

# The Origin and Development of Occupational Graveslabs

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*This paper attempts to comprehend the meaning and function of funerary monuments, and endeavours to fulfil its objective by briefly examining a specific feature of mortuary practice: the representation of workmen's tools carved on graveslabs. These slabs are essentially a feature of the post-Reformation period and symbols representing many contemporary trades are depicted. The aim is to show the universal role of 'occupational' symbolism and how it can be used in an archaeological context to interpret the expressive nature of tomb construction. A central theme is that tombs are a form of communicational device, erected not solely for the dead, but also for the living.*

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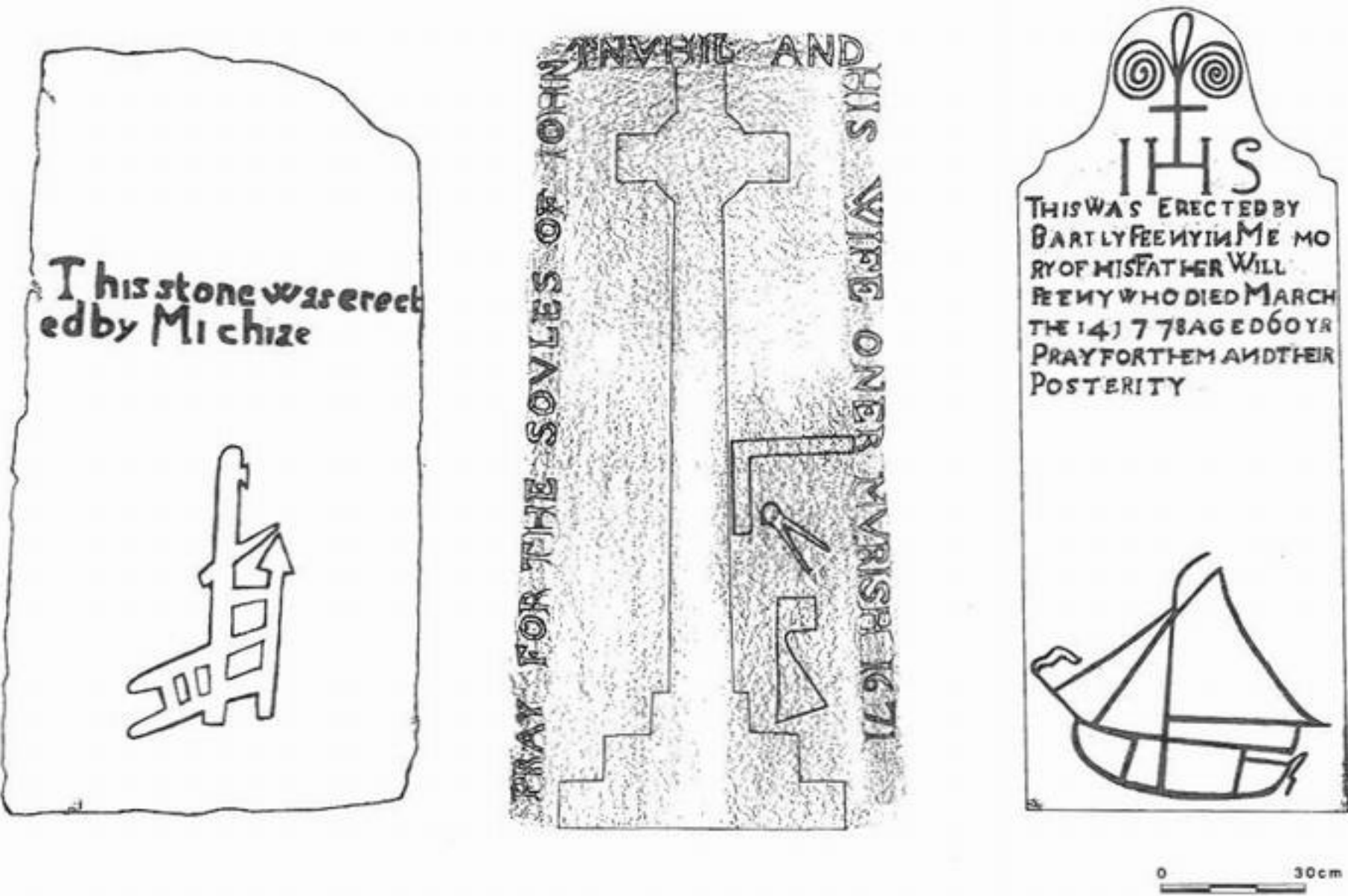
In archaeological terms, the field of symbolic imagery is broad ranging, crossing many cultures and eras. This study, however, focuses on mortuary occupational symbolism which is very rich in meaning, but which has been almost completely overlooked by archaeologists. Such symbols on graveslabs denote the occupation of the deceased with the carved depiction of a variety of tools characteristic of his/her trade. Erected in times of mass illiteracy, these unambiguous secular motifs reflect the processes of a changing society and are indicative of a new and rising social group, the skilled artisans. These slabs epitomise man's search for personal identity and recognition (and even in death) achieved through a recognised series of carved workmen's tools. Occupational symbols are admired for their aesthetic qualities and can be sorted into stylistic categories. There are, however, other aspects to these symbols, in particular the circumstances of their creation and their function as part of a social process. Funerary images of an 'occupational' nature are not passive; they engage attention and create an impact on the observer independent of any text. Such images powerfully capture past ideas like moments frozen in time and therefore have tremendous persistence and fascination not only for the art-historian, but also for the passer-by. These highly visual funerary representations play a multiplicity of roles, but in the archaeological context, they allow us to attempt to understand or communicate the sentiments and aspirations of past societies by interpreting their messages in a meaningful way. Occupational symbols are not just attractive pieces of graveyard art; they all have a purpose, a message to relay, and every stone imparts its own story. In the context of the contemporary society, the portrayal of specialised tools on a graveslab gave the deceased and the extended family a form of recognition by being associated with membership of an established profession.

