

SKELLIG MICHAEL, CO. KERRY: THE MONASTERY AND SOUTH PEAK

Archaeological stratigraphic report: excavations 1986–2010



Edward Bourke, Alan R. Hayden, Ann Lynch

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Archaeological stratigraphic report:
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Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The ongoing conservation works programme at the early medieval monastic site on Skellig Michael commenced in 1978 and has continued each summer season since then. The first season's work was in response to the collapse of a section of retaining wall to the west of St Michael's Church within the monastery, and shortly thereafter work focused on the repair of the south steps, the main access route to the monastery. Survey work began at this time and the first archaeological intervention took place in 1980, with excavations proper commencing in 1986 and continuing almost every season until 2010 (see Section 2 for full details). Over the years the archaeological work ranged from monitoring and supervision to full excavation and, because the scope of the archaeological work was determined by and large by the conservation works programme, investigations were focused on the monastery and associated structures and the South Peak. In 2010 survey and conservation works commenced on the lighthouse road; once this is completed, a programme of conservation works will be carried out at the old (disused) lighthouse.

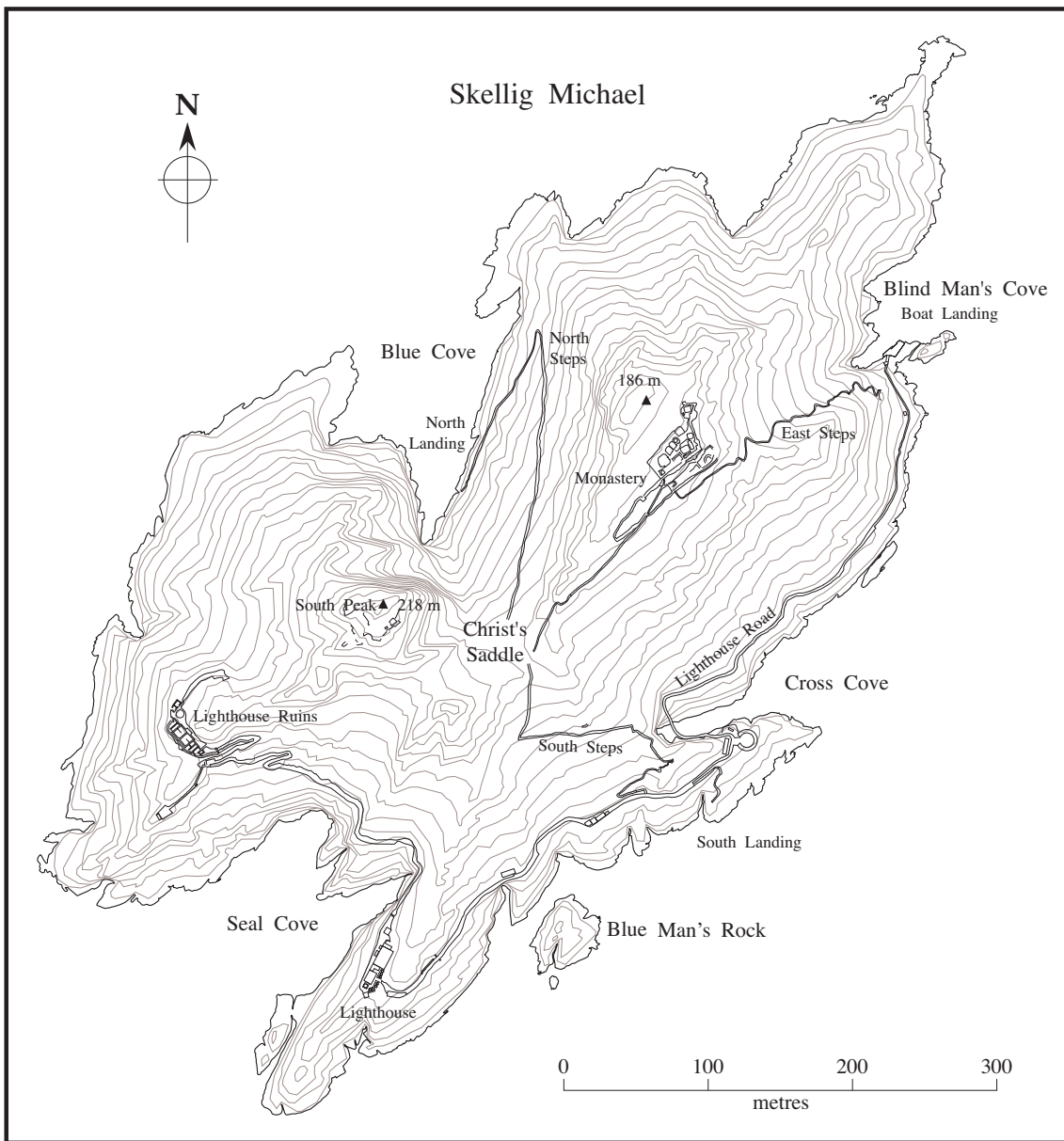
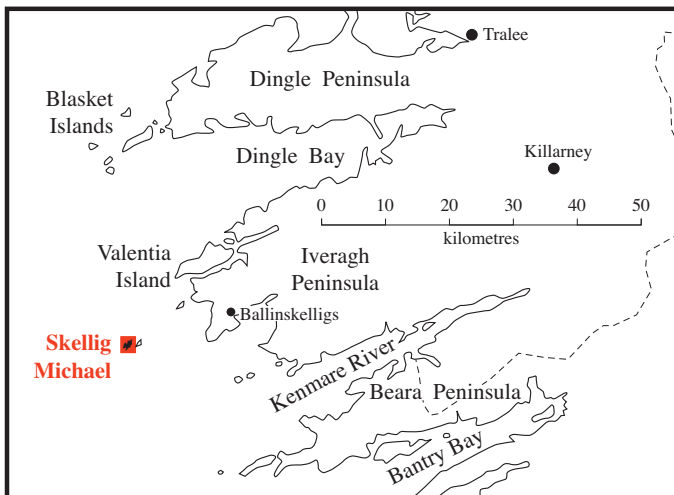
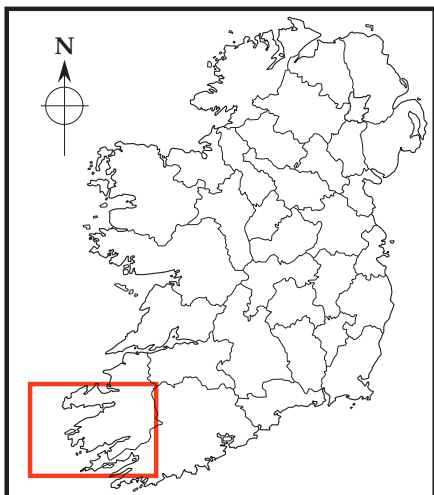
This report (which is to be published in pdf format on the website www.worldheritageireland.ie and which will be lodged in the state archaeological archives) is the full account of all the archaeological works carried out within the monastery and South Peak structures. It contains stratigraphic details with supporting plans, sections and photographs; a finds catalogue with descriptions and interpretations by relevant specialists; the raw data and results of palaeoenvironmental analyses and the osteoarchaeological analyses of human remains; a full account of the faunal remains; and the radiocarbon dates. The report concludes with an interim statement of the site's significance. The purpose of this report is to make available the details of the archaeological works undertaken to date, in advance of the planned multidisciplinary publication programme.

It is intended to produce a series of publications that will integrate the archaeological results with those of the conservation works programmes and related projects. Work has commenced on these publications and it is envisaged that a number of separate volumes will incorporate the following:

- The historical and documentary background of Skellig Michael. This will cover accounts from the early historic period up to the surveys carried out in the 1950s. A research project looking in detail at the lighthouse period of occupation will be published at a later stage in conjunction with the results of the works that have yet to be carried out to these later structures.
- The architecture, archaeology and conservation of the monastery and associated structures. This will include detailed surveys and descriptions of the monastic structures and a full account of the engineering, structural and conservation works undertaken. The results of the archaeological excavations will be incorporated with those of other related projects, e.g. water management.
- The architecture, archaeology and conservation of the South Peak structures. This will incorporate a full record of all structures discovered and their conservation, together with the results of excavations carried out.
- A study of the geology of the island and its influence on the form of the monastic settlement.
- An in-depth discussion of the monastery, its role in early medieval Ireland and its European context.

All excavations described in this report have been carried out by, or on behalf of, the National Monuments Service (NMS). The NMS was part of the Office of Public Works (OPW) until 1996, when

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III. 1.1—
Location of
Skellig Michael
and contour
map of island,
showing main
features.

an integrated Heritage Service was established in the Department of Arts and Culture. In 2003, however, the different elements of the Heritage Service were reassigned to various government departments; at the time of writing (2011) the architectural component of the NMS (responsible for the conservation and management of all monuments in state care) is in the OPW and the archaeological service is part of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (DAHG).

1.2 SUMMARY BACKGROUND INFORMATION

12.1 LOCATION AND LEGAL STATUS

The island of Skellig Michael (townland: *Sceilg Mhichíl*) lies 11.6km off Bolus Head, the westernmost tip of the Iveragh peninsula, Co. Kerry (SMR: KE 104A-001; National Grid Reference 024812 060654) (Ill. 1.1). The island, which is approximately 21.9 hectares in area, is owned by the Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht on behalf of the Irish people, with the exception of the lower (working) lighthouse and its curtilage, the helipad and adjacent store. Skellig Michael is a National Monument in state ownership, the preservation of which is a matter of national importance by reason of its historical, architectural, artistic or archaeological interest.

The entire island was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996 in recognition of the outstanding universal significance of its cultural landscape and the importance of its protection to the highest international standards.

