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The Peakaun Site: Duignan's 1944 Investigations*

by John Waddell and Patrick Holland

The ecclesiastical site at Peakaun, near Cahir in the Glen of Aherlow in Co. Tipperary, has long been known for its antiquarian remains. In the townland of Toureen, the little church there was called *Teampuillín Pheacáin* or Kilpeacan in the last century. The eponymous 'Peakaun' or *Beagán*, whose name was latinised *Beccanus*, was known in Irish as *Mo-Bhec-óc* (Plummer 1910, 17). He was an anchorite who was distinguished for his austerities, which included standing daily with outstretched arms against a stone cross while he chanted the entire Psalter.

Some of the antiquities were drawn by Du Noyer in 1840, and these drawings and a brief account of the remains there by O'Keeffe are to be found in the Ordnance Survey letters. Stokes (1878, 32) has provided a short description of the site and published four inscribed stone fragments. Another short report is given by Crawford (1909), who discovered two other inscribed slabs and also provided a list of those then known (1912).

When the remains were taken into State care in 1944, they included the featureless ruins of a small church, the so-called western enclosure, some Romanesque fragments, a holy well, a small circular walled area (a supposed clochan) occupied by a large triple bullaun, four stone crosses (including two plain examples), some half-a-dozen grave slabs, two slabs with wheeled crosses and (marked on the Ordnance Survey map) an embanked ditch cut across an escarpment to the west and south-west.

The principal monuments are situated on low-lying level ground on either side of a small stream, and the ground rises steeply a short distance west and south-west of the church (Fig. 1). The remains of two crosses lie west and south-east of the church respectively, and the so-called clochan and the holy well are situated some distance away, across the stream to the south-east.

In August 1944, when the Office of Public Works tidied up the remains at Peakaun, the church, for instance, was overgrown with trees and littered with the wreckage of the walls. Duignan, with some financial assistance from the Royal Irish Academy, had intended to survey the site and to do some exploratory excavation. However, the Office of Public Works operations proceeded at such a pace that much time was taken up recording the numerous fragments of crosses, grave slabs, inscribed stones and Romanesque fragments that turned up, and very little general survey or excavation could be undertaken in the limited time available.

The results, however, were gratifying: "The number of known grave slabs was raised to thirty; the construction of the unique east cross was determined; the church was shown to have had a trabeated west doorway and two Romanesque windows of considerable merit; the long inscription on the east cross was shown not to be Runic, as at one time supposed; finally the only partially explored western enclosure yielded evidence of industrial activity" (Duignan, 1944).

The latter evidence mainly consisted of some iron slag which, along with the excavation documentation, is now in the National Museum of Ireland. Some of the material then discovered

*The late Michael V. Duignan (1907-1989) was Professor of Celtic Archaeology in University College, Galway from 1945 to 1977. From 1939 to 1944 he was an Assistant in the Irish Antiquities Division of the National Museum of Ireland.



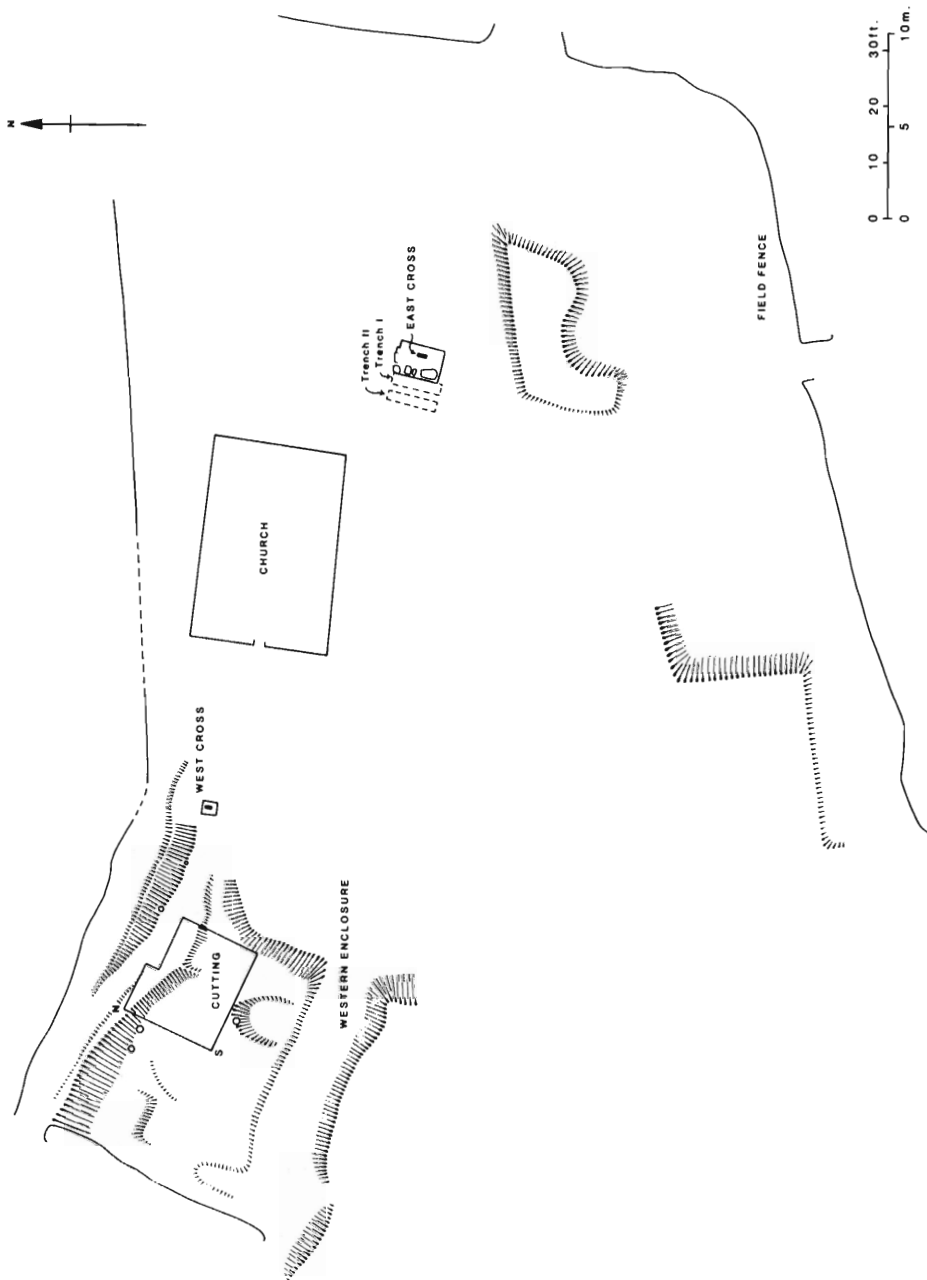


FIG. 1: General plan of Peakaun, Co. Tipperary, 1944.

