

Symbols of power in Ireland and Scotland, 8th-10th century

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RESUMEN: Este artículo investiga algunos de los símbolos del poder utilizados por las autoridades reales en Escocia e Irlanda a lo largo de los siglos VIII al X. La primera parte del trabajo se centra en las cruces de piedra, tanto las cruces exentas (las high crosses) del mundo gaélico de Irlanda y la Escocia occidental, como las lastras rectangulares con cruz de la tierra de los pictos. El monasterio de Clonmacnoise ofrece un ejemplo muy bien documentado de patronazgo regio, al contrario que el ejemplo escocés de Portmahomack, carente de base documental histórica, pero en ambos casos es posible examinar cómo los reyes

ABSTRACT: This paper explores some of the symbols of power used by royal authorities in Scotland and Ireland from the 8th to the 10th centuries. In the first half of the paper the focus is on stone crosses, both the free-standing crosses ('High Crosses') of the Gaelic world of Ireland and Western Scotland, and the rectangular cross-slabs of Pictland. The monastery of Clonmacnoise provides a very well documented case of royal patronage, by contrast the Scottish case study at Portmahomack is supported by no historical documentation, but in both cases it is possible to examine how kings used stone crosses in a

utilizaron las cruces de piedra en su inserción espacial como signos de poder. La segunda parte del trabajo analiza más ampliamente los aspectos visibles del poder y la naturaleza de las sedes reales en Escocia e Irlanda. Los ejemplos estudiados son la sede de la alta realeza irlandesa en Tara y la residencia regia gaélica de Dunnadd en Argyll. El trabajo concluye volviendo al punto de partida con el examen del centro regio picto de Forteviot.

PALABRAS CLAVE: pictos, gaélicos, escultura, Clonmacnoise, Portmahomack, Tara, Dunnadd, Forteviot.

landscape context as an expression of power. The second half of the paper looks more broadly at the visibility of power the nature of royal sites in Scotland and Ireland. Here the case-studies are the seat of the High Kingship of all Ireland at Tara and the Gaelic royal residence at Dunadd in Argyll. The paper concludes by returning to our starting place with an exploration of the Pictish royal centre of Forteviot.

KEY WORDS: Picts, Gaels, Sculpture, Clonmacnoise, Portmahomack, Tara, Dunadd, Forteviot.

INTRODUCTION: KINGS AND THEIR CROSSES

This volume marks the 1200th anniversary of a royal act of piety and patronage, the creation by Alfonso II of the magnificent Cruz de los Angeles in 808. At almost exactly the same time as the Cross of the Angels was being wrought, far to the north in Scotland, another king was creating another cross, not of gold, but of stone. The Dupplin cross stands about 2.5m tall and is carved from a single block of sandstone (Henderson 1999; Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 135, 189-91, figs. 196, 278). An inscribed panel records the name of Custantin son of Uirguist (Constantine son of Fergus), king of Picts, c.789-820 (Forsyth 1995). Constantine son of Fergus was one of the great Pictish kings. He extended power over the neighbouring people—the Gaels of the western territory of Dál Riata—and is credited with founding Dunkeld, one of the principal monasteries in Scotland, the head of the great federation of monasteries which looked to St Columba as patron. Constantine was succeeded in the kingship by his brother Onuist (Óengus), another powerful king, who is credited with bringing the relics of the Apostle Andrew to Pictland, to the great monastery of St Andrews, where he himself is possibly buried in another great work of Pictish sculpture, the so-called St Andrews sarcophagus (Foster 1998). The two brothers were part



The Dupplin Cross (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS, drawing by I. G. Scott)

of a dynasty which had dominated northern Britain since the 720s but was wiped out a little over a century later in 839 in a great battle against Vikings in Strathearn. The broad valley of Strathearn was the dynasty's power base. In its midst stood the royal palacium of Forteviot, and on its northern flank the Dupplin cross stood looking down on Forteviot 3 km away in the valley bottom.¹

¹ Since 2002 the cross has been housed in the ancient church of St Serf, at Dunning, c.3 km upstream.

Although the Dupplin sculpture is first and foremost a cross —the symbol of the resurrected Christ— it is also very much a monument about royal power. There is religious imagery, of course, but far more prominent is the military imagery. The principal face is dominated by the portrait of a mounted warrior, presumably Constantine himself, which occupies a panel at the top of the shaft in the equivalent position to the inscribed panel on the opposite face. The equestrian figure is identified as a military commander ‘by means of the four heavily armed foot-soldiers who form a sort of plinth for him to ride on’ (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 135), additional armed foot-soldiers with extravagant moustaches occupy the whole of one side of the shaft. Even the religious imagery conveys a clear message about royal power focussing as it does on David, the Divinely sanctioned Old Testament king, depicting him ‘as protector of his people, in the act of saving his sheep from the lion’s jaws’ (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 191). This theme occurs on other significant Pictish sculptures, including, tellingly, the St Andrews sarcophagus (Henderson 1986; Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 129-33).

It is striking that these two kings, Alfonso and Constantine, who in many other ways were so similar, were both creating crosses at around the same time. One had a jewelled cross, placed in the cathedral of his capital. The other had a huge stone cross, designed to be seen against the sky (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 191), placed out in the landscape above his principal royal residence. The similarities and the contrasts between these two seem revealing about the nature of power and of symbolism at that time in these two, very distant parts of Europe.

The Dupplin Cross, then, is the starting point for the following exploration of the theme of symbols of power, specifically royal power, in Scotland and Ireland in the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries. The two halves of this paper examine these themes from different perspectives each with case studies from both Ireland and Scotland. We begin by focussing on one specific class of objects: stone crosses, both the free-standing crosses (‘High Crosses’) of the Gaelic world of Ireland and Western Scotland,

and the rectangular cross-slabs of Pictland.² Our Irish examples come from a context which is very well documented historically, the major monastery of Clonmacnoise and its royal patrons the Clann Cholmáin kings of Míde (Meath). Our Scottish case study comes from a context for which there is absolutely no historical documentation at all, the recently excavated monastery of Portmahomack in Easter Ross. In each case we explore the ways in which kings used stone crosses in a landscape context as an expression of power. In the second half of this paper we look more broadly at the visibility of power in the landscape and the nature of royal sites in Scotland and Ireland in our period. Again, we have a pair of case-studies, the Irish one being the seat of the High Kingship of all Ireland at Tara in Co. Meath, the Scottish one, the Gaelic royal site of Dunadd in Argyll. The paper concludes by returning to our starting place with an exploration of the Pictish royal centre of Forteviot, which is currently the focus of a major research project by Glasgow University.

SETTING THE SCENE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF SCOTLAND AND IRELAND

Scotland and Ireland are linked by certain shared circumstances and experiences.³ Most fundamentally, both were ‘beyond Empire’. They have their roots firmly in a Celtic-speaking Iron Age, though both were deeply affected by the long centuries of proximity to and interaction with the Roman Empire. Scotland and Ireland were non-urban throughout our period and had a non-monetary cattle-based economy. High status was

² The Dupplin Cross is the only complete free-standing cross to survive in Pictland, though there are about nine which survive as fragments. Isabel Henderson (1999) has emphasised Dupplin’s affinities with Anglo-Saxon free-standing crosses rather than Gaelic ones.

³ An overview of Scottish history to 1100 is provided by Forsyth (2005*b*), far more detailed discussion will be found in Woolf (2007) and Fraser (2009). Accessible archaeological overviews are provided by Foster (2004) and Driscoll (2002). For the history of Ireland in this period see the following, in ascending order of detail and accessibility: Ó Cróinín (1995), Charles-Edwards (2000), and the various contributions to the 1200+ pages of Ó Cróinín (2005), which also contains archaeological discussion.



Map showing locations of sites mentioned in the text (Lorraine MacEwan)

accorded to native learning and the vernacular languages and we have texts in Gaelic ('Irish') and British ('Welsh') from as early as the 6th and 7th centuries. Despite the similarities between these two areas, there are also many contrasts. A large body of written sources, in Latin and the vernacular, survives from Ireland (much of it still unedited and untranslated). In contrast there is comparatively little textual evidence from Scotland. Ireland in our period was ethnically homogeneous but politically fragmented, while Scotland was ethnically diverse yet ultimately more politically unified. Ireland was, of course, conquered by Anglo-Normans in the 12th century and endured a colonial experience till the 20th century. It remained Catholic and predominantly agricultural. Scotland was an independent kingdom throughout the Middle Ages. It underwent a vigorous Protestant Reformation which resulted in much loss of historical material and church fabric, and later experienced heavy industrialisation, at least in the 'Central Belt' around Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Ireland and Scotland, then, are complimentary. With their similarities and contrasts it makes sense to look at them together. Another, very obvious, reason to do so is the intense interaction between the two: they are, after all, only 28 km apart at their closest point, and there has always been a great deal of maritime communication between them. The Gaelic cultural zone encompassed all of Ireland and also Argyll in western Scotland from at least the 5th century. From this base, the area of Gaelic language and cultural influence in Scotland expanded throughout our period until by the 10th century the whole kingdom was Gaelic-speaking (Clancy, forthcoming). There was movement back and forth between Scotland and Ireland in the political arena, in the form of dynastic marriages and military alliances and interventions, but above all there was interaction in the ecclesiastical sphere, with the west Highlands and islands of Scotland being in many respects, an integral part of the Irish Church in this period.⁴ Many of the most important monasteries had

been founded by Irishmen and continued to be stocked by Irish and Irish-trained monks, most famously, of course, Columba's foundation on Iona (AD 563). Columban influence in eastern Scotland was heavy, but it was not a monopoly, saints cults and other evidence points to many other ecclesiastical links between Ireland and Pictland.

The island of Ireland was in this period politically fragmented but linguistically and ethnically homogeneous. Although primary identities were local, all would have recognised the label 'Gael', a term coined in the 7th century by their British-speaking neighbours but quickly adopted by the Irish, alongside older labels, such as *Scotti* (which originally meant 'Irishmen' and only later became transferred to Scotland). All the Gaels spoke Gaelic, or Irish, as it is also known, and recognised the pan-Irish reach of the secular learned classes. The basic political unit was the *túath* ('tribe', 'petty kingdom'), each with a population of upwards of c. 10,000, headed by a *rí* 'king'. Succession to the kingship was open to any grandson of a king, and as a result there was usually a large pool of rival candidates. Irish politics is therefore characterised by intense and violent competition between and within dynasties, and Irish history is bewildering in its dynastic complexity. The key trajectory in our period is the growth in power at the level above that of the individual *túath*. We see the rise of provincial over-kings who were able to dominate the petty kingdoms (although each of these retained their *rí*). These relationships were expressed in terms of inter-personal contracts between kings and, in theory, would be dissolved on the death of one or other party. In practice, certain royal dynasties came to dominate their provinces over several generations. In time the most ambitious provincial kings came to aspire to an even greater prize—rule over the whole island. The ideology and reality of the 'High Kingship' of all Ireland, focussed on the ancient ceremonial site of Tara, will be discussed further below, as will the disruptive/galvanising impact of Viking attacks and, later, settlement.

Scotland is divided by a central spine of rough mountains running north-south. This massif has always been

⁴ Archaeologically this is reflected in the forms of stone sculpture prevalent in Argyll which are closely aligned with Irish types (Kelly, 1993).

a barrier to communications. To the west of it is the rocky west coast and adjacent islands with their pockets of fertility and access to rich marine resources. This is a maritime zone with easy seaborne communications and strong connections to Ireland. The southern half of this area (Argyll and adjacent islands) has been Gaelic-speaking since at least the 6th century.⁵ Traditionally it was thought that the language was brought there by settlers from Ireland, but new work suggests this part of the West may always have been Gaelic-speaking since the two branches of Celtic began to diverge (Campbell 2001). Although physically part of Scotland, this area was politically and culturally part of Ireland. Indeed a single polity known as *Dál Ráda* straddled the Irish sea, ruled at first from Ireland then from Scotland, until the two parts of the kingdom went their separate ways in 637 (Fraser, 2008).

Eastern Scotland is far more fertile than the West, its inhabitants spoke a different branch of Celtic: British, or 'Brittonic', the language spoken throughout Britain (except in areas of Anglo-Saxon settlement) which survives today as Welsh. Contemporary neighbours distinguished the Britons from the Picts who occupied a number of petty kingdoms to the north. Beyond occasional mentions in Gaelic and Anglo-Saxon sources, we have virtually no written sources for the Picts. What we do have is a rich artistic legacy of stone sculpture. In the past great emphasis was placed on the supposed exoticism of the Picts. Many liked to see them as a survival of a pre-Indo-European Bronze population and there were several attempts to link them with the Basques. There has been a strong trend away from that in recent scholarship (Forsyth, 1997a). Instead we now identify Pictish ethnogenesis in the 6th and 7th century (Fraser, 2009) and recognise Pictish as closely related to British.

