Corcomroe Abbey Ship Graffito: A Sacred and Secular Symbol

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The Viking Ship and Pagan Burial Customs

In Scandinavia, Viking culture and pagan burial customs were inextricably linked with the longship which was seen as the mode of conveyance from this world to the next. Wealthy Vikings were buried in their ships with all the supplies required for the journey. The less wealthy were interred in ship-settings made of stones embedded upright in the ground following the outline of a ship which have been interpreted as symbols of the voyage to Valhalla. Following the arrival of Christianity in the mid 12th century, graffiti of longships began to appear on the walls of Scandinavian churches.

Pagan Viking burial traditions appear to have been imported during the period of the Viking invasions and settlement of Ireland, between the 8th and 10th centuries. Despite the general lack of evidence of ship-related Viking burials in Ireland, Eamonn P. Kelly, who is actively engaged in archaeological research into the presence of the Vikings on the west coast, believes he has identified a Viking ship burial at Knoxpark, Co. Sligo. Kelly also supports the tentative identification by Brendan Walsh of a Viking ship-setting at Treanbeg in the Clew Bay area. He believes that these sites can be connected to na Lothlainni, the first group of Vikings to arrive on the west coast. This term is found frequently from the 9th to the 11th centuries in The Annals of the Four Masters and is Irish for “Scandinavians”, “Norwegians” or “Vikings”?

During the period of invasions, the sight of Viking longships struck terror into the Irish. One of the earliest documented raids took place in 795 AD at Inishbofin, off the Connemara coast. In 807 AD, the Vikings sailed to the inner waters of Galway Bay and attacked Roscam near Oranmore. As land was scarce in Scandinavia, and fish their dietary staple, they soon began to settle on the west coast. Kelly writes “the overall evidence seems to suggest that there was a substantial Viking settlement in the coastal areas of Connemara and including the south side of Galway Bay. They began to intermarry with the Irish and, by the mid 9th century, a generation of mixed parentage emerged. Many native Irish took Norse personal names: one of the earliest is Lochlainn, derived from na Lochlainni. Greene and Kelly point out that the clan name Lochlainn denotes Viking ancestry.

As Viking power was based on maritime prowess, the Vikings brought their shipbuilding technology to Ireland. Because their ships represented a radical development beyond the native corraich, they contributed many nautical terms to the Irish language. They established a base with two longphorts (“ship camps”) at Dublin in 841 AD and may have built one at Athlunkard, near the mouth of the Shannon during the 9th or 10th century AD.13 By the 11th century, their fleet controlled the Shannon from Limerick to Lough Derg, and their longships, together with their commercial skills, turned Limerick into a major trading centre. Viking presence would have extended up and down the west coast as they needed a way to protect their sea routes as well as “a network of secure landing places” where they could put in for repairs and shelter from storms.14

In addition to fighting their own battles, the Vikings forged alliances with native Irish chieftains whose power they helped to bolster. Although the “Viking age” in Ireland ended technically in 1014 after they were routed by the native Irish at the Battle of Clontarf, the Scandinavians maintained a strong presence. In 1095 AD, Godfred Merenug, King of the Ostmen, had a naval force of “not fewer than ninety ships in the harbour of Dublin.” During the 11th century, Dublin remained “a powerful and warlike city of which the inhabitants ... are expert in the management of fleets.”

Ireland was not the only country where the Vikings settled. In 911 AD, they found a home in northern France where the “Norsemen” gave their name to Normandy and became known as “Normans.” They adopted Christianity, along with French culture and language, during the 10th century. In 1066 AD they invaded England where William the Conqueror became the first Norman king. In 1169 AD., now known as “Anglo-Normans”, they invaded Ireland in ships that were “essentially still the Viking ships with which their ancestors had landed in Normandy.” Norman ships were virtually indistinguishable from Viking longships.

Although the Vikings of Dublin, Limerick and Cork offered powerful resistance to the Anglo-Normans, Dublin fell in 1170 AD. marking the end of Viking Dublin as a political entity. Nevertheless, the Scandinavians remained a distinct presence there and in other Irish towns during the 12th century. Although King John built a castle in Limerick c. 1200-1212, and many Anglo-Normans moved there during the 13th century, the town was divided into separate areas, one for the English and another for the Irish and Scandinavians. Thanks to the strong base established by the Vikings it continued to grow and flourish as a trading centre under Anglo-Norman rule.

By the beginning of the 10th century, many of the Vikings in Ireland were bilingual, culturally Hibernicized, and Christian. They had their own churches and bishops, monasteries and convents. A stone at St. Flannan’s Cathedral in Killaloe, County Clare, dated to the first half of the 11th century, indicates that the chief abbot, Thurgum, was Norse. Limerick became a diocese with its own bishop in 1106/7, and both Erolph and his successor, Turgesius (Thorgils), bishops of Limerick from 1140-1151 and 1151-1167, were of Viking stock.

