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Old Testament prefigurations of New Testament events on Irish high crosses

PETER HARBISON*

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Abstract

Irish high crosses feature a number of clear-cut instances where Old Testament figures can be understood to prefigure events in the New Testament. Examples are cited from the North Cross at Castledermot, the Market Cross at Kells and Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice. Two further panels are here re-interpreted as prefiguration scenes: *The Fall of Jericho* on the Tall Cross at Monasterboice and *Joseph and the Pharaoh's Butler* on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise. Acceptance of the latter interpretation implies that this cross need no longer be associated with the erection of the Cathedral at the site in 909, and could open the way to a potential dating of this and similar crosses to the late ninth century.

Introduction

Along with the Carolingian frescoes in the church at Müstair in the eastern Swiss Canton of Graubünden,¹ the Irish high crosses have, taken together, the greatest and most varied selection of Old and New Testament narrative scenes preserved anywhere from the second half of the first millennium AD. They appear in the form of carved panels usually, though not always, rectangular in shape, which are placed on both the faces and the sides of the crosses. Usually, though again not always, the east face is devoted to the Old Testament (with, occasionally, a *Last Judgment* or related scene above), while the west face has the *Crucifixion* at the centre of the head, accompanied by illustrations from the Life, Passion and Resurrection of Christ. This division of the material, echoing that in the wall decoration of earlier continental churches, offers a suitable opportunity to examine potential Old Testament prefigurations of New Testament events, best exemplified (though not exclusively) on a group of crosses in Counties Louth, Meath and Offaly that have been attributed to a workshop whose master-wright has been dubbed the 'Muiredach Master'.²

The material covered can be seen to range widely from the Book of Genesis to eschatological scenes associated with the Last Day, the beginning and the

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¹ Jörg Goll, Matthias Exner and Susanne Hirsch, *Müstair. Die mittelalterlichen Wandbilder in der Klosterkirche* (Müstair/Zurich, 2007).

² Roger Stalley, 'Artistic identity and the Irish scripture crosses' in R. Moss (ed.), *Making and meaning in insular art* (Dublin, 2007), 153–66.

end, as it were. Starting with *Adam and Eve*, it was their original sin that caused Christ to give his life for mankind on the cross, a link shown, for instance, on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. Here we have Our First Parents starting off the biblical programme at the bottom of the east face of the shaft, accompanied by their offspring *Cain slaying Abel* (Fig. 1), the latter being the first innocent victim of the Old Testament, and looking forward to the *Crucifixion* in the most prominent position at the centre of the west face, where *Christ* becomes the innocent victim *par excellence* of the New Testament. This conjunction is brought home even more forcefully on the North Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare (Fig. 2), where we find *Adam and Eve* uniquely taking centre stage on the head of the east face of the cross with, back to back with it, the *Crucifixion* at the centre of the head of the west face. A comparable case is presented on the

FIG. 1—*Cain slays Abel* at the bottom of the east face of the shaft of Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth. Note the wavy hem of Cain's garment. Photo: P. Harbison.

FIG. 2—*Adam and Eve* occupy the central position on the head of the east face of the North Cross at Castledermot, Co. Kildare. Photo: P. Harbison.

Market Cross at Kells, where *Daniel* in crucifixion pose with outstretched arms is featured at the centre of the head on what was once the east face (Fig. 3), as the counterbalance to the crucified *Christ* on the other face. But the cross on which we can most easily sense the use of prefiguration is the Broken Cross at Kells, Co. Meath (Figs. 4–5), which must have been re-erected some centuries ago, as its Old Testament scenes are on the west face, and those of the New Testament on the east, which is the opposite to what one expects from the great Scripture crosses. How the Old Testament scenes can be seen to prefigure those illustrating the New Testament back to back with them has already been discussed in some detail,³ and so need not be repeated here, interwoven as they were with the significance of water and its cleansing effect in the sacrament of baptism.

