

## Some Late-Medieval Sculptured-Chimneypieces From Limerick

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The subject of this article is a small group of interesting late-medieval chimneypieces of stone, from Limerick City. These are all carved in fossiliferous limestone and date to the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The objects and the sites which they came from are very significant as Limerick contains relatively few good surviving examples of Late-Medieval domestic architecture and sculpture.

### Introduction

Cities like Limerick, Cork and Dublin, unlike towns such as Galway and Kilkenny, had much of their Medieval and Late-Medieval domestic architecture swept away as a result of Georgian developments of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and highly significant sculptural survivals such as those described below are rare. The examples described here are just some survivals, but it is likely that fieldwork and future excavations may, hopefully, reveal more such features and carvings from what must once have been a rich sculptural tradition in Limerick City. A significant group of chimneypieces are published here and these can be compared and contrasted with examples found elsewhere in Ireland. Few comprise of such items have been published except for those from Cork published by Sherlock<sup>1</sup> and those from Galway City by Higgins.<sup>2</sup>

The carvings consist of the following: Cat. No. 1 is a fragmentary Renaissance-style fireplace of limestone in a late medieval house on the corner of St. Nicholas and St. Peter Street. Two lintels, one (Cat. No. 2) dated 1648 and another (Cat. No. 3) dated 1627 which have been utilized to form two sides of a kerb around a flower bed in The People's Park. The original provenance of Cat. No. 2 (dated 1648) can be identified. As luck would have it Lenihan, in his *Limerick Its History and Antiquities* (1866), mentions the chimneypiece in passing in relation to a funerary monument to the Roches in St. Michael's Church. Finally, Cat. No. 4 a plainer lintel dated 1633 is now incorporated in the facade of the Augustinian Church in O'Connell Street and is most likely also to have come from a chimneypiece rather than a door lintel.

It is clear that the lintels (Cat. No. 2 and Cat. No. 3) once formed parts of the mantel pieces of fireplaces of broadly similar types to the aforementioned example. The fluting and moulding, along with the interlaced 'True Lover's Knot' in which the sets of initials on lintel of 1627 Cat. No. 2 are interlaced all suggest that both lintels also come from

<sup>1</sup> R. Sherlock, 'The Late Medieval Fireplaces of County Cork', *J. Cork Hist. and Archaeol. Soc.*, 105 (2000) pp 207-30.

<sup>2</sup> J. Higgins, *Galway's Heritage in Stone. Galway City Museum Catalogue No. 1: Catalogue of the Medieval and Late Medieval Sculpture down to the 17th century in Galway City Museum* (Galway, 2003); idem, *Galway's Heritage in Stone Catalogue No. 2: Medieval Sculpture (Down to the 19th century) at Galway City Museum* (Galway, 2004); idem, *Conamara Cathrach, Fragments of the City, Músaem Cathrach na Gaillimhe, Galway City Museum [Exhibition Catalogue]* (Galway, 2006); idem, *Galway's Heritage in Stone Catalogue No. 3: The Medieval and Late Medieval Stone Carving Collection at the National University of Ireland Galway* (Galway, 2011); idem, *A Corpus of Galwegian Medieval and Late Medieval Sculpture 13th - 17th centuries* (Galway, 2014) forthcoming.

chimneypieces. The plainer lintel fragment dated 1633 (Cat. No. 4) is likely to have also come from a chimneypiece (rather for instance, than a doorway) and its interpretation as a chimneypiece lintel is based on its height, proportions and its similarity to the other examples discussed and to examples from Galway City.

The chimneypiece and the displaced lintels, their design-sources and parallels are discussed briefly as is the heraldry of the lintel (Cat. No. 2) which is dated 1648. An attempt is made to identify the initials on the lintel Cat. No. 3 of 1627 and to identify the coats of arms displayed and the individuals who bear the arms shown on the lintel of 1648 (Cat. No. 2).

### Descriptions

#### Cat. No. 1 The Renaissance-Style Chimneypiece at the Corner of St. Peter and St. Nicholas Street (Plates 1 and 2)

The remains of a large chimneypiece survive in the northern wall of a late-medieval house. An intact undercroft and most of the sidewalls of this house are also extant. The corbels for the support of flooring beams also survive. The chimneypiece is mentioned in passing by O'Rahilly.<sup>3</sup> This is a very fine, but badly damaged piece of sculpture. The sides of jambs of the fireplace are elaborately carved, and take the forms of curved brackets or consols with moulded bases, and with the moulded fragments of a mantel-ledge above it. The front of these side-stones are curved and taper gradually inwards towards their bases. Decoration consists of formalized feathers and a plain border, above which is a formalized shell-like motif. The feather-like ornament is reminiscent of that found on the O'Kennedy wall-monument by the seventeenth-century sculptor Richard Kerin at the Dominican foundation at Lorrha, Co. Tipperary, though there the ornament has been reduced to formalized lozenges. The ends of the patterns curl upwards and inwards and bear stylized foliate ornament. On either side of the jambs are large spiral-shaped scrolls of stylized acanthus-like foliage typical of Renaissance-style ornament. This ornament is bordered by a plain rim of stone. The scrolled jambs of the chimneypiece are reminiscent of the much plainer consols or brackets flanking the door-case at the entrance to the sacristy and seventeenth-century DeBurgo-O'Malley Chantry Chapel of Ballintubber Abbey, Co. Mayo.<sup>4</sup>