Occupational graveslabs could depict a plough or parts of a plough to commemorate a farmer; anvil, hammer and bellows for a blacksmith; scissors and measuring tape for a tailor, and saw and axe for a carpenter. As an Irish archaeological entity, occupational graveslabs span a period between the late medieval and the onset of our industrial heritage, and are to be found in small quantities from a number of old graveyards. These special slabs are not unique

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to Ireland and are to be found in many parts of Britain and Europe. Some fine European examples of tapered graveslabs with sculptured occupational symbols are known from the early fourteenth century. The widespread use of such symbolism, however, did not become popular in Ireland until later times. The earliest Irish occupational slabs date to the mid-sixteenth century; these mainly represent coopers, mariners, merchants, goldsmiths, and hammermen, and only a few isolated examples survive from earlier times. Occupational slabs are essentially a feature of the post-Reformation period, the majority of them, both here and in Europe, date between the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century (see Illus. 1). Such slabs mostly commemorate members of the farming community and those associated with the wool, metal and woodworking fraternities. Representations of tools are also to be found on some Stone Age megalithic tombs, and in particular on many Roman funerary monuments of the first and second centuries A.D. There is, however, no firm evidence to indicate that the representation of tools portrayed on post-Reformation monuments are part of a continuous process.



Illus. 1. Examples of Occupational Graveslabs depicting a Farmer, a Carpenter and a Boatman. These well-carved slabs illustrate man's search for recognition, and pride of craftsmanship, through the representation of symbols characteristic of one's trade. (Drawings by Jack Mulveen)

<sup>1</sup>Bradley, R. 1989. 'Death and Entrances: A Contextual Analysis of Megalithic Art', *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 30, No.1, 68-75, p.70.



