



1838 six-inch Ordnance Survey Map

The ringed cross-head that is now in the parish church of Rath in County Offaly is – probably together with the cross now in the grounds of Castlebernard – the most significant remnant of a once-important monastic foundation at Drumcullen, close to the banks of the river Camcor, about a kilometer north of Kinnitty, from which it has been recently removed for safe-keeping. John Feehan has kindly examined the cross-head and found that it was carved from limestone, unlike most of the other midland crosses, which were made of sandstone. It is just under 1m in height and would have measured about 76cm across, on the basis of doubling the width of the one surviving arm, the end of the other arm having been broken off centuries ago. There is no record of the shaft on which the head would have stood, and it is idle to speculate as to whether it was smashed or buried, or what its fate may have been. At least we should be thankful that we have the head. On the site is a large circular stone which is unlikely to have served as the base of the cross. There are still the remains of a later medieval church (recently de-ivied, and now covered in Russian vine), and one stone decorated in the Romanesque style of the second half of the twelfth century, of which not a single other ornamented stone seems to survive from the church it once adorned.

The monastery from which the cross came must have been more important than the meagre records of its history would suggest.¹ In an article published in Volume 7 of *Offaly Heritage*,² Pádraig Ó Riain demonstrated that there were two saints associated with the place. One was a lady, Ríognach, patron of the parish of Reynagh (now Banagher), who shared her name with a sister of St. Finnian of Clonard. He, Ó Riain argues, was the same person as St. Fionnbharr of Cork, but also the patron saint of Drumcullen, Bairrfhionn, who, under another name, Barinthus, is mentioned in the *Navigatio Brendani*, ‘arguably the most influential of all medieval Irish texts’, and one that was translated into many other European languages down the centuries. Medieval genealogists linked Bairrfhionn to St. Columba (Colmcille), but his original name Finnian would connect him with Movilla in Co. Down.

But all of these links have no real bearing on the cross-head, which would seem to have been made in County Offaly and which, most significantly, came from a monastery which was within a stone’s throw of the river Camcor, which separated Leinster from Munster in the medieval period. There is one cross presently on the Munster side of the river, now in the grounds of Castlebernard, on which Liam de Paor³ deciphered an inscription bearing the name of Maelsechnaill I, a king of the Clann Cholmáin, which ruled on the Leinster side of the river. It is probable that the Castlebernard cross was brought there, probably some time in the nineteenth century, to decorate the castle’s gardens. It is most likely that it came originally from Drumcullen on the Leinster side of the Camcor, and not from the monastery of Kinnitty which was located not far away, but on the Munster side of the river.

¹ S. Lyons, *The Forgotten Navigator Saint Barron of Drumcullen* (The Holly Ridge Press, 2003).

² P. Ó Riain, ‘Tullamore and surrounding Parishes in a Dictionary of Irish Saints’, *Offaly Heritage* 7, 2013, 75-77.

³ L. de Paor, ‘The High Crosses of Tech Theille (Tihilly), Kinnitty, and Related Sculpture’, in E. Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the Past. Studies on Figurative Art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dun Laoghaire 1987), 140-141.

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THE DRUMCULLEN CROSS-HEAD of c.900



by Peter Harbison

“... the most significant remnant
of a once-important monastic foundation
at Drumcullen ...”



On both faces, the shape of the ringed cross is outlined by a strong outer and a narrower inner rope-moulding, which show the arms of the cross to have expanded scarcely at all beyond the outline of the ring. These mouldings enclose an uncomplicated interlace or plait, which is deeper on one face than on the other, and follows the curving movement of the ring. There is no cylindrical-shaped formation which is seen on many other crosses attached either to the inside of the ring or to the interior of the outline moulding of the cross.

At the centre of the head of one face of the cross, which would originally have been the east face, there is a circular roll-moulding which encloses a central whorl from which spin out three slightly comma-shaped elements which develop into so-called peltas in the 'Celtic' style. In the surviving arm beside it is an interlace, narrow at the arm-constriction, but widening out towards its end. Near the centre of the head it forms almost a straight line, whereas it expands to points at the end of the arm. There are indications that the other arm, and the part of the shaft above and below the centre circle, were provided with a similar broad-band interlace.

The central spiral ornament has its parallels in the east face of the Tihilly cross,¹ some 25 kilometers away, where the symbol doubtless had a religious meaning when first carved more than a thousand years ago, but which is now sadly totally lost to us. But, more than quarter of a century ago, Liam de Paor² pointed to other crosses bearing a similar feature, at Kinnitty/Castlebernard, Duleek in County Meath and on the Tower Cross at Kells in the same county. On these, however, the decoration is in higher relief, but less so at Tihilly, which provides the closest comparison to the Drumcullen ornament. That cross also provides satisfactory parallels for the 'fleshy' interlace on the arm of the Drumcullen cross.



