

Illus. 1. Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary; the arrow in the area between the inner and middle wards indicates the position of the carving. (Plan reproduced courtesy of the Office of Public Works)

A Carving in Cahir Castle, County Tipperary

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An interesting carving, consisting of a bust or truncated human figure whose head is flanked and interlocked by two upturned human heads, one on either side, is here described and discussed for the first time. The carving is on a stone of the batter of the eastern wall of the keep of Cahir Castle, and may date to the thirteenth century or somewhat later.

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Cahir Castle, County Tipperary, contains several features and structures broadly datable to the thirteenth century though much of the castle was added, or original features altered, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The structure presently known as the keep was originally built as a gatehouse in the thirteenth century when a curtain wall with mural towers enclosed a ward with a hall and other buildings.

The gatehouse is built of roughly coursed limestone dressed to a rough face. There is a truncated base batter. One of the batter's facing stones in the eastern wall, about one metre to the north of the late medieval wicker-centered gateway (Illus. 1), has the roughly incised, interlocked outlines of two heads and a central figure¹ (Illus. 2 and 3). The stone is badly cracked, with some cement patching, measures 32cm. by 39cm., and is 1.4m. from the ground. It is situated towards the top of the lower, truncated part of the batter, and was probably carved *in situ*. The slab has a flat outer face, like many of the stones in the batter, but is somewhat larger than most. The carving fills the flatter part of the stone, with higher parts and a hollow framing the heads on either side.

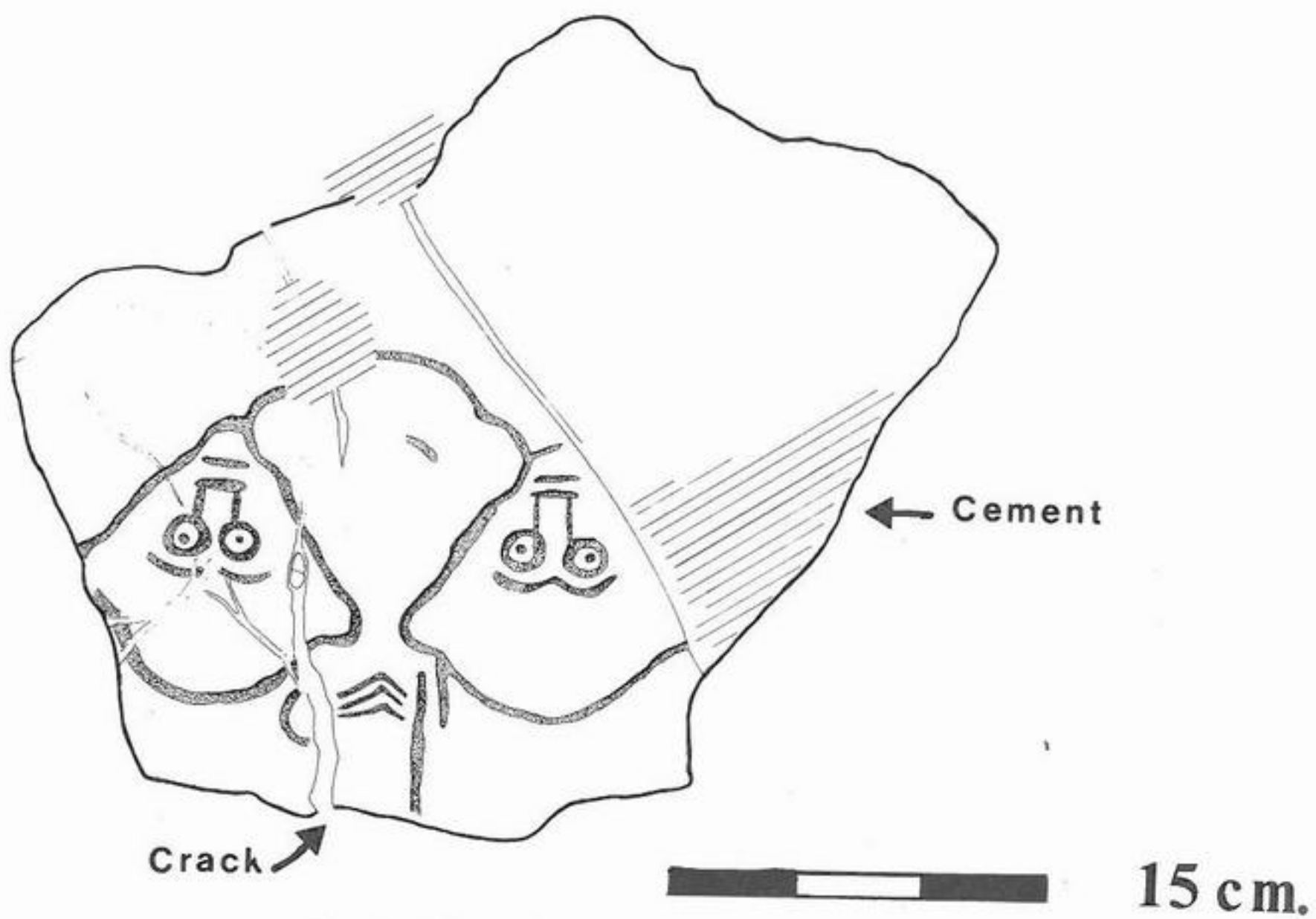
The design was apparently scored into the stone with a pointed implement so as to make a broad V-sectioned groove 2-3mm. deep. The groove forming the top of the central head has an asymmetrical cross-section with the outer side being steeper than the inner, as if scraped with a sharp or pointed implement held upright by the user. The outline of the central figure is the most deeply cut; the subsidiary heads less so, while the ribs of the figure are only scratched. The design is not without some skill, especially in the layout, but it is neither accomplished nor artistic.

