

# Early Christian Era | H1 Notes

## The People

From around 430AE, **missionaries** were sent to Ireland. Christianity gradually grew, and trade in and out of the country increased. As a result, **skills** like Roman metalworking and writing were **imported** too, and by the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, the period known as the **Irish Golden Age** had begun.

Elements from a mixture of cultures, techniques and art styles (Celtic **La Tène**, Mediterranean **knotwork**, Anglo-Saxon & Pictish **intertwined zoomorphic** designs, and later, Viking **Urnes** style), were adopted and mixed, eventually becoming what we know as **Insular Art**. **Monasteries** were established and run by various orders of monks across the island, these monasteries were centres of learning and scholarly devotion.

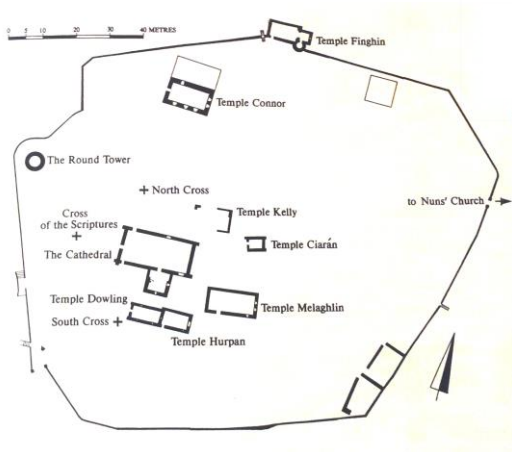
Many of the masterpieces that were created during this time were made or **commissioned** to show the craftsperson/patron's **devotion**. These pieces were made of precious metals and stones, some also functioned as **reliquaries**, (artefacts containing **holy relics**, like the **Cross of Cong**, said to contain part of the "True Cross").

The wealth concentrated in the monasteries began to attract attention. During the 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries, the **Viking raids** began. The monasteries stood little chance against the raiders, and so valuable pieces were often **hidden** away to keep them safe. Some, like the Ardagh hoard, were never recovered until many years after. Some have never been recovered. Many pieces were destroyed, melted for their precious metals, jewels torn off etc. However, as the worst of the raids passed, Irish artists began to adopt aspects of the Vikings' **Urnes** style, (typified by **zoomorphic interlacing** (interlaced animals)). As well as style, the Vikings brought new metalworking techniques and large supplies of **silver**.

# The Monasteries

Especially in the early days, many monasteries were built in **isolated**, remote areas, (such as **Sceilig Michael**), following the example of **St Anthony**, an Egyptian monk who lived as a **hermit** in the desert), in the hope that the difficult, yet peaceful life would bring the monks **closer to God**. The monks were devoted to prayer, fasting, contemplation & learning. The early monasteries rarely had more than a few simple stone structures, such as corbelled **oratories** (a kind of small chapel) or **beehive huts** (named for their similarity in shape to old wicker beehives), and a protective enclosure (sometimes known as a **tearmann**). Though simple, the buildings were impeccably crafted (see St Sionnach Macdara's Church, or the Gallarus Oratory).

Over time the monasteries became more complex. Later monasteries like **Clonmacnoise** (aerial view shown to the right, map below, detailing functions of buildings) and **Glendalough** (shown below) included more complex structures like Round Towers & large chapels. The monasteries also had purpose-built structures like the **refectory** (food hall), the **scriptorium** (for **illuminating** manuscripts), and other complex structures like forges, bell houses etc.



# The Artefacts

## Stone Crosses

Early Christian Stone Crosses evolved from simple **stone pillars** with incised designs like the Riasc Pillar, to highly ornate High Crosses like the Cross of Muiredach. By the **7<sup>th</sup>** Century, the cross's shapes were carved out, and by the **8<sup>th</sup>** and **9<sup>th</sup>** centuries, high relief, intricately decorated, ringed **High Crosses** began to appear. By the **12<sup>th</sup>** Century, the crosses were no longer ringed, and had only a few large figures.

