

A tall, cylindrical stone round tower with a conical roof and a small arched window near the top. To its right is a stone church with a gabled roof and a small bell tower. The background features trees with autumn foliage under a blue sky.

Timahoe

ROUND TOWER

***T**imahoe round tower is one of the finest examples of a round tower in the country and is the only remaining feature of an early ecclesiastical foundation.*

St. Mochua founded a monastery here in the 7th century which was plundered and burnt to the ground in 919 and 1142. In 1019 a priest is said to have been murdered in the doorway of the church. St. Mochua emerges as an interesting figure in early Irish Christian folklore. However, there are 58 Irish saints called St. Mochua so it is always possible that there is confusion over which tale belongs to which one. The son of Lonan, Mochua was originally from Achonry in Connaught and was a successful soldier before becoming a monk. According to folklore, Mochua lived at Timahoe as a hermit with only a rooster, a mouse and a fly. The rooster would ensure that Mochua never missed matins (morning prayers).

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The mouse would nibble his ear if he fell asleep to ensure he didn't miss prayers during the day and night and the fly would walk along Mochua's texts to make sure he never lost his spot. There is a modern piece of sculpture at the site called St. Mochua's Desk which commemorates this tale. Miracles associated with Mochua include the healing of two fellow abbots, St Coleman of Elo and St. Fintan Munnu of memory loss and leprosy respectively.

In 880AD, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, Focarta, son of Dubhdacheall, was Abbot of Teach Mochua (Timahoe). The round tower itself dates to the 12th century (a rather late round tower) although the base

could be earlier in date, suggesting that it was possibly built in two phases. This is suggested by the difference in building material used in the tower. The base is made of sandstone to a height of around three meters while the rest of the tower is made of limestone. In the later medieval period the O'Mores refounded the monastery but in 1609 it was granted to Richard Cosby. It was at this time that the medieval church was converted into a tower house.

The round tower stands six storeys high to a height of just below 30m and has a conical cap from the 1880s. The doorway, partway up the tower, is decorated in Hiberno-Irish Romanesque style with four orders

with human heads with intertwining hair. The window at second floor level is decorated in a similar fashion, although this is a little more difficult to see from ground level. Internally there are no remaining floors. The similarities between the styles found at Timahoe and the nearby Killeslin church, suggest the same sculptor which would place the construction of the tower we see today at c1150AD.

The church/tower house structure is somewhat unusual because of its conversion. You can still see a large arch belonging to the medieval church with a fine decorated capital still visible. Only the East wall of the tower house survives to full height with small portions of the North and South wall



still visible. A sheela-na-gig is reported to have been located on the East wall of the castle, but this is now missing. It is possible that the figure is still located at the site under debris. Carved into the third order of stone on the Romanesque doorway of the round tower is what was believed to be a "seán-na-gig". All agree that it is not a sheela, as the carving is of a male rather than a female figure, but instead is a very interesting example of a Romanesque male exhibitionist figure typically found on Romanesque churches throughout Europe. The male exhibitionist figure at Timahoe round tower appears to be that of a male bearded figure in a squat position with his two hands either pulling down on his beard or grabbing his buttocks

and pulling his cheeks apart. Similar male exhibitionist figures can be seen on Romanesque churches in England and France.

The classic sheela-na-gigs of late medieval date are typically female figures carved onto churches and castles dating from the 15th/16th century and look very different from the Romanesque exhibitionist figures. They are related to these earlier figures but are quite different stylistically from the Romanesque figures.

It is possible that the sheela-na-gig described as located on the doorway of Timahoe Castle and now lost was a figure dating from the late medieval period while the male figure is an example of a 12th century exhibitionist figure carved originally for the doorway of Timahoe round tower. This would make it a very interesting, rare and early example of a European motif found in an Irish context on a Romanesque building.

The local community have, in conjunction with Laois County Council and the OPW, opened a wonderful heritage centre on the site to welcome visitors. The centre is a part of the Ireland's Ancient East initiative and includes an audio-visual presentation on the wonderful, undiscovered monastic heritage of Co Laois. Timahoe is a beautiful, unspoilt Irish country village with the Round tower dominating the landscape. Visitors are welcome to the village where there is a wonderful playground beside the heritage centre which includes toilets and Wi-Fi.

► *Images: All images courtesy of AbartaHeritage.ie*

Abarta Heritage's core services and products are digital audio guides and heritage interpretation that makes the story of heritage sites, towns and places informative, accessible and fun.

The following link is to the Laois Monastic Trail audio guide that includes Timahoe. It was produced by Abarta Heritage in conjunction with Laois County Council and it is free of charge for users. It is designed to lead you around the beautiful landscape of County Laois to discover the remains of ancient churches and monasteries and to hear stories of saints and sinners at the dawn of Christianity in Ireland. On the tour you will discover wonderful historical sites like Aghaboe Abbey, Clonenagh, Coolbanagher, Timahoe with its famous round tower and Killeslin one of the most beautiful Romanesque sites in Ireland.

<http://www.abartaheritage.ie/product/laois-monastic-trail-audio-guide/>

This is one of a number of audio guides that produced by Abarta Heritage for County Laois, including the Rock of Dunamase, Laois Heritage Trail, Abbeyleix Heritage Town, Portlaoise Historical Trail and the Story of Portlaoise. All available for free from their website www.abartaheritage.ie (where there are more than 25 free audio guides for Ireland's historical sites).

