

# REFLECTIONS ON THE ARDAGH CHALICE

*By Paddy Fullam*

The discovery of the Derrynaflan Chalice in 1980 aroused such public interest that when it was first exhibited in the National Museum in March of that year the counting machine of the Museum was overwhelmed by the crowds that came to gaze in awe at this splendid masterpiece. It was indeed appropriate that this priceless antiquity from Ireland's Golden Age should be the centre of such attention but, inevitably, the focus was also re-directed on the Chalice which had been found more than a hundred years before - The Ardagh Chalice.

In "Ár Scéal Féin", a video of the history of West Limerick, Dr. Pat Wallace, Director of the National Museum, describes the Ardagh Chalice as follows:

"The primary object in the whole National Museum - in the whole National Collection. The most distinctively famous object associated with Ireland. You will find a picture of this Chalice and the details of its discovery and its significance in Early Christian terms in every Encyclopaedia in every language in the world".

And yet the history of the Chalice is still shrouded in mystery. In the absence of conclusive answers to many questions we can only theorize from the knowledge which painstaking research yields. In my attempt to formulate a plausible theory I put forward the following questions for consideration:

- (a) Where was the Chalice made?
- (b) When?
- (c) By whom?
- (d) For what purpose?
- (e) How did it come to be buried in a fort in Ardagh?
- (f) What were the circumstances of its discovery?
- (g) How did it come to be placed in the National Museum?

Since the last question is the one for which most documented evidence is available we will deal with it now.

After a protracted legal wrangle between the Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Butler, on one side and the British Treasury on the other, the good Bishop was eventually persuaded by John Baron O'Hagan, Master of the Rolls, to hand over the Chalice and the other articles which had been found. It is interesting to note that at the centre of the conflict was the thorny question of "Treasure Trove". History was repeated when it

came to deciding the ownership of the Derrynaflan Chalice. The High Court found that "Treasure Trove" went out of existence with the adoption of the 1922 Constitution and that, therefore, the finders of the Chalice were the rightful owners. However, the Supreme Court overturned this verdict ruling that, as a Sovereign State, Ireland had a right to the ownership of an antiquity that was considered a national treasure.

In 1878 the Ardagh Chalice, a bronze chalice and four brooches (the entire find) were secured by the Crown for the sum of £100 which was paid to Dr. Butler. This must have qualified as "The Bargain of the Century" for seldom can so much have been obtained for so little. The statement by Margaret Stokes in her edition of Petrie's "Christian Inscriptions in the Irish Language" that the Bishop received £500 is vehemently denied by Canon Begley in his "Diocese of Limerick" vol. 3. He states "This £100 was devoted to liquidation of the £50 paid to Mrs. Quinn and of £50 to the expenses incurred".

After the purchase all of the items were deposited in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin. When the National Museum was established in 1890 it became the home of the Ardagh Chalice and apart from a few sojourns abroad has been its permanent home since then. Before leaving the question there is an interesting point to be considered. The British Treasury claimed the right to confiscate all the objects found in Ardagh on the basis that they were (i) made of silver and (ii) were found buried and therefore Crown property under the terms of the Treasure Trove Laws. Dr. Butler contended that the metal was not silver but an alloy of tin and silver. When the Chalice was submitted to assay, the jeweller Donegan who carried out this work stated that the Chalice was made of silver but that the silver was of "inferior quality". He was unable at that stage to state the exact alloy. When the Bishop agreed terms with the British Treasury a full assay became unnecessary.

However, Liam S. Gogan, M.A., in his scholarly treatise, which must rate as the definitive book on the Ardagh Chalice, states that the alloy is actually that of silver and copper. It is an important point, not just because of the legal controversy at the time, but also because the precise alloy is a pointer in attempting to date the Chalice and the possible location of its manufacture. (I use the word "manufacture" in its strict Latin derivation - "made by hand").