The lintel and most of the hood of the mantel-piece, along with the mantel ledge, are almost completely gone. The lintel occurred above a moulded cap set on top of each jamb of the fireplace. It is clear from the surviving fragments that the outer ends and perhaps parts of the undersides were fluted and moulded respectively. A ledge seems to have projected above the lintel, but this has all but disappeared. It is likely that a long, low, rectangular lintel with a moulded, lower outer edge occurred. This could have been a single stone (or similar to one of the lintels described below) or might have been made up of two stones partly attached to each other with a metal strap leaded into it. This is also likely to have been the case with the third object (Cat. No. 3 described below). If Cat. No. 2 and Cat. No. 3 are anything to go by, the fireplace lintel may also have been attached by a metal bar leaded into a rebate and linking a mantel-ledge with the top of the lintel.

Given the elaborate form of this fireplace it seems likely that there was additional ornament on the over-mantel. Above the moulded mantel-ledge there is now a gap the

<sup>3</sup> C. O'Rahilly, 'No. 163, 36-39 Nicholas St./1-3 Peter St. Limerick, Urban Medieval' in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1994: Summary Accounts of Archaeological Excavations in Ireland* (Dublin, 1995) pp 58-9:58.

<sup>4</sup> J. Higgins, 'The De Burgo-O'Malley Tomb and Chantry Chapel at Ballintubber Abbey, Co. Mayo, (Part 1)' *Cathair na Mart, Journal of the Westport Historical Society*, 29 (2011) pp 103-16, plates 1-3.

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entire width of the fireplace chimneypiece. This may have originally been bridged by either a wooden or a stone lintel, which is a feature of many Co. Cork chimneypieces, as we shall see below. Above this again are some wedge-shaped stone voussoirs which are not finely dressed or carved but which seemed to have formed a relieving course above the now missing wooden (or stone?) lintel. Above these again there seems to have been another stone course which may have formed a ledge on the chimney-breast. Only one curved stone with a concave side and flat top survives on the outer left edge of the chimney-breast. Most of the top of the chimney-breast along with the front of the flue has disappeared. The fireplace is now badly damaged but must originally have been a splendid feature of the room which it once adorned. The style of the fireplace would seem to suggest a very late sixteenth or early seventeenth century date for it. In 1994 and again in 1995 excavations by the City Archaeologist, Celie O'Rahilly, archaeologically tested and uncovered parts of the buildings in which the fireplace occurs. The overburden of the deposits in the vaulted undercroft was excavated in 2000.

**Cat. No. 2 Chimneypiece lintel dated 1684 now in the People's Park but from the vicinity of Broad Street, John Street or Curry's Lane (Plate 3-6)**

The second item to be discussed is a single stone lintel which, by analogy with Cat. No. 1 the fragmentary fireplace just described, seems also to have come from the mantel of a chimneypiece. The object has moulded and fluted ornament at its outer ends. The corners of the stone have simple, three-quarters rounded moulding and simple 'shouldered' stops. The fluting is reminiscent of that found on Cat. No. 3. The lower edge of the stone is simply moulded and has a typically seventeenth-century form of moulding. This moulding originally continued downwards from onto the jambs of the chimneypiece.

The lintel bears two achievements of arms, one at either end, and in the middle, (and set within an oval frame) is the IHS monogram, a heart pierced by the three nails of the crucifixion and the date 1648. All of the decoration is carved in low false relief. The bulbous, baluster-shaped down-strokes of the IHS monogram are typical of those found in Renaissance and Elizabethan-style architectural features, inscriptions, prints and books.

The arms of Roche occur on the left end of the stone and those of Blackwall or Blackwell occur on the right end. The arms on the left end of the lintel are those of Roche and are accompanied by the initials G and R. These arms have been blazoned by Kennedy<sup>5</sup> as follows:

Arms: Gules three Roches naiant in pale proper. Crest: On a rock proper a bird statant holding a roache (fish). In this instance what appears to be an eagle grasping a fish is shown though the modern arms shown an aspery in the crest.<sup>6</sup>

Mac Lysaght<sup>7</sup> gives the arms of Roche as follows:

Arms: Gules three roaches naiant in pale argent. Crest: On a rock proper an aspery rising argent beaked and legged or, holding in the claws a roach argent.

