

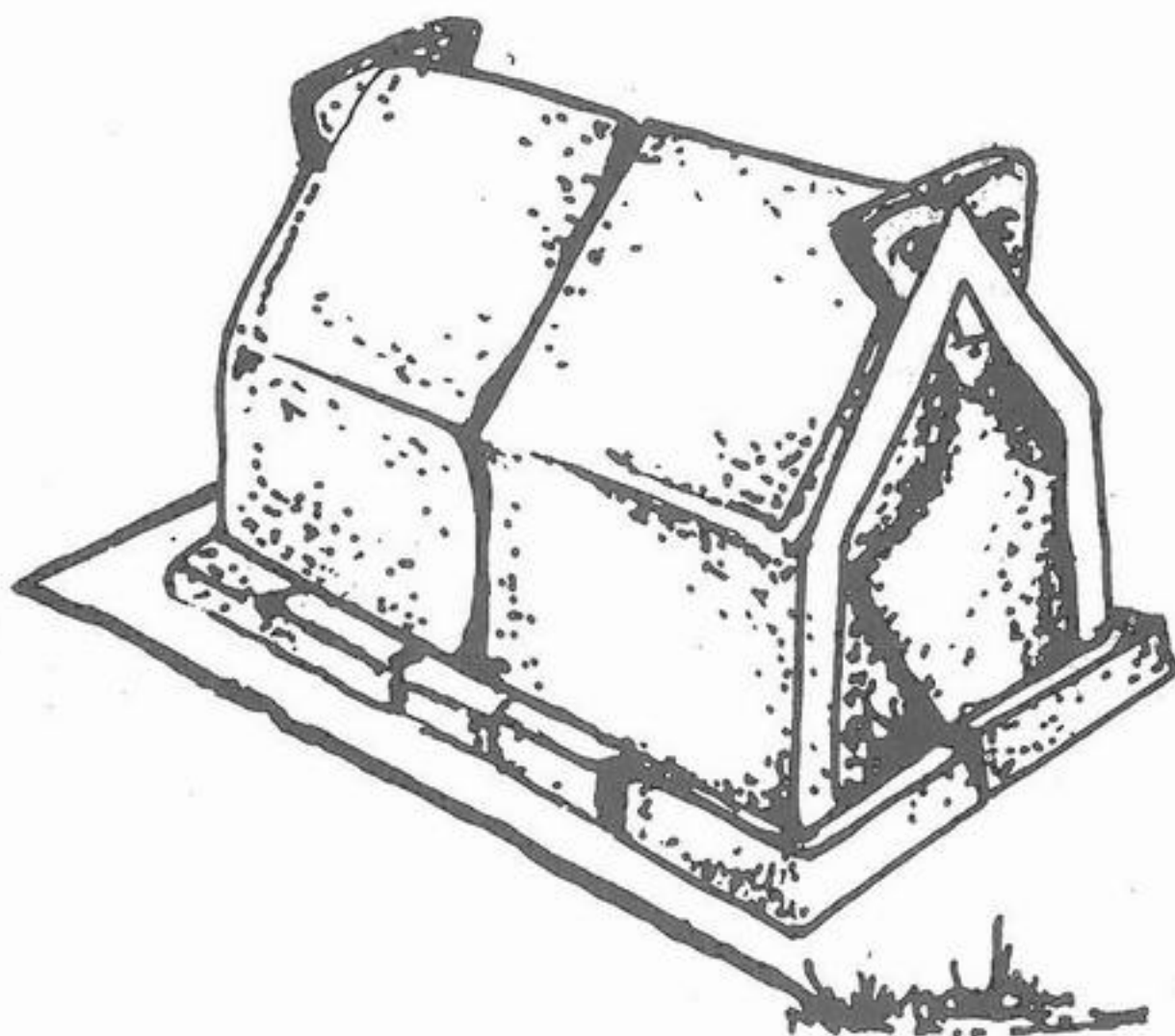
'The Cross in the Field', Kilfenora —part of a 'Founder's Tomb'?