## *The circumstances of its discovery*

The Chalice and other objects were found at the foot of a thorn tree on the western side of the fort close to the vallum (a bank of earth which originally





*Ardagh from the air, with the semi-circular outline of Reerasta Rath showing to the east.*



surrounded the rath) by a young man digging potatoes. The late Paddy Aherne of Carrickerry (ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis) had a marvellous store of knowledge of local history and told me that he had heard from an impeccable source that the man credited with the discovery, Jim Quin, was not alone at the time. According to Paddy he was accompanied by a journeyman or casual labourer that the Quins had employed in a temporary capacity. However, when the Quins hurried off to show their find to the local Parish Priest their employee Paddy Flanagan kept on digging, convinced that there were further treasures to be found. Later when the Quins received their award of £50 from Dr. Butler, they only gave £10 to Paddy who naturally felt very hard done by. The unfortunate man spent his final days in the Newcastle West Workhouse, now St. Ita's Hospital, and is buried in the nearby paupers' graveyard. Jim Quin emigrated to Australia where he spent some years working on the railway. I believe there is a monument in Melbourne erected to his memory as "the man who found the Ardagh Chalice".

However, whichever version of the story you care to accept, we are still left with the remarkable phenomenon of potatoes being dug *inside* a fort in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I stress the point because other authors refer to it only casually. Having some little knowledge of the superstitious beliefs and illogical fears that still surround the interference with forts or any tree or thorn bush growing therein, and concluding that these fears and beliefs were even greater and more prevalent in the last century, I find the story of "potato digging" in the fort one of the amazing aspects of what proved to be a most fortuitous discovery. Why should potatoes be planted inside a fort? The most plausible reason that I can give comes from the clue we get by closer examination of the date - 1868. Remember it was only 20 years after the Famine. The memory of that dreadful calamity would still be very fresh in people's minds. The feared word 'blight' could still reduce people to take any measure, however desperate, to avoid that plague and I believe that the planting of potatoes inside a fort was just such a measure. In 1868 the vallum surrounding the fort was probably still intact to a large extent. The Quins likely decided that this high bank of earth could afford extra protection to their valuable potato crop and keep the blight at bay. The fear of the blight overcame their superstitious beliefs and hence the setting and later the digging of potatoes inside the fort. If my assumption is correct is it not odd to reflect that the horrible catastrophe of the Famine may have indirectly led to the finding of one of the most unique treasures of our heritage.

There is another matter which must be mentioned here - the vexed question of the wooden Penal Cross which it is claimed was found in exactly the same spot as where the silver chalice, the bronze chalice and the four penannular brooches were also located. It is, of course, a vital clue if it was located with the other objects because on the Cross are the figures 727 which one could reasonably conclude because it is a Penal

Cross must stand for 1727, a time in which the Penal Laws were being enforced. This in turn may suggest that the burial of the objects could not have taken place before 1727. If that is so then we must accept the fact that the Ardagh Chalice was in some person's possession up to 1727 and held in safe-keeping for many hundreds of years.

We only have the word of the widow Quin and her son that the Penal Cross was found in the same place and at the same time as the discovery of the rest of the hoard. However, why should they hand it over to the Parish Priest if they hadn't found it. If it had been in their possession prior to the discovery why should they hand it over now. According to Gogan the finding of the Penal Cross with the other objects was just a coincidence but it is very difficult to dismiss it as such.

Before leaving the circumstances of the discovery of the Chalice it is worth pointing out that the digging stopped when the sound of the spade striking metal was heard. It later transpired that this was the sound of the bronze chalice being smashed by the spade thrust. Instead of the bronze chalice it could just as easily have been the Ardagh Chalice.

#### *Why was the Chalice buried in a fort in Ardagh?*

Reerasta Rath gets its name from the Irish 'Riaráiste - the Arrears - the Fort of the Arrears'. Sadly, there is very little left of the Rath - just part of a single vallum on the north side and part of a double vallum on the south. The southern side is more typical of the multi-vallate forts in the west of Ireland so it is possible that the rath was originally surrounded by two high banks of earth. It must have been a very impressive fortress in its heyday. The inner vallum was topped with a wooden pallisade and, considering the weapons of the time, the rath must have been impregnable. It was also quite large - the circumference being about 185 metres - and it was obviously the residence of a Chieftain or Taoiseach of some significance. A number of reasons have been given as to why the Chalice was buried in Reerasta Rath.

