

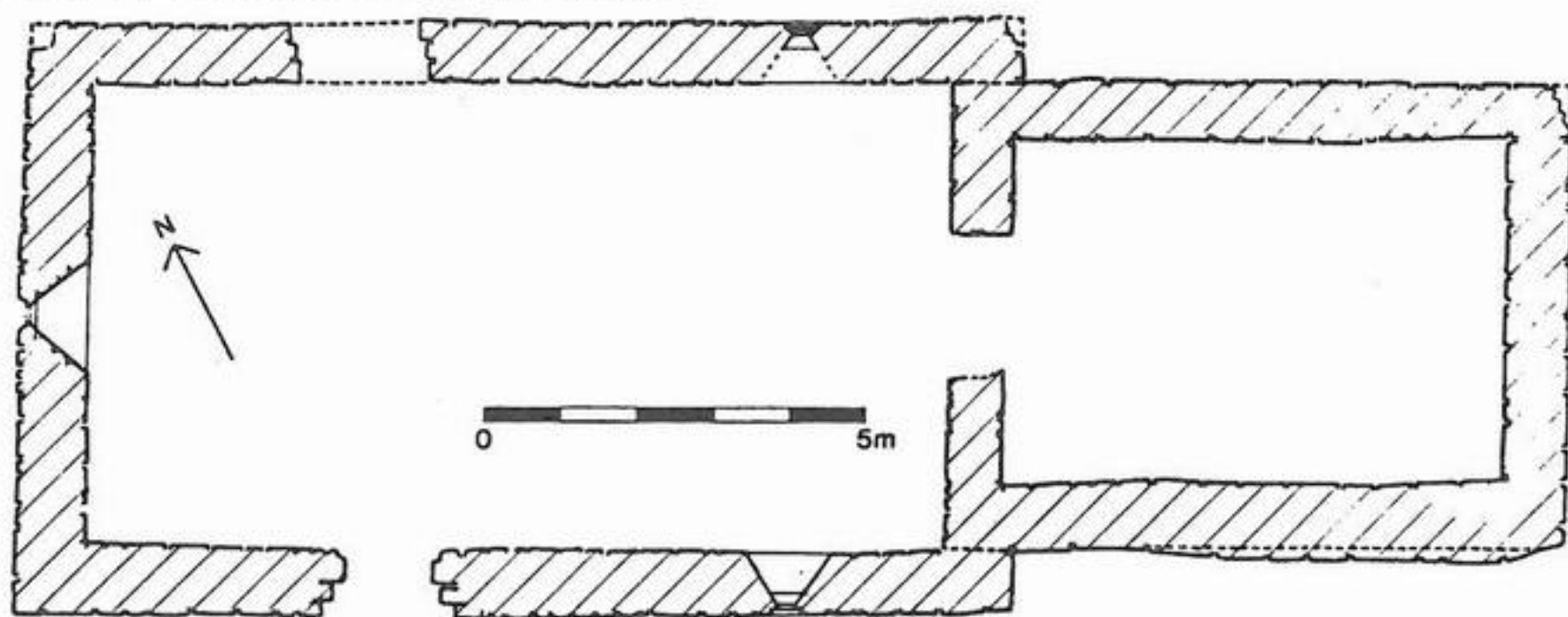
Archaeological Excavations at Kilcash Church, Co. Tipperary

P. D. SWEETMAN

This paper describes limited archaeological excavations undertaken at Kilcash Church, Co. Tipperary. Architectural features are described, comparisons with other Romanesque churches are made, and a date and building sequence are suggested.

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The standing remains of the church at Kilcash, near Clonmel, Co. Tipperary,¹ consist of a chancel and nave (Illus. 1). The chancel is pre-Norman and the nave a late Romanesque addition. The Tipperary County Council, who own the monument, were anxious to carry out conservation works since the west wall of the nave and the south wall of the chancel were leaning outwards and had pulled away from the main structure. The Office of Public Works agreed to undertake an archaeological investigation of the interior of the monument in 1984 to facilitate its conservation.

