

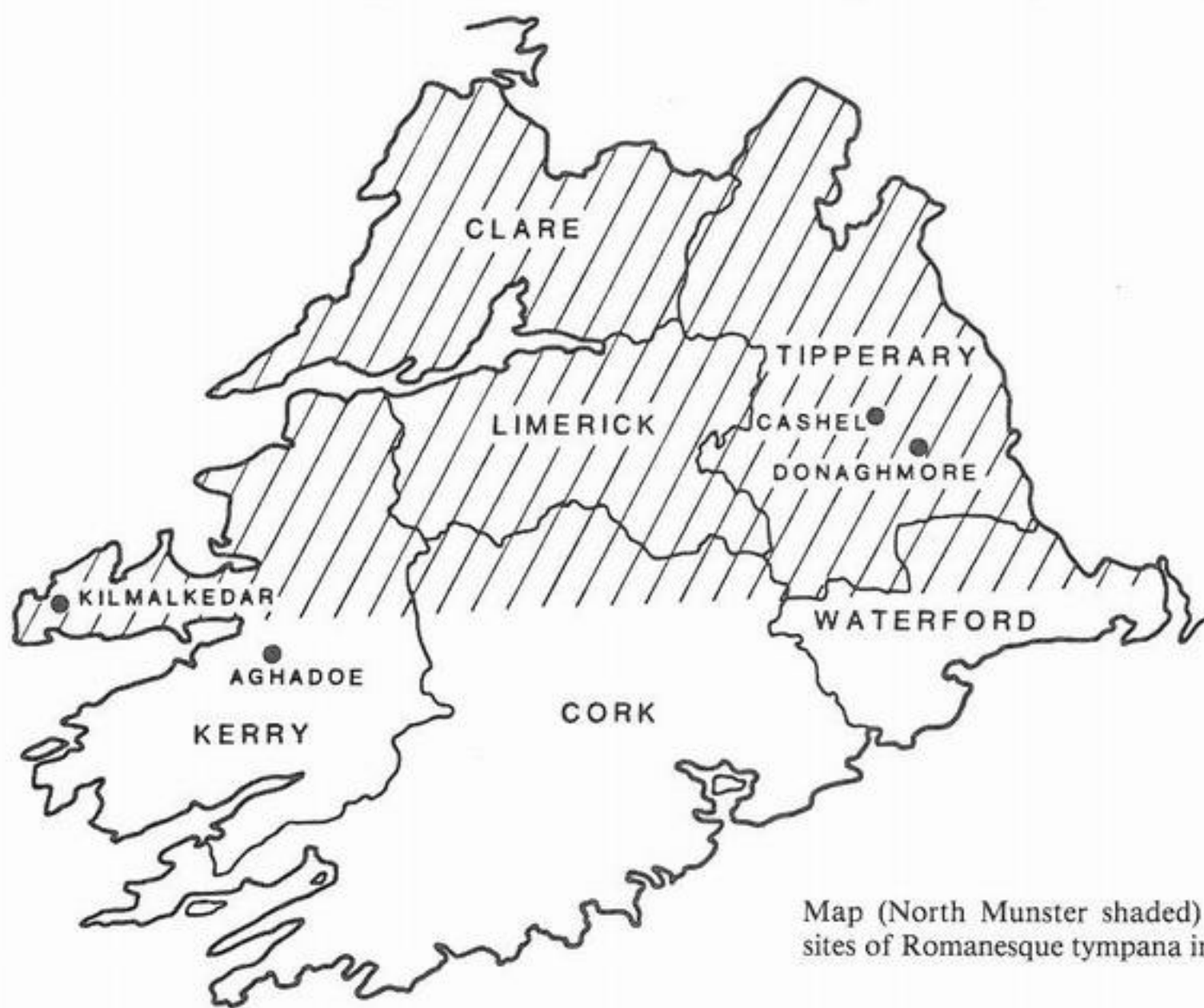
Evidence for a Tympanum at Aghadoe, Co. Kerry

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Tympana are unusual in the Irish Romanesque, only four being previously known, all in North Munster. Recently, however, evidence for the former presence of an apparently wooden tympanum was noted in the Romanesque doorway dated 1158 at Aghadoe, just outside the North Munster area.

