

Two Romanesque Carvings from Rath Blathmaic and Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare

PETER HARBISON*

County Clare never fails to amaze with the richness and variety of its twelfth-century sculpture in the local Romanesque style. Most of it is already well-known—some of it illustrated in earlier numbers of this Journal—but further examples do occasionally come to light, and two of these are the subject of this brief note.

* * * *

Rath Blathmaic

The ruined church of Rath, 3 km. south-south-east of Corofin, is best known for its Romanesque window decorated with a Sheela-na-Gig, first illustrated by the indefatigable Westropp¹ in his study of the building. However, when a recent FÁS scheme removed ivy from the walls, Seán Ó Murchadha, Chairperson of the Executive Committee of the Clare Historical and Archaeological Society, rediscovered another interesting sculpture which I had been shown by the late John Hunt around 1970. It is a piece of limestone (Illus. 1), measuring 76 × 26 × 37 cm., which has been built horizontally into the exterior south-

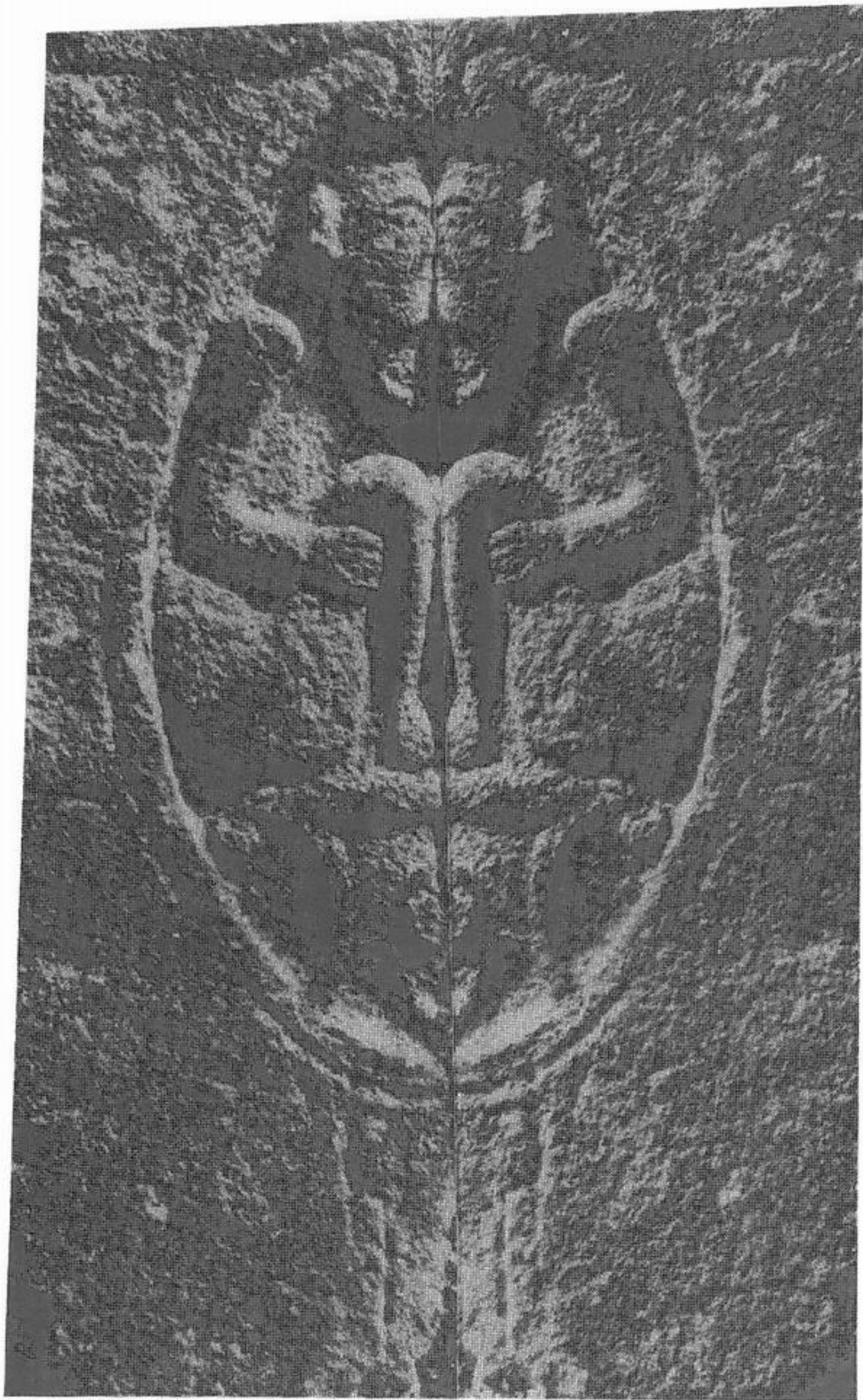


Illus. 1. Rath church. Figure-carved Romanesque stone, shown in its present horizontal position on the external east wall of the chancel.

(Photo: P. Harbison)

*An Bord Fáilte, Baginbun Street Bridge, Dublin 2.

¹T. J. Westropp, "Churches with Round Towers in Northern Clare", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 24(1894), 30-34, and 30(1900), 418-419. See also *ibid.*, "The Churches of County Clare", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 22(1900), 143.



Illus. 2. Rath church. The Romanesque carved figure placed vertically in a photo-montage with a mirror-image to provide an exaggerated idea of the full carving, and a fortuitous side-effect of making the man look more like a monkey.

(Photo: P. Harbison)

eastern corner of the chancel, facing east, but which must have originally stood upright. Only half of the carving is now visible; the other half, on what is now the upper face and presently covered by masonry, is likely to be a mirror image of what is currently exposed on the east face (compare the exaggerated photo-montage, Illus 2). What we can see is a small figure with a long, thin, bearded face and an ear placed high up on the side of the head—a typically Romanesque characteristic.² He sits on his haunches, balancing on an elegant stool, his shoulders possibly clothed, and with his hands holding his tucked-up legs, which were presumably placed close together so as not to expose his private parts—unlike the Sheela-na-Gig. He is framed in an oblong, almost mandorla-like setting which curls in at the top, where it joins a simple flat moulding running along what must surely have been the top of the stone originally. Beneath the frame there are also traces of a moulding, which seems to curl outwards into a tendril at the top.

