



Forsyth, K. (2020) Protecting a Pict?: Further thoughts on the inscribed silver chape from St Ninian's Isle, Shetland. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 149, pp. 249-276.

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Deposited on: 25 August 2020

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Protecting a Pict?: further thoughts on the inscribed silver chape from St Ninian's Isle, Shetland

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Abstract

A detailed discussion of the inscription on the silver chape (NMS FC 282) discovered in 1958 as part of a large hoard of silver from the major early medieval ecclesiastical site on St Ninian's Isle, Shetland (NGR: HU 3685 2090). Previous interpretations and a range of parallels are explored. A new interpretation of the inscription is proposed: that it contains a Pictish male personal name, Resad. This has implications for previous arguments in favour of an Anglo-Saxon origin for the metalwork. Features of the lettering previously interpreted as errors are instead argued to indicate familiarity with the type of cursive writing used on wax-tablets, rather than bookhand. It is argued that the inscription was designed and manufactured by a single literate artisan, possibly in an ecclesiastical workshop.

Introduction: St Ninian's Isle and its hoard

St Ninian's Isle is a tiny island joined to the west coast of southern Shetland by a remarkable sand tombolo. In the 1950s, a team of students from the University of Aberdeen, under the supervision of Professor A C O'Dell, excavated the medieval chapel on the east side of the island (NGR: HU 3685 2090; Canmore ID 587). The most sensational discovery was made in 1958 by local schoolboy Douglas Coutts who had come to help out for the day. Under the floor of the medieval chapel, beneath a cross-marked slab, Coutts found a larchwood box which contained the jawbone of a porpoise and the largest hoard of early medieval silver yet discovered in Scotland (Illus 1). The hoard was published in 1973, together with a brief account of the excavations (Small et al 1973). Decades later, the unpublished excavation archive, such as it was, together with the other finds, were reanalysed as part of a University of Glasgow research project led by Rachel Barrowman, which also included two seasons of fresh excavation to establish a dated sequence (Barrowman 2003, 2011).

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Barrowman demonstrated that a late Iron Age settlement of cellular buildings on the Isle had been abandoned in the 7th century and replaced by a sequence of, first, pagan and then Christian burials. The first church on the site was built in the 8th century, in association with a Christian long-cist cemetery which continued in use into the 9th or 10th century, spanning the native/Norse interface (Barrowman et al 2011). Twenty-four items of early Christian sculpture have been recovered from the Isle (plus a further two, now lost, ogham fragments (Goudie 1879) – by far the largest collection from Shetland (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 18–27, 29–33, 36, 44). These carved stones, which date from both the pre-Norse and Norse periods, mark St Ninian's Isle as being one of the two most significant church sites in the archipelago (the other being Papil, West Burra, which has 11 items of sculpture (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 18–19, 22–4, 29–30). By the Late Norse period (11th/12th centuries) the site was experiencing inundation by wind-blown sand, which caused its eventual abandonment (yet preservation). On top of this thick layer of sand a later medieval chapel and burial ground was established in the later 12th century (Barrowman et al 2011). The dedication to St Ninian is likely to reflect the late medieval cult of the saint and has no bearing on the site's connections in the early Middle Ages. The chapel continued in use until the Reformation, while the burial ground was still in use until the mid-19th century (Barrowman et al 2011: 12).

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The famous hoard, which is now in the National Museums of Scotland (NMS X.FC 268–96), comprises 28 pieces of silver and silver-gilt, plus the jawbone of a porpoise (Illus 1). The metal objects fall into three categories: jewellery (12 penannular brooches), feasting equipment (seven bowls and a hanging-bowl, a spoon, and a pronged instrument thought to be for eating shellfish) and weaponry (a sword pommel and two sword chapes). Three conical mounts are of unknown function but may be fittings from an item of dress or weaponry. One of the two chapes is incised with a short roman alphabet inscription in Latin (NMS FC 282; Brown, T J 1959 ; Jackson 1973; Wilson 1973, no. 15; Okasha 1985: 57–9; Brown, M 1989: 110, pl 102; Webster & Backhouse 1991: 223–4, no. 178; Graham-Campbell 2002: 28–32; Clarke 2008: 17; Karkov 2011: 156–7; Webster 2017; Henderson 2017) (Illus 2, Illus 3).

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Initial attempts to characterise the hoard as primarily ecclesiastical in nature (McRoberts 1965) have been superseded by a consensus that the hoard, though Christian, is predominantly secular in nature (Small et al 1973), whether it comprises items donated to the Church by lay patrons, lay property held in the church for safe-keeping, objects held as pledges for legal contracts or as title to rights or property, or indeed some combination of these. The variation in silver content and quality of workmanship between items, the high degree of wear on some of them, and the evidence of repair, indicates a heterogeneous collection from diverse sources accumulated over a long period (Graham-Campbell 2008). The suggestion that the hoard was hidden in haste in advance of Viking attack has been widely accepted, but it would be unwise to rely on it overly as dating evidence for the hoard's deposition: the social disruption which might lead to the non-retrieval of the deposited items could as easily have resulted from native conflicts before or after, or, given the dynamic physical environment of the Isle, from some local natural disaster.

Henderson has discussed the art style of the various objects, emphasising their stylistic cohesion and essential Pictishness (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 113; Henderson 2017), a view endorsed by Wilson (1973: 137–40). Webster, on the other hand, has noted stylistic parallels between the pommel and the chape, and certain items of Southumbrian, and specifically Mercian, metalwork (Webster & Backhouse 1991: nos 175, 176, 181). Webster interprets these similarities as evidence that these two objects are likely to be imports of Mercian manufacture, or at the very least, Pictish copies of Mercian imports (1991: 223, a position reasserted more recently and in greater detail in Webster 2017, following the discovery of the Beckley sword-pommel, see also Webster 2001). Such an explanation is, however, rejected by Henderson, who sees the parallels as evidence of a more sustained interchange of artistic ideas between northern Pictland and Mercia in the mid-8th century. In her view, stone sculptural evidence, including newly discovered fragments of the Hilton of Cadboll cross, indicates instead that the Picts 'had assimilated rather than copied aspects of the southern repertoire as a result of a more general exposure to it' (Henderson 2017). The potential historical context of such an interchange may have been the reign of the expansionist northern Pictish king Onuist son of Uurguist (ruled 729–61), who was in alliance with Aethelbald of Mercia (ruled 716–57) (Henderson 2017: 66–7). Obviously, the inscription has direct bearing on the question of the chape's place of manufacture, for, as discussed below, it appears to contain a Brittonic (that is, Pictish) personal name. If a linguistically Brittonic/Pictish text has been intrinsic to the chape since its time of manufacture, the argument for an Anglo-Saxon origin is severely weakened.

Background: Language in pre-Norse Shetland

The evidence for the linguistic situation in early Shetland is of two kinds: onomastic and epigraphic. Virtually all the surviving names in Shetland post-date the arrival of Norse-speakers who had an effect like onomastic napalm and all but entirely obliterated the earlier linguistic layers. Three possible exceptions are the island names, Unst, Yell and Fetlar. Certainly, these are not transparently Norse and are hard to explain. As a consequence, they have been held up as evidence of a non-Celtic, non-Indo-European language having been spoken in Shetland before the arrival of the Norse (Nicolaisen 2003: 141–2). Detailed new analysis by Coates, however, suggests that Fetlar may well be Scandinavian after all (Coates 2019), and Yell (*Iali, Iala*, c 1300) is likely Brittonic, deriving from the Celtic **ialo-* ‘unfruitful/late-bearing land’, seen in numerous French place names of Gaulish origin (for example, *Auteuil, Ebreuil*) and in the Welsh place name: *Iâl*, Denbighshire (English *Yale*) (Sims-Williams 2005). This convincing derivation would seem entirely appropriate to ‘da wilds o’ Yell’ (Coates 2007). The linguistically opaque island name Unst remains unexplained. It may, like Yell and Fetlar, eventually yield to an etymology, whether Celtic, Norse or something else, but until then, it cannot carry much weight in this discussion. What is significant, however, is the positive evidence presented by the new etymology of Yell which suggests that Brittonic was once a community language in Shetland.

The epigraphic evidence is more complex. The St Ninian’s Isle chape is the only roman alphabet inscription known from early medieval Shetland. Below, it is proposed that its text incorporates a Brittonic personal name. The archipelago has produced a number of ogham inscriptions but their linguistic testimony is far from certain. In addition to the extant and lost ogham-inscribed stones from St Ninian’s Isle, a further seven lapidary oghams are known from Shetland: Bressay, Cunningsburgh 1–4, Lunnasting, Whiteness, (Bressay – Forsyth 1996: 117–38; Close-Brooks & Stevenson 1982: 35. Cunningsburgh – Forsyth 1996: 206–26; RCAHMS 1946 no. 1136. Lunnasting – Forsyth 1996: 402–19; RCAHMS 1946: 81–2. Whiteness – Forsyth 1996: 495–502; Stevenson 1981: 285–7. For all, see Scott & Ritchie 2009: 6–7, 26–8). There is also one portable item which may be ogham-inscribed. This is a small stone disc, c 65mm in diameter, possibly a gaming piece, from Bigton – the nearest settlement to St Ninian’s Isle on the adjacent mainland of Shetland – which is incised on both its upper and lower surfaces as well as its circumference with a variety of different carvings. A drawing of it is included in Scott & Ritchie 2009 (17, no. 28) but it is otherwise unpublished. The carvings include a sequence of at least six short, roughly parallel, irregularly grouped lines which have the air of ogham letters. Poor preservation makes them difficult to discern and the reading remains in doubt. As linguistic testimony they must be set aside for now, as must the small fragment from Whiteness and the three fragments from Mail, Cunningsburgh, which preserve only snatches of text that are too short for meaningful interpretation.