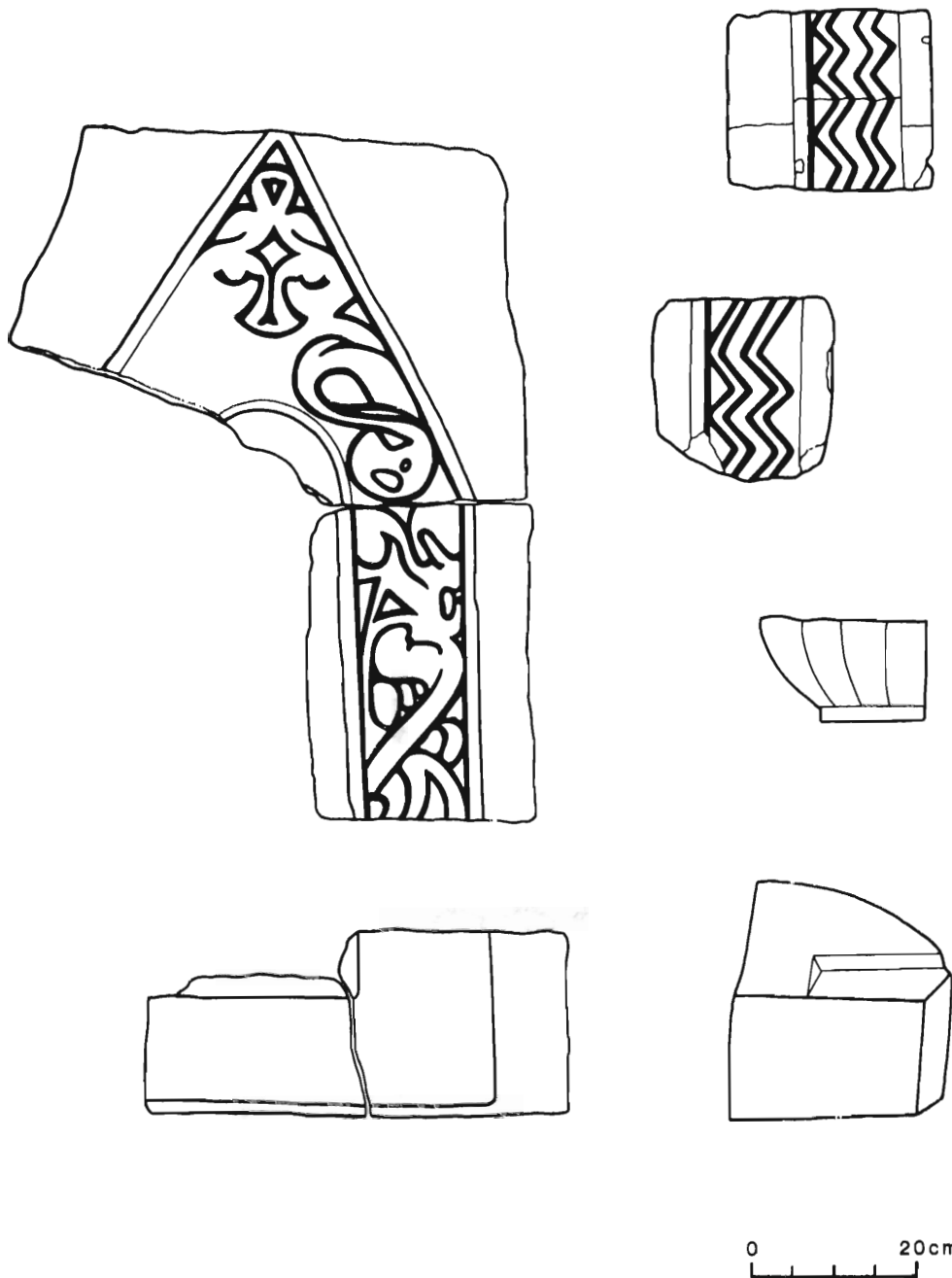


FIG. 2: Architectural fragments including South window.



FIG. 3: Inscribed grave slabs.

at Peakaun has since been briefly noted or published in the literature: e.g. in Macalister (1949, 100, 213), in Leask (1955, 106), in Lionard (1961, 154), in Killanin and Duignan (1962, 120) and in Moloney (1964, 99).

The surviving documentation comprises a number of annotated plans, sections, and rubbings, some photographs, a list of some of the stone fragments discovered, drawings of these by various hands, drawings of the fragments of crosses, and of some of the pieces of Romanesque stone work, as well as the text of a very short lecture on the work at Peakaun (dealing mainly with the inscribed cross and one inscribed grave slab).

ARCHITECTURAL FRAGMENTS

The church was a simple rectangular structure with, according to Duignan, a trabeate west doorway; it measured some 11m. by 7.30m. overall. In time it had acquired a tall narrow Romanesque window in the east wall and one or two smaller Romanesque windows in the south wall. There was no trace of post-Romanesque work. The Romanesque fragments were found in the collapsed stone outside the church along with pieces of grave slabs.

Further fragments of grave slabs were found in the church, and in and on a crude pilgrim's 'station' which had been erected at its west end (Plate 1). A photograph published in 1912 shows this end of the church unencumbered by any station (McCraith 1912, 17). This structure was presumably built some time between this date and the 1930s.

The east window has since been published by Leask (1955, 106, fig. 58) who, however, omits the top of the pediment and its finial. The latter (12.5cm. high) is now atop a 'reconstructed' window in the south wall. The east window is decorated with chevron and foliate designs in low relief. The fragmentary remains of a south window (Plate 2; Fig. 2) comprise a decorated architrave and pediment — the latter first recorded by Crawford 1909 (63, fig. 13 — bearing foliate ornament and a figure-of-eight interlace of serpentiform motifs in low relief.

Two fragments with chevron ornament may come from a second southern window, and a small capital with scalloping was also recovered. Two other fragments bearing interlaced ornament have been incorporated in the 'reconstruction' of the south window. Other items found included the plain archstones of windows, and two plain water stoups. In addition to architectural fragments, other stone objects noted were parts of some three rotary quern stones.

GRAVE SLABS

Over forty hitherto unrecorded grave slabs or fragments of grave slabs were recovered. All were of the simplest kind: sandstone slabs varying in thickness from 2.5 to 7cm. and bearing a cross and perhaps an inscription. Only a few could be described as elaborate. All were stray finds, most coming from the vicinity of the ruined church (CH) or from the rubble around the East Cross (EC).

- Fig. 3:
1. Small Greek cross (with expanded terminals) with inscription DOMNIC below. (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 1. Lionard (1961), fig. 3:3. Moloney (1964), fig. 4.
 2. Small Greek cross (with expanded terminals) dividing fragmentary inscription below: BAN D Macalister (1949), 213, no. 12.
 3. Small Greek or Latin cross (with expanded terminals) followed by remains of inscription: C (CH). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 10.
 4. Inscription FLAND with simple Greek cross (with expanded terminals) below. (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 16.
 5. Slab with pair of simple crosses with two-line inscription below: the first line CUMMENE in Roman capitals, the second LADCEN in Irish half uncials. The use





FIG. 4: Inscribed grave slabs.

of two contrasting scripts is noteworthy. Macalister (1949), 213, no. 15. Lionard (1961), fig. 3:2. Moloney (1964), fig. 2.

