

RAHAN

RAITHIN

County Offaly

**Shafts of Light on
Old-World Monastic Life**



Rahan, Its Geographical Setting. (*County Offaly, Ireland. ed.*)

The Slighe Mhor (pr. Shlee Vor) or Great Highway from Tara to Galway Bay, crossing the Shannon at Clonmacnoise, was officially opened A.D. 123 by the King of Ireland. Like the other four highways, it was skilfully planned, solidly constructed, and sufficiently wide to accommodate two chariots driving side by side. Last July (July 1936. ed.) the Archdeacon of Clonmacnoise, Right Rev. Monsignor Langan, appealed to the public bodies to reconstruct that portion of the road leading immediately to St. Ciaran's city, so as to render it as safe for traffic as it was one thousand eight hundred years ago in the reign of King Cormac Mac Art. Centuries after its construction monasteries famous in ecclesiastical history flourished by the side of the great roadway, such as Clonard, Durrow, Clonmacnoise, and that founded in



Church of Ireland, Rahan

Rahan by "the greatest ornament of the Irish Church of his period" (Lanigan), namely, by St. Carthach (pronounced Kar-hach) or Carthage or Mo Choda. Another important geographical fact to bear in mind is that this road from Tara to Clonmacnoise passed through the ancient principality of Meath, which corresponded in territory with the present Diocese of Meath, plus the present Diocese of Clonmacnoise.

The Name Carthach Or Carthage.

The name Carthach (the affectionate) was a baptismal name taken from an older bishop of the name, known as Carthach the Elder, a scion of the Eoghanacht or royal race of Cashel. The subject of this lecture is known as Carthach the Younger and Carthach of Rahan and Lismore. The pet name given to him by his senior namesake and patron was Mo Chuid (my beloved), and his disciples were afterwards known as Giolla Mo Choda. The well known Kerry cognoman, Mac Giolla Coda (MacGillacuddy) keeps the name alive, as do the culminating mountain ranges, the MacGuillacuddy Reeks. The birth (563 A.D. ed.) of the glorious soldier of Christ was heralded by miracles. An angel foretold to St. Brendan the birth of the child "who was to gain multitudes for Heaven. His first City shall be Raithin, in the region of the Fir-Ceall of Meath, which will become a place revered"



Church and Cemetery

Carthach's Birthplace.

Carthach Mo Choda was the son of a wealthy landman, named Finghan, who possessed two lioses not far from Castlemaine in West Kerry. The lad grew up full of the Spirit of Christ, "graceful of figure and handsome of features as David; master of his passions as Daniel; mild and gentle as Moses." His father, who employed him as a swineherd, despised the lad because of his want of earthly values—he was a boy of prayer and contemplation rather than one who

would increase his father's wealth in swine or land property. The family was of the race of Ciar-ruighe (Kerry), descended from Ciar, a son of Fergus and Queen Maeve of Connaught.

Carthach Visits The Kerry King.

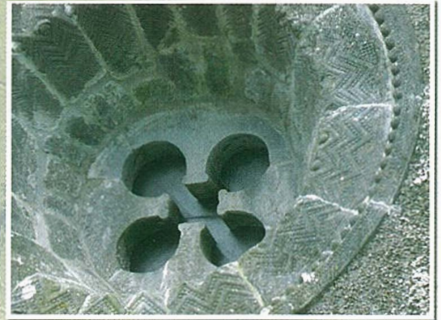
One day the elder Carthach, accompanied by a host of clerics and singing hymns along the Kerry road, passed by the swineherd's land. The little boy, ravished by the melody of their strains, stealthily followed the chanting host to the dun of the local king of Ciar-ruighe Luachra, named King Maol-tul. The king conceived a great liking for the shy, gentle boy, around whose neck he saw a chain of gold, visible to himself only, while a column of fire ascended from the youth's head towards Heaven. Young Carthach refused a royal offer of a sword, javelin and shield, adding that he was mysteriously attracted by the singing of the clerics, and that his one desire now was to learn their psalms and their ritual. In accordance with the wishes of the king the boy was placed in charge of the bishop, Sean-Charthach, and accommodated in a cell called Cill-Tullach near the river Maine. The name survives in the proper name of the parish of Castlemaine, and it is quite possible that the second word of the place name as well as the king's name comes from St. Tel-og, a nephew of St. Patrick.



