

# Early Ecclesiastical Art in Chorca Dhuibhne and Its Implications Abroad

H. E. KILBRIDE-JONES\*

*Examples of the early ecclesiastical art of Chorca Dhuibhne are generally found on cross-slabs most of which are associated with Christian foundations, one of which dated to the period fifth to seventh centuries. In the art itself scrolls are common, and out of them developed the scrolled palmette. By taking multiples of eight, these were made up into a new pattern, of which that on the Ardamore stone is perhaps the earliest example. This pattern persisted for rather more than three centuries, one example having been found in a late tenth century context in Dublin, whilst another similar pattern can be seen on a print sweated to a Group B hanging-bowl from Chesterton-on-Fossway, Warwickshire.*

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Part of the County of Kerry, Chorca Dhuibhne<sup>1</sup> is a beautiful peninsula of hills and valleys which juts out into the Atlantic Ocean. Inhabited since pre-bog times, according to a recent survey,<sup>2</sup> there are the remains of four hundred and fifty ring-forts, nineteen promontory forts, fifty-six cashels, forty-two isolated souterrains and fifty-six Christian foundations. Faced with so much evidence of building activity it is clear that occupation of the peninsula was on a large scale for so small an area. Christianity was introduced into Chorca Dhuibhne in the fourth century.<sup>3</sup> This early (pre-Patrician) church was diocesan and episcopal; and by A.D. 431 Christianity was sufficiently widespread for Pope Celestine to have sent Palladius to southern Ireland to be the first bishop of this newly established church. The distribution of ecclesiastical sites is approximately the same as that of the ring-forts, suggesting that the church found it necessary to go to the people.

Parallel with the trappings of Christianity is a paucity of art and art-forms. Most of what passes for art can be found upon stone slabs and some boulders, and the quality of workmanship was poor. High crosses, with all their fine decoration and association with the Patrician church, are absent in this region. Two plain examples exist at Killiney and at Kilmalkedar, whilst at Reenconnel there is another, but it is inscribed with a plain Latin cross having T-bar terminals and the crossing of arms and shaft has been surrounded by two large concentric circles.

Totally absent from this region is interlacing. For its absence there are two possible explanations: either the stone-carvers were never in contact with any practitioners of this art form, or, and this is probably the more acceptable explanation, all the stone slabs remaining were inscribed at some time prior to the introduction of interlacing, and before

\*90 St. George's Street, Saint Paul's Bay, Malta.

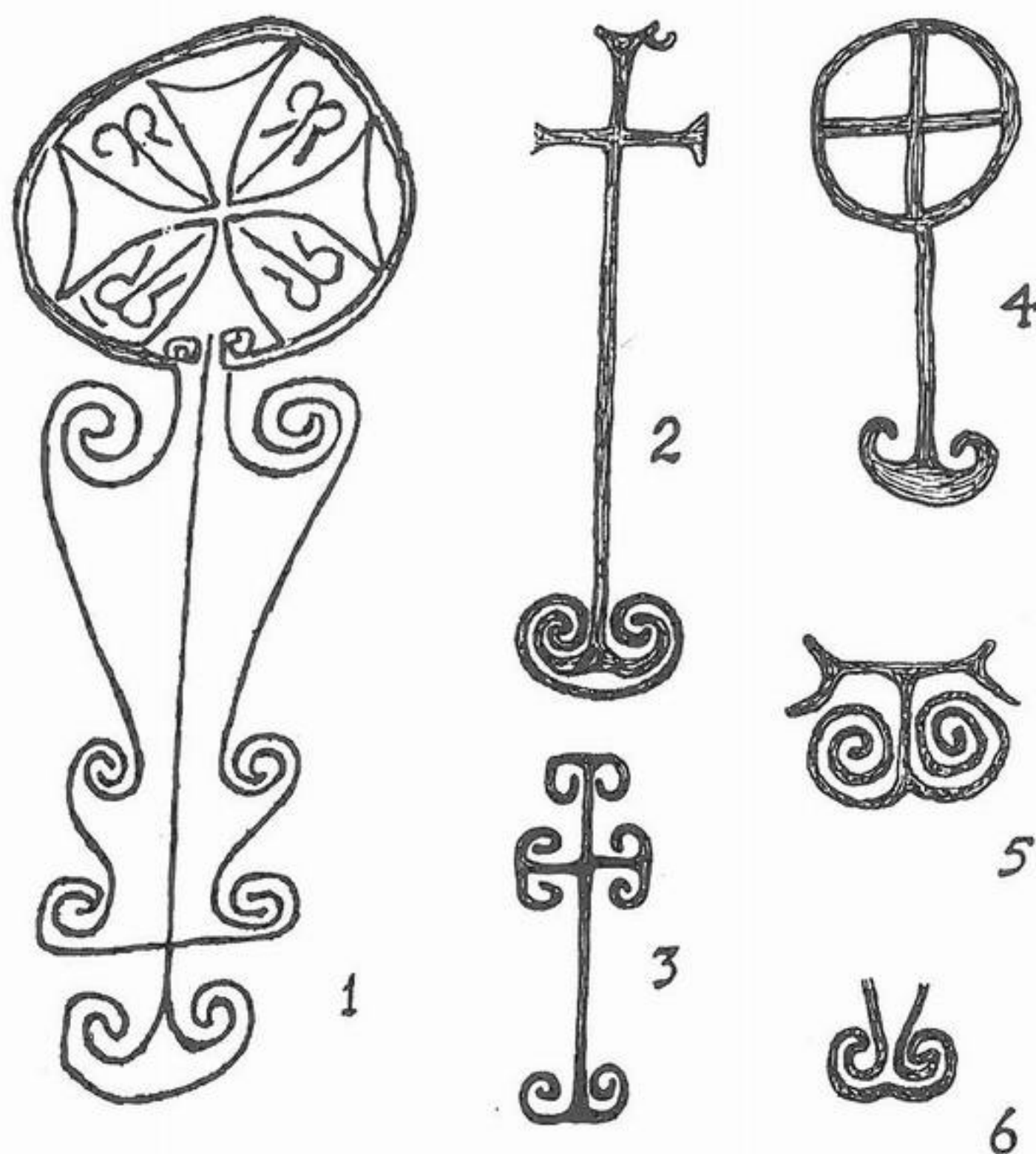
<sup>1</sup>Sometimes referred to as the Dingle Peninsula. It has an area of 217 square miles.

