

From realism to caricature: reflections on Insular depictions of animals and people

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ABSTRACT

Typical seventh- to ninth-century AD depictions, on stone and vellum and in metal, of animals and people, mostly from northern Britain, are displayed and their purposes and iconology are discussed.

Animal and human images are common in manuscripts and on sculpture throughout Insular art, but they are less common on metalwork. Examples range from the realistic to the fantastic and the purely decorative. In some cases, the purpose appears to be to illustrate scenes and objects from daily life (though this may be an unsubtle analysis), but in others the images are obviously conventional or symbolic. There is also a wide range of interactions between human beings and beasts. In this essay, an attempt is made to abstract these images from their original contexts, and to discuss them as a discrete class of evidence. The hope is that we may thereby gain new insights about them, and about the purposes of their creators.

Because of the disparate styles in the depiction of animals, there has been much discussion about the possibility of establishing classes or categories within Insular animal art as a whole. One approach is to distinguish the realistic from the imaginary (for a general discussion, not entirely followed here, Hicks 1993b, 5–8). At one extreme, the imaginary, are fantastic beasts, such as those which inhabit some of the Bewcastle vines, or which crowd beside the cross-shafts of Pictish Class II stones. A major sub-class of these consists of interlacing animals with ribbon-like bodies, and extended limbs and jaws. For some scholars these appear to comprise the essential corpus of Insular animal art (eg Haseloff 1987).

At the other extreme are animals which are anatomically correct even to their postures at rest or in movement: these might be classed as naturalistic. The term ‘naturalistic’ as used here implies that, despite some minor stylized elements, the animal would immediately be recognized in detail (including its stance and movement) by an observer familiar with the living creature in the pasture, on the hill, in the air, or in river pools and falls. Thus a ‘naturalistic’ eagle would be depicted in such correct detail that an ornithologist could state that it was a white-tailed (or sea-) eagle, not a golden eagle, because there were no feathers on the lower legs.

Between the two extremes, however, there is an important group of animals which, while not anatomically correct, can none the less be regarded as ‘credible’. Thus, across Eurasia and into Insular contexts there are birds (especially in metalwork), with viciously curving beaks and talons, and often large staring eyes, which can readily be recognized as raptors, and probably

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eagles (illus 7 & 9). Again, among Evangelist symbols in Gospel books, tawny quadrupeds with manes, swishing tails and prominent claws are regarded as 'credible' lions (Backhouse 1989, 168).

The present enquiry is primarily (though not exclusively) concerned with the naturalistic category. The most conspicuous group of animal depictions which falls into this category consists of the line-engravings and shallow relief carvings of Pictish Class I and Class II.

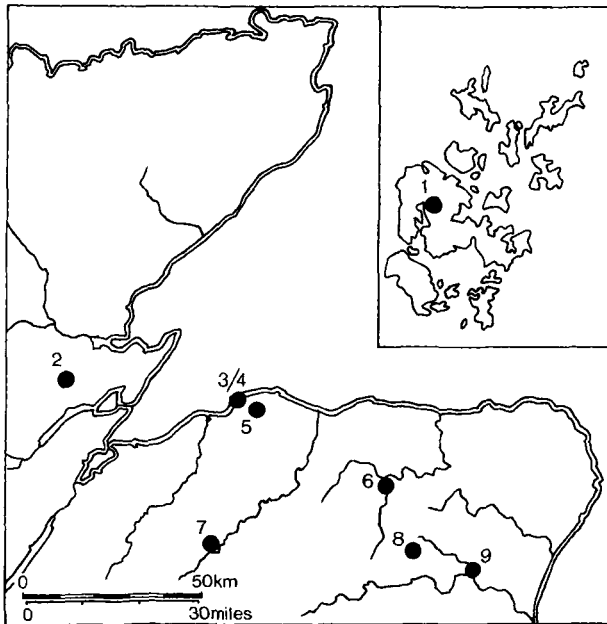
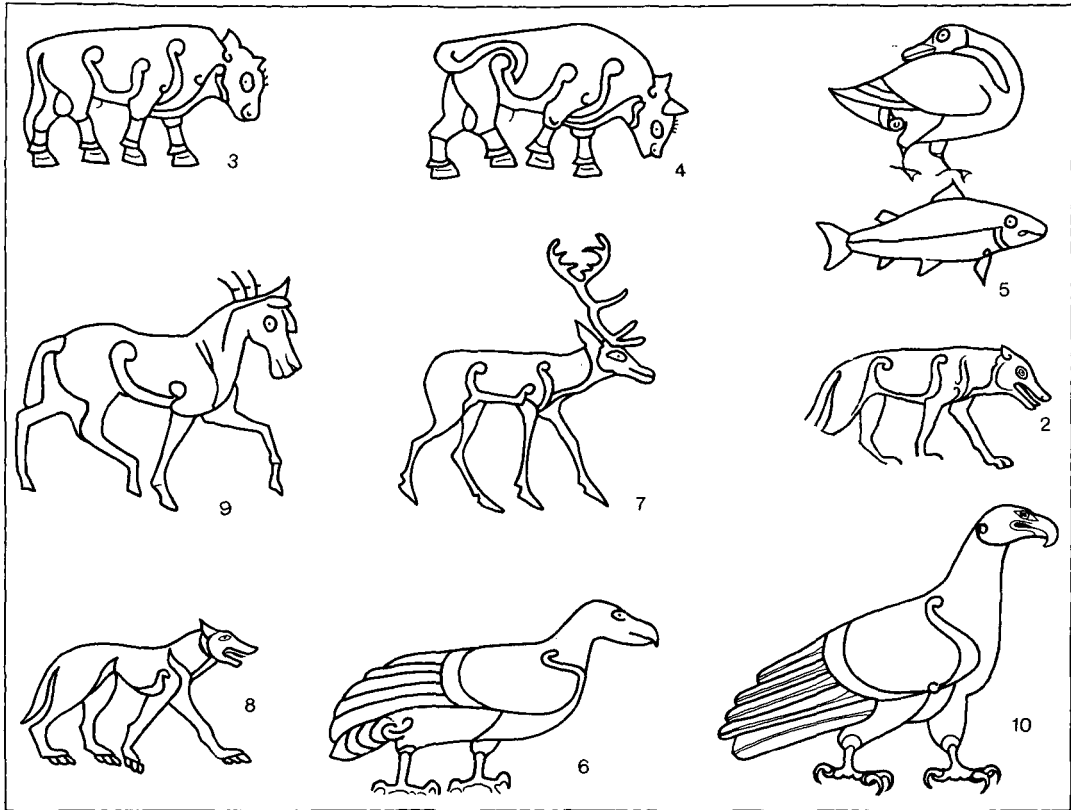
In the case of the Class I animals, it is necessary to assert the clear conceptual difference between animals and symbols, because in the past both have normally been treated as a unitary class. The difference is that, with the exception of the mirror-and-comb (and even this is highly conventionalized), the Pictish symbols are the inventions of the human mind: the animals, in contrast, have an objective or external reality, which is observed and then depicted. Moreover, there are differences in the mode of occurrence: the animals are frequently on small portable plaques, and are normally solitary. Only in two cases is there a pair of animals, respectively an eagle and a goose paired with a salmon. Moreover, on 41% of stones which bear animals, there are no regular symbols on the animal face.

On the criteria of naturalism set out above, the following symbols should be excluded from the list of Pictish animals, though they have normally been included in previous accounts (Hicks 1993a): the swimming beast, supposedly derived from a dolphin; the supposed seal; the serpent because it is always stylized; and the couped heads of hind and supposed otter. Omitting fragments, such as the tail of a fish or the legs of a possible boar, the naturalistic Pictish Class I animals are (illus 1): boar (two examples); bull or ox (nine); canines, dog or wolf (two); deer (one); eagle (six); goose (two or three); horse (one); salmon (11). There are no cows or other females, and the hind legs of the bovines are so arranged as to reveal whether the beast is a bull or an ox — that is to say, a castrate.

Why were these particular animals chosen for the Pictish zoological gallery? The salmon has been described as 'an aggressive carnivore, as potent in [its] environment as a bull or boar in theirs' (Henderson 1991, 4–5). Such characteristics would no doubt have appealed to the martial nobility of an Early Historic society. But in the case of some creatures, we may also reasonably suppose a sense of mystery and wonder. This is particularly true of the goose and salmon, both migratory animals which disappear for long seasons. The autumnal sight of geese in their thousands, in disciplined arrow formations, arriving at their winter feeding grounds on the firths of eastern Scotland, is matched only by their massed gatherings for the spring departure to their Arctic breeding grounds. The salmon provides no such large-scale spectacle; but the battle of the individual to mount the falls of the Tay, the Tilt, the Dee and other eastern rivers, in order to reach the spawning pools, is itself a thrilling display.

