The round towers of Ireland possess an attraction and an ambiguity which has rendered them the subject of endless speculation since the eighteenth century. While George Petrie’s magnum opus on their function, published in 1845, laid to rest many of the wilder theories, a new crop arises with every generation, and some of the older myths of their utility as hideouts from the Vikings, die hard. Few round towers are ornamented with architectural sculpture, either because they predate its common utilisation from the 1130s onwards, or due to innate conservatism with regard to this particular type of structure. Devenish round tower (Fig.1) is one of these few exceptions, and furthermore, its unique cornice sculpture unusually lends itself to an iconographic reading, being, it will be argued, a depiction of the four evangelists. Such an interpretation is moreover a loaded one, as

1 I am most grateful to Prof. Roger Stalley for reading and commenting on this paper, also to my colleagues at UCC, especially Emma Nic Cárthaigh for her discussion and help.


3 Roger Stalley, “Sex, Symbol, and Myth,” 30, notes that a high proportion belong to the twelfth century, but does not tackle the issue of the lack of sculptural decoration.
Fig. 1. Devenish round tower, Co. Fermanagh, showing western cornice mask, with northern and southern masks just visible to either side. (photo: author)
in the medieval period, both in Ireland and elsewhere, the evangelists had strong apotropaic associations. This raises anew the issue of the range of functions of the round tower, and whether function was as strictly limited to bell-ringing and its audibility as its Irish name, cloigthech implies, and hitherto most scholarly accounts agree. Popular unwillingness to accept such an explanation may sometimes frustrate, but does highlight a certain obvious disconnect between their spectacular form, and mundane function.

Crucially, the iconography of the evangelists raises the question of sanctuary—not through physical impregnability, but through intellectual expectation and societal norms—and how that sanctuary was spatially defined. The medieval Irish conception of space, as illustrated by their selective adaptation and interpretation of foreign architectural models, appears to have been quite distinct from that of continental Europe, especially in its relationship with landscape. The visibility of the round towers in the landscape has long been commented on, but the audibility of their bells across that same landscape has raised little comment (Fig.2).

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7 Lalor, *The Irish Round Tower*, 67, 70, notes that they would have been an aural as well as visual presence, and that the bells would have been audible for about a mile, but O’Keeffe, *Ireland’s Round Towers*, 95-99 plays down their acoustic significance, and concentrates almost exclusively on their visual qualities. Stalley, “Sex, Symbol and Myth,” 39-42, addresses their bell-ringing functions at length, but only from the viewpoint of the immediate audience of the monastic community.
But these buildings can only be understood through an exploration of the duality of their sensory perception by their intended audience. It is argued here that in this respect the iconography of the sculpture at Devenish can serve to point towards the overall function of the structure, and thereby elucidate more generally the meaning of the round tower in medieval Ireland.

Fig. 2. Devenish round tower is far more visible than the other monastic remains. (photo: author)

**Devenish round tower: post-medieval interventions & current condition**

Before exploring the implications of the iconography of the sculpture of Devenish round tower, it is necessary to examine that iconography, and indeed the sculpture itself, in somewhat more detail, especially considering the highly condensed and allusive manner in which the figures are depicted. Specifically, can we be sure that the heads are in their original cornice position at the cardinal points?

The round tower as it stands today appears to be in pristine condition (Fig.3), but it was repaired no less than three times in the nineteenth century, first in 1835, and again in 1876 and 1896, this time under the
auspices of the Board of Works. However, it seems to have survived intact right up to 1834, when John O’Donovan wrote that it:

was perfect four months since, is now most lamentably injured, and if not soon repaired, the winter storms will certainly knock off its beann-chobair (top-shield) or conical cap.

This had been a result, he noted, of jackdaws carrying up seeds, and it implies that the masonry joints were being split by plant growth. Given the damage suffered by several of the cornice stones on the northwest face, it seems likely that the plants had dislodged these, and that they had fallen to the ground.

The repairs of 1876 consisted merely of repointing some of the lower courses of the tower where the joints were loose, while it is unclear whether in 1896 repairs as such were necessary at all, but the installation of a lightning rod was no doubt hastened by the fact that it had been struck earlier in the year. The twin perils of plant roots and lightning strikes are inherent problems with round towers. Indeed, Roger Stalley has suggested that the development of masonry caps in the eleventh century was surely a response to the dangers posed by fire caused by such strikes, damage resultant from lightning being recorded on six occasions in the annals.