<sup>2</sup>J. Cuppage, *et al*, *Chorca Dhuibhne: Archaeological Survey*, Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne, Baile n'Fheirtearaigh (1986). This very competent survey is supremely well produced and printed to the highest standards, and it must surely remain a model for all future county surveys.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 257.



it became popular as a form of artistic expression. Both are natural conclusions. Isolation might be thought to have been responsible for loss of contact with that area from which interlacing was derived, which according to Uta Roth was the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup> Yet the Christians of Chorca Dhuibhne imported their wine from Antioch.<sup>5</sup> At Reask there is a stone pillar upon which a pair of peacocks has been inscribed.<sup>6</sup> A brush with Greek civilisation is suggested by the pattern inscribed on a stone from Milltown,<sup>7</sup> and in the omega-like designs between the Maltese cross arms on stone A at Reask (Illus. 1:1). Greek (equal-armed) crosses far outnumber all other forms in Chorca Dhuibhne: some are plain,



Illus. 1. Chorca Dhuibhne: occurrence of scrolled palmettes as terminal decoration on cross-slabs from (1) Reask, (2) Kilshannig, (3) Kilmalkedar, (4) Glin North, (5) Currantly, and (6) Kilfountain.

<sup>4</sup>Uta Roth, "Early Insular Manuscripts: Ornament and Archaeology, with Special Reference to the Dating of the Book of Durrow", in M. Ryan (ed.), *Ireland and Insular Art, A.D. 500-1200*, Dublin 1987, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Imported in Bii amphorae, with a date range from the late fifth century to A.D. 600.

<sup>6</sup>J. Cuppage *et al*, *loc. cit.* Fig. 206, Stone H at Reask, which Fanning puts somewhere in the period fifth to seventh century. See T. Fanning, "Excavations of an Early Christian Cemetery and Settlement at Reask, Co. Kerry", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 81,C(1981), 152, Fig. 31,H.

<sup>7</sup>Cuppage, *op. cit.*, pl. 39, p. 334.



whilst others are enclosed within circles. Of these there are forty-seven examples. Maltese crosses are fewer in number at eighteen, whilst Latin crosses total thirty. The Maltese cross, or cross of arcs as some will have it, was a popular enough form in the Mediterranean, and it was much favoured by the wood-carvers and mosaic-artists of Santa Sophia at Istanbul.<sup>8</sup> Faced with this evidence, it would seem that isolation was no problem to the Christians of Chorca Dhuibhne. Pre-Patrician contact of Irish Christians with Rome through the offices of Palladius confirms this view.