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An attempt to explain the unworked gable-like feature at the bottom of the shaft of the 'Cross in the Field' at Kilfenora, Co. Clare. It is argued that it was originally meant to have been concealed by a house-shaped reliquary or 'Founder's Tomb'.

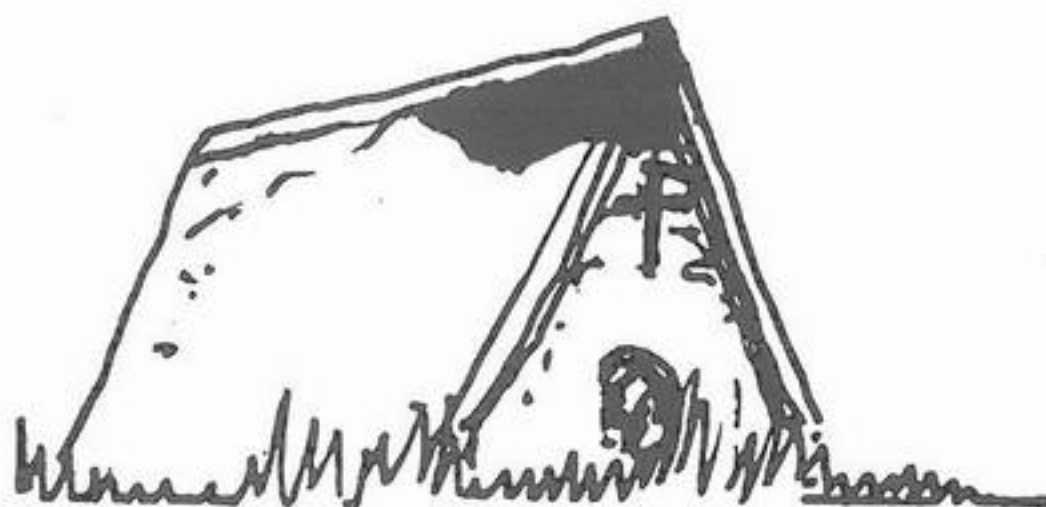
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Examination of the surviving monuments of the Early Christian Period in Ireland shows the concern of the monks of the period that the remains of their Founder should be laid in a place of honour within the monastic complex. In some cases, they formed a special tomb of which we have some few examples left. At Clones, Co. Monaghan, the site of a monastery founded by St. Tighernach in the sixth century, near the 75ft. high round tower, stands the twelfth century stone tomb known locally as 'The Shrine of St. Tighernach'



Illus. 1. Stone tomb at Clones, Co. Monaghan.

(Illus. 1). At Killabuonia, Co. Kerry, is still to be seen the triangular-shaped shrine, standing near a pillar, with circular hole in the end-slab to allow the pilgrim to touch the relics within (Illus. 2). At Duleek is recorded a tomb to contain the relics of the founder, Saint Cianán,

