

The Inistioge Priory Cloister Arcade

Conleth Manning

THE finely carved fragments of the cloister arcade of the Augustinian priory at Inistioge, Co. Kilkenny, deserve to be better known, because, in its day, this cloister must have rivalled the Jerpoint cloister in the richness and variety of its sculpture. Added to this, the cloister can be fairly closely dated, as will be shown below, a thing that cannot be said about the Jerpoint cloister which has been dated in recent years, by one authority¹ to c. 1500 and more recently by another² to c. 1400.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FRAGMENTS

All the fragments are within the enclosures of the Catholic and Church of Ireland churches at Inistioge which are on the site of the priory. The complete and fragmentary columns, which are of dumb-bell section similar to those at Jerpoint, are numbered C1 to C6 below and three other miscellaneous pieces are numbered M1 to M3. There are also ten arch pieces, two capitals and one base.

THE COLUMNS

C1 (plate 1 and 2) is kept in the porch of the Church of Ireland church under the crossing tower of the old priory. It consists of the lower part of a dumb-bell sectioned cloister column with carving in high relief on both sides of the plate between the twin colonnettes. One side (plate 1) has the lower part of a representation of the Trinity with the label "Sca. Trinitas" carved on a raised band underneath, which is supported by a mock corbel. The other side (plate 2) has a carving of two dragon-headed quadrupeds with interlocking necks biting their own tails,³ above which there is an interlacing foliage design.

C2. This and all the other pieces except one column base are built into the inner side of the wall surrounding the Catholic church. It is directly to the left of a font bowl, also built into the wall, to the right of the main east gate as you enter. It consists of the upper part of a column with the

¹E. C. Rae, *The Sculpture of the Cloister of Jerpoint Abbey*. J.R.S.A.I. 96. (1966) p. 87.

²John Hunt, "Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture 1200—1600." Vol. 1 (1974) p. 177—180.

³Peter Harbison, *Animals in Irish Art*, 2. "Animals with Interlocking Necks," *The Arts in Ireland*. Vol. 2. No. 4. (1974) p. 59 and fig. 18.

to read but there is a definite "S" for saint, and what comes after may be "MAT" for Matthew the apostle. He is depicted with a similar instrument, which may be a sabre type sword, on some of the Ossory tomb surrounds.¹⁰ The figure is shod, but that need not exclude him from being an apostle as this convention was not strictly adhered to on some of the 16th century Ossory tombs.¹¹ The right hand colonnette is spirally grooved and the plate only begins with the label about two inches above the base of the colonnettes.

C6 (plate 6). At the other side of the main gate are three more carved stones and the farthest to the right of these is another similar complete column with two grotesque figures on it. The lower one is a strange creature which seems to have its head between its shoulders and two arms raised to its dexter side. The upper one is a two-bodied grotesque with human head similar to two known from the Jerpoint cloister arcade.¹²

MISCELLANEOUS PIECES

The two carved stones south of the main gate to the left of C6 are flat and narrow and have no colonnettes on each side so that they could not have served as shafts in themselves. They also differ from the pieces so far described in that the carving on them is in false relief. As they are roughly the same height as the columns they could have been set into the thicker piers of the cloister at the corners or intermittently in the arcade.

M1 (plate 6), the piece nearest the east gate, has a vine scroll pattern carved in false relief with a bird on top picking at the grapes. It is framed by a thin flat band at each side.

M2 (plate 6) is to the right of M1, is similar to it in shape and has carvings in false relief of a mermaid and of an animal below, which is sideways to the vertical. The mermaid is combing her hair and holds a circular object in her other hand, which might be a mirror though it has no handle.¹³ There is a

¹⁰Compare the instruments, described by Hunt as scythe-like weapons, that figures of St. Matthew hold on the original surround of James Schorthal's tomb at St. Canice's, on the tomb of Pierce Fitz Oge Butler at Kilcooley and on a fragment at Cashel, all from the O'Tunney atelier. Hunt, *op. cit.* Vol. 1, p. 252—253, Vol. 2, plates 284, 298 and 278. Rae (J.R.S.A.I., 100, p. 37) describes these as scimitar swords.

