Some Medieval Thomond Tomb-Sculpture: Lost, Found, and Imaginary

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The tradition of the workshops which created the figure sculpture on the twelfth century Romanesque churches and crosses in Thomond, and more particularly in North Clare, can scarcely have come to an end with the introduction of Gothic architecture in the thirteenth century, but must have been carried on by those craftsmen who carved the figures on the later medieval tombstones. After the completion of the choirs at Corcomroe and Kilfenora Cathedral and of such work as the convent at Killone, there seems to have been little demand — or possibly little money — for the decoration of further churches with figure sculpture. The craftsmen-sculptors, in looking for an outlet for their talents, must have turned instead to private patrons — lay and ecclesiastical — in search of commissions to produce effigies. The well-known surviving examples of such effigies are discussed in such a masterly manner in John Hunt’s forthcoming book on *Medieval Figure Sculpture on Irish Tombs 1200-1600* that there is no further need to discuss them here. The purpose of the present paper is rather to focus attention on some lost, recently found, and probably non-existent sculpture from Thomond, and to show its place and significance in medieval Irish tomb art.

Lost effigy of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea, St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick

Probably the greatest loss we have suffered among the once-existing medieval tomb-sculpture of Limerick is that of the effigy of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea. An inscription on a tomb-front placed against the south wall of the chancel in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick, proclaims that this is the effigy of Bishop Cornelius O’Dea, and that the tomb was repaired by Donough O’Brien in 1621. But instead of finding an effigy on top of the tomb, as we would have expected from the inscription, all we can see nowadays is a flat slab of black marble. A slightly different state of affairs is shown to us on page 133 of Thomas Dyneley’s manuscript *Tour of Ireland*, now MS No. 392 in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin (Pl. II). Dyneley, it will be remembered, made a tour of Ireland in 1681, jotting down tomb inscriptions and sketching certain buildings as he went; it is to him, for instance, that we owe the earliest known representations of Bunratty Castle and of the town of Ennis. Dyneley shows the tomb of Cornelius O’Dea with what was presumably the original effigy of the bishop on top of the tomb. The bishop is shown lying on his back with his head upon a cushion, one of the tassels of which falls down over the side of the slab. He wears a bejewelled mitre, different from that which we know him to have had made for himself¹, and he wears Mass vestments with rather wavy and restless folds. The feet which peep out from the bottom of his alb are too small in comparison to the rest of the body. The apparent bump above the bishop’s chest is curious; even more strange is the lack of any sign of arms and hands, not to mention the customary

¹ J. Hunt, *The Limerick Mitre and Crozier*, Dublin 1953
bishop’s crozier. That Dyneley may have been slightly inaccurate in parts of his drawing could be confirmed by comparing his version of the inscription on the tomb-front with that which we can see today. Certain carelessnesses can be noticed in his transcription; for instance his IUNII for IULII and REMOTUS HUC FUIT for REMOTUS AUTEM HUC FUI, and he also replaces the original Latin numerals by Arabic ones. Similarly, the position of the tablet commemorating Bishop Barnard Adams (died 1603) in the wall above the tomb is shown lower down the wall in Dyneley’s drawing than it is today. While some of these differences could be explained by alterations having been made since Dyneley’s day, there are nevertheless grounds for suspecting that while Dyneley was generally correct in what he recorded, some of his details may be slightly inaccurate.

But despite this, there is nothing inherently improbable in the supposition that the effigy drawn by Dyneley was probably that of Cornelius O’dea, for the style could fit in well with a date of circa 1421 — the year in which the prelate died. But as ecclesiastical effigies are notoriously conservative because of the unchanging nature of episcopal robes, the effigy could also belong to any period half a century on either side of that date.