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Cormac's Chapel, on the Rock of Cashel, "is an entity, a piece of Romanesque architecture, as hardly any other Irish Romanesque church is".¹ In this Cormac's Chapel is indeed unique in Ireland, the Romanesque of other Irish churches consisting of individual features and/or art applied mostly to pre-Romanesque-type stone buildings or, as so well put, "Romanesque growths engrafted on an Irish stock".² Among the distinctive and innovative Romanesque features found in Cormac's Chapel, which dates from 1127-1134 and "stands at or near the beginning of the Irish Romanesque series",³ are the tympana



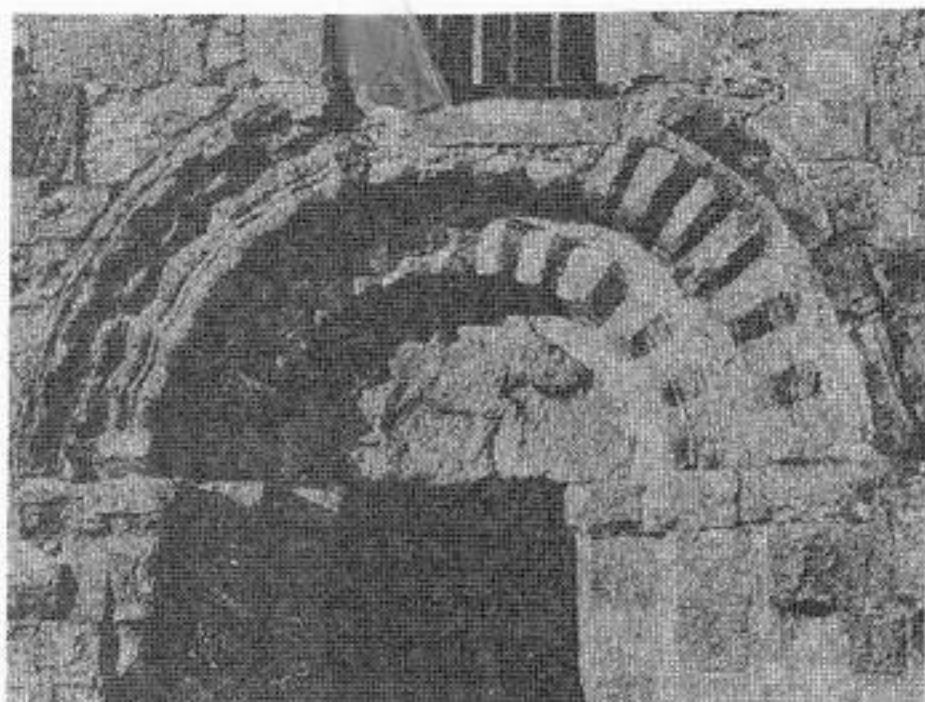
Map (North Munster shaded) showing sites of Romanesque tympana in Ireland.

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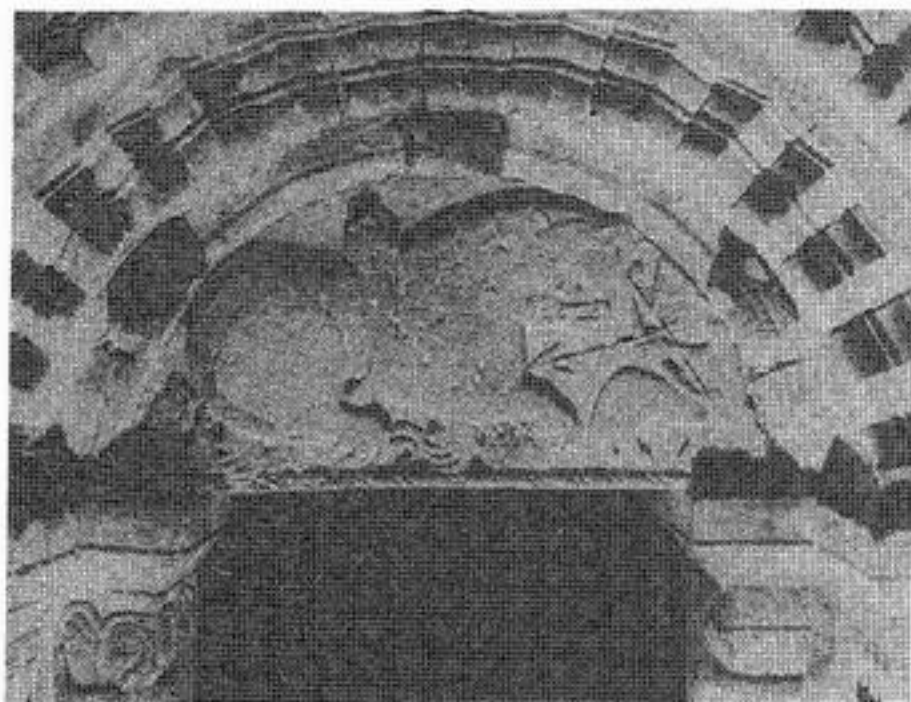
¹L. de Paor, "Cormac's Chapel: the beginnings of Irish Romanesque", in *North Munster Studies, Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney* (ed. E. Rynne), Limerick 1967, p. 142.

