the work as a "mockery" and "a delusion," fearing that it would mislead future scholars. The work was so poorly documented that it prompted a survey by William Wakeman in 1885 in an effort to record the features of the island as they existed before the 1880 interventions.

The Board of Works' actions on Inishmurray reflect a broader pattern of 19th-century "restoration" efforts on other important Irish sites, such as Skellig Michael, where similar complaints were raised about the lack of archaeological discipline. While the intention was to preserve the monuments, the methods employed often resulted in the loss of crucial historical information and a distorted view of the original structures.