Carved Stone Pillar at Bantry, Co. Cork.

By J. N. A. Wallace.

The old road to Bantry from the South forms the Southern boundary of Lord Bantry's demesne, some four hundred yards up this road lies the townland of Kilnaruané, in this, the Co. Cork O.S. six-inch Map No. 118 (154 x 108) marks a "Monumental Pillar." This pillar stands near the crest of a low hill in an area of about 72' x 62', which had many years ago been enclosed by a low iron railing. It is also defined by a slight rise in the ground level, for about three-quarters of its perimeter, above the surrounding field, and is probably the site of the old Church of Kilnaruané. No trace of any foundations are now visible, but a very heavy covering of coarse grass and weeds made close observation impossible at the time of my visit. On the site and close to the Pillar lie three grooved and mortised stones and two bullauns, one of which is damaged.

The monument was first noticed by Windele, (1) who made a drawing of the South face and states that on the other side the carving is so worn that it is undecipherable. Windele's statement and drawing, together with notes on the place name, etc., appeared in the Journals of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society by various writers in 1913 and 1914. Crawford in his List of Early Cross-slabs and Pillars, published in the Journal R.S.A.I., 1916, copies Windele. In 1933 Mille F. Henry in her La Sculpture Irlandaise again reproduces Windele's sketch. Up to this no writer had examined the Pillar since 1846. Since then Mille Henry seems to have visited the site, for she gives a short but somewhat inaccurate description of the carvings on both sides of the Pillar in her latest compilation Irish Art in the Early Christian Period. It is, therefore, essential to give a full description, with illustrations, of the interesting Monument.

The Pillar, which is now erect, stands just over seven feet clear of the ground; it tapers from 12 to 9 1/2 inches on the carved faces, the uncarved sides also taper slightly from 7 to 6 inches. Slots or mortises are let into the top of both sides, as if to give a secure hold to a cross head or cap. The carved surfaces face South-West and North-East and with the exception of one panel, are greatly weathered, but a “rubbing” brings out most of the details.

The South-West face has four panels, which are as follows; from above downwards (Fig. 1):

(a) An interlacement, too worn to allow of any full reconstruction.

(b) A figure in a long straight robe which reaches down to the ankles, the arms are bent upwards from the elbows, the palms of the hands turned to the front with fingers and thumbs extended. It represents an “Orans” or praying figure in the attitude called “crosfigil” in the Irish hagiographical texts. This figure is found in the catacombs and on early sarcophagi. A somewhat similar figure is to be seen on the north cross at Castledermot. It is carved in the lowest panel on the north side below representations of the Massacre of the Innocents. Mlle. Henry states that it is “un personage aux bras levés qui sont doute une mère se lamentant.” There is another carving on the Kilrea Cross of a seated figure with uplifted arms between two horsemen, the same writer recognises in this representation of the Gaulish goddess Epona. The general attitude of these figures bear a striking likeness to that on the Bantry pillar, so much so that I should suggest a similar interpretation for them.

(c) A cross potent; this panel has obviously been re-cut, as it could not have lasted against the weathering which has so affected all the other carvings, and kept its sharpness. Similar crosses are to be found on many of the Clonmacnoise carved slabs.

(d) A representation of SS. Paul and Antony in the desert, a scene also carved on the High Crosses at Armagh, Castledermot and Moone. Here the saints are represented as seated on low stools (not kneeling, as Mlle. Henry states), with their knees bent up towards their chests, an arm of each is raised to accept the Host, which a bird

The North-East face has only three panels:

(a) An interlacement, almost obliterated.

(b) Only faint traces of four animals can be made out, one above the other in pairs, each pair facing one another, this panel is turned sideways.

(c) A boat with four oarsmen with ears, in the stern sits a steersman holding a spoon-like steering paddle, the craft is something like our currach but with a higher stern. On either side of the blade of the paddle are two plain crosses, and a similar cross is carved under the bow. Perhaps the crosses at the stern are symbolically assisting the steersman in his task and that at the bow is helping the frail boat to glide in safety over the seas to its haven. The whole scene is depicted with great life, the rowers straining to impel their craft onwards and the steersmen bending over the handle of his paddle seems to be striving to keep on a straight course.

The only other representation of a boat in Irish sculpture which I can call to mind, is that on the tall cross at Monasterboice. On the west face, where the shaft leaves the ring, there is a panel, which Crawford describes as “Jonah cast out of the ship. The vessel is a boat built of curved planks and rowed with oars which pass through openings in the gunwale; the steering oar is also shown. The prophet is in the water and holds

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(1) I have to thank Dr. Macalister for helpful suggestions in the identification of some of the panels.

(2) Henry, Irlandae, p. 144. Fig. 104.

(3) Ibid. p. 122. Fig. 90.

(4) Crawford, Curved Ornament, p. 79. Pl. XLIV. No. 132.
up his hands in supplication.” The scene has also been described as Peter walking on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. Crawford's restored drawing shows five figures in the boat, but a close examination of the original panel leaves some doubt as to the accuracy of his restoration, as the figure at the stern seems to be outside the boat and would thus be Christ stretching out his hand to assist Peter. The Bantry panel represents neither of these incidents but, perhaps, may illustrate some feature in the life of one of the Irish navigating saints.

The three grooved and mortised stones which lie on the site are much too heavy to have formed any part of a cross, and I cannot suggest any use to which they may have been put. The groove on each stone starts at the mortise and fades out as it proceeds. One of the bullauns is perfect, the basin 11 inches in diameter, is deeply cut in an oval slab measuring 30 x 32 inches. The other bullaun is damaged and had a very shallow basin.