

A Medieval Grave-Slab at Lisronagh, County Tipperary

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This Short article brings to attention a late medieval grave-slab in Lisronagh Churchyard, County Tipperary. A sixteenth century date is proposed for it. The slab is of particular interest in that it features a number of Celtic Revival motifs.

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The small village of Lisronagh is located four miles north of Clonmel on the Fethard road. It is located towards the northern end of the area which formed the Norman rural borough established here in the later twelfth century (Glasscock 1970, p. 172), probably by William de Burgo. Alexander de Worcestor appears to have held the manor around 1200, before it was acquired by the de Berminghams of Athenry, Co. Galway (Curtis 1935, p. 54). The ecclesiastical taxation returns of 1319-22 evidence the existence of a church at Lisronagh at this time (Barry 1977, p. 167). A 1333 rental of the medieval manor survives and has been published by Curtis. He notes that by then the owner was Lady Elizabeth de Burgo and that the manor may have had as many as forty-eight English burgesses as well as significant numbers of cottiers, gavillers and betaghs (Curtis 1935, pp. 41-76). Barry has suggested that the borough might have had a population of over two hundred and forty inhabitants at this time (1977, p. 167). The borough was probably primarily agricultural in function and, due in part to its location midway between Clonmel and Fethard, it appears to have failed to develop as a true town. Like many such rural boroughs in the south-east of Ireland it features a tower house, known as Howett's Castle, and an adjacent churchyard.

The churchyard is of rectangular plan and occurs a short distance north of the tower house. In it stand the ruins of a simple rectangular Protestant church which features a tower at the western end. It was built around 1831 (Curtis 1935, p.58). There is no apparent trace of the medieval church which stood on the site. The grave-slab which forms the subject of this note is located outside the east gable of the present church.

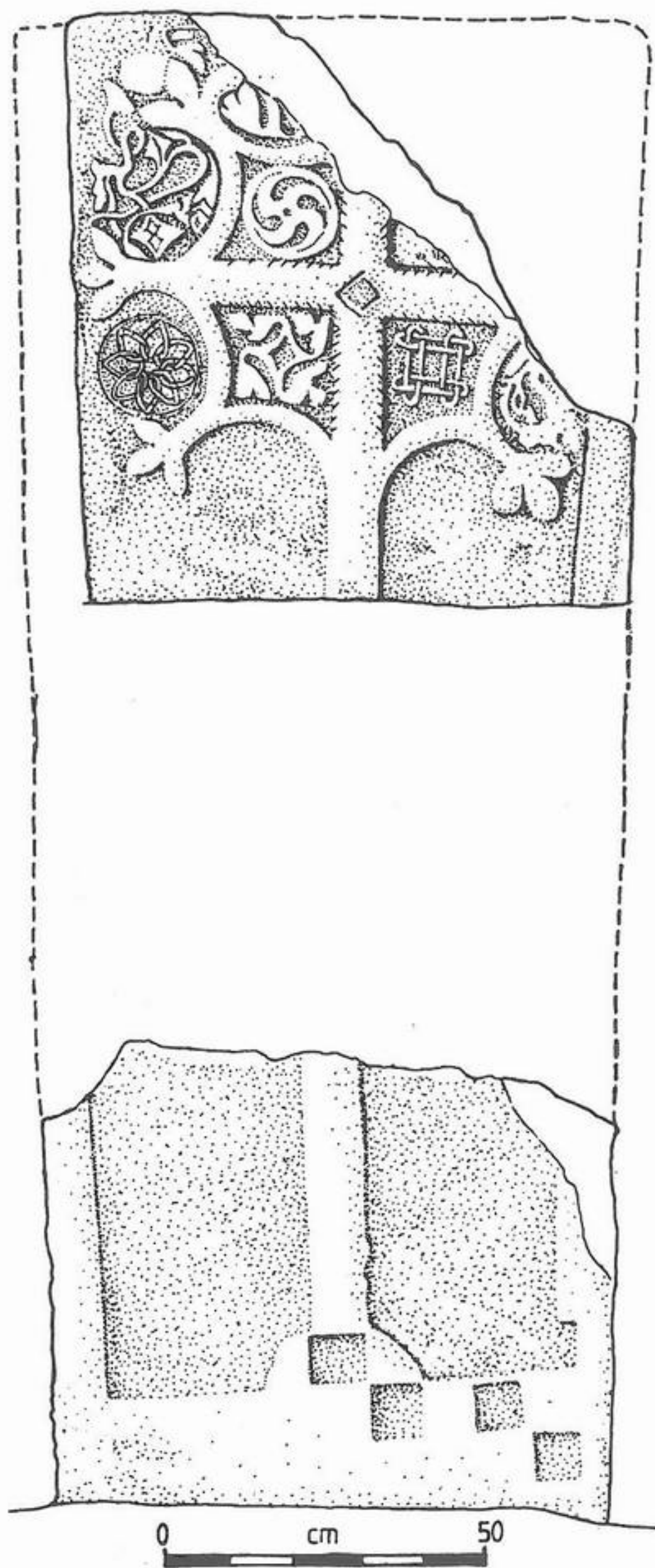
Two large portions of the grave slab survive (*Illus. 1*). The first represents most of its head, though a good deal of its upper sinister corner is broken off. The second portion represents the base portion of the slab. A cursory search of the churchyard failed to reveal either its middle portion or the missing upper corner. The slab does not appear to have borne an inscription. While it is not possible to categorically state that both surviving portions are derived from the same slab, it seems likely that they are. Both are of limestone and display the same carving technique. In addition, they represent the only evidence for medieval grave slabs at the site.

