

CARPET PAGES AND CHI-RHOS: SOME DEPICTIONS IN IRISH  
EARLY CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS AND STONE CARVINGS

A CROSS-DECORATED boulder at Killorglin, Co. Kerry, seen by the members of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland on their Summer Excursion in 1906, was illustrated in the Society's Journal (*JRSAI* 1906:341) from rubbings supplied by Dr Digby and Mr Whitton. The central design was included by Hamlin in the provisional list of Chi-rhos in Ireland and Britain appended to her description and discussion of the Chi-rho stone at Drumaqueran, Co. Antrim (1972). Inspection of the slab, a drawing of which is presented here (fig. 1), suggests that this tentative identification can now be confirmed. This paper also adds descriptions of two recently-recognized examples of carved stones with this motif at Rathlin O'Birne Island, Co. Donegal, and Caher Island, Co. Mayo; a third from Kilcorban, Co. Galway, apparently a prayer-stone, has been published recently by Higgins (1987:410). This stone from Kilcorban and the grave-slab with monogram Chi-rho from Inis Cealtra, Co. Clare, published by de Paor (Cone 1977:99 fig. 23), confirm the largely western distribution of these carved symbols in Ireland noted by Hamlin (1972:24).

In this paper a new description of the Killorglin slab, some observations on representations of the Chi-rho monogram in stone, and on stone carvings resembling manuscript pages are offered in homage to Brian Ó Cuív at his retirement.

Recent examination of cross-slabs in counties Mayo, Kerry and Donegal suggests that some of those listed by Hamlin as definite or possible examples of Chi-rhos should now be excluded. Henry's suggestion, that the cross of arcs in relief inside the roundel at the head of the decorated cross-pillar at Killaghtee in south Donegal is a Chi-rho, is doubtful; we have been unable to confirm the rho suggested by her in a rubbing made recently. We are further unable to document Hamlin's suggestion (1972:26) that one of the tall pillars on Inishkea North, Co. Mayo, bore a Chi-rho. A rubbing of the slab at Cloonlaur, Co. Mayo, shows that the upper end of the shaft terminates in an expanded forked terminal, not as suggested by Henry (1947:37 n. 28, 38 fig. 8) a Chi-rho symbol. The upper right corner of the cross-pillar at Kilfountain, Co. Kerry, listed by Hamlin as a possible Chi-rho, is damaged. It might be that the ornament with a loop curving to the left at the top of the design was intended to represent this symbol. This ornament, however, issues, not from the carved cross as is the case in all other insular Chi-rho symbols, but from the circle surrounding the cross, a feature which makes its identification as one less likely. Accordingly a revised map is presented here showing the sites of nine stone-carved Chi-rho symbols in Ireland (fig. 2). The distribution presented by Hamlin is changed only by the new examples in Galway and Clare. Though Hamlin suggests that the five certain

Fig. 1. Chi-rho carved stone at Ardmoneel, Killorglin, Co. Kerry.

Chi-rhos listed by her are 'all remarkably different from one another' it is possible to see loose groupings within the nine now listed: Kilshan-nig and Inis Cealtra, which represent the rho in similar fashion, can be grouped together, so can Arraglen and Knockane, which are erected on stems like representations found in the Cathach manuscript, the Book of Durrow and the Echternach Gospels (Herity 1989:63) (Inis Cealtra shares this feature with them); Kilcorban, Drumaqueran and Rathlin O'Birne feature rings or wreaths.