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8 William F. Wakeman, “The Antiquities of Devenish,” JRSAI 3 (1874-75), 59, mentions “a process of repair, not restoration”, which took place in the summer of 1835. John O’Donovan had recorded in 1834 that these repairs had been delayed through difficulties in finding a builder willing to undertake the work; Letters containing information relative to the antiquities of the County of Fermanagh, collected during the progress of the Ordnance Survey in 1834-5, ed. M. O’Flanagan (Bray,1928. Typescript – no publishers), 16. The ruins at Devenish were vested on the 27th October, 1874, and were handed over to the care of the Board in 1875; 46th Annual Report from the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland: with Appendices, for the year 1877-78 (Dublin, HMSO 1877), 76; 44th Annual Report, 14. In 1876 only minimal repairs were necessary; 45th Annual Report, 70, while the 1896 intervention consisted in affixing a lightning rod to the tower; 64th Annual Report, 77.
9 O’Donovan, Letters, 15.
10 45th Annual Report, 70; 64th Annual Report, 77.
Fig. 3. Devenish round tower as it stands today. (photo: author)
The fact that the cap of the Devenish round tower remained firm right up to the 1830s is indicative of the skill of its twelfth-century builders, and it is interesting to note that the cap of the round tower of Temple Finghin, Clonmacnoise, of c. 1170 also endured until the 1860s, showing a high level of expertise in such construction by this late period. At Devenish previous failures may have ensured that particular care was taken with its construction, as the nearby foundations of another, earlier round tower indicate that this was not the first to be built on the island. That the current tower’s nineteenth-century repairs took place so rapidly after its damage, when the original appearance was fresh in everyone’s memory, and moreover that they were partial only, is a warranty of their relative accuracy, especially given the increasingly scientific interest taken in faithful reconstruction at this period. The positioning of the windows facing the cardinal points implies that the heads have always done so too, and this is consistent with the general placement of heads as keystones of arches in Romanesque work, as at Freshford, Co. Kilkenny, and at the apex of window openings, as on the Tomregan stone, Co. Cavan (Fig. 4). Unfortunately, the earliest antiquarian sketches which show the cornice detail are those of E. Grey, 1835, and of Edward Jones, 1836, and therefore postdate the repair work. Nevertheless, the likelihood seems strong that the masks are in their original position, although the other parts of the cornice may have become confused.

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Identifying the masks

Granted, then, that these four masks (Figs. 5-8) are in their original position facing the four cardinal points, this is by no means in and of itself a guarantee that they are intended to depict the four evangelists. Apocalyptic literature consistently associated the beasts of the visions of Ezekiel and of St John, identified with the evangelists by early Patristic writing, with existing cosmological concepts, the cardinal directions amongst them, which certainly strengthens this interpretation. However, caution is required in such a reading given the general impenetrability towards iconographic interpretation of the sculpture of the Hiberno-Romanesque. Two issues arise here. Firstly, are these masks intended as bearers of meaning, or are they purely decorative? Secondly, if they are intended to


15 For a summation of parallel interpretative methodological concerns within the other areas of Insular art, see Carol Neuman de Vegvar, “Remembering Jerusalem: Architecture and Meaning in Insular Canon Table Arcades,” in Moss, ed. Making and Meaning, 242, who summarises the issue as follows: “Where once many motifs were perceived as ornament in honour of the Word or of a particular patron
be identified as specific individuals, is their identification as the evangelists convincing?

Fig. 5. The northern mask – St John the Evangelist? (photo: author)

Fig. 6. The eastern mask. (photo: author)

Fig. 7. The southern mask. (photo: author)

saint, recent work on the stone crosses and on manuscript illumination has revealed previously unsuspected depths of exegetical and liturgical referents, a multi-layered system of interlocking theological constructs.”
Fig. 8. The western mask. (photo: author)

Scholarship on the Hiberno-Romanesque has tended to concentrate on style and patronage, rather than meaning, due to the overwhelmingly decorative feel of the work.\textsuperscript{16} With notable exceptions, such as the lintel of Maghera, Co. Derry,\textsuperscript{17} the chancel fragments at Kilteel, Co. Kildare,\textsuperscript{18} and the west façade arcades of Ardmore, Co. Waterford,\textsuperscript{19} Hiberno-Romanesque sculpture is not, at least, narrative in representation, and few


scholars have attempted an iconographic reading. This non-narrative tendency is present in the earliest Irish Christian art, and with the exception of the tenth-century high crosses, continues to be a feature even of late Gothic art in Ireland. In the twelfth century this native trend was further reinforced by the type of contact with Anglo-Norman sculptors which occurred. Thus the initial impetus for the decorative Romanesque style in Ireland came with the arrival of sculptors to work on Cormac’s Chapel at Cashel, and perhaps other buildings in Munster, from the area of the Welsh Marches. The architectural sculpture of the buildings of this region, although often sumptuous, is not noted for iconographic complexity or coherence. But in England generally, much of the architectural sculpture of this period does not relate to biblical themes. Indeed, the clearest narrative depictions often derive from not strictly architectural contexts, such as the spectacular screen reliefs at Chichester cathedral, of c.1120-25. Or rather, with some exceptions such as the Lincoln frieze, narrative biblical iconography is not concentrated on the

