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18th century decorated gravestones: the Kilsheelan – Kilmurry group

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Introduction

The decorated gravestones called here the Kilsheelan-Kilmurry Group have long been noticed in the South Tipperary region. Longfield (1954) wrote the first detailed account of these gravestones. Shee and Watson (1975) also refer to them. The main purpose of this article is to create, as accurately as possible, an inventory of these gravestones, to classify them into types and to discuss their origins and particular iconographic characteristics.

Emblems depicting the elements of the Passion of Christ begin to appear on gravestones from the 13th century onward.¹ European nobility developed heraldry and used these emblems as elements of their family crests.² The popularity of the feast of Corpus Christi led to the instruments of the Passion becoming popular symbols. Devotional broadsheets became common all over Europe after the invention of the printing press, and many of these depicted the instruments of the Passion.³

In the 16th century the advocates of the Reformation attempted to suppress this iconography as "superstitious".⁴ In Ireland, in an act of defiance, gentry and merchants continued to use the Passion instruments as tomb symbols to indicate their allegiance to Catholicism.⁵ In the 18th century these symbols began appearing on upright tombs.

The Kilsheelan-Kilmurry Group consist of mostly upright tombs with some exceptions. Their distribution ranges from South Kilkenny through South Tipperary to North Waterford. The iconography throughout is extremely similar and differs from other Passion tombs in the area.

The gravestones are of sandstone, usually rough at the reverse, and the decoration is limited to the upper portion. The inscriptions are plain, without embellishment, and usually read: "*Here lieth the body of . . . who parted this life . . .* (date and age)". Other relatives also buried there are then listed; occasionally an erection date is included. It is noticeable that many of the examples in the South Kilkenny area furthest from the main concentration were of married women.

The decorated portion is bordered at the top and sides by a plain flat moulding. The Calvary cross is central and the instruments of the Passion are dispersed around it, some standing on the base, others floating in the free space around the cross.

The graves with no figure on the cross have been classified Type A. This is not a random distinction, as this type share a number of common characteristics. Those with the figure of Christ shown are Type B. Despite the differences between the two types there are enough common elements to suggest a link.

The dates by which these gravestones have been classified refer to the date of death inscribed on the tomb, not of erection. As the timespan between death and tomb erection may have varied from one or two years to up to ten years, the information gleaned from these dates is suspect. It is, however, the only information available on a date range and must therefore be used.

