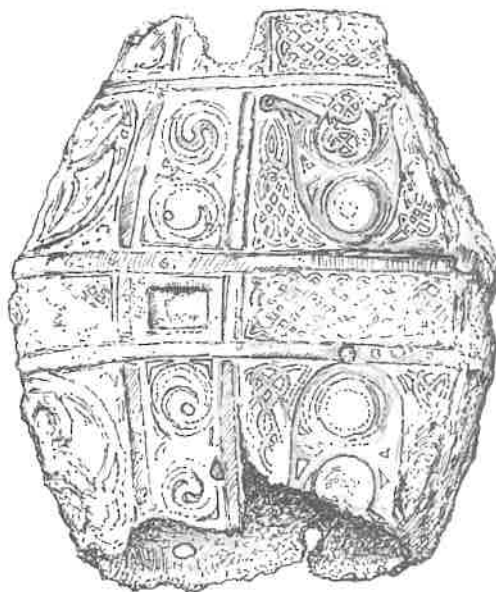


A Crozier Knop from County Tipperary: A Preliminary Note

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While museum curators dream of those treasures that may survive against all the odds, it is still a rare and special moment when something important comes into our institutions. The purpose of this note is to record the discovery of a small, battered but very important piece of Early Christian metalwork which seems to be a crozier fragment. It is a sobering thought that if it were not for the presence of an astute local historian and a professionally-staffed county museum (the latter institution not yet found in a majority of counties in the state), this piece might have been lost for ever.



0 5 cms

Drawing of object as is at present (Copyright retained by South Tipperary County Museum).

On Monday 6th of October, 1997, Mr. Tommy Kavanagh of The Commons, Co. Tipperary, a friend of the museum, brought in two items for examination. The first was a modern heating iron slug and the second a piece of Early Christian metalwork which would appear to be a knop or circular knob from the shaft of a metal crozier. Mr. Kavanagh had recognised the possible importance of the knop when he first heard of it and had several times asked the finder to look for it as it had become misplaced in the finder's house. Eventually it was brought in to us wrapped in the same plastic shopping bag in which the finder had left it in on Mr. Kavanagh's doorstep the previous week.

At a subsequent meeting with the finder, I was informed that it was found in the mid to late 1970s in Kilbraugh td. some one and a half miles to the north-west of The Commons village. The field, to the south-east of Kilbraugh House, is noted on the 1:10,560 maps as having a *Grave Yd. (Disused)* in it.¹ The field slopes down from the south-east to lower land on the northern boundary, and a small valley on the west in which a stream runs northwards. There are several traces of human activity in the field. There appears to be a trackway consisting of a long linear hollow extending down the slope towards the northern end of the field. There is an overgrown large platform or scooped-out area at its south-western end and another smaller platform to the north-east of its northern end. A detailed drawn survey of the site would be required to understand what is present.

The find spot was close to a small banked and ditched circular enclosure² some 20 m in diameter sited on a sloping part of the field extending down from the end of the trackway towards the stream.

There are some bushes growing in the interior of the enclosure and some stones are also visible. These may be the traces of adult or child burials. The enclosure is locally known as the site of an 'old church'.

The knop was found some eight paces out from the enclosure in a northward direction. It was found some 10-12 inches deep in what the finder described as gritty soil and was apparently lying on its side with nothing else being found with it. He noted what he described as a 'burnt rag' packed into the cavity but this fell apart as the object was being brought home by car and has not, unfortunately, survived³.

A preliminary description of the knop⁴

The knop consists of a small hollow biconical copper-alloy cylinder⁵. The interior is generally smooth and featureless. It is decorated with a series of motifs laid out within a framework of raised bands. The knop has the remains of a vertical 'collar' at one end (for convenience called the upper end). There may have been a similar collar at the other end. Some traces of gilding have been noticed⁶ and there are locations on the body which are probably sockets for decorative insets. The knop seems to have had a long period of usage with wear, reuse and damage.

Damage

When found the knop was in a relatively poor condition, one portion (c. 25 %) being burnished and polished by wear and another sizable part encrusted by copper corrosion products. Much of the upper 'collar' is missing with the rim present in only two places. At one of these two points, there are indications of recent abrasions to the metal exposing raw copper-coloured metal. This is the only definite modern damage to the object.



Photograph by National Museum of Ireland photographic studio.

