

Video 2

Glendalough: Artefacts and Early Christianity

Video Transcript



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National Museum of Ireland
Ard-Mhúsaem na hÉireann



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Glendalough: Artefacts and Early Christianity

Voiceover:

The National Museum of Ireland – Archaeology has a huge collection of objects from our past, but why are these so important? In this film, we look at the arrival of Christianity in Ireland, and show how these objects can tell us about the impact Christianity had on the people who lived here, and the changes it brought to Ireland.

Siobhán Pierce, Education Officer, National Museum of Ireland:

There are many different religions in Ireland today and there were many different religions in the past, and we know this from objects like this one. And this has three faces, it's a three-faced Celtic god. It's associated with the Celtic god, Lugh, and it comes from Corleck in County Cavan. This is the time that we would associate with the Celts.

Image on Screen: The 'Corleck Head' Corleck, Co. Cavan, 1st – 2nd century AD

Matthew Seaver, Archaeologist, National Museum of Ireland:

Yeah, and of course this is around the time when the great stories around ancient Irish heroes like Cúchulainn were based, which are often centred in ancient Irish sites like Emain Macha.

Image on Screen: Loughnashade Horn, Loughnashade, Co. Armagh, 1st century BC

Siobhán: And the Loughnashade Trumpet was discovered nearby, not far from Navan Fort at Loughnashade, or the Lake of the Treasures. Many objects were found at that ceremonial site.

Matthew: Yeah, with the really distinctive artwork on the bottom of it. And then a little bit later, you have the Romans. And of course the Romans never invaded Ireland, but we have evidence for contact from the earliest stage. And then in the 4th to 5th century, we see things like the Balline Hoard, which are chopped up bits of silver plate, which were being paid probably by Roman Britons to Irish Kings to stop them raiding parts of their shoreline.

Image on Screen: Balline Hoard of Roman Silver, Balline, Co. Limerick, c. 300 - 400 AD

And we know at this time then, they're coming into contact with the early Christians, and early Christian people are then travelling to Ireland.

Siobhán: So it's like if you saw your sister in your jumper you'd know "Ah, she's been in my bedroom and borrowed it." And it's the same thing with the evidence of the Roman hoards here. We know there was contact between Ireland and the Romans by the objects that we find here.

Matthew: Exactly. That's kinda like, that's what the role of the archaeologist or the historian is – it's like a detective piecing things together. And you can see that kind of continuation and borrowing then as you mentioned, the designs on the horn are very like the designs on a stone from Mullaghmast, in County Kildare, which comes from the 6th century, and isn't that far from Glendalough.

Image on Screen: Mullaghmast Stone, Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare, 500 - 600 AD

Siobhán: And Christianity had a huge impact on Ireland and the lives of people here, and you can see that through the different objects that we have here in the museum. So we're gonna take a look now and see how life changed for people in Ireland, because of Christianity.

Voiceover:

The objects from the Glendalough Exhibition hold many clues and evidence of the arrival of Christianity in Ireland. Each object from this famous Christian site is a piece of a puzzle which, when we look at it altogether, can tell us about the people alive at the time, what they believed, and how they lived.

Siobhán: So, what can a piece of burnt wood and an early Christian hand-bell tell us about the buildings and the valley of Glendalough, one and a half thousand years ago? We all know Saint Patrick and Saint Brigid, but Glendalough had its own saint, Saint Kevin. According to the early Irish annals, he was born in Leinster and died in 618 AD. He was buried here in the valley, and his grave became a very famous place of pilgrimage.

Voiceover:

The old Irish annals tell us that Saint Kevin brought Christianity to this area. He left a monastery near Tallaght in Dublin, went into the wilds of the Glendalough Valley, and started what would become a powerful and famous monastery. As the centuries passed, the annals had more and more elaborate tales of what he did – banishing monsters, carrying hot coals without being burned, and even turning cheese into stone.

Siobhán: These myths and legends sound very, very interesting, but when were they written down?

Matthew: Well, most of the stories about Saint Kevin weren't written down 'til about, at least 300 years after he had died, and then they were added to, and added to, and changed over time, so we can't really be sure exactly which are the earliest stories about him.

Siobhán: Okay, well what can archaeology tell us then, about people who lived here in the time of Saint Kevin?

