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The Bearnán Chúláin bell–shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary:
an archaeological and historical analysis

GRIFFIN MURRAY

This paper presents the first modern detailed account of the Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, one of the most important pieces of medieval Church metalwork to survive from Ireland. Originally from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary, the shrine may be dated to the period of the late-eleventh/early-twelfth century. The paper principally consists of descriptive and historical analyses of the bell-shrine, as well as contextual discussion around its dating and manufacture. The reliquary is compared to a sword handle from Lough Derg and a recent find from England, all of which are attributed to the same workshop that was conceivably under the royal patronage of Muirchertach Ua Briain.

INTRODUCTION

Although now damaged and with significant loss, the Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine remains one of the finest examples of Irish metalwork surviving from the late-eleventh and early-twelfth centuries (Pl. 1*). Associated with St Cúlán and from Glenkeen (townland and parish; barony of Kilnamanagh Upper), Co. Tipperary, the name, Bearnán Chúláin, translates as the 'gapped [bell] of Cúlán. Both bell and shrine were once in the collection of the antiquarian Thomas Lalor Cooke of Birr, Co. Offaly, and have been in the British Museum since the mid-nineteenth century (BM 1854,0714.6). It is the largest of only around a dozen insular bell-shrines to survive from Ireland and Scotland. Recently, it has been prominent in a number of international exhibitions and books, yet a detailed written archaeological and historical account of it has not been published (e.g. Bagnoli *et al*. 2011, 119, cat. no. 57; Overbey 2012, 118–19, 124–25, pls 16–18, fig. 66; Marzinzik 2013, 4, 303, cat. no. 142; Pulliam 2015, 119, 220–21, 224, 232, figs 201, 214). The purpose of this paper is to amend this gap in the published record for what is one of the most important pieces of Irish metalwork to survive from the medieval period.[**]

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The shrine encases a brazed iron bell, categorized by Cormac Bourke (1980, 52–4, 59; 2008) as a 'Class 1' bell and dating from sometime around the seventh century. The bell itself is damaged and corroded on all sides and its handle, clapper and suspension loop are missing. The shrine, which is made principally of copper alloy, measures 310mm x 190mm x 113.5mm in its maximum dimensions. While the copper-alloy reliquary is incomplete, the upper and lower portions, as well as two of the side plates, survive. The

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* To view the plates in this paper see the colour section.
** This paper is principally based on a catalogue entry for the bell-shrine in the author's doctoral thesis (Murray 2007).

lower portion, or base, was cast in one piece and, although a complex casting, is largely undecorated. In contrast, the top of the reliquary, which was also cast in one piece, is highly decorated. Of the two side plates, one is fixed on one of the main faces and is decorated, while the other is fixed on one of the short sides and is plain. For ease of description, the four faces of the bell have been labelled Sides A–D (Pls 1–4). The bell-shrine now sits on a modern Perspex base for stability and internally is supported by a Perspex framework to which it is fixed.

The Base

The lower portion of the reliquary consists of a cast copper-alloy, rectangular base, which measures 190mm x 113.5mm, and is 83mm high (Pls 1–4). It is broken on Side B, where it has been repaired by the attachment of a large, copper-alloy plate (Pl. 2). At each of its corners there is a rounded angle moulding, at the base of which are four feet. Two of the feet, seen on Side A, have a moulding reminiscent of the brow of an animal head and it may be that this is the intention (Pl. 1). The other two feet, seen on Side C (Pl. 3), are diminutive, the result of which is that the reliquary cannot stand upright without extra support placed under these feet. There is also a rounded moulding that runs around the lower edge of the base (Pls 1–4), and in the centre of Side A there is a semi-circular shaped recess in this lower edge (Pl. 1). On all four sides of the base, the upper edge steps in approximately 20mm from the point of the four corners. There are a number of fixing holes in the base, some containing modern screws.

