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**Ships Ahoy!**  
**Medieval Ship Graffiti in Sacred Context and Meaning**  
By  
Karen Deslattes Winslow<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

On July 7, 1939, R. A. S. Macalister, a member and former President of The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland, visited Moyne Friary in County Mayo, Ireland. As Macalister exited the doorway at the west end of the nave, he noticed several incised ship drawings on the west wall and on the arcade respond above. The drawings appeared to be sixteenth-century ships. This paper explores incised ship drawings that have been documented in twelve Irish ecclesiastical sites, primarily found along the coast. Previous scholars' fixation with the types of ships depicted has led to only brief discussions regarding the context and meaning of the ship graffiti. The principal aim of the paper is to explore the sacred context and provide a corpus of possible functions and meanings for consideration and discount those that seem unlikely. Some possibilities are more viable than others such as requesting a particular saint's intercession for an impending voyage and a memorial to those lost at sea. However, scholars' interpretation of the incised ship drawings as blueprints or underdrawings for fresco paintings is strongly refuted. The concentration of the incised ship drawings in specific spaces within the sites may be useful information for determining the original location of minor altars, recessed panels, important burial spaces and ephemeral furnishing such as movable altars.

**Keywords**

Ship graffiti; boat graffiti; incised ship drawings; ex-voto; votive

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Deslattes Winslow, Postgraduate scholar, Department of the History of Art and Architecture, B.S. in Commerce Business Administration, M.A. in Marketing, MPhil. in Art History, Art + IRELAND, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. Email: winslowk@tcd.ie

### Introduction

On July 7, 1939, members of The Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland visited Moyne Friary in County Mayo. As R.A.S. Macalister, a member and former President of the Society, was exiting the friary doorway at the west end of the nave he "suddenly became aware that the grey, weather-beaten plaster...contained a number of scratches while, on closer inspection, took shape as a series of diagrams of sixteenth-century ships, covering the west wall and the arcade respond above."<sup>2</sup> This paper examines incised ship drawings that have been documented in twelve Irish ecclesiastical sites, predominantly along the coast. Monasteries, churches and chapels served as indispensable landmarks and safe havens during storms for the medieval seamen as they sailed along the coastline.<sup>3</sup> A common saying was "love the shore, let others go to the deep" encouraging seamen to keep their distance from land but always keep it in sight.<sup>4</sup> Ireland's insularity only magnified preoccupation with the sea since trade or travel over a significant distance automatically required an ocean voyage. Ireland not only engaged in trade but also served as an anchorage for ships from other countries *en route* to their final destination. This activity made the Irish Sea a favoured hunting ground for pirates and enemies of the king of England, another danger added to the perils of running aground, bad weather and rough seas.

Haunted by what he had seen, Macalister returned to Moyne Friary and spent several days making rubbings of the ship graffiti. In 1943, he presented his findings to the Society, concluding the drawings were blueprints or underdrawings for frescos. He received a lukewarm response with one attendee suggesting, "they were mere *jeux d'esprit* on the part of the plasterer."<sup>5</sup> Over sixty years passed before archaeologists Karl Brady and Chris Corlett revisited Ireland ship drawings in their

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<sup>2</sup> R. A. S. Macalister, "On Graffiti Representing Ships, on the Wall of Moyne Priory, Co. Mayo," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 13, no. 4 (1943): 108.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Ward, *The World of the Medieval Shipmaster: Law, Business and Sea, Circa 1340-1450* (University of Michigan: Boydell Press, 2009), 122-23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

seminal *Holy Ships* article.<sup>6</sup> Brady and Corlett interpreted the images as depictions of actual ships providing "vital information on the variety of ship types plying the Irish waters during the medieval period."<sup>7</sup> Based on the presence or absence of crow's nests, castles, mizzen masts, clinker planking, sails, rigging, ratlines and poop decks, five possible ship types emerged: carracks, cogs, hulks, keel tradition and longships. Given the lack of archaeological evidence of ship types from this period, viewing the graffiti as portraits of real ships is useful. However, this fixation with the type of ship depicted has led to only brief discussions regarding the context and meaning of the ship graffiti. Moreover, Macalister's interpretation that the drawings were underdrawings for frescos has not been challenged and has essentially stunted research into other possibilities.

The principal aim of this paper is to explore the sacred context of the incised ship drawings and provide a corpus of possible functions and meanings for consideration and discount those that seem unlikely. While the drawings may represent actual ships, it is very unlikely that the crudely drawn images are underdrawings for frescos. A more plausible interpretation is the drawings represent prayers to a particular saint etched in a sacred place by someone facing an impending voyage or by someone waiting for the safe return of a loved one. This conclusion was reached by first conducting a comprehensive literature review of occurrences of ship graffiti in Ireland and other parts of Europe. From this review, a list of possible functions and meanings were developed. The occurrences of ship graffiti in Ireland were plotted on a map and as many sites as possible were visited. Each possible function and meaning was considered in conjunction with the placement and the nature of the drawings. Some interpretations could be easily discounted whereas others seemed more plausible.

Importantly, the location of the incised ship drawings provides evidence of how church spaces were used, including areas considered sacred and the possible location of minor altars dedicated to specific saints, important burial spaces and more ephemeral furnishings.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Brady and Chris Corlett, "Holy Ships: Ships on Plaster at Medieval Ecclesiastical Sites in Ireland," *Archaeology Ireland* 18, no. 2 (2004).

<sup>7</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster" 312.

