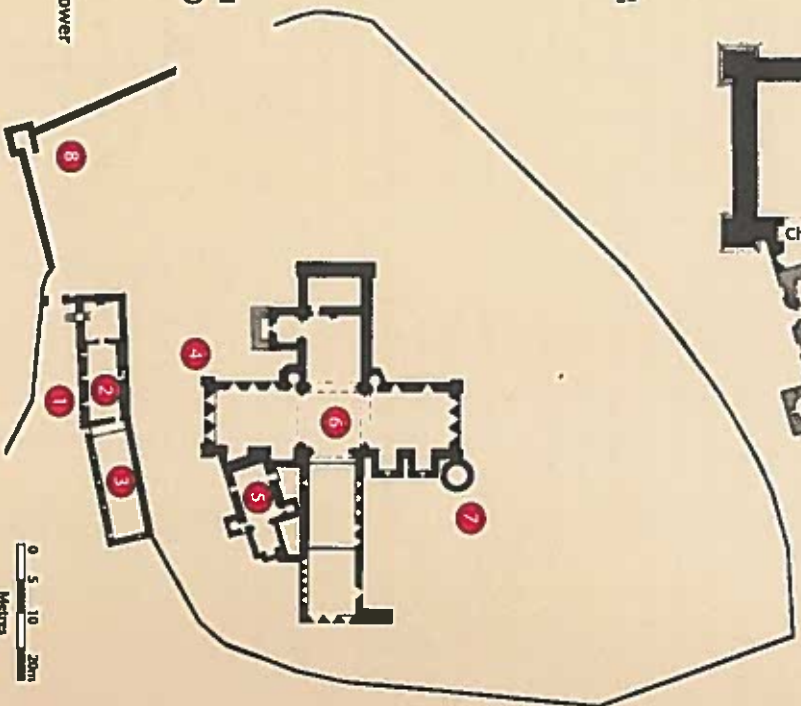


Site Map of the Rock of Cashel

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The Rock of Cashel

VISITORS' GUIDE



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Cashel, Co. Tipperary

The Rock of Cashel

The Rock of Cashel with its dramatic silhouette of ecclesiastical medieval buildings rises steeply above the fertile plain of the River Suir, in the heart of Munster.

Background: Rock of Cashel from Bartlett's 'Scenery and Antiquities of Ireland' 1842

History

Once the seat of the overkings of Munster, the Rock of Cashel first attained importance as a fortress. Its origins as a centre of power go back to the 4th or 5th centuries AD when the Eóganacht, the descendants of Eógan Mór, first came to prominence. Connall Corc, a descendant of Eógan Mór, is said to be the founder of the Cashel kingship. Eóganacht dynasties spread throughout Munster and, up to the 10th-century, only Eóganacht kings were eligible to be overking. An unusual feature of the Cashel kingship is that a number of its kings were also ecclesiastics.

According to tradition St Patrick baptised the grandsons of Connall Corc at Cashel. During the baptism it is said that the saint's sharply pointed crozier pierced the foot of Oengus, who, believing it to be an essential part of the ceremony, suffered in silence.

By the later 10th century, the kings of Dál Cais, centred around Killaloe in Co. Clare, ousted the Eóganacht from the Cashel kingship. Brian Borainne (Boru) of the Dál Cais succeeded his brother as king of Cashel in 978 and later became the first Munster king to achieve the

high kingship of Ireland when he became king of Tara in 1002. He was killed at the battle of Clontarf in 1014.

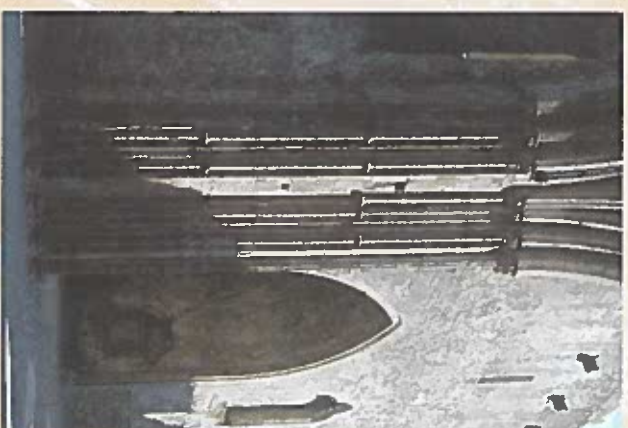
In 1101, Muirheartach Ua Briain, king of Cashel gave the Rock of Cashel to the Church. By this masterstroke he both advanced his credentials as a church reformer and simultaneously deprived his old enemies, the Eóganacht, of their ancient royal seat. In 1111, Ireland was for the first time divided into territorial dioceses and at the synod of Kells (1152) approval arrived from Rome for four archbishoprics to be set up, at Armagh, Cashel, Tuam and Dublin. This system of dioceses has remained largely unchanged to the present day.

