

# Holy Sites and Pilgrimage

## In Ireland and the East

### [Premodern Digital Cultural Heritage Network](#)

#### Teacher's Guide

- Pilgrimage is a journey that a person (pilgrim) takes to a sacred place.
- A place is considered sacred when it is linked to the holy or the divine.
- Pagan sacred spaces could be marked by shrines or temples. They are associated with rituals and worship. After the rise of Christianity, many pagan temples were destroyed or fell into disuse; over time, some were converted to churches.
- **Christian pilgrimage** grew in popularity from the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. People travelled to saints' and martyrs' burial places, to churches housing relics, or to living saints. Pilgrimages often were undertaken in the hopes of curing an illness.
- The **Holy Land** and the places associated with Christ's life were an attractive destination. Some major sites in the Holy Land are the **Holy Sepulchre** in Jerusalem and the **Church of the Nativity** in Bethlehem.
- Early pilgrims to the Holy Land are the Bordeaux Pilgrim (333 CE) and the noblewoman Egeria (381–384 CE). Their accounts are invaluable sources of information regarding religious practices or the appearance of a particular pilgrimage site. Many sacred sites have disappeared or changed over time due to natural disasters, destruction, or renovation.
- Early **Irish monks** like Colum Cille (521–597) and Columbanus (d. 615) left Ireland to embark on pilgrimage, preaching and establishing monasteries in Britain and Europe.
- Local pilgrimage sites in **Ireland** include **holy wells** and places linked to **Saint Patrick** such as Croagh Patrick.
- Pilgrimage is also firmly established in **Islam**. One of the Five Pillars of Islam is the **Hajj**, the pilgrimage to **Mecca** and the shrine of the Ka'ba.
- Muslims also undertake pilgrimage to other holy sites, saints' graves or shrines. This type of journey is called **ziyara**.
- In Islam, after Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem and Damascus are among the most important holy places.

#### **Bibliography**

[Frank, Georgia, Oliver Nicholson, Nancy Khalek, and Matthew Canepa. "Pilgrimage." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018](#)

[Lunn-Rockliffe, Sophie. "Sacred Geography." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018](#)

[O'Loughlin, Thomas. "Pilgrimage." In \*The Oxford Companion to Irish History\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002](#)

#### **See also**

[Bolli, Christine M. "Pilgrimage routes and the cult of the relic," \*Smarthistory\*, August 8, 2015](#)

**Materials suitable for:** Religious Education (Senior Cycle); History (Junior Cycle) – The history of Ireland, The history of Europe and the wider world

# Holy sites in Christianity: Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem



Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre - forecourt (parvis) - facing north. Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar [ID 72599]



Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre - Calvary - facing east. Emilio Bonfiglio/Manar al-Athar [ID 49639]

- One of the most holy sites in Christianity.
- Site where Christians believe Christ was crucified, buried, and resurrected.
- Rock cut tomb known from the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE on. Later it was believed that Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine I, found the True Cross, on which Christ was crucified.
- Under Constantine and his sons, the Anastasis (Resurrection) rotunda and a structure built over the tomb of Christ (Aedicule), with a five-aisled basilica to the south.
- Mostly destroyed in 1009; rebuilt in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century by the Byzantines and, afterwards, the Crusaders; further restoration works in later centuries.
- **Calvary/Golgotha** is thought to be the place of the **Crucifixion**.
- The **Tomb of Christ (Aedicula)** within the **Anastasis rotunda** is the place of Christ's burial.
- Today the Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, and Ethiopic churches have rights to different parts of the building.

## More images

[Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre – exterior](#)

[Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre – Calvary](#)

[Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre – rotunda](#)

For further images of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, please visit [Manar al-Athar](#).

