

Excavations at the Base of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel

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Introduction

St. Patrick's Cross, sited just south of the cathedral on the Rock of Cashel, belongs to a small group of Irish High Crosses known as crucifix-crosses. It is unusual in form having had upright supporting(?) members to the arms or transom and in being without the distinctive ring around the intersection of shaft and transom (Fig. 1). Carved in high relief on the west face is a figure of the crucified Christ, clad in an ankle length belted garment, while on the east face, also in high relief, is an ecclesiastic (possibly St. Patrick), fully robed and with his feet resting on a carved ox-head, now badly weathered.

The cross which is 2.42m. high is tenoned into and supported by a massive base which was highly decorated. On the east face a panel of animal interlacing or possible 'inhabited vine-scroll' survives in part, while on the north side there is a very faint design of concentric grooves centred on a small circle containing a carved animal which resembles a lion, according to Leask (1951, 17). The design on the south face is also badly eroded and consists of recessed crosses and squares. No decoration survives on the west face.

The possible original form of St. Patrick's Cross has been discussed in detail by Leask



Fig. 1. St. Patrick's Cross, taken before excavation; A. east face, B. west face.
(Photo: Office of Public Works.)



Fig. 2 St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel, being lifted for transference to the Vicars' Choral Building.
(Photo: Office of Public Works.)