The Side Plates

The copper-alloy side plate that remains on Side C is decorated with an incised cross (Pl. 3). The plate is trapezoidal in shape, while its upper edge is concave. It fills the space between the top and the base of the bell-shrine on this side. It is damaged in the bottom left corner, where a section of it has been broken off. While there are nine rivet holes present (probably originally ten), only six of these contain rivets; these fix the plate to the body of the bell. There are traces of solder on the sides of the plate, as well as along the lower edge, where it also occurs along the upper edge of the base. The incised cross on the plate consists of two bands, has a circle at its centre, and has semi-circular terminals. There is also an incised border running around the side and top edges of the plate.

The copper-alloy plate on Side B is currently fixed to the body of the bell by two copper-alloy rivets (Pl. 2). Like the plate on Side C, it is also trapezoidal in shape and was specifically made to fit the area between the top and base of the bell-shrine on this side. However, it appears to have been reattached to the bell and is currently fixed off-centre, with its lower edge partially overlapping the base.

The Top

The copper-alloy top of the bell-shrine is hollow and was cast in one piece (Pls 1–6). It is in openwork and measures 170mm x 75mm, and is 93mm high. It is decorated with inlaid silver, copper, and niello, as well as red and yellow enamel settings and gold foil. The niello has been analysed in the British Museum and has been identified as a silver-copper sulphide known as stromeyerite (CuAgS) (Moss 1953, 76; La Niece 1983, 293, no. 107). Inlaid bands of copper and silver wire in an alternating herringbone pattern are used as

borders for much of the ornament on the top of the reliquary. These are made out of two pairs of wires, each consisting of one copper and one silver wire. Each pair of wires has been twisted together to produce an alternating copper/silver pattern. The two pairs then have been flattened and inlaid side by side to produce a herringbone effect. For ease of description, the top of the bell-reliquary may be divided into two areas, a *lower area*, which is largely angular, and above this *the crest*, which is curved.

Lower Area. Mirroring the base of the reliquary, its lower edge is stepped in, or recessed, on all four sides (Pls 1–4). On Sides A and C it steps in approximately 35mm, while on Sides B and D it steps in approximately 9mm. At the four angles is a downward facing animal head with projecting almond-shaped eyes and eyebrows inlaid with niello with two lines of zigzagging silver wire through it (Pls 1–4). A double stranded moustache sweeps back on both sides from two spirals at the end of each snout. The strands are inlaid with niello, have lobed terminals, and each strand features a short offshoot.

On Side A there are three openings in the lower area, a central lozenge-shaped one and a five-sided one over each of the two animal heads at the angles (Pl. 1). The openings are bordered by broad bands of inlaid silver, which are connected to each other by linear silver bands. This divides the surface of the lower area of the top of the reliquary into six different panels of decoration. An inlaid border of copper/silver wire in a herringbone pattern helps to further define the outer margins of these panels; on the interior side of these borders is a thin line of niello. The four panels of decoration on the horizontal area consist of knotted vegetal designs in inlaid silver edged with niello. All of these feature lobed terminals and each of the strands emanate from the silver and silver/copper borders that frame them. The same borders surround the two panels next to the corner animal heads. The vegetal decoration there is very similar, with the exception that the design here is interlaced, rather than merely knotted, and the strands are independent of the borders.

The form of decoration on the lower area of Side C is similar to that on Side A, except there are no openings and the decoration is not divided into panels (Pl. 3). Instead, a copper/silver band of herringbone, the inner side of which is edged with niello, borders the entire lower area. Within this the area is decorated with a knotted zoomorphic and vegetal ornament consisting of bands of silver edged with niello. The two snakes, which can be seen in the central section of the panel, have rounded heads, a single eye, open mouths and snouts with lobed terminals. Both of them form loops, feature a single short offshoot along the length of their bodies, and have tails that feature lobed terminals. The snakes are intertwined with bands of vegetal ornament that also have lobed terminals and which emanate from the border in the centre and the two ends of the panel.

