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An overlooked gem of Pictish art: the cross-slab fragment from St Ringan's Cairn in
Aberdeenshire

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7640 words

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An overlooked gem of Pictish art: the cross-slab fragment from St Ringan's Cairn in Aberdeenshire

Anna Ritchie¹

with a contribution by Cynthia Thickpenny²

ABSTRACT

A little-known fragment of cross-slab from St Ringan's Cairn in the Grampian Mountains of Aberdeenshire is identified as a significant example of Pictish sculptural art of the late 8th or early 9th centuries. It was created by a skilled stone carver with an exceptional sense of design, probably based in a monastery in southern Aberdeenshire or Angus, and its location marked an important route through the mountains between north and south Pictland.

At a seminar on Scotland's early medieval sculpture held in 2003, Isabel Henderson drew attention to several fragmentary carved stones which she termed 'fragments of significance'.³ These indicate evidence of quality of design and carving, knowledge of art styles used in manuscripts and high-status metalwork, and communication of ideas between north and south Pictland.⁴ The purpose of this paper is partly to add another fragment to this select group of significant pieces and to show how it fits into their criteria of excellence. In addition, the provenance of the cross-slab allows conjecture about its function and about the location of the stone-carving workshop that produced it.

The author's attention was drawn to the cross-slab and socket stone from St Ringan's Cairn by the publication in 2007 of John Borland's drawings, which show the very high quality of carving displayed by the fragment of what must once have been an impressive cross-slab.⁵ Although the carved stones were discovered in 1964, they were not recorded accurately until 2005, when the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland drew them in the University of Aberdeen Museums and Collections in Marischal College. St Ringan's Cairn lay on the 320m contour just below the crest of Redstone Hill, which is a spur dropping south-south-east from Cairn

O' Mount in the former county of Kincardineshire (now Aberdeenshire) (Fig 1).⁶ The old Military Road from Banchory over the Mounth (the Grampian Mountains) passes Cairn O' Mount and heads south-south-east along the flank of Redstone Hill towards St Ringan's Cairn, where it changes course slightly to run in a more southerly direction (its route is still visible today on the ground and in air photographs). This suggests that the cairn was a prominent landmark, perhaps with the cross-slab still standing, around 1760 when Major William Caulfeild built the road, although nothing appears on contemporary maps.⁷ In the first *Statistical Account of Scotland*, there is a mention of 'two large cairns at the top of the mountain and many small ones lower down, near to which, according to tradition, a great battle was fought'.⁸ St Ringan's Cairn may have been one of these small cairns, though it is not named until it appears on the first two editions of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map in 1868 and 1904, and there is no mention of a cross-slab, which must have been toppled sometime in the intervening century. The remains of St Ringan's Cairn were last recorded in 1981 as measuring 8.5 m in diameter and 0.4 m high.⁹

CATALOGUE

ST RINGAN'S CAIRN 1, PICTISH CROSS-SLAB FRAGMENT (Fig 2)

Measurements: H 0.57 m, max W 0.59 m, max D 0.16 m

Stone type: fine-grained red sandstone

Place of discovery: NGR NO 6549 7944

Present location: University of Aberdeen Museums and Special Collections (ABDUA: 39615).

Evidence for discovery: found in 1964 amongst the stones forming St Ringan's Cairn, which lies beside a track (the old Military Road) over Redstone Hill, east of the modern road. It was taken to the grounds of the University of Aberdeen and set up next to St Mary's on the High Street, Old Aberdeen, until the early 1990s when it was taken into the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen.¹⁰

Present condition: broken at the top, damaged along both narrow sides, and the carving is worn.

Description

This stone is the lower part of a straight-sided cross-slab with a well-shaped tenon with a maximum length of 0.30 m. It is a relatively narrow slab, which is carved in high relief on face A and in low relief on face C. Possible traces of a narrow plain flat-band border may be seen on face C. The lower part of a cross-shaft survives on face A, 0.18 m wide and edged by a roll moulding which flares outwards at the expanded foot and slithers over the frame of the main carved area to become a fish-tail on the left-hand side of a dressed panel 0.13 m in height. The fish-tail is crescentic with a central bulge on the lower edge. On the right-hand side of the base of the shaft, much has been lost through flaking but again the roll moulding slides off the base to become a long narrow curving band, perhaps the end of a tail, which is open-ended and finishes at the point at which the tenon begins. The interior of the shaft is filled with diagonal key pattern, the upper part of which is very worn, and the pattern expands to fill the flaring base of the shaft. Placed vertically on the left of the shaft is a heavily built animal, carved in high relief some 30 mm deep along its back and 40 mm deep beneath its hind legs. The upper rounded surface of the animal is equal in height to the cross-shaft. The area of its head is damaged, leaving only the partial outline of its lower jaw or perhaps a mane, and the flaking has created the illusion of a double line to the beast's chest. To the right of the shaft the surface of the stone is missing apart from a narrow strip of the original background close to the shaft, where the depth of relief is 31 mm.