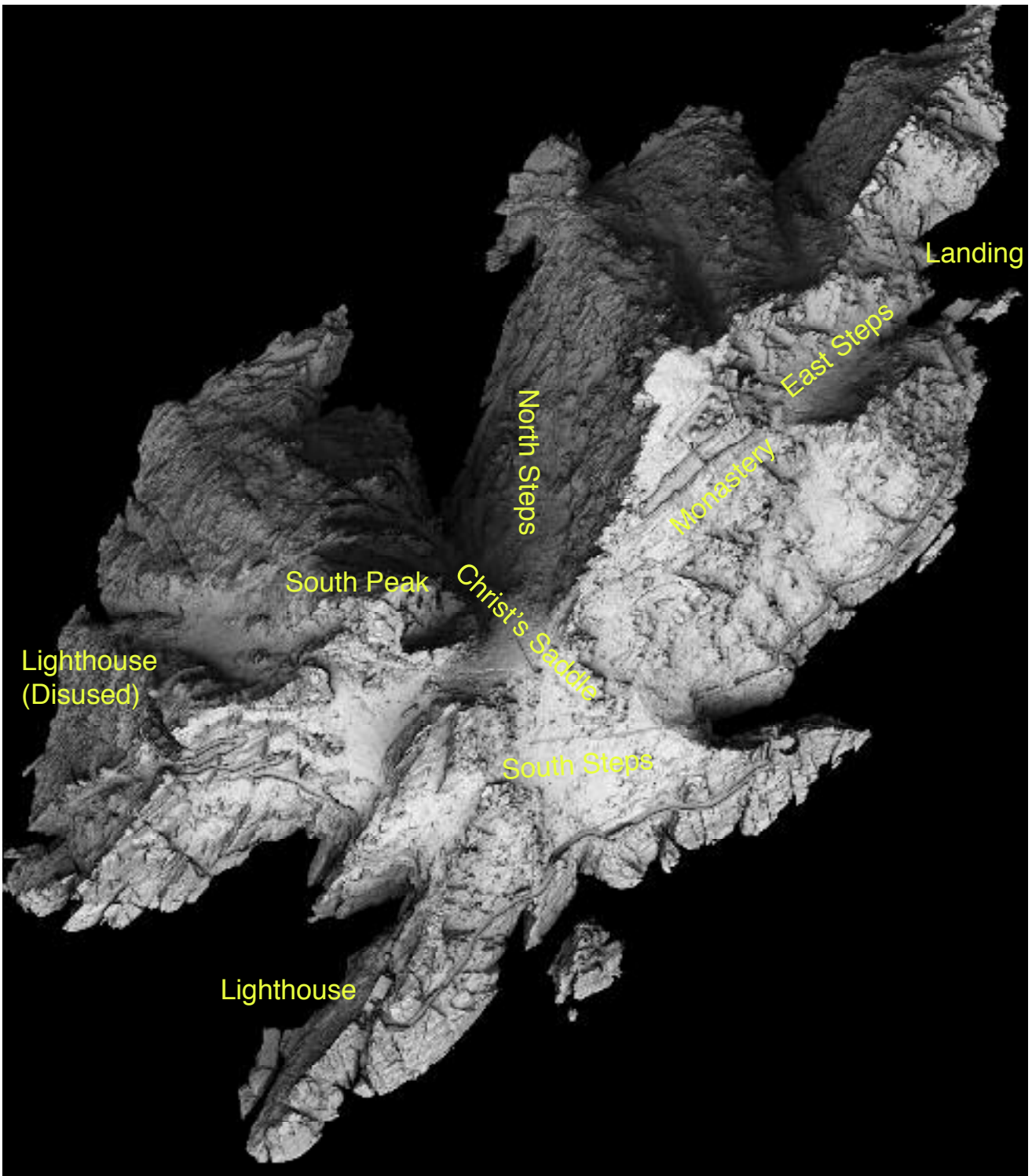
1.2.2 GEOLOGY AND TOPOGRAPHY

Michael O'Sullivan

Skellig Michael represents one of the most westerly exposures of Devonian (Old Red Sandstone) rocks in western Europe. These rocks are sedimentary in origin and were deposited during the upper part of the Devonian period, between 360 and 374 million years ago. During this time Ireland, as part of a larger continental land mass, was situated south of the equator. A crustal depression or trough, known as the Munster Basin, existed in southern Ireland at this time, allowing the accumulation of a great thickness of sediment. The basin was bordered by mountainous or upland areas to the north and south. The 200m of sediments exposed on Skellig Michael were deposited in alluvial and fluvial environments in this basin.

The present outcrop pattern of the Devonian (Old Red Sandstone) is due to subsequent structural deformation. This compression or folding of the rocks occurred during the Hercynian Mountain-building period, approximately 300 million years ago. The structure of Skellig Michael is characterised by a major open trough-shaped fold (syncline) developed about an axis that plunges to the east. Conjugate joint sets (criss-crossing joint sets resulting in a diamond fracture pattern) are generated symmetrically about this axis, while an intensive cleavage fabric parallels the axis orientation. It is this relationship between fine-grained sedimentary rocks and planes of weakness such as bedding, cleavage and jointing that allows for small tool workability in the main.

The topography of Skellig Michael (Ills 1.1, 1.2), its iconic twin peaks and intervening valley (Christ's Saddle) is entirely controlled by bedrock geology. A major north-south-trending fault (running from Blue Cove in the north to Washerwoman Rock in the south) is expressed today as the valley between the peaks. The bedrock adjacent to this fault zone is dislocated, brittle and friable and erodes out more easily than the surrounding bedrock. It is this geological feature that underlies the saddle-like island outline we see today.



III. 1.2—LiDAR image of the island of Skellig Michael.

1.2.3 THE MONASTIC SETTLEMENT

Introduction

There are two separate elements to the monastic settlement on Skellig Michael: an extensive and well-preserved monastery constructed just below the top of a high, sloping rock platform on the east side of the island and a range of structures constructed on ledges high on the South Peak.

Three long flights of steps lead up to the monastery from three different landing places. The monastery consists of an inner enclosure containing two oratories, a mortared church, seven beehive cells and the remains of a 'latrine', water cisterns, a cemetery, *leachta*, crosses and cross-slabs. Two large terraces, referred to as the upper and lower monks' gardens, comprise the outer enclosure. High retaining walls support all the terracing upon which everything is constructed (Ills 1.3a, 1.3b).

On the other side of the island, rock-cut steps and ledges lead up to the structures on the South Peak. They comprise a series of platforms, traverses, enclosures and terraces daringly constructed on quarried ledges just below the peak (Ill. 1.4). The oratory terrace still retains its original features: an oratory, altar, *leacht*, bench, water cisterns and a possible shrine. Crosses and a cross-slab were also found on the South Peak.

Access to the monastery

There are three long flights of steps (east, south and north steps) that lead to the monastery and are part of a possible succession of routes, with traces of other, possibly earlier steps being discovered in places as survey work proceeds (Ill. 1.1). The monks used three different landing places, depending on the prevailing weather and sea conditions at the time of voyage. The basal sections of the three stairways were rock-cut, with the steps constructed of drystone masonry once they reached a level where stormy seas could no longer reach them and cause damage.

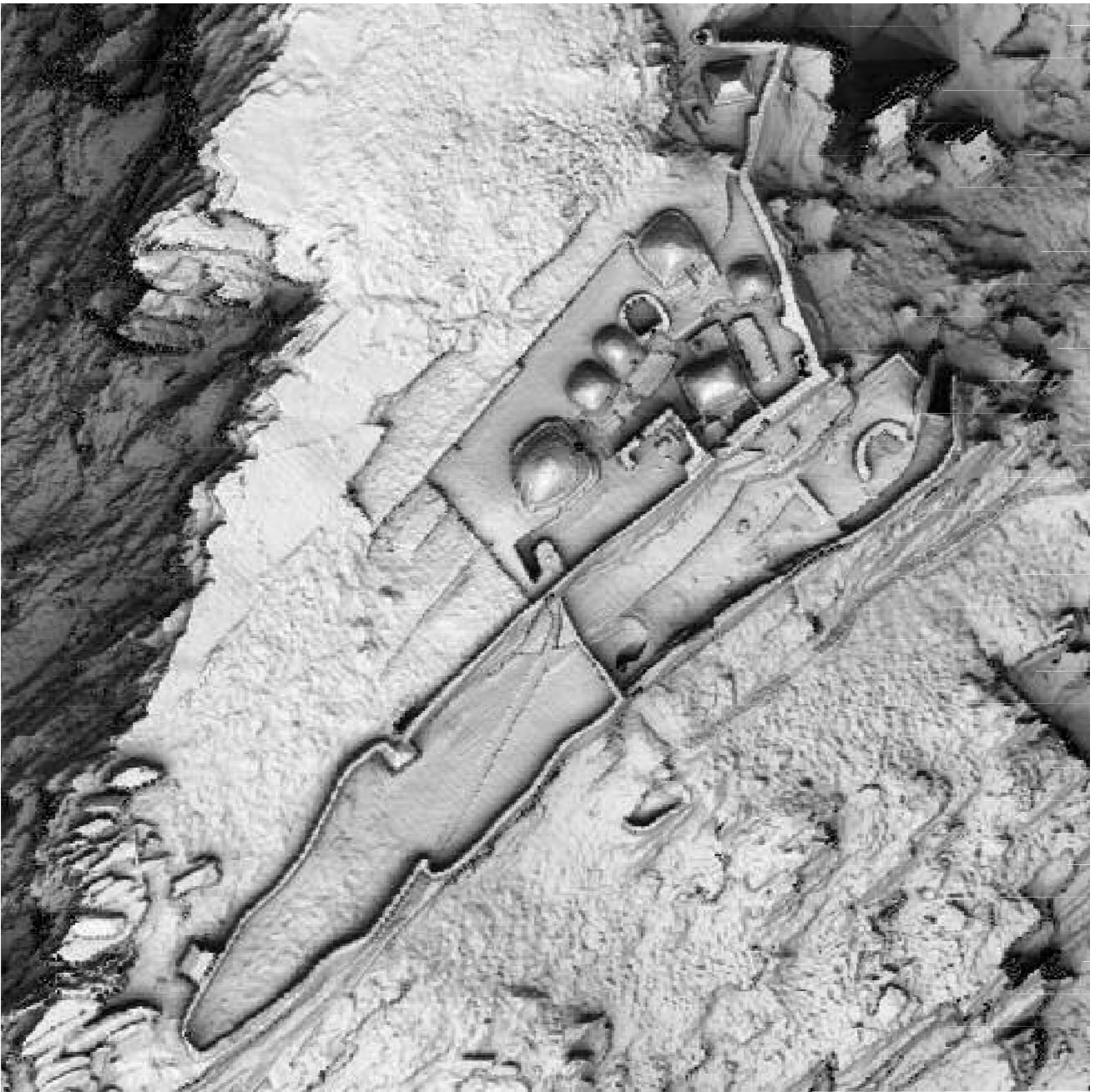
The base of the east steps was blasted away by the lighthouse-builders when they constructed the pier and the lighthouse road in the 1820s. Above this level the steps have been conserved and are in very good condition. The remains of a structure, which may have sheltered a boat or housed provisions, are located adjacent to these steps.

The north steps were used extensively by the lighthouse-builders. The lower rock-cut section has been very eroded by the action of the sea and a parapet was added at the lowest section of the drystone steps, which are in one long, continuous flight. These steps have been repaired, but owing to collapse on the very steep ground it has not been possible to recover all of the steps and some sections have been ramped. Neither the east nor the north steps are accessible to the public.

