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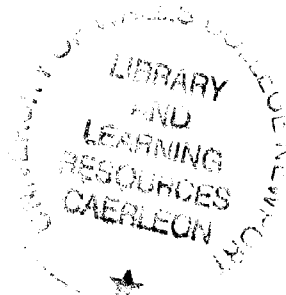
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**THE EPIGRAPHY OF WALES 550-1000  
EXAMINED IN A WIDER INSULAR CONTEXT:  
THE INTERCHANGE BETWEEN WRITTEN AND INSCRIBED LETTERS**

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**A thesis submitted to the University of Wales  
in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of M.Phil.**

**University of Wales College, Newport**

**2000**

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## INTRODUCTION

Early Insular palaeography is dominated 600–800 by the high-grade Irish development of half-uncial and its associated minuscule and display scripts. But the Irish phase of development overlies an earlier British layer of manuscripts and writing techniques that must have travelled from Wales to Ireland in the fifth century. Although we do not have any surviving manuscripts from this pre-600 British layer, we do have inscribed stones. They are of the greatest importance as inscribed versions of written letterforms, but they are low-grade letterforms that seem to defy categorisation. Due to their irregular originality of style and because they predate any manuscript survivals, these early Welsh inscriptions have been very difficult to date precisely. Various approaches have been taken to this problem. In his Early Christian Monuments of Wales of 1950, V.E. Nash-Williams set out a division of the monuments into four classes of stones in which he presents a fifth- to eleventh-century chronological progression from uninscribed to capitals, to mixed capitals and bookhand, to bookhand alone. 416 stones are shown in drawn and/or photographed form, each described and analysed carefully. Nash-Williams made a very close study of the letterforms, subdividing letters into types with minute differences of execution, resulting in an elaborate but confusingly presented series of letterform tables which has been criticised by K.R. Dark. He has proposed another four-fold classification, simply within Nash-Williams' Class I, by type of cutting and layout, given as an appendix to his Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300–800; and he has also discussed the chronology of this class in a separate study.<sup>1</sup> Close dating of some of the stones was also attempted on philological grounds by Kenneth Jackson, in his Language and

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<sup>1</sup> K. R. Dark, Civitas to Kingdom: British Political Continuity 300-800 (Leicester, 1994), 267-9; *id.*, 'Epigraphic, Art-Historical, and Historical Approaches to the Chronology of Class I Inscribed Stones', in N. Edwards and A. Lane (eds.), The Early Church in Wales and the West (Oxford, 1992), pp. 51-61.

History in Early Britain ;<sup>2</sup> and Charles Thomas has written extensively on the nature of the Roman alphabet and learning preserved by the post-Roman British.<sup>3</sup> Despite this attention to the problem we have not much improved on Nash-Williams: a rough categorisation into early, middle and late periods spanning the fifth to the eleventh centuries.

There has been a tendency to rank the letterforms of these early Welsh inscriptions within the known canon of Roman practice: they are classified broadly as “square capitals”, or “bookhand” or “half-uncial”. In graphic terms this elevates many of the inscriptions above their station. An intimation that we should search for a graphic context in the undergrowth rather than the treetops lies in Ken Dark's remark on the characteristics of early Welsh vertical pocked inscriptions: they “do not relate closely to Romano-British epigraphy.”<sup>4</sup> The remark is true of the “bookhand” inscriptions also. Without an illustration, this discreet phrase of Dark's does not convey the peculiarly crude and graphically unconscious nature of the first Welsh stones to depart from the debased Roman capitals of a long-lost craft to the childish letters of a writing form that does not rise to the lowest note on a scale of broad-pen manuscript hands. Perhaps this was because the lettering of these inscriptions did not issue from the context of a scriptorium, was never written with a broad pen and, as the lack of layout and the lack of ruling suggest, was very far removed from book arts. The most distressing feature of early Welsh inscriptions, at first sight, is their wandering lines' lack of ruling, and the consequent fluctuations in letter size. A possible graphic source for these inscriptions, tablet writing, indented with a stylus in wax, was both the writing first learned by the novice and the record medium used by traders for accounts and bills of lading. Unlike the wooden slivers of the Vindolanda tablets, and the papyrus roll, which contained within their grain and weave a built-in set of parallel rules, wax tablets were rule-free but did have distinct advantages. They were a great boon to the traveller exposed to an extreme range of weather conditions. The two leaves of a tablet being locked together face to face, they were waterproof and virtually

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<sup>2</sup> K. Jackson, Language and History in Early Britain (Edinburgh, 1953), pp. 149-93.

<sup>3</sup> C. Thomas, Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500 (London, 1981), pp. 61-95.

<sup>4</sup> Dark, Civitas to Kingdom, p.268.

indestructible; some have even survived from a Late Bronze Age shipwreck off the coast of south-west Turkey.<sup>5</sup>

Through trade, tablet writing was possibly the first kind of Roman writing to be seen and understood in the British Isles. On an unruled surface the writing is in an even monoline, with no thicks and thins, and is uninflected rather than the inflected or modelled line, with contrast between thicks and thins, of a broad-pen letter.

DIAGRAM: an uninflected line, and an inflected or modelled line.



Tablet writing is a letterform produced by pressing the writing instrument into the wax writing surface in contrast to the broad pen which glides over the surface of parchment, sliding on the liquid ink that is keyed to the parchment surface with the thin approach stroke of every letter. An intermediate technique between quill pen and stylus was reed pen on wood or papyrus. We might compare the reed pen with a modern day felt pen: it gave a soft-edged flowing line, and has evidently influenced the development of semi-uncial hands like that of TCD Ussher I, that push rolled entries into the heads of downstrokes, a stroke entry that pre-dates the distinctive Insular triangular serif.

DIAGRAM: the development of the Insular serif.



**F.2.**

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<sup>5</sup> R. Payton, 'The Ulu Burun Writing Board Set', *Anatolian Studies*, 41 (1991), pp. 99-106.

Unlike the higher art form of formal broad-pen letters with their separately stroked serifs, cursive tablet writing has simpler distinctive characteristics: a rolled, curving entry stroke at the heads of downstrokes, separation of bowed strokes and flowing horizontal ligaturing. It is a free form, unbounded by the scribe's ruled lines on parchment. How could it have come into general use in Wales, ousting capitals even for monumental inscriptions, in favour of any other more obviously suitable form?

Ken Dark, in his Civitas to Kingdom, discusses the process through which Wales came to hold the only kingdoms remaining under British rule in what had been Roman Britain. By the end of the seventh century the lowland zone that had been Romano-British was in Saxon hands, and Wales had absorbed an overlay of the eastern British displaced by the incoming Saxons. These refugees would have been the British tribes who were most Romanised. During the period when there was a Saxon "fringe" on a British population that had been Romanised, and who perceived the Saxons as barbarian, there was sufficient time for the British to develop their own version of a writing system. Ken Dark suggests a "replacement of the Late Roman elite ... by an elite of lower status origins without the imposition of an outside elite group." This would produce exactly the kind of conditions under which a home-grown hybrid of a letterform might flourish. He further writes: "Sub-Roman kings were not barbarian Celtic chiefs, but nor were they fourth century intellectuals ... they might live in refurbished Roman buildings but equally, many of the material trappings of Late Roman life had ceased to exist."<sup>6</sup>

Evidently, by the appearance of the monuments of the sixth and seventh centuries in Wales, all knowledge of the inscriptional art and craft of the Roman ordinator and monumental mason had ceased to exist, even if it was still visible. The inscriptional capitals of the public monuments left by the Romans bore so little relationship to the Roman letterforms that survived in practical use in Wales that they appear to have become redundant as a graphic source of reference. The new elites composed and commissioned monuments to their taste that were executed to the best of the ability of their craftsmen. They might have discarded monumental Roman capitals for a reason. Thomas Charles-Edwards, in his 'Language and

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<sup>6</sup> K. Dark, Civitas to Kingdom, pp. 255-256.

Society among the Insular Celts 400–1000’, writes of the Irish:

those on the frontiers of the empire were both attracted and repelled by Roman civilization. They might desire to take what they wanted – subsidies, trade, even office within the empire – but they also desired to remain distinct. The ogam alphabet was created under just these twin impulses of attraction and repulsion. It was to be an alphabet fit for the commemoration in stone of a king...<sup>7</sup>

Like the Irish, the Welsh did their own thing, at first in isolation. When Augustine received the British bishops during the Roman mission of 597, he did not rise to greet them, a failure to honour their status that had profound consequences. The British church chose not to evangelise among the pagan Saxons – an answering failure that Bede found unforgivable. The Welsh ecclesiastics turned away, retiring on their own resources, blind to their Saxon neighbours, though by 700 and the foundation of Lichfield by Saint Chad there was co-operation between some of them. The first lettering on stone that we see from this society is in graphic terms a levelling down to the lowest common denominator of the shapes of a rudimentary Roman alphabet in upper- and lower-case letters.

Nash-Williams did not associate the capital letterforms of the earliest Welsh inscriptions with any bookhand: he thought that they were unrelated, and that there had been a break in the tradition of carving inscriptions on stone after the Roman withdrawal. He thought that inscriptional capitals re-appeared in Wales as a reflection of a Gallo-Roman fashion. The extent of this supposed inscriptionless period is difficult to estimate. We have debased Roman capitals c. 400 from legionary bases and the settlements around them. Nash-Williams dates his Group I series of stones, which are at the beginning capitals only, from the mid-fifth century. Although Group I inscriptions are in capital letters, they are placed on the stone irregularly and show cursive ligaturing. They do not have the appearance of easily acknowledged offspring of Gallo-Roman inscriptions. They look far more like a home-grown continuation of a debased

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<sup>7</sup> T. Charles-Edwards, ‘Language and Society among the Insular Celts AD 400-1000’, in The Celtic World, ed. M. J. Green (London, 1995), pp.721-722.

Roman tradition that began, in the late sixth century, to show borrowings from a bookhand that by the mid-seventh century contained within its range several grades of script. In this process they became even less like Gallo-Roman inscriptions.

Since the appearance of Early Christian Monuments of Wales, the discovery of the Vindolanda tablets and the Bath curse tablets have revolutionised our knowledge of the range of written forms used by the Romans in Britain. We know that upper-class Britons became Latin-using, that legionaries married British women and settled in Britain after their retirement, and that Celts served in the Roman army. It would not be surprising if the range of hands used in the day-to-day running of the tabularium of a large legionary base was in some way reflected in the writing of the local population, from aristocrats to tradesmen.

R. S. O. Tomlin's edition of the Tabellae Sulis illustrates 29 written capital texts out of 110 legible tablets. The great significance of these tablets is that they are from a second- to fourth-century civilian milieu. The capital texts contain Celtic names, and Tomlin suspects that tablet number 14 may be a text in Celtic. He believes that the model for these capital-letter texts is not the monumental inscripational alphabet lapidariae litterae but "Latin bookhand. The script of tablet 10 in particular resembles the 'headings' used by Roman military clerks."<sup>8</sup> He also associates the cruder capital texts with "semi-literacy" and this would accord with the proportion of capital to cursive that we see in Roman Inscriptions in Britain in inscriptions made by craftsmen marking their wares. Smiths, potters, workers in lead and horn preferred to use the clear two-line capitals rather than the more complex four-line cursive. Basic literacy at the level of fifth-century craftsmen would most easily have been learned in written capitals, whereas the scrittura di base of the trainee Insular scribe was a four-line simplified version of half-uncial.

The British church had an organised, hierarchical structure by the early fourth century. Some form of British bookhand was taken to Ireland by Patrick in the fifth century that must have evolved through the copying of Italian half-uncial service books and psalters. So during

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<sup>8</sup> Tabellae Sulis, ed. R. S. O. Tomlin (Oxford, 1988), p.86.

the fifth century in Wales it was perfectly possible for there to have co-existed two palaeographical strands, two live traditions: the Roman outgoing and the Insular incoming. The lettercutter in stone eventually converted from two-line to four-line script, but it was script of the utmost simplicity. These simple inscriptions remained an acceptable form even for royal memorials as late as the memorial for Hywel ap Rhys, ruler of Glywysing, d. 886 though the surrounding decoration of his memorial is elaborate and accomplished. Elsewhere in the British Isles other peoples were receiving and adapting new epigraphic forms with great success. In Northumbria from the mid-seventh century, precise uncial and geometrical display letters were cut in stone, while in Pictland, where the incomparable sculpture was of the highest quality, we have two fine inscriptions displaying the ability to cut geometrical capitals in bas-relief and in deep-cut “v” section. This was not paralleled in Wales. The high-quality Irish, Pictish and Northumbrian inscriptions provide a puzzling background to the Welsh, persisting in simplicity.

Epigraphy on the continent at this time branched out into regional variations, as in manuscript hands, but hardly anywhere was there the lack of interest in the epigraphic concept of ruling parallel bands of lettering as extreme as we see in Wales. It is during the period of deliberate Welsh isolation from eastern Britain in the sixth and early seventh centuries that we find inscriptions that are as far from the precise rules of Roman lapidary graphics as it is possible to be; but there is a visible intrusion of graphic awareness in the mid-seventh century when we find attempts to replicate on stone manuscript hands with thick and thin strokes and serifs. This must represent some point of Welsh self-awareness at which exchange began to take place between scriptoria and workshops, and at which craftsmen began to borrow from outside sources coming into the British Isles. There are regional variations, for example in consequence of the Irish links with the South West and its bilingual Ogham/Latin stones, the kingdom of Gwynedd’s links with the Isle of Man, or Saxon influence when the kingdom of Glywysing was a client of Alfred of Wessex. There are evident pockets of definite stonecarving tradition at Margam and Llantwit Major in Glamorgan, but the nearby schools of Llantwit Major and Llancarfan, reputedly great centres of learning in the sixth century under Saint Illtud



and Saint Cadog, left no sign of lettering skills on the inscriptional style of the stones remaining at Margam and Llantwit Major. It might be that some of the best scribes practised their skills while living as anchorites; for concentration's sake this would be preferable to working in the environment of a school thronged with scholars. The fact that a small group of seventh-century Glamorgan slab crosses, in the hinterland of Margam, do show scribal skill suggests that the monastic schools were quite separate institutions from monastic scriptoria. Many scholars trained in the schools may never have graduated from stylus writing to the rarefied calligraphy of the scriptorium. A monastic scribe may well have been a rare bird to the flocks of scholars to whom book production would have been a closed shop. Ken Dark would interpret the early differing epigraphic styles and techniques as chronological indicators; in this thesis I put forward an alternative explanation for the variety in letterforms that we see coming together in the period of Nash Williams' Group I, fifth to seventh century.

By close examination of what is left on parchment, stone, wax, lead, bone and wood, it might be possible to build a picture of the context and the time in which Welsh lapidary inscriptions boldly enlarged to monumental size the child-like letterforms of a novice writer, and persisted in inscriptional simplicity throughout a period when stonecarvers learned new and elaborate techniques of decoration.

For each Chapter, I have carried out experiments in replicating lettering techniques with the relevant tools and materials of the time. When discussing the Nash-Williams numbered stones I have had to refer to the old county boundaries of his time. I would like to thank my supervisors at University College of Wales Newport, Professor Aldhouse Green and Dr Grey, and my external supervisor at the University of Edinburgh, John Higgitt. I am grateful to Dr Martin Wenham, lettercutter in wood, for his help and stimulating discussions on lettering in wood, and to Dr Tom Kemp, brush letterer, for his research and expertise in replicating brush-formed Roman capitals. Dr Elizabeth O'Brien and Ragnall Ó Floinn have been helpful particularly with regard to the lost medium of wood.

## Chapter 1

### NASH-WILLIAMS' GROUP I, "MIXED", HALF-UNCIAL/CAPITAL INSCRIPTIONS OF THE FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION IN THIS GROUP.

Nash-Williams' Group I fifth- to seventh-century inscriptions showing "half-uncial" intrusions into what had been an epigraphical style of Roman capitals only are placed on a chronological scale founded on the apparently reasonable assumption that the inscriptions showing one or two "half-uncial" letters are early, those with a few are later, and those in mostly "half-uncial" letters are at the end of the Group I/II time span.<sup>1</sup>

Placing the mixed inscriptions in a time sequence according to their percentage of capital/half-uncial forms is not quite as satisfactory as it seemed. Close analysis of the letterforms of the twenty-five mixed inscriptions surviving in Group I shows that Nash-Williams included under the umbrella term "half-uncial" not only letterforms from the early form of geometrical capital alphabet that later became the eighth-century display script of Phase 2 half-uncial, but also monoline cursive minuscule letterforms from the stylus tablet writing, the scrittura di base that all trainee writers learned initially.<sup>2</sup> Many of these scholars may not have progressed to learning any broad-penned manuscript hand. These two non-broad-penned letterforms, the drawn and filled geometrical capitals and the linear stylus tablet writing, represent two extremes: of the most elaborate – a bold drawn highly decorative alphabet – and a lightweight alphabet of the most simple monoline skeletal form. One is boldly monumental and one is lightweight cursive. Of the twenty-five mixed inscriptions in Nash-Williams' Group I, sixteen have intrusive features which are not half-uncial but rather angular geometrical capitals or cursive stylus letters.

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<sup>1</sup> V.E. Nash-Williams, The Early Christian Monuments of Wales (Cardiff, 1950). Group I stones are discussed on pp. 3-16. References to Nash-Williams numbering are given as ECMW No -.

<sup>2</sup> John Higgitt, 'The display script of the Book of Kells and the tradition of insular decorative capitals', in F. O'Mahony (ed.), The Book of Kells: Proceedings of a conference at Trinity College Dublin 6-9 September 1992 (London, 1994), pp. 209-233.

All those learning to write in this period began to form their first letters with a stylus on wax tablets; tablets were used as well for note taking and records in order to save costly parchment only for the most important texts. Tablets were very economical as they were reusable, the wax being smoothed over to take the next text. Clearly small-scale tablet writing was the natural ground out of which low-grade insular penned forms developed, but the geometrical capitals were drawn from some other larger-scale source into manuscript use through that process of eclecticism that is in full swing in our first competently decorated insular manuscript, c. 650, Durham A.II.10. The first of the manuscript geometrical capitals surviving appears to be the triangular delta form used in the Book of Durrow c. 675, which is also the first insular manuscript to use squared fourfold patterning, but they had flowered quickly into a complete scribal alphabet of great variety by the time of writing of the Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 700. The fifth/seventh-century Group I stones represent evidence that prototype geometrical capitals were in use on materials other than parchment before they were borrowed by insular scribes. From the same period we have a series of related inscriptions on stone in the Middle Rhineland, which are treated in Chapter 4. John Higgitt has discussed the difficulties of understanding the interchange between lettercutters and scribes.<sup>3</sup>

A clear indication that those inscriptions with dominant angular letters are of a different, and higher, order from the irregular cursive/half-uncial types is that the most ambitious of the inscriptions using geometrical forms, like ECMW No 62 at Llanlleonfel in Breconshire, use a mechanical aid to ensure a regular width of letter stroke. When we find geometrical letters in the majority in a mixed Group II inscription, they are placed on the stone in a competent way, some of them with a double scriber, giving a bold monoline broad letter of a constant, ribbon-like thickness. The double scriber was used by sculptors laying down interlace patterns; we may assume that the use of a double scriber shows a developed understanding of the layout of cut letters, utilising the techniques necessitated by the complex

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<sup>3</sup> John Higgitt, 'The stone cutter and the scriptorium: early medieval inscriptions in Britain and Ireland', Epigraphik 1988 (Wien, 1990), pp.149-162.

windings of the double line of insular interlace work on bone, stone or wood.<sup>4</sup>

DIAGRAM: lettering from the Llanlleonfel stone and apparent preparatory drawing on the stone with double scribe.



In the following list of twenty-five of the Group I mixed inscriptions it will be seen that thirteen of them have been classified as mixed because of the presence of one non-Roman capital letter, four have two non-Roman capitals, three have three, one has four, one has five and three have six. The overall proportion of capital to non-capital in the most “mixed” inscriptions is this: of the three with six non-capital letters, ECMW No 214 has a total of eighteen letters, ECMW no 270 has a total of twenty nine letters, ECMW no 305 has a total of thirty-one letters. The proportion of non-capital intrusive letters in Group I inscriptions is not overwhelming, and the text of the inscription or its surface may reveal reasons for the mixing of the letterforms that have little to do with a gradual stylistic change taking place over two centuries. Three different alphabets drawn from different sources were breaking up the dominance of capitals as a monumental letterform.

In the list of inscriptions I have divided the letters into cursive, flowing and informal, or squared, formal and angular, with the category of half-uncial letters lying in between. None of the half-uncial letters in Nash Williams’ Group I show the attempts to replicate the pen-formed serif that we see in Group II. The wide range of skill and of graphic knowledge of letterform seems to indicate that although there was a lack of an overall style for monuments there was also a large pool of variously gifted craftsmen who could be entrusted with a memorial inscription. To illustrate the extent of variation in this mixed Group I, and to confirm the point that those inscriptions that contain geometrical capitals are of a higher order than those that do

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<sup>4</sup> George Bain, Celtic Art: The Methods of Construction (London, 1981), p 34.

not, I have made case studies of ECMW 214, a relatively well-designed inscription showing carved letter-stroke ends and geometrical capitals, and ECMW 270, an irregular cursive inscription dashed on with no attempt at parallel ruling. Both of these inscriptions are from Glamorgan, always an epigraphical hotbed: ECMW 214 is from Llanilterne by St Fagans on the coastal plain, and ECMW 270 is from Tirphil in a mountain valley east of Merthyr Tydfil.

### ECMW GROUP I "MIXED INSCRIPTIONS"

Here follows a listing of these inscriptions, with Nash-Williams datings, and a commentary on individual letterforms, with diagrams. I use "intrusive" to describe a letterform that is non-capital and breaks into the pattern of capitals only.

33. ECMW late sixth century. Anglesey/Llantrisant.

to the wife of BIVATIGIRNUS

Cursive, put on freely. Intrusive letters d1, d2, and q.

Open-bowled p, d. Angled L.



41. ECMW sixth century. Breconshire/Abercar.

ANNICCIUS...

Squared, put on freely. One intrusive letter squared "h".

Three-stroke M, trident-shaped, ligatured LI.

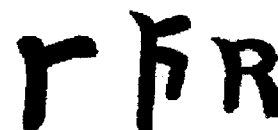


68. ECMW sixth century. Breconshire/Scethrog.

NEMNII FILIUS VICTORINI.

Cursive, put on freely. One intrusive letter "s" minuscule.

Ligatured FI. Spiked entry into "F" and "R".



F. 4.

70. ECMW fifth/ early sixth century. Breconshire/ Trallwng.

CUNACENNIVI.

Capitals with one intrusive letter: a lapse of concentration on the “F” of filius, which has a clear manuscript form of uncial “F”, spiked entry as 68.

76. ECMW sixth century. Breconshire/ Ystradgynlais.

HIC IACIT

Capitals with enlarged “C” and one intrusive squared letter “t”.



84. ECMW sixth century. Caernarvonshire/ Brynkir. Illustrated above.

ICORI FILIUS POTENTINI

Capitals with minuscule “s”, or a flattened form of “s” to fit the right-hand margin of the inscription to just above ground level. This is an important indicator that some of the cutters knew that there was a margin defined by the proportion of the stone to be underground if it was to be set upright, and it suggests the building up of craft knowledge.

95. ECMW sixth century. Caernarvonshire/ Llannor.

FIGULINI FILI LOCULITI

Cursive, put on freely, intrusive letters “f” and “h”, attempt to flatten curves, especially “c”.

F.4.

105. ECMW sixth century. Caernarvonshire/ Penmorfa.

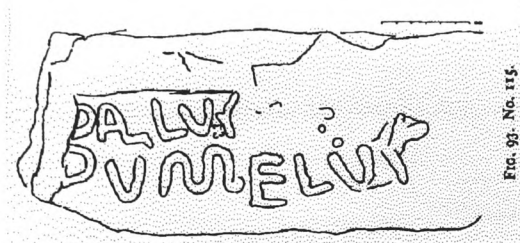
FILI CUNALIPI/CUNACI

Irregular cursive, ligatured FI, NA, NA, intrusive letters "b", "e" and minuscule "r."

115. ECMW sixth century. Cardiganshire/ Llanddewi Brefi. Illustrated below.

DALLUS/DUMELUS

Cursive, ligatured AL, two terminal minuscule "s", with a double-looped single-stroke "M".



116. ECMW sixth century. Cardiganshire/ Llanddewi Brefi.

IDNERT FILIUS IA..

Irregular capitals, some spiked line finishes, intrusive letters half-uncial "d", "t", "e", "l", "n", clearly squared forms of capital "c".

121. ECMW sixth century. Cardiganshire/ Llandysul.

VELVOR[IA] FILIA BROHO[MAGLI]

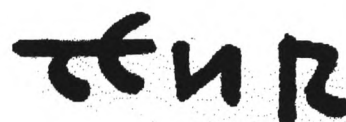
Squared forms "A", "H", ligatured FI, with open-looped R having a straight horizontal bar rather than diagonal.

F.4.

132. ECMW sixth century. Cardiganshire/ Tregaron.

POTEN[T]INA/ MULIER

Free regular capitals with cursive ligature “te”, reversed  
N, open-bowled R. Intrusive “t” and “e”.



140. ECMW sixth century. Carmarthenshire/ Cynwyl Gaeo.

TALOR[I] ADVEN[TI]

Angle bar “A”, intrusive half-uncial “q” with squared bowl.  
“D” squared, avoidance of curves.



141. ECMW sixth century. Carmarthenshire/ Cynwyl Gaeo.

[R]EGIN[-] FILIUS NV[D]INTI

Intrusive minuscule “s”, flattened curve on possible half-uncial “g”.



144. ECMW sixth century. Carmarthenshire/ Henllan Amgoed.

QUENVENDANI/ FILI BARCUNI

Angle bar “A”, squared form of “q”, and “b”.

Avoidance of curves.



149. ECMW late sixth century. Carmarthenshire/ Llanboidy. Illustrated below.

MAVOHE[NI]/ FILI LUNAR[C]

Squared forms, three-stroke “M” with linking crossbar at top, three-stroke “gate” “N”, one  
angle bar “A”, ligature FI, square “h”.

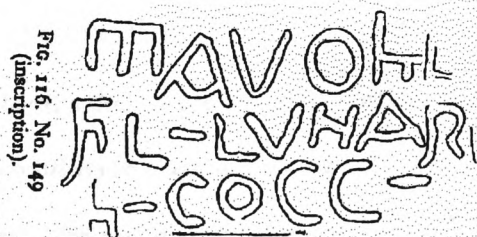


Fig. 116. No. 149  
(inscription).

F. 4.



170. ECMW late fifth/sixth century. Carmarthenshire/ Merthyr.

CATURUG/FILI LOVERNACI

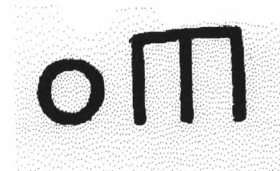
Flattened curves, small “O”, separation of strokes on “R”, half-uncial “F” and “L”.



184. ECMW sixth century. Flintshire/ Caerwys.

HIC IACIT MULI/ ER BONA NOBILI

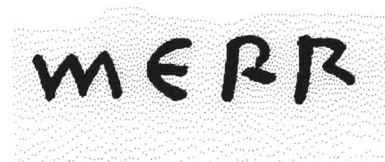
Flattened curves, small “O”, squared three-bar “M” with link at top.



198. ECMW sixth century. Glamorganshire/ Kenfig.

PVMPEIUS/ CARANTORIUS

Ligated “VM”, half-uncial “E”, one “R” with separated strokes. Flattened curves.



214. ECMW late sixth/early seventh century. Glamorgan/Llanilterne. Illustrated below.

VENDUMAGLI/ HIC IACIT

Two angle bar “A”, half-uncial “e”, “d”, “m”, “g”, “l”, “t”. Attempt at wedge serifs. Squared forms of “t”, “h” and “c”.



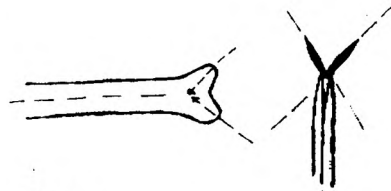
F.4.

Commentary on illustration of ECMW214.

Serifs are wedged on both sides of the ascender heads, showing that the model is a cut form, not a pen form which would have a wedge to the left side only. Both “C” forms and the “T” show signs of the “fish tail” line ending (see diagram below), where the cutter drives two

diagonals towards the central incised spine of the stroke, and does not finish the line end with a cut plane joining the two diagonals; this is evidently an early prototype line ending that we see also at Capel Anelog in Caernarvonshire and at Whithorn. It is discussed further in Chapter 4.

DIAGRAM of early line endings, as seen in ECMW 214.

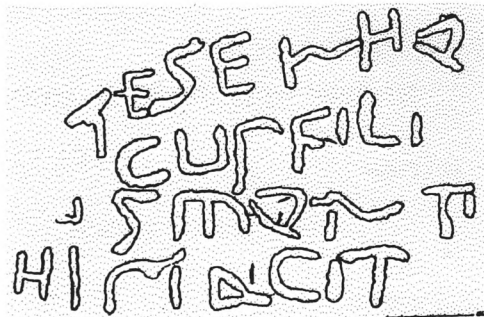


F.6.

270. ECMW seventh century. Glamorgan/ Tirphil. Illustrated below.

TEGERNA/ CUS FILI/[U]S MARTI/ HIC IACIT

Squared forms “u”, “m”, “s” and “a”. Three-stroke “M” with linking bar at top. Cursive minuscule “r” twice, one minuscule “s”. A good example of the writer not changing his stance.



F.4.

Commentary on illustration of ECMW 270.

Though retaining Roman capital “E”, discarded by ECMW 214 for the correct manuscript form, this inscription uses cursive forms of “r” and “g” as well as attempted squared versions of “u” and “m”. Its most curious letter is its “a” which appears on line 1 to be a sideways turned capital, but by lines 3 and 4 is much more like a cursive “a” with diagonal back and looped second stroke. This would suggest that the more remote regions were familiar with

tablet writing and letters that were for whatever reason squared, and utilised them in lettercutting, before they encountered manuscript half-uncial.

279. ECMW sixth century. Merioneth/ Llandanwg.

EQUESTRI/ NOMINE

One minuscule “s” in a line of capitals with an unusual nine-shaped “q” form borrowed from cursive stylus writing.



299. ECMW sixth century. Pembrokeshire/ Brawdy.

BRIAC[I] FILI/ [ ] GI

Half-uncial “f”, ligatured “fi”.

305. ECMW sixth century. Pembrokeshire/ Cilgerran. See illustrations below, p. 13.

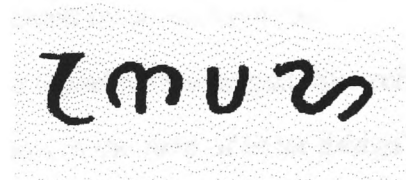
TRENEGUSSI FILI/ MACUTRENI HIC IACIT

Squared forms “t”, “u”, “g”, “h”, minuscule “s”, flattened curves, separate crossbar on “r”.

352. ECMW late sixth century. Pembrokeshire/ Narberth.

]MOGI FILIUS/ [ ]S[ ]LACATI

Half-uncial “l”, “m”, “u”, “s” cursive double loop, attempt at serif on half-uncial “l”.



These early attempts at geometrical letters that break away from the graphic rules of Roman capital inscriptions appear to be governed by a desire to avoid the large curves of bowed OCGQ, to avoid pitting where three strokes conjoin, and as far as possible to render the letter cuts in straight lines or flattened curves. From Nash-Williams’ datings he would appear to agree that the problem of the capital “s” – a mirrored half circle one above the other – was being solved by the substitution of minuscule “s”, a straight line with a small bar at the top right; and the problem of capital “R”, with its convergence of a bow and a diagonal on

a downstroke, was being solved by the substitution of open minuscule “r”, even as early as the sixth century. For example, as shown in the list above: ECMW No 84, the only intrusive letter being a minuscule “s”, and ECMW No 115, intrusive minuscule “r”. This would be in keeping with the scribal eclecticism and preparedness to rank minuscule alongside half-uncial that we see in the mid-seventh-century manuscript Durham A.II.10, discussed in Chapter 3.

The listing above shows the wide variety of attempts, not restricted to any particular area, to adapt a workable epigraphic style from the whole gamut of letterforms in circulation. When we come to the inscriptions that are thoroughly mixed, adapted hybrid forms eventually outweigh Roman capitals. We can see that – particularly for “s” – minuscule was drawn upon, but the intrusive forms which occur more frequently than minuscule in these Group I mixed inscriptions are the squared forms that are evidently prototype versions of what became, elaborated in the hands of scribes, eighth-century geometrical capitals. Here we have, cut in stone (ECMW Nos 149, 184, 270), a version of the three-bar “m”, which is what E.A. Lowe called a “shibboleth” letter,<sup>5</sup> that was such a mystery to Nicolette Gray when she discussed geometrical capitals in her Lettering as Drawing: Contour and Silhouette.<sup>6</sup> The Samson cross at Llantwit Major, ECMW No 222, dated by Nash-Williams to the tenth century, uses both the Group I type of three-bar “m” with link bar at the top, and the later Phase 2 half-uncial type with a centrally placed linking bar. It was a letterform that seemed to her to have “no ancestry”. She could see no obvious source from which these letterforms emerged. She refers to “the extraordinary range of experiments made by these artists in the field of letter design”, and fixes upon one feature above all that distinguishes the alphabet which is so peculiarly the invention of insular scribes: “They evolved a new version of the capital alphabet based on verticals, rectangles and diagonals, in some cases completely excluding the curve.” Commenting on the fact that the alphabet is not at all uniform, as it was adapted by the scribes of each volume in which it appeared, she wrote: “the distinguishing characteristics are geometrical constructions, compressed proportions, and wedge serifs.” She did see an

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<sup>5</sup> E.A. Lowe, Codices Latini Antiquiores, (Oxford 1934-1971), p.xv. Hereafter CLA.