In addition to these clear-cut cases, there are two notable instances where, in my view, mis-identifications of panels have obscured their prefiguration function. The first of these concerns the panel at the centre of the head of

³ Peter Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland* (3 vols, Bonn, 1992), vol 1, 333–34. It should be mentioned in passing that the third panel up on the east face of the cross should, I suggest, now best be interpreted as *The raising of Lazarus* on the left, with *Christ talking to Martha and Mary* on the right.

FIG. 3—The figure of *Daniel* at the centre of the head of what was once the east face of the Market Cross at Kells, Co. Meath. Photo: P. Harbison.

FIGS. 4–5—The west and east faces respectively of the Broken Cross at Kells, Co. Meath. Photos: P. Harbison.

FIG. 6—The figure with sword and shield at the centre of the head of the east face of the Tall Cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth is here identified as *Joshua* in connection with the Fall of Jericho. Photo: P. Harbison.

the Tall Cross at Monasterboice (Fig. 6), where we see a central figure holding a sword and shield, with a staff over the right shoulder and a miniature figure above the left. He is accompanied on each side by soldiers equally bearing swords and shields standing above a series of wavy lines. Over the years, this panel has received a variety of interpretations listed in volume 1 of *The High Crosses of Ireland—David acclaimed king of Israel, Goliath, The Ascension and Christ in Glory*, the last of which seems particularly inappropriate given the number of weapons and shields illustrated.⁴ It has recently been argued⁵ that the depiction of *The Fall of Jericho* on folio 59b of the Bible of San Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome, dating from around 870 (Fig. 7), could lead to a very different interpretation of the Tall Cross scene. Here the figure of *Joshua*, albeit unarmed (though described as a warrior in the Book of Exodus), appears twice, once at the bottom of the page where he can be seen arming the Reubenites, Gadites and half the tribe of Manasseh (Joshua 4,12) with round shields similar to those on the Monasterboice cross. He is shown again, further up, supervising the transport of the Ark of the Covenant across the river Jordan, whose waves recall the wavy lines beneath the figures' feet at Monasterboice. Top right is the actual scene of *The Fall of Jericho*, for which there was no room on the

⁴ Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland*, vol. 1, 148.

⁵ Peter Harbison, 'The Monasterboice high crosses: an addendum', *Archaeology Ireland*, 30:1 (Spring 2016), 40–41.

FIG. 7—*Joshua and the Fall of Jericho* as illustrated on fol. 59b of the Bible of S. Paolo fuori le Mura in Rome, of c. 870.

cross-head, but a short-hand version of it may be given by the miniature individual above the main Monasterboice figure's left shoulder who may represent the harlot Rahab. She saved Joshua's henchmen from being caught when he sent them to spy out the land of Canaan in preparation for his destruction of the city, during which only Rahab's family were to be spared. The early church commentator Origen saw the Fall of Jericho as a prefiguration of the Last Judgment,⁶ the good (Rahab's family) being saved from the bad (the denizens of

⁶ *In Homiliae in Librum Jesu Nave* VII, 1–2, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca*, XII (Paris 1857), 856–59. Saints Jerome (*Patrologia Latina* 22, 545 – *Joshua = Jesus*) and Augustine (*Patrologia Latina* 34, 743) both saw Joshua as an Old Testament 'type' of Christ.

Jericho), so that we could envisage *The Fall of Jericho* at Monasterboice as a suitable prefiguration scene instead of repeating *The Last Judgment* on the neighbouring Cross of Muiredach back to back with the *Crucifixion*.

