The Double-Armed Cross on the Church Gable at Killinaboy, Co. Clare

PETER HARBISON

The ruined church of Killinaboy (Grid reference: R.270.916) stands in a dominating position on a ridge at the southern end of the Burren, like a sentinel guarding the access route to it from the rolling countryside to the south. To the traveller passing on the road from Kilfenora to Corofin, the church's most striking characteristic is the double-armed cross which stands out in low relief on the west gable (Plate 1:1), its upper arm being slightly shorter than the lower one. The most interesting features of the cross are the terminations of the arms and the top of the shaft which, as John Hunt first pointed out to me, are in the form of volute capitals with a trapeze-shaped member emerging from the volutes.

The stones forming both the cross and the antae (or projecting walls) at the corners of the west gable consist of neatly-dressed rectangular masonry, in contrast to the many irregularly shaped stones peppering the rest of the gable. The north-western anta, and possibly also a few stones adjoining it, may be the only parts of the existing gable which survive in situ from an earlier church. The rest of the gable (including, probably, the south-western anta) was apparently reconstructed into its present form around the fifteenth or sixteenth century, when most of the rest of the surviving church including the south doorway would appear to have been built. As will be argued below, the cross too must derive from the earlier gable, but it is no longer in its original position. It must have been of sufficient importance to have been dismantled carefully for re-erection when the original gable was probably almost entirely demolished, and then reinstalled in the reconstructed gable. In the reconstructed gable, the stones forming the cross would appear to have been reassembled in the way they must have stood in the original gable though, for reasons which will be given below, the stone at present forming the base of the cross is unlikely to have formed part of the cross originally. It seems very likely, therefore, that the original gable must have stood until very shortly before the reconstruction, as otherwise the masons would scarcely have known how to reassemble most of the stones of the cross correctly, nor would the majority of the original stones of the cross necessarily have been available for use in the reconstruction. In the original gable, the cross was presumably placed symmetrically in the centre; the reason for its present off-centre position in the gable

1 The use of alternating vertical and horizontal stones in the anta bears a certain resemblance to the "long-short" work of Anglo-Saxon churches in England.

2 Parts of the north wall of the present church can also be claimed to be survivals from the original stone church, having the "cyclopean" masonry typical of early Irish churches. However, most of the masonry of the north wall—even that directly adjoining the stones forming the north-western anta—would appear to be of a secondary nature. Even if some of the stones of this anta—most noticeably those nearest the top—may have been moved in the subsequent reconstruction (discussed below), it seems likely that their positioning in relation to one another remains substantially as it was originally.
is elusive. It may be noted that, in the reconstruction, the stones forming the shaft of the cross were placed very slightly out of line, and that the upper part of the cross stands further out from the surface of the wall than does the lower part. Many of the stones in the present west gable are not as neatly dressed as the stones of the cross, but they are nevertheless roughly rectangular in shape, suggesting that they may have been taken from the walls of the original church and reinserted later. A neat line of such reused stones can be seen dipping down diagonally from the north-western anta to the stone now forming the base of the cross, and they were obviously placed in this position when the cross was carefully rebuilt during the reconstruction of the gable.

That the cross was not first carved when the church was rebuilt in the fifteenth/sixteenth century can be presumed firstly from the fact that the north-western anta, which appears to survive reasonably intact from the original church, shares with the cross the careful rectangular masonry, in contrast to the rougher stonework of the rest of the gable. Secondly, it can be noted that when the sun shines obliquely on the gable, traces of the axe-finish with its characteristic diagonal tooling can be seen on at least one stone of the north-western anta, and the same finish can also be distinguished on the stone forming the southern member of the lower arm of the cross, and possibly also on a few of the other stones of the cross as well, thus strongly indicating that the cross and the north-western anta are contemporary.