DESCRIPTION

Upper Portion:

This measures 89cm in length, 82.5cm in width at its broken base and 11.5cm in average thickness. The sinister edge features a chamfer which measures 3cm in width. The portion tapers in form. The top and the upper sinister corner of the slab are broken off, but much of

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Illus. 1: Medieval grave-slab at Lisronagh, Co. Tipperary.

the design carved on its upper surface remains. It consists of a seven-armed cross, carved in relief, with simple floriated terminals. Each of the three remaining sunken segments of the cross-head contain motifs: the upper dexter one features an encircled arrangement of a four-legged whirling motif; the lower dexter one features a foliate design; and the lower sinister segment features an interlocked arrangement of four elongated links with rounded ends. An outline lozenge occurs at the crossing of the transom with the shaft. A series of closely set, obliquely disposed, incised lines outline the centre of the cross-head. In each of the surviving external spaces between the cross arms (with the exception of the lower dexter one) are foliate designs with tendrils. The lower dexter one contains an incised outline, compass-drawn motif formed of eight interlocked almond-shaped rings.

Lower Portion:

This measures 64cm in length, 77cm in width at its top and 70cm in width at its base. Both sides feature chamfered edges which measure 12cm in width. The decorated upper surface is somewhat worn. The design, which is in relief, consists of the lower portion of a cross-shaft, terminating in a semi-circular base which features a sunken square recess. Beneath this, occupying the lower sinister area, are three further recesses of similar form.

