Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

A Fragmented Masterpiece

Recovering the Biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish Cross-Slab

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Chapter 8

Conclusions

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This project arose from the discovery, in 2001, of the lower portion of the Pictish slab at Hilton, Ross and Cromarty, together with thousands of Pictish carved fragments from the lost front face. It has greatly enhanced our understanding of the value of one of Scotland's premier monuments to contemporary society as well as throughout its history (illus 8.1). This has been achieved though a multi-disciplinary project involving art-history, archaeology, scientific analysis, ethnography and cultural history. The result is a wider understanding of the meaning and relevance of the monument at the time of its first erection and how this has changed through time. The interdisciplinary nature of the project produced a range of perspectives, modes of analysis, and styles of writing. However, it is hoped that the tensions between different approaches are productive and that the diversity of interpretation allows for a wider, multi-vocal approach to the monument and its significance.

The diverse research methods of the project team have included both conventional and more experimental aspects. Within the archaeological sphere, the excavation methodology was of necessity targeted and limited, rather than being a more conventional but expensive and lengthy 'open area' excavation. A recording system which could deal efficiently with the location of the many thousands of fragments was designed for this project. The standard analysis of the artefacts, pottery, soils, faunal remains, human remains and use of radiocarbon dating was expanded to include the more innovative dating technique of Optically Stimulated Luminescence. The reconstruction of the monument has so far involved a conventional 'hands-on' visual approach, with the addition of a pilot study involving a database-driven methodology. The geological work has revealed a potential quarry for the cross-slab nearby at Jessie Port.

The biographical approach to the monument explored in Chapter 6 is part of a growing body of research focusing on the social lives of monuments and artefacts, but it is far from conventional with respect to early medieval sculpture. The resulting biography incorporates the archaeological and art-historical insights but also draws on historical sources, oral history, folklore, museum research and ethnographic evidence to reveal the complex history of this monument.

The study of the art-historical context of what is now known of the cross-slab when complete contributes to a wider understanding of Pictish art, locally, nationally and within Insular art generally. The Hilton of Cadboll slab, usually regarded as the most secular slab, in subject-matter, of the tall cross-slabs of Easter Ross, is now shown to have been profoundly Christian, drawing on venerable Early Christian imagery to convey its message of Salvation. The uniquely architectural, embossed stepped base preserved on the front of the lower portion confirms Pictish sculptors' knowledge of the representation, widely known in the West, of the jewelled cross erected at Golgotha in the fifth century (illus 8.2). Elements of this imagery are found elsewhere in Ross-shire, on the Shandwick cross, on a cross-slab at Rosemarkie and on the Edderton cross-slab, where a stepped base for the cross on the front of the slab was revealed in 2004. The reconstruction of the mid-portion showed that a cross-head of a distinctly Pictish design was set at the centre of the spiral panel on the reverse of the slab. This glorified cross can reasonably be compared to the vision of the cross set against the sun experienced by Constantine the Great before the battle at the Milvian Bridge around AD 312. The vision was associated with Conversion and the Triumph of Christianity and accounts of it had a major influence on the symbolic representations of the cross. The glorified cross and the Eucharistic vine-scroll which borders the reverse of the slab allows a reappraisal of the famous image of a female rider on the Hilton slab. It is argued that this dominant Christian context and the frontal pose of the mounted figure, with its resonance of depictions of Epona and of the Virgin Mary, suggest that, like the male riders on Pictish slabs, the figure is not one of a specific contemporary aristocrat but rather an idealisation of in this instance female authority and Christian integrity. On the front face of the mid-portion a case can be made for identifying the fragments of figural sculpture reconstructed as located on either side of the cross-