Cashel would have had a relatively large church or cathedral soon after 1101 and certainly by 1111. This probably stood on the site of the east end of the 13th-century cathedral choir. In 1119 a



Right: Carved heads on 13th-century capitals

continued overleaf



Pier of the crossing and transept chapel, the Cathedral



Interior of Cormac's Chapel



Above: The Round Tower and Cathedral from the north east
Background: Choir windows of the Cathedral



branch of the Eoganach, surnamed Mac Carthaigh and based in Desmond (South Munster), regained a measure of power and influence at Cashel. This resulted in Cormac Mac Carthaigh, king of Desmond, building the beautiful Cormac's Chapel which was consecrated in 1134.

There are no known surviving records relating to the 13th-century construction of the present cathedral. Consequently, the evidence for its dating is purely architectural. The choir was probably begun under Archbishop Marianus Ua Briain (1224-38) or his immediate successor David mac Cellaig Ó Gilla Pátraic, who died in 1253. The remainder was probably completed during the long episcopate of David MacCarwill (1253-89).

The cathedral was greatly altered in the 15th century, possibly by Archbishop Richard O'Hedlan (1406-40), when parapets were added and the residential tower at the west end of the nave. O'Hedlan also endowed the Vicars Choral with lands and built a hall for their accommodation on the Rock.

The cathedral underwent many troubles, notably its sacking by Lord Inchiquin on behalf of the English Parliament in 1647. However, it was still used by the Church of Ireland until 1749, when the old site was abandoned and cathedral

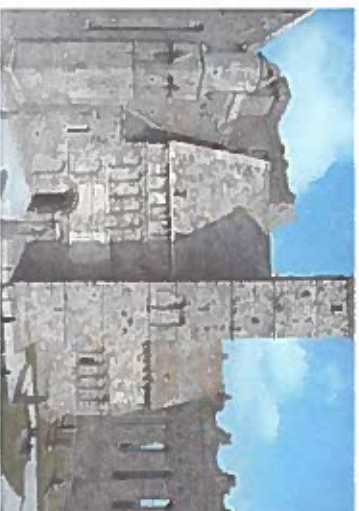
status was conferred on St John's church in the town. The old cathedral on the Rock remained partly roofed for some time but gradually fell into decay. By 1848, the roof had collapsed as had part of the residential tower. Most of the east gable of the choir also fell during these years of abandonment and neglect.

When the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869, important ecclesiastical ruins such as Cashel were taken into State Care as National Monuments and conservation work was carried out at Cashel in 1875.

In 1975, the Hall of the Vicars Choral was excavated, reroofed and restored and in the 1980s the dormitory was restored. Conservation work in Cormac's Chapel including the wall paintings in the chancel, is ongoing.

St Patrick's Cross

Between the Hall of the Vicars Choral and the cathedral is a replica of the 12th-century St Patrick's Cross. The original is now displayed in the undercroft of the Vicars Choral. The Cross is unusual among Irish high crosses in not having a ring around the cross head and in having subsidiary supports at each side of the shaft, although only one survives. As with most 12th-century high crosses, there is a figure of the crucified Christ on one side clad in a full-length robe; on the other side is a figure of a bishop or abbot. The often-repeated suggestion that the base was the inauguration stone of the kings of Cashel is highly



Cormac's Chapel

improbable, the base stone having clearly been chosen, quarried and worked along with the cross.

Cormac's Chapel

Cormac's Chapel is one of the earliest, and finest churches in Ireland built in the Romanesque style. The building consists of a nave and chancel with projecting towers on the north and south walls of the nave. The nave has doorways in its north and south walls and both nave and chancel have connecting attic chambers (trofifs) above their vaulted ceilings.

Unusual features, which have parallels in England and on the continent, include the string courses and blind arcading on the internal and external walls. These are most clearly seen on the south-facing sandstone facade. The arched doorway of three orders, with an animal carved on the tympanum, (the stone filling the inner semicircular head of the arch) is another Romanesque feature.

The south door is not as impressive as the larger, more ornate original main entrance doorway on the north side of the building. The carved tympanum above this north door shows a large lion being hunted by a small centaur (half man, half horse) with a bow



Tympanum over the north doorway of Cormac's Chapel

and arrow and a Norman-style helmet. Now hemmed in by the walls of the cathedral, this entrance originally faced onto an open space.

Above the blind arcading of the interior walls of the nave is a plain barrel vault with ribs. Towards the east end, openings in the north and south walls lead to the towers. The south tower has a spiral stair, which gives access to the crofts above. The larger more ornate doorway in the north wall gives access to the ground-floor room of the north tower. This may have been a tiny subsidiary chapel. The nave was originally lit from the west by three windows now partly blocked by the transept of the later cathedral.

