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MEDIEVAL IRISH WOODEN FIGURE SCULPTURE

VOLUME I OF II

JENNIFER K. COCHRAN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE HISTORY OF ART
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF LETTERS

TRINITY COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN

2004
DECLARATION

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Jennifer K. Cochran
SUMMARY

This thesis provides an updated catalogue and review of the late medieval wooden figure sculpture extant in Ireland, and includes detailed descriptions of the figures examined. An attempt is also made to begin to place these figures within their Irish and greater European contexts. This was done by first examining the archaeological, skeuomorphic, and documentary evidence for a woodcarving tradition in Ireland in the pre-invasion period out of which the figures might have emerged, followed by a detailed examination of four of the Irish figures from the study group, and one sculpture of foreign origin known to have been in Ireland during the medieval period. These figures were chosen with a view to illustrating the differing styles and influences active on the wooden figure sculpture of Ireland. The determination of what traits were specific to the genre of Irish wooden figure sculpture, which could be seen in other Irish contexts and what might have resulted from international influences was attempted.

It was found that while the specific genre of religious wooden figure sculpture may have been introduced during the post-invasion period, there were certain stylistic and compositional consistencies with earlier examples of woodcarving in Ireland. Parallels were also found in contemporary Irish stone carving, and in both English and Continental art.

It was not possible to determine if there were certain regional styles, because although the figures come from a geographical area which extends over most of the island, not enough remain extant to say with any certainty that the figures from – for example – the west of Ireland differ to any great extent from the figures of the east of Ireland.
Consistencies were found in the type of mutilation done to the figures, likely as a result of iconoclasm. In most cases where the damage appears deliberate it seems that removal of the hands and occasionally the feet was involved. This may have been done in order to remove the identifying symbols of the figures. There are also similarities to be found amongst the various ‘survival stories’ and ‘discovery myths’ told about the various figures.

The catalogue includes the extant wooden figures in Ireland that are certainly both Irish and medieval, or have previously been published as such. It is divided into three sections. The first section, organized chronologically is comprised of the Irish medieval figures. The second section addresses selected Irish figures which have previously been attributed as – or inferred to be – medieval, but which are likely post-medieval in date. The third section is comprised of figures which have previously been attributed or inferred to be Irish medieval, but which are likely of foreign origin. The current whereabouts, technical details, thorough descriptions, and commentary – including the history, stories, and comparative examples both in Irish stone carving and in greater European art, as well as the need for conservation – is provided for each of the figures.

Photographic documentation of the sculptures is also an important and necessary portion of the study. These are to be found in the second volume of the thesis, and additional illustrations for the catalogue are included in the CD-R appendix.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The help of many people have enabled me to undertake this project. Without their support, encouragement and valuable advice it would have been an insurmountable task. I wish in particular to thank the following:

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INTRODUCTION

Wooden figure carving from the late medieval period is a genre of Irish art that has long been over looked. It has been supposed that not many figures survived and that the ones that do are largely provincial in style. The primary purpose of this thesis is to provide a review and an updated catalogue of late medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture, and detailed descriptions of the extant figures. Many of the figures have been moved since their last publication and so much new information has become available in the study of Irish art history that an updated catalogue was needed. Additionally, an attempt has been made to begin to examine these wooden figure sculptures in their greater Irish and European contexts, although it is certainly acknowledged that there is much more work to be done in this area.

All of the extant wooden figure sculpture in Ireland apparently dates to the period after the Norman invasion, and so this project was commenced with a search for evidence of a woodcarving tradition in Ireland before this time, in an attempt to determine where the origins for the post-Invasion figure sculpture might lie. Following that, an analysis of the existing documentary sources for the figures was undertaken, and an attempt was made to locate, view and photograph as many of the sculptures as possible, and to collect all the information associated with them. The study area was limited to figures which were either certainly Irish and medieval, figures which had previously been published as such, or figures that were part of rare ‘hoards’ of surviving medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture. Occasionally pieces were included that had not been explicitly defined as medieval in previous publications, but from which the inference could possibly be made that they were – such as with the figure of St. Francis/St. Anthony at Multyfarnham. In this case although no date had been given for the piece in previous publications, the
inference that it was medieval could be made because of the figure's association with the friary at Adare. An attempt was also made to determine dates and provenances for these works and to begin to establish their context both in terms of extant Irish stone sculpture and in artwork from the rest of Europe.

Much of the work involved in this project was dedicated to simply locating the pieces, and accessing them once located. Such was the case with the collection from St. Kieran's College in Kilkenny. The museum that was attached to that college was dissolved some years ago and its collection dispersed. One of the wooden figures from their collection, that of St. Molua, has found its way back to its parish of origin in Killaloe, Co. Kilkenny, but the other wooden figures from their collection – of St. Mo Cheallológ / St. Martin, St. Nadán, and possibly one of St. Patrick from St. Patrick's Cathedral in Kilkenny – have been not been located. The lack of reply to repeated phone calls and e-mails by that institution's historian has been a great hindrance in the matter.

Two other known figures also have not been located, the Bruff Madonna and the figure of St. Maol-Rúán. The small figure of the Madonna from Bruff, Co. Limerick was last documented as being in the possession of the Healy family. The priest of that parish was unaware of any persons with that last name, and his inquiries did not uncover any evidence as to the carving's current whereabouts. The fate of the figure of St. Maol-Rúán is more tragic. Approximately ten years ago the figure was stolen while it was in the possession of Mrs. Wilifred Mythen of Crossabeg, Co. Wexford, in whose family the figure had been for generations.

Once located, the sculptures were often difficult to access. Many of the pieces were located in small towns not easily accessed by public transportation. In a few instances, when generous friends could not be coerced to drive me, it was necessary to
take a bus as close as possible, and – after being left on the side of the highway – walking
the several miles the rest of the way to my destination. This was an enjoyable way to
travel when the weather was nice. In other cases, the physical location of the sculptures
were easily accessed but the carving itself was not. In an effort to study the figure of Our
Lady of Dublin at close quarters it was necessary to scale the walls of the Whitefriar
Street church from the outside, because the only access to the shrine was from the roof of
the church. When attempting to study another sculpture – the identity of which is
probably better left nameless – the room that it was kept in had long been locked and the
key lost. Access to that room was gained by a couple of monks and some deft work to
the handle of the door by a sledge hammer. Despite the obstacles involved however,
these were often the excursions from which the most valuable information was attained.

The first chapter of the thesis attempts to answer the question, where did these
sculptures come from, by looking at the evidence for a professional woodcarving
tradition in Ireland before the Anglo-Norman conquest, and an examination of the figure
carving tradition. The study was largely confined to examples from the Christian era,
although evidence for a woodcarving tradition in Ireland before this time certainly exists
as well. In doing this, it was hoped to establish the context out of which the post-
conquest figures emerged. Textual evidence, depictions of carved wooden objects in
other media, skeuomorphic evidence and extant carved wooden objects from this era
were examined, as well as figurative representations in illuminated gospel books, stone
high crosses and in Romanesque sculpture.

The second chapter analyzes in detail four of the extant medieval Irish wooden
figure sculptures and one sculpture of foreign origin known to have been in Ireland
during the medieval period. The examples taken were chosen with a view to illustrating
the different styles and influences within the wooden figure sculpture of medieval Ireland from the period dating to immediately after the conquest to the time of the suppression of the monasteries. The determination of what traits were specific to the genre of Irish wooden figure sculpture, which could be seen in other Irish contexts and what might have resulted from international influences was attempted.

The catalogue is divided into three sections. The first section, organized chronologically, deals with extant wooden figure sculpture in Ireland that is both medieval and which has its provenance in Ireland. The second section deals with extant Irish figure sculpture which has previously been published, or inferred, as medieval, but is likely post-medieval in date. The third section encompasses figures which have been published, or inferred, as Irish medieval, but which are likely to be foreign in origin. No attempt has been made to address sculptures about which there is general agreement over their foreign origin or post-medieval date. Figures such as the Holy Ghost Unidentified Saint and the Crucifixion Group from Kilcorban have however been included although they have never been misattributed. This is because both are important parts of larger 'hoards' of medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture and the stories of the extant medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures from those collections would be incomplete without the inclusion of these figures.

Had time allowed, a thorough examination of primary sources would have been conducted. Due to time constraints, the study of primary source material studied had to be restricted to that directly pertaining to the extant sculptures. There are, however, many primary and secondary documented accounts of carvings which have not survived, and an in depth examination of these accounts should be conducted in the future.
CHAPTER 1

THE WOODCARVING AND FIGURAL TRADITIONS IN PRE-CONQUEST IRELAND

All of the medieval wooden figure sculpture extant in Ireland seems to come from the period after the Anglo-Norman conquest. Is this the art of the conquerors, or did it have its origins in earlier Irish art? We know that Irish visual culture was vibrant and thriving in the early medieval period. Evidence enough for this exists in the brilliant manuscripts, exquisite metalwork, and expertly carved stonework that survives to our own day. Did a similar tradition and standard of excellence in the more easily worked medium of wood exist? If there was a pre-existent tradition in wood, to what extent does it resemble the later medieval figures? What common threads, if any, can be seen running through the woodcarving and figurative traditions both pre- and post-conquest?

In order to answer these questions, however, another series of questions must first be asked. Considering that the modern landscape of Ireland is predominantly pastoral, what was the availability of wood in the early medieval period? Do we have any textual evidence of a woodworking tradition in Ireland? Are there depictions of woodwork in other contemporary media? How do figurative representations in other media relate to the later medieval wooden figures; and finally, what do the few surviving pieces of early medieval woodwork itself tell us?

Due to the biodegradable nature of wood, few wooden artefacts have survived. Wood is perishable; it decays, breaks, can be eaten by worms and insects, and it can be burned into nothing. Only in circumstances of extreme wetness, dryness or cold is wood granted survival. With Ireland’s turbulent history, and especially the effects of iconoclasm, it is not surprising that there are not many extant wooden artefacts. Less than one percent of one
percent of all surviving artefacts from this early period are made of wood. However, this is only the percentage that survives, and cannot be taken as representative of the extent to which wood was utilized. It could have been the primary material worked by man in this period, and this can be supposed if for no other reason than its easily worked nature and the abundance of which wood was to be found on Ireland at that time. In addition to this circumstantial evidence for the use of wood, there are also sources of documentary evidence in the writings of Bede, Cogitosus, and Adomnán, and artistic representations of wooden objects in manuscripts and the high crosses. There is evidence for carpentry techniques in the construction of some of the stone high crosses, and in the architecture of some of the surviving stone churches of this and later periods. Surmounting all of this evidence are the wooden artefacts themselves. More wooden artefacts survive in Ireland than one would suppose, some preserved and occasionally yielded up by the bogs, others being discovered during excavations. Discoveries worthy of note came from the Wood Quay excavation in Dublin which yielded some 150 carved and decorated wooden objects. These objects range greatly both in terms of purpose and intricacy of carving. Many are simple utilitarian objects with primitive incised decoration, but others are objects elaborately carved in interlace patterns. The finds here include utilitarian objects, gaming items, and elaborately carved prestige items. Additionally, some objects appear to be without a purpose and may have been purely decorative. The highly skilled workmanship exhibited in many of these objects would be evidence enough for them to have come out of a long and sophisticated woodworking tradition.

Looking at the modern Irish landscape today, one would not suppose that as recently as a few centuries ago the island was heavily wooded. However, even though Ireland is currently one of the least heavily forested countries in Europe up through the late Middle Ages it was comparatively well forested, and down to the year 1600, it is estimated that approximately an eighth of the island was covered by woodland. In essence, the modern-day pastoral landscape is a human artefact. The deforestation of Ireland was a long and complicated process that took place over hundreds of years. The landscape alteration began in the prehistoric period by farmers via felling, burning and animal grazing, and was continued into the historical period through continuing tillage and pastoralism, clearance by the Anglo-Normans to facilitate safe communication between settlements and as military protection from the Irish rebels or “wood-kernes”. During the Norman period as well, there was a large export trade of Irish timber back to England and Scotland. Additionally, there was a drastic clearance of the forests in the 17th Century for the timber trade, and to provide fuel for numerous small-scale iron smelting furnaces, which was one of the most important and widely distributed industrial enterprises of that century. The result was an Ireland nearly totally denuded of her woodlands by the beginning of the 18th Century.

Through the analysis of fossil pollen, it can be determined that Irish forests were deciduous, of primarily oak and ash. There is even evidence during the Anglo-Norman

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3 Ibid., 163.
4 Ibid., 34.
5 Ibid., 164.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid. 226.
period for woodmanship, the practice of producing a renewable and constant supply of wood, in effect the “cropping” of wild trees and regulating deforestation particularly in the area around Dublin. This very practice illustrates that wood was regarded as a valuable commodity in Ireland at this early period, and how integral it was to the culture at that time.

In addition to the physical evidence of the availability of wood in the period, there is also textual evidence for its use in the early middle ages. These texts, including several of the Lives, Hisperica Famina, and the writings of Bede, give evidence for the use of wood in the construction of churches, High Crosses and various other objects. Additionally, the law books discuss the woodcarvers’ place in Irish society. The mid-eighth century law tract, Uraicech Becc, spends a significant amount of time detailing the woodworker’s status, and the ways in which the woodworker could ascend into the ranks of the nobility through the practice of his craft. Considering that at a time when the movement through the stratas of Irish society was generally downwards – the aristocracy customarily divided their inheritance equally amongst surviving sons, thus reducing the holdings of peripheral lineages – this favouritism towards woodworkers shows how immensely valuable and important the wood craftsman and his skills were considered.

Uraicech Becc deals largely with the concept of nemed – meaning sacred status or privilege – including that of those who possesses a dan, or craft, art or profession. The information that we can glean from Uraicech Becc essentially comes from two different

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8Ibid., 72.
9Ibid., 233.
12Ibid., 127.
sources; the mid-eighth century text itself, and the eleventh or twelfth century glosses. 13 This is very valuable because not only do we get information about the woodworker’s status and the objects that he made in the early middle ages, but also how that status and objects changed and progressed throughout the following three or four centuries.

One of the main transitions that this text illustrates is the transition for the saer, or wright, from a woodworker in the original text, to a stone mason in the later glosses, reflecting the transition in Irish society from a use of predominantly wood, to an increasing use of stone. 14 This evidence is also supported by inscriptions on several of the extant remnants of stone High Crosses, such as that of a granite cross-shaft at Delgany in Co. Wicklow which carries the inscription: “ODRAN SAIR”. 15

The text of Uraicech Becc dealing with the saer is largely devoted to his status in society. The saer was at the head of an elaborate workshop system. He was at once both a ‘dependent professional’ and a ‘noble-dignitary’ because a woodworker could enter into the ranks of the nobles through his craft. The saer who built a dron-duirtech, that is, a firm or substantial wooden oratory or church was accorded the status of ‘aire deso’, ‘lord of vassalry’, which was the lowest rank of the nobility. 16 Those who worked in yew-wood, the most common material for domestic utensils, millwrights, ship builders, blacksmiths, copper and bronze workers, as well as jewellers who worked in gold and silver, were all accorded the same social status. However, the woodworker could advance even higher within the ranks of the nobility – to the rank of ‘aire ard’, or ‘high lord’. The metal worker, though,

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 128.
15 Ibid., 129.
16 Ibid., 131.
could not advance higher than the rank of ‘aire deso’. This is a potent comment upon how
valued a woodworker’s skill was in Ireland in the early Middle Ages, that he could climb
higher socially than the makers of the exquisitely fine metal work that we know to have come
from this period.

In addition to the evidence given in *Uraicech Becc*, there are several references to
wooden objects in other texts. Cogitosus’ *Life of St. Brigid* also gives a very detailed
description of a 7th century church.

**Of the Church Door**

Neither should one pass over in silence the miracle wrought in the repairing of
the church in which the glorious bodies of both – namely the Archbishop Conleth and
our most flourishing virgin Brigit – are laid on the right and left of the ornate altar
and rest in tombs adorned with a profusion of gold, silver, gems and precious stones
with gold and silver chandeliers hanging from above and different images presenting
a variety of carvings and colours.

Thus, on account of the growing numbers of the faithful of both sexes, a new
reality is born in an age-old setting, that is a church with its spacious site and its
awesome height towering upwards. It is adorned with painted pictures and inside
there are three chapels which are spacious and divided by board walls under the
single roof of the cathedral church. The first of these walls, which is painted with
pictures and covered in wall-hangings, stretches widthwise in the east part of the
church from one wall to the other. In it there are two doors, one at either end, and
through the door situated on the right, one enters the sanctuary to the altar where the
archbishop offers the Lord’s sacrifice together with his monastic chapter and those
appointed to the sacred mysteries. Through the other door, situated on the aforesaid
cross-wall, only the abbess and her nuns and faithful widows enter to partake of the
banquet of the body and blood of Jesus Christ.

The second of these walls divides the floor of the building into two equal parts
and stretches from the west wall to the wall running across the church. This church
contains many windows and one finely wrought portal on the right side through
which the priests and the faithful of the male sex enter the church, and a second portal
on the left side through which the nuns and congregation of women faithful are
accustomed to enter. And so, in one vast basilica, a large congregation of people of
varying status, rank, sex and local origin, with partitions placed between them, prays
to the omnipotent Master, differing in status, but one in spirit. 18


Although it is not possible to tell what the outer walls of this church were built of, ample proof exists that at least much of the interior construction, and perhaps some of the objects that the church contained, were of wood. The “finely wrought portal” is especially intriguing. From the language of the text it is not clear whether or not it was the door itself that was carved or the door frame, but either way we can be reasonably sure that the material that it was made of was wood, since the wall that it was placed in was made of timber. If it was the door itself that was carved, as Roger Stailey pointed out, this would be a rare example in the pre-Romanesque era of a carved wooden door outside of Italy.\(^{19}\)

Some scanty textual evidence for wooden predecessors to the high crosses exists, in addition to archaeological and some very strong evidence in the actual construction of the extant stone high crosses themselves. Unfortunately, none of the surviving textual sources mentioning wooden high crosses come directly out of an Irish context, but rather from a Northumbrian one, but as Dorothy Kelly has shown, this area, particularly Iona, belonged to the cultural province of Ireland.

Adomnán in his *Life of St. Columba* writes about three high crosses linked to significant events in the life of St. Columba, one of which was still in existence at the time that he was writing, “In that place a cross that was later fixed in a mill-stone is seen, standing by the roadside, even today.”\(^{20}\) Although the material that the cross was constructed of is not mentioned, it is taken by most scholars to be wood. W.G. Collingwood was the first to take this position, stating in his 1921 publication *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age*, “Now a cross that would stand in a quern must have been a slender thing of

\(^{19}\)Roger Stailey, conversation with author, April 2003.

That this was a wooden cross is also corroborated by evidence for a larger tradition of free-standing wooden crosses. Adomnán in his De Locis Sanctis records a "tall wooden cross" that had been erected in the river Jordan at the spot of Christ's baptism. Also, Eddius writes of a wooden cross erected at Oundle to commemorate an event in St. Wilfrid's life, "The people who inhabited the monastery afterwards built a wooden cross on the spot, and the Lord used to perform many marvels there." The cross mentioned in Adomnán's Life of St. Columba seems to have stood there for a long time. Bede also mentions a wooden high cross that survived to a great age,

The place is still shown today and is held in great veneration where Oswald, when he was about to engage in battle, set up the sign of the holy cross and, on bended knees, prayed to God to send heavenly aid to His worshippers in their dire need. In fact it is related that when a cross had been hastily made and the hole dug in which it was to stand, he seized the cross himself in the ardour of his faith, placed it in the hole, and held it upright with both hands until the soldiers had heaped up the earth and fixed it in position... And even to this day many people are in the habit of cutting splinters from the wood of this holy cross and putting them in water which they then give to sick men or beasts to drink or else they sprinkle them with it; and they are quickly restored to health.

At the time that Bede was writing, Oswald's cross had been in existence nearly one hundred years -- we know this because the battle at Heavenfield occurred in the year 633 and Bede's Ecclesiastical History was completed in the year 731. Also, Oswald's erection of a wooden cross could possibly have been influenced by the similar practice of the Irish monks at Iona, as described by Adomnán in the Life of Columba, since he spent time and was

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baptized there. All of this textual evidence of wooden high crosses, including the evidence for a wide spread practice of this in the Christian world, and taken in conjunction with the archaeological and skeuomorphic evidence, make a very strong argument for there having been wooden predecessors to the stone high crosses in Ireland.

The archaeological evidence for wooden high crosses comes from two main sources, the indirect evidence of depictions on cross slabs, and one possible relic from a wooden high cross itself. Depictions on cross slabs – which have been dated to the early eighth century and would therefore pre-date the stone high crosses – show ringed crosses, some of which have stake-like butts. Ó Ríordáin has argued that these images are depictions of the wooden precursors to the stone high crosses, the evidence for this lying in the pointed stake rendered on some of them, the stake serving the purpose of driving the wooden high cross into the ground.

The only possible relic of a wooden high cross that has been found to date is a wooden boss (Fig. 1) that was found during the Wood Quay excavations in Dublin. The large hemispherical boss was discovered at tenth century levels, but is possibly much older. It is unique amongst the objects found during the Wood Quay excavations in that it seems to have been introduced from outside the city. Originally the boss would have measured approximately 26 cm in diameter and 11.2 cm deep, and the surface of it is carved entirely in interlace ornament. The evidence for it having come from a wooden high cross lies in the strong resemblance that it bears to the bosses that appear on several of the extant stone high crosses.

25 Kelly, 106.
26 Kelly, 107.
crosses, particularly those of Tynan, Co. Armagh, which are roughly the same size and shape and are also carved with interlace.28

The archaeological and skeuomorphic evidence for wooden high crosses was thoroughly detailed by Dorothy Kelly in her 1991 article “The Heart of the Matter: Models for Irish High Crosses,” and the evidence that she presents supports the limited textual evidence for wooden high crosses.

In Kelly’s detailing of the skeuomorphic evidence of wooden predecessors to the stone high crosses, she identifies four main groups of stone high crosses in Ireland and western Scotland that can be shown to be skeuomorphs of wooden high crosses. The crosses from western Scotland that are included in this evaluation are shown to be so similar in form to those of Ireland as to be regarded as belonging to the same extended cultural province, and the evidence that they give elucidates and extends the evaluations of the Irish models.29 All of the high crosses in this evaluation are composite built structures, linked predominantly through the use of mortice-and-tenon joints, and their forms are unnecessarily complex given the material used. Nearly all of them are shown to be possible skeuomorphs of monumental wooden high crosses with composite plank-built structures.

Three of the groups of stone high crosses that Kelly identifies can be shown to be skeuomorphs of wooden plank-built crosses composed of three vertical elements-- planks laminated together in order to form a wider shaft – with what would have been a separate horizontal board comprising the transom. In two of these groups the widest section is the one in the middle, and the decorated segment is the thinnest. They both also seem to have an element half-way up the length of the shaft that could be possibly explained as a feature on

28Lang, 4.
29Kelly, 109.
the original wooden high cross that was used to secure the outer planks to the central section, as Kelly explains, through the use "...of a rivet or bolt driven through the projecting wooden tongue." In the third group, the central element is the thinnest. These examples, such as the North Cross at Ahenny, also include a deep-set pierced ring that is chamfered on the upper surface of each segment and recessed to the depth of what would have been the central element of the shaft.

The recessing of the ring to the depth of what would have been the central element could signify that the inclusion of a ring necessitated a different approach to the construction of the shaft, one in which the outer planks could be used to clamp the ring into place. A further implication of this theory is that on the wooden prototype, the ring would have had to have been worked as a separate element. As Kelly points out, "...viewed from the side the overall structure gives the impression that the segments of the ring are clamped between the two projecting, flanking upright elements of the shaft." The double-stepped, trapezoidal base of the cross is massive, and the outer edges of the cross are defined by a hachured rolled moulding, which is duplicated in a more slender form on the narrow north and south faces. On these narrow faces it seems to trace the boarders between the separate vertical elements of the shaft. The cross is capped with a bee-hive shaped stone that overhangs the edges of the upper shaft. Additionally, on the head of the cross are five large bosses in a cruciform pattern on both of the broad east and west faces of the cross.

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30 Kelly, 111.
31 Ibid. 129.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 127.
The bee-hive shaped caps and the massive trapezoidal base, both worked as separate elements from the rest of the cross, may have served a functional role that would account for their seemingly disproportionate size. Both are linked to the main body of the cross through the use of mortice-and-tenon joints, a technique borrowed from carpentry, and could have served to fasten the three separate elements of shaft together. In serving as a fastener, its massive size is accounted for – unless the sculptor severely rebated the top ends of the planks, the cap and base would have had to have been larger than the shaft of the cross. Additionally, both would have protected the raw ends of the planks, which would have been more susceptible to rot and decay than other areas of the wooden cross. The cap’s size and unusual shape would have aided in this, the over-hang created would have further protected the cross from weathering, and the domed shape would cause rain water to run off the top of the cross.

Both Francois Henry and Peter Harbison believed that the stone bosses on this type of cross were skeuomorphs of metal bosses used to conceal rivets or nails in the metal plating of the prototype cross. Kelly however makes a more convincing argument for the original function of these bosses. Still believing the bosses to be performing a concealing function, she postulates that they were used to conceal the bolts that were used to fix the three upright of the elements of the shaft together at the midpoint, just as the projecting tongue and cessation of the rebated edges were skeuomorphs of fastenings that performed a similar function in the other examples.

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34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 130.
In addition to crosses that seem to be based on wooden prototypes consisting of three vertical plank-like elements, Kelly identifies another type of high cross skeuomorph which contains an excessive number of mortice-and-tenon joints linking the various elements of the crosses together, exemplified by St. John’s and St. Oran’s crosses from Iona. These crosses have only survived to the present day in a highly fragmented state. As with examples from the other crosses discussed here, it seems that the crosses of this type do not merely imitate carpentry techniques, but may in fact be direct imitations of wooden predecessors. The primary evidence for this assumption lies in the number of pieces that these crosses are comprised of, and the method with which they were joined. The primary joint utilized in both the Irish and west of Scotland examples is the mortice-and-tenon joint, a technique borrowed from carpentry. However, while most of the high crosses incorporate one or two such joints – usually used to link shaft with base, or the capstone to the top of the shaft – there are so many joints in St. John’s and Oran’s Crosses as to cause structural frailties. It would seem that given that the material used to create these crosses was stone, it would make more sense for them to have been sculpted as monolithic structures. This point is further validated when it is taken into consideration that less structurally complex high crosses than these were extant in Northumbria at the time that St. John’s and Oran’s Crosses were carved. It seems likely that they would have been known to the Ionian community. The construction of St. John’s and St. Oran’s crosses makes more sense in the context of wood, and so the evidence points to these crosses being a direct imitation of wooden examples.

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38 Kelly, 131.
39 Ibid., 120-121.
40 Ibid., 122.
This skeuomorphic evidence for the existence of several different types of wooden precursors to the Irish stone high crosses, particularly when taken in conjunction with the textual evidence for them, is convincing. It shows there to have been a varied and widespread tradition of the construction of wooden high crosses and the copying of these crosses into the more durable medium of stone is additional proof of the significance that these wooden objects to the Irish people of that time. From the textual evidence we can see that the wooden high crosses were venerated and associated with specific saints. This veneration extended to the cutting of splinters from wooden high crosses to be kept as relics and used for their supposed curative properties as mentioned Bede, and perhaps the possible carved wooden high cross boss from the Wood Quay excavations was brought to Dublin as precisely this sort of relic. Additionally, the carved wooden boss gives evidence that the carving of the extant stone high crosses may also reflect a lost timber tradition — i.e. that the wooden high crosses may also have been carved. Therefore, even though no wooden high crosses survive we have abundant and compelling proof for their existence and through the use of the skeuomorphic evidence, for what they may have looked like.

The texts, in addition to indicating the pre-eminence of wooden crosses record a miscellany of wooden objects too vast to repeat fully here. These objects include everything from simple utilitarian objects, to highly carved decorative objects in churches. Some of the many objects in Adomnán’s Life of St. Columba are a log raft, boats, spear shafts, a little box of pine wood, a wooden spike, and a carriage, this is in addition to mentions of wattle and timber constructed churches and the previously mentioned wooden high cross. Cogitosus’ Life of St. Brigit contains several excellent descriptions of wooden objects. A wooden altar base is mentioned in chapter two,

Kneeling humbly before God and the bishop as well as before the altar and offering her virginal crown to almighty God, she touched with her hand the wooden base on
which the altar rested. And to commemorate her unsullied virtue, this wood flourishes
fresh and green to the present day as if it had not been cut down and stripped of its
bark but was attached to its roots.  

So here there exists evidence for the use of wood in very practical everyday objects, and also
the presumably more finely wrought altar base.

Artistic representations of carved wooden furniture are found in the Book of Kells
and on the high crosses. These depictions indicate that highly detailed and beautifully carved
examples of wooden furniture were known to the illuminators and sculptors of the period
between c. 700 – 900 C.E. This evidence is also supported by surviving specimens of carved
Irish furniture from later centuries which can be seen to have their stylistic roots in the
furniture that is depicted in the manuscripts and the high crosses.

The Book of Kells, c. 750-810, provides some of the most detailed depictions of
opulent furniture. While it is likely that these were stylized depictions, they were
nevertheless based upon real examples. The chairs or thrones on which St. Matthew (folio
28v.), St. John the Evangelist (folio 291v.) and Christ (folio 32v.) all sit are very similar.
They are richly upholstered with curved backs and arm supports. Because of the great
similarity that these three chairs bear one another it would seem that they were of a type that
the artist/s were familiar with; i.e. they represent realistic chairs and were not merely the
artist’s creation. The size differential between the chairs is possibly just an example of how
they were stylized for depiction in the manuscript.

The most interesting and elaborate chair depicted in the Book of Kells is the one that
the Madonna and Child sit upon in folio 7v. (Fig. 2). This chair is shown in profile and
instead of being heavily upholstered like the chairs of St. Matthew, St. John the Evangelist

41Cogitosus, 2: 2-3.
42 John Teahan, Irish Furniture and Woodcraft (Dublin: Country House and the National Museum of
Ireland, 1994) 10.
43Ibid.
and Christ, it seems that the decoration on this throne is entirely carved and painted. The seat of the chair is a concave curve and the chair back is high and straight and topped in animal head finials with a possibly carved interlace pattern. The space between the legs of the chair is enclosed with a presumably wooden panel, carved in an abstract cross pattern painted in green, purple, brown, black and a small bit of blue on a gold ground. The chair back, seat and legs/box edges are all also painted gold with a light red abstract pattern and possibly incised decoration at the edges. The lion’s head finial is intricately carved and is painted in red, gold, white, and black with a long curling blue tongue that becomes a gold interlace pattern immediately above Mary’s right shoulder. The highly skilled level of carving indicated in the drawing of this chair points to a sophisticated woodworking industry in Ireland at this time. Additionally, chairs of this type are repeated on the high crosses (Fig. 3), depictions of similar animal head finials appear in other contemporary manuscripts, such as the Book of Dimma, where St. Mark appears in a highly abstracted chair or throne with intricate birds head finials (Fig. 4). With the evidence of a similar extant animal head finial, we can assume that chairs of this type were not unknown to the artist.

The proof for a long a sophisticated woodworking tradition in Ireland is abundant. From the evidence to be found through the analysis of fossil pollen records for the vast availability of wood on this island from the earliest times of human settlement up through the early 18th century, to the textual, pictorial and skeuomorphic evidence for wooden objects, architecture and high crosses, as well as the high position that woodworkers were accorded within Irish society in the early middle ages as shown through the brehon laws of the time, there can be no doubt of the importance of woodcarving in Ireland in the period before 1300. All of the evidence thus far given, however, is secondary to the objects themselves.

44Ibid., 11-12.
A plethora of wooden objects survive that date to the period before 1200. These objects include utilitarian objects such as axe handles, bowls, stave built vessels, wooden jewellery boxes, cauldrons, cart-wheels, shovels, and weavers’ equipment. Timber from roads and track-ways are also extant, as are some ship timbers and remnants of dugout canoes. Wattles and timber from houses and other buildings have been discovered during excavations. There are also examples of finely carved wooden objects. One example is a square gaming board from Ballinderry, Co. Westmeath (Fig. 5), the boarder of which is carved in bands of interlace and geometrical patterns. It has a small projecting wooden handle and a slightly larger projection on the opposite end, carved in the form of a human head.45

Some of the most exquisite examples of wrought wood from the Viking era come from the Wood Quay excavations in Dublin. More then 150 different examples of wrought wood were unearthed at late 10th and early 11th century levels during this excavation, and nearly all of them bear some sort of carved or incised decoration. Even the simplest tools are ornamented. Some of these are done in the more primitive method of incised decoration, but other objects are ambitiously carved in intricate three-dimensional interlace.46

According to James Lang, “The decorated wood from Dublin demonstrates a continuing native tradition with its own receptive eye to compatible, neighbouring art.”47 Many of the Viking age objects discovered at Wood Quay retain Insular characteristics while incorporating characteristics reminiscent of Viking taste from the western Scandinavian colonies. Many also echo styles current in southern England, indicating that there was

45 John Teahan, Irish Furniture and Woodcraft, 9.
46 Lang, v.
47 Ibid.
contact between there and Dublin at this time. As Lang points out, none of this indicates “a mere reflex of imported styles,” rather the Irish were responding to, and incorporating the styles of other cultures with which they were in contact into their own unique manner of carving.

Just by sheer numbers alone, it would be impossible to tackle all of the finely wrought wooden objects found at Wood Quay. However, by taking a few examples of the sorts of objects found during this excavation it is possible to see the various styles of decoration and ornamentation popular in wood carving at this time. The objects that will be looked at are: the hemispherical carved wooden boss, illustrating the insular style; a gaming piece figurine indebted to both Insular and to what Lang terms the ‘West Viking’ style (a mode which was an amalgam of Irish, Anglian and Scandinavian styles); a small crook that terminates in an animal head and is carved heavily in interlace, as well as a carving of a small human head, also heavily interlaced. Both the crook and the small human head resemble Scandinavian Ringerike works. The final object is a knife handle, made unique at this sight by its incorporation of Sub-Classical motifs.

The carved wooden boss (Fig. 1) discovered at Wood Quay is purely insular in style, and to date is the only possible relic of a wooden high cross yet found. It seems to have been introduced from a context outside the city, brought to Dublin either as Lang suggests, as a souvenir, or as Kelly suggests, as a sort of relic, and may be much older than the 10th century levels at which it was discovered. It is hemispherical in shape with dimensions of 26 cm long, 18.3 cm wide, and 11.2 cm deep, although according to Lang, the boss would have

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., 4.
50 Kelly, 107.
been purely hemispherical originally, these measurements being post-conservation.51 The interlace on this boss is deeply carved in a triquetra pattern of three separate triquetrae, each self contained. At the crown of the boss, the points of each of the three knots meet, and they are all linked to each other through a separate strand that winds through all three. The boss has a small lip at its base that is only partially extant. This wooden boss bears strong resemblance to bosses that appear on several of the extant stone high crosses, particularly those of Tynan, Co. Armagh, which are roughly the same shape and carved with interlace.52

The second artefact from Wood Quay to be discussed here is a gaming piece (Fig. 6), carved in the form of a human figure, which Lang speculated could be the “king-pin” from a board game.53 It is carved in intricate detail from a dowel-like piece of wood, and measures only 9.9 cm high.54 The base of the piece is plain and tapers slightly downwards. This is separated from the figure and the stool that it sits upon by a band of angular pellets. The figure has a skull-like head with a severely recessed hair-line. The eyes of the head are deeply gouged, perhaps intended to have been filled with either glass or metal eyes, as Wallace suggested.55 The figure sits crouched, shoulders slumping forward, knees and feet together, with the elbows resting on the knees, and the chin supported on the figure’s hands. A long triangular shawl falls over the back of the figure, filled mostly with basket-plait and

51 Lang, 49.
52 Ibid., 4.
53 Ibid., 7.
54 Ibid., 51.
the very tip of the shawl is filled by a triquetra, which Lang states is similar to that found in triangular panels of stone Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture.56

The ‘crook’ and the small human head are both exceptionally beautiful examples of Irish woodcarving. The small crook (Fig. 7) has a plain cylindrical base from which the crook arises and then bends to slightly below the horizontal, and finishes in an intricately carved animal head. Beginning at the upturned snout of the animal are cascading tendrils that fall over the jaw line. Behind the head are similar tendrils that fall and become interlace ornament. The brow of the animal juts up from the snout in a curved angle, and a small tongue protrudes from its lips. The eyes of the animal are tear-shaped and the point of the tear-drop faces forward towards the snout. The right face of the crook is more intricately carved then the left face. On the right side of the crook, the tendrils that fall back from the back of the animals head become interlace ornament, whereas on the left face many of these tendrils just fall straight, curving slightly at their tips. It is possible that the animal intended to be depicted here is a snake, or a dragon. The treatment of the tendrils on this piece resembles those found on the small human head.57 The exact function of this piece is somewhat unclear because of its exceptionally small size. Measuring only 8.9 cm high, the crook would seem to be too small to have been the head of a crosier-like staff.