²W. P. Burke, "Donoughmore", *J. Waterford & Sth.-East of Ireland Archaeol. Soc.*, 2(1896), 32.

³de Paor, *loc. cit.*

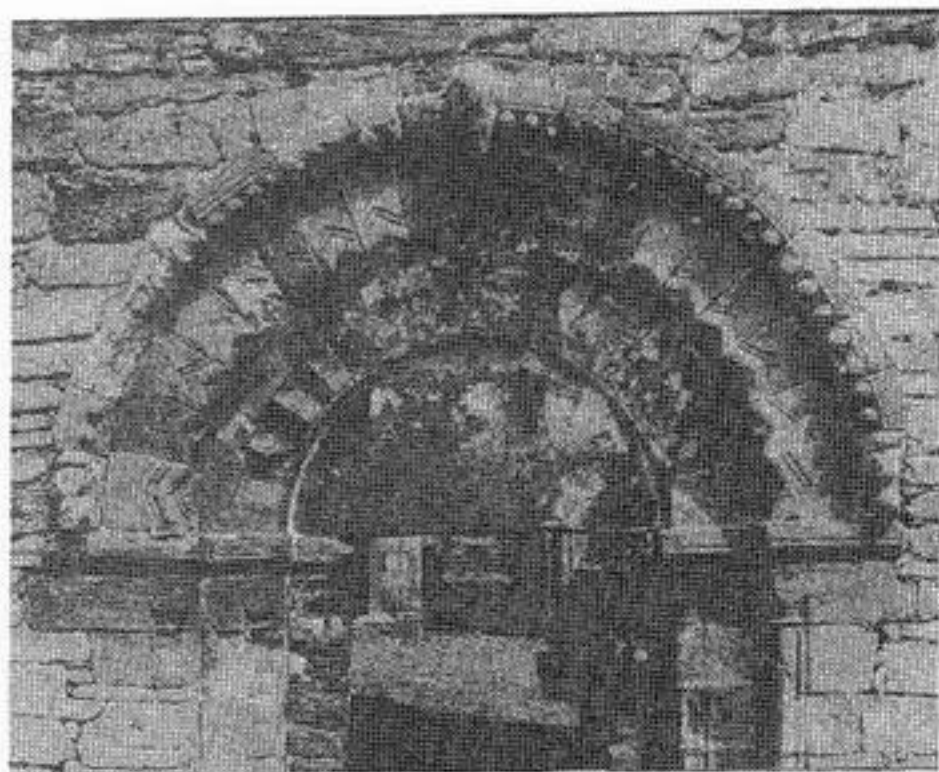


Illus. 1. Tympanum in South doorway, Cormac's Chapel, Cashel.
(Photo: Comm. of Public Works, Ireland)