6. Inscription SOADBAR with simple cross above. (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 5. Lionard (1961), fig. 3:1.
- Fig. 4: 7. Outline Greek cross (with slightly expanded terminals) above and dividing inscription FID LAER. Recorded by Du Noyer and Petrie: Stokes (1878), 34. Crawford (1909), 64, fig. 15. Macalister (1949), 100, no. 920. Lionard (1961), 105, fig. 5:2.
8. Similar cross above fragmentary inscription FINDLU Recorded by Du Noyer and Petrie: Stokes (1878), 34. Crawford (1909), 64, fig. 14. Macalister (1949), 100, no. 921. Lionard (1969), 105, fig. 5:6.
9. Fragment with remains of outline Latin cross and inscription above ... LETHO. Macalister (1949), 213, no. 11.
10. Fragment with outline Greek cross above and dividing inscription ...ER LE (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 9.
11. Fragment with remains of cross and inscription.
12. Outline Greek cross below inscription BAEDAN. (Found on the wall of the so-called clochan). Crawford (1909), 65, fig. 17. Macalister (1949), 101, no. 924.
13. Outline Greek cross above and dividing inscription DON GUS. (CH). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 18.
14. Outline Greek cross above remains of inscription ... ALE. (Noted near West Cross). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 19.
15. Similar cross followed by inscription in two lines which Macalister read as CAELRACAND. Crawford (1909), fig. 18. Macalister (1949), 100, no. 919.
- Fig. 5: 16. Fragment with remains of cross with inscription HE ... above. The cross is in relief against a pocked background. (EC). Macalister (1945), 213, no. 3.
17. Fragment with remains of cross preceded by inscription SOER LECH in two lines. (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 6.
- 18-23. Half a dozen small fragments of slabs bear the remains of inscriptions but no crosses. (Nos. 18-19 and 21-22 are recorded as from the EC area, nos. 20 and 23 from CH). The inscriptions include FOR ... and in Macalister (1949), 213 are listed as nos. 7, 8, 13, 4 and 2, respectively. No. 23 here was recorded by Crawford (1909), 65, fig. 16 and Macalister (1949), 100, no. 922, and has been variously read OUR ... and AUR
24. A sandstone fragment found in the packing in front of the East Cross and bearing the finely pocked inscription CONCL ... (EC). Macalister (1949), 213, no. 17.
- 25-26. Two small inscribed fragments (No. 25:EC).
27. Small fragment bearing part of inscription BAC ... or BAE
- Fig. 6: 28. A small granite cross slab $2\frac{1}{2}$ -3" thick, with outline Greek cross with expanded terminals. (EC).
- 29-34. Small sandstone fragments with parts of outline crosses. (Nos. 31-33:EC. No. 33 was found in Trench II near EC).
35. A cross inscribed slab. (EC).
36. A small fragment bearing two tiny crosses. Lionard (1961, 136, fig. 27:7) considers this a possible altar-slab.
37. A fragment with a thinly incised cross. (EC). Now in the National Museum.
38. Part of a dressed sandstone slab. The sides are straight and the only original corner



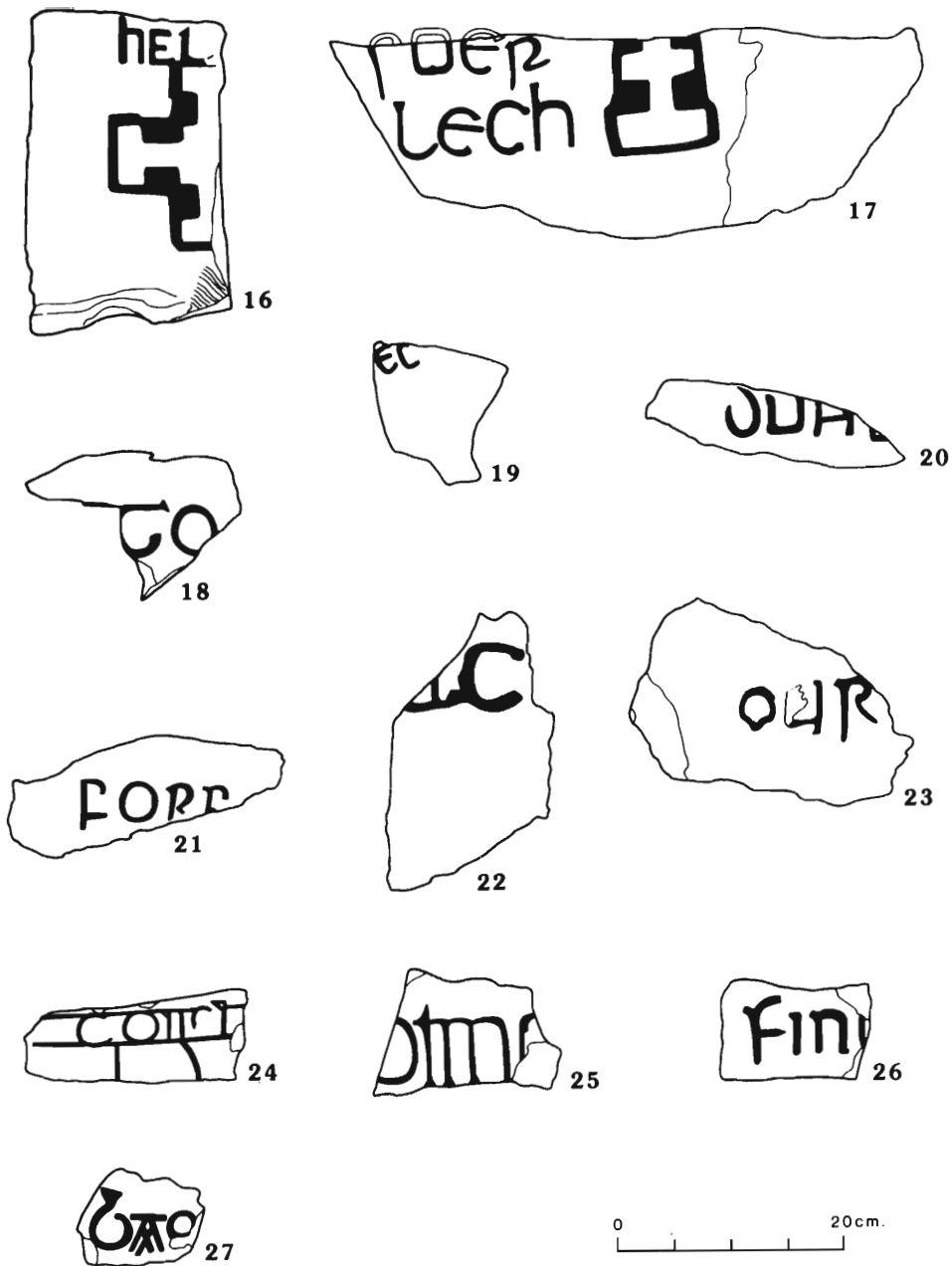


FIG. 5: Inscribed grave slabs.