The decoration on the lower area of Sides B and D is similar to each other (Pls 2 & 4). On each side, between the corner animal heads, there is an n-shaped panel consisting of a copper/silver border with an internal edging of niello. The decoration itself is zoomorphic and is formed out of bands of silver edged with niello. It consists of snakes that form knotted designs. They have rounded heads, featuring a single eye, long snouts with lobed terminals, and tails that also feature lobed terminals. On Side B the decoration is made up of three snakes, while on Side D it consists of only two. Above these panels, on either side of the shrine, there is a large D-shaped opening, which is bordered on its upper edge by a band of copper/silver herringbone.

The Crest. The upper area of the top of the bell-shrine, the crest, was made to immitate the handle of the bell (Pls 1–6). It is curved, or semi-circular in shape, and features a large animal head at the base on each side. These features dominate the ornament on this part of the reliquary and exhibit prominent snouts that are decorated with complex intertwined moustaches. They have projecting almond-shaped eyes that sit on raised bases and they have eyebrows inlaid with niello, which were each further embellished with two zigzagging lines of silver wire. Between the eyes, in each case, there is a human head, with oval eyes, a long nose, and a horizontal mouth (Pls 1–5); both heads feature a short angular moustache inlaid with niello and their eyebrows also seem to have originally been inlaid with niello. They both have short hair; that on Side B is parted in the middle, while that on Side D is crosshatched (Pl. 6). Three bands emanate from the base of the head in each case (Pl. 5). The central one runs straight to the base of the snout, though its inlay is now missing. The moustache emanates from spirals of inlaid silver on either side of these, from which sweep back two horizontal silver strands that each feature a single offshoot and end in lobed terminals (Pl. 5). The outer two bands that spring from the bases of the human heads are inlaid with niello and these intertwine with the upper silver strands before sweeping back above them and ending in lobed terminals, as well as featuring single offshoots (Pls 1, 3 & 5). Further strands inlaid with niello seem to emanate from the central band, below the human head, and these loop and intertwine with the silver strands.

Between the animal heads on Sides A and C there are two large semi-ovoid openings and in the centre of these there is a knotted ornament. This consists of bands of copper/silver herringbone, niello with two lines of zigzagging silver wire, and silver (Pls 1 & 3). On each side of the reliquary the copper/silver herringbone runs around the edges of the semi-ovoid openings before ending in lobed terminals in the centre. Between the two strands of copper/silver herringbone, is a vegetal motif consisting of a central strand with a rounded terminal, with two diametrically opposed offshoots with round expanded terminals that pass 'under' the copper/silver herringbone strands and project into the openings. Passing 'behind' these, but 'over' the copper/silver herringbone is a decorative ring. On Side A (Pl. 1) the vegetal feature is inlaid with silver and the ring is inlaid with niello with two lines of zigzagging silver wire. On Side C (Pl. 3), it is the reverse, while the terminal of the offshoot on the right has been broken off.

In the upper section of the crest there are three smaller openings on each side, one circular and the other two semi-circular in shape (Pls 1 & 3). The circular one is located in the centre, while the semi-circular examples are located immediately above the eyebrows of the animal heads. These openings are all surrounded by bands of silver, which in turn are bordered by bands of niello with a single zigzagging silver wire. These bands of niello define four panels around the central circular opening. These panels are plain, with the exception of the upper two on Side A; here, the panels have cast geometric ornament, which was originally covered in gold foil, traces of which remain. A circular hole in these panels was filled with a copper alloy of darker composition before the reliquary was completed. A similar filling can be seen in the same two panels on Side C. These probably relate to the original casting process. On the upper edge of these two panels on either side there is a band of copper/silver herringbone outside the niello border.

On the upper surface of the crest three enamel settings survive out of an original total of five (Pl. 6). The two semicircular settings located directly above the human heads are

both missing; these were made separately and riveted to the top of the reliquary and are composed of red and yellow champlevé enamel. The surviving settings include a central circular one and two lozenge-shaped examples. They are all decorated with geometric designs, two of which are identical. The red enamel, which forms the background of the design is now somewhat diminished, while the yellow remains intact and bright (Pl. 6). Analysis of the yellow enamel in the British Museum has shown that it was coloured and opacified with a lead-tin-oxide. Unfortunately, the results of the first analysis of the red enamel showed that the area sampled had been restored in modern times. However, subsequent analysis revealed that the red enamel was a copper-oxide lead-oxide silica composition, which may have been made from slag that derived from a refining process (Stapleton, Freestone, & Bowman 1999, 916, table 1). The spaces between the enamel settings on the upper surface of the reliquary are decorated with a border consisting of inlaid bands of niello featuring a single zigzagging silver wire. A further band through the centre of the spaces divides each of the four areas in two (Pl. 6).