Image on Screen: St. Mary's Church or The Lady's Chapel, Glendalough, c. 1100 AD

Matthew: Well, most of the buildings, the church buildings in the valley, they don't date 'til maybe 500 years after Saint Kevin was meant to have died.

Image on Screen: St. Kevin's Church, Glendalough, c. 1100 AD

So really the earliest evidence was found actually behind us here at this, the Caher, this stone circular monument, where we found a ditch around it. And in that ditch was charcoal.

Image on Screen: The Caher, Glendalough, 6th to 12th century AD

Siobhán: The same kind of charcoal that you'd use for a barbecue?

Matthew: Yeah! So burned wood – and the burned wood was found along with bits of what's called slag, or metalworking waste, from making iron. And we know from early Irish laws that they were meant to have a sack of charcoal for making iron. This really early evidence, it shows us that a blacksmith was working here at the *Caher*, at the time of Saint Kevin.

Siobhán: So when they were using the charcoal back then, what kind of objects would the blacksmith have made?

Matthew: Well, the most important object that would've been made at an early monastic site would've been an iron bell, and we have one in our exhibition, which was found quite close to Glendalough, in a place called Knockatemple.

Image on Screen: Hand-bell, Knockatemple, Co. Wicklow, 8th – 9th century AD

So the little piece of charcoal that we found in the ditch with the metalworking waste, shows that there were people here connected with the working of metal, at the time of Saint Kevin.

Siobhán: So it really is evidence then that Christianity was in the valley at that time.

Matthew: Yeah, it's the earliest evidence we have for people here during that time period.

Voiceover:

So what can we learn about Christianity and the past, from looking at objects? Often, we learn a lot about our past from the artwork on these objects. The early Christian styles combine the earlier Celtic styles with woven strands called interlace, often containing many interwoven beasts and birds and mythical creatures. They were used to decorate books, like *The Book of Kells*, stone crosses, and also metal objects.

Image on Screen: The Ardagh Chalice, Ardagh, Co. Limerick, 8th century AD

Matthew: So the most famous is this, the Ardagh Chalice. It's a silver cup which was used in the Christian mass, and it was found in a place near Ardagh in County Limerick, by two boys digging for potatoes. It shows a whole range of decorative techniques that were used in the early Medieval period, early Christian period, in the 8th century, including glass, amber, quartz, silver, and gold wire. And the gold wire is threaded for a band of strange creatures, with interlocking arms and legs which depict scenes from the Bible. And this is probably the finest example of early Christian art.

Great monasteries like Glendalough accumulated wealth, and they sought to hire craftsmen to make beautiful objects. And we have one of them here today in the case – this beautiful

gilt mount. And it's a small piece of metal, beautiful interlaced design, copper alloy, but it's made to look like gold, so it's gilt. And it was part of a horse harness.

Image on Screen: Gilt Horse Mount, Seven Churches or Camaderry, Co. Wicklow, 8th century AD

They would have been working both in metal and in stone, so there's a beautiful cross also, the Market Cross, which is in another style, called Hiberno-Urnes style, so it's a Viking-influenced style of art, from a little bit later. But this object is from around the same time as the Ardagh Chalice.

Image on Screen: 3-D scan, The Market Cross, Glendalough, 12th century AD

Siobhán: Okay, and relics, I mean, are the greatest evidence we have of all the artwork that was done, I suppose, in early Christian Ireland.

Image on Screen: St. Patrick's Bell Shrine, c. 1100 AD

We have the beautiful St. Patrick's Bell Shrine, we even have a Shrine of St. Lachtin's Arm.

Image on Screen: Shrine of St. Lachtin's Arm, early 12th century AD

And a relic is, of course, anything that can be associated with a saint. It can be something they used or wore, or it can be part of their body. And of course, they're enshrined in these beautiful casings of gold and silver and beautiful metalwork. But are there any relics from Glendalough?

Matthew: Because of a series of events, perhaps things like, there were three different Viking raids at Glendalough, and then after that, later on in the later Medieval period, Glendalough became abandoned, and maybe its relics were put away and taken away from Glendalough. But we know they were there, because in 790 we know that the relics were taken on a tour of the territory, which Glendalough, the monastery, controlled. But the closest thing that we have from Glendalough, that is an actual artefact of evidence of what might have been there, is probably this plaster cast that we can see here.