In part, the lively appearance of the Class I animals comes from the fact that it was actual living, even moving, creatures which were depicted. Three examples may be cited here. First, of the Inverurie horse (illus 1.9), an experienced horsewoman has written that 'it is a fine, well-fed animal in the peak of condition . . . moving forward vigorously at a walk' (Hughson 1997, 27). Secondly, even though no more than three complete plaques with Burghhead bulls have survived (out of an original 25–30), it is possible to set up a sequence of movement like a series of cinematographic stills: Burghhead no 3 is at rest (illus 1.3); no 1 is disturbed, flicking its tail; no 5 has hunched its shoulders, and lowered its head preparatory to a charge (illus 1.4). Thirdly, all the salmon show the gill-fin positioned below the belly (illus 1.5), but this is apparent only when the fish is swimming, or leaping a fall. It is also significant that five out of 10 salmon are shown not horizontally, but at a high angle, evidently in the act of leaping.

The only unrealistic element in these depictions is the conventional treatment of joints: the lobe-ended scroll which marks the shoulder and haunch of the quadrupeds, and the wing of the



ILLUS 1 The Pictish Animal Master: 2 Dog/wolf, Ardross; 3 & 4 Bulls, Burghead; 5 Goose & Salmon, Easterton of Roseisle; 6 Eagle, Tillytarmont, no 5; 7 Stag, Granttown; 8 Dog/wolf, Newbigging Leslie; 9 Horse, Inverurie; 10 Eagle, Corpus Christi College MS 197b (outline only). (The Eagle from Garth, Orkney (no 1), would complete this group, but is omitted here.)

eagle. This is emphatically not the hair-spring spiral of the Durrow calf, with its Celtic roots, but seems to be a Pictish innovation to indicate the musculature. Indeed, in the case of the eagles, close-up photographs of them on the nest bring out very clearly the powerful curve of the wing joint, which is by no means exaggerated in the carvings, though it cannot be seen when the bird is in flight. Even the recurved scroll at the junction of wing and body is hinted at in photographs of the bird on the nest (Tomkies 1994, pls between pp 96–7).

Traditionally, realistic depictions of eagles have shown them with a very erect stance, as can be seen, for instance, in works by the celebrated 19th-century bird illustrator, John Gould (Lambourne 1980, 34–5). A similar stance can be seen in many stuffed specimens in museums. The carved Pictish eagles, however, normally present a lower stance; and in particular, the two best ones, those at Tillytarmont (illus 1.6) and Garth, Orkney, have bodies which are almost horizontal. This suggests that the bird is on the eyrie, either incubating eggs, or brooding or feeding an eaglet; and this in turn implies very close observation by the carver.

Mike Tomkies, a very experienced observer and photographer of eagles, has kindly responded to a query: 'I am sure the carver must have watched nesting eagles because of the stooping stance, but eagles often stoop when on moors and hills looking for ground prey. They do hunt voles, mice etc. on foot sometimes, and then the bodies are mostly parallel to the ground' (*in lit*, 1 May 1997).

At their best, the Class I animals demonstrate the potential of a skilled line drawing to suggest both movement and three-dimensional bulk. Plainly, not all examples are of the highest standard; but, at the risk of a degree of subjectivity, it seems possible to distinguish a small group of 'alpha' quality. Furthermore the stylistic details suggest that these are the work of a single craftsman, whom we might designate as the 'Pictish Animal Master'. The animals in question are: the Burghhead bulls, the two canines, the Orkney and Tillytarmont eagles, the Easterton goose, the deer and the horse (illus 1). The boars are not of top quality (and indeed the best Pictish boar is that in relief on the Class II stone, St Vigean's no 1). The salmon are too variable to classify.

The distribution of alpha-animals is well defined, essentially clustering around the Moray Firth and its rivers (illus 1, map). Taken together with the sheer numbers from Burghhead, the pattern would suggest that the great fort was the site of the Master's workshop. The one exception to this distribution, the eagle from Knowe of Burrian, Garth, on Orkney, might be a by-product of Pictish overlordship of the Orkney Isles, perhaps under Bridei son of Maelchon.

It might have been expected that, as compared with the stone-carver's chisel, the greater flexibility of pen and brush would have led to the appearance of naturalistic animals in decorated manuscripts. Indeed, the shoulder-scroll of the Orkney and Tillytarmont eagles is echoed on the eagle of St John in the Corpus MS 197B (Henderson 1986, 77 with illus 109: here illus 1.10). It would be hazardous to guess whether the manuscripts copied the carved birds, or the other way round. In either case, there is an obvious chronological implication: namely, that the alpha animals were probably carved around the turn of the seventh and eighth centuries.

In relation to naturalism in the manuscripts, we should notice Yapp's acclaim for the details of the eagle of St John in the Lindisfarne Gospels (f 209v). 'The plumage', he writes, 'is so good that it must have been done with a bird, possibly even a golden eagle, in hand' (Yapp 1981, 84–5). He contrasts this with 'most Johnian eagles, which are merely conventional birds with hooked beaks'. But this is all that we should expect of Evangelist symbols, which were intended purely as such. Although it has been possible to single out a small group of 'naturalistic' eagles, the symbol as such needs merely to be a 'credible', not a naturalistic animal. Some animals, indeed, especially those in the Book of Durrow, were anatomically pathetic: for instance, the ox/calf of Luke, with a sheep-like head, f 124v (*contra* Meehan's description of it as 'a naturalistic depiction', 1996, 56



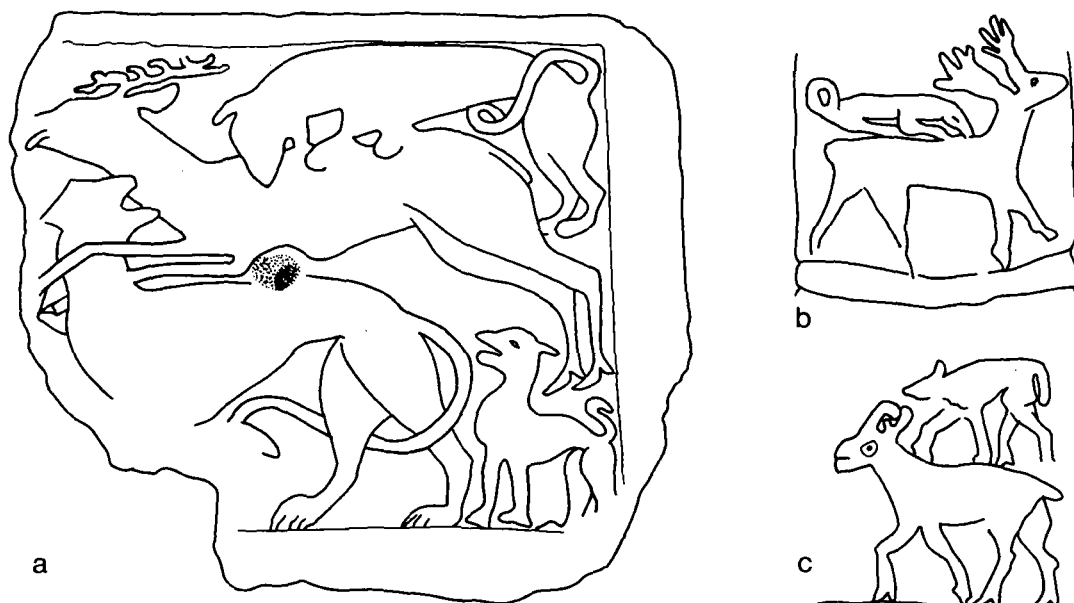
ILLUS 2 The Elgin hawking and hunting scene

& 63). Others had been copied directly from highly stylized metalwork, such as the eagle of John (f 84v) (illus 7.c).

These comparisons reinforce the contention, promoted here, that the Pictish Class I animals were primarily representational, not symbolic; and that this was because the stone-carvers appreciated and admired animals, their attributes and movements for their own sake, and strove to present them in stone. They were not, however, interested in human beings, or in scenes of human activity. These first appear on the Class II stones, with all the acuteness of perception and technical skills exhibited by the earlier line drawings, now repeated in low relief. The sense of movement of the Inverurie horse or the Burghead bulls now informs the vigorous riding and hunting scenes. Among these, the outstanding examples, for instance from Aberlemno, Hilton of Cadboll, or Meigle, are sufficiently well known as to need no repetition here.

Instead, the hawking and hunting scene from Elgin is presented as an example of the vigorous movement which the Pictish carver could produce even from an exceedingly intractable stone: namely a coarse crystalline granite (illus 2). There are obvious limits to the realism, for instance in the sizes of the riders' heads relative to their bodies, and of the birds and the dogs to the stag itself. But this does not detract from the excited action of the hunt, which is emphasized by the eager leaps of the two upper dogs.