Commemorating the dead either individually or collectively in a durable monumental fashion is known from the Neolithic Period. Status was often expressed by highly visible monuments on the landscape, but in all cases the identity of the individual remains a mystery. The carving of axe-heads and hafted axes on isolated standing stones and in some passage tombs in Iberia, the Paris Basin and especially in Brittany, is most interesting. It is possible that this early Breton 'art style' could reveal a link with the first farmers, who with axes first cleared the land for cultivation. Richard Bradley sums up the importance of tools in this context:<sup>1</sup>

"Axes and axe plough could reflect the importance of clearing and working the land; the bovids and possibly the shepherds' crooks may relate to the changing use of livestock ... if megalithic tombs served as territorial markers, so did the early menhirs; indeed, a few had axes or possible ploughs carved on them".

In Mesopotamia (Syria) a form of occupational symbolism is known from 2200 B.C. These occupational type symbols are carved on tools (such as scrapers, chisels *etc.*), now known as the Blau Monuments. Illustrated on one replica are three blacksmiths apparently engaged in making objects on three anvils.<sup>2</sup> Tools denoting the trade of masons and carpenters are carved on a few small individual Egyptian tombs, dated between 2400-1400 B.C. On one tomb, a carpenter is depicted hewing a log with an adze, on another a mason is shown in a seated position working with a large chisel. One of the most interesting funerary emblems of an occupational nature is known as the 'drilling scene'. On this monument a carpenter is seen using a bow-drill, while his apprentice applies pressure to the top of the drill.<sup>3</sup>

The use of occupational symbolism as an individualistic and identifiable commemorative burial custom also occurs in the Roman world of the first century A.D.<sup>4</sup> Some Roman monuments such as stelae and sarcophagi portray the livelihoods of the deceased through the carved representations of tools pertaining to their particular trades. These sculptured funerary reliefs portray scenes of everyday life: potters, fishmongers, cobblers, fullers, merchants, cutlers, butchers, blacksmiths, armourers are some of the craftsmen whose skills are represented.<sup>5</sup> A well-carved first century stela depicts the trade of a coin-maker: a punch, bow-drill, knife, hammer and a small anvil are prominently carved on the memorial. In the pediment of this monument there are carvings representing a timber-block with a cased coin-die on it. This central set of symbols is bordered by a hammer and tongs. On closer examination it can be seen that the tongs holds a coin-blank ready to be stamped.<sup>6</sup> In a manuscript of Sir Thomas Browne (first published 1658) an account on the antiquities of Verona is given<sup>7</sup>:

"...whither to declare the Trade or Occupation of the Person, is uncertain. But upon the Monuments of Smiths...we meet with the Figures of Hammers, Pincers, and the like; and we find the Figure of a Cobbler's Awl on the Tomb of one of that Trade."

<sup>2</sup>Mallowan, M. 1965. *Early Mesopotamia and Iran*, Cambridge, p.65.

<sup>3</sup>Walker, P. 1986. *Woodworking Tools*, Shire Publication, 50, Buckinghamshire, p.4.

<sup>4</sup>Burgess, F. 1963. *English Churchyard Memorials*, Norwich, p.164.

<sup>5</sup>Cowell, F.R. 1964. 'The Ancient Life', in Grant, M. (ed) *The Birth of Western Civilization*, London. 175-208.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>7</sup>Browne, T. *The Religio Medico & Other Writings of Sir Thomas Browne*, (reprinted New York 1906), p. 145.

After the decline of the Roman Empire its cultural unity was also destroyed. Inscriptions and symbols on funerary markers disappeared, and the individuality or personality of the deceased became anonymous once again. Some writers believe that this type of anonymity in funerary practice is true death, total and definitive annihilation.<sup>8</sup> Occupational slabs reappeared in the Scottish Pictish kingdom of the seventh century. The sculptural art of the Picts has particular value for it not only conveys some carved representation of tools but also a highly organised system of symbolism. It is suggested that personal rank, or interpretation of profession is the common message relayed.<sup>9</sup> A graveslab from Dunfallandy, Perthshire, bears testimony to one particular class, that of a blacksmith/farrier. The monument is carved on both faces, on one of which symbols denoting a farrier (anvil, hammer and pincers) are neatly executed.<sup>10</sup>

