A Decorated Stone Fragment from Terryglass, Co. Tipperary

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Once the site of a famous monastery, Terryglass is today a village near the north-eastern shore of Lough Derg, close to the ruins of a fine 13th century castle which overlooks the lake. In the village stands the shell of a church with a trabeate doorway, a part of which was destroyed when much of the western wall fell in a recent storm. The church is probably pre-Norman in date, though it was altered possibly in the 14th century when a large pointed window was inserted in the east wall. The adjoining graveyard is surrounded by a high mediaeval wall. The church and graveyard probably mark the site of the once famous monastery founded by St. Colum Mac Creithhainn who died in 549. The monastery played a major role in the revival of ascetic monasticism in the 8th century known as the Culdee movement. Aedh Mac Crimthainn, who was elected Abbot of Terryglass around 1152, was one of the greatest men of learning of his time. He it was who compiled—probably at Terryglass—the so-called Book of Leinster (Book of Nuachonghaile) which is one of the richest treasuries of Old Irish tales and genealogies. The monastery was twice burned in the 9th century, was plundered in 922 and burnt again in 1112, 1140 and 1164. Gwynn says that "None of the extant annals have so much as a single entry concerning the Abbey after 1164, and there is no trace to-day of any of its former buildings... The ruins of a fourteenth-century Norman parish church are now the sole remainder of what was once one of the greatest and most famous Irish monastic communities." This is not quite true as the ruined church probably formed a part of the old monastery while the recently discovered stone discussed below may be considered as adding further to our knowledge of the early monastery.

A part of the old wall surrounding the graveyard was demolished recently to make way for a shop. Some of the stones from this demolition were removed by a local landowner, Mr. Alex G. Kent, who used them as foundation material for a new avenue leading to his house. Mr. Kent's keen eye noticed that one of these stones bore decoration, so he kept the stone in his house. While on a visit to Oldcourt Castle (which stands in Mr. Kent's grounds) I was shown the stone, and thought it worthy of being brought to the notice of the readers of our Journal.

The stone measures 11 inches in height, is 8 inches wide and just over 10 inches thick. One face bears decoration which has been slightly damaged in the top left hand corner, as can be seen in Plate V:1. The right side of the stone was probably broken off (though this is not absolutely certain) and the underside may have been chipped away to create a rough surface. The back of the stone has a flat surface which is parallel to the decorated face, but is itself not decorated.

The decorated face has been carefully dressed smooth. On this smooth surface a framed panel stands in raised relief. The motif in the panel when seen in the positive, i.e. seen as

the raised part of the relief, consists of four approximate squares which are placed so as to form a rough square. Each of these squares is joined to two others by a link in the middle of one side. But if the eye concentrates only on the negative, or on the hollowed-out background, then it can see an equal-armed cross sunk into the middle of the panel. The cross is framed by four small squares, and there are also sunken spaces in the extensions of the arms of the cross.

Dr. John S. Jackson, of the National Museum of Ireland, says that the stone is identical with the basal carboniferous or uppermost Old Red Sandstones of the Slieve Blooms and the Devil's Bit, Silvermines, Slieve Feagh, range, and was thus obtained locally. It is pale greyish white, of medium coarse-grained grit essentially monomineralic in composition. The constituent grains of quartz are extremely angular and unabraded. A single large pebble (circa 1.5 cms. in length) of pink ferruginous quartz occurs in the grit.

The cross-motif in diaper pattern is one which fits more comfortably on metalwork, and is probably to be ultimately derived from it. Many variations of the pattern are found on Irish metal-work allegedly of late 12th or early 13th century date such as the Breac Moedoc and the Shrine of St. Patrick's Bell. It is also found in stone at many sites in the vicinity of Lough Derg, such as on the cross and cross-base at Dysert O'Dea, Co. Clare, the cross-base at Monaincha, Co. Tipperary, a stone from Lithmore Mochausan, Co. Tipperary, and on grave-slabs at Clonmacnoise and Inishkeeltra, as well as on Romanesque doorways at Killeshin, Co. Laois, and Freshford, Co. Kilkenny. In most of these cases, however, the raised relief surrounding the cross simply forms part of a step-pattern. But only a few instances are known where the sunken cross is surrounded by raised squares. One of these is on the base of the cross at Killamery, Co. Kilkenny, the date of which is thought to be 8th century, though it could be dated much later. Two more instances are found in 11th century metalwork—the Soiscéal Molaise (between 1001 and 1025) and the Cathach (between 1062 and 1098). One of the closest parallels for our piece is to be found on the south face of the base of St. Patrick's cross on the Rock of Cashel. As Cashel was handed over to the Church in 1101, the cross must be after 1100, and could possibly be contemporary with the building of Cormac's Chapel (1127-1134). The dates for parallels thus range from the 8th to the 12th century. But as the 8th century date for the Killamery cross is by no means certain, we may be justified in laying greater emphasis on the 11th and 12th century parallels. The carving, therefore, is probably 11th or 12th century in date.