12th century carving on chancel arch

He Visits Many Monasteries.

Afterwards he went to Bangor, near Belfast, to study under St. Comhghall. His personal wish was to go to Rome with the stream of Irish clerics who went abroad to evangelise, but on the advise of his angel he returned to Kerry, where he built many churches and did much missionary work.



Unique circular East Window - 12th cent.

And Settles In Rahan.

Mo Choda visited many famous monasteries in order to perfect his education and study the laws of monastic discipline. The old "Lives" give many details, till we find him here near Tullamore in the monastery of Lynally. The abbot, St Colm-an Elo, a nephew of Colm Cille, advised him to go to Rahan - the place of the ferns - on the great Tara highway, prophesying that he should be known in future as Carthach Raithuin; so also would Rahan be known as Raithin Cartaigh (Rahan of Carthach). Mo Choda, accompanied by two monks, went on to the Place of Ferns, and built their cells of stout posts, crosspieces, saplings and plaster, and roofed them over with thatch. (595 A.D. ed.)



O' Molloy's, Chiefs of the Fir Ceall.

The territory of which Rahan became one of the capitals was known as Fir Ceall, comprising the present baronies of Fir Ceall (Eglish), Ballycowan and Ballyboy. The chiefs of this territory were the O'Molloys. The rise of the city was phenomenal. In a short time we find a community of eight hundred and forty-seven monks following Mo Choda's Rule, working on the land, building schools, churches – seven in all – an hospital for lepers, whom Carthach himself, with Christlike devotion, tended with loving care.

The Rule Of Mo Choda.

The rule of Mo Choda – one of the four great Orders of the Irish Church – was religiously followed. It fortunately survives. The fame of the place spread abroad, more especially when it became known that numerous miracles were performed there, such as curing the deaf and dumb, healing lepers, and even raising the dead to life. "I never experience more acute pain in hell than the breaths and prayers of the Saints of Rahan," said the devil in an argument with Mo Choda (Plummer).

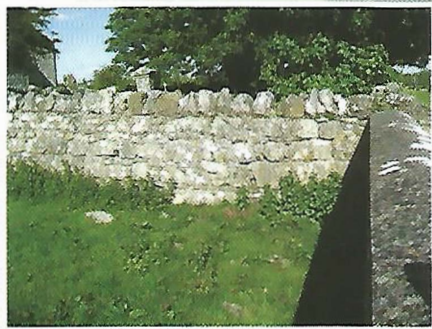


Nun's Church - Window and Face

It was, moreover, a period of great activity and enthusiasm in the working of the Irish church. Monastic institutions covered the land and overflowed into Britain and the Continent. "It was the Irish apostles about this period," writes a leading German authority (Dr. Ressel), "that brought to the Continent not only the treasures of schools, but hospitals, shelters for the poor and similar retreats" – men of the type of Mo Choda. To the Rahan of Mo Choda flocked disciples from Ireland, Great Britain and the Continent. We have on the roll Constantine, an ex-king of the Britons, who, during his period of penance in Rahan, cleared so much of the land that the plain around was known as the plain of Constantine – Magh Constantin. The name was afterwards assumed by the O'Molloys as a baptismal name for their children. Stranger still, we have on record that in the six hundreds (600 A.D. ed.), seven streets of Rahan were occupied by Norsemen; that is more than a century and a half before the period when these aggressive Vikings

The Fame of Rahan.

made their first appearances off the Irish coast – according to our annalists. (*Vikings settled in Dublin from 841 A.D. – ed.*)



Site of Round Tower ??

The Poet Ruman Resides In Rahan.

We have also an account of a great Irish poet, Ruman, son of the King of Meath, who was known as the Virgil of Ireland. Challenged by the Norsemen of Dublin to compose an extempore song on "The Sea," he rose to the occasion and sang a classical song, a stanza of which, translated from the Irish, runs as follows:



“Save, O Son of God, from harm,
 When the awful gales alarm;
 Thou Lord, who low descended
 Save us, when all is ended
 From deep Hell’s stern horrid storm.”

