Exile
and
Homecoming

Papers from the Fifth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies

University of Sydney, July 2004

Edited by

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Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 8
University of Sydney

2005
Boundaries, routes and sculptured stones in early medieval Scotland

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In the course of my research into stone sculpture, its iconography and purpose, I have developed a keen interest in the distribution of early medieval sculptured stones in the landscape. Exploration of this subject is hampered by the difficulty of establishing whether stones remain on or near their original sites: many have been moved one or more times. Nonetheless, some progress can be made. In this paper, I will discuss only stones whose original sites seem likely to be identifiable. I have excluded stones for which there is evidence of later relocation and inadequate indication of previous location.

This paper is directed specifically to early medieval sculptured stones which appear to have ecclesiastical connections and which appear not to be of a primarily funerary nature. Thus the significant bodies of monastic grave slabs and Pictish class I monuments are not considered, as I do not believe that their distribution or purpose were directly comparable to those of the monuments discussed here. It intrigues me that there are centres with many sculptured stones (up to 30 or more), while other stones appear to be completely isolated. In this paper, I will seek an explanation of the distribution patterns of some of the early medieval sculptured stones in Scotland. I shall look in detail at several examples from various areas, and attempt to draw from these some patterns which might be capable of application to the wider corpus. I will not distinguish between stones which might be considered Pictish, Dalriadan or Anglian, but rather suggest

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1 University of Melbourne.
2 This contrast has also attracted the attention of Isabel Henderson, who urged that ‘Sites with assemblages ... need to be assessed together, and explanations for apparently single monument sites, found.’: I Henderson, ‘Towards defining the function of sculpture in Alba: the evidence of St Andrews, Brechin and Rosemarkie’ in S Taylor (ed), Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland, 500-1297 (Dublin, 2000) 35-46, p46.
overall patterns of the use of sculptured stones which might apply across those boundaries.\(^3\)

**Forteviot**

Leslie and Elizabeth Alcock have commented on the relationship between the Dupplin and Invermay crosses and the Pictish royal and ecclesiastical site at Forteviot, in the area of the Firth of Tay.\(^4\) The two monuments, Dupplin a freestanding cross and Invermay apparently a fragment of another, overlooked the site from elevated positions just over one kilometre to the north and south respectively. They were both intervisible with the site in the valley between them, but were situated on the inner slopes of the surrounding higher ground, limiting their visibility from outside the valley. Their placement, at virtually the same distance from the site and in almost opposite directions from it, seems carefully designed.

I would suggest that these two crosses were deliberately positioned in order to welcome visitors to the site, to signal that they had arrived at it, and to mark that the ground between them belonged to it. The fact that both monuments are situated on elevated positions may indicate that they point to, rather than mark the actual line of, specific boundaries.

It is possible also that these crosses indicate what have been called ‘field churches’,\(^5\) sites where preaching and sacraments might be administered by ecclesiastics associated with the site for the benefit of the surrounding populace. The two functions could happily coexist. The site at Forteviot itself has yielded a reasonably extensive collection of stone sculpture, some of it architectural. The Alcocks deduced from their

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\(^3\) Unless otherwise indicated, the observations presented here are based largely on the notes in J R Allen and J Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903: repr Balgavies, 1993) and on reference to Ordnance Survey maps. I have not yet been able to visit all of the sites under discussion.


excavations that a ninth-century royally sponsored church had been built at the site of an earlier palace.\(^6\) Importantly, they suggested that the church would have been used by an elite, a position endorsed by Stephen Driscoll.\(^7\) This would reinforce the utility of related sites such as field churches for administering to the general population.

Thus I would argue that Forteviot, Dupplin and Invermay demonstrate a clear relationship between an ecclesiastical site, which has several surviving sculptured stones, and nearby individual monuments, which yield no suggestion of archaeological context in their immediate locations. There is perhaps nothing startling in this, and it is now 12 years since the Alcocks pointed out that the Dupplin and Invermay crosses must relate to the site at Forteviot. However, I would like to explore a selection of other sites in the vicinity of Tayside to assess whether there may be comparable relationships elsewhere.