This leaves only three inscriptions that are sufficiently long and clear to be of linguistic relevance. The surviving ogham inscription from St Ninian’s Isle is discussed in detail by Forsyth (2011) where it is proposed that the fragmentary text includes a di-thematic Brittonic personal name with second element *-(g)uist / -ust* (< Celtic *Gustos* ‘choice’), which also appears in such names as Pictish *Onuist / Unust* (< **Oinogustos*, cf Irish *Oengus*), and Pictish *Uurguist / Uurgust* (< **Worgustos*, cf Irish *Forggus*, Welsh *Gorwst*, *Gwrwst* < **Gworwst*) (Jackson 1955: 163).

The other two longer texts – from Bressay (intact) and Lunnasting (missing its final section) – present many difficulties of interpretation despite having the unusual advantage of clearly indicated word division. Although both inscriptions are entirely legible, both contain

a high proportion of letters for which the sound value is in doubt, including not only the characters h ‘H’ and f ‘V’, which are uncertain throughout the Scottish ogham corpus (Forsyth 1996, 2011), but also no less than eight unusual or unique additional characters (*forfeda*), the sound value of which is not known. There are also uncertainties regarding the orthographic significance of the frequent doubling (and in one case tripling) of consonants. All this leaves considerable doubt over the reading. Failure to take such issues sufficiently into account has led some previous commentators to take standard transliterations of these inscriptions at face value as unintelligible and reflecting an otherwise unattested non-Celtic, non-Indo-European language (Macalister 1940; Jackson 1955: 141). This is premature: a more nuanced and epigraphically sensitive approach is required, based on a more thorough analysis of ogham orthographic conventions in Scotland and the values of the *forfeda*. Only then can it be ascertained with confidence which language(s) they are written in. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this paper (see Sims-Williams 1993 and Forsyth 1996 for more detailed discussion of some of the issues), but the presence of some plausibly Celtic words in both inscriptions must weigh heavily in any assessment of the oghams’ linguistic testimony, even if they remain uninterpreted in their entirety. For example, Jackson suggested (1955: 145) that Lunnasting’s NEHHTONN is a form of the Celtic male personal name **Nektonos*, with the HH standing for ‘some kind of weakened *ch* on its way to *i*’ (Nechtan > Nehton > Neiton, cf the Pictish *Naiton* (*Bede HE* v.21) and *Neitano* on the cross-slab from Peebles (Steer 1969).

These challenging inscriptions are, however, of only qualified relevance to the question of the linguistic situation in pre-Norse Shetland. On art historical grounds, the Bressay cross-slab has been dated to the 10th century, that is, the Norse period (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 7). If the use of word-division dots is indeed a borrowing from the runic tradition, this implies that the Lunnasting slab, too, dates to the Norse period when the linguistic situation was complicated by the presence of incomers who perhaps spoke a variety of languages (cf the contemporary mixed linguistic situation in the Isle of Man). The Bressay slab, in particular, has been interpreted as exhibiting Norse forms, for example, DATTRR has been interpreted as a form of Norse *dottir* ‘daughter’ (see Forsyth 1996), although a Pictish reflex of the cognate of Gaulish *duxtir*, Irish *Der-* ‘daughter’ (O’Brien 1956), as seen in *Derile*, the name of the mother of King Nechtan (died 732) (Clancy 2004), should also be considered.

The evidence for the pre-Norse linguistic situation in Shetland is thus very limited. The onomastic evidence consists of perhaps only a single item – the island name, Yell. The inscriptional evidence is not voluminous and is beset with considerable technical epigraphic difficulties. Place-names, especially major names, like an island name, are only generated when there is a community of speakers to use them. The significance of the Brittonic derivation of Yell is thus considerable and is further supported by the apparent presence of a Brittonic name in the St Ninian’s Isle ogham inscription. Taken together, it seems likely that the language spoken on Shetland at the time of the deposition of the hoard was indeed Brittonic (that is, Pictish). Although linguistic identification can be made only on the basis of linguistic evidence, not on similarities of material culture, the conclusion reached on this, admittedly limited, onomastic and epigraphic evidence is entirely consistent with the increasing archaeological evidence for recognisably ‘Pictish’ culture in Shetland (for Pictish sculpture, see Scott & Ritchie 2009).

The Inscribed Chape

A chape is a U-shaped terminal mount from the tip of a leather sword-scabbard which serves to protect the blade of the weapon and to prevent it slicing through the covering. The surviving evidence for early medieval chapes, such as it is, is reviewed by Wilson (1973:

121). Such objects would be familiar items of prestige personal equipment belonging to the male secular elite and as such, were suitable gifts and pledges to the Church. Horseshoe-shaped chapes of exactly the St Ninian's Isle type are depicted on two pieces of contemporary art – a cross-slab from Meikle (no. 3), Perthshire (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 73), and a copper alloy gilt shrine mount of Insular type found at Oppdal, Trondelag, Norway (Youngs 1989: 142) (see also an apparently different type of chape on the mounted figure on the St Andrews 'sarcophagus' (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 130, fig 190)). Although similar in design, the two chapes in the Shetland hoard are not a pair. The smaller, uninscribed one, no. 16, is made of silver, from two plates riveted together and is in mint condition. Graham-Campbell (2003: 32) has suggested it may be a local copy of the other, larger, one (no. 15). This latter, the inscribed one, is made of silver-gilt, is of three-part construction (front plate, back plate and binding strip capping the join) and is obviously worn. It is a particularly fine piece of metalwork design. It is approximately 81mm in width – larger than all but one of the brooches (which average 65–70mm) – and is formed from the heads of two blunt-nosed beasts, conjoined at the neck, with small blue glass studs for their beady eyes. The sword is clasped in the maws of these two beasts, their jaws open wide, revealing dagger-like fangs which spear the little fishes they are about to swallow. The beasts' heads are clearly differentiated from the necks which support the smooth flat fields of the inscribed panels. Their head-crests continue and merge to form an outer framing band.

Although the two plates form, in effect, a single three-dimensional design, the two sides of the chape are distinguished from one another in a number of respects. On one side ('obverse'), the animals' heads are more elaborate, with fishes and lower jaws depicted and the compact space beyond the eye elaborated with a barred, hooked, scroll. The neck area of each is filled with cross-hatching and separated from the inscription by a quadrilobate bossed rivet cover. On the other side ('reverse'), fishes and lower jaws are lacking and the space beyond the eye is longer, narrower and blank, and ends in a simple scroll. Curiously, the two scrolls are not mirror images of each other. The smoothness of the narrow area beyond the eye leads comfortably to the narrow inscription area. Although the beast on the reverse is plainer, the crest of the chape is more elaborate on this side, 'with its busy protective row of beast heads, curiously seven at the left, eight at the right' (George Henderson pers comm).¹ The crest on the obverse, in contrast, is a monotonous row of curves broken by double-notches at its mid-point (there is a single notch in the mid-point of the reverse). On both sides there are notches in the crest at the back of the beast's head. Both faces have a single line of inscribed text, but the lettering on the obverse is in a more formal kind of script (see below). It is clear from this, the bosses, and the greater elaboration of the heads, that the object has a definite 'front' and 'back'.

On each face, the single line of text is arranged with the feet of the letters to the inside of the curve, in other words, as the scabbard hung down from its owner's waist with the terminals pointing up, the inscription would have appeared upside-down to an on-looker, though as the owner looked down the length of the scabbard it would have faced them the 'right' way up (of course the inner inscription would not be visible when the scabbard was in use). As will, I hope, be clear from the discussion which follows, the text did not, however, need to be legible while the scabbard was in use, its mere presence on the object was sufficient for it to be effective.

The relationship of the inscription to the object has occasioned some discussion. Obviously, the lettering was incised after the chape was cast (although not necessarily before the components were assembled), but it is clear that the chape was designed from the outset to bear an inscription on both faces. The carving of the lettering has been done with great skill, to a level consistent with the calibre of the rest of the craftsmanship. Also, as argued below, the layout of the text is 'artisanal' in approach (that is, it has a strong visual/design

element) and there is no reason to doubt that it was done at the time of manufacture and in the same workshop by the same artisan(s). The very close similarity between the final letter **o** of the inscription and the scroll which immediately follows it gives the strong impression that they were carved by the same hand (Illus 3).

Julian Brown set store by the change in lettering style between the obverse and reverse, which he saw as also reflecting a change of hand (that is, a different carver). He envisioned a scenario in which the obverse text, dedicating the chape to God, was carved in the workshop, with the personalised ‘note of ownership’ added subsequently, somewhere else, though with ‘no need to suppose any substantial difference in date’ (1959: 252). Jackson found it ‘most improbable’ that the panel on the reverse would have been left blank initially (1973: 170). Our understanding of craft patronage in this period suggests, in any case, that deluxe metalwork of this sort would have been made to order for a specific patron, not ‘on spec’ in the way Brown proposed (McLeod 2004). In any case, I am unconvinced by his argument that the change of script reflects a change of hand. As discussed below, a more pertinent consideration is the inscriber’s need to fit more letters into a given space.

