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Author(s): Vanessa Houssaye

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‘Image of Lust’?¹

The Origin and Function of the Castletown Mouth-Puller

BY VANESSA HOUSSAYE

INTRODUCTION

‘Against whom do ye make a wide mouth ...?’² Initially, this biblical question certainly seems an appropriate one to level at the carved stone mouth-puller which is located on the periphery of the town of Dundalk, at Castletown.³ Indeed, in relation to the Castletown mouth-puller, this quotation poses two crucially important questions of origin and function that have hitherto been neglected in archaeological and historical research. But before any current critical analysis of this mouth-puller can be attempted it is necessary to consider the research that has already been completed on the subject.

The earliest analysis of the Castletown mouth-puller occurred in 1925 when H.C. Lawlor briefly included it in his study of medieval grotesque carvings, which had previously been incorrectly labelled as sheela-na-gigs.⁴ Once again, in 1941, the mouth-puller was the subject of an interesting but regrettably brief treatment by Oliver Davies which consisted of just eleven lines of discussion.⁵ In the same year Davies made an even sparser reference to the carving in a study of the parish churches of Co Louth, stating that: ‘Into a modern retaining wall beside the castle is built an interesting grotesque head, probably of the sixteenth century’.⁶ It was not until 1977 that the most comprehensive and lengthy discussion of the mouth-puller to date was undertaken by Anthony Weir. This analysis offered a comparative study of the mouth-puller with a small carving on the east face of Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice and also with an ithyphallic anal-exhibitionist figure which was then on display in the Millmount Museum in Drogheda.⁷

Presumably as a follow-up to this study, the Castletown mouth-puller was subsequently included in the 1986 joint work of Weir and James Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches*. Here it is illustrated in the ninth chapter entitled ‘Rude Gestures and Ruder Postures’, although it is not discussed in any great detail.⁸ Finally, the most recent description of the mouth-puller was published in the *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*.⁹

It is the aim of this paper to make a critical analysis of the medieval mouth-puller at Castletown by combining the research of the aforementioned scholars with the most recent research of the present author. This investigation will also adopt an interdisciplinary approach to allow for the inclusion of any historical sources or evidence which may supplement and strengthen the archaeo-

1 A. Weir and J. Jerman, *Images of Lust: Sexual Carvings on Medieval Churches* (London, 1986), cover page.

2 Isaiah, chap. 57, verse 4; Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, pp 100 and 102.

3 See Plate 1.

4 H.C. Lawlor, ‘Grotesque carvings improperly called Sheela-na-gigs’, *Irish Naturalists’ Journal*, i, (1925-7), pp 182-5.

5 O. Davies, ‘Drakestown Graveyard, Co. Meath’, *J.R.S.A.I.*, lxxi, (1941), p. 66.

6 O. Davies, ‘Old Churches in County Louth’, *C.L.A.J.*, x, 1, (1941), p. 15.

7 A. Weir, ‘Three Carved Figures in County Louth’, *C.L.A.H.J.*, xix, 1, (1977), pp 67-73.

8 Weir and Jerman, *Images of Lust*, p. 106.

9 V.M. Buckley and P.D. Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* (Dublin, 1991), p. 362.



Plate 1. Mouth-puller at St Louis Convent, Castletown, Dundalk.

Photo: Jimmy Green.

logical arguments. It is hoped to make a critical examination of the origin and function of the Castletown mouth-puller mainly through a systematic analysis of its salient physical features, its original date and place of construction, and finally, its iconographic symbolism.

DESCRIPTION

The Castletown mouth-puller is currently set into a modern wall which is located to the south of an impressive late fifteenth-century tower house, Bellew's Castle. The tower house itself has, since the 1940s, been incorporated into the grounds of a St Louis convent and secondary school. Buckley and Sweetman, having surveyed the site for inclusion in the *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, objectively concluded that the Castletown carving was:

a very good example of a mouth-puller with the typical bulging eyes, exposed teeth and exaggerated wrinkles all over the face and head. The hands, like the Carntown example, come from behind the head and have the thumbs pointing upwards. All the other fingers, as with the Carntown one, are inserted in the mouth rather than merely the forefinger as in the French examples.¹⁰

However, Weir, writing some fourteen years before the survey was published, offered a rather more energetic description of the mouth-puller and surmised that it was:

a very striking and well-carved grotesque, consisting of a head with almond-shaped, lidded eyes, deep grooves representing wrinkles, and an enormous tooth-filled mouth pulled into a baleful grin by hands which appear from either side of the head ... It is fairly small, some 30cms high, well-preserved, and carved with considerable vigour and panache.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

¹¹ Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 68.

