

Masons Marks at the Augustinian Abbey, Fethard, Co. Tipperary

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This paper describes and discusses sixteen masons marks which occur in the Augustinian Abbey at Fethard, Co. Tipperary. These are dated to the fifteenth century and are of interest in that a number of them are of 'Celtic' type.

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The Abbey Church at Fethard, Co. Tipperary, was founded around 1306 by the Order of Hermits of St. Augustine (more commonly known as the Augustinian Friars). This Order was introduced from England during the late thirteenth century and by the fifteenth century had founded twenty-two friaries in Ireland. Fethard is one of five such foundations in Munster.

Walter de Mulcote introduced the friars to Fethard and granted them one and half acres of land on the east side of the town, which he held free of all service from Maurice Mac Carwell, the Archbishop of Cashel. A commission held at Cashel in April 1306 found that de Mulcote's grant had been made contrary to the Statute of Mortmain and without the permission of King Edward I. Within a few months, however, Edward had issued a writ

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Illus. 1. A general view of the interior of the Augustinian Abbey, Fethard.
The masons marks occur on the conjoined arches.

pardoning the friars for acquiring the land at Fethard (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, pp. 299-300).

With the receipt of royal grants during the fourteenth century, the holdings of the friars were increased. By the early sixteenth century Fethard had become one of the richest mendicant friaries in Ireland, but during the dissolution of the monasteries it was granted, with its lands, to the Baron of Dunboyne (Butlers). In the early nineteenth century the Augustinians regained possession of the ruins of the monastery which had been renovated a number of times during the medieval period. Among the features which survive at the site are two fourteenth century nave windows with foliated heads (Leask 1966, p. 129, fig. 60), fifteenth century arches, a collection of fifteenth to seventeenth century grave-slabs, and a seventeenth century traceried east window.

Only the arches are of relevance in the context of this paper. They are located at the east end of the church and join the chancel to the south chapel (better known as the Dunboyne Chapel). They are quite ornate and display trefoiled, traceried and foliage work on the basis of which a fifteenth century date is suggested for them. Three arches are featured in Illus. 1, but only the two conjoined arches are of concern to this paper. These will be referred to as the east and middle arch (the former being the larger of the two). The meeting point of these arches is supported by a central pier. The east arch features a heavy rectangular moulding on its underside. This is chamfered and terminates on either side in an elaborate corbel. Beneath the west corbel a human head is carved. The north face of the arch features a hood moulding of multiple rolls which terminates at the west with another carved human head. The central pier is of rectangular plan. Through its lower portion is an ogee-arched opening, above which is a pair of multi-foiled apertures. The middle arch is of semi-circular form and features a similar moulding on its underside to that previously noted on the east arch. However, the terminating corbels of this feature are quite plain. Carved on the west jamb, on the north face of the arch, is a human head below which is an interlaced collar, clearly of late fifteenth century date (Illus. 2).

All the masons marks which form the subject of this article are located either on the east or middle arch or on the central pier. Each is carved in relief on well-dressed limestone (see Illus. 3). When describing the location of individual marks on the arch voussoirs, the latter are enumerated from the east side upwards.



