

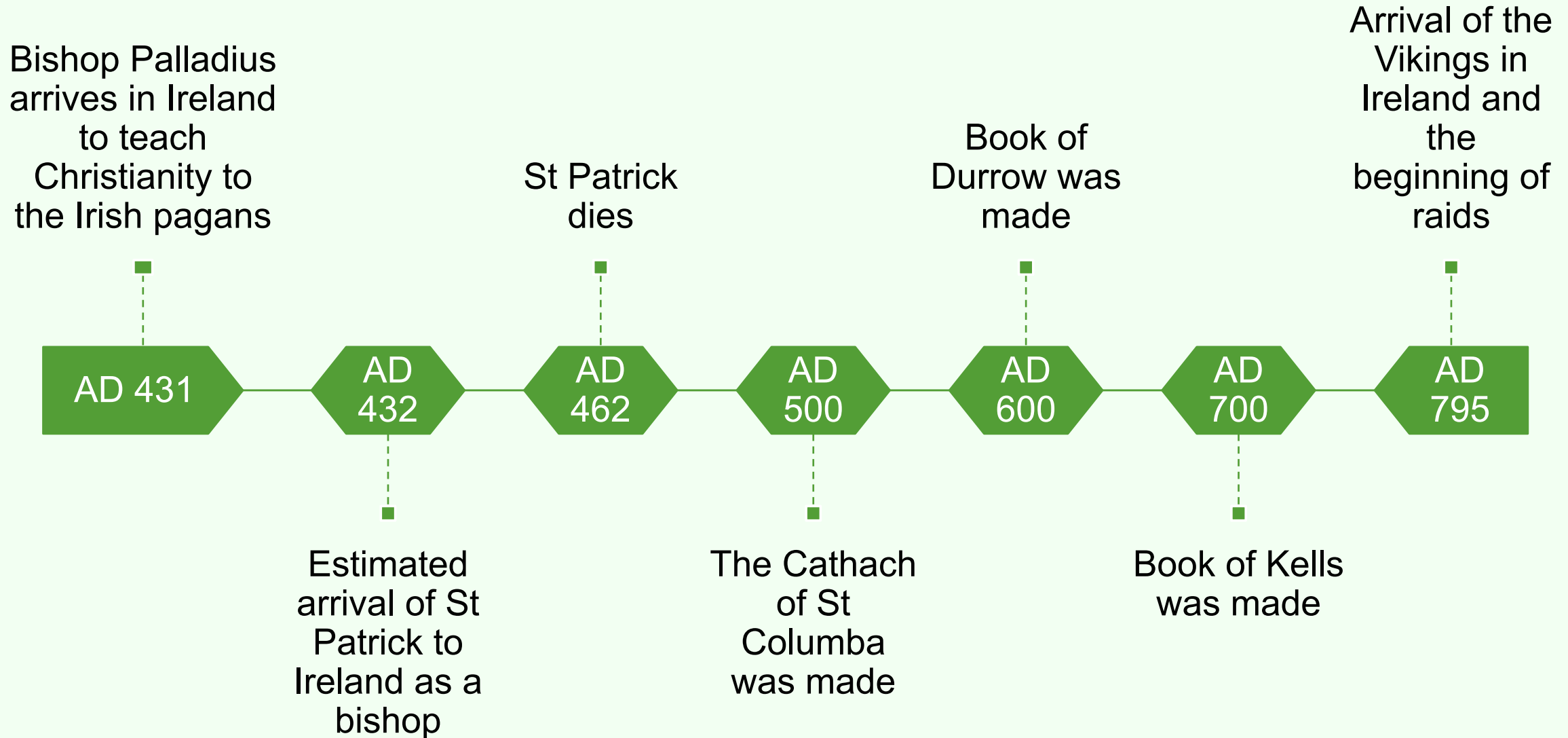
An aerial photograph of a medieval Irish monastery, likely Keshigoan Monastery. The scene features a winding river in the upper left, a large stone church with a prominent tower, and numerous stone ruins and foundations scattered across a green field. The text "Ch. 4: Culture and Society in Early Christian Ireland" is overlaid in a large, white, sans-serif font.

