

The Influence of Alabaster Carvings on Medieval Sculpture in Ennis Friary

JOHN HUNT¹

In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England there was a flourishing trade in major sculpture for tombs and altarpieces from the alabaster quarries at Chellaston and Tutbury, and the concomitant production of smaller sculptures—evidently the output of actual “factories” as the workshops seem to have become—was the subject of the well-known exhibition of English medieval alabaster-work held in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries in 1910.² Such small devotional objects, capable of being rapidly produced in an easily workable material, and of being brilliantly coloured, found a ready market. Of a handy and manageable size, they could be used as individual objects of piety, or combined in frames into large or small compositions, readily forming large and imposing retables for the altars of a church. It has been shown that they were widely exported from their centres of production throughout Europe. Salesmen evidently kept large stocks of these “tables”, as they were called, and it was such travelling salesmen who must have been responsible for their widespread distribution. In 1491, one William Botte, salesman, was summonsed by a Nottingham image-maker, Nicholas Hill (no doubt the master of a sculptor’s workshop producing such pieces), for the sum of five marks for fifty-eight heads of St. John the Baptist, some of them mounted “in tabernaculis et in howsynges”, which he had received for sale.³

There is evidence to show that Ireland benefited from the ripples of this flood of popular sculpture. The National Museum of Ireland houses five examples from various sites, and at least an equal number of others are known from elsewhere in Ireland,⁴ so that there was evidently a ready import market here. But the greater interest lies in some evidence of the impact and influence of this flourishing industry on native artists and their work, which can best be studied in some of the sculpture in Ennis friary, Co. Clare.

¹ Over a number of years, John Hunt made a study of the carvings in Ennis Friary. Some of these he discussed briefly in an article in *The Irish Times* of Wednesday, 4 April 1962, and in greater detail in his book *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600*, Dublin 1974, pp. 121-127 (cited below as *Hunt*). At his death on 19 January 1976, he left a number of notes on the subject which he had hoped to work into an article, dealing more particularly with those carvings which were not mentioned in his book. These notes I have tried to “stitch” together here, and I have added footnotes for purposes of documentation. As this article is such a valuable contribution to the study of Irish medieval sculpture by one who knew it most intimately, John Hunt’s own wording has been retained virtually without exception. I would like to take this opportunity to thank John Hunt’s widow, Putzel, for having put her late husband’s notes at my disposal for publication here, and to express my gratitude also to Dermot Foley who was kind enough to look over the draft version of the article.—*Peter Harbison*.

² *Illustrated Catalogue of the Exhibition of English Medieval Alabaster Work held in the rooms of the Society of Antiquaries, 26th May to 30th June, 1910*, London 1913 (cited below as *Illustrated Catalogue*).

³ W. H. St. John Hope, “On the Early Working of Alabaster in England”, *Illustrated Catalogue*, p. 10.

⁴ J. Hunt and P. Harbison, “Medieval English Alabasters in Ireland”, *Studies*, Winter 1976, pp. 310-321.

The Royal Tomb

At Ennis, the so-called Royal Tomb is evidently closely based on an English original composition,⁵ presumably an altarpiece, perhaps indeed that once over the high altar of the church. The mannered gestures and general workshop formulae developed by the English artisans can clearly be recognized as adapted by the Irish workmen in the treatment of the subjects of the tomb. In the Resurrection scene,⁶ the Nottingham alabasterman's general stock of attitudes, the same number of figures and their disposition, are closely copied. Only on the labarum carried by Christ has the Irish artist allowed himself to substitute a native variation of a swastika for the normal "cross gules" proper to Resurrection scenes.

It is even possible to determine the approximate date of the original altarpiece. It is evident that the model for the Resurrection scene was a table of Prior's Class III, which he dated between 1420 and 1460.⁷ The gesture of the rigidly extended right arm of Christ gave way to the angularly flexed attitude seen at Ennis on the later series about 1450, thus allowing us to postulate an English original of the middle of the fifteenth century.⁸ The church must have possessed more altarpieces of the Nottingham School—the figure of a woman in a horned or heart-shaped head-dress⁹ is evidently based on similarly dressed personages occurring in some English altarpiece scenes but these seem to be productions of a slightly later date, when single figures of saints like that of St. Thomas at the western end¹⁰ are common.

The devotion to St. John the Baptist resulted in the carving of thousands of alabaster examples of the subject known as *Caput Johannes in Disco*, that is, St. John's head placed upon a charger or dish. Many of these still exist—and one such was copied by the Irish sculptor upon the centre of the gable of the tomb (Pl. I, 1).