The small human head (Fig. 8) measures 5.9 cm high, 2.1 cm wide and 2.2 cm thick.58 The face of the head is much damaged, but one can still make out the interlaced strands that comprised the mouth. The eyes bulge underneath the brow, and the C-shaped ear is carved in relief along the side of the head. The hair of the small human head is carved in

56 Lang, 7.
57 Ibid., 63.
58 Ibid., 61.
the same sort of interlaced tendrils as was seen on the crook. The tendrils stand in two separate bunches, split roughly down the middle of the head. Like the crook, the incorporation of interlace in this piece has its roots in Insular art, however the manner with which the tendrils are carved in both pieces show close links with Scandinavian Ringerike style.59 Both pieces bear a great amount of similarities to each other, both in terms of how intricately they are carved and the similarities that the tendrils on each piece bear to one another.

The final piece of decorated wood form the Wood Quay excavations to be addressed here is a knife handle decorated in Sub-Classical foliate ornament (Fig. 9). While not as elaborate as some of the other objects, it is interesting in that it bears a European pattern rather then an insular or Scandinavian one.60 The designs on the knife handle are so close to later Romanesque patterns that if it had not been found in such a strict archaeological context, it could perhaps be settled more comfortably with a 12th century label. This knife handle is 8.5 cm long, has widths of 1.8 and 1.5 cm, and a thickness of 1.3 cm.61 The vinescroll motif is found on both sides of the handles and do not differ much from side to side. The vinescroll is organized into static registers, and Lang hypothesizes that the details such as the trefoil tips may point to a Carolingian source.62

From the extant wooden objects, one can trace the development in wood technologies and the sophistication of carving techniques. They give evidence of the existence of professional woodcarvers, a high degree of technical skill and expertise, as well as equipment

59 Ibid., 16.
60 Ibid., 29.
61 Ibid., 68.
62 Ibid., 29.
needed for woodworking. In the incorporation of compatible styles from other cultures that the Irish were in contact with into their own native art, we can see the artisans are both conscious of the Insular artistic tradition that they were inheritors of, and the willingness to adapt and change with modern fashions. Taken with the additional textual, pictorial, and skeuomorphic evidence for the use of wood carving, these objects give irrefutable proof of a vibrant, living, woodcarving artistic tradition in Ireland during the Early Middle Ages.

What, then, of surviving figural representations in other media? In what ways, both in terms of form and function do they relate to the later medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures? It seems that in surviving early medieval Irish stone sculpture, manuscript illumination, and metal work the human figure is largely treated as pattern, abstracted into geometric shapes or twisted into complicated designs of interlace. In the late seventh / early eighth century Book of Durrow, folio 21v, the figure of Matthew is reduced to a composition of flat geometric shapes. Similar figures can be seen on some metalwork examples such as the Crucifixion plaque from St. John’s (Rinnagan) near Athlone (Fig. 10), now in the National Museum, dated to the later eighth or early ninth century, as well as on some stonework such as the North and South Crosses at Castledermot, Co. Kildare (Fig. 11), or the cross at Moone, Co. Kildare. In all of the figures the heads are over-large and when shown frontally seem to have been simplified to a basically ovular shape with elliptical eyes, long straight noses, slit-like mouths and broad chins. Necks – when they are shown – are only minimally indicated. In most cases, the chins seem to rest on the chests of the rectangular bodies. The limbs are usually quite short. In cases where a figure is shown from the side, as on the North Cross at Castledermot, one can see the distinctive “Kell’s Profile” with its beak-like nose, elongated jaw, and large frontal eye which Susan McNab has traced back to the
second century B.C.E. in Visigothic Spain. This type of profile occurs in many of the Irish figures in both stone and illuminated manuscript, but it is particularly linked with interlaced figures such as those found in the book from which it takes its name.

Interlaced figures are found in a variety of contexts and they seem to vary in function. On the high crosses they seem to act primarily as marginalia to the narrative scenes, but in the case of the Book of Kells, they turn up nearly everywhere, incorporated into carpet pages, forming dividing columns on the canon tables or twisting to form an initial letter. We do not know what theological or philosophical ideas these figures refer to, if any at all, although in the example of the initial letter figures McNab’s query, “Could it be that (they) represent the Word made flesh, the incarnation of Christ as made manifest in the words of the Gospels?” is very intriguing.

More naturalistic figures than those thus far examined also occur in early medieval Irish art, and are found in the narrative scenes of several of the high crosses. These figures, which are found on Muiredach’s Cross, Monasterboice, Co. Louth; the Cross of the Scriptures, Monasterboice, Co. Louth; and the Durrow Cross, Co. Offaly, seem all to draw heavily upon late classical sculptural examples, particularly what is to be found on early Christian Roman sarcophagi, the links between with have been detailed extensively both by McNab and Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk. But as McNab points out, although aspects of

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63 Susan McNab, “Celtic Antecedents to the Treatment of the Human Figure in Early Irish Art,” in From Ireland Coming: Irish Art from the Early Christian to the Late Gothic Period and Its European Context, ed. Colum Hourihane (Princeton: Index of Christian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, in association with the Princeton University Press, 2001) 164.

64 Ibid., 166.


the Roman sarcophagi figures were imitated – including overall figure height proportion, naturalistic modeling, and similar narrative themes – the Irish figures do not blindly copy the earlier Roman ones. They often have celticized beards and moustaches. Other figures – like the largely classical figure of Christ from the Arrest scene on Muiredach’s Cross (Fig. 12) – wear Irish clothing and jewelry.⁶⁷

Later Irish figures also look towards Rome for their inspiration, such as the twelfth century Adam and Eve from Ardmore Cathedral, Co. Waterford (Fig. 13), in which the figures seem to stand in a contrapposto manner. Though in pose these figures may have been inspired, as McNab suggests, by Italian Romanesque models,⁶⁸ the way in which they are carved – as two separately conceived figures on a uniform front plane of relief against a flat background – is strongly reminiscent of other Irish examples.

Other examples of twelfth century Irish Romanesque stone figure carving even more clearly display evidence of their heritage in both Irish and classical traditions. Irish Romanesque capitals, such as that from Kilteel, Co. Kildare (Fig.14), have a human face in the corner of the block underneath an abacus, giving the impression of a classic caryatid type.⁶⁹ However, the disembodied head is a reoccurring theme throughout the early history of Irish art (perhaps carrying with it some talismanic intension) and the long moustache and hair which falls into an interlace pattern differ greatly form other European versions. It would seem then, that even into the early Romanesque era carvings of the figure in Ireland retained something of native style while incorporating and adapting imported ideas.

⁶⁷ McNab, “Early Irish Sculpture”, 165.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 169.
⁶⁹ Ibid., 170.
The way in which these depictions of the human figure function varies, but there seems to be an almost total lack of wholly devotional images. The figures on the high crosses would seem to be primarily narrative, as would many found within manuscript illumination. The interlaced figures already noted may also have had in some cases a kind of narrative function, or may have been used as 'visual prompts' for ideas such as “the Word made flesh”, as suggested by McNab.70 Of course, many of them could be simply ornamental as well. Figures such as the Madonna and Child on Folio 7v of the Book of Kells, or the portrait of Christ on Folio 32v might be said to be devotional in nature, but these would be rare examples.

To what extent, though, do these carvings resemble the later wooden figure sculptures, all of which seem to have been designed as devotional objects? On the surface apparently not much, but perhaps a common thread might be seen in the Irish artist's willingness to adapt and incorporate new styles into their own native art. It may be that the depiction of saints and other religious figures in free-standing wood sculpture was a genre of art introduced to the Irish by the conquering Anglo-Normans, and it was willingly incorporated into the indigenous artistic tradition. Another common thread is the Irish artist’s sense of composition and design, so necessary in the execution of the elaborate interlace patterns of pre-conquest woodcarving, is also seen in the arrangement of the later medieval figures’ elaborately designed drapery folds. Although they incorporate certain modes and traits of English and Continental sculptures, they are not simply copies of these but evolve into an artistic tradition of their own. From here, though we must now turn to the study of the late medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures themselves.

70 McNab, “The Human Figure in Early Irish Art”, 166.
CHAPTER 2

LATE MEDIEVAL WOODEN FIGURE SCULPTURES IN IRELAND

Extant examples of late medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture are found all over the island of Ireland and they evidence what must have been a major and widespread artistic tradition. In order to gain greater understanding of this tradition, certain questions must be asked. Why did these figures survive where others did not? What can be said about the artistic tradition out of which these carvings come through the examination of the surviving works? What stylistic links do the figures show to each other and to what degree are they influenced by art from abroad? Can regional differences be determined amongst the surviving Irish figures?

Through the detailed examination of a few of the surviving Irish wooden figures, these questions can perhaps be addressed. The four medieval Irish wooden figures included in this analysis were chosen on the basis of their abilities to illustrate some of these points, their association with widespread geographic locations within Ireland, and in order to show a progression of style chronologically. The likely Netherlandish figure of Our Lady of Dublin was also included, both to serve as a counterpoint to the Irish tradition of woodcarving, and to show what sorts of foreign sculpture the Irish artist had readily at hand to observe. Additionally, its presence in Ireland during the medieval period further illustrates the close contact that Ireland must have maintained with the artistic developments that were happening in the rest of Europe.
The Kilcorban Madonna and Child

In the sequence of extant Irish wooden figure sculpture, one of earliest known statues comes from Kilcorban, Co. Galway. This figure of the Madonna and Child (Fig. 15) is carved of oak and measures approximately 92 cm high. It has a flat and partially hollowed back. The Madonna is enthroned, her knees wide-spread, with the Christ Child in her lap seated between them. Both figures are quite rigid and depicted in the Romanesque style. The Madonna’s right arm is broken just below the elbow and both of the Child’s arms are missing from the shoulders. As can be seen in most other enthroned figures of the Madonna and child in the Romanesque mode it can be surmised that the Child most likely held his right hand up in a gesture of blessing and held a book or an orb in his left. The Madonna possibly held onto the Child with her no longer extant hand, as is typical in most Romanesque depictions; however there are no indications of this on the body of the Christ Child. It is also possible that she gestured outwards with this hand, as is seen on some latter Romanesque carvings, or held an orb, if the Child in fact held a book. This can be seen on a few later French examples such as one late 12th / early 13th century example from Prats-Balaguer, France.

Although compositionally simple, the underlying iconography of this figure is rich and complex. This type of front facing, enthroned Virgin and Child has its iconographical origins in Byzantine art.1 In Romanesque art, the Madonna and Child came to be shown as they are depicted here, in a sort of double-enthronement. The Madonna is shown enthroned in a chair and regal. The Child is enthroned in the lap of his mother. The Madonna was compared to the throne spoken of by Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1)

\[\text{\footnote{1} Maria Vassilaki (ed.), Mother of God: Representations of the Virgin in Byzantine Art (Milan: Skira Editore, 2000).}\]
continuously from Early Christian times through the Romanesque period, citing the passage where Isaiah states that in a vision he saw "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." The Child's depiction as a small adult, rather than as an infant is, as Forsyth states, "pertinent to his portrayal as a sovereign who assumes his high majesty in ascending the throne, which is in this case the figure of Mary. As a throne she is subordinate to him, yet as his mother she embodies the lineage of the house of David whence the Saviour... inherits the rights of an earthly king." The Madonna was also often described in terms of the throne of Solomon, and thus sits as a representation of the Old Testament holding the incarnation of the New Testament in her lap. Additionally the Madonna was also used as a symbol of the church, and the Child with his usual gesture of benediction with the book or orb in his hand shows also his status as head of the church, on which he is here enthroned. Another dimension to images of this sort is that of the male and female. As Forsyth points out, "The statue combines the male and the female figures in one image... the Godhead with his Church. Male and female provinces interlock as do the figures... In claiming a seat for himself in the Virgin, Christ takes possession of her not as male possesses female, but as Christian divinity possesses the earth and his Church."

In depictions such as this Christ and the Virgin must also be understood as the Logos and Theotokos, thus illustrating not only the human nature of both, but also their

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3 Ibid., 23.


5 Ibid., 23.

6 Ibid., 29.
divine natures as well, a view supported by the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the
Council of Chalcedon in 451. Christ represents the Divine Wisdom made flesh, and the
Madonna, as his mother, the bearer of the wisdom or as these images were sometimes
referred to in contemporary writing the *sedes sapientiae* – the Seat of Wisdom.\(^7\)

However, although a Romanesque approach is definitely taken to the Kilcorban
Madonna and Child, many of the details, especially in the drapery folds of the Madonna’s
skirts, are Gothic (Fig. 16). The long, repetitive loopy folds that hang between the
Madonna’s knees and on the sides of the legs are not found in Romanesque art. They
can, however, be seen on several examples of stone sculpture in Ireland dating to the 13\(^{\text{th}}\)
century. Examples of this can be seen on tomb figures from Christchurch in Dublin (Fig.
17), Corcomroe Abbey in Co. Clare (Fig. 18), and at Jerpoint in Co. Kilkenny (Fig. 19).
The folds found on the effigy of a bishop at Jerpoint seem most like those on the lower
portion of the Kilcorban Madonna. In both examples the folds are carved to about the
same depth and the distance between the folds are proportionately similar. The Jerpoint
sculpture is thought to be an effigy of William of Cork, who died in 1266,\(^8\) and so the
stone carving is likely to have been executed around that time. The similarities between
it and the Kilcorban Madonna, the commonalities found between the Kilcorban figure
and the other 13\(^{\text{th}}\) century stone carvings mentioned, as well as the Madonna’s retention
of a Romanesque approach, serve to date the wooden figure to the 13\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

Little is known about the figure’s early history. The Kilcorban Madonna and
Child would already have been old, and possibly venerated, when the Dominicans took

\(^7\) Ibid., 24.

\(^8\) John Hunt, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture 1200-1600: A study of Irish tombs with
notes on costume and armour* 1 (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974) 72.
over the chapel at Kilcorban in 1446.\(^9\) Both Coleman\(^{10}\) and MacLeod\(^{11}\) suggest that they might have brought it with them from Athenry, however it is also possible that figure was already in situ at the Kilcorban chapel when the Dominicans took it over. Reputedly, the Madonna and Child was found together with the figures of St. Catherine and the Madonna and St. John the Evangelist from the crucifixion group – now also in the Clonfert Diocesan Museum – in a hollow tree at some point during the 19th century.\(^{12}\) Semi-miraculous stories such as this, though, are common to many of the medieval Irish wooden figures and perhaps should not be taken too literally. The first documented account of the Kilcorban Madonna and Child comes from the 17th century when O’Heyne writes that Tiege MacKeogh, bishop of Clonfert,

…gave his soul to the Creator, in 1687, and lies buried in the chapel of the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary, called Kilcorban. Before the ruin of our country this chapel belonged to Athenry abbey, and the statue of the Blessed Virgin, which is devoutly venerated there, is preserved in the noble family of the Burkes of Pallis. The frequent miracles which God works through this statue of the Blessed Virgin continually confirm Catholics in the true faith and devotion to the Queen of Heaven. It is probable that our venerated bishop, from his profound devotion to the Holy Mother of God, wished to be buried there.\(^{13}\)


\(^{11}\) Catriona MacLeod, “Medieval Wooden Figure Sculpture in Ireland: Medieval Madonnas in the West,” in *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 105 (1945) 175.

\(^{12}\) T. Shea to a Mr. Mahr, 12 September 1929, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box 51, Collin’s Barrack’s, Dublin.

The next account of the Kilcorban Madonna was written in 1762, when de Burgo refers to the figure as the “Devotissima Deiparae Imago,” but this is the last that we hear of the figure until the early 20th century. Ambrose Coleman, writing in 1902, states,

There are three wooden statues, belonging in former years to this chapel [Kilcorban], which are still held in great veneration by the people. They are the statue of Our Blessed Lady, referred to by O’Heyne, a statue of St. Peter and another of St. Paul [in actuality these are most likely the figures of the Madonna and St. John the Evangelist from the crucifixial group], all about two feet in height. In O’Heyne’s time, the statue of the Blessed Virgin, and perhaps the others were in the keeping of the Burkes of Pallis. Within recent years, they are preserved under lock and key in the sacristy of the parish church and are exposed for veneration only on the feast of St. Laurence, the patron saint of the parish. The people have always shown the greatest devotion to these statues. It is not improbable that they belonged in ancient times to the monastery in Athenry...

If one believes that the figures of the Madonna and St. Catherine were found in a hollow tree during the 19th century, then they would have had to have been hidden at some point after 1762, at a time when the waves of iconoclasm had already subsided. There is no apparent reason why they would have been hidden in such a manner. Additionally, if the two were found together, why was the St. Catherine not brought to Tynagh along with the Kilcorban Madonna?

The first record of the appearance of the Kilcorban St. Catherine is in 1929 in a series of unpublished letters between a Mr. T. Shea, associated with the National Museum and a Mr. Mahr, also associated with the Museum. Coincidentally it was in these letters that the first mention of the figures discovery in a hollow tree is made.

Writing to Mr. Mahr, Mr. Shea states,

14 De Burgo, *Hibernia Dominicana*, 344 as quoted in Catriona MacLeod, “Medieval Wood Figure Sculptures in Ireland: The Kilcorban St. Catherine and Calvary Figures,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 105 (1945) 203.

15 Coleman, 87.
I made a discovery yesterday which may turn out to be very interesting. While questioning a farmer (in Portumna) about a ruin he informed me that some years ago four figures were found in the hollow of a large tree and that they were in the possession of the parish priest. I went to the clergyman... he kindly allowed me to see the figures which were placed behind the altar in the church. Two are about two feet high and the other two about one foot... The priest thought they belonged to the Dominican Abbey of the vicinity... 16

Coleman never mentions the myth of the figures' discovery in the tree. This suggests that he was either not aware of it, or perhaps had some reason to discount it. It is possible that the myth of their discovery did not come into being until after the time of Fr. Coleman's publication. Discovery myths, such as that associated with the Kilcorban Madonna are common to several of the medieval Irish wooden figures. Most are implausible and no definite dates or identities of persons involved are ever given. In the example of the discovery myth of the Kilcorban figure, even if there was some unknown reason for it to have been hidden in a hollow tree in the late 18th or early 19th century, it could only have been there for a negligible amount of time. Wood does not long endure under such circumstances, and the Kilcorban Madonna is not sufficiently decayed for it to have spent a long amount of time within the hollow of a tree. Perhaps myths such as this were constructed out of some sociological need of the people to explain the survival of such carvings, almost as if a miraculous occurrence was needed to lift these few surviving figures to the level of relic. A people who had lost so much of their religious material culture could easily come to imbue the few surviving objects with more importance, perhaps, than what the object within its original context might have warranted. The

16 T. Shea to a Mr. Mahr, 12 September 1929, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box 51, Collin's Barrack's, Dublin.
association with a miraculous occurrence would lift the more mundane object to the level of religious relic, and so perhaps the discovery myths were created.

Whether the story of the Kilcorban Madonna’s discovery is myth or not, what is known for certain is that by 1902 the figure was kept at St. Lawrence’s in Tynagh, Co. Galway. It remained there, exposed only on the feast day of St. Lawrence until 1930 when it and the Kilcorban St. Catherine were loaned to the National Museum. These two figures were displayed in National Museum for eleven years, after which they were returned to Tynagh. In 1957 the Clonfert Diocesan Museum at St. Brendan’s Cathedral in Loughrea, Co. Galway was established, and the figures were presented to it by the Very Rev. B.M. Bowes, P.P., V.F.

The Kilcorban Madonna and Child does not seem to show a direct relationship with any of the other extant Irish medieval wooden figures. In a general way, there are some commonalities between it and the Holy Ghost Madonna and Child (Fig. 20), as well as with the Athlone Madonna (Fig. 21), but these are mostly in the hieratic nature of the Romanesque approach rather than a reflection of direct influence from one of these figures to another. Additionally, the convention of the cape having been pulled across the seated Madonna’s lap seems to be a common one and can be seen in several early Gothic examples from France, including a figure of the Madonna in the tympanum from the

17 Coleman, 87.

18 Bernard Bowes to Dr. Mahr, 5 June 1930, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box 51, Collin’s Barrack’s, Dublin.

19 Catriona MacLeod, Unpublished Notes, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box 51, Collin’s Barrack’s, Dublin.

centre doorway of the north transept of Chartres Cathedral, dated 1205-10 (Fig. 22), and an enthroned Virgin from the south portal tympanum from Donnemarie-en-Montois, dated to 1220-30 (Fig. 23). The most intriguing examples of this convention, however, come from Norway. In Norwegian sculpture of the mid 13th century several figures of the seated Madonna and Child (Fig. 24-26) show the Madonna’s cape having been pulled across her lap underneath the Child in a very similar manner to the Kilcorban Madonna. They even have the same fold-over of the fabric revealing the lining of the cloak.

Andersson has successfully demonstrated that the wood sculpture of Norway and Sweden was heavily influenced by contemporary English work.21 This suggests that this particular way of depicting the cloak of the Virgin had its origins in English sculpture, and was later translated both into Scandinavian and Irish work.

MacLeod’s statement that there is between the Kilcorban Madonna and the Athlone Madonna, “a definite facial likeness comparable to a family likeness,”22 doesn’t seem accurate. The Kilcorban figure’s pointy chin, high cheek bones, and wide archaic eyes (Fig. 27) are quite different from those of the Athlone Madonna, which has much smaller eyes, very little indication of cheek bones and broad chin. There is however, a definite likeness in the faces of the Athlone Child and the Kilcorban Child (Fig. 28), but this likeness may not be original.

According to the museum label, restoration work was carried out on the figure in the 1940’s or 1950’s. However no records of this restoration were kept. Photographic evidence suggests that several layers of more modern polychrome were removed to

21 Aron Andersson, English Influence in Norwegian and Swedish Figure Sculpture in Wood: 1220-1270 (Stockholm: 1949).

22 MacLeod, “Medieval Madonnas in the West,” 181.
reveal some of the medieval polychrome (Fig. 29-30). Where repaints were carried out, they follow the line of the carving and are generally sympathetic to the older polychrome. Unfortunately, however, some of the mid-20th century restorers’ penchant for reconstruction is evidenced in this carving. From photographs taken before the restoration (Fig. 31) it can be seen the damage to the Child’s face was so extensive as to have nearly erased its features. It would seem, therefore that the current face of the Kilcorban Child is largely a reconstruction by MacLeod. Given that she already saw a resemblance between the faces of the Athlone Madonna and the Kilcorban Madonna, it is possible that she modelled the face of the Kilcorban Child on the face of the Athlone Child, but because no records were kept of the restoration, this is in part conjecture.

*The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*

The first manifestations of the Romanesque style predate the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. However the style continued into the first century after that conquest. These two Madonnas represent the latter phase of that style, dating to approximately the late 13th century. They are from geographically distant places, and yet display so many similarities as to make one wonder if they were the work of the same school of sculptors.

The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child (Fig. 32) comes from the collection of the Holy Ghost Hospital in Waterford, and seems to be the earliest of the six wooden figures from that collection. It shows a seated, forward-facing Madonna and Child carved from a single block of wood. The Madonna sits rigidly with her knees wide spread, and the fully clothed Christ-Child sitting on his mother’s left knee. It is the positioning of the Child
which indicates that this carving is of a late Romanesque style; in earlier depictions the Child is shown seated between the Madonna’s two knees. Both wear high collared tunics carved in long undulating vertical folds, there only a singular example of ‘rippling-ribbon’ style fold seen throughout carving of the Gothic period, located towards the bottom of the left profile of the figure. Details of the Holy Ghost Madonna’s hair, crown and possibly veil have been obscured by decay; however it appears that her hair may have been carved in an accordion-style similar to the Kilcorban Madonna and that she wore a crown (Fig. 33). The top of the Holy Ghost Madonna’s nose is damaged, although the rest of the facial features remain pretty well intact.

The survival of this statue, as well as the other figures from the Holy Ghost Hospital is unusual in a city so subsumed under the sphere of English influence, where the iconoclastic onslaughts were likely to have been most thorough. The explanation for this lies in an aberration in the history of the suppression of the monastic houses in Ireland during the Reformation. The Franciscan Grey Friars Abbey in Waterford was dissolved in 1539, however in 1542; a rich merchant of the city, Henry Walsh, obtained possession of the abbey. The Walsh family was both politically active in the city and long time patrons of the Franciscans. Three years later, Henry VIII granted a charter to Henry Walsh for the establishment of an almshouse in part of the abbey. The stipulations of this charter were that it should be called the Hospital of the Holy Ghost, that Walsh be its Master and his successors afterwards, and that Walsh and his successors had the power to nominate Catholic priests to celebrate mass there. This enabled the abbey to remain inhabited throughout all the successive waves of persecution and gave the religious objects therein the opportunity, denied to so many others, to survive. The Holy
Ghost Madonna and Child remained in the possession of the Holy Ghost hospital, and was moved with the hospital when it was decided to erect a new building in 1882. In 1994 it was acquired, along with the other figures from Holy Ghost, by the Waterford Treasures Museum.

The friary at Kilconnell also was allowed to survive and remain inhabited long after the general suppression of the monasteries, which probably contributed to the survival of the Kilconnell Head (Fig. 34-35). A mention is made in the table of contents of the Red Council Book (the book itself having been lost) dated to 1541 says, “A note of concordat for the not suppressing of Killconnell in the Diocese of Clonfert.” Mooney writes that “almost all of the nobles of the country have erected burial places for themselves in the church,” and so perhaps it was upon their appeal that the monastery was not suppressed. Mooney goes on to say that even at the time of his writing, circa 1616, the monastery was still inhabited. He attributes this to the Protestant soldiers’ fear of retribution from God if they harmed the friars or the Kilconnell Friary. Mooney relates the story, which said occurred about the year 1596,

A certain knight, named John Kynk, came on one occasion to the Convent while the garrison was there. He had with him a horse, which he highly prized, and nothing would do him but to stall the animal in front of the altar of St. Francis... This desecration did not escape the vengeance of God. The horse, so valued by its owner, which in the evening was in sound health, lay dead when they entered the church in the morning. All were struck with astonishment, and acknowledged that it was an act of the

23 Catriona MacLeod, “Medieval Wooden Figure Sculpture in Ireland: Statues in the Holy Ghost Hospital, Waterford,” in Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland 106 (1946) 99-100.


Divine Power. About the same time some of the soldiers were ransacking the graves of the dead, in expectation of finding some hidden treasure or other spoil, when a monument fell, in a wonderful way, and crushed the thigh bone of one of the plunderers. The others were so terrified by the accident that they never dared again to rifle the tombs. Captain Stryck [captain of the garrison of soldiers]... influenced as well by fear as by other motives, he promised the friars, giving them his word of honour, that he would not allow them to be injured. He told them to remain in the monastery, and gave strict orders that no one should molest them. He also ordered the soldiers, and took care that his orders were enforced, to do no damage to the building, and on no account to burn the wood or roof of the church or cloister. He moreover set aside for their exclusive accommodations some cells in the dormitory and the sacristy, where he permitted them to say Mass in private. Thus during the nine months he remained there in garrison, the friars lived in the convent, and succeeded, with the help of God, in preserving their old home from destruction. All of the trees of the orchard and garden were, however, cut down and burned by the soldiers. When these were consumed they had to seek their supply of firewood in the neighbouring forests, from which they seldom returned without a skirmish with the enemy, and the loss of some of their men. However, they were more afraid of injuring the wood-work of the church and convent than of meeting their foe in battle.26

It is perhaps this reluctance to harm any of the wood work of Kilconnell Friary which permitted the Kilconnell Head to survive. It was not until around the time of the battle of Aughrim that most of the monks were forced to abandon the monastery, and went to live in a neighbouring bog, although it appears that at least some remained – or returned from their bog – until the early 19th century.27

Although the monastery at Kilconnell was not established until 1414, the Kilconnell Head, due to great similarities between it and the late Romanesque Holy Ghost Madonna, seems to be at least a century earlier than this. It is possible that the Franciscans brought the figure with them from elsewhere when they established their monastery at Kilconnell, or that it came from a neighbouring church in that area and

26 Ibid., 9.
27 Bigger, 16.
brought at some point to the Kilconnell monastery. And although it seems likely that the head was found at the Kilconnell Friary, so little is known about its acquisition that it is possible that it came from another ecclesiastic establishment in that area.

Nothing about the specific history of the Kilconnell Head is known prior to the 20th century, when it was acquired by a school-teacher named Martin J. Joyce who lived from the years 1909-1991. According to the museum label at the Aughrim Interpretive Centre, where the Kilconnell Head is now kept, Joyce, “began collecting items of historical interest with artefacts from the 14th century Franciscan Abbey near his birthplace in Kilconnell... With them, he established a museum in this school (St. Catherine's National School, Ballinsloe)...” In 1991 shortly after Joyce’s death, the Aughrim Interpretive Centre was opened and acquired the collection of this small museum. It is unknown in what manner Joyce acquired the piece, whether he simply found it, or acquired it in some other way.

There is an intriguing reference made to a Kilconnell Madonna in a 1979 thesis by Peter O’Dwyer. He states, “Two statues of Mary, venerated in Franciscan monasteries are mentioned in the 15th century – one in Tralee and the other in Kilconnell abbey, Co. Galway.”28 The reference which O’Dwyer provides for this is the article by Francis Bigger. However upon close examination of that article, no mention is ever made of a Kilconnell Madonna. It seems that O’Dwyer did not think that the Kilconnell Madonna was still extant, and so probably did not know of the existence of the wooden head then in the possession of Martin Joyce. It would be interesting to find out where O’Dwyer got the notion then of a Kilconnell Madonna. Research has thus far proved inconclusive.

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28 Peter O’Dwyer, *Towards a History of Devotion to Mary in Ireland 1100-1600*, for the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy (Dublin: Carmelite Publications, 1979) 77.
The resemblance between the Kilconnell Head and the head of the Holy Ghost Madonna is striking, and although the Kilconnell Head is in a much more decayed state, the extant features are very close to those of the Holy Ghost Madonna. In profile (Fig. 36-37), they share the same long, clearly cut angular jaw-line and small short chin. The length of their foreheads in proportion to the rest of the face is virtually identical. The same can be said for the length of their noses, and distance between nose and mouth, as well as from underneath the bottom lip to the tip of the chin. The manner in which the hair or veil is cut in high relief and covering the ears is very similar in both figures also. The width of the neck in relation to the width of the jaw is nearly the same on both the Kilconnell Head and the head of the Holy Ghost Madonna.

The individual features of the face of the Kilconnell Head have been largely obscured by time, however it can still be determined that the eyes were closely set in towards the nose underneath arching brows, as in the case of the Holy Ghost Madonna. Although both figures’ noses are virtually obliterated by decay their lengths and proportions in relation to the rest of the face are quite similar. The most striking similarity of the extant facial features is the mouth (Fig. 38-39). In both figures, it appears that no upper lip was carved; instead the mouths consist of a deeply bevelled line over a very full lower lip, with deep indents at the corners of the mouths.

In other instances where there seems to be a relationship between two extant figures, such as between the Clonfert Madonna and the Athlone Madonna, the resemblance is akin to a family likeness. However, in the case of the Kilconnell Head and the Holy Ghost Madonna, the extant heads are relatively the same size and the
proportions of their features are virtually identical. This may imply that the two figures were carved by the same school of sculptors.

The only apparent aberration between the extant features of the Kilconnell Head and the Holy Ghost Madonna is the manner in which the two figures were constructed. The Waterford figure was carved from a single block, but the Kilconnell figure, although of comparable size, was carved from at least two. This is evidenced by its ‘head-on-a-pike’ remains. The figure’s neck is very long, and it tapers into a wedge shape at the bottom. This shaft was probably meant to sit down into the collar of the figure’s garment. This same method of construction is shown in the figure of St. Molaise (Fig. 40) from Innismurray (now in the National Museum) and in photographs and drawings of the no longer extant figure of St. Brendan (Fig. 41-42) from Innisglora. This style seems so far to be restricted to figures from the west of Ireland. It is possible that it is a coincidence that surviving figures utilizing this method of construction all come from the west of Ireland, due to the enormous numbers of wooden figures which must have been destroyed, especially in the British controlled east. However, it could also be a matter of regional taste, where in the west a common and acceptable method of construction was the ‘head-on-a-pike’ style illustrated by the Kilconnell Head, and in areas further east, single block construction was preferred. If both the Waterford and the Kilconnell figures did in fact come from the same school of sculptors, it is possible that the reasoning behind constructing figures in these different ways was influenced by the differing tastes of the east and the west of Ireland, and each was carved to suit the taste of the patrons.

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Our Lady of Dublin

Many myths surround this large oaken figure of a Madonna and Child (Fig. 43). It currently stands in the Carmelite Church on Whitefriars Street in Dublin, above the small Lady altar in that church, and was purchased by that order in 1824 from a second-hand shop on Capel Street. It is said to have come from the pre-Reformation abbey of St. Mary’s, in Dublin, the richest Cistercian monastery in Ireland. St. Mary’s Abbey was a favourite Irish resort for English nobility, and the Irish Parliament occasionally met in its chapter house. When in February, 1539 the suppression of Irish religious houses were first decreed, an appeal was made to save St. Mary’s Abbey. The abbot of that monastery wrote asking that St. Mary’s be exempt from the general Dissolution, as did the Lord Deputy. However, the appeal fell on deaf ears and in October, 1539 the abbey was surrendered to the Crown.

St. Mary’s Abbey was first converted into a munitions warehouse and then five years later, in 1543, it was granted to the Earl of Desmond on lease to serve as his residence during the Parliamentary session, during which time the great figure of the Madonna is thought to have remained at the abbey. Circa 1583, Queen Elizabeth granted the abbey to the Earl of Ormonde to use for stables. It was after the Abbey passed into the hands of Ormonde, that Petrie writes of it having been condemned to be burnt. “One

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33 Ibid.
half of it was actually burnt,” he writes, “the other half was carried by some devout or friendly hand to a neighbouring Inn-yard, where, with the face buried in the ground, and the hollow trunk appearing uppermost, it was appropriated for concealment and safety to the ignoble purpose of a hog-tough.”

This fanciful tale of the burning, rescue and subsequent concealment as a hog-trough, has little to substantiate it. There is no evidence of burning on the wood, and relatively little decay, certainly much less than one would expect to see on a piece of timber that had been kept under such damp conditions and exposed to the elements as its use as a hog-trough in an Inn-yard suggests. In fact, within the hollow of the wood – where the ‘slop’ would have lain – there is no evidence of decay whatsoever. Instead, this story told to Petrie by unknown persons was probably an attempted explanation for the figure’s flat, hollowed back. In an era where it had likely been forgotten that most medieval wooden statues were flat-backed – for them to be mounted or placed against a wall – and hollowed to lessen their weight and prevent radial cracking, an explanation was probably needed as to why the figure of the Madonna and Child would appear so.

It is not known then under what circumstances the Madonna survived. It was at some point partially mutilated, the Child’s lips were sliced off with a blade (Fig. 44), as was one of his feet and one of his arms just past the shoulder. The cuts in each of these areas are too clean, and with the exception possibly of the arm, in a relatively protected area of the sculpture, for them not to have been deliberate. At some point as well, the bright medieval polychrome was covered over with whitewash thick enough to obscure the figure’s features (Fig. 45).

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34 Petrie, 308.
History first records Our Lady of Dublin in 1749, after its appearance at St. Michan’s, known as Mary’s Lane Chapel. It is not known at what point, from where, or by whom the figure was brought there. The chapel had been built around 1700 in the vicinity of St. Mary’s Abbey. The Egerton manuscript by an anonymous author states, “In Mary’s Lane is a parochial chapel whose jurisdiction extends from one side of Boot Lane to one side of Church Street. It is a large and irregular building... On the Epistle side of the altar stands a large image of the Blessed Virgin with Jesus in her arms, carved in wood; which before the dissolution belonged to St. Mary’s Abbey.” The people had remembered the old carving and had brought it with them to their new place of worship. The Madonna and Child stood in St. Michan’s for another 60 years after the Egerton manuscript noted it, but when a new church was built in 1816, Our Lady of Dublin was abandoned in the old building which had been converted into a school. A few years later, in 1824, Fr. John Spratt, head of the Carmelite Church in Dublin, saw the figure in the window of a second hand shop and bought it.

Fr. Spratt had some restorations done to the figure, most of which have now been removed. He had two feet added to the bottom of the statue, and some repairs done to the bottoms of the Madonna’s draperies. He replaced the broken arm of the Christ-Child with an extended arm holding at that time, a sceptre or baton. Of Fr. Spratt’s repairs, the only one remaining is the extended arm of the Christ-Child, although the sceptre that he used to hold – as evidenced by a woodcut in the Dublin Penny Journal – is no longer

35 quoted by MacLeod, “Wooden Figure Sculptures,” 56.
36 Ibid.
37 As evidenced by photographs
38 This is shown in a woodcut illustration in Petrie, 308.
extant. The position of the arm originally, and what object it held, if any is difficult to determine, because the break in that arm occurred at shoulder level. In 1827, the Carmelites brought the newly restored figure with them to their new church on Whitefriar’s Street. The figure became known as Our Lady of Dublin in the time subsequent to the Carmelites acquisition of her, and she has gained quite a devotion amongst the local community. With a view towards restoring the figure, in 1915 the Carmelites had the white paint which covered the figure removed. The medieval polychrome came away with it. Thus the dark oak figure that we see today presents a very different picture than how this figure must have looked originally. MacLeod speaks of bright turquoise polychrome and gilding that remained in the inmost crevices of the figures draperies at the time of her writing. There no longer appears to be any evidence of the turquoise, although some traces of gold leaf remain. Additionally, there are spots of white and yellow polychrome. The figure has been further restored but no records of this restoration were kept. In this second restoration the repairs that Fr. Spratt had made to the bottom portions of the draperies and the replaced feet were removed.