In the south of Scotland there were half-a-dozen little kingdoms of Britons, all but one of which were conquered by Anglo-Saxons in the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries. The sole surviving one, which was centred on the river

Clyde (by modern Glasgow), remained a major force in northern politics. The Anglo-Saxon advance was halted in 685 at the famous Battle of Nechtansmere and the English were forced back to the south bank of the Forth estuary (Woolf 2006). In time, a post-Viking kingdom on the Clyde expanded back into former British territory in the 10th century (Broun, 2004) and in the 11th English control was pushed back to the Solway-Tweed, approximately the modern border. Irish political and dynastic history can be pieced together in great detail. Pictish history is very difficult to discern. By the late 8th century we appear to have two major polities, one based in Perthshire with its focus at Forteviot, another in the north, named Fortriu.⁶ Each of these kingdoms became dominant in their half of the country, but neither could successfully control the other. Only after 1000 were the kings of the south able to impose their rule on Fortriu (Woolf, 2000).

One of the key motors in this major change was the impact of the Norse. There was dense Norse settlement in the north and west, to the extent that virtually all pre-Norse place-names in these areas were obliterated (Kruse and Jennings, 2009). These areas were so completely integrated into the Scandinavian world that Orkney and Shetland were ruled from Norway until the mid-13th century (Imsen, 2009). In addition to settlement, Viking armies conducted major military campaigns in the mid-9th century across the Pictish midlands. These appear to have fatally undermined the southern Pictish kings, the descendants of Constantine and his brother Onuist.

Past historiography has been dominated by the notion of the disappearance of the Picts following what appeared to be the violent take-over of the Pictish southern kingdom by a Gaelic dynasty from the west. There has been a big change in our understanding of this period in the last decade or so and older ideas about ethnic-cleansing have been set aside (Woolf,

⁵ The northern half appears to have been Pictish-speaking in the pre-Norse period (Jennings and Kruse, 2009)

⁶ We used to think Fortriu was the name of the southern kingdom, but a brilliant new study has shown that the Fortriu of our sources was actually in the North (Woolf, 2006). The fact that we could have got this wrong for 150 years, shows you how little we have in the way of written sources! Note: there is no connection between the names Forteviot and Fortriu.

2007). Instead we now see that what happened was a deliberate change in nomenclature in our sources. Both the old ethnic labels —*Picti* and *Scotti*— disappear as terms, to be replaced by the ethnically neutral ‘men of Alba’, as part of the (not entirely non-violent) process of forging a politically unified though ethnically diverse kingdom (Broun 2005). Nonetheless it was the Gaelic language and culture which was in the ascendant and which eclipsed Pictish to the extent that it was probably no longer spoken beyond the end of the first millennium.

CROSSES IN STONE

The British Isles are distinctive in a European context in having an important tradition of free-standing stone sculpture, erected in a landscape context. There are many hundreds of extant examples of what is a very characteristic type of monument.⁷ Why was this form chosen and why was it so popular? In order to answer this question we must look back to an earlier period, to an older local tradition of individual inscribed memorials. This distinctive class of monument, which is found almost throughout the Celtic-speaking parts of the British Isles from the 5th century, arose in response to the turmoil of the end of Roman rule in southern Britain. The monuments are rough pillars which stand marking special burials at nodal points in the landscape (especially on boundaries). They commemorate the dead but in so doing, also assert the kingroup’s claim to land (Handley, 1998). They are expressions of power on a local level by a new social elite and represent a fusion of two strands of authority: the *Romanitas* invoked via the Roman tradition of inscribed Latin memorial, and the indigeneous context of a landscape already articulated by prehistoric standing stones. We have several

⁷ For Ireland see Harbison (1992); for western Scotland see Fisher (2001); for Pictland see Henderson and Henderson (2004), Allen and Anderson (1903), RCAHMS (2008); for the Isle of Man see Kermodé (1907), for Wales see Redknap and Lewis (2007), Edwards (2007) and Edwards (forthcoming), for Anglo-Saxon England see the various volumes of the British Academy’s *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture in England*, Oxford, general editor Rosemary Cramp, 1984 onwards.

hundred examples over a wide area written in one or other of two scripts, or indeed both. In the British-speaking territory of Western Britain from the Forth to Cornwall,⁸ they used the roman alphabet and Latin language though the result is very far from any Roman model (Tedeschi, 2005; Edwards, 2007; Edwards, forthcoming; Redknap and Lewis, 2007; Okasha, 1993; Forsyth 2005a). In Ireland they chose instead to write in Gaelic and used an alphabetic script of their own devising —ogham— which, though visually very different is based ultimately on the Roman alphabet (McManus, 1991; Swift, 1997; Moore, 1998). Ogham inscriptions are also found in areas of Irish settlement and influence in Western Britain, the Isle of Man and widely in Scotland.

We have here a phenomenon separate from but parallel to the invention and use of runes in Scandinavia. Both were a creative reaction to Latin literacy by those beyond the Empire, adopting the idea of writing but rejecting the specific form and creating instead a special, local response, thereby asserting an idea of cultural difference (see Spurkland, 2005; Looijenga, 2003). In Pictland there is a class of cognate monuments which are incised, not with lettering but with a set of symbols even further removed from the Roman model but still apparently some kind of writing system. These are the famous Pictish symbols, a set of about 40 distinctive symbols which recur in various paired combinations on hundreds of examples of stones, and also on a few portable objects (RCAHMS, 2008). Their operation is still mysterious, current approaches emphasise the likelihood that they somehow represent personal names (Forsyth, 1997b), but the system was used throughout the whole country, despite political disunity, and stayed in use for several centuries, as we shall see shortly. The strong physical and archaeological parallels between the symbol-incised pillars (‘Pictish Class I symbol stones’) and the individual inscribed memorials incised with ogham and roman-alphabet texts suggests that they too should be read as memorials erected on the death

⁸ And indeed in British-settled territory in Brittany (Davies et al., 2000).



Bi-lingual inscription in ogham and roman alphabets, Tavistock (Buckland Monachorum), Devon. 6th century. Reading: Latin: Dobunni fabri filii Enabarri 'of Dobunnus, the smith, son of Enabarros'/ Ogham (on left edge): Enabarri 'of Enabarros' (Photograph: K. Forsyth)



Pictish symbol-incised pillar, Aberlemno, Angus (Photograph: W.F.H. Nicolaisen)

of an individual which were also used to assert claims to land (Driscoll, 1988).

Individual inscribed memorials of all three types (roman alphabet, ogham, Pictish symbols) ceased to be erected in the early seventh century, reflecting a shift in the nature of power (Forsyth, 2005*a*). By this time the Church was well established and beginning to insist on burial in churchyards. In the political sphere, local magnates were losing out to the growing power of regional magnates, however, it is clear that enduring power relationships were established in this period. Recent work has shown the remarkable extent

to which Pictish symbol stones (i.e. of the 6th and 7th century) are located on what were to become medieval parish boundaries in the 12th century, demonstrating the longevity of the territorial units which they express (RCAHMS, 2007: 118).

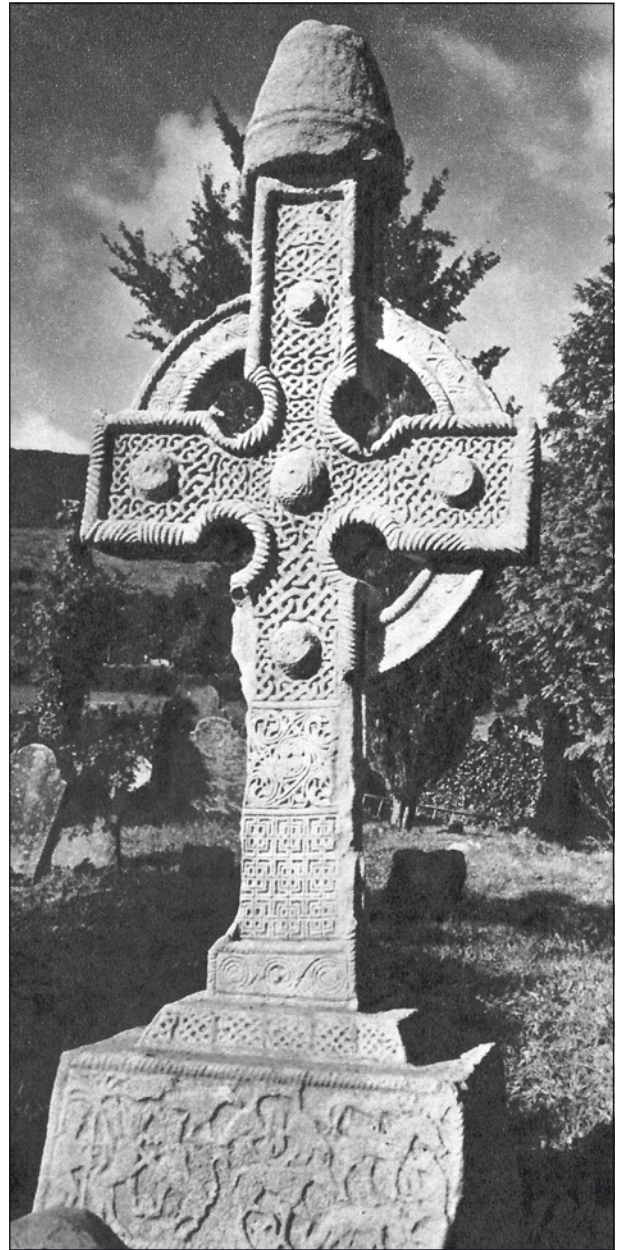
THE 'HIGH CROSS' TRADITION: A NEW MONUMENTAL IDIOM

Even after the end of the individual inscribed memorials tradition in the early 7th century, the idea of a



Cross-incised pillar, Reask, Co. Kerry
(Photograph: K. Forsyth)

stone pillar was so deeply established that we start to see new monumental forms based on it used by the Church to articulate space and express power relations in a different way. Rough, unworked pillars incised with often elaborate cross-forms are widespread in the



North Cross, Ahenny, Co. Tipperary, height
c.4m (de Paor and de Paor 1958, pl.37)

rocky west of Ireland (Henry, 1937; Cuppage et al., 1986; O'Sullivan and Sheehan, 1996), for instance, at the small church settlement at Reask, in the Dingle peninsula, Co. Kerry (where the verticality of the inscription —'D(omi)ne', 'Oh, Lord!'— reflects the ver-

tical set of ogham inscriptions) (Cuppige et al., 1986: 342, fig 205a, pl. 44). A far more elaborate example from the opposite end of the island is the tall, slim, multiple-cross-incised pillar from the early cemetery of Kilnasaggart, Co. Armagh, which dates to the early 8th century, and bears one of the earliest non-ogham inscriptions in Ireland, recording the donation of land to the Church by a local magnate (Macalister, 1949: No. 946; Hamlin, 1982).

From the 8th, and especially the 9th century, we start to see far more complex, multi-element monuments. That the earliest of these were constructed using unsuitable carpentry techniques (Hamlin, 1982; MacLean, 1995) implies that there was a contemporary tradition of monumental free-standing crosses in wood, none of which survive. After this early experimental phase, techniques of carving in stone were quickly mastered, and there was an ‘explosion’ of stone sculpture, with the tradition really taking off in the 9th and into the 10th century. Iona was a particularly important early centre (Fisher 2001) and it has been suggested that the tradition begins here. Certainly monumental crosses, are found throughout the Gaelic world, where the preference was for free-standing crosses (the famous ‘High Crosses’) (Stalley, 1991), and also in Pictland, where the preference was for cross-carved slabs which in many ways look like giant ‘carpet pages’ from illuminated gospel books (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 216-217).

Although they were created within a single ‘Insular’ art tradition, which encompassed metalwork and illuminated manuscripts, and in which different geographical areas were subject to considerable mutual influence, there are nonetheless distinct regional variations.⁹ In Pictland, for instance there was a preference for immensely complex interlace patterns. The intricate knot-constructed from a single strand—which fills the shaft of the cross on the famous Aberlemno

churchyard slab (the reverse of which features a detailed battle scene) is the most complicated of all interlace patterns rendered on stone in the British Isles (Allen and Anderson, 1903: vol. 1, 296; RCAHMS, 2008: 47). It is hard enough to draw these patterns with pen and ink on vellum, but to be able to realise them in three dimensions on stone is indeed astounding.