The text reads as follows:

on the obverse:	INNOMINEDS
on the reverse:	RESADFILISPUSSCIO

Julian Brown’s hesitations over the reading of the **f** and **u** on the reverse are unwarranted (Jackson 1973: 172–3) and subsequent writers have agreed that the reading of the inscription is not in doubt (Graham-Campbell 2002: 28). The interpretation, on the other hand, is full of uncertainties. The first question is: are these two separate inscriptions, or one continuous text? To answer that, we must establish the significance of the use of different scripts for the text on each side.

Script

On the obverse, the lettering is in a ‘two-line’ form of majuscule script (that is, ‘capitals’). This is a formal, high grade of script used for precious manuscripts, not for everyday use. On the reverse, the lettering is a four-line minuscule script (that is, ‘lower case’), still formal, though less so than the majuscules of the obverse. It contains within it traces (in the shape of some letters) of even less formal, cursive script: the fast, informal style of everyday writing.

The distinction between the two grades of script on each face reflects the palaeographical convention of the ‘hierarchy of scripts’ observed in medieval book production. It need not imply that the two lines are separate texts: different grades of script can appear on a single manuscript page with higher grades being used as display scripts or for initial letters in sentences (Bischoff 1990: 71, 78–80). In this context it is entirely appropriate that the formula invoking God should be in a more formal hand than that naming the owner (Jackson 1973: 170). The use of different grades of script for the two lines brings with it the added advantage that it allowed the inscriber to balance two sections of unequal length: on the obverse, ten letters plus a boss; and on the reverse, 17 letters. The scale of the lettering is largely constrained by the width of the panel and the desire to avoid large areas of blank surface. The choice of script is then the key variable which allows some degree of control over the number of letters which can be fitted in. The letters of the higher-grade majuscule script take up more space, permitting fewer per line. The designer has been able to fit in as many as they have only by condensing them horizontally (note the tall thin **ns**). The switch to the lower minuscule grade, which is more economical of space, enabled the St Ninian’s Isle inscriber to accommodate an extra 7 letters, i.e. 70% more, within the same area, yet without this being immediately obvious. The visual impression is that both lines are pleasantly full but not cramped. If anything, it is the reverse which looks more generously spaced, especially at the beginning.

A closer inspection will reveal the price that has had to be paid for this overall impression of balance (Illus 4-5). Although the individual letter forms on the reverse are those of a four-line script, with ascenders and descenders, they are vertically compressed to fit between the two lines of the panel edge. The result is that some letters are rather squat. The **d**, **f**, **l** and **s** would normally rise up above the other letters and the **p** descend below the line, yet the **p** goes no lower than the base of the **u** and the **s** goes no higher than the **e**, the **a**, or the top of the **c**. The ascender of the **d** is atrophied and the **f** appears in a highly unusual form with upper bar sloping and lower bar horizontal. An impression of the degree of compression required comes from comparing the actual inscription with Brown's idealised 'manuscript' version of the lettering (1959: 251, fig b = Illus 6).

<illus 4 near here>

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<illus 6 near here>

Julian Brown commented favourably on the 'bold and stately style' of the obverse inscription, which he thought was the work of a skilled craftsman, noting that 'the curves are all very uniform and the serifs are all very neat and regular' (1959: 251). He was less impressed by the inscription on the reverse which, in his view, was 'less carefully executed and less formal in style', 'much rougher in general appearance than on the recto' (1959: 251). Brown interpreted this supposed contrast as evidence that each side had been inscribed by a different person (see discussion above), with the writer of the reverse seeming to have been 'technically less accomplished' (1959: 252). I think Brown has overstated the contrast between the two sides and not taken adequate account of the distorting effect of the compression of the minuscule script between two lines. Arguably the letter forms of the reverse are more complex than those of the obverse, and many of them are well formed, the curves of the **a**, **c** and **o**, for instance, being completely controlled.

Brown's principal error, however, was in starting from the premise that the inscriber was trying to imitate bookhand (at that period, a typical approach to epigraphic inscriptions also reflected, for example, in Nash-Williams (1950)). Brown provided two diagrams showing 'roughly how the words would look in a manuscript' (1959: 251) (Illus 6). To him, the style of the obverse script 'strongly suggests the writer was copying the very formal and evolved variety of Insular majuscule handwriting found in manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels ... and the Book of Kells' (1959: 250). Inevitably, compared with such superlative models, the script of the St Ninian's Isle chape will be found wanting. Yet, as Jackson has demonstrated, such comparisons are quite inappropriate: 'all discussion of the lettering must start from the fact that this is a problem in epigraphy; that these are *inscriptions* cut on metal with an engraving tool, not written with pen and ink on parchment' (1973: 170, his emphasis). Jackson was able to provide numerous parallels in British inscriptions for various forms which troubled Brown (1973: 171-3), thereby showing that such supposedly egregious features were 'part of the epigraphic convention inherited by the engraver' (1973: 171) and not due to any personal deficiencies on the part of the inscriber or the writer of any model from which they worked.

Brown identified certain features which suggested to him that the carver of the obverse 'may not himself have been literate', despite exhibiting great skill as an engraver (1959: 251-2). Jackson too surmised that the carver 'may not have been very competent or experienced' (1973: 171). It is worth looking at these supposed faults in detail to establish if they do tell us something about the level of literacy of the inscriber. Firstly, Brown condemns the failure to join all the minims (downstrokes) in **n** and **m**, specifically permitting the three

minims of the **m** to be interrupted by the central dummy rivet – two fall to the left and one to the right. Yet this formation is not capricious: to have pushed the **m** entirely to one side or other of the stud would have upset the graphic balance of the text in a way which would have been immediately obvious. To have the letter straddling the mid-point leaves the inscription evenly distributed. Although doing so necessitated the bisection of the **m**, this is not obvious without close scrutiny and does not seriously compromise the legibility of the text. We have here our first instance of design considerations trumping simple readability. Also, we have an example of graphemes being thought of less as letters and more as geometric forms. This ‘design’ attitude to lettering is particularly prevalent in epigraphy of this period, especially in the complex geometric forms of Insular display scripts (Higgitt 1994; Charles-Edwards 2007a). Another example of **m** being treated as three individual minims comes on the inscribed cross from Lethnot, Angus (Okasha 1985, pl III), where the three straight strokes of the initial **m** are entirely separate (Illus 7), and from metalwork, Jackson provides another instance of an engraved **m** split by a rivet, on the Irish shrine of St Patrick’s Bell, *c* 1100 (1973: 171–2).

<illus 7 near here>

The second failing identified by Brown is the ‘marked reduction of **o**’ which he rationalised as ‘presumably to save space’ (1959: 250). In fact, small **o** is also a feature of Insular display script, where it is used for purely visual effect, as, for instance, on the 7th-century Peter Stone from Whithorn (Forsyth 2005: 127–9), as noted by Jackson (1973: n. 172) (Illus 8). A third feature which jarred, in Brown’s view, was the bold serif at the end of the crossbar of **e**, ‘where formal majuscule allowed a square or triangular serif’ (Brown, T J 1959: 250). Yet, surely, this is simply a design flourish embellishing a word ending. Jackson provides epigraphic examples of similar letters (1973: 172), including the probably 8th-century inscribed stone from Llanllwni, Carmarthenshire (Nash-Williams 1950 no. 164; Edwards 2007: 259 = CM30). Brown was also unhappy with the ‘extravagance of the hook representing the wedge in **s**’ (1959: 251). Note his assumption (misplaced) that the hook should properly be a wedge. As will be discussed below, it is possible the exaggerated entry stroke of the final **s** arose from a misunderstood suspension mark, but comparison with some of the preceding letters shows that entry strokes were extended into blank spaces created by the curve of a preceding letter (**o** to **n**) or the curve of the chape itself (**m** to **n**). The biggest gap of all is the one created by the leftward lean of the **d** and this may be sufficient explanation of the exaggerated form of the **s**.

<illus 8 near here>

It is perhaps the hooks that caused most disquiet to Brown. Although he noted their presence, he did not comment on their significance other than to say that they replaced ‘the typically insular wedges’ (1959: 250). While Jackson was able to provide 8th-century epigraphic examples of letters with hooked entries from south-western Britain, at Stowford, Devon (Okasha 1993: 268–9), and Wareham, Dorset (Denial and Gongorie) (Jackson 1973: 171), and thereby show that the feature was not ‘wholly without parallel’ (1973: 173). He erred, however, in lumping these together with examples of mannered wedges, a quite separate phenomenon. In fact, hooked entries are highly significant, as Charles-Edwards has shown (2007a). The triangular wedge serif as the entry into the heads of downstrokes is a distinctive feature of Insular script. It arose as a specific response to a very practical problem: ‘the regular pushing of an upward left bow with a broad-edged pen ... [as entry into down strokes] ... was an impossibility on the rough-surfaced Insular parchment, but not on its smooth-surfaced Continental counterpart.’ (Charles-Edwards 2007a: 79). How then to initiate a letter with a flat-nibbed quill loaded with ink without causing a blot? The solution was to

enter the down-stroke with a short horizontal serif. For aesthetic and legibility reasons this was then joined to the down-stroke by a diagonal, forming the triangular wedge (Charles-Edwards 2007a: 83, fig 54) (Illus 9). What began as a practical expedient developed into a stylistic feature so dominant that exaggerated wedge serifs appear on incised inscriptions, such as the Dunadd pebble (Okasha 1985: 64–5, pl VIII) (Illus 10), or the Kilnasaggart pillar, Co Armagh (*CIIC*: no. 946), where they have no practical function.

