

FOLLOWING THE OLD STONE ROAD:
ÉIRE
part two

by Tomas Lipps

The Lakes of Killarney, looking south.

DROMBEG



Drombeg Stone Circle,

aka the Druid's Altar, is purported to be the best known and most visited stone circle in Ireland but there were few folks about when I arrived late one September afternoon and received a marvelous win in the quality-of-light lottery. The sun went behind the ridge shortly after the moment captured above.

Its diameter is smaller than the Kenmare circle yet it is a more powerful site, not least because it relates to the surrounding terrain. It is comprised of 17 stones of which two have, over time, gone missing and are represented here by smaller, placeholder stones.

The recumbent 'altar' stone and its perhaps inevitable association with Druids and human sacrifice combined with the discovery

of an urn containing charred human bones (when it was excavated by archaeologist E. M. Fahy in 1958) have given Drombeg a "rather dark reputation" (in the words of one guidebook.) The lurid visualization of a notable psychic reported in *the* book on megalithic stone circles by respected archaeologist Aubrey Burl doubtlessly helped.

Archaeology is an imaginative science. Mr. Fahy fancied that the pair of stones nearest to the camera are "...distinctly suggestive of a pointed male upright and a very broadly fecund female. (he) suspected '...the possibility that a fertility cult was an integral part of the beliefs of the circle builders.' Other observers, however, may conclude that sometimes a stone is just a stone.*"

*Howard Goldbaum, *VoicesFromTheDawn.com*

THE ROCK OF CASHEL



The Formidable Rock of Cashel

This upthrust limestone dome standing over 200 feet high in the center of a fertile plain is a geologic anomaly, surrounded as it is by the Galtee Mountain rockscape of sandstone and shale.

Cashel of the Kings. . .

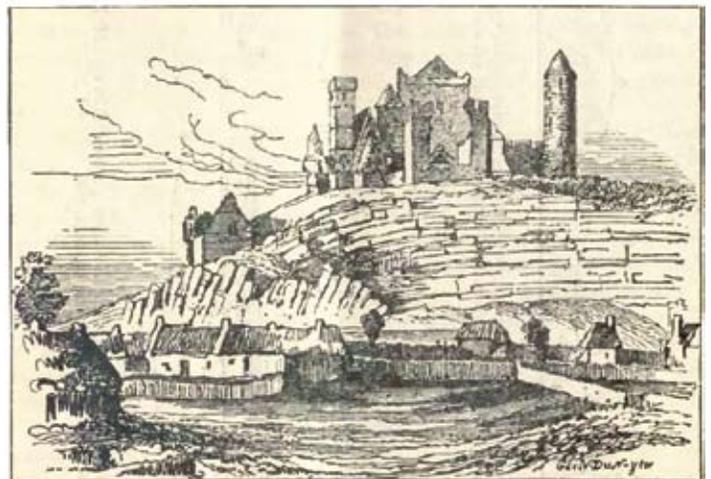
Cashel comes from the Irish *caiseal* meaning strong fort and while there were many throughout the land, this one became site-specific, *the* Cashel. Its commanding eminence made it a seat of power since at least the 4th century and from it one clan, the *Eóghanachta*, ruled Munster, the southern quarter of the island, for over 500 years, presiding over the subject clans that comprised its political landscape.

The ascendancy of one of these clans, the *In Déis Tuaiscirt*, or *Dál gCais* as they came to be known, resulted in the overthrowing of *Eóghanachta* rule and, later, the acquisition of the Kingship of Munster by *Brian Bóruma* (Brian Bóru) who ultimately became the only High King to rule effectively over the entirety of Ireland—if only briefly and by right of might. The *Imperator Scottorum* (Emperor of the Irish) as he was styled, conducted his rule over the fractious island from the Rock of Cashel from 1002 to 1014.

The great grandson of Brian Boru, *Muirchertach Ua Briain* (Murtagh O'Brien), King at Cashel, gifted the Rock to the Bishop of Limerick in 1101. Such a bestowal to the church was believed to earn salvation in the afterlife but historians surmise a political motive as well: this rendered the Rock, the ancestral capital of the rival *Eóghanachta* dynasty, unavailable to them forever, disenfranchising them in a sense. The *Eóghanachta* King Cormac, however, restored the historical association of his clan with the Rock by the act of building there, from 1127 to 1134, the marvelous church that still bears his name: *Teampul Chormaic* (Cormac's Chapel)

The Chapel, undergoing restoration, was encased in scaffolding and off-limits when we visited. It was frustrating to be denied the opportunity even to view what was the first real flowering on Irish soil of continental styles of building—the two square towers over the arms of the apse had a precedent in Germany, a land and a culture familiar to Irish missionaries. The masons, whoever they were,

concocted an architectural amalgam, the fusion of continental and insular practice and style. *Hiberno-Romanesque* architecture with its prolific architectural stone carving would take many forms. Kilmalkedar church on the Dingle peninsula, built a few years later, includes the blank arcades and ornamentally carved portal with recessed orders (though the Irish portal with inwardly inclined door-jamb, abandoned at Cashel, was retained in Dingle). Both churches had corbelled stone roofs. Kilmalkedar's has collapsed; that of Cormac's Chapel, constructed of ashlar stone, survives. The chapel, like other stone-roofed early Irish Christian churches, was not more than 20 feet wide; Irish builders had evidently determined that was the limit that could safely support a steeply corbelled roof. When the Archbishopric was fixed at Cashel in 1172 a more capacious structure was needed and the Cathedral that stands there now in ruin was built; the older church became a chapel or chapter-house. St. Patrick's Cathedral was burned in 1491 in a failed attempt to incinerate the Archbishop and burned again in 1647 by Cromwellian forces—with 3,000 townsfolk inside. It is, perhaps, best left in ruin.



the Power of the Portal. . .

