

AR2200

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### Cistercian Reflections

As grey, tiered hills loom above and the sky bears down upon the land, a visitor to the Burren can't help but feel solitude and perhaps desolation surround them. As unwelcoming as it sounds, this bleak landscape became home to the Cistercian monks of Corcomroe Abbey, a building whose architecture emphasizes both the orderliness and functionality of the Benedictine Rule, yet allows the Irish expression of beauty in its interior details. Located in County Clare, the abbey is smaller than its brothers in the Southeast of Ireland and lacks the rigidity of the Cistercian ideal in architecture, both in mathematical precision and style. Roger Stalley, a scholar of Medieval architecture, provides much of the evidence presented for these observations of Corcomroe, and the following interpretation of its function as a Cistercian monastery. Though most of the buildings and rooms typical of Cistercian architecture are either non-existent or no longer standing, the daily life and practices of the abbey's inhabitants were likely concurrent to their brothers at Jerpoint or Mellifont Abbey.

The construction of the abbey was begun in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, but the community suffered a combination of famine and war, and the resulting poverty led to deterioration in construction and maintenance (Jones 2004, 122). What remains of the monastery are broken walls, high arches of the roofless church, and beautifully carved Romanesque decoration in the mostly-intact presbytery. While much is missing, it is still possible to see the well-proportioned plan typical of Cistercian monasteries of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. Michael Mac Mahon

provides a floor plan of an abbey based on Jerpoint, illustrating the dimensions and specific rooms (see figure 4). The abbey of Corcomroe shares the basic features of a grassy courtyard, now a cemetery, with the north wall formed by the church and the east by a chapter house or dormitory. Most monasteries of the time were larger, with the courtyard fully enclosed by the walls of the church, the kitchen and refectory, the abbot's rooms and chapter house, and lastly the communal dormitory (Jones 2004, 123).

It has already been stated that the Cistercians were well known for their orderly ways, but the extent to which their religious beliefs and practices influenced the structure of their monasteries and daily lives is unique. Mac Mahon best describes the community as follows: “The Cistercian way of life was based on prayer, study, and manual labor according to the Benedictine Rule...self-sufficiency was all-important,” (2000, 4). In order to lead this life effectively, the monasteries were organized to reflect the expectations of piety and efficiency.

The importance of the church, for example, is indicated by its foremost position and size. In nearly all Cistercian monasteries it is located to the north of the cloister garth, with aisles separating the inner structure from the outside world. In the case of Corcomroe, there are two side chapels on either side of the presbytery, though in larger monasteries there were usually four. These were used for private prayer and reflection, as well as providing space for individual masses (Stalley 1987, 57). One of the most recognizable features of medieval monasteries besides the church is the large square cloister surrounded by the ambulatory. It not only provided



*Figure 1. Southern wall and cloister of Corcomroe.*

centralization for the monastery's layout, but allowed space for reflection and reading (Stalley 1987, 51). These private and semi-public spaces devoted to prayer and meditation are present at Corcomroe, though on a smaller scale. It is important to note the proportions used at the site, for the Cistercians enforced a strict rule of uniformity that even extended to architecture. Their "unity of customs, of chants, of books; one charity, one Rule, one life," is reflected in nearly all the Irish Cistercian monasteries, as they all have an almost perfectly square cloister (Stalley 1999, 188). In the case of Corcomroe, the cloister is 65' by 56'.6", smaller by comparison to Graiguenamanagh and Hore, both of which are also perfect squares, 119' and 76' respectively, (Stalley 1987, 54). In most Cistercian monasteries the dimensions for the Cloister were applied to other parts of the building, either halved or quartered.

