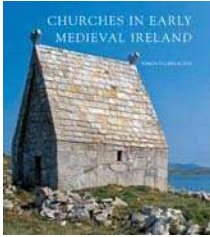


RESENHA

Early Irish Churches: form and functions



Ó CARRAGÁIN, Tomás. *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland: Architecture, Ritual and Memory*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art Series). Hardback, 298 illustrations, including maps, p. xvi, 392. ISBN: 978-0-300-15444-3. £40.00 or €50.00

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This book emanates from a doctoral thesis completed in 2002 by Tomás Ó Carragáin. He is currently a lecturer at the Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, Ireland. It is a very elegant edition, printed on large pages, it literally looks like a History of Art book due to the many beautiful photographs it contains of the early Irish churches and their surrounding landscapes. It would be a suitable adornment for any coffee table. The contents can equally interest archaeologists, historians, historians of art, and even well informed tour guides in Ireland who want to gather information about particular sites. Its Appendix provides a descriptive list of Irish Pre-Romanesque Churches and its bibliography is very useful for both historians and archaeologists of early Christian Ireland. The fact that the notes have been published as endnotes rather than footnotes, while enhancing the visual attractiveness of the text, renders them rather unhelpful to the reader; particularly because the full reference of the works are not given in the notes. Consequently, every time the reader wants to check a reference it is necessary to look up the notes at the end and the bibliography, turning a huge volume of large heavy pages in the process.

Ó Carragáin's study is about the pre-Romanesque churches built in Ireland from the arrival of Christianity in the island in the fifth century to the early stages of the Romanesque style around 1100¹. Therefore, far from being simply an exhaustive descriptive work of churches and monasteries and their respective architectures, or of excavation reports, it provides some interesting and updated analysis of the usage of those religious sites, analysing its social and political associations. The chosen structure for the book is both chronological and thematic. Consequently, I found it easy to follow

the arguments. In the process, the author has crafted a fruitful balance between the material culture and the textual historical evidence.

In the first part of his Introduction he locates his work within a historiographical framework in which he discusses previous writings and interpretations of these churches' architectures. An interesting aspect of this work derives from how he positioned himself in the middle-ground when discussing whether Ireland was an odd place in the Middle Ages or whether it was completely in line with other European countries and its movements², in terms of its art and architecture style, aspects of Christianity and its politics. He concluded that Ireland is not completely different from the rest of Western Europe but as differences are realities 'they are often more revealing than similarities' (p. 8). I do not agree entirely with that sentence, as such a determination depends on the focus and aims of a given piece of research. In many cases the study of similarities could provide lots of interesting insights. Even though, in this particular book we are offered an equilibrated use of comparative observations between Ireland, England and the Continent identifying both disparities and similarities.

In his discussion on early Irish Church organization, he has tended to agree with recent studies which argue that the Church did not suffer cycles of corruption and reform but experienced continuity throughout the period. This perspective departs from an older orthodoxy that the Irish Church in Patrick's time was based on an episcopal model which was superseded by a monastic model. He agrees that the highest rank of churches were multi-functional and that the Irish church settlements, especially the bigger ones, such as Clonmacnoise, Glendalough, Kildare, and Armagh, were in fact episcopal-monastic centres rather than purely monasteries³, thus both bishops and abbots were important figures in these contexts (p. 9).

In chapter one, "*Opus Scoticum: Churches of Timber, Turf and Wattle*", (p. 15–47), he analyses the architectural structure of the churches made with these materials. Most of the churches built before c. 900 were probably not made of stone, and certainly after this period these materials were used as well as stone to build churches. Ó Carragáin has acknowledged that little is known archaeologically about them. His argument in that informs the entire book. It is that some of these churches were modelled according to a Romano-British style; while others were designed to allude to the tomb of Christ in Jerusalem. So, they were read by the Irish *literati*⁴ as representations of the Jerusalem temple and were associated with their founding saints. Subsequently, its quadrangular form was monumentalized by the Irish who in later periods keep this style relinquishing any search for other complex types of buildings.