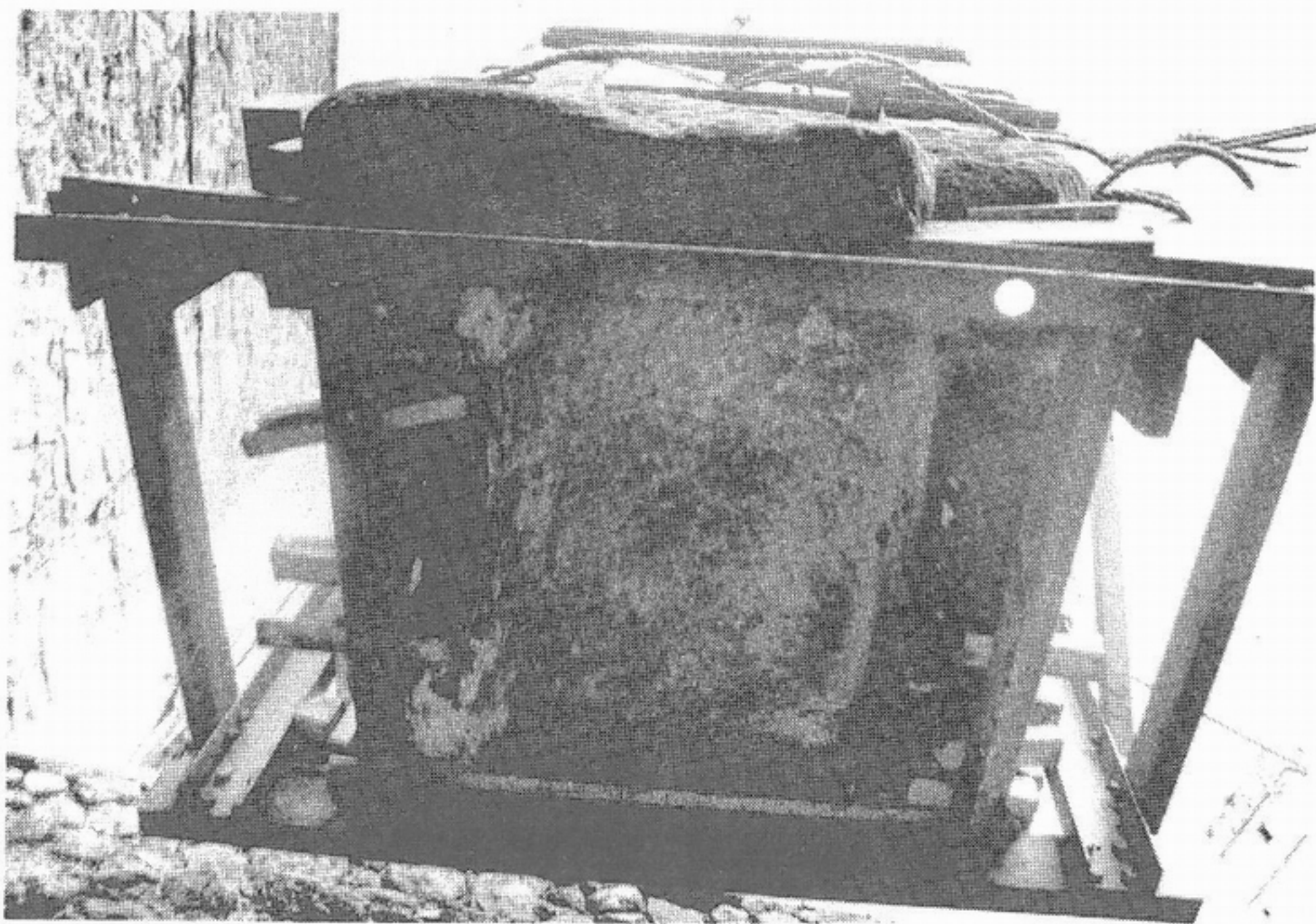


Fig. 3. View of the underside of the cross, showing the rectangular-shaped depression, taken as the cross was being lowered into the Vicars' Choral Building. (Photo: Office of Public Works.)

(1951, 14-18). He mentions the mortise (7.5cm. wide, 2cm. deep) in the south face of the upper limb of the cross-shaft, at the bottom of which there is a small rectangular hole (3cm. \times 4cm. \times 6cm. deep). There is a similar small hole, at exactly the same level on the north side of the shaft. Leask (*ibid.*) concludes that there must have been attachments to the transom and the upper limb of the cross on each side, perhaps in the form of angelic figures or evangelist symbols.

It is generally accepted that, on the basis of artistic style, St. Patrick's Cross may be dated to sometime in the twelfth-century (Henry 1964, 60; Leask 1951, 17).

The soft sandstone of the cross (see Appendix II) coupled with its exposed location had resulted in severe weathering of the carved details over the years. As a result, it was decided by the Office of Public Works that the cross should be moved indoors to the undercroft of the nearby Vicars' Choral building and that a replica be put in its place. Before the cross was moved, an excavation was carried out at its base; this was undertaken by the writer over a two-week period in January 1982.

When the cross was lifted (Fig. 2) it was noticed that a rectangular-shaped depression (79cm. long, 67cm. wide, 23cm. deep) had been cut into the underside of the base (Fig. 3). Loose brown soil had accumulated in this depression, probably brought in by burrowing animals who could have squeezed through one of the several gaps which existed between the underside of the base and the underlying mortar layer. Such burrowing animals must also account for the fragments of newspaper, a camera flash-cube and recent animal bone, all found in the brown soil.

The Excavation

Before excavation, the cross stood on a low grassy mound c.6m. in diameter and c.60cm. high. Two opposing quadrants of the mound were excavated before the cross was lifted (Fig. 4, Quadrants A and B) and the remainder was excavated after the cross had been removed and the replica put in its place (Fig. 5).

Stone Plinth and Associated Features

When the cross was lifted it was seen to have been sitting on a layer of compacted mortar (15cm.—20cm. thick) which had been used to level the top of a natural limestone outcrop (Fig. 6). Several flat stones had been wedged between the edge of the base of the cross and the mortar layer to help keep the base level.

A stone-built plinth surrounding and bonded to the limestone outcrop was exposed (Figs. 4 and 5). This consisted of a core of mortar-bonded limestone rubble faced with limestone blocks, and on the southern and western sides, traces of two or possibly three steps could be seen. Few of the facing stones had survived but where present were large roughly dressed and closely-set blocks. The plinth survived to a maximum height of c.1.10m. on the southern downhill side, but the northern edge had at some stage been almost completely demolished (Fig. 1). Originally, the plinth on the northern or uphill side of the cross cannot have been more than one or two courses high since the maximum depth of the bedrock below the mound surface was 60cm.

The basal course of a wall (80cm. thick) extended westwards from the southwestern corner of the plinth (Fig. 4, Wall A). This wall is keyed into the plinth, and the masonry of both structures is similar, indicating contemporaneity. Two trial trenches were opened to the west of Quadrant A which showed that the wall extended for at least a further 7m. but its full length was not revealed.

