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Doors to different worlds

Conceptual connections between Gotlandic and Pictish sculpture

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The monumental sculpture from the north-western margins of Europe provides unique insights into the early medieval societies which formed beyond the Roman *limes*. Here ancient traditions of megalithic monumentality were augmented with figurative ornament rich in representational details and iconography. By curious parallel evolution the richest and most detailed examples are developed in eastern Scotland and on Gotland. The visual similarities have frequently prompted comparison between the Gotlandic *bildstenar* and the Pictish symbol stones (Foster 2012). Although the two traditions share an interest in detailed representations of people, creatures and material culture, no direct artistic or social connection has been established. They are independent inventions, which makes them particularly helpful for comparison. This sculpture exerts a magnetic pull and a shared fascination for it is responsible for my first meeting with Anders at a Copenhagen conference in 1987 and further encounters with stones have characterised all our subsequent meetings.

Between the two traditions there are striking parallels, for instance in the prominence of mounted warriors, however their artistic roots are fundamentally different: *bildstenar* are quintessentially Scandinavian while Pictish sculpture draws on Insular Celtic art. Despite the geographic distance, comparing the two traditions can be fruitful, particularly in attempting to understand how these monuments engaged with their audiences. Inspired by Anders' reading of the *bildstenar* (1993) as architectural representation, this paper explores the possibility that a particular form of Pictish sculpture, the cross-slab, was intended, like some of the *bildstenar*, to represent doorways. Not only does this contribute to understanding the semantic significance of the images, but it also allows us to reflect on the otherwise virtually unexamined Pictish church buildings.

The Picts developed sophisticated carving in shallow relief on dressed rectangular slabs by the eighth century, if not earlier (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 174–82), and although it developed stylistically, the essential form remained popular for up to five centuries. The monuments were executed at a range of scales from less than 1 m to over 6 m, but the majority were around 2 m tall and rarely wider than 1 m. The distinguishing feature of all these monuments is the prominent representations of the cross which dominated one, or occasionally both sides.

These crosses never depict the crucifixion, but are always richly embellished with abstract ornament, typically with interlace knotwork, spirals, or key patterns. Using the recent survey of Pictish symbol stones (Fraser 2009) and the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* corpus (Allen and Anderson 1903) it is possible to identify 66 cross-slabs. The cross shafts are frequently flanked by animal ornament: both realistic creatures and fantastic beasts. Approximately 53% of the cross-slabs include Pictish symbols, a unique graphic system invented by the fifth century and used until the tenth century (Forsyth 1997). What is clear is that the cross-slab tradition outlasts the use of Pictish symbols.

We know the Pictish sculptors were also erecting free-standing crosses, indeed some of the cross-slabs depict crosses with supporting bases, but only about ten of these more fragile crosses have survived in Pictland (Foster 2004, 92). The cross-slab thus is the defining form of Pictish sculpture, which continues to be executed until replaced by Romanesque sculptural practice. This contrasts with the Gaelic (including Irish) and Anglo-Saxon overwhelming preferences for free-standing crosses. Dating Pictish sculpture largely relies on art historical argument, because there are so few with inscriptions or well-dated excavations (Portmahomack and Hilton of Cadboll are exceptions).

The rectilinearity, a defining characteristic of Pictish Christian sculpture, is strongly influenced by the intrinsic properties of the prevalent geological formation of eastern Scotland, Old Red Sandstone. Just over half of cross-slabs have flat tops, which has inspired comparisons with carpet pages of the insular manuscript tradition (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 17–39), a point reinforced by some of the decorative motifs. There are also strong stylistic influences linking the sculpture to metalwork and textiles, but hitherto less attention has focused on the possibility of architectural influences, although Henderson and Henderson note in passing that the Aberlemno stone displays the 'architectural skills [of] a regularly cut pediment' (2004, 177).

The presence of a pediment (or shallow-pitched gable) suggests an architectural inspiration. My survey of the corpus of Pictish sculpture indicates that there are approximately 56 examples which are well enough preserved to identify how their tops were finished. A more detailed examination of the fragmentary evidence, would

undoubtedly throw up more examples. This means that approximately 43% of the surviving corpus display an 'architectural' top. Pediments account for 18% and arches also for 18%, and in addition, animal ornament frames (usually facing pairs of 'protective' serpents) are present on an additional 7%.