Along with the very decorative stool, one feature which makes this carving so unusual in the corpus of Irish Romanesque sculpture is the oblong frame curving inwards at the top. A mandorla-like frame is found on Corinthian capitals with similarly-curving corner volutes on French Romanesque churches, as at Saint-Benoît-sur-Loire,³ Cluny⁴ and Vezelay.⁵ While the two elements are not combined there, as at Rath, the comparison is sufficiently remarkable for us to speculate that the Rath sculptor may have found inspiration for his design on some twelfth-century church in France⁶ or Spain. However, I have failed to find any comparable continental figure crouched on a stool which might help in identifying the Rath figure. John Hunt suggested to me that it might represent a devil, though there is nothing to identify it positively as such. A figure crouching in a somewhat similar manner on the north side of the base of the North Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare,⁷ may be an angel, as it seems to have wings, which are, however, absent at Rath.

Leaving aside for the moment the problem of identifying the Rath figure, we may turn to the question of the former position of this stone in the original church. Known Irish Romanesque portals would not suggest that it formed part of a doorway and, despite the presence of figure sculpture on the chancel arch at Kilteel, Co. Kildare,⁸ it is difficult to envisage how it could have fitted into a chancel arch at Rath, if such existed, as is quite probable. However, the present position of the stone in the outside of the chancel wall may well recall a memory of its original position in an external wall of the church. On the basis of the mouldings on the quoins, or corner-stones, of the Dysert O'Dea church, and others of a similar nature now used to support the High Cross in the adjoining field, the moulding under the oblong frame of the Rath stone could suggest that it may once have adorned the top of one corner of the church, where the figure may have functioned symbolically as a more circumspect and chaste male counterpart of the Sheela-na-Gig in keeping watch over, and warding off evil from, those entering or already inside the church. One thing, however, is certain, and that is that the original Romanesque church at Rath appears to have been unique in Ireland in its decorative sculpture, making it very much an 'exotic' in the Clare landscape of the twelfth century, perhaps inspired by some features noticed by the stone mason in churches of France and Spain.