The central, upright, figure is clearly the most prominent. It has a large, oval face with very prominent ears and a slight trace of an eye in a battered face. A thin neck joins the head to a stylized body with three parallel inverted V's which probably represent ribs. The lower part of the body is damaged making it impossible to say where or how it terminated. The figure has a thin left arm and possibly a right arm, bent at the elbow, which may be indicated by a loop on that side.

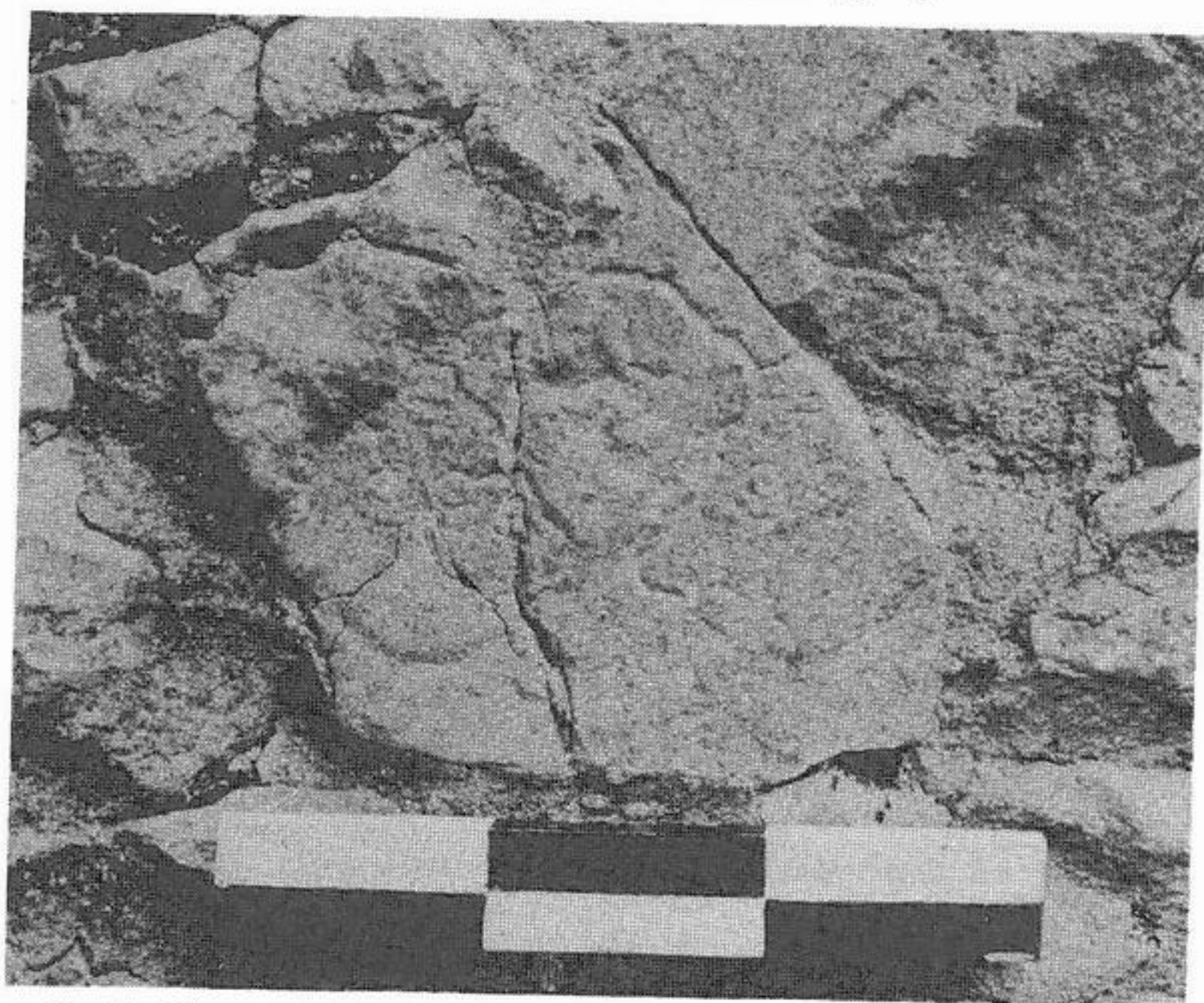
The heads to right and left are inverted and do not have any bodies but fit into, and around, the neck and cheeks of the central figure. They have eyebrows, open circular eyes with pupil-like central depressions, and mouths shown as two horizontal lines. A nose is

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¹The carving does not appear to have been previously described or discussed though it has been known for several years. A version of the motif has been used on the masthead of the *Cahir Heritage Newsletter*, an occasional duplicated publication (ISSN 1710-7265) produced by Joseph Walsh, Cahir, since 1986 to whom I am grateful for information. I would also like to thank Patricia Johnson for having brought it to my notice.