**Firth of Tay**

At Invergowrie, on the north shore of the Firth of Tay, two sculptured stones were found by Allen and Anderson.\(^8\) I would suggest that this may have been another ecclesiastical site with multiple sculptured stones. One of the surviving pieces is fragmentary, suggesting damage to the site and its sculpture, which would allow for the possibility of other sculpture now lost. Local tradition has it that the church at Invergowrie was founded by the Pictish Bishop Boniface in 715.\(^9\) About three kilometres north-west of Invergowrie, a single cross-slab was found at Benvie.\(^10\) It was situated approximately half-way up the southern slope of a rise. About six

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6 Alcock and Alcock, p227. The Alcocks suggest that the church was erected by Kenneth MacAlpin or his brother Donald on a palace site of their ‘Pictish predecessors’, but the notion that Kenneth’s reign marked the end of Pictish rule has recently lost popularity: see D Broun, ‘Alba: Pictish homeland or Irish offshoot?’ in this book.


8 Allen and Anderson, pp255-257.


10 Allen and Anderson, pp247-249.
kilometres west of Invergowrie, another single cross-slab was found at Rossie priory, again on a southern slope, a little higher than the cross-slab at Benvie.\textsuperscript{11} It is not unreasonable to suppose that these two monuments may have borne a relationship to the site at Invergowrie. There are good prospects of intervisibility with the site under clear conditions.

Not far from Invergowrie, Strathmartine, on the north bank of Dighty Water, is the site of a large group of sculptured stones, including a recumbent monument and a free-standing cross, as well as several cross-slabs.\textsuperscript{12} This variety of stone sculpture types suggests a site which may have been in use for some time, and which must have been of some significance. About three kilometres north of Strathmartine, an individual cross-slab was found on the southern slopes of Balluderon Hill, at about 150 metres above sea level.\textsuperscript{13} About six kilometres north-east of Strathmartine, an individual cross-slab was found on the southern slope of Gallow Hill at Tealing, about 150 metres above sea level.\textsuperscript{14} Again, intervisibility with Strathmartine would be possible for both monuments under favourable conditions.

In addition to both Tealing and Balluderon being sited at 150 metres above sea level on the southern slopes of hills, it is of interest that their distances from Strathmartine correspond fairly closely to those of Benvie and Rossie from Invergowrie. I would suggest that in both of these cases the outlying individual monuments may act as markers for the site, and possibly also as field churches.

Both Strathmartine and Invergowrie have water immediately to the south, with the outlying individual monuments in the opposite direction. The water forms a natural boundary or border, and probably also provided transport access to the sites. I think it likely that some of the sculpture at the sites may have been positioned close to the water’s edge to indicate landing points and to proclaim the identity and ownership of the sites. For travellers or locals arriving overland, the single cross-slabs may, as I have suggested in relation to Forteviot, have indicated landward boundaries or direction markers, almost ‘signposts’, to the major sites at Invergowrie and Strathmartine.

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\textsuperscript{11} Allen and Anderson, pp306-308.
\textsuperscript{12} Allen and Anderson, pp230-234, 266-267.
\textsuperscript{13} Allen and Anderson, p215.
\textsuperscript{14} Allen and Anderson, p234.
If one were to postulate further individual outlying stones related to both Invergowrie and Strathmartine, perhaps marking more easterly and westerly boundaries respectively, the logical positions for such stones would have a good chance of lying underneath modern Dundee, which occupies a good part of the space between the two sites. This might be a reason why no such monuments have been recorded.

Rivers Tay and Tummel
The other group of monuments around Tayside which are of particular interest here are distributed along the inland watercourses. I will begin this exploration at the prominent ecclesiastical site of Abernethy, near the south bank of the River Tay at its confluence with the River Earn. Local traditions suggest that Abernethy may have had a church as early as the fifth century; it seems certainly to have had one by the sixth century. The site has a collection of stone sculpture including what were probably free-standing crosses.

About four kilometres north-east of Abernethy, on the south bank of the Firth of Tay, is Mugdrum, where a putative cross-shaft was found ‘on an elevation’, purportedly in its original base, which argues that it is probably in situ. This would seem a likely landing site or a seaward boundary marker for Abernethy.

Approximately 38 kilometres upriver from Abernethy is Murthly, where a single slab was found on the bank near the confluence of the Gelly Burn with the Tay. This slab does not in its current form contain any overtly Christian reference, and may not be ecclesiastical at all. However, it is of rather an unusual shape, and the shape suggests to me that it has been truncated and is the lower portion of a cross-slab from which the cross is now missing. The slab is only ten centimetres thick and sculptured on

17 Allen and Anderson, p367; Proudfoot, pp54-56.
19 Alternatively, this slab may be a panel from a composite construction such as a shrine: see C Thomas, ‘Form and function’ in Foster (ed), The St Andrews
only one face, and may be the remnant of a slab which has had one face removed for reuse, an act which is attested in other Pictish cross-slabs such as Hilton of Cadboll.\textsuperscript{20} The fact that the Murthly stone was discovered by a plough would support its having been a rejected piece at some time in its history.