¹¹St. Thomas, for instance, is shod in some cases and bare-foot in others and on the tomb of a Butler knight at Gowran a number of the apostles are depicted with footgear. Hunt, *op. cit.* Vol. 2, pl. 304.

¹²E. C. Rae, J.R.S.A.I. (96) pls. 7d and 8a, and p. 79, also C. Manning, *Jerpoint Cloister Fragment at Sheepstown*. O.K.R. (1975) 118—119.

¹³There are three other medieval carvings of mermaids in Ireland known to the writer, one on the south wall of the south transept at Kilcooley, Co. Tipperary and two others in Co. Galway: on the chancel-arch pier in Clonfert Cathedral and on the west doorway at Clontuskert. In all three cases the mermaid holds a comb and mirror.

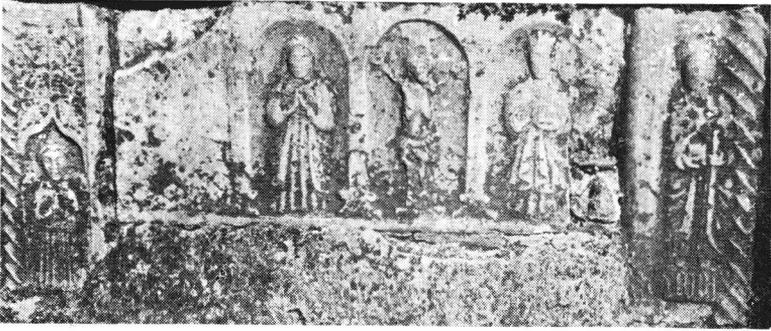


Plate 5



Plate 6

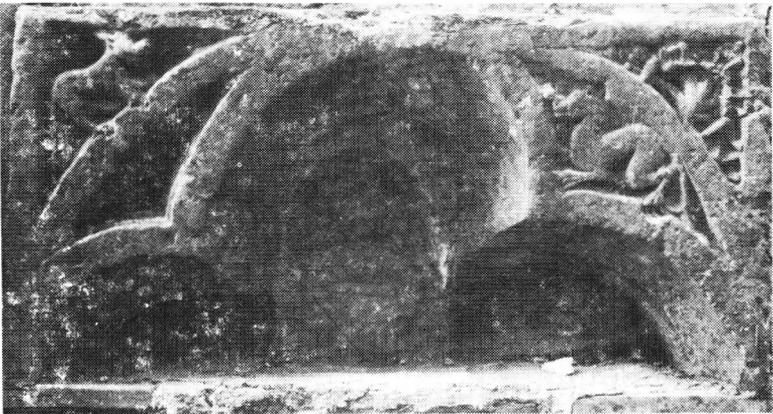


Plate 7

decorative false corbel below the animal which may represent a fox or a wolf. The top of the stone is concave.

M3 (plate 7). This small piece is built into the north surrounding wall between two decorated arch pieces and as the carving is in false relief it may have been similar to the last two. It has the top part of an angel holding a shield carved in a round-headed frame. The angel has a cross circlet on his head and the top of a saltire cross can be seen on the shield. Unlike the last two pieces, which are too tall and narrow, this fragmentary piece could be part of a tomb surround.

THE ARCH PIECES

The pieces are in three groups; one small group of two, frames M3 in the north wall surrounding the Catholic church, there is another group in the same wall farther to the east and a third group in the west wall. Each arch of the arcade was formed of two parts meeting at the centre. Some were round-headed and others rounded trefoils. In some cases one stone sitting on top of the capital sprung both ways, forming half of the arch at each side. There are four of these pieces, two forming half trefoil arches at each side and two forming half a trefoil at one side and half a round-headed arch on the other. The main spandrels and cusp spandrels are recessed within a frame either to a flat surface or to a V-section. There are six half-arch pieces, one forming half a round arch and the others forming half trefoil arches. Three of the latter are ornamented. The one to the left of M3 (plate 7) at present in a side-ways position has a small quadruped in the main spandrel exactly similar to the interlocked pair on C1. The arch piece to the right of M3 (plate 7) has a dragon-like quadruped in the cusp spandrel and foliage ornament in the main spandrel. The piece at the bottom left of the group in the west wall (plate 8) has rope and foliage ornament in the main spandrel.