<sup>5</sup> P. Kennedy, *O'Kennedy's Book of Arms. Sketches collected chiefly from the Records in Ulster's Office and other authentic documents* (1815, Facsimile, Canterbury, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> Kennedy's *Book of Arms* p. 32 gives the arms of Roche, Lord Viscount Fermoy as follows: *Arms: Gules three roaches proper. Crest: On a rock a bird (?stork) statant holding in one foot a fish (a roach)* see E. Mac Lysaght, *Irish Families Their Names, Arms and Origins* (4th edn. revised and enlarged, Dublin, 1985) Plate XXV, pp 219 and 144.

<sup>7</sup> Lysaght, *Irish Families Their Names, Arms and Origins*, Plate XXV, pp 219 and 144.

Foliated heraldic mantling springs from behind the crest (there is no helm (or helmet) shown in the crest in this instance. The mantling is highly stylized foliage which ends in a pair of tassels.

One wonders whether there is any link between the G. Roche whose arms occurs and the Roche donor of the seventeenth-century uninscribed and undated chalice exhibited in the Thomond Church Silver exhibition at the Hunt Museum, Limerick in 2000. The chalice has similar heraldry but with the arms of Roche engraved in reverse. Three naiant roaches are shown swimming towards the right instead of towards the left. The helmet of nobility (or helm) has its visor facing towards the viewer's right also, and none of the usual elements of the Roche crest or a crest-wreath are shown. The shield form, and the foliated mantling which ends in a pair of tassels, bear some good similarities with the heraldry of the fireplace, however the lack of a crest wreath is also a feature of the heraldry of the fireplace lintel.<sup>8</sup>

The arms of the Roches is similar, with only a minor variation on most of the arms of Roches listed in the General Armory. 'Gules 3 roches naiant in pale' are the arms of various branches of the Roches, including those of Granagh Castle and Ryehill, Co. Galway, and the bearer extinct dormant title of Viscount Fermoy (dormant since 1733). This is also the arms allowed in 1721 to the Roches of St. Malo and borne by a great grandson of Richard Roche of Limerick City. These arms are the same as that allowed to the James Roche of Martinique in the West Indies in 1725. The Roches of Fermoy, Co. Cork (whose title Baronet became extinct in 1801) had the same arms. The holder of the Baron Fermoy bore the same arms with a 'canton of the last' for difference, while the arms of the Roches of Carass, Co. Limerick (bart.) also had the same arms with the difference of a 'border engraved of the last'. The Roches of Tourin, Co. Waterford bore 'Gules three roches naiant in pale argent' is also the arms of several English families of Roches, including those of Wellcomb in Devon recorded in a heraldic visitation of 1620, and those of the Roches of Walkneath, London is also the same. A variant (perhaps a mistake) is that of John Roche of Kilfinnan, Co. Limerick who died in 1640 and whose arms are given in his funeral entry as 'Gu. a roache naiant in fee ar'.<sup>9</sup>

The crest of the Roches used on the stone carving is an interesting variant on that used by various Roche families and helps us to associate the stone with a Co. Limerick branch of the Roches. 'On a rock proper an eagle rising argent beaked and legged or holding in the claws a roaches gules' is the crest used by Roche Viscount Fermoy (now dormant). This crest was used by the Roches of St. Malo, in Brittany and Martinique in the West Indies. That of Barons Fermoy was 'Standing on a rock proper an asprey or sea eagle with wings displayed argent collared gemel azure membered or holding a roach in its claw'. The Roches of Carass, Co. Limerick used the following crest 'A rock there on a stork close charged on the breast with a torteau, and holding in his dexter claw a roach all ppr'. The Roches of Granagh Castle and Ryehill, Co. Galway used 'A rock proper there on a fish-eagle, wings displayed argent membered or, holding in the claw a roach as in the arms' and the Roches of Ballnard used the same crest. The Roches of Woodbine Hall, Co. Waterford used the following 'An asprey or sea-eagle standing on a cliff proper the wings

<sup>8</sup> See J. McCormack, C. Lynch and M. Lynch 'Thomond Church Silver 1425-1820' (Hunt Museum Exhibition Catalogue, Limerick, 2000) p. 16. The chalice was on loan from the Roman Catholic Parish of Bruff, Grange and Meanus.

<sup>9</sup> B. Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales* (1884, new edn, Ransbury, 1989). For a modern version of the arms of an Irish Roache see Grant of Arms (Confirmation) to Michael John Roache published / created 3 January 1975 in Genealogical Office archives, National Library of Ireland Catalogue, www.NLI.ie.

extended argent membered or, in the dexter claw, a roach as in the arms.<sup>10</sup> As will be seen from the above, the only crest with a stork rather than an eagle, sea-eagle or asprey is that used by a Co. Limerick family, The Roches of Carass. An asprey holding a roche is a feature of all the other crests of the families of the various places mentioned above and we cannot link any of them specifically with that used on the chimneypiece fragment.