Interpreting the Viking Ship Symbol within a Christian Context

The earliest graffiti (incised drawings) of longships found in Scandinavia come from the Oseberg burial of 834 AD. Later graffiti of longships on wood, stone and plaster show, for the most part, only the stems of ships. The most famous of these is the Norwegian Bryggen stick, dated 1248-1322, which depicts a row of 48 longships. This tradition was brought to Ireland with the Vikings. Three
graffiti of longships on wood, dating to the late 11th or early 12th century, were discovered in Viking Dublin during the excavation of Winetavern St. and Christchurch Place.29

During the 12th-13th century, after paganism gave way to Christianity in Scandinavia, ship graffiti began to appear on the walls of churches, most of them located near the coast.30 In Denmark and Gotland (a Swedish island) they were scratched on the medieval limewash of the stone churches, while in Fortun they were carved or scratched into church walls, both inside and out, using the point of a knife.31 Although they tend to show only the ships' stems, in Fortun the "long, slender profile of a warship dominates the carvings on the inside of the north wall of the nave".32 Attempts to interpret their significance and meaning range from the ridiculous to the sublime. Arne Emil Christensen wrote "In my opinion they should be interpreted as expressions of men and probably boys who were living in a maritime society. They were interested in ships, they saw ships as important tools for trade and warfare, and they may well have accepted the ships of kings as symbols of power and glory, and they carved them as expressions of preoccupation and strong interest, not as symbols."33 Blindheim, in his study of the large number found in medieval Norwegian stave churches,34 divided them into three categories: chance, piety, and prophylaxis.35 Jan Bill has come to the conclusion that "it is very likely that many of the carvings have had a definite religious or communicative intention."36

The longship was not only emblematic of Viking culture during the medieval period, it remains so to the present day. Liz le Bon sees early visual imagery as the product “not only of artistic and physical contexts, but of a very different thought world from our own. Problems in identifying the use and meaning of symbols in ancient art may provide serious obstacles to reading an image’s deeper levels of meaning. Reading the graffito, then, relies on understanding the many contexts which influenced the artist who created it.”37 When used as a symbol in a secular context, as on a coin, seal, or coat of arms,38 its meaning may be sought in national, political, economic, professional, social or personal contexts. When found in a church, on a coffin or tombstone, while it may carry secular meaning, it must also be considered in a spiritual context.

Christianity was quick to appropriate pagan symbols, and the ship was one of them.39 Birgitte Munch Thye points out that, although it was the symbol of passage and means of transportation to the next world in many ancient religions, ships appear in the Bible on less than a dozen occasions and the motif was not, therefore, very relevant to Christianity. While “Ships were an everyday necessity, and it must therefore have felt quite natural to incorporate the idea of ships into the new faith, it had to be done in a different way than in the old pagan religions. On the other hand: ship symbols were tainted with paganism, and the first Christians had to be careful. They did not want symbols or parts of the new faith to remind people of anything non-Christian. So the Christian ship symbol had to signify life and not death.”40

Ships were depicted in the Bible as safe havens during storms: in the Old Testament, Noah’s Ark ensured the survival of man and beast during the Great Flood41 and, in the New Testament, Christ calmed the storm on the Lake of Genesereth that terrified St. Peter and the Apostles. Based on the traditional formula of Ecclesia est navis, Anne-Marie D’Arcy points out that the ship was interpreted as a figure of the Church in via migratorius.42 The body of the church was called the “nave” (based on the Latin world navis meaning ship) and the congregation saw itself as “the crew of St. Peter”43

Zbigniew Kobylinski points out that although “all the occurrences of boats and ships in spiritual culture should be treated as fragments and versions of the same ‘text’, the meaning of which can be discovered by means of structural analysis” … “studies of the historical development of the meaning of a given symbol provide no assistance in identifying its specific meaning in a particular spatio-temporal context, since variability in the course of this development can lead to a total change in the original meaning.”44 For this reason “the discovery of which aspect of the ship symbol is culturally or socially meaningful in a particular situation depends on a detailed study of its context.” Hence “the boat could be the central symbol for members of one group of the society while it was simultaneously only a technico-utilitarian artifact for the others.”45

Kobylinski also pointed out that it is “equally important and interesting to study how particular socio-cultural groups added their own communications to the universal symbol, how they stressed and modified its aspects or modified its meaning” maintaining that “on the borders of Scandinavian settlement, i.e. in situations where there was contact with other peoples, as in the British isles … the ship symbol, particularly in the form of the boat-burial, could be first of all a symbol of ethnicity.”46 By the 13th century, the “Viking type” ship motif may have become synonymous with the concept of “ship” and as Viking and Norman ships were indistinguishable, the motif had the potential to cross cultures. Ship graffiti could have been employed as secular or sacred emojis by those of Scandinavian descent, whether Galli-Gaedhil or Anglo-Norman. Given the geographical distribution of Viking settlements, one might expect to find similar ship graffiti in churches in Normandy and England, but to date no examples appear to have turned up in Normandy, and only one possible example in England.47 In Ireland, however, ship graffiti dating from the 13th-16th c. have been found scratched into the chancel walls of churches, most of them monastic,48 suggesting a link between graffiti in Scandinavia and Ireland.