These monumental crosses were, in many cases, representations in stone of jewelled metalwork crosses (i.e. decorated sheet metal covering wooden cores) and their decoration often recalls metalwork effects and constructional methods, for instance, binding strips, bosses covering nails, and settings for jewels. It is widely thought that some such crosses might be recalling actual metalwork crosses housed inside a church on site or at the mother-church, acting in a sense, as an advertisement for the cross within. Until comparatively recently, our understanding of what Irish metalwork crosses would have looked like was based on fragmentary components and mounts, and, of course, on the spectacular Cross of Cong, a processional reliquary cross dated by inscription to 1125 and therefore somewhat outwith our period (Wallace and Ó Floinn, 2002). In 1986, however, a relatively intact example of a late 8th/9th-century metal-encased wooden cross was found in controversial circumstances on the bed of Tully Lough, Co. Roscommon, close to the edge of a small crannog (an artificial island supporting a secular elite dwelling). This tall, slim processional cross, decorated with bosses and with interlace and figurative panels, some of them open-work, is now in the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin (E. Kelly, 2003). From Scotland there are the much more fragmentary remains of a similarly large, bronze-encased wooden cross dating to the later 8th century from Dumfriesshire, now in the National Museum of Scotland. This, however, was decorated in characteristically Anglo-Saxon style with vine-scroll ornament (Webster and Backhouse, 1991: 174-175)

The impulse to create stone crosses on a monumental scale and place them in the landscape is a dramatic local response to the development of the Cult of the Cross in the wider contemporary Church. It is rooted in a deeply

⁹ See also the free-standing stone crosses in Wales (Edwards 2007, Edwards forthcoming, Redknap and Lewis 2007), Man (Kermode 1907), and Anglo-Saxon England (see the several volumes of the British Academy’s *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture in England*, Oxford, general editor Rosemary Cramp, 1984 onwards).

established indigenous tradition of stone monuments in the landscape and flourished in a context in which stone architecture was generally lacking. The preference of timber for churches was remarkably persistent in Ireland and stone churches were rare there until the 10th century (Stalley, 2005). Churches of whatever fabric tended to be small: even the larger monasteries had numerous small churches—tiny even—rather than a single large structure, and these buildings were ‘commemorative shrines and places of pilgrimage, rather than for congregational worship’ (Stalley, 2005: 720). The massive stone crosses, the tallest of which are 6m tall (though 3-4m is more typical), would, therefore, have been imposing presences within the monastic precinct. They are not funerary in purpose but rather performed a number of other functions. Some appear to have been votive and are dedicated to specific saints, others appear to commemorate significant events in the life of the monastery. Some, which stood at liminal points in the precinct, performed a protective role. Liturgical references in their decoration implies that some acted as ‘points of assembly for religious ceremonies’ (Richardson, 2005: 707-708). The role of kings in commissioning these monuments is made explicit on the minority which bear inscriptions (Harbison, 1992). In Ireland the majority of crosses appear to have stood at church sites and while this is also largely true in Scotland there is more evidence here that crosses were sometimes placed at nodal points in the landscape, for instance by routeways and on boundaries (Driscoll, Forsyth and O’Grady, 2005).

CASE STUDY: CLONMACNOISE

To better understand the way in which the monumental crosses are monuments of power we turn now to a case-study of a group of important crosses erected by Irish kings.¹⁰ Clonmacnoise is one of the handful of wealthiest and most important monasteries in pre-

Norman Ireland. Remember that in Ireland, although bishops were, of course, important, the seats of power were not dioceses, but major monasteries whose abbots were from local (minor) royal dynasties. Clonmacnoise is exceptionally well documented and also has been excavated in recent decades. As a result we know more about this monastery than any other in Ireland (King, 1998, 2003). It owes its prominence, in part, to its key strategic location. Irish monasteries are typically in boundary locations but Clonmacnoise is near the boundaries, not only of several local kingdoms but also the boundaries of three major provinces (Connacht, Munster, Southern Uí Néill-Míde). It is also at the crossing point of two major communication routes, the east-west land route across the great central bogs, and the north-south riverine route up the mighty Shannon (Manning, 1994).

According to ancient tradition, the monastery was founded in 587 by St Ciarán and King Diarmait son of Cerball (who, it was said, was the last king for whom pre-Christian inauguration rites of symbolic marriage to the goddess of sovereignty were performed, and who, in later tradition was thought of as the first Christian ‘high king’ of Ireland). Sixth-century activity at the site is attested archaeologically by an ogham stone (Manning and Moore, 1991). In the 7th century Clonmacnoise was controlled by the provincial kings of Connacht and grew to be the most prestigious monastery in the region. In this period we can clearly see in the historical sources the symbiotic relationship between kings and monastery. Two dynasties were in on-going competition for the provincial kingship. Rivals sought the favour of the monastery through endowment, in return for burial. We have lists of the kings buried at Clonmacnoise, with the earliest noted in extant documents in 663 (Bhreatnach, 2003). Mostly those buried were from the perennially dominant dynasty, but when, occasionally, a member of the alternative dynasty managed to secure the kingship, we find that he was also able to secure burial at Clonmacnoise. And it is not only the great provincial kings who are buried there, but also, according to our sources, kings of the surrounding petty kingdoms. Archaeological evidence

¹⁰ The following draws heavily on Ó Floinn (1995, 1998 and 2001) and on Manning (1998).

indicates that others too sought burial here: there are over 700 recumbent burial slabs from the graveyard at Clonmacnoise (mostly inscribed), yet it is rare for even the most important of the other monasteries to have more than a dozen or two (Macalister, 1909; Swift, 2003). One reason why burial at Clonmacnoise might seem particularly attractive is that the monastery possessed a famous relic—the *Odar Chiaráin*, ‘the hide of St Ciarán’s dun cow’ (an animal which features in the foundation legend of the monastery). It was claimed that anyone dying on the *Odar Chiaráin* would receive eternal life. The Annals of Innisfallen record that Tadg, king of Connacht, died after renouncing the world on the relic in 900 (Ó Floinn, 1995, 255).

Kings derived spiritual legitimacy from the monastery, but it is clear that the monastery also derived benefit from their royal connections. Obviously there was wealth, in the form of gifts and endowments—surviving buildings and sculpture and extensive archaeological evidence of craft production attest that this was a very wealthy site—but also there was protection—as Raghall Ó Floinn has demonstrated, the annals show that at times of disputed succession the monastery was vulnerable to plundering, something which happened rarely during the reigns of strong patrons (1995: 257-258)—. The lengths to which a monastery might go to secure royal favour is demonstrated by a remarkable battle which took place in 764 between the monks of Clonmacnoise and the monks of the rival foundation of Durrow (which had previously been the most important monastery in the Irish midlands) over which would be the burial place of Domnall, king of Míde. Durrow lost and was thereafter eclipsed by Clonmacnoise (Ó Floinn, 1995: 254).

The mid-9th century is a watershed in the history of Clonmacnoise, as in the history of Ireland as a whole. We see the rise to power of the Clann Cholmáin (‘children of Colmán’) dynasty, part of the mighty Southern Uí Néill. Clann Cholmáin were kings of Míde, and the most powerful of them were able to claim the kingship of Tara. This symbolic ‘High Kingship of Ireland’ became almost a political reality under one of their number, Máel-Sechnaill son of Máel-Ruanaid

(846-862), who at his death was described, uniquely as *rí hÉirenn uile*, ‘king of all Ireland’ (Annals of Ulster for 862).

The earlier burial place of Clann Cholmáin had been at Durrow which was in their core territory, but Máel-Sechnaill was the first of the dynasty to be buried at Clonmacnoise having patronized it generously during his life. His wife, daughters, son and further descendants were all buried there, and the Clann Cholmáin remained enduring patrons of the monastery until their demise in the 11th century. Máel-Sechnaill erected the first of the stone crosses which stand there, the so-called ‘North Cross’. It has close stylistic parallels with a number of pieces of contemporary sculpture within a 25 km radius, such as Banagher and Bealin (Edwards, 1998), the latter of which comes from a site (Twyford/*Íseal Chiaráin* ‘the low place of Ciarán’) known to have been a dependency of Clonmacnoise (Ó Floinn, 2001: 8-9). It appears that these monuments were produced in a Clonmacnoise workshop, with the distinctive style of the sculpture providing iconographic expression of political dependency on the centre.¹¹

Máel-Sechnaill’s son Flann Sinna (879-916) followed in his father’s footsteps as patron of Clonmacnoise. He built a great stone church, jointly with Abbot Colmán, the famous *daimliag* (‘stone house/church’). As indicated by the name, this was very unusual at a time when most churches were still timber-built. Flann Sinna’s was the first stone church at Clonmacnoise but also one of the first in Ireland. Its erection may have been a response to his decisive victory the previous year over his major southern rival, the king of Munster. The enduring symbolic importance of the monumental cross at Clonmacnoise is demonstrated by the fact that Flann Sinna erected not one, but two additional monumental crosses at the site, including one of the most famous of all Irish High crosses, the

¹¹ See Swift (2003) for a discussion of the same phenomena relating to the much simpler grave-slabs at Clonmacnoise, including a comparative analysis of the sculptural connections between Iona and its dependencies on Islay. A very clear example of a similar phenomenon from a slightly later period is found in the ‘Whithorn School’ of probably 10th-century sculptures from churches dependent on the important church settlement at Whithorn, in Galloway, south-west Scotland (Craig, 1991).

so-called 'Cross of the Scriptures' (Harbison, 1992: i, No. 54), and, significantly, repositioned his father's cross and erected his own crosses with reference to his new stone church (Manning, 1998). The Cross of the Scriptures is aligned on its west door and as one exits the church what one is confronted with an image of Christ Triumphant at the centre of the cross-head, but also, at the bottom of the shaft, a panel which, very unusually on an Irish cross-shaft, depicts a non-Biblical scene. It depicts king and abbot in an act of co-founding with their hands together on a staff or stake (Harbison, 1992; Aitchison, 2006). Below this is part of an inscription which not only records the names of king and abbot but asserts that Flann is 'king of Ireland', a highly charged and contentious declaration. In erecting this cross Flann Sinna committed an act of piety, an act of patronage, but also an act of propaganda.

Other kings saw the symbolic potential of such acts. Máel-Sechnaill's contemporary and sometime rival Cerball mac Dunlainge (847-888), was the most successful ruler of the small kingdom of Ossory, who was able to manipulate the fragmented native struggle with rival Vikings armies to his advantage and to squeeze out a space between the provinces of Leinster and Munster. Ragnall Ó Floinn has argued that Cerball used stone sculpture in 'conscious imitation' of Máel-Sechnaill to assert his power, though Cerball erected his crosses not at major monasteries but at small family/demesne churches at symbolically important locations on the borders of his kingdom (Ó Floinn, 2001: 11-12). There is a northern group of crosses apparently erected by Cerball on the border with Máel-Sechnaill's kingdom to the north, and in the south a very interesting group which includes the remarkable pair of crosses at the obscure church of Ahenny, Co. Tipperary. The Ahenny crosses are on the far bank of the river Lingaun which traditionally formed the border of the kingdom. This was former Osraige territory reclaimed by Cerball as he expanded the kingdom, and the distinctive non-figurative style of the Ahenny crosses—which, Ó Floinn argues, are self-conscious copies of a jewelled metalwork cross—is



East face of the Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. The lowest panel on the shaft shows the planting of a staff symbolizing the foundation of the monastery (Photograph: S. Driscoll)

perhaps a deliberate contrast with the figurative style of the midlands 'scripture' crosses, a visual reminder that this is Cerball's territory now.

Clann Cholmáin patronage at Clonmacnoise continued in the century following the death of Flann Sinna, down to the time of Flann Sinna's grandson, Máel-Sechnaill II, the last Clann Colmáin king of Ireland (980-1002 and 1014-1022). The twelve-year gap in his high-kingship was due to a coup by his arch-rival Brian Bóruma (Brian Boru) king of Munster. It is instructive to look at the acts of patronage of these two great rivals. It is recorded that Mael-Sechnaill levied 'a hide on every fort in Meath' for the purchase of a gold altar frontal for the high altar of his grandfather's

stone church at Clonmacnoise.¹² Máel-Sechnaill's act of generosity appears to have been a direct response to the action of Brian who in 1005 visited Armagh—the pre-eminent monastery of Ulster—and declared it to be the chief church in Ireland to which all others should send tribute. Prior to this there had never been a chief church of Ireland, just as there had never been a single king who could genuinely claim to rule all of Ireland, though Brian came closest. During his visit Brian placed 20 ounces of gold on St Patrick's altar, and a note was duly added in the margin of the ancient Book of Armagh (an early 9th-century Bible manuscript which also contained Patrician texts central to Armagh's claim to primacy) describing Brian as *imperator Scottorum*.

