

The Skeith Stone, Upper Kilrenny, Fife, in its context†

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ABSTRACT

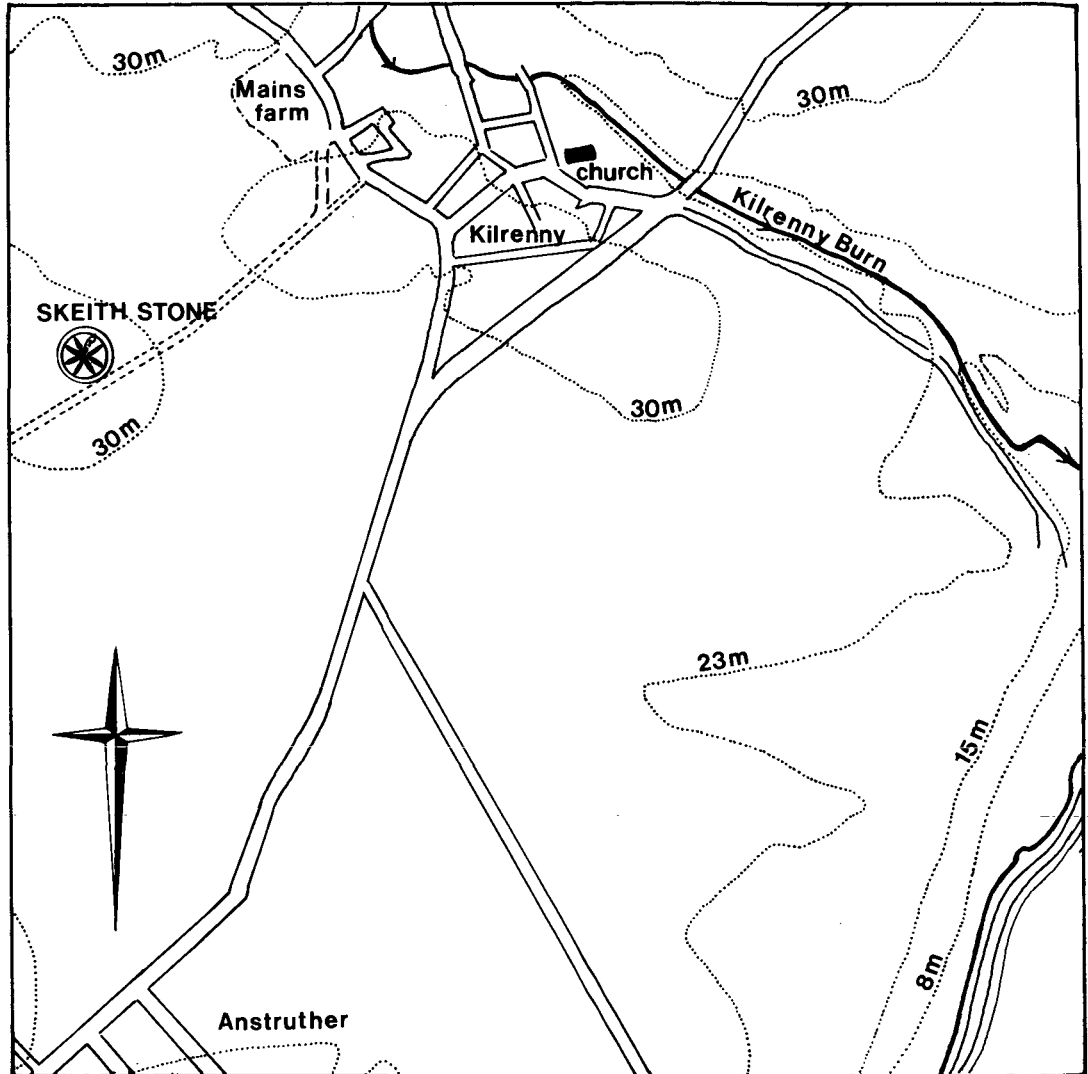
The identification on the badly worn Skeith Stone at Upper Kilrenny, Fife, of a rho-hook attached to a cross of arcs motif the decoration of which is augmented with a saltire of arcs is significant because it is the first example of a chi-rho symbol to be recognized in Pictland. The design on the stone shares stylistic links with carved monuments at Whithorn and on the Isle of Man and also with sculptural motifs in western Ireland. It seems to belong within a seventh-century context. The stone is erected next to an apparently ancient trackway leading into Kilrenny, a place-name which is thought to contain a dedication to Ethernan, a Pictish saint whose death is probably recorded in AD 669. The village is identified from 19th-century maps and aerial photographic evidence as a relict early monastic precinct divided into three sections with the Skeith Stone functioning as a wayside boundary marker to the site. A relationship between the Kilrenny site and another Ethernan focus on the nearby Isle of May is postulated.

INTRODUCTION

In a field to the north of the main road from Anstruther to Crail (A917) and a short distance west of the village of Kilrenny, in Fife, stands a badly weathered piece of stone known locally as the Skeith Stone. For most of the year it lies hidden from the road amongst the tall crops of this fertile area and even after harvest it remains almost indistinguishable on the skyline. A series of notes by Edwina Proudfoot (1993; 1995a; 1998) has recently drawn attention to the potential for further carved stone discoveries in and around Kilrenny, but the Skeith Stone has elicited little comment. Stuart (1867, 59, pl 124), who saw the monument in the 19th century, seems to have been left quite unmoved by this large, unshaped, ochre-coloured lump of rock, dismissing it in little over three lines of comment; nevertheless his illustration remains valuable. Allen (Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3, 374) saw no need to illustrate it, limiting his text to six lines of largely topographical description. Nevertheless, this is a significant monument by virtue of its location close to Kilrenny, a site which has been claimed as a probable early dedication to Ethernan, an important seventh-century Pictish saint (Taylor 1996, 99), its proximity to the Isle of May, a centre of later medieval pilgrimage, which also has connections with St Ethernan (Yeoman 1997) and because of its decoration.

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ILLUS 1 Skeith Stone and the Kilrenny area. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)

PART I: THE DESIGN IN CONTEXT

DESCRIPTION

The Skeith Stone (NGR: NO 5708 0465) stands on the top of a low hill (32 m above sea-level) and 1 km from the coast (illus 1). Today, this large piece of sandstone stands on the northern margin of an unmetalled track running south-west from Upper Kilrenny (illus 2). It has visible measurements of 0.94 m by 1.02 m by 0.31 m and is orientated NE/SW with its carved side facing south-east. It is clear, however, from Stuart's drawing (1867, pl 124) that in his day the stone was less deeply embedded in the earth, thereby allowing a more complete record of the carved detail. Evidence in the Royal Commission's files suggests that at some time between 1933 and 1968 the slab was 'moved slightly nearer the farm track' and realigned with the track to its present