CLONFERT CATHEDRAL

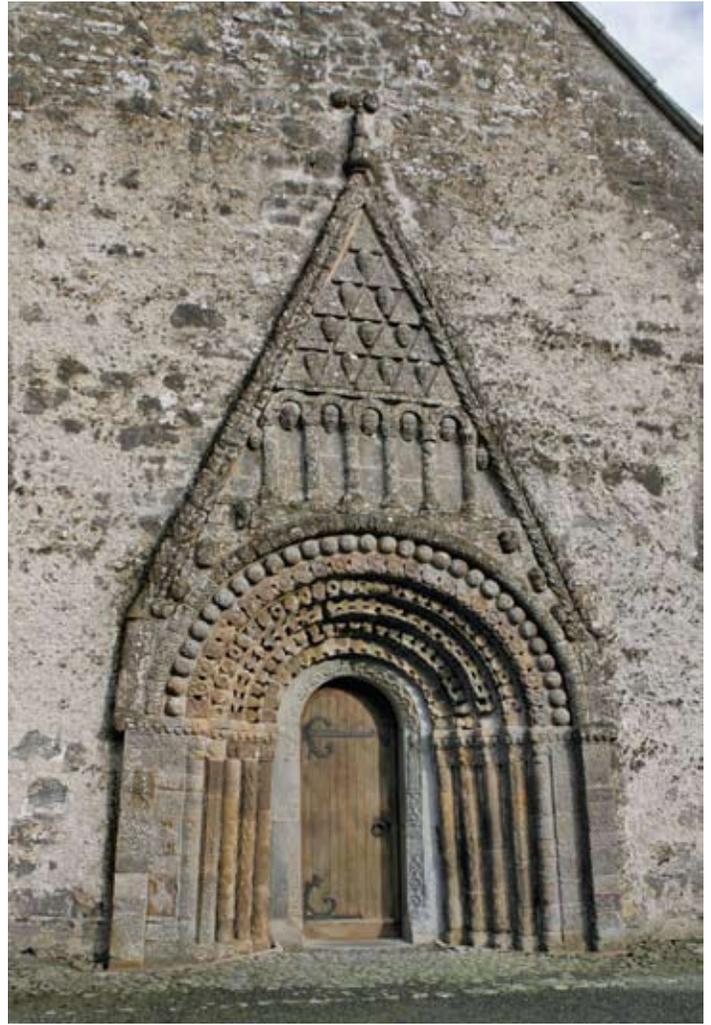
In 6th century Galway,

near the River Shannon, Saint Brendan the Voyager founded a monastery and built its church. Clonfert became a center of learning and a place of pilgrimage—home, at one stage, to more than 3,000 monks. With apostolic zeal Saint Brendan traveled and founded a great number of churches and monasteries around Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but he chose to be interred at Clonfert.

Saint Brendan's church was built of wood and would have been replaced several times. It was noted in the records that a 'stone' church there had burned (a common fate of churches) in 1045.

The Synod of Rath Breasail in 1111 created the diocese of Clonfert and the church became a Cathedral. Its simple, barn-like space enclosed by walls of indifferent masonry did not befit its new designation; this disparity may have motivated adorning the face of the plain structure with Ireland's most ornately carved portal. The exact date of the portal's construction is unknown but it may well be connected to another synod that took place, at the cathedral, in 1179.

The renowned Hiberno-Romanesque entryway with its distinctive inwardly inclined ancient Irish door jambs, has six 'orders' of carved sandstone; these have not weathered well. A seventh, inner order of blue limestone was added in the 15th century. An idiosyncratic mix of motifs have been carved into the column shafts, abaci, capitals and voussoirs. The triangular tympanum over the arches with its alternating (portrait?) heads peering down is a powerful compound feature. Can it be merely coincidental that the silhouette of the portal/pediment recalls the silhouette of the gable end of an early Irish church?





MICHAEL QUANE

Quane has described his sculpting process as 'drawing into stone' and the surfaces scored with the cross-hatching texture left by his toothed chisel lend a graphic quality to the forms he painstakingly liberates from limestone rocks (he prefers not to work from quarried blocks). The effect is similar to an engraving; indeed, as a young boy he copied engravings from old copies of the *Illustrated London News*.*

This texture (the surfaces of his sculptures are seldom ground and polished) gives the forms a tactile energy as they absorb the light. It also reminds the viewer of the degree of handwork involved in their creation.

His sculpture, while extremely personal, is firmly rooted in the traditions of Western Art: it relates to Greek sculpture (the *kouroi* and *Moskhophoros*, the Calf-Bearer), Gothic carvings, monumental statuary, Picasso (*Man with a Lamb*, 1942). His subject matter is enigmatic and often grotesque. Gothic gargoyles come to mind. Human figures, nude or nearly nude (and thus free of cultural reference) exist solitarily or in association with animals: riders on horses, figures in relation to, or combined with, bizarre creatures, such as the work pictured here.

Quane's human and animal figures are emphatically non-heroic, even prosaic and sometimes cartoon-like, but none-the-less poetic. There is not enough space here to do his work justice; look for it to be featured in a future issue

**"He not only believes that the impulse to carve grew out of the impulse to draw, but that it is. . . the same impulse. Carving is drawing. He borrowed his father's chisels and began to carve wood. He visited the caves close to his home and began to carve into the stone. . . this activity was undertaken in secret, an aspect of the teenager's growing awareness of internal life."* Aidan Dunne, art critic, *The Irish Times*

above and left: *FIGURE TALKING TO A QUADRAPED*, Sculpture in the President's Garden, University College Cork, Kilkenny limestone,

