LOUGH ERNE
PILGRIM WAY

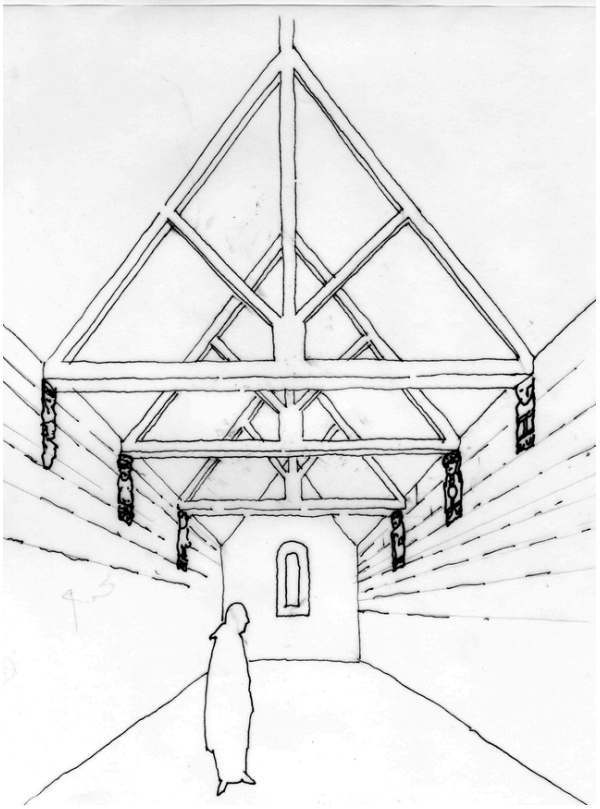
White Island Figures

By Helen Lanigan Wood

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.

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.

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).



Drawing by Richard Pierce showing how the White Island figures might have been used as roof-support corbels. ©Richard Pierce.

The Meaning of the Figures

The sculptures are described from left to right in the order in which they are displayed:

1. Exhibitionist female figure.

This figure has an extended, exaggerated mouth between bulging cheeks suggesting a smiling or grimacing face, quite unlike the solemn expressions on the other figures. The figure wears a short round-necked cape covering the upper body, while the lower body is unclothed. Two hands resting on the upper thighs are directed towards the genital area. While the latter lacks any detail such as a vulva, a phallus, or testicles to establish beyond doubt whether the figure is male or a female, the more likely interpretation is that it is female, and of the six White Island figures, the only female represented. The gesture of the hands is significant in trying to determine its meaning and strongly suggests a message about female sexuality.

Damage to the stone has destroyed much of the narrow head band and most of the socket (or possibly two small sockets) on the top. In 1860 George Du Noyer published an accurate drawing of this figure (Du Noyer 1860, facing 62) at that time displayed on its side beside the Romanesque south doorway. Moss has pointed out that this location is typical of exhibitionist figures (Moss 2014, 317). Originally used like the other figures as a caryatid, this figure may have been built into the church wall in the late 12th century when the doorway was built. However, there is a suspicion expressed by William Wakeman (Wakeman 1880, 289) that General Archdale, owner of the site, may have been responsible for inserting the figure much more recently, perhaps at the same time (c.1830) that he had two recently discovered figures displayed horizontally in the outer east wall of the church.

A commonly held view in the early church was that the seductive powers of women were the cause of the sin of lust and of man's downfall. This view, while in keeping with the Church's fear of sexuality, owes much, as Margaret MacCurtain has suggested, to a preoccupation with male chastity (MacCurtain 1980, 27-28). Widespread throughout the Christian world, this negative view of women can be traced in a number of saints' lives, in the calendar of saints known as the Martyrology of Oengus and in the inclusion of an exhibitionist female figure among the damned on Muiredach's high cross in Monasterboice (ibid.; Lanigan Wood 1985, 19-23). It can also be traced in medieval Irish religious poetry and a recent study of how women are portrayed in such poetry, (Murray 2013, 514-523) poems mainly written by men, many of whom were clerics, clearly demonstrates this. Women are portrayed 'as unable to repress their lustful feelings and presented as constant temptations to men' (ibid.517). Women's guilt is linked to that of Eve, condemned for being responsible for man's fall from grace and loss of paradise. So while the White Island figure predates the exhibitionist figures found on Romanesque carvings which included male as well as female examples, the message it conveys may be similar: a warning to monks and lay men against the sins of the flesh.

2. Figure holding gospel shrine or gospel book

Marked bulges at knee level indicate a seated figure with a rectangular object on his knees. One writer, who must have interpreted the hands emerging from the tunic sleeves as arms, has suggested that this represents a muff-like object, (Hamlin 2008, 362). A more plausible interpretation is that it represents a metal shrine to hold the gospels or possibly a gospel book laid flat with spine to the fore. Whether interpreted as a gospel shrine or a gospel book, the message is the same: the importance of the gospels in providing guidance on leading a Christian life and in spreading the Word of God.

