

# A Bronze Bell-Crest from the Rock of Cashel, Co. Tipperary

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*The object which forms the subject of this note was recently found on the Rock of Cashel, Co. Tipperary. It is a cast bronze bell-crest datable to the late eleventh or early twelfth century. Its importance extends beyond its association with the famed ecclesiastical capital of Munster: its ornament testifies to the impact late Viking art-styles had on Irish metalworking traditions of the period, while its overall form has certain dating implications for a number of other, plainer bells.*

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A bronze bell-crest was recently found in spoil derived from the earthen floor of the croft above the nave of Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel, Co. Tipperary. A trial excavation, carried out there in 1988, under the supervision of Dr. Anne Lynch of the Office of Public Works, revealed that this floor had been laid down in relatively recent times, possibly in connection with the croft's use as a Sunday School in the nineteenth century. It would therefore appear quite likely that the object had inadvertently been introduced into the croft with this material.<sup>1</sup> Originally it may have derived from the same context as a group of miscellaneous objects discovered "in open space between Cormac's Chapel and the main building of Cashel Cathedral" in 1877, which are now housed in the National Museum of Ireland (Cahill 1982, pp. 99-101).

## DESCRIPTION

The object (Illus. 1 & 2) may be identified as a bell-crest to which a small portion of sheet-bronze is attached. The crest consists of two individual components, viz. an arched handle with curving cap and a vertical rod with a suspension knob. Both components are separately cast, and the former exhibits both cast and incised ornament.

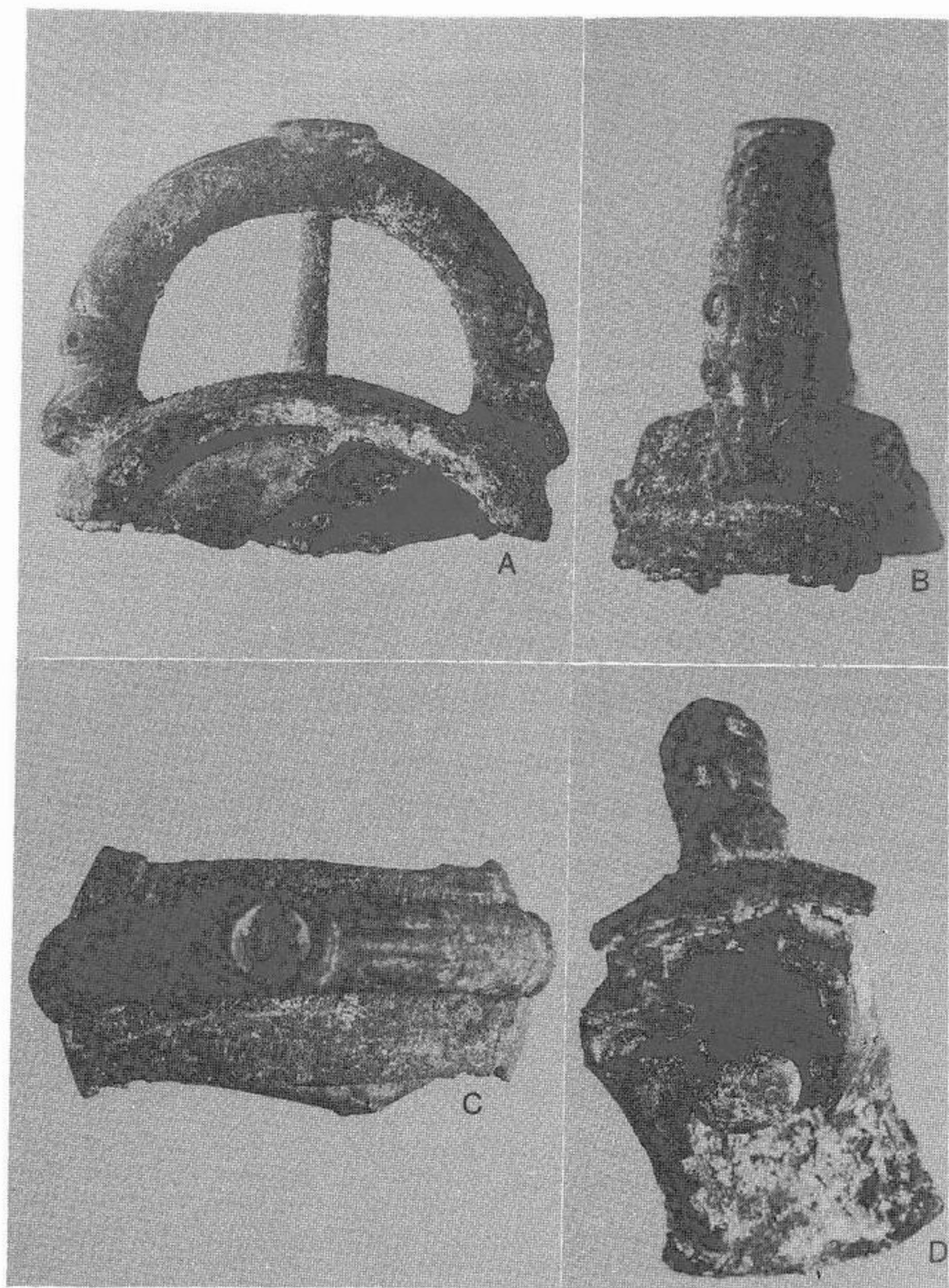
### Handle and Cap

This casting comprises an arched handle of approximately semi-circular form which surmounts a broad curving cap (Illus. 2,A). The latter element, which is curved in both its long- and cross-sections, expands slightly in width towards the ends, on both sides of which there are traces of single rivet-holes. The long sides of the crest are bevelled. Around the edges of its upper surface is a continuous band of incised diagonal hatching (Illus. 2,B and D).

