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*Mellifont Abbey: It s Decoration and Artifacts*

*by  
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## **Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter I : Background</b>	6
Origin of the order	
Plan of the abbey	
Features unique to Mellifont	
<b>Chapter II : Tiles</b>	25
Three types of tile : inlaid, relief and line	
Their manufacture and decoration	
<b>Chapter III : Stone Carving</b>	42
Carvings on the lavabo and the chapter house	
Decorative stone fragments found	
<b>Chapter IV : Metalwork</b>	63
Metal artifacts found: their decoration and manufacture	
<b>Conclusion</b>	74
<b>Bibliography</b>	77



## Illustrations

1	Ruins of Mellifont abbey as seen from the air.	2
2	Typical early Cistercian architecture.	8
3	Mellifont abbey: plan showing basic suggested phases of building.	10
4	Jerpoint abbey church showing clerestory windows.	13
5	Watercolour by <sup>Gabriel</sup> Beranger.	14
6	New north transept doorway.	15
7	The base mouldings of the transepts.	16
8	The crypt with stairway.	18
9	The crypt as seen from the west.	18
10	The lavabo with four remaining arches.	19
11	Capital and lavabo with stylised foliage carving.	19
12	Chapter house window with elaborate mouldings.	21
13	Chapter house with ribbed vaults.	21
14	The gatehouse with spiral staircase.	23
15	The chapel built by the Moore family.	24
16	Line impressed tiles from Mellifont and other sites.	26-8
17	The overall layout of the tiles in Swords castle.	31
18	Design [T5] from Mellifont.	33
19	Relief tiles from Mellifont and other sites.	36-7
20	Design [T25] from Mellifont.	38
21	Two colour (inlaid) tiles from Mellifont.	39-40
22	Distribution of medieval pavement tiles in Ireland.	42
23	Reconstruction of part of the original cloister arcade.	45
24	Elaborate fragments of scalloped capital from the cloister arcade.	47
25	Part of straight scalloped capital.	47
26	A more elaborate version from Baltinglass.	47
27	A small cubic capital.	48
28	Three fragments with chevron design.	48
29	A celtic spiral.	49
30	The lavabo and the cloister garth.	50
31	A beautifully carved sandstone capital from the lavabo.	51
32	Another capital from the lavabo.	52
33	Octagonal lavabo from Poblet, Spain.	53



34	Capital with figures of three men.	54
35	Carved corbel with berries.	54
36	Base fragment with animal head carving.	55
37	Engraving of the original chapter house doorway.	56
38	Two capitals with foliage designs.	57
39	Capital with foliage ornament (c. 1200).	57
40	Four masons marks from Mellifont.	58
41	Capitals with rope or billet ornament (1200s).	58
42	Pieces of arch moulding.	59
43	Profile of rib moulding from the decorated period.	59
44	Octagonal capital.	60
45	Stone carving which formed the head of a niche.	61
46	A carved head which is now on display in the chapter house window.	62
47	Another carved head on display at Mellifont.	63
48	The Mellifont ring.	66
49	Silver chalice and paten found at Mellifont	67
50	Silver chalice from Mellifont.	68
51	Gothic monstrance said to have come from Mellifont.	69
52	Processional cross found at Sheephouse Co. Meath (front)	71
53	Processional cross (back)	72
54	English Processional crosses	73
55	Bell and candlestick found at Sheephouse Co. Meath.	74





## Introduction

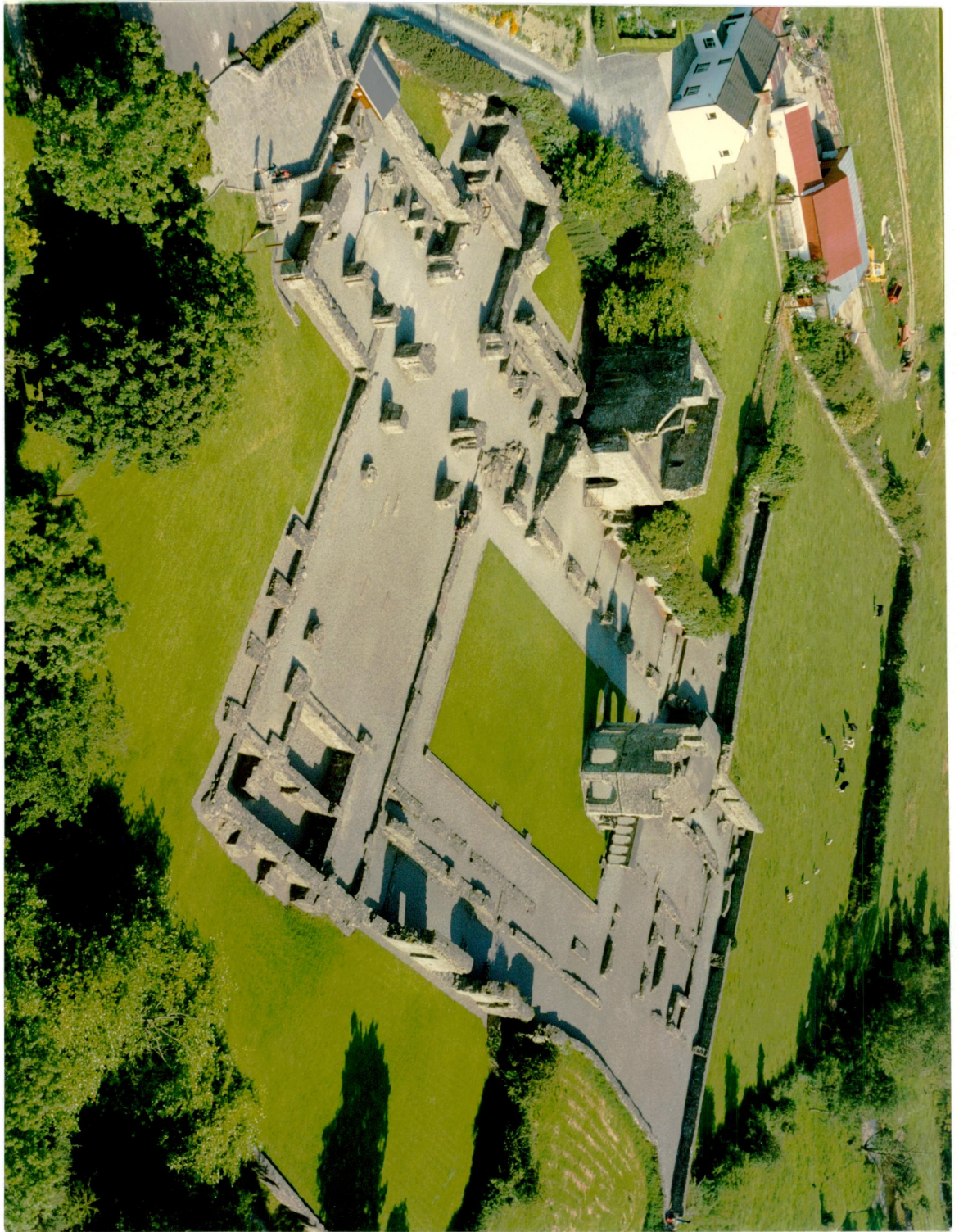
The ruins of Mellifont Abbey lie in the picturesque valley of the river Mattock in Co. Louth (Illus. 1). Eight hundred and fifty years ago this year (1142) the first monks arrived to found what was to be the most influential medieval monastery in Ireland .

This thesis deals with the decoration of Mellifont. Due to the rules of the order, as laid down by St. Bernard decoration was forbidden in the Cistercian Abbey and at a first glance therefore it may seem a contradiction in terms to discuss the decoration of a Cistercian Abbey. However in later years when the rules lapsed many abbeys resorted to rich and lavish additions to their original buildings and interiors. This was the case at Mellifont. The original abbey resembled its mother house in Clairvaux in terms of style and decoration; no stone carving or ornament of any kind were permitted. The decoration of Mellifont is an aspect which has been overlooked by all studies of the abbey already completed. Perhaps little interest has been shown in the subject because the Cistercians were not renowned for their decoration. However on closer inspection, the Cistercians contributed enormously to medieval art in Ireland. In particular Mellifont which, was the Mother house and leader stylistically; influencing the decoration of all the other Cistercian Abbeys in Ireland. It was constantly in touch with its own Mother House in France and with other abbeys of the order in England which means it was never isolated in terms of what was fashionable in church decoration at the time.

This thesis is the first attempt at a full discussion of the decoration and interior of the abbey. In the discussion all the material relevant to the tiles, carvings and metal objects is studied in order to build up a stylistic analysis of the inside of the abbey and help us to picture the abbey as it was when in use as a place to live work and pray in. Comparisons are made with daughter houses and with other buildings both religious and secular which were contemporary to the abbey. The articles found are also examined and comparisons are made with similar items both in Ireland and in England.

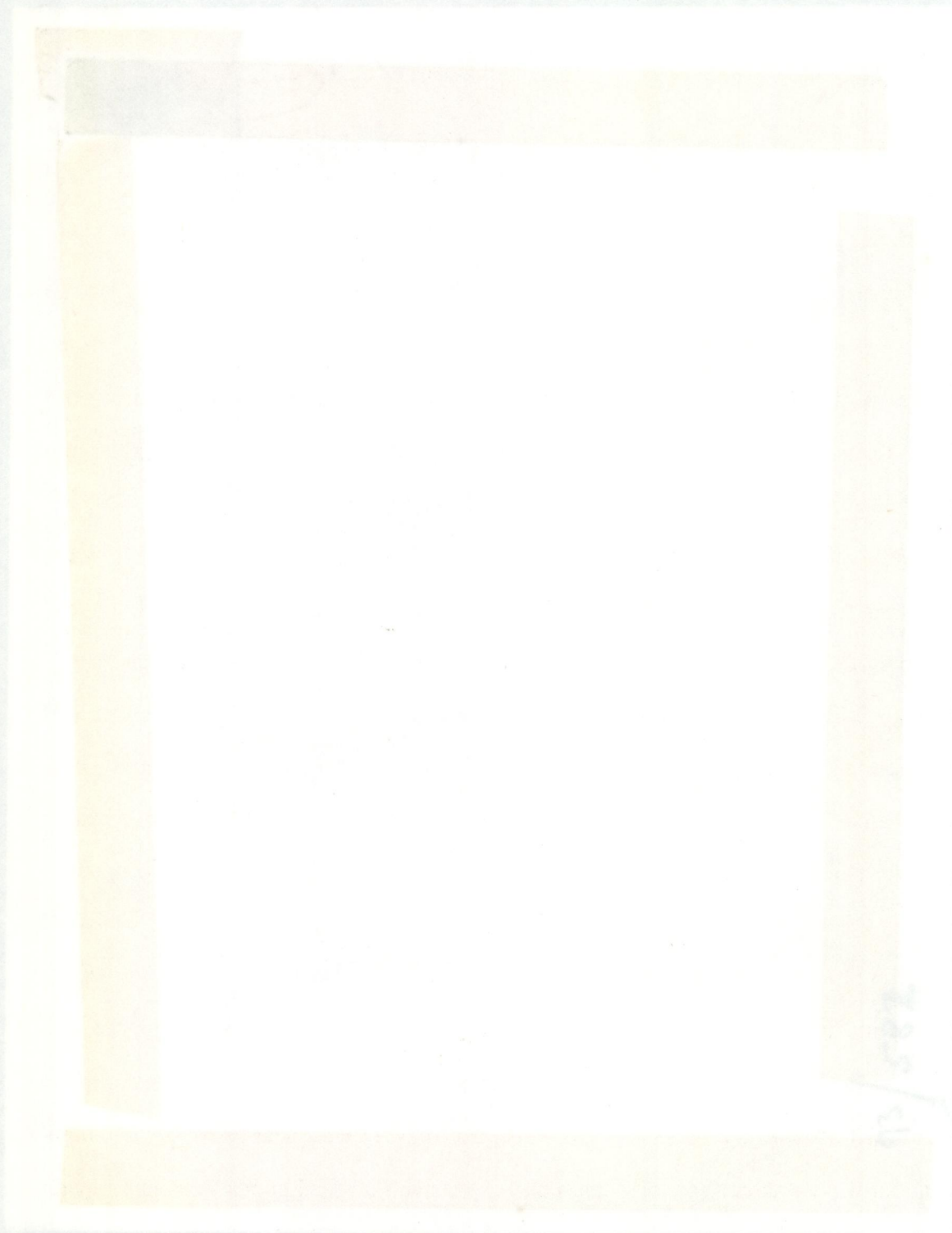






**Illus. 1** The ruins of Mellifont Abbey as seen from the air.





Many medieval tiles were found during the excavations in the 1880s and later some fragments were found during the de Paor excavations in 1954. Fragments of carved stone were also found. These along with the tiles are now on display in the chapter house museum which is now the property of the Office of Public Works and is open to the public. Some are also kept in store and are not on view.

Some items of metalwork also belonged to the abbey. A silver chalice and paten along with some coins were found during the excavations in 1954. A hoard of liturgical items were also uncovered at Sheephouse near Mellifont. This hoard consisted of a processional / altar cross, an altar candlestick and a bell. These are believed to have come from the abbey originally. The foot of a late gothic monstrance made of bronze was also found. All these items are now in the possession of the National Museum of Ireland. A silver ring was also uncovered from a grave in the presbytery during the excavations in the late nineteenth century. This now belongs to the Cistercian monks in New Mellifont Abbey at Collon in Co. Louth.

The monks when they first arrived in Ireland brought with them new styles and influences from England and France. In Ireland their arrival heralded the first great examples of monumental architecture. Mellifont itself came to be known as An Mainistir Mhor. The Cistercians initially were interested in simplicity in architecture and decoration. They believed in purity of form, clarity of proportions and good technical execution. Therefore the decoration in a Cistercian abbey was subtle rather than over stated. This was in sharp contrast to what the Irish had been familiar with in the early Irish monasteries where items such as the Ardagh Chalice and the Cross of Cong were in use. Therefore despite rigorous rules the Irish could not resist the use of carving and ornament in their churches and in the early thirteenth century when the rules lapsed Mellifont was one of the richest, most prestigious and beautifully decorated abbeys in Ireland with an abundance of stone carvings. In later years a beautifully tiled pavement was introduced to the church and expensive liturgical goods were purchased. Thus stating that the Cistercians did not suppress decorative religious art in Ireland. However it is true that most of the decorative work was imported or was similar to work being produced in England at the time. The Sheephouse Cross for example was





imported. Very little celtic design was used apart from some instances of stone carving and tile design. There is no evidence of the rich gold filagree work which was being crafted in Ireland not long before the arrival of the Cistercians.

The Cistercians or White monks as they came to be known were instrumental in bringing a new era of decorative church art to Ireland. They built their abbeys all over the country, with over thirty Cistercian abbeys in all. We are left, sadly with a beautiful collection of historical ruins; as very few remain intact, Holy Cross being one exception. It is difficult to imagine the Abbey in the days when the monks walked its corridors, as so little of the original building remains. There is however a considerable amount of information available on the abbey in the form of written evidence.

The Royal Society of Antiquities of Ireland is a rich source of information and articles written on Mellifont. The liturgical items found are discussed in an article for the society by E.C.R. Armstrong; Processional Cross Pricket Candlestick and Bell found together at Sheephouse near Oldbridge Co. Meath (1915). This is the only article of any considerable depth which has been written on the subject.

Fr. Colmcille O' Conbhuidhe in The Story of Mellifont (1958) gives an account of the abbey with an emphasis on its history from foundation in 1142 to its suppression in 1539 and finally to the return of the order to the area in the nineteen thirties with the foundation of New Mellifont in Collon Co. Louth.

Roger Stalley gives a detailed account of Mellifont in his article for the Royal Irish Academy; Mellifont Abbey a Study of its architectural history (1980 ). This article is the only extensive piece which has been written on the stone fragments found and has been invaluable in the writing the of this thesis. In his book later published; The Cistercian Monasteries of Ireland (1987 ) he deals mainly with the Cistercian abbeys in broad architectural terms and deals only briefly with the decoration of the buildings. Nevertheless this book contains very important background information and relates Mellifont to all the other abbeys in Ireland.

Eames and Fanning examine Irish tiles extensively in their book Irish Medieval Tiles. Here the tiles found at Mellifont are compared with other contemporaries. This book also contains a very important study which relates tiles from Mellifont and other





sites to a collection found in Cheshire.

Perhaps part of the beauty and mystery of Mellifont lies in its ruination which leaves us to speculate about its original appearance. This thesis looks inside the original Mellifont and tries to see the abbey as it was when the walls were decorated with carvings, the floors were tiled with medieval griffins and lions and the priests said mass in the transept chapels using rich and precious utensils.



## Chapter I : Background

In order to discuss the decoration of Mellifont it is necessary to examine the background to the abbey and how it came to be founded. The introduction of Cistercian architecture to Ireland was the first mainstream European monastic architectural influence in Ireland. Before this the Irish were used to a much simpler basic style of building. So Mellifont was not only of religious significance but also one of the most important architectural influences in Ireland. To understand the architecture one must look at the Cistercian way of life as both are interconnected as set down by the rules of the order. From the ruins which remain it is possible to make out the plan which is based on the same Cistercian plan which was used at the mother house in Clairvaux and which was used in every abbey. There are however a few differences which make Mellifont unique.

Mellifont Abbey was the first Cistercian Abbey in Ireland. The Cistercians are an order of monks that originated in Citeaux in France in 1098. A group of men who became dissatisfied with the Benedictine order decided to return to the primitive and literal observance of St. Benedicts rule and reject everything that seemed to oppose the purity of the rule. The order took its name from the first monastery in Citeaux in Burgundy. These early Cistercians not only rejected the need for excess food and clothing but they also rejected every kind of ornament and superfluity in their churches (which was the norm in their contemporary Clunic Churches). They also rejected the possession of private churches as well as alterages, offerings, burial dues and titles. Their lands were to be situated in places remote from the haunts of men and were to be used for the purpose of their own communities and exploited by their own work. Their aim was to earn their bread by the labour of their own hands (19, p. 4).

It was under the direction of Stephen Harding <sup>b. 1100</sup> (circa 1100) that the order was founded. Regarding the furniture of the churches, regulations introduced by him are described in the Exordium Parvum.



*Lest anything might remain in the house of God (in which they desired to serve God devoutly day and night) which would savour of pride or superfluity or which might at any time corrupt poverty the guardian of virtue in which they had chosen of their own accord they resolved to use no crucifixes of gold or silver but only of painted wood; no candlesticks except one of iron, no thuribles unless of copper or iron, no chausubles except of wood or linen without gold or silver embroidery; no alb or amices unless of linen without silk, gold or silver. They rejected altogether the use of palliums, copes, dalmatics and tunics though they kept silver chalices, not golden but when possible gold plated; the silver tube (for communion) gold plated if possible and stoles and maniples of silk only without silver or gold. They also ordered that the altar cloths should be made of unembroidered linen and that the cruets should have on them no gold or silver (19, p. 5).*

In the year 1112 St. Bernard with thirty companions joined the order and thence forth the future of the new monastery was assured. St. Bernard later founded the abbey of Clairvaux and he soon became famous throughout Europe. He was the most famous Cistercian of all time and one of the greatest men of his era. He was a great prophet and a man of peace and he secured many peace treaties in his time (16, p. 17).

Cistercian monasteries multiplied and among many of the monasteries founded from Clairvaux was the house of Mellifont the mother house and first Cistercian Abbey in Ireland.

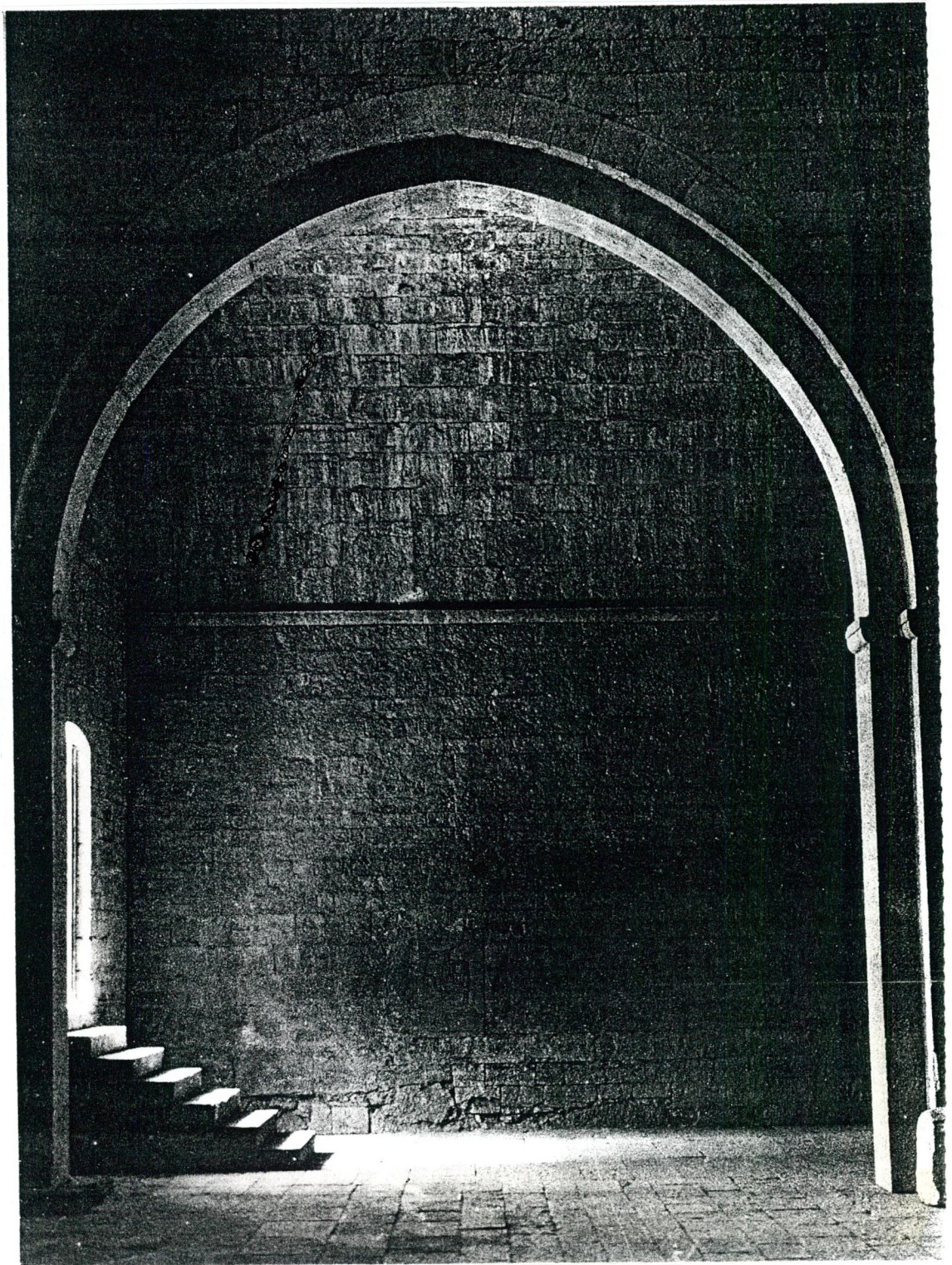
St. Bernard however has also been criticised and looked upon as an iconoclast little concerned with beauty as regards the architecture and decoration of his churches. Nevertheless especially through his demands for simplicity he has inspired an architecture which is unique and still attracts many visitors from all over the world. This architecture is best understood in the light of two of St Bernard's basic themes listening and seeing. All of his monasteries were designed first for sound and then for light: no ornament whatsoever surprisingly effective acoustics and art that captures light in an incomparable way (Illus. 2). St. Bernard wrote:

*You desire to see, first listen. Hearing is a step towards vision. Also listen and incline your ear so that by the obedience of hearing you may arrive at the glory of vision. Isn't it more for sake of hearing than of seeing that you have gathered here? It is his ear that has opened to me not his face that he has shown me. He is here hidden behind the wall (16, p. 24).*

