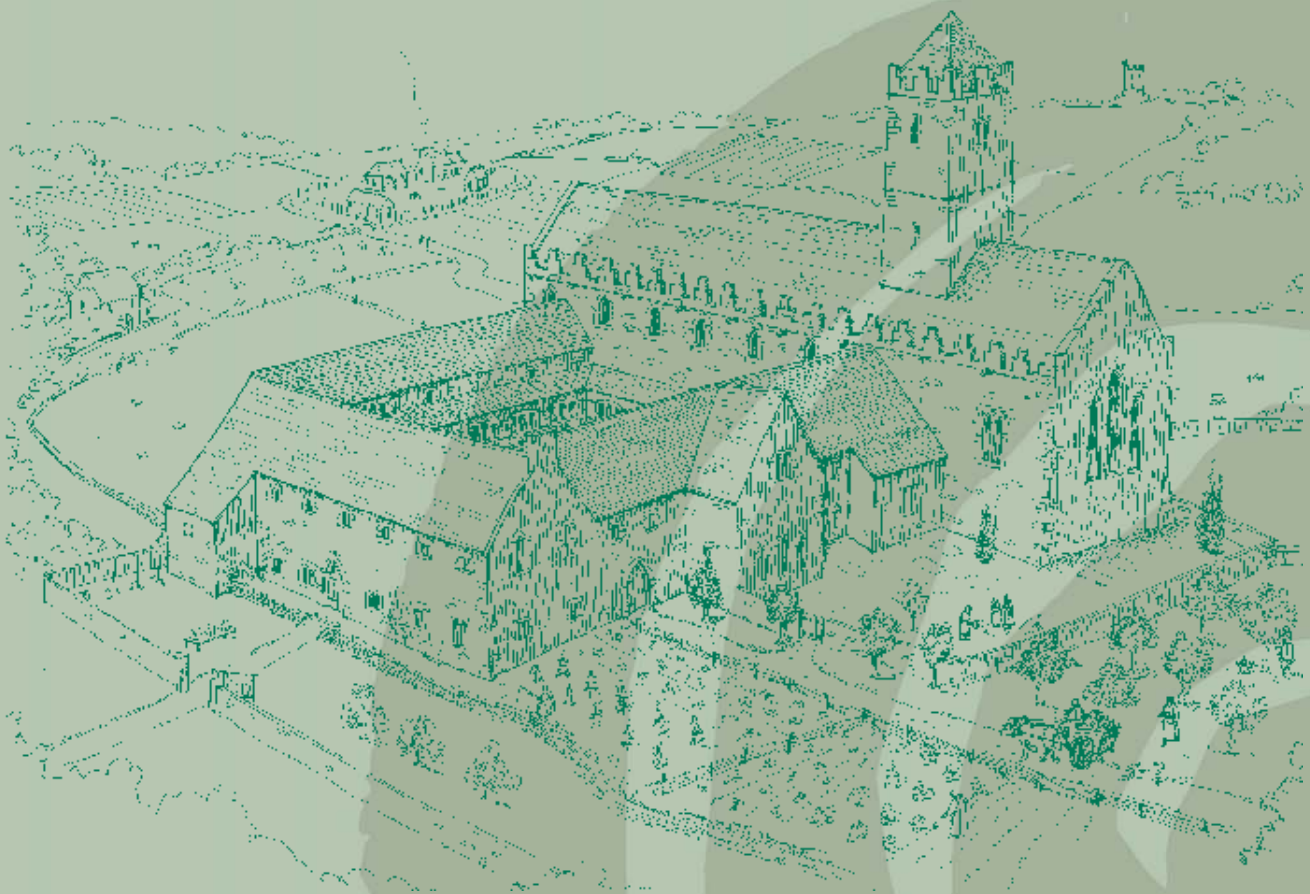


Monasticism

LESSON 2

The Cistercian Monastery



ARCHAEOLOGY
time in transition

IT'S ABOUT TIME 2

**Aim(s)**

To examine a typical medieval Cistercian monastery and place it in an Irish context.