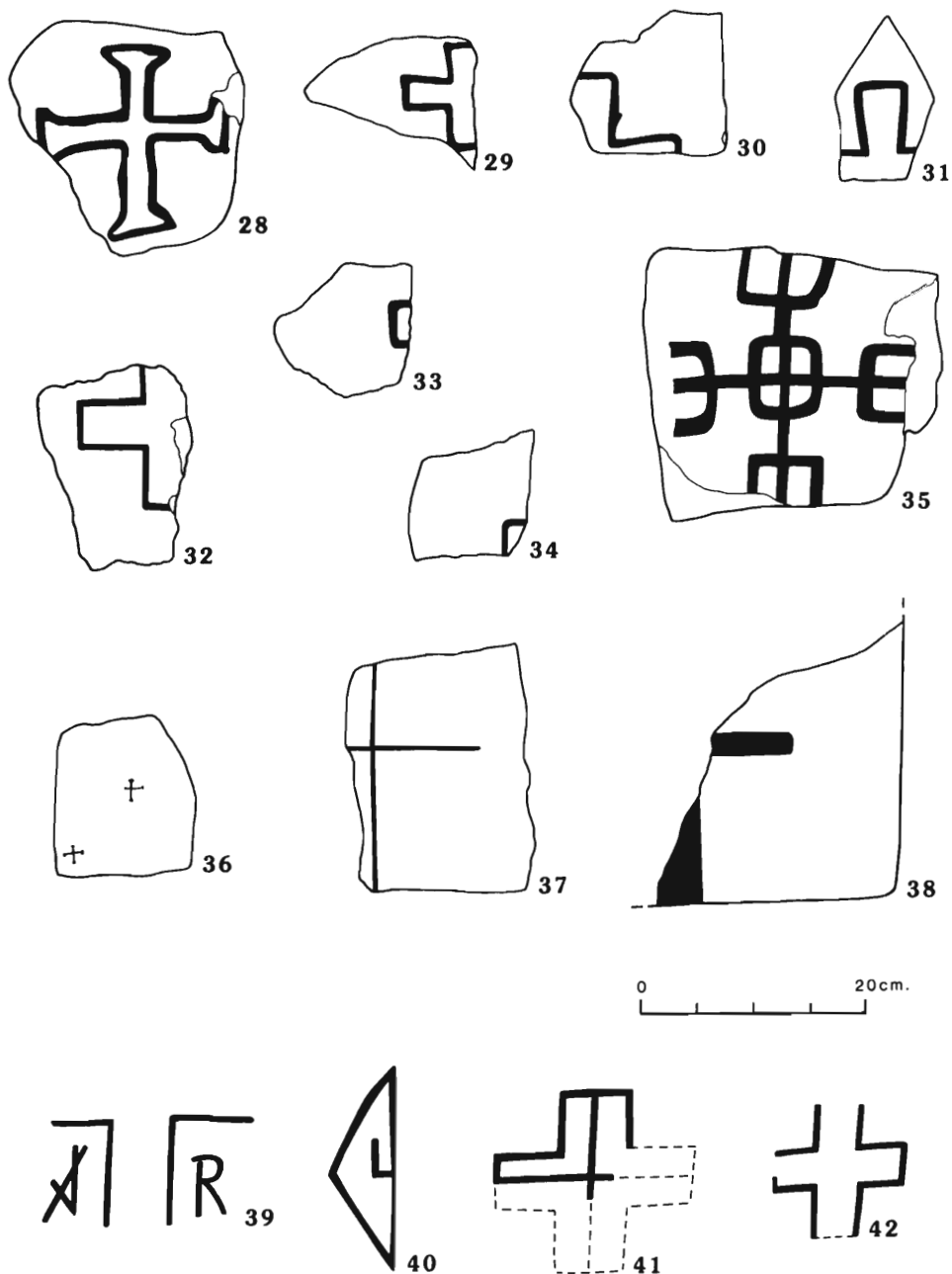


FIG. 6: Cross-inscribed slab and fragments 28-42. (Nos. 39-42: scale unknown).

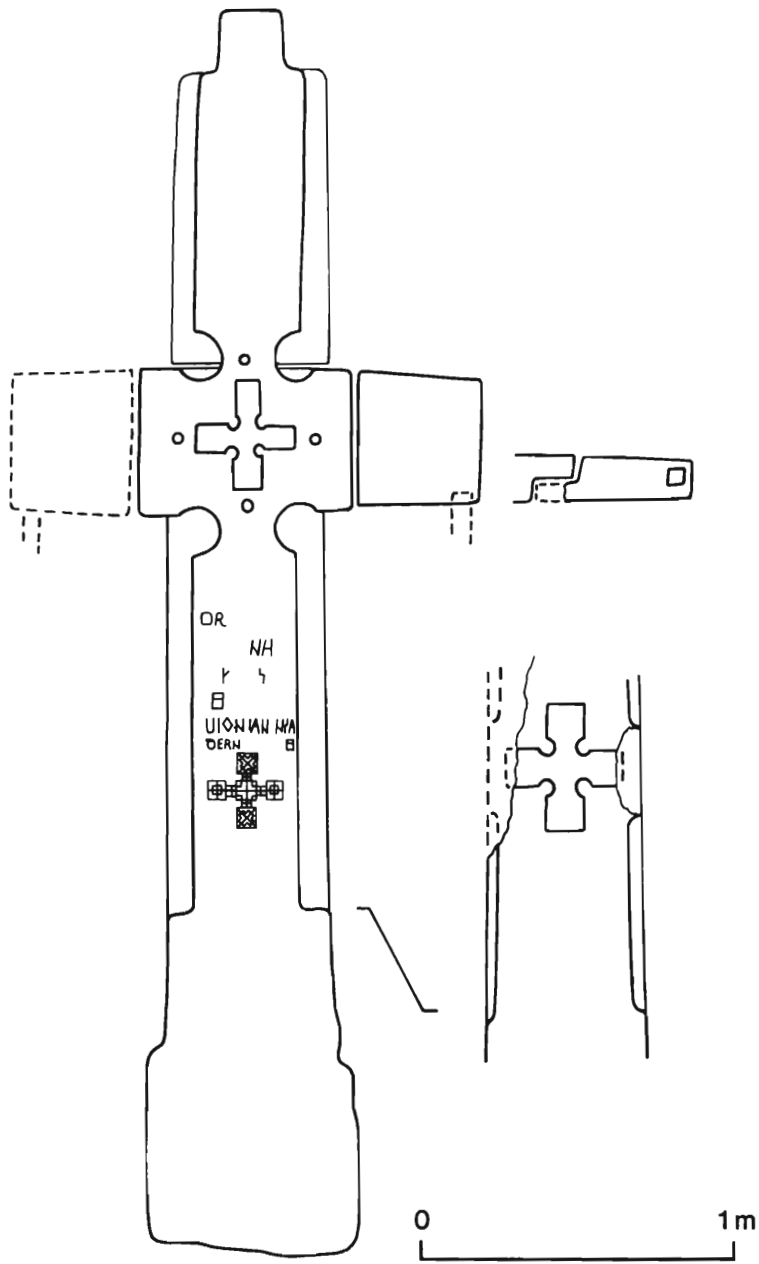


FIG. 7: Reconstruction of East Cross.

is rounded. A shallow groove may represent one arm of a cross. The original width of the grooved shaft (?) is uncertain. (CH). Now in the National Museum.

- 39-42. Four small sketches of inscribed fragments are preserved (as shown) with no indications of scale. No further details. One is part of an outline cross with a letter in each lower canton. (All EC).

A number of other slabs are known from Peakaun. Macalister (1949), 213, no 14, refers to a fragmentary inscription '... DIE ... (letters doubtful)' and to an inscription OR AR AEDLAC (no. 923); neither figures in the Peakaun documentation to hand; nor, indeed, do two fragments illustrated by Stokes (1878, plate 22, nos. 45 and 47). Du Noyer has also recorded a small slab bearing an encircled cross pattee.

CROSSES AND CROSS-PILLARS

There were, it seems, four stone crosses at Peakaun: the West Cross, the great East Cross, and two plain granite crosses. In addition, there were two large and two small cross pillars.

The remains of the East Cross stood about 7m. south-east of the church: this was, in Duignan's words, "part of the shaft of a tall stone cross with a six-line inscription and a simple cross-pattern on the West face. Around it had been erected another pilgrims' station which proved to be made up *inter alia* of early cross-pillars, fragments of grave stones, and flakes and scraps from the great cross itself. Not far away was the upper portion of the shaft of the cross". A sketch of the standing portion of the shaft is figured in Stokes (1878, 34).

The cross (Fig. 7) proved to be a composite monument, and sufficient fragments were recovered to allow an accurate reconstruction. It measured 4.06m. in total length, 3.10m. in length from the shoulder of the foot to the top of the top tenon. It was 73.5cm. wide at the foot, 54cm. at the lower shaft, and tapered to about 48cm.; thickness was about 23cm. The shaft was rebated, and this rebate extended inwards at the junction of shaft and arms to form hollowed angles.

One arm of the cross was found (Plate 3); it had been fitted to the shaft by means of a lap-joint. As Fig. 7 shows, the half-lap of this surviving transom is broken; originally it was about 15cm. long, as indicated by traces of its counterpart on the broken top of the shaft. The upper part of the shaft is a piece with a tenon at either end; one tenon was set into a mortice in the shaft, the other supported a finial.