A little-known hunting scene appears on a panel from Burghead, which had formed one end of a slab-shrine or sarcophagus: in short, a Christian monument (illus 3.a). This has suffered from both weathering and recent damage. Despite this, it still captures the high excitement of the



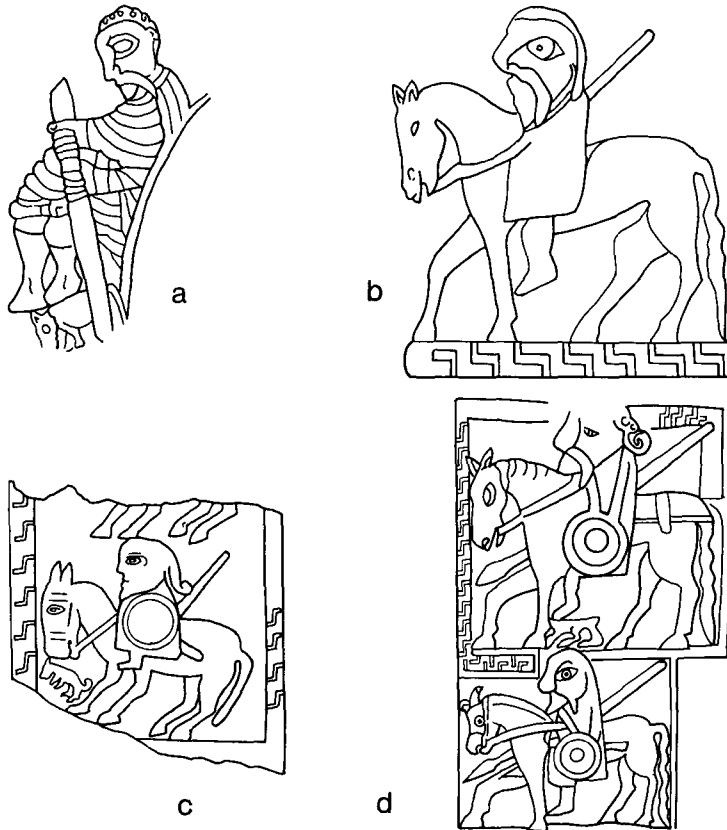
ILLUS 3 Hunting stags with dogs: (a) Burghead slab shrine; (b) Dacre cross-shaft; (c) Govan sarcophagus

end of a chase, with the hounds grappling savagely with the stag. Visually, the effect is heightened by the vice-like grip of the hounds, and by the contrast between the horizontal, arrow-like flight of the stag, and the curvilinear lines of the dogs. In particular, the S-curve of the lower one seems reminiscent (perhaps quite inappropriately) of the tension created by S-curves in Germanic zoomorphic jewellery.

Presumably this kind of dramatization of the terminal action of the hunt was greatly favoured by the lay patrons who commissioned such dynamic sculptures. The view that this was a particularly Pictish taste is reinforced by comparison with versions of the same scene on Christian monuments of Viking age: the cross shaft at Dacre in Cumbria (illus 3.b; Bailey 1977) and a sarcophagus at Govan, Strathclyde (illus 3.c; Spearman 1994). In comparison with the power of the Burghead slab, these seem feeble in the extreme.

At this point, however, it is necessary to ask why these scenes of violent, indeed bloody, action occur on Christian monuments. In fact, the hunt of the stag with hounds has profound Christian meaning: or more correctly, several possible meanings which, to a modern pattern of thinking, are not mutually compatible. This introduces us to the medieval pattern of 'multi-think', which Krautheimer (1971, 149) stressed in developing the concept of the iconography of Early Christian architecture: 'What counts in medieval thought, in the context of any given theme, is the multitude of its connotations, fleeting, only dimly visible, and therefore interchangeable'.

In conformity with the pattern of 'multi-think' in Christian iconology — the interpretation, that is, of the inner meaning of the perceived images — Bailey (1977) has expounded very sympathetically on the images on the Dacre cross. The hunting scene there is placed above a scene of Adam and Eve, and below one of Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac. The Christian meaning is profound: Adam and Eve symbolize the Fall of Mankind, whereas Abraham and Isaac foretell the Redemption of Mankind through the self-sacrifice of Christ, represented here by a Lamb. The hunting scene is thus firmly embedded in a Christian context of great profundity.



ILLUS 4 The Benvie-Dupplin school of carvers: (a) Forteviot; (b) Dupplin; (c) Kirriemuir; (d) Benvie

On the evidence of early Christian commentaries, especially some based on interpretations of the Psalms, Bailey sets out three possible Christian interpretations: (1) the deer represents sinners, and the purpose of the hunt is their conversion; (2) the stag recalls Psalm 42:1: 'As the deer longs for springs of water, so my soul longs for thee, O God', so the deer may represent the Christian soul seeking salvation, while the dogs, harrying the soul, are the hounds of hell, driven on by the hunter-devils; (3) the deer may represent Christ himself as a victim of persecution leading to his crucifixion.

We shall see (below) another example of how the medieval mind might accept ideas which would be considered mutually inconsistent to a rigorously analytical mind.

Returning to the topic of Pictish realism, one particular aspect deserves further notice. The Picts rejected the image of the horse moving in a 'flying gallop' which was otherwise universal across Eurasia from the first millennium BC until the late 19th century. Indeed, it was only the invention of motion photography by the English photographer Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) that 'forever changed artistic depictions of the horse in movement' (Janson & Janson 1995, 758–9; for the repercussions among practising artists, see Thompson 1896, especially pls xxxix-xli). The Picts, however, on the basis of their own observations, had depicted the leg movements correctly from the very beginning with the Inverurie horse (illus 1.9).

In the second or third decade of the ninth century, however, naturalism was abandoned by the Benvie/Dupplin group of carvers (illus 4). They created a new, highly idiosyncratic, model for regal equestrian portraits, in which all four feet of the horse are on the ground. It has been suggested that Roman or Carolingian Imperial models were the inspiration at Dupplin (illus 4.b). This is difficult to maintain, however, because the horses in Classical triumphs — including Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem — regularly have one foreleg raised. This is also true of the well-known bronze equestrian statue, supposedly of Charlemagne himself (Backes & Dölling 1969, 71); and, perhaps, the eighth-century equestrian carving from Repton, though the forelegs are too damaged for certainty (Biddle & Kjølbye-Biddle 1985, 241, with fig 3.7 & pl VI).

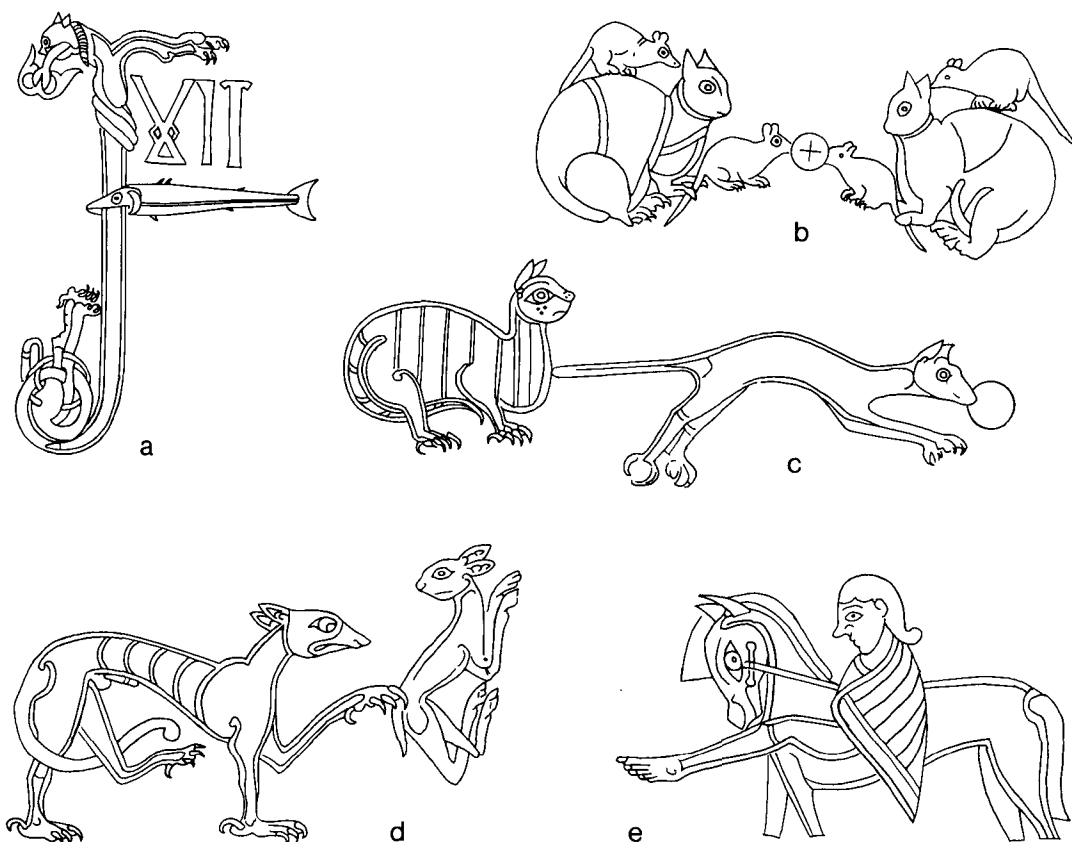
On the reasonable assumption that the Book of Kells was written and decorated in Dal Riata, and most probably on Iona, it is the outstanding manuscript source for the present survey (most accessible illustrations: Meehan 1994). It is very clear that the Evangelist symbols in it make no pretence at realism. On some folios, there is a flourish of legs and wings, and a riot of colours (f 290v); in others, there is greater restraint in both form and colour (f 27v & f 129v). The impression given is that these were entirely decorative, and presumably intended to embellish the pages of the sacred book, just as its protecting cover-shrine might have been embellished with gold filigree and jewels.