The foundations of another wall were found running eastwards for a distance of 1.40m.

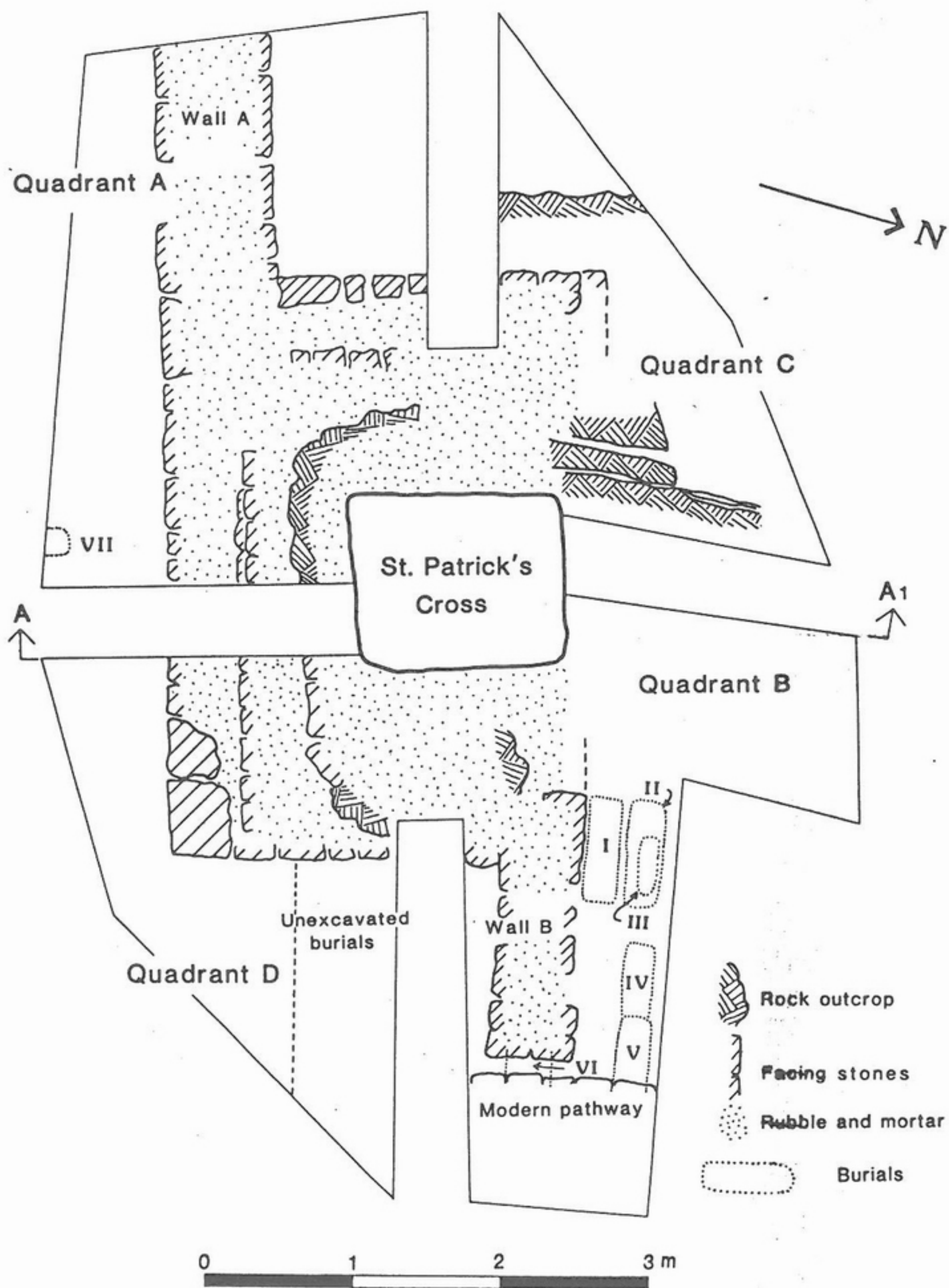


Fig. 4. Plan of excavation area showing stone-built plinth and other features.

