St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a: A Reconsideration

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Abstract

The monument known as St Vigeans No 1, or the Drosten Stone, is located in St Vigeans Museum, near Arbroath in Angus, Scotland. It is a Pictish cross-slab of approximately 9th-century date and bears both Pictish symbols and a cross. It stands 1740 mm tall, is about 550 mm wide, and roughly 180 mm thick. In its present form, it consists of two pieces of sandstone, St Vigeans No 1 and St Vigeans No 1a (as catalogued in The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland), together with various modern substances employed in the joining and presentation of the monument.1 This paper contends that St Vigeans No 1 and St Vigeans No 1a are not parts of a single early medieval monument, as is generally accepted, but rather originated as parts of two separate monuments, although the two original monuments may have been products of the same school, possibly the same sculptor, and of similar date. This contention arises from the author’s observations of the monument during a visit to St Vigeans in July 1999.

In The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland, Romilly Allen says of St Vigeans No 1: ‘... No. 1, the “Drosten” Stone, used to form part of the pavement at the bottom of the stairway in the church; afterwards, at the time when Dr J. Stuart’s Sculptured Stones of Scotland (vol. i.) was published in 1856, it was standing in the churchyard; and it is now placed upright in the W. porch of the church on the S. side of the entrance doorway, against the steps leading into the church ... St Vigeans No. 1 is the lower part of an upright slab of Old Red Sandstone, of rectangular shape, 3 feet 7 inches high by 1 foot 9 inches wide by 7 1/4 inches thick, sculptured in relief on four faces ...’.”2

Of No 1a, Allen says: ‘... No. 1a, the upper part of the “Drosten” Stone, was found during the restoration of the church in 1872, and is now placed on the top of No. 1 and joined to it by cement ... St Vigeans No. 1a is the upper part of an upright cross-slab of Old Red Sandstone (evidently belonging to the “Drosten” Stone and now united with it) of rectangular shape, 2 feet high by 1 foot 9 inches wide by 7 inches thick, sculptured in relief on four faces ...’.”3

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1 Stephen Gordon of Historic Scotland’s Stone Conservation Centre advises that the ‘made up area’ appears to include phosphor bronze dowels, composite mortar, and sand with either shellac resin or PVA (pers. comm. 11 November 2004). I am grateful to Sally Foster for facilitating this contact.
3 ECMS, 235-239.
Allen’s discussion is accompanied by clear photographs of the monuments. No. 1 stands vertically in the churchyard, its 1856 location, and not the location described in *ECMS*. The schedule attached to the *Ancient Monuments Protection Act* of 1882 lists “[t]he cross slab, with inscription, in the churchyard of St. Vigeans”, suggesting that the stone was still in that location in 1882. It was apparently still there in 1884, when General Pitt Rivers visited the site.

![Figure 1. ECMS photograph of St Vigeans No 1 ‘front’](#)

William Duke’s report of restoration work carried out at St Vigeans in 1871 comments that No 1 ‘is intended to occupy a position within the church which will admit of its easy examination’. The same report notes that another fragment of sculptured stone, which had been used as a ‘footstep for [No 1], one of its sides having been hollowed out for the

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4 *Ancient Monuments Protection Act* (1882) schedule.
purpose’, had now been built into the church fabric.\textsuperscript{7} The removal of the footstep would suggest, although not conclusively, that No 1 may have been removed from its churchyard location before the presentation of the report in 1872. Duke’s text also suggests, however, that No 1 had not yet been erected within the church.

\textbf{Figure 2. ECMS photograph of St Vigeans No 1 ‘back’}\textsuperscript{8}


\textsuperscript{8} After J R Allen and J Anderson, \textit{The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland} (Edinburgh, 1903) plate 2.
Stuart’s work of 1856 was illustrated by drawings, not photographs. The photographs in ECMS show No 1’s base embedded in an approximately rectangular stone, and although the photographs show little detail of this, it seems likely that it is the footstep. The photograph, then, presumably dates from some time after 1856 but before the removal of the footstep, claimed by Duke as having occurred in 1871, but possibly later. It is possible that the photograph was taken in association with the 1871 work.