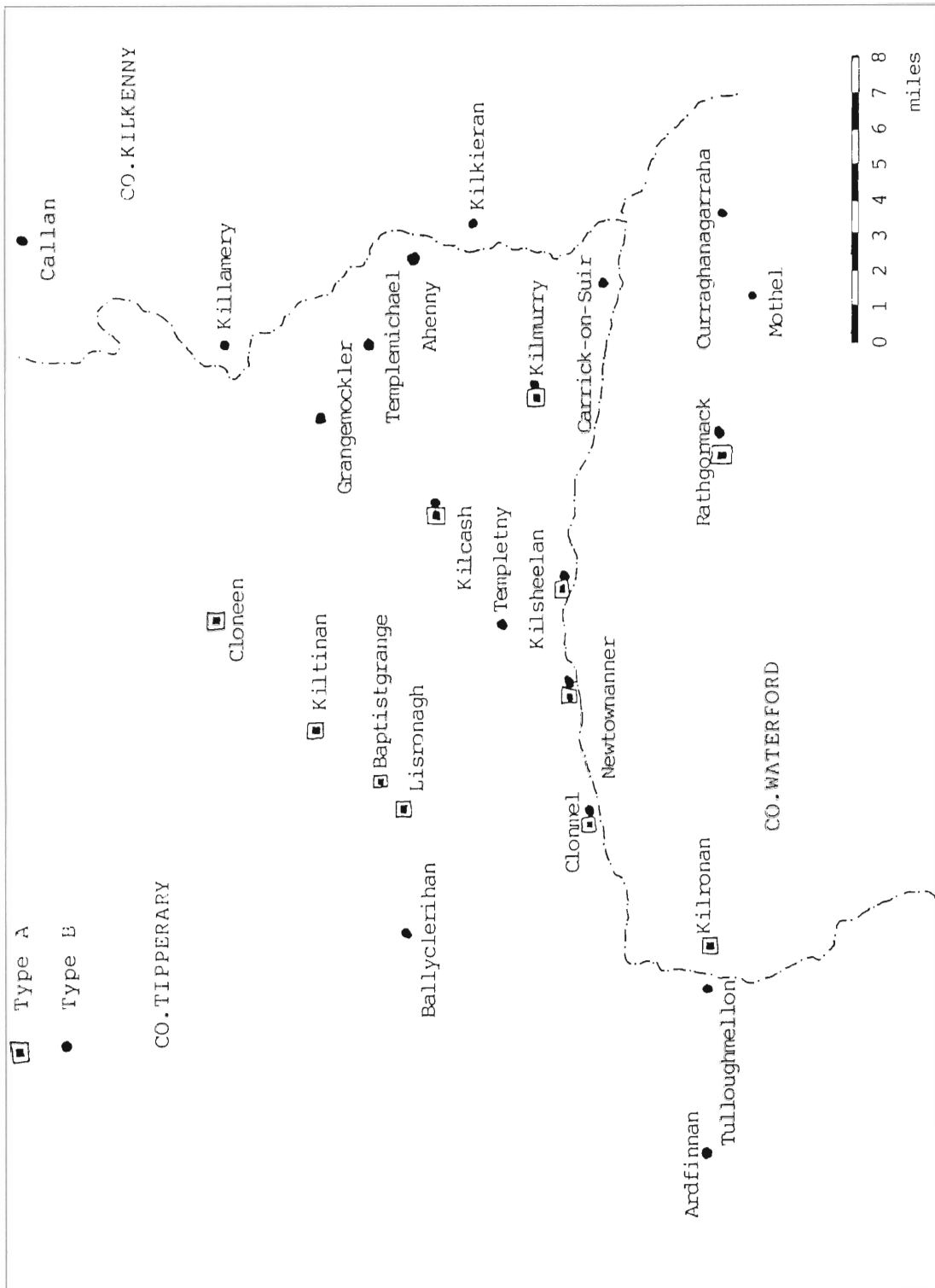


Fig. 18: Distribution.

The dates inscribed on the tombs range from 1720 to 1786, with the main concentration between 1730 and 1756. Type A and Type B seem to be roughly contemporary, but with Type B having a broader spread.


The main concentration of these gravestones is around the village of Kilsheelan in Co. Tipperary. Previously Kilsheelan itself was seen as the centre and source due to the number of well preserved examples in the graveyard there. However, the larger graveyard of Kilmurry, near the village of Ballyneale, c. 4.5 miles from Kilsheelan, has a greater number of both types A and B. These are considerably more weatherbeaten and more difficult to spot. Kilmurry churchyard also includes a number of older *mensa* tombs dated around 1630, with Passion symbols. This is therefore, the more likely source.


The Type B gravestones are more widely distributed in the area. They are found as far west as Ardfinnan, south to Mothel in Co. Waterford, and north as far as Callan in Co. Kilkenny. Type A, on the other hand, are found closer to the Kilsheelan-Kilmurry "base", with a further small number located south of Fethard. Many of the graveyards have only one or two examples of this type of gravestone. Only Kilsheelan (11 stones), Kilmurry (15 stones), Kilcash (4 stones) Rathgormack (4 stones) and Mothel (4 stones) have more than two. All of these graveyards are close to the centre of distribution.


Longfield (1954), up to now the definitive account, contains some errors. Longfield based her research on a small number of examples, mainly at Kilsheelan.⁸ Consequently the date range of 1741 to 1755 is too narrow. Even within the context of Kilsheelan graveyard some of the names and dates were incorrect.⁹ She suggests that a more extensive list could be made but, as the design differs so little, it would be of no benefit to the over-all picture.⁹ The following account suggests otherwise.










Iconography

The following are the emblems used in the Kilsheelan-Kilmurry gravestones. Some are common to both Type A and Type B; others are not, and this is indicated.

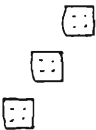
1.  Lancet: A & B; the lance that pierced the side of Christ. Generally shown close to the cross.¹⁰ On all gravestones.

2.  Ladder: A & B; placed either behind or beside the cross. Common to all gravestones.


3.  Sepulchre and stone: A & B; common to all graves, usually in the right corner.¹¹

4.  Sponge on hyssop: A & B; "So a sponge was soaked in the wine, put on a stalk of hyssop and lifted up to his lips". Hyssop is an aromatic herb.¹² Common to all stones.
5.  Nails: A only; three nails, one for the foot and two each for the hands.
6.  Scourging pillar with cock: A & B; The pillar to which Christ was tied to be whipped.¹³ The cock that crowed on Peter's denial.¹⁴ Common to all graves. Occasionally the cock does not sit on the pillar.
7.  Rope: A & B; to tie Christ to the pillar. Usually depicted beside the pillar.¹⁵ More common on Type A.
8.  Bucket with hammer and pinchers: A & B; common to all gravestones. Usually in the left corner. The use of the hammer and pinchers in the nailing of the cross is obvious, but the bucket-like holder may only have been a convenient receptacle.¹⁶
9.  Whip: A & B IV; Three tailed whip with star-like protrusions.¹⁷
10.  Crown of thorns: A only; common to all A tombs. Type B shows the crown on the head of Christ, if at all.¹⁸
11.  Crescent moon: A & B; common to all tombs. May indicate the darkness at the death of Christ.¹⁹ The face may represent the Archangel Gabriel who, according to medieval belief, lived there.²⁰
12.  Three stars; A & B; common to all gravestones. May be a further indicator of darkness.²¹ In medieval times thought to have been the homes of angels.²² Stars rarely appear in any other instruments of the Passion gravestones in the country.


13.




Three dice (occasionally two): A & B; "The soldiers said to one another: 'Let's not tear it, let's throw dice to see who will get it'."²³ More commonly found on Type B.
14.




Skull and crossbones: A only (occasionally); an emblem of mortality.²⁴ The bones of Adam were said to have been buried at Calvary.²⁵
15.




Seamless garment: B (once on Type A); "They also took the robe, which was made of one piece of woven cloth without any seams in it".²⁶
16.




Thirty pieces of silver: B, and occasionally on Type A. The price Judas received for his betrayal.²⁷ Usually displayed vertical, though sometimes horizontal or even square. There is rarely any attempt to have exactly 30 coins.
17.




Bag: B, occasionally A; presumably provided for the silver. The same design appears on older tombs in the area, e.g. the Friary in Clonmel.²⁸
18.




Bag: B only; variation used on roughly one-third of all Type B tombs. Never used in conjunction with "Sceptre of Reeds" (no. 22).²⁹
19.