## Bibliography

[Curl, James Stevens, and Susan Wilson. "Holy Sepulchre." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Architecture\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021](#)

[Livingstone, E. A. "Calvary." In \*The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church\*, edited by E. A. Livingstone. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014](#)

[Vikan, Gary. "Sepulchre, Holy." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005](#)

# Holy sites in Christianity: Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem



Jerusalem - Church of the Holy Sepulchre - tomb of Christ - facing south. Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar [ID 72723]



Milan – Trivulci ivory. Charles Diehl/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 61022]

A 4<sup>th</sup>-century ivory panel now in Milan depicts the scene of the women at the empty tomb:

“Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” (Mark 16:2-6)

Holy Bible. New International Version. 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

- Contrary to the Gospel story, the depiction of Tomb of Christ in the ivory is similar to the structure built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (and rebuilt in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries).
- The Roman soldiers (depicted on the roof) also are wearing 4<sup>th</sup> century (and not 1<sup>st</sup> century) clothes.
- In front of the depicted building an angel (on the left, with a halo) informs the two women of Christ’s resurrection. His raised right hand with stretched out index and middle finger represents a gesture of speech.

## Jerusalem – a sacred city for Jews, Christians and Muslims



Jerusalem - Western Wall - looking towards the Dome of the Rock. Emilio Bonfiglio/Manar al-Athar [ID 27410]

- Jerusalem is an important city for three major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.
- Captured by King David, it became his capital. The Temple Mount was thought to be a seat of the Davidic kings and the place of Solomon’s temple. It was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, rebuilt and finally destroyed by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. Now, only the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) remains.
- For Christians, Jerusalem is the place of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is also the third most holy place in Islam.
- The Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa mosque were built on the Temple Mount, called Haram ash-Sharif (‘Noble Sanctuary’) by Muslims.

# Holy sites in Christianity: Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem



Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity - nave looking east.  
Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar [ID 72506]



Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity - wall mosaics.  
Andres Reyes/Manar al-Athar [ID 97160].  
Christ's entry into Jerusalem: Christ, riding on a white donkey, is greeted by the citizens of Jerusalem. The city is depicted on the far right of the image.



Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity - wall mosaics.  
Andres Reyes/Manar al-Athar [ID 97159].  
The Ascension of Christ: The Virgin (in the middle), flanked by two angels, and the apostles look up at the rising Christ (upper part of the mosaic missing).



Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity - grotto - altar of the birth of Jesus. Sean Leatherbury/Manar al-Athar [ID 72539]

- Traditional site of **Christ's birth**.
- Church built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century at the time of Constantine, damaged in the 6<sup>th</sup> and rebuilt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- Basilica with a nave and four side aisles; columns with Corinthian capitals.
- 12th-century mosaics, created during the Crusader period, decorate the walls of the nave. The mosaics depict scenes of the life of Christ, angels, major cities (e. g. Antioch) where church councils were held, and floral motifs.

#### **More images**

[Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity](#)

[Bethlehem - Church of the Nativity - mosaics \(post-cleaning\)](#)

#### **Bibliography:**

[Verstegen, Ute, and Konstantin Klein. "Bethlehem, Church of the Nativity." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018](#)

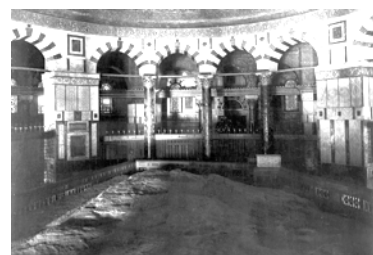
# Holy sites in Islam: Ka'ba, Mecca & Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem



Mecca, The Ka'ba. Lieut-Colonel F R Maunsell/Geography Collections, Radcliffe Science Library, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 51396]



Jerusalem - Haram ash-Sharif - Dome of the Rock - facing northwest. Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar [ID 70699]



Dome of the Rock – interior. American Colony, Jerusalem/Institute of Archaeology, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 54774]

## The Ka'ba, Mecca

- Birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad and site of the Ka'ba.
- According to Muslim tradition, the Ka'ba was created by God after Adam's expulsion from Paradise, and later rebuilt by Abraham.
- After Muhammad was opposed by the ruling clan in Mecca, he went to Medina (*hijra*) in 622, later returning to conquer Mecca in 629.
- Muhammad removed the idols from the **Ka'ba** and proclaimed it the **holiest place on earth**
- Every Muslim is supposed to undertake the **Hajj (a pilgrimage to Mecca)** once in their lifetime
- The Ka'ba is a cube-shaped structure, covered by a cloth (*kiswah*) decorated with verses from the Quran; it contains the Black Stone (possibly a meteorite).
- Pilgrims walk around the Ka'ba seven times, kiss and touch the stone in their belief it absorbs sin.

## Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

- Jerusalem is the third most holy city in Islam, after Mecca and Medina.
- The Dome of the Rock was built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE on the 'Noble Sanctuary' (Haram ash-Sharif).
- Site of *ziyara*, pilgrimage to Muslim holy sites.
- Octagonal structure with a central dome over a rock, surrounded by two walkways (ambulatories).
- Lavishly decorated with glazed tiles (exterior, added in the 16<sup>th</sup> century), mosaics (interior, Byzantine- and Persian-inspired motifs) and Arabic calligraphy (interior).
- Believed to be the rock where Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac and from which Muhammad began his **Night Journey**.

### More images

[Jerusalem - Haram ash-Sharif - Dome of the Rock - exterior](#)

[Jerusalem - Haram ash-Sharif - Dome of the Rock – interior](#)

[Jerusalem - Haram ash-Sharif - Dome of the Rock - mosaics](#)

### Bibliography

[Esposito, John L. "Kaaba." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Islam\*, edited by John L. Esposito. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003](#)

[Hawting, Gerald. "Mecca." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018](#)

[Milwright, Marcus. "Jerusalem, Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock." In \*The Oxford Dictionary of Late Antiquity\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018](#)

# Holy sites in Islam: Great Mosque, Damascus



Damascus - Umayyad (Great) Mosque. Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar [ID 21778]



Damascus - Umayyad (Great) Mosque - west arcade. Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar. [ID 21851]



Damascus - Umayyad (Great) Mosque - prayer hall - shrine of St John the Baptist. Judith McKenzie/Manar al-Athar [ID 21802]

- Damascus, the capital of modern-day Syria, has been a centre of Islamic culture since the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century; the city was the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750).
- The Great Mosque of Damascus, a symbol of the city's status, was built by the Umayyad caliph al-Walid I (reigned 705–15) on the site of the Church of St John the Baptist (previously the site of a Roman temple).
- The Great Mosque was a **central place of pilgrimage** in the early Islamic period.
- The mosque was lavishly decorated with Byzantine-style non-figural mosaics, many of which are still preserved, depicting trees, rivers, villas and houses, which may be representations of Paradise.
- A shrine within the mosque is believed to house the head of John the Baptist, honored by Muslims and Christians.

## More images

[Damascus - Umayyad \(Great\) Mosque](#)

[Damascus - Umayyad \(Great\) Mosque - Byzantine colonnades](#)

[Damascus - Umayyad \(Great\) Mosque - treasury](#)

## Bibliography:

[Encyclopedia Britannica. "Great Mosque of Damascus." Accessed September 2, 2021](#)

[Rogers, J. M., Jean-Paul Pascual, and Robert Hillenbrand. "Damascus." In \*Grove Art Online\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003](#)

# Pilgrimage in Ireland: Murrisk Augustinan Friary and the Croagh Patrick pilgrimage



Monastic Ireland. "Murrisk Augustinan Friary."

## Text and images from:

[Monastic Ireland. "Murrisk Augustinan Friary."](#)

For detailed information on each building at the Friary, visit [Monastic Ireland](#).