The most important slab at the hermitage founded by Assicus on Rathlin O'Birne Island off the coast of Donegal near Slieve League (Walsh 1983) stands at the east side of the well-house at the entrance to the outer enclosure which faces the pilgrim arriving from the landing-place (Herity 1989:57 fig. 3). It is over 48 cm high and has a gable-shaped top. Both faces are decorated: on the north-east face is an incised Chi-rho of monogram form, the loop of the rho curving to the right and balanced by a back-serif curving around to the left at the upper end of the shaft of a Latin cross. The cross is wreathed in the manner familiar in the world of Late Antiquity but not commonly found on Irish slabs. The south-west face has an encircled equal-armed cross with simple bar terminals of a type known in other parts of the country (Herity 1989:57). Comparison has been made between this monogram Chi-rho and the pair on the Drumaqueran slab published by Hamlin (1972:22-8). Hamlin noted traditions of an association with St Patrick at that site (1972:23-4). The slab on Rathlin O'Birne may be the work of Assicus the founder, metalworker to St Patrick, who spent the last seven years of his life on the island about the year 500 (Herity 1989:57). The cross-pillar standing in the north-east corner of the enclosure at Caher Island is 1.15 m tall (fig. 3). On its west face a multiple outline Latin cross 56 cm high is carved above three bosses in rectangular frames. The outline of the slab generally follows the outline of the cross, except at the head where expansions to right and left form a hammer-head, and at the foot, where the cross has the appearance of sitting into a pedestal created by the unworked lower half of the pillar. The cross is created by two nested mouldings in relief and has relatively short arms placed just above halfway on a long shaft, all four elements expanding towards the extremities, the lines of the upper and lower shaft tending to be concave. A single raised rounded boss is created at the junction of arms and shaft by the reduction of the field within the inner moulding. At the top left corner of the cross the outer of the two mouldings is drawn out into a horizontal projection apparently indicating the rho of a Chi-rho design. An outer framing moulding which follows the outline of the upper elements of the cross kicks out at this point to accommodate the rho; at the base it expands to enclose the three framed bosses.

In its proportions, in the placing of its arms slightly above halfway on the shaft, in the slight concavity of the long elements and in its multiple outline this cross resembles the cross on f. 149 v of the Codex Usserianus

Fig. 2. Map showing sites referred to in text.

Fig. 3. Cross-pillar in north-east corner of oratory enclosure on Caher Island, Co. Mayo.

Primus (Trinity College, Dublin, MS 55 (A.4.15); Alexander 1978: pl. 1) (fig. 3). On the manuscript cross the impression of the multiple outline is created by the use of dotted lines. Both are shown in the form of a Chi-rho design although the Caher Island rho is carved on the left-hand side of the head.

The carved stone at Killorglin, Co. Kerry, is a boulder of fine-grained stone with some small quartz inclusions, maximum length 103 cm, width across upper surface 58 cm, height 49 cm, with a design incised on the upper flat surface. The boulder, which lies with its long axis oriented NE/SW (250°) in Ardmoneel townland 2 m from the boundary of that townland with Farrantoreen townland, is in a very marshy area approximately 30 m from the south-west bank of the River Laune. It appears not to relate closely to any other known Christian monument; a little over 300 m to the south-east near Ardmoneel Cottage a circular enclosure is marked on the Ordnance Survey six-inch sheet.

The design carved on the surface is an unusual triple-barred cross contained within a rectangular frame which is ornamented at the corners and the mid-points of its sides. The stem of the cross, 49.5 cm long, is completed at the top by a sinuous loop to the right ending in a curvilinear expansion, apparently the rho of the Chi-rho symbol; at the lower end of the stem is an oval expansion. Each of the three horizontal bars of the cross is also completed by circular expansions. The central bar which cuts the stem 2 cm above its mid-point is 28.5 cm long, projecting beyond the ends of the bars above and below it which are 16.5 cm and 17.5 cm long, respectively. A rectangular frame around the cross, 58.5–61 cm long and 37.4–39 cm wide, is ornamented at all four corners by the addition of simple semi-circular loops which enclose the outer sides of the angles. At top and bottom, midway along the short margins of the rectangle, a short line running out of the line of the frame bifurcates and curls to the left and right, the loops ending in oval expansions creating a pelta-like detail. Close to the mid-point of the southern long margin of the frame is a similar short bifurcating line which also loops to left and right but in this case continues back to meet the line of the frame again, creating two rectilinear cells. Opposite this, on the northern margin of the frame, a very attenuated groove at right angles to the line of the border may indicate the beginning of a similar detail. The frame is very close to the edge of the stone on this side, however, and the line does not develop like that on the south.

