

Irish Medieval Sculpture, 1200-1600 — a review article*

JAMES WHITE and ETIENNE RYNNE

What a triumph for art scholarship is John Hunt's *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture*. It bridges the gap between Celtic Art and the new civilisation which began to emerge in the second half of the 17th century. It links the manuscripts, the crosses and the round towers of early Ireland with the various objects so passionately collected under the rather erratic title of "Georgian".

Art students have had to rely mainly on Harold Leask's *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, Dundalgan Press, 1961, from which to imply the presence of paintings and sculptures and in general give rather incomplete reasons why pictorial art seemed to have died in the country for over 500 years — the black years as we call them. Indeed, such an absence of pictorial objects of every kind during this long period has caused more than one scholar to justify the situation by observing that the Irish are a literary people and not a pictorially gifted race.

Of course, the historian knows the record and is aware of the tragic destruction of almost everything which could be destroyed unless it had been taken out of the country or carefully hidden away. Still, a trace of fresco here and there gives evidence of the existence of painting. There are, too, certain small remains of the medieval wooden figure sculptures which have been catalogued by Catriona MacLeod and the written records help us to build up a picture of a society somewhat different than at first sight seems to be the case and which helps one to realise that our medieval forbears never really ceased to produce some pictorial objects.

The importance, therefore, of piecing together what remains cannot be overstated. Many of the medieval stone figure sculptures are in open sites in remote parts of the country rarely seen or visited by anyone. In the majority of cases they are damaged and are difficult to "read" or be understood. Ordinary members of the public are unlikely to have their attention riveted by such works and they could walk over them or pass them by, unaware of their importance and attractiveness.

At the end of the first volume, containing 297 pages of text, is a location map showing the tomb sites and this alone is enough to intrigue the art student. The large cathedral towns apart, the two main areas of interest are grouped around Kildare and Meath to the north and Tipperary and Kilkenny to the south. The perusal of such a map always whets my appetite and suggests days spend in the open air walking knee-high through meadows in search of the remains of an old abbey or church. It needs only one of John Hunt's delightful entries to start me dreaming in anticipation. For instance, under the heading "Corcomroe Abbey" he prefaces the catalogue descriptions as follows:

"Situated in a fertile and hauntingly beautiful valley in the midst of the bare limestone landscape of the Burren, this Cistercian Abbey was given the name of "Saint Mary of the Fertile Rock" when it was founded in 1182 — allegedly by

* John Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, 1200-1600*, 2 vols., Irish University Press Ltd., Dublin, and Sotheby Parke Bernet Publications Ltd., London, 1974. Price £25.00.

Donal Mor O'Brien. Donal's son, Donat, brought monks there from Inishlounaght, Co. Tipperary, in 1195, but in 1295 jurisdiction of the monastery was transferred to Furness in Lancashire. In the chancel of the church there are two effigies."

Throughout a long and obviously intricate text John Hunt's natural and charming descriptive method prevails and denies any suggestion of the stuffy pedant. Indeed, it is well-known and appreciated by Irish Art lovers that few are more qualified than he to do a work like this. He combines a passion for Ireland with a love for the mysticism of the Christian tradition. In his own remarkable collection are evidences of this enthusiasm and openness of mind to every artifact of man which is marked by the reflective capacity and which bears witness to the supernatural element. But only a lifetime's dedication could nevertheless have produced so complete and satisfying a result.

The text is divided into a simple and clear series of sections which in the first place sets out the types of monuments and their chronological grouping. Follows a historical background which explains the Norman Rise and Establishment 1170-1330; the Irish Resistance 1330-1400; the Anglo-Norman Ascendancy 1400-1536; the Reformation and the Native Decline 1536-1600. Then there is a fascinating essay on armour:

"An armour is a matter over which we can either sentimentalise or marvel according to our mood. Though it might not be a man's daily wear, as it must have been in many of the more turbulent parts of Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, armour to any man other than a cleric (and many of them had good armouries, too) was both a commonplace and a necessity. The feel of it upon his back was familiar, and none better than he realised that some day upon the stoutness of his head-piece or the sturdiness of his plates his very life might depend. Armour was, therefore, a cherished possession. But it is due to this very circumstance that so little of it, and that mostly of late date, has survived to the present day. This at first glance may seem to be an anomaly, and most people prefer the dramatic explanation of the dead being buried after a medieval battle in heaps in their armour as they fell. This certainly happened after the great Battle of Wisby in 1361, and it is thanks to the wasteful conduct pursued on this occasion that our knowledge of the knightly equipment of the middle of the fourteenth century is as extensive and as intimate as it is. But search of English, Scottish and Irish battlefields has produced no such treasure trove. An odd coat of mail, a head-piece, a sword or a spur are about all that excavation and the plough have turned up. For the fact is that the iron spoils of battle went onto the backs or into the armouries of the victors. We have, for instance, documentary evidence that the armour taken at Flodden was either sold at York to replenish the military stores upon the Border or was placed for safekeeping in the castle at Nottingham, and the value of that taken at Athenry help to build the walls of the town."

