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An Eighth-century Inscribed Cross-slab in Dull, Perthshire

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SUMMARY

The discovery of a cross-inscribed slab with an inscription is described. Because of its importance it was decided to invite specialist comment on this piece of sculpture and to publish it in advance of the full report on the excavations. The form of the monument, its inscription and archaeological context are considered. The text appears to consist of a Gaelic personal name. The script is a form of geometrical lettering which can be dated to the opening quarter of the eighth century. The form of the cross has Columban associations which sit well with place-name and other evidence which points to Dull having been a monastery founded from Iona by c. AD 700.

KEYWORDS: Atholl, Pictish Church, Iona, St Columba, St Adomnán, Sculpture.

INTRODUCTION

In 2002 and 2003 the opportunity arose through the Breadalbane Heritage Society and the Clan Donnachaidh Society to excavate inside Dull parish church by Aberfeldy (NGR NN 806 492). With the support of Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, GUARD undertook a small excavation as part of Perthshire Archaeology Week. The disused church had recently changed ownership, and the repairs to the structure created the opportunity to investigate below the timber floor of the church.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND (Fig 1)

The church of Dull first appears in the historical record in the 12th century *Libellus de nativitate Sancti Cuthberti* (the so-called 'Irish' Latin Life of Cuthbert) (Clancy 2003). In this text Dull is referred to as an *urbs* (ch. 24: *Veniens itaque in urbe, quae Dul dicitur*). It seems likely that *urbs* here is a calque on Irish *cathair* in the sense of 'monastic settlement' (*DIL*) (see

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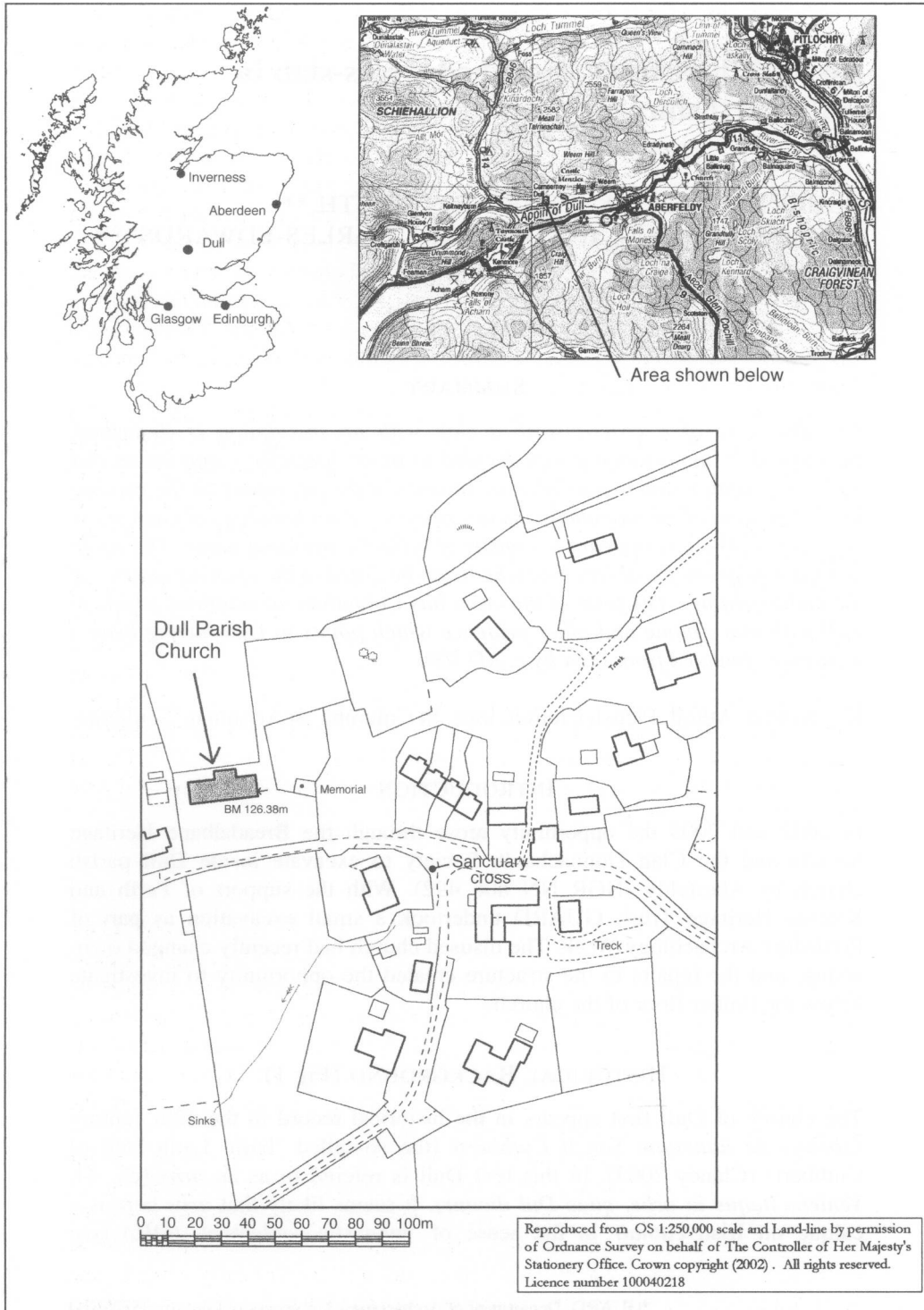


