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# *Derrynaflan: the Medieval Grave Slabs*

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## Introduction

The monastic site of Derrynaflan is located on an island in a bog c. 11 kilometres south-east of Thurles. It is situated in the townland of Lurgoe and is referred to locally as “the Island” or “the Gobán Saor”.<sup>1</sup> The latter appellation derives from the local belief that the burial-place of this well-known mythological character (O’Donovan 1840, 523-534; O hOgáin 1935, 264-5 and *anon.* 1833, 112) occurs in the small trapezoidal enclosure to the south-east of the thirteenth-century church.

During the past decade considerable academic attention has been focused on the Derrynaflan site: Ó Muraíle (1983) and Byrne (1980) have focused on its historical background, while the well-known Early Christian period hoard of metalwork from the site has been published by Ryan *et al* (1983). The purpose of this short article, however, is to draw attention to a group of three funerary slabs from the site which are of medieval date and related in form to Hunt’s “head-slab” category (1974, 35-50).

## Description

### Slab No. 1 (Fig. 1)

This consists of a tapered limestone slab in two portions. The upper measures 1.60m in length; 0.41m in width at its top; 0.33m in width at its base and 0.21m in average thickness. The lower fragment measures 0.42m in length; 0.31m in width at its top; 0.29m in width at its base and 0.21m in average thickness.

The upper surface of the slab is worn and its sinister and dexter edges are broken in places. A human head is carved in relief at the top of the slab; it is partly defaced, and the surviving features include the base of the nose, the mouth and the neck. At the base of the slab what may be a representation of a pair of feet is carved in high relief.

The remainder of the design on the slab is incised and extends along its full length. A circle occurs beneath the head and encloses a cross formed from the juxtapositioning of four outline penannular circles. At the centre of the composition is thus formed a lozenge, and this motif is repeated at the end of the transverse arms. Two single stems with lobed terminals extend upwards from the enclosing circle, and between the dexter stem and the carved head is a circular design formed from four lentoids disposed around a central circle.

Linked to the enclosing circle by a pair of grooves is a small human head which features eyes, a nose and mouth. A double outline central shaft extends from the base of this head to the carved feet at the base of the slab. Two smaller upwardly disposed stems extend from the central shaft a short distance below the heads and terminate in lobed terminals. Two similar stems extend out from its base.

### Slab No. 2

This consists of a tapered limestone slab surviving in four portions which are reset in concrete. The slab measures 1.10m in overall length; 0.33m in width at its top; 0.20m in width at



its base and 0.10m in average thickness. It survives in a rather weathered condition. The only apparent design is an extremely defaced human head which is carved in relief at the top of the slab.

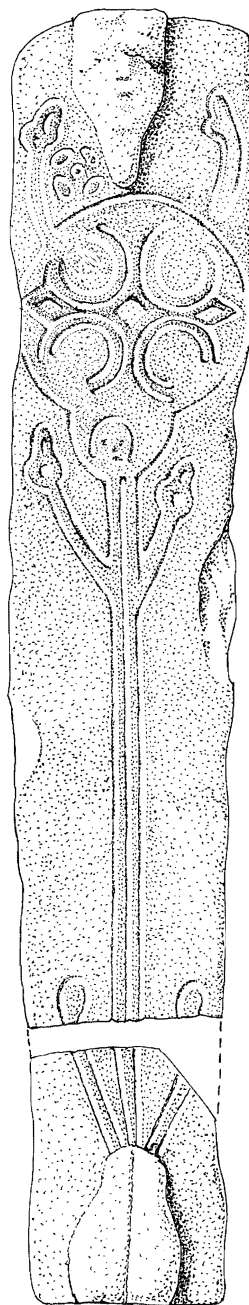
**Slab No. 3 (Fig. 2)**

This consists of two portions of a tapered limestone slab. The upper portion measures 0.8m in maximum width; 0.5m in length and 0.09m in average thickness. The lower portion measures 1.14m in length; 0.75m in width at its top; 0.65m in width at its base and 0.11m in average thickness. The decorated upper surface is worn. The upper portion features two defaced human heads in relief. The only surviving features of the head on the dexter side are its mouth and neck. No features survive on the other head.

A motif in relief, consisting of four lentoids in a circle, occurs between the two carved heads. Beneath the two carved heads are the remains of two poorly preserved incised crosses contained within outline circles which surmount narrow, partly surviving, cross-stems. The crosses are each formed from a juxtapositioning of four penannular circles, which results in a cross with expanded terminals and hollowed angles. The sinister example features an incised circle at its centre.

**Discussion**

It is here suggested that the three Derrynaflan slabs should be regarded as derivatives of the thirteenth/early fourteenth century type of slab defined by Hunt as the “head-slab”. In its classic form this funerary monument type may be described as a tapered slab which features a human head carved in high relief above a floriated cross. There are over 30 examples known from Ireland.<sup>2</sup> While the majority are tapered in form, some rectangular examples are also on record, for example that from Trim, Co. Meath. Even though most of the slabs feature carved heads in relief, a number of incised examples are also known, for example those from Jerpoint, Co. Kilkenny, and Tullylease, Co. Cork. Examples also occur in which the head is set within a sunken reserve, for example, the slabs from Gowran and St. Canice’s Cathedral, Co. Kilkenny. The other recurring attribute of these slabs is the cross which can occur in incised or relief form. While most of the slabs bear the floriated-type cross three feature Ryder’s so-called “bracelet” cross-form,<sup>3</sup> which is dated to the thirteenth century in Britain. Examples of this cross-type occur in Christchurch, Dublin and St. Mary’s Church, New Ross, Co. Wexford.