Approximately ten kilometres upriver from Murthly is Dunkeld, where twelfth-century sources indicate that an important church was established around 800.\textsuperscript{21} As might be expected, the site has yielded a number of sculptured stones.\textsuperscript{22} Dunkeld is located at the confluence of the Ballinloan Burn with the River Tay.

Approximately 13 kilometres upriver from Dunkeld is Logierait, situated at the confluence of the Rivers Tay and Tummel. At Logierait a single cross-slab was found in the churchyard on the riverbank.\textsuperscript{23}

Approximately 12 kilometres upriver from Logierait, near the confluence of the Rivers Garry and Tummel, is Killiecrankie. Here a single cross-slab was found in a ruined chapel in a wood on the bank of the Garry. It is now known as the Dunfallandy Stone after a later location.\textsuperscript{24}

I would postulate a site of lost sculpture at the confluence of the Rivers Tay and Almond near Scone and another at one of the minor confluences near Stanley. These are entirely unattested, to my knowledge. Scone is approximately 13 kilometres upriver from Mugdrum. Stanley is approximately 12 kilometres upriver from Scone and 13 kilometres downriver from Murthly. If there were sculptured stones at both of these points, we would have a pattern of single monuments at intervals of ten to 13 kilometres all the way up the Tay from Abernethy to Dunkeld and beyond. This surely indicates stages in a journey between the two important ecclesiastical centres.

By water, the journey from Abernethy to Dunkeld is something like 75 kilometres. I would guess that this would take more than a day moving upriver, although considerably less in the other direction. In the course of a

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{sarcophagus.png}
\caption{Sarcophagus, 84-96. Such a function is not suggested by the irregularly-shaped lower edge of the Murthly slab, however.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{20} Allen and Anderson, p62.
\textsuperscript{21} MacQuarrie, p121, gives a brief summary of the uncertainty of the dating of Dunkeld’s foundation, but points out that it must date from no later than the first half of the ninth century.
\textsuperscript{22} Allen and Anderson, pp317-319, 342.
\textsuperscript{23} Allen and Anderson, pp291-292.
\textsuperscript{24} Allen and Anderson, pp286-289.
full day’s rowing against the current, the traveller would require regular rest stops. I would suggest that the single cross-slabs at regular intervals might represent places where those stops might occur.

The fact that the monuments are situated near confluences is surely also significant. Not only are these unmissable landmarks, but at these points the current is likely to be disturbed and more difficult to traverse, making a rest stop desirable, possibly even with a short portage along the riverbank if a boat were light. The siting of the points at confluences echoes the Pictish inclination to locate important administrative and/or ritual sites at confluences, and would make easy foci for wayside preaching by the ecclesiastical traveller.

The two sites upriver from Dunkeld may also be significant. This is conjecture, but it would theoretically be possible to traverse by water from Tayside to the Great Glen at Ballachulish, with an overland portage of not more than a kilometre between Loch Laidon and Black Water, a path obviously not too impenetrable as it has been able to support a railway line for many years. From Ballachulish, clear waterborne transport routes to the important Pictish region in the Moray firthlands and to the Columban islands of Iona and Islay are available.

Moray Firth
The most exciting site in the Moray Firth area is undoubtedly Portmahomack at Tarbat Ness. Archaeological investigations carried out here in the last few years clearly demonstrate an important early monastic site, with extensive stone sculpture remains. The most impressive monument seems to have been a cross-slab which was probably over two metres tall. The site centres around a relatively sheltered landable beach on a peninsula.

Approximately eight kilometres to the south of Tarbat, also on the shore of the Moray Firth, is Hilton of Cadboll. Here the pieces of a magnificent large cross-slab were found on a low hill close to the shore. No

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25 See, for example, W F H Nicolaisen, ‘On Pictish rivers and their confluences’ in Henry (ed), The worm, the germ and the thorn, 113-118.
26 N Robertson, ‘The early medieval carved stones of Fortingall’ in Henry (ed), The worm, the germ and the thorn, 133-148, -134, proposes a different route via Glendochart and Loch Awe, which is feasible but lacks the sort of material remains I describe.
associated ecclesiastical remains of the early medieval period have been identified, despite archaeological investigation of the locality.\(^{28}\)

About two kilometres south of Hilton of Cadboll is Shandwick, where another large cross-slab was found on a hill sloping towards the sea.\(^{29}\) Again, no associated ecclesiastical remains have been identified.