### Characteristics of the Incised Ship Drawings

To date, Irish ship drawing have been documented in twelve ecclesiastical sites including four Franciscan sites (Court Abbey, County Sligo, Moyne Friary, County Mayo, Ross Errilly Friary, County Galway and Ennis Friary, County Clare), two Augustinian foundations (St. Catherine's Nunnery, County Limerick and Molana Abbey, County Waterford), two Cistercian sites (Corcomroe Abbey, County Clare and Knockmoy Abbey, County Galway), two parish churches (St. Mary's Schull, County Cork and St. Mary's New Ross, County Wexford), one chapel (Barrys court Castle, County Cork) and one cathedral (Cashel Cathedral, County Tipperary) (Figures 1 and 2).<sup>8</sup> Remarkably, the drawings are very similar to each other despite the distances between the sites and the varying dates of the ecclesiastical fabric. Almost without exception, the ships are depicted in profile with the full hull visible. The modern historian Matthew Champion observed that the ships appear as "they would have been seen when first built or drawn up for repairs."<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Brady and Corlett believed the drawings were inspired by representations in manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> However, ships in manuscript miniatures are traditionally shown crewed and the bottom of the hull hidden under water, often represented by parallel wavy lines to suggest a current. The incised ship drawings, however, are unmanned and drawn as if on dry land. Brady and Corlett also offered a unique interpretation for one of the drawings at Moyne Friary. The ship has details at the bow and stern, but the centre section of the hull is completely open (Figure 3). They noted some European medieval paintings of Noah's Ark omit the hull so the viewer can see the animals

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 29-31. "Ships on Plaster: Evidence for Ships in Medieval Ireland," in *From Ringforts to Fortified Houses: Studies on Castles and Other Monuments in Honour of David Sweetman*, ed. Conleth Manning and P. David Sweetman (Wicklow County, Ireland: Wordwell Ltd., 2007), 312-33. Tracy Collins, "Missing the Boat," *Archaeology Ireland* 24, no. 4 (2010): 9. Mary McGrath, "The Materials and Techniques of Irish Medieval Wall-Paintings," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 111. Karena Morton, "Irish Medieval Wall Painting," in *Medieval Ireland: The Barryscourt Lectures; 1-10*, ed. John and Jameson Ludlow, Noel (Cork, Ireland: Barryscourt Trust, 2004), 335.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Champion, *Medieval Graffiti: The Lost Voices of England's Churches* (Ebury Press, 2016), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Holy Ships," 320.

inside. However, the connection to Noah's Ark is tenuous as the incised boat drawing does not contain any semblance of a crew or animals.

In many cases, enough details in the drawings exist to suggest the artist may have spent time on a ship or at a ship-building or repair yard. Archaeologist Christer Westerdahl noted in an article published in 2013 that builders at medieval ecclesiastical sites were often carpenters at nearby boat yards.<sup>11</sup> Most ship drawings in Ireland are roughly drawn and are missing structural details. None appear to be done with the aid of a compass or straight edge. Masts are depicted by thick lines and rigging by thinner lines. Any ripple in the plaster near a mast can be imagined as a pennant or sail. Westerdahl observed many of the drawings in Norwegian churches were "so elementary that they only convey the general feeling...[of] a vessel."<sup>12</sup> While many of the ship drawings indicate a baseline knowledge of naval architecture, accuracy does not appear to be the intent.

Most depictions of ships in Ireland are eye-level, though some are higher or lower at kneeling, perhaps prayer level. The drawings are relatively similar in scale. However, some drawings dominate others. For example, a single ship at Moyne Friary placed higher than the other drawings is much more detailed and slightly larger than the other drawings. Perhaps, this higher placement was a desire by the artist to elevate his message above the messages of others. No attempt was made to hide the drawings in unseen or lower traffic areas. They tend to be located in spaces open to the congregation, suggesting lay people and perhaps even travellers passing through were responsible for adorning the walls. Ann Marie Yasin, in a recent study of Christian graffiti in the Catacomb of Callixtus and the Parthenon church in Athens, noted entrances or thresholds and columns seem to be "key contact zones where graffiti seems to explode."<sup>13</sup> In Ireland,

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<sup>11</sup> Christer Westerdahl, "Medieval Carved Ship Images Found in Nordic Churches: The Poor Man's Votive Ships?," *The International Journal of Nautical Archaeology* 42, no. 2 (2013): 343.

<sup>12</sup> Westerdahl, "Medieval Carved Ship Images Found in Nordic Churches," 343.

<sup>13</sup> Ann Marie Yasin, "Prayers on Site: The Materiality of Devotional Graffiti and the Production of Early Christian Sacred Space," in *Viewing Inscriptions in the Late Antique and Medieval World*, ed. Antony Eastmond (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 53-54.

concentrations of incised ship drawings are also found above entrances of main doorways (Moyne Friary) and on columns (Ennis Friary). In the case of St. Mary's Schull, the incised ship drawings are located on the porch, an entrance reserved for "marriage ceremonies, the churhing of women after childbirth and the burial service."<sup>14</sup>

Ecclesiastical authorities presumably permitted the drawings. Four of the sites in Ireland, Court Abbey, Moyne Friary, Ennis Friary and St. Mary's Schull contain clusters of ships existing in close proximity to each other. If these drawings were viewed as vandalism, the first drawing would have promptly been covered with plaster discouraging others from following suit. Instead, the first ship drawing inspired others to make their own mark on the site. Referring back to the single ship at Moyne Friary that is higher than the other drawings, Macalister concluded a ladder or scaffolding was required to reach this area of the church wall.<sup>15</sup> However, upon closer inspection of the wall, sockets are visible where a wooden structure such as gallery or pulpit may have been fixed, accounting for the height of the graffiti. A person doing something unauthorised would presumably not have access to such a structure. Further supporting the notion that ecclesiastical authorities permitted the drawings, is the presence of three incised ship drawings in areas traditionally reserved for members of the religious community including the north wall of the chancel at Corcomroe Abbey and Cashel Cathedral and in a small chamber to the north of the altar at Knockmoy Abbey.