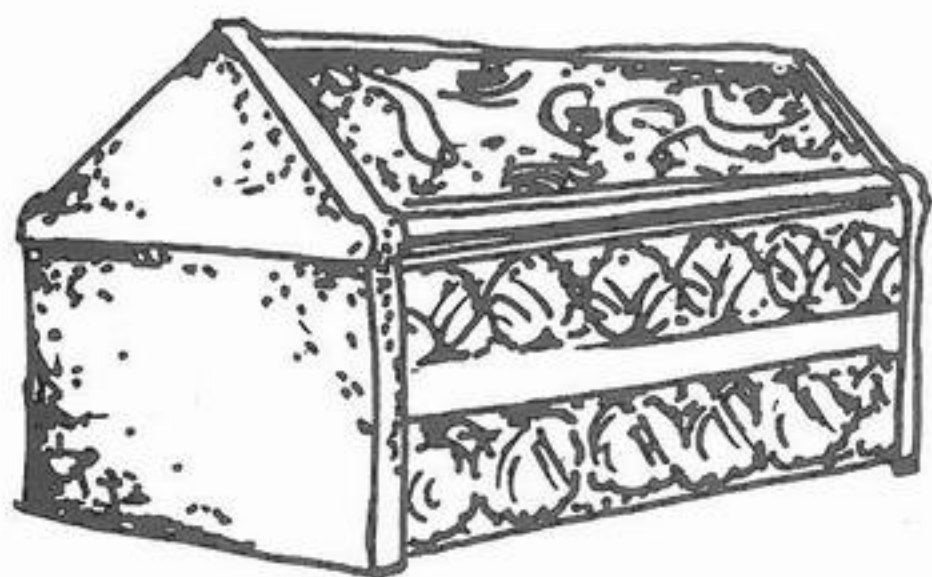


Illus. 2. Stone tomb at Killabuonia, Co. Kerry.

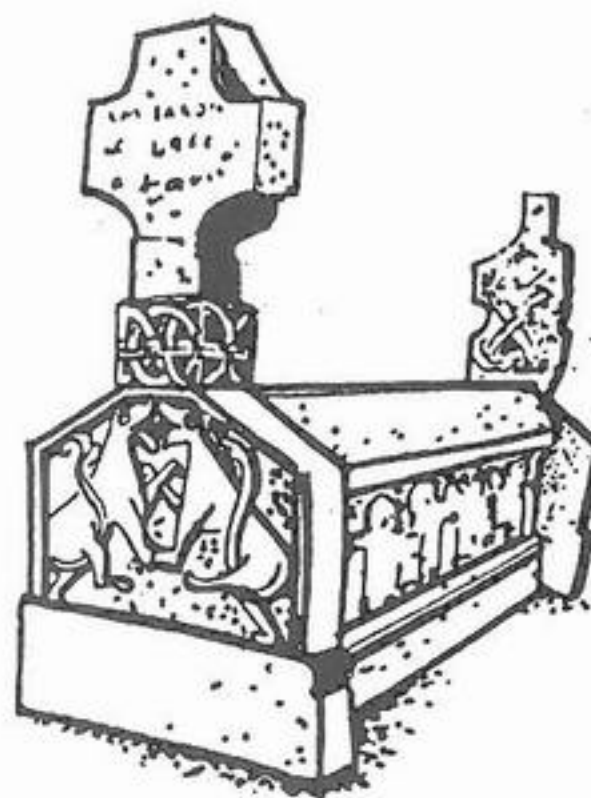
through the end-hole of which St. Adamnan of Iona inserted his crozier and mixed up the bones, dissipating the virtue from them. At Banagher, Co. Derry, is still to be seen the substantial tomb of the O'Heanys, with a carved representation of an episcopal figure on the end.¹ This tomb, in spite of examination by the Northern Ireland Archaeological Survey, did not yield to attempts to open it, and its contents for the present remain a mystery. At various other sites, such as Slane, Co. Meath, and Teampall Chronáin, near Carron, Co. Clare, remains of these house-shaped structures have been identified.²

From the continent there are also some examples of this type of tomb. At Jouarre, near Paris, is the stone sarcophagus of Theochilde, niece of the founder, who died in AD 662 (Illus. 3). Husaby, in Sweden, possesses a tomb, house-shaped, with a cross at the end³ (Illus. 4), and there are yet other examples of 'Founder's Tombs' to be found throughout Europe.⁴

The small cathedral dedicated to St. Fachtnan at Kilfenora, Co. Clare, dates from about AD 1200, and the site holds other monuments of similar date. Three High Crosses and



Illus. 3. Stone tomb at Jouarre, near Paris, France.