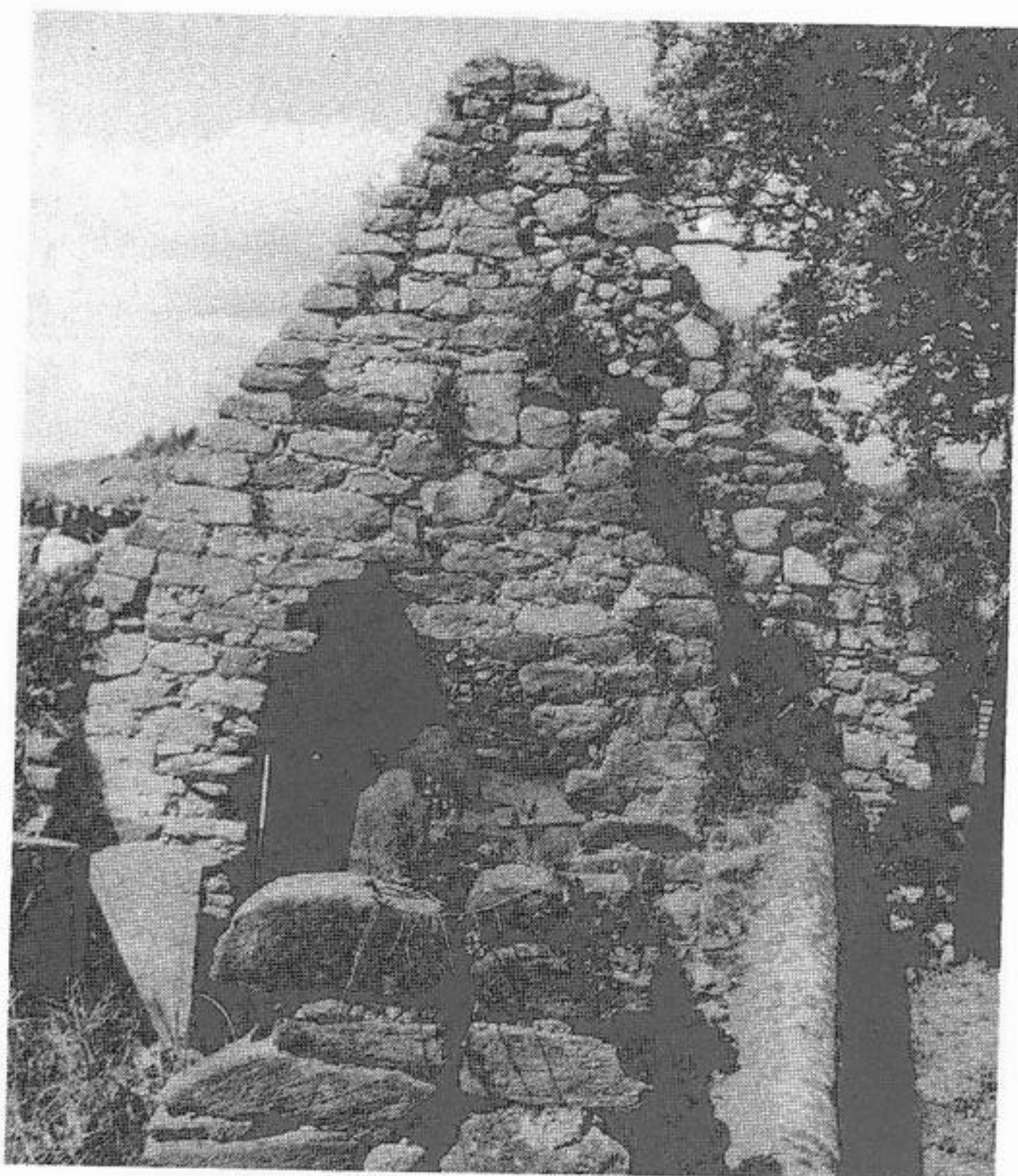


Illus. 1. Plan of church, Kilcash, Co. Tipperary.

The chancel is constructed of large stone blocks of mainly granite and sandstone (Illus. 2). Some of the sandstone blocks show very distinct evidence of diagonal tooling indicating that the building, which is otherwise featureless, is hardly earlier than the twelfth century. The window in the east gable is completely destroyed and no features remain which might have given evidence of its date. The south wall, as stated above, was leaning outwards and was broken away from the south-east corner. Weak foundations and lack of adequate bonding had obviously caused the entire wall to shift. The upper part of the north wall has been rebuilt in modern times as a field boundary but the remains of the original wall were found below the present ground surface during the course of the excavation. Incorporated in the rebuilt upper portion of the wall is a well-carved base of a doorway. This may or may not have been part of the original west doorway to the early church.²

¹Nat. Grid. Ref. S 323 272; O.S. 6 inch sheet: Co. Tipperary 78.