**Fig. 1. Slab No. 1, Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary**



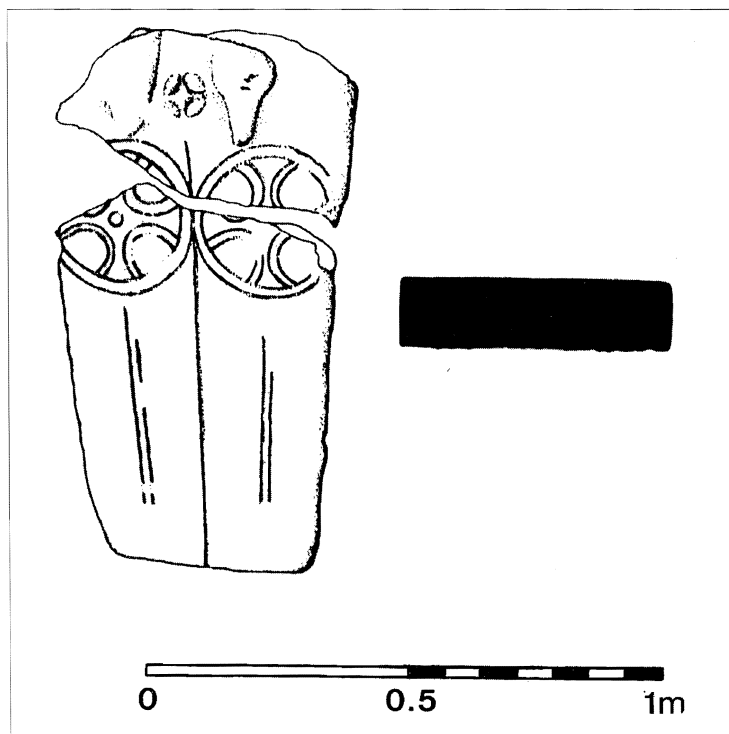


Fig. 2. Slab No. 3, Derrynaflan.: (after Sadhbh Modell).

The main concentration of head-slabs in Ireland is in the south-eastern counties of Kilkenny, Tipperary and Wexford (Fig. 3). There is one known example in counties Kerry, Cork and Meath, while a few examples occur in Dublin. They may occur in cathedral, parish church or monastic sites. Their distribution largely coincides with the area of strongest Anglo-Norman influence in this part of Ireland.

Irish head-slabs have been dated to the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Given the general form of these slabs, and in particular their tapered aspect and the type of cross they usually feature, such a date range is not surprising. However, details other than the form of the slabs themselves also indicate such a date. The hair-style and head-dresses on the ladies' slabs are invariably pill-boxes with barbettes, seen for example on the slab at Black Abbey, Co. Kilkenny. In the case of male head-slabs the typical thirteenth to fourteenth-century style features the hair curling outwards below the ears, seen for example on the slab from Cashel, Co. Tipperary. Only a minority of the slabs bear inscriptions, but these, significantly, occur in Lombardic lettering. This fact can also be used as a basis for assigning the slabs within the above stated date range. Examples of slabs bearing such lettering occur at St. Mary's Church, New Ross, Co. Wexford and St. Patrick's Cathedral, Cashel, Co. Tipperary.

Hunt records only two head-slabs from Co. Tipperary – one at Two-Mile-Borris old village cemetery and one at St. Patrick's Cathedral, Cashel, which was originally located at the Presentation Convent, Cashel. The three Derrynaflan slabs described in this paper should also be assigned to this group, though (as will be suggested below) they should be regarded as derivative of the type.

Certain features of the Derrynaflan slabs link them with the classic head-slabs. Such features include the cross-heads formed of pennanular circles on slabs Nos. 1 and 3, the tapered forms