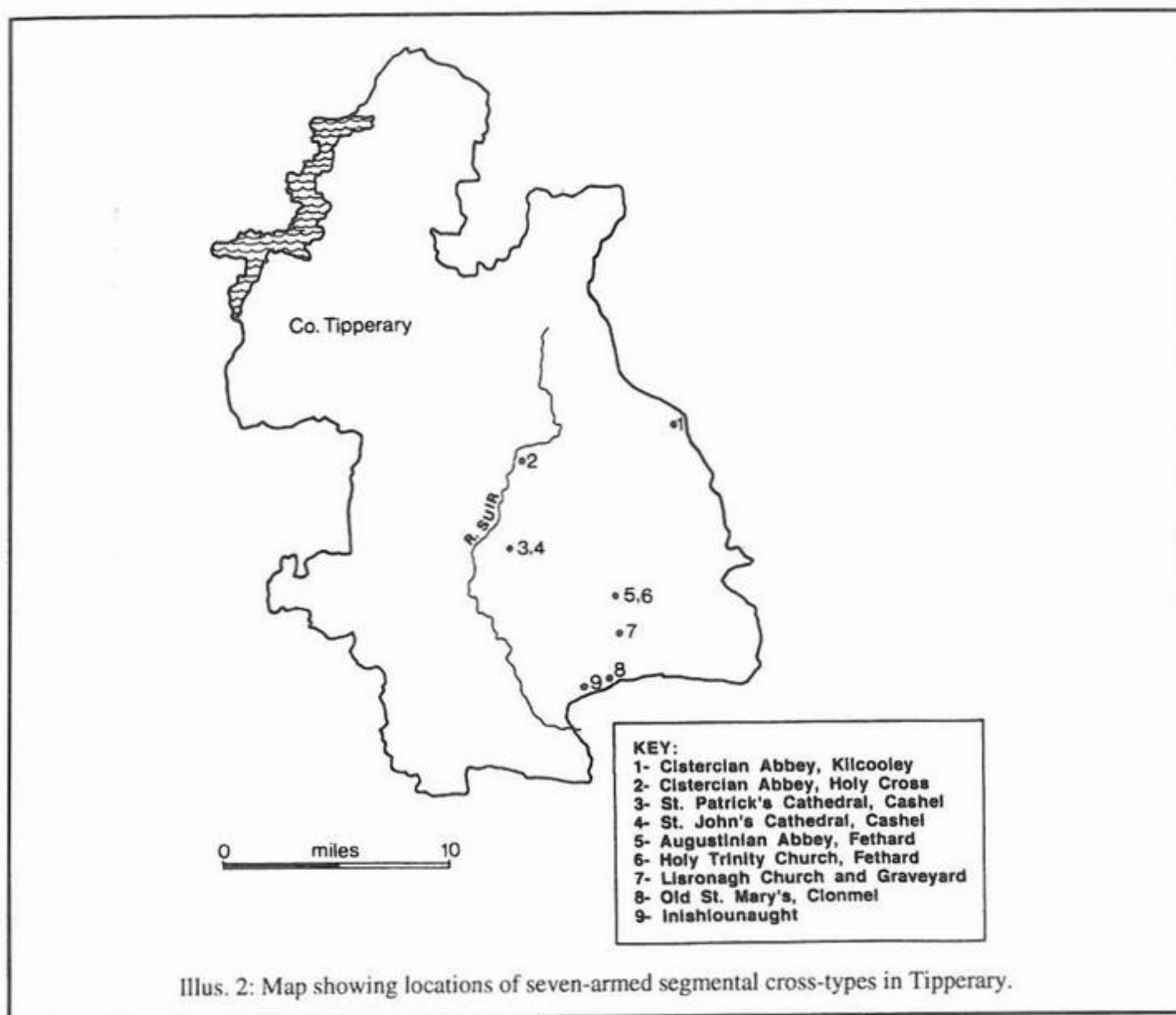
DISCUSSION

The cross-form featured on the Lisronagh slab is of a type which may be described as a seven-armed segmental cross with fleur-de-lis terminals. Usually the shafts of such crosses terminate in pillar-base forms. This form of cross-head is the most frequently occurring type found on the one hundred and five Medieval grave-slabs recorded to date in Co. Tipperary (Maher 1992)¹, but some variation in the details of their execution and ornamentation is evident. The terminals of the arms of such crosses, for instance, usually feature fleur-de-lis ends although in a number of cases, as at Lisronagh, these are of simpler, trefoil form. A total of thirty-eight Medieval grave-slabs featuring such cross-heads, occurring in either rectangular or tapered form, are located in nine individual sites in Co. Tipperary (*Illus 2*). These include a number of parish churches, St. Patrick's Cathedral on the Rock of Cashel, the Cistercian monasteries at Kilcooley, Holycross and Inishlounaught, and the Augustinian Abbey at Fethard. Related examples are also on record from a number of locations in adjoining counties (see Bradley 1985; Langrishe 1905, p. 365; Garstin 1907, p. 190).

While some of these slabs may have originally served as recumbent grave-makers others functioned as tomb lids. At Holycross, for example, one such slab survives *in situ* in a tomb niche in the north wall of the chancel, while at Fethard another features an undercut chamfer on its sinister side only suggesting that it acted as the lid of a tomb which was placed against a wall. It bears a largely indecipherable inscription which appears to include the date 1508 in Roman numerals. Thirteen of the Medieval grave-slabs from Co. Tipperary of this type feature decipherable dates as part of their inscriptions. These range from 1503 up to 1600, but the majority date to before 1540. While it is tempting, therefore, to suggest that many of the undated examples are also of early sixteenth century date, it is not inconceivable that some may be later fifteenth century and that others post-date 1600.

Unfortunately the Lisronagh slab carries no inscription and is not dated. However, a number of the elements of the cross-head design may be paralleled on other Medieval grave slabs in Co. Tipperary. The presence of relief designs within the sunken segments of the cross-head, for instance, is repeated on three of the slabs at the Augustinian Abbey at Fethard,

