A 16th Century Spanish Wooden Statue from Co. Clare

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While Catriona MacLeod was the first to make us aware of the surprising extent to which medieval wooden statuary has survived in Ireland,¹ she has also made us realise that the ravages of time and the iconoclast's axe have dealt such severe blows to so many of the statues which must once have existed that we should be thankful for every example which has been preserved and for every new one which comes to light. The treasure-house which Miss MacLeod opened up for us was enriched in 1953 by the discovery of two statues at Killoran, Co. Galway,² and can now be enlarged by the identification of a further example, possibly from Liscamnor in Co. Clare, and now in Mrs. Sheelagh Harbison's collection at Inchiquin, near Corofin, Co. Clare. It is a walnut statue, 43 cm. high, representing the Child Jesus in a sitting position (Pl. II). The arms have long been broken off, and the lower right-hand part of the back of the statue has been hacked away—presumably from a Madonna which once held it and which is no longer preserved. This was scarcely done maliciously, for the statue was so carefully lopped off that the outline of the back of the body and legs has been purposely preserved.³ The child may well have been displayed by itself in a sitting position after it had been severed from the parent wood. Why it was chipped off in the first place we shall never know. Possibly the Madonna was already in poor condition, or had been smashed for religious reasons.

Particular care has been lavished on carving the child's head into a beautiful interplay of rounded surfaces and planes. The face is dominated by the large and prominent swelling eyes. The eyelids—more rounded on the top than on the bottom—are indicated by a raised band, while the eyebrows form a graceful arc which glides gently over to the small and retoussé nose. The mouth is closed, and small in proportion to the eyes. The short upper lip is full, and is modelled in the shape of a Cupid's Bow, while the lower lip, pouting gently outwards, forms almost a straight line. A small groove falls from each end of the mouth. The chin is prominent and slightly cleft, the cheeks softly but fully modelled, while the tall and slender neck is more that of an older boy than that of an infant in its mother's arms.

The angle from which the face is viewed determines the interpretation of its ex-

³ The family tradition is that the chips were caused by Famine emigrants taking a part of the statue with them to America to guide them safely on their journey, but this explanation is not very convincing in face of the even and uniform nature of the chipping.
pression, and one of the most remarkable features of the statue is that its facial expression changes according to the viewpoint and the lighting. Seen from the front, the child has a benign smile—the reserved joy of a monarch greeting his people—the impression of the smile being created particularly by the sensitive modelling of the mouth. But, like the Mona Lisa, the smile is inscrutable. It carries with it an expression of wisdom and intelligence far beyond a child’s years—the quizzical expression of the boy discovered by the Virgin in the midst of debate with the sages in the Temple. The three-quarters front view shows the child almost with a frown and taking a more serious view of life. The upper lip, curling upwards and outwards, adds a touch of what could almost be described as cynicism. Here the child is the bearer of his own destiny, reflecting the tragic events which are to come. Seen from the side, the face has a beautifully classical profile, with the straight forehead making only a slight angle with the nose, and with the mouth and chin receding below it. Infused with great beauty and clarity of line, it is the silhouette of a well-developed youth. The facial expression of the profile combines the feeling of inner joy with a philosophy of resignation to the inexorability of fate; in short, the expression is not that of a playful infant but more that of the benign deity of slightly more mature years, distressed by the sadness of the world, yet smiling because he sees hope for the future.

The hair, too, has been carefully carved, and is composed of a number of locks consisting each of three or four strands in a whirl and radiating in circles from the crown of the head. There is one large curl at the centre of the forehead, flanked on each side by two smaller ones, while another large lock falls over the ear on each side. The hair is thickly cropped at the back where it falls down to the neck.

Slightly less care has been expended on the tunic which covers the figure from neck to ankle. The collar of the robe has been folded over and down, both front and back. The thick material of the garment falls in wide pleats which gather to a point between the slightly spreading legs and drop heavily to the ankles. The front part of the feet have been severed, but enough remains to show that the child wore high-sided shoes consisting of a front and a back piece of leather which overlapped where the sides of the shoes dip down just below the shin-bones.

The face, neck and legs show the remains of paint beneath a dark surface patina. Traces of body colour remain in places on the face, so that we may presume that the skin was painted cream or offwhite. Traces of gesso still remain encrusted in the crevices of the hair and the pleats of the garment, suggesting that these, too, were painted, without giving any indication as to what colour was used.