What is undeniably apparent from a perusal of these two descriptions, and indeed from a study of the carving itself, is that there are three main salient features which are of chronological importance here; the protruding eyes, the distinctive wrinkles and the fingers inserted into the oversized mouth to reveal the teeth.¹²

DATING

In any critical analysis of the origin and function of a medieval carving of this type, the date of construction is of paramount importance to the study. The Castletown mouth-puller has clearly been uprooted from its original architectural environment, therefore negating the possibility of any comparative archaeological study with the medieval monument that it was originally intended to adorn.

At first glance, the Castletown carving in its present physical form would certainly appear to be of Romanesque origin, and indeed, in his study of the carving, Weir compared it to several French Romanesque examples,¹³ (a comparison which was to later influence Buckley and Sweetman).¹⁴ This would suggest a very early date of origin for the carving and indeed one which might even pre-date the foundation of the Anglo-Norman settlement itself at Castletown. Considering the fact that it is probable that there was no other significant settlement at Castletown to warrant the production of such a carving before the arrival of Anglo-Normans in the 1180s, this earlier date of origin seems a difficult one to reconcile with the archaeological development of Castletown in the Middle Ages. Of course, one other alternative to this premise is that the mouth-puller does not in fact owe its origins to the Castletown area at all and that at some stage in the later medieval development of the community it was removed from a completely different and chronologically earlier settlement and relocated in Castletown. While this is not a wholly impossible hypothesis, there are some other alternative theories of place and date of origin which deserve a more thorough investigation.

Firstly, while the Castletown mouth-puller is undeniably carved in a twelfth-century form, it is also possible that it does not date to the 1100s but is in fact a later copy of a Romanesque style of carving.¹⁵ Encouragingly, the available archaeological and historical evidence seem to corroborate this proposition. For example, the Castletown mouth-puller is carved from limestone. This point, although perhaps seeming initially innocuous, is of crucial importance in attempting to pin-point an accurate chronology for the carving. It is notable that the darker coloured limestone, from which the Castletown mouth-puller is clearly fashioned, was more commonly used in carvings and architecture of the fifteenth century.¹⁶

This later date of origin makes much more sense chronologically than the earlier twelfth-century date, as it would indicate that the mouth-puller originated in Castletown with the fifteenth-century architectural redevelopments of the Bellew family, which not only resulted in the renovation of the parish church, but also in the construction of two later fifteenth-century tower houses.¹⁷ If this is the case, then Weir was correct in his assumption that if the mouth-puller origi-

12 In addition to these publications, a photograph of the Castletown carving was included by Sweetman on p. 143 of *Medieval Castles of Ireland* (Cork, 1999). It was also featured on the front cover of *Archaeology Ireland*, xi, 3, (1997).

13 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', pp 67-73.

14 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 362.

15 R.A. Stalley, pers. comm (May 2005).

16 P.D. Sweetman, 'Dating Irish Castles', *Archaeology Ireland*, 6, 4, (Winter, 1992), p. 8.

17 For an illustration of both tower houses see H.G. Tempest, 'A Seventeenth-century Map of Dundalk and Castletown', *C.L.A.J.*, xiv, 1, (1957), pp 35-6. Incidentally, the first fifteenth-century tower house to be erected at Castletown and also the parish church which was renovated in the same period are both constructed from limestone.

nated from a tower house then it was unlikely to be of a much earlier date than 1475,¹⁸ as the documentary sources confirm that a grant was made to Richard Bellew in 1472 for the construction of the first tower house at Castletown:¹⁹

... Richard Bellew ... intends with the grace of God and the support of the inhabitants of the County Louth to ... build a tower or peel at the Castleton by Dundalk ... which will be a singular refuge and help to all the King's faithful liege people there inhabiting, and a resistance and defence against Irish enemies setting before them to destroy the aforesaid county.²⁰

However, although the idea of the mouth-puller having originated with the parish church at Castletown could certainly point to an earlier date of origin than 1475, it would seem most likely to be of an earlier fifteenth-century date and not in fact a twelfth-century Romanesque date of origin as inferred by Weir.