20 Although see Tadhg O’Keeffe, “The Romanesque Portal at Clonfert Cathedral and Its Iconography,” in From the Isles of the North, ed. C. Bourke (Belfast: HMSO, 1995), 261-69.
west façade in the same dramatic way as it is in France. The creation of twelfth-century stone crosses in Ireland with an often sophisticated iconography, indicates that, as in England, stone sculpture could be used to express complicated ideas. But with an initial body of workmen who were accustomed to produce non-narrative work, the same vocabulary when pressed into the service of biblical iconography, can produce strangely allusive results. A good example of this in an English context is Eardisley font (Fig. 9), at St Mary’s Eardisley, Herefordshire, which depicts the harrowing of hell, but using a decidedly ornamental language. And at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, which had Irish connections, the decorative-looking columns, with figures entrapped in vegetal scrolls, were intended to be read as a moral warning against the snares of this world.

Thus it is clear that in Romanesque England meaningful iconography is sometimes concealed by the decorative manner of its presentation. The same can be shown to be true in an Irish context. In the gable of the porch at Roscrea, Co. Tipperary is a relief figure which can almost certainly be identified as Christ, as it seems stylistically to derive from a lost model at Old Sarum of Christ in Majesty, known from a derivative copy at its dependency, Lullington, in Somerset. At Killeshin, Co. Laois


30 The arguments presented here are a much condensed version of those I have presented at the Irish Conference of Medievalists, Limerick, 2007, in a paper entitled “Unmasking Christ: Re-Interpreting the Hiberno-Romanesque Portal,” which I am currently preparing for publication.

(Fig. 10), and Freshford, Co. Kilkenny, there is no figure in this position, but in each case the keystone of the outer arch of the portal is a human head. As Roger Stalley has pointed out, it seems unlikely that these, and other heads at Killeshin, had a merely decorative meaning, given their solemn expressions and dignified physiognomy, but Stalley is reluctant to ascribe a particular interpretation to them. However, their positioning alone, corresponding to that of Christ at Roscrea, is highly suggestive, especially given the pre-Romanesque tradition of placing a cross over the lintel, as at Fore, Co. Westmeath, of which the crucifixion lintels at Raphoe, Co. Donegal and Maghera, Co. Derry, may be seen as a development. Crucially at Raphoe and Maghera, in what may be seen as a parallel iconography, Christ is directly positioned above the centre of the lintel, occupying a place analogous to the keystone at Killeshin or Freshford, or the cross in the earlier non-figurative tradition. Furthermore,

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Romanesque Ireland, 178-79.

at Killeshin the keystone head is held between the beaks of two small birds. This corresponds startlingly with the disposition of birds about Christ’s head on the Doorty cross at Kilfenora. It may also relate to the Canticle of Habakkuk, interpreted as a prophecy of the revelation of Christ between two living beings, which was so often referenced in tenth-century high-cross sculpture. The implication surely must be that it is Christ who is intended at Killeshin and Freshford, although shown in such an abbreviated form. This is not to argue that wherever we see human heads in an Irish Romanesque context, the intention is always to depict Christ or

other holy figures. On the contrary, the human heads which for instance, adorn the chancel arch at Cashel, probably only have decorative import. But just because a similar stylistic vocabulary is being used at Killeshin, this should not blind us from reading it in a more complex manner, if the context seems, not just to allow, but to imply meaning.  

If we accept that the masks of the Hiberno-Romanesque can sometimes be intended as representational sculpture, then to dismiss an iconographic level of meaning in the Devenish heads is rather wilfully to foreground stylistic pedigree to an unconscionable degree. But does the theory that these are the four evangelists, so far put forward without any serious argumentation, bear up to scrutiny?

The most convincing argument is also the most basic—quite simply, the four evangelists are by far the most popular quaternity of the medieval Insular world, and it is their lack of representation in stonework which has hitherto elicited most surprise. Images, whether of their portraits, their symbols, or combinations thereof appear in, for instance, the Book of Durrow, the Book of Kells, the Book of Armagh, the St Gall Gospels, as well as the Gospels of Mael Brigte, written in Armagh in 1138. Continuing intellectual interest is shown by the inclusion of a short exegetical text on the four evangelists and their cosmological significance.