- Founded in 1456 by Friar Hugh O'Malley and Thady O'Malley.
- Located on the southern shore of Clew Bay, Co. Mayo **at the foot of the mountain of Croagh Patrick**.
- The friary was **dedicated to St Patrick** and served as the starting point of the **Croagh Patrick pilgrimage**.
- Croagh Patrick is around 760m (2,500 feet) high, in Co. Mayo and a major pilgrimage site in Ireland.
- Main pilgrim days: last Friday of July, last Sunday of July or Reek Sunday and the 15<sup>th</sup> of August.
- Associated with **St Patrick** since the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- Pilgrims prayed, performed penitential exercises, and spent a night-long vigil at the mountain's summit.
- Revived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, today it is one of the major Roman Catholic pilgrimage sites in Ireland.
- The Murrisk Friary is thought to have housed relics of **St Patrick**, one of the most important early Christian saints in Ireland, including one of the saint's teeth, now in the National Museum of Ireland.
- Modern visitors can enjoy the experience of what the pilgrimage might have been like in the late Middle Ages by visiting the friary before climbing the mountain.



## Explore

Search for 'Murrisk' to explore the monuments on the site via the [Historic Environment Viewer](#) offered by Archaeological Survey of Ireland.

## Bibliography

Nugent, Louise. "An Overview of the History of Pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick." *Pilgrimage In Medieval Ireland* (blog), July 29, 2012

O'Connor, Thomas. "Croagh Patrick." In *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002

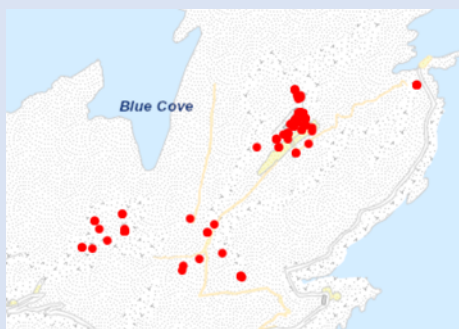
# Pilgrimage in Ireland: Skellig Michael



Monastic Ireland. "Skellig Michael."

**Skellig Michael is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site:**

[UNESCO. "Sceilig Mhichíl."](#)



## Explore

Explore the monuments on the site via the [Historic Environment Viewer](#) offered by Archaeological Survey of Ireland.



To do this, use the 'Query Data' option (first icon on the top right), select Co. Kerry, and type 'SCEILG MHICHÍL' in the field 'Townland'.

- Foundation traditionally attributed to **St Fionán** between the **6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries**.
- Located on a small island off the coast of County Kerry.
- Skellig Michael, or 'The Rock of St Michael', the larger of the two Skellig Rocks, has a well-preserved **monastery** and remote **hermitage**.
- Skellig Michael was an organised monastic settlement and a retreat for senior religious figures from mainland communities.
- Although attacked by the Vikings in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, it continued to function as a monastery and pilgrim site well into the medieval period.
- 12<sup>th</sup> century: a priory was founded at Ballinskelligs on the coast of the Iveragh Peninsula by Augustinian canons, which was closely associated to Skellig Michael. The canons continued to use the monastery and received money from pilgrims until the dissolution of the priory in 1578.
- Mid-18<sup>th</sup> century: Skellig Michael was again a much noted place of pilgrimage.

## Text and images from:

[Monastic Ireland. "Skellig Michael."](#)

For more details and further images, please visit the Monastic Ireland website.



# Holy wells in Ireland

- Wells, springs, and other natural water sources were associated with healing in many pre-Christian societies. In Ireland, holy wells (*toibreacha naofa*) and springs (*toibreacha beannaithe*) were and still are sites of religious devotion.
- Pagan wells were Christianized by missionaries and monks. Christian missionaries often preached beside sacred wells, and churches were founded next to them. Because of these foundations, some wells are now located in the middle of church graveyards.
- In Christian times, wells are often dedicated to a saint and thought to cure specific ailments. Pilgrims would walk around the well clockwise, pray, and sometimes offer a gift (votive) to the saint, looking for a cure from illness, protection, or other benefits.
- At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were approximately 3,000 holy wells in Ireland. While some have been lost to modern development, hundreds are still visited as sacred sites. They are traditional places of pilgrimage, especially on the annual “patterns” or patron days.



Monastic Ireland. “Killone Augustinian Abbey (Nunnery).”