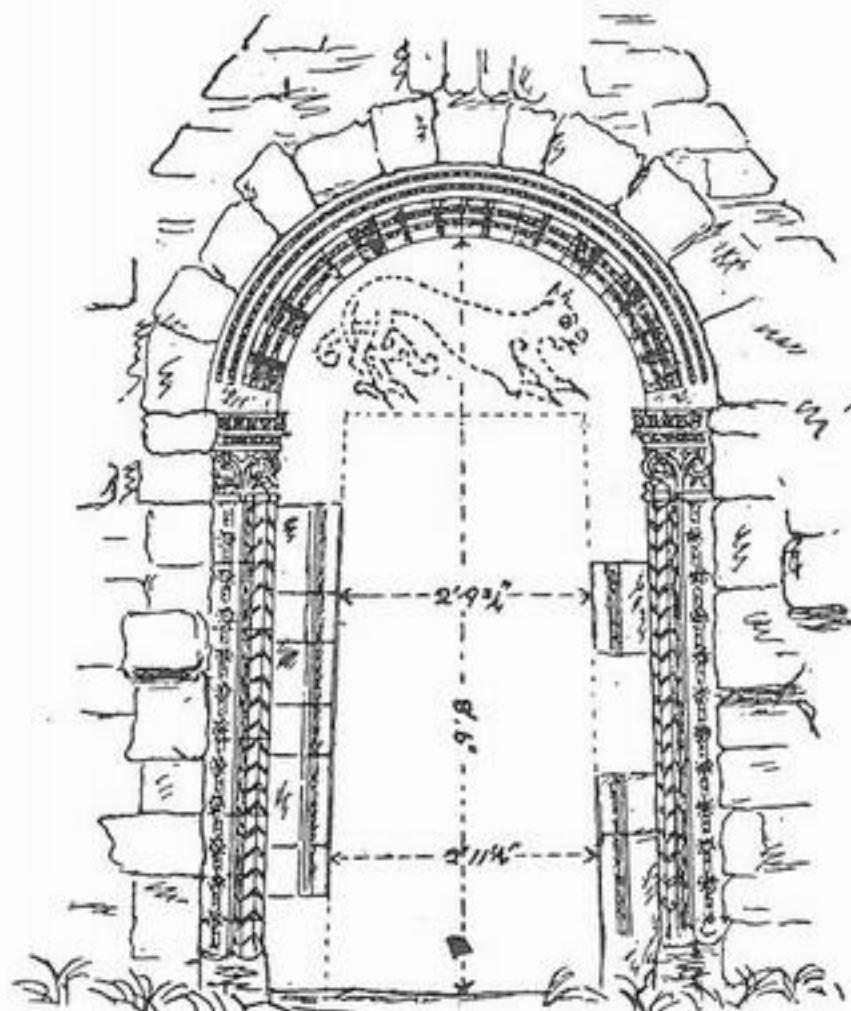


Illus. 2. Tympanum in North doorway, Cormac's Chapel, Cashel.
(Photo: Comm. of Public Works, Ireland)

in its two doorways (Illus. 1 and 2). In contrast, one of the more notable characteristics of Irish Romanesque churches is the absence of tympana. Kilmalkedar, on the western tip of the Dingle Peninsula, a church which shows strong influence from Cormac's Chapel and which is probably not very much later in date, has a tympanum over its Romanesque western doorway (Illus. 3)—its inner face bears a carved animal head in high relief but unlike the two at Cashel its outer, obviously more important, face is plain and undecorated and clearly must have been originally painted. Donaghmore, Co. Tipperary, also had a tympanum (now destroyed) which was apparently carved with an animal design (Illus. 4) somewhat similar to those at Cashel.⁴ But apart from those four examples, two at Cashel



Illus. 3. Tympanum in West doorway, Kilmalkedar, Co. Kerry.
(Photo: Comm. of Public Works, Ireland)