"Dice Box": Almost always on B, and occasionally on Type A. this may be a box for the dice. Does not appear on any other Passion tombs and its form, short of being of rectangular shape divided into two rather like a book, is unclear.³⁰
20.



Angel: A & B; usually only appears on the recumbent stones of both A and B. Always in this form, except on Type BV.³¹
21.



"Flail": B, occasionally A; possibly a flail used in the torture of Christ,³² but this is not definite. Looks on most tombs like a bent or broken stick. Only once appears in conjunction with "Sceptre of Reeds" (No. 22).
22.



Sceptre of Reeds: A & B. Used in the mockery of Christ.³³ This design appears on some of the older *mensa* tombs.

23.



Chalice: B only; angels were said to have collected the blood of Christ as it dropped from his wounds.³⁴ Usually one shown, occasionally two.

24.



Many-tailed whip: B, only once on A; used in the torture of Christ.³⁶ It may represent, not a whip, but a torch,³⁵ the torch symbol being common Passion gravestones.

Type A

Type A graves are characterised by a plain central cross, occasionally on a plinth-like structure, more often held in place by two small struts. The ladder and lance cross diagonally behind the cross. In the right corner are the tomb and stone. A large crown of thorns is present, usually at the left hand side. In the left corner is the bucket containing the hammer and pinchers.

Grouped around the base of the cross are the three nails and whip, usually three- or four-tailed. To the left of the cross is the pillar, usually shown with a rope coiled beside it, with a cock on top. The crescent moon and three stars are shown near the top. The cross itself is usually flared at the edges. Occasionally other icons, like the 30 pieces of silver, flail, hyssop with the sponge, or the sceptre of reeds, appear. (Figs. 2, 3, 4, 5) Some gravestones, while different in detail, retain enough of the defining icons to be still considered Type A.

Type AII. These graves, two in number, A2 and A21, have the ladder and lance perpendicular to the cross. The cross itself is on a plinth. The pieces of silver are shown. The Lynch grave (A2) has a similar style to many of Type B in the area (Fig. 1).

Type AIII. Only one grave, AII, at Kilmurry. It has similar icons, but a different style. It is more expertly sculpted with several distinct details: I.N.R.I. printed at the top of the unflared cross; smaller dice; narrow armed stars; smaller cock; and different bucket and tools (Fig. 6).
Type A total: 23.

Type B

Type B gravestones are more common than Type A, have a wider time-frame, and are spread over a wider area. Styles of execution differ, not only over distance, but within the same graveyard. Efforts to define stylistic patterns by area or time proved fruitless, except for those gravestones that were distinctly different – Types BII to BIV.

Most of the standard Type B stones are upright, with one exception (B5). The Calvary cross is central, with a simple figure dressed in an outward flowing loincloth. The lower shaft behind the figure is rarely depicted. The figure usually has some sort of crown – either radiating spikes or a furl in the case of Type BII.

Attached to the right-hand cross-beam is the ladder, while the lance is generally shown at the opposite side. One or two chalices, occasionally absent, are shown underneath the crossbeams. In common with Type A the grave and stone are shown in the right corner, with the bucket and tools shown in the left. The dice almost always appear, as does the hyssop and sponge.

Beside the bucket is the cock and pillar, often with the coiled rope beside it. The moon and stars are always shown. A many-tailed whip is also a common occurrence. The 30 pieces of silver, in various geometric patterns, are always shown, usually near the tomb. A bag for the

silver also appears, either as a knotted triangular bar or a round purse-like bag. The flail, or the sceptre of reeds, is shown, though rarely together, and occasionally not at all. The rectangular "dicebox" is nearly always shown, usually above the cross. (Figs. 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14).

Type BII: Five graves – B13, B17, B18, B28, B36. These graves are distinctly different. The figure is wider and the crown on the head is coiled like a rope. The lance is shown beside the ladder. The figure is often shown on a plinth. In four out of the five graves the gravestone itself is pointed; generally Type B gravestones are rounded. Iconographically, they are similar to standard Type B, but differences do occur, e.g. B13 (Corbet 1731, Kilmurry) cf. Fig. 12, the cock being shown on a pot rather than the pillar.

The four similar-shaped gravestones, B28, B13, B17 and B18, are similar enough to suggest that these are by the same sculptor. The other grave, B36, differs in style and may be by another sculptor. (Figs. 10, 12, 15).

Type BIII: One grave – B29. This recumbent stone uses the same symbols as Type B, but in a different style. (Fig. 16). **Type BIV:** One grave – B27. Another recumbent stone which, though using the symbols on Type B (and one of Type A – the three-tailed whip), is of a very different style. It also shows two new icons, the bell and the cock on a box. (Fig. 17).

Type BV: One grave – B38. This grave is an interesting variation on Type B. Icons such as tomb, stone, 30 pieces of silver, dice, ladder, bucket with tools, lance, whip, stars and moon all appear. The figure is of standard type. The central section is more akin to graves found in South Kilkenny, two of which appear in the same graveyard.

The I.H.S. monogram stands on the base. The crucifixion scene begins on the horizontal part of the 'H'. Two full-bodied angels are collecting the blood from the wounds with chalices. The inscription is in relief and of a wholly different style from the standard Type B. It is arguable that this may not belong to Type B at all. Type B total: 38.