Similarly, the type of workmanship evident in the carving of the Castletown mouth-puller would seem to favour a fifteenth-century origin rather than an earlier Romanesque date. To the naked eye, the salient facial features of this mouth-puller have been very deeply cut into the stone and the carving as a whole is in fact quite crude in its design. This is in strong contrast to the accepted form of twelfth-century Romanesque carvings which were distinguished by being very finely carved into the stone, so much so in fact that the observer could almost nearly still envisage the original block of uncarved stone. In particular, the deeply-cut and pierced almond-shaped protruding eyes of this mouth-puller are extremely significant, as are the deeply-grooved wrinkles which characterise the facial expression. Although, as observed by Roger Stalley, the fact that there are some twelfth-century precedents for this type of carving at Christchurch cathedral, Dublin, does not automatically signify that the Castletown mouth-puller is an original twelfth-century example.²¹ Indeed the available archaeological and historical evidence strongly indicate that it is more likely to have been a fifteenth-century example which was simply carved in the same twelfth-century style as those carvings at Christchurch cathedral.

DISTRIBUTION

As previously mentioned, any attempts to discover the true date of origin of the Castletown mouth-puller would greatly benefit from the knowledge of its original location. At this juncture, and presuming that the stone head is indeed of fifteenth-century origin, it would seem feasible that the carving was originally intended to be displayed on either one of the two tower houses or indeed upon the newly-refurbished church at Castletown. In this regard, Weir has speculated that it is really only in Ireland that exhibitionist figures appear to embellish castles, both Gaelic-Irish and Anglo-Norman.²² However, it is difficult to determine which was the more plausible original venue for the display of the Castletown carving, as in Co Louth there are precedents for comparable stone heads having been erected both on later medieval tower houses and also on later medieval parish churches. In the case of the Castletown mouth-puller, one possible theory of its origin is that the

18 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 69.

19 For a more detailed discussion of this grant and also the subsequent grant of 1479 intended for the building of a second tower house at Castletown see H.G. Tempest, 'Bellew's Castle, Castletown-Bellew, or Castletown Castle, Dundalk', *C.L.A.J.*, x, 3, (1943), pp 184-5.

20 Henry F. Berry (ed.), *Statute Rolls of the Parliament of Ireland, first to the twelfth years of the reign of King Edward the Fourth* (Dublin, 1914), pp 65 and 743; Tempest, 'Bellew's Castle', p. 184; C. McNeill, 'Castletown and Roche', *C.L.A.J.*, vi, 1, (1925), p. 1; H. O'Sullivan, 'The Landed Gentry of the County of Louth in the Age of the Tudors', *C.L.A.H.J.*, xxii, 1, (1989), p. 74.

21 Stalley, pers. comm (May 2005).

22 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 72.

carving was salvaged from the second tower house at Castletown following its demise at an unknown date, and probably re-used on another building in the interim before it eventually found its way to the modern wall at the St Louis convent and school.

