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Incised effigial slab at Athassel Priory

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Incised effigial slabs in Ireland in the post-Norman period (1169-1400) have received very little attention. The practice of having the effigy of the deceased represented on a horizontal slab was introduced to Ireland by the Anglo-Normans. Most of these figural monuments are executed in low or high relief.

However, there are more than a dozen extant effigial or semi-effigial slabs from the period on which all the work is incised. These range in quality from the ultra-simple head-slab of a cleric at Jerpoint Abbey, Co. Kilkenny to a very high quality work of two unknown knights called "The Brothers", also at Jerpoint.

One of these early incised effigial slabs is in Co. Tipperary; this is the representation of a man and a woman at Athassel Priory.¹ It is now fastened upright to the east wall of the church choir. This is an unusual slab with no exact comparisons, yet with many similarities to contemporary work. It is dated by John Hunt to the first half of the 14th century.² Costume and hairstyle both help with the dating.

The three garments worn by civilian women of the period were the kirtle, the gown and the mantle. The kirtle was a long-sleeved body dress, with sleeves that came down to the wrist and were tight fitting. The gown was worn over the kirtle and could either be sleeveless or have wider sleeves than the kirtle that would reach to the elbow or forearm.³ The mantle was worn over the gown. A simple cord and/or clasp fastened the mantle at the neck, and it was often tucked up between the body and the forearm.⁴

The Athassel woman wears her mantle tucked up against her, and holds her right hand up as though holding a mantle cord — although the cord is not there. In the past this position of the hand has been erroneously called "relic-holding"; it was thought that the figure was holding a relic or reliquary to the breast. The concept of the relic-holding effigy probably arose from heavily weathered or worn funerary monuments, where the mantle cord being held could not be distinguished.⁵

Medieval women, except for unmarried girls, were generally portrayed with their heads covered.⁶ The veil and wimple were common on many sculptured effigies in late 13th-century England.⁷ However, the veil was sometimes worn without the wimple and the neck was left bare, as with the Athassel woman, whose veil falls down her back.

The civilian men of the period dressed even more simply than the unornamented women. The man's costume on incised slabs consisted of a tunic and/or a supertunic. The tunic corresponds to the lady's kirtle with tight-fitting sleeves, while the supertunic was either sleeveless or had wide sleeves to the forearm, like the one on the man at Athassel.

The hairstyle of the Athassel man is interesting with its curls on either side of the face below the ears and a fringe in the centre of his head where the hair divides. Hunt discounts any suggestion that the man could be in minor orders on the grounds of this hairstyle.⁸ It is a fashion very frequently found on lay effigies of the period and is quite common in contemporary manuscript art.

Examples of slabs include the slightly earlier effigy of the mason William de Wermington (c1275) in Crowland Abbey, Lincs.⁹ and the slab of Conte Chase-Conee, Lombard of Old Siena (1303) in



Arpajon, Essone, France.¹⁰ The manuscript Escorial Lib. Q II 6 dates from c1320-1330 and was possibly made in Lincolnshire.¹¹ On folio 36 there is a painting of David pointing to his eyes; David has the same type of short fringe and side curls. William de Wermigton and David also wear the typical tunic and supertunic.

The hairstyle can again be identified on many head slabs and relief slabs of the early 14th century — for example, the relief effigy of a layman (c.1300) in St. Mary's Church in New Ross, Co. Wexford.



This layman also holds his hands in a position very similar to that of the Athassel man. The Wexford effigy shows good workmanship and is made of Dundry stone, indicating that either the stone or the slab was imported from the West Country in England.¹²

So we have evidence of this hairstyle in the late 13th and early 14th centuries on both incised and relief memorial sculpting as well as in manuscript painting, and appearing in England, on the Continent and in Ireland. It seems to have been a popular style and helps in the dating of the Athassel slab to the early 14th century.

The drawing of the drapery on both Athassel figures is simply done. The rounded necklines of their garments are plain. The sinister edge of the man's body is missing.

The slab is a trapezoidal-shaped fragment, 99 cms long and 82.5 cms wide at the top, tapering to 63.5 cms. The lower part of the slab is missing. The cutting is clear and deep. The man faces outwards. The woman is at a three-quarter angle turned towards the man and she holds a cross with four *fleur-de-lis* terminals in the head. The man and the woman take up equal amounts of space.

The faces of the figures are stylised and stiff. They were not meant as portraiture as we know it. They were formal faces on formal figures. If one compares the two faces, they are very much alike, except for direction and the small indentation on the man's nose. Both have open eyes; open eyes were the general rule in northern Europe.¹³

The subjects of this Tipperary slab are thus far unknown. Athassel was a burial site for several members of the de Burgo family, but there is nothing substantive to link this slab with the family. It has been suggested that the slab was once a rectangular wall decoration representing St. Augustine and his mother, St. Monica.¹⁴ However, there is no convincing evidence to substantiate such conjecture.

The circumstances of manufacture of the slab are also unresolved. From external observation it seems to be made of local Irish limestone. The drawing is simple; but the artist was aware of contemporary fashion in clothes and hair. A Kilkenny workshop would be a reasonable place of production. The slab of this unknown couple at Athassel Priory, while not an extraordinary piece of craftsmanship, is still a pleasing example of incised sculpture in the early 14th century in Ireland.

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FOOTNOTES

1. For previous discussion of this slab, see J. Hunt: *Irish Medieval Figure Sculpture 1200-1600*, Vols 1 & 2, (Dublin, 1974), p. 220 and plate 30; F. O'Farrell: *Incised Slab at Athassel Priory, Co. Tipperary*, *North Munster Archaeological Journal*, Vol. XXVII, 1985, pp 80-1.
2. Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
3. H.A. Tummers; *Early Secular Effigies in England: the Thirteenth Century*, (Leiden, 1980), p.54.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 55.
5. Hunt, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 42.
6. F.A. Greenhill: *Incised Effigial Slabs: a Study of Engraved Stone Memorials in Latin Christendom, c1100 to c1700*, Vol. I, (London, 1976), p. 233.
7. Tummers, *op. cit.*, p.58.
8. Hunt, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
9. Greenhill, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 202, fig. 23.
10. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, plate 109a.
11. L.F. Sandler: *Gothic Manuscripts 1285 - 1385*, (London, 1986), p, 87.
12. Hunt, *op. cit.*, Vols 1 & 2, pp 239-40 and plate 45.
13. Tummers, *op. cit.*, pp 23-4.
14. O'Farrell, *op. cit.*, pp 81-2.

