

**Identification**

<i>Nomination</i>	Skellig Michael (Sceilig Mhichil)
<i>Location</i>	County Kerry
<i>State Party</i>	Republic of Ireland
<i>Date</i>	23 October 1995

**Justification by State Party**

The monastery and hermitage on Skellig Michael qualify for inclusion on the World Heritage List on the basis of **criteria i, iii, and iv**. They are an outstanding example of a perfectly preserved Early Christian settlement.

During the course of conservation and repair works, it has been possible to examine the structures in detail and hence to work out a relative chronology for the cells. A clear evolution of drystone masonry techniques is evident, providing unique documentation of the development of this type of architecture and construction.

It is the most spectacularly situated of all the Early Christian island monastic sites, particularly the isolated hermitage perched on narrow, man-made terraces just below the South Peak. Most of the structures within the monastery are almost complete, as are the stepped terraces and the paved areas. In addition to individual features, the overall layout is almost fully intact; its isolation in the Atlantic has helped preserve it. This isolation has protected it from alteration and adaptations, other than those of the lighthouse builders, who were in occupation for a brief period in the 19th century. Because the level of authenticity is so high, it makes this site of immense and immeasurable importance to the archaeologist, the architectural historian, the anthropologist, and the ethnologist.

**Category of property**

In terms of the categories of property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, Skellig Michael is a *group of buildings*. Since the entire island is covered by the nomination, it may also be considered to be a *cultural landscape*, as defined in paragraph 39 of the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.

**History and Description***History*

The date of the foundation of the monastery on this island is not known. There is a tradition that it was founded by St Fionan in the 6th century; however, the earliest written records come from the end of the 8th century. It was dedicated to St Michael somewhere between 950 and 1050. It was customary to build a new church to celebrate a dedication, and this date fits in well with the architectural style of the oldest part of the existing church, known as St Michael's Church.

It was occupied continuously until the later 12th century, when a general climatic deterioration led to increased storms in the seas around the island and forced the community to move to the mainland. However, a monastic presence was maintained as a dependence of Ballinskelligs Abbey. The church was enlarged in the 12th century and the older buildings were kept in repair. The prior of Ballinskelligs Abbey continued to be addressed in Papal communications as "Augustinian Prior of St Michael's, Roche I = Skelligl."

When in 1578 Queen Elizabeth I of England dissolved Ballinskelligs following the rebellion of the Earl of Desmond, under whose protection it had been, the island passed from the Augustinian Order to John Butler. However, although the monastery no longer existed, it continued to be a place of pilgrimage. Around 1826 the current owner, John Butler of Waterville, sold the island to the Corporation for Preserving and Improving the Port of Dublin (later to become the Commissioners of Irish Lights), who built two lighthouses on the Atlantic side. These were made accessible by improving the landing on the eastern side and blasting a road on the precipitous

southern and western sides. In 1880 the island was taken over by the Office of Public Works (OPW), which has been responsible for the maintenance and preservation of the remains ever since.

### *Description*

The island of Skellig Michael lies 11.6 km off Bolus Head, the westernmost tip of the Iveragh Peninsula of County Kerry. Faulting of Devonian sandstone and gravels have created a U-shaped depression, known today as "Christ's Valley" or "Christ's Saddle," 130 m above sea-level in the centre of the island, and this is flanked by two peaks, that to the north-east rising to 185 m and that to the west-south-west 218 m. The rock is deeply eroded and weathered, owing to its exposed position, but it is almost frost-free.

Landing is possible at three points, depending upon the state of the sea. These communicate by flights of steps with the principal monastic remains, which are situated on a sloping shelf on the ridge running north-south on the north-eastern side of the island; the hermitage is on the steeper South Peak.

The approach to the monastery from Christ's Saddle leads to a long narrow terrace, enclosed by a drystone wall. A doorway in the rear wall gives access via a flight of steps to a larger enclosure, which is in its turn terraced and subdivided; the lowest level contains the main monastic enclosure, comprised of a church, oratories, cells, a souterrain, and many crosses and cross-slabs. The white quartz paving between the buildings gives the ensemble an urban quality.

#### - The monastery

The *large oratory* has the usual inverted boat-shaped form, with a door in the west wall. It is built in coursed stone, rectangular at the base and becoming oval as it rises in height; the elongated dome terminates inside in a row of large slabs. The walls are about 1.2 m thick and there is a small window in the east one. The *small oratory* is more carefully constructed, and is considered to be later in date. Nearby are the unique remains of a beehive-shaped toilet cell.