The Pietà

Westropp¹¹ refers to "a boss of a groined canopy" from the Royal Tomb carved with a figure of Our Lord. This appears to be the important but unfortunately mutilated fragment of a Pietà or "Our Lady's Pity" as it was known in the fifteenth century. It is the most ambitious piece of sculpture remaining in Ennis friary, and is on a larger scale than those of the Royal Tomb. It is also among the only remaining fragments of fifteenth-century free-standing stone sculpture in the round in Ireland. The material is the very hard local limestone, and the carving now rests on the floor

⁵ Hunt, pp. 123-125, with Plates 235-242 and 244-245.

⁶ Hunt, Plate 241.

⁷ E. S. Prior, "The Sculpture of Alabaster Tables", *Illustrated Catalogue*, pp. 34-38.

⁸ It might be mentioned here that among the sets of alabaster tables which most resemble the ones found copied in Ennis, those now in Iceland are possibly the closest (see P. Nelson, "English Medieval Alabaster Carvings in Iceland", *Archaeol. Jn.*, 77 (1920), 192 ff., with Plates I-III). Whether we accept Nelson's dating of these Icelandic examples as belonging to the time of Richard III (born 1452, died 1485), or to the period 1426-1441 as suggested by Pitman (C. F. Pitman, "Reflections on Nottingham Alabaster Carvings", *The Connoisseur*, 130 (1954), 226), we still achieve a likely date for the Ennis carvings of after 1420, and thus, at earliest, in Prior's Class III. In this connection it is worth noting the remark by D. B. Quinn and K. W. Nicholls in the *New History of Ireland*, vol. III, Oxford 1976, p. 13, that Galway "was a port of call on the fifteenth century route of the British ships to Iceland".—P.H.

⁹ Hunt, Plate 242.

¹⁰ Hunt, Plate 236.

¹¹ T. J. Westropp, "Ennis Abbey and the O'Brien Tombs", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 25 (1895), 151.

of the friary choir (Pl. I, 2). The body of Christ lies upon the knees of the Virgin, the arms crossed at the wrists and the right arm grasped at the elbow by Our Lady's left hand. Although the fragment is much mutilated, enough of it remains to relate it to the Royal Tomb panels, etc., viz. the curiously square tips to the fingers, and the convention of the ribs as well as the hard precise angular folds of the drapery.

The sculptor may have abandoned the convention of the folded border which he successfully used to emphasize the pattern of his smaller groups and to enforce the re-iteration of his figure series. Here, working on a more monumental scale and on a single composition, he falls back on the dignified universal continental tradition of the breaking folds and angular drapery, crystallized in the fourteenth century, which had become the lingua franca of the sculptors of northern Europe. The folds, however, do not show the over-elaboration which the fifteenth century had brought, but a very successful and archaistic formalized treatment, such as is to be found on the products of the English alabastermen.

This fragment shows how impressive the mannered style of this workshop becomes when used on a larger scale. The tradition which produced the capitals in the chancel of Kilfenora Cathedral can be seen continuing through the corbel in the cathedral there in the same cold severe mannered technique down through this Ennis series, conditioned no doubt to a great extent by the nature of the working material. The subject occurs again at Strade in Co. Mayo,¹² where it forms the central portion of a series of panels, perhaps from a tomb, but possibly part of the reredos of the high altar. This is also a product of the Western School, and, though later than the Ennis series, shows some similarities of treatment and continuity of tradition in the convention of the robe borders.

While this Pietà group may have had the same direct artistic parentage as the panels from the Royal Tomb, this need not, however, necessarily have been so. Such images were produced in large numbers by workshops in many European centres, so that it would be unwise to suggest that the Ennis group is also an adaptation of an English original. One rival school of sculptors, also working in alabaster, whose work was very popular at this period, was centred on the Lower Rhine. Its productions are of superior quality to the English work, and have less of the appearance of "Art Populaire". The best known artist has been called the "Rimini Master", and he was responsible for the Calvary in the Liebighaus in Frankfurt.¹³ There is a Pietà of this school in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London¹⁴ which may be compared with the Ennis fragment, and it also compares very closely to the group from Blunham Church, Bedfordshire.¹⁵ This group was free-standing, but unfortunately the greater part of the body of the Virgin, the head and shoulders of the dead Christ, and the

¹² Hunt, Plate 256.

