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# Reconsidering the Forres cross-slab (Sueno's Stone), part 2: iconography

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ABSTRACT

*Standing over 6.5m high, the Forres cross-slab (NJ 04655 59533), erroneously known as Sueno's Stone, is Scotland's tallest early medieval carved stone monument. One side features a cross and 'inauguration', the other is covered with multiple military scenes. A new carbon date from the 9th century, 3D photography and an accurate suite of new drawings allow the iconography of the stone to be examined in detail. This reveals the 'inauguration' as an adaptation of the biblical Arming of David. The episodic arrangement of battle is compared to verses of heroic poetry rather than accurate reportage. The sacrifice of horses beside headless corpses relates the encounter to Viking funeral practice. The conical structure is interpreted as the furnace of hell, destination for unbelievers. The cross form and other ornament relate clearly to a Pictish heritage but their composition looks forward to later sculpture evolving in the west and Isle of Man. Complementing archaeological and historical evidence, the cross-slab is understood as a mighty affirmation of Christian kingship and victory at a time of shifting power structures in north-east Scotland.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Forres cross-slab is over 6.5m high, tapering slightly from a maximum width of 1.14m, standing by the roadside on the eastern edge of Forres, Moray (Illus 1; for map see Loggie et al 2024: 226, illus 1). While the west face is dominated by a cross, the east face is covered by intense scenes of warfare. (A portfolio of drawings by John Borland at enhanced scale is in the Appendix – see under 'Supplementary material' at the end of the article.)

From its earliest historical record it was associated with Viking invaders, Robert Gordon of Straloch deducing in 1654 that the monument was 'to a battle fought by our King Malcolm son of Kenneth against the commanders of the Dane Sweyn's forces' (Gordon 1654: 105). That Sweyn or Sueno was Sweyn Forkbeard, king of Denmark from 986 and king of England from 1013 until his death in 1014. Both the association and date are mistaken, and so in this article the monument will be referred to as the Forres cross-slab. A detailed historiography of the many authors who have tried to explain and date the stone is provided by Southwick (1981: 6–8) and Sellar (1993: 98–105). The latest appraisal, which provides the context and archaeological dating, forms part 1 of this investigation (Loggie et al 2024). Part 2, about the iconography and style, is therefore prompted by new sources of evidence. Foremost is the first set of accurate drawings ever created, by John Borland. He was able to use on-site inspection, a 3D rotational model combining photogrammetry and laser scanning made in 2018,[1] a moveable light source and close-up examination in studio conditions of casts taken in the 1920s (McCullagh 1995: 703). The stone, its surface obscured by the glare of a protective glass pavilion since 1991, is so tall and