They were decorated with **La Tène** triskels & spirals, Mediterranean **interlacing** (or **strapwork**) and **Anglo-Saxon animal motifs**.



### Cross of Moone

10<sup>th</sup> Century – Moone, Co. Kildare

Unique **vertical** shape, emphasised by **small ring**. No capstone.

Very **tall** base, 2 tapering sections. **Granite**, bears weathering well, but difficult to carve. Hence **simple imagery**.

Decoration includes the **12 Apostles**, cleverly carved to **fit tapering space**.

Small Crucifixion scene above this. Bible stories depicted incl. the Loaves & the Fishes, Daniel in the Lion's Den, Sacrifice of Isaac, Adam & Eve. Also, St Anthony



(the hermit) included, as he was important to the Irish monks.

**Visual representation** of stories important. Most laypeople could not read, therefore crosses were likely used to **educate** them.

## Cross of Muiredach

10<sup>th</sup> Century – Monasterboice, Co. Louth



**Wider** shape, incl. church shaped **capstone**. **Sandstone**, easier to carve. Hence high relief.

West Face – Centre; crucifixion, Left; Peter denying Christ, Right; Christ's resurrection at the tomb.

– Panels – Top; doubting Thomas, Middle; blessing from risen Christ, Lower; Arrest of Christ (shown).

– Base – Cats, inscription (partially eroded – "Pray for **Muiredach** who had the cross made")



East Face – Centre; **Judgement Day**, shows crowds, left (damned), right (saved), and Christ in the centre with power symbols (roman eagle, cross, staff), above, angels, below, St Michael weighing souls.

Side panels – some further figurative panels, some La Tène motifs

Again, visual representation of **stories** important. Most laypeople could not read, therefore likely used to **educate** them.



## List of High Crosses – (in approximate date order, showing development)

- Riasc Pillar
- Duvillaun Cross
- Fahan Mura Cross
- Carndonagh Cross
- Ahenny High Crosses, North & South
- Moone High Cross
- Muiredach's High Cross
- Dysart O'Dea

## Manuscripts

Beginning of written history, (hence end of pre-history). A **scribe** was a monk who was skilled at **calligraphy** & **illumination**. Illumination is the art of intricately decorating written volumes. The building or room where the scribes worked was called the **scriptorium**. Made their own inks. Egg white (binder), was added to coloured pigments to make richly coloured ink.

Scribes made **quills**, or pens, from feathers. They also used grids, compasses & guide lines to lay out their work & keep it neat.

The scribes wrote on **vellum**, a kind of parchment made from the skin of calves. The skin was washed, treated and scraped clean of hair, then stretched, dried and cut.

Due to the fragile nature of the manuscripts, few fully preserved volumes have survived.