¹³ *Bildwerke aus dem Liebighaus*, Frankfurt/M. 1959, Taf. 18.

¹⁴ A. Legner, "Der Alabasteraltar aus Rimini", *Städel-Jahrbuch*, N.F. 2 (1969), 127, Fig. 34, for the reference to which I am grateful to John Beckwith. For illustrations of alabaster representations of the Pietà in the Middle Rhine area during the period 1430-1440 see G. Swarzenski, "Deutsche Alabasterplastik des 15. Jahrhunderts", *Städel-Jahrbuch*, 1 (1921), 171, Abb. 5 and pp. 204-205, Abb. 91-101, in addition to which see also I. Futterer, "Ein Beitrag zum Werk des Riminimeisters", *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst*, 60 (1926-27), 293-296. Compare also *Marienbild in Rheinland und Westfalen*, *Ausstellung Villa Hugel, Essen, 14. Juni-22. September 1968*, Essen 1968, Kat. 304 and 307.

¹⁵ *Illustrated Catalogue*, Plate XXIX, no. 78.

lower part of the robe and feet of Our Lady as well as the legs of Christ, are broken away.¹⁶

"Our Lord's Pity"

On the western face of the pier of the eastern arch to the transept is a carving depicting the scene known in the fifteenth century as "Our Lord's Pity", as seen by St. Gregory in his vision when at Mass. It is also probably an Irish (native) version of an alabaster table (Pl. III, 1).

Under a square hood-mould is a depressed ogee-headed niche containing a demi-figure of Christ in his tomb, his hands bound before him. Above his head is a large nimbus, and on either side are the instruments of the Passion. On the dexter side, the column and mallet, on the sinister, the seamless garment, the dice and also the pot with the cock rising from it. Behind Our Lord's body is the cross; on the borders below the hood-mould are the ladder, hammer and pincers, with a sword below. In the spandrels are the three nails and a hand grasping what appears to be either a bag of money or, as Westropp¹⁷ suggests, a lock of hair. It is to be noted that the convention of the folded borders to the robes seen in the Apostle figures, on the St. Joseph in the Entombment, and on the Maries in the Crucifixion panel of the Royal Tomb,¹⁸ occurs here again on the lower border of the coat.

St. Francis

On the north side of the nave, over the usual position of the patronal altar, there is a figure of St. Francis in high relief, carved on the jamb-stone of the western tower arch. The saint stands in a niche, dressed in a long habit falling in folds over the feet. Over the shoulders is the semi-circular golee of the hood of his scapular. The girdle has a long end in front, with a tassel at the feet and having four knots in its length.¹⁹ This motif is also used effectively on the thin shafts carried up as crocketed pinnacles on either side of the canopy. The habit is opened over the right breast to show the wound in the side, and the hands and feet show the stigmata. There is a cross-staff in the left hand (Pl. III, 2).

The sculpture is vivid and striking but the artist shows all the marks of the Western School. He makes an unusual use of flat hollows bordered by sharp ridges, instead of broad raised masses bordered by narrow sunken areas, to suggest foliage and light and shade. The same technique is used in the foliate crockets above the flat gable. This also occurs on the canopy tomb in the friary.²⁰ The exaggerated limbs and haphazard junctions with the body as well as the unusual eye formula of an incised iris line (or epicanthus delineation?) suggests that this comes from the same workshop as the other carved details if not indeed from the same hand.

¹⁶ In the notes prepared before his death, John Hunt continued by discussing an old photograph of a similar Pietà which he thought had once been in Ennis and which he considered to have been lost since the photograph was taken in the early years of this century. However, as the Pietà in the photograph is not lost but located in a church at Kilmurry Ibrickane in Co. Clare, Hunt's discussion of the photograph has been omitted here, and a separate description of the Kilmurry Pietà is given as an Appendix instead.

¹⁷ Westropp, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

¹⁸ Hunt, Plates 235, 244-245, 240 and 239 respectively.

¹⁹ The knot of the Franciscans today is three-fold in honour of the Trinity. The knots here seem to be five- and six-fold.—*John Hunt's original note.*

²⁰ Hunt, Plates 246-247.

All the carved details discussed in this paper seem to be of the *same date*. If the tomb panels formed part of the MacMahon tomb erected by More ní Brien,²¹ these must date from 1460-1470. They appear to be the product of one workshop, if not indeed of a single artist.