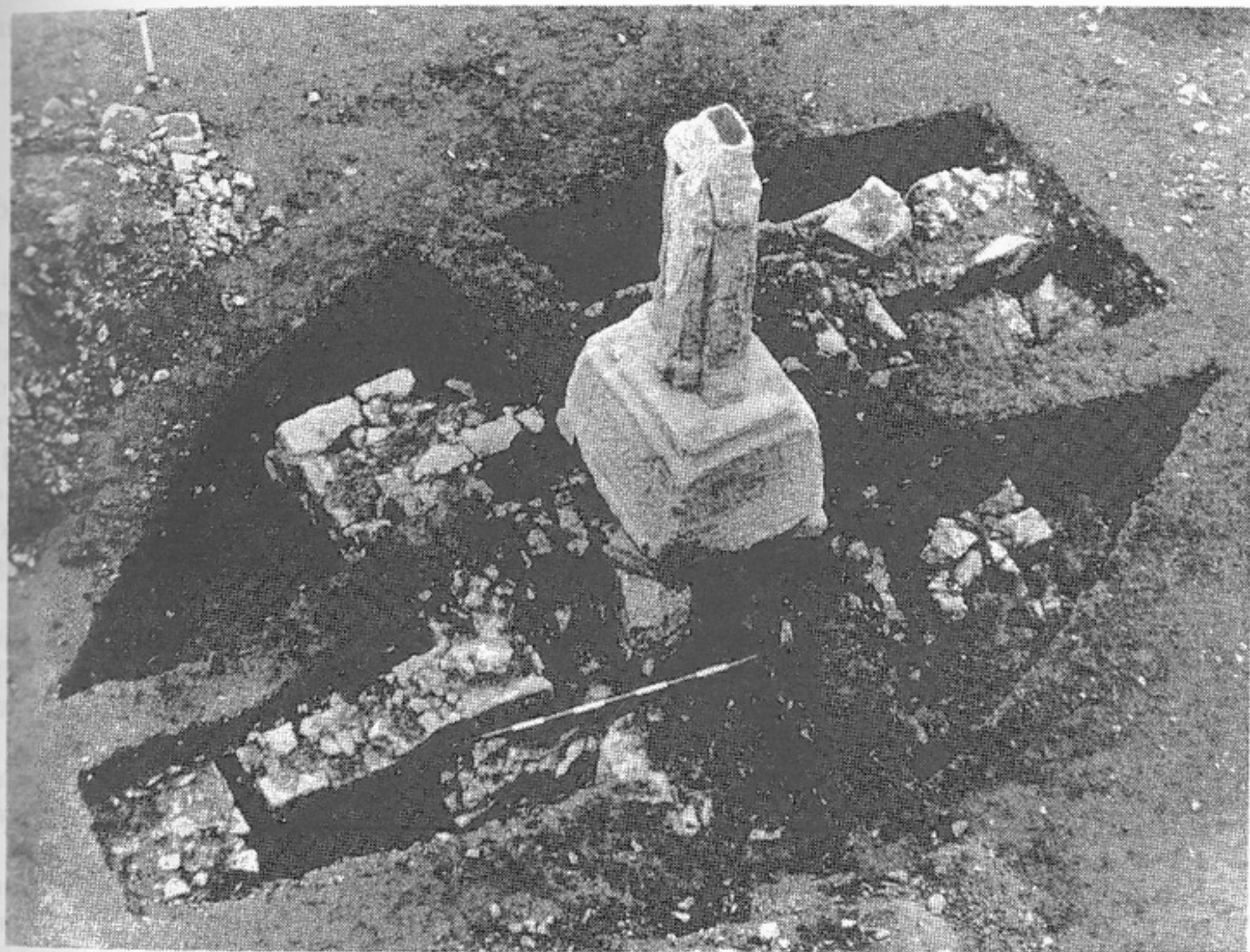


Fig. 5 The site after excavation, with the replica cross in position. Scale division = 20cm.
(Photo: Office of Public Works.)

from the northeastern corner of the plinth (Fig. 4, Wall B). This mortar-bonded wall is 60cm. wide and survives to a maximum height of 40cm. It is crudely constructed and not as substantial as Wall A, but nevertheless is probably contemporary with the plinth since no straight joint could be discerned at the junction of the two features.