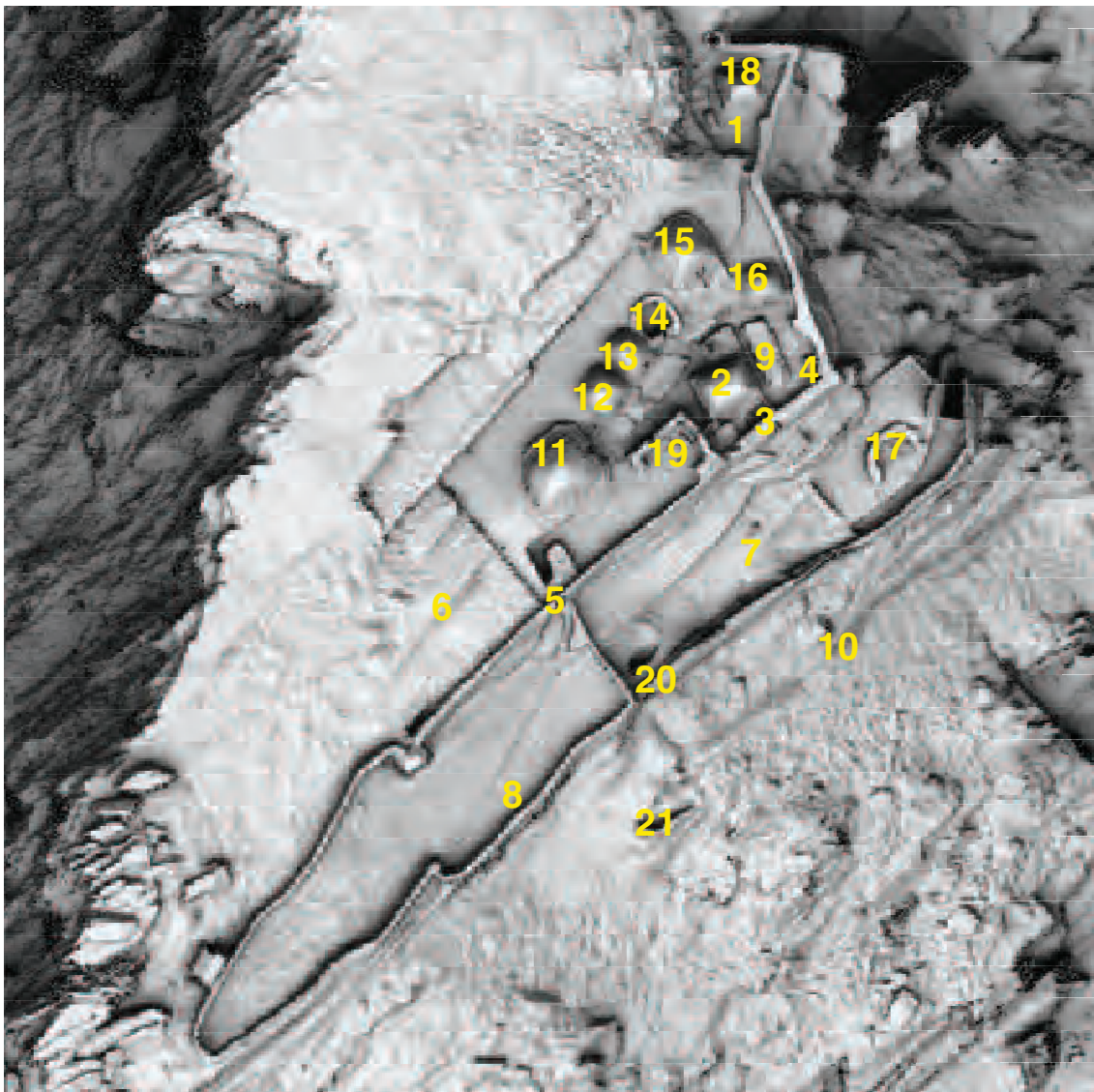
The south steps are used by visitors today and are accessed from the lighthouse road. They join the north steps at Christ's Saddle and continue as one flight up to the monastery. There are traces of other structures associated with these steps, including the remains of walling which may belong to terracing, a substantial prayer or pilgrimage station and lighthouse features.

The outer enclosure

Access to the monastery is via the outer enclosure, which comprises two large terraces known as the upper and lower monks' gardens. The present entrance into the upper monks' garden is not original and was probably constructed in the early nineteenth century. This terrace would have provided a suitable area for cultivation as it is south-facing and well shielded from the elements. Excavation in the lower monks' garden revealed the remains of an early cell (Cell G) surrounded by paving, indicating that at some stage in its history it could not have been used solely for cultivation (see Section 2.2 below). Part of this terrace is very steep but it is possible that small cultivation terraces were located here.



III. 1.3a—LiDAR image of the monastery using a sky-view factor processing algorithm.



III. I.3b—
Annotated
LiDAR image of
the monastery.

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Small oratory terrace | 11. Cell A |
| 2. Large oratory | 12. Cell B |
| 3. South entrance 1, inner enclosure and <i>Leacht</i> area | 13. Cell C |
| 4. East entrance, inner enclosure | 14. Cell D |
| 5. South entrance 2, inner enclosure | 15. Cell E |
| 6. Cistern 3 | 16. Cell F |
| 7. Lower monks' garden | 17. Cell G |
| 8. Upper monks' garden | 18. Small oratory |
| 9. Monks' graveyard | 19. Saint Michael's Church |
| 10. East steps | 20. South entrance, outer enclosure |
| | 21. Guesthouse |



Ill. 1.4—Aerial photograph of south peak indicating principal features.

The enclosure walls

One of the most imposing elements of the monastery is its retaining walls. The monks used these massive walls to create terraces upon which to build and to provide shelter from the prevailing winds. There is a long history of collapse of these walls, even during the monastic occupation.

The east retaining wall has three phases of construction representing repeated collapse and rebuilding. The retaining wall of the small oratory terrace is largely original in spite of considerable movement over the centuries. The long, south-facing wall of the inner enclosure comprises at least two phases of monastic construction, repair during the lighthouse occupation in the early nineteenth century (including the construction of a dry toilet for the construction workers) and a late nineteenth-century construction. Minor conservation work was carried out on this wall in the 1970s. The long, south-facing outer enclosure wall has also suffered repeated collapse. Most of the retaining wall holding the upper monks' garden had collapsed and was rebuilt during the current conservation works programme. The retaining wall of the lower monks' garden is almost fully original at its western end, but the eastern section had collapsed and was reconstructed during the current programme of conservation.

The entrances

There are two entrances into the outer enclosure. The earlier one (south entrance 1, outer enclosure), at the top of the east steps and leading into the lower monks' garden, has been repaired but is no longer in use. The later one, leading into the upper monks' garden, probably dates from the early nineteenth century and is the one currently used by visitors.

There are three entrances into the inner enclosure. The earliest (east entrance, phase 3), leading through the east retaining wall, is a short distance from the east steps. This was abandoned after serious collapse at an early stage in the history of the monastery. The monks then constructed an entrance on the south side (south entrance 1, inner enclosure) from the lower monks' garden, which is no longer in use and which pre-dates the large oratory. The last entrance to have been built by the monks (and modified in the nineteenth century) is accessed from the upper monks' garden and is the one still in use today (south entrance 2, inner enclosure).

The inner enclosure

The large oratory

This oratory is of the usual inverted-boat shape, with the door in the west wall (Ill. 1.5). It is built of stones of moderate size laid in horizontal courses. Internally it is rectangular (measuring 3.45m by 2.35m) up to a height of 2.3m and then develops into an elongated dome. The internal walls show signs of later limewashing. There is a small rectangular window in the east wall. On either side of the door, which has inclined jambs, the wall is faced inside with two large vertical slabs. The walls of the oratory are about 1.2m thick. Externally, there is a cross of white quartz inserted into the stones of the wall above the doorway, but this is a later addition.

The small oratory

This oratory is built on a small artificial terrace at the eastern end of the inner enclosure (Ill. 1.6). The interior is of superior construction to the large oratory and measures 2.4m by 1.8m by 2.4m in height. There is a small rectangular east window. The door has inclined jambs. The corners are articulated throughout, both inside and out. This structure is of later date than the large oratory.

Nearby are the remains of a beehive cell which has been interpreted as a latrine—possibly a unique structure in the context of Irish monasteries of this date.

Ill. 1.5—The monks' graveyard with the large oratory behind (Con Brogan, DAHG).



Ill. 1.6—The small oratory terrace viewed from south (Con Brogan, DAHG).



The dwelling cells (Ill. 1.7)

Cell A is the largest and clearly had a communal function. It is particularly imposing and has very thick walls, with several offsets to facilitate construction. The walls, 1.8m thick at the base, are built of small flat stones and there are a number of projecting stones on the outside at the upper level, again a construction feature. The door has a double lintel, inside and out, and the floor retains most of its original paving.

The internal space measures 4.6m by 3.8m and the cell is 5m high. It is subrectangular at floor level,



Ill. 1.7—The cells viewed from west (Con Brogan, DAHG).

evolving into an ovoid shape about 1m above ground level. There are two cupboards and projecting stone pegs (probably used for storage purposes). Uniquely, there are window openings, one of which focuses on the South Peak and another on the Little Skellig.

Cell B, to the east of Cell A, is built of very carefully worked large stones but there are no projecting stones inside or outside. The interior is square in plan, measuring 2.75m by 2.75m by 3m high. The corners are well defined and the corbelling leads to a large, square capstone. The cell is paved but much of this dates from the nineteenth century. There are two cupboard niches in the walls.

Cell C lies to the east of Cell B and is very similar to it. It is probably the last cell to have been constructed. It is also built of large stones but not as refined. It is almost square in plan, measuring 2.75m by 2.6m, and again the corners are well defined, with the corbelling leading to a rectangular capstone. There are no cupboards or special features. This cell retains most of its original paving and there is a drain running down the centre of the floor, under the paving.

Cell D, to the east of Cell C, is no longer intact. It is probably the earliest surviving cell within the inner enclosure and was already ruined when Cell C was constructed. It is D-shaped in plan and its shape is defined by orthostats. There is still some original paving visible at the entrance.

Cell E lies to the north-east of Cell D and at a higher level than the other cells. It is built of relatively small stones and has stepped plinths and projecting stones at the upper level. It is quite spacious inside, 3.65m by 3.58m, and is almost 4m high. Though almost square in plan, it becomes circular in shape as it reaches the roof. Most of its paving dates from the nineteenth century. There are some projecting stone pegs on the interior and there are holes in the walls to take wooden beams for a loft.

Cell F, to the south-east of Cell E, is built of moderately sized stones. It measures 2.98m by 2.75m, with the corners defined up to about 60cm above the lintel, after which it becomes circular. A stone with a circular opening completes the dome; it is unclear whether this is an original feature. There are three cupboards in the walls and projecting stone pegs. The floor is irregularly paved and includes some upright slabs that define a raised section on three sides, which may have been where the monks slept.

St Michael's Church

St Michael's Church lies to the west of the large oratory (Ill. 1.8). Part of this mortared church collapsed in the late nineteenth century when the enclosure retaining wall to the south collapsed. The church is rectangular in plan and has straight sides with sharp, rectangular corners. It would have had a timber roof structure. There is an east window and a doorway on the north side. There is evidence of two distinct phases of construction: an earlier, smaller, mortared church, constructed of large blocks of stone, was later expanded to provide a larger church, the masonry of which is primarily oblong stones laid horizontally with definite coursing. Sandstone for the door and window of this later church was sourced on nearby Valentia Island. There is evidence that this later church was rendered externally.

Ill. 1.8—The monastery viewed from south-east, with the remains of St Michael's Church in centre foreground (Con Brogan, DAHG).