So one inclines to the belief that all the designs which remain are likely to have been inscribed on their stone slabs at a period anterior to the general introduction of interlacing. This is possible if they relate to an early occupation represented at Reask as being between the fifth and the seventh centuries, before monasticism took over.<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, the visible art is restricted to a few scrolls and the stylised palmette, the oft-referred to original of which is that seen amongst the decoration on the Brentford horn-cap.<sup>10</sup> This is a British form and it travelled extensively. Amongst hanging-bowls of Group A are escutcheons termed ovoid, of fifth century date, which possess a central diamond-shaped void flanked by two voids shaped like stylised palmettes. The distribution is from Cambridgeshire to Inverness, at which locality was found a mould for casting this form of escutcheon.<sup>11</sup> It was found in association with E ware. The ovoid form found its way to Ireland, an example having been found at the Ford of Camus, on the River Bann.<sup>12</sup> In Chorca Dhuibhne the stone carvers were made aware of this motif, but they altered it to their own particular liking, that is to say, they represented it through the medium of scrolls. They appear to have adopted the motif on a wide scale, and they used it as a terminal to an extended cross-shaft. As such it appears many times. The best example of the new form is to be seen on the cross from Kilshannig (Illus. 1:2). By comparing the Kilshannig palmette with other examples shown in Illus. 1, it will become noticeable that there has been an improvement in workmanship. The new form may be termed the scrolled palmette, and it must be added to the existing galaxy of motifs and patterns which go to make up later Celtic Art as it is at present understood.

Once these people had their new motif, they began to use it in combination. A good example of pattern-making was recently brought to light at Ardamore,<sup>13</sup> on a cross-slab (Illus. 2) found during the course of preparation of the ground for the erection of a cattle-shed; immediate excavation of the area failed to reveal any further finds, so the context must remain a secondary one. The pattern, shown in Illus 3:1, occupies the upper third part of a stone with a rounded top, making it similar in form to another found at Carrowntemple, Co. Sligo,<sup>14</sup> which was found to possess ear-like ridges. Similar 'ears' are a

<sup>8</sup>R. B. K. Stevenson, "Aspects of Ambiguity in Crosses and Interlace", *Ulster J. Archaeol.*, 44-45(1981-82), 23, fn. 38d, and pl. 2:2.

<sup>9</sup>T. Fanning, *loc. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>10</sup>R. A. Smith, "Specimens from the Layton Collection in Brentford Public Library", *Archaeologica*, 69(1920), 22, Fig. 22.

<sup>11</sup>R. B. K. Stevenson, "The Earliest Metalwork of Pictland", in J. V. S. Megaw (ed.), *To Illustrate the Monuments*, London 1976, Fig. 3e. Also A. Small *et al*, *Craig Phadraig*, University of Dundee, Dept. of Geography, Occasional Papers No. 1 (1972).

<sup>12</sup>This escutcheon is almost certainly Irish, as Françoise Henry was inclined to believe. F. Henry, "A Bronze Escutcheon found in the River Bann", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 78(1948), 182-184.

<sup>13</sup>C. Manning, "Cross-Slab at Ardamore", *J. Kerry Archaeol. Hist. Soc.*, 13(1980), 39-44; J. Cuppage *et al*, *loc. cit.*, pl. XIII.

<sup>14</sup>P. F. Wallace and M. A. Timoney, "Carrowntemple, Co. Sligo and Its Inscribed Slabs", in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the Past, Studies in Figurative Art in Christian Ireland, in Honour of Helen M. Roe*, Dublin 1987, p. 53-55, illus. 2:15-19 (Slab No. 10).