While Corcomroe exemplifies desire for mathematical equilibrium in the church's proportions, the inaccuracy of the overall architecture becomes evident under further examination. The church's east and west sides are misaligned, and the ceiling cuts off the topmost window of the presbytery. This should not be seen as separation from the Cistercian value system, though, but rather poor planning and construction on the part of the masons (Stalley 1994, 33-34). However, a specific feature of Corcomroe that deviates



*Figure 2. Chevron rib vaulting of presbytery.*

from the Cistercian ideal of simplicity is the carved detail work in the presbytery. The architecture of most Cistercian abbeys in continental Europe is "straightforward and free from non-essentials" as the "superfluous decoration" was thought to be distracting to the monks and a

“dangerous luxury,” (Stalley 1971, 90). The knot work and chevron detailing on the rib-vault of the presbytery clearly defies this standard (see figure 2 and 7). Carvings of foliage and faces seen in figures 3 and 6 are also present in other Cistercian abbeys, like Knockmooy, and Stalley observes that “most of the stylistic features...are parallel elsewhere west of the Shannon,” (1994 34, 39). Despite these discrepancies in the style of architecture, the rest of Corcomroe’s layout adheres to the Cistercian’s love of order and separation from the outside world.

This Cistercian isolation from society carried over into the architecture that separated the ordained monks from the lay brothers who worked for the church. Not only were there two sets of dormitories, but there were also two refectories, as seen in the provided floor plan. The church itself was divided into two parts, the nave and monk’s choir, separated by a screen (Stalley 1994, 36). In Corcomroe the dormitory may have been

above the chapter house, located on the east wall of the cloister, and there is no evidence for a second dormitory or even refectory, though that may be due to the small population of the monastery (Jones 2004, 123). While both sets of brothers performed manual labor in accordance with the Rule, the ordained spent more time in reading and reflection than their lay companions. Segregation of tasks also meant a segregation of space, and similar to the church, the chapter house reflects this. It was “left open to the cloister walk, with unglazed windows flanking the entrance,” so the lay brothers could listen to readings without stepping into the chapter house itself (Stalley 1999, 189).

Just as the brother’s lives served the purpose of adhering to Cistercian practices, the



*Figure 3.*

buildings they used served the purpose of providing them with optimal functionality. As referred to above, the chapter house was a place for reading, specifically the chapters of the Benedictine Rule. The room was also host to confession, prayers, and dispensation of the abbot's advice on spiritual matters. It is located on the east wall of the cloister, separated from the southern transept of the church by the sacristy. Oftentimes the doorway was large and richly decorated, such as at Graiguenamanagh, further indicating its importance (Stalley 1987, 162). Corcomroe did not have such large rooms, even for its chapter house, but it is still clear that it "was thus the focus of order and discipline within the monastery," (Stalley 1999, 188). For those monasteries whose dormitories were located above the chapter house, there was a set of "night stairs" leading into the church for easy access to midnight prayers, seen specifically at Corcomroe (Mac Mahon 2000, 7). Another room that bore its function in name is the calefactory, literally the room that was made warm. Here the monks could gather on cold winter days for readings and prayer, the elderly could alleviate their rheumatism, and tasks that required the heating of animal skins, like drying parchment or oiling shoes, were carried out (Stalley 1987, 169). Other buildings unattached to the monastery also had certain functions that allowed the monks to live self-sufficiently. These included the dove-cote, infirmary, brewery, and guesthouse (O Carragain, 6<sup>th</sup> of September, 2013). Again, these buildings are non-existent at Corcomroe, though that doesn't mean that the monks didn't carry out the same tasks on a smaller scale.