<illus 9 near here>

<illus 10 near here>

Of course, none of this had been necessary in earlier days when people wrote, not with pen and ink, but with a stylus on a wax tablet. In tablet-writing, letters were entered by means of loops, as can be clearly seen on the 6th-century wax tablets from Springmount Bog, Co Antrim (Armstrong & Macalister 1920; Charles-Edwards 2002) (Illus 11). Although these are, as yet, the only tablets known to survive from the period, there is textual and other evidence to indicate that the tradition of tablet-writing continued in early medieval Britain and Ireland for material which was too informal, ephemeral or private to merit the expense and effort of committing it to a vellum manuscript (Brown, M 1994). Charles-Edwards has contrasted the writing techniques which were in use on these different materials: ‘that of the developing scribal craft, with its contrast between the careful thick and thin strokes of the broad-edged pen, and the more workaday linear letter-forms of the stylus’ (2007a: 79). What is perhaps surprising is that the latter appears so widely in monumental form,² ‘presumably practiced by mason craftsmen who were familiar with stylus-writing, but not with penned lettering, and who transferred to stone, enlarged, and with brushes, the curved entry strokes’ (ibid). The painted origin of such epigraphic lettering is sometimes betrayed by a distinctive blob at the entries. Because a point, rather than a flat-tipped nib, was employed for stylus-writing, the letters are uninflected (monoline), that is, there is no contrast between thick and thin. Furthermore, such scripts ‘naturally preserved cursive characteristics that were not possible to execute with broad-edged pens on the napped surface of Insular parchment’ (2007a: 79).

<illus 11 near here>

In this broader context, it can now be seen that the hooks on the St Ninian’s letters in fact imitate the rolled entry into down-strokes seen in stylus-writing. See, for instance, the initial **r** on the reverse, the **i**, **l** and **s**, and compare them with similar letter forms on the Springmount Bog tablets (Illus 11). The same explanation would account for Julian Brown’s ‘thick blob’ at the end of the second stroke’ of the **r** (1959 252) which, in any case, would be more fairly described as a hook (Jackson 1973: 172). The cursive formation of some letters, such as the ‘deeply split **s** and ... the angular **p**’ (Brown, T J 1959: 251) should also be seen in this light. Thus, far from Brown’s notion that the script of the St Ninian’s Isle inscription was a pale imitation of book-lettering, we can now see that, like the Catamanus Stone from Llangadwaladr (Nash-Williams 1950: no. 13; Edwards 2013: GN25), which also features rolled entries into down-strokes, its lettering is ‘suggestive of a workshop milieu that had its own frame of alphabetical reference, existing independently of *scriptorium* practice’ (Charles-Edwards 2007a: 79).

Dating

The dating of the chape is primarily a question for the art historians – the palaeographer can provide only supporting evidence. As discussed above, comparison with deluxe manuscripts, may not be entirely appropriate, although it provides at least a rough guide. As Julian Brown explains, the style of insular minuscule used on the reverse was employed over a lengthy

period, from the 7th century to as late as the 10th (1959: 251) and so the formal majuscule on the obverse, which is more distinctive and short-lived, is a ‘surer guide’ to the date of the chape. In his view, this style of script is ‘perfectly consistent with a date in the second half of the eighth century’ (Brown, T J 1959: 251), although it could equally be somewhat earlier in the 8th century or as late as the second quarter of the 9th (ibid).

Reading and interpretation

Obverse

Taking the obverse first, INNOMINEDS is relatively straightforward. It opens with Latin *In nomine*, ‘in the name of’, which we would expect to be followed by one of the *nomina sacra* – the abbreviated forms of the names of the Godhead – in the genitive case. What we have is *ds*, which is the standard abbreviation for *D(eu)s* ‘God’, yet in this position, *Ds̄* would constitute a fundamental grammatical error: what is required is *Dī* for genitive *Dei* (Brown, T J 1959: 250). Such a gross error seems particularly unlikely in a formulaic phrase.

Okasha proposed that the minuscule *s*, as it appears on the chape, could be a misinterpretation of *ī* in which the short horizontal bar above the *i* (which marks the abbreviation) has not been sufficiently distinguished from the entry stroke of the *s* and merged on subsequent copying (1985: 58). This assumes that the carver was working from a model written by someone else, which is possible, but not certain. Undeniably, the left hook which forms the entry into this, the final letter, is exaggerated, as will be seen by comparing it with the hooked entry into the *i* at the beginning of the line. In fact, the left hook is as long, if not slightly longer than the right hook of the *s*, which means the downstroke falls at the mid-line of the letter, well to the right of its usual position. The merging of the suprascript line with the following letter is the kind of error that even a literate scribe could make, and so it is not of great import in evaluating levels of literate skill, especially in this case, as the resulting ‘*ds*’ could be rationalised as ‘*dei summi*’. As noted above, a contributing factor may have been the design consideration of tending to want to fill the space created by the backward lean of the preceding *d*.

More likely than either of these explanations, however, is Jackson’s proposal that *ds* is for *D(ei) S(ummi)*, ‘of God the highest’, a well-attested invocation (1960; Brown, T J 1959: 250). As he notes (Jackson 1973: 167–8), *in nomine dī summi* appears on five³ inscribed stone crosses from south-east Wales:⁴ Margam 4, Margam (Cwrt-y-defaid) 2, Llantwit Major 3, St Brides Major and Wick (Ogmore Castle)⁵, all Glamorganshire; and Vaynor (Highway), Breconshire. These are mostly of 10th- or 11th-century date, though Llantwit Major 3 has recently been redated to ‘probably late eighth century’ (Redknap & Lewis 2007: 375–82), and thus may be contemporary with the St Ninian’s Isle chape. Okasha (1985: 58) objects that *summi* appears in full on these Welsh examples, but on them space is not a problem whereas on the chape it is lacking in the extreme. Writing out *summi* in full would have added four letters, including two broad *ms*, to a text of only ten. The special circumstances of the chape could have necessitated an improvised abbreviation.

The *in nomine* formula derives ultimately from the command of the resurrected Christ to his disciples to go forth and baptise *in nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritūs Sancti*, ‘in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19). It appears in this form on two crosses from Glamorganshire: Merthyr Mawr, which is possibly 11th century (G99), and the mid-late 9th-century Llantwit Major 1 (Houelt Cross) (G63) (Redknap & Lewis 2007: 466–72, 369–73). The texts on both begin with the invocation: ‘in the name of God the Father and of the Son (and) of the Holy Spirit ...’⁶ The specific invocation to ‘God the Highest’ (*in nomine Dei summi*) occurs in a number of Hiberno-Latin texts of the 7th century onwards, including the *Cambrai Homily* and as the dedications/titles of a set of seven, late

8th-century, Hiberno-Latin sermons preserved in an Anglo-Saxon manuscript of Continental provenance (McNally 1979).⁷ While the use of this formula is by no means exclusive to texts of Irish origin (it appears, for instance, as the invocation on ten extant Anglo-Saxon charters of pre-AD 900 date, with elaborated versions of this formula on a further 12, Sawyer 1968; see *ASChart* under Diplomatic Indexes > ‘By Invocation’), the opinion of exegetical scholars is that it is ‘connected, but not exclusively so, with Irish usage and tradition’ (Kaestli & McNamara 2001: 652–3, n. 2), and thus, while ‘not by itself a conclusive proof of the Hiberno-Latin element, is symptomatic of its influence’ (McNally 1979: 123).

The Trinitarian sentiments expressed on the St Ninian’s Isle chape contrast with the emphatically Christological focus of the opening words of the roughly contemporary inscription on the splendid cross-slab from the Pictish monastery of Portmahomack, at Tarbat, Easter Ross (Higgitt 1982; Okasha 1985: 61–3), which reads: *in nomine I(es)hu Xr(ist)i* ... ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’.⁸ Apart from Tarbat, and the Welsh monuments noted above, the use of the *in nomine* formula in epigraphy is not widespread in Britain and Ireland. In addition to the lapidary inscriptions there are a handful of examples of it on portable objects. The 10th-century Anglo-Saxon coin-brooch from Canterbury, inscribed *nomine domine*, ‘(in the) name of the Lord’, is of limited relevance as its text is probably imitative of contemporary Scandinavian coin legends (Okasha 1971: 59). More pertinent is the small (4cm) slate pebble from Dunadd, Argyll, noted above, which dates to perhaps the 7th or 8th century and is incised with only the words *i(n) nomine* (Okasha 1985: 64–5) (Illus 10). This short text, in beautifully formed letters, was written by someone who was used to lettering with ink on vellum. This can be seen in the skeuomorphic, two-stroke quality of the *o*, formed as it would be with quill and ink, and in the triangular wedges at the entry to the letters, carefully reproducing the distinctive form of contemporary ink-on-vellum lettering (discussed above). Okasha interprets the inscription as practice letters, but it is perhaps more likely to be amuletic, deliberately recalling the various formulae, *in nomine dei*, etc. Hall has plausibly suggested the item may be a gaming piece (Hall 2007: 41). The ‘*In nomine ...*’ inscription on the Anglo-Saxon Coppergate helmet is discussed further below: its amuletic purpose is clear.

