

NOTES ON THE ECCLESIASTICAL
ARCHITECTURE OF IRELAND.BY RICHARD R. BRASH, ARCHITECT, M.R.I.A.,
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(Continued from page 5.)

THE period of the introduction of lime cements into Ireland is unknown; Dr. Petrie assumes it to be during St. Patrick's mission, but without authority. The use of cements is as old as the building of Babel, and was known to the old Pelasgic builders, though but occasionally adopted. Edward Dodwell, describing the fortifications of Delphi, in Phocis, writes, "that the high antiquity of the walls is not to be disproved by the use of mortar in their construction." He further states, that the walls of the Acropolis of Pharsalia and other places, where they are of an unusual thickness, are lined on both sides with large blocks, while the interstices are filled up with smaller stones, and earth or mortar; also, that the walls of Methana are constructed with a hard mass of small stones, mortar, tiles, and earth, between casings of regular masonry. The Romans used cements a thousand years B.C., and carried their use into all their colonies, including Britain, which latter was covered with their towns and villages. The Gaedhil in these remote ages had constant intercourse not only with Britain, but also with France and Spain, and that of a peaceable and commercial character. Tacitus, the Roman historian, states that in his day the ports and harbours of Ireland were better known to Continental merchants than those of Britain. Under such circumstances they could not have been ignorant of the use of lime-cements, and it is ridiculous to associate their use or introduction with Christianity. Ireland abounds with surface limestone and deposits of marine shells, from which that article can be made; so much so, that the English governor of Derry, when building the fort of Culmore, wrote to the Lord Deputy, stating, that he had found such a deposit of oyster-shells in the locality as would be sufficient to provide lime for the work.

This article was, no doubt, but sparingly used, being in all probability scarce and expensive. We could not, therefore, expect to find it in our great stone forts and military works, or in the underground chambers of the innumerable raths scattered over the face of the country. The old Gaedhelic masons had everywhere an abundant supply of stone; and that they did not spare it in construction, the thickness of the walls of their fortresses and stone-roofed dwelling's will testify. It is quite true that the earliest Christian edifices now existing among us are built in mortar, though some of these also are uncemented; but we have no right to assume that, previous to these, no buildings were constructed by the Pagan Gaedhil bonded with mortar, because such do not now exist. If they had been secular buildings, they would in all probability have gone to ruin; if religious, the Christian converts would in all probability destroy them. Very few Christian buildings of an early date are standing, and these owe their existence to the extraordinary veneration with which they were regarded, and the anxious solicitude shown for their preservation. Whether the early Gaedhelic masons were skilled in the use of cements or not, they were certainly skilled in a more difficult art—the preparation and fitting of stone,—as I have already shewn. The converts to Christianity had, therefore, no difficulty in finding skilled labour for the erection of their oratories, and the humble churches which for several centuries contented them. These I shall now proceed to describe.

It may be expected that I should here refer to that important class of structures—the Round Tower; but as the question of their age and uses is a vexed one, and of too broad and extended a character to be discussed within the limits I have prescribed for the subject under consideration, I shall for the present not enter on it, more particularly as I don't believe in their ecclesiastical character.

The primitive ecclesiastical buildings of Ireland appear to have been of two classes—the *duirtheach* and the *daimhliag*, literally "the oak house" and "the stone house," or "the oratory" and "the church." It cannot be denied that, though stone was the prevailing material for religious edifices in the primitive Irish church, they were also occasionally constructed of wood, in localities where stone was scarce or difficult to quarry. This has been clearly shewn by Dr. Petrie, at pp. 341-3 of his valuable work. He, however, seems to think that stone was used for the churches (*daimhliag*), and oak for the oratories (*duirtheach*). In the present limited state of our knowledge, we cannot draw so hard and fast a line. It is probable some of the churches were also of wood, and we know from existing examples that many of the oratories were of stone.

As none of these oak-churches are now in existence, we are not in a position to speculate on their size or construction. Dr. Petrie seems to think that some of them were of considerable dimensions, and gives some quotations to that effect from ancient MSS. These are not, however, of that nature which will satisfy the architectural critic.