Discussion

Longfield (1954) wrote that the tombstones of Kilsheelan were executed "by the same unknown hand" with two possible exceptions, White 1721 and Hogan 1735.³⁷ Having looked at the broader range of tombs, one must query the validity of this statement. The Hogan memorial is a standard Type B (B6) and "White 1721" is actually Lynch 1744 (A2), a Type AII stone, which differs from the other Types but is not unique. It seems probable that the standard Type A were sculpted by the one person. Those designated AII and AIII were carved by different sculptors, though following the style of the originals. In the case of AII both stones may not have been made by the same sculptor.

Type B and its variations were carved by different sculptors using many of the same icons as Type A and in much the same style. Most of the standard Type B stones were probably carved by the one sculptor, although some, e.g. B25, Fig. 13, seem different. The variations, BI to BV, were carved by different sculptors. These variations are well distributed throughout the date-range.

All the sculptors may have been working together, possibly a family unit, although there is no evidence of this. The commonality of style certainly suggests some connection. The other instruments of the Passion stones in the area are quite different. It is possible that each sculptor learned his trade from a common source, thus creating a common icon use.

The reason for the use or non-use of individual icons is also a mystery. No pattern in either date or distribution were found to explain this. Nor does the idea of different sculptors using certain icons. Longfield suggests that it is the shape and size of the actual stone that dictates

which icons are used.³⁸ This may be true in some cases; but other factors must have been involved. Personal choice, by the sculptor or the client, may have been a factor, or possibly rates of payment. The individual icons may even signify status, or membership of social groupings.

The particular style employed by the sculptors of Kilsheelan-Kilmurphy seems to be original. There are a number of older *mensa* or Table tombs in the vicinity with instruments of the Passion decoration on the sides. There are at least two in Kilmurphy Churchyard itself, one of which has a readable display of symbols. A number of these – cloak, three dice, cock on a pillar, 30 pieces of silver, whip, sceptre of reeds, calipers, lance, sponge, dicebox and ladder – can all be found on the later tombs, but the style and organisation is quite different.

Some symbols common to Mensa tombs at Kilmurphy, Callan and Clonmel, such as the “Five Wounds” and the pot, appear nowhere on the Kilsheelan-Kilmurphy graves. Longfield mentions a stone in the grounds of the Sisters of Charity convent in Clonmel as a definite stylistic influence.³⁹ Unfortunately neither the stone nor a pictorial representation could be located.

These older tombs in such close proximity must have influenced the Kilsheelan-Kilmurphy sculptors, but the later style was a new approach, itself copied later, as can be seen on gravestones at Mothel and Churchtown, both in Co. Waterford. The original model for the Kilsheelan-Kilmurphy style may have been a woodcut or a broadsheet that now no longer exists. Whatever the origin, the particular design, especially the use of the three stars, does not appear on any other graves in the area.

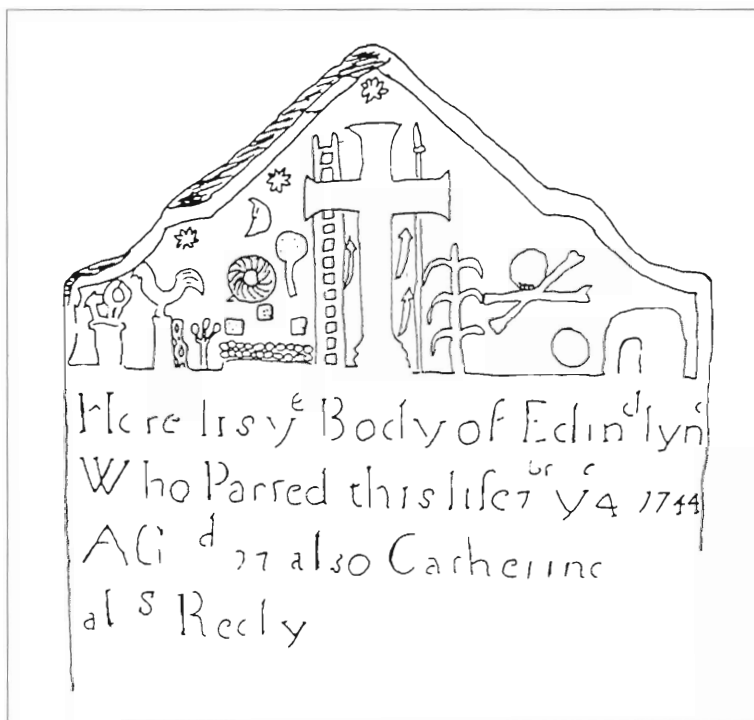


Fig. 1: A2 (All): Lynch 1744 (Kilsheelan).

