

Romanesque Head from Peter's Cell

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In 1946, Mr. Robert Herbert secured a very interesting and unusual carved stone head for the Limerick Museum. It was dug up just outside the city walls, close to the site of St. Peter's Cell, a convent founded in 1171, by Donal Mor O'Brien for Canonesses of the Order of St. Augustine.

Apart from its intrinsic interest as a piece of sculpture, it is a most important document in the history of Limerick.

In 1176, King Donal Mor O'Brien founded his great new cathedral in Limerick. This replaced the old wooden structure, a building "more Hibernici," which had probably been destroyed, as Dr. Aubrey Gwynn suggests, in that terrible conflagration started by Donal as a desperate expedient to drive the Normans out of the town. He succeeded, at the expense of a ruined city, but was left master of his territory until his death nearly 20 years later.

Five years earlier than this, however, and in the comparatively tranquil period before the first capture of the city by the Normans, the King had founded a church close to the spot where the head was discovered. The building, like the new cathedral he was to begin so soon afterwards, was probably a stone structure, for he was evidently strongly influenced by the vigorous new continental ideas and the advancing tide of Romanesque art.

The Church was dedicated to St. Peter, but to-day no vestige of the building remains, and there is no tradition to tell us clearly what manner of building it actually was. The finding of this stone head, therefore, becomes a most important piece of evidence, if we can show that it probably formed part of Donal Mor's original building, and is not from some later medieval church or reconstruction on the same site.

The sculpture takes the form of a grotesque head carved in sandstone. This material is in itself a sign of the early period of the object. The Normans preferred the more easily worked freestone or limestone, and most late sculpture in Ireland is executed in that material. The face is shown with a moustache and no beard. In Gothic art, faces are shown either as clean shaven, or represented as having a beard as well as a moustache. In Celtic inspired art, however, the moustache alone is common, and we find such moustached heads without beards throughout Hiberno Viking art. They appear on several of the high crosses, and also in decorative sculpture in churches, such as at Rahan. More pertinent to the period suggested, there are examples on the capitals of the Priests House at Glendalough, and on the Monastery Church there, also at Cashel, Kilteel and other early sites.

A striking feature of the carving is the curious series of lines or corrugations crossing the face. These again are indicative of an early date and seem only to be found in Romanesque art. Comparison may be made with the carved stone head now inserted in the wall at Clan-na-Phillip Church, Co. Cavan⁽¹⁾ and other instances may be seen on the corbel tables at Romsey Abbey and Kilpeck⁽²⁾, where the Hiberno Viking moustache also appears, and on the Schottenkirche at Regensburg in Germany⁽³⁾ also intimately connected with similar northern sources of inspiration.

This lining of the face raises a further problem. It is generally a formula used together with grimacing mouth to represent lions or animals masks, at Cashel, and on the doorway at Freshford.⁽⁴⁾



These carvings, however, show the typical flat jaw of the traditional lion form, and not the human pointed chin of the Limerick sculpture. The exact iconographic representation is therefore further complicated. If it be a lion's mask, these beasts were amongst the most favoured subjects of the Romanesque craftsmen, standing on the one hand as a symbol of the Church, strong and powerful, or as a type of Christ in the Resurrection (the lion's cubs being believed to be born dead, and to be given life by his roaring over them) and on the other hand as an antitype of good, as the devil "who goeth about as a roaring lion."

If however, it is intended as a grotesque human representation, human heads on the exterior of churches were common. They might also stand as symbols of a variety of Iconographic ideas, and might depict the snares and wiles of the world waiting outside the church to catch the unwary, or the attributes of the Church upholding the edifice, or virtues and their opposite vices, and so forth.

It remains to consider the use and position of the head. Although the stone is fractured at the back, it is possible to see that a tenon or tailpiece projected backwards from behind the forehead. New corbel table supports and isolated heads on buildings are always carved on substantial stones, larger than the head itself, usually performing a mechanical function to which the face itself was merely a decorative adjunct or terminal. Corbels, for instance, help to support the very considerable weight of the projecting course above them, and also part of the thrust of the roof, and the body of the stone is often several feet in length. The Limerick head on the contrary had only a very small area of attachment to its tenon, situated behind the forehead and upper part of the face, suggesting that the lower part and chin hung down over some architectural feature such as a moulding, and that the tenon had no other function than to support the head as a feature in some decorative scheme.

Heads with similar tenons still attached to them, and which give a clue to the original use of this stone, are to be seen in the vestry of St. Finbarr's Cathedral, Cork. They were found during the 19th century building operations, and appear to have come from an important Romanesque doorway, no doubt part of the early church on the site there. The tenons projecting from the back of each head are rather stouter in section than that formerly attached to the Peter's Cell carving, but they are of the same general form and position in relation to the face. These heads probably come from a band of ornament forms of human faces, such as appears on the doorways at Clonfert and Dysert O'Dea and over the chancel arch at Cashel. The tenons lay supported on the stones of the voussoir of the arch, and the lower part of the faces and the chins projected and descended over the surface of the stones immediately below them. The shape therefore of the Limerick head gives a clue to its former use and position, and further confirms the suggested date, as heads are not found used in such positions in any purely Norman or later buildings in this country.

In conclusion, therefore, it may be stated that in this Limerick sculpture we have proof substantiating the tradition of a Romanesque Church of stone at Peter's Cell, decorated by an important doorway of Dysert O'Dea type, presumably the one founded by King Donal Mor O'Brien just before his rebuilding of Limerick Cathedral.

(1). J.R.S.A., 71.113.

(2). A Gardner. English mediaeval Sculpture. Cambridge, 1937. Figs. 77 and 78.

(3). Das Bild v-vi. Romanische Bildnerei. Munich, 1922.

(4). Champneys Irish Ecclesiastical Architecture. Pl. LXI.