Cell A is the largest of the six *cells*, measuring 4.6 m x 3.8 m x 5 m high, and must have had a communal function. Several have cupboards and projecting stones for hanging purposes. They vary in plan - square, rectangular, and D-shaped; several retain their original flagged floors.

*St Michael's Church* is rectangular in form, unlike the oratories, and would originally have had a timber roof. Two stages of construction can be identified: a small church in mortared stone was later expanded, using much larger sandstone blocks.

#### - The Hermitage

This group of buildings on the South Peak, which is almost invisible from the lower levels of the island, was not properly studied or understood until investigations by the Office of Public Works began in the 1980s. It consists of three separate terraces, tentatively labelled the Garden or Dwelling Terrace, the Oratory Terrace, and the Outer Terrace. The first two of these are adjacent, on the two best natural terraces on the peak, and they are connected by two passages, whilst the third is some distance away and extremely difficult of access. The principal remains are those on the Oratory Terrace, where much of the north and west walls of the building survive. At the western end of this terrace are the remains of a *leacht*, a rectangular stone structure typical of early Irish monastic sites, which probably served as a deposit for relics or an altar.

## **Management and Protection**

### *Legal status*

Skellig Michael is in full State ownership and is protected by the National Monuments Acts (1930, 1954, 1987, and 1994), which prohibit any form of unauthorized activity or work. It is also covered by successive Irish planning acts from 1963 onwards, which ban any undesirable development.

### *Management*

Management of Skellig Michael is in the hands of the South-West District of the National Monuments and Historic Properties Service of the OPW. The Service has on its staff qualified archaeologists, conservation architects, and engineers; skilled craftsmen are employed to carry out restoration and conservation works. The State Exchequer provides the annual funding needed for maintenance, management, and conservation.

The OPW has had a full-time presence on the island since the current preservation programme began in 1978. At that time the lighthouse was still manned, but it has since gone automatic. An official guide service was introduced in 1987; three of the four guides live on the island and are present on site seven days a week throughout the season. One of their main functions is to regulate the number of visitors to the sites during peak visiting hours. Following a massive increase in the numbers of visitors coming to the island by boat, and a consequent increase in damage to the site, either wilfully or accidentally, the OPW concluded an agreement with the local boatmen, whereby a finite number of non-transferable permits are issued to those boatmen already established on the route. Only one trip is allowed each day, each with a maximum of twelve visitors. These controls, which are supervised by the guides, apply only to the main monastery site. However, the effect of increased visitor numbers to the hermitage, which is very difficult to reach, is being monitored, and consideration is being given to closing this area to visitors until conservation work has been completed.

## **Conservation and Authenticity**

### *Conservation history*

Conservation work began in the 1880s when the island came into State ownership; these included the rebuilding of part of the upper retaining wall along St Michael's Church and some minor repairs to the enclosure walls. Other minor works were carried out in the 1930s. The current programme of preservation and conservation began in 1978 and will continue into the next millennium. One of the principal objectives is the stabilization of the retaining walls of the terraces.

The current programme began with an initial survey, along with repair of the steps from the lighthouse road to the monastery. With the completion of the survey conservation work began, including the removal of 19th century revetments to the walls of the cells and of material covering the paving. All this work was carefully recorded by survey and photography, and revealed a surprising amount of evidence of the monastic structures and layout. This work took place in 1981-85.

In 1984 and 1985 a survey of the remains on the South Peak was carried out, with the technical assistance of mountaineers.

Major conservation works began in 1986; these are always accompanied by archaeological excavation. This concentrated on the permanent restoration and consolidation of the terraces, their retaining walls, and the buildings. A major three-year campaign began on the Garden Terrace in 1994, in tandem with archaeological investigations.

### *Authenticity*

The level of authenticity is very high. Because of its isolation the island has been protected from alterations and adaptations, other than those of the 19th century lighthouse builders.

## **Evaluation**

### *Action by ICOMOS*

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Skellig Michael in June 1996. An expert on the early Celtic church has provided a report on the cultural significance of Skellig Michael.

### *Qualities*

The island of Skellig Michael lies at the extreme north-western edge of European civilization in the 1st millennium AD. Its cells and chapels and the even more precipitous South Hermitage symbolize both the conquest by Christianity and literacy of lands so remote that they were beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire and the ultimate reach of organized monasticism which spread from Egypt by land and sea through Italy and Gaul to Britain and Ireland in a mere two centuries (the 5th and 6th). Where large deserts on land did not exist, small "deserts" in the ocean served instead. All the physical components of the ideal small monastery - difficult access, living spaces, buildings for worship, and plots for food production - exist here in dramatic and unique settings, with the indigenous stone architecture of a past millennium fossilized and relatively stable.