The other arms, on the right hand side of the stone, is carved in a similar manner to the Roche arms and has similar features. These arms are flanked by the initials S and B. Unfortunately, the Christian name of its bearer has not yet been identified, but the arms are those of either Blackwall or Blackwell, a family of English origin. The depiction of the arms on the right hand side of the stone is a slight variation on what it should be but the arms can now be identified as those of either Blackwall or Blackwell. Interestingly, the arms is the same for both families in both Ireland and Britain but the details of the crest – which is common in some of its features to both Blackwalls and Blackwells – may eventually help to identify the woman whose initials ‘S.B.’ appear on the right hand side of the stone. The arms can be blazoned as follows:

Arms: Per fess dancetty, in chief three roundels, in base a talbot dog (greyhound) passant.<sup>11</sup>

The crest is difficult to interpret. What may possibly be a very formalized helm seems to occur but is very stylized. Above this two enigmatic, limb-like features (each of which are bent inwards and downwards) occur. These are in fact the ‘embowed arms’ of the Blackwall or Blackwell crest. The underside of the lintel is moulded except where the ends of the lintel were positioned directly over the jambs of the fireplace. The dog looks far more like a talbot (a big eared breed typical of medieval heraldry) than the sleek greyhound that it is meant to represent. The arms of the Blackwall of Blackwall of The Peak in Derby, England are as follows: ‘Arms – Argent a greyhound in full course, collared chequy or and gules, on a chief dancetty of the second three bezants’. The same basic arms are used by Blackwell. Those in Blackwall of London vary only a little in its colours. ‘Argent a greyhound courant sable on a chief indented of the second three bezants’. The arms of John Blackwall is given by The General Armory as ‘argent a greyhound courant or collared chequy or and gules on a chief indented of the second three bezants.’<sup>12</sup>

The crest of Blackwall or Blackwell on the stone looks like a pair of arms both bent at the elbow and with one curved partly around the other. Some Blackwall and some Blackwell families have similar features. Blackwall of Blackwall, in The Peak, Derby has ‘Two arms embowed, habited in mail proper, hands argent’. Blackwall-Evans of Idrighay, Derby have ‘Two arms embowed habited in mail proper holding a greyhound’s head coupé at the neck sable collared chequy or and gules’ and the crest of John Blackwall confirmed in 1764 is given in the General Armory as ‘A greyhound’s head coupé sa, collared chequy or and gules between two arms embowed habited in mail proper’. Some Blackwell achievements including those Amprey Park have ‘Two arms embowed in scale armour, hands proper holding a greyhound’s head coupé at the neck gules, collared sable.’<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *The General Armory*, pp 863-4.

<sup>11</sup> The division per fess could be described as either ‘indented’ since the points are closely spaced and frequent or ‘dancetty’ a term usually used to describe more widely-spaced pointed indents in such a division of the shield.

<sup>12</sup> *The General Armory*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

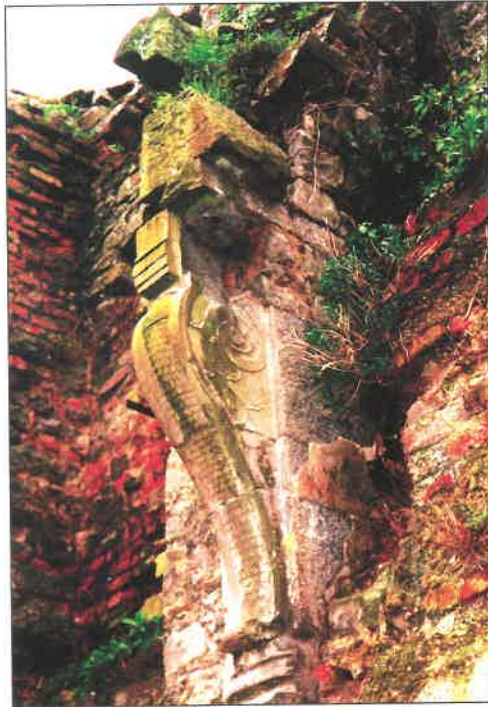
The Blackwells do not have an entry in *Burke's Irish Family Records* but the Blackwalls do. The Blackwalls trace their ancestry from Richard Blackwall (alias Blackhall) of Exter-Devon, who settled at Black Island, Co. Limerick according to last-mentioned source. This goes on to say that Richard settled at Black Island in the time of Charles I. He was expelled from there and robbed by the Irish in the 1641 rebellion and was later besieged by the Confederates under Lord Muskerry at Kilfinny Castle in 1642. The Irish Blackwalls are descendent from him and his first son Thomas. It seems likely, though it cannot yet be proven, that there is a link between these Blackwalls and the female Blackwall represented by the heraldry shown here. His second son John, of Kevin Street, Dublin has a son Richard who was baptized on 16 September 1686. The third son of Richard was George whose address is given as Angier Street, Dublin. He was an Alderman in 1683, Receiver-General in 1694, and City Treasurer in 1695. He was removed, along with other Protestant Aldermen in the reign of James II in 1687 but was restored to office in 1690 in the reign of William III. By fortunate coincidence Maurice Lenihan, in his history of Limerick, happens to mention this fireplace (Cat. No. 2) in the context of the Roche family as follows:

While speaking of families, I may here note a curious discovery recently made in one of those very narrow and miserable lanes that run between Broad Street and John Street and Curry's Lane, of what had been some few hundred years ago a magnificent chimneypiece, made of richly grained red and white marble, massive and beautiful; it is now fixed over the fireplace in a room of one of the houses in this narrow lane. It is about ten feet in width; about five and a half in height; the architrave is nearly two feet in breadth; and on it are sculptured, in relief, on the extreme right, the arms of the Roche family on a floriated shield; a bird with outspread wings perched on a rock forms the crest and tops a shield – underneath, on the face of the shield, are three roches nayants – at either side of the crest are the letters. C. R. - at the extreme left of the architrave are the arms of a family, which I am unable to identify by reference to the contemporary matter written in the MSS of Dr. Thomas Arthur; but those arms are also beautifully sculptured in relief on a floriated shield likewise. The crest is formed, neither of bird or animal, but of something which appears to be a warlike weapon – underneath the arms, a hound passant, and on either side are the works S.B. In the middle of the architrave, between the two floriated shields, are the initial letters I.H.S. a cross on the H is a French cross, tri-foliated, and the letters are foliated also. Underneath is the figure of the Sacred Heart pierced with three swords. The pillars on which the architrave rests, are fluted, and the top or mantel-piece is fluted in the same manner. It indicates the costly taste of the citizens at the time when Pyers Creaght Fitz Andrew was Mayor of the City, when "trouperers were cessed" on the citizens at 15d. a day; when the civil war, which began in Limerick in 1641, was still raging, and a short time before Ireton's dreadful siege. There was an "Edmundus Roch, Corkagiensis" – an ancestor, most likely, of the Catholic Roches of Limerick in the city at this period; his name we found at p. 75 of Dr. Thomas Arthur's Diary, who says he cured his daughter of measles, for which he received a fee of £1, equal to a very considerable sum in our money.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> M. Lenihan, *Limerick: Its History and Antiquities, Ecclesiastical, Civil and Military from the Earliest Ages etc.* (Dublin, 1866); he records the inscription in St. Michael's churchyard as follows: 'Pray for the Souls of Philip and Ellen Roche 1755' and describes the deceased as 'the first members of the Catholic family of Roche who has settled in Limerick after the revolutionary war', pp 345-6). I have been unable as yet to identify the exact individuals whose arms are depicted, but hope eventually to do so.



The description of the fireplace given by Lenihan would seem to suggest that the stonework must have been painted in imitation of coloured stone or 'marble'. The stone is of limestone and now bears no trace of colour. The above description by Lenihan confirms the use of the lintel as fireplace elements and gives it a Limerick City provenance. Unfortunately he makes no reference to the next set of lintels.



**Plate 1** Cat. No. 1 Renaissance Style Chimneypiece on the corner of St. Peter and St. Nicholas Streets. Left side.



**Plate 2** Cat. No. 1 Right side of St. Peter – St. Nicholas Street chimneypiece.

**Cat. No. 3 Chimneypiece Lintel with initials dated 1627 in The People's Park (Plates 7-10)**

The third item is a lintel of a chimneypiece formed of two stones. These are likely to have been originally attached together at their inner ends by a metal bar leaded into a recess in each stone but no such a fitting can be detected. In the tops of each stone however there is a slight rebate which held a metal spline or fitting which probably helped to hold a moulded course such as is found on the top of the St. Peter/St. Nicholas Street fireplace to the top of the two stones which formed the lintel. On the left end of the stone is a knot interlaced through the initials I and P and ends in a pair of thin tassels. These are cut in very low false relief within a rectangular recess in the stone with a low triangular top. On the right end of the second half of the lintel is a similar recess cut in very low false relief and bearing the initials E and A with interlace through them. The knot-work ends in a pair of thin tassels. Near the inner ends of the two stones and running across both the inscription ANO DNI and the date 1627. There are two S-shaped constriction marks above the ANO DNI indicating that the words have been abbreviated from ANNO DOMINO, (The Year of Our Lord).