Fig 1 Location map.

Macdonald and Laing, 1970, 132; Skene 1872, ii, 413). The surrounding district of Appin takes its name from the *apdaine* 'abbacy', hence 'abbey-lands' (Watson 1926, 124). Up until the beginning of the 13th century Dull pertained to Dunkeld but 1203x1210 it was ceded to St Andrews. Thereafter it is regularly mentioned in St Andrews' documents (see Macdonald and Laing 1970, 132).

Dull parish church was dedicated to St Adomnán, eighth abbot of Iona (AD 679–704) and author of the *Vita Columbae* (Watson 1926, 270). There was also a St Adomnán's well, *Tobar-Eonan*, in the parish, and an annual St Adomnán's Fair, *Feil Eonan* (Taylor 1999, 68). There are more than half-a-dozen other places in Atholl (Dunkeld diocese) where Adomnán was commemorated, a concentration which Taylor characterizes as 'significant of strong Iona influence' (1999, 59). That this influence might date from Adomnán's lifetime is suggested by a strongly localized group of commemorations of the obscure Coeti, bishop of Iona during Adomnán's abbacy (*ibid.*).

Although the present church building is post-medieval (possibly 17th century) and the earliest datable grave-stones in the cemetery belong to the 18th century, it is likely that the present church and kirkyard perpetuate the site of the early medieval monastery (see below). The newly discovered cross-slab joins a substantial group of Early Christian sculpture already known from Dull. This comprises: a decorated shrine panel ('Dull 1', Allen and Anderson 1903, ii, 315, *ill. fig. 329*), five other recumbent cross-slabs ('Dull 2', unpublished; 'Dull 3', Macdonald and Laing 1973, 144–5, *fig.6*; 'Dull 4' Robertson 1989; 'Dull 5', Robertson 1989; 'Dull 6', Robertson 1991; 'Dull 7', this excavation: *Becli*; 'Dull 8', this excavation: 022), the socket stone of a free-standing cross or cross-slab ('Dull 9', unpublished), a large *bullau* stone or font ('Dull 10', unpublished), and four plain free-standing crosses which formerly marked the Sanctuary of Dull ('Dull 11–14', Allen and Anderson 1903, ii, 342, Dewar 1845, 767). A further slab with incised lines is of uncertain status and date ('Dull 15', Robertson 1989).

CIRCUMSTANCES OF DISCOVERY

In June and November 2002 and June 2003 small trial excavations took place inside the church with volunteers from the local area and further afield. Below the timber floor a large spread of rubble was revealed, with concentrations of large stones at the W end and towards the middle (Figs 2 and 3). As soon as excavation began disarticulated human remains were discovered across the interior in each of the four areas investigated. These bones were carefully removed and examined by a specialist before being reburied at the end of the excavations. No intact burials were disturbed.

Evidence of earlier church buildings was encountered: at the W end remains of a N-S running clay-bonded stone wall were observed (014), while the unexcavated concentration of large stones in the middle of the church may mark the foundations of an E-W running wall from an earlier and smaller church. Most of the deposits examined were probably of later medieval or early modern date as is indicated by a silver groat of Robert III (minted at Dumbarton between 1403–06) found within the superficial rubble towards the E end of the trench.