#### 1. *The Clonmacnoise Legend*

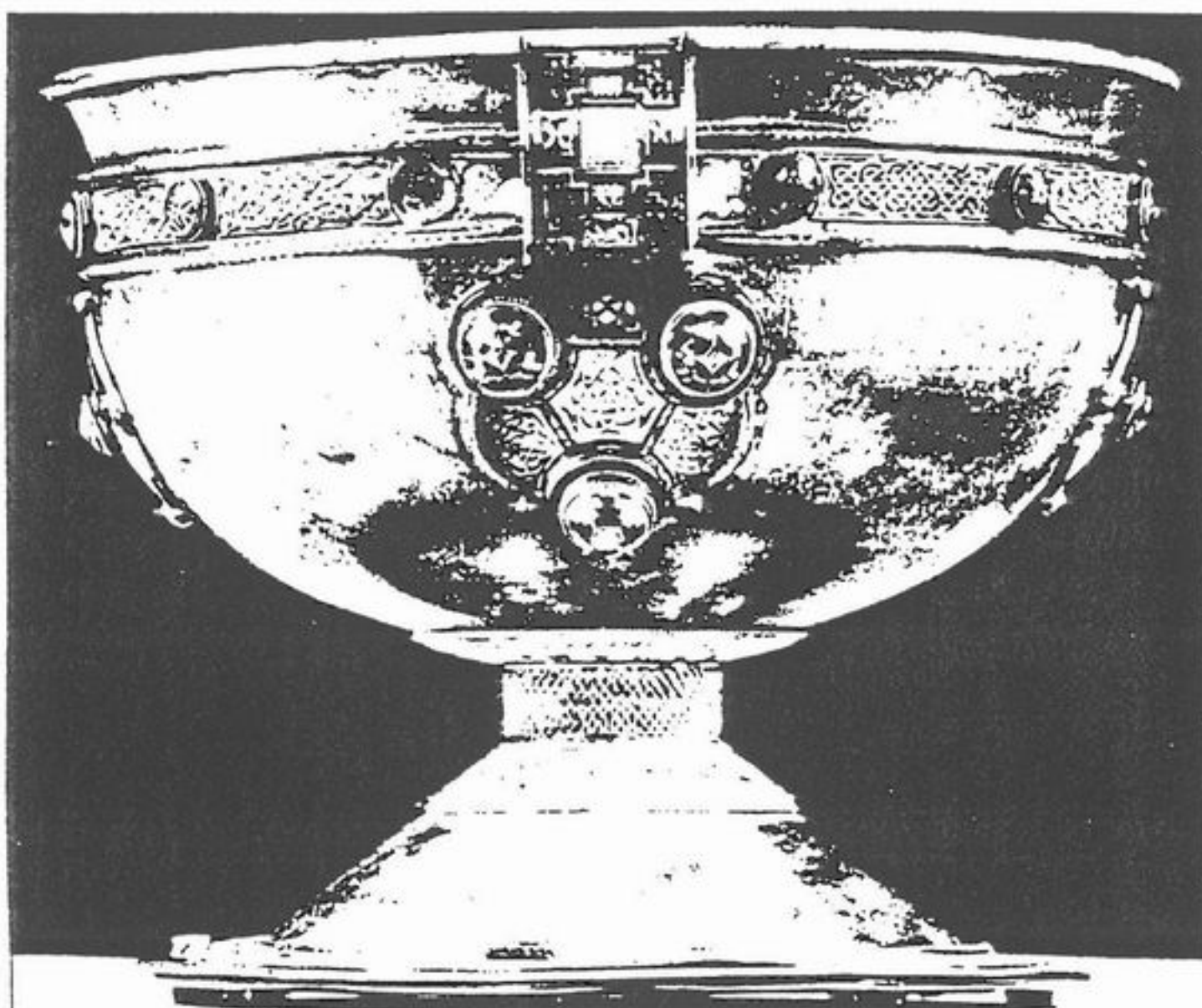
In 1192 some sacred vessels were stolen from the monastery of Clonmacnoise. One of them was described as follows: "A silver chalice with gold embellishment and its paten from the daughter of Ruairí Ó Conchúir successor to Turlough". This description obviously fits the Ardagh Chalice. However, the following year, the culprit, who turned out to be a Dane from Limerick, was captured by Conor O'Brien of Thomond and the stolen treasures were found in the Danish quarter of Limerick. The property was then returned to Clonmacnoise. The unfortunate thief was handed over to Cormac McCarthy, King of Munster, and he executed the culprit with the consent of the community of Clonmacnoise. Mention of the paten reminds us of the beautiful paten found with the Derrynaflan Chalice and makes us wonder if a similar paten accompanied the Ardagh Chalice and whatever became of it?