In conclusion, then, the picture we get from these examples is of kings commissioning major ecclesiastical art works in response to historical events and in reaction to similar acts by political rivals. In addition to motives of personal piety—which should not, of course, be overlooked—such acts of patronage and largesse effectively demonstrate their control of economic and cultural resources, their relationship to ecclesiastical power structures and thereby their access to the saints. The crosses provided a vehicle for asserting political authority: their decoration was a means of visually encoding messages expressing the claims to authority which were sometimes made explicit in inscriptions. By placing monuments in the open at symbolically significant locations kings ensured maximum visibility of such messages at strategic and sometimes contested locations.

CASE STUDY: PORTMAHOMACK

Ireland is very well documented in the Early Middle Ages, and we can piece together in great detail dynastic politics and ecclesiastical history. This is in complete contrast to Scotland where we have only the outline, and even this is very incomplete. Instead we have to rely

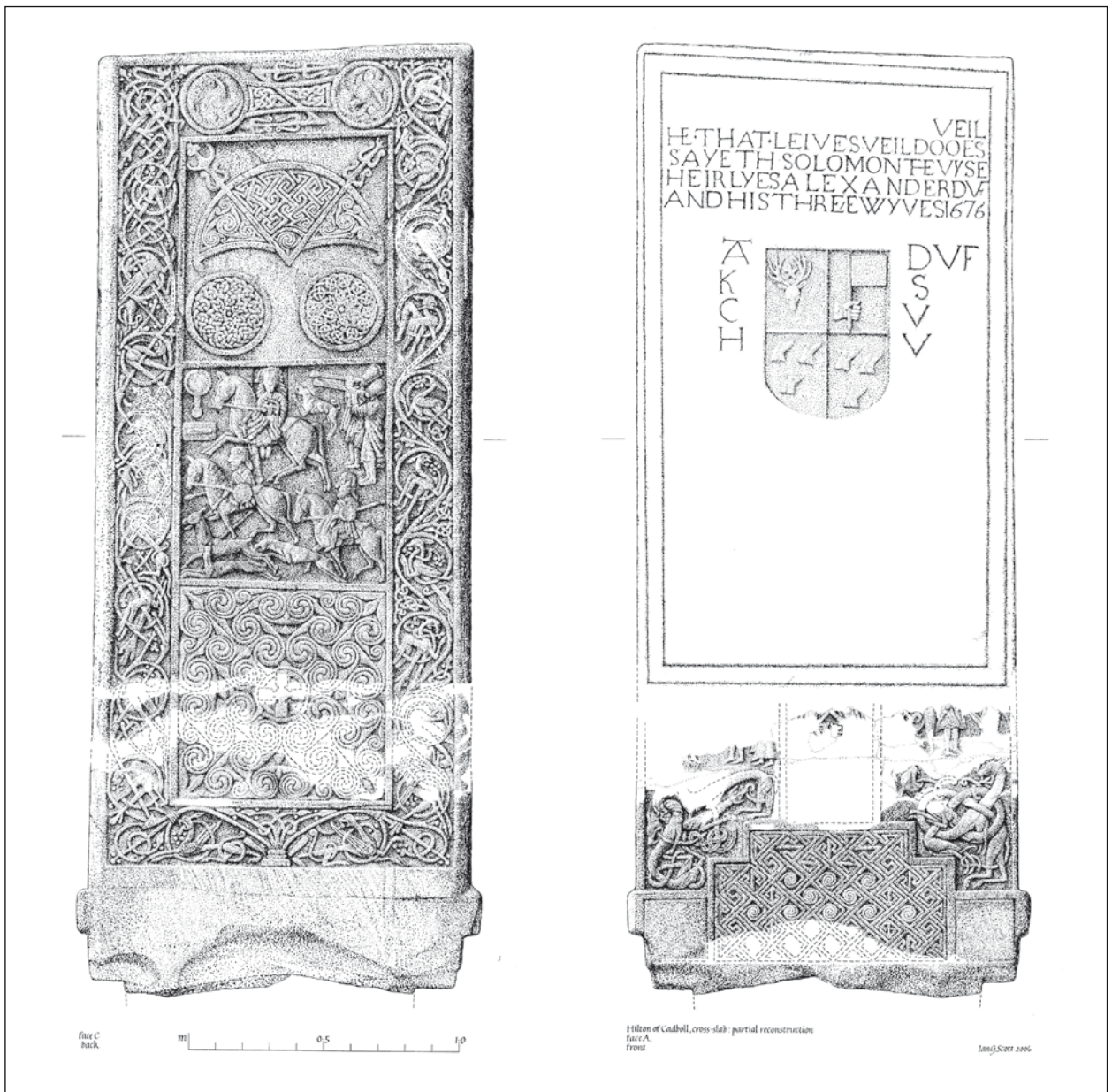
heavily on archaeological evidence, especially sculpture which we have in rich abundance. Our final case study in this section comes from the recently excavated monastery at Portmahomack, on the Tarbat peninsula, in northern Scotland. Martin Carver of York University has just completed a programme of excavation which uncovered a major Pictish monastery which had been previously utterly unknown (Carver, 2004, 2008). There is no mention of it in our meagre historical sources, yet it must have been of great importance: the excavation uncovered evidence of metalworking, parchment production and large quantities of sculpture of the highest quality. Carver's description of the site as 'an Iona of the East' may not be too far-fetched (Carver, 2004). One reason we knew nothing of this foundation was that it suffered catastrophic attack somewhere between 780 × 830. The sculpture was deliberately smashed, the workshops destroyed and the site burnt—excavation had uncovered rare and dramatic archaeological evidence of a Viking attack. Although occupation continued after the attack it was never at the same level of wealth and sophistication as before.

The total number of pieces of sculptured stone from Portmahomack is now 225, though the majority of these are small fragments. In advance of full publication it is difficult to estimate the number of monuments this represents, though Carver thought they probably constituted four ambitious relief-carved cross-slabs (c. 3 m tall and 1 m broad), five architectural pieces (panels and a grooved post), a tomb lid and 10 simple cross-carved grave-markers (2008: 97-117).¹³ One of the tall cross-slabs, of which two substantial pieces survive (TR20 and TR10), bore an elaborate inscription on its narrow side. The lettering is carved in relief, a highly unusual feature in Insular epigraphy, using an elaborate and distinctive form of script: Insular display capitals (Higgitt, 1982). Only the first part of the text has survived and this has been read as:

In nomine Ihu Xpi crux Xpi in commemoratione Reof—

¹² Ó Floinn draws the parallel with Máel-Sechnaill II's Continental contemporary Emperor Henry II, who presented altar frontals to Aachen and Basle Cathedral (1995: 256).

¹³ For art historical analysis of a number of these see the index to Henderson and Henderson (2004).



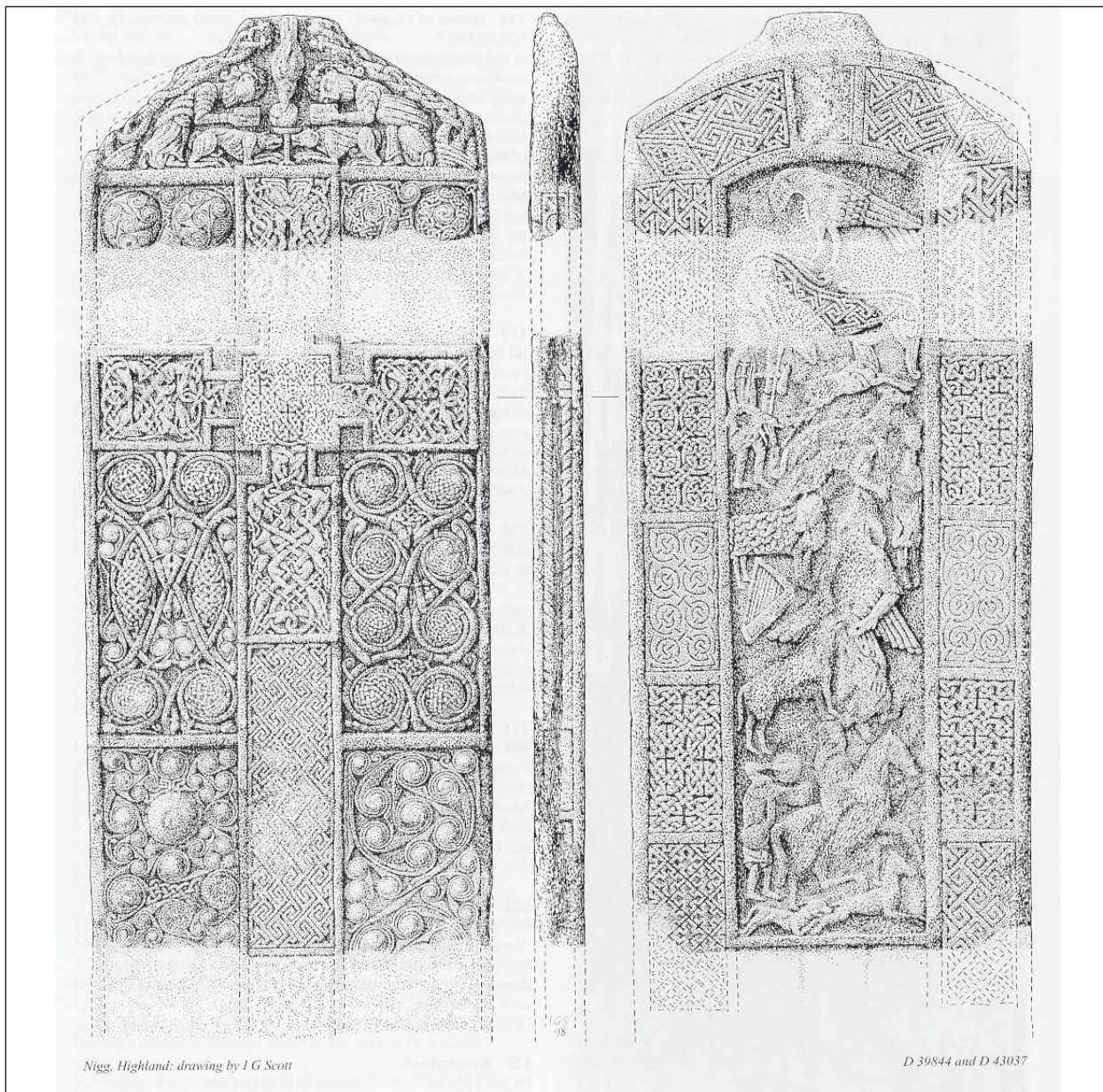
Cross-slab, Hilton of Cadboll, Easter Ross (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS, drawing by I. G. Scott)

‘in the name of Jesus Christ, the cross of Christ, in memory of Reo[?]’

There is no little irony in the fact that while the opening is well preserved the surviving text breaks off after only three letters of the patron’s name, but even if his (or her) full name were preserved we have no historical records with which to try to match it. Given

the grandeur and high quality of the monument it is tempting to imagine that he (or she?) would have been some king (or queen) of Fortriu, a Pictish equivalent of Mael-Sechnaill, a royal patron of a major monastery.

The four great crosses which, Carver suggests, stood within the monastic precinct at Portmahomack, were destroyed perhaps within decades of having been



Cross-slab, Nigg, Easter Ross (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS, drawing by I. G. Scott)

carved. Some of the larger fragments were re-used in the later medieval church fabric, others were buried in the ground. Their short life out in the open means that a number of them are in near 'mint' condition (e. g. Henderson and Henderson, 2004: figs. 38, 53, 54, 57) and give an indication of the exceptional workmanship of the finest Pictish sculptures, so many of

which are now in a weather-worn or damaged state. Work on the Portmahomack sculpture is still at a comparatively early stage but it is clear that it cannot be understood except in the context of its immediate hinterland. Portmahomack stands near one end of the Tarbat peninsula, a long, slim expanse of extremely fertile land, c.23km long, and famous for the quality

of its sandstone, which juts out diagonally into the North Sea, separating the Dornoch and Cromarty Firths. The name Tarbat is simply the Gaelic word *tairbeart*, 'portage', and reflects the strategic location of this peninsula which, at pre-modern sea levels was indeed a semi-island, joined to the mainland by short stretches of land between firth and loch across which boats could be dragged to avoid the sometimes difficult passage round Tarbat Ness (Carver, 2008: 184-186).