# Ch. 4: Culture and Society in Early Christian Ireland

# Learning Outcomes

- **2.6 CONSIDER** the historical significance of Christianity on the island of Ireland, including its contribution to culture and society in the Early Christian period.
- **1.3 APPRECIATE** their cultural inheritance through recognising historically significant places and buildings and discussing why historical personalities, events and issues are commemorated
- **1.8 INVESTIGATE** a repository of historical evidence such as a museum, library, heritage centre, digital or other archive or exhibition.
- **1.9 DEMONSTRATE** awareness of the significance of history of Ireland and of Europe and the wider world across various dimensions including political, social, economic, religious, cultural and scientific dimensions.

# Timeline – Early Christian Ireland



# Introduction

- In Ireland, **the Iron Age** – when iron was used to make tools and weapons – took place between 500 BC and AD 400.
- Towards the end of the Iron Age, by the early fifth century AD, Christianity had arrived in Ireland.
- This development had an enormous impact on culture and society in Ireland.
- Many fascinating archaeological sites and a wealth of artefacts date from this time.

# 4.1 The Arrival of Christianity in Ireland

# Christianity Arrives in Ireland

- Early Christian Ireland is the period when Christianity first came to Ireland.
- At that time, the people of Ireland were **the Celts**, farmers and warriors who had come from Central Europe and were pagans.
- A **pagan** is someone who worships various gods, often with a focus on nature or the earth.
- **Druids** were spiritual figures similar to priests in pre-Christian Celtic Ireland.



# Christianity Arrives in Ireland

- By the third century AD, the Roman Empire had spread as far as England and was mainly Christians.
- For historians, the first official source about Christianity in Ireland is dated AD 431, when a bishop named **Palladius** was sent to the 'Irish who believe in Christ'.
- The most famous bishop to travel to Ireland was **St. Patrick**.
- He was brought to Ireland from Wales as a slave when he was 16 years old.
- After six years, he escaped back to Britain but later returned as a bishop to spread Christianity.

# Christianity Arrives in Ireland

- Between AD 432 and 461, St Patrick worked, mainly in the north, and founded many churches and missions.
- We know all of this from his book, '**St. Patrick's Confessio**'.
- In it he says that he 'baptised thousands' and 'ordained clerics everywhere'.
- St. Patrick began to convert the pagan Celts to Christianity.
- **Pagan festivals** continued, but gradually became absorbed into Christianity: for example, Samhain became Hallowe'en.
- St. Patrick is said to be buried at Down Cathedral, Co. Down.





Saint Patrick was born in Britain. At sixteen he was captured and taken to Ireland, where he was sold into slavery. He escaped to France, but one night in a dream he heard the voice of the Lord calling him back. Now Patrick answered that call and brought Christianity to Ireland. It is one of the most splendid chapters in our history.

According to tradition the remains of Saint Patrick with those of Saint Brigid and Saint Columba who is also known as Columbkille, were interred on this site by Saint De Conroy in the 12th Century thus fulfilling the prophecy that the three Saints would be buried in the same place.

Down District Council Recreation/Museum Department  
September 1988

# Early Irish monasteries

- Some Christians chose to live apart from the rest of society in a closed religious community (**monastery**) to devote their lives to God.
- The first Irish monastery called **Inis Mór** was founded by **St Enda** on the Aran Islands around AD 500.
- Many followed his example:
  - **St Ciarán** in **Clonmacnoise**
  - **St Colmcille** in **Derry**
  - **St Brendan** in **Clonfert**



# Early Irish monasteries

- **Monks** are men who dedicate themselves to a religious order and to life in a monastery.
- The monks lived very **strict, simple lives** and spent their days **praying** and **working**.
- They prayed six to eight times every day.
- Farm work included ploughing, milking, harvesting and grinding corn.
- The monks were often **self-sufficient** – they produced all the food they needed.