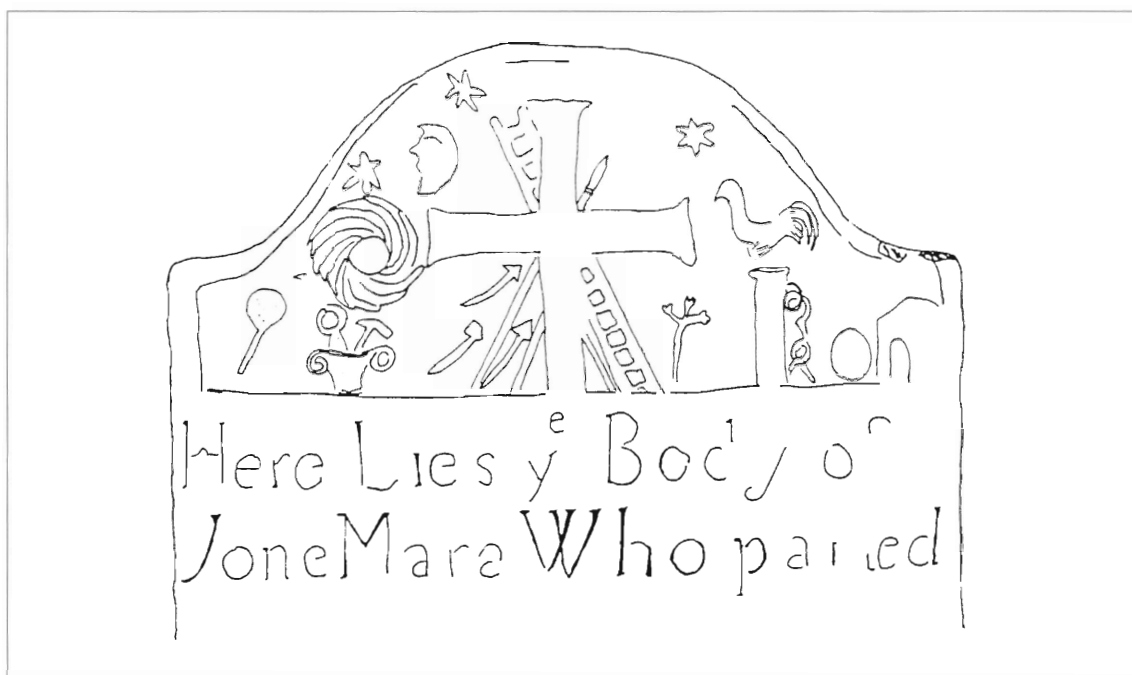


Fig. 2: A3; Mara 1731 (Kilsheelan).



Fig. 3: A4: Houlahan 1756 (Kilsheelan).

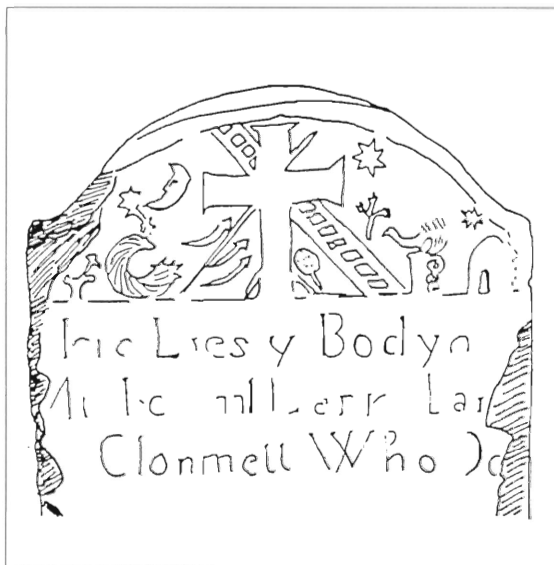


Fig. 4: A15: Lai ___ 1741 (Old St. Mary's, Clonmel).

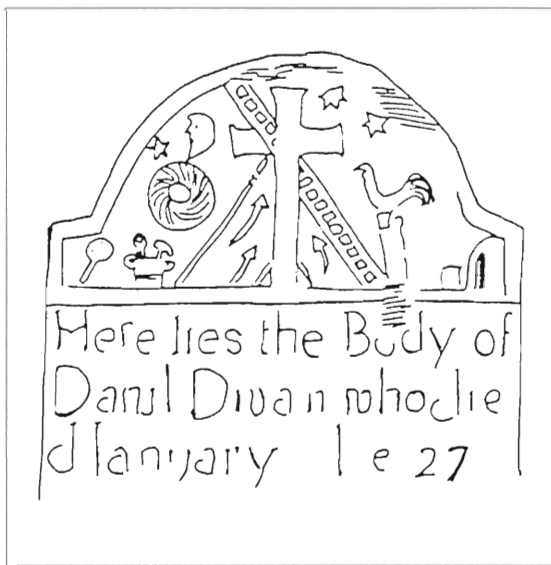


Fig. 5: A14: Dwan 1722 (Newtownanner).



Fig. 6: A11 (AIII): Cleary 1742 (Kilmurry).

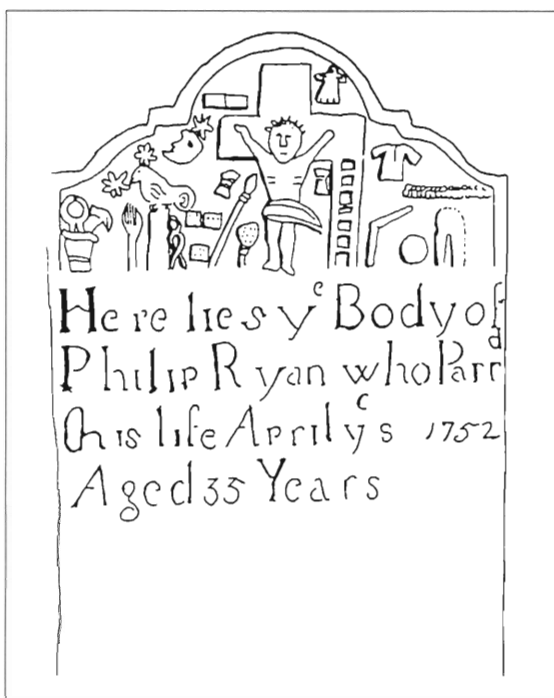


Fig. 7: B9: Ryan 1752 (Kilcash).