Champion believed worshippers were not only permitted, but were encouraged to interact with the church fabric by inscribing their faith on the walls.<sup>16</sup> In Corcomroe Abbey, evidence of a consecration cross is visible on the south wall of the chancel (Figure 4). Consecration crosses were incised into the walls of the church when it was first built and are considered apotropaic markings designed to protect the building and its habitants from evil.<sup>17</sup> The act of incising the walls of the church with crosses was a ritual indicating the very fabric of the walls

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<sup>14</sup>Champion, *Lost Voices*, 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> Macalister, "On Graffiti," 114.

<sup>16</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 214.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

was considered a sacred space. Similarly, sailors and their loved ones may have interacted with the fabric of the church by incising ships.

### Underdrawings for Frescos

Ireland is not unique with its collection of ship graffiti. Significantly more examples occur in churches in England and the Scandinavian-Baltic region.<sup>18</sup> However, the interpretation of the function of ship graffiti in Ireland is inconsistent with the scholarly consensus. Nowhere else do scholars believe the ship drawings are blueprints or underdrawings for fresco paintings. Macalister made this suggestion and perhaps out of respect for his contributions, this idea has been perpetuated to the current day. As noted by Macalister, when this approach is used, the underdrawings "appear as faint and shallow depressions ... enough to guide an artist who has to execute a fresco painting on the wall."<sup>19</sup> Karena Morton recently agreed with Macalister's assessment stating "on Irish [medieval] wall paintings, frequently the intended design was mapped out on the wall with incised lines into the still damp plaster... allowing the artist to visualise the space required for each component of the painted scheme."<sup>20</sup> Both Macalister and Morton believed the graffiti were never intended to be visible and it is only because the smooth *intonaco* layer has fallen away that we are able to see them today. In an expanded version of their *Ghost Ships* article, Brady and Corlett concurred with this interpretation noting one of the ships at Ennis Friary was clearly incised on the primary layer with the secondary layer partly concealing the underlying design. However, the slight outline of the ship was still visible to be used as a guide if required.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ship drawings have been thoroughly documented in the County of Norfolk's medieval churches and in churches on the island of Gotland in Sweden. At Blakeney on the north Norfolk coast, there are more than forty ships covering a single pier in the church of St. Nicholas. Champion, *Lost Voices*, 131. In one of the Gotlandic parish churches there is a ship image with an inscription above the image that seems to be a prayer for the crew – "Jesus grace all Christian souls. Amen..." Westerdahl, "Medieval Carved Ship Images Found in Nordic Churches," 344.

<sup>19</sup> Macalister, "On Graffiti," 115.

<sup>20</sup> Morton, "Irish Medieval Wall Painting," 330.

<sup>21</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster," 321.

Many problems exist with the underdrawing interpretation.

First, *buon frescos*, a fresco technique where pigments are applied to wet plaster and underdrawings are sometimes employed, are not suitable for damp climates like as Ireland.<sup>22</sup> Over time, the plaster is likely to crumble and the frescos fade quickly.<sup>23</sup> Of the handful of surviving murals in Ireland, most are categorised as *fresco secco*, pigments painted onto dry plaster or *mezzo fresco*, pigments mixed with slaked lime and applied on the dry plaster or the dry plaster was saturated with a lime wash and then the pigment was applied.<sup>24</sup> For both *fresco secco* and *mezzo fresco*, the artist does not face the time constraints associated with a *buon fresco*, where the plaster may dry before the painting is complete. As a result, an underdrawing or incised design on the primary layer of plaster is not necessary. Second, even in the few Irish sites employing the *buon fresco* technique, incised underdrawings are more compositional in nature and not preliminary designs for individual objects or figures.

Based on analysis of paint samples, the *buon fresco* technique may have been employed at three sites: Cormac's Chapel at Cashel, Clare Island Abbey, and Knockmoy Abbey.<sup>25</sup> However, the ship graffiti found at these three sites is not related to the frescos. At Cormac's Chapel, the murals were painted directly on the coarse and uneven *arriccio* layer.<sup>26</sup> One is the only known surviving example of a painted ship in Ireland. However, as described by Brady and Corlett, no lines on the painted ship could be interpreted as an underdrawing.<sup>27</sup> Concerning the mural paintings at Clare Island, Morton noted incised lines were used to "map out" the intended location of painted stone ribbing and to create the tonal qualities of ashlar masonry blocks.<sup>28</sup> The ship graffiti, including details of hull planking, full rigging, crisscrossed ratlines and pennants cannot be defined as architectural blueprints.

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<sup>22</sup> McGrath, "The Materials and Techniques," 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Morton, "Irish Medieval Wall Painting," 330.

<sup>25</sup> There is not enough of the murals remaining or evidence of plaster joins to confirm whether these are true frescos. McGrath, "The Materials and Techniques," 111.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>27</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Holy Ships," 31.

<sup>28</sup> Morton, "Irish Medieval Wall Painting," 327.

Knockmoy Abbey contains two fine *intonaco* layers of plaster applied to the surface of a course *arriccio* plaster layer. Both Henry Crawford in 1919 and Mary McGrath in 1987 noted incised lines outlining the black letter inscriptions and shapes of the figures.<sup>29</sup> While initially their observations may seem to support the idea of incised ships serving as underdrawings, McGrath separately noted the presence of a boat graffiti incised in the plaster in a chamber to the left of the altar. She did not interpret the graffiti as an underdrawing, but instead compared it to similar ship graffiti found at Trebizon, Turkey in the 13th century.<sup>30</sup> If the ships formed part of a broader scheme of paintings, they should appear alongside the other incised drawings to guide the fresco artist. However, the incised ship drawings stand alone.

In a 1994 seminar, Arne Emil Christensen, Jr. noted the drawings in Denmark and Gotland appeared to have been incised while the plaster was still wet, but in Norway the drawings tended to be scratched into dry plaster.<sup>31</sup> Christensen did not infer the drawings made while the plaster was wet were underdrawings for frescos. Interestingly most of the incised ship drawings in Ireland appear to be scratched into dry plaster, further discounting any notion of the incised ship drawings serving as underdrawings for frescos.