Duignan noted as follows: "The cross-shaft was wrought from a grey-green micaceous sandstone which is very rich in mica, and therefore both hard to dress and very susceptible to flaking. Nothing more suitable for his purpose being available, the cross-maker had to do his best with it. Being unable to fashion a monolithic cross, he set about making a joiner's cross, a cross of planks as it were, the 13¹/₂ foot tapering shaft of micaceous sandstone, the transoms of course yellow sandstone, the transoms mortised into the shaft, the whole crowned with some sort of finial which was secured by a tenon and mortise joint. In the course of time this top-heavy, composite, cross tilted backwards.

"The upper part of the shaft broke — or was broken off. Fortunately, five large flakes from the West face slipped down and came to rest between the foot of the cross and a vertical foreslab; and there we found them. They enabled us to reconstruct some important details of the cross and to identify a puzzling piece of dressed sandstone as the south transom of the cross. (We failed to find its fellow). In the under side of the transom, close to the other end, was a square socket or mortise. The socket presupposes a prop or crutch under the transom. And so the complete cross was in a very real way a joiner's job.

"Furthermore, it was a prototype of the 12th century St. Patrick's Cross on the Rock of Cashel, not so very far away ... The flakes so fortunately preserved also make it possible to reconstruct a simple



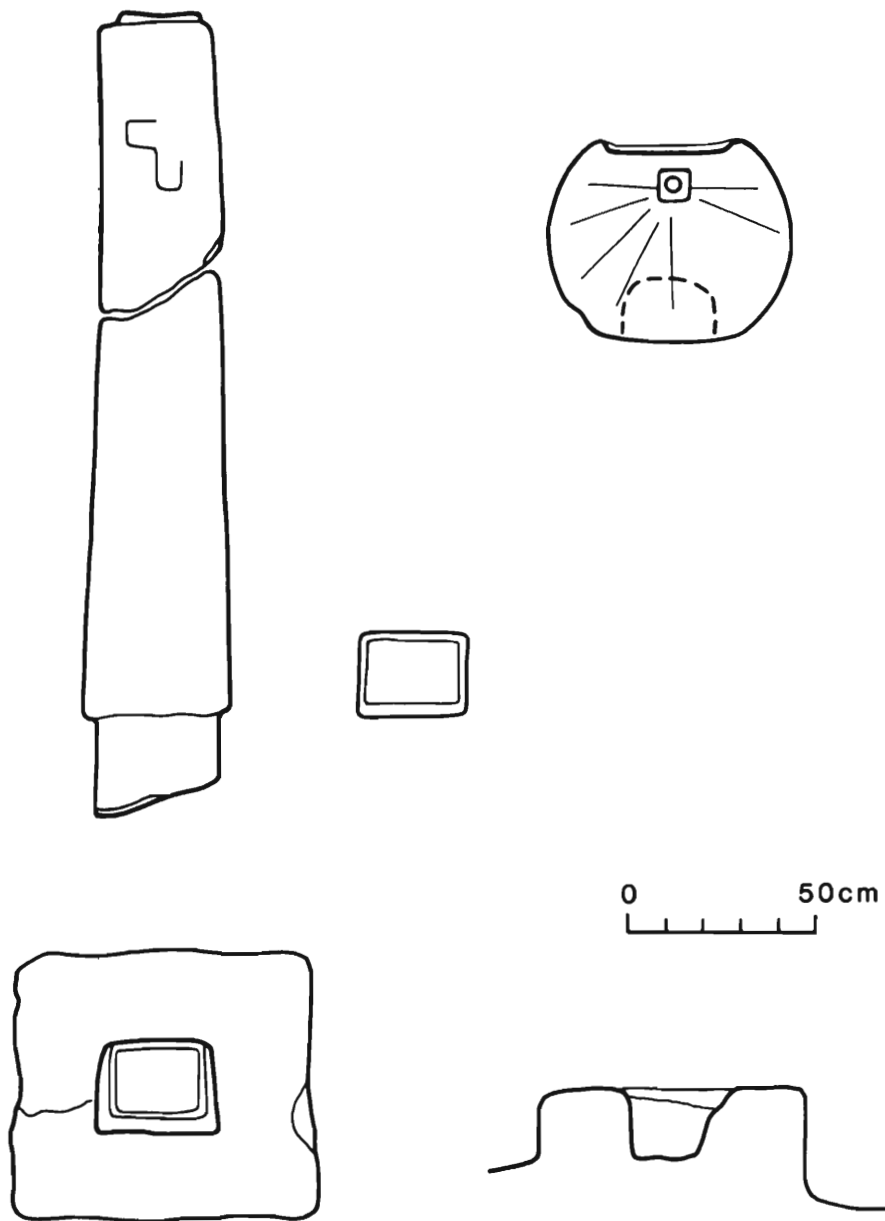


FIG. 8: Shaft and base of West Cross, and sun-dial.