The “Viking-type” Ship Graffito at Corcomroe Abbey

The earliest ship graffiti found in an Irish monastic setting was scratched into a damp plaster on the north wall of the chancel of the Cistercian abbey church, Sancta Maria de Petra Fertilis, at Corcomroe (Plate 1). The Abbey is situated 1.5 km. south of Bell Harbour on the south side of Galway Bay in northwest County Clare, and about 55 km northwest of Limerick. Its picturesque ruins, nestled into a valley in the austere limestone hills of the Burren, have been exposed to the elements for centuries. Given the erosion that has taken place over the past 40 years, it is fortunate that Professor Etienne Rynne measured, traced and published it in 1968.49 His outline drawing, now in the National Museum of Ireland, is of the utmost importance in reconstructing the original.50 (Plate 2) Rynne recorded the dimensions of the ship as follows: “it measures 58.5 cm from end to end; the hull averages about 5.7 cm. in height, with the pointed ends rising about 12 cm. higher; the mast is 3 cm. wide at its base and can be traced to a height of 29 cm. above the hull.” Rynne concluded that it would be impossible to identify the boat “on typological grounds” because “the schematic … nature of the graffito prevent prow and stern from being distinguished one from the other”.

After comparing a photograph of the recently reconstructed Viking longship, “Sea Stallion”51 (Plate 3), Edward
Plate 1 – Ship graffito, Corcomroe Abbey, 2008.

Plate 2 – Line drawing by Prof. Rynne of ship graffito, Corcomroe Abbey, 1968. Reproduced with the permission of the National Museum of Ireland.
O’Loghlen and I wondered whether the ship depicted at Corcomroe could possibly be a Viking type ship. The silhouette, ratio of proportions and subtle rendition of the inside curves of prow and stern appeared to be virtually identical to “Sea Stallion” which was modelled on “Skuldelev 2”, one of three Viking ships scuttled in Roskilde Fjord in Denmark in the 1070s. Built c. 1042 AD of Irish oak from Glendalough, south of Dublin, “Skuldelev 2” was a type of longship used for raiding and warfare known as a skei (“that which cuts through the water”). It “represents the group of larger, if not the largest, warships built in eleventh-century Dublin for the fleets navigating along the coasts of Ireland, Scotland and Wales.”52 These ships were eight times as long as they were wide 53 and the masts were so short they could be “lowered into the boat for manoeuvrability – or for the low profile needed to make a sneak attack.”54 They moved swiftly and silently under sail or oar, required only a shallow draught, and were easily sailed up rivers and dragged onto sandy beaches. Being double-ended with prows of equal height, they did not have to be turned around before setting out to sea again.

Longships were built well beyond the end of the “Viking age.” In Scandinavia “the large warships of the eleventh century were the precursors of even larger royal ships of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”55 The longest were built by the Norwegian King Hákon who became monarch in 1217 and used his impressive fleet to intimidate the Swedes and Danes.56 These ships were eight times as long as they were wide 57 and the masts were so short they could be “lowered into the boat for manoeuvrability – or for the low profile needed to make a sneak attack.”58 They moved swiftly and silently under sail or oar, required only a shallow draught, and were easily sailed up rivers and dragged onto sandy beaches. Being double-ended with prows of equal height, they did not have to be turned around before setting out to sea again.

Although Corcomroe was built in the 13th century, Rynne thought that the ship might have been incised during 16th century renovations as “most Irish graffiti in monastic plasterwork” have been assigned to that period.63 Since then, Stalley has published extensively on Corcomroe and dated the completion of the chancel to c. 1227.64 The last phase of construction involved the application of plaster and limewash over the masonry. Stalley published the architectural graffiti which he believes were intended as guides to the masons.65 Since they were incised in the initial layer of limewash before it dried, and are gothic in style, they can be dated both on technical and stylistic grounds to c. 1226-7. Although he was aware of Rynne’s 1968 article, he did not mention the ship graffiti which also appears to have been incised in the first layer of plaster.66 He observed, in conversation, that it must have been incised before the scaffolding was removed since it is approximately 8 feet off the ground.67 It appears to have been deliberately placed there by an artisan working on the chancel c. 1226-7.68

After reviewing Rynne’s outline drawing, Kelly confirmed that the ship is a “Viking-type” ship and pointed out that they were derived directly from the Scandinavian clinker-built tradition, were used for long distance voyages, trading

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and fishing, and would have been a familiar site around the coast of Ireland" from the 10th to the 16th centuries.69 The longship *graffito* at Corcomroe is not a generic representation like those at Roscrea and Wexford,70 it more closely resembles a *graffito* found at Winetavern Street, Dublin. (Plate 4) It appears to be an accurate rendition made by a person who must have known those ships in the original.71 Care was given to the ratio of proportions and the exact angle and curvature of stem and stern. After examining digital images of the Corcomroe ship, Ian Friel observed that the curvature of the post on the right appears to be greater than the one on the left and is set at a steeper angle. He concluded that "it may be an early depiction of a double-ended ship designed to take a stern rudder." He also thought he could see traces of rigging and possibly of mast bindings.72

The Decorative Scheme at Corcomroe  
While the architectural *graffiti* at Corcomroe had a practical purpose, the ship *graffito* did not. As the *graffito* technique was also employed to create underdrawings for wall paintings, it is possible that the ship was related to a decorative scheme. If it can, indeed, be dated to c. 1227, and if it is the underdrawing for a wall painting, it is the earliest datable one in Ireland. As such, it would help to fill the gap identified by James Mills who observed that "the student of Irish culture lacks one resource available to the Continental student: the Church frescoes from A.D. 900 to A.D. 1600."73

