

# Roscommon Dominican Priory

## Foundation

The Dominican priory of Roscommon, known today as Roscommon Abbey, consists of the remains of a large church and graveyard. It was founded in 1253 by Felim O’Conor, king of Connacht. He was a son of the famed Cathal Crobhdearg. The priory was founded at a time of great upheaval in Ireland. Anglo-Norman barons and their knights, who had crossed the River Shannon two decades before, had partially dismembered the kingdom of Connacht. As a result, the power of the O’Conors was increasingly confined to their ancestral estates in what is now mainly county Roscommon. Despite external pressure, the construction of the

and individual poverty and they were mainly supported through donations of money and gifts from the communities that they served. The Dominicans received papal approval from Pope Innocent III in 1216. The Order spread rapidly across the Continent. The first Dominicans came to Ireland in 1224 and their earliest foundations in this country were in Dublin and Drogheda. All the early Irish foundations were at towns and this suggests that the decision to establish a community at Roscommon was taken because it too was an important population centre, in addition to being an O’Conor administrative centre.

The Dominicans were a popular order in

campaign there. In 1496 a Galway merchant, John Lynch, left money and goods to Roscommon Priory. This suggests that he was a regular visitor to the place and that some sort of trading settlement still existed at Roscommon under O’Conor rule.

## Dissolution and Destruction

Europe was riven by doctrinal disputes and religious wars associated with the Reformation during the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ireland was no exception. However, matters were complicated in Ireland because the Reformation was closely linked to the expansion of the



View of Felim O’Conor’s tomb. The tomb, as seen today, is of composite construction. Felim’s effigy, which is dated to the late thirteenth century, is situated on the top of parts of a fifteenth-century frontal. This later sculpture consists of two panels, each with four arcades that contain the figures of armed warriors. The niche which houses the tomb is a later construction, at least in its current form. It seems to have been rebuilt in relatively modern times. A fragment of a medieval graveslab that has been incorporated into the rear wall of the niche is also visible in the background.



church progressed rapidly and it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary in 1257. The building is a fine example of a Dominican priory and it is a testament to Gaelic Ireland’s engagement with the religious reform that was sweeping through Western Europe at that time.

It is not all that surprising that Felim invited the Dominicans to establish a community at Roscommon. Despite his waning fortunes, Felim still considered himself to be king of Connacht, so patronising a new reforming religious order could be seen as enhancing his reputation as a modernising sovereign. In practical terms, the O’Conors already had a fortified residence on Loughnaneane at the north end of the town. More importantly, Roscommon had been an important religious centre since at least the eighth century and it is likely that a substantial lay population already existed at the place. That earlier monastery, which had adopted the Augustinian Rule in the mid twelfth century, was located in the vicinity of St Coman’s Church-of-Ireland church, which lies about 400m to the north of the Dominican priory.

## The Dominican Order

The Dominicans were a mendicant order, founded in the early thirteenth century by the Castilian St. Dominic Guzmán (1170-1221), against a backdrop of theological discord, corruption and resentment of the Church’s wealth. St. Dominic’s intention was to address criticisms of excess within the church and to promote spiritual renewal through preaching to the laity. The Dominican Order included highly-educated preachers such as the Italian scholar, theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas. Early Dominican foundations were established beside major population centres and were often close to schools and early universities, so that the friars could more effectively preach to the laity.

The Dominicans were sworn to corporate

the Diocese of Elphin. The first Dominican house in the diocese was founded in 1252 by the great Anglo-Norman baron Maurice Fitzgerald, close to his castle and town of Sligo. Later foundations were Cloonshanville in the 1390s, Tulsk in the late 1440s and Ballindoon in 1507.

## The Founder’s Tomb

The tomb of the priory’s founder, Felim O’Conor, is located in a niche at the eastern end of the church. This position, close to the High Altar, was the most prestigious burial place in the entire church. It was also an enduring reminder of the generosity of its founder. It has been heavily restored and the panels depicting armed men actually date to the fifteenth century and have been incorporated from a later tomb. The original effigy was possibly carved in England and it seems to have been placed over the tomb sometime after Felim’s death in 1265. His family was evidently eager to portray him as a king of European status at a time when they were under increasing pressure from the seemingly relentless advance of the Anglo-Normans. Felim is portrayed in his effigy as a king, being dressed in a long robe, holding a royal wand of office or a fleur-de-lys headed sceptre. His left arm is doubled up from the elbow and his left hand holds a crucifix or reliquary suspended from the neck by a chain. Felim’s feet rest on either a dog or lion curled up in a sleeping position.

## Subsequent History of the Priory

The construction of an Anglo-Norman castle at Roscommon in the 1270s ensured that the new English town was targeted for attack by Felim’s successors and the priory was burned during one such raid. It was hit by lightning in 1308 and parts of it were badly damaged. The O’Conors regained control of Roscommon at some stage around the middle years of the fourteenth century. In 1445 the priory was in disrepair due to the effects of warfare and it received a papal indulgence to assist a re-building

administrative power of the English state. Both objectives were advanced through military conquest and consolidated by the colonisation of New English landowners on confiscated land. The estates of abbeys and friaries were suppressed by the English Crown and became a means of patronage to be granted to loyal subjects. The priory and its possessions were confiscated by c. 1570 and were attached to the constablership of Roscommon Castle, which was now firmly under governmental control. In 1573 the priory was leased to Thomas le Strange, an English settler and administrator. In 1578 the priory buildings and its possessions, including the church, cloister, hall and cellars, orchards, gardens, one hundred and forty acres, including fifty at Roscommon, some messuages (ie cottages with gardens) and the advowsons of two rectories were granted to an English soldier and colonial administrator called Sir Nicholas Malby. He also received a grant of Roscommon Castle and the nearby Augustinian priory at this time. In 1612 the Dominican priory was described as ruined. In 1615 it was included in a grant, with all its possessions, to another Englishman named Francis Annesley, Viscount Valentia.