St. Malachy (died 1148) one time archbishop of Armagh was the founder of

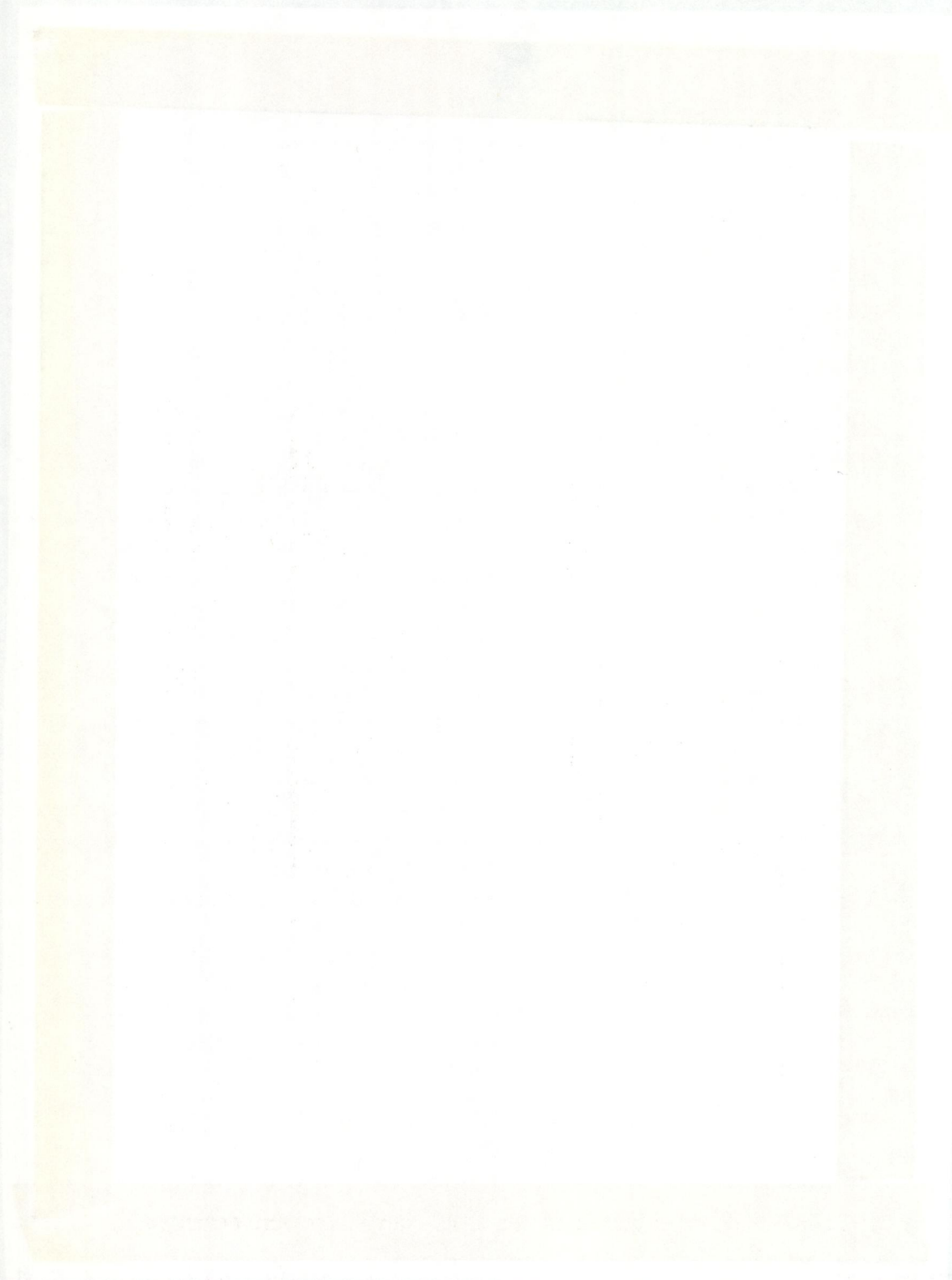






*Where? date?*  
**Illus. 2** Typical early Cistercian architecture with little or no ornament. The light accentuates the basic beauty and simplicity of the stonework. Light was one of St. Bernard's basic themes.







Mellifont Abbey . In the year 1140 he set out for Rome with five priests and a number of clerics. His purpose was to petition the pope for the palliums for the new archbishops of Armagh and Cashel. Attracted by the fame of St. Bernard he visited the abbey of Clairvaux and such was the impression made upon him by the holy abbot and by the community that he wanted to abandon his position as archbishop and become a simple monk. The church in Ireland still required his presence as he was the guiding light of reform and the pope would not allow him to become a monk.

On his return journey from Rome, St. Malachy paid another visit to Clairvaux. He left behind him to be trained by St. Bernard four of his companions. This was in the view to founding an abbey in Ireland.

St. Malachy returned to Ireland and chose a site for what was to be the first Cistercian Abbey in Ireland. He chose a secluded glen about five miles north west of Drogheda. The site was far removed from the haunts of men as was laid down by the rules of the order.

The land chosen by St. Malachy lay within the lands of the King of Airghialla Donnchadh O Cearbhaill who was a friend of St. Malachy. He gave the land on which the abbey was to be raised and he also supplied the materials for building; both wood and stone (19, pp. 6-8).

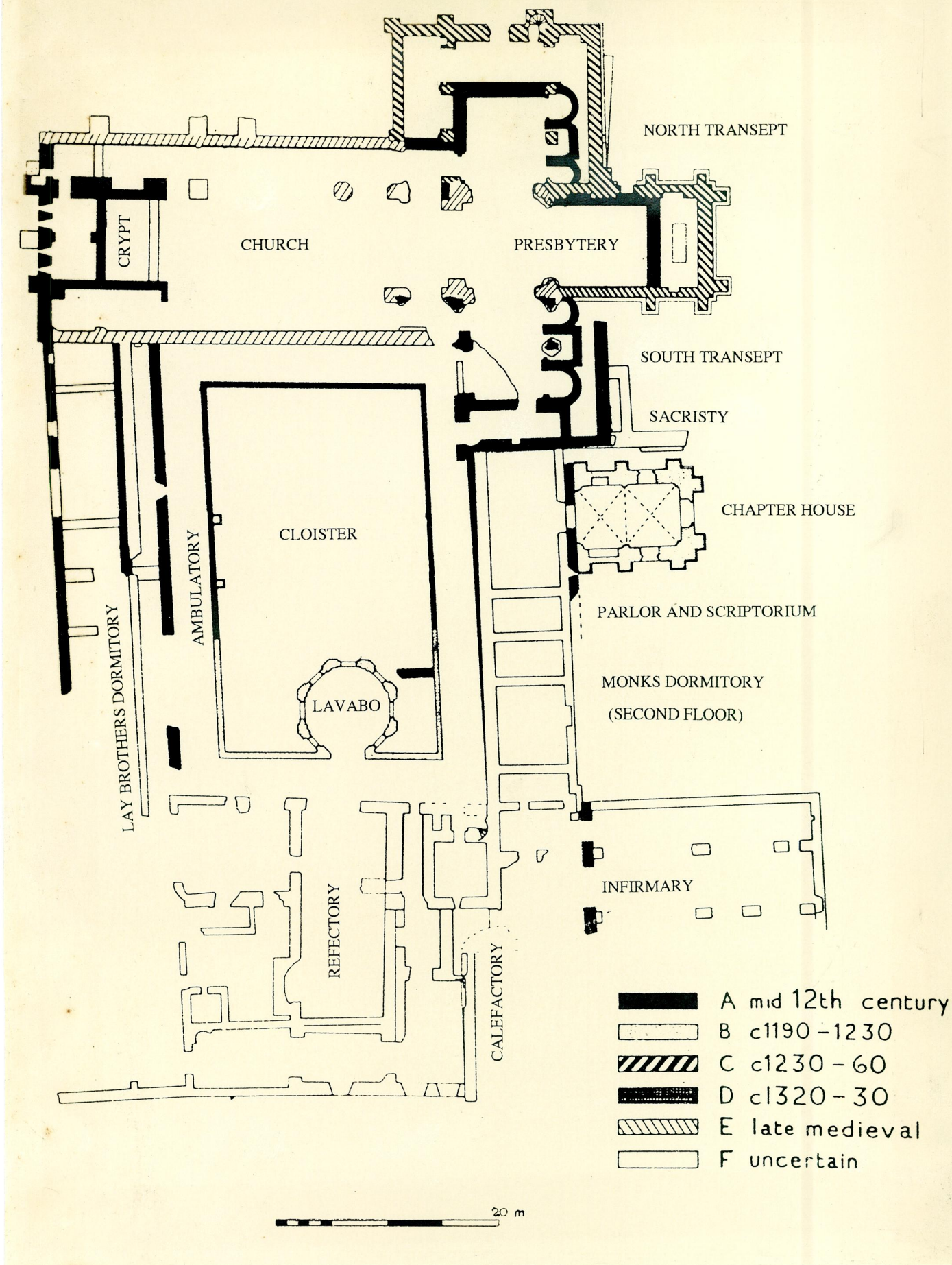
The building began in 1142 two years after Malachys initial visit to Clairvaux. The first group of monks was comprised both of French and Irish. The Irish monks having been trained in Clairvaux. St. Bernard also sent Robert a monk who was a skilled architect to help the Irish who were unfamiliar with continental building styles. The domestic buildings of the abbey were solidly constructed in stone and systematically arranged around a cloister. This was in contrast to ancient Irish monasteries which were made of wood or wattle (21, p. 3).

The church and other buildings in a Cistercian abbey were designed *'In order to assemble a community and to help it recognise in a symbolic way its identity as a people of God'* (16, p. 25).<sup>x</sup>

Bernard's own life focused entirely on this service of the church embodies the same standards of discipline and simplicity that he imprinted on the building of







**Illus. 3** Mellifont Abbey: Plan showing basic suggested phases of building.





Cistercian Abbeys. Every Cistercian Abbey therefore was built to the same plan (Illus. 3).

The monastery was constructed in the form of a quadrangle around an open space which was the cloister. Around the cloister ran the ambulatories. These were covered walkways which made communication possible from one part of the abbey to another. The church was on the north side of the cloister. The northern walk of the cloister was provided with benches for readings. Nearest to the church was the sacristy, then the library, the Chapter House, the Parlour and the Scriptorium. The monks dormitory was generally located on the second floor over the Chapter House and was connected directly with the church by a staircase known as the nightstairs since it was used by the monks for the purpose of coming from the dormitory to the church for night prayers. The southern range of the abbey contained the calefactory (warming room) the refectory (dining hall) and the kitchen. Opposite the door of the refectory was the lavabo. This was the washing fountain at which the brethren washed their hands before entering the refectory for meals. The west range of the Abbey held the lay brothers quarters with various storerooms and a corridor reserved for the use of the laybrothers. There were also other buildings which were built somewhat apart from the monastery such as a guest house and farm buildings.

The fabric of Mellifont Abbey was altered many times in the four hundred years of its existence. It is however a fair assumption that Mellifont embodied the architectural ideas of St. Bernard and his immediate circle as closely as any other Cistercian church of its time in Europe. When Cistercians arrived in most countries they found vigorous local styles of building which were blended with certain basic Cistercian ideas principally concerning the plan. English Cistercian architecture represents a typical example of this mixture <sup>for example at Abbey</sup> ie. Fountains. In Ireland the situation was different as there was no tradition of major church building and Cistercians were free to introduce their own ideas. The earliest buildings at Mellifont would therefore have been entirely foreign in style.

Unfortunately very little remains of the first church at Mellifont which would have been greatly influenced by the Mother house in Clairvaux. A general impression



of the nave can be made by looking at the first daughter houses Bective Abbey, Co. Meath (1147) and Baltinglass, Co. Wicklow (1148). Particularly relevant are the ruins of Bective which is situated less than 20 miles away and easily reached along the Boyne. Part of the original south elevation of the nave still remains. The design is extremely simple, fulfilling the austere requirements of the early Cistercian Abbey in Europe with the plainness of the piers relieved only by a chamfer. The total absence of vertical articulation is striking particularly in comparison to French churches in the order. The frequent appearance of arcade designs related to Bective strongly suggest Mellifont as the source.

The nave at Baltinglass is relatively well preserved and the design of the eastern bay may give some idea of the first church at Mellifont. A plain pointed arch rests on piers approximately four feet square. Unlike the Bective group these piers are crowned with capitals also square in plan which provide a much needed accent in design. It is virtually certain that similar capitals existed at Mellifont. Two fragments with scalloped ornament were found during excavations and are now preserved in the Chapter House. The original elevation of Mellifont therefore cannot have been very different from this particular bay at Baltinglass and if anything Baltinglass is simplified (21, p. 356).

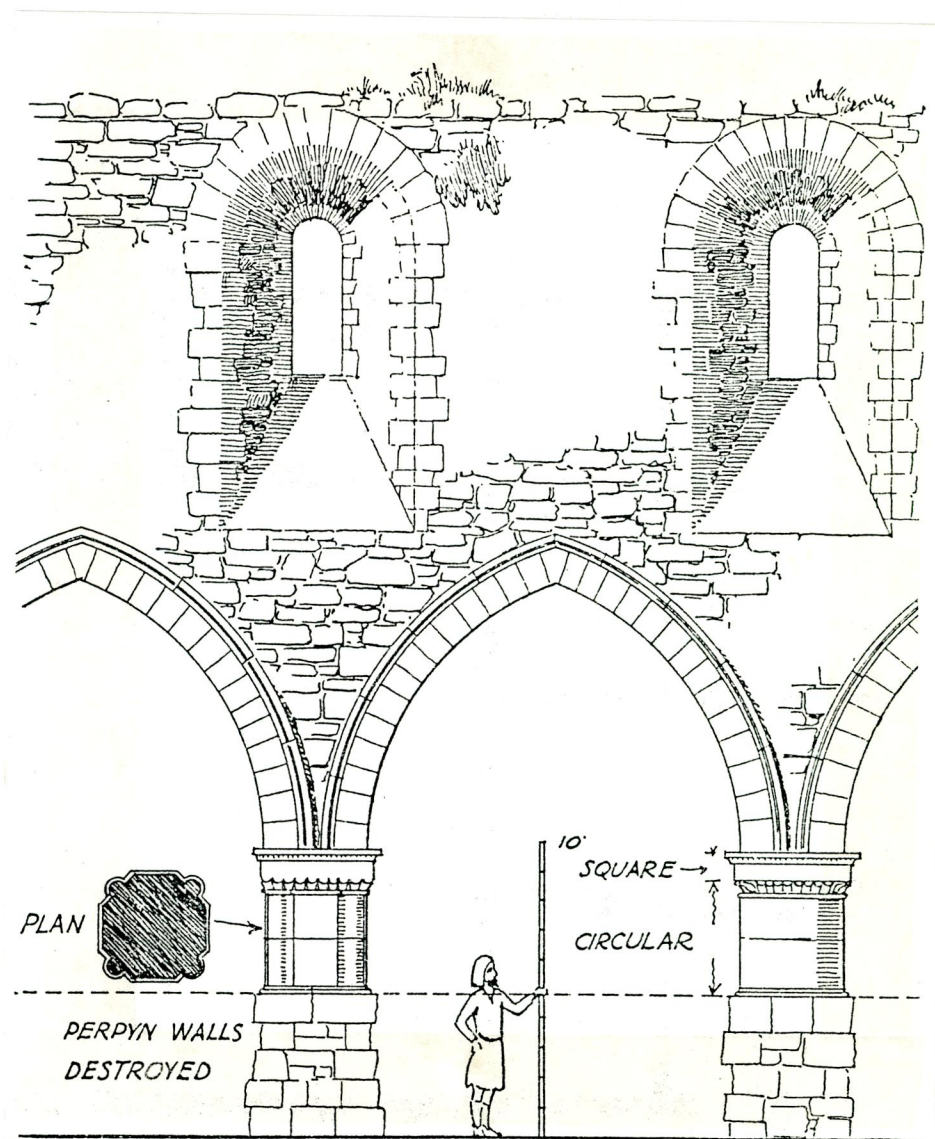
Mellifont might also provide the origin for one of the oddest features in Irish Cistercian architecture. The citing of the clerestory windows over the piers and not the arcades. Ten monasteries followed suit, Bective being an exception. It gives the design an interesting syncopated rhythm and the normal explanation is that it allowed a slight reduction in height of clerestory wall since the lower splay of the window could be dropped below the apex of the arcade (Illus. 4).

The popularity of this feature in Irish Cistercian Abbeys makes it probable that it was adopted in the first church at Mellifont. This can be seen in the illustration by Beranger of the late medieval reconstruction at Mellifont (Illus. 5).

The first church does not seem to have been very sophisticated in European standards with its rectangular piers on simple bases supporting a pointed arcade. The general austerity of the design is not in doubt an austerity greater than most French and

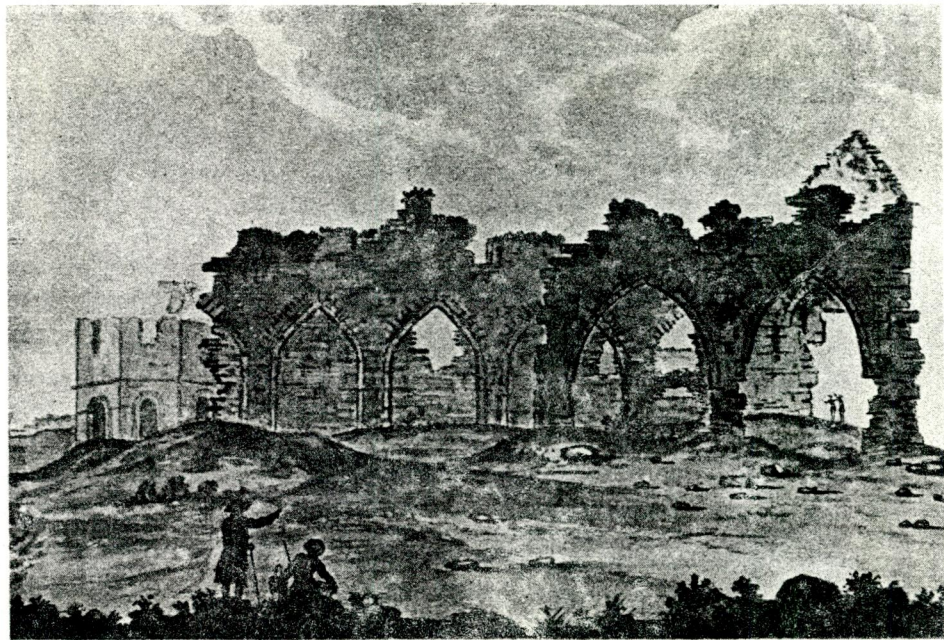






**Illus. 4** Jerpoint Abbey church showing the clerestory windows over the piers and not the arcades.





**Illus. 5** Watercolour by Gabriel Beranger (c. 1760-83) (National Library of Ireland) showing the clestory windows over the piers at Mellifont.

English ecclesiastical houses of the time (21, pp. 357-60).

After the first church had been completed in 1157 all energy would then have been focused on the cloister and surrounding buildings. Not until the thirteenth century when these buildings had been finished did interest once again turn to the church. It was then decided to enlarge the whole building beginning at the east end with the presbytery. There were probably two objectives behind this, firstly to increase space for altars and secondly a desire to bring the church up to date.

In 1220-1 the visitors to Mellifont complained of a lack of care of monastic buildings and properties so it does not sound as if much activity was going on then. }  
Indeed between 1216 and 1231 the Cistercian order in Ireland was so disrupted by the conspiracy of Mellifont that it was not a likely time for a new building scheme.

Sometime after 1228 when the trouble began to cool down and an Anglo-Norman contingent settled among the monks at Mellifont seems a more likely time for the start of a reconstruction especially since the style of the work can be related to Anglo-Norman building elsewhere in Ireland. Leask compared details of the new north





transept with St. Patrick's Dublin which was started in 1220 (13, p. 49).

The north transept was tackled first as this involved less complications. This new transept provided the space for five altars three in the east and two in the west now easily identified by the piscinae. A fine doorway with elaborate moulding (Illus. 6) was also built along with a staircase which may have led to a tower over the aisles.

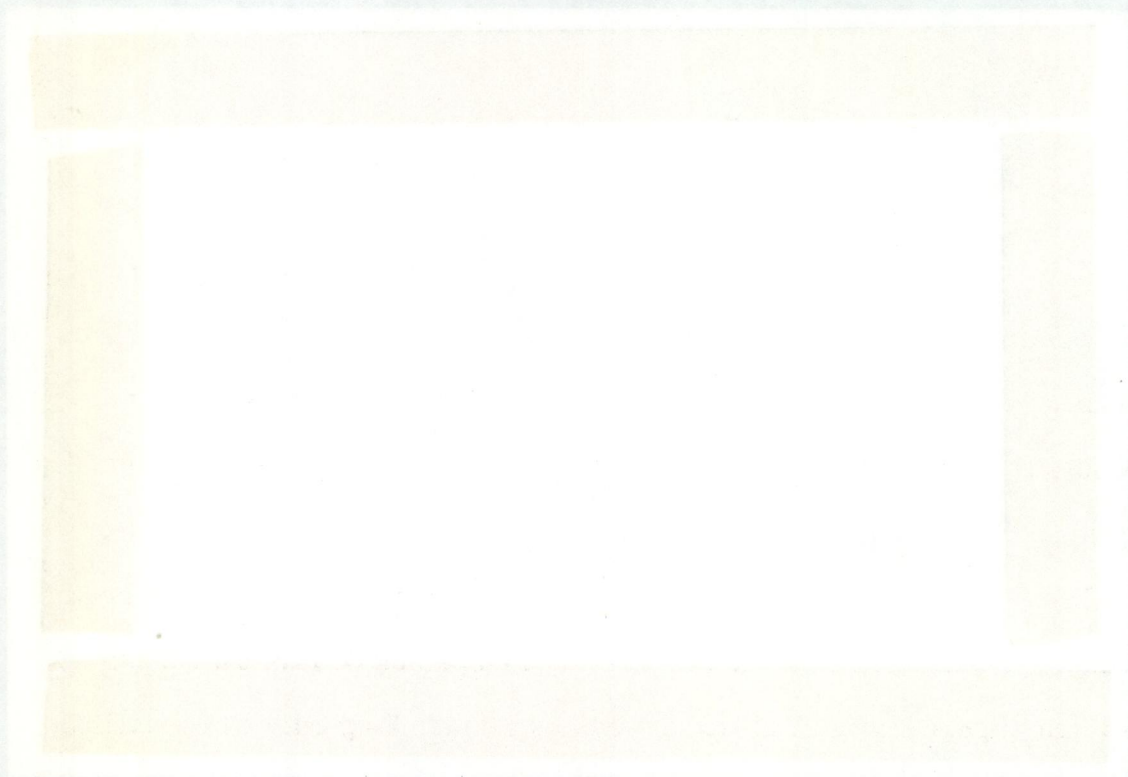
With the north transept complete there appears to have been a lapse of several decades before the building operations continued with the south transept. Not many clues for the dates of building are to be found. However the base mouldings give a rough idea. Their profile is quite different to the north transept.

