

Monasteries

in Ireland and the East

[Premodern Digital Cultural Heritage Network](#)

Teacher's Guide

Why monasticism?

- Monasticism is an expression of the desire to devote oneself to God via asceticism and prayer.
- **Ascetics** (those who practice **asceticism**) retreat from social life to a certain degree. Monks and nuns renounce marriage and private property and commit to celibacy; more extreme forms of asceticism include isolation and fasting.
- The daily activities of monks and nuns include prayer and work (traditionally farming, study, and teaching).
- There are two main forms of monastic life: **eremitical** (from Greek *eremos*, 'solitary') or hermit life and **coenobitical** (from Greek *koinos* 'common' and *bios* 'life') or common life. While hermits live in isolation, coenobitical monasticism involves living together as a community.
- Both forms originated in **Egypt** around the **late 3rd century CE**. An early form of coenobitical monasticism was established by St Pachomius (d. 346 CE) in Upper Egypt. Egyptian monasticism played an important role in the diffusion and development of European monasticism, including in Ireland.
- A complex of buildings for a community of monks is called a **monastery**. The establishment of St Benedict's Rule in the 6th century, guiding daily life in the monastery, led to the development of medieval monastic architecture.
- Standard buildings within a monastery were a church, cells, cloisters, dormitory, refectory (dining hall), chapter-house, gardens, graveyards, bakehouses etc.
- Monasteries often were part of the local economy, for example by producing and selling olive oil and wine.
- Monasteries often were decorated with paintings or sculpture. For example, wall paintings in Egyptian monasteries helped monks achieve their spiritual goals, providing an appropriate setting for prayers and contemplation.

Some vocabulary

- **cloister**: an open quadrangle, surrounded by a covered walkway; connects the church to other structures within the monastery.
- **chapter-house**: room where the community met daily to listen to readings and discuss other matters.
- **dormitory**: sleeping chambers for the monks living communally

Adapted from Monastic Ireland, "Glossary."
<http://monastic.ie/glossary/>.

Some questions for discussion

- Why would a person choose to live as a monk/nun?
- What is the difference between a coenobite monk and a hermit?
- What is asceticism? What practices can be described as ascetic?
- When and where did monasticism originate?
- What does a monk's/nun's day look like? What do they do throughout the day?
- What types of buildings would be necessary within a monastery to make the monk's/nun's life self sufficient?
- Can you think of a monastery close to where you live?

Bibliography

Clarke, Michael. "Monastery." In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Aswan (Egypt) - Monastery of Anba Hatre / Saint Simeon



Aswan - Monastery of St Simeon - upper level. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 62509]



Aswan - Monastery of St Simeon - church - facing east. Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 62477]



Aswan - Monastery of St Simeon – church, apse, wall painting (2015). Ross Burns/Manar al-Athar [ID 62485]

Early Christian Egyptian monasteries consisted of one or more churches and various other buildings with different functions. Many of them were richly decorated with colourful wall paintings.

Monastery of Anba Hatre / St Simeon

- Situated 1,200m from the West Bank of the Nile, south of the island of Elephantine.
- Dedicated to **Anba ('Father') Hatre** (Hidra, Hadri); called St Simeon by archaeologists and travelers.
- St Hatre was an anchorite (an ascetic hermit) who became a bishop of Aswan in the 4th century.
- The monastery is a **7th-century foundation**; rebuilt in the **10th century**; destroyed by Ayyubid forces in 1173; abandoned by the end of the 13th century.
- Walled enclosure with a church, monastic cells, a refectory, a bathhouse, stables, stores and others.
- **Lower terrace**: rock caves, church, baptistry, pilgrim's rooms; **Upper terrace**: living area of the monastic community, refectory, kitchen.

Church

- Constructed in the first half 11th century.
- Two rectangular rooms, covered with half domes, flank the sanctuary.
- Consists of a nave and two side aisles.
- The remaining walls in front of the sanctuary and in the nave indicate where the central **dome** stood.
- Many **wall paintings** could still be seen at the end of the 19th century.
- A large part have been badly damaged or destroyed.

