

Christian sculpture in Norse Shetland

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The incised and carved stone monuments found in Shetland which date from the early centuries of Christianity in the north, are so different from those as yet known from Orkney that it is hardly surprising neither have any parallels in the Faeroes. We can, however, deduce from them something about the Shetlanders' religion and population in the times when they were the relatively near overseas neighbours of those Norse settlers investigated by Sverri Dahl. So I am glad to be able to offer him this note as a friendly tribute from Scotland.

Charles Thomas discussed very fully many of the remarkable sculptured stones and crosses when he published the parts of two shrines from St Ninian's Isle. He then wrote (1973,30), "It is obviously impossible to be dogmatic as to whether or not surviving Shetland Christians continued to make, and erect, cross-marked stones during the ninth and tenth centuries.' At the same time he was inclined to generalise that 'work of Christian Norsemen (was) in Shetland unlikely to be before the mid-eleventh century', and only represented by small crudely incised or shaped crosses and a plain hogback grave-cover.

The question how far the native population of Pictish Christian culture in the Northern Isles survived in the ninth century, has had new light shed on it in Orkney by Dr Anna Ritchie's excavations at Buckquoy, Birsay (1974 and 1976). She found that a Pictish house was succeeded by three Norse house-phases within the ninth century, but that the artifact assemblage from the Norse levels continued to be dominated by native products. Above the ruins there

was a mid-tenth century burial with grave-goods, which included a cut half Anglo-Saxon penny, of king Eadmund, and a loose-ring pin very like the one from Tjørnuvík. In considering the wider implications of the site, Dr Ritchie pointed to other aspects of native material culture also adopted by the colonists.

This makes it increasingly probable that the cross-slab from Culbingsgarth, Bressay, in Shetland, not referred to by Thomas, was erected by a Christian Pict, or half-Pict, in Norse times. It has along the edge an inscription in late Pictish ogams, which has been read as including not only the Gaelic words for a cross and a son, but the Norse word for a daughter (ECM III pp. 5—10 and figs. 4 a—d). If one simplifies the double consonants (a convention inherited from Ireland), the transliteration is — Crosc:Nahtvdaðs: Datr:Anbenises:Meqdroan. Kenneth Jackson has accepted the reading and interpretation of the foreign words (1955, 140—2). Further evidence of the mixed cultural origins is, as noted by Romilly Allen, that the words are separated by two points as on many runic inscriptions. (The long ogam from Lunnasting also has such points, but not that from St Ninian's Isle.) There is coarsely executed relief carving on both faces, which echoes three of the four main features of the much more often illustrated one-sided cross-slab from Papil in Burra, another island, on the far side of Shetland's mainland (ECM III 10—15). The Papil stone in its fine part-incised low relief, seems to correspond to the one from Birsay in Orkney which show three warriors below Pictish symbols, and which may have lost a cross from its other face.¹) Both probably date from the end of the eighth century, the point at which there is now a break in the sequence of Orcadian sculpture. (These two stones, and several of the others mentioned later, are illustrated in Stewart Cruden's excellent small guide and picture-book, pls. 5 and 7). The stone from Bressay seems to be a considerably later copy and elaboration of that from Papil. They share a circular cross-head with expanded arms and interlace in the angles, cowed monks facing one another carrying crooks and book-satchels, and a lion, its tail arched over its back like the evangelist's lion in the much older Book of Durrow. The Bressay stone has these in a different arrangement from Papil

and it is altogether more elaborate, with a second cross-head on the back, curiously formed of coarse interlace. Typological signs that it is later are firstly the beasts on the upper corners devouring the man lying between them, as first found on southerly Pictish stones during the first half of the ninth century. Then around the rougher cross-head is a square frame of interlace, which not only contains bolder rings than those found exceptionally early on the Papil, cross-head, but appears to loop and bifurcate in a way related to the Jellinge style of 900 and later, such as the Skaill silver brooches found in Orkney.

