

# COLMCILLE'S LIFE AND LEGACY

## EDUCATION PACK



CREATED BY ABARTA HERITAGE FOR DONEGAL COUNTY  
ARCHIVES, DONEGAL COUNTY COUNCIL

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall**  
Donegal County Council



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## PAGE 1: IRELAND BEFORE ST. COLMCILLE

8,000 BC

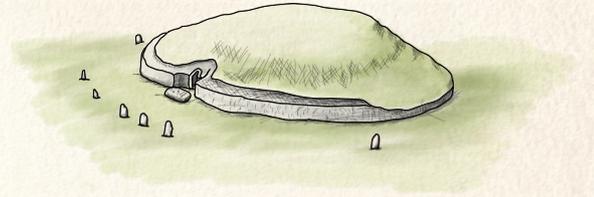
Mesolithic hunter gatherers living in Ireland.

4,000 BC

Neolithic: Farming arrives.

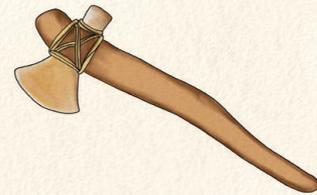
3,200 BC

Newgrange passage tomb is built.



2,500 BC

The skill of making bronze is brought to Ireland.



Lacknacoo cup-marks are created.



Ireland is a pagan country with lots of small kingdoms.

0 ad

Jesus is born.

Slaves, farmers and warriors live in wooden houses.



432

St. Patrick is brought to Ireland.

492

St. Patrick dies.

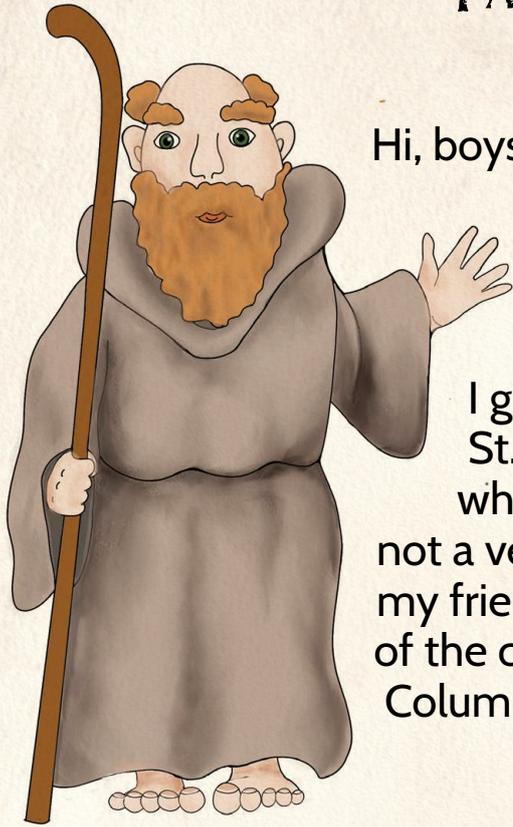
There are only a few small churches in Ireland.



520

Colmcille is born.

## PAGE 2: INTRODUCTION TO ST. COLMCILLE



Hi, boys and girls, welcome to the Colmcille Life and Legacy workbook where you will learn all about one of the three great patron saints of Ireland - me!

I go by many names such as St. Columba or St. Colmcille, but my real name is Crimthann which means 'fox' or 'deceitful one' in Irish. It's not a very nice name, so God sent his angels to tell my friends to call me Colmcille, which means 'dove of the church' in Irish. Some people also call me Columba, which is Latin for dove.



Doves represent peace, love and the Holy Spirit in Christianity.

I was born in Gartan, County Donegal on the 7th of December 520 AD or was it the 7th of December 521 AD? I can't remember, in fairness, it has been over 1,500 years!

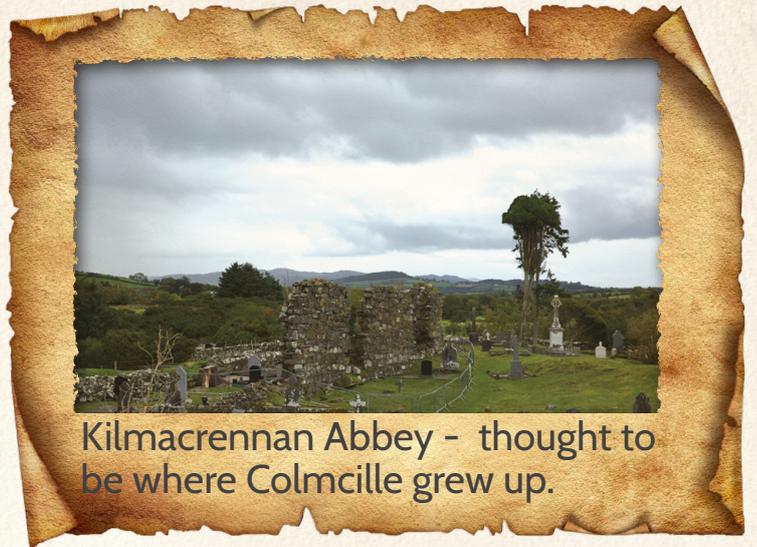
My parents were Feilimí and Eithne; they were descendants of Irish royalty. I lived a very comfortable life and would have become a prince, except I felt a calling from God. I wanted to spread the word of God and the wonder of Christianity and lead the Pagan people of Ireland into God's light.



It is believed that St Colmcille's father was descended from Niall Noígíallach (Niall of the Nine Hostages), the man who brought St. Patrick to Ireland.



I was baptised by a priest called Cruithneachán in Temple Douglas, County Donegal. He later became my foster-father and taught me all about Christianity. He taught me about the importance of following in God's footsteps in my life and actions and that I should help guide everyone into God's light.



When I was older, I moved to Movilla in County Down to study Christianity with St. Finnian. Next, I went to a famous Christian school in Clonard, County Meath, with lots of other students. Afterwards, I went with some of my friends to Glasnevin, County Dublin to learn from the great St. Mobhí.



When St. Colmcille studied on the Aran Islands he had a fight with St. Éanna. He cursed the islands so that no firewood could be found there. The people had to use dry cow dung for their fires instead.

Unfortunately, I couldn't stay long because a terrible plague came. It caused people to swell up and say very strange things. Nothing could stop this plague; it even killed our great teacher.

**After this, I began to travel and spread the word of God!**

I built my first church when I was 25 years old.

My cousin King Aodh mac Ainmhireach gave me a beautiful oak grove that he owned in what is now known as County Derry. I loved the old oak trees and refused to cut them down, but I needed to cleanse the area, so I lit a small fire. Unfortunately, it got out of control, but I said a prayer and my beautiful oak trees were saved.



Oak leaves are associated with St. Colmcille.

This humble little church brought many people to the area. They settled down, and over time they built the magnificent city of Derry. I am now known as the patron saint of Derry.

