

Instruments of the Passion on Gravestones in County Limerick

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Some gravestones illustrating the Crucifixion, accompanied by motifs showing various instruments associated with the passion of Christ, located in a number of cemeteries in County Limerick are described and discussed. The examples chosen range in date from the late-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries.

In 1287 the bishop of the diocese made the church of Effin, County Limerick, a prebend of St. Mary's cathedral, in Limerick city. The ruins of what may have been this medieval parish church survive in the graveyard now used by the inhabitants of Effin and the surrounding countryside.¹ One gravestone there displays Instruments of the Passion arranged around a central scene of the Crucifixion (Fig. 1). This entire display is partially covered with a narrow stone canopy decorated with a chevron pattern. Both side margins of the stone are covered in foliate tracery, unfortunately, this is very weathered. The letters INRI are over the head of Christ representing the inscription 'Jesus the Nazarean, King of the Jews' which was placed on the Cross of Jesus by order of Pontius Pilate. A serpent twined around the foot of the Cross represents the defeat of the Devil, while a skull and crossed bones, also at the foot of the Cross represent the defeat of death.

At the feet of Jesus a woman sits in an attitude of sorrow. She appears to be weeping and is holding her cloak in such a manner that she may have used it to dry her tears. Her flowing hair is a very noticeable feature, as is the hair of Jesus which is also long and abundant. This may be a representation of Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha of Bethany. According to the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 12, verse 3, Mary used a jar of costly perfume to anoint the feet of Jesus and she then wiped them with her hair. The feet of Jesus are worn away but her kneeling figure is in close proximity to where they were once placed upon the cross. However, the figure could also be Mary the mother of Jesus. It was not uncommon to find her at the left-hand side of Jesus in illustrations of the Passion found on gravestones in Wicklow, Wexford and Carlow areas.²

Two Roman soldiers are also carved upon the stone. The figure upon the right-hand side of Christ is holding up what appears to be a sponge, upon a long stick. This soldier is known in Christian tradition as Stephaton. In St. John's gospel, Chapter 19, verse 28-30 there is a description of this event: 'With that Jesus knew all was now finished and he said "I am thirsty" to fulfil what was written in the Scriptures.' A jar full of bitter wine stood upon the ground and a sponge soaked in the wine was put upon a hyssop stick and raised to the lips of Christ. The other soldier holds a spear. This is the centurion known in Christian tradition as Longinus who pierced the side of Christ with a lance. He is usually placed upon Christ's right-hand side but here he is shown on the left. The portrayal of the

¹ Rev. John Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick Ancient and Medieval* (Dublin, 1906), p. 145.

² A. K. Longfield, 'Some 18th Century Irish Tombstones' in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, vol. 73, Part 11, (1943) pp 29-39.

two soldiers is very interesting. They seem to be wearing a form of military tail-coat and skirt or kilt. The collars of their coats are high, stiff collars, usually worn by soldiers of the eighteenth century. This could be a carving of soldiers from a British highland regiment. However, the hats on both men are different. The soldier, Stephaton, has a hood with a tail-piece down his back which could be a rendering of the bonnet worn by highland regiments. The actual bonnet had two ribbons falling from the back. Longinus wears a high hat which was also worn by these regiments on certain occasions.³ His spear is also a symbol of his standing as an officer. Spears were carried, usually by non-commissioned officers in the British army during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The thirty pieces of silver given to Judas for his betrayal of Christ is also on the slab and the ladder, used when taking him down from the cross, is also portrayed. What could be interpreted as the head and upper portion of the neck of a cock projects from behind the body of Christ though the rendering of the cock is not a very convincing one. However, it could be a reference to the story told about St. Peter and his wife. On the night of Good Friday, Peter reminded his wife that Jesus said he would rise from the dead. His wife replied that the cock boiling in the pot would have as much chance of coming back from the dead; whereupon the cock flew out of the pot and crowed loudly. The following inscription is carved upon the graveslab:

Erected by I^{no} Lynch
in memory of his
Father I^{no} Lynch wh^o
Died April 28 1781
Aged 35 ye^{rs} also hi^s
Son Laurence Lynch
Died Aug^s 19th 1829 Ag^d
48 ye^{rs} may they rest
in peace Amen
Also John Lyn^{ch} His wife & family
Quarry Hill
Martin Lynch
Mary (Babe) Lynch
Died May 25 1996
Aged 100 years.