Crosses with multiple transoms are rare in Irish early Christian art but a few comparanda may be cited. A slab with a simply incised triple-barred cross, the central bar of greater length than the others, comes from the cemetery within the *caiseal* on Inismurray (Wakeman 1893: fig. 52). Possibly also of the same type was the cross carved on a small slab, now broken, from Teampall Geal, Co. Kerry (Cuppige 1986: fig. 151e). A cross with double bar and with square expansions at the ends of the

terminals is depicted on a carpet page, f. 1 v, of the Book of Durrow (Alexander 1978: pl. 11).

Crosses in square or rectangular frames are a feature of the recumbent grave-slab tradition in Ireland. Lionárd (1961:98), and Crawford (1919:154), suggested a relationship between these sepulchral slabs and the cross-bearing pages of early Christian manuscripts. Crawford illustrated six slabs from Clonmacnois, the designs on which he compared with carpet pages in the St Gall Gospels and the Book of Kells. On only one of these slabs is the design brought outside a rectangular frame (Crawford 1919: fig. 2, slab 39) and here the additions are rectilinear L-shaped panels at the corners of the frame. The Killorglin slab, with ornaments at each corner and midway along the margins of the frame, appears to be unique among stone-carvings in Ireland in the closeness of the design and its frame to those of the cross-carpet pages of manuscripts. Of the many recumbent cross slabs illustrated by Macalister from Clonmacnois, only three at most have ornament outside the frame (1909: figs. 34–70, 86). Fragments T18 and H30 from Gallen (Kendrick 1939:12), parts of a slab with incised fret-pattern frame having a projecting loop on a right angle at one corner, appear to represent the only example from that site.

Framed manuscript pages with elaborations at the corners and on the margins are found at an early date in the Trier Gospels, and in Corpus MS 197B, a manuscript of the Echternach School, both dated to the early eighth century, as well as in the Lindisfarne Gospels (Alexander 1978:35–40, 44, 52–4). An earlier manuscript may have been the model for the simpler Killorglin designs, the corner ornaments of which have the simplicity of those of the frame surrounding the Chi-rho on f. 149 v of the Codex Usseianus Primus (Alexander 1978: pl. 1) or f. 85 v and f. 125 v of the Book of Durrow (Alexander 1978: pl. 20, 21). Bruce-Mitford noted the simplicity of the corner-ornaments on these two folios of the Book of Durrow, describing them as 'of a primitive kind' and contrasting them with the more elaborate examples in the later Lindisfarne Gospels (Kendrick et al. 1960:256–7). A seventh-century date is supported by the closeness of the design of the Chi-rho on the Killorglin slab to that on the slab at Kilshannig, Co. Kerry (Henry 1965: fig. 4b), and in particular that on the grave-slab at Inis Cealtra for which de Paor suggests a date c.650.

If the proportions of the frame of the Killorglin slab are compared with pages of insular manuscripts of the appropriate date it is found to compare well with the unusually tall and narrow proportions of the illuminated areas of several pages of the Book of Durrow, including four of the five carpet pages, ff. 1 v, 85 v, 125 v and 192 v. Figure 4, where the proportions of the decorated areas of these manuscript pages are drawn, shows how closely the proportions of manuscript and slab compare; it also shows that these designs in the Book of Durrow contrast with the proportions of a sample of the illuminated pages of the

Lindisfarne Gospels. Expressed as mathematical ratios the proportions of the framed spaces of the Durrow pages are 1.71, 1.60, 1.63 (close to the Golden Section, 1:1.618) and 1.71:1 respectively, those of the framed area of the Killorglin slab are 1.56:1, while those of ff. 2 v, 26 v, 94 v and 138 v of the Lindisfarne Gospels are 1.28, 1.34, 1.30 and 1.22:1. Folio 129 of the Turin Gospel Book fragments (Cod. O.IV.20) comes close to the Book of Durrow at 1.54:1 (Alexander 1978:80). One other Irish slab, the Berchert slab from Tullylease in Co. Cork (Leask 1938; Lionárd 1953), has often been compared in its cross-shaped design with f. 26 v of the Lindisfarne Gospels. Perhaps surprisingly, its proportions at 1.43:1 come quite close to the Vitruvian ( $1:\sqrt{2}$ ; 1:1.4142) and are distinctly different from those of the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Durrow.