The text as a whole is spangled with creatures of many species, shapes and colours: riders, warriors, peacocks, domestic fowl, dogs, hares, cats, mice, fish, otters, lizards, moths (illus 5). Most of these fall into the category of 'credible/recognizable' animals, but few — if any — could claim to be naturalistic. Two riders in particular defy anatomy, in that they appear to sit *below* the spines of their horses (f 89 & f 255v; illus 5.e). Curiously enough, the same quirk can be seen on an otherwise perfectly normal Pictish Class II stone from St Madoes in south-east Perthshire (RCAHMS 1994, 103, k).

Cats were an especial interest of the Kells artists. Perhaps the most astounding vignette is that near the foot of the great chi-rho page in Matthew's Gospel (f 34). There, two mice are contending for a circular object, presumably a host. Behind each mouse is a cat; and on the back of each cat sits another mouse (illus 5.b). This seems a frivolous, even unseemly, motif for the most numinous folio in Kells. But even a mousing cat may be transfigured into a symbolic figure, as we know from the ninth-century verses about the cat Pangur Ban, written by a scholar-monk in the margin of his manuscript:

I and my white Pangur/have each his special art/
He rejoices with quick leaps/when in his sharp claw
sticks a mouse,/I too rejoice when I have grasped/
a problem difficult and dearly loved (Meyer 1911, 83).

Cats appear only rarely in the Lindisfarne Gospels, the most obvious being the head which acts as terminal to the right-hand border of the opening of Luke's Gospel (f 139; illus 6.g). It is claimed that 'this creature . . . is quite distinctly provided with whiskers': an astoundingly realistic feature. It is admitted, however, that the whiskers have not normally been recognized because 'they are virtually invisible' in the facsimile text (Backhouse 1989, 168). By contrast, dogs are very common, either with ribbon-like interlacing bodies infilling crosses and other large areas of design (illus 6.e), or as terminals and finials around the borders of the main painted pages (illus 6.a & b). Here they serve as guardians and, appropriately, appear to be mastiffs with heavy jaws.

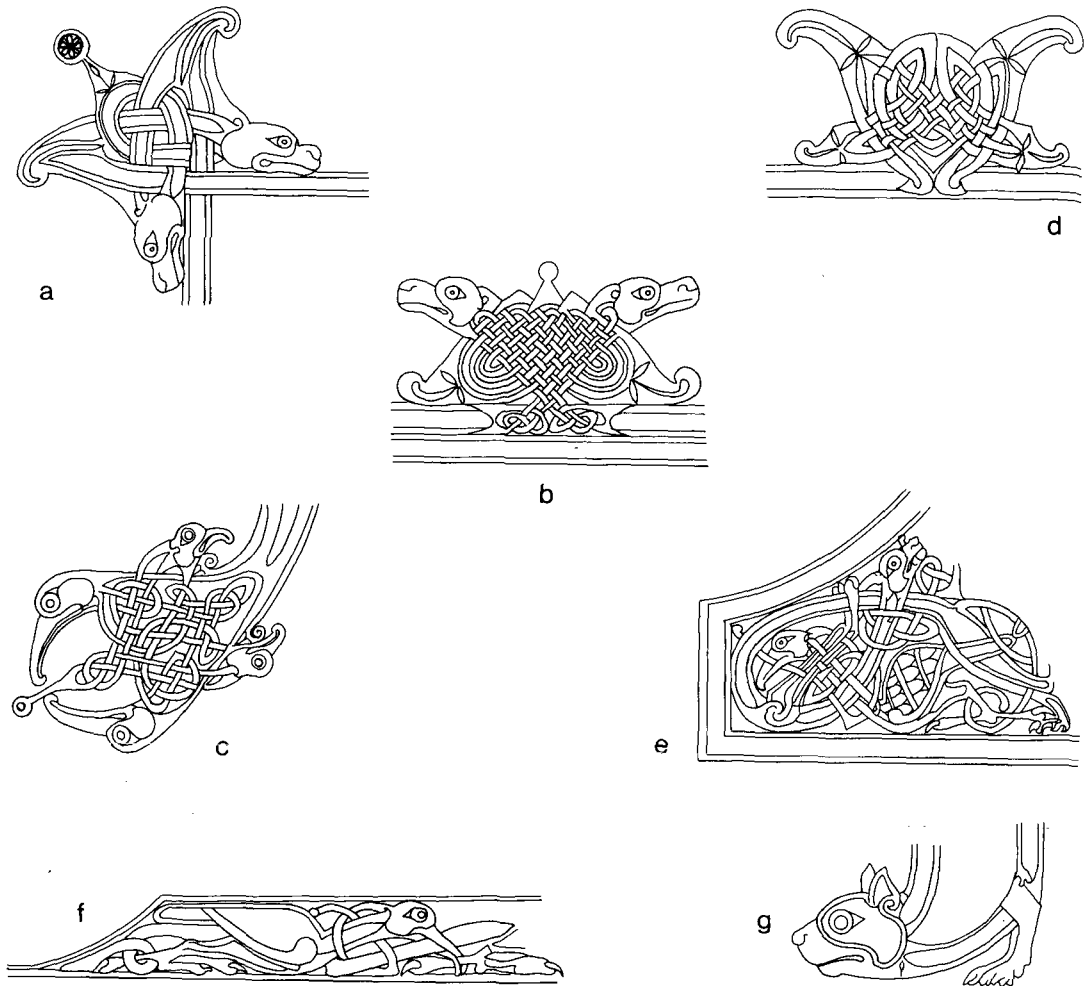


ILLUS 5 The Book of Kells: (a) cat and fish; (b) & (c) cats and mice with host; (d) hound and hare; (e) rider

Even more common are birds, especially infilling crosses, borders, and panels of various shapes, where the flexibility of necks, bodies, legs and tails is used to the greatest decorative advantage (illus 6.e & f). As a further decorative touch, the bodies are frequently multi-coloured. These birds are obviously far distanced from the concept of naturalism set out above, and the attempt to identify them ornithologically must seem to be a vain one. It has been considered, none the less, a worthwhile academic pursuit.

Under the influence of the common sea-birds of the Bernician coast, the cormorant has been the favourite choice, though unspecific birds of prey have also been suggested. Contenders for the cormorant have dismissed the objection that cormorants have webbed feet, but the Lindisfarne birds do not. The overlapping scales or tiled texture of the bodies have been claimed as a credible feature of the feathers of an actual sea-bird (Backhouse 1989, 166–7), regardless of the fact that overlapping is a normal and indeed necessary characteristic of feathers. One observer has even identified the birds on folio 2v as peacocks, and has concluded that ‘the Lindisfarne birds are based on peacocks, with simplification on most folios’ (Yapp 1981, 86–7).

To the uncommitted observer, the attempt to establish such identifications must seem futile. Indeed, it distracts attention from the marvellous inventiveness of the motifs and patterns, and the exquisite delicacy of execution which the artist achieved. Perhaps it takes a vision wider than

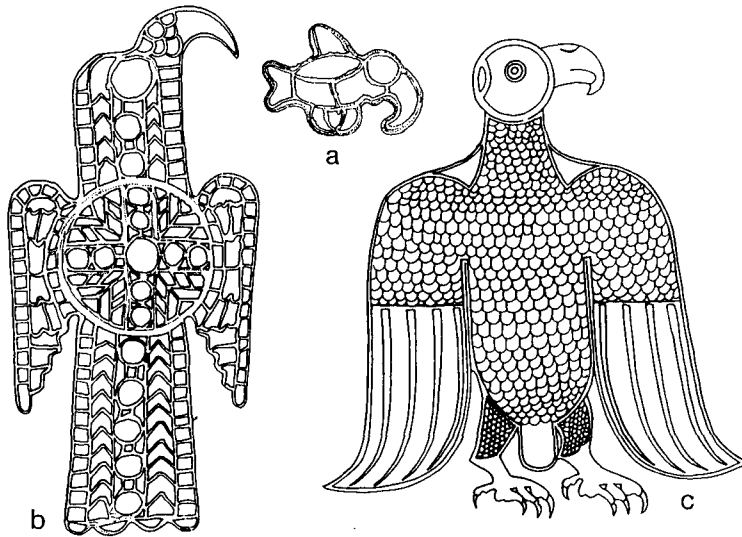


ILLUS 6 Lindisfarne Gospels: dogs, birds and cat as decoration and as guardians

the early medieval Insular world to see in a Lindisfarne cross-page 'an imaginative creation of breathtaking complexity' (Janson & Janson 1995, 287, on Lindisfarne f 26v).

