

The Derrynaflan Hoard

BREANDÁN Ó RÍORDÁIN

On Friday, 17th October, 1980, Breandán Ó Riordáin, Director of the National Museum of Ireland delivered a lecture illustrated with colour slides on the subject of the Derrynaflan Hoard.*

The hoard consisted of a silver chalice, a large silver paten together with its stand, a gilt bronze strainer and a large bronze bowl; the bowl had been found in an inverted position and acting as a cover for the chalice, paten and strainer. The discovery had been made by Mr. Michael Webb and his son in February, 1980 in the vicinity of Derrynaflan Church (Doire na bhFlann) near Killenaule in Co. Tipperary.

The hoard had been deposited in the National Museum by the finder on the day following its discovery. The find place lay within the enclosure of an ancient monastery reputed to have been founded in the sixth century by St. Ruadhan of Lorrha.

Through the co-operation of the landowners of the site Mr. John O'Leary and Mr. Denis O'Connell of Lurgoe, Killenaule, Co. Tipperary, the National Museum carried out archaeological excavations at the site and this investigation had resulted in the recovery of a number of panels and glass studs which had become detached from the silver paten. It had also been established that the hoard had originally been deposited – presumably with the intention of recovery – in the post Norman Period.

The two-handed chalice is quite similar in appearance to the Ardagh Chalice and it is considered to date to the eighth or early ninth century. It is decorated with settings of amber and with panels of gold filigree in the form of animal motifs, bird figures and curvilinear designs. The underside of the base is also decorated with studs of amber and gold filigree.

The large silver paten measuring 37 c.m. in diameter is decorated on its upper surface with a band of twenty gold filigree panels separated by polychrome glass studs. The filigree panels are of a high standard of excellence; some depict animals and humans while others consist of motifs made up of interlocking curved scrolls. Further decorative bands on the paten are formed of knitted silver wire mesh of the type known as trichonopoly work and the side of the paten is decorated with bands of interlace framing rectangular panels of curvilinear designs together with spaced polychrome glass settings. The paten is regarded as one of the more important pieces of Early Christian metalwork so far discovered in Ireland.

The strainer is of gilt bronze and takes the form of a long handled ladle. The bowl is divided into two equal parts by means of a vertical metal plate which is decoratively perforated. The handle terminates in a large glass crystal encircled by smaller glass settings.

* A preliminary report on the find is being prepared by the Keeper of Irish Antiquities, Michael Ryan and his colleagues, Mary Cahill, Raghnaill O Floinn and Eamonn Kelly.

This hoard of Early Christian Period objects is of special significance in that it includes not alone a chalice but also a paten – the first example of this particular period to be found in Ireland. Another Irish paten is known – the Mias Tighearnáin – but it appears to date to a later period. In the Early Christian Period it was customary to pass the communion chalice and paten to the minor clergy and faithful. Whilst the practice of employing cakes of bread brought as oblations by the congregation was in vogue and patens used continued to be of large size. When that practice was superseded by that of using wafers – made expressly for the purpose – the size of the paten became much smaller. In addition to a chalice and paten a range of other implements were used to serve the eucharistic liturgy. Ladles and strainers such as that discovered at Derrynaflan would have been used in the preparation of the eucharistic wine.

Doire na bhFlann (the oakwood of the Flanns) known in earlier times as Doire Eidhneach (the ivied oakwood) is named after three monastic persons whose Christian names were Flann or Flannan as recorded in the 12th century Book of Leinster which was compiled at the monastery of Terryglass in north Tipperary. The Derrynaflan community was closely connected with the 8th/9th century Céili Dé reform in the Irish Church, a movement which had close associations with the monastery at Tallaght, in Co. Dublin.



Photo courtesy National Museum