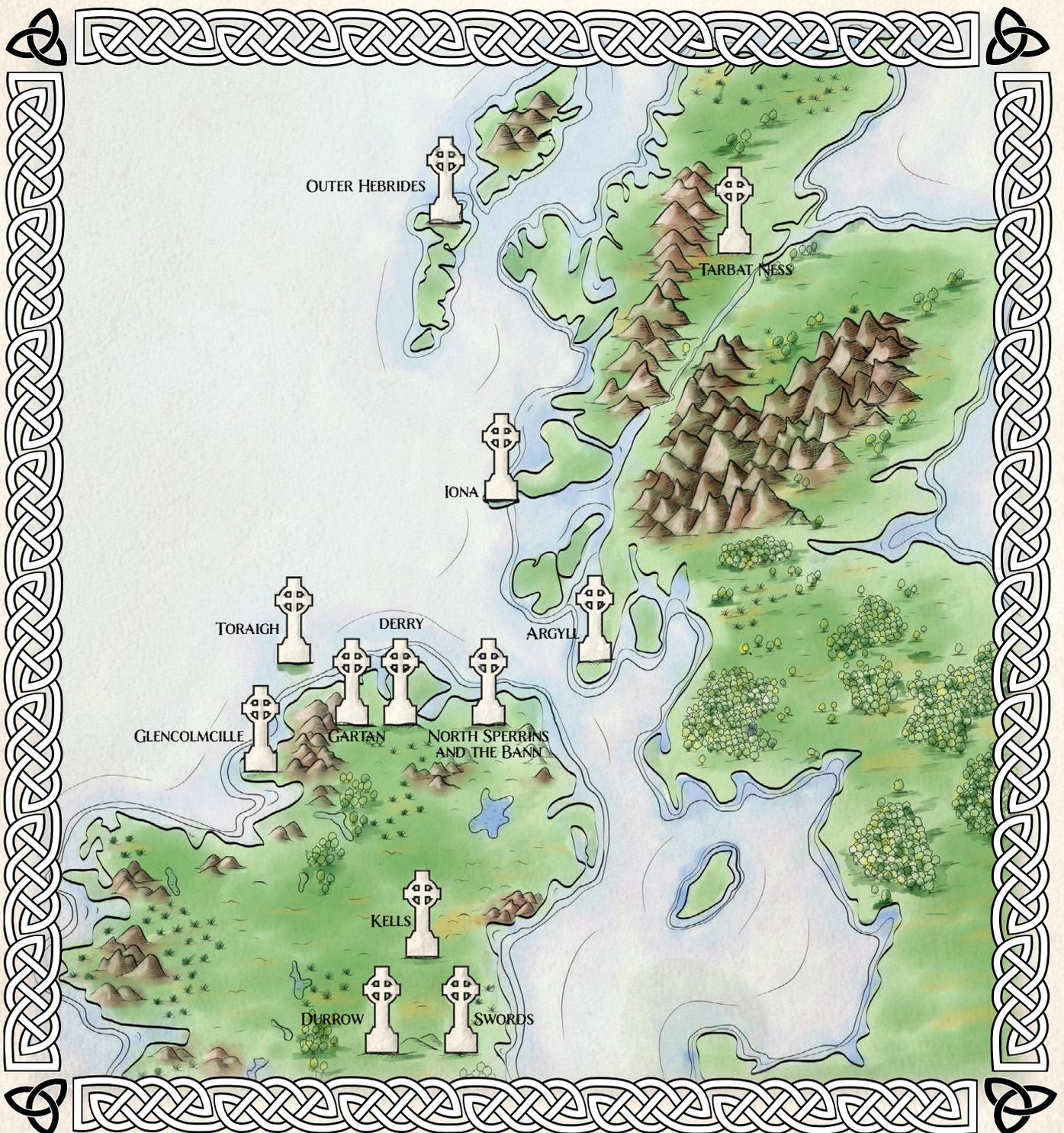


St. Augustines Church, Derry. It is said that this church stands on the site of Colmcille's first church.

## PAGE 5: ST. COLMCILLE'S CHURCHES ACROSS IRELAND

My church in Derry was so successful that I decided to build churches all over Ireland. After my death, my followers built even more churches and named them after me.

Have a look at my map to see where I have been. I travelled across the country to places as far apart as Toraigh and Durrow, which took much longer than it would today. Remember, we did not have cars back then.



I've told you all about my many churches and monasteries across Ireland, but I am sure you are wondering what was the life of a monk like?

It was a lot of hard work. We worked all day either farming in the fields, making things in the workshops or writing in the scriptorium and only stopped to eat and pray.

Monks didn't believe in comfort. St. Colmcille often slept on a bed of stone with another stone for a pillow!



We ate a lot of watery porridge called gruel at the monastery. We were lucky to grow our own vegetables in the garden although we did not have potatoes, they didn't come to Ireland until the late 1500s.

We went to Mass at least five times a day, got up during the night for prayers, and took vows of silence which could last days! Sometimes I forgot what my voice sounded like.

When I joined the monastery, I was given a fashionable hairstyle called a tonsure. I had to wear a scratchy white tunic with a cloak called a casula to keep me warm and dry.



To be a monk, you must:

- Be a boy (girls could serve as nuns)
- Love God
- Love learning
- Love hard work (this one is really important)

## PAGE 7: WHAT BUILDINGS WERE IN A MONASTERY?

In my day, monasteries and churches were small wooden buildings, not like the massive Cathedrals you have now. You can see one of my monasteries below:

The most important building was the **Church**, where we went to mass at least five times a day! We called this building **Ecclesia** in Latin.

The area around the church was surrounded by an earthen bank called a **Vallum**.

There were lots of **Workshops** and **Farm buildings** too.

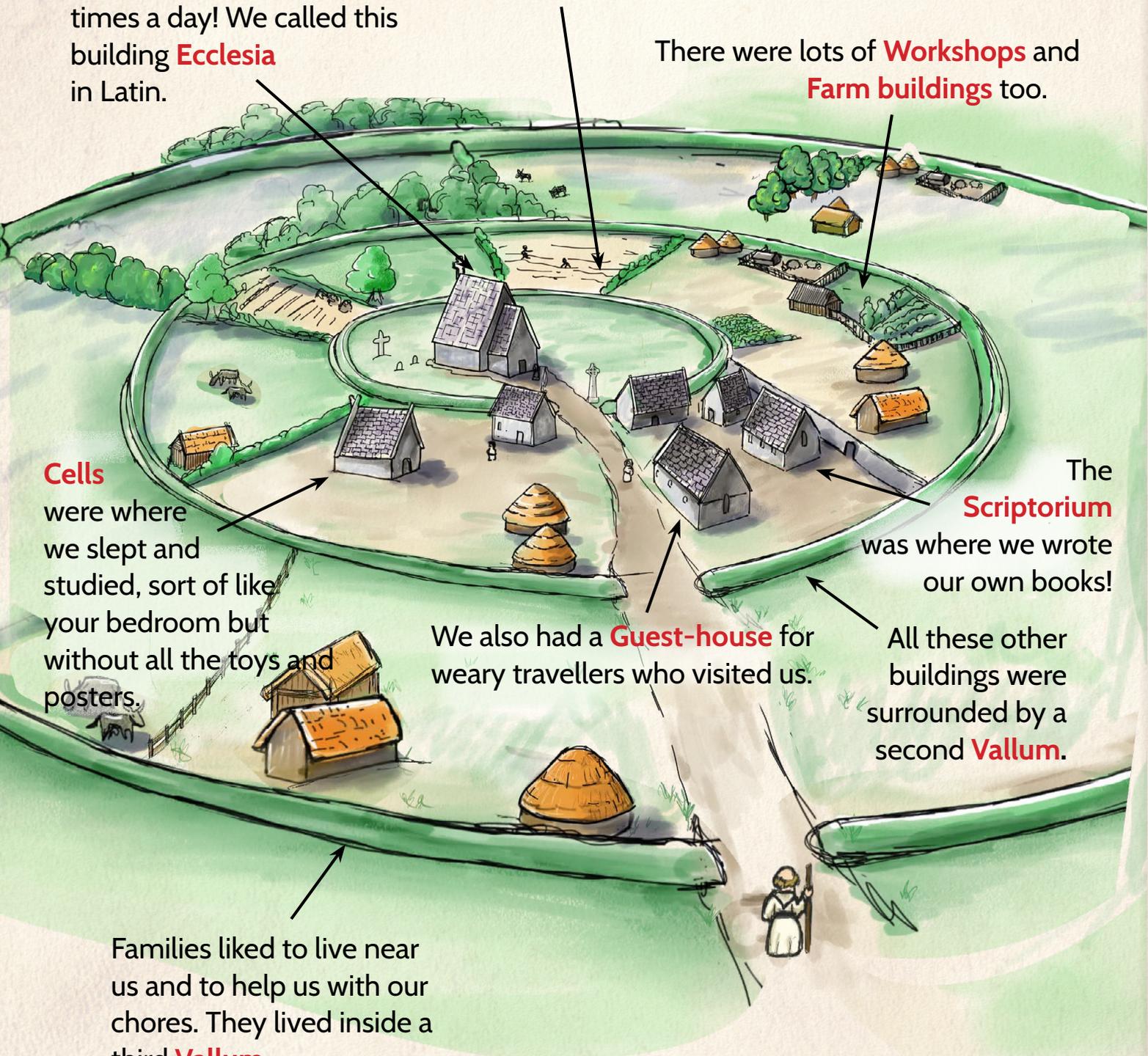
**Cells** were where we slept and studied, sort of like your bedroom but without all the toys and posters.

We also had a **Guest-house** for weary travellers who visited us.

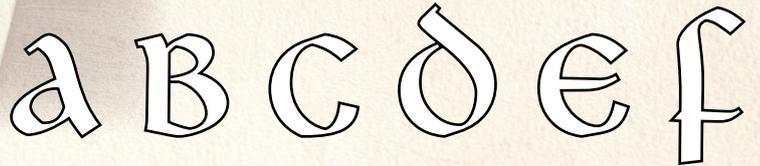
The **Scriptorium** was where we wrote our own books!

All these other buildings were surrounded by a second **Vallum**.

Families liked to live near us and to help us with our chores. They lived inside a third **Vallum**.



My favourite place in the monastery was the scriptorium. This was a peaceful room where I practised beautiful writing known as calligraphy.