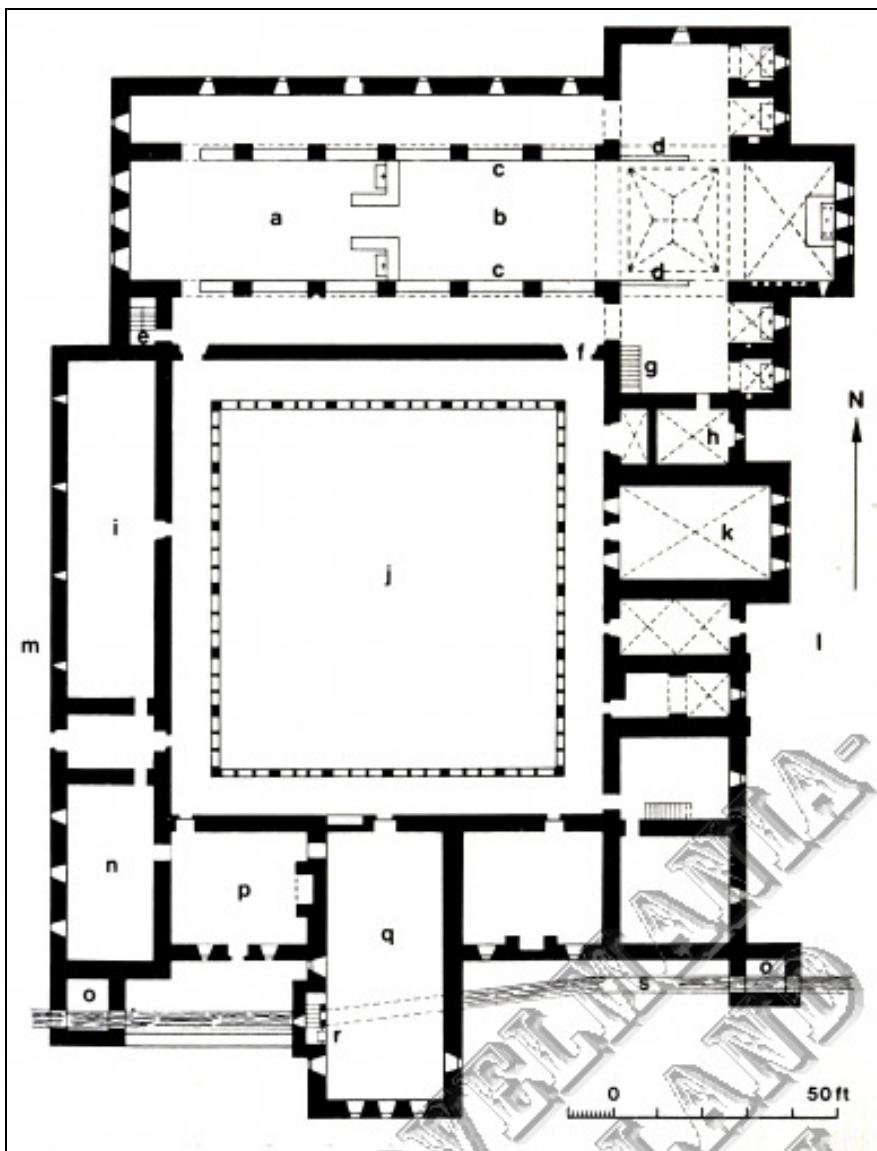
What Corcomroe lacks in size and grandeur, it makes up for in historical significance, not just regionally but also in the broader context of Ireland. The development of Cistercian monasteries in Ireland was nationwide, as people found the order's rules and simplistic life style appealing in a time of constant upheaval. In the remote hills and valleys of Ireland the Cistercians offered a well-regulated life, "everywhere peace, everywhere serenity and a

marvelous freedom from the tumult of the world” (Stalley 1999, 177). Even kings would retire behind the monastic walls in their final years, later buried in the church. King Conor O’Brian’s tomb is an example of this, found on the north wall of Corcomroe’s presbytery. While the Cistercians focused on bringing the teachings of St. Benedict to Ireland, they inadvertently brought new architectural ideas that changed the Irish landscape. Both early Romanesque and Gothic design leaked into the decorative architecture, blending with local craftsmanship to create unique Irish styles (Stalley 1987, 2-3).

If and how Corcomroe will continue to shape Ireland is difficult to say. In a world where secularism is increasingly uniform, religious institutions have lost credence and their historical significance is often vilified. At the very least, it can be said that Corcomroe will continue to be recognized for its fusion of distinctive decoration and Cistercian sobriety.

## Photos

With the exception of Figure 4, all photos are produced by Rory Nachbar



*Jerpoint Abbey ground-plan*

- a Lay brothers' choir;
- b Monks' choir;
- c Stalls;
- d Screen;
- e Lay night stairs;
- f Processional door;
- g Night stairs;
- h Sacristy;
- i Cellars, etc.;
- j Cloister;
- k Chapter house;
- l Monks' dormitory above;
- m Lay dormitory above;
- n Lay frater;
- o Necessarium;
- p Kitchen;
- q Frater;
- r Pulpit;
- s Drain

Figure 4. Plan of a typical Cistercian monastery, based on Jerpoint abbey.

\*Image found in Mac Mahon 2000, see website citation for downloaded image above



*Figure 5.* Western wall of church.



*Figure 6.*



*Figure 7.*

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