The north transept had round polygonal plinths whereas the south although similar were decorated with multiple shafts and no doubt the arches above had elaborate soffit mouldings. As part of this same rebuilding campaign the southern piers

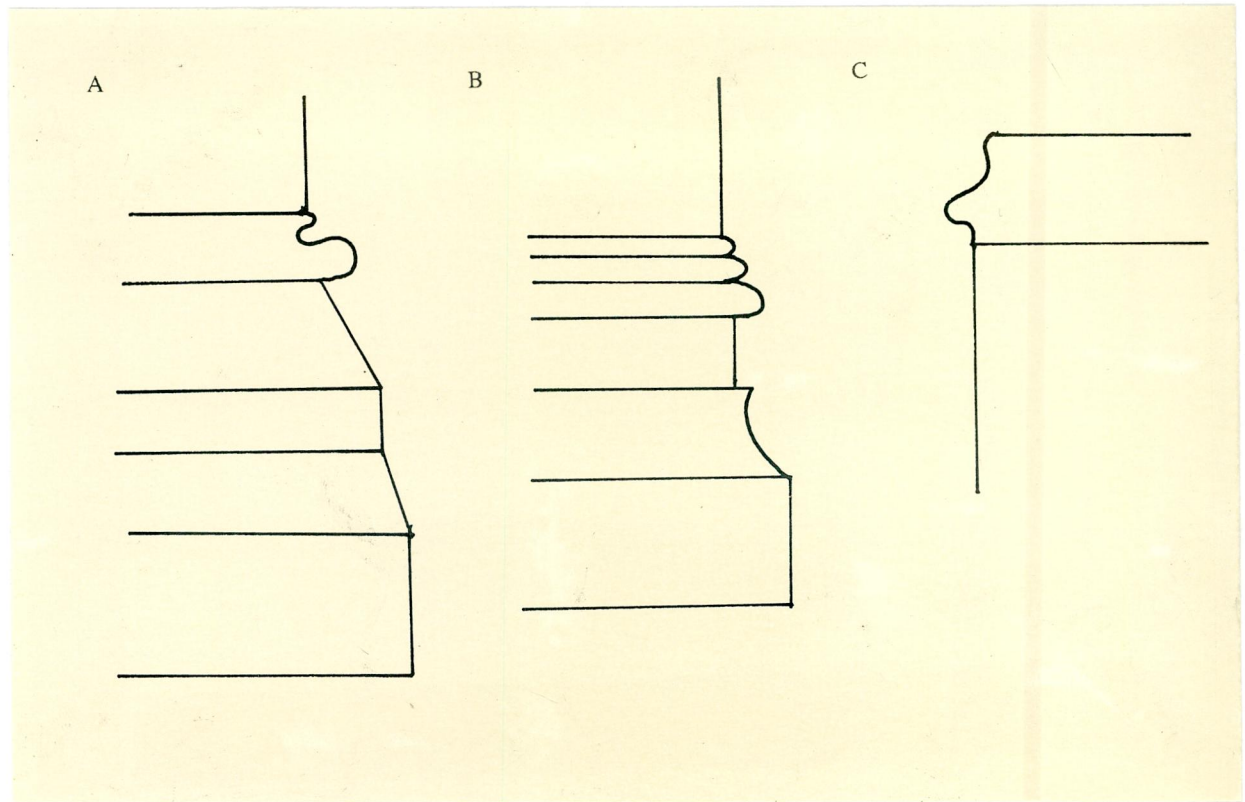


**Illus. 6** New north transept doorway with elaborate mouldings (c. 1220).





of the crossing were rebuilt (Illus. 8).



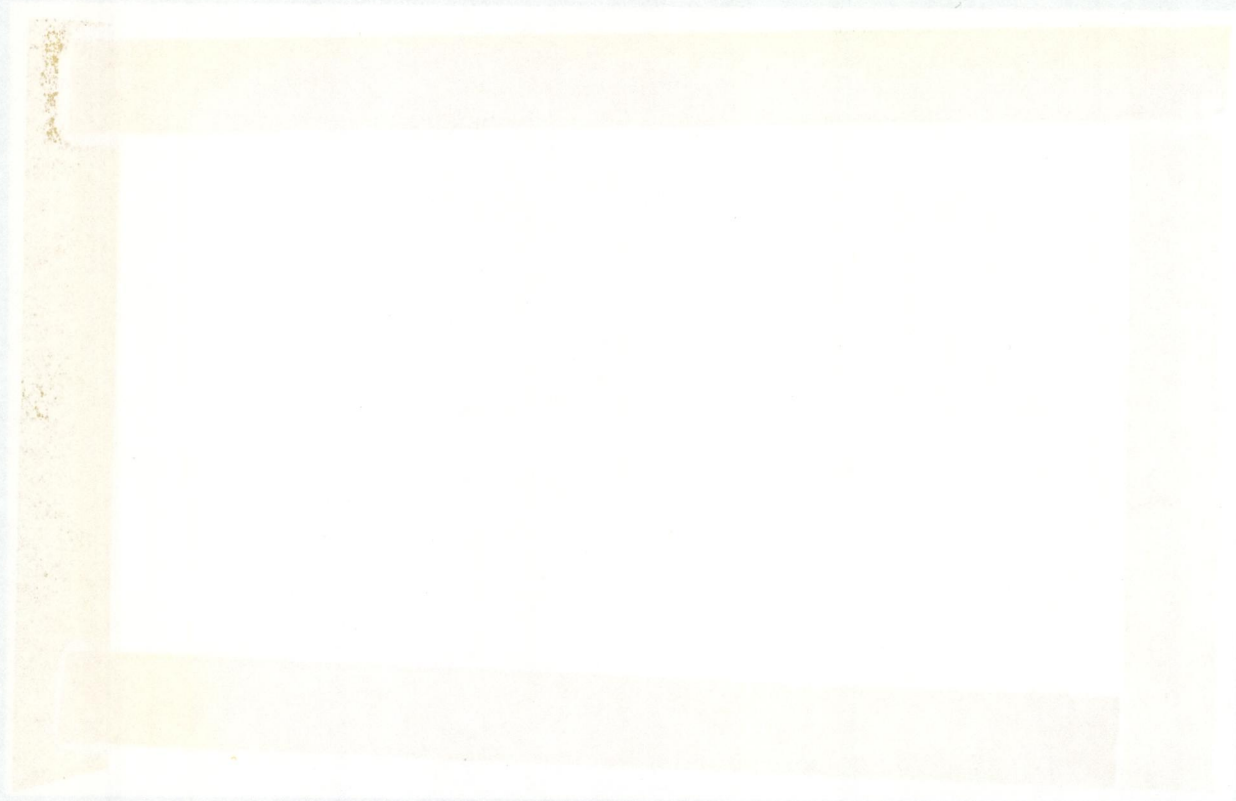
**Illus. 7** The base mouldings of the transepts after rebuilding  
a) North transept (c. 1200)  
b) South transept (1290 - 1330)  
c) Crossing piers (c. 1300)

This building campaign at Mellifont contains some of the most sophisticated Gothic work in Ireland. One face alone of the crossing piers contains six vertical shafts and a degree of elaboration which begins to compare with major English buildings of the period. The crossing piers must have been intended to support a great tower in the centre of the church (Illus. 7).

This building campaign was left unfinished because of a fire in the church in the fourteenth century. Evidence of the fire was found during the de Paor excavations of 1954 when large amounts of charcoal were uncovered along with coins smelted together from the heat. *reference*

The fire must have required instant revision of the monks building plans and living accommodation would have been the priority before the rest of the abbey was rebuilt. As a result the rebuilt nave was much simpler in design. In fact all evidence







points to the fact that the final church was much simpler in design and does not seem to have been a particularly distinguished piece of architecture. Indeed the most spectacular aspect of this work was probably the crossing tower.

The plan of Mellifont does have some features which are unique to Cistercian architecture in Ireland. The original twelfth century church has three chapels in each transept. The two outer chapels are apsidal in shape. This is a direct influence from France as these apses are only to be found in churches founded directly from Clairvaux between 1135 and 1153. They were more than likely the idea of Robert the architect. It is difficult to understand why these were introduced as it would only have led to complications with every chapel needing a separate roof. It did however add a touch of individuality to an otherwise strictly organised plan (20, p. 344).

There are also two structural features which distinguish Mellifont from other daughter houses of Clairvaux. One is the use of rubble masonry. In Ireland high quality masonry was restricted only to piers and arch mouldings. Inside the building this poor quality masonry was covered by plaster and fragments of this came to light at Mellifont during the 1954-5 excavations. In most Cistercian Abbeys the walls were subsequently whitewashed and marked with false masonry marks. There is no proof that this was the case at Mellifont (20, p. 344).

The crypt is another unique feature (Illus. 8 & 9). It is rare to find one at the west end of the nave. The existence of the crypt in Mellifont is due to the sloping land. It was necessary to cut away the hillside to maintain a level floor in the church and to build up the foundations on the western side. The crypt was then used as a storage area and not for burial which was normally the function of a crypt (20, p. 345).

The Lavabo in Mellifont, built around 1200 is the only one of its kind in Ireland, although evidence of one has been found in Dunbrody (21, p. 172). The lavabo is octagonal in shape with four arches now remaining (Illus. 10). The arches are beautifully moulded and the shafts which support the arches have neatly carved capitals decorated with stylised foliage designs (Illus. 11). The use of the round arches suggests the Romanesque style but the delicacy of the mouldings looks forward to Gothic, clearly suggesting that this is a transitional building. The lavabo was a very extravagant





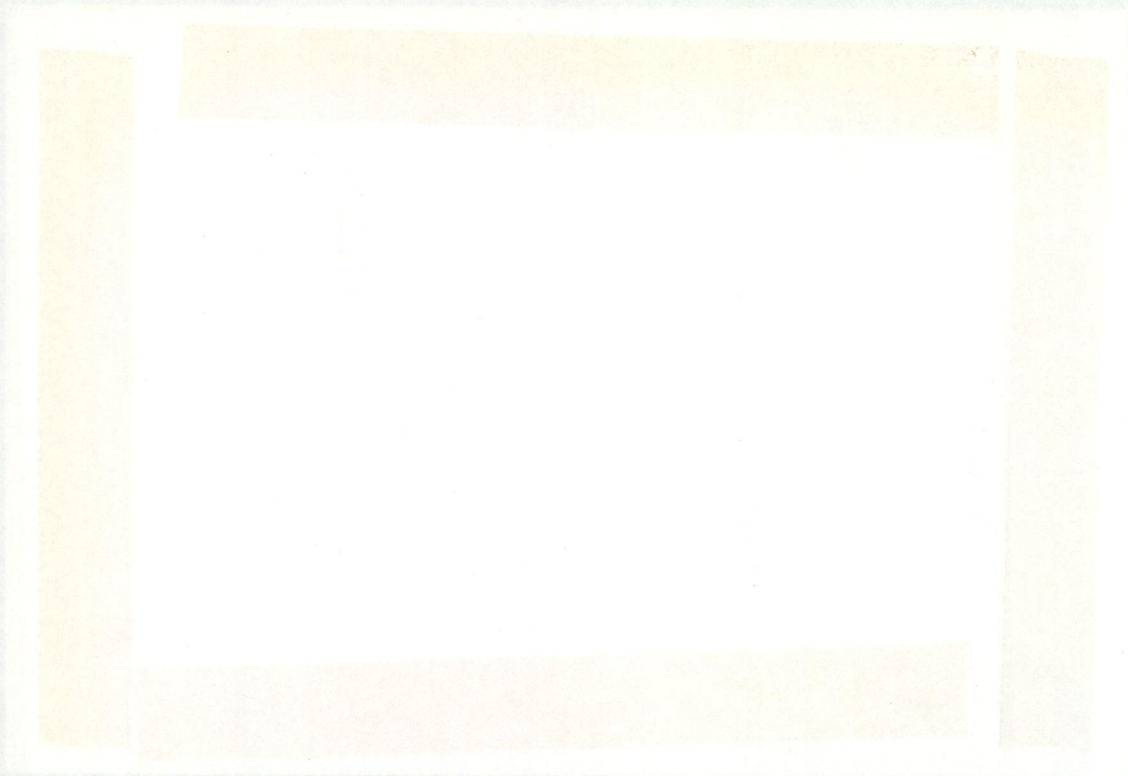


**Illus. 8** The crypt with stairway leading down.



**Illus. 9** The crypt as seen from the west side of the abbey.









**Illus. 10** The lavabo with four remaining arches.



**Illus. 11** Capital and the lavabo with stylised foliage carvings.





addition to the monastery. It is evident that at this stage the monks were abandoning the strict rule of the order and were more interested in Mellifont having the prestige and elaborate look appropriate to the mother house in Ireland. It has also been suggested by Georges Duby in Saint Bernard - L'art Cistercian (22, p. 146) that the lavabo had a symbolic function. The sound of running water echoing across the cloister garth was a permanent reminder of baptism and of the pure river of the water of life. This would seem a very likely theory as it has already been suggested that the two basic themes in St. Bernard's architecture are listening and seeing, '*Hearing is a step towards vision*' (6, p. 24).<sup>^</sup>

The Chapter house at Mellifont is very well preserved and the only room still roofed apart from the calefactory. The existing Chapter house was built in the fourteenth century whereas the original chapter house was built in 1150 and was then converted into a vestibule. The building is richly ornamented in both the capitals and the mouldings (Illus. 12). The room is covered by two bays of ribbed vaults which rest on bold clusters of shafts (Illus. 13). The Chapter House is now a museum which holds tiles and carved stones which were found during the excavations. A modern concrete bench runs around the interior wall as it would have been when used as a meeting house by the monks. Here the monks met every day. The abbot would read a chapter from the book of St. Benedict. Also monks would pray and say open confessions here. When in use the bench around the perimeter would have been covered by a rush mat.

Of the interior decoration at Mellifont very little is known. Only speculation can be made. A description has been written in Mellifont Abbey County Louth, Its Ruins <sup>not in</sup> *Bibliography* and Associations (1897).

*In the church two rows of stalls ran down on each side the length of the nave. These stalls were generally of carved oak and were artistically finished. The outer rows were for the novices and backs of their stalls formed the desks used by the professed monks whereon they rested the ponderous tomes containing the sacred psalms. During the high mass the stalls next the chancel were used and the place of honour that is the first stall was given to the abbot. The prior as second superior occupied the first on the opposite of gospel side.*

This Guide Book also tells us that in the centre of the chancel midway between

*not in bibliography  
(written anonymously)*





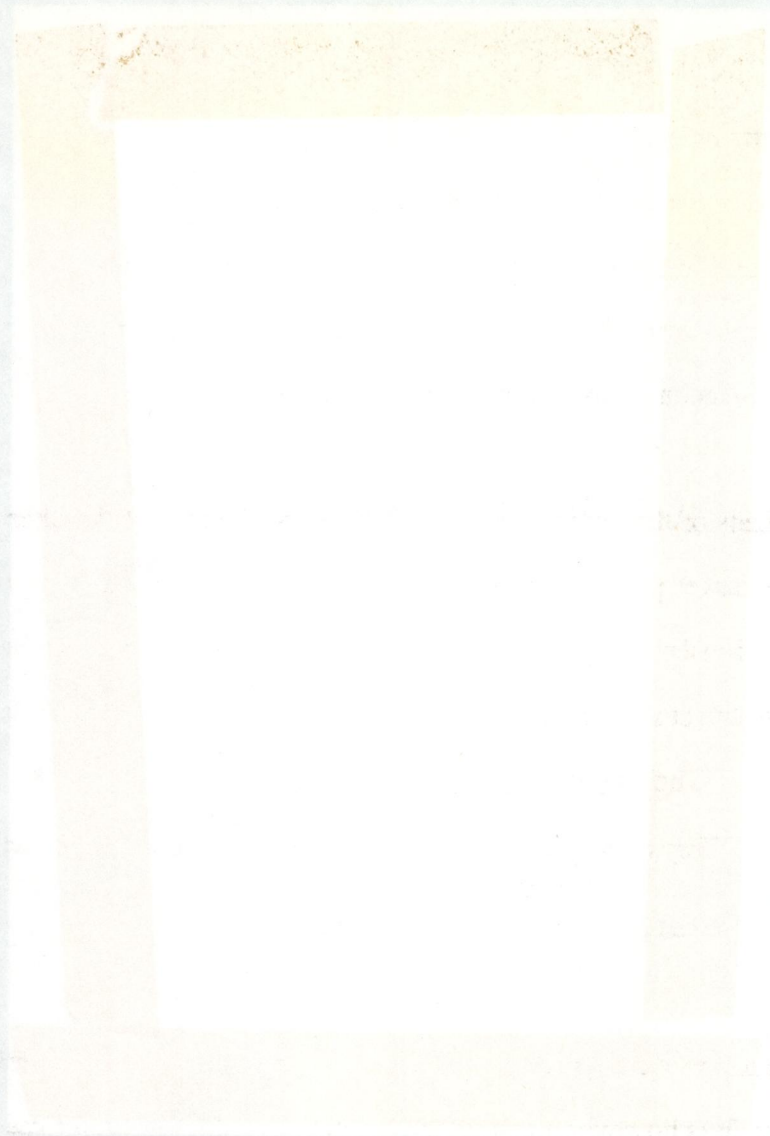


**Illus. 12** Chapter house window with elaborate mouldings.



**Illus. 13** Chapter house roof with ribbed vaults.





the two piers were two sockets (no longer present) sunk in sandstone blocks. They may have been used to hold supports on which a violet curtain was suspended during lent screening the sanctuary. This curtain spanned the space from pier to pier. The custom is still preserved in the order. Here on this central spot a lectern was placed at which the sub deacon at Solemn masses sang the epistle.

In the church can also be seen the remains of two piscinae. It was the custom for priests of the order to wash their hands at the foot of the altar before commencing mass the server poured water on the priests hands which he then dried using a towel that had previously been laid on the altar. The water used was then cast into the piscina. It was also the custom for the priest to wash his hands over the piscina after holy communion.

The Exordium Parvum also states

*They reject whatever was opposed to the rule: habits with ample folds, furs, linen, shirts, hoods, drawers, combs and bedspreads, mattresses, various kinds of dishes in the refectory, lard and all else opposed to the rule (19, p. 4).*

These accounts give us some idea of what the interior of Mellifont would have looked like. It is however a general description and does not refer specifically to Mellifont.

At Mellifont there are only two buildings outside the Abbey still standing. They are the gatehouse and the small church on the hill (Illus. 14 & 15). The gatehouse is a formidable stone tower with a wide barrel vaulted entrance at ground level and a spiral stair led to the three storeys above. It was principally a watch tower and held the porters residence.

The church on the hill was built by the Moore family who lived in the abbey after its suppression in 1539. It is however believed to have originally been the site of a capella ante portas (a chapel for the laity) built beside the precinct wall of a monastery near the main gate. No other outhouses remain and until further excavations take place their whereabouts will remain unknown.

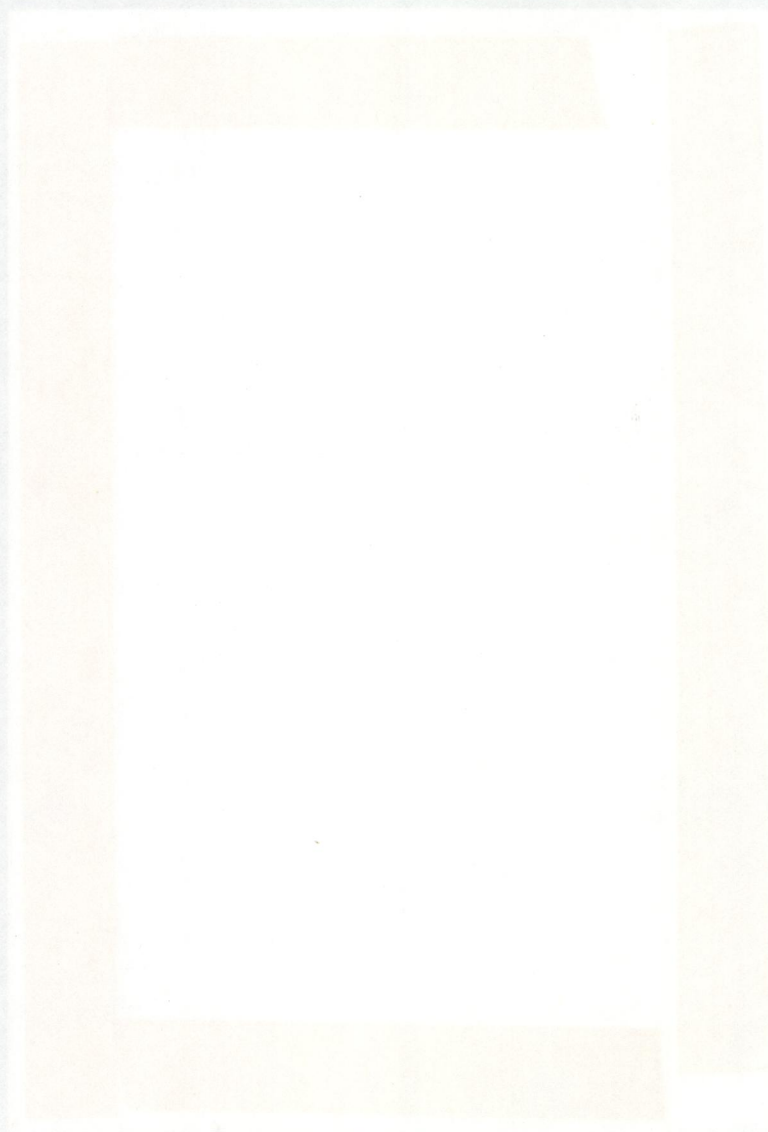
The monks remained in the abbey until 1539 when it was suppressed by Henry VIII. It was then sold to the Moores who converted it into a dwelling house.







**Illus. 14** The gatehouse with spiral staircase.

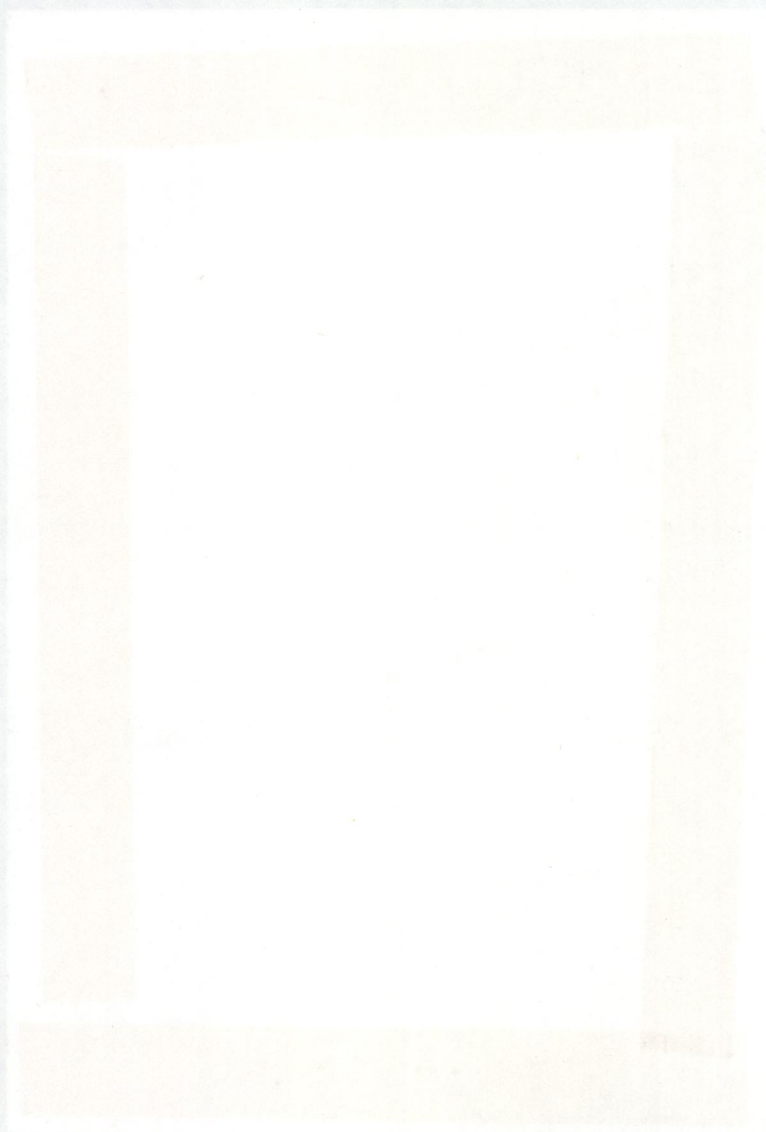






**Illus. 15** The chapel built by the Moore family on the site of the original capella ante portas.





## Chapter II : Tiles

Three types of medieval floor tiles are found at Mellifont Abbey: two colour inlaid, line impressed and relief tiles. The vast majority found are line impressed. The tiles were discovered during excavations in the late nineteenth century and some inlaid tiles were discovered in the fill of the crypt during the excavations of 1954 by de Paor. A large selection of line impressed and relief designs are now on display in the chapter house.