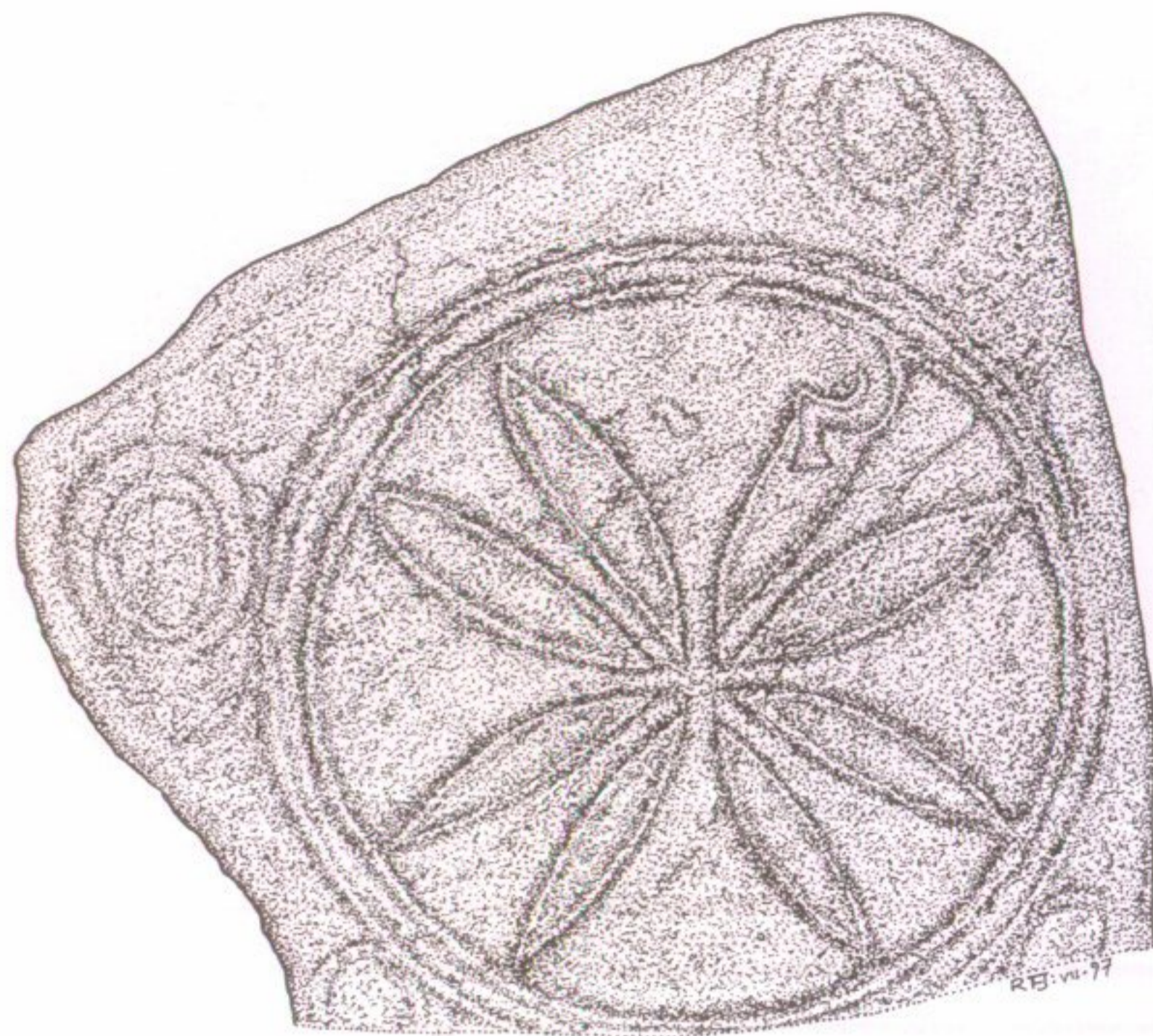


ILLUS 2 A general view of the Skeith Stone and associated trackway looking east towards Kilrenny

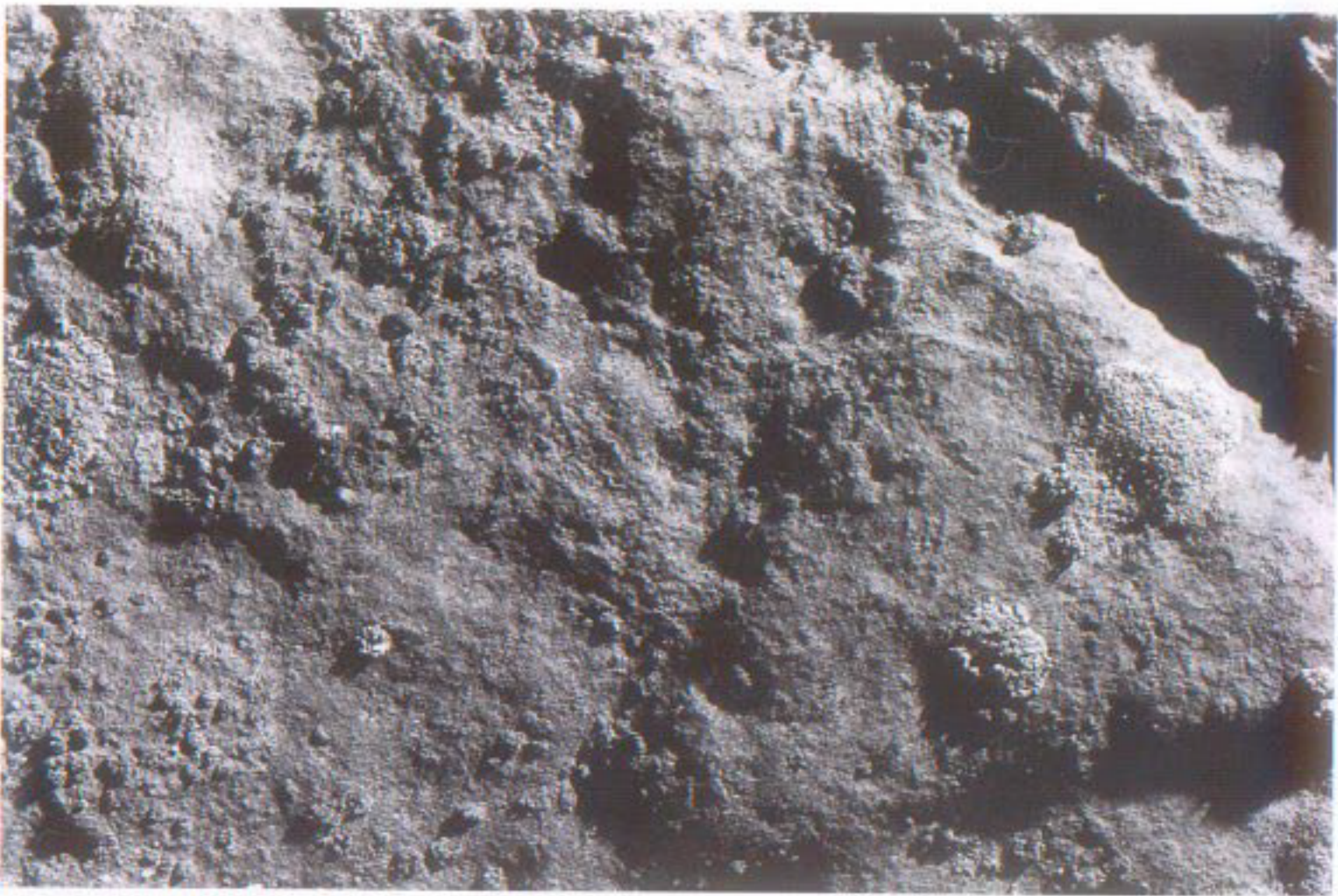
orientation.¹ Evidence for the stone before its re-siting (RCAHMS 1933, no 331) provides measurements of 3 ft 8 in by 3 ft 4 in (1.12 m by 1.02 m) and gives an earlier axis of NNW/SSE, indicating that it was previously aligned across the track rather than with it.² The worn carving is incised and fills the available slab surface. The main motif comprises a large circle (diameter 0.83 m) formed from two closely paralleled incised lines (0.045 m apart) (illus 3). Within this narrow circular band lie eight incised, radiating, leaf-shaped foils of irregular width and disposition (0.3 m by 0.07 m): viewed another way, these cuts (0.01 m maximum depth) represent the outline of an eight-armed figure resembling an uneven double cross. The arms are of differing proportions and the whole seems to represent a complex, compressed motif.

The main cross, formed from the four largest members, stands upright with its arms facing the prime points of the compass. The slighter arms, virtually half the width of the main cross, lie at the half points of the compass forming a saltire. Because of their narrowness the smaller saltire arms appear distorted while the intervening foil shapes have, in part at least, been scooped out. This serves to differentiate foreground from background and makes the motif more readily recognizable, but in so doing the sculptor has created a false-relief effect. It can also be appreciated that neither the arms of the cross nor saltire is of normal structure for both were formed using a compass — the centre points for the cross being on the circumference of the circle while the saltire's centres necessarily lie outside the circle — hence the apparent distortion of the foils.