APPENDIX

The Pietà from Kilmurry Ibrickane, Co. Clare

PETER HARBISON

The late medieval church of Kilmurry Ibrickane houses a fragmentary carving of a Pietà which, except for two brief mentions by Westropp,²² has not received the attention it deserves. It is published here for the first time not only in its own right but also as an obvious comparison to the sculpture of the same subject in Ennis friary discussed in some detail by John Hunt in the preceding pages.²³ It was probably carved at some time during (and possibly in the later part of) the half century from 1430 to 1480, and is therefore likely to be roughly contemporary with its Ennis counterpart.

The Kilmurry Pietà (Pl. III, 3) is carved in Clare limestone which contrasts with the laminated slate with which the church was built. Regrettably, Christ's head and the upper part of the body of the Virgin are lost, but except for some minor damage the group remains otherwise intact and is thus more complete than the comparable fragment at Ennis. Its present height is 32 cms; it is 42 cms broad and 22 cms deep. Its scale is considerably smaller than that of the Ennis Pietà, as can be seen for instance by comparing the distance between the central points of the Virgin's knees which is 14 cms at Kilmurry and 23 cms at Ennis.

Christ's body lies lifeless and emaciated across the Virgin's lap, his thin arms crossed above the wrists, and he is clad only in a loin-cloth terminating just above the knees. The rib-cage is scarcely noticeable on the chest, but the ribs are more clearly delineated on the right-hand side of the body beneath the right arm. There is a noticeable cavity at the bottom of the neck just beside the point where the head and neck have been broken off, a feature which is also found on the Ennis Pietà. The body tilts slightly downwards away from the Virgin's body, while the upper part

²¹ Hunt, p. 121.

²² T. J. Westropp, "Kilmurry Ibrickane Parish", *Jn. Assoc. Preservation Memorials Dead Ireland*, Vol. V, No. 1, Part 1 (1901), p. 22; T. J. Westropp, "Ancient Remains near Miltown Malbay, Part II", *Jn. Limerick Field Club*, 3 (1905-08), 6.

²³ John Hunt made reference to this Pietà (see fn. 16) which he knew only from an old photograph which Dermot Foley had discovered a number of years ago in Corofin. His perceptive eye noted that the Pietà of the photograph resembled the fragment of the same subject in Ennis, but that it differed sufficiently to warrant the conclusion that it was a separate piece of sculpture. He died, alas, without ever having found out about the whereabouts of the Pietà in the old photograph. In connection with the posthumous publication of John Hunt's notes in which the Pietà of the photograph was mentioned, Dermot Foley had occasion to discuss the photograph with Miss Nora O'Sullivan who was able to point out to him that the Pietà was not lost but was preserved in the church of Kilmurry Ibrickane. As a result, the reference to the Pietà of the photograph was deleted from Hunt's article, and thanks to Dermot Foley and Miss O'Sullivan, it was possible for the author to prepare this note separately but in conjunction with the article by John Hunt.

of Christ's legs are approximately horizontal. On the right leg the loin-cloth can be seen to be slightly faceted, though not as noticeably as on the Christ figure at Ennis. Christ's left hand, slightly damaged, rests on the loin-cloth above the right thigh, the fingers being shorter than those of the Ennis carving except for the thumb which seems to be longer at Kilmurry. His right arm is only partially visible under the Virgin's left elbow, and has a rather flattened appearance. Christ's legs are placed almost together, their lower portions beautifully carved and coming to a blunted point in front. The feet, which are partially broken away above the toes, rest on the folds of the Virgin's garment.

Although the upper part of the Virgin's body is, alas, broken away just above the waist, sufficient remains of it to show that it tilted backwards considerably and was draped in a long robe which fell to the feet. Around her waist the Virgin wears a belt with a loop in the centre, from which the pendant end drops down to be lost sight of beneath the left side of Christ's body. The sleeves of the Virgin's robe terminate just above the wrists as can be seen on her left arm, and while the details of the right arm are not easy to make out it seems possible that a cloak may have been draped over it. The Virgin's right arm is broken off below the elbow, but it is clear that her missing right hand must have supported Christ's head. Her left forearm lies over the lower part of Christ's right arm, while her left hand (which is not well preserved) grasps Christ's right arm a little below the shoulder.