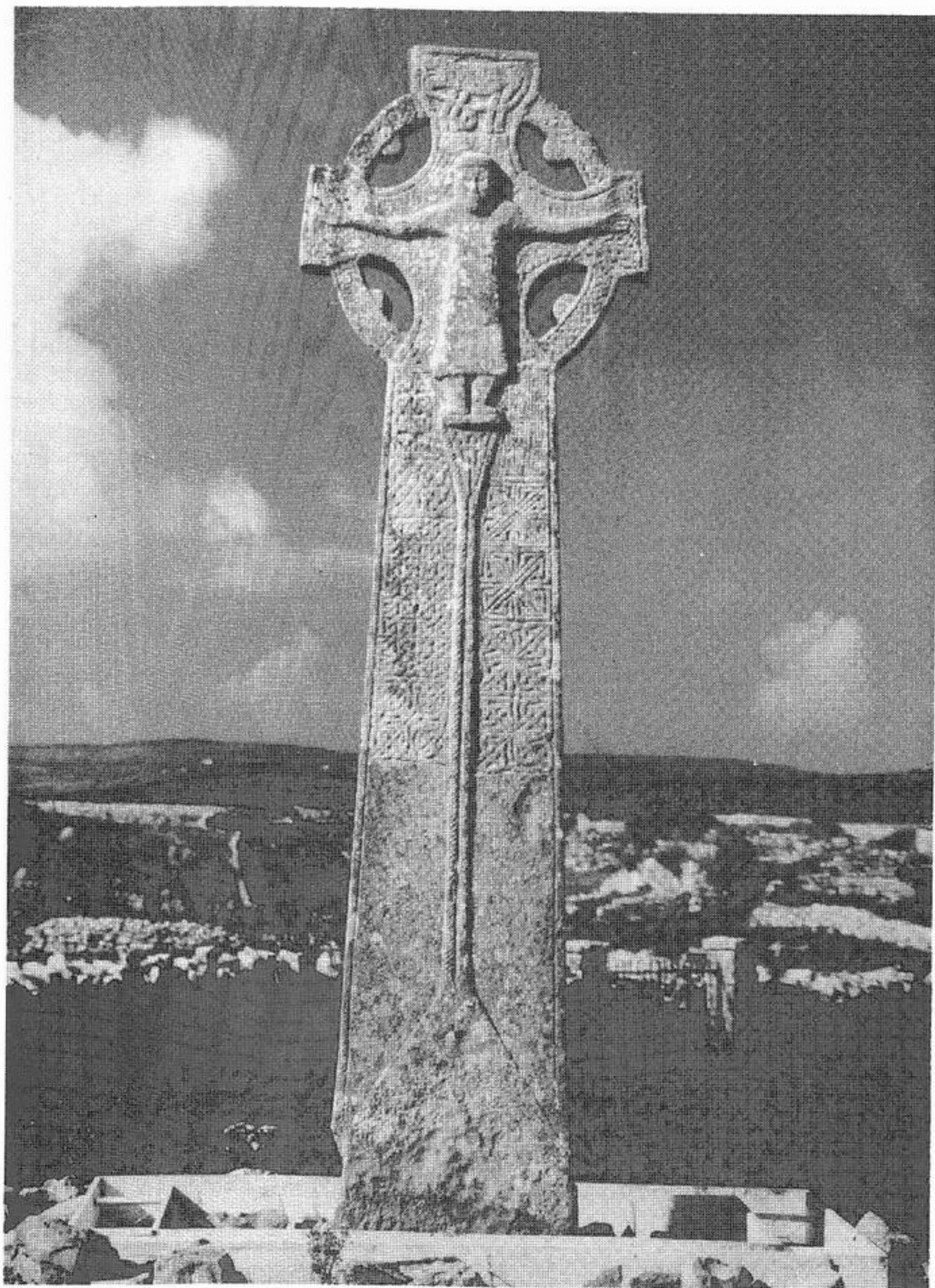
Illus. 4. Stone tomb at Husaby, Sweden.

¹*Historic Monuments of Northern Ireland*, Belfast 1983, p. 126.

²C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain*, Glasgow and Oxford 1971, pp. 141-142, pl. VII.