# Early Irish monasteries

- Monasteries became **centres of learning** and were famous as the best in the world for the teaching of poetry, literature, arts and the Gospel.
- Ireland became known as '**the Land of Saints and Scholars**', a saying that is still popular to this day.
- Large monasteries such as **Clonard**, **Kells**, **Clonmacnoise**, **Glendalough** and **Clonfert** were built along important routes and had regular contact with nearby towns.
- But small monasteries were also built in far more remote spots such as **Sceilg Mhicíl** in Co. Kerry

# Early Irish monasteries

- On Sceilg Mhicíl, about a dozen monks lived on a steep rocky island with a small stone church.
- A **beehive hut** was a small stone hut, shaped like a beehive, where a monk slept.
- To plant and grow food, soil had to be brought from the mainland.
- The extreme isolation meant that monks could better focus on God and work.

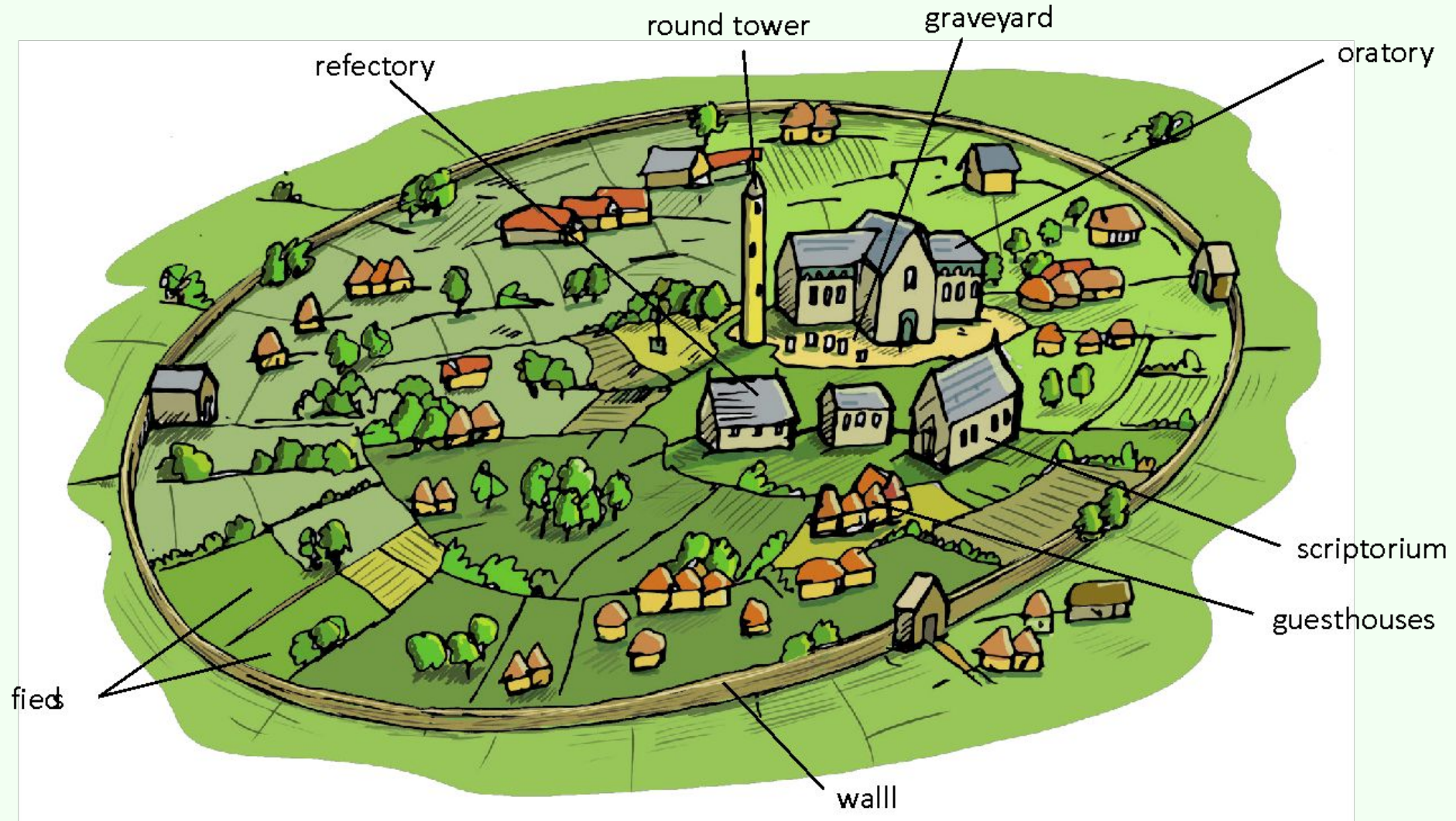








# The layout of an early Irish monastery



# The layout of an early Irish monastery

- The **oratory** (church) – made of wood or stone – was where monks attended Mass or prayed.
- The **scriptorium** was where manuscripts were copied by hand and illustrated.
- A **manuscript** is a book written by hand. The monks who did this work were called scribes.
- The **refectory** was where the monks ate their meals.

# The layout of an early Irish monastery

- The **round tower** was a bell tower and a safe place for people (and treasures) if the monastery came under attack.
  - The door was many meters above ground and could not be reached without a ladder.
  - Its few windows were very high up so that a lookout could spot attackers and access would be difficult.
  - Many round towers are still visible in Ireland, including:
    - **Glendalough** in Co. Wicklow
    - **Kells** in Co. Meath
    - **Ardmore** in Co. Waterford
    - **Clonmacnoise** in Co. Offaly





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# The layout of an early Irish monastery