#### Recording of Everyday Seaborne Activities

The incised ships may represent a record of everyday seaborne activities. Christensen believed the ships were "expressions of men, probably boys who were living in a maritime society" who were enamoured with ships as "tools for trade and warfare" and "symbols of power and glory."<sup>32</sup> This so-called past-time fascination with ships is

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<sup>29</sup> Henry S. Crawford, "The Mural Paintings and Inscriptions at Knockmoy Abbey," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 9, no. 1 (1919): 209. Mary McGrath, "The Materials and Techniques of Irish Medieval Wall-Paintings," *The Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 117 (1987): 111.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Arne Emil Christensen, Jr., "Ship Graffiti. In O. Crumlin-Pedersen and B. Munch-Thye," in *The Ship as Symbol in Prehistoric and Medieval Scandinavia, Papers from an International Research Seminar at Danish National Museum, Copenhagen, 5-7 May 1994*. (Copenhagen: The National Museum Copenhagen, 1995), 182.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

supported by ship graffiti on secular objects. Three planks of wood with incised longships and a small replica of a Viking longboat, most likely a toy, were found during archaeological excavations in Dublin.<sup>33</sup> However, why would the ecclesiastical authorities permit ships to be incised on the walls if they had no religious context? Brady and Corlett contended the almost "exclusively ecclesiastical association of these ships" meant they were intended to be religious symbols.<sup>34</sup> For example, in Mark 6:47, Jesus walks on water to rescue a boat of disciples in the middle of a lake. Similarly, in the Apostolic Constitutions, a collection of later treatises regarding discipline, worship and Christian doctrine dating from 375 to 380 AD, the Church is compared to a great ship with "the deacons as mariners to prepare places for the brethren as for passengers, with all due care and decency."<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, the word "nave" which defines the main area of the church open to lay people is derived from the Latin term *navis*, meaning ship.<sup>36</sup> In support of this interpretation, Champion observed that, "each ship seems to respect the space around it with no two inscriptions obviously overlapping each other."<sup>37</sup> If the drawings were an informal method of documenting maritime life, one would expect the graffiti to be overlapping and messy. Additionally, the incised ship drawings are not found in the domestic buildings associated with the sites. Both of these observations point to the ship graffiti having a sacred meaning.

### Recording of Historic Events

Perhaps, the ship graffiti were designed to record significant events and not everyday occurrences. In an article published in 2010, historian

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<sup>33</sup> Arne Emil Christensen, Jr., *Ship Graffiti and Models*, ed. Patrick F. Wallace, MRIA, vol. 2, *Miscellanea 1. Medieval Dublin Excavations, 1962-81* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy for National Museum of Ireland, 1988), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Holy Ships," 31.

<sup>35</sup> Bishop Clement and Citizen of Rome (Pseudonym), *Apostolic Constitutions (or Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Lat. Constitutiones Apostolorum)*, (375 - 380 AD), <https://ldsfocuschrist2.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/apostolic-constitutions-william-whiston.pdf>. PDF.

<sup>36</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster," 324.

<sup>37</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 91-92.

Véronique Plesch noted that inscriptions at San Sebastiano at Arborio recorded key events in the life of the community including storms, epidemics, wars, the beheading of Louis XVI and a comet sighting.<sup>38</sup> In 1318, the archbishops of Dublin and Cashel were unable to attend the papal curia in Avignon because the Irish Sea was "so very perilous and stormy."<sup>39</sup> A safe voyage could never be assumed. Gerald of Wales (c.1146-c.1223), the first foreigner to write a book about the topography of Ireland, remarked, "the Irish Sea, surging with currents rushing together, is nearly always tempestuous so that even in the summer, it scarcely shows itself calm even for a few days."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the graffiti may memorialise ships lost at sea. Champion described English seas as "graveyards bigger than those of the largest cathedrals dotted with the unblessed graves of a million fathers, husbands and brothers."<sup>41</sup> As noted by Plesch, the ritual act of inscribing the event removes it from the present and forever sets it in the past, allowing those left behind to move forward with their lives. All they can do is "digest the event, objectify it and then detach from it."<sup>42</sup>

Macalister posited the ship graffiti at Moyne Friary recorded the failed Spanish Armada of 1588.<sup>43</sup> He viewed the drawings as "representing floating wreckage and floating bodies with seabirds feeding upon them."<sup>44</sup> Champion noted a similar occurrence in English churches where the ship drawings appear with "sails missing and yardarms torn away" possibly representing wrecked ships.<sup>45</sup> Twenty-six ships from the Spanish Armada were recorded as wrecked on the western Irish coast and several thousand sailors died either by

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<sup>38</sup> Véronique Plesch, "Destruction or Preservation? The Meaning of Graffiti on Paintings in Religious Sites," in *Art, Piety and Destruction in the Christian West, 1500-1700*, ed. Virginia Chieffo Raguin (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 141.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 116-17.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>42</sup> Plesch, "Destruction or Preservation?," 158.

<sup>43</sup> Macalister, "On Graffiti," 116-17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>45</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 95.

drowning or by the sword of an Irishman.<sup>46</sup> Surely, such a gruesome scene would have been permanently seared into the minds of those living nearby. Whether they would be inclined to document the horrific event on church walls is uncertain. Some incised ship drawings do seem to document ships fully rigged, ready for battle with gun ports in the hull and a crow's nest for enemy lookout (Figure 5). However, Brady and Corlett identified the five ships on a column dividing the nave and the south transept at Ennis Friary as cargo ships.<sup>47</sup> While not uncommon for merchant ships to be recommissioned as war ships during times of conflict, this explanation does not satisfactorily explain the sites where a simple, single masted ship is depicted such as the drawing in Corcomroe Abbey (Figure 6).