The very short chapter two, "Drystone Churches and Regional Identity in Corcu Duibne", (p. 48–55), as the title suggests, is about the drystone type of churches which are only found in the south-west area of Ireland, (facing the Atlantic), area of Co. Kerry, as shows on maps 1 and 4. They date from the eight century onwards and are not found elsewhere. It used to be believed that they were a step in an evolutionary typology of the double-vaulted roof, a theory disregarded by Ó Carragáin. He suggests that 86% of such churches are distributed on the Iveragh peninsula and western end of the Dingle peninsula, regions which formed the early medieval kingdom or Corcu Duibne. The other 14% is spread around the Corcu Duibne's domains. He concludes that those churches positioned within the Corcu Duibne area should not be understood as a material strategy of differentiation representing their association with St. Brendan the Navigator's cult, because the Corcu Duibne geographical area was dedicated to a number of other saints. Nevertheless, the other sparsely located churches may be evidence of St. Brendan's cult expanding beyond the immediate Corcu Duibne area. Though his interpretation is based on some previous works but the claim is

underdeveloped, while this may be because there are not enough archaeological or textual sources to support the claim, thus it remains rather speculative rather than warranted by available evidence.

Chapter Three, “Relics and Romanitas: Mortared Stone Churches to c. 900”, (p. 57–85), is about the important sites where mortared stone churches were built during the eighth and ninth centuries while most of the other churches were still being built with other materials. They constitute symbolic architecture and therefore, symbolic places. For the sacrality of those sites he returns to some discussions developed by some scholars, especially by Charles Doherty and Nicholas Aitchison whose work avails of concepts from comparative religion. His argument is that the first large stone church built in the eighth century in Armagh, was associated with the ideal of *Romanitas*⁵, as an *imitatio Romae*. While the other early stone churches built at other important religious centres, Iona and Clonmacnoise, were inspired by biblical cities of refuge, such as, Jerusalem, and in particular with the Jerusalem temple, and with the Holy Sepulchre Complex, carrying the ideal of *imitatio Hierusalem*. In these sites a novelty was also built, little shrine-chapels, where the remains of the dead founder saints were deposited. They were usually built on top of the original tombs of the saints, but some saint’s remains may have been transferred to shrine-chapels. From a political perspective, it appears that the construction of these stone churches had been supported by local kings thus contributing to the rivalries among these churches and their prominence in Ireland. The positioning of these sites on the landscape and their architecture carried cosmological value, as centres of the world, or microcosms.

In the following chapter, “Pre-romanesque churches of mortared stone, circa 900–1130: form, chronology, patronage”, (p. 87–142), Ó Carragáin has described their form, their distribution in the country and the involvement of kings in commissioning the earlier ones. In Chapter 5 “Architecture and Memory”, (p. 143–166), he discusses the concept of social memory and analysed it in the Irish context in order to comprehend the conservative form of these churches. Tension between continuity and change within a building tradition is analysed and associated with the disconnection between immutable form and mutating social context, revealing conscious manipulation of the past in order to suit the needs of the present. In the construction of this argument he accessed a study of a Chinese village in the second half of the twentieth century, as a mode of comparison. Within this logic he observes a preoccupation with the past as expressed through the medium of medieval art. He highlights that from c. 900 onwards Ireland was suffering political, economic, social and military changes which stimulated among the Irish *literati* a desire to preserve the past, and this was reflected in the conservatism of the churches and the style in which they were built by the early saints. He affirms that “like the historical writing of the tenth to twelfth centuries, the stone churches were intended to make the past continuous with the present”, (p. 149).

“Architecture and Ritual” is the theme of the chapter 6, (p. 167–214) and here the author searches the material for evidence of the nexus between the architecture of these sites and the ritual enacted on them. As part of this process, he attempts to observe how Mass, consecration ceremonies, baptism, and processions were celebrated. In Chapter 7, “Sacred cities and pastoral centre after 900”, (p. 215–234), he continues to explore the usage and function of these churches. He opens the chapter by returning to the discussion as to whether or not the big church groups such as Armagh and Clonmacnoise were simply monasteries or cities. In Latin hagiography, the Irish scholars have referred to these sites as *civitates*, *locus* and *monasterium*, (p. 216). Based on Doherty’s and Bradley’s arguments, Ó Carragáin seems to agree that these ecclesiastical sites experienced substantial nucleation. Here the author returns to

Cólman Etchingham's argument that these sites varied in function and affirms that the archaeological evidence supports it. The early Irish churches, although all built in the same quadrangular format, served different purposes. According to him, the term "monastery" is not the most useful one to describe these sites, and posits that "episcopal-monastic centres" or simply *civitas* may more accurately reflect their multiplicity of functions (p. 216–217). Although he explains the particularity of what the term *civitas* meant for the Irish, I consider that since this term is often associated with the Roman concept and structure of *civitas* and the episcopal centres later developed in them, the term "episcopal-monastic centres" seems most appropriated for the Irish context.