ORATORIES.

These, from their diminutive size and peculiarities of construction, appear to me to have been the earliest religious buildings erected in Ireland. They are numerous in the south and west, and a few of them are to be found in the central counties. With a few exceptions, they are constructed of cemented masonry, varied in character. In some instances the stones are squared and neatly fitted, as at Leabba Molagga, County Cork; in others the work is of polygonal character, the stones large, dressed to the natural shapes, and fitted with few spawls; in others the work is of an inferior class of rubble, the stones large, rough-dressed, and spawls used. Their builders always affected large-sized materials; in many cases the stones are inlocked one to another, as in some of the stone forts and round towers. The interior of the walls is usually filled with small stones and lime-grout of exceeding hardness; in many instances there are no thorough bonds, the builders appearing to depend on the thickness of the walls and the soundness of their mortar, the existing examples of which fully justify their trust. As a rule, the masonry of the oratories and primitive churches is of a very superior class, far exceeding that of the churches and monasteries of the thirteenth and succeeding centuries.

Dimensions.—The size of these buildings varies: St. Molagga's (see plan) is 10 ft. by 7 ft. 2 in., clear of walls, which are 2 ft. 9 in. thick; St. Declan's, at Ardmore, is 13 ft. 8 in. by 8 ft. 4 in., clear of walls, which are 2 ft. 6 in. thick. The oratory of St. Molua, Killaloe, is 10 ft. 6 in. by 6 ft. 4 in., clear of walls, which are 3 ft. in thickness; St. MacDara's, on the island of Cruach MicDara, off the coast of Galway, measures 15 ft. by 11 ft., clear of walls, which are 2 ft. 8 in. thick; St. Columb's, at Kells—a different type of building,—is 16 ft. 1 in. by 13 ft., clear of walls, which are 3 ft. 10 in. thick; St. Kevin's, at Glenualough—an oratory of a similar type,—is 22 ft. 7 in. by 14 ft. 10 in., clear of walls, which are 3 ft. 7 in. thick. Other examples vary between these dimensions.

Plan.—The oratory is of two distinct types—those with and without over-crofts or upper chambers. All are rectangular on plan, and most of them have a curious feature—namely, the prolongation of the side walls beyond either gable, to the extent of from 18 in. to 2 ft. This extension is sometimes the full thickness of the wall, on the face, sometimes less, and is also carried up the gables on a line with the stone roof. The masonry of these antae is generally of a very superior class, the stones being neatly squared and fitted, no matter what the finish of the walling may be. The doorway is usually in the west, and, when otherwise, it will be found to be a later insertion, as at St. Columb's, Kells, and St. Declan's, Ardmore. These doors are a very remarkable feature; they are built of massive blocks, usually the full thickness of the walls, the jambs inclining inwards towards the top, and covered by a flat massive slab, as a lintel, also generally in one stone; in some cases the entire doorway

is formed of three stones, as at St. Molagga's

We find but one window ope in these structures, and that invariably in the east gable, and of very small dimensions. It is either angular or semicircular-headed, the latter being the more prevalent form. In all cases the jambs incline as in the door-opes. Inwardly they have wide splays, both on jambs and arches, the sills being also splayed, and sometimes stepped, as in the example at Friar's Island (see plate). The roof coverings appear to have been of stone: certainly, we have several examples of such stone-constructed coverings existing to this day, while the ground plans and masonic construction of numerous others indicate a similar treatment, though these features no longer exist. In their execution we find two modes of forming the roof—the first and simplest are high-pitched, never less than an equilateral triangle in section, often steeper; they are also triangular on the soffits, the internal and external lines being parallel. They possess no principle of the arch, being built of rectangular slabs in overlaid courses of from 4 in. to 9 in. in height, and from 12 in. to 3 ft. in length, dressed both inside and outside to the rake of the roof, laid, breaking joint, and at such an angle as to throw off the water, the top being covered by a solid angular capping stone. These roofs are constructed with undoubted forethought and skill; several which I have examined, after the lapse of 1,000 or 1,200 years, are still stanch and sound. This was the mode of construction used in St. Molua's oratory, Friar's Island, and in St. MacDara's, County Galway.

