

Clonamery

Very Rev. John Brennan

CLONAMERY, the parish church of the ancient parish of Clune, is marked on Sir William Petty's map (1657). The old Irish speaking people of the district pronounced it Cloon Ammizha. This could be Cluain Ainmirech or the Plain of Ainmire -- a name of one of the Kings of Ireland in the 6th century. On the other hand if the Irish used by the local people became slightly corrupted from Ummighe to Ummizha it could be the Cloone or lawn of the ridge. The place is certainly situated on a bold ridge, which would thus be well named.

The patron saint of this parish was Naev Browndoon. Carrigan holds that this was not the great St. Brendan the Navigator. However, the church in Clodagh, which was built later than Clonamery, and the more recent Clodagh School, are both dedicated simply to St. Brendan.

Tradition holds that an ancient monastery existed on this site. There is evidence for this in the form of what seems to be clochawns which still exist in the field west of the present church on the highest point of the elevated ridge. There are two clochawns, one is 14½ feet in diameter, the other is 11 feet (Carrigan, Vol. 4 v.121). These were dwelling places used principally, as far as we know, by monks in the early Irish monastic form of living close together in groups of such huts.

First, as regards buildings, there is a well authenticated tradition that timber was used by Irish church builders in the very earliest days of Christianity in this country. "Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings" (Leask p.1). This is true at least for the forested parts. Building with stone commenced in the Western part earlier than here because stones were more readily available than timber. However, building with loose stones was known and used in many parts of Ireland even from pre-Christian days. Hence "the precise dating of any work of primitive building is difficult and often impossible" according to Leask (p.1). He continues: "if the date of the introduction of the use of mortar were known the task might be made easier. Unfortunately this is not known so far, but the Irish Christians must have become acquainted, through their contacts with the Continent, particularly in the 7th century, with buildings of stone and mortar. Hence it can be confidently assumed that such building was introduced here between the 7th and 8th centuries." (Leask p.2). Hence also stone buildings without mortar should thus normally be pre-8th century.

All this is helpful when considering the clochawn or

beehive huts. They should be at least pre-8th century. Clochawns were built on the corbel principle i.e. of one stone supporting another. Not that corbelling came with the beehive hut; it was known here as far back as the Bronze Age. Recall the great passage graves at Newgrange (Leask pp. 17, 18). In the typical clochawn this principle is well applied and the work competently done, corbelling being used from the very foundation to the cap stone. In positioning the courses, the stones were laid so as to slope slightly outwards thus directing the rain away from the interior. The clochawns which are still intact are always quite dry inside. The normal shape for the clochawn is circular or nearly so or roughly oval. However, it develops towards the oblong with rounded corners and with a rectangular internal plan. This is true of the skellig huts, for example, but they show an advance on the simpler but more typical clochawn (p.19) such as those we now see at Clonamery. The clochawns here are almost destroyed and so it is very difficult to know what they looked like in their original form. We are tempted to ask how common are clochawns in Leinster? Maurice Craig, in his book "The Personality of Leinster," says no intact examples survive in this province (p.14). Although this author writes about and illustrates the Clonamery west door he does not even mention the beehive huts. However, we have here something quite rare in Leinster and in fact something not common in all Ireland.

We turn now to the church itself, which in its present form came after the clochawns. It is built of stones and mortar and, as we saw above, Leask estimates that the Irish began to build in stones and mortar within the 7th to the 8th century A.D. The general style of early masonry was uncoursed rubble, i.e. roughly dressed or even undressed stones not laid in regular courses. Many stones are large by modern standards. There seems to have been a strong preference for such stones particularly, but by no means always in the lower parts of the walls and around the entrance doors (Leask p.51). These large stones are often fitted together with remarkable accuracy. Small stones were fitted and tightly packed into the more open joints. This type of building construction may usually be dated in the 9th to the 10th century, but it must be pointed out in general terms that while changes in masonry types in any one building usually indicates differences of date it is not possible to arrive at a definitive dating from masonry types alone. Local geology is a potent factor — where good stones were readily available styles changed very slowly but where stones were of poor quality a very crude looking structure is not necessarily a very early one.