We also created beautiful drawings of animals or difficult knots known as interlace for our books. Many people struggle to create interlace, but there is a trick to doing it, the secret is you must always avoid the dots!

Step 1                      Step 2                      Step 3

Connect to another pattern

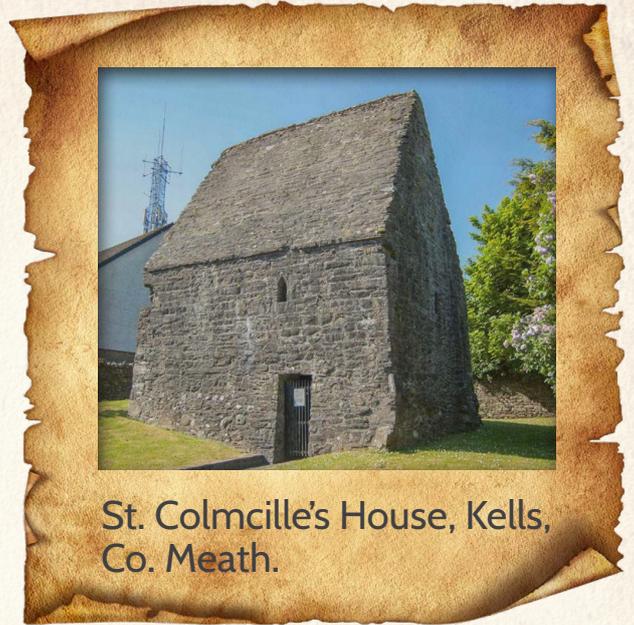
Connect to another pattern

We didn't have paper, that won't be brought to Europe for another 600 years, so we wrote on vellum which is calfskin. We made our own paint using stones, flowers and even fungus.

Did you know the skins of 185 calves were used to make the vellum for the Book of Kells?

Almost 200 years after my death, my followers created the beautiful **Book of Durrow** and the **Book of Kells** in their scriptoriums.

These books were written in Latin and record the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They were beautifully decorated and were used on special occasions, like Easter, Christmas and my feast day (9<sup>th</sup> June).



The **Book of Kells** takes its name from the monastery of Kells in County Meath, but it is also known as the great gospel of Colmcille.

The Book of Kells is one of the greatest medieval treasures in the world. It was made by my monks in around 800 AD on the island of Iona. Sadly Vikings attacked Iona, they stole our treasures and slaughtered my monks!



Those that survived left Iona and moved to the safety of Kells in County Meath with this precious book.

Extract from Book of Kells (Courtesy of The Board of Trinity College Dublin).

Anyway, back to my great adventures. Did I tell you that I was visited by angels who warned me that there were horrible demons in County Donegal?

The demons created a mist so thick, no one could see through it, and a poisonous, fiery river sprang up that killed those who crossed it.

My friends and I wanted to defeat them, so we camped beside the river to hatch a plan.

Suddenly, the devil threw a spear at us. It killed my servant An Chearc, which angered me.

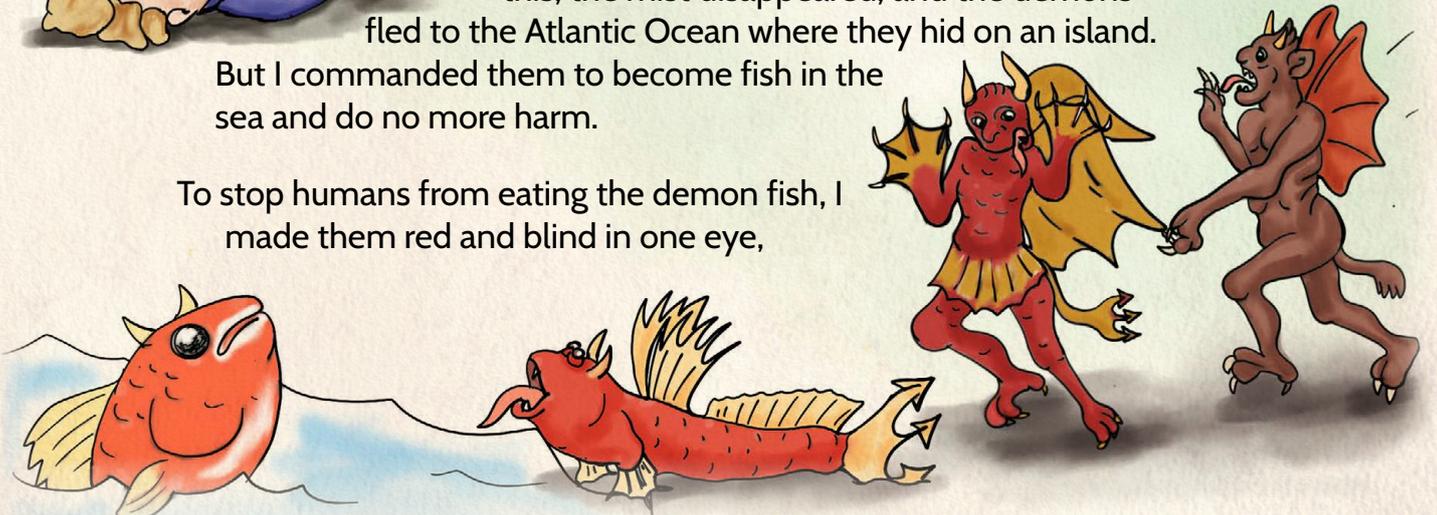
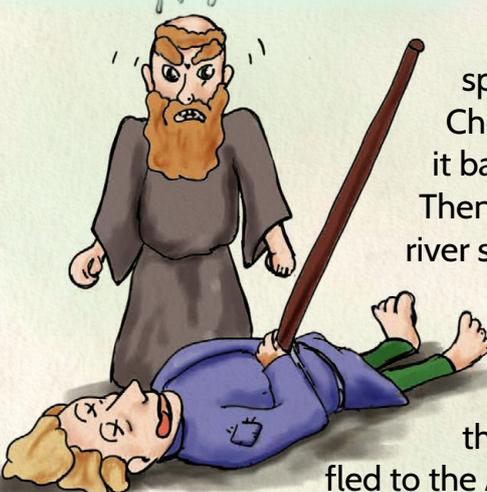
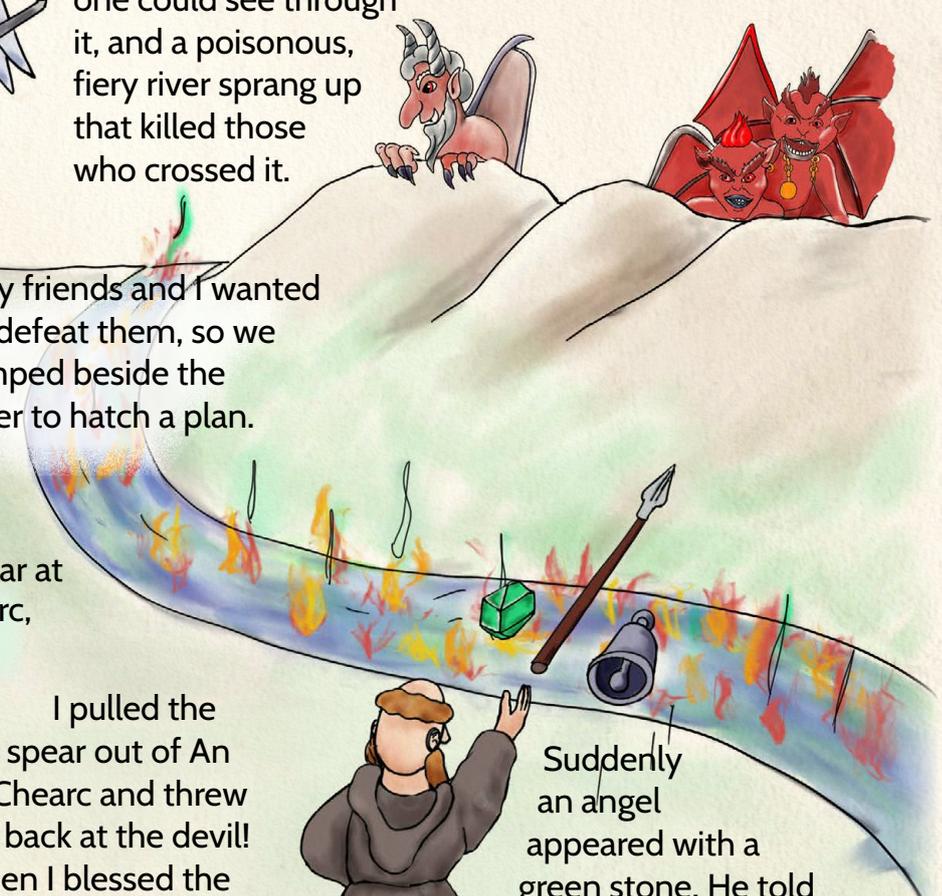
I pulled the spear out of An Chearc and threw it back at the devil! Then I blessed the river so my friends and I could cross it.