Fig 2 View from the E showing the excavation of the superficial rubble in progress.
(photo copyright GUARD).

The most exciting discovery was made as the rubble in the W end was being removed. The inscribed cross lay face down within the superficial rubble (Fig 4). It was accompanied by a second Christian monument, a simple incised cross without an inscription (022), which was also found once the superficial rubble had been cleared (Figs 5 and 6). This may cover a grave and it was left *in situ*.

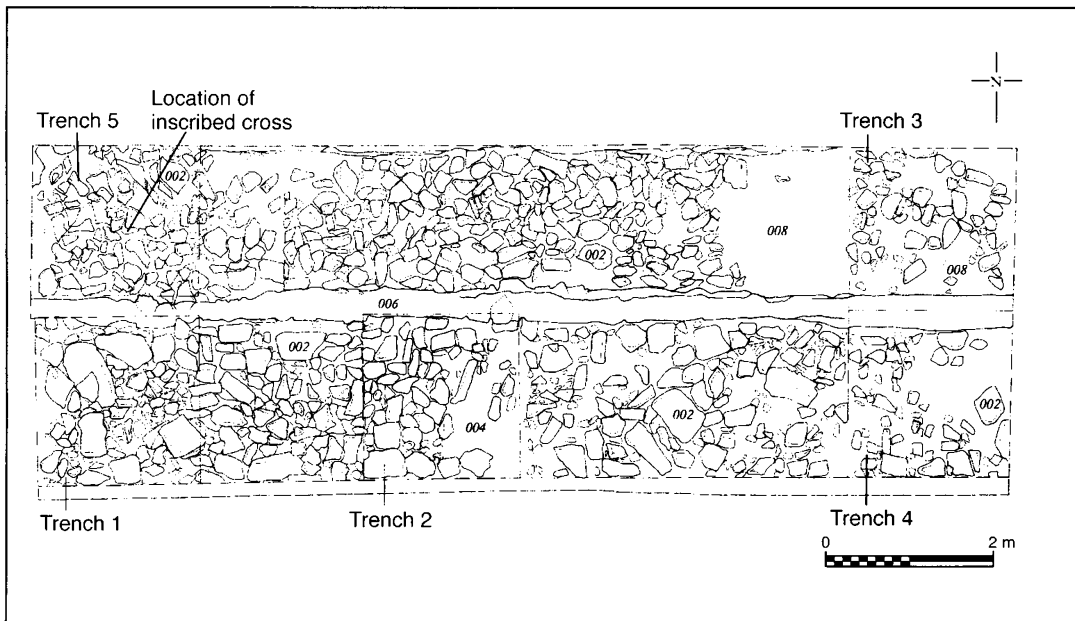


Fig 3 Excavation plan showing superficial rubble. The inscribed cross-slab was located in the NW corner of the church.



Fig 4 The *Becli* stone (next to ranging rod) shortly after discovery amongst the rubble in front of the bucket (photo copyright GUARD).