The Virgin's knees are placed slightly apart, and spread fairly tautly across them is a cloth on which Christ's body rests. This cloth, which is only visible when the statue is viewed from knee-height, does not project as far forward on the Virgin's knees as it does on the Ennis group. The lower part of her right leg is vertical, whereas the left leg inclines diagonally somewhat to the left, thus allowing Christ's thigh to lie at a slightly lower level than the shoulders and permitting a certain variety to be given to his body-line. Her legs are covered by graceful drapery which falls in gentle vertical folds to the right foot and in more expansive folds to the left. Between her legs there are two elegantly curving folds meeting at a point, the uppermost fold being in higher relief than the lower one. The rim of the Virgin's robe falls in graceful wave-like scrolls around the feet which emerge from under them, clad, apparently, in round-toed shoes. These scrolls can be compared to those on the Apostle figures in Ennis²⁴ and on the figure on the font from Kilballyowen²⁵ now on display in the Ennis Museum. On that side of the Kilmurry group, beneath where Christ's head lay, the Virgin's garment forms two further angular folds, the lower of which is deeper and projects out much farther than the upper one.

The carving of this Pietà is of good quality, the flattening of Christ's right forearm being its only unflattering feature. The drapery is delicately differentiated, that over the Virgin's left leg showing a greater variety than that of the corresponding part of the Ennis sculpture, and the folds between the Virgin's legs also differ markedly from those at Ennis. The scrolls of the rim of the Virgin's garment above the feet are very attractively carved, and may help to give us some idea of the original appearance of the lower part of the Ennis Pietà, now missing. A further difference between the Kilmurry Pietà and that at Ennis, as John Hunt was able to notice even on the basis of an old photograph, is that at Ennis the Virgin's left hand grasps

²⁴ J. Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600*, Dublin 1974, Plates 235 and 244-245.

²⁵ T. J. Westropp, "Ancient Remains on the West Coast of Co. Clare", *Jn. North Munster Archaeol. Soc.*, Vol. III, No. 4 (1915), 353 ff., with illustration facing p. 354.

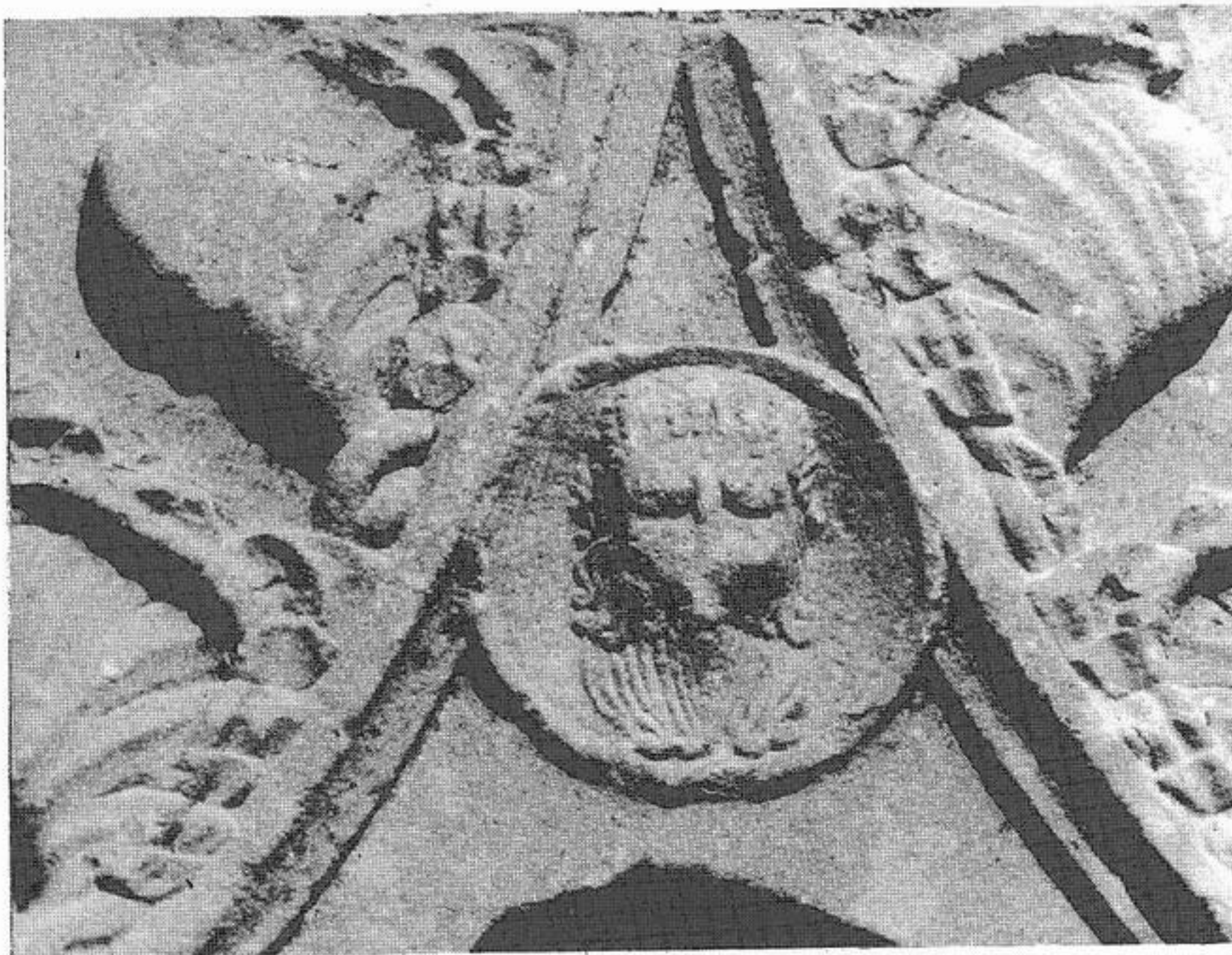
Christ's arm at the elbow, whereas in Kilmurry it grasps the upper part of Christ's arm only a little below the shoulder.