Suddenly an angel appeared with a green stone. He told me to throw the stone and my holy bell at the demons.

When I did this, the mist disappeared, and the demons fled to the Atlantic Ocean where they hid on an island. But I commanded them to become fish in the sea and do no more harm.

To stop humans from eating the demon fish, I made them red and blind in one eye,

**So make sure you never eat a red and blind demon fish for dinner!**



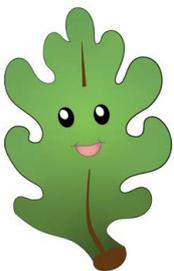


One day myself and my three friends St. Fionán, St. Dubhthach and St. Begley climbed a big hill called Cnoc na Naomh. We had a good view of pagan Toraigh, which we all wanted to convert to Christianity.

We threw our staffs at the island. I threw mine so hard that it made a crater on the island. Thank God no farmer or fisherman was hurt by my staff! No one else's staff hit Toraigh, so it was mine to convert.

Unfortunately, Oilill, the ruler of the island, didn't want to be Christian and refused to give me any land to build a church on. So I asked for a patch of ground, only as big as my small cloak. Oilill agreed, but I tricked him, and miraculously made my cloak grow until it covered the island!

Oilill was so angry with me that he unleashed his poisonous dog. I quickly made the sign of the cross, which caused the murderous hound to leap into the sea to avoid the blessing. Seeing this, Oilill fell to his knees and converted to Christianity. He granted the island to me, and I built another monastery there.



The poisonous dog's paw marks can still be seen on the island where he leaped into the sea at a place known as Cloch an Chú (Rock of the Hound).

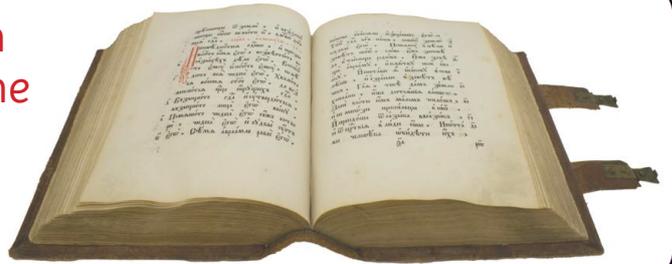


Remember I told you about my love of writing and being in the scriptorium? Well, this got me into some trouble.

When I was visiting my old friend St. Finnian of Movilla, I saw his beautiful psalter. I wanted it, so I secretly copied the psalter at night.



A psalter is a book which contains psalms from the Old Testament. Psalms are prayers which can be sung to God.



Finnian was so angry that when he found out he demanded that I give him my copy of his book! I refused and brought it to the High King of Ireland, Diarmait Mac Cerbaill, to let him decide. Did I mention Diarmait was also my cousin, so I was very confident about winning the case.

I was shocked when King Diarmait said:  
***'to each cow its calf and to each book its copy.'***

Meaning that as a calf belongs to its mother, my copy belonged with its owner - Finnian's book. I was disgusted with the outcome. On top of that, King Diarmait angered me even more, when he killed a prince of Connacht who was under my protection.

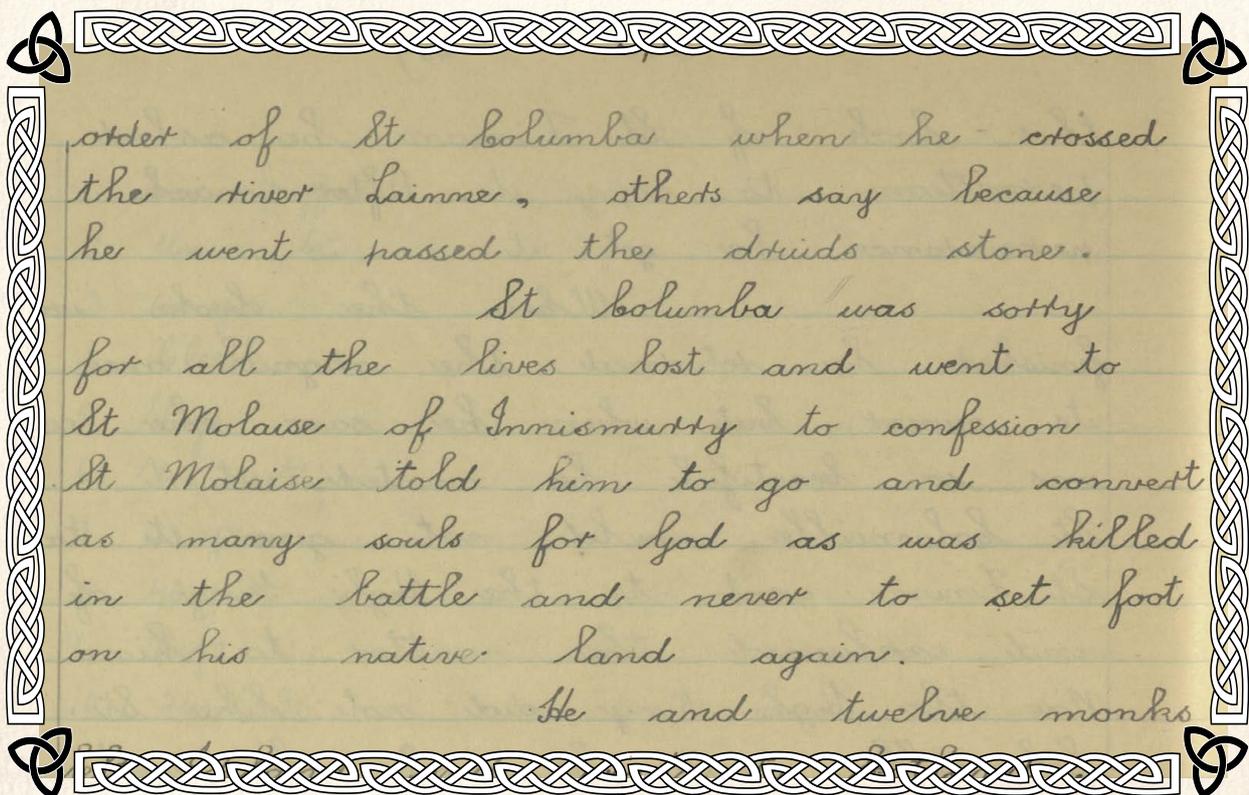
**THIS MEANT WAR!**



I went to my homeland of Donegal and Derry and asked my followers and family to wage war against my cousin, the treacherous King Diarmait. They agreed, and we marched to meet King Diarmait in Cúil Dreimhne, County Sligo (near Drumcliffe).

The battle was very gruesome. At the end of the fight, my side had won but at a terrible cost. Over 3,000 people were dead, and I was starting to feel like it was my fault.

The other monks of Ireland were not happy with me. It was our job to be peaceful, to love our neighbours, not to wage war. Many of them wanted me to be excommunicated (which means I couldn't be part of the church or go to heaven!) This was a fate worse than death, but luckily it didn't happen.



Excerpt from The Schools' Folklore Collection. Courtesy of National Folklore Collection - Story recorded by Ailis Ní Maonaig and the interviewee or informant was Mr Griffith. Ailis was a pupil of Cnoc an Dúin (c.) roll number 11377, the teacher was Máire Bhreathnach, For more information, see [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)

My old friend St. Molaise told me I must leave Ireland. He said I would not be able to see this land again until I had converted as many people to Christianity as had died in the battle of Cúil Dreimhne. That's almost 3,000 baptisms I'd have to perform before I could see my beloved Ireland again.

I was very upset at having to leave my family, my friends and my many churches. On my last night, I visited a large rock at Lacknacoó at Churchill, County Donegal. I cried here and asked God to take away my loneliness.

The next day I took 12 monks with me, and we sailed a small boat up Lough Foyle. I could see my family, my friends and even some animals running after us waving their goodbyes.



Lacknacoó stone with cupmarks created between 3,000 - 2,000 BC.



Lacknacoó  
(Leac na Cumha)  
means Stone of  
Homesickness or  
Sorrow in Irish.



Some people believe that if an emigrant lies on the stone at Lacknacoó the night before they leave Ireland, they will not suffer homesickness in their new home.

After being very seasick, we landed on an island. However, when I climbed to the top of its tallest hill, I could still see Ireland, so we left and went to another island called Iona. We landed there on Pentecost Sunday (12th of May) 563 AD and started building a church and cells.