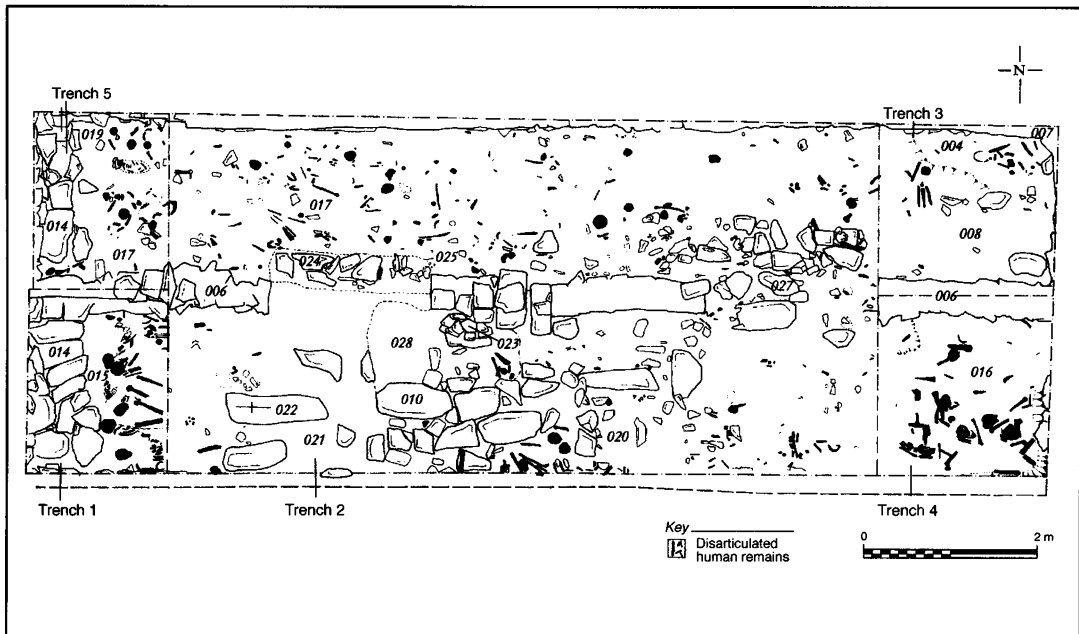


Fig 5 Excavation plan showing human remains and features below the rubble. The cross-slab without the inscription (022) was located in the SW of the church.

Although the fabric of the existing building does not appear to be medieval there is every reason to suppose that it stands on the site of the medieval church. Several architectural fragments of possible medieval date (door or window jambs with a simple roll moulding) have been re-used within the present building. The clay-bonded wall and possible foundation stones suggest the presence of an earlier church, but in any case the sculpture makes it clear that the earliest church stood here or quite nearby. Time constraints meant that excavations were confined to the upper levels, but enough bone was encountered to make it likely that undisturbed burials (of unknown age) lie further below.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STONE (Fig 6 and 7)

by Katherine Forsyth

Part of a cross-incised slab, carved on one-side only. H 45cm, W 35cm, D 3cm

Stone type: garnet schist

Present Condition: Broken with lower portion missing. The carving remains deep and legible.

Side A: Incised in outline, a Latin cross with parallel-sided arms and circular arm-pits (type 12A, Cramp 1984, xvi). The upper arm is bounded by a ruled framing line which extends the full width of the slab. There is no trace of vertical framing lines, instead the straight, parallel sides of the stone serve to frame the cross. There is evidence that these side edges have been ground to shape them to the outline of the cross (see Charles-Edwards, below).

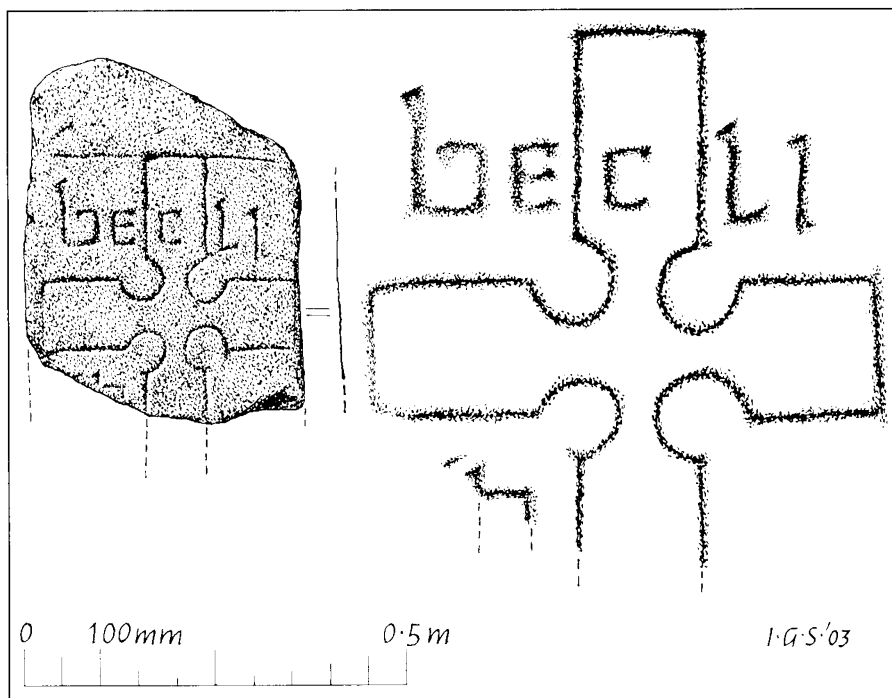


Fig 6 The inscribed cross-slab drawn by Ian G Scott, Crown Copyright.