**Objective(s)**

To give the students an understanding of the Cistercian plan and to show how its introduction here helped to bring Ireland into the mainstream of Western Christianity.

**Time Period**

Medieval (11th to 16th centuries).

**KEY INFORMATION****Lesson**

- The arrival of the Cistercians in Ireland in the 12th century.
- The architectural features of a medieval monastery.
- The Cistercians in Ireland today.

Context

- A new monastic tradition sweeps across Europe in the 11/12th century, with a new style of buildings and layout.
- This new tradition comes to Ireland in the 12th century as part of the reform of the Irish church.
- This new monastic movement was pioneered by the Cistercians with their large formally built stone monasteries, the first of these to be built in Ireland is Mellifont in Co. Louth, founded in 1142.

**METHODOLOGY & MEDIUM**

- Instruction
- Visual–PowerPoint
- **Student Handout** The Cistercians

**SECTIONS**

Section 1 News Headlines 1142–‘French monks arrive in Ireland’

Section 2 The Plan of a Cistercian Monastery

Section 3 A Monk’s Life

Section 4 The Success and Decline of the Cistercians



Key Question(s) Who are these new monks and why is their arrival in Ireland so newsworthy?

In this lesson we are going to look at one of the most successful multinational organisations in medieval Europe. Today we are familiar with multinational organisations. A feature of these multinationals is the uniformity of their product and appearance. This is not a new concept. In a sense one could say that The Cistercians were the most successful ‘franchise’ in medieval Europe.

Slide 1 The Cistercian Monastery

News Headlines 1142–‘French monks arrive in Ireland’

- Who are these monks?
- Where did they come from?
- Why was their arrival in Ireland so newsworthy?

Slide 2 Who Are These Monks?

- **The** Cistercians are a new monastic order that started in Citeaux, France in 1098.
- **Their** aim was to return to the essence of monasticism by following the Rule of St. Benedict in the strictest sense.
- **They** quickly became very successful and rapidly spread throughout France and further afield.

Slide 3 Why Did They Come to Ireland?

- **Malachy**, Archbishop of Armagh, invited them in 1142. **He** had been hugely impressed by the Cistercian abbeys he had encountered on his way to Rome.
- The new continental monastic system pioneered by the Cistercians impressed Irish visitors to France (on their way to Rome and on pilgrimage, see *Pilgrimage* T1, U3). **The** Cistercians were eager to develop new monasteries, particularly in the more remote areas of Europe which Ireland was then.

Slide 4 How Are the New Monasteries Different From the Traditional Irish Model?

- **Unlike** the informal arrangement of an Early Christian Irish monastery with mostly wooden **buildings**, Cistercian monasteries were a formally planned grouping of stone buildings.

Slide 5 What did the Cistercians Need to Set up a Monastery?

- **Land:** the Cistercians were often connected with powerful local families. The land for the first Cistercian monastery at Citeaux was given by the founder’s cousin. Cistercians were prepared to accept land that had not previously been cultivated. With its extensive tracts of waste and forest, Ireland provided plenty of scope for land clearance and the new agrarian techniques being pioneered by the Cistercians.

- **Money:** getting money was not difficult as monasteries attracted donations and gifts. To be a benefactor of a monastery had a number of advantages. The monks would pray for your soul—this was very important in an age when there was a strong belief in hell and damnation. The founder was allowed burial in the church in the habit of the order and this was regarded as ensuring eternal reward in heaven. The Cistercian monks also developed excellent skills at farming, creating wealth in the local agrarian economy.
- **Support:** the Cistercians got huge political support judging from the number of dignitaries that attended the opening of Mellifont in 1157: 17 bishops; Murtagh Mac Loughlin, the High King; Donough O'Carroll, a local king and the original benefactor; and Dervorgilla, wife of the King of Meath. It was prestigious to be the benefactor of a Cistercian monastery.
- **Labour Force:** the lay brothers provided the bulk of the work force at a Cistercian monastery and were one of the main reasons for its success. They were the engine that made the monastery viable and self sufficient. They were the perfect workforce: hard-working, obedient and cheap!