The other instance of what I take to be a prefiguration scene, but which is not widely recognised as such, is on the most enigmatic, yet also the most discussed, panel in the whole corpus, that at the bottom of the east face of the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly (Fig. 8, bottom). It shows two figures with their feet towards one another and their faces partially towards the viewer. Their hands, one above the other, grasp an object which rises from the ground between them. The left-hand figure, as we look at it, seemingly clean-shaven with tufts of hair at the back of the head, wears a long garment with beaded hem-band just above the ankles, over which is a cape draped over the upper arm, with a broader decorated band at the bottom of the hem and a narrower ornamented section along the upright edge. Hanging down his back from a strap around his neck is a container, perhaps not so much Françoise Henry's book satchel suggestion⁷ as a small square or cylindrical bag. The presence of shoes could indicate that he is a traveller or someone of high social rank. His opposite number is shoe-less, and wears a tunic to just above the knees with a double-arched beaded hem, and a belt around the waist in ancient Roman style, attached to which is a short broad-bladed sword with clearly visible cross-guard. This figure on the right is marginally taller and, in contrast to his counterpart on the left, is clearly bearded and has hair falling down to a level just below the shoulders.

The object held by the pair of hands is narrow until it expands at the level of the figures' faces into a kind of wing on each side and a small bulbous piece on top. While Kingsley Porter⁸ took this feature to represent a bird, Crawford⁹ took the whole upper part to represent the bust of a human body, but the facial features of the bulbous piece look as if they may well be secondary. Certainly, a drawing of the panel by G.V. Du Noyer of around 1860, preserved on page 16 of Vol. VII of the artist's watercolour albums in the Library of the Royal Irish Academy (Fig. 9) shows no signs of any facial features on the globular section on top of the stem.

The two figures and what they hold have led to a variety of both local and biblical interpretations expressed over two centuries by a host of authors, a selection of whose views are summarised below, omitting, however, the absurd *Adam and Eve with the tree of life* suggestion made by Ledwich.¹⁰

⁷ Françoise Henry, *Irish art during the Viking invasions (800–1020 A.D.)* (London, 1967), 191.

⁸ Arthur Kingsley Porter, *The crosses and culture of Ireland* (New Haven [Conn.], 1931), 26.

⁹ Henry S. Crawford, 'Note on the high cross at Clonmacnois', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 40 (1910), 356.

¹⁰ Edward Ledwich, *Antiquities of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1804), 76. He was, at least, the first to suggest the vegetal nature of the central object.

FIG. 8—The two lowest panels on the east face of the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, are suggested here to represent Joseph interpreting the dream of Pharaoh's butler (below) and the butler putting a drinking horn into Pharaoh's hand (above). Photo: P. Harbison.

Local historical
interpretation

1. *Diarmait son of Cerrbél* (who was to become king on the morrow) assisting *Saint Ciarán* at Clonmacnoise to drive the first stake of his church into the ground—according to Petrie,¹¹ Champneys,¹² Power,¹³ Macalister,¹⁴

¹¹ George Petrie, 'The ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland anterior to the Anglo-Norman invasion; comprising an essay on the origin and uses of the Round Towers of Ireland', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, 20 (1845), 270.

¹² Arthur C. Champneys, *The ecclesiastical architecture of Ireland* (London, 1910), 226–7.

¹³ Rev. P. Power, *Early Christian Ireland: a manual of Irish Christian archaeology* (Dublin, 1925), 62–3.

¹⁴ R.A.S. Macalister, *The archaeology of Ireland* (London, 1928), 270–1.

FIG. 9—The lowest panel on the east face of the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise as drawn around 1860 by George Victor Du Noyer on page 16 of Vol. VII of the Royal Irish Academy's bound volumes of his watercolours shows no signs of facial features on the bulbous object at the top of the staff held by the two figures, suggesting that the existing eyes and mouth are secondary. Reproduced by courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy.