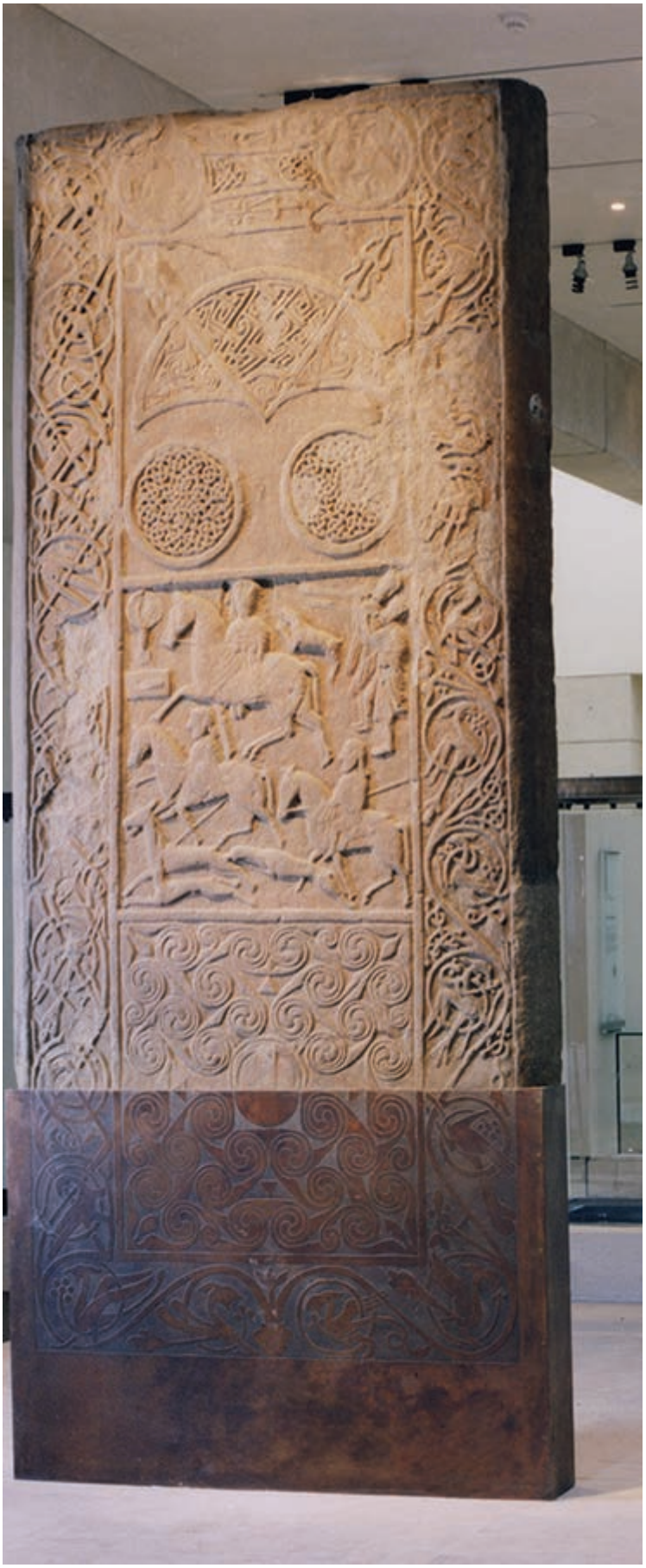

Illustration 8.2
The front face of the middle and lower portions of the cross-slab. This is a digitally enhanced version of Illustration 5.33 with the conservator's hands removed (based on images © Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

shaft as concerned with Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell. Hell iconography is a feature of other Pictish sculpture but the figures on the Hilton cross-face are very damaged and the interpretation remains uncertain.

The heavy fleshy creatures that flank the cross-base are in a style that can be directly related to the animal art of the other tall slabs of Easter Ross, the St Andrews Sarcophagus and to a number of Insular works of art of the second half of the eighth century, in particular the Anglo-Saxon Gandersheim Casket. This whalebone house-shaped liturgical Casket was made in Mercia in the late eighth century, and thus the connection bears out the long perceived relationship between Mercian and Pictish works of art and provides in its shared stylistic background the most secure approximate date for the Hilton cross-slab. The condition of the carving on the hitherto unknown bottom edge of the Hilton vine-scroll shows that the same animal style is used both for the inhabitants of the scrolls and for animals on the upper portion. This uniformity of style is the creation of the Hilton sculptor, as is the unique arrangement of the animals flanking the growing point of the vine where the creatures face the same way. This rather quirky innovation matches the known discrepancy of the organisation of the vine-scroll borders on the upper portion. The art of the Hilton cross-slab underscores the relationship between the sculpture north and south of the Grampians evident in the other tall slabs of Easter Ross. It is no longer possible to treat the northern sculpture as an isolated phenomenon, nationally or internationally.