Another ten kilometres south of Shandwick is Nigg, on the southern tip of the peninsula and again close to the sea. Nigg is the site of a further large cross-slab.\(^{30}\)

I would suggest that these three very large and magnificent cross-slabs relate to the site at Tarbat.\(^{31}\) All three cross-slabs are similar in scope and size to the large partial cross-slab from Tarbat. They were all located near the seashore on slightly elevated ground. All would be clearly visible from the water. They were possibly intended to identify the ownership and identity of the peninsula, primarily for sea travellers. Nigg was near what must have been a sheltered landing place. It appears that Shandwick Bay may also have been a safe landing point, although less sheltered.

The monuments from Hilton of Cadboll and Tarbat are very similar in style, featuring fine animal sculpture and vinescroll surrounds. Those from Shandwick and Nigg are also very similar to each other, but quite different from the other two. They feature heavy bosses and do not have the vinescroll frame. Perhaps the Shandwick and Hilton slabs served as maritime signposts or navigational aids of some kind, pointing to their corresponding counterparts in the more sheltered bays.

**West coast islands**

On the west coast of Scotland are the islands occupied by the Gaelic Dalriada, including the major Columban Christian site of Iona. Iona has a selection of sculptured stones, mostly in the form of free-standing crosses. While some are thought to have stood close to the early medieval monastery, it is not particularly clear where others were originally sited. I suggest that some were at the landing points for the island. Interestingly, no sculptured stones have been found at the modern embarkation points for

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\(^{29}\) Allen and Anderson, pp68-73.

\(^{30}\) Allen and Anderson, pp75-83.

\(^{31}\) After I reached this conclusion, Martin Carver’s report on Portmahomack, including broadly the same suggestions, became available: Carver, p26.
Iona on Mull or the mainland. This may be because the early medieval monastic community on Iona did not expect visitors from that direction. There is, indeed, no particular reason why early medieval visitors to Iona would travel via Oban or even Mull, although the Life of Columba informs us that some visitors to Iona did come from Mull.32 With water as a major transport route, and with Christian presence attested on other islands and in the areas around Kintyre and Glasgow, Iona might well have looked to these and to Ireland, southern Britain and the continent for the majority of its visitors.

South of Iona is the island of Islay, where early medieval sculptured stones including two well-preserved free-standing crosses and fragments of others, together with several smaller monuments, have been found.

The finest and best-preserved of the the free-standing crosses on Islay is at Kildalton, where there are also several smaller sculptured stones.33 The site at Kildalton is not visible from the sea, and there is no surviving evidence of any outlying sculpture associated with it.

The free-standing cross at Kilnave, however, was within clear view of the shore, and indeed would be visible immediately upon entering Loch Gruinart.34 It is placed within the shelter of the Loch, where the shore is shallow and safe for landing. It was almost undoubtedly intended to mark a preferred landing point, perhaps for travellers from more northerly places such as Iona.

At Kilbride on Islay, a cross-marked slab was found on the site of the later church, and another some 700 metres away towards the sea, on the site of a disused burial ground.35 The slabs are of rather similar appearance, and might have been intended as either boundary markers or ‘sign posts’, marking a route from the harbour at what is now Port Ellen, possibly towards Kildalton.

Other sculptured stones have been found on the coastline of Islay, at Kilchoman, Gleann na Gaoith, Laggan, and on the tiny islands of Orsay and Nave Island just off Islay’s coast.36 Islay was therefore possibly marked by sculptured stones at several suitable landing points distributed around the

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34 Allen and Anderson, pp395-397; Fisher, p139.  
35 Fisher, pp136, 137.  
36 Fisher, pp 137-140.
island. Boundaries are not in question on an island; they are provided by the sea. It might still have been desirable, though, to welcome visitors, or to proclaim to them whose boundaries they were about to cross. I believe that the sculptured stones on Islay were intended to serve this purpose.

**Whithorn to Lindisfarne**

An area of particular interest to me is the south-western portion of modern Scotland. In the period when the monuments considered here were erected, this region was under the control of Northumbria. The centre at Whithorn pre-dates this period and, like Tarbat, has yielded evidence that it was a major ecclesiastical centre during this period. One sculptured stone from Whithorn is generally accepted as a boundary marker of some kind, and bears an inscription which translates roughly as ‘the place of the apostle Peter’. There are extensive stone sculpture remains, many of them early. Whithorn is close to the sea in a sheltered bay. It is probable that at least one of Whithorn’s sculptured stones originally stood by the landing place on the shore. Access by water was convenient from Ireland and from the west coast of Britain.

