Some Romanesque Heads from County Clare

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When we want to look at the work of the great 12th century Clare school of Romanesque sculptors, we immediately think of going to the obvious places like Dysert O'Dea, Killaloe, Tuamgraney and Kilmacormac, as well as to the islands of Inishcealtra and Scattery. We forget all too often that there are other, less frequented, places where Romanesque carving can also be seen to advantage—even if the churches which it embellished have long since disappeared. The object of this short paper is to present a selection of photographs of human and animal heads from three of these lesser-known locations and to demonstrate that even small oratories were decorated with works of quality which are equal, if not indeed superior, to some of those found on the larger and better known churches in the County.

Temple Cronan

The first of these oratories is that known as Temple Cronan which is tucked away in a secluded hollow not a mile north-east of the village of Carran in the centre of the Burren. It has, projecting from its walls, a number of interesting animal and human sculptures, the quality of which has never been properly appreciated largely because they have only been published in the form of totally misleading drawings.¹

The original doorway in the west gable (now blocked up) is flanked on each side by an animal head. That on the south side is scarcely in its original position, and because of its flattish top, it may once have been a corbel. It is a fully-projecting head of a dog-like beast with incipient horns and with a short squared snout below ridge-like eyes. When viewed from the side (Pl. I, 1), the beast is seen to have an open mouth with a tongue between a fierce-looking set of teeth. The head which adorns the north side of the door (Pl. I, 2) is carved on one of the stones forming the original doorway, and it is the only one of the heads discussed here of which we can say with certainty that it occupies its original position. Not easily comprehensible due to its worn condition, it has square proportions, and one can just make out a cross-ridge and two deep (secondary?) eye-holes just above the snout. High up in the middle of the south wall is yet another fully modelled and more massive animal head (Pl. I, 3). Its most prominent features are the diagonally-placed bulging eyes and the gracefully arched eye-brow ridges which form a flowing curve with the nose. Its flattened top suggests that it, too, originally served as a corbel.

Two of the original corner corbels bear heads carved in relief on the concave underside. When we stand with our backs to the wall and look up at the corbel at the south-western corner, we can see what appears to be an unfinished animal head (Pl. I, 4); the square part in relief retains the outline of the head on which the bulging eyes and the ridge of the nose were roughly cut but never completed. The other corner corbel, now at the south-eastern angle of the church, is decorated with what is possibly the most fascinating of all the heads from Temple Cronan. When we stand

with our face to the wall and look up at it, we see a hobgoblin-like human mask with swelling eyes and a flat nose from the top of which emerge two curled horns (Pl. II, 1). But the lay-out of the unfinished south-western corner corbel mentioned above (Pl. I, 4)—which only makes sense when we look up at it when standing with our backs to the wall—suggests that we should also look at the south-eastern corner corbel in the same way. The effect of what we can then see may be achieved if we turn Pl. II, 1 upside down, and by doing so we can make out an animal head with large and lentoid bovine eyes and a lyre-shaped snout which narrows upwards between the eyes to emerge as the forehead above them. There is a wonderful sense of rhythmical curving motion in the stylised rounded modelling of the various components of this face, all of which unite to form a simple but ever-pleasing whole. The lyre-shaped snout gives at once a Celtic twist to this head, and the fact that the head can be seen as a human or an animal mask—depending on which way you look at it—shows that the sculptor is following in the time-honoured Celtic tradition of double-meaning. This corbel is, indeed, one of the most striking examples of the influence of an earlier Celtic art preserved in the Romanesque sculpture of Clare.

Three human heads can also be seen projecting from the exterior walls of the church. Their original position may have been above the west doorway, like the three heads from Tomfinlough mentioned below. The head now inserted above the pointed north doorway (Pl. II, 2) has that gauntness characteristic of other Romanesque heads in Clare. The eyes are more hinted at than modelled, and the hair of the eye-brows is unusually indicated by broad oblique chisel-strokes on a slight ridge above the eyes. The pouting mouth forms a gentle arc, and although the chin is partly broken away we can see that the face had a beard which recedes on the lower jaw into a smaller and a larger curl. Characteristically for the Romanesque heads of Clare, the ear is stylised, small and placed high up on the side of the head on a level with the eyebrows. The roughened surface of the top of the head may have been intended to represent hair. Two further human heads project from the west wall of the church. One of these is very high up and difficult to photograph, and is therefore not illustrated here. It also has that gaunt look of the head over the north doorway, though it is not as well sculpted. It is apparently flat on top. Its eyes, nose and mouth are little more than suggested, and the ears too are placed high on the head. Lower down in the west wall, to the south of the doorway, is another human head where one feels—more so than with practically any other Romanesque head in Clare—that this is an attempt at a portrait (Pl. II, 3). Its limestone surface seems to have suffered from weathering, and as a result the eyes are somewhat worn. They bulge out slightly within the pointed oval ridges of the eye-lids which are visible below the well-marked eyebrows and above the prominent cheek-ridge. The nose has been largely broken away, but we can still see the slightly pouting lips forming a straight line which terminates at one end in a sharply drooping fold (a moustache ?). There is a prominent ridge running around the edge of the chin, almost suggesting a short beard. Inserted upside down in the interior face of the north wall of the oratory is what may be a rough-out for yet another human head, but no carved details are visible.