Kingsley Porter,¹⁵ Francis John Byrne,¹⁶ John Ryan,¹⁷ Brandt-Förster,¹⁸ Weir,¹⁹ Gsänger,²⁰ Richardson and Scarry,²¹ and Charles Doherty.²²

2. King *Flann Sinna* (879–916) and *Colmán*, abbot of Clonmacnoise (904–925), making a pact by swearing on a cross or pastoral staff according to Margaret Stokes,²³ or possibly combining to press into the earth what may be the church or cathedral foundation post—unless it be a simplified figuration of the cross itself—according to Françoise Henry.²⁴

¹⁵ Kingsley Porter, *Crosses and culture*, 26.

¹⁶ Francis John Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), 91.

¹⁷ John Ryan, *Clonmacnoise. A historical summary* (Dublin, 1973), 65.

¹⁸ Bettina Brandt-Förster, *Das irische Hochkreuz: Ursprung, Entwicklung, Gestalt* (Stuttgart, 1978), 86.

¹⁹ Anthony Weir, *Early Ireland: a field guide* (Belfast, 1980), 200.

²⁰ Hans Gsänger, *Die irischen Hochkreuze, ihre Geschichte, ihre Verbreitung und ihre Formgeschichte* (Freiburg i. Br., 1982), 71.

²¹ Hilary Richardson and John Scarry, *An introduction to Irish high crosses* (Cork/Dublin, 1990), 35.

²² Charles Doherty, 'Clonmacnoise', *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Munich, 2003), II, 2167.

²³ Margaret Stokes (ed.), George Petrie, *Christian inscriptions in the Irish language* (Dublin, 1872), Vol. 1, 43–4.

²⁴ Henry, *Irish art*, 191.

3. Numbers 1 and/or 2 above—according to Westropp,²⁵ Manning,²⁶ Stalley²⁷ and Ní Ghrádaigh,²⁸ to which may be added Crawford's non-committal 'warrior and cleric'.²⁹

The belief that the scene has a local historical explanation goes back to Petrie in 1845, and it remains popular. However, its supporters would not seem to have carried out a sufficiently critical examination of the ensemble of details of the composition to check whether these really tally with the proffered interpretations of the two figures and what they hold between them. In both of the suggested options listed above, the sword-bearer on the right has to be presumed to be one or other of the two posited kings, Diarmait or Flann, so that the figure on the left would correspondingly have to be seen under the circumstances as being either Saint Ciarán, founder of Clonmacnoise in the sixth century, or Colmán who was the tenth-century abbot who built the Cathedral with Flann Sinna's help in 909. But the spindly nature of the object held by both figures does not lend itself to being seen as part of a church, as Champneys³⁰ recognised over a century ago. He thought it may be a cross (though not a high cross), while Stalley and Con Manning both compared it to an enamel panel on the late ninth-century Mathilda Cross in Essen³¹ which shows the Duke of Bavaria and the eponymous abbess Mathilda grasping in similar fashion the shaft of what is clearly a cross, but not a staff,³² and certainly nothing like what is visible on the County Offaly cross. The nature of the object between the pair of Clonmacnoise figures can thus clearly be seen to be neither part of a church nor a cross, or even an actual high cross, whose erection it is thought by some to represent. On both counts, therefore, the shape of the object does not match either of the functions which it has been thought to represent.

²⁵ Thomas Johnson Westropp, 'A description of the ancient buildings and crosses at Clonmacnois, King's County', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 37 (1907), 293; he thinks it represents the erection of the Cross of the Scriptures itself.

²⁶ Conleth Manning, 'Clonmacnoise Cathedral' in Heather A. King (ed.), *Clonmacnoise Studies, Vol. 1, Seminar papers 1994* (Dublin, 1998), 73–5.

²⁷ Roger Stalley, 'Irish sculpture of the early tenth century and the work of the 'Muiredach Master': problems of identification and meaning', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 114C (2014), 159.

²⁸ Jenifer Ní Ghrádaigh, 'A stone in time: saving lost medieval memories of Irish stone monuments', in Howard Williams, Joanne Kirton and Meggen Gondek (eds.), *Early medieval stone monuments: materiality, biography, landscape* (Woodbridge [Suffolk], 2015), 228–9. She offers the curious suggestion that the object held by the two figures is likely to be a crozier.