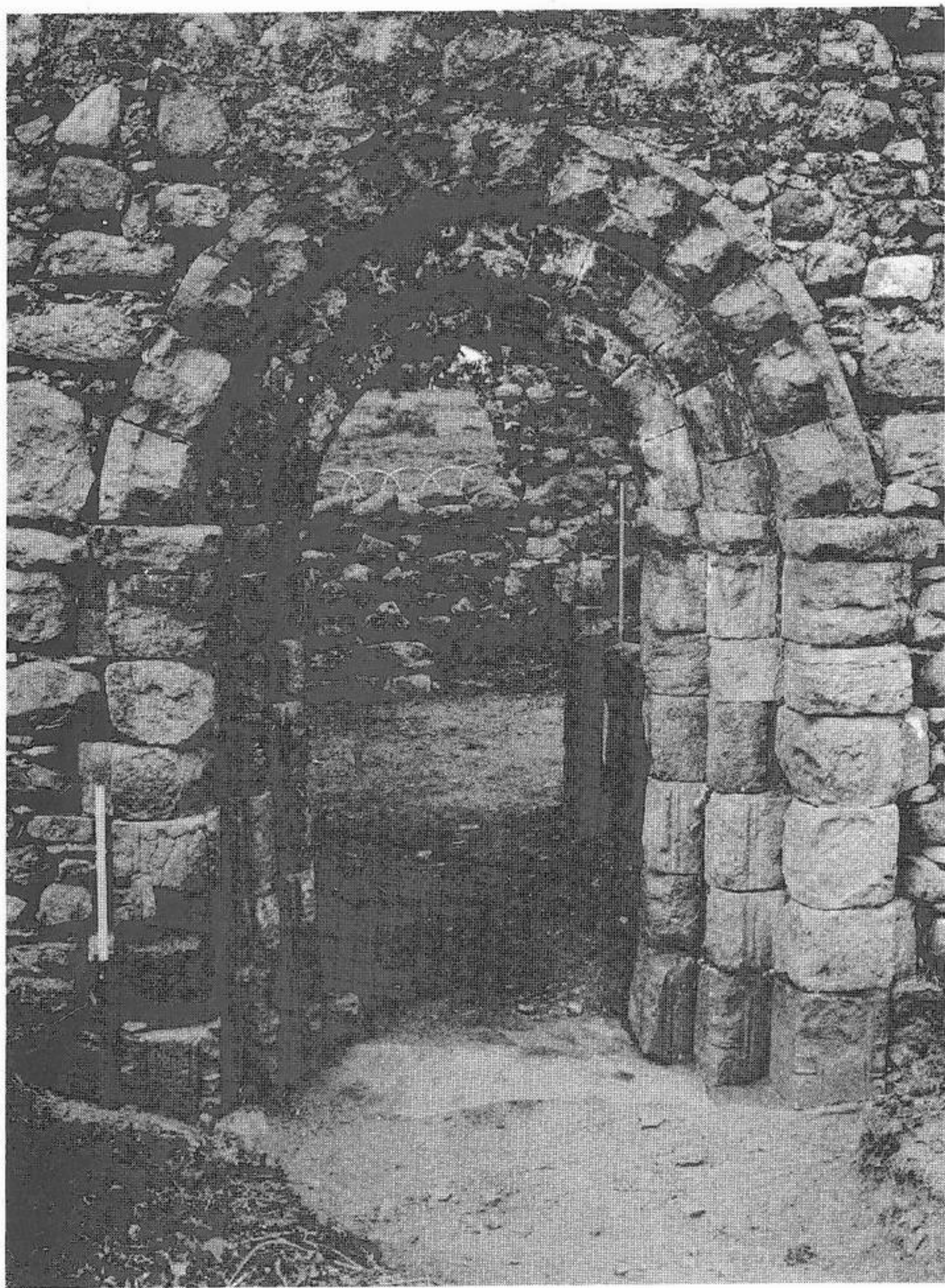
²For a short history of the church refer to W.P. Bourke, "Local Church Architecture, from the 12th to the 15th century", *J. Waterford & South-East Ireland Archaeo. Soc.*, 1(1895), 265-267. It should however be noted that the dating and building sequence is not acceptable. I wish to thank Mr. Con Manning for pointing out this article to me.



Illus. 2. Overall view of the church, chancel and east walls of the nave from the East.