SECTION 2 The Plan of a Cistercian Monastery



Key Question(s) What are the key elements of a Cistercian monastery?

Slide 6 The Formal Plan of a Cistercian Monastery

What is this plan telling us? The Cistercians sought simplicity with order, and this is reflected in the design for their monasteries.

- This building plan is centred on an open square area surrounded by a covered walkway, known as a **cloister**.
- To the north of the cloister is the church. This is the largest and tallest building in the complex.
- Around the other three sides of the cloister are the remaining buildings, forming the **east, south and west ranges**.
- All Cistercian monasteries were built to this strict plan. This type of layout was new to Ireland.

Slide 7 What is This Building Telling Us?

- Working as archaeologists, we are now going to look at some features of medieval Cistercian abbeys in Ireland.
- What can these buildings tell us about life in a monastery in Ireland 900 years ago? (The picture shows the nave of the Cistercian Abbey at Jerpoint, Co. Kilkenny).

Slide 8 The Cloister

- What is the cloister telling us? It is a large space—not a room but a passageway. A passageway with many doors and so linking the different parts of the monastery together. Open to a green space (garth) inside so a pleasant place to walk—bright and airy.
- Cloisters were developed in France and Italy—much warmer countries than Ireland—here a cloister can be a bit cold in winter!
- The garth was used as a herb garden (herbs were used in the infirmary to cure ailments).

Slide 9 The Plan of the Church

- The church is the most important building in a Cistercian monastery and this is reflected in it being larger than any other building in the complex.
- For obvious symbolic reasons the plan is **cruciform**. The church has an east-west orientation, common to all churches in Western Christendom up to the 19th **century**. (See *Places of Christian Worship*, T1, U1, L2).
- The altar is at the east end and directly above it is the great east window—the largest in the **church**.
- The church is divided into areas which were quite distinct. The monks occupy the monks' choir where they chant/sing the various holy offices. They are separated from the lay brothers by a **screen**. A night stairs brings the monks into the church from their dormitories after a bell calls them to pray at night and in the early morning.

Slide 10 Choir Monks in Stalls at the Crossing in the Church

- The monks are chanting/singing Gregorian Chant, facing each other in wooden stalls. They do this during the various 'offices' of the day (see below).
- The monks are wearing the plain white robes of the Cistercians and have tonsures (top of head shaved).
- **Note** the altar at the east end of the church and the great east window above it.

Slide 11 East Window, Sedelia, Piscina and Night Stairs

- **East** window—east is the direction of the rising sun and all churches were built on an east-west orientation with the altar directly below the east window. The rising sun was seen as symbolic of the risen Christ in Early Christian times. The morning sun reflected through a brightly coloured stain glass window and shining down on the altar during dawn mass, created a special **atmosphere**.
- The sedelia is a stone seat built into the south wall of the church, near the altar. There are usually three seats, one each for the main celebrants of mass—a priest and two deacons. A mass in medieval times took a very long time—sometimes over two **hours**!

- The piscina is a recess in the south wall near the altar. In the recess was a basin with a drainage hole. The water used in the mass to wash the holy vessels and the priest's hands was poured away here—the south side was considered the sacred side of the church and so the piscina is always located on that side of the altar.
- The night stairs led from the monk's dormitory directly into the church. The monks came down into the church at 2am to chant Matins.



Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny

Slide 12 The Chapter House

- The chapter house was a very important room in the monastery. This was where the monks assembled every morning for a meeting. A chapter from the Rule of St. Benedict was read each day in the chapter house (hence the name). Different monks took it in turn to read.
- The Abbot presided over the meeting and the rule of the day was discussed. Open confessions were heard afterwards. Abbots were elected in the chapter house and all other important business matters were dealt with here.
- A feature of many chapter houses is a rib-vaulted ceiling.

Slide 13 Extract from a Chapter of *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

- We have already met these rules in the worksheet of the previous lesson (see *Monks, Monasteries and Monasticism*, T1,U2,L1).
- The Rule emphasises fasting, humility, silence and adoration of God.

