

## DATING IRISH GRAVE SLABS: THE EVIDENCE OF THE ANNALS

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### *Introduction*

In 1961, Lionard published what he described as 'the first systematic study' of early Irish recumbent grave slabs (1961, 95) and proposed a chronology. This remains the only study of its kind and, as such, Lionard's conclusions are deferred to in both the work on sculpture from Iona published by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture* (RCAHMS 1982, 14–16, 266; Cramp 1984, 7). Unlike the British studies, however, Lionard's chronology is only loosely based on archaeological or art-historical criteria. Instead, he placed great emphasis on identifying those individuals whose names are inscribed on the slabs with figures of the same name whose death notices occur in the annals. In this way he was able to put forward a typological sequence of grave slab design which was tied to historical dates. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether or not this approach provides a basis for the dating of Irish slabs. I begin by looking at the historiographical background to Lionard's theory, followed by a brief statement on current beliefs concerning Irish annals and a review of the annalistic record for Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly, the site which contains the largest collection of grave slabs in these islands.

### *Historiographical background*

The first person to study Irish grave slabs in detail was George Petrie, who visited Clonmacnoise in 1822. In his subsequent testimony to the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the Ordnance Memoir of Ireland in 1843, he stated that at Clonmacnoise 'inscriptions which had never been previously noticed, or at least explained, I found, from reference to books which I had with me at the place, presented the names of some of the most distinguished people during that period that figured in Irish and some of them even in British history' (*OM* 1844, 36). The names on the slabs were considered so peculiar that 'little doubt can be entertained of their being identical with those bearing the same names whose death or remarkable quali-

ties are recorded in the ancient histories' (Stokes et al 1869, 7).

Petrie's positive presentation of the relationship between grave slabs and annals to the Ordnance Memoir Commission was in the nature of a defence; the authorities were concerned at the expenses incurred by the Irish survey (*OM* 1844, 36–41; Andrews 1975, 156–77). In particular, they queried the validity of the eleven-man topographical department of which Petrie was head and which was attempting to provide a nationwide survey of Irish antiquities in their historical and topographical context. This was at a time when the value of the annals was greatly appreciated but the vast majority were not available in published form. The exaggerated importance attached to these, largely unknown, texts by the scholars of the day is vividly summed up in a reaction to the early 19th-century edition of annalistic extracts published by Charles O'Connor (1826):

The chronicles of Ireland, written in the Irish language, from the second century to the landing of Henry Plantagenet, have been recently published, with the fullest evidence of their genuineness and exactness. The Irish nation, though they are robbed of their legends by this authentic publication, are yet by it enabled to boast that they possess genuine history several centuries more ancient than any other European nation possesses, in its present spoken language (quoted in O'Donovan 1851, lii).

Petrie's belief that there were close connections between the records provided by the annals and the inscriptions on the grave slabs were thus formed in a period when few of the annalistic texts were available in print but expectations concerning their putative value were high.

The most prolific commentator on Irish grave slab inscriptions after Petrie was Macalister (1909; 1917; 1949). Macalister expressed his distrust of the use of annals as dating criteria for grave slab design but he did so in a manner hardly logical: 'there may have been fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand, now unknown persons, bearing the same not uncommon name, interred

in the graveyard *in the same century*' as the person named in the annals (Macalister, 1909, 96; my italics). If a slab commemorated somebody who died at the same time as an individual noted in the annals, it hardly matters to the art-historian whether one corpse or a thousand were involved. Moreover, Macalister's scepticism led him, not to dismiss Petrie's chronology for grave slabs, but to query the accuracy of annals as historical texts: he suggested that the annalistic death notice for the two Clonmacnoise abbots Eogan and Máel-Tuile must be corrected because a slab bearing the names Eudus and Máel-Oinae had been found there (1909, 105–6; 1917, 106; 1949, 52).

Both Petrie and Macalister, therefore, accepted that the dead recorded in the annals and the dead commemorated on Irish grave slabs were often one and the same. Without questioning this assumption, Lionard attempted to outline the chronological sequence of design which this view implied. Petrie's initial premise was, however, made in the absence of any investigation of the Irish annalistic corpus and his claim for a relationship between annals and grave slabs must now be re-evaluated in the light of such studies.