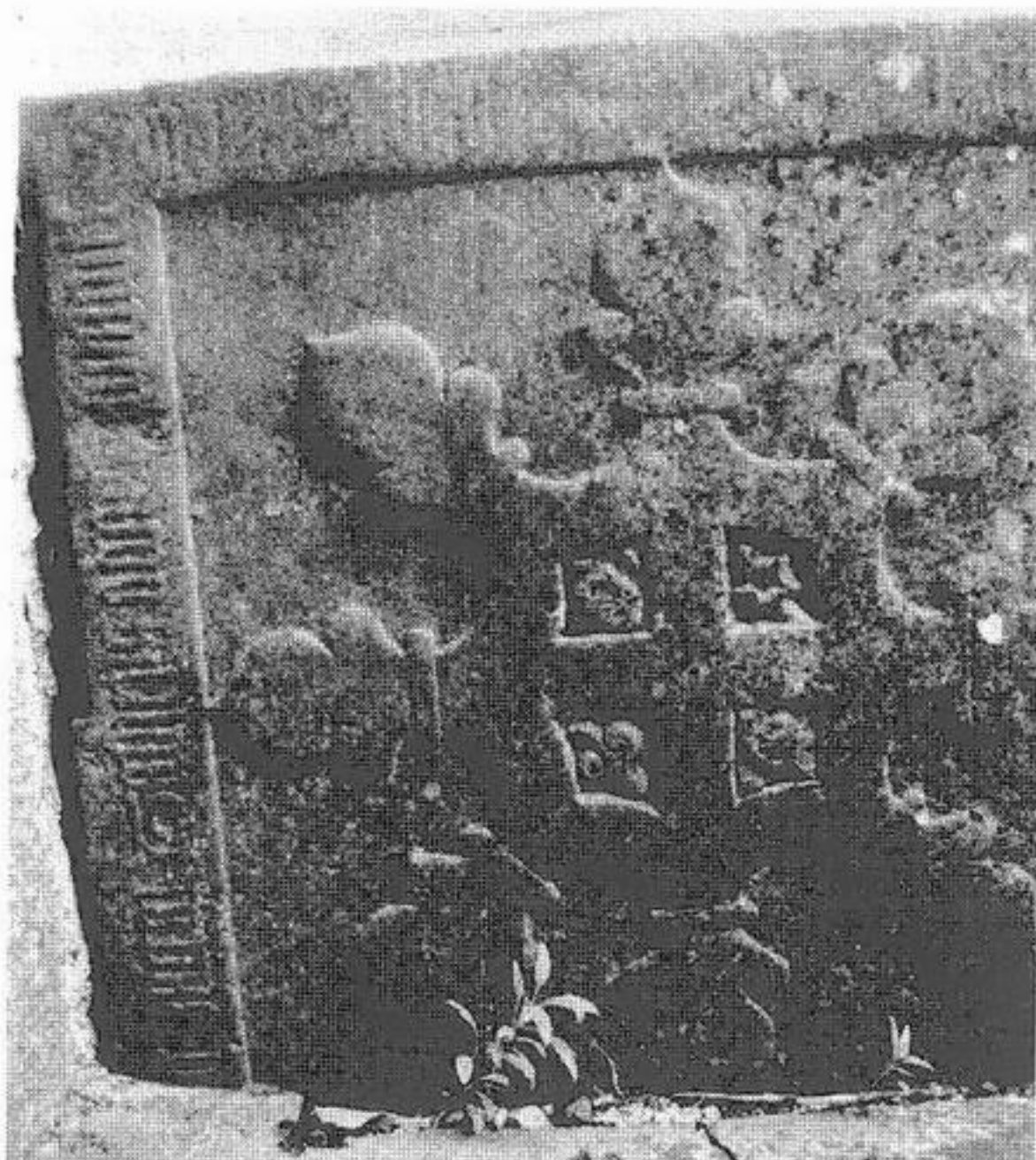
¹. A.D. 1600 is treated as an notional *terminus* for the Medieval Period. In Co. Tipperary and elsewhere a number of Medieval cross-forms continued even later in use.



each of which features foliate forms broadly similar to that occurring in the lower dexter segment of the Lisonagh cross-head (*Illus. 3*). One of these slabs carries an inscription to *Thadeus Owns Meagher* and *Honora Keeghan* and is dated 1540 (Knowles 1903, pp. 113-114). The foliate, tendrilled designs on the Lisonagh slab, on the other hand, are vaguely reminiscent of that which occurs on the finely carved floor-slab of *Abbot Philip O'Molwanayn* at Kilcooley Abbey, dated 1463 (Hunt 1974, No. 242, Pl. 184). The trefoil terminals on the arms of the Lisonagh cross-head are of much simpler form than those found on other examples of its type, and find their closest parallels on a series of apparently fourteenth century slabs from the Cistercian Abbey at Athassel². It is therefore difficult to assign a date to the Lisonagh slab on the basis of the three elements discussed above. It is a distinctive monument with an apparently eclectic background.