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38 This is by no means a comprehensive list. For a convenient account and description of the different depictions of the evangelists in Insular manuscripts, see Michele P. Brown, The Book of Cerne: Prayer, Patronage and Power in Ninth-Century England (London: British Library 1996), 88-103. Briefly summarised, the different types of depiction consist of: whole page Evangelist symbols, e.g. Book of Durrow, Echternach Gospels; whole page author portraits enthroned, e.g. Barberini Gospels, or standing, e.g. Book of Mulling, Book of Dimma; or Evangelist author portraits with the appropriate beast, e.g. Lindisfarne, Lichfield, St Gall and Macregol Gospels, see O’Reilly, “Patristic and Insular Traditions,” 49, also Brown, “Embodying Exegesis,” 110-12.
in the latter.\(^{39}\) Moreover, the *Soiscéal Molaise* shrine, which was made between 1001-11 for the *coarb* and *airchinnech* of Devenish, was presumably kept at the monastery, and its front panel shows the symbols of the four evangelists around a central cross.\(^{40}\) This was certainly one of the most highly prized of the monastery’s possessions, and would have played a prominent and public role in rituals, such as oath-taking ceremonies.\(^{41}\) The association of Molaise with a gospel book being so strong, would have lent a particular resonance to the visual representation of the evangelists at the centre of his monastery.

The lack of identifying inscriptions may raise doubts, but one very suggestive element of the masks is that while three are shown with elaborate beards, that on the north side is clean-shaven. This has led, in the past, to the suggestion that it may represent a woman, and the possible interpretation of the four as the saints Patrick, Columba, Molaise and Brigit.\(^{42}\) However, the representation of native saints in Ireland was a feature, not of twelfth-century Romanesque art, but of the later Gothic period, and even then, few native saints can be satisfactorily identified, with the exception of Patrick.\(^{43}\) That this is a representation of a range of Irish saints cannot therefore be credited, while by contrast, the popularity of depictions of the evangelists is beyond dispute. The alternative suggestion, that these are the four evangelists, and that John is being distinguished by his youth, therefore has much greater likelihood.

Identifying an earlier Insular exemplar which thus distinguishes John has unfortunately not proved possible. The hairstyles of the portraits of the evangelists show no consistency, with some manuscripts showing them all bearded, or all youthful, and a number of combinations of both bearded

\(^{41}\) Fergus Kelly, *Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: DIAS, 1989), 199. Incredibly, it was required as late as 1835 for a court case in Sligo, where it was affirmed that the defendant might perjure himself upon the bible, but would not dare to do so on the *Soiscéal*, Ó Floinn, “The Soisceál Molaisse,” 51.
\(^{42}\) McKenna, *Devenish*, 44-46 was in favour of the native saints as he thought the north mask definitely female; Hickey, *Images of Stone*, 60 repeats both possibilities; while Lalor, *The Irish Round Tower*, 144-45, preferred the evangelists.
\(^{43}\) For instance, above the fifteenth century north doorway of Clonmacnoise Cathedral, Patrick is shown between the saints Dominic and Francis. Hourihane, discusses the iconography of later sculpture in detail, *Gothic Art in Ireland*, 1169-1550, 65-98.
and youthful types, showing a fusion of Italian and Byzantine sources.\textsuperscript{44} However, Michelle Brown has noted that despite the general mix of types, John is more commonly portrayed as youthful and beardless.\textsuperscript{45} Furthermore, vernacular textual sources continually single John out for his youth, and suggest that in appearance he was beardless, as for instance in the poem, found in the Gospels of Mael Britle mentioned above, where he is described as \textit{óc amulcach}.\textsuperscript{46} While the same poem also describes Matthew as “without a tyrant’s beard”, the specific association with youth is not made for Matthew.\textsuperscript{47} Similarly in the fourteenth-century \textit{Ó Cianáin Miscellany}, a list of Christ and his apostles describes the appropriate hairstyles for each, showing an accurate perception of Continental iconography, and singling out John as having wavy black hair, and no beard whatsoever—although here also Matthew is equally described as beardless.\textsuperscript{48} Both these sources omit descriptions of Luke or Mark, as neither of these was an apostle, and inasmuch are not as useful as they immediately appear. More significant than the description of hairstyles is this emphasis on John’s youthfulness, which continues in the Irish medieval tradition into the later period, as for instance when he is invoked in a fifteenth-century litany along with John the Baptist and Mary, but distinguished from the Baptist, not as the evangelist, but as a boy, i.e. \textit{Eoin macain \textit{g} Eoin babtaist}.\textsuperscript{49}