### *Current views on Irish annals*

A hundred and seventy years after Petrie's visit to Clonmacnoise, Irish annals are no longer largely unknown. Five major compilations of pre-Norman derivation have been identified: the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Annals of Tigernach*, the *Annals of Inisfallen*, *Chronicum Scotorum* and the *Annals of the Four Masters*. As a result of studies undertaken in the 20th century, it is now believed that the records provided in these five major compilations are relatively limited in scope, at any rate for the period prior to AD 911/13 when all five depend to varying degrees on a single core text. This was termed the 'Ulster Chronicle' by O'Rahilly and the 'Chronicle of Ireland' by Hughes (O'Rahilly 1946, 237, 253; Hughes 1972, 100–15; Dumville & Grabowski 1984, 7). The clearest evidence for this core text is provided by the entries common to both the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Tigernach* (Hughes 1972, 100–5). The core text found in *Chronicum Scotorum* is a shorter version of that found in *Tigernach* (O'Rahilly 1946, 258–9; Hughes 1972, 107; Mac Niocaill 1975, 22–3) while that in the *Annals of Inisfallen*, although 'savagely abbreviated' (Hughes 1972, 109–14) has been attributed to the same *Tigernach/Chronicum Scotorum* family (O'Rahilly 1946, 502–3; Dumville & Grabowski 1984, 24–5, 33–7, 42–5, 54–66). A large number of all entries in Irish annals prior to the 10th century thus appear to stem ultimately from one source.

The elements which went to make up this ancestral text are broadly accepted by scholars although there is still much work to be done and an ongoing debate over questions of detail. The substantial amount of Scottish material visible in the early entries is interpreted as the remnants of a chronicle kept on Iona,

dealing in the main with the accessions and deaths of leaders of the Columban community and the kings and battles of the Scottish mainland (O'Rahilly 1946, 255–6; Bannerman 1974; Smyth 1972, 33–41; Anderson 1973, 6–22). Another body of entries which may, in fact, derive from the Iona compilation concerns the north-eastern kingdoms of Ulster (O'Rahilly 1946, 253–7; Hughes 1972, 119–23; Smyth 1972, 17–18, 41; Mac Niocaill 1975, 19–20); a third appears to reflect the interests of Armagh (Hughes 1972, 29–135; Mac Niocaill 1975, 22). Byrne (1980, 133–53) has detailed the very localised entries which appear to corroborate the suggestion, made by both Mac Niocaill (1975, 22–3) and Smyth (1972, 21–9), that early records were also kept at Clonard. Finally, Kelleher has stressed (1963, 122–6) the substantial Uí Néill element which he suggests may reflect the keeping of propagandist records by a royal dynasty as witnessed in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* under Wessex influence (Hughes 1972, 124–34; Gransden 1974, 34–8).

In addition to the core text, each of the annalistic compilations has undergone a prolonged process of revision in which entries were added, subtracted and apparently re-written at various periods. In the words of Mac Niocaill, 'annals grow . . . by a process of interpolation and intercalation, the physical traces of which disappear when the text is re-transcribed' (1975, 14). The 12th-century fragment of the *Annals of Tigernach* shows this process clearly for, as another commentator has described it, the text is 'thickly stuck over with interlinear and marginal accretions' (Mac Neill 1914, 45; see also Hughes 1972, 99). A relatively large number of all these insertions are simply entries which are found in other compilations and which have 'wandered' into new texts (Mac Niocaill 1975, 17).

It is clear that removing duplicates of both 'core text' annals from the various compilations, together with those that have 'wandered', substantially reduces the number of entries which provide us with historical material. The collective total of 127 entries dealing with ecclesiastical centres in Connacht prior to 900, for example, represent in truth a mere 56 notices; over half are simply copies of entries found elsewhere. Furthermore, a number of annalistic entries represent attempts to delineate a remote Irish past and in consequence only a proportion provide death notices for Irish figures of the historical period. Other entries can consist of material drawn from compilations by authors such as Prosper of Aquitaine, Orosius, Marcellinus Comes or Bede, hagiographical texts on Irish saints and their foundations, traditions concerning the heroes of the vernacular sagas and the sequence of paschal cycles (Mac Neill 1914, 41–53; Smyth 1972, 3–8; Kelleher 1971, 119–22; Grabowski & Dumville 1984, 10–14, 26).