The Mound and Later Features

Just to the east of Wall B a roughly paved surface was exposed running north-south (Figs. 4 and 5). The 'paving' stones were set into dark brown stony earth with charcoal flecks and, even though patches of mortar were found on top of the stones, the stones themselves were not mortar-bonded. This feature is most likely to be part of a path which led to the south doorway of the cathedral, and a relatively recent date is suggested by the thin covering (maximum 20cm.) of topsoil.

The northern half of the mound consisted of brown friable soil with scattered human and animal bone, resting for the greater part on the limestone bedrock. On the southern side of the cross two phases of mound-construction were identified (Fig. 6). The modern sod overlay a layer of loose stone and brown soil which in turn rested on a thin layer of mortar. This mortar sealed a brown greasy humic layer which is interpreted as the sod layer of the original mound. Underlying this old sod layer and covering the remains of

the plinth was a deposit of brown earth containing much loose stone, lumps of mortar and charcoal fragments.

No evidence of dating for either phase of mound construction was retrieved.

The Burials

Several burials were exposed during the excavation both within the mound material and in disturbed deposits directly underlying it.

In Quadrant B, two badly disturbed adult skeletons were found within the mound, c.25cm. below its surface. They were lying immediately north of Wall B and in both cases neither the skull nor the leg bones had survived (Fig. 4, Burials I and II). Burial III (Fig. 4) was that of an infant placed in a crevice in the bedrock, underlying Burial II. Immediately to the east, lying close to the bedrock was an adult burial (IV) which was partly overlain by Burial V. The latter was in turn, partly overlain by the roughly paved pathway (Fig. 4). Burial VI underlay Wall B and the pathway and only its pelvic bone was exposed in the area between the two structures. The deposit in which Burials IV, V and VI were found consisted of a loose black stony soil with fragments of animal and human bone indicating disturbance.

The skull of Burial VII was uncovered in Quadrant A but since the remainder of the skeleton extended southwards into the section face, it was not fully excavated. A quantity of disturbed human bone was found underneath the mound material, in the angle between the western edge of the plinth and Wall B.

Several undisturbed adult burials were partly exposed in Quadrant D (Fig. 4) but were not fully excavated. The burial deposit here was similar to that in Quadrant B and extended under the eastern edge of the plinth. No burials were recorded in Quadrant C.

All the skeletons, with the exception of No. VII, were laid out in a fully extended supine position on an east-west axis with the head to the west. The bodies had been placed in shallow graves without the use of coffins. No artifacts were found which could be reliably associated with the burials but two sherds of thirteenth/fourteenth century pottery were recovered from the disturbed burial deposits in Quadrants B and D (Fig. 7). On completion of the excavation, the skeletons were re-interred.