When we come to consider the question of the date of the original church for which the cross was carved, the diagonal tooling on some of the stones helps to provide us at least with a rough terminus post quem for the building of the original church. Liam de Paor⁹ has pointed out that the earliest dateable use of this technique in Ireland is found on O'Rourke's Tower at Clonmacnoise sometime around or shortly after 1124, and he infers that it began to be used in this country around 1100, rapidly gaining popularity over the hammer-dressing used apparently on a number of other stones of the Killinaboy double-armed cross. From this we can presume that the original stone church at Killinaboy, and also the cross which was built into it, is scarcely likely to be earlier than 1100.⁴ But the diagonal tooling and ashlar masonry of the cross and the north-western anta at Killinaboy also find their parallels at the northern end of the Burren in the chancel of Corcomroe Abbey which was probably erected during the first three decades of the thirteenth century⁵—a date which, as suggested below, would also be quite acceptable for the original stone church at Killinaboy.

But what is the origin of the double-armed cross, and what possible explanation can be offered for its presence on the gable of the Killinaboy church? The basic form of the double-armed cross is Byzantine in origin. The presence of the smaller upper

---

⁴ This invalidates the argument for an earlier date for this church put forward by me in Medieval Archaeology, 14 (1970), 49. Compare also the possibly misleading statements I made in this Journal, 14 (1971), 32-33.
arm is normally explained as being derived from the *titulus* which bore the inscription above Christ’s head on the cross. According to Frolov, the author of the most extensive study of double-armed crosses, the majority of Byzantine examples date from the tenth to the twelfth centuries, and some of these were brought to central Europe as early as the middle of the tenth century, as exemplified by the famous Staurothek in the Treasury of Limburg Cathedral in Germany. Frolov is of the opinion that the oldest western, that is, European, double-armed crosses are twelfth century or at earliest eleventh century in date, and they seem to have been most popular in the thirteenth and subsequent centuries. However, almost all of the European double-armed crosses which survive from the eleventh or twelfth century have straight arms without capitals at their extremities—a form which is undoubtedly derived from Byzantine prototypes. The popularity of double-armed crosses in Europe is probably due to the Crusades, and—in Frolov’s view—particularly to the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), the participants of which probably brought back a number of them to Europe from the Near East. Luke of Tuy, a thirteenth century Galician bishop, states that the double-armed cross was reserved for reliquaries containing fragments of the True Cross, and most of the surviving examples would appear to bear out his testimony. It was only at a somewhat later period that it was adopted as the symbol of the House of Lorraine—the form in which it is now most widely known—while the pectoral cross of some archbishops still bears its shape today.

The volute capitals of the kind seen on the terminations of the arms of the Killinaboy cross may have been a European rather than a Byzantine addition to the basic cross form, and a variety of related capital types was used in Europe, at least on single-armed crosses, from the second half of the eleventh century—if not earlier. As instances, the second Mathilde Cross in the Treasury of the Cathedral at Essen in Germany, recently redated by Elbern to the second half of the eleventh century, and a small gold cross from the tomb of Edward the Confessor who died in 1066 could be mentioned, and variations on this form of capital are known from an earlier period, as on the Lothar Cross at Aachen.

One cross-type which combines the double arms and the volute capitals as seen at Killinaboy is that based on the famous cross of Caravaca, a town in the province of Murcia, in south-eastern Spain. A seventeenth century Spanish source tells us that