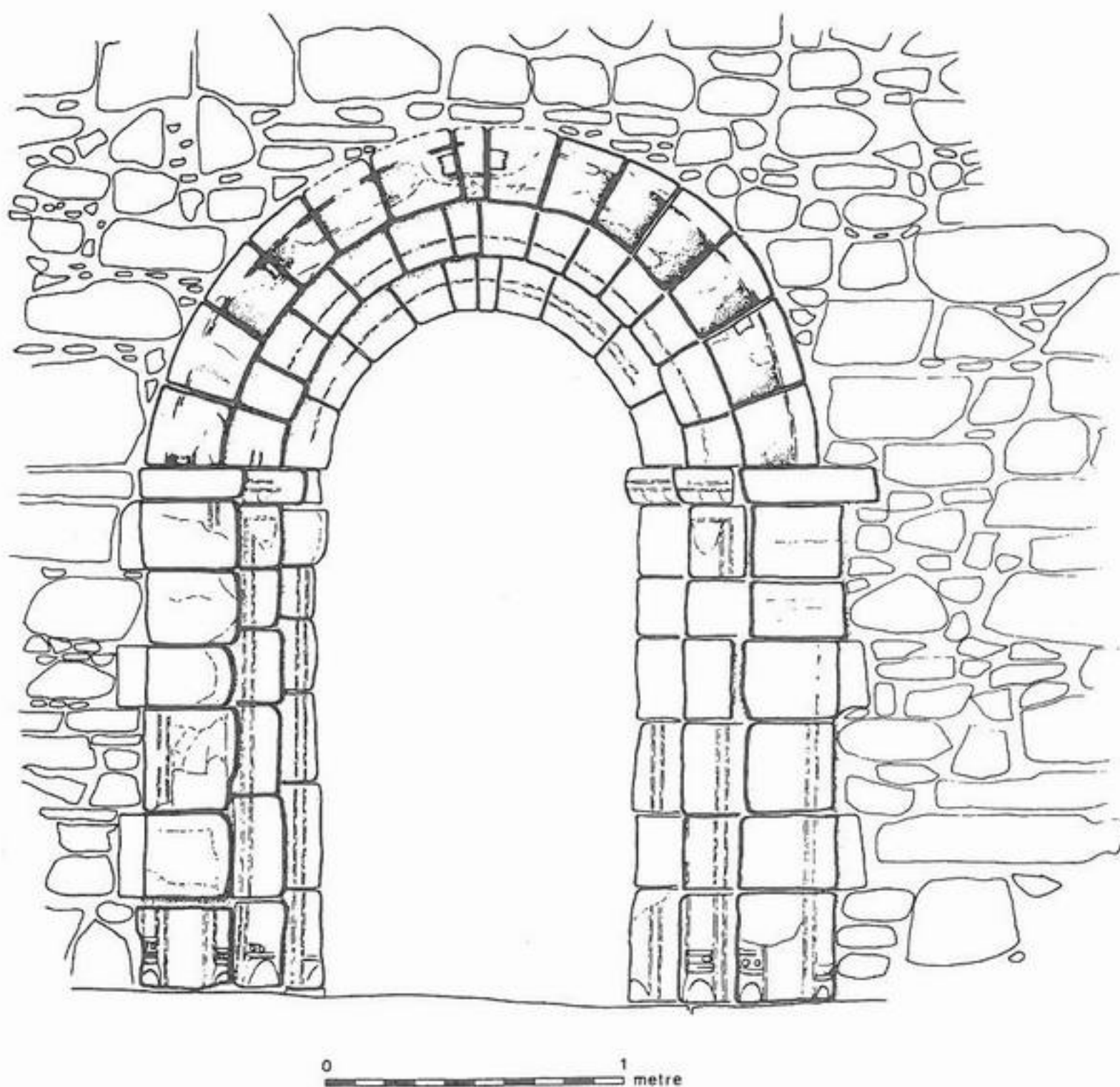
The nave is a later addition and is slightly wider and higher than the chancel (Illus. 2). The stonework of the nave, which consists of undressed boulders of various shapes and sizes, is much cruder than that of the chancel and is not properly bonded into it, the straight joints being clearly visible. The main feature of this part of the church is a very badly weathered Romanesque sandstone doorway in the western end of the south wall (Illus. 3 and 4). There are three small plain sandstone windows surviving, one in the eastern end of each of the side walls of the nave and one high up in the west gable. Those in the north and south walls have a single sandstone round-headed arch on the outside (Illus. 6) but their inner faces have been destroyed. That in the west gable has a two-stone arch, also of sandstone, and has a hood moulding on the inner face of the wall (Illus. 7). A portion of the north wall opposite the doorway has been destroyed down to ground level and may have contained a fourth window. The chancel arch has been completely robbed of its dressed stone; only one single piece of it was found *in situ* and no fragments or remains of any kind were found in the excavations.