Little survives of face C, only the lower left corner of a panel of finely executed spiral pattern. Set obliquely in the left-hand corner are two small double spirals, one of which is linked to the first of two larger triple spirals, which are linked and run along the lower edge of the panel. The right-hand side of this spiral panel is largely defaced by flaking up to 15mm in depth, but the lower part of the corner survives, with a curve in relief to match that on the left, and two curving lines to the left. The dressed panel below is plain. The narrow faces B and D are also plain but carefully dressed.

ST RINGAN'S CAIRN 2, SOCKET STONE (Fig 3)

Measurements: L 1.14 m, W 0.80 m, H 0.32 m

Stone type: red sandstone conglomerate

Place of discovery: NGR NO 6549 7944

Present location: University of Aberdeen Museums and Special Collections (ABDUA: 90150).

Evidence for discovery: found in 1964 amongst the stones forming St Ringan's Cairn, which lies beside a track (the old Military Road) over Redstone Hill, east of the modern road. It was taken to the grounds of the University of Aberdeen and set up next to St Mary's on the High Street, Old Aberdeen, until the early 1990s when it was taken into the Marischal Museum in Aberdeen.

Present condition: damaged edges.

Description

The surface of this socket stone has a broad chamfer along the long sides of a rectangular socket, and the socket extends through the full height of the block. There are hollows in the upper surface where pebbles have dropped out of the conglomerate. The socket is stepped at either narrow end, and it appears to have been designed to accommodate a slab up to 0.70 m wide and up to 0.12 m thick, with a tenon up to 0.50 m wide and up to 0.12 m thick. The stepping need not, however, be original work. As the base of the socket is open, the height of the tenon could be greater than the height of the socket stone.

DISCUSSION

PROVENANCE

Unfortunately, there is some confusion over the exact findspot of the two stones. The earliest record is by Alan Small writing a brief entry in *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* in 1965, in which he states that both the fragmentary cross-slab and the socket stone were found 'on the slopes of the Cairn O' Mount at a height of just over 1,000 feet', with no mention of St Ringan's Cairn.¹¹ At that time Small was a lecturer at the University of Aberdeen, which is presumably why the two stones were taken initially to

the grounds of the university, before being taken into the Marischal Museum. In 1971, the Ordnance Survey was told by the finder of the cross-slab fragment that it was found ‘in the centre of St Ringan’s Cairn’, while the cairn was being dismantled for road material. The ‘finder’ was named as R Fairlie, the Farm Manager of Glensaugh, and it seems unlikely that he would be taking part in gathering stones, which suggests that this is a second-hand account of something that happened six years earlier. Almost ten years later, by which time he was based in the University of Dundee, Alan Small wrote a brief article for *The Deeside Field*, in which his main object was to argue that the Cairn O’ Mount route originated as early as Pictish times if not in prehistoric times, with the cross-slab acting perhaps as a wayside shrine.¹² Oddly he gives no details of its discovery, saying only that it was found ‘quite close to a cairn known as St Ringan’s Cairn’ and 15 m from the old routeway, without giving any source for this information. He identified the stone as an ‘Old Red Sandstone conglomerate’ for which he gave the nearest source as 2 km away, although the cross-slab fragment lacks inclusions. The cross-slab was included in the handlist of Pictish symbol stones produced by RCAHMS, with the information that it was found ‘during clearance of a pile of stones’, but Alastair Mack discounted it as a symbol stone and the lack of a symbol other than a possible ‘boar’ led to its exclusion from the most recent version of the handlist.¹³