To date, no comprehensive survey of all of the known medieval stone heads of Co Louth has been conducted. Only twelve carvings have been included in the *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* in the section entitled 'Medieval stone heads', and, according to Buckley and Sweetman, all of these appear to date to the late medieval period. They also state that all of these examples, including the Castletown mouth-puller, probably date to the sixteenth century, although regrettably they do not elaborate upon any archaeological or historical evidence which may have led them to arrive at that assumption.²³ Along with the Castletown carving there are two stone heads listed at Carntown tower house which were used as corbels;²⁴ at Bawn (Mansfieldstown) church there are seven which were used on the windows as hood moulding stoppers;²⁵ one survives in the grounds of Beltichburne House, its original function is unclear,²⁶ and finally, there is one surviving carving set into the outside of the south wall of Killincoole tower house.²⁷

In addition to these twelve examples, there are a further two stone heads surviving on the gate tower at Mellifont Abbey, although Buckley and Sweetman have not listed them separately in the section specifically detailing the Louth stone heads, as they state that the Mellifont examples are not of the same type as the other twelve.²⁸ However, as far back as 1897 additional stone heads at Mellifont were recorded in a description of the windows of the chapter house: 'The internal pilasters, which form an architrave for the northern window, spring from grotesque heads, elaborately carved, and which appear as pressed down by the superincumbent weight'.²⁹ These carvings were discussed much more recently by Stalley, who described them as 'monster heads'³⁰ and published a photograph of one example.

As previously mentioned, the Mellifont examples were not included in the 'Medieval stone heads' part of the *Survey* because they were not considered to be of the same genre as the other twelve carvings. In support of this categorisation Buckley and Sweetman state that a feature common to all of the twelve heads is their bulging eyes.³¹ However, even a brief examination of the those examples which are grouped together in the survey as probable sixteenth-century carvings would seem to indicate that none of them is of the same architectural or chronological type, or even in fact that they all share the exact same type of craftsmanship in the carving of the eyes.³²

In addition to these fourteen stone heads there are several other known medieval carvings of this variety which have survived to the present day in Co Louth and which are also relevant to a discussion of the origins of the Castletown mouth-puller. The first of these carvings is also located at Castletown. In his detailed survey of Bellew's Castle and the adjoining eighteenth-century house, H.G. Tempest made reference to 'a very small carved head projecting from the angle of a coign

23 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 361.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 362.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 361.

26 *Ibid.*, pp 361-2.

27 *Ibid.*, pp 362-3.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 361; the remains at Mellifont are detailed on pp 237-40.

29 Fr. Joachim Hennessy, *Mellifont Abbey, Co. Louth: Its Ruins and Associations. A Guide and Popular History* (Dublin, 1897), p. 17.

30 R.A. Stalley, 'Mellifont Abbey: A Study of its Architectural History', *PRIA*, Vol. 80, Section C, No. 14, (1980), p. 302. The photograph is Plate VIa.

31 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 361.

32 Stalley, pers. comm (May 2005).

stone at the S.E. corner of the S.E. tower just below the level of the ogee window'.³³ Although the existence and position of this stone head is indicated in an elevation and section of Bellew's Castle which was published in the *Survey*,³⁴ it is not mentioned by Buckley and Sweetman in the discussion of the tower house itself³⁵ and has also been omitted from the 'Medieval stone heads' section.

Furthermore, in the portion of the *Survey* which elucidates the remains of the medieval churches of Louth there is a fleeting reference to two stone heads located at St. Nicholas's church, Dundalk: 'The E window of the chancel in the present structure has a drip moulding terminating in two very badly weathered heads'.³⁶ However, they are not included in the 'Medieval stone heads' section of the *Survey*, and, in common with the second Castletown carving, there is no explanation offered for this omission. One of these heads was photographed by Davies for his survey of the churches of the barony of Upper Dundalk, and he described it as a 'terminal head on east window'.³⁷ In his deliberation on the medieval features of the church he also concluded that this broken projecting head 'certainly does not belong to the east window, and was probably a terminal of the fourteenth or fifteenth century'.³⁸ Over a decade later Tempest also noted the presence of the two stone heads at St Nicholas's church when he commented that: 'If you look at the outside of the east window you will see, round the top, a drip-moulding and small carved heads'.³⁹ It is therefore quite surprising that no mention of either of these two heads was made by H.G. Leask when he was discussing the medieval features of the windows of St Nicholas's church just five years later in 1960.⁴⁰