Crawford briefly indicated that comparisons between carved stonework and manuscripts can be taken further by his comparison of the design of the roundel containing a cross of arcs with interlaced terminals on f. 85 v at the beginning of the Gospel of St Mark in the Book of Durrow (Alexander 1978: pl. 22) with a small slab from Inis Cealtra, Co. Clare, which has an equal-armed cross in a circular frame, its terminals filled with triquetra knots.

At Gallen, Co. Offaly, amongst a large number of carved stones discovered in excavations by Armstrong (1908; 1908a; 1908b; Macalister 1908) and Kendrick (1939) are fragments of a small, thin, roughly circular slab of sandstone, R6, maximum diameter 45.6 cm, the surface covered by a complex interlace forming an equal-armed cross; the cross is contained within a regular roundel outside which the surface of the slab has been sharply cut back (fig. 5). The method of carving, which displays an element of chip-carving, gives a strong texture or body to the interlace without particularly deep incision; the deepest cutting back is at the centre of the cross where the circular space left by the design of the interlace has been cut away, creating a deep hole. The flat surfaces left between the arms of the cross have a very regular form, a large almost circular area towards the outer end narrowing to a slender neck which expands slightly again at the inner end to fill the area at the intersection of the arms; Kendrick (1939:9) described them as 'mirror'-shaped interspaces, noting their occurrence on other slabs at the site.

The surface of the bands of the interlace forming the cross are cut by a thin incised line which at first sight looks like a decorative feature. When analysed, however, it can be seen that at certain points the bands separate along this line, the points where they divide marked by deeper chip-carving, and the two strands take different directions. The incised line thus represents the division between two separate strands which for the most part run together and which give the superficial impression that the cross is formed of a single strand interlace. In fact there are three elements to the interlaced cross: at the heart of the design one strand forms a cross (fig. 6b) with expanded interlaced terminals growing from

Fig. 4. Diagrammatic representation of proportions of decorated pages in the Book of Durrow, ff. 1 v, 85 v, 125 v, and 192 v, the Lindisfarne Gospels, ff. 2 v, 26 v, 94 v and 138 v, and the cross-slabs from Killorglin and Tullylease.

Fig. 5. Drawing of cross-slab (Kendrick 1939: R6) from Gallen, Co. Offaly.

short straight arms which at their junction curve slightly to accommodate the circular space hollowed out at the centre of the slab. The other interlaced strands (fig. 6c and d) are in part elaborations of certain elements of the interlace of the terminals of the cross but each in its turn diverges from this pattern to link to the next terminal, either curving around the intersection of the arms (Strand d) or drawn out from the outermost points of the terminals (Strands c and d). They thus create a link between one terminal and the next at the outer extremities and mark the outer edge of the mirror-like spaces between the arms of the cross.

The design of this slab from Gallen may be compared to a second ornamental roundel from the Book of Durrow. The central roundel of

Fig. 6. Cross-slab from Gallen: (a) reconstruction; (b)(c)(d) elements of inter-lace design.

f. 192 v is set in a plain square panel surrounded by rectangular friezes of biting animal interlace. Within the roundel is a sophisticated interlace composed of two separate strands which interlock with one another to create a tripartite design (fig. 7). Each strand forms three heart-shaped elements symmetrically placed. The foundation design created by Strand 1 (fig. 7c) is the less complex; the point of each heart-shaped element is set touching the outer frame of the roundel, the two broad lobes created by the spiral interlacing of the strand are set back to back, the lobes touching and interlaced with those on either side, creating a vacant space at the centre of the design. The second strand, less tightly woven (fig. 7b) follows a similar pattern but creates an obverse design with the points of the heart-shaped elements set facing the central space and the interlaced lobes touching the outer circle framing band of the roundel. At the outer margin of each of these lobes the strand is drawn out to form quill-like points from which the line of the strand runs back in a bold curve running through four spiral knots to integrate the strands, finally forming one of the quill-like points of the opposite heart-shaped element (Roth 1979: Abb. 48).

