

Clonkeen church Co. Limerick: the West Door

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A detailed examination and description of the carvings and designs on the triple archway of the western portal at this twelfth-century church.

The small church at Clonkeen, on the Limerick to Murroe road,¹ is a simple single-cell building, on the site of a monastery founded by St Díomóg, or Díomán, whose death is recorded in the Annals of Innisfallen and the Annals of Ulster for the year 811.² The Romanesque features on the west doorway and on the window surrounds in the western end of the building are possibly twelfth-century additions to an older structure as the antae which project from the western gable are seen on early stone churches like the abbey church on Scattery Island in the Shannon Estuary. The eastern part of the building seems to have been reconstructed in the 15th Century.³

Romanesque features appear on Irish churches in the 11th and 12th centuries though only a small number use the technology associated with Romanesque architecture. The round headed arch and vaulting systems used in Europe, allowed for the construction of large buildings. The first Cistercian abbey in Ireland, at Mellifont in Co. Louth, begun in 1142 and consecrated in 1157, consisted of a group of buildings including a church, cloisters and living quarters for the monks, in the continental style, but it did not seem to influence the traditional Irish monastic authorities who continued to construct comparatively small churches in a loosely organized group of buildings within a monastic enclosure.

The western doorway at Clonkeen is typical of the tendency in the 12th Century to add some decorative Romanesque features to existing buildings. These decorations are often associated with churches involved in the movement to reform the diocesan organization in Ireland which was instigated from the Anglo-Norman archdiocese of Canterbury.⁴ The Ua Briain kings were involved in this attempted reform, so many of the churches in their area of influence were decorated in the new way.

The portal at Clonkeen has three arches surrounded by a hood moulding. The inner arch is of plain cut stone without decoration, forming a continuous surface from ground level to the apex of the arch. It has none of the usual architectural features of plinths, bases, impostes or capitals. The earlier doorway at St Flannan's in Killaloe Co. Clare has a similarly plain inner arch with only a simple chamfered impost separating the arch from the jambs. The Abbey Church at Aghadoe Co. Kerry, which is contemporary with Clonkeen, also has a plain inner arch.

The second arch is decorated with a saw-tooth chevron pattern, the saw-tooth points facing the intrados (inner) surface are outlined with a finely carved rib on the face of the arch. The chevron element takes up about half the depth of each voussoir, the inner half

¹ National Grid reference 16891 15480.

² Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin, 2011) pp 266-7.

³ Tadhg O'Keefe, *Romanesque Ireland* (Dublin, 2003) pp 195-6.

⁴ Aubrey Gwynn, *The Irish church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries* (Dublin, 1992) pp 46, 111 and 112.

has a row of beading decorating the intrados surface. Saw-tooth chevron is frequently used in European Romanesque, particularly in Anglo-Norman Britain.⁵ The builders of Cormac's Chapel at Cashel, 1127 to 1134, used chevron in the decoration of the portals and the arcades, this was a very important building in twelfth-Century Ireland both politically and artistically and would have been visited by all the important clergy of the time. Elements of the design of the chapel were noted and borrowed in churches all over the country. Françoise Henry believed that there may have been English stone carvers employed at Cashel. This second order in Clonkeen doorway does not quite match up with the capitals of the pillars below, this may be a result of faulty reconstruction at some stage.