Friar's Island lies in the Shannon, about three-fourths of a mile below Killaloe, towards the Tipperary side of the river. It is a long low deposit of sand, gravel, and boulders, with a light sprinkling of soil, the only vegetation being grass, weeds, and a few alder trees. About the centre of the islet is a small church, consisting of a ruined nave and a nearly perfect chancel, the latter being the original oratory of St. Molua. Its dimensions are 10 ft. 6 in. by 6 ft. 4 in., clear of walls, which are 3 ft. thick on the flanks, the gables being 3 ft. 4 in. It was lighted by a semi circular-headed ope, 1 ft. 6 in. high by 9½ in. wide externally, having large inward splays (see drawing), the head being cut out of a single stone. The original doorway was in the west gable; but when the nave was added, the door-ope was cut away and enlarged, and an ope to the chancel constructed, 5 ft. 9 in. wide; the alteration is quite palpable. A rude door-ope was also cut through the south wall of the oratory. Its most remarkable feature, however, is the stone roof, which is constructed of rectangular slabs of various thicknesses, laid in courses, each overlapping the preceding one, and dressed both inside and outside to the rake of the roof, which has the same angle both internally and externally. Under the ridge is a rectangular air-chamber, 2 ft. by 1 ft. 3 in., having an external vent, and communicating internally by a square ope in ceiling of 1 ft. 3 in., and close to the west gable. This chamber was evidently for ventilation; it also lightened the dead weight in the apex of roof. This curious little structure appears to have been originally built with great solidity and care. The masonry was of large-sized rubble, dressed and accurately fitted; it has, however, been much injured and dilapidated by the growth of trees and ivy through the joints both of walls and roof. It is, however, in wonderful preservation, considering the usage it has undergone. The nave, which had been added at some remote period, was itself a building of great antiquity; it was 21 ft. 5 in. by 12 ft. 7 in., clear of walls, of which only about 3 ft. in height remain standing. The west gable fell about twelve years before my visit. A drawing in "Grose's Antiquities" shews the doorway to have been a massive square-headed ope, with converging jambs. St. Lua, in the early part of the sixth century. Built a cell in this place, hence it was named Cill-da-Lua, the cell of Lua, from which Killaloe. We have every reason to believe that the oratory on Friar's Island was this identical cell. In our hagiology the name is Molua

the endearing term *Mo* being prefixed to the names of many of the saints of our primitive church. It is worthy of remark that this little oratory, though subjected to violent alteration and dilapidation from neglect and want of repair, still stands, and by judicious care may stand another 500 years, while the more recently built nave has all but disappeared.

The stone roof of St. MacDara's church is much damaged; enough of it, however, remained, in Dr. Petrie's time, to shew that its construction was similar to that of the building I have been describing.

There is no district in these islands supplies us with so many and remarkable examples of early masonry as the County Kerry, reaching far back into the Pagan age. that her primitive ecclesiastical architecture should be strongly influenced by the pre-existing Pagan forms, is reasonable to suppose, and so we find it.

The oratory at Gallerus, in that county, is perhaps the most curious little building in our island. Its dimensions are 15 ft. by 8 ft., clear of walls, which are 4 ft. thick at ground level. The gables are perpendicular, but the side walls batter inwards from the ground to the ridge in a curved form, making the section of the building a pointed arch, the stones being dressed and laid with remarkable care, the entire being stanch and water-tight; the height 16 ft., or nearly so, to the ridge. The doorway is, as usual, in the west end, flat-headed, with inclining jambs; it is 5 ft. 7 in. high, 2 ft. 4 in. wide at base, and 1 ft. 10 in. wide at top. There is one small semicircular-headed window-ope in east gable, the head cut out of two stones. The masonry is of flat green-stone rubble, carefully built, the door dressings and quoins being neatly wrought. There is no appearance of mortar in the walling. The great antiquity of this structure is undeniable. Dr. Petrie was so impressed with it, that he admits, with the historian of Kerry, that it "may possibly challenge the Round Towers as to point of antiquity."—p. 131. The masons who designed and built this structure—in the section adopted, the material selected, and the character of the workmanship—shewed an amount of practical knowledge, skill, and experience that must have been the result of long and extensive practice. With ordinary care and a few trifling repairs, this little structure may last another 1,000 years for aught that it has worn in the past. Surely these old Gaedhelic stone-masons built for all time.