In the late-thirteenth century the manor of Ayne or Knockainy belonged to Thomas de Clare.⁴ The present Knockainy Church of Ireland church, is reputed to be the third edifice for worship erected upon the same site, thereby indicating the great age of this sacred area. A gravestone in the graveyard displays a Crucifixion scene, Instruments of the Passion and references to the Day of Judgement. The Crucifixion is contained within a decorated, rounded arch. Christ does not have the long flowing hair of the Effin stone. In fact, he seems to have no hair. INRI is placed over his head. Three nails are carved over the right-hand arm of the cross while three spears coming from the decorated right edge of the arch seem to be aimed towards Christ. What could be the stem of a plant with leaves or flowers is carved on the right-hand side of the cross. It is possible that this could

³ D.S.V & B.K. Fosten, *The Thin Red Line: Uniforms of the British Army between 1751 & 1914* (London, 1989) p. 32 and Plate VII.

⁴ Begley, *Diocese of Limerick*, p. 170.

be a representation of corn which is sometimes used as a symbol of new life. At the right-hand side of Christ there is also a decorated chalice and the thirty pieces of silver. A cock stands on top of the cross. He may represent the Resurrection. At the foot of the cross the letters IHS are carved in a florid fashion. These are usually understood to be, in the Greek alphabet, the first three letters of the name of Jesus. A ladder, pincers and hammer are at the left-hand side of the Crucifixion. What could be a graphic representation of a very large nail is at the mouth of the pincers.

At either side of the arch containing the Crucifixion, the head of an angel with wings has been carved. Outside the rounded arch containing the Crucifixion, yet situated directly overhead the cross, there is a representation of God the Father (Fig. 2). Two wings surround a long face which is topped with a crown. A flower is placed at the left-hand side of the crown. The flower here could represent creation. An arch of chevrons surround the carving of God the Father and overhead the arch is written the words 'Gloria in Excel [broken] Deo'. What could be two doves are shown to the lower right and left of this carving, which may represent the Holy Spirit. The Devil is carved within a decorative, rounded arch, at the left-hand side of Christ. The arch is smaller than the one containing the Crucifixion. His beard and hair are both curled and protruding; in fact he is portrayed as a dandy with wings. He holds an hour glass and a scythe. He is waiting impatiently for the sands of life to run out for humans and the scythe is the instrument with which he will cut down those who are to follow him. There is a corresponding decorated panel at the right-hand side of Christ. The angel here is St. Michael. He holds a weighing-scale, the symbol for judgement, and he blows a trumpet to call the dead from their graves. The following inscription is carved upon the stone:

ERECTED BY
Ann Quish alis Dea
of Ballycahill in Memory
Of her husband William
Quish who Dep^d life
April 26th 1828
Aged 55 ys
May his Soul rest in peace Amen.

The graveyard which surrounds the Church of Ireland church at Nantenan, County Limerick, contains six gravestones displaying representations of the Crucifixion and Instruments of the Passion. The earliest reference to Nantenan is in the *Black Book of Limerick* for the year 1237. Its income belonged to the precentor of St. Mary's Cathedral and it was dedicated to St. James the Apostle, whose feast is 25 July.⁵

The stone erected by Edmond Culhane for his father who died in 1800 has some similarities to the stone found in Knockainy. It seems probable, from the inscription, that it was also erected in the 1820s. There is a Crucifixion scene but unusually Christ is shown with a beard and what could be a full crown of thorns (Fig. 3). The two angels on either side of Christ are good and no Devil is represented. St. Michael is shown on the right-hand side of the cross and he holds the weighing scales in his hand. Another angel, probably St. Gabriel, on the left-hand side is blowing a trumpet to call the dead to judgement. Both angels face left. There are boldly carved flowers on each side of the scene which may be Passion flowers and a very large IHS is placed beneath the crucifix.

⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

The following inscription is carved upon the gravestone:

Edm^d Culhane erect^d y^s stone in memor^y of
His Father Thos Cul who dep^d y^s Life Sep^t
28th 1800 Aged 48 Years & of his sister
Naney OBrien alias Cul^e who died
24th ditto Aged 32 also of his brother Pat
who died 24 years of age Nov^r 4th 1821.