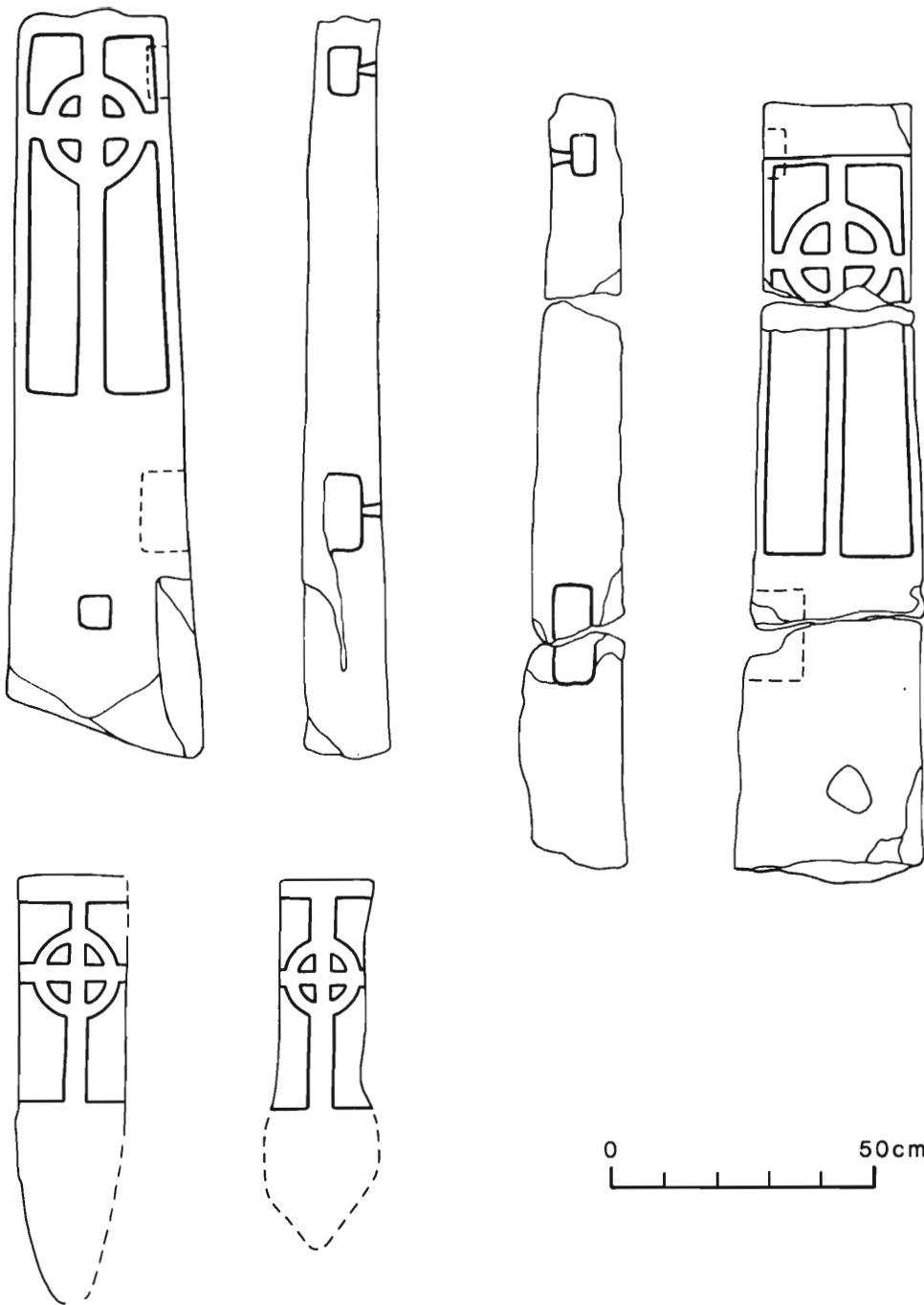
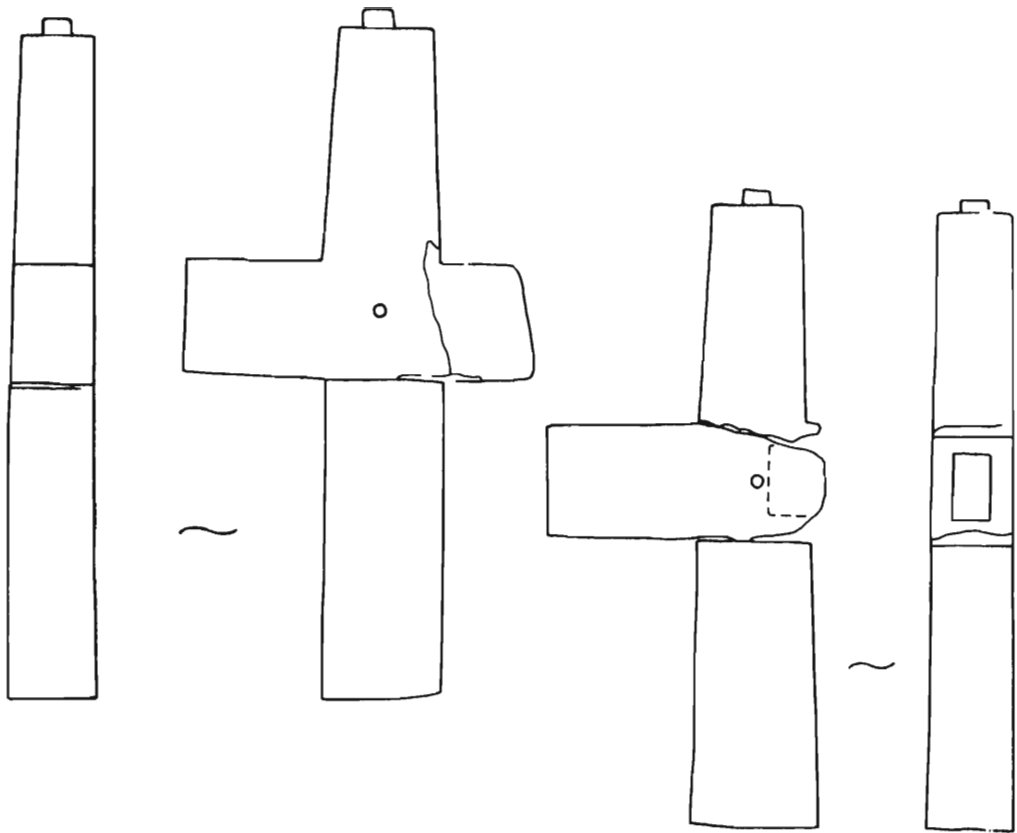


FIG. 9: Pairs of cross pillars.



0 50cm

FIG. 10: Plain crosses.



incised cross pattern at the crossing (somewhat similar to another on the East face), and with it an arrangement of four small circular sockets in the face of the cross just beyond the end of each arm of the cross-pattern. These sockets are 1 to 1½ inches in diameter and 3 inches deep. Presumably there were intended to receive something ..., hardly a Crucifixus, possibly the shanks of four ornamental bosses". (The stone flakes from the cross are preserved in the National Museum).

A further significant feature of the West face of this cross is the presence, on the lower part of the shaft just above another incised cross pattern, of a six-line inscription in a mixture of capitals and half uncials (Plate 4). Macalister (1935, 296) had thought this inscription to be Runic. For Duignan this mixture of scripts, as on the CUMMENE and LADCEN grave slab above, suggested an early date "before the half uncial had been established as the Irish norm for inscriptions as well as for manuscripts"; but, while some letters such as O, N, I, L and possibly D were identifiable, he was unable to decipher sufficient to make it intelligible. He thought it possible that it began with the conventional OR[OIT] and that the last line included DERNAD.

The remains of the West Cross stood some 9m. west of the church. The broken shaft of this monument sat in a rectangular stone base at least since the mid-19th century, when Du Noyer sketched it. Crawford (1909, 64) noted it as "uncarved and not at all of early type". Near its lower end this shaft was 29cm. wide and 21.5cm. thick. A second piece of the shaft was found giving it a total length of some 1.32m. (Fig. 8). A basal tenon holds the shaft in its base and the remains of the top tenon 21 by 9.5cm. have a central circular peg-hole 4cm. in diameter and 5cm. deep.

Some very faint lines on the pitted West face of this shaft are a very uncertain cross pattern. Duignan noted that a solid roughly disc-shaped sun-dial just over 45cm. across could fit on the top of this shaft. More recently, however, the sun-dial with other shaft fragments (not part of the West cross) were cemented to the south wall of the church (Plate 5). The top of the sun-dial has a recessed rectangular area with a circular peg-hole, and the bottom has a rectangular mortise. In 1955 a fragment of shaft (shown in Plate 5) had been inserted in the rectangular area on the top of the dial; this shaft fragment is no longer there.

The two larger cross pillars (Fig. 9) are a pair of more or less similar size and design, each a tapering slab about 1.40m long with a wheeled cross in relief on one face. Each slab has two rectangular mortises (each with a small conical peg-hole at the back) in one side, and were evidently part of a composite construction. The available drawings show what appears to be an irregular hole or hollow near the base of each pillar. No details are recorded about these features, and these pieces are buried today. One cross pillar is intact, the other broken in three: the top piece was found at the so-called clochan (and was at the church in the 1930s: see Plate 1, top left). The middle piece was found near the west end of the church, and its lower portion came from the platform around the East Cross. Duignan thought it possible that these two pillars and the East cross may have formed a sort of trinity. They were reconstructed in this fashion, one on either side of the cross (Fanning 1976, plate 3).

Two small cross pillars (Fig. 9) each have a wheeled cross in relief on one face and are about 80cm. and 70cm. in overall length, respectively. The larger has the remains of an illegible six-letter inscription just above the wheel on either side of the shaft. This would seem to be a slab recorded by Macalister (1949, 101, no. 924A), who read the inscription as ART UIR. This is questionable, Duignan ventured C...NIS, but without much confidence (Plate 6).