An outstanding additional feature is a bulbous extension just within the line of the circle, on the right edge of the upper arm of the cross. Erupting from the bulge, an independent strand (0.02 m wide, 0.09 m high) loops downwards across the adjoining foil and returns to fit neatly into an indentation in the cross arm. From this point the strand turns abruptly downwards and terminates in a wedged serif. The strand is damaged and now stands in low relief, suggesting it



ILLUS 3 The Skeith Stone, interpretative drawing (above) and photograph (below)

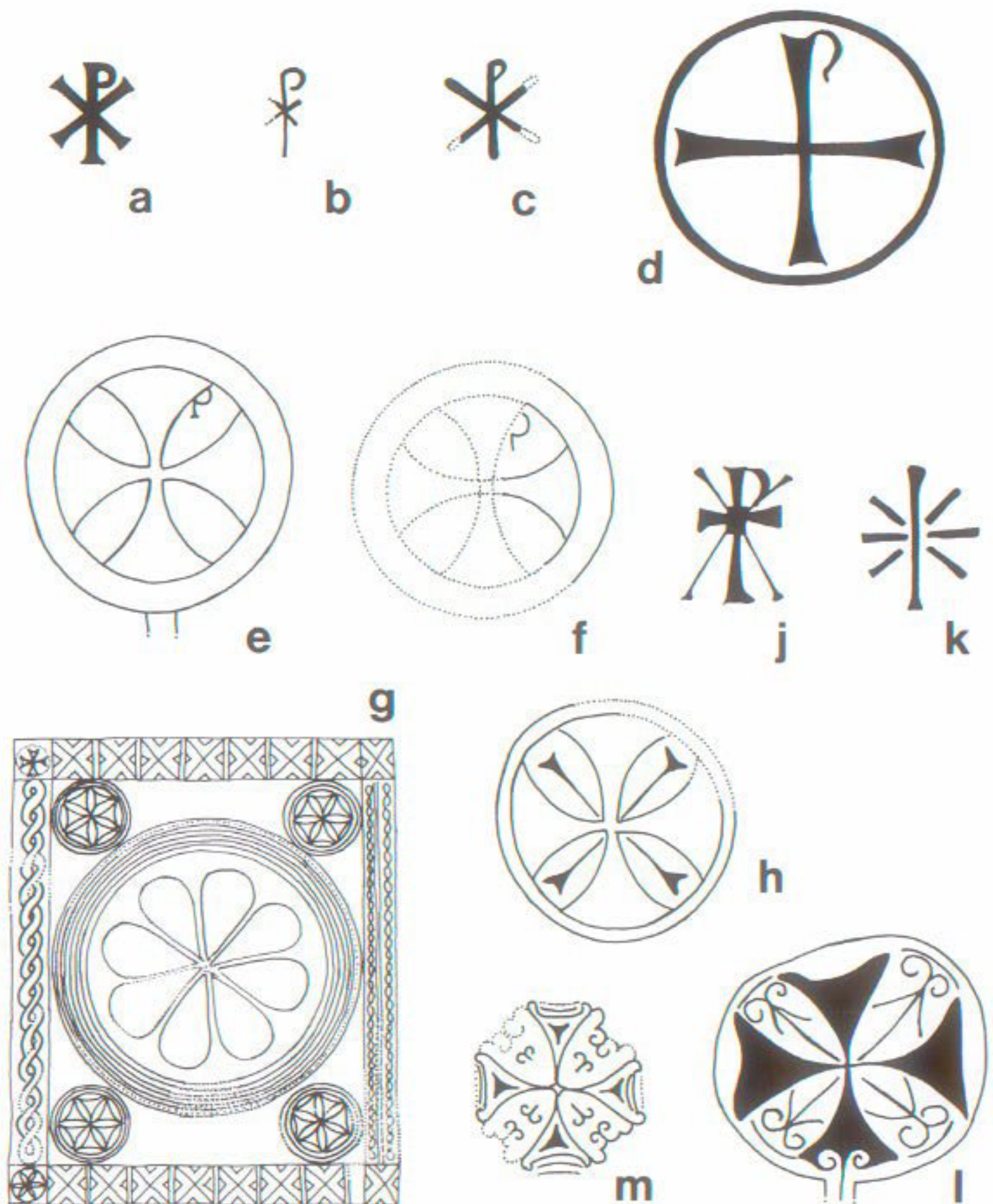


ILLUS 4 A detail of the Skeith Stone, showing the weathered hook and serif of the *chi-rho* motif

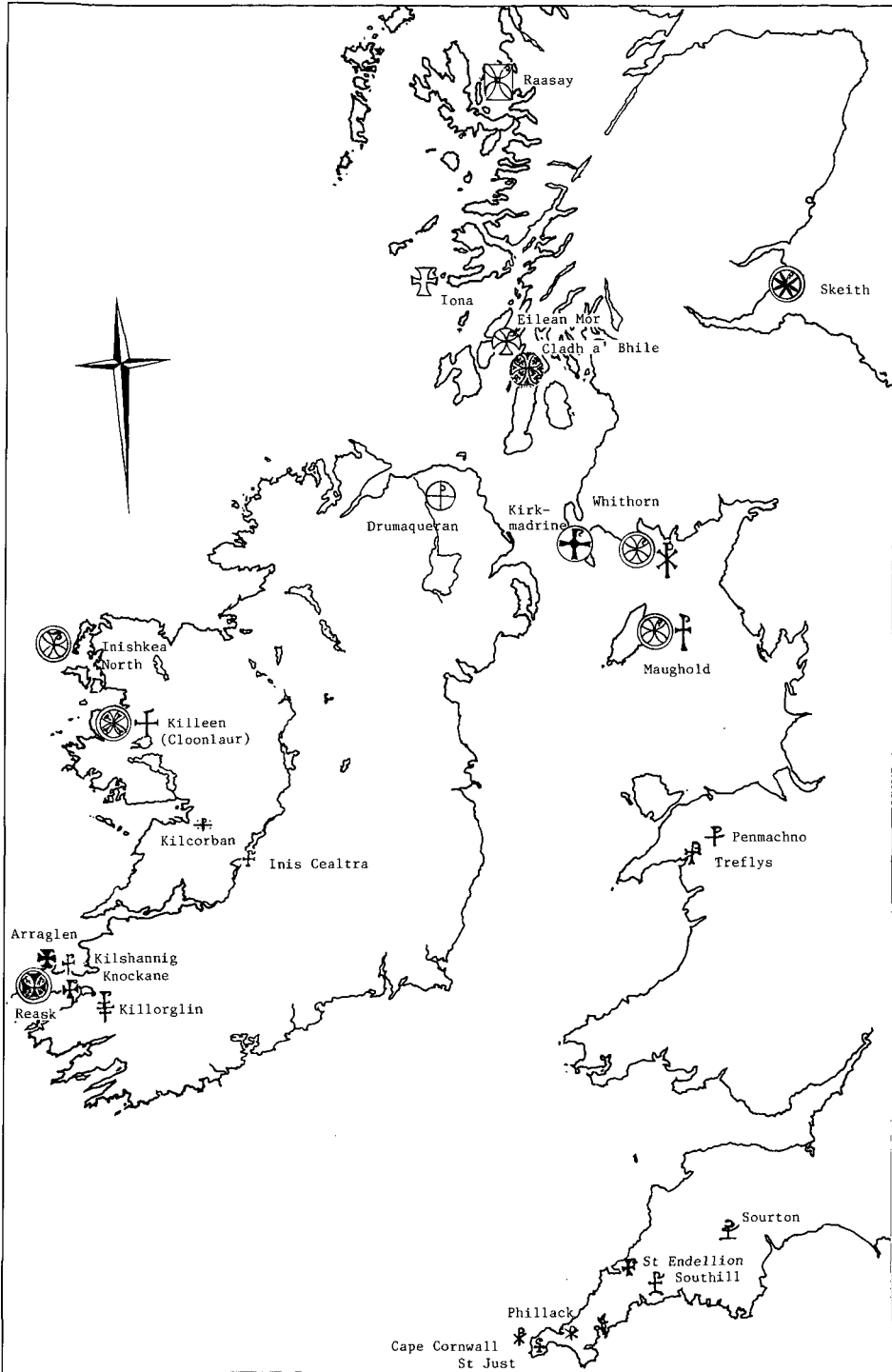
may not originally have stood as proud of the excavated background as the cross arms (illus 4). Beyond the circle little surface area remains, except in the irregular corners of the slab and at ground level. These small areas are decorated with sub-circular shapes formed from a single cut with the centres, although now badly worn, left proud. Only the upper arcs of the lower circles are visible above ground level, establishing beyond question that the design was originally less embedded in the earth. The combined motif thus comprises a cross of arcs with a hooked extension in the upper arm, imposed upon a saltire of arcs, all contained within a narrow circle which is flanked by four rings.