” “The eastern semidome of the sanctuary is decorated with a scene of Christ enthroned within the mandorla with flames licking at its base. The mandorla is held by two angels. On the extreme right a person with a square nimbus appears in an orans position. Christ holds a book on one knee with his left hand. His right hand, which extends beyond the edge of the mandorla, is raised in blessing” (Gabra/Vivian 2002, 135).

More images via Manar al-Athar
[Aswan - Monastery of Saint Simeon](#)

Bibliography

Bresciani, Edda. 'Aswan,' *Grove Art Online*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Gabra, Gawdat and Tim Vivian. *Coptic Monasteries: Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*. Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002.

Sohag (Egypt) - Monastery of Apa Bishuy / Saint Pshoi (Red Monastery)



Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - facing southeast. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65321]



Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - north apse and east apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65339]

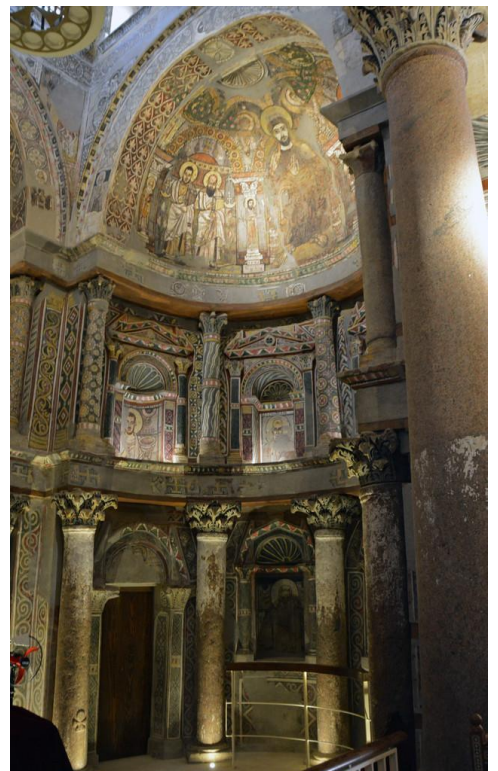
- Within the village of Nag' Abu Azizah, Sohag, Upper Egypt [In contrast, the Irish monastery Skellig Michael (see p.5) is on a remote island].
- Called the Red Monastery because of the color of its walls, built of baked bricks
- Remarkable for its **Late Antique (i.e. Early Christian) wall paintings**.
- Church, basilican type (nave and two side isles); **triconch** (three-apsed) **sanctuary** from the 5th or early 6th century.
- Four phases of **wall paintings**, preserved because covered by mudbrick walls for 500+ years; since 2002 conserved by the Red Monastery Project.

Watch (5 min)

[Art historian Elizabeth Bolman introduces the Red Monastery project \(2012\)](#)

”The “**architectural decoration of the triconch sanctuary** from the second half of the fifth century is uniquely preserved. Its walls are adorned with **columns in two rows** and between the columns are **niches**. (...)

Several parts of the building, such as the pilaster shafts of many niches, are decorated with **paintings instead of sculpture**. Almost all the column capitals are in the Corinthian style.” (Gabra/Vivian 2002, 126-127)



Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) -south apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65336]

Sohag (Egypt) - Monastery of Apa Bishuy / St Pshoi (Red Monastery)



Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - north apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65356]

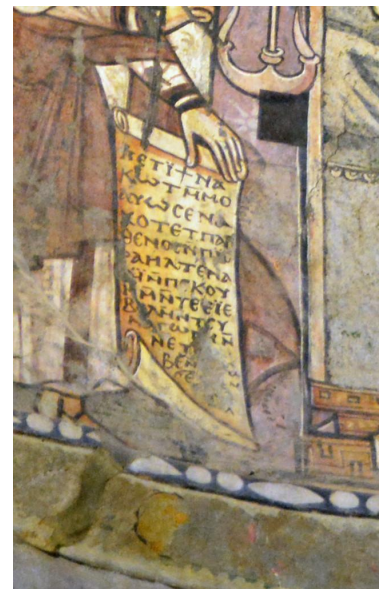


Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - south apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65373]



Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - north apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65341]

Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy (Red Monastery) - north apse. Mohamed Kenawi/Manar al-Athar [ID 65347]



- The triconch sanctuary is richly decorated with **biblical figures** like the enthroned Christ (south apse) and the Virgin breastfeeding the Christ-Child (north apse), as well as angels and saints.
- **Inscriptions** in Greek and Coptic (a language descended from ancient Egyptian) played a major role in Egyptian monasteries and monks were expected to be able to read and write. Inscription in the church at Sohag include name labels of the various figures and quotations from scripture.