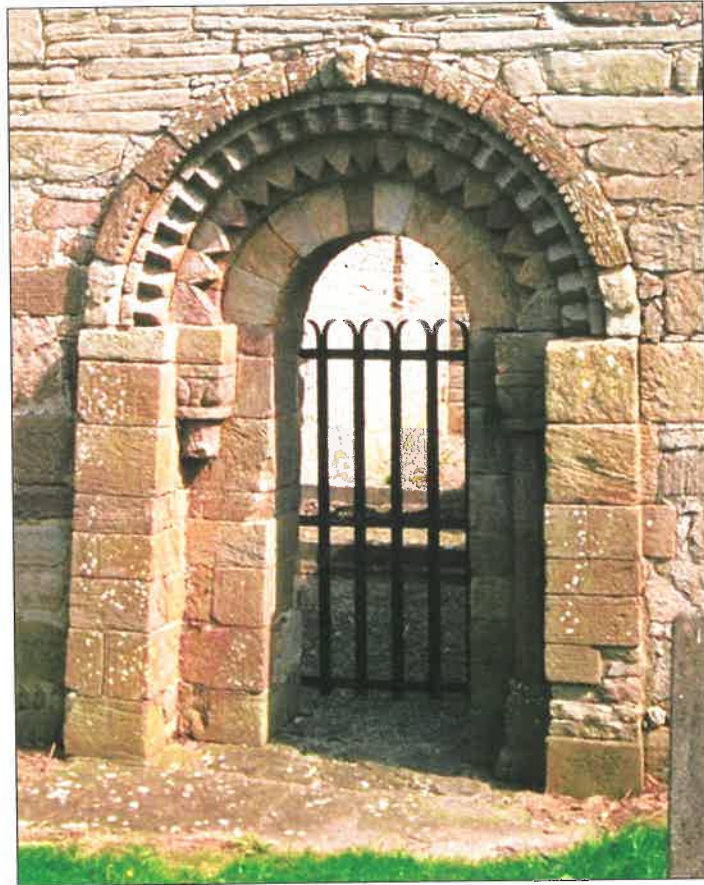
The polygonal pillars, set in the jambs of the doorway are decorated with beaded chevron, only the capital and a short section of shaft survives on the north side of the door but the complete arrangement survives on the south side. The pillar sits on a torus moulding with a row of beading below it. The surface of the base is decorated with alternate rows of beading and chevron, this base sits on a simple chamfered plinth. A spur finishes the top outer corner of the base. The lower parts of the capitals are formed into round sectioned mouldings called 'astragals' which provide a sort of cushion which sits on the pillar. Oval leaf-shaped designs form the corners of the capitals, which look a little like Roman egg and dart patterns. This style of capital appears again on the chancel arch of St Caimin's Church on Inis Cealtra on Lough Derg in Co. Clare and on the doorway at Aghadoe near Killarney Co. Kerry, which dates from the 1150s. The similarities in style suggest that the Clonkeen doorway may have been built in the same decade.

The third arch is decorated with an archivolt saw-tooth chevron moulding, this time, with the points facing outward. A light rib is used again to outline the points on the intrados surface and to add interest to the indented face of the arch. The outer quarters of the voussoirs are left undecorated creating a plain band surrounding the patterned face. The contrast between the outward and inward facing saw-tooth patterns on the two arches creates a bold surface texture.

A hood moulding forms an enclosing element to the whole entablature. It has a fine toothed inner edge and the intrados surface has a row of beading like that on the second arch. The face of the moulding is decorated with beaded chevron which echoes the pattern on the pillars and on the remaining sections of the window surrounds inside the church. The outer ends of the moulding are finished with animal heads which are badly weathered. These terminal heads follow in a long tradition of Christian-Celtic design. The seventh-century Ballinderry Brooch has an almost abstract animal head at each end, holding the ring of the brooch in their jaws: it is one of the earliest examples of the use of terminal heads in Irish Art.⁶ The illuminated capital I on the 'Initium' page, fol.86 r. which begins the Gospel of St Mark in the seventh-century Book of Durrow has a wonderful terminal animal head, with flaring nostrils and huge eyes, just one of the many exotic creatures which populate the decorated capitals of Durrow. These animal heads, viewed from above, with bulging eyes and wrinkled snouts appear in decorated manuscripts, on metalwork and in stone carvings throughout the Early Christian period and are often seen in Romanesque designs. The hood moulding on the Nuns' Church at Clonmacnoise, completed in the 1160s, is also finished with animal heads which are in better condition than those at Clonkeen. There are a number of animal heads in the outer arch of

⁵ Françoise Henry, *Irish Art in the Romanesque Period 1120 to 1170 A.D.* (London, 1970) p. 166.

⁶ G. Frank Mitchell, 'Foreign Influences and the Beginning of Christian Art', in Polly Cone (ed.), *Treasures of Early Irish Art, 1500 B.C. To 1500 A.D.* (New York, 1970) p. 91.



The western doorway at Clonkeen church.

the doorway at Dysert O'Dea in Co. Clare. A similar creature, a very close parallel with one of the heads at Dysert O'Dea, holds the Cross of Cong in his jaws, making the connection with the shaft.

The keystone of the hood moulding is carved in high relief in the shape of a human head, the features are badly damaged so it is difficult to make direct comparisons but it is similar in form to a number of nearly contemporary sculptures. The outer arch at Dysert O'Dea has a number of, quite realistic, carved heads which resemble the head at Clonkeen. The heads on the doorway of St Caimin's Church on Inis Cealtra are a bit chunkier in form but still quite realistic. The hood moulding and the third arch rest on a plain cut stone pilaster which completes the layout of the portal.

The doorway at Clonkeen is one of a number of portals at monasteries close to the Shannon River, built mainly in the 12th century they have elements in common but no two are closely alike. This love of individuality is part of the story of Irish art where influences from outside are combined with traditional elements in a style which was continuously evolving. The designers of this doorway combined the patterned arches of the Anglo-Norman tradition with the human and animal heads of the Irish tradition creating a foundation for the more elaborate designs that followed.

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