- Large monasteries had a **guesthouse** for travellers or visiting tradesmen.
- All monasteries had **fields** to grow crops and graze animals.
- There was a **cemetery** (graveyard) for the monks' simple graves.
- Large monasteries had a **circular wall** or bank for protection.



# Questions Pg.39 (Artefact Textbook)

1. How did Christianity arrive in Ireland and when?
2. Explain the terms monastery and beehive hut.
3. Name three examples of Early Christian Ireland monasteries.
4. Explain the terms scriptorium; refectory; oratory; round tower and manuscript.

## 4.2 The Art of Early Christian Ireland

Early Christian Ireland monasteries were famous for their great works of art, which were made **to honour God** and show **the monastery's importance**. These works of art included manuscripts, metalwork and high crosses.

# Manuscripts

- Christianity helped to spread reading and writing in Ireland.
- Manuscripts contained the Gospels and the Psalms from the Bible, accounts of the lives of saints and also Celtic myths and sagas.
- They were written in **Latin**, on **parchment** made from sheepskin or **vellum** made from calfskin.
- They were decorated with **Celtic patterns** in vivid colours made from berries, crushed acorns, powdered rocks, metals and beetles.
- For pens, monks used **quills** – goose feathers sharpened and dipped in ink.

# Manuscripts

- The **Cathach of St Columba** is the oldest Irish manuscript. It dates from the late sixth century AD.
- The **Book of Durrow** was probably created between AD 600 and 700 and is kept in Trinity College Library.
- The most famous manuscript is the **Book of Kells** also kept at Trinity College Dublin. It dates from around AD 700-800 and is a beautifully decorated copy of the four Gospels.
  - The Book of Kells attracts over 500,000 visitors to Trinity College each year!
  - Every day a librarian very VERY carefully turns to a new page.
  - It is, after all, over 1,200 years old.