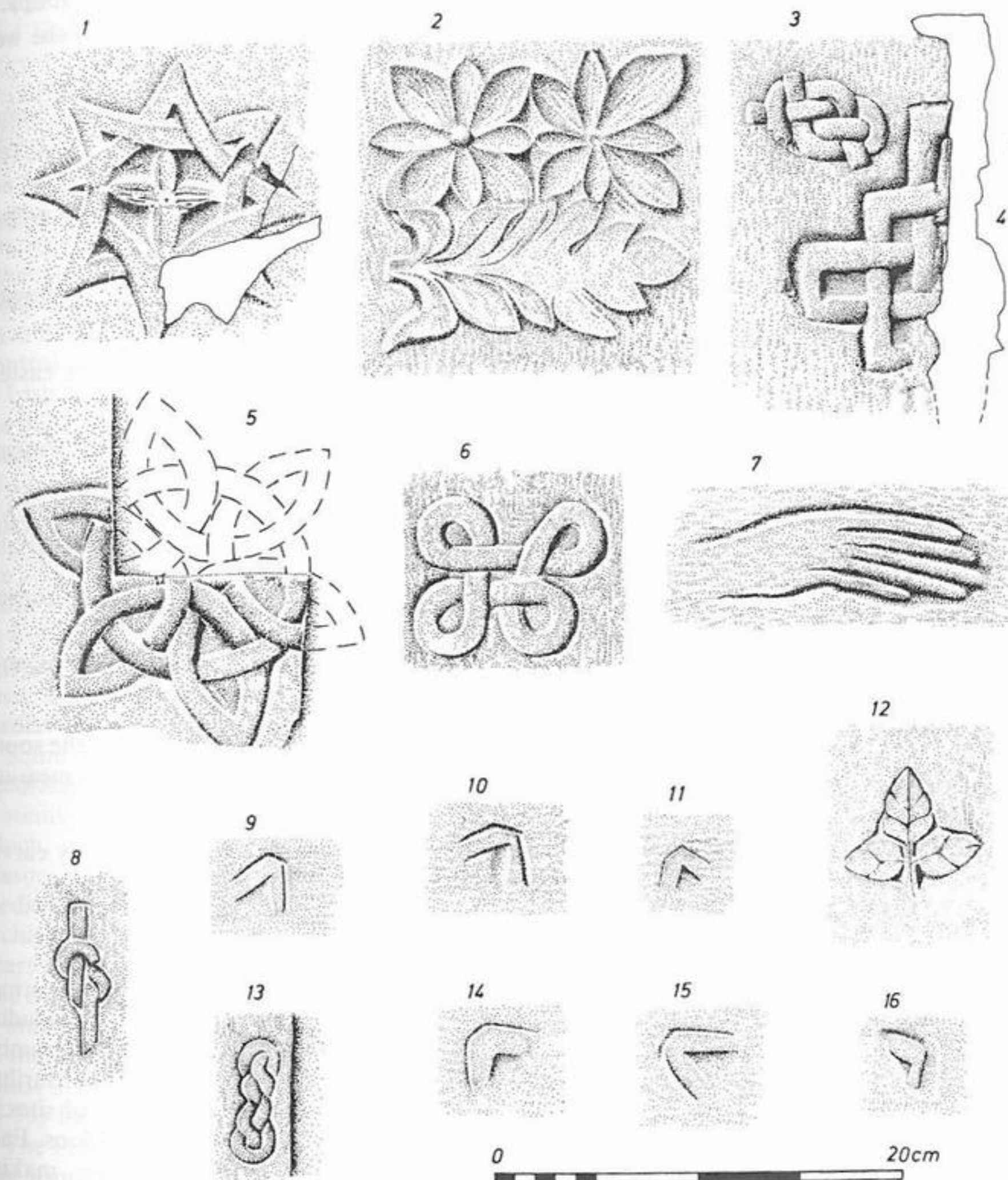
Illus. 2. Carved human head with interlaced collar on the middle arch, Augustinian Abbey, Fethard.

DESCRIPTIONS

No. 1: This is formed by two interlocked concave-sided lozenges enclosing a simple quatrefoil motif. A portion of the design is damaged and has been infilled with cement. The overall dimensions of the motif are 14cm × 14cm. It is carved near the top of the south-facing side of the central pier. This face of the pier bears some traces of blue paint.

No. 2: This motif is composed of three foliate designs in a rectangular field which measures 15cm x 14cm. A pair of eight-petalled flower heads are carved above a horizontally disposed leafy frond. It is carved in relief and is located near the top of the east-facing side of the central pier. Both the mark and stone are in good condition.

Nos. 3 and 4: These marks are carved adjacent to one another near the top of the west face of the east pier of the east arch. No. 3 is the uppermost of the two and takes the form of a single interlaced knot, measuring 6cm x 4cm. A substantial portion of No. 4



Illus. 3. The masons marks in the Augustinian Abbey, Fethard.

has been spalled away. Originally however, it seems to have been a short band of angular interlace c. 13cm × 10cm.

No. 5: This attractive compass-drawn motif is damaged, but its original form is suggested in Illus. 3:5. It consists of a continuous strand of six loops interlaced with a large central ring. It is situated near the top of the north face of the central pier. Originally measuring 15cm × 18cm, it is located just below No. 12.

No. 6: This motif consists of a square with large asymmetrically disposed corner-loops. It is carved in relief and is in fairly good condition. It is situated near the top of the west face of the eastern pier of the east arch and measures 10cm × 8cm.

No. 7: This unusual motif takes the form of an elongated and awkwardly rendered human hand, either the back of a left hand or the front of a right hand. Measuring 12cm × 4cm, it is carved on the moulding on the fourth voussoir of the middle arch.

No. 8: This motif consists of a simple vertical knot carved in low relief on the second voussoir soffit on the east-facing side of the east arch. It measures 2cm × 7.8cm.

No. 9: A motif in the form of an inverted 'V', carved in low relief on the first voussoir moulding of the east arch. It measures 3cm × 2cm.

No. 10: A motif in the form of an inverted 'V' located on the west face of the eastern pier of the eastern arch. It measures 2.5cm × 3cm.

No. 11: A motif in the form of an inverted 'V' located on the west face of the third voussoir of the east arch. It measures 2cm × 3cm.

No. 12: This motif consists of a finely carved three-leafed frond in low relief. It is situated near the top of the north face of the central pier and measures 6.5cm × 6cm.

No. 13: Consisting of a poorly and incompetently interlaced vertical strip, the motif is carved, in relief, on the seventh voussoir of the eastern arch and measures 6.2cm × 2.2cm.

No. 14: A motif in the form of an inverted 'V', situated on the north face of the first voussoir on the middle arch. It measures 3cm × 2.5cm.

No. 15: A motif in the form of a nearly horizontal 'V', slightly worn, located on the south-facing chamfered edge of the moulding on the third voussoir on the middle arch. It measures 3cm × 2cm.