Directly above both of the main groups of arch pieces is a capital well embedded in the wall. There is also a base half buried in the ground in the graveyard a little to the left of the entrance.

DISCUSSION

THE FORM OF THE CLOISTER ARCADE

The conjectural reconstruction of the form of the cloister arcade (fig. 1) is based on the surviving fragments described above. The structural features of the arcade are by no means unique. The use of a single stone spanning half of the arch is found also in the north arcade at Holycross, Co. Tipperary¹⁴

¹⁴G. Carville, *The Heritage of Holycross*, illustration 20, p. 46.

and the use of double pieces springing both ways is paralleled in the arcade at Fore, Co. Westmeath.¹⁵ The form of the trefoil is more unusual. It is basically a round arch with two large cusps, for the line of the round arch remains well defined.



Plate 8

The arcade would have probably supported a lean-to roof as at Jerpoint, but whether the openings were in groups interrupted by piers of solid masonry or not is impossible to say on the present evidence.

¹⁵H. G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, Vol. 3, fig. 67, p. 146.

THE SCULPTURE OF THE CLOISTER

In subjects and style the figure sculpture on the columns is similar to that on late 15th and early 16th century tomb surrounds in the area. The decorative foliage work and animal ornament can also be paralleled on these tombs. The depiction of St. Simon with a ship points to a connection with Rae's "Thurles group,"¹⁶ as does the general treatment of the figures, so that the work at Inistioge, including the tomb surround piece (plate 5)¹⁷ was probably done by the same school of craftsmen that worked at Thurles and Cashel.

There are definite similarities between the Inistioge cloister and that at Jerpoint. The form of the columns and the positioning of the sculpture on them is similar in both cases. As to the range of subjects, the Trinity, apostles and some grotesque creatures are represented at both sites but only at Inistioge were some of the figures labelled. Unlike Jerpoint, there are no carvings of contemporary ecclesiastics or civilians surviving at Inistioge. The beautifully ornamented capitals and bases at Jerpoint have no counterparts at Inistioge, where the few remaining examples are just plainly moulded but here a new area for ornamentation was exploited in the spandrels of some of the arches (plate 7), just as spandrels were often filled with ornament on contemporary tomb surrounds.

DATING

A catalogue of the bishops of Ossory, probably drawn up originally in 1555, as Carrigan argues,¹⁸ has, among other things, the following to say about bishop Milo Baron. The translation from the latin is Carrigan's.¹⁹

"A.D., 1550. Died Milo Baron, otherwise Fitzgerald, Bishop of Ossory. He was in early life made prior of the Canons Regular at Inisteake, where he devoted himself daily and incessantly to many labours and works, which it would be too long even to enumerate. He built there, at no small expense, a new bell-tower and a new cloister. Having been afterwards chosen for the Episcopal dignity, etc."

"This pious and gentle pastor, beloved of God and man, full of good days, died, after a life of 23 years in the Episcopate, and was buried in the tomb of his forefathers, in the Abbey of Inistioke."

This account written about Milo Baron so shortly after his

¹⁶E. C. Rae, J.R.S.A.I. 100, p. 37.

¹⁷Rae (op. cit. p. 38), has included this in his Thurles group.

¹⁸Rev. W. Carrigan, *The History and Antiquities of the Diocese of Ossory*, Vol. 1 (1905), p. 28—29.

¹⁹Carrigan, op. cit. p. 68.