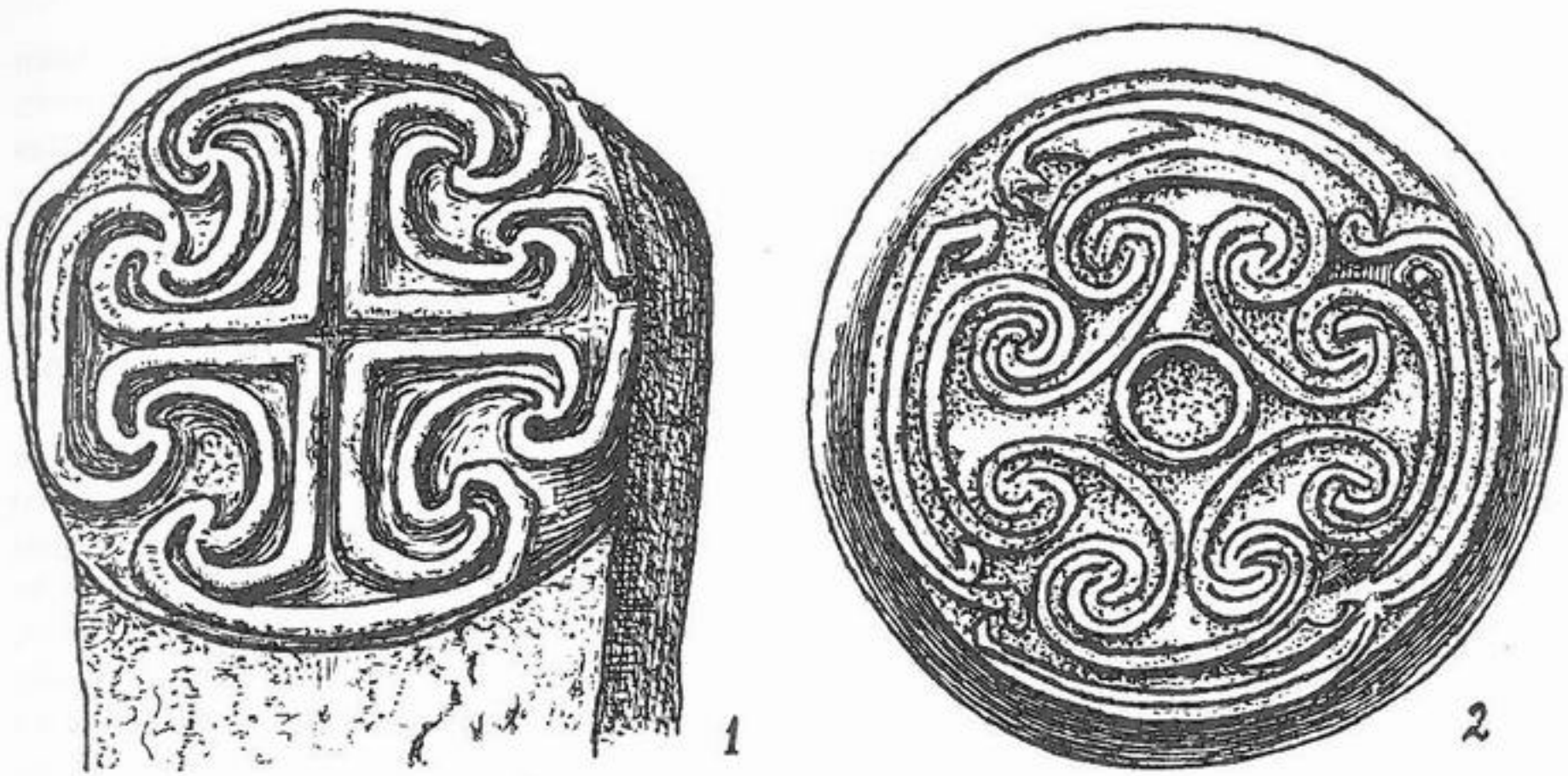


Illus. 2. Cross-slab at Ardamore, Chorca Dhuibhne. (Photo: C. Manning)

possibility at Ardamore, but the stone has been damaged on top, though there are fragments of what might have been an 'ear' to the left. Decoration is in the form of a roundel. The pattern is a remarkable quadripartite one of scrolled palmettes, linked together. Four palmettes were set down at the four points of the compass, and these were then linked by means of an additional four palmettes, making a total number of eight. This layout is not original, for there is a precedent for it. At Tummel Bridge, Perthshire,<sup>15</sup> an

<sup>15</sup>H. E. Kilbride-Jones, "A Bronze Hanging-Bowl from Castle Tioram, Moidart, and a suggested absolute chronology for British Hanging-Bowls", *Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.*, 71(1936-37), 207, Fig. 2:3.





Illus. 3. Quadripartite arrangements of scrolled palmettes on (1) Ardamore cross-slab, and (2) Chesterton-on-Fossway hanging-bowl print.

openwork escutcheon, which clearly belongs to the ovoid tradition mentioned above, was found at this location, but instead of having only two stylised palmettes in openwork it possesses four voids of the same form. These stylised palmette-shaped voids were linked by means of peltae. That the intervening metal was of this shape is a matter which could have been wholly fortuitous, since the metal shape was dictated by the surrounding shape of the four voids in the form of stylised palmettes. Like its near relations, the ovoid escutcheons, this specimen also belongs to a Group A hanging-bowl, in which group, among the patterns on the escutcheons and prints, there is a tendency to get away from the mainstream of Celtic Art. At Ardamore the disposition of the scrolled palmettes into a quadripartite pattern, in which scrolled palmettes replace peltae, represents a distinct improvement, and is indicative of an original approach to pattern-making.

