

'Living Stones Built Up': Symbolism in Irish Round Towers

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Round towers are some of the most enigmatic icons of Ireland's medieval period. Their function has been debated since Petrie, however we know from the annals that they did contain relics, as well as attracted Vikings to these resulting in the burning and destruction of several examples. Dating from the 10th to 13th centuries, round towers or cloitchech contained bells and it has been largely accepted that belfry was their main function. However the masonry adds a new perspective to this narrative. Often overlooked, the fabric contains the evidence for understanding the relationship between people and round towers, in the medieval context. There is a clear development of the quality of the masonry towards ashlar, based on a survey of the coursing, length of stone, use of spalls and stone cutting; and the results are at odds with the contemporary churches. The reasons for this, at a time when rendering and white-washing was the custom, reveals a requirement for aesthetically pleasing fabric that was visible.

This paper discusses the results of a recent study of the masonry of round towers. Evidence from the survey and the written record suggest that these towers were representations of the faith of the congregation and the stone was an integral part of this. The fabric has revealed the intriguing function of round towers which may have even surpassed that of belfry. This changes our interpretation of how significant these structures were to the people and demonstrates a more complex involvement with stone structures than previously suggested.