Champneys’ hints that these heads, the Romanesque pelleting and rounded moulding on the interior of the east window and the rounded moulding on parts of some of

the exterior corners of the church form part of a 12th century 'restoration' of what is basically an earlier church with 'Cyclopean' masonry, and that the pointed doorway in the north wall represents a second and even later 'restoration.' This interpretation, involving three building phases, seems unnecessarily complex, and does not appear to fit the facts. As an alternative, I would suggest that the church has only two main building phases. The first, dating from the 12th century, is the building of the church itself, including the carved heads, and the second is the later 'restoration' in which the west doorway was blocked up, and the new pointed doorway inserted—for some strange reason—in the north wall of the church. During the same 'restoration' a considerable part of the masonry must have been re-set. The rounded moulding and the pelleting on the lower part of the inside of the east window probably continued originally right to the top, and the same may also be true of the rounded mouldings at the exterior corners, suggesting that a good part of what is above these mouldings may be due to the 'restoration'. Also it may be noted that the large stones in the south wall which are characteristic of 'Cyclopean' masonry are placed much higher up in the wall than one would expect, for in such 'Cyclopean' work the largest stones—when in their original position—are invariably on the bottom. This again suggests that much of the south wall, too, has been rebuilt. It was also presumably in the course of this 'restoration' that the corner corbels and the projecting heads—with the exception of the animal head on the north side of the west doorway—were placed in their present position. That the heads belonged to the original church, and were not a 12th century addition to an earlier church, can be seen from the animal head on the north side of the west doorway, for it is carved from a block which forms a part of the original doorway, and which goes through from the outside to the inside. Nor is there any compelling reason in this case why the 'Cyclopean' masonry should necessarily ante-date the carving of the heads. In the largest church at Oughtmama, a few miles farther north in the Burren, we also have an instance of early-looking masonry combined with an apparently 12th century chancel arch. If it be argued that the Oughtmama chancel arch looks as if it had been inserted later, then it can be argued equally well that its stones were re-set at a later period (15th/16th century), as there is evidence, particularly at roof level, that very considerable alterations took place in the masonry of the church at the time. It is quite likely that the 'restoration' at Temple Cronan took place at around the same period, and there are other churches in Clare where considerable structural alterations must have taken place at much the same time or even later. This apparent use of 'Cyclopean' masonry in the Burren in the 12th century seems to be symptomatic of the survival there—and possibly also in the Aran Islands—of a type of masonry which was also used in earlier pre-Romanesque churches outside these areas. Analogous to the appearance of High Crosses in these areas in the 12th century after they had largely ceased to be carved in other parts of the country—it may even be that this 'Cyclopean' masonry only began to be used in the Burren and on the Aran Islands as late as the 12th century when it was already going out of use elsewhere.

Kilvoydaune

The late Andrew O'Loughlin brought to my notice another Romanesque corner corbel which came to light during the last decade while a grave was being dug in the old cemetery at Kilvoydaune just outside the village of Corofin. Shortly after its discovery, the corbel was cleaned through the good offices of the Rev. Martin Ryan.
Because it had lain in the earth for so long, this corbel has retained the freshness of the original carving, and is thus one of the best preserved—but also one of the crispest—of the carved creations of the Romanesque period in Clare. It shows a head of very good quality (Pl. III) which has a shape like an inverted pear, narrowing noticeably from the widest part at eye level to almost a point at the chin. The face sports a scroll-like moustache and a beard which runs down the sides of the face, rolling itself into two curls at the chin. The details of the protruding eyes and eye-lids are unusually well preserved. The cheeks are fleshily moulded, and the stylised ears are placed extraordinarily high at the level of the forehead. It is strange that one side of the mouth appears to remain unfinished. The church to which the head belonged has completely disappeared, though memories of its former existence survived until at least 1900.