Reverse

Turning now to the reverse, we have RESADFILISPUSSCIO. No word-division is indicated but, as Jackson says, ‘[t]o the Celtist, the interpretation seems quite obvious’: *resad fili spusscio*, ‘Resad son of Spusscio’ (1973: 169). *Fili* for Latin *fili* is common enough, the difficulty then, is to explain what goes before and after.⁹ Jackson said that neither name is known and that ‘the second perhaps looks a little queer’. Given the proposed Pictish context of the chape, however, this did not trouble him as, in his view, ‘rather little is known about Pictish nomenclature, but what is known indicates that quite often it was very queer indeed’ (1973: 169). Jackson’s ‘all bets are off’ attitude to Pictish influenced others, including Julian Brown, in whose view, ‘the two names are unknown and so are not unlikely to be Pictish’, noting that in his opinion ‘there are plenty of Pictish names that sound far stranger than Resad and Spusscio’ (1959: 253). I have argued elsewhere that Jackson has overstated the ‘queerness’ of Pictish (Forsyth 1997). The onomastic oddities he cites as equally queer are taken from the Pictish king-list and in large part their difficulty stems from tortuous textual transmission. More recent work on Pictish toponyms points increasingly to a near identity between Pictish and Brittonic (James 2009; Rhys 2015; Rhys 2020a; Rhys 2020b).

The admitted apparent oddness of a name ‘Spusscio’ has perhaps coloured Jackson’s perception of Resad which, I would argue, is likely to be a straightforwardly Brittonic name derived from the root **rets-* (from the Indo-European root **ret(h)-* ‘run’), as in the Gaulish names *Redsatus*, and *Restumarus*) (Evans 1967: 249–50).¹⁰ This element appears in Brittonic

as a simplex personal name, *Res*, *Ris* (> Rhys), and in a wide variety of compound names. The dictionary of Old Breton personal names lists no less than 23 different compound names with *Res* / *Ris* (Loth 1890: s.n.): 9th-century examples include *Resuuoret* / *Risuuoret*, *Restanet* / *Ristanet*, and *Risan*, with the diminutive *Resuc* / *Risoc* attested in the 11th century. Welsh examples of *Res* / *Ris* compounds include *Idris* (< Old Welsh *Iud-ris*) and Middle Welsh *Maelrys* (Sims-Williams 2002: 194 n. 1183). I would argue that *Resad* is the expected Pictish reflex of the name which is attested in Gaulish as *Redsatus* / *Re(s)satus*, feminine *Ressatu* (see Whatmough 1970: 1296–7 for various forms; also three attestations in Delamarre 2007: 230, 153). It appears, in the form *Ressatus*, in a Roman inscription from Dunaújváros, Hungary (that is, Intercisa in Roman Pannonia) (*RIU* vol 5: 1264). This is a fine tombstone erected to one Ulpus Eubico of the *Ala Britannorum*, an auxiliary cavalry unit of the Roman army, recruited, at least initially, in Britain. This costly monument was erected by his brothers and heirs, *Ressa[tus]* and *Susso*.¹¹ The geographical origin of this family, and of the numerous others whose Celtic-named members erected epitaphs at Intercisa (Raybould & Sims-Williams 2007: 252–7) is not known, although given the origin of the regiment it is possible the family had British, or even northern British, roots. If the comparison with *Ressatus* is correct, then we should expect the final syllable of *Resad* to have been pronounced /ad/, not /að/, that is, to have undergone Brittonic voicing to /-ad-/, as opposed to Gaelic spirantisation (Jackson 1953: 396–9). Normal orthographic usage in the other branches of Brittonic was -ad = /að/, but forms such as Urad/Ferat in the Pictish king-lists (Anderson 1980) suggest this may not have been the case in Pictish, however Brittonic spelling is not entirely consistent, so it would be wrong to press this too far (see Falileyev 2000: 65).¹² Inflectional endings had been lost in Brittonic by the period of the chape’s manufacture (Koch 1983) and so it is not possible to determine the grammatical case of *Resad*. From context and by analogy with the Coppergate Helmet, it is probably nominative. If ‘Spusscio’ is a name, I can find no parallel for it. Initial /sp/ is not an inherited Celtic feature, though it arises in Brittonic (but not Gaelic) from earlier /sk^w/ (Jackson 1955: 529, 534–5; Jørgensen 2012),¹³ It does, however, occur in Latin, in which connection, note the name *Spurcio* which appears on a probably 4th-century inscription on a rough slab from Maryport in Cumbria (Maryport III (*RIB*: no. 863) ‘[S]PURCIO VIXXIT ANNOS LXI’). Another similar slab from Maryport features the definitely Celtic name *Rianorix* (*RIB* no. 862) (Sims-Williams 2002: s n). Now ‘Spurcio’ is not ‘Spusscio’, although it could be mistaken for ‘Spusscio’, if written in minuscule script, the *r* and *s* of which are easily confused.¹⁴ By now, however, we are clutching at straws, especially as *Spurcio* itself is not explained, and the two names are separated by perhaps four centuries of sound changes. The similarity is doubtless no more than coincidence. On an altogether different tack, McRoberts proposed that ‘spusscio’ is not a name at all, but an abbreviation for *Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i*, ‘of the Holy Spirit’, to be taken with the preceding *fili* as ‘*Fili (et) Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i*’, ‘of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (1965: 236–7). Certainly, *sp̄s* and *sc̄i* are the common abbreviations for *spiritus* and *sancti* (Jackson 1973: 168; Okasha 1985: 58) and the lack of suspension marks is not a worry. The omission of *et* which troubled Jackson, may be accounted for by the extreme lack of space. Nonetheless, to Julian Brown, McRobert’s reading seemed ‘impossible’ (1959: 252), as it failed to account for the unknown ‘resad’ and the otherwise unaccounted for final ‘o’. For similar reasons, Jackson found it far-fetched (1973: 168).

Michelle Brown, on the other hand, not only accepted McRobert’s interpretation, but went a stage further and disposed of *Resad*, taking the whole thing as Latin *res ad Fili Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)io* ‘property of the son of the holy spirit’ (pers com in Spearman 1989). Removing, as it does, any linguistic connection with Pictland, this interpretation has found favour with those who would like to see the St Ninian’s Isle chape as an Anglo-Saxon production. There are, however, significant difficulties with it. There is the theological

question of who is meant by the ‘son of the Holy Spirit’? More likely would be *Fili (et) Spiritus Sancti*, ‘of the Son (and) of the Holy Spirit’, although, what then of the third part of the Trinity? And what, in any case, might it mean that something claimed to be ‘the property of the Son (and) of the Holy Spirit’? As Graham-Campbell points out, while the example of the York (Coppergate) helmet, discussed further below, demonstrates that ‘Christian invocations were regarded as appropriate to arms and armour in the eighth century’, the York inscription ‘does not lay claim to be holy property’ (2002: 31). While the preposition *ad* usually takes the accusative case, it did appear in Classical usage with the name of a deity elliptically for *ad templum* or *aedem*, ‘to the temple of the god X’, so the fact that *ad* is followed by (genitive) *fili* is perhaps not a fatal objection. A Christian equivalent of this expression could be *ad (altarem) Dei*, although I have not been able to find any Christian attestations of such a formula. A further difficulty concerns semantics. The noun *res* ‘thing, matter, affair, fact’ has a broad range of meanings but these are predominantly abstract or generic. While it can refer to ‘an actual thing, reality’ as opposed to the ‘appearance of a thing, mere talk’ (Lewis & Short 1879, s.v.), it is not usually used in such a concrete sense of a specific actual object. Finally, this interpretation, like the others, leaves unexplained the ending of *sanctio*.

I would argue that it is not necessary to explain away ‘Resad’ and that the sequence is most readily explained as a Pictish personal name. I am, however, persuaded by the McRoberts/Michelle Brown interpretation of the rest of the line and therefore take the reverse as: *Resad – Fili(i) (et) Sp(iritu)s S(an)c(t)i o*, ‘Resad – of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, o(-)’. I will return to a possible explanation of the final *o*, but for now will restrict my discussion to what precedes it. To make sense of this phrase we need to read it together with the text on the obverse: ‘In the name of God (*or* God the highest) (and) of the Son (and) of the Holy spirit, – Resad’. Grammatically and semantically the name is separate from the invocation of the Trinity, but graphically and symbolically it is enveloped by it.

In this respect, a direct comparison may be made with the inscribed helmet from Coppergate, York, discovered in 1984, which dates to the third quarter of 8th century, and is therefore roughly contemporary with the St Ninian’s Isle material (Tweddle 1992). This parallel was noted by Michael Spearman (1989) and has been discussed by subsequent commentators (Tweddle 1992: 1134–5, Webster & Backhouse 1991: 224; Graham-Campbell 2002: 31; Webster 2017). It is worth examining in detail. The Coppergate text is inscribed twice on strips which run over the top of the helmet from front-to-back and ear-to-ear, creating a cross over the wearer’s head, which, as Webster (2017) points out, is by its form, intrinsically apotropaic. The Coppergate inscription is much longer than the St Ninian’s Isle text, there being far more room available. In further contrast to St Ninian’s Isle, word division is clearly indicated, and abbreviation is consistently marked by a suprascript line. The inscription is discussed in detail by Okasha (1992a) who reads it as follows:

INNOMINE:DN̄I:NOSTRI:IHV:SC̄S:SP̄S: D̄I:ET:OMNIBVS:DECEMV̄S:AMEN:OSHERE:XPI
*In nomine D(omi)ni Nostri Ih(es)u S(an)c(tu)s Sp(iritu)s D(e)i et omnibus decemus
 amen. Oshere Xp(ist)i*

There are a number of difficulties with interpreting this text. The abbreviation SCS SPS is ungrammatical (it should be genitive), the verb *decemus* is unattested and appears to require emendation, and the word order is puzzling. Okasha emends SCS to SCI, and *decemus* to *dicimus* ‘we say’. She takes this to mean:

‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit (and) God and to (*or* with) all we say Amen. Oshere.’