The disappearance of the effigy must on all accounts be considered as a great loss. Certainly if the effigy were of the same quality as the bishop’s mitre and crozier which are still — almost miraculously — preserved for us in St. John’s Church in Limerick (see footnote 1), it must have been among the finest of medieval Irish ecclesiastical effigies. Its preservation would also have been of great art-historical value because there is no other surviving episcopal effigy in Ireland which can be assigned with certainty to the first half of the fifteenth century, and with the effigy of Bishop de Ledrede in St. Canice’s Cathedral, Kilkenny, it would have been the only other known example which could have helped to fill the sculptural gap in such monuments between the years 1350 and 1450.

Hewson was certainly correct when he stated in this Journal in 1944 that the figure drawn by Dyneley is not to be confused with another badly mutilated effigy of a bishop which now fills the bottom of the Bulfinghort-Galway niche in the south aisle of the Cathedral. The chamfering on the sides and other traces show that the latter is a separate and earlier effigy. This is further supported by Dyneley’s comment, much of which can be seen on the manuscript page illustrated here (Fig. 1):

"I return to the Cathedral, where near the Altar, between that and the Bishop’s Seat, observe the remains of the two famous Bips of this Diocese. The one being being built in the wall and the other being the statue of Bipp O’Dee conserved by the Great Donagh O’Brien who erected the Monument underneath to his Memory In black marble with an Inscription in Letters of Gold.”

Hewson also said of the O’Dea effigy that it had “escaped the hammers of the Cromwellians to perish under the hands of the restorers” and further that it “would appear that the O’Dea monument has been pushed back into the wall of the chancel, at some time to make more room. This would account for the disappearance of the effigy, as there is no room for an effigy on the narrow top now projecting from the wall.” I am not sure if the last statement is entirely valid. If the original effigy made way for the present flat top sometime after 1681, and if this black marble slab

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3 Quoted by E. P. Shirley in J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland, 8 (1864-66), 435.
was not a part of the restoration of Donough O'Brien, could it even be that the effigy might either be still inside the tomb or be on the underside of the slab? It might be worthwhile opening the tomb to find out.

Knights' Effigies at Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare, and Hospital, Co. Limerick

Some time within the last ten years a fragment of a medieval tombstone was found apparently within the walls of the church at Dysert O'Dea and has since been attached to the exterior wall of the church just to the east of the famous Romanesque doorway. The stone (Pl. III) formed part of a tombstone wedge-shaped in plan, the edges of which were bordered by a rope-moulding between two simple rolled mouldings. One of the most extraordinary aspects of the stone is that although about 95% of its original surface has peeled off, the outlines of the carving are still very clear on the layer beneath. The stone shows part of a human figure from the waist downwards. The area above the knees is clothed in a garment which spays out from the waist and which has broad folds suggestive of a heavy material. It is difficult to say whether or not the legs were covered, and if so, with what. Closely-spaced incised lines visible between the calves could represent the folds of trews or trousers massing as they recede in perspective between the legs. Another less likely interpretation is that they could represent the front folds of a garment worn on the back which fell towards the feet behind. It is, however, also conceivable that the legs were intended to be shown as bare, though in that case, the incised lines between the legs would be difficult to interpret. The feet, which splay outward and downward, are certainly bare. The sculptor has made the curious mistake of transposing the right and left foot, as we can see from the fact that the big toe of the right foot is shown where the little toe should be. The closest parallel for the Dysert figure is the rather crudely carved effigy of a knight in the ruined church at Hospital, Co. Limerick—not the now upright figure discussed below (pp. 33-36) but one now lying flat in a niche in the south wall of the church (Pl. IV). This Hospital knight is shown clad in a surcoat—the outermost garment worn by knights—and like that on the Dysert effigy, it too spays outwards below the waist. The Hospital knight's left hand is placed on a sword with circular pommeled with a centrally grooved blade which hangs down over the left leg. The original surface of the Dysert stone fortunately preserves a small portion of a similar sword blade which can be seen falling at a slight angle across the right leg, thus confirming that the Dysert effigy is indeed that of a knight. The feet of the Hospital knight are not bare, and unfortunately the present surface of the stone does not permit us to see in what, if anything, the legs were clad. The outward and downward splay of the feet on both the Dysert and Hospital knights may also be observed on brasses, such as that of Sir John d'Abernon of 1327 at Stoke d'Abernon, in Surrey, with which the Dysert stone may be roughly contemporary. The wedge shape of the Dysert stone would not be incompatible with such a date in the first half of the fourteenth century, though the rope-moulding around the edge could suggest a somewhat later date.