It is highly probable therefore, that this beardless mask is an attempt to represent John’s youthfulness and that there is no need to search for an immediate exemplar with the same feature; indeed, this may be an independent reinvention of the convention. While an exemplar cannot be ruled out, it was hardly necessary, given the general and widespread association of youth and beardlessness in medieval Irish culture. The concept of distinguishing the young from the mature by their growth of beard or lack of it is found, for instance, in the early eighth-century legal text \textit{Críth Gablach}, where the age of “beard-encirclement” is associated

\textsuperscript{44} Brown, \textit{The Book of Cerne}, 103.
\textsuperscript{45} Brown, \textit{The Book of Cerne}, 103.
\textsuperscript{46} Whitley Stokes, “The Irish verses, notes and glosses in Harl.1802,” \textit{RC} 8 (1887), 346, 350.
\textsuperscript{47} Stokes, “The Irish verses, notes and glosses,” 352.
\textsuperscript{48} James Carney, “The \textit{Ó Cianáin Miscellany},” \textit{Eriú} 21 (1969), 122, 135, 136. The descriptions given of Peter (completely grey with a small beard), and Paul (bald in front, black) are the most obvious examples of conformation to European iconographic types.
\textsuperscript{49} Charles Plummer, ed. \textit{Irish Litanies} (London: Henry Bradshaw Society 1925), 26, 27. From Brussels MS 4190, dated by Plummer to the late 15\textsuperscript{th} century.
with progression to *boaire* status from being a *fer midboth*. In saga literature the same association is revealed in the *Táin*, where Cú Chulainn is reduced to the ludicrous stratagem of blackening his chin with blackberry juice before single combat, as his opponent refuses to fight a beardless youth.

Given the extreme abbreviation of forms which was required for corbel sculpture at such a height, it is not so surprising that the only key to the identity of the four figures which has retained its legibility is John’s youthfulness. However, this may not have been as important to the contemporary audience, who may have been able to identify the evangelists purely by their positioning, perhaps the same as that on the colophon drawing of the Book of Mulling (Fig. 11), discussed below. This shows pairs of crosses, dedicated to the four evangelists and the four major prophets disposed at the cardinal points around a double concentric circle, sometimes identified as a plan of the monastery of St Mullins, with four further crosses in the centre. John is to the north at Devenish, as his cross is on the colophon drawing, although whether Matthew was to the west, Mark to the south and Luke to the east, as on the drawing, or whether they were arranged in a *deisel* or clockwise disposition, or, as on the *Soiscéal Molaise* bookshrine, is impossible now to know. Interestingly, the windows on Devenish round tower ascend in an anticlockwise direction, contrary to their customary clockwise ascent in most round towers. This may indicate that the evangelists were indeed also positioned anticlockwise, as the Mulling comparison suggests.

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50 D.A. Binchy, ed. *Críth Gablach*, (Dublin: DIAS 1979) 3:§9. I am grateful to Dr Gerald Manning for drawing this to my attention.  
51 Cecile O’Rahilly, ed. *Táin Bó Cúailgne: Recension I* (Dublin: DIAS 1976), 58-59 lines 1899-1907. I am very grateful to Emma Nic Cárthaigh for drawing this episode to my attention.  
54 See Martin Werner, “The Four Evangelist Symbols Page in the Book of Durrow,” *Gesta* 8 (1969), 3-17 for a discussion of the order of the symbols of the evangelists in a manuscript context. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, 293 notes that the eighth-century Fleury Prayer Book recommends a morning prayer ritual which involved invoking four pairs of evangelists and prophets while rotating anticlockwise. This may indicate a connection between this usually avoided direction and apotropaic charms. I am most grateful to Prof. Sims-Williams for first drawing this reference to my attention.  
Interpreting the iconography

But what would viewers have understood from such a representation? In Insular manuscripts the portraits of the evangelists were characteristically placed either facing or directly preceding the opening words of their own gospels, usually written in highly ornate fashion. This mirrored the patristic exegetical technique of associating the evangelists with the opening words of their gospel, a technique which was further developed by Irish commentators in the early medieval period. But the evangelists were also considered by St Augustine, and later commentators, to represent the four facets of Christ’s being, and thereby were established as important vehicles of contemplation. So the depiction of the evangelists on the round tower at Devenish would have brought to mind immediately

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56 O’Reilly, “Patristic and Insular Traditions,” 53.
the opening words of their gospels, but also would have encouraged meditation on the harmony of the gospels, and on Christ himself. In this sense they can be understood as comparable with the images found in cloisters in the European context, also positioned at the heart of the monastery, a space equally implicated in the marking of daily liturgical routine, and whose sculptures are particularly notable for the multiplicity of readings they encourage.  