In the vacant space left at the core of this interlaced design is a tiny roundel containing an equal-armed cross having expanded terminals with concave ends. The three spaces at the perimeter between the three branches of the interlaced design are each filled with a roundel of similar size to that at the centre, each of these filled with cross-shaped designs resembling the metal grids under glass studs of vernacular pieces like the Ardagh chalice.

The interlace of this manuscript roundel is coloured in red, yellow and green, the red and yellow being used for the spiral interlace of the lobes, the green being used for the points. As with other carpet pages of this manuscript the colours are used to create their own symmetry within the design but confuse the eye wishing to analyse the structure of the interlace. This design has a number of points in common with the Gallen interlace. Two of these are the use of a number of strands, each making an independent but complementary design, and the concept of fitting this interlaced design into a contained circular space which is outlined by a plain band. Whereas the Gallen slab is content to leave plain mirror-shaped spaces between the elements of the design and a plain circular space at the centre, the Book of Durrow page puts contrasting and repetitive designs into these spaces.

The details of the Durrow roundel suggest that a very formal abstract layout of the design was made before the ornament was finally drawn. This is most clearly seen in the way in which the interlace interacts with the three gridded peripheral roundels; the strands narrow to accommodate the roundels where the interlace is drawn out into points, indicating that the roundels were part of the original construction of the design. If the circular knots at the broader ends of the heart-shaped designs are considered as based on similar circles to the roundels then the layout of

Fig. 7. (a) Interlaced roundel, Book of Durrow, f. 192 v; (b)(c) analysis of interlace design.

the design appears to be based on two concentric rings of circles arranged around the small cross-decorated central roundel. Similarly the layout of the Gallen slab with curvilinear knots and blank mirror-shaped spaces seems to be based on a comparable formal layout of two concentric rings of circles, in this case arranged around a cruciform detail of circles at the centre.

The broad bands of the Durrow interlace, the dominant form on all the major decorated pages of this manuscript, compare closely with those of the Gallen slab. Both may be contrasted with the finer interlaces, commonly found in Saxon material (Kendrick et al. 1960:256 n. 2) and the dominant form in two-, three- or four-strand plaitwork of the Lindisfarne Gospels, a type which appears only in minor ornamental roles in Durrow. A further similarity between slabs at Gallen Priory and the illuminated pages of the Book of Durrow may exist in the simple corner ornament of the stone fragments T18 and H30 referred to above.

Françoise Henry observed the essential unity of early Christian Irish art, 'whatever its medium of expression', documenting the close similarity of ornament carved in stone with the decoration of bronze and parchment (1963:15). Commenting on the tendency of manuscripts to wander, she contrasted them with the sculptured monuments which are rooted in the country: 'carved as they are on local stone, their native character cannot be doubted' (1963:14).

Considering the evidence for the place of origin of the Book of Durrow she looked to contemporary stone-carving amongst other evidence, suggesting that the region where the monuments closest in style to the manuscript were carved might be where it was illuminated. She saw the Columban monastery of Derry, close to Fahan Mura and Carndonagh, Co. Donegal, the ornament of whose monuments she compared to that of the Book of Durrow, as a likely place of origin but went on to ask what was known of the art practised in Durrow itself at the time of the production of the manuscript (1965:171-3). The present article has suggested comparisons between cross-carved stones and some early insular manuscripts, particularly the Book of Durrow. A distinctive roundel on f. 192 v of the Book of Durrow has been compared with a carved roundel from the monastery of Gallen only fifteen miles away. Perhaps the Gallen roundel indicates that some affiliations of the Book of Durrow lie in this part of the Irish midlands? If so, why not at Durrow itself?

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