



A Small Group of Coins from Croagh Patrick

by Alan Dunlop, Member NSI-NB

Some years ago, a small group of coins was found on the path nearing the top of Croagh Patrick by a walker / pilgrim who, along with some friends, decided to make the climb in memory of his mother who had made the pilgrimage several times.

Nearing the final bend in the path he decided to stop and rest a while, and as he bent to sit down, he saw some unusual stones. They looked like thin pieces of slate sitting edge on amongst the other stones, but they were regular and circular in shape. His curiosity aroused he picked them out of the stones to discover that they had markings on them. With a little cleaning it became obvious that they were coins, very unusual but coins without doubt. He recognised them as being very old but had no idea how old. Taking them home with the intention of finding out more about them, as often happens, they were put aside and forgotten. When preparing to move house the coins once again came to light and he decided to find out more about them. He contacted the Numismatic Society of Ireland (Northern Branch) and took them along to a meeting to have them identified.

They were identified as an Edward III Pre- Treaty Halfgroat struck 1351-1361, an Edward III Florin Penny struck 1344-1351 (both minted in London), and an Edward I or II Penny struck in Canterbury no later than 1327. All the coins had a similar grey patina which indicated they were found in the same place. The Canterbury penny had considerable wear, but the Edward III coins were in relatively good condition but showing signs of wear; the date of deposition was probably late 1360's to late 1370's.


The coins themselves are fairly common types and are what might be expected in a small hoard of this nature, perhaps lost or left as private offering. What is unusual is where they were found. Croagh Patrick was well beyond the influence of the Anglo-Irish administration in Dublin and deep in the heart of Connacht which was controlled by Gaelic lords. No coins had been struck in Ireland for almost 100 years and the use of coinage was minimal in what was essentially a cattle economy. Coins would have been used to pay for food and lodgings along the way in the abbeys that were used by the pilgrims on their journey.

The Kings of England, Lords of Ireland, had all but ignored Ireland focusing their attentions on France and Scotland and none had visited since King John in 1210. The colonists of Anglo- Norman descent were left very much to their own devices and in many ways had been assimilated into the hostile environment by adopting Irish customs and manners.

A brief history of Croagh Patrick and what the situation in Ireland for the traveller to the mountain would have been like in the latter part of the 14th century might be of interest.

Croagh Patrick appears to have been a place of importance and pilgrimage from pre-historic times. There is evidence that the site was in use as long ago as 3000 BC. It is also very likely that it was used during the pre- Christian Celtic festival of Lughnasa.

Patrick is said to have fasted on the mountain for 40 days and nights and from there banished the serpents from Ireland.



The site is mentioned as a place of pilgrimage in the Book of Armagh in the 7th century and an attack in 1079 is recorded in the Annals of the Four Masters. The rigours of the vigil and penance were all too apparent and in 1113 30 pilgrims died on the mountain, struck by a bolt of lightning during a thunderstorm.

In 1216 the King of Connacht Cahal O'Connor founded an abbey at Ballintubber on the site of a church said to have been founded by St. Patrick. A 'pilgrim way' was established from Ballintubber and the route to the site on the mountain was considered '*termon*' or a place of sanctuary, this was strictly enforced. In 1225 Hugh O'Connor had the hands and feet cut off a man who had molested and robbed pilgrims.

Croagh Patrick was thought important enough for the ubiquitous Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) to take time off from redefining the Papacy, harassing Cathars in the Languedoc and excommunicating King John, to make a determination in a dispute between the Archbishops of Armagh and Tuam over jurisdiction of the site.


Unlike St. Patrick's Purgatory at Lough Derg, there are no reports or descriptions surviving from foreign pilgrims to Croagh Patrick. It would seem that Croagh Patrick was very much a place of prayer and penance for the inhabitants of Ireland, both Gaelic and Anglo-Norman. Unlike most other places of pilgrimage in Western Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries a pilgrimage to Croagh Patrick was not dependent on relics and candles to gain absolution. It was a personal journey of absolute faith of an ascetic nature relating back to the very earliest Christian traditions.

Ireland in the 14th century was a place of two very different cultures. In the east, along the coast from Waterford to Carrickfergus the influence of the Normans and the colonists had taken root. During the 200 years since their arrival the establishment and spread of towns and the influx of settlers had completely altered the demographics in the country. In the north and west the Gaelic clans still held sway with the exceptions of Limerick and Galway. There were two codes of law, Brehon and English, two languages and two very different life styles - one urban supported mainly by arable farming and the other pastoral and partially nomadic. Life was extremely difficult at all levels of society, although to a lesser extent at the very top. Each person knew their place in that society: workers, warriors and those who prayed.