The doorway (Illus. 3, 4 and 5) has three orders of carved sandstone blocks, now badly weathered and in some instances large portions of the surface of the stones have spalled off leaving no trace of decoration. The outer order of the arch has a running point out



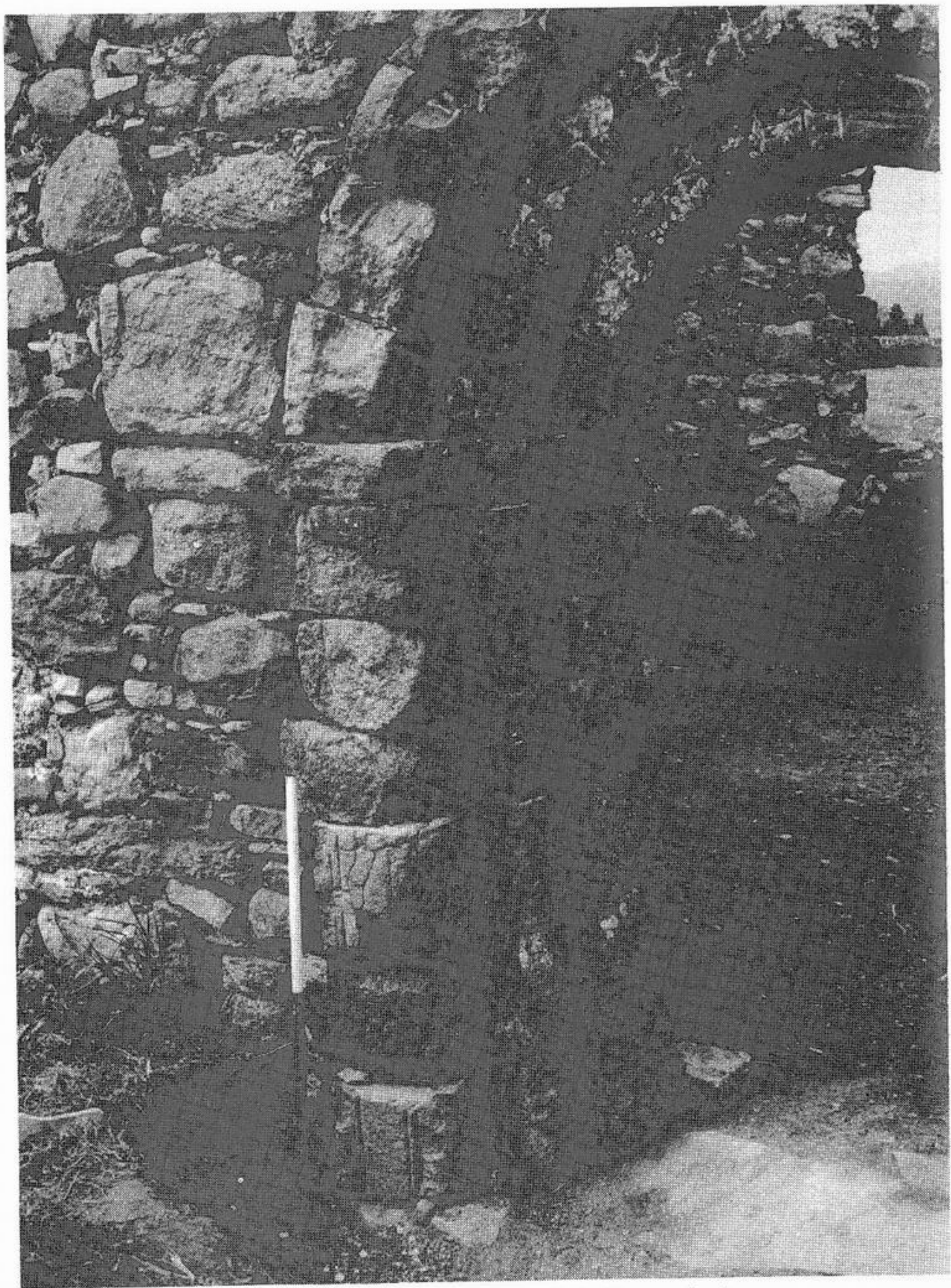
Illus. 3. Romanesque doorway (scale in 50cm. sections).