Fig 7 Photograph of the inscribed cross-slab by Tom Gray.

Inscription

The inscription is cut across the broad face of the slab and reads horizontally from left to right. It consists of two extant lines. The upper line is complete and fully legible. It comprises five letters: two each in the two quadrants either side of the upper arm, and one on the upper arm of the cross itself. Only a small portion survives of the lower quadrant to the left of the cross-shaft but in it are the remains of two, or possibly three letters. The relevant portion of the shaft and lower right quadrant are sufficiently well preserved to make it clear that the inscription did not continue across the slab at this level. The asymmetrical layout of inscriptions on some Irish slabs means, however, that the possibility cannot be ruled out that the Dull inscription continued on a second line in the lower left quadrant, although this is, perhaps, unlikely.

The text reads:¹

BE || C || LI
-[.][H] ||

Becli[-] (see Clancy, below)

Evidence for Dating

The form of the script suggests a date in the first quarter of the eighth century (see Charles-Edwards, below).

Discussion

The inscribed recumbent cross-slab is a typical monument at Irish monastic sites but is known elsewhere in Scotland only on Iona. The type of cross – a Latin cross with rounded arm-pits – also occurs on two other cross-slabs from Dull (Dull ‘2’ and Dull ‘6’). With or without ring this is the preponderant cross-type found on upright Pictish cross-slabs. Henderson has described it as ‘a venerable Columban shape’ (1995, 216) which in origin, constitutes ‘a Christian connection, visually expressed, between the Iona community and its mission fields’ (1995, 209). It occurs on Iona on slabs which are dated to the 8th century and, under Columban influence, at Lindisfarne on slabs datable to the late 7th century (Henderson 1995).

COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT OF THE INSCRIPTION

by Thomas Owen Clancy

Given the probable commemorative context of the inscription, placed on,

¹*Conventions*

|| interruption of inscription by ornament

[H] damaged letter, reading uncertain but preferred by editor

[.] damaged and illegible letter

– *lacuna* of uncertain length at start of line

indeed, across an incised cross-slab probably meant as a grave-marker, the likelihood is that the inscription records the name of an individual. Other information is possible in such a context, but apart for a request for prayers for the soul of the deceased, which usually precede the name, it is rarely found. The layout can be paralleled in several examples from Ireland, notably at Kilbreacan on Aran Mór (CIIC 539) where the A of TOMAS AP – (the latter word representing *ap* ‘abbot’) lies on the cross with the rest of the name on either side; or at Clonmacnoise (CIIC 625) where the A of the name CONASSACH lies on the cross (see also CIIC 658). In both these examples the name lies below the cross-arms, but there are copious examples where it flanks the cross-head (e.g. CIIC 622, 672, 657, 676 and 660, 663, 664 with middle letters on the cross-head) including CIIC 525 from Clonfert where the name reads *becgán*. Information continues below the cross arms, as in Dull, on CIIC 670, 671, 681, all from Clonmacnoise, and many others. There are as yet no precise parallels from Scotland, though the corpus is so small that this is not significant.

The inscription at Dull certainly reads *becli*, with fragments of two further letters beneath the left arm of the cross. There is a certain amount resting on how one divides the name, and on whether or not the letters below the cross are part of it. Taken as it stands, *Becli* is not a name attested in any of the languages we might be likely to find represented at Dull, though phonologically it is almost certain to be Gaelic. The closest name I know to it is found in the genealogies of saints descended from the Leinster kindred of Dál Messin Corb, the rather obscure *Bicliu Uscidi* (‘the watery’) of an unidentified church Raith Biclend (Ó Riain 1985, §181.12). *Becli* could not easily represent *Bicliu*. It would be most unusual in such an early context to lose the final –n stem nominative ending in –iu (cf. the ultimate transformation of *Ériu* to *Éri*, and later *Éire*); the more common transformation of –n stems is the appearance of genitive for nominative, as indeed appears in the genealogical mention of *Bicliu*, where he is first called *Biclend*. Nonetheless, *Bicliu* does hold out the possibility that the Dull inscription records a simplex name (i.e. an ‘ordinary uncomposed noun’, cf. O’Brien 1973, 219), though not one that suggests a ready etymology.