In summary, the physical association of the two carved stones with St Ringan’s Cairn is ambiguous, though they were certainly found in the near vicinity. The denuded cairn appears always to have consisted of small stones, rather than being the residue left after larger boulders were removed, for the Ordnance Survey Name Book describes the cairn in 1863 as ‘a collection of small stones’, and adds ‘there is no tradition connected with this to give it a claim to antiquity’.¹⁴ But this statement is at odds with the name, St Ringan’s Cairn, which was well-known to the OS informants, and the place-name Redstone Hill, again well-established in 1863, which may have been inspired, as Borland, Fraser and Sherriff point out, by the presence of the red sandstone cross-slab.¹⁵ The name Ringan is a Scots variant of Ninian, and church dedications to St Ninian were common from the 12th century onwards.¹⁶ It may be that a cairn accumulated around the standing monument, as stones were added by people travelling along this ancient route across the Mounth. At some later period, there was a deliberate and brutal destruction of the cross-slab, perhaps leaving the basal fragment in the cairn. If, as suggested above, the monument was used as a sighting line by the surveyors for the Military Road, its

destruction may have taken place as the road was being built or sometime later in the 18th or early 19th century.

Close examination of the cross-slab suggested to John Borland, Iain Fraser and John Sherriff that 'it is not the stone that was originally intended to be housed in the socket' of the surviving base.¹⁷ The well-shaped tenon of St Ringan's 1 indicates clearly that the intention was to house it in a socket stone, but it is too slender to fit satisfactorily into St Ringan's 2 and would require chocking stones. If it were dropped to the point at which its width fits the lower part of the socket, some of its carving would be invisible (Fig 4). The socket was designed for a slab some 0.20 m wider than the existing cross-slab. It may be noted that none of the accounts of their discovery suggests that the cross-slab fragment was seated in the socket stone, and there are no signs of damage from the use of chocking stones on the cross-slab itself. This leads to the conclusion that the cross-slab and the socket-stone are unrelated, and they may be centuries apart in date, with the socket stone much later than the cross-slab. Excavation of the remains of the cairn might produce another socket stone more suited to the cross-slab.

The cross-slab when standing and intact on the southwest-facing flank of Redstone Hill would have been easily visible from Cairn O' Mount, above it to the northwest, and would point the traveller in the direction of the confluence of the Knowegreens Burn, the Slack Burn and the Devilly Burn at the foot of Redstone Hill to the south. A double function as a wayside cross and a route marker thus seems most likely, and its height would be useful at times when there was deep snow on the hills. The Mounth is a formidable obstacle to travel between Deeside and western Aberdeenshire to the north and the Mearns and Angus to the south, subject to severe weather conditions from thick fog to impassable snow, and snow posts are essential even today. For a medieval traveller, the cross-slab would have been a welcome sight and an opportunity to offer a prayer for a safe journey. On analogy with wayside crosses in similar locations, the cross-slab is likely to have faced east/west, with the cross facing west, like that on Aberlemno 3 in Angus, on a route along the hills leading to Brechin.¹⁸ Whether the stone was carved in the sculptor's workshop or in situ on Redstone Hill, the concept was ambitious and its achievement was arduous.

The quality of carving of St Ringan's 1 suggests that its sculptor belonged to a wealthy foundation for which both Edzell and Fordoun might be contenders: Edzell lies

some 12 km away to the south-west and Fordoun some 10 km to the south-east (as the crow flies). Part of a free-standing cross of red sandstone survives at Edzell, in the form of one side-arm and the central part of a cross-head, carved in relief with ornament that includes both triple spirals and key pattern, both of which are present on the St Ringan's fragment.¹⁹ But in contrast to the virtuoso skill in handling key pattern displayed by St Ringan's 1, the Edzell carver compressed the key pattern into the narrow area between the armpits in a manner that resulted in haphazardly uneven angles within its spiral-shaped units.²⁰ This may suggest that the two monuments were carved by different hands, particularly since the free-standing cross form is likely to be later in date than the cross-slab. Although this fragment of a free-standing cross, a late symbol-bearing cross-slab and a fragment of a probable symbol stone are the only carved stones to survive from early medieval times at Edzell,²¹ the medieval church was thoroughly demolished in the early 19th century and any such stones built into its fabric would have been lost or reused. Jane Geddes has explored the links between Edzell and St Drostan, which underline the early importance of the site, and George and Isabel Henderson have discussed the implications of the cross-head as part of a composite monument of Iona type.²² From Fordoun comes a cross-slab bearing inscriptions in Insular miniscule and ogham, which as signs of literacy suggest that the church here was monastic (see below), and again there should be more sculpture than has yet been found.²³ It may be noted that Redstone Hill falls within the parish of Fordoun. Closer to Redstone Hill than either Edzell or Fordoun is Fettercairn, which has as yet yielded no early medieval carved stones, although its church history goes back to before 1263 and its high-status name is part Gaelic (*foithir*, slope) and part Pictish (*carden*, thicket, or sometimes enclosure).²⁴ Like Edzell and Fordoun, Fettercairn is located on lower Old Red Sandstone.