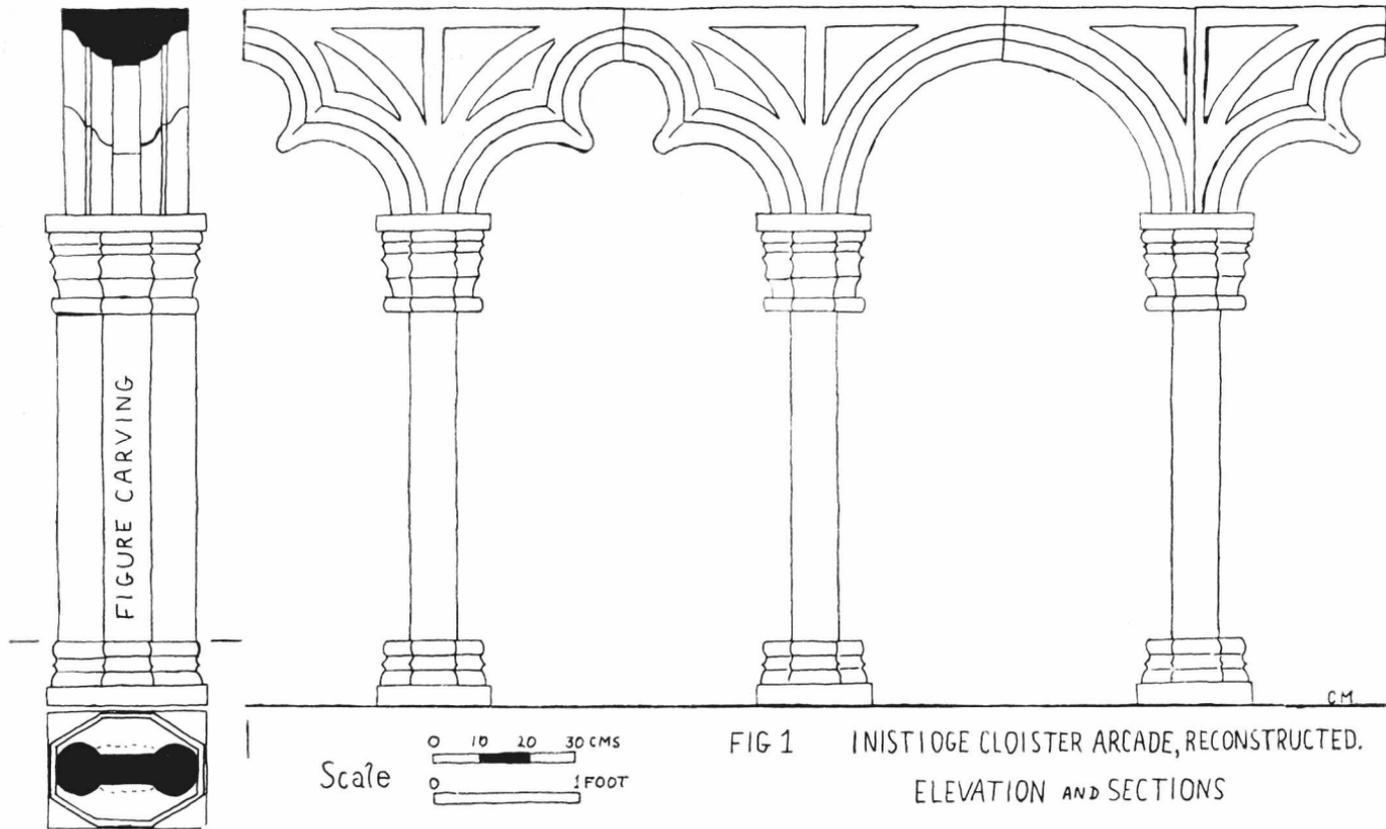


FIGURE CARVING

Scale

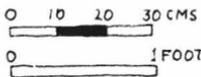


FIG 1 INISTIIGE CLOISTER ARCADE, RECONSTRUCTED.
ELEVATION AND SECTIONS

C.M.

death is surely reliable. It states clearly that Milo Baron built a new cloister and the wording of the translation and its latin original indicates that the cloister was built before he became bishop of Ossory in 1528. Dr. Moran took the same meaning from the above quotation for, concerning Milo Baron, he wrote: "Before his appointment to the See he added a new Tower and Cloister to the Priory at Inistioge."²⁰ This is important, as he was allowed to retain the priorship of Inistioge, while being also bishop of Ossory, until the dissolution in 1540. History does not tell us when he became prior of Inistioge but it is unlikely to have been much earlier than c. 1500. So, from historical evidence, we know of a cloister at Inistioge dating from around the first quarter of the 16th century.