The early part of the 14th century had seen the ravages of the Bruce invasions with the chaos and privations caused throughout the country. This was followed by a series of famines caused by extremely wet summers and harvest failures. These combined with huge losses of livestock through illness and starvation made life more difficult. On top of this the arrival of the 'Black Death' in 1348 produced even more misery. The plague mostly affected the towns and abbeys - up to half the population perished. It also killed many, although fewer in proportion, throughout the rural and the Gaelic areas.

The political unrest and rebellions in the reigns of Henry III and Edward II, coupled with the focus of Edward I and Edward III on their ambitions in France and Scotland, meant that they had not paid full attention to the enforcement of their rule in Ireland.

By the middle of the century the government of the country was in the hands of a comparatively small number of powerful Norman families and some Irish chieftains who had acknowledged their suzerainty to The King of England. In this situation, with a lack of direction and little or no financial or military support from England they came under pressure. The population in many areas was so depleted by the deprivations that the only way for the colonists to have the land worked was to rent to Irish tenants. To protect their estates they frequently had to depend on alliances with Gaelic Lords



siding with them in the almost continual feuds caused by the Gaelic tradition of inheritance, where any member of a dead Chief's family was entitled to the leadership of the clan if he could gain the most support. This coupled with the Norman primogeniture system of inheritance and the fact that many Anglo-Norman lords failed to leave male heirs frequently led to marriage alliances. In time they often adopted Irish customs and dress, as well as language. To quote they became 'more Irish than the Irish themselves'.

On top of this the 'degenerate English' that is many of the junior branches of the English families became in effect independent war lords in the manner of the Gaelic Chieftains. In 1341 the Irish Parliament complained to Edward III that the men he sent to govern them had little knowledge of Ireland and were of little use in controlling the general lawlessness without financial support.

It was not until 1361 that Edward III, because of his success in France and the signing of the Treaty of Brétigny / Calais, felt able to commit himself to the task in Ireland.

He despatched his second son Lionel, Duke of Clarence, who through his marriage to Elizabeth de Burgh was *jure uxoris* Earl of Ulster and Lord of Connacht, to Ireland as his Lieutenant. He provided him with finance and a large army. Included in the army were over 60 great lords who held lands in Ireland and had been threatened with confiscation of their lands if they had refused to go.

Lionel then established a regal court in Dublin and set about trying to wrest back control. Some of the leading Gaelic Lords had submitted to him, including O'Neill of Tyrone and O'Brien of Thomond, but the costs were enormous. After five years his efforts had come to nought. He returned to England to raise more money to be told by his father Edward III that according to his information Ireland was 'sunk in the greatest wretchedness'.

In 1366 Lionel called a Parliament in Kilkenny where he introduced 'The Statute of Kilkenny'. This banned marriage between English and Irish, banned the English from speaking Irish, dressing in the Irish fashion, naming themselves in the Irish manner and a host of other prohibitions. This was easy to legislate for, not so easy to enforce.

Elizabeth, Lionel's wife, had died in 1363 and in 1368 he travelled to Milan where he married Violante Visconti, daughter of The Lord of Pavia. He died in mysterious circumstances in Italy a few months afterwards.

Conditions in Ireland gradually deteriorated as the focus of Edward III returned once again to France.

This was the Ireland our pilgrim would have known - wasted by famine and war, a very difficult and dangerous place to be. To undertake such a journey to a mountain in Connacht on the fringe of the known world would have required a special type of person with an unflinching faith.

What would have helped our pilgrim was that in the Middle Ages people, no matter where they were from or what social strata they were in, respected the pilgrim and the Pilgrim Ways. With a network of abbeys to give shelter and support it was, even in this remote part of Europe, possible to complete the journey.



Edward I/II Penny of Canterbury Type 15 (?)

Obv. + EDW (R AN)GL DNS hYB

Rev. CIVI / TAS / CAN / TOR



Edward III

Penny of London

3rd Florin Coinage

1344-51

Obv. + EDWA . R . AnGL . DnS . hYB (annulet stops)

Rev. CIVI / TAS / LOn / DON



Edward III

Halfgroat of London

Pre-Treaty Series 'G'

1352-1353

Obv. + ED(WARDVS) REX ANGLI .Z. FRAN

Rev. (+ POS / VI DEV. / ADIVT / OREM (annulet stop)

LON / DON / CIVI / TAS (unbarred 'N's)

The finder indicated that he intended to present the coins to the museum near Croagh Patrick.



Further Reading

1. Fiona Rose McNally, "The Evolution of Pilgrimage Practice in Early Modern Ireland," Thesis for the Degree of MLit, Department of History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Feb. 2012.
2. "The Journey of Viscount Ramon de Perellós to Saint Patrick's Purgatory," Celt Corpus of Electronic Texts, University College Cork.
3. Jonathan Bardon, *History of Ireland in 250 Episodes*, Gill & McMillan, 2008.
4. Robin Frame, *Colonial Ireland 1169-1369*, Forecourts Press, 2012, 220pp.