More images via Manar al-Athar

[Sohag - Monastery of Apa Bishuy \(Red Monastery\)](#)

Bibliography

Bolman, Elizabeth S. *The Red Monastery Church: Beauty and Asceticism in Upper Egypt*. Cairo/New Haven: American Research Center in Egypt/Yale University Press, 2016.

Gabra, Gawdat and Tim Vivian. *Coptic Monasteries: Egypt's Monastic Art and Architecture*. Cairo/New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002, 131.

Skellig Michael (Ireland)



“Sceilig Mhichíl is an outstanding, and in many respects unique, example of an **early religious settlement** deliberately sited on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved because of a remarkable environment. It illustrates, as no other property can, the **extremes of a Christian monasticism** characterizing much of North Africa, the Near East, and Europe.”

[UNESCO World Heritage Centre. “Sceilig Mhichíl.”](#)



In contrast to Egyptian monasteries, early Christian Irish monasteries have very little painted or sculptural decoration.



[Monastic Ireland. “Skellig Michael.”](#)

Skellig Michael is listed as a **UNESCO World Heritage site**: UNESCO World Heritage Centre. [“Sceilig Mhichíl.”](#)

- Foundation between the **6th and 8th centuries CE** traditionally attributed to **St Fionán**.
- Dedicated to St Michael around the 10th century.
- Located on an island off the coast of **County Kerry**. Skellig Michael or “The Rock of St Michael” is the larger of the two Skellig Rocks.
- It is a spectacularly situated early medieval island monastery.
- There is a well-preserved monastery and remote **hermitage**.
- The island’s isolation has helped to preserve and protect the monastic remains.
- The monastery is a material example of the **arrival and spread of Christianity** and the emerging literacy in lands outside of the Roman Empire.
- It is a manifestation of the spread of organised monasticism from Egypt through Europe and Britain to Ireland.

Skellig Michael (Ireland)



Monastic Ireland. "Skellig Michael."

- Skellig Michael was a retreat for senior monks from mainland communities. It functioned as a monastery and pilgrim site into the medieval period.
- The monastery consists of an inner stone enclosure with two oratories, a mortared church, seven cells and the remains of water cisterns, a cemetery, leachta (cult shrines or pilgrim stations), standing crosses and cross-slabs.
- It includes two large terraces referred to as the Upper and Lower Monks' Gardens. High retaining walls support the terraces.

Information and images from:
[Monastic Ireland. "Skellig Michael."](#)

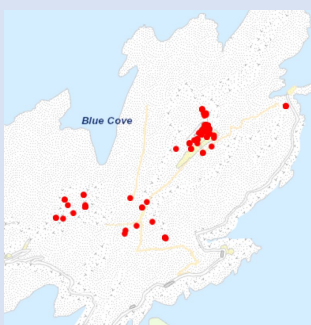
For more details and further images, please visit the Monastic Ireland website.

Monastic Ireland. "Skellig Michael."

- In contrast to the Egyptian monasteries in urban settings at Aswan and Sohag, the monastery of Skellig Michael is situated on a small remote island.
- The terrain is rocky and some structures are difficult to access.
- The architecture is simpler in form and lacks sculptural or pictorial decoration.

Some questions for discussion

- How does Skellig Michael differ from the Egyptian monasteries in Aswan and Sohag?
- How must it have felt to be a monk on an isolated island in the North compared to the much warmer climate in Egypt?
- How do these two types of monasteries express monastic ideals?