---

8 A possible, though disputed, exception is the reliquary of St. Croix in Poitiers which may be as early as the sixth century, for a reference to which I am grateful to Etienne Ryme—see P. Lasko, *The Kingdom of the Franks*, London 1971, p. 74. However, as the double-armed cross of this reliquary does not have capitals, it is not crucial to the present discussion.
9 Quoted in Frolov, *op. cit.*, p. 128, where it is pointed out, however, that the Caravaca cross discussed below here was not a reliquary, and did not therefore house a fragment of the True Cross.
10 V. Elbern, *Das Erste Jahrtausend*, Tafelband (1962), Pl. 378 and p. 82.
11 I am grateful to the late John Hunt for this information.
the original cross of Caravaca (made of wood) was borne by two angels to an altar at Caravaca where a priest was celebrating Mass at the request of his Moorish captor Zeyt-Abuzeyt, either in 1227 (according to the seventeenth century Spanish account) or in 1232 (according to a more recent Spanish computation). Because of its miraculous appearance, the cross became a famous object of pilgrimage, and Spaniards respectfully carried around with them copies of the original cross which is said to have worked many miracles. Professor Schunk, formerly Director of the German Archaeological Institute in Madrid, has kindly informed me that a stone copy of the Caravaca cross was apparently built into the outside wall of the church which contains the original, but I have been unable to discover at what date this happened, nor have I been able to find an illustration of this cross.

The original Caravaca cross was enshrined in a new gold casing in the fourteenth or fifteenth century, and copies of the cross continued to be made at least into the seventeenth century, if not later. One seventeenth century portable example at Monza in Italy is illustrated here (Fig. 2). On it we can see that crosses of this general type had a capital not only on the extremities of the arms and at the top of the shaft, but at the base of the shaft as well. Given that the Killinaboy cross resembles the Caravaca cross in the positioning of the capitals on the upper parts of the cross, it seems reasonable to assume that the Killinaboy cross also had a capital on the base, and that the stone at present forming the base of the cross is therefore not original. Further evidence in support of the secondary nature of the present base stone is that whereas all the stones forming the rest of the shaft have almost exactly parallel sides being at most 47.5 cms apart, the shaft on the base stone expands outwards as it descends, reaching a maximum width of about 54 cms at the bottom of the stone. Furthermore, on the other stones the area flanking the shaft is cut away, while on the base stone the edge of the shaft is merely outlined by two broad grooves which does not form a continuation of the line of the cross-shaft in the stones above it. Nevertheless, the very large size of the present base stone is possibly significant in as much as it may echo the likelihood that the original base stone of the cross on which the base capital was carved may have been the massive lintel of a trabeate doorway. Support

16 E. Tormo, Levante-Espana, Guías Regionales Calpe III (1923), p. 378. I am grateful to Professor H. Schunk for this reference.

16 One of these seventeenth century copies of the Caravaca cross reached Ireland, and was discovered in a grave in Youghal, Co. Cork, in 1814 (S. Hayman, “Relics of Antiquity at Youghal, Co. Cork, No. 1—Ancient Pectoral Cross, found at Youghal in 1814”, Ulster J. Archaeol. 1st ser. 2 (1854), 114-18). It may be identical with a cross illustrated in a plate of the Sale Catalogue of the Day Collection, London 1913, (and probably lot 694 of that sale) for the reference to which I am grateful to Etienne Rynee. A late sixteenth or seventeenth century example which was aboard a ship bound for Mexico (presumably from Spain) when it sank was recently illustrated in the National Geographic for December 1977, p. 732. Its proportions, however, differ somewhat from the one illustrated here, suggesting that the reconstruction of the original form of the Killinaboy cross proposed here (Fig. 1) can only be taken as approximate rather than absolute.

17 The stone or stones originally at the bottom of the shaft would probably have splayed slightly outwards towards the bottom, as there seems to be an almost imperceptible splay downwards on the original and extant stones of the shaft below the lower arm (from 45 cms above to 47.5 cms at the bottom). This splay is not apparent on the Caravaca cross reproduced here (Fig. 2), and may not have been a normal feature of Caravaca crosses generally. (I am grateful to the Victoria and Albert Museum London, for this illustration.)
Fig. 1. Conjectural reconstruction of the west gable of Killinaboy Church, with its double-armed cross.

