Early Christian Ireland

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce Farmers Journal readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.

The round towers range in height from 20-40m with the entrance door high above ground level. Though associated in the popular imagination with Viking raids, the original name for these is cloigtheach (bell tower), which probably gives a truer idea of their purpose.

The round, tall, ringed crosses standing on a broad base and often display biblical scenes from the Old and New Testaments.

Clonmacnoise is the largest and most remarkable collection of cross-slabs in Europe, ranging in date from the eighth to the 12th century. These slabs are almost all made of sandstone and are elaborately carved with crosses—many asking for a prayer for the person commemorated. A small number of the best examples of these cross-slabs are currently on display in Clonmacnoise Visitor Centre.

Some aspects of the early church still retained strong elements of pre-Christian beliefs. Two examples of this are holy wells and bullaun stones. Bullaun stones are rocks or boulders in which circular depressions have been carved. Their exact function is unclear but many are associated with early monastic sites with local folklore attributing healing properties to rainwater collected in the hollow.

Some monasteries were important places of pilgrimage and many were located in remote areas. The best-known and most extreme example is Sceilig Michael, off the coast of Kerry. Here a tiny monastic community consisting of six circular stone huts and two oratories are perched on a narrow shelf over 200m above the sea. Sceilig Michael is a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1996. Unfortunately, not all early monasteries have left such impressive upstanding remains. However, many old graveyards, especially those containing the remains of a medieval church and associated with a local saint, may in fact be much older and hugely important archaeological sites.

The early church has also left a strong impression on Irish place names. Words meaning “church”, like cill and teampul were anglicised by the Ordnance Survey to “kill” and “temple”. Churches in isolated locations were often referred to as “dysert”.

Therefore, places like Kildare, Templemore and Dysert O’Dea derive their names from early church sites. For more information and details on local place names, the Placenames Database of Ireland can be consulted at www.logainm.ie

NEXT WEEK: EARLY MEDIEVAL FARMSTEADS