The elegant abbey church, on which no expense appears to have been spared, would have been expected to conform to the restrictions placed on interior decoration by the Cistercian Order whose mother house was at Citeaux in France. In his *Apologia* of 1125, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the most influential member of the order, tolerated painting, and sculpture, but not coloured stained-glass windows and figured tiles, maintaining that such lavish church decoration as gold-covered relics, images of saints, chandeliers, candelabra, and floor mosaics were at odds with the poverty and aestheticism espoused by the Order.74 In 1134 a decree banning figural art and coloured stained glass windows was issued, and again in 1159, 1182, and 1254. However, it was challenged: as early as 1151 it was partly relaxed, permitting some decoration.75 By 1230 architectural elements in Cistercian churches in France were being picked out in a restricted palette of red, ochre and black.76 Surviving samples of these colours can be seen on stones at Mellifont, the Irish Cistercian motherhouse near Drogheda, consecrated in 1157.77 Corcomroe was at odds with Citeaux at this time. While the presbytery was under construction a struggle took place between the Anglo-Norman and native Irish abbeys which may have brought building to a halt.78 The former supported the Chapter General, the Order's central organization, while the latter were largely opposed to it. In 1226 a papal mandate was addressed jointly to the diocesan Bishop of Kilfenora and the Abbot of Corcomroe de Petra Fertilis complaining about the absence of the abbot of Corcomroe from meetings of the Chapter General at Citeaux.79 This had no effect for, in 1227, the abbot's absence was noted again with irritation. The clash of cultures between the native Irish and the Anglo-Normans came to a head in the "conspiracy of Mellifont" of 1227 in which Irish monks rebelled against the Anglo-Irish abbots threatening the very survival of the Cistercian Order in Ireland.80

The following year, in 1228, Stephen of Lexington, Abbot of Stanley in Wiltshire, England, was dispatched by Citeaux to find out what was going on in Ireland. The decoration of the chancel at Corcomroe must have been complete by that time, as Stephen was informed that one of the two gravest offenders against the rule concerning sculpture and paintings in churches was the monastery of Corcomroe. After one of his assistants was wounded in an ambush prepared by the prior of Corcomroe's mother-house, Inisloughnacht, Stephen decided not to visit Corcomroe but instead had it transferred from the jurisdiction of Inisloughnacht to the abbey of Furness at Barrow-in-Furness, Lancashire. When the abbot of Furness asked to visit in 1231, his request was refused.

On his first visit to Corcomroe in 1878, the antiquarian Thomas J. Westropp found "traces of fresco painting in the groining (of the chancel) red, black, drab and perhaps green."81 To-day traces of red pigment can still be found on the O'Brien effigy and to the right of the tomb canopy, and traces of both red and ochre can be seen in the lowest layers of plaster on the wall to the right of the O'Brien tomb and on the north wall of the south chapel and left side of the window surround.82 This suggests that the vault, walls and stonework of the chancel, as well as the O'Brien effigy, were once painted. To-day the ship *graffito* is the only evidence of what may once have been a scheme of painted decoration at Corcomroe.

In trying to determine the nature and purpose of the *graffito* at Corcomroe it is helpful to look at the surviving interior decoration in sister Cistercian abbey churches. Corcomroe belongs architecturally to the "School of the West", a small but distinctive group of churches west of the Shannon. Stalley has noted that "in strictly architectural terms, Corcomroe is closer to Abbeyknockmoy (Knocknoy) than any other building."83 Traces of the same red and ochre pigments found at Corcomroe can be seen on the...
remains of the first layer of plaster on the north wall of the south chapel of Abbeyknockmoy. Although the entire north wall of its chancel was once covered with wall paintings, those that survive to-day appear to date to the 16th century.83

Of greater relevance to Corcomroe is Abbeyknockmoy's 13th-century daughter house on Clare Island in Clew Bay, County Mayo. The wall paintings in Clare Island Abbey were the subject of a major study published by the Royal Irish Academy in 2005, and the scientific examination, research, and conservation of the paintings have yielded information that can be applied to understanding the nature and purpose of the ship **graffito** at Corcomroe.84 They have been divided into two chronological phases by “the clear stratigraphic distinction” created by superimposing “an overlying plaster layer” on top of the first phase of decoration.85 The first phase corresponds more closely in date to the chancel at Corcomroe than any other surviving example of wall painting on the west coast or, for that matter, elsewhere in Ireland.86

The **graffito** technique used in decorating the Clare Island Abbey church is applicable to Corcomroe. The rubble walls were pointed with grey mortar which was covered with finer, lighter grey mortar and then a layer of limewash.87 The design was “mapped out by incising the plaster, which was still partly damp … using a sharp instrument.”88 Colour was applied on top of the dry plaster (a *secco*).89 “either in bold outline strokes with the interior of the image left unpainted, or the image was filled in with block colours with a few additional details.”90 The pigments used in the first phase were carbon black, red, ochre, and lime white. The red and ochre tones found at Corcomroe appear to be the same as those found on the walls at Abbeyknockmoy.