---

for such a possibility comes, for instance, from Clonamery, Co. Kilkenny, where a cross (though not a double-armed one) is carved on two separate stones above a flat-headed doorway. But Killinaboy must have been much more impressive if its original appearance looked anything like the conjectural reconstruction of the west gable proposed here (Fig. 1). Even though not a trace of an original west doorway remains in the present gable, the former presence of a doorway is made even more likely by the fact that churches of early Irish type with *antae* invariably have a door in the west gable. Sometimes, as at Kilmalkedar in Co. Kerry, that doorway is round-headed. But as no traces of a round-headed doorway survive at Killinaboy, and as it would have been difficult to carve a capital 65 cms in width on the keystone of a

---

round-arched doorway, a flat lintel is much the more plausible suggestion for the putative west doorway of the original stone church at Killinaboy. One could argue that a reason why the base capital of the cross was not built into the present gable along with the other parts of the cross is that it was carved on such a heavy lintel that it was impractical or too difficult to lift the lintel back into place once the old gable had been demolished. But this argument can be negated by the large size of the stone at present forming the base of the cross. A more likely suggestion is, however, that the lintel may have cracked, thus damaging the capital so much that it could not be reinserted when the gable was rebuilt in the fifteenth/sixteenth century. Such an hypothesis could also possibly help to explain why it was necessary to reconstruct the whole gable, as the cracking of the door lintel might have made the gable too unstable and dangerous to allow it to continue in use.

But the base capital may not have been the only part to have been omitted when the original cross was reconstructed in the later medieval period. That a section of the

Fig. 2. Double-armed cross of Caravaca type at Monza, Italy, dating from the seventeenth century. (After Barbier de Montault)
bottom of the shaft is also missing is suggested by a study of the relative proportions of the various parts of the Caravaca and Killinaboy crosses. These proportions can be expressed as multiples of a single unit which is the height of the uppermost section of the shaft of the cross. On the Killinaboy cross, this single unit is also found in the width both of the shaft and of the capitals of the lower arm, though the ratios are less uniform in the drawing of a Caravaca cross reproduced here (Fig. 2).

Allowing for certain imprecisions in each case, the number of basic units which make up the individual parts of the Caravaca and Killinaboy crosses respectively may be expressed in tabular form as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Caravaca</th>
<th>Killinaboy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uppermost part of shaft</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper arm (minus capitals)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle section of shaft</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower arm (minus capitals)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower section of shaft</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At Caravaca, the height of the lower section of the shaft can be seen to be both the length of the lower arm (minus capitals) and three times the height of the middle section of the shaft. But if these calculations are projected to Killinaboy, we obtain two different possible heights for the lower section of the shaft, as the length of the lower arm (minus capitals) at Killinaboy is, relatively, only two-thirds that of the corresponding member of the Caravaca cross and, therefore, only twice—but not three times—the height of the middle section of the shaft. This relative difference between the two crosses is presumably not accidental, unless one stone of two units was omitted from each arm at Killinaboy when the gable was reconstructed in the later medieval period. The height of the lower section of the shaft of the Killinaboy cross could thus have been either 4 units (if based on the length of the lower arm, minus capitals) or 6 units (if based on the measurement of three times the height of the middle section of the shaft). Because, unlike Caravaca, the length of the upper arm (minus capitals) at Killinaboy is the same as the height of the middle section of the cross-shaft below it, the height of the lower section of the shaft is shown in the reconstruction drawing here (Fig. 1) as being equal to the length of the lower arm of the cross (minus capitals) that is approximately 4 units. Support for the 4-unit measurement could be found in the proportions of an early thirteenth century cross attributed to Hugo d’Oignies.\(^{19}\) It must be admitted, however, that it would be equally valid to suggest that the 6-unit measurement could originally have formed the basis for the proportions of the Killinaboy cross, but to accept that assumption would imply that 1.50 m of the lower shaft of the cross was omitted when the gable was rebuilt, whereas the 4-unit measurement proposed here has the attraction that it implies the loss of only 39 cms of the lower part of the shaft. 39 cms is exactly the same height as the lowermost surviving original stone of the cross which, incidentally, may have been built in upside down when the cross was being reinserted into the gable and which is placed the right way up in the reconstruction drawing illustrated here (Fig. 1). In this reconstruction, it is assumed that the present level of the top of