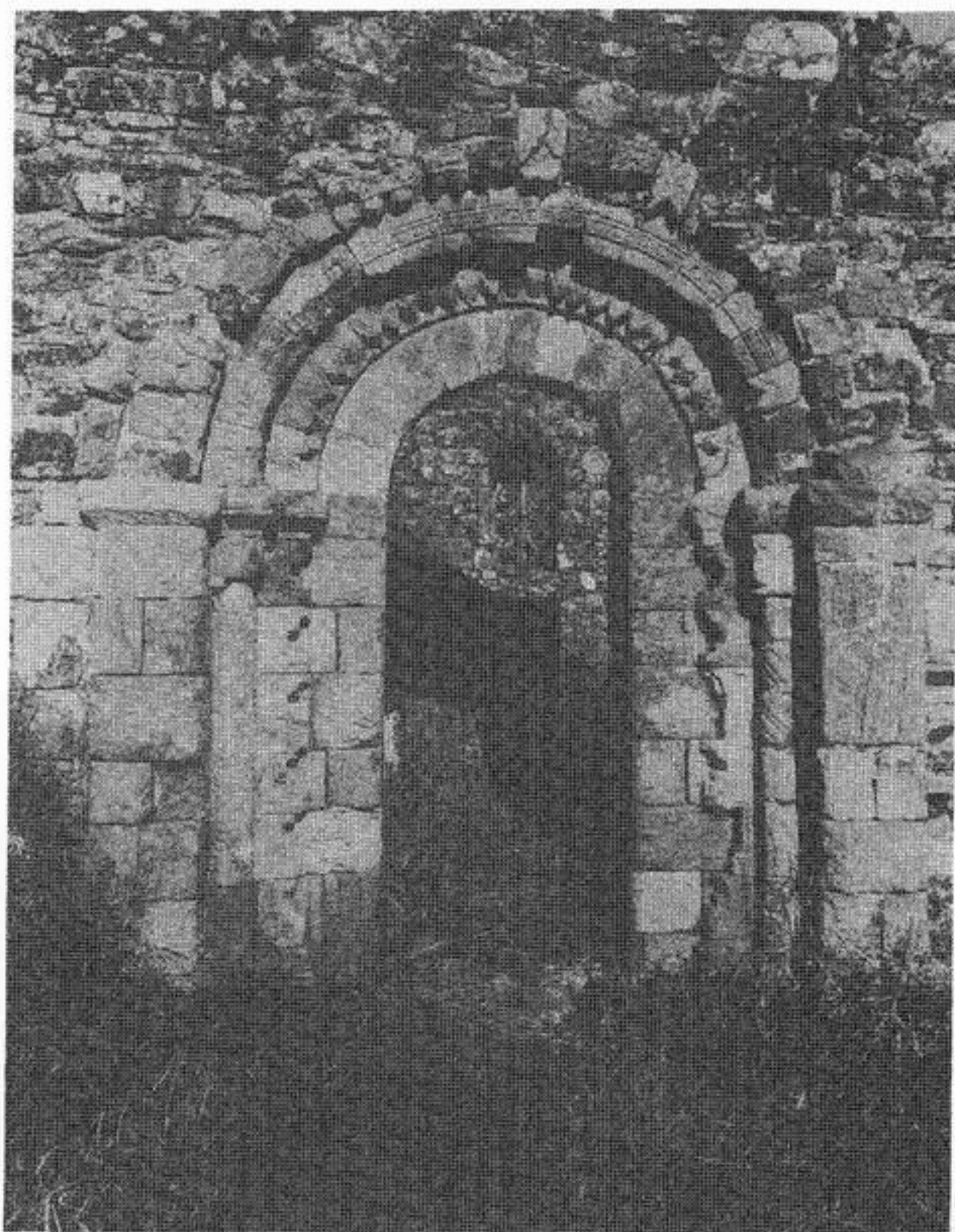


Illus. 4. Doorway at Donaghmore, Co. Tipperary, showing version of tympanum as 'restored' by W. P. Burke, 1896.

⁴Burke, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-29; H. S. Crawford, "Donaghmore Church, Co. Tipperary", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 39(1909), 262; de Paor, *op. cit.*, p. 136; P. Harbison, "Tipperary Romanesque", in *Tipperary Remembers* (ed. W. J. Hayes), Thurles(?) 1976, p. 56.

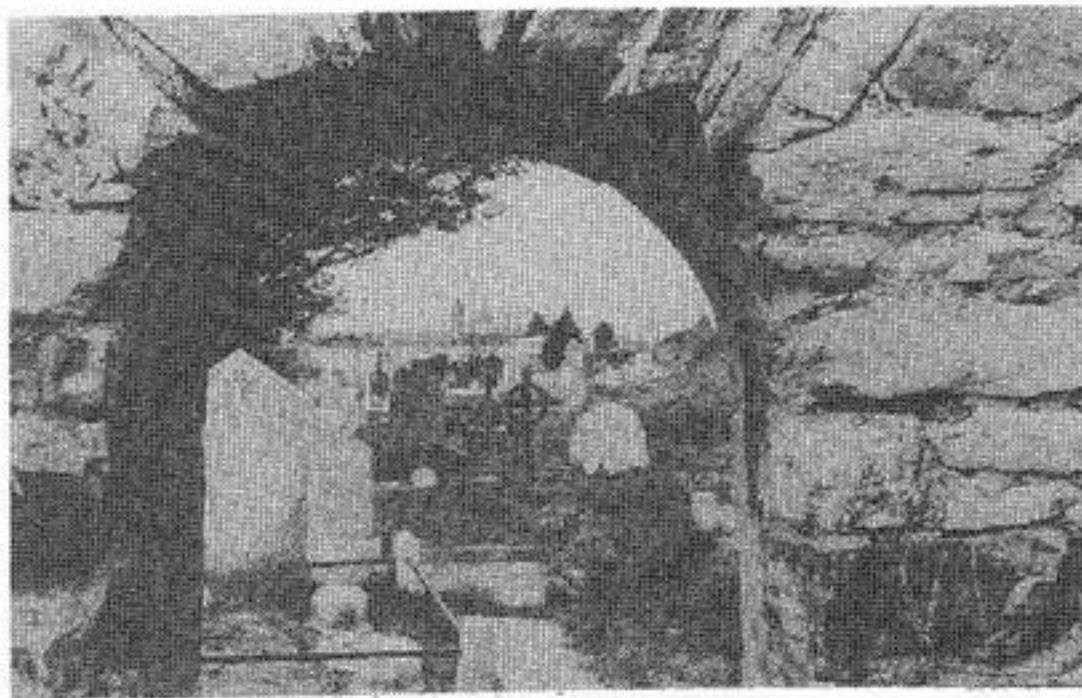
and one each at Kilmalkedar and Donaghmore, all in North Munster (see map), true tympana are unknown in Irish Romanesque churches.

