

The shrine of St Patrick's bell and the origins of the Hiberno-Urnes style

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The shrine of St Patrick's bell is one of the finest pieces of craftsmanship surviving from early medieval Ireland (*see image*). It was commissioned to enshrine a hand-bell associated with the national saint by Domnall Ua Lochlainn, king of Cenél nEógain and sometime claimant to the high kingship of Ireland, and by Domnall Mac Amhalgaidh, the *coarb* of Patrick (1091 – 1105) at Armagh, Ireland's most senior cleric.

Importantly, it is the earliest securely dated major artefact from Ireland to display influence from the Scandinavian Urnes style, something which was first acknowledged by Haakon Shetelig in his pioneering study of the style in 1909. Surprisingly, although discussed in relation to late Viking art in numerous publications since then (e.g. Shetelig 1948; Kendrick 1949; Moe 1955; de Paor & de Paor 1964; Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Ó Floinn 1983; Graham-Campbell 2013), the ornament on the shrine has received very little detailed attention. What may be even more surprising, is the fact that the political background to its creation has not been fully explored, given that we know the names of its patrons, as well as the name of its craftsman, through its inscription.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the zoomorphic ornament on this shrine to reveal its background influence in terms of late Viking art. Preliminary analysis not only suggests direct stylistic links to Scandinavia, but also across the Irish Sea to England. This is significant, as stylistic connections with the Urnes style in England are generally not discernible in Hiberno-Urnes art (Owen 2001). This may help to point the way towards understanding the origins of the style in Ireland. An investigation of the political background to the commissioning of the shrine is key in this respect also, and preliminary study suggests the influence of a hidden female benefactor.



Shrine of St Patrick's bell (© National Museum of Ireland)