Again at Ardamore, the centrally placed scrolls were malformed in order conjointly to form an equal-armed cross-shaped void, which at once appears to be central to the whole arrangement (Illus. 4 shows 'corrected' arrangement). Subsequently, this centrally-placed simulated cross was dropped, perhaps because it was felt that the quadripartite arrangement of scrolled palmettes was itself sufficiently cruciform to render a cross unnecessary; and by so doing malformation of the innermost scrolls was avoided. Further occurrences of the quadripartite arrangement of scrolled palmettes are seen to be without the central equal-armed cross, like that from Chesterton-on-Fossway, Warwickshire, on a bronze print (Illus. 3:2) on which there is a pattern of scrolled palmettes disposed in precisely the same manner as those at Ardamore;<sup>16</sup> but the print is out of place in that it is sweated on to the base of a Group B hanging-bowl. The pattern is completely out of context on this bowl, since the decoration of its escutcheons is recognisably Celtic, as they should be with a Group B bowl, being based on the triskele, and consisting of interconnected triple spirals set down at the three points of an equilateral triangle. The workmanship, too, as displayed by these

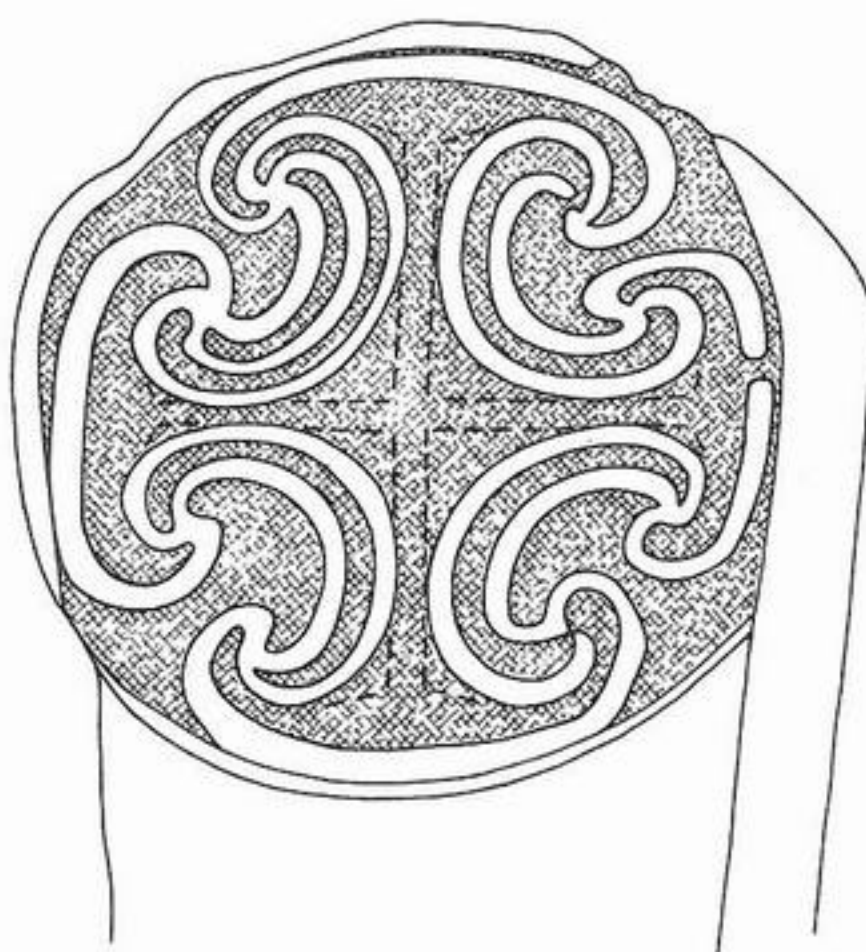
<sup>16</sup>J. Romilly Allen, "Metal Bowls of the Late Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Periods, *Archaeologica*, 56(1898), 40, Fig. 1.



escutcheons, is in the best tradition of the Celtic metalworkers' productions, having been carried out with great care and precision. In this respect there is a strong contrast between this art and that of the print: precision is lacking in the print, and the scrolls of its palmettes are of a type not found previously in Britain. Yet, in all respects, the Chesterton-on-Fossway hanging-bowl is a typical example of a Group B hanging-bowl: with its bent over rim and characteristic Celtic decoration of the escutcheons there would normally have been little to remark upon but for the intrusive nature of the pattern on the print. Belonging essentially to a Group A hanging-bowl tradition it can be seen as a secondary addition to the hanging-bowl.

On the Chesterton-on-Fossway print multiple scrolls are everywhere, springing out in multiples of two, three and four, yet in all essentials they are identical with the scrolled palmettes of the Ardmore stone, particularly in the layout of the pattern. The essential difference is in the centralised hollow boss, presumably put there to fill up space left by the removal of the equal-armed cross. The inclusion of a hollow boss at the centre of the roundel was in accordance with Group B thinking at the time; for hollow bosses or circular voids were superceding centrally placed triple spirals. Otherwise any difference noted between the two representations can be put down to the differences in media. Rather than to have been sweated on to a Group B hanging-bowl, the Chesterton-on-Fossway print would have been more at home on a hanging-bowl within Group A.