<sup>6</sup> N.Gray, Lettering as Drawing: Contour and Silhouette (Oxford,1970), pp. 22-27.

aesthetic affinity between Germanic runic inscriptions and the Insular geometrical capitals, but was more attracted to Kufic as the possible model, pointing to connections between Ireland and Egypt and the influence of Coptic manuscripts on early Christianity in the British Isles. This flies in the face of the fact that Kufic was developing, if not in the wake of, then at least at the same time as Insular script and that it peaked later.<sup>7</sup> As a possible influence on the development of geometrical capitals, runes at least have the advantage of a longer ancestry, and they were being used in Britain in the seventh century.

Nicolette Gray does not explore the possibility of necessity being the mother of this alphabet's invention. As well as tablet writing for everyday notation, post-Roman Britons must have used some form of large display lettering for relatively ephemeral signage that did not rank in importance with permanent memorials on stone. Insular geometrical capitals appear to have borrowings from runes, particularly those that utilise a stem line differentiated by horizontal or angled bars, but this may be a case of parallel development. This is discussed further in Chapter 4. There is wide agreement among palaeographers that runic was adapted for cutting on wood.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately in the British Isles very little has survived from this period in wood, but there is some evidence, discussed in Chapter 4. When rendered in relief on bone in bands such as we see on the Franks casket, runes have unseriffed line ends.<sup>9</sup> The bolder wedge serif of Insular geometrical capitals is a feature peculiar also to the Insular half-uncial. The Roman capital has serifs that are cut forms of painted brushed letters: they are curved into the main stem of a letter.<sup>10</sup> Angular wedges at stroke entries are the product of direct carving in stone or wood with a straight-edge chisel, as well as the more obvious pen-made entry stroke on parchment. The possibility that the ancestry of geometrical capitals might lie in a cut alphabet on the mostly lost medium of wood is discussed in Chapter 4.

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<sup>7</sup> Y.H. Safadi, Islamic Calligraphy (London, 1978), pp. 11-17.

<sup>8</sup> Hans Jensen, Sign, Symbol and Script (London, 1970), pp. 550-579.

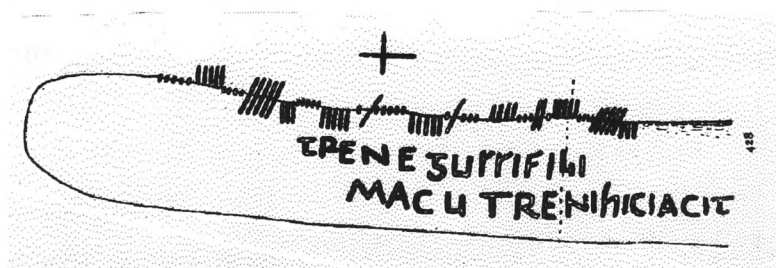
<sup>9</sup> R.W.V. Elliott, Runes (Manchester, 1959), pp. 96-109.

<sup>10</sup> R. Grasby, 'Roman Letters: The Capitals of Empire', in The Edge, Vol. IV, 1998, pp. 4-7.

Within the ECMW Group I mixed inscriptions there is a small number of stones bearing Ogham. These are six bilingual Ogham/Latin stones with a mixed capital/ half-uncial inscription. As we can be fairly certain that Ogham had gone out of use in Wales by c. 600, the nature of the Latin letterforms in this small group is of crucial importance. Of the six stones, five have been included under the “mixed” grouping because of one non-capital letter: ECMW No 43 has a back-to-front open-bowled “d”; ECMW No 84 has one minuscule “s”, a flattened shape made of necessity to fit a small space; ECMW No 198 has one half-uncial “e”; ECMW No 298 has one round-bottomed “u” and ECMW No 390 has one squared lower-case “h”. This leaves, of the six stones, only ECMW No 305/CIIC No 428 showing a thoroughly mixed selection of letters.

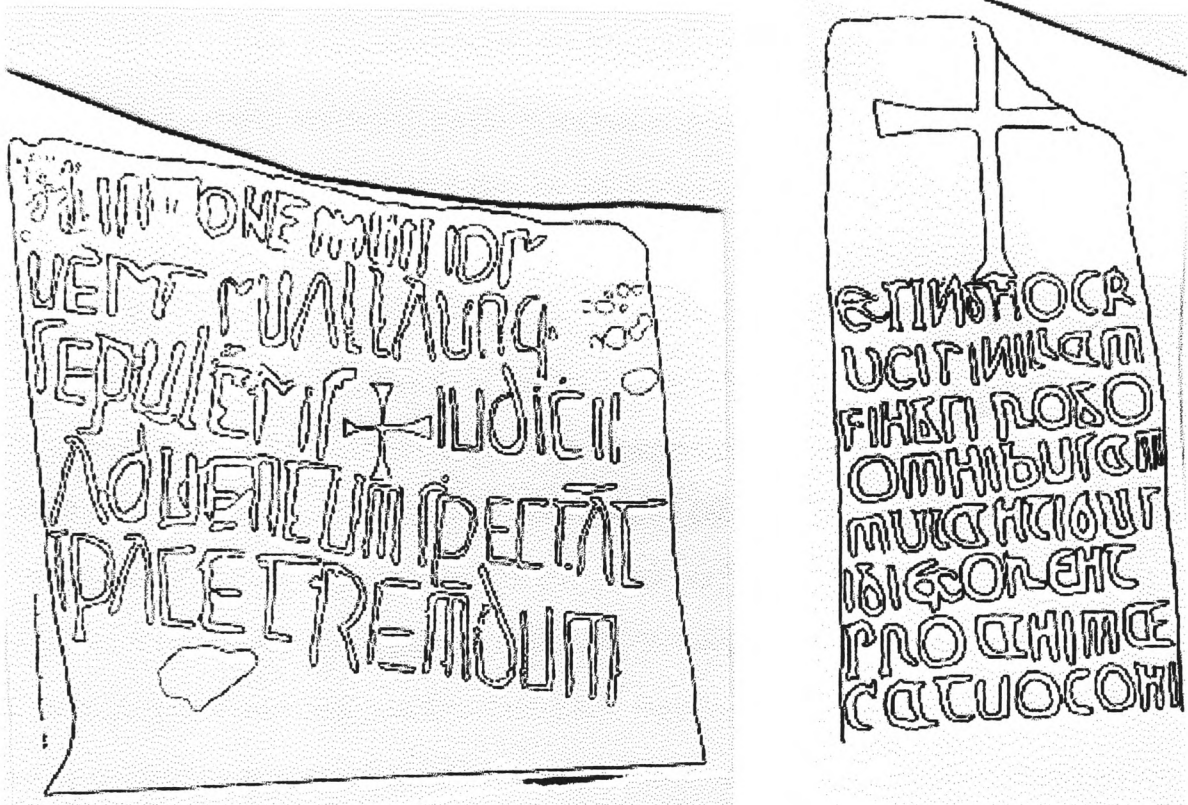
The intrusion of letters into ECMW No 305 is overwhelmingly of angular forms rather than rounded half-uncial. Indicative of Nash-Williams’ failure to respond to geometrical forms as a distinct phenomenon alongside half-uncial is the fact that his drawing of No 305, his Figure 198, fails to render the geometrical letters, as Macalister’s drawing, CIIC 428, does. Nash-Williams’ photograph of the stone, his Plate IV, shows quite clearly the angular forms of “T”, “F”, “H” and “S”, and possibly “U”, that Macalister drew correctly.

ILLUSTRATION of both these drawings.



F. 6.

From this early, pre-600 example of a change in style it would seem that stonecutters were borrowing from an already epigraphic alphabet of angular letters before they borrowed extensively from manuscripts. We find angular letters in ECMW Group II at Llanlleonfel and on Caldey Island, illustrated below, and a stone showing the alphabet in its most elaborate form was discovered on Ramsey Island in 1967.<sup>11</sup>



F.7.

Showing similarities with Runic and some early Gaulish inscriptions, especially in the habit of placing the second strokes of the letter at a diagonal to, and sometimes crossing, the vertical main stem, as in ECMW No 305 on “F”, “S” and “H”, the alphabet may represent a British/Gaulish solution to the difficulties of incising across the grain on wood, which was later borrowed into cutting on stone, then into calligraphy. The alphabet is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Okasha, A New Inscription from Ramsey Island, *Archaeologia Cambrensis*, Vol. CXIX (1972), pp.68-70.

The alphabet that eventually superseded the others in ousting Roman capitals is less obtrusive at first than half-uncial or geometrical letters. Cursive tablet writing is first drawn upon in the solution to the problem of the pitting of capital “R” at the mid-stroke join of stroke one and the second broken stroke. We find both minuscule “r” and tablet “r” used to avoid this. Tablet writing features that appear in the wake of the “r” are rolled entry and exit strokes, high “e” with ligaturing from the crossbar, open bows on “d”, “b”, “p” and “q”, and horizontal ligaturing. The alphabets that compete with Roman capitals in sixth- and seventh-century Welsh epigraphy come from different sources, only one, half-uncial, being a broad-pen form. In art historical terms, when we see them cut in stone they are skeuomorphic: letterforms that were shaped by other tools and materials before being translated to stone, where they preserve characteristics acquired from the surface of the wood, wax or metal on which they first appeared.

It is evident from the richness of the decoration of the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells that insular scribes were capable of absorbing and transforming decorative motifs from a wide range of sources like metalwork or textiles, and similarly craftsmen in metal and stone would borrow from manuscripts and portabilia.<sup>12</sup> Even if they were only carrying their tablets and a Psalter, *peregrini* like those who followed in the footsteps of Columbanus must have provided each religious foundation that they passed through with a comparative check on scribal house styles. Patterns and letter shapes must have been collected eagerly by those involved in book production.

If geometrical capitals represent the highly developed and sophisticated display alphabet of the uppermost level of Insular craftsmanship, as Nicolette Gray believed, and tablet writing represents the low-grade everyday workhorse of note taking and epistolary communications, the presence of both these alphabets in the same inscription, alongside letters from manuscript half-uncial, seems to show that the same absorbing and transforming capacities that operated in the realm of manuscript decoration also operated in the less rarefied

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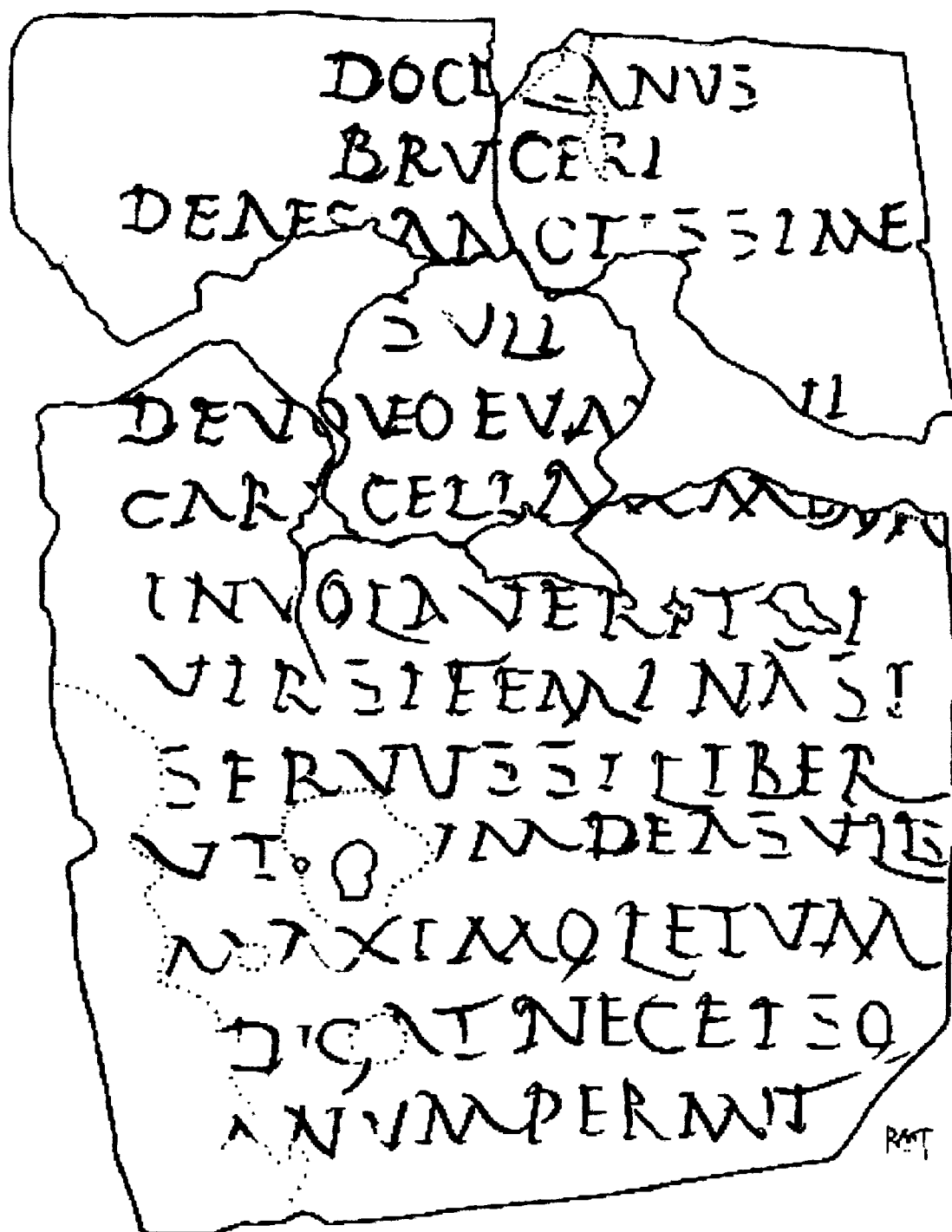
<sup>12</sup> George Henderson, From Durrow to Kells: The Insular Gospel-books 650-800 (London, 1987), pp. 57-98.



realm of Welsh epigraphy. In Nash-Williams' Group II inscriptions of the seventh to the ninth centuries, when Insular Phase 2 half-uncial was at its peak, we do find a few stones that are attempts to replicate half-uncial manuscript forms. But they have a far larger sub-group of stones with less distinguished lettering. Both in the capital and in the "mixed" inscriptions of Nash-Williams' Groups I and II, they represent not a failed attempt to cut a manuscript or monumental letter, but the cutting of a letter of a lower grade, or an earlier evolution, than an Insular manuscript hand.

Considering the freedom and speed with which many of the early capital inscriptions have been placed on the stone, it might be that written Rustic capitals had remained in use as a simple written hand. As the British church was organised in the early fourth century it may well have adopted Rustics as an instructional and book script rather than the half-uncial that was still in a state of formation. The steep pen-hold of Rustics, producing a broad horizontal stroke and a thin downstroke, encourages the formation of angular forms, for example in the "S", and a tendency to "box" the foot of the "T" and "C": we see these features in *Tabellae Sulis* 10 (see overleaf). The capital inscriptions on stone also use the ligaturing of New Roman Cursive in joining "FI" and "LI". This again suggests a survival of Roman cursive practices.

That the simple tablet letters came to dominate at the time when sculptured decorative stonework was at its height before the coming of the Normans would suggest that high-grade scribes no longer existed who were capable of the design and layout of monumental inscriptions, though stonecutters skilled enough to cut them were certainly still present. On the other hand the fact that we find low-grade letterforms alongside high-grade sculpture suggests that there was a wide understanding and practice of tablet letters. Inscribed stone monuments must have been expensive, and can have been commissioned only by the most powerful or wealthy, yet they show no awareness that there ever existed such a thing as high-grade monumental display lettering. There must have been a very basic level of literacy in a population, from the highest patrons to the low, that was able to accept tablet writing as a standard and that perceived monumental grandeur in the size or decoration of a stone rather than in the letters of the inscription on it.



F. 8.

Here we see the effect of Rustic compression of the letterform: the “boxing” of the shapes between horizontal bars, See particularly on line 12: C, D and S and the T on line 11. These simplified sgraffito letters may have crossed over into use for incised inscriptions.

How these three alphabets – one majuscule, one minuscule and one of angular decorative capitals – came to oust Roman capitals, and secondly how tablet writing came to dominate, depends largely on changing standards, on tools and materials and the craftsman's adaptation to practical difficulties. The following Chapters will deal with the radically different problems of writing on wax with a stylus, of cutting letters in stone with a metal point and a metal edge, and of broad-pen writing with ink on parchment. From examples, insular craftsmen learned how to do these things themselves with what was available to them. From their examples, by replication, it is possible to reconstruct something of the causes for what appears at first sight to be, compared to Roman standards, a downwards progression of Welsh epigraphy c. 550 – c. 950.

Two stones, ECMW No 122 and ECMW No 54, illustrate the changeover that took place in Wales in the sixth century, from capitals to a hybrid mix of half-uncial and other elements. The Domnicus stone, ECMW No 122, is very well pecked, and though put on the surface irregularly with no ruling, it is a recognisable attempt at Roman capitals. ECMW No 54, on the other hand, the Catacus stone, is something else. We have angle bar “A”, angular capitals “T” and “C”, half-uncial “f” and “g”, and it is altogether a startling conglomeration of innovations when we set it beside ECMW No 122.

The Domnicus inscription, ECMW No 122, Nash-Williams' Group I, c. 500.



FIG. 97. No. 122.

F. 9.

The Catacus inscription, ECMW No 54, transitional Nash-Williams' Group I/II, c. 600.



**F.10 .**

There is evidently a change in epigraphic fashion. The new look does not seem to have parallels anywhere at this point in Britain. The question of its origin and how it emerged is a fascinating one. It is not improbable that there survived in Wales some low-grade forms of the Latin alphabet during the period 410–550, from the Roman withdrawal to the period of the Springmount Bog tablets, discussed in the next Chapter, which must represent a form of common writing in sixth-century Ireland and Wales. There is the relevant example of the Albertini tablets, from the Vandal Interregnum in North Africa.<sup>13</sup> They show that sixty years after the Roman withdrawal, a remote farming settlement near the present day Tunisian/Algerian border still maintained a level of schooling in Latin and cursive writing. Here in AD 493, more than thirty hands appear on a series of fifty-six tablets, fifteen of these being capable of writing letters.<sup>14</sup> New Roman Cursive ligatures are seen in these tablets that are paralleled in the Springmount tablets.

The range of reference made by early Welsh inscription makers was wide, drawing on letterform of different grades in an eclectic way by the beginning of the seventh century. This would seem to suggest, despite its slapdash appearance, that there was a rooted and diverse writing tradition already shared between Christian Wales and Ireland before the re-introduction of Christianity by the Roman mission to the pagan Saxons in 597.

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13 Chr. Courtois, Les Tablettes Albertini, (Paris, 1955).

14 S. Raven, Rome in Africa, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London, 1993), pp.200-203.

## Chapter 2. FIFTH AND SIXTH CENTURY: INSULAR EPIGRAPHY AND ADJUSTMENTS TO THE IMPORTED STYLE OF ROMAN LETTERING.

The importance of wax tablet stylus writing in its influence on large letterforms outside the range of any that could be produced by an edged writing instrument.

Valuable manuscript evidence has survived from the early Christian period in Ireland in the Springmount Bog tablets<sup>1</sup> and TCD MS Ussher 1, a period from which we have nothing comparable in Wales. But the Irish evidence may tell us something of its British models. Irish Latin was in the main British Latin,<sup>2</sup> and with its importation into Ireland came the manuscript hands associated with it. Having acquired it first through trading links, Romano-British Christians were probably using Roman cursive as well as bookhands<sup>3</sup> – and developing their distinctive insular production of parchment<sup>4</sup> – for some time before we hear of a Christian presence in Ireland. The fifth-century missions of first Palladius and then the Briton Patrick would have brought to Ireland two quite separate types of writing, one for teaching and one for the liturgy: the rarefied calligraphic broad-pen manuscript hand of book production, and the more widespread cursive stylus writing of the businessman, trainee scribe or working scholar. The pointed stylus, or reed, gives an uninflected line with no thicks and thins, can be used very rapidly, and naturally produces ligaturing. The broad pen gives a letter with pronounced thicks and thins, requires careful usage and naturally produces well-spaced letterforms. These two quite different writing instruments – one pointed, one edged – are at the root of the basic division of the Roman script system into majuscule, the large calligraphic display hands of grand productions, and minuscule, small cursive notational hands.

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<sup>1</sup> Codices Latini Antiquiores, Supplement, 1684.

<sup>2</sup> T. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and Society among the Insular Celts 400-1000', in M. Green (ed.), The Celts (London, 1995), pp. 703-736.

<sup>3</sup> R. Fletcher, The Conversion of Europe from Paganism to Christianity 371-1386 (London, 1998), pp. 80-81.

<sup>4</sup> A. Di Majo, C. Federici, 'Indagine sulla pergamena insulare (Secoli VII-XVI)', Scriptorium, 44 (1988), 131-139.

Springmount Bog tablet, Psalm 31. NMI Photograph.



What we see, then, in the earliest surviving Irish writing (c. 570) on the Springmount Bog wax tablets – a practised writer's mixed hand with features of the later Phase 1 half-uncial – should give us a reflection of British hands of the time from which no manuscripts survive, though we have inscriptions that begin to show majuscule and minuscule forms from c. 600. Movement between Ireland and Wales was two-way; as well as the Irish settling in Wales in the fifth and sixth centuries, the Welsh maintained religious houses in Ireland, such as Gailinne na mBretan, Gallen of the Britons, close to Clonmacnois. It was said to have been founded by Saint Conóc, or Mo-Chonóg, in the fifth century. Mo-Chonóg had an establishment on the eastern seaboard, just below Dublin, at the village now called Kilmacanoge.<sup>5</sup> We should not expect to see distinct traditions of writing in Ireland and Wales in the fifth and sixth centuries, but they became so later, if the epigraphy of the two countries reflects the type of letterforms generally approved by patrons. But there are in the Springmount Bog tablets some early cursive features that are puzzling.

Out of the conviction that Ireland had no contact with the penned literacy of the Roman world until the Christian mission has grown the theory that Insular half-uncial and Insular minuscule evolved from a common model, this being cursive half-uncial. Daibhi Ó Croinin has commented on the fact that palaeographers too easily construct layers of scripts forming one out of the other in a rigid chronological sequence.<sup>6</sup> It seems more likely that scrittura di base, majuscule and minuscule were all in use simultaneously in this early period, and were all utilised in the mix that came to suit the British and Irish. It is possible that in the learned classes of Ireland, who would have responded to the Christian mission by taking quickly to its writing system, there was already some knowledge of Roman cursive. There are what appear to be New Roman Cursive features in the Springmount Bog tablets, and as more evidence of organised trading between Ireland and Roman Britain emerges they become less surprising. The great rivers of southern Ireland like the Barrow, Nore and Suir are navigable

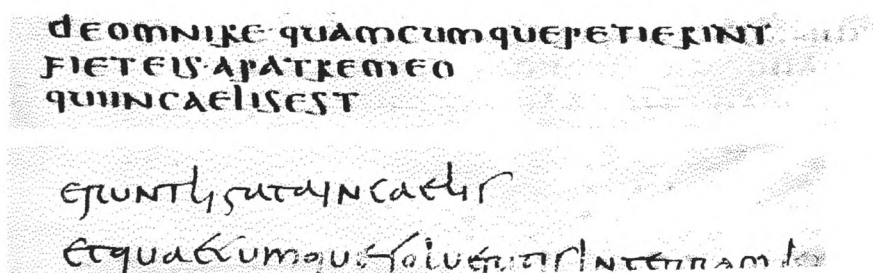
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<sup>5</sup> Lord Killanin and M. Duignan, The Shell Guide to Ireland, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London, 1967), p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> Daibhi Ó Cróinín, 'Pride and Prejudice', Peritia, 1 (1982), pp. 352-62.

far inland. From the first century AD, more than twenty miles inland, we have a Roman cremation at Stonyford on the River Nore, County Kilkenny; and we have two emporium sites: one at Loughshinny, by Skerries to the North of Dublin, and a fourth-century site at Freestone Hill, County Kilkenny.<sup>7</sup> With the largest copper workings in Europe, but no tin (which was imported from Cornwall), the export and import of metals, both in the raw state and as alloyed bronze, must have been intensive.

In the mercantile class of Northern Europe, New Roman Cursive must have spread via tablets wherever the Empire traded. It was not only a low-grade script restricted to what Petrucci, writing of secular literacy, calls the scholastico-mercantile class: the secretariat of the trading world. Shading into literary cursive, we find it used well-spaced by scribes in grand books, for example by the sixth-century corrector G of the fifth-century uncial Codex Bezae (Plates 61B and 63A of E.A. Lowe's Palaeographical Papers: see illustration below). The corrector is a more distinguished calligrapher than the scribe of the main text.



F.12.

Cursive and Uncial were terms originally intended to describe the polar opposites of the Roman script system. There are five or six distinct variations in the traverse of the scale of the system from grandest to lowest grade.<sup>8</sup> Notational cursive minuscules with as few pen lifts as possible, and rapidly written; uncial majuscules with separated pen strokes, widely spaced and deliberately written. Scholars used the hybrid cursive half-uncial as their everyday clear working hand.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Thomas, Christianity in Roman Britain to AD 500 (London, 1981), pp. 295-97.

<sup>8</sup> A. Petrucci, Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy (New Haven, 1995), pp. 59-68.



After the Roman withdrawal from Britain, Insular scribes developed a hybrid half-uncial of their own. What is thought to be an Iona manuscript, The Psalter of Saint Columba, c. 600, represents the first clear prototype example; the Book of Durrow, c. 675, possibly another Iona manuscript, is an example of developed first phase of insular half-uncial. The style rose to its height, Phase 2 half-uncial, between the Lindisfarne Gospels, of c. 700, and the Book of Kells, c. 800. The characteristic features of this script arose, I suggest, from adjustments to the cursive half-uncial that had to be made in writing upon the napped surface of insular parchment. It was a four-line script, that would be classified as minuscule in the Roman hierarchy of scripts, used as a display hand – a majuscule. Lowe thought that Irish half-uncial was a distinctive development out of a Roman cursive half-uncial that he rather confusingly called “quarter uncial” as we see in TCD MS Ussher I. This quarter-uncial was a forerunner of Phase 1 half-uncial typified by the Psalter of Saint Columba, the Cathach. The term has been ousted by the clearer “cursive half uncial”. But Julian Brown, in his ‘Insular Handwriting’ (Chapter 7 of A Palaeographer’s View ), later wrote: “Something less formal than cursive half uncial was apparently part of the sub-Roman tradition.....A background in cursive half-uncial alone...is not enough to explain typical Phase 1 minuscule”;<sup>9</sup> and he comments further that trainee Anglo-Saxon scribes would have used New Roman Cursive as well as the formal Insular half-uncial, though we have no surviving manuscript examples. Brown wrote further in Chapter 8 of the same volume: “The Anglo-Saxon pupils of Augustine and his companions, must, if they learned to write, have learned the scripts known to their teachers, including uncial and some form of New Roman Cursive...”<sup>10</sup>

From the Roman period in Britain we already had the division in the two hands, formal and informal, from edged and pointed writing instruments. E.A.Lowe’s comments on the third century Livy Epitome<sup>11</sup>, from “a dark period in Latin palaeography”, written in Egypt on

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<sup>9</sup> Julian Brown, A Palaeographer’s View: Selected Writings of Julian Brown, ed. J. Bately, M. Brown, J. Roberts (London, 1993), p.191.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, A Palaeographer’s View, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> Codices Latini Antiquiores, ii. 208.

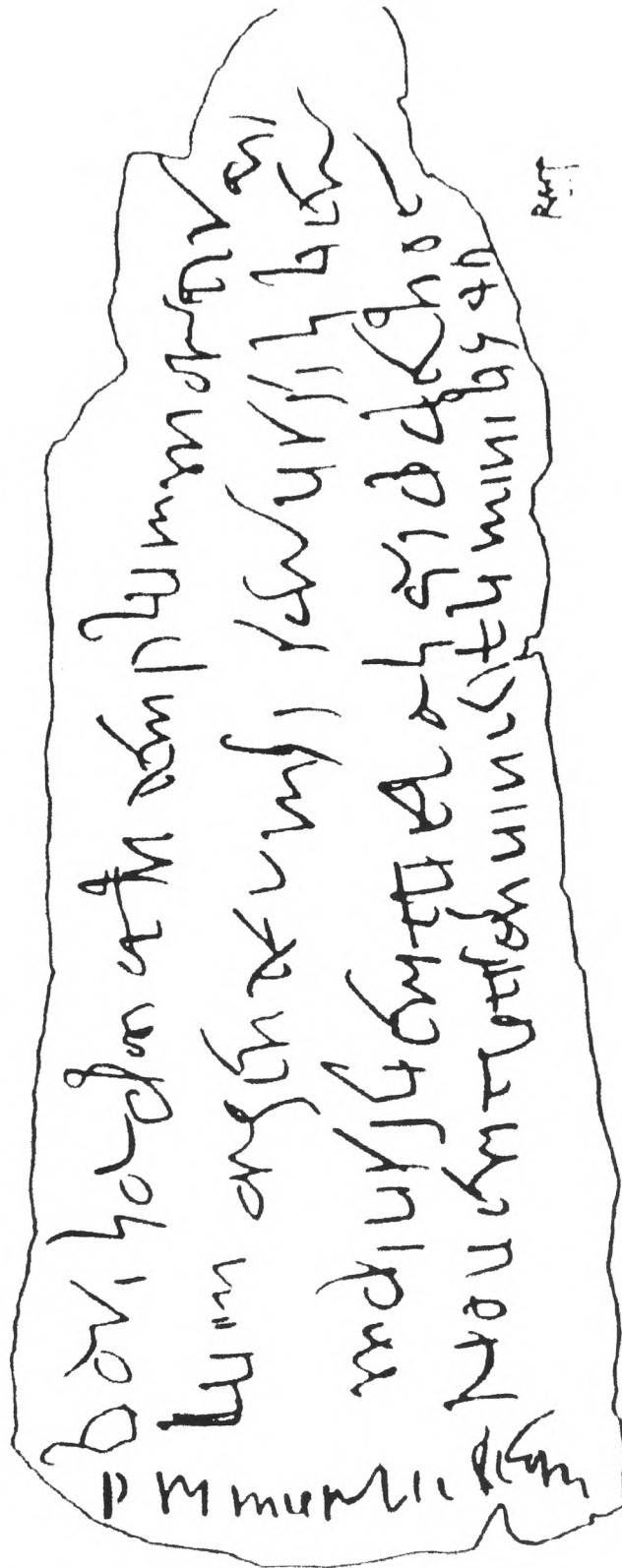
papyrus with a flat uncial pen hold with very little line inflection, suggest a connection between the script produced by the blunt reed used on papyrus and the early examples of script having an uninflected line, like the Springmount Bog Tablets, written with a stylus on wax. The script is described by Lowe as “calligraphic but provincial – A, E, G, S are in uncial, b, d, r, m are half uncial, it shows Greek influence in A, E and small o.” In his preface to the second edition of Codices Latini Antiquiores (Volume II) Lowe further described the Livy Epitome as “neither canonical uncial or canonical half uncial and an alien in its Insular surroundings” – he classified its script as “mixed half uncial”. It is sensible to assume that the easier uninflected tablet writing would be assimilated more quickly into secular Insular society than pen lettering, with its more complex technology and association with Biblical manuscripts, and that therefore its peculiarities would influence the later development of a distinctively Insular pen script.

We have examples of New Roman Cursive in Britain from the finds at Vindolanda,<sup>12</sup> on wood, and at Bath,<sup>13</sup> on lead. There are peculiarities of ligaturing and of letter construction that we see in the Springmount Bog Tablets and in Nash-Williams Group I stones which suggest that some knowledge of New Roman Cursive survived in Britain after the Roman withdrawal; curious features in some Insular manuscripts are quite inexplicable otherwise, as they pre-date the re-introduction and spread of Roman Christianity in Britain c. 600. For the purposes of comparison with the Springmount tablets I shall concentrate on the lead defixiones illustrated by Roger Tomlin's drawings in his Tabellae Sulis. The Vindolanda tablets are written in ink on wood, the defixiones are sgraffito in lead with a burin or stylus – very much in the manner of the wax tablets. A clear and well-written example among the Bath curse tablets is Number 97, on the theft of a silver ring.

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<sup>12</sup> A. K. Bowman and J. D. Thomas, Vindolanda: The Latin Writing Tablets (London, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Tabellae Sulis: Roman Inscribed Tablets of Tin and Lead from the Sacred Spring at Bath, ed. R. S. O. Tomlin (Oxford, 1988).



Hand-drawn sketch of a tablet containing ancient script, likely Etruscan or similar. The script is written in a cursive style. The text is arranged in several lines, with some characters appearing to be ligatures or specific symbols. The tablet is oriented vertically on the page.

Part

FIG.

In this transcription by Tomlin I have put in square brackets comments on the single letters and ligatures that we find in the Springmount Bog tablets.

Tabellae Sulis 97

b [two-stroke curved entry] asil [curved entry, exit curved out to left] iadonatintem  
[tem ligature identical construction] plummartisani  
lumargen [en ligature] te [te ligature] umsiserussiliber  
mduisiluertuelaliquiddehoc  
n [full uncial n, identical strokes] ouuer [er ligature] itutsan[g]uineetliminibuset

A prominent ligature which does occur in a few of the Bath defixiones though unused in 97, t followed by an I longa, ligatured, is one of the obvious characteristics of third-century New Roman Cursive, and is a constant feature of the Springmount Bog tablets. The most complex ligature te is common to both.

One of the scribes of the Springmount Bog tablets, apparently giving an example of a formal hand, evidently already knows a cursive to which he reverts at moments of inattention. One of the first training exercises for the trainee scholar was to learn the Psalms by rote, to be able to recite and write them from memory. The scribe of the bog tablets is writing from memory, and in a few cases, tries to reproduce with his stylus the pen-formed triangular serif that is the most characteristic feature of Insular pen script. The fact that he draws this serif on the wrong side of the head of the downstroke seems to suggest that he was a proficient stylus writer but was unfamiliar with the broad pen. It might be that even as late as the eighth century more people would have been more familiar with the sight of inscribed, and most likely uncoloured, lettering on stone, wood or wax rather than with pen lettering. That writing in an incised form was more familiar than manuscript writing seems to be suggested by the given name Dublitter (black letter), noted by N.K. Chadwick.<sup>14</sup> To qualify the word “letter” with

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<sup>14</sup> N. K. Chadwick, The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church (Oxford, 1961), pp. 143-148.