The archaeological excavations led to the discovery that the cross-slab had been broken twice early in its life, the first time when the tenon broke and the second time when the upper portion fell, leaving the lower

Illustration 8.1
The Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab on display in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

portion in the ground. The excavations also revealed that its original location was probably close to where it was re-erected in the mid-12th century, perhaps even where the collar stone was found, rather than an elevated position close to the sea. Closely associated with this early setting was early medieval evidence for a burial, a stone-built structure and for a settlement nearby. This suggests that there was possibly a Pictish chapel here accompanied by burial, which acted as a satellite site to the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, as may the sites at Nigg and Shandwick. The medieval context for the second setting, possibly slightly pre-dating the construction of a medieval chapel and children's graveyard, has showed the continued importance of the site to medieval society and the desire to express veneration and respect for this Christian monument. Despite the small area of the graveyard that has been examined, it can be seen that its use changed after the Reformation to include the adult population. The surrounding deposits are not rich with artefacts but are consistent with a site that was in the vicinity of medieval and post-medieval settlement.

The biographical approach has enabled the changing meanings and values of the monument to be traced though time and contributed to a wider understanding of attitudes towards early medieval sculpture. Historical research has unearthed important sources pertaining to the monument and its wider contexts. For the early medieval and medieval periods these are often remote from the cross-slab and its Tarbat environment, and we have had to draw on wider historical research to set the context for what at times are inevitably speculative arguments. For more recent phases in its biography, historical sources pertaining directly to the monument or its immediate context have been enlightening. For instance, the serendipitous discovery of George Mackenzie's letter of 1675 about a storm the year before which toppled a large obelisk has been important in our interpretation of 17th-century events surrounding the cross-slab. Furthermore, whilst at times frustrating in their silences, historical documents from the 17th century onwards have enabled a much fuller picture to be drawn of the monument and the various people who have engaged with it, ranging from Alexander Duff and his wives, to early antiquarians and travellers, to the Macleods of Cadboll and the seaboard communities of Easter Ross. Undoubtedly the richest body of documentary sources relates to the 1921 events surrounding the upper portion's brief sojourn at the British Museum and its return to Scotland, which have enabled fascinating insights into the monument's national significance (see Chapter 7.6).

The ethnographic research, involving qualitative interviews and participant observation, has also proved to be very important revealing the depth and range of meanings and values attached to the monument in contemporary society. Through these modes of research it has been possible to explore the unusual and unique circumstances behind this particular project, and to gain insights into local feelings of ownership and attachment, which can conflict with the aims and priorities of archaeologists, art-historians, heritage managers and museum professionals. This research has deepened our understanding of the significance of the later locations in which crosses are found and will underpin future strategies for the protection, preservation and curation of carved stones.

Nevertheless, the project as a whole has not been without its limitations, which have left some gaps in our knowledge. The restrictions placed on the extent of the excavations meant that it was not possible to explore the monument's wider Pictish and later medieval context. This is in contrast to the site at Portmahomack where full-scale excavation revealed a wide range of sculpture, traces of metalworking and leather workshops in addition to a monastery, mill and farm (Carver 2004). The departure from comprehensive open area excavation has also left many stratigraphical relationships unresolved and therefore the stratigraphy remains more difficult to understand and prone to uncertainties. Little has been revealed about the origins of the chapel, when it was built and whether there was a stone-built predecessor. There remain contradictions within the archaeological evidence, such as the dating of the fragment scatter by OSL to possibly the 16th century while the record of a stone falling in a storm in 1674 would suggest that the defacement took place after this date, unless there were two phases of defacement, the implications of which are explored in Chapter 6. The spread of carved fragments around the cross setting seems to confirm two separate defacement events, the first of the cross specifically and a second which involved the removal of the remaining carving in preparation for the 17th-century memorial. However, there is no clear evidence indicating how much time passed between these two events, which could have been separated by days or decades.

Although considerable progress has been made with the reconstruction of the mid-portion, the need to come to an 'honourable stop' has meant that the original cross-shape has not been revealed, although

Illustration 8.3
Heather James and Colin Muir discuss the discovery during excavation of the lower portion of the cross-slab

the investigators believe that the majority of the carved surface has been retrieved and catalogued. This was confirmed by calculating the density of the fragments retrieved which returned an estimate of between 70 per cent and 85 per cent of the monument having been recovered (excluding the missing tenon). The reconstruction drawing also shows that there are no missing fragments large enough to have acted as a lintel stone for a building in the village, as was once rumoured, although this rumour could perhaps relate to other fragments of the medieval relief cross that was also found.

