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# *A foundation deposit in Drangan?*

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By Patrick Holland

On Friday 2 July, 1993 Tipperary S.R. County Museum received a report from Mr. Michael Hall, Kyle, Mullinahone that bones had been found during the renovation of the "Old School" in Drangan village to form a local enterprise centre. The report was investigated by the author on the same day. The "Old School", a rectangular building aligned on an east-west axis, is situated immediately to the east of St. Mary's Catholic Church in the village. It is thought to have been erected as a church in 1806 on the site of an earlier small thatched church (Hall 1993). Used as a boy's school on the construction of the current Catholic church in 1853, it fell into disrepair after the school transferred to new premises in 1967.

The bones were found buried in the interior of the building, close to the eastern end and roughly on a central longitudinal line.<sup>1</sup> Their original depth below the floor level is hard to ascertain as it had been removed during the work, but it would probably not have been in excess of 1 metre. Those employed on the work informed me that there appeared to have been a dump or area of rubble above them.

The bones have been examined by Ms. Margaret McCarthy, M.A., of the Archaeological Services Unit of the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork, who reports as follows: "The fragmented remains of three horse skulls are present. No mandibles or post-cranial material were found. The animals appear to have died or to have been killed at a rather late age as all the maxillary teeth are heavily worn (8-10 years approx). A number of superficial knife marks of the frontal bones provides evidence for skinning although these may also have been caused during excavation. Two skulls had eroded cut marks on their occipital condyles at the point where the skull had been severed from the vertebral column".<sup>2</sup>

How did skulls of three aged horses, which appear to show signs of skinning and dismemberment, come to be buried in the interior of a church, if we exclude the possibility that they were interred at some time before the construction of the two churches? Foundation deposits of horses' skulls and other items including coins are well known from domestic contexts in Ireland (O Suilleabháin, 1945), and there are also some references to deposits of animal heads in churches (*ibid*, 49). O Suilleabháin sees the continuation of the ancient practice of foundation deposits behind the contemporary explanation that the animal heads gave an enhanced rhythm for dancing and music in the same general fashion as the practice of burying acoustic pottery vessels in walls of medieval and later buildings.

An intriguing reference, noted by Merrifield (1987) in his book *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (126), describes the burial of a horse's head in the centre of the foundation trenches of a Primitive Methodist chapel being built in eastern England in 1897, with a glass of beer being poured over the head before the trench was filled. The burial of these three horse heads, assuming that they are primary and associated with the construction of the church, would therefore appear to be an interesting Tipperary example of a widespread custom based on the enduring continuity of ancient ritual in Ireland.



## FOOTNOTES

1. I am informed that they were "found under stones about 4 yards from east end wall and 3 yards from south wall, opposite 2nd window in south wall" (information from Mr. Michael Hall).
2. The heads have been added to the collection of Tipperary S.R. County Museum, Clonmel.
3. I am grateful to Mr. Michael Hall and Mr. Ned Morris for having reported the find and providing further information, and to Mr. John Sheehan and the Local Studies section of the County Library, Thurles for their assistance with references. Rev. Christy O'Dwyer, President, St. Patrick's College, Thurles, was also most helpful with references. The bones were found by Mr. Paddy Meehan, foreman, Mr. Philly Kane, Mr. Richard O'Brien and Mr. Noel Leahy.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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