Tomfinlough

The west wall of an old oratory, which was probably similar to Temple Cronan and which had three carved heads above a blocked-up lintelled doorway, was still preserved as part of the cemetery wall at Tomfinlough, near Newmarket-on-Fergus, when T. J. Westropp visited the site in the early years of this century. All traces of the original wall and the doorway have since vanished, and the only parts which survive are the three Romanesque heads which have been built into the modern wall in the south-eastern corner of the churchyard. Two of these heads were, unusually, carved in sandstone, and they have deteriorated so much that it is only just possible to recognise the fact that they were once carved human heads. The third head—carved in the more usual Clare limestone—is in a much better state of preservation (Pl. II, 4). It shares certain features with some of the other heads described above, but it is not of the same quality. The eyes are merely marked by a broad furrow around them, the mouth is a simple arc, the small ears are at eye-level and on the side of the head there is a strange clump of hair. The most unusual feature is a horizontal V-shaped wrinkle on each cheek. By comparing this head with the others described above, we can see just how superior the quality of the work in North Clare was.

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Certain features of the human head just described belong to the general Romanesque canon, such as the pouting arched mouth and the lentoid eyes protruding from the ridged eye-lids. The animal heads from Temple Cronan belong to a general style common in Irish Romanesque, and were partly derived from earlier Irish designs. The beast to the south of the Temple Cronan doorway can be paralleled on the chancel arch of the Nun’s Church at Clonmacnoise, which must have been completed in the 1160s, and the same type of head can also be found forming the stop of the outermost moulding of a number of western Irish Romanesque doorways. But certain features

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4 Compare a similar feature on a head from Trinity Island, Co. Cavan, and now in the National Museum of Ireland (O. Davies, “The Churches of County Cavan,” *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland* 78 (1948), 100, Pl. XIX, 2), which Davies ascribes to about the 15th century.

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of the human heads discussed here are distinctly different from those of other Irish Romanesque heads, such as the ones on the Dysert O'Dea doorway. The Dysert heads show peculiar hair-styles, and in certain cases, wear head-gear, whereas the heads here—with the exception of that at Tomfinlough and possibly the one above the north doorway of Temple Cronan—seem to be bald. The treatment of the beard at Temple Cronan and at Kilvoydaune is not directly paralleled on other Clare heads, and one has to go to the doorway at Clonfert in County Galway to approach the portrait character of the apparently beardless head from Temple Cronan (Pl. II, 3). The use of corner corbels or brackets as the bearers of Romanesque relief-sculpture is a highly unusual feature, as is also the strongly projecting nature of the animal heads (Pl. I, 1 and 3) re-set in the walls of Temple Cronan. We are dealing here with features which show the signatures of individual and individualistic craftsmen, the details of whose work cannot be paralleled on other Clare churches. The contrast of the facial features at Dysert O'Dea and Temple Cronan show the Dysert heads to be in a more ornate and almost oriental category, indicating that the two sets of heads were carved by different hands. And at Temple Cronan itself, even if the human heads were all carved by the same hand (which is quite likely but not certain), the animal heads may well have been the work of a different sculptor. The stylised characteristics of the solemn head from Kilvoydaune are again not easily paralleled—least of all on the heads in much higher relief at Dysert O'Dea which are located only a few miles from where it was found. With the heads discussed here, we are dealing with the work of imaginative craftsmen who worked within the framework of the great Clare school of sculptors of the 12th century, but who put their own highly individual stamp on the works which they produced.
1. Animal head on the south side of the west doorway.

2. Animal head on the north side of the west doorway.

3. Animal head high up in the south wall.

4. South-western corner corbel, with unfinished animal head in relief.

Temple Cronan, Co. Clare (Photos: D. H. Davison, P.D.I.)
1. South-eastern corner corbel, with human mask in relief. (When inverted, it can be interpreted as an animal head.)

2. Human head above north doorway.

3. Human head in the west wall to the south of the doorway.

4. One of the three heads formerly above an oratory door and now built into the cemetery wall.

Temple Cronan (1-3) and Tomfinlough (4), Co. Clare

[Photos: D. H. Davison, P.D.I. and P. Harbison]
1 and 2. Front and side view of corbel from Kilvoyleane, Co. Clare.
(Photos: E. Rynne)

3. Human head on corner corbel from Kilvoyleane, Co. Clare.
(Photo: D. H. Davison, P.D.I.)