The ECMS photographs of No 1a have been trimmed of their backgrounds, and are apparently not in the same lighting conditions and therefore not of the same time and location as No 1. They are perhaps studio photographs. These photographs are clearly the basis of the illustration that accompanies Duke’s report of 1872. As early as 1848, Patrick Chalmers had reported that ‘another piece of [No 1], but defaced, is said to be built into the staircase wall’. Duke reports, with disturbing vagueness, that No 1a was found in ‘the east gable of the church, or the adjoining stair’. Apparently, Duke was satisfied that his find, a ‘large fragment of the inscribed stone’, was the piece alluded to by Chalmers.

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**Figure 3. ECMS photograph of St Vigeans No 1a ‘front’**

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10 Duke, 496.

Figure 4. ECMS photograph of St Vigeans No 1a ‘back’\textsuperscript{12}

Figure 5. ECMS photograph of St Vigeans No 1a side\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} After J R Allen and J Anderson, \textit{The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland} (Edinburgh, 1903) plate 2.

\textsuperscript{13} After J R Allen and J Anderson, \textit{The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland} (Edinburgh, 1903) plate 2.
The cementing together of the two pieces, referred to in ECMS, which obviously post-dates the ECMS photographs, may well also post-date Allen’s first interest in the monument. Be that as it may, his assertion that the two ‘evidently’ belong together suggests that Allen shared the opinion of Chalmers and Duke that these two pieces had originated as parts of a single monument. The two pieces were separated in the early 1960s, when the monuments were relocated from the church to the museum, and then reassembled, indicating that those involved in the repair and conservation saw no compelling reason to permanently separate them. Historic Scotland’s conservation records contain no written account of this work.¹⁴

Stewart Cruden’s description of ‘The Drosten Stone’ in 1964 notes that the ‘two broken parts’ are ‘now united’.¹⁵ Elizabeth Okasha considers the piece in her 1985 survey of Pictish inscriptions, noting that the stone has been rejoined after being broken in two.¹⁶ The monument is mentioned in Historic Scotland’s guide to Pictish stones written by Anna Ritchie in 1989.¹⁷ Ritchie dispenses with all reference to No 1a, and discusses the monument as a single entity. George Henderson and Isabel Henderson’s wide-ranging 2004 survey of Pictish art makes frequent reference to St Vigeans No 1, but does not mention that the monument is composed of two separate pieces, although the issue of conjoined fragments is raised in connection with Tarbat.¹⁸ A 2005 discussion of the sculpture at St Vigeans by John Borland refers to the two sections of No 1, but does not address the question of the compatibility of the two sections.¹⁹

It seems clear, then, that the early view that St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a are two ‘reunited’ pieces of the same original monument is widely accepted. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the two fragments, St Vigeans No 1 and St Vigeans No 1a, are in fact from two different early medieval monuments.

St Vigeans No 1a, the upper piece, is quite a small fragment, measuring approximately 630 mm by 500 mm. It is more or less triangular in shape, with the left side placed almost contiguously with No 1’s left side

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¹⁴ Gordon, pers comm.
¹⁵ S Cruden, The Early Christian and Pictish Monuments of Scotland: an Illustrated Introduction, with Illustrated and Descriptive Catalogues of the Meigle and St. Vigeans Collections (Edinburgh, 1964) 21.
¹⁶ Okasha, 59.
¹⁷ A Ritchie, Picts: an Introduction to the Life of the Picts and the Carved Stones in the Care of Historic Scotland (Edinburgh, 1989) 36-37.
in the current reconstruction, and a break diagonally across the broad faces terminating in the upper right corner. The triangular space between the two pieces is occupied by the fill inserted as part of the 1960s work, which has been modelled to represent a conjectured outline of the missing portion. The only sculpture which is placed more-or-less contiguously in the reconstruction is the narrow face known as the left side. This face features vinescroll ornament.