That there was tenth-century Christian stone carving in Shetland is shown by a grave-slab from Papil (Moar and Stewart 1944 pl. xv). This bears a broadly incised cross entirely of interlace, the arm-ends resembling a triquetra, and the intersecting bands in the centre surrounded by a circle. Thomas firmly dated this as pre-Norse, reminiscent of the Northumbrian name- or pillow-stones, while also referring to the Irish tombstones somehow related to them. It is indeed close to certain Irish slabs, and even more to some at Iona, which Thomas did not mention in this context though he did when considering extremely simplified stones that might well be twelfth century (1973 29—30). These close parallels have long been dated by Irish antiquaries, and confirmed by Pádraig Lionard, to the 10th century with also an eleventh century example (1961, 133—5; Moar and Stewart 96). The interlaced heads of the mid-tenth century cross-slabs by Gaut in the Isle of Man, are cognate though more elaborate (Shetelig 1954, 124ff). A further, unpublished, slab at Iona, one with a square centre to the cross, has along the whole of one margin an inscription in Norse runes. This appears to be contemporary, and ascribable to the tenth or eleventh century. The combination reminds us of the pilgrimage to Iona, and death there in 981, of Anlaf Cuaran, once Norse king of York and of Dublin. A fragmentary slab from the old White Ness churchyard in mainland Shetland, has on one face the triquetral foot of another simple cross of interlaced bands. It is cruder than that from Papil, and may be secondary to a more elaborate and quite well executed interlace design on the other face, which is not easy to complete (Tait 1937).

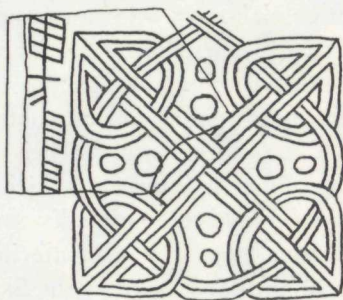


Fig. 1. *Reconstruction of design on carved fragment from White Ness, Shetland.*

The now vanished church of St Ola at Kirkhouse, White Ness, was probably founded before the time of the royal saint and his forcible conversion of the Earl of Orkney in 995. For another piece of sculpture found there has on its margin four or five letters of a very late ogam inscription, unlikely to be later than the tenth century — though that would not be impossible, of course, since the ogam alphabet as a curiosity is known from a fourteenth century Irish manuscript.²⁾ The sculpture is more deeply cut and in quite a different style from the one just considered ([Stevenson] 1947, pl. xxii. 4; also unpublished fragment in the County Museum). Its design has not been reconstructed or discussed until now — fig. 1. The interlaced knot, a single strand with central line, is Romilly Allen's No. 758 (ECM II 294), which he and Collingwood (1927 80) show as confined to a few stones in County Durham, in ancient Northumbria; and it is not included in the earlier Anglian patterns from the same area (Lang 1978 36ff). The principal monument which has this knot is a cross-shaft at Aycliffe, ascribed to the tenth or possibly eleventh century after 930 (Morris 1978, 104 and pl. 6.4b). The cruciform centre of the Shetland knot is emphasised by two small bosses in each cross-arm. This attractive design may not be precisely paralleled elsewhere, but is not dissimilar in conception to an interlaced cross-head with single bosses at Aberford near Leeds (Collingwood 1927 fig. 121), and is connected with the 'lorgette' and related bosses at the same place, such as were

common elsewhere in northern England at the period of the Aycliffe sculpture.

A third carved fragment from White Ness is also unifacial ([Stevenson] 1947, not. ill.). It has a bold border of incised key-pattern in horizontal and vertical oblongs. This is not a Northumbrian design, but was possibly simplified from the oblique diaper squares of various stones in eastern Scotland, and that on the fine cross-slab at Farr in northern Sutherland which may belong to the second half of the ninth century (ECM III fig. 51). However the undecorated and somewhat attenuated hogback grave-cover from St Ninian's Isle of eleventh or twelfth century date (Thomas pl. xi), can now be seen as a late result of cultural contact with eastern Britain down to Northumbria over a prolonged period.

Given then that Christian stones were being sculptured in the middle of Shetland's Norse pagan period³), and Dr Ritchie's evidence for earlier continuity in Orkney, already argued by Frederick Wainwright (1962 158—62), the pre-Norse date of the St Ninian's Isle shrine-posts can not be taken as self-evident, nor their priority over the wonderfully sculptured tomb-shrine at St Andrews in southern Pictland, of around 800. In looking for the sources of the Shetland scheme southward along the east coast, as Thomas did in a general way, one does not find that its carving resembles eighth century work stylistically. In particular the 'S-dragons' facing one another with spiral tails are surely a debased form. The related creatures on Pictish stones as at Meikle in Perthshire (ECM III fig. 310; Cruden pl. 28), or considerably later at Brodie in Moray perhaps around 850, (ECM III fig. 136), must be dolphins. They were a regular part of Christian symbolism, and reached Britain by the seventh century in a form comparable to that used by the Picts later on, to be seen on the engraved hanging-bowl escutcheons from south of the Thames, from Faversham in Kent (Kendrick 1938 pl. xxxiii 18). On these they rise vertically on either side of a bold Cross. The Pictish dolphins are less realistically drawn, but there is in the far north a fine pair adorning the cross on the slab from Skinnet in Caithness, now in Wick (ECM III fig. 29); their tails each form a spiral of three coils, and they have grown an ear-lappet like a