In addition to the dog-head terminals and finials, bird-heads occur, but more rarely, in similar positions in Lindisfarne. Some of the birds have long beaks with a slight curl at the tip, others are short with a stronger curve: both occur together on the left-hand up-stroke of folio 3 (illus 6.c). The first may indeed be a cormorant, and the second is certainly a raptor, probably an eagle. More common, for instance at the corners of the Evangelist portraits and at the sides of carpet pages, are abstract curves which are probably the final stage in the stylization of eagles' beaks (illus 6:d). Similar stylization may also be seen in metalwork, and it deserves fuller consideration against a Germanic background.

Eagles have been regarded as creatures of power, and therefore symbols of power, over large spans of time and space, and eagle-brooches, or mere eagle-heads were very popular in metalwork. For our purposes the most relevant examples are those from Merovingian Europe in the late fifth to early seventh centuries (Christlein 1979, Taf 54–5; Bertram 1996, Taf 4–5, 65, 83).

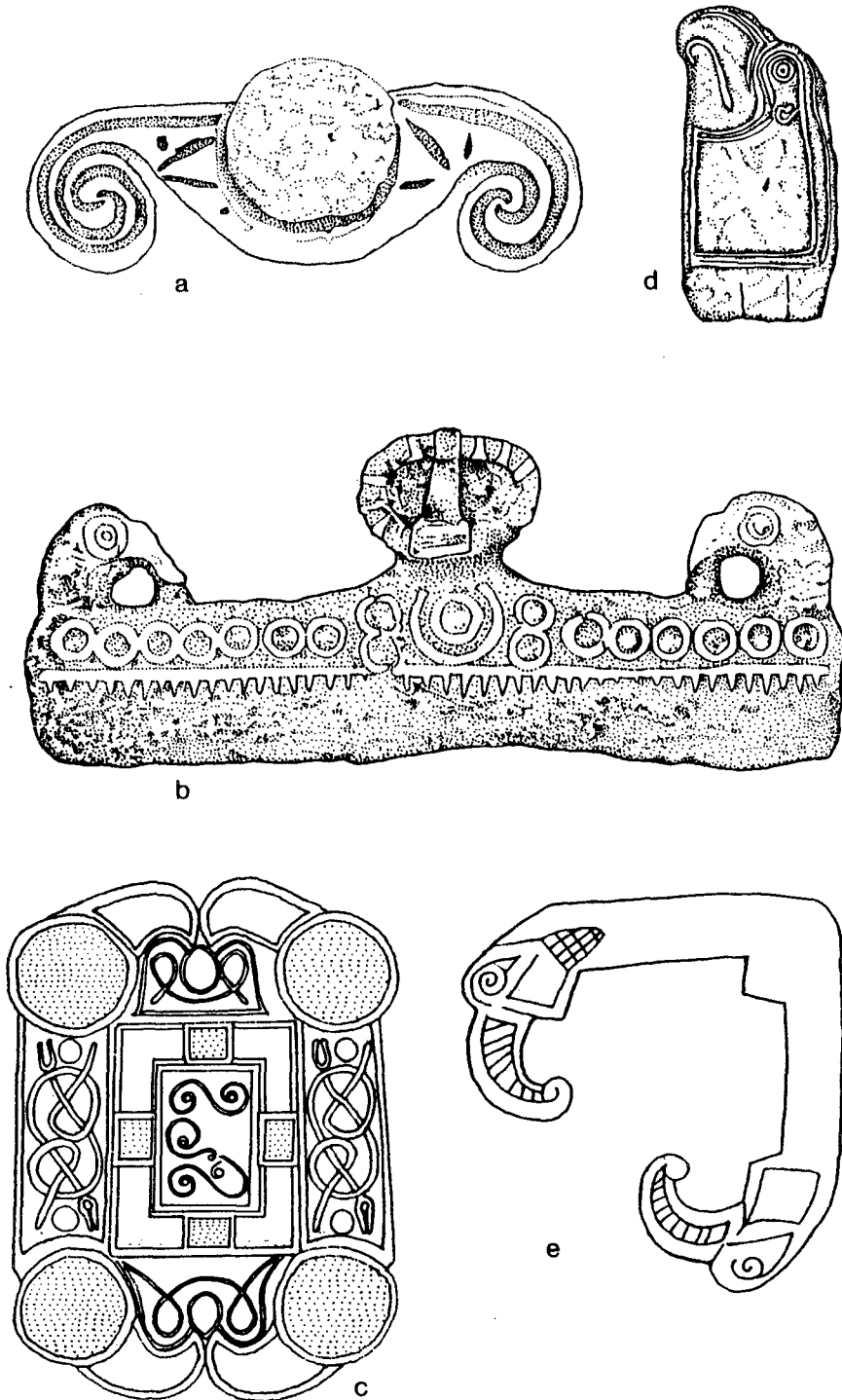


ILLUS 7 *Cloisonné* eagles: (a) Merovingian; (b) Ostrogothic; (c) manuscript version, eagle of St John, Book of Durrow

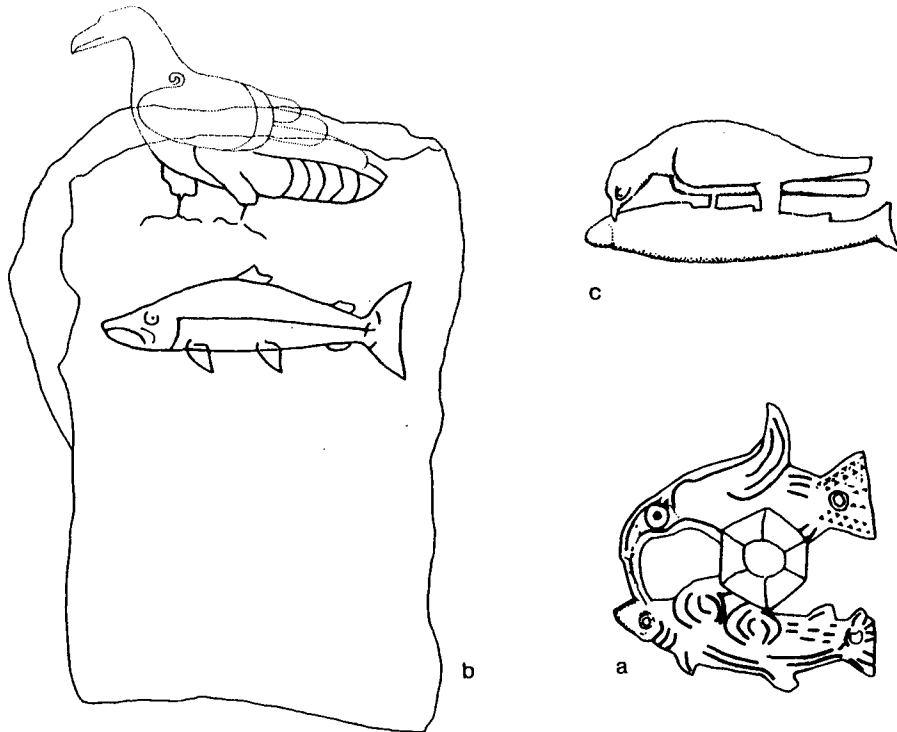
Frequently the bird was presented in profile, with a large garnet or other inlay for the eye (illus 7.a). Altogether more impressive were gold-and-garnet *cloisonné* birds, seen from above with the wings partly open, and the head turned to one side (illus 7.b). It is thought that this motif was spread initially from Russia to northern Italy by the Ostrogoths. In the sixth century it appears among the Visigoths in northern Spain and southern France, especially in the neighbourhood of Toulouse (Volbach 1969, 222–5, illus 240 & 242, captions p 360). It was probably from that area that the image reached the Irish Sea, where it occurs as the eagle of St John in the Book of Durrow (folio 84v: illus 7.c).

Among the Franks, the Alamanni, and elsewhere in Merovingian graves of the later fifth and sixth centuries, some eagle-heads appear to have had a guardian role. Iron strike-a-lights (*Feuerstahle*), decorated in relief, or with silver or even garnet inlays, may also have eagle-heads at either end (illus 8.b). The strike-a-light is normally fitted with a buckle to attach it to a pouch containing flint and tinder. This combination of fire-making equipment and materials was apparently considered to be of such power, and even mystery, that an equally powerful guardian was necessary (Christlein 1979, 65, Abb 38; Bertram 1996, 56–7, Taf 31–2).

These are no doubt pagan concepts, but there is no reason to believe that they died out with the coming of Christianity. For instance, four eagle-heads guard the central cross on the brooch from Hunterston (Ayrshire) (Stevenson 1974; illus 8.c). Three conjoined pairs of eagle-heads, rather similar to the beak-curves on the borders of some of the Lindisfarne carpet pages (illus 6.d), support the escutcheons on the Capheaton (Northumberland) hanging-bowl (illus 8.a). Another Christian example is provided by the silver corner clasps of a book-binding now at Fulda (illus 8.e). The binding is considered to be of Northumbrian workmanship of the late seventh/early eighth century. The clasps take the form of confronted eagle-heads (Wilson 1961). Finally, presented here is an example of a guardian-eagle in stone (illus 8.d), discovered at the small ecclesiastical site at Heysham (Lancashire) (Cramp 1994, 106–11). This was probably a finial from a stone throne.