Whereas the treatment of the drapery may be considered to have been rendered with more sensitivity and greater variety at Kilmurry, the carving of Christ's torso and both his and the Virgin's hands are of better quality at Ennis. We ought to expect therefore that Christ's legs on the Ennis group must have been very beautifully carved indeed, and the impression made even by the tragically fragmentary remains both at Ennis and at Kilmurry suggests that the two groups when complete must have been among the most moving and beautiful free-standing stone sculptures in medieval Ireland. The quality of the surviving fragments makes the loss of the figures' heads all the more tragic.

The general similarity of the two Pietà groups, and the fact that they are the only two examples of their kind known in the country, could suggest that they are quite probably the products of a single workshop. This workshop is most likely to have been located in Ennis, where there is the greatest preponderance in Clare of sculpture from the second half of the fifteenth century. It seems most likely that it would have been from there that the font was brought to Kilballyowen and the Pietà group to Kilmurry, though for what reason or by whom it would be difficult to surmise at this remove in time. In the preceding pages of this issue, John Hunt pointed out that the Ennis Pietà could have been modelled on an alabaster representation of the scene which may have come from the Rhineland, and the same may well be true also of the Kilmurry group. One feature in the Kilmurry and Ennis Pietàs which argues against an English alabaster original is the gesture of the Virgin's left hand being placed on Christ's right arm, because the surviving English alabasters²⁶ show the Virgin's left hand not on Christ's arm but raised to touch the veil around her head. The slight differences in detail between the Kilmurry and Ennis groups, such as the precise positioning of the Virgin's left hand in relation to Christ's right arm or the drapery over her left leg, could be used to argue in favour of each of the Pietàs being modelled on two slightly differing originals, but as it seems improbable that two closely similar representations of the Pietà would have been imported into a centre such as Ennis from somewhere possibly as far away as the Rhineland, the more likely presumption would seem to be that the Kilmurry and Ennis Pietà groups were modelled on the same original. The difference in their respective sizes might have come about because of the considerable differences in scale of the sizes of the respective churches for which the carvings were commissioned, and the slight variation in detail between the two groups might best be explained by the suggestion that one of the carvings may have adhered more closely to the model on which it was based, while in the other the sculptor added his own variations.

²⁶ Compare the Pietà from Breadsall in Derbyshire (W. L. Hildburgh, "On the Early Working of Alabaster in England", *Archaeol. Jn.*, 61 (1904), illustration facing p. 228), and another now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (Reg. No. A. 43-1946), which is illustrated in W. L. Hildburgh, "Notes on some English medieval alabaster carvings", *Antiq. Jn.*, 4 (1924), Plate LII, and compared to a similar one at Yarnton, Oxon., in P. Nelson, "Some unpublished English medieval alabaster carvings", *Archaeol. Jn.*, 82 (1925), 33. See also the group from Blunham Church, Bedfordshire, referred to in John Hunt's article earlier in this issue and the alabaster table of the Pietà shown in P. Nelson, "Some Additional Specimens of English alabaster Carvings", *Archaeol. Jn.*, 84 (1927), 124, with Plate VI, 3.