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The lower edges of these stones are embedded in cement mortar but it is clear that they are bevelled or moulded for much of their length except in the areas immediately above where the jambs of the fireplace originally sat. It is also clear that the lintel was left un-moulded at either end, just above the jambs of the fireplace.

Chimneypieces with similar stops and mouldings on the outer corners of the mantle are common. A dated example of 1619 with chamfered stops and cable moulding is now in the Tourist Office at the Market House, Kildare. It is believed to have been brought there from Castledermot and bears the following inscription; 'This. Chimnie. was. made by Gerald. Fitz. Geralde. The xxth of Febrvarie 1619.' The inscription which is in three lines seems to imply that it was all made in one day. Only two inscribed stones from it now survive.<sup>15</sup>



**Plate 3** Cat. No. 2 Chimneypiece lintel with the IHS monogram dated 1648. The arms of Roche at the left end and those of Blackwall (or Blackwell) at the right end of the stone. The Peoples Park, Limerick.

**Cat. No. 4 Fragment of a Chimneypiece Lintel dated 1633 from Fish Lane Chapel, now in the facade of the Augustinian Church in O'Connell Street (Plate 11)**

It is uncertain whether this lintel of fossiliferous limestone came from a doorway or from a fireplace but by analogy with other Irish examples it would seem most likely to have come from a fireplace as we shall see in the discussion below. The stone is considerably battered and damaged. The right end of the stone has been cut in modern time when it was inserted in the church wall and a small triangular repair in limestone has been inserted at the lower left-hand corner of the stone. The stone bears a cross and IHS monogram with a heart pierced by three nails below it. This signifies Jesu Hominum Salvator (Jesus the Saviour of Mankind) or In Hoc Signo (Vinces) [In this Sign (Conquer)] depending on the interpretation. This is flanked by the date 1633. The carving is recessed and the decoration is left in low false relief.

<sup>15</sup> See H.A. King, 'The Medieval and 17th Century Carved Stone Collections in Kildare', *J. Kildare Archaeol. Hist. Soc.* (Centenary Edition, 1991) pp 59-95:94 and plate 43 for the Kildare chimneypiece.



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**Plate 4**  
Detail of Cat.  
No. 2 showing  
the IHS  
monogram, a  
cross a heart  
pierced with the  
three nails of the  
Crucifixion and  
the date 1648.



**Plate 5**  
Detail of Cat.  
No. 2 showing  
the arms and  
crest of Roche  
and the initials  
G.R. The  
People's Park,  
Limerick.



**Plate 6**  
Detail of Cat.  
No. 2 showing  
the arms and  
crest of  
Blackwall or  
Blackwell and  
the initials S.B.  
The People's  
Park, Limerick.





**Plate 7** Two piece lintel Cat. No. 3 dated 1627, The People's Park, Limerick.



**Plate 8**  
Detail of  
chimneypiece  
lintel Cat. No. 3,  
dated 1627, The  
People's Park,  
Limerick.



**Plate 9**  
Right end of  
Cat. No. 3  
of 1627 and  
bearing the  
initials E.A.,  
The People's  
Park, Limerick.



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**Plate 10**  
Left end of Cat.  
No. 3 of 1627  
and bearing the  
initials I and P.



**Plate 11**  
Lintel dated 1633  
from Fish Lane  
Chapel now in  
the facade of  
the Augustinian  
Church, O'Connell  
Street, Limerick.

### Discussion

The Limerick fireplaces described above are just some survivals from what must have been a strong late-medieval sculptural tradition. It would be very worthwhile to compile a complete corpus of them and to examine their heraldry, iconography, structural forms and parallels in detail. The great eighteenth to early-nineteenth-century Georgian phase seems to have swept away much of the domestic architecture and sculpture of the late medieval and early modern periods in cities like Cork, Dublin and Limerick. By contrast, there has been a greater survival of the type of fabric in places like Galway and Kilkenny for instance.<sup>16</sup> The extent of survival of the late-medieval house in which the Renaissance

<sup>16</sup> For the Galway fireplaces see Higgins (2003) Cat. Nos. 19-22, Higgins (2004) Cat. No. 3, 4 and 5, pp 8 and 50. Higgins (2011), Cat. Nos. 10, 11 and 12, pp 21-7. A stone bearing a sea eagle or asprey and a roche now in Galway City Museum may also have Roche family associations, see Higgins (2004) Cat. No. 8, pp 15 and 50.

