

White Island Fact Sheet



Background

The ruined church on White Island in Lower Lough Erne is remarkable for the carved sandstone figures displayed there as well as for its fine Romanesque doorway. Six figures have been found at various times from about 1830 to as recently as 1958, and at least three of them were reused in the construction of the church, as were a head in relief carved on a flat stone and an unfinished figure. The latter suggests that the sculptural work was originally carried out on the island. The figures are unusual for their large scale, the largest being about half life size, and for their bold relief carving. At one time they were thought to be pre-Christian but are now accepted as belonging to the Christian era, probably the 9th or 10th century AD.



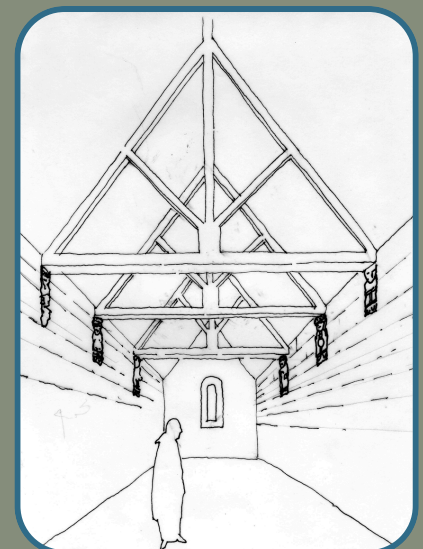
Figures

Five of the figures are male, all robed in round-necked, long-sleeved, full-length tunics and shown with various symbols providing clues about their identification and meaning. The sixth figure (Illustration 3) is almost certainly female and is shown in a distinctive pose with crossed legs and with feet represented naturalistically at right angles to the legs. On all the other figures the feet appear as dainty little stumps and on all six figures the hands are shown as basic shapes without any surviving trace of fingers or thumbs. Four of the figures have individual facial expressions but two others have almost identical faces and similar stylized hair suggestive of curls. While damage to one figure has destroyed evidence of eyes and eyebrows, on all the other figures the eyebrows are shown in strong relief.



Historical Use

Below the worked surface of each carving is a roughly shaped base of varying size suggesting that the figures were not designed to be free-standing, while the sockets on the top of each stone show that the figures were used structurally as supporting pillars or columns. Because the figures were made up of three pairs of different heights, a long accepted view first proposed by Francoise Henry (Henry 1967, 192) was that they were used together to support the steps of an ambo, an early form of preaching chair. However, new theories have been put forward in two recent publications: Rachel Moss suggests that rather than being part of a church, they could just as likely have been part of a separate external feature such as a shrine (Moss 2014, 317-318): architect Richard Pierce taking account of the surviving sockets, proposed their use as roof-support corbels and illustrates how they might have been used (Lanigan Wood 2014, 647-648, fig.262).





St Patrick's
Purgatory,
Lough Derg

LOUGH ERNE — PILGRIM WAY —



Lough Erne is home to many religious sites, places of gathering, learning, worship, and burial. Today, we can trace these places along the lough as they quietly sit as timely reminders of a once thriving early Christian community.