Underneath the modern crown of painted plaster and glitter, the Madonna’s head is flat with a grooved ridge (Fig. 46) to support her original crown. Writing in 1832, Petrie describes the original crown as “double arched... such as appears on the coins of Henry VII, and on his only.” Petrie also tells of its fate, “Within the last few years the ancient silver crown was taken from the Virgin’s head – sold for its intrinsic value as old

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39 Catriona MacLeod, Unpublished Papers, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box 51, Dublin, Ireland.
plate, and melted down... The crown itself we have often seen exposed for sale in the window of the jeweller to whom it was sold.”

The description of the crown is interesting because its dating matches up so well with the style and design of the carving. However, the crown’s survival seems somewhat inconsistent with the rest of the purported history of the statue. It seems unlikely that the crown would not have been taken during the statue’s supposed use as a hog-trough. Additionally, the description of the crown as being “double arched... such as appears on the coins of Henry VII and his only,” is somewhat troublesome. Upon examination of English coins from the reign of Henry VII, none of the differing styles of crowns depicted on them appear to be double arched. It is possible that both the account of the crown as well as the story of the hog-trough are apocryphal.

Another mythical story that surrounds Our Lady of Dublin’s crown is that it was used to crown Lambert Simnel during his 1487 coronation in Christ Church Cathedral. However, as Petrie alluded, and MacLeod detailed in an unpublished text from a lecture of uncertain date, the crown in question most likely came from a now no-longer-extant figure of the Madonna from the church of Santa Maria del Dam. MacLeod states,

[St. Mary’s] Abbey stood in solitude, far away from the Hurdle Ford, the only bridge between the North bank and the city. It would seem strange to go beyond the walls to look for an improvised crown if there was any other within and close to the place of ceremony. The earliest reference to Simnel’s crown is contained in the preface to a contemporary poem from Waterford. The old manuscript is called “The Mayor of Waterford’s Letter,” and written shortly after the coronation says: “The crowne they tooke off the head of Our Lady of Damascus and clapte it on the boy’s head.” It would seem that the statue so casually referred to, was well known. Also as the city’s East Gate was commonly called Dames gate or Damask Gate it would seem that the crown was believed to have come from the quarter... The next reference to Simnel’s crown is contained in

40 Petrie, 309.
Ware’s Rerum Hiberniarum Annales, published in 1664... Under an entry for the year 1487 Ware describes the coronation... “The crown used,” continues Ware, “was borrowed from a statue of the Virgin Mary, preserved in a church dedicated to her name. “A statua Beatae Mariae Virginis in Ecclesia memoriae dicata, prope portam urbis, quam Dames Gate vulgo appellamus asservata mutuatum ferient.” Beside the Gate commonly called Dames Gate. The Church referred to was Santa Maria del Dam, situate inside the city walls and close to the Eastern Gate.41

It would seem therefore that Our Lady of Dublin’s association with the coronation of Lambert Simnel is unfounded. Also, if its dating to the reign of Henry VII – based not upon its supposed crown but upon stylistic parallels with the sculpture in the Henry VII Chapel in Westminster – is correct, the statue was not likely to have yet been carved in 1487, only two years into that king’s reign.

Our Lady of Dublin is a large oak figure of the Madonna and Child measuring approximately 1.83 meters high. The Madonna stands and gazes down at the viewer with a look of calm serenity. The semi-reclined, nearly nude Christ-Child twists in her arms and reaches around to grasp a pomegranate, symbol of the Resurrection (Fig. 47). The Madonna uses her voluminous drapery, carved in deep box-shaped folds, to help support the Child’s body. The clearly incised lines of both figures’ faces are deftly carved. The form of the piece has a gracefulness which underlines that it is the work of a master carver. The naturalism and sophistication of the carving would seem to indicate that this figure is not of Irish origins.

Figures of Irish origins have a simplicity which is lacking in this piece. The Irish carver reduces his subject nearly to abstract forms, and shows his mastery in the composition of these forms and in the design play of the drapery folds. Often the figure itself acts as a scaffold over which the sculptor lays his abstract design of drapery folds,

41 MacLeod, Unpublished Papers.
and little attention is paid to realistic modelling of facial features or hands. This emphasis on abstract shape and simplified composition of forms is lacking in the figure of Our Lady of Dublin.

If Our Lady of Dublin is not an Irish work, where is its provenance? Petrie suggests that it is German, and likely the work of Albrecht Dürer or of one of his followers. However, it has never been proven that Dürer ever executed any three-dimensional work of art, and Our Lady of Dublin does not resemble closely enough any of that master’s prints or paintings to have been directly inspired by his work. Our Lady of Dublin does however resemble more closely the work of one of Dürer’s German contemporaries, Riemenschneider – a great carver of wood whose work was thoroughly examined in the exhibition and catalogue, *Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages*. The facial features of Riemenschneider’s female figures, such as his sculpture of St. Barbara (Fig. 48), closely resemble those of Our Lady of Dublin. They both have clearly carved, double-lidded almond shaped eyes, softly moulded crescent shaped brows, high rounded foreheads, clearly incised thiltrums and lips, and a soft folds of skin underneath small rounded chins. Female figures by Riemenschneider tend though to have more slender faces and throats and more angular jaw-lines. His treatment of the hair, although arranged similarly to that of Our Lady of Dublin, is more erratically carved; it is composed of more curling strands of hair instead of the long sweeping incised lines of Our Lady of Dublin. Additionally, Riemenschneider tends to sculpt more elaborately detailed bodices on the dresses of his figures when compared to

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42 Petrie, 308.

43 Chapuis, Julien (ed.). *Tilman Riemenschneider: Master Sculptor of the Late Middle Ages* (London: Yale University Press, 1999).
the relatively simple bodice of Our Lady of Dublin. His treatment of the breasts is
different as well, the breasts that he carves tend to be more rounded and prominent than
those found on Our Lady of Dublin, and the carving of the drapery found on the figures’
is wholly different. Although in both Our Lady of Dublin and in Riemenschneider’s
female figures the drapery is deeply carved with box-shaped folds, Riemenschneider’s
tend to be more elaborate, there are more small crinkles in the cloth, and more folds
carved in even higher relief than those found on Our Lady of Dublin. In addition,
Riemenschneider carves virtually no long undulating vertical folds, the type which is
most prevalent on Our Lady of Dublin. In a Virgin and Child figure by him now in the
Helen Foresman Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas (Fig. 49), the
Child’s hair is carved in the same series of clearly incised small swirls all over his head
as that of the Dublin figure, however the treatment of the two’s bodies are completely
different. Riemenschneider’s Child doesn’t have any where near the quantity of fat roles
found on the body of the Dublin Child. The faces of the two children are also quite
different; the Dublin Child has a higher more rounded forehead than Riemenschneider’s.
Riemenschneider’s Child’s ears are carved in more detail and both the eyes and cheeks
are more rounded. So, although there are several similarities between Rimenschnieder’s
figures and Our Lady of Dublin, the suggestion that the Dublin figure was carved by
Riemenschneider has to be dismissed.

The composition and pose of the figure is similar to several other wooden German
Madonnas as well. This can be seen in a Virgin of Mercy by Gregor Erhart, c. 1502 (Fig.
50) – which according to Baxendall was destroyed during the bombings of Berlin in
1945 – and to another figure of the Virgin of Mercy by Hans Sixt von Staufen, c. 1521 (Fig. 51). It would seem though that the slightly contraposto position of the Madonna in junction with a sprawled, twisting Child was a common mode of depiction, and appears in several of Riemenschneider’s figures of the Madonna and Child as well. It is possible, though, that Our Lady of Dublin – due to the similarities that it shows to these German figures – is German as well.

It has also been pointed out by several authors (Stalley, Hourihane, and MacLeod) that Our Lady of Dublin could be an English figure, due to its similarities with certain figures from Henry VII’s chapel at Westminster. The short proportions of the Westminster figures – which perspective lengthens when they are viewed in their niches high above the ground – are very like those of Our Lady of Dublin. The long undulating vertical folds of Dublin Madonna’s gown as well as the box shaped folds found on the front and sides of her skirt are paralleled in many of the Westminster figures. These types of folds can be seen on the figure of St. Edmund (Fig. 52) as well as on the figures of Mary Salome and St. Margaret, unfortunately however, there is no extant figure of the Madonna and Child at Westminster, if one ever existed, with which to compare it with. There is also a similarity about the faces of the figure of St. Margaret

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45 Stalley, 233.
47 MacLeod, Unpublished papers, Box 51.
48 Stalley, 223.
49 MacLeod, Unpublished papers, Box 51.
and Our Lady of Dublin; they share the same high rounded forehead and wear similar expressions. The correlations between these sculptures and Our Lady of Dublin argue favourably that the Dublin figure was carved by the same school of sculptors as those who carved the figures for Henry VII’s chapel.

That St. Mary’s Abbey would be in possession of a masterful carving from the same school of sculptors as the Henry VII chapel at Westminster makes sense in terms of St. Mary’s history. St. Mary’s Abbey had a long history of association with England. During the 12th century St. Mary’s was subject to both Combermere and Buildwas, and later had daughter houses in Dunbrody and Abbeylara. St. Mary’s became a favourite of English nobility and officials visiting Ireland up to the time of the Reformation. It is not surprising then, that the Abbey might have been given, or perhaps purchased, a carving of the Madonna and Child by an important sculptor in Britain. Tantalizingly, H.J. Dow speculates that the Westminster figures had their origins in wood sculpture. She believed that the king’s joiner, Thomas Stockton, together with his cousin William Stockton, headed the school of Westminster sculptors. Disappointingly though for our current study, Philip Lindley convincingly argues against this theory and that the Westminster figures may not be by English carvers at all.

Lindley argues that the Westminster figures may have been carved by sculptors from the Low Countries. He states, “Henry VII’s patronage, and that of his court, was dominated, with the key exception of architecture, by foreign artists.” Lindley goes on

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50 Stalley, 244.

to say that the closest parallels to the stone sculpture of Henry VII’s chapel are found in the bronze statuettes on the grate of that same chapel, that these bronze figures were executed by a Dutch smith, and that the closest parallels that these bronze sculptures have are with other Netherlandish figures. He continues,

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a great influx of Low Countries craftsmen into London, and they dominated some crafts, such as stained glass painting. The style of glazing produced by indigenous craftsmen seemed old fashioned by contrast with that of the immigrants and royal court patronage decisively broke the stranglehold of the London guild… it seems likely that sculptors from precisely these areas came to London and worked for Henry VII… In exactly the same way that the work of English glaziers was rendered obsolete by Netherlandish workmen, so, perhaps, were English sculptures old-fashioned by comparison with Netherlandish images. It seems more than plausible then that the Westminster figures were carved by Dutch sculptors working in England, and by extrapolation due to the many stylistic similarities between the Henry VII chapel sculptures and Our Lady of Dublin, that Our Lady of Dublin, may have been carved by sculptors of that same school. It seems most likely to be the work of Netherlandish sculptors, and possibly of Netherlandish sculptors working in Britain.

Regardless of the whether the figure’s provenance is German, English, or as suggested here, Dutch, it is certain to date to the late 14th or early 15th century, and is a contemporary of all of the European figures thus far examined. Our Lady of Dublin is a masterful work of art and its presence in Ireland illustrates the close contacts between Ireland and the rest of Europe.


53 Lindley, 291-292.
The ‘cosmopolitan flavour’ that Stalley described in the figure of Our Lady of Dublin is also apparent in some of the wooden figures of Irish origin. The figure of Christ after the flagellation (Fig. 53) from Fethard, Co. Tipperary is an excellent example of this. The figure of Christ is approximately life-size, and is very narrow in profile. It seems to have been originally carved from a single block – with the exception of the thorns which were carved separately and then inserted into holes in the crown – and many repairs and replacements have been made to the figure in the intervening centuries. The rope which binds Christ’s hands appears never to have been carved, but rather an actual rope has been used and stiffened with gesso to hold it in place.

The early history of this figure is not known. The first published account does not appear until 1874 in an article by J.W. Cantwell in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Irish Antiquaries*, in which the figure is referred to as a Man of Sorrows. According to Cantwell, this figure as well as two other figures – a John the Baptist and a figure of God the Father from a Trinity group – was in the Catholic church in Fethard, Co. Tipperary, having been moved there from an older Catholic church in that town, c. 1822. The three figures were exhibited to the public on Trinity Sunday every year as part of a local ‘pattern’, when they were still kept in the older Catholic church. The pattern discontinued around the time of the building of the newer church. According to the same article, the figure were traditionally believed to have belonged to the “ancient church of the Holy Trinity” and that when that church “passed into the hands of the

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54 Stalley, 233.
Protestants these figures were removed from that building and buried.55 However, there was more than one Church of the Holy Trinity in Fethard, and so precisely which church the figures belonged to is no longer known.56 Additionally, while there is no evidence to disprove the story of the figures having been buried, there is nothing to substantiate it either. If they were in fact buried and subsequently disinterred to be placed in the older Catholic Church, they could not have been buried long. Although there was much damage to the figure – which was later rectified with many plaster repairs – the damage was not as extensive as one would expect in a piece of wood long buried. The survival of much of the polychrome also does not seem in keeping with the story. The most compelling evidence against the burial of the three figures though is simply their size. All three figures are roughly life size. This would have necessitated the digging of either three big holes – comparable in size to three graves – or one giant hole in which to bury them. This would involve a tremendous amount of work, and if the purpose behind burying the figures was to hide them, certainly the digging of such a hole or holes would have been noticed by those who they wished to hide the figures from. It is likely then, that this story, like so many other of the discovery stories associated with medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures, is a myth.

In a series of letters between L.S. Gogan, Deputy Keeper of the Art Division of the National Museum, and Rev. Timothy O’Dwyer, a parish priest from Fethard, Co. Tipperary, it is learned that all three Fethard figures were first brought to the National Museum in 1932 for an exhibition of ecclesiastical objects put together for the


56 MacLeod, Medieval Wood Sculptures in Ireland, 59.
Eucharistic Congress which was to take place in Dublin at that time. Subsequent to this exhibition, it was requested that the carvings remain at the National Museum on ‘perpetual loan’, however the request was denied. Restoration work to the figures was discussed at this time, and was approved by the Archbishop of Cashel, Dr. Harily in 1932. It is not known if the figures were ever returned to Fethard or if they remained in the custody of the museum from the time that the restoration work was approved until 1948 when the loan of the figures was finally agreed to by Rev. Canon J.J. Ryan, parish priest of Fethard.\footnote{Catriona MacLeod, Unpublished Papers, Box 52.}

The lack of restoration records for all of the Irish wooden figure sculptures has been a great hindrance to their study; however in the case of the Fethard Christ some clues exist to what work might have been carried out, both in photographic evidence and in letters between the Museum and various people associated with the Augustinians of Fethard from 1932-1980. In November of 1932 it was initially suggested that the more modern coats of polychrome be removed from the figure, and that “new hands and part of a new face” would need to be constructed.\footnote{Ibid.} From a photograph taken before the restoration of the figure (Fig. 54) it can be seen that a pair of crude forearms and hands from an earlier ‘restoration’ were removed and replaced by the more delicately modelled plaster ones currently on the carving. Thick over paints to the figure were removed and cracks in the wood just before the shoulders – which from their jagged edges do not seem to be original – were repaired. The lower portion of the nose and possibly the mouth also seem to be plaster reconstructions made at this time. At least part of the rope is a
replacement as well, since the only extant portions of the rope in the pre-restoration photograph is the part which lies against the figure's legs. A letter from Breandon O Riordain, Director of the National Museum to Prof. F.X. Martin of the Augustinian House of Studies in Ballyboden, Co. Dublin dated 18th June, 1980, states that when the Fethard Christ was received by the Museum it was 'in very bad condition with dry rot and furniture beetle,' and that the wood was subsequently treated and strengthened. An earlier letter from an unknown person associated with the National Museum, dated 12th March, 1948 and addressed to Canon Ryan, specifies that the wood was treated with Biotex and that the wood was 'strengthened from behind'.

Although often described as a Man of Sorrows, the Fethard Christ could perhaps more accurately be called a Christ after the Flagellation, or perhaps a Herrgottsrub – Repose of the Lord. When Christ is shown as the Man of Sorrows, he nearly always displays the five wounds and usually is shown either sitting on or emerging from the sepulchre. The Fethard Christ is shown awaiting the crucifixion. He sits upon the rock of Golgotha, his hands are still bound with the ropes which bound him to the whipping post. His knees are torn from falling while carrying the cross and the heavy crown of thorns weighs his head. The theme of Christ after the flagellation first appears in Italian painting of the 14th century and became particularly popular in 17th century Spanish art. This theme encompasses both Ecce Homo images and Herrgottsrub images, the principle difference between the two being that in Herrgottsrub images Christ is seated, often on

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59 Ibid.


the rock of Golgotha. That this is the rock of Golgotha that the Fethard Christ sits upon is evidenced by the skull placed into the left side of the rock. The skull has an additional allegorical meaning; it is also meant to represent the skull of Adam. During the Middle Ages, it was thought that the place of the crucifixion was also the burying place of Adam. The skull therefore, not only indicates the location, literally ‘place of the skull’, but also reminds the viewers of the original sin of Adam, and Christ’s suffering to redeem that sin.

Although Ecce Homo and Hergottsrub images are found throughout European art from the late Gothic era through the Baroque, the Fethard Christ seems to have the most in common with Spanish works of the late 15th and early 16th centuries both in terms of sentiment and style. In examples from other countries, the emphasis seems to be placed more on the spirituality and holiness of the Christ figure, than on the physical suffering of his body. To briefly examine the related motif of Christ at the Column in Italian art, in a painting of this subject by Bramante, c. 1490 (Fig. 55), Christ’s body remains unscourged. Even the crown of thorns does not pierce the flesh of his brow. The slightly earlier painting by da Messina, c. 1475-79 (Fig. 56), does show Christ bleeding, but only the smallest droplets more resembling sweat than the profusion of blood that is seen in both Spanish examples and on the Fethard Christ. Even in the Baroque example of the Ecce Homo by Dominico Feti, c. 1600-10 (Fig. 57), the wounds that Christ bears on his body seem more like flesh wounds and the expression of anguish that he wears on his face appears to be more mental than physical.

62 Schiller, 74.

63 Hall, 81.
The same can be said of German figures. In the several examples of both Christ at the Column and the Ecce Homo by Albrecht Dürer at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries, the physical suffering of Christ is never depicted, it is rather his mental and emotional anguish that the artist has chosen to emphasize. This can be seen in the Ecce Homo from the engraved *Large Passion*’s Ecce Homo c. 1512 (Fig. 58). It can also be seen in the Kaisheim Altarpiece by Hans Holbien the Elder, c. 1502 (Fig. 59), where a *Hergotssrub* figure is depicted. Christ suffers mentally and spiritually, but his body is virtually untouched.

Spanish art leaves no doubt as to the bodily suffering that Christ has undergone. A figure of Christ at the Column c. 1523 (Fig. 60) by Diego de Siloe graphically illustrates this. De Siloe’s Christ is covered with open, bleeding wounds, and bruises. The body contorts with physical pain. Although in later examples of the Ecce Homo in Spanish art an increasing emphasis is placed on the spiritual element, the physical dimension of Christ’s suffering is never forgotten, as in Juan de Juni’s Ecce Homo c. 1560-70 (Fig. 61), or in an 18th century example from Granada (Fig. 62) now in the collection of the Martin D’Arcy Gallery of Art, Loyola University Museum of Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art, in Chicago.

The visceral quality of Spanish Ecce Homos and figures of Christ at the Column is echoed in the Fethard Christ. Although the Irish *Hergottssrub* is slightly more contemplative – and in this the extensive restoration work carried out on the figure’s face must be kept in mind, the nose and possibly the mouth as well are plaster reconstructions – the physical suffering of the body is still evident. Red polychrome is intermixed with
the flesh-tone over the entire figure and the torn flesh of the knees is carved as well as painted.

The folds of the figure’s draperies also have correlations with Spanish art, and help to date the figure. The folds of the perizonium are particularly reminiscent of the Hispanic-Flemish school (Fig. 63). They are in fact quite similar to the folds found in a painting of the *Death of the Virgin* (Fig. 64) by an unknown Spanish master, sometimes referred to as the Master of La Sisla, of this school. The smaller striated folds of the perizonium around the hips of the Fethard Christ are very like those found in the hanging draperies of the Madonna’s bed in the painting of the *Death of Virgin*, dated to the 1490’s. In both examples the folds are primarily small and straight, with a few small box folds. This same kind of drapery pattern can also be seen in several other examples of Spanish painting.

The large boxy folds in the drapery immediately underneath the Fethard Christ’s right thigh (Fig. 65) are harder to place, although they too are reminiscent of some seen in Spanish painting of the late 15th century. This can be seen in the drapery of the Madonna’s cloak in Pedro Beruguette’s *Annunciation* (Fig. 66) from the latter half of the 15th century. In this example, the folds are exceptionally geometric and box-like.

The more erratic and ‘bunched-up’ folds of the very bottom of the Fethard Christ’s drapery are also directly reminiscent of some seen in several of the figures from the *Death of the Virgin* by the Master of la Sisla, previously referred to. From the surmounting evidence of both the sentiment of the carving and the style of the drapery folds of the Fethard Christ, it would seem that this Irish carving was directly inspired by Spanish art and likely dates to the late 15th or early 16th century. Additional evidence for
an earlier rather than a later date exists in the slight ‘gothic-twist’ of the figure’s torso. It should also be noted that if the Fethard Christ does in fact date to this time – when images of the Ecce Homo were just beginning to become popular Europe-wide – it was amongst the *avant guarde* of art and illustrates the artistic dialog which must have existed between Ireland and mainland Europe at that time.

Another trace of continental influence in the Fethard Christ is found in the proportions of the figure. The Fethard figure has an elongated torso. The distance between the hips and knees is quite short, and the length of the calves is fairly naturalistic. When the viewer stands at the same level as the carving these proportions seem odd, however the figure might appear differently if placed at a height. The torso would appear shorter due to visual foreshortening. The short length of the upper legs of the seated figure would help to keep the knees from blocking the viewers sight of the body of the figure, and the more natural length of the calves, the portion of the carving most directly in the viewers line of sight, would appear completely in keeping with the rest of the carving when the torso was shortened with perspective. This technique was known from the late 13th century in Italy in the work of Giovanni Pisano, and was frequently used by Donatello in the 15th century. Additional evidence that the Fethard Christ may indeed have been placed at such a height is found in the right foot. This foot is the lowest portion of the Christ figure and closest to the viewer in space, and it is much worn – as if from touching or rubbing (Fig. 67). Why should the foot of the figure be particularly worn in this manner instead of some other part of the Fethard Christ’s body?

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If the figure was placed at a slight height, it is possible this foot was the only portion of the figure which the viewer could reach, and devotion to the figure resulted in its constant touching.

One peculiar element of the carving of the Fethard Christ is as of yet without explanation. Ribs are not carved on the rather short ribcage, instead a series of ridges radiates out from the where the navel should be placed were it carved, to the bottom of the ribcage. This strange aberration in the figure’s anatomy is so far without parallel, it is not seen in the other Irish carvings, nor has it been yet found on Continental examples. The anatomy of the shoulders, extant portions of the arms and the legs is well studied, and oddities in the proportions of the rest of the figure, as explained above, are deliberate. Therefore, the carving and placement of these ridges must also have resulted from a deliberate decision by the sculptor, and seem likely to have been modelled after an example which he had seen elsewhere. What this example may have been, though, is not known.

Although the Fethard Christ is heavily influenced by Continental art – and by Spanish art in particular – it is still most definitely a work of Irish craftsmanship. The subject of the Ecce Homo is found in extant in Irish stone carving, for example one found at the Carmelite Priory in Kildare, co. Kildare (Fig. 68), and one in the Cathedral of that same city (Fig. 69). Both are the seated Hergottsrub type, and the one from the Cathedral in Kildare is particularly similar in sentiment to the Fethard figure. In both, Christ is nude except for the cloth draped around the waste. Both figures are similarly slender, in comparison to the more corpulent figure from the Carmelite Priory. They have the same expression around the eyes. Additional evidence for the Fethard Christ’s Irishness is, as
observed in other examples of Irish wood carving, a simplicity to the carving which is lacking in continental sculpture. Anatomy is acknowledged, but not over-emphasized, and the true mastery in the piece is found in the abstract design of the folds of the perizonium. Despite the fact that parallels for the types of folds used can be found in Hispanic-Flemish art, the particular combination of types of folds and their arrangement resonates with the sort of abstract design favoured by Irish carvers. This would then indicate that the Fethard Christ is an Irish work, heavily influenced by Spanish art.
CONCLUSION

From the evidence described it can be seen that while the specific genre of wooden figure sculpture may have been introduced to Ireland during the early Anglo-Norman period, the sensibilities of what might be called the Irish aesthetic in art remained consistent with earlier carving. This aesthetic is one of compositional harmony and abstract design, and can be seen in extant examples of woodcarving both pre- and post-conquest. In the later medieval wooden figure sculpture naturalism is largely disregarded and instead the Irish artist shows his mastery through the well-balanced compositions of the figures and in the arrangement of the drapery folds. In many cases the figure is treated like a scaffold over which the sculptor can hang his abstract design of folds. Even in figures which borrow heavily from Continental examples, such as the Fethard Christ, this aesthetic is paid heed. There is never an over-emphasis on anatomy, and the drapery — though the style of it may be borrowed — is arranged in a manner consistent with the Irish aesthetic.

Medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture did, though, borrow heavily from both English and Continental art. This extended beyond simply the incorporation of certain traits — such as the convention of the Madonna pulling her cloak across her lap as seen in the Kilcorban Madonna, or the small twirl of drapery found at the bottom of the Holy Ghost Madonna’s skirts, both of which had their origins in English sculpture, and the Hispanic-Flemish box folds found on the drapery of the Fethard Christ — to iconography as well. The shared iconography amongst all European art, Irish included, illustrates the communication of ideas between Ireland and the rest of Europe at this time. This is seen in the hieratic and richly iconographical images of the Madonna and Child in the
Romanesque mode seen in the surviving sculptures from Kilcorban, Athlone, and Waterford. It can also be seen in the Hergottsrub image of the Fethard Christ, a carving that seems to have been made at a time roughly concurrent with when such images were just gaining popularity on the continent.

There is possibly evidence of certain regional styles to be seen within the extant carvings, particularly in the form of the head-on-a-pike method of carving certain figures. This feature can be seen on two surviving carvings from the west of Ireland, the Kilconnell Head and the figure of St. Molaise from Inismurray, Co. Sligo. From photographic evidence this method also seems to have been used in the carving of the no-longer extant figure of St. Brendan from Inisglora. It could be that this method of carving figures was widespread across the country and that it is simply coincidence that the ones which have survived are all from the west; however both the Holy Ghost Madonna and the Kilconnell Head seem to have been carved by the same school of sculptors. Although the extant heads of both figures are relatively the same size, the Holy Ghost Madonna was carved from a single block of wood, whereas the Kilconnell Head was carved from at least two. If the assumption that they were carved by the same school of sculptors is correct, this could indicate that each was carved in a manner to suit the regional tastes of the patrons.

The sculptures which have survived have done so through chance. It is amazing to consider that 21 known figures of Irish medieval origin have survived, despite the fragility of the medium, repeated waves of iconoclasm, and that the institutions which might have sheltered them have lain in ruins for centuries. The figures that survive come from a geographical region which extends over most of the island and speak to what must
have been a widespread tradition of religious wooden figure sculpture. In addition to these figures of Irish origin, a number of wooden figure sculptures of foreign origin—many of which were likely in the country during the medieval period—also survive in Ireland, although those sculptures—except where they have been misattributed as Irish in previous publications—are beyond the scope of this thesis. In most cases it was the devotion of the people which enabled the survival of these figures.

The surviving sculptures have not done so unscathed, however. Many are extensively damaged by decay and wood worm, and several others show evidence of the iconoclast’s sword. The pattern of damage to the extant figures which appears to be the result of iconoclasm is surprising. Almost invariably it is shown in mutilation to limbs of the figures. The hands are removed, and occasionally the feet. That these cuts were deliberate in many of the figures is evidenced by the cleanness of the break, and in some cases the necessity of two cuts with the blade to remove a limb. This can be seen in the Clonfert Madonna discussed in the catalogue. One of the Madonna’s arms has been lopped off with a single swing of a blade; we know this because it left an indentation on the torso of the figure in exact line with the cut. The Christ-Child, whom she holds in her extant arm, is missing one of his arms as well. In this case two cuts with the blade were needed, one horizontal and one vertical, since at the point where the arm was cut the underside of it was still attached to the torso.

It seems odd that such this was the way that the iconoclasts chose to mutilate the carvings. Would it not have been easier and more expedient to chop off the head or halve the figure? Perhaps this was not done because it would not have destroyed the figure’s identity. The manner of identifying the figures did not lie in their visage, but rather in the
identifying symbols which they often held in their hands. The one figure that also seemed to have its feet, as well as its hands deliberately removed was a figure of the Risen Christ from the Holy Ghost Hospital in Waterford. Perhaps originally this carving displayed the stigmata – which would have been on both hands and feet – and so both hands and feet were removed.

Another option could possibly be that it was not iconoclasts that mutilated the figures, but maybe people that were trying to save them. If the identifying symbols were removed, those sheltering the figures could claim that it was not a figure of a saint, but rather a depiction of some non-religious person or a decorative item for their home. This sounds far fetched, but when one takes into account some of the other stories that were told in order to preserve figures – such as that told by the Combha family in whose keeping the Askeaton Madonna was until the late 19th century, who used to say when questioned about the figure that it was carved with a spoon by a retarded boy – it may be a plausible explanation. Of course, it could be as well that since the limbs often stuck out from the statue that they were simply broken off. In a few of the figures, such as on the arms and legs of the Kilcorban Crucifixion figure, it is apparent from the jaggedness of the break that this was the case. But in the majority of the figures that are thus damaged, the breaks do not occur where the limb was likely to have been weakest. Often the breaks are just before the shoulder where the wood is thick, or on a vertical portion of the arm that does not protrude substantially from the body. And as has been noted these breaks are often too clean to not have been deliberate.

A series of stories has evolved around these figures which attempt to explain both the survival and the discovery of many of the carvings. Most of these stories have more
the air of folklore about them than of a factual account of the survival of the figure in question. These stories also usually involve a semi-miraculous event, such as a figure being saved from a fire in which half of it was burnt (likely to account for the flat back), or its preservation as a hog-trough (in order to explain the hollow of the wood). Several of the figures are said to have been found within the hollow of a tree, but as previously explained, the wood of these figures would not be so well-preserved if this was the case. One wonders if the origins of that story lie in it having once been explained as having been carved from a hollow tree (again to account for the hollowed back) and in the retelling, the story became that it was found in a hollow tree. Regardless of the stories origins, however, the prevalence of such semi-miraculous tales and discovery-myths seem to have emerged from out of a sociological need of the people to explain the survival of the carvings, and to raise them to the level of relic. So much of their religious material culture had been lost that it is not surprising that the survival of the any of the items would seem miraculous, and so the people came to imbue them with more importance than what the figures might have warranted in their original context. The association with a miraculous event would achieve this. Several of the figures of been restored in some way. The lack of restoration records for most of them, however, has been a great hindrance in their study. Often, photographic evidence was relied upon to determine what might have been done to the figures. In most cases the most recent restoration work, conducted in the mid- twentieth century, involved a removal of the more modern layers of paint to reveal the medieval polychrome underneath. Where repaints were done in these cases, they rarely cover the entire figure and are largely sympathetic to the carving and to the extant medieval
polychrome. There is evidence – in the form of correspondence between the Museum and various people – that during the restorations conservation of the wood was often undertaken as well. It is certain that this was much needed at the time that it was done, and in some cases – the Kilcorban St. Catherine being one example – it is needed again. Unfortunately, however, the mid-twentieth century restorers often extended their restoration and conservation work to reconstruction as well. It is regrettable that this was carried out, often with very little evidence on which to base these reconstructions. This was the case with the face of the Kilcorban Child, the Fethard Christ, and most extensively to the figure of St. Molaise.

It would be exceedingly valuable to have a conservator re-evaluate the extant medieval wooden figure sculpture. Several pieces have never been properly conserved – this is true for the entire collection from the Holy Ghost Hospital in Waterford, currently located in the Waterford Treasures Museum, and the figure of St. Francis / St. Anthony in Multyfarnham. In these cases the wood should be treated, if possible, to help prevent further deterioration of the wood. Active rot is evident in the figure of the Holy Ghost Risen Christ, and possibly active wood-worm in the figure of St. Francis / St. Anthony. The thick layers of modern paint which cover all of the Holy Ghost figures and the Athlone Madonna ought to be removed in order to reveal the medieval polychrome which surely lies underneath. In several cases, although restoration work was conducted on these figures only half a century ago, it is needed again badly. There seems to be extensive and active rot in the head of the Kilcorban St. Catherine, a large chunk of the veil has fallen out since it was last photographed by MacLeod and the top of the figure’s head is becoming detached. Additionally, the extensive ‘reconstructions’ made to
several of the figures should be removed where possible. It also might be interesting to see what dendro-chronological tests might reveal about the dating and origins of the wood of these sculptures. Although such tests do involve the removal of a small sample of wood, this could perhaps be taken from several of the pieces along the outer circumference of the hollow in the back of the sculptures. In this way, the damage done to the piece would be negligible and the information attained immensely valuable.

There is still much research to be done in the study of medieval Irish wooden figure sculpture. Although this thesis attempts to touch on the figures' context in both Irish and greater-European art, there is more work to be done. Medieval Irish stone sculpture was the primary indigenous medium to which the figures were compared, however other correlations maybe found in other extant contemporary genres of Irish art. Additionally, the figures ought to be placed more firmly within their greater-European context, and the dialog between them examined. Influence almost never only works in a singular direction, and it would be interesting to see not only how the Irish sculptures were influenced by Continental art, but how they may have influenced those works in turn. If possible, the sculptures which could not be located or viewed in the course of this study should be and incorporated into future catalogues.
CATALOGUE

This catalogue is divided into three sections. Section I consists of wooden sculptures that are both medieval and Irish. Section II consists of selected wooden sculptures that are apparently Irish, but post-medieval in date. Section III consists of selected foreign medieval wooden statues in Ireland. Neither of the second two sections claims to be comprehensive. In addition to the sculptures included here, a few other medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures are thought to be extant. Due to difficulties of access, a figure of St. Molua (Fig. 94) known to be kept in the Catholic Church at Killaloe, Co. Kilkenny, and the figure of the Athlone Madonna (Fig. 95) at the Poor Clares convent, Nun’s Island, Galway city were not able to be studied. A third figure, St. Gobnat (Fig. 96) in Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, was only able to be viewed very briefly by me, and although photographs were obtained, I do not feel that I can at this point adequately assess it.

In addition to these, the collection of medieval wooden figure sculptures once in the now dissolved museum at St. Kieran’s College, Kilkenny city have gone missing (with the exception of the figure of St. Molua, mentioned above), and have thus far proved untrackable. These figures include a figure of St. Mo Cheallóg or St. Martin (Fig. 97), and possibly also figures of a St. Nadán and a figure of St. Patrick formerly in St. Patrick’s Church, Kilkenny city – although I have only found very brief references to these last two figures. The figure identified by Duignan and Killanin as St. Nadán may be the figure of St. Mo Cheallóg, since they do not mention the latter figure. An unattributed photograph of a 17th century figure that could possibly be thought to be a St. Patrick (Fig. 98) found in MacLeod’s notes may be the Kilkenny figure. It is worth
noting that this figure bears a great resemblance to another 17th century wooden figure attributed as St. Patrick (Fig. 99) currently in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin.

Finally, two other figures that are not included should be mentioned. The Bruff Madonna (Fig. 100), last published by Hourihane in 1984, is unable to be found. The Healy family who were its keepers twenty years ago are no longer in the area of Bruff, Co. Limerick, and despite the generous help of the priest at that parish, the current whereabouts of the statue remain a mystery. The figure of St. Maol-Rúan (Fig. 101) which was last in the keeping of Mrs. Wilifred Mythen of Crossabeg, Co. Wexford, is thought to no longer be extant. It was tragically stolen approximately ten years ago.
Section I: Late Medieval Irish Wooden Figure Sculpture

Kilcorban Madonna and Child (Fig. 70; Dig. Illus. 1-5)

1. Location: Clonfert Diocesan Museum, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway

2. Working title of the carving: Kilcorban Madonna and Child

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 92 cm (approximately).