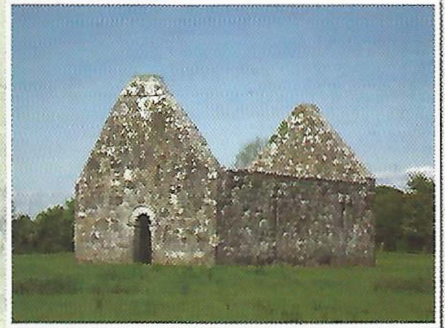


Aerial Photo

The poet exacted a fee of two coins from each noble Dublin Norseman and one coin from each common Norseman. Needless to state, no man paid less than two coins. Ruman brought his wealth to the University City of Rahon – such is the title of the city in the hagiology – and resided at Cill Bealach, the church on the (narrow) road, one of the seven churches of the city. (*Location unknown in 2007. ed.*) Retaining a third of his fortune, the poet bestowed a third on the schools and a third on the churches.

Humility And Austerity Inculcated.

From the same Ruman we get many shafts of light on old-world Irish monastic life. We get a glimpse of the humility inculcated when we read of the king’s son attending artisans who were building a large oratory or Duir-teach of a thousand boards (note its size), who set stones to make walls for churches; who made stone tochars or causeways over bogs, and who built Caiseals or walls around the city. The present church is called Cill-an-Atha, or the Church on the Ford, showing that the Great Highway from Tara was forded here. Fords were places of obvious importance. All this is of high value from a historico-geographical point of view.



Nun's Church

Irish Influence On The Continent.

We find the austere bishop himself with all his multifarious duties, working at the mill, and requiring his monks to assist the neighbours at the sowing of their crops. “As long as our Church kept close to the teaching and example of the pioneer Irish missionaries” said a distinguished German scholar last August (*1936. ed.*) (Dr. Reuther) “there were no heresies, no schisms – Everything great and permanent in German culture came from Ireland.” To the influence of these migrants the German scholar might have added that of the great teachers who taught along the Slighe Mhor, such as Finian, Colm Cille, Ciaran and Mo Choda. One of the old poems on Carthach in the Martyrology of Donegal tells us that never a man shed half as many tears for fallen humanity as did the great saint of Rahon:



"Carais Mochoda an Chraibheach,
Amhra gach sceal da scealaibh,
Roimha, nocha dearna neach,
Leath a ndearna do dearaigh."

Mo Choda Loved Piety.

Every sermon of his sermons was a poem. Up to his time never did anyone shed half the tears he shed.

Expulsion of Mo Choda from Rahan.

Colm Cille, on a visit to Rahan, foretold to Mo Choda that his place of Resurrection – so dear to these apostles – was not to be there, but in his native Munster. The thought of



Saint Carthage

leaving Rahan was poignant sorrow to Mo Choda. But the great master of spiritual life realized that – in the words of St Paul – all those who live gladly in Jesus Christ will suffer persecution, and persecution he did suffer, for the day came after a glorious period of forty years' work, when he was ordered by the Prince of Meath to leave his territory. It is agreed that the prince was prevailed upon by the conductors of the rival monastery of Durrow to carry out this unjust decree. Tribal feeling ran high in those days and jealousy, no doubt – *invidia religiosorum* – played its part. The

regional monasteries in close propinquity and under Ulster patronage, could not brook a highly successful rival in charge of a foreigner from Kerry, which threw a shadow on their institutions. When the news of the expulsion got noised abroad consternation seized the populace. "Through the city and in the county around there was among both sexes weeping, mourning and wailing over their humiliating expulsion from home and monastery." The three worst counsels of the Irish Church, according to ancient writers, were, the shortening of the life of Ciaran of Clonmacnoise, the exile of Colm Cille, and the expulsion of Carthach from Rahan. Carthach loved Rahan tenderly. Once while on a visit to his native Munster, he exclaimed: "I hear in this place the voice of the Leinster children proceeding from the Monastery of Rahan!" We are also told that a curse fell on everyone who willingly took part in the work of expulsion, while those who pleaded for fair play for the great saint – like the Abbot of Killeigh, outside Meath territory – were specially blessed.



Bullaun Stone (ex Rahan) - Killina

Farewell to Rahan.

Bidding farewell to the faithful people, and asking a blessing from those buried in the great cemetery, Mo Choda uttered this consoling

prophecy:

“On the day of the Resurrection with all my monks, I shall return to thee, Rahan, and to that cross which stands at the doors of our Church. In like manner shall we all go together before the judgment seat of God”.

He Is Welcomed In Lis Mor Mo Choda.