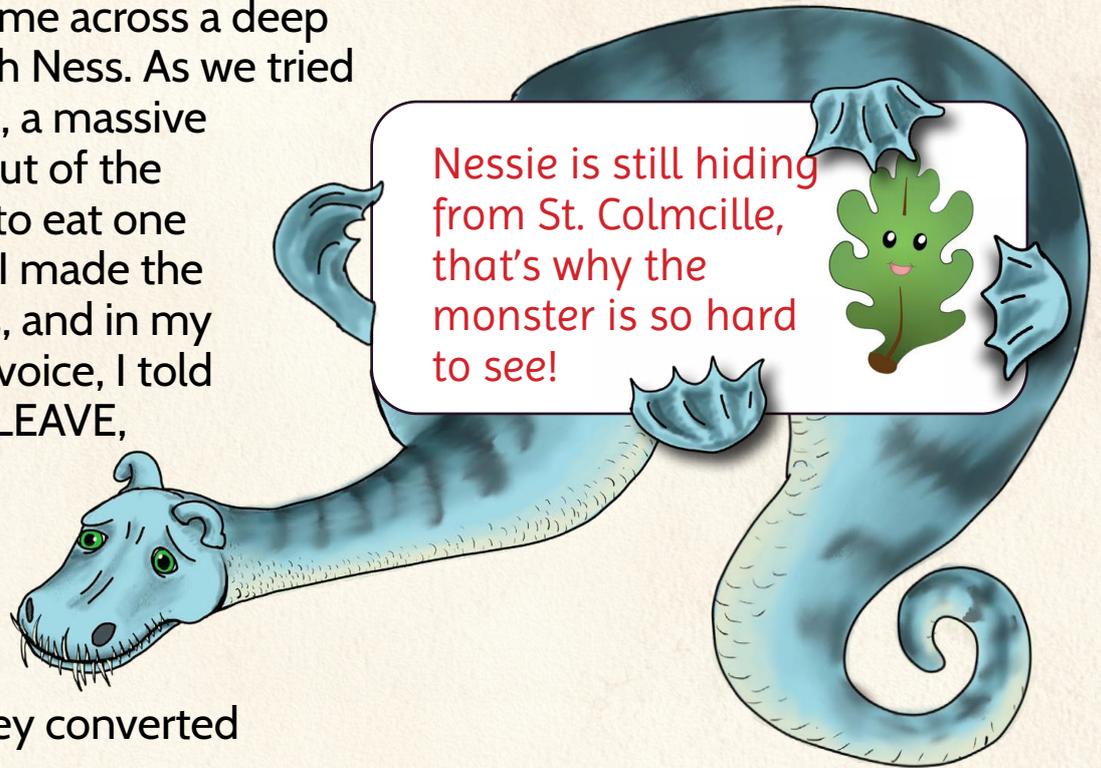
I spent the next few years travelling around the nearby islands and the Kingdom of Dál Riata in west Scotland converting pagan people to Christianity.

Pentecost is the day the holy spirit descended on the disciples of Jesus and gave them the power to speak in different languages.



After converting the people in west Scotland to Christianity, I travelled across the Great Glen to east Scotland where the pagan Picts lived.

On my way, I came across a deep lake called Lough Ness. As we tried to cross the lake, a massive monster burst out of the water and tried to eat one of my men! So, I made the sign of the cross, and in my most fearsome voice, I told the monster to LEAVE, and it did! The local pagan people loved me for saving them from the monster and they converted to Christianity.



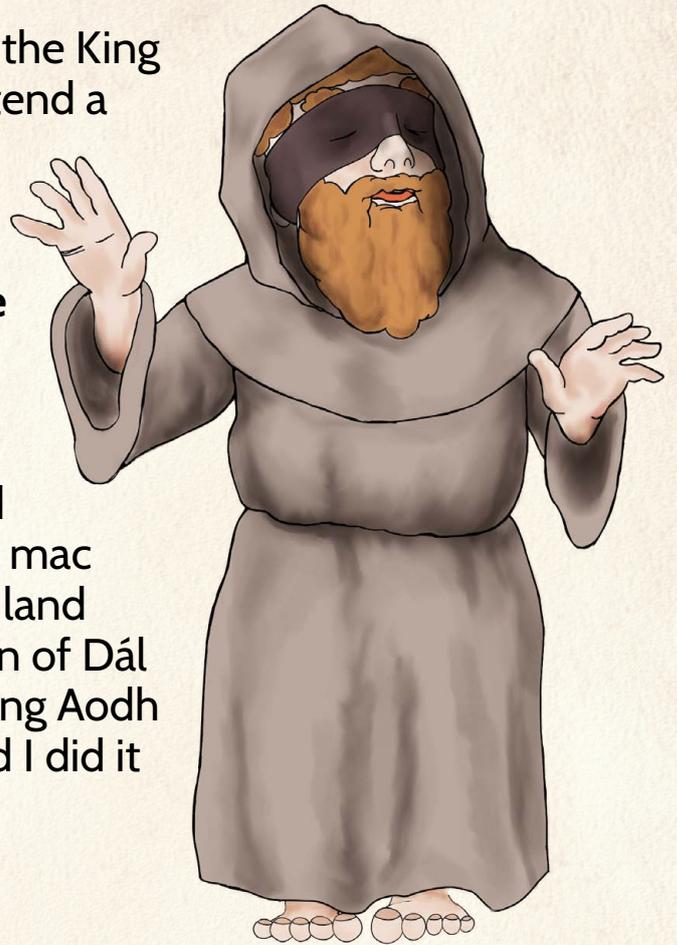
Loch Ness, Scotland.

Next, I went to visit the King of the Picts, but he was not happy to see me and used his pagan druids to close the doors to his house and seal them with magic. I made the sign of the cross before the doors, and they burst open! Everyone inside was impressed and they decided to become Christians too.

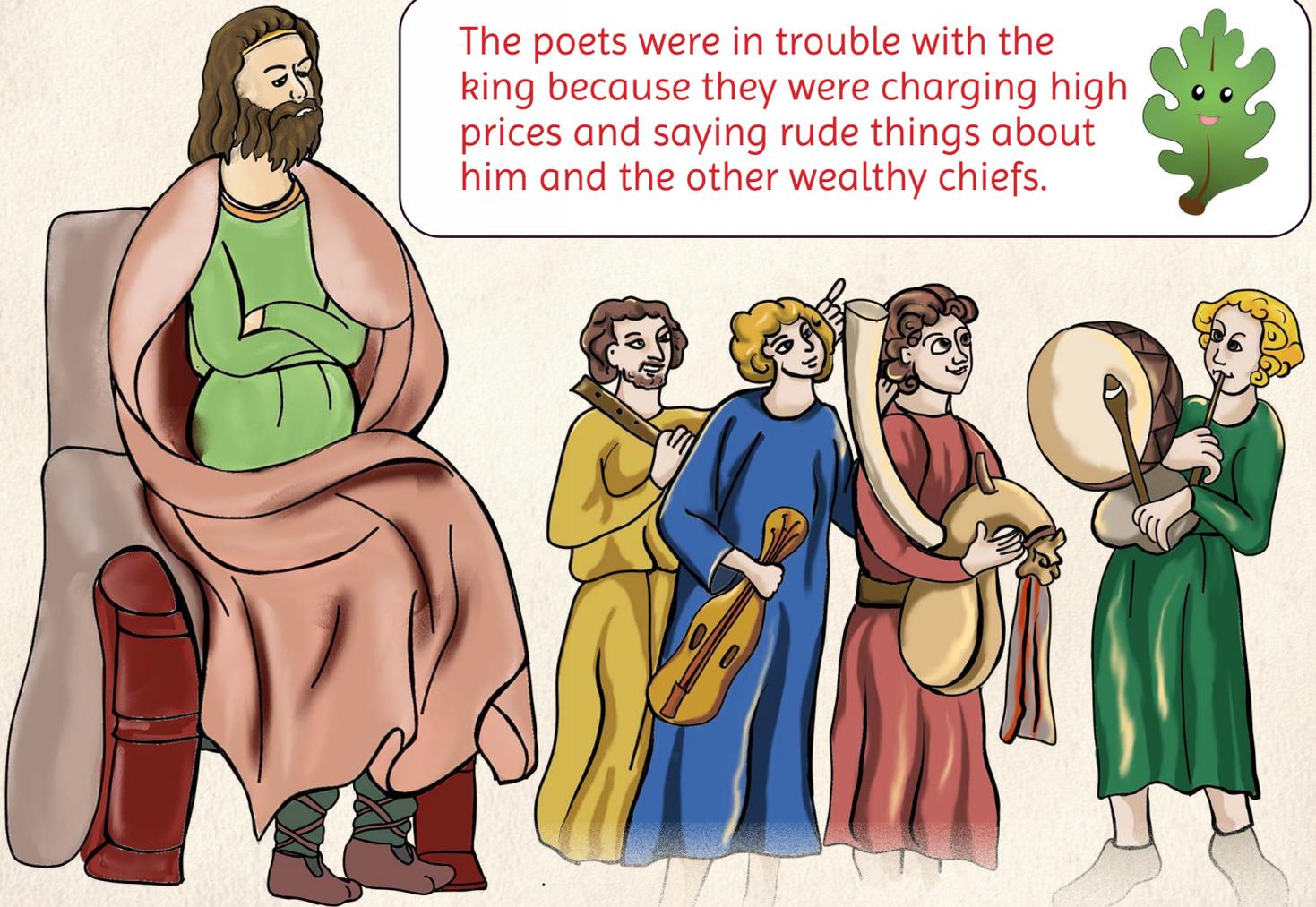
I was ordered by Aodán mac Gabhráin the King of Dál Riata to return to Ireland and attend a meeting at Droim Ceat, County Derry.