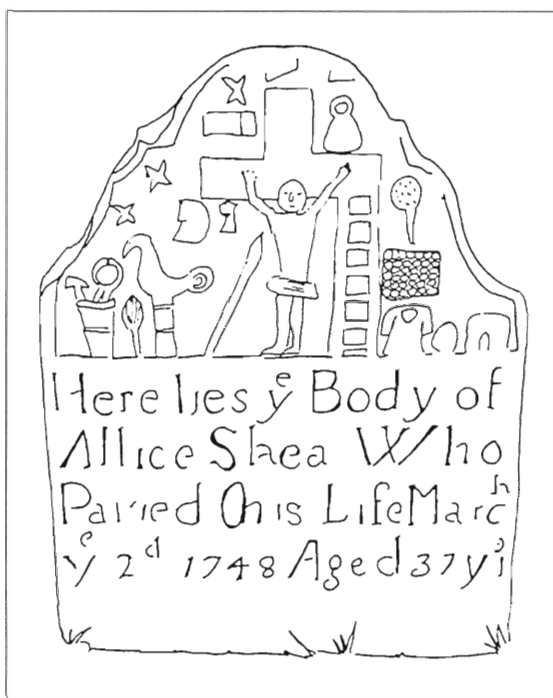


Fig. 8: B4: Shea 1748 (Kilsheelan).

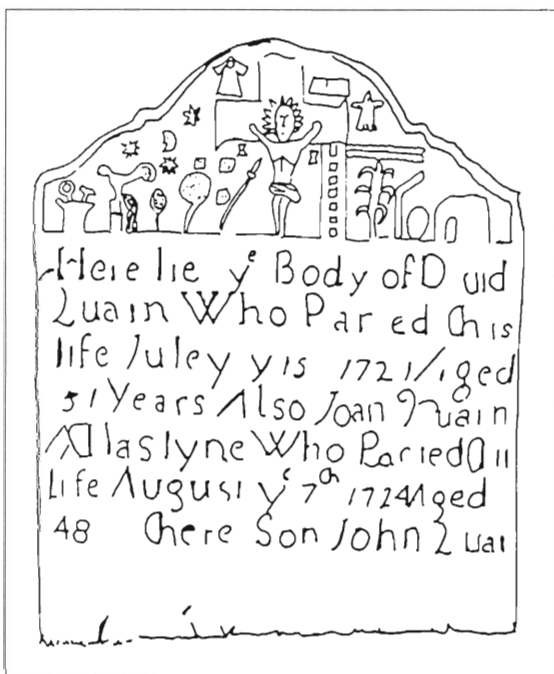


Fig. 9: B2: Quain 1721 (Kilsheelan).



Fig. 10: B28 (BII): Butler 1747 (Grangemockler).



Fig. 11: B24: Sweeney 1740 (St. Mary's, Callan).



Fig. 12: B13 (BII): Corbet 1731 (Kilmurry).



Fig. 13: B25: Neale 1720 (Tulloughmellon).

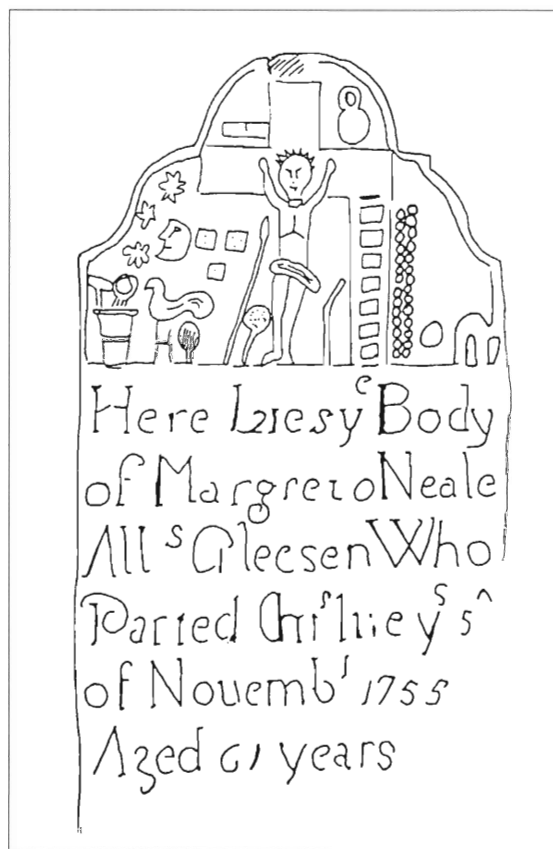


Fig. 14: B21: Neale 1755 (Kilsheelan).

