

Fermanagh

a story in **100** objects

One of the first objects is part of a beautifully stone carved window, currently on display at Enniskillen Castle Museums, which points to the connections between medieval Fermanagh, Spain and France. The object has been researched by former curator of Fermanagh County Museum, Helen Lanigan Wood who uncovers the fascinating story of the stone's hidden significance.

What a little stone can tell us - By Helen Lanigan Wood



Photograph caption: A carved stone from Iniskeen graveyard near Enniskillen showing the scallop shell, symbol of St James and an angel standing in the prow of a boat. Photographed by Tony Corey and reproduced courtesy of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Legend about St James of Compostela depicted on 15th century Fermanagh window

A Gothic window from a small medieval parish church near Enniskillen connects Fermanagh to the celebrated pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella in northern Spain.

Built on Iniskeen island in Upper Lough Erne, the church is long gone and only two fragments of the twin-light window survive. One of these is decorated with a scallop shell, symbol of the apostle and martyr St James the Greater, who was put to death in 44 AD by order of Herod Agrippa I, grandson of Herod the Great. Beside the shell is a carving of a curly-headed angel (identified by large wings) standing in the prow of a boat. This almost certainly refers to the legend of St James' body guarded by an angel or angels and accompanied by two disciples as it was transported miraculously in a stone boat from Judea to Galicia in Spain and later to the site of what is now the city of Santiago de Compostela.

The same legend on 15th century altarpiece at Santiago Cathedral

This legend was also depicted on an English alabaster altarpiece donated in 1456 AD to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela and illustrating scenes from the life of St James. One of its five panels shows the angel standing in front of the central mast and, unlike the Iniskeen carving, also includes the two disciples and the body of St James displayed full-length in the boat. A document of 1456 AD indicates that Father John Goodyear, of Chale church in the diocese of Winchester on the Isle of Wight, brought this altarpiece with him to Santiago de Compostela to present to the Cathedral. A condition of the donation was that the altarpiece should never be removed from the church and remarkably, it still survives there after more than 550 years, providing evidence that this legend was current in England and Spain in the middle of the 15th century.

Visit of Maguire Chieftain to Santiago de Compostela in 15th century

Evidence from the Annals of Ulster suggests that the Iniskeen window may relate in some way to the pilgrimage that the Fermanagh Chieftain Thomas Óg Maguire made in 1450 AD to Santiago de Compostela and to Rome. That this pilgrimage was viewed as highly significant at the time is reflected in the way it is referred to in the Annals of Ulster. The year 1450 AD was a special Holy Year in Rome – these holy years occurred there every twenty five years – during which pilgrims to the city received a special indulgence which granted them remission of all punishment due for their sins. The annals record that Maguire set off 'a month before Lamas' to go to Rome, in 'a year of the Indulgences'. 'And mournful were the learned companies and poets and clerics of Ireland after him' because of the king's generous support of poetry, scholarship and the Church. The same annals for the following year begin cheerfully with the announcement that Thomas Óg had come back from Rome. 'And joyful in sooth were the Foreigners and Gaidhil of Ireland and the learned companies and pilgrims likewise through his returning into Ireland'. The king's safe return was a reason for celebration and contrasted with the sadness that must have been felt at the deaths of two other Fermanagh pilgrims which according to the annals

took place in Rome early in 1450, namely Nicholas Flanagan, the parson of Devenish and Muircertach Ua Flanagan from Tuath Ratha, the latter as a result of the plague. Not that Thomas Óg Maguire needed to be reminded of the perils of pilgrimages: in 1428 he and his uncle Hugh Maguire had made the pilgrimage to Compostela, but on their way home in August tragedy struck when Hugh became ill and died in Kinsale

Thomas Óg Maguire, a man of strong Christian faith

King Thomas Óg Maguire ruled Fermanagh from 1430 – 1471 during a period of relative political stability and allied prosperity. Under his leadership the Church flourished and after his death in 1480 obituaries for him in the Annals of Ulster and the Annals of the Four Masters describe him as the most charitable, pious and hospitable man of his day who built churches and monasteries and commissioned chalices. One of the churches known to have benefited from his patronage was his parish church at Aghalurcher, adjacent to his fortress at Lisnaskea. In 1447 the Annals of Ulster record that he had a ‘French roof’ put on the church (probably a stone-ribbed vault) and built (or rebuilt) the east gable . It is tempting to surmise that the French roof was inspired by his journey to Compostela in 1428 which very likely took him to see many of the important French churches on the pilgrimage route. Another matter for speculation is whether the cost of the Iniskeen window was met by the parishioners themselves or whether Thomas Og may have paid to have it erected, perhaps in thanks for a safe return from his continental pilgrimages.

'Fermanagh: a story in one hundred objects' is a project involving people from the local community, historians, students from the University of Ulster and Young Friends of Fermanagh County Museum.

Supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Collections Fund, the research project will tell aspects of Fermanagh’s diverse history through the selection and interpretation of one hundred key objects. Objects will be locally important as well as of wider international significance.

Over the course of the project, local people can nominate artefacts for inclusion in the final list by filling out the on-line form at the museum website www.enniskillencastle.co.uk

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Part of 'Our Fermanagh Stories' Consultation