In the case of the stone heads which are extant at Louth Abbey, two are mentioned briefly by Buckley and Sweetman in their description of the medieval church,⁴¹ but again they are not included in the 'Medieval stone heads' section of the *Survey*. However, Peter Harbison discussed these heads in considerable detail in his article on Louth Abbey⁴² and published photographs of them: 'Plate 1A. Capital on east jamb of window SW 6'⁴³ and 'Plate 2B. Head as label-stop on interior moulding of large arch in the east wall'.⁴⁴

In addition to these two heads there are two more carvings at Louth Abbey which warrant inclusion in this study. One of these carvings was published by Harbison: 'Plate 3b. Pilaster-quoin below end of coping stones with head (of Christ?) in niche at south-east exterior corner of church'.⁴⁵ This last example along with another nearby medieval stone head were described by Davies in 1942 as 'flatly carved heads' which he dated to the sixteenth century.⁴⁶ However, Harbison queried this date of origin and concluded that there was no reason why these examples were not contemporary with the first two stone heads, which he dated to the late thirteenth or early

33 Tempest, 'Bellew's Castle', p. 189.

34 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 310.

35 *Ibid.*, pp 308-10.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

37 Davies, 'Old Churches in County Louth', photograph no. 15, facing p. 16.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

39 H.G. Tempest, *Notes on the Parish Church of St. Nicholas Dundalk* (Dundalk, 1955), p. 14.

40 H.G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings, Vol. III, Medieval Gothic: The Last Phases*, (Dundalk, 1960), p. 181.

41 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 254.

42 Peter Harbison, 'New Light on St. Mary's "Abbey", Louth', *C.L.A.H.J.*, xviii, 1, (1973), pp 39-42.

43 *Ibid.*, Plate 1A, facing p. 40.

44 *Ibid.*, Plate 2B, second page after p. 40.

45 *Ibid.*, Plate 3B, third page after p. 40. For a discussion on the form and dating of these carvings see pp 39-40 and p. 42.

46 O. Davies, 'Old Churches in County Louth: Barony of Louth', *C.L.A.J.*, x, 2, (1942), p. 104.

fourteenth century,⁴⁷ and also with the main body of the church itself which probably dates to the first quarter of the fourteenth century.⁴⁸ At Carlingford there are also three medieval stone heads which were published after the completion of the *Survey*. All three are included in the *Medieval Town Trail of Carlingford*,⁴⁹ while one is illustrated in *Carlingford Town: An Antiquarian's Guide*.⁵⁰

Finally, as well as those sites which were omitted from the *Survey* but which were published in other sources, there are three remaining sites which have never been published at all. The first of these is located at Glaspistol near Clogherhead where there are a number of heads built into a boundary wall. The second site is at Lisrenny near Tallanstown where a row of single-storey buildings now used as kennels for the Louth Hounds has a head positioned over each doorway. The third of these sites is located at Clonmore where there is a head built into the wall surrounding the medieval church and graveyard, and where the recent discovery of two pieces of a high cross may add to its significance.

Overall, out of a total of twelve known sites of medieval stone heads in Co Louth,⁵¹ five sites were either medieval churches or monasteries, with a total of eighteen carvings between them,⁵² while a further three sites were medieval tower houses with a total of five heads between them.⁵³ The remaining examples cannot be classified in either of these categories and are located at Beltichburne, Carlingford, Glaspistol, and Lisrenny. Even with these statistics, however, it is still impossible to state with certainty whether the Castletown mouth-puller was originally associated with a medieval church or a medieval tower house. The only other mouth-pulling example in Louth is also tantalisingly associated with a tower house at Carntown. Interestingly, this is also the only one of the Louth examples to which any kind of an architectural comparison can be drawn with the Castletown carving, albeit perhaps a tenuous one, as the two mouth-pullers were certainly not crafted in an exactly identical style.

