



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1992**

© County Tipperary Historical Society

**www.tipperarylibraries.ie/thh
society@tipperarylibraries.ie**

ISSN 0791-0655

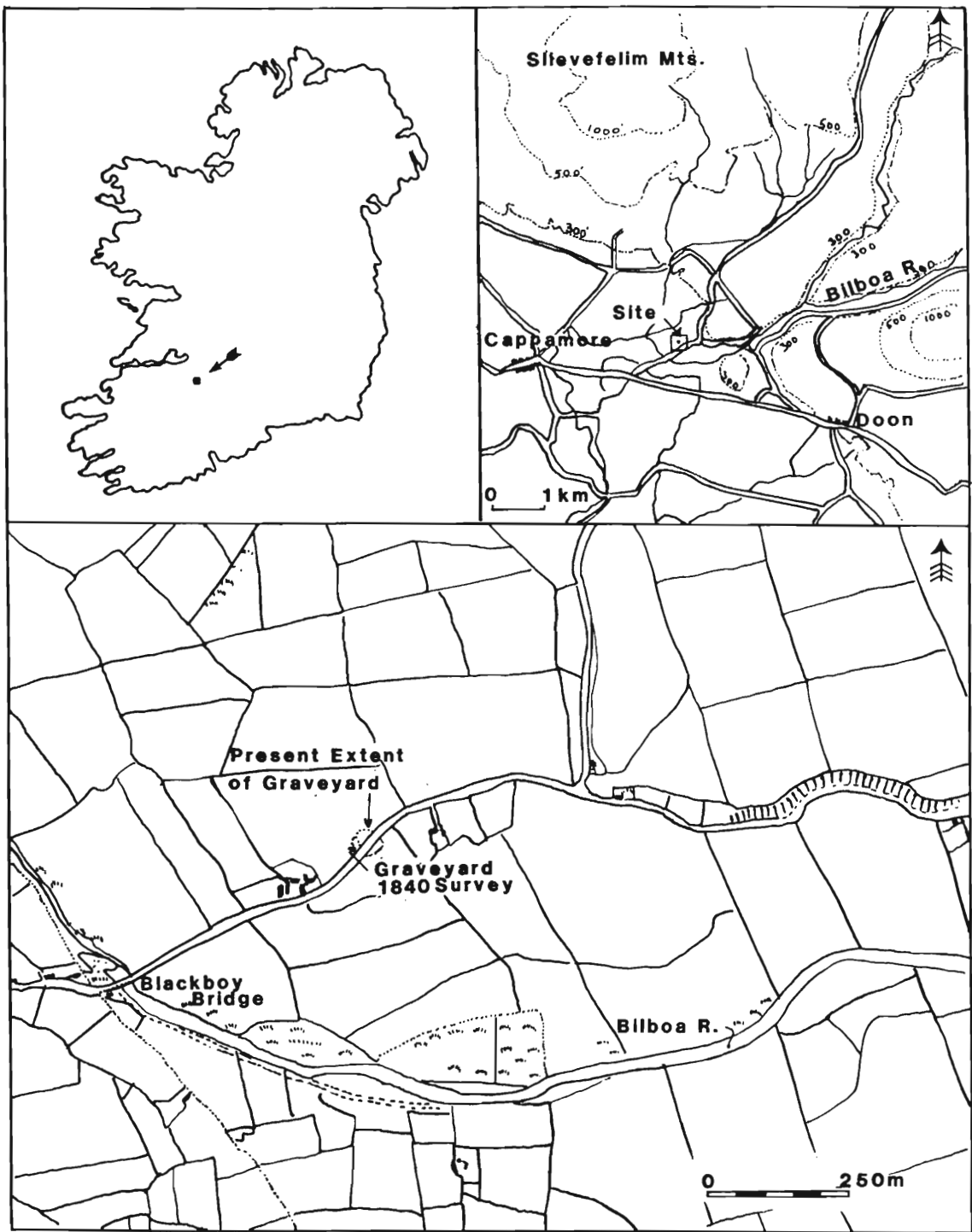


FIG 1: Site location and graveyard extent.