All of the gravestones discussed in this paper are limestone and face east. Most are approximately six feet in height. It is difficult to be absolutely accurate because many of the stones have sunk into the ground or are now inclining at odd angles. However, the stone erected by James Enright in memory of his father is an impressive eight feet. A rounded arch surrounds Christ on the cross (Fig. 4). The background has been cut away to heighten the impact of the Crucifixion scene. The figure of Christ conveys an impressive combination of power and resignation. INRI is placed over his head and his hair lies in a fringe upon his forehead. At Christ's right-hand side there is a ladder, three vertical spears, a scourge or flail, pincers with a nail in its clasp, two other nails, a hammer and three dice. These latter indicate the incident after the Crucifixion when the soldiers gambled for Christ's tunic. On the left-hand side of Christ there are thirty pieces of silver, a chalice, a scythe, a cock upon a pillar, which probably represents the Resurrection, corn or wheat and a strange edifice. This could be a representation of the Temple of Jerusalem because at the moment of Christ's death, the veil of the Temple was torn in two. The incident is described in St. Luke's Gospel, Chapter 23, verse 45. The inscription reads:

Erected by
James Enright in memory of his
Father Maurice Enright of
Ballylin who departed this Life
On the 6th of October 1828
Aged 70 years
May he rest in Peace AMEN
And also his wife Bridget Enright
Who died January 11th 1871
Aged 65 years.

A gravestone, now much weathered and eroded, was erected by Michael P. Cahill. The name of his residence can no longer be made out. Christ upon the cross is still plain but all details are gone (Fig. 5). At Christ's right-hand side a pillar is still clear, as is a beautifully detailed, free-standing halberd. At the left-hand side of Christ a few pieces of the thirty pieces of silver still survive. There is also an Ionic pillar and the figure of the cock, standing upon it can be made out.

A gravestone, erected by Michael and James Cahill in memory of their father has a Crucifixion scene. Christ has, what appears to be a halo and markings on his forehead, which may be the crown of thorns. On his right-hand side there is the ladder, an iron pot with the cock standing upon it, the three spears, a pincers holding a nail, a hammer, a nail and a jug at the foot of cross. The jug is probably a reference to the bitter wine offered to Christ on the sponge. On the left-hand side of Christ there are the thirty pieces of silver, a pillar, a scourge, three spears and a plant which may be corn. The gravestone has the following inscription:

ERECTED BY

Michael and James Cahill in
Memory of their beloved Father
Patrick Cahill who dep^d this life
April the 11th 1843 Aged 76 y^{rs}

The gravestone erected by James Cahill of Ballyhomen is similar in design to that erected by Michael and James Cahill. The background has been cut away behind the Crucifixion in order to emphasize the most important aspect of the scene (Fig. 6). INRI is placed over the head of Christ. What appears to be a halo rises from his head and the markings upon the forehead could represent the crown of thorns. At his right-hand side there are three spears slanting towards him. A cock stands in a four-legged iron pot. There is also a ladder, a jug, a hammer, two nails, a pincers holding a nail and drapery, which may represent the linen which was wrapped around the dead body of Christ in the tomb. On Christ's left-hand side there are three nails, drapery, a three-stepped pillar, thirty pieces of silver, a flail and three spears slanting towards him. The stone carries the following inscription:

ERECTED BY

James Cahill of Bally
homen in memory of his wife
M^{rs} Cahill who died January
the 3rd 1852 Aged 40 years.
Deeply regretted by her loving
Husband and Children
James Cahill
died 16 March 1972 age 58 yrs.

Further down the stone, the name In Rahilly is carved. This is the name of the stonemason who produced the work. Rahilly signed another gravestone in Nantenan graveyard. It is the stone erected by Patrick O'Donnel and it is very similar to the Cahill stone. INRI is placed over the head of Christ; a halo rises from his head and a cross-banded effect could represent the crown of thorns. On Christ's right-hand side there is a hammer, a ladder, possibly two nails, a pincers with a nail in its mouth, drapery, three spears, a cock standing in a four-legged iron pot and a jug. On Christ's left-hand side there are two nails, thirty pieces of silver, drapery, a flail, a pillar and three spears. The following inscription is carved:

ERECTED BY

Patrick O'Donnel of Crag
moor in memory of his belov^d
Wife Anne Sheehy wh dep^d this
life Nov^r 26th 1848 Aged 48.

