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# A ROMANESQUE FRESCO IN CORMAC'S CHAPEL

*By Gerard Crotty*

Medieval frescoes are extremely rare in Ireland. The two best-known examples are the hunting scene in Holycross Abbey in this county and the series showing the encounter between the Three Live Kings and the Three Dead Kings, as well as the Holy Trinity and Martyrdom of St. Sebastian (now mostly faded) in Knockmoy Abbey in county Galway.

Both of these however, are of late medieval date. The only examples from the Romanesque period appear to be the fragmentary patches discernible in Cormac's Chapel on the Rock of Cashel.<sup>1</sup> Until recently the only identifiable theme in this series was the very incomplete figure of Christ at his baptism on the south wall of the Chancel.

The chancel arch itself bears a number of red roundels decorated with floriated crosses outlined in white paint. The chancel vault is divided into four triangular areas by the heavy cross-ribs. In the apex of the westernmost of these areas a pattern of ashlar masonry outlined in red on a yellow background, together with a gabled structure drawn in black, has always been discernible.

From its haphazard appearance this had been supposed to represent the collapse of the walls of Jericho (Joshua 6, 20). That this attempted interpretation was not correct can now be confidently demonstrated as a result of careful conservation work carried out in the summer of 1987 by Messrs. David and Mark Perry and Richard Lithgow of Oxford. The removal of grime and whitewash has now revealed to view such fragments of original pigment as survive.

The pictorial scheme is divided unequally by a painted white column with a yellow ochre capital. The column is offset to the right and supports two semicircular arches indicated by broad white bands. Because of the unequal division, the arch on the left is larger than that on the right. The latter is also less well preserved, large areas being entirely lost. A wide area of greyish ochre represents the soffit of each arch.

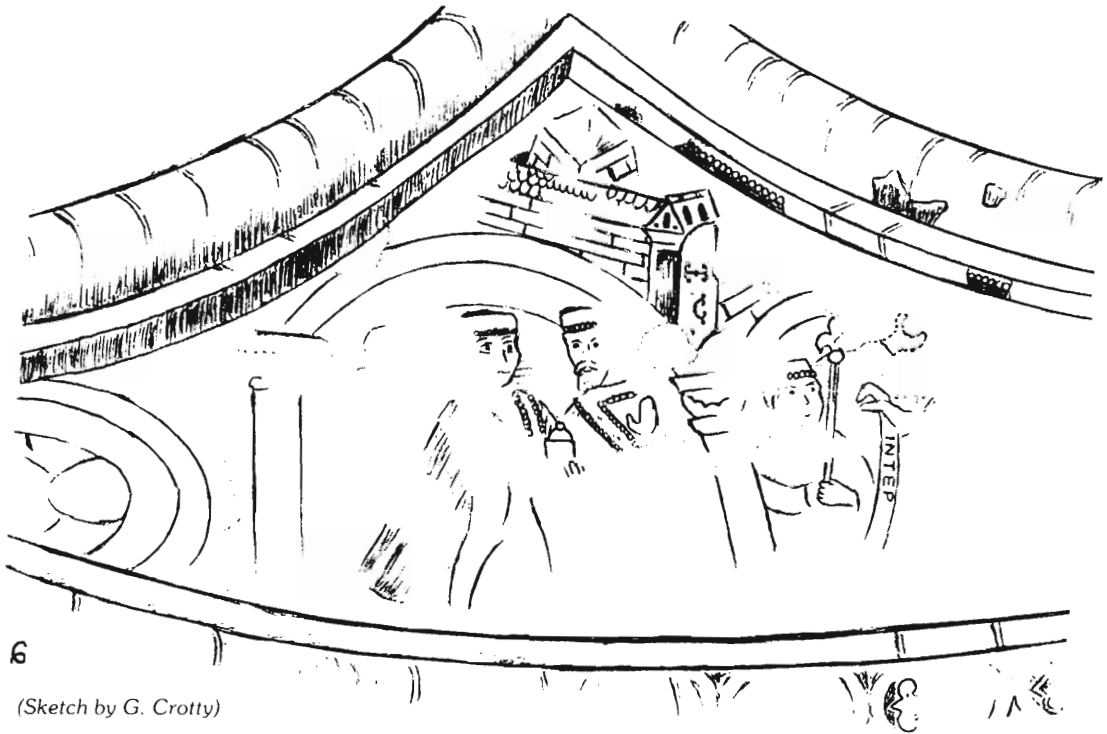
Under the centre of the left-hand arch stands a tall figure, apparently female, wearing a white gown and a long flowing mantle, now of a maroon colour but probably originally purplish red. She faces a bearded figure, standing under the right side of the arch with his back to the pillar. He is dressed in a long robe of the same reddish colour with a diagonal orphrey and also a band at the neck-line, both in yellow ochre no doubt representing cloth of gold.