ILLUS 8 Guardian eagles: (a) Capheaton hanging bowl; (b) Frankish strike-a-light; (c) cross-panel of Hunterston brooch; (d) stone finial, Heysham; (e) Fulda book-binding



ILLUS 9 Eagles with fish: (a) Frankish bronze ornament; (b) Pictish Class I slab, Gairloch; (c) Pictish Class II cross-slab, St Vigean's (extract)

Occasionally in the Merovingian lands a raptor, presumably an eagle, seizes a large fish, probably a salmon (illus 9.a; Bertram 1996, Taf 97; sixth century). This theme appears on the Pictish Class I stone at Gairloch (illus 9.b; Stevenson 1952, pl XXI). Although only the belly and legs of the bird are preserved, they show clearly that it has the talons of an eagle, not the webbed feet of a goose (*contra* Thomas 1963, 72). At Gairloch, the bird and fish are not actually in contact, but on the Class II stones at Latheron (Anderson 1904; Hicks 1993b, fig 2.13 for better illustration) and St Vigeans no 1 (Allen 1903, 235–9, fig 250b) the contact is clear. Indeed at St Vigeans the bird is plainly biting the fish's head (illus 9.c). Thomas (1963, 70–4) has explored the wider cult symbolism of the association of goose or eagle and fish in the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean. This is no doubt of great interest to the Insular art historian; but it may have seemed of no surprise to an inhabitant of northern Britain in the seventh century.

Indeed, an incident related in the two prose Lives of St Cuthbert (VCA cap v; VCB cap XII) makes it plain that eagles were expected to catch fish, an expectation wholly consistent with the evidence that the eagles depicted by the Picts were white-tailed (or sea-) eagles (above). In brief, the Lives relate that the saint and a young acolyte were travelling through a rather deserted area along the Teviot valley. The youth became anxious about the provision of their midday meal but Cuthbert encouraged him to be of good cheer, because 'the Lord will provide'. At that point, an eagle appeared, carrying a large fish, and settled on the river bank. On the saint's instructions, the boy drove the eagle off, and brought the fish to Cuthbert. He was then ordered to leave half the fish for 'our fisherman', as Cuthbert calls the eagle.

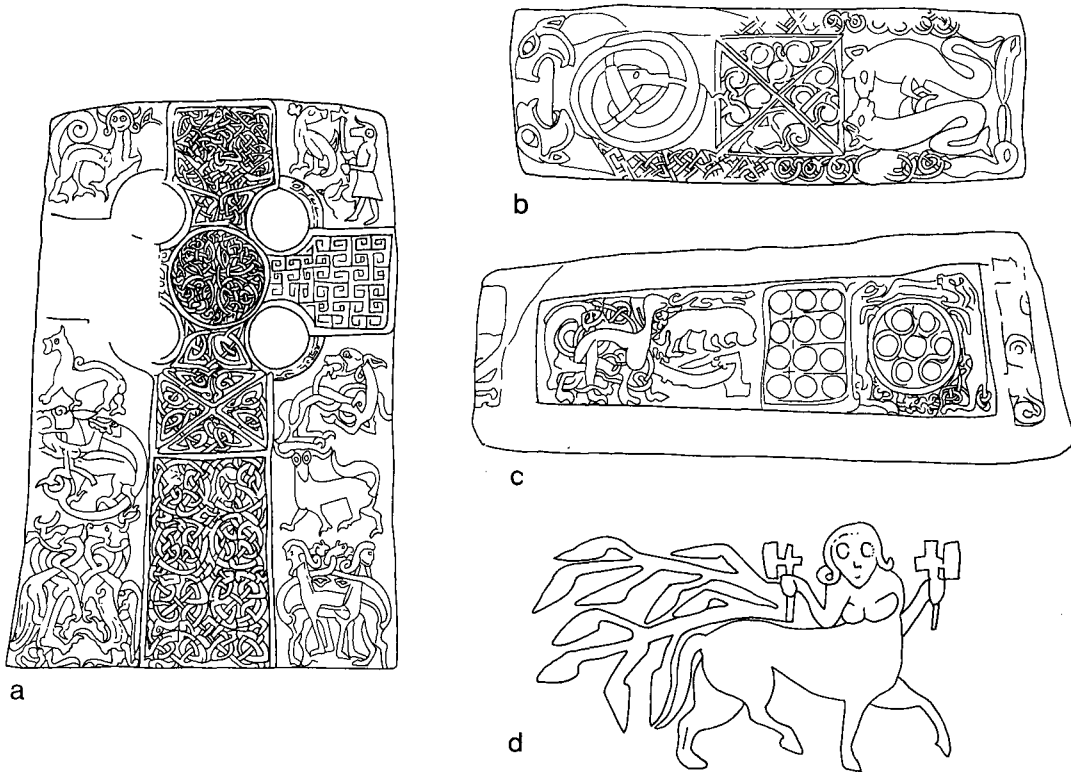
A major interest of this story is that there is no element of the miraculous in it. It is simply affirmed that God will provide, and accepted that eagles do feed on fish. The eagle, 'our fisherman', does not call forth a reference to the fishermen of Galilee, nor to the eagle-symbol of St John. Moreover, the fish is not regarded as a symbol of Christ himself. This is perhaps not surprising, for although the fish 'seems to have been used from the start [of Christian art], especially in painting and funerary slabs, [it] tends to disappear with the coming of the Constantinian era' (Carletti, in Di Bernardino 1992, 803). Latter-day commentators are sometimes more ready than the saints and writers of the seventh and eighth centuries to read a deep religious significance into mundane events.

It should be added that, among the multitude of minor incidents in the folios of Kells, an eagle (or, however unlikely, a peacock), captures a fish (f 250v), as does an otter (f 34), but it would be impossible to define what kind of fish is represented. On folio 188v it is the fish which catches the cat (illus 5.a). It might be thought that this is merely a typical example of Kellsian pictorial whimsy, were it not for its context. The fish forms the lower horizontal of the initial capital F which begins one of the crux passages in Luke's Gospel: *Fuit in diebus Herodis* ('There was in the days of Herod . . . a priest Zecharia': Luke 1:5). Thus begins the account of the birth of John the Baptist, and the subsequent foretelling of the birth of Jesus himself (Luke 1:31).

The beasts considered so far have some 'credible/ recognizable' characteristics, even when, as with the birds in Lindisfarne and Kells, they are contorted in the interests of decorative effects. There are others, however, which in zoological terms can only be described as fantastic. These occur sparsely in Bernicia in our period, for instance in the inhabited vine scrolls of Bewcastle and Ruthwell. They are common, however, among the Picts, occurring for instance on either side of the stem of crosses on cross-slabs (illus 10.a), or on recumbent monuments which may have been grave covers (illus 10.b & c). They are often in combat with other beasts or with men (for good examples from Meigle, see RCAHMS 1994, 100–1). Presumably a rich folklore had inspired these images; but if so, it is now irrecoverable, simply because of the loss of the written records of the Picts.

Some other fantastic or fabulous beasts have Classical and/or Christian antecedents. The most obvious are the centaurs, creatures with a human head and arms mounted on a four-legged body. They wield axes and may carry leafy boughs (eg illus 10.d: Meigle no 2, RCAHMS 1994, 99G). An elaborate Classical genealogy can be suggested for them, emphasizing the healing skills of the centaur Chiron (Stevenson 1993, 24). A simpler, and perhaps more plausible, explanation for Pictish centaurs recalls the visit of St Antony to St Paul, the first hermit. Lost in the desert, Antony was pointed in the direction of Paul's cell by a centaur (Waddell 1936 & 1962, 45–6). The pediment of the cross-face at Nigg (Allen 1903, 76–7, figs 72–3) demonstrates the familiarity of Jerome's *Life of St Paul, First Hermit* in a Pictish monastery, and suggests that this was a likely source for the centaurs in Pictish sculpture.