She acknowledges that separating *Ihu* and *Xpi* is ‘odd’ but to do so allows the rest of the text to be framed ‘within a well-known Christian formula’ (1992a: 1013). Binns, Norton and Palliser propose an alternative explanation (1990) in which they emend *decemus* to

dicemus (from *dicare* ‘to dedicate, offer’), and take *scs* as an abbreviation for *sanctis* (dative or ablative plural) together with *omnibus*:

‘In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and of the Spirit of God, let us offer up Oshere to All Saints. Amen’

They point out that the helmet was discovered near to All Saints’ Church, which, they argue, occupies the site of the Anglo-Saxon minster of All Saints at York, mentioned in historical sources (Binns et al 1990: 138). Ingenious though their interpretation is, Okasha points out a number of concerns: she notes that *scs* is not attested as an abbreviation of *sanctis*; the interpretation of Binns et al does extreme violence to the – admittedly difficult – word-order: it is far more natural to take the adjacent words *scs sps* together as ‘Holy Spirit’; the verb *dicare* is rare; other Anglo-Saxon objects inscribed with personal names refer to the ‘maker, owner or commissioner of the object’ (1992a: 1014). Okasha’s interpretation, notably her emendation of *decemus* to *dicimus*, is supported by her comparison with a number of Irish versions of the *Gloria in excelsis*. The earliest of these occurs in the late 7th-century *Antiphony of Bangor* (Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS C.5, fo.33r; Warren 1893–95: 1 vol 2, 31; Curran 1984): *domine filii unigenite ihesu christe sancte spiritus dei et omnes dicimus amen*. The same phrasing occurs in later Irish liturgical texts, including the 8th- or 9th-century *Stowe Missal* (Dublin, RIA MS d.II 3, fol 14r), and the 11th- or 12th-century Irish *Liber Hymnorum* (Dublin, Trinity College MS E.4.2, fol 9r). As Okasha explains, the interpretation of *omnes* is not certain. It could be vocative, paralleling the *nomina sacra* in the vocative, or it could be nominative ‘we all say’ (1992a: 1014). Either way, she notes that the phrase *et omnes dicimus amen* ‘does not seem to appear in any other version of the *gloria*’ adding that the fact that the Coppergate text is ‘most nearly paralleled in early Irish liturgical texts raises some interesting questions about the relationship between York and Ireland at this time’ (ibid). It does indeed.

Irrespective of the precise interpretation of the Coppergate text, it indisputably contains the following elements which help elucidate similar features on the St Ninian’s Isle chape: an invocation of the Trinity, a single male-personal name, and unusual word order. The Coppergate precedent encourages us to read the two sides of the chape together as a single text:

‘in the name of God (*or* God the highest) (and) of the Son (and) of the Holy Spirit,
Resad

or rather, as the word-order is significant

‘in the name of God (*or* God the highest) – Resad – (and) of the Son (and) of the Holy Spirit,

Read this way, the name and its bearer are protected by being surrounded by the triune God. God (or ‘God the highest’) himself is in the most prominent position, on the front face, with a whole line to himself, and with the most exalted form of script reserved for him alone. Graphically the next most prominent position is at the beginning of the second line and this is where Resad is positioned (‘fronted’). An examination of the corpus of British inscriptions (Edwards 2007; Redknap & Lewis 2007) provides numerous examples of the manipulation of textual order and layout so that the name of the principal falls at the beginning or, occasionally, the end, of a line or some other visually prominent position contrary to natural (or unmarked) syntax. The careful positioning of personal names to give visual prominence is a technique also employed in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions. As discussed by Higgitt, the use of the mid-point of a text as a position of honour for the principal’s name can be seen in the Late Anglo-Saxon lapidary inscription from Deerhurst (2004: 29–33). In this respect, it should be noted that, in addition to coming at the start of the second line, *Resad* simultaneously sits in the middle of the united text (ten letters before, 12 following).

What remains to be explained is the final, problematic letter: **o**. McRoberts (1965) suggested it was an ‘ornamental filler’, which, in Jackson’s view, was ‘a counsel of despair’ (1973: 168). Equally despairing is Okasha’s suggestion that the **o** is ‘presumably an error, perhaps due to confusion over the abbreviating of nouns in oblique cases’ (1985: 58). The Coppergate text and various other Anglo-Saxon examples tabled by Okasha demonstrate that such confusions were indeed not unknown, even on prestigious artworks. Nonetheless, we should be reluctant to fall back on ‘ignorance’ (other than our own) as an explanation until all others have been exhausted. Whilst agreeing with Jackson that ‘ornamental filler’ should not be an explanation of first resort, it should be noted that there are Welsh epigraphic examples of o-shaped ornamental fillers – for instance the two o-shaped rings which fill the blank space at the bottom of the inscribed panel on a 10th- to 11th-century cross-slab from Margam (Eglwys Nynnid 2) which opens with the phrase *in nomine [Dei]* (Redknap & Lewis 2007: 441–4, G87). These, however, are not letters, though they are very like letters.¹⁵ Two other inscribed crosses from Margam (Cwrt-y-defaid 1–2) (Redknap & Lewis 2007: 427–36 (G84–5)) also bear incised rings on their inscribed panels, although these are more closely tied to the decorative frames around the inscriptions.

What makes ‘ornamental filling’ an unlikely explanation for the St Ninian’s Isle **o** is that the space available for lettering was finite and far from generous (contrast this with the Welsh examples which have large panels, only part of which is consumed by their inscriptions). The St Ninian’s Isle designer was faced with a considerable challenge in attempting to accommodate the text whilst retaining geometric order and graphic harmony. The division of the **m** on the obverse shows that in cases of conflict, visual/design considerations trumped straightforward readability, although, of course, the inscription remains perfectly legible. The compression of the four-line minuscule script of the reverse between two lines is evidence that the designer took pains to completely fill the panel and avoid any blank spaces, even if this meant a distortion of letter forms. Given this careful attention to the graphic balance of the text, it is inconceivable to me that the designer would have left a blank space at the end requiring ‘filling’ in such a clumsy way.

Jackson (1973: 168) disposes of McRobert’s (1965) suggestion that the final character is intended for an omega to match a hypothetical ‘missing alpha’ from the beginning. As he points out, other Insular examples have the Greek letter **ω** rather than ‘**o**’. Even were this not the case, the careful attention to layout discussed above makes the notion of a ‘missing’ letter far-fetched. Such explanations have a place in the toolkit of scholars used to lapidary inscriptions which are fragmentary or worn, or manuscript texts which have been copied and recopied without due attention. It is not, however, appropriate in this case for a text which is intact, undamaged, and very carefully designed and executed. I do not accept McRobert’s ‘missing alpha’ and *a fortiori* reject Howlett’s (2002) proposed interpretation of the text as:

in nomine D(ei) s(ummi) | (Pat)res ac D(ei) Fili Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i o

‘In the name of God the Highest Father and of God the Son, of the Holy Spirit, **Ω**’ which requires, not only a missing alpha, but also a missing **pat** of *patres* and demands that the ‘horned’ **a** be read as **ac**.

Far more likely is that the **o** is an abbreviation for something. Jackson dismissed McRobert’s (1965) suggestion that the **o** stood for *omnipotentis*, ‘almighty’, on the grounds that it was not ‘a recognised part of the *patris et filii* formula’ (Jackson 1973: 168). A glance, however, at the great variety of invocations found on contemporary Anglo-Saxon charters suggests that there may have been more variation in such formulae than Jackson allowed. The corpus of pre-900 Anglo-Saxon charters mentioned above (*ASChart*) includes examples of, for instance, *in nomine Dei patris omnipotentis*, *in nomine omnipotentis Dei et Domini nostri Iesu Christi*, and *pater omnipotens Deus*. In adducing the parallel of Anglo-Saxon charter invocations I do not mean to imply any direct connection with the St Ninian’s Isle chape,

merely that this body of material preserves – uniquely – a wide range of invocations which were in use in the Insular Church at the time and which are not recorded in other sources.

Returning to the Coppergate comparison furnishes an alternative possibility that the **o** is an abbreviation for *omnibus* ‘to all’ (as on the helmet) or *omnes* (as in the Irish *Gloria*). As explained above, in neither of these cases is it certain whether the ‘all’ in question refers to those appealing (‘we all say’) or those being appealed to (‘to all’, or indeed ‘to all saints’). One further possibility is to read the two sides of the inscription as a request to the reader to pray (*ora*) in the name of God the Highest, the Son and the Holy Spirit, on behalf of Resad. Inscribed pre-Norman metalwork from Ireland, in the form of a dozen 10th- and 11th-century reliquaries, consistently requests prayers for the patron and maker(s) of the object, albeit in Irish (*oróit do X*, ‘a prayer for X’) rather than Latin (Michelli 1996).

If we accept that the **o** is an abbreviation, and that Resad has been fronted for graphic rather than grammatical reasons, the range of possibilities includes (but is not limited to):

in nomine D(e)[i] (et) Fili (et) Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t) o(mnipotentis). Resad

in nomine D(ei) S(ummi) (et) Fili (et) Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i (et) o(mnes dicimus, Amen).

Resad

in nomine D(ei) S(ummi) (et) Fili (et) Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i (et) o(mnium sanctorum).