The interpretative argument presented here is that the pitched top reflects a doorway, the main ornamental entrance to the church. The pediment and arched top appear to be equally common and span the chronological range of the cross-slabs. In a wet climate the practical benefit of a sloping top is that it sheds water and thus protects the stone from erosion. The curving top could equally represent an ornamental doorway, but also might echo an interior chancel arch. Given that the overwhelming majority of Pictish cross-slabs were originally set up within churchyards, church buildings would have exerted a strong visual presence.

We might wonder whether the shallow pitch of the cross-slabs reflects the actual shape of typical Pictish church roofs. Given the much steeper roof angle found in surviving Irish churches and in early medieval church shrines (Ó Carragáin 2010) it is perhaps more likely that these reflect the shape of doorways, some of which were triangular or rounded. The majority of surviving early church doors in Anglo-Saxon England and Ireland have flat lintels (Fernie 1983; Ó Carragáin 2010), but there are known examples of peaked Anglo-Saxon doorways, for in-

stance at Jarrow and Barton on Humber, and round-headed doorways are not just known from England, but are found in Pictland at Abernethy, Brechin, and Restenneth. Several of the cross-slabs have details which are highly reminiscent of architectural features, none more so than the interlace band with a shallow arched top that frames the scene on the reverse of the Nigg cross-slab (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 127). The idea that the cross-slab depicts a doorway would also account for the animal framing feature seen on so many examples. This zoomorphic treatment may have been inspired by carving found on timber churches. The remarkable survival of early stone churches in western Ireland provides the classic image of the early Celtic church, but we might doubt whether it accurately reflects Pictish ecclesiastical architecture, which in eastern Scotland is likely to have been largely of timber (Driscoll 2011).

In this paper it is only possible to outline this interpretation and illustrate it with two examples both from southern Pictland. Aberlemno 2 (Fig. 1) stands today in a modest rural parish churchyard, but in Pictish times this was a strategic point on a key route way through a sacred prehistoric landscape (Ritchie 1995; Busset 2017). Aberlemno 2's narrative depiction of a battle is highly unusual and has inspired sensational interpretations linking the scene to a historic battle (e.g. Alcock 2003, 131–136), and counter arguments (Woolf 2006; see also Henderson and Henderson 2004, 38–39). Under the pediment, this
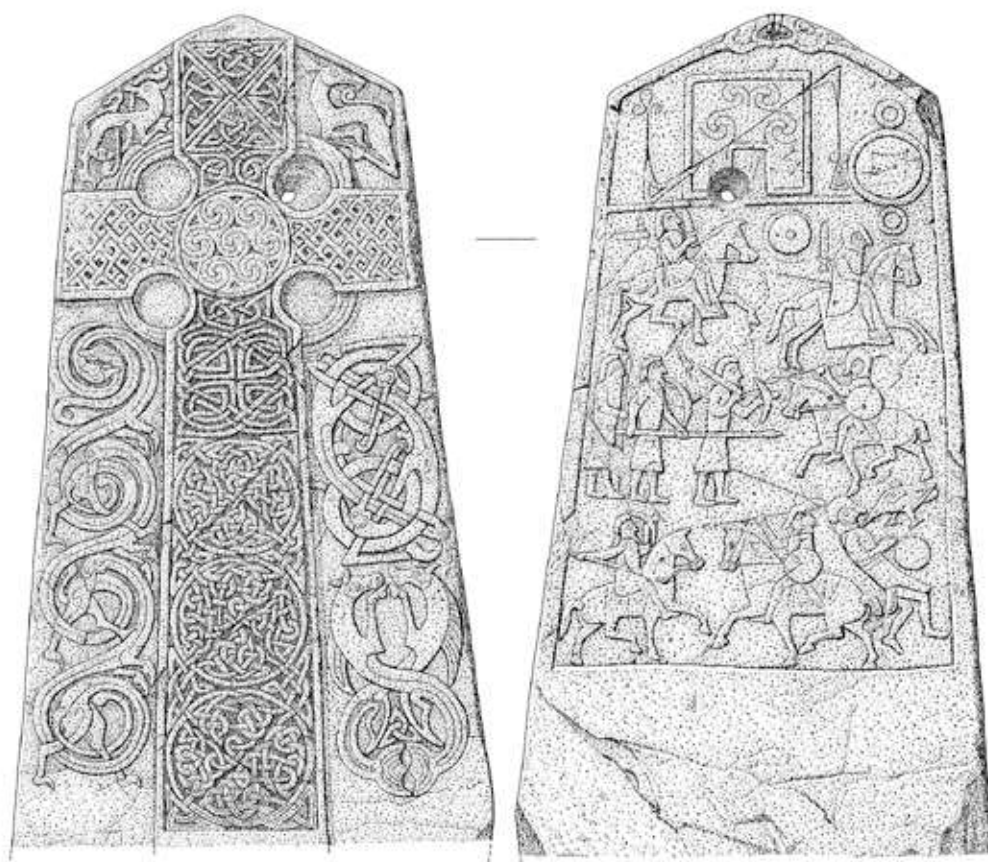

Fig. 1. Aberlemno 2. Illustrated by John Boreland, copyright Historic Environment Scotland (National Monument of Scotland reference NO55NW8).