The practice of combining secular occupational emblems with the Christian symbol of the cross was first seen on Anglo-Norman slabs.<sup>11</sup> A thirteenth century occupational slab, for example, from St. John's Church, Chester, commemorates a glover with the depiction of a scissors.<sup>12</sup> In Britain, it was not until the late seventeenth century that symbols signifying the trade of the deceased became popular. There are many occupational memorials from this period that commemorate barbers, butchers, carpenters, millwrights, painters, farmers, shepherds, coffin-makers, coach makers, game keepers and musicians. A weaver's memorial, dated 1640, shows a spinning wheel, warping-mill, loom, tentor and shuttle.<sup>13</sup> An undated occupational memorial from Saddleworth, England, depicts woollen-mill workers with an elaborate display of symbolism. This highly impressive chest-tomb shows in many carved panels the treatment of wool, from the sheep in the fields to the finished product.<sup>14</sup>

In the Scottish West Highlands some occupational graveslabs dated between the fourteenth and seventeenth century depict a shears. Pointed shears are the most numerous and are attributed to the trade of woolstapler. Two large square-ended shears are known and are associated with the trade of clothiers.<sup>15</sup> In the churchyard of Prestonpans, Scotland, a military memorial dated 1745 shows a drum, two cannon, a pistol and an axe. A mason's memorial in the same churchyard has the carving of a chisel, square and dividers. An elaborate memorial dated 1699 commemorates a shipmaster: a sounding lead, compass and quadrant complete the occupational symbolism.<sup>16</sup> Parts of a plough for a farmer, shears and pressing-iron for a tailor, and complete sets of tools for blacksmiths are also known from seventeenth century Scotland.<sup>17</sup> A 1756 slab to a merchant shows a hand holding a set of scales and other implements of his profession; a shipwright's memorial from Angus, dated 1629, has a carving of an anchor bordered on both sides by an axe; a wheelwright's slab of 1782 depicts a dividers, square, saw and axe.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Aries, P. 1991. *The Hour of our Death*, London, p.203.

<sup>9</sup>Henderson, I. 1967. *The Picts*, London, p.104-159.

<sup>10</sup>Cruden, S. 1968. *The Early Christian and Pictish Monuments of Scotland*, Edinburgh, plate 12; Thomas, C. 1964, 'The Interpretation of the Pictish Symbols', *The Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 120, 31-97, pp. 55-56; Allen, J. R., 1903. *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, (reprinted Angus 1993), p.288.

<sup>11</sup>Burgess, F., *op. cit.*, pp.228-240.

<sup>12</sup>Ward-Perkins, J.B. 1967. *Medieval Catalogue*, London Museum, p.151.

<sup>13</sup>Burgess, F., *op. cit.*, pp.228-240.

<sup>14</sup>Lindley, K. 1972. *Graves and Graveyards*, Lincoln.

<sup>15</sup>Steer, K. and Bannerman, J. 1977. *Late Medieval Monumental Sculpture in the West Highlands*, Edinburgh.

<sup>16</sup>Reid, A. 1907. 'The Churchyards of Prestonpans', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, Vol. XLII, 18-39, pp.25-36.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas, C. 1994. *And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? post-Roman inscriptions in western Britain*, Cardiff, p.17.

<sup>18</sup>Willsher, B. 1988. *Understanding Scottish Graveyards*, Edinburgh, plates 9, 24, 31.



In the Chateau-Fort which overlooks the city of Lourdes, France, there is a very small graveyard which contains five occupational slabs.<sup>19</sup> On one graveslab the depiction of a comb and a scissors are neatly carved. As this particular representation of a scissors resembles those used in medical surgery, it may be deduced that this graveslab represents a common seventeenth century trade, that of barber-surgeon. Several medieval memorials with the symbol of a shears, probably representing workers in wool rather than shepherds, are known from Co. Down. Shears are a prominent feature of the graveslabs and can be located on either the dexter or sinister side of the cross. These early (14th/15th century) occupational symbols are to be found on memorials from, Killarn, Ballymaghan, Bangor Abbey, Ballywalter and Movilla Abbey.<sup>20</sup> St. Canice's Cathedral, Kilkenny, boasts the most comprehensive collection of medieval burial monuments in Ireland. John Bradley (1985) surveyed a total of eighty-one examples, one of which was classed as an occupational graveslab. On this sixteenth century slab, two adzes and an auger are carved, which represent the trade of a woodworker, possibly a cooper rather than a carpenter. In a brief note the writer eloquently captures the social meaning of this isolated occupational graveslab with regard to its contextual setting<sup>21</sup>:

"There are no memorials to artisans, labourers or peasants among these tombs and obviously the cost of commissioning one was beyond their reach and also, perhaps, their aspiration. There is, however, one late sixteenth century tomb to a tradesman, Donatus Brin, who would appear from the tools depicted on his tomb to have been a carpenter. Coming as it does at the end of our period it has a singular importance: the bluecollar in a whitecollar world. In its own unobtrusive way it is an indicator of the beginning of the social changes which were to create our modern world."

In County Clare, two occupational graveslabs are known from the Friary at Quin. One a 1786 memorial, was erected for a William Lynch and bears a solitary emblem, that of a hammer. This symbol probably represents a stone mason. It is unusual to find an individual tool such as a hammer depicted on a graveslab as more often a trowel or a dividers accompanies the symbol of a hammer on a stone mason's graveslab. The second graveslab, dated 1836, bears the symbols of a blacksmith: anvil, hammer, bellows and a horseshoe are carved in low relief.<sup>22</sup> Bigger (1901) gives a detailed account of an occupational slab from Bangor, Co. Down.<sup>23</sup> The deceased, one Archbel Wilson, was hanged at the pier of Bangor on 26th. June 1798; from the symbols depicted on his graveslab it would appear that he was a roofer or slater.<sup>24</sup> An occupational memorial from Clonoe Churchyard, Co. Tyrone, was erected to commemorate a stone mason and is dated 1750; Bigger (1908) comments<sup>25</sup>:

<sup>19</sup>Personal research undertaken while visiting this area in the summer of 1994.

<sup>20</sup>*An Archaeological Survey of County Down*, (H.M.S.O. 1966).

<sup>21</sup>Bradley, J. 1985. 'The Medieval Tombs of St. Canice's', in Empey, C. (ed.), *A Worthy Foundation: The Cathedral Church of St. Canice, Kilkenny, 1285-1985*. Dublin, 54-104. p.54.

<sup>22</sup>Murphy, C. 1981. 'Trade Symbols on Graveslabs in the Friaries of Quin and Ennis', *The Other Clare*, Vol. 5, 47-48, p.47.

<sup>23</sup>Bigger, F. 1901. 'The Franciscan Friary of Kilconnell', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 1, 145-167, p.33.

<sup>24</sup>At the age of twenty-six he was charged with the offence of rebelling against the State in the 1798 rising; he went to the gallows declaring his innocence. The inscription on his graveslab recounts his martyrdom.

<sup>25</sup>Bigger, F. 1908. 'Clonoe Churchyard in Tir-Eoghan', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 14, 72-77, p.73.



"Every stone tell its own tale; every corner has its lesson. Clonoe is a type of Ulster life; the spring flowers and the cawing rooks come and go annually, but the dead remain, and their actions still bear fruit...The monument to Patrick Byrne is a fine example of a mason's stone, with all the emblems of his trade - compass, square, calipers, etc., carved on the back in bold lines as if he had pride, even in death, of his handicraft."

In County Roscommon there are also many fine occupational memorials; those which have been examined date mostly to the late eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup> Another survey in Co. Roscommon gives details of ten occupational memorials from seven graveyards.<sup>27</sup> These slabs are dated between 1790 and 1823, and five trades are depicted: farrier, shepherd, blacksmith, carpenter and stone mason. In Co. Galway, this writer discovered over one-hundred and seventy examples of occupational graveslabs from forty-five old graveyards.<sup>28</sup> Symbols representing twenty different trades were recorded. The most frequently occurring symbols were ploughs schematically carved in low relief or incised. Ploughshares and coulter were also numerous, as were symbols denoting the blacksmith's trade. Tailors, mariners, surveyors, butchers, shoemakers, locksmiths, coopers, masons, carpenters and goldsmiths were also noted. There was also some excellent depictions of farming practices: two horses lined abreast and attached via swingletrees by means of chained-harness to long-beamed timber style ploughs. The Dominican Priory, Athenry, Co. Galway, probably has the finest collection of occupational memorials in Ireland which commemorate the farming community. Westropp (1895) was the first to record the various occupational memorials in the Priory, followed by Macalister in 1913.<sup>29</sup> Rynne also commented on the graveslabs from Athenry, with particular reference to the occupational symbolism:<sup>30</sup>