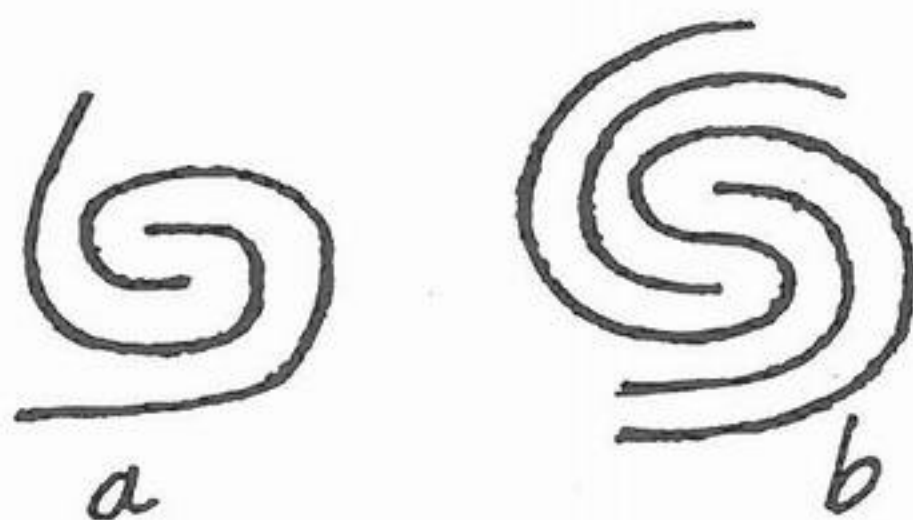
Recognisable similarities in the patterns from Ardmore and from Chesterton-on-Fossway open up a new vista in Celtic Art. These similarities suggest a close connection which is supported by detail; and by detail reference must be made to spirals. When the artist dealt with spirals, it was his custom to take the inner and outer spirals in a triple representation and to join them together by means of an arc, to form a loop. This left the end of the third spiral without any attachment, so it remained sandwiched between the other two. This arrangement is very evident in the case of the pattern on the Chesterton-on-Fossway print (Illus. 3:2); on a decorated roundel from Carrowntemple, Co. Sligo;<sup>17</sup> and



Illus. 4. 'Corrected' (normal) arrangement of innermost scrolls of Ardmore cross-pattern.

<sup>17</sup>P. F. Wallace and M. A. Timoney, *loc. cit.*, p. 48, Illus. 2:3, Slab No. 2.

