



Strand | The Island of Ireland

Strand Unit: Identity and heritage	
Stage	4 (Fifth and sixth classes)
Subject	History
Learning Outcome	<i>Through appropriately playful and engaging learning experiences children should be able to explore significant developments and/or conflicts in different eras of Irish history such as during the Neolithic Period, Bronze and Iron Ages, the Early Christian Period, Medieval Period, Early Modern Period and Modern Ireland.</i>
Relevant Key Competencies	AL – Being an active learner C – Being creative AC – Being an active citizen'
Topic: Early Christian Ireland	The period of Early Christian Ireland (c. 400–800 Common Era / CE) marks a time of profound cultural, artistic and religious transformation. The arrival of Christianity brought new ways of living, learning and expressing identity, while many aspects of earlier Celtic traditions continued to shape daily life. By exploring this era, children can appreciate how belief systems, craftsmanship and community life intertwined to form a distinctive Irish culture that influenced Europe for centuries.

Why is learning about this topic important?	What will this look like in the classroom?
<p>Learning about Early Christian Ireland helps children develop historical understanding, empathy and curiosity about how faith, innovation and creativity shaped Irish society.</p> <p>Children have opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● discover how Christianity spread across Ireland and how monastic settlements became centres of learning, art and community life ● explore how life changed and what endured from earlier times, examining homes, farming, art and beliefs ● connect local and national history by investigating nearby monastic sites, round towers or ogham stones ● develop historical thinking through engagement with artefacts, images, legends and creative activities, such as map-making, drama or digital storytelling 	<p>Children have opportunities to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● explore and interpret different sources from Early Christian Ireland (<i>e.g., illuminated manuscripts, carvings, ruins, legends or artefacts</i>) ● investigate how monastic communities lived, worked and influenced society through religion, art and education ● appreciate what aspects of Irish life and culture endured, such as craftsmanship, oral storytelling and connections between learning and faith ● use creative methods (<i>e.g., model-making, art, role play or digital media</i>) to communicate understanding of life in Early Christian Ireland

Ideas for children working as historians

Concept	Ideas
Time and chronology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Place Early Christian Ireland (c. 400–800 CE) within a simple timeline of Irish history, linking it to the Iron Age and later medieval period Use a classroom display or digital timeline to mark key developments, such as the arrival of St. Patrick, the founding of monasteries (e.g., <i>Clonmacnoise, Glendalough, etc.</i>) and the creation of famous manuscripts Plot local Early Christian sites, artefacts or ruins on the class timeline to show how local and national history are connected
Cause and effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore why Christianity spread in Ireland (e.g., <i>missionary work, trade, and political alliances</i>) and how this led to new communities and practices Investigate how the rise of monasteries changed daily life, influencing farming, art and education Reflect on how Early Christian beliefs and practices still shape Irish life today, (e.g., <i>in place names, festivals and symbols</i>)
Change and continuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare life in Ireland before and after Christianity's arrival (e.g., <i>religion, housing, art, farming, learning, etc.</i>) Examine how Early Christian communities blended older Celtic traditions with Christian ideas, creating continuity alongside change Discuss how aspects of Early Christian culture (e.g., <i>art, learning, language, monastic ruins, etc.</i>) continue to influence Ireland's heritage and identity
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Imagine the experiences of people living in a monastery, such as a monk copying manuscripts, a craftsman creating a chalice or a visitor seeking refuge Write a diary entry, letter or short narrative in role, expressing hopes, beliefs or daily challenge Conduct a role play or drama to envisage how people carried out basic daily tasks (e.g., <i>preparing and cooking food, heating their living spaces, etc.</i>)
Multi-perspectivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compare how different groups in Early Christian Ireland (e.g., <i>monks, farmers, craftspeople, and rulers</i>) might have viewed the spread of Christianity and the growth of monasteries Explore how accounts from different sources (e.g., <i>annals, legends, archaeological evidence, or modern historians</i>) can tell varied stories about the same events or people Discuss how perspectives on Early Christian Ireland have changed over time, considering how modern visitors, archaeologists or local communities might interpret its heritage today