The left knee can be seen to be raised above the level of the right knee which drops down limply. The child was, therefore, not sitting on the Madonna’s lap as in Romanesque representations, but was carried on the Virgin’s arm in the Gothic manner. Because it is the left knee which is raised, we can gauge that it was the Madonna’s left arm which held the child, and this is confirmed by a small hollow on the outside of the left upper leg, where the Virgin’s hand must once have rested. Because much of the right side of the upper part of the statue has been carefully carved in the round rather than being chipped away, we may presume that the child sat upright and did not lean against the Madonna’s body. The position of the child on the Virgin’s left arm may be roughly paralleled on the Madonna from Loughrea, or on the Madonna

*MacLeod, *JRSAI*, 77 (1947), Pl. XXXIII, 3.*

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from Waterford. The child’s arms, too, must have stood free but we do not know whether they hung down by the sides, or whether, for instance, the right hand was raised in benediction.

When we compare the statue with similar works from Ireland we cannot find any really convincing analogy. The child of the Clonfert Madonna seems much more baby-like, and appears to have a more bloated face, while the hair is given a totally different treatment. The only Irish parallels which are in any way close are the Madonna from Waterford, which is copied from Continental models, and that from Loughrea, Co. Galway, but there the child’s head is a modern restoration and the statue is not Irish, but French. The closest resemblances are found on the Continent, where polychrome statues were usual in the 16th and 17th centuries, and among these, some of the nearest stylistic parallels are statues by Diego de Siloe (1495-1563) in the Museo Polícromado, in Valladolid, Spain. The treatment of the face and hair is also clearly similar in style to Italian Renaissance carving of the middle or latter half of the sixteenth century, but de Siloe, who was both sculptor and architect, studied in Italy and, like his compatriot Berruguete, brought back the Italian Renaissance style with him to Spain where he utilized it to decorate the altars of Burgos and Granada Cathedrals. Without further research, it would be rash to assign our statue—or at least the face of our statue—to such a master as de Siloe, but its style is close to his. If the parallel is apt, then the statue can be said to have been carved in Spain around the middle or in the second half of the sixteenth century, and was brought to Ireland by sea.

Little is known of the history of the statue. By 1915 it formed part of the collection of Colonel John Macnamara of Corofin, Co. Clare. His brother was the well-known antiquary George U. Macnamara, but the statue is not, to my knowledge, mentioned in any of the latter’s writings, nor did George’s son, Donough, know anything further about it. John Macnamara’s widow, Gertrude, who died in 1907, stated that all she knew was that the statue was said to have been found in the sands at Liscannor, ten miles away, that it was alleged to have come from the Spanish Armada and that her husband had probably bought it from somebody. Michael Macnamara, however, says that he heard that it came from somewhere near Spanish Point.

The findspot could take on a new significance when we call to mind the stirring events which took place at Liscannor in September 1588. We learn from the Calendar of State Papers that, on the night of September 5th, sails from the Spanish Armada were sighted off the Cliffs of Moher, and two more boats were possibly discernible farther out to sea. Watchers on the cliffs reported this to the local sheriff, Boethius Mac Clancy (or Mac Clancy), who set out immediately, and encamped for the night near O’Brien’s castle at Liscannor. His loyalty to the Queen doubtless made him eager to be able to carry out the orders expressed by Sir Richard Bingham, Governor of

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8 MacLec, JRSAI, 77 (1949), PII. XXXVI, 5.
9 MacLec, JRSAI, 75 (1947), PII. XXXV, Fig. 3-4.
10 MacLec, JRSAI, 77 (1949), PII. XXXVI, 6.
11 MacLec, JRSAI, 77 (1947), 131.
12 MacLec, JRSAI, 77 (1947), PII. XXXVIII, 3.
13 MacLec, JRSAI, 77 (1947), 126.
14 Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland, of the Reign of Elizabeth, 1588, August 1592, September, London 1885, pp. xviii f. and 42, No. 43, v.