The leachta

Leachta (plural; *leacht* singular) are common features of many early medieval monastic sites: they are rectilinear drystone platforms and may have been prayer stations associated with pilgrimage rounds within the monasteries.

There are two *leachta* within the monastery, one on the south side of the large oratory, which was fully excavated, and another close to the entrance of the small oratory.

Burial platform

A stone-built platform (2.3m by 3.6m), sometimes described as a *leacht*, lies on the north side of the large oratory. This was constructed in two phases, with the earlier phase pre-dating the construction of the oratory. Although not excavated, this feature is described as a burial platform because of its similarity in form to the nearby monks' graveyard, which does contain human remains.

The monks' graveyard

This is located to the east of the large oratory: it takes the form of a subrectangular platform (constructed in two phases) measuring 7.3m by 3.2m (Ill. 1.5). Its base is defined by large, long orthostats, against which a row of crosses and cross-slabs are placed vertically on the west side. The graveyard was bigger

originally but the east side fell away when part of the adjacent enclosure retaining wall collapsed.

Paving

The area of the inner enclosure where the cells and oratories are located was fully paved throughout. Large white quartz flags are used to define a symbolic area in front of the large oratory. The paving dates from the monastic period and gives the monastery an almost urban quality. The paved area to the east of the monks' graveyard is a nineteenth-century repair.

Crosses/cross-slabs

There are two large, decorated crosses near the large oratory, one on either side, each of which is accompanied by smaller cross-slabs. There are many crosses and cross-slabs behind the large oratory in the monks' graveyard. On the island there are over 90 crosses/cross-slabs, most of them roughly shaped.

Quarrying and water collection

The sloping rock above the monastery provided the major source of building stone for the monks. The area beneath was also quarried. Once the sloping bedrock was exposed, the monks used it to collect rainwater, cutting channels into it to direct the water into the cisterns below.

The cisterns

There are two cisterns within the core area of the monastery. They are constructed on the exposed sloping bedrock and incorporated within the stone-built plinths beneath the cells. Their sides are constructed of orthostats and drystone walling. Together these cisterns can hold about 450 litres of water. An additional cistern (Cistern 3) to the west of Cell A was identified incorrectly as a souterrain prior to its excavation. A fourth cistern is located outside the monastery, below the lower monks' garden by the east steps. This is probably associated with the structure referred to as a 'guesthouse'.

The 'guesthouse'

At the top of the east steps, just before the entrance into the lower monks' garden, is a drystone structure on the left-hand side. It is elongated in shape, with a doorway on the east side, directly opposite the steps. It has one cupboard. This was most probably a guesthouse, where visitors could be accommodated outside the monastery. Associated with this place is a large, undecorated stone cross known as Dunraven's Cross.

The South Peak

The first mention of the possible existence of the structures on the South Peak was made by the Ordnance Survey of 1841, but it was not until a visit to the island by the antiquarian Lord Dunraven in the 1850s that reference was first made to a probable oratory: 'Near the highest point of the island, which is called the Spit, I found the remains of a little building which appears to have been quadrangular, probably an oratory' (Dunraven 1875–7, vol. 1, 34).

Liam de Paor, who studied the monastic remains in the early 1950s, made a vague reference to structures on the South Peak. Subsequently, noted academic Françoise Henry, although unable to ascend the Peak herself, received a plan of the ruins of the structure from one of the lighthouse-keepers, which confirmed Lord Dunraven's observations.

The lack of information about the South Peak structure prompted the Office of Public Works to conduct its own detailed study, which began in the mid-1980s. This investigation discovered what has been described as a hermitage constructed on the steep slopes of the peak. The 'hermitage' consists of three separate terraces, labelled garden/dwelling terrace, oratory terrace and outer terrace. The garden/dwelling and oratory terraces are located near each other, on the two best natural ledges of the

peak. Their spatial proximity is reinforced by the construction of the two routes between them, suggesting that they had an important functional relationship. The outer terrace, in contrast, is set very much apart from the other terraces and is also the most difficult to reach. The recent works carried out on the South Peak suggest that the structures constitute an elaborate pilgrimage station and perhaps use of the term ‘hermitage’ is not wholly accurate in this context.

Access to the South Peak

The climb to the South Peak starts at Christ’s Saddle and follows rock-cut steps and handholds to the lower traverse, below the Needle’s Eye—a point where the monks cut almost vertical rock-cut steps through a cleft in the rock. Above this is a small enclosure which may have been a contemplation or prayer station (Ill. 1.9). A further steep climb leads up to the first of three terraces. At a point halfway up this climb is a separate, more basic route, which leads right up to the summit. The rock-cut steps near the top of this route run under the upper traverse, evidence that this was the original route used by the monks to get to the summit prior to the construction of the ‘hermitage’.

The garden/dwelling terrace

This kidney-shaped terrace is 13m long and varies in width from 2m to 4m. Its long axis runs roughly from north-west to south-east. The retaining wall, 1.5m high at the north-western end of the platform,



Ill 1.9—The small enclosure, possible prayer station, just above the Needle’s Eye on the South Peak (Con Brogan, DAHG).

is built on firm bedrock and is in impeccable condition. Much of the remaining terrace has collapsed, the current ground level now being below the original level. It is possible that a small dwelling cell may have existed here.

The oratory terrace

The second and most important of the terraces on the South Peak, the oratory terrace lies at right angles to the garden/dwelling terrace and 4m above it (Ill. 1.10). The main structure is a corbelled oratory with a narrow entry midway along the west wall and its east wall partially built on a stone slab bridging a cleft in the rock. Internally it measures approximately 2.3m by 2m. Against the east wall are the remains of an altar. Two small, interconnected rock-cut basins are located beside the church. These hold water—a vital resource for a monk in this inhospitable place. The monks had cut channels into the near-vertical exposed rock faces above this terrace to channel the rainwater down into the basins below.

At the western end of the terrace, approximately 1m east of the rock face, are the remains of a rectangular *leacht*, 1.1m by 1.6m. This is most likely to have been an external altar. A low drystone bench runs along the rock face, looking towards the oratory. This terrace appears to have been fully paved originally. It is constructed in quite a complex way to allow for circumnavigation of the oratory itself. A similar arrangement can be seen on the small oratory terrace within the monastery, indicating that this must have been an important liturgical requirement. To the east of the oratory terrace is a long, narrow,



Ill. 1.10—The oratory terrace on the South Peak, with Little Skellig and the Kerry coastline in the background (Con Brogan, DAHG).

tapering terrace upon which are the possible remains of a shrine.

The upper traverse

This is located above the oratory terrace and leads across to the final rock-cut climb to the summit and the outer terrace. It was originally paved and had a parapet wall.

The outer terrace

The outer terrace is the most isolated of the three terraces on the South Peak. It is structurally dissimilar to the others as the masonry remains consist of a 17m-long perimeter wall enclosing a series of stepped ledges. The function of this terrace is unclear, as the location of a dwelling cell here would have been impossible. It may have been used as a shelter or as a place of contemplation. Indeed, it may never have been completed.

Quarrying on the South Peak

There is clear evidence of quarrying below the South Peak and on the peak itself. The area between the Needle's Eye and the garden/dwelling terrace displays evidence of major quarrying. Below the southern retaining wall of the oratory terrace there is also evidence of quarrying, with platforms constructed to store the stone prior to bringing it up. At the base of this retaining wall is a small raised platform that would appear to have been the place from which the monks winched up the quarried stone from below. Quarrying on the South Peak is currently the subject of further investigation and research.

1.2.4 THE NATURAL HERITAGE

Birds

Skellig Michael, together with nearby Little Skellig (townland: *Scelig Bheag*) are two of Ireland's most important sites for breeding seabirds. Both the size of the seabird colonies and the diversity of species present make these islands highly significant on a national and international scale. Skellig Michael, together with the Blasket Island Group and Puffin Island, supports some of the biggest breeding populations of Manx shearwater and storm petrel in the world. Other seabird species breeding on Skellig Michael include fulmar, kittiwake, guillemot and puffin (OPW 2008, 14).

Skellig Michael is known as a traditional eyrie for peregrine falcon, although the birds do not breed on the island every year. Other birds that have been recorded as breeding in small numbers are chough, raven, rock pipit and wheatear.

Owing to its ornithological importance, Skellig Michael is designated as a Statutory Nature Reserve and a Special Protection Area, and is a proposed Natural Heritage Area.

Mammals

A small number of mammals have been recorded on Skellig Michael over the years. Grey seal haul out on rocky ledges around the island and, while the numbers are not significant on a national scale, they add to the diversity of the island's fauna. This species is listed under Annex II of the EU Habitats Directive and the Irish population is monitored on a regular basis. Other mammals recorded are rabbit and house mouse. Rabbit is a relatively recent introduction and was probably brought to the island by the lighthouse personnel in the early nineteenth century (*ibid.*, 15).

Vegetation

Much of Skellig Michael is composed of poorly vegetated habitats such as rocky sea cliffs and exposed

rock. The vegetation that does occur is typical of highly exposed maritime conditions limited by thin soil, steep ground, salt spray and high winds. Common plant species include thrift, sea campion and rock sea-spurrey, with patches of red fescue, dock and sea mayweed occurring frequently (*ibid.*, 15). Lavelle (1977) records 38 species of higher plant.

1.3 THE EARLY HISTORY OF SKELLIG MICHAEL

Teresa Bolger

1.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Most published studies of the site have focused on the archaeology and architecture of the monastic settlement (e.g. de Paor 1955; Henry 1957; Horn *et al.* 1990). Examination of the historical references and material in relation to the site has largely consisted of recitation of the key references with minimal analysis.

The source material

This study of the early history of the site has focused on references to the site dating from before AD 1300. A variety of historical sources, both primary and secondary, have been consulted; details of the published editions of these sources are included in the bibliography. References to the site occur in the annals, martyrologies and a series of prose texts dating from between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. These references are generally sparse and largely incidental.

References to the island (as opposed to the monastic foundation) occur in a number of prose texts:

- Conall Corc and the Corcu Loigde
- *Lebar Gabála Éirenn*
- *Cath Finntrága*

References to the monastic foundation occur in three of the surviving sets of annals:

- Annals of Ulster (AU)
- Annals of Inisfallen (AI)
- Annals of the Four Masters (AFM)

in two martyrologies:

- *Feilire Úa Ghormáin*
- Martyrology of Tallaght

and in a number of narrative prose texts:

- *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh*
- *Caithréim Cellacháin Chaisil*
- Giraldus Cambrensis's *Topographia Hibernica*
- *Libellus de fundacione ecclesie Consecrati Petri*

The Augustinian abbey at Ballinskelligs is listed in the ecclesiastical taxation of 1302–4, which was the latest record included within the scope of this study.

1.3.2 *SCILLEC* AND ASSOCIATED PLACENAME EVIDENCE

The term *sceillec* in Old Irish is generally translated as meaning a small piece of rock or a steep rock or crag (Quin 1953; Toner *et al.* 2007). It is not a common element in Irish placenames and can only be confirmed in use at three locations—at the western end of the Iveragh peninsula, Co. Kerry (in the area around the Skelligs themselves), at Bunskeellig, Co. Cork, and at Templenaskellig in Glendalough, Co. Wicklow (Irish Placenames Commission 2010). It has been suggested that a number of other placenames, such as Skelgagh, Co. Tyrone, and Spellickanee, Co. Louth, also derive from *sceillec* or include it as an element (Joyce 1875, 421–2).