Finally, fragments of two plain crosses were found (Fig. 10). Shafts and arms are of rectangular cross section, and each has a small rectangular tenon for some form of cap. Each has a small conical hole 5cm. deep and about 3cm. in maximum diameter, centrally placed on one face. One cross has a large rectangular mortise for a missing arm; the other has a broken arm without a trace of such a joint. It is not clear if the upper and lower parts of both of these crosses are joined by a mortise and



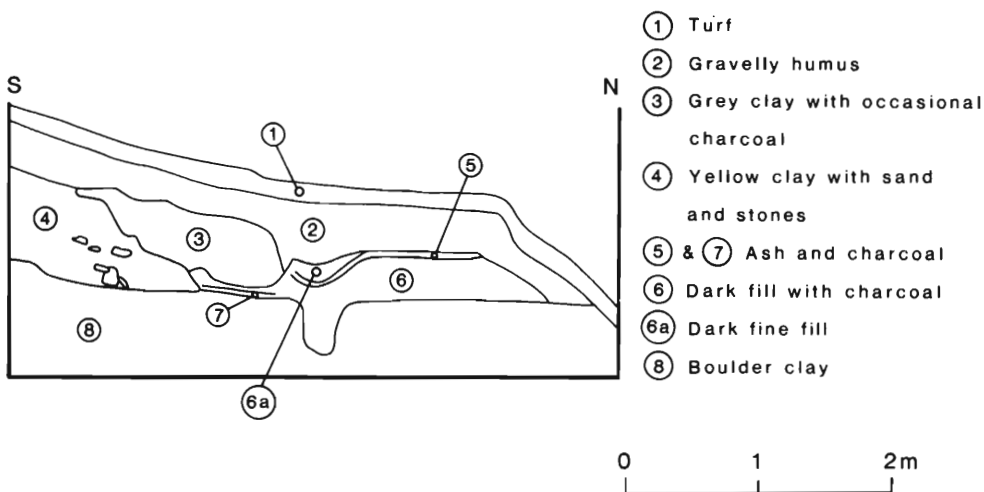
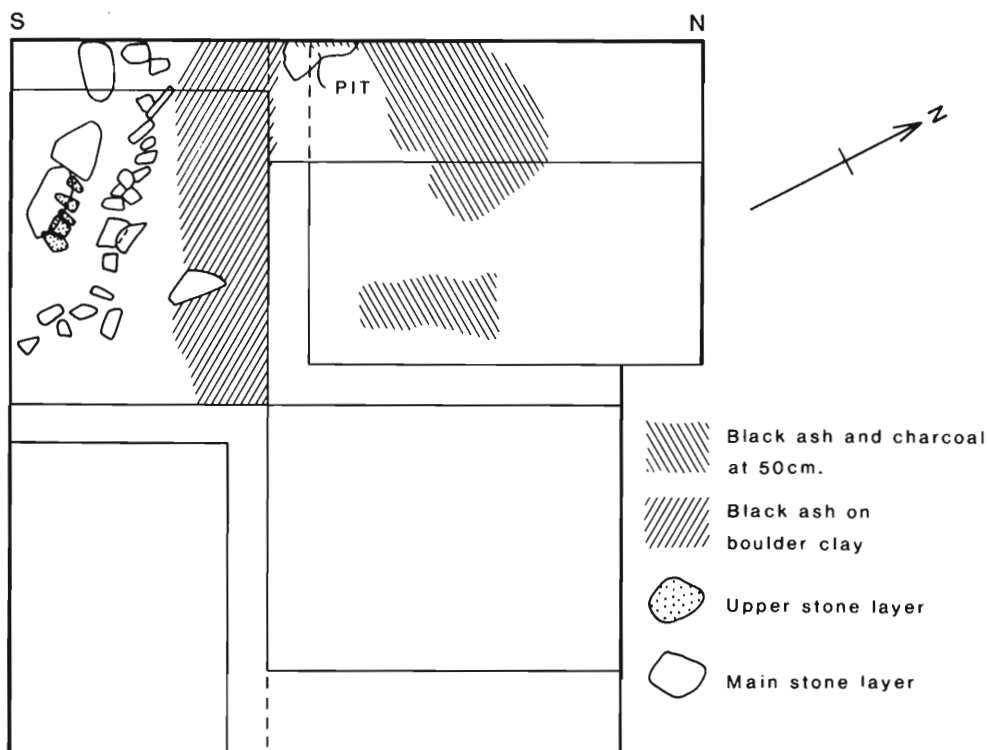


FIG. 11: Cutting in Western Enclosure: plan and section.

tenon; both are now firmly cemented to the east wall of the church.

EXCAVATION

Very limited excavation was undertaken at two points: in the vicinity of the East Cross and in the western enclosure. The western enclosure was a roughly rectangular scarped area on a steep slope just west of the church. It measured about 12.50 by 10m. and sloped downwards from south to north. A sub-rectangular cutting about 5.20 by 5.50m. was excavated in this area (Figs. 1 and 11). Unexcavated baulks 30cm. wide divided the cutting into quadrants.

A trench just over 90cm. wide at the cutting's western side was excavated down to yellow boulder clay (and provided the section S-N); a similar trench just over 60cm. wide on the eastern side of the north-eastern quadrant was also dug to boulder clay. It is not clear to what depth the south-eastern quadrant was taken. Excavation of the north-western quadrant revealed two black ash areas with charcoal (2.5cm. thick on average) at a depth of about 50cm. below the surface; a pit (thought too irregular to be a posthole) had much fine charcoal at its bottom.

Another deposit of black ash 2.5cm. thick occurred on the boulder clay in the south-west quadrant. This quadrant also contained a deposit of yellow clay with sand and stones (disturbed boulder clay?) which contained two layers of stones; the upper layer (dotted on plan) partly overlay the main layer. Some small fragments of iron slag were found in the western enclosure, probably in this cutting.

The limited excavation in the area of the East Cross included some excavation at the base of the shaft and to the west of the platform around the shaft. Removal of the rubble around the cross revealed the remains of a dry-stone platform. It was destroyed on the south-east, but seems to have been sub-rectangular and to have measured about 2.60m. by 1.80m. Few details are available of the investigation here: Fig. 12 shows a plan of the surviving upper stones of the platform. A second plan of similar stones at a lower but unspecified level is also preserved (not illustrated).

A partial section shows that the cross rested on a foundation stone and was supported by a stone packing. Two narrow rectangular areas delineated on a general plan (Fig. 1) immediately to the west of the platform are designated TI and TII, and were presumably trenches each 3.20m. long and 61cm. wide. There is no information about TII (except that grave slab fragment no. 33 came from it); but a transverse cross-section of TI (which occupied an area locally called 'the grave') showed that it was 76cm. deep, had more or less straight sides and a gently rounded bottom. According to a note on the cross-section, the humus was 10 to 16.5cm. deep and covered a trench fill consisting of "varying shades of disturbed gravel cum boulder clay. Scraps of bone given to Dr. Keenan, U.C.D., to see if human". No further details are available about the bones. Another find from the area of the East Cross was a small stone with a green vitreous glaze on part of it. It, and the iron slag from the western enclosure and the small fragments of the East Cross, are preserved in the National Museum of Ireland.