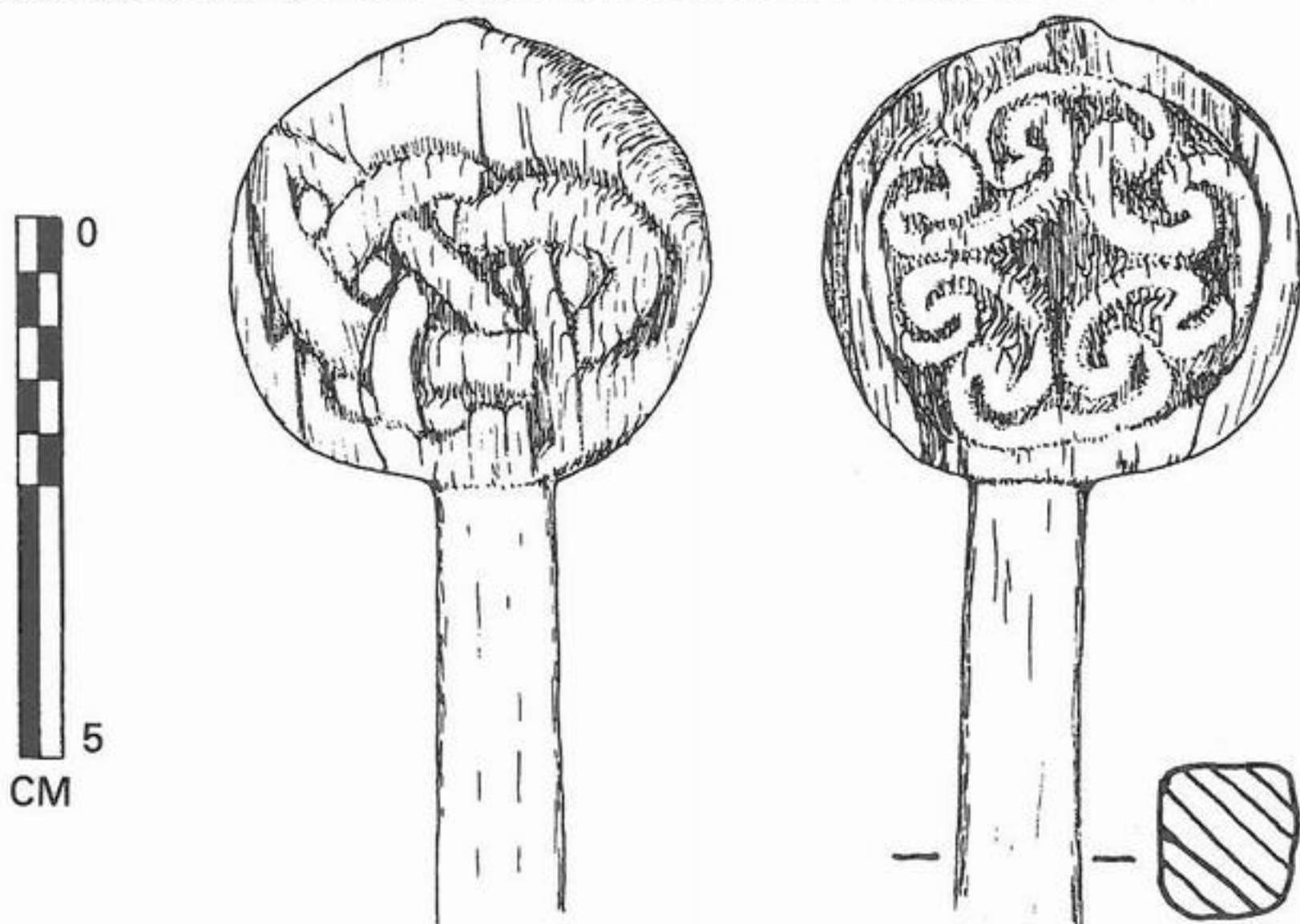




Illus. 5. Decorative details from (a) Stone A at Reask, and from (b) Chesterton-on-Fossway print, the latter being a development of the first.

(remarkably) on the Winchester Print.<sup>18</sup> The whole conception began at Reask (Illus. 5: a & b). Repetition of this development over a large area indicates that it was not one person's whim. Apart from the Winchester print, and temporarily leaving aside the Chesterton-on-Fossway specimen, all other occurrences of the said development known to the author are in Ireland.

Whilst neither the Ardamore nor the Chesterton-on-Fossway quadripartite palmette patterns can be dated with any degree of assurance, a third was found in a late tenth century context at Fishamble Street, Dublin<sup>19</sup> (Illus. 6). The medium is wood, fashioned into what



Illus. 6. Decorated disc-terminal of wooden spoon-handle(?) from Fishamble Street, Dublin.

<sup>18</sup>H. E. Kilbride-Jones, *Celtic Craftsmanship in Bronze*, London 1980, Gig. 82:6.

<sup>19</sup>P. Wallace, *Aspects of Viking Dublin*, No. 6 (Crafts), illustration on p. 2. National Museum Reg. No. E.141:2730.



is generally said to be the handle of a spoon, though the spoon itself is missing. Because of the apparent Christian connotations involved with this pattern, it is possible that this was a christening spoon, a fact which might account for its survival. Comparison of the pattern here with that from Chesterton-on-Fossway indicates that there is no discernable difference in the layout of both of them, differences in detail being due to differences in media, with the exception of course that in the case of the spoon-handle pattern the central hollow boss is missing. However, the boss has no relationship with the pattern, and it can be looked upon as a space filler. Because of the context with which the spoon-handle was associated, it can safely be assumed that the quadripartite scrolled palmette pattern had a long history, perhaps one of three centuries or longer, assuming of course that the Ardamore stone is of seventh century date.

On this spoon-handle there is an association of the quadripartite palmette pattern with interlacing, to be found on the reverse side in the form of a knot, thereby disassociating this product from Chorca Dhuibhne. In Ireland interlacing anticipated the Book of Durrow, which is of early to middle seventh century date. The Book of Durrow knots are double-looped, one to each corner of the pattern, but in the case of the spoon-handle knot a third loop has been introduced between the corner loops, thereby making three. For this arrangement there is a parallel among the interlacing on the gilt panel on a silver sheet of the 'Soiscél Molaise' book-shrine, from Devenish Island, Co. Fermanagh.<sup>20</sup> The silver plate carries an inscription stating that it was redecorated under the direction of Cennefaead, who became abbot in 1001 and died in 1025, thereby placing the interlacing firmly at the beginning of the eleventh century, which is useful confirmation of the late tenth century date for the spoon-handle, and of the survival of a quadripartite palmette pattern first devised in Chorca Dhuibhne in (perhaps) the seventh century.