The coast of the Tarbat peninsula is 'thick with burials' of various periods (Carver, 2008: 177) but, other than the site of Portmahomack, its most striking archaeological remains are a series of three huge cross-slabs carved in distinctive Pictish styles, all, on the basis of art historical comparisons, dating to the later half of the 8th-century (Henderson, 2008). One of these, the Shandwick cross (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: especially pp. 76-77, figs. 51, 97, 200), stands probably in its original location 13km from Portmahomack on a ridge overlooking the sea with views to the distant coast of Moray. It serves as a sea-mark for the landing point which gives it its name (Norse: 'sandy bay'), one of only a few such havens on the east coast of the peninsula. From the front, the Shandwick monument has a 'striking *crux gemata* appearance' (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 46) due to the 56 high-relief spiral bosses which cover the cross and give the monument 'even from a distance the sumptuous appearance of a cross encrusted with pearls or great cabochon gems' (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 138). On the reverse of this remarkable sculpture are a series of panels carved in low relief with a complex spiral design and a diverse and busy scene of naturalistic animals and confronted warriors.

Only 3km away to the north (closer to Portmahomack) is the original site of the Hilton of Cadboll stone (James et al., 2008). Broken and disfigured in the late 17th century the Cadboll stone exists as a large piece intact on the reverse face only (which has been on display in the National Museum in Edinburgh since the 1920s), the broken stub of the

slab which was discovered during excavation in 2001 and which is intact on both faces, and a collection of 7497 fragments (representing the front hacked off in 1676) which was recovered during excavations in 1998 and 2001 (James et al., 2008). The reverse is framed by a masterly rendering of inhabited vine-scroll motif and at its centre is perhaps its most famous feature: an unparalleled female equestrian figure, wearing a brooch and depicted frontally on her mount, at the centre of a hunting scene of familiar Pictish type. It is a matter of ongoing debate whether the image is a representation of a specific powerful noblewoman, or a personification of a timeless ideal of female nobility and power (Henderson, 2008: 183-189). Either way, she is unequivocally an image of authority.

Both the Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll stones are carved with Pictish symbols, very prominently displayed at the top of their reverse faces. Perhaps these symbols are in some way 'inscriptions' naming the patrons of the monuments, perhaps they serve an entirely different purpose. It is notable, however, that the ancient symbol system first seen in simple guise on the early pillars retains its value centuries later. Pictish symbols also feature on the third of the Tarbat peninsula cross-slabs, the 'ravishingly elegant' slab from Nigg (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 140, especially figs. 40, 41, 184, 202, 203). The Nigg slab stood at the foot of the peninsula and appears, like the Shandwick stone, to have stood above a landing place and to have been visible from the sea (Carver, 2008: 178). It is perhaps the finest of all Pictish cross-slabs and displays virtuoso carving and sophisticated iconography. The writhing snakes and bosses which fill its cross-face are symbolic of Resurrection but there is also Eucharistic imagery with the depiction of the Desert Fathers Paul and Anthony, a scene with potentially monastic overtones. Alongside the Pictish symbols on its reverse Nigg features prominent David imagery, perhaps an indication of royal involvement. Here is not the place to do justice to this marvellous monument. It is discussed in detail by Henderson and Henderson (2004, see index for references to dis-

cussion and illustration), a sustained analysis which led them to the opinion that the Nigg cross ‘deserves a place second to none in the history of Western medieval art’ (2004: 140).

It is clear that the sculpture of the Tarbat peninsula can only be understood as a group, and then only if appreciated in its landscape context. Much work remains to be done on this sculpture and its inter-relationships, and with its links to the rest of Pictish sculpture. At this stage, its function can be only guessed at. Carver considers that the four coastal sites ‘together represented an expanded version of the monastic precinct, signifying a time, in the later eighth century, when the whole peninsular had become the monastic estate’. The crosses therefore marked out the ‘protected, or rather proclaimed, space’ of a monastic sanctuary (2008: 187). Isabel Henderson emphasises instead the iconographical sophistication of these monuments which they prefer to see as functioning within a ‘coherent liturgical landscape’ (2008). Whatever their purpose, or purposes, these are a truly remarkable concentration of monuments of the highest quality, artistically and technically. With their Pictish symbols and other images of authority, and their display of cross imagery ‘as confident and splendid as anything in Europe in this period’ (Henderson and Henderson, 2004: 138), they are indeed a fitting place on which to end our consideration of crosses as symbols of power in Scotland and Ireland in the 8th to 10th centuries.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF POWER: PREAMBLE

In the second half of our paper we continue our exploration of the themes of royal power, symbols and landscape in Scotland and Ireland, but shift our focus from the evidence of art monuments to that of field archaeology and material culture. As noted already the limitations of the textual record for Scotland place a particular importance on the physical remains there, whether they are sculpture, artefacts or sites, but we hope to show how, in both Scotland and the better documented Ireland, the archaeological record pro-

vides not only a context for the sculpture but, more importantly, provides its own evidence for the nature and development of power.

A key issue of concern is the archaeological visibility of power. Just as the character and depth of the textual record changes over time, so too does the archaeological evidence. However, we will suggest that changes in the visibility of power are influenced by changes in the nature of power as small-scale local polities were replaced by national kingdoms. It is possible to distinguish three aspects of the symbology of royal power, and these have a roughly, though not rigidly, chronological dimension. First, as prehistory ended in the 5th and 6th century, we see strong identifications between locations of royal ritual and older pagan religious centres. One of the striking features of such sites, is that in their Early Medieval phase they are often visually dominated by the prehistoric ritual monuments.

The second aspect concerns the importance of fortified residences. In Britain the majority of these can be termed hillforts (Alcock, 2003), while in Ireland fortified residences, known as ring-forts, were not typically elevated (Stout, 1997). In both places artificial island dwellings known as crannogs are found (O’Sullivan, 1998). The hillforts can be thought of as ‘proto-castles’, as these fortified elite residences frequently occupied prominent positions of natural strength and visually dominated their hinterland. The use of hilltop fortifications declines during the 9th century, when paradoxically, warfare was at its most intense during the wars of the Viking Age.

The third aspect concerns the emergence of monasteries as seats of kings and focal points for displays of royal authority. The increasing importance of these church settlements as settings for making ideological statements and staking political claims is also associated with their use as political assembly places (Fitz Patrick, 2004; Panos and Semple, 2004). During the 10th century we see a shift away from the use of the old pre-Christian sites for the display of power towards ecclesiastical settings where the rule of secular and ecclesiastical law was asserted, and in exceptional cases the national body was constituted.

THE REINVENTION OF THE ANCIENT LANDSCAPE

One of the most distinctive features of the political development of Early Medieval Scotland and Ireland is that aspects of the ideology of kingship derive from pre-Christian concepts of sacral kingship. These ideas are seen most clearly in Ireland where we have extensive Latin and vernacular legal material dating from as early as the 7th and 8th centuries (Kelly, 1998), along with abundant vernacular literary material which focuses heavily on the concerns of kings (Ó Cathasaigh, 2006; Ní Mhaonaigh, 2006). From this there has built up a detailed understanding of the nature of kingship and the exercise of royal power (Jaski, 2000; Charles-Edwards, 2000: 522-585). The textual evidence from Celtic Britain is much more fragmentary and elusive but such evidence as we have suggests that social and political structures were broadly similar there too. The archaeological manifestation of this phenomenon is that in both Scotland and Ireland the evolving institution of kingship was explicitly linked with the ancient pre-Christian past through the staging of royal ritual amongst prehistoric monuments which dated as far back as the Neolithic.

Here is not the place to rehearse the detailed scholarship on the nature of Irish kingship, though it is true to say that historians today would lay more emphasis than in the past on the extent to which Irish kings were effective rulers in the familiar Early Medieval mould (war lords and law makers) rather than Indo-European sacral kings, kings in name only— or ‘priestly vegetables’ as one scholar memorably put it (Binchy 1970). Nonetheless the link made between king and land is pervasive in contemporary Irish literature. It is made most explicit in the 7th-century Old Irish text *Audacht Morainn* (‘the Testament of Morann’) which has as its central theme the tenet that the king’s justice —*fir flathemon* (‘true ruling’)— brings about the fertility of the land (Kelly, 1976). One of the most well-known themes of early Irish literature, and one of the most intensely studied, is the mythic personification of the land as a goddess of sovereignty whose ritual marriage to the rightful king is the defining act of royal inauguration (Mac Cana, 1955-1958).

We know from the historical record that royal inaugurations took place at specially designated, elevated locations with strong mythological traditions and concentrations of prehistoric monuments. These places were the sites of royal assemblies on a local, regional, and arguably national scale, and feature prominently in both historical and literary sources. The tradition of the provincial (i.e. major) royal assembly places is so overburdened by mythological embellishments and propaganda that until recently it obscured our understanding of the nature and developmental of these sites (Wailes, 1982; Warner, 1988; Waddell, 1998). However, there has been a scholarly revolution in our understanding of them in recent years following a succession of archaeological surveys and excavations¹⁴. The most important insights have come from Tara, the royal assembly site of Mide at the symbolic centre of Ireland (*Mide* means ‘middle’), where since the 1990s the Irish government has funded a major research project through the Discovery Programme (Newman, 1997, 2007; Bhreathnach, 2005).

Before examining Tara in more detail there are two related points to make about the association between the Early Medieval and prehistoric activities at these royal assembly sites. First, although these are sites with a deep past, we should *not* imagine any continuity of religious belief or practice from the Neolithic to the Early Middle Ages (Bradley, 1987), the archaeological evidence shows completely different ritual activities and practices. Secondly, in the Early Middle Ages people were actively manipulating and modifying these sites to meet their current political, ideological and ceremonial needs (Driscoll, 1998; Newman 1998, 2007).

CASE STUDY: TARA

Tara is the most extraordinary Irish royal site, outstripping all rivals in terms of quantity and richness of

¹⁴ For Emain Macha (Navan) in Ulster see Waterman (1997), for Dún Ailinne in Leinster see Johnston and Wailes (2007), for Crúachain (Rathcroghan) in Connacht see Waddell (2009), and for Uisneach see Schot (2008). Only Munster’s Cashel remains without a modern study.



Digital Terrain Model of Tara based on the Discovery Programme Survey (Copyright C. Newman)

monuments and historical documentation. Tara was the seat of the High Kingship of Ireland, occupied by the most powerful king in Ireland and in the absence of any throne or crown, the site itself was the very embodiment of that kingship (Charles-Edwards, 2000: 469-521). The annals speak of an ancient fair at Tara at which was celebrated the ritual wedding of the king to the goddess of sovereignty. These pagan rites were alleged to have been last held in the 6th century, but the idea of royal inauguration ceremonies as a symbolic marriage between king the female deity of the land is found through out Ireland and is hinted at in Scotland.

The coming of Christianity brought changes in the nature of authority at Tara. Rather pointedly, St Patrick

is said in later sources to have bested a pagan druid in a magic contest there. Further construction work apparently stopped, but the Hill remained a place of assembly and retained its identification with the High Kingship. It is the activities associated with these assemblies which are most likely to enter the contemporary historical record: such gatherings could form an arena for acceptance, but equally they were a stage on which rivals might battle for supremacy. The most easily identified assemblies in historical terms were the exceptional ones, such as Máel Sechnaill's *Rígdál* ('meeting of kings') in 859 (FitzPatrick, 2005).

The notion of a High Kingship of all Ireland was politically highly charged in the Early Middle Ages and has continued to be so, for different reasons, ever

since. In the past scholars focused on the historicity of the mythologically loaded and politically biased historical evidence: could there have been an effective High King of all Ireland in this early period? Were genuinely national assemblies actually convened at Tara in the Early Medieval period? In short were the stories about Tara purely ideological or was there a political reality behind them? The scepticism of the previous generation is being replaced by a growing recognition that the most powerful kings were indeed able to lay claim to a nationally recognised overlordship,

Significant recent advances in our understanding of the topography and archaeology of the Hill of Tara have done much to enhance our knowledge of what went on there over the millennia [Fig 9]. The deep past is represented at Tara by several monuments, perhaps most conspicuously by the mound known by the ancient name of the ‘Mound of the Hostages’ (which we presume was where in the Early Medieval period sub-kings bound-over hostages —usually sons— to their superior as a pledge of compliance). The mound is, in fact, a Neolithic passage tomb, built c. 3500 BC, which subsequently during the Bronze and Iron Ages served as the focus for burial and other (ritual) activities involving fire. During the course of prehistory wide expanses of the Hill of Tara were utilised for burials under prominent barrows. These burial mounds provided an ideal means of linking the social order with the cosmological world. Overtime this heightened sense of religious importance is reflected in a series of enclosures constructed on the hill. The first, built in the Bronze Age, and discovered through geophysics, was a ditched enclosure crowning the hill. This, or a subsequent enclosure appears to be responsible for the name ‘Tara’ itself, which is now thought to refer to an area that has been ‘cut off’, a place that has been ‘demarcated for sacred purposes’ (Newman, 2007: n. 1).