When first discovered in 1917 by Olive Purser¹ (niece of the famous artist Sarah Purser), this east face lay flat on the ground, and was not impaired by lichen, as seen in Françoise Henry's photograph published in 1933.² The original west face, however, had suffered more from exposure to the elements,³ and the moss covering the cross made its nature unrecognisable. It was only when the moss was removed that it became clear that here was a hitherto unknown old Irish High Cross-head. While this face of the cross is more worn, its main features are nevertheless discernible. At the centre, carved in high false relief, is the figure of the crucified Christ with dominant rounded head, seemingly with projecting hair at ear level, and with eyes and nose at least indicated. Christ's short arm, slightly drooping to fit in with the contour of the cross, has a rather large hand in comparison. The Saviour's left arm is higher to make room for the head of Longinus, the top of whose spear apparently pierces Christ's left armpit. He is balanced on the other side by the head of Stephaton, for whose body there was no room, and whose offer of hyssop by means of a chalice-like vessel on top of a pole may be intimated by a triangular shape immediately beneath Christ's chin. This detail we can reconstruct on the basis of comparison with Crucifixion scenes on other Leinster crosses, again with Tihilly offering the best comparison.⁴ As seemingly at Tihilly, too, there is a spiral ornament above Christ's head.



There are, however, two curious features associated with the Crucifixion figure. The first is a large rounded boss in relief on the arm of the cross beyond Christ's right hand. There was doubtless a somewhat similar-shaped boss on the other, lost, arm. One possible explanation is that these represented the

cosmic symbols, sun and moon, whose faces may well have been painted onto the smooth surface of the bosses. We do find these two cosmic elements present, for instance, on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice where, however, they are accompanied by the two corresponding elements, earth and ocean,⁵ which are clearly absent at Drumcullen.

The other unusual feature consists of the garment covering Christ's torso. It consists of a number of ribbons or rope-like stripes dropping vertically but also creating something of an arc in the horizontal on Christ's chest. The nature of this garment is difficult to grasp, but it does occur on other crosses, most notably on the Tall Cross at Monasterboice (which gives the clearest detail)¹ and the Tower Cross at Kells,² in both instances decorating the body of the crucified Christ. It is, however, also present on a seated figure, tentatively identified as Abel being axed by his brother Cain, in a panel on the north side of the main cross at Durrow, Co. Offaly,³ recently brought in from the elements to be displayed in the deconsecrated church building close to where the cross had stood for generations. As Abel was the first innocent victim of the Old Testament, prefiguring Christ in the New, perhaps the garment is meant to have a 'victim' element evincing our sympathy. Interestingly, the manuscript 51 in the Library of St. Gall in Switzerland, generally (though not universally) thought to have been painted in Ireland or at least by Irish monks on the Continent, also has a similarly-clad Christ.⁴ Because Christ's legs are visible, we may presume that he was wearing a loin-cloth or something similar.

The end of the surviving arm has a broad-strand interlace similar to that on the east face of the cross described above, and the surviving outer surface of the ring above it has a flat surface divided vertically into two halves by a raised moulding, suggesting that some ornament may have been painted on there.

Some of the crosses adduced as parallels here, such as those at Monasterboice, Durrow and Kells can be reasonably dated to around the last decades of the ninth century, so that a date for the Drumcullen cross-head can be estimated as being roughly contemporary, or, say, around 900. To judge by the likely width of the arms, about 76cm, this would not have been a big cross like those of Monasterboice, Durrow or Clonmacnois, but is more likely to have been the size of that at Tihilly, and comparable to the main cross at Duleek, Co. Meath, say about 1.80m or six feet high. Nevertheless, because of the special feature of Christ's rope-like garment paralleled only on crosses such as those at Durrow or Kells and Monasterboice mentioned above, it must be reckoned as an important cross able to hold its own iconographically in comparison to the big crosses just mentioned.



1 P. Harbison, 'Tihilly High Cross: An exploration of the Background, Dating, Interpretation and Commentary of the Tihilly Monastic Site and High Cross', *Offaly Heritage* 7, 2013, 53.

2 L. de Paor, 'The High Crosses of Tech Theille (Tihilly), Kinnitty, and Related Sculpture', in E. Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the Past. Studies on Figurative Art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe (Dun Laoghaire 1987)*, 148. On p. 145, he illustrates the Drumcullen cross-head, but shows the crucified Christ as wearing a belt, which does not seem to be present.

1 O. Purser, 'Fragment of a Celtic Cross found at Drumcullin, King's County', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 48, 1918, 74-77.

2 F. Henry, *La sculpture Irlandaise pendant les douze premiers siècles de l'ère chrétienne*, Vol. II (Paris 1933), Pl. 97,8.

3 Henry, *op. cit.*, Pl. 97,3.

4 Harbison, 'Tihilly', 48 and 50.

5 P. Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland. An iconographical and photographic survey*, Vol. III (Bonn, 1992), Fig. 894. See also P. Harbison, 'Earth and Ocean on Irish High Crosses', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 140, 2010, 83-88.

1 Harbison, *High Crosses*, Vol. III, Fig. 895.

2 Harbison, *High Crosses*, Vol. III, Fig. 898.

3 Harbison, *High Crosses*, Vol. III, Fig. 670.

4 Harbison, *High Crosses*, Vol. III, Fig. 900.