The military road northwards over Cairn O' Mount started at Fettercairn, and by 1774 the road had been extended southwards to the River North Esk at North Water Bridge, its route north to the River Dee west of Banchory marked with 19 milestones.²⁵ Milestone no 9 is shown on Garden's map just to the north of St Ringan's Cairn (though the latter is not shown), but sometime later it was moved to the south to Knowegreens nearer to the foot of Redstone Hill, where it was recorded on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey 25-inch map published in 1865.²⁶

Despite its small size and even smaller area of surviving carved surface, this fragment of cross-slab is full of interest. Key pattern and spirals are common enough patterns in Pictish art, but the remnant of a panel of spiral ornament on face C of St Ringan's 1 is more unusual than most (Fig 5). The surviving design suggests that, along the bottom of the panel, there would have been four large spirals set between a pair of small spirals in each corner, which, reconstructed, could have been the lower side of a square panel containing 32 large triple spirals and at least eight small double spirals set in pairs in each corner. Such a panel invites comparison with those in Easter Ross on the great cross-slabs at Hilton of Cadboll and Shandwick, and the square panel on face C of the Hilton of Cadboll stone also contains 32 large triple spirals, though on a larger scale than the panel on St Ringan's 1.²⁷ The way in which the corner spirals are handled is not, however, identical either to Shandwick or to Hilton of Cadboll, nor to spiral work south of the Mounth. The high quality of this spiral ornament on St Ringan's 1 is matched by that of the key pattern filling the shaft of the cross on face A, where expanding the pattern to fill the splayed base of the shaft was a test of the sculptor's ingenuity (Fig 6). Cynthia Thickpenny has studied in depth the use of key patterns and has been kind enough to contribute the following assessment of St Ringan's 1.²⁸

Key pattern on St Ringan's Cairn 1, by Cynthia Thickpenny

The pattern on the cross-shaft is a fairly common diagonal key pattern with two-stranded spirals that occurs throughout the Insular world. It is similar to key pattern no. 958 in John Romilly Allen's *ECMS*.²⁹ However, the St Ringan's sculptor's treatment of the curved corners of the cross-shaft sets it apart from many surviving key patterns across Insular art. Insular artists developed unique structures for the corners of their key pattern fields, which Thickpenny has defined as 'mitres', adapting George Bain's earlier term, 'mitring'.³⁰ Mitres allowed the path (the raised, positive space in carved stone) to pass continuously through the corners of a key pattern field.³¹ The convex corners of the St Ringan's 1 cross-shaft prevented the artist from including full mitre structures in the bottom corners of the field. In a virtuosic solution, the carver included only half of the expected mitre structure in each corner and then skewed and rearranged some of the pattern's negative (carved-out) lines to ensure that the path remained

continuous and at a consistent width. Manipulation of mitres occurs elsewhere in Insular art, often when artists needed to fit key pattern into curved fields or acute and obtuse corners, but this was not always done so adeptly as on St Ringan's 1. A similar but more modest example of this phenomenon occurs on page 208 of the 8th-century St Gall Gospels, in the field of key pattern to the left of the evangelist's legs. In marked contrast, the Hilton of Cadboll sculptor either chose not to create mitre structures in key pattern within the two bottom, convex corners of the crescent and v-rod symbol on this cross-slab or was unable to render them. The St Ringan's 1 sculptor's control of negative space and ability to create an illusion of an even and uniform pattern, despite radical structural alterations, reflect their exacting approach to key pattern and remarkable artistic mastery.