“black” would seem to suggest that the word “letter” on its own did not immediately convey the image of an inky-black pen-made letter, but something else. A distinguished cleric mentioned in the Annals of Ulster, Dublitter died in 796. His name might indicate that inked pen letters were still at that date signs of high, and rare, accomplishment. We may not know exactly when it was introduced but we do know that stylus tablet writing survived in Ireland alongside pen script until the sixteenth century.

One of the six Springmount tablets is almost completely readable. The points in the text of Psalm 31 – where the scribe gives indications of his mental process as he writes – are commented on by footnote. The text is the Vulgate version.

Column 1.

Beati quorum r]emisi sunt iniquitatis (1)

et quorum] tecta sunt peccata (2)

Beatus vir] cui non inpotavit dns (3) pecca]superscript tum

nec est in] eius (4) dolos quoniam tacui in

veteraverunt in me ossa mea dum

clamar]em tota die quoniam die [acnocte

(5) gravata est super me m[anus tua

conversus sum in aerumna[mea

dum] configitur mihi (6) spina

1. t followed by I longa. 2. Ligatured **ec** by broken left bow. 3. Contraction for dominus, hooked head of stroke and looped mark of superscript **tum**. 4. Attempt to replicate triangular serif. 5. Uncontrolled looped minuscule G. 6. Long looped approach stroke to head of **h** ascender.

## Column 2

Dilectum (7) meum cognitum tibi fe]ci  
et in iustiam (8) meam non absco[ndi  
dixi confitebor adversis mea  
rimisisti impietatem (9) peccati (10) mei  
pro hac orabit ad te omnes scs(11) in  
tempore (12) oportuno  
verumtamen in (13) diluvio aquarum  
multarum (14) ad eum [non approximabunt]  
tu es refugium meum [a tribulatione}

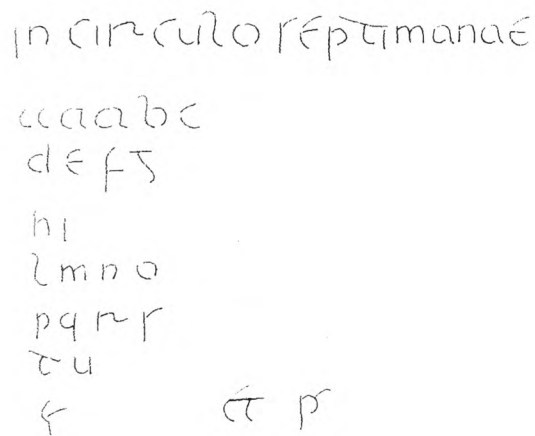
7. **d** cursive, bow unconnected to downstroke, ligatured **ec**. 8. **et** ligature, **ti** ligature.  
9. **te** ligature. 10. **te** ligature, **ti** ligature. 11. **es** ligature, Sanctis contraction magnified.  
12. **te** contraction. 13. **di** of diluvio an attempt to draw a triangular serif, on the wrong side of the downstroke. 14. **r** thrown with a long loop, out of proportion to the parts of this text written in a tight bookhand pattern of strokes.

In these two columns of Psalm 31 we see the hand of a scribe who already knows a hand something like New Roman Cursive and is less familiar with a more measured and open spaced formal bookhand. He is, as has been noticed, a good scribe, but is not completely familiar with a formal hand. His letter size varies from word to word. He is not writing from dictation: there are frequent breaks in the line, superscripts and decorative experiments. He is not writing a scribal draft for line length and word breaks before transfer to parchment: there are stops mid-line where the text carries on on the line below. He is thinking of a not completely familiar half-uncial model with triangular serifs which he attempts to draw (as at note 13 in the above transcription) on the wrong side of the ascender – a sign that though he is very proficient with a stylus on wax, he is not yet proficient, or familiar with, the construction of pen letters. The Springmount Bog tablets have been discussed anew by David Dumville who

closes that section of his review by writing: “it is hard to disagree with Schauman's conclusion ... that ‘it is not unreasonable to place them in the sixth century and indeed they may ... represent a type of hand common in Ireland as early as St Patrick's day’.”<sup>15</sup> This is to push the dating back from the generally held dating of c. 600. The tablets provide a complete alphabet of regular forms: see alphabet sheet overleaf.

The features in our earliest Irish examples that seem to be distinctively New Roman Cursive rather than cursive half-uncial arise from the breaking of the left bow into two, and a ligaturing line being taken from the mid-bow break and drawn to the right. This is common to the Springmount Bog tablets, the main hand of TCD MS Ussher I, and the minute drypoint glosses to that text, which are clearly related to the tablet letters. See photograph and extracted alphabet. The drypoint glosses have been edited by Pdraig O’Neill.<sup>16</sup>

DIAGRAM of drypoint gloss alphabet from Ussher I below.



F.14.

From Luke 17:35, main hand “illa nocte erunt” glossed p[er] se antecris;

main hand “duae erunt” glossed synec for synecdoche;

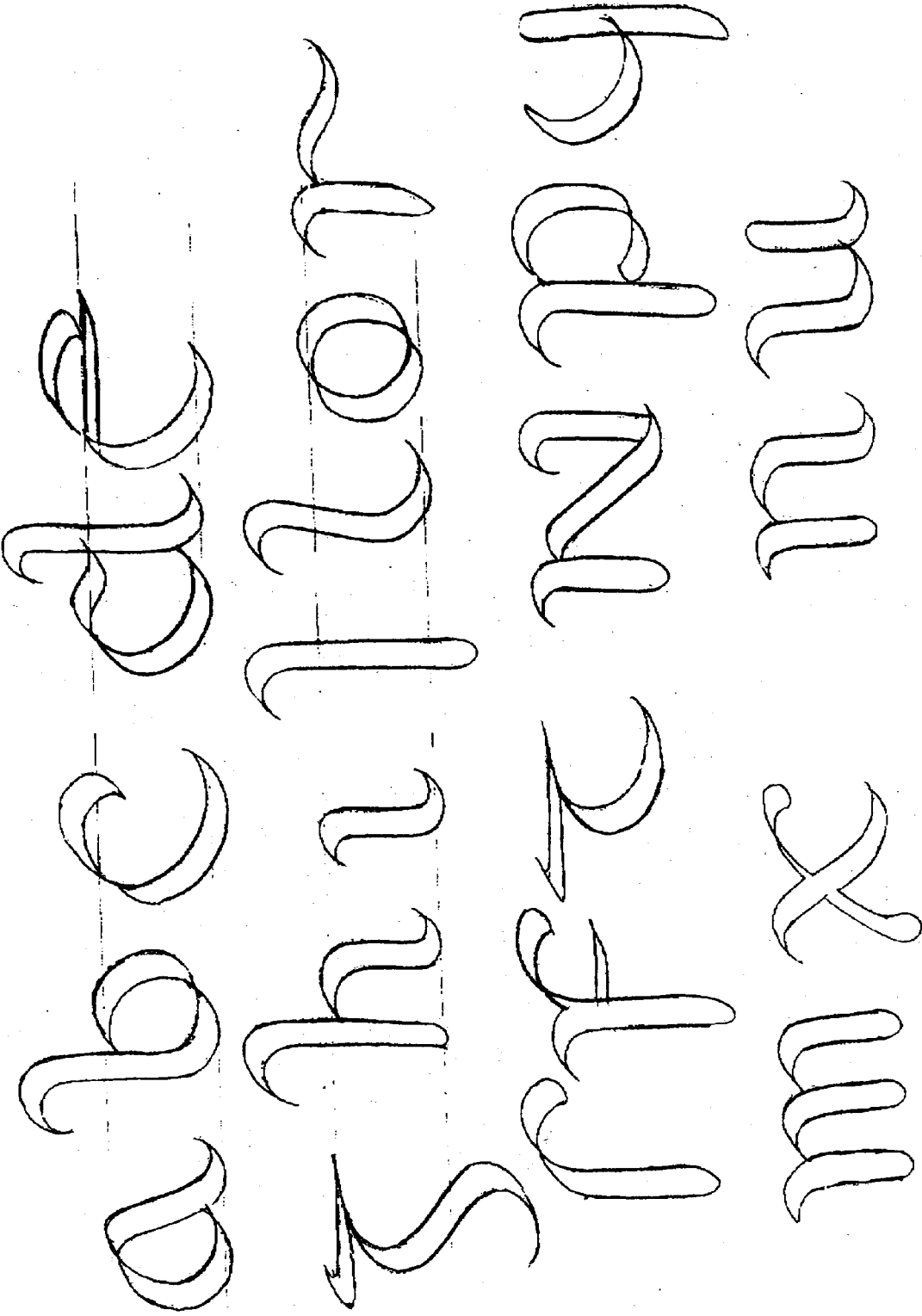
main hand “molentes in unum” glossed in circulo septimanae.

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<sup>15</sup> David Dumville, A Palaeographer's Review: The Insular System of Scripts in the Early Middle Ages (Osaka, 1999), pp. 31-35. Bella Schauman, ‘Early Irish Manuscripts’, Expedition, 21.3, Philadelphia 1979, pp. 33-47.

<sup>16</sup> Pdraig O’Neill, ‘The earliest dry-point glosses in Codex Usserianus Primus’, in A Miracle of Learning: Studies in manuscripts and Irish learning (Aldershot, 1998), pp. 1-28.

DIAGRAM: Alphabet from Springmount Bog tablets



F.15.



TABLET LETTERS: see replica inset into back board of thesis.

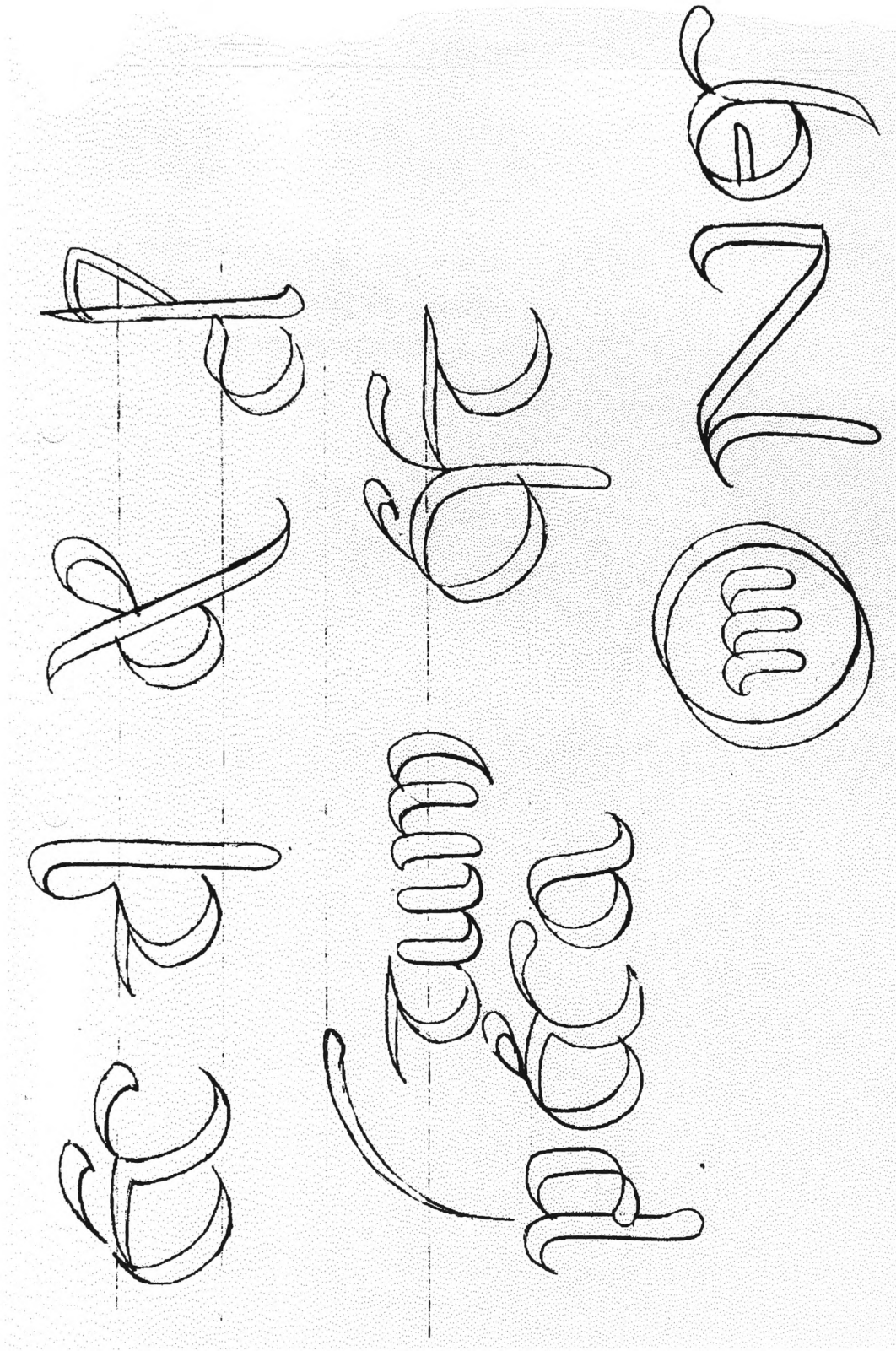
In preparation for use an oak board was shaped, hollowed and scored, copying the pattern of the Springmount Bog tablets, to provide a surface key to hold melted beeswax. First a layer was poured onto an unrailed area of oak to ascertain the depth at which the beeswax naturally levelled off: this proved to be to a depth of 2mm. A replica alphabet was drawn on with a compass point: first with a body height of 2mm, secondly at 4mm. Both were legible. Like pen lettering it was not possible to push a stroke and the downstrokes had to be entered and left with a rolling movement. As in metal engraving a burr was thrown up at the edge of the indented lines, and where lines met this produced a blurring of the letterform. It was assumed that the surface of the tablet was brushed over lightly after completion, sweeping away all burrs of wax. But during writing the fact that joins such as the crossbar of the “e” being linked to its previous bow produced a temporary obscurity may be the reason for leaving a break between the two strokes, as so many of the stones do. The Springmount Bog tablets give us ample evidence for the pre-600 standardisation of a clear semi-uncial hand in Ireland, and similarities with inscribed letterforms of the Nash-Williams Group I suggest that this type of hand was used also in Wales. Tablet writing is characterised by lack of serifs, rolled entry and exit strokes, an uninflected line and the utmost simplicity of letterform. When written quickly it has a tendency to horizontal linkage by ligature. Examples of stones listed by Nash-Williams that clearly show tablet writing are: No132 with the common tablet ligature “te”; Nos 147, 164, 220, 223, and 231 with ligatured “fe”; No 234, the Conbelin stone, showing an open “b” and round entry and exit to “l”; No 287, the Towyn stone (illustrated below, p. 34), with marked rolled entry and exit strokes.

It might have been possible to have been professionally literate without necessarily having graduated to the use of a broad-edged pen.<sup>17</sup> At the scholastico-mercantile level a scribe in a secretariat might have worked entirely on tablets.

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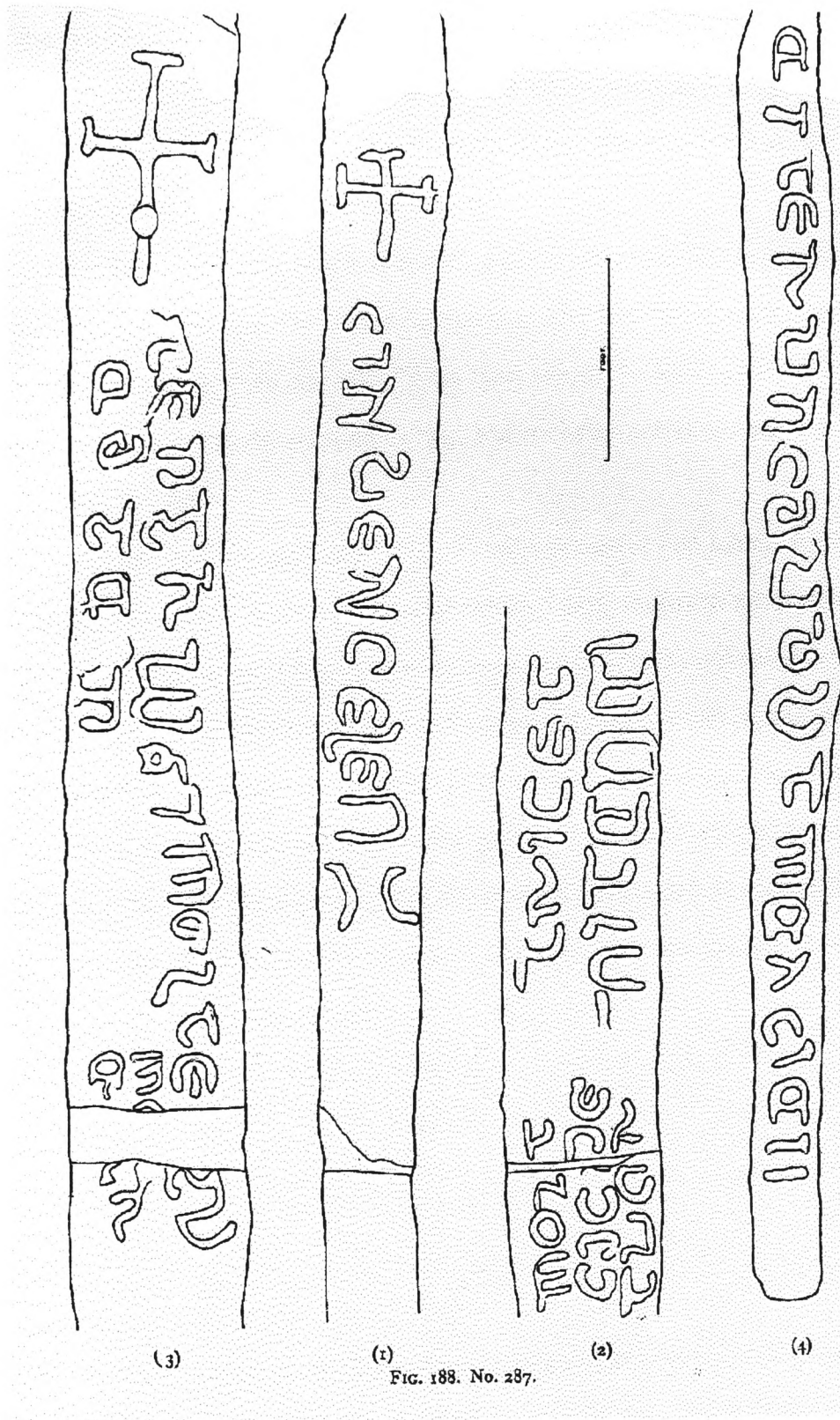
<sup>17</sup> Armando Petrucci, Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy (New Haven, 1995), pp. 71-72.

DIAGRAM: Ligatures and decorative experiments from the tablets.



F.16.

The Towyn stone, ECMW No 287, showing rolled entry into ascenders.



F.17.

These neat and lightweight devices, “the principal writing vehicle during antiquity” as they are described by Michelle Brown, in her Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts,<sup>18</sup> continued to be used into the twentieth century. She lists their wide range of uses – from accounts to teaching aids to “proto-Filofaxes”. When the Book of Armagh was written, in the early ninth century, it was thought that at the period of conversion in Ireland the tablet symbolised holy writ before the book. Saint Patrick is described as using them:<sup>19</sup>

Patrick came ... and people saw him with eight or nine men, holding written tablets in their hands like Moses. The Pagans shouted as they saw them (demanding) that we should kill the holy men and said, “They have swords in their hands for killing people. In their hands they look wooden by day, but we believe they are swords of iron for shedding blood.”

In his Airy Plumeflights<sup>20</sup> Tim O'Neill speculates that tablets were used as the means of contact between religious houses, or within a large monastic establishment. The initial message was smoothed away for the response to be written, and was sent back with the messenger. It seems more than probable that they were used for drafting memorial inscriptions which would then be transferred to stone by a mason who may not have been literate. If the intention was to make a grand memorial with a grand script, its broad-pen features would have to be drawn in outline by the pointed stylus. Many early Christian inscriptions have some serifs and other indicators like ligatures which show that a pen form was known, though the letterform is monoline and uninflected.

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<sup>18</sup> M.P. Brown, Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts (London, 1994), p. 119.

<sup>19</sup> The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh, ed. and tr. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1979), pp. 122-123.

<sup>20</sup> Tim O'Neill, Airy Plumeflights (Dublin, 1994), p. 9.

DIAGRAM: features we find attempted later on stone.

The drawn serif from the Springmount Bog Tablets

The cursive ligatures



F. 18.



Columba the scribe is shown by his biographer Adamnan writing both with pens and with a stylus.<sup>21</sup> Importantly for the period 600-900, a reference to Columba using wax tablets comes from a late source: an 11th-century text preserved in the early 15th-century Book of Lecan.<sup>22</sup> That it is late shows that the reference is still understood. It is concerned with giving a provenance to a relic: the Delg Aidechta, Columba's stylus. His stylus "graib" (graif=graphium) by miraculous means had come into the possession of Pope Gregory the Great, had returned to Ireland as a cloak pin, and was eventually converted into "the hereditary brooch of the co-arb of Columkille."

The manuscript TCD MS Ussher I gives us an example of a cursive looping hand that is moving towards the formality of a half-uncial. It has serifs that show how the movement to the head of the ascender shafts, without a pen lift, was gradually to break into two separate strokes. The act of pushing a stroke with a broad pen, I suspect, was possible on the smoother continental membrane, but not on the napped Insular.

DIAGRAM: Letter "d" showing development towards the triangular serif.



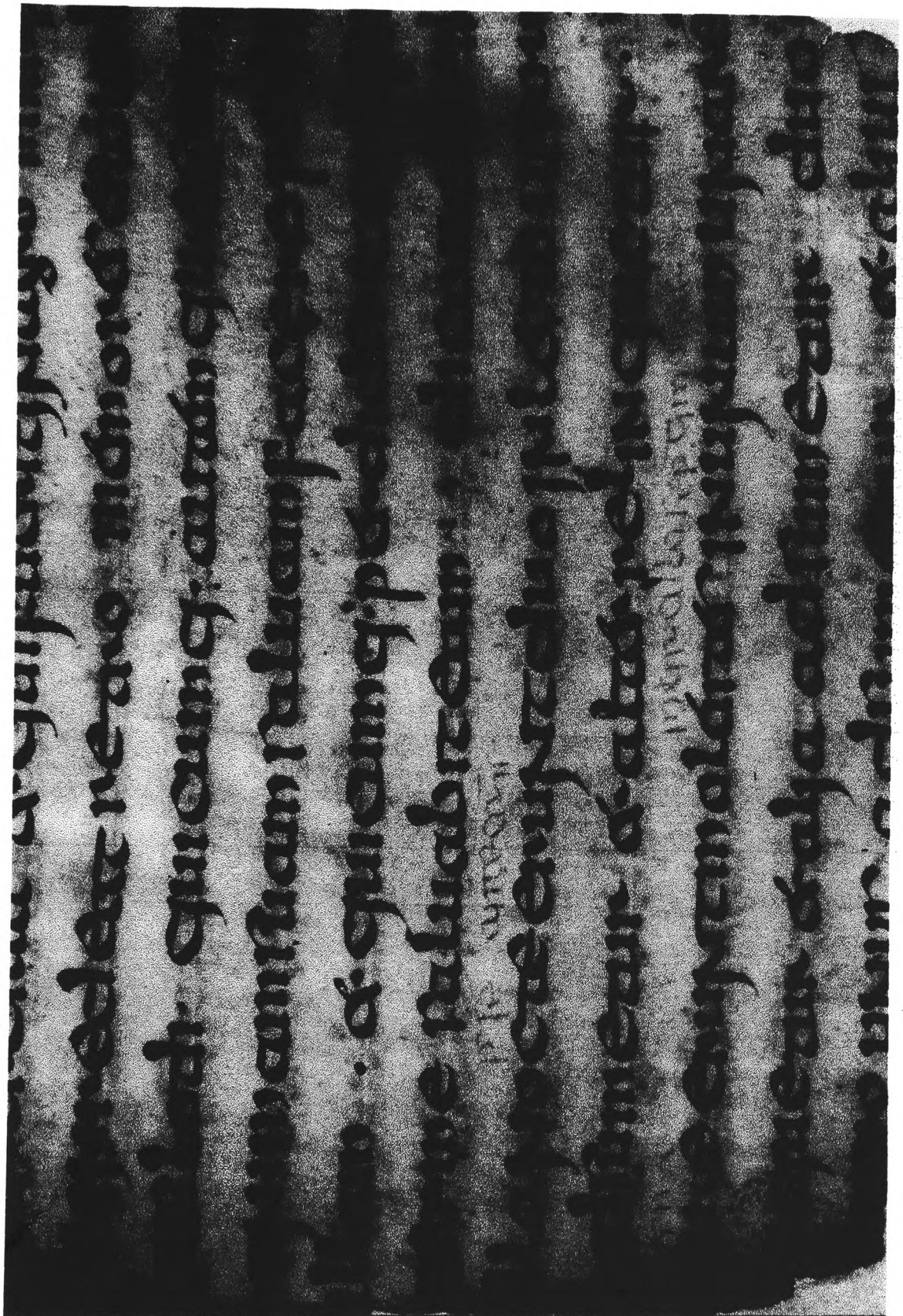
F. 19.

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<sup>21</sup> Adomnan's Life of Columba, ed. A.O. and M.O. Anderson, (Edinburgh, 1961), 4b, 36a, 58a, 59b-60b, 76b, 136a.

<sup>22</sup> C. Bourke, 'A Note on the Delg Aidechta', in C. Bourke (ed.), Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba (Dublin, 1977), pp. 184-92.

TCD MS Ussher I, showing three drypoint glosses.



The decorated cross from Ussher I with an apparent representation of a V section.



F.21 .

Before the evolution of Insular half uncial another element in the scribal mix was Greek. Alpha and omega appear on a number of stones, and the unusual Greek text of the Fahan Mura stone in Donegal is paralleled in the mid seventh century Antiphony of Bangor. Pi and delta were borrowed into geometrical capitals. The pi has affinities both with “gate” form of M and the scribal contraction for enim, and the link between them was noted by Bischoff in his Latin Palaeography (p. 86). There are well-written Greek texts in Durham A.ii.10, Schaffhausen MS Generalia I, and in the Liber Commonei. The alphabet in uncial form must have come into the British Isles with biblical texts. It is likely that its bold graphic style then joined with a number of other elements that pre-existed there. We are gradually learning more, from archaeological finds, of the wide range of Roman scripts inherited directly through the Roman occupation.

Before the establishment of an organised Christian church in Britain, the Roman army must have been a potent force in the spreading of basic literacy wherever it made legionary bases, and set up trading and supplies links with the native populations. This would surely have introduced scripts of a lower grade than those later associated with ecclesiastical scriptoria. A.K. Bowman gives an account of the ranges of scribal skill in his study of Roman letters and literacy in Britain.<sup>23</sup> He stresses the amount of daily documentation recorded by the clerical staff of the legionary record office, the tabularium. Reference has already been made, in the Introduction p.viii, to Tomlin's remarks on the Bath defixiones written in capitals. An elongated and compressed written capital form, descended from rapidly written pen-made Rustics might well have been a two-line forerunner of scrittura di base, out of which four-line half uncial developed.

In Roman Britain scribes, like those of the best of the Vindolanda tablets, who wrote fine calligraphy with a pen as well as everyday missives and drafts with a stylus on wax, were from the topmost level of a range of grades of writer within which the critical division must have been between stylus-only writing skills and stylus plus pen-writing skills. Only this topmost level of scribe could have laid out the capital lettering of grand memorial inscriptions. In monumental capitals the play of thin and thick, giving the light and dark of the V cut inscribed letter, comes from the initial thick and thin made by the broad-edged pen or brush. After the Roman withdrawal from Britain the quality of inscriptions in stone declines generally to a lower grade of craft, where we have no play of thick and thin, and letters revert to the uninflected line of the stylus-using scribe. The following diagram shows how the range of lettering skills from Roman Britain might compare when set against the skills of letterers from around 800 in Wales.

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<sup>23</sup> A.K. Bowman, Life and Letters on the Roman Frontier (London, 1994), pp. 82-99.



DIAGRAM of scribal grades possible c. 800

CUT CAPITALS Insular equivalent of the Roman ordinator/ sculptor. In Britain only in Northumbria.

Display capitals drawn and penned

Phase 2	Phase 2
MINUSCULE	MAJUSCULE

Phase 1	Phase 1
MINUSCULE	MAJUSCULE

Broad-pen cursive half-uncial

Broad-pen cursive minuscule

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Broad brush/Pointed stylus on wax tablets

Grade of scribe providing drafts to some of the mason cutters of 600-900 in Wales

sgraffito as on the earlier lead defixiones

sgraffito on soft metal/slate/pottery=ownership marks

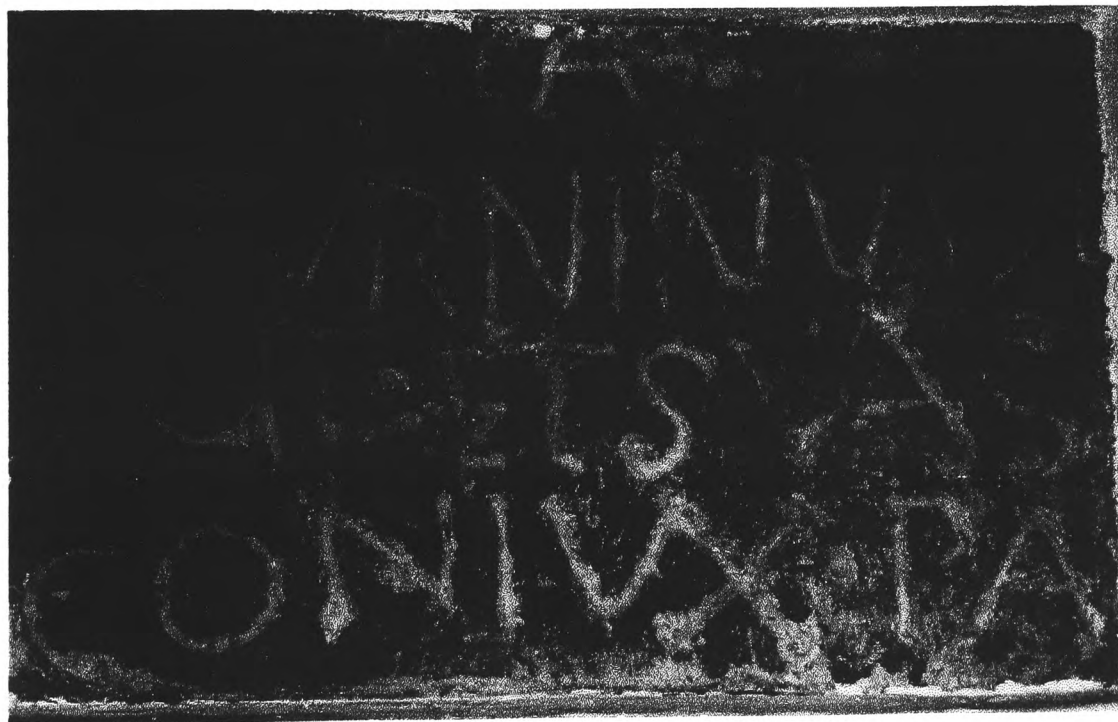
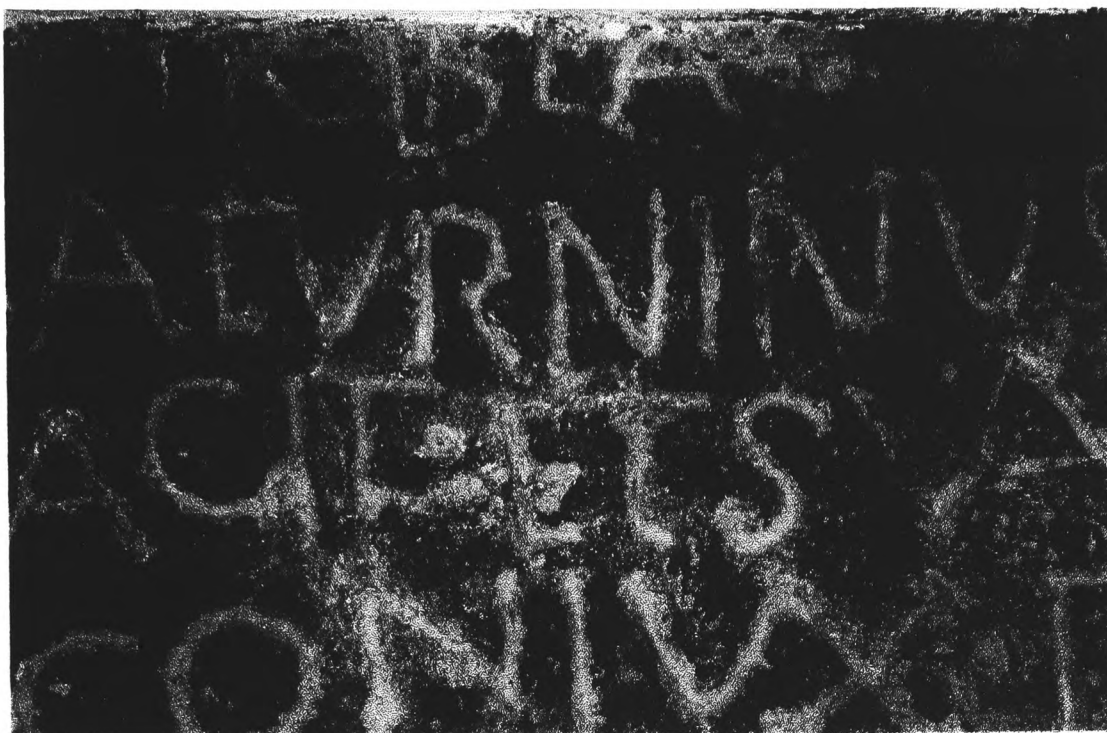
Ravenscar inscription, RIB 721, dateable c. 400.



IUSTINIANVS P P  
VINDICIANVS  
MASBIERIVS  
MACASTRUM ECT  
A:TO

F.23.

Two photographs of the Saturninus stone, ECMW 32, dateable c. 530.