2. Some historians claimed that all ecclesiastical objects were made in Clonmacnoise. The discovery of the Derrynaflan Chalice has helped debunk this myth. Just as priceless manuscripts were written in various monasteries around the country, similarly sacred vessels were produced not in one specific centre but in various locations scattered around Ireland.

I fear the Penal Mass story appeals more to the imagination than to any sense of logic.

4. A theory which I have not seen put forward before but which is, nevertheless, quite plausible is worthy of some consideration. While it is usual to regard the rath as the residence of the local chieftain it



THE ARDAGH CHALICE

### 3. *The Penal Mass Theory*

This was always the popular local theory. The story goes that an outlawed priest was celebrating Mass in secret in the vicinity of the fort at a time when the Penal Laws were being rigidly enforced. The celebration was interrupted by the sudden appearance of the "Red Coats". Determined that the sacred vessels should not fall into their hands the priest hastily buried them but, for some unknown reason, was never able to return to recover them. The discovery of the Penal Cross gives a further touch of authenticity to the story and it is easy to see how it appealed to the people. There are, however, too many serious flaws in that particular theory.

(a) The Ardagh Chalice is a ministrual chalice. The administration of the Eucharist under the form of wine to the laity was discouraged in the twelfth century and abandoned in the sixteenth century. Why then should such a Chalice be still in use in the Penal Laws' period of the eighteenth century?

(b) It is impossible to believe that a priest on the run, attempting to outwit the authorities, would carry a sacred vessel not in liturgical use on his person.

could also conceivably have been a monastic site. Monastic sites of the early Church in Ireland were protected by a high vallum, just like a chieftain's fortress. It was also the practice of a king or taoiseach to hand over property for Church use. This was a custom that continued for centuries and there are numerous examples in all parts of Ireland.

If the rath was a monastic site then the sacred objects may have been buried during one of the frequent Viking raids. Burying the objects on the site makes more sense than the notion of a monk hurrying with the hoard to a nearby fort to bury it for safe-keeping. Invaders like the Vikings who pillaged monasteries and put the monks to the sword would hardly be deterred by any superstitions concerning the violation of forts.

There is another very interesting explanation as to why the Chalice was buried in Reerasta fort but I will deal with it later.

### *Why was the Chalice made?*

It is a ministrual Chalice as already stated. It symbolically represents the Last Supper and was used



to administer the Blessed Eucharist under the form of wine to the laity. The Chalice was obviously the craftsman's effort to reproduce the Chalice used by Our Lord at the Last Supper. But what was that Chalice like? We are neither sure of its material or form. The person(s) who made the Ardagh Chalice obviously had to rely on descriptions which were given centuries later. The inspiration may have come from the "Le-abhar Breac" where the Chalice used at the Last Supper is described as "a silver chalice having two handles, one at either side, and is equivalent to a sextarius". (A sextarius was a vessel which held 2.5 pints. The capacity of the Ardagh Chalice is 2 pints).

#### *When was the Chalice made?*

There is a great diversity of opinion among the experts. The dates of its manufacture range from 700 A.D. to 1000 A.D.

The British Museum Guide - 750 A.D.  
 Guide for Medieval Antiquities - 750 A.D.  
 Medieval Times - 8th century  
 Celts and Normans - 750 A.D.  
 R. A. S. Mac Alister - middle of the 9th century  
 Liam S. Gogan - about the year 1000 A.D.