I was so excited to finally come home, but I was still not allowed to see Ireland. So I blindfolded myself for the whole trip.

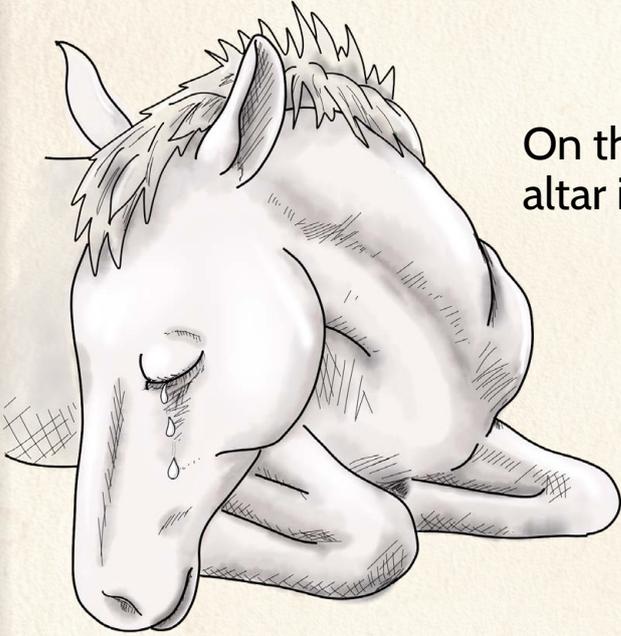
At the meeting of Droim Ceat, I settled a dispute between the High King Aodh mac Ainmhireach (my cousin who gave me land for my church in Derry) and King Aodán of Dál Riata. I healed people, stopped High King Aodh expelling all the poets from Ireland and I did it all blindfolded!



The poets were in trouble with the king because they were charging high prices and saying rude things about him and the other wealthy chiefs.



The years passed by and I continued to convert people to Christianity and build churches. One day, a white horse came to me and cried on my lap. The horse knew I was old and very very tired.



On the 9th of June 597 AD, I collapsed near my altar in Iona. My friends ran to me, and I said:

*Raise my hand  
That I may bless my monks.  
Higher still that I may bless the Land of  
Erin and all I love there,  
My oak grove and my children.*



Possible burial place of St. Colmcille at Downpatrick, Co. Down.

Sadly, I died at the age of 76, though I'm not sure where I was buried? I think it was the island of Iona, but others say I was brought to Downpatrick in County Down and was buried beside my fellow patron saints of Ireland, Bridget and Patrick.

After his death Colmcille became the Sanctus (Latin word for saint) of book binders, poets, Derry, and Ireland!



After my death, my monks travelled across Ireland, Scotland and North England spreading Christianity. They told people about my great life and adventures.

Many people have since written about me. St. Adhamhnán, the Abbot of Iona (another one of my relatives), wrote a book called *Vita Columbae* which is Latin for Colmcille's Life. His book was all about the prophecies and miracles I performed while I was alive.

Abbots are in charge of monasteries, kind of like a school principal.

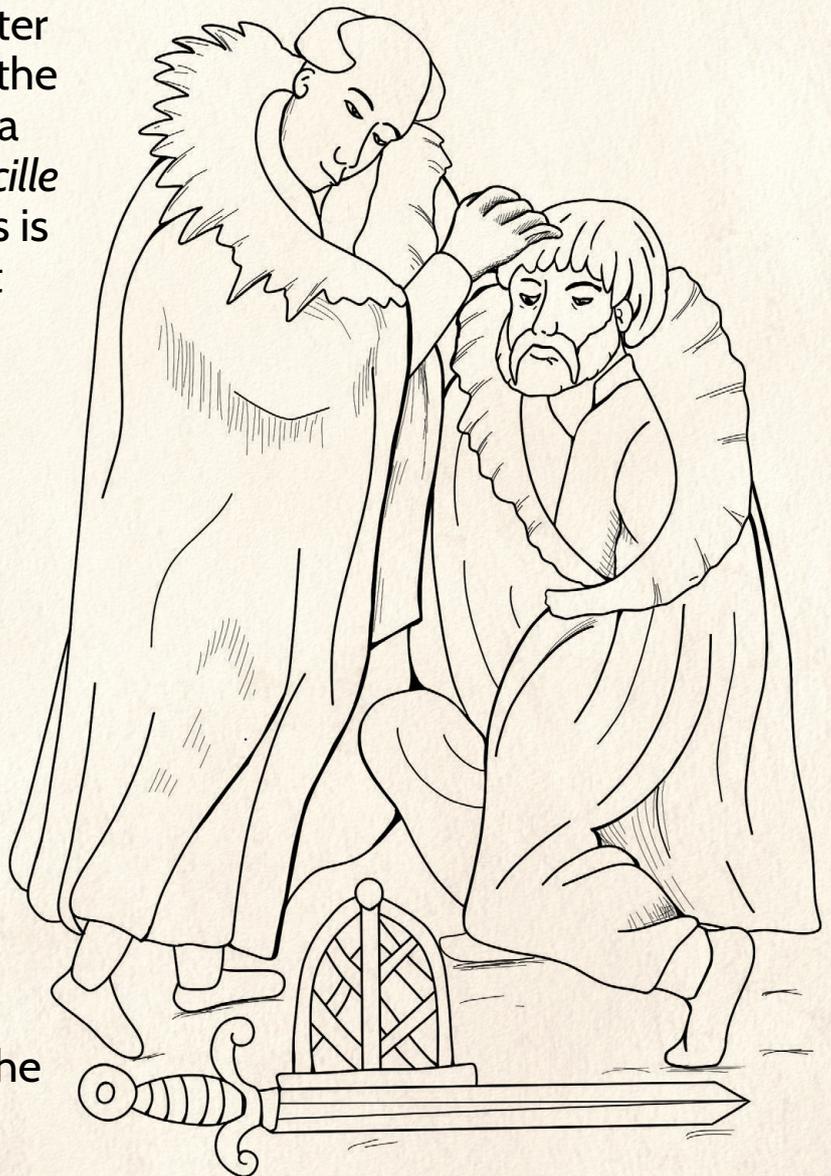


Nearly one thousand years after my death, Manus O'Donnell, the Chief of Tír Conaill, had 'Beatha Cholm Cille' – *The Life of Colmcille* written about me in 1532. This is the most detailed book about my life.



Parts of Derry and Donegal were once in the kingdom of Tír Conaill.

Manus and his family loved me. They held special ceremonies in Kilmacrennan, where I used to live and carried my copy of the stolen psalter into battle. The book became known as the Cathach or 'the Battler'.



A King is blessed by a Columban monk at Doon Rock, Kilmacrennan.

To this day Colmcille has a great legacy in both Britain and Ireland, below are some of the things Colmcille is known for:

I am one of the three patron saints of Ireland, along with St. Patrick and St. Bridget.

I am the patron saint of Derry.

My feast day is celebrated throughout the world on the 9th of June.

I created a great link between Scotland and Ireland.

I began to write Irish history at Iona.