Taking the name as potentially compounded of more than one element, it may be comprehensible. Most likely is that it contains the Gaelic element *bec*, Sc.G. *beag* ‘small’. In the Old Irish period to which this inscription probably belongs, this word was frequently, though not invariably, written as *becc*. In names, it may appear either on its own (as an ‘ordinary uncomposed adjective’, O’Brien 1973, 219), or with diminutives, such as *Beccán*, *Beccnat*, *(Mo)Beccóc* (cf. index to Ó Riain 1985, 227; also CIIC 525). It should be noted that the names *Béc(c)*, and *Béc(c)án* are also known, if these are not simply alternative spellings for *becc*, e.g. AU 707.3 (see discussion also in Sims-Williams 2003, 136–7, for possible Brittonic names containing this element.) O’Brien (1973, 222) lists a number of names consisting of adjective + noun compounds, and employing *bec*, so *becli* could be such a name, otherwise unattested. In this context, the most likely second element would be *lí* ‘beauty, glory, lustre’, making the name ‘small glory’ or ‘small beauty’ or ‘little colour’: an odd name, but some names are odd. Indeed, the names noted by O’Brien are of this

seemingly uncomplimentary sort: *Becenech* ‘small honour’; *Becairle* ‘little council’; *Becride*, perhaps ‘small heart’ (see Uhlich 1993, 176 for discussion of *Becride*, and sources). The possible presence of *lí* as a final compound element in a series of other names, such as *Connlae*, *Áinle* (see Uhlich 1993, 153, 215–16; 268 for full discussion), suggests that this is the best interpretation for BECLI. Stephen Driscoll suggests to me (*pers. comm.*) that rather than uncomplimentary we might see such names as peculiarly religious ones, reflecting the ideals of monastic humility; nonetheless, naming patterns can assume a distinctly unflattering tone, cf. *Uarchride* ‘cold-hearted’. It should be noted that if the letters beneath the cross-arm are part of the name (becli[. . .]), a putative diminutive, *Beclígán* might be suggested, on the analogy of *Conlígán* (cf. Uhlich 1993, 216); the final letter beneath the arm could be an N. Of course other second elements then become possible (one might suggest *Beclitir* on analogy with *Dublítir*).

The ambiguous spacing of the inscription means that other possibilities should be briefly explored, however. The name could, of course, be *Bec*, and be followed by a separate word, *li*, or *lí*[. . .]. One candidate would be a place-name used as an epithet, as in the case of the most famous early Gaelic *Bec/Béc*, *Bec Bairche* king of Ulster (AU 707.6, 718.2). *Lí* is the name of a river in Ireland (Hogan 482), and appears also as a place-name element in Scotland (e.g. *Beinn Lí* in Skye). It would however be unusual for such an element to appear in this sort of commemorative context (though cf. CIIC 723, from Clonmacnoise). More plausible is a different sort of epithet, such as a profession (*liaig*, ‘physician’ springs to mind, though the fragments of letters beneath the cross-arm do not support this) or perhaps a colour, such as *liath* ‘grey’ (and the final fragmentary letter could just possibly be an H, though an N or R are more likely). *Lí* on its own means ‘beauty, colour, brightness’, and has a genitive singular *lí*, but a genitive of an abstract would be an unusual epithet.

One final possibility should be entertained, and that is that it is the name of a woman. The element *bé* ‘woman’, is known in a series of personal names, some perhaps nicknames rather than given names. DIL (s.v. *bé*) notes *Bé Find* (> *Bé Bind*, *Bébinn*), *Bé Chuille*, *Bé Tuinde*. The first of these incorporates an adjective as the second element ‘fair woman’; the latter incorporate common nouns: ‘woman of hazel-tree’, ‘woman of wave’. In this context, we should investigate possibilities for the word *cli*. Three possibilities stand out: *clí*, ‘house-post, wooden pillar’, which metaphorically may also mean ‘champion, support’; *clí*, ‘poet’, specifically the third highest rank of the grades of *filid*; and *clí*, ‘body’. Here it should be noted that *bé* is found in legal texts in a number of terms as part of a phrase followed by a noun in the genitive, making an idiomatic expression for a type or class of woman. Examples include *bé loirge* ‘woman of the road’; *bé tacuir* ‘foundling woman’, *bé roethine* ‘woman cast up by the sea’ (perhaps echoed in the name *Bé Tuinde*); *bé n-indlis* ‘non-owned woman’ (all from DIL, s.v. *bé*). Interesting among these is *bé carna* ‘woman of flesh, harlot, prostitute’, for which *bé clí* could be a possible alternative, taking *clí* as ‘body’. It seems an unlikely label for a cross-slab to bear. More appealing is the possibility that this is a female poet, though one would expect instead the compositional form **ban-chlí* (cf. *ban-fili*, *ban-éices*). If the word here is *clí* ‘poet’, then *bé* would more likely represent ‘wife of poet’.