- **Killone** is a National Monument situated on the shore of Killone Lake, near Ennis Co. Clare.
- The nunnery was founded by Donal Mór O’Brien in about 1189, at the same time as Clare Abbey of the Augustinian canons.
- Killone Abbey was dedicated to **St John the Baptist**. It was suppressed in 1584 and had fallen into ruin by 1617.
- To the northeast of the nunnery at the edge of the lake lies St John’s well, which is a **holy well** with an altar next to it.
- An inscription records that the altar was last repaired by an Ennis merchant, Anthony Roche, in 1731.
- The well is still frequented.

**Bibliography on holy wells in Ireland**  
[Connolly, S. J. “Holy Wells.” In \*The Oxford Companion to Irish History\*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002](#)

**Text on and images of Killone from:**  
[Monastic Ireland. “Killone Augustinian Abbey \(Nunnery\).”](#)

# Holy wells in Ireland and the Holy Land



Monastic Ireland. "Kilmacduagh."

- Founded in 7<sup>th</sup> century as a monastery, 13<sup>th</sup> century as an Augustinian abbey.
- Founded by **Colmán mac Duach (St. Colmán)**.
- Kilmacduagh sits at the edge of the Burren, dominating the rural landscape some 5km southwest of Gort, in County Galway.
- In the medieval period, Kilmacduagh was the most important church of the Uí Fiachrach Aidhne, a powerful local dynasty.
- By the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Kilmacduagh had an enclosed settlement with the main church at the centre, at least three subsidiary churches, a round tower, the grave of the founder, **Cólmán mac Duach**, and a **well** dedicated to him.
- Local people continued to venerate **St Colmán** at Kilmacduagh long after the settlement was abandoned.
- A **pilgrimage**, called a '**pattern**', to the saint's church and **holy well** took place until the 20<sup>th</sup> century on his feast day, celebrated on 29 October.

**Text and images from:**  
[Monastic Ireland. "Kilmacduagh."](#)

For more details and further images, please visit the Monastic Ireland website.

- Sacred wells are venerated outside of Ireland as well.
- A prominent example is **Jacob's Well** in Palestine. According to tradition, this is where **Jesus** encountered the **Samaritan woman**:

”

“So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, “Will you give me a drink?” (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”” (John 4:5-10)

*Holy Bible. New International Version. 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®*



*Jacob's Well or Well of Sychar, Palestine, West Bank. Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford/HEIR Project [ID 44740]. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century (?)*

# Exercises

## **Questions for discussion**

The following questions could be discussed in class:

- What makes a place sacred?
- What beliefs and practices are associated with different sacred sites?
- What is a pilgrim? Why do people go on pilgrimage?
- What do pilgrims do when visiting a sacred site?
- What events and traditions are sites in the Holy Land associated with?
- Which are the most important pilgrimage sites in Christianity and Islam?
- What are holy wells? Why do people in Ireland visit them?
- What does a pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick entail? Why do people go to Croagh Patrick?
- How do pilgrimage sites in Ireland differ from sites in the East? How are they similar?
- Why are some sites sacred to more than one religion, or remain sacred despite a religious change (e.g. from pagan to Christian, or from Christian to Muslim)?

## **Group project**

Ask your students to plan a pilgrimage to a site in Ireland using a map and online resources.

The following questions could be used as guidance:

- Where would you go and why: Croagh Patrick, Skellig Michael or somewhere else (perhaps a holy well near your town)?
- How would you get there (by bus, train, car etc.)?
- How long do you think it will take you? Are there other stops on the way? Where would you stay during your visit?
- What would you do once you reached your destination (pray, leave a gift behind etc.)?
- When would you go (in summer, winter, on the “pattern”)?
- Who would you go with?
- What difficulties might you expect along the way?
- How much is it going to cost? Calculate an estimate based on online research (e.g. cost of transportation, accommodation, food)?

Ask your students to consider a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. How would they plan it in comparison to a pilgrimage in Ireland?

Discuss the pilgrimage plans in class.

## **Crossword**

Print the exercise on p. 12. Ask your students to fill in the crossword.