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Connacht, that any Spaniards coming ashore should immediately be taken prisoner, and, if necessary, be slaughtered. Early the following morning a ship was found moored off-shore in an exposed bay about a mile west of the castle. Soon, a small cock-boat with a red anchor was lowered, but when it landed, it was immediately taken and burned by the Sheriff. Later on, the ‘patron’ and the purser of the galleass, disguised as merchants, put out in another boat and when they got ashore, they were met by Mac Clancy whom they begged for water and provisions which the ship’s crew badly needed. But Mac Clancy, instead of fulfilling their request, arrested them. The ‘patron’ managed to escape and returned to the ship, but the purser was taken for questioning before the Bishop of Kildare. He gave his name as Pedro Battista of Naples and that of the ship as the “Sumiga”, and described how the dreadful lack of water aboard had already caused the deaths of four members of the crew. The galleass, more properly known as the Zuniga, stayed in the bay for a week, and Evelyn Hardy says that its crew obtained supplies of food and fresh water by force, before leaving on September 12th. We learn from other sources that the Zuniga got away safely though a great number of vicissitudes befell her before she was able to return to her home port of Naples, where she had already been written off as having perished off the coast of Ireland together with many other ships of the Armada.

No boat of the Armada was wrecked at Liscannor, and in the face of Mac Clancy’s opposition, it is difficult to imagine how a statue of the Madonna and child could have come ashore, unless it were as barter for much-needed water and provisions. Two Armada ships were wrecked further south off the Atlantic coast of Clare, one at Malbay near Doonbeg and the other at Tromoroe near Mutton Island. The latter came to grief on a reef which becomes solid ground at low tide, and the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside came and plundered the wreck, putting any survivors to death. Although these ships foundered further south than Liscannor, Westropp made an interesting observation that the body of a person drowned off Kilkee in 1588 floated northwards and was washed ashore at Liscannor Bay. It is thus conceivable that objects from the two wrecks could have floated up the coast as far as Liscannor. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that our statue could have come from the Zuniga or from one of the wrecked galleasses, as Co. Clare still preserves some other objects which are reputed to have come from Armada ships.

A table which used to be at Dromoland and which is temporarily housed at Bunratty, is said to have come from the Armada and to have been given by Mac Clancy to his O’Brien cousins at Leamanagh, whose descendants brought it to Dromoland. It was said to have come from an Admiral’s cabin, and Bagwell stated that a letter, supposed to have been still extant in 1890, had accompanied the table to Dromoland, but that Lord Inchiquin was unable to find it at the time. The table has been very heavily restored, and while it is possible that the timbers came from a wreck washed up on the coast of Clare, the figures carrying them are most probably English and

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13 See Kilfeather, Ireland: Graveyard of the Armada, Tralee 1967, pp. 98f.
15 Westropp, “Notes on the Armada Ships lost on the Coast of Clare, 1588,” JRSAI, 19 (1889), 131f. See also Westropp, “Ancient Remains near Leinch, Co. Clare,” JLF, 3 (1907-08), 194f.
16 Westropp, “Remains of the Spanish Armada in Clare and Sligo,” JRSAI, 90 (1900), 921f.
not Spanish in design. Lord Inchiquin presented to the Museum in Ennis a carved and painted panel which is alleged to have come from the Armada at Spanish Point. The panel, bearing a cornucopia, two half-flowers, a 'parcel', barrels, a book and a scroll, now forms part of a modern door. Salazar tells of an iron strong-box in Westport and a figurehead from a galleon reported to be in Sligo which are supposed to have come from the Armada too. He also says that:

"there are other iron or brass cannons, gold coins, coats of arms in metal, tables, cannon balls, and weapons scattered here and there in many houses" which are reputed to have come from Armada wrecks, though many of these items need not necessarily have come from the Armada at all. Bagwell, historian of the Tudors, gives us an interesting account of some further items as follows:

"The Macnamara family formerly possessed cups, a watch, crosses etc., out of the Armada, brought from the Arran Islands, but these I have been unable to trace; guns have been recovered, but not many, and the rudder of a ship was cut into gateposts near Westport!" It is interesting to note from this that the Macnamara family is said to have had items from the Armada in its possession. However, Westropp, who published two accounts about the Armada off the Clare coast, often came to stay with George Unthank Macnamara at Corofin, and possibly also knew John Macnamara, but he never mentioned the statue in any of his accounts. We might conclude that the statue was not an heirloom in the Macnamara family, as Westropp would otherwise undoubtedly have mentioned it, and this supports the testimony of John Macnamara's widow that it was probably bought from somebody. As John Macnamara did not return from India until about 1904, we may also presume that the statue did not come into his possession until some time after this date.