Explore

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



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

Bibliography

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

Glendalough (Ireland)



Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough."



Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough – Cathedral."



Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough – St. Kevin's church."

- Founded by St Kevin (Cóemgen) in the early 7th century CE.
- Re-organised in the 11th/12th centuries.
- Located in a glacial valley next to two lakes, the Upper and Lower Lakes. Thus, the Irish place name is *Gleann dá Locha*, "the valley of the two lakes".
- Glendalough is one of the most important medieval ecclesiastical landscapes in Ireland and from the 19th century onwards one of Ireland's major tourist attractions.
- **St Kevin** (died ca. 618) is believed to have been a hermit by the Upper Lake at Glendalough. There are many legends about him (including his royal descent), but little secure information.
- Up to the early 11th century, most of the structures on the site were made of wood. These burned down in a fire in 1020.
- The earliest stone building is the cathedral, probably built around 1100 and enlarged in the late 12th century. It was originally dedicated to St Peter and Paul.
- To the south is St Kevin's church, which is exceptionally well-preserved. Dated to the 12th century, the church is also called St Kevin's Kitchen because of its round tower.
- Glendalough was a major **pilgrimage and burial site in medieval Ireland**.
- As a result, Glendalough was an appealing burial place for elites. Some inscribed grave slabs at Glendalough carry the names of kings, queens and ecclesiastics.
- Glendalough was also a **centre of learning**. Several manuscripts in Irish and Latin are known to have been written there.

Bibliography

[Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough."](#)

Carpenter, Andrew, and Rachel Moss, eds. *Art and Architecture of Ireland. Volume I, Medieval c.400-c.1600*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2015.

Glendalough (Ireland)



Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough – Round Tower."

The Round Tower is dated to the 10th-11th century; height 30 m. It functioned as a bell tower. The only door is located several metres above the ground and was accessible via a movable ladder.



Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough – Gateway."

The monastic city was protected by a wall. This is the only surviving gateway in Ireland from an early medieval monastic settlement.

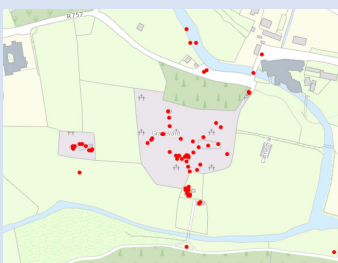


Information and images from:
[Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough."](#)

For detailed information on each building, see <http://monastic.ie/tour/glendalough/>.

1 Gateway; 2 Round Tower; 3 Cathedral;
4 Priest's House; 5 St Kevin's Church

Monastic Ireland. "Glendalough – Ground Plan."



Explore

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



To do this, use the 'Query Data' option (first icon on the top right), select Co. Wicklow, and type 'SEVENCHURCHES OR CAMADERRY' in the field 'Townland'.

See also:

[Glendalough, Co. Wicklow. "Monastic city."](#)

["Glendalough Monastic City – Ireland's Ancient East."](#)

Mellifont Cistercian Abbey (Ireland)

- Two new European [monastic orders](#), the Cistercians and the Benedictines, brought more orderly and expansive monastic structures to Ireland.
- Mellifont Abbey was the **first Cistercian foundation in Ireland** and became **one of the wealthiest religious foundations in Ireland**.
- It was founded in 1142 and affiliated with Clairvaux, France.
- This foundation was among the wealthiest in medieval Ireland, holding extensive lands.
- Its structures are not well-preserved, but all the **essential components of a Cistercian abbey** are evident, including a **cruciform church**, **chapter house** and **cloister**.



Monastic Ireland. "Mellifont Cistercian Abbey."