Skill	Ideas
Historical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore how the spread of Christianity changed Ireland, recognising that belief systems and leaders can shape a country's culture • Consider the experiences of people in monasteries or local communities to build empathy and perspective • Recognise that different sources (<i>e.g., artefacts, ruins, legends, texts, etc.</i>) tell different parts of the story and evaluate what each reveals
Chronological thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sequence key developments — the arrival of Christianity, the building of monasteries, the creation of manuscripts and later Viking raids • Situate Early Christian Ireland within the wider timeline of Irish and European history • Notice patterns in where monasteries were built (<i>i.e., near rivers, crossroads or coastlines</i>) and discuss why location was important
Using evidence and sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore artefacts and images such as crosses, manuscripts, bells, or carvings to gather clues about life in Early Christian Ireland • Examine digital reconstructions or photographs of monasteries and reflect on how their layout shows daily routines and priorities • Read or listen to short stories and legends (<i>e.g., St. Brigid's cloak, St. Columba's travels</i>) and discuss what they reveal about values and beliefs
Questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate questions such as “<i>Why did people become monks?</i>”, “<i>What was life like in a monastery?</i>” or “<i>Why are some monasteries still standing today?</i>” • Conduct a mini-inquiry into a local monastic site, ogham stone or artefact, using photos, maps, or interviews • Develop follow-up questions during investigations, deepening understanding of how evidence can provide different answers
Interpreting and analysing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare different accounts or depictions of Early Christian Ireland (<i>e.g., written records versus archaeological findings</i>) to identify similarities, differences and possible biases • Analyse what changes in art, architecture or language suggest about broader shifts in belief, power or daily life during this period • Draw reasoned conclusions from evidence, explaining how particular artefacts or stories help us understand the influence of Christianity on communities and culture

Ideas for children’s learning through the elements:

Inquiring	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pose questions such as “<i>What changes did Christianity bring to Ireland?</i>” or “<i>How did monasteries help people and communities?</i>” Encourage children to predict answers before researching and to refine their questions as they learn more• Investigate local or regional links to Early Christian Ireland (e.g., <i>visiting nearby monastic ruins, examining carved stones or crosses, or researching place names that reveal religious or historical origins</i>)• Examine historical maps, written records or digital reconstructions showing how monasteries spread across Ireland. Children could trace trade routes, pilgrimage paths or centres of learning to see how knowledge and culture moved through the island
Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present findings through posters, digital slideshows, podcasts or short oral presentations explaining how Early Christian communities lived, worked and learned. Include visuals such as maps, sketches, or artefact images to strengthen explanations• Create diary entries, letters, or short plays depicting life in a monastery. Through role-play, children can imagine the experiences of monks, students, or travellers visiting a monastic settlement, exploring daily routines• Use art and design to illustrate illuminated manuscripts or create Celtic patterns inspired by Book of Kells imagery. Children might experiment with traditional motifs, colour and symbolism to reflect the creativity of Early Christian artists
Understanding and connecting	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain how Early Christian Ireland shaped Irish identity, learning and art by linking the work of monks, scholars and craftspeople to Ireland’s cultural heritage today• Connect local historical features (e.g., <i>round towers, crosses or holy wells</i>) to Ireland’s broader story, recognising how local heritage contributes to the national picture of Early Christian life• Identify similarities between Early Christian learning and modern forms of community and education. Children might compare monastic learning with today’s schools or libraries

Ideas for teaching:

Pedagogical approach	Ideas
Story	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tell the story of St. Brigid, St. Patrick, or St. Columba, highlighting values of courage, learning and faith• Use extracts from myths and chronicles to spark discussion about what is legend and what is history• Encourage children to retell or dramatise key moments, linking storytelling with historical interpretation
Place-based learning and fieldwork outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit or virtually explore a local Early Christian site (e.g., <i>monastic ruins, round tower, cross</i>)• Record observations through sketches, notes or photographs, identifying what the site reveals about daily life• Create maps or displays linking these local features with the national story of Early Christian Ireland
Dialogic pedagogy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a range of sources (e.g., <i>maps, artefact images, texts, etc.</i>) and invite children to investigate: “<i>What can we learn about Early Christian Ireland from these clues?</i>”• Give groups of children a selection of artefacts and ask them to infer what kind of place they might have come from (<i>‘Archaeology in a Box’</i>)• Encourage groups to share interpretations and justify conclusions using evidence