Cross-Inscribed Slab from Bilboa, Co. Limerick

By Rose M. Cleary

The existence of this cross-inscribed slab has been known to the landowners, Jack and Lucy Walsh, for several years.¹ The find spot is recorded by the Ordnance Survey as a disused graveyard (Fig.1). The original Ordnance Survey of 1840 showed the graveyard on both sides of an existing road. By the 1901-02 Ordnance Survey revision the graveyard was marked only on the north side of the road, and is shown as being less extensive than on the original survey.

Local tradition, as recorded by Fr. W. Skehan, suggests that a coffin and some bones were unearthed when the road was being built.² The graveyard is now visible only on the north side of the road and is apparent as a low mound, c.30m in diameter. Fr. Skehan recorded the remains of three headstones in the field. The remaining two are visible as linear slabs, c. 20cm thick and 70cm long, which may be basal sections of cross slabs; but no upper sections are now visible. The present slab was removed from the field to the farm buildings for safe keeping in recent times.

The cross stands to a height of 87cm and ranges in thickness from 7-15cm with an average of 10cm. The form is vaguely in the shape of a human figure. The diameter of the head is 29cm and the cross is narrowest at 17cm at the shaft area, broadening to a base which is 39cm wide. The cross is sandstone and may be of local origin.³

The stone itself must have been deliberately shaped into its present form. The front of the slab is dressed, whereas the back was unworked and rough. The shape is comparable to disc-headed slabs which are recorded in S. Wales, though in this instance the head is filled with a marigold motif rather than a cross, as is common on the Welsh examples (Nash-Williams 1950, 33).

The motif on the slab is an encircled marigold pattern with parallel lines extending from the enclosing circle towards the base. The motif has been chiselled or picked out and is incised on the smooth face of the slab. The motif is worn and particularly faint towards the top left-hand corner. The marigold motif consists of six petals set symmetrically within the circle. The centre of the marigold is a circular picked-out arc, c. 6cm in diameter. The enclosing circle has a diameter of 40cm. The lower end of the circle, where the parallel lines occur, is not complete. The parallel lines are 53cm long.

The decorative marigold motif is considered by both Lionard (1961, 110) and Hamlin (1982) to be related to the Maltese cross. Marigold patterns were also popular in classical art, though undoubtedly the use of this motif in Christian art stems from the use of the motif as representational of a flabellum. Flabella were used as fans in the Coptic church where insects were a nuisance. The fans were made of feathers and leaves and were of various shapes. As peacock feathers were often used for flabella, and the eyes suggested watchfulness, the flabellum became a symbol of Christian fidelity (Lionard 1961, 137).

The marigold pattern as used on the flabella probably became an integral part of Christian art, and this is reflected by the transfer of this motif to cross slabs. The double parallel lines which extend from the encircled motif on the Bilboa slab may be interpreted as a representation of a handle of a flabellum. The flabellum or symbol of watchfulness was "intended to guard or delimit" the extent of sanctified land or termon of a monastic site "(Higgins 1987, 12). It may be that the Bilboa slab was, in fact, a termon cross. This interpretation may also account for the deliberate shaping of the cross into a human figure with sentry-like qualities.