Debate over the etymology of *sceillec* had suggested a possible Old Norse origin for the term. This argument was first put forward by Oftedal (1976, 128–9), who questioned the reliability of the earliest annalistic reference to the site (AU, AD 824) and suggested that *sceillec* might be a Hibernicisation of the Old Norse *skellingar* ('the resounding ones'), which also occurs as a placename element in Norway. Initially this argument was accepted (e.g. Fellows-Jenson 1992, 31), but doubts about its validity have more recently been raised (Ó Corráin 1999).

Ó Corráin notes that Oftedal's original argument does not adequately account for the well-attested occurrences of *sceillec* in a variety of different texts (such as *Aislinge Meic Congline*, *Bretha Coemgen* or *Sanas Cormaic*) in its ordinary substantive meaning (Quin 1953; Ó Corráin 1999, 311; Toner *et al.* 2007). Further, while the annalistic references and that in the Martyrology of Tallaght may be the earliest definite references to the monastic foundation, the placename *sceillec* (referring to the Skelligs themselves) occurs in the text 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde' (Meyer 1910, 60), which can be dated to *c.* 700, thus pre-dating any influence from Old Norse (Ó Corráin 1999, 311).

While *sceillec* does appear to be the original or early name, there are occasional hints of an alternative name for the island—'Glascarraig' (lit. 'the green rock'). *Cath Finntrágha* relates how a fleet of ships belonging to the high king of the world made harbour at 'the green rock that is called Sgellig Michil today' (Meyer 1885, 4; O'Rahilly 1962, 3). O'Rahilly (1962, 78n.) notes that 'Glascarraig' occurs as an alternative name for Skellig Michael in late manuscripts, and an article on the Skelligs in the *Kerry Archaeological Magazine* notes that the island is sometimes known as 'Green Skellig' (S.M. 1913, 164).

1.3.3 *ÍARMUMU*—WEST MUNSTER POLITICS IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

For a large part of the early medieval period Mumu or Munster was divided into two principal territories—Aurmumu (east Munster, centred on and controlled from Cashel) and *Íarmumu* (west Munster)—although the king of Cashel was nominally recognised as the king of all Munster. Until the emergence of the Dál Cais in the tenth century, the dominant political force within Munster were the Eóganachta. With a small number of exceptions, the kings of Cashel down to the mid-tenth century were drawn from branches of the Eóganachta, primarily the Eóganachta Chaisil and the Eóganachta Glendamnach.

Íarmumu was controlled by the Eóganachta Locha Léin, who were based in and around Killarney, Co. Kerry. This region was also commonly referred to as *Íarluachair*, referring to Sliabh Luachra, which formed the eastern boundary of the territory. There are indications, however, that, perhaps at an early period, the influence of the rulers of *Íarmumu* extended into south Clare and as far east as a line between the modern

cities of Limerick and Cork (Ó Buachalla 1952, 80–1). Very few of the Eóganachta Locha Léin succeeded in obtaining control of Munster as a whole; the last to be acknowledged as king of Cashel was Ólchobur m. Cináed († 851), who succeeded Feidlimid m. Crimthainn and was previously abbot of Emly.

West Munster contained a number of significant subkingdoms; the kingdom of Corcu Duibne occupied all of the Iveragh peninsula, the southern and western portions of the Dingle peninsula and the linking lands at the head of Dingle Bay (MacCotter 2008). Corcu Duibne itself was further divided into three main territories, Irrus Tuaiscirt, Áed Conchinn and Áes Irruis Deisceirt; analysis of the Corcu Duibne genealogies suggests that these latter three divisions existed as political entities by at least 900 (*ibid.*). Áes Irruis Deisceirt occupied most of the Iveragh peninsula and the reference to Skellig Michael in the *Lebor Gabála* expressly states that it was located within Áes Irruis Deisceirt (Best *et al.* 1954, 48).

It would appear that by the eighth/ninth centuries AD the control of the Eóganachta Locha Léin over the subkingdoms of Íarluachair was waning. The title accorded to the rulers of the dynasty is increasingly given as ‘ríg Locha Léin’ rather than ‘rí Íarluachair’ in the annals (Byrne 2001, 218). Further evidence of dissent comes from the so-called ‘West Munster Synod’ (Meyer 1912, 315–16); the present form of the text appears to date from the ninth century (Ó Buachalla 1952, 80; Ó Cróinín 2005, 224) and is an account of an alleged mid-sixth-century gathering of west Munster clerics and saints at the behest of the king of Ciarraige Luachra. It is unlikely that this is an account of a real event—many of the alleged attendees were not contemporaries (Ó Buachalla 1952, 78); it is more likely a propagandist text developed to support the claims of subkingdoms of west Munster (in particular the Ciarraige Luachra) for greater independence from the Eóganachta Locha Léin. A number of ‘prophecies’ within the text clearly correspond to late eighth-century personages and events (*ibid.*, 80), indicating that the political landscape described within the text is likely to be an accurate representation of the status quo in the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

1.3.4 EARLY MEDIEVAL FOUNDATION

Foundation

It is not clear when a monastic settlement was established on Skellig Michael. The earliest definite reference to an ecclesiastical foundation at the site is the annal entry of AD 824 which records a Norse raid on the island.

The next reference to the site, only slightly post-dating the first, is in the martyrologies deriving from the monastery at Tallaght, Co. Dublin. The earliest in the sequence of martyrologies is the Martyrology of Tallaght (MT) itself, which includes an entry under 28 April referring to ‘Suibne in Scelig’ (Best and Lawlor 1931, 37). Suibne of Skellig is also included in the *Féilire Uí Ghormáin*, which was compiled between 1166 and 1174 at Knock, Co. Louth (Stokes 1993[1895], 86–7); this later martyrology refers to the original Martyrology of Tallaght by name and would appear to have derived its list of saints from a copy of MT that no longer survives. The earliest surviving copy of MT is the incomplete example included in the Book of Leinster, which dates from the mid-twelfth century, but Ó Riain’s (1990, 37–8) analysis of the surviving corpus of the Tallaght martyrologies points to the original composition of MT no earlier than 828. Interestingly, the *Féilire Óengusso*, also composed in the ninth century and deriving from a redaction of MT (Ó Riain 1990), does not include Suibne.

What is certain is that the site was well established by the time these earliest surviving references occur, and most studies of the site would place its foundation sometime before 700 (e.g. de Paor 1955; Henry 1957; Horn *et al.* 1990). If we accept the association of the site with St Fionán (see below), it could well be a sixth-century foundation.

As previously mentioned, there is a reference to the Skelligs in the *c.* 700 text ‘Conall Corc and the

Corco Luigde' (Meyer 1910); this is a reference to the island itself—the existence of a monastic settlement is not indicated. The relevant section of the text describes a dispute between the king of Cashel and the king of Íarmumu, which results in the king of Íarmumu fleeing to 'Scellec' and 'Gaur mac Maugo' (*ibid.*, 60). Neither is expressly described in this text as an ecclesiastical site, but both are islands off the Kerry coast. Gaur mac Maugo (*recte* Gair Mic Moga) is recorded as the site of an ecclesiastical foundation and is commonly identified with the modern island of Garinis (e.g. Hogan 1910, 435), though more recent studies suggest Scarriff Island (Ó Carragáin and Sheehan 2008). The text states that both islands are the property of the Eóganachta Locha Léin.

The events recorded in 'Conall Corc and the Corco Luigde' are set in the mid-fifth century. This does not mean, however, that it is an accurate record of the period; the events and political relationships that it describes are far more relevant to its period of writing (c. 700). While the Eóganachta Locha Léin would have been overlords of Corcu Duibne (and thus by extension its offshore islands, such as the Skelligs or Scarriff Island) c. 700, the reference in this text seems to imply a more direct relationship. The Eóganachta Locha Léin may have directly held these island territories or, perhaps more likely, they may have been the main patrons of the ecclesiastical foundations that came to be established on both islands.

This association of the Skelligs with the Eóganachta Locha Léin contrasts strongly to the later reference to Skellig Michael in the twelfth-century text *Caithréim Cellacháin Chaisil* (Brugge 1905, 38). Like the *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh*, the *Caithréim* is a propagandist text (in this instance in favour of the MacCarthaig dynasty, the ruling dynasty of the Eóganachta); far from detracting from the reference to Skellig Michael, however, this fact enhances it. In the relevant section of the text various subject kings of Munster explain their rationale for fighting against the Norse. The three kings of Corcu Duibne justify their involvement as a reaction to an attack on Skellig Michael, placing the site on an equal footing with such regionally important sites as Scatterry Island (Inis Cathaig) and suggesting a link between the site and the ruling dynasties of Corcu Duibne. This lends weight to recent arguments regarding the potential regional importance of the site (Ó Carragáin 2008), while also suggesting that patronage and support for the site by the eleventh or twelfth century derived more from the local dynasties of the Corcu Duibne than from the Eóganachta Locha Léin, as may once have been the case.

Dedication

There are many questions surrounding the dedication of the site. As the name of the site indicates, the foundation came to be dedicated to St Michael, but the association of this saint with the site is commonly believed to have occurred quite late in its history. The first reference to the dedication is the latest in the sequence of annal entries relating to the site (AD 1044) and occurs only in AFM. The corresponding entry in AI simply refers to 'Sceilic'. AFM was compiled during the seventeenth century using a variety of surviving annalistic texts as its sources, including redactions of many surviving sets of annals (such as AU and AI) in addition to material that has not survived to the present. It is presumed that the reference to the site as 'Sgellic-Mhicil' derives from an earlier set of annals used by the compilers and is not an interpolation by them (certainly the earlier reference to the site in AFM at AD 950 refers just to 'Sgeillic'), but the divergence with AI is worth considering. The entry in AI is quite long and by this period the surviving manuscript of AI is likely to be a contemporary record of events. It could even be argued that the 'newness' of the dedication is reflected in its omission from AI.

Aside from St Michael, the other saint commonly associated with the site is Fionán, an important local saint who was a member of the Corcu Duibne and founded Inisfallen; though much of his ecclesiastical career was spent in the midlands, the surviving Latin Life emphasises his connections to south Kerry (Ó Riain 2009). No evidence for this association with Fionán has thus far been identified in early medieval texts, however. Skellig Michael is not recorded as one of the sites founded by Fionán, which is a curious omission, given the likely proposed regional significance of the site (Ó Carragáin

2008). The earliest identified instance of the association is the assertion by Smith (1756, 61) in his account of the site that it was originally founded by Fionán. Subsequent scholarly work on the site derives the association with Fionán from Smith's account. There are three holy wells in the townland of Kinard West (Tobar Muire, Tobar Fionain and Tobar Michil) on the south side of the Dingle peninsula; there is a folk tale that the wells were created by Saints Fionán and Michael when they landed there from Skellig Michael (Ó Danachair 1960, 75). On that basis it is likely that Smith's association of Fionán with the site derives from local folk tradition. The antiquity of this tradition is difficult to determine.