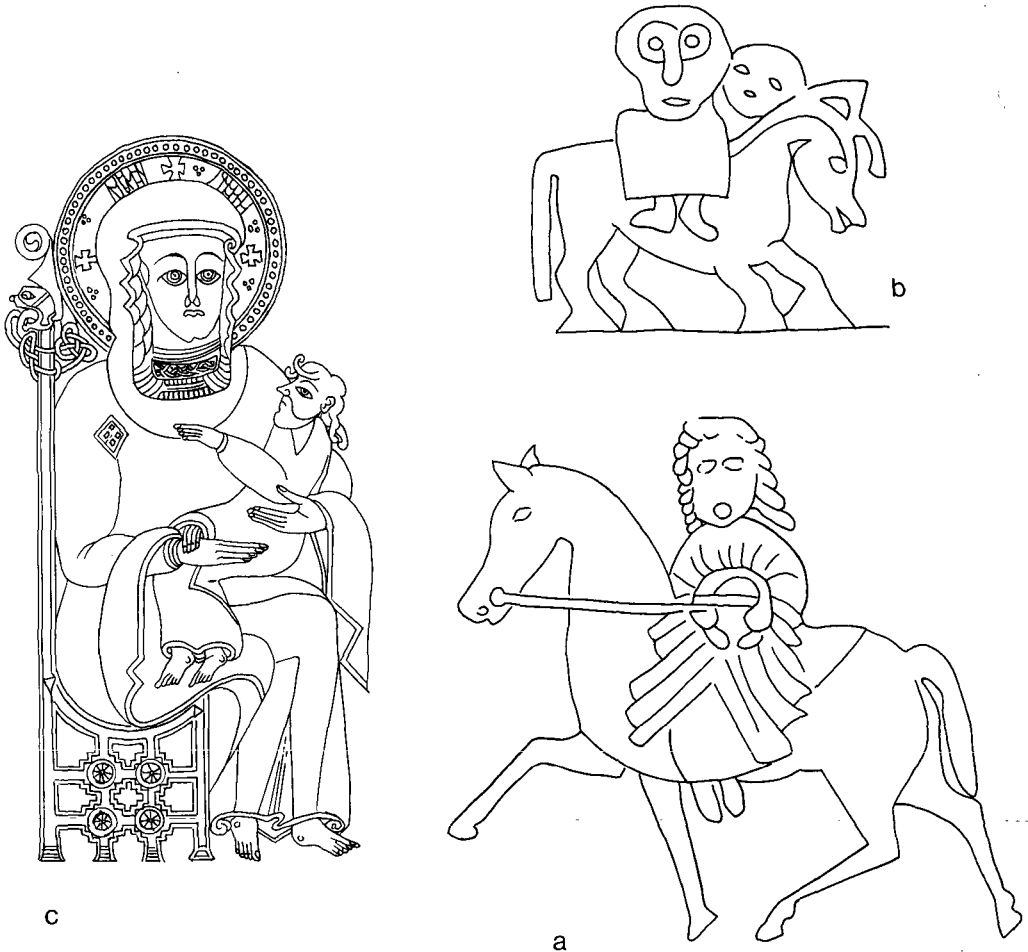
When we turn to images of human activities, one major aspect of Insular art, and by inference of Insular society, emerges at once: we are seeing a man's world through male eyes. For the most part, whether in painting or in sculpture, the only women who appear do so in New Testament contexts. The largest number on any one monument occurs on the Ruthwell cross, where four panels do indeed show women: the Virgin at the Annunciation, on the flight to (or return from) Egypt, and in company with Martha; and the woman wiping Christ's feet (Cassidy 1992, pls 6–25). In general, the Virgin Mary is the only woman to be depicted. In Kells, three possible faces of women are also to be seen incorporated in decorated initials (Meehan 1994, illus 90–2), but women are vastly outnumbered by cats.



ILLUS 10 Fantastic creatures: (a) Rossie Priory cross-slab; (b) & (c) recumbent monuments, Meigle; (d) centaur, cross-slab, Meigle no 2 (extract)

There is, however, one outstanding example of a supposedly secular female in Insular sculpture: the rider who is at top centre of the hunting scene on the Hilton of Cadboll slab (frequently illustrated: Allen 1903, fig 59; good examples in Ritchie 1989, 9; Laing & Laing 1993, pl 13). In the top register she is flanked on the left by the mirror-and-comb symbol, and on the right by a hound and two trumpeters. In the middle register are two male riders, and at bottom left two hounds, reminiscent of the Burghead slab, attack a hind. If we accept the reasonable suggestion that only potentates hunted deer with hounds and on horseback, the prominent position of the Hilton woman suggests that she was a very grand potentate indeed: perhaps a queen. She is frequently described as riding side-saddle, but this is an anachronistic error (illus 11.a). The side-saddle is designed to allow a female to face forward, and control her mount, without having to throw a leg over the horse's back. The Hilton lady is quite clearly sitting athwart the horse, at right angles to its spine. Her legs drop down the horse's left flank, and her feet are seen, side by side, beneath her skirt and below the horse's belly. She is closely accompanied by her groom, whose face and mount can just be seen behind her. He, we must assume, controls the horse and provides some support to his mistress.

This particular image, of a woman athwart a horse, is not unknown in Insular sculpture in depictions of Mary on the Flight into Egypt (or alternatively, the Return from Egypt). On the Ruthwell cross, despite its severe weathering, it would seem that Mary is sitting at right angles to the spine of the ass (Cassidy 1992, illus 25, too weathered to illustrate here). A virtually



ILLUS 11 Females in Insular art: (a) rider on Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab (extract); (b) Mary and Child on Moone cross-slab (extract); (c) Mary and Child enthroned, Book of Kells

unweathered example on the Moone cross (County Kildare) depicts Mary looking out at right angles to the ass, with her feet hanging side by side down its flank (illus 11.b; Henry 1965, 149–50, pl 72). It is not claimed that there is any direct connection between Ruthwell and Moone, or between either of them and Hilton of Cadboll. None the less, it is reasonable to suggest that there was a common Mediterranean model or models which showed Mary sitting athwart an ass, an obvious exemplar being that of Mary and Joseph on the journey to Bethlehem, depicted on the mid sixth-century ivory chair of Bishop Maximian (eg Milburn 1988, 248–9, illus 159).

Before discussing the implications of this, we must also consider a minor element of Christian iconography on the Hilton slab; namely, the pair of trumpeters, who also appear on the hunting scene on the Aberlemno roadside cross-stele (Allen 1903, fig 228). Henderson (1967, 154–6; 1986, 107–8) has drawn attention to the close relationship between these trumpeters and those depicted in the eighth-century illuminated manuscript known as the *Vespasian Psalter* (Nordenfalk 1977, pl 32). This shows David enthroned, playing a lyre, and surrounded by scribes, musicians playing curved horns and straight trumpets (like the Hilton and Aberlemno

ones), and men clapping their hands, presumably in rhythm. Nordenfalk entitles this scene 'David composing the psalms' because of the presence of the scribes; but it also recalls several references in the Old Testament when David is accompanied by musicians with horns, trumpets, lyres and cymbals (eg 1 Chronicles 15:28). So, to a man of religion, trumpets may suggest an allusion to David, who was acknowledged as forerunner of Christ himself.

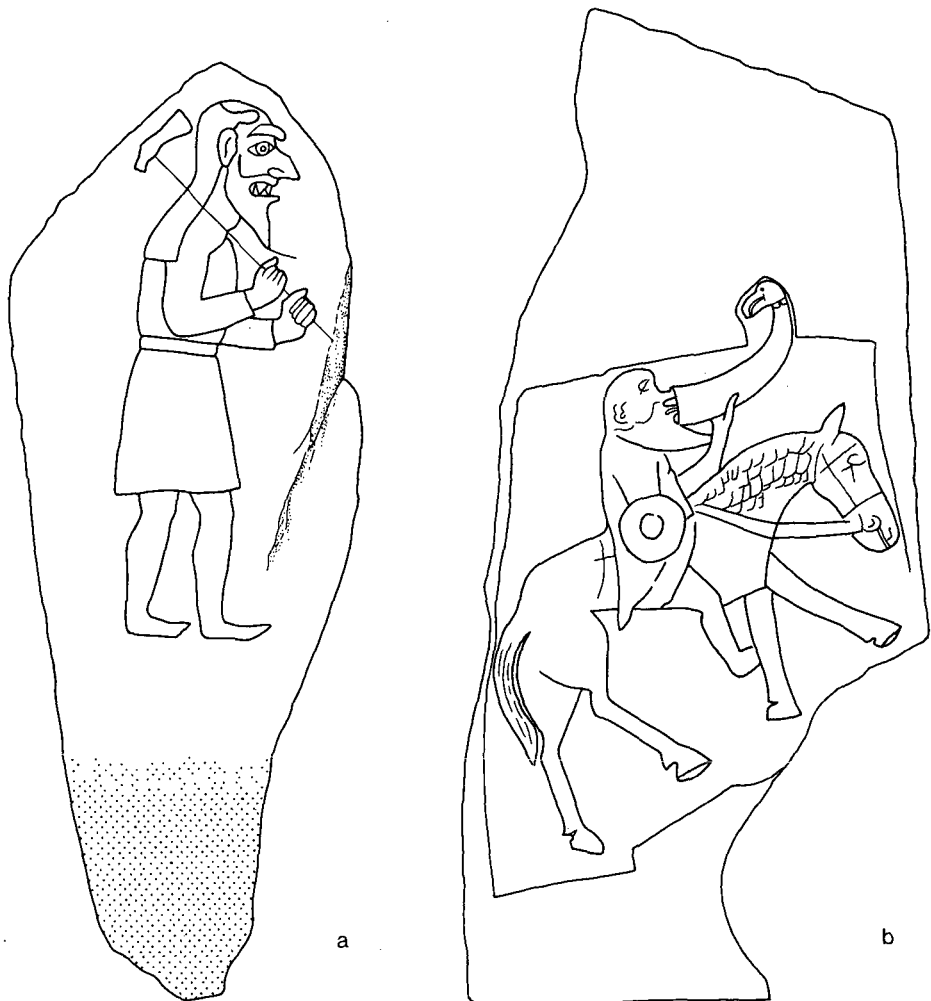
But such thoughts may not have been present at all in the mind of an untutored eighth-century nobleman, for the simple reason that he expected to see and hear trumpets on the hunting field. Our evidence for this comes from a ninth-century Latin poem, celebrating a hunt at the Carolingian court, in which the deer were roused by blasts, not on a horn, but on a straight trumpet (Godman 1985, 256–7). So even if Pictish carvers had known of the manuscript 'models' and the religious echoes of David and Christ, they accepted the images because they saw them as objects which were already familiar in the everyday world.