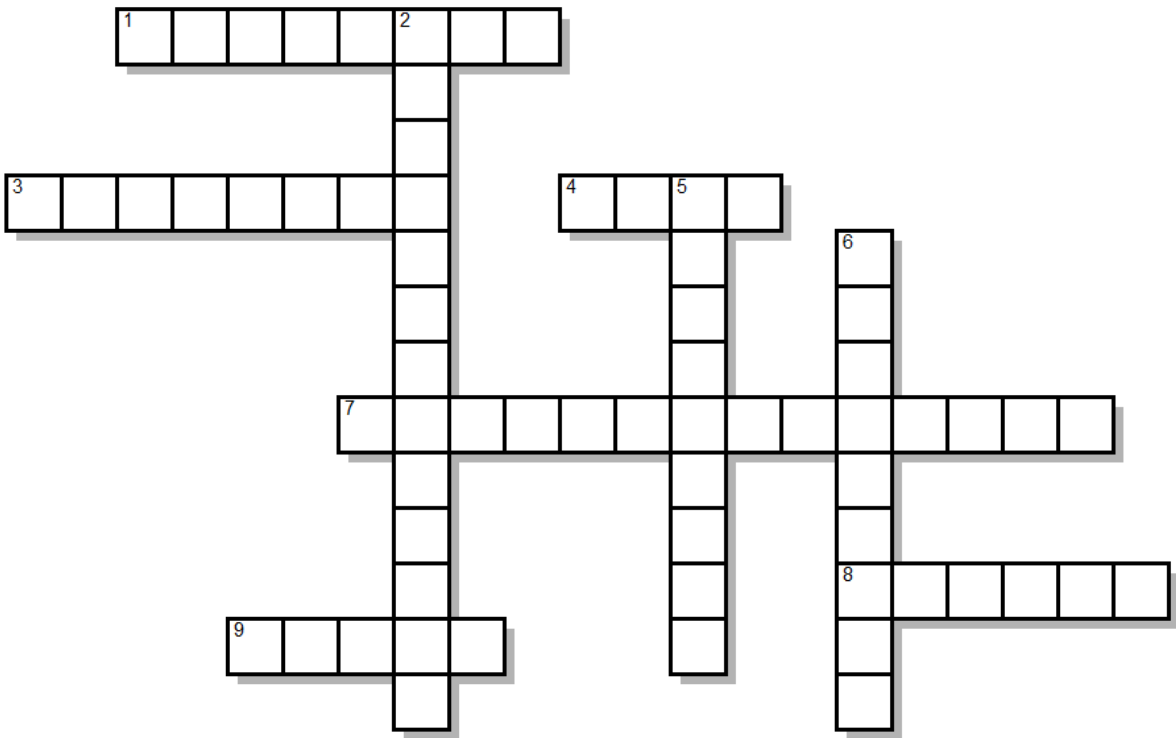
The activity is suitable as individual or group work.

Crossword (answers)

1. Damascus; 2. Croagh Patrick (written together); 3. Golgotha; 4. Hajj; 5. Jerusalem;
6. Bethlehem; 7. Haram ash-Sharif (written together without a dash); 8. Helena; 9. Mecca.

# Exercises

## Crossword



### ACROSS

- 1 A city where the head of John the Baptist is believed to be kept
- 3 The place of Christ's Crucifixion
- 4 A pilgrimage to Mecca
- 7 The Muslim name of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem
- 8 The mother of emperor Constantine I., who according to tradition found the Cross, on which Christ was crucified
- 9 The most holy city in Islam

### DOWN

- 2 A major pilgrimage site in Ireland (two words)
- 5 A sacred city for Jews, Christians and Muslims
- 6 Town of Christ's birth

# Resources

For further images of the sites in Bethlehem, Jerusalem, or Damascus, please visit [Manar al-Athar](#).

For further images and detailed information on the Irish sites, please visit [Monastic Ireland](#).

To explore each monument on the sites in Ireland and for further details, please visit the [Historic Environment Viewer](#) provided by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland.

For historical photographs of various sites, please visit the [Historic Environment Image Resource \(HEIR Project\)](#).