Below, and slightly to the right of the ship **graffito** at Corcomroe, two ruled lines were drawn in the shape of a cross in the damp plaster; a hole made by a compass can be seen where the arms intersect. While it is not clear what, if any, relationship this armature bears to the ship, similar underdrawings for circular bosses can be seen below the surviving painted decoration on the ceiling vaulting of the chancel at Clare Island.90

The motifs that survive from the first phase of decoration at Clare Island Abbey are located in the lower register of the chancel walls, the zone in which symbolic devices related to local nobility are found. On the north, a stag hunt is depicted just to the right of the canopied tomb and, above a doorway on the south, a mounted knight in armour.92 (Plate 5) Morton points out that these are “in accord with the role of the chancel as a place of lordly burial as reflected by the depiction of the activities of hunting and the dress of the horseman as a Gaelic lord.”93

Although these motifs clearly have relevance in a secular context, Anne-Marie D’Arcy has pointed out that both the hart (stag) hunt and the knight also have ‘Christological associations in the Christian exegetical tradition. As a symbol of rejuvenation, the stag was interpreted as a type of Christ, the *homo cervus*. Christ appears as a stag in the hagiographic accounts of St. Herbert and St. Eustace, who pursues a stag while hunting, which turns out afterwards to be Christ. It also appears in the context of a knightly hunt in the early thirteenth-century French text, *La Quest del Saint Graal*, which was written in a Cistercian milieu and translated into Irish in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century as *Lorgaieacht an tSoladh Naomhtha*.94

The ship motif at Corcomroe may be analogous to the stag hunt and gaelic knight at Clare Island in having both secular and sacred meaning. Stalley has pointed out that it was used a great deal in medieval Ireland to symbolize the voyage through life.95 D’Arcy notes its Christological associations. Celtic Christianity was informed by the specifically Irish concept of the *immrám*, as a *peregrinatio pro Christo*, which could take several forms: an actual voyage by ship

Plate 5 – Gaelic Lord wall painting at Clare Island Abbey.
beyond the bounds of the known world, a spiritual voyage in a rudderless boat across a sea of troubles, or a metaphorical voyage through this life and the journey to the next. Like the stag hunt and knight in the Clare Island Abbey, the ship motif may represent local nobility and encapsulate biblical associations and the Celtic concept of the immrám.

**The O Lochlainns and Corcomroe Abbey:**

At Corcomroe Abbey, two County Clare tribes with a symbiotic relationship came together: the Ruricians and Dalcassians. Ruricians are associated with the Corcomruad comprising the O’Lochlainns and O’Connors and looked northward to Fergus MacRóigh and the stories of the Ulster Cycle for inspiration and possible origins. The Dalcassian O’Briens looked south deriving inspiration from the heroic deeds associated with the Munster men from Cashel. In 925 AD, Dalcassian rule was imposed on Corcomroe: although weakened following the arrival of Viking raiders to Thomond, Mael Seachnall, the Dalcassian first cousin of Brian Boru, was overlord until his death in 983 AD.

At the end of the 10th century, the Irish upper classes began to borrow Norse names such as Lochlainn. As the chieftaincy of Corcomroe passed back and forth between the descendants of Mael Seachnall’s son, Lochlainn, and his nephew, Conchobar, the surname Lochlainn began to appear among the chiefs of Corcomroe in the 10th century and Burren in the 11th century.

The Corcomruad tribe expanded their tribal territory until the 10th century when the O’Briens extended control over their territory. The O’Lochlainns entered into an alliance to secure independence within their own lands and support when superior forces, such as the Connacht O’Connors, arrived on cattle-raiding expeditions. At a time when ecclesiastical parishes were based on existing secular territories, the Corcomruad were still sufficiently powerful to carve out a separate diocese, Kilfenora, in 1152 AD.

The O’Lochlainn “castle, town and quarter” of Turlough guarded the southern entrance to the valley and plain of Glenamannagh where the Abbey was situated. O’Brien named it after the Corcomruad rather than giving it a Dalcassian name. In the late 12th or early 13th century the Corcomruad split: the Uí Conchobar ruled Corcomroe West and the Uí Lochlainn, Corcomroe East.

**Cistercian Rules Regarding Chancel Burials:**

Strict rules governed eligibility for burial in the chancel of a Cistercian Abbey during the 13th century. The honour was restricted to the founder, the founding abbot and kings. At Corcomroe this would have included Donal Mór O’Brien, the founding abbot and O’Lochlainn chieftains. Donal died, however, before construction began and he was buried in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick in 1194. Later O’Brien tombs were placed close to Donal’s to the left of the high altar.

When Donal’s grandson, Conor Na Siudáine O’Brien, King of Thomond, was killed by Conor Carrach O’Lochlainn near Corcomroe in 1268, his body was retrieved from the battlefield by the monks and interred in the chancel of Corcomroe “in deference to his close kinship with the abbey’s founder and to his own royal status.” Conor’s tomb canopy was situated as far to the left as possible in the space available perhaps to avoid encroaching on the ship graffito and any surrounding decoration. (Plate 6)

Although the “Viking type” ship was also used by the Anglo-Normans, there is no reason to believe that the ship at Corcomroe was placed there as a Norman emblem. There is no history of Norman welcome either ecclesiastical or political in County Clare. On the contrary, the abbot and monks of Corcomroe resisted all attempts by the Anglo-Normans to assert control over them. Although the Kings of Thomond ruled at the pleasure of the Anglo-Norman kings, some O’Briens, O’Lochlainns and other north Clare clans combined successfully to keep the Normans out of Clare at the battle of Dysert O’Dea in 1318, ensuring that the Burren remained a Gaelic controlled area.