A more straightforward solution to fitting diagonal key pattern into the basal corner of a splayed or pedestalled cross-shaft may be seen on a fragment from Tealing in Angus, where the curve of the splay is slightly convex rather than concave, thus providing more space for a fully mitred corner.³² Flared bases are relatively rare on early medieval cross-slabs in Scotland, though there is another Angus example from Menmuir, where the infilling is interlaced work rather than key pattern.³³

On St Ringan's 1, the extremities of a zoomorphic frame to the cross-shaft extend well below the main field of carving, with a fish-tail on the left and a tail, perhaps of a serpent, on the right, which extends to the top of the tenon. An alternative interpretation might be that the 'tail' is the elongated tongue of a serpent, especially as the roll moulding widens as it falls off the base of the shaft, but the area where the head should be is damaged and such a long tongue is unlikely unless part of an interlaced design. The way in which the parallel lines of the tail on the right stop short at the top of the tenon might conceivably indicate that it continued on to the original socket stone, but this is perhaps taking the unique aspects of this cross-slab too far. Serpents with fish-tails in Pictish art and in the Book of Kells have been discussed by Isabel Henderson as 'a sign of lateness'.³⁴ The shape of the fish-tail can vary, and the crescentic shape of the carefully delineated St Ringan's fish-tail is reminiscent of those belonging to the two hippocamps on the cross-face of Aberlemno 2.³⁵ A zoomorphic frame to the cross itself is unique in Pictish art, although a zoomorphic frame around the entire cross-slab is known from several monuments, such as the Dunfallandy cross-slab with its fish-tailed beasts.³⁶ On

the cross-slab Dunblane 1, a roll moulding outlines the cross and just short of the scrolled foot of the shaft turns into serpent-heads, facing upwards towards the cross-head, with long thick tongues ending in curls, perhaps protecting the cross.³⁷ The outlining creatures on St Ringan's 1 are likely to have performed a similar protective function, their heads set probably at the top of the shaft or possibly confronted over the top arm of the missing cross-head. These zoomorphic frames are also reminiscent of the way in which the initial to the *augmentum* to both Mark (*f* 15v) and Luke (*f* 16v) is treated in the Book of Kells, conventionally dated to the 8th century, where the letters following the initial are enclosed within a zoomorphic frame for Mark and an anthropomorphic frame for Luke. The artist of the Book of Kells often uses the device of extending ornament beyond the main field of illustration, perhaps most notably on *f*. 291v, where the crosses surrounding St John are extended beyond the frame by the head, hands and feet of 'a second figure spread-eagled behind the whole decorative layout'.³⁸

This extension of the two tails well beyond the main field of carving is unique in Pictish sculptural art, but there is a hint of a similar idea on the Fordoun cross-slab, where the tail of a reptilian creature hangs down from the upper arm of the cross towards the centre of the cross-head, and alongside the tail is another tail curled into a spiral around a small fish-tail. This juxtaposition of motifs appears in identical form, though not position, on Meigle 1 on the left of the base of the cross-shaft on face A and on a fragment from Tealing to the right of the base of the cross-shaft.³⁹

The animal carved in high relief on the left of the shaft on St Ringan's 1 is depicted moving forwards, its front legs on a slightly higher plane than its back legs. Its feet are large with claws and, on the paws closest to the viewer, with rounded projecting heels. It has a medium-length tail and, unusually, its genitals appear to be indicated at the base of a scroll delineating the musculature of the hindquarters. This is a powerful animal with a large head hanging downwards. There are bear-like qualities about the heavy hindquarters and the massive head, but the tail is over-long for a bear, which typically has a short stubby tail. The stance is very similar to the bear beneath the crescent on face C of St Vigeans 1 in Angus and in Perthshire to face D of the recumbent Meigle 26 with its 'heavy snuffling bear' (second animal from the right), but they both have the correctly stubby tails.⁴⁰ A review of the bone evidence for the brown bear, *Ursus arctos*, in Britain shows that, while the date of extinction is still uncertain, by the early medieval period the

presence of bears is most likely to relate to their importation from elsewhere.⁴¹ Thus a Pictish sculptor could have seen a real bear or copied one from a manuscript, and in either case a small mistake such as the length of its tail could easily have crept in. The superbly delineated bear from Old Scatness in Shetland is surely the work, as Julie Bond argued, of someone who had seen a live animal.⁴² The St Ringan's animal is perhaps best seen as a hybrid, like so many Pictish animals, particularly as its bulbous heels are such a pronounced feature.⁴³ Its massive head could suggest a lion's mane, but it lacks the distinctive lion's tail curving up over its back. In Pictish art, depiction of genitals is normally confined to bulls, such as the right-hand bull on face B of Meigle 12 and the bull on Burghead 3, but the St Ringan's beast is definitely not a bull.⁴⁴ The remarkable depth of relief and careful modelling of this animal recalls similar treatment of those on the fragment of architectural frieze Meigle 22, as well as those on face A of the cross-slab from St Madoes, although the depth of relief on St Ringan's is deeper than either.⁴⁵ Between the back of the animal and the cross-shaft, the depth is 30 mm, and it increases to 40 mm below the hindquarters.