Slide 14 The Architecture of the Chapter House

- If the Chapter House is one of the most important rooms in the monastery how would you expect its architecture to reflect that?

Location next to the church; large and imposing entrance door; high vaulted ceiling; elaborate windows; carved pillars and capitals; tiled floor.

Slide 15 Arrangement of Rooms in the East Range of the Cloister

- **Sacristy**—Beside church. (Inset picture is a rare piece of medieval sacristy furniture from Spain. It was a wardrobe for holy vestments.)
- **Chapter House**—(see Slide 14).
- **Parlour**—The only room in a Cistercian monastery where the rule of silence was relaxed to allow necessary private conversations.
- **Dormitory**—Overhead on the first floor is the monk's dormitory. This was not a very luxurious place but a large unheated room in which the Cistercian monks slept on straw mattresses on the floor.

Slide 16 Arrangement of Rooms in the South Range of the Cloister

- The refectory and kitchen was found in the south range. The monks ate communally, in silence.
- Scriptures were read to the monks while they ate.
- Their diet consisted of vegetables, grown in the monastery farm, and bread, except on Friday when fish was allowed. The Cistercians kept carp in fishponds and played an important role in the development of aquaculture in medieval Europe.
- One rule of St. Benedict (written in the warmer Italian climate) which had to be relaxed a bit in northern Europe was the ban on fireplaces in the monastery. One room, the calefactory (warming room), had a fireplace but only very old and infirm monks were allowed to enjoy its heat.

Slide 17 The Lavabo

- As the monks entered the refectory they washed their hands in a basin or lavabo. This washing of hands was seen as an important ritual—there are many references to the washing of hands in the Bible. In some Cistercian monasteries an ornate lavabo was built to reflect the importance of this ritual.
- The lavabo on the right is in the cloister at Mellifont Abbey, Co. Louth and is the largest and most elaborate example surviving in Ireland. It originally looked like the one on the left which is 13th century and part of Poblet Abbey in Spain.

Slide 18 The 'Rooms of Necessity'—Domus Necessarii

- The Cistercians always built their monasteries in such a way that the toilets (garderobes) were positioned above streams of flowing water.
- The plumbing was very simple but clean and efficient—a wooden seat, set into a stone alcove, with an opening positioned directly above the stream.
- These toilets were located at the south end of the dormitories.

Slide 19 The West Range

- The west range consisted mainly of cellars and stores.
- The lay brothers refectory and dormitory was also found here, on the first floor.
- It also contained the main entranceway into the cloister and the monastery from outside.

Slide 20 Other Monastery Buildings Outside the Cloister Complex

- These buildings included the guest house, infirmary, scriptorium, abbot's lodgings, farm buildings including barns and stables, mills and workshops. The hard manual work in the fields was performed by the lay brothers.
- The photograph is the dovecote or columbarium at Kilcooly Abbey in Co. Tipperary. Pigeons were kept for food (meat and eggs) and also for their droppings which were an important ingredient in lime mortar. The monks did not eat meat but it was allowed in the infirmary and served in the guesthouse. This building is circular with a domed roof. The roof has an opening on top to allow the birds fly in and out. The inside wall is lined with nesting boxes. Most monasteries also had fish ponds where carp were farmed.

Slide 21 Cistercian Monasteries in Ireland

- In 1170 Mellifont had 100 monks and 300 lay brothers.
- In 1228 Mellifont had 50 monks and 60 lay brothers.
- In 1228 Jerpoint had 36 monks and 50 lay brothers.

These figures show the initial impact of the Cistercians with 400 monks at Mellifont in 1170. The figures from Jerpoint show that the average size of a Cistercian Abbey in Ireland in the early 13th century was about 35 monks and about 50 lay brothers—a viable number for a successful monastery.



Key Question(s) What was the daily life like for a Cistercian monk?