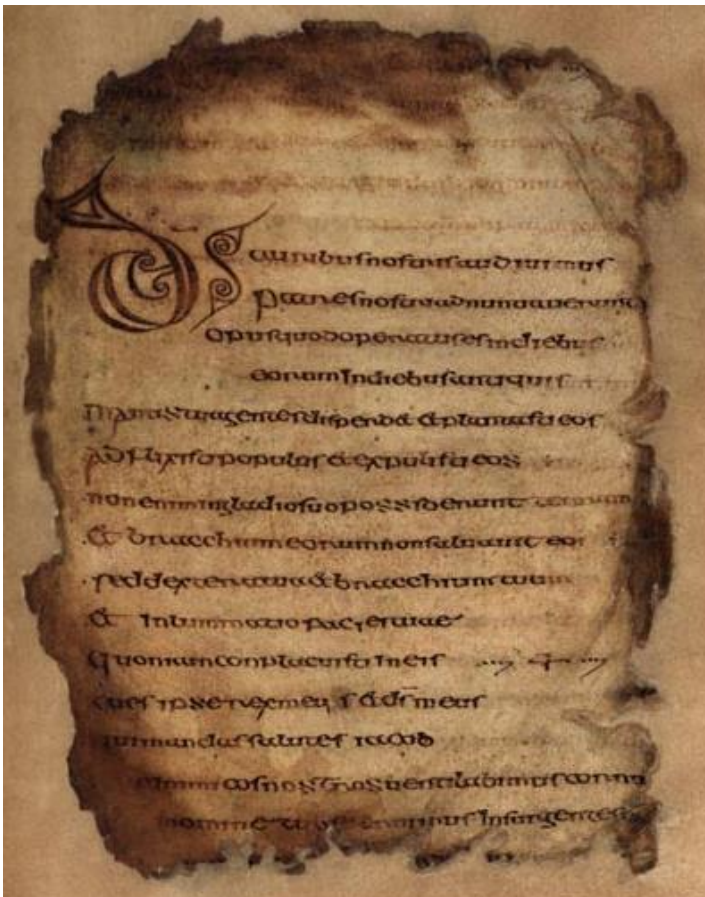


## Pigments (Not too important. Only memorise 2-3 to throw into the intro or "and" section)

- **Black** – Soot
- **Red** – Lead or ground insects
- **Yellow** – Orpiment (mineral)
- **Green** – Verdigris (compound formed when copper is exposed to air. (This is why copper domes on buildings appear green))
- **Blue** – indigo dye from plant or lapis lazuli (Precious stone imported from Afghanistan)
- **Brown** – Ground oak apples

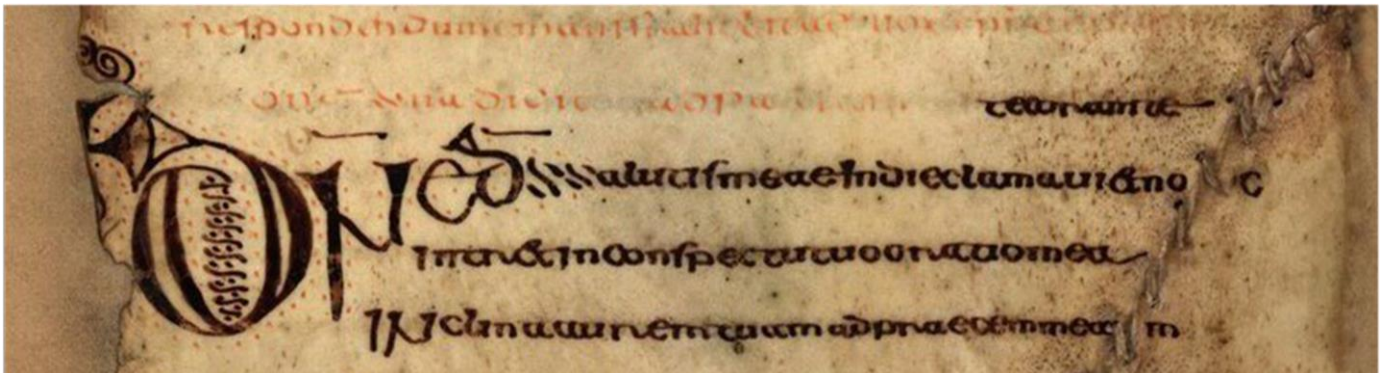
## The Cathach (From Irish, "The Battler")

7<sup>th</sup> Century



Book of psalms, (aka "**psalter**"), carried into battle for luck. (Hence much damage). Earliest surviving Irish manuscript. **Limited colour**, mostly black, some red. Irish explanations

before each Latin psalm. **Initial capital** letters decorated, red dots or La Tène design. Letters following larger capital grow smaller until same as rest of text (**Diminution**), see below. Decoration and diminution considered innovative, influenced Books of Durrow & Kells.