F. 24.

Roman Inscriptions in Britain<sup>24</sup> shows us a wide range of competence in lettercutting. In fact there are Roman inscriptions that prepare us for the crudity of the later Welsh stones. As well as the superlative large-scale public works of a major legionary base, we see that a quite low level of skill was evidently acceptable at the lower end of the market. Low-grade Roman inscriptional work has been examined by Marilynne Raybould,<sup>25</sup> who describes the ability to inscribe one's name as an ownership mark as an indication of basic literacy. She rates the ability to copy as a skill of those with moderate literacy. The sheer variety of lettering skill that we have already examined in Nash-Williams' Group I stones seems to indicate that basic and even moderate literacy was fairly widespread in Wales in the sixth century. The strange irregularities of the Welsh inscriptions of 600-900 are more noticeable when we compare them to high-quality Trajanic V-section artworks. When we compare them to inscriptions produced at the level of centurions and individuals wishing to mark personal attainments we are on more familiar ground. The sandstone dedication slab at Ravenscar, RIB Number 721, illustrated above, is executed in pecked letters, and shows a layout and letter size fluctuation very similar to later post-Roman British productions. Most interestingly, as they record interaction between Roman and Celt, we have two inscriptions in a similar loose style recording the work of two groups from Celtic tribes on the renovation of Hadrian's Wall: the Durotriges (RIB Number 1672) "The canton of the Durotriges of Lendinae (built this)" and the Catuvellauni (RIB Number 1962) "From the tribe of the Catuvellauni Tossodio (built this)". This last is a stone dated to AD 369.

A Briton with a Celtic name in some supervisory building role on the wall recorded his part personally (RIB Number 2053): "the length in feet built by Vindomorucus." The style of these three stones is paralleled by the many inscriptions put up by soldiers from far-flung parts of the empire who had been drafted to Britain for a term of duty and who wished to leave a permanent mark before taking a new posting. These stones are so free in execution that it

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<sup>24</sup> R.G. Collingwood and R.P. Wright, Roman Inscriptions in Britain (Oxford, 1965). Vol. I: Inscriptions on Stone. Reprinted Stroud, 1995. Hereafter RIB.

<sup>25</sup> M. Raybould, A Study of inscribed material from Roman Britain: an inquiry into some aspects of literacy in Romano-British society, BAR 281 (Oxford, 1999)

seems possible that they could have been cut by the soldiers themselves. See RIB Nos. 1473, 1475, 1625, 1859. Of particular interest are two granite milestones, RIB Nos. 2232, 2233, which in their pecked uninflected letters are clearly analogous to the later British inscriptions on such intractable material. The technique here is possibly borrowed from the technique of punching outline letters in metal (see illustration) that we see in bronze ansate panels, that were attached to a wooden support, as in RIB Nos. 187, 191 and 194.



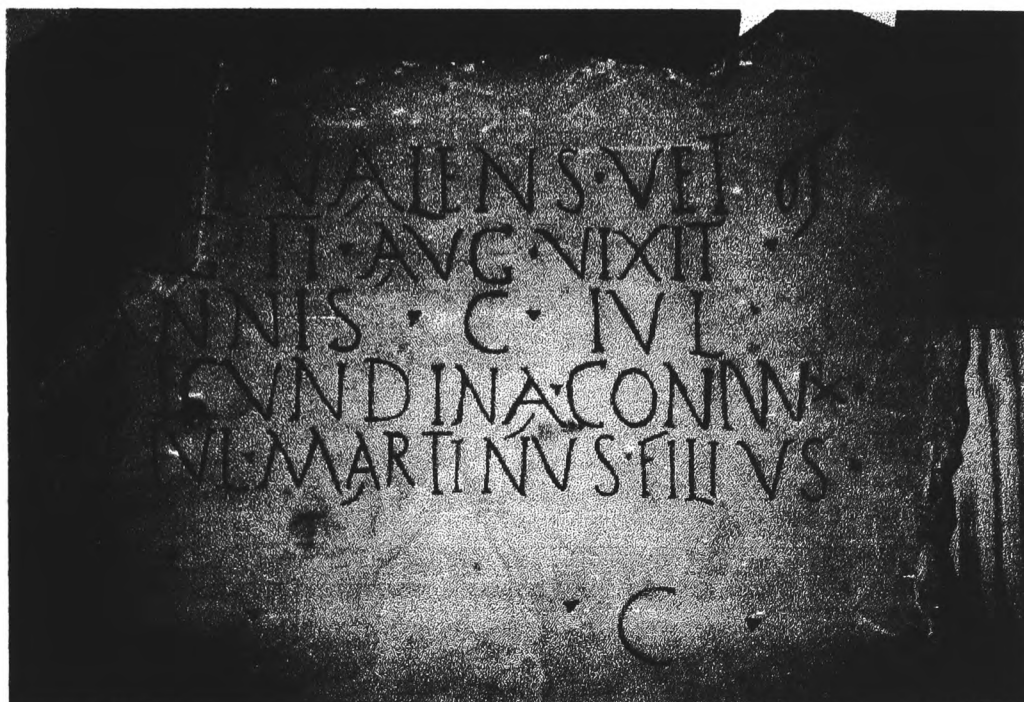
In their use of capitals the post-Roman British were not debasing a model, or producing anything that had not been seen before: they were simply carrying on inscriptional techniques from Roman demotic graphics rather than Roman imperial graphics. Illustrating his argument with the example of the tombstone of Julius Valens, “a very old soldier” from Caerleon, A.R. Burn described how the garrison towns, like York, Chester or Caerleon, where the legions stayed in one place for decade after decade, were the places where old legionaries came to settle down:

Inscriptions from all three show us discharged soldiers settling down close to the barracks in which they had served rather than returning to a home they had not seen for twenty years. Even soldiers who were still serving often married and had children, though the marriages of serving soldiers were not officially recognised until the time of Severus. Even after that time women were not permitted within the sacred precincts of the “camp”, and had to live outside. Thus the legionary fortress became the nucleus of a town, with a population of discharged soldiers and their families, soldiers’ wives, children and slaves, and numerous traders and other civilians serving the forces.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> A.R. Burn, The Romans in Britain: An Anthology of Inscriptions (Oxford, 1969), pp. 59-60.

ILLUSTRATIONS: from the series of cursive capital late Roman inscriptions from Great Bulmore by Caerleon, cut for legionaries who had elected to stay in Wales.



F.26.

In the fifth and early sixth century we can see that surviving inscriptions, some of them the bilingual Ogham/Latin stones of the Irish incursion, are using letterforms that are recognisable adaptations of Roman inscriptional letters. It is in the later lettercutters' use, in the mid-sixth century onwards, of "bookhand" on stone that we enter into mapless territory. It is possible that this choice was made much as the Columban church cleaved to its own Insular half-uncial in the face of the full uncial of the Roman party under Wilfred. Their graphic medium, the letterform itself, was part of their message of difference. In comparison to Ireland, Wales has suffered total loss of early manuscript records. We only begin to have evidence from the ninth century marginalia in the Lichfield Gospels<sup>27</sup> and the Cambridge Juvencus.<sup>28</sup> The earliest evidence of formal British bookhands appears then to be epigraphic. In epigraphy the insular habit of mixing a hybrid style to suit themselves produces a more freakish effect than in calligraphy, such as we see in Durham A.II.10, when we only consider the presence of models in Britain of a high-quality Roman inscriptional tradition, and fail to register its coexistence with a demotic one.

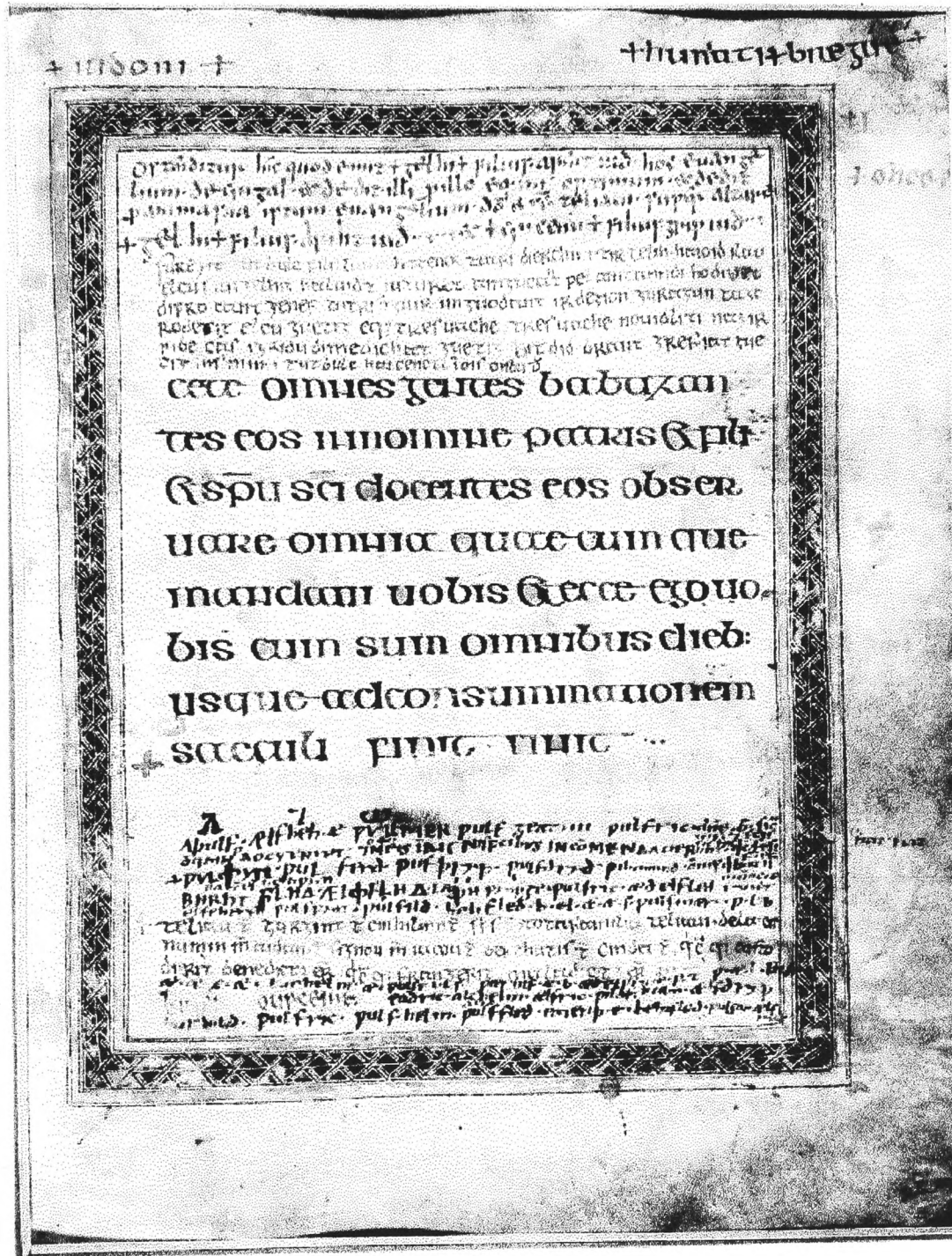
The British church preserved its identity and its Latin between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. Given that there is surviving inscriptional Christian material from the late Roman period in Britain and that the first inscription from the "Dark Ages" in Wales, ECMW No13, to show a manuscript hand is datable to c. 650, it should be helpful to compare and analyse them alongside the scribal styles of the two earliest surviving Irish examples of the prototype Insular discussed above. These early Irish examples have oddities of formation that appear to be reflected in the Catamanus stone of c. 650, Nash-Williams 13, from Llangadwaladr, Anglesey. This stone appears to be the first to use, though only for two letters: capital A, itself a borrowing from the Greek alphabet, and capital M, the geometric decorative alphabet<sup>29</sup> that we only see fully developed in the Lindisfarne Gospels at

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<sup>27</sup> Lichfield Cathedral Library, St Chad Gospels.

<sup>28</sup> Cambridge, Univ. Libr. Ff.4.42.

<sup>29</sup> John Higgitt, 'The display script of the Book of Kells and the tradition of insular decorative capitals', in The Book of Kells, ed. Felicity O'Mahony (Dublin, 1994), pp. 209-233.



F. 27.



the end of the seventh century.<sup>30</sup>

Following the grouping system of ECMW, Nash-Williams thought that inscriptions in capitals only were replaced by mixed at the beginning of the seventh century. He lists twelve dated stones in his Early Christian Monuments of Wales. The earliest, c. 530, is No 32 from Llansadwrn, Anglesey, (see page 42) where the Saturninus of the inscription has been identified with Sadwrn Farchog, the founder of the church and brother of Saint Illtud who died 527-37.<sup>31</sup> A further four are in a sequence of stones using capitals only: No 104 of c. 540; No 138 of c. 540-550; No 139 of c. 550; No 96, sixth century.

With the dateable stone No 33 of mid-to-late sixth century we have the first appearance of a few half-uncials in a mixed inscription, and by c. 650 with the Catamanus stone, No 13, we have a thoroughly mixed inscription, with evidence of geometric capitals as well as bookhand. In the sequence of dateable stones we then jump to No 182 of the mid-ninth century and the four concluding dateable stones take us to c. 1150. The difficulty with the Nash-Williams sequence at least up until the ninth century stones is that today, after much further historical research, there is now little agreement on these dates, and hardly one of them on which there is complete agreement.

Charles Thomas has rightly commented on the inadvisability of drawing clear chronological divides between the capital-only inscriptions, placing them early in the sequence, and the apparently more developed bookhand and mixed inscriptions. A good case in point is from Llantwit Major, a renowned centre of learning where we would not expect a break in scribal tradition. Here we have an apparently “early”, meaning crude and irregular, entirely bookhand inscription in Samson's pillar (ECMW Fig. 156, No 223) including a distinctive round minuscule r and ligatures, that Nash-Williams dates to the tenth/eleventh century, and another inscription (ECMW Fig. 15, No 222), that Nash-Williams dates to the late tenth century, uses an extraordinary mixture of minuscule and geometrical capitals. Both these

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<sup>30</sup> British Library Cotton MS Nero D.IV.

<sup>31</sup> J.E. Lloyd, History of Wales, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London, 1939), i, p. 150.

stones have been re-dated by C.A. Raleigh Radford.<sup>32</sup> He places them at the beginning of the ninth century, taking as the key palaeographical point of his argument the fact that geometrical capitals are typical of Nash-Williams Group II rather than Group III. Clearly, to have included geometrical capitals under the heading of “half-uncial”, assuming their invention to have taken place within the development of Phase 2 of that hand, needs reconsideration. More minute epigraphical differences should be drawn into the dating evidence. There are two clear tendencies away from standard capital forms, the one cursive, the other angular. Both of these tendencies can be related to manuscript examples: the first appearing to be borrowed by lettercutters from scribes, the second a lettercutters’ alphabet borrowed by scribes. Geometrical capitals are discussed in Chapter 4. First it should be established exactly what were the tools and alphabets that were in the repertoire of the epigraphers, or at least in the repertoire of the inscription designers.

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<sup>32</sup> C.A. Raleigh Radford, ‘Two Datable Cross Shafts at Llantwit Major’, Archaeologia Cambrensis, 132 (1984), pp.107-115.

Chapter 3

THE TRANSITION FROM DEBASED ROMAN CAPITALS TO A BOOKHAND FOR INSCRIPTIONAL USE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SIXTH CENTURY: A BOOKHAND BASED ON PHASE 1 TYPE HALF-UNCIAL.

The transition from large openly spaced Roman capitals to the tighter pattern of early British bookhand letters is in graphic terms dramatic, and was a change of scale less suited to the range of skills of the lettercutters. In Nash-Williams' ECMW classification of Group I stones, generally capitals of the 5th-7th centuries, there is no noticeable clustering in any geographical area. But, with the exception of the Catamanus stone (ECMW No 13) in Anglesey, there is a concentration of bookhand inscriptions of Group II, 7th-9th centuries, in the South and predominantly in Glamorgan.

Table showing proportional variation of types of letterform.

DERIVATIVE OF CAPS/BASICALLY CAPS/DERIVATIVE OF BOOKHAND/MIXED

Anglesey:		6	1	2	-
Brecknockshire:		8	7	4	-
Caernarvonshire:		1	3	-	-
Carmarthenshire:		16	4	3	-
Denbighshire:		3	-	2	-
Flintshire:		1	-	-	-
Glamorganshire:		4	4	22	-
Merioneth:		6	2	1	-
Montgomeryshire:		1	-	-	-
Pembrokeshire:		24	9	6	1

F.28.

However, Pembrokeshire has the highest incidence of Latin/Ogham inscriptions in the Group I class, indicating the influx of Irish into this area after the Roman withdrawal from Britain: see map below.

Distribution map of Ogham and Latin/Ogham stones.



**F.29.**

So that in their dominant Groups Pembrokeshire, with 24 stones surviving, and Glamorganshire, with 22 stones surviving, present a mass of epigraphical evidence firstly in the aftermath of the Roman withdrawal as well as later in the development of the early church in Wales. The transition from use of capitals to use of bookhand is also marked by a change from the use of a pillar stone to a slab, and by a continuing decline from the standards of

Roman professional lettercutting. With the departure of the Romans went a knowledge of the technology of stoneworking and quarrying. Giancarlo Susini describes the two heavyweight stoneworking tools necessary for shaping rough quarried stone to a regular block:<sup>1</sup> the ascia (axe) and the dolabra (mattock). From the latter comes the verb dolabro: to hew or to chop. Two types of set square were employed to give continuous checks that the block, during hewing, kept a right-angled edge.

It is possible that the highly specialised knowledge of Roman quarriers in locating and utilising quarries of the best stone for carving was completely lost. The making of bore holes for cleaving clean breaks in a stone face remains highly skilled, and requires leverage with hard metal wedges of great durability. There was no difficulty with the movement and transport of very large stones over great distances, as we see from the moorland or marshland wayside standing stones that are brought from a far quarry, like ECMW Nos. 73, 72 and 258 at Port Talbot – the stone of which is Rhaetic sandstone from the Bridgend/Pyle area. There was a difficulty with the dressing of the surface to a plane before sculpting and inscribing; this was evidently an insurmountable problem.

The survival and re-use of some squared pillars of the fifth century in Wales with debased Roman capitals suggests that some stonemasons' workshops might have carried on these advanced stonecutting techniques for a while, or that some previously shaped blanks were used after a lapse of time. A good example of this type of memorial, a fine-grained pillarstone squared for use, is the Bodvoc stone (ECMW No 229) at Margam whose text exemplifies the determination in successive generations of Romano-British to preserve Latinity:

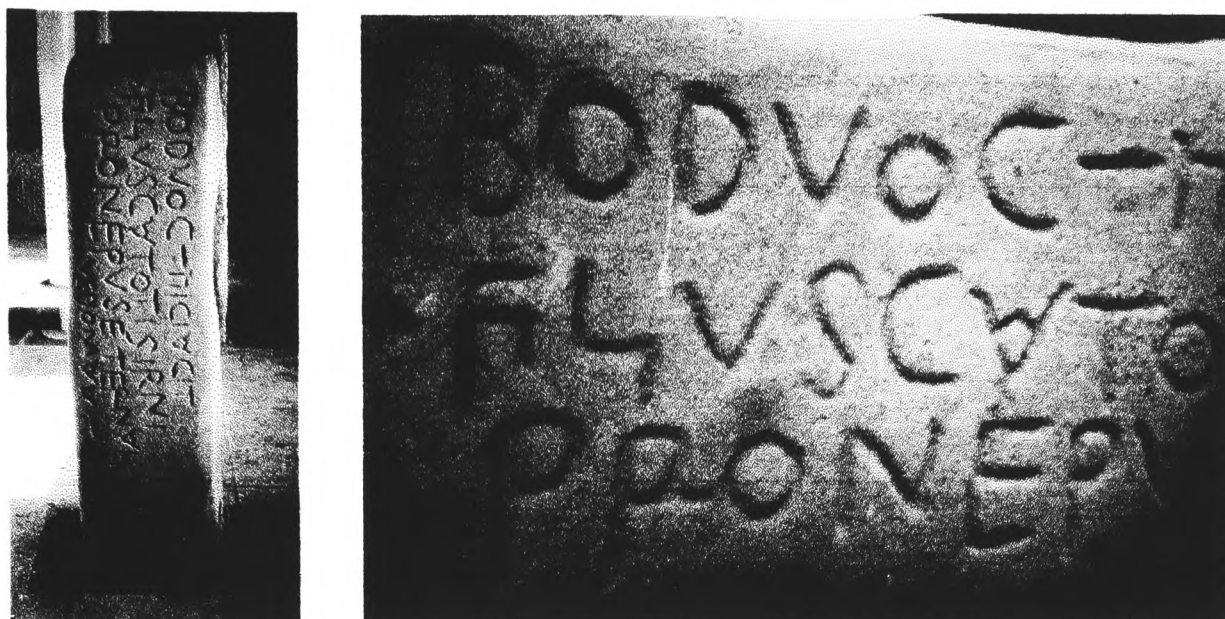
BODVOCI HIC IACIT / FILIUS CATOTIGIRNI / PRONEPUS ETERNALIS /  
VEDOMAVI

(The stone of) Bodvoc. Here he lies, son of Catotigirnus (and) great-grandson of  
Eternalis Vedomavus.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Susini, The Roman Stonecutter (Oxford, 1973), p. 25.

Photographs: one overall and one detail of the Bodvoc stone.



**F. 30 .**

This inscription has deformed half-uncial “h” and “g”, ligatured “fi” and “li” and inverted “a” throughout, but is regularly and deeply cut with a “u” section. It shows no sign whatever of having been laid out as an inscription before it reached the surface of the stone. The final “VEDOMAVI” is severely cramped. So within a few generations of the Roman withdrawal this suggests that even where a plane surface was available, the technique of ruling and layout had been very quickly lost. It also suggests a simplification and slipping of standards in the invasion of the monumental capital forms by written forms. In order for the Romano-British to continue the appearance of the Roman memorial tradition, naturally occurring “pillars” were broken out of strata near the surface, as we see from examples such as the Towyn stone (ECMW No 287) and in an early representation of the Crucifixion scene at St Dogmaels (ECMW No 130).

From the two techniques, roughly divisible into pocking with a point and an attempt at “v” or “u” section cuts, that were used for lettering on Group I stones, we might speculate that the craftsmen who worked this phase of lettering on stone were drawn from the two pre-existing trades of smith and carpenter. The best of the pocked inscriptions have the appearance

of repoussé metalwork, and in photographs they baffle the eye with the difficulty of reading the letterform as raised or recessed. The technique of repeated striking with a point to raise areas of metal from the reverse of the piece was known from the late Iron Age. Stones that show an attempt to make a deep “v” or “u” cut, that would catch the light better and read more definitely from a distance, have letter-stroke finishes that show the cutting tool coming at an angle from right and left down into the cut, producing a very primitive serif. The two techniques co-existed.

The techniques and tools of carpenters were unsuitable for stone. Not all stones were malleable like metal or could take the repeated battering of the pocking technique that was familiar to a smith. Group I stones do not show that a standardised stoneworking craft was in the process of developing. There was adaptation: by the sixth century, inscriptions are applied to large stones in their natural irregular state where very little attempt, if any, is made to provide a plane surface for the laying out of text. We find early Christian epigraphy in Wales on material that a Roman stonemason would have discarded as unfit to work on: visible fracture lines, faults and laminations were evident that would inevitably result in defacement and illegibility of the memorial. Yet even up to the close of the eleventh century – because of the poor choice and preparation of the stone – we find damaged inscriptions with unreadable sections due to the obvious inherent faults of the stone. An example is the large-scale and elaborate Samson stone (EMCW No 222) dated by Nash-Williams to the late tenth century, which has laminations of only a half an inch thick that have caused flaking off of sections on its inscriptional panels.

The two heavyweight stoneworking tools that the Romans used to block out the form corresponded to the axe and adze of the woodworker who worked the flat planes of planking.<sup>2</sup> The failure of the British to work the stone face in the way that they were able to work wood indicates that in the sixth century the metal tools available to them could not be tempered to the greater hardness and durability necessary for stoneworking. It is possible that the peculiar

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<sup>2</sup> Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, s.v.

wrought iron alloy produced in Britain<sup>3</sup> resulted in tools that with repeated striking became brittle and difficult to maintain with a well-tempered edge. Improvements in metal technology during the ninth and tenth centuries,<sup>4</sup> when hard steel edges were welded around the cutting edges of iron swords, may have spread to stone-carving tools, as there is a perceptible change in the symmetry of the sculptured stones of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The high cross at Nevern (ECMW No 360) dated by Nash-Williams to the late tenth/ early eleventh century shows neat squaring of the block, and a rising stepped profile over 3.96 metres. The quality of available stone may also have been an influence, as carving was of a far higher standard in Northumbria and those parts of Scotland where a fine-grained sandstone was easily available. The Pennant sandstone quarries, which provided the stone for the elaborate late crosses of Margam and Merthyr Mawr, of the Bridgend area, cannot have been worked on a large scale until about the ninth century. Despite the difficulties presented by the medium of stone, inscriptional lettercutters began to use on it a letterform that in Roman times would not have been considered suitable for the purpose.

The change from Roman capitals to bookhand for inscriptional use marks a shift in the presentation of text from formal public address to a more intimate relationship as between book and reader. The scribe and his book enter into both the texts and the symbolism of the stones. The inscription on Eliseg's Pillar at Valle Crucis (ECMW No 182) states that "Conmarch painted this writing at the command of his king Concenn" (d. 854) and addresses "whosoever shall read this hand-inscribed stone". As the lower part of this pillar is a turned baluster of stone, possibly a reused architectural piece, Conmarch's inscription could have been written freely on the plane surface and then cut. As it is thirty-one lines long and carefully composed, the surface must have been lined with temporary guide ruling in a substance like chalk; in this it is quite alone among the Welsh monuments. As a scribe of book texts, Conmarch would have adapted for stone his scribal ruling techniques. In general the scribe, or

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<sup>3</sup> W.H. Manning, 'Ironworking in the Celtic World', in The Celtic World, ed. M.J. Green (London, 1995), pp. 313-315.

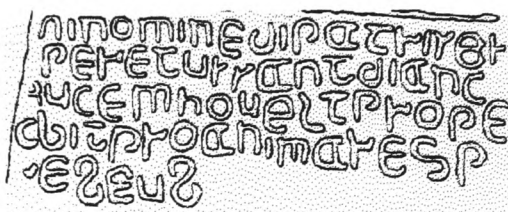
<sup>4</sup> Dafydd Kidd, 'Viking Crafts', in The Vikings, ed. James Graham Campbell (London, 1980), pp. 137-8 and pp. 131-133.



mason interpreting the scribe's text, was faced with a bumpy surface where ruling was impossible, and had to deal with each letter as a separate item as he worked his way through his text. For example, on Vortipor's stone (ECMW No 138) the “GI” of VOTEPORIGIS and the “OR” of PROTECTORIS actually turn a corner round the shoulder of the natural boulder.

The inscription beneath the high-quality cross (ECMW No 220) of Hywel ap Rhys, ruler of Glywysing (now roughly Glamorganshire), d. 886, who was a subject of Alfred of Wessex, to his father Rhys, is perhaps not by the hand that carved the very fine fret patterns directly above it. It is a hand that was affected by the irregular surface. See illustration below.

F. 31.



The time-honoured technique, still used by signwriters, of ruling parallel guide lines by snapping a painted or chalked string against the surface was impossible and so was any chance of laying a flat rule. This failure to retain the craft of stone preparation is not found uniformly throughout the previous area of the Roman occupation in Britain. Contemporary graveslabs in Northumberland show both prepared plane surfaces and ruled texts on fine-grained stone: these traits of highly skilled workshop practice had probably been reintroduced by craftsmen brought from Gaul by Wilfred and Benedict Biscop in the seventh century.<sup>5</sup>

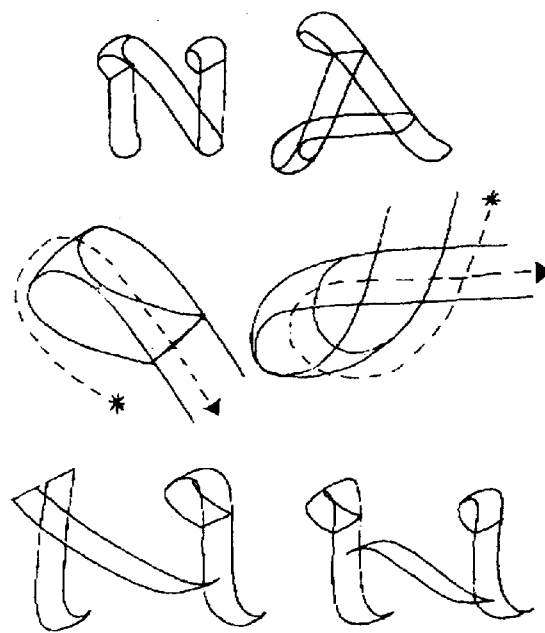
If we compare a range of three stones from the early, middle and late time span of Nash-Williams' Groups II-III, it is clear that once the bookhand alphabet had been fixed upon it changed very little overall in three hundred years. The earliest memorial to show a mixture of bookhand letters and display capitals is the Anglesey Catamanus stone, c. 625 (ECMW No 13). It is singular in being the only such example from the North West, and in having been, apparently, painted by a scribe with a vigorous quickly-written style, shown in his ligatures and flourished form of “a”.

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Brooks, ‘The Church in Northumbria’, in The Making of England: Anglo Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900, eds. Webster and Backhouse (Toronto, 1991), p 109.

The large unornamented monuments contemporary with Phase 1 half-uncial that rely only on lettering for graphic impact have some of them been lettered by craftsmen who knew how to write fluently. The finish of the letterforms on these stones shows, in the outline of the cutting, the rounded edges produced by a brush-stroke as the letterer swings into a stroke and lifts out of it. To reproduce these forms, experimental letters were brushed onto a variety of stones lying flat, from sandstone to a pitted conglomerate, with a very dilute mix of earth colour, each type of stone taking a complete outline .

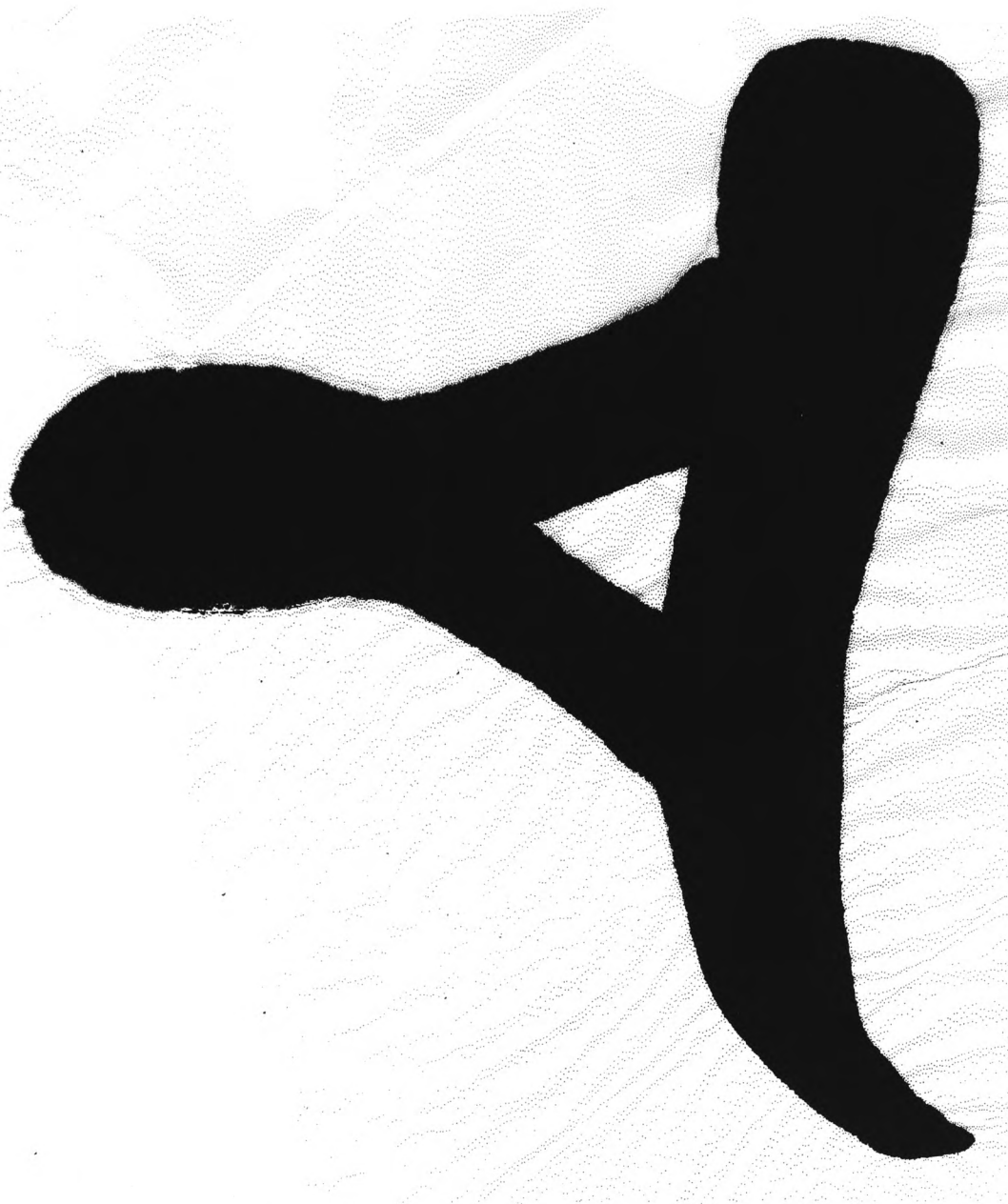
DIAGRAM: “N” and “A” of Catamanus, showing brush stroke turning over the point of entry, compared with pen-made strokes of the “N” of TCD MS Ussher I.