DISCUSSION

Although the total Skeith design seems unique, there exist closely related motifs both in the Insular tradition and further afield which provide useful comparative material. Initially, it seems reasonable to suggest that the basic design derives ultimately from the original '☩' (*chi-rho*) formula, a motif espoused in the early fourth century by the Emperor Constantine as a monogram after he won imperial status and instituted Christianity as the official religion of Empire (illus 5a). The symbol combines the first two letters ('X' — *chi*, plus 'P' — *rho*) of Christ's name in Greek — *CH R [istos]*. The emblem reached the province of Britain in the fourth century, appearing in various contexts (Thomas 1981, 86–91, 165, figs 3–7, 21), but after the cessation of Roman rule and the Anglian land takings, it appears rarely in this precise form. One of only two examples is found in re-Christianized Northumbria, where it occupies the initial position on the dedication slab of Benedict Biscop's monastic foundation at Jarrow (illus 5b).³ This monument, Jarrow 17



ILLUS 5 *Chi-rho* and cross forms, motif parallels for the Skeith Stone: (a) Constantinian *chi-rho*; (b) Jarrow 17, County Durham; (c) Whithorn, Galloway, *LATINUS* stone; (d) Kirkmadrine, Galloway; (e) Whithorn, Galloway, *LOCI PETRI APUSTOLI* slab; (f) Maughold, Isle of Man, altar frontal fragment; (g) Ambrosiana ms, Orosius's *Chronicon*, folio 1v; (h) Killeen (Cloonlaur), County Mayo; (j) Bologna ms, Lactantius's *Opera*, folio 1022v; (k) Rhineland tombstone (Thomas 1971, fig 49); (l) Reasc, County Kerry; (m) Cladh a' Bhile, Argyll, no 20



ILLUS 6 Location of *chi-rho* and other decorative parallels for the Skeith Stone

(Cramp 1984, 113–14, *illus* 524), may accurately be dated to the year AD 685 but represents an arcane use, a revival harking back to earlier centuries. The Jarrow motif does not exactly resemble the Skeith design as it combines only ‘X’ with ‘P’ and has no cross bar. Further, the Jarrow form is linear and lacks the compass design used at Skeith. Its importance lies in the fact that it indicates the presence of the specific Constantinian form of the motif in northern Britain as late as the end of the seventh century.

To extend the expansion of possible Northumbrian influences a little further entails a trip to Jarrow’s twin monastery at Monkwearmouth. Amongst the carved monuments from this site are two separate but virtually identical blocks decorated with relief crosses of arcs set around a central disc. Rosemary Cramp, who includes them in her corpus as architectural fragments (Monkwearmouth 28 & 29: Cramp 1984, 133–4, *illus* 6, 19–20), is uncertain how to date them because monuments of a similar design (Heddon-on-the-Wall 1, Warden 5, Woodhorn 3–4, Birtley 3 and others) are considered to have an 11th-century date. Monkwearmouth 28, however, seems to come from a secure context for it ‘appears to be properly bedded in with the wall, so that it could be part of the [late] seventh-century church rather than an insertion marking the consecration of an 11th-century tower’.⁴ Such an example indicates a potential model for the second element of the Skeith design: its cross of arcs. The twin monasteries, conveniently sited for northbound as well as southbound travel at the mouths of Tyne and Wear, might be appropriate as sources for models of elements in the Skeith design.

Another area worth exploring for sources and parallels for the Skeith motif lies around the northern Irish Sea. Whithorn possesses the second of the two Constantinian *chi-rhos* occurring in a post-Roman northern British context. It appears on a later fifth-century pillar gravestone erected to *LATINUS* and his daughter (Thomas 1971, 99; Radford & Donaldson 1984, 27). The *chi-rho* is cut awkwardly at the top of the stone and may — although Craig (1997, 614–16) has argued eloquently against this suggestion on the grounds of the interpretation of the inscription — be an addition (*illus* 5c).⁵ The Constantinian *chi-rho* motif was common in the late Empire but it became transmuted during the later fourth and fifth centuries (Thomas 1981, 86, *fig* 3) when (to simplify a complex process) ‘X’ (*chi*) evolved into ‘+’ (cross) which, when added to ‘P’ (*rho*) produced the form ‘⦿’. The cross-form with *rho*-hook extension was used in Insular contexts as a later variant of the *chi-rho* motif (Thomas 1981, 165, *fig* 21). This developed type is found in an Insular context within a three-century bracket (*illus* 6) at several sites in Cornwall and Wales (Thomas *op cit*; Nash-Williams 1950), in the Isle of Man at Maughold (Kermode 1907) and in Ireland (Thomas 1981, *fig* 21.5; Herity 1990; Herity 1994). In south-western Scotland it first appears around AD 500 at Kirkmadrine (Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3, *figs* 534–5) (*illus* 5d) but it also occurs in the western isles of Scotland on Eilean Mór (RCAHMS 1992, no 33), on Iona (RCAHMS 1982, no 22) and on Raasay (Galbraith 1933, 63–4, 316–20). These Scottish monuments, sometimes framed in a circle or rectangle, preserve a *rho* attached to straight-sided or expanded arm crosses. Rarely, however, the motif occurs as a *rho*-hook attached to a cross of arcs within a circle. The best-known example of this formula occurs on the *LOCI PETRI APUSTOLI* slab at Whithorn (Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3, 497, *fig* 537; Radford & Donaldson 1984, 5, 27–8) (*illus* 5e) but it also appears on a stylistically related shrine panel or altar slab fragment from Maughold, Isle of Man (Trench-Jellicoe 1980, 202–3, pl XI) (*illus* 5f); both have been dated to the seventh century.⁶ Catherine Swift (1997, 70–83, 126), in a recent survey of the dating evidence for crosses of arcs related to other motifs, suggested that the seventh century was the most likely *floruit* for crosses of arcs linked with Latin (as opposed to ogam) inscriptions.⁷ These monuments, all of which have a western distribution, are carved in incised technique but none carries any hint of false relief — probably because their simplicity made it

unnecessary to clarify the meaning of the decorative form.⁸ They also provide parallels for the *rho*-hook attached to the upper arm of the Skeith cross of arcs. The form of the Skeith *rho*-hook is closely similar to both the Whithorn and Maughold examples, differing only in that the Fife version is carved in false relief. Although detail has undoubtedly been lost due to later wear, the initial intention would almost certainly have been made clear by picking out intricacies of the design with paint.

An interesting parallel with potential relationships in a monastic context in Ireland appears on folio 1v — the decorated frontispiece — of a manuscript of Orosius's *Chronicon* which has been dated to the early seventh century. It was long preserved at Bobbio in northern Italy and later gifted to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan, where it became MSOD23 sup (illus 5g). The page is claimed to be 'the earliest carpet page of Insular art' (Alexander 1978, 28, illus 6; Henderson 1987, 27, pl 18; Henry 1965, pl 85a) and shows a large encircled medallion rosette of eight petals positioned between four smaller circular motifs filled with hexafoils, all within a rectangular decorated frame. The eight coloured petals, here of equal size, equate with the eight foils of Skeith. The spaces between the petals thus become an eight-armed motif in which straight arms develop into curved terminals and fuse. Although the intention of the *Chronicon* artist is unclear because the page is now much faded, he created a motif of striking structural similarity to that at Skeith, although it lacks a *rho*-hook. A second, much closer Irish parallel for the overall Skeith design comes from Killeen (Cloonlaur), County Mayo (Herity 1994, 235, 248, 255, pl 3.2) (illus 5h). Within the churchyard is a bronze-age *gallán* which has been Christianized by the addition of an encircled cross of arcs. The circle is proportionately narrow (0.02 m), as at Skeith, and within the cross arms lie incised motifs similar in form to the saltire at Skeith but, falling short of the line of the circle, they terminate with a moline shape.⁹ The upper right quadrant of the circle is damaged but remaining evidence suggests it is unlikely that the Killeen cross had an additional *rho*-hook.

There remains the problem of the source of the combined motifs; the later *chi-rho* fused with the saltire. This design can be traced back to the fourth or early fifth century when a graffito example was scratched on a wall of the Roman catacomb of St Callixtus (De Rossi 1864–77, vol 2, Tav. XXXIII, no 4); it also appears in the second half of the fifth century in manuscript form on folio 1022v of a Bologna Biblioteca Universitaria manuscript (no 701) of Lactantius's *Opera* (Nordenfalk 1970, tab 14b) (illus 5j) and Charles Thomas (1971, 109, fig 49) has demonstrated its continued presence as late as the seventh century when it was carved on a tombstone in the Rhineland (illus 5k). None of these examples is, however, attached to a cross of arcs as it appears on the Skeith monument, for all are linear designs.