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Thomas Lalor Cooke (1852–3, 49, 62) stated that Rev. Michael Bohun, parish preist of Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary, presented this bell-shrine to him. When Rev. Bohun died, on Christmas Day 1815, it seems that the bell-shrine had already been in Cooke's possession for two or three years. Cooke must have been only 20 or 21 at this time, and this bell-shrine was probably the first major piece to enter his collection. Cooke was originally from Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary (his parents were buried in the graveyard in Glenkeen), and only moved to Birr, Co. Offaly after his marriage in 1816 (Hogan 1990, ii–iv), which probably meant he had access to a lot of local knowledge and folklore concerning the bell-shrine. He presented a lecture on it to the Royal Irish Academy in 1822, from which the following information is derived.

According to Cooke (1822, 31) the bell-shrine was reputedly found in a hollow tree at 'Killcuilawn' in the parish of Glenkeen 'about two miles' from Borrisoleigh. It was known as the Bearnán Chúláin and also as '*Obair na gnaomh*, that is, "The Saints' Work" (Cooke 1822, 31).'

> Several credible and respectable inhabitants of the Parish in which it was found affirm that within the last forty years there was a cross on the front side of the Barnaan Cuilawn enriched with various coloured precious stones but, although much pains have been taken to procure this cross, rewards and enquirers have proved alike ineffectual. The Cross just spoken of has been lost in the following manner. At the death of the Rev'd Mr McEnerny Roman Catholic Vicar of the Parish of Glankeen, the Barnaan Cuilawn fell into the hands of his successor, the Rev'd Michael Bohun a man of great learning but who had not much taste for the antiquities of the country. Upon Mr Bohun's having been newly come to the Parish, the Barnaan Cuilawn was, in the hurry of removing, unfortunately thrown along with some articles of furniture into an open stable and while it remained there some person induced by a wish of possessing part of so revered a relic or more probably by a spirit of avarice took away the cross before mentioned.

> . . .

> [I]t is said that any person who is fortunate to gain possession of the Barnaan Cuilawn was always attended by good superior to that of any of his neighbours. It is also

attested that one Burke who inhabited the Castle of Burrissileigh about the commence-ment of the Seventeenth century having by some misfortune lost the Barnaan Cuilawn in a few nights after an invisible hand brought it back while he was sleeping and placed it upon a table near his bed side.

Tradition also goes so far as to say that a noted Hurler, named Fitzpatrick, wanting a hurl on the eve of some great match went to the tree in which the "Saints Work" was found in order to lop off a branch but when in the act of cutting it happening to look towards his house which stood at a little distance he imagined he saw it in flames. Affrighted he leaped from the tree and ran to save his burning house – On his approach however to his astonishment the house was in safety and no appearance whatever of fire. He then returned to the tree again imagining that he saw the house enveloped in flames ran to save it but still it was unhurt. A third time he goes to the tree, enraged, determined at any risqué to cut the hurl and a third time the house appears on fire. However he persisted in cutting and on returning home he found his habitation in ashes.

.   .   .

[I]t was supposed of the Barnaan Cuilawn that if any person swore falsely by it his face would change to his back and the order of nature be distorted – There was living, until within the last three or four years, a man who was reputed to have fallen a victim to the dreaded supernatural influence of this piece of Antiquity. This person afterwards nick-named *builín*, that is 'loaf,' having been accused of stealing some bread protested upon the Barnaan Cuilawn that he was not guilty; and immediately by a contraction of the muscles his mouth was drawn close to his left ear! Without entering into any enquiry as to the real cause of this poor creatures misfortune it may gratify curiosity to mention that in point of fact the distortion of his features occurred at an advanced period of his life and continued until his death.