As already noted, one saint is mentioned in connection with the site in the early medieval documents. The Martyrology of Tallaght and the *Feilire Uí Ghormáin* both record a Suibne of Skellig with a feast-day of 28 April. It is tempting to suggest that Suibne could be the name of the original founder of Skellig Michael. Ó Riain's (1990, 26–35) schema for dating the original compilation of the martyrologies relies heavily, however, on the annalistic obits of late eighth- and ninth-century clerics who were accorded sainthood in the martyrologies. In such a context, Suibne may well have been a prominent cleric at Skellig Michael during this period; given the paucity of recorded information about the site it is difficult to be more definitive.

Clerical succession

Only four clerics are recorded in the annals (Table 1) and only one of the four is expressly titled abbot (Flann m. Cellach, †882); it is possible that the others were also abbots, though Aed (†1044) is described as a priest. Though the site is sometimes considered a hermetical foundation, none of the clerics is noted as being an anchorite. Possibly we could add Suibne to this list also, bringing the total of recorded clerics to five; while there is a potential that Suibne could be the name of the original founder of the site, many of the saints listed in the Tallaght martyrologies can be identified with clerical office-holders whose obits occur in the annals (for examples see Ó Riain 1990, 26–35).

Table 1—Clerics of Skellig Michael recorded in the annals.

| <i>Year</i> | <i>Name</i> | <i>Annal</i> | <i>Entry</i> |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|--|
| 824 | Étgal | AU | Étgal of Scelec was carried off by the heathens, and died shortly afterwards of hunger and thirst. |
| | | AI | Scelec was plundered by the heathens and Étgal was carried off into captivity, and he died of hunger in their hands. |
| 882 | Flann | AI | Repose of Flann son of Cellach, abbot of Scelec. |
| 950 | Blathmac | AFM | Blathmhac of Sgeillic died. |
| 1044 | Aed | AI | Aed Sceilic, the noble priest, the celibate, and the chief of the Gaedil in piety, rested in Christ. |
| | | AFM | Aedh of Sgelic-Mhichil. |

A single Norse raid is recorded in annals, in 824, resulting in the death of Étgal, possibly the abbot but certainly an important cleric. A record of a further raid is preserved in the *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib* (CGG). CGG is a problematical text, as it is primarily a work of political propaganda (though early scholars mistakenly viewed it as a historical treatise), but it does draw directly on the contemporary annalistic records (Ní Mhaonaigh 1996), many of which do not survive to the present. So it is likely that the reference to the additional raid on Skellig Michael is authentic. There is an identifiable stratum of unique material within CGG relating to the territories of the Ciarraige and the Eóganachta Locha Léin, which suggests that the compiler of CGG may have had access to a west Munster source, though equally

the material may reflect strong ties between the Ciarrige and Lismore, the possible source of the unique material for south-east Munster and the Deisí (*ibid.*, 120–1). This second raid is listed amongst a series of undatable entries within *CGG* which cannot be correlated with the surviving sets of annals (Todd 1867, 16–17). The position of the entry within the text of *CGG* suggests a general ninth-century date; in the redaction of *CGG* preserved in the Book of Leinster the raid on Skellig Michael is described as originating ‘from Limerick’ (*ibid.*, 228), which might suggest a mid-ninth-century date, after the establishment of the longphort but before its destruction in 887 (Valente 2008, 50).

1.3.5 A TIME OF TRANSITION: TWELFTH-CENTURY REFORM

While the tenth and eleventh centuries were significant periods in the political history of Munster as a result of changes wrought by the emergence and expansion of the Dál Cais, the twelfth century was an important watershed in the history of the Irish church. By the end of the eleventh century religious and ecclesiastical life in Ireland had diverged sharply from the contemporary norms of mainland European Christianity. As a result, the twelfth century witnessed a growing movement within the Irish church in favour of ecclesiastical reform. The reform movement was characterised by a series of major church synods that set out and developed a new diocesan system and began the process of bringing the Irish church closer to European norms.

The impact of this reform movement can be seen in the history of many prominent ecclesiastical sites within Ireland, sometimes through the loss of episcopal standing, sometimes through the introduction of the new religious orders or the adoption of their rule.

The exact standing of the ecclesiastical foundation at Skellig Michael prior to the reform movement is difficult to ascertain. There are no indications that it was ever an episcopal foundation; nevertheless, the reference in *Caithréim Cellacháin Chaisil* does suggest that it was a significant site within Corcu Duibne and that, while it may originally have drawn support from the Eóganachta Locha Léin, its main patrons by the twelfth century are likely to have been the local Corcu Duibne dynasties.

This period broadly coincides with the time-frame during which year-round settlement at Skellig Michael may have been abandoned and a new foundation established on the mainland at Ballinskelligs. In light of the existence of a vibrant medieval tradition of pilgrimage to the monastery (see below), it is likely that the site continued to be occupied at least seasonally.

As with the foundation of the original monastic settlement at Skellig Michael, the exact date at which the Augustinian priory was established at Ballinskelligs remains elusive. The priory is listed in the ecclesiastical taxation of Ireland of 1302–4 (Sweetman and Handcock 1886, 298); the prior is described as the ‘collector’ for the deanery of Agadoc (*ibid.*, 295), so it was clearly well established by the late thirteenth century.

It is possible that the establishment of the priory at Ballinskelligs pre-dates the arrival of the Anglo-Normans. One of the characteristics of the twelfth-century reform movement was the introduction of new religious orders, such as the Cistercians and the Augustinians (notably the Arroasian rule). Though this led to the establishment of new religious foundations, the new monastic rules, in particular the Augustinian rule, came to be adopted at existing foundations also. The initial introduction of the new religious orders is generally credited to Malachy Ó Moirgair—new foundations such as the Cistercian abbey at Mellifont and the Arroasian abbey at Louth can be attributed to his direct patronage. During his term as papal legate (1140–8) Malachy was known to have been active in Munster, and the adoption of the Augustinian rule (commonly the Arroasian form of the rule) at existing ecclesiastical foundations within Munster, such as Roscrea, has been attributed to that period and to his influence (Dunning 1945, 303–4). O’Sullivan and Sheehan (1996, 347) have stated that the priory was founded in or shortly after

1210, following the date suggested by Gwynn and Hadcock (1970, 192).

The Life of Malachy written by St Bernard of Clairvaux records that Malachy established a new foundation at ‘Ibracanese’ in Munster; this placename has been described as deriving from *Íbh Rathach* (Iveragh), suggesting a location on the Iveragh peninsula, leading to the suggestion that this foundation was the abbey at Ballinskelligs (Fenton, *The Kerryman*, 13/11/1948). There are a number of difficulties with this (Gwynn 1992, 207–8), not least of which is the assertion in the text of the Life that Cormac MacCarthaig, the king of Cashel, who had endowed the foundation, could have had daily access to the new priory.

1.3.6 TWELFTH- AND THIRTEENTH-CENTURY RECORDS

References to both the island monastery of Skellig Michael and the Augustinian priory at Ballinskelligs are sparse during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the best-known references being the account of Giraldus Cambrensis and the ecclesiastical taxation of 1302–4, previously mentioned.

Giraldus Cambrensis’s account of the site is not particularly informative. He does not name Skellig Michael, but describes how a hollow stone situated outside a church miraculously produces wine for the celebration of the Eucharist each day. This miracle occurs ‘in the south of Munster near Cork’ on a ‘certain island which has within it a church of Saint Michael, revered for its true holiness since ancient times’ (O’Meara 1982, 80). Despite the dubious geography of the reference it is unlikely that any location other than Skellig Michael would fit the broader description; in addition, the miraculous tale recounted occurs in a later document, which definitely confirms Skellig Michael as the location (see below).

A more interesting reference to the site occurs in the *Libellus de fundacione ecclesie Consecrati Petri*, commonly referred to as the *Regensburger Schottenlegende*. This is a mid-thirteenth-century Latin text giving an account of the foundation of the Irish Benedictine monasteries in Germany, at Weih Sankt Peter and St James in Regensburg, St James in Würzburg and St Nicholas in Memmingen. The text appears to have been composed at Ratisbon by an Irish monk, potentially originally from Kerry (Breatnach 1977–8, 58).

The initial section of the text offers an account of the career of St Patrick which includes a version of Patrick’s expulsion of the demons from Ireland, featuring an intervention by St Michael that occurs on a rock off the coast of Ireland. This rock (according to the text) is known as ‘Silex Sancti Michaelis’ as a result. The text then includes a detailed description of the rock, its setting and various miraculous tales concerning the site (*ibid.*, 59). One of these miracles is identical to that described by Giraldus Cambrensis.

Breatnach (1977–8) has argued that this section of the *Libellus* functions much like *dindsenchas* (and may have been intended as such), providing a rationale and origin-tale for Skellig Michael and possibly for another prominent local landmark, the Saint’s Road, which leads to the summit of Mount Brandon on the Dingle peninsula. The text also points to a well-established tradition of pilgrimage to the site by the thirteenth century; the abbey at Ballinskelligs is likely to have provided a useful base for pilgrimage to the island. It may well be that the development of Skellig Michael as a place of pilgrimage provided impetus for the establishment of the Augustinian abbey on the mainland, to provide a controlled ‘gateway’ to the island.

1.3.7 CONCLUSIONS

The surviving evidence for the early history of Skellig Michael is very sparse; references to the site in texts prior to the thirteenth century tend to be brief and incidental. Some of these references are to the ecclesiastical foundation while others are to the island itself, as a prominent landmark off the south-west coast.

The earliest surviving reference to the island is contained in the *c.* 700 narrative text ‘Conall Corc and the Corcu Loigde’, while the earliest surviving references to the monastic foundation occur in AU, AI and the Martyrology of Tallaght, all dating from the ninth century .

By the eleventh century the site was clearly dedicated to St Michael and it is likely that a tradition of pilgrimage to the site had begun to evolve. There is a slight possibility that the site was originally dedicated to St Michael, though at present the balance of evidence suggests a rededication either from an unnamed local saint or from St Fionán (though the association of Fionán with the site has not been sourced in any medieval documentation).

There is no strong historical information that would establish a foundation date for the site, though a foundation before 700 seems indicated.

Historical sources do suggest that the original patrons of the site could have been the Eóganachta Locha Léin, with patronage shifting to local Corcu Duibne dynasties by the twelfth century. This would tally with the diminution in power of Eóganachta Locha Léin from the late eighth/early ninth century.

Again, uncertainty surrounds the date of the establishment of the Augustinian abbey at Ballinskelligs, though its background context would probably have been the influence of the twelfth-century reform movement in combination with a growing tradition of pilgrimage.