The meaning of the small circular devices on the perimeter of the slab can only be guessed at. But it is perhaps of significance that the encircled rosette in the frontispiece of Orosius's *Chronicon*, cited above (illus 5g), is surrounded in the four corners by small hexafoil medallions, providing a useful parallel for the basic Skeith design. Four small circles, carved in relief, also appear within a rectangular frame around an encircled, seven-armed cross of arcs on the west face of a tall slab at Carndonagh church, County Donegal, a carving dated by Henry (1965, pl 59a) to the seventh or eighth century.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

While none of the parallels from Northumbria or the Irish Sea Province provides an exact model for the Skeith motif, sufficient evidence remains to show that the design of the Skeith Stone is in no way freakish. The single potential Northumbrian parallel is unsatisfactory: as a Constantinian

type, it is an archaic form whose immediate source probably lies in continental Europe; further, the detail of the Jarrow design bears little similarity to the specific form of the Skeith example; and, thirdly, it can be firmly dated close to the end of the lifespan of the *chi-rho* motif. Stylistically, a stronger case can be made for deriving Skeith's design from the northern Irish Sea cultural province although it seems, in part at least, to draw inspiration from models with a surviving coastal distribution in the west of Ireland. It appears that the Skeith design is a re-working of a number of motifs which were certainly present in the Insular repertoire by the early seventh century, although the majority of the parallels which can be made are conventionally dated to that century.

Most significantly this is the first example of a *chi-rho* motif to be securely identified east of Druimalban and within an acceptably Pictish context, although others may also have existed.¹¹ The relative locations of the Skeith Stone and its closest parallels in south-west Scotland and on the Isle of Man appear to replicate the sphere of influence of the Ninianic church as recorded in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 222–3) and it is likely that sufficiently strong links remained during most of the seventh century to allow direct dissemination of motifs from Galloway into Fife (illus 6).¹² Elsewhere, I have demonstrated the probability of strong links between southern Pictland and the northern Irish Sea area during the eighth to ninth centuries using the Manx monastery of Maughold as a specific example (Trench-Jellicoe 1985, vol 1, 261–8). The Skeith Stone may well be another, earlier manifestation of this connection.

Moreover, two aspects of the Skeith Stone are remarkable. First, it is a monument carved on a larger scale than either its Whithorn or Maughold parallels and its enhanced size suggests a new confidence and awareness of the importance of monumental display in the religious life as manifested in Pictland. Second, and linked with this, the adoption of a cut-away technique at Skeith, equivalent to false relief, hints at the beginning of a development towards a fuller use of relief. Once sculptors had begun to go beyond the incised linear expression of their design and started to cut away sections of the background, probably as a response to a need to clarify increasing complexity in their carved motifs, a false relief style was created and subsequent rapid development towards a full-blown relief technique in the eighth century was inevitable. Finally, the presence of this stone in an area of southern Pictland which is noted otherwise for having a paucity of both Class I and Class II stones (Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3) is of great interest.

PART 2: TOPOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

EARLY MAPS AND AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS

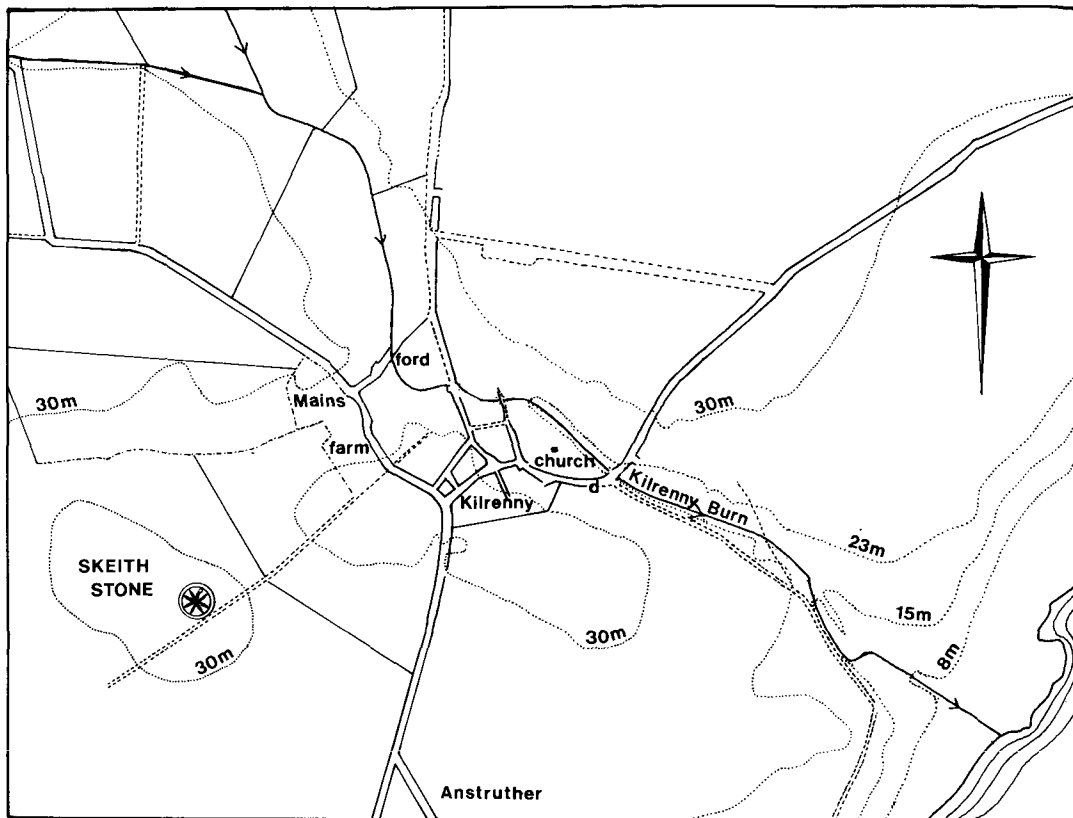
Another approach to attempt an understanding of the significance of the Skeith Stone is to view it in the context of its local topography. Today the virtually straight track on which the stone stands runs westwards into fields and turns at a right-angle to meet the track bed of a dismantled railway. Neither feature existed in the mid 19th century on an Ordnance Survey map dating to 1855 (Fife, Sheet 20, 1854, 1: 10,560) (illus 7), although the line of the trackway, which is lost further westwards, and the position of the Skeith Stone are both recorded. The track, continuing eastwards towards Kilrenny, crossed a road that skirted the west of the village before extending vestigially into what appears to have been an orchard and seemingly petering out approximately 70 m from the Gellie Burn (designated 'Kilrenny Burn' on maps). The characteristic of the Skeith track seems at odds with other local roads as it travels in a straight line before abruptly veering off on a new orientation (illus 2). As the track is clearly not modern, nor directly related to the farms working the land, which might have been expected, the implication, particularly in the light

of the Skeith Stone's presence, is that it is ancient and originally headed for the lowest point at which the Gellie Burn was readily fordable. It probably continued eastwards, joining the line of the present road several hundred metres to the east.