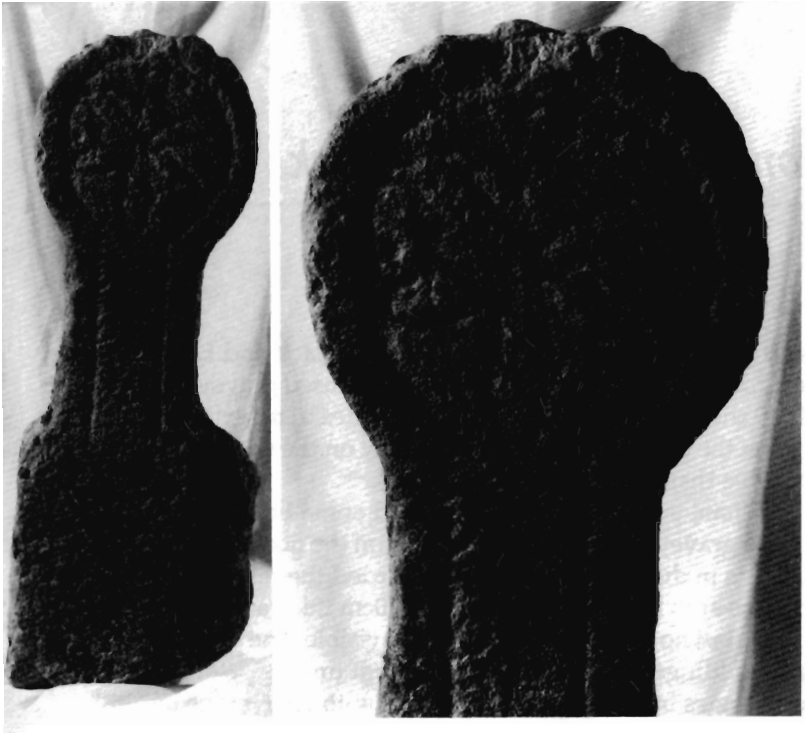


PLATE 1: Bilboa cross-inscribed slab.

PLATE 2: Bilboa cross-inscribed slab detail of head.

Cross-inscribed slabs are rare in co. Limerick. Three examples are recorded by Crawford (1912); these are in the east of the county in Limerick city, Castleconnell and Dromkeen North. The Castleconnell stone is described as a plain encircled Greek cross (*ibid*). This is reminiscent of the Bilboa slab. Henry has noticed in her treatise on cross slabs in the west of Ireland that some striking analogues exist between cross slabs which are very far apart (1937, 278).

The nearest concentration of cross slabs to the Bilboa example is in

Berriherts Kyle in co. Tipperary. Here a marigold pattern is recorded on stone A; but in that instance the marigold is at the centre of an elaborately designed cross (O hEailidhe 1967). The collection of cross slabs at Gallan priory in co. Offaly has 8 slabs which have marigold patterns, and nearly all have 6 petals. These belong to Lionard's group II category, and illustrated group II examples from Gallan, Clonmacnoise and Kilmacavan are comparable to the Bilboa stone (*ibid* 1961, fig.9, nos 1 and 2).

Further afield on the west coast a cross slab with an encircled Maltese cross from Ballywiheen, in the north-west of the Dingle peninsula, is vaguely reminiscent of the Bilboa slab (Cuppage 1986, fig.154). A cross-inscribed slab from Temple Soorney, Inishmore, on the Aran Islands, has a two-line circle enclosed Maltese cross which is comparable to the Bilboa encircling feature (Higgins 1987, fig.69-71).

The most obvious comparison to the Bilboa marigold pattern is the "Marigold Stone" at Carndonagh, Co. Donegal (Lacy 1983, plate 25). However, the Carndonagh stone is more elaborate with figures beneath the cross and pellets between each petal of the marigold. A comparable cross slab was recorded at Capel Colman, in Pembrokeshire, S. Wales (Nash-Williams 1950, no. 302, fig.194). The Capel Colman example is considered to be comparable to the Irish cross slabs and dated to the 7th—9th centuries (*ibid*, 182).

The dating of cross slabs, by association with monastic settlements, is generally from the 6th—9th centuries. Higgins has suggested that the Irish and Welsh examples of flabella are early in the cross-inscribed slab sequence (1987, 110). Hamlin (1982) has also suggested that marigold patterns were in use in Ireland from the 7th century onwards. The Bilboa slab can be categorised, using Lionard's (1961) scheme, into his Group II, which are dated between the 6th-8th centuries A.D. Group V of Higgins' classification (1987) is also comparable to the Bilboa slab and this group is dated to the 6th—7th centuries. A date of between the 6th—8th centuries A.D. is therefore likely for the Bilboa slab.

The Bilboa slab, which may be one of a group of three from this site, appears, on the simple unmodified decorative style, to belong to the earlier cross slab genre. The motif is obviously derived

from the flabellum, and by symbolic association the cross may in fact be a termon cross of a previously unrecorded monastic site. This site is now only visible as a low mound; but further work may uncover enclosure remains which can be associated with an early monastic settlement site.