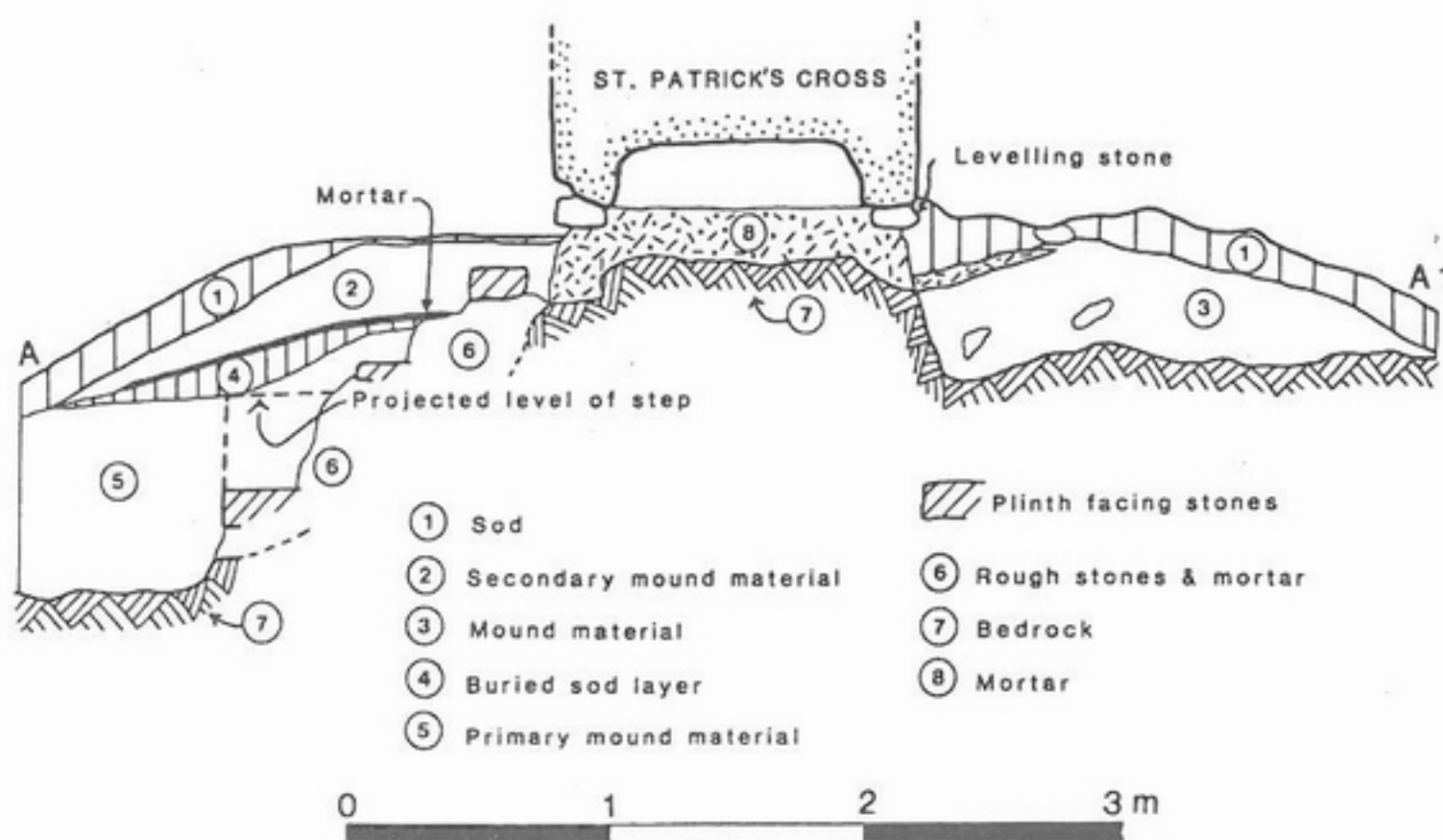


Fig. 6. Sectional profile of the mound.

The Finds

Two sherds of pottery were found during the excavation. E268:1 (Fig. 7) is the rim fastening of a handle from a Ham Green jug with a fairly typical form of decoration consisting of a row of three-stick end piercings with impressed lattice design on each side (Barton 1963, 110). Traces of light brownish-green glaze can be seen on the upper surface of the handle. The fabric, which is buff-coloured with a dark grey core, has very fine gravel or sand inclusions, and seems to correspond to Barton's Type B ware which he dates to mid/late thirteenth century (*ibid.*, 124). This sherd was found lying under the skull of Burial IV in Quadrant B.