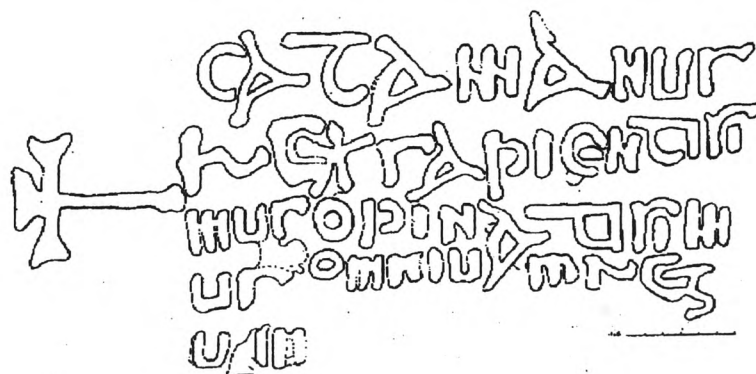
F. 32

DIAGRAM, overleaf: brush letters: a comparison of an enlarged brush-made angular “a” as in the Catamanus stone, and the Nash-Williams drawing of the complete inscription. The characteristic brushed outline is utterly unlike the sharp-angled strokes and wedges of a pen-made seriffed letter and makes the division of inscriptions into those produced by the precise movements of a hard-edged tool and those produced by the sweeping movements of a soft brush quite a clear one.

Large brush-painted "A" with the Nash-Williams drawing of the Catamanus stone.



F. 33 .



The characteristics of brush letters are its clubbed-stroke entries and exits, with a flowing ductus if the letterer is capable of speed of execution, like the letterer of the Catamanus stone, and an uninflected width of stroke. Stones listed by Nash-Williams that were apparently brush-lettered are: No 13, the Catamanus stone, No 35, No 164, No 193, No 220, No 223, No 233, No 248.

### Letters from the Catamanus inscription

Three-stroke “a” borrowed from Greek,  
the forerunner of the Irish pointed minuscule “a”.



Three-stroke “M” with cross bars avoiding links  
with the deeply-cut line stops.



Two-stroke “N” with cross bar avoiding the  
line stops.



Bookhand “r”, an adaptation from a  
capital, the crossbar taken out as far  
from the stop as possible.



“e” with unattached cross bar to avoid flaking at join.



“P” with incomplete bowl, to avoid lifting of centre.



Ligatured “ti” and “eg” showing great speed of  
execution.



P. 34.

The Greek three-stroke alpha was a letterform attractive to insular penmen, and its shape influenced the eventual form of the minuscule “a” that is still in use in Ireland. During the Phase 1 half-uncial period only two surviving Welsh inscribed stones, both seemingly by the same draughtsman, use it. They are close neighbours on Anglesey: Nash-Williams’ Number 13, the Catamanus stone at Llangadwaladr, and Nash-Williams’ Number 35, now at Llangaffo Church, but originally at Fron-Deg Farm, Newborough. These two stones offer a remarkable opportunity to make close study of a scribe laying out the same type of lettering on two different stone surfaces which have called for different techniques in applying the letterforms.

Apart from the unusual form of the “a”, there are three other features that suggest the same draughtsman: the “C” form of “E” with detached crossbar, the flat entry into the second stroke of “X”, the ligature with following letter from the “E” crossbar, and the three-stroke “M” with no link between the first two uprights.

DIAGRAMS:



ECMW No 13, the grandly phrased and planned memorial to Catamanus, is a plane-surfaced slab 48" by 20" of a hard, fine granular conglomerate stone that was non-porous. Being non-porous, the brushed letterform has puddled at the stroke ends, giving a very distinctive clubbing that the lettercutter has followed minutely. Brush lettering was necessary as the surface could not take a continuous solid line from an edged or hard writing instrument. Evidently the stone was lettered and cut on the flat.

ECMW No 35, a personal memorial of a lesser quality than No 13, is a shaly, softer stone, a pillar 55" by 8" with fissures and a fractured away section, now lost. The stone is smooth and could take charcoal or scribe, unlike the gritty surface of the Catamanus stone that must have been painted with a well-diluted paint mix. The letterer has adjusted his letterforms to adapt to the surface of the stone.

Photographs of ECMW No 13 and ECMW No 35.



F.35.

He uses a capital “L” with vertical upright in line 3, for filius, but, reaching a bad fault line that runs down the left edge of the stone, he uses a curving more cursive “I” to begin lapidem in line 9, thus attaching the letterform firmly to the mass of the solid stone of the pillar’s mid-section rather than take any chances with the fissured edge. In lines six and seven he positions the letters of erexit to avoid collision with two fissures.

The particular “a” form is seen in the Phase 1 Insular manuscript the Cathach, Dublin RIA MS S.n. It is closer to a cursive hand than any inscription subsequently cut in the South, though it incorporates some geometrical capitals. The inscription shows three letterforms apparently carried over from cutting in wood, a technique illustrated and discussed in the next Chapter, and all of them are featured as display capitals in insular manuscripts.

A quarter of a millennium later, in the cross of Hywel ap Rhys, c. 875 (ECMW No 220), geometrical capitals have been discarded and contractions have been introduced. Though we see the same bookhand letters, there is a stiffening up of forms and no ductus, possibly because the lettering has been transferred by a mason to the stone from an original on wax or parchment. No scribe would have placed two reversed “s” letters close to one another in the space of only four letterforms.

Letters from the Hywel ap Rhys inscription:

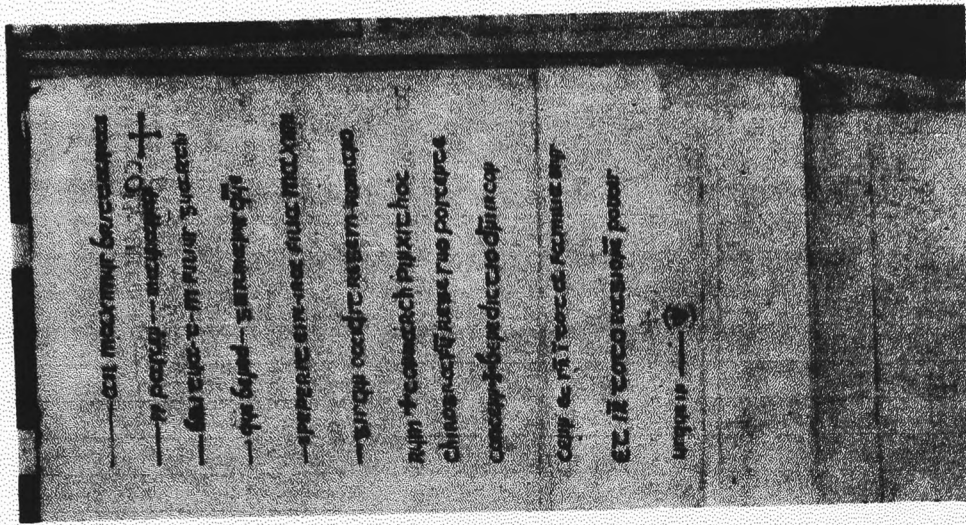
“di” with stroke over to indicate contraction for dei.

“p”, open bowl.

“d”, open bowl.

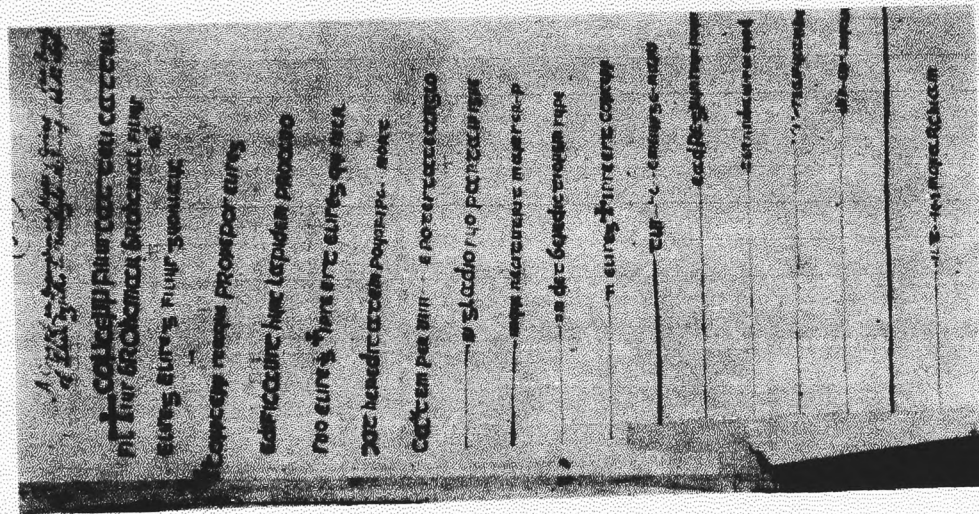
“r”, minuscule.

F. 36.



Harleian MS. 3780 fo. 95r

from the Pillar of Eliseg  
British Museum



Harleian MS. 3780 fo. 95r

Edward Lhuud's transcript  
Copyright



When we take into account the fact that the Pillar of Eliseg, dateable to c. 850 (ECMW No 182), showed use of some geometrical display capitals when an exact record of the lettering was made by Edward Lhuyd in 1696,<sup>6</sup> illustrated above, we might consider that the placing of the (King) Samson cross (ECMW No 222) at c. 990 is too late, when we look at it alongside its companions at Llantwit Major (ECMW No 220, discussed above), and the (Abbot) Samson cross, ECMW No 223, dated by Nash-Williams to the tenth/eleventh centuries. This last preserves a scribal practice of using two separate forms of a letter when they occur doubled, as in summi, where the first "m" is a geometrical capital and the second bookhand. This was noted as a characteristic of what is possibly the earliest Welsh half-uncial when W.M. Lindsay was describing the Lichfield Gospels, his first exemplar in Early Welsh Script, which is dated to the early eighth century. Both the Samson crosses suggest a rich stonecarving tradition that is at odds with the crude lettering of the cross of Hywel ap Rhys at the same site. Nash-Williams' dating sequence relies on the relative elaboration of the sculptured decoration as evidence for placing a stone at some point in Group II or III (7th-11th centuries), but these four centuries with respect to manuscript decoration have produced their gamut of patterning from c. 650 in the Book of Durrow to the Lindisfarne Gospels at the end of the same century.

The third stone under consideration, King Samson's cross (ECMW No 222), dated by Nash-Williams to the end of the tenth century, is well cut with cable and fret pattern overall, suggesting the later part of Group III from a purely decorative point of view, but has geometrical capitals that repeat the construction technique of letters in wood that went out of fashion in manuscript production by the mid-ninth century. For example:

Letters from King Samson's cross:

"P" of pro anima eius. The bowl is left unjoined to the shaft. The top of the bowl connects to the shaft below the deeply-cut downstroke stop, as in woodcut letters.



F. 36.

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<sup>6</sup> Harleian MS. 3780 folio 95 recto and verso.

“N” of hanc crucem, pro anima sua and Samson. Again avoids joining at the stops. Shafts connected with a centrally-placed diagonal.



“M” of Samson, pro anima and hanc crucem. Three vertical shafts linked by diagonals avoiding the stops.



DIAGRAMS: Letterforms in wood/stone showing what might have been adaptive devices by lettercutters to avoid flaking and damage.

“R”: to take the second broken stroke as far away from the first shaft as possible.



“B”, “D”, “A”: to leave the form open to prevent lifting of central section.



“G” move from capital to loose “s”-like form.



F. 38.

In Wales, once the conversion from capitals to a mixed bookhand had been made, memorial stones become progressively more elaborate as a consequence of carpenters and wrights adapting and hardening tools and making the change from building in wood to building in stone from the eighth century onwards. Charles Thomas has excavated several sites to reveal the foundations of the earlier wooden chapel underlying the stone structure, like that at

Ardwall, off the Kirkcudbright coast. He has also convincingly demonstrated the skeuomorphic nature of stone detailing in these early stone churches, which showed “imitations in another medium, of elements proper to timber construction”.<sup>7</sup> In Wales, evidence of a similar transition from wood to stone comes from a series of excavations on the Graeanog ridge in Gwynedd.<sup>8</sup> The wooden hut groups and agricultural buildings of the complex were dated from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, with the overlying medieval homestead stone building dating from the eleventh to the early thirteenth. This complex was on the route between Bangor and Bardsey, and close to the monastery of Clynnog Fawr. It was during the eighth century that Insular scribes produced the finest of their manuscripts, from the Lindisfarne Gospels, c. 700, to the Book of Kells, c. 800. The disciplined half-uncial of these manuscripts is of the evolved Phase 2 type classified by Julian Brown.<sup>9</sup> But what we find on the early Christian memorials of Wales that are more ambitious in letterform than tablet writing, is the much freer half-uncial of the Phase 1 type such as we see in the Book of Durrow and the Cathach, a type of uncial that was written c. 600 to c. 675.

An Irish stone belonging to Phase 1 is the Kilnasaggart stone, CIIC 946, bearing the inscription: “This place did Ternoc son of Ciaran the Little bequeath under the protection of Peter the Apostle”. Ternoc has two obits, one dated 716, the other 714. Macalister links this stone with the “Petrus Apostoli” stone at Whithorn, and suggests that both are by-products of the decision of the Synod of Whitby in 664. The Whithorn stone is of an earlier lettering type than the Kilnasaggart stone, which uses Phase 1 half-uncial at a time when scribes had developed a more advanced form, suggesting a certain time-lag in the transition from scriptorium to workshop.

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Thomas, The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain (Oxford, 1971), pp. 75-7, 118-9, 123, 149-50.

<sup>8</sup> P.J. Fasham et al (eds.), The Graeanog Ridge: The Evolution of a Farming Landscape and its Settlements in North-West Wales (Aberystwyth, 1988), pp. 160-163; R.S. Kelly, ‘The Excavation of a Medieval Farmstead at Cefn Graeanog, Clynnog, Gwynedd’, BBCS 29, pp. 895-98.

<sup>9</sup> Julian Brown, A Palaeographer's View (New York, 1993), pp. 191-195.

Photographs of Ternoc's stone.



F.39.

In his Early Welsh Script<sup>10</sup> (hereafter EWS), W.M. Lindsay fixes on the most distinctive features of the earlier form of half-uncial. The triangular spatulate terminals are common to the early and late Phases, as is the use of what Lindsay calls “a particular stylisation of decorative capitals” (the geometric capitals that I suggest were used by lettercutters in wood, discussed above and in the following Chapter); but what Lindsay marks as clearly peculiar to the earlier half-uncial hand are, firstly, the tendency to go over to a lower grade of script at line ends, and, secondly, diminuendo: enlarged then diminishing script at openings of passages. Both of these traits we see in the hands of the letterer on stone who was faced with adjusting the shape of each of his letters to the individual peculiarities of the surface he was inscribing.

Letterforms peculiar to Phase 1 half-uncial do survive into Nash-Williams' Group III (9th-11th centuries) in epigraphy, whereas during the same period manuscript scribes, unlike the lettercutters, do go through stylistic changes – to Welsh round minuscule and pointed minuscule. These persistent epigraphic features, with horizontal ligaturing, high “e” with a pushed stroke above the writing line, and drawn serifs, are also features of the more cursive tablet writing that we see in the Springmount Bog tablets..

At the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century in Glamorgan we find elaborate crosses with reference within their text to the significance of their stone-cut “writing” (ECMW No 240 at Merthyr Mawr), or with a layout of text on a double page spread representing a symbolic book on the stone such as we see on both sides of the King Samson cross (ECMW No 222 at Llantwit Major). The partly defaced half-uncial text of the Merthyr Mawr cross dedicates property to a nearby monastery: “in gre/fium” (graphium) and “in proprium usque / in diem iudici” – in this writing into its possession until the Day of Judgement. This stone gives valuable evidence of the graphic crossover in Wales from monumental majuscules holding their place as the proper letterform for inscribing in stone to a letterform having more of the personal nature of handwriting.

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<sup>10</sup> W.M. Lindsay, Early Welsh Script (Oxford, 1912), pp. 3-4.

In his commentary to Asser,<sup>11</sup> W.H. Stevenson writes of the everlasting significance of the term “graphium” cut on stone and written on parchment in the native Charter tradition. The word passed into Welsh as “greif” and in early inscriptions is used with the meaning of “land secured by deed as private inheritance”. Although grapheion in ecclesiastical Greek originally had the sense of “scripture” or “Holy Scripture”, after it had been taken into British Latin it passed through increasing elaborations of meaning: from writing style to written deed, to property held by written deed and finally to an estate in land conferred by written deed.

The phrase “in sempiterno graphio” is used in the early Welsh life of Saint Carantoc and in Chapter 11 of Asser's biography of Alfred:<sup>12</sup>

[855] In the same year Aethelwulf, the esteemed King, freed the tenth part of his whole kingdom from every royal service and tribute, and as an everlasting inheritance [sempiterno graphio] he made it over [immolare] on the cross of Christ to the Triune God for the redemption of his soul and those of his predecessors.

“In sempiterno graphio” and “immolare” are common terms in Celtic Latin charters. In their notes on these terms Keynes and Lapidge compare them to the similar usage in Anglo-Saxon charters, where the metaphor is further developed by describing lands held according to the privileges stated in a book or charter as “bookland”. This bookland when it became the property of the named owner was said to be “booked” to him. In King Alfred’s charter for Ealdorman Aethelhelm it was recorded:

This is the charter of the ten hides at North Newnton which Alfred booked to Aethelhelm his thegn in perpetual inheritance [sempiterno graphio].

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<sup>11</sup> Asser, Life of King Alfred, ed. W.H. Stevenson (Oxford, 1904), pp. 191-3.

<sup>12</sup> Asser’s Life of King Alfred, trans. Keynes and Lapidge (Harmondsworth, 1983).

In an interesting variation on the “graphio” theme, Stevenson notes that an Abingdon Charter of 944<sup>13</sup> replaces “graphio sempiterno” with “stilo perhenni” so that the writing instrument is transformed from the object on which the writing is made (“graphio”) to the pen that makes the writing (“stilo”). During the Roman period the top of the range of alphabets used by professional letterers on stone was monumental capitals, which were used by scribes in pen variations like rustic capitals, but this upper end of the range fell into disuse in Britain. Clearly at the time of the cutting of Welsh early Christian inscriptions there had been a complete break with any tradition of formal drawn or written capitals. Formal record, even on stone, had become a record written in the hand of a scribe and written in a four-line script rather than a two-line. The British had missed out on high-grade capitals. As we have seen in Chapter One, it is probable that Irish half-uncial developed out of a cursive early Roman model from Britain, much lower in the hierarchy of scripts than a formal literary hand. Later, full uncial capitals, promoted by the Romanising party under Wilfred, had been eschewed by the Columban church in favour of their own developed half-uncial; as a result we would not expect to find inscribed high-grade uncial capitals in Wales such as we see on an eighth century gravemarker at St Peters, Monkwearmouth, Tyne and Wear.<sup>14</sup>

We find in the Bible the belief that cutting words into stone gave them everlasting significance; the image of the tablets graven with Mosaic Law must be the most familiar. In Job Chapters 18 and 19 where Job is in verbal contention with Bildad the Shuhite, Bildad is exasperated with Job's confused complainings and asks him, “How long will it be ere ye make an end of words? mark, and afterwards we will speak” (Chapter 18, verse 2). At the close of Chapter 19 Job responds:

“Why do ye persecute me ... Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!”

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<sup>13</sup> Cartularium Saxonicum, ed. W. de G. Birch, 3 vols. (1885-93), ii. 556,18.

<sup>14</sup> L. Webster and J. Backhouse (eds.), Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture (Toronto, 1991), p.104.

This is the King James translation updated to accommodate the printing press. The Greek version of the text has en biblioi eis ton aiona, ‘in a book for eternity’, followed by the difficult phrase en grapheiōi sidērōi kai molibōi, ‘in an iron writing instrument and lead’ and closing with ē en petrais engluphēnai, ‘engraved on rocks’. In a comparison of stone and wooden Malagasy and British henges, where the techniques of carpentered jointing were taken across into stonework, M.Parker Pearson has written recently on the symbolic significance of stone in comparison with wood: “stone’s durability and enduring nature places it at a different temporal level to the lifetimes of wood or people.”<sup>15</sup> So written words cut on stone would have a peculiar power and efficacy, even more than words recorded in a book. To write a bookhand inscription then cut it in stone within a framework suggesting the bifolia of a volume was to make an extra-powerful combination.

This reverence for the book and for calligraphy would give high status to the skilled scribe. By the time that early Christian memorials had become as elaborate as the Merthyr Mawr and Llantwit Major stones mentioned above, we would not expect a scribe to have any part in the cutting of his written words. Stonecarving is heavy manual labour: a scribe would not be fit for carving, nor a stonecarver for scribing. Scribes in their scriptoria practised arts with their broad-edged pens that were arcane, beyond the ken of mason-sculptors, who might well be able to write a cursive notational hand with a pointed instrument. Whether scribes co-operated with stonecarvers by painting direct on the stone, or by providing a text for copying, the difference between the two options is visible even now.

Some stones show advanced scribal practice in contractions, for example, but are badly formed and cut; others show a free calligraphic layout on the stone and cutting by a cutter who understands the pen ductus, and where to cut deeply. To take two examples where there are clear observations to be made on the scribe/stonecarver combination: in the Llantwit Major (Abbot) Samson cross (ECMW No 223), discussed above, its scribe, when faced with the vastly enlarged scale of his letters, a brush rather than a pen, and a bumpy surface, approached

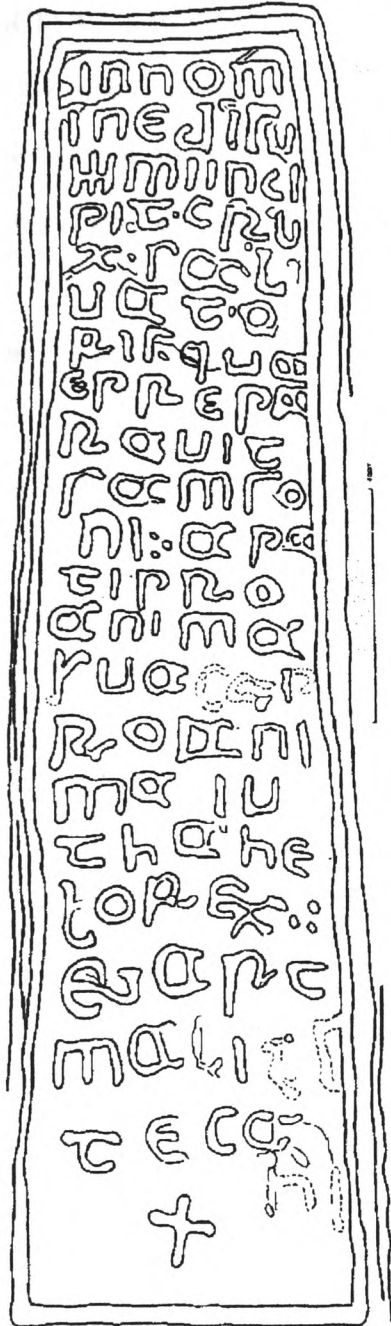
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<sup>15</sup> M. Parker Pearson and Ramilisonina, ‘Stonehenge for the ancestors: the stones pass on the message’, *Antiquity*, 72 (1998), p. 310.

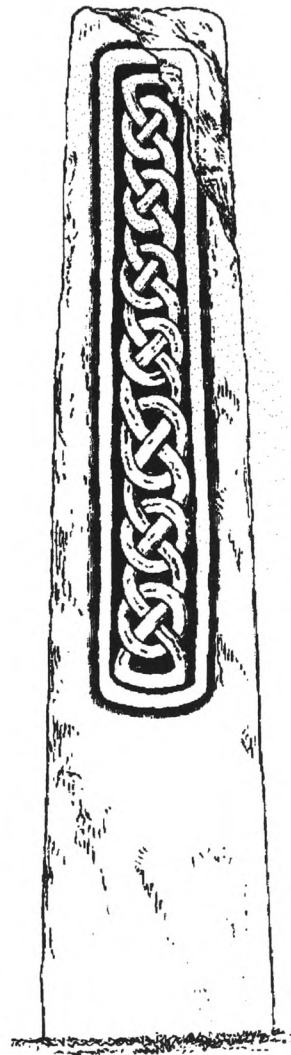


each letter as a production in itself and abandoned line and word spacing.

ECMW No 223: Abbot Samson's cross at Llantwit Major.



(FRONT)



(RIGHT)

FIG. 156. No. 223.

F. 10.

The stonecarver working on the scribe's letters, who was a proficient carver of deep interlace, looked at the pattern of letter strokes and chose the one visible regular feature to cut deeply: the downstrokes. This is made very clear by the side-lit photograph of this stone in Plate 23 of the RCAHMW for Glamorgan, Volume 1, Part 3. In the case of the cross to Maredudd at Carew, Dyfed (ECMW No 303), a splendidly carved sculptured pillar cross with the inscription: MARGIT/EUT.RE/X.ETG(UIN).FILIUS has been transferred to the stone from a scribe's penned copy by the stonecarver. The pen serif of the "r" in "Margit" is drawn and cut as a linear outlined triangle: the stonecarver is as ignorant of the nature of a pen-formed serif as was the stylus-using scribe of the Springmount Bog wax tablets.

This cross, illustrated below, is one of a family of at least four, and though their sculptured ornament is uniformly splendid their inscriptions are variable. This suggests that though stonecarvers travelled from patron to patron, so that we find such families of related monuments over a wide geographical spread, high-grade scribes were less mobile.

ECMW No 303: Maredudd's cross at Carew.

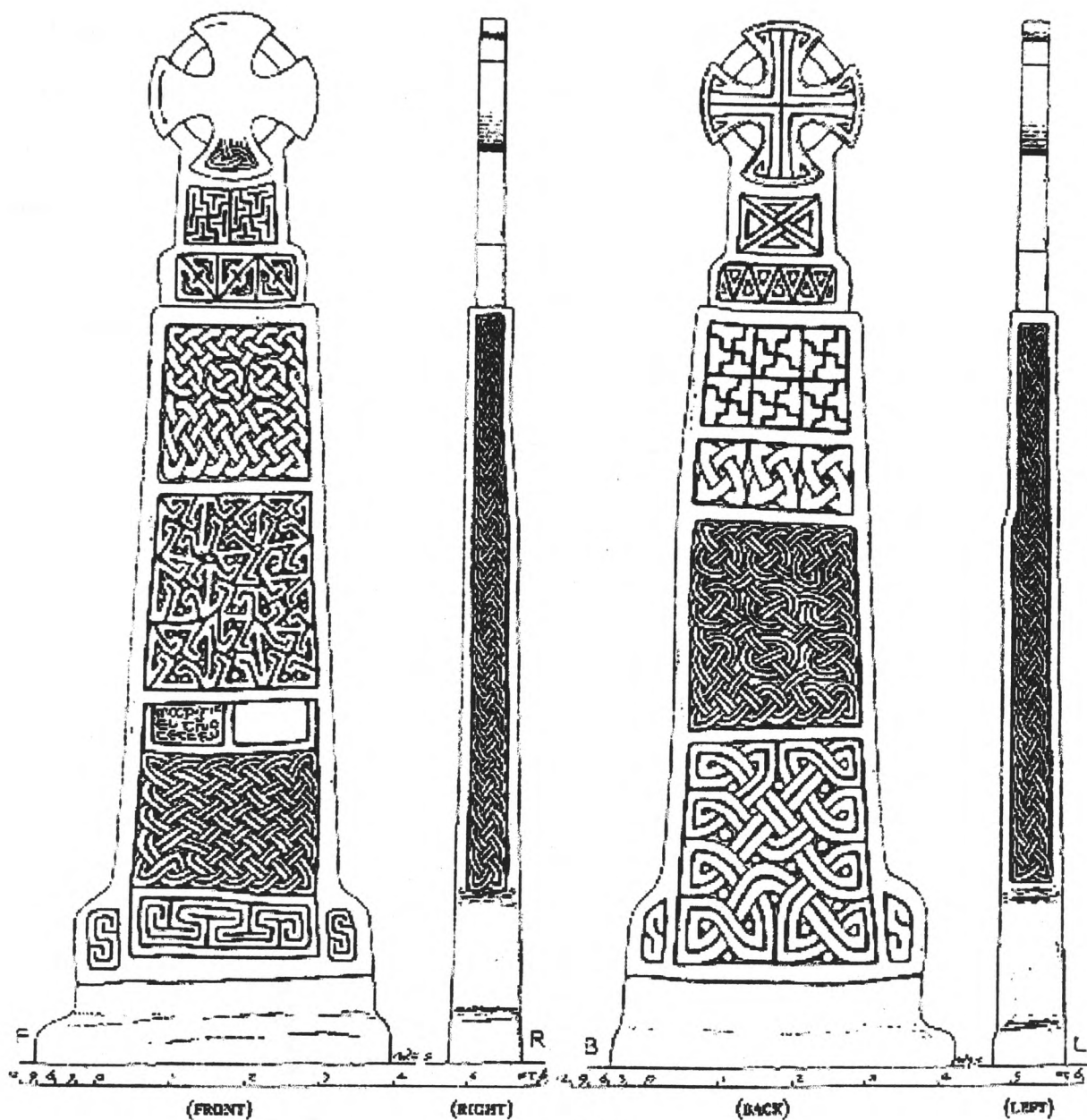


FIG. 196. No. 303.

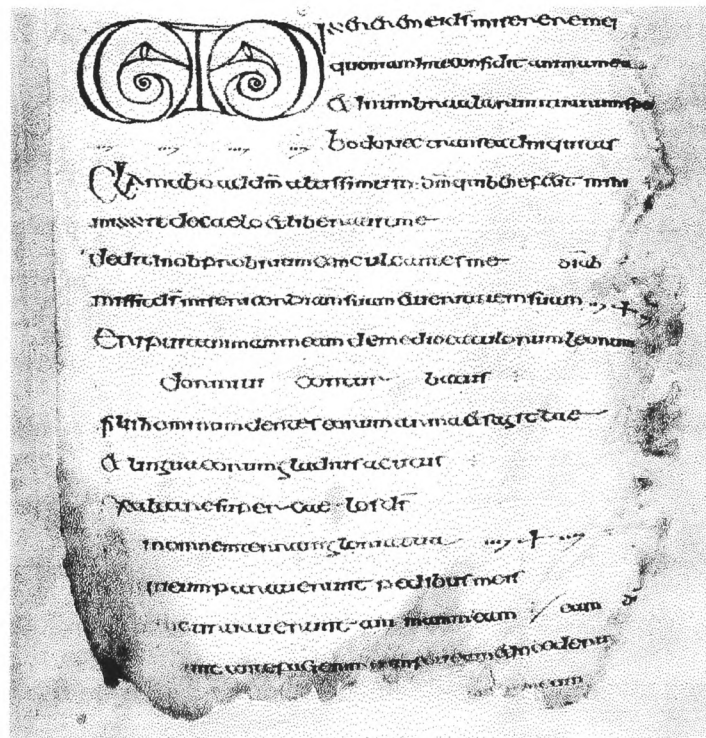
F. 41.

## Chapter 4

### THE EPIGRAPHIC ORIGIN OF THE GEOMETRICAL CAPITAL LETTERS OF PHASE 1 HALF-UNCIAL.

In discussing the three types of ornament discernible in Insular manuscripts of the Hiberno-Northumbrian type – interlace, curvilinear and rectilinear – Carl Nordenfalk in his Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting<sup>1</sup> attributed to the Irish the initial specialisation of curvilinear ornament based on spirals, circles, whorls and trumpets. He saw these forms as a legacy of La Tène art and remarked on their “power of expansion” – and on the capacity of the scribes to absorb and adapt other forms into their repertoire. Of the fluidity of their designs and transforming skill he wrote: “never at rest, it has an elasticity for expansion or contraction, so that, like liquid in a container, it is able to adapt itself to the passages it must fill.”

The early-seventh-century style of ornamentation of the Cathach, Dublin RIA MS S.n., and of TCD MS Ussher I is curvilinear. See illustration of folio 21r below.

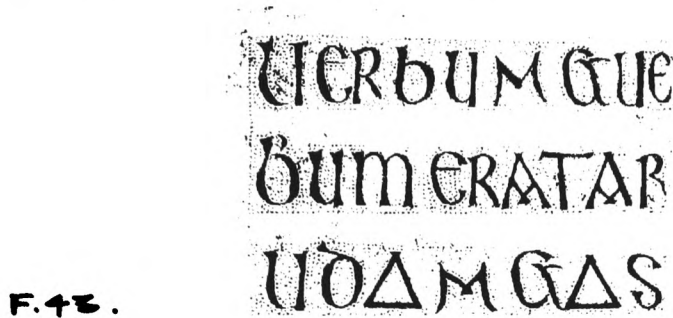


**F. 42 .**

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<sup>1</sup> C. Nordenfalk, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Painting (London, 1977), pp. 18-19.

This curvilinear style is augmented in the mid-seventh-century Book of Durrow, TCD MS A. 4.5., by the addition of a rectilinear style of ornamentation with an associated alphabet, drawn in outline and painted, of geometrical capitals which offers a striking contrast. See illustration of folio 193 below. The Greek delta influenced the later Z shaped S and G.



We have seen that the makers of inscriptions were happy to draw upon a wide range of sources, combining in a very short inscription a range of letterforms that a scribe would not. The origin of this angular alphabet must be looked for outside the scriptorium, for its letterforms are not influenced by the modelled strokes produced by the calligrapher's pen, but by a tool that produces a stroke of constant thickness like the chisel and cutting implements of masons or woodworkers. We might consider the possibility that the faceted shapes that were first cut into wood or bone with a chip-carving knife were borrowed by scribes who rendered them in drawn outline on a flat surface. We find the alphabet in use cut in stone on the Anglesey Catamanus stone, ECMW No13, dateable to c. 650, and in wood both on the coffin of Saint Cuthbert in Durham Cathedral dateable to 698 and on his portable altar, the oldest British example.<sup>2</sup> It was an alphabet best suited to engravers in metal, and we find it on the Ardagh Chalice, dateable to c. 800; its popularity as a display script spanned the period from the mid-seventh to the mid-ninth century.