The study of pastoral care in Ireland is a field which continues to require further study and this work is an exciting contribution to the subject. A very interesting argument developed in this seventh chapter is that church sizes cannot be directly associated with the number of people frequenting them, as many factors may have influenced the size of the churches built in the early middle ages. Therefore, little churches may have had a considerable amount of people sharing the space, while bigger churches may have not been filled with people. This means that it is hard to know with certainty the number of dependents of a given church.⁶ Therefore, he argues, the amount of small churches built in Ireland may indicate that a larger number of lay people had access to pastoral care than had been thought previously. Because it was believed that only monasteries provided pastoral care, it used to be supposed that the majority of society did not have access to it. However, he argues differently that "because the power structures in Ireland were relatively diffused, a higher proportion of the lay population were entitled to found their own churches", (p. 226). Consequently, he agrees with recent historians such as Richard Sharpe that, because of this, Ireland may have experienced in the early Middle Ages one of the best structures of pastoral provision in Northern Europe (Blair, J.; Sharpe, R. 1992: 109).

In chapter 8, "Architecture and Politics: Dublin and Glendalough around 1100" (p. 235–253) he analyses the building of churches in these two sites with Romanesque influences. In this and the following chapter, "Relics and Recluses: Double-vaulted Churches around 1100" (p. 255–291), he develops a model for the relationship between three phenomenon: architecture, politics and reform. These new style of churches were used to fulfil certain functions, but they were still associated with previous church models discussed throughout the book and also with the past, but with a particular view of this past, as emphasized in his epilogue "social memory is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering", (p. 302). This interpretation of the Irish church architecture as modelled according to a social memory construct based on a reading of the past situates this work within the field of History of Memory, and therefore, very much in tune with a new trend within Cultural History which has been increasingly explored since the 1970s⁷.

In general, *Churches in Early Medieval Ireland* is an impressive work with considerable potential to contribute to understanding the history of the churches built in Ireland during the Middle Ages, to the motivations behind their erection and to their social function. Many important satellite discussions and arguments around these issues were considered en route by the author and these intellectual detours have provided evidence that enabled him to support or disregard some of his central theses. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Ó Carragáin postulations, this book is definitely indispensable reading material for the researcher of early Christian Ireland engaged in the different fields, archaeology, history, history of art⁸.

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NOTES

¹ The author has explained that the term pre-Romanesque church is used for churches without Romanesque features, but it does not necessarily mean that all of these churches predate the arrival of the Romanesque in Ireland. After the construction of the first Romanesque church (c. 1080–1094) pre-Romanesque churches were still been built for another half century, (p. 8), and the Romanesque buildings were expressions of the Gregorian reform movement, (p. 235).

² To follow these discussions Ó Carragáin has suggested: Thomas, 1971; Hughes, 1973; Wormald, 1986; Brown, 1999.

³ For the discussions on the conflict of episcopal and monastic models see: Hughes, 1966; 1972; 2008. For the opposition to this view and updated studies on the subject: Sharpe, 1984; Blair e Sharpe, 1992, in particular Sharpe's article in this work; Etchingam, 1991; 1993; 1994; 2002; Kehnel, 1997: 28–46; Charles-Edwards, 2000: 241–281; Blair, 2005: 43-49;73–78; Foot, 2006: 265–268.

⁴ Ó Carragáin did not define what he is understanding by the term *literati* but it has been defined by Bart Jaski as: “a term used in a general sense to refer to those men of learning engaged in composing and writing literary matter, without implying that they formed a uniform body”, p. 329.

⁵ The concept of *Romanitas* is also not directly defined, but it is understood in the context. He puts it in terms of opposition such as “in the Roman manner” versus “wooden churches” or “in the Irish manner”, affirming that this dichotomy is evident in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, it seems that in Bede's opinion a *Roman* style of church was one built with stones, (p.60–66).

⁶ He also supported this argumentation in an article published after the completion of his thesis but before its publication in the book format: Ó Carragáin, 2006: 114.

⁷ For discussions on this field see Innes, 2000: 6

⁸ I am thankful to Professor Ciaran Sugrue (UCD) for reading a draft of this review and providing me with some corrections and helpful observations. Therefore any inaccuracy is of my own responsibility.