Slide 22 A Monk's Life

One monk described the lifestyle as follows: *'Our food is scant, our garments rough, our drink is from streams and our sleep often upon books. Under our tired limbs there is a hard mat, when sleep is sweetest, we must rise at bell's bidding. Self will have no place, there is no idleness or dissipation'* Ailred of Revaulx (1110 - 1167 AD)

A choir monk lived a life of unvaried routine and absolute discipline. They had one year as a noviciate and then took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Cistercian monk pursued a life of ferocious asceticism and self-denial. The aim was to form a close spiritual union with God.

- Strict daily routine of *opus dei*: chanting offices in church at set times; mass; private prayer; religious reading; domestic and manual labour.
- They lived in silence.
- The monks ate together in silence—vegetarian diet except for fish on a Friday.

Slide 23 Roles in the Monastery

- **Abbot**—The head of the monastery.

Besides the Abbot there were other roles which specially appointed monks had to perform. These included

- Sacrist—maintained the church, and took care of holy books, vestments and vessels.
- Prior—the deputy to the abbot, or the superior of a monastery that did not have the status of an abbey (hence 'priory').
- Almoner—dispensed alms to the poor and sick.
- Barber/Surgeon—shaved heads and faces of monks and performed surgery, especially blood letting.
- Cantor—lead the choir.
- Cellarer—supervised the general provisioning of the monastery.
- Infirmarian—in charge of the infirmary.
- Lector—supervised the reading of the lessons in the church and in the refectory.

Slide 24 Times of Prayer

- Eight times during the day, excluding mass time, the monks assembled in the choir and chanted/sang the various 'offices' of the day. These were as instructed in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. However, the *Rule* was also careful to ensure that the monks got enough time for sleep.

Slide 25 Lay Brothers (Conversi)

- Mostly illiterate and uneducated. Separate accommodation to choir monks.
- Separate prayer area in church—only required to pray in morning and evening.
- Did most of the hard labour—farm labourers, millers, smiths, tailors, carpenters, masons, cooks etc.
- The key to Cistercian success were the lay brothers who provided the engine that ensured self-sufficiency: they were a large, unpaid, obedient work force.

SECTION 4 The Success and Decline of the Cistercians



Key Question(s) How successful were the Cistercians in Ireland?
What factors led to the decline of the Cistercians?

Slide 26 A Huge Success

- Recruits flocked to Mellifont when it opened in 1142 and within 6 years five new daughter houses were established: Bective 1147, Baltinglass 1148, Inislounaght 1148, Monasternagh 1148, Grellachdinach 1148 (later moved to Boyle).
- In Ireland, 36 monasteries had been built by the order within 130 years of the foundation of Mellifont. The order spread by a system of mother house founding a number of daughter houses and then these in turn becoming mother houses for a further group of daughter houses.
- Of the original 36 Cistercian monasteries built in Ireland, 20 are now in a ruined state (most preserved by the State as National Monuments), 2 are restored and in use as parish churches (Holy Cross and Graiguenamanagh) and 14 have no standing remains.

Slide 27 The Distribution Map of Medieval Cistercian Monasteries in Ireland

- Nearly all of these with standing remains are now in State care and are open to the public as visitor attractions, including two in Northern Ireland (Grey and Inch Abbeys).
- The densest concentration is in the Norman areas, reflecting the popularity of founding Cistercian monasteries amongst the Norman Lords.

Slide 28 The Distribution Map of Cistercian Monasteries in Europe

- By 1151 the Cistercians had spread throughout western Europe with 307 monasteries.
- Within a year of the foundation of Mellifont in 1142 there were Cistercian monks setting up monasteries in Sweden as well as on the eastern side of the river **Elbe**.
- By 1250 AD, six hundred and fifty Cistercian monasteries were spread throughout Europe, from southern Spain to Sweden, from the west coast of Ireland to the Czech Republic.

Slide 29 A Selection of Irish Cistercian Monasteries

- These Cistercian monasteries have become major tourist attractions. Visiting ancient monastic remains is a way of experiencing the medieval world and imagining what life was like in these places long ago.

Slide 30 Stone Carvings

- These are examples of the wonderful stone carvings found in Irish Monasteries. Most of the carvings depict **Biblical** scenes or floral geometric patterns.