The orphrey and neck-band are edged on both sides with a row of pearls. A few faint dark smudges indicate what must have been large jewels on the orphrey. Both figures wear flat cylindrical headgear resembling the "pillbox" hat which was to become a feature of ladies' attire in the late 13th century, presumably here representing gold circlets. Each has a row of pearls on its lower edge.

Although without raised ornaments on the upper edge, these circlets bear a strong resemblance to the crowns depicted in Byzantine and Ottonian art. The male figure has his left hand raised, with the palm outwards in a gesture of greeting. Between both figures is a cylindrical jar with a domed lid having a spherical knob at the top. The fingertips of one of the figures, almost certainly the woman, can be seen supporting the jar.

There may be a third figure under the left side of the arch; but the outline can be discerned only with great difficulty. If there is a third figure, its lower half is partly obscured by the end of the lady's cloak. A deep blue sky fills the background under the arch behind the figures.





In the right-hand arch the face of another figure can be seen. It is wearing a hat or circlet of yellow ochre like those of the other personages; here again the lower edge is enriched with pearls. The figure occupies the left part of the archway, and stands with its back to the pillar which separates the two scenes.

The shoulders have disappeared because of the damaged state of the plaster, but the hands can be seen grasping a long white sceptre surmounted by a thinly painted *fleur-de-lys*. A large hand emanates from the right, holding a long white scroll which once carried an inscription in dark lettering, of which only the word "INTER" can now be seen, the "R" looking more like "P". Sufficient red paint survives to show that the figure to which this hand belonged was dressed in a long red robe or mantle. As in the other arch, the background is a plain blue sky.

The masonry already referred to occupies the area above the two painted arches, and it is now possible to see that it is a poorly rendered cruciform church. The red ashlar pattern represents the wall of the nave, and the gabled structure is a transept. The end wall of the transept is shown with a white door fitted with ornate black hinges and a large black handle, thrown wide open to reveal the dark interior.

Two black windows have been painted on the inclined roof, no doubt in error as the painter must have had to work in very cramped conditions. It is this feature, together with the very poor grasp of perspective, which gives a confusing appearance to the masonry. It seems that the artist was trying to portray a large Romanesque church with transepts — a far grander affair than any Irish Romanesque building. Certainly the painting shows no transeptal towers such as can be seen on Cormac's Chapel itself.



The lower edge of this triangular pictorial scheme nests against the chancel arch. The left and right ends taper gradually. That on the right (or south) side bears traces of red paint; the left side is occupied by another arch, smaller than the others and defined like them by a band of white paint and a darker soffit. The niche-like space thus formed encloses a single figure in a robe of the purplish colour noted above, standing in front of a blue sky.

Although the obscuring of this fresco by whitewash took place in living memory, it is reasonable to suppose that more detail can now be discerned than has been the case for a long time. Writing in 1892, Michael J.C. Buckley described the outlines of three figures, and supposed them to represent Christ the Redeemer, St. Patrick and St. Bridget.<sup>2</sup>

A bearded figure in a reddish robe, with his hand raised in what might be taken for a gesture of benediction, could quite reasonably be identified as the Redeemer and the sceptre held by the fragmentary figure on the right arch could have been mistaken for a crozier, as a fleur-de-lys at its tip is not very obvious — leading to the assumption that its bearer was St. Patrick. It was but a small step then to surmise that the female figure might be St. Bridget.

If the jar held by one of the figures was visible in 1892, Buckley does not explain its presence. A more serious objection to this identification, however, is the absence of haloes on any of the figures. If the scenes depicted are of a religious nature, which their location in the chancel vault surely indicates, the absence of haloes may well point to a subject from the Old Testament.