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<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank Dr. Lynch for discussing the context of the find with him. Other material which was found in the croft includes brick, charred wood, bottle-glass, plaster fragments, 19th century clay-pipe fragments and window glass (including three fragments of possible medieval date). Quantities of human, animal and fish bone also occurred.





Illus. 1. The Cashel bell-crest: **A** frontal view; **B** side view; **C** view of top; **D** view of underside.  
 (Photos: U.C.C. Audio-Visual Services)



The arched handle is of approximately circular cross-section and is positioned somewhat asymmetrically on the crest. This may indicate that it was cast separately and soldered onto the cap, though this does not seem to be the case. An oval setting with a series of punched dots on its rim is located on top of the handle (Illus. 2,D). It is empty, but probably originally contained a stud. From either side of it a low, plain, rounded band sweeps centrally down the handle to the animal-headed terminals, giving them a mane-like effect (Illus. 2,B). These terminals are very neatly cast and feature prominent, rounded ears and deep, V-shaped brows with slightly curled tips at the ends. The eyes are almond-shaped, with the point towards the rear, and exhibit deep circular pupils which may originally have contained inset glass beads. The animals' snouts are emphasized by raised bands which extend downwards from the centre of the brows and terminate in a nose-like gentle swelling. Each head has a pair of moustaches in the form of S-shaped tendrils with scrolled and lobed frontal terminals and simple curled tips at the rear (Illus. 2,A and B).

### Knobbed Rod

This is a cast tapering rod of circular cross-section at the wider end of which is a horizontally perforated spheroid. It is inserted through a perforation in the crown of the sheet-bronze and is carried through two further perforations in the cap and handle of the crest. Its top is secured at the base of the handle's oval setting by splaying (Illus. 2,C). The spheroid functioned as the suspension device for the bell's now missing tongue or clapper. The vertical, tapering rod bisects the semi-circular form of the bell-crest itself (Illus. 2,A).

### Sheet-Bronze Fragment

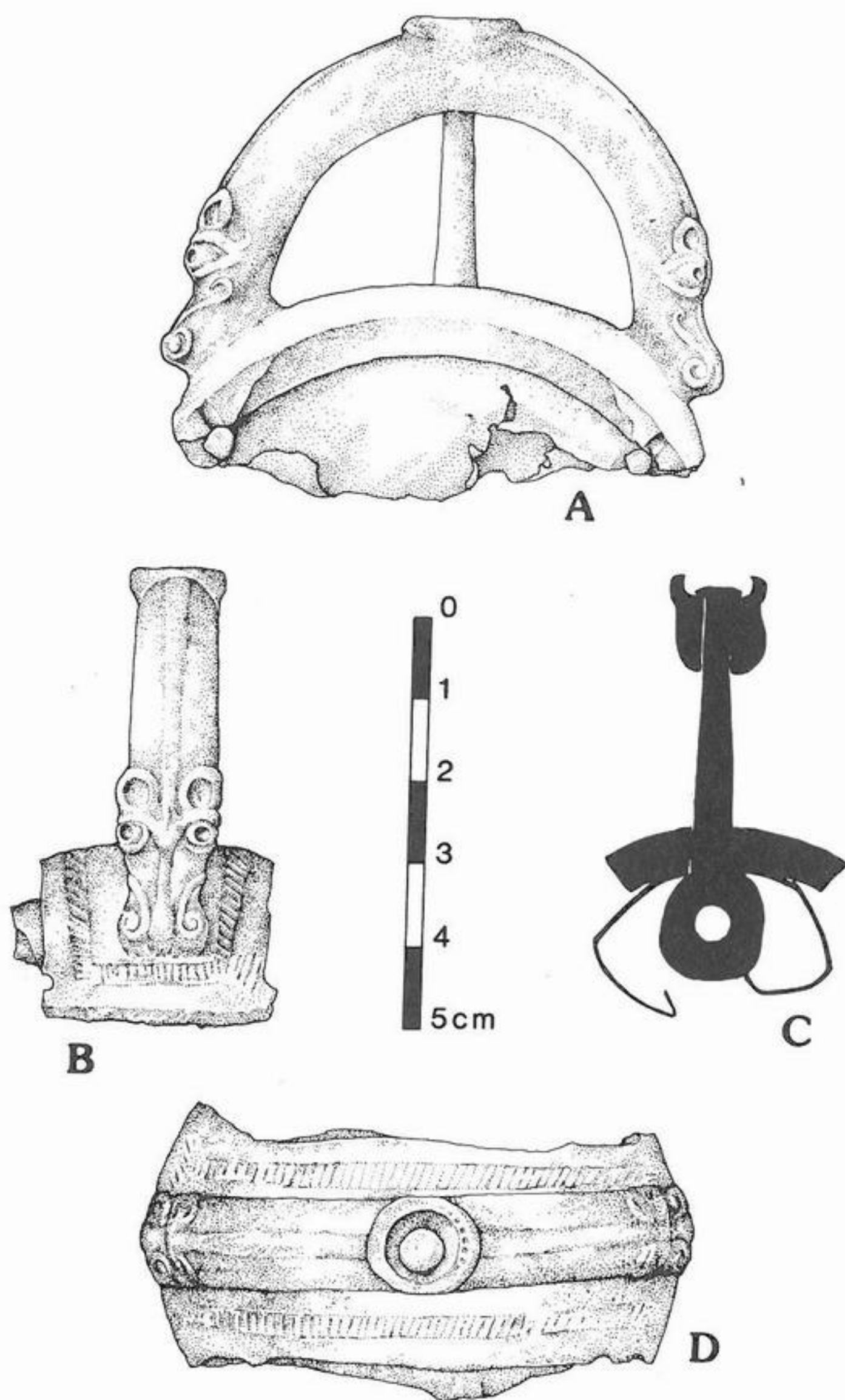
Secured to the underside of the cap is a portion of thin sheet-bronze which may have formed the body of the bell (see below). Its ragged edges are folded inward (Illus. 2,C). In addition to being held in position by the knobbed rod, it had been fixed to the long sides of the cap by four small bronze rivets. Two of these are still attached to the fragment of sheet bronze (Illus. 2,A).