In each of the periods outlined above the author lists objects under the headings of Knights, Civilian Ladies, Civilian Males and Ecclesiastics. Eventually he treats of the tombs and the tomb-surrounds, and then turns to deal with the styles and workshops.

The second part of the first volume is a detailed catalogue of each of the 275 sculptures included and with copious references to other publications. It is this part of

the work which must be kept in the car and brought in to every Abbey and site on all future occasions.

The second volume contains 340 photographic reproductions of all the sculptures which have been considered in the text. Even if one never left the sitting-room, an endless pleasure can be obtained in discovering new and unnoticed details on each perusal.

As is quite obvious, I write not an expert but as an enthusiast whose training is in a more recent pictorial tradition. I have been particularly thrilled to discover here that the 18th- and 19th-century primitive tomb carvings described by Ada K. Longfield in the *Journals of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* owe much of their iconographic detail to grave-slabs of the 14th and 15th centuries reproduced here. It is also obvious that these early carvings themselves derive in many cases from the high crosses of the early Celtic period — and how surprising to turn up a photograph in this volume representing a crucifixion in Cashel, Co. Tipperary, and to realise it was the origin for Evie Hone's stained-glass panel now in the Tate Gallery in London.

There is a kind of historic reincarnation (if one may dare use the word) in the use of the same theme in four widely separated periods. The recurrence of elements which suit the temperaments and the purposes of Irish artists of different eras, awakens, once again, thoughts about the subconscious of a people's memory. Surely it makes history more exciting and more reasonable than any outlining of facts recounted from a partisan attitude.

John Hunt's two-volume work, in which he was ably assisted by Peter Harbison, makes my awareness of my heritage as an Irishman something much more vivid than any political speech I ever heard.

JAMES WHITE*

What a triumph for medieval archaeology is John Hunt's *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture*. With these two volumes he has provided the archaeologist working on the medieval period not only with a near-corpus of figure sculpture on Irish tombs dating from c. 1200-1600 but also with a wealth of valuable and relevant information concerning the historical background, monument-types, armour, lay and clerical costume, the places where the monument are to be found, architectural details, and art, much of it not readily found elsewhere in an Irish context. All of this is capped by three useful appendices providing additional information, and what to even the real expert will be absolutely invaluable: a glossary of standard terms used by medieval art historians and other specialists — indeed, I would defy almost any of my colleagues and friends to correctly identify even 20% of them unassisted!

The author explains in his Preface that the work was not intended to deal with all Irish medieval figure sculpture of the period 1200-1600, but to be confined to a study of that on the tombs — excluding cadaver effigies [dealt with by Helen M. Roe in *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 99 (1969), 1-19] and "those renaissance effigies without any native Irish flavour which are listed on page 261". The author complains that "tombs

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often take second place to architecture", but with the publication of these two volumes that will no longer be the case — indeed, one can see future students henceforth using these volumes to supply dating for architectural sculpture and, *ipso facto*, architecture itself!

The glory, past and present, of these tombs is brought home to the reader not only by the scholarly discussion and descriptions in volume I, and by the marvellous photographs (mostly by David H. Davison) in volume II, but also by the author's reminder that "tombs now appearing as cold and austere limestone were originally bright with gold and polychrome", something which even if known is seldom adequately appreciated.

Most Irish tombs have to be dated on internal evidence, artistic and otherwise, rather than on historical or documentary evidence. Despite this, however, Hunt has succeeded in supplying us with satisfactorily close dates for most of them. He divides them into various classes and notes that they fall into two major groups separated by a century-long hiatus. Although these tombs are largely concentrated into Periods I and II, the Hiatus was not entirely devoid of them and at least nine tombs can be assigned to the phase. The first group, those of Period I (1200-1350), corresponds with the latter part of the Anglo-Norman invasion and its subsequent peak period of importance. The Hiatus (1350-1450) resulted largely from the appalling disaster of the Black Death of 1348-49, followed by the revival of the power of Gaelic Ireland — the period when the Anglo-Normans tended to become *Hiberniores Hibernicis ipsis*. The second major group, Period II (1450-1570), corresponds with the re-assertion of Anglo-Norman power and consequent relative peace and stability; its close started with the Reformation (1536-on) and ended with the Elizabethan colonization in the latter part of the sixteenth century.