Illus. 2. The carving in Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary.



Illus. 3. The carving in Cahir Castle, Co. Tipperary (scale = 30cm.). (Photo: P. Holland)

indicated. Their ears are not well defined but interlock into the neck area of the central figure on one side and are the corresponding extension on their outer sides. Although these two heads are not the main part of the design they are contemporary with it and the design was clearly conceived as a whole.

The central head, and especially the ears, can be compared with the face carved on a boulder at Clonroad More, Ennis, which has been described by Rynne who noted parallels datable to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.² The ears of the Cahir carving are similar in being placed high on the head but the faces are a little more rudimentary and, unlike the Clonroad More or Kilmacduagh faces,³ one of them has a body and limbs attached. The Cahir carving is also unusual in being of three interlocking heads. A *terminus post quem* of the thirteenth century for the carving, derived from the date of the gatehouse and the batter in which it is situated, is compatible with Rynne's date range for the Clonroad More example. A later date for the work could be possible, however, and the siting of the graffito inside a gateway of the early fifteenth century could lead one to regard it as an idle 'doodle' of that or later times. There are similarities between the prominent ears of the Cahir graffito and other pieces of medieval carving. While ears are not generally shown on most medieval burial monument types such as effigies of knights or women, several of the ecclesiastics in Hunt's Period I (1300-1350) have 'jug' ears. One, an abbot's effigy at Ardfert,⁴ dated to the late thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries, is a good example and, interestingly, this might be due to the "flat formalized treatment" in which the treatment of features in relief is less accomplished. This would agree with one's impression that the Cahir carving is by an untrained hand. The effigy of a bishop at Kildare,⁵ dated to 1235-58, has similar ears, also placed high upon the head. Hunt noted that the "unnatural formalized rendering of the ears shows a workshop with a degenerating tradition".⁶ Two other slabs, situated at Jerpoint and St. Canice's, Kilkenny,⁷ and also dating to the late thirteenth/early fourteenth centuries, similarly have prominent ears. Prominent ears can also be found on Sheela-na-Gigs such as at Ballylarkin, Co. Kilkenny, Ballyportry, Co. Clare,⁸ and Garry Castle, Co. Offaly.⁹

More generally the ears, the shrunken and ill-proportioned body, the rib-lines, the stick-like arms, one of which may be bent, all call to mind features in Sheela-na-Gigs. The possible Sheela-na-Gig in a secondary position in a wall at Fethard Friary, for example, has 'jug' ears, a prominent head, stick arms and incised rib-lines. The Sheela-na-Gig at Cleenagh Castle, Co. Clare, with its thin limbs¹⁰ can also be compared.

We can conclude, therefore, that the Cahir graffito is a crude motif, of uncertain purpose, dating generally to the medieval period but after the construction of the gatehouse in the thirteenth century. Such parallels quoted as are above, however, are only for certain features,

²E. Rynne, "Face Carved on a Boulder at Clonroad More, Ennis", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 27(1985), 78-80.

³Illus. 4 and 5 in Rynne, *op. cit.*

⁴J. Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture*, Dublin 1974, cat. no. 69, plate 76.

⁵*Ibid.*, cat. no. 87, plates 69 and 70.

⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 161.

⁷*Ibid.*, cat. no. 116, plate 109, and cat. no. 134, pl. 110, respectively.

⁸J. Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall*, Copenhagen 1977, cat. no. 52, p. 145, and cat. no. 54, p. 145, respectively.

⁹A. Weir, "Exhibitionists and Related Carvings in the Irish Midlands: Their Origins and Functions", in H. Murtagh (ed.), *Irish Midland Studies*, Athlone 1980, plate 16:2.

¹⁰J. Andersen, "Sheela-na-Gig at Cleenagh Castle, Co. Clare", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 18(1976), pp. 75-76, plate VI.

or for the central figure in isolation, and it is only when the particular impulse or influence which created two heads upside down at either side of a central figure is identified that we will be able to fully evaluate this interesting feature. While in no way suggesting a direct connection, it is interesting to note that the Celtic temple at Entremont in France has a somewhat similar motif of a human head, upside-down with another, right way up, on either side, carved on a stone pillar.¹¹

Acknowledgements

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¹¹A. Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, London 1967, p. 64, fig. 25.