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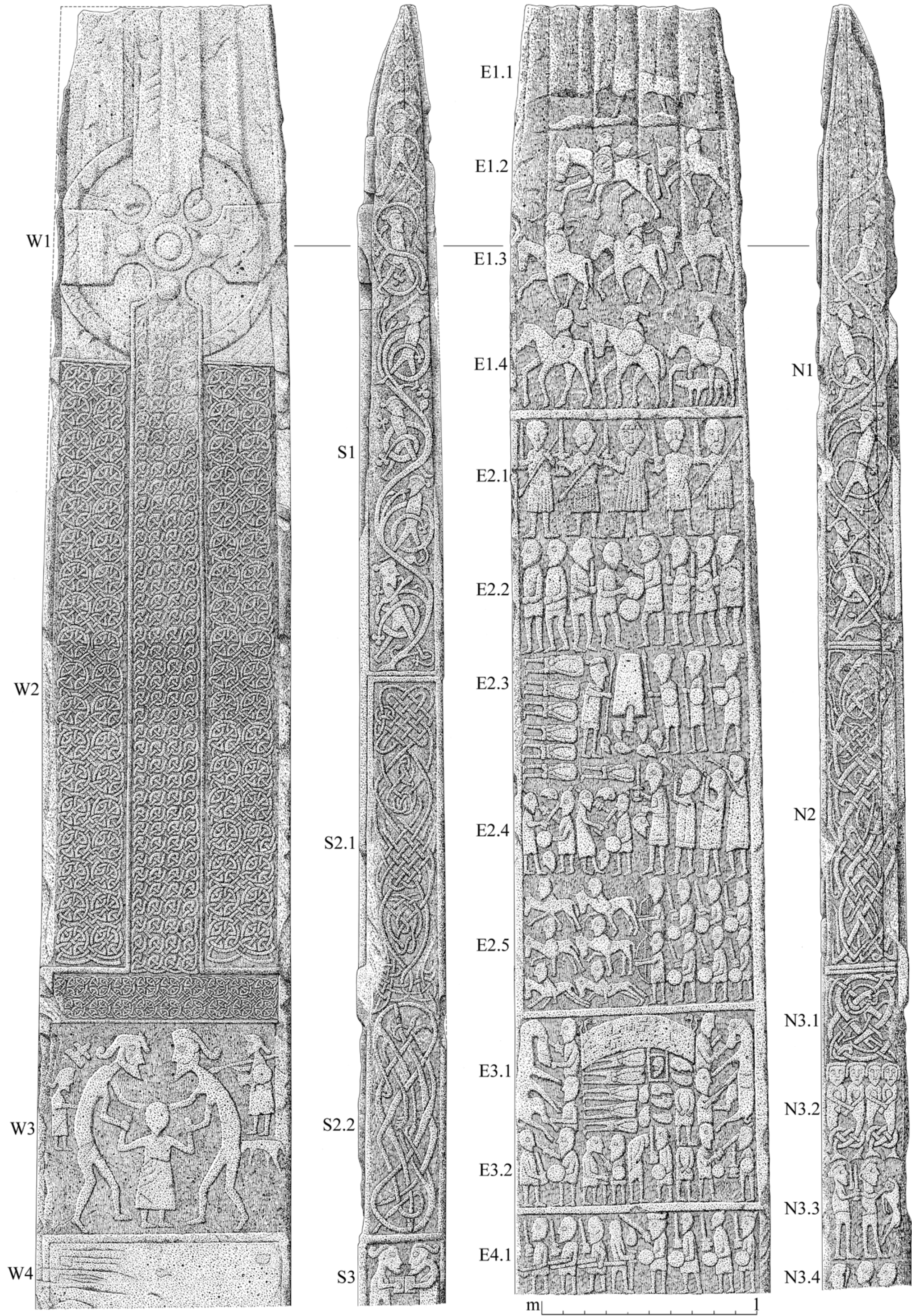



Illus 1 Forres cross-slab. (John Borland © Historic Environment Scotland)

inaccessible that no previous images have been able to reveal the details now available. Secondly, a re-evaluation by Loggie et al (2024: 234–5) of carbon found in post holes adjacent to the pillar has led to a scientific dating of cal AD 780–900 (95% probability), or cal AD 825–885 (68% probability), presumably associated with scaffolding at the time of erection. This narrows the date from estimates that previously ranged from the 9th to 11th centuries.

Because the scenes on the east face are so vivid, earlier scholars tried to focus on the narrative of a specific event: Scots versus Danes or Norwegians, Scots versus Earl of Orkney; Picts against Norsemen, Scots versus Picts, Scots against the men of Moray; King Dubh against the men of Alba (Gordon 1726: 158–9; Cordiner 1788: np; Skene 1886, vol 1: 337–8; Mackie 1975: 204; Jackson 1993; Sellar 1993: 107; Southwick 1981: 18; Duncan 1984: 139). Cruickshank (1991) makes the case that the Aberlemno stone represents the Battle of Dunnichen in 685 between Picts and Anglo-Saxons (Canmore ID 34806). Here two different warrior groups are shown proceeding chronologically from pursuit to struggle, defeat and death, demonstrating that by the 8th century when the stone was carved Pictish artists could devise a historical local narrative. However, other observers have hesitated to see the Forres sculpture as a current event (Anderson 1881: 163; Henderson 1967: 134). George and Isabel Henderson (2004: 135–6) expressed doubt: 'We cannot know whether anyone had the status or acumen to turn reporting of near contemporary events into art', and wonder if the camp scenes, parades and massacres can be seen as 'as an intelligible act of local reportage'. Alcock (2003: 177) concluded 'it can tell us nothing about how warfare was actually conducted' and is instead a 'celebration of the principal fruits of war'. Picking out the 'inauguration scene' beneath the cross, Sellar (1993: 107) might 'expect it to represent a scriptural scene, and this perhaps remains the most probable explanation. Nevertheless, it has not yet proved possible to point to a clear iconographic parallel in Scotland or Ireland. It is therefore possible that this panel, like the battle scene on the reverse of the Stone, represents an actual event.' Alcock (2003: 396) also sought a religious theme here, featuring Christ but 'with no ready identification of the flanking figures'. These earlier scholars leave a conflicting array of theories regarding the historic and possible theological significance of the monument which can now be sifted more closely from a visual point of view.