### *Comparative analysis*

There are some twenty island monasteries off the coasts of Ireland, a few more round the Hebridean Islands off north-western Scotland, and some upon small stacks in the Northern Isles (Orkney and Shetland). Almost all are

readily accessible and have therefore been constantly modified and altered up to the Reformation in the 16th century and, indeed, later, and many were plundered for building stone or damaged by careless investigation or unskilled "restoration" in recent times. The extreme remoteness of Skellig Michael, where the monastic settlement may have begun in the 7th century (earlier than the Hebridean and Northern Isles sites), has allowed an exceptional state of preservation and, until recently, hardly any visitors. Until about 1950, there were even no reliable ground-plans and archaeological drawings. Within the whole corpus of such monuments, Skellig Michael must be claimed among the earliest, certainly the best preserved, and the most impressive of monastic settlements on Atlantic islets.

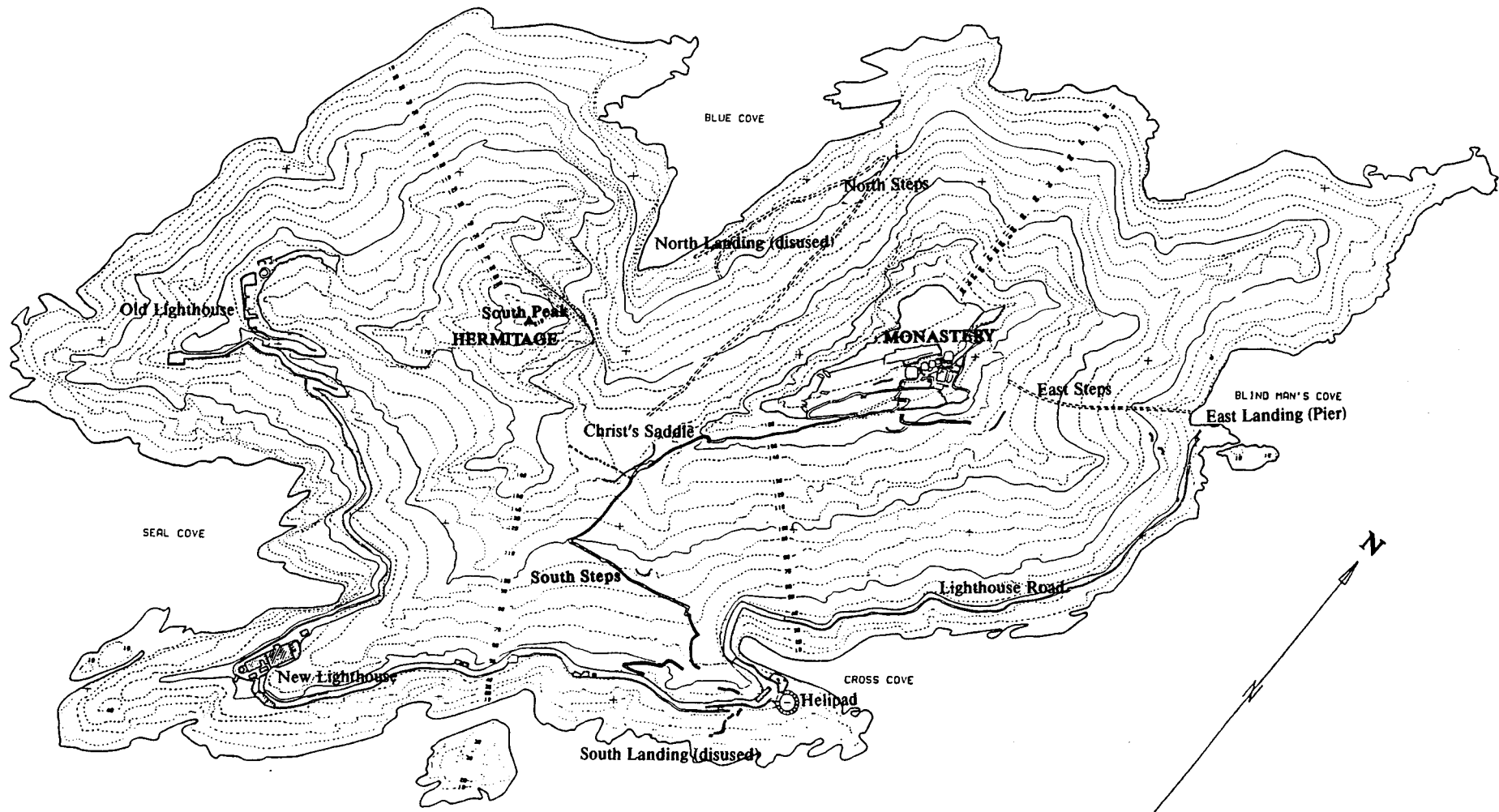
### **Recommendation**

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria iii and iv*.