One of the churches included by de Paor in his Munster group of Romanesque buildings, a group of earlier type related to Cormac's Chapel, is that at Aghadoe, near Killarney, Co. Kerry, just a few miles south of North Munster. One of the very few closely dated Romanesque churches, it is annalistically dated to 1158, having been completed in that year by Amhlaibh, mac Aonghus Ó Donnchadha.⁵ In 1981, when visiting Aghadoe, evidence for the former presence of a tympanum in the west doorway there (Illus. 5) was noted by the writer. This consists of a rebate, averaging 3.5cm. by 8cm., which is at the back of the arch (Illus. 6), and which starts at the back of the arch springers; it does not continue down the doorway's jambs, resulting in the top edges of the jamb imposts forming small ledges acting as closing stops at either end of the bottom of the rebate (Illus. 7 and 8). Such a rebate could only have served one useful purpose: the retention of a tympanum.

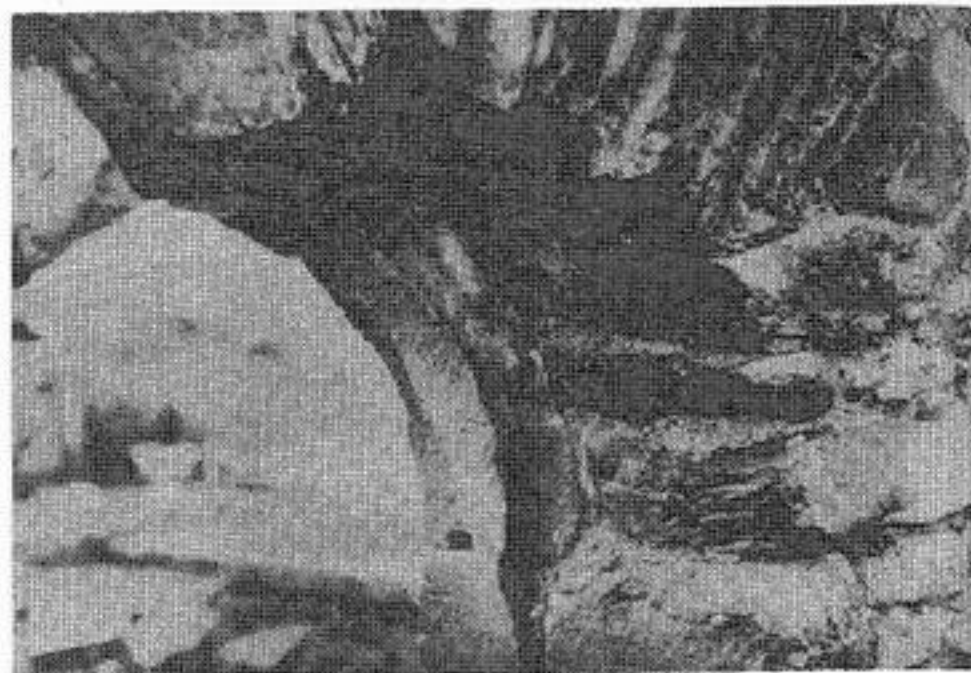
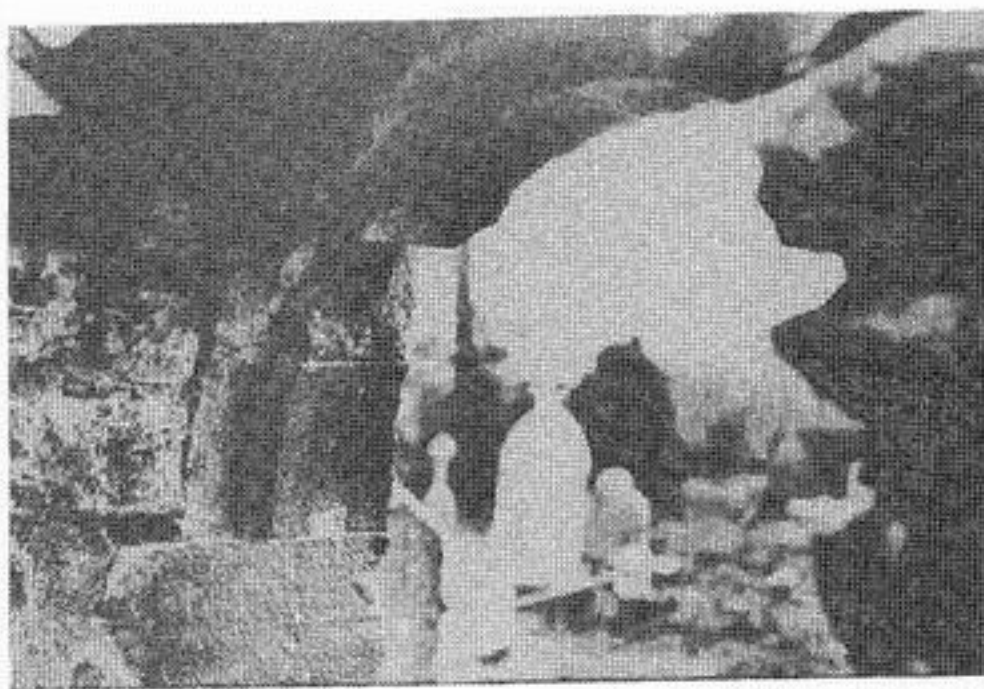


Illus. 5. West doorway, Aghadoe, Co. Kerry.
(Photo: Comm. of Public Works, Ireland)

⁵*Miscellaneous Irish Annals (A.D. 1114-1437)*, ed. S. Ó hInnse, Dublin 1947, *sub anno* 1158:6.



Illus. 6. Back of arch of West doorway, Aghadoe. (Photo: E. Rynne)



Illus. 7 and 8. Rear views of arch of West doorway, Aghadoe, showing ends of rebate for a tympanum. (Photos: T. Fanning)