A Mrs Dunne, to whom the Barnaan Cuilawn descended as an heir-loom from her ancestors, named Spellane, used until recently to earn a livelihood by giving it out for people to swear upon. The form observed was this – when anything was stolen the Barnaan Cuilawn was sent for to Mrs Dunne and on the messenger paying one shilling and swearing by itself that he would safely return it he was permitted to bear it away enclosed in a strong leathern case (purposely prepared for it) to those when sent him. On arrival of Barnaan Cuilawn, the persons suspected were obliged to purge them-selves of the accusation by swearing upon it, while, with all the solemnity of a religious rite, they at the same time touched it with a hazel wand or rod. He who refused to do this was stigmatised as a convicted plunderer.

Women would never touch it; and so great awe was this ordeal held, that many, who would perjure themselves if the gospels had been presented to them, when swore upon the Barnaan Cuilawn almost invariably told the truth even though it were the acknowl-edgement of their own guilt. The only instance mentioned to the contrary is the solitary case already alluded to. In order to check the progress of superstition it was taken in one of these swearing excursions about the year 1797 by the before mentioned Roman Catholic Vicars of the Parish of Glankeen from whose successor (who is now dead may years) its present possessor obtained it (Cooke 1822, 33–7).

The following account of the bell-shrine comes from two leaves of script, which were inserted into an antiquarian album that was originally compiled by Cooke (National Library of Ireland MS 19,822):

Dr Daniel Tracy tells me that when he was a very young child the family of his aunt Mrs Dwyer of Ballyaman [Ballyroan?] had possession of the Barnaan Cuilane for many years, and that one of the sons of Richard Cooke of Borrisileigh applied for it, and got it by way of present from the family. Dr D. Tracy states that young Cooke (most probably Thms L. Cooke) got the relick from the Dwyer family without the least trouble. Dr Tracy did not hear that people were cured by it, but he did hear that people swore on it. The children when threatening each other at Mrs Dwyers used to say 'I'll tell the Barnaan Cuilane of you' and words to that effect. Dr Tracy's sister Mrs Duff at one time threatened the Barnaan Cuilane on Mrs Duff's son Joseph, who appeared greatly frightened in consequence, Mrs Duffy asked her aunt Dwyer to explain the meaning of the Barnaan Cuilane at all – and Mrs Mary Dwyer (Mrs Dwyer's daughter) said 'She show it to you.' She then took it down off the tester overhead, all covered deeply with dust, which showed that it was very seldom handled at all, as though no one laid hands on it for months.

> December 12th 1869
> M. Lennihan
> Daniel Tracy [In very shaky hand]

An additional note below this reads: 'The Dwyers lived at Ballinaman [Ballyroan?] until Feb 17th 1879 as I am told by Dr T.' Dr Tracy's account is not out of keeping with the information that Cooke presented, with the exception that he said his aunt, a Mrs Dwyer, held the bell-shrine, while Cooke said that a Mrs Dunne had possession of it.

In 1846 Cooke sent the Bearnán Chúláin, St Ruadan's bell, the bell of Kilshanny, as well as some crotals from the Dowris hoard to George Petrie for him to study (National Library of Ireland MS 790, 130–4). In the same year Petrie exhibited these to the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) and delivered a paper on the subject of bells (Anon. 1845–7, 272). It was intended that this be published in the *Proceedings*, and while George V. Du Noyer prepared the illustrations, the article never appeared (Crawford 1922, 1). Later, both Ellacombe (1872, figs 11 & 12) and Crawford (1922, pls I, III, IV) used some of Du Noyer's illustrations in their publications, and one of the lithographs of the Bearnán Chúláin may also be found in a scrapbook in the RIA (MS 23P25). Cooke later exhibited it in 1852 to the Kilkenny Archaeological Society, with some of his other bells (Cooke 1852–3), and in 1853 the bulk of Cooke's collection was shown at the Dublin Exhibition, which included the 'Barnan-Caulawn' (Anon. 1853, 149, cat. no. 1924). The following year Cooke's collection was bought by the British Museum for £300. The bell-shrine is currently on permanent exhibition in the British Museum and has been included in a number of international travelling exhibitions (e.g. Rosedahl & Wilson 1992, 340, cat. no. 430; Bagnoli *et al*. 2011, 119, cat. no. 57; Pulliam 2015, 119, 220–21, 224, 232, figs 201, 214).