Pictish 'elephant'. The pair on St Ninian's Isle post 3 have diverged a little further, and grown a front leg and two small ears. On post 1 another pair have become quadrupeds.

The relative date of the Skinnet stone does not seem to have been discussed anywhere. Though sadly battered it can be seen to be an ambitious monument in low relief, having an unusual cross on each face covered with elaborate well-designed interlace, and beside them Pictish symbols and a horse in the best tradition. It can not be very early nor very late, so a date in the middle of the ninth century might be guessed, or at any rate substantially later than the Birsay stone and Papil cross-slab. This is important for St Ninian's Isle, because other uncommon details on the shrine-posts are also found on Skinnet. The three-whorl spiral on top of post 2 is like that on one of the four roundels set in the angles of the Skinnet's front cross. Such roundels are an unusual arrangement, perhaps to be derived from bosses like those of the great Aberlemno No. 3 cross-slab in Angus, thought to be early ninth century (Cruden pl. 22). The equal-armed cross on post 5 has an echo of such bosses, and of another detail of that and earlier cross-heads in Angus, in that it has a quadrilobate not circular ring (Stevenson 1955 113) — seen in Thomas' pl.v rather than fig. 12. Then small sunk triangles alongside the spirals which decorate the crescent symbol both on the Skinnet stone and on the one closely related, possibly earlier, from Ulbster nearby (ECM III fig. 31), are found more prominently beside the running spirals on the side of the dragons' post 3. These running spirals may be noted as reminiscent of running vine-scroll, such as that on the edge of the 'Drosten stone' at St Vigean in Angus (ECM III fig. 252). Similar emphasis on sunk spandrels might be a clue to the date of the otherwise baffling curvilinear design deeply cut on a piece of slab from Cunningsburgh south of Lerwick, unsatisfactorily illustrated in ECM fig. 11. It has on the back three large strongly incised ogam letters on a vertical stem.

A date not long before that of the St Ninian's Isle posts, and so well into the ninth century, might be appropriate for the unique sculptured side-panel from a shrine, found nearly forty years ago at Papil (Moar and Stewart 1944, also illustrated in Wainwright 1962).

It represents, in skilful two-plane low relief, a procession of cowed clerics, one riding and four on foot holding crooks, the last of them also carrying a satchel round his neck like those on the older Papil stone. Ahead of them is shown a monumental cross on a square base. Its large head has no hollow armpits nor a 'halo' ring, and so is unlike the Irish high-crosses and most of those of the Iona-school. It shares with the latter the slightly concave arms (an Anglian feature) and a central boss, here surrounded by simplified scrolls. But if, as is likely, the artistic influence on Shetland was still from the east coast, where there was also a tradition of sculptured scenes in Angus and Perthshire, two fragments of free-standing crosses at St Vigean and Edzell show that something of the kind was occasionally being erected there early in the ninth century (Stevenson 1959).⁴) The heavy spirals in relief below the Papil procession, which Thomas imaginatively suggests may represent the sea, are elaborated from C-shaped scrolls not running spirals, but otherwise are very comparable to the paired spirals incised on St Ninian's Isle post 1. Both seem to reflect the general coarsening that is to be seen in southern Pictish art after the early ninth century, which had been the period of its finest developments starting with the St Andrews shrine.

One may conclude, therefore, that there were in Shetland active Christians erecting sculptured monuments in the tenth century, and most probably about the middle and end of the ninth century as well, all while the Papil cross-slab was still standing and providing inspiration. Artistic, and so probably also ecclesiastical, links with Pictland were first maintained or renewed, but later, after the Picts lost power to the Scots, were supplemented or possibly replaced by contact both with Iona and with Anglo-Scandinavian Northumbria.