Kenneth Nicholls' recent dictum⁵ that the boundary between Anglo-Normans and

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⁵ Kenneth Nicholls, "Gaelic and Gaelicised Ireland in the Middle Ages", The Gill History of Ireland, vol. IV, Dublin 1972, pp. 3-4.
native Irish in the late medieval period was not a clear-cut one may appear apposite when we come to consider the racial affiliations of the sculptor and the sculpted. The idea of carving the effigy of a knight on a wedge-shaped tombstone and the way in which the feet splay show that the sculptor, Norman or Irish, was familiar with Norman tombstone fashions. But the flat relief technique used in the carving of the Dysert stone is found also on a number of other effigies in the West of Ireland, including some at Kilfenora and Corcomroe. One of these is the unfinished effigy of a bishop now built into the north wall of the chancel at Corcomroe, and this figure is carved from a stone which is very similar to the millstone grit used in the Dysert effigy. It is even possible that both the Corcomroe and the Dysert effigies may have emanated from the same workshop which may have been located somewhere in the region of Clifden Hill near Corofin where, according to the geologist, Dr. John S. Jackson, millstone grit occurs. The only really non-Norman feature of the Dysert effigy is that the feet are shown bare. This stands in contrast to all the Norman knightly effigies in Ireland where the legs and feet—in as far as we can see any details—are invariably shown clad in tightly-fitting chausses de mail. This provokes the question—which for the present must remain unanswered—as to whether the barefooted knight on the Dysert stone is not in fact a native Irishman who had a tombstone carved for him in the Norman style? If the figure is that of an Irishman and if it was carved in the first half of the fourteenth century, then it could represent someone killed a few fields away in the Battle of Dysert in 1318, or—in view of the fact that Dysert Church is a traditional burial place of the O’Dea family—it could commemorate someone like Donough O’Dea who was killed in the Battle of Drumfindglas, between Corofin and Dysert, in the year 1325. But in the absence of an inscription on the stone, any such identification is, of course, pure speculation. While the finding of the upper part of the stone would be highly desirable, it is unlikely that it would provide us with an inscription which would help us further in identifying the individual in whose memory the stone was carved.

(2) Bishop’s Head, Killinaboy Church, Co. Clare
In the north wall of the ruined church at Killinaboy is a canopy tomb of western Irish type which is now the burial place of the McGann family. One of the stones in the middle of the canopy has a remarkably regular shape and gives the impression that it once bore carving in relief which has since been hacked away. I believe that on this stone may be seen the outline of a head with a mitre on it. It could be that such a mitred head could have been used originally as a corbel or as a decorative head above a doorway, as at Kilfenora Cathedral, but in cases where that is so, it is only the neck which normally protrudes from the stone while the head is almost free-standing. In the case of this Killinaboy stone, the head would not appear to have been free-standing but was probably in relief, projecting directly from the surface of the stone. The asymmetrical position of the head on the stone might argue in favour of the stone having been over a doorway, as stones bearing bishops’ heads found over doorways and windows are not necessarily always symmetrical. It could be, however, that the head once belonged to an effigy, in which case we would have

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the remains of yet a further example in Co. Clare. It could be argued that the head
may have been part of an effigy which fitted into the canopy tomb; but this is very
unlikely as effigies are not normally associated with the western Irish canopy tombs.
But the suggestion that this may have formed part of a bishop's effigy must be regarded
as extremely tentative. Even if it were correct, it would raise the question as to
why a bishop should have been buried at Killinaboy? I know of no reference to any
bishop having been buried there, nor is there any reference to the church at Killinaboy
having acted as an episcopal seat. The matter would become even more complicated
when we realise that in the west wall of the same church is a double-armed patriarchal
arch of which almost certainly antedates the head by some centuries. We
may thus have possibly two episcopal insignia associated with Killinaboy, without
having any bishop to attach them to.