There are numerous manuscript illustrations of evangelists holding gospel books and also some examples in the Book of Kells and the Gospel book of Turin where Christ holds a gospel book. However, in these illustrations the book is always shown upright, which suggests that the flat White Island object is more likely to represent a metal shrine that a vellum book. The tunic worn by this figure is unusual in that its central band or seam extends only from below waist level rather than from the neck down. The top of this figure has two small sockets, one open at the back, and may have matched the partly damaged socket on the exhibitionist figure. All the other figures have a single socket, open at the back. This figure is one of the two found under soil c. 1830 near the old cemetery.

3. Figure holding bell and crozier or crozier shrine

This well preserved figure bearing the episcopal emblems of bell and crozier was found in 1958 lying face downwards in the lowest course of the south wall of the church, just east of the doorway (Lowry-Corry 1959, 61-62). The emblems of bell and crozier apply to abbots as well as bishops and as the figure wears a hood, it is likely that in this case it represents an abbot, perhaps a travelling one. The crozier may represent either a wooden one or a metal crozier-shrine. A message that might be drawn from this figure is the importance of missionary work to spread knowledge of the gospels. The socket on top of the stone is 21cm long, 13cm wide and 1.5cm deep.

4. Figure holding shepherd's staff and pouch

This figure has a strongly-defined face, in which a curved line delineating the lower end of the cheeks continues as a circle to below the chin, suggesting a double chin! The stone surface below the cheeks is slightly recessed and the expression on the face has been interpreted, although not very convincingly, as a grimace. (Foley and McHugh 2014, 823-824). The left hand on the chin is directed towards the mouth, a short staff is held against the right shoulder and a pouch-like object hangs diagonally from the waist. The central seam or band of the tunic is visible only from the waist down to the hem and because of damage to the upper stone surface it cannot be determined whether of not it originally extended to the neck. This figure is one of the two found about 1830 near the old cemetery. The socket on top of the stone is 16cm long, 12.5 cm wide and 1.7cm deep.

This figure is identified as King David by the gesture of his hand towards the mouth, a reference to David's role as author and singer of psalms. His shepherd's staff alludes to his deliverance of the lamb from the lion and could also refer to David's role as a prefiguration of that of Christ the Saviour. The top of the staff has been damaged but the outline shape of its head extending to the right resembles that of the animal-headed staff held by David in his confrontation with Goliath, as shown very clearly in two Irish psalters.In the badly fire-damaged 10th century Cotton Psalter (Vitellius F.XI) the staff is short like the one on the White Island figure; in the 11th century Southampton Psalter, it is longer and terminates in what looks like a sharp metal point. A possible interpretation of the pouch hanging from the waist is that it held the five stones collected by David to use with his sling against Goliath. Moss has suggested that the staff could also be interpreted as a sceptre, symbolic of regal or imperial authority, and she finds the figure reminiscent of depictions of Roman emperors sitting in judgment (Moss 2014, 317-318).

5. Figure holding pair of fabulous animals

This curly-headed figure holds two identical animals by the neck, strange winged animals with bird heads, their beaks and limbs touching as the animals face each other. Each has a single foreleg ending in a claw and two hind legs ending in hooves. This figure is unique in being decorated on one side providing evidence that it was intended to be viewed from two sides. The pattern of broad single-strand interlace is well laid out and covers the entire surface. This figure and the next have similar facial features and they are almost the same height, with the slab on which they are carved being identical in height (81cm). In both cases the central seam of their tunics is defined, not by a plain band as on the other tunics, but by a band with a raised border on each side. Traces of the same feature appear on the hem and more clearly on that of the neighbouring figure. They are also the only figures shown with curly hair.

This figure probably represents a tetramorph, in the form of a very strange combination of the four evangelists' symbols of man, lion, eagle and calf, inspired by the biblical text of the Vision of Ezekiel (1, 5-10) and symbolising the inherent unity of the Gospels. The man, symbol of Matthew, is represented by the human figure itself, the calf for Luke by the hind legs with hooves, and the eagle for John by the beaked heads and wings of the animals. A parallel for such a tetramorph can be found in the 8th or 9th century Trier Gospels (Illustration 10) written for the cathedral of Trier, probably at the nearby monastery of Echternach.

Decorated in HIberno-Saxon style, it is the work of a monk named Thomas who was probably Irish (Henry 1965, 180-181; Nordenfalk 1977, 92-93, Pl.31; Kenney 1929, 650). The design is strange and grotesque: the figure obviously represents Matthew, the thin calf legs represent Luke, the dangling hind quarters and feet symbolise Mark and above them in the centre are two talons below wings with hatched stripes symbolising John.

Tetramorph from the Trier Gospels written in the 7th or 8th century for the cathedral of Trier, probably at the nearby monastery of Echternach (after Nordenfalk 1977).