#### Dedication of Ships Before Maiden Voyage

A large number of ships supplied to the English fleets were built in Irish ports in the late middle ages.<sup>48</sup> Three of those ports, Cork, Waterford and Wexford, also have ecclesiastical sites with ship graffiti. Traditionally, before a ship took its maiden voyage, the vessel would be christened and given a religious name to ensure both the ship and crew were protected from harm. More than seventy-five percent of Venetian ships from the end of the twelfth century to the early fifteenth century were given a religious name.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, of the 2,793 ship names recorded in England's maritime logs between 1320 and 1360, the name Nicholas appears with the greatest frequency, a total of 248 ships.<sup>50</sup> Saint Nicholas (270-343) was a Bishop of Myra in Lycia during the fourth century and is considered the Patron Saint of sailors. As part of his legend, Nicholas reportedly helped a ship in the eastern Mediterranean Sea caught in a storm. The sailors prayed for his intervention and he miraculously appeared on the ship and helped

<sup>46</sup> Cormac F. Lowth, "Finds of the Spanish Armada," *Dublin Historical Record* 57, no. 1 (2003): 24.

<sup>47</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster" 313.

<sup>48</sup> O'Neill, *Merchants and Mariners*, 112.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea Babuin, "Byzantine Ship Graffiti from the Church of Prophitis Elias in Thessaloniki," *Skyllis* 11, no. 1 (2011): 15.

<sup>50</sup> Craig L. Lambert, *Shipping the Medieval Military: English Maritime Logistics in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2011), 216.

them into deeper water. After the ordeal, the sailors went to a church in Myra to give thanks.<sup>51</sup> Saint Nicholas is also the Patron Saint of Galway, Ireland, where incised ship drawings have been documented. In discussing ship graffiti at Hagia Sophia Church in Istanbul, Anthony Bryer believed the drawings were related to the dedication of ships.<sup>52</sup> While the drawings may have been part of ship launching festivities, the crudely drawn ships were probably not part of the formalised christening ceremony. The construction of a ship was a complicated and expensive endeavour undertaken at the behest of wealthy and powerful people. A formal dedication would have been correspondingly involved.

#### Related to Pilgrimage and Ex-Voto

Morton suggested the ships were related to pilgrimage due to the proximity of ship graffiti to key ports used by pilgrims.<sup>53</sup> Eleven Irish ports are associated with religious travel to and from Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain.<sup>54</sup> Six of these ports are close to sites with ship graffiti. The interior walls of an oratory in Templemanaghan, located north-west of Dingle, County Kerry, are covered with small incised crosses.<sup>55</sup> Pilgrims likely incised these crosses to signify completion of a pilgrimage.<sup>56</sup> Similar crosses are found in the interior of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.<sup>57</sup> The connection between the ship graffiti and pilgrimage would be more satisfactory if ship graffiti were found at these pilgrimage sites as well. Due to the precious nature of relics and

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<sup>51</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 93.

<sup>52</sup> Anthony Bryer, "Shipping in the Empire of the Trebizond," *The Mariner's Mirror* 52, no. 1 (1966): 5.

<sup>53</sup> Morton, "Irish Medieval Wall Painting," 335.

<sup>54</sup> The six counties are Wexford, New Ross, Waterford, Cork, Limerick and Galway. Roger Stalley, "Sailing to Santiago: Medieval Pilgrimage to Santiago De Compostela and Its Artistic Influence in Ireland," in *Ireland and Europe in the Middle Ages: Selected Essays on Architecture* (London: Pindar Press, 1988), 398.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Harbison et al., "Early Irish Pilgrim Archaeology in the Dingle Peninsula," *World Archaeology* 26, no. 1 (1994): 98.

<sup>56</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 64. Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster," 323-324.

shrines, pilgrims were probably guided around the sites and not left alone. In many places, pilgrim badges, tin ampulla for holy water and wax were sold to pilgrims to discourage them from taking pieces of shrines as portable talismans.<sup>58</sup> Webb noted the wax was sometimes modelled into the shapes of ships and anchors as votive offerings with one story describing rescued sailors offering a ship made of wax to be lit during mass.<sup>59</sup>

Several instances of ship models offered as votive offerings have been recorded. Many churches in England and Denmark had intricate miniature ship models hanging from timber roofs. In some cases, the models were ex-voto given to the church as an act of thanksgiving for a safe journey.<sup>60</sup> One such story concerns Irish sailors who interrupted the 1307 papal inquiry researching canonisation for Thomas de Cantilupe. Having survived a violent storm en route to France for wine, the sailors wanted to present a ship ex-voto and pay homage to the Cantilupe tomb.<sup>61</sup> Clearly, the sailors thought he should be declared a saint (Cantilupe was canonised in 1320). Westerdahl contended an incised ship drawing was "a poor man's" ex-voto offering.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps, pilgrims created some of the cruder ship inscriptions or those only having essential elements of a ship with a single mast and hull. However, the more accurate and detailed images such as those found at Moyne Friary and Court Friary suggest the artists had intimate knowledge of ship construction and were more likely seamen.

### Intercessory Prayer

The incised ship drawings may have been designed to invoke a particular saint to intercede on the artist's behalf. Plesch contended the act of writing on the wall was a way of claiming ownership of the space

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<sup>58</sup> Diana Webb, *Pilgrimage in Medieval England* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 81.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 89.

<sup>61</sup> Margery Kirkbride James, *Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade* (Clarendon Press, 1971), 166-67.