"Also worthy of note is a slab dated to 1631 which has not only some interlace carved on it but also an axehead. Likewise of special interest is the graveslab dated 1682 commemorating a blacksmith called Tanian which is not only carved with a large cross, but also with two bellows, a horse-shoe, an anvil, a hammer, and a pincers. Other graveslabs have carvings of ploughs or parts of ploughs, thus indicating the farming status of those commemorated."

In America, occupational tombstones first appeared during the late-eighteenth century. Richard Meyer of Salem, Oregon, a professor of English literature undertook a private survey of these slabs.<sup>31</sup> The research covered a broad geographic region of the United States. Most of his examples are dated to the late nineteenth century. He has also compiled an extensive list of recent occupational tombstones. In his catalogue there is a 1780 slab to a marine officer which displays the emblem of a carved ship. A tombstone dated 1864, which shows the carving of a sword, hat and belt, commemorates a confederate officer of the American

<sup>26</sup>Higgins, J. 1995. *The Tisrara Medieval Church Carrontemple, Four Roads, Co. Roscommon, Its Archaeology and History*, Roscommon, p.130: see also Higgins, J. 1994. *Aspects of the Archaeology and History of Dysart Church, Cummeen, Co. Roscommon*, Roscommon.

<sup>27</sup>Siggins, A. 1984. 'Tradesmen' Memorial Slabs,' *The Newbridge, Ballygar, Toghergar News*, Galway, p.29-30.

<sup>28</sup>Mulveen, J. unpublished M.A. Thesis (1977) presented to the National University of Ireland, Galway.

<sup>29</sup>Westropp, T.J. 1895. 'Athenry', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 25, 295-302; Macalister, R.A.S., 1913.

'The Dominican Church at Athenry', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 43, 193-222.

<sup>30</sup>Rynne, E. 1992. *Athenry a Medieval Irish Town*, Athenry.

<sup>31</sup>Information received via Internet, <http://aristotle.sils.umich.edu:4444/GRAV/html-stuff/tomb.html>



Civil War. The officer was killed in the Battle of Wilderness, Virginia, on May 6th. The inscription reads: "Come boys. Rally. Never desert the Union flag". Other tombstones from the same period commemorate firemen, sailors, grocers, blacksmiths, teachers and stagecoach drivers.

The modern tombstones from Meyer's collection cover a variety of occupations. All of these tombstones show symbols relating to the individual occupational skills of the deceased. Cowboys, farmers, loggers, candymakers, airline pilots, photographers, homemakers, forest rangers, ice-cream makers, hairdressers, rescue workers, lighthouse keepers, radio announcers and tyre salesmen are represented. An imaginative dual purpose tombstone portrays the occupations of both husband and wife. The stone shows the carving of a man filling petrol at a service station, while, on the other side of the tombstone, a woman is depicted beside a schoolhouse, in the background of which children can be seen playing on a swing. A stone dedicated to William H. Samelius, 1873-1961, Dean of the American Watchmakers, has the appropriate carved emblem of a clock face.

In graveyards throughout Ireland there are many modern memorials representing a variety of skills: painters, turf accountants, musicians, woodwork teachers, writers, doctors, undertakers, carpenters, civil engineers are some of the skills represented. A 1978 memorial from Abbey (near Gort, Co. Galway) commemorates husband and wife; it shows an anvil, horse, hammer, pincers and horseshoe, denoting the trade of farrier for the man. There is also the representation of an accordion; it is believed that the woman was an accomplished player. In the new cemetery Athenry, the following carved symbols were noticed: bolster and pointed chisel (stone mason), motor car (taxi driver or mechanic), plough with man and horse (farmer), mallet and flat-pointed chisel and two 'theatre-masks' (both woodworker and 'amateur' actor) and a mini-bus (bus driver/owner).