³*The Art of Scandinavia*, London 1970, vol. 2, pl. 68.

⁴Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-166 ('The Cult of Relics'), *passim*.



Illus. 5. 'The Cross in the Field', Kilfenora, Co. Clare.
(Photo: Commissioners of Public Works, Ireland)

remains of at least two others, generally accepted as dating from the twelfth century, still remain. Yet another such cross was removed by Bishop Mant to his garden in Killaloe in 1821—it is now to be seen in St. Flannan's Cathedral, Killaloe, where it is backed against the western wall.

To the west of, and adjacent to, the graveyard around Kilfenora Cathedral is one of these crosses, the 'Cross in the Field', which is the subject of this article. This cross, hewn from a single thin slab of local stone, stands more than 5m. high and is 13cm. thick. On one face the decoration is composed mainly of patterns of tight geometric interlace. On the other face (Illus. 5) a figure of a robed figure with outstretched arms is in high relief against a background covered with interlace and design which does not flow over the surface, but is tightly contained in disconnected units. An animal devouring its own tail is carved in low relief above the figure. The Christ-figure stands on a small carved ledge, below which is a small interlace-filled triangle bordered by rope mouldings. On joining, the ropes continue side-by-side down the centre of the cross-shaft to within one metre of the ground, where they flatten slightly and merge into a roughly carved area standing slightly proud of the generally finely dressed surface of the stone. The shape of this area is like the gable end of a house, with two ropes rising above it like chimneys.

We are inclined to look at the products of the past from the modern point of view, biased by the logic and technology of the twentieth century, and we lose sight of the simple tools with which the craftsman of the past had to overcome the difficulties of his project. Economy of movement, of line and of effort are the signs of an expert, and the apparent casualness of the expert, whether in sport or in art, is always a source of wonder to the onlooker.

Expert workmen do not usually waste their labour by overfinishing work which will be concealed, or in some way covered up or buried.

On viewing this cross, the roughly finished area at the bottom intrigues one. Had fine craftsmen worked for months on the carving of this stone and then left it with one day's work unfinished? No! Craftsmen do not think that way: surely this was left unfinished because it was hidden or concealed in the finished work? This postulate would mean that the cross as we see it today is only portion of a more complex work, not the complete artistic conception. But how might this unfinished triangle have been concealed?

With this question uppermost in mind, the other remains crowded around the cathedral were examined. The 'Doorty Cross' (Illus. 6), with its strange figures, seems to want to tell a story. On one face a robed Christ with outstretched arms looks down and appears to be entangled in a complex Urnes-type interlace connecting with a strange figure astride a horse-like animal which stands on the tiled roof of a church or perhaps of a house-shaped shrine. This scene can perhaps be identified as a sculptural way of showing a connection between the Christ-figure and the figure on the horse, and this latter figure is in close association with the church or shrine.

If the unfinished triangle on the base of the 'Cross in the Field' were concealed by a house-shaped shrine, as drawn in Illus. 7, then we would have a similar subject depicted on both crosses. Both crosses would represent a connection between the relics of the holy man at their base and Christ, depicted by a physical connection between the representation



Illus. 6.
'The Doorty Cross',
Kilfenora, Co. Clare.

of Christ carved on the face of the crosses and the carving of the shrine in one case and the actual tomb in the other.