Line impressed tiles were the most popular and the most widespread of all the tiles found in Ireland although not the most numerous in terms of designs, they are the most numerous in terms of the quantity of tiles which have survived the ravages of time. This is due partly to the fact that they didn't<sup>o</sup> actually become popular until the early fourteenth century when the fashion changed from inlaid two colour tiles to line impressed. At Mellifont fifteen examples have been found (Illus. 16).

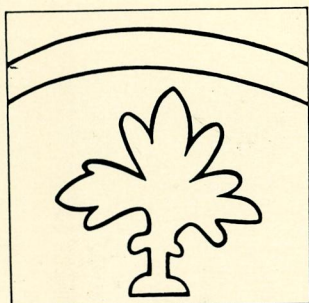
The influence here was clearly from Chester where there was a great medieval trade route from Dublin, Drogheda and Carrickfergus. The earliest tiles in Mellifont were probably imported from Chester until a local industry was established even though contact with the Chester industry was still maintained (5, p. 35).

Evidence of a medieval tile kiln has been found in Drogheda at Magdalene St. Tile wasters or rejects from the tile making process and kiln debris which includes floor tiles, roof ridge tiles, kiln furniture and structural tiles have been found. Five line impressed designs were found among the wasters. In 1950 a medieval floor of tiles was uncovered near the Magdalene Tower. These were made using the same stamps used at the kiln site (2, p. 51). The designs all belong to the group of Irish Cheshire designs which are discussed in Eames and Fanning Irish Medieval Tiles.

While none of the actual wasters match tiles found at Mellifont one tile, the lion rampant was found in the 1950 pavement but not at the kiln site (2, p. 51). It is possible however this tile was produced at the kiln but no wasters were uncovered. It is highly



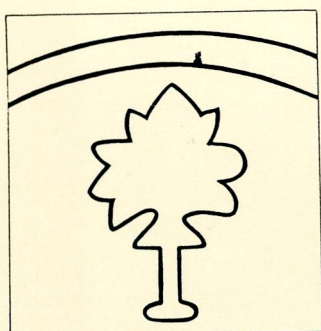




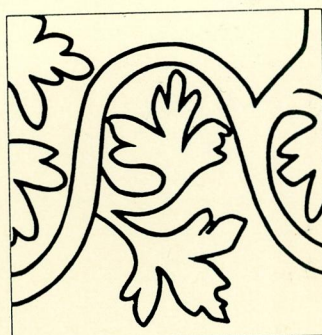
T1



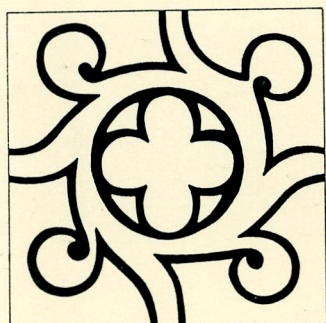
T2



T3



T4



T5

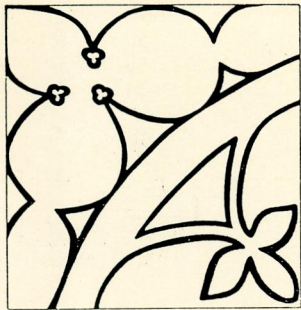


T6

**Illus. 16** Line impressed tiles from Mellifont and other sites.



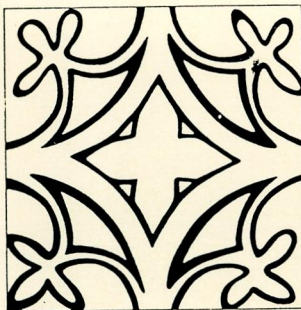




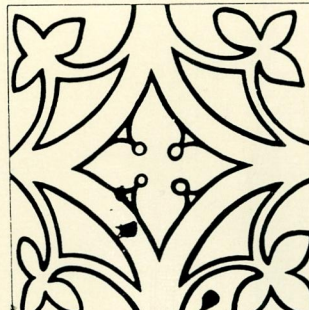
T7



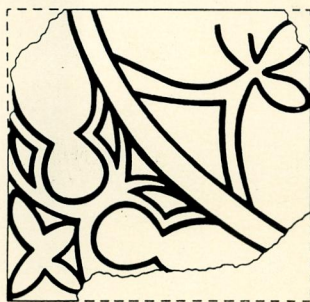
T8



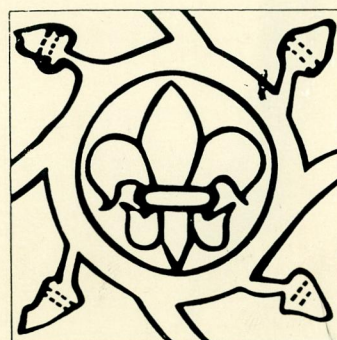
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T10



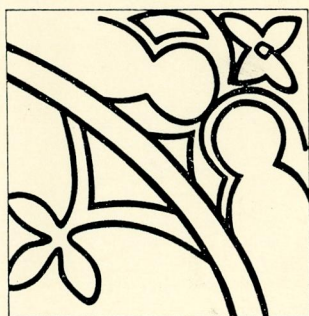
T11



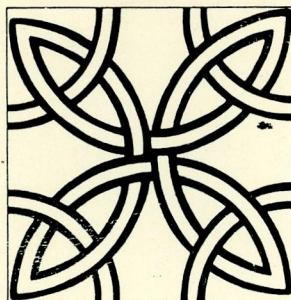
T12



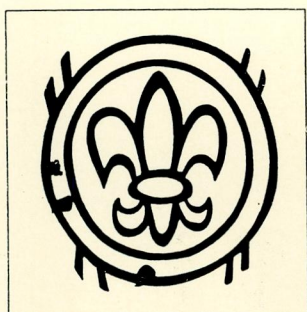




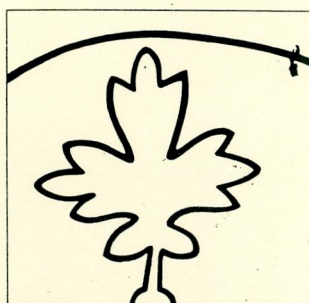
T13



T14



T15



T16 From St.Patricks Cathedral



T17 From Swords Castle



T18 Found at kiln site in Drogheda







likely that the kiln at Magdalene St. supplied Mellifont with its line impressed tiles due to its close proximity to the abbey and also the fact that the tiles from the kiln have been found in several sites in Drogheda.

A group of Irish medieval tiles have been compared with a collection found in Chester and Cheshire in England (as already mentioned above). Eames and Fanning discovered that the line impressed tiles in Ireland are very closely related and fifteen of the Irish tiles are exactly paralleled on tiles found in Chester and several other tiles are closely related. Four of these designs have been found in Mellifont and several other places in Louth: in Drogheda, <sup>the</sup> Dominican Friary, James Street; St Mary's Church; St Peter's Church; Dundalk; St Nicholas' Church; Monasterboice Church. They have also been found in other sites which are quite near: Lusk Church, Swords Castle and several sites in Dublin (5, p. 34).

There is a very close connection between the line impressed tiles of Chester and the surrounding county and those in Ireland. It has been thought that the tiles found in Ireland were imported from Chester but scientific tests carried out by Michael Huges in the research laboratory at the British Museum on tiles submitted from Kells Priory in County Kilkenny and Chester, both decorated with the identical designs have shown that the body fabric from the two sites was entirely different. Those from Kells Priory included products of old hard rocks absent from the Chester designs.

All the Swords Castle and Kells <sup>Priory</sup> tiles were found to share a generally similar chemical composition and were therefore probably made from clay of similar geological environments. There were differences in detail between the Swords and Kells results suggesting that they do not all represent a single common clay source. Use of different clays by a single production centre may have occurred and this is more likely if there is a chronological difference between the laying of the two floors.

The Cheshire tiles which were examined are close in composition to each other although found at two different sites in Cheshire so they may represent the same or quite close production centres. However they are distinctly different from all the Swords Castle and Kells Priory designs. The differences were so marked that it was concluded that the two Cheshire tiles are from a different geological environment to the



Irish tiles indicating that the Irish tiles were locally produced in Ireland rather than imports (5, p. 138). Thus enhancing the theory that the tiles at Mellifont were actually produced locally rather than imported even though the designs are very similar to these found in England.

Some line impressed tiles were incised by hand but the majority had a decoration stamped on the surface. It could be applied either with small stamps which could be used on tiles of any shape and in any number of combinations or with a stamp that covered the whole surface of the tiles and applied all the decoration at once. It became the general practice to use one stamp as it was quicker. Only two glazes were commonly used on line impressed tiles when they were first introduced: a lead glaze applied over a light slip to produce yellow and a lead copper glaze with a fairly high concentration of copper applied direct to the body of the tile to produce black or occasionally a very dark green.

Line impressed tiles do not have their design picked out in colour but in Mellifont this is compensated for by the use of wide range of glazes. Several shades of green were employed as well as a deep chocolate brown. Most variety however was found in the orange finishes which ranged from one which was almost yellow to other with a rusty hue. These endless modifications must have given the floors a subtle and varied appearance far removed from the machine produced monotony of Victorian Gothic replicas (20, p. 337).

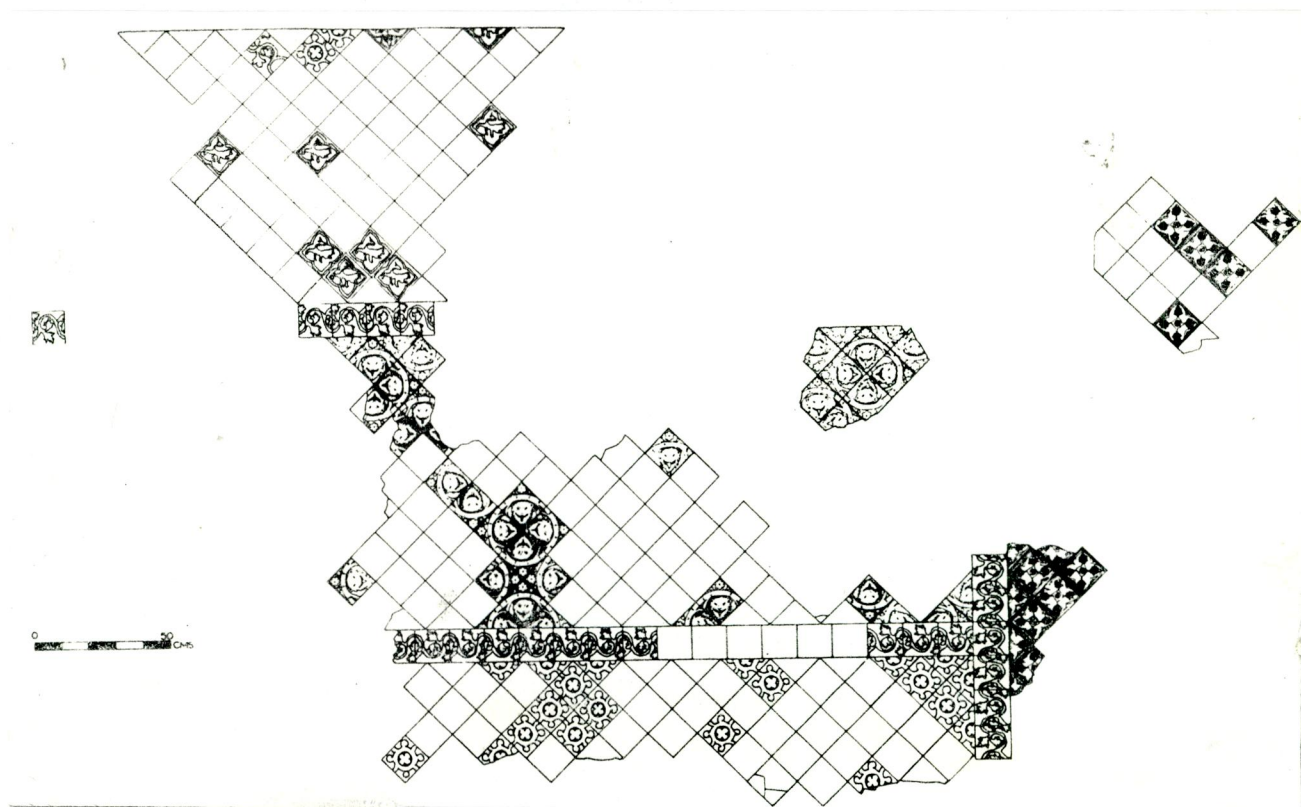
The pavement found in situ at Swords Castle included both two colour and line impressed tiles. Each panel in the pavement was filled with tiles of one design only but added interest was supplied by the alternation in the stripes or chequers of dark and light glazes. This arrangement made the first impact and the decoration on the surface of the tiles was only apparent on closer inspection.

The beauty of the tiled pavement rests on the colour, the pattern and the overall layout. The overall layout is extremely important. Medieval pavements could produce striking patterns by skillful juxtaposition of different coloured tiles. Until recent times medieval pavements were not regarded seriously and even when found in situ it was customary to gather up the tiles without noting the complete design. The floor at





Mellifont was vandalised in this way during the 1880s. The excavations at Graiguenamanagh and the archbishops residence at Swords Castle have been recorded in their original positions during the excavations and these give us an idea of what Mellifont would have looked like (Illus. 17). Particularly important is Swords Castle which has many of the same designs which were found at Mellifont <sup>such as</sup> ie. the lion rampant, the vine scroll (22, p. 211).



**Illus. 17** The overall layout of the tiles in Swords castle.

It was usual with a line impressed tile to transfer the decoration to the surface of the tile by placing the stamp on the tile and striking it one sharp blow. This process was carried out when the tile was leather hard. The wooden stamps used were subjected to tough treatment and they frequently cracked leaving small projections which broke off





the surface. This is demonstrated by ridges of clay and missing pieces of the decorative design on the surface of some tiles. Indeed it is sometimes possible to trace the development of cracks and other damage to a stamp on tiles from different sites. This has been observed on the line impressed tiles found during excavations at Norton Priory in Cheshire and indicates that the decoration on those tiles had been applied with wooden stamps. It seems improbable that a wooden stamp with the thin projections necessary to impress linear decoration would last for very long before pieces began to chip out. The very wide distribution of some of the designs used on the tiles of this type indicates that the same stamps were used to produce a very large number of tiles. It therefore seems probable that in some cases metal stamps were used. It is interesting that tiles decorated with design [T16] from St. Patrick's, Dublin and St. Nicholas' Church, Dundalk (which is almost identical to [T1] and [T3] found in Mellifont) were made when the stamp was still perfect but examples were found in Cheshire which were decorated after a crack appeared across the top of the leaf. This suggests that the traffic in designs was not always in one direction from England to Ireland (5, p. 34).

Design [T16] forms the side of a nine tile pattern in which design [T5] was used as the centre and designs [T7] and [T11] as the corners (5, p. 34). All these designs have been found at Mellifont and it is reasonable to assume that they were laid in the same way. As the tiles were lifted from the site before the 1954 excavations and the exact placing of the tiles was not recorded we can only assume from looking at other medieval floors how they were placed.

Only line impressed tiles found in Swords Castle have been excavated and recorded in situ (Illus. 17). The pavement was divided into panels. The panels were separated from each other by borders one tile wide composed entirely of examples of design [T4]. This continuous running scroll of vine leaves was used at Mellifont and eight other sites in Ireland including Christchurch and St. Patrick's Cathedral and also in Chester. The panels at Swords were each filled with examples of one design only and three line impressed designs are used in this way. The most attractive is the lion rampant which is placed in a pointed quatrefoil frame. This design is apparently the most popular in Ireland and is also found at Mellifont and nine other sites in Dublin



including St. Patrick's Cathedral, six sites in Kilkenny including St. Canice's Cathedral and nine other places in Ireland. It is also present in Chester (7, p. 80).

The second design used in the panels at Swords is of four formal leaves springing from a central circle within a cusped square frame [T17]. This design has also been found in three sites in Drogheda and at Slane Church. It has not been found at Mellifont but it is likely that it formed part of the tile decoration as all the other designs are present. The third design within the panels was design [T5]. This is a single tile repeating pattern which was also found at Mellifont (Illus. 18). Design [T8] from Swords was also said to have been found at Mellifont. This was a double headed eagle displayed within a cusped frame. This was recorded by Oldham in 1843 in his report for the Royal Irish Academy (pp. 353-355) however no trace of this tile is now to be found.



**Illus. 18** Design [T5] from Mellifont a single repeating pattern.





There is little doubt that the line impressed tiles used at Swords Castle were closely related to those in Chester and may even have been imports. If they were made in Ireland it is likely they were produced very early in the life of Irish linear tiles. All these tiles came from the same series which was found at St. Patricks and Christchurch.

A four tile design based on a lions face [T18] is known from six sites in Dublin and four in Drogheda as well as Kilkenny and Mosney. The wasters found at the kiln site in Drogheda make it certain that such tiles were manufactured in Drogheda (5, p. 42).

While Mellifont does not include design [T18] it is very likely that other designs were manufactured there as [T18] has been found in pavements contemporary to Mellifont and including other designs found there.

The majority of line impressed tiles were based on the same decorative motifs as the two colour designs i.e. lions, lions faces, rosettes, fleur de lis and intersecting circles.

It is suggested by Eames and Fanning in Irish Medieval Tiles that the manufacture and use of line impressed tile decoration in Ireland was most popular in the fourteenth century and that the type continued in fashion until the early sixteenth century.

Many tiles decorated in relief have also been found at Mellifont. Decoration to a monochrome tile in relief could be impressed with a stamp on which the design had been hollowed and which therefore left the design upstanding or with a stamp on which the design was upstanding so that the decoration was sunk below the surface in counter relief. Counter relief decoration was sometimes produced when a tile was stamped with a design usually employed for two colour decoration but the crevices were then left empty of white clay. When decoration in relief was applied with a small stamp the top of the relief was level with the surface of the tile and the background was depressed but when a stamp that covered the whole surface was used the top of the decoration stood up above the surface of the tile.

Decoration in relief could be very elaborate with modelling at various levels on the upstanding areas but many of the designs in Ireland are on two planes only .





There were ten relief tiles found at Mellifont (Illus. 19). Design [T22] is of fourteenth century origin and is in counter relief as well as design [T28]. Both designs are monochrome. These are the only two counter relief tiles which were found.

An unusual series of designs has also been found in Ireland which have linear decoration in raised lines instead of sunken lines. Three of these designs have been found at Mellifont [T27] and eight from other sites in Drogheda. It is possible that some of the tiles decorated in this technique were made in Drogheda and they were probably late fifteenth century.

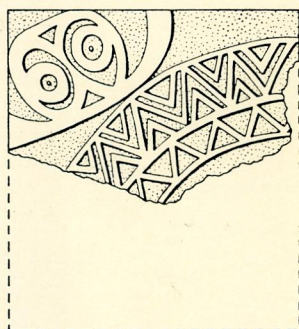
Compare design [T27] with [T29] found in Drogheda they both have a bird as their central motif but that from Mellifont is surrounded by a square border whereas that from Drogheda is between four quarter circles and four rosettes. The birds are not identical but the two designs do resemble each other and may have come from the same production centre.

Also design [T21] is very similar to a tile found at Bective Abbey, [T30] which was the first daughter house in Ireland and would have been greatly influenced by Mellifont. Both are four tile patterns including a circular band with the inscription Ave Maria. The designs from Mellifont seem to be of an earlier date being better drawn and each of the small upstanding roundels is decorated with five spots standing above the level of the roundels. You can also see the spotted roundel in the centre of the design [T25] (Illus. 20).

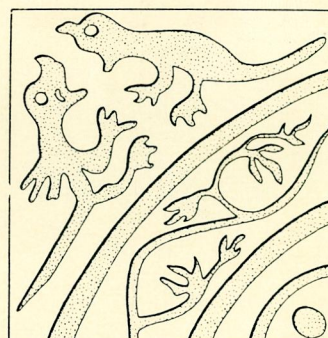
Most of these Irish fifteenth century tiles have a grey reduced body over which the lead glaze looks an olive green colour. No other glazes were used so that the only variation in colour occurs when part or all of the body is oxidised and the glaze looks brown.

In England the two colour tile was most popular from the mid thirteenth century. These tiles were made with white clay inserted into the surface in various ways. In the earliest examples cavities were stamped in the surface of the leather hard tile, the white clay was inserted in a plastic state and the surplus trimmed off. This type of decoration is generally called inlaid. In the fifteenth century the white clay seems to have been poured into the cavities as a liquid slip.





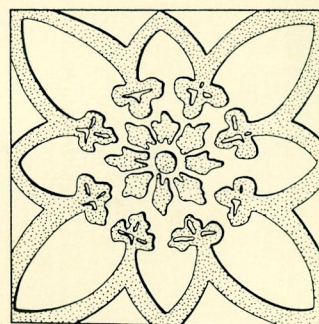
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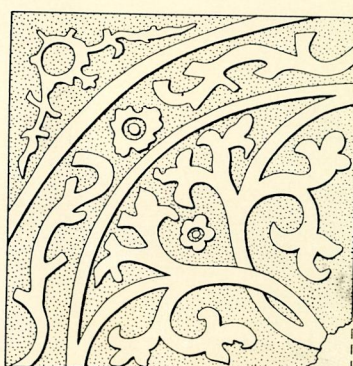
T20



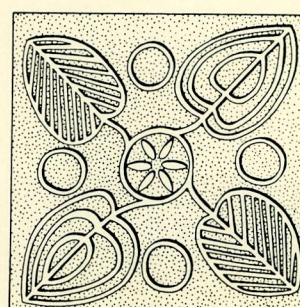
T21



T22



T23

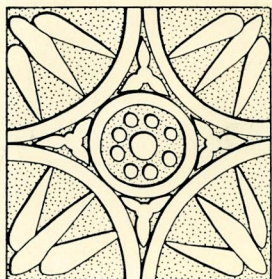


T24

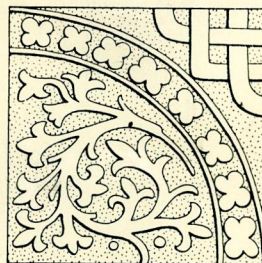
Illus. 19 Relief tiles from Mellifont and other sites.



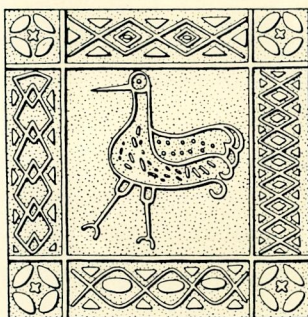




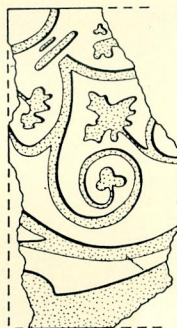
**T25**



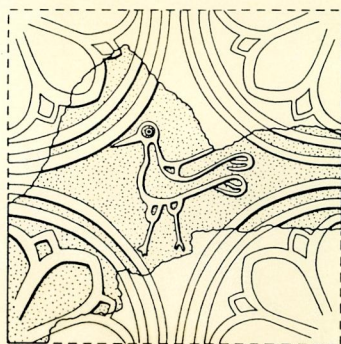
**T26**



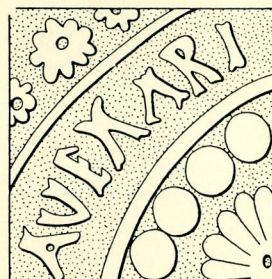
**T27**



**T28**



**T29** Found in Drogheda



**T30** From Bective Abbey









**Illus. 20** Design [T25] with spotted roundel in the centre of this one tile repeating pattern.

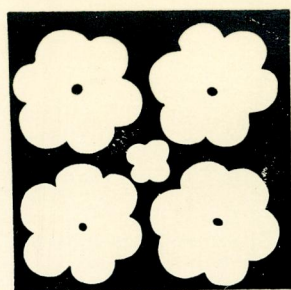
The majority of tiles with two colour decoration found in Ireland are standard square quarries most of them with decoration inlaid. At Mellifont fourteen two colour tiles were found (Illus. 21). They are about 11cm square with a thickness of 2cm.

Because of the difficulty of working in clay the simpler motifs were generally chosen by the tile designer. Heraldic beasts; lions, griffins and dragons were used as decorative motifs without any heraldic significance.