-style chimneypiece (Cat. No. 1) occurs is impressive. The vaulted undercroft of the building, substantial portions of the walls and the corbels on which the beams supporting some of the floor rested all survive in situ. This chimneypiece (Cat. No. 1) is difficult to parallel closely in Ireland though some of its individual features can be paralleled in the few Renaissance influenced chimneypieces, which remain in Ireland. One of the small number of typically Renaissance-style fireplaces to be found in Ireland is the very highly ornamented one in Donegal Castle, Co. Donegal.<sup>17</sup> Though very different in its elaboration from the Limerick example some small points of detail are similar especially in the ornament around the arms of Brook and Leicester which occupy two panels of the overmantel. The general curved shape of the three pairs of consoles which divide the overmantel into panels is reminiscent, in a general way, of the jambs of the Limerick chimneypiece. The Donegal example, with its heraldic panels, swags, strap-work, foliage and so on, is more elaborate by far than the example under discussion but does give some clue as to how the lintels and mantel of the Limerick chimneypiece may have been ornamented. The many individual chimneypieces have been published in articles and books, few corpora of Irish chimneypieces occur apart from Sherlock's (2000) catalogue and discussion of the County Cork examples and the writer's corpus of the examples in Galway City Museum and at NUI Galway and general discussion of the Galway City examples (See Higgins, (2003), Higgins (2004) and especially Higgins (2011) for the latter collection. Heraldic chimneypieces are generally rare in Ireland before the sixteenth century. In Galway dated heraldic fireplaces begin to occur in the 1550s and continue down to the early 1650s with only the occasional example being carved thereafter: the tradition of such heraldic chimneypieces ended then, mainly because of the Cromwellian Wars and the breaking of the power of the families for which they were mainly made, the so-called 'Tribes of Galway'. At least forty examples occur and most of them are carved with dates and initials. The Galwegian chimneypiece lintels on which the heraldry is carved are always taller than those from Limerick and usually consist of a central trapezoidal key stone supported between side-stones (or sometimes on top of side-stones and corbels). In some examples two separate 'spandrels' form the top of the mantel piece and 'fold' together and meet in the middle. These examples are usually attached by metal bars leaded into rebates for security and strength in the manner which has been suggested above as the way in which the two stones of Cat. No. 2 may have been attached.

Usually in Galway (and often elsewhere in Ireland) the arms of the owner or owners of the house in which the fireplace occurred appear. Most commonly, the arms of a married couple are impaled *Baron and Femme* to use the old heraldic terminology, with the arms of the man on the left side of the shield and those of his wife on the right. In a few cases the arms of the two individuals occur in separate shields. The initials of the people whose arms occur on the Galway carvings and from the 1640s and 1650s onwards the full names also occur on a few of the fireplaces. The Galwegian armorial fireplaces are usually carved with both the date and initials only however as in the case with Cat. No. 2 from Limerick. On Cat. No. 3 the initials shown are most likely those of a man and wife as well. The dates on the Galwegian chimneypieces sometimes but not always refer to the dates of the construction of the building or extension to the building in which the fireplace was erected instead of necessarily referring to the date of a marriage or alliance. It is worth noting as a point of difference that the Galwegian heraldic carvings generally have well

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed description of the Donegal Castle fireplace see B. Lacy *et al.* (eds), *Archaeological Survey of County Donegal* (Lifford, 1983) and also T.E. McNeill and M.A. Wilkin, 'Donegal Castle', *Ulster Archaeol. J.*, 38 (1999) pp 81-9.

carved crests and in the case of an impalement (the joining of two arms together in a single shield) the crest of the male is usually placed above the shield bearing both arms. Elaborate mantling ending in tassels is usually a feature of these carvings too.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the Irish heraldic chimneypieces also bear religious iconography as well as heraldry especially those dating from c.1615 to the 1620s and between 1645 and 1650. Usually the IHS monograph and cross along with a heart often pierced by three nails occurs. This iconography also occurs as we have seen on three of the Limerick examples of 1648 (Cat. No. 2), 1627 (Cat. No. 3), and 1633 (Cat. No. 4). The IHS is also on several of the Co. Cork chimneypieces including one of those at Barryscourt Castle of 1588, an example in a laneway off North Main Street of 1386 and one at Mahon Castle of 1627.<sup>19</sup>

Occasionally, on chimneypieces associated with religious houses, religious iconography occurs on its own as is the case with Cat. no. 4 from Limerick and with two chimneypieces dated 1615 from the Dominican Convent in Kirwan's Lane, Galway. One of these, a complete example, is now at the Wedgewood Galway Crystal Interpretive Centre, Dublin Road, while the keystone of the other is now in the northern porch of the Dominican Church, Claddagh, Galway City. Generally speaking the points of similarity between the Galwegian and Limerick decorated fireplace are in their decoration rather than in their size. The heraldry and religious iconography is similar but the size and proportions of the fireplace, mantels and lintels is very different as can be seen in Plates 3 – 6 and 9.