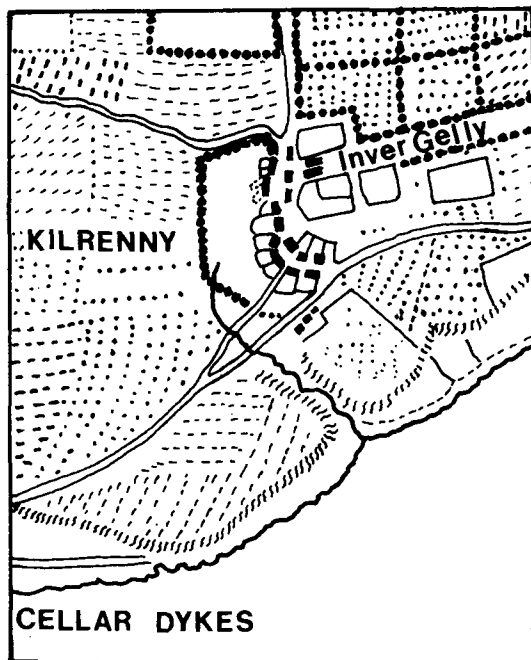
The track's projected crossing point of the burn is immediately north of Kilrenny graveyard which, containing the church, lies next to the stream. The kirkyard is defined on the west by a curving roadway which approaches the burn at both ends (both bridgeheads) and was well established as part of the main road system through the village by the 18th century. The curved profile of the road suggests a large curvilinear boundary, a feature elsewhere considered to be one of the signifiers of an early ecclesiastical foundation (Thomas 1971, 48–90). A second road, already noted above, skirting the west of the village, also follows an unusual configuration, curving and in part paralleling the road around the graveyard. This road links eastwards at its northern end, most probably following its original line, to approach a ford across the river. To the south the road joins the main east/west route. These curved sections of road appear to preserve part of an earlier layout of the village; the inner arc around the graveyard is still preserved completely intact although a projected southern section of the second arc is now lost to the south of the main road.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1855 offers further evidence of earlier structures fossilized in the field system, evidence which is lost today. West of the village, field boundaries can be seen curving in concert with the road system. The boundary line begins on the main road, linking it with the Skeith track. Where the boundary crosses the track it marks the point at which the path veers slightly to adopt a revised line towards the burn. The boundary system curves to the north and, after a short interruption close to Kilrenny Mains and Rennyhill farms, reappears following the general line of the inner curves until it too reaches the Gellie Burn. Evidence for the continuation of this system is also lost in the area south of the main road where all field boundaries seem to have been obliterated by the mid 18th century. An 1836 estate map preserved in the Scottish Record Office (SRO RHP/9516) and the 1832 map which accompanies the *Parliamentary Boundaries Report* (opp page 72) confirm these borders (Watson 1986, 99). The 'Fair Copy' of Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland* (1757), preserved in the British Library, also shows a prominent feature west of Upper Kilrenny which, notwithstanding the inevitably schematic representation (Whittington 1986, 18–28, 66–73), appears to correspond closely with those elements preserved on the Ordnance Survey map of 1855, but to record them in a more complete state (illus 8).¹³

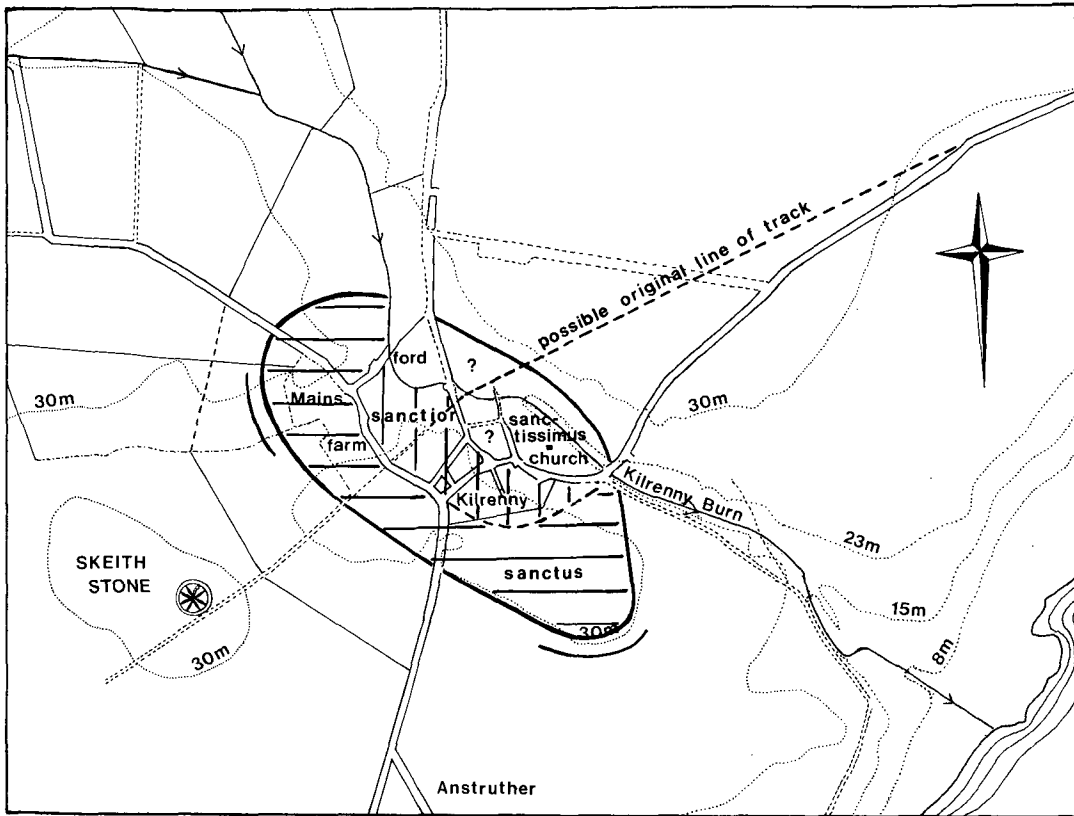
The archive of the Royal Commission includes photographs from two aerial surveys of the area, completed at a 20-year interval (1947, 1967). These reveal cropmark evidence for a substantially complete ditch system running on a line between 100–125 m inside the field boundaries described above. The ditch, best identified on the 1967 survey by the Ordnance Survey (OS/67/304/037–039), curves at the northern end rather than adopting the angular turns of the field boundaries and, in fact, turns due east to meet the Gellie Burn just north of the ford. The line of the ditch sweeps around Kilrenny Mains farm but becomes more difficult to observe further south in the field between the Skeith track and the main road. The ditch appears more clearly again south of the road, in an area hitherto lacking evidence; here, it follows the 30 m contour, curving around at its southern end and running obliquely NNW-by-N to a junction with the Gellie Burn, close to the present bridgehead on the main road. At two points, in the north-west and to the south, a second line may mark the line of an outer ditch. It should also be recorded that a line, which appears to complete the precinct boundary, runs close to the eastern bank of the Gellie Burn linking with the terminal points on the west bank as described. The clear evidence of a return in the ditch at the northern end (and in the south) suggests that the boundary recorded



ILLUS 7 The Skeith Stone and Upper Kilrenny based on the Ordnance Survey map of 1855



Illus 8 Significant boundary feature recorded west of Kilrenny on the 'Fair Copy' of Roy's (1757) *Military Survey of Scotland*



ILLUS 9 The line of the monastic ditch as revealed in the 1967 aerial survey

by Roy's *Military Survey* is likely to represent the curvilinear earthwork of a former monastic precinct, while the later field boundaries probably reflect this line in the development of the surrounding agricultural landscape.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL LANDSCAPE

The proposed monastic boundaries appear to be bisected by the straight Skeith track, thus augmenting its perceived significance and that of the Skeith Stone. The stone may now be recognized not only as a way marker, on a primary route through the site, but also as a boundary marker on the approach.¹⁴

The tripartite layout which is preserved in the roads shown by the Ordnance Survey of 1855 and as cropmark evidence on aerial photographs seems to represent the three primary divisions that early monastic precincts are thought to have adopted: the *Sanctus* (the modern fields), *Sanctior* (the village) and *Sanctissimus* (the kirkyard) (illus 9).¹⁵ This structure may be paralleled at Hoddam, in Dumfries & Galloway. Here, the evidence seems to suggest that the tripartite monastic form was established and already working at its fullest extent by the Northumbrian period (Lowe 1991, 11–26). One sophisticated building in Area 8 at Hoddam (*ibid*, 20–1, fig 5), apparently constructed from reused Roman building material, is thought to have had a religious function and Chris Lowe (*pers comm*) suggests there is a high probability it pre-dates AD 612.