Examples in cut form are scattered throughout the British Isles from Tarbat in Pictland through mid-Wales to Ramsey Island off the Pembroke coast to Ireland's Clonmacnoise, so that this alphabet represents an epigraphic series of forms adapted for cutting that was in

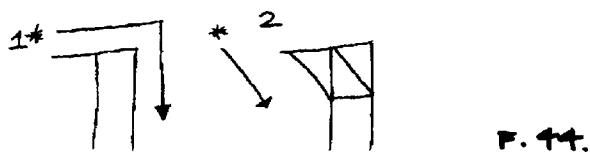
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<sup>2</sup> C. Thomas, The Early Christian Archaeology of North Britain (London, 1971), pp. 191-193.

general use as a monumental Insular equivalent to Roman capitals. Differences in Britain between the Columban church and the Roman mission through Canterbury came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664 at which the Roman party under Wilfrid triumphed. From the few surviving manuscripts it would seem that the opposing churches favoured different hands, the Columban church developing its own half-uncial and the Roman party of Wilfrid favouring a full Roman uncial. Despite this clear stylistic division, described by Julian Brown<sup>3</sup> in terms of “old spontaneity” versus “new dignity”, scribes of both schools utilised geometrical capitals. Borrowing them, it seems most likely, from carvers, insular scribes took them into their repertoire and used them in their manuscripts even in Northumbria where we might expect to find the Italian-influenced scribes of the Roman party using solely Roman varieties of capitalis like quadrata.

The Irish epigraphic script of Ogham, it is now thought, was an adaptation of the Latin alphabet of great ingenuity. The Irish entered into the Roman script system either at a mid-point in its hierarchy with a cursive half-uncial, or even lower with the use by traders of a mercantile cursive. In either case their first familiarity with a practical monumental letterform was not with classical Roman capitals, but with an alphabet of four sets of vertical stem lines crossed or joined by one to five bars. Ogham was a peculiar adaptation of the Roman alphabet that developed into a working system; it is possible that both Ogham and Runic influence the forms of the Hiberno-Northumbrian geometrical capitals. Some of the display capitals use a stem line and differentiate letters by placing bars or a small rectangle at various points on the stem line. Before discussing the origin of the geometrical alphabet it is important to establish the radical difference in construction between the triangular serif of the scribe and the triangular finial of the lettercutter.

DIAGRAM: The scribe's serif

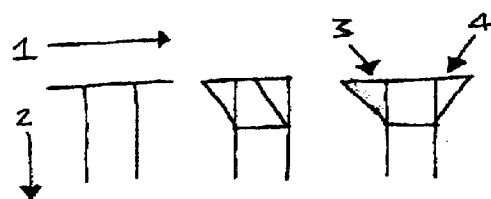


<sup>3</sup> The Durham Gospels, ed. C.D. Verey, T.J. Brown, and E. Coatsworth (Copenhagen, 1980), p.47.

Familiar first with the flowing stylus line of writing in wax, the scribe had to adapt to the slower, much more critical contact of the ink-carrying broad-edged pen on an absorbent surface, vellum. Love of display and decoration influenced the particular finish of insular vellum or parchment. It was a surface ideal for minute pointed-pen work and colouring and had a suede-like nap that was “very rough to the touch”.<sup>4</sup> It was not an ideal surface for edged pen work. The pen hold for half-uncial was “flat” – that is, parallel to the writing line – thus producing a thick stroke when drawn down, and a thin one when drawn across. The broad edge of the calligrapher’s pen at first contact on such a napped surface could not, and still cannot, pull a cleanly-inked downstroke.

A technique was developed to speed the ink into the head of the downstroke. A preliminary thin stroke was drawn across, the sharpness of the quill making a microscopic cut into the napped surface and laying down a thin film of ink to which the downstroke ink could be attached. No matter how thin the across stroke, and how broad the quill edge, this was – and still is – an infallible capillary trick by osmosis. To conceal the exposed thin stroke on the left of the ascender, a stroke called a serif was pulled over it. The triangular serif of the scribe, then, is asymmetrical, and to the left of the downstroke of the pen-formed letter.

DIAGRAM: The lettercutter's finial



F.45.

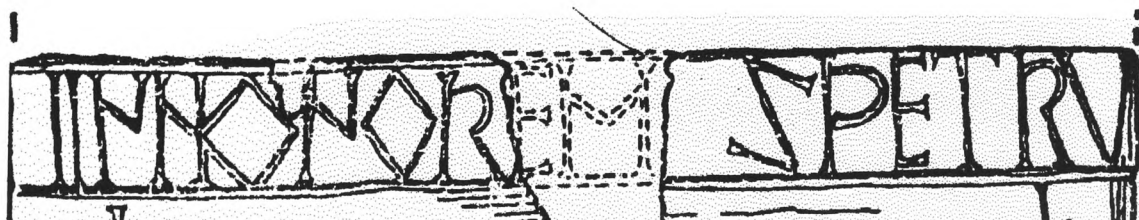
In contrast to the scribe, the sixth-century Welsh lettercutter on the other hand needed to develop a letterform that avoided curves, which were difficult to cut in both stone and wood, and evolved an alphabet based on an oblong with differentiations by diagonal and a triangular “stop”. In cutting in wood and in friable stone, care had to be taken to prevent ripping across the grain of the material, and finial “stops” were carved first before the downstrokes. These

<sup>4</sup> Codices Latini Antiquiores, ii, p. xvi.

finials were produced with three symmetrical angled cuts, one across the head or base line, and two at the same left and right oblique angle into the downstroke. Signs that an alphabet was influenced by once being cut in wood are:

1. Strong triangular finials symmetrically placed at stroke ends to prevent grain ripping. All strokes.
2. Avoidance of right-angled joins, by using detached oblique strokes, where pitting might occur: F, E, L, G, P, R.
3. Avoidance of exposing too small an area within the letterform to breaking off as a section: A, lozenge O, D.
4. Blocking off points to simplify chisel work, and, again, to avoid the ripping of the grain: A, V; N and M reduced to two- and three-bar "gates".

The triangular finishes of geometrical capitals, then, in their original form on wood, lie centrally over the strokes of the drawn and painted letter. As the forms became familiar to scribes the symmetry of the drawn spikes at each corner of the finial lessens, but the spike to the right of the finial still distinguishes its origin. By the time of the production of the Book of Kells, c. 800, for example, the spikes to the left are larger than those to the right, leaning towards the proportion of a broad-pen-formed serif. The late-seventh-century oak coffin of Saint Cuthbert,<sup>5</sup> and his portable altar, illustrated below, give us a range of these geometrical letterforms in various combinations. The carver has used one "u"-shaped gouge, and a straight-edge chisel. The entire design of figures and inscriptions was first sketched on the oak with a sharp burin. The carver has not always followed these initial guidelines with the gouge.



F. 46 .

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<sup>5</sup> J.M.Cronyn, C.V.Horie, St Cuthbert's Coffin: The history, technology and conservation (Durham, 1985), pp.24-25.



As the angular letterforms developed and on stone were less influenced by the practical difficulties of cutting in wood, we see different types of angular letters evolving. They remain distinctive despite variation. This family of angular alphabets utilises mirrored forms as in A/V, Z/S, F/G, P/Q. It shows every sign of adaptation for “chopping” rapidly with a single tool. Some illustrations from Walburg Boppert's corpus of memorials from the Middle Rhineland discussed by Charles Thomas<sup>6</sup> show the same techniques in the earliest sixth-century examples, with precisely the same avoidance of right-angle joins as the lettercutter in the British Isles. These peculiarities are shared with some Runic letters. Hans Jensen discusses the adaptation of Runic forms to the various materials on which they were inscribed:

In their most common forms the runic signs show definite peculiarities compared with the [North Italian version of] Latin capital letters assumed to be their models; the most important are that strokes originally horizontal were given a slant (F, H, T), that curves were mostly replaced by broken lines (K, S, O), and that over long oblique strokes were avoided by shortening, breaking, or crossing (N, A). These remodellings have rightly been attributed to the needs of working on wood. The cutting of horizontal strokes along the grain of wood was avoided – the vertical ones were incised across the grain – and the incising of the difficult curves was made easier ... it can probably be concluded from this that the older metal technique retained the horizontal strokes and curves to begin with, and that the remodelling is to be ascribed only to the later wood technique through which the new forms then became customary for metal and stone also, although there was really no need for them.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C. Thomas, And Shall These Mute Stones Speak? Post Roman Inscriptions in Western Britain (Cardiff, 1994), pp. 66-68.

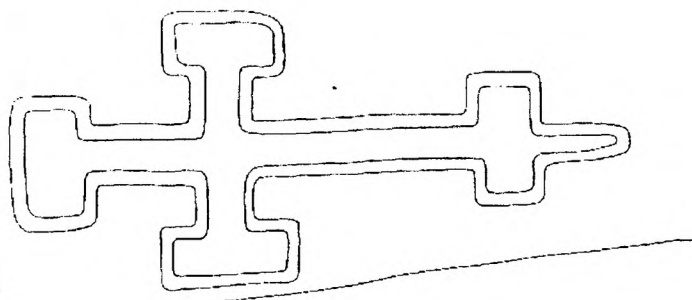
<sup>7</sup> H. Jensen, Sign, Symbol and Script (London, 1970), pp. 567-568.

F. 47.



The early-sixth-century Armentarius stone, illustrated above, from Boppard on the Rhine, Boppert No 1,125, shows clearly the line endings that result when this means of finishing a stroke is borrowed into stone: it produces a fish-tailed “V” shape at the letter-stroke end. This is a letter-stroke end that we find in some early Clonmacnois stones, for example CIIC Nos 550 and 579, at Whithorn on the Petri Apostoli stone, and in Caernarvonshire at Capel Anelog, ECMW Nos 77 and 78. These last are close to Bardsey. There is another possible survival from woodworking carried over skeuomorphically into stone. In Anglesey we have a number of slabs bearing representations of crosses with a spiked foot, ECMW Nos 11a (see illustration below), 17, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 26, 28.

F. 48.



It is possible that these represent in stone copies of pre-existing crosses in wood, as such a base could not have been carved, and would not have been necessary, on a stone cross.

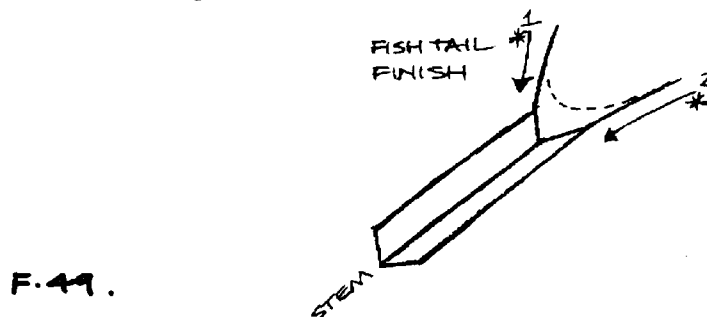
We have some surviving runes carved in wood from the Christchurch Place excavations in Dublin where we can see the fish-tail line end quite clearly. O'Meadhra illustrates a wooden box lid, Catalogue No 25, in her Plate 6.<sup>8</sup> Evidently in the free-est decorative woodcarving,

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<sup>8</sup> Uaininn O'Meadhra, Motif Pieces from Ireland (Uppsala, 1979).

chip-carved “v” section lines are finished not with three cuts, as we see later on stone, but with two.

DIAGRAM: Fish-tail line endings.



The elaborate carving of the wooden boss, assumed to be a centrepiece to a lost wooden cross, found at the same site in Dublin, is also evidence that carvers would have developed to the full a range of techniques on that medium before they were able to on stone.<sup>9</sup> A good range of dendrochronological datings was gained from the Christchurch Place excavations. Also found with Viking material was a carved insular Vandyke, Catalogue DW 14, with an incised “V” inside step fret patterns. It has well-cut serifs with a cut sloped plane joining the two diagonal cuts that are left unjoined in fish-tail line endings. Broad-edge chisels that could keep their edge must have greatly extended the range of possibilities for woodcarvers, and their production. Wood was cheaper and more convenient to use for everyday purposes.

Weatherproof signage must have been in wood. We have references to early memorial crosses in wood from the Life of Saint Patrick.<sup>10</sup> In one incident Patrick lifts and repositions – from one grave to another – a wrongly sited memorial; in the other a whirlwind lifts, breaks and scatters a similar lightweight cross. From buildings to portabilia and kitchen utensils, the early British used wood. Wood technology was highly developed: the material was easily workable with the metal tools of the time where stone was not. As in Scandinavia the woods

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<sup>9</sup> James T. Lang and D. Caulfield, Viking Age Decorated Wood: A Study of its Ornament and Style (Dublin, 1988), Catalogue DW 1.

<sup>10</sup> The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1979), Chapter 41.

of different trees were prized for their various qualities. It seems probable that as burial sites increased in area there must have been a marking system on the surface, now lost, to prevent confusion below, particularly in kindreds where burial with forebears was of importance. Dr Elizabeth O'Brien has made a survey of post-Roman insular burial practices. She noticed the occurrence of the remains of grave markers of wood in the form of post holes at the heads of graves, as well as post holes at the foot:

The placing of post holes at the foot of the grave is a recurring feature throughout the early medieval period. It indicates that the burial was laid facing towards the feature. If, as is likely, these burials were Christian, then the post hole might have contained a wooden cross. A grave marker with the name of the deceased would more likely be placed at the head of the grave.

Dr O'Brien gives tables showing the wide distribution of grave markers excavated to date.<sup>11</sup> She also lists several instances of sets of four post holes, indicating a "wooden superstructure" like the house-shaped shrine over Saint Chad's grave (d.672) that Charles Thomas compares to a Bavarian Totenmemoria.<sup>12</sup>

We might expect British craftsmen to have a store of specialised knowledge of the cleaving properties of various woods rather than stone. The Hisperica Famina,<sup>13</sup> c. 620, gives a description of the construction of a wooden chapel:

This wooden oratory is fashioned out of candle-shaped beams,  
it has sides joined by four-fold fastenings;  
the square foundations of the said temple give it stability,  
from which springs a solid beamwork of massive enclosure;  
it has a vaulted roof above;  
square beams are placed in the ornamented roof.

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth O'Brien, Post-Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England: Burial Practices Reviewed, B.A.R British Series 289, 1999, Chapter 2, Table 5, pp. 30-32; Chapter 5, pp. 66, 84, 122; Chapter 6, p.183.

<sup>12</sup> Bede, H.E. iv. 3.

<sup>13</sup> The Hisperica Famina: I. The A-Text, ed. M.W. Herren (Toronto,1974), p. 109.

Hans Jurgen Hansen in his Architecture in Wood<sup>14</sup> remarked on the skills of those tribes under the Roman Empire who lived in heavily wooded areas: “their language included no vocabulary for the materials, tools or techniques of building in stone or brick. They did, however, have specific words for all the concepts of the carpenter’s craft ... excavations in Celtic, Teutonic and Slav areas have shown that a noteworthy technique of building in wood ... existed in these areas at a relatively early date.”

In his comments on the insular decorated wood found with the Viking material in Dublin, James Lang discusses the wide geographical spread of a common store of woodworking patterns and techniques.<sup>15</sup> Remarking on the persistence of native Irish patterns right in the centre of Viking Dublin alongside the Saxon and Scandinavian, Lang wrote that the Dublin decorated wood confirmed Françoise Henry’s judgement, made in 1970, long before the wood was found. In *Insular art and craft* she thought that it was wrong to attribute too closely, and to an exact geographical area, particular stylistic features; she was “more inclined to see here parallel phenomena and varying aspects of a fashion which takes slightly different forms in the various countries in which it occurs, countries in constant contact with one another, having in common not so much fully evolved patterns as certain tastes and trends.” As we find geometrical capitals used with great skill in the manuscripts associated with the Echternach scriptorium, and also on sixth-century early Christian memorials of the middle Rhineland, this is a coincidence, of early epigraphic use and later manuscript use, that we see in Western Britain and seems to be an example of that parallelism that Françoise Henry described.

When we see the letters in manuscripts, they sometimes show signs of mimicking the appearance of the inscription by which they are inspired, like the drawn cut serif of the ornamental cross in TCD MS Ussher 1 (see Chapter 2 above), or when the geometrical capitals are used in a band beneath the rim of the Ardagh Chalice, NMI 1874:99, thought to be contemporary with the Book of Kells. Their appearance here suggests a band of raised

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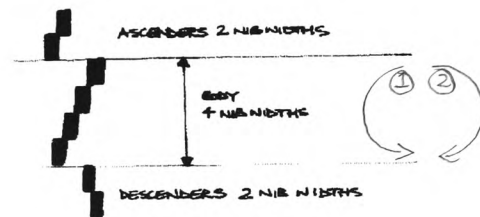
<sup>14</sup> H.J. Hansen, Architecture in Wood (London, 1971), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Lang and Caulfield, Viking Age Decorated Wood, p. 14.

lettering such as we see in the Franks casket, discussed by Page,<sup>16</sup> where the runes stand proud of a cut-away background. On the silver of the chalice the letterforms are clear while the background is pecked, giving the appearance of bas-relief. This is carried over into manuscripts, too, where the background is filled with minute dotting, leaving the letterforms as if they were in relief, as in the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The alphabet used on wood like that on Saint Cuthbert's coffin, built up of straight cuts, is drawn in to the Insular scribes' repertoire at the time that they begin to experiment with rectilinear forms for decorated pages. These check, step and key patterns with a diagonal fret are worked within a frame of units measured up from the scribe's writing line, which was calculated by making four steps of the nib width, creating a linear grid.

DIAGRAM: measurement of body height by nib widths.



F.50.

We first see a geometrical capital placed in a decorative field in the Book of Durrow, c. 675, at the beginning of Saint John's Gospel, and the habit of using them as a contrast to a curvilinear main hand persisted until the time of Ferdornach, writing in the Book of Armagh in the early ninth century. His hand is discussed by Bernard Meehan in an article that is illustrated with a page heading APOCALIPSIS in geometrical capitals.<sup>17</sup> Quite clearly they had fallen into decay by the time of the MacRegol Gospels, c.820, Bodleian Auct. MS D.2.19, which of the survivors is the last of the series of Insular half-uncial gospel books and undistinguished calligraphically. The alphabet peaks in the Lindisfarne Gospels, BL Cotton MS Nero D.IV. See

<sup>16</sup> R.I. Page, An Introduction to English Runes (London, 1973), pp. 174-182.

<sup>17</sup> B. Meehan, "A Melody of Curves Across the Page": Art and Calligraphy in the Book of Armagh', Irish Arts Review, 14 (1998), pp. 90-101.

illustration of folio 29 below. This period of very rapid development in book arts falls in the reigns of the Northumbrian King Oswy and his sons Eadfrith, and Aldfrith who had an Irish mother. Oswy and Aldfrith were both educated on Iona in the Columban tradition. Aldfrith reigned from 685 to 705. Adamnan, Abbot of Iona and biographer of Saint Columba, brought his book De locis sanctis<sup>18</sup> with him to Aldfrith's court in 686. This book was compiled by Adamnan from discussions on Iona with the visiting Papal Legate Arculf, who gave to Adamnan as a visual aid sketches on wax tablets. At this stage, long after the Synod of Whitby in 664, Adamnan was evidently still wearing the Celtic tonsure, as it was two years later in 688 that Ceolfrith, Abbot of Wearmouth and Jarrow, claimed to have converted Adamnan, when on a visit to Ceolfrith at his monastery, to the Roman tonsure and method of reckoning the date of Easter. It is clear, then, that the Synod of Whitby did not cause an instant cutting off of connection with Iona or with Columban churchmen.

As the scriptorium of Wearmouth Jarrow was producing books that were graphic propaganda for the Roman party in the English church, the prominence given to geometrical capitals in these great Insular gospels must signify something more than a scribal demonstration of skill. E.A.Lowe is referring to the use of the full range of the Roman script system in the Introduction to CLA II when he writes: "Majuscule came before minuscule, not only in rank, but also in time. The second may be derived from the first but not vice versa. This is an obvious point and hardly needs pressing. The attitude of insular scribes confirms it. The priority which they give to majuscule in the hierarchy of scripts is conclusive – whenever a fine liturgical book was required it was written in majuscule, even though minuscule was known at the time. In writing a minuscule text the headings and colophons for which it was customary to use an older and more dignified script, are in majuscule; in short, insular scribes invariably give majuscule the place of honour and that can only be because it is the older type."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Adomnan's Life of Columba, eds. A.O. and M.O. Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), pp. 93-94.

<sup>19</sup> Lowe, CLA II, p. xv.



F. 51.



The point that does need pressing here is the high position given to geometrical letters as the most elaborate display script, and the question must be asked: was it the oldest and most dignified letterform as it was associated with early insular memorials rather than Roman capitals?

Insular scribes, particularly during Phase 1 of half-uncial, were flamboyant in displaying a range of scripts, they liked variety, and geometrical letters offer the strongest contrast to the wide bows of half-uncial. Because the Irish did not make practical contact with the Roman script system at the high point of Trajan capitals, it rather looks as though they worked up a display form of half-uncial from more lowly sources. It is clear from the Durham manuscripts A.II.10 and A.II.16 that their scribes were equally fluent in majuscule and minuscule and moved with the same pen from one to the other even within a line, and sometimes even within a word. If these scribes, as Lowe proposes above, did use “an older and more dignified script” for openings and headings, then they were choosing geometrical capitals as they carried significant tradition with them. The alphabet is inventive in using forms from minuscule as well as majuscule, which would seem to indicate that even if an ancient system it was a highly absorbent one. They resemble Runes and like them look well when they are cut in stone. Circa 750 Runic was well cut on the Ruthwell cross<sup>20</sup> with practised skill and was evidently then a recognised medium for dignified memorialising.

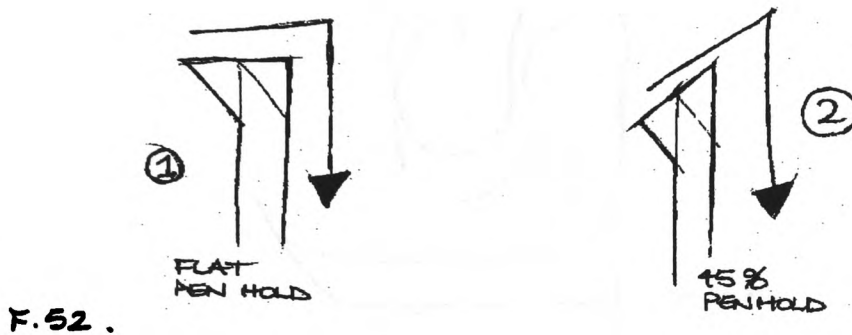
The scribe Ferdomnach, c. 807, draws the outline of his geometrical capitals (as in his opening to Apocalypse, folio 160 recto, TCD MS 52) with the pen of his main text. The spiral finials are also made with the same pen. A competent scribe could use the same nib in two ways: firstly with the broad edge of the cut quill to produce the inflected band of his text letters, and secondly with the nib turned on its edge to produce a fine line. In the first the entire edge is in contact with the writing surface, in the second only the right or left point of the cut quill's edge. See DIAGRAM of pen manipulation by the scribe of Durham A.II.16, p. 92 below. It has been thought that the fine line ornament sprouting from significant letters was

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<sup>20</sup> J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, Early Christian Monuments of Scotland (Edinburgh, 1903), pp. 442-448.

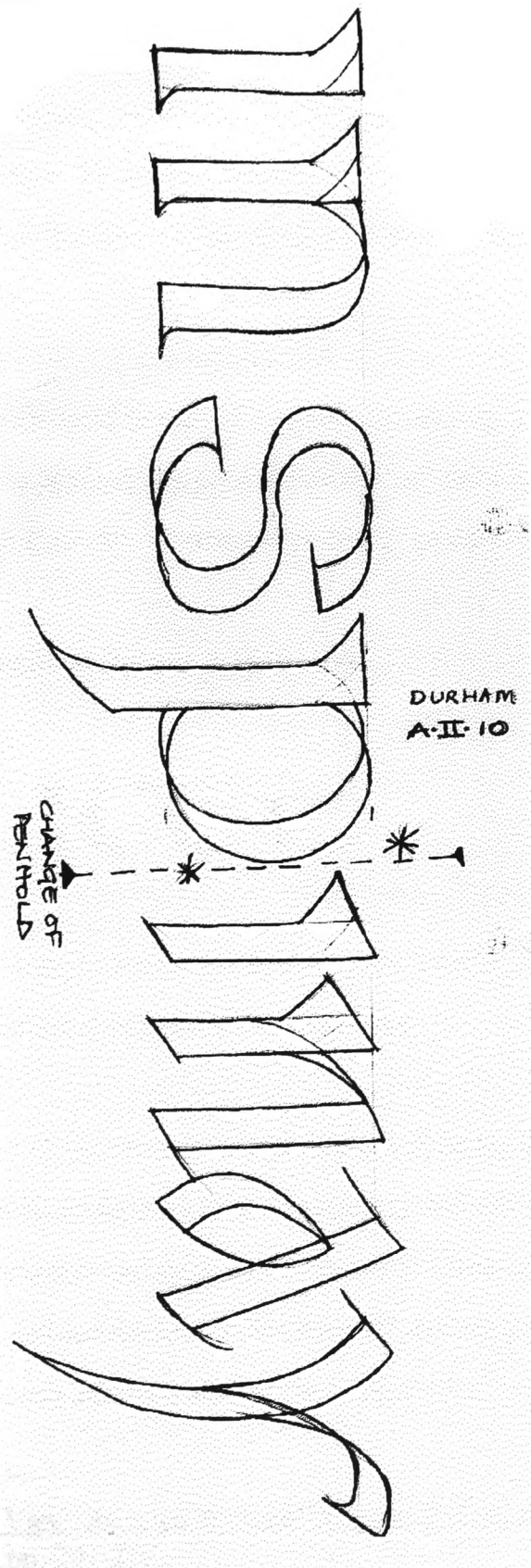
added later with a “mapping pen”, but it springs naturally from the wet inked letter at the time it was written, and was not added later. Well-trained scribes could use fluently majuscules and minuscules that were calligraphic and with the same pen draw geometrical display capitals. Close examination of the construction of these letterforms and the point at which the scribe makes a changeover from one to the other may tell us something of the frame of mind that allowed those designing an inscription on the relatively confined space of a memorial inscription to choose their letterforms freely.

DIAGRAM: Pen Holds 1 and 2



At the beginning of this chapter Nordenfalk’s opinion was quoted regarding the decorative capacity for infinite expansion. This was a facility that could spread to the making of the letterform itself, and from our very earliest examples of Insular script we see the tendency to ligature, to make conjoint strokes and compendia in both penned and drawn letters. We have already noticed the O/M combined in the Springmount Bog tablets, and the extensive ligaturing when the scribe reverts to notational cursive. In Durham A.II.10 we have a scribe writing at least fifty years later than the scribe of the tablets using the same t/e and t/i ligatures in a very much more florid minuscule which he uses alongside his main text hand. It has the earliest example of Insular decorative minuscule. Closing a line with not enough space to complete in half-uncial, he changes his pen angle to 45 degrees and he completes the phrase in minuscule. Durham A.II.10 can shed some light on what may have been going on in a Welsh scriptorium of the time. It certainly makes use of a range of letterform in a small area, which is a curious feature of our earliest bookhand inscription, ECMW 13.

DIAGRAM: Penhold change in Durham A.II.10: contraction produced by changing from flat to 45 degrees.



F.53.

Examples of changes of penhold in Durham A.II.10 are:

Between words:

page 3 recto Column 1, last line: half-uncial est inducas to minuscule partes.

Within a word:

page 338 verso Column 1, seven lines up: in spinas changes from half-uncial to minuscule at the letter “i”. See DIAGRAM above.

page 338 Column 1, last line: et dixit ad illos changes from half-uncial to minuscule at the “o” of illos.

The scribe is so habituated to the “et” ligature that he uses it not only as an ampersand sign but within words as in licet sabbato bene where the “et” finish of licet uses the same horizontal conjoint stroke from the “e” crossbar to the “t” crossbar as in the Springmount Bog tablets.

DIAGRAM: the “et” ligature in Durham A.II.10.



Another example of ligaturing in Durham A.II.10 is: page 2 verso, Column 1, line 3. half-uncial languori closes with a flourished ligature “ri” in minuscule.

The scribe of A.II.10 likes to put his pen through all its paces and obviously feels that there is no incongruity in his juxtapositioning of majuscule and minuscule. With the same pen he draws capitals within his text and carries small spirals out from the serifs. He belongs to the Phase 1 of half-uncial, a division made by Julian Brown<sup>21</sup> to distinguish between what he calls the “old spontaneity” of Irish influence and the “new dignity” of the perfected Phase 2

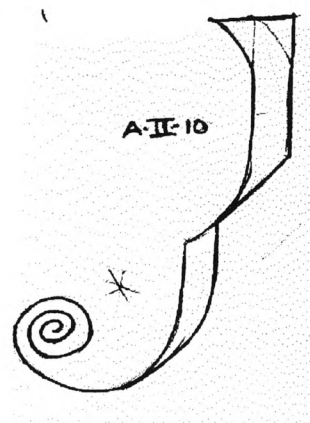
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<sup>21</sup> A Palaeographer's View: Selected Writings of Julian Brown, ed. J. Bately, M. Brown, J. Roberts (Oxford, 1993), pp. 201-220.

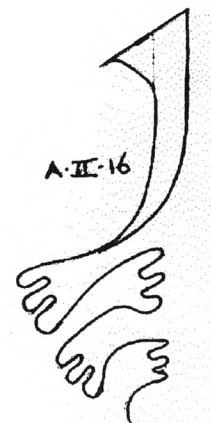
Northumbrian style seen in the Lindisfarne Gospels. In his section of the prefatory matter to the facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels, Julian Brown writes of another Phase 1 manuscript: “In the Cathach ... the letters behave like a band of irregulars, form rough ranks and keep their individuality. In Lindisfarne, Durham, Echternach ... they parade like the trained soldiers of a regular army.”<sup>22</sup>

Very little of the epigraphy of Western Britain 600-900 aspires to Julian Brown’s “new dignity” of Phase 2 half-uncial, and as we see it in Wales – c. 650 at the time of writing of Durham A.II.10 – in its spontaneity, it carries into stone carving the insouciant mixing of hands that we see in that manuscript. In Northumbria the passage from spontaneity to dignity was not a sudden complete conversion: there was a period of scribal confusion with a tussle between letterforms which sometimes ended up bound together. The eighth-century Durham manuscript A.II.16 is a “mixed” gospels of three hands, with sections in pen-manipulated full uncial on the Italian model (folios 1-23, 34-86 and 102), half-uncial contemporary with the Durham Gospels (folios 24-33, 87-101) and a closing section of Anglo-Saxon majuscule completing the last gospel (folios 103-134).

The Irish-influenced Insular half-uncial section of Durham A.II.16 is of great interest in further developing features that we first see in Durham A.II.10, which may well have been written on Iona before travelling to Lindisfarne. The scribes refine the spiral finials to text capitals, and make a flamboyant feature of a fine line decorative filler (see DIAGRAMS below): this last we see also in the Durham Gospels.



F. 55.



<sup>22</sup> Evangelium Quattuor Codex Lindisfarnensis (Olten and Lausanne, 1956), p. 90.

The thin lines of this scribe are true hair lines, showing high skill at quill cutting. Although the Durham Gospels, written at Lindisfarne, are in the dignified Phase 2 department of half-uncial manuscripts, there is still the habit of completing a word or phrase in minuscule. Minuscule finishes in the Durham Gospels are, for example: 5 recto: SUB ventit, 9 recto: SALVAtor mundi, 23 recto: BETHANIA JUXTa hierusalem. The scribe is also using many capital compendia, for example: 12 recto: P/Ost haec, 34 recto: P/Ater, 86 verso: D/Icebat, 97 verso: D/Ico. On 34 recto and 38 verso the scribe writes a section of florid minuscule with very tall ascenders and looped links.

If Julian Brown's theory is correct and the Durham and Echternach Gospels are contemporaries of the 690s, set minuscule seems to have reached a point of near equivalence with half-uncial. In the view of Julian Brown and Christopher Verey the latter was a presentation volume from one foundation to another. Only the first recto of the Echternach Gospel is written in half-uncial: the rest is a very fine set minuscule. We know that the scriptoria of Bangor and Iona by this date had strong house styles of set minuscule, that we can see in Dorbenne's Schaffhausen MS Generalia 1, and in the Bangor Antiphonary now in the Ambrosian. By the mid-ninth century in Ireland formal half-uncial had been largely abandoned in favour of pointed minuscule, which then fossilized. Far more suitable for the purpose than majuscule or minuscule round hands, we see it beautifully adapted for lettercutting, with its flattened arcs and pointed joints, on the orthostats of the burial chamber at Knowth.<sup>23</sup> In the interplay of the various manuscript hands, geometrical capitals held their place as the choice display letter until the time that half-uncial was discarded.

In Wales we see the lettercutters failing to evolve such a homogeneous inscriptional alphabet; instead they clung to a round majuscule/minuscule, mixing it with some geometrical capitals, including the Greek A of the Catamanus inscription, which also passed into the Irish minuscule, where it survives in modified form to this day. The features of early penmanship that pass into the repertoire of the British lettercutter are the "et" ligature (still in use on the

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<sup>23</sup> G. Eogan, Knowth Inscriptions, unpublished report by the Discovery Programme, Dublin.

Samson Cross at Llantwit Major), the minuscule ascenders that are vestigial remains of the cursive loops of wax tablet writing (seen clearly on the Towyn stone), conjoint lateral strokes (like the “RE” of the Catamanus stone) and the strong triangular serif (stone of Briamail Flou). A careful charting of these features, bearing in mind the tendency of minuscule to “decorative expansion” which may have been brought into play by the problems of dealing with the surface irregularities of the stone being worked on, might give us a less condescending analysis of these apparently crude inscriptions.

In epigraphy geometrical capitals are rarely seen en masse, but Kermode discovered a pre-Viking memorial to a Bishop of Man at Maughold (Kermode No 27, illustrated below), showing that they could be used as the sole letterform.<sup>24</sup>



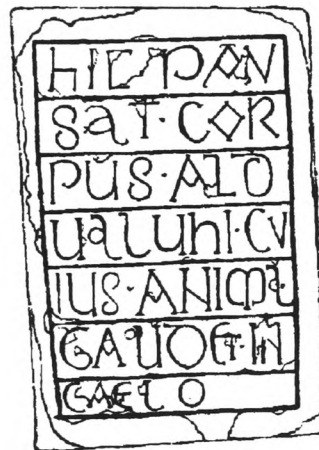
The alphabet uses some stem line letters with confronted, mirrored forms of “a” and “p”. It is by a skilled letterer and carver as it uniquely places the letters around the rim of a roundel, angling all downstrokes towards the centre, like a coin. The advantage of arranging an inscription in a circle if the cutter were working in wood, across the grain of a plank, would be that no line would be cut along the grain. Kermode No 27 is a survivor that perhaps gives us a clue as to the appearance of a lettered wooden monument.