Both of the stone heads at Carntown Castle were originally used as corbels to carry wooden beams for the first floor of the structure.⁵⁴ The face of the mouth-puller is characterised by numerous groovings which could represent hair, or alternatively wrinkles, although these markings do not seem to be as deeply carved as the wrinkles/hair on the Castletown carving. Small arms extend from the back of the head, and, most remarkably, all of the fingers, except for the thumb, which is upright, are used to pull the mouth wide open and expose the teeth, in an almost identical manner to that in which the Castletown mouth-puller reveals its teeth. The second stone head at Carntown Castle appears to represent the face of a woman with a cowl-like garment around it. Like the mouth-puller it does have quite similar protruding eyes, although here the similarities ostensibly appear to end. Disappointingly however, Carntown tower house itself is not thought by Buckley and Sweetman to have been erected much earlier than the seventeenth century, as documentary sources would indicate that it was first constructed and occupied by John Chivers, a supporter of James II.⁵⁵ Even so however, this does not preclude the possibility that the carving itself may have originated at an earlier date, perhaps on an earlier, unrecorded structure in the Carntown vicinity.⁵⁶

47 Harbison, 'New Light on St. Mary's "Abbey"', p. 42.

48 P. Mallon, P.F. Power, N. Ross and A.B. Swan, 'Gravestone inscriptions at St. Mary's "Abbey", Louth', *C.L.A.H.J.*, xix, 4, (1980), p. 297.

49 Carlingford Lough Heritage Trust, *Medieval Town Trail of Carlingford* (Carlingford, 1992).

50 Paul Gosling, *Carlingford Town: An Antiquarian's Guide* (Carlingford, 1992), pp 45-6.

51 Castletown, Carntown, Bawn, Beltichburne, Killincoole, Mellifont, St Nicholas's church, Dundalk, Louth Abbey, Carlingford, Glapistol, Lisrenny and Clonmore.

52 Bawn (7), Mellifont (4), Louth Abbey (4), St Nicholas's church, Dundalk (2), and Clonmore (1).

53 Castletown (2), Carntown (2), and Killincoole (1).

54 Buckley and Sweetman, *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*, p. 362.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 308; Sweetman, *Medieval Castles of Ireland*, pp 145-6.

56 T.B. Barry, pers. comm (March 2006).

Despite the apparent constructional similarities between the Castletown and Carntown mouth-pullers, it is interesting to note that in 1972 the Castletown carving was included in a *Preliminary Report on Monuments of Archaeological Interest in County Louth*, as a 'grotesque sculpture'.⁵⁷

Unfortunately, until a fully comprehensive national survey of all other comparable stone heads throughout the thirty-two counties is completed, it is impossible to accurately postulate upon the significance of the Castletown mouth-puller in a national context of distribution. However, since the publication of the *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* in 1991 it has become possible to examine the distribution pattern of the small number of extant medieval carvings which punctuate the archaeological landscape of Louth. It has also now become possible to make a stricter regional comparison of the Castletown carving with a more fine-tuned contemporary collection of neighbouring carvings than those to which Weir had access to and chose to compare in 1977.

In his 1977 comparison of three Louth carvings (the Castletown mouth-puller, the carving on Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice and the Drogheda exhibitionist), Weir himself admitted that his chosen examples appeared to have very little in common and even commented that they were likely to have greatly differed in function.⁵⁸ In addition to this it seems reasonable to concur that these three figures also greatly differed in origin, chronology and appearance, and in this regard it would seem wise to err on the side of caution before labelling all three under the blanket term of 'exhibitionist',⁵⁹ and this is particularly the case with the Castletown mouth-puller. However, it is certainly worth reflecting upon Weir's deduction that distribution of these exhibitionist figures was largely concentrated in vicinities of violent discord for the duration of the medieval period, he cites for example: Yorkshire, the Welsh borders, and most interestingly a broad band from Dundalk Bay to the Shannon Estuary. He further concludes that in Ireland these 'exhibitionist' figures were notable by their absence from the more politically tranquil areas of the country that were not infiltrated by the Anglo-Normans until later on in the colonisation process.⁶⁰

While there is no definitive proof that the political climate of the time had any bearing at all upon the distribution of such carvings, it is worth pondering the fact that from the outset, the incursion into the north Louth area was pursued belligerently and violently, ultimately resulting in enduring political instability in the border areas.⁶¹ This instability was also apparent in the Castletown area, as in 1472, the same year in which a parliamentary grant of £10 was made to Richard Bellew to construct the first tower house at Castletown, the *Statute Rolls* had also recorded that: '... the county of Louth and the lieges of our lord the King dwelling therein ... are destroyed and wasted by Irish enemies and English rebels of our lord the King, for want of castles and towers ...'.