Another possible but less convincing interpretation of this White Island figure is that the animals represent griffins, with the head wings and claws of an eagle and the body and hind legs of a lion. As such they would symbolise the dual nature of Christ, divine represented by bird, human by animal.

6. Figure bearing shield and sword and wearing a brooch

This curly-headed figure wears a brooch with expanded terminals, roughly circular in shape below the left shoulder and holds a short sword and a round shield with narrow rim and central boss. Two bulges at knee level suggest that the figure is seated. The sword and shield cannot be closely dated but the brooch, despite being badly weathered, provides some evidence of date, not altogether conclusive. Raghnall Ó Floinn who has made a close study of the Irish brooches (Ó Floinn 1989, 72, 89-90), is of the view that the brooch could be either annular (circular) or penannular in shape (circular with a small part of its circumference missing) (Ó Floinn, pers. comm. 2003). The full length of the moveable pin is visible and can be interpreted as either passing through the gap of a penannular brooch or passing over a crossing bar of an annular brooch. If it represents a penannular brooch, it is shown in an unlocked position (penannular brooches are locked by swivelling the brooch head to allow one terminal to pass under the moveable pin, rotating it further to lock it in position). Whether annular or penannular, Ó Floinn believes the brooch is likely to have had circular terminals, probably flat, and to belong to the 8th or 9th century. Such brooches have a predominantly northern distribution within Ireland, were also made in Scotland and may have been in fashion and served as a model when the White Island figures were being carved (ibid.) Another possibility recently expressed by Rachel Moss (Moss 2014, 317-318,412) is that the brooch represents a silver Hiberno-Viking penannular brooch, in fashion from the mid 9th to the mid 10th century and called a thistle of ball brooch because of its spiky spherical terminals and pin head. However, as pointed out by Ó Floinn (pers. comm.2003) in thistle brooches the pin head is normally the same size as the terminals and it looks smaller on the White Island brooch. Also the marked Munster distribution of the thistle brooch makes this a less likely model.

This armed figure has been interpreted as Christ at his Second Coming on Earth in Power and Glory (Roe 1966, 28-30) with the concept of an armed Christ deriving from a psalter illustration.

The Utrecht Plaster dated to c.820 AD contains one such illustration as does a later copy of the same text, the Canterbury Psalter (BM Harley 603). There is also the possibility that the figure represents either David or Joshua, both seen as prefigurations of Christ. Harbison, proposing the identification with Joshua (2011, 134 and 137-140, figs 5 and 6) compared scenes of an armed figure flanked by soldiers on the Tall Cross at Monasterboice, the Market Cross in Kells, Co Meath and a cross at Tynan, Co. Armagh with an illustration of Joshua crossing the Jordan with his troops and the Fall of Jericho from the Bible of S. Paulo fuoiri le mura in Rome (dated 869/870).

Parallels for the White Island Figures?

A small number of full-length stone figures, similar in size to the White Island figures are known in Ireland: at Lismore in Co. Waterford near the cathedral is a male seated figure holding an open book (Henry 1937, 306-307; Macalister 1938, 298-300; Hickey 1985, 30-31) and at Downdaniel in Co. Cork a simply carved human figure with a double cross on the back was dug up in a field by the river Brinny opposite Dundanier Castle (Cole 1907, 61,pl.after 63). These may have served as caryatids. In 1995 a stone head carved at the end of an unfinished block of stone was found on Woodward's Island, Pollintemple, Lough Ramor (McCabe 1996, 183) but showed no evidence of having been a caryatid. It has been compared to the White Island figures but its two-dimensional form and scowling expression have more in common with the single head from White Island than with the figures (Lanigan Wood, 2004, 42-43). A figure carved in relief on a rectangular pillar was discovered in Killoscully graveyard in Co. Tipperary and is believed to have been found in the wall foundations of an old church on the site (Farrelly and O'Brien 1996, 29). A vertical groove along one side indicates that the pillar served as a caryatid and acted as a frame for a horizontal panel, suggesting to Moss that it may have been part of a slab shrine (Moss 2014, 318).

Afterword

Moss believes the White Island figures reflect a tradition of figure carving on the islands and shores of Lough Erne which 'for the time being must be considered a relatively localized phenomenon' (ibid.).

Recent research also suggests that the period during which figure carving flourished in the Lough Erne area may have been relatively short, perhaps no more than two or three centuries between the 8th and 10th centuries and is unlikely to have begun as early as the pre-Christian Iron Age as had been supposed (Lanigan Wood 2004, 34-42).

A significant recent discovery was a missing piece of the pillar stone from Caldragh graveyard in Dreenan townland on Boa Island, a celebrated carving with its two figures back to back, which suggests that it was carved, not in the Iron Age but as late as the 9th or 10th century AD (Warner, R. forthcoming as part of 100 Objects project).

The final word has yet to be written about the White Island figures but with further research, particularly into the evidence of their use as caryatids and into the sources of the symbols associated with five of the figures, may clarify the current uncertainties about what many still regard as enigmatic sculptures.

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