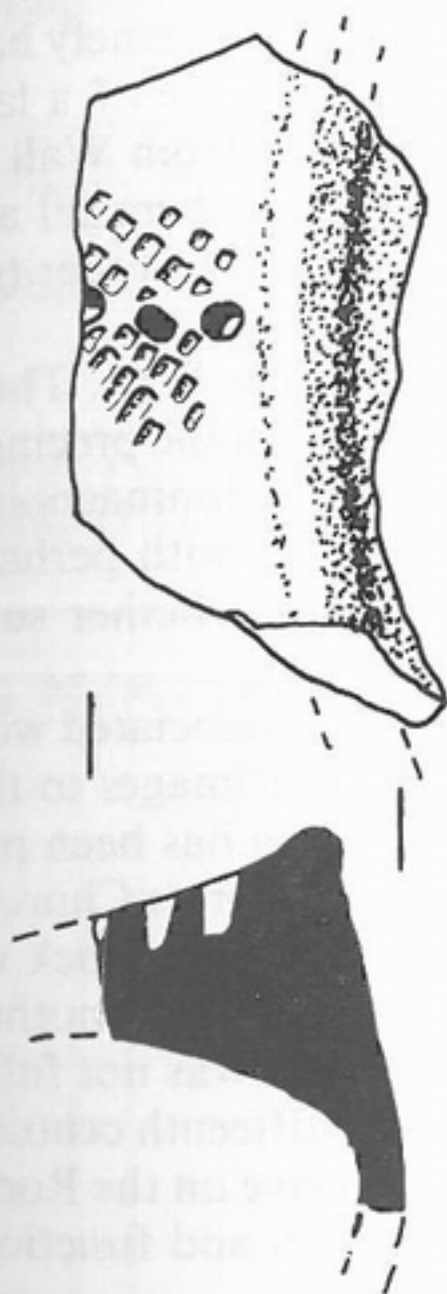


Fig. 7. Sherd of Ham Green Pottery (E268:1).

E268:2 (not illustrated) is an undecorated body sherd with bright green glaze on the outer surface. The fabric is orange-coloured with a grey core and fine quartzite inclusions. The sherd is from a wheel-turned vessel of thirteenth/fourteenth-century date and probably of local origin. It was found in the burial deposit in Quadrant D.

Discussion

Any discussion of the results of the excavation hinges on the chronology of events as established by the excavation.

The positioning of the cross on top of the limestone outcrop must be contemporary with the construction of the plinth. It is unlikely that the outcrop alone could have supported the cross without the buttressing effect of the plinth which also helped to spread the weight of the cross. A further function of the plinth would have been to emphasise the cross as a focal point and, by means of the steps, to provide easy access to a viewing platform at its base. This is the first example of such a plinth to be found at the base of an Irish High Cross.

A somewhat similar arrangement consisting of a circular flight of four stone-built steps was exposed during excavations at the base of the ninth-century cylindrical cross-shaft at Wolverhampton, Staffordshire (Rix 1960, 79). The later medieval market crosses and post-medieval wayside crosses may also have stone-built bases, e.g. the Erril Wayside Cross, Co. Kilkenny (Carrigan 1905, 347, 349).

The burials are difficult to date without associated grave goods. Burials I and II were found in the mound material and must be of relatively recent date. The thirteenth/fourteenth century pottery from the burial deposit in Quadrants B and D is not reliably associated with the burials themselves but it at least provides a *terminus post quem* for Burial IV. It is likely that the immediate surrounds of the cross were being used for burial purposes from at least the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries up to the time of the partial demolition of the plinth and construction of the mound.

No date can be assigned to the original construction of the mound but it was certainly in existence by the mid-eighteenth century at which time it was depicted in a drawing of the cross by General Charles Vallancy (Béranger 1765-74).

The plinth was built largely on the limestone outcrop, but its eastern edge overlay the loose black stony soil which produced the medieval pottery and in which the burials were

found. The associated northeastern wall (Wall B) also overlay at least one human burial. Even though the black deposit was disturbed by the many burials, the presence of only medieval pottery suggests a thirteenth/fourteenth century date. The plinth and associated features must therefore post-date this period. Assuming that the twelfth-century date assigned to the cross on artistic grounds is correct, then one must conclude that St. Patrick's Cross was not in its primary position at the time of excavation. In fact, the extremely hard and fine consistency of the mortar under the base of the cross was suggestive of a late-medieval or even a post-medieval date. A sample of this mortar, plus one from Wall A, were submitted to the Institute for Industrial Research and Standards for chemical and sieve analysis, and the constituents of both samples were found to be broadly similar (see Appendix I for details).

There is no indication of where the original site of the cross could have been. There seems to have been no fixed rule as to the positioning of High Crosses within the precincts of an early Irish monastery, but there is some evidence (*e.g.* at Kells and Clonmacnoise) that several crosses could have been scattered about between the churches with perhaps one sited at the main gate of the enclosure (Henry 1964, 19, 20), though whether such a custom was common in post-Viking times is less certain.