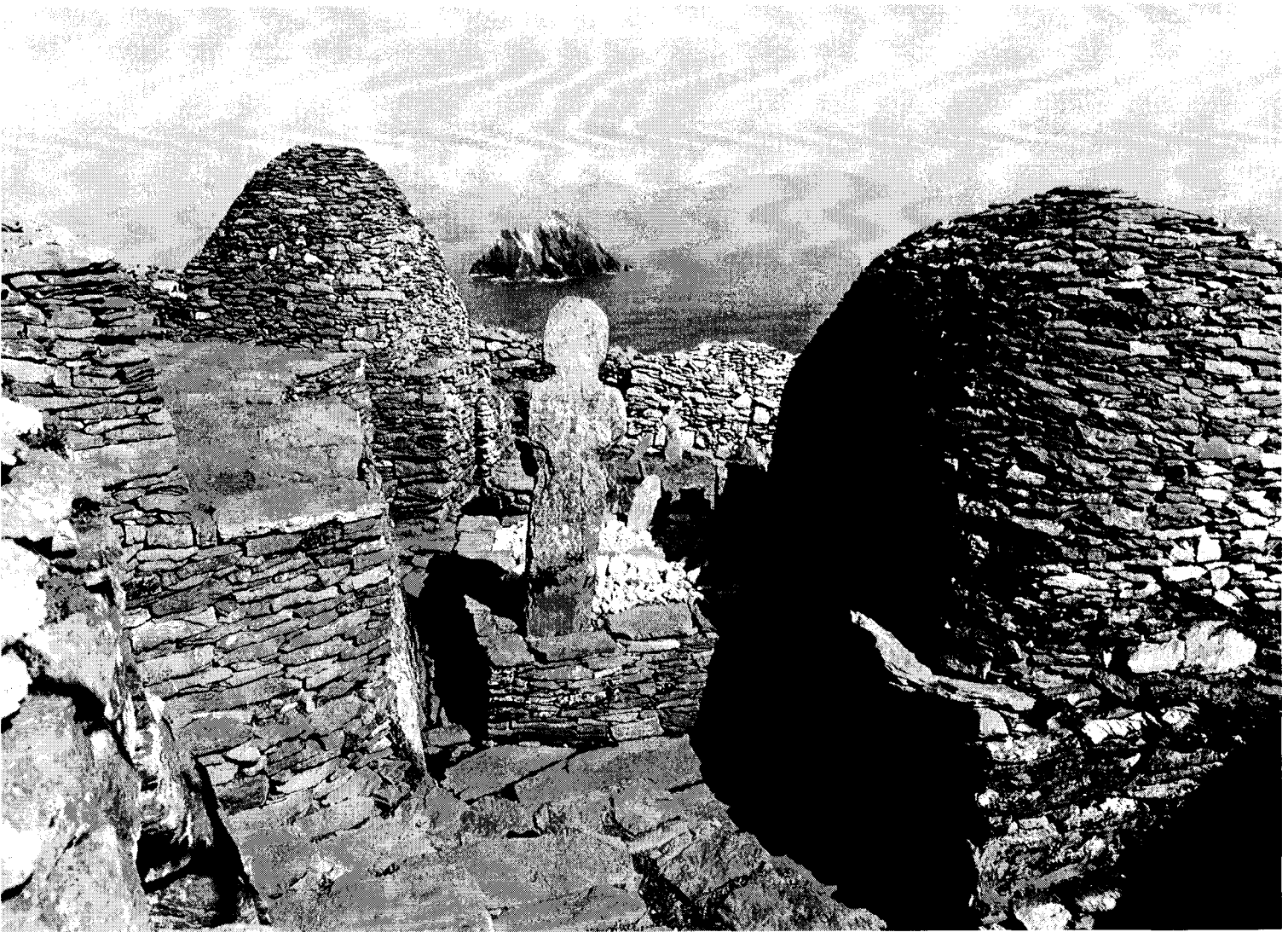
Skellig Michael is an outstanding, and in many respects unique, example of an early religious settlement deliberately sited on a pyramidal rock in the ocean, preserved because of a remarkable environment. It illustrates, as no other site can, the extremes of a Christian monasticism characterizing much of North Africa, the Near East, and Europe.

ICOMOS, October 1996

Scale 1 : 2500



Skellig Michael : carte de l'île  
Skellig Michael : map of the island



Skellig Michael : le grand oratoire et la cellule F  
Skellig Michael : the Large Oratory and Cell F