Compare also F. W. Cheetham, *Medieval English Alabaster Carvings in the Castle Museum, Nottingham*, Nottingham 1973, pp. 54-55. France must also be considered a possible source for the model on which the Clare Pietàs were based; see, for instance, the Pietà de Lave in the Cathedral of Saint-Flour (Cantal), which is close in style to Kilmurry. If Austrian parallels of about 1410-1420 are apt, then the model may have been up to 50 years old before it was copied at Ennis.



1. St. John's head on the canopy of the Royal Tomb, Ennis Friary, modelled on an alabaster original.
[Photo: P. Harbison]

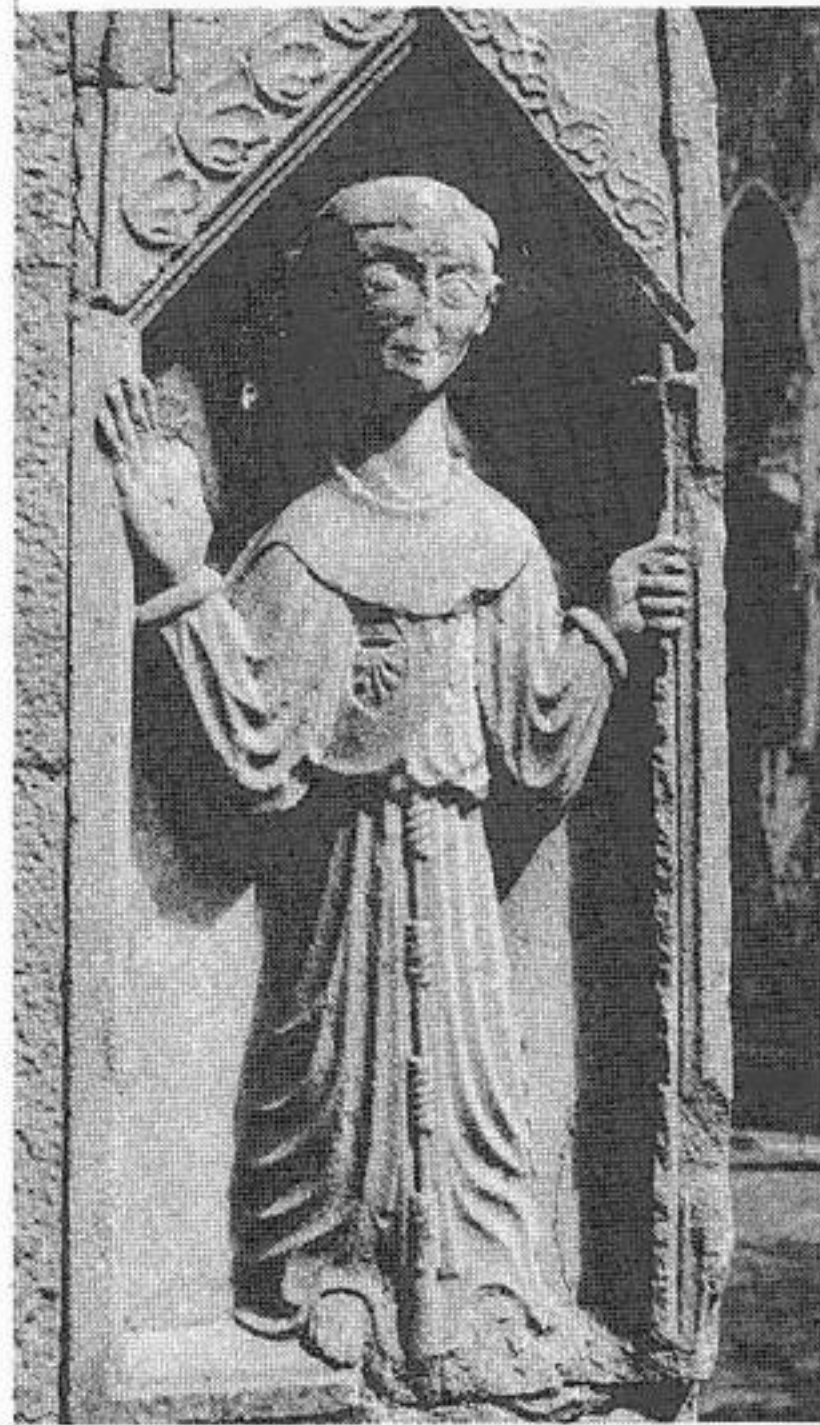


2. Fragmentary carving of a Pietà at present in the choir of Ennis Friary.
[Photo: David Davison, PDI]



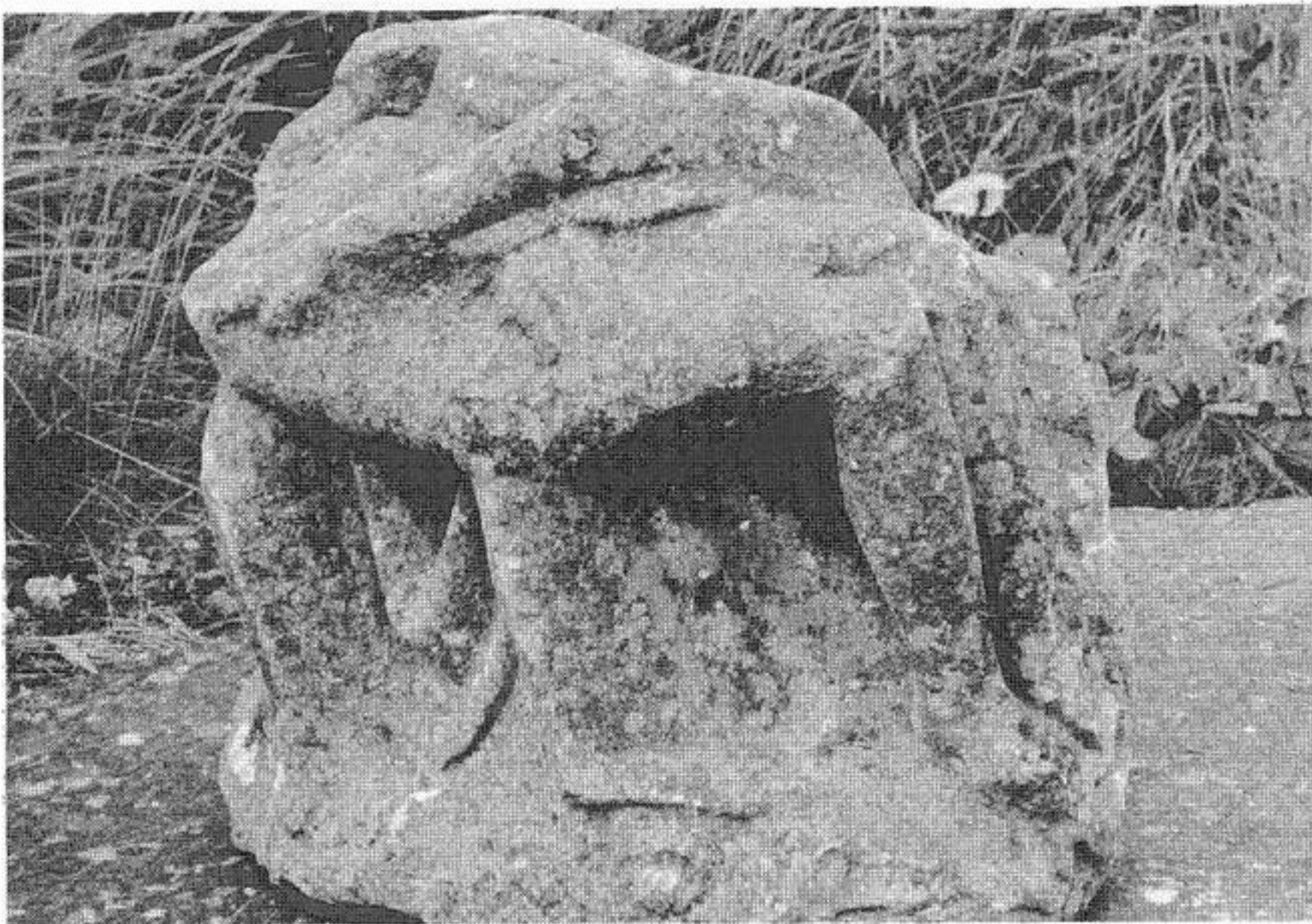
1. "Our Lord's Pity" on the western face of the pier of the eastern arch to the transept of Ennis Friary.

[Photo: The Green Studio, Dublin]



2. Representation of St. Francis in the nave of Ennis Friary.

[Photo: David Davison, PDI]



3. Fragmentary carving of a Pietà group in the church of Kilmurry Ibrickane, Co. Clare.

[Photo: P. Harbison]