The Original Site of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel

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It is suggested that the original location of St. Patrick's Cross, on the Rock of Cashel, may have been associated with the first cathedral on the Rock (1101) which was located on the site of the existing 13th century cathedral chancel, and that the Cross originally stood somewhere in the area of the crossing and western choir of the later cathedral. Dates between 1224 and 1252 are suggested for its re-location.

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One of the interesting discoveries made by Ann Lynch in her excavations at the base of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel, in 1982, was the fact that it was moved at some point in its history, probably in the middle ages.[1] The illustration of a mobile crane lifting the cross to the Vicars Choral[2] underlines the fact that moving high crosses is not a task that can be undertaken lightly. The intriguing questions are: where was the cross originally sited and why was it shifted? Although speculation is no substitute for archaeological science, there is one line of enquiry which is at least worth considering.

Presumably the cross was moved because it was in the way of some new building. This might have been the fifteenth-century Vicars Choral, though it seems unlikely that such a large cross would have been placed close to the precinct wall at the edge of the rock. Alternatively it could have been Archbishop O'Hedian's fortified house located at the west end of the church or even the thirteenth-century cathedral itself. It is the latter possibility that is worth pursuing.

A cathedral church must have existed at Cashel by 1111 at the latest, when it was chosen as the centre of an archdiocese.[3] In fact it is likely that a cathedral was erected soon after 1101, when the rock was given to the church by Muirchertach O'Brien.[4] This building was apparently reconstructed in 1169 by Donal Mór O'Brien.[5] It appears that it was located more or less on the site of the existing thirteenth century chancel, as can be deduced from the following points:

1. Doorways in Irish round towers frequently, though not invariably, point towards the west door of the main church.[6] If this was so at Cashel, the west wall of the

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[1]Ann Lynch, "Excavations at the Base of St. Patrick's Cross, Cashel", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 25 (1983), 9-18. Dr. Lynch could not establish a close date for the stone plinth used to support the cross in its secondary position, but it cut through deposits with pottery of thirteenth/fourteenth century date, *ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

[2]*Ibid.*, Figs. 2 and 3.

[3]A. Gwynn and R. N. Hadcock, *Medieval Religious Houses Ireland,* London 1970, p. 62.

[4]The 1101 date (*Annals of the Four Masters*) provides a *terminus post quem* for the round tower at Cashel which has often been misleadingly attributed to an earlier period, as in the official guide: H. G. Leask, *St. Patrick's Rock, Cashel, Co. Tipperary,* Dublin (n.d., but probably 1930s), p. 3.