(b) type of wood: Oak¹

(c) number of blocks: Single block, a small section (about 4 cm) just below the Madonna’s left elbow appears to have been broken off and then reattached. The hand and the rest of the forearm remained intact when this section broke because the hand solidly connects with the side of the cape.

(d) dowel holes: There are two visible. One in the broken stump of Mary’s right arm, and one in the break just before where Christ’s right shoulder would have been.

(e) evidence of polychrome: There are traces of gold-leaf on the Madonna’s crown and hair, as well as on the V-shaped collar of her dress. The face of the Madonna is fully painted in a flesh tone, except on the bridge of her nose, where it seems to have been worn away. Following the carved brow ridge, black crescent shaped eyebrows are each painted in a single line. The scleras of Mary’s wide eyes are painted white; the irises are painted blue encircling a black pupil. There is a white dot of reflected

¹ All identifications of the type of wood used is as previously published, confirmed by my own observations of grain, color, and occasionally weight when possible. In order to have a definite identification of the type of wood used, microscopic analysis would have to be conducted.
light painted on top of the iris and pupil on each of her eyes. Her cheeks are flushed a carmine-coloured red. Her lips are painted so dark a red that they almost appear black, but a brighter red shows through from underneath this layer. All of the paint on her face looks much thicker than the rest of the polychrome and seems to be much more modern. There are remnants of dark blue polychrome on the torso of her dress. Her cloak is brown, but traces of carmine still cling to the cloak in places. Her extant hand has some flesh-coloured polychrome left on it, but it is of a different colour, and seems much older than that on the face. Over the entire piece are traces of white paint, possibly gesso, and some of the red-lead priming is visible. The colouring of Christ’s face is the same as his Mother’s, but his hair is painted brown. His robe is white with a red V-necked collar. The throne is painted a very dark colour, possibly black, although the lighting makes it difficult to tell. The painted details around Christ’s eyes are smudged, and appear different than in MacLeod’s photographs.

(f) general condition: Mary’s right arm is broken off from just below the elbow, a dowel hole indicates a repair was attempted to it. On her other arm, in almost the same place, a small section (about 4 cm) was broken out of the arm but was fitted back in. Two small stubs underneath the bottom of Christ’s robes indicate that there were no longer extant feet. Both of his arms are missing from just before the beginnings of his shoulders. A dowel hole in the left side indicated that there was an attempted repair made to at least this side. The top of Mary’s head, in the portion where her crown is carved, is gone, apparently from decay, and there was a poor
plaster repair to this section. The whole figure has evidence of rot and
decay (all of which seems to be dormant now), which is especially
prevalent at the back and bottom of the carving, as well as on the top of
the throne. According to the museum label the figure was restored by
MacLeod in the 1940’s / 1950’s.

4. Description:

(a) head: The top of the Madonna’s head has been damaged by decay, and a
plaster repair, which has been painted dark brown, has been laid over top
of this. This plaster repair could also possibly be thick gesso, it is difficult
to determine. Below the missing top of the head are the remnants of a
thick crown. The width of it varies from between about a centimetre to
2.5 cm, depending upon how much of the top of the head remains extant in
that particular section. Patches of gold leaf still cling to the crown. Her
hair, which stays fairly close to the side of her head and neck, falls behind
her shoulders. It is crimped into 'accordion-style' waves, and was also
gilded. The portion of her forehead which shows beneath her crown is
quite short, the distance between her crown and her brow is only about 2.5
cm. The rest of her face, from below the brow, is quite long. The painted
black crescent-shaped eyebrows follow the lines of her slightly upraised
carved brow, which is situated above large, archaic eyes. The eyes bulge
out and there is some indication of lids in how the flesh rises to meet the
white of the open eye, although the eyelids do not have sharply defined
lines. The Madonna’s nose is long and thin and her carved nostrils are
quite dainty, except for the large black splotches of paint daubed in them.
Her mouth is tiny and her thin lips smile gently. The chin is long and pointy and the jaw-line is angular. Her neck is wide and long, and ends in the V-necked collar of the Madonna’s dress.

(b) body: The V-shaped collar of the Madonna’s dress is about 2.5 cm wide and large patches of gold leaf still cling to it. Her shoulders are very narrow. Her cloak flares out from behind the collar of her dress, and stands above her shoulders. There are traces of brown, red, and white (possibly gesso) polychrome on the cloak.

Mary’s cloak is pulled across her lap from the left to the right underneath her broken right arm (left side), the red-lead priming of the wood shows through in several places. On the right half of the figure no clear delineation is made between the cloak and the dress. The cloak falls from Mary’s wide-spread knees and ends at its lowest point about 10 cm from the bottom of the figure, and rises on the right-hand side to about 20 cm from the bottom of the statue. Between her knees falling to the bottom of her cloak, are two long loopy folds that are almost, but not quite, V-shaped. The wood below the line of the cloak is too rotted and decayed to ascertain any details and large chunks of wood from the bottom of the figure are missing.

The folds on the Madonna’s torso fall in rippling vertical ridges and flounce out slightly over the flat band of her belt. The belt is situated just above the small bulge of her stomach. The same undulating folds continue underneath the belt over her stomach. There is no indication of breasts whatsoever. The sleeves of the Madonna’s dress cling tightly to
her arms. Mary’s right arm is broken just below the elbow. That this was not part of the original construction is evidenced by the jaggedness of the break. There is a small dowel hole in the stump indicating that an attempt at repair was made. The arm would have been outstretched and either held an object or was gesturing towards the Christ-Child that sits between Mary’s divided knees. The Madonna’s extant hand rests on her knee. This hand is rather flat and the fingers all seem to be about a joint too long.

The profile of the statue is very narrow. Both Mother and Child seem to lean forward expectantly. The sides of the Madonna’s cloak fall in small, repetitive loopy folds. Mary sits on a low thrown with no back, although her cloak seems to imitate a chair back. The actual rendering of the thrown is nothing more than a thick vertical board that Mary sits upon.

The back of the statue is flat and there is much evidence of decay. A long crevice which has been filled in with plaster runs from the back of the head down most of the length of the torso. The back is hollowed from where the thrown begins to the bottom of the figure. This hollow is rather shallow at the top and gradually becomes deeper towards the bottom of the statue, while the carving of the figure tapers towards the bottom. The back is unpainted.

(c) Christ-Child: The Christ-Child sits between the Madonna’s divided knees, and he is carved from the same block. His torso and head are carved in the round. His face is chubbier than his Mother’s, but over all the features are similar. The flesh tone on his face is of the same thick paint as on the Madonna’s face, however, the paint on the Child’s face obscures the way
that facial features were carved. His eyes, which are painted as slits, are
carved large and archaic like the Madonna’s. The carved line of his brow
is higher and more crescent-shaped than the painted eyebrows. Christ’s
tiny mouth has the same gentle smile as his Mother, but the paint of the
bottom lip makes it appear much thicker than the carving. His chin is long
in comparison to the rest of his face. His forehead, not being cut-off by a
crown, is much higher than the Madonna’s. The hair is cut high on his
forehead and low over his ears, as Macleod describes, in ‘fluted ripples’
around his entire head. The top of the head is smooth. The neck of the
Christ-Child is thick and long and ends in the same sort of V-necked collar
as on the Madonna’s gown. The Child’s collar, however, falls slightly
lower than that of the Madonna and it is painted bright carmine red. The
remnants of paint that are on his robe are white. His torso and legs are
very long – his proportions are those of a small adult, not a child. His
arms are missing from just before the shoulders, giving the figure a very
narrow appearance. There is a dowel hole in the stub of his right shoulder,
evidencing an attempted repair. The baby leans forward and slightly to
the right. Although his arms are now missing from the shoulders, it can be
surmised from other depictions in the Romanesque mode that his right arm
was likely raised in blessing and that he held either a book or an orb in his
left. His legs are also widely splayed like those of his Mother, and his
thighs are much shorter than his long shins. The Christ-Child’s robe flares
out in a flat bell-shape, from his hips to either side of his divided legs,
against his Mother’s gown. Underneath the bottom drapery of his robe are two stubs where his feet must have broken off.

5. **Identification of the subject**: This is a hieratic Romanesque depiction of the Madonna and Child. The Madonna is shown enthroned, her legs widely splayed with the Christ-Child seated between them. The Child is fully clothed and both figures face the viewer. This type of front facing, enthroned Virgin and Child has its iconographical origins in Byzantine art. In Romanesque art, the Madonna and Child are shown as they are depicted here, in a sort of double-enthronement. The Madonna is shown enthroned and regal. The Child is enthroned in the lap of his mother. The Madonna was continuously compared to a throne from Early Christian times through the Romanesque period, both in terms of Isaiah’s vision of the Lord enthroned in Isa. 6:1, and in terms of throne of Solomon. She also came to represent the church, and therefore Christ can also be understood as sitting enthroned in his Church. The Christ-Child and the Madonna can also be seen as representing the Logos and Theotokos – the god and the godbearer – illustrating the indivisibility of both figures’ human and divine nature. This view was authorized by the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In thus viewing the figure of Christ as the Divine Wisdom made flesh and his mother therefore as the bearer or seat of that Wisdom, images of this sort came to be known as the *sedes sapientiae* – the Seat of Wisdom.\(^2\) So while this Romanesque enthroned Madonna and Child is compositionally simple, the underlying iconography is rich and complex.

6. **Comments**: (See Chapter 2: *The Kilcorban Madonna*, pp. 31-38.)

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St. Molaise (Fig. 71; Dig. Illus. 6)


2. Working title of the carving: St. Molaise

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 1.27 m.

(b) type of wood: Oak

(c) number of blocks: Two, the neck and head are carved from a separate block than the rest of the body. It appears that the neck and head piece are fitted into the collar of the amice.

(d) dowel holes: There are two possible small dowel holes on the front-left of the sculpture, located approximately halfway between the bottom of the sculpture and the arm. It is also possible that these were two large worm holes that have been filled in with plaster.

(e) evidence of polychrome: there are traces of a white paint or gesso over the entire figure, but no other indications of polychrome remain.

(f) general condition: much of this carving is a modern reconstruction. Virtually the whole face and much of the hair is the work of a 20th century sculptor. Plaster repairs have been made to the body as well. Both arms of the
figure are broken just above below the elbows. The right arm looks as if it would have been raised in blessing. There were many cracks in the wood, which have been filled in during modern 'repairs'. There are also several worm holes. The dalmatic is broken off at the bottom.

4. Description:

(a) head: The head is largely a modern creation. The hair of the long narrow head is comprised of a cap of long fluted curls emerging from a centre point. The figure has a long forehead, the brow is not carved. The eyes bulge out drastically. Without paint it is impossible to tell if they were meant to be open or shut. The round cheek bones are very prominent. The nose is long and thin, and there is a deeply incised thiltrum. The mouth is small, thin and straight; it neither smiles nor frowns. Along the strong jaw-line is an odd-looking beard carved in a series of deeply incised lines approximately 3.5 cm long. There is no moustache. The ears seem to be part of the original carving, not the modern restorations. They are rendered in great detail, and the left ear especially is very realistic. The neck is very long and only slightly thinner than the head. The neck sits in a hole in the collar of the amice and is in this way joined to the block that the rest of the figure is carved from.

(a) body: The collar of the amice is very wide and high, especially behind the neck. The figure's shoulders are narrow and sloping. The chasuble falls straight until the point where the arms emerge from underneath it. Both arms are broken off below the elbows, right after they emerge from the chasuble. The figure's right hand looks as if it could have been raised in
blessing, and perhaps the other hand held some sort of object of identity, since this arm seems as if it was held straight out. Below the arms, the chasuble falls in long V-shaped folds. The end of the chasuble is pointed. The figure wears a dalmatic and tunicle underneath the chasuble. Both are carved in long, undulated vertical folds. The dalmatic is approximately 12-15 cm shorter than the tunicle. The bottom of the tunicle seems to have been broken at the bottom. Below this is a strange mushroom-stalk like base. The figure has a very shallow profile.

5. Identification of the subject: There is very little iconographical evidence for the identification of this saint. He wears the robes of an ecclesiastic and is tonsured. However the tradition is very firm that this is a carving of St. Molaise (although the figure does not wear an abbot’s mitre). St Molaise is also known as Laisren mac Delain. He was the founder and abbot of the Innismurray monastery in the 6th century. He is also the man who imposed, as penance, the banishment of Columbcille.

6. Comments: Much debate surrounds nearly every aspect of this statue and its history. It has been dated as early as the 12th century to as late as the late 15th century. Nothing of this figure’s past is known prior to the 19th century. The first time that history takes note of the figure was early in the 19th century in an account related to Wakeman. The figure was said to have been stolen from Teach Molaise, an early Irish stone church, and carried out to sea by boat. It was then thrown overboard and used as a target for rifle and pistol practice; afterwards it was left out at sea. However, miraculously the next morning it was found in its accustomed place in the church. MacLeod states that it was said that at some
point a Captain Morgan landed from a warship on the island and slashed the figure’s face with a sword. She goes on to say that plaster repairs were attempted to the face as early as 1834. The first published account of this figure was in 1838, when it was given a cursory mention by O’Donovan in his description of a figure of St. Brendan on Innisglora. He states, “The resemblance which it (St. Brendan) bears to Father Molaise on Inish Murray is striking, but the latter is better preserved as being placed in a roofed chapel.” Unfortunately the figure of St. Brendan is no longer extant; it has not been seen since the early 20th century.

From a sketch by Caesar Otway (Dig. Illus. 7) and a photograph by Dunraven (Dig. Illus. 8), it can be told that the two had similarly shaped heads, wore a high collared amice, and both appear to have been carved in the same head-on-a-pike manner as the Kilconnell head.

From the time of Wakeman’s description in 1886 to the time of MacLeod’s writing in 1946, the figure was kept at Teach Molaise surmounting a tomb-like projection in one corner of the building, called St. Molaise’s bed. It remained there until 1948, when the last of the islanders departed Inismurray, at which point the figure was acquired by the National Museum. MacLeod theorizes that both this figure and the figure of St. Brendan were brought to their respective island homes in small early Christian stone churches from larger establishments on the mainland at some point during the suppression of the monastic houses. She dates both figures to between the late 13th and century and the early 14th century. This dating seems most in keeping with the style of the carving. The type of V-shaped folds which fall down along the front of the figures garment first enter art in approximately the mid 13th century and can be seen on several
examples of extant French stone sculpture, such as a figure possibly of St. Dionysius from Rheims Cathedral. Close parallels can also be seen on a few of the figures from Wells Cathedral in England, such as the figures of St. John, St. James the Less and St. Simon, all on the west front of Wells Cathedral, as well as in two figures of bishops seen on the middle tier of that same front of the Cathedral.\(^3\) The manner in which the two sides of the V-shaped folds do not quite meet are very reminiscent of a wooden figure of an ecclesiastic from Herefordshire. As MacLeod points out, even the hair styles of the two figures are similar. Parallels can also be seen in contemporary Irish stone carving such as on an effigy of a bishop from Jerpoint, Co. Kilkenny, or an effigy of a woman from Christchurch in Dublin. All are dated to the late 13\(^{th}\) or early 14\(^{th}\) century, and this is a likely dating for the figure of St. Molaise as well.

Both Wakeman and Hourihane concur on a late 15\(^{th}\) century date for the figure. Wakeman gives no supporting evidence for this date, but Hourihane states that the treatment of the draperies is reminiscent of stone sculpture of the mid-fifteenth century, and that the narrowness of the figures resembles the wooden figure of St. Gobnat, dated to the early fourteenth century. If the figure of St. Molaise is indeed dated to the fifteenth century then it is wholly unlike the other wooden figures in this study group from that time. The drapery folds on both the Holy Ghost Risen Christ and on the Askeaton Madonna are much more deeply undercut and free flowing than St. Molaise’s shallowly cut stiff folds. The pose of the Askeaton Madonna is much more natural than St. Molaise’s strict frontal position (the Risen Christ’s pose has been too affected by his replaced limbs to

make a good comparison in this) and both are carved much more ‘in the round’
than St. Molaise. Additionally the hachured style of St. Molaise’s draperies is not
seen in any of these later carvings. The similarity that Hourihane finds to the
narrowness of the early 14th century figure of St. Gobnat also surely would argue
for an earlier date as well. This same narrowness is also seen in the 13th century
figure of the Kilcorban Madonna.

O’Farrell’s dating of the figure to “no later than the 12th century” seems
implausible. As discussed above, the sort of drapery folds seen on the front of the
carving of St. Molaise did not enter art until the mid 13th century. Also, many of
O’Farrell’s assessments do not seem quite accurate. He states, “The change from
the old Celtic monasticism to the pan-European monastic orders introduced in the
mid-twelveth century… likewise brought a change in devotional practices, so that
from that period onwards non-Irish saints predominate in Irish sculpture. If the
Inismurray statue really represents St. Molaise, and tradition is firm on this, it
would seem rather unlikely that it dates from a time much subsequent to the
twelveth century.” But as has been seen in the course of this study of medieval
Irish wooden figures, several of them, dated much later than the 12th century,
represent Irish saints, such as St. Gobnat, St. Molua, St. Maulruan, St. Patrick and
the no-longer-extant St. Brendan. In fact, amongst the surviving medieval
wooden figure sculptures it would seem that there are more Irish saints than non-
Irish saints.

O’Farrell also states that “The drying and shrinkage of the figure has
resulted in the present attenuated appearance of the figure which when carved
would have been appreciably wider. The head has become detached but the grain
and cracks on the neck match perfectly with the socket in the body into which the head fits, leaving no doubt that the figure was originally carved, head and body, from the one piece of timber.” However, for the figure to have survived so long — and O’Farrell gives a 12th century dating for the figure — and for it to have come down to us in such a relatively well-preserved state, it would have had to have been carved from well seasoned wood. This would greatly reduce any subsequent drying and shrinkage of the figure. Also it is a wonder, that if its present attenuation occurred as a result of drying and shrinking, that the same has not occurred to other the other medieval Irish wooden figure sculptures, none of who show this same effect. The grain of the wood in the back of the figure was not able to be studied during the course of this research, and the junction of the pike-neck with the torso of the figure has only been able to be examined from photographs. However the neck of the Kilconnell head is made in a similar manner and the bottom of the long pike-like neck is definitely carved into a wedge shape, not broken. Also, it seems strange that the figure Of St. Molaise should have cracked in the manner that O’Farrell suggests, at a junction where the wood would have been strongest — in the centre of the shoulders. And that, if it did in fact crack here, that it should crack in a circular manner in order to cut a long neck out of the figure, rather than straight through the wood, with the grain. That the junction of the pike-neck with the torso of the carving is so perfect is perhaps a testament to the skill of the carver.

The only extant wooden Irish statue that bears any real similarity to the figure of St. Molaise is the Kilconnell Head, dated to roughly the same time. This similarity lies in their manner of construction. Both are constructed on a head-on
a-pike design, where the head is carved on a long pike-like neck that was then set into the collar of the torso of the figure. This style is only seen in these two extant figures, and from the drawings and photograph of the no longer extant St. Brendan. It could be that this was a regional style, however due to the large numbers of wooden figures which were destroyed; it could also be simply a coincidence that the three figures known to have been carved in this manner all come from the west of Ireland.

After the National Museum acquired the wooden sculpture of St. Molaise in 1948 the figure was reconstructed by sculptor Gabriel Hayes. The face of the figure is largely a modern creation. From the photographs taken by MacLeod in the 1940’s, pre-restoration, the nose of the figure was completely missing and possibly the mouth as well, with a large section of plaster covering over it in the photograph. Although conservation of the wood was probably much needed at the time that the Museum acquired the piece, it is regrettable that reconstruction was undertaken without any comprehensive record of the original appearance of the figure.


Holy Ghost Madonna and Child (Fig. 72; Dig. Illus. 9-12)

1. Location: Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford.

2. Working title of the carving: Holy Ghost Madonna and Child
3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 80cm.

(b) type of wood: Oak

(c) number of blocks: Single block

(d) dowel holes: None apparent from the front, metal loop coming out of the back where it is held to the back of the case. This loop was attached before the museum acquired the piece.

(e) evidence of polychrome: Putty-colour paint covers entire figure, in places dark brown paint shows through.

(f) general condition: This figure is very damaged from decay and has many small worm holes. The top of the Madonna’s head is no longer extant. The sides of her hair have also been eaten away by decay, especially the right side. There is some damage to the forehead and much of her nose is gone. Top of the left shoulder is quite damaged as well. The right arm is missing from just above elbow to the wrist. The wrist and hand still rest on her knee. There are two deep cracks on the left side of the figure towards the back, just below the curve of her cloak. There is another long crack between Mary’s legs, which is filled in with thick polychrome. The base is very much decayed and the feet are nearly gone. A large section is missing from the bottom of the base approximately 13 cm high. The arm on this side is intact, but very much decayed. The top of the Christ Child’s head is gone and also his left eye and much of his nose. His right arm is missing and his left arm is marred by rot. There are some small areas of decay on his left foot, but otherwise his body and limbs are well preserved.
4. Description:

(a) head: The Madonna’s head is long and ovular. Her hair seems to have been carved in an ‘accordion-style’ similar to that of the Kilcorban Madonna. Also, traces of a veil over the hair are extant, and from the shape of the damaged top of the head, possibly a crown as well. The hair and veil fell behind the shoulders and were quite full. The hair / veil completely covers Mary’s ears, and the veil comes across her forehead. This causes her forehead to look short in comparison to the rest of her face. Her eyes and brow are shallowly carved and obscured by many layers of paint. It is difficult to tell if the eyes were meant to be opened or closed – the incising on the bottom of the eye is much deeper than that of the top – however the carving of the left eye in particular shows that they were open. The iris and pupil have not been carved. The eyes are set in very close to the nose. The nose is long and marred by decay; the top of the nose is gone, as is the tip and much of the right side. The space between the nose and the lips is long and with a lightly incised thiltrum. The Madonna’s upper lip is not carved, but she has a very full lower lip. Her chin is long, and the jaw-line is soft. Her head sits on a thick pillar-like neck.

(b) body: The Madonna’s gown is quite plain, except for the simple belt around her waist. The collar of the gown is high and meets her neck. The cloak falls over her left shoulder; a portion of it is missing from decay. On the other side of the figure, only her gown shows in the front, the cloak stands up, imitating a high chair back behind her right shoulder. The sleeves of
her dress cling tightly to what remains of the Madonna’s arm. There are lightly incised vertical folds on the Madonna’s torso, and only the slightest indications of breasts. Her shoulders are narrow, although they appear even narrower now than when originally carved, because of the extent of damage to the figure. Her belt is wide. Her right arm is missing from just above the elbow to the wrist. The wrist and hand are still intact and rest on her knee. Her left arm is extant, but so damaged by decay that few details can be made out. It is with this hand that she holds her cape which helps support the Christ Child who sits on her knee.

The Madonna’s legs are strangely rendered. Her waist is positioned high above the seat of the chair. The legs project outwards from the hips at roughly a 90 degree angle, instead of the more acute angle that sitting on so low a seat should cause. The distance from the Madonna’s hips to her knees is much too short in proportion to the rest of the figure. Her legs are widely parted. Most of the drapery folds, particularly in the cloth hanging between her knees, are long and vertical however there is one fold on the left side towards the bottom which becomes a ‘rippling-ribbon’ style fold. It is very difficult to tell anything about the very bottom of the drapery, or about the Madonna’s feet, because they are so badly decayed. The feet would have faced straight out, but it is impossible to tell anything else about them. The base was round. The back of the entire piece is flat and deeply hollowed out; it was clearly meant to be placed up against a wall.

(c) Christ-Child: The diminutive figure of the Christ-Child sits on Mary’s left
knee. He has the proportions of a small adult. The Christ Child looks out slightly to the right. Much of his tiny head is gone, and the features are marred by decay. His nose is worn away, as is much of his extant right eye. The top of his head, including his left eye, is missing. What features he does have intact, however, closely resemble those of his mother. He has the same long, oval face and soft jaw-line, although his cheeks are slightly fuller than those of the Madonna. He has no upper lip, but a very full lower one, much like his mother. The Child seems to smile, but Mary’s expression is much more sombre.

The Child’s hair completely covers his ears and is cut in the same style as that of the Kilcorban Child. His head sits on a long, pillar-like neck. His torso is very flat and long. The collar of his garment is high, and in the same fashion as the Madonna’s gown. The folds are lightly carved, long and vertical. His left arm is much deteriorated, but the hand resting upon the knee is still discernable. His other arm is broken from just before the shoulder.

His lap is very shallow and his knees are slightly splayed with a fold of his garment hanging between them. His feet dangle from underneath his robe, the details of which have been obscured by decay.

5. Identification of the Subject: This is a typical Romanesque hieratic depiction of the Madonna and Child. The Madonna is shown enthroned, her legs widely splayed and the Christ-Child, in this case seated on his mother’s left knee. The Child is fully clothed and both figures face the viewer. The Child being seated on the knee rather than between the Madonna’s legs may indicate that this figure is from
the late Romanesque period. (See the entry for the Kilcorban Madonna, section 5, p. 82.)

6. Comments: It seems unlikely that so many figures as the collection from the Holy Ghost hospital represents, of such varying date and style would have been associated with one church. It is perhaps more than coincidence that many of the surviving figures can be identified as patron saints of Pre-Reformation churches in Waterford. This theory has been suggested in conversation with Eamon MacEneany, current curator of the Waterford Treasures Museum, and is born out by some of MacLeod's own theorizing in her unpublished notes. Thus, this figure of the Madonna could well have originated there at the Franciscan Abbey, the figure of the Risen Christ from the Dominican friary of St. Saviour, the St. Stephen from St. Stephen's leper hospital, and the alabaster St. Catherine from the Augustinian Priory of St. Catherine. Knowing that the Holy Ghost hospital had been granted such special dispensations, it could have been that the people who had secreted away these precious figures later brought them to the hospital for safekeeping. The figures remained in the possession of the Holy Ghost hospital, and were moved with it when it was decided to erect a new building in 1882. In 1994 they were acquired by the Waterford Treasures Museum.

This late Romanesque figure of the Madonna and Child is the earliest of the Holy Ghost figures. Although the figure displays the hieratic frontal pose and widely spread knees of so many Romanesque Madonna and Child images, the positioning of the Child on the Madonna's knee rather than between them indicates a dating in the later portion of this period, perhaps in the late 13th century. The Romanesque approach in art remained popular in Ireland to a later
date than on the Continent, thus explaining the appearance of a Romanesque Madonna at this time.

There are many similarities between this figure and the Kilcorban Madonna and Child. Both figures of the Christ-Child seem to have the same hairstyle (although the top of the head of the Waterford figure is quite damaged, and the head of the Kilcorban figure has been restored). The knees of both Madonnas are wide spread. Both Madonnas wear a cloak which rises behind their shoulders to imitate a high chair back, and although the head of the Waterford Madonna is very damaged by decay, it seems to have once been carved in a similar 'accordion-style' coif as that of the Kilcorban Madonna and to have worn a crown. These are all commonalities of the Romanesque style, and it does not seem as if the Waterford Madonna was directly imitating the earlier Kilcorban figure.

The odd singular rippling ribbon-style fold on the bottom of the Holy Ghost Madonna's left profile echoes the bottom-side draperies of a carving found in the 1886 excavation of the chapter house of Christchurch in Dublin. This stone effigy of a woman is thought by Hunt to either have been imported from the west of England, or possibly carved by a west of England sculptor in Ireland, and is dated to the early 13th century. The long vertical folds found on the majority of the Holy Ghost Madonna's gown are also very like those of the Christchurch effigy. Due to the extent of damage to the bottom portion of the Waterford Madonna, it is impossible in most places to determine the treatment of the bottom

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4 Hunt, John, *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture 1200-1600: A study of Irish tombs with notes on costume and armour* 1 (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974) 134.
of the draperies; perhaps the rest of the bottom draperies were treated in a similar manner to those of the Christchurch effigy. This may indicate some English influence on the piece.

The most intriguing resemblance that the Waterford Madonna shows to any of the others within this study group is to the Kilconnell Head. (See Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 39-45.)

The Holy Ghost Madonna has come down to us in a much damaged state. From the extent of decay throughout the figure it would seem that at some point in its history it was exposed to the elements for an extended period of time. It lacks, however, the evidence of deliberate mutilation seen in so many of the other Irish medieval figures. If this piece did in fact originate in the Franciscan abbey at Waterford, the establishment which sheltered it throughout the successive waves of iconoclasm under the name of the Holy Ghost Hospital, this would explain its total escape from the hands of the image breakers, but not why it would have been exposed to the elements, unless during the five years between the dissolution of the abbey and the establishment of the hospital. It is much in need of conservation. The many layers of modern paint ought to be removed in order to uncover the medieval polychrome, and the wood should be treated so as to prevent any further decay, and so restore it to some of its former glory.

Kilconnell Female Head (Fig. 73; Dig. Illus. 13-15)

1. **Location:** Aughrim Interpretive Centre, Aughrim, Co. Roscommon

2. **Working title of the carving:** Kilconnell Female Head

3. **Technical details:**
   
   (a) dimensions: H. 56 cm. W. 13cm.
   
   (b) type of wood: Oak
   
   (c) number of blocks: One extant.
   
   (d) dowel holes: None apparent.
   
   (e) evidence of polychrome: Aside from a few spots of white paint or gesso on the long shaft, none of the polychrome is intact.
   
   (f) general condition: Only the head and long neck/shaft remain of this figure, and these are very decayed. There are many worm holes in the extant portion of this carving, which gradually increase towards the top of the head. The top of the head is the most damaged by decay. The end of the nose is missing from decay, and most of the rest of the features are difficult to discern because of the extent of the damage to the piece.

4. **Description:** The face of the figure is long and narrow oval. The back of the head is flat. It is difficult to determine if the figure was meant to be wearing a veil or if this is what is left of the figure’s hair. The eyes of the figure were open, elliptical and double lidded. Most of the figure’s nose is worn away by decay, and the end of the nose is completely missing. The lips smile, the line between them is very deeply incised, and the lower lip is very full. The corners of the mouth are indented. The chin is slightly tapered. The back of the head is flat. There are
many worm holes throughout the extant portion of this figure, which become more concentrated towards the top of the head.

The neck / shaft is very long, and it tapers into a wedge shape at the bottom. There are some spots of white paint or gesso on the shaft. This shaft was probably meant to sit down into the collar of the rest of the figure, in the same manner of construction as the figure of St. Molaise now in the collection of the National Museum of Ireland.

5. **Identification of the subject:** This is most likely the head of a Madonna or Female saint. Although much deteriorated, the features are very effeminate. That the figure was found at Kilconnell abbey would lead us to a religious association with the figure, as opposed to a secular one. The great likeness that it bears to the Holy Ghost Madonna and the proliferation of images in wood of the Madonna – especially in the west of Ireland – give evidence that this could be the head of a figure of the Madonna.

6. **Comments:** (See Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 39-45.)

7. **Bibliography:** Previously unpublished.

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**Clonfert Madonna and Child** (Fig. 74; Dig. Illus. 16-19)

1. **Location:** Clonfert Catholic Church, Clonfert, Co. Galway

2. **Working title of the carving:** Clonfert Madonna and Child

3. **Technical Details:**

   (a) dimensions: H. 1.22 m (MacLeod).

   (b) type of wood: Oak
(c) number of blocks: One
(d) dowel holes: None apparent
(e) evidence of polychrome: Much gold leaf remains on the crown. The Madonna’s veil is painted white and the flesh of both figures is painted with a cream-colored polychrome. The cheeks of both are blushed with a pale carnation, and the lips of both are painted with carmine. The hair of both the Madonna and the Christ Child is painted dark brown. There is what seems to be a white gesso base and red-lead priming over the wood of the entire carving. The scleras of both figures are painted white with the irises and pupils painted black with small white dots intended to depict reflected light painted in them. The painted pupil / iris of the left eye of the Madonna has a marked outward diversion. The Madonna’s dress is painted blue and her cloak is red. The Christ-Child’s robe is painted the same cream coloured polychrome as his skin tone. His shoes appear to have once been painted cream as well, although they are much decayed which makes it difficult to tell. The carving is almost entirely covered with polychrome. The majority of the paint is pretty well attached to the figure, although it has worn off in places and in others it is flaking. The polychrome is missing from approximately the bottom 25 cm of the Madonna’s skirts as well as from the Child’s feet—with the exception of only one or two small flakes. The polychrome of the Madonna’s neck is cracking.
(f) general condition: The Madonna’s left arm is missing from just before the elbow. The Christ-Child’s left arm is also missing from just before the
elbow. Both appear to have been hacked off and there is a dent in the wood of the Madonna's torso, just below the left breast, in line with the break in the arm. Presumably this is where the blade that cut the arm made contact with the body of the figure. There is a chip of wood missing from the right side of the Madonna's crown. Christ's feet are much decayed, as is the entire bottom portion of the Madonna's draperies. There is also some evidence of decay on the stub of Mary's broken arm, although none on the stub of the broken arm of Christ. This may be because the stub of the Christ-Child's arm is covered with the same cream-colored polychrome as his robe and skin, whereas the break in the Madonna's arm has been left bare.

4. Description:

(a) head: The Madonna wears a crown that sits high on her head. The crown comes to three bumps in the middle. Below the crown is a long straight veil which falls onto her shoulders. This veil has a short pleated fringe that emerges from underneath the crown in front. Beneath this fringe the Madonna's curly hair can be seen above her forehead. Her hair is painted dark brown, the veil is white and the crown has traces of gold leaf. Her hair continues to fall along the sides of her face and neck, underneath the veil and covers her ears. It falls in front of her shoulders in two locks. The lock on the left side falls to just past her collar. The lock on the right is much longer and is grasped by the extant left hand of the Christ-Child.

The Madonna's face is long and ovular. The jaw-line is very soft and the cheeks are slightly rounded. The painted black crescents of her
eyebrows follow the carved line of the brow. The eyes bulge out from the sockets. They are double-lidded, however the carving on them is very shallow and soft and difficult to discern. The eyes themselves are elliptical, but when the lids are taken into account, the bulges out of the sockets are round. The scleras of the deeply-set eyes are painted slightly whiter than the cream coloured skin-tone. The irises/pupils are painted black with a small white dot painted in each to depict reflected light. The right eyes gazes straight out, however the left eye has a marked outward divergence. The nose is long and triangular; it has a high profile and the small nostrils are deeply carved. Below this is a shallowly carved thiltrum. The cheeks are blushed a pale carnation. The unsmiling lips are thin and straight. The top lip comes to a slight rise in the centre with only a small indication of a cupid’s bow. The chin is very long and broad, and the jaw does not project out very far from the neck. The neck also is very long and broad.

(b) body: This carving has a shallow profile, except where the Child is held on the left side. The back is flat, and, according to Macleod, deeply hollowed. The Madonna’s rounded shoulders are narrow and sloped. The ends of the figure’s veil fall onto her shoulders. The scoop-necked collar of the Madonna’s gown falls to just below where her collar bones would be, were they carved. The bodice of the gown is tight to the torso and no drapery folds are carved on it. There is a slight rise indicating her left breast. The other breast is not carved because this area of the Madonna’s chest is covered by the outstretched extant arm of the Christ-Child. There
is no gap between the arm of the Christ-Child and the Madonna’s chest; they are carved from the same block of wood. The sleeve of the Madonna’s gown stays tight to the break in her right arm. In exact line with the break, quite close to it on the Madonna’s torso underneath her left breast is a long, thin, horizontal indent in the wood. It appears that this is where the blade which cut the Madonna’s arm made contact with the wood of the torso. The indent does not break the polychrome, however. The other arm is completely covered by her red cloak leaving only the hand exposed, which emerges to support the Christ-Child. This hand is quite large and the carving of it is very flat. There are definite separations carved between the fingers, especially between the middle and index fingers. The cloak is draped diagonally across the figure’s body from her right shoulder, behind the Christ-Child’s body, and around her waist on the other side. The folds of the cloak fall vertically from where the Madonna’s hand emerges to support the Christ-Child, and from underneath the Child’s body, becoming a ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern towards the bottom. The remainder of the cloak’s drapery folds – mostly on the right side of the figure – falls diagonally downwards from left to right, following the line of how the cloak has been draped around the Madonna’s body. Viewed from the front, it appears that these diagonal folds become fluted on the right side. On the profile, these flutes are a series of about 6 loopy folds that fall almost to the bottom of the cloak. The cloth of the gown which can be seen underneath the bottom of the cloak falls in long undulating vertical folds. This portion of the figure is very decayed and
most of the polychrome is missing from approximately the bottom 25 cm of the figure. The Madonna's feet are not carved. No movement can be seen underneath the clothing of the figure. The Madonna stands very straight and rigid. Underneath the polychrome on the hair, dress, and cloak of the figure, some white gesso and red-lead priming show through.

(c) Christ-Child: The Child is seated in the Madonna’s extant right hand. He is carved from the same block of wood as his mother. The Child sits up very straight and reaches with his extant left arm to grasp a lock of the Madonna’s hair in his hand. There is no separation between the Christ-Child’s arm and hand and the boy of the Madonna. Most of the paint on the upper portion of this arm is missing, and what appears to be the red-lead priming of the wood can be seen.