Overall width of handle, 69mm; internal radius of handle, 44mm; average thickness of handle, 10.5mm × 9.5mm; external diameters of handle setting, 14mm × 12mm; maximum length of cap, 65mm; minimum width of cap, 28mm; maximum width of cap, 32mm; thickness of cap, 4.5mm; average width of incised band in cap, 2.5mm; length of knobbed rod, 48mm; maximum thickness of knobbed rod, 5.5mm; minimum thickness of knobbed rod, 3mm; dimensions of suspension knob, 14.5mm × 14mm × 9.5mm; diameter of perforation, 4mm; thickness of sheet-bronze, 0.5mm.

## DISCUSSION

### Ornament

The incised band of diagonal hatching which occurs on the upper surface of the cap of the Cashel bell-crest (Illus. 2,B and D) is unusual in metalwork of the period. It is by no means unique, however. On the Cross of Cong, for instance, datable by its inscription to between 1127 and 1136 (Henry 1970, p. 77), the narrow bands which frame the inscription are hatched. So, too, are the ribbons which form the bodies of the Urnes-style animals on the faces of the cross (*ibid.*, Pl. 43). Related animals are a major feature of St. Manchan's Shrine, for which a date range of 1128-1136 has been proposed (*ibid.*, p. 111). The sides of the ridges on the underside of the Tau crozier-head from Kilkenny also bear hatching



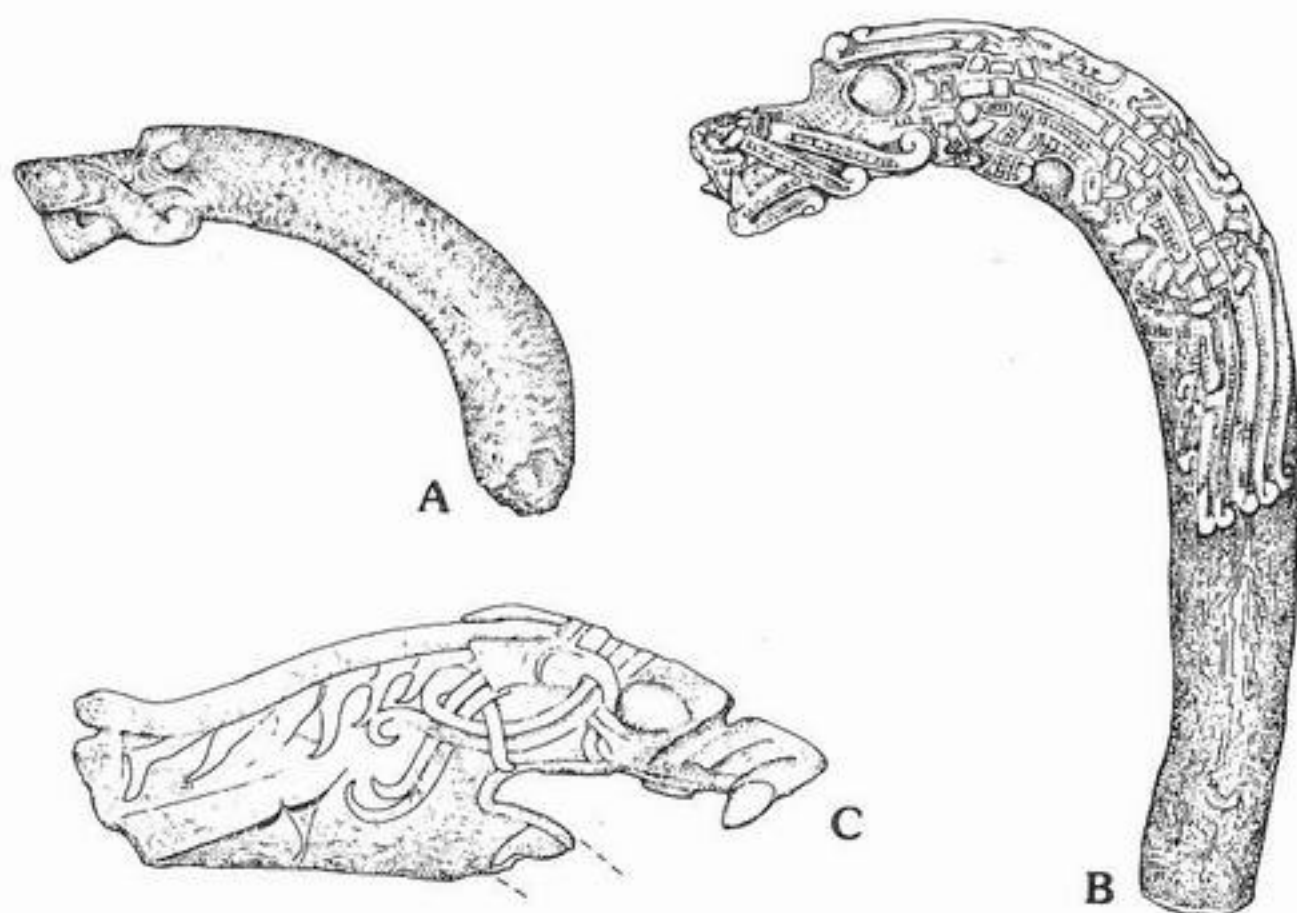
Illus. 2. The Cashel bell-crest: **A** frontal view; **B** side view; **C** section; **D** top view.