The earliest enclosure was replaced (c. 100 BC) by an even larger sanctuary, the *Rath na Righ* (‘fort of the king’), defined by a massive ditch and, curiously, an external bank —the inverse of the fortifications on domestic settlements—. The *Rath na Righ* was constructed around a new focus where a series of monu-

ments were associated with the ceremonies for making a king. The *Rath na Righ* enclosure was carefully laid out to include the Mound of the Hostages, but the new focal point was the *Forrad*, a ceremonial platform forming part of a figure-of-eight structure with an unexcavated monument (a possible dwelling) known as the *Tech Cormaic*, ‘house of Cormac’ (after a legendary king). This combined structure of royal dwelling and inauguration mound also incorporated earlier burial mounds. Nearby was a standing stone, known as the *Lia Fail*, the ‘stone of destiny’, which is said to have screamed out when a rightful king put his foot on it.

All of the visible monuments on the hill had names, recorded in Medieval sources, which linked them to stories about the mythological past. Many were identified as the dwellings or burial places of legendary kings. In this respect Tara was no different from less symbolically charged parts of the landscape as one of the distinctive features of early Irish literature is the way in which the names of places and features in the familiar landscape are explained in terms of (pseudo-)historical and mythological personages and events. This habit of *dindsenchas* (‘lore of famous places’) literally grounds the past in the physical present of the visible landscape. It is therefore not surprising that the lumps and bumps in the green sward of the Hill of Tara should have been invested with meaning. What is remarkable is the way in which archaeology was manipulated to enhance these connections. All the structures so far dated belong to the pre-Christian period but Conor Newman (2007) has recently argued that the *Tech Midchuarta*, the ‘banqueting hall’, was modified in the Early Medieval period to enhance the ideological impact of its use. Later generations thought this elongated structure was an impossibly long feasting hall for heroes. In fact it is a processional way, built to frame the royal progress into the sacred space at the top of the hill for the ritual union of king and tribal goddess. The banks on either side of the *Tech Midchuarta* prevent anyone walking up it from seeing what lies beyond, except at a number of key points where there are gaps. Newman argues that these gaps occur in order to frame views of specific burial mounds, associated with ancestral kings and heroes.

Tara is just the most famous of a large number of regional inaugural sites located at ancient burial grounds which served as places of tribal assembly. Even the great sites like Tara were not the main dwelling places of kings (Warner, 1988). Under Irish law many individuals were eligible for the kingship (Jaski, 2000), and kings and would-be kings therefore tended to dwell within their local power base. Although a number of major royal residences have been excavated in Ireland, to best understand the functioning of royal centers in the 8th/9th century we need to turn our attention to the west of Scotland.

CASE STUDY: DUNADD

The royal hillfort known as Dunadd, ‘fort on the river Add’, has been excavated on several occasions, but the most recent work provides a reconsideration of earlier assessments and greatly clarifies the site’s importance as a royal residence and ceremonial centre (Lane and Campbell 2000). In formal terms the use of a craggy hill as a platform for a dry-stone fortification is utterly characteristic of northern and western Britain in the post-Roman period (Alcock, 2003). Dunadd’s situation, however, is reminiscent of the Irish positioning of royal sites within an ancient religious landscapes. It rises above the low lying plain on the edge of the Kilmartin valley which is home to perhaps the densest concentration of prehistoric ritual monuments in the west of Scotland (RCAHMS, 1988).

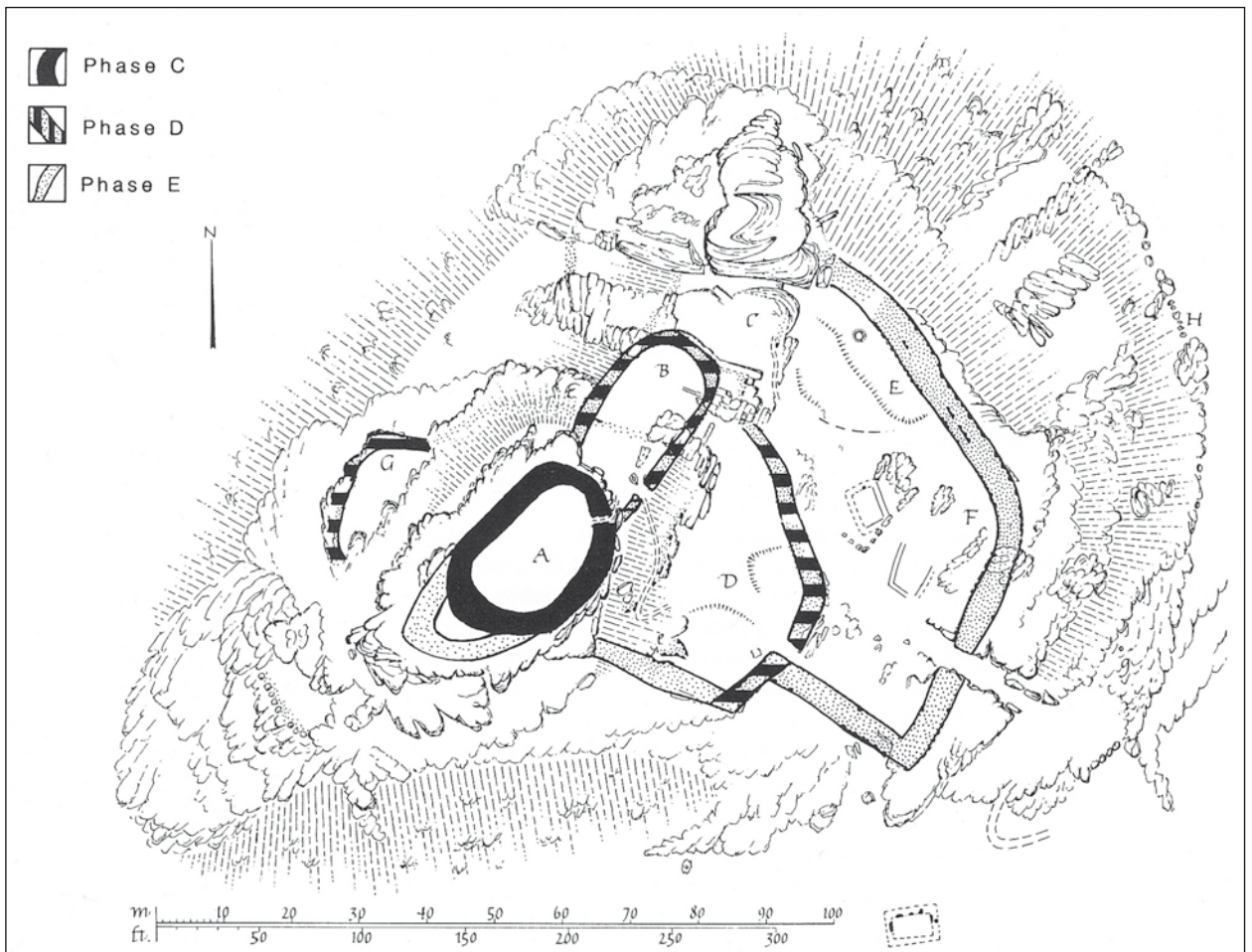
There is much about Dunadd and its material culture which sheds light on royal power. Elaborate dry-stone architecture was used to create a series of concentric enclosures with a fortified dwelling occupying the summit. Large quantities of imported pottery and glass from the Continent reflect the consumption of wine and other exotic commodities. The remarkable number of quern stones and large quantities of animal bones are suggestive of feasting on a grand scale. We focus here, however, on three additional signs of royal authority: evidence for royal inauguration ceremonial represented by carvings on the rockface near the summit, the va-

rious signs which point to a link with Iona Abbey, and the evidence for the manufacture of fine jewellery on site.

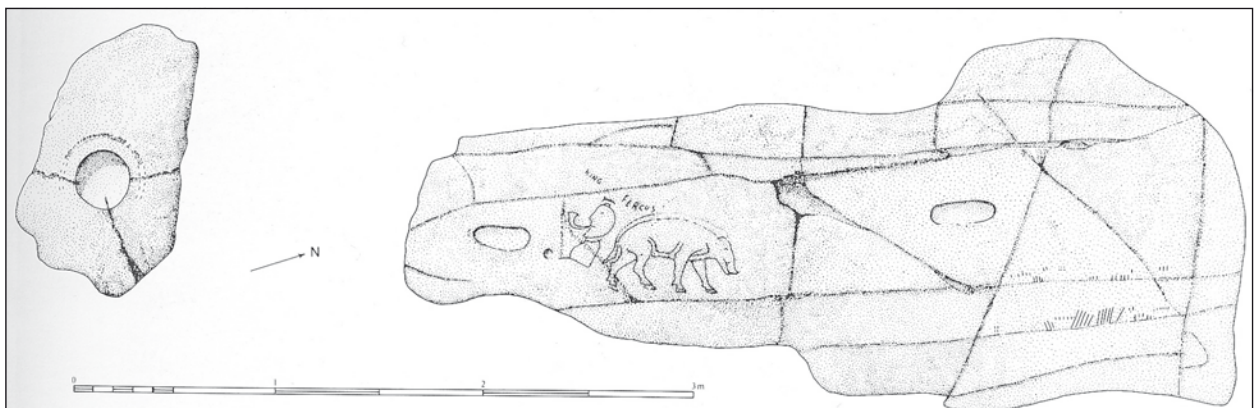
The carvings are located on a flat area, just below the summit occupied by the royal residence, which overlooks the main courtyard of the hillfort. They consist of a basin of uncertain function and a single shod footprint into which it is believed the king placed his foot to symbolise his union with the land. Alongside there is a fine incised image of a boar and an inscription in the ogham alphabet, which has not yet been satisfactorily read. The footprint motif is known elsewhere in Scotland at Clickhimmin, Shetland, and from several sites in Ireland, and as Elizabeth FitzPatrick (2004) has shown the use of natural rock slabs is a common feature at many local Irish royal sites.

The ogham inscription is not the only epigraphic evidence from Dunadd. A slate pebble, 40 mm in diameter, discovered in an early excavation, is incised in the roman alphabet: *inomine* (Okasha, 1985: 64-65, pl. viii). The lettering, with its wedge serifs and pseudo-inflected line, imitates a book-hand, and reflects training in manuscript production, possibly at the scriptorium on Iona, a short sea-voyage away. The discovery at Dunadd of a lump of orpiment, an exotic mineral pigment used to create the yellow paint used in illuminated Gospel books, also points towards close links with this major scriptorium, which, it has been argued, is the likely home of the finest of all Insular illuminated Gospels, the Book of Kells.