FOOTNOTES

1. Exact location: Td. Bilboa, Par. Doon, By Coonagh. O.S. 6" scale sheet No. 15, Co. Limerick. 16.7cm from E. margin, 31.7cm from S. margin; NGR R803516.
2. Fr. Skehan papers (compiled in the late 1940s—1950s), Library, St. Patrick's College, Thurles, Co. Tipperary.
3. Dr. W.E. Nevill, Geology Department, UCC, has identified the stone type as being a non Red Devonian Sandstone (Old Red Sandstone) and originating in the top of the Old Red Sandstone strata or Millstone grit sandstone.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank the following: Jack and Lucy Walsh, Blackboy, for permitting the stone to be examined and who subsequently loaned the stone to Cork Public Museum for display; Ms. Eilis Duggan, FAS, Cappamore, who brought the stone to my notice; Mr. Donal Anderson for producing the published drawing; Mr. Tomas Tyner for the photograph and Ms. Angela Desmond for typing the paper.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Crawford, H.S., 1912. A descriptive list of early cross slabs and pillars, *J.R.S.A.I.* 42, 217-44.
- Cuppige, J., 1986. *Corca Duibhne. Dingle Peninsula Archaeological Survey*. Ballyferriter.
- Hamlin, A., 1982. Early Irish stone carving: content and context. In: S. Pearce (ed), *The Early Church in Western Britain and Ireland. Studies presented to C.A. Ralegh Radford*, 283-296. BAR, Oxford.
- Henry, F., 1937. Early Christian slabs and pillar stones in the west of Ireland, *J.R.S.I.* 67, 265-79.
- Henry, F., 1985. *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period (to 800 A.D.)*, Vol. 1. London.
- Higgins, J.G., 1987. *The Early Christian Cross Slabs, Pillarstones and Related Monuments of County Galway, Ireland*. Oxford.
- Lacy, B., 1983. *Archaeological Survey of Co. Donegal*. Lifford.
- Lionard, P., 1961. Early grave slabs, *Proc. R.I.A.*, 61, 95-169.
- Manning, C., 1991. Toureen Peakaun: three new inscribed slabs, *Tipperary Hist. Journal*, 208-14.
- Moloney, Rev. M., 1964. Brecan's Hermitage in Aherlow: the riddle of the slab, *N. Munster Antiq.J.*, 9, 99-107.
- Nash-Williams, V.E., 1950. *The Early Christian Monuments of Wales*. Cardiff.
- O hEailidhe, P., 1967. The crosses and slabs at St. Berriher't's Kyle in the Glen of Aherlow. In E. Rynne (ed.), *North Munster Studies*, 102-26. Limerick.
- Raftery, J., 1942. Finds from three Ulster counties, *Ulster J. Arch.*, 5, 120-21.
- Waddell, J., and Holland, P., 1990. The Pekaun site: Duignan's 1944 investigation, *Tipperary Hist. Journal.*, 165-86.

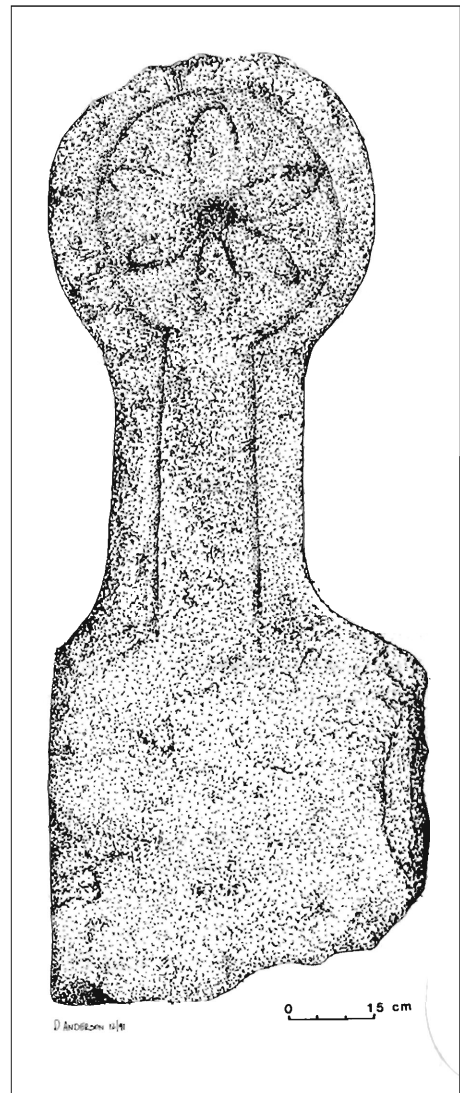


FIG 2: Cross-inscribed slab, Bilboa, Co. Limerick.