During the late sixteenth century, the burial record indicates that gravestones were confined, for the most part, to members of the aristocracy. The so-called 'ordinary' person, due to economic and social reasons, had probably not the opportunity or aspiration to participate in such lavish mortuary activities, and had to be satisfied with anonymous burials. With the many social changes which occurred after the Reformation, came a new and consolidated group of people, the skilled artisans. These craftsmen belonged to a rising social group, exemplified in this instance through a new and innovative form of mortuary practice; the introduction of the 'occupational' graveslab. Emulation of material styles was an important factor for the commissioning of occupational slabs, and for the first time in history, 'ordinary' people were able to compete with a higher social order with the introduction of their own special graveslabs.<sup>32</sup> The existence of a personal gravemarker, and the added dimension of the portrayal of specialised tools peculiar to one's craft, gave identity and status to an otherwise neglected group.

Occupational slabs stand at the beginning of what could be termed the first formal and personalised burial practices for classes other than those of the élite. The emergence of occupational memorials coincides with the demise of tapered slabs and the beginning of what was to become the widespread use of rectangular-shaped slabs. Erected in an era of major economic and social upheaval, these slabs undoubtedly reflect the processes of a changing society. In one way their introduction marks an important part of our history: a move from

<sup>32</sup>What is most interesting from both an archaeological and historical viewpoint is the noticeable absence (especially in Co. Galway) of aristocratic graveslabs from this period. However, there is an abundance of chalices and other ecclesiastical vessels which are carved with 'memorial' inscriptions. See Mulveen, J. 1994. 'Galway Goldsmiths: Their Marks and Ware', *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, Vol. 46, 43-64, p.49.



medieval times to the post-Reformation period. The desire and discretion to choose the representation of tools over religious or symbolic imagery may well indicate the independence, personality and aspirations of the deceased. To some extent, these slabs illustrate the importance of the craftsman's work in the post-Reformation period. They also emphasise the unification and continuity of the family and the controlled passage of 'social' identity from one generation to another.

During the late medieval period, most craftsmen were members of a trade guild, and all these guilds had banners showing a variety of emblems and tools pertaining to the individual craft. The arrangement of carved tools on graveslabs, such as those commemorating blacksmiths, carpenters, coopers, slaters, masons etc., is somewhat similar to those depicted on guild or trade banners. Such displays of tools on medieval and post-Reformation banners were there to show an illiterate society the craft represented and similar designs on graveslabs played the same role, although this was not their primary function. As a form of monumental expression, these graveslabs reflect a segment of a past society's fundamental social desires and values. In light of an often meagre existence, the expenditure on tomb architecture is a most interesting and significant social characteristic. The cost and the care given to memorials could possibly have exceeded the attention given to the home and living conditions. A carved graveslab was an expensive item and many families went into great debt to secure one, rather than suffer the 'shame' and loss of dignity connoted by a so-called pauper's burial.

The conspicuous entombment of the dead and the elaborate carvings of tools are all part of a burial tradition which attempts to bestow a form of status or social identity on the deceased. The message of status was imparted by the depiction of a recognised series of tools, associated with relatively well-respected occupational fraternities. In one way these slabs give real meaning to the word 'memorial': they directly convey a consistent and comprehensible message, particularly when compared with other contemporary slabs with their vast range of often enigmatic and non-personalised symbols. During the post-Reformation period occupational graveslabs were designed to meet (and mostly surpass) a person's success in life; however, such 'distinction' could only be awarded posthumously. A well-ornamented slab would ensure that a positive message was expressed for posterity. Occupational slabs were meant to be viewed, admired and understood by the passer-by and this concept was intended to produce a type of ideological control over the observer. In other words, occupational graveslabs were not just for the dead, but also for the living.