Resad

in nomine D(ei) S(ummi) (et) Fili (et) Sp(irit)us S(an)c(t)i o(ra pro) Resad

If the formula were a familiar one, say from a local form of liturgy, then a single **o** would be sufficient to stand for the whole word or phrase. To write it out in full would have required a number of additional letters. These could not have been accommodated without reducing the size of the script, which would in turn have meant areas of blank space above and below (unless the letters were unpleasantly elongated). This palaeographical explanation would be sufficient to account for the final abbreviation, and of the omission of the ‘*et*’s and their associated spaces, but it may have been desirable in and of itself. In another context, that of Roman republican funerary inscriptions which are typically ‘rich in allusive abbreviations and readable only by those with the proper skill’, Petrucci has discussed how the heavy use of abbreviations in an epigraphic text can serve ‘to compress the text and render it still more dignified in the symbolic complexity of its signs’ even when space is not at a premium (1998 (1995): 17). The Christian *nomina sacra* are not abbreviated for reasons of space, but as a mark of dignity and sanctity. Similarly, it could be argued that boiling down the St Ninian’s Isle text to its bare essence, the minimum necessary to convey the sense, served to enhance its symbolic power and apotropaic efficacy.

Comparable inscriptions

There are more than half a dozen examples of inscribed weaponry from Anglo-Saxon England, but in contrast to the St Ninian’s Isle chape, most appear simply to record the maker’s and/or owner’s name (Webster 2017; Johnson 2020). A sword-guard from Exeter is inscribed in Latin with a maker formula (Okasha 1971: 70–1, no. 37) and the blade of a scramasax (knife) from Sittingbourne, Kent, has owner- and maker-formula on opposite faces (in Old English in roman script) (Okasha 1971: 113–14, no. 109). The Anglo-Saxon runic inscription on the Westminster scabbard guard (now in the British Museum) has been transliterated but ‘not satisfactorily interpreted’ – it appears to be gobbledygook – and is possibly amuletic (Webster & Backhouse 1991: 225; Webster 2017). This striking object is of particular interest in the present context as there is nothing very like it in the corpus of Anglo-Saxon metalwork, the closest parallels both come instead from Pictland. In form, it is like the scabbard depicted on the St Andrews ‘sarcophagus’, which has been interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon diplomatic gift (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 130, fig 190), and its animal head is closest to the heads on the St Ninian’s Isle chapes (Wilson 1973: 138). It seems Anglo-Saxon

sheaths and scabbards were not infrequently inscribed. Of the 20 extant leather sheaths for knives or daggers, three are inscribed (Okasha 1992b). These all date to the 10th or 11th century and come from areas of Anglo-Saxon England then under Viking influence. All are inscribed with a Latin maker-formula in capital script: '[N.] *me fecit*' '[N.] made me'. This may refer directly to the leatherworker, or, in the sense 'had me made', to the patron (Okasha 1992b). The lack of surviving weaponry from Celtic-speaking areas makes it difficult to know whether such inscriptions were a specifically Anglo-Saxon habit. A Norse runic inscription on a small bronze plaque, possibly a scabbard mount, from Greenmount, Co Louth, now in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin (*CIIC*: no. 576), suggests not. It records ownership by a Gaelic-speaker: 'Donald "Seal's-Head" owns this sword' (Barnes et al 1997: 50–3, IR1; Jackson 1973: 170).

By far the closest parallel to the St Ninian's Isle chape inscription is, of course, the Coppergate helmet, but from the foregoing it will be clear that it is quite unlike the other extant items of inscribed Anglo-Saxon war-gear with their maker/owner formulae. Certainly, Shetlanders were aware of and responded to Anglo-Saxon metalwork styles, as demonstrated by the chip-carved brooch and the Anglo-Saxon-type spear from Scalloway (Campbell 1998; 2010), but the fact that the Coppergate text apparently derives from Gaelic liturgy reminds us that cultural influences flowed to, as well as from, Anglo-Saxon England.

Concluding discussion: Implications for literacy and place of manufacture

Julian Brown speculated that if the texts on the two sides of the chape 'were written by Picts, then they add something to our knowledge of Latin learning in the Pictish kingdom' (1959: 254). The choice of Latin over the vernacular is in keeping with British epigraphic tradition in general, and in contrast to Ireland where the vernacular had sufficient status to be the norm for inscriptions on all materials (Forsyth 1998). Brown argued that 'the sophisticated majuscule style of the obverse and the every-day minuscule style of the reverse indicates that the object was produced and used in a centre or centres where the full range of Insular handwriting, from the most formal to the most cursive, was known and used'. Furthermore, the high quality of this lettering showed that 'by the end of the eighth century, at the latest, Pictish scribes had little to learn about Insular handwriting, whether from Iona in the West or from Northumbria in the South' (Brown, T J 1959: 254). The subsequent archaeological identification of vellum manufacture at Portmahomack has provided tangible evidence of book production in northern Pictland (Carver et al 2016). Indeed, given the stylistic links between the St Ninian's inscribed chape (and pommel) and certain pieces of sculpture in Easter Ross, all of which Henderson sees as exhibiting Mercian influence (2017), and given the evidence of fine metalworking at Portmahomack, it is tempting to consider it as a potential place of manufacture of the chape.

While the chape's lettering certainly reflects familiarity with high-grade display scripts used in books, the distinctive looped entries to the down-strokes betray the fact that the person who wrote it was used to writing, not with pen on vellum, but with stylus on wax. Arguably, the layout of the lettering is 'artistic' rather than 'calligraphic', in the sense that letters are treated in part like geometric shapes, their integrity subordinated to overall graphic balance.

Rather than support the assumption of previous writers that the lettering was designed by one individual (literate), and implemented by another (non-literate), these features point instead to it having been both conceived and executed by a single literate artisan. This is consistent with the situation in early medieval Ireland. Griffin Murray has taken issue with earlier scholars who assumed there was a dichotomy between the design and manufacture of early medieval Irish metalwork. Murray shows that there is no evidence to support this anachronistic distinction and, on the contrary, 'the craftsmen who created the elaborate

Church metalwork of early medieval Ireland were educated individuals of reasonably high status, whose creations were made, not as commercially driven commissions, but as devotional acts' (2013: 172). Murray argues that many – though, of course, not all – of these craftsmen, were clerics and likely to have been literate. This is borne out by a number of dedicatory inscriptions, and by physical evidence, such as the assembly marks on the 8th–9th-century Derrynaflan patten, which include several letters (Brown, M 1993), and the inscription round the bowl of the roughly contemporary Ardagh chalice (Murray 2013: 164).

Clearly, the chape is a military fitting, not an ecclesiastical item, but this does not mean it could not have been made in an ecclesiastical workshop. Murray provides compelling evidence that, at least in 12th-century Ireland, clerics who made ecclesiastical metalwork also made secular objects. For example, on 'both stylistic and technical grounds' it appears that the same anonymous artisan made both the Bearnán Chúláin, an early 12th-century bell-shrine from Glenkeen, and the handle of a sword found on the bed of Lough Derg near Curraghmore, both Co Tipperary. Similarly, stylistic considerations point to a single master craftsman named Nechtan being responsible for no less than four extant items of metalwork: two ecclesiastical and two secular (the Lismore crosier, a cross from Cloyne, Co Cork, the Small's Reef sword-guard, and a drinking-horn terminal now in Carlow County Museum) (Murray 2013: 170–1). This physical evidence is augmented by textual evidence: the 12th-century Middle Irish *Life of Colman Son of Luachan* features a 'famous goldsmith' (*certt amræ*) who was a member of the monastic community of Tech Conan, who 'made a bridle with gold and with silver for the king of Offaly', which was worth 12 cows (Meyer 1911: 38–9; Murray 2013: 169).

There is, therefore, no reason to doubt that the St Ninian's Isle chape could have been made by a clerical silversmith, and the fact that the lettering on the obverse is imitative of bookhand appears to point in this direction (cf Julian Brown's view (1959: 254) that it was made 'near, or even in, an ecclesiastical establishment of some importance'). Though we might expect many (most?) clerics to have a basic competence in everyday stylus-writing, not all literate clerics would have been trained in the quite different writing methods used in the specialist work of lettering on vellum. It should go without saying that the Church in Shetland would have been in possession of, at the very least, the key scriptural and liturgical manuscripts (note the depictions of clerics carrying book satchels on sculpture from Papil and Bressay (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 18–19)). Whether or not one believes any books were actually made in Shetland or had to be imported from further afield is a separate question, but it does not seem overly far-fetched to imagine a scriptorium of some sort on Shetland. The widespread use of the ogham script on monumental sculpture in Shetland reflects a general engagement with and interest in literacy, which may also have encompassed secular society.

Henderson has argued convincingly (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 113; Henderson 2017) that the St Ninian's Isle chape was produced in a Pictish workshop of some sophistication – and the proposed identification of the name Resad as Brittonic (that is, Pictish) supports this argument – but the location of that workshop remains elusive. Modern perceptions of Shetland as remote and, before the advent of North Sea oil, relatively impoverished, may be less valent for the early Middle Ages: the ambitious nature of the sculpture from St Ninian's Isle and Papil reflects a degree of wealth and sophistication in the Church in Shetland, deriving from effective lay patronage from the kind of people who lived in the contemporary settlements at Scalloway, Jarlshof and Old Scatness (Ritchie 1997; Turner 1998; Sharples 1998). Nor was Shetland disconnected from mainland Scotland: the sculpture demonstrates awareness of and responses to material and ideas from further south (Scott & Ritchie 2009). Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that the archipelago could have supported the volume of work and number of artisans necessary to sustain craft production at the level of accomplishment required to produce something of the exceptional quality of the inscribed

chape. Graham-Campbell (2002, 2008) has drawn attention to the considerable variation in silver content between the different components of the hoard, and to the differing levels of skill exhibited in their manufacture and repair. Clearly, the hoard encompasses work from a range of workshops/individuals and it is unlikely they were all located in Shetland. The lack of wear on the smaller, uninscribed chape and the lower level of skill and sophistication evident in its manufacture led Graham-Campbell (2002: 32) to argue that it is probably a local reinterpretation of the inscribed chape, a view endorsed by Webster (2017: n. 69), further underscoring the gap in quality and the likelihood that the inscribed chape was produced at a major centre elsewhere.