With great minutiae the ancient writers tell us of the sad departure of the sublime enthusiast and his retinue southwards towards Lismore, where still greater glory and success awaited them. Most pathetic of all in this sad itinerary was the case of the Rahan leper-colony, who accompanied them in chariots and wagons, for Mo Choda had special love for these, his most afflicted brethren, whom he treated with great dignity – cum magna dignitate. It is not the purpose of this paper to deal with the history of the illustrious school of Lismore under the guidance of the great ascetic.

His Glorious Death.

His death, precious in the eyes of God, like that of Ciaran Cluana (of Clonmacnoise) was in the open air, beside the Monastery (*at Lismore, County Waterford. ed.*). God opened the gates of heaven and sent for him a host of angels in glory and majesty unspeakable.... “Mo Choda asked to receive the Body of Christ, and gave his last instructions to his monks to observe the Law of God... and on the 14th May, accompanied by the host of angels, the glorious and holy bishop – the supporter of the aged, the health-giver of the weak, the consoler of the afflicted, the hope-giver of the hopeless, the moderator of the young – departed to heaven in his union with the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for ever and ever. Amen”
(Translated from the Irish).

Two Heartening Notes.

There are two heartening notes to accentuate in connection with this festival in Rahan – one foreign and at the present time; the other very old and local. The foreign note refers to the fact that in France all during the coming week (1937, ed.) a congress of the Catholic Church is being held, under the presidency of Cardinal Baudrillart to deal with local ecclesiastical history; with inter alia, what we are doing here today, namely, the question of the local saint and his cult. The second is very old and native and prophetic. It is a quatrain from the old Irish Feltre or Calendar of the Irish Saints



Serpent with webbed feet North Window



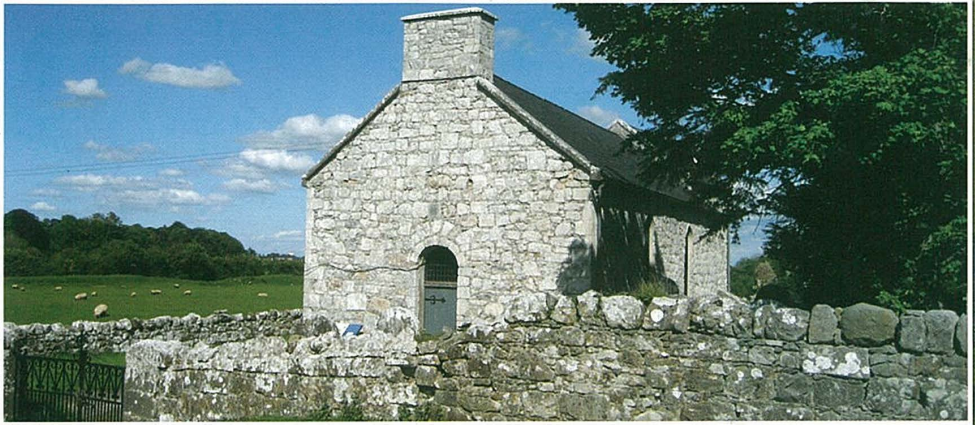
Rahan Sheela-na-gig - Athlone Museum



by Aengus the Ceile De, referring to Rahan and to Mo Choda. Who knows but we are here in fulfillment of that prophecy? Here it is :-

"Corona agus victor
Cona cleir cen maithim,
For oen lith leir suthain,
Feil chain Cathaig Raithin,"

"Crowning and victory,
With their train, and without abatement,
On one pious perennial festival,
Follow the fair feast of Carthach of Rahan.



Sponsors

N. I. S. Computers, Rahan.
G. Plant, The Derries, Rahan.
Island Rahan Development Association.
Finnerty Machine Tool Services.

Aidan Shortall, The Thatch, Rahan.
Mick Cantwell, Turf Cutting, 087 2343299.
Presentation Sisters, Killina.
Offaly Historical & Archaeological Society.

Lecture delivered by Mr. Seamus Fenton in the grounds of Presentation Convent Killina, May 14th 1937, on the occasion of the revival of the old "pattern" which for centuries had been allowed to lapse.

(Text from Midland Tribune 22nd May 1937 and edited May 2007 by Rahan History and Heritage Group.)

Further information:

www.monasticway.com

Stories from a Sacred Landscape, Croghan Hill to Clonmacnoise - Caimin O'Brien

Printed by Jetprint 057 9341373