

'Our Lord's Pity' in Ennis Friary

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Recently, while lecturing on the sixteenth century vestments preserved in the Dominican Convent, Taylor's Hill, Galway, I showed slides of the Passion symbols embroidered on them and discussed their identification and significance. One of the symbols present immediately recalled to Professor Etienne Rynne, of University College, Galway, a strange and puzzling fossil-like mark which he had some years previously noticed in the bottom of the surround or frame of the carved panel of 'Our Lord's Pity' in the Franciscan Friary in Ennis. Following on the lecture, Professor Rynne brought the Ennis carving to my attention and invited me to discuss it, and the other Passion symbols on the panel, in this *Journal*.

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The panel in question (Figs. 1 and 2) is positioned at eye level on the western side of the fifteenth/sixteenth century transept of the friary. It measures 47 cm in height by 39.3 cm wide. It depicts the scene commonly called 'Our Lord's Pity' and contains *inter alia* various objects associated with the crucifixion and death of Jesus. It has been described a number of times, the best early description being that by Thomas Johnson Westropp in 1895,¹ and the most recent being by John Hunt some eighty years later.²

The use of symbols to represent objects and events associated with Christ's Passion started in the very early days of the Church. As heraldry developed in the Early Middle Ages, certain objects such as the crown of thorns, the spear and sponge, the hammer and nails, etc., with or separate from the Five Wounds of Christ, became known as the *Arma Christi* or Arms of Christ.

At a later date, around 1500, the rigorous and formal heraldic representation fell into disuse, and the practice of crowding as many objects as possible onto tombstones and altar frontals became fashionable. Each school of carvers seems to have used its own specific collection of objects and, in consequence, not all carvings depict exactly the same objects.

The scene depicted on the Ennis panel, as was pointed out by John Hunt (*loc. cit.*) is adapted from the 'Mass of St. Gregory'.

St. Gregory the Great (540-604), born of a wealthy Roman family, became a monk at the age of thirty-five. He was elected to the Papacy in 590. 'The Mass of St. Gregory' shows him in Papal robes celebrating Mass in front of an altar behind which Christ appears, surrounded by various Instruments of the Passion, depicting a miraculous manifestation to confute and confuse those who doubted the Real Presence of Christ on the altar and to bring home to them the fact that the sacrifice of Calvary and that of the Mass were the same.

Woodcuts of this scene were in common circulation about 1500, and usually carried wording setting out the indulgence to be gained and the prayers to be said. The Ennis panel has no doubt been copied from such a broadsheet and would probably have also carried an indulgence and have had certain prayers to go with it.

¹ T. J. Westropp, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 25(1895), 153-154.

² J. Hunt, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 17(1975), 38.





Fig. 1. 'Our Lord's Pity', Ennis Friary. (*Photo: Rory O'Farrell*)

The Ennis panel depicts a demi-figure of the naked Christ, with bound hands, crown of thorns, and halo with cruciform pattern, facing out of an ogee-headed recess in the tablet. Crossed behind the figure's head can be seen the spear (note the end of the spearshaft in



Fig. 2. Outline drawing of 'Our Lord's Pity', Ennis Friary.

the bottom left-hand corner) and the cup containing vinegar on a pole (described as a mallet by Hunt, *loc. cit.*, who cannot have noticed the end of the shaft beside Christ's left elbow). At the tip of the spearhead are the three dice, all apparently marked, with which

the soldiers cast lots for His garments; below the dice is the seamless garment. In the bottom right-hand corner of the panel a cock rises from a cooking-pot.

This latter scene is taken from the Gospel of Nicodemous, one of the Apocryphal Gospels, which contains the story of Judas's return home after his betrayal of Christ. He laments to his wife that Jesus would seek him out when He rises as He said He would after the Crucifixion. Judas's wife replies that Jesus had as much chance of rising from the dead as the cock she was cooking had of rising from the pot—with which the cock rose from the pot and Judas went out and committed suicide. This scene was particularly popular in Late and Post-Medieval Ireland,³ perhaps most notably on the so-called 'Penal Crucifixes'.⁴