As previously indicated, it is difficult to place the Castletown mouth-puller into any accurate national trend of distribution with strict contemporary carvings, or indeed into any coherent pattern of distribution either throughout the British Isles or indeed in a Western European context. Even just a physical comparison of the Castletown mouth-puller with some French Romanesque examples poses difficulties; according to Weir, most French mouth-pullers insert their forefingers into their mouth.⁶² The Castletown figure, however, inserts all four fingers into the mouth, indicating that they are not of the same architectural type or origin. Once again the evidence appears to point towards a fifteenth-century date of origin for the Castletown example. Although Weir has drawn a comparison with a number of these French Romanesque examples, as well as with some

57 A. Walsh, *A Preliminary report on Monuments of Archaeological Interest in County Louth* (Dublin, 1972), p. 35.

58 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 67.

59 *Ibid.*, pp 67-73.

60 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

61 O'Sullivan, 'Landed Gentry', p. 67.

62 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 69.

other Irish Romanesque examples and offered a number of interesting general insights into the symbolism of the 'mouth-puller' it still becomes difficult to pin-point the exact function or symbolism of the Castletown mouth-puller in a precise fifteenth-century milieu.

FUNCTIONALITY

Although it can cogently be argued that the 'exhibitionist motif'⁶³ migrated from France through Britain before finally evolving in Ireland,⁶⁴ the question must be asked whether the Castletown mouth-puller can actually be defined by this blanket term of exhibitionist, or would a narrower architectural term of reference better serve the purpose, especially from a chronological point of view? In other words, was the primary function of the Castletown mouth-puller purely of an exhibitionist or indeed of a sexually exhibitionist nature? Or, alternatively, did it serve an altogether different function which has been obscured by a pre-occupation with its grotesque appearance and provocative gesturing. Of course, before attempting any such analysis of the symbolic or iconographic functionality of the Castletown mouth-puller, it would seem wise to first assess its physical and most basic functionality.

So, what primary physical function did this mouth-puller serve? For example, was it a functioning corbel head on one of the two Castletown tower houses, in a similar way to the stone heads which can still be viewed on the Carntown tower house? Or, was it perhaps initially employed to ornament St John's church at Castletown? As previously discussed, the carving was removed from its original medieval setting at an unknown date, only to be eventually incorporated into a modern wall. Regrettably, this has meant that the original medieval stone surround of the carving, which would be vital for discerning its original functionality, has been completely obscured here by the modern wall. Perhaps the only remaining way to solve this predicament would be to remove the carving and its stone surround from the wall for closer examination, and this is unfortunately not a viable option at the present time.

That this stone head did originally serve some practical architectural function is beyond question. However, a similar unembellished stone block would no doubt have equally served the constructional purpose just as well, so on a more iconographic level, what symbolic function did the Castletown mouth-puller afford, if indeed any? The first, and most obvious supposition which should be examined at this stage is the idea that the stone head, through the action of pulling open its mouth to expose its teeth, is sexually suggestive and representative of 'vagina dentata', thus rendering it as what Weir has termed a 'metaphorical "sheila-na-gig"' after the fashion of similar motifs which he has identified on a number of French Romanesque churches, where the portrayal of lust occurs frequently without genital display. Weir himself however admits that a 'metaphorical' sheila-na-gig would be a contradiction in terms, although he does assert that an apotropaic function similar to that of female exhibitionists was almost certainly intended for mouth-pullers.⁶⁵ Therefore, if the stone head under scrutiny at Castletown is to be presumed to date to the Romanesque period of Irish architecture then of course this would be a very valid comparison to make.

However, if the carving is alternatively considered to be of a fifteenth-century date, as the archaeological and historical evidence in this instance seems to purport, then certain problems of interpretation immediately arise with this elucidation of a sexually symbolic function for the Castletown mouth-puller. After all, just because in twelfth-century Romanesque France similar

63 Ibid., pp 67-73.

64 Helen Hickey, *Images of Stone* (Belfast, 1976), pp 62-3; Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 71; J. Andersen, *The Witch on the Wall: Medieval Erotic Sculpture in the British Isles* (Copenhagen, 1977).