Here we encounter once again the Janus face of Insular iconography. For the layman, the Hilton of Cadboll, Aberlemno roadside, and many other hunting scenes, would be immediate reminders of worldly pursuits and excitement. But we have already noted the possible religious interpretations, not necessarily wholly self-consistent, of the Burghead stag and hounds and other hunting scenes (above). The trumpeters may have been a commonplace of the hunt, but on a religious monument such as a cross-stele, they could have been used by a cleric to preach about David as forerunner of Christ the Saviour. Earthly queens may have ridden to the hunt, even if only as spectators; but the Hilton queen may have recalled Mary, mother of Christ, and herself Queen of Heaven. The concept of *Maria Regina* was already established in the Western Church by the sixth century (Marinone, in Di Berardino 1992, 539–40). The Mary-and-Child folio in the Book of Kells approaches the Mediterranean style of icon; but the Hilton of Cadboll image of a queen would be more immediately accessible to a Pictish viewer.

Turning to wider aspects of the Insular depictions of people, a broad comment would be that, with very rare exceptions, no sense of individuality or personality is conveyed. In sculpture, this is perhaps inevitable. In the first place, the depiction of facial expression was normally inhibited by the coarse texture of the original stone. Subsequently, whatever original expression there might have been would have been obliterated by weathering.

It might be expected that the greater flexibility of painting would have made it possible in manuscripts to depict the personality of individuals. In fact, that potential is only very rarely realized, and for the most part we see stereotyped, expressionless faces with staring eyes, whether in frontal, profile, or three-quarter views. Even in the Evangelist 'portraits' of Lindisfarne, the four saints are differentiated by their hair styles and bodily postures rather than by any visual reflection of their personalities.

To these generalizations there is one striking exception: the Virgin-and-Child portrait on Kells folio 7v (illus 11.c). In keeping with an icon which goes back at least to the sixth century, Mary sits on an elaborate jewelled throne appropriate to a queen. But unlike the earliest icons, in which the Child sits squarely on Mary's knee, and both look stolidly to the front, Kells provides an excellent example of a more informal icon (compare, for instance, illus 11.c with Hedlund & Rowley 1959, illus 542, 546 & 552). For a start, Mary has crossed her legs and swung them to her left. This makes it possible for Christ to sit across her lap, and gaze up to her face. To judge by his features, and the colour and length of his locks, the Child is a lusty infant at least four or five years old. His right hand clasps his mother's hand, while his left reaches up to her breast in what Kitzinger has charmingly described as 'playful gestures of affectionate babyhood'. In broader terms, Kitzinger (1956, 257–61) writes 'the details . . . express a more intimate, a more humanized relationship between Mother and Child than is commonly represented in works of that period'.



ILLUS 12 Personal images: (a) the grim warrior, Rhynie man; (b) the ancient warrior from Bullion

Two other cases, this time of Pictish carvings, may express individual humanity through exaggeration or even caricature. The first of these is the outstanding example of a small group of depictions of grim warriors (Shepherd & Shepherd 1978). Some of them carry axes, which seem to be intended for hostile purposes rather than for tree-felling or carpentry. The tallest of them, the man from Rhynie, stands only 1.03 m tall on a kite-shaped slab 1.78 m high; but seen face-to-face he is considerably more daunting than these measurements might suggest (illus 12.a). This is a token of the skill of the carver, who has given him a jutting nose and fangs for teeth, and has placed in his firm grasp a long-handled axe which rests on his shoulder, ready to be swung viciously forwards. To a sensitive viewer, this dramatic image is enhanced because the line of the axe-head runs parallel to the upper left margin of the stone, while the hooked nose is similarly echoed by the curve of the stone on the right.

However that may be, it is clear that the artist has used his skills to strengthen the image by exaggerating certain features. Hence it seems legitimate to consider it as an idealization: but the

term itself assumes an underlying reality. What was the social or historical reality of Rhynie man? One possibility is that he was a legendary hero or even a historical battle-leader. Alternatively, because Rhynie man does not stand alone, but is essentially the outstanding representative of a class of grim warriors, it is tempting to see him as a member of a class well known in Ireland, the socially recognized outlaw or noble bandit (McCone 1986). This opens up a large field of legend, hagiography and social history, which cannot be pursued here. We can, however, accept that Rhynie man gives us a vivid pictorial representation of the class.

Finally, we have what must surely be a portrait of a real person, albeit caricatured, in the carving of the drunken old nobleman from Bullion (Angus) (Stevenson 1959, 43–4). This shows an ancient warrior, bald-headed, but with a jutting beard, riding a dispirited nag (illus 12.b). The details have been marvellously preserved from weathering as a result of early burial; they even include the horse's mane and tail. The reins lie slack, and the warrior's targe is carelessly slung on the wrong side. For such matters, however, he has no care, for he has almost emptied a drinking horn capable of holding several pints of mead or wine. All this might be taken as straightforward pictorial reportage were it not for one touch of ironic humour: the bird's-head terminal of the drinking horn has been turned through a right angle, so that the bird looks the warrior in the eye. Was it the intention of the artist that the bird's beak seems to have a sarcastic twist?

Each of these carvings has an immediacy akin to portraiture or caricature, which seems to transcend time and bring us very close to the living person.

A NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

With two exceptions (illus 8 & 9.c), the images of animals and people presented in this essay have been executed to a common convention of line drawings by two illustrators, Sylvia Stevenson and Caitlin Evans. The convention has been questioned, and needs some comment. In the case of the illustrations from Gospel books, the originals were essentially coloured-in line drawings. Moreover, the engraved symbols and images on Pictish Class I stones are line drawings, admittedly of differing width and depth; but these differences are irrelevant to the basic design.

Problems arise, however, with the Pictish Classes II and III sculptures carved in low relief, and frequently encountered today in a battered or weathered state. Here the criticism has been made that a line drawing, by ignoring the uncertainties of the weathered stone, attempts to make a firm statement; a statement, moreover, about one observer's interpretation. To this, I would respond that the illustrations presented here are actually précis based on the initial records of Romilly Allen, supplemented by those of other illustrators, by photographs in monochrome and colour, and by personal inspection of the stones. From the combination of all these, a justifiable (albeit simplified) statement may be made.

Two other favoured techniques of illustration should be mentioned. In skilled hands, stippling and other forms of modelling may suggest the very grain of the stone, and give a convincing impression of realism. But it is an impression only; the presentation is wholly dependent on the initial perceptiveness and ultimate drafting skills of the illustrator. What appears to be totally realistic is in fact personally nuanced and therefore subjective.

The other favoured technique is that of photography, and again some excellent results are currently being achieved. There is a common belief that a photograph is a mechanical process (for want of a better general term) and is therefore totally objective. But wide experience of looking at stones in the field and in museums reveals the large part which lighting plays in determining what may (or may not) be seen and therefore photographed. Especially important is the angle(s) at which lighting can be deployed indoors. A recent outstanding example of this in a

parallel area is the discovery of both Latin and ogam inscriptions on the Dupplin cross (Forsyth 1995).

In conclusion, I considered that the present minimal visual statement, or *précis*, was the appropriate way to make the points necessary for the theme of this essay.

For the reader who wishes to follow up some of the original images, a further problem arises in relation to those taken from the great decorated Gospel Books. The need to safeguard these treasures renders them inaccessible to all but a very select group of specialists. There are indeed excellent facsimile volumes, in very realistic colours, which may be seen, under fairly stringent circumstances, in some national, municipal and university libraries. Fortunately for the interested non-specialist, within the last two decades reasonably priced handbooks have been published, with full-colour plates of the most important decorated folios. Bearing in mind the interests of the majority of Fellows of the Society, I have largely limited references to these handbooks. Full bibliographical references to these are given below to Durrow (Meehan 1996), Kells (Meehan 1994) and Lindisfarne (Backhouse 1981). Specialists in early medieval art will need no such guidance.

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