(*ibid.*, Pl. 19). On the basis of the zoomorphic patterns on its knop, Henry parallels this crozier with that from Lismore—dated by inscription to between 1090 and 1113 (*ibid.*, p. 97). Two rows of diagonal hatching occur on the transverse arms of the cross on the bronze plaque with Ringerike-style ornament from Holy Cross (Graham-Campbell 1980, No. 505). A more mundane but nonetheless relevant metalwork item is a strap-end from the late Viking-Period levels of Christchurch Place, Dublin, which exhibits rectangular panels of interlace framed by bands of diagonal hatching on both faces (Lang 1988, Fig. 118).

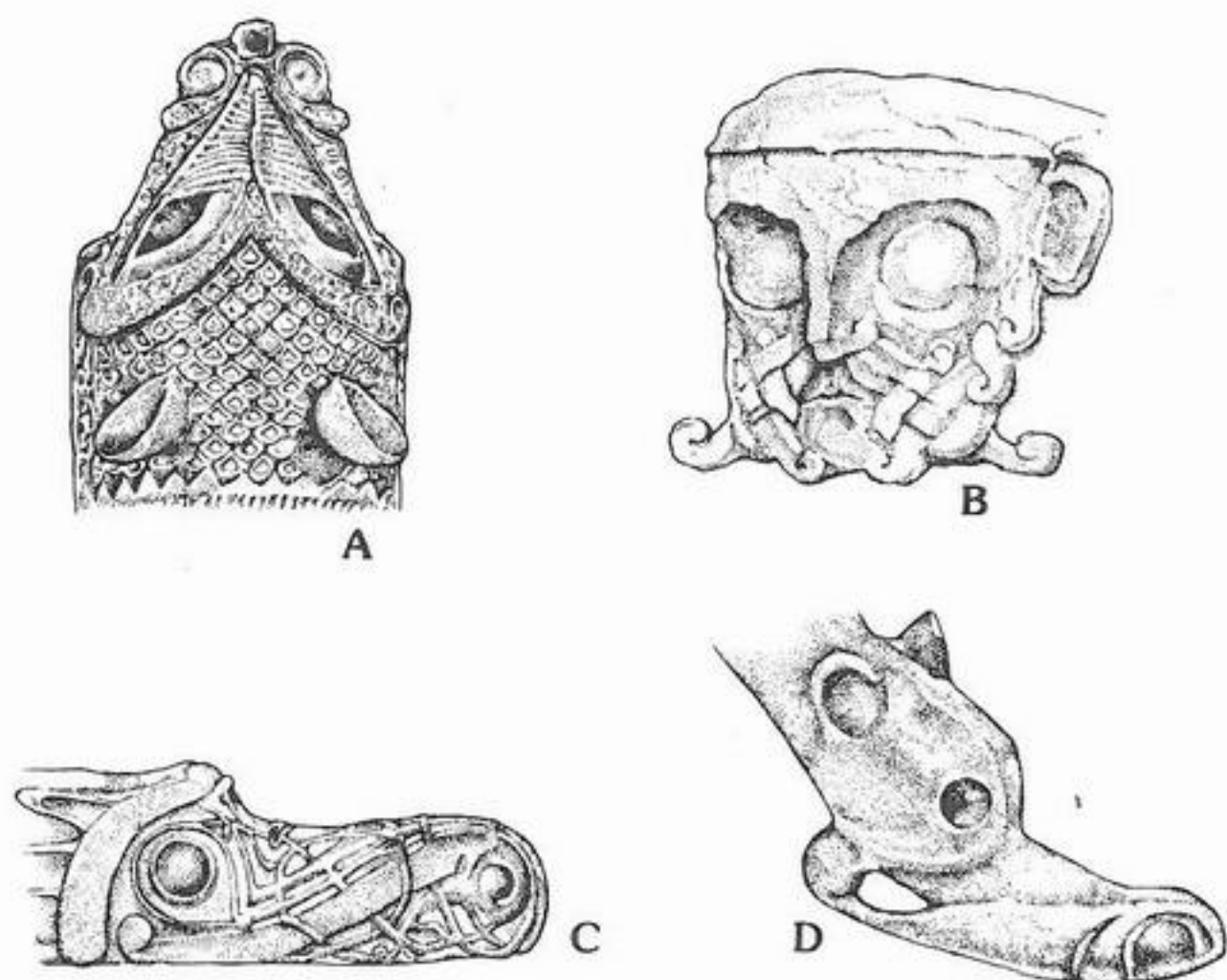
An unusual instance of diagonal hatching executed in stone occurs on a remarkable capital in the Romanesque chancel-arch at Tuam cathedral, tentatively dated by Henry to the middle of the twelfth century (*op. cit.* p. 168, Pl. 86), though Clyne dates it more securely to between 1184 and c.1200 (*Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, forthcoming). Here, the eyebrows of a human face-mask are formed by a curving band infilled with hatching. Both Leask (1955, p. 153) and Henry comment on the distinctive style and treatment of this capital, which the latter perhaps significantly regarded as a “near-metallic oddity” (*loc. cit.*).