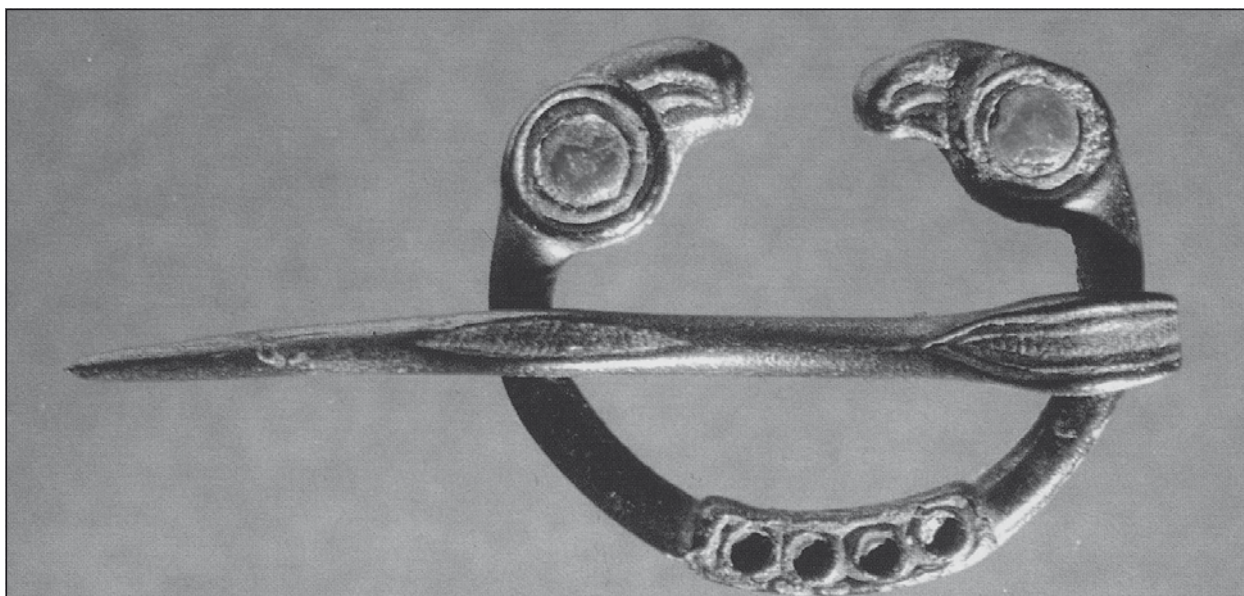
The patronage of the kings of Dunadd allowed Iona to flourish as an artistic and literary centre, in return they were granted the privilege of burial on the island. Furthermore, the scribes of Iona provided ideological support to the leading Dalriadic dynasty, Cénel nGabráin, as is reflected in the treatment of prominent Cénel nGabráin figures in the late 7th century *Life of Columba* by Adomnán, the 9th Abbot (Sharpe, 1995; Fraser, 2008), and in the prominence given to the dynasty in the Irish *Annals of Ulster*, the core of which is believed to have originated on Iona (Smyth, 1972). This reciprocal arrangement of support was sustained even after the arrival of the Norse in the region, long after



Plan of Dunadd showing the three Early Medieval phases. The summit was crowned by a dwelling (marked A), the carvings were in an adjacent enclosure (marked B) (Copyright Lane and Campbell?)



Carvings in the exposed rock surface. The primary footprint is to the right of the boar which is above the ogham inscription. The figure to the left of the boar is modern, while there is doubt over the antiquity of the left footprint. The basin appears to be ancient (Copyright Lane and Campbell?)



One half of a complete mould for a Class G penannular brooch from Dunadd (Copyright Lane and Campbell)

the centre of political gravity had shifted decisively to the East. The cult of Columba was vigorously promoted by Cinaed mac Ailpín and his descendents. In Columba the Gaels acquired a powerful patron saint, the original 'hope of the Scots' whose protection sustained the Scottish kingdom throughout the Middle Ages (Broun and Clancy, 1999).

Returning to Dunadd, we can see how the patronage of fine-metalworking provided a means of exercising power. At Dunadd excavations have produced over 900 fragments of clay moulds and crucibles used for the casting of bronze and precious metal. The form of the brooches made can be reconstructed from the moulds with confidence. These moulds can be used only once and were then broken apart, so there is no doubt that the work took place on the site. It would appear that the rulers of Dunadd exercised a royal monopoly on the production of personal ornaments. The dominant form of brooch made here was the penannular brooch, a type worn throughout Celtic-speaking world by all members of society for fastening their outer garment, a cloak. Men wore it on the shoulder, women centrally (Nieke, 1993). The type derives ultimately from a Roman type

of brooch, which was suddenly adopted widely across Britain and Ireland at the end of the Roman period (Youngs, 1989: 72-124). It is emblematic of the appeal of Roman culture characteristic of the immediately post-Roman period in the British Isles.

Brooches were one of the key means of the public display of status. Made of precious metals and drawing upon highly skilled craftsmen they were personal symbols of power, an effective means of displaying wealth and access to 'men of arts'. The production of brooches at a royal centre raises the possibility that characteristic forms were identified with particular centres of power. If kings exerted control over the distribution of these objects then brooches could have served as badges of affiliation between a lord and his clients and supporters (Nieke, 1993). The relatively small size of these objects means that all but the most exceptional examples were a fairly subtle means of displaying affiliation. The possibility that they also conveyed a wider range of associations such as familial or ethnic identities seems entirely likely. The point to stress here is that royal or elite control of the manufacture and distribution of brooches emphasises that political power was

not based on institutional structures (which were, in fact, still weak) but on interpersonal bonds of clientship and kinship.

VIKING AGE DYNAMICS

The development of the small Gaelic kingdom ruled from Dunadd was arrested by the arrival of the Norse in the late 8th century. As is well known the Viking raids initially focused on vulnerable and wealthy monasteries—Iona was raided at least six times—but within a couple of generations more sustained campaigns were mounted and the Norse (and Danes) exerted a major political influence during the 9th century. The scale and intensity of warfare increased to such an extent that the formerly secure hillforts were abandoned. Dumbarton—the seemingly impregnable ‘fort of the Britons’ on the Clyde was utterly destroyed after a four month-long siege by the Dublin Vikings in 870 (Woolf, 2007: 109–110). Raiding and seasonal campaigns were followed by permanent Scandinavian settlement and deep infiltration into the local political scene. In Ireland, a seasonal encampment at a harbour on the River Liffey developed into the island’s first truly urban settlement at Dublin and rapidly became a thriving commercial centre (Clarke et al., 1998; Larsen, 2001). In England, the great ecclesiastical city of York was the focus of Viking ambitions. As a result of spectacular excavations of waterlogged Viking deposits in both cities we know a great deal about how these emporia were sustained by trade in slaves, manufactured goods and commodities such as leather. Although this incipient urbanism largely by-passed Scotland, the macro-political consequences of the Viking Age contributed decisively to the shaping of the Scottish kingdom. The destabilisation of the political landscape was catastrophic for Dál Riata—Iona was forced to send its precious relics to daughter houses in Kells (Ireland) and Dunkeld (Scotland) for safekeeping—and the kingdom itself disappeared from the written sources. Other kingdoms also disappeared as a consequence of Viking depredations: the destruction of the British royal site of Dumbarton

has been noted already, add to that the collapse of the kingdom of Northumbria which caused Anglian York to become Danish Jorvik. However, as some kingdoms disappeared, others emerged. One such was the Gaelic kingdom of Alba, the precursor to medieval Scotland. In this final section we outline how, with colleagues, we are investigating the emergence of Alba through a research project known as SERF (Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot).

THE ORIGINS OF SCOTLAND

In many respects the critical location for understating the development of the Medieval Scottish kingdom is Forteviot in Strathearn, the original setting of the Dupplin cross, and the centre of the Pictish kingdom which was transformed into ‘Alba’ (Driscoll, 1991). Now a tiny village, Forteviot was once a royal seat occupied by Cináed son of Alpín (Kenneth mac Alpin), who in 858 died in the *palacium* there in 858.¹⁵ Cináed is a pivotal historical figure: in traditional historiography and the popular mind he is credited with ‘uniting’ the Picts and the Scots and he is widely regarded as the first of the medieval Scottish kings (who are numbered from him). The reality is that we know little about his activities, indeed the fact that he died in a ‘palace’ at Forteviot is one of the most intriguing things about him. The use of the term *palacium* is unique and conjures up visions of Aachen, which was possibly the annalist’s intention. We have little idea, however, as to what a Pictish *palacium* would possibly look like. For our understanding of the nature of Pictish Forteviot we must turn to the archaeology, which includes an important body of sculpture and a dense concentration of prehistoric monuments.

The most striking archaeological remains at Forteviot are located some 500 metres south of the modern vi-

¹⁵ From one of the few contemporary records for this period, the *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba* (Hudson 1998), we learn that in 858: *Kimadius igitur filius Alpini ... Mortuus est tandem turnore ante idus Feb', feria .iij. in palacio Fothiurtaicht.* ‘Cináed son of Alpín died finally of a tumour, on the Tuesday before the Ides of February [13th Feb 858], in the *palacium* of Forteviot’.



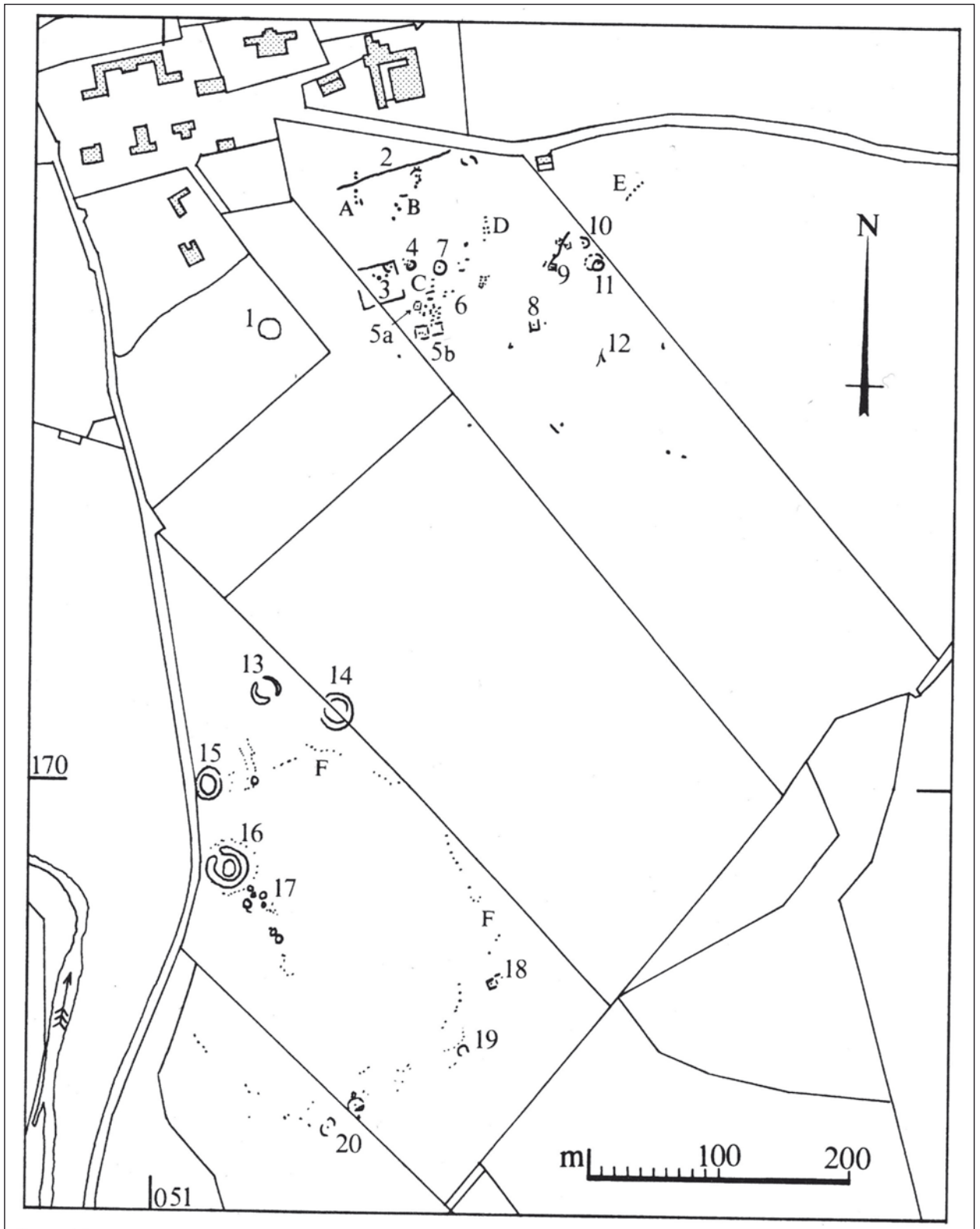
The Dupplin Cross in its original location with the village of Forteviot in the middle distance. The cropmark sites are in the fields beyond the village. (Photograph: S. Driscoll)

llage and consist of a major complex of prehistoric ritual monuments. Unlike Tara, where many of the ancient monuments survive as upstanding earthworks, here they have all been ploughed flat and are visible only as patterns in ripening crops recorded through aerial photography. At their initial discovery in the 1970s these cropmark sites caused a sensation because they represent one of the largest concentrations of Neolithic monuments in Scotland (Alcock and Alcock, 1992). The most conspicuous are the henge monuments (ritual enclosures) located both inside and outside of a massive timber circle some 300 m across. Nearby are other features which are apparently burial monuments of the Bronze Age and, perhaps, an Iron Age house. Closer to the village, 300 metres to the northeast, is another set of cropmarks showing the position of a cemetery