While it is certainly worth keeping in mind the possibilities which arise when the name is split as *Bec Lí* or *Bé Clí*, the best likelihood is that BECLI represents a name *Becli*, formed from adjective-noun compound, comparable to *Becenech*, *Becairle* and *Becride*, and meaning ‘small glory’ or ‘little colour’. The presence of fragmentary letters beneath the cross-arm however, means that we could be dealing with an as yet incomplete name or statement.

COMMENTARY ON THE PALAEOGRAPHY OF THE INSCRIPTION
by Gifford Charles-Edwards

The geometrical letters of the newly-found inscription from Dull are revelatory, particularly in providing evidence of their scribal use in a Columban foundation at an early period. They are used as a four-line script, rather than two-line capitals. We do not see the development of geometric capitals, as a display alphabet, in Insular manuscripts until the Book of Durrow and the Durham Gospels towards the end of the seventh century (Henderson 1987, 19–72). Although we have two other inscriptions in this display hand, from Tarbet, *ECMS* Tarbet No. 10 and *ECMS* Lethnott, No.1, both of these are more elaborate in lettering style and accompany elaborate decorative carving (Allen and Anderson 1903, Higgitt 1982, 300–21; Higgitt 1994, 209–33). Both keep their letters between two bands, as for capitals, despite the fact that some of the letterforms, borrowed from minuscules, have ascenders. They should date from a later stage in the eighth century, but before the degeneration of this display alphabet into the type of the St Gall Gospels, or the grotesque adaptations of the MacRegol Gospels of the first quarter of the ninth century, when the alphabet goes out of fashion.

Although the letters of the Dull inscription have the square-bodied simplicity of the purest examples of these letterforms that have survived (like those of the Lichfield Gospels, roughly contemporary with the Lindisfarne Gospels), they have wedged scribal serifs of a particular kind (Charles-Edwards 2002, 30, 37). The text hands of Insular manuscripts of the seventh and eighth centuries were made with broad-edged pens and with naturally formed heavy triangular serifs on the left, but the associated display alphabet was drawn in outline with pointed pens and filled. The wedge serif of the text hand is not a practical necessity in the making of the display capitals. In the Lichfield Gospels we can see that often the flat-topped stroke-ending is symmetrically placed over the downstroke, like a double-sided serif. This is consistent with a letterform that has been borrowed from lettercutters, and with Julian Brown’s theory that the alphabet was in origin epigraphic, and only later adapted by scribes for use in books (Brown 1960, 75; 1993, 118). When we see the same letterform with a serif inclined to the left, as if broad-pen formed, we may assume that we are looking at a scribally adapted letter that has come from a repertoire of lettering made by tools other than pens.

From the Cathach of c.600, to Durham A. II. 10 of c.650, to the Book of Durrow of c.675, there is a discernible progression in the writing of text hands whereby the Insular scribe becomes aware of the fact that the letters of the alphabet replicate, in various combinations, a relatively small number of pen movements such as bows, downstrokes, horizontal links and serifs. The more