The two colour tiles in Mellifont were probably introduced in conjunction with the mid thirteenth century remodelling of the presbytery and the north transept. One of the animal tiles [T34] portrays a griffin within a circle. It is very dramatic as the griffin forcefully bursts his way through the circular frame. This tile was paired with the lion dexter design [T33]. This shows the full body of a lion within a circle with fleur-de-lis shapes in each corner. The design is rather feeble and is not as dramatic as the griffin. Neither of these tiles have parallels found in other Irish sites, although similar







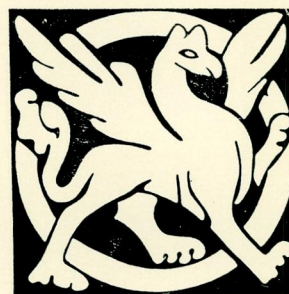
T31



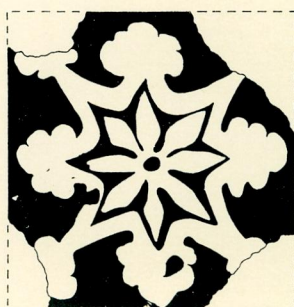
T32



T33



T34



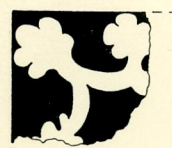
T35



T36



T37

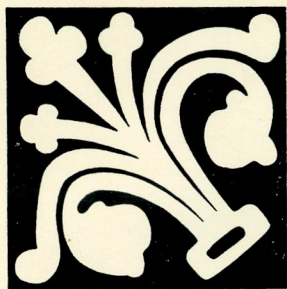


T38

**Illus. 21** Two colour (inlaid) tiles from Mellifont.



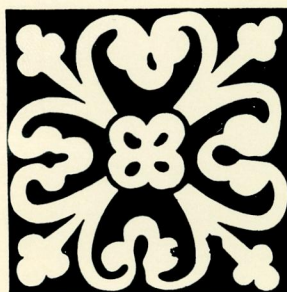




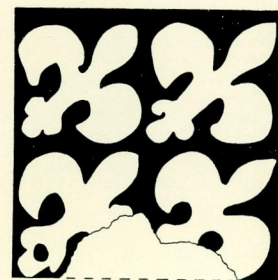
T39



T40



T41



T42



T43



T44







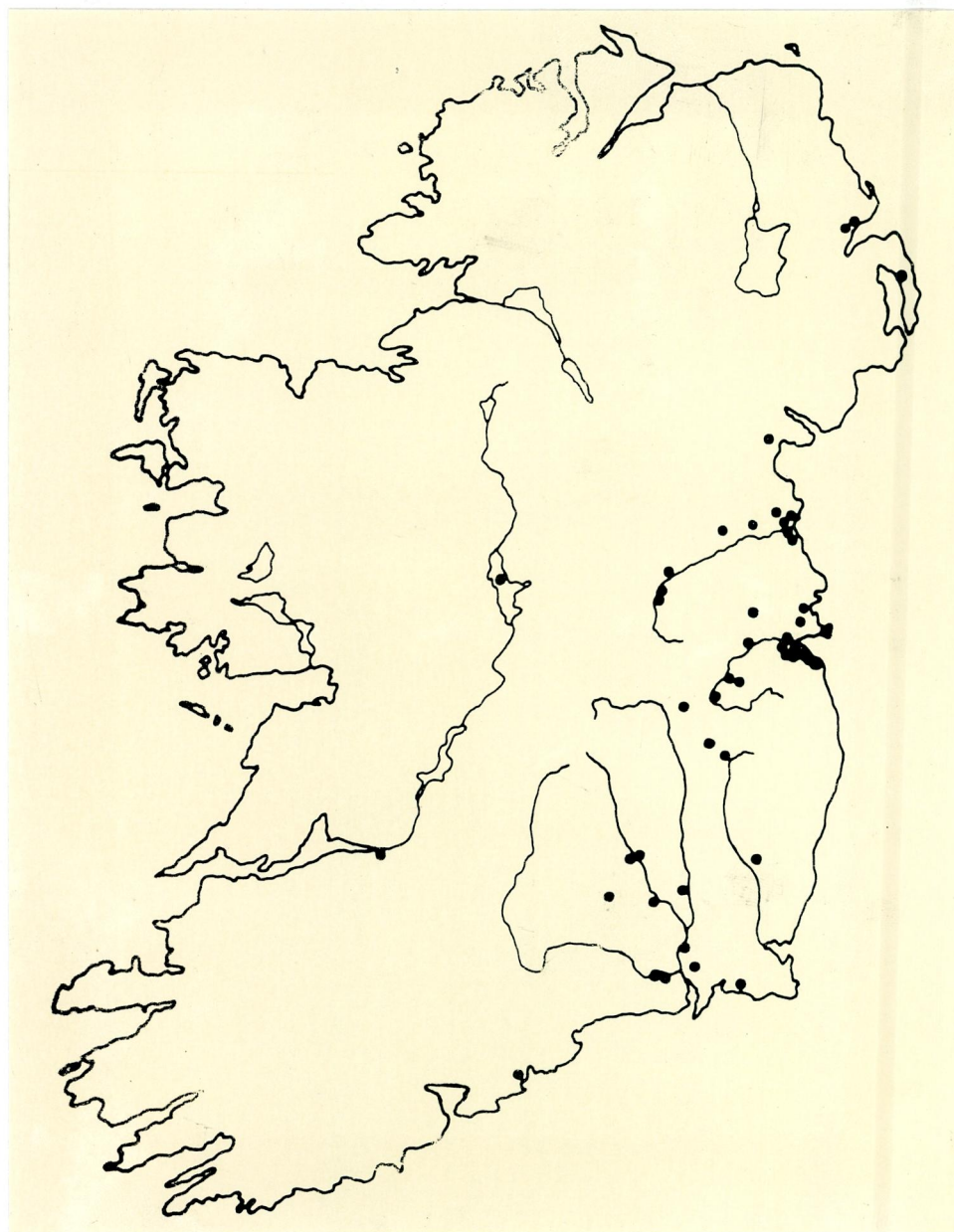
designs have been found in England. The lion for example can be seen in the Corpus Christi Chapel and Wells Cathedral. Griffins can be seen on tiles in the Wessex school as well as at Rievaulx and Westminster (20, p. 336).

Possibly contemporary with these in design is [T31] which consists of four pierced rosettes with a small quatrefoil in the middle. This tile has been found cut in halves and could clearly be used in a number of different places in the arrangement of a pavement. Design [T40] a four tile circular band with stiff leaf foliage is one of the very few which seem to have been used in identical form at several sites including St. Patricks, Dublin and Great Connell Abbey in Co. Kildare. The general style of foliage tiles is widespread both in England and in Ireland and the excavations at Graiguenamanagh have revealed many patterns of this type.

The evidence which is available suggests that fancy floors were a fashion introduced by the Normans and before then the Irish abbeys were probably contented with pavements of plain stone flags more in keeping with the austere dictates of the Cistercian order. The introduction of the tiles by the Normans is confirmed by the fact that the use of this form of floor furnishing was confined almost exclusively to the Anglo Norman areas of the pale and south Leinster (Illus. 22). Despite a number of large scale excavations at medieval monastic sites in Connaught e.g. Ballintober Priory and Knockmoy Abbey Co. Galway not a single floor tile or fragment of a tile has been recovered. When the Cistercians did succumb to a taste for elaborate floor tiles they appeared to have exercised little control over the pavements they employed. The patterns used were mostly used elsewhere in other non Cistercian churches and there is no distinctive Cistercian style. Indeed the lion and the griffin depicted on the inlaid tiles at Mellifont represent just that type of distracting meaningless art which St. Bernard had preached against over a hundred years before.

The tiles may have been made in Drogheda (as has already been discussed) or further excavations could reveal the site of a kiln, as the outer extremities of the abbey which would have held such buildings has not yet been excavated. Such a kiln would have been a temporary building used by travelling craftsmen while they were at work tiling the abbey church.





**Illus. 22** Distribution of medieval pavement tiles in Ireland. Note how they are confined almost entirely to the pale and south Leinster.





It is difficult to ascertain when exactly the different tiles were introduced into the abbey. Some inlaid tiles were discovered in the fill of the crypt which means this style of tile was used in the monastery before the early fourteenth century. In view of the similarities with Graiguenamanagh it seems certain that some of the inlaid tiles from Mellifont were used on the floor of the presbytery and north transept. As this part of the building was begun between 1230 and 1260 it was probably the middle of the century before the paviers were called in to lay the floor. This was the time when the abbey assumed an Anglo Norman character. This reinforces the impression gained from the architecture of the abbey that the whole style and approach to building was transformed at this stage. The tiled floor must have made its own colourful contribution to the new visual splendour and while not specifically Cistercian in style it heralded the end of the strict austere 'Bernardian' architecture and the beginnings of a more decorative and glamorous style which Stalley refers to as the ornamental phase which coincides with the period when strict adherence to the discipline of the Cistercian order was breaking down in the Mellifont affiliation (20, p. 338).

Line impressed tiles are usually considered to be later than the inlaid variety and it is not easy to judge where the vast quantities of them were used in Mellifont. One possible location for these tiles is the south transept which was completed in the early fourteenth century (20, p. 338).





### Chapter III : Stone Carving

Mellifont Abbey today lies almost in complete ruins apart from the Chapter house, lavabo and the raised foundations of the other buildings. Therefore it is difficult to establish the complete story in relation to the carved decoration of the abbey. However studies have been made of the carved stonework remaining on the site and the fragments which are now to be seen in the chapter house. Through careful examination it is possible to get an idea of the decoration of the original buildings.

Despite the austerity of the order and the strict rules laid down by St. Bernard it is surprising to discover how much sculpture did exist in the Irish Abbeys. Indeed some of Ireland's most important medieval sculpture comes from Cistercian buildings. The rules against painting and sculpture were the most notorious of all. The statutes of the order stated, *'Whilst attention is paid to such things the profit of Godly meditation or the discipline of religious gravity is often neglected.'* (22, p. 179)

These rules of St. Bernard were directed at monks. Sensory images as well as being an expensive luxury which were contrary to the ideals of the order were also a barrier to mystical union with God and this was the goal of monastic life. In one of his sermons on the song of songs St. Bernard wrote, *'But you have not flown far unless by the purity of your mind you are able to rise above the images of sensible objects which are constantly rushing in upon you from every side.'* (22, p. 179)

Painting and sculpture therefore was a meaningless distraction which had no place in the Cistercian 'Workshop of Prayer.'

The Cistercian monasteries in Ireland have been criticised as a major intrusion from abroad which brought about the disappearance of native Irish art. This is not entirely true however and if carefully examined these monasteries did fit into what we know of Irish art in the twelfth century. When Mellifont was founded in 1142 Irish church building was still very little affected by the tremendous architectural development which took place on the continent and in England at the end of the



eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century. The Cistercians arrived and unlike other orders, the Benedictines and the Augustinians they established themselves very well in Ireland as they were a strongly centralised order with very clear cut ideas on what was to be the layout and appearance of their abbeys.

As a result the Cistercians established themselves firmly in Irish society bringing with them new and alien ideas in architecture and decoration (22, p. 411).

Of the decoration of the first church at Mellifont nothing is left for it was soon destroyed by fire and only its foundations have survived. But it is generally assumed that it conformed to the strict principles of early Cistercian architecture as it was so closely linked to the mother house at Clairvaux in France and the first building was supervised by French monks. Fragments have been found of many parts of the building. Some of the earliest pieces were put together to form part of the original cloister arcade (Illus. 23). Voussoirs, capitals, bases and parts of the shafts were found lying both in the



**Illus. 23** Reconstruction of part of the original cloister arcade.





ambulatory and in the garth. These appear to have been relatively undisturbed since this section of the arcade had collapsed but elsewhere the remains of the arcade had been completely removed. A few fragments of the same arcade had previously been removed and stored in the chapter house. The arcade was of twelfth century type in sandstone. The position in which the collapsed material was found and the complete absence from the site of any fragments of later work relating to a cloister arcade indicates that the original arches of the cloister survived the fire and remained in position throughout the monastic life of Mellifont. Sufficient fragments remained to reconstruct more than two bays of the arcade with complete accuracy except for the height of the shafts which could not be accurately determined (4, p. 135).

The simple but elegant ornament of the cloister capitals and bases is quite appropriate to the period when the abbey was built. Irish cloisters were built in a conventional way as simple penvices with lean to roofs supported on arcaded walls. The earliest schemes followed the standard continental arrangement. This was the design introduced at Mellifont in the twelfth century. With its coupled shafts and scalloped capitals this repeats the pattern of many a Cistercian monastery in England. Rievaulx is a good comparison (22, p. 153). As Mellifont was the mother house it is likely that this cloister arcade became the norm in Ireland but evidence from other sites is scarce.

A considerable number of other stones have been found which also date from middle or late twelfth century and which came from the first church and the original conventional buildings. These would have been contemporary to the cloister arcade. Several other scalloped capitals were found. This was the typical design for early capitals found in the abbey. Three of these fragments actually came from the cloister and are somewhat more elaborate than those used in the reconstruction of the arcade (Illus. 24). Also found were two sections of straight scallop capitals which came from a pilaster or rectangular pier. One of these is exceptionally well preserved and has a basic form of the scalloped motif (20, p. 317) (Illus. 25).

A slightly more elaborate version of this was used on the square piers of the nave at Baltinglass (22, p. 182). Since the first church at Mellifont is known to have had piers of similar plan it is possible that the pieces of scallop came from them. A third



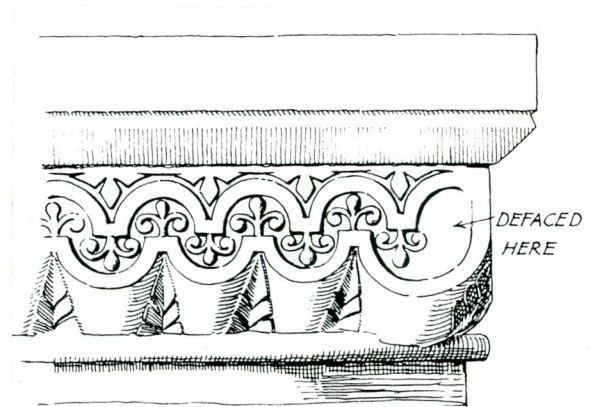




**Illus. 24** Elaborate fragments of scalloped capital from cloister arcade decorated with pointed leaf shape carvings in relief.

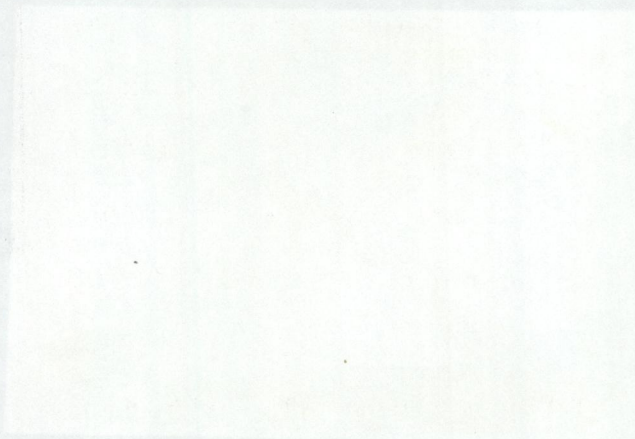
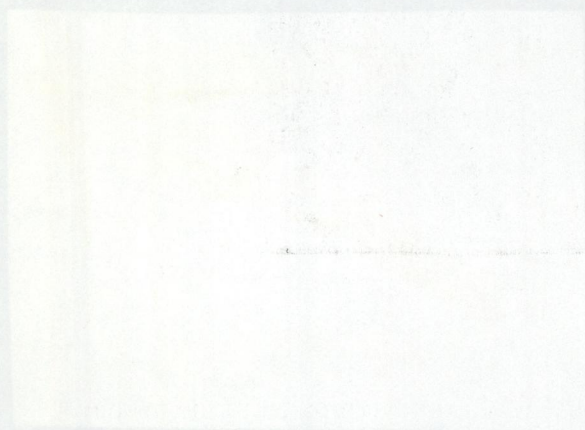
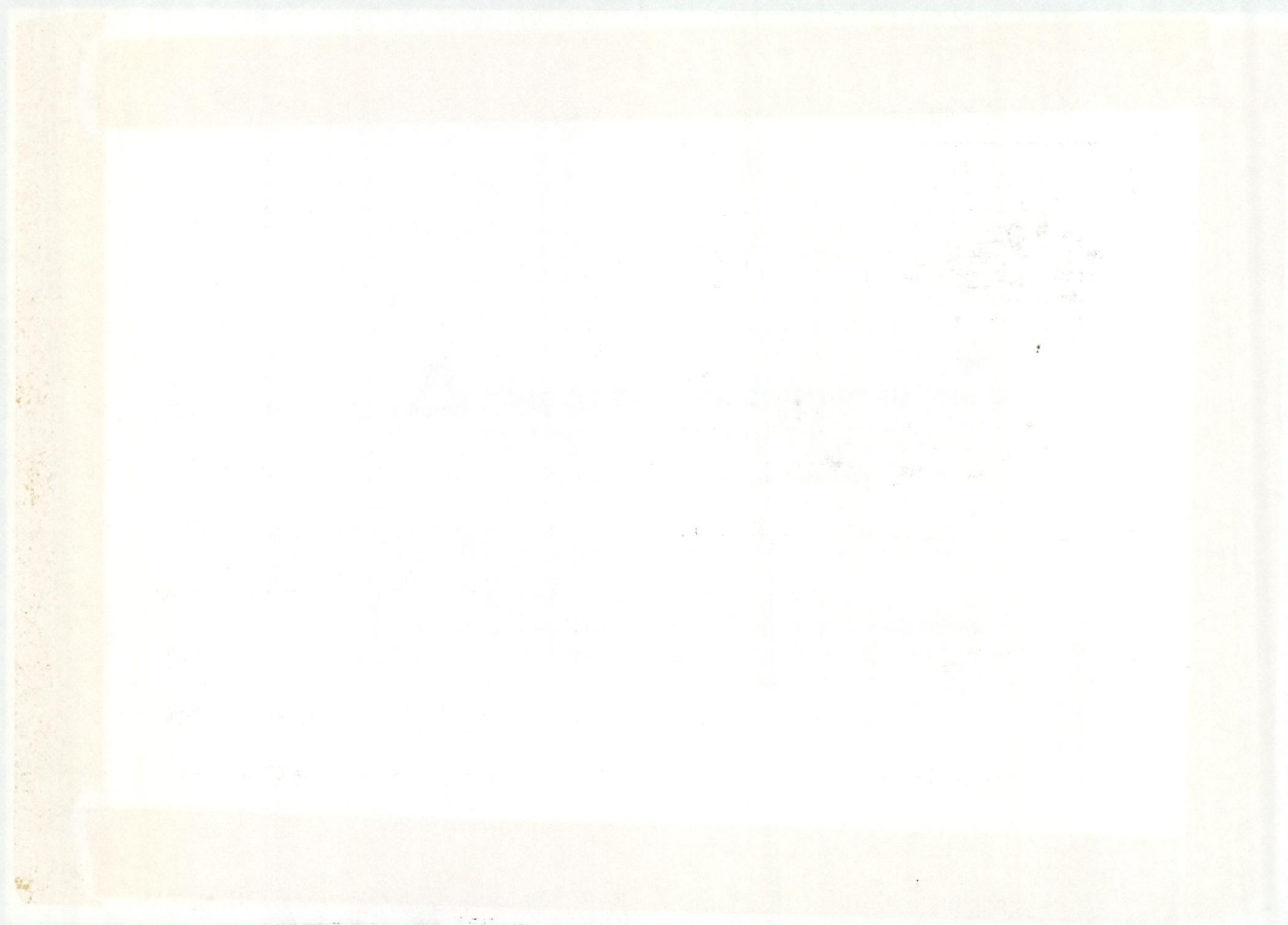


**Illus. 25** Part of straight scalloped capital.

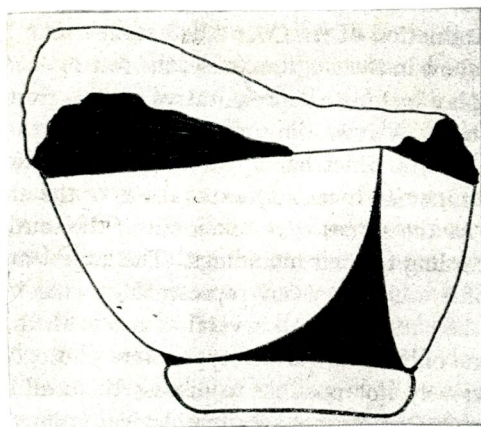


**Illus. 26** A more elaborate version from Baltinglass.





fragment of the same type was re-used in the building of the lavabo where it is visible above the arch of the north face. As the lavabo is of later date the capital must have come from a building that had been demolished immediately prior to the erection of the lavabo.

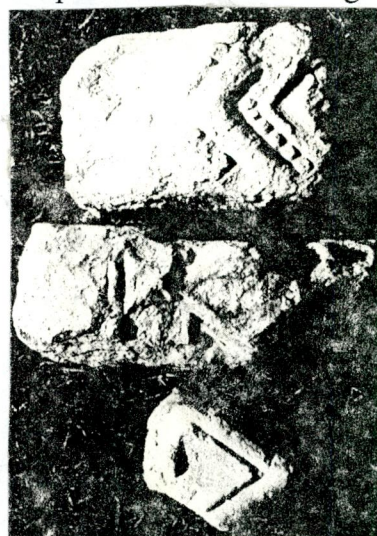


**Illus. 27** Small cubic capital

A small cubic capital was also found (20, p. 316) (Illus. 27). As the capital is very small there are not many places in the abbey where it could have been fitted. The piscina in the presbytery in Jerpoint has a capital similar to this one. This may have been where the Mellifont capital came from or it may have been part of the armorium or book cupboard. This

cubic style of capital was first introduced into England after the Norman conquest of 1066 and it was later replaced by the scalloped capital. This type of decoration is extremely rare in Ireland. Apart from Mellifont they are to be seen at Cormac's Chapel in Cashel. As this form of decoration became unfashionable in the middle twelfth century it is assumed this cubic capital formed part of the first buildings (20, p. 316).

From the earliest building phase there has also been found three pieces of stone with chevron design which may have come from a doorway or a window (Illus. 28). One stone has a beading along the zig zag, a design which was common in Hiberno-Romanesque (20, p. 317). Simple examples of chevron were also used in the Abbeys of Jerpoint and Baltinglass



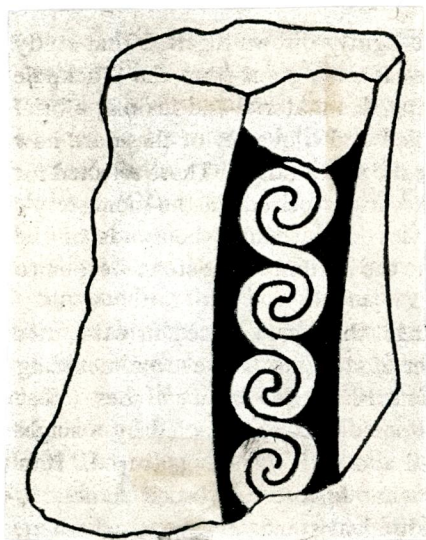
**Illus. 28** Three fragments with chevron design.

which were in fact influenced by the mother house Mellifont. Compared to the austere design of the Cistercian churches in Burgundy, the presence of chevron shows that the





Irish were not following the strict rules of austerity even in the earliest days of Cistercian architecture. These decorative fragments are nothing compared to the decoration of Clonmacnoise and Clonfert. They do however show that Cistercians did not herald the end of native Irish art and that the divide between the Cistercian Abbeys and the traditional Irish monasteries was not as severe as was once suggested.



**Illus. 29** Celtic spiral

A decorative Celtic spiral design has been found on a fragment of stone which came originally from a window (Illus. 29). This further enforces the fact that native Irish art was not extinguished by the new order. In romanesque art this motif can be paralleled with sculpture in Tuam Cathedral.