In summary, then, the Irish annals which promised so much to Petrie and his contemporaries by virtue of their sheer bulk are only a comparatively rich source for the modern scholar. Even when one pares the

record down to a simple list of Irish entries identified as 'historical', the many sources which lie behind the present compilations differ in geographical location and interest; it follows that the death notices which the texts incorporate also cover different areas of the country in varying degrees of detail. The result is never more than a patchy record which rarely, if ever, provides even an outline account of the history of individual communities.

To create the type of chronology proposed by Lionard, therefore, one has often to assume that a slab located at point X can be linked to a death notice in the annals where no geographical specification is given or where the figure in the annals belongs to a settlement other than point X. The stone from Clonmacnoise inscribed with the name *Maeliohain eps*, for example, is identified with a bishop from Roscrea of the same name, although no explanation is provided for the burial of a Roscrea bishop in Clonmacnoise (Macalister 1949, 45; Lionard 1961, 162). Such unsubstantiated claims undermine the validity of Lionard's argument, while the relatively sparse annalistic coverage over wide areas of the country make his postulated association between annals and grave slabs inherently less likely.

### *Evidence from Clonmacnoise*

Of the settlements which are documented in the Irish annals, the two which receive the most detailed coverage are Armagh and Clonmacnoise. The latter also boasts the largest collection of grave slabs in the country, although the exact number is unknown. In 1822 Petrie drew 143 slabs of which 86 survived in 1869, the others 'having been broken up and lost or perhaps stolen by tourists' (Stokes et al 1869, 3). Macalister catalogued 206 in 1909 and states that 95 of those previously recorded were missing (1909, 40–50). Others have been found in the course of digging graves or in conservation work; still others, recorded by Petrie and lost in Macalister's day, have now reappeared. Thus the collection of grave slabs at Clonmacnoise has been a fluctuating archaeological resource, but in 1961 Lionard estimated that the number of recorded slabs, including decorated slabs without inscriptions, lies between 400 and 500 (Lionard 1961, 145).

The annals explicitly referring to Clonmacnoise can be listed according to the nature of the information which they purvey. Entries studied here were drawn from the five major compilations and from the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, a 17th-century English translation of a lost Irish original. To present this material in tabular form requires interpretation. The varying degree and quality of editing to which the recensions of the 'core text' have been subjected, allied to the phenomenon of 'wandering annals', has meant that the year under which a specific event is entered can vary widely in the different compilations (Walsh 1942). Moreover, the language and the detail provided in particular entries can also vary; it is thus a matter for

individual assessment whether two references to looting, located in two compilations under two successive years represent two separate raids on Clonmacnoise. Despite this problem, the categorisation of Clonmacnoise material under typological headings provides useful information about the nature of annalistic records kept in some Irish settlements during the early middle ages.

The basis of the 7th- and 8th-century record at Clonmacnoise is an abbatial list, that is a list of death notices for the leaders of the settlement. References to fires, battles in which the community took part or laws benefiting Ciarán's household do occur but they are rare. This is in accordance with the testimony of other, non-annalistic, texts that the early Irish were accustomed to using death notices of important individuals to provide a chronological framework for the past (Bieler 1979, 126, 146; Ó Cróinín, 1983, 79–83). Other compilations from Irish settlements appear to be similar to that of Clonmacnoise in make-up. The evidence for Bangor in the same period, for example, consists of references to a fire and 15 abbatial death notices, all of which are listed independently in the 7th-century *Antiphonary of Bangor* (Hughes 1972, 122–3, Mac Niocaill 1975, 19). Similarly the predominant elements in both the Clonard (Smyth 1972, 24) and the Clonfert records are their detailed abbatial lists. McCormick (1975, 35–6) suggests that this is a common feature of many European annals which are often constructed around a series of key figures belonging to a single institution, be they abbots, kings or popes.