The building lies immediately within, but stratigraphically pre-dates the curved line of the outer enclosure which has been radiocarbon dated not earlier than the mid-seventh century, perhaps implying that a boundary for the monastic area may already have been recognized at the beginning of the century but was less permanently defined at that date.¹⁶

More information on Upper Kilrenny helps to expand this evidence. The location of the Skeith Stone is significant, just beyond the outer boundary of the postulated monastery, facing ENE, towards the site.² In the last century, Skinner (1870, 56), describing excavations at 'the Scaith [Skeith] stone', noted that 'careful examination of the soil on all sides, even below the surface of the subsoil . . . could discover no traces of interment', an observation which helps to confirm that the stone did not serve as a grave marker. It is, therefore, more likely, given its original orientation, that it operated as a street and boundary marker to the monastic precinct in the same way that the *LOCI PETRI APUSTOLI* slab is believed to have functioned on the road to the Isle of Whithorn as it quit Whithorn (Craig 1997, 616; Stuart 1867, 53; Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3, 496; Radford & Donaldson 1984, 4–5, 27–8).¹⁷ Simon Taylor (1996, 99), studying the place-name evidence, has drawn attention to Kilrenny's probable early eighth-century dedication to Ethernan and also (pers comm) to the significance of the name Skeith which he interprets as meaning 'boundary'.¹⁸ The accumulated evidence of the orientation and line of the trackway, attached place-name evidence suggesting Skeith means 'a boundary', and the village's early saintly dedication all support the relict evidence for a monastic enclosure of considerable dimensions lying about a focus at Kilrenny. This evidence also appears to underpin the seventh-century date suggested (above) for the Skeith Stone.

ETHERNAN, KILRENNY AND THE ISLE OF MAY

This dating for the Skeith Stone and the related monastery is further supported by two other strands of evidence. Alan Macquarrie (1997, 66–7) has recently revised forward Ninian's *floruit* to the first half of the sixth century with a suggested *obit* around 563. If Bede's statement (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 222–3), written in the early eighth century, that the southern Picts had 'long ago given up the errors of idolatry and received the true faith through the preaching of the Word by the reverend and holy man Bishop Ninian' is accepted as an accurate record, conversion is then likely to have begun in Pictland in the second quarter of the sixth century and continued under him into the third quarter to be extended subsequently by his successors. Secondly, both the *Annals of Ulster* (MacAirt & MacNiocaill 1983, 138–9) and the *Annals of Tigernach* (Stokes 1896, 201) record *sa* 669 (*Tigernach sa* 668, *recte* 669) that '*It[h]arnan et Corindu apud Pictores defuncti sunt*' (Ethernan and Corindu died among the Picts).¹⁹ Ethernan, if this is the same Ethernan preserved in the name of Kilrenny and associated with the May, died a little over a century after Ninian. His *obit* suggests that any monastic centre at Kilrenny associated with him is likely to have developed in the first half of the seventh century, its foundation perhaps dating most comfortably to the second quarter of the century. Given these arguments it now seems appropriate to associate early Kilrenny with the important early religious site on the Isle of May which also has Ethernan associations (Yeoman 1996).

The May lies immediately off shore, 7 km from Kilrenny which is its closest mainland landfall.²⁰ It would make sense, in view of the shared dedication, to consider Kilrenny and the May in a similar light to the documented connections between Lindisfarne and Great Farne, or other similarly bracketed monastic sites: as a monastic centre and its hermitage. Parallels might be drawn between Cuthbert's withdrawal and death at the hermitage on Great Farne and the pilgrimage focus of the Isle of May in the medieval period. Indeed, it is possible to speculate that,

instead of repatriation to Kilrenny — as Cuthbert's body was removed to become the primary focus of Lindisfarne — Ethernan's body remained on the Isle of May, intensifying and sustaining the importance of that site while monastic Kilrenny fell into later obscurity. Without Cuthbert's *Lives* (Colgrave 1940; Colgrave & Mynors 1969) we should know little of the significance of the Great Farne community and it is regrettable that the gap in the early literary evidence for Ethernan seems so unbridgeable. It is hoped that the present study will help to open a small window into understanding the expansion of the Ninianic church — however we understand that concept (Thomas 1992, 13–18) — in early southern Pictland and may suggest a background against which an archaic *chi-rho* was added to the dedication slab at Jarrow in AD 685.²¹

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NOTES

- 1 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland aerial survey vertical archive 1:5000 series (106G/SCOT/UK4 PT 1,14.4.1946, Print nos 6078–9) clearly show the Skeith Stone prior to re-siting, less than 1 m north of its present position, apparently facing towards Kilrenny. Oral evidence from Eugene d'Espermil relayed by Sonny Corstorphine, both of the Kilrenny area, indicates that the stone was moved in 1967, after the farm changed hands from Mr Fleming to Mr Macgregor in 1965, but before the great storm in 1968 which dislodged a farm chimney sending it crashing through the roof. The incident was remembered because the late Farmer Buchan had warned against moving the Skeith Stone on the grounds that 'disaster would befall' and the damage was seen as a fulfillment of that prediction.
- 2 Further evidence collected orally at Kilrenny in June 1997 (Eugene d'Espermil, Sonny Corstorphine) confirm that the Skeith carving, before its 1967 realignment, faced ENE towards the village. It is possible, however, that the slab had been moved several times in the past.
- 3 Jarrow's dedication slab was erected in the year of the Battle of Nechtansmere/Dunnichen not long before Bede records King Nechtan requested guidance in the early eighth century from Northumbria on aspects of Roman church practice and building techniques (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 533–53). Both Bede, in his *Prose Life of St Cuthbert*, and the author of the *Anonymous Life*, on whom Bede relied as a source, mention Cuthbert's journey by sea to *niduaria regio* (Colgrave 1940, 82–5, 192–3), a place recent scholarship has identified as south-eastern Pictland, probably Fife (Kirby 1973, 10–11, 22–4; Duncan 1975, 78). Kirby (*ibid.*, 10–11) has dated the visit between 664–c 678 and suggested that Cuthbert, as Prior of Melrose, was visiting fellow Christians in a Pictish religious community with which his own monastery had 'a relationship of considerable significance' and with whom he intended to celebrate the feast of the Epiphany (6 January).
- 4 A close examination of the forms of the Monkwearmouth crosses and similar forms indicated by Cramp (*op cit*) suggest the 11th-century types differ from Monkwearmouth 28 & 29 in so far as they are virtually straight-sided rather than exhibiting the marked curve in profile found at Monkwearmouth. This feature should indicate a clear typological difference.

- 5 I am grateful to Derek Craig (pers comm) who drew my attention to the carved Constantinian *chi-rho* at Whithorn which he had rediscovered. Its presence on the stone was recognized in a 19th-century drawing by Galloway (c 1890) which is now preserved in the archive of the Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh. The illustration depicts a Constantinian *chi-rho* in the upper area of the sub-Roman *LATINUS* stone at Whithorn (Craig 1992, pl 171). This rediscovery is now published (Craig 1997, 614–16).
- 6 A seventh-century date has been claimed by Radford (Radford & Donaldson 1984) for the *LOCI PETRI APUSTOLI* slab at Whithorn on the evidence of the letterforms, but the lettering was perhaps a subsequent addition to an already upstanding monument, a view supported by their irregular application to an otherwise well-executed design.
- 7 Catherine Swift (1997, 70–83), surveying sculptural crosses of arcs (Maltese crosses) in the light of their accompanying ogam inscriptions as studied by Damian McManus (1991), notes the Scottish evidence. While admitting a general lack of consensus on dating, she attempts to introduce fresh correlative evidence (Swift 1997, 71–2). She suggests (*ibid*, 126) that, by using the ‘linguistic method’ (ie that which uses developmental phases in early Irish language) of dating ogam-inscribed stones which also bear crosses of arcs, they ‘appear to be later sixth and early seventh century . . . with the Maltese design continuing to be used for Latin-letter inscriptions until the early eighth century.’ She comments that this dating bracket agrees with dated monumental inscriptions in Gaul and Spain.
- 8 Arciform crosses lacking the *rho*-hook but encompassed within circles appear at Ronaldsway (Neely 1940, 72, pl IX) and Maughold, Isle of Man (Kermode 1907, nos 25A, 26A, 117A) and in Wales, in Dyfed (Pembrokeshire) at Chapel Colman, Clydai and St Dogmaels (Nash-Williams 1950, nos 302, 308, 388). In Ireland, Lionard (1961, 111, fig 9) indicates examples of the simple arciform cross from Killeakle, Leix and two at Clonmacnoise, Offaly, while elaborated types occur at Killadeas, Fermanagh, Clonmacnoise and Inis Cealtra, County Clare. Lionard admits a potentially broad dating bracket but considers the Irish examples are likely to belong in the eighth century. Scottish examples are rare, that from Cladh a’ Bhile, Ellary, Argyll (RCAHMS 1992, no 20), is similar to those elaborated monuments from Clonmacnoise and Inis Cealtra, but those from Daltote Cottage and Dunans, Knapdale (RCAHMS 1992, nos 24, 27), and from Millport, Great Cambrae (Curle 1961–2, 223–4, no 1), should be rejected as parallels. The *Book of Kells* (Kells facsimile 1990) also contains some 24 eight-armed motifs but the arms are wedge shaped. It contains only one example of an encircled eight-arm motif with arciform structure, on folio 155r.
- 9 The ‘saltire’ form, as it appears at Killeen (Cloonlaur), seems to be a simplified, perhaps slightly later form within the same tradition as the interstadial decoration of Stone A at Reask, County Kerry (Cuppage 1986, 341–3, fig 205a, pl 44), for which Fanning (1981, 152) has suggested a sixth- to seventh-century date (illus 5L). Related decoration appears in a Scottish context in the armpits of an arciform cross on the east face of a slab from Cladh a’ Bhile, Ellary, Argyll (RCAHMS 1992, 55, pls A & B, no 20) (illus 5M). The Argyll motifs have been likened to a mirrored omega.
- 10 Many relief crosses have four circles or bosses placed in the arm pits and this may be a continuation of the tradition present on incised cross slabs such as those at Cladh a’ Bhile, Ellary, Argyll (RCAHMS 1992, 61, pl A, no 20). Note also the slab with flanking circles from Dyce, Aberdeenshire (Allen & Anderson 1903, part 3, 196, fig 212).
- 11 I am grateful to Isabel Henderson for drawing my attention to references for St Nathalan’s Cross at Tullich, Aberdeen. Simpson (1925, 28) records that the monument was destroyed in 1857 and in a footnote (4) quotes Gibb (1878, 196): ‘Near the church also stood another stone bearing a cross which is said to have resembled the Skeith Stone at Kilrenny, Fifeshire. It was thus probably an equal-armed cross of Candida Casa or Ninianic type.’
- 12 For a recent reassessment of Ninian’s dates and the extent of his influence see Macquarrie (1997, 50–73). His views on the ‘*naturae*’ = ‘*niduari*’ debate (*ibid*, 65–6) are unhelpful in the present context. Northumbria, reaching up to the Forth, did not become an intrusive Christian presence until the second half of the seventh century while Columban influence seems still to have been mainly directed towards northern Pictland (pre-dating Scottish interest from the west in Atholl) in the later sixth and early seventh century.

