

II.—*Description of an ancient Irish Shrine, called the “Mias Tighearnain.”*  
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THE great interest attached to ancient Irish shrines, and a desire to record the history and description of an exceedingly valuable piece of antiquity, have induced me to bring this curious relic before the Academy. It is an ancient shrine, from the barony of Tirawley, in the county of Mayo; and at present belongs to Annesley Knox, Esq., of Rappa, who has kindly lent it to me for this purpose. This unique species of shrine consists of a circular disk, or plate of copper, slightly *dished* or hollowed, about one-eighth of an inch thick, and thirty-four inches in circumference, and ornamented with a silver cross on the front, or concave side, as represented in the annexed engraving (fig. 1). Upon a close examination it is found to consist of four thin plates of copper, riveted together; and from the worn appearance which the two central plates exhibit at a part where, the shrine having sustained some injury, they have been uncovered, it would seem as if they had been the original portion, and that the present outer plates, which are much thicker and newer, were subsequently added to preserve the former; to which there are many analogies in the Irish shrines still remaining in the kingdom, and, like several of them, this appears to have been repaired by a variety of artists. Each outer plate is divided into four parts, and these parts are covered at their joinings by the arms of the cross on each side. These crosses bespeak a very early period in Irish art, and resemble many of the earliest stone sculptured and sepulchral crosses which are found connected with some of the primitive monastic remains in Ireland, having a central circular piece, and the arms expanded at their extremities. The central piece of the silver cross was originally gilt, and formed a ring, in which it is likely a crystal, such as that in the Cross of Cong, was set;

and within this ring there is a small hollow cavity, covered over with a separate piece of copper, which contains within it some hard substance, believed (according to the popular traditions of the country) to be a relic of the Virgin. The carving on the circumference of this silver centre-piece resembles more closely the patterns on some of the gold ornaments of the pagan era than any that has yet been discovered on a Christian antiquity, and would of itself bring back the date of the manufacture of this shrine to a very remote period (see fig. 5). We do not find on this shrine any remains of the dog-figured ornament so common in the emblazonry of the early manuscripts, and so frequently found among the tracery of shrines and croziers as to be almost emblematical of early Irish art.

On the front of the shrine we find the settings, in silver, of two precious stones, but these appear to have been added in comparatively modern times, and were evidently offerings placed on it by those who believed they had derived benefit of some kind from it: a fragment of amber still remains in one of these, which is represented of the natural size at fig. 6. The edge of the shrine was bound with a narrow band of copper, which appears to have been renewed on several occasions, each addition exhibiting a different form of ornament, and at one period the whole was encircled with a rim of silver, only a very small portion of which now remains. Each arm of the cross was carved in a different manner, and on one of the arms may be traced the wivern, and also a portion of the head of a bird (fig. 3). On the reverse, or convex side, the cross is plain, and of copper, and is strengthened by an inner circular plate of the same material, which appears to have been added to give additional security to the whole; as seen in the annexed engraving (fig. 2).

There are but few of the original rivets now remaining, most of the fastenings being either of modern brass or iron. There can be little doubt that this is one of the oldest shrines in Ireland, but its use is involved in more obscurity than some of those at present in the museum of the Academy; and its local name, *Mias Tighearnáin*, "St. Tiernan's dish," does not throw much light on its history. This term is a corrupt translation of the original. *Mias*, though used occasionally to express a dish or platter, is rendered by the best Irish scholars an *altar*, or rather the *Paten*, and this is its true meaning in the oldest Irish manuscripts. The original part, whichever it is, may have been the altar-plate, or *Paten*, of St. Tiernan, on which the chalice and the sacred elements were placed, or any

other portion of the altar, which it was customary, even at that time (the date of St. Tiernan), to decorate with precious stones, gold, silver, brass, copper, &c. It has been conjectured to be part of an ancient pix, but this opinion has not been supported by either argument or analogy.

The local traditions are chiefly confined to its miraculous virtues, it having been for a great many years used by the country people to swear upon; they believing that it possessed the miraculous power of causing the face of any one who forswore upon it to turn round to the back,—in the same manner as the ancient crozier called the Gearr Bearaigh [Garr Barry] of the O'Hanleys, of Slieve Baune, in the east of the County of Roscommon, and other shrines and relics throughout the country, are supposed to do.

St. Tiernan, or St. Tighearnan, of Oireadh Locha Con, flourished about the end of the fifth century. His pedigree, as given in the Book of Lecan (fol. 46), runs thus: "Tighernan, son of Muinidh, son of Cairpri, son of Ambalgaidh, son of Fiachra, son of Eochaidh, monarch of Ireland;" so that he was of royal descent. He is also mentioned in the genealogy of the Hy-Fiachrach, by Duaid Mac Firbis (see O'Donovan's Genealogies, Tribes, and Customs of Hy-Fiachrach, published by the Irish Archæological Society, pp. 12, 103, 239). His church was at Oireadh, or Errew, as it is now called, a promontory that runs into Lough Con, in the barony of Tirawley, a locality crowded with monastic remains, and hallowed by the personal mission of St. Patrick. St. Tighearnain's festival day was annually celebrated here on the 8th of April, according to the Irish Calendar of Michael O'Clery. The original church has long since been destroyed, but the ruins of an abbey, of considerable extent, said to have been erected on its site by the Barretts, still remain. It is mentioned in the Annals of the Four Masters at the year 1404, when Thomas Barrett, Bishop of Elphin, a most distinguished scholar and divine, was interred at Arradh (Errew) of Lough Con; and again in 1413, where it is stated that Henry Barrett was taken prisoner in the church of Airech Locha Con by Robert, the chief of the Barretts, who bore the Irish name of Mac Wattin, who led him captive from the sanctuary; that the patron saint of the church appeared in a vision at night to Robert, requesting him to discharge the prisoner; that this was finally done, and that Mac Wattin bestowed a quarter of land on St. Tiernan for ever, as an atonement for having violated his sanctuary.

Archdall mentions in the *Monasticon*, p. 502, that "This friary was erected at the extreme end of Erew, a peninsula stretching from the barony of Tirawley into Lough-conn. St. Leogan was abbot of Lough-conn, and his feast is held on the 30th September. In the year 1463 an Act passed enabling the friars of the house of Erew, in Connaught, to receive the sum of five shillings annually out of the lands of Ballymoy."

It is also mentioned in inquisitions of the 27th of Elizabeth and the 3rd of James.

"A holy well, called Tobar Tighearnain" (writes Mr. O'Donovan, in a note to the poem of the Hy-Fiachrach, p. 239), "dedicated to this saint, is situated in the south of the townland of Killeen; and a relic which belonged to him, called Mias Tighearnain, i. e. St. Tighearnain's dish, was preserved for ages in the family of O'Flynn, who are said to have been the herenachs, or hereditary wardens, of Errew; but though they held it in the highest veneration, as a relic of the patron saint of their family, they were finally induced, in a hard summer, when provisions were very dear, to sell it to Mr. Knox, of Rappa Castle."

Besides the antiquarian interest attached to this curious relic, it is of much consequence in an historical point of view, inasmuch as it may yet be found referred to in the unpublished manuscripts; and therefore the Academy should carefully preserve and record all the circumstances connected with this shrine of the Mias Tighearnain.

Two very accurate drawings of it have been deposited in the pictorial catalogue of the museum of the Academy.

In the annexed plate, figure 4 shews the inferior arm of the cross, the natural size; and figure 7 is a diagram of a section of the shrine.