Apply this to Clonamery. In the lower part of the walls we find the earliest type of large stone work — large, well fitted

and helping to date it as 9th to 10th century. I do not think granite can be found near here but Cullintra hill about four miles away abounds in it. The top sections and the reconstruction, of which we will speak later, is made of crude field stones and is of later date.

Besides the interesting stone work in the lower part of the walls of this church we find other interesting features as well. Keep in mind, first of all, that the original church was the present nave and that the present chancel with other modifications came at a later date. We will consider the oldest part first. Here there are three very interesting features. These are (a) the batter of the walls, (b) the sloping jambs of the old doorway, (c) the antae. We will consider each in turn.

First, **The Batter of the Walls.** This consists of the inward sloping of the walls so that they are widest at the foundation and become gradually narrower as they are built up. Leask suggests that this possibly grew from the constructional techniques used with timber building. But there were also good and practical reasons for its adoption in earth or dry masonry work. In Clonamery it is on the west gable the batter is used. Here the wall is four feet thick at the ground, then there is a batter on the inside to a height of six feet. From then on it assumes a fixed thickness of 3' 4". The side walls were ten feet high and of an even thickness.

Secondly, **The Sloping Jambs of the Doorway.** The simplest form of doorway is, of course, the square standing, flat headed opening spanned by a level lintel. Most of the doorways in early Irish buildings are of this kind. Some, however, have a characteristic by no means common whereby the jambs incline inwards towards each other. Thus the opening is narrower under the lintel than at the threshold or ground level. The diminution in width in this way is commonly from three to four inches. The reduction in span at lintel level could give it additional strength, yet the Irish masons who built such doorways do not seem to have considered this advantage. They usually inserted very massive lintels — more massive than any stone in the building, and more than adequate for their function. One thing is certain, that from an aesthetic viewpoint the sloping jambs of Irish doors and windows when used form a parallel and harmonizing unit with the battered walls. One likes to know were they kept on in later times of Hiberno Romanesque for their aesthetic characteristic also.

Clonamery west doorway is described by Carrigan as "a splendid specimen of an early Celtic doorway." (Vol IV, p.118). It is one of the relatively small group of examples of such doorways in Ireland. The best of the others are Trinity Church (Glendalough), Killeavy (Armagh) and Kilgobnet Church (Arran Islands, Galway). The nearest in dimensions to Clonamery is

also the nearest to it geographically viz. Trinity Church, Glendalough.

The framework of the door here before us consists of great pieces of granite, carefully cut and squared, with a heavy, flat lintel overhead measuring 5' 2" long, one foot in thickness and about the same in width. Few as these doorways are an even fewer number have a further characteristic viz. the elaboration of an additional raised border, an architrave. On this a few have a cross symbol carved or engraved (Leask, p.56). Crosses carved in relief over the architrave are at Fore, Westmeath, and here at Clonamery, while there is a Greek cross between four roundels on face of St. Molaise's House, Innishmurray, a circle inscribed symbols at Gallan and a sature on the soffit of the doorway of St. Mary's Church, Glendalough.

Thus we have here a rare doorway made even rarer by this raised cross over the architrave. Carrigan adds "From it (the architrave) descends to left and right across top of door and down the sides to the ground a scroll or border also in relief." (Carrigan, V. 4, p.118).

Paris Anderson ("Nooks and Corners," p.105) comments on this church, and doorway in particular, and refers to the cross sculptured in relief called in heraldry "pattee." He wonders why Petre had not mentioned it,—or perhaps not even seen it—due to the remoteness of the church.

Thirdly, we come to **the Antae**. These are peculiar pilaster-like projections of the side walls beyond the gables. They are known to architects as antae, a term borrowed from the Greek architecture. Smith, in his "Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities," calls them "square pillars which were commonly joined to the side wall of a building being placed on each side of the door so as to assist in forming a portico (p.26). These terms are seldom found except in the plural — they should be in pairs, corresponding with each other and supporting the extremities of the same roof. The Temple in Antis was one of the simplest kind; it had in front antae attached to the walls which enclosed the cella or small room forming the interior of the Temple. Hence the name Antae.