1.4 A SUMMARY OF THE LATER HISTORY

In the early thirteenth century a general climatic deterioration resulted in colder weather and increased storms on the seas around the south-west coast. This, along with a shift in the Irish church from a monastic to a diocesan structure, signalled the end of Irish eremitic island settlements, with the result that the community of Skellig Michael eventually moved to the mainland at Ballinskelligs. This is likely to have happened over a period of time in the later thirteenth century and possibly the early fourteenth century (see Section 8 below).

The island probably continued to be used as a dependency of the Augustinian abbey at Ballinskelligs, being occupied by some monks in the summer months. The prior of Ballinskelligs was still addressed in papal letters as ‘Augustinian prior of St Michael’s, Roche (de Rupe)’. The Augustinians must also have been actively involved in promoting and managing pilgrimages to the island and maintaining the structures there.

Skellig Michael remained in the hands of the Augustinian monks until 1578, when, as a result of the Desmond Rebellion, Queen Elizabeth I dissolved certain monasteries that were under the protection of the earl of Desmond. The Skellig islands thus passed into secular hands, to the Butler family. Although the monastery ceased to exist, the island continued to be used as a place of pilgrimage.

In the early 1820s the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (the predecessor of the Commissioners of Irish Lights) purchased Skellig Michael from John Butler of Waterville under a compulsory purchase order for the purpose of erecting two lighthouses on the Atlantic side. These were made accessible by an improved landing on the east side and a road that was blasted out on the precipitous southern and western sides of the island. During the period of construction, the lighthouse-builders occupied many of the beehive cells within the monastery, and the structural modifications carried out at this time have had a significant impact on areas of the monastic settlement. Both lighthouses and their associated domestic quarters were completed by 1826.

In 1880 the OPW took the monastic remains into guardianship and commenced a project for the repair of collapsed structures. Since that time, the OPW has continued in its efforts to maintain and preserve the monastic remains.

1.5 BACKGROUND TO THE CONSERVATION WORKS

Grellan D. Rourke

1.5.1 INTRODUCTION

Skellig Michael had been abandoned for a long time, during which much deterioration had taken place. Given the topography, the pressures of retained material and the lack of any maintenance over centuries, considerable loss must have taken place. During the lighthouse occupation in the 1820s considerable works were undertaken to render the place safe for use. This necessitated the creation of level platforms, improved paving and, most notably, works to the retaining walls. Before the builders departed, additional works were undertaken to clean up the site and to conceal the large amount of building debris created over a period of six years. Later on in the century the OPW took over the care of the monument and repair works were undertaken to walls, most notably to St Michael's Church, which had partially collapsed in the intervening period.

The condition of the site in the late 1970s was such that there were considerable structural problems requiring attention. Some were very serious in scale with potentially grave consequences, while others were more localised. With the consultant engineer Joss Lynam, a strategy was developed. The structural problems were rated and the most serious were tackled first. The works detailed in this report were driven by the need to resolve structural issues of all kinds in order to preserve the unique remains. Great care was taken to retain as much of any original material as possible, and this was the primary guiding principle. In addition to the preservation of the site, it was necessary to undertake the works to ensure the safety of visitors now and into the future.

The following is a summary of the rationale behind decisions taken regarding conservation works and the resultant archaeological excavations. The information is presented under the same headings as the archaeological excavations for ease of reference. Additional information is supplied for the north and south steps, where archaeological monitoring took place.

1.5.2 THE SMALL ORATORY TERRACE AND LEDGE

The terrace retaining wall

This was the first major work to have been undertaken on Skellig Michael. This retaining wall is an original monastic structure and retains a terrace upon which the small oratory is constructed (Ill. 2.26). Over time it had moved considerably owing to the pressure of the retained material above. The terrace itself had filled with a peaty soil and much water is channelled onto it from the rock above. The wet, peaty fill added to the weight this wall was required to support. Structural drystone construction is very flexible and the wall simply adjusted to accommodate the pressure of the retained material. The most vulnerable walling is the centre section of the south wall, which is not constructed on rock. This section began to move outwards at the base and, as it did so, the wall migrated both downwards and inwards above. This movement was slow and considerable; as the wall dropped, additional stonework had to be added to the top to maintain an enclosing wall. In the end a retaining wall had also to be constructed on the inside of part of the terrace to stop the upper parapet wall from falling in onto the terrace.

The deformation was considerable, with the base of the wall 2.6m out from the top, although there would have been some slight batter to the wall originally. The large base stones in the centre had fallen away, exposing a large hole (Ill. 2.3). Failure was not far off and it was remarkable that this wall had not collapsed, given the intense pressure it was under. It was not possible to correct the deformation in any

way but it was essential to halt any further movement by providing a counterbalance secured from the rock well below. This was effectively a reinforced concrete arch put in at an angle to the wall and secured into the rock at either end. From the crown of the arch a buttress, faced in drystone, was built under the centre of the retaining wall, impeding any further slippage. Once the engineering works were completed, the wall was given additional strength *in situ* by tightening the existing drystone work.

The small oratory terrace

The material that had accumulated on top of the paving level on the terrace had added to the structural problems, and when this material was excavated the weight on the terrace was reduced to a more acceptable level. Some of the original paving was still intact. There are three major structures associated with this terrace: the small oratory, the monks' 'latrine' and a *leacht*.

The excavation exposed the original level of the paving on top of which the oratory was constructed. This building had suffered over time as the built-up ground consolidated under the weight. The north-west corner was partially built on exposed rock but the other walls were mostly constructed on paving which lay on fill. The settlement of the building varied and was most evident at the south-east corner, where most subsidence had taken place. Here the damage to the stonework was worst. The outer stone skin had suffered in the usual way with loss of stone at the upper level. As a consequence, water was coming into the building from the roof and was causing erosion of material from the interior, which is not paved. The south-east corner and the upper section of the outer stone layer were repaired to preserve the structure.

The monks' 'latrine' may pre-date the construction of the terrace and could have been accessed from a rock-cut ledge on the upper side. The *leacht* was partially constructed on this sloping bedrock. The base of the 'latrine' and substantial walling on the west side were fully exposed in excavation. The walling on the interior was corbelled, demonstrating that this had been a small beehive structure. All its features were intact and were repaired.

1.5.3 THE LARGE ORATORY

This structure has had a long history of movement, some happening very slowly over time, so that the building was able to deform considerably without collapse, notably in the north-west corner. There is one area (the north-east corner) that had collapsed and had been repaired during the monastic occupation. The north-east corner collapsed and was repaired when the annexe to the burial platform was built on its east side.

The main issue with the oratory was water ingress. This building had been used again from the nineteenth century, first as an office during the lighthouse construction in the 1820s and later as a church by the lighthouse families stationed on the island. There is still evidence of limewash on the interior. The outer skin of the dome had been repaired very roughly, with the stones placed in a very haphazard way. In time this facilitated the ingress of water into the building and the erosion of the internal floor. It was necessary to halt this cause of the deterioration of the structure. The rough work to repair the dome had been undertaken during the lighthouse occupation and a pipe bowl dating from this period was found when this repair was taken down. The upper part of the external skin on the dome was reconstructed in such a way as to throw the water away from the roof and walls. The interior masonry was in such good order that no work was deemed necessary.

1.5.4 SOUTH ENTRANCE 1 (INNER ENCLOSURE) AND *LEACHT* AREA

This entrance is located in an area not now easily accessible and in a wall of curious construction. A length of the original walling remains on the west side, while that on the east side had collapsed down onto the ‘garden’ below. It was this collapse that probably damaged the circular cell and the lower retaining wall in this location. The west jamb was reasonably intact, although it had started to deform under the weight and pressure of the wall above and to the side.

This is the second entrance into the inner enclosure. The seriousness of the collapse of this important feature needed to be addressed. Left unattended, the west jamb would have collapsed with additional loss of the surrounding upper retaining wall. This wall is quite unique on Skellig Michael. While it gives the appearance of a collapsed structure, it was constructed intentionally this way with a very rough face, the large, long stones built into the wall with the short ends protruding out in a haphazard and irregular fashion. There is a parallel on the mainland in the enclosure wall of the early medieval monastic site of Killreilig. This form of construction is very solid but has the disadvantage that it can be scaled very easily in the event of an attack, which might explain why it went out of fashion.

The main thrust of the work here was engineering, and it was possible to jack back the very large collapsing stones in the west jamb. The walling on top was taken down and the area was excavated. This revealed the original innermost lintel. It was possible from the collapse to reinstate the east jamb, and the wall to the east was built in a similar style to retain the structures above. A facing wall was constructed within the entrance opening at the back to support the retained material behind. On the exterior the base of a platform was revealed; this gave access to the entrance, which is at a higher level.

The large oratory was constructed after this entrance had been abandoned. It was not possible to excavate the area inside the wall fully, as the foundations for the oratory are constructed on the fill. It was possible to reach a sufficiently low level to show the very interesting stepped foundation of the oratory. The ground to the west was excavated in order to undertake repairs to the inside face of the upper retaining wall, and in the course of this excavation a number of skeletons were uncovered. Also excavated was a *leacht* with a large vertical stone at the west end. This stone proved to be the base of one of the two major decorative crosses in the inner enclosure. Where soil had built up against St Michael’s Church a patch of original external render was uncovered. This was conserved *in situ*. The second phase of St Michael’s Church had been rendered externally and probably limewashed, creating quite a stark contrast to all the earlier structures on the site.

1.5.5 SOUTH ENTRANCE 2 (INNER ENCLOSURE)

While repairs had taken place on either side of this entrance, repair to the actual entrance had only taken place above the lintel level. There were two structural problems that manifested themselves by the early 1980s and both required immediate attention, as this is the only way for visitors to access the inner enclosure.

The nineteenth-century wall running from the entrance on the interior was giving cause for concern. It was effectively a retaining wall, holding back material to a height of a little under 2m. The forces at play were causing the wall to bow inwards, and it would have had a catastrophic effect had this collapsed when visitors were accessing the monastery. In addition, one of the lintels on the inside of the entrance had cracked and greater support was required, as most visitors also pass overhead.

During excavation the nineteenth-century wall was taken down; some of the rubble behind the wall was taken back and a better-quality wall constructed in its place. In exposing the inner corner of the west jamb of the entrance it became clear why this intervention had occurred in the first place: the inner face of the upper retaining wall had collapsed inwards and there was very little of the inner face left. This

original corner was consolidated and the new retaining wall constructed back from the face of the previous wall so as to expose the inner corner of the entrance, showing the great thickness of the original upper retaining wall.

The area above the lintel on the inside was excavated and support was put in place to take the stress off the original cracked lintel, which was left *in situ*. In examination of this entrance it became clear that the stepped paving within the entrance was not original. There is a set of paving beneath, on top of which the entrance was built. The state of this paving was much dilapidated by the time the secondary paving was built. Interestingly, it does not turn west towards the current entrance into the upper monks' garden but east to make its way down to the entrance in the outer enclosure.