²Compare E. Rynne, "Face carved on a Boulder at Clonroad More, Ennis", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 27(1985), 79-80.

³R. Oursel, *Floraion de la Sculpture Romane* (La Pierre qui Vire, 1973), Pls. 86-87.

⁴B. Rupprecht, M. and A. Hirmer, *Romanische Skulptur in Frankreich* (Munich, 1975), e.g. Taf. 144.

⁵Rupprecht and Hirmer, *op. cit.*, Taf. 163, top right.

⁶Compare F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period, 1020-1170 A.D.*, London 1970, pp. 155 and 164.

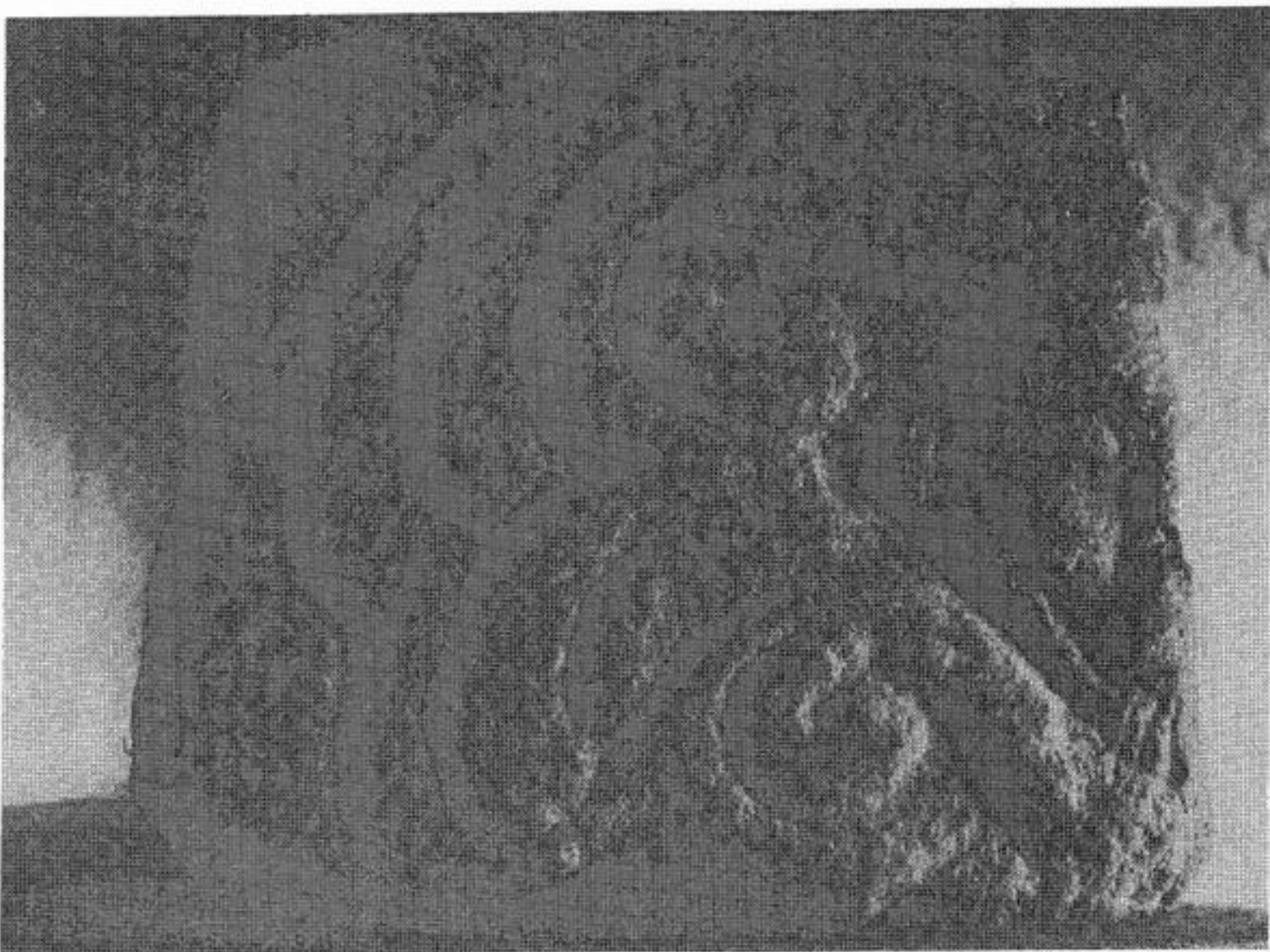
⁷F. Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions, 800-1020 A.D.*, London 1967, Pl. 68.