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<sup>24</sup> P.M.C. Kermode, Manx Crosses (London, 1907), pp. 111-112.

The series of early Christian stones from the middle Rhineland represents a unique group of survivors in being cut entirely in a style of geometrical lettering.<sup>25</sup> They come from Mainz, Bingen, Boppard, Wiesbaden and Worms. They are all cut in limestone, an easy stone to cut, so that the angular forms are not forced upon the cutter by any restriction of the medium; they are cut in the lettering familiar to the craftsman. One unusual stone from Worms, the Aldualuhus-Stein, shows a mixing of half-uncial with geometrical letters familiar to us from Wales, showing that if he so wished the cutter could perfectly well inscribe curved strokes.

ILLUSTRATION of Aldualuhus' stone.



F.57 .

We can now compare the middle Rhineland series with the debased Roman epigraphy of its Gaulish neighbours, where for angularity there is nothing comparable, apart from the few high-quality Greek inscriptions of the fifth-century Jewish merchants of Trier.<sup>26</sup> But Le Blant shows three Merovingian rings with inscribed lettering, Numbers 19, 20B and 24, that clearly show angular letters with fish-tailed line endings.<sup>27</sup> This suggests again a cross-craft influence by engravers or metalworkers on lettercutters in stone.

<sup>25</sup> W. Boppert, Die frühchristlichen Inschriften des Mittelrheingebietes (Mainz, 1971).

<sup>26</sup> Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieure à la renaissance carolingienne, Vol. I. Belgique Première; Vol. XV. Viennoise du Nord; Vol. VIII. Aquitaine Première.

<sup>27</sup> E. Le Blant, Inscriptions Chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures au VIII siècle, Vol. I (Paris, 1856), pp. 19-24.



DIAGRAM: engraved inscription on a Merovingian metal ring. (Le Blant 19).



Christianity in the middle Rhineland was in a perilous position in the early sixth century after the Roman withdrawal in 475, although bishops held out at Trier, Mainz and Worms. Clovis converted very late in his life, in 508; his son Theuderic who succeeded in 511 deliberately regenerated Christianity by bringing in churchmen from Aquitaine. Nicetius, Bishop of Trier from 525 to 565, was a native of Aquitaine. Britons, Irish and, later, Anglo-Saxons became involved in the mission to the Franks. Columbanus was active in the eastern parts of Francia for about twenty years from 590. When he was having difficulties at first in setting up his community at Luxueil, as described in chapter 9 of Jonas's Life,<sup>28</sup> he was aided by a British abbot, Carantocus, who was already established in the area. Contacts between Ireland and Britain with Gaul by sea probably concentrated on the estuaries of the Loire and the Garonne.

There was a well-worn route connecting Ireland and Aquitaine initially established through trade.<sup>29</sup> Links between Wales and Gaul had been further strengthened when the Anglo-Saxon invasions displaced Britons to the Continent, with a major settlement in Brittany. That some epigraphic fashions had travelled to Wales along this route was noticed by Charles Thomas:

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<sup>28</sup> Jonas, Vita S. Columbani, ed. B. Krush, Ionae Vitae Sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis, MGH SRG (Hanover, 1905), Book I, Chapter 7, pp. 165-6.

<sup>29</sup> Edward James, 'Ireland and western Gaul', in D. Whitelock et al. (eds.), Ireland in Early Medieval Europe (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 362-386.

About the only epigraphic innovation of note, brought in from Christian Gaul, the Atlantic side of France in VI.1, was a little sub-fashion for angular, or angle-bar, A, no doubt thought very smart ... the use of angle-bar A was again diffused originally in S-W Demetia.<sup>30</sup>

Angle-bar A belongs to the geometrical alphabet and, we might speculate, has an angled crossbar for the same reason that the O became lozenge-shaped, the F had two diagonal bars rather than horizontal, and the L had a diagonal foot: in order to avoid horizontal bars. This is an absolute necessity only when working across the grain of wood. It seems that once they were borrowed into stoneworking these features gradually died out. I illustrate the development of the family of geometrical alphabets with three sets of letters.

I. The first, the earliest, based on the middle Rhineland stones of the sixth century and some of the earliest angular letters from the Welsh stones, shows the highest incidence of avoidance of right-angle joins, with fish-tail serifs and a T that has an arrowhead crossbar: the same solution to the same problem, that of avoiding a horizontal, as in the A. What is clear from the continental stones is the tendency to allow strokes to cross over. This could have been produced by the use of a chip-carving knife, where the left hand presses on the flat back of the knife while the stroke is pulled and obscures the end of the cut. We have Welsh examples in stone also. The A in the hands of scribes was perfected by joining the points: we see this for example in the Saturnbiu stone from Ramsey Island.

DIAGRAM: the Saturnbiu stone.

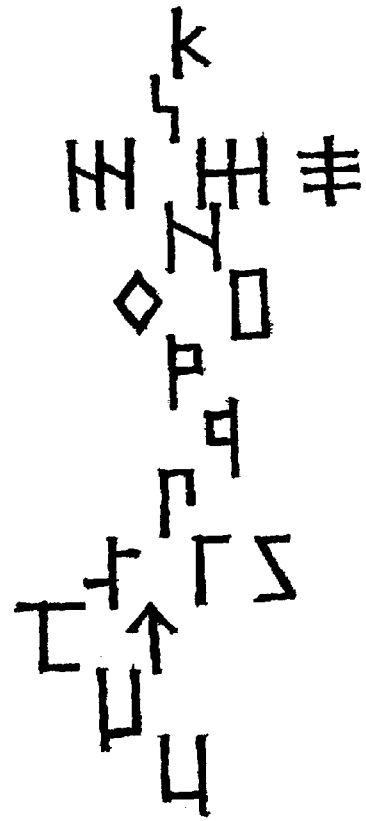
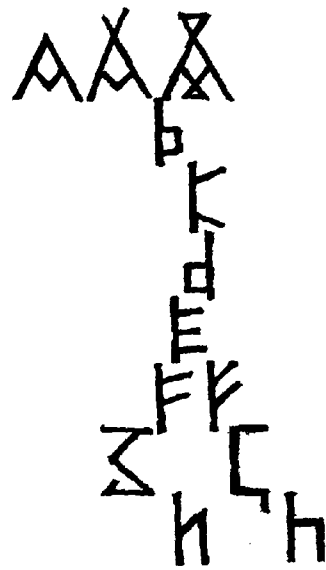


F. 59.

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<sup>30</sup> Thomas, And Shall These Mute Stones Speak?, p. 96.

Reconstructed alphabet: geometric Type I and II.



F.60 .

Alphabet Type III: geometric capitals.

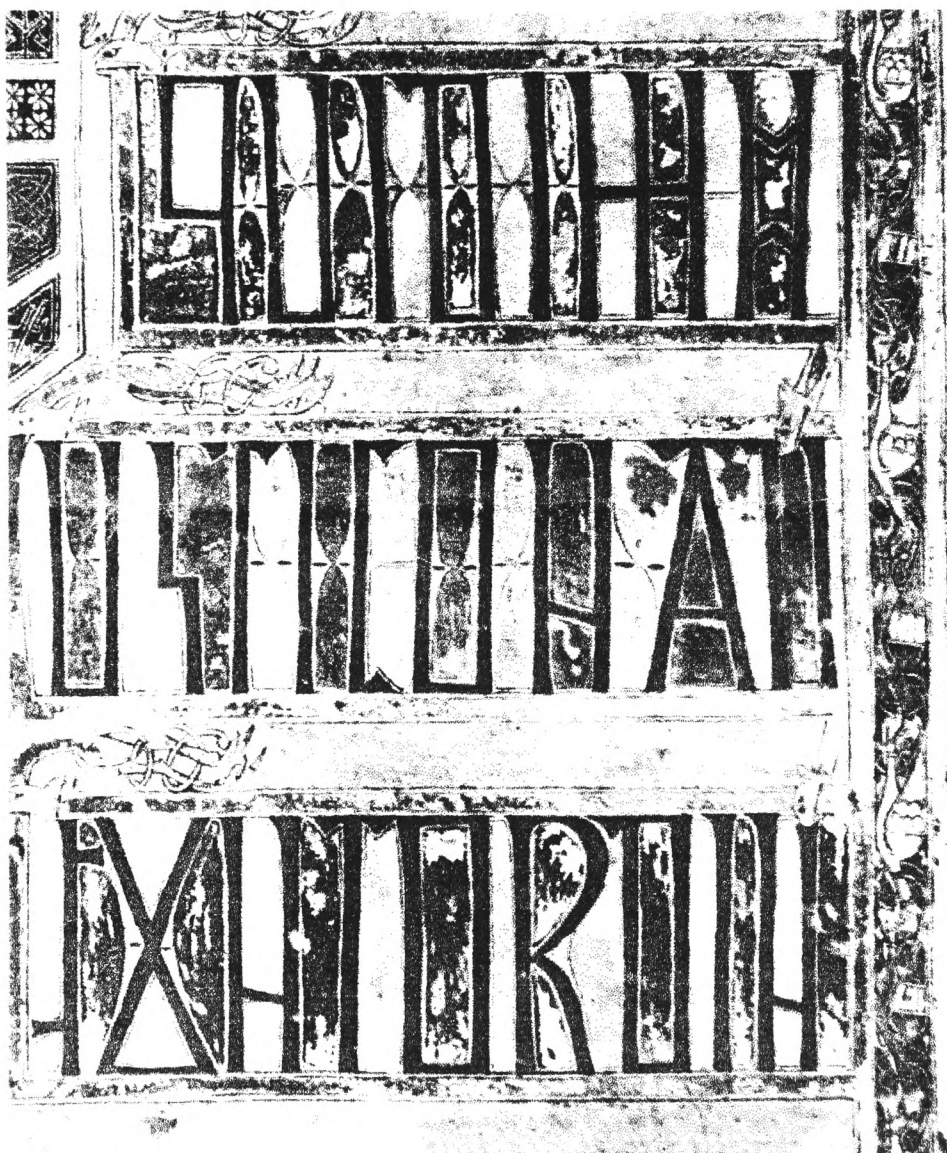
A B C D E F S  
H I K H H O  
P Q R S T U  
X Y Z M N

F. 61.

II. The second, seventh-century, no longer transitional: the cutters begin to discard the limitations that were imposed only by the medium of wood. They develop a set of letters using a stem line and differentiating the letters with added bars that no longer have to be diagonal. They retain the decorative A and lozenge O.

III. Scribal geometrical letters peculiar to Kells, Lichfield and some Continental Gospels. See alphabet above.

ILLUSTRATION: Lichfield Gospels, folio 221.



F. 62 .

In his paper 'Early Christian Latin Inscriptions of Britain and Gaul: Chronology and Context', Jeremy Knight comments on Nash-Williams' awareness of the fact that the *Hic Jacet* formula could have come to Wales from two areas of Gaul – either South Gaul (Lyon/Vienne) or the Rhineland – and his decision that the Rhineland was less likely to have been the area through which it was transmitted c. 500.<sup>31</sup> The two stones in ECMW giving Gaulish links are Nos 33 and 104. No 33 is a memorial for Bivatigirinus, a native of Angers on the Loire. No 104 is the Penmachno stone that uses the consular system of dating peculiar to the district around Lyon and Vienne. As we find in the areas of Lyon/Vienne and Aquitaine a similar debased style of Roman inscriptions to that which we find in the Rhineland and the British Isles in the sixth century, those inscriptions that show something different in their lettering, noticed by Charles Thomas as a "sub-fashion", namely angular letterforms, are an important indicator.

Because of their superficial resemblance to Runic, and the borrowing of a few forms, a conviction has grown up that geometrical capitals are Northumbrian in origin. In her Ph.D. thesis on the Lichfield Gospels, Wendy Stein makes this widespread assumption: "An artist would most likely be exposed to Runes within their area of heaviest use in Britain, especially in Northumbria."<sup>32</sup> The Welsh epigraphic evidence shows that an angular alphabet was in use over a wide area before Runes were used in Britain. It is an angular alphabet akin to that used by the Franks in the sixth century. The extent to which Runic was influenced by the Latin alphabet is still debated; it seems to have been a development in the Northern Alps that was as original as Ogham. The Anglo-Saxons had been less exposed to Roman ways than had their Frankish neighbours, and although their alphabets have similarities these arise, I suggest, from the limitations imposed by similar tools and materials. The Franks were clearly adapting the complete Latin alphabet. We should, I think, suspect this alphabet of being the model for the display letters later developed by insular scribes, rather than Runic or Kufic.

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremy Knight, 'The Early Christian Latin Inscriptions of Britain and Gaul', in Edwards and Lane (eds.), The Early Church in Wales and the West (Oxford, 1992), pp. 45-50.

<sup>32</sup> W.A. Stein, 'The Lichfield Gospels', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, Berkeley (1980), p. 59.

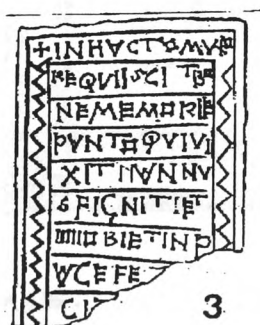
The Gospels of Kells and Lichfield share some unique features. They have a unique reading of Mark 14:24. They both have extensive use of white lead and overlaid glazes. Their display capitals are akin. Wendy Stein noticed that the squared forms of H and P [both found in sixth-century Welsh epigraphy] are unusual, and observed that the geometric S, A and L of Lichfield are found on the Ardagh Chalice. The rectangular A, from the latest “boxed” style of geometrical letters, she wrote, “does not occur in Lindisfarne or any other surely Anglo-Saxon manuscript.”

DIAGRAM: geometric S, L and A.



When we take this into consideration alongside evidence of the display letters from Continental insular-influenced Gospels, which show a clear understanding of their own local epigraphic ancestor alphabet, it seems that a good case might be made for a strong connecting link of a shared graphics tradition running from Ireland and Wales through Northern France to the insular-influenced foundations of Luxeuil, and its offshoots, and the Rhine valley area: a shared graphic vocabulary of letterform and decoration that was distinctive by the mid-seventh century. The St Gall Gospels, MS 51, Cathedral Library St Gall, use the late boxed geometrical letters with the rectangular A that Stein does not recognise as Anglo-Saxon. The Echternach manuscript, Cologne 213, Collectio Canonum, uses a square O echoing the crossovers of the seventh-century Panto-Stein from Mainz. See manuscript ILLUSTRATION and DIAGRAM below.

DIAGRAM: Middle Rhineland stones for Panto, seventh century, and Badegiselus, c.700.



F.64.







We find the rare angular S of the Gospels of Lichfield and Kells in the fragmentary Freiburg Gospels, Universitäts Bibliothek Cod.702, folio.iv, and in the Saturnbiu inscription from Ramsey Island. The Echternach Gospels, Paris BN MS Lat. 99389, use the broken L and the lozenge O of the Ardagh Chalice.

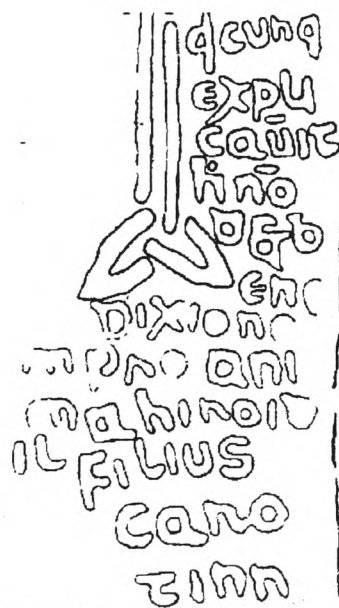
Wendy Stein does not consider that Wales might have had a scriptorium that could have produced the Lichfield Gospels, describing it as a cultural backwater at that time. But the *Liber Commonei*, discussed in the following chapter, shows us high-quality scribal work in Greek, Insular minuscule and half-uncial, and shows that Greek was being sung in services there in the early ninth century. More importantly, the inscribed stones give very early evidence for the existence of three kinds of letterform, the most elaborate of which, the geometrical alphabet, shows that Wales was not off the map and in the dark, but rather a communicating member of the insular family.

## Chapter 5

### THE CHANGE FROM PHASE 1 HALF-UNCIAL TO PHASE 2: HOW THIS CORRESPONDS IN EPIGRAPHY TO AN EMPHASIS ON ORNAMENT AND COMPLEXITY OF LAYOUT RATHER THAN ON LETTERING.

One Welsh inscription, ECMW No 125 at Llanwnnws in Cardiganshire, is long enough to show clear signs of being modelled on the developed Phase 2 half-uncial complete with scribal contractions, and it has a text giving Irish connections. To reproduce in stone the great curved strokes of the manuscript hand with its strong contrast between thick and thin was apparently beyond the capacities of the average stonecutter in Wales. What was possible on parchment for presenting a text could not transfer to stone, but the larger-scale decorative schemes associated with the eighth-century flowering of book arts between the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells could do so. Scribes and scholars were fascinated by symbolism and patterning, and though the general standard of lettering remained low compared to Northumbrian work, we see on the grander monuments of Nash-Williams' Groups II and III a thorough understanding of complex patterning by the stonecutters.

ILLUSTRATION: Nash-Williams' drawing of the Llanwnnws stone, ECMW No 125.



F.66.

ILLUMPS. 1928

The mid-thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen<sup>1</sup> contains a poem in praise of the Trinity that is discussed by Oliver Davies in his Celtic Christianity in Medieval Wales.<sup>2</sup> As the Feast of the Trinity was not established as a church festival until 1334, Davies suggests that the poem, which has an eighth-century Irish parallel,<sup>3</sup> may reflect “trinitarian devotion – so typical of the Celtic peoples” from a much earlier period. He links the general style of the poem to fourth-century Latin hymnology, and the opening lines specifically to a possibly Welsh composition, “The Prayers of Moucan”, a Latin penitential poem found in the eighth-century Anglo-Saxon Book of Cerne:

I praise the threefold  
Trinity as God,  
Who is one and three,  
A single power in unity....

He made the hot and the cold,  
The sun and the moon,  
The word in the tablet,  
And the flame in the taper.....

The Welsh original for “The word in the tablet” is “A llythyren mewn cwyr”: the word in the wax.<sup>4</sup> To the epigrapher this poem suggests two things of importance: the first being the simple – and to the unlettered the easily understandable – graphic symbolism of the triangle, the second being the association of “The word” not with a manuscript or book, but with “the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Haycock, Blodeugerdd Barddas o Ganu Crefyddol Cynnar (Bala, 1994), no. 2.

<sup>2</sup> O. Davies, Celtic Christianity in Early Medieval Wales (Cardiff, 1996), pp. 57-60.

<sup>3</sup> Old Irish Table of Commutations, tr. D.A. Binchy, Appendix to The Irish Penitentials, ed. L. Bieler (Dublin, 1963), pp.277-83.

<sup>4</sup> Haycock, Blodeugerdd, pp. 20, 22.

tablet” and with the medium of wax. In his dictionary of graphic religious symbolism, Ellwood Post<sup>5</sup> gives nine examples of ancient symbols for the Holy Trinity including the equilateral triangle, the triquetra and the trefoil. The scribe of the Phase 1 half-uncial Book of Durrow had incorporated the Greek delta, as an equilateral triangle, into his repertoire of geometrical capitals, using it where he requires it to express the holy name of God. Rudolf Koch<sup>6</sup> placed the triangle among the oldest of signs in general use. First used by the ancient Egyptians as the emblem of godhead, then as a Pythagorean symbol for wisdom, it was later taken into Christian symbolism as the sign of the triple personality of God. At the opening of Saint John's Gospel, folio 193, the scribe of the Book of Durrow uses the delta form twice in the same line, line 6, for the name of God, DM: DEUM/ DS: DEUS. Here as a geometrical figure it stands for “D”, but the triangular letterform, like an expanded Greek alpha, was borrowed into a three-stroke “A” that we find in the ornamental alphabets of the scribes of Phase 2 half-uncial manuscripts like the Lindisfarne Gospels (folio 27), the Echternach Gospels (folio 76), the Durham Gospels (folio 38) and the Book of Kells (folio 130) as well as in the work of the scribe of the Book of Durrow, who uses a drawn triangular form of the delta to stand for a capital “A”, as we see on folio 23 at the “Christi autem” of line 11.

ILLUSTRATION: three-stroke “a” from 1. the Cathach, 2. the Book of Durrow, and 3. the Catamanus stone.



<sup>5</sup> W. Ellwood Post, Saints, Signs and Symbols (London, 1987), pp. 16, 79.

<sup>6</sup> R. Koch, The Book of Signs (New York, 1955), p. 3.

Although it does have an unobtrusive cross, the Catamanus stone represents a high point in the development of early Christian memorials that rely on the visual impact of the lettering alone. The stone belongs to the period, mid-seventh century, when half-uncial manuscript scribes were moving from the formative Phase 1 period to the fully developed Phase 2, and if general palaeographical estimation is correct, then it is contemporary with the Book of Durrow. As the later scribes of Phase 2 came to design memorials, the impulse to ornament the stone with designs from increasingly elaborate manuscript examples meant that the inscribed area was reduced, and at no stage did the lettering convey exactly in stone what the pen of the scribe made in its movement over parchment: an inflected line showing thick and thin, with the stone showing depth at the broadest point of a “V” cut.

The line of the lettercutters who were contemporaries of Phase 1 scribes remained obstinately uninflected, yet, to take the case of the Catamanus stone, here is an inscription making a display within its text of a composition of an equilateral triangle of Greek alphas. This certainly communicates more than one message. It is a sign of a literate person’s knowledge, artistry and cunning and suggests a pleasure in displaying that knowledge to an understanding observer. The designer of the Catamanus inscription was familiar with diagrams and manipulation of text layout. Might he have seen books or attended classes that contained such text-play? We have the example of Isidore, Bishop of Seville (c.570-636), who compiled his encyclopaedic *Etymologiae* for the inquisitive scholar; it became a hugely popular text in Ireland and Britain in the generation after his death. Noting that the only seventh-century manuscript of the work to survive is written in Irish minuscule, Kathleen Hughes thought that: “His writings, with their compendia of classical knowledge and their mixture of erudition and fantasy, were just to the Irish taste.”<sup>7</sup>

The earliest closely dated example, 817x835, that we have of early Welsh minuscule is the *Liber Commonei*, illustrated here by facsimile of folio 24 recto below, part three of Bodleian MS Auct.F.IV.32.

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<sup>7</sup> K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (London, 1972), p. 195.

*Small marginal text at the top of the page, likely a rubric or commentary.*

**Κ**ΑΙ ΔΙΑΤΕ ΜΟΥ ΔΙΤΟΙΣ  
**Μ**ΕΝΤΕ ΕΧΕΡΑ  
**Δ**ΙΑΤΕΚΕΝ ΑΓΡΟΙ  
**Ε**Ε ΜΕΤΑΤΟΜ ΤΕΡΙΟΝ ΤΟΙ  
**Σ**ΚΙΜΕΤΑΤΟΜ ΠΕΤΕΣΜΟΝ  
**Η**Η ΤΟΥΡΑΝΟΣ ΤΕΣ ΡΕΣ  
**Θ**Η ΚΑΙ ΜΕΤΑΤΟΜ ΕΘΠΕΤΟΝ  
**Ι**Ι ΑΛΟΙΚΑΙΣ ΛΟΓΟΝ ΕΩΙ  
**Κ**Κ ΟΥΗ ΚΕΡΑΝΕΛ  
**Μ**Λ ΟΤΙ ΧΡΙΣΙΣΤΟ ΕΩΠΡΟΣΤΟΙΣ  
**Λ**Λ ΕΙΤΟΥ ΚΟΥΚΙΑΣ ΤΕΝΡΕΝ  
**Ν**Ν ΔΙΟΤΟΙ ΡΕΣ ΠΙ ΕΛΕΟΣ  
**Ξ**Ξ ΟΔΕ ΑΨΕΘΙΑ ΤΕΣ  
**Ο**Ο ΟΔΕ ΕΠΙΓΝΟΙΣ ΘΙΕΠΠΤΕΣ  
**Ρ**Ρ ΑΡΑ ΚΑΙ ΠΘΕΙΔΟΣ  
**Υ**Υ ΚΑΙ ΠΗΘΟΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΛΟΠΕ  
**Ρ**Ρ ΚΑΙ ΜΟΥΚΕΙΑ ΡΕΚΥΤΑΙ  
**Σ**Σ ΕΠΠΤΕΣ ΓΕΣ  
**Τ**Τ ΚΑΙ ΔΙΜΑΤΑ ΕΦΑΙΜΑΙΝ  
**Υ**Υ ΜΙΣΤΟΙΣΙΝ  
**Φ**Φ ΔΙΑΤΟΥ ΤΟΠΕΝ ΤΕΣΕΙΓΕ  
**Χ**Χ ΚΥΝΤΙΑΣΙΤΟΙΣ ΕΑΤΟΙΧΟΙΣ  
**Ρ**Ρ ΕΝΑΥΤΕΝ  
**Ο**Ο ΚΑΙ ΕΣΤΑΙΣ ΚΤΟΛΑΩΣ  
**Θ**Θ ΟΥΤΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΡΕΙΣ  
**Ο**ΟΡΤΙ ΟΥΣΙΝ ΠΡΟΣ ΜΕ  
**Λ**Λ ΕΡΟΝΤΕΣ  
**Π**Π ΟΡΕΥΤ ΗΕΜ

**Q**uoniam in  
 nullo die  
 transieram  
 cum bestis agri  
 et cum uolubilibus  
 caeli / et cum  
 serpentibus  
**A**udite uerbum domini  
 filii israhel  
 quia iudicium domino aduersus eos  
 qui inhabitant terram  
 quam non transieram  
 manus uentur  
 super agrum / et super terram  
 malachiam et madaianum  
 et esau et sicutum  
 et aduersus quos sumus  
 super terram  
 et sanguina super sanguina  
 misimus  
 prope ea iuxerunt uerba  
 uim omnibus qui inhabitant  
 terra  
**S**icut uerba populi  
 sic iacobus  
**D**elusio in silabus ad me  
 dicitur  
 etiam

*Small vertical marginal text on the right side of the page.*

It is known as *Saint Dunstan's Classbook*<sup>8</sup>, Richard Hunt identifying a section of the MS in Dunstan's own hand, because at one stage the manuscript belonged to that saint; David Dumville has studied it also.<sup>9</sup> It consists of a single gathering of eighteen leaves, and is roughly contemporary with the *Book of Kells*. It is of enormous importance to early Welsh palaeography as it shows, as well as a fine minuscule, a half-uncial hand of good quality. The scribe is an excellent calligrapher who writes equally well in Greek, folio 24r-36r, 19r-v being liturgical lessons and canticles in Greek and Latin, with some transliteration. The left margin of folio 24r has the Greek alphabet with Latin equivalents. The manuscript gives us evidence of the high level of early-ninth-century scholarly knowledge in Wales that, if we could demonstrate its previous existence in parallel with the known level in Ireland in the seventh century, would give the necessary background of playful knowledge to account for a production like the layout of the text of *Catamanus*. Even so, it provides a definite key for comparison with the half-uncial of the as yet homeless *Lichfield Gospels*, which might be Welsh. In his introduction to *Saint Dunstan's Classbook*, after remarking that the Greek lessons for the Easter Vigil were transliterated for reading aloud, Richard Hunt writes: "somewhere in Wales in the early ninth century the Greek was still being read with the Latin."<sup>10</sup>

The *Liber Commonei* is an early-ninth-century collection of miscellaneous texts that begins (20r) with a section from Isidore.<sup>11</sup> A paragraph on number with diagrams contained within the text is illustrated below, a facsimile of page 20 recto. Instructions and diagrams demonstrate the construction of geometrical figures: three-sided, four-sided, five- and so on. Each side is marked with the letter "a" as "the letter alpha is placed to indicate lines as this letter signifies one [a line] amongst the Greeks."

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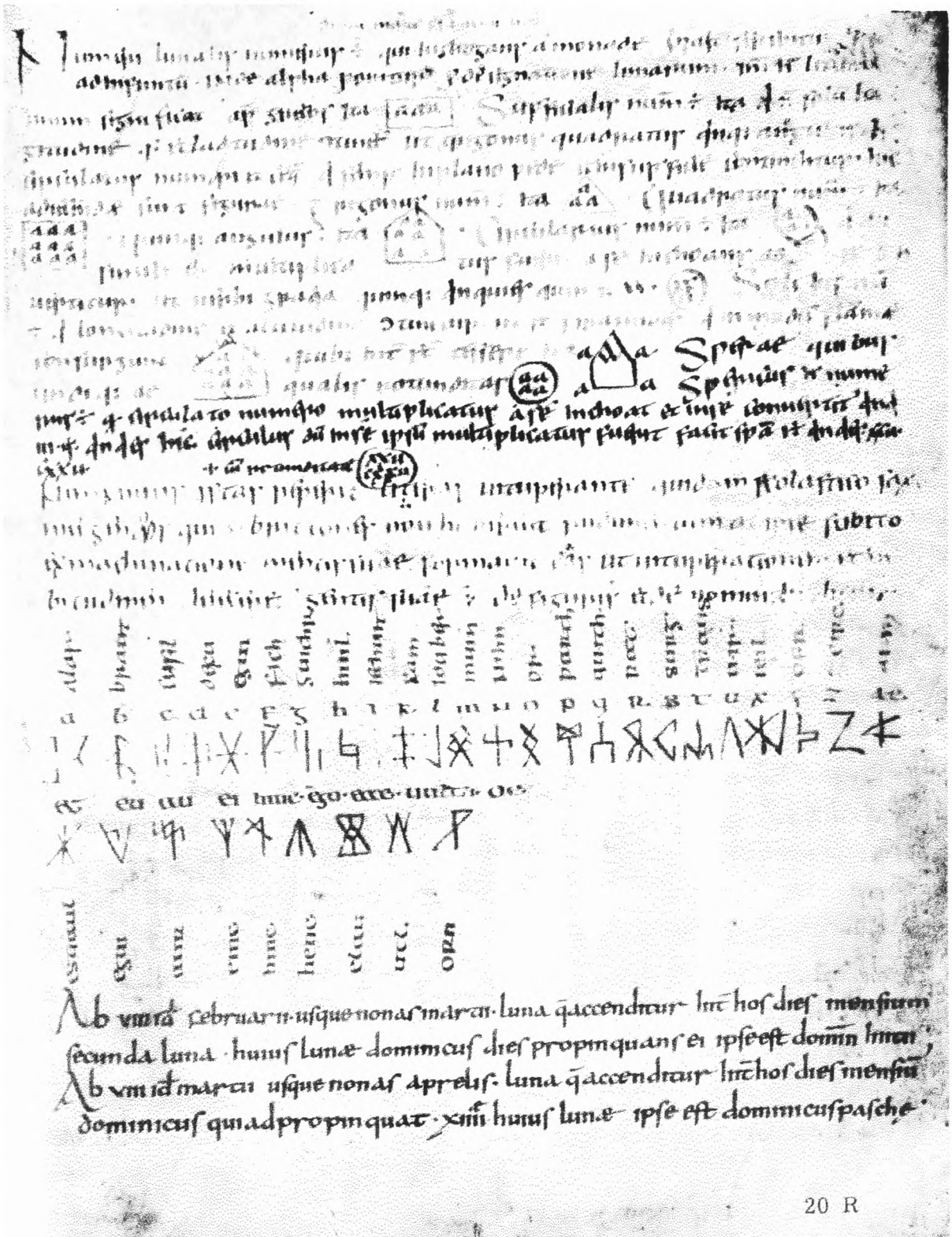
<sup>8</sup> *Saint Dunstan's Classbook from Glastonbury*, ed. R. W. Hunt (Amsterdam, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> D. Dumville, *A Palaeographer's Review: The Insular System of Scripts in the Middle Ages* (Osaka, 1999), pp. 123-4.

<sup>10</sup> Hunt, *Saint Dunstan's Classbook*, p. xii.

<sup>11</sup> *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum*, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), III, 7, pp. 3-6.

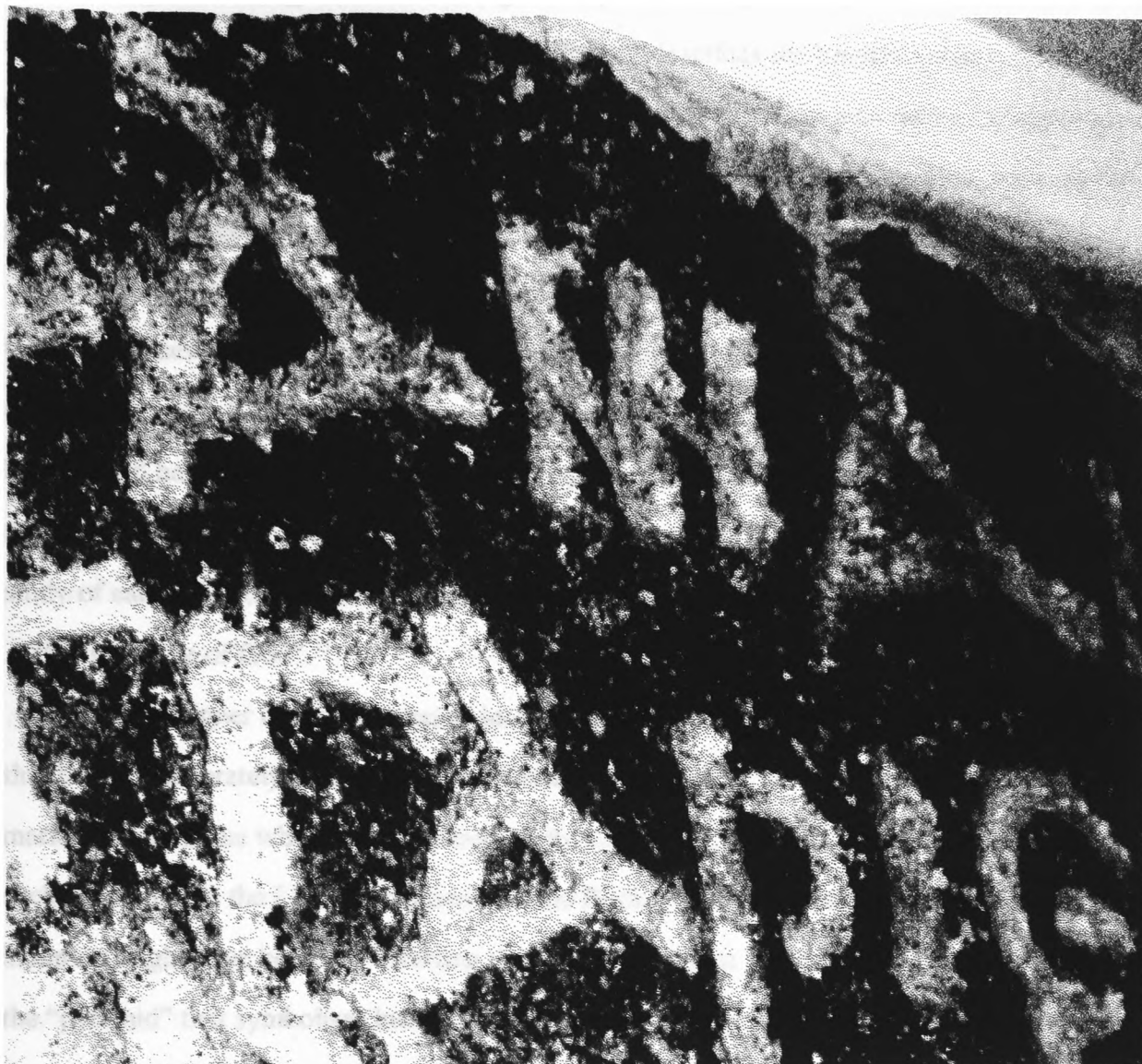
Liber Commonei, folio 20 recto, showing after the paragraph on number a Runic alphabet borrowed from Old English by Nemnivus.