Rynne correctly described the ship graffito as “heraldic in nature” which suggests that it may have had a special symbolic function. MacMahon was the first to note its juxtaposition with the O’Lochlainn burials in the chancel floor and the long association of the O’Lochlainn clan with ships and the sea.

Most of the early tombstones are illegible, however the “The “O’Loughlin King of Burren Family Tomb”, which appears to date from the late 18th or early 19th century, is located in the floor directly beneath the graffito. (Plate 7) Its neoclassical slab is incised with an inverted anchor, symbolic of death. The use of the anchor by the clan goes back centuries. Keating described the “Bearings of O’Lochlin, of Burren in Clare, as including “a Blue Anchor/With Gold Cable Bound.” When Sir Michael O’Loghlen registered his coat of arms in 1838 he chose, as its crest, an anchor of oak with a cable and the personal motto “anchora salutis” (anchor of safety).

The most significant link between the O’Lochlainn clan and nautical imagery is found in the poem by the 18th century poet Aodh Buí Mac Cruitín entitled “Bless the Boat” in praise of the ship of O’Lochlainn of Burren. Its Epilogue could stand as a prayer beneath the graffito:

“O God of Grace, who saved the eight who lived
So Long on Ark so great until the Flood did give,
Bring safely home each day, I beg, unharmed or lost
O’Lochlainn’s boat and crew by storm winds tossed.”
Conclusion

Having discussed the significance of the graffiti in both the sacred and secular contexts, I would like to propose that the ship graffiti at Corcomroe may function both as a Christian symbol and also as an emblem of the O’Lochlainn clan. It merges the Viking concept of the longship as a means of conveyance to the next world with the biblical concept of the ship as a place of refuge during the storms of life and the Irish notion of the immrám, a particular form of spiritual journey.

The long association of Viking longships with pagan burials in Scandinavia, the adoption by the Irish of various Scandinavian customs and the presence of the Viking-type ship motif at Corcomroe, suggest that the genre of graffiti dubbed ‘Holy Ships’ may have travelled from Scandinavia to Ireland, where it was transformed by the 13th century into a symbol of that final journey, not to Valhalla, but to a Christian heaven.

It would seem reasonable to propose that this graffiti of a “Viking type” ship may have been placed on the wall by the O’Lochlainn clan to act in both a secular and sacred capacity as a symbol of the clan name, a sign of its authority, and to embody the concept of journeys terrestrial, biblical and spiritual.

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References

2 About 2,000 examples, dating from the 6th to the 11th centuries A.D., have been found in Scandinavia. Torsten Capelle, “Bronze-Age Stone Ships”, 71-75 in Crumlin-Pedersen et al., The Ship as Symbol, 71.
3 Torsten Capelle, “Bronze-Age Stone Ships”, 71-75, in Crumlin-Pedersen et al., The Ship as Symbol, 71 and 75. I am grateful to Elizabeth Fitzpatrick for bringing these stone ships, and this important publication, to my attention.
4 Interviews with Eamonn P. Kelly, June 16, 2008 and October 22, 2009. I am very grateful to E.P. Kelly, Keeper of Irish Antiquities, National Museum of Ireland, for sharing his wealth of information based on his own archaeological work and that of his wife Erin Gibbons on Vikings on the West Coast of Ireland. See Gibbons, E.R. & Kelly, E.P. "A Viking Age Farmstead in Connemara", Archaeology Ireland, vol. 17, no. 1 Spring 2003, 28-32. Kelly writes in an e-mail to Lochnan, Jan. 12, 2010: “Erin and I are happy that the house and associated burials are Scandinavian. We now have the Carbon 14 dates for the house and burials that supports this interpretation as well as isotope evidence suggesting that the burials are those of persons intrusive to the area.”
7 It is spelt “Ua Laclainn” or “Ua Lachlainn” . Entry for 1150 A.D., John O’Donovan, ed. Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters, II (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, & Co., 1954 repr. 1966) p. 1090. E.P. Kelly believes that this is the source of the Ó Lochlainn clan name. He has identified a number of Irish surnames of Viking origin as well as tracked Viking settlements along the west and south coast of Ireland. Conversation with Katharine Lochnan, Dublin, June 16, 2008.
9 Notes from conversation with E. P. Kelly, October 22, 2009.
August, 1973 (Dundalgan Press, 1976), 75-82, 78, writes “Lochlainn...is very common indeed, and is attested as the name of the royal heir of Corcu Modruad in the Annals of Inisfallen in the year 983. This territory is in Co. Clare, and not far from the Viking city of Limerick; it may have been under Norse cultural influence. However the name was introduced, it became very popular and is still in use in Gaelic-speaking Ireland and Scotland, as well as forming the common surnames O Lochlainn, Mac Lochlainn.”