On the left-hand side of the panel, *i.e.* Christ's right, is carved the pillar and the ropes with which Christ was bound to it during the scourging, and at each side of Him is a birch bundle with which He was beaten. Two peculiar and unusual symbols occur, one on either side of Christ's head. To date, no-one seems to have mentioned them in print, much less attempted to identify them. They are, in fact, mouths with protruding tongues, representing the faces of those that spat at Christ:

“Then did they spit in His face and buffeted
Him and smote Him with the palms of their hands”.
Matt. 26.67

In the left-hand spandrel are the three nails with which Christ was hung on the cross, and in the right-hand spandrel, is a hand holding a lock of hair (as suggested by Westropp, *loc. cit.*; Hunt, while mentioning Westropp's identification, also offers the suggestion that it may be a hand grasping a bag of money):

“He gave His back to the smiters and his cheeks
to them that plucked out the hair. He hid
not His face from shame and spitting”.
Isaiah 50.6

In the left-hand side of the frame, below the Elizabethan-type hood-moulding, is the ladder, and balancing it in the right-hand side of the frame is the hammer and pincers used during the Crucifixion. In the bottom of the frame is a sword of a distinctly Irish sixteenth century type⁵ with some distance from its point the peculiar mark noted by Professor Rynne which gave rise initially to this re-assessment of the Ennis panel.

There are some forty or more symbols associated with Christ's Passion, most of which are readily identifiable from the accounts given in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Others lead one into the byways of the Epistles and the Apocryphal Gospels which were in circulation in the early church, memories of which lingered on well into the Middle Ages and even later. The strange mark in the bottom of the frame of the Ennis panel can, however, be identified without seeking beyond the standard four gospels.

When, during the arrest of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, St. Peter cut off the

³ Revd. St. John D. Seymour, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 51(1921), 147-151.

⁴ A. T. Lucas, “‘Penal’ Crucifixes”, *Co. Louth Archaeo. J.*, 13(1953-56), 145-172, particularly pp. 152, 156 and 163-165; the reader is referred to pages 146-152 and 160-166 of this article for what is undoubtedly the best account of the use of the Symbols of the Passion in Irish art.

⁵ G. A. Hayes-McCoy, *Sixteenth Century Irish Swords in the National Museum of Ireland*, Dublin 1959.

ear of Pilate's servant Malchus, Jesus touched the wound and it was miraculously healed (Luke 22.47). The puzzling mark, unnoticed by Hunt but described by Westropp as a "spray of . . . late foliage circa 1460 or 70" (*loc. cit.*), represents in fact, Malchus's ear!

On many Late Medieval tombs in Ireland various symbols of the Passion are shown. These often include a scimitar associated with a C-shaped mark representing the

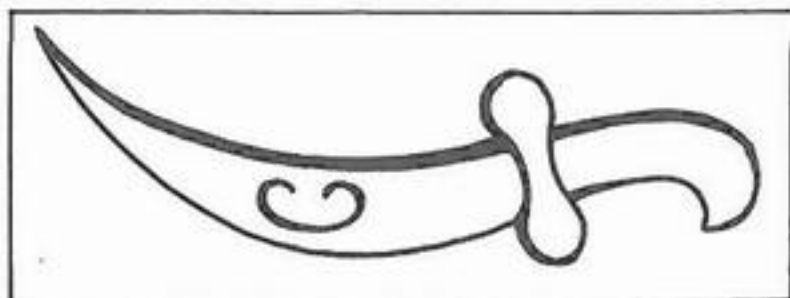


Fig. 3. Gowran, Co. Kilkenny—detail, showing scimitar and ear, from tomb of James Kiely, *obit* 1626.

amputated ear. Generally the ear is shown on a scimitar blade, as, for example, on the tomb of James Kiely (*obit* 1626) at Gowran, Co. Kilkenny (Fig. 3), or close to one as on the newly-discovered tomb-slab at Lorrha, Co. Tipperary (see this *Journal*, pp. 63-64, fig. 1). In the case of the Ennis panel, the wide-bladed scimitar has become a sixteenth century Irish sword, the blade of which is too narrow to allow the ear to

be carved on it and it was therefore carved near to but separate from it. On the Galway embroideries the ear stood out very clearly on the sword which was worked in grey thread, with the ear, in bright red, easily seen.