

Where do churches come from?

The architectural traditions of the Christian church take two strands: the Byzantine east, centred on Constantinople, and the Roman west centred on Rome. This difference is expressed in the Byzantine churches with their central circular dome, like Santa Sophia, and the basilica churches of the west. Basilicas were originally Roman halls of justice and their basic design was copied by Christian churches from the 4th century onwards and has remained a dominant feature of church architecture ever since.

The basilica church is a rectangular building, its long axis east-west, except for a semi-circular apse at its eastern end. The church is entered by a doorway in the centre of the west wall which gives access to the nave. This central space is flanked along each side by a colonnade of pillars, behind which are aisles. Rising from the colonnade is a wall pierced by clerestory windows. At the east end of the nave is the altar behind which is the apse. The floor and walls were richly decorated with mosaics creating a very impressive interior.

“In The Irish Style”

Writing in the early eighth century the Venerable Bede, in his account of the church in England, made the distinction between the Roman (French) way of building a church in stone and the Scottorum (Irish) way ‘not of stone but of split wood’.

So what did a church built ‘in the Irish Style’ look like?

No wooden church of the period has survived and the few early churches which have been excavated (e.g. Church Island, Kerry) are so small they tell us little of what a more typical church looked like. Two accounts of churches built of wood survive and give some idea of what they looked like. One is from Cogitosus’s life of St Brigid and the other is from the seventh-century poem *Hisperica Famina*.

But we can also see what they may have looked like from a page in the Book of Kells. This is the page showing The Temptation of Jesus by the Devil (drawn in black) and features an illustration of Solomon’s Temple which must be modelled on what a contemporary Irish church looked like. It is a rectangular structure with a sloping hip roof covered in shingles (wooden tiles). At the apex of the roof is a decorative finial. The door is a plain rectangular opening. Another source are the models of a church which are on the top of some of our finest High Crosses, like Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice. These show very similar building features to the Book of Kells church.

Stone Churches with Antae

It is perhaps not surprising that when churches were built in stone in Early Christian Ireland, they should reflect in their architecture some features of a wooden church.

The ends of the side walls project beyond the end wall itself (antae) and this projection continues up the edge of the gable. This is clearly a representation in wood of the end beams of a wooden building. To complete the illusion a finial is placed on the apex of the gable in the form of two crossing timbers—exactly in the form of the Book of Kells finial. The doors of these churches, located in the west end-wall, also reflect the type of simple wooden door seen in the Book of Kells. They are plain openings with inclined sides and a flat lintel on top.

Church Reform and The Romanesque

By the early 12th century the church in France, led by The Cistercians, was forcing great change in the way Christianity was organised and practiced. Irish clerics and people of high rank who were by then regularly making the pilgrimage to Rome (see *Pilgrimage*, T1, U3) were coming into contact with these new ideas and saw that the church in Ireland needed to be reformed to keep in line with what was happening on the Continent. Synods were held, Cashel in 1101 and Rath Breasil in 1111, which introduced a diocesan system and brought many other reforms.

The Rock of Cashel, the inauguration place of the Kings of Munster, was granted to the church at the synod held there in 1101. A high cross and a round tower were amongst the first two religious structures put up on the Rock but in 1127 a church was founded there which was consecrated in 1134. This is now known as Cormac's Chapel after its patron Cormac MacCarthy, king of Munster.

Cormac's Chapel is remarkable in that it is built in an entirely new style of architecture for Ireland, what is now termed Romanesque. The plan is divided between wide nave and narrow chancel. The entire structure is built of chiselled blocks of sandstone. The window and door openings are covered by round arches elaborately carved in 'orders' featuring geometric designs like zig-zags and scallops. All of these ideas are brought in from Europe and represent a new 'modern image' for the Irish church.

Hiberno/Gaelic-Romanesque

For the next hundred years the Romanesque style dominated church building in Ireland. But there are no exact copies of Cormac's Chapels. Instead elements of the Cashel church are taken and applied to much plainer buildings built of rubble stone with wooden roofs. Especially used were the 'orders' around door and window openings. Some of these became very elaborate, especially around the door in the west wall. An example of this is the 'gable' frame around the door at Clonfert Cathedral in Co. Galway. The Cashel plan of nave and chancel was also widely used and chancels were added to many existing churches like Kilmalkedar in Kerry. When the Cistercians came to Ireland they were building in the Romanesque style as were the Normans.

Gothic

The Gothic style had developed on the Continent by the late 12th century in response to the demand for bigger churches than were possible using the round arch of the Romanesque. The new style used a pointed arch instead and this, with other innovations like the use of buttresses, enabled builders to go higher and wider. It took the new style some time to reach Ireland. Perhaps one of the first Gothic features built in Ireland is the door at Athassel Priory, Co. Tipperary. This was built in the Norman area of influence and the areas in Ireland under Norman control saw the Gothic style introduced before elsewhere. The door shows a more English than Continental design.

The Athassel Priory door has a pointed arch, features new decorative motifs and was built in hard limestone as opposed to the softer sandstone favoured by the Romanesque. Of course, not everybody could afford to tear down the existing church completely and build in the new style. That is why some of our medieval churches have a Romanesque core but the door and window openings are rebuilt in the Gothic style. Some of these are such a mixture it can be very difficult to make out the sequences of repairs and rebuilding over time.

Later Gothic

The 14th century was a period of recession and regression in Ireland, as it was throughout Europe, with disasters like the Black Death taking a heavy toll on civil life. In Ireland the area under Norman control shrunk back the Pale around Dublin. Elsewhere a new order emerged, led by the Earls of Kildare, Ormond and Desmond. A great rebuilding took place throughout the countryside in the 15th and 16th centuries under these new lordships.

Everywhere tower houses were being built to house and protect the new landowning lordships. But also parish churches and abbeys were being rebuilt or repaired. The new style of this rebuilding was a fairly modest form of Gothic featuring limestone surrounds and much used of the ogee arch for window heads.

New parish churches sprung up everywhere. The entrance door was switched from the west end wall to the south wall to allow the west end of the church be used as a residence for the priest (in some cases a tower was built for this purpose). The windows were small and narrow, usually just one in the east wall and one in the south wall, featuring ogee-arches. The church will also have a small wall-press and maybe a piscina. There might also be a stoup (holy water container) in the doorway.