Langrishe, the first to mention the cloister fragments, was of the opinion that they could not belong to the first half of the 16th century but were of a much earlier type,²¹ but as Rae points out²² here is no validity in this opinion. Rae himself is under the misapprehension that Milo Baron was prior of Inistioge only from 1528 on, and thus wrongly dates the cloister between 1528 and 1540.²³

The comparative material of Rae's "Thurles Group" is all dated by Hunt (op. cit.) to around the first half of the 16th century. As the closely related work on the Archer tomb at Thurles, which depicts St. Simon with a ship, probably dates to 1520,²⁴ a date between c 1510 and 1528 would seem most likely for the Inistioge cloister. If the piece with the angel holding a shield (M3 above) belongs to the cloister it would provide a possible material link between the cloister and Milo Baron for the shield has a saltire cross on it which is the basic component of the arms of the Barons or Fitzgeralds.

SUMMARY

There are sufficient cloister arcade fragments at Inistioge to allow for a conjectural reconstruction of part of the arcade (Fig. 1). This cloister was built, probably between c. 1510 and 1528, by Milo Baron, last prior of Inistioge and last pre-reformation bishop of Ossory. It was on the last medieval cloisters to be built in Ireland, only that at Creevelea, Co. Leitrim (built 1536) is known to be later.²⁵ It was built with the model of the Jerpoint cloister in mind, but probably by tomb sculptors, who were influenced more by the style of contemporary tomb surrounds and were probably the same craftsmen as worked on certain tombs at Thurles and Cashel.

²⁰Rev. Dr. Moran, *The Bishops of Ossory from the Anglo-Norman Invasion to the Present Day*, Transactions of the Ossory Archaeological Society, Vol. 2, p. 249.

²¹Richard Langrishe, *The Priory of Inistioge*, J.R.S.A.I. 26 (1896), p. 372.

- ²²E. C. Rae, *The Sculpture of the Cloister of Jerpoint Abbey*, J.R.S.A.I. 96 (1966) p. 64, n. 17.
²³*Ibid.*, p. 88, note 77.
²⁴Hunt, *op. cit.* Vol. 1, p. 230.
²⁵Leask, *op. cit.* p. 149—151.

ABBREVIATIONS

J.R.S.A.I.—The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.
O.K.R.—Old Kilkenny Review.



Burials at Killaree, Threecastles

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ON October 16th, 1971, a large number of burials were discovered at Killaree, Threecastles, on the lands of Mr. Michael Dalton.

It is an area of limestone out-crop on rising ground and over-looking the Nore Valley. A firm of monumental sculptors were engaged in quarrying for limestone when the burials were turned up by the machinery. They consisted of about nine or ten extended skeletons buried about 18 inches below the surface. They were laid in rows roughly in an east-west direction.

The site was inspected by Miss Nell Prendergast of the National Museum. Though many of the burials were disturbed by the machinery a selection of bones sent to Professor C. H. Erskine, T.C.D., for examination revealed that the skeletons of at least five adults (three female and two male) and one child of eight or nine years were among the remains. An iron knife found by the writer close to the hip-bone of one skeleton and a slate whetstone found near-by are not closely dateable except they indicate the medieval period.

The grave-yard of Killaree is about half a mile east of the site. Local tradition says that three kings are buried there. The site of the great battle between Strongbow's men and the Ossorians of 1170 was a few miles north-east of Killaree, near Freshford, and the presence of female burials does not seem to point to a battle.