

A 13th-Century Architectural Fragment at Killinaboy, Co. Clare

IAN FISHER*

A carved fragment re-used in the churchyard wall at Killinaboy combines foliage of Romanesque character with a rare example of 'dogtooth' ornament. A thirteenth-century date is suggested.

* * * *

Several of the medieval churches of the Burren and the adjacent area to the south display varied and accomplished carved ornament of late twelfth or thirteenth century date—Dysert O'Dea, Rath Blathmaic, Corcomroe Abbey and Kilfenora Cathedral being notable examples. The ruined parish church of Killinaboy, however, is unadorned except for the huge double-transomed cross set in relief above its blocked west doorway,¹ and a Sheelana-Gig² above the much-altered south doorway. The detached fragment described in this note, although its original location within the church is uncertain, suggests that work of high quality was being carried out there during the thirteenth century.

The fragment was first noticed by the writer during a brief visit to Killinaboy in 1985, when Professor Etienne Rynne confirmed that it had not been recorded in print. It was measured and photographed in greater detail in October 1990, and had evidently attracted local attention since it had recently been set in a fresh bed of mortar, for security.

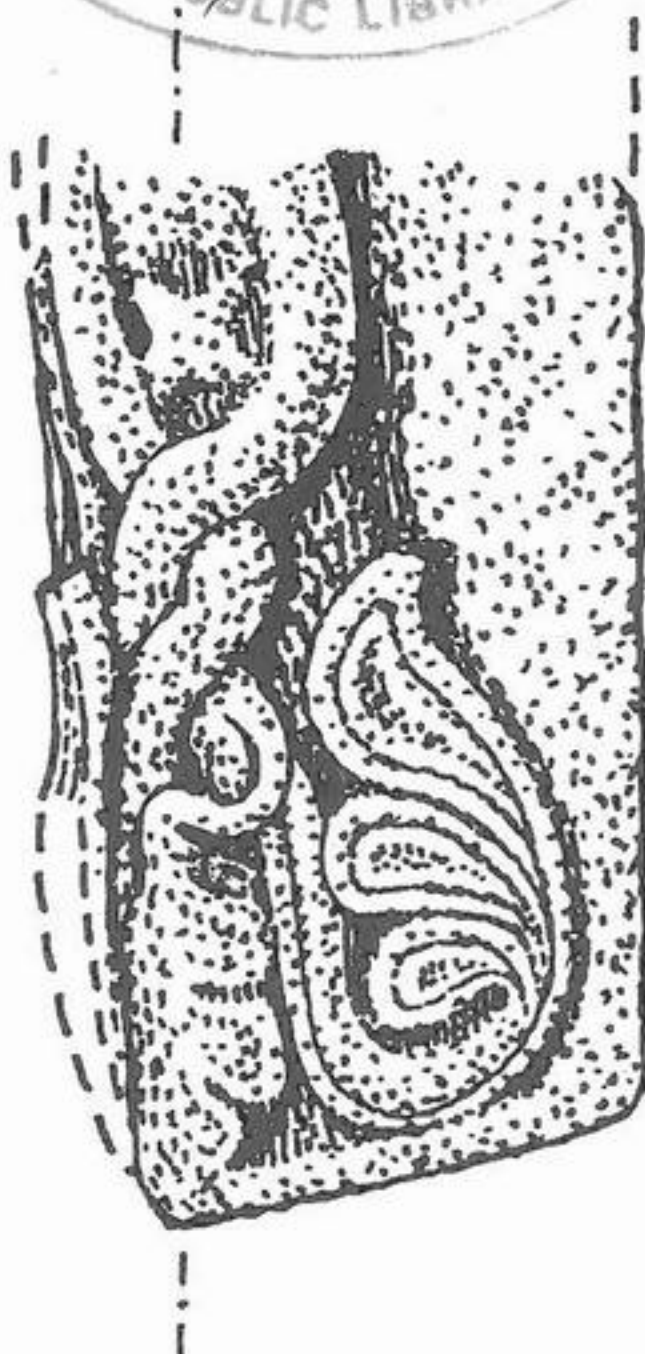
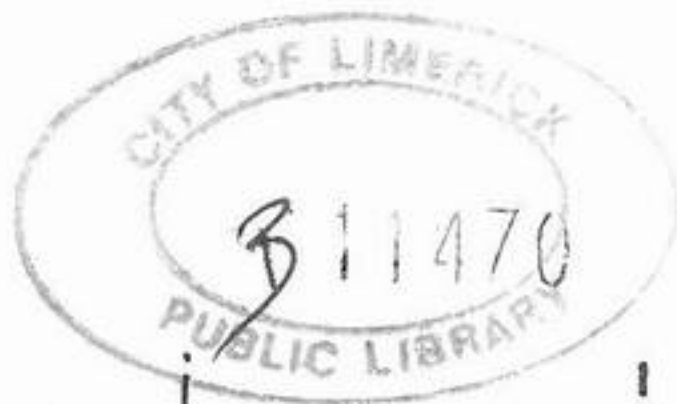
The fragment is built into the inner face of the rubble-built east wall of the churchyard, at the south-east angle of the Flanagan family burial-plot. It is a well-squared block of limestone, set in its original vertical axis and measuring 42cm in overall height (39cm on the visible carved face) by 21cm in width and at least 40cm in depth within the wall. The concealed face to the left returns at right angles and appears to be carved in a mirror-image of the exposed narrow face, but without dismantling the wall it is not possible to tell whether it bears additional ornament. The first 13cm of the right face is wrought smoothly, and rebated slightly in relation to the rougher finish of the remainder of this side of the stone. Although the horizontal base of the block is well preserved, its top is irregularly broken (Illus. 1).