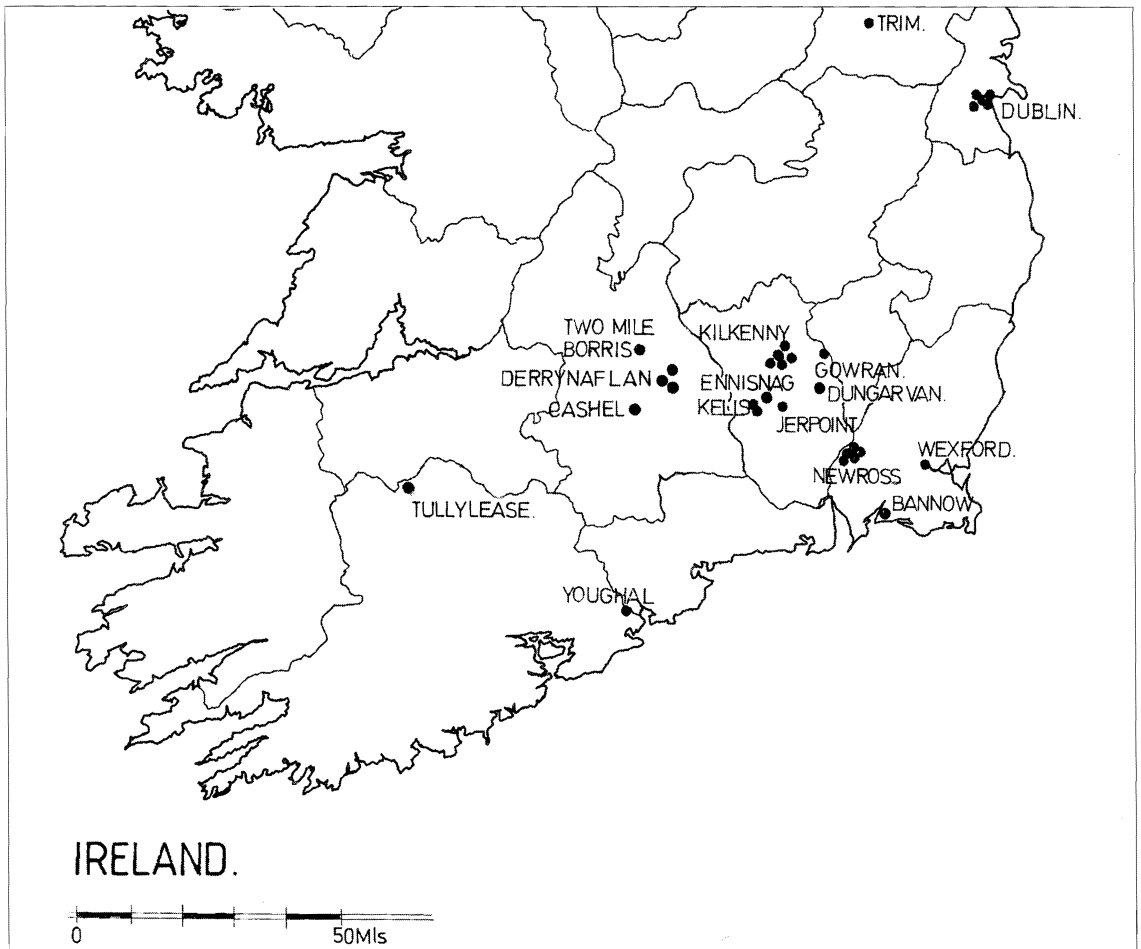


Fig. 3. The known distribution of head slab (after Hunt, 1974, with additions).

of each of the three slabs and the presence of the relief heads. However, there are a number of additional features present on slab No. 1 which do not occur on other recorded head-slabs. These include the relief feet at the base of the slab, the circular design formed from four lentoids, the incised human head linked to the base of the enclosing circle, and the stems ending in lobed terminals which extend out from the central shaft. Even though the basic cruciform design of this slab can be paralleled with other head-slabs, the overall design is distinctive. The pair of cross-forms on slab No. 3 are reminiscent of those occurring on some Early Christian cross-slabs, for example at Gallen Priory, Co. Offaly, though they also have close affinities with the "bracelet" cross-form.

Even though the designs on Derrynaflan Nos. 1 and 3 deviate somewhat from those of the classic head-slabs, it is conceivable that they are contemporary. The basis for such an argument lies in the general form of the Derrynaflan slabs; they are all tapered and bear simple incised designs. The cruciform design of Derrynaflan Nos. 1 and 3, which may be related to the "bracelet" cross-form of other head-slabs, may point to a thirteenth-century date.

However, one may more convincingly propose a fourteenth to fifteenth century date for the Derrynaflan slabs. Even though slabs Nos. 1 and 3 bear features comparable to the classic head-slabs, they appear to be of a more degenerate form, featuring a combination of native and non-native influences – the former manifesting themselves in the form of the motif formed from lentoids on Derrynaflan No. 1 and in the close similarities between the cross-forms of Derrynaflan No. 3 and some cross-slabs of the Early Christian period. The poor quality of the stone, along with the plain carved human heads, would also point to the Derrynaflan group being outside the main “classic” head-slab group.

In summary, therefore, it is proposed that the Derrynaflan group of slabs are later in date than most Irish head-slabs. The native aspects which some of them present are of interest in that they reflect an increased interest in “Celtic” motifs during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, an interest which is manifest, for example, in the recently published group of mason’s marks from the Augustinian Church, Fethard, Co. Tipperary.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### FOOTNOTES

1. Parish: Graystown; Barony; Slieveardagh. O.S. 6” Sheet 54; N.G.R. S180 495.
2. Hunt (1974, 35-50) lists 28 such slabs. A small number of additional slabs have since been discovered (*pers comm* C. Manning).
3. The “bracelet” cross-type is formed from four pennanular circles (see Ryder 1985, Figs. Escomb 1, and Kirk Merrington 1).

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