Among the quantities of wooden artifacts bearing carved decoration produced by the Dublin excavations are a small number which feature hatching. These include a carved cylinder of unknown function on which are ring-knots with diagonally hatched interiors (Lang 1988, DW 53, Fig. 45), and a fragment of a handle with trial ornament of hatched tendrils (*ibid.*, DW 46, Fig. 30). While the latter item cannot be precisely dated, the former is derived from an early eleventh century level (*ibid.*, p. 68). The occurrence of these items may perhaps be taken to indicate that it was in the artistic milieu of late Viking Dublin that the occasional usage of hatching on late eleventh and early twelfth century Irish metalwork developed.<sup>2</sup>



Illus. 3. Carved wooden objects from Viking Dublin: A-B walking-stick finials; C chair-back pommel (after Lang 1988). Various scales.

<sup>2</sup>A number of items of eighth and ninth century date, however, display the use of diagonal-, vertical-, or cross-hatching, in some instances executed in the kerbschnitt technique. These include two bone motif-pieces from Lagore (O'Meadhra 1979, Nos. 119, 123), the metal fittings on the bucket from Derrymullen (Ryan 1983, No. 58), and the fittings on the Domnach Airgid (*ibid.*, No. 85).



Illus. 4. **A** animal head supporting base of Cross of Cong; **B** human head from frieze, Devinish round tower (after Stokes, 1878); **C** animal head forming crest terminal of Lismore crozier; **D** animal-headed foot of Connemara cross-base. Various scales.

The form of ornament on the rim of the setting of the handle of the Cashel object (Illus. 2, D) is not a particularly unusual feature on metalwork of the period. Similar effects are achieved, by milling, on the margins of the eye-settings of the Kilkenny Tau crozier-head, on the sides of the circular settings along the arms and shaft of the Cross of Cong, and on the cuffs and sides of Christ's colobinn on the Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque (Henry 1970, Pl. 19 and Pl. M; Ryan 1983, No. 78). The setting on the Cashel object presumably held an inset of material such as glass or enamel.

The animal-headed terminals of the handle of the bell are of more than passing interest. They are characterized by their prominent ears, deeply curving eyebrows and by their moustaches. These latter are composed of S-shaped tendrils with terminal lobes or volutes (Illus. 2, A and B), and appear to be ultimately of later Viking-age derivation. In Ireland such devices first appear amongst the assemblage of mid-to-late eleventh century carved wooden objects from the Dublin excavations, manifesting themselves in rather elaborate form on a curved walking-stick finial and a 'cock's-comb' mount from Fishamble Street (Lang 1988, DW 35, Fig. 17; DW 33, Fig. 27). The Dublin tendril style is regarded by Lang as the result of a fusion between native styles and the Anglo-Scandinavian Ringerike tradition (*op. cit.*, pp. 22-25), and here the depiction of a moustache may vary from an elaborate grouping of interlaced tendrils to a pair of simple volute tendrils (Illus. 3, A and B).

Interestingly, moustaches of both extremes commonly appear on animal-heads in Irish metalwork dating from c.1050 to c.1150. Elaborately interlaced examples occur, for instance, on the upper mount of the Glankeen bell-shrine (Henry 1970, Pl. K) and on the crest terminals of a number of croziers—such as that from Lismore (Illus. 4, C). Somewhat less florid examples occur on an animal head supporting the base of the Cross of Cong (Illus. 4, A) and at the end of the applied moulding on the Tongres horn-reliquary (Ryan



1988, Fig. 46), while similar examples occur on the recently rediscovered cross-base from Connemara (Illus. 4,D; Ó Floinn 1987a, p. 177, Illus. 10:16, and 1987b, p. 186, Pl. IIe), on the Clonmacnoise crucifixion plaque (Ryan 1983, No. 78), and on a spur from Dublin (Lang 1988, Pl. XXV). Whether the frequent occurrence of this sub-Ringerike feature on such items justifies Wallace's suggestion that reliquaries of metal were actually being made in Dublin during this period is uncertain (1983, p. 156), but it does indicate the importance of Dublin as a innovative artistic centre which, no doubt, strongly influenced contemporary schools of metalworking (Ó Floinn 1987b, 181).