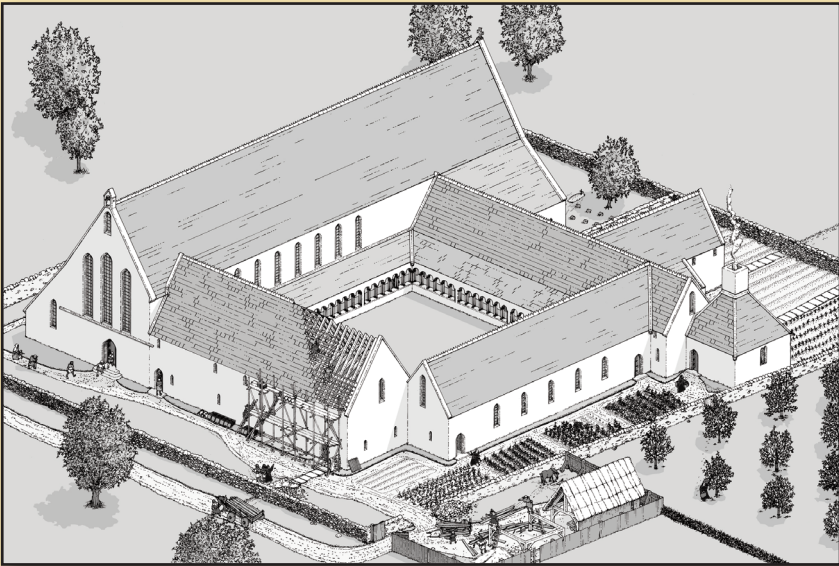
Although much of the church survives, the adjoining claustral buildings that contained the priory’s administrative and residential rooms were demolished and used as a source of stone over the course of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. This culminated in the priory’s tower being undermined and demolished in the last years of the latter century.

Although the Dominican Friars were evicted from the site, they remained in the vicinity of the town under the protection of local Catholic families. Some of them were put to death during the Cromwellian period. Later, the friars obtained a small house and land at Roscommon. This community numbered sixteen in 1791 but it had died out by 1844.



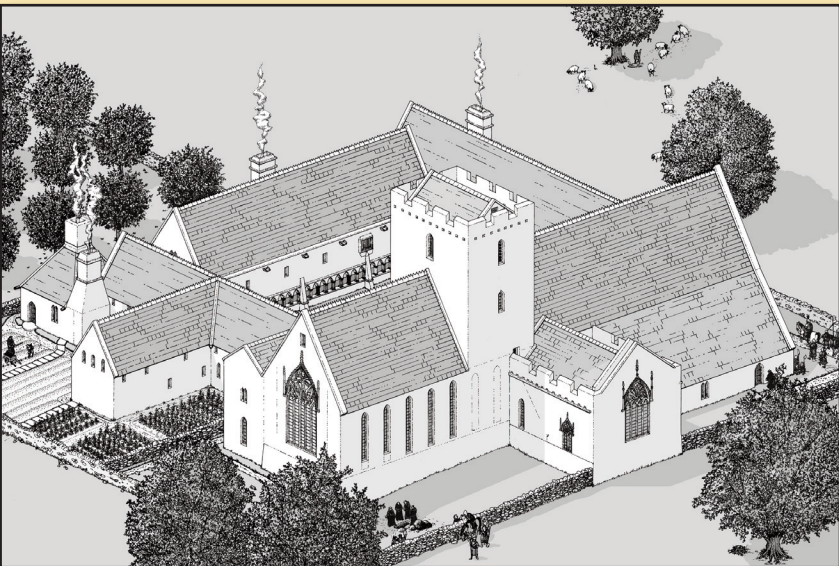
**Roscommon Dominican Priory c. 1265**

This reconstruction by Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler shows the Dominican Priory, viewed from the south west, as it may have appeared shortly after its foundation. The priory church consisted of a nave and a choir. The north aisle appears to have been an original feature. This may have accommodated a large lay congregation from the adjacent town or it may have been intended to serve as a Lady Chapel, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. The original windows were plain pointed lancets. The footprint of the cloister buildings is based on geophysical and topographical surveys undertaken by the Discovery Programme. These buildings would have been grouped in three ranges around a roofed ambulatory or walkway and an open square area known as the cloister garth. The east range contained important rooms such as the chapter house and the friars’ dormitory was on the upper floor. The south range contained the priory’s Refectory or dining hall.



**Roscommon Dominican Priory c. 1470**

This reconstruction, also by Daniel Tietzsch-Tyler, shows the Dominican Priory, viewed from the north east, as it may have appeared after major renovations in the second half of the fifteenth century. Very fine traceried windows replaced the earlier lancets. A crossing tower was also constructed at this time that spanned the full width of the church. This tower, which was depicted in eighteenth-century antiquarian drawings of the site, subsequently collapsed. A north transept containing additional chapels was built at the east end of the north aisle. The probable catalyst for this rebuilding was the papal indulgence given in 1445 to anyone who contributed in some way to the cost of repairing the priory, which is described at this time as being in a very poor state. Another spur to this rebuilding episode could have been in the aftermath of the funeral of Tadhg O’Conor who may have been buried in the priory church in 1464. The annals noted that his funeral procession, which included horsemen, soldiers, poets and men of learning, was followed by substantial donations to what may have been the priory.



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**Roscommon Abbey**  
... a Dominican priory