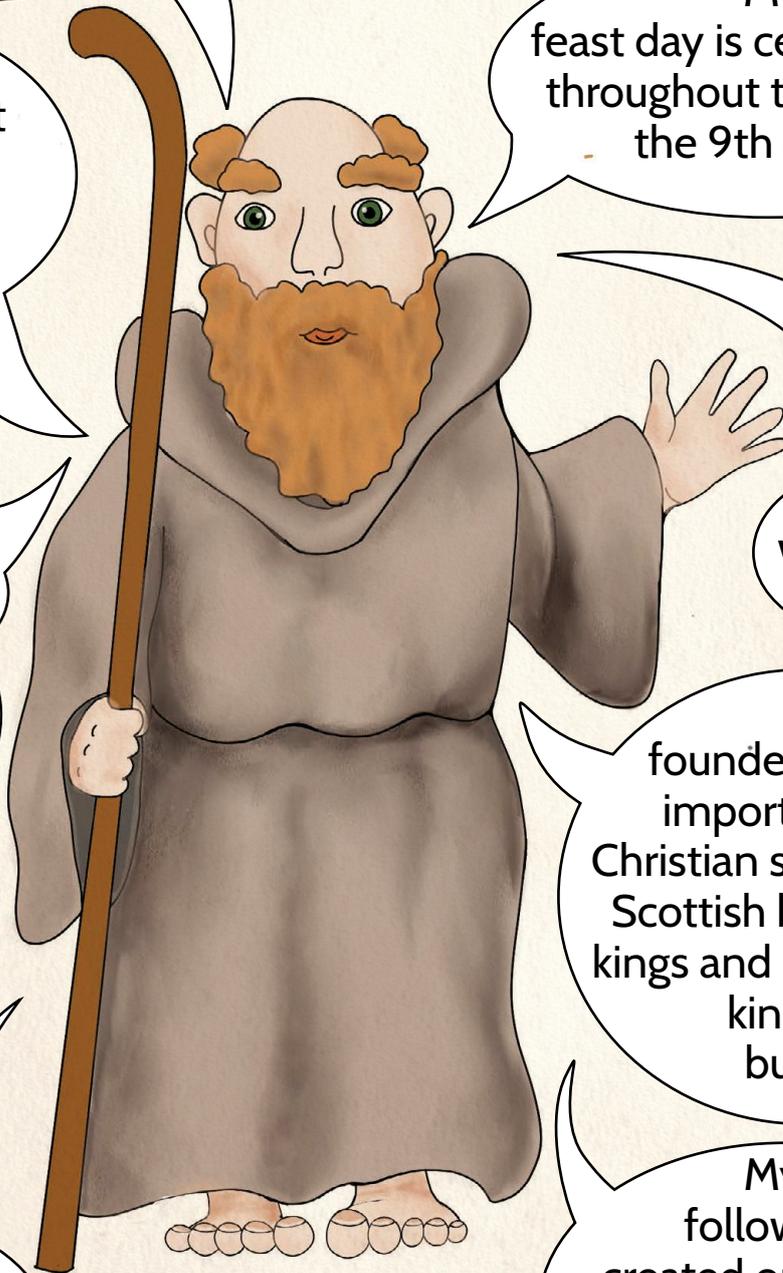
I wrote many hymns.

I founded many churches in Ireland and Scotland.

I founded Iona, an important early Christian site where 48 Scottish kings, 4 Irish kings and 8 Norwegian kings are buried.

My followers created the Book of Durrow.

My followers created one of the greatest treasures of the middle ages, the Book of Kells.



## PAGE 21: LEGACY- PLACE NAMES IN DERRY AND DONEGAL

There are many churches, schools, community centres, sports pitches and streets named after St. Colmcille in counties Donegal and Derry.

**For example:**



Holy well at Turas Cholm Cille, in Co. Donegal



St. Columba's Park in Derry.

**Can you think of any more places named after me in your area?**



Every year my feast day is celebrated on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June (the day I died).

On this day people say prayers to me, they go to churches named St. Colmcille, they go to holy wells blessed by me, and they go on a Turas or pilgrimage.

There are many pilgrimage routes dedicated to me in Derry and Donegal such as the Slí Cholmcille and Turas Cholm Cille. During a pilgrimage, people walk to places called penitential stations, that are connected to me.

At the stations, they perform rituals. You might see someone walking around the station clockwise, or you might hear someone saying prayers at the station during a pilgrimage.

A pilgrimage is when a person goes on a long journey to a sacred place.



Doon well near Termon,  
Co. Donegal



Turas Cholm Cille Station 6,  
Co. Donegal

Some people wear oak leaves on St. Colmcille's feast day, while others walk the pilgrimage barefoot!



## PAGE 23: LEGACY- ST. COLMCILLE'S FEAST DAY AND PILGRIMAGE

Here are some interesting places you might see if you go on the Slí Cholmcille or Turas Gleann Cholm Cille pilgrimage between the 9th of June and the 15th of August.



Gartan Heritage Centre,  
Co. Donegal

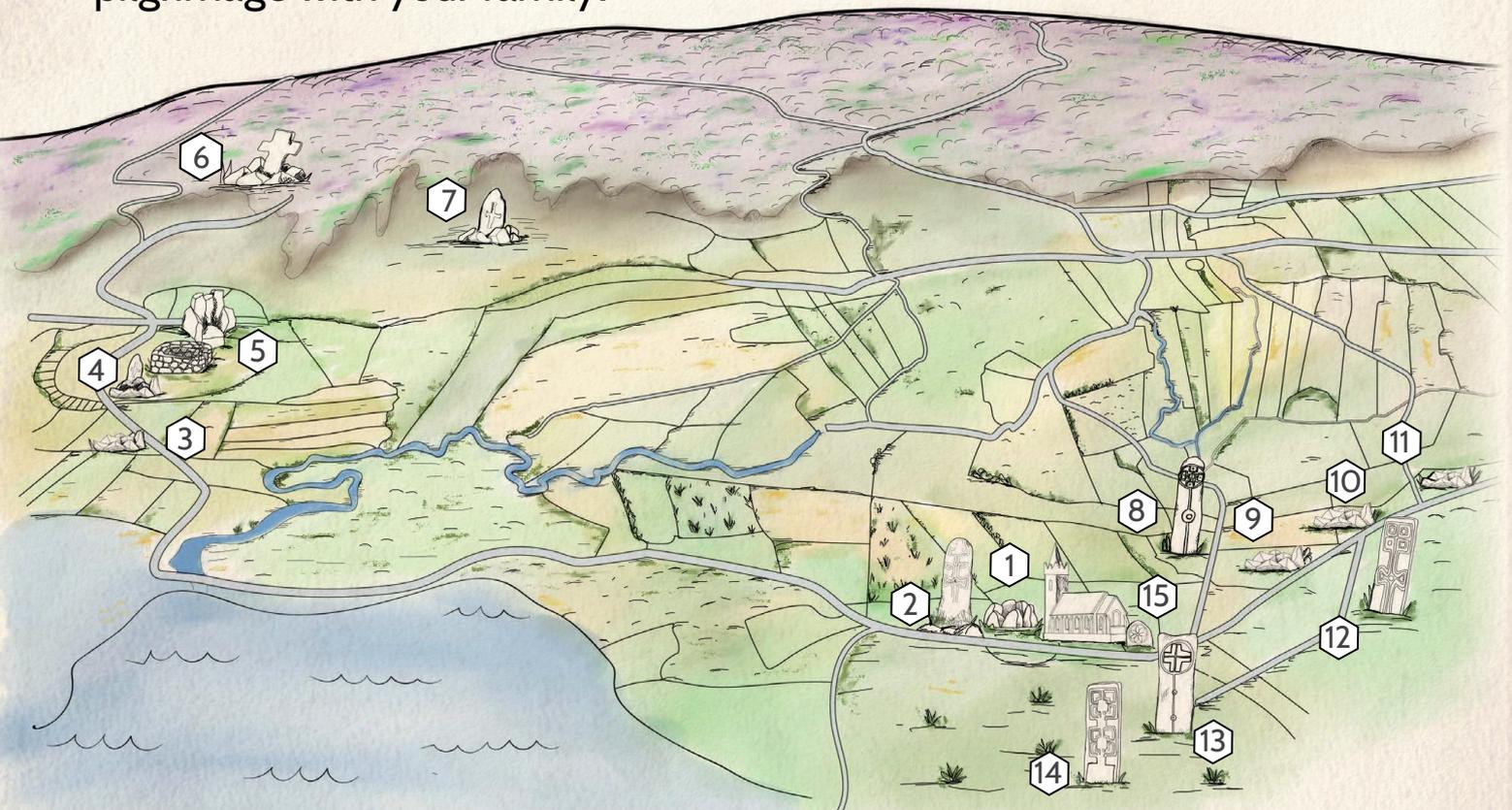


St. Columb's  
Cathedral, Co. Derry



Gleann Cholm Cille  
station 2, Co. Donegal

Here is a map of Turas Cholm Cille, Gleann Cholm Cille. You can follow the pilgrimage by visiting the different stations (numbered on the map). There are 15 in total. Remember to wear an oak leaf when you walk the pilgrimage with your family!