An interesting feature of the decoration on the stone is that the frame surrounding the motif is not square, but slightly trapezoidal, and none of its sides is absolutely straight. None of the four small squares is equal in size to any other, and each is narrower at its bottom and broader at its top. This broadening towards the top of both frame and squares, which is scarcely due to bad workmanship, could have been done to allow for the effect of perspective. Could it be that the stone-cutter, like the architect of a Greek Doric temple, knew about optical illusions and the means of counteracting them?

Separated from the frame by a groove is the edge of an undecorated raised panel which runs off to the right. The top of this panel is about an inch below the top of the frame while the lower part is flush with the bottom of it. It doubtless formed

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* Leask and Macalister, PRIA, 51, C (1945-48), 13, fig. 10:2, b.
* Henry, op. cit., p. 139.
* Leask, JRSAI, 81 (1951), 14ff., fig. 1.
part of a panel which extended farther. Unfortunately not enough of this panel remains to show whether it continued in a straight line running parallel to the top and bottom of the frame, or whether it formed a curve. As the frame enclosing the motif is broader than the panel which runs off to the right, it is obvious that the frame and motif were meant to be emphasised more. The left side of the frame is unfortunately slightly damaged, but there is no sign of a similar panel on the left side of the frame, which suggests that the framed panel formed the end of something.

Fig. 1. Possible position of stone as springer in an arch. Fig. 2. Possible position of stone as part of a lintel.

To what then did this enigmatic stone belong? As a large area of the face is smooth but undecorated, and as the flat back bears no decoration, it is unlikely to have formed part of a high cross. There may be many other possibilities, but the most likely seems to be that it formed part of a church, with the decorated face forming part of the outside wall. If this were so, it would fit best as part of the top of a doorway. But what kind of doorway? Of two possible alternatives the more probable is that it formed part of an arched doorway. If this were the case, then the stone may have formed the left-hand side of the arch, and from it the undecorated panel may have formed an arc around the doorway with a corresponding decorated panel on the right-hand side and possibly another one at the top, as shown in the suggested reconstruction, Fig. 1. If this was where the stone was placed, it might provide another expla-
tion for the asymmetry of the frame. As the lowest stone forming an arch is normally trapezoidal, the artist may have made his frame asymmetrical in order to create the impression that the decorated panel formed the bottom stone of an arch. If the stone originally formed part of an arch, then it should be seen at right-angles to the position in which it is shown on Pl. V : 1. But in reconstructing the stone as part of an arch, the large smooth surface below the frame (as seen in Pl. V : 1) is difficult to understand, as one might expect the ornament to be nearer the edge of the doorway.

But another alternative should not be entirely excluded, and that is that the stone formed part of a large lintel-stone covering a flat-headed doorway. Lintels bearing extended cross-decorated panels in raised relief are known from Fore, Co. Westmeath, and from Clonamery, Co. Kilkenny. Our framed panel could perhaps have formed part of a larger panel in raised relief on a similar lintel. A possible reconstruction of this is shown in Fig. 2. If the stone did form part of a lintel, and if it is to be dated to the 12th or even more likely to the 13th century, it would provide us with a later date for the building of a doorway of this type.

As the now fallen lintel of the door of the church which is still standing is plain and undecorated, it is unlikely that our stone could have formed any part of that church, unless it was used in a now no longer existing side-door. It could, however, have formed part of another church, of Romanesque date, of which nothing else now survives. The annals tell us little of Terryglass in the 12th century, but suggest much activity there in the 13th. It would be tempting to see in our stone a part of a church which may have been burned in 1112, or, more likely, one which may have been built after the fire of 1112 or that of 1140, and which could have fallen a victim to the last recorded conflagration of 1164.

Unless by some good fortune other pieces of the same stone or of the same putative doorway turn up, we may never know to what type of structure the stone belonged. There may be other pieces preserved in the old graveyard wall, but let not the wall be demolished further just to find out.

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7 Henry, op.cit., pl. 22 (Clonamery) and pl. 23 (Fore); see also Leask, Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings, vol. I, Dundalk 1955, fig. 31, a-b.
I. Decorated stone fragment, Terryglass, Co. Tipperary.
   (Photo: P. Harbison)