When we realise that the statue is probably Spanish, dating to the second half of the sixteenth century, that one Spanish Armada galleass was moored in the bay where the statue is alleged to have been found, and that the statue was in the hands of a member of a family known to have had other relics from the Armada, it would be romantically appealing to combine these remarkable coincidences and to conclude that the statue came to Ireland with the Armada. However, we have absolutely no definite evidence at all to prove this.

The hulks of two Spanish Armada galleasses, the Santa Maria de la Rosa in the Blasket Sound and the Girona near the Giant's Causeway in Co. Antrim, have recently been investigated by underwater archaeologists but nothing of a religious nature has come to the surface so far, other than personal ornaments in the shape of a

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17 In Westropp, "Relics of the Spanish Armada in Clare and Sligo", JRSAI, 30 (1900), 94.
18 Bagwell, op. cit., pp. 192 ff. I am grateful to my mother for having brought this reference to my attention. Bagwell also notes that an iron chest washed ashore near the Giant's Causeway, and which was alleged to have come from the Armada, was in Lord Antrim's possession in 1880. The Georgian Society Records, Vol. V, 1913, 45 mention another chest with the words "Christophe Colomb" studded in nails on the lid, which was in Castletown in 1913, and which tradition ascribed to the Armada, but its Armada origin seems doubtful. See also JRSAI, 27 (1897), 190 f.
19 See Notes 14 and 15 above.
20 Wignall, The Spanish Armada Salvage Expedition—A Progress Report on seven years Research and underwater Investigation into the Stinking of the Santa Maria de la Rosa, privately printed 1968.
cross or bearing the IHS monogram. A statue of almost life size, as the Madonna which bore the child must have been, would not have fitted very comfortably into a chapel on board a Spanish warship (if it had a chapel), though the statue could have been brought along as a protective talisman. Nor is it likely that such a statue would have been put aboard an Armada galleass to be used as a gift, for the Armada was a crusade bent on conquest by means of war rather than diplomacy.

On the other hand, we know of strong trade links between Spain and Ireland during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. One account tells of six hundred Spanish smacks at one time around the Irish coast in the second half of the sixteenth century, and we know that the towns of Galway and Dingle were particularly active in trade with Spain. Miss MacLeod has stated that the greater number of medieval statues of foreign origin found in Ireland came from Spain. The Spanish expedition which was practically annihilated at Smerwick Harbour in 1580 was, for the English, the most obvious outward sign of Spain’s desire to free Ireland from its religious dominators. But, at the same time, a number of Spanish merchants were quietly supplying objects of religious devotion to Ireland as part of a subversive propaganda campaign against the English. Miss MacLeod has pointed out that this smuggling must have reached such large proportions by 1593 that the High Commission for Ecclesiastical Causes had to give orders that all ships coming from abroad should be examined, and that any ‘copes, vestments, chalices, idols, crosses and other superstitious relics’ should be seized and the possessor punished. She also points out that Philip II of Spain sent to Lord Hugh O’Donnell a statue of the Madonna in cedarwood which was ‘gracefully and artistically carved’. Rather than being associated with the Armada, our statue is probably better explained as being one of those many religious statues which were brought secretly to Ireland in the second half of the sixteenth century. What its history was between that time and the beginning of the twentieth century, we do not know, nor can we say if it really lay in the sands at Liscannor all that time. Most of the wooden statues of the period, Irish or foreign, seem to have been associated with the great religious orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans, but there is no foundation of either order in or around Liscannor, though there was, however, an Augustinian monastery not far away at Kilshanny.

It is a great pity that the Madonna which was originally the bearer of our statue has not survived, for if the quality of the child is any indication, the parent must have been very beautiful indeed, and was probably able to hold her head high in comparison to any of the Madonnas known to have survived in Ireland down to our own day. It is a strange quirk of fate that Co. Galway has preserved more than its fair share of medieval wooden statues, while the surrounding counties have so few. The child under discussion is all the more important in being the first example known to have survived in Clare.

Acknowledgments

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23 MacLeod, *JRSAI*, 77 (1947), 121.
24 MacLeod, *JRSAI*, 77 (1947), 131.
16th century Spanish wooden statue from Liscannor, Co. Clare

(Photos: P. Harbison and J. Robson)