Image on Screen: Plaster Cast from 'The Priest's House' Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, Original 12th century, Replica 19th century

So it's a cast made of a stone that's in Glendalough over a doorway. And what it shows is an abbot, and then it's got a bishop on the other side, who both would have been living at Glendalough, and they're holding two objects. The abbot is holding a hand-bell, which we've seen already, so a really old sign of the Church's power. And the bishop is holding a crozier, which is a kind of crooked staff, covered in all kinds of beautiful ornament, and we have many of them here in the museum.

Image on Screen: Croziers, late 11th – early 12th century

Neither of these objects survive for Glendalough, but we have references to them, and we know that they were there.

Siobhán: It's really hard to make that out on the stone Matt, I mean were there other ways that the site was recorded? Because, I suppose, the weather has worn away the stone an awful lot.

Matthew: Well, what we're very lucky is that from the 18th century onwards, artists were going to Glendalough and they were recording the details on the stonework.

Image on Screen: Illustration of stone at 'The Priest's House', 19th century

So before this stone was broken someone else recorded the complete stone. Someone then recorded it again in the 19th century, and again at the end of the 19th century, so using those and the plaster cast, we can piece together what this stone looked like. And we think it might've been over the building that was used to contain the relics, a place called the 'Priest's House' in Glendalough.

Siobhán: These days Glendalough is really popular with hikers and ramblers. They might come here for a two or three hour walk around the lakes and mountain ridges. The pilgrims however, it might've taken them two to three weeks to get here. And the early Irish annals tell us that Glendalough was at least a one day's walk from civilization.

Voiceover:

So, who was coming and why were they coming? Many different people came here – some were very religious and came from far away and would have travelled across the sea to get here. Others may have been seeking refuge, or to connect with God. We know this from some objects we have found at Glendalough.

Image on Screen: Jet Cross, Seven Churches or Camaderry, Co. Wicklow, 11th – 12th century AD

Siobhán: This cross was discovered during recent excavations in the Valley of Glendalough. It's made of a material called jet, and jet is found in Whitby, in England. So it might've been worn by a monk who was maybe coming on pilgrimage to the valley. But I think you said others were coming to Glendalough as well?

Matthew: So apart from priests, bishops, abbots and nuns, you would also, there's evidence in historical sources for quite important people, local and regional kings, who were coming to stay at Glendalough, probably making up for the lives they'd led, maybe of violence and looking for forgiveness for their sins in their final years, at Glendalough. There are other objects then in the exhibition which kind of illustrate how far people might have come and the objects that came with them. And one in particular, beside the Jet Cross, is a piece of a tile made out of a stone called porphyry.

Image on Screen: Porphyry tile fragment, Temple-na-Skellig, Co. Wicklow, 11th - 12th century AD

So porphyry comes from the Eastern Mediterranean, and it's used in Roman buildings, and we know that in Rome now, you have the pope, and his authority extended throughout Europe. And in Northern Europe, bits of these stone tiles seem to have been given to maybe missionaries and those missionaries then were sent out all over Europe to different places,

and we find them in Ireland, in some quite remote places, including right up on this rock at Temple-Na-Skellig, in this house where we found this piece of tile.

Image on Screen: Temple-Na-Skellig, Upper Lake, Glendalough, 8th to 14th century AD

Siobhán: So during early Christian times, people were beginning to go on pilgrimages to many places, some long distances, but some maybe short as well. And we also have a shoe from the valley, from Lugduff. We think from the size of the shoe, from looking at it, that it might've been worn by a woman. It's only a size four, and we think there were many women coming to the valley as well.

Image on Screen: Leather Shoe, Lugduff, Co. Wicklow, 899 – 1033 AD

Matthew: That's right, and unfortunately the written sources for women at Glendalough are quite poor, but obviously this object shows that women were here and we know that there were also powerful women here, because we know that the mother of a high king was actually, went into retirement in Glendalough in probably in St. Mary's, or Our Lady's Church which was a place where nuns lived.

Image on Screen: St Mary's Church or The Lady's Chapel, Glendalough, c. 1100 AD

Siobhán: And apart from coming to pray, there were other reasons that people were coming to Glendalough.