Doubtful Tomb-Surrounds, Hospital, Co. Limerick

Probably the earliest reference to the existence of the effigy of a knight at Hospital
occurs in Archdall's *Monasticon Hibernicum* (1786), page 423, where we find the following
description:

"In a niche on the north side of the high altar is the tomb of a knight, in alto relievo, which is
said to be the tomb of the founder."

A similar description is given in 1826 by J. P. Fitzgerald and J. J. Macgregor, who
add that the knight had a sword and buckler and that the founder was Geoffrey de
Mauriscis. Their description causes confusion because there are two effigies of single
knights at Hospital, one with a sword and the other with a shield, but neither with
both. The one with the sword is still in a niche in the south wall of the church (see
above page 31 and Pl. IV), but it is in very low relief, whereas the effigy in high relief
is that with the shield. The Ordnance Survey Letters of 1840 also refer to only one
knighthood effigy, which because of the measurement given can be identified with the
knight with shield which is now standing in the north-eastern corner of the church.
The description in the Letters is as follows:

"The monumental stone with the figure of the knight on it is still seen inside the building... and
now rests on its edge in the earth, sloping or inclining (or) with a slope or inclination
to the south. The length of the figure is seven feet two inches. It has received injuries in
many places; the legs and arms have been much disfigured. Oral information tells us that
Geoffrey Fitzmorris was the name of him whose figure, the one here spoken of, is. The name,
however, is not Fitzmorris but De Maurisco."

But two old prints show the same knight's effigy resting not "on its edge in the earth"
but on top of a tomb-chest of which not a trace can be seen today. The older of these
two prints is that (Pl. V) to be found bound in the National Library of Ireland's
copy of a book by Harvey R. Morres, 2nd Viscount Mountmorres and entitled *Les
Montmorency de France et les Montmorency d'Irlande* (1828). According to Morres,
the print was drawn on the spot after the original and was published in a book of his

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7 *The History, Topography, and Antiquities of the County and City of Limerick*, vol. I, Dublin
1826, p. 317.
8 *Letters concerning Information relative to the Antiquities of the County of Limerick collected
during the Progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1840, 325*, vol. II, typescript edition 1929, p. 94.
entitled *Genealogical Memoir*, printed in 1817⁹. Morres states that the tomb is that of Geoffrey de Marisco, once the King’s Justiciar in Ireland, who was exiled to Scotland in 1242 from whence King Alexander banished him to France where he finally died in 1245-46. Morres also says that after de Marisco’s death his body was brought back to Ireland to be interred at Hospital. The second print is among the unnumbered plates in the 1823 edition of Sheffield Grace’s *Memoirs of the Family of Grace*. Both prints are very similar. They show the knight atop a tomb-chest with three identical panels on the tomb-front and a fourth one on the only side which is visible. The centre of each of these panels contains a coat of arms showing a *cross, between four eagles*, which is surrounded by the four leaves of a quatrefoil with oval leaves in the interstices. The panels on the front of the tomb are divided by buttresses, and the corners are composed of supports with double-tiered cusped fenestrations above three-tiered bases. The two prints differ slightly on certain points. The Grace knight has the Latin numerals MCCXLVI on the top of the headstone near the knight’s face — presumably a reference to the year of Geoffrey de Marisco’s death. The Morres print, on the other hand, bears an inscription running along the bottom of the tomb-front, which reads

