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Thorgrim, the Killaloe Cross, and the Norwegian Campaign in Ireland in 1102–1103

Griffin Murray

Abstract: This note offers an identification, for the first time, of the individual named in inscriptions in Old Norse runes and scholastic ogham on a stone cross fragment at Killaloe, Co. Clare, and discusses the potential political context that led to the erection of the cross at the beginning of the twelfth century.

Keywords: Killaloe, Thorgrim, Magnús Barelegs, Muirchertach Ua Briain, Ireland and Norway, runes, ogham, cross.

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The fragment of a stone cross with a runic inscription at Killaloe cathedral in county Clare is a well-known and well-published piece (Fig 1).¹ It is one of only seventeen currently known runic inscriptions in Ireland and is the only one on a Christian monument.² It was first identified by Robert Macalister built into the precinct wall in front of the cathedral in 1916 and was published by him.³ It was removed from the wall sometime before 1929 and has been on display inside the cathedral since then. It is a fragment from the upper shaft, just below the head, of a free-standing cross and measures 68cm high, 47cm wide, and 22cm in thickness. The runic inscription occurs on one of the principal faces (Fig. 1), while a crude representation of Christ occupies

¹ I would like to thank John Sheehan, Department of Archaeology, University College Cork, for his comments on this note. My thanks also to the Very Revd. Rod Smyth, Dean of Killaloe, for permission to publish on the cross.

² Michael P. Barnes, Jan Ragnar Hagland & R. I. Page, *The runic inscriptions of Viking age Dublin. National Museum of Ireland medieval Dublin excavations 1962–1981*, Ser. B.5 (Dublin 1997); Michael Barnes & Jan Ragnar Hagland, 'Runic inscriptions and Viking-age Ireland', in John Sheehan & Donnchadh Ó Corráin (eds), *The Viking age: Ireland and the west: Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress* (Dublin 2010) 11–18. It may be noted that there is a small cross inscribed on the only known rune stone from Ireland, that from Beginish, Co. Kerry, which may, or may not, be contemporary with the runes; see M. J. O'Kelly, 'An island settlement at Beginish, Co. Kerry' *PRIA* 57C (1955–1956) 159–94: 171–75; John Sheehan, Steffen Stummann Hansen & Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'A Viking-age maritime haven: a reassessment of the island settlement at Beginish, Co. Kerry', *Journal of Irish Archaeology* 10 (2001) 93–119: 101–03. All other Scandinavian runic inscriptions in Ireland occur on portable objects.

³ R. A. S. Macalister, 'On a runic inscription at Killaloe Cathedral', *PRIA* 33C (1917) 493–98; Macalister, 'Further notes on the runic inscription in Killaloe Cathedral', *PRIA* 38C (1929) 236–39; Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, 2 vols (Dublin 1945–1949) i, 58–59. Based on the gate piers, this wall appears to have been built in the eighteenth century and is depicted on the first edition Ordnance Survey map. The wall also contains several large dressed stones that may well have originally derived from a demolished early medieval or Romanesque church at the site.

the other (Fig. 2).⁴ An ogham inscription is found on one of the short sides. The runes have been read as follows:

Þorgrímr reisti kross þenna

‘Thorgrim erected this cross’⁵

The ogham inscription, which is in scholastic ogham, occurs on one of the short sides of the cross (Fig. 3) and has been read most recently as:

BENDACHT FOR TOROQRIM

‘A blessing on Thorgrim’⁶

In the most recent discussion of the runic inscription by Michael Barnes and Jan Ragnar Hagland, it has been tentatively dated to sometime around c. 1100.⁷ Surprisingly, no one has yet identified the named individual, Thorgrim, nor has the form of the cross or its context being given much consideration, apart from a general view that it may represent evidence for a local Hiberno-Scandinavian community. Killaloe was a focus of activity around this time, became the seat of an important bishopric in 1111,⁸ and may have developed into a borough in the pre-Norman period.⁹ Richard Gem has dated St Flannan’s oratory, the Romanesque church at Killaloe, to c. 1100, and has linked it with the patronage of Muirchertach Ua Briain, King of Munster (1086–1119) and, for parts of his career, overlord of Ireland. Muirchertach is perhaps best known, in historical terms, as the patron of the Church reform movement in Ireland and as one of the most powerful and outward-facing kings of Ireland.¹⁰ Indeed, Killaloe was the place of Muirchertach’s eventual death and burial in 1119.¹¹

In the year 1102 Magnús Barelegs, King of Norway, arrived in Ireland as part of his military campaign in the West.¹² For that year the Annals of the Four Masters record:

⁴ Peter Harbison, *The high crosses of Ireland: an iconographical and photographic survey*, 3 vols (Bonn 1992) i, 121.

⁵ Carl J. S. Marstrander, ‘Killaloeorset og de norske kolonier i Irland’, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap* 4 (1930) 378–400; Magnus Olsen, ‘Runic inscriptions in Great Britain, Ireland and the Isle of Man’, in Haakon Shetelig (ed), *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, Part VI (Oslo 1954) 151–232: 181–82; Barnes, Hagland & Page, *The runic inscriptions*, 53–56.