Without full excavation it is difficult to explain the function of the walls associated with the plinth. Perhaps they were connected in some way with patterns or pilgrimages to the site which had St. Patrick's Cross as a focal point? A similar interpretation has been put forward for a system of paved paths and associated wall connected with St. Mary's Church, on Inishcealtra, Co. Clare (de Paor 1971, 8). More recent minor works on the Rock of Cashel (supervised by David Sweetman, Office of Public Works) exposed part of another wall running parallel with Wall A and 6m. distant from it. This wall, which was not fully excavated, runs under the Hall of the Vicars' Choral, thus indicating a pre-fifteenth century date for it. It is obvious that the remains of structures of various dates survive on the Rock of Cashel but until more extensive excavations are undertaken, their form and function will remain unclear.

It has been suggested in various earlier publications (*e.g.* Leask 1951, 18), and it is a strong local tradition, that the base of St. Patrick's Cross was originally the inauguration stone of the kings of Munster. The importance of the inauguration stone, whether in the form of a large boulder or flagstone, is well attested, especially in the later sources, and that at Cashel was known as Lecc Cotraidi. (I am grateful to my colleague Mr. Conlett Manning, M.A., who has researched the royal inauguration sites of Ireland, for this information). It is possible that the base of the cross is a re-cycled inauguration stone (it is certainly hewn from a single large boulder) but, as Leask (1951, 18) points out, "there can be no doubt that it [the base] was shaped for the purpose it now serves". While many of the inauguration stones were said to have foot impressions there is no parallel for the rectangular-shaped depression as revealed on the underside of the base of the cross (Fig. 3). This depression is centrally placed in the stone and is likely to be contemporary with its shaping for use as a cross-base. The petrographic analysis revealed that both the cross and base are argillaceous felspathic sandstone, and the evidence of the minerology and texture points to a common source for both elements (see Appendix II). This reinforces the argument that the base was hewn and shaped at the same time as the shaft—it would be too much of a coincidence to expect an exact matching of materials after an interval of several centuries. A possible interpretation of the rectangular depression could be that it was designed to fit over a relic or other object of a dedicatory nature placed under the cross when it was first erected.

References

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Appendix I

Analysis of Mortar Samples

Two samples of mortar, one from under the base of the cross and the other from Wall A, were submitted for analysis to the Institute of Industrial Research and Standards, Dublin. Quantitative chemical analysis and a sieve analysis were carried out to determine the composition of the samples.

Sample	Sand	Water (% on dry weight)	Clay + Silt	Lime	Proportions by Volume Sand/Lime	Type of Sand
From under cross	92	1.6	0.5	5	6.1	Limestone
Wall A	71	23	3	5	5.1	Limestone

Table 1. Constituents of the mortar samples based on the chemical analyses.

The results shown in Table 1 indicate a broad similarity between the samples. The major discrepancy is in the water content which is considerably higher in the sample from Wall A but this could be due to water seeping through the topsoil onto the wall, while by comparison, the mortar under the cross had been effectively sealed from the elements since its manufacture.

The sands used in the manufacture of the mortar mixes were unwashed sands from local gravel pits and not from river beds.

Appendix II

Petrographic analysis of the cross-shaft and base

Two small fragments of stone were removed from the cross, one from the shaft and one from the base, and were submitted for petrographic analysis to Mr. John Kelly, Joint Conservation Laboratory, Queen's University, Belfast.

Two standard petrological thin sections were prepared from each sample and the following is a summary of results:—

Minerology

	Shaft	Base
Major phase:	Quartz Alkali Feldspar Lithic fragments	Quartz Alkali Feldspar Lithic fragments
Minor phase:	Muscovite Biotite Chlorite Iron ore Sphene Zircon	Muscovite Biotite Iron ore Sphene Zircon Apatite
Cement:	Argillaceous characterised as 'Sericite' predominates.	Argillaceous characterised as 'Sericite' predominates.

Rock Type

A high proportion of the major phase show metamorphic texture although this does not extend to any obvious preferred orientation. In addition, the nature of most of the minor phase and the relationships to each other and the cementing material indicate that the rock was subjected to incipient, low grade metamorphism.

Conclusions

The stone may be classed as an argillaceous felspathic sandstone on the basis of the major phase and the cementing material. The evidence of the minerology and texture points to a common source for both shaft and base.

Acknowledgments

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