**GEOFFROY II. DE MONTMORENCY BARON DE MONTEMARISCO, VICE-ROI D’IRLANDE MORT EN 1245.**

The relative proportions and the perspective of the tomb-chest differ in both prints; so too do the shape of the shield, the width of the belt, the strap across the shoulder, the folds and the neck of the surcoat and also the thickness of the legs. Floor-tiles are also shown on the Grace print, but it is unlikely that these existed in the church at the time. One of the most extraordinary items common to both prints is the hand which stands up on the shield. The only thing visible on the shield today is the muffler covering the knight’s right hand with which he held the edge of the shield. There is little or no reason to suppose that a hand existed there; it is probably the artist’s interpretation of the remains of the muffler. Two separate artists are unlikely to have made the same drawing and interpretation of the same unusual feature, nor is it likely that two artists would have drawn the tomb from almost exactly the same angle independently of one another. Despite the divergences discussed above, it can only be presumed that one print was copied from the other, and although the shape of the shield is shown more accurately on the Grace print of 1823, it is more likely that the Morres print of 1817 was its model.

In 1828 Morres maintained that his print showing the tomb-surrounds was drawn on the spot after the original presumably some time around 1817, and in 1840 the Ordnance Survey Letters describe the knight’s effigy as resting “on its edge in the earth”. We are now faced with the conundrum: did the tomb-surrounds disappear without trace between 1817 when they are first shown on the Morres print and 1840 when Curry described the effigy as resting in the earth, or is there some other and more likely explanation?

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⁹ Page 93: “On voit encore son tombeau surmonté de ses effigies . . . Un dessin de ce tombeau pris sur les lieux, d’apres l’original, se trouve dans mon *Genealogical Memoir* (de 1817) . . . .” The same print was also illustrated in H.G.F.E. de Montmorency, *A Memorandum Explaining the Claim of the Morres Family to Bear the Name of de Montmorency*, Saffron Waldon 1938, for the reference to which I am grateful to Gerard Slevin.
To come nearer to an answer to this question, let us now look at some of the details of the tomb, starting with the effigy itself. The date on the Grace print is a product of the artist's imagination; there is no room for it in the position shown, as the top of the stone in fact runs parallel to the top of the knight's head. Various inaccuracies can be seen in the two drawings of the figure of the knight: the lower part of the right arm should be shown as being at right angles to the upper arm; the foliage below the feet is missing and the positioning of the legs is not quite accurate. Comparing the narrow front edge of the slab as it exists today with what the prints show, we can see that in the prints the part between the top of the shield and the top of the stone should be shown as chamfered, and the part below the shield juts out too far. Furthermore, this edge of the slab as seen today is sufficiently rough and irregular in width never to have formed the visible edge of the slab. It is much more likely that the slab was sunk into a floor or into the earth, but it would never appear to have been squared off so neatly and to have oversailed the top of a tomb-chest as the two prints suggest. All we can say about the knight's effigy is that the artist probably saw it, as the knight still exists, and the artist's general outlines of the knight's figure seem to be roughly correct.

But what now of the tomb-surrounds? The inscription on the Morrse print is in a rather modern-sounding French and can scarcely be regarded as anything but imaginary. The nearest stylistic parallels to the design of the panels would date from the 1290s and, as John Hunt has pointed out to me, the buttresses between the panels are of an even later type. There is thus no evidence to suggest that knight and tomb-surround should be contemporary. When we come to examine the coat of arms, we should note first that, as Gerard Slevin, the Chief Herald, has pointed out to me, it would be highly unusual to have the same coat of arms repeated identically a number of times on the same tomb. As well, it must be stressed that the arms are not those of Marisco, whom tradition takes to be the subject of the effigy. Matthew Paris gives Geoffrey de Marisco's arms as gules, a lion rampant, argent and those of his son William as or, a lion rampant sable. Instead, the cross between four eagles shown on the prints is the coat of the Morrse family. This family was granted its first title in 1163, and The Complete Peerage tells us the long story of the family's attempts to establish its descent from Geoffrey de Marisco, and through him from the great French house of de Montmorency. The publication of the Morrse works of 1817 and 1828 shows that the family was particularly active in the early part of the last century in trying to establish its supposed pedigree. Already in 1815 the family had succeeded in getting Sir William Betham, then Deputy Ulster King at Arms, to approve its claim, but for this act Betham has since been roundly condemned, as the credentials which he accepted were totally inadequate. Indeed, The Complete Peerage suggests that there is no evidence to show that the Morrse family was necessarily descended from Geoffrey de Marisco at all, or that the de Mariscos were in turn descended from