<sup>62</sup> Westerdahl, "Medieval Carved Ship Images Found in Nordic Churches," 344.

and creating a personal "contact zone" for communicating with "heavenly martyrs and seeking divine assistance."<sup>63</sup> Many prayer inscriptions at San Sebastiano in Arborio, Italy are etched on religious frescos representing iconic depictions of saints. Plesch believed the saintly subject matter of the frescos dictated the placement of the inscriptions.<sup>64</sup> This line of argument leads to the conclusion that specific spaces in the church where ships drawings are found had a sacred significance. The inscriptions may have been close to the former location of a baptismal font, an important tomb or a minor altar dedicated to a specific saint. Unfortunately, most of the sites in Ireland have undergone changes of use, especially during the English Reformation. Many have been exposed to the elements and unoccupied for long periods destroying architectural evidence of ephemeral furnishings that may have influenced the placement of the drawings at the site.

However, inferences can be made at a few sites. Immediately below the ship drawing on the north wall of the chancel at Corcomroe Abbey in County Clare is the recumbent effigy tomb of Conor "na Suidane" O'Brien, King of Thomond who was slain in battle in 1268 (Figure 7).<sup>65</sup> A small group of ship drawings are found near the south-east corner of the south transept at Court Abbey. At the juncture of the south and east wall is a small recessed dome area with a drain hole (Figure 8). In all likelihood, this was a piscina used for washing the communion vessels. In addition, on the west wall of the south transept a ship drawing is immediately below an area with traces of paint, suggesting the area contained a wall painting. Thus, a conclusion may be drawn linking the subject matter of the wall painting to the incised ship drawing. Ennis Friary's ship drawings are located on a column dividing the nave from the south transept. A few steps away from the column on the east-most pillar of the arches leading to the south

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<sup>63</sup> Véronique Plesch, "Memory on the Wall: Graffiti on Religious Wall Paintings," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002): 168.

<sup>64</sup> Plesch, "Destruction or Preservation?," 149-50.

<sup>65</sup> Brady and Corlett, "Ships on Plaster," 323.

transept is a retable of an Ecce Homo panel in relief (Figure 9).<sup>66</sup> At one time, this would have stood above a minor altar of the church. Such depictions of the suffering Christ, surrounded by the instruments of the Passion, were designed to aid in prayer and contemplation. In this case, the ship drawings nearby might be prayers of intercession.

Many Irish patron saints are associated with special powers over rivers and seas and perhaps the ship graffiti were designed to communicate with a particular Saint and call on their miraculous powers in times of need. In the *Lives of Irish Saints* (*Bethada Náem nÉrenn*) an electronic edition recently compiled by Elva Johnston and funded by the School of History, University College Cork, Saint Abban (died 520?) is associated with New Ross in County Wexford and is reported to have special powers of the sea.<sup>67</sup> The *Lives* provides a couplet to be repeated three times in his name to ensure a safe return from a sea voyage.<sup>68</sup> Saint Brendan (Bréanainn) of Galway (c. 484-c.577), Patron Saint of Kerry and Clonfert, is known as "the navigator" or "the voyager" for his famous voyage in search of the island of the Blessed and his ability to calm the sea during a violent storm.<sup>69</sup> Saint Nicholas of Tolentino (c. 1246-1305) was an Augustinian friar named after Saint Nicholas of Myra, the saint whose name was used often in the dedication of ships. Saint Nicholas of Tolentino is connected with the Waterford custom of placing bread blessed in his honour in boats.<sup>70</sup> The *Acta Sanctorum* records several nautical miracles associated with Saint Nicholas' bread. In addition to saving sailors and ships, the bread

<sup>66</sup> Conchubhar Ua Briain, "Ennis Franciscan Priory," *The Architectural and Topographical Record*, Part 2 1 (1908), [http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ennis\\_franiscan\\_priory\\_cobrien.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archaeology/ennis_franiscan_priory_cobrien.htm).

<sup>67</sup> "Bethada Náem nÉrenn," CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a Project of University College, Cork, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T201000G/>.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> "The Saints of Munster Brought It About Well," CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts: a Project of University College, Cork, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/online/T402577.html>.

<sup>70</sup> John Hennig, "St. Nicholas' Bread," *Béaloides: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society* 13, no. 1/2 (1944): 266.

could also be thrown into the sea to appease demons and sea monsters.<sup>71</sup>

Many English churches along the coast are dedicated to Saint Nicholas of Myra. A baptismal font from the Saint Nicholas Church in Brighton has a single masted sailing ship carved in stone.<sup>72</sup> The ship carving is similar in design to the ship graffiti at Cashel Cathedral, though with figures standing in the boat. Similar dedications to Saint Nicholas are recorded in Ireland; however, Irish saint connections were more common. Initial investigations have not revealed any specific maritime saintly cults associated with the sites containing ship graffiti. While the connection seems probable, certainty is not possible.

### Summary

Friars, monks, priests, lay brothers or nuns probably did not adorn the walls with ship graffiti, but the possibility cannot be discounted completely. Where multiple ships are presented in an open site, the consensus among scholars is many “artists” were involved over an extended period of time. Since most spaces with drawings were open to lay people, the artists could have been carpenters working at a nearby shipyard, pilgrims returning or planning a pilgrimage, parishioners with loved ones at sea and mariners facing an impending voyage or thankful to be safely at home. While scholars have suggested several possible functions and meanings for the incised ship drawings, some are more plausible than others. The crudely drawn ships are unlikely to represent underdrawings for frescoes. Due to the predominately religious context of the spaces where the drawings occur, random doodling is easy to discount. The more likely function was a prayer to a particular saint etched in stone by someone facing an impending voyage or who had lost a loved one at sea. In the middle ages, sea voyages were very dangerous; even if a sailor survived the extreme weather as his vessel tossed about, he still feared becoming a victim of piracy.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>72</sup> Champion, *Lost Voices*, 93.