Another link with St Vigean's 1 lies in the concept of a relatively narrow cross-slab with animals flanking the shaft of the cross. This form of narrow cross-slab is repeated at Murroes, farther south in Angus, where a basal fragment survives with a roundel of zoomorphic interlace in the shaft of the cross and a crouched animal carved in low relief which is set vertically to the right of the shaft.⁴⁶ In most cases where vertical animals flank the cross-shaft, they face the shaft with their feet touching it, whereas on St Ringan's the one surviving animal has his back to the shaft with a marked gap between the two, and a strip of intact surface to the right of the shaft suggests that the vanished image there was similarly detached from the shaft. This very unusual placing of the animal reflects, in the words of George Henderson, 'the calm elegance of the St Ringan's design, where the animal moves freely in its own space'.⁴⁷ Even on St Vigean's 1, where some creatures have their backs to the shaft and others face it, most are touching the shaft. The physical proportions of St Vigean's 1 (H 1.84 m, W 0.55 m, D 0.16 m) suggest that St Ringan's 1 cross-slab (W 0.49 m, D 0.16 m) could originally have been 1.7 m to 1.8 m high. The tenon to St Vigean's 1 is surprisingly short: if the base of the inscription panel on face B was intended to be seen, the tenon is only 0.14 m long, and the stability of the slab must have depended upon a very snug fit between tenon and socket stone (around 1872 St Vigean's 1 stood in a rectangular base with a chamfered surround to the

socket).⁴⁸ St Ringan's tenon is 0.24 m long and would be more easily seated in a socket stone.

CONCLUSIONS

Among Isabel Henderson's criteria for 'fragments of significance' are quality indicators of creativity and craftsmanship, and format indicators that point to the original purpose of the stone.⁴⁹ St Ringan's 1 fits both criteria, for its sculptor was particularly skilled in carving in depth and in laying out both key pattern and spiral work, and the location of the monument indicates a special purpose as a route marker and wayside shrine signalling one of the physical routeways between north and south Pictland. Woolf has noted the spread of sculpture around the possible limits of church or pastoral lands, while Fraser and Halliday observed of the early medieval landscape of Donside in Aberdeenshire that both Pictish symbol stones and cross-slabs tend to be situated towards the margins of medieval parishes and to mark particular locations such as routeways.⁵⁰ St Ringan's Cairn lay towards the northern boundary of Fordoun parish and marked an ancient routeway over the Mounth (Fig 1). The latter was well-known to the Picts as a substantial ridge of hills between north and south Pictland, and it was mentioned by name in the *Annals of Ulster* in 782 as *Monoth*.⁵¹ The Cairn O' Mount routeway would have acted as a means of physical transmission of ideas between the monasteries of the Moray Firth and Easter Ross and those of southern Pictland. In this respect, St Ringan's 1 fits another criterion of significance, as a communication indicator linking the sculptural traditions of north and south Pictland.⁵² Moreover, this cross-slab on its remote hillside made a cultural statement: for the traveller coming south it was the first sight of one of the relief carved sandstone cross-slabs that are typical of Angus.

It was not the first time that a pass over the Mounth had been marked by a Christian carved stone. Farther west, there are even more hazardous drove roads from a ford on the Dee south of Dinnet that pass over the mountains and emerge on the south side at Tarfside and continue along Glen Esk: the Mounth Road over Mount Keen and the Firmouth over Gannoch (Fig 1). Near Tarfside is a stone incised with an outline Latin cross, which may have marked the junction of these two routes.⁵³ Another such stone was found at North Water Bridge, close to the River North Esk to the south of Fettercairn, which could have signposted the Cairn O' Mount pass for travellers to and from

Strathmore, as well as the route along the river into Glen Esk.⁵⁴ Jane Geddes has recognised these two stones as ‘a cultural extension from Deeside, over the Mounth pass’, emanating ultimately from an early ecclesiastical settlement at Tullich on the north side of the River Dee between Dinnet and Ballater, where there are six stones carved with outline Latin crosses.⁵⁵ All these stones are likely to be late seventh or early eighth century in date, and they suggest that the idea of wayside cross-slabs to mark routes over the Mounth was in place some hundred years before St Ringan’s was set up.