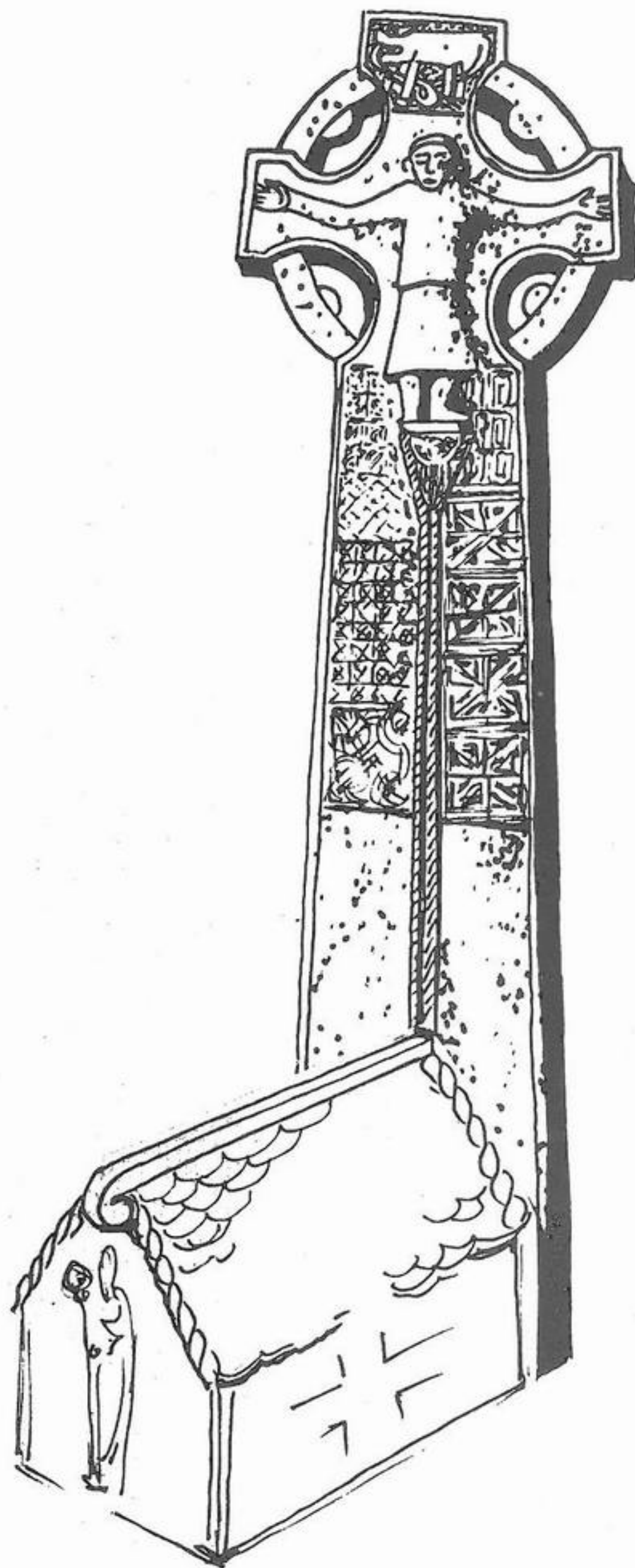
How valid is such a theory? The Swedish tomb at Husaby shows a continental approach, but if such a tomb were to be built by an Irish mason it is a reasonable assumption that the cross might be emphasised to the extent of becoming a High Cross, given that High Crosses were in the tradition of monastic Ireland. Many of the High Crosses have a house-shaped top, the symbolism of which has never been satisfactorily explained. However, it might be that the house-shaped tops in some way may represent the tombs of the founders of the associated church-sites. Excavations around High Crosses have not been carried out to any great extent, with the exception of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel, Co. Tipperary.⁵ Under this cross, now on display in the reconstructed Vicars Choral, was found a substantial hollow chamber cut in the underside of the base-stone. This did not contain any remains, but the excavator has hinted that it may have been so designed "to fit over a relic or other object of a dedicatory nature placed under the cross when it was first erected" (its present position is secondary).⁶ A similar purpose is here suggested at the Kilfenora 'Cross in the Field'.

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I must acknowledge the great assistance of Professor Rynne, who first introduced me to Kilfenora, and who, by argument, discussion and constructive dissent, has greatly promoted this article. The drawings accompanying this paper are by the author.

⁵A. Lynch, "Excavations at the Base of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 25(1983), 9-18.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 16.



Illus. 7. Reconstructed drawing of 'The Cross in the Field', Kilfenora, associated with a 'Founder's Tomb'.