65 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 68.

mouth-pulling figures may have been imbued with a sexual meaning by their creators does not mean that two to three centuries later on in Castletown a mouth-puller, carved and displayed in a completely different social and political environment, would have been intended to convey to the casual observer the exact same sexual connotations.⁶⁶ In 1941 Oliver Davies also questioned the validity of a sexual function for the Castletown mouth-puller and compared it to a possible fifteenth-century mouth-puller at Drakestown graveyard, Co Meath.⁶⁷

In any case, the stone mason who carved the Castletown figure, or indeed maybe the patron who commissioned it, may just have been following an architectural, or indeed an artistic trend, and it is probable that they would have had their own personal idea of what the mouth-puller symbolised. Account must also be made for the fact that just as today the symbolic meaning of any such carving is individually subjective and perhaps even prone to the predispositions of the spectator, in the medieval period, the iconographic symbolism of the Castletown carving may have been intended to evolve in the eye of the beholder.

Similarly, whilst original medieval Irish Romanesque carvings, such as those at Christchurch, can illustrate the way in which an alien culture was implanted in Ireland during the century after the invasion⁶⁸ so too perhaps can a fifteenth-century carving exemplify the way in which an Anglo-Irish patron was possibly seeking to immortalise his own importance at Castletown by emulating the celebrated architecture of a previous era and embellishing his tower house with an ornate mouth-puller.

On this note it seems only logical to surmise that it is probable that medieval motifs over time could become estranged from their original function and significance and indeed be subsequently adapted to new purposes, thus demonstrating a metamorphosis of meaning which is certainly not peculiar to the study of medieval stone carving. If the Castletown mouth-puller was originally placed on a tower house, then the iconographic possibilities are endless. For example it might be the case, as has been suggested by Weir, that such a carving would have been erected to declare the sexual purity of the castle's holders, and hence render it free of guilt for causing plague. Furthermore, in late medieval times plague and other misfortunes were construed as punishment for sin, especially the sins of sexuality.⁶⁹ From this point of view it is certainly noteworthy that from the 1420s to the 1450s the Anglo-Irish of Louth, under the leadership of Sir John Bellew of Castletown and Roche and his son Richard were engaged in an ongoing war with hostile Gaelic-Irish elements.⁷⁰ Alternatively however, if the mouth-puller was originally incorporated into the architecture of the medieval church at Castletown it may well have been intended to censure the sin of lust and promote chastity among the local congregation.⁷¹ In any case, any such theory is highly speculative and lacks concrete archaeological or historical proof.

CONCLUSION

'Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing'.⁷² This quotation unintentionally illustrates the fascination and confusion which surround the origin and, more particularly, the function of the medieval mouth-puller at Castletown. Accused by previous scholars of being alter-

66 Stalley, pers. comm (May 2005).

67 Davies, 'Drakestown graveyard', p. 66.

68 R.A. Stalley, 'The Medieval Sculpture of Christchurch Cathedral, Dublin', *Archaeologia*, cvi, (1979), p. 119.

69 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 72.

70 O'Sullivan, 'Landed Gentry', p. 74.

71 Weir, 'Three Carved Figures', p. 72.

72 Epistle of James, chapter 3, verse 10.

nately, grotesque, baleful, exaggerated, and sexually suggestive, the true original function of this carving, as intended by the mason who crafted it, or indeed by the patron who commissioned it can probably never be conclusively determined. What can be established however with a reasonable degree of certainty is that despite its somewhat misleading appearance, this mouth-puller is more likely to date from the late fifteenth century, rather than the twelfth century as has been previously suggested. It also must be borne in mind that the blanket term of 'exhibitionist' should only be used with extreme caution with regard to the Castletown carving as it is a term which obscures the individual architectural attributes of the mouth-puller and greatly over-simplifies its original function by supposing it to have been of a primarily sexual nature.

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