---

\(^{19}\) Frowlow, *op. cit.*, p. 205, Fig. 76.
the antae is original, and the pitch of the roof can be seen to conform roughly to the angles formed by joining the uppermost points of the capitals on each side of the cross. If the 6 unit measurement were adopted, it would of course imply that the cross would originally have been at least 1 m higher. Why 39 cms of shaft were omitted in the later medieval reconstruction of the gable is unknown. Did the masons, through carelessness just omit one stone, 39 cms high, when rebuilding the cross or could it have been that the minimum 39 cms missing from the shaft was carved on the same stone as the base capital?

We have already seen that the Caravaca and Killinaboy crosses differ in the relative proportions of their upper and lower arms (4 and 6 as opposed to 2 and 4 basic units respectively), but other differences are also apparent. Whereas on the Caravaca-type cross (Fig. 2) the capitals of the upper and lower arms are identical in size and design, the capitals on the upper arm at Killinaboy are smaller than those on the lower arm, and the respective angles of the trapeze-shaped parts of the capitals also differ on the two arms. Furthermore, the lower arm at Killinaboy is about 9 cms thicker than the upper arm, whereas on the Caravaca cross both arms are of equal thickness. These differences between the two crosses strongly suggest that it was not actually a Caravaca cross which was the model on which the Killinaboy cross was based. But the similarities between the two types of crosses, notably in the use of capitals, can also be seen to suggest that both crosses derive from the same basic type of double-armed cross with ornamental capitals on the extremities—be it Byzantine or European in origin or manufacture. As I have not been able to locate any Byzantine double-armed crosses decorated with capitals, and as it seems relatively unlikely that an original Byzantine cross would have penetrated as far as the west of Ireland, it is more probable that the cross-type represented at Caravaca and at Killinaboy was manufactured in Europe—in some cases possibly to house relics of the True Cross, fragments of which must have been brought by Crusaders in considerable numbers from Constantinople and elsewhere in the Near East. Some of the European double-armed crosses were doubtless made of wood, like the original Caravaca cross, and could well have been the model on which the Killinaboy cross was based.

However, double-armed crosses were also produced in more precious materials. One of the areas producing (or altering) ornate metal double-armed crosses, particularly in the thirteenth century, was the Meuse.20 Another centre was Limoges in south-central France, famous for its enamels.21 I have not as yet been able to trace a Limoges double-armed cross with the same proportions and capitals as those of the Killinaboy cross, but it is of interest in this context to note that the National Museum in Dublin houses what is probably an Irish copy of a Limoges double-armed cross, found in a sandpit at Kilkenny West in Co. Westmeath (Plate I:2). It is of more elongated form than that of the Killinaboy cross as reconstructed here (Fig. 1), but it shares with it the expanded terminals, even if these are not visibly of the volute type.

---


21 Compare, for instance, the cross for Saint Martin in Limoges (Fig. 3), with seventeenth century decoration, illustrated by Cabrol in Dictionnaire d’Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie, Vol. IV, 2, Col. 2688, Fig. 4053. (I am grateful to the National Library of Ireland for this illustration.)
Unfortunately, however, the original decoration of the Kilkenny West cross has been removed, so that we do not know how the extremities of this cross were ornamented. In the opinion of the late John Hunt, the figure of the Crucified Christ on the Kilkenny West cross may be slightly earlier than the cross itself—which is of thirteenth century date—and attached to the back (Plate I:3) is a silver panel showing two winged dragons which John Hunt considered to be continental in origin and later in date. Neither this panel nor the figure of Christ, therefore, are likely to have belonged to the cross originally. But if the Kilkenny West cross was based on a double-armed cross from Limoges, we can surmise that at least one Limoges double-armed cross—possibly containing a relic of the True Cross—had reached Ireland by the thirteenth century, and the thirteenth century crozier of “Cormac MacCarthy” found at Cashel is proof of the presence of Limoges products in Ireland at the time.