11 Greene, “The Influence of Scandinavian on Irish”, 77. The earliest reference to “Lothlind, Laithlind, later Lochlann” is in the Irish Annals of the Viking Period”, Peritia 20(2008), 257-275. There has been ongoing scholarly debate regarding the positive identification of this site.


13 Tim Lambert “A Short History of Limerick”, 1-4, www.local histories.org/limerick.html, 2008 points out that “Many English settlers came to Limerick. They settled on Kings Island in Englishstown while the native Irish were moved across the Abbey River to Irishtown. In the 13th century a stone wall was erected around Englishstown. Later they extended Irishtown.”

14 F.J. Byrne, “The Viking Age”, 37-38. In 928 AD the Limerick Vikings after the conquest of Ireland as ‘a peculiar and separate people, who carried on trade and navigation, and had a separate army. Giraldus Cambrensis speaks of the Vikings after the conquest of Ireland as ‘a peculiar and decidedly separate people, who carried on trade and navigation: Even more than a century afterwards we can still trace many ostman in the chief cities of Ireland, where it seems, they continued to preserve those Scandinavian characteristics which distinguished them from the Irish and English. In the year 1201 a verdict was pronounced by twelve Irishmen, twelve Englishmen, and twelve Ostmen in Limerick, concerning the lands, churches, and other property belonging to the church of Limerick; which shows that the Ostmen were sufficiently numerous there to be placed on an equal footing with the English and Irish.” In 1263 the Irish applied to the Norwegian King Hakon for assistance against the British and offering him the Irish high kingship.

15 E.P. Kelly. E-mail to Katharine Lochnan, December 22, 2009.

16 R.A.S. Macalister “A Runic Inscription at Killaloe Cathedral”, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C v. XXXIII (1916-17), 493-498,497. Stone, From Mist and Stone, 110, points out that by 1066 Roman script had nearly replaced runes.

17 F.J. Byrne, “The Viking Age”, 37-38. In 928 AD the Limerick Vikings put a fleet on Lough Neagh, in 929 AD on Lough Corrib and Lough Well as well as on the Erne waterways in 931 and 936. They raided Connacht repeatedly. “Its forces were a menace to the whole of the west and north of Ireland, and a serious threat to Dublin”, 29, (check references)

18 “Lochlann” was the Irish word for Norway, 77.

19 Meike Blackwell, Ships in Early Irish History, Whitegate, Co. Clare, Ireland: Ballinakella Press, 1992, She points out that by 1066 Roman script had nearly replaced runes.

20 F.J. Byrne, “The Viking Age”, 38-40.

21 David Henry, Viking Ireland, Jens Wraac’s Accounts of his Visits to Ireland, 1846-7, Angus, Scotland: Pinkoford Press, 1995, 73.

22 Christensen, “Ship Graffiti”, 182.

23 Tim Lambert “A Short History of Limerick”, 1-4, www.local histories.org/limerick.html, 2008 points out that “Many English settlers came to Limerick. They settled on Kings Island in Englishstown while the native Irish were moved across the Abbey River to Irishtown. In the 13th century a stone wall was erected around Englishstown. Later they extended Irishtown.”


25 R.A.S. Macalister “A Runic Inscription at Killaloe Cathedral”, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, Section C v. XXXIII (1916-17), 493-498,497. Stone, From Mist and Stone, 110, points out that by 1066 Roman script had nearly replaced runes.

26 St. Flannan’s Cathedral, Killaloe: Places of Interest, Clare County Library website, 2. It is described as “a unique stone with a Viking runic inscription which reads ‘Thorgam carved this stone’ and an ogham inscription which reads ‘a blessing on Thorgam’.”

27 Thoth of Limerick Bishops, Limerick Diocese Heritage Project. www.limerickdioceseheritage.org


31 Christensen, “Ship Graffiti”, 182.


36 “Ship Graffiti”, 1.


38 For the interpretation of ships on town seals see Thye, “Early Christian Symbols”, 192.

39 This can be seen carved into the sarcophagi of some of the earliest Christians in Catakomas on the outskirts of Rome and the necropolis below St. Peter’s Basilica.

40 Thye, “Early Christian Symbols”, 186. She points out with reference to Scandinavian church wall paintings: “When we look at the seals of ports it is remarkable how much they resemble the wall-paintings in style and details.”


Interview with Anne-Marie D’Arcy, Dublin, June 16, 2008.

Ships were also found on coffins in Scandinavia, a continu-
ation of the association of the ship with the voyage to the next world.

In interviews with Prof. Roger Stalley, Dublin, June 16, 2008 and February 27, 2009 he pointed out that more and more of these architectural graffiti have been turning up in French cathedrals.

The incised line is overlapped in places by a later layer of plaster.

I have not yet found a reproduction of the graffiti in Barrys-
court Castle in Cork so am unable to comment on it.

R.A.S. Macalister, “Miscellaneous”, Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, LXI:1 (1932) 223. They are accompanied by two lines of Ogham writing loosely translated “Amen Fidelis”. This was presumably executed when the church was under construction.

The incised line is overlapped in places by a later layer of plaster.