The Child’s face is round and rather flat in profile. The Child’s thick dark brown hair is carved in deeply incised erratic curls all over his head; the longish hair completely covers the ears. The Child’s forehead is high and round. The eyebrows are neither painted nor carved. The flesh is painted with the same cream-colored polychrome as his Mother’s was, and this same cream-colour covers his tunic as well. His cheeks are blushed with pale carnation. The paint of his scleras is slightly whiter than that of his flesh-tone. The Child’s irises/pupils are painted black with small white dots intended to depict reflected light. The eyes are open wide and glance upwards towards his mother. Both upper and lower lids are indicated, although shallowly carved. The nose is short and round; its profile hardly rises from the face at all. Most of the paint on the nose has
been worn away, and what appears to be the red-lead priming of the wood shows through. The thiltrum is clearly carved above a distinct cupid’s bow painted in bright carmine. The mouth is tiny, barely wider than the nose, and the chin is very long as compared to the rest of the face. The head sits on a thick, pillar-like neck.

The Christ-Child wears a long tunic with a high notched collar. It is relatively plain. The garment stays tight to the torso, and the wrist-length sleeve, as shown on the extant arm, stay close to the arms. There are no decorative folds carved on the Christ-Child’s robe, the only fold carved in it at all is to differentiate between his two legs beneath the skirt of the garment. His legs are disproportionately long in comparison to his torso. His little feet, which stick out from beneath his robe, are much decayed. Very little evidence of polychrome on the feet survive, but traces of a white or cream-colored paint on the feet indict that they may have been covered with the same polychrome as the flesh and robe, or perhaps these flakes are what remain of a gesso base.

The right arm of this little figure has been mutilated in much the same way as the Madonna’s arm was. It appears to have been hacked off just before the elbow. The stub of the broken arm of the Christ-Child, unlike that of his mother, has been painted over with the same polychrome as his robe and flesh.

5. Identification of the subject: This Gothic standing Madonna is shown holding the Christ-Child in her right arm. He turns towards her, looks up at her smiling and grasps a tress of her hair. The figure of the Madonna is still stiff and formal,
although she has left her throne and simply stands in front of the viewer, but the Child more naturally, turns away from the viewer and towards his mother. The Child is seen grasping a lock of the Madonna’s hair, which may be a symbol of the Madonna’s purity and chastity; Virgin saints were often portrayed with their hair loose and flowing, in contrast to the courtesan or personifications of profane love, who were usually shown with braided hair. The more naturalistic manner in which the Child is portrayed is first illustrated in French sculpture, as can be see in the figure of the Virgin and Child from Saint-Corneille in Compiègne, dated to c. 1270.5

6. Comments: This is the earliest extant firmly Gothic Madonna. Although the Kilcorban Madonna displays traces of the Gothic style in the drapery folds towards the bottom of the figure, it was still Romanesque in its composition and iconography. The Clonfert Madonna has left her throne and stands before the viewer, although stiffly and without the grace that typifies Gothic sculpture, evidencing its early date. The Child looks up at his mother and grasps a lock of her hair lovingly, but he sits rigidly, and his hair style – cut high across his forehead and low over his ears – is of an early type. As MacLeod points out, there is a certain similarity between the Clonfert Madonna and the Athlone Madonna; they share the same ovular face-shape and long thick neck that goes straight into the chest, but the Clonfert Madonna is clearly later. It possibly dates to the early 14th century.

Little is known about the history of the Clonfert Madonna. No accounts of it exist prior to MacLeod’s article of 1945. At that time it was at Eyrecourt Chapel, Eyrecourt, Co. Galway, although locals assert that it must have only been

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very briefly there, and that it has always otherwise been in Clonfert. Local
tradition asserts that the figure came from the Cathedral at Clonfert, and that it
was partly mutilated during Cromwell’s campaign when his soldiers pillaged the
cathedral – though this seems to be a standard form of explanation of damage
done to religious figures. The missing arms of both the Madonna and the Child
seem to bear witness to intentional damage, whether specifically by Cromwell’s
soldiers or others. It seems to be of a typical type of damage associated with
iconoclasm in Ireland. The arms have been cut off with a blade; this is evidenced
by the cleanness of the break on both. In the case of the Child’s arm, there is
particular evidence of its deliberateness, because at the point at which it was cut,
the underside of the arm was still joined to the torso. This necessitated two
separate cuts with the blade, one horizontal and one vertical. On the figure of the
Madonna, the arm seems to have been removed with one heavy horizontal swing
of the blade, the evidence for this lies in the mark of its contact with the torso.
There is still a long thin dent in the wood just below the Madonna’s breast and in
line with the cut of the arm.

Restoration of this figure has been carried out since the publishing of
MacLeod’s article. Hourihane states that the faces of both figures are largely
reconstructions, but the evidence for this is not apparent. Judging from the
photographs published by MacLeod in her article, several layers of paint have
been removed and repaints done perhaps to some of the details of the face of the
Madonna. But as in the case of so many of the restorations done to the medieval
Irish wooden figures, no records were kept, and so exactly what work was done to
the figure can not be wholly ascertained.
Fethard St. John the Baptist (Fig. 75; Dig. Illus. 20-21.)

1. Location: National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin (on loan)

2. Working title of the carving: Fethard St. John the Baptist

3. Technical details:

   (a) dimensions: H. 1.65 m (approximately).

   (b) type of wood: Oak

   (c) number of blocks: It seems as if this figure was originally carved from either three or four blocks. The main part of the figure, as well as the lamb, was carved from a single block of wood. It appears that the block was not quite wide enough to accommodate the shoulders, so an extra piece of wood on either side was attached to broaden the shoulders. The extension to the left shoulder is no longer extant. The bottom of the right shoulder extension is broken towards the bottom, and so it is not possible to tell if the no longer extant right arm was a separate block, although it appears to have been. Additionally, only two small pieces of the original base are intact, below the feet. This original base was carved from the same piece of wood as the rest of the main body of the figure; the current base consists of a thin bevelled board attached to a second triangular board that is nailed to the front of the figures feet.

   (d) dowel holes: There are two visible. On the back of the right shoulder there is
a hole with a dowel in it where the shoulder is attached. There is also an empty dowel hole in the other side where the no longer extant shoulder would have been attached.

(e) evidence of polychrome: The hair and beard are painted with brown and black polychrome, the layer of black paint seems to overlap the brown. There are also some traces of gold leaf on the hair. The eyebrows are painted as black single-line crescents, as is the upper lash of each of the eyes. The scleras are painted white. The irises are dark blue, and the pupil is not indicated. The warm flesh-tone, painted on the face neck, and upper chest, is enhanced by blushing on the cheeks and lips of the figure. The low-collared undergarment is painted pale yellow ochre and has a single black line painted approximately one centimetre below where the collar meets the chest as well as some other additional traces of black polychrome. The outside of the cloak is bright red with underlying traces of black paint, and the lining of the cloak is blue. The lamb is painted with a white polychrome. The bare legs and extant portions of the feet are also painted with the same warm flesh-tone as the face and neck. Traces of gesso underneath the polychrome can be seen on the entire figure.

(f) general condition: The right arm is missing, as are the ends of both feet and most of the base. The bottom of the attached right shoulder has been broken off from decay and the extension of the left shoulder is completely missing. There are several small cracks throughout the entire figure and some small areas that have been worm-eaten. The top-back of the head
was damaged and is repaired with plaster. The lamb’s features have all been rubbed smooth.

4. Description:

(a) head: The head is very long and ovular. Towards the back of the top of the head is a plaster repair. The hair, which is parted in the middle of the forehead, consists of long, thick, wavy, interlocking strands that are tucked behind the figure’s ears and fall in the front of the shoulders. The forehead is high and the temples are bare, the hairline does not begin until behind the ears. The insides of the ears are roughly carved. The face is very long and there is a small bulge carved on either side of it to indicate cheek bones. The cheeks have a slight blush. The high, double-crescent shaped brow is carved in shallow relief; this is enhanced by two black painted crescent-shaped eyebrows which follow the line of the carved brow. The elliptical eyes bulge out slightly, and both upper and lower lids are indicated. The upper lashes of the eyes are outlined in black polychrome. The scleras are painted white, and the irises are dark blue; the pupils do not seems to be indicated. The eyes glance upwards. The long, thin nose has a triangular underside and the nostrils are carved. The entire space between the nose and the mouth is taken up by a long drooping moustache. The top lip is not carved; the bottom lip juts out below the deeply bevelled line of the mouth. There is about 2 cm of bare skin between the lip and where the beard begins. The beard does not meet the hairline; instead it is like a long, wide goatee. The ends of the moustache join with the beard. The beard and moustache, like the hair,
consists of long, wavy interlocking strands. The long beard hangs straight from the face; it does not touch the neck or the chest although it covers both. The neck is very long.

(b) body: The neck of the figure joins with the bare chest, the collar bones are not carved and no distinction is made between where the neck ends and the chest begins. The chest and upper torso of the figure are quite flat. The scope-necked collar of the undergarment is very low. No folds are carved on this undergarment. It is painted mustard yellow, with a thin faded black band painted about a centimetre below the edge of the collar. There are other traces of black polychrome on this garment as well. As discussed above, the carving would have originally consisted of either three or four blocks (see p. 108). The figure wears a red cloak with a blue lining - visible on the underside of the garment’s folds - over his shoulders. The cloak is swept from the right side of the figure to the left. The extant left hand, which is held close to the body and holds the ‘Agnus Dei’, is covered by cloth from the cloak. The non-extant right hand possibly pointed towards the ‘Agnus Dei’. The cloth from the extant hand falls in long vertical folds, forming ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern towards the bottom. This ‘rippling-ribbon’ fold reveals the blue polychrome of the lining of the cloak. The folds on the rest of the cloak fall diagonally from the right to the left; they are pointed at the top on the right side and become open ended loops on the bottom-left. All of the folds are carved in high relief. The cloak falls to the knees of the figure.
The legs and feet of the figure are carved in the round, the rest of the back of the figure, from the back of the head to the end of the cloak, is flat. According to MacLeod, it is also deeply hollowed. The legs and feet are bare, and the fronts of both feet are missing. Only a small amount of the original base of the figure, attached to the soles of the feet, is extant. It seems to have been carved from the same block of wood as the feet are. On the outsides of the feet, this small piece of the base has been painted with the flesh-tone polychrome, making the soles of the feet appear thicker than they are carved. The current base consists of a thin bevelled board attached to a second triangular board that is nailed to the front of the figures feet. The whole figure leans drastically backwards and would not stand unless placed against a wall.

(c) lamb: A small lamb is held in the figure’s left hand. It is painted white, and there are also some faint traces of black polychrome (particularly in the nose area) as well. The majority of it appears to have been rubbed fairly smooth. The carving of the tail and back legs remains the clearest, while the detail of the head, back and front legs seems to have been erased from rubbing.

5. Identification of the subject: The saint is depicted bare legged, holding a lamb and wearing a rough tunic underneath his cloak. John the Baptist is frequently depicted with bare legs and wearing clothing made of animal skins, which the roughness of the tunic that this figure wears may indicate. Another of John the Baptist’s standard symbols is the lamb, or Agnus Dei. The figure has the cloth of his cloak draped over his hand, underneath the lamb that he holds, symbolizing its
sacredness. He may have pointed with his no longer extant right arm to the Agnus Dei. The symbol had its origins in a gospel passage (John 1:36) that states, “and as he (John the Baptist) watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’” 6

6. Comments: Little is known about the history of the figures from Fethard, Co. Tipperary. It is not even known to what church in Fethard they belonged. They were said to have come from the Church of the Holy Trinity; however there was more than one church in the town of that name. MacLeod states that one of its companion figures, the Trinity, was known to be in the possession of the parish priest in 1759. The first published account mentioning the John the Baptist figure, by J.W. Cantwell, appears in 1874. He states that there were in the church “three very ancient and well-carved figures” and he goes on to describe the figure of John the Baptist as a representation of ‘the Good Shepherd’. The church in which the figures were located at the time of Cantwell’s writing was built c. 1822. When they were still kept in the older Catholic Church the figures were exhibited to the public on Trinity Sunday every year as part of a local ‘pattern’. The pattern was discontinued around the same time as the building of the new church. It was traditionally believed in Fethard that at the time that “the ancient church of the Holy Trinity passed into the hands of the Protestants” the three figures were taken and buried – presumably to hide them. However, this tradition may be an example of one of the discovery myths associated with many of the Irish wooden figures (See Chapter 2: Fethard Christ, pp. 57-66.)

Although both MacLeod and Hourihane assign this figure a date in the late 15th century, the style of the carving would seem to indicate an earlier date. The way in which the cloth of the figure’s cloak is draped up over the arm, is a convention which entered French Gothic sculpture in the 13th century. A good example of this, dated to 1225-30, can be seen at Amiens Cathedral in the left jamb of the left doorway in the west portal. Here, the figure of Honoratus drapes his cloak over his arm in a very similar manner to the Fethard John the Baptist. The drapery folds, both undulating vertical folds and rippling-ribbon style folds are also very similar to the Fethard figure. In Irish stone carving this same convention can be seen in an incised slab of an ecclesiastic, dated to the 14th century, from St. Canice’s in Kilkenny city. Here again, the drapery is brought up over the figure’s arm and is carved in both undulating vertical and rippling-ribbon style folds. The Fethard John the Baptist also seems to have more in common with the Clonfert Madonna, dated to the early 14th century, than to any of the others in the study group. They share the same sort of elongated ovular head, and pillar-like neck which goes straight into the chest. Additionally the drapery folds of the Fethard St. John the Baptist have more in common with those of the Clonfert Madonna than with figures such as the Askeaton Madonna and the Holy Ghost Risen Christ, both of which appear to belong to the late 15th century. The folds carved in the draperies of both the Fethard John the Baptist and the Clonfert Madonna are carved rather shallowly in comparison to the late fifteenth century examples. They share the same sort of ‘rippling-ribbon’ style of drapery fold. In these two early figures the fold begins as a series of long, undulating vertical folds.

7 Sauerländer, Pl. 169.
which suddenly begin to loop over themselves, forming a more drastic sort of rippling-ribbon effect – the folds loop over themselves to such an extent so as to completely close off the individual sections of the fold – all the while remaining, on the rippling-ribbon section especially, rather shallowly carved. The drapery folds of both the Askeaton Madonna and the Risen Christ are much more deeply undercut, and are shown in higher relief, and although the ‘rippling-ribbon’ style fold persisted throughout the Gothic era, in the later figures it did not loop over itself so drastically as seen here, nor did it come from the long undulating vertical folds as seen in these two earlier figures. Later figures do not display the same feature of the neck coming straight down in to the chest and rarely possess elongated ovular heads. This would seem to indicate a 14th century date for the Fethard St. John the Baptist.

Much conservation work has been carried out on this statue since its loan to the National Museum in 1948, but the records of the work that was carried out during the course of this are scanty. In a series of letters between various personal of the Museum and the Canons of the Church at Fethard, it can be ascertained that some of the more modern polychrome was removed from the statue (this is also born out by photographic evidence), that the wood was treated with Biotex because of the extent of decay from ‘furniture beetle’, and that the wood was ‘strengthened from the back’. Some of the details, especially of the face are repaints that were probably carried out at this time. This figure of St. John the Baptist is now on display in the National Museum as part of its Medieval Ireland exhibition.
Kilcorban St. Catherine (Fig. 76; Dig. Illus. 22-25)

1. Location: Clonfert Diocesan Museum, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway

2. Working title of the carving: Kilcorban St. Catherine

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 76 cm (approximately).

(b) type of wood: Oak

(c) number of blocks: Single block

(d) dowel holes: There are two large dowels holes. One on the back of each arm, half way between the shoulder and the elbow. These were probably where the sculpture was attached to a wall.

(e) evidence of polychrome: The circlet crown over the figure’s white painted veil has traces of gold leaf. Her hair is painted brown. The flesh-tone of the face is yellowish and the cheeks are flushed. The flesh-tone on her face and neck is chipping badly, especially on the left side as well as on the neck and underside of the chin. The eyes are smudged, like those of the Christ-Child on the Kilcorban Madonna and Child. The crescent-shaped single line eyebrows are black, and nearly identical to those of the Kilcorban Madonna. The lips are just barely touched with carmine. The robe is painted dark blue-green. Her cloak is maroon on the outside and bright carmine on the inside of the folds. There are traces of white paint
over top of the maroon of the cloak; this white is possibly a more modern coat of paint that was removed during the restoration of the figure. Likewise, there are traces of black polychrome overtop of the blue-green of the gown. Her belt is painted black over a layer of burnt sienna. The ring-and-pin brooch which fastens the figure’s cloak was gold leafed, as was the hilt and cross bar of her sword. The blade of the sword begins as a dark grey in the section just below the hilt, and gradually becomes brown towards the tip of the blade.

(f) general condition: The top of the head above the circlet crown has come off and sits on top of the figure’s head, seemingly no longer attached. On the left side of the veil a piece of the wood is missing about 3 cm long, 2.5 cm wide and 1 cm deep, and there is active rot in this area. The paint is flaking off of the chin. The left arm is missing from where it once emerged from the cloak. The bottom is quite decayed and worm-eaten, and there are a few hair-line cracks. There is also much evidence of decay on the flat portions of the back of the piece, although there is almost none in the hollow.

4. Description:

(a) head: The top of the head has come off, or is coming off, from decay in the wood underneath the polychrome. The figure wears a circlet crown about one cm wide over a white hair veil. The veil runs the length of the hair. The hair emerges in the front from the fringe of the veil, and follows the line of the sides of the face, neck and shoulders, and then appears to fall behind the shoulders. It is brown and straight. The white of the veil has
painted shading in a brown colour that looks as if it was applied to the white polychrome when both paints were still wet. This shading compliments the real areas of shading, and helps to make some of the carving more visible, especially on the fringe of the veil, where it is carved in an ‘accordion-style’ underneath the circlet crown. There are also some artificial areas of shading painted on the veil where the carving is flat and smooth, especially on the left side. Also on the left side, the circlet crown and veil are damaged. The circlet has a section missing about 3 cm long, and there is a large chunk of the veil missing, about 3 cm long, 2.5 cm wide, and 1 cm deep. There is active rot in this broken area.

The forehead is short beneath the fringe of the veil. The face is long and ovular, and no attempt has been made at carving cheek bones. The black, single-line crescent of each of her eyebrows perfectly follows the delicately carved brow ridge. The paint of the eyes looks as if it has been rubbed off. There is no clearly incised line to define the eyes, the almond -shape bulge of them emerges gradually from the eye sockets. The nose is long, straight and triangular. There has been no attempt at carving nostrils, nor have any been painted. The saint has a shallowly carved thiltrum. Her mouth is very small, not even the width of the nose. The lips are thin, and the upper lip reaches a single point in the middle instead of a cupid’s bow. The figure’s chin when compared to the mouth, is proportionately quite long and broad, however its size is in keeping with the size of the large, bulging eyes. The neck is long and thick.

(b) body: The long broad neck widens towards its base and meets with the high
round collar of the dark blue-green dress. The shoulders are sloped; they are narrow in proportion to the head but perfectly proportionate to the body. The shoulders are covered by a maroon coloured cloak that is fastened in the middle by a formerly gilded ring-and-pin style brooch. The brooch has a flat front face and is undecorated. The pin passes through two loops of the cloak’s fabric. The cloak comes down in two convex curves from the shoulders to meet the pin, and emerge from it on the bottom in two concave curves, allowing the arms to emerge from underneath of it. The cloak swoops up underneath the figure’s extant right hand and underneath where the non-extant left hand would have been.

The figure’s gown is a dark blue-green with chips of black clinging in places on top of this. The dress is belted across the waist of the figure. It is painted black over a layer of burnt sienna.

There are very few drapery folds carved on this figure, with the exception of the ‘accordion-style’ fringe of the veil already described, and a few vertical folds on the cloak. At the bottom of the cloak there are two places, one on each inside edge, where the cloth loops up in a C-shape to reveal the carmine coloured lining of the cloak.

The extant left arm of the figure emerges from the cloak at a point just below the elbow. The dress is tightly sleeved to the wrist. The arm and hand are kept flat against the body. The hand is very flat. The thumb is not carved, presumably it is meant to be hidden behind the hilt of the sword. The sword’s hilt has a handle with a rounded end, straight quillons, and a pointed tongue that extends over part of the blade. The
entire hilt has traces of gold-leaf. The colour of the double-edged blade is
difficult to discern. It appears that the lowest layer of visible paint is the
same burnt sienna as was seen on the belt, this layer is most visible closest
to the hilt. Over this, chips of black paint cling. The bottom 6 cm or so of
the blade seem to be a repair, possibly of plaster. This section is separated
from the rest of the blade by a small crack. It is much smoother than the
rest and is painted a solid gunmetal grey, which surprisingly matches the
rest of the polychrome until closely examined.

The entire bottom portion of the figure, below the cloak, is much
damaged. There are a few small cracks especially in the area around the
sword. Large chunks of the wood are missing from decay; this is most
prevalent towards the back of the figure on both sides.

5. Identification of the subject: This female figure wears a circlet crown and holds a
sword in her right hand, her other arm is missing. This is most likely a figure of
St. Catherine of Alexandria, a fourth century martyr and very popular saint in the
Middle Ages. St. Catherine was of royal birth, symbolized here by her circlet
crown and gilded brooch – the gilding on the brooch indicating the wearer’s high
social status, as detailed by Deevy – who converted to Christianity after becoming
queen. The Roman emperor Maxentius desired her and when she would not
consent, devised a wheel studded with iron spikes with which to torture her, but it
was destroyed by a lightening bolt sent by God before it could harm her. After
that, Maxentius had St. Catherine beheaded. 8 This figure holds her sword of
martyrdom in her extant hand. In her other hand she most likely held either a

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8 Ibid., 58.
small spiked wheel, or perhaps a book, as St. Catherine was a patron of education
and learning.

6. Comments: (For a general history please see Chapter 2: The Kilcorban Madonna, pp.
31-38.)

Coleman, writing in 1902 refers to the presence of the Kilcorban Madonna
and the Crucifixion Madonna and St. John the Evangelist in the church at Tynagh,
but does not mention the figure of St. Catherine. The first documented
appearance of the figure was in 1929. A letter from a Mr. T. Shea, associated
with the National Museum, addressed to a Mr. Mahr, also of the Museum, states,
"I made a discovery yesterday which may turn out to be very interesting. While
questioning a farmer (in Portumna) about a ruin he informed me that some years
ago four figures were found in the hollow of a large tree and that they were in the
possession of the parish priest. I went to the clergyman… he kindly allowed me
to see the figures which are placed behind the altar in the church. Two are about
two feet high and the other two about one foot… The priest thought they belonged
to the Dominican Abbey of the vicinity." 9

There are several extant examples of figures of St. Catherine in Irish stone
carving. Five of these, from Howth, Co. Dublin, Castlemartin, Co. Kildare,
Duleek, Co. Meath, Cashel, Co. Tipperary, and Lismore, Co. Waterford all show
St. Catherine holding the down-turned sword in her right hand in front of her
body and the wheel in her left hand. The stone carving which seems to bear the
most resemblance to the Kilcorban St. Catherine is the Howth figure. The swords
that the two figures hold are of nearly identical types, and they are held in the

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9 Letter dated 12th September, 1929, National Museum of Ireland, Art and Industry Archives, Box
51, Collin’s Barrack’s, Dublin.
same position in the front-enter of the body. Hunt dates the Howth carving to c. 1462, and this may indicate that the Kilcorban St. Catherine dates to the late 15th century as well. Hourihane also gives evidence for a late fifteenth century date for this figure, noticing that the sword that the Kilcorban St. Catherine carries is particularly similar to a one found on a late 15th century stone carving of that same saint from the Priory of St. Mary, Clontuskert, Co. Galway, both having the same “broad double-edged blade, stop ridge, straight quillons and short grip.”

The manner in which the cloak is worn across the upper body and fastened at the centre of the chest by a ring-and-pin style brooch is very reminiscent of two figures of Christ showing the wounds from the 16th century, one from Gowran, Co. Kilkenny and the other from St. Canice’s Cathedral, Kilkenny city. This type of brooch with a plain and undecorated front is described by Deevy as a type worn throughout western and northern Europe. She notes that although in sculptures of the 12th and 13th centuries ring-and-pin style brooches were used to fasten the slit in the neck of the garments worn by figures, by the 15th and 16th centuries the brooches are used primarily as cloak fastenings. The evidence of the manner in which the brooch is worn, combined with the type of sword held by the figure serve to date it to the late 15th century.

Of the extant Irish wooden figures, the Kilcorban St. Catherine bears the most resemblance to the Museum Pietà. They both have elliptical eyes, straight triangular noses and proportionately tiny mouths. Although the figure of the Madonna is more heavy set then the St. Catherine, they both have ovular faces lacking any indication of cheek bones. The vertical folds in both figures are

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10 Hunt, Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, I, 144-5.
carved in gradual undulations, and there is a relative lack of modelling of the drapery on the upper portion of the cloaks.

Like the Kilcorban Madonna, the figure of St. Catherine was restored by MacLeod in the 1940's or 1950's, and as in the case of the Kilcorban Madonna, no records were kept of the restoration. Photographs taken before the restoration indicate that layers of paint were removed, and that the face of the figure was repainted. All of the restoration work done to the figure seems to be wholly sympathetic, and it is without the elaborate reconstructions that have marred a few of the sculptures. A strange thing has happened to the eyes of the figure, however. In what is presumably a photograph taken during the restoration work, there is no evidence of polychrome on the eyes of the figure, evidencing that the paint there now was added during the restoration. The polychrome on the eyes of the figure, unlike that on the rest of the face, is quite smudged. It looks as if someone had tried unsuccessfully to rub off the paint of the eyes. Without the restoration records however the reasoning behind the current strange state of the eyes, if that did in fact occur during the restoration, is difficult to discern.

Although restoration work was carried out on this figure half a century ago, it is badly needed again. Since MacLeod's restorations were undertaken, a large chunk of the wood from the side of the drapery has fallen out and there is evidence of active rot here. The top of the head also appears to be coming off, perhaps from rot found underneath the surface of the polychrome. The wood, especially of the figure's head ought to be retreated so as to prevent further decay.

Museum Pietà (Fig. 77; Dig. Illus. 26-30)

1. **Location**: National Museum of Ireland –Decorative Arts and History, Collin’s Barracks, Dublin 7.

2. **Working title of the carving**: Museum Pietà

3. **Technical details**:

   (a) **dimensions**: H. 75 cm.

   (b) **type of wood**: Oak

   (c) **number of blocks**: Six originally, four of these are extant. The Madonna and the Christ figure are carved from separate blocks, and the arms of each were also carved separately and then attached to the main figure with dowels. The arms of the dead Christ are no longer extant. There is one additional, more modern, piece of wood that has been used to repair a large crack in the Madonna’s skirt.

   (d) **dowel holes**: There are several dowel holes in this figure. The Madonna and the figure of the dead Christ are connected through the use of two dowels, much of which are exposed in the gap between their bodies. The holes for these dowels are located one in each of the Madonna’s knees which correspond with two holes in Christ’s back. The dowel on the right side tapers in order to fit into the smaller hole in Christ’s back. Additionally there is a large dowel hole in each of the stumps of Christ’s shoulders.
The broken dowel can be seen in the visible dowel hole in his right shoulder. Presumably the Madonna’s arms are also attached with dowels. 

(e) evidence of polychrome: The outside of the Madonna’s veil/cloak is painted with a navy-blue polychrome and edged with gold-leaf. Where the underside of her cloak is exposed a lighter blue polychrome is used. This same lighter blue is used also for the swag of cloth around the collar of the Madonna’s dress. The Madonna’s dress is painted brick-red; she wears a gilded belt. Her skin is painted with a very pale flesh-tone, the cheeks are brightly flushed and the lips are painted with a dark red polychrome. The Madonna’s eyebrows are painted with faint black polychrome, her upper eyelids are also edged in black. Her scleras are white and the irises/pupils are black with a white spot of polychrome in them to represent reflected light. Although much of the Madonna’s polychrome is intact, this is not so in the case of the Christ figure. Most of the paint remains on his head, but there are large chips missing from Christ’s torso, and it is nearly gone entirely from the top of his perizonium and from his feet. The cream polychrome used for the flesh-tone of the mostly nude Christ is even paler than the flesh-tone of the Madonna. There are faint traces of a red polychrome, representing blood, on Christ’s forehead, coming from the wound in his side and running down the side of his exposed leg, and on top of what remains of the polychrome of his feet. His perizonium was painted white. His hair and beard are painted with a medium brown polychrome. On both figures where the paint is chipped, a gesso base-coat can be seen.
(f) general condition: The heads of both figures are in excellent condition. The Christ-figure's arms are missing from just before the shoulders; much of his polychrome is missing as well. The tips of the fingers of the Madonna’s right hand are missing, as is the end of the thumb of her left hand. The two figures have been poorly fitted together; the dowels are exposed and there is a significant gap between the figures. A large radial crack in the Madonna’s skirt has been repaired with a more modern section of carved wood, the repair is nearly seamless. There is some evidence of wood worm at the bottom of the Madonna’s skirts.

4. Description:

(a) head of the Madonna: The Madonna wears a long, voluminous navy-blue veil/cloak with a thin boarder of gold-leaf. Across her forehead, the edge of this veil is squared. No hair can be seen between the face/neck and the veil. Much of the lighter blue lining of the thick veil is visible. The Madonna’s face is quite round and heavy-set. Her forehead is high and round. She has crescent-shaped brows over almond-shaped, double-lidded eyes. The eyes glance upwards. The painted eyebrows follow the carved line of the brow, and lift up over the bridge of the long triangular nose. The nostrils are shallowly carved, and the thiltrum is not carved at all. The Madonna’s diminutive mouth has a very full upper lip over a deeply incised line, and virtually no lower lip, causing the Madonna’s mouth appear to be slightly open. The jaw-line is very soft and shallow, it tapers into a short, wide neck.

(b) body of the Madonna: This figure has a flat back that does not appear to have
been hollowed. The Madonna is seated in chair with a seat-back which comes to about the level of her elbows. She uses her right arm to support the figure of the dead Christ behind his shoulders. The ends of the fingers of this hand are missing; they appear to have been cut. The other arm is bent at the elbow and held palm-up above the dead Christ’s body in a gesture of supplication. The last joint of the thumb of this hand is missing. Neither hand makes contact with Christ’s body.

The Madonna’s veil becomes a cloak which falls over the front of her shoulders. On the tops of her arms there are some general stylized folds carved in the cloak. The fabric of the cloak wraps completely around the arms and flares where the arms emerge to reveal the light blue lining. The material of the sleeves of the Madonna’s dress is carved in a twisted pattern, ending in thick, gilded cuffs which are tight to the Madonna’s wrists. The fabric of these cuffs is also carved in the same twisted style, as is the gilded belt which she wears around her waist. Below the Madonna’s left arm, the cloak falls to the side and back of the figure. Below her right arm, however, the cloak is drawn across her lap underneath the figure of the dead Christ. From her knees, the cloak falls in a curved diagonal from the right (left knee) back towards the left side, and ending at the bottom of the figure. Deeply cut curved-diagonal folds follow the line of the falling cloth.

The collar of the Madonna’s long gown is a swaged cloth which falls just below her neck and is painted with the same light blue polychrome as the lining of her veil/cloak. This semi-circular swag is
made of small, deeply cut, curved overlapping folds. From below the collar, the Madonna’s brick-red dress emerges in shallower vertical folds which dissipate with the rise of her breasts. Below the Madonna’s dress, the vertical folds re-emerge and become more deeply-cut as they gather underneath her gilded belt.

From her knees, the Madonna’s skirt falls in deeply undulating vertical folds to the bottom of the statue. Slightly to the left of centre, a large radial crack in the figure has been repaired with a fitted piece of wood that has been carved to match the rest of the drapery. There is some evidence of wood worm in the bottom of the figure.

(c) Christ: The figure of the dead Christ is smaller than that of the Madonna. He is carved from a separate block, attached with dowels at the back to the Madonna’s knees, and supported across the shoulder-blades by the Madonna’s left arm. Because of the large gap between the two figures, which exposes the dowels between them, the figure of the Christ does not actually come in contact with the Madonna’s lap.

Christ’s hair and beard are carved in many small, wavy incised lines. His hair falls to meet the beard at the jaw-line and completely covers the ears. His forehead is high and round, there is some faded red polychrome representing blood caused by the crown of thorns of the passion, which has not been carved. The brows are crescent-shaped and are not painted, although the manner in which the polychrome is chipped makes them appear as if they were. The deep-set eyes are slightly open. The scleras are painted white and the pupils/irises are painted with a sepia
coloured polychrome. Like the Madonna, Christ’s nose is long and triangular, although the nose of Christ is much more finely rendered. The space between his nose and mouth is quite long; he does not have a moustache, nor is the thiltrum carved. The mouth turns up at the corners slightly. The top lip is not carved and the bottom lip is only indicated by a slight rise. The mouth is slightly agape, and the inside of it is touched with red. The beard follows the jaw-line, incised with the same small wavy lines as the hair, and becomes longer and slightly forked on the chin. His neck is short and thick, like that of the Madonna.

The musculature beneath Christ’s skin is skilfully alluded to with the pectoral muscles, breast bone and the line of the stomach muscles all delicately carved. He has a C-shaped wound carved in his right side, with faded red polychrome, representing his blood, emerging from it and falling on his cream-colored skin. The distance between his shoulders and waist is quite short. He has an hour-glass figure; the torso comes in drastically at the waist and then rounds outwards for his hips. Christ’s perizonium is tied over the left hip and carved in the same sort of small, deeply cut, curved overlapping folds as the Madonna’s collar, with an additional vertical bit of cloth between his legs. Much of the polychrome on Christ’s torso and the top of his perizonium has chipped away.

Christ’s arms are missing from just before the shoulders. They appear to have been originally carved separately, and in the visible stump of the right shoulder a large dowel hole with the broken-off dowel still intact, can be seen.
The legs are short in proportion to the rest of the figure, accounted for mostly in the upper leg between his hips and knees – the distance here is very short, although the length of the lower legs is fairly proportionate to the rest of the figure. The legs are carved in soft, rounded shapes and painted with the same cream-colored flesh-tone as the rest of the figure. Red trickles of blood can be seen running down the outside of his visible leg and on the top of his foot. The feet appear a bit odd. The toes are anatomically accurate, but the rest of both feet are constructed of drastically rounded shapes, and the distance between the ankle and the heel is very short.

5. Identification of the subject: This image of the Pietà shows the Madonna holding the body of the dead Christ in her lap in the conventional manner. Devotional images of this type became popular in the 13th and 14th centuries and continued throughout the Renaissance.11 As is typical of medieval portrayals of the pietà, the body of Christ is depicted much smaller than that of the Madonna, perhaps alluding back to images of the Madonna and Child.

6. Comments: The Museum Pietà is the only surviving Irish example in wood of this subject, and nothing is known of its history prior to the early 20th century when it was bought by the National Museum from a Dublin salesroom. There are very few examples of the pietà extant in Irish stone sculpture; however, one example dating to the second half of the 15th century from Strade, Co. Meath has certain similarities to the Museum Pietà. In both, the Madonna is slightly heavy set and wears a long veil which becomes a cloak over her shoulders. The veil in both

11 Hall, 246.
examples is cut square across the forehead and the hair does not show from underneath it. The figure of Christ in both examples is shown much smaller than the figure of the Madonna.

Of the extant Irish wooden carvings, the Museum Pietà seems to have the most in common with the Kilcorban St. Catherine in terms of style. They both have elliptical eyes, straight triangular noses and proportionately tiny mouths. Although the figure of the Madonna is more heavy set than the St. Catherine, they both have ovular faces lacking any indication of cheek bones. The vertical folds in both figures are carved in gradual undulations, and there is a relative lack of modelling of the drapery on the upper portion of the cloaks. This, when taken in conjunction with the evidence of the Strade Pietà, would seem to indicate a similar date for the figure in the 15th century, and possibly also a provenance in the west of Ireland. It is also worth noting in brief that the information currently provided on the museum label and in the interactive touch screens in the Out of Storage Gallery, Collin’s Barracks, where this figure is currently displayed, are inaccurate. The information provided therein, including the registration number, belong to the smaller figure of the pietà.


**Museum Standing Madonna** (Fig. 78; Dig. Illus. 31-36)

1. **Location**: National Museum of Ireland, Reserve Collections – Art and Industry Division, Collin’s Barracks, Dublin 7.

2. **Working title of the carving**: *Museum Standing Madonna*
3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 50 cm.

(b) type of wood: Oak

(c) number of blocks: It currently is comprised of two blocks. The figure is carved from one block of wood, with a much more modern base attached. However, if the no longer extant cross from the top of the Christ-Child’s orb and the object that the Madonna held in her hand were wooden, they would have been carved separately.

(b) dowel holes: There are two apparent. One is in the top of the orb that the Child holds, presumably for a cross to be inserted. The other is in the closed fist of the Madonna, as if she used to hold some object.