No French influence can be seen in any of the earliest stone fragments, which leads one to believe that the French influence in the first buildings was restricted to broad architectural forms and that it was Irish craftsmen rather than French who carried out the masonry and carving. There is however English influence. This may have come directly from England or may have been as a result of other earlier churches influenced by English architecture <sup>such as</sup> ie. Cormacs Chapel.

Several of the details on the stones have links with daughter houses ie. Baltinglass, Boyle and Jerpoint. There is one stone with a shaft carved out of it's angle almost identical to those at the entrance of the transept chapels at Baltinglass. The way this moulding is finished off at the bottom is like the pilasters of the nave at Fontenay in France. This is the only French influence which can be seen in Irish Cistercian sculpture (20, p. 318).

Transitional architecture is considered to be the period from 1180 - 1230. This covers the transition from romanesque to Gothic architecture. At Mellifont both the lavabo and the chapter house were built during this time.

The lavabo was built around 1200 and is generally thought to be the most attractive piece of Cistercian architecture in Ireland (illus 30). Only half the building







**Illus. 30** The lavabo and the cloister garth.

now remains standing. It is octagonal in plan. Each side was pierced by an arch of three orders, the mouldings of which include plain rolls and pointed bowtells. The capitals are in different states of preservation. Two have foliage ornament in good condition (Illus. 31 & 32) and on one at the southeast angle there are the traces of claws. This is all that remains of a capital with two birds described in it's complete condition by William Wilde in the nineteenth century (19, p. 249). The vaulting capitals have survived in various states of repair. Their foliage broadens out and begins to turn over at the top. These are reminiscent of Cistercian water leaf capitals. The elaborate mouldings of the lavabo provide us with clues to the date of it's construction. The distinctive way mouldings are returned across the bottom of the arches has several parallels around this time for example at Knockmoy and Ballintober (1216). Mellifont may be the last link between the hallowed mouldings which are to be found in English Cistercian abbeys and the examples which are to be found in the west of Ireland <sup>not</sup> ie.









**Illus. 31** Beautifully carved sandstone capital from the lavabo. The decoration is interspersed with symmetrical trefoil leaves and curvilinear foliage. The design is in high relief with linear details and is decorated with a zig zag border and a parallel line of circular motifs. Sadly the capital is in bad repair.



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**Illus. 32** This capital is freerer in design with plump foliage shapes decorating the stonework. The border is of a double scalloped design. Sadly this capital is also in bad repair.

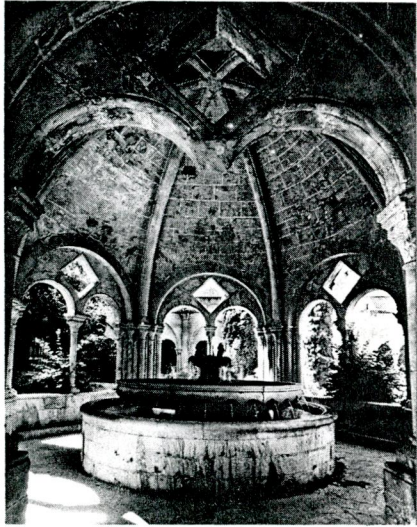






Cong, Cormonroe (20, p. 312).

The mouldings are crisply cut in yellowly brown sandstone and there is an abundance of keels and bowtells. There is a clarity and subtlety about the buildings.



**Illus. 33** Octagonal lavabo from Poblet, Spain.

The interior was vaulted and the ribs radiated out from a central column like the branches of a tree (Illus. 33). From examining other lavabos there would have been a wide circular or octagonal basin and above this a smaller basin with a series of spouts into which the water was fed by pipes from the nearby river Mattock (22, p. 171). Fragments of what are believed to be the original central column have been found. These consist of several badly damaged stones carved with human figures which have been set into a masonry structure in the chapter house. Two of the stones are carved with figures seated behind some sort of parapet. All the pieces are carved in grey sandstone finely grained. Another stone from the same piece has also been found and is now in Townley Hall, <sup>Co. Louth</sup> Drogheda. Two figures are represented and it looks as if they are sitting on a boat. One holds a large cylindrical object which droops over the side of the vessel. While the carving is too battered for it's meaning to be certain the miraculous catching of the fishes has been suggested by Stalley (20, p. 312) as a possible interpretation. It has not entirely been proven where exactly this piece of stone came from but it may have been part of the central pier in the lavabo, resting on top of the basin of water in the centre of the building.

Over a hundred stones survive from the lavabo. Thirty eight of these are from the ribbed vault and most of the other stones belonged to the main arches of the building. The profile of the ribs consists of three rolls, the centre one having a hollow cut out of it's face. In three of the pieces the side rolls taper and these correspond to the ribs just above the springing point of the central pier.

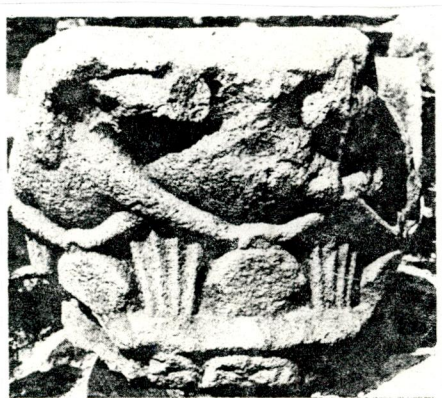
Since the ribs formed semi-circular arches the lavabo was in effect covered by



an annular barrel vault, the ribs acting as a series of transverse arches.

The middle order of the lavabo has a section with a prominent keeled profile in the centre. The way this is cut is of considerable interest. The point of the keel represents a right angle which itself once formed the corner of the block of stone from which the moulding was carved. Usually keels were carved so that the point was formed by the intersection of two arcs. This technique was not restricted to the lavabo as other loose stones were found using the same technique. These details show us that Mellifont was at the forefront of Cistercian building techniques in Ireland.

It is also reported in Mellifont Abbey Its Ruins and Associations (1897) a guide book by the Cistercians in Roscrea that the lavabo was painted red and blue and the track of the paint was still visible in several places.



**Illus. 34** Capital with figures of three men.

conveyed any religious significance which is further evidence that the Cistercians no longer followed the strict rules of the order as laid down by St. Bernard which forbade such carvings.

A beautifully carved corbel was also found (Illus. 35). This is carved in limestone in a precise manner and the bottom is filled by an enormous berry from which foliage rises up to a circle of trefoiled leaves. Some of the leaves have curling tips which is a feature to be seen at Killaloe Holy Cross, Tuam and



**Illus. 35** Carved corbel with berries.





Monasteranagh.



**Illus. 36** Base fragment with animal head carving.

A base fragment has also been found. Below the base moulding was a short plinth on which was carved an animal head (Illus. 36). The style of carving has been compared to that of the Ballintober Master. This is the name given to a stonemason who worked at the Augustinian monastery in Ballintober (22, p. 184). The style is typical of Hiberno-Romanesque and the cutting of the eyes

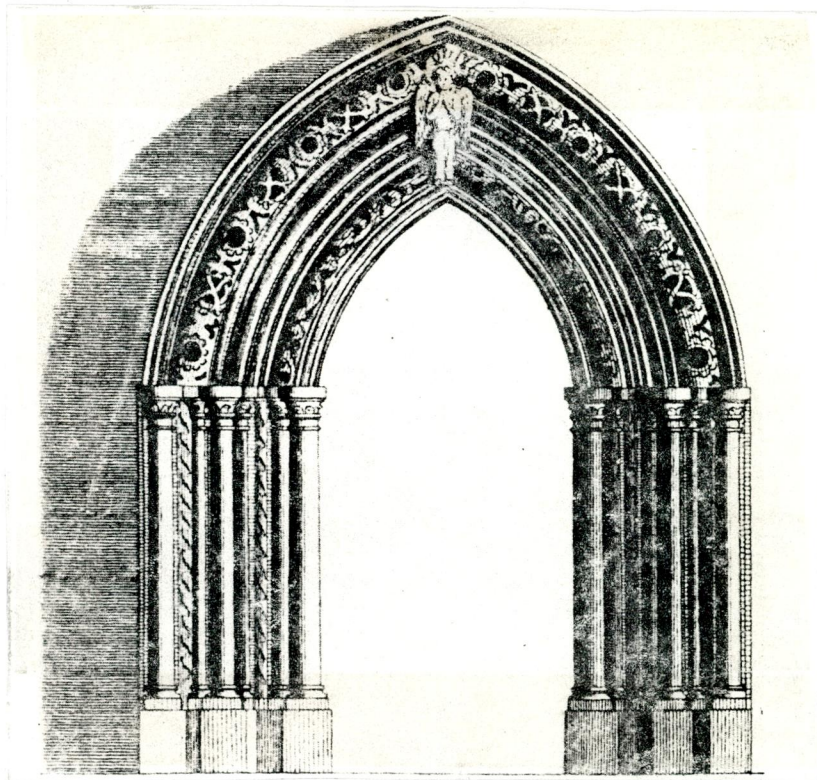
recalls that of the monsters on the east window of Balintober Abbey, carved by the Ballintober Master. The chapter house has three windows. These have similar bases but the carving is inferior. This was a very peculiar and original way of decorating the bases of window shafts. It has been suggested that the versions in the chapter house were copied from an earlier building which was destroyed. This piece of carving demonstrates that Ireland's major Cistercian abbey employed one of the countries leading Romanesque sculptors. The rules against irrelevant animal ornaments were being ignored and Mellifont, the mother house was one of the greatest offenders with birds carved in the lavabo and grimacing faces in the chapter house. The buildings were alive with decoration and ornament, considering only fragments remain, the full beauty and complexity of the carving can only be left to the imagination.

The Chapter house is also considered to be transitional although there is some debate over this. In the past it was said to be a fourteenth century building because of the curvilinear tracery in the windows. This is not possible as the window tracery was an addition to the original building. The original windows would have been lancets. Stylistic analysis of other details shows that the chapter house must have been built in the first quarter of the thirteenth century.

Sadly one of the most beautiful parts of the chapter house has now been removed; the doorway (Illus. 37). We know from an engraving in Wrights Louthiana (Dublin 1748) (22, p. 163) what the original doorway looked like. The base of the







**Illus. 37** Engraving of the original chapter house doorway.

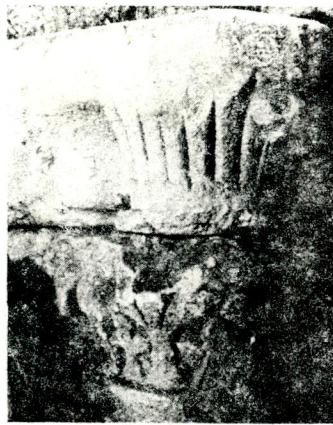
original doorway can still be seen inside. It has four corners of detached shafts resting on polygonal plinths and these were to be seen on the interior rather than the exterior which is very unusual. One of the only other examples of this is the doorway of Durham Cathedral. The engraving shows only three main shafts instead of four. Two of the orders in the arch above appear to have had openwork foliage sculpture. According to the engraving one was a running foliage scroll, the other an alternating design of marigold and cross shaped leaves. A carved angel is depicted at the apex of the arch (22, p.163).

The decorative capitals in the chapter house can be divided into five groups. Analysis of the decoration further establishes the date of construction as twelfth century.

Moulded capitals with nail head ornament can be found on the arches of the north and south windows. These were a common thirteenth century form of decoration. The earliest examples are to be seen at Graiguenamanagh.

Two capitals with broad stems ending in foliage or fruit can be seen on the arch





**Illus. 38** Two capitals with foliate designs.

scallop in Ireland occurred in Christchurch (1186 - 1200).

Foliage capitals are also to be found in the chapter house. These tend to be coarse and undefined. These designs are very similar to the stiff leaf capitals found in the south transept in Christchurch Cathedral (illus. 39).

of the east window (Illus. 38). The taller stems end in a small trefoiled leaf, the shorter ones in a fruit shape.

Trumpet scalloped capitals are to be found on the bases of the shafts of the south window and on the capitals which decorate the vaulting shafts of the north west angle. The scallops are divided into a series of narrow flutes. This implies that they were a late example of the form. The earliest forms of



**Illus. 39** Capital with foliage ornament (c. 1200).

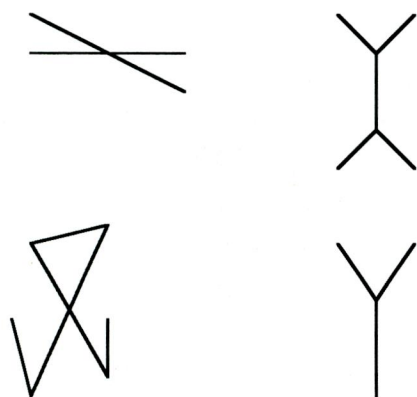
The leaf formation on the central capital of the southwest angle is almost a repeat of the design used for the capitals of the vaulting shafts of the lavabo. As this building is generally agreed to date 1200 it further establishes the chapter house as belonging to the years 1200 - 20.

The grotesque heads which embellish the bases of the shafts of the north and east windows are the fifth example of capitals in the chapter house (illus. 36).

The largest quantity of well cut stone belonged to the middle of the thirteenth century. This is undoubtedly the most outstanding building period in the monastery's history. Most of the stones once formed parts of piers, arches, doorways and windows and the decoration is mostly of roll mouldings. Many of these stones were identified by masons marks and nineteen have been found.



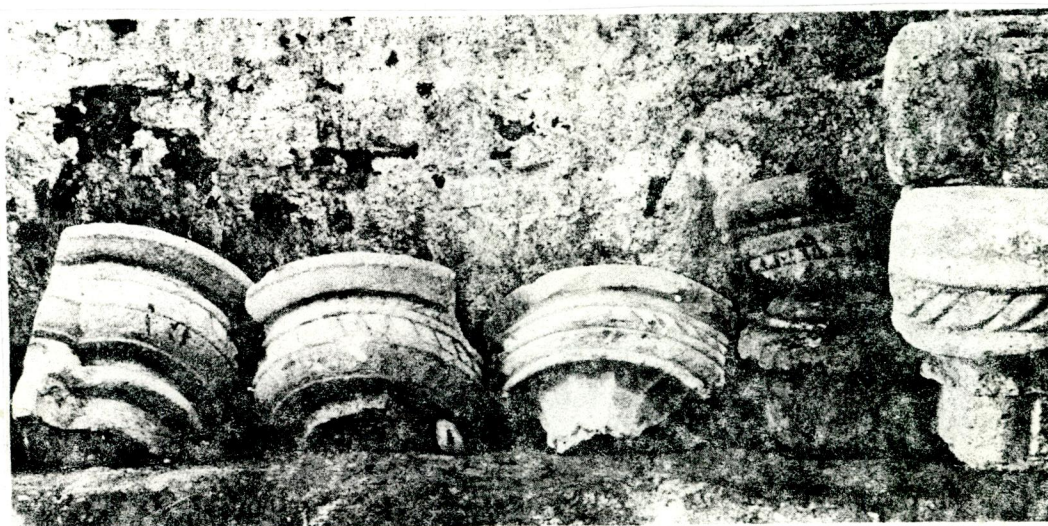




**Illus. 40** Four masons marks from Mellifont abbey. the twelfth century (20, p. 322).

These marks first appear in Ireland after the Anglo Norman invasion and they can be found in several Cistercian buildings of the thirteenth century ie. Boyle, Inch, Grey. Their presence proves that by this time the Cistercians were using professional craftsmen from outside the community as indeed they were almost certainly doing in

Twelve pieces of moulded capitals have survived. Eight of these are decorated with some type of rope or billet ornament (Illus. 41). The use of such capitals was



**Illus 41** Capitals with rope or billet ornament (1200s).

widespread in Ireland during the early gothic period and in the theoretically austere environment of a Cistercian monastery they were a particularly suitable ornament.

The most popular of early English ornaments was the stiff leaf foliage. Very few examples of this have been found. The finest piece however is on a stone that formed a re-entrant angle. Deeply undercut foliage embellishes a corbel which was squeezed into the angle of the stone and the leaves sprout upwards from a carved human head.

The most exquisite of all the thirteenth century decoration is that of the pieces of arch moulding carved with dog tooth and unusual curving zig zag lines across the outer face. The decoration is almost certainly an early English successor to Romanesque



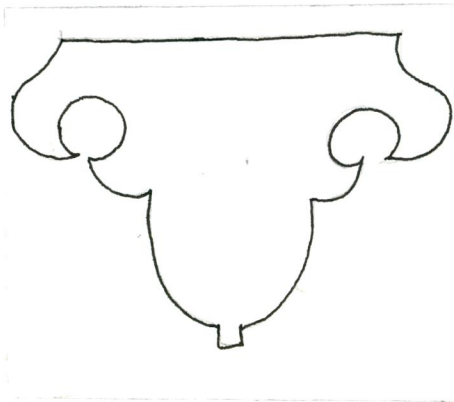




**Illus. 42** Pieces of arch moulding carved with dog tooth and zig zag lines seen in their original position ornamenting the piscina of the rebuilt presbytery.

chevron and there is evidence to suggest that it ornamented the piscina of the rebuilt presbytery (Illus. 42).

A small group of stones belongs to the decades after 1300. This is referred to as the decorated period (20, p. 331). Three massive fragments came from a continuous

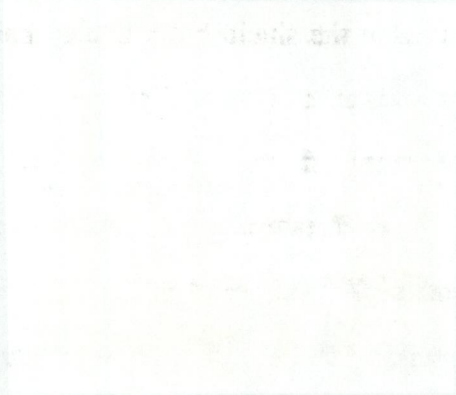
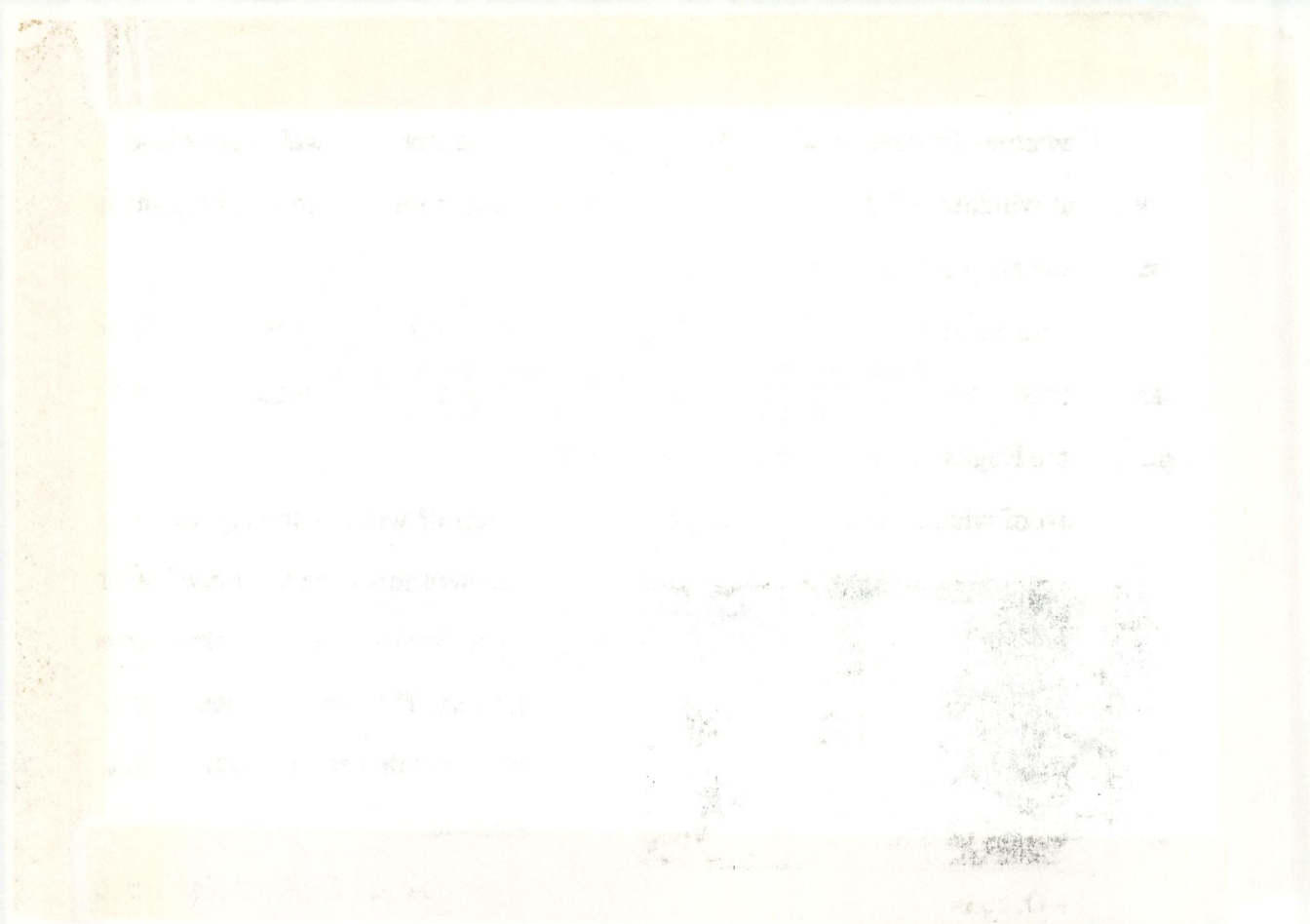


**Illus. 43** Profile of rib moulding from the decorated period.

series of moulded capitals each merging into the capital alongside. These are believed to have come from the south transept as they measure exactly.

Several sets of voussoirs were also found and three pieces of rib moulding which have a profile which is characteristic of the decorated period. The profile consists of a



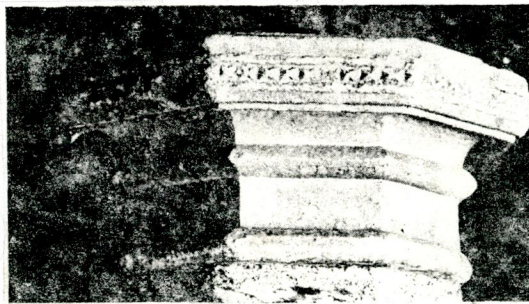


filleted roll flanked by beaked half rolls (Illus. 43). This was common in the Severn Valley where it can be seen in the north aisle of Worcester Cathedral (1317 - 27) (17, pp. 16-19).

Numerous fragments of curvilinear tracery survive, some of which are close in style to the windows of the chapter house. This shows that there were other windows similar to the chapter house elsewhere in the abbey.

In the later middle ages Mellifont still retained contact with stylistic developments in England. This was due to the situation of the abbey in the Pale and its loyalty to the English community during this time.

Most of what remains from this period is fragments of window tracery. Some of



**Illus. 44** Octagonal capital.

the windows were carved with ogee heads others with simple trefoils. This was a typical pattern of fifteenth and sixteenth century Ireland.

One of the most significant stones from this period is the fragment of a huge octagonal capital (Illus. 44). In view of the use of octagonal piers in the nave it has been suggested that the capital came from there (20, p. 335).

The only elaborate sculpture which dates from this period is a stone which formed the head of a niche (Illus. 45). It has an ogee arch embellished with square leaves and in the top left hand corner a figure emerges from the foliage clutching a shield. The square leaves are typically of fifteenth century work. No coat of arms is carved on the shield but this may have been painted originally. The carving is coarse when compared to earlier work and it lacks the sharpness and precision which characterised some of the earlier work in the twelfth century.