Like the batter, they are a feature of some Irish churches found quite early with the use of stone and mortar but also found as late as middle of 12th century. Hence of themselves they do not date a church but here as they are part of the original church, like it they too are 9th to 10th century.

Up to the present time nobody knows quite what was their function. Without a doubt they were not erected as buttresses. Buttresses are erected to support a wall. In the position in which antae are found there is no thrust to be resisted, there is nothing to support in that sense. They could possibly have

supported the roof timbers in advance of the gables. But several theories have been advanced as to their origin :

(a) Some derive them from the classic pilaster, but they would be a poor substitute from an aesthetic viewpoint to the classic pilaster. The early Celts learned a lot from the Greeks and Romans but much earlier than the antae period.

(b) Some see in them a translation into stone of the corner posts of timber prototypes — and thus derived from timber buildings. Remember the earliest buildings in this part of Ireland were from timber. The corner posts would strengthen the structure somewhat like clasped fingers.

(c) Others see in antae the pilaster-like end walls of the Megaron, i.e. the Mediteranean house, examples of which were unearthed in Mycene, Troy and elsewhere. Again these were much earlier than the Antae period, although trade between Celts and these people continued throughout the ages.

None of these theories is quite convincing but the second may be favoured at least to the extent that in many churches where antae are not present another feature is found which was definitely used for the support of the roof timbers or end rafters or large boards. I refer to the corbel stone projecting at the base of the gables. These corbel stones supported the roof timbers but the antae could have done so as well and in a more striking way (v. Leask, p.56).

Other examples of antae can be seen at Teampull Chiarain (Clonmacnoise); St. Declan's, Ardmore; the Cathedral, Glendalough (p.256, Harbison); at Liathmore-Moohoemog, near Littleton, Co. Tipperary (Leask, pp.61-2), and, nearer home, at Kilree and Tullahern (v. Harbison, pp.137-8), Co. Kilkenny. So much for this interesting feature, the Antae.

Before a further examination of the church itself a few words about **windows**. Windows in the early churches in Ireland and, indeed, up to the 12th century, were few in number, small in size and narrower on the outside than on the inside. They were frequently not more and often less than six inches wide, while having a wide splay on the inside. Thus while having a narrow opening to the elements on the outside they admitted a maximum of light to the interior. Flat-headed lintelled windows belong to both early and late periods. Arched windows are from early and late periods, while triangular-headed windows are found in early periods only.

We should remember that the Irish masons knew the arch form and built true arches at a very early period. We may be tempted to think the round arch came only with Romanesque —this is not so. In fact the **true** round arch usually spans the **inner** opening of **early** Irish windows, but occasionally a single stone cut to arch form suffices (Leask, p.58).

As we are speaking about windows we should look at the

oldest window in this church, viz. the East Window. It is thought that it is not now in its original place which was rather in the east wall of the present Nave, which was the original church. Look above the present Choir arch and see what seems to be the inside lintel of the original window position. The window, removed when the church was extended and the present choir arch and chancel were made, was re-inserted in the present east wall. Note: the window is framed with cut granite, it is now broken on the top but on the inside it shows the unmistakable signs of Celtic work.

Having seen the window which was probably removed from the nave we continue with the nave itself, the oldest part of Clonamery. First of all, in the middle of the north wall is a doorway—long since built up—probably when the church was extended. It is square or flat headed on the outside where it measures 5' 10" in height and 3' 11" in width. This door was slightly arched on the inside. As it was the only opening to or from the church, apart from the main entrance i.e. the west door, it probably led to another building or a sacristy. It scarcely ever opened directly to the north without another building being there even if for no other reason than to break the cold north wind!

On the south wall of the nave, six feet from the east gable, is a walled up window which threw light into the original church. It is a "square topped window measuring on the **inside** 5' 0" in height, 2' 5" in breadth at top, and 2' 7" at bottom, and on the **outside** where it is six feet from the present level of the ground it measures 2' 3" in height, and in breadth 6" at top and 8" at bottom." (O'Donovan in Ordnance Survey Letter). However, since O'Donovan's time a monument has been erected in the form of a mural slab (to James Hutchinson, New Ross, 1860). This mural slab has cut off the proper viewing and study of the window outline on the outside of the church.

