

The Celtic Way

No 4 – The Monastery: A Centre of Education, Art, Literature and Community Service

Introduction: Celtic monasteries played a crucial role in the development and preservation of education, art, literature, music, and community services. This week we will explore how monastic communities were not only spiritual centres but also hubs of cultural and intellectual activity, and reflect on their enduring legacy.

Education and Community Service

- Irish monasteries such as Clonmacnoise and Glendalough: A life on contemplation and devotion, echoing the fellowship of the Apostles (Acts 2: 41-26)
- Monastic school attracted students from across Europe
- Community service, caring for the sick, shelter for the traveller
- Rigorous ascetic practices; extreme fasting, self-denial
- A focus that shifts from a relationship with God to strict adherence to rules/ rituals?
- Only through faith in Christ can we find salvation (Matthew 11: 28-30)

www.celt.ucc.ie www.litpress.org

(Doherty, Jerry C. 2003. *A Celtic Model of Ministry: The Reawakening of Community Spirituality*)

Literature and Poetry, Illuminated Manuscripts

- Monks composed hagiographies e.g. “*Vita Sancti Columbae*” by Adomnan of Iona
- *The Columille fecit*” poem written by Saint Columba
[Columille fecit – The Society of St. Columba](#)
- Preservation of Celtic legends and folklore
- Were the monks faithful copyists of earlier pagan traditions?
- Scriptoria: *The Book of Kells*: contains the four Gospels, famous for its elaborate and ornate designs. Also the *The Lindisfarne Gospels*
<https://mymodernmet.com/book-of-kells-online/>
[Text: Vita sancti Columbae | Exploring Celtic Civilizations](#)

Art

- Intricate knotwork e.g. The *Triquetra* or *Trinity knot*
- Zoomorphic designs: Stylised animals and mythical creatures that carries symbolic meanings e.g. strength, courage, leadership
- Metalwork e.g. The *Tara Brooch* example of the high level of craftsmanship
- <https://www.medievalists.net/2015/11/early-medieval-celtic-art-in-britain-and-ireland-a-curators-perspective/>

Celtic Kitsch

- Shamrock decorations, Celtic knot jewellery

Music and Chant

- Chants and hymns formed part of daily worship
- Columba was taught bardic music for voice and harp
- Gregorian chant and plainsong
- Caedmon: an angelic vision gave him the sacred gift of God to write songs
- *“In praise of saint Columba”, the sound of the medieval Celts* – performed by [Choir of Gonville and Caius College](#), Cambridge
(*Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English People, Book IV, chapter 24*)
- <https://www.christianheritageedinburgh.org.uk/2016/08/20/the-celtic-church-and-music/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5m3BvXkXzFM>