## The Book of Durrow

7<sup>th</sup> Century – Durrow, Offaly

**Gospel book.** Highly **developed style**, evidence that previously similar manuscripts lost. Showed development since the **Cathach**.

**Lavish** decoration, only **5 colours**, (Black, red, yellow, green &



brown), but well used. Contrast **negative space** & high decoration. Motifs from stone carving & metalwork. Much Mediterranean-influenced ribbon **interlacing**. Stylised **zoomorphic** and **contorted human figure** designs. Symbols of **evangelists**. **La Tène** birds' heads, trumpets, triskels & spirals.





Shown above is a more advanced example of **diminution** than is in the Cathach. The opposite page is known as The **Carpet Page**. To the right is the **Chi-Rho monogram**. (The Chi-Rho monogram is a symbol of Christ, shaped like a decorative Xp)

## The Book of Kells

9<sup>th</sup> Century – Kells, Co. Meath



Gospel Book. Monks from **Iona**, took refuge from Viking raids in monastery of Kells. Each gospel divided by **carpet**



**pages** (One surviving). Every page decorated, (bar two). Complex decoration. Much strong, **vibrant colour** & vitality. Use of **humour** in places. E.g. Cat & mouse on Chi-Rho monogram page. (Some pages cut down to fit, hence some damage)



Text written by (at least) four different scribes, and three main artists; the **Illustrator** (or the **Storyteller**), the **Portrait Painter**, & the **Goldsmith**.

The **Illustrator** – **The Temptation of Christ**, the **Virgin & Child**

The **Portrait Painter** – **Portrait of St John**

The **Goldsmith** – **Chi-Rho monogram**

## Metalwork

### Techniques

**Casting** – Molten metal was poured into a clay or bone mould

**Chip Carving** – (German *kerbschnitt*) – Fine chisels were used to carve flakes from a smooth gold surface, the broken surfaces glittered, reminiscent of wood carving. This technique was used to create patterns in high relief

**Enamelling** – Powdered glass was mixed with colourful minerals, the fused to a metal with intense heat. Two types of enamelling were generally used during the Early Christian Era.

- Champlevé – Hollows carved into the metal, then filled with the enamel.
- Cloisonné – Areas were outlined with fine strips of metal or wire. The raised outlines were then filled in with enamel.

**Engraving/Incision** – Designs were scratched into metal

**Filigree** – Fine wire was twisted together, used to create delicate designs, and then soldered to a metallic surface.

**Gilding** – As precious metals were expensive, a fine sheet of gold or silver, (gilt), was used to cover a “lesser” metal.

**Millefiori Glass** – Coloured glass rods were fused together, then stretched into thin lengths. The rods were sawn into small pieces, each showing a delicate flowerlike pattern. (Hence *millefiori*; Italian for “a thousand flowers”)

**Niello** – A black paste was rubbed into incised lines. Excess was removed, then the piece was heated, leaving the lines filled in with black. (See Cross of Cong)

## The materials

- **Precious Metals** – Gold & Silver
- **Other metals** – Copper, Brass etc. Objects cast, then gilded with gold & silver
- **Enamel** – Particularly in the form of decorative studs
- **Amber** – Fossilised tree sap. Usually as carved studs

## Note on Brooches

At this time, brooches generally came in 3 forms; **Annular** – closed ring, **Penannular** – (e.g. Ballinderry Brooch) – broken or incomplete ring, **Pseudo-Penannular** – (e.g. Tara Brooch) – Looks like an incomplete ring, but isn’t actually.

# The Tara Brooch

8<sup>th</sup> Century – Bettystown, Co. Meath



Swivelling pin, crescent shaped decorative area on ring, woven silver chain. More decorative than functional.

Minutely **detailed**. Some **damage**, some **panels missing**. Many parts, **soldered** to ring.

Techniques incl. soldering, filigree, enamel, gilding, casting & moulded glass.