⁸H. G. Leask, "Carved Stones discovered at Kilteel, Co. Kildare", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland* 65(1935), 1-8; C. Manning, "Excavation at Kilteel Church, Co. Kildare", *J. Kildare Archaeo. Soc.*, 16:3(1981-82), 173-229.



Illus. 3. Frontal view of the Romanesque head-capital found at Dysert O'Dea, and now displayed in the Archaeology Centre at Dysert castle.

(Photo: P. Harbison)



Illus. 4. View of one side of the Romanesque head-capital found at Dysert O'Dea, and now on display at Dysert castle.

(Photo: P. Harbison)

Dysert O'Dea

It was the same Seán Ó Murchadha who, some years ago, found in a heap of rubble outside the wall of Dysert O'Dea churchyard a corner capital, 30 cm. high, which he subsequently deposited in the Archaeology Centre at Dysert Castle, where it is now displayed (Illus. 3-4). It bears at the corner a head sloping outwards and downwards towards the chin, and placed in luxuriating foliage emanating from above and below the head, before spreading out to cover the two unequal sides of the capital. The stone is flat on top, but uneven beneath, which poses the question as to whether it actually served as a capital, or is to be regarded as the practice piece of an apprentice? The lack of a roll moulding which we might expect along the bottom, need not prevent us from accepting it as a capital, for two comparable examples from Duleek, Co. Meath, and Inisfallen on the Lakes of Killarney⁹ also lack such a moulding. They, too, are lying loose on their respective sites, so that we must ask the question—in which part (if any) of the church at Dysert did our corner capital serve?

Face capitals are found on both the doorways and chancel arches of Romanesque churches in Ireland. Sadly, however, the capitals of the present south doorway in Dysert church do not offer any help in settling the question, firstly because their height (20 and 22 cm. respectively) suggests that they belong to a different series, and secondly because the doorway—being an amalgam of pieces likely to be from different arches—does not help us in identifying where the individual parts belonged originally. Furthermore, the visible lack of any voussoirs and capitals which we might expect to have been present in or around the Romanesque church at Rath only 2 km. away, linked with the local legend¹⁰ of the removal to Dysert O'Dea of a Round Tower at Rath, can only lend support to the shrewd suspicion voiced some ninety years ago by Dr. George Unthank Macnamara¹¹ that some of the stones in the Dysert doorway may have been garnered from Rath—rather than from Limerick, as suggested by Francoise Henry¹²—in order to provide enough material to make up the Dysert doorway when it was assembled, perhaps in the seventeenth century (?by Conor O'Dea, who also re-erected the High Cross). That same suspicion could also theoretically apply to the head capital under consideration here, and even to some of the stones supporting the High Cross. The question must arise, then, as to which pieces might have come from Rath, and which stones now in the south doorway may once have belonged to a Romanesque chancel arch which is likely to have existed at Dysert before being swept away to make room for the existing arch built probably in the first half of the thirteenth century—a process to create more room, which may also have been practised at Rath?

Clearly, a detailed analysis of all the decorative stonework surviving from Dysert and Rath needs to be undertaken in conjunction with one another before any conjectural reconstruction of either or both churches could be attempted, as the *disjecta membra* from these two locations present interlinked problems which clamour for a joint solution.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Risteárd Ó Cróinín for facilities in photographing the head in his Archaeological Centre at Dysert, and Seán Ó Murchadha for his courtesy in allowing me to publish his discovery.

⁹H. G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, Vol. I, Dundalk 1955, p. 100.

¹⁰Westropp, *op. cit.* (1894).

¹¹G. Macnamara, "The Ancient Stone Crosses of Uí Fearmaic, County Clare", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 29(1899), 254.

¹²Henry, *op. cit.* (note 6), p. 169, note 1.