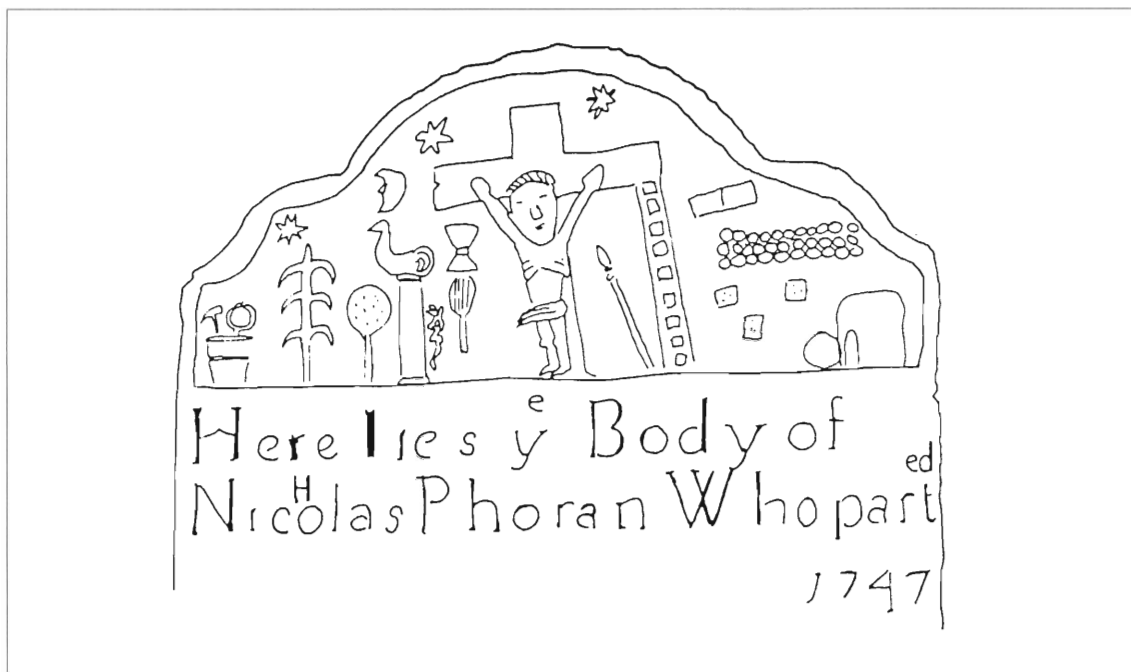


Fig. 15: B36 (BII): Phoran 1741 (Curraghnagarraha).

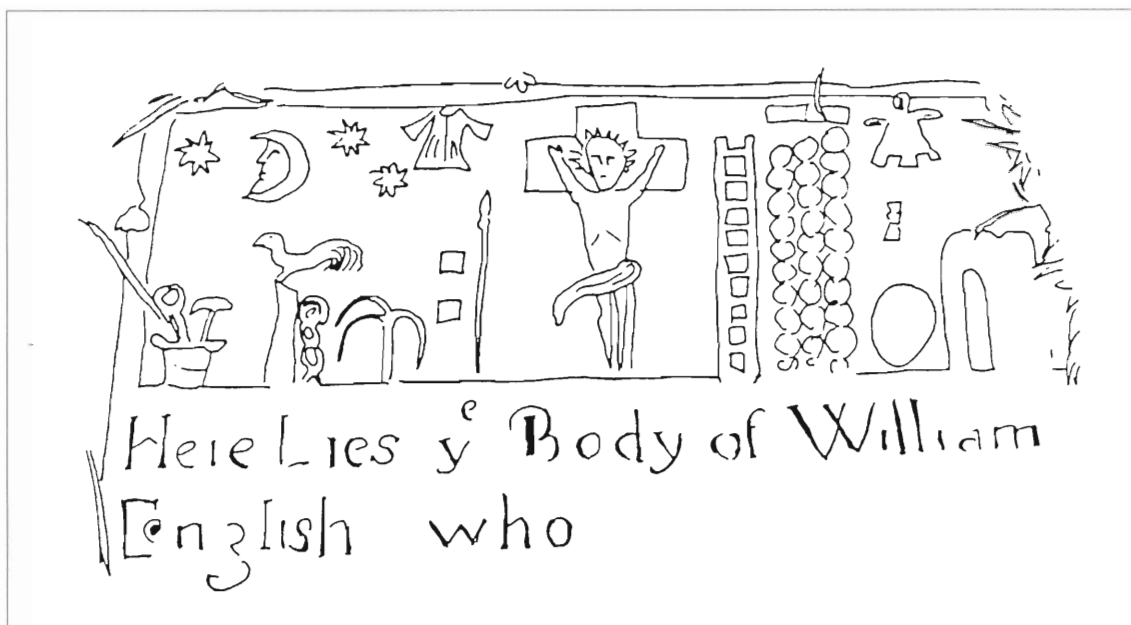


Fig. 16: B29 (BII): English 1764 (Ballyclurihan).