The lower end of the object is more severely damaged. Only some small portions survive below the lower edge of the decoration. It is clear that the diameter of the opening of the body at this point is larger than that at the upper end. Two small holes through the lower body, immediately above the edge of the decoration are probably the results of attempts to secure the object to something. These holes seem to be secondary as they are pierced through the decoration. The areas of damage to the upper collar are equally spaced and could be the enlarged and broken away remains of original securing holes.

The damage to the lower portion of the object extends up into the body in one area (the burnished part) and it would seem that the

object has suffered a blow or considerable pressure here as the lower edge of the decoration is missing and the body is split along a decoration frame line.

Scheme of Decoration

The decoration consists of a repetitive scheme of decorated panels arranged within a framework of narrow plain raised bands. With the exception of the mounts described below all of the decoration is integral and not applied. A central band is formed by two horizontal framing lines. Four regularly-spaced vertical sets of two lines, crossing the central band, divide the body and the upper collar into four areas. The main body panels are trapezoidal in shape with parallel top and bottom edges and sides which expand outwards and downwards to skilfully take account of the object's oval shape. The small rectangular areas formed by the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal framing bands contain a rectangular panel holding a sunken area. All of the four sunken panels contain corrosion products and the precise nature of their filling is at present uncertain. They do appear however to have contained some inset or mounted material. The eight main body panels, above and below the horizontal band, are occupied by two motifs, repeated once each, diametrically opposed, on both top and bottom areas. Each motif is reflected by the similar but upside down motif on the other side of the central band. The raised bands continue upwards into the upper collar to frame alternatively broad and narrow decorative panels. The lower collar area, little of which remains, does not appear to have any decoration. This regular, reflective and symmetric placing of the motifs emphasises the central band which, as noted above, probably had mounts or inset material along it, spaced between the main motifs. The design is a sophisticated and balanced one.

Decorative Motifs

Panel 1' (Broad)	Panel 2 (Narrow)	Panel 3 (Broad)	Panel 4 (Narrow)	Panel 5 (Broad)	Panel 6 (Narrow)	Panel 7 (Broad)	Panel 8 (Narrow)
Motif 1 Loose interlace panel	Destroyed	Destroyed	Unclear	Motif 2 ? Interlace panel (tight?)	Destroyed	Unclear	Destroyed
Upper Band	Motif 3 Circular ring, ² with central mount, surmounted by two openwork extensions, terminating in small ring, all surrounded by interlace motifs.	Motif 4 Hidden by corrosion	Motif 5 scrollwork (?zoomorphic)	Motif 3	Motif 6 ? zoomorphic or poss. scrollwork	Motif 4 two trumpet lobes or similar motif extending down to meet a circular mount socket, all within a circular frame and with the spaces within the motifs filled by interlace in lower relief.	Motif 5 scrollwork or zoomorphic? birds heads.
Central Band	Motif 7 Dense interlace panel	Motif 8 ? mount	Unclear due to corrosion	Motif 7 tight interlace	mount	corrosion	mount
Lower Band	Motif 3 in mirror image of that above central band	Motif 4 in mirror image of that above central band	Motif 5 in mirror image of that above central band	Motif 3 in mirror image of that above central band	Motif 6 ? ? zoomorphic or poss. scrollwork	Motif 4 in mirror image of that above central band	Motif 5 ? In mirror image of that above central band

Clearly a lot more work will have to be done on the description and analysis of the art motifs after the object has been cleaned and conserved but the impression one gains is of a well designed and executed piece using Ultimate Lá Tene motifs, decorative mounts and interlace motifs in a confident way. Note how the circular recesses formed within the ultimate Lá Tene motifs are arranged either side of the central band, balancing each other across the band and forming a counterpoint to the mounts in the central band. The bands/mounts and the circular recesses are the primary foundations of the decorative scheme.