DISCUSSION

There is reason to believe that Side A was originally the front of the reliquary, as the base and top on this side are more decorated then their equivalents on Side C. Indeed, it is most likely that the cross 'enriched with various coloured precious stones' that was removed in the late eighteenth century was originally fixed to this side. One may speculate that the missing cross was of a similar form to that on Side C, except in that case it was elaborately decorated. The cross form on Side C is very similar to the cross which may be seen on the Clogán Óir bell-shrine from Co. Clare (Murray 2014, figs 4.6 & 4.7).

It has been noted that the enamel settings were made separately and riveted to the crest of the bell-shrine. This was probably done to prevent any adverse effects that working the enamel on the reliquary itself would have on the niello (La Niece & Stapleton 1993, 148). The enamel settings are comparable to those on the Cross of Cong, which can be dated to 1123, which were also made separately (Murray 2014, 138– 40). Zoomorphic ornament similarly executed occurs on St Laichtín's Arm, which has been dated to between 1118 and 1121 (Murray 2004). However, many of the techniques exhibited on the bell-shrine, including: inlaid copper and silver wires, inlaid bands of silver and niello, zigzagging silver wire inlaid in a band of niello, and champlevé enamel, occur on the crosier from Clonmacnoise, Co. Offlay, which is usually considered to date from the later eleventh century (Ó Floinn 1983, 61, 64, 67, 165–6, cat. no. 77).

However, two modern finds that have come to light are the most closely comparable to the bell-shrine, both technically and stylistically. A sword recovered from the bed of Lough Derg, near Curraghmore, Co. Tipperary (Ryan 1991, 152, 215; Rosedahl & Wilson 1992, 340, cat. no. 431) features a handle decorated with knotted zoomorphic ornament executed in inlaid silver edged by niello and bordered by bands of inlaid twisted copper and silver wire edged on its inner side by niello. The sword handle is so similar in style and technique that it has to have been made by the same workshop, if not the same craftsman (Murray 2013, 170, fig. 14.2; Murray 2014, 118). Furthermore, SusanYoungs (2016, *this volume*) has published a large Irish strap-end found recently in Bulford near Amesbury, Wiltshire, which is even closer to the Bearnán Chúláin in style and technique and is almost certainly a product of the same craftsman. This has led Youngs (2016) to consider this find within the context of the political career of Muirchertach Ua Briain (1086–1119) (Duffy 2006), whose reign corresponds with the broad dating of the Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine set out here. Indeed, considering the north Munster provenance of the Bearnán Chúláin and the Lough Derg sword, as well as the evidence for royal patronage of other Irish workshops in this period (Murray 2014, 205–11), it seems reasonable to suggest that the workshop that produced them may have been patronised by Muirchertach Ua Briain.

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'A Hiberno-Norse strap-end from Bulford near Amesbury, Wiltshire', Susan Youngs
Plate 2: Detail of the silver, copper and niello inlay on the Bearnán Chúláin , the enshrined iron
bell found near Glankeen , Co. Tipperary (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

'The Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary', Griffin Murray
Plate 1: Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, Side A, angled view (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

'The Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary', Griffin Murray
Plate 2: Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, Side B (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

'The Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary', Griffin Murray
Plate 3: Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, Side C, angled view (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

'The Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary', Griffin Murray
Plate 4: Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, Side D (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

‘The Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine from Glenkeen, Co. Tipperary’, Griffin Murray

Plate 5 (*see Youngs paper, plate 2, this volume, colour section*): Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, angled view of crest showing human and animal heads (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)

Plate 6: Bearnán Chúláin bell-shrine, view from above showing enamel settings on the upper surface of the crest (© *Trustees of the British Museum*)