

Freshford, Doorway

K.A.S. Outing.

August, 1968.

KATHERINE M. LANIGAN

This porch is all that is left of the 12th century Church of St. Lactain of Acadh Ur or Freshford. It is important because it is Co. Kilkenny's best example of Irish Romanesque Architecture. The Churches of Ullard, Sheepstown and Clonamery could also be classed as Romanesque but none of them carry the rich embellishment which we see here.

MONASTIC SETTLEMENT

First, the history, which is sparse. We have a monastic settlement of the early Celtic type — a cell — founded by St. Lactain about 600 A.D. and mentioned several times from the 7th to the 11th centuries by the Four Masters and the Song of Diarmuid and the Earl. St. Lactain died in 622.

The name of the Foundation was Acadh Ur, the fresh field. This has been wrongly translated in modern times as Freshford. The word acadh was confused with ath, a ford.

ST. LACTAIN

St. Lactain was born in Muskerry, Co. Cork, and studied under St. Comgall in Bangor. He founded a monastery in his native Co. Cork near Ballyvourney and there is a Church of Donoughmore in the Diocese of Cloyne, which is dedicated to him, but his most important foundation seems to have been Freshford.

The Annals refer to him as a Bishop and it is very likely that there was a small diocese here in Freshford and that it was incorporated in the See of Ossory at the time of the Norman invasion.

LACTAIN'S SHRINE

An interesting relic of the Saint was preserved at Donoughmore Church, Co. Cork until 1740. This is a 12th Century Shrine of bronze inlaid with silver and gold ornament fashioned in the shape of a forearm and inscribed with the usual request for a prayer for the donor, the maker, and the high king. The High King was MacCarthy.

It's purpose was, of course, to contain a relict of the

Saint which presumably had been preserved for 500 years before the Shrine was made.

Up to its removal by the Bishop of Cloyne from Donoughmore in 1740 the relic was used by the people for swearing oaths on solemn occasions, a practice customary in many parts of Ireland. When the reliquary was acquired by the Royal Irish Academy late in the 19th century from the family of Fontaine the relic with its wooden inner box had disappeared. The reliquary is now in the National Museum.

THE CHURCH

This, then is all the history we have about Freshford—a cell foundation by St. Lactain about 600 A.D. — a monastery of the Celtic style which flourished for 500 years —and then a Romanesque Church built in the Saint's honour at Freshford somewhere in the third quarter of the 12 Century.

Freshford was conquered by Dermot Mac Morrough and his Anglo - Norman allies in a three - day battle in 1169 and after that there is silence.

Perhaps the Irish monks fled before the armies of the Normans. If so the monastic life of this 12th century Romanesque building must have been very short — not more than about 10 years. The manor of Freshford was granted to the Bishop of Ossory early in the 13th century and the Episcopal Palace of Uppercourt was built, nearby, about 1250.

The Church however continued in use, whether monastic or parochial, passed to the Reformed Church and was rebuilt about 1740 leaving only this beautiful porch of the original Church. We may be thankful that the 18th century restorers recognised the beauty of the classical symmetry of the doorway and preserved it.

THE ARCHITECTURE

Romanesque Architecture, generally speaking, means that type of architecture which is based on Roman Art and which appeared in Italy and spread to North Western Europe between about 600 to 1200 A.D. It is characterised by round-headed openings and large Churches with columns and pillars.(1)

Irish Romanesque, or Hiberno-Romanesque as it is also called, however, differs considerably from that of Western

Europe, though it contains many features imported from Germany, France and England. When the roman arch was introduced into Ireland the Irish masons adapted it to their corbel-type style of building so that it acted as a propping arch to correct the tendency to sag in the middle which was the great fault of their small corbelled churches. Irish churches then retained their traditional shape. They did not follow the continental pattern. So we get in Irish Romanesque smaller churches than in Europe, with battered walls, inclined door-jambes, steeply pitched roofs, projections or antennae on the side walls and no internal pillar or columns.

Similarly when true Romanesque architecture that is, the church with the elaborate decorated doorway and chancel arch, began to develop in Ireland the mason — artists placed the unmistakable Irish stamp on the ornament. Design — motifs were taken from all sources — traditional Irish patterns interlacing and convolutions long used on the manuscripts and high crosses; dogs tooth from Norman England; chevron, common to all north-western Europe; animal and human heads and masks from France; frets and other classical designs from Greece and Rome etc. Irish Romanesque was in short, a uniquely native product. Dr. Leask describes it as “the most original and truly national of Irish Architectural achievements.”(2)

Writers have not been in agreement about the date of introduction of Hiberno — Romanesque but the general consensus at present seems to place this style of embellished architecture to a period of about 100 years roughly from about 1080 to 1180. Gothic architecture was introduced by the Normans. Dr. Leask distinguishes three Phases. Phase I simple not highly adorned, Phase II highly elaborate ornament and Phase III over-elaboration. He places Freshford in the beginning of Phase III (he refuses to admit Cormac’s Chapel in Cashel into any category, saying it is an exotic and of foreign origin). Liam de Paor, however, thinks Cormac’s chapel was of English derivation and was the major influence on other Romanesque buildings in the neighbourhood where the masons were able to see and copy.(3)

There are only three historically dateable Romanesque churches : Cormac’s Chapel, Cashel, 1134, the great Church

at Aghadoe, Kerry, 1158, and the nuns' chapel at Clonmacnoise, 1166. Other churches have to be dated approximately by comparison.