chevron with roll-moulding close to the hood of each stone. The moulding has been almost completely destroyed due to spalling off and only a few small fragments remain. The other orders of the arches are decorated mainly with parallel incised lines. The stones immediately below the impost on the middle order have the remains of what appear to be human heads now so worn that it is not possible to distinguish any clear features on them. Neither the inner nor the outer orders have matching features and their jambs are merely decorated with incised lines which extend up to a flat undecorated impost. The bases of the jambs were uncovered by the excavation and revealed carving on all three orders (Illus. 3, 4 and 5) with shallowly wrought colonettes on the exposed angles of the outer order. The original sillstone was also found *in situ*. The doorway is typical of the Irish Romanesque with its jamb-piers roughly square in plan, and can therefore be fitted into Leask's phase two of the development,³ although not as elaborately decorated as most examples in this group. The chevron on the arch is very common in Europe, especially in Britain and Ireland, but is normally found on one of the inner orders. Because of its simplicity of decoration the doorway is not easy to date, but, given the arrangement of the jambs, the third quarter of the twelfth century would seem appropriate.



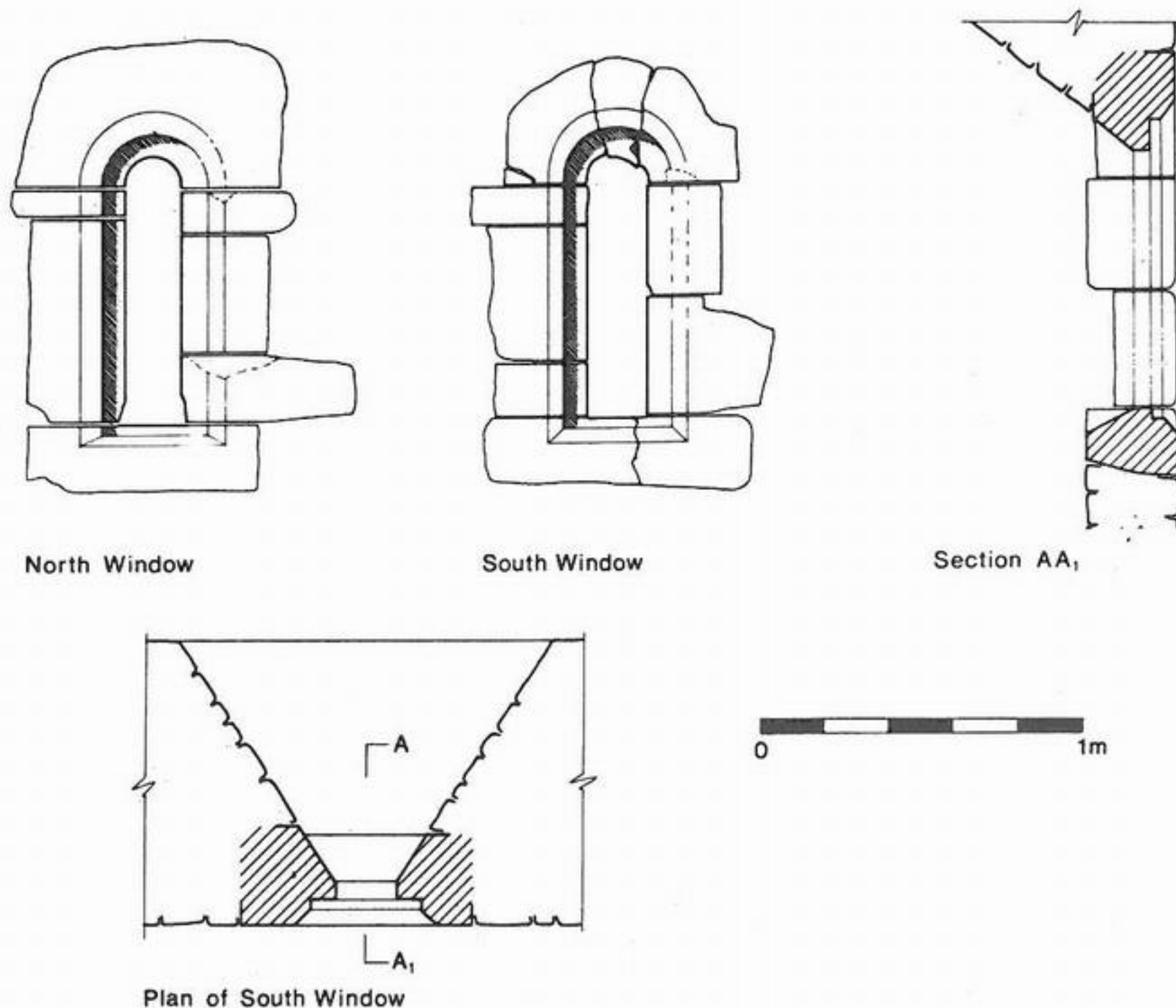
Illus. 4. Elevation of Romanesque doorway.