But what kind of tympanum? Probably not one of stone, as such would not be easily supported on such narrow (3.5cm.) ledges nor balanced within such a rebate without bonding or otherwise anchoring in position. However, the twelfth century was a period in which wooden pieces were apparently often used in conjunction with stone sculpture, witness the evidence of mortice-holes cut in uncarved areas on High Crosses at Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo,⁶ Tuam, Co. Galway,⁷ Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare,⁸ and Roscrea, Co. Tipperary,⁹ and it is therefore very likely, indeed probable, that a carved wooden tympanum may have been used at Aghadoe. There is little doubt but that Romanesque carvings, and also, indeed, the High Crosses (of all periods), were originally painted, something which would disguise any too obvious differences between stone sculpture and associated wooden elements. The tympanum at Aghadoe would have measured 88cm. in breadth at base, 45cm. in height, and 8cm. in thickness.

The evidence for a tympanum at Aghadoe not only further emphasises the close relationships of de Paor's Munster group of Romanesque buildings, but also suggests that re-examination of other Romanesque doorways in Ireland might well provide similar interesting results.

⁶F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period (1020-1170 A.D.)*, London 1970, Pl. 61.

⁷*J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 21(1890-91), Fig. 2, facing p. 31; R. Stalley, "The Romanesque Sculpture of Tuam", *BAR International Ser.*, 111(1981), Pl. 13:1.

⁸Henry, *op. cit.*, Pls. 47 and 60; F. Henry, *Irish High Crosses*, Dublin 1964, Pl. 62.

⁹Henry, *op. cit.*, (1970), Pl. 58.