Slide 31 Medieval Artefacts from Cistercian Abbeys

- **Top** left–The foot of a late Gothic monstrance said to come from **Mellifont**.
- Bottom left–The *Sheep House Cross*, one of a number of liturgical objects discovered in 1899, 3kms from **Mellifont**.
- Middle–Silver Chalice found in a grave at **Mellifont**.
- Right–The Boyne Seal.
Initially the Cistercians had little use for the arts of the goldsmith and jeweller as their regulations did not encourage it. The monasteries did however receive gifts from benefactors which included gold chalices. Eventually most monasteries built up a collection of chalices, crosses and statues made of precious metals.

Slide 32 Other Orders in Medieval Ireland

Other continental orders became established in Ireland in the 12th and 13th Centuries. The most important of these were:

- Augustinians: St. Augustine of Hippo 354 - 430 lived in North Africa. Established 125 monasteries in Ireland.
- Franciscans: Founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209. Established 110 monasteries in **Ireland**.
- Dominicans: Founded by St. Dominic of Guzmán (1170 - 1221). Established 40 monasteries in Ireland.

Slide 33 The Decline of the Cistercian Monasteries

From c. 1300 onwards the Cistercian order in Ireland went into decline.

- Number of Cistercian monks joining declined.
- Decline in the number of lay brothers.
- The Black Death.
- Economic depression and political turmoil in the 14th century.
- Dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII in the 15th century.

Slide 34 The Cistercians in Ireland Today

- Cistercians came back to Ireland and set up a monastery in Mount Mellerey in County Waterford. Founded in 1832, Mellerey is the first Cistercian monastery founded in Ireland since the Reformation and is now one of the larger abbeys of the Cistercian Order.
- Four other Cistercian have since been established—Roscrea, Bolton, Mellifont, Glencar.

Slide 35 Closing Slide

- This owl is carved on a pier at Holycross Abbey in Tipperary. The owl symbolises Jesus, who has gone into the darkness in pursuit of those living in darkness.

See Projects section: Visit a Medieval Monastery and join in chant with Nóirín Ní Riain

WEB LINKS**WWW.**

National Monuments Service

www.archaeology.ie/

The Cistercians

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cistercians>


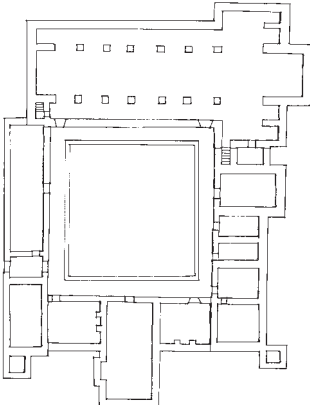

The Cistercians—Chants

<http://cistercensi.info/canto/canto.htm>

Life of St. Benedict

www.newadvent.org/cathen/02467b.htmInvestigating Dundrennan Abbey/
Sweetheart Abbey[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/
learning/freepublications.htm](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/index/learning/freepublications.htm)

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of the Abbey)