At Clonmacnoise, this early abbatial list is conflated with entries dealing with relations between the settlement and ancestral figures of groups who were politically important in the history of the midlands. These traditions were incorporated into the record at unknown and probably varying dates. Records of ecclesiastical office-holders from Clonmacnoise (other than the leaders of the community) begin only in 730 in the case of *scribae* (scholars), 756 in the case of anchorites, 809 in the case of *secnabaid* (subordinate abbots) and 889 in the case of bishops. In all cases, other than that of the settlement's rulers, such references are sporadic and the annals do not appear to provide a full record of all holders of even the most important of the clerical offices. For the period prior to the 10th century, the number of references to figures from Clonmacnoise who are not rulers of the site is a mere 24 in total.

The record for Clonmacnoise in the 10th and 11th centuries is rather different although, again, the fullest record is that of the leaders of the community, described as *apid*, *principes*, *comarbaí* and so forth. Unlike the earlier sequence, there are a relatively large number of entries describing diverse events such as building activity, violent storms, and legal actions taken against the enemies of Clonmacnoise amongst others. These appear to have been recorded contempor-

aneously. The number and variety of offices for which death notices are given has greatly increased: one sees references to the man in charge of the subordinate church, priests, the man in charge of the guest-house, the bell-ringer, the door-keeper and the confessor. None of these occur in the earlier period. Even given the possibility that one man held a number of offices, as indicated in several 10th-century death notices, the number of individuals represented remains extremely small. In the period between 915 and 1070, for example, there are obits for 19 heads of Clonmacnoise in comparison to 50 concerning other ecclesiastics. It is difficult to believe that these entries represent anything like a full record of the leading men of the settlement.

It is against this scanty record from one of the best-documented Irish sites that we should examine Lionard's proposed chronology for grave slabs from Clonmacnoise. Of the 8th or 9th-century identifications which are provided for names on slabs, eight refer to abbots, two each to *scribae*, *secnabaid* and anchorites and one to a bishop.<sup>1</sup> (Other identifications are to figures from the region around Clonmacnoise who may or may not have been buried there.) Of the attributions to 10th and 11th-century figures, four are to abbots, two to bishops and one each to a priest, a *secnabb*, a learned elder, a scholar, a guest-master and the compiler of a manuscript. In short, Lionard's attributions mirror almost perfectly the changes in the nature of the annalistic records. Where the entries are limited to abbots, he identifies slabs commemorating abbots; where the record becomes more diverse, so too do the people for whom the slabs are thought to have been created. It would appear that Lionard was misled in thinking that the relatively common Old Irish personal names which occur both in the annals and on the slabs must relate to the same individual. The annalistic evidence from Clonmacnoise does nothing to support Petrie's 19th-century claim for substantial links between these two, very different, types of sources.

The suspicion that there is no obvious relationship between the death notices and the figures commemorated on the slabs is further strengthened when one looks at the attributions recorded on the slabs themselves. These show slabs being carved for a much wider range of persons than normally appear in the annals, including females, fosterers, canons and pilgrims as well as kings, priests, bishops and abbots (Macalister 1949, 6–8, 39, 45–7, 64, 88–90). Though only a minority of the monuments provide evidence for the social groups who were commemorated in this way, the little information which we have contradicts the assumption that the figures mentioned in the annals are automatically those whose names are inscribed on the stones.

### Conclusions

As the only detailed attempt to classify Irish grave slab

designs and as a study which preceded the much more systematic catalogues presently being produced in Britain, Lionard's chronology has been and is being used extensively by art-historians and archaeologists. In this paper, I have attempted to show that his chronology, though a logical development of the work of his predecessors, rests on shaky foundations. His underlying belief is that the annals provide such a detailed list of death notices from individual sites that they can be used to provide identifications for persons of the same name who are noticed on grave slab inscriptions. As a consequence of recent studies of the annals, however (which in most cases post-date Lionard's publication), it can be shown that this is not the case and that even where the annalistic record is at its fullest, as at Clonmacnoise, it is too scanty to allow this assumption. The currently accepted dating range for Irish grave slabs is, therefore, almost entirely illusory, and a chronology must now be constructed according to the principles of detailed typological analysis as has been done and is being done for similar material from Britain and the Isle of Man.

### Note

- 1 I would like to thank Ragnall Ó Floinn for pointing out to me that the chronological list accompanying Lionard's text was compiled by Françoise Henry (Lionard 1961, 95, n 1).

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