exact the replication of these elements, the more even would be the calligraphy. As we can see from the Cathach the element that gave most trouble was the making regular of the size of the serif (H. J. Lawlor 1916, 250; M. Herity and A. Breen 2002, 7, fig. 5). At the time of writing of the Book of Durrow, it had been realised that the serif of 'h', 'l' and 'b' could be made regular by triangulation with the upper writing rule. The scribe completed the serif by driving from the thin entry stroke, on the left of the downstroke, to intersect at an angle with it on the upper writing rule. By the time of writing of the Lindisfarne Gospels, now dated to c.720 by Michelle Brown, we see an almost mechanical replication of such strokes (Brown 2003, 109). The wedge serif of the Dull inscription is of this type. The fact that the downstroke and serif of the 'b' and the 'l' are above the writing line, i.e. the inscription is being treated as a four-line, or book-script composition, rather than a two-line capital one, would seem to suggest a scribe, using a display alphabet with which he is familiar, but which he has deliberately adapted, perhaps to suit the difficulties of the carving surface. We see the same impulse to adaptation in the mixed-alphabet inscriptions of *Early Christian Monuments of Wales (ECMW)* Group I inscriptions (Nash-Williams 1950, 11–13).

Preparation and Layout

The cross has been laid out symmetrically with some form of straight edge, but the curves of the 'armpits' are freehand and asymmetrical. The base writing line of the inscription is parallel with the cross arm only as far as 'bec' of 'becli'; at 'li' it drops, but only at the foot, in the manner of a scribal 'i longa', which is possibly deliberate. The cutting technique is advanced compared to *ECMW* Group 1 inscriptions, and relatively meticulous, so that the cutter may be following precisely the ordinator's layout, which as suggested above, is that of a scribe with a repertoire that included display letters. A small-ended chisel or punch has been used with neat strokes. On the flat working face the schist has been left in its naturally laminated state, but it may be that the edges of the stone were ground, to shape it in harmony with the cross form which may have been panelled. A ground edge, with a length of c.10cms, has survived at the left end of the cross arm, and parallel to it; other edges show violent fractures where the piece was broken up for reuse.

Tooling

Close examination of the Group I stones of *ECMW* suggests that hard, large grained stones were worked by the letter-cutter firstly by striking down repeatedly, in a crude *pointilliste* technique, along the uninflected line of the painted letter, then the adjacent pits were smoothed in a secondary operation with chased strokes that removed the more prominent rough areas in the trough. The hard conglomerate of the Catamanus inscription on Anglesey, *ECMW* no. 13, was worked in this way. At certain points in the Dull inscription we can see where the secondary smoothing operation has detached garnets from the matrix of the schist.

These have left angular sockets that it is important not to mistake for tooling marks: these are visible, as blunt round-sectioned dunts, but they are not of the same formation as the garnet crystals. The maximum depth of the strokes is c. 5mm. The chisel appears to have had a 3mm tip: there is a clear stroke driven, with a chasing hold, on the lower downstroke of the 'h'. For making the triangular line-ends of the serifs, the same chisel appears to have been ground to give a sharp edge to the outline, as on the letter 'l'. The serifs appear to have been worked with great care, and garnets have been removed from these areas. It is possible that the irregular clustering of the garnets has resulted in the lettercutter working the garnet-free areas with longer chased strokes than in those areas where there are clusters. On the long parallel arms of the cross shape, the apparently straight lines have been made in a series of overlapping chasing strokes, of c.5mm, that move in a flat curve from slightly below the intended edge to make contact with it, then curve away again. This is clearest on the upper left arm.

Conclusion

The inscription is precise, and stylish, both as calligraphy and lettercutting. We might speculate that it must have emanated from a scriptorium familiar with Phase I half uncial manuscripts. It shows a confident use of spacing. If we may rely on the finish and detail of its line-endings, the serif form suggests scribal work of the first quarter of the eighth century.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The discovery of an early medieval inscription from Pictland is a rare event. The Dull discovery brings the total of roman alphabet inscriptions to only eleven (Okasha 1985; Forsyth 1995; Hall *et al* 2000). Despite its location, however, the new Dull slab looks very much to the Gaelic west, specifically to Iona. The type of monument, the shape of cross, the language of the text, are all features which reflect this cultural orientation. The early eighth-century date suggested by the form of the lettering sits well with the historical and place-name evidence of a Columban monastery at Dull as early as the life-time of Adomnán. Although this is a comparatively simple monument the 'precise and stylish' way in which the lettering is laid out and cut implies the presence at Dull of some-one familiar with display script and sufficiently confident in its use to adapt it to the peculiarities of the local stone. It is a concrete expression of the highly literate milieu which would have existed at Dull in the eighth century.

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