Carved in bold relief on the exposed face is a large three-lobed semi-palmette leaf which curls upwards at the end of a thick curving stem. The stem rises to the left arris of the block, where it twists once round the corresponding stem from the concealed face, before continuing the short distance to the damaged top as parallel roll-mouldings, with a single piece of 'dogtooth' ornament (and traces of a possible second piece) in the hollow between them. The space on the lower part of the angle, between and below the two plant-stems,

*Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 16 Bernard Terrace, Edinburgh, Scotland.

¹P. Harbison, "The Double-Armed Cross on the Church Gable at Killinaboy, Co. Clare", *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 18(1976), 3-12.

²J. Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall, Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles*, Copenhagen and London 1977, pp. 83, 98 and 149, no. 85.



Illus. 1. 13th-century architectural fragment, Killinaboy, Co. Clare.
(Photo: I. Fisher; Drawing: I. G. Scott)

is filled by a complete palmette-leaf, tip downwards, which is attached at the top to a thin stalk splitting from and curving across the visible stem. It is presumably also attached to a similar stalk from the concealed stem, and further examination may reveal that the palmette is in fact two half-leaves set back-to-back, but the detail on the angle of the block is worn. The level surface of the block, into which the relief-carving is cut, is preserved at the bottom as a narrow flat moulding, and widens to the right, curving to follow the outline of the large leaf and plant-stem, and with an additional indentation to accommodate the out-curved tip of the leaf. The one significant unornamented area within the relief-carving, above the leaf, is also wrought to a level field.

The semi-palmette leaf is 18cm in height and is carved with great precision, each of the three lobes having a bead-moulded outline and a scooped centre which is V-shaped rather than rounded in section. The thick stem also has a double outline on the underside, formed by a small forward-facing rebate, but because of weathering it is uncertain whether this continued above the junction of the two stems. The palmette leaf on the lower angle has also been affected by weathering, but the individual lobes likewise appear to have scooped centres. Regrettably, the 'dogtooth' ornament, which is the most remarkable feature of the carving, is also worn, but it appears to be of plain character, without the delicate shaping and undercutting of the individual petals that is found in some examples.

As with the fragment from Rath, recently published in this *Journal* by Dr. Harbison,³

it is difficult to suggest an original location for this piece. The absence of a splay precludes a function as the base of an internal window-jamb, for which the terminal leaf and double-moulded angle would otherwise seem appropriate. A doorway or chancel-arch incorporating the block as one of several recessed orders would be of greater elaboration than seems likely from the surviving remains at Killinaboy, although the smooth area on the right face would be suitable for such a position. A more probable use would be in the surround of a mural recess such as a cupboard or a tomb-recess. It is to be hoped that further discoveries in the church or churchyard may provide new evidence to resolve this problem.

The multi-lobed palmette, a conventionalised version of the oriental palm-leaf, and its semi-palmette derivative, were among the commonest forms of Romanesque and transitional ornament in Western Europe, although they were generally replaced by 'stiff-leaf' and later foliage-types during the thirteenth century. In Ireland, however, they continued to be popular at that period, and in the West Highlands of Scotland they became the principal foliage-type of the local schools of monumental sculpture which flourished from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. The large upturned leaf on the Killinaboy carving is of decidedly Romanesque character, and the very detailed treatment of the lobes, with their scooped centres and separate beaded outlines, can be closely paralleled in English work of the middle of the twelfth century such as cloister capitals from Lewes Priory (Sussex). The ridge on the plant-stem can be matched in many carvings which imitate naturalistic stalks, including the grooved leaf-stem in the left half of the window-sill at Rath. However, the 'dogtooth' set between roll-mouldings indicates a later date, perhaps in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. Although 'dogtooth' is found in advanced buildings such as Canterbury Cathedral by about 1180, in Ireland it is normally associated with the mature Gothic style in buildings under strong English influence, mainly in the eastern half of the country—Grey Abbey in Ulster, Gowran, Graiguenamanagh, and Kilkenny Cathedral in Leinster, Athassel, and Kilmallock Dominican Priory in Munster, and at Abbeyknockmoy in Connacht. The motif is used in a variety of contexts, doorways, tomb-recesses, window-heads and in the abaci of corbels and capitals, and it is set between mouldings in the choir doorway at Athassel, in window-heads at Gowran and Kilkenny, and in a tomb-arch at Kilmallock. Its use in the same way at Killinaboy, although associated with more archaic ornament, is thus seen to conform to regular Gothic practice. While there may be other examples of 'dogtooth' in Munster of which the writer is not aware, it seems certain that the Killinaboy carving will remain a rare instance of this motif on the western edge of medieval Europe, and yet another case of County Clare's amazing richness and variety.

Acknowledgements

In addition to thanking the Hon. Editor for his encouragement to publish this note, I should like to record my gratitude to the Rynne family of Athenry, and to Mrs. N. Mullins (Nonie Rynne) of Scool, Corofin, for their kind hospitality during the two visits on which this fieldwork was conducted. My photographs were processed by my colleagues in the photographic section of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and the drawing is by Mr. Ian G. Scott, formerly the Commission's chief illustrator. I also wish to thank the local residents of Killinaboy who have taken the necessary care to preserve the stone in position.

³P. Harbison, *Nth. Munster Antiq. J.*, 29(1987), 7-9.