(c) evidence of polychrome: This figure is well covered with polychrome and was lavished with gold-leaf. The Madonna’s hair retains traces of black polychrome and gold leaf. Remnants of gold-leaf also remain on the hair of the Christ-Child and on the ball that he holds. There is also a small spot of gold leaf on the boarder of the Child’s skirt. Gold-leaf remains on the Madonna’s belt, as well as on the boarders of her skirt and sleeves. The Madonna’s crown also was gilded, and touches of red polychrome remain on the portion of the crown which would have covered the top of the head. The gowns of both figures are painted with a bright red polychrome. The Madonna’s cloak is painted dark blue. In places the red-lead priming of the wood and gesso base coat can be seen underneath the polychrome. Both figures have the same pale flesh-tone, and the cheeks and lips of both are blushed with carmine. The scleras of both figures are painted with the
same flesh-tone as the rest of their faces. The eyes and eyebrows of both figures are outlined with black polychrome. The irises of both figures are brown, outlined in black, with black pupils. There is a blackish shading on the outside corners of the noses of both figures, as well as the inside corners of the eyes. The nostrils of both the Madonna and Child are painted black. There is a splattering of a different, brighter flesh-colour over the entire figure.

(d) general condition: The surfaces are very dirty. The paint is chipping in places, but for the most part is intact. With the exception of having both black polychrome and gold leaf on the hair of the Madonna, it would seem that all of the polychrome is original to the figure; there is no evidence of over-paints. Some of the crenulations from the top of the crown have been broken off. The cross from the top of the ball which Christ holds is missing, as well as the object which would have been held in the Madonna’s closed fist. There is a horizontal crack in the figure where the Madonna’s right knee would be, over the fluted drapes. Below this there are some other smaller horizontal cracks which are either just in the paint or perhaps only in the surface of the wood. In the back of the figure, approximately four centimeters above the bottom of the skirt is another horizontal crack. A large chunk of wood, about 2.5 cm high and 5 cm wide is missing from the back of the figure. This area has been painted black, and there is some active rot towards the top of this chip. There does not appear to be any other decay in the figure, and no evidence of wood worm is present.
4. Description:

(a) head: The Madonna wears a crown that sits high upon her forehead. The bottom of the crown is triple banded, with two thin upraised bands sandwiching a wider depressed band with carved upraised round studs. Some of the crenulations from the crown are missing and the extant ones are worn. It appears that originally they were either clover or flower-shaped. Over the top of the head, there is a portion of the crown that looks as if it was meant to depict cloth, this has traces of red polychrome, and reaches a low peak in the centre. This red polychrome is the same shade as that found on the gowns of both the Madonna and Child.

The Madonna’s hair is very long; it falls to about 6 cm above the bottom of the figure. It remains very close to the sides of her face and then becomes fuller as it falls behind her shoulders. It reaches its fullest point just past the back of her shoulders and then tapers towards the bottom. It is carved in many fine incised wavy lines. Traces of black polychrome remain on the hair as well as much gilding. The hair completely covers the figure’s ears.

The carving of the Madonna’s brow and eyes is very shallow. She has thin painted crescent-shaped black eyebrows, and the elliptical eyes are outlined thinly in black paint. These painted lines follow the carving of the left eye very closely, but the bottom painted line of the right eye falls below the carved line. The scleras of the eyes are painted the same pale flesh-tone as the rest of the face. The irises are painted brown and outlined in black, with a black pupil in the centre of them. The long
hooked nose has a high profile. The nostrils are carved and painted black. There is black shading at the outside corners of the nose and at the inside corners of the eyes. The space between the nose and mouth is quite large and the thiltrum is shallowly carved. The Madonna has a clearly painted cupid’s bow. The cheeks of the Madonna are blushed with carmine and her unsmiling lips are painted solidly with carmine. The carved bottom lip of the Madonna is much fuller than what has been painted. The chin is small and pointy and the neck is long and broadens towards its base.

(b) body: This figure is carved fully in the round and does not appear to have been hollowed. The Madonna’s rounded collar falls to just below where her collar bones would be, were they carved. The figure does not have breasts. There are very few drapery folds carved on the bodice of the Madonna’s dress, and those that are, are very shallow. The Madonna’s gown is painted with a bright red polychrome. The dress is belted at the waist with a gilded girdle.

The Madonna wears a thick dark blue cloak over her shoulders, which falls to the bottom of the figure in the back. Her very large right arm emerges from underneath the cloak; it is bent at the elbow as she holds her closed fist to her chest. There is a dowel hole in this fist for the insertion of some no-longer extant object, possible a flowering rod or a sceptre. The arm and hand are very large, and if straightened, would fall to just below the figure’s knee. The sleeve of the Madonna’s gown stays relatively close to the arm and the cuff retains traces of gold-leaf. The Madonna’s other hand, which supports the Christ-Child, is also quite big.
This arm, too, is over-long, although not as long as the other, owing mainly to the forearm being quite short. However, the entirety of this arm is hidden behind the body of the Christ-Child and so is not visible when the statue is viewed from the front.

The legs of this figure are much too short in proportion to the torso. The Madonna stands in a contraposto position with her right knee out. The drapery folds on the lower portion of the figure’s gown emerge from underneath the bottom of the Child’s tunic; the skirt seems to be gathered up underneath the Child’s body. These drapery folds begin as vertical flutes that then fall in a ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern for approximately six centimetres and then end in a relatively straight vertical fold to the bottom of the figure. This reveals an underskirt painted the same colour red as the Madonna’s gown. There is a horizontal crack over the fluted drapes. Below this there are some other smaller horizontal cracks which are either just in the paint or perhaps only in the surface of the wood. Falling towards the left, additional diagonal folds emerge from underneath the fluted vertical drapes ending at the knee and shin of her prominent (right) leg. There is one loop fold that emerges from underneath the Madonna’s closed fist and falls over her pelvis. The bottom of the skirt falls in undulating vertical folds. Its boarder retains traces of gold-leaf. The feet are not carved.

The Madonna’s cloak is fairly form-fitting at her upper body and torso. The cloak follows the shape of the arms, even on their undersides. However, below this indentation the cloak begins to fall more fully to the
bottom of the figure, approximately 2-3 centimetres wider than the skirt on either side. The upper portion of the cloak, where it can be seen on either side of the Madonna’s long hair, has relatively few folds carved in it. There are a few very shallow folds carved in the cloak over the left arm, but without the same sense of decorative pattern seen in the folds of the gown. There is one long loop-fold carved in the cloak on the left side of the figure, just below her arm. The back of the cloak is carved in a series of shallow vertical undulating folds. The Madonna’s long hair, which reaches nearly to the bottom of the figure, covers the majority of the back of the cloak. On the left side of the figure is a long horizontal crack beginning at the edge of the Madonna’s skirt, through the cloak extending back towards the end of her hair. A large chunk of wood, about 2.5 cm high and 5 cm wide is missing from the back of the figure. This area has been painted black, and there is some active rot towards the top of this chip.

(c) Child: The Christ-Child is quite small. He sits in the crook of the elbow of the Madonna’s left arm and she supports him underneath his bottom with her left hand and the Child is held against the Madonna’s chest. He has a ‘page-boy’ haircut that falls over his ears with short bangs cut high across his forehead. The hair is carved in thinly incised lines. Traces of gilding remain the on the Child’s hair, and there is a large green splotch of polychrome on the back-top of his head. The Child’s eyebrows are thin black lines of polychrome, which do not entirely follow the carved line of the brow; the painted eyebrows lift up towards the centre more than the
carved line does. His eyes, unlike the Madonna’s, are painted only, but the painting of them is virtually identical to the Madonna’s. They are elliptical in shape, outlined in thin black lines, with brown irises also outlined in black with black pupils. The eyes of the Christ-Child gaze straight out at the viewer.

The Child’s nose is short with a large round end. The nostrils are carved and the thiltrum is lightly incised. Like the Madonna, the space between the Child’s nose and mouth is quite long. His unsmiling lips are quite thick in his small face. They have a distinct cupid’s-bow. His chin is small and pointy. The Christ-Child’s flesh-tone is the same as the Madonna’s, and like the Madonna, his cheeks are blushed with carmine and his lips are painted solidly with carmine.

The collar of the Christ-Child’s tunic is quite high; it comes up right under his chin, and he does not appear to have a neck at all. His upper body is quite long in proportion to his short legs. The shortness of the Child’s legs is accounted for mostly in the thigh bone; his shins are in good proportion to the rest of the figure. The robe that the Christ-Child wears is painted with the same red polychrome as that of the Madonna, and the border of the skirt of the robe has traces of gold-leaf. It is unbelted. The Child’s skirt falls in deeply carved, undulating vertical folds. The underside of the skirt is flat and no attempt has been made to portray feet.

The Christ-Child raises his right arm in a gesture of blessing. It is very flat, bent at the elbow and held against his Mother’s chest. He holds
up his first two fingers and thumb in a gesture of blessing. His small hand also is quite flat. His other arm is bent at the elbow and rests in his lap holding a large gilded ball. It has a small hole in the top of it for the insertion of a cross which is no longer extant.

5. Identification of subject: This Gothic representation of the Madonna and Child shows the Madonna standing and holding the Infant Christ. He holds a globe that would have been surmounted by a small cross, and raises his other hand in a gesture of blessing. This was a typical mode of presenting Christ as ‘Salvator Mundi’, or saviour of the world. This same globe-with-a-cross symbol was also one of the insignia used by English kings. In the Madonna’s now empty left hand, she may have held either a lily, symbol of her purity, or a flowering rod of Jesse, symbolizing the genealogy of Christ.

6. Comments: Nothing is known about the history of this small Gothic Madonna prior to the National Museum’s acquisition of it in 1948. When it was acquired the piece was covered completely with black paint. Several coats of paint were removed from the figure to reveal the medieval polychrome underneath. Hourihane points out that the figure of the Christ-Child is similar in pose and dress to a stone carving at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny and therefore dates the figure to the mid-to-late 15th century. Supporting evidence for this date can be found in the fluted, falling, rippling-ribbon type of drapery folds which expose the underskirt seen towards the bottom-right of the Museum standing Madonna. Parallels for this type of fold can be seen in a figure of an unknown female saint (possibly St. Catherine) from a tomb-chest in the east gable of the sexton’s house of St.

12 Ibid., 324.
Canice’s Cathedral, Kilkenny city. Hunt dates this stone carving to the 16th century. An additional comparison can be made to another figure from St. Canice’s from a tomb chest of an unknown woman dated to the early 16th century. However the similarity of the Child’s pose and dress to the Jerpoint figure would seem to indicate an earlier date, in the 15th century.


**Holy Ghost St. Stephen** (Fig. 79; Dig. Illus. 37-38)

1. **Location**: Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford.

2. **Working title of the carving**: Holy Ghost St. Stephen

3. **Technical details**:

   (a) dimensions: H. 55.7cm. W. 13.6 cm. (at the base)

   (b) type of wood: Oak

   (c) number of blocks: Single

   (d) dowel holes: None visible. The figure has the same metal loop coming out of back as seen in the other Holy Ghost figures.

   (e) evidence of polychrome: This figure is entirely covered in a putty-coloured polychrome, a layer of dark brown polychrome shows through in places.

   (f) general condition: This majority of this figure is well preserved although the shallowly carved facial features are obscured by several coats of thick paint. The bottom of the figure shows some evidence of decay and the feet are no longer extant.
4. Description:

This is a small, but well proportioned standing figure with a flat back. Its back has not been hollowed and the statue is quite heavy.

(a) head: The head is broader across the front than at the side. The face is round and fleshy. The hair is parted in the middle; it is incised with regular wavy lines and curls under where it touches the collar. In the front it emerges from the temples and completely covers the ears. The eyes and brow are barely carved, and obscured by too-thick paint. Little can be told of their shape. There is a large dent/chip over the left eye, and a smaller one on the right cheek. The cheeks are quite full. The nose is short and round. The distance between the nose and the lips is short, there is no thiltrum, and nostrils are only hinted at. The upper lip has not been carved. The mouth consists of a bevelled line, with a very full lower lip and it does not smile. The long, broad chin slopes down into the neck. The neck is long and wide, but half covered by the upstanding collar.

(b) body: The figure stands very straight and rigid; no movement can be seen beneath the garment’s draperies and there is no indication of underlying anatomy. The figure wears a long undergarment with dalmatic worn over it with a high, wide collar. The dalmatic is open on the sides, until just above the bottom where it is connected by a wide band. It has a carved fringe at the bottom edge. It has sleeves, and the undergarment’s sleeves show below it on the right hand. There are long, vertical undulating folds in the entire costume. A long, narrow maniple is draped over his left wrist. Both arms are bent at the elbow and held close to the figure’s body.
In his right hand, held against his chest, he holds a bunch of rocks. In his other hand, he holds a book to his chest. The book is carved in detail, and held together by a clasp. The bottoms of his draperies seem to bunch and part for his no-longer-extant feet.

5. **Identification of the subject:** This figure is shown wearing a deacon’s dalmatic with a narrow early-type of maniple draped over one wrist. He holds a bunch of rocks in one hand and a book in the other. St. Stephen was the first Christian martyr, who was stoned after offending the Jewish Sanhedrin, an account of which is given in Acts 7:2-60. St. Stephen was also one of the first deacons appointed by the apostles. He is thus shown he wearing the garb of a deacon and holding the rocks of his martyrdom. The book in his other had may symbolize his wisdom and learning, or the Word of God that he died for.

6. **Comments:** (For the history of the Holy Ghost figures, please see Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 39-45, and the catalogue entry for the *Holy Ghost Madonna*, section 6, p. 95.)

This figure can be dated based upon his deacon’s dalmatic and narrow maniple draped over his wrist. According to MacLeod, the dalmatic, open on the sides, is shown on English alabastors and French ivories of the 15th century. The maniple that figure wears is of a type in use until the 16th century. Both she and Hourihane date the figure to the late 15th century, with Hourihane specifying a date between 1460-1480.

There are no known extant stone examples of St. Stephen in Ireland; however a figure of St. James Major from Kilconnell, Co. Galway dated to the

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13 Ibid., 290.
late 15th century is similar in style to the Holy Ghost St. Stephen. The garments of both are carved in similar long, straight rippling ridges. The Holy Ghost St. Stephen is also very similar to two English alabaster figures of that same saint in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, both dated to the 15th century. Both of these figures hold a book in one hand and a pile of rocks in the other, as does the Holy Ghost St. Stephen. The garments of the alabaster panel figure are especially similar to those of the Holy Ghost St. Stephen. One aberration, however between the English figures and the Irish one, though, is that while the English figures each have a rock on the top of their head, the Holy Ghost St. Stephen does not. The similarities between the Holy Ghost Stephen and the alabasters as well as to the Irish stone carving of St. James Major evidence a date in the mid-to-late 15th century for the Holy Ghost St. Stephen.

Although the evidence for English attribution of the figure is not strong enough to refute its former classification as an Irish piece, it is very unlike any of the other surviving Irish carvings.

This small figure is the one of the best preserved carvings from the Holy Ghost. This is perhaps owed to its very small size, allowing it to be more easily hidden from the image breakers. The only damage to the figure is found at its very bottom, where there is some evidence of decay and the feet are now missing. Perhaps like the figure of St. John the Baptist it was left with this portion of the sculpture on a damp floor for a long period of time. As in the case of the other Waterford figures, the many thick modern layers of paint should be removed in order to reveal the medieval polychrome underneath. MacLeod refers to several

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layers of polychrome that could be seen at the time of her writing, which are no longer visible. In addition the current polychrome on this and the other Waterford figures seems to be much darker than the cream-colour that she describes, perhaps giving evidence that they have been repainted since the time of her writing.


Holy Ghost Risen Christ (Fig. 80; Dig. Illus. 39-44)

1. Location: Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford.

2. Working title of the carving: Holy Ghost Risen Christ

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 162 cm. (approximately)

(b) type of wood: Oak.

(c) number of blocks: The figure is currently made up of 4-5 separate pieces. Both arms are replacements that have been inserted into large plaster sections. The hand of the upraised arm is separate. The feet and base, which are one piece, are attached to the broken stumps of the legs of the original sculpture. There is a gap between the replacement feet and the break in the original sculpture.

(d) dowel holes: None visible.

(e) evidence of polychrome: Thick putty-coloured paint overlays several other layers of polychrome. The layer of dark brown paint immediately beneath this is can be seen in several places, particularly on the underside of the
cloak; layers of white and red polychrome are also visible, as well as indications of red-lead priming on the wood. Large pieces of the paint are flaking off in the case to reveal the wood (and in places, plaster) below.

(f) general condition: This figure is much damaged and several sections are replacements or plaster repairs. Both arms have been replaced and are not in their original positions, as is evidenced by the carved musculature of the chest and the large plaster sections into which they are inserted. At the meeting of the wooden upraised arm and the plaster the paint has chipped off revealing active rot in the wood. The legs have been broken at a point just above the ankles; a pair of replacement feet joined to a board-like base have been attached to this break. There are large radial cracks in the torso, and smaller cracks that follow the fold of the garment, although these smaller cracks are possibly only in the paint. The paint is falling off of the wood in large sections and lies in the bottom of the case.

4. Description

(a) head: The head is very long and ovular on a thick, wide neck. A crown of thorns has been carved around the top of Christ’s forehead. His hair falls in waves behind his neck and shoulders, with separate tresses only slightly indicated. His eyes are double lidded and his brow is shallowly carved. Christ’s face is rather flat in profile. The nose has a low profile, is straight and triangular and the nostrils have been clearly carved. The space between his nose and mouth is not very long and is taken up by his moustache. Both of Christ’s lips can be seen below this moustache and the mouth turns down at the edges. The moustache extends down quite far
to join with the beard. This accentuates the down-turned expression of the mouth. There is a gap about an inch long between the bottom lip and the beginning of the beard. The beard follows the jaw-line, and while it covers the underside of the jaw, it does not extend onto the neck whatsoever. The beard and the moustache are comprised of many small incised lines. The chin is long and the facial features are obscured by many layers of paint.

(b) body: The wide, long neck joins to the bare torso at the collar bone. The collar bone is shallowly carved, however the pectoral muscles and ridges of the breastbone are rendered in high relief. The nipples are not indicated. The ribs are carved equally in depth to the breastbone. On the exposed left side of the chest the ribs are nearly straight horizontal lines that then rise at an angle underneath the pectoral muscles to form the hollow of the stomach. The figure's left shoulder (right-side of the statue) is covered by tightly-pulled drapery. Just after the concave of the stomach begins, the cloth is wrapped more loosely around the figure at a diagonal. The folds hang straight from where the left arm used to be, and then fall diagonally towards the left, and become fluted at the side. On the side of the figure, these flutes become very deeply cut V-shaped folds. The drapery then sweeps up and behind Christ's upraised arm. The end of the drapery, halfway down the calf, flies backwards drastically as if blown by a great gust of wind. An attempt is made to show the right knee bent forward beneath the drapery. The cloak is higher on the right side of the figure and falls diagonally towards the left side. The bottom of the left
knee is exposed. The drapery descends in an almost ribbon-like fashion. The back of the drapery is much lower than the front.

There are two major cracks in the torso; the first extends from the corner of the collarbone on the left side, through the pectoral muscle just to the right-of-centre, then narrows to its end halfway down the ribcage. The second crack in the torso begins in the bottom corner of this same pectoral muscle and extends down the torso and ends around the junction of the legs. This is the wider of the two major cracks.

The figure is carved almost fully in the round; only at the last possible moment does the back of the figure become flat. The flattening begins at about shoulder-blade level, and extends down the length of the drapery. Not enough of the back is visible to discern if the back is hollow, however from the amount of radial cracks in the front of the sculpture, it would seem not to be. The legs are carved fully in the round. They are very cylindrical and missing from just before the ankle. A pair of rather flatly carved feet and a small board-like base, carved from a single block of wood, has been attached to the stumps of the legs. There is a gap between the feet and the ends of the legs. The arms also are replacements, inserted into large plaster sections. The right arm is upraised in a gesture of blessing, it has no elbow, but rather the arm curves gradually in a hose-like fashion. Although Christ’s chest is bare, he is given cuffs which don’t appear to have been carved from the wood, they are, perhaps rolls of plaster. The hand raised in blessing is carved from as separate piece of wood from the rest of the arm. The attaching of the arm
to the figure is odd. Much plaster has been built up on the side of the figure into which the arm was inserted. This was necessary because the arm is found in a different position than it would have been in the original—this can be told from the musculature of the chest. There is a large crack in the plaster where the wood of the arm meets the plaster. Near this crack there appears to be active rot in the wood of the arm. The other arm is also inserted into a large plaster section, but here the plaster is sculpted into drapery folds incongruous with the wooden folds.

5. **Identification of the subject**: Christ is depicted here with a nude torso and legs wearing a drapery that is tightly wrapped at the shoulder and becomes looser as it falls around his body. His arms are not shown in their original positions and he perhaps either held the banner of the Resurrection with its red cross as can be seen in a Veronese painting by Rosso Fiorentino dated to c. 1425, or were held in a palms-out gesture to show the stigmata, as can be seen on a few examples of Irish tomb sculpture. If this were the case, however, it is odd that the wound in Christ’s side is not carved. Perhaps it was a detail added with polychrome.

6. **Comments**: (For the history of the Holy Ghost figures, see Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 39-45, and the catalogue entry for the *Holy Ghost Madonna*, section 6, p. 95.)

This Gothic representation of the Risen Christ presents a problem in dating. Its long ovular head, pillar-like neck and cylindrical legs all would seem to indicate an earlier, rather than a later date; however the subject of the Risen

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Christ as a devotional image did not become popular in Italy until the late 14th century\(^\text{16}\) and funerary images of the risen Christ do not begin to appear in Ireland until towards the end of the 15th century. The deeply undercut drapery folds of the figure’s garment would also indicate a date in the late 15th or early 16th century – although shallower V-shaped folds are found from the second half of the 13th century. As seen in several of the other figures, stylistic modes remained popular to a later date in Ireland than elsewhere, thus accounting for the retention of the cylindrical forms of the figure.

This is the only figure of a Risen Christ found within the study group, and so there is little with which to compare it. The long ovular head and cylindrical neck bears some resemblance to the much earlier figure of St. John the Baptist from Fethard. The deeply cut V-shaped folds of the garment are similar to those found on the closely dated Askeaton Madonna.

There are, however a few examples of the Risen Christ in Irish stone sculpture with which the Holy Ghost Figure could be compared. Two carvings, one from Athboy, Co. Meath and the other from Ennis, Co. Clare both show the Risen Christ just having emerged from the tomb, holding a cross staff in his left hand with the right hand raised in blessing. Both figures are bare-chested and wear the crown of thorns. In the stone carvings, however, Christ wears the perizonium and not the cloak that the Holy Ghost Risen Christ is depicted in. Figures of Christ showing the wounds, such as one from Strade, Co. Mayo and one from St. Nicholas in Galway city depict him wearing a cloak, although in these the cloak is fastened on the front of Christ’s body – rather than draped

\(^{16}\) Hall, 263.
across one shoulder as in the Holy Ghost figure – and show him wearing a kingly crown, rather than the crown of thorns. Since the Holy Ghost Risen Christ’s original arms are missing from the shoulder, it is now impossible to determine whether the figure was a Christ showing the wounds, or held a cross staff and raise his right hand in blessing. In feeling, however the Holy Ghost figure seems the closest to the Risen Christ from Ennis. All of the stone figures, except for the Athboy carving (which is dated to the early 16th century) are dated to the late 15th century. This evidence, as well as the similarities between the Holy Ghost Risen Christ and the Askeaton Madonna discussed above, evidence a date in the late 15th century for the Holy Ghost figure.

Although this figure has largely escaped damage from decay, it shows evidence of once having been subjected to the mutilations of the iconoclasts. The break in the figure’s arms cannot be seen underneath the large plaster sections which have been added to it, but the break just above the figure’s ankles is very clean and occurs at exactly the same level in both legs. This argues for a deliberate cut with a blade. Many of the medieval wooden figures that escaped total destruction at their hands show similar damage to that done to this figure, namely, mutilation of the limbs. This perhaps was done in order to remove their identifying symbols, often held in their hands. Mutilation to the feet of a figure, as in this case, seems to be rarer, but with an image of the Risen Christ this has a possible explanation. If the figure displayed the stigmata on his hands and feet, these would be his identifying symbols, and so the image breaker would wish to remove them.
Of all the figures from the Holy Ghost Hospital, this is the one most in need of conservation work. It is literally crumbling within its case, with large chunks of polychrome falling off from both the wood and the plaster. There is evidence of active rot in the figure — although this, thankfully, seems to be confined to one of the replaced arms. The restorations made to the sculpture in the past are unsympathetic to the original carving. The hose-like arms are found in a different position than the arms of the original figure, and in order to accommodate their new positions large sections of plaster had to be built up on the sides of the figure. The feet and base also are poorly carved, crude replacements attached to the break in the figure’s legs. It is unknown when these repairs were made to the figure, and they have at least been there since the time of MacLeod’s writing, long before the Waterford Treasures Museum acquired the piece. If it is possible to remove these ‘restorations’ without doing further damage to the original carving, it should be done; also, the many thick layers of paint that cover over its medieval polychrome ought to be removed and conservation of the wood undertaken.


Askeaton Nursing Madonna (Fig. 81; Dig. Illus. 45-46)

1. Location: National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin

2. Working title of the carving: Askeaton Nursing Madonna
3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 93 cm. W. 45 cm (at the base) Hollowed to a depth of 11 cm.

(b) type of wood: Oak

(c) number of blocks: Single block

(d) dowel holes: Two very shallow ones. The first one is at the break in the Madonna’s arm, just to the left of centre. The second one is at the break in the Christ-Child’s arm, also just to the left of centre.

(e) evidence of polychrome: There is evidence of an aged cream-colored polychrome, and a brown ochre one as well. Traces of both are found over the entire carving.

(f) general condition: This figure is much damaged. The top of the Madonna’s head is completely missing and her left shoulder is almost completely gone from decay. The Madonna’s left arm has been broken about half way down the forearm and the Christ-Child’s left arm is broken just before the elbow. In both cases there is evidence of an attempted repair; a shallow dowel hole is located on both breaks just to the left of centre. There is much evidence of decay and a proliferation of worm-holes through out the whole figure, especially on the lap and skirts and becoming increasingly worse towards the bottom of the figure.

4. Description: This figure is rather small, flat backed and hollow from the shoulders to the base. None of the original polychrome remains, however there are traces of both a cream and a brown ochre coat, both of which would have covered the entire figure.
(e) head: From the crest of the forehead up, the top of the Madonna’s head is missing from decay. Her hair falls behind her shoulders; it appears to have once been parted in the middle. At the temples the tresses are deeply carved, this carving becomes increasingly shallow as the hair falls until it fades away. The hair completely covers the ears. The Madonna’s face is ovular and her jaw-line is soft. The brow is lightly carved. Her eyes are double-lidded and deeply incised. The figure’s cheek bones are high. Her nose is short and rather round. The space between her nose and lips is quite long. The thiltrum is lightly incised, and the thin lips smile gently. The top lip is fuller than the lower lip.

(f) body: The figure’s rounded shoulders are very narrow. The left shoulder is almost completely eaten away by decay. The neckline of the very tight bodice which she wears is lightly incised and falls below her exposed right breast. The collar bone is lightly carved. The nipple and aureole are clearly carved. The Child’s hand rests on the Madonna’s exposed breast just to the right of the nipple. The bodice of the dress comes to below the waist. The Madonna wears a cape over her shoulders, out of which the broken stump of her right arm emerges. The cape is drawn under this arm, across her lap and underneath the seated Child, from left to right. On the right side, the cape falls from her left arm in a stylized ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern. There is no carved distinction made between the cape and the skirt. From the waist down it is very full and falls in stylized drapes and folds. There is a singular deeply undercut V-shaped fold that hangs between the Madonna’s parted knees. From her left knee fall two
undulating vertical folds, and one long triangular fold hangs from the
Madonna’s right knee. Hanging from the Madonna’s right thigh is a series
of three loopy folds very similar to the one in the front. The material of
her skirt is draped across the rather narrow board that she sits upon, and
the folds of the cloth here are draped in a very stylized ‘rippling-ribbon’
pattern. On the profile of the other side, the cloth of the Madonna’s sleeve
covers that of her dress. It hangs down to the base of the figure in one long
vertical fold overlapped by a long ‘rippling-ribbon’ fold. Unlike the other
side, the material of the Madonna’s skirt is not draped across the seat-
board.

The base of the figure is very decayed and worm eaten. It is
roughly round in shape, although this could be a result of the extent of
deterioration. Two much rotted upraised bumps which were the
Madonna’s feet emerge from underneath her skirt and rest upon the base;
however none of the details of them have survived.

(g) Child: The Christ-Child sits upon the Madonna’s left knee and she clasps him
about his waist with her left hand. His proportions are more those of a
small adult than those of a child. The Child’s hair is arranged in a series
of small curls around his face and at the base of his neck. The back of the
Child’s head is very flat. He looks out straight towards the viewer. The
Christ-Child’s facial features are very similar to those of the Madonna,
although unlike the Madonna, he does not smile. His brows are only
faintly indicated but his eyes and eyelids are deeply incised. The eyes are
almond-shaped and doubled-lidded. His nose is short and round; the
nostrils are not carved. His thiltrum is faintly indicated. The Child’s thin-lipped mouth does not smile. The chin is very small and round set into the chubby face and flaccid jaw-line. His neck is quite short.

The Child sits very erect. His left arm is broken off just before the elbow; his right hand reached up to touch the Madonna’s exposed breast to the right of her nipple. He wears a long tunic with no carved lines to indicate the collar or cuffs of the sleeves. Drapery folds on the Christ-Child’s torso are only very faintly indicated. His right foot is propped up on the thigh of the Madonna’s right leg, and the knee of is right leg is upraised slightly. The drapery of the Child’s robe falls in a very stylized fashion from his left/forward knee and covers where the left foot would be, were it carved. The folds here are carved in yet another ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern hanging from the Child’s knee. Emerging from underneath this and swooping back towards his bottom are two curved diagonal folds.

5. Identification of the subject: The Madonna in this depiction is shown seated with the Christ-Child on her knee. Her left breast is bare and the Child gestures to it. Images of the nursing Madonna, or ‘Maria lactans’, are among some of the most ancient manners of depicting the Madonna – the earliest known of which occurs in a third century fresco in the Christian catacomb of Priscilla in Rome.\textsuperscript{17} Also the earliest known Irish representation of the Madonna and Child, found in the Book of Kells, is a Maria lactans. Although Child is not actually shown nursing

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 328.
in the Askeaton carving, the Madonna’s bared breast and the Child’s gesture to it make the meaning of the figure apparent.

6. Comments: This carving of a nursing Madonna has been associated with the Franciscan Friary at Askeaton, however nothing is now known of the history of this statue prior to the 19th century. At that time it was in the possession of the Combha family at Tubrid, about one mile away from the friary. It has hence become associated with that Franciscan house although no other evidence for this association exists. In 1890, Michael Sommers – the owner of the land on which the Combha house stood – got custody of the statue, and around 1940 it passed into the care of Sommers’ nephew, Patrick Casey.

The story is related that the Combha family, if questioned about the Madonna, would say that it was carved with a spoon by a retarded boy. Clearly the Combhas were not very good liars, given the preposterousness of the story when confronted with such a masterful work of art. The Askeaton Madonna is a beautifully carved figure of Irish workmanship that suggests Continental influences. The deeply undercut, regularly spaced folds greatly resemble those of the figure of the Risen Christ at Waterford, and the broad face, and long neck recall the other earlier Irish Madonnas. The bodice of the dress is similar to one painted by French artist, Jean Fouquet c. 1450 in his work, Virgin and Child of Melun, although in this figure the collar of the dress simply falls below the bared breast, where as in the Fouquet painting the Madonna has undone the lacing on the front of the gown. This carving, by its similarities both to the Holy Ghost Risen Christ and the very closely dated Virgin and Child of Melun, can be dated
with relative certainty to the late 15th century, despite the fact that no other similarly dated Irish nursing Madonnas are known to be extant.


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**Holy Ghost St. John the Baptist** (Fig. 82; Dig. Illus. 47-49)

1. **Location**: Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford.

2. **Working title of the carving**: *Holy Ghost St. John the Baptist*

3. **Technical details**:

   (a) **dimensions**: H. 90 cm. W. 30 cm. (at widest point - knee level)

   (b) **type of wood**: Oak

   (c) **number of blocks**: Two that have been fused together lengthwise with dowels, i.e. the front half of the sculpture is a separate piece of wood from the back half.

   (d) **dowel holes**: Four visible from the front. One is near the right knee, the figure is held together from the back with dowels, this dowel appears to be the front section of one of them. There are two dowel marks on the top of the hand, and one on the right side of that arm just below the end of the sleeve. A metal loop protrudes from the back.

   (e) **evidence of polychrome**: The figure is entirely covered in thick putty-coloured paint, where the paint has chipped one can see that there are several layers of paint visible, including the dark brown and cream-colored layers seen on the other Waterford figures.

   (f) **general condition**: The top half of the figure is well-preserved. The index
finger of the figure’s right hand is missing, as is the tip of the thumb on the left hand, which holds the book. Below this point the damage from decay begins, becoming increasingly worse towards the bottom of the figure. Large pieces of wood are missing from the bottom of the carving, including the figure’s right foot and ankle, as well as the front half of his other foot. The lamb’s two back legs are missing as well as half of one of its front legs. Pieces of drapery and of the rectangular background are missing towards the bottom of the carving as well. Several worm holes are visible in the bottom portion of the sculpture.

4. Description:

(a) head: The figure has a short, round forehead and prominent cheek bones. His eyes are double-lidded ellipses that are deep-set and close to the brow. He has a long narrow nose with deeply gouged nostrils and a long moustache that completely fills the area between his nose and lips. His lips are thick and both are carved. His beard does not extend all the way up his jaw line, but rather is like an over-large “goatee”. The long beard is sharply forked, and carved in long incised lines that follow the shape of the beard. The forks of the beard protrude out into space from the face at an angle. They do not rest against the neck at all. Little of the neck can be seen underneath the beard. He has very thick hair carved in round tufts around his face carved with curling incised lines. His hair is a little longer than shoulder length and falls behind his back. The head is large in proportion to the body.

(b) body: The figure is made of two separate pieces of wood doweled
together from the back, the joint runs along the sides of the figure. The shoulders are broad compared to the rest of the body, but still slightly narrow in proportion to the head. On the figure’s left shoulder is an object that is used to fasten his cloak which MacLeod believes is a paw. It is an object made up of indeterminate, lump-like shapes. It is flat on the bottom and has a divot in the middle of both the front and the side.

The figure is composed of rounded shapes which convey a certain sense of muscularity. He wears a knee-length garment with only very faintly incised grooves for folds. The lightly bevelled folds in his undergarment fall at a gentle diagonal from right to left. This garment has slits that extend to about mid-way up the thigh, through which his legs protrude. The high collar is notched and meets the neck. He wears a cloak that is slung from his right shoulder, diagonally across his left knee. It is very pouch-like, especially since one of his hands seems to reach into one of the deep folds. The right arm is bent at the elbow and the hand seems to reach into the pocket-like drapery fold. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes apparent that this impression is a result of damage to the figure; the finger that would have pointed towards the lamb is missing which makes the hand look like its grabbing for something, and the a fold of the drapery has been broken off just past the knee, causing the cloak to appear more pouch-like.

The sleeves of the figure’s tunic are tight to his arm and end just above his elbows. The sleeves are very deeply undercut. His arms are well proportioned to the rest of his body, but the hands large. The left
hand holds a closed book resting at hip level on the front of his body. The

tip of the thumb of this hand is missing. The book, spine facing up, is

small in comparison to his hand. There are two dowel marks on the top of

the hand, and one on the right side of that arm just below the end of the

sleeve.

The right knee and shin protrude out from underneath the cloak.

There is much damage to the left side of the knee and to the drapery

beside it, although the leg itself is relatively well intact to just above the

ankle. The back block of wood at the same level as the ankle also has

large chunks missing from rot and decay. There are worm holes all

throughout this area. Dark brown paint can be seen where a section of the

wood is missing at the back. This same dark brown shows through the

putty colour on the entire figure.

From about the level of the lamb, the back block is largely missing

on the right side from decay. The back section is higher on the right than

on the left. Also on the right it seems to slope forward toward the bottom.

It is shaped like a tombstone at the top, right side. On the left, the figure is

free standing and carved in the round to about shoulder blade height, at

which point the backboard emerges out gradually to meet the wall. The

back of the carving is flat.

(c) lamb: There is a figure of the Agnus Dei carved from the front block of wood.

It stands in front of John’s partially extant left foot. The wood the lamb is

carved from is very deteriorated. Its back legs are completely missing, as

is half of one of its front legs. Its one remaining intact leg is riddled with
worm holes. The lamb’s bottom has mostly decayed away as well. The lamb’s ear closest to the viewer is no longer extant, but the other tiny, upstanding triangular ear is. The lamb’s face is largely worn away, but a tilted elliptical eye, nostrils, and slit mouth can still be made out. The head is very dog-like, but the body is very woolly and lamb-like. The wool of the lamb is carved in little chips.