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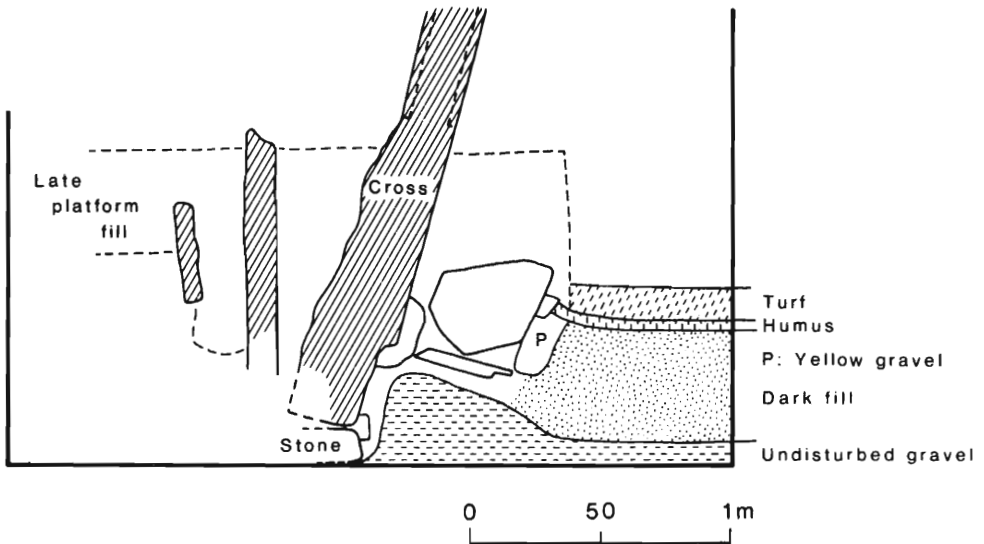
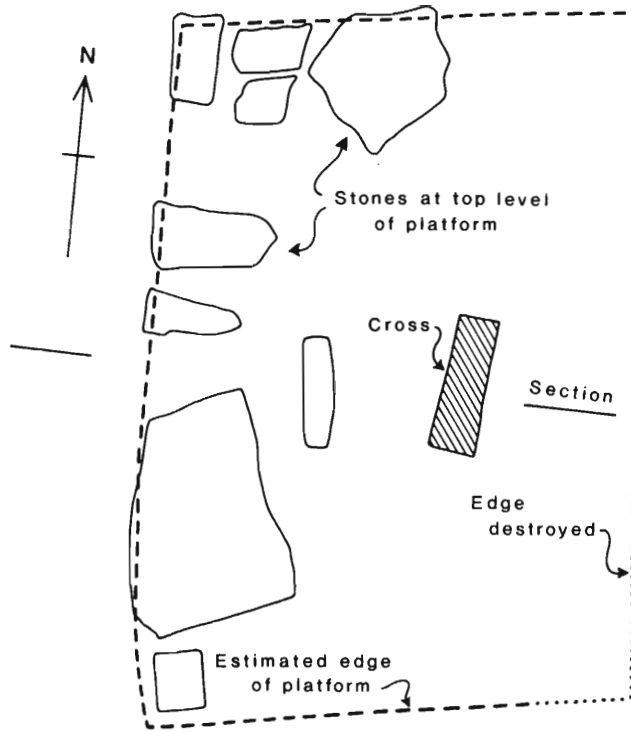


FIG. 12: Excavation at East Cross.

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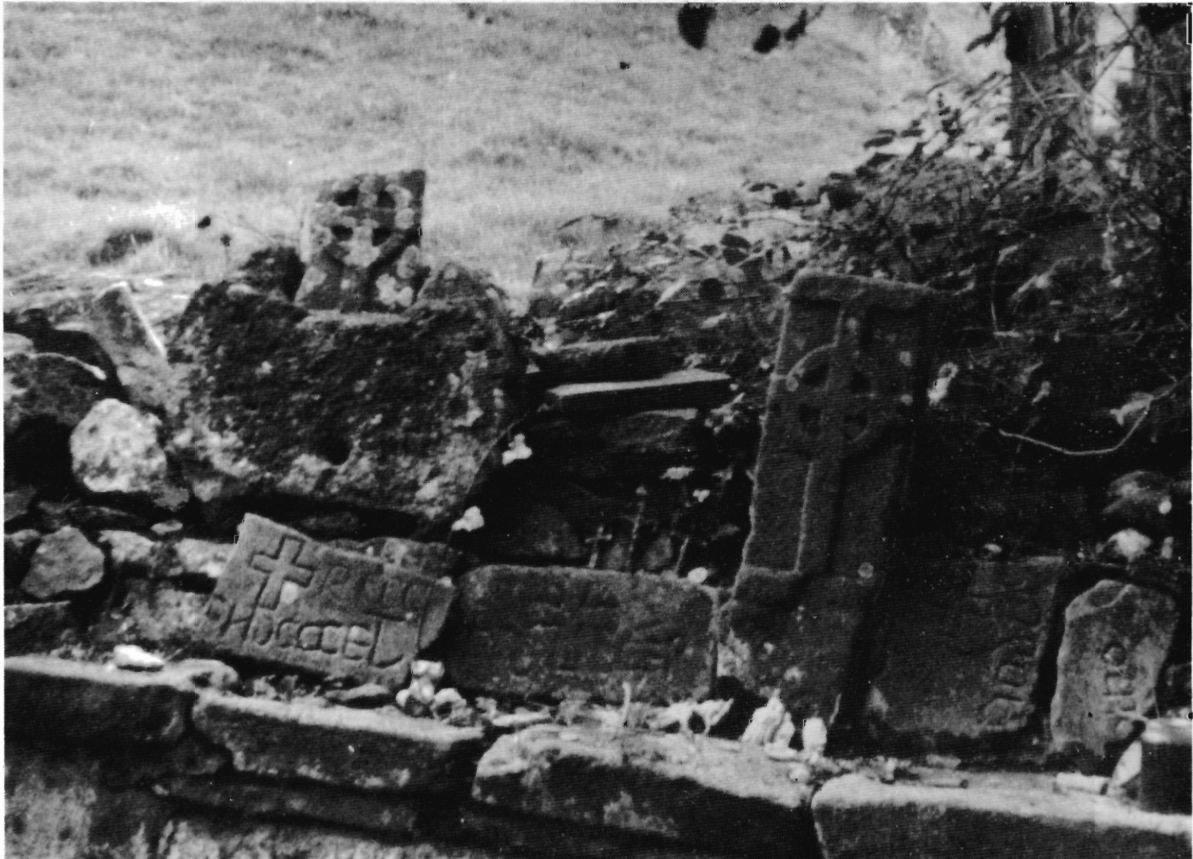
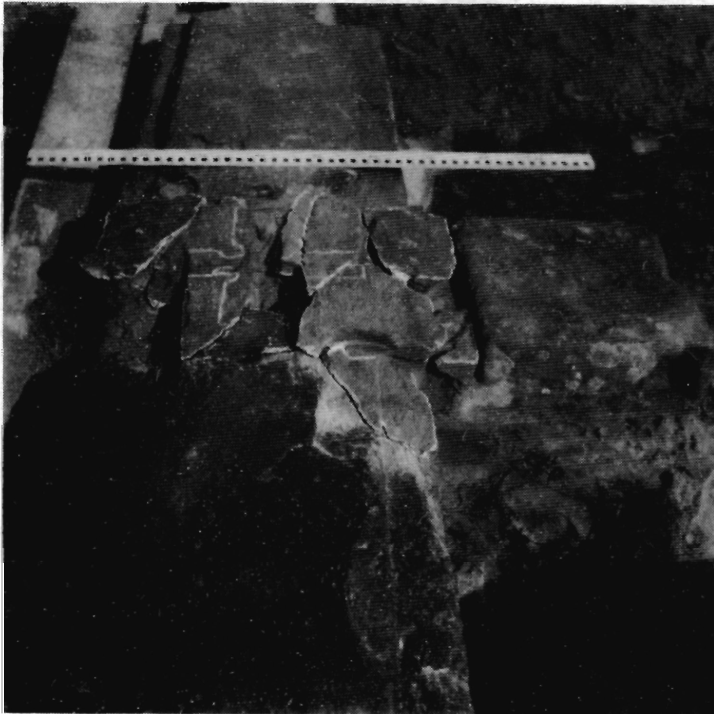


PLATE 1: *Grave slabs collected at the west end of Peakaun church to form a pilgrim's 'pattern station'. Grave slabs 15, 7, 8 and 23, the back of the sun-dial, one small cross pillar and part of the other are visible.*

PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY JOHN MEAGHER IN THE EARLY 1930S.



*PLATE 2:
South Window,
1955.*



*PLATE 3: Piecing
together the fragments
of the East Cross, 1944.*



PLATE 4: East Cross - inscription on west face.

*PLATE 5: Sun-dial
now on the south
wall of the church,
1955.*



*PLATE 6: The pair
of smaller cross
pillars, 1944.*