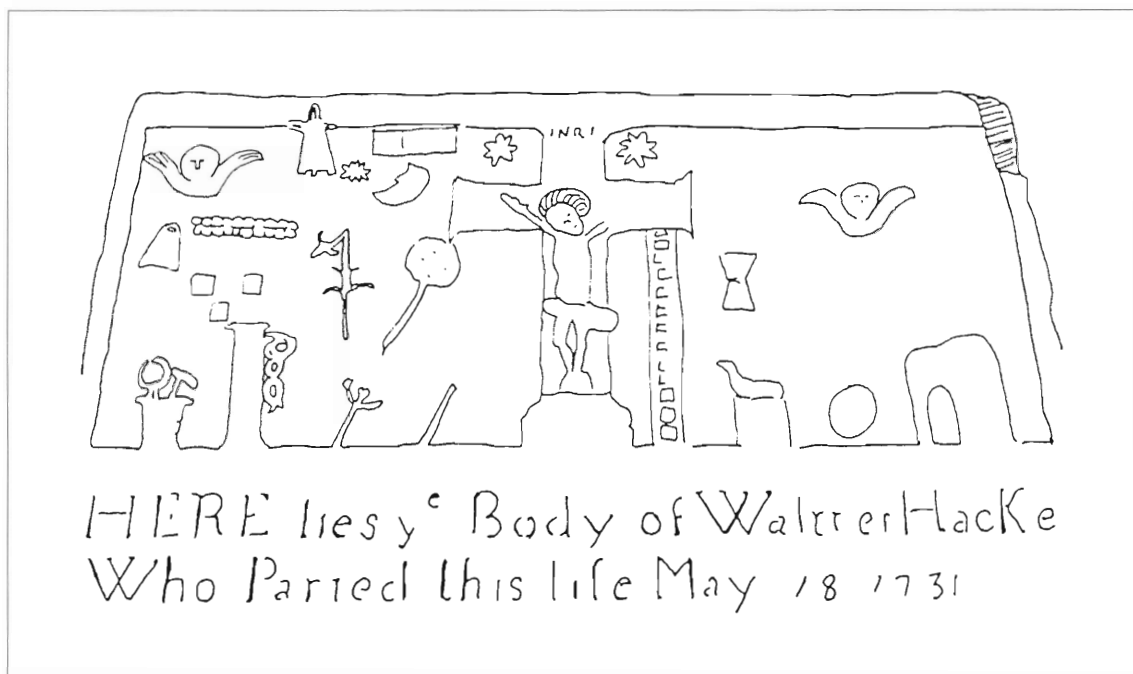


Fig. 17: B27 (BIV): Hacket 1731 (Templetny).

Inventory

Graveyard	Type A	Type B
(i) Kilsheelan:	1. Comerford 1732 2. Lynch 1744 AII 3. Mara 1731 4. Houlahan 1756 5. Quin 1715	1. Neal 1752 2. Quain 1721 3. Dwyer 1743 4. Shea 1748 5. Power 1755 6. Hogan 1735
(ii) Kilcash:	6. _____ *	7. Mangan 1743 8. Comerford 1730 9. Ryan 1752
(iii) Ardfinnan:		10. Bourk 1742
(iv) Kilmurry:	7. Keavan 1727 8. Guire _____ * 9. Cody 1747 10. Doyle 1747 11. Cleary 1742 AIII 12. Hiet* 1776* 13. Holahan 1722	11. Meany 1731 12. Sexton 1755 13. Corbet 1731 BII 14. Houlahan 1749 15. Butler 1750 16. Hackney 1732 17. Walsh 1748 BII 18. Dunphy 1730 BII
(v) Newtownanner:	14. Dawn 1722	19. Hogan 1786
(vi) Old St. Mary's, Clonmel:	15. Lai.* 1741	20. Slattery 1753
(vii) Kilkieran:		21. Neale 1755
(viii) Kilclispeen (Ahenny):		22. Comerford 1756
(ix) Kilamery:		23. Cahell 1741
(x) St. Mary's, Callan:		24. Sweeney 1740
(xi) Kilronan:	16. Daniel 1745	
(xii) Tulloughmellon:		25. Neale 1720 26. Scully 1723 27. Hackett 1731 BIV
(xiii) Templetny:		
(xiv) Kiltinan:	17. Morrisey 1746	
(xv) Lisronagh:	18. Kennedy 1741	
(xvi) Baptistgrange:	19. Cahill 1756 20. Ryan 1742 21. Tracy 1739 AII	
(xvii) Cloneen:		28. Butler 1747 BII
(xviii) Grangemoekler:		29. English 1764 BIII
(xix) Ballyclarihan:		30. Daughrer 17__ *
(xx) Rathgormack:	22. Quillenan 1747 23. Phorane 1747	31. Phelan 1753 32. Mores 1755 33. Devoy 1755 34. Shortis 1755 35. Ryan 1755
(xxi) Mothel:		36. Phoran 1747 BII 37. Walsh 1764 38. Hanrahan 1747 BV
(xxii) Curraghnagarraha:		
(xxiii) St. Nicholas' Carrick-on-Suir		
(xxiv) Templemichael:		

* Illegible.

Author's note: Other graves must have existed as well as those on the list. The fragment of a Type B was found in the rubble of a collapsed gable wall at Kilmurry.



FOOTNOTES

1. Roe. H. M. 1983: "Instruments of the Passion", in *Old Kilkenny Review* 2, p. 528.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, p. 529.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 532.
6. Longfield, A. K. 1954: "Some 18th Century Irish Tombstones" (contd.), in *J.R.S.A.L.*, Vol. 84, p. 174.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
9. *Ibid.*
10. John 19:34.
11. John 20: 1; Luke 24:2.
12. John 19:29.
13. Pillar is not mentioned in the Bible text, but is part of the Stations of the Cross.
14. Luke 22:60; Mark 14:72.
15. Rope not referred to in Bible.
16. These instruments not referred to in Bible.
17. Mark 15:15.
18. Mark 15:17.
19. Luke 23:44.
20. O'Shea, P. J. 1988: *Memento Mori* (unpublished M.A. theséis, U.C.C.), p. 177.
21. Luke 23:44.
22. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 117.
23. John 19:24.
24. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
25. O'Farrell, F. 1983: "Passion Symbols in Irish Church Carvings", in *Old Kilkenny Review* 2, p. 538.
26. John 19:23.
27. Matthew 27:3.
28. Not referred to in the Bible.
29. Not referred to in the Bible.
30. Not referred to in the Bible. O'Mahoney, E. 1995: *A Study of 17th Century Memorials to the Dead in the Medieval Towns of Cork, Kinsale and Youghal* (unpublished M.A. thesis, U.C.C.), p. 81.
31. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
32. Not referred to in the Bible.
33. Referred to as "stick" in the Bible (Matthew 27:29).
34. O'Shea, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
35. John 18:3.
36. Mark 15:15.
37. Longfield, *op. cit.*, p. 174.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

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Shea, E. and Watson, S. J., 1975: *Clonmel: An Architectural Guide* (An Taisce, Dublin).

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