Mr O’Loghlen’s publications include Bráthair M.F. Ó Conchuir and Eamonn Ó Lochlainn, A Short History of the Ó Lochlainn Clan, Clon Rasc, Co. Clare, 1995, Edward O’Loghlen, Muntri Ó Lochlainn: Second International Re-

Interview with Prof. Stalley, Dublin, February 27, 2009.

I am grateful to Anne-Marie D’Arcy for this information.

Bernard of Clairvaux’s ‘Apologia” and the Medieval Attitude
towards the Church at Corcomroe” in Colum Hourihane, ed., Irish Historical Studies in Honour of Peter Harbison, Princeton and Four Courts, 2004, 175-188.

Roger Stalley, The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland: An
Account of the History, Art and Architecture of the White
Monks in Ireland from 1142 to 1540, London: Yale University
Press, 1987. Prof. Stalley revisited his earlier conclusions in “Peta Ferttilis: The Uncertain History of the Cistercian Church at Corcomroe” in Colum Hourihane, ed., Irish Historical
Studies in Honour of Peter Harbison, Princeton and Four Courts, 2004, 175-188.

Citing the incised drawings at Moyne, Co. Mayo, and Abbey-
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Roger Stalley, The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland: An
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Studies in Honour of Peter Harbison, Princeton and Four Courts, 2004, 175-188.

Citing the incised drawings at Moyne, Co. Mayo, and Abbey-
knockmoyn, Co. Galway.
81 The pigments were matched to Benjamin Moore paint colour.


81 The pigments were matched to Benjamin Moore paint colour samples and correspond most closely to CC 188 (Butter Rum), pink: CC 156 (Tofino Sunset), CC 158 (Apple Blossom), ochre: CC-210 (Dijon) and CC-190 (Summer Harvest). These correspond to the colours of the pigments found at Abbeyknockmoy and Clare Island Abbey.


83 I would like to thank Christian Kralki, Ph.D. candidate, University of Toronto, who is writing her dissertation on the motif of “four living, four dead” for confirming the 16th c. date of these wall paintings.


85 See Christoph Oldenbourg, “Conservation of the Wall Paintings”, 49-60, in Manning et al., New Survey, 49-61, 50.

86 The church was built in the 13th century, and it would seem likely that the first phase of wall painting could date from that time. However Stalley pointed out in our interview of Feb. 27, 2009 that the wall paintings on Clare Island have not yet been dated.

87 Oldenbourg, “Conservation of the Wall Paintings”, in Manning et al., New Survey, 49-60, 50.

88 Oldenbourg, “Conservation”, 51.

89 Oldenbourg “Conservation”, 51.


91 Karena Morton and Christoph Oldenbourg, “Catalogue of the Wall Paintings” in Manning, New Survey, 61-96, 70, Pl.XIII Boss J.

92 Morton and Oldenbourg, “Catalogue”, 65, fig. 2 and 66 pl. IV.


94 The image finds its origins in Physiologus, a didactic text written or completed in Greek by an unknown author in Alexandria between the 2nd and 4th c. A.D. It was a major source of Cistercian imagery, where the stag comes back to life. Interview with Anne-Marie D’Arcy, Dublin, June 16, 2008. Prof. D’Arcy interpreted the iconographical programme of the Clare Island Abbey ceiling vault in light of Cistercian texts.


96 See the collection of pivotal articles reprinted in The Otherworlds of Leinster as fessa (feasts), echtrai (adventures) and immrama (narrations): cf. David N. Dunnill, “Echoes and Immram: Some Problems of Definition”, Eriu 27 (1976), 73-94. I am grateful to D’Arcy for providing this information.

Edward O’Loghlen, e-mails of May 3, 4, and 5, 2011 to Katharine Lochnan, points out that M.F. Ó Conchúir played a pivotal role in linking the Corcomruad to the Rurician clan. The Clanna Ruari were driven out of the eastern part of Ulster during 332 AD. The Corcomruad controlled about one third of Clare during the 7th and 8th centuries including the Aran Islands. During this period they equaled the Dal gCas but later ceded much of this territory, including the Aran Islands, to it. M.F. Ó Conchúir in Ó Conchúir agus Eamonn Ó Lochlainn, “A Short History of the Ó Lochlainn Clan”, 1995, 7-10. This and the three paragraphs that follow were composed by Edward O’Loghlen.


101 Comber and Hull, M.S. “Excavations”, 3. Conchuir and his sons held power until 1015 with Úi Lochlainn kings taking over until at least 1060. An Úi Choilíneach followed, until 1104 when another Úi Lochlainn regained control. After his death in 1149, power reverted to the Úi Conchobhair line.

102 MacMahon, Fertile Rock, 2.


104 MacMahon, Fertile Rock, 5, writes that Donal Mór ÓBrien probably founded it but that it is possible that it was founded by his successor, Donough Cahirbreach ÓBrien.

105 The Ó Brien tombs in St. Mary’s Cathedral, Limerick, are prominently situated to the left of the high altar.


107 Rynne, “Boat Graffito”, 76.


109 The inscription and invented anchor are executed in the neoclassical style which would suggest that the tombstone dates from the late 18th or early 19th century.


111 MacMahon, Fertile Rock, p. 26 f.n. 71.