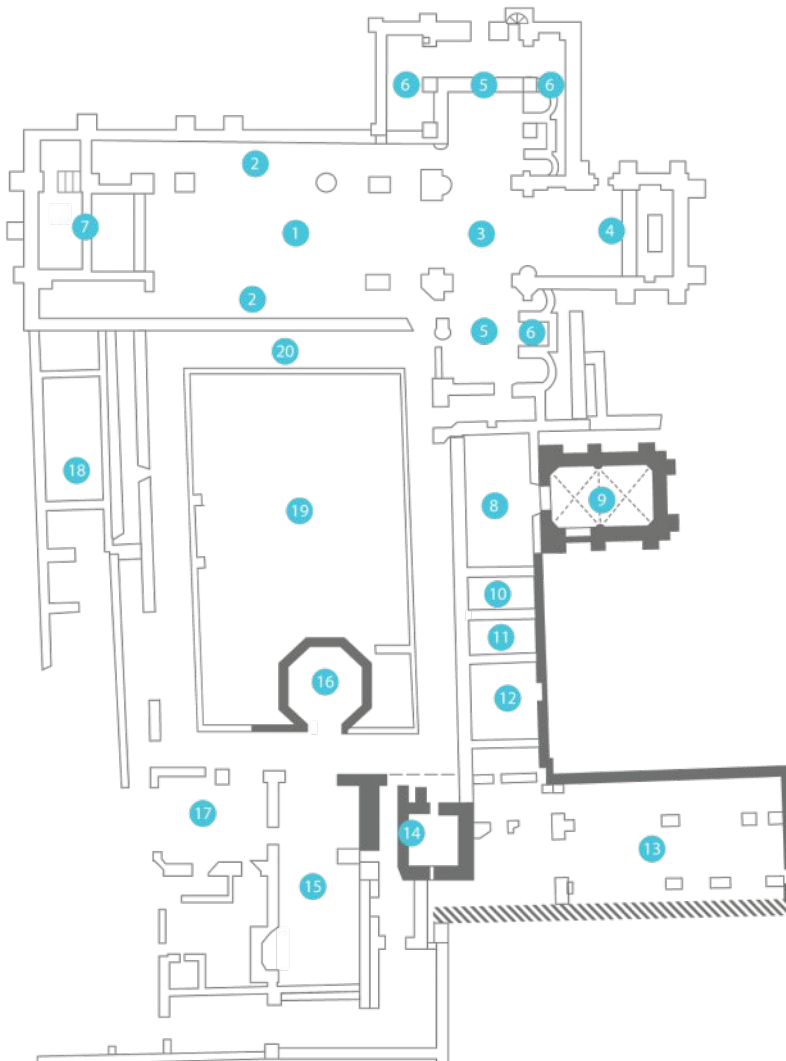
Information and images

from: Monastic Ireland.
["Mellifont Cistercian Abbey."](#)

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

- 1 Nave & Monks' Choir;
- 2 Aisle; 3 Tower (site of);
- 4 Presbytery; 5 Transept;
- 6 Chapels; 7 Crypt; 8 East Range;
- 9 Chapter House;
- 10 Parlour; 11 Day Stairs;
- 12 Monks' Day Room;
- 13 Infirmary; 14 Calefactory;
- 15 Refectory; 16 Lavabo;
- 17 Kitchen; 18 West Range;
- 19 Cloister Garth; 20 Cloister Walk.

For detailed information on each building, see <http://monastic.ie/tour/mellifont-cistercian-abbey/>.



Mellifont Cistercian Abbey (Ireland)

Additional Information



The elements of a medieval church

Nave: The main body of the church in the western part of the building.

Aisle: This was the area either side of the nave or chancel.

Chancel: The east end of a church where the altar is situated usually reserved for the use of the clergy and choir.

Transept: the space which intersects the nave and chancel, giving the church its characteristic cruciform appearance.

Sanctuary: The area immediately around the main altar of a church.

Apse: Area projecting eastward from the church (rectangular, circular or polygonal in shape).

Chapel: a small separate space (usually off the aisle or transept) which contained a secondary altar, often dedicated to a particular saint.

Monastic Ireland. "Glossary."
<http://monastic.ie/glossary/>.



CISTERCIAN ORDER (white monks)

The order had its origins in Cîteaux, Burgundy, formed as a response to the ostentatious liturgical and artistic practices of religious orders such as the Cluniacs.

The exact nature of the order's development during the twelfth century is unclear, but by c. 1190 it had established a firm foothold across Europe, with central administrative control maintained through annual meetings of abbots at a general chapter in Cîteaux.