There are also on display in the chapter house three carved heads. These are mounted in the base of one of the windows (Illus. 46 & 47). Although no mention of these has been found in any literature, local folklore tells that they represented the seven deadly sins and originally four more would have been mounted on the opposite



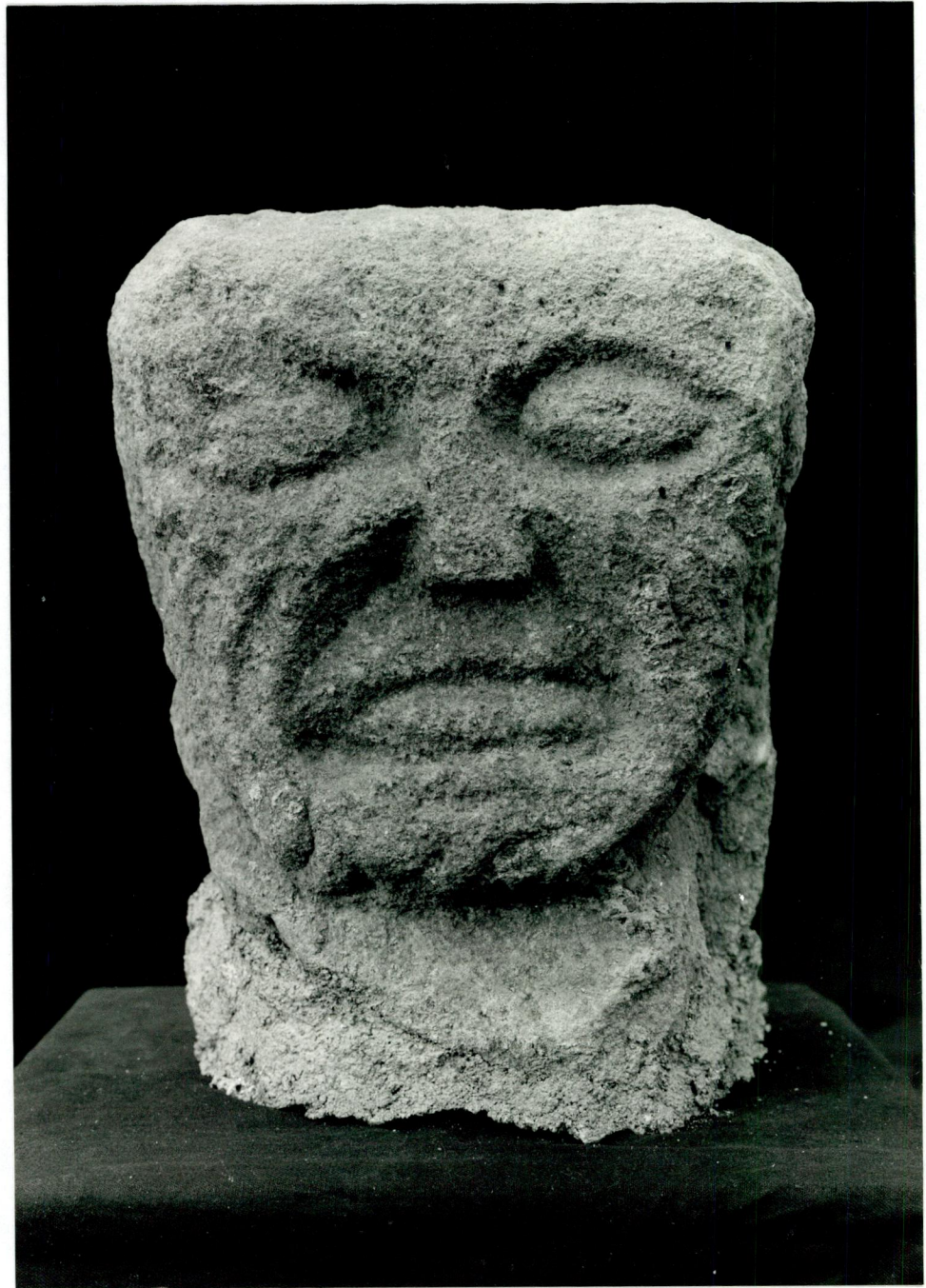




**Illus. 45** Stone carving which formed the head of a niche. Elaborately carved with foliage and trefoil leaves. There is a figure holding a shield on the top left hand corner.



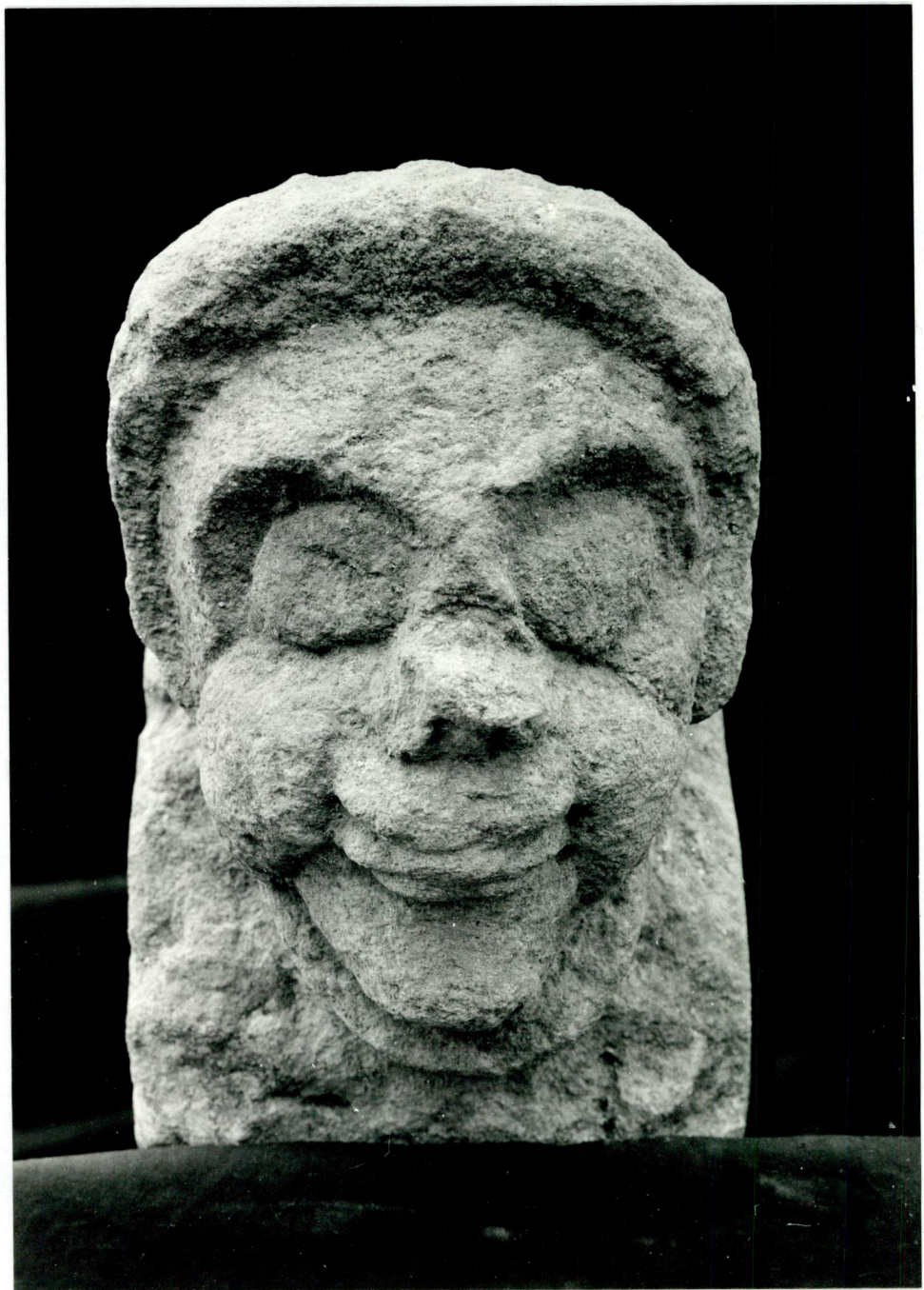




**Illus. 46** A carved head which is now on display in the chapter house window. It is said to represent anger; one of the seven deadly sins. The carving is coarse and disfigured but does display expression of the emotion.

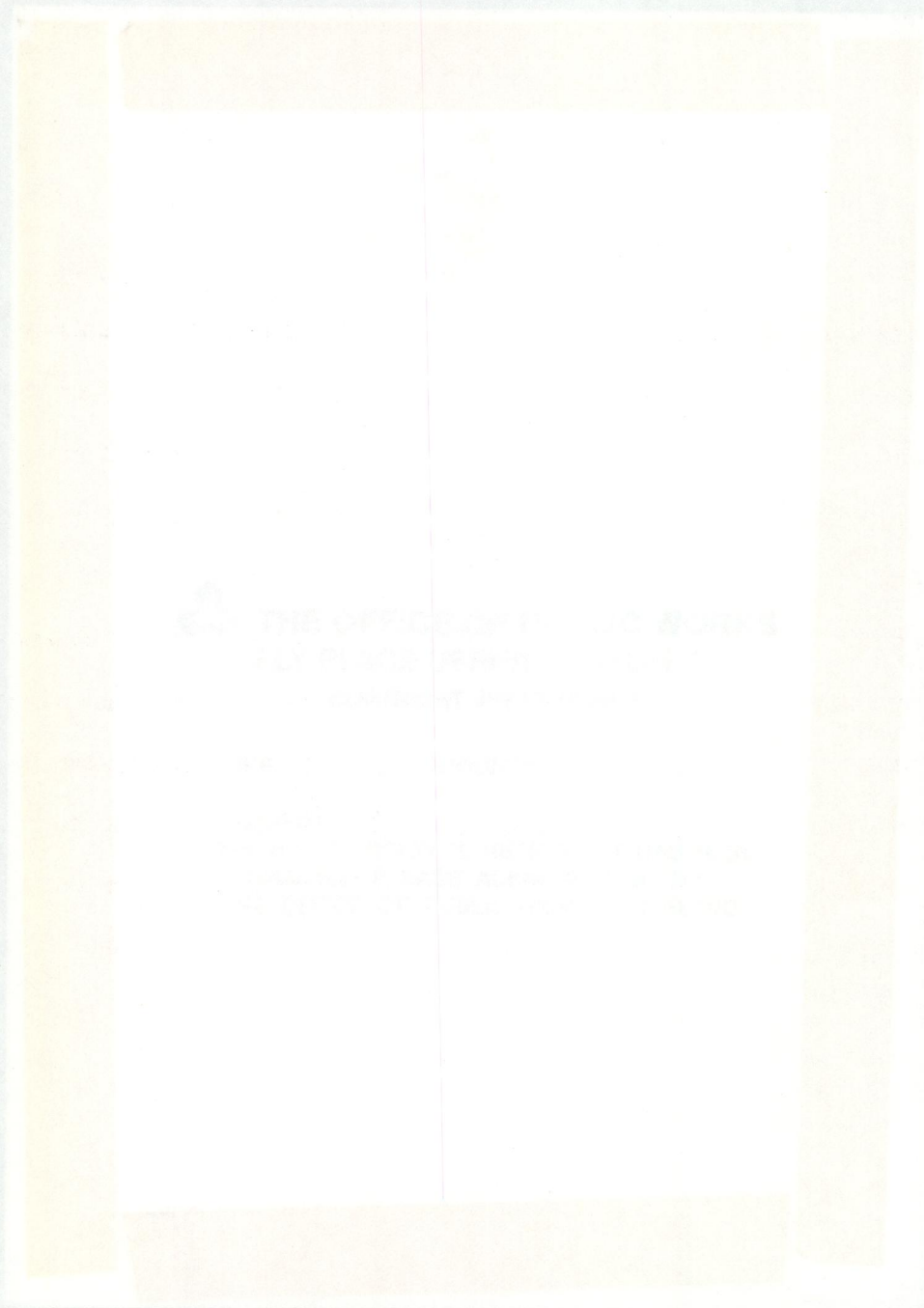






**Illus. 47** Another carved head on display at Mellifont. Here the carver has excellently portrayed pride as the head is bulging with self-importance.





window. The three remaining heads are badly disfigured but hold the expressions of anger, pride and gluttony. These were said to remind the monks of the evil of sin and help to keep sin out of the abbey. This was totally alien to St. Bernard's teaching which stated that monks should be able to '*rise above images of sensible objects*' (22, p. 179) and such carvings were only a distraction in the Cistercian abbey.

The stone used in the carving at Mellifont was mainly sandstone. Its source is not clear. Leask suggests that the stone came from Johnstown near Navan. This stone would have been easily transported along the river Boyne. It has also been suggested by G. Wilkinson (24, pp. 306-7) that the stone came from northeast Meath presumably in the district around Kingscourt. Much of the dressed masonry from the mid thirteenth century is in a yellow limestone. Some of this was imported from Caen in Normandy and its fine grain permitted very precise and accurate carving. There is also some use of Dundry stone which was widely used after the Anglo Norman invasion.

Through the study of the stone carvings and fragments at Mellifont it is now easier to appreciate the enormous architectural influence that the abbey had over its daughter houses and indeed over architecture in general in Ireland. One can now appreciate that the abbey was once a magnificent building which kept in touch with current trends, constantly rebuilding and redecorating in order to keep in the forefront of fashionable developments as would have been expected of the founder and mother house in Ireland.





## Chapter IV : Metalwork

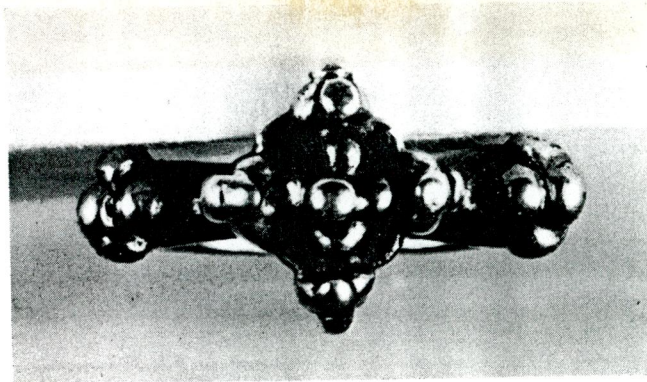
The Cistercians were not usually associated with fine metalwork. Indeed the rules of the order forbade the use of gold and silver. However as with all the other forms of decoration when the rules lapsed the monasteries began to build up a range of valuable pieces of metalwork. As the Cistercians did not produce their own metalwork there was nothing specifically Cistercian about any of the pieces found and they could have been from any church of the time.

Mellifont as the mother house must have acquired a large and valuable collection of metal items. Mellifont was the second wealthiest abbey in Ireland after the suppression in 1539. It was wealthier than the abbey of Meaux in Yorkshire which was worth £298 at the time. The following is a list of the items which belonged to Meaux and is an indication of the type of objects which Mellifont may have possessed:

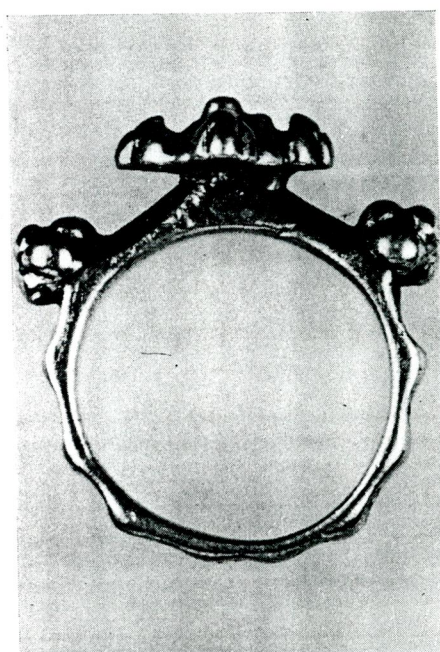
*In the sacristy there was a large gilded silver cross and an ivory carving of the Virgin Mary with two attendant angels, a crystal urn with diverse relics and a variety of other reliquaries including a green velvet purse containing the belt of St. Malachy. There were two silver crosiers, two silver thuribles, a large gold chalice and a further eighteen chalices for various altars. In the church itself there were painted panels and statues at the high altar, four iron candelabra and a 'candelabrum electrinum' hanging in the middle of the choir. There was a large organ at the west end of the church, a small organ in the choir and a clock that rang out the hours of the day. The abbey also possessed a magnificent range of vestments and altar cloths. Equally splendid was the domestic silverware in the abbots lodgings; three gilded silver cups, silver jars and water jugs, a set of six silver goblets a silver 'spyceplate', a silver salt cellar and even a silver chain for the seal of the abbot (22, p. 220).*

What beautiful items were to be found at Mellifont can only be imagined as sadly very few artifacts were found. During the excavations in the 1880s a skull and some bones together with a silver ring were found in the south side of the chancel (Illus. 48). The ring is gothic in style and inscribed with the words 'AVE MARIA.' It is now in the possession of the Cistercians in the new abbey at Collon in Co. Louth (19, p. 244).





MELLIFONT RING—FRONT VIEW



MEDIEVAL RING FROM MELLIFONT



MELLIFONT RING—INSCRIPTION

**Illus. 48** The Mellifont ring shown above has a large knob in the centre with a cross shape decoration in high relief. There are two knobs on each side and the band has nine concave indents around the back and the words 'AVE MARIA' are inscribed into it.





During the excavations of 1953-1954 a small silver chalice and paten were found in a disturbed burial in the east end of the church (Illus. 49). They were badly



**Illus. 49** Silver chalice and paten found at Mellifont.

damaged and even after repair the shape of the chalice is slightly distorted as it is an extremely fragile object. Its over all height is only three inches and the diameter of the cup being two and a half inches (Illus. 50). There is a single large knob elliptical in elevation on the stem and the whole design is simple but elegant. The object is constructed of six separate pieces. The bowl was spun and finished with a delicately hammered everted rim. The knob was made of two pieces an upper and a lower each







like a shallow bowl with a round hole sweated together. The stem consists of two tubes each of which enters the knob, the terminal of the tube within the knob being split into frills which were folded back to secure it in position. The tubes of the stem at their upper and lower ends are soldered to the cup and the base respectively. The base probably like the cup spun and then finished by beating is brought out in a shallow splay to a lower edge or rim which is finished by folding the metal under in a square fold (5, pp. 138-9).



**Illus. 50** Silver chalice from Mellifont.

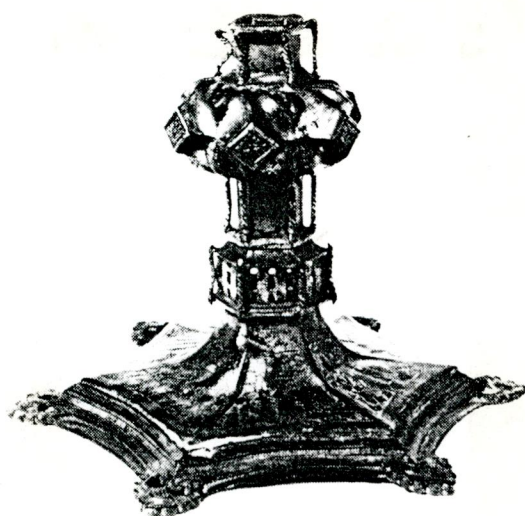




The paten which has a diameter of three inches is a paper thin disc of silver. It was found in fragments and is not quite complete.

The Mellifont chalice which may itself be of English manufacture is closely paralleled by English chalices of the mid thirteenth century. Since it is far too small to have been a serving chalice it was most probably a celebrant's chalice used at the altar. The burial with which it was found was disturbed and not intact, a later interment with a stone coffin having been inserted over it and its association with a burial is not absolutely certain: there remains a possibility that the object may simply have been lost in the fire which destroyed the original church.

Twelve silver coins were also found during the excavations. These were scattered over the floor of the crypt. They almost certainly represent a hoard which had been concealed in the beams of the rafters of the original church as they were found in a layer of charcoal from the collapse of the burning timbers into the crypt and showed signs of intense heat (4, p. 139).



**Illus. 51** Gothic monstrance said to have come from Mellifont.

Also from Mellifont is the foot of a late gothic monstrance made of bronze. A monstrance is a vessel in which the host is exposed for veneration. The hexagonal base has compartments alternatively engraved with the monograms IHC and XPC in gothic black writing. The main stem is decorated with pieces of twisted wire detached from the background like miniature columns. There are two knobs, the upper one typically late gothic, with six lozenge shaped settings occupied by foliage motifs (Illus. 51). The monstrance

is now in the National Museum of Ireland as is the Mellifont chalice, paten and coins.

In 1899 a small hoard of liturgical objects was discovered in a quarry at Sheephouse two miles from Mellifont. The hoard consisted of a late gothic processional





cross, a pricket candlestick, and a tiny bell. It is generally believed that the objects once belonged to the abbey and were hidden after the suppression to avoid confiscation. However there is no definite proof of this.

Another theory is that they may have been taken from the monastery some years before. In 1495 the monks complained to the archbishop of Armagh about lay encroachment speaking of local lords who '*retain and conceal the books the jewels and the other goods and property of the said monastery of Mellifont which had been lent to them for their use or given to them as a pledge.....*' (18, pp. 55-61).<sup>1</sup>

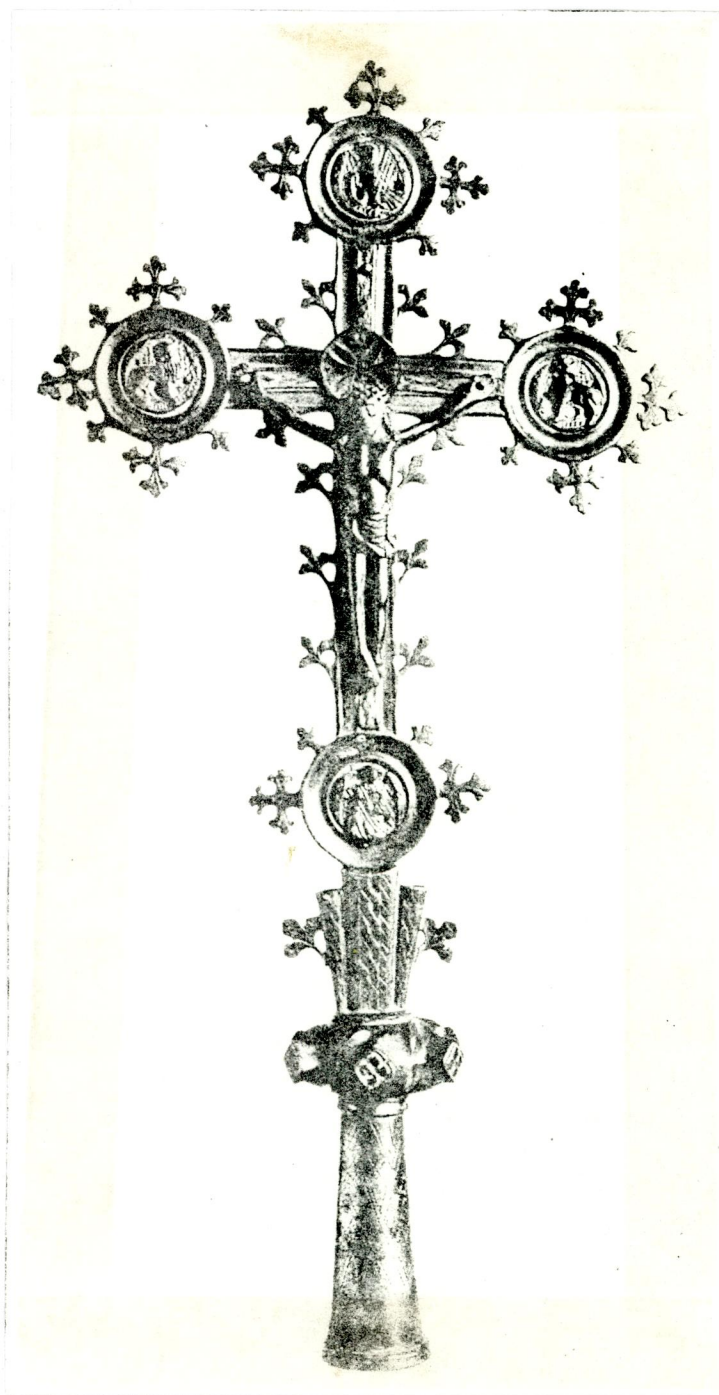
The surface of the cross is made of bronze or latten gilt and was made in two parts an upper portion and a socket. The whole cross has a length of 25.5 inches while the span of the arms is 12.75 inches (Illus. 52). The upper portion of the cross has a strip of copper with a diamond pattern in dark blue enamel along the centre of each limb reaching as far as the circle at each extremity. The figure of our Lord was rivetted to the cross over this strip and the circles at the extremities were filled with plates of bronze to which were attached openwork symbols of the four evangelists. The saviour wears a loin cloth and his head is encircled with the crown of thorns. An ornamental nimbus is affixed to the back of the head by means of a pin. The symbols of the four evangelists occupy the places on the cross determined by ecclesiastical usage. The eagle for St. John is on the upper limb and the winged man for St. Matthew at the foot, the winged lion for St. Mark is placed on the right arm and the winged calf for St. Luke on the left. They are cut out of pieces of bronze about 1.5 inches in diameter and fill the circles already mentioned (1, p. 28).