Matthew: Well, some people would've actually been coming to Glendalough to seek safety or sanctuary. Glendalough would've been surrounded by a big ditch or moat, and it would've had a gate house, and once you were within that, you were safe from the law of outside.

Image on Screen: The Gate Way, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, c. 1100 AD

And we know from a lot later, in the Late Medieval period, that a man who murdered his son was sent on a tour of the most holy places in Ireland to do penance for his sins, and one of those places was St. Kevin's Bed in Glendalough.

Matthew: Unlike today, people in the Medieval period would've rarely left their home place, so when they wanted to journey to monasteries like Glendalough, they would've followed stone crosses like these.

Image on Screen: Stone Marker Cross, Glendalough, 8th – 12th century AD

Two important examples are in the National Museum. One, called the Labyrinth Stone, has a network of passages which look like a maze.

Image on Screen: Labyrinth Stone, Lockstown Upper, Co. Wicklow

The other one we have is a concrete cast of a cross which stood on St. Kevin's Way.

Image on Screen: Cast of St. Kevin's Way Cross, Original 8th to 12th century AD

The cross on this cast is very unusual and looks exactly like the one on a pin which was found at Temple-Na-Skellig behind us here in an excavation in the 1950s.

Image on Screen: Disc-Headed Pin, Temple-Na-Skellig, Lugduff, Co. Wicklow, 11th or early 12th century AD

All these objects, the Jet Cross, the shoe, the tile, and the stone crosses show us that Medieval Christians came to the valley from near and far.

Siobhán: There were lots of hungry pilgrims then, coming over the mountains, looking to be fed, and there was no McDonald's back then, so we need another way of feeding them. I suppose the monasteries did, and the biggest object that we have from the exhibition, and it of course tells us about the food they ate, is this beautiful cauldron, and it is quite a spectacular cauldron.

Image on Screen: Cauldron, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, 14th century AD

I know it's from later on in the time of the valley, but something like this would've been used to feed all the pilgrims, the monks, the priests who were there. But what kind of food would they have ate?

Matthew: So this kind of vessel would've been used to make something called pottage, which is kind of a mixture of grain, something like stock, and then maybe, if they were lucky, bits of meat and vegetables mixed in. So a kind of a stew and it's a typical diet in the later Medieval period.

Siobhán: And I suppose, the ingredients for the stew, we have evidence for that as well? I think we have some grains here.

Image on Screen: Charred Oat & Barley, Sevenchurches, Glendalough

Matthew: Yeah, so we've both oat and barley in the exhibition – some charred oat and barley, which would've come from the excavations. We've also evidence for a millstone at the site, so milling is something that came in with Christian monasteries, and mills were used to produce grain, flour, and render cereal.

Siobhán: Okay, and it wasn't just food, there's also drink of course, in the valley. And we have some pottery here, some very expensive pottery, that would've been imported.

Image on Screen: Jug Handle, Temple-na-Skellig, Lugduff, Co. Wicklow, 12th century AD

Matthew: This jug comes from Bristol, and it's a ceramic jug. It would've been used to serve wine or potentially water.

Siobhán: Okay, it's very pretty, and I suppose, we have this in the handling collection in the museum. I think it's you know, around the same time period, the same handle on it, but would it have been something like this?

Matthew: Something like that, except it shows a hunting scene, so it's got just the edge of someone's hand, holding a big, long, wooden club. They might've been blowing a horn and chasing something, a stag or something like that, on the original pot, before it broke.

Siobhán: So we're gaining lots of evidence then, around food in the valley, but what do you think about early Christianity then, and food? What's the big change?

Matthew: Well, we know that the whole idea of the monastery, the early stories of Saint Kevin talk about how he went into a wild place, and made it really fertile. So the cows were well-fed, cereals grew, so the idea of a monastery was that it was provisioned, that people were bringing food to it from outside, from the other churches. The introduction of Christianity meant that monasteries completely changed the way that food production was organised in Ireland.

Voiceover:

By the 8th century Glendalough was getting busy. Not just with the pilgrims walking here, but also with the dead. It was called 'The Cemetery of the Western World' in 780 AD, and it was said that its graveyard was getting really crowded.