That the late Viking art-styles—in particular those which include lobed tendrils and related vegetal motifs in their repertoires—also influenced Irish stone-carving traditions is clear from a brief examination of the evidence. Instances are found on the late high crosses (Fuglesang 1980, pp. 63-65), but general parallels for the form of the tendril ornament on the Cashel handle are to be found amongst those carved human and animal heads which are a feature of a number of Hiberno-Romanesque churches. Some of these churches, including, for instance, Cormac's Chapel, St. Saviour's Priory (Glendalough), Killeslin, and Tuam, feature heads with hair, beards, and moustaches formed by interlaced lobed tendrils (Henry 1970, Pls. 104, 108, 92, 87), as do the four heads from the cornice of Devenish round tower (Illus. 4,B). The style of these heads is regarded as resulting from an amalgam of Scandinavian (Ringerike and Urnes), Irish, and Continental stone-carving styles, and the presence of examples on what is generally agreed to be Ireland's first Romanesque building—Cormac's Chapel—indicates that this fusion had already taken place by 1127 when construction of this church commenced.

The eyes of the Cashel bell-crest animal-heads are almond-shaped, with the point towards the rear, and feature deep circular pupils. Almond-shaped eyes are a feature of the carved woodwork from Dublin, occurring for instance on one of the elaborate walking-stick finials (Lang 1988, DW 35, Fig. 17), but may also be seen on prized items of contemporary metalwork, such as the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell and the Lismore Crozier (Henry 1970, Pls. 23, 25). The pupil-sockets in the eyes of the Cashel heads may have originally contained inset beads of glass—such as the minute circular examples on the Urnes side-panels of the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell—though it is equally possible that they may have been of amber or enamel.

The form of the eyebrows, ears and noses of the Cashel handle-terminals deserves brief mention. As previously noted, the noses are indicated by a slightly raised band which extends downwards from the mid-point of the brows to terminate in a gentle swelling. This form, and its disposition, is reminiscent of the elongated pear-shaped lobe which terminates the drawn-out central tendril of the large openwork palmette on the upper mount of the Glankeen bell-shrine (Henry 1970, Pl. 18). The animal heads on the lower portion of this mount also provide a general parallel for the V-shaped form of the eyebrows on the Cashel object, as do those on the Cross of Cong and the Lismore Crozier (Illus. 4, A and C). The slightly curled tips at the ends of the brows are, however, somewhat unusual, and appear to be best paralleled by those on the rather earlier carved chair-terminal from Fishamble Street (Illus. 3,C).<sup>3</sup> The deep rounded ears of the Cashel animal heads are similar in form to the more prominent examples on the cross-base from Connemara (Illus. 4,D), which Ó Floinn parallels with those on the head gripping the base of the Cross of Cong (1987b, p. 183).

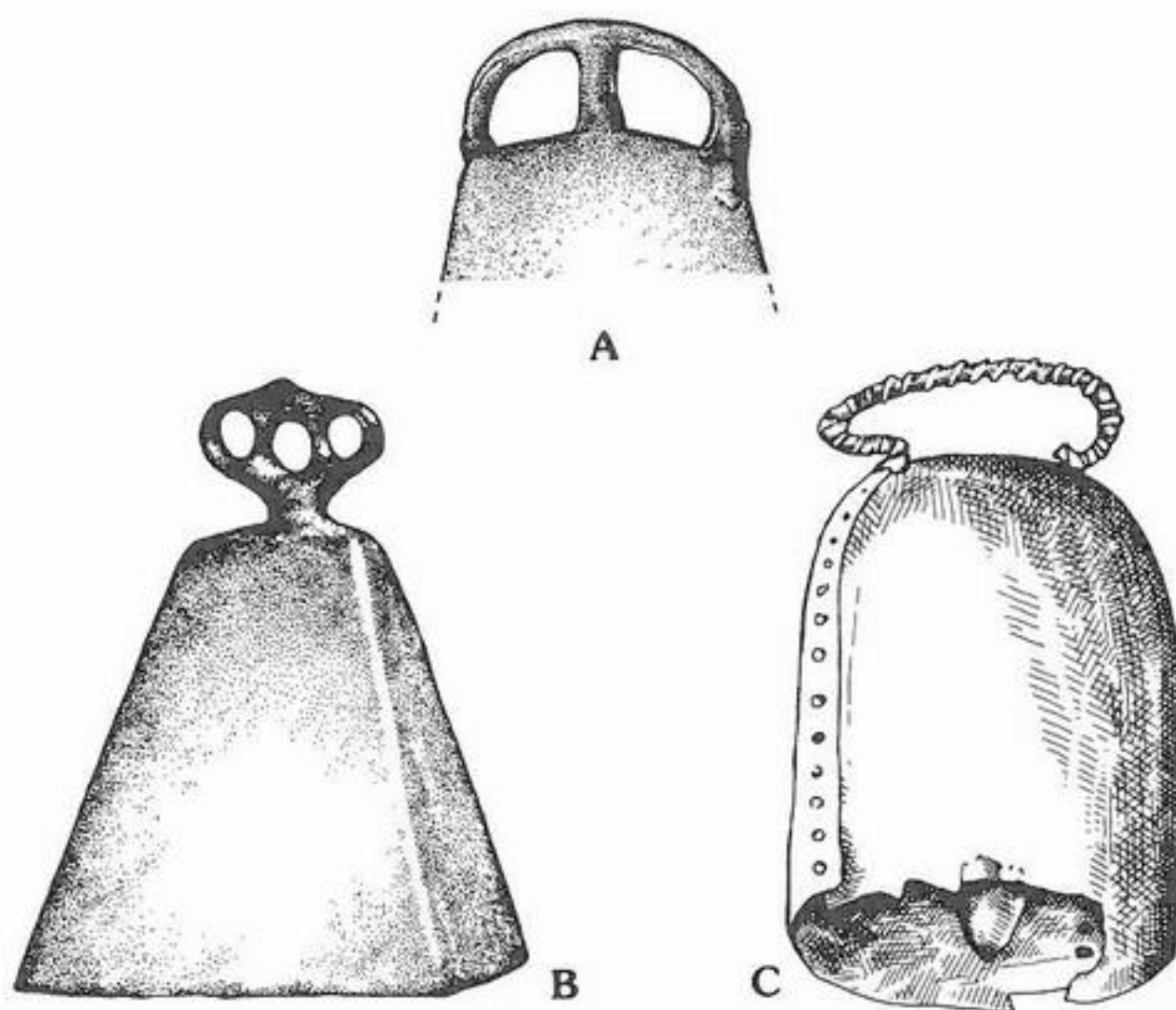
<sup>3</sup>The object (Lang 1988, DW 12) derives from a late tenth century level.