Travelling by water up the Solway Firth, it is approximately 80 kilometres from Whithorn to Ruthwell. Ruthwell is situated at a point which was probably on the shore of the Solway in the early medieval period and a convenient landing point. It is home to the famous Ruthwell Cross, a very large sculptured stone cross or pillar. Its precise original location is unknown, although it is almost certainly from somewhere in the village. Ruthwell would normally be an easy and short journey from Whithorn by water.

Travelling overland from Ruthwell, a long day’s walk or shorter day’s ride of 50 kilometres or so would bring one to Bewcastle. Here in the fells next to a Roman fort stands the Bewcastle Cross (see figure 1), another

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37 Allen and Anderson, p497.
very large sculptured stone cross or pillar, frequently compared to that at Ruthwell.\textsuperscript{41} There are no apparent ecclesiastical remains associated with it.

Travelling north from Bewcastle, a difficult day’s journey of about 50 kilometres over the Cheviot Hills via Kielder would bring one to Jedburgh. At Jedburgh, a later abbey covers the site of an early medieval Christian establishment, where archaeologists have found a collection of sculptured stones including an intricate panel probably from a shrine.\textsuperscript{42}

From Jedburgh, the major Christian site at Lindisfarne might again be reached in a day’s journey by land or water down the Tweed and Teviot Rivers. A journey between Whithorn and Lindisfarne by sea would be unnecessarily lengthy and hazardous. In this instance the preferred mode of travel for much of the journey must have been equine or pedestrian. It is reasonable to suggest that travel between the two centres would have been undertaken. Both were the seats of bishops during the early medieval period. Both possessed reputations as centres of learning and holiness. Both would be interested in exchange of learning, ideas and artefacts. It seems to me natural that sculptured stones would mark the resting points on the journey.

I have suggested elsewhere that the Ruthwell Cross was probably part of a monastic foundation, and that in fact what we now know as the Ruthwell Cross represents the remains of at least three early medieval sculptured stones.\textsuperscript{43} Jedburgh appears also to have been the site of a considerable ecclesiastical foundation. The Bewcastle Cross appears to have no such associations, but is situated at a convenient resting point, and the disused Roman fort beside it might have provided shelter. I suggest that the Bewcastle Cross is another example of an isolated sculptured stone used to mark a significant point in a journey. It might also have served a ‘field church’ function, allowing the traveller to break his journey to preach and administer to the local population.

**Physical and written evidence**

Much has been written about the siting of stone crosses on and within


\textsuperscript{42} Allen and Anderson, pp433-435, 514-515.

\textsuperscript{43} O’Neill, *passim*. 
monastic enclosure walls and ditches. Much of it is speculation, unsupported by physical evidence, such as the various attempts

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to interpret the colophon drawing in the Book of Mulling. There are documented references to the setting up of stone crosses on the boundaries of ecclesiastical land, such as in the twelfth-century St Andrew’s foundation legend, purporting to describe early medieval activities. Early Irish law mentions the setting up of crosses to mark out church precincts. It will always be difficult to substantiate such sources and ideas with physical evidence, because of the extent to which that evidence has been tampered with by time, weather and human agency.

What I hope I have demonstrated here is that it is possible to use the physical evidence to construct models for the possible uses of the sculptured stones which remain to us. In some cases these models will be compatible with the written sources which remain to us. It seems clear that some sculptured stones were used to indicate the extent or direction of ecclesiastical land holdings. I believe that the physical evidence suggests that sculptured stones were also used to indicate travel routes, and to mark points on those routes where travellers might safely and beneficially pause in their journey. I believe that I may have identified suitable stops for the river traveller on the Tay in Scotland. I also believe that I may have identified suitable stops for the overland traveller between Whithorn and Lindisfarne.

Isolated sculptured stones appear to have served as visible signs in the landscape, separate from but related to the grouped sculptured stones located within ecclesiastical sites. They seem to have had two possible and complementary purposes: to show the surrounding population where church land was and where to gather to hear preaching or receive sacraments; and to show travelling ecclesiastics and others their way. The Bewcastle or Dupplin Crosses or the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab must surely have been a meaningful and welcome sight for the homecoming early medieval traveller.