Ideas for integration:

Subject	Learning Outcome	Ideas
Art	Strand: <i>Performing and presenting</i> Organise, structure, perform, present and share work in Art, Drama, Music and/or a combination of various artforms in impactful ways.	Children may create and perform a short drama set in Early Christian Ireland. For example, they work in small groups to write and act scenes involving monks at a monastic school, a craftsman making illuminated letters or a pilgrim arriving at a monastery. After performing, they discuss: “Which scenes felt realistic?”, “What might we have guessed/made up?” and reflect on how that performance helped them understand life in Early Christian Ireland.
Language	Strand: <i>Writing</i> Engage positively and purposefully while creating text in a variety of genres, other languages where appropriate and across the curriculum.	Children create a short informative brochure or leaflet for visitors to a local monastery using descriptive language and persuasive tone to help people understand its history and importance. This gives them purpose and encourages them to use historical vocabulary (e.g., <i>monastery, scribe, vellum, manuscript, pilgrimage, etc.</i>) in context.
STEM Education	Strand: <i>Materials</i> Identify and discuss the properties of materials that need to be considered when constructing objects, structures, fashion and food	Children explore materials and engineering related to Early Christian artefacts. They investigate how metal, stone or vellum were used in manuscripts, crosses or bells. They might research what properties (e.g., <i>weight, durability, design</i>) those materials had then compared to modern materials. For instance, design and test small model versions of a bell or metal clasp using different materials, then explain which would be more practical in Early Christian times and why.

Ideas for assessment:

Assessment method	Ideas
Teacher observation	During a group activity exploring images of monasteries or artefacts, observe how children ask questions, draw conclusions and connect evidence to daily life in the past.
Questioning	Children respond to higher-order questions posed by the teacher such as “ <i>Why were monasteries important beyond religion?</i> ” or “ <i>What do these artefacts tell us about Early Christian society?</i> ” Children’s responses will demonstrate understanding of cause, change and impact.
Project-based learning	Children create a project (e.g., poster, digital presentation or model) exploring an aspect of Early Christian Ireland (e.g., <i>daily life in a monastery, art and manuscripts, or local heritage</i>). They present findings showing how they gathered, organised and interpreted evidence, and identified causes and effects.

Progression

Progression in Social and Environmental Education involves the gradual development and extension of key concepts and the skills of working as a historian and geographer, enabling children to question, investigate and interpret the world around them - past and present - with increasing depth and confidence. Please note that more detailed, specific guidance on progression within Social and Environmental Education will follow in due course.

In the case of the concept of ‘*Time and chronology*’, children’s learning across the four stages could be described as follows:

‘*Time and Chronology*’ involves understanding a sequence of events (past, present and future) and how they relate to each other over time



The child:

creates very simple timelines using objects and pictures to order recent events

creates more detailed timelines using objects, pictures and other appropriate artefacts to order familiar events

analyses and compares key events in the school or local community over time identifying patterns and changes and presenting findings using appropriate timelines

evaluates the significance of key events in the school or local community, interpreting how patterns and changes have shaped current practices

In the case of the skill of 'Chronological thinking', children's learning across the four stages could be described as follows:

'Chronological thinking' involves understanding and organising events in the order they happened, recognising how time influences change and continuity in the past.



The child:

creates very simple timelines using objects and pictures to order recent events

creates more detailed timelines using objects, pictures and other appropriate artefacts to order familiar events

analyses and compares key events in the school or local community over time identifying patterns and changes and presenting findings using appropriate timelines

evaluates the significance of key events in the school or local community, interpreting how patterns and changes have shaped current practices

Ideas for resources

- Images or models of monasteries, round towers, ogham stones, crosses
- Replicas or photos of artefacts such as bells, chalices, manuscripts
- Maps showing the spread of monasteries in Ireland
- Resources connected with the locality
- Documentary clips or museum websites with reconstructions of Early Christian life
- Local heritage resources or virtual tours
- Short legends or folklore accounts of early saints
- Art materials for creating illuminated letters or Celtic designs
- Audio clips of chants or Irish-language prayers to evoke monastic soundscapes