The pseudo-interlaced knot-work with the initials entwined in the loops of the knotwork is not found on Galwegian fireplaces but is found on the Renaissance style door-case-cum-oriel window from the house of Dominic and Maria Browne dated 1627. This feature was originally in their mansion in Abbeygate Street Lower but is now at Eyre Square. A stone panel with a set of initials dated 1585 with similar knot-work to that on Cat. No. 3 from Limerick is to be found at the Royal Society of Antiquities headquarters in Dublin.<sup>20</sup> Similar knot-work with the initials of Queen Elizabeth I and various portrait heads and other ornament occurs in plasterwork at the Butler house of Ormond Castle, Carrick-on-Suir where there is some strapwork ornament which is also reminiscent of that found on the Donegal Castle chimneypiece.<sup>21</sup>

The Limerick fireplaces fragments described above seem to represent a regional variation and for all their similarities in the content of their ornament with the Galwegian examples their forms are quite different. Such a regional variation is not unusual however. In Kilkenny City for example the sixteenth to early-seventeenth-century fireplace is common with scores of examples known. However only one or two of these are elaborately ornamented with heraldry. The burgers of Kilkenny – notably the ten most important families – tended to display their heraldry (usually impaled or quartered) on large heraldic panels incorporated in the facades of their houses rather than on internal features like chimneypieces. This is in obvious contrast to heraldic display in Galway where heraldic panels with moulded surrounds number less than a dozen as against the several score of such panels which occur in Kilkenny City.

<sup>18</sup> Higgins, *Galway City Museum Catalogue No. 1* (2003).

<sup>19</sup> Sherlock, 'The Late Medieval Fireplaces of County Cork', pp 207-30.

<sup>20</sup> A panel from Monksgrange Castle, Co. Dublin, now in the Society of Antiquities, Merrion Square, Dublin, bears initials and very similar knots interlaced through them and the Browne Doorway, Renaissance style portal and oriel window combined and now at Eyre Square Galway bears a similar knot and is dated 1627. The portal originally came from Abbeygate Street Lower, see J. Higgins, 'The Browne Doorway', *An Taisce Newsletter* (Galway 1984).

<sup>21</sup> See J. Fenlon, *Ormond Castle* (Dublin, 1996) pp 14 and 40 for plaster panels with sways scrolls and other details. The knotwork around the ER (Elizabeth Regina) is similar and also ends in narrow tassels, see p. 12 of Fenlon's booklet.



The Galwegian chimneypieces only rarely have long inscriptions. Usually only two sets of initials and a date occur.<sup>22</sup> Unusually the one from the High Street, Galway City now in Galway City Museum has:

‘In Godis.name.Katline.French.and.her.son.Robart.French.is.arms,’ and the date 1627.<sup>23</sup>

By contrast, many of the eleven inscriptions found on the County Cork chimneypieces are long and elaborate. Sometimes they refer to the owners of the building and often sometimes too, there is a religious text accompanying the details of the owners and the date.<sup>24</sup>

In Galway City the structural features of the chimneypieces are remarkably consistent from the 1550s to the late 1650s. In all cases the lintels are of stone. Frequently too, there is above the mantel-ledge a shallow, relieving arch of stone. Wooden lintels between or above the mantel ledge and the relieving arch do not occur as may have been the case with Cat. No. 1 from the corner of St. Peter and St. Nicholas Street, Limerick.

In Co. Cork, there is a chronological distinction in the structural aspects of the chimneypieces. The earlier examples generally found in tower houses and dating to the fifteenth and early-sixteenth century usually had a stone lintel and are frequently undecorated. The later examples are usually in fortified houses of the sixteenth or early-seventeenth century and are normally spanned by a lintel sometimes or timber, but in many cases the hearth area may be spanned by a decorative principal arch, normally flat in elevation. Relieving arches where present, are generally segmented in form. Over 36% of the fireplaces now display decoration, though this is probably an underestimation of the original figure.<sup>25</sup>

If the evidence of the Co. Cork examples can be applied to Limerick City the Peter Street and St. Nicholas Street chimneypieces may have had a multi-piece lintel (of stone), a mantel ledge of stone and a wooden beam between the top of the mantel ledge and may be datable to the late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century. From the historical perspective too, this is a likely date for that chimneypiece. We are fortunate that the other fireplace lintels are dated, Cat. No. 2 is dated to 1648 and Cat. No. 3 is dated 1627. These Limerick chimneypieces are excellent examples of late medieval stone sculpture which are not only important architectural and archaeological survivals, they also provide good evidence for a best late-medieval sculptural tradition which, in the main is now only represented in funerary monuments rather than in domestic architecture.

<sup>22</sup> Higgins, *Galway City Museum Catalogue No. 1* (2003) pp 25 – 31.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, Cat. No. 21, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Sherlock, ‘The Late Medieval Fireplaces of County Cork’, pp 210-11.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.