These images are unlikely, however, to have been produced for contemplation alone, or for the benefit only of the immediate monastic community given their prominent position, visible for some distance. Acknowledging their multivalence, a range of other readings can be opened for discussion. For instance, the sculptures may have alluded to the precise nature of some of the relics kept within the tower, perhaps the *Soiscéal Molaise* itself. Relics certainly were kept within round towers, as some were destroyed in the towers at Slane and Monasterboice.  

Paul Mullarkey has argued that the front panel of the *Soiscéal Molaise*, based as it is on a four Evangelist page, may have been a way of forging a strong link between the relic and its shrine. The same argument might suggest that in the sculpture of the round tower, a similar link is being made, in this case between the shrine, and the building which housed it. Interestingly, a small detail of the sculpture indicates that whatever exemplar was used was of metalwork: this is the treatment of the eyes. These are very prominent circular protuberances, with the inner and outer lid clearly defined. Comparing these with the eyes of the beast-head grasping the bottom of the Cross of Cong, and some of the ecclesiastics on the *Breac Maedhóg*, it becomes apparent that this prominent setting is common for glass eyes, and technically necessary to hold them securely in place. In the stone sculpture at Devenish it is a skeuomorph, a tell-tale clue to the medium of the model, but one charged with significance.  

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61 It is important to note that there is no documentary evidence conclusively indicating that the *Soiscéal Molaise* was kept in the round tower, but it certainly was housed somewhere on Devenish.  
an enshrinement of a shrine—visually rendered for all to see; it may even have been intended directly to reference the *Soiscéal Molaise*.

But the significance of the siting of the sculpture, with the evangelists facing the four cardinal points of the compass—and on the monastic bell-tower—requires more careful exploration. One of the most compelling comparisons for the associations of the four evangelists with the four points of the compass is the colophon drawing from the Book of Mulling, mentioned above. Lawrence Nees has convincingly argued that this drawing, while alluding to the monastic plan, is in fact largely apotropaic in function, intended to protect the manuscript, and also the monastery in which it was kept, from damage. The cryptically abbreviated accompanying texts also have a protective intention, one of them being a *lorica* which the *Liber Hymnorum* records was particularly effective in protecting from fire and lightning. In other contexts also the Evangelist symbols were used as apotropaic devices, carved onto the sides of St Cuthbert’s wooden coffin, while the opening verses of St John’s Gospel were commonly used as an amulet against harm. Following on from this idea, the representation of the four evangelists on Devenish round tower may have been intended to safeguard the tower itself, as the colophon drawing of the Book of Mulling was intended to safeguard the manuscript. In particular, the tower would have been exceptionally prone to lightening strikes, situated as it is on an otherwise low-lying island—and indeed we know that it was struck in the 1890s. Furthermore, for the more literate monks, the association of Evangelist portrait or symbol with their Gospel *incipit* would have been strong, and no inscription on the round tower would have been necessary to evoke the words. And from the twelfth century, the *incipits* of gospels were often used as benedictions against bad weather, a practice widespread across Europe, as indeed a synod of 1470 at Passau condemned a common ritual against storms which involved reading the *incipits* to the four points of the compass.

But the idea of protection can be brought a lot further. The theory that the round tower was a place of refuge has often been suggested and is usually dismissed—rightly so, if such refuge is thought to depend on the

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64 Nees, “The Colophon Drawing,” 86. And even in eighteenth century France it was thought to be a good thing to start ringing church bells on the approach of a thunderstorm, which suggests a longstanding association with church bells and protection. Roger Stalley, pers.comm.
supposed military strength of the structure. However, as Tadhg O’Keeffe has pointed out, the impressive doorways which lead into the towers do imply that they were probably consecrated buildings, and if this is the case, their status as affording sanctuary is clear—they are safe refuges in exactly the same way and for the same reason that churches are: in that it was far more sinful to kill someone when under church protection than when not.\(^67\) While numerous entries in the annals show that such killings continued to take place, they were recorded for the very reason that they were unusual, and particularly abhorrent to the monastic annalists.\(^68\) The four evangelists may therefore be intended to evoke protection not just of the structure, but for those within the structure, seeking sanctuary. Indeed, it could have functioned as a protective amulet for the whole monastery, similar to the apotropaic colophon drawing of the Book of Mulling, but embossed upon the landscape.