The original Caravaca cross, made of wood, is closer in shape to the Killinaboy cross than any metal double-armed cross not of Caravaca type that I have seen, and
this could argue in favour of a small wooden cross having acted as the model for the large stone cross at Killinaboy. Nevertheless, if the Killinaboy cross were based on a Limoges double-armed cross, then it would lend credence to the suggestion made above that the original Killinaboy church for which the stone cross was created may well date from the first half of the thirteenth century. Even if it were not based on a Limoges cross, the resemblance in the masonry of the cross to that of the chancel of Corcomroe Abbey built between 1200 and 1230, and the appearance of the Caravaca cross-type during the first third of the thirteenth century, combined with the increasing popularity of the double-armed cross in the period after 1200 which, in Frolov’s view, was spurred on particularly by the Fourth Crusade of 1202-1204, all make the first half of the thirteenth century or the decades centring around 1230 a more likely date than any other for the building of the original stone church at Killinaboy, and for the carving of the cross now in the church’s west gable. If this dating is correct, it throws an interesting light on the retention of older features such as antae—and probably a flat lintelled doorway as well—in the Burren as late as the thirteenth century.

The presence of the double-armed cross in the gable of the church at Killinaboy may possibly be explained by the suggestion that it was there to serve as a reminder to the visitor that the church housed—or may even have been specially built to house—a small double-armed cross. It must be said, however, that as the Caravaca cross was not a reliquary (see footnote 9), the cross on which the Killinaboy cross was modelled did not necessarily house a fragment of the True Cross.

Even though the church at Killinaboy would not appear to have been of great significance—little or nothing is known of its history beyond the name of its foundress, the daughter of Baoithe—it would not come entirely as a surprise that it could have contained a relic of the True Cross in the thirteenth and subsequent centuries, as a number of other fragments of the True Cross were known in medieval and immediately post-medieval Ireland. Possibly the best known of these was housed in the Cross of Cong, dating from around or shortly after 1123. Other reliquaries made for portions of the True Cross include the one recently returned to Holy Cross Abbey in Co. Tipperary, the Arthur Cross, and one from Waterford—all double-armed crosses—as well as a silver case formerly preserved at Ferns in Co. Wexford, and possibly also the Domhnach Airgid.

18 A. Gwynn and R. N. Haddock, Medieval Religious Houses Ireland, London 1970, p. 392, devote only two lines to the foundation.
20 D. Murphy, Triumphal Chronologia Monasterii Sanctae Crucis in Hibernia, Dublin 1895, pp. lx-lxix; J. Coleman, “The Relic and Reliquary of the Holy Cross in the Ursuline Convent, Blackrock”, J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc., 3 (1894), 45-48. The fragment of the True Cross which this reliquary contained may well have been the same piece which was sent to Ireland in the early twelfth century and given to Holy Cross Abbey on its foundation in 1169, and from which the monastery got its name—see G. Petrie, Christian Inscriptions in the Irish Language, Vol. 2, Dublin 1878, p. 121.
23 “Some relics of the Holy Cross, formerly preserved in Ireland”, Irish Ecclesiastical Record, 8 (1872), 255-259.
Fig. 1. Map showing site of Abbeydorney Monastery, Co. Kerry (reproduced from the Ordnance Survey map of 1898).
1. The west gable of the church at Killinaboy, Co. Clare, into which the double-armed cross is built.

(Photo: Brian Lynch, Bord Fáilte Éireann)

2. Double-armed cross of Limoges type found at Kilkenny West, Co. Westmeath

(Photo: National Museum of Ireland)

3. Silver panel on back of double-armed cross from Kilkenny West, Co. Westmeath

(Photo: National Museum of Ireland)