# Metalwork

- Irish monks were very skilled craftsmen and created beautiful metalwork pieces.
- These included: **chalices**, **brooches**, **bells**, **cups** and **belts**.
- The monks decorated **silver** with **gold**, **amber**, **enamel** and **coloured glass**.
- They also made intricate gold writing, called **filigree**.
- **Celtic designs** can be seen in their work, which shows overlap between Christian beliefs and pagan traditions.



# Metalwork

- The **Ardagh Chalice** (eighth century) and the **Derrynaflan Chalice** (early ninth century) are examples of chalices made using these skills.
- The **Bell of St Patrick and its Shrine** (cover) is another example.
  - The bell dates from the eighth to the ninth century, while the shrine is from a later date.
- The **Cross of Cong** is a later example of detailed metalwork (early twelfth century).
- All of these are on display in the National Museum in Dublin.









# Stone Crosses

- Stonemasonry was very important in Early Christian Ireland.
- Gifted stonemason monks carved what we call high crosses.
- A **high cross** is a free-standing stone cross, usually with elaborate carvings showing biblical scenes.
  - For example; the story of Adam and Eve or the Crucifixion of Christ.
  - Most people at that time could not read or write so these scenes helped teach Bible stories.
  - Complex Celtic patterns surrounded these scenes – like a page border.

# Stone Crosses

- Two of the most beautiful high crosses in Ireland are:
  - **The Cross of the Scriptures** in Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly (late tenth century)
  - **Muiredach's Cross** in Monasterboice, Co. Louth (mid-ninth to early tenth century).







# Questions Pg. 42 (Artefact Textbook)

1. Name three types of art produced by Irish monks.
2. What materials were used in the scriptorium?
3. Name two examples of metalwork from Early Christian Ireland.
4. Describe the kinds of decorations on metal work pieces/
5. Explain the term high cross.
6. Why did monks carve scenes from the Bible on high crosses?

## 4.3 The Impact of Irish Monks Abroad

# Irish Monks Abroad

- After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, much of Europe went through a period of unrest known as **the Dark Ages** (AD 500 to 1000).
- These hard and savage times – and later, the new threat of Viking attacks at home – led to many monks travelling abroad to found monasteries throughout Europe.
- These Irish monks produced manuscripts in the Irish style and worked to convert Europe to Christianity.
- This period of time was known as **the ‘Golden Age’** of Irish monasteries.





# Irish Monks Abroad

- St Columbanus left a monastery in Bangor, Co. Down to found several monasteries including Luxeuil in France and Bobbio in Italy.
- More examples of monasteries can be seen on the next slide.
- St Colmcill left Ireland at the age of 44 to found the monastery on the island of Iona (off the coast of Scotland).
- Iona is actually where **the Book of Kells** was made – it was simply found in Kells much later.



- Aachen (Germany)
- Aosta (Italy)
- Babbio (Italy)
- Brigantia (Spain)
- Caerdydd (Wales)
- Canterbury (England)
- Corbie (France)
- Echternach (Germany)
- Eichstatt (Germany)
- Erfurt (Germany)
- Flesole (Italy)
- Fosse (Belgium)
- Glastonbury (England)
- Iona (Scotland)
- Kelheim (Germany)
- Lagny (France)
- Laon (France)
- Lindisfame (England)
- Lucca (Italy)
- Marseilles (France)

# Questions Pg. 43 (Artefact Textbook)

1. Why do you think war followed the fall of the Roman Empire?
2. Explain what is meant by the Dark Ages.
3. What work did Irish monks do when they went abroad?
4. Name three modern European countries where Irish monks founded monasteries.

# 4.4 The Arrival of the Vikings

# The Vikings

- In eight-century **Scandinavia** (modern-day Denmark, Sweden and Norway), the people we know as Vikings were farmers and fishermen.
- Their superb shipbuilding and navigational skills allowed them to voyage to many countries, including Ireland.
- The Vikings' boats were called **longships**, capable of crossing stormy seas but still shallow enough to sail up rivers.