Mungret graveyard also has a gravestone with Instruments of the Passion carvings. The date upon it is 1814 but its use of iconography represents a transitional phase in this form of folk-art in County Limerick (Fig. 7). It contains elements of the designs shown on the Lynch stone in Effin and aspects of the stones in Knockainy and Nantenan. The Crucifixion is central with Our Lady on his right-hand side and a kneeling figure is on the left-hand side. This may be St. John or it could also be Mary Magdalene; the hair is long and falls over the left shoulder while the body is slender and seems more feminine than masculine. Our Lady's cloak appears to be composed of strips of a heavy material, maybe

wool, sewn together. It comes to just below her knees and a skirt reaches the ground. The pillar and flail are carved in a very graphic manner. There is also the cup for the bitter wine, three dice, thirty pieces of silver, and the ladder.

The cock, which is usually placed upon the right-hand side of Christ, is here upon the left. However, it is not rising from a cooking-pot. It is placed on top of a classical building. It is probable that this building represents Christ's tomb and the cock represents the Resurrection. Three spears slant inwards from the right-hand side of the stone and three from the left. The stone is approximately four feet in height and faces east. Just where the stone enters the ground the name O'Donohue is carved. This is surely the name of the man who did the work upon the stone. Mungret was the site of a very large and famous early Christian monastery founded by St. Necessarius. Art O'Donoghoe, one of its erenachs, died in the year 1028.⁶ In the present graveyard there are many stones which have been erected to the memory of O'Donoghues. The following inscription is carved on this tombstone:

Er^d by Jn^o Fitzgerald
in mem^y of his daughter
Honora who died March
17th 1814 aged 19 y^{rs}
also his daughter Cath
rine died Aug^t 2nd 1818
aged 18 y^{rs}
RIP

The old graveyard at Adare, which surrounds two ruined medieval churches, has two slabs displaying scenes of the Crucifixion. There was a parish church in Adare in 1302, as shown in the taxation of the diocese of Limerick for that year when the church at Adare and the chapels of Kilcurly and Castle Roberts paid 15 shillings and one penny, half-penny.⁷ The older of the two slabs belongs to the 1820s. It has some representational similarities to the Culhane stone in Nantenan, which was carved, at about the same time. Here, Christ also has a beard and what could either be a representation of a halo or the crown of thorns (Fig. 8). INRI is placed above his head. The Crucifixion itself and the other symbols of the Passion have become very weathered and difficult to see. On Christ's right-hand side there is the ladder, three spears, and dice. On his left-hand side thirty pieces of silver can be seen. A border of diamonds, horizontally placed, divides the Crucifixion scene from the inscription which reads as follows:

ERECTED BY
John Connelly in
memory of his son James
who dep^d this life March
the 15th 1826 in the 22 year
of his Age also his Daugh
ter Mary who dep^t ed
Life Decem^r 18th 1808

⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

The second gravestone belongs to the late 1840s or 1850s. However, it is also very weathered. This stone echoes the one in Mungret because it displays the Crucifixion and two figures but it contains no symbols of the Passion. The figures could be Our Lady and St. John. Both seem to have drapery over their heads but it is possible that the figure on Christ's right-hand is Our Lady, who is kneeling while St. John stands on Christ's left-hand side. The head of an angel, with wings is carved upon each corner at the top of the slab. The inscription of the stone reads as follows:

ERECTED BY
James Connelly of
Adare in memory of his
Daughter
Ellen Connelly who departed this
Life Jan 7th 1844 Aged 17 Years.

As with all the other slabs discussed, those in Adare graveyard face to the east and are carved from limestone. Both are approximately six feet in height.

Discussion:

The use of Instruments of the Passion in Medieval Christian art has a long history, which began, according to Helen Roe, in the fourth and fifth centuries.⁸ It is very probable that Ireland would have followed in this tradition. A surviving example in Irish art of the use of the Instruments of the Passion, known collectively as the *Arma Christi*, are on the *Domhnach Airgid* book shrine dated to 1340-50. There is a small shield on the shrine, which contains a cross, a crown of thorns, nails and a scourge. The use of the *Arma Christi* on tombstones seems to have started in Ireland in the fifteenth century. The seat of the abbot of Kilcooley contains a shield on which are carved two nails, a crown of thorns on a cross, a ladder, pincers, a cock on a pot, a spear, a pillar, a seamless garment, dice, two scourges and a hammer. This monastery was rebuilt in 1445; therefore the shield would seem to belong to this period.⁹ It can be seen from the above list that much of the iconography used on the nineteenth-century gravestones in County Limerick, was already well established by the mid-fifteenth century. As a result of the Reformation, representations of the Instruments of the Passion and crucifixes were considered a form of idolatry; therefore, the use of the *Arma Christi* became a statement of religious belief only on the part of those who adhered to the Catholic Church.