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There remains the matter of how this quadripartite scrolled palmette pattern reached Britain. Irish influence in Britain was considerable, particularly in that period following upon the rescript of Honorius. In the run up there was the *barbarica conspiratio* of A.D. 369. In 388 the Irish poured into Wales; and both Irish and Welsh sources portray a tribal emigration of the Irish Deisi into Dyfed, headed by their king. This royal family and its descendants were the rulers of Dyfed until the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>21</sup> Irishmen, it seems, were free to sail their boats up and down the Irish Sea.<sup>22</sup> Into the territory of the Silures, whom Tacitus regarded as being Iberian (Hibernians?) came Irish proto-zoomorphic pins as well as brooches of the Initial Form.<sup>23</sup> An Irish pin, once part of a zoomorphic penannular brooch, was found at Silchester,<sup>24</sup> and an Irish hand-pin at St. Albans.<sup>25</sup> At Lydney, in Gloucestershire, the temple dedication was to the Irish god, Nodens. Finally, the spread of oghams into south-west Britain, especially in Dyfed,<sup>26</sup> is a rough guide to the extent of Irish settlement. These oghams appear on upright stones and slabs, running up and down at well defined corners, using the straight edges of the stones as the basal line.

<sup>20</sup>*Treasures of Early Irish Art, 1500 B.C. to 1500 A.D.*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, No. 57, p. 182.

<sup>21</sup>C. Thomas, *Celtic Britain*, London 1986, p. 114.

<sup>22</sup>H. Williams, *Gildas I*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>23</sup>G. C. Boon, "Two Celtic Pins from Margam Beach, West Glamorgan", *Antiq. J.*, 55(1975), 400.

<sup>24</sup>G. C. Boon, "The Latest Objects from Silchester, Hants", *Medieval Archaeology*, 3(1959), 86, pl. III, Bl.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Biddle, "Saint Albans", *Current Archaeology*, 101(1986), 183.

<sup>26</sup>C. Fox, *The Personality of Britain*, Cardiff 1952 (4th edition), Fig. 19; see also Leslie Alcock's map in D. Moore (ed.), *The Irish Sea Province in Archaeology and History*, Cardiff 1967, pp. 55-65.



In Ireland most of the three hundred and fifty, or more, oghams are heavily concentrated in the counties of Kerry, Cork and Waterford, whence the traditional crossing of the sea was made to south Wales. One third of all oghams occur in Kerry, with no less than sixty occurring in Chorca Dhuibhne.<sup>27</sup> The authors of the Chorca Dhuibhne Survey suggest that these oghams were associated with the pre-Patrician church, and that they represent the earliest known Irish script. Of course, art-forms known to the church could have travelled in like manner, and with the oghams.

As to the history of the palmette itself, about which little has been said, it was used as decoration on Greek vases, after which in western Europe it appears on wine flagons (Besancon, France) before its general adoption by the Celts for incorporation in decoration on ceremonial objects, such as the hanging-bowl from Cerrig-y-Drudion, Wales, and the famous Battersea shield as well as for horn-caps on ceremonial chariots. Its appearance in the form of voids on the ovoid escutcheons assures its continuance on ceremonial objects. In Chorca Dhuibhne the palmette acquired Christian respectability, hence its appearance as terminals on cross shafts, and again in multiple form and associated with an equal-armed cross on the Ardamore stone. Its Christian overtones remained even after the removal of the central cross, for in itself the pattern was considered to have been sufficiently cruciform in character; and thus it remained untrammelled by further alteration for at least three centuries, as the Fishamble Street spoon-handle has demonstrated.

So, in view of all the similarities with the two Irish examples, it is easy to see whence came the inspiration behind the pattern on the print from Chesterton-on-Fossway: the bronzesmith who fashioned this print probably came to the west of Britain, not necessarily to Chesterton-on-Fossway itself, but in the wake of the oghams, and there he continued to practise his trade. However, none of the pieces examined here would have carried this form of decoration had it not been for the stated development of the scrolled palmette in Chorca Dhuibhne where the pre-Patrician church had established itself, all of which provided the background for the present study.

#### Acknowledgements

To Professor Etienne Rynne an especial word of thanks for his presenting me with a copy of the *Chorca Dhuibhne Archaeological Survey*, for drawing my attention to the Fishamble Street spoon-handle, for obtaining a drawing of same, and for his co-operation and encouragement. I also wish to thank Dr. P. F. Wallace, of the National Museum of Ireland, and Mr. Con Manning, of the National Parks and Monuments Branch, Office of Public Works, for kindly providing the drawing of the Fishamble spoon-handle and the photograph of the Ardamore cross-slab, respectively.

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<sup>27</sup>J. Cuppage, *loc. cit.*, p. 247.