Needless to point out, the survey covers figure-sculpture from all parts of Ireland. Although Kilkenny figures somewhat more prominently than most regions, North Munster readers will feel particularly privileged and proud as they note the prominence given to carvings from their own area. This is not only due to John Hunt's own North Munster connections, but also to the excellence of the many fine carvings in the region. As one would expect, the tomb-carvings in Ennis Friary receive detailed coverage, carvings which can usefully be studied in association with the non-funereal carvings in the same building — we are fortunate that he subsequently published the important sculptures absent from the book in our own *Journal* [17 (1975), 35-39], including those of St. Francis and Christ's Pity, referred to on pages 127 and 111 respectively, and that Dr. Peter Harbison, who not only assisted him in the book's production but also saw his subsequent 1975 article through the press, has published yet other Ennis carvings for us [this *Journal*, 19 (1977), 39-42].

At Kilfenora, like Ennis, is an important collection of figure sculpture, and future visitors to the site will be most grateful for John Hunt's dating of them, notably of the effigial slabs. Although a 15th century date might seem rather late for the cleric shown holding a book on his chest with one hand and with his other hand on his stomach (Cat. no. 12; Plate 132), a portrayal almost identical with figures on the mid-12th century Doorty Cross also at Kilfenora, Hunt's use of the peculiar hairstyle to provide a 15th century date (footnote 11 on page 128) would seem justified — a closely similar hairstyle is found, for instance, on the unpublished head above the east window at

Clontuskert which dates to 1471. One might, however, regret that Hunt stated that the crozier of Irish form held by the incised figure of a bishop on a slab at Kilfenora (Cat. no. 10; Plate 77) is "the only one depicted of this shape in the country" — another is carved at Duleek, Co. Meath, held by a marvellous bishop's effigy which somehow Hunt seems to have missed altogether!

Before leaving North Munster, one might be forgiven for querying the date John Hunt gives the carving of the smiling bishop (or abbot?) at Corcomroe (Cat. no. 2; Plate 74). He suggests a 13th century date, which while quite possible would appear perhaps more likely to be late 12th century: parallels for the mitre and crozier are closest on the mid-12th century Doorty Cross at Kilfenora and on the High Cross of similar date at Dysert O'Dea, while the unusual neck-opening of the chasuble can be paralleled on the mitred figure on the Doorty Cross, and also on a small figure (Unpublished) carved on the late 12th century Romanesque/Transitional east window in Tuam Cathedral.

Although the purpose of this review is to assess the importance and value of these two volumes for the interested public and working scholar, and not to search for minor errors or sins or omission in them, it would seem justifiable to seriously offer one important correction. This concerns catalogue number 62 (Plate 264), a lovely little carving of St. Dominic from the Dominican Priory at Athenry, Co. Galway. Hunt describes this as an "angle-shaft, probably from a gabled tomb of Western type" and dates it to the late 15th-early 16th century; he also describes it as being "part of a double shaft" and as "standing on a moulded base". The moulded base was stolen or removed in or about 1970 (it is not shown in the illustration) and the figure itself was stolen in the following year. Despite this, however, Hunt's description and the illustration are enough to indicate a different purpose for it — as part of a webbed cloister double-colonette. The writer had photographed and examined the pieces several times before their theft and can assure the reader that such an identification is correct. The carving clearly was associated with the rebuilding of the Priory after its accidental burning in 1423 when the earlier 13th century cloisters were replaced, thus indicating a date in the second quarter of the 15th century for it. Without having seen it, one might also suggest that the carving of a knight, flanked by colonettes with multiple mouldings and remains of bases, in the Dominican Priory Garden at Tralee, Co. Kerry (Cat. no. 75, Plate 189), could likewise be a cloister fragment.

Finally, one last comment: the arms on the reveals of the Archer tomb in St. Nicholas' Collegiate Church, Galway, shown in Plate 267 and described on page 149 under catalogue number 64, are undoubtedly those of the well-known Galway Lynch family and not those of the Archers (though Hunt does not say that they are, it is more or less implied).

While accepting this publication as the *magnum opus* of its author, and also as a major event in the history of Irish medieval archaeological studies, one also accepts that it is not the last word on the subject. John Hunt was too knowledgeable a man not to have realised this, and there can be little doubt but that he looked upon it as providing a jumping-off tool, a runway as it were, for other scholars to use to advance knowledge on the subject. Even so, it will be a long time before his work will be superceded.

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