Use, Form, Art and Date

This piece of metalwork was intended to be mounted upon a cylindrical object. The differing diameters of the openings suggest that it was part of a composite or at least complex whole. While there might be other possibilities, the most obvious Early Christian candidate object is the crozier. These staffs are a characteristic feature of Early Christian religious metalwork. Approximately 45 (G. Murray pers. comm.) of them survive, many as fragments only (Murray 2004, 24). The surviving examples date from between the 8th and 12th centuries, with the majority of these dating to the late 11th and 12th centuries. While a wooden crozier has been found in a Co. Offaly bog (O Carroll 2000)⁸ they characteristically consist of metal fittings on a wooden core. Opinions differ as to whether the wooden cores are simple constructional elements or enshrined relics. The metal fittings (from the top) are the crook, tubular casings and a ferrule or foot. The tubular casings are jointed by three or four knobs along the shaft. 'One is always placed immediately below the crook and another immediately above the ferrule, with one or two other knobs between these' (Murray 2004, 26). Bourke (1987, 172) says that '... expanded knobs were of three principal kinds: (1) those divided medially into two continuous zones ...; (2) those bearing numerous small panels of ornament and having borders of triangles united at the tips ...; and (3) those bearing panels in equally spaced and staggered rows.... There are examples of overlap between these three categories'. The Kilbraugh knob would appear to be one of those examples of overlap as it has numerous small panels and is also divided medially. This feature and the presence of possible mount settings, perhaps comparable to those on the Shankill, Co. Antrim crozier cylinder, the crook from Helgo, Sweden,⁹ might support a typologically early date in the development of the Irish crozier. Bourke (ibid.) suggests 'that the earliest Irish croziers are of eight-century date, and that the familiar standardised form was evolved only after at least a century of development'.

Although obscured, it is clear that a major part of the art of the Kilbraugh knob is of the Ultimate La Tene 'Celtic' curvilinear style. Interlace and animal ornament appears to be present also¹⁰. The mounts may have been of amber or perhaps enamelling. These artistic features would also hint at an early date, the eight century perhaps.

Conclusions

The object from Kilbraugh, Co. Tipperary is the sadly battered remains of a piece of Early Christian metalwork, probably a crozier. It appears to have been an early one in the series of such venerated shrines. Its significance lies not only in the still partly obscured art but in the fortuitous co-incidence of an astute local historian and a properly staffed and proactive county museum. Such partnerships increase the odds on reclaiming such fragile parts of our vanished past.

Acknowledgements

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¹O.S. sheet 49 Tipperary S.R. O.S. 1:10,560 and in the SMR as site 10 of that sheet.

²Apparently the disused graveyard noted on the O.S. map.

³The enquiries arising from the receipt of the knop included requesting the donor to bring in, for archaeological inspection, all of his other finds which he had described as 'modern coins'. Most indeed proved to be such when they were eventually inspected on the 8th of February, 1999 but one item is far older and more significant. It is a circular copper alloy disk, flat and polished in places on the back, centrally pierced, front face bounded by a raised rim, now very battered. The central portion of the face is a circular mount socket itself having the centrally located perforation. The area between the central socket and the rim is occupied by what appears to be conjoined pairs of scrolls in slight relief. The scrolls and perhaps the rim appear to have traces of gilding. The object is worn and battered and has traces of bronze corrosion. It would appear to be a decorated fitting of some sort, made to be attached to a larger, flat object and of Early Christian date. It could be a decorative medallion from a house-shaped shrine. It was reportedly believed by the finder to have been found in the 'Moyné area' of Tipperary. It is 3.1 cm in diameter and 2 mm in thickness.

⁴This description is taken from notes made at the time the object was received in the museum and more recently checked while on a visit to the National Museum. They can only be regarded as preliminary. The object is presently awaiting conservation in the National Museum of Ireland, having been registered into the collection as N.M.I. 1999.15 (file 1A/164/97). Further study of the cleaned art will reveal new information.

⁵It measures 6.65 cm in height, 5.8 cm in greatest diameter (damage to the basal area has somewhat flattened it), 3.4 cm diameter upper opening, 3.7 cm diameter lower opening, .2 cm width of wall of upper collar at outer edge.

⁶I am very grateful to Mr. Ragnall O'Floinn, National Museum of Ireland for this and other contributions and advice

⁷The most polished part of the knop (and the most visible pre-conservation) has been arbitrarily chosen as the starting point

⁸It may also be a pilgrim's staff (Murray 2004, 26).

⁹And probably originally on the top knop of the Durrow crozier (see C. Bourke 1997 'Insignia Columbae II,' in C. Bourke (ed.) *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1997), 179-83, fig. 10) (Murray, G., per. Comment).

¹⁰The decoration on the knop resembles the abstract ornament one finds in 8th century Insular manuscripts such as the Book of Durrow (Murray, G., per. Comment).