1.5.6 EAST ENTRANCE, PHASE 3 (INNER ENCLOSURE)

The existing east wall of the inner enclosure had collapsed numerous times and was repaired on three different occasions. Each repair had been set back from the previous one, at a higher level. The last repair was undertaken in the early nineteenth century, when considerable enabling works were undertaken by the lighthouse-builders. This length of repair coincided with the long dimension of the monks' graveyard. It had become dangerous, and this is an area where visitors congregate. The initial project had been to take down this later section of walling and reconstruct it, but the walling beneath was also quite unstable and it was necessary to reduce the wall further. In the process another wall with an intact entrance came to light on the interior, and its condition required additional investigation to consolidate sufficiently to facilitate the upper wall repair.

This was one of the most significant structural finds and brings the history of the monastery back considerably in time. It was possible in the excavation to reveal the full extent of this early entrance and then investigate the interior in a limited way. It was soon evident why this entrance had been abandoned. There was significant evidence of a collapsed structure within, collapsing in front of the entrance on the inside. The fallen stones were long and flat with smooth faces and were aligned east–west. These remains are most likely those of an earlier well-built structure. It was possible to consolidate this entrance and to repair the later wall in such a way that visitors can now view the feature from above.

1.5.7 CISTERN 3

This structure had been considered a souterrain. It was possible to crawl into the entrance and see that the interior chamber was located on the west side, but most of the low, long chamber was filled with debris from the collapsed roof structure. Visitors could walk on the ground above and this was exacerbating the structural failure. Excavation established the scale of the structure and that it was in fact another cistern rather than a souterrain. The side walls, which had collapsed, were repaired and the lintels put back into position again.

1.5.8 THE LOWER MONKS' GARDEN AND ITS STRUCTURES

This was the most challenging part of the work undertaken on the monastery. There had been at least two considerable collapses of the upper retaining wall into this area, with rebuilding by the lighthouse-builders and repairs by the OPW in the nineteenth century. The rebuilding was focused on the east end of the terrace; walls were built to enclose the steep and vulnerable terrain and to stop further erosion. A

cross-wall had been built across the terrace, cordoning off the east end, which was very dangerous. In this area an additional wall had been constructed, set back from the line of the lower retaining wall. In time this latter wall had been undermined from underneath and had begun to fail. The overall structural stability of the east end of this terrace was considerably compromised, and any collapse would have cascaded down the steep south slope onto the lighthouse road below.

Owing to the topography it was necessary to have a different strategy for this terrace. Because of the seriousness of the situation at the east end, remedial works and excavation began here. Considerable safety precautions were required before the failing nineteenth-century interventions could be removed. Once the area was made safe, excavation began in earnest. This revealed the base of the original lower retaining wall, which must have collapsed most spectacularly. Set back from this wall were the remains of an early circular cell, with one door jamb still intact. The area surrounding this cell on the north and west was paved, so it clearly could not have been part of a garden. The condition of the drystone walling of the cell was good and this was tightened. Originally this cell must have been built against and partially into the lower retaining wall.

Near the entrance to the cell and at a lower level, and against the lower retaining wall, the remains of an indeterminate structure were revealed, possibly a storage chamber. The retaining wall, which had fallen away at this end of the terrace, was reinstated to retain all the features above. In doing so it was possible to present the full remains of this small chamber.

Only when this end of the terrace had been consolidated was it possible to work on the central section. Owing to the fall across the terrace it was not possible to fully excavate in this area; indeed, to reveal enough for structural consolidation it was necessary to construct a retaining wall midway along the garden to provide support to the upper retaining wall. This facilitated the exposure of more of the original south retaining wall. It showed that a series of large rocks, most likely from the base of the upper retaining wall, had come crashing down, hitting the lower retaining wall with such force as to cause it to deform. The major force of the collapse hit the base, causing a reaction which saw the upper section fall inwards. This dramatic deformation had to be addressed, and very slowly this long length of walling was carefully jacked up on the inside to increase its stability.

At the upper west end no works were undertaken other than those recorded when the outer entrance was excavated and repaired.

South entrance 1 (outer enclosure)

This is the only entrance into the lower monks' garden, and the north, south and east steps lead to this point. The entrance had been used by the lighthouse-builders, who before they left built a drystone facing wall on the exterior of the entrance, where most of the collapse had occurred. The structural problems relating to this entrance are inextricably bound up with the upper monks' garden. The west jamb is one of the 'pillars' underpinning the south-east corner of this garden. In addition, stonework at the top of the blocked-up ope was beginning to unravel.

Excavation exposed a very complete doorway with pillar jambs that had fallen outwards considerably. Much of the west jamb on the exterior had fallen away. The inner lintel had survived thanks to its protected location; it was still in its original position. A certain amount of jacking back was required for the pillar stones. The entrance had been designed to take a strong door and there were holes in the wall on the interior to accommodate a large draw-bar. The outer west jamb had to be repaired and new lintels found for the outer section of the entrance.

On the interior of this entrance a curved wall on the west side follows the curved steps that lead up into the terrace above. This wall had begun to fail and had fallen in and partially collapsed at the top and the end where it abutted the entrance. It was necessary to take down the upper section of this wall. The wall that was partly dismantled would appear to date from the nineteenth century.

1.5.9 UPPER MONKS' GARDEN

This area has suffered a series of collapses. To the left of the inner enclosure entrance the upper wall had collapsed and been repaired considerably, in a stepped fashion, by the lighthouse-builders, when they inhabited the monastery and constructed their latrine. The outer retaining wall had dramatically collapsed, most likely after the abandonment of the monastery. Most of it had fallen over onto the steep southern slope of the island and been lost. The lighthouse-builders needed to enclose this garden area and make it safe, so they built a new retaining wall. This was constructed in quite a different style to the original. One of the problems facing them was the dearth of building stone and it was only possible to build a narrow wall. In order to increase its strength they curved the wall in and out, which significantly changed the appearance of this feature. The third intervention had been to build a narrow wall on the diagonal at the south-east corner, where a section of the original walling had fallen away as the south-east corner of the garden had collapsed.

There were two structural issues, both relating to nineteenth-century interventions which were beginning to fail. The outer retaining wall had been pressured by some of the retaining material, and in two places the wall had failed where it abutted the remains of the original monastic walling. This failure manifested itself in partial collapse, creating holes that deteriorated each year. The ground on which the diagonal wall had been built had considerably eroded under the exposed exterior face, undermining the base of the wall. Had either of these structures failed there would have been fatalities, as visitors to the monastery congregate in this area before entering the inner enclosure.

In reconstructing the outer retaining wall it was possible to straighten out the footprint somewhat so that it better resembled the original line of the wall. Excavation revealed portions of the straight line of the inner face upon which the repair was constructed. Excavation at the south-east corner revealed why this part of the garden had failed, the perimeter walls here being built on a layer of large boulders sloping steeply to the south-east. In the end, the pressure became so great that this section collapsed, taking with it the west jamb of the outer entrance below. It was possible to provide sufficient support to this part of the repair so that the original line of the corner could be reinstated.

1.5.10 STRUCTURE AT THE BASE OF THE EAST STEPS

For the most part the east steps were reasonably intact, although many had slipped, which can represent the first phase of failure. In a number of locations this slippage had begun to accelerate and, given the steep topography on this side of the island, this would have resulted in loss of individual steps and a further unravelling of the staircase. Given the sensitive location of this staircase right above the landing pier, there was also a serious safety risk to those landing on the island. In all cases these steps, with attendant masonry, were secured back into their original positions. All slipped material was retrieved.

An elevated stretch near the end of the long flight leading down from the south entrance 1 (outer enclosure) had collapsed; both steps and masonry had fallen down the very steep ground to the south, some of it lost. If this length of structure had been left untouched further collapse would have occurred. This could have had serious impact far below, where the access road from the pier is located. In addition, given the height of the staircase above the ground at this location (this length of staircase has the highest supporting exposed masonry on the island), it would have been very difficult to access the remainder of the east steps to undertake works and effect ongoing maintenance. As much as possible was retrieved from the steep slope beneath and this section of the staircase was repaired using this material; some additional material was also required to complete the work.

At the base of the east steps lie the remains of a drystone structure. Below this location the steps had

been dynamited away when the lighthouse-builders constructed the pier and road. This action unfortunately destroyed half of the long, rectangular structure, and what remained was very vulnerable to erosion as the ground falls away very steeply at this point. It is probable that more of this structure had survived the blasting and that it had fallen away in the intervening years. It was essential to consolidate and conserve what was left of this unique structure, possibly a boat-house. It is situated at a level at which the housing of a boat would have ensured its protection from winter storms. It was only necessary to tighten the existing masonry and to support the end wall where the ground fell away. One jamb of the entrance was revealed during excavation and this was secured.

This area was cleaned of vegetation to reveal a whole series of rock-cut steps. As these became worn, new steps were cut out alongside. This is the only location on the island where this has been noticed. Further up the east steps there is evidence of rock-cut steps running parallel with the later masonry steps. This can be seen elsewhere, and it is clear that the monks created their routes to the monastery in a simple straightforward way at first. Once they had established the preferred routes and had more time at their disposal, they created the major drystone staircases.

1.5.11 THE NORTH STEPS

The north steps are made up of two long flights leading down to the water from Christ's Saddle. These steps had been repaired and much used by the lighthouse-builders in the nineteenth century. The lower flight is made up entirely of rock-cut steps, many of which had been widened by the lighthouse men and since that time have become considerably eroded by the harsh seas on the north side. The upper, longer flight is of drystone construction. Given how they were constructed into the steeply sloping ground along their length, they were particularly vulnerable to erosion and collapse. In addition, on this side of the island there are continual falls of stone from the cliffs above and these would have exacerbated the situation. This stone fall continues and each year there is damage done to these steps, often quite considerable.

Unlike the east steps, when the side support gave way the individual steps fell away quite dramatically. The topography meant that they travelled easily down the steep slope, gaining considerable momentum; some were halted by large rocks below but many fell to the bottom, either falling into the sea or crashing onto the bedrock below and breaking up. The rate of loss to this staircase was accelerating as the steps unravelled, and the intervention required was quite different. The goal was to retain as much of the original as possible.

Where the steps had fallen away, a residue of masonry had remained. From examination of the slope and of the construction that remained it was clear that this was a long, straight flight of steps with the occasional flat landing. It was possible to set up ropes from the rock above to scour the steep ground below and retrieve what had been caught in the fall. This was a very slow process and the retrieved steps had to be pulled back up to the locations whence they fell. All that was possible to retrieve was taken back up but gaps remained; in these areas the side retaining walls were reinstated and the ground above consolidated and left sloping. It is now possible to reach the north landing safely again.

1.5.12 THE SOUTH STEPS

The south steps have been in continual use and were no doubt repaired by the lighthouse-builders. Only one section of steps, that situated on the lower section of the flight above Christ's Saddle, posed a structural problem. It had begun to fall away although it had not yet failed. It was a relatively easy task to put the

SKELLIG MICHAEL, CO. KERRY: THE MONASTERY AND SOUTH PEAK

steps back into their original positions, thus consolidating the staircase again. The south steps regularly become loose from visitors travelling over them, and there is an ongoing daily maintenance programme in place to secure them and to avoid the development of more serious problems.