St Ringan’s cross-slab was an elegant creation, in which the overall quality of carving and balance of design point to a master craftsman with extensive experience of carving and modelling in high relief and of the execution of sophisticated key and spiral patterns. On analogy with other cross-slabs with similar characteristics, such as St Vigeans 1 and Aberlemno 3, the original intact slab may conceivably have been carved with symbols on the reverse.⁵⁶ It seems possible that the same school of stone-carvers produced both this cross-slab and the free-standing cross of which Edzell 1 is a fragment, working at Edzell or somewhere else in the late 8th or early 9th centuries. Fordoun has an ecclesiastical history going back into the 5th century AD with written sources recording the presence there of St Palladius, and, despite the fact that just one inscribed cross-slab has survived from this site, Fordoun was undoubtedly an important monastic foundation.⁵⁷ It may be that the sculptors who carved St Ringan’s 1 and Edzell 1 were based at Fordoun, but this can be no more than speculation. Despite all the uncertainties of its history, the fragment of cross-slab St Ringan’s 1 deserves to be better known both as one of the notable achievements of Pictish sculptural art and as a rare cultural indicator on a remote mountain pass between north and south Pictland.

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Captions

FIG 1

Location map showing places and landscape features mentioned in the text. Drawing by Laura O'Connor, courtesy of AOC Archaeology, Edinburgh.

FIG 2

St Ringan's 1 cross-slab fragment.

Faces A (left) and C (right). Scale 1:10. Drawing by John Borland © Crown copyright, Historic Environment Scotland, SC1058010.

FIG 3

St Ringan's 2 socket stone.

Longitudinal section, top, one long side, and transverse section. Scale 1:10. Drawing by John Borland © Crown copyright, Historic Environment Scotland, SC1058007.

FIG 4

St Ringan's 1 and 2.

Reconstruction of the cross-slab seated uneasily in the socket stone. Scale 1:10. Drawing by John Borland © Crown copyright, Historic Environment Scotland, combining SC1058010 and SC 1058007.

FIG 5

St Ringan's I cross-slab fragment (as displayed set into the socket stone St Ringan's 2).

Face C. Photograph by Kim Downie © University of Aberdeen, ABDUA 39615_back_img02.

FIG 6

St Ringan's I cross-slab fragment (as displayed set into the socket stone St Ringan's 2).

Face A. Photograph by Kim Downie © University of Aberdeen, ABDUA 39615_front_img02.

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³ Henderson 2005.

⁴ Isabel and George Henderson kindly accompanied the author on a visit to see the fragment in Aberdeen, and Isabel agrees that it should join her ‘fragments of significance’.

⁵ Borland, Fraser and Fraser 2007, 106–8; St Ringan’s Cairn, Canmore 36067.

⁶ NGR NO 6549 7944.

⁷ Taylor 1976, 96–7, 166–7.

⁸ *Statistical Account* 1793 vol 5, 330.

⁹ RCAHMS 1982, no 68.

¹⁰ Neil Curtis pers comm.

¹¹ Small also wrote that a ‘full report of this slab will be included in a survey of recent archaeological discoveries in NE Scotland which will probably appear in *Aberdeen University Review*’, but no such paper was published.

¹² Small 1974.

¹³ RCAHMS 1984, 12; Mack 1997, 144, Redstone Hill (though he was mistaken in listing the stone as lost); Fraser 2008.

¹⁴ Ordnance Survey 1863, 51.

¹⁵ Ordnance Survey 1863, 218; Borland, Fraser and Sherriff 2007, 108.

¹⁶ *Saints in Scottish Place-Names*.

¹⁷ Borland, Fraser and Sherriff 2007, 106–8. The two stones are displayed together but only by skewing the cross-slab fragment.

¹⁸ Aberlemno 3, Canmore 34863, ECMS pt 3, 214–15.

¹⁹ Edzell 1, Canmore 242661, Fraser 2008, 52; Stevenson 1959, 42–3, pl 6.

²⁰ Cynthia Thickpenny pers comm.