The Annals of St. Mary's Abbey in Dublin mention in 1204 John de Curcie attempted fifteen times to "saile over sea into Ireland but was alwaise in danger and the wind evermore against him: wherefore he waited a while among the monkes of Chester."<sup>73</sup> In the course of his fifteen attempts, Curcie had time to ponder the safety of his ship and whether it would withstand the elements. Perhaps, while he was waiting with the monks of Chester, he decided to inscribe a replica of his boat on the fabric of the church walls, near a minor altar dedicated to Saint Nicholas. The inscription was a way of asking Saint Nicholas to intercede on his behalf and provide a circle of protection around his vessel. Curcie's inscription would have signalled to others that this was a space that was active and an effective venue for prayer. Yasin noted the "clusters of graffiti seem to murmur a steady hum of separate and unorchestrated, yet harmonious prayers."<sup>74</sup> Unfortunately, we will never know whether the drawings were incised in a sense of desperation for an overdue ship, in trepidation for an impending voyage or in joy for loved ones back on dry land. However, we can safely assume the images were devotional in nature and the spaces where they occur were at one time viewed as sacred. As the location of the incised ship drawings continues to be documented, hopefully a clearer picture will emerge regarding how church spaces were used allowing us to reconstruct the placement of minor altars to particular saints, important burial spaces and movable altars.

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I would like to thank my trusty field assistant and husband Matt Winslow for helping to find many of the incised ship drawings. I would also like to thank Dr. Rachel Moss, head of the Department of History of Art and Architecture at Trinity College Dublin, for introducing me to the ship drawings in Ireland and for challenging some of my initial conclusions.

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<sup>73</sup> O'Neill, *Merchants and Mariners*, 116-17.

<sup>74</sup> Yasin, "Prayers on Site: The Materiality of Devotional Graffiti," 49.

**Glossary of Terms (sources: Grove Art Online and Oxford Art Online)**

1. Arcade - A row of arches on columns or piers attached to a wall.
2. Arriccio layer – The underlying layer of a fresco that is laid slightly coarsely to provide a key for the intonaco layer.
3. Apotropaic markings – Symbols or patterns scratched into fabric of a church to ward off evil spirits.
4. Buon frescos – Italian for true fresco, in which pigments, ground in water are applied to wet plaster.
5. Consecration Crosses – Crosses on the interior and exterior walls of Christian churches showing where the bishop has anointed the church with holy water in order to consecrate it.
6. Ecce Homo – Statue of Jesus during his trial after being imprisoned by the Romans, designed to trigger a sympathetic response from the viewer.
7. Ex-voto – Votive offering to a saint in fulfilment of a vow or in gratitude or devotion. The destinations of pilgrimages often include shrines decorated with ex-votos.
8. Fresco secco – Italian term for a wall painting technique where pigments are mixed with a binder and/or lime and applied onto a dry plaster.
9. Intonaco layer – Italian term for the final, very thin layer of plaster on which a fresco is painted
10. Mezzo fresco – Italian term for a wall painting technique where pigments are painted only a nearly dry intonaco layer that is firm enough to not take a thumb-print.
11. *Pars pro toto* – Latin for a part of the whole, where a portion of a object represents its entirety.
12. Patron saint - A saint who is believed to protect a particular place or type of person.
13. Recumbent effigy tomb – representation of a specific person in a lying position in the form of a funerary sculpture.
14. Respond - Half-pier bonded into a wall and carrying one end of an arch.