⁶ Damian McManus, *A guide to Ogam* (Maynooth 1997) 130.

⁷ Barnes & Hagland, ‘Runic inscriptions and Viking-age Ireland’, 12.

⁸ Geoffrey Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: the History of Ireland*, edited and translated by David Comyn & Patrick S. Dineen, 4 vols (London 1902–1914) iii, 300–01; Aubrey Gwynn & Dermot F. Gleeson, *A History of the diocese of Killaloe* (Dublin 1962) 116–27.

⁹ John Bradley, ‘Killaloe: a pre-Norman borough?’, *Peritia* 8 (1994) 170–79. A stone trial-piece from Killaloe, bearing Urnes style ornament, demonstrates that skilled craft activity was also taking place around this time, see Uaininn O’Meadhra, *Early Christian, Viking and Romanesque art motif-pieces from Ireland*, 2 vols (Stockholm 1979–1987) i, 24, 85–87 (cat. 114); ii, 60–61.

¹⁰ Anthony Candon, ‘Muirchertach Ua Briain, politics, and naval activity in the Irish Sea, 1075 to 1119’, in Gearóid Mac Niocaill & Patrick F. Wallace (eds), *Keimelia: studies in medieval archaeology and history in memory of Tom Delaney* (Galway 1988) 397–415; Seán Duffy, ‘“The western world’s tower of honour and dignity”: the career of Muirchertach Ua Briain in context’, in Damian Bracken & Dagmar Ó Riain-Raedel (eds), *Ireland and Europe in the twelfth century: reform and renewal* (Dublin 2006) 36–73.

¹¹ AFM s.a. 1119; Misc. Irish Annals, s.a. 1119.

¹² Rosemary Power, ‘Magnus Barelegs’ expeditions to the West’, *Scottish Historical Review* 65/2 (Oct 1986) 107–32; Power, ‘The death of Magnus Barelegs’, *Scottish Historical Review* 73/2 (Oct 1994) 216–23.

*A hosting of the men of Ireland to Ath-cliath [Dublin], to oppose Maghnus and the foreigners of Lochlann, who had come to plunder Ireland; but they made peace for one year with the men of Ireland; and Muircheartach gave his daughter to Sichraídh, son of Maghnus, and gave him many jewels and gifts.*¹³

The early thirteenth-century *Heimskringla* saga provides more information, stating that Magnús and his forces when campaigning over-wintered with Muirchertach in Ireland in 1102.

*King Magnús dwelt in Connaught with King Mýrjartak [Muirchertach], putting his men to the defence of the land he had won. But when spring came the kings with their army marched west to Ulster and there had many battles and subdued the land, winning the greater part of Ulster. Thereupon Mýrjartak returned to Connaught.*¹⁴

The Irish geographical locations are somewhat confused in the saga and it gives the location of over-wintering as Connacht, as it was thought, mistakenly, that Muirchertach was king of Connacht.¹⁵ Thus, one should read Munster for Connacht and so the place of over-wintering is likely to have been in the Limerick/Killaloe area, Muirchertach's home and power-base. One of Magnús Barelegs' barons, who accompanied him on his campaign to Ireland, was Thorgrím Furcap from the Upplands in Norway. It was Thorgrím with his men who, according to the *Heimskringla*, abandoned Magnús and fled when they were under attack in Ulaid, an attack that resulted in the king's death.¹⁶

It seems most likely that Thorgrím Furcap was in Killaloe in the winter of 1102/1103. There is further evidence to support the idea that this cross was erected by a Norwegian and that is its form. While the cross fragment is wholly unique in Ireland, it bears a striking similarity to Norwegian high crosses dating from the eleventh century and later, some of which carry runic inscriptions on their principal faces, such as that at Stavanger.¹⁷ It is wholly conceivable that one of Magnús's barons, Thorgrím, had a cross erected at Killaloe during their over-wintering with Muirchertach in 1102/1103, which accords with the tentative date for the cross proposed by runeologists. Thus, over a century after its first publication, we have a likely explanation as to why this unusual cross with an Old Norse runic inscription was erected at Killaloe at the beginning of the twelfth century.

¹³ AFM s.a. 1102.

¹⁴ Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Magnúss saga berfætts*, ch. 23, in Lee M. Hollander (ed & trans), *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway* (Austin 1992) 683–84.

¹⁵ See Power, 'Magnus Barelegs' expeditions', 122.

¹⁶ Sturluson, *Heimskringla: Magnúss saga berfætts*, ch. 25 (Hollander, *Heimskringla*, 686); Power, 'The death of Magnus Barelegs'.

¹⁷ Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, 'Cross monuments in north-western Europe', *Zeitschrift für Archäologie des Mittelalters* 37 (2009) 163–78; Fridtjov Birkeli, *Norske steinkors i tidlig middelalder; et bidrag til belysning av overgangen fra norrøn religion til kristendom* (Oslo 1973).



Figure 1: Killaloe cross fragment; face bearing runic inscription (photo: author)



Figure 2: Killaloe cross fragment; face bearing figure of Christ (photo: author)



Figure 3: Killaloe cross fragment; narrow side bearing ogham inscription (photo: author)