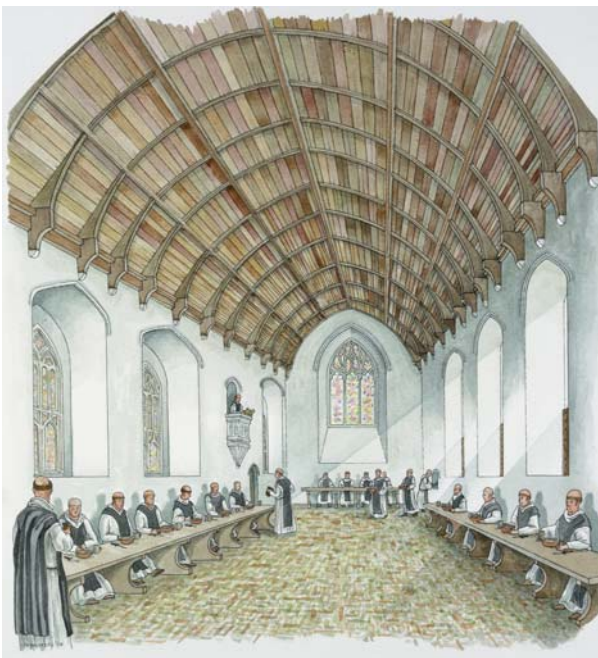
	<p>1142 AD <i>'French monks arrive in Ireland'</i></p> <p>The Cistercians</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new monastic order founded in France in 1098 • Aim to follow <i>The Rule of St. Benedict</i> in the strictest sense • Their life was <i>'devoted to God through work, prayer and the practice of severe asceticism (self discipline)'</i>
<p>Why did they come?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Archbishop Malachy of Armagh invited them • Need to reform Irish church • Cistercians were eager to develop new monasteries throughout Europe 	<p>The new Cistercian monasteries were</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Built in stone on a scale far larger than anything seen in Ireland previously • Cistercian monasteries tended to be located in isolated places—away from the settlements
	<p>They were</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal in plan, centred around an open cloister unlike the earlier Irish monasteries • The church, the most important building, was on the north side • The other buildings (chapter house, dormitories, refectory etc) were clustered around the other three sides of the cloister • The chapter house was the second most important building of the monastery • Other monastic orders built monasteries with a similar cloister plan
 <p>When the Cistercians first arrived they built in a Romanesque style like this Lavabo at Mellifont. In the 13th century they began to build in a Gothic style.</p>	<p>Meals were eaten in the refectory in the south range. The food was simple</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monks ate communally in silence • Listened to scripture during meals • Vegetarian food mostly • Fish on Friday • Kitchens adjacent • Wash basin or Lavabo adjacent <p><i>'Our food is scant, our garments rough, our drink is from streams and our sleep often upon books. Under our tired limbs there is a hard mat, when sleep is sweetest, we must rise at bell's bidding. Self will have no place, there is no idleness or dissipation'</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">Ailred of Revaulx</p>
<p>Between 1150 - 1250 the Cistercians had founded 650 monasteries throughout Europe. In Ireland 35 were built by 1230.</p>	<p>Lay brothers contributed enormously to their success. They were essentially a large unpaid obedient work force.</p>
<p>From the 14th century onwards the Cistercian order in Ireland went into decline</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of monks and lay brothers joining declined • The Black Death • Economic depression and political turmoil in 14th century Ireland • Dissolution of monasteries by Henry VIII—15th century 	<p>Cistercian Monasteries in Ireland today</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mount Mellera • Roscrea • Bolton • Mellifont



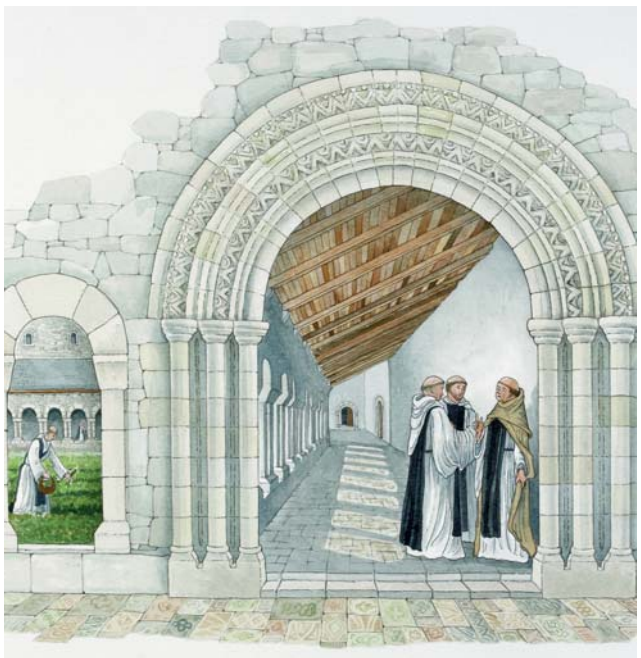
Church Interior



Chapter House



Refectory



Cloister