²¹ Edzell 2, Canmore 242659, Fraser 2008, no. 59; symbol fragment Canmore 269041.

²² Geddes 2017, 109, 127–9; Henderson and Henderson 2004, 193.

²³ Fordoun, Canmore 36458, ECMS pt 3, 201–3.

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- ²⁴ Taylor 2011, 107; 2015, 27.
- ²⁵ Salmond 1938, map opp 294; Garden 1797.
- ²⁶ Redstone Hill milestone 9, Canmore 362042.
- ²⁷ Henderson 2008, 175–6, illus 4.3b.
- ²⁸ Thickpenny 2019.
- ²⁹ ECMS pt 2, 348.
- ³⁰ Bain 1973, 75, pl 1.
- ³¹ Thickpenny 2019, 209–11.
- ³² Tealing, Canmore 318083, Fraser 2008, 60. This fragment was in better condition in the late 1930s than it is now, and the key pattern may be seen more clearly on a photograph taken when it stood in the church porch at Tealing by O G S Crawford (NMS Special Collections, SAS 337, nos 39–4).
- ³³ Menmuir 1, Canmore 35132, ECMS pt 3, 263–4.
- ³⁴ Henderson 1982, 93–4.
- ³⁵ Aberlemno 2, Canmore 34806, ECMS pt 3, 209–14, Fraser 2008, no.51.2.
- ³⁶ Dunfallandy, Canmore 26295, ECMS pt 3, 286–9, Fraser 2008, no. 181.
- ³⁷ Geddes 2017, 65; Dunblane 1, Canmore 24673, ECMS pt 3, 315–17.
- ³⁸ Henderson 1987, 174–5.
- ³⁹ Meigle 1, Canmore 30838, ECMS pt 3, 296–7, Fraser 2008, no. 189.1, Tealing, Canmore 318083, Fraser 2008, no. 70.
- ⁴⁰ Geddes 2017, 119–20, 122, 223; Henderson and Henderson 2004, 76.
- ⁴¹ O’Regan 2018. I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this paper for a reference to The Penitential of Archbishop Egbert of AD 732–66, in which the eating of meat mauled by a bear or a wolf is forbidden (Oakley 1923, 122). This suggests that there were indeed still wild bears around in early medieval times in parts of Britain.
- ⁴² Bond 2010, 306.
- ⁴³ Henderson 1996, 32–3.
- ⁴⁴ Meigle 12, Canmore 30841, ECMS pt 3, 333–4; Burghead 3, Canmore 319203, ECMS pt 3, 121, Fraser 2008, no. 152.3.
- ⁴⁵ Meigle 22, Canmore 30852, ECMS pt 3, 337; St Madoes, Canmore 28201, ECMS pt 3, 292–6.
- ⁴⁶ St Vigeans 1, Canmore 318444, ECMS pt 3, 235–9, Geddes 2017, 177–81; Murroes, Canmore 318444.

⁴⁷ George Henderson pers comm.

⁴⁸ Geddes 2017, 24–5.

⁴⁹ Henderson 2005, 78.

⁵⁰ Woolf 2013, 12; Fraser and Halliday 2011, 321–2.

⁵¹ Fraser 2009, 327.

⁵² Henderson 2005, 78–80.

⁵³ Tarfside, Canmore 33920. Tarfside is linked with St Drostan through the place-name Droustie’s Meadow, just north of the cross-slab, and Drostan is recorded in the *Aberdeen Breviary* as having founded a church at Glenesk around AD 700 (Macquarrie with Butter 2012, 353–4). The southern part of the Firmounth is shared with yet another route from the Dee, known as The Fungle, but the Firmounth crosses the Dee much closer to Tullich.

⁵⁴ North Water Bridge, Canmore 35868.

⁵⁵ Geddes, Murray and Murray 2015, 270–1. Just to the east of Tarfside is the district place-name Cairncross, within which area was a very large cairn mentioned in the mid 19th century: ‘It is not improbable that this Cairn may have had a Cross on or near it, from the fact of a portion of this district going by the name of Cairncross, but there is no tradition concerning it.’ (Ordnance Survey Name Book 1857–1861, 95). This place-name may suggest that the role of the early Tarfside stone was supplemented later and some 2 km to the south-east by a larger cross-slab or even a free-standing cross.

⁵⁶ Isabel Henderson pers comm.

⁵⁷ Clancy 2009, 23–6.