# Viking raids in Ireland

- The first record Viking attacks on Ireland took place in AD 795, focusing on rich monasteries.
- Those on Lambay Island, Co. Dublin and Rathlin Island, Co. Antrim were both pillaged and burned that year.
- By the mid-ninth century, the Vikings were establishing **longphorts**, camps by the water used as a base for raids.
- Many longphorts were temporary while others grew into important trade points and eventually large towns.
- **Wexford**, **Waterford**, **Limerick** and **Dublin** were all once longphorts.

# Viking raids in Ireland

- Early Christian monasteries were easy targets for raiders.
- To the pagan Vikings, Christian monasteries were not sacred in any way – they were isolated places, full of treasure and with no warriors to defend them.
- The Vikings also took captives to sell as slaves along with cattle and food stores.
- Round towers were very useful in Irish monasteries for warning and protection in times of attacks – but not just by Vikings as the native Irish also attacked (also pagans).

# A Viking settlement in Ireland

- Very important Viking remains and examples of beautiful craftsmanship were found in Dublin at **Wood Quay**, **Christ Church** and the **Temple Bar** area.
- At Wood Quay, remains of about 200 houses from the tenth and eleventh centuries were uncovered, giving us a wealth of information about Viking life in Ireland.
- The houses were **rectangular** and their **thatched roofs** (of barley straw) were supported by posts inside the house.
- The walls were **wattle and daub**, a woven mesh plaster with a mixture of mud, dung, sand and straw.

# A Viking settlement in Ireland

- Once dry, it was quite strong and helped insulate the house against Irish weather.
- Inside, **hearths** (for a fire) and benches were found, along with evidence of workshops.
- Streets and **pathways** were surfaced with gravel, stones, wattle mats or split logs.
- Back yards were divided by posts and wattle **fences**.
- Even toilet areas and **rubbish pits** were identified (the Vikings were very clean when not at war)



# A Viking settlement in Ireland

- Other amazing artefacts such as glass beads, necklaces and brooches were found there.
- Underneath Dublin's streets lay the archaeological footprint of many generations who lived in the bustling international port known to the Vikings as Dyfflin.

# Questions Pg. 45 (Artefact Textbook)

1. Explain the terms longphorts and longship.
2. When did the Vikings arrive in Ireland?
3. List two examples of Viking sites in Dublin.
4. Name three things found in Wood Quay by archaeologists.
5. What does the archaeological evidence tell us about how the Vikings impacted on Ireland?

## 4.5 Summary

# Summary

- In this chapter, we learned that:
  - Early Christian Ireland is the period when Christianity first came to Ireland.
  - A bishop called Palladius was sent to Ireland in AD 431 to spread Christianity.
  - The most famous bishop to travel to Ireland was St. Patrick between 432 and 461.
  - From the sixth century on, many monasteries were build on island.
    - The first monastery, named Inis Mór, was founded by St. Enda.
    - The first convent was founded by St. Brigid at Kildare.



# Summary

- Other examples of monasteries include Clonard, Kells, Clonmacnoise, Glendalough, Clonfert and Sceilg Mhicíl.
- Some monastery buildings were: beehive huts, an oratory, a refectory, a scriptorium and a round tower.
- Art created by the monks included manuscripts, metalwork and stone high crosses.
- The Vikings began to raid and settle in Ireland in the eighth century.
- Amazing evidence giving insight into their lives in Dublin was found at Wood Quay.
- Many Irish monks went abroad to save or spread Christianity.

# Questions Pg. 46 (Artefact Textbook)

1. How did Christianity arrive in Ireland?
2. What was life in a monastery like? Give five pieces of information.
3. Give two examples of each of the following: manuscripts, metalwork and stone crosses.
4. What was the impact of the arrival of the Vikings?
5. What was the effect of Irish monks travelling abroad?
6. Explain five terms from the box below:

Pagan	Monastery	Round tower	Chalice	Longship
Druid	Beehive Hut	Oratory	Manuscript	Longphort
Monk	Refectory	Scriptorium	High Cross	Wattle and daub