However, the very visibility of the round tower and its sculpture provoke another question—how far was this area of sanctuary in fact considered to spread? Specifically, apotropaic devices are usually associated with boundaries, often between the sacred and profane, which conflicts with the siting of round towers, usually in the central monastic area.\(^69\) Conceptually, however, these buildings could have defined boundaries, particularly in an aural way, and this is given credence by contemporary vernacular sources. An early Irish text on bee-keeping, \textit{Bechbretha}, dating probably to the seventh century, outlines the legal limits of the secular faithche or lawful green, as being as far as the sound of a bell is audible.\(^70\) While this may only indicate the concept in a secular sphere, it is glossed \textit{do ecclais} i.e. “from a church”, albeit by a fifteenth-century glossator.\(^71\) Brian Lalor has noted that a handbell rung from the top windows of a round tower is audible up to a mile away, but up to now, the significance of such audibility has not been examined.\(^72\)

\(^{67}\) O’Keeffe, \textit{Ireland’s Round Towers}, 99.
\(^{68}\) A useful compilation of such entries, when they clearly mention monastic buildings, although not including round towers, is found in Manning, “References to Church Buildings in the Annals,” in \textit{Seanchas: Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne}, ed. A.P. Smyth (Dublin: Four Courts 2000), 42-45.
\(^{69}\) Although at Clonmacnoise the two twelfth-century round towers are on the edge of the central space, right beside the river Shannon.
\(^{70}\) Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly, eds. \textit{Bechbretha} (Dublin: DIAS 1983), 82, 83: \textit{is sí ind fhaithche théchtæ la Féniu ní ro-saig guth cluicc}.
\(^{71}\) Charles-Edwards and Kelly, \textit{Bechbretha}, 6 for the dating of the gloss.
\(^{72}\) Lalor, \textit{The Irish Round Tower}, 70.
spectacular form of the round towers and their extreme height in comparison with other monastic buildings of the period, seem to beg more of an explanation than the necessity of monks to hear the bell calling them to office.

It seems plausible that as far as the sound carried, thus far were monastic sanctuary and monastic laws applicable. This is backed up by evidence from hagiography that very clearly associates bell-ringing both with time-keeping and sanctuary, as for instance from the albeit late *Betha Maedóc II*:

Woe to him who shall outrage my venerable church,
Woe to him against whom my bells utter their voice,
Woe to him against whom my bells are rung
Every morning and every evening.

Woe to the man who trespasses on my sanctuary,
Woe to him who shall outrage my temple.\(^73\)

The association of timekeeping, liturgy and sanctuary was of long tradition, and its early appearance in Insular material culture is shown by the carving of the sundial on the Bewcastle cross.\(^74\) The reading of the round tower as a sign of sanctuary, both audible and visible, helps explain their construction at monasteries particularly exposed to attack—thus Scattery Island’s round tower, often pointed out as ludicrously unhelpful in drawing Viking raiders towards the unprotected site, should rather be seen as a statement of safety and defence. The interaction of building with landscape is uniquely conceived in Ireland, and architectural differences from a European conceptualisation of space are most visible in the disintegration of complex buildings into a disarticulated skeleton at Irish sites.\(^75\) This suggests especially a permeability of space, of exterior and interior, and of visible and conceptual boundaries. Visibility from afar was long a key issue, as noted by Brian Lacey with regard to the secular site of Ailech, which overlooked a whole territory.\(^76\) But with the round tower, visibility and audibility were uniquely combined to proclaim sanctity and

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\(^75\) Ó Carragáin, “Skeuomorphs and spolia,” 97-98.

\(^76\) Brian Lacey, *Cenél Conaill and the Donegal Kingdoms, AD 500-800* (Dublin: Four Courts 2006), 111.
sanctuary. At Devenish, the sculpture simply elaborates, and deepens, an already existing meaning, just as Jane Hawkes has suggested for the Sandbach crosses, where the highly visible quality of the “sign”—the cross itself—was the primary significance, and the carvings only secondary.\footnote{77 Jane Hawkes, “Reading Stone,” in\textit{ Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture}, ed. C.E. Karkov and F. Orton (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press 2003), 27.}