F. 69.



Enlarged central section of the Catamanus inscription.



F.70.

It would appear that any scholar learning rudimentary geometry would be familiar with this form of diagram-making. We know that geometry was among the subjects offered to visiting scholars in Ireland in the seventh century. Aldhelm<sup>12</sup> describes the English going to Ireland for the renowned teaching there as “a mass of ravenous scholars and an avid throng of sagacious students, the residue from the rich fields of Holy Writ, thirstily seize and swallow not only the grammatical and geometrical arts ...”

In his *Etymologiae*, Isidore is recording the teachings of an ancient educational system taken into a new one. The diagrams within the text drawn by the scribe of the *Liber Commonei* are fluently made. The commentary on the triangle describes it as “a figure that has length, breadth and height” and “as a pyramid rising up like flames”. Around the point of the triangle are drawn flames. The triangle contains within it three alphas. According to Rudolf Koch in his study of early Christian symbolism, an upward-pointing pyramid symbolises “the triangle of fire ... the fiery rage of God”.<sup>13</sup>

The designer of the Catamanus inscription has inverted the triangle formed of alphas that he has deliberately made larger than the size of the rest of his text. The layout has clearly-marked borders, the whole design being clearly intentional. Using for comparison graphics such as we find in the *Liber Commonei* and the *Book of Durrow*, we can speculate on what his intention might have been. By inverting the triangle so that it points in the opposite direction to the “pyramid” that symbolises burning flames, he may be suggesting extinction, earth, the burial beneath, or all three. He is celebrating Catamanus within his text as “sapientisimus” – most wise – and has made an inscription constructed around a geometrical figure that would be a familiar item of use to the educated. He has fitted his inscription around the large alphas placed in the form of a triangle, and in fitting the rest of his letters around it the closing “omnium regum” has become a left-over as a result and has been stuck in awkwardly, unbalancing the composition towards the left.

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<sup>12</sup> *Aldhelm: The Prose Works*, trans. M. Lapidge and M. Herren (Cambridge, 1979), p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> Koch, *The Book of Signs*, p. 94.

The *Liber Commonei* not only gives evidence on the form of diagrams used in the study of geometry in its Part 3, but in the hand – Hand D – of the marginal annotator, common to Parts 1, 3 and 4, we have further evidence of the significance of triangular layouts of text. The annotator was also Welsh and writing perhaps within the generation of the main text scribe. Richard Hunt describes his hand in the introduction to the edition of Saint Dunstan's Classbook:

the hand is of a person taught to write in insular script, who later learned to write Caroline minuscule.<sup>14</sup>

He notices the insular traits of this scribe: round “d”, purely insular “g” and the upper hook of the “e” rising above the writing line. This last – a survival from the earliest period – is a trait of the Springmount Bog wax tablet writing, that facilitated ligaturing by the “e” crossbar, which we also see on the two stones discussed above in Chapter 3: ECMW No 13 and ECMW No 35. The *Liber Commonei* glosses have an especially interesting interpretation of the word tabellas in the Welsh Ovid, Ars Amatoria, folio 42r22, to line 385 of the text: it is glossed with aepistolas.

The scribe of the Classbook marginalia, Hunt's Hand D, writes three triangular marginalia with great fluency and no sign of preparatory measuring on folio 8r and folio 9v. These annotations are shaped as if they were indices, like the later marginal pointing finger used by typesetters, the point arranged to be directed at the relevant text matter which covers word relationships, grammar and case endings. The longest of the three has sixteen lines descending to a point. The shortest and simplest, laid out over six lines, is: “ut est gallus, galli, gallina” and “rex, regis, regina”.

As I have mentioned in the previous Chapter, surviving manuscripts like Durham A.II.10, contemporary with the Catamanus stone, and the earlier Springmount Bog tablets themselves show that scribes who were confident of their skills showed no hesitation in escaping from the ruled grid of the page and playing with lettering in making free forms and extensions out of the text. What is curious about the designer of ECMW No 13 and No 35 is

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<sup>14</sup> Hunt, Saint Dunstan's Classbook, p. xiv.

that although he has the capacity to make this lettering play, he still draws his letters with an uninflected line: he does not use a broad-edged pen. Could it be that at a certain level of craftsmanship and literacy a skilled man could have knowledge of writing and script entirely limited to practice on wax tablets? It might be that what we see in the inscription of Catamanus is the shallow curved-section indented lettering of a wax tablet writ larger.

The poem in praise of the Trinity found in the Black Book of Carmarthen describing “the word in the tablet” was copied c. 1250, so that we know that tablets were still in common use in Wales at that time. The collection of the National Museum of Ireland holds not only the late-sixth-century Springmount Bog tablets but also a tablet found at Maghera dating from a thousand years later, prepared and used in exactly the same manner. The scrittura di base of tablet writers changed little: it is a pared-down sans serif entirely lacking the finesse of quill-pen calligraphy, and we should not expect finesse from a tool that is a blunt hard point.

The styli for writing in wax were iron tools of a weight and substance far exceeding the featherweight quill pens. Styli with their rounded points give an uninflected line that has none of the subtlety and the contrast of thick and thin strokes of the broad-edge pen. The unpopular schoolmaster Cassian of Imola was murdered by his pupils. He was stabbed with their “pens” during the early-fourth-century persecution of Diocletian, their weapons being their 6" to 8" long iron styli, which clearly shows that this implement was forged out of a substantial rod of metal.

Anyone habituated to writing only with a stylus on wax would be accustomed to a rounded entry into the head of a letter, and also would be, as a writer, conditioned to press with the writing instrument into the writing surface, not to draw a layer of ink smoothly across the parchment with a quill, in which to apply any pressure results in disaster. One of the several incompetent scribes in the ninth- and tenth-century Cambridge Juvencus, Univ. Library Ff.4.42, in a plate illustrated by Lindsay in Early Welsh Script (Plate VI) of folio 7v, cannot unlearn the application of pressure to his writing instrument, showing that he has too late been promoted from wax tablets to parchment, and persistently splits open the quill to produce a divided stroke at line ends. He uses round entry strokes and provides a clear example of the

fact that calligraphy with the quill must be mastered in early youth, as the Irish understood, and that once habituated to tablet writing it was difficult to write with a broad pen, whereas scribes could use both pen and stylus.

The seventh-century Hisperica Famina<sup>15</sup> gives a description of a tablet, with its “wax from another region”, and an account of the making of the wooden boards: “This once grew among the leafy oaks of a green field; the artisan cut off a growing branch with his iron axe, hewed the square product out of the fibre of the wood, carved a small border with his knife, and finished the embellished tablet, which is carried in the right hand of the scholars and contains the mysteries of rhetoric in waxen spheres.”

The reference to the scholars carrying the tablets in their right hands shows that the tablets were not merely aides memoires or only for practising on. They were to be seen, as the recorded source and fixed record, of the spoken quotations. The Springmount Bog tablets contain the text of one Psalm on one tablet: the entire book of Psalms, all one hundred and fifty, could be shelved in just over a yard in length. Trainee scribes and scholars grappled first with the Psalms, learning to recite and write them; after succeeding in this the trainee graduated as “psalteratus”. The Psalms were the obvious source for sermon quotation and as a weatherproof, light and extremely durable, portable text, wax tablets had many advantages over precious manuscripts for everyday use.

As parchment was so precious, by far the larger proportion of those who could write would never have progressed further than tablet writing, and only a small proportion of the most skilled scribes would have been put to specialist calligraphy with quill on vellum. It is not surprising as a result that many of the early Christian inscriptions should reproduce in stone the serifless plain letters of tablet writing. It is possible to discern three main techniques used in transferring an inscription, the choice depending on the surface of the stone, its size and the grandeur of the monument. No instrument other than a brush could produce the large letters needed for a monument like the Catamanus stone, considering its rough surface. On the other hand, Geluguin's cross at Port Talbot, cut on the smooth local Pennant sandstone, has been put

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<sup>15</sup> Herren, Hisperica Famina A-Text, pp. 106-7.

on by a fluent writer who has been able to write linked strokes that must have had thick and thin variations before they were broadened out by the cutter. His instrument was not a brush, but no quill or reed could give a letter of this size. It might be possible that he used an elderwood pen, cleaning out the core just as one did with the quill and sharpening and splitting the writing edge in exactly the same manner. Other stones show a sharp clean-edged thin line that could have been made by charcoal or very thick paint brushed on precisely. Depending on the roughness of the surface, the mixture of pigment was thinned to produce a solid letter with the pigment flooding into the uneven surface.

F. 71 .

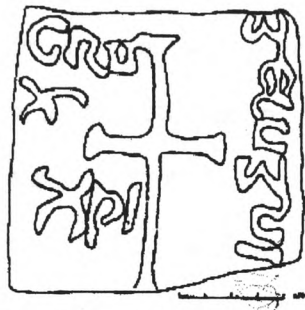
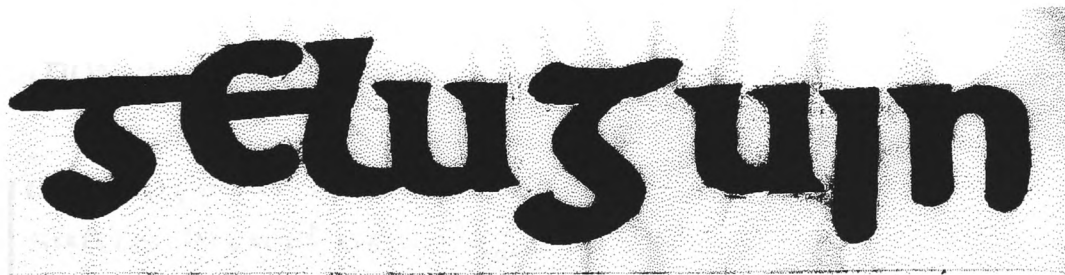


ILLUSTRATION: Geluguin's inscription, and how it might have been written on the stone. These are PEN LETTERS in a replication of techniques for transferring a text onto stone.



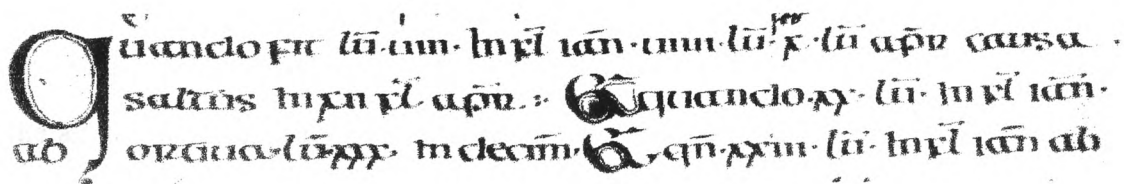
F. 72 .

The technical difficulty of reproducing the lettering of those stones that show the calligraphic features of the thin and thick strokes of an inflected line lies in their size. Experiments with a double metal scribe failed to produce results on a variety of uneven surfaces such as the inscribed stones present. To letter those stones some tool was used that had the broad edge of a pen, only at least four times larger. A reed, that we know was used later for wall painting lettering, for example in the Gothic script in the wall paintings in

Llantwit Major Church, does not produce a broad enough stroke. Accordingly, taking as a pattern the bamboo pens still used by Chinese scribes today when they write precise large characters, experiments were undertaken with woody-stemmed plants that could be cut and cored like a quill. An elder branch was sectioned from a half-inch diameter at its top to three-quarters at its base. The core from which the pith can be cleaned becomes too small to hold a reservoir of ink or thin paint if the stem is any thicker. This elder pen produced a sharp-edged letter with a one-and-a-half-inch body height on parchment paper and on dressed sandstone, but only a partially-inked letter on a rough sandstone boulder.

The characteristics of the letters produced by this pen are those of the quill. Stones listed by Nash-Williams where letters must have been written directly on the stone by a scribe with some such instrument are: No 49, a 15" wide inscription across a pillar; No 110, showing a well-shaped thin-to-thick movement at the top of "h"; No 159, very neatly spaced in a cartouche; and No 191, the Brancuf stone at Baglan, showing clear thick and thin strokes. Most calligraphic of all is No 260 on Pennant sandstone, an inscription across 11". The two great Pembrokeshire crosses at Carew, No 303, and Nevern, No 360, show some pen forms with serifs.

ILLUSTRATION: three lines of half-uncial from the Liber Commonei, page 22 recto.



F. 73.

In general, those stones that show pen forms belong in style to the Phase 2 manuscript period when ornamentation is shown in the cutting of complex decorative patterns and the lettering is demoted, reduced in size to small panels as in the Nevern and Carew crosses. In the ninth century, shown by the greater number of manuscript survivals, Lindsay in his Early Welsh Script points out the development of characteristically Welsh features of a dense and rounded

letterform.<sup>16</sup> If we compare the half-uncial hand of the *Liber Commonei* with the hands of the *Book of Kells*, there is only a significant difference in the body height of the letter. The *Liber Commonei* maintains the height of its “o” letter consistently under four nib widths, where the height in *Kells* is between 4.5 to 5. The *Liber Commonei* has a more rapid movement from thin to thick strokes, giving a “boxy” O compared to the full curves of the *Book of Kells*. We find this boldness and density in Welsh scripts up to the time of the *Black Books of Chirk* and *Carmarthen*: it gives a scribe more control over throwing curved strokes, which would be necessary if the quality of parchment were poor. These heavy letters are in the greatest possible contrast to the skeletal linear letters of the stones contemporary with Phase 1 manuscripts, and the fashion for the massive and the ornamental would lead eventually to the extraordinary aberration of cut Lombardic capitals in stone. Yet for two centuries fashion had accepted tablet lettering for use on monuments, which would seem to suggest a live tradition of low-level literacy where the high-grade lettering of a manuscript tradition stayed within the confines of the scriptorium.

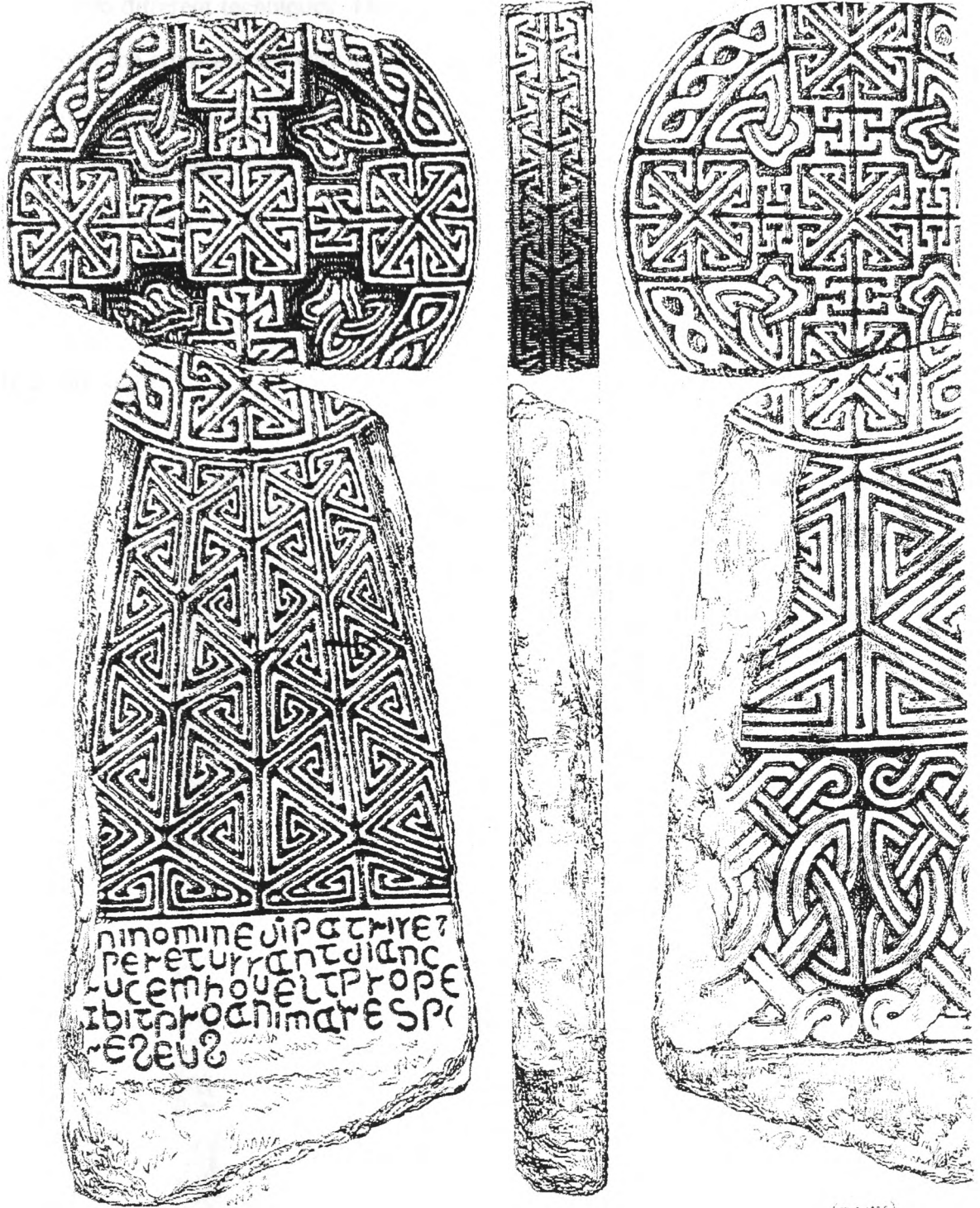
Sculptured stones of Nash-Williams’ Group II and III that show skilled carving in decoration but not in lettering, like the *Margam Conbelin Cross*, or the cross of *Hywel ap Rhys* at *Llantwit Major* (illustrated overleaf), present a contrast to Irish stones where the stonecutters have taken the techniques of cutting used in the decoration and applied them to the cutting of the letterform. Nash-Williams comments on the cross to *Hywel ap Rhys*: “The close similarity of the flat calligraphic style of of its decoration and of the motifs used to those of the almost contemporary *Berechtaine* slab at *Tullylease*, County Cork, identify the monument as the work of an Irish or Irish trained sculptor.”

*Hywel ap Rhys’s cross at Llantwit Major.*

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<sup>16</sup> Lindsay, *Early Welsh Script*, p. 22, Plate X.





F.74.

The Berechtaine slab, CIIC No 908, illustrated below, preserves clearly the deep

cutting of a skilled craftsman who knew how to render and finish geometrical and curvilinear lines with two different techniques. The angular line ends of the enclosed geometrical patterning of the cross are cut with a deep triangular stop, while the bounding curvilinear outer edges of the cross are finished with spirals the line ends of which are dished. The cutter used deep V section and semicircular section at line ends, with a deep U section for continuous strap work. Adapting the line ends of the geometrical patterns, the cutter has used these for his letter serifs.

Photographs of the Berechtuine stone.

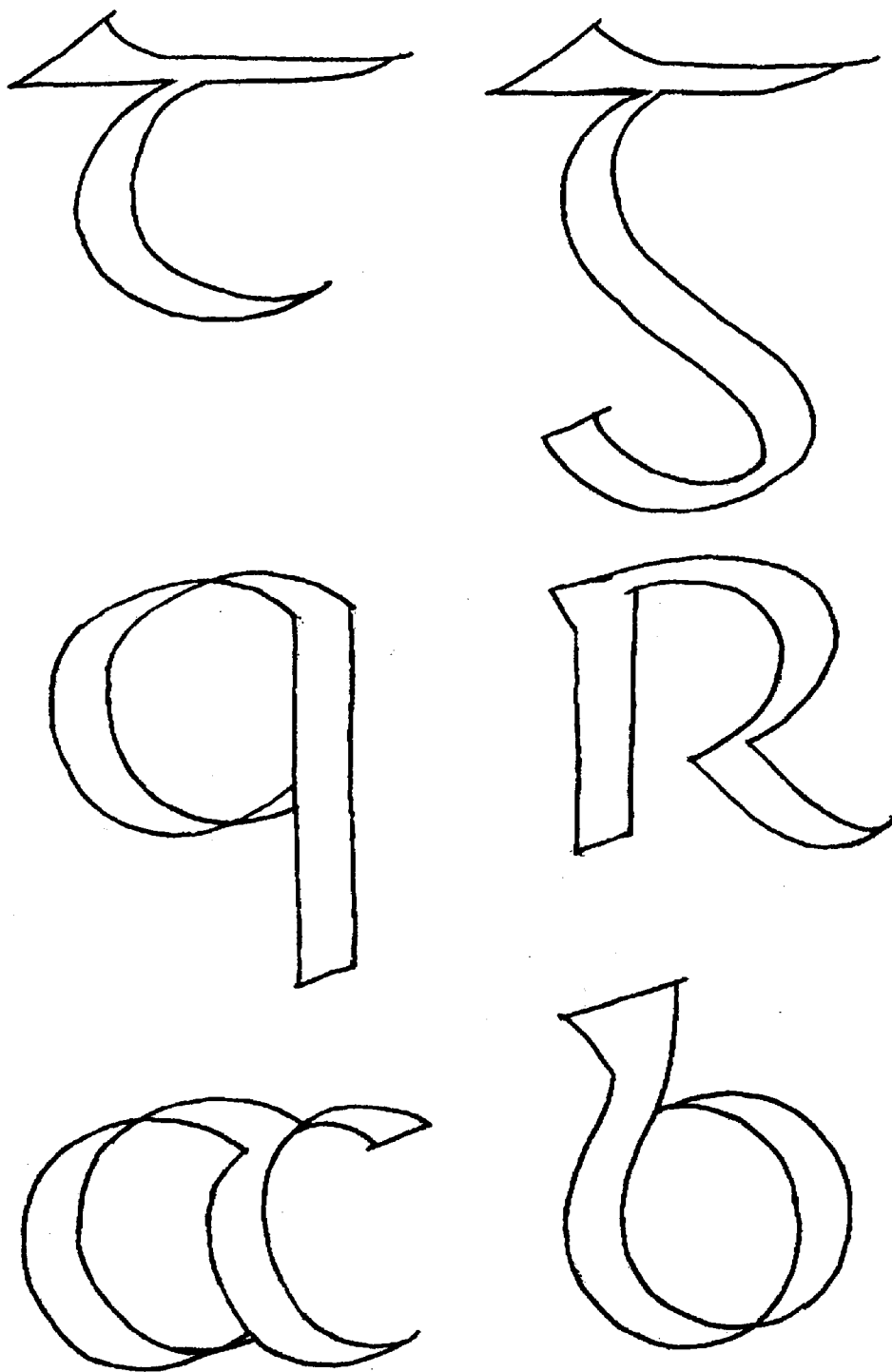


**F. 75 .**



F.76.

Pen-form details from the Berechtuine stone.

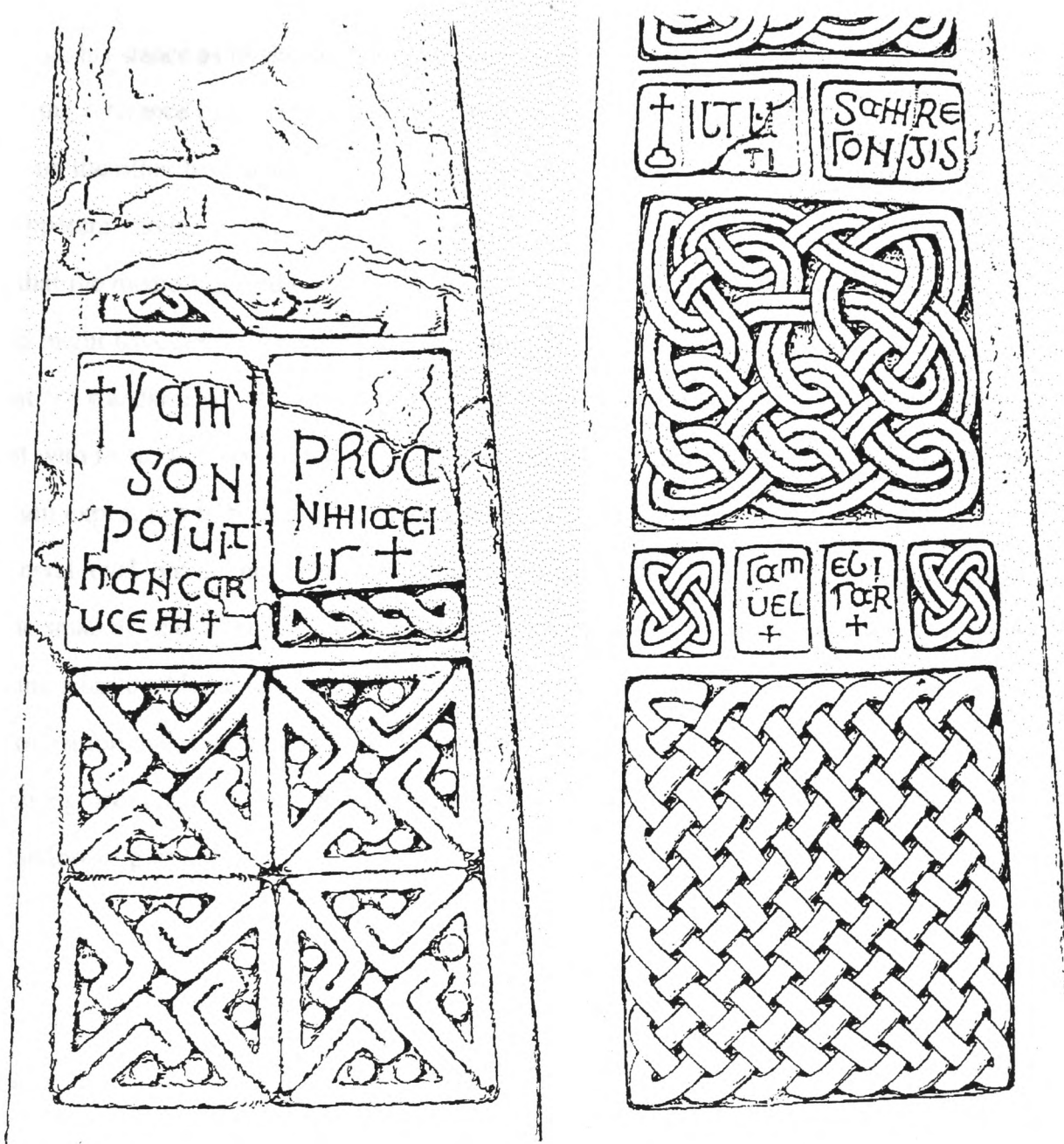


F. 77.

The half-uncial of this inscribed lettering is of the highest quality, and regular punch marks still visible in the gutter of the V- and U-section letters seem to indicate that the strict proportions and measurements of the scribe working in parchment had been transferred to the rendering of the letterforms on stone. The punch marks are an eighth of an inch apart. There is a clear ductus, letter spacing and no avoidance of curves, suggesting that a good scribe may have put the letters on the stone, but they have been cut by a sculptor of equal skill.

The contrast between the contemporary Irish and Welsh stones is marked: the Irish are able to render their highest grade of manuscript hand on stone where the Welsh very rarely attempt it. The large collection of over two hundred and fifty inscribed slabs at Clonmacnois, CIIC Vol.II numbers 597-850, though containing a range of letterforms from the simplest, linear and lightweight, to the most accomplished with the thicks and thins, serifs and linkages of pen forms, are evidently from a workshop milieu that used scribes to lay out inscriptions within parallel ruling.

The Clonmacnois collection has slabs that show a preference for geometric forms, indicating that an angular drawn alphabet co-existed with the calligraphic one, as we know was the case in scriptorium practice. Although we find in Welsh inscriptions the variation between geometrical and curvilinear, the stones never approach the standards of high-quality Irish work, and most noticeably in their failure to space their letterforms evenly. With the continuing elaboration of their sculptured decoration, Welsh stones in their lettering adhered to their traditional simple alphabet. Nash-Williams remarked on the “tendency to over-elaborate ornament” on the late-tenth-century Conbelin Cross at Margam, ECMW No 234, which he described as “the largest and most elaborate of the Welsh disc crosses”, and which has an inscription of loose, looped and irregularly spaced letters. Another Glamorgan stone, ECMW No 222, King Samson's Cross at Llantwit Major, illustrated below, shows well-cut overall sculptured patterning, but in its inscription uses a combination of geometrical letters and minuscule with a Phase 1 half-uncial “a” in an irregular layout, with none of the awareness of repeat patterning, that is apparent in the sculpture, being applied to the lettering.



F.78.

With some grand exceptions, like the Catamanus inscription, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the sculptors were not calligraphers, and were working from a model supplied on a much smaller scale, like a tablet draft. ECMW No 255 from Ogmere, illustrated below, is not the only stone to show that the person writing the large lettering onto the stone did not change his stance as he did so, but remained rooted on the left side of the stone, presumably making reference to a model held in his left hand. Again this suggests a shortage of specialists, but on the other hand a supply of many craftsmen with basic writing skills who were thought competent enough to letter memorials. What is remarkable about the Llantwit Major evidence is that the memorials of this church lie at the centre of what was a renowned monastic school, and might have been expected to show calligraphic distinction. That they had none must tell us that the standards of the monastic school at Llantwit Major were concerned with content and not with form, and that they were not concerned with the beautiful appearance of words. We might expect this to be the case if such a school attracted and educated great numbers to a general level, but did not have the facilities or teachers to train up scribes in specialist skills. The small number of stones surviving showing scribal skills, and the great number of stones using a basic tablet letterform even on the most elaborate monuments, must confirm the proposition that, though there may have been remarkable numbers of scholars with a basic training, from high to low, this resulted in an acceptance of the simplest letterform even for the grandest of purposes.

ECMW No 255 from Ogmore.



F. 79.



## CONCLUSION

The early Welsh inscriptions show versions of manuscript hands and decorative geometrical capitals from a period before we have any surviving manuscripts. They therefore give us a version of the letterforms that were in use in early British book production. Whatever their quality, they pre-date the conversion of Northumbria, and the period when Wilfrid, Benedict Biscop and others brought from abroad craftsmen to initiate high-quality workshop production there. The change in Wales from capitals to bookhand for memorials was of some significance: Nash-Williams saw this as developing between 530 and 625, the date he gives to the Catamanus inscription, by which time he thought the process of change complete. Clients and craftsmen evidently discarded capitals and adapted a monoline version of bookhand for a reason: one was more attractive to them than the other. This is despite the fact that two-line capitals are easier to execute than four-line lower-case letters with their ascenders and descenders. Simplified bookhand had become widely recognised and used, perhaps through a widespread low-level literacy in the hinterland of monastic schools and settlements, in its monoline form for every purpose, even for a king's memorial. It has none of the grandeur and high art aimed at in similar Irish and Northumbrian memorials. From its use on symbol stones in Pictland where there was no widespread Latin literacy, we know that the outer form of "the book" was generally understandable, even reduced to a square held in the hand, as a powerful sign, a repository of Christian religious belief and knowledge. In Wales, on the other hand, the book's inner medium, "bookhand", as a communications packhorse, seems to have escaped from the calligraphic context of a monastic scriptorium into the more secular setting of the world of schooling and the wider society of royal courts, where it lost its connections with calligraphy. Perhaps Nash-Williams was correct to advert to the "proletarian associations" of early Christianity, influential even after being transplanted to Britain, when he remarked on the perplexing cursive and informal features of this inscriptional hand. The sheer persistence of these features suggests a reverence for basic human handwriting, fixated at a primitive level of skill. Rather than something to look up to in awe, the inscription would have been familiar and comforting, touchable and copyable.

We need not assume that knowledge of Roman letterform was lost at the Roman withdrawal, to be revived later through contact with Gaul. It might be rather that the knowledge survived in a rudimentary graphic style, that adapted an informal Roman model to suit local tools and materials. Although there are flurries of productions that attempt more ambitious inscriptions with more elaborate letterform, this informal style had staying power: it was in use over half a millennium until replaced by the capital scripts brought in by the Normans in the eleventh century. It won out over half-uncial and its associated display script; but by losing out they have given us a dating aid. By going out of fashion, after three developing stages, the geometrical alphabet can help to provide a more exact chronology than can the more commonplace hand that ousted it. Nash-Williams' great sorting of the inscriptions laid down a grand general pattern; it is in the Group I stones of his classification that there seem to be signs of a greater complexity in manuscript tradition than previously acknowledged.

ILLUSTRATION: the crux Christi from Geluguin's stone.



F. 80.

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Book of Durrow, Dublin, TCD MS. 57.

Book of Kells, Dublin, TCD MS. 58.

Cambridge Juvenus, Cambridge Univ. Library Ff.4.42.

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Durham, A.ii.16.

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