On the back of the cross the limbs are divided by raised lines into three panels (Illus. 53). The centre is filled with an incised diamond pattern which at the junction of the limbs takes the shape of a four leaved conventional flower like form. The outer panels are plain. The discs in the circles to which the symbols of the evangelists are fixed are ornamented with a conventional representation of a flower.

The socket which is 9.5 inches long was made in three parts an upper and a lower portion which are fixed into a decorated knob. The upper portion contains a small socket on each side which no doubt was to hold branches ending in a figure of the

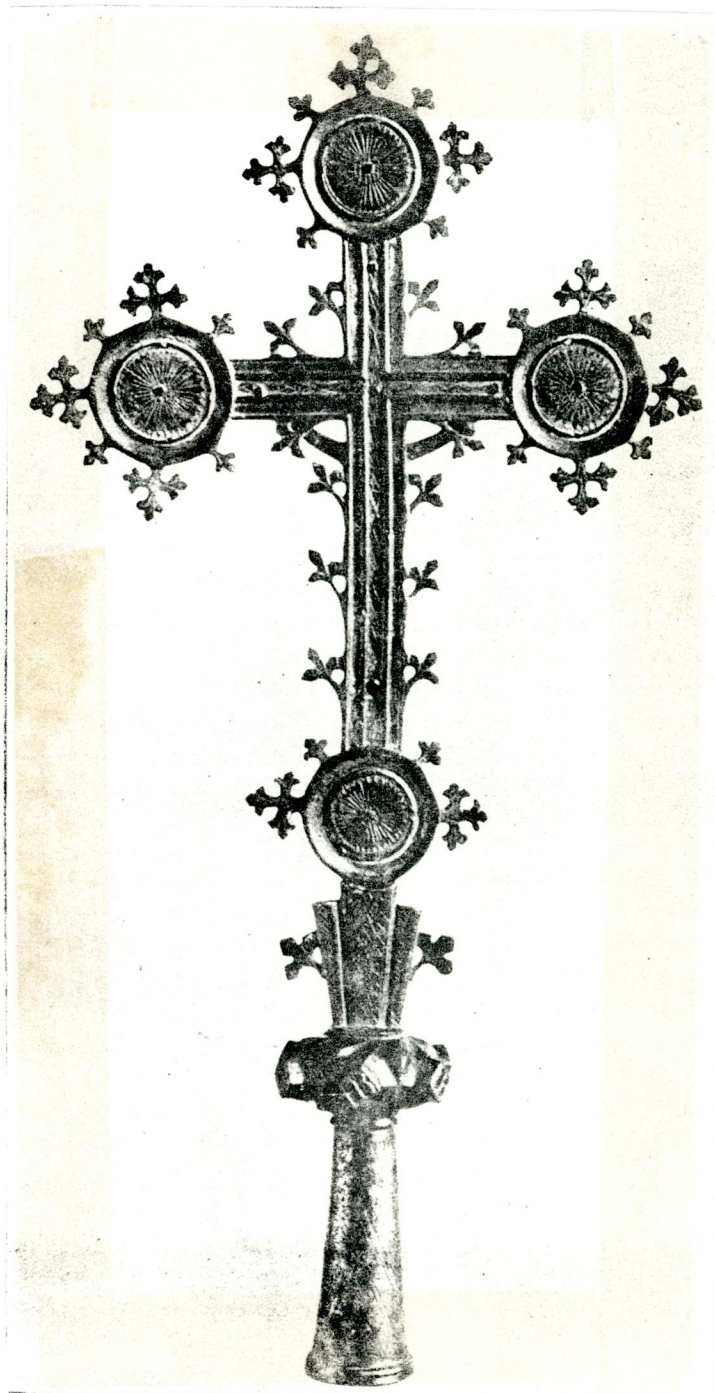






**Illus. 52** Processional cross found at Sheephouse Co. Meath (front).





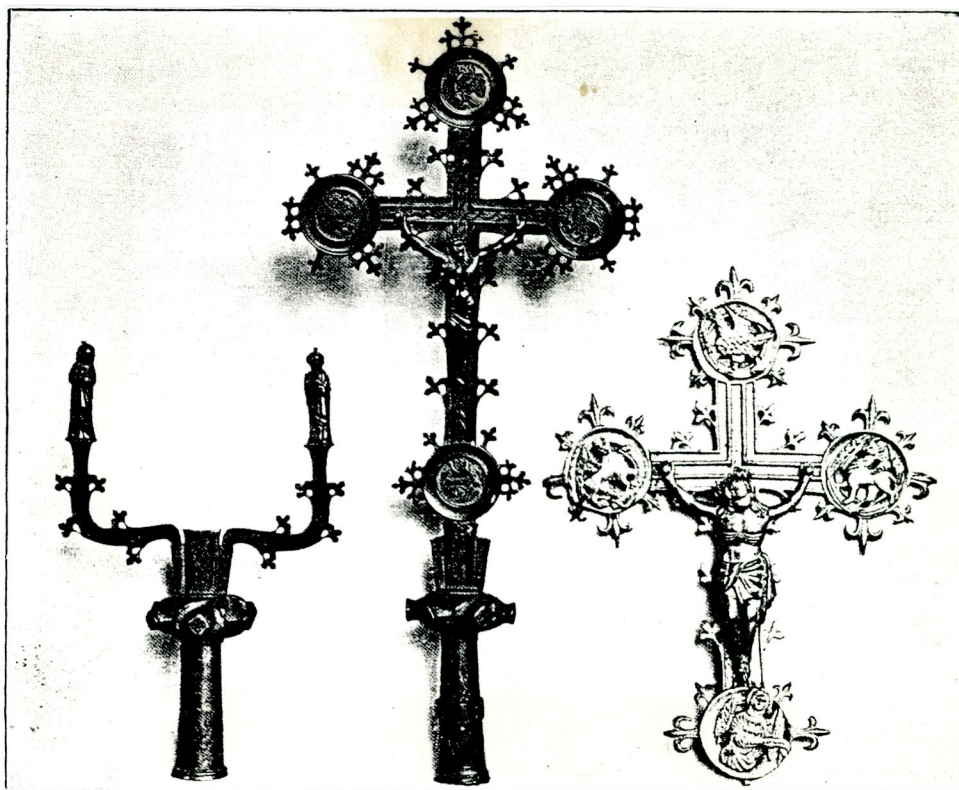
**Illus. 53** Processional cross (back).



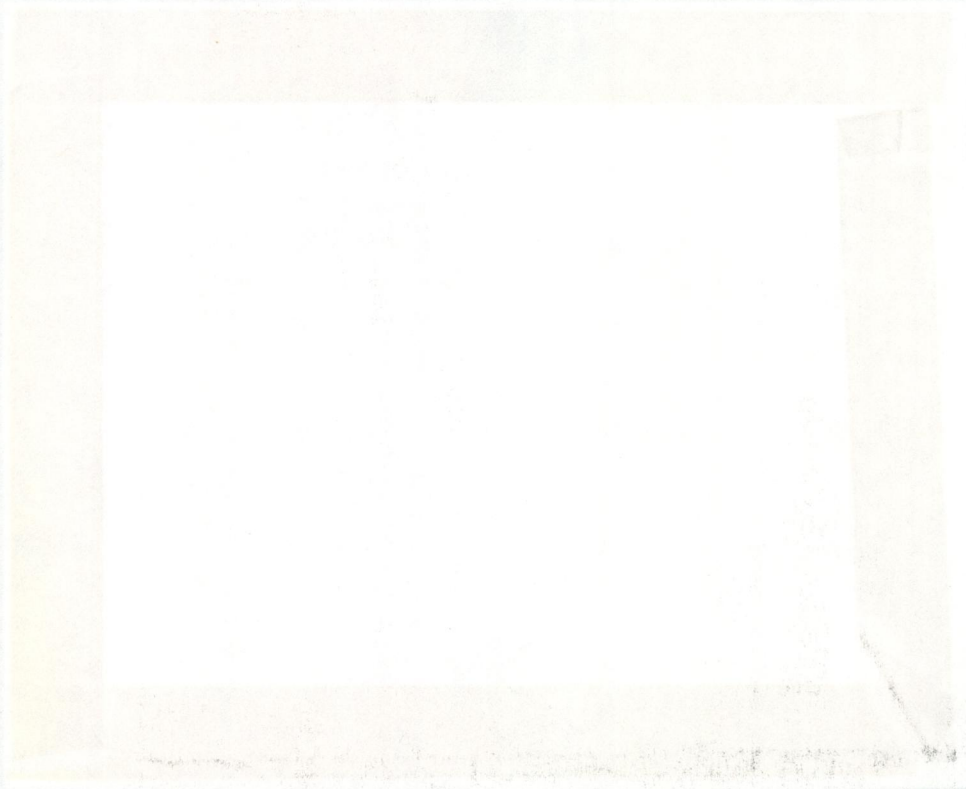


Virgin on the right side and St. John on the left. It is ornamented on the front with an incised rope pattern and on the back with a diamond form which is continued up the back of the upper portion of the cross. The moulded knob is of a type common in the stems of chalices and the sockets of crosses in the late medieval period. It is formed with lobes ending in lozenges enclosing quatrefoils which may possibly have been enamelled. Between the lobes above and below are compartments ornamented with incised long leaf-like designs. The lower portion of the socket is decorated with a linear pattern of broad bands crossing one another (1, pp. 28-9).

This cross can be compared with an almost exactly similar one of about the same date which is the property of the Society of Antiquaries of London (Illus. 54). This cross is also made of latten and it also has sockets which originally held side branches for the Virgin and St. John (3, pp. 53-4).



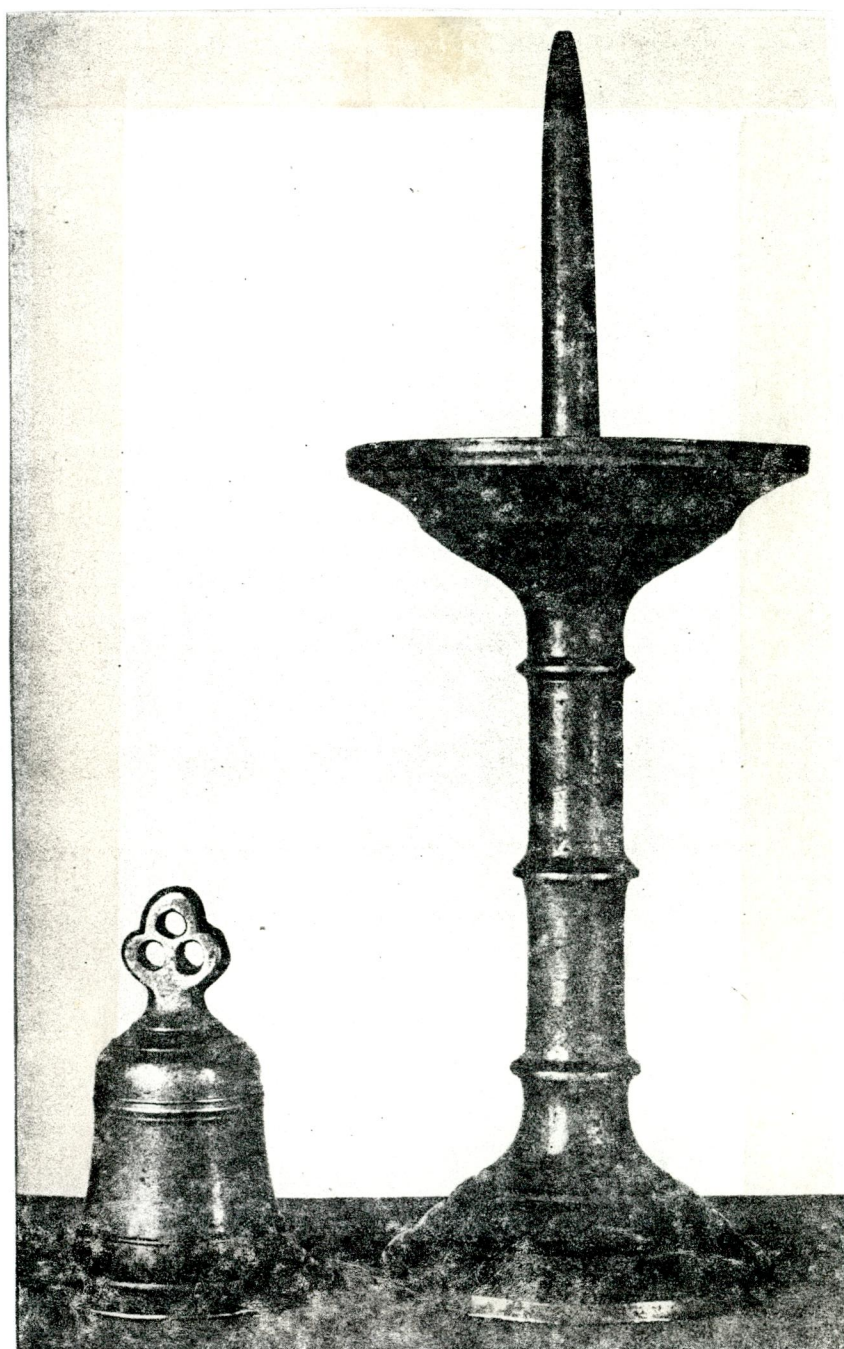
**Illus. 54** Processional crosses 15<sup>th</sup> century (Society of Antiquaries London). The centre cross is almost identical to the Sheephouse cross.



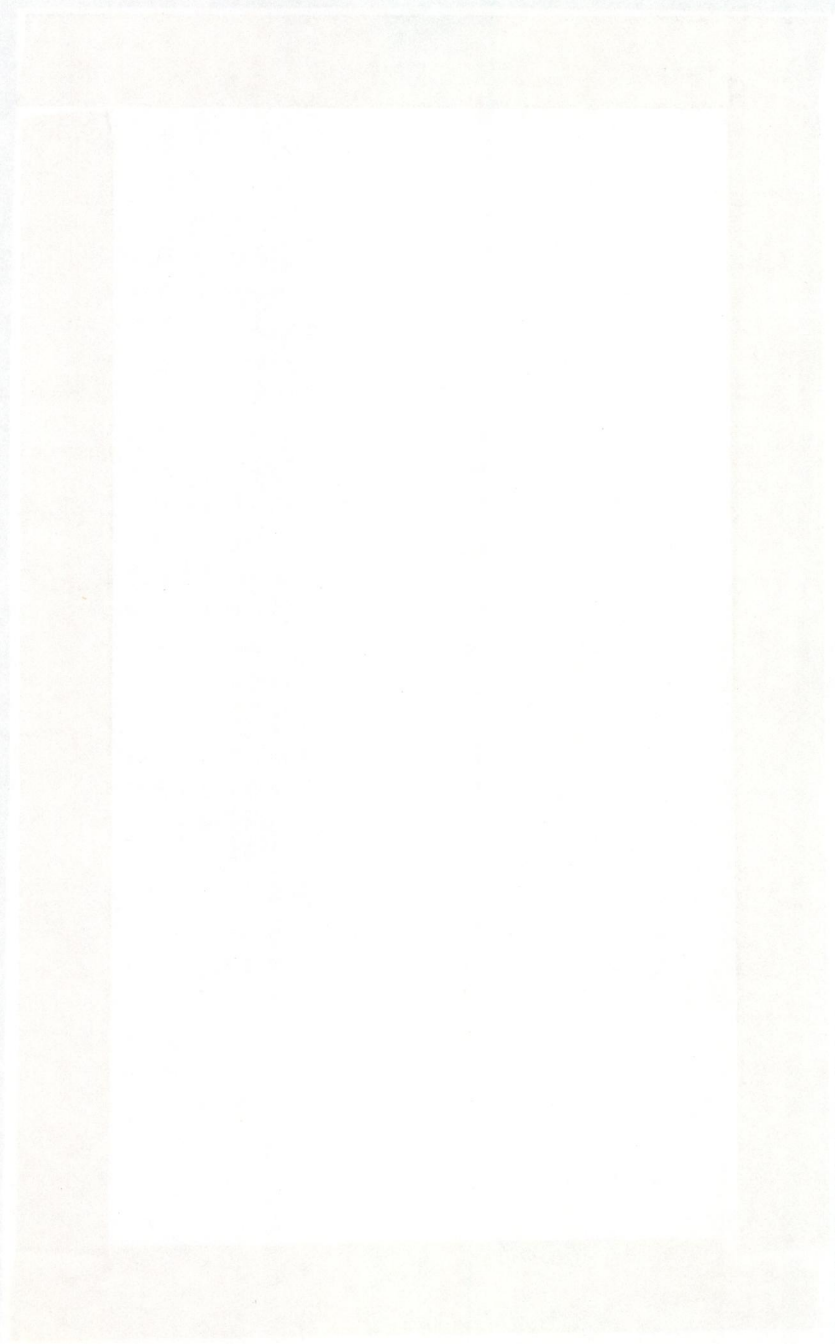


Until the end of the fifteenth century there was no difference between the altar cross and the processional cross. The same cross was used for both purposes, being furnished with a socket so that it could be mounted on a staff for processions or placed in the base for an altar cross.

The bell which was found is a small handbell of bronze cast in one piece measuring four inches in height (Illus. 55). It has a pierced trefoil handle and it is encircled with raised ornamental lines. This bell was probably used as a sacring bell, that is a bell rung during the consecration in the liturgy of the mass.



**Illus. 55** Bell and candlestick found at Sheephouse, Co. Meath.





The pricket candlestick measures one foot in length including the spike (Illus. 55). It was made in two pieces, the body and the spike. The inside of the base seems to have been turned. The candlestick belongs to a type common in the fifteenth century. It probably formed one of a pair which stood on the altar.

The cross, candlestick and bell do not show any distinctively Irish features, nor is the cross inscribed and thus connected with an Irish family. The cross is typically late medieval English work and may be considered as made in England and brought to this country or made here by an English craftsman. As these objects are late fifteenth century or early sixteenth it must be remembered that the statute forbidding the election of anyone Irish to the office of Archbishop, Bishop, Abbot, or Prior was renewed in the early fifteenth century and a rich community like Mellifont with presumably an English Abbot would be likely to obtain its sacred furniture from England.

The items which have been found however do not give an accurate representation of the metalwork at Mellifont. We can assume that at one stage Mellifont (as the motherhouse) would have had a large and varied collection of liturgical items. Unfortunately we can only judge the metalwork from what has been found. There is little or no Celtic influence in the craftsmanship and when compared with the superb early Irish religious metalwork ie. the Ardagh Chalice, Cross of Cong, it is disappointing.





## Conclusion

The concept of a structured planned abbey; with all the buildings surrounding a central cloister was alien to the Irish when the Cistercians first arrived in Ireland. The Irish were more familiar with their monasteries of scattered mud and wattle huts. It is true that Mellifont was not the very first such building in Ireland. St. Mary's Abbey in Dublin was built in 1139 and belonged to the order of Savigny but later converted to the Cistercian order. The Cistercians however were the first to bring widespread use of European building styles to Ireland.

The original building was supervised by the French monks who ensured that the building upheld the strict standards of austerity which were laid down by St. Bernard. However the Irish found it hard to resist the temptation for decoration. The monks it seems could not resist the human desire for an aesthetically pleasing environment. This is understandable considering the drab regulated lives which the brethren subjected themselves to. They must have felt the need for an interesting and stimulating environment to live and pray in. This need for decoration may also have been inherited from the early Irish monasteries where the monks created some of the most beautiful carved stonework in the world for example Muirdeach's Cross at Monasterboice which is only three miles away from Mellifont and beautiful metalwork such as the Ardagh Chalice with its gold filigree and enamel work. The contrast must indeed have been drastic. St. Bernard has been criticised in this way for bringing to an end Irish liturgical art. While there is a decline in such work, the Cistercians did not herald the end of decorative church art in Ireland.

It was only sixty years after the foundation that the monks succumbed to decoration on a large scale with the building of the lavabo in 1200. This was a huge and lavish undertaking which was not only as the result of a lapse in the strict rule of the order but also due to what must have been a surplus of funds. The monastery was after all one of the wealthiest in the country second only to St. Mary's in Dublin. The





Cistercians were great farmers and quickly grew in wealth. Along with their agricultural success they were recipients of large pieces of land from benefactors. So it is easy to understand how tempting it was for them to spend this money on the decoration of their buildings.

While one refers to the decoration as Cistercian it is true that mostly it was not actually Cistercians who executed the building and decoration. The monks themselves generally acted only as supervisors. As was typical of other religious orders of the time.

The building activities and crafts of each individual monastery were too discontinuous for the monks who were tied to their religious vocations. They could not take for example tiling or stone carving as a full time profession (11, p. 156). Besides as such decoration was forbidden in the Cistercian order no Cistercian monk could ethically have trained in such a profession, particularly in the early days when the strict rules were observed.

Craftsmen from outside were assigned in the abbey. Despite any guidance or requests by a particular monastery each stone carver, for example would express his own individuality in his work through the creative process (11, p. 158). The Ballintober Master was one such individual. He worked in several monasteries and not just for Cistercians. It is doubtful that he was a monk due to the travelling nature of his profession. Evidence of his work can be seen in Mellifont on the carved capitals in the chapter house (22, p. 184) with their grotesque heads and slanty eyes they bear comparisons to his work in the Augustinian abbey in Ballintober. Sadly most of the stonework remains anonymous and the creators received little recognition for their work. Also much of the stonework is left to be interpreted by the visitor as the story behind much of the carving has been lost through time. The heads in the chapter house for example, it is local folklore which has interpreted their meaning as the remaining three from the seven deadly sins.

The paved floor in the church was not specifically Cistercian and indeed many of the tiles are abstract in design and have no religious significance. They were the kind of tiles which were to be seen in most important religious houses of the time for example Christchurch and St. Patrick's Cathedral and indeed in non religious houses



such as Swords Castle. The monks it seems were keeping up to date with the latest interior fashions and were more interested in the prestige and standing of the abbey rather than in whether it conformed to their religious ideals.

Precious metals which were more or less banned at the outset of the order were later to be seen in all Cistercian abbeys. Mellifont is believed to have had a large quantity of precious metals. However what little has been found is all of English craftsmanship. The Sheephouse Cross is almost identical in design to a cross that belonged to St. Alban's church in England and is now in the possession of the London Society of Antiquaries. The strong English influence was due to the Anglo - Norman presence in the Pale at this time.

From examining the carvings, tiles and metalwork one can see that they were haphazardly chosen and there is no real Cistercian connection between the three. Some medieval themes do come through in both tiles and carvings i. e. lions, birds, and fleur-de-lis. The fleur-de-lis can be seen in the decoration of the Sheephouse Cross as well as in the tiles. The use of this three leaved ornament was of religious significance in medieval times symbolising the trinity. The lion symbolised the resurrection. The story is told by Honorius that the lioness gave birth to two lifeless cubs but that after three days the roaring of the lion brought them back to life (15, p. 26). Such symbolism was widespread in medieval times leaving the artist to conform to preconceived ideas of how his work should look.

There is some evidence that the tiles were actually made in Ireland and that not all the designs were imported. Indeed some have Celtic influences in their design (T14) for example which is an abstract design with four intertwined loops.

There were many fine stone carvers working in the country during the life of Mellifont. Almost four hundred years of their work can be seen in the fragments which remain.

Although the Cistercians did not initiate a particular style of their own, or a set policy for the decoration of their abbeys, at Mellifont they brought together a very important and varied collection of medieval art and decoration in Ireland.





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