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12 G.E.C., The Complete Peerage, 9 (1938), Appendix I.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., pp. 72-73.

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the de Montmorencys. The inscription on the Morres print of 1817 claiming that Geoffrey was de Montmorency and Baron of Montemarisco may have been concocted, therefore, after Sir William Betham had approved the Morres family claim. It is in this light that we must now understand the fact that the coat of arms on the tomb-surounds are those of the Morres family and not of de Marisco. The family may have thought that it might further its claim by placing what it thought were the de Marisco coat of arms on the tomb surrounds, but instead it only succeeded in depicting its own. The eagles in the Grace print are not easily recognisable, suggesting that its artist, T. Powell of Dublin, was not so interested in supporting the Morres cause, and this may well be the reason why he left out the inscription shown on the Morres print. Despite the view of Morres referred to above, there is not a scrap of proof to show that de Marisco was brought home to Ireland from France after his death and then buried in Hospital. Indeed, there would not appear to be any evidence to show that any of the knightly effigies at Hospital represent any members of the de Marisco family. Until better evidence comes to light, they must remain anonymous.

If not a trace of the tomb-surrounds exists today, did they ever exist other than in the artist’s imagination? The description in the Ordnance Survey Letters does not mention any tomb-surrounds; the differing dates of the features of the tomb-surrounds, and the fact that the arms shown on them are the modern ones of the family of Morres, who were claiming descent from Geoffry de Marisco at about the time the prints were made, all cast considerable suspicion on the genuineness of the tomb-surrounds. Such a suspicion finds support in the fantastic nature of some of the other prints bound in the same Morres volume in the National Library, and particularly one of the double effigy at Hospital which is nothing like the original. Lurking in the background is the suggestion that the tomb-front was invented by the artist in order to bolster up the claim of the Morres family to descend from the de Mariscos and the de Montmorencys. In doing so, he attempted a bit of antiquarianism which misfired slightly because of the differing dates of some of his details, and because he placed the wrong coat of arms on the tomb-surrounds.

It would be very important if we could establish the genuineness or otherwise of these tomb-surrounds. If genuine, they would represent the only Irish tomb-surrounds before the middle of the fifteenth century to bear a coat of arms, and they would co-incidentally be the earliest known monumental use in Ireland of a coat of arms. They would also be a valuable addition to the very few examples of early Norman tomb-surrounds in Ireland. There would appear to be only one way to prove their genuineness and that would be to find them — whole or in part. But with the doubts cast above on their authenticity, and the lack of even the smallest trace of even a fragment of the tomb-surrounds, it would seem preferable to leave them out of any discussion on early Norman tomb-sculpture in Ireland until such time as their genuineness can be proved by the finding of a part, or preferably the whole, of the tomb-surrond.

Acknowledgements

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Thomas Dyneley's drawing of the tomb of Bishop Cornelius O'Dea in St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick, 1681. (By kind permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Ireland)
Fragmentary effigy of a knight at Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare

(Photo: David Davison, F.D.I.)
Effigy of a knight, in a niche in the south wall of the ruined church at Hospital. Co. Limerick.

(Photo: P. Harbison)
The alleged tomb of Geoffrey de Marisco at Hospital, Co. Limerick — after a print in Morres, Les Montmorency d'Irlande, etc.

(Photo: National Library of Ireland)