5. Identification of the subject: The saint is depicted bare legged, accompanied by a lamb -- the ‘Agnus Dei’ -- and carrying a book. John the Baptist is frequently depicted with bare legs and wearing clothing made of animal skins -- the strange clasp of this figure’s cloak, may indeed be the animal paw that MacLeod identifies it as. The book that the saint carries could well symbolize his role as the messenger of Christ, indeed in much earlier Byzantine art St. John the Baptist was sometimes shown with angels’ wings, since both he and they are messengers. Another of John the Baptist’s frequent symbols is the lamb. In earlier depictions the saint is shown holding the lamb, but in this case its runs along at his feet, and his now missing finger probably pointed towards it. Although several figures of St. John the Baptist are extant both in Irish stone sculpture and in English alabaster work, no parallels have yet been found for the lamb being located at the figure’s feet. The symbol of the lamb had its origins in a gospel passage (John 1:36) that states, “and as he (John the Baptist) watched Jesus walk by, he said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God.’”

6. Comments: (For the history of the Holy Ghost figures, please see Chapter 2: The Holy

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18 Ibid, 172.
Both MacLeod and Hourihane suggest a possible date in the early 16th century for this figure. The sharply forked beard and hairstyle of the piece is very reminiscent of English alabaster work of the 15th century, although the lamb running along side the figure of St. John, rather than being held by him, may possibly indicate a later date.

This small figure of St. John the Baptist shares the standard iconography of the much earlier Fethard St. John the Baptist – both are bare-legged, wear clothing made of animal skins and are accompanied by the symbol of the Agnus Dei – but other than in their iconography they bear no resemblance to each other. The face-type of the Waterford figure is so unlike any of the other Irish figures, as to almost beg the question, is this figure English rather than Irish? The head of the figure is very like examples seen in English alabaster, such as a panel from the second half of the 15th century currently in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. However, the multitude of various depictions in Ireland of the saint as well as manner of construction of the piece – with its two boards doweled together from the back – would seem to indicate local manufacture. It is possible that the woodcarver had an example of an English alabaster of the saint, on which he modelled the head.

There is extensive damage from decay to the bottom of this figure. However, since the decay is localized mostly towards the bottom and back, it does not seem that the figure was left to the elements. Instead, it was perhaps left lying...
on a damp floor or leaning against a damp wall for a significant length of time, causing damage to the wood. It seems to have wholly escaped the hands of the iconoclasts. Like the other Waterford figures, this small image of St. John the Baptist is in need of conservation. The many thick modern layers of paint should be removed in order to reveal the medieval polychrome underneath, and conservation of the wood should be done.

7. **Bibliography:** Hourihane (1984) 973-974; Duignan and Killanin (1967), 456; MacLeod (1946), 95-97; Smith (1746), 183.

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**Unidentified Glendalough Saint** (Fig. 83; Dig. Illus. 50-53)

1. **Location:** National Museum of Ireland, Reserve Collections - Antiquities Division, Kildare Street, Dublin 2

2. **Working title of the carving:** *Unidentified Glendaloagh Saint*

3. **Technical details:**
   
   (a) **dimensions:** H. 30 cm. W. 10.5 cm

   (b) **type of wood:** Oak

   (c) **number of blocks:** Single block extant. The figure originally held a separately carved object in his right hand, but this object is not extant.

   (d) **dowel holes:** Four, plus two small nail holes. One dowel hole is found in the closed fist of the figure’s right hand, presumably for the insertion of some object which is no longer extant. In the stub of the ankle of the saint’s broken left foot appears to be a smaller dowel hole perhaps from attempted repair. The final two dowel holes are oddly placed and of indeterminate purpose. They are located on the underside of the saint’s
skirt to the front -- and slightly outside -- of his legs. There are two tiny
nail holes in the figure’s back.

(e) evidence of polychrome: The figure appears to have once been entirely gilded.

Much of the gold leaf remains on the front of the figure, but very little
remains on the back. There is a shiny varnish over the gilding and other
areas of polychrome in several places. On the back much polychrome
remains. There appears to be at least two layers of a thick white or cream
coloured paint. The lowest of these layers has yellowed with age, while
the upper most layer has greyed with age and dirt. This same polychrome
clings in some of the crevices of the carving on the front of the figure.

Red lead priming shows through in places, especially on the right shoulder
blade. There are a few small spots of bright red polychrome on the back
of the saint’s left arm. On the bottom of what remains of the base is a
strange, thick substance, orange in colour. This is not polychrome; it is
very thick and grainy. A small bit of this same substance clings to the
right shoulder blade as well.

(g) general condition: Most of this figure is in fairly good condition. The
most damaged portions are the saint’s face, and his feet. The toes of his
right foot are gone, as is the entirety of his left foot and most of the base,
with the exception of a small portion extending from underneath the extant
portion of his right foot back to the bottom drapery of his cloak. There is
very little rot in the figure, and no evidence of wood-worm. The saint
used to clasp some no-longer-extant object in his right hand. Much of the
gold leaf, with which the figure was covered, remains.
4. Description:

(a) head: The hair sweeps back from the figure's high square forehead and the sides of the face. It is carved in fine, long incised lines. The hair completely covers the ears but is not long enough to touch the shoulders. It is, as Hourihane describes it, "orb-like".

Unfortunately the face is one of the most damaged areas of the carving. The forehead is high and square. The saint's brows are crescent shaped. A chip is missing from the left eyebrow. The outline of his almond-shaped eyes is clearly incised making the eyes seem to bulge out from their sockets. Most of the tip and bridge of the nose have been worn away, although both tiny nostrils remain. Although the figure wears a beard, he has no moustache. The thiltrum is not carved; instead a singular ridge extends from the nose to the incised line of the slightly open mouth. The upper lip is not carved. The down-turned crescent of the mouth is deeply incised and the lower lip appears quite full. The beard emerges from underneath the lower lip and falls in long, finely incised wavy lines from the lip to the collar. The strands of hair on either side of this part of the beard are shorter, also carved in fine, wavy incised lines and fall to halfway down the length of the neck. The rest of the beard follows the jaw-line. The neck is cylindrical.

A lot of gold-leaf remains on the figure's face, as well as on the front of his hair and neck. None of the gilding remains on the back of the head or neck, although much of the thick whitish polychrome that covers most of the back of the figure clings also to the back of the head and neck.
(b) body: This figure is mostly carved in natural human proportions, with the exception of his rather small hands and feet. He wears a belted tunic with a round collar which meets his neck. The tunic has a split or a seam carved down the middle which extends from the collar to the belt. The saint wears a thick cloak draped over his broad shoulders. The folds of the cloak which hang over the tops of his arms fall in a 'rippling-ribbon' pattern, the cloak then sweeps back in order to allow his arms to emerge. The saint’s left arm is held straight in front of his body and he clasps a book in this hand, holding against the front of his thigh. The sleeves of his tunic are tight to his wrists. The book is carved in great detail in clearly incised fine lines. The pages of the book are carved separately from the cover. The cover is decorated with a rectangular design, and the ridges which bind the book across its spine are clearly indicated. The lower portion of the right arm emerges from the cloak at a perpendicular angle, making it appear as if it were bent at the elbow underneath the cloak. However, no movement can be seen under the cloak whatsoever; the elbow does not jut-out under the cloak as it would if it were bent. In fact, no attempt is made at portraying the body underneath the figure’s clothing whatsoever. The right hand is held against the saint’s body just beneath the belt and is closed in a fist. There is a dowel hole through the centre of the fist for the insertion of some no-longer extant object, perhaps a staff or a flowering rod.

The figure’s cloak sweeps back underneath his hands and closes around his body, meeting in the front so that the skirt of his tunic cannot
be seen, save for a small portion directly underneath the belt. On either
side of where the edges meet, the cloth of the cloak falls in a very stylized
‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern, and on the outside of these folds, the drapery is
carved in very deeply cut vertical folds. The figure’s cloak-skirt is quite
wide especially at the upper thigh. The front of the cloak falls
approximately four centimetres higher than the back of the cloak. The
back of the cloak falls level with the bottoms of the feet and meets the
extant portion of the base. The back of the cloak is only very generally
carved; none of the highly stylized decorative folds seen on the front of
the figure are carved on the back.

The saint’s legs emerge from beneath the skirt of his cloak from
approximately halfway down the calves. Unfortunately, the feet and base
of the figure are much damaged. The left foot is completely missing from
the ankle down and the toes are missing from the right foot, with the
exception of the two smallest toes. There is a small dowel hole in the
broke stump of the left foot, the probable evidence of an attempted repair.
What survives of the feet and legs is intricately carved. The ankles and
surviving toes are realistically modelled. The saint wears sandals rendered
in much detail. The straps of the sandals extend up the leg up under the
skirt. They consist of a series of perpendicular straps. A single vertical
strap extends down the front and back of each leg, in the back the strap
joins with the sole of the sandal. The vertical strap in the front of each leg
extends down the length of the foot of the extant right foot and terminates
in a horizontal strap found just before the toes. Further up the foot is
another horizontal strap, both of these join with the sole of the sandal at their bottoms. A strap extends from just below the ankle on the top of the foot back to the heel. There are two additional horizontal straps on each of the legs before the legs disappear underneath the bottom of the saint’s cloak.

The only extant portion of the base is found underneath the extant portion of the right foot. It is broken in the front even with the break in the toes of this foot, and a small portion of base extends back to meet the bottom of the cloak. The base is one and a half centimetres thick and is carved from the same block of wood as is the rest of the figure.

5. Identification of the subject: The identity of this figure is unknown. He has been hypothesized to be St. Kevin, since he was found at Glendalough, although there is no evidence to support this identification. Hourihane supposes that the sandals that the figure wears, not seen on other Irish medieval wooden figures, in conjunction with the book in his hand, may indicate that it is meant to be one of the apostles. Based upon comparisons with apostle figures found in Irish tomb carving, this identification is likely to be accurate.

6. Comments: The Glendalough Saint is very like several extant Irish stone figures of the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Examples of such figures can be found at Strade, Co. Meath, St. Canice’s, Kilkenny city, and Howth, Co. Dublin. Figures found on the canopied tomb at Strade of SS. Peter and Paul, as well of the three kings – Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar – are similar in style to the Glendalough figure. All are of similar proportions and their thick cloaks are edged with a distinctive zigzag drapery pattern which falls over their shoulders and down the
length of the cloak. The figures of SS. Peter and Paul hold a book in their right hands and the symbol of their identity in the left, as the Glendalough figure would have done. The undulating vertical folds found on the Strade figures’ tunics are echoed in the folds found on the Glendalough Saint’s cloak. The zigzag fold found along the borders of each of these figures’ cloaks can also be seen on a figure of an unidentified female saint on a fragment of a tomb-chest in St. Canice’s as well as on a series of apostle figures from that same Cathedral. However, the figure that the Glendalough saint bears the most resemblance to is that of St. Peter, from Howth, Co. Dublin, dated by Hunt to c. 1462. This similarity is not surprising given their geographical proximity. They share the same thick cloak worn over both shoulders, and similar long tunics – although that of the St. Peter is carved in long undulating vertical ridges, and the Glendalough saints is relatively unfolded. The boarders of the cloaks are carved in the same zigzag pattern observed on the other stone figures, and in both the Howth and Glendalough carvings the cloak comes in under the arms. Both hold a book in their right hand. The figure of St. Peter holds his identity symbol – a key – in his left hand, as the Glendalough figure would have done, evidenced by the dowel hole located in his closed fist. The most striking similarity between the two figures, however is found in their hairstyles. They share the same ‘orb-like’ hair combed back away from the face commented upon by Hourihane. Additionally, the beards of both are carved in a similar manner, emerging from underneath the lower lip and falling over the neck, carved in long, wavy lines. This same style of beard can also be seen on the much larger wooden figure of Christ from Fethard, Co. Tipperary. The similarities between the Glendalough and Howth figures
indicates a plausible dating for the Howth figure to the late 15th century, and the similarities between these two figures found in terms of dress, stance and proportion to the figures of SS. Peter and Paul from Strade, as well as to the apostle figures from St. Canice’s, Kilkenny strongly suggests that the Glendalough figure was likely an apostle.

This small figure was found by a ten year old girl amongst the ruins of one of the buildings near the lake at Glendalough, Co. Wicklow, and was acquired by the National Museum in 1930. When the figure was found it was covered with a thick, greyish-white paint. Removal of this paint revealed gold leaf covering the front and profiles of the figure, but not its back. Although carved ‘in the round’ the back of the figure also is not modelled in as much detail as the front is. These factors may indicate that the back of the figure was not really meant to be seen. It was perhaps meant to be displayed in a niche of a retable behind the altar of a church.


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**Fethard Christ** (Fig. 84)

1. **Location:** National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin (on loan)

2. **Working title of the carving:** *Fethard Christ*

3. **Technical details:**

   (a) **dimensions:** 165 cm (approximately)

   (b) **type of wood:** Oak

   (c) **number of blocks:** Single block, with the exception of the thorns in the crown.
The thorns were carved separately and inserted into small dowel holes; only two of them are now extant. The rope that binds the figure’s hands does not appear to have been carved, it is most likely an actual rope stiffened with gesso.

(d) dowel holes: There are several small dowel holes in the crown where the separate thorns would have been inserted. Only two of the thorns are extant, although there are many more holes. No other dowel holes are apparent.

(e) evidence of polychrome: This mostly nude figure is painted with a warm flesh-tone. The ample mantle which has been draped around his pelvis and over some of the rock on which he sits is painted with a bright red polychrome. His hair, beard and eyebrows are dark brown. The scleras are painted white and the irises are dark blue. The pupils are indicated with black. There are touches of red around the figure’s eyes, the cheeks are blushed and the lips also are touched with red. The teeth which can be seen through the parted lips are painted white. The heavy crown of thorns worn around his head is painted a matte burnt sienna colour, and the rope which binds his wrists are painted a slightly lighter shade of burnt sienna than the crown. There are touches of red on the face and neck, and even more on the mostly nude body of the figure. There are pronounced painted and carved scrapes on the knees in red, touches of red running along the shins, on the tops of the toes, and some on the backs of the calves. Some of this could possibly be a red lead base coat showing through the worn flesh tone. There is additional red polychrome on the
torso, arms and hands. The rock on which the figure sits does not appear
to be painted, but rather the wood seems to have been varnished or waxed.
The skull set in to the left side of the rock is painted white.

(f) general condition: There are a few hairline cracks in the wood, but no major
ones. The toes of the figure's right foot are worn away as if from rubbing.
There are some areas of decay along the edges of the drapery as well as
towards the bottom of the rock. Overall the figure is well preserved.

4. Description:

(a) head: The figure's head is inclined slightly to the left and glances downwards.
The face appears small in the long head. Most of his forehead is covered
by the massive crown of thorns, and the sides of his face and chin are
covered by his hair and beard. The heavy crown of thorns is comprised of
three loosely braided strands. There are several dowel holes in each of the
strands for the insertion of carved thorns. Only two of the thorns are
extant. The thorns are tapered dowels that extend out from the crown
about 2 cm. The figure's long hair stays close to the head and falls behind
his back. It is carved with deeply incised wavy lines. The figure's beard
is approximately 10 cm long and extends from the face approximately 5
cm. It is carved with the same type of deeply incised wavy lines as the
hair. The head is carved in the round.

The figure's face wears an expression of quiet sorrow. The
eyebrows incline slightly upwards at the bridge of the nose, although not
enough to make the brow furrow. The eyebrows consist of two thin brown
lines that closely follow the line of the carved brow. Both lids of the
almond-shaped eyes are carved; the eyes glance downwards and to the left. The scleras are painted white and the irises are dark blue. The pupils are indicated with black. There are touches of red around the figure’s eyes. The long straight nose is perhaps a plaster repair. Both nostrils are rendered and he has a pronounced thiltrum. The lips are slightly parted and the tips of the upper teeth can be seen. The lips are touched with red polychrome, and the exposed teeth have been painted white. The figure’s top lip is fuller than the lower lip.

(b) body: Over all, this figure is rather shallow and the back is flat beginning at the shoulders. According to MacLeod, the figure is hollow. The torso is very long and has a slight ‘ivory-bend’. The collar bone, breast bone, muscles of the shoulders and arms are all clearly carved. The pectoral muscles have also been indicted, although not as clearly, and the nipples are not indicated. The ribs cage is oddly short; it ends just below the pectoral muscles, but it very pronounced. No ribs are carved on the rib cage, instead, the clearly defined bottom line of the rib cage is made-up of a series of distinctive bumps and from each of these bumps a more faintly carved ridge radiates down towards where the navel would be, behind the crossed hands.

The figure’s arms are kept close to the body. They are not quite long enough in proportion to the torso. Although slender, they have muscular definition, especially in the shoulder muscles and around the elbows. His hands are crosses at the wrist, but do not touch. The hands also are a plaster repair. The left arm is held against his stomach from just
below his elbow to just above his wrist, at which point the wrist and hand jut out away from the body. The right hand and wrist cross over this one and held out in space closer to the viewer. A rope binds the wrists. It is tied very loosely; it passes twice over the top wrist, once under the bottom wrist and is then knotted in front of the bottom wrist. One end of the rope hangs down behind both hands, passes across the thigh of the right leg and clings to the inside of that same leg from the knee to where the rope terminates in the middle of the calve. The other end of the rope hangs from the knot, is draped across the left knee and hangs on the outside of that leg, terminating about three inches below the side of the knee. This appears to be an actual rope painted over with thick gesso to stiffen and hold it in place.

The figure’s hips are wide and fleshy. The red painted mantle is draped over and around the figure’s pelvis. There are many angular and box shaped folds throughout the whole cloth. The cloth partially covers the pyramidal rock on which the figure sits. His legs jut out sharply to the right, in the opposite direction of the inclination of the head – this helps to cause the S-shaped curve of the body. The legs are not nearly as long as they should be in proportion to the body. The shortness of the legs is mostly accounted for between the hips and the knees; the seated figure’s lap is far too shallow. The leg from the knee to the ankle is fairly proportionate to the length of the torso. The thighs are wide in proportion to the calves. On the knees of the figure, scrape and tears in the flesh have been carved, and the effect of this is enhanced by red polychrome. There
are other touches of the same red polychrome indicating Christ’s wounds, over the entire nearly-nude figure. The left leg of the figure is propped up higher than the right. The right leg extends out towards the viewer. The feet of the figure, particularly the right foot -- which is both the farthest out in space and the lowest -- are much worn, as if from rubbing. There is a lot of red polychrome in addition to the flesh-tone on the tops of the feet.

(c) rock: The majority of the pyramidal rock structure on which the figure sits is covered by the drapery hat has been previously described. Where the ‘rock’ is exposed the wood is convincingly carved to resemble rock. The wood here does not appear to have been painted, but instead either vanished or waxed. A skull with no jaw-bone has been carved into a crevice in the rock structure. The skull is painted white. There is a significant crack in the wood of the ‘rock’ just to the left of the figure’s most prominent foot. The crack is about 2 cm wide, 3.5 cm deep, and 10-12 cm long, beginning at the base of the structure.

5. Identification of the subject: Although often described as a Man of Sorrows, this figure is in fact a depiction of Christ after the flagellation. Depictions of Christ as the ‘Man of Sorrows’ nearly always display the five wounds, and Christ is usually either standing in or sits on the edge of an open sepulchre. Images of Christ after the flagellation show him as he is depicted in this carving: at the moment of having been untied from the column, his arms still bound by the rope, alone and naked except for a loincloth. The flagellation is mentioned briefly in all four gospels. In the case of this image, Christ has already carried the cross, his knees are torn from the times that he fell, and he is seated on the rock of Golgotha –
evidenced by the skull on the left side of the carving. The skull has a further allegorical link, it was supposed during the Middle Ages that Adam’s burial place was at the site of the crucifixion, and the skull was meant to represent Adam’s skull, and by extension, to represent original sin on account of which Christ suffered and died to redeem mankind. The theme of Christ after the flagellation first appears in Italian painting of the 16th century, and became particularly popular in 17th century Spanish art.

6. Comments: (See Chapter 2: Fethard Christ, pp. 57-66.)

Section II: Selected Post-Medieval Irish Wooden Figure Sculpture

Fethard Holy Trinity (Fig. 85; Dig. Illus. 54-57)

1. Location: National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street, Dublin

2. Working title of the carving: Fethard Holy Trinity

3. Technical details:

   (a) dimensions: 122 cm (approximately)

   (b) type of wood: Oak

   (c) number of blocks: Two main blocks extant, however there probably would have been four originally. The papal tiara is carved from a separate block of wood from the rest of the figure. The now missing cross and dove would have been carved from separate pieces of wood as well. In addition to the two main extant blocks, a small cross and ball which top the tiara are also carved from separate pieces of wood.

   (d) dowel holes: There are two visible, still with dowels in them. One located in the top, left side of the tiara, and the other is located on the drapery of the cloak just below the figure’s right hand. They are both about 2.5 cm in diameter and of uncertain purpose.

   (e) evidence of polychrome: This figure is covered completely with polychrome, very little bare wood is visible. The cross and ball which surmount the papal tiara are covered in flaking gold leaf. The round dome at the top of the tiara is painted a bluish-grey. The majority of the rest of the tiara is gilded, with the exception of a row of triangular crenulations, which are painted red. The carved ‘jewels’ on the tiara are painted either greenish-blue, or silvery-white. The flesh-tone of the face is enhanced with a rose-
colored blush on the cheeks and lips. The eyebrows and upper lashes of the eyes are denoted by single lines of thin, black, crescent-shaped paint. The scleras are painted white. The irises are painted dark blue, and each have a small spot of white paint to denote reflected light. The inside of the nostrils are painted grey. The hair, beard, and moustache are painted grey with light brown paint applied over top of this while the paint was still wet. The figure's robe is painted white. The outside of the red-lined cloak has a greyish-blue ground (the same polychrome as on the dome of the tiara) with a design of red and yellow polychrome painted over this. In places this design becomes a fleur-de-lis pattern. The edge of the cloak has traces of gold leaf. The hands are painted with the same flesh-tone as the face and the exposed of one of his shoes is much decayed but retains some traces of the blue-grey polychrome.

(f) general condition: There are several long radial cracks in the lower half of the figure. The exposed toe and, to a lesser extent, the drapery in the surrounding area, show some evidence of decay. The cross and dove, which would have been carved from separate blocks, are no longer extant. Otherwise, the figure is well preserved.

4. Description:

(a) papal tiara: The tiara is carved from a separate block from the rest of the figure. It is surmounted slightly off centre by a gilded ball and cross. These small items are also carved from separate pieces connected by a tiny stick, which appears to be metal. Beneath the ball and cross, the top of the main portion of the tiara is an egg-shaped dome painted with a blue-grey
polychrome. On the left side of this dome, towards the left, is a dowel hole, with a slightly upraised dowel about an inch in diameter. It is painted with the same polychrome as the rest of the dome. Below this dome is a row of small, upraised, alternating clover and rectangular-shaped crosses. These are all gilded. The clover-shaped crosses have a round ‘jewel’ carved in the centre of them and painted a silvery-white. The rectangular crosses have diamond-shaped upraised ‘jewels’ carved in the centre of them. These are painted blue-green. Beneath this row of crosses is a row of semi-circle crenulations which are also covered with gold leaf. Each of these semi-circles has a small incised circle in the centre. Under the semi-circular crenulations is a row of larger alternating gold-leaf-covered clover and rectangular crosses, which have the same jewel and polychrome patterns as the top row. The crosses in this row are joined to each other by cleft cross shafts that link to the shaft of the next cross in the row. The ground behind this row of crosses is gilded as well. Below this middle row of crosses is a row of triangular crenulations, painted red. The red polychrome of this band of crenulations becomes the ground for the final row of alternating clover and rectangular crosses. The gold leaf, jewel and polychrome pattern, as well as method of linking the row of crosses together is exactly the same as in the previous row of crosses, with the exception of one of the round jewels, which is painted blue. This final row of crosses, located immediately above the band of the tiara, is mid-sized between the larger row of crosses in the middle of the tiara and the smaller top row of crosses. The band of the tiara actually
consists of three separate bands, the top and bottom of which are thin and upraised. The middle wider band is depressed, and decorated with large 'jewels', some of which are rectangular and others, diamond shaped. The paint on these jewels is green, dark blue and purple, the rest of the band is covered with gold leaf. The back of the tiara is flat and it is wider in profile than when viewed from the front.

(b) head: This figure has a long head, accentuated by the high tiara and long beard. The top of the head is flat where the tiara is joined to it just above the forehead. The eyebrows consist of two painted single black line crescents that follow the line of the carved brow. The bridge of the nose is so small and the painted brows extend so far that they nearly meet. The eyes bulge slightly and both upper and lower eyelids are carved; even though the eyes are open very wide, much of the upper lid can still be seen. The upper lash of each eye is enhanced with a thin black line along the edge. The scleras of the eyes are painted white. The irises are completely surrounded by the sclera, and do not touch either the top or bottom lids. They are dark blue with small white highlights to indicate reflected light.

The nose is long and ends in an up-turned tip that clearly exposes the nostrils. The end of the nose is made up of round shapes. The cheekbones are high and the cheeks are blushed with a rose colour. The entire space between the nose and the mouth is taken up by the moustache, which is carved with very fine incised lines. The ends of the moustache flow down into the beard. Only the bottom lip of the mouth is carved. The
beard and hair are comprised of small, erratic hair swirls. The hair stays fairly close to the head, beginning at the temples underneath the tiara, and completely covering the ears and neck. The beard falls on to the chest and completely covers the front of the neck.

(c) body: The figure has a flat back and is very shallow. He wears a hooded cloak, draped across his shoulders, and drawn across his lap from left to right. The cloak is fastened in the centre with a large ‘jewelled’ clasp. The clasp consists of a large blue-green diamond-shaped ‘jewel’ encircled by small round beads painted white and resembling pearls. The arms of the figure are exposed from underneath the cloak and resting on the figure’s lap from approximately the elbows down. The wrinkled white sleeves of the figure’s undergarment are tight to the wrist. The large hands are painted with the same flesh-tone as the face and are held cupped and palm out. The no longer extant cross and dove symbols would have been held in the figures hands. Where the cloak flares out to allow the arms to emerge, as well as at the hood and where it is drawn across the figure’s lap, the red polychrome of the lining can be seen. The outside of the cloak has a blue-grey ground (the same colour polychrome as was found on the egg-shaped dome of the tiara) with a design of red and yellow polychrome painted over this. In places this design becomes a fleur-de-lis pattern. The edge of the cloak has traces of gold leaf. There are very few folds in the cloth of the cloak, with the exception of a few ‘whisker’ folds radiating out from the clasp, and a few in the lower portion of the garment where it falls from the figure’s knees. The figure’s left
knee projects farthest out in space towards the viewer. The cloak falls approximately 30 cm from this knee and then falls at a gradual diagonal another approximate 30 cm. Where the cloak is upraised the white, wrinkled undergarment can be seen.

The high collar of the white robe is not visible underneath the figure’s beard. On the torso of the body and where it can be seen below the cloak, the white robe has many small vertical erratic folds. At the waist, the robe flounces out a bit above where the cloak has been pulled across the figure’s lap. On the sleeves, the small folds are horizontal around the circumference of the arm. Near the bottom around the exposed toe, there is some evidence of decay, both on the drapery folds of the garment and on the toe. It is also in this general area that most of the major cracking appears. Traces of the blue-grey polychrome remain on the toe.

The overall depth of the figure, especially of the torso, is very shallow. On the right side only, beginning where the cloak flairs out to expose the arm, is a long triangular shaped bevel that extends to the bottom of the figure and angles back to where it meets the wall. This triangular bevel is covered with white polychrome; it was possibly carved this way to fit the figure back into a niche.

5. Identification of the subject: This life-sized figure of an older man, seated and wearing a papal tiara is most likely an image of God the Father from a Trinity Group, or Throne of Grace. The cross which he would have held in his outstretched hands is now missing, and the dove – representing the third person of the Trinity – has been missing since c. 1822 when the figure was moved into a new church. It is
not known when the cross was lost. Images of the Trinity became popular in later medieval art and continued to be in use throughout the Renaissance, although it was more typical to depict God the Father wearing a crown as opposed to the papal tiara he is shown wearing here. In most images, God the Father holds either end of the patibulum in his hands and the dove is perched somewhere above Christ's head. Other modes of depicting the Trinity would be for God the Father, instead of holding a crucifix, to hold a book with the Greek letters Α and Ω (or Ω)\textsuperscript{20} inscribed on it, or positioned with the patibulum resting on his knees and holding a "napkin of the souls," often in substitution of the dove.\textsuperscript{21} If this figure did in fact hold a cross, the back of the cross would have had to have been notched; the knees of the figure project out further than the level that his hands are held at, and so the patibulum of the cross would not be able to extend straight across from hand to hand unless notched at the back.

6. Comments: (For a general history of the three figures from Fethard, Co. Tipperary, please see Chapter 2: Fethard Christ, pp. 57-59, and the entry for the Fethard John the Baptist, section 6, p. 113.)

MacLeod states that the figure of the Trinity was known to be in the possession of the parish priest in 1759. The first published account mentioning the figure, by J.W. Cantwell, appears in 1874. He states that there were in the church "three very ancient and well-carved figures." Cantwell identifies the Trinity figure as God the Father and goes on to say, "Now it is within the memory of persons yet living that a carved figure of a dove was placed in a remarkable

\textsuperscript{20} Hall, 309.

\textsuperscript{21} Cheetham, 296.
niche in the old chapel adjacent to what we call the figures of the Trinity; but that in the period of transition (c. 1822) from one chapel to another it was lost..."

Although Hourihane assigns this figure an early 16th century dating, the style of the carving seems somewhat later. The manner in which this figure is carved would seem to indicate a post-medieval date. The curls of his beard and the folds of his cloak seem too erratic, and lack the sense of decorative design found in the drapery folds of medieval works. It is possible that an older figure of the Trinity had been destroyed during the iconoclastic waves that swept over Ireland in the sixteenth century, and that the people of Fethard, to whom the Holy Trinity is so important, commissioned a new statue to be made during the Catholic Revival of c. 1600-1640. It is perhaps then that this figure was carved. In 1608 a charter was issued to the citizens of Fethard by James I, authorizing a fair to be held on the three days prior to the feast of the Holy Trinity. It is perhaps then that the ‘pattern’ began, and that the statue was carved around this time.


Holy Ghost St. Patrick / St. Bonaventure (Fig. 86; Dig. Illus. 58-61)

1. Location: Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford

2. Working title of the carving: Holy Ghost St. Patrick / St. Bonaventure

3. Technical details:

   (a) dimensions: H. 157 cm. (approximately)

   (b) type of wood: Oak

   (c) number of blocks: Currently three or four. Body is all one piece, and the head
appears as if it were carved separately, although with how the figure is positioned, it is impossible to see, even with the aid of a ladder, if this is in fact the case. The staff of the crosier is a long dowel that has been fitted into a hole in the figure’s hand. The head of the crosier is carved separately from the staff. (MacLeod says that staff is ‘modern’).

(d) dowel holes: The back not visible. Crosier staff is one long dowel inserted through the saint’s hand. Also, there is a dowel 2/3 of the way down the left inside of the cloak, and on the saint’s right shoulder towards the back there is one. This one is reddish in colour. There is a small dowel on the underside of the pointing right hand.

(e) evidence of polychrome: A thick putty-coloured paint overlays a layer of dark brown paint, both layers cover the entire figure. The dark brown paint is exposed several places, especially on the undersides of the drapery folds.

(f) general condition: There are many radial cracks throughout the torso. The underside of the right arm appears to have been repaired with plaster.

4. Description:

(a) head: The head appears to be a separate block from the rest of the body. If it is in fact a separate piece from the body, it appears that the neck sets into the collar; however the figure is placed too high for this to be clear. He wears a tall bishop’s mitre with an upraised cross on the front of it. The bottom of the mitre is carved in three bands, the widest one in the middle. The mitre sits across his forehead, covering the hairline on all sides, except where the beard, becoming sideburns, goes up underneath of it. The mitre has ribbons that fall from the back. The saint has a prominent brow. The
eyes are set very close to the brow. The aquiline nose is finely moulded and the nostrils are carved. A long, drooping moustache fills the space between the nose and the lips and joins with the beard below. Sideburns in low relief emerge from underneath the mitre and follow the jaw-line to join with the beard as well. His bottom lip is thick and protruding, the top lip is not carved. The slight space between his moustache and bottom lip make it appear as if his lips were slightly parted. The saint’s beard is carved in wavy, deeply cut locks. His whole face is long, and his jaw-line is sharp on the sides. There seems to be a repaired crack on the left side of his face, but this is difficult to determine with how the figure is currently positioned. A small triangle of his neck shows on the sides between the ribbons of his mitre and his beard. The beard is squared off at the bottom and completely covers the neck in front, and meets the collar of his robe. His ears are small and barely carved.

(b) body: The body is very stiff; no trace of movement can be seen underneath the saint’s robes whatsoever. The figure is carved in the round, although it appears that the back is carved with less detail than the front. His body is cylindrical and his robe is carved in many small, erratic folds from the collar to the floor. About a foot from the floor the garment becomes tiered. This bottom tier does not reach the ground, and his round lumpy feet protrude from underneath. There is no real base, just an uncarved cylinder of wood less wide than the bottom tier of his robe. His entire body is filled with radial cracks. The cloak which is draped across his shoulders form two semi-circular shapes on his chest where they are
connected by a rectangular strip. His arms come out from underneath this cloak in a stiff manner and there is a repair underneath of the right arm. Both hands wear large gauntlets. The right hand points out with the first two fingers and thumb, to the front and slightly to the side. The other hand holds the crosier. The curved end of the top of the crosier is broken off. The staff, according to MacLeod, is modern. What is left of the damaged crosier top is carved in a foliate design.

There are two large dowels in the figure, one on the inside of the cloak 2/3 of the way down, and one towards the back of the shoulder, both on the left side. They are of unknown purpose.

The putty-coloured paint is chipping off in several places to reveal a previous dark brown coat. Also, in other spots white shows through, and on the shoulder dowel it looks red or orange (red lead priming?).

There is a small dowel on the underside of the pointing right hand. There is a large crack towards the back on the right side of the figure – it looks as if there used to be a knot here.

5. Identification of the subject: This life-sized standing man wearing the clothing of a Bishop and holding a crosier might seem at once to be a figure of St. Patrick, but the nuns under whose care the statue was at the time of MacLeod’s writing were insistent that it was a figure of St. Bonaventure. If that were so, however, as MacLeod goes on to point out, one would expect to find a figure of St. Bonaventure attired in the clothing of a cardinal. The figure, with his tall mitre, is certainly that of a bishop. Hunt points out that many figures attributed in Ireland
as St. Patrick could actually be figures of St. Thomas of Canterbury. This is usually the case however when the figure in question represents an archbishop. The crosier that this figure carries does not have a cross staff, and is therefore not an archbishop. It is likely then a representation of St. Patrick. However, it is possible that the original staff to the crosier had a cross bar that was not recarved on this replacement staff, only the head of which is original. If this latter was the case than the identification of the figure could well be St. Thomas of Canterbury. For the purposes of this study, however, the figure will be referred to as St. Patrick.

6. Comments: (For the history of the Holy Ghost figures, see Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 39-41, and the catalogue entry for the *Holy Ghost Madonna*, section 6, p. 95.)

This figure of St. Patrick appears to be post-medieval in date. The erratic drapery folds and general stiff expression tend to be traits of figures from the era of the Catholic Revival, c. 1600-1640. It was perhaps during the respite from oppression during the Catholic revival, early in the 17th century that the church from where this came commissioned the figure. Later, when the waves of iconoclasm and suppression broke out upon the country again, perhaps this newer statue was sent for sanctuary to the Holy Ghost Hospital. Although the post-medieval dating of this figure has never been in dispute, it is included in the current catalogue because it is part of a rare ‘hoard’ of Irish wooden figures, several of which are medieval. Their story would be incomplete without this figure’s inclusion.

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22 Hunt, Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture, I, 110.
Kilcorban Crucifixion Figure (Fig. 87; Dig. Illus. 62-64)

1. Location: Clonfert Diocesan Museum, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway

2. Working title of the carving: Kilcorban Crucifixion Figure

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 46 cm (approximately).

(b) type of wood: Sycamore

(c) number of blocks: The figure is carved from one block and attached to a cross at the back. The cross is modern; the original would have been carved of a separate block to which the figure was attached.

(d) dowel holes: There are none visible, however there is a large screw projecting from the stump of the left shoulder.

(e) evidence of polychrome: The skin tone of this figure is greenish, and his lips are slightly blushed. The hair, eyebrows, beard and shading around the eyes are painted dark brown. Very red blood cascades from the wound in the side, down the torso and onto the perizonium. Red blood also cascades from the nail in the one partially extant foot. The perizonium is either very dark blue or black.