Fig. 2. Meigle 1. Despite the damage to the top, the surviving frame shows that the original top was a shallow pitched profile. Illustrated by John Boreland, copyright Historic Environment Scotland (National Monument of Scotland reference NO24SE25).

exceptional sculptor executed a typical cross-slab with a cross on one side with Pictish symbols and 'secular' figures on the reverse. The stone's setting is a very old one, and although we cannot be certain if it is original, today the viewer facing east is looking at the cross and 'into' the church; facing west, back to the church and into the wider world, the viewer sees the Pictish symbols above the battle scene.

Meigle 1 (Fig. 2) is drawn from one of the largest and finest collections of Pictish sculpture, which has plausibly been interpreted as a royal monastery (Hall 2014). It is not in its original position, indeed it is notable for its complex biography. Here the connection with the ancestral world is evident because this is a reused prehistoric standing stone with its Neolithic cup and ring-marks visible towards the base. Although the top is damaged, it survives well enough to show the sloping frame of a pediment. The stone must have been heavily reworked into the desired flat slab before the Pictish carvings were added. Again, we have the cross richly ornamented with interlace and flanked by fantastic beasts, while on the other side Pictish symbols are scattered amongst a procession of mounted warriors and other creatures, including a camel and an angel, possibly inspired by textile rather than manuscript art.

Both of these monuments are technically accomplished, intrinsically interesting works of art, but their significance is enhanced if we consider them as representations of doorways. As with the door-shaped *bildstenar* these are not just *any* doorways, but doorways to churches. The entrance to the church was the most symbolically powerful part of the church, because unlike the altar it was universally accessible. As a religious metaphor, the doorway was a threshold to salvation, but perhaps more importantly it was also a performance space. There are no Pictish liturgical texts, but we know that the Picts were in close contact with the Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic worlds, especially through the Church. The earliest Anglo-Saxon liturgies emphasize the main portal as the chief location for highly charged ceremonies at the feasts of Easter and Candlemas (Gittos 2013, 257–274). Moreover, it is clear that the church entrance was an important setting for public, legal business, including the swearing of oaths and making of solemn commitments, such as marriage contracts. In Ireland, attention has been drawn to the elevated doorways, particularly of round-towers as royal ceremonial settings (O'Keeffe 2004, 106–115), an interpretation that fits well with the doorways at Brechin and Abernethy (Semple 2009).

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The question remains, if most of the cross-slabs are from churchyards, what would be the value of representing a doorway if the real thing was available? One consideration is that the major church sites in Ireland favoured a number of smaller churches within an ecclesiastical precinct (Ó Carragáin 2010). The evidence is sparse, but this seems to have been the case in Scotland too: for instance, at Iona, St Andrews, and Dunblane. In Andrén's inspirational discussion of the *bildstener*, he proposes that the stones served as representations of buildings, physically positioned where buildings would have stood. Did some of the Pictish cross-slabs similarly represent buildings, or even replace them?

Although they do not provide a physical space, the sculptural representations have other advantages. The cross-slabs offer a platform for presenting statements of iconographic complexity which blend ecclesiastical, cosmological and political themes. The sculpture offers a high degree of permanence (compared to the timber churches) and if we are right in thinking that the symbols embody personal or dynastic names, then they also serve as memorials. Finally, they were less expensive than a stone church.

If we choose to think of the cross-slabs as doorways it provides another semantic level when thinking about some of Scotland's greatest contribution to early medieval culture. The stone representations of architectural features point to lost traditions of sacred architecture which were central to the intellectual and social lives of Scotland and Gotland. The symbolic vocabulary of the two traditions makes it plain that the ritual practices conducted in the buildings were different, but the shared monumentalization of architectural features hints at some common social purposes. I do not argue that there was any ancient connection between Pictland and Gotland, but do wish to celebrate the connections and intellectual insights created by the contemporary scholarly links made by Anders and others.

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