²⁹ Crawford, 'Note on the high cross', 356.

³⁰ Champneys, *Ecclesiastical architecture*, 226–7.

³¹ Stalley, 'Irish sculpture', 160, Pl. XI; Conleth Manning, 'Clonmacnoise Cathedral', 74.

³² Stalley, 'Irish sculpture', 159. The abbess holds the cross with only one hand.

Biblical explanation

The argument that our panel is unlikely to portray a biblical subject because it is unique in Ireland, whereas one would expect some better known event to be represented in such a prominent place,³³ is scarcely persuasive, as there are a number of examples of biblical subjects making only one appearance on Irish high crosses, including that illustrating *The soldiers casting lots* on the shaft of the west face of the Cross of the Scriptures,³⁴ and the biblical Joseph subject discussed below can be deemed to be important as its prefiguration role (see below) merits its prestigious position. Furthermore, why should the Cross of the Scriptures be the only example in the whole country to have one or more panels of specifically local interest on the east face of the shaft which, on other high crosses of the kind, normally bears Old Testament (usually Genesis) scenes? Indeed, for a cross which has usually been identified as ‘The Cross of the Scriptures’ mentioned in the Annals of the Four Masters under the year 1060,³⁵ should we not expect all the main carvings on the faces of the shaft to have a biblical theme? Of course, it could be argued that the title ‘of the Scriptures’ only began to be applied decades, or even a century, after the cross was carved. Even so, it should encourage us to give due consideration to scriptural interpretations. So, let us now turn to two suggestions for identifying the panel as an Old Testament scene which would have helped the cross to have earned its epithet ‘of the Scriptures.’

4. *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* (Numbers 2.19) as suggested by Stalley,³⁶ though now withdrawn in favour of a local historical interpretation as noted above. The former is unlikely because of the apparent absence of a serpent on the upper part of the object held by the two figures, as the event is wont to be represented.³⁷
5. *Joseph interpreting the dream of Pharaoh’s Butler* (Genesis 40. 9–13)—as argued by Harbison.³⁸

This subject has the best prospects of fitting in with the details of the panel under consideration (particularly when taken in conjunction with the panel above, Fig. 8,

³³ Manning, ‘Clonmacnoise Cathedral’, 74.

³⁴ Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland*, vol. 2, figs. 139–40 and vol.3, fig. 881.

³⁵ John O’Donovan (ed.), *Annals of the kingdom of Ireland, by the Four Masters* (7 vols, Dublin, 1858–51), vol. II, Dublin 1856, 878–79, s.a.1060. ‘The Eli and Uí Forgga came upon a predatory excursion to Cluain-mic-Nois; and they took prisoners from Cros-na-Screaptra’.

³⁶ Roger Stalley, ‘European art and the Irish high crosses’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 90C (1990), 157.

³⁷ U. Graepler-Diehl, ‘Eherne Schlange’ in Engelbert Kirschbaum (ed.), *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* (Rome/ Freiburg/ Basel/ Vienna, 1994 edn.), vol. 1, 583–6.

³⁸ Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland*, Vol. 1, 202–3. This is also one of the possibilities considered in Elinor Powell, *The high crosses of Ireland, inspirations in stone* (Dublin, 2007), 123. Oliver Crilly, *The great Irish crosses: meaning and mystery* (Blackrock, 2013), 85 just mentions ‘themes from the Old Testament’.

top).³⁹ It concerns the Patriarch Joseph being told of a dream which Pharaoh's butler had while in prison, and which Joseph interpreted to mean that the butler, who had lost his job, would have it restored to him in three days. The relevant text may be quoted in full below from the Vulgate Douay version of the Bible:

The chief butler first told his dream: I saw before me a vine, on which were three branches, which by little and little sent out buds, and after the blossoms brought forth ripe grapes: And the cup of Pharaoh was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into the cup which I held, and I gave the cup to Pharaoh. Joseph answered: This is the interpretation of the dream: The three branches, are yet three days: After which Pharaoh will remember thy service, and will restore thee to thy former place: and thou shalt present him the cup according to thy office, as before thou wast wont to do.