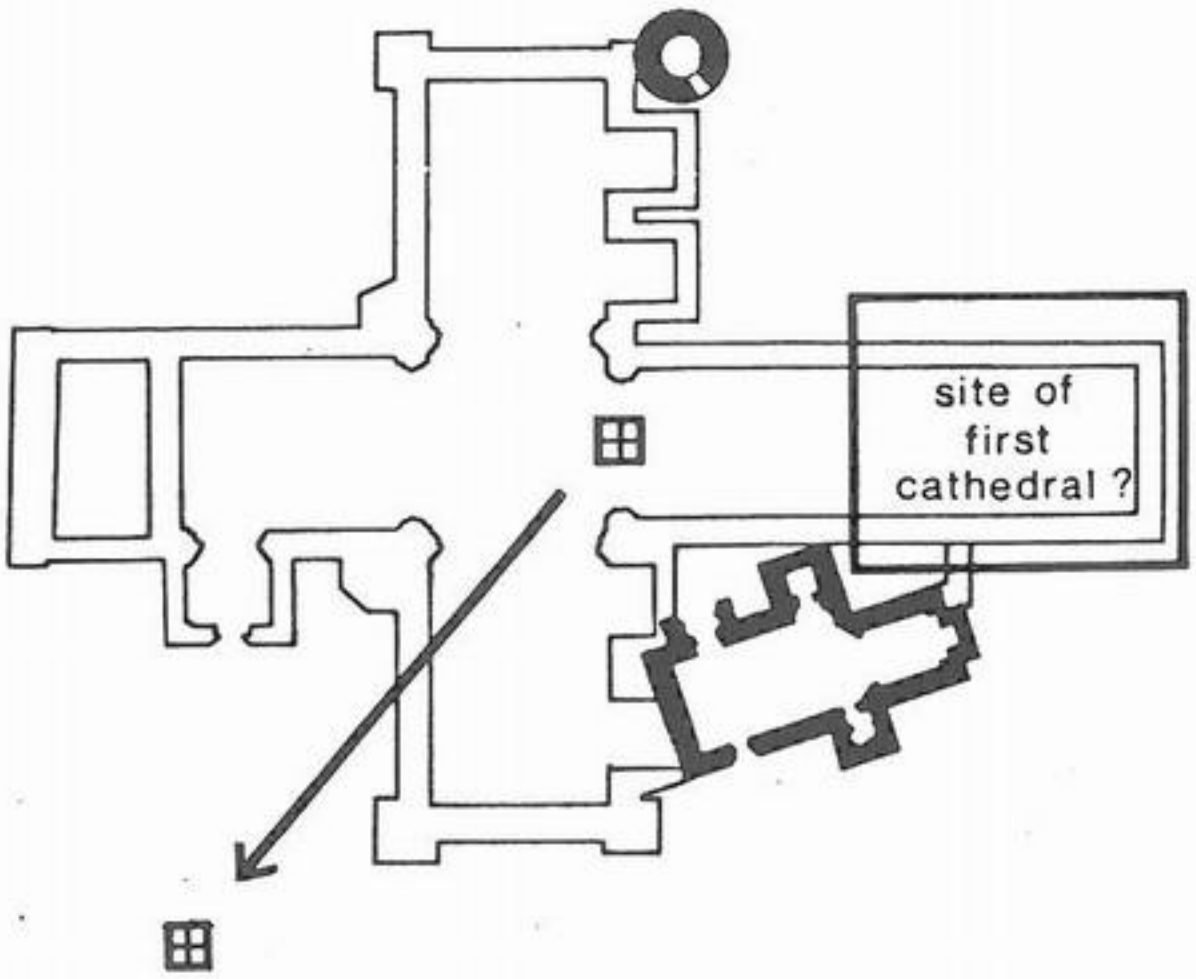
[5]H. G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings,* II Dundalk 1960, 69.

[6]Rattoo, Roscrea, Scattery Island, Cloyne, Clonmacnois, Kilmacduagh, Kildare, Glendalough, etc.; see G. L. Barrow, *The Round Towers of Ireland,* Dublin 1979. The relationship between round towers and churches has never been systematically studied.

cathedral would have been aligned to the chancel of Cormac's Chapel, allowing for a church approximately 50-60 feet in length.[7]

2. The chancel of Cormac's Chapel is placed off-centre, an adjustment which must have been planned deliberately at the outset of building.[8] Presumably this was prompted by the existence of another structure at the north-east, perhaps the cathedral itself or a projecting sacristy or chapel.
3. The deep and elaborately modelled porch of Cormac's Chapel points north, and, until the construction of the thirteenth century cathedral, this was the main ceremonial entrance to the building. To warrant such an inspiring design there must have been a reasonable amount of open ground outside the porch, just to the north.

Thus the main courtyard of the ecclesiastical settlement at Cashel seems to have lain in the area of the crossing and the western choir of the later cathedral.[9] This would also have been an appropriate place for St. Patrick's Cross (Illus. 1). It is important to remember



Illus. 1.
Plan of Cormac's Chapel and the Cathedral, Cashel, showing possible original location of St. Patrick's Cross.

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[7]The pre-Romanesque cathedrals of Clonmacnois and Clonfert were 62 feet and 65 feet 6 inches long respectively; see C. A. Ralegh Radford, "The Earliest Irish Churches", *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 40 (1977), 3.

[8]The main literature on Cormac's Chapel is Leask, *Irish Churches,* vol. I, Dundalk 1955, pp. 39-40 and 113-120; L. de Paor, "Cormac's Chapel: The Beginnings of Irish Romanesque", *North Munster Studies, Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney* (ed. E. Rynne), Limerick 1967, pp. 133-145; F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period, 1020-1170 A.D.,* London 1970, pp. 169-175; R. A. Stalley, "Three Irish Buildings with West Country Origins", *Medieval Art and Architecture at Wells and Glastonbury* (eds. N. Coldstream and P. Draper), London 1981, pp. 62-65. There is no masonry evidence to support Leask's view, *op. cit.*, p. 116, that the off-centre position of the choir was the result of a change of plan. There is of course the alternative explanation offered by Seamus Murphy, *Stone Mad,* London 1977, p. 91: "the mason was probably drunk an' forgot the centre line!"