Isabel Henderson, in her 1983 survey of Pictish vinescroll ornament, also refers to the monument as a single entity. She says that it has ‘a vinescroll on one of its narrow sides’. She discusses the ‘lower reaches’ and the ‘upper part’ of the vinescroll, but always as though they are parts of a single entity. In discussing the monument’s vinescroll as a whole, Henderson says:

... The tendrils, which are of the same thickness as the main stem, are lifeless and the sharply pointed, keeled leaves project stiffly from the tendril to fill the angle between the main stem and the scroll ... [an] unusual [feature] of the lower reaches of the St Vigeans vine-scroll are the upturned berry bunches ... The upturned berry bunch is a feature of the inhabited vine-scroll where the bunches are conveniently positioned for the creatures to eat the fruit. The upper part of the St Vigeans scroll contains a little otter-like creature nibbling at the berry bunch ... the model [perhaps] having been an inhabited vine-scroll simplified in order to fill a space of minor importance with less effort.\(^\text{20}\)

There is no departure from these views in Henderson and Henderson’s 2004 work, where once again there is discussion of ‘a meander vinescroll’, of which the ‘upper section’ is ‘handled somewhat differently’.\(^\text{21}\)

I have two minor points of contention with Henderson. One is the assumption that ‘minor importance’ was allocated by a 9th-century Pictish sculptor in the same way as by a 20th-century scholar. This is particularly important when one considers that the inscription on St Vigeans No 1 occupies some of the same space as the vinescroll on the opposite side from it. The other is the assumption that the sculptor of such remarkable work would be interested in an option with ‘less effort’. I believe that the identification of the two fragments as belonging to two separate monuments is a more straightforward explanation of the peculiarities in the vinescroll.

\(^{20}\) I Henderson, ‘Pictish vine-scroll ornament’ 243-268 in A O’Connor and D V Clarke (ed), \emph{From the Stone Age to the Forty-Five} (Edinburgh, 1983) at p 264.

\(^{21}\) Henderson and Henderson, 55.
Figure 6. St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a ‘left’ side (drawing J Grigg)

Henderson’s 1983 description is unusually detailed and thorough, and remarks on the ‘keeled leaves’ which ‘fill the angle between the main stem and the scroll’. At this point, she is discussing the vinescroll as a whole; she uses no distinguishing words like ‘lower reaches’, although the 2004 book does imply that this leaf pattern occurs only on the lower section. The ‘keeled leaves’ clearly appear only on No 1. On No 1a, there are no surviving keeled leaves. Here, the angle between the main stem and the scroll is filled in one instance by the tail of the creature and in another by a pair of intertwined, unkeeled, leaves. The other spaces are too damaged to allow of conjecture as to what might have filled them.
The upturned berry bunches which Henderson notes in the ‘lower reaches’, so obvious on No 1, appear not to be present on No 1a. On No 1 the tendril curves past the bottom of the circle before producing the bunch. On No 1a the tendril produces the bunch before reaching the bottom of the circle.

On No 1a only two scrolls survive intact, of which one contains the little creature, and the other is the top, terminal scroll, which in inhabited vinescroll is frequently left uninhabited, as for example on the Ruthwell Monument. The two lower, damaged scrolls may well also have been inhabited, albeit probably not by creatures very similar to the surviving one. Indeed, I would suggest that the tendril at the lower left of the panel may be an elongated leg or tail, not dissimilar to those of the fantasy beasts on the Ruthwell Monument.

At the bottom of No 1a, the scroll pattern appears to stop and the main stem to thicken slightly and straighten toward the side of the panel. I would argue that what we see on St Vigeans No 1a is probably a complete small panel of inhabited vinescroll, with a terminus at the lower end.