Here we can see a spread of three centuries. Experts tend to date the Chalice by comparing illustrations in early manuscripts with the ornamentation work on the Chalice. The difficulty with this is establishing a time-gap between one and the other. The question also arises did the metal workers copy the designs from the manuscripts or did the writers get their inspiration from the master smiths.

Perhaps the best clue comes from the metal used in the making of the Chalice. Silver alloyed with copper was a very popular Viking metal. The metal used in the making of the Ardagh Chalice may have come from the Viking trading centre at Limerick. This would date the Chalice post Viking invasion and not earlier than the ninth century.

#### *Where and by whom was the Chalice made?*

In the absence of any conclusive evidence as to where and by whom the Chalice was made, the theory that it was made locally is just as valid as any other. Indeed the discovery of the Derrynaflan hoard tends to support such a theory. In the case of Derrynaflan the stone remains of a medieval monastic site can be taken as proof that the Chalice was in use in that monastery and in all probability made by the monks there. Unfortunately there are no stone remains in the case of the monastic site in Ardagh. Building materials at the time depended on what was available locally. Since Derrynaflan is an island in the middle of marsh land and bog, trees were not available and thus stone had to be used. Ardagh, on the other hand, was densely wooded and the monks would have used timber for their buildings but any traces of such have naturally long since vanished. However, it is my belief that the Chalice was made for the local monastery of St. Molua

by the monks of that monastery. In support of the theory consider the following:

(a) What we now call West Limerick, comprising the four baronies of Upper and Lower Connello, Glenquin and Shanid, was originally one Tuath or Kingdom called Uí Conaill Gabhra and before that the Kingdom of Uí Fidhgeinte. In Celtic times the power base was always situated in the centre of the Kingdom. A study of the map of West Limerick shows Ardagh strategically placed with roadways radiating from it in all directions. The *Shell Guide to Ireland* points out that "the country round Ardagh is rich in ring forts and small, circular earthworks". Near Cahermoyle House are the remains of a massive stone ring fort and "close to Dunganville Bridge is a well-preserved, bivallate ring fort with souterrain and a wet fosse". In Lewis' *History and Topography of Limerick City and County* we find Ardagh described as "situated in the heart of an interesting and fertile district" and in addition "the land is some of the best in the county and finely planted". In more recent times the discovery of what is called "The Black Fort", the largest in the country in extent, suggests that Ardagh was the centre of the ancient Celtic Tuath of Uí Conaill Gabhra.

(b) A monastery located in such a centre would no doubt be of considerable significance. The fact that the monastery was founded by St. Molua emphasises even further its importance because Molua was one of the major saints of his era. It is reasonable to conclude that Molua's monastery in Ardagh was an appropriate home for the superb Chalice.

(c) It is interesting to note that in the Norman conquest of West Limerick the invaders located strongholds on either side of Ardagh - the first at Shanid - and later the much larger castle in Newcastle West.

(d) Up to 1100 Ardagh had a bishop and actually remained episcopal property until the seventeenth century. The link was maintained in the following century when Dr. Lacy, Bishop of Limerick, was buried in the local cemetery on 5th August 1759.

It is rather a remarkable coincidence that at the time of the discovery the fort was actually owned by the Sisters of Mercy who had leased the lands to the Quins. The property had been given to St. Mary's Convent in Limerick City in 1858 by Helena Heffernan. The Bishop of Limerick, Dr. Butler, was a trustee of their property and so the connection between Ardagh and the Bishop of Limerick was still there when the Chalice was found.

There is another coincidence worthy of mention. It relates to the Roll of the Apostles inscribed on the Chalice. The names Peter, Paul and Bartholomew are singled out by the inclusion of a small cross after each of their names. It is easy to make a case for honouring Peter and Paul but why was Bartholomew selected? There is very little known about him. Yet interestingly enough he is the only Apostle whose feast day falls in June, the same month as St. Molua's feast day. Was it a way of honouring the founder of the local monastery? Of course, other explanations could be



found but it remains an intriguing question.