³J.H. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings, Vol. I: The First Phases and the Romanesque*, Dundalk 1955, pp. 94-113.



Illus. 5. West jamb of doorway (scale in 50cm. sections).

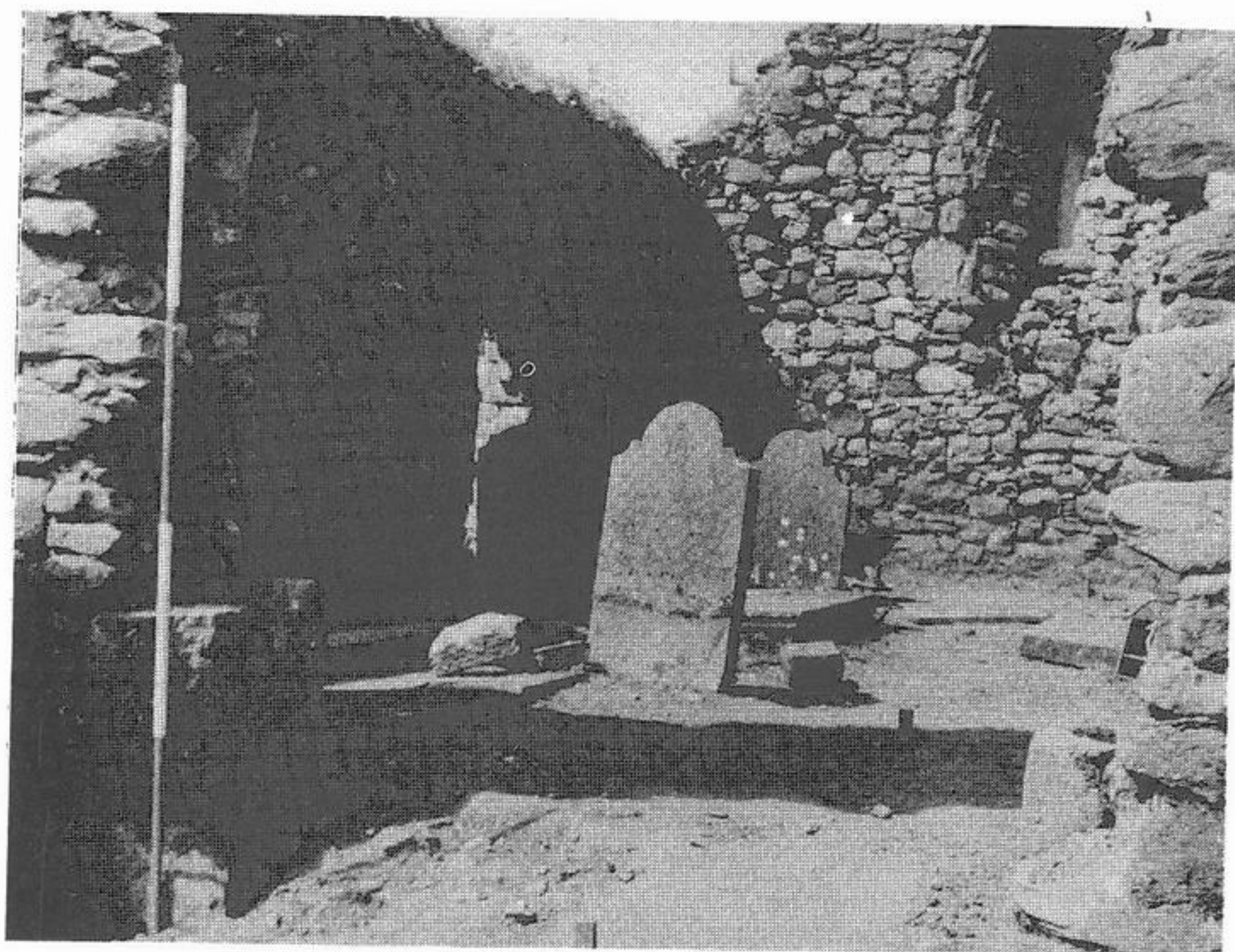
Excavation of the interior of the nave revealed nothing of archaeological interest and was disturbed by modern burials down to the undisturbed natural soil. Fill up to a depth of just over one metre was removed from the chancel. It consisted of fine clay and was also disturbed down to the boulder clay surface with modern burials. At the east end of the building close to the south-east corner, a number of carved medieval stones were recovered which had been re-used as part of a relatively modern tomb and had in consequence been destroyed prior to excavation. The stones consisted of one large and two small fragments of a large slab with beaded edge, and three blocks of sandstone with colonettes. These stones may have originally belonged to a medieval tomb. They were found in a single course mixed with fifteenth-century stones and were bedded in mortar in no logical order. They were placed in such a way as to utilize the south and east walls of the