By contrast, St Vigeans No 1 is clearly uninhabited vinescroll, of a distinctive and heavily stylised kind. Its lower end has no distinct terminus, merely finishing abruptly where the frame cuts the main stem. Its upper end is damaged; we cannot say whether it finished in the same way, or continued above the fracture.

One thing is clear: these two pieces of vinescroll are not two parts of a single panel. These are two separate panels of vinescroll, one inhabited, the other not. This does not, in itself, render completely impossible the idea that St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a are two parts of a single monument. It does render the idea most unlikely. Nowhere else in Pictish sculpture are two discrete panels of vinescroll placed adjacent to one another. Indeed, vinescroll is used so sparingly in Pictish sculpture that nowhere else do we find inhabited and uninhabited vinescroll on the same monument. The possible exception to both is the unusual Sueno’s Stone, where weathering has made it difficult to distinguish between interlace and very complex vinescroll. Henderson and Henderson note that the lower panel of vinescroll on Sueno’s Stone ‘loses its leaves and its pliable scroll, and becomes like dry brushwood ... like matting’.

As to the ‘back’ of the St Vigeans monument, I have found no other occurrence of Pictish symbols with a coursing hunt placed above them, although there are multiple examples of symbols with a hunt below them, as at Hilton of Cadboll and Elgin. Henderson and Henderson compare the position of the St Vigeans symbols to those on Meigle No 4 and Fowlis

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22 Henderson and Henderson, 55.
Wester No 1, but the cases are not alike. The Meigle and Fowlis Wester slabs show not a coursing hunt where the hound engages with deer as at St Vigeans, but rather a stylised procession of riders with hounds and companions, amongst whom the symbols, carved in the same style, are placed. At St Vigeans, the heavy stylisation of the symbols contrasts with the sense of vigorous movement present in the hunt above, and the symbols are clearly not integrated with the figures but separate from them in space, scale and style. The figure carving on the ‘back’ of the monument is another instance where to accept the ‘reconstruction’ would be to posit a unique occurrence in Pictish sculpture.

Figure 7. St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a ‘back’ (drawing J Grigg)

\[23\] Henderson and Henderson, 67-68.
The balance of probabilities is that St Vigeans No 1 and St Vigeans No 1a were not originally parts of the same monument. The sculpture on the front and right faces cannot support an argument that the two pieces belong together. The right face of No 1a has been completely lost, in contrast to Allen’s description of four sculptured faces, quoted above. On the front, the interlace pattern filling the cross is different on the two pieces, but this is not conclusive, as cross-slabs frequently feature a variety of patterns filling the cross.

Figure 8. St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a ‘front’ (drawing J Grigg)

Consideration of the artistic style and nature of the carvings shows a marked contrast between No 1 and No 1a. On all faces, the style of the carving on No 1 is heavy and stylised. The arrangement of human and
animal figures and symbols on the ‘back’ is particularly so, as is the vinescroll, whose distinctive heavy quality has been remarked upon.\textsuperscript{24} While the sculpture on No 1a may be of a similar height of relief, it shows differences in execution. The coursing hunt is fluid and light, not pinned down as are the figures below it on No 1. Similarly the vinescroll on No 1a lacks the heavy stylisation of that on No 1. The ‘front’ or cross face betrays less difference, and yet No 1a is so fragmentary that it is difficult to judge. The interlace on No 1, and indeed the snake-like creature to the left of the cross, show a clear medial incision, which is apparently lacking on No 1a. The height of the relief seems roughly similar, but this is inconclusive, particularly since it is likely that both have worn to the extent where the relief is now shallower than originally.