Before leaving the Nave note the later window over the West door and double opening in tower; these came with later construction. Note too that the later church must have been very dark if both North doorway and South window were closed up! I cannot see where it got its light from except from small windows over West door, and from Chancel!

In the Chancel we have a building more recent than the Nave. It was built of ordinary rough field stones which were used for all parts of the reconstruction. It measures 22' in length and 14½' in width. It has a small rough window in the South Wall and west of this, on the same wall, a rough small round-headed doorway — probably to a new Sacristy on the South.

Adjoining the Chancel on the North is a small chamber of no antiquity. It is about 10 feet long and 7 feet wide with door at its south wall leading into Chancel, also a narrow loop or

window in **East** wall. Note Carrigan makes a slight printing error in calling this the **North** wall. It is correct in his notes. Peter Harbison in "Guide to the National Monuments," p.128, says "this out-building may have been added in the 15th or 16th century, when a bell-cot was also added to the top of the west gable." It is difficult to assign any purpose to this room. It is possibly a mortuary chapel added to the church in later times by some member of the Fitzgeralds of Cloone or Brownsford. It would have been erected before they were eventually deprived of their property in 1691.

Before we leave this venerable old church we must note a few things :—

1st—Carrigan in his notes but not in his book points out that on the Chancel side of the Choir arch wall there is an **ornamental stone** as in the Nave front which is used as a building stone. I cannot identify it, or has it been hidden by the new Lavin mural slab;

2nd—Note the granite headstone leaning loosely against wall. It has a border all around with a large plain cross in front. It has the following curiously arranged and badly carved inscription in rased italics : "Here lieth ye body of Sylvester Whe" This stone once stood outside the church. It is good to see it kept inside for safety. It is of value not only in itself but because like other stones in the South East angle of Co. Kilkenny it can be identified as the work of a stone cutter named Darby O'Brien of Rathpatrick, Slieverue, who flourished during the first quarter of the 18th century. This, too, helps to date the stone. (See Carrigan, Vol. 4, p. 121).

3rd—Note the stone clamped to the wall in the Nave; it is a pillar stone and is of early date. It is of mica-schist like texture and of greyish-green colour. It has three crosses — one quite prominent — and two cup-shaped hollows. Mr. Hughes in an article on this church (in O.K.R. No. 9, p.29) says stones with combinations of cross-and cup-marks such as this have been found on monuments in the district immediately South of Dublin.

4th—Carrigan refers to a granite holy water font with rectangular cavity 9" x 8" x 2½" deep to be seen in the graveyard attached to the church (p.120). Where is it?

Finally, may I sum up the facts and be allowed the possibility of a little speculation. There was an old monastic settlement here — the clochawns indicate this. An ancient church was also here which can be dated from 9th to 10th century with the special features of Antae, batter in wall and special west doorway. Either this church continued to be the church of the parish of Clune — when parishes were formed at the time of Synod of Rathbrasail (1111 A.D.) — i.e. about 200 years later, or it was rebuilt after Rathbrasail in the form

in which we now find it. It was used by the Fitzgerald family of Clune as their parish church when they came here and built Clune Castle. In fact during their time it became known as Pobul a Baruin or Barron's Parish (Carrigan, V 4, p.122).

It continued in use until Edward Fitzgerald of Clune was killed at Battle of Aughrim, 12th July, 1691. After that all the property, including Clonamery Church, was confiscated and later sold to the Corporation for making Hollow Sword Blades, London. All was assigned later to Stephen Swete on 17th June, 1703. The price for all the property was £1,473. Evidently between 1691 and this time, i.e. June 1703, the church was pulled down, because in the descriptive reference to the church entry in "The Books of Postings and Sales of the Forfeited Estates of Ireland under the Acts of 11th and 12th William III," we read: "In the parish of Clune . . . the walls of an old church and 5 or 6 cabins . . ." This was 1703 (v. Carrigan, p.122).

As a church for service of God it was permanently closed in 1691. As a monument of antiquity it is endowed with many features of special Irish character type.

Source Material References :

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