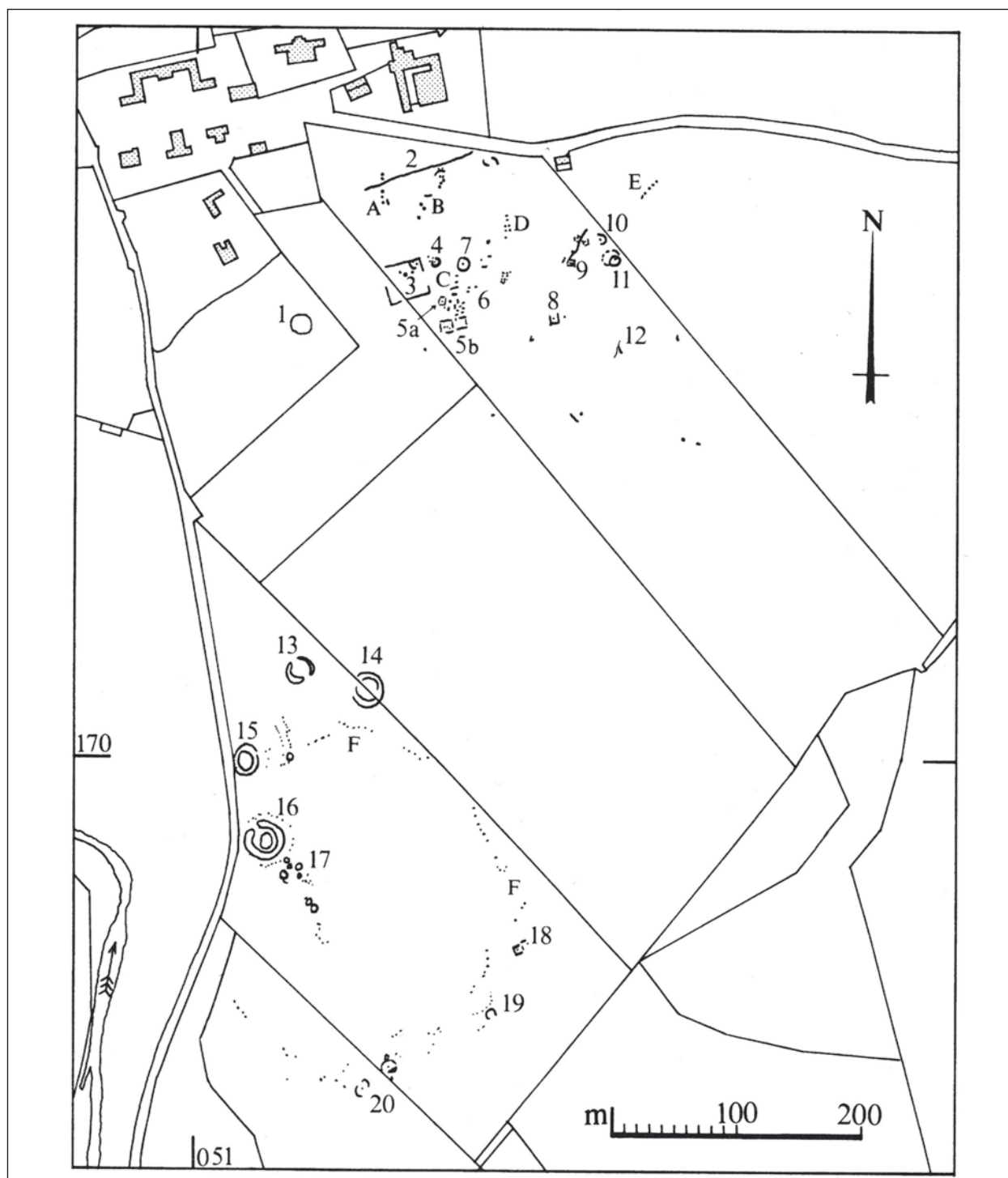
consisting of barrows, both round and square, and rows of graves. The square barrows are a distinctive form of Pictish funerary monument (Ashmore).

For the past three years Glasgow University Department of Archaeology has been exploring these sites with the support of colleagues from Glasgow and elsewhere.¹⁶ One of our key goals is to understand what use the Picts made of these prehistoric monuments. One of the henges, which was originally defined by massive

¹⁶ The Strathearn Environs and Royal Forteviot project (SERF) is examining Forteviot and its hinterland. Our multi-disciplinary, cross period landscape study is examining approximately 170 km of the best agricultural land in Scotland through excavation and a range of survey methods. Our web site gives details of our investigations: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/departments/archaeology/research/projects/serf/>



Aerial photograph of the Neolithic cropmarks at Forteviot (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



Transcription of aerial photographs of cropmarks at Forteviot. The features associated with the cemetery are numbered 2-12, the Pictish square barrows are 5a and 5b. The features associated with the Neolithic complex are numbered 13 to 20. The excavated henge monument with signs of later reuse is numbered 16 (Crown copyright: RCAHMS)



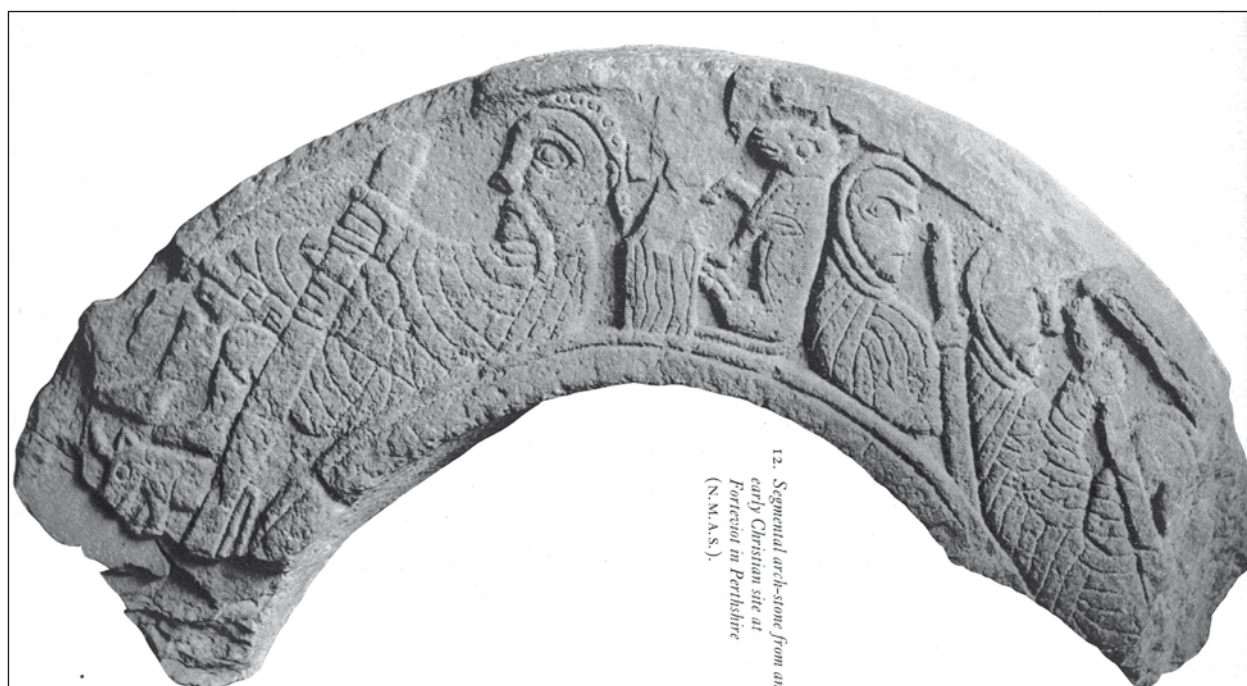
The base of a fragmented cross-slab from Forteviot depicting a wolf biting a snake (Photograph: S. Driscoll)

ditches, had been deliberately filled-in with boulders and capped with a cobbled surface. The artefacts and dating evidence are scant, but it looks like this took place in the Roman Iron Age or Pictish period, as a conscious attempt to modify the Neolithic monuments but to what end is not yet clear. Excavations at the cemetery have confirmed the presence of high status Pictish burials: radiocarbon dates from the excavated graves span the 7th to 9th centuries. Forms visible in aerial photographs, however, suggest the cemetery had an even longer history of use, perhaps originating in the pre-Christian period. Further excavation is planned to determine the cemetery's extent, longevity and to locate

any associated church.

Long before the cropmarks were discovered, Forteviot had caught the attention of antiquaries who recognised the significance of the Pictish sculpture which had long been known from the area. In addition to the Dupplin Cross, a second cross, now shattered, had stood in the landscape at nearby Invermay. Early maps suggest that the two were counterparts, standing, adjacent to important routes, on or near the northern and southern boundaries of the medieval parish of Forteviot, which undoubtedly embodied an older territorial unit of lordship (Hall forthcoming). There were also pieces of a number of smaller cross-slabs from Forteviot proper which, even in their fragmented state, were sufficient to indicate that this was a site of the highest status. We do not yet know where the early church settlement was, or whether it is likely to have been a major monastery, which was periodically home to the king and his entourage, or rather a royal residence with accompanying chapel and burial ground. We hope that future survey and excavation may provide an answer to these questions.

The final piece to mention is, in a sense the most remarkable of all the pieces from Forteviot: a large, monolithic architectural arch, carved in low relief with three staff-bearing figures. Utterly unique in an Insular context, the Forteviot arch could have served as a chancel arch in a church similar in scale to the contemporary churches of 9th-century Asturias. Satisfactory interpretation of the arch's unusual imagery proved elusive until a convincing analysis was recently proposed by Nick Aitchison (2006). He drew a parallel with the scene on the shaft of the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise (discussed above) to argue that the holding of a staff represented the initial 'staking out' of an ecclesiastical enclosure and therefore symbolized the royal act of foundation. The identity of the principal figure, presumably the founder of the church/monastery at Forteviot, remains to be established. Further art historical comparisons may help refine the dating of the arch, but, of course, the commemoration may be retrospective. It is of particular note that two scenes involving staff-bearing figures, apparently in



The Forteviot Arch (copyright National Museums of Scotland)

the act of foundation, should appear exceptionally at Forteviot, *palacium* of Cinaed mac Ailpín, and at Clonmacnoise, principal monastery of Clann Cholmáin. Cinaed's daughter Máel-Muire was married to none other than Flann Sinna, who commissioned the Cross of the Scriptures.

To summarise, what appears to have happened at Forteviot, is that like Tara, a site of immense antiquity and conspicuous monuments was selected as a place for royal ceremonies, which involved burials in close proximity to ancestral graves and (presumably) popular assemblies at which the kings were acknowledged. Unlike at Tara, there was also a royal residence and a major church in the immediate vicinity. Also, unlike Tara, the symbolic significance of Forteviot did not endure. During the later part of the 9th century Forteviot slipped from prominence. Despite the presence of Cinead there in the 850s, Forteviot appears to have been too strongly identified with the previous Pictish dynasty, disgraced by the Vikings in the decisive defeat in Strathearn in 839. The royal church had been long

forgotten by the time of the 12th century monastic reforms. Although Forteviot remained a royal estate for many centuries, its position as the focal point for royal ceremonial activities shifted 11 km to the east to Scone, a site with similar geographic attributes and less political baggage¹⁷. The first such assemblies are recorded at Scone in AD 906.

CONCLUSION

We hope that the foregoing examples have conveyed some flavour of the diverse means by which the kings of Scotland and Ireland manipulated sites, monuments and portable artefacts as symbols of power. Some of these strategies would have been familiar to their

¹⁷ In 1996 the Stone of Destiny, used in the coronation of Scottish monarchs was returned from London and to mark the occasion a collection of papers assessing its history and context was published which provides an excellent starting place for assessing Scottish royal ceremonial practices at Scone from the 10th century onwards (Welander, Breeze and Clancy, 2003).

Continental contemporaries—for instance, their engagement of the support of the Church through the endowment of monasteries and the commissioning of major religious art works— even if the form in which they were realised was distinctive and local.

The fact that (in contrast to the many other regions of Europe which saw mass migration in the Early Medieval period) both the elite and the general population of Scotland and Ireland were indigenous may have fostered the importance of the land as a deep-rooted source of authority. Certainly, one of the recurring themes of our paper has been the symbolic importance of the pre-Christian past and the attention given to ‘creating continuity’ with the ancient landscape, whether through

the erection of large, free-standing stone monuments at significant points in the landscape, or the enacting of royal ceremonial on a prehistoric stage. The invention and continued use of the ogham alphabet and the Pictish symbol system reflect highly local responses to the stimulus of Latin literacy. A similar degree of intellectual independence and cultural self-confidence can be seen in the Scottish and Irish response to the developing cult of the Cross: the creation of a tradition of magnificent carved stone crosses. Many of the finest examples of these, including the Cross of the Scriptures and the Dupplin Cross, were commissioned by kings and to this day stand witness to royal aspirations as symbols of faith, and symbols of power.

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