Siobhán: So what can we learn from how people are buried? Well, by looking at gravestones around us here, and the valley, we can see that people have been buried here for over a thousand years, and they're still buried here today. With the arrival of Christianity, how people were buried changed. We see the burial of an individual, and we see the burial of the body so that they're facing east-west – they're gonna face Jerusalem. If you were rich enough, you might get a gravestone, marking where they were buried, with their names carved on it, so that they would be remembered.

Image on Screen: Grave Slab, Glendalough, 3D Scan

Further up the valley there's a church, and really important people would've been buried up there - it's associated with regional kings and queens. Ordinary people might've been buried with no marker, but we can still see graves all around us today, and we still have that practise of having our names inscribed on the gravestones.

Image on Screen: Ogham Stone, Colbinstown, Co. Kildare, Late 6th – early 7th century AD

Siobhán: With the arrival of Christianity, we see a gradual changing in writing styles as well. This stone behind me is over 1,500 years old, and on it we see Ogham writing. And that style of writing is very Irish, it was used for writing Irish family names. But, with Christianity, we see a move on manuscripts, but also on those gravestones, and it can be seen here on this stone as well, to the Roman, or Latin, alphabet. So, in Glendalough we actually have over a hundred of those gravestones from that early Christian period, requesting prayers to be said, and the gravestones have on them, in that Latin writing, the names of the people who died.

Matthew: So, like today, a bell would've been rung when someone was being buried. In the beginning, this was a hand-bell, like we saw in the exhibition. But, as bells changed, so did the design of the buildings. The earliest churches at Glendalough would've been wooden, but over time, they were replaced by stone churches, and there are seven of them still surviving in Glendalough.

Image on Screen: St. Kevin's Church, Glendalough, c. 1100 AD

You might notice the small circular tower at the back of this church. This was used to carry a suspended bell. There's also a bigger, freestanding tower called a round tower, or in Irish, cloigtheach, which means bell house, but we're not sure what kind of bell was rung in it.

Image on Screen: Round Tower, Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, 11th century AD

The suspended bell that we have in the exhibition is made of copper alloy, and it would've been bought from somewhere in North-western Europe to be suspended in this bell tower. (St Kevin's Church, above)

Image on Screen: Suspended Bell, Late 11th – early 12th century AD

It would've been bought at great expense, probably through the port of Dublin, sometime in the 11th century. And it would've been rung continuously during funeral services here at Glendalough.

Today, when we're at a loose end, we play games on our phone or maybe a board game. This is a modern version of Nine-Mens-Morris, a game that's been around for over 1,200 years.

Image on Screen: Nine-Mens-Morris Stone Gaming Board, Temple-na-Skellig, Lugduff, Co. Wicklow, 13th century AD

A stone found at Glendalough with scratch markings on it was probably a version of this game. Board games are found at a lot of monastic sites, and, they were a sign of a good education.

Siobhán: The Glendalough board game was probably scratched quite quickly into the stone, by two monks who were trying to pass the time. We know that monks did play board games, and we have found board games at archaeological sites in Ireland, and also small, little gaming pieces of wood and bone. One of the places that we've also found a board game is down in County Kerry, at the Skelligs, also a monastic site, and it was one of the locations for the "Star Wars" films. But what other evidence do we have for education and learning at Glendalough?

Well as a young monk, you would've had to learn Latin, Greek, Hebrew, maths, and philosophy, and to write. You also would've been looked up to if you had a lot of knowledge. They were called Lectors. We know that books were written at Glendalough, because there's a book of complex maths, and there's a little note in that book that records an abbot dying in Glendalough. You also, as a monk, would've had to practice your writing before you started writing any manuscripts. You would've used something like this, a little wax tablet.

Image on Screen: Replica Wax Writing Tablet, examples from late 7th – early 8th century AD

Voiceover:

As well as people coming here to learn, they also came here for power. The Church and saints had a new wealth and influence over the population, and that wasn't to everyone's liking.

Siobhán: The site of Glendalough then is becoming more powerful, more wealthy, and that attracts other types of power, I suppose, the regional kings and even queens were interested in what was happening there within the site. We know even some of the families fought over

the site of Glendalough. They would've wanted family members maybe to be an abbot, or they might've wanted one of the powerful women in the family might become a widow, and she might retire to Glendalough. And it was all about having a connection to this place, that was seen as a place of power.