The ornate stone sarcophagus at the west end of the nave was strongly influenced by the Scandinavian Urnes style with intertwined beasts and snakes on its damaged front panel. It is roughly contemporary with the chapel but was moved here from the 13th-century cathedral in 1875.

The chancel is almost square in plan with an externally projecting altar recess at its east end. A puzzling feature of the chapel is that the chancel is positioned off-centre to the nave. The chancel arch, of four orders, has finely carved pillars and capitals. The second order from the outside has a remarkable series



12th-century painting on the chancel ceiling of Cormac's Chapel



The Cathedral nave and choir

of stone heads on the pillars and arch. The roll mouldings in the arch retain a considerable amount of their original medieval decorative paintwork. The two ribs of the chancel vault spring from the corners and cross at the centre, dividing the surface of the vault into four triangular areas, which have remains of a painting possibly relating to the Magi. Extensive remains of paintwork on the south wall show part of a scene depicting the baptism of Christ. Much of the colour was obscured for centuries and is only now visible after painstaking cleaning and conservation work carried out in the 1980s and 1990s. Surviving mural paintings are very rare in Irish medieval churches and these examples are the earliest and some of the most complete to have survived.

The Cathedral

The cathedral is a large cruciform Gothic church without aisles built between 1230 and 1270. A 15th-century tower rises from the crossing between the church and the transepts. The cathedral was crudely fitted in between three earlier features: the round tower, Cormac's Chapel and a rock-cut well. An extensive and varied collection of stone heads was used on capitals, label stops and corbels both inside and outside the building.

The high altar was located at the east end of the choir. Only the lower part of the east gable, with the lower section of its three-light east window, now survives. The series of tall lancet windows on the north and south walls are in keeping with a building dating to around the 1230s. Between the tops of these windows are small quatrefoil windows. The original carved stone in the choir is of sandstone in contrast with the limestone used for fine carving in the remaining later part of the building. In the south wall, starting at the east end, are the piscina (a niche with a stone basin and drain, where the sacred vessels were washed), the damaged sedilia (where the celebrants sat at certain points during Mass) and the wall tomb of the notorious Miler Magrath, who was Protestant archbishop of Cashel from 1570 to 1622.

The Transepts and Crossing

The end walls of both transepts contain large three-light windows, which were lowered in height in the 15th century. Opening off the east side of the north transept are two chapels, each having an east gable with a two-light window. The chapels in the south transept are far shallower because of the pre-existing Cormac's Chapel. There are significant remains of 15th century wall paintings on the east wall of the south transept.

The arches of the crossing are original 13th-century work and rise from clustered banded columns with ornate capitals. The plainly ribbed vault in the centre was mostly reconstructed in 1875. The upper part of tower and the parapets at the tops of the walls date from the remodelling of the cathedral in the 15th century.

The Nave

In contrast to most churches, the nave is unusually short, especially in comparison with the considerably longer choir. The 13th-century plan probably envisaged a longer nave with the north and south doorways placed midway along it. The residential tower, built in the 15th or 16th century, takes up the whole west end of the original nave and clearly involved almost the total rebuilding of the walls.

The porch on the south side with its groin-vaulted ceiling is the main entrance. There may have been a matching porch on the north side but this no longer survives.

The Round Tower

The round tower is the oldest surviving building on the Rock and may date from about 1101. Round towers were free-standing bell towers built between the late 10th and the mid-12th centuries and are unique in shape and form to Ireland. They are found only at important ecclesiastical sites and the doorway often faces towards the west doorway of the principal church at the site.

The round tower at Cashel (28m high) is complete right up to its conical stone roof. Its round-headed doorway is well above ground level, a common feature among round towers. It would originally have had wooden floors connected by ladders. The intermediate floors are lit by small lintelled windows while the top floor, which housed the bell or bells, has four evenly spaced triangular-headed windows.

The Hall of the Vicens Choral

To the south of the cathedral, at the head of the steeply inclined approach road to the site is a long two-storey building. In the early 15th century Archbishop O'Hedian built the hall and later the dormitory to the east, to house the Vicens Choral, a group of men, both lay and cleric, appointed to sing during the services.

The upper level comprised the main living room of the Vicens Choral with a large fireplace in its south wall. This room has been restored with a timber gallery at its west end. The vaulted undercroft beneath the hall contains a collection of stone sculpture mostly from the Rock. The original St Patrick's Cross is housed here to protect it from weather damage.



Right: The hall and dormitory of the Vicens Choral from the south
Background: Choir windows of the Cathedral