Computer-aided methods for reconstructing the cross-face involving scanning the fragments to create surface models and then refitting them digitally, or even automatically, have not been explored. Whilst some projects have used this approach on stone fragments (eg Stanford Digital Forma Urbis Romae Project, http://formaurbis.stanford.edu/), they involve greater hardware resources and funding than was available to this team and required the development of bespoke software systems. Even with access to enhanced resources, automatic refitting would have been significantly hampered by the large number, small size and abraded surfaces of much of the Hilton of Cadboll assemblage. Crucially, the fact that much of the assemblage was worn and further abraded after it was initially dressed off the monuments suggests that no attempt at automated refitting, however sophisticated, would yield results likely to justify the required investment.

Some might also say that the inability to re-unite the lower portion with the fragments and upper portion in the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh was a limitation for the project, particularly for the reconstruction work. However, there is a considerable amount of work that can still be done with the fragments themselves, before exploring whether it is feasible to display all the portions together. Clearly one of the greatest contributions of any future project

to Pictish studies would be the reconstruction of the entire cross face from the many thousands of carved fragments. It is possible that only by reconstructing the uncarved inner layer and the core of the mid-portion of the monument would the outer carved fragments ever be put in their correct positions, and this would be a major undertaking. In the meantime there is further work that could be done with the individual types of ornament, such as key pattern which, it is thought, may constitute a significant element of the design. The possibility could also be further investigated that the red staining noted on the surface of the fragments derives from an applied paint.

There is significant archaeological potential remaining at the chapel site which encompasses Pictish and later activity and which has only been very partially investigated so far. We do not know to what kind of structure the sandstone rubble and fragment of dressed stone belonged and whether there were other structures on this site during the Pictish period, or the nature of settlement in the vicinity. Further archaeological investigation of these structures would contribute to our understanding of the relationship between Hilton of Cadboll and the monastery at Portmahomack. There may even be another setting, consisting of a massive basal slab, as was found beneath the Shandwick cross-slab. What was excavated as the first setting still lies *in situ* in the ground at Hilton and the results so far achieved by the OSL dating method suggest that it would be worthwhile re-excavating this setting and applying OSL dating to the surrounding sand in order to achieve a more accurate date. Further work could also examine whether there is evidence of Pictish activity on top of the hill in the vicinity of Cadboll Mount as has been suggested by Carver (2004).

The medieval context requires further examination, including the remains of the chapel, which has remained essentially untouched, as this would reveal much about the date of construction, the development of the Church on the Tarbat peninsula, and the role it played in the local community. The size of the medieval graveyard is still unknown and the appearance of disarticulated human bone in rabbit burrows around the site indicates that it is not confined to the area to the west of the chapel. Further work could investigate whether the graveyard was segregated by age or sex, how long it was in use, or whether the archaeological evidence so far, which suggests that it was for children only, is misleading. There may be additional features within the chapel enclosure, such as other crosses, which would help to ascertain the importance of this site.

Outside the chapel enclosure there are several features identified by the University of York's geophysical survey, which could relate to the documented medieval fishing village. Investigation of these features could reveal the settlement morphology and the activities taking place in the vicinity of the chapel, which are probably the source of the domestic material found within the wind-blown sand on the chapel site.

An investigation of the post-medieval context could focus on evidence for the impact of the Reformation on the site and its transfer to secular ownership. Documentary sources provide some understanding of the wider historical context but shed little light on the specific events surrounding the chapel itself. Further archaeological investigation could address the decay of the chapel fabric, the nature and extent of the post-medieval burials (including the possibility that they were cholera burials) and the construction of the rectangular plantation bank which surrounds linear features to the east and south of the oval-shaped bank.

It is hoped that this project, and its the publication, will spur academic interest in the Hilton of Cadboll chapel site and that a wider public awareness will be fuelled by the data being made fully available on the web by the Archaeology Data Service (York University). While this project has not required us to re-write the archaeology of the Picts, it has revealed the complex biography of the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab and has increased awareness of the potential for this approach on such a significant monument. It was the grandeur of the stepped cross-base and the completion of the vine-scroll frame, coupled with the challenges presented by the historical and archaeological remains and the many carved fragments from the upper portion that has inspired the project team to appreciate with new eyes the craftsmanship and cultural milieu of Pictish sculptors whose monuments form such a significant part of our heritage. This project has greatly increased our appreciation of the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab as a national treasure.