No. 16: A motif in the form of a nearly horizontal and widely angled 'V', poorly carved in relief on the seventh voussoir of the east arch.

DISCUSSION

The earliest masons marks on record from Ireland date to shortly after the Anglo-Norman conquest. They are found in several Cistercian buildings of thirteenth century date, including that at Mellifont, Co. Louth (Stalley 1980, pp. 329-331), and are also a feature of a number of Cistercian abbeys in Co. Tipperary, including Hore, Holycross and Kilcooly (Hourihan 1979; Stalley 1987, pp. 42-43). Such marks are not a feature of all architectural sites of the medieval period, and when they do occur they may be found in varying positions. Each mason is thought to have used the same mark repeatedly throughout his career, making it possible (in theory at any rate) to trace the movements of individual craftsmen. Stalley has suggested, for instance, on the basis of parallels for the forms of the masons marks

which occur on the thirteenth century renovated portions of Mellifont Abbey that the team of masons which was responsible for this work was recruited from England (1980, p. 330). The demand for masons had greatly increased after the introduction of the continental religious orders to Ireland, the Anglo-Norman phase of castle-building, and later development in church architecture. It is clear that the Cistercian and Augustinian orders played a major role in the introduction of the medieval mason to Ireland.

The types of stone on which masons marks are found in Co. Tipperary include sandstone and limestone. Sandstone was the more commonly used for dressing up to the early thirteenth century in the Cashel/Kilkenny area. The doorways and windows of the earlier building phases of Athassel and Hore Abbeys date to around 1200 and were of sandstone but were later replaced in limestone. All the fifteenth century dressings there, and in Cashel, Kilkenny and Holycross, are likewise in limestone (Hourihan 1979). As will be noted below, the forms of the masons marks themselves also changed radically over the medieval period.

The actual function of masons marks is a matter of controversy. Some of the simpler examples may have acted as position marks to aid in the assembly of complex arches and other features. Such position marks would also, of course, have been used to identify the work of particular masons: in this context they should be viewed as signatures. This may have been necessary from an administrative viewpoint, as it would have aided in quality control as well as for the purposes of payment (Coulton 1928, pp. 143-165).

Irish masons marks vary greatly in form and there is a major difference in style between the thirteenth century examples and those of fifteenth and sixteenth century date. The former are perhaps best exemplified by the array at Mellifont, where all are sharply incised and of simple linear form (Stalley 1980, fig. 38). By the late medieval period, however, even the simplest masons marks occur in band form and many occur as complex designs with interlaced and floral motifs executed in relief. 'Celtic' knots and other interlaced motifs are abundant, and are paralleled by a revival of such motifs on a number of medieval grave-slabs, as on the slab from Lisronagh, Co. Tipperary (publication forthcoming, this *Journal*). In Co. Tipperary, masons marks in this tradition occur at Hore, Holycross and Kilcooly (Stalley 1987, p. 43, figs. 6-8), as well as Fethard (Nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13). In many ways such marks are a manifestation in stone of the Gaelic cultural resurgence of the later medieval period.

Some of the more elaborate marks at Fethard could be interpreted as being of merely decorative function. However, taking their location and positioning into consideration, it seems more reasonable to regard them as masons marks which also serve as emblems, which, as Stalley suggests, were designed to record for posterity the achievement of the masons who worked the stone (1987, p. 43). Where comparable embellishments occur on medieval buildings, they usually form part of the ancillary decoration of specific architectural features, as at Kilcooly Abbey where a corbel on the north-west crossing pier bears a leaf comparable in a general way to mark No. 12 at Fethard (Stalley 1987, pl. 112). The carved head with an interlaced collar which occurs on the central pier at Fethard (Illus. 2) may be more than a decorative carving; perhaps it was intended to have the same function as the more elaborate marks in its vicinity. The same might be said of the carved hand (Illus. 3:7). It seems clear that the very simple 'V'-shaped marks at Fethard (Nos. 9-11, 14-16) functioned as the more usual type of masons marks.

The Fethard carvings are paralleled to some extent at Holycross and Kilcooly, suggesting that some of the masons who worked at Fethard may also have worked at these two sites (see Stalley 1987, figs. 7-8). The 'V'-shaped motif, however, is one of the more common masons marks in Ireland. Mark No. 8 also finds general parallels at Hore and Holycross, while

the elaborate arrangement of No. 5 is broadly paralleled on the east window of the late medieval parish church at Cahir, where the interlaced motif is multi-stranded. The phyllomorphic motifs at Fethard (nos. 2 and 12) belong to a range of such designs which is also represented at Holycross and Kilcooly.

COMMENT

Although the masons marks at Fethard, as are described above, can be broadly paralleled with examples elsewhere in Ireland, they are still rather unusual and obviously form a group of their own. These marks also illustrate the artistic ability and appreciation of their masons. The use of the interlaced motifs, however degenerate and confused they may appear, suggest that these masons were Irish, as opposed to masons imported from other countries.

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