The graveyard at Effin contains what seems to be the oldest gravestone under discussion. It was erected in memory of a father who died in 1781 aged 35 years. It seems unlikely that his son, who could only be in his teens in the 1780s caused this work to be executed in the year of his father's death. Therefore, a date at the end of the century, for example, the late 1790s or very early nineteenth-century is more probable as the time of its construction. The serpent at the foot of the cross and the skull beneath the feet of Christ are symbols belonging to the eighteenth or very early nineteenth century.¹⁰

The stone at Effin was an attempt to create a three-dimensional picture. At Knockainy, where the stone dates to the 1820s, there is no such treatment of the scene and the

⁸ H. M. Roe, 'Instruments of the Passion' in *Old Kilkenny Review*, 2, 5, (1983) pp 527-33.

⁹ Colum Hourihane, *Gothic Art in Ireland 1169-1550* (New Haven and London, 2003) p. 95.

¹⁰ A. K. Longfield, 'Some 18th Century Irish Tombstones (continued), iii, James Byrne and his School', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquarians of Ireland*, vol. 75 (1945) pp 76-84.

iconography has changed substantially. The stone does not display a serpent or skull, the soldiers, and the mourning female figure are gone; an emphasis on the Day of Judgement has replaced a recreation of the last moments in the life of Christ. St. Michael, the Archangel blows his trumpet and the Devil, in all of his vanity, waits impatiently counting the moments until he can gather his own to himself. The introduction of God the Father and a plant of either corn or wheat are also new elements.

The gravestone in Mungret is of particular interest as it carries aspects of the late eighteenth-century stones and it also points to many of the iconographic devices used extensively in the early to mid-nineteenth century. As in the stone at Effin, it has human figures, such as Our Lady and possibly, St. John. But it also portrays spears, dice, the flail and a representation of the tomb of Christ.

The Culhane gravestone in Nantenan has some unusual features. Christ on the cross seems to have a crown of thorns covering his head. He also has a short pointed beard. The only other stone which has a bearded Christ is the one at Adare which was also raised in the 1820s. However, the crown of thorns on the Adare slab could also be a radiation of light from the head of Christ. This 'radiation' is to be found on a number of the slabs in Nantenan. The Culhane stone has a stark emphasis on the suffering of Christ; his hands are laid flat against the cross and the nails are large and impossible to overlook. There are two beautifully carved flowers on either side of the scene which may be representations of the Passion flower. The exact dating of the stone is difficult because it commemorates a man who died in 1800 and another one who died in 1821. Its shared emphasis on the Last Day with the Knockainy stone would indicate that it was erected in the 1820s.

The Enright gravestone in Nantenan, approximately eight feet in height, has carving which raises it from the realm of folk art to sculpture of an impressive level. Christ is now a man of suffering and acceptance; he has become a person in his own right. There are no other figures on the stone. However, he is surrounded with the iconography of the *Arma Christi*. One representation is unique; it could be the Temple of Jerusalem which does not appear on any of the other stones discussed here. Again the dating raises some questions. James Enright died in 1828 but the stone has no similarity with the Culhane stone. It is closer in general layout and design to the stones carved during the 1840s and 1850s and signed by a man whose surname was Rahilly.

Gravestones by Rahilly were erected at Nantenan in memory of people who died in the 1840s and 1850s; for example Anne Sheehy, the wife of Patrick O'Donnel, who died in 1848 and Mrs. Cahill who died in 1852. Christ crucified is always the only figure and the background has been cut away to emphasize the Crucifixion. On Christ's right-hand side there is the cock in the four-legged iron pot and the ladder. On Christ's left-hand side there is the flail, thirty pieces of silver and the plant which may be corn or wheat. Another stone, which is probably by Rahilly, is that erected by Michael and James Cahill for their father, Patrick, who died in 1843. This stone is almost identical in workmanship and layout to the two stones already discussed.