The inscribed chape is ‘much worn’, ‘slightly buckled at one end’ and ‘has been repaired on the back face of the terminal’ (Wilson 1973: 64). It had seen a lot of use before it came to rest in the larch-wood box which was to be its home for over 1,000 years. Perhaps, most simply, Resad, was its original owner, and bequeathed it to his local church at the end of a long life. Alternatively, it may have had a more complex life, passing from him to a succession of other owners as a gift, bequest or pledge, travelling who knows how far before finally reaching St Ninian’s Isle. Webster asserts that ‘swords and weapons are more likely to travel from their place of origin than most other prestige artefact types, given the exigencies of warfare, and the travels of royal entourages’ (2017). While this is perhaps open to debate, especially when compared with penannular and pseudo-pennanular brooches which also seem to have circulated widely, nonetheless, the presence of Anglo-Saxon weaponry at Scalloway, noted above (Campbell 1998; 2010), testifies to the ways in which objects could circulate far and wide. The presence of shrine posts on the Isle may reflect a developed saints-cult (although unlikely to be Ninian’s at that date) which might have attracted pilgrims from outwith Shetland, who may well have taken the opportunity to donate valuable objects to the saint’s successors. A valuable piece of weaponry might be considered a particularly suitable object to give if one were doing penance for an act of violence.

Early medieval Shetlanders were entangled with the wider world. The political dominance of Fortriu in the mid-late 8th century, during the reigns of Onuist son of Urquist and his successors, meant the centre of political gravity and artistic production appears to have centred further south, around the coasts of Moray and Easter Ross. We lack the historical evidence to be sure, but the rulers of Shetland may have been in alliance with, or acknowledged the over-kingship of the kings of Fortriu. They would likely have visited or been visited by them, perhaps even participated in their entourages or campaigned alongside them in battle, and been rewarded for their loyalty with gifts of precious objects. Precisely where in Fortriu such objects were manufactured is unknown, but several reasons combine to suggest the Tarbat peninsula as a potential place of origin for the St Ninian’s Isle inscribed chape. Craftsmanship of exceptional quality is evident on the peninsula in the sculptures at Shandwick, Nigg, Hilton of Cadboll and Portmahomack, and several of these pieces exhibit Mercian influences of the kind also identified on the St Ninian’s Isle chape (and pommel). At Portmahomack there is evidence, not simply of literacy, but of deluxe book production, not only in the form of the parchmenerie but also the unique relief inscription in display capitals. That there is also evidence there of fine metalwork means that Portmahomack is a plausible contender for the chape’s place of origin, though any such identification necessarily remains speculative.

Whether or not the chape was made in Shetland, it was clearly valued in Shetland. Resad may have been the maker of the chape, but it is far more likely he was the person for whom it was made (Okasha 1985: 59). The near total lack of historical records for the North in this period means there is no means of identifying who this Resad might have been. Silver-mounted weapons were symbols of status (Graham-Campbell 2002: 38) and so he would have been a powerful and wealthy man, a magnate or even a king. Perhaps he was based on

Shetland, perhaps not. Whatever his identity, he ‘was a pious Christian who drew his sword in the Lord’s name or invoked his protection when he did so’ (Jackson 1973: 170).

Acknowledgements

This article is a substantially reworked version of a paper delivered at *The St Ninian’s Isle Treasure, Fifty Years Since* conference, held in Lerwick in July 2008 to mark half a century since the discovery of the hoard. I am grateful to staff of Shetland Museum and Archives, especially Brian Smith, for organising the conference and the accompanying field-trip to St Ninian’s Isle, and for inviting me to participate. It had been hoped to publish the conference papers in a single volume but this has not proved possible after more than a decade. The delay has, however, led me to a number of insights not grasped at the time. I am most grateful to those who have discussed this material with me or otherwise supplied assistance, whether at the time of the conference or subsequently: Thomas Clancy, Stephen Driscoll, James Graham-Campbell, George Henderson, Isabel Henderson, Guto Rhys and Alex Woolf. I am grateful to the late Tommy Watt and his colleagues for facilitating my visit to Shetland museum in 2008, including my inspection of the stone objects from Vaivoe and Bigton. I also wish to record my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers who helped me clarify the focus of this article; and to Frances Driscoll and Adrián Maldonado for assistance with the illustrations.

My understanding of the St Ninian’s Isle chape inscription owes much to the work, published (2002, 2007a, 2007b) and unpublished (2006), of the late Dr Gifford Charles-Edwards who tragically died just a few days before the 2008 conference. I was privileged to know her and to benefit from her unique perspective on Insular epigraphy, a perspective informed not only by her scholarship but by her practice as an artist, as a calligrapher and as an epigrapher. Her loss is still most keenly felt. To her memory I respectfully dedicate this essay.

Captions

ILLUS 1 The St Ninian’s Isle hoard (inscribed chape at bottom of picture). (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 2 The inscribed chape: obverse. (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 3 The inscribed chape: reverse. (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 4 Detail of the inscription: obverse. (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 5 Detail of the inscription: reverse. (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 6 The text of the inscription written as if in bookhand (a) obverse, (b) reverse. (After Brown, T J 1959: figs 72–3)

ILLUS 7 M as three separate strokes: *Medicii*, cross-slab from Lethnot, Angus (detail). (Canmore SC 1359712)

ILLUS 8 Epigraphic small **O**: Whithorn St Peter stone (detail). (Canmore SC 593550)

ILLUS 9 Bookhand versus tablet writing: formation of wedged serifs. (Image by Frances Driscoll after Gifford Charles-Edwards 2007a: 83, fig 54)

ILLUS 10 Bookhand reproduced in stone: Dunadd pebble (showing imitation of wedged serifs and two-stroke ‘**O**’). (© Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland)

ILLUS 11 Comparison of letter-forms. (a) St Ninian’s Isle chape, reverse: Letters in alphabetic order; (b) Selected letters from Springmount Bog tablet 3v: **b, n, i, l, p, r, s**. (© The author)

Abbreviations

ASChart: Nelson, J & Burgart A 2018 *Anglo-Saxon Charters*. <http://www.aschart.kcl.ac.uk/>. Accessed 25 November 2019.

Bede HE: Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* = Colgrave, B & Mynors, R A B 1969 *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, reproduced 1991. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

CIIC: Macalister, R A S 1945, 1949 *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, 2 vols, Dublin: Stationary Office.

eDIL: Toner, G, Ní Mhaonaigh, M, Arbuthnot, S, Theuerkauf, M-L & Wodtke, D (eds) 2019 *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*. www.dil.ie. Accessed 25 November 2019.

RIB: Collingwood, R G & Wright, R P 1965 *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain. I Inscriptions on stone*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

RIU: *Die römischen Inschriften Ungarns* (Budapest, Amsterdam, Bonn, 1972–).

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¹ I am most grateful to Professor Henderson for help in clarifying the differences between the two sides of the chape.

² In Wales as late as the late 10th or early 11th century (Charles-Edwards 2007a: 79).

³ Subsequent work on a sixth, Margam (Eglwys Nynnid, G87) (Jackson’s ‘Kenfig’, Nash-Williams 1950: no. 200) has shown the correct reading to be ‘*inomine dei*’, there is no ‘*summi*’ (Redknap & Lewis 2007: 443).

⁴ Glamorganshire: Margam 4 (Redknap & Lewis 2007: G81), Margam (Cwrt-y-defaid) 2 (Redknap & Lewis 2007: G85), Llantwit Major 3 (Redknap & Lewis 2007: G65), St Brides Major and Wick (Ogmore Castle) (Redknap & Lewis 2007: G117; Nash-Williams 1950: no. 255); Breconshire: Vaynor (Highway) (Redknap & Lewis 2007: B48; Nash-Williams 1950: ‘Faenor’ no. 72).

⁵ The upper portion of the inscription is lost, the surviving portion begins[-]/*di sumi*.

⁶ In idiosyncratic orthography influenced by pronunciation: *i(n) nomine d(e)i patris et fili (et) speritus san(c)ti ...*; (... *speretus santdi*)

⁷ I owe this reference to my colleague, Professor Thomas Clancy.

⁸ An observation I owe to Professor George Henderson.

⁹ Early Gaelic *fili* ‘a poet’ is unlikely.

¹⁰ I am grateful to my colleague Professor Thomas Clancy for pointing me in this direction.

¹¹ Here, and following, square brackets indicate inscribed letters which are damaged but legible.

¹² An observation I owe to Dr Guto Rhys.

¹³ I am grateful to Dr Guto Rhys for clarification on this point.

¹⁴ Minuscule *s* appears on the Latinus stone from 5th-century Whithorn, a short trip across the Solway Firth (Forsyth 2009).

¹⁵ Compare them with the *O*s in *pro* earlier in the text.