Illus. 6. North and South windows.

church as part of a box-tomb which would have extended into the area where the medieval altar once stood. No remains of the altar were revealed in the excavation.

The chancel arch was considerably wider than the original west doorway of the early church which was broken out to accommodate a presumably Romanesque chancel arch (Illus. 7). When the soil from around the arch was removed, a plain, undecorated sandstone jamb was found at the north side and is now set on the basal course of the west wall of the early church. At the south side it could also be clearly seen that the base of the arch was built directly onto the lower course of the original west gable of the early church.



Illus. 7. Have showing window and remains of chancel arch (scale in 50cm. sections).

The only small finds from the excavation were three sherds of Ham Green pottery, one of which is a complete bridge spout, the others being a small decorated neck sherd and a plain body sherd. They were found in the disturbed ground immediately above the boulder clay in the south-east corner of the chancel.

The Romanesque nave door is the most interesting feature of the building. As described above, it is relatively plain and is unusual in that it has only three orders. The Romanesque doorway at Inis Cealtra had only three orders prior to archaeological excavation there in 1976, by Liam de Paor who found clear evidence for a fourth and it has been reconstructed as such (inf. Paul McMahon, Office of Public Works). The outward pointing chevrons are a common feature in Irish Romanesque doorways as is lightly incised or relief carving. The incised decoration on the jamb stones is also paralleled on the Inis Cealtra doorway. Except for two possible heads at the top of the central jambs, the doorway is devoid of human or animal representation. A date somewhere in the third quarter of the twelfth century would seem appropriate for the doorway, but it is possible that it may not be in its original position since such doorways are more normally found in the gable end of the nave. Its present position might indicate that it was reconstructed here as part of a later parish church, and as no carved stone was found during the excavations it seems, therefore, still to be its original size.

In 1260 the building appears as a parish church in a dispute between the bishops of Lismore and Cashel.⁴ According to Bourke the church was enlarged in 1389, and at the time of his writing it had a window in the west gable similar to that in the north wall. The west wall is now heavily buttressed with timbers and the outer face of the window is completely obscured. However, enough of the window can be seen from the inside to indicate that it is rebated like those in the north and south walls but its arch is not as rounded. The inner portions of both the north and south windows have been destroyed, but the dressed stone of the order framing the embrasure of the west window still remains (Illus. 7).

Although south doorways are not very common in the Romanesque period in Ireland they can be found at several sites including St. Saviour's Priory, Glendalough; Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare, and Cormac's Chapel, Cashel, Co. Tipperary. The example at Dysert O'Dea is an obvious reconstruction, perhaps "of a west door of the original church?"⁵ Cormac's Chapel is unique, and St. Saviour's has a small plain doorway in the east end of nave, very close to the chancel arch, which may have been inserted during alterations in the late medieval period. Rebating of windows appears to be a late feature in the development of the Romanesque in Ireland, and it is clearly evident in the remains at Kilcash. It has been assumed above that the doorway is also late because of the type of decoration, and it might be inferred that its position in the south wall is also an indication of its lateness in the development of Irish Romanesque building.

Acknowledgements

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⁴Bourke, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

⁵Leask, *op. cit.*, p. 151.