The Cistercians were introduced to Ireland at Mellifont, Co. Louth in 1142, by St Malachy (Máel-Máedóc Ua Morgair) as part of his wider policy of Church reform. By 1228 thirty-four houses had been established across the country.

Monastic Ireland. "Religious Orders."
<http://monastic.ie/religious-orders/>.

Other major monastic orders



Benedictines

These were independent monastic communities who follow the rule of St. Benedict. They were also known as the Black Monks. [One of the earliest monastic orders established in the 6th century CE]

Carmelites

Order of the Brothers of Our Lady of Mount Carmel was founded by a group of hermits on Mount Carmel in Palestine in the 12th century. They follow the Rule of St. Albert, which centres upon prayer, poverty, manual work and a life of contemplation.

Franciscan

A Mendicant Order [rely on charitable donations to survive] known as the Friars Minor or Grey Friars. They were founded by St. Francis of Assisi (d. 1226) in 1209. They exercised corporate as well as individual poverty and lived by begging and occupied urban environments and preached to the populace.

Dominican

A member of the Mendicant Order [rely on charitable donations to survive] of Friars Preacher, also known as Black Friars. The order was founded by St. Dominic (d.1221) and recognised by the pope in 1216. Observing poverty, they followed the Rule of St. Augustine and placed a focus upon scholarship and theology.

Monastic Ireland. "Glossary." <http://monastic.ie/glossary/>.

See also

Some better preserved examples of Cistercian monasteries in Ireland are the [Jerpoint Cistercian Abbey](#) and the [Baltinglass Cistercian Abbey](#).

Exercises

Discussion

The following further questions could be discussed in class:

- What types of buildings are there within a monastery?
- What is a refectory? A dormitory? A cloister? A chapter house?
- What are the main elements of a church in a Cistercian monastery? (nave, aisle, presbytery, transept)
- What common buildings can be observed in both Irish and Egyptian monasteries?
- How do Irish and Egyptian monasteries/churches differ?
- How do the early medieval monasteries at Glendalough and Skellig Michael differ from the later Mellifont Cistercian Abbey?
- Does a programme of extensive wall painting such as in the Red Monastery in Sohag agree with ascetic/monastic values? Why did the Egyptian monks paint their churches in this way?

Group activity in class

Divide the class into 4 groups at the beginning. Give each group printouts of one of the monasteries/churches (Skellig Michael, Glendalough, Aswan, Sohag, taken from the In-Class Presentation PDF) guided by questions, e.g.:

- Briefly describe the images.
- What do you think this building/group of buildings is?
- What functions do these have?
- What materials are they made of?
- What architectural elements do you recognize?
- Where do you think this place is?
- When do you think this site was created?

Let them discuss for ca. 10 min.

Group activity in class at the end or as homework

Divide the class into groups. Let each group explore and discuss the different types of buildings in one of these Cistercian monasteries:

- Jerpoint Cistercian Abbey, <http://monastic.ie/tour/jerpoint-cistercian-abbey/>
- Baltinglass Cistercian Abbey, <http://monastic.ie/tour/baltinglass-cistercian-abbey/>
- Mellifont Cistercian Abbey, <http://monastic.ie/tour/mellifont-cistercian-abbey/>
- Abbeyknockmoy Cistercian Abbey, http://monastic.ie/tour/abbeyknockmoy_cistercian_abbey/
- Other Cistercian monasteries: <http://monastic.ie/religious-orders/>

What types of buildings are there in a Cistercian monastery? What are their different functions? What is a cloister, refectory, dormitory etc.?

Further activities or project work

- What types of monastic orders and their respective monasteries are represented in Ireland? Explore <http://monastic.ie/religious-orders/>.

Resources

For further images of the monasteries at Sohag and Aswan in Egypt, please visit [Manar al-Athar](#)

For further images and detailed information on the monasteries in Ireland, please visit [Monastic Ireland](#)

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

See also

Sorabella, Jean. "[Monasticism in Western Medieval Europe.](#)" In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000– (originally published October 2001, last revised March 2013).