



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1995**

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ISSN 0791-0655

A medieval carved wooden altar-support (?) from St. Patrick's Well, Clonmel

By Peter Harbison

This year the first exhibition in the National Gallery's newly-designed Watercolour and Drawings Room celebrates 150 years of activity of the Geological Survey with a display of works by George Victor Du Noyer (1817-1868). However, before he started working for the Geological Survey in 1846, Du Noyer was employed during the 1830s as a draughtsman by the Ordnance Survey.

There he recorded antiquities along with other members of that famous, if all too short-lived, team which included George Petrie, from whom Du Noyer had learned his artistic skills. Du Noyer's archaeological drawings are preserved in the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Dublin, and around 1860 he worked up some of his earlier sketches into large-scale watercolours bound together into eleven volumes for presentation to the Royal Irish Academy.

Page 61 of the second of these Du Noyer albums in the Academy preserves for us a fascinating illustration of an otherwise unrecorded antiquity at St. Patrick's Well, Clonmel, which should be of interest to readers of this Journal. It shows a vertical block of wood, square in cross-section but with faceted corners, and which is apparently decaying on the bottom and partially hacked away on top.

On one face a ringed cross was carved in what seems like false relief. Unfortunately no scale is given, but a height of about three feet is not unlikely. The text accompanying the drawing states: "Stump of Yew Tree carved – close to altar on S side interior of old Church at St. Patrick's Well, Clonmel."

Mr. Pat Holland has searched recently in and around the church for any surviving traces of this piece of wood – but, sadly, without success. As Dr. Philip O'Connell's detailed booklet *St. Patrick's Well, Clonmel, Co. Tipperary* (Clonmel, 1956) also makes no mention of it, we may presume that the wooden fragment was either removed or destroyed – or simply disintegrated – during the century or so after Du Noyer had sketched it.

But, even if the wooden fragment had survived, it would still have posed the question as to its original function. Its roughly square section would seem to preclude the possibility that it could have acted as a cross-decorated grave-marker of the kind found by Etienne Rynne (1970) at Corcomroe in co. Clare, an abbey of the Cistercian order – which may have been responsible for the building of the church at St. Patrick's Well, as the grounds on which it stood apparently belonged to the Cistercian abbey of Inishlounaght, only a mile to the south (O'Connell 1956, 24).

But Du Noyer's remark that the wooden block stood close to the altar of the church may, however, provide us with a possible clue that it may have formed part of an altar in the medieval church where Du Noyer sketched it. The existing ruins are typical of the normal Irish parish church of the 15th/16th century, though it was obviously built on the site (and may incorporate parts) of an earlier twelfth-century church, of which a decorated Romanesque voussoir is built into the doorway (O'Connell 1956, 18-19).

On the subject of the age of the wooden block, it may be said that its faceted corners would be quite in character with the decorative scheme of a 15th/16th century church. Because of its long

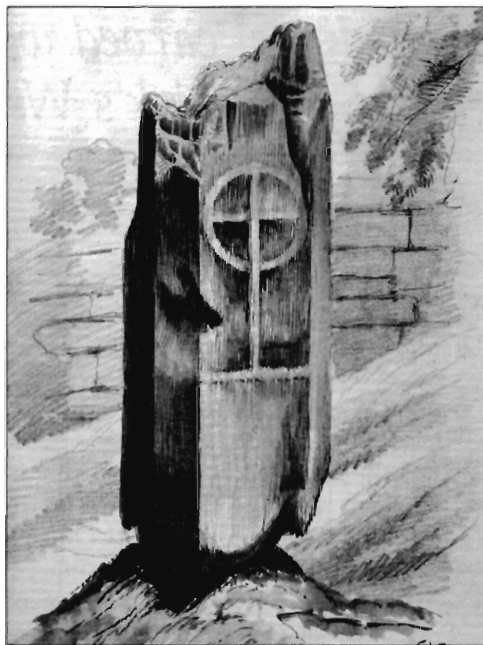


history, the ringed cross is not nearly as susceptible to precise dating; but the presence of the Cross on only one side of the yew fragment could be seen to accommodate the suggestion that the block may have acted as the leg of an altar – with the cross facing towards the congregation.

If so, it is tempting to bring the fragment into association with the decrees of the provincial synod of Cashel which was held at Limerick in 1453, where certain strictures were laid down with regard to church furnishings (Wilkins 1737, 565, §3 and 570, §94; Begley 1906, 289-94; Gwynn and Gleeson 1962, 511-13 and Burrows 1989, 65). According to these, each parish church was to display three statues: a Crucifixion, a Blessed Virgin and the patron saint of the church.

The laity were enjoined to provide a missal, a silver chalice, vestments and a baptismal font for use in the liturgy, while the nave and chancel, roof and walls, were to be well built and kept in repair as far as resources would allow. Sadly, the synodal decrees gave no specific instructions concerning altars, but the absence of any surviving traces of altars among the ruined medieval parish churches of Ireland would support the notion that they were made of wood.

If, as suggested here, this Clonmel fragment drawn by Du Noyer were part of a wooden altar in the medieval parish church of St. Patrick's Well, it would take on added significance as the only apparent example of its kind known in the country, and one which may bear witness to the spirit of the Synod of Cashel in 1453 in drawing attention to church furnishings – even if there is no way of dating the wood-carving itself.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks, firstly, to the Royal Irish Academy for its permission to reproduce the Du Noyer drawing here, as well as to its Acting Librarian, Ms. Siobhán O'Rafferty, for details about it. Secondly, to John Kennedy, of the Green Studio, for having provided the transparency of the drawing. Thirdly, to Rev. Michael Burrows, Rector of Bandon, for assistance in connection with the Synod of Cashel. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude both to the editor of this Journal, Marcus Bourke, for having encouraged me to write this note, and to Mr. Pat Holland, curator of S. Tipperary Co. Museum, Clonmel, for having searched the area in and around the church for the missing fragment.

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