## PAGE 24: IRELAND AFTER ST. COLMCILLE

520/521 aD

St. Colmcille is born in County Donegal.

545 aD

St. Colmcille founds his first church in Derry.

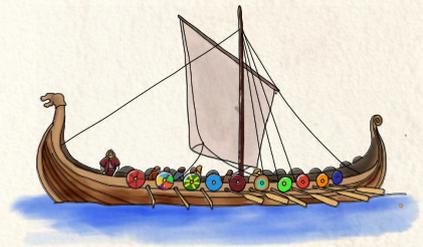
563 aD

St. Colmcille copies St. Finnian's book.  
Battle of Cúil Dreimhne .

St. Colmcille leaves for Iona.

597 aD

St. Colmcille dies on Iona.



795 aD

Vikings attack Iona.

800 aD

Book of Kells is written.



1169 aD

Normans invade Ireland.

1607 aD

Flight of the Earls from Donegal.

1689 aD

Siege of Derry.



1798 aD

The 1798 Rebellion.

1845 aD

The Great Irish Famine begins.

1914 aD

World War I begins.

1916 aD

Easter Rising.

1921 aD

War of Independence ends.

2020/  
2021 aD

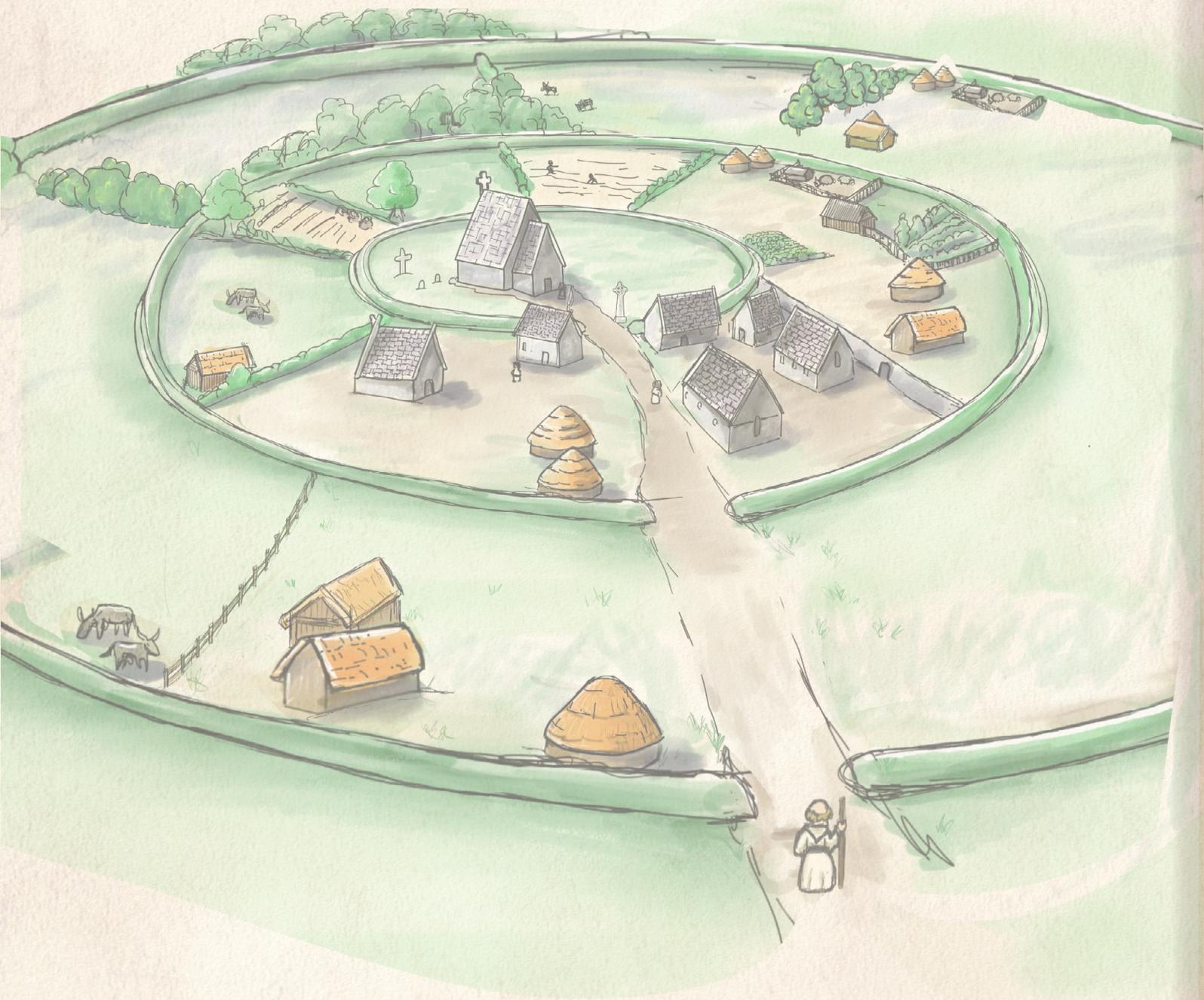
St. Colmcille's 1500th Birthday.

NAME	CONTENT	LINK OR LOCATION NAME
<b>Colmcille Life and Legacy</b>	Great interactive website for pupils where they can watch videos, read ebooks and learn more about St. Colmcille, monasteries and the Book of Kells.	<a href="https://ccea.org.uk/colmcille/index.php">https://ccea.org.uk/colmcille/index.php</a>
<b>The Book of Kells Primary School Teachers' Guide</b>	Lots of fun facts for pupils with great images and activities about St. Colmcille and the Book of Kells.	<a href="http://www.tcd.ie/visitors/assets/bok/education/book-of-kells-primary-teachers-guide_updated-07-09-20.pdf">www.tcd.ie/visitors/assets/bok/education/book-of-kells-primary-teachers-guide_updated-07-09-20.pdf</a>
<b>Illuminating Colmcille, A pilgrimage through colour</b>	A fantastic colouring book about St. Colmcille's life and legacy.	<a href="https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/heritage/publications/">https://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/heritage/publications/</a>
<b>St. Columba Heritage Centre</b>	Youtube video about the life of St. Colmcille	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl8q8fHriMw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sl8q8fHriMw</a>
<b>Nerve Centre Digital Book of Kells</b>	Collection of videos about St. Colmcille and the Book of Kells made by pupils in Derry-Londonderry	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTvQgt-gMm8NlXdY8evnikL-rzRS6HLMMxq">https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLTvQgt-gMm8NlXdY8evnikL-rzRS6HLMMxq</a>
<b>Ask About Ireland</b>	A useful resource for pupils to learn more about St. Colmcille and other educational topics.	<a href="http://www.askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/looking-at-places/donegal/people-in-history/saint-colmcille/">http://www.askaboutireland.ie/learning-zone/primary-students/looking-at-places/donegal/people-in-history/saint-colmcille/</a>

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<b>Slí Cholmcille</b>	A great resource to discover more about St. Colmcille's travels and pilgrimage sites in Derry, Donegal and Scotland.	
<b>Audit of Columban Heritage</b>	Interesting information about the places St. Colmcille is connected to in Derry and Donegal.	<a href="https://www.donegalcoco.ie/media/donegalcountyc/heritage/pdfs/AUDIT%20OF%20COLUMBAN%20HERITAGE%20mid%20res.pdf">https://www.donegalcoco.ie/media/donegalcountyc/heritage/pdfs/AUDIT%20OF%20COLUMBAN%20HERITAGE%20mid%20res.pdf</a>
<b>Schools Folklore Collection</b>	A fantastic collection of handwritten stories and folklore by primary school pupils in the 1930s.	<a href="https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes">https://www.duchas.ie/en/cbes</a>
<b>Donegal County Archives</b>	A useful resource for information about Donegal's history.	<a href="http://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/">http://www.donegalcoco.ie/culture/archives/</a>
<b>St Colmcille's Donegal - A Journey Through his Homeland</b>	The audioguide takes you through St. Colmcille's homeland.	<a href="https://www.abartaheritage.ie/archaeology-irish-history-audio-books/">https://www.abartaheritage.ie/archaeology-irish-history-audio-books/</a>
<b>Colmcille Heritage Centre</b>	A heritage centre which tells the life story of St. Colmcille through interpretative displays, audiovisual film and replicas.	Gartan, Church Hill, Letterkenny, Co. Donegal.







**Comhairle Contae  
Dhún na nGall**  
Donegal County Council



comhairle chontae na mí  
meath county council

Clár Éire Ildánach  
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