Therefore, if one accepts that Ardagh was an important centre in Celtic Ireland and that a saint, praised by no less than Pope Gregory the Great, chose to build a monastery there, then one can easily conclude that Ardagh was the home of the magnificent Chalice that will forever bear its name. Indeed Canon Begley, in his "Diocese of Limerick", vol. 3, raises the very interesting possibility that the Chalice may have been in safe-keeping in Ardagh right up to the middle of the eighteenth century. While it may be difficult to believe that such a treasure could be stored in a small village for so long, just consider the number of priceless works of art that have been discovered and indeed are still being found in the most unlikely settings in various countries all over Europe. It may indeed well be that the Chalice and other objects were not even recognised as treasures for many of those centuries. From the time of the Statutes of Kilkenny until the Gaelic Revival at the end of the nineteenth century, things of Irish origin or related to the Celtic culture were considered inferior. Even in 1868 while the Chalice was in St. Mary's Convent it was referred to in the Annals of the Convent as "The Ardagh Vase". If its purpose was in doubt then we may take it that even less may have been known about it in the preceding centuries.

According to Canon Begley the Chalice may have been buried in the fort exactly one hundred and twenty years before being accidentally unearthed. The Parish Priest of Ardagh, at the time, Fr. Christopher Bermingham, a graduate of the Sorbonne, Paris, had a most unfortunate career in Ardagh. In 1736, after an incident with a local landlord, he had to flee to Limerick City to avoid arrest. Then, in 1739, a Protestant squire from Ballingarry, Thomas Odell, had Fr. Bermingham thrown in prison on a trumped-up charge in order to prevent him from taking up the position of Parish Priest of Ballingarry - a position to which he had been appointed by Bishop Lacy. The squire wanted the Rev. Martin O'Connor to secure the position and both conspired to keep Fr. Bermingham out of Ballingarry. In 1748, in a very poor state of mental and physical health, he left for Bath in England and was never heard of again.

Perhaps the poor man, agitated and tormented as he was, buried the Chalice and other sacred objects lest they be confiscated but, unfortunately, he never

returned to re-claim them. Where would be safer than Reerasta Rath, of which a superstitious people would have an unnatural fear? To further guarantee their safety he may have buried the wooden Penal Cross as a kind of talisman to afford even greater protection.

Were these the circumstances of the burial of the two chalices and the brooches? Will the real story ever be revealed? That still leaves the question of who made the Chalice. Again sadly the name of that truly gifted craftsman may never be made known to us but he was certainly a monk. I say this because the Chalice in its entirety represents a total act of faith by the man responsible for its design and manufacture.

1. The maker obviously believed that Christ used a similar Chalice at the Last Supper and this he imitated in shape and size.

2. He divided the frieze panel into twelve parts to signify the Twelve Apostles.

3. When you look at the medallions in the Chalice you may first see what appears as a quatre foil design. However, continued observation will reveal a cross. Obviously the medallion was designed to represent the Sacred Host.

4. Under the handles of the Chalice are the beautifully ornamented escutcheons. If we examine the design we find an equilateral triangle with a circle at each apex and these circles are joined by arcs. We can conclude that the equilateral triangle represents the Trinity - each Person equal - the circle at each angle denotes the eternity of each Person and these circles being joined show the Unity. We find a similar treatment of the Trinity in an icon painted by a Russian monk, Roublev, in 1410 for the monastery of St. Sergius near Moscow. To show the Trinity in his painting he uses an equilateral triangle surrounded by a circle.

5. The pièce de résistance of the the Ardagh Chalice is the emblema - a large crystal surrounded by gold filigree located at the base of the Chalice. Naturally this was only visible to the congregation when the Chalice was raised. Then the glittering display must have reminded all present of the Resurrection of Christ.

There can be little doubt that it was the remarkable faith of some monk that inspired such a beautiful masterpiece as the Ardagh Chalice. Some mystery may forever surround it but this merely increases its fascination for us and we can truly say that the Ardagh Chalice was created more for the glory of God than for the admiration of man.



*Detail of bronze gilt decoration on stem of Ardagh Chalice*