(f) general condition: Both arms of the figure are missing from just before the shoulder. There are some splinters of wood coming out of the right shoulder and an old screw emerging from the left shoulder. The right leg
is intact until a break about halfway through the foot. The left leg is broken halfway through the shin. There is a chunk missing in the hip from decay. Also the wood is pitted with many tiny holes. The original cross is missing, and the current cross looks quite new.

4. Description: This is a very small full length figure.

(a) head: Christ's head inclines towards his right shoulder, and the eyes are closed, as in death. The hair is parted in the middle and scored with many fine incised lines. It is painted brown and stays very close to the head and neck and ends at the top of the collar bone. It is tucked behind his ears. The hair as it falls becomes two spiral curls, one on either side of the neck. The wood is scored diagonally on the curls. There is not much detail to the back of the head, the brown paint of the hair ends at the point where the neck ends. The ears stick out on either side of his head, and are less naturalistic than the other features of the head.

The figure has a heavy brow, and the painted eyebrows almost meet in the middle. The eyes bulge out from the deep sockets. They are almond-shaped and closed. In all of the crevices around the eyes, the shadows are enhanced by dark brown paint. This was probably to make the features more visible to the viewer on the ground, since this crucifixion group was place high up on a rood screen.

The nose is long and thin. There is no indication of nostrils, however the thiltrum is carved. There are deep crevices carved from the corners of the nose to the corners of the mouth. The mouth is deeply bevelled and the lips are blushed. The beard follows the jaw-line and is
slightly forked. There is no moustache across the top lip, but rather the goatee portion of the beard emerges from the crevices at the corner of the mouth. The neck is long.

(b) body: The neck of the figure emerges from very well-defined collar bones. These collar bones ‘V’ at a rather drastic angle. Both of his arms arm missing from just before the shoulders, but based upon the pectoral muscles, collar bones, and even angle of the break, it seems that the arms were in a V-shaped position, as opposed to a straight-out, T-shaped position.

The distance between the figure’s collar bones and nipples is very long. The entire torso is elongated, especially when compared to his relatively short legs. The nipples and navel are all carved as small knobs. There is a long crack that runs from the collar bone on the right side of the figure down nearly the whole length of the torso that has been patched with plaster. The pectoral muscles are well defined. There is a small notch carved underneath the right pectoral muscle to indicate the wound in Christ’s side from which much painted red blood cascades. The ribs fall in the wrong direction and the stomach bulges below the waist.

The flesh-tone of the figure is greenish, with several discoloured patches where either the wood shows through or where plaster patches are. The colour of the wood is a warm light brown, occasionally whitish from gesso. The plaster patches are darker brown.

The perizonium is tied at Christ’s left hip, and the many small, erratic folds fall downwards at an angle towards the other side. A chunk
of the wood is missing at the left hip from decay. It was where this
missing piece is that the tie of the cloth would have been, and some loose
cloth falls from here. The perizonium is painted a bluish black.

The legs are very short in comparison to the long torso. They are
well muscled and did not cross, causing the figure to have been affixed to
the cross with four nails instead of three. This is made apparent by the
extant left foot where the hole from the nail can be seen, and the painted
blood that flows from this wound is plentiful.

5. Identification of the subject: This figure of Christ on the cross is shown with his eyes
closed in death and nailed to the cross with four nails instead of three, the two feet
having been nailed separately. It does not appear that there would have been a
suppedaneum for the feet on the original, no longer extant cross, and the arms
would have formed a deep, plunging V-shape.

6. Comments: Coleman, writing in 1902 refers to the presence of the Madonna and St.
John the Evangelist from this crucifixion group in the church at Tynagh, Co.
Galway, “there are three wooden statues belonging in former years to this
(Kilcorban) chapel... they are the statue of Our Blessed Lady, referred to by
O’Heyne, a statue of St. Peter and another of St. Paul (in actuality, these were
most likely the figures of the Madonna and St. John the Evangelist from the
crucifixion group), all about two feet in height.” It is not known when the figure
of the crucified Christ was discovered, or whether it had been in the church and
had become simply become disassociated with the other two statues.

The figure of the crucified Christ is of a definitive Counter-Reformation
type. The feet are not crossed necessitating the use of four nails to fix Christ to
the cross instead of three. The figures of the Madonna and St. John the Evangelist are so similar to the figure of the crucified Christ in both form and facial features that they must have been carved by the same artist, and therefore also of a Counter-Reformation date. They most likely date to the Catholic Revival c. 1600-1640. MacLeod supposes that the figures once surmounted a rood screen in the church at Kilcorban, however the figures are quite small, and the figures typically found on rood screens are much larger. The manner of depicting Christ having been fixed to the cross with four nails instead of three is also seen on examples dated until the 13th century. In addition, the manner in which the Kilcorban Crucified Christ’s head and upper body veer towards the left is reminiscent of certain 11th century examples, such as a Crucifixion figure from St. George’s Cathedral in Cologne, currently in the collection of the Schnütgen Museum in that same city – even the compactness of the Virgin and St. John the Evangelist echo 11th century examples. These factors when taken in conjunction with the fact that although the iconography of the grouping is correct for a rood screen, the size of the figures is not, leads one to wonder if perhaps there was a larger 11th or 12th century example from a rood screen that the 17th century sculptor was copying. It is also interesting to note that in two other subsequent copies of the Kilcorban Christ figure have been found, one in the sacristy of the church at Tynagh, Co. Galway and the other at Mullagh, Co. Galway.

Although the Crucifixion Group from Kilcorban has only been previously published with a 17th century dating, Hourihane in his 1984 unpublished dissertation dates these figures to the late medieval era, c. 1500-1550. They are included on the basis of this discrepancy in dating.

**Kilcorban Crucifixion Madonna** (Fig. 88; Dig. Illus. 65-67)

1. **Location:** Clonfert Diocesan Museum, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway

2. **Working title of the carving:** *Kilcorban Crucifixion Madonna*

3. **Technical details:**
   - (a) dimensions: H. 36 cm (approximately).
   - (b) type of wood: Sycamore
   - (c) number of blocks: Single block
   - (d) dowel holes: None
   - (e) evidence of polychrome: The figure wears a black veil that becomes a cloak over a dark maroon dress. The flesh-tone is greenish, as with the other two figures in this group. The hair, eyebrows, details and shadows around the eyes are all painted dark brown. The scleras are painted white, the pupils and irises are indicated by brown dots that have a marked outward divergence.
   - (f) general condition: The top of this figure’s head is slightly damaged from decay. Like the other two figures in this grouping, the carving is pitted with many tiny holes. Otherwise, the figure is in good condition.

4. **Description:** This standing figure is very strangely proportioned with a very long torso and extremely short legs (judging by the placement of the hips). The hips are placed in such a way as to make it appear that the figure was kneeling,
except that her long, skinny, finger-like toes peak out from beneath the front of her robe. There is no movement beneath the clothing. The figure has no indications of breasts, and almost no indication of anatomy whatsoever. The figure leans forward quite drastically; this is especially apparent from the side, but difficult to tell when viewed from the front.

(a) head: The top of the head shows some surface decay. The smooth veil falls straight across her forehead. Very dark brown hair can be seen emerging from the veil from about halfway down the face. Her forehead is short and her brow is heavy. The eyebrows are long, thick and straight. The painted lines nearly meet in the middle and do not follow the carved line of the brow. The nose is long and thin; it is broken on the left side. The figure’s eyes are downcast but open. The painted eyes have a slight outward deviation; they do not look in the same direction. The space between the nose and the lip is long and the upper lip is not carved. The bottom lip has been carved but is not painted. The incised line of her mouth is accented with darker paint. Her chin is pointy and her face is broad across the cheek-bones. The shadows of her collar bone and the creases of her neck are emphasized by painted shadows.

(b) body: At the collar bone, the figure’s chest projects out farther than her chin but she has no breasts. The veil becomes a cloak that is fastened just below the figure’s collar bones. The fastening of the cloak is comprised of a band that stretches across her dress, with four beads, in the shape of a flower or a cross, in the centre. The cloak stays very close to the Madonna’s body. The sleeves of the dress extend to just past the wrist.
They are not tight to the wrist, there is some gap between them and the hands. The hands are long and thin, almost claw-like; they are in a gesture of prayer but do not meet. The only folds in the cloth of the figure’s garments are at the edges especially at the bottom near the base. These folds are at a diagonal extending upwards to the left. The base, which is carved from the same block of wood as the figure is thick. The sides and back of it are painted black, and the front is a painted a yellowing white. On the white portion, the initials “B.V.M.” are painted, standing for “Blessed Virgin Mary”.

5. Identification of the subject: This figure and the figure of St. John the Baptist, when first published were presumed to be SS. Peter and Paul, however when the crucifixion figure was later found and all three set together, that it became obvious that this was a figure of the Virgin Mary. The initials painted on the base of the figure, B.V.M., were probably added at this time, early in the 20th century.

6. Comments: (See entry for the Kilcorban Crucifixion Figure, section 6, pp. 192-193.)


**Kilcorban St. John the Evangelist** (Fig. 89; Dig. Illus. 68-70)

1. **Location:** Clonfert Diocesan Museum, St. Brendan’s Cathedral, Loughrea, Co. Galway

2. **Working title of the carving:** *Kilcorban St. John the Evangelist*

3. **Technical details:**

   (a) dimensions: H. 36 cm. (approximately).

   (b) type of wood: Sycamore
(c) number of blocks: Single block

(d) dowel holes: None

(e) evidence of polychrome: This figure has the same greenish flesh-tint as the other two figures in this grouping. His hair, beard, and some of the facial details are picked out in a dark brown polychrome. The scleras are painted white, and the robe is painted black. The base of this figure is painted brown.

(f) general condition: The hands of this figure are missing and it has the same multitude of tiny holes throughout the entire carving as do the other two figures in this grouping. There is a crack in the front of the base which has been repaired with plaster. There are also large chunks of wood missing at the back of the base from decay.

4. **Description**: This figure of John the Evangelist stands erect, unlike its companion figure, the Madonna, which leans forward drastically.

(a) head: The head of this figure is nearly identical to that of the Crucifixion figure, although the eyes of St. John the Evangelist are open and downcast, the ears project out even farther, and the hair falls behind the figure's back. The iris consists of a thin black line encircling a thin white line around a black pupil. Otherwise, they have the same hair parted in the middle and scored with many fine incised lines. It is tucked behind the ears, painted brown and stays very close to the head; it ends at the back of the neck at the collar. It has the same heavy brow, almond-shaped eyes, long thin nose, and a similar mouth. The beards are identical. The irises
of John's open eyes are different from the open eyes of the Madonna figure.

(b) body: This figure wears a simple tunic with a high, wide collar. At the collar, the paint does not completely follow the carving, but rather overlaps the neck slightly. The body has the same proportions as the Madonna figure from this grouping; there is no movement beneath the clothing, and little indication of anatomy. The torso is very long in comparison to the legs. From the placement of the figure's hips, it makes it appear as if the figure was kneeling, however the same long, finger-like toes as seen in the Madonna figure peak out from underneath the front of John's robe. Both of the arms of this figure are bent at the elbow, and held up against the body in a similar prayer pose as that of the Madonna figure; however the left arm is raised higher than the right, so the no longer extant hands would not have been held at the same level. The base of the figure is of approximately the same thickness as that of the Madonna, it is painted dark brown. There is a plaster repair to a crack in the front of the base, and there are large chunks missing in the back of the base from decay.

5. Identification of the subject: As mentioned above in the entry for the Kilcorban Crucifixion Madonna, The figure of St. John the Evangelist and the figure of the Madonna, when first published were presumed to be SS. Peter and Paul; however when the crucifixion figure was later found and all three were set together, it became obvious that this was a figure of St. John the Evangelist. The great likeness that the head of this figure bears to the figure of the crucified Christ, and that the form of its body bears to the Madonna figure, makes it obvious that these
three were part of the same grouping. Although the hands of the figure are no longer extant, the difference in the levels at which they were held indicates that the figure of St. John likely held a book in one of them as is seen on several Continental examples.

6. Comments: (See Kilcorban Crucifixion Figure, section 6, pp. 192-193.)


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**St. Francis / Anthony** (Fig. 90; Dig. Illus. 71-74)

1. **Location:** Franciscan Friary, Multyfarnham, Co. Westmeath.

2. **Working title of the carving:** *St. Francis / St. Anthony*

3. **Technical details:**

   (a) **dimensions:** H. 61 cm, W. 22 cm (at shoulders).

   (b) **type of wood:** Oak.

   (c) **number of blocks:** One block is extant, it appears that the no longer extant wrists and hands were carved from separate blocks. The base is separate and quite modern.

   (d) **dowel holes:** There are two visible, one in each stump of the arm measuring 2 cm in diameter. The hole in the right arm still has a portion of the broken off dowel intact. The other hole is empty and quite cleanly carved.

   (e) **evidence of polychrome:** Streaks of dark brown polychrome remain sporadically on the back of the figure from just below the belt to the bottom of the carving. This same polychrome is found on the back of the left arm, in places on the belt, as well as on the tonsured hair. A small
amount of the pale pinkish flesh-tone is intact around the figure’s ears and on the back of the jaw.

(f) general condition: The front of this figure is in excellent condition, however the back of the figure has been damaged by wood worm – some of which may still be active. This damage is at its worst on the back of the left arm and shoulder. The back of the hood as well as some of the large worm-holes have been filled in with brown putty. There are several chunks of wood missing from the bottom of the back of the statue, especially towards the right side. It appears that a portion of the bottom of the figure may have been removed when it was attached to its current base.

4. Description: This solid oak figure is fully carved in the round.

(a) head: This figure of a monk wears a tonsured hair style cut high above his ears. The face is expressively and realistically carved. The forehead is short under the fringe of the tonsure and clearly cut brows are crescent-shape. The eyes are deeply set and double-lidded. The nose is long and realistically modelled. The figure has a wide thiltrum over thick lips, and the creases between the nose and the corners of the down-turned mouth are clearly carved. The jaw is short and square and the ears are long. The hood of the figure’s habit comes up high behind his head, only a small portion of the neck can be seen in the front.

(b) body: This small figure is carved with mostly naturalistic proportions, fully in the round. He wears a full length Franciscan habit carved in long undulating folds and tied around the waist with a knotted rope belt, which hangs to the bottom of the figure in the front. The belt is carved in
diagonal notches and has three groups of three knots on the hanging portion of the belt. Around the figure's waist in the front there are two groups of three knots and one group of three knots in the back. The back of the hood, which comes high above the back of the head, is not pointed on the bottom, whereas most Franciscan habits are. Over the figure's shoulders is a drape of cloth which is round in the front and long and pointed in the back. This point falls to just past the rope belt. The movement of the body is indicated underneath the thick cloth of his garment; the stomach swells slightly above the belt, the bulge of the thigh muscles can be seen and the right knee projects pronouncedly. The only aberration in the naturalistic way that this figure has been carved is in the distance between the projecting knee of the figure and the bottom of the carving, the distance between them is too short.

Both of the figure's arms are bent at the elbow and held out in front of the body, the left arm is held slightly higher than the right arm. A portion of both forearms and hands are missing. The break in the arms occurs underneath a projection of the sleeves. There are large dowel holes in these smooth breaks, and a portion of the dowel is still intact in the hole in the right arm. (For description of extant polychrome and general condition of the sculpture, please see sections 3a and 3f, pp. 199-200.)

5. Identification of the Subject: There is very little with which to identify this figure, especially since the hands, which may have held symbols of its identity, are missing. It shows a monk in the robes of a Franciscan, implying that it may be either St. Francis or St. Anthony.
6. **Comments:** Almost nothing is known about the history of this carving. It was supposedly dug up in a field beside the friary at Adare early in the 20th century. This friary was established in 1464 and remained inhabited until 1578. In 1633 a respite from the suppression of the monasteries allowed the friars to return, however they seem to have disappeared again by the 18th century.

Although no date appears to ever have been published for this figure, the implication by its association with the friary at Adare suggests that it is medieval. It is included in the current catalogue on that basis. The style of the carving, however, suggests that it is much later. The naturalism of the carving, the emotional expression of the face and the impression that it was carved from an actual model is not found in medieval examples. Additionally, the carving of the drapes lacks both the highly decorative quality of gothic carving and the small erratic folds of the Catholic Revival. This suggests a date, at the earliest, in the 18th century, and possibly much later than that.

The details of the circumstances under which the carving was found are not available. If it was in fact found buried as is said, it could not have been interred for long. Wood decays quickly under such circumstances. The front of this figure is virtually free from decay, and the back of the carving is not sufficiently decayed to suggest that it was buried since the time of the occupation of the friary at Adare. If the statue had been buried at the very end of Franciscan’s residence at Adare, which Conlan puts in the mid-18th century, there is still a lapse of approximately 150 years for it have been interred before it was found, and it could not have remained in such an excellent state of preservation.
subject without corruption from insects in the damp soil. This brings into question the manner in which it is said to have been found.

A portion of the bottom of the figure appears to have been cut off, possibly when the 20th century base was attached. The entirety of the figure is excellently carved in naturalistic proportions, except for the distance between the knees and the bottom of the carving, which is too short. Additionally, the bottom of the draperies ends abruptly, which also is not in keeping with the naturalism of the rest of the carving. This suggests that perhaps 5 cm or so have been removed from the bottom of the figure.

Upon the statue's discovery, it was brought to the Franciscan Friary at Limerick, where it remained for some years in the library there. It has since been brought to the Friary at Multyfarnham, where it is currently kept in the Museum there.

Holy Ghost Unidentified Saint (Fig. 91; Dig. Illus. 75-77)

1. **Location:** Waterford Treasures Museum at the Granary, Waterford City, Co. Waterford.

2. **Working title of the carving:** Holy Ghost Unidentified Saint

3. **Technical details:**

   (a) **dimensions:** H. 105.3 cm. W. 21 cm. (at the base)

   (b) **type of wood:** Oak

   (c) **number of blocks:** Single block extant

   (d) **dowel holes:** In left shoulder there are two empty dowel holes and three with broken pegs still in them. Presumably these are the evidence of attempts to reattach the no-longer-extant arm

   (e) **evidence of polychrome:** Painted all over in a thick putty-coloured paint, overlying a layer of dark brown polychrome. No trace of the original polychrome is visible.

   (f) **general condition:** Very decayed, much radial cracking in the folds of the over-the-shoulder garment, and one in the right side of the face that runs the length of the head. The top of the head is missing. The torso is much decayed and worm eaten. The right arm that might have held an identity symbol is missing. Dowel holes in the shoulder of this arm indicate that there were several attempts to repair it. The left arm is under the over-the-shoulder garment but large chunks are missing from rot. The bottom of
the figure is much decayed, the feet are so badly decayed that their details
can no longer be discerned.

4. Description:

(a) head: Unfortunately the top of the head and the hair on the left side of the face
of this figure are missing from decay. The hair on the right side shows it
to have been carved in short curls that cover the ears, cut in small incised
swirls that frame the face. The face is softly moulded and the entire face
is delicately carved. The brow is faintly suggested. The eyes are large,
open and double lidded. The nose is small and although it is much
decayed, it seems to have been made up of small, softly rounded shapes.
The nostrils appear to have been deeply carved. The thiltrum is clearly
carved over the lips which are gently smiling and deeply bevelled,
especially at the corners. The chin is small and round and the cheeks are
full. The neck is long and slender and ends in the notched collar of the
saint’s undergarment. A wide, deep crack runs along the left side of the
face. The facial features are obscured by thick layers of paint.

(b) body: The figure is carved in the round and solid. The back is much more
decayed than the front. The chest of the figure is very flat and much
decayed. The undergarment is tight with a notched collar. The thick toga-
like cloak sweeps across the figure from its left shoulder and loops up
under where the no-longer-extant right arm used to be. It appears to have
had a boarder. The cloth falls from the left arm which it covers, and there
is some ‘rippling-ribbon’ effect towards the bottom of this section of the
cloth. In the front of the figure on the right, the cloth is fluted which
becomes V-shaped folds as it wraps around the side. Additionally, there is a small bit of fluting on the left side in addition to the ample fluting on the right side. The feet peak out from underneath the bottom draperies but are decayed nearly beyond recognition.

The right arm is completely missing from the shoulder and there are several dowel holes in the break. The other arm, and possibly the hand, is covered by the saint’s cloak. If the hand was meant to be covered by the cloak, than it looks as if the figure used to hold an object here that is no longer extant. If the hand was meant to be exposed, than it is possible that this is where the hand was, but now is broken off. There is so much decay on this section, large chunks of wood are missing, that it is impossible to determine which the case was.

5. Identification of the subject: Because both of the hands of this figure are missing, and therefore any identifying symbols which might have been held in them, identification of this figure is difficult. It has been identified variously as both an unidentified female saint, or as MacLeod theorizes, possibly an angel. MacLeod states, “This statue...recalls some of the sculpture inspired by the great Nino Pisano’s work in the second quarter of the North Italian Trecento. It is especially reminiscent of the angel sculpture popularized by his famous Annunciation groups of the Virgin and the angel Gabriel.” However the extent of damage wrought by time on this piece makes this identification impossible to determine. Although carved in the round, the extent of the decay on the back of the piece has erased any evidence that it might have had of once having wings. Even its more general identification as an unidentified female saint is up for debate. Although
the face is quite effeminate, its short hair style and lack of breasts make even assigning a gender to the figure impossible.

6. Comments: (For a general history of the Holy Ghost figures, please see Chapter 2: *The Holy Ghost Madonna and Child and the Kilconnell Head*, pp. 40-41, and the catalogue entry for the *Holy Ghost Madonna and Child* section 6, p. 95.)

MacLeod’s note of the similarity of this piece to the work of Nino Pisano, seems to be quite accurate. Both in terms of facial features and drapery the Holy Ghost Unidentified saint bears a striking resemblance to that master’s work, as can be seen in his figure of the Madonna and Child from Santa Maria Novella in Florence and in his Annunciation group in Santa Caterina in Pisa. The marble Annunciation figures that Pisano sculpted in Pisa greatly influenced woodcarvings of the same subject in and around that area for a long time afterwards, and his workshop carved many copies in wood of the figures as well. It is also interesting to note that wings were not carved on Pisano’s marble angel. MacLeod’s attribution of the figure as an angel then, is not wholly unfounded. However, to say that the figure was actually carved by Pisano or his workshop is difficult to say, such is the extent of damage to the piece and lack of documentation of it prior to the 18th century. It is certainly the work, however, of an Italian carver working in the later half of the 14th century, possibly from Pisa.

Although the foreign attribution of this figure has never been in dispute, it is included in the current catalogue because it is part of a rare ‘hoard’ of medieval

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wooden figures, the majority of which are Irish. Their story would be incomplete without this figure's inclusion.


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**Our Lady of Dublin** (Fig. 92; Dig. Illus. 78-82)

1. **Location**: Whitefriar Street Carmelite Church, 56 Aungier Street, Dublin 2.

2. **Working title of the carving**: *Our Lady of Dublin*

3. **Technical details**:

   (a) *dimensions*: H. 1.83 m (approximately)

   (b) *type of wood*: Oak

   (c) *number of blocks*: Three blocks. Both the Madonna and the Christ-Child are carved from the same block of wood. Christ’s extended arm is a replacement, and his extant original arm is also carved from a separate piece of wood.

   (d) *dowel holes*: There are many dowel holes in the back of this piece. There are ten of about a centimetre in diameter filled in with plaster, and between six-eight, some with small wooden pegs still in them, of about ½ cm. in diameter. All of these are along the flat outer radius around the hollow. Additionally there is a small dowel hole in the end of the Christ-Child’s foot, where the toes are missing. Presumably the arms of Christ are attached with dowels, and possibly the Madonna’s repaired finger as well.

   (e) *evidence of polychrome*: There is very little polychrome left on this piece,
however there are small traces of gold leaf, white (possibly gesso), and yellow paint.

(f) general condition: There is very little evidence of decay in this figure, aside from some at the bottom of the Madonna’s skirts. The Christ-Child’s lips look as if they have been cut off, only the incised line of the mouth remains. Also the toes of the Child’s most prominent foot have been cut off, and there is a small dowel here. The Child’s extended arm is a replacement. The Madonna’s finger, positioned below the pomegranate, has been broken off and then repaired.

4. Description:

(a) head: The Madonna wears a very modern-looking crown that appears to be made of plaster. It has high triangular crenulations, is covered with gold-coloured paint, rhinestones and blue, green and red glitter. The figure’s hair is parted in the middle. It is carved in deeply incised wavy lines which emerge from the forehead and temples. The hair appears to be brushed back towards the back of the head. The hair is fullest in line with the cheekbones. It falls in front of her shoulders in two locks, one on either side of her neck. From photographs, it is apparent that underneath the crown, the top of the Madonna’s head is flat.

The figure has a high round forehead. The brow is faintly suggested over clearly incised, double-lidded, almond-shaped, open eyes. The face wears a calm expression. The nose is long and delicate, with the nostrils clearly carved. Her mouth is small and turns down at the corners. The clearly carved lips are thin. The thiltrum is clearly carved and there
are slight creases from the corners of the nose to the corners of the mouth. The chin is small and round in the ovular face. The jaw-line is soft. Because the head is tilted downwards, there is a subtle fold of skin between the jaw and the neck. The Madonna’s neck is wide and a little long. The head is disproportionately large to the rest of the figure.

(b) body: The figure is flat backed and hollow from about shoulder level. The Madonna’s slight figure appears to be swathed in much fabric. The figure has a slight ‘Gothic-bend’. Her shoulders are small and rounded. The bodice of the dress that she wears is tight and rounded in a convex curve over her bosom. It has a seam carved down the middle of it. From behind her neck, what seems to be a thinner piece of fabric is carved coming down and tucked into the crest of the bodice. This section of cloth forms a V-shaped collar. She wears a long, heavy, hooded cloak. Her arms are kept in close to her body. On the left arm, it appears that the Madonna’s sleeves are tri-layered. The first layer of the sleeve is tight to the wrist, and only the very edge of it can be seen. The second layer falls loose from this and the third layer over top of it seems to be the very wide sleeve of the cloak. On the right arm, only this third layer can be seen, as it falls past the wrist. The semi-reclining Christ-Child is held slightly below and in front of the Madonna’s bosom. She supports him underneath the armpit with her left hand and at the feet with her right hand. She draws the fabric of her dress across her body and uses it to help support the Christ-Child. She holds the fabric pinned beneath her left hand, against the Child’s side. The bones in her left hand are delicately carved, her extended finger below
the pomegranate appears to have been broken off and then repaired. The folds of the fabric of the dress, as it is held underneath the Child, at first follow the line of his body. As the folds become wider they also become more horizontal and eventually begin to decline in the opposite direction to the angle of the Child’s body. Below these folds, the folds of the dress become long V-shaped folds which fall to level where the cloak terminates. Below this, to the bottom of the figure, the folds of the dress are predominantly vertical. The folds of the cloak, as it hangs from her arms, are predominantly horizontal. There are a few box-shaped folds, and on the left side towards the back of the figure, the folds become fluted. The edge of the cloak on this same side falls in a sort of ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern.

There is some decay along most of the edges of the Madonna’s cloak; however this is very minor except for that at the very bottom of the figure. Along the bottom of the Madonna’s drapery, both of the cloak and the gown, the decay becomes quite severe, there are several small chunks of the wood missing and in places especially on the left side of the figure; there is evidence of active rot.

The left side of the figure is bevelled towards the back from just below the shoulder to about 16 inches above the bottom. The back is deeply hollowed.

(c) Christ-Child: The semi-reclining Christ-Child is supported in the Madonna’s two hands and with the cloth of her dress. He is completely nude except for a bit of the Madonna’s cloak which covers his genitals. This Child is
realistically portrayed as a baby with his child-like proportions, chubby legs, round stomach and realistic fat rolls, rather than the small adult seen in so many other depictions. His legs are bent at the knees, the back leg, closest to the Madonna’s body, is propped up with the knee pointing towards the Madonna’s face. The prominent leg is turned so that the knee points out towards the viewer. The toes of this foot are missing and appear to have been cut off. There is a small dowel hole here. The Christ-Child’s body twists, while the stomach and the back leg face upwards, the torso and the head turn to the right. His left arm, which is a replacement, is extended outwards, and the too-large hand is closed in a fist. The right arm reaches across his body and holds a pomegranate against the Madonna’s left hand.

The Child has a full head of curly hair. The hair is carved in deeply incised swirls all over his head. His facial features are very similar to those of His Mother. They have the same high, round forehead, faintly carved brow, clearly incised, double-lidded, almond-shaped, open eyes, and similar noses. The mouth of the Christ Child is almost completely missing. It appears to have been hacked off, only the deeply incised line that would have separated his upper and lower lips and the down turned corners of His mouth remains. The cheeks are very chubby and his small round chin emerges from the roles of fat underneath his jaw. The ears are deeply incised and seem to be more stylized than realistic.

5. Identification of the subject: This Gothic representation of the Madonna and Child
shows the Madonna standing, holding the semi-reclined nude Christ-Child in her arms. The Christ-Child holds a pomegranate in one of his hands, and the other arm, a replacement fashioned in the 19th century, is extended in a fist. The fist is pierced with an empty dowel hole. A woodcut, executed shortly after the restoration work of the 19th century and published in the *Dublin Penny Journal*, shows that the Child held a metal baton or short sceptre in this hand, although the object held in the figure’s hand originally, if any, is unknown. The pomegranate is an often used symbol of the Resurrection because of its classical associations with Persephone who returned to regenerate the earth every spring.

6. Comments: (See Chapter 2: *Our Lady of Dublin*, pp. 46-56.)

Although the majority of scholars have long accepted a foreign attribution for this figure, beginning with Petrie in 1832, the person who could be said to be this figure’s primary publisher, Catriona MacLeod, seemed to dispute this notion somewhat. In her published article from 1947, it was intimated that Our Lady of Dublin could have been the work of an Irish sculptor with foreign training. In an unpublished manuscript of a lecture given by MacLeod in the 1950’s it was put in even blunter terms; here, she spoke of the figure being a relic of medieval Irish nationalism. The figure was spoken of by MacLeod as a physical remainder of a time when “national spirit, the Gaelic language and culture were strong.” It is on the basis of these intimations of an Irish origin for the piece that it is included in the current catalogue.

7. Bibliography: Stalley (1987), 222-223, 236, 244; Bradley (1987), 269; Hourihane (1984), 987-988; O’ Dwyer (1979), 77-78; Duignan and Killanin (1967), 226, 228; MacLeod, (1947), 55-57; Mahr (1932), 167; Stokes (1886), 10-11; Waterton
Small Museum Pieta (Fig. 93; Dig. Illus. 83-85)

1. Location: National Museum of Ireland, Reserve Collections – Art and Industry Division, Collin’s Barracks, Dublin 7.

2. Working title of the carving: Small Museum Pieta

3. Technical details:

(a) dimensions: H. 72 cm. W. 33 cm.

(b) type of wood: limewood or possibly sycamore

(c) number of blocks: Single block

(d) dowel holes: There are two dowel holes in this piece. One is in the bottom-centre of the base of the figure; the dowel is still in the hole and has been cut flush with the base. It is of unknown purpose. The second is empty and is in the break at Christ’s right wrist. This hole pierces the carving completely, and was either to reattach the broken portion of the arm, or perhaps was used to fix the figure to a wall.

(e) evidence of polychrome: The flesh of both the Madonna and the dead Christ is painted with a cream-colored polychrome. Her cheeks are brightly flushed with carmine, but the individual facial features are not picked out in polychrome on either figure, with the exception of Mary’s eyebrows and eyes, which are outlined with yellow ochre. Christ’s hair and beard are painted the same yellow ochre. The Madonna’s veil/cloak is painted

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\(^{25}\) Within the same entry of the Museum files the wood is listed both as limewood and as sycamore.
dark blue, which in places appears to have yellowed to green. Her dress is
paint an orange-red colour which in places, particularly on her knees, has
turned into a burnt sienna. The colour changes in the polychrome are
possibly from a varnish which may have been put over the paint, and has
yellowed with age. Mary’s shoe, which peaks out from underneath her
dress has both brown and black polychrome. Bright red paint, which has
largely worn off, emerges from the wound in Christ’s side. Christ’s
perizonium is painted is painted with the same yellow ochre as his hair
and beard. The mound that the figures sit upon is bright green. Traces of
gesso can be seen underneath the polychrome in places.

(h) general condition: Overall the carving is very well preserved. The
polychrome is worn and in some places has yellowed. The bottom portion
of Christ’s right arm is missing and there are several small worm holes,
similar to those seen on the Crucifixion Group at Loughrea, throughout the
carving, especially on Christ’s leg.

4. Description: This is a very small carving with a flat, hollowed back. The Madonna
sits upon a green mound and holds the dead Christ in her lap. “2-1953”
has been engraved on the back of the piece.

(a) Madonna: The figure of the Madonna is larger than that of the dead
Christ. She gazes down at him. The Madonna wears a veil which
becomes a cloak. The Madonna’s hair cannot be seen underneath the veil.
The short fringe of the veil is carved in undulating ridges. Along the sides
of her face, the veil falls in a ‘rippling-ribbon’ pattern. This pattern
continues along the edge of the cloak, behind the leg of the dead Christ, to
the bottom of the figure. The Madonna’s forehead beneath the fringe of the veil is very short. Her brow is carved in two crescents. Her slit-like elliptical eyes glance down towards her dead son. The Madonna’s nose is straight and the nostrils are carved. The thiltrum is just barely indicated. The corners of the Madonna’s mouth turn down in sadness. Her head is inclined towards the left. The features of the Madonna’s face are highlighted with yellow ochre.

The Madonna supports her son’s head with her right hand. Her other hand grasps Christ’s body at his right hip. The Madonna’s right knee is raised considerably higher than her left knee. She supports Christ’s body underneath his right arm-pit with the upraised knee, and underneath his bottom with her lower left knee.

The cloak falls over the Madonna’s shoulders, down to the ground. Where the cloak falls over the Madonna’s arms, the wood is carved in a zigzag pattern. On the Madonna’s gown, the folds closest to her collar follow the concave of the collar. Below this, they abruptly become vertical ridges that extend from underneath the folds of the collar to behind the dead Christ’s body. From either side of the Madonna’s upraised (right knee) the fabric falls in more zigzag folds. The cloth is pulled tight over the knee and falls in long vertical folds over her shin. The toe of her shoe, painted with brown and black polychrome peaks out from underneath the skirt of her gown. The fabric of the gown curves gracefully upwards to accommodate the foot, and then falls back down over the green mound.
The cloth is also pulled tight over her other knee and begins to fall in vertical folds, but then a series of loopy horizontal drapes begin just after where the vertical folds on this shin began, and fall to the bottom of the figure.

(b) Christ: Christ’s body is mostly nude with the exception of a perizonium wrapped around his pelvis. It is painted yellow ochre and carved in a series of small horizontal folds. His flesh is painted with a cream-colored polychrome. He is supported in the Madonna’s lap as previously described.

Christ’s shoulder length hair is painted with a yellow ochre polychrome, parted in the middle and carved in a series of ridges which ends in two curls on either side. His facial features are similar to the Madonna; they have the same brow carved in two crescents, straight nose and down-turned lips. He has a high, round forehead. Christ’s eyes are closed as in death; both upper and lower lids are carved. The space between his nose and lips is taken up by his moustache. His beard is forked.

The anatomy of Christ’s torso is well carved. His right arm falls lifelessly, the hand resting near the Madonna’s foot. The bones in Christ’s hand are delicately carved. The other arm is wedged between Christ’s body and the torso of the Madonna. The bottom portion of this arm and the hand are missing, or perhaps they were never carved. There is a dowel hole here, which may have been to reattach the broken portion of the arm, although it appears quite large to be for this purpose. Another possibility is
that the bottom portion of this arm was never carved and the dowel hole was used to affix the carving to a wall. The ribs and breast bone are deeply incised, and the muscles of Christ’s arms and leg are realistically rendered. Only his right leg was carved, the left was not. The wound in Christ’s side is carved as a deep gash in the right side of his chest. Bright red polychrome drips from this wound.

5. Identification of the Subject: This image of the Pietà shows the Madonna holding the body of the dead Christ in her lap in the conventional manner. Devotional images of this type became popular in the 13th and 14th centuries and continued throughout the Renaissance. As is typical of medieval portrayals of the pieta, the body of Christ is depicted much smaller than that of the Madonna, perhaps alluding back to images of the Madonna and Child.

6. Comments: This small pieta was acquired by the National Museum in 1953 from the Columban Sisters in Caheron, Co. Clare. Nothing else is known about it. The drapery and faces of the figures are unlike anything else in the study area, and do not seem to resemble Irish works in other media. It is well known that during the Reformation religious images were smuggled into Ireland from other countries, and a figure as small as this would have been easy to conceal. Hourihane assigns it a date in the mid 16th century, at the beginning of the suppression of the religious houses in Ireland. Assigning the figure a country of provenance proves more difficult. The files of the National Museum state that it is possibly either German or Flemish, although strict parallels in the art of either of these countries have been difficult to find. This piece has only been previously documented in

26 Hall, 246.
Hourihane’s unpublished doctoral dissertation. Because no provenance was able to be assigned to it – either there or here – and its presence in Ireland, it is included in the current catalogue.


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