But a still more curious, and probably a more ancient, oratory exists near the old church of Kilmalkedar, in the same locality. It has been described by the late Mr. DuNoyer in the *Jour. Kil. Arch. Soc.*, v. 1864-5, p. 29. Its internal dimensions are 17 ft. 2 in. by 8 ft. 6 in. at ground level; the walls are of unequal thicknesses, the side ones being 3 ft., the west gable 4 ft. 6 in., the east gable 2 ft. The section shews externally the form of a pointed arch, as at Gallerus, but internally that of an ogee one, while the gables have the same batter as the side walls. It is also built of uncemented masonry, the stones being flat and close-jointed. The door ope is in the west end, of the usual form, and there is a narrow rectangular loop in the east, which is splayed inside and outside.

There is no doubt that the domestic edifices of the ancient Irish were generally of wood. We have plenty of evidence of this in old historic tales, found in various MSS. of great antiquity; but we have also abundant evidence in existing remains that they also constructed their habitations or storehouses of stone. They have been usually named *clochans* by antiquaries, or rather the term has been adopted from the peasantry. These buildings are to be found in the west of the County Cork, all through Kerry, particularly on the coasts and in the islands; they are also found on the coasts of Clare, Galway, and Mayo, principally in the islands. They are generally circular on plan, from 10 ft. to 20 ft. in diameter, in clear of walls, which are from 4 ft. to 8 ft. in thickness at ground level; their section is somewhat of the bee-hive form, the stones being laid overlapping one another, and the wall diminishing in thickness to the top; the doorway is of the type I have been already describing, with inclined jambs and flat-

headed, window ope being unusual.

Though I have described the prevailing type, there are several varieties of these structures; some are circular on plan both inside and outside, some oval, others approach the form of the human eye, and others again form a quadrant or quarter of a circle; we have also some examples which are circular or oval externally, while internally they are square or rectangular. Thus on Arranmore Island, at the entrance of the bay of Galway, we find one known to the Arraners as the *clochan-na-carraige*, i. e., the stone house of the rock. It is circular outside and rectangular inside; its dimensions, as taken by Dr. Petrie, being 19 ft. long, 7 ft. 6 in. wide, and 8 ft. in height. A similar and characteristic example is to be seen on Church Island, in Lough Currane, in the south-west of Kerry. Externally it is an irregular circle whose diameters are 31 ft. and 29 ft.; internally it is a rectangle of 16½ ft. by 15 ft., the walling being from 6 ft. to 7 ft. at the ground line. The masonry is of cyclopean character, being formed of large blocks laid without cement. The doorway is but 4 ft. 3 in. high, 3 ft. wide at sill, and 2 ft. 9 in. at head; it is covered by three large slabs. The peasantry have named it "the house of St. Finan Cain," a saint who flourished in the sixth century. This appropriation is, however, very problematical, as there is neither window-ope nor vent for smoke in it. I can scarcely imagine that an educated saint of our primitive church would take up his abode in so comfortless a dwelling. I believe this and kindred structures to be older than even the remote age of the saint named. The Barony of Corcaguiney, in Kerry, contains numbers of *clochans*; in many instances groups of from two to six are to be found enclosed within fortifications of massive masonry; and at Fahan, near Dingle, there is quite a town of them, deserted ages ago, beyond even tradition. Such groups are also to be found in the islands off the coast of Connaught.

My object in thus describing these buildings is to shew the source from whence the early Irish church had the simple and massive architecture of her religious buildings. The *clochan* was evidently the original type, and the curve-sectioned structures at Gallerus the transition stage to the rectangular and vertical walled oratory.

[Taken from *Irish Builder*, Vol. XIV, 1872, p.19]