Materials incl. gold, silver, bronze (gilded), amber, glass & enamel.

Decorations incl. **La Tène** spirals & triskels, interlaced serpents, **filigree** panels, **Zoomorphic** motifs, **decorative studs** (glass, amber, enamel).



# The Ardagh Chalice

8<sup>th</sup> Century – Reerasta, Co. Limerick



Hemispherical bowl, 2x handles, neck/stem, conical base, foot ring.

Strong **sense of design, contrasting** areas of high decoration versus plain polished silver. Band of **filigree** panels, interspersed with **enamel**



studs. Names of the apostles, (excl. Judas) inscribed. 2x circular **medallions**, incl. **Maltese/Greek**



cross. Decorations incl. **cloisonné** studs & spirals on gold foil, interlaced **filigree**, Rock **crystal** underneath. (Very

unusual, to be decorated underneath). Masterpiece, as many, many parts.

Gold, silver, copper alloy (stem was cast, then gilded), enamel, amber, coloured glass, natural rock crystal.

# The Derrynaflan Chalice

9<sup>th</sup> Century – Reerasta, Co. Tipperary



Part of Derrynaflan Hoard. Taller, but similar to Ardagh Chalice.

Differences – No engraving. Amber, rather than enamel studs, - Viking influence. No medallions.

Side's plain, decoration at handles. Less complex filigree & decoration. Less decorated underneath.

# The Cross of Cong

12<sup>th</sup> Century – Co. Mayo

Post Viking Raids. **Reliquary** (said to hold part of the True Cross). Altar Cross, also for outdoor processions.

Cast bronze panels, featuring **Urnes** figure-of-eight interlaced **zoomorphic filigree**.

Decorative **studs** (glass & enamel), polished **rock crystal** in centre. Urnes style **beast** at base of cross/top of shaft. Ornamental animal heads.

Oak core. Cast bronze **strapwork** (broader interlacing, more like bands than thin rope), gilded. Silver edging. Gold, silver, bronze, glass, oak, rock crystal.





## Other Important Artefacts

- Ballinderry Brooch – 7<sup>th</sup> Century – Ballinderry, Co. Offaly
- Rinnegan Crucifixion Plaque – 8<sup>th</sup> Century – Rinnegan, Co. Roscommon
- Roscrea Brooch – 9<sup>th</sup> Century – Roscrea, Co. Tipperary
- St Patrick's Bell Shrine -12<sup>th</sup> Century – Belfast, Co. Armagh
- Lismore Crozier – 12<sup>th</sup> Century – Lismore, Co. Waterford
- St Lachtin's Arm Shrine – 12<sup>th</sup> Century – Donaghmore, Co. Cork

## Writing Your Answer

This section of the course is pretty big, so it's generally divided into three sections (**High Crosses, Manuscripts, Metalwork**). Generally, **at least one** of these will come up every year, sometimes two. You may have noticed, the **key vocab** for each is pretty **similar**, so if you don't like learning off keywords, this chapter and one other will have you covered.

Typically, the question asks for, (/gives), an example of a High Cross/Manuscript/piece of Metalwork, then wants you to **compare** it with another, e.g. Ardagh Chalice, versus Derrynaflan Chalice. Discuss different **styles**, intricate interlacing & enamel on Ardagh Chalice, vs amber studs and less elaborate style of Derrynaflan Chalice. You **don't always have to** do a very **in depth analysis**, often you're asked to **describe** the main piece, "**and**" then to **briefly compare** it to another **similar** piece.

Alternatively, the “**and**” part could ask about **life in the monasteries**, in which case all you need is a **short** paragraph similar to the one above. If you’re feeling very extra, you can include a **map**, but it’s **usually not necessary**.

As always, try throw in a few **quick sketches** if you have time, just quick drawings in the margin. They don’t have to be elaborate to show off your “in depth” knowledge. But never forget that the most important thing in Art History is **LABELS**.

## Sources

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