## Form

The Cashel find is of particular interest as Irish bells which may be convincingly dated to the eleventh or twelfth centuries are not numerous. They are, in fact, relatively rare when compared with the larger number of earlier Irish hand-bells (Bourke 1980). Indeed, one could be forgiven for assuming that it was the enshrinement rather than the manufacture of bells which was the more common practice during the later period. Not surprisingly, therefore, the general form and characteristics of the Cashel bell find some of their better parallels amongst the bell-shrines.

The most striking characteristic of the Cashel bell's features is the animal-headed form of its terminals. Only two other bells feature heads in this position. One is Irish and the second is Welsh, and both are of cast bronze. The Welsh example, Saint Gwynhoedl's Bell, is from Llangwnnadr, Gwynedd (Fisher 1926, p. 326; Barnwell 1871, p. 274), and in overall form is little different from a number of Bourke's Class 2 Irish bells (1980, p. 54). Its terminals are in the form of animal heads. The second example was found at Kilmainham, Dublin, in the last century, and is also of Class 2 type. It is heavily corroded, but, interestingly, the terminal heads appear to be human (*ibid.*, p. 59; Wright 1900, Fig. 1). Bourke argues that the majority of Class 2 bells were manufactured during the eighth and ninth centuries, but, on the basis of the handle-terminals of the Kilmainham example, leaves open the possibility that some few may have been made in an altered form as late as the twelfth century (1980, p. 59). The form of the terminals of St. Gwynhoedl's Bell supports this suggestion, particularly as it is quite likely to have originated in Ireland.

The second distinctive feature of the Cashel bell-crest is the division of the arched form of the handle by the central rod. The only published parallel for this feature known to the author is the form of the handle of another Welsh bell—that known as St. Garmon's,



Illus. 5. A St. Garmon's Bell, Llanarmon, Caernarvonshire; B bell from Ballymagroarty, Co. Donegal (after Morris 1931); C St. Ronan's Bell, Locronan, Brittany (after Coleman 1898). Various scales.



from Llanarmon, Caernarvonshire (Illus. 5,A; Fisher 1926, p. 326), though Ó Floinn has recently identified two related Irish examples—one from Rath Blathmach, Co. Clare, and the other unprovenanced (see Ó Floinn, *North Munster Antiq. J.*, forthcoming). Although the perforated knob of the Cashel rod is a functional device from which the bell's clapper was suspended, the portion which joins the cap to the handle is not. The fact that it would have been quite simple to have splayed a shorter rod at the level of the cap indicates that the division of the arch was a visual rather than a functional element of the bell's composition. This is probably also true in the case of St. Garmon's Bell (for which a late date now also appears likely).

Both characteristics of the Cashel bell which have been so far considered—the division of the handle and the form of its terminals—are reflected in the design and ornamentation of a number of Irish bell-shrines. At least four of these feature animal heads on the sides of their crests. The position and general form of those on the Clogán Óir and on the Shrine of St. Mura's Bell recall those of the Cashel bell, and the former examples are also furnished with interlaced manes and moustaches. Both can be assigned to the second half of the eleventh century (Ryan 1983, p. 197; Henry 1970, p. 91, fn. 1). Two florid pairs of animal heads occur on the crest of the Glankeen bell-shrine (Henry 1970, Pl. 18), while those on the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell are rather elongated, stylized examples (Henry 1970, Pl. 23). The former shrine has been assigned a twelfth century date by Henry on the basis of its similarities with the Shrine of St. Lachtin's Arm, while the manufacture of the latter is dated by inscription to between 1094 and 1105 (*ibid.*, p. 100). The division of the arch of the Cashel handle by the central rod is also paralleled by the form of the Glankeen and St. Patrick's bell-crests. The former is effectively divided on both faces by a combination of the vertical element of the central openwork palmettes and the circular perforation above these (*ibid.*, Pl. 18). Both the front and rear of St. Patrick's bell-shrine are similarly divided: the former by central circular settings at top and bottom with two, short, vertical bands between (*ibid.*, Pl. 22), and the latter largely by the trunk of the stylised Tree of Life which divides the main panel of ornithomorphic ornament (*ibid.*, Pl. 23). It is suggested, therefore, that the central dividing rod of the Cashel bell-crest and its animal-headed handle terminals are features which are clearly related to the form of highly decorated, contemporary bell-shrines.