Taking the idea of sanctuary and its application to the round tower a little further, this begs the question of the missing finial or bennchobar at Devenish. Rachel Moss has argued that the bennchobar had apotropaic associations.\footnote{78 Moss, “A Twelfth-century Renaissance?” 137-38.} And the word certainly is applied to the finials of round towers and not just churches, as for instance in the Annals of Ulster which record in 1121 the benncopor being knocked from the round tower at Armagh due to great winds. All that remains at Devenish is a mortice hole about 4 inches in length, in the uppermost remaining capstone, in which part of a metal attachment still remained in the nineteenth century.\footnote{79 Illustrated in RIA MS 12.T.15 (14).} This probably would have been adequate to support some sort of finial, perhaps a metal one, and the question which arises is the form it would have taken. Here again, Insular exegetic texts, as well as the evidence of four-evangelist pages is helpful. Malgorzata Krasnodebska-D’Aughton has noted that in the Insular tradition the foundations of the Temple are thought to stand on the quaternity of the cardinal virtues, which themselves represent the four evangelists.\footnote{80 Malgorzata Krasnodebska-D’Aughton, “The Four-Symbols Page Page in Cracow Cathedral Library MS 140: An Image of Unity,” \textit{Peritia} 12 (2000), 331.} This is significant in the context of the tradition of viewing Christ as the keystone—or apex of the Temple, as shown in the Book of Kells—as demonstrated by Jennifer O’Reilly.\footnote{81 Jennifer O’Reilly, “Exegesis and the Book of Kells: the Lucan Genealogy,” in \textit{The Book of Kells}, ed. F. O’Mahony (Aldershot: Scolar Press 1994), 375-81.} If a figural finial was used here, similar to the wing finials found elsewhere, all the evidence would suggest that the figure represented thereon was Christ, supported on four sides by the four evangelists of the cornice.\footnote{82 \textit{Pace} Moss, “A Twelfth-century Renaissance?” 139, who suggests such figures are angels. I am unconvinced that the shape of the finial behind these figures represents wings.} Of course, this is purely speculative, since the finial no longer survives. But it resonates with the central cross of four-
evangelist pages, and the replacement in the Romanesque period, of crosses above church lintels with figural representations of Christ.

Finally, the sculpture must be considered within the context of the twelfth-century reform of the Irish Church. Romanesque and reform have often been coupled before, but only metaphorically. 83 To me, it is particularly symbolic that the only iconography which may be read as programmatic of reform is on that most idiosyncratic invention of the Irish church, a round tower. For the essential unity of the gospels, fourfold but revealing one truth, was also crucially associated with the concept of the one church, spread to the four parts of the world, and resistant to heresy—moreover, in the Gospels of Mael Brigte, written at nearby Armagh at the height of the reform movement, this connection is explicitly spelled out in the exegetical text on the evangelists. 84 The four evangelists, looking out to the four corners of the world at Devenish, can therefore also be read as indicating Devenish’s allegiance to reform within the Irish church, in unity with Roman practice.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the iconography of the round tower at Devenish is a representation of the four evangelists. Furthermore, these can be read as proclaiming sanctuary and safety. The sculpture thereby challenges accepted scholarship on the limitations of the functions of the round tower. The web of references to which it alludes is apotropaic and almost magical in import, but also references the liturgical conformity with which the twelfth-century Irish church is more usually associated. Nevertheless, what Devenish confirms above all, is that bell-ringing was the primary function of such towers—but that to regard such a function as relating purely to time-keeping is overly simplistic. What makes Devenish unusual is that the audible proclamation of sanctuary is here given visible presence by the four evangelists looking out to the four points of the compass.

But this paper is not intended to be definitive; rather it tries to raise some of the questions which these intriguing sculptures pose, once we are willing to admit that they are iconographically charged, rather than dismissing them as mere decoration. More questions yet remain to be answered, specifically, connections with Roman art, both personifications

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of the four winds, often shown as heads with puffed cheeks, and ornamental motifs, which the debased egg-and-dart ornament of the cornice recall.\textsuperscript{85} Such personifications, reduced to tiny heads, are combined with the apocalyptic beasts in the Trier Gospels frontispiece, giving it an eschatological as well as cosmic dimension.\textsuperscript{86} The implications of this, both in the context of apocalyptic imagery on twelfth-century Irish crosses, and in the context of such themes on Romanesque tympanum sculpture abroad, deserve further attention. And their possible stylistic similarities with sanctuary rings, indicates another path which warrants exploring.\textsuperscript{87} Ultimately, Devenish suggests that Irish Romanesque sculpture is a lot more complex in its meaning than has hitherto been acknowledged.

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\textsuperscript{85} This is particularly relevant given recent dissatisfaction with the application of the term “Romanesque” in Ireland; see Harbison, “The Otherness of Irish Art in the Twelfth Century,” in From Ireland Coming, ed. C. Hourihane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 103.

\textsuperscript{86} O’Reilly, “Patristic and Insular Traditions,” 85-86.

\textsuperscript{87} Jane Geddes, “The Sanctuary Ring of Durham Cathedral,” Archaeologia 107 (1982), 125-9. I am grateful to Prof. Roger Stalley for bringing this to my attention.