Most authorities now agree that Freshford belongs to the advanced development which would put it in the 3rd quarter of the 12th century perhaps about 1158, the date of Aghadoe with which it has affinities. If so, it would have been a-building about the same time as the Cistercians were starting on Jerpoint and we know there are many Romanesque features in the earlier portions of Jerpoint.

Freshford shares with six other churches a tangent gable—a feature very rare in England. It is a steep Irish-style gable, rising, in all other cases except Freshford, close to the arch, but, here, from the edge of the lateral frieze. This tangent gable occurs at Cormac's Chapel (the idea could have come from there). It also appears at Roscrea, Donoughmore, Co. Tipperary, Killeshin, Kildare and, at its most highly developed stage, in the beautiful decorated gables of Clonfert Cathedral.

The deep porch projecting from the wall, which we have here, occurs also at Cormac's Chapel, and at Kildare. The ornament known as battlement or, in its double form, the fret, is of classical origin but was already used by the manuscript artists. It is rare in Irish Romanesque but does occur at Aghadoe and, in the form of a fret, at Killeshin.

The chevrons, human heads, animal masks and lizards are common motifs in Romanesque architecture.

The figure sculpture which we see here is an unusual feature in Ireland though highly developed in France. There are figure sculptures only at Ardmore, Co. Waterford, and Killeel, Co. Kildare. The sculptured frieze depicts a man on a horse and two figures embracing and there is a panel on the south jamb. Nobody has attempted an explanation of the symbolism.

INSCRIPTION

Finally there is the inscription on the arch of the door and the south jamb. Inscriptions are also rare on 12th century Irish architecture but there are two others, Killeshin, Co. Laois, and Monanicha, Co. Tipperary. This one is quite long but, alas, does not help us at all with the history of the church. It is in Irish and reads in translation "A prayer for Niamh daughter

of Corc, and for Mathgamain O'Cearmeic, for whom this church was made. A prayer for Gilla mo Cholmoc O'Ceannucain who made it".

It is notable in that it gives credit to the mason-artist who designed it, a custom which could be followed with profit in modern records and it also gives individual identity to Niamh Quirke, who was presumably the wife of Kerwick or O'Cearmeic, the patron.

Canon Carrigan notes the coincidence that in St. Lactain's parish of Donoughmore where the shrine was preserved there is a townland of Ballykerwick or O'Kerwick's town. The name is sometimes anglicised in Cork.(4)

Recent writers have emphasised the dynastic quality of early Irish monastic settlement.(5)

Is it fanciful to suggest a sort of proprietary right of the Kerwick family in the ecclesiastic settlements of St. Lactain which continued as a family tradition over the centuries? The word Cearmeic is also inscribed on the Kilamery brooch which, one supposes, has some connection with the monastic site at Killamery.

Generally speaking, then, we can relate this door directly to Cormac's chapel at Cashel which the sculptor O'Ceannucain, must have stood before in awe and also to most of the Romanesque churches from Killeshin in Leix westward to Aghadoe in Kerry. Perhaps many of them were decorated by the same O'Ceannucain, a travelling mason-artist.

ALTERATIONS

Note on Freshford Church by Mrs. St. George, Freshford.

During alterations to the Church about 1950 an ogee-headed piscina was uncovered in the south wall of the chancel and a gothic doorway in cut stone in the north wall. They were left in position and recovered with plaster. The carved wooden alter rails were made about 1900 by local craftsmen under the direction of Canon McCheane of Wellbrook. The decoration consists of carved representations of the leaves of all the trees then growing at Wellbrook.

A resident of Freshford declares that the damage to the south jamb of the porch was caused by the sharpening of butcher's and other knives on the granite.

FOOTNOTES

1. Leask Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings Vol. I.
2. Op. Cit.
3. Liam De Paor "Cormac's Chapel," North Munster Studies. Ed. Etienne Ryan.
4. Carrigan —History of the Diocese of Ossory Vol II.
5. Kathleen Hughes —The Church in early Irish Society.

K.A.S. CHRISTMAS PARTY PROGRAMME 1967

Talk : "Lord of the Lough"	Mr Pat Walsh
Songs	Mr Pat Curran
Songs with Harp	The Misses E. Dunne and P. McCarthy
Talk : "The Turol Stone"	Mr James Gibbons T.D.
Song	Mr T. Fitzgerald
Song	Mr Holmes
Song	Dr. T. McKeogh
Talk : The Old Fenian	Miss M. Cassin
Song	Mr George Wilde
Talk : "Mammy Water"	Mr T. Lyng
Song	Mr T. Coyle
Talk : Jack of the Lantern	Mr W. Monks
Verses	Mrs T. Delaney
Story	Master J. Bradley
Piano Solo	Miss E. Gowan
Talk : "Beginnings of the Butler Society" ...	Mr George Butler
Talk : "Kilkenny Families"	Eoin O'Mahony K.M.
Question Time Panelists	Fr O'Doherty, Mr E. Hughes, Master J. Bradley, Miss K. Dunne, Mrs J. C. Murphy, Miss M. Hegarty.
At the Piano	Miss Mary O'Carroll
The function was arranged and organised by Joseph O'Carroll.	