Image on Screen: Disc-Headed Pin, Temple-Na-Skellig, Lugduff, Co. Wicklow, 11th or early 12th century AD

Matthew: So, I mean, this pin that you can see in front of you here, the round head and the beautiful decorated cross on it, this probably belonged to a bishop, and was part of their pall, which was a garment given to them as a sign of their office, so a piece of clothing put around their neck, and fastened with these beautiful pins. And this one dates to the 11th century. One of the most significant people associated, that might have worn this kind of pin, was a famous abbot called Laurence O'Toole, who later became a saint. And in the beginning, he was Abbot of Glendalough. He was eventually promoted to become Archbishop of Dublin, but we know that he came back to this little, remote ledge, at the Upper Lake in Glendalough, and he prayed in the cave there, which is called St. Kevin's Bed.

Image on Screen: St. Kevin's Bed, used from at least 8th century AD onwards, 3D scan

He's probably the most famous person who we know of, other than Saint Kevin, associated with Glendalough. And his heart is actually kept in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, which you can still see today. And I guess this is a sign of the growing power of Dublin.

Image on Screen: Heart of St. Laurence O'Toole, Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin

Voiceover:

As we saw earlier with the Gilt Horse Mount, Vikings came to Glendalough from early on. They would've first come to plunder the wealth and people, but as the Vikings began to settle in Ireland, and Glendalough became more powerful, they began to trade with each other.

Image on Screen: Coin Hoard, St. Mary's Church, Co. Wicklow, 1270 - 1272 AD

Siobhán: We know this from three hoards of coins that have been found at Glendalough. So there was a lot of trading and connections going on between the monastic site, and then the Viking city of Dublin.

Image on Screen: Silver 'King Sitric Coin', Sevenchurches or Camaderry, Co. Wicklow, minted AD 995

Matthew: Yeah, so one of the most exciting objects that we have here in the exhibition, is this silver coin which is a penny of King Sitric, who was the Viking King of Dublin, and it's the first Irish coinage, first coin, to be minted in Ireland. And what's interesting about it is, it actually has a cross on it, so it's an imitation of a coin used at the same time in England, but it's giving across that message that Christianity is now part of the trading system. And coins like this would be used in everyday transactions in Glendalough.

Siobhán: And then, of course, the people in Glendalough were also selling things to the Vikings, and we have one of the most unusual examples of this that comes from Denmark,

the home of the Vikings. And the reason we have this evidence, is it's ships timbers, the timbers of a ship. And the wood came from the monastic site of Glendalough, but would've been traded to the Vikings, and then would've been used by them, to make a ship that was sailed to Denmark. And we have such good evidence about that ship that they recreated one, they made a replica, which is called the 'Sea Stallion', from Glendalough.

Image on Screen: 'Sea Stallion' Replica Viking Longship, original built in Dublin region, 1042 AD

Matthew: Then, of course, after that time, the Vikings gradually became a part of local politics, and they became allied with local kings, and they were used to fight one side against another. And Dublin became an increasingly important town, and gradually, there was a fight over which centre would become the ruling part of the Church. And eventually, Dublin won out, in a kind of a "Game of Thrones."

Siobhán: So, I suppose, Glendalough becomes a rebel, becomes called, "A den of thieves and robbers."

Matthew: That's right, and that's what one bishop said about Glendalough. But, of course, that was kind of 'fake news' because we know from archaeological evidence, from things that you've seen already, the cauldron, the pot, coin, a coin hoard, all of these things are showing us that Glendalough was very much alive, even after the bishop was no longer sitting there anymore.

Voiceover:

Today the valley is famous as a national park, and people from all over the world visit to see the scenery and the two beautiful lakes. And all the stories of powerful struggles, and of those who lived there in the past are hidden in the valley. We only have the legends of the annals, the remains of the buildings, and a few objects left.

Siobhán: So we've shown how, by looking at these objects, the buildings, and the landscape in the valley, that we can understand what happened here in the past.

Matthew: And thanks to archaeology, how this simple piece of charcoal helped unlock the start of the story of early Christianity here in the monastery at Glendalough.