Nantenan appears to be unique in Co. Limerick with the number of gravestones bearing the Crucifixion and Instruments of the Passion. It may have been the availability of talented stonemasons in this area combined with wealthy Catholic farmers which gave rise to such a concentration of stones carrying the *Arma Christi*.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Elsie O'Connell, member of the Society, and Mary Kenahan, Hon. Secretary of the Society and Mr. Liam Irwin, Hon. Editor, for bringing the stones at Nantenan and Mungret to my attention. I would also like to thank Mr. James Lavan for his invaluable assistance. All photographs are by the author.

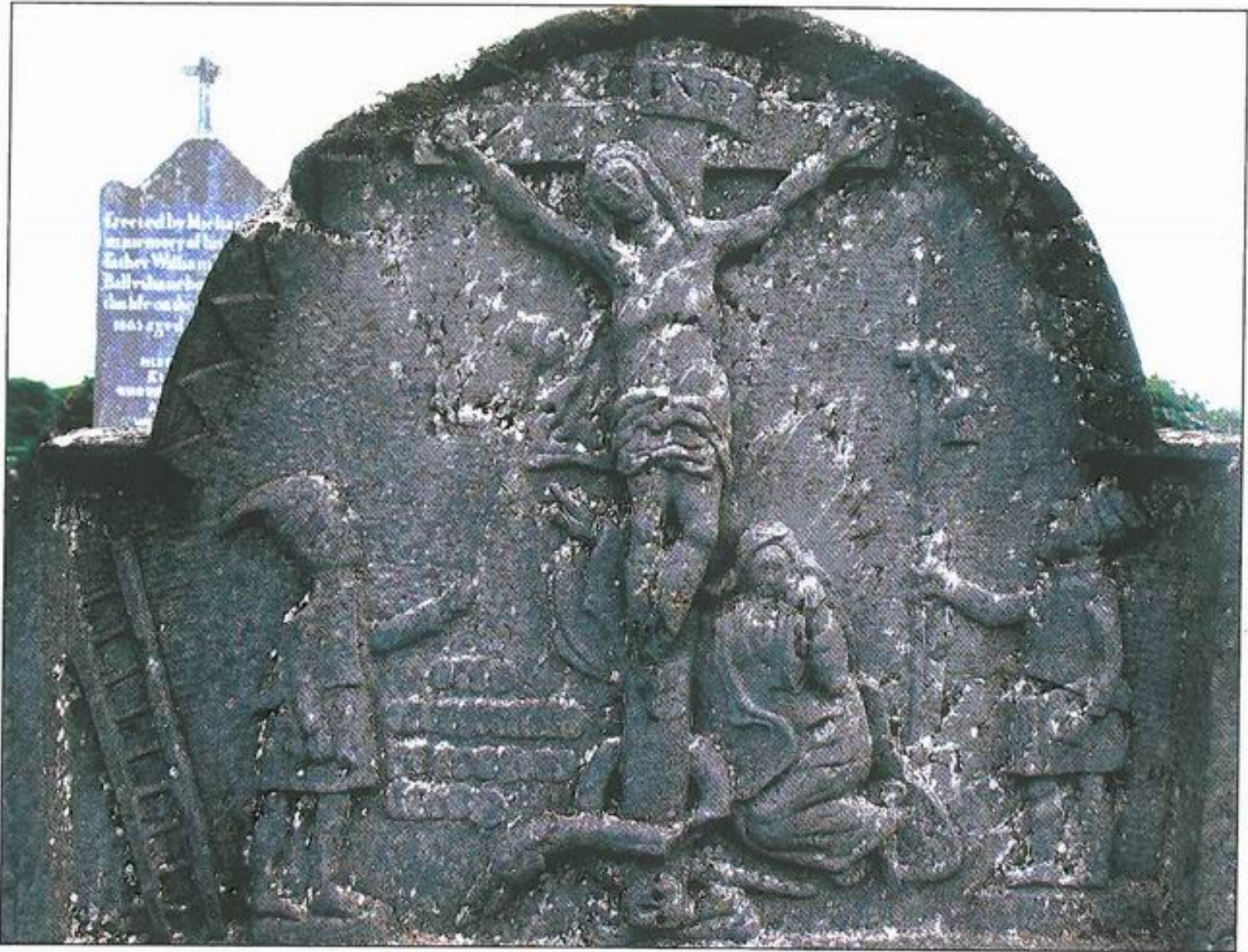


Fig. 1 Lynch gravestone, Effin cemetery



Fig. 2 Quish gravestone, Knockainy cemetery



Fig. 3 Culhane gravestone, Nantenan cemetery

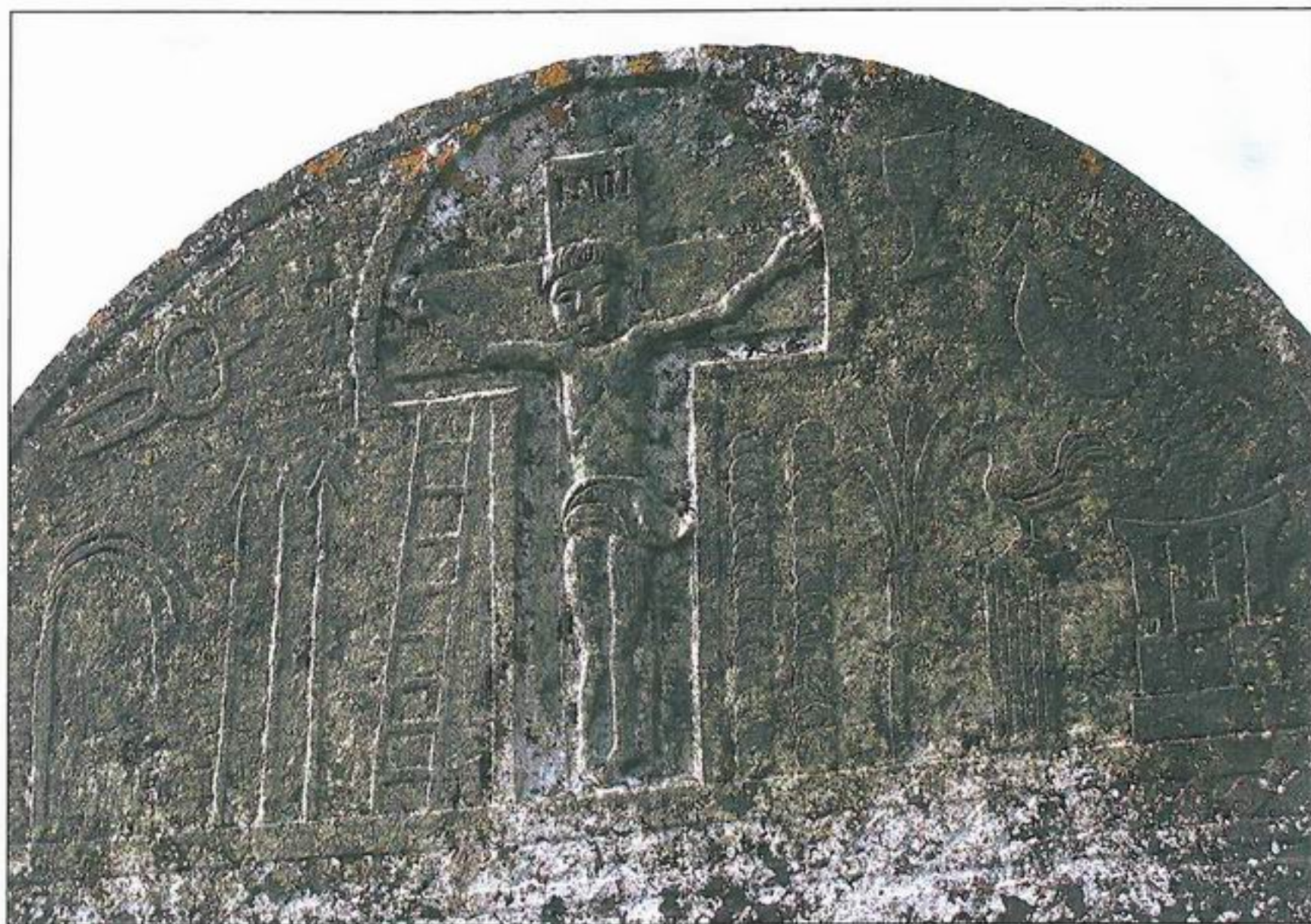


Fig. 4 Enright gravestone, Nantenan cemetery



Fig. 5 Cahill gravestone, Nantenan cemetery



Fig. 6 Mrs Cahill gravestone, Nantenan cemetery



Fig. 7 Fitzgerald gravestone, Mungret cemetery



Fig. 8 Connelly gravestone, Adare cemetery