This view is reinforced when the three remaining design elements are considered. These comprise the encircled arrangement of a four-legged whirling motif in the upper dexter segment of the cross-head, the interlocked arrangement of four elongated links in the lower dexter segment, and the encircled motif formed of eight interlocked almond shaped rings

². The form of the cross-heads on this group of five slabs do not appear to be represented elsewhere in Ireland and the slabs are not dated. However, they can be paralleled on fourteenth-century slabs in southwest Britain.



Illus. 3: Head of medieval grave-slab at Fethard, Co. Tipperary. (Photo: J. Kenny)

external to the cross-head in the lower dexter position. Each of these designs is 'Celtic' in style and form and they are manifestations of the Late Medieval revival of interest in native Irish culture which has been termed the 'Celtic Renaissance'. Rynne believes that these revived art styles "seems to have become almost a symbol of nationality with the nationalistically minded Irish and Highland clans, and in Ireland to some extent also with the older Anglo-Irish families, those who had become 'More Irish than the Irish themselves'. This revived Celtic art can be found on buildings, grave-slabs, tombs, high crosses, brooches, caskets, harps, powder horns, dirks, swords, shields, wooden vessels, leatherwork, shrines, etc., etc."³.

The interlocked arrangement of four elongated links on the Lisronagh slab is a variation on the frequently used duplex motif in Late Medieval 'Celtic' art. Fine examples of the latter occur carved in relief on the window embrasures in the churches at Liathmore, Co. Tipperary, and Aghadoe, Co. Kerry, for instance, while forms of the motif also frequently occur in the range of fifteenth century masons' marks found in Co. Tipperary (Maher 1990, No. 4, Fig. 3; Stalley 1987, p. 43, Figs. 6-8). 'Celtic' knots and other interlaced motifs also occur in this repertoire. An angular form of the duplex motif occurs on the rear of the late Medieval pendant cross from Kilmallock Abbey, Co. Limerick (Cherry 1988, p. 149, Pl. 17), while a multi-strand example occurs on a fifteenth or sixteenth century wooden casket from Co. Clare (Rynne 1971, p. 39, Pl. 6,3). These parallels for the Lisronagh motif, like itself, should be

³. Rynne, E. "Continuity of Celtic Art in Late Medieval Ireland and Scotland", an unpublished hand-out which he uses during lectures on the subject.

regarded as revivals of Early Christian Period duplex knots such as those found on a series of cross-slabs in the west of Ireland (Higgins 1987, p. 123, Figs. 654 e and d; Wallace and Timoney 1987, pp. 50-51, Nos. 4-6).

The encircled arrangement of the four-legged whirling motif which occurs in relief in the upper dexter segment of the cross-head is also strongly reminiscent of elements of Early Christian art. In Later Medieval contexts it occurs in the form of decorative ventilators in towers houses at Coole, Co Offaly, Derryhivenny, Co. Galway (Leask, 1986, Figs. 60 and 70), and Moate, Co. Westmeath, and among a range of other motifs on a keystone featuring a puny Sheela-na-Gig, at Ballinderry Castle, Co. Galway, built shortly after 1540 (Andersen 1977, p. 144, No. 50). The general form of the Lisronagh motif finds numerous parallels in Early Christian carving, metalwork and manuscripts. Similarly, the encircled arrangement of interlocking almond shaped rings on the slab might perhaps be regarded as a variation of the marigold-type motif which commonly occurs on sculpture and metal work throughout the Early Christian Period. Among numerous Late Medieval examples is one in multi-strand form at the head of the mullioned east window in the parish church at Cahir, Co. Tipperary.

The presence of revived 'Celtic' motifs on the Lisronagh grave-slab suggests that it dates to the later part of the Medieval Period and a late fifteenth/early sixteenth century date would not seem inappropriate for it. The slab is of interest in that elements of its composition testify to the conscious revival in Ireland of native art forms during the Later Medieval period. This revival is also reflected, though in a somewhat different form, on two of the three Medieval grave-slabs from the monastic site at Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary (Maher, forthcoming).

Acknowledgements

This article is based on a portion of the authors M.A. thesis, *The Medieval Grave-Slabs of County Tipperary, 1200-1600 A.D.* (Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, 1992). She wishes to thank her Head of Department, Professor P.C. Woodman, and her supervisor J. Sheehan, M.A., for their advice and assistance. She also wishes to thank Professor E. Rynne, Department of Archaeology, University College Galway, for his constructive criticism regarding this article, and also Rhoda Cronin, M.A., for preparing the illustrations.

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