It remains to discuss the probable form of the element to which the Cashel bell-crest was attached. In this respect the only surviving evidence is the affixed portion of sheet-bronze, and therefore any conclusions offered must be treated as tentative. It is clear, however, that the Cashel object either functioned as the handle of a bell or of a bell-shrine.

It is known, that bells of both quadrangular and approximately hemispherical form were current in Ireland during the twelfth century. The quadrangular examples comprise those belonging to two small groups with distinctive handle-forms (apparently unrelated to the Cashel handle), e.g. Illus. 5,B, which were first identified by Bourke and which he regards as transitional between Class 2 early hand-bells and types of more recent date (Bourke 1984, pp. 54-55); only two examples of the hemispherical type were known to Bourke, and both are regarded by him as probable imports from the Norman world (*ibid.*, p. 55; but see Ó Floinn, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, forthcoming, for a third example).<sup>4</sup> This need

<sup>4</sup>Given that such hemispherical bells seem to be best considered, at present, to be of twelfth century date, it is possible to argue that the slab in Killinaboy churchyard, Co. Clare (on which a depiction of such a bell is incised below that of a tau-crozier), may also be twelfth century, rather than thirteenth or fourteenth century as suggested by Rynne in 1967 (p. 161, Fig. 3, Pl. XIV); but see *North Munster Antiq. J.*, forthcoming, where Rynne opts for a date possibly as late as the 15th century for the type).



not necessarily be the case however, as the form of interlace which ornaments the crown of one of these—the Clog na Rí (Hynes 1931, Pl. 3)—appears to be not unlike Irish Urnes. It would appear, therefore, that the Cashel crest, if it was affixed to a bell, could have crowned either an approximately hemispherical or a quadrangular example. There is no compelling reason why the crest should not have been attached to a hemispherical bell, such as those from Fenagh, Co. Leitrim (the Clog na Rí) and Kilshanny, Co. Clare (Crawford 1923, Fig. 12). However, one would expect that the form of the crown of the bell would be reflected in that of its crest, and the Cashel crest is of rectangular, not circular, plan. It is, therefore, suggested that the body of the supposed bell would have been of approximately quadrangular form with distinct faces and sides.

It is possible to regard the sheet-bronze fragment attached to the underside of the crest as portion of the upper body of a bell. However, bells of this period from Ireland which are formed of sheet-bronze are not of common occurrence. In fact, all such surviving bells appear to have been of cast metal. Ancient bells formed from sheet-metal are, nevertheless, known: a copper example from Wales, now lost, is St. Beurno's Bell, from Anglesea (Barnwell 1871, p. 272), while in Brittany a bell formed of two sheets of riveted copper, now housed in the church at Locronan, Finistère (Fig. 4,C), is associated in local tradition with the Irish missionary Ronan (Coleman 1898, pp. 168-170).<sup>5</sup>

It would therefore appear conceivable that the Cashel crest could have crowned a sheet-bronze bell, as is suggested by the presence of the attached bronze fragment. On the other hand, it is likely that the solid bronze crest might have been too heavy a crown for such a bell, even if the latter were strengthened with binding strips. Furthermore, it seems improbable that such a high-quality piece of casting as the crest would not have crowned a more stable and sophisticated body.

An alternative interpretation of the function of the crest is that it formed part of a bell-shrine. Parallels have already been drawn between its form and the crests of certain examples. A distinction may be made between shrines which fully enclose bells—such as St. Patrick's bell-shrine (Ryan 1983, pp. 167-168), and those which are formed by simply affixing decorative plates to the surfaces of the venerated object—such as the bell-shrine of St. Molua (Crawford 1923, pp. 161-162). It is more likely that the Cashel crest—if it formed part of any enshrining arrangement—was of the latter type, and that the portion of sheet bronze which remains served to cover the upper part of the enshrined bell. If so, the provision of the suspension knob-like hook suggests that this bell was an old, damaged example, devoid of its clapper and must have had a new one supplied when it was enshrined.

Unfortunately, not enough survives of this interesting object from Cashel to enable a more positive identification of its original form and function to be essayed. These must remain a matter of conjecture. Equally conjectural is the possibility that it may have been made under MacCarthaigh patronage, and may even have played some small part in the rituals involved in the consecration of Cormac's Chapel in 1134.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the Commissioners of the Office of Public Works, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin, for permission to publish the find; Professor Etienne Rynne and Mr. Ragnall Ó Floinn for commenting on this paper in draft form; Ms. Patricia Johnson for preparing Illus. 1-4, Mr. Tomas Tyner (U.C.C. Audio-Visual Services) for his photography, and Mr. Rory MacDonald for his typing.

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<sup>5</sup> Bourke, however, argues that the Lacronan bell may be quite late (1987, p. 349).



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