The left-hand figure on the Clonmacnoise panel wears a long garment almost to the ankles decorated with beads or small circles on the hem. These have recently been compared by Niamh Whitfield⁴⁰ to those on Carolingian and Ottonian manuscripts such as the Stuttgart Psalter of c.830, and may have been modelled on circular appliqués sewn on in a row on a strip of cloth. Over this garment is what has been described above as a cape—unique on Irish crosses—which is draped over the right upper arm, and it too is ornamented with a broad band along the bottom and a thinner one on the upright edge. The figure's bag and shoes could indicate that he had travelled from afar—perhaps from Canaan to the land of Egypt. His lack of beard may indicate his youthfulness, in contrast to the beard of his presumably older opposite number. The wavy double arch of the right-hand figure's tunic hem corresponds to what we see on the butler's tunic in the fifth/sixth-century Vienna Genesis manuscript (Fig. 10), and the combination of this feature and beaded hem decoration is also found on the figures of Cain and Abel respectively (Genesis 4.8) on a panel in the same position on Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice (Fig. 1).

The curious upper part of the object held by the two figures finds an interesting comparison in a series of seventh- or eighth-century Coptic plied-warp woollen roundels illustrating Joseph's story, one of which—in the Simeonsstift in Trier—is illustrated here (Fig. 11). On it we can see two figures, one with a halo and seemingly longer garment and another wearing a 'tunic' to the knees, holding a slender upright object with a leaf on the stem topped by two wings or leaves with a globular piece above. Behind the haloed figure is another, sitting on what looks more like a throne than a seat. This figure Vikan⁴¹ interprets as Jacob talking to his departing son Joseph, but omits any explanation for the budding upright object. The seated figure is much more likely to be Pharaoh sitting on his

³⁹ Roger Stalley, 'Irish sculpture', 159 and 162 rejected this interpretation of both panels.

⁴⁰ Niamh Whitfield, 'Aristocratic display in early medieval Ireland in fiction and in fact: the dazzling white tunic and purple cloak', *Peritia* 27 (2016), 173–4 with Figs. 1 and 4.

⁴¹ Gary Vikan, 'Joseph iconography on Coptic textiles', *Gesta* 18, No. 1 (1979), 100–1.

FIG. 10—The chief butler hands the cup to Pharaoh on page 34 of the fifth/sixth century Vienna Genesis manuscript, gr. 31 in the National Library in Vienna. Note the double-arched hem of the butler's tunic resembling that of the right-hand figure in the bottom panel of Fig. 8. Photo: Nationalbibliothek, Vienna.

throne, and the two figures in front of him could then be Joseph and the butler holding up the vine, with the globular shape on top representing a grape. Such an explanation would also fit well the upright object on the Clonmacnoise panel, with the wings being the leaves of the vine and the bulbous piece on top a grape, so that the two figures could then be interpreted as Joseph and the butler.

It is worthy of notice that the scene back to back with our panel at the bottom of the west face of the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures represents Christ in the tomb (Fig. 12),⁴² having a bird breathing life into the corpse, indicating that the moment of Resurrection is at hand. Beneath it, on the right

⁴² Compare Anna Maria Luiselli Fadda, 'The mysterious moment of resurrection in early Anglo-Saxon and Irish iconography' in Alistair Minnis and Jane Roberts (eds.), *Text, image, interpretation: studies in honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin* (Turnhout 2007), 149-68, and Éamonn Ó Carragáin, 'Recapitulating history: contexts for the mysterious moment of resurrection on Irish high crosses', in Jane Hawkes (ed.), *Making histories: proceedings of the sixth international conference on insular art* (York 2011, Donington 2013), 246-61. Note that the beaded decoration of the shroud around Christ's face links in neatly with that seen on the hem of the long garment worn by the left-hand figure on the lower panel on the east face of the cross, here identified as Joseph.