[9]The existence of some sort of court in the centre of early Irish monasteries is discussed by M. Herity, "The Buildings and Layout of Early Irish Monasteries before the year 1000", *Monastic Studies,* 14 (1983), 247-84 and "The Layout of Irish Early Christian Monasteries" in *Irland und Europa, Ireland and Europe, Die Kirche in Frühmittelalter, The Early Church* (eds. Próinséas Ní Catháin and Michael Richter), Stuttgart 1984, pp. 105-116.

that it is one of those twelfth century crosses that gives great prominence to an ecclesiastical figure, perhaps as a way of demonstrating the new diocesan and hierarchical structure of the Irish church.[10] A site in front of the original twelfth century cathedral would have been especially meaningful.

In medieval Gothic cathedrals the role of the Cross, with its crucified figure of Christ, was taken over by the rood, the huge wooden crucifix that was habitually hung above the choir screen in medieval churches. Indeed the Gothic rood of Cashel may well have been situated close to the site of its stone predecessor.[11]

Equally interesting is the fact that the medieval archbishops and canons of Cashel cared enough about the cross to have it transferred, rather than destroyed. This respect for the past is far from unique in Ireland. One has only to think of the way in which the Romanesque arcades were preserved in the west wall of the Gothic cathedral at Ardfert to appreciate this point,[12] but Cashel is a particularly outstanding case. The planning of the thirteenth century cathedral reveals a remarkable interest in preserving ancient (and probably redundant) buildings. To the south the Gothic walls neatly embrace Cormac's Chapel (the transept chapels were abbreviated in order to accommodate it) and to the north the transept was cleverly aligned with the old round tower. Considerable ingenuity was required to accomplish this, and it suggests that the interest in conservation, reflected in the transfer of St. Patrick's Cross, was not an isolated occurrence. Is it too much to conclude that both episodes were associated with the same archbishop, and took place at the same time? If so, two potential candidates for this proto-conservationist rôle would be archbishops Marianus O'Brien (1224-38) and David MacKelly (1238-52), both early patrons of the Gothic Cathedral.[13]

POSTCRIPT by Ann Lynch

It is very difficult to establish the date of the plinth of St. Patrick's Cross on the basis of archaeological evidence. Its eastern edge overlaid black burial soil, which contained Ham Green pottery. In view of the presence of the pottery, I suggested in my report a thirteenth/early fourteenth century date for the burial deposit, but the possibility of later disturbance cannot be ruled out. Ham Green pottery has generally been thought to date to the thirteenth century, but now there is evidence to suggest that it may go back to the late twelfth century. Either way, a mid-thirteenth century date for the plinth *could* be possible on the basis of the archaeological evidence.

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[10]The link between the large scale ecclesiastical figures (? bishops) on Irish twelfth century crosses and the introduction of a new diocesan structure is a point that has often been made, see for example L. de Paor, "The Limestone Crosses of Clare and Aran", *J. Galway Archaeol. Hist. Soc.*, 26 (1954-56), 61-62.

[11]The form of the crucified Christ on the Cashel cross has analogies with a number of Romanesque wooden roods, particularly those associated with the Volto Sancto at Lucca: the north Italian crucifixion of *c.*1200 in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a good example. There are also close parallels with the Langford Rood (Oxfordshire). The carvings of large stone crucifixes outside the church like that at Cashel may be an Irish response to the spread of large wooden roods elsewhere in Europe.

[12]H. G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings,* vols. I, Dundalk 1955, pp. 124-126, and II, Dundalk 1958, pp. 111-113.

[13]The chronology of the Gothic cathedral at Cashel has not been satisfactorily examined. Dr. Colum Hourihane, who has made a close study of the architectural sculpture, suggests *c.*1260-80 for the crossing arches and *c.*1300 for the north transept, "The Iconography of Religious Art in Ireland, *c.*1250-1550", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London (1984), pp. 302-315—I am grateful to Dr. Hourihane for allowing me to give here the results of his work on the matter, in advance of his own publicaton.