Such a subject is not difficult to find. If the pearl-edged headgear does indeed represent crowns, the sumptuous robes (especially of the bearded figure) are if anything even more obviously royal.<sup>3</sup> The gesture of greeting surely tells that one is in the presence of Solomon as he welcomes the Queen of Sheba to Jerusalem. The jar is then a spice-jar which she is offering to him.

The Second Book of Chronicles relates that she presented Solomon with a great quantity of gold and a large amount of jewels and spices (2 Chronicles 9, 9). From the First Book of Kings one learns that the amount of spices which Solomon received from the Queen of Sheba was the greatest quantity he ever received at any time (1 Kings 10, 10).

The Queen of Sheba is often, though by no means always, shown offering a jar of spice to Solomon. A 15th century manuscript in the *Musée condé de Chantilly* shows her kneeling at the steps of his throne, and holding a golden jar of rounded form but with a lid resembling that shown in the Cashel fresco.<sup>4</sup>

The series of frescoes by Piero della Francesca illustrating the Legend of the True Cross in the Church of San Francesco at Arezzo includes a scene showing the Queen of Sheba visiting Solomon.<sup>5</sup> The Queen bows and shakes Solomon's hand in greeting; but no spice-jar is shown. It is purely coincidental that the tapestry which hangs against the end-wall of the Hall of the Vicars Choral at Cashel depicts Solomon and Sheba. Here too, as in the Arezzo frescoes, there is no jar.

There can be no doubt that the Cormac's Chapel painting represents Solomon and Sheba. This is confirmed by the large church shown above the figures. Very grandiose by the Irish standards of the 12th century, it must have been intended as the Temple of Jerusalem, whose building by Solomon is described in 1 Kings 6 and also in 2 Chronicles 2-5. The Temple was already built at the time of the visit of the Queen of Sheba, who saw (among many other things) the sacrifices offered by Solomon in the Temple (1 Kings 10, 5; 2 Chronicles 9, 4).

There could hardly be a more appropriate theme for Cormac Mac Carthaigh to choose as decoration for his new chapel. Cormac had become King of Cashel in 1123, only to be displaced and banished two years later by his brother. While in temporary retirement in Lismore he built churches; on regaining power he began his greatest building project,



Teampall Mór Chormaic. What better model could he emulate than Solomon, the great temple-builder and archetypal wise king?

The subject-matter of the right-hand scene is not so easy to identify. It may well continue the theme of wise kingship with the judgement of Solomon. The word *inter* (between) might conceivably be part of Solomon's command to divide the child between the two women who claimed it.

However, there are some difficulties with this hypothesis, not least the fact that the sceptre-wielding figure is beardless, unlike the figure under the other arch. On the other hand, this episode (recounted in 1 Kings 3, 16-27) took place in Solomon's youth or early manhood, and he is often shown beardless in representations of the judgement scene. The small figure in the niche-like compartment in the left corner of the triangle may be that of a prophet.

prophet.

I know of no other representation of Solomon in Irish Romanesque art. It is of interest, however, that among the items stolen from the high altar of the cathedral at Clonmacnois in 1129, according to an annalistic reference, was a model of Solomon's Temple.<sup>6</sup> It would be interesting to know what this model, which had been presented by a king or chieftain, looked like.

The above interpretation of the fresco is the sole responsibility of the writer.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. There is no reference to Irish frescoes in Françoise Henry's work, "Irish Art in the Romanesque Period 1120—1170 A.D."
2. I am grateful to Mr. Thomas Wood for this information.
3. They clearly resemble the robe worn by the enthroned emperor in the Gospels of Otto III, dating from around 1000 A.D. This robe is of purple with golden orphreys at the neck, hem and on the sleeves, as well as a wider orphrey down the centre, all the orphreys being set with jewels and edged with pearls.
4. "The Israelites", Time-Life Books, 1975, p. 151.
5. According to the Legend of the True Cross, the Queen of Sheba was on her way to visit Solomon when it was miraculously revealed to her that the wood of the little bridge which she passed in crossing the river Shiloh would eventually be used to make the cross of Christ. She related this to Solomon, who then had the bridge removed.
6. Henry, *op. cit.* p.76.