FIG. 11—Section of a seventh/eighth century woollen Coptic roundel in the Simeonsstift in Trier, a detail of which is interpreted here as the butler and Joseph holding up a vine that budded, with Pharaoh enthroned to their right. Photo: D. Thomassin, Trier.

of the lower register of the base,⁴³ is the angel telling the ladies approaching the tomb that Christ had risen (Matthew 28.6), an event which Christ himself foretold would happen on the third day (Matthew 27.63, Mark 10.34 and Luke 24.7). As the slaying of Abel, the first innocent victim of the Old Testament located in the same position on the east face of Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, was a prefiguration of Christ's death at the centre of the west face of the cross,⁴⁴ so our east face panel with Joseph's interpretation that the butler would be re-instated on the third day, should be seen as one part of an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ rising from the dead also on the third day. The other part is provided by the panel above (Fig. 8, top) where we see two figures with swords and long garments (apparently also with broad decorated hem), that on the left handing a long horn to the man on the right. The horn

⁴³ Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland*, vol. 1, 289–90 and vol. 3, Fig. 917, with the details made clearer on the upper part of the early ninth-century ivory in the National Museum in Florence, illustrated in fig. 918.

⁴⁴ Henry, *Irish art*, 147.

FIG. 12—A bird breathes life into the body of Christ betokening his rising from the dead on the third day as seen on the panel at the bottom of the west face of the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise, exactly back to back with the panel at the bottom of the east face of the shaft interpreted here as Joseph telling Pharaoh's butler that he will be restored to his post three days hence—an Old Testament prefiguration of the Resurrection. Photo: P. Harbison.

need not be understood as a symbol of power, as suggested by Stalley,⁴⁵ but a drinking vessel of the kind seen being held by Israelites to receive water on a Moses panel on Muiredach's cross at Monasterboice, Co. Louth,⁴⁶ which Stalley suggests was carved by the same 'Muiredach master' who created the Clon-

⁴⁵ Roger Stalley, 'Irish sculpture', 162, who thought it possibly represented king Maelsechlainn passing on his rule to his son Flann Sinna. Following Fr. John Ryan, Doherty ('Clonmacnoise', 2167) has suggested that the upper panel represented an agreement between Flann Sinna and Cathal mac Conchobair, King of Connacht.

⁴⁶ Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland*, Vol. 3, Fig. 702.

macnoise cross. Thus, the upper panel could represent the fulfilment of Joseph's prediction that the butler, on the left, would be restored to his job on the third day as he hands the horn ('cup') to Pharaoh on the right (Genesis 40.21), and would confirm the real significance of the bottom panel as an Old Testament prefiguration of the Resurrection on the west face. The presenter of the horn is clearly dressed differently to the man with tunic in the panel below who was identified above as the imprisoned butler, but the long garment in the upper panel may be meant to indicate that, as guest at a birthday banquet prepared by Pharaoh for his servants (Genesis 40.20), he has been liberated and restored to his job, while the beards and swords of both of the long-garmented figures in the upper panel and the right-hand figure below could be taken to identify all three as Egyptians, in contrast to the clean-shaven Israelite Joseph in the panel beneath. The brooches on the left shoulder are the only items which could be taken to connect their wearers with Ireland, but these are also worn by biblical characters on other crosses at Kells and Monasterboice.