There are borders around each face, surviving in various, mostly poor, states of repair. These are mostly too damaged to allow precise determination of their width, but in general they seem to be of similar width. This, of itself, provides insufficient evidence for the conjoining of the two pieces. Considerable scholarship in the Anglo-Saxon context has demonstrated that regions or schools of stone sculpture frequently used common units of measure.\textsuperscript{25}

The dimensions of the two pieces are not conclusive of contiguity.\textsuperscript{26} Allen gives No 1’s thickness as seven and a quarter inches and No 1a’s as seven inches. A mere quarter of an inch, certainly, but Allen was an engineer, and it is unlikely that he would give the measurement to a quarter of an inch if he could not measure quarter inches with precision on this monument. The two fragments are therefore of different thicknesses, which may be a result of unequal wear, but may also argue that they are not of the same original piece. The widths he gives are identical at one foot nine inches, but the right edge of No 1a lacks any sculpture, is irregular, and cannot be considered an edge with any certainty. Neither is it possible to project an estimated original width based on symmetry of design, since less than half of the decoration survives.

The sandstone from which the two pieces are carved appears to be similar. Geological assessment of the stone might provide some assistance to the argument advanced here. However, even if geological evidence were to prove that the two pieces were cut from the same quarry at the same time, this would not mean that they were cut as a single piece for a single monument. A non-destructive geological survey of the sculptured stones at

\textsuperscript{24} Henderson, 15.
\textsuperscript{26} When I visited St Vigeans in 1999 I did not have appropriate equipment to make my own measurements.
St Vigeans has been carried out, with the aim of identifying rock types.\textsuperscript{27} The report of that survey gives considerable detail of the methodology and findings of the survey, but does not at any point mention that the survey considered the two fragments of No 1 as separate pieces of stone. The readings from each monument were treated as a single data set and details are not given as to the precise part of the stone at which the individual readings were taken. That survey report thus provides no information which could assist the consideration of No 1 and No 1a.

What we see in St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a, then, are two fragments of Pictish cross-slabs, which were of similar dimensions. They have different find-sites within the church enclosure, have suffered different degrees of damage, and were discovered at different times. They have no contiguous features. Since they are both from cross-slabs, they both have part of a cross on the front, figures and/or symbols on the back, and decoration on the narrow sides. Because it was possible to do so, and apparently with no supporting evidence, internal or external, someone decided to join them together sometime between 1871 and 1903. Their action created the myth of St Vigeans No 1, the almost-complete cross-slab which purports to contain the only panel of insular vinescroll with just one inhabited scroll, and the only example of a hunt scene placed above a group of Pictish symbols.

The likelihood of there being two cross-slabs of similar dimensions at St Vigeans is very high. Allen identified a total of thirty sculptured stones of what he called the early Christian period at St Vigeans. It is worth noting that none of them is complete. For some he recorded similar dimensions to No 1. For example, No 2 is one foot eight inches wide; No 14, although not a cross-slab, is one foot six inches wide and seven inches thick; No 29, again not a cross-slab, is one foot nine wide and six inches thick. Several other stones have been split through their planes, probably for subsequent reuse, and might therefore have had a similar thickness. Similarly, several stones that survive are fragmentary and may have shared similar widths. The similarity in dimensions of No 1 and No 1a is not in itself a valid reason to assume that they are part of the same sculpture.\textsuperscript{28}

Nineteenth-century antiquaries had a compulsion to discover, to preserve, and to ‘reconstruct’. Scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries owe them a huge debt; it has often been remarked that without

\textsuperscript{27} S Miller and N A Ruckley, \textit{Geological Survey of Early Medieval Sculptures, St. Vigeans, Angus} (Edinburgh, 2001).

\textsuperscript{28} I have argued this point about Pictish cross-slabs generally in P O’Neill, ‘Dimensions and distribution: aspects of Pictish sculpture’ 39-49 in P O’Neill (ed), \textit{Between Intrusions: Britain and Ireland between the Romans and the Normans} (Sydney, 2004).
them we would have precious little to study. But in the case of St Vigeans No 1 and No 1a, the urge to ‘complete’ an important monument appears to have led antiquarians to an error which has misled subsequent scholars and conservators down to the present day.

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