- 13 Skeith is first recorded in a land grant of 1606 as ‘the quarter toune and lands of *Killrynnie* callit the Skeith’s quarter’ (Watson 1986, 13). An 1836 estate map of Rennyhill farm, preserved in the Scottish Record Office (SRO RHP/9516), does not mark the Skeith Stone although the farm track is shown. The 1832 *Report on the Parliamentary Boundaries* refers twice to the ‘Skeigh [Skeith] stone’ (1832, 74; Watson 1986, 99) as an ancient monument and the accompanying map represents the field boundaries similarly to the Ordnance Survey map of 1855. The ‘Fair Copy’ of Roy’s *Military Survey of Scotland* (1757) shows a prominent curving feature to the west of Upper Kilrenny which corresponds with the field boundaries of the 1855 map (Whittington 1986, 18–28, 71–3, fig 12b) but although they stood in a more complete form than in 1855, even then the feature does not appear to have been complete at its southern end. Roy usually recorded estate boundaries in detail and as these features were not a boundary to a current estate their inclusion suggests they were of particular prominence. Significantly neither of Roy’s ‘Protracted Copies’ (*ibid*, figs 12a, 13) provide as clear evidence for this boundary as the ‘Fair Copy’.
- 14 It must be suspected that the line of the Skeith track follows an earlier way, already established in the Early Christian period; its design — marked by straightness and abrupt but slight realignments — suggests it was perhaps originally of Roman construction.
- 15 The area of the monastery calculated (from the Ordnance Survey map) on a cumulative basis suggests that the *sanctus* covered c 17 ha, the *sanctor* was c 4.5 ha and the *sanctissimus* c 1.15 ha. These figures indicate that Kilrenny occupied a similar overall area when compared with other early monastic sites: Armagh = c 17 ha (Edwards 1990, 110), Clonmacnoise = 18 ha (Thomas 1971, fig 7), Monasterboice = 24 ha and Old Melrose = c 17 ha, Hartlepool = c 37 ha (Cramp 1976, fig 5.6), Hoddam = 8 ha and Iona = 8 ha (Lowe 1991).
- 16 Chris Lowe (pers comm) reports that the radiocarbon dates for the building in Area 8 at Hoddam are AD 455–630 (LCR = two-sigma) or AD 550–620 (SCR = one-sigma), but comments that statistical analysis of these and other overlying dates, using stratigraphic evidence, effectively pushes these further back. When linked with the historical evidence, this suggests a date for the building c AD 600 with an 85% probability of a date before AD 612, indicating a minimum period of 40 years before the construction of the great ditched enclosure (not earlier than AD 650).
- 17 Stuart’s description (1867, 53) of the siting of the *LOCI PETRI APUSTOLI* stone almost 1.07 km (0.66 miles) from Whithorn standing ‘on high ground above the town . . . on the side of the road leading towards the Isle of Whithorn’ — the last leg of an important pilgrimage route to Whithorn from the Isle of Man — offers an uncanny parallel for the Skeith Stone’s situation. Regrettably his information is misleading as its site, unbeknown to him, was secondary. Although the original site remains uncertain, Derek Craig (1997, 161; 1992, vol 3, 194) cites 18th-century reports recording the stone ‘like a boundary . . . a little way out of town . . . towards the Isle of Whithorn’ and on the basis of 19th-century evidence he has suggested that it originally stood beside an older road to the Isle of Whithorn, a road which still exists as a footpath across the fields. Thus, parallels between the siting of the stones continue to be relevant. Douglas MacLean (1997, 82) notes that as early as the seventh century the *Synodus Hibernorum* pronounces that Irish monastic precincts should be defined by crosses.
- 18 Simon Taylor (pers comm) considers that the name ‘Skeith’ is more likely to be derived from an otherwise unrecorded Scots word of Scandinavian origin, meaning ‘boundary road’ or ‘boundary’ rather than coming from the common Scottish word ‘skaith’ meaning ‘damage, hurt or harm &c’. He has further suggested that the Ethernan dedication, which appears to be at the core of Kilrenny, may date as early as c AD 700.
- 19 The *obit* of an Ethernan, recorded in the Irish *Annals of Ulster* and *Annals of Tigernach* sa 669, indicates he was a subject of Irish interest and Isabel Henderson (pers comm) has suggested that it was likely, therefore, to have been recorded in the core Iona chronicle. Simon Taylor (pers comm) has pointed out that, despite this, his name is more common in a Pictish and Welsh context than in an Irish one (for a full discussion of the name see Katherine Forsyth 1996, 488–91). He further comments that the *cille*-element at the head of *Kilrethni* (recorded c 1170) should, in the context of east Fife, be understood to derive from a period before general Gaelicization and ‘must date to a time before about 800’ (*ibid*, 99).

- 20 In the light of the suggested relationship between Kilrenny and the May, the findspot of a fragment of what is probably a Class II Pictish monument on the shore beneath Kilrenny, a short distance west of the mouth of the Gellie burn, becomes more significant (Proudfoot 1993; Proudfoot 1995a, 36–9; Proudfoot 1995b, 28, fig 18; Burt 1995, 40). The significance of this eighth- to ninth-century piece was not recognized when it was found in a demolished wall on the east headland of the mouth of the Gellie Burn. Subsequently, a second fragment of the same slab, also initially recovered from the headland wall, was identified after having been rebuilt into a wall at Cornceres Farm (Proudfoot 1998, 3; P Yeoman, pers comm). Its original siting suggests it could have acted as a landfall marker functioning similarly to the Skeith Stone although erected (on a stylistic dating) between one and two centuries later.
- 21 Acceptance of a mid seventh-century dating for the Skeith Stone indicates that the Pictish church was not unaware of the value of the use of stone in the religious sphere over half a century before King Nechtan's request for Northumbrian masons to build *iuxta morem Romanorum* (after the Roman fashion) (Colgrave & Mynors 1969, 532–3), a date also prior to Wilfred and Benedict Biscop's use of imported specialists for their own building projects.

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