NOTES

⁴) Some of the sketches on slate from the early Norse levels at Jarlshof, Shetland, were more probably drawn by a native rather than by a Norseman, notably the man's head with a row of curls only paralleled by the chief on the Birsay stone.

²) Although in Ireland ogam inscriptions are thought to have mostly ceased about the time they began among the Picts, the seventh century, they occur on the ninth century large silver brooch from Ballyspellan, on a grave-slab at Clonmacnois c. 925 and on a cross-shaft at Killaloe — bilingual ogam and Norse runes including a Norse name. (Macalister 1945; Lionard 163).

³) A slab-lined grave in White Ness churchyard found in 1938 contained a possibly tenth century Viking axe.

⁴) The large square bases of the crosses on the Skinnet stone, decorated at the corners in a manuscript fashion with loops, are perhaps more likely to derive from altar crosses than from monuments. There is a similar but quite square base on the simpler but probably related cross on a slab at Graemeshall in Orkney. This may be of about the same date, as may the altar-front from Flotta bearing an equal-armed cross likewise covered with interlace (ECM II figs. 18—19).

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SYNOPSIS

This paper suggests that there is acceptable evidence for the continuation of Christian sculpture and Pictish writing in Shetland in the period 800—1050, which Professor Thomas did not consider in his discussion of the finds from St Ninian's Isle and Papil. Following her more recent excavations in Orkney Dr A Ritchie has reopened the questions of cultural and physical survival of the pre-Norse population in the northern isles of Britain, and of assimilation. A tenth-century date has long been proposed for the Bressay cross-slab with its Pictish inscription in ogam letters, which includes two Gaelic words, and one Norse, and has uniquely : between the words as in runes. A fragment from Papil which clearly resembles tombstones at Iona should also belong to that century. So does the knot-design reconstructed in fig. 1, for it is only known otherwise from a group of monuments in Scandinavian northern England. Its use of little bosses is a link with the same area. Some ogam letters also survive on this stone.

Features of the sculpture from St Ninian's Isle are reconsidered, and arguments put for a date no earlier than mid-ninth century rather than before 800, by comparison with Pictish sculpture in east-central Scotland and in Caithness. Although the fine processional scene from Papil is older, it may also belong to the ninth century. The writer agrees with Professor Thomas that, despite the representation of a monumental cross, it too is in the east-coast tradition rather than influenced direct from Iona.

ÚRTAK

Í ritgerðinni verður víst á, at nóg góð prógv eru fyrri, at kristin myndaskurður og piktiskt skrifv kynstur hava hildið fram í Hetlandi í tíðini 800—1050. Hetta tekur Thomas professari ikki við í síni umrøðu av fundunum frá St. Ninian's Isle og Papil.

Sambært sínum nýggju útgrevstrarúrslitum í Orknoyggjum hevur Dr. A. Ritchie tikið upp aftur spurningin um fólk, sum búði í bretsku norðuroyggunum, áðrenn norðbúgvur komu, livdi áfram mentunarliga og í blóði og um samruna millum hetta fólk og norðbúgvur.

Tíggjunda öld hevur leingi verið skotin upp sum tíðarfesting fyrri Bressay krosssteinum, sum við síni piktisku áskrift í ogam bókstøvum, ið telur tvey gælisk orð og eitt norrønt og sum eindømi hevur : millum orðini eins og í rúnunum.

Eitt brot frá Papil sum greitt líkist gravsteinum á Iona skal eisini vera úr somu öld. So ger eisini knútamynstrið sum er endurbøtt á mynd 1, tí tað er annars best kent frá einum bólki av minnismerkjum í Skandinaviu og Norðuronglandi. Nýtsla tess av smáum vølum er eisini samband við sama øki. Nakrir ogam bókstavir eru eisini varðveittir á hesum steini.

Drøg úr skurðmyndini frá St. Ninian's Isle eru tikin upp til nýggja viðgerð, og uppskot eru sett fram um tíðarfesting ikki fyrr enn um miðja 9. öld heldur um fyri 800. Hetta er gjørt við at bera saman piktiskar skurðmyndir í eystara parti av Mið-Skotlandi og á Katanesi. Hóast skurðgongumyndin frá Papil er eldri, so hoyrir hon helst eisini til nýggjundu öld. Høvundurin er samdur við Thomas professara, at hóast ein stórkrossur er á myndini, hoyrir hon eisini upp í eysturstrandararvin heldur enn at hava verið fyri beinleiðis árinu frá Iona.