I have not been able to find any specific reference to the story of Joseph and the Butler in Irish biblical exegesis earlier than 900, though it may be hinted at in one of the poems in *Saltair na Rann*⁴⁷ of a century or two later. But presuming that the iconographical composition of the two panels is based on some unidentified continental model, it is relevant to our theme of prefiguration that the Commentary on Genesis by (H)rabanus Maurus, the abbot of Fulda, later Archbishop of Mainz, who died in 856, links the Joseph and the Butler story with Christ rising from the tomb.⁴⁸

Conclusion

If the biblical interpretation offered here from Genesis is found acceptable, then the local historical explanation loses its validity, and the Cross of the Scriptures need no longer be seen as having been erected in connection with the building of Clonmacnoise Cathedral in 909. Because Liam de Paor⁴⁹ made the suggestion that the Colmán whose name is inscribed on the plinth of the cross may be the carver of the cross, rather than the abbot of the name who reigned from 904 to 912, we do not necessarily have to see the cross as having been erected during these years. Thus, what seems to be the main reason for dating the major high

⁴⁷ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Saltair na Rann* (Oxford 1883), 48, for the reference to which I am grateful to Anthony Harvey.

⁴⁸ Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentaria in Genesim*, in J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus*, 2nd Ser., vol. 107, (Paris 1851), 634, Caput II, B. My thanks to Anthony Harvey for this reference also.

⁴⁹ Liam de Paor, 'The high crosses of Tech Theille (Tihilly), Kinnitty, and related sculpture' in Etienne Rynne (ed.), *Figures from the past: studies on figurative art in Christian Ireland in honour of Helen M. Roe* (Dun Laoghaire, 1987), 154.

crosses to the early tenth century must be called into question, leaving open the possibility of a late ninth-century dating.

The reign of king Flann Sinna, whose name appears on the Cross of the Scriptures, stretches across both centuries, 879 to 916. The same also goes for the Muiredach mentioned in the inscription on the Monasterboice Cross who is normally, and reasonably, identified as the abbot of the monastery who reigned from 887 to 924. But as Matthew Stout⁵⁰ has recently reminded us, the Monasterboice inscription is secondary, obviously cut in between and around the pre-existing cuts. This could be interpreted to mean that Muiredach—who, as his obituary in the *Annals of Ulster* says, was ‘high-steward of the Uí Néill of the South and head of counsel of all the men of Brega, lay and clerical’⁵¹—may have been involved in erecting the cross even before becoming abbot, after which it was deemed necessary to insert his name on the cross.

The possibility that this group of crosses could be late ninth century is, I have argued, supported by the presence of *Earth* and *Ocean*.⁵² These two classical figures underwent a renaissance on the Continent in the later years of the reign of Charles the Bald, roughly from 860 to 875, but virtually disappeared when imperial patronage evaporated with the emperor’s death in 877. Their transmission to Ireland could have come about in a variety of ways. One possibility is that craftsmen, abandoned by the emperor’s successor, came to Ireland in the last two decades of the ninth century and there contributed to the country’s high cross iconography, including that of the Cross of the Scriptures. Given that we know only seven or eight examples of the presence of these figures in Ireland (including arguably two from Clonmacnoise), it seems to me more likely that the majority would have been carved before the year 900. Whatever its precise date, the large posthole discovered by Heather King⁵³ under the Cross of the Scriptures raises the tantalising prospect that it replaced a wooden cross.

⁵⁰ Matthew Stout, *Early Medieval Ireland, 431-1169*, (Dublin 2017), 148.

⁵¹ William M. Hennessy (ed.), *Annals of Ulster*, vol. I, (Dublin 1887), 446–47.

⁵² Peter Harbison, ‘*Earth* and *Ocean* on Irish high crosses’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 140 (2010), 83–8.

⁵³ Heather A. King, ‘Burials and high crosses at Clonmacnoise (Ireland)’ in Guy De Boe and Frans Verhaeghe (eds.), *Death and burial in medieval Europe. Papers of the ‘Medieval Europe Brugge 1997’ conference, vol. 2. I.A.P. rapporten 2* (Zellik, 2007), 127–31. My thanks to Heather King for this reference.