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Figures

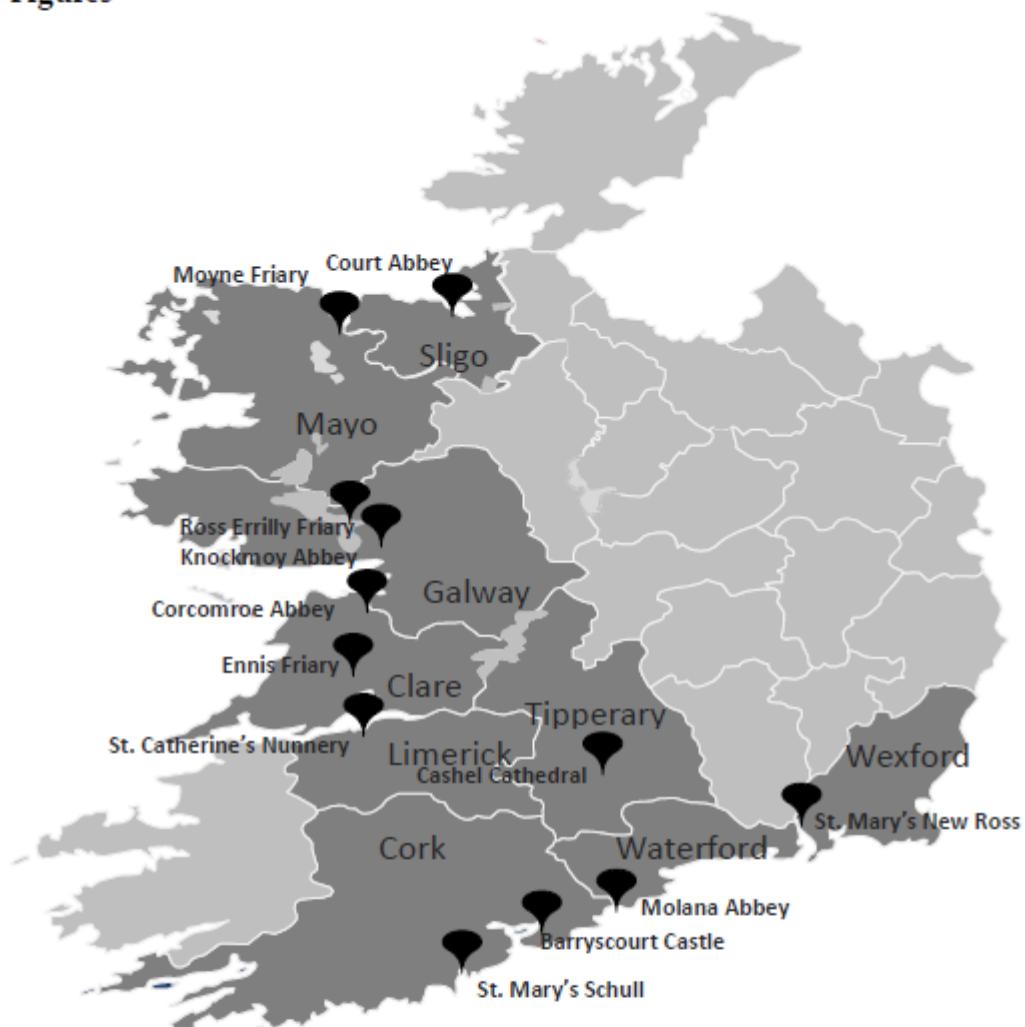


Figure 1. Location of Ecclesiastical Sites with Incised Ship Drawings.  
Map created by Karen Winslow using template downloaded from  
<http://www.24point0.com/ppt-shop/republic-of-ireland-map-editable-ppt>.

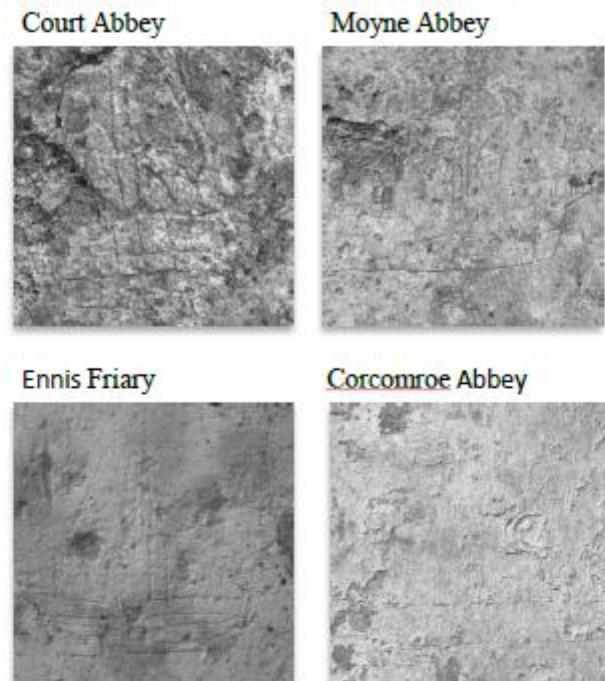


Figure 2. Photos of incised ship drawings at Irish ecclesiastical sites.  
Photos taken by Karen Winslow.

Moyne Abbey

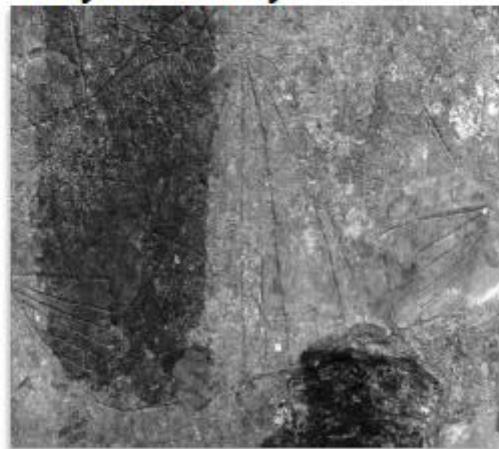


Figure 3. Incised drawing at Moyne Friary with details at bow and stern, but centre section completely open. Photo taken by Karen Winslow.

## Corcomroe Abbey



Figure 4. Example of a Consecration Cross at Corcomroe Abbey. Photo taken by Karen Winslow.

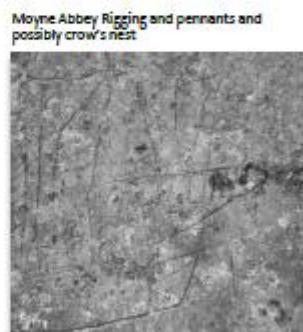


Figure 5. Photos of ship details. Photos taken by Karen Winslow.

### Corcomroe Abbey

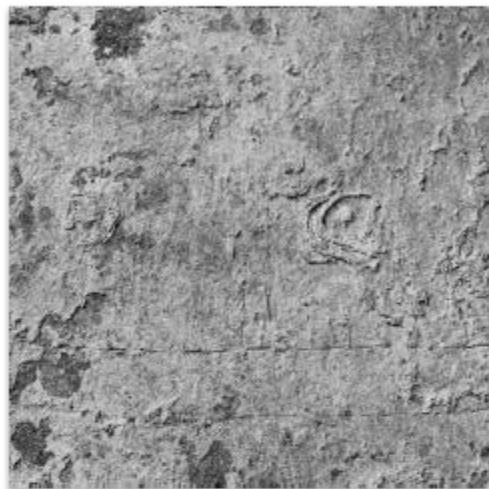


Figure 6. Single masted ship at Corcomroe Abbey. Photo taken by Karen Winslow.

### Corcomroe Abbey



Figure 7. Recumbent Effigy Tomb of Conor "na Suidane" O'Brien, King of Thomond at Corcomroe Abbey. Single Masted Ship drawing is located in the upper right space of the photo. Photo taken by Karen Winslow.

## Court Abbey



Figure 8. Court Abbey, Junction of the south and east wall of the south transept. Matt Winslow indicating ship graffiti. Piscina within the small recessed dome area to his left. Photo taken by Karen Winslow.

Ennis Friary, Nave looking East, Photo By Andreas F. Borchert, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45313473>



Ennis Friary, Ecce Homo detail. Photo By Andreas F. Borchert, CC BY-SA 3.0 de, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45356314>



Figure 9. Ennis Friary, ship graffiti on column dividing the nave from the south transept and a few steps away on the east most pillar of the arches leading to the south transept, a small Ecce Homo panel in relief.