Part 1 of this investigation deals with the date, significant location of the stone, function of the blade scores on the base panel, and political context (Loggie et al 2024). Rather than struggle with controversy over a historic battle as the starting point, this paper instead works through layers of cultural evidence using the Bible, pictorial comparisons, contemporary secular literature, and the archaeology of Viking warfare. The monument is divided into three separate topics: on the east face, the 'inauguration' scene with blank panel below; on the west face, warfare, including some figures on the narrow sides. The final topic looks at the loaded art-historical evidence provided by the cross, other ornament and figure style, ranging beyond the analyses provided by Romilly Allen (*ECMS* II: 150) and Southwick (1981: 8, 16).

## THE 'INAUGURATION'?

The scene shows a small central figure, apparently a child, wearing a long tunic (Illus 2; see Loggie et al 2024: 229, illus 4). On each side looms a much larger man, with the familiar trimmed beard and Pictish hair curl at the back of the head, legs stepping forward. Bulges on the 3-D image suggest that they wear breeches, like the Kirriemuir huntsman (Canmore ID 32300) and tight upper garments like several figures in the Book of Kells (Henry 1974: 74, 121; ff 68v, 97v, 253v). With one hand they clutch the child's raised forearms, with the other hand they touch his head. Behind the left figure is a small man in a tunic, his arm reaching out to touch the large officiant. Above him floats an unknown object rather like the hilt of the floating sword on the Aberlemno stone (Canmore ID 34806) or the many hilts shown on the reverse

Illus 2 Forres cross-slab, west face, W3. (John Borland © Historic Environment Scotland)

of the stone (E2.1). His partner to the right of the scene holds a small shield, and points his spear towards the large officiant, while below him is a dog-like quadruped. Both the small figures are static.

Sellar (1993: 106–10) and Duncan (2003: 143) relate the scene to the much later 13th-century seal of Scone Abbey showing the inauguration of Alexander III in 1249 (Illus 3). Although aged only seven at the time, Alexander is scaled according to hierarchical importance, flanked by officiating clergy and the earls of Fife and Strathearn, identified by their shields below. This parallel has led to one conclusion that the scene at Forres recalls some form of royal inauguration. Echoes of this ceremony may be read in the 17th-century accounts of a West Highland clan chief's inauguration, which was a predominantly secular rather than religious occasion, binding a chief to his clan. Here key elements included the

Illus 3 Scone Abbey seal. The inauguration of King Alexander III, 1249. (© National Museums of Scotland)

company of the chief's followers, the wearing of a robe and investiture with sword and sceptre by his 'principal friends' (Caldwell 2003: 63–4). A ritual of this type would justify the positions and secular appearance of the main celebrants on the stone, but a direct linear connection is misleading. It leaves unexplained the diminutive size of the central and therefore most important person: on the seal, the child Alexander is nonetheless shown as the largest figure. Woolf (2007: 29) points out that in the early medieval period kings were chosen by their followers for their worth, a mature adult being 'infinitely preferable to a youth still wet behind the ears'. At Forres he is a standing child, not, *pace* Duncan (2003: 143), the adult King Cuilen seated on the low Stone of Scone.

While an inauguration of some sort remains a likely interpretation, a biblical source may account for the iconography. King David already provided well-established scenes to represent Pictish kingship. Dominant Pictish themes show him as a precursor of Christ, with his musicians and harp representing the composer of the Psalms and, often with his flock, rending the jaws of the lion, representing the Good Shepherd (Henderson 1986). The nine silver Byzantine 'Cyprus plates' made between 613 and 629/30 probably for Emperor Heraclius offer additional scenes from the life of David, showing his rise from anointed child, through resilient shepherd, to the heroic slayer of Goliath, finally rewarded by his marriage to Saul's daughter (Wander 1973: 93–5). They foreground the child and adolescent boy. The Byzantine sequence begins with the Anointing of David, a rare scene in Insular art (Illus 4; Alexander 2017, vol 1: 281).

Here the child is flanked by Samuel, performing the unction, and his father Jesse, backed on each side by his brothers, the one on the left reaching out to touch Samuel's back, like the figure on the stone. The scene includes a 'floating' sword, staff and heifer. These marginal props in the exergue refer to David the shepherd and Samuel coming to Jesse under the guise of sacrificing a heifer (1 Samuel 16:2). The problem with this comparison to the moment of anointing is that a priest and horn of unction are essential components, absent at Forres. Wander (1973: 94–5) has shown how the composition of the much rarer scene of the Arming of David is, in this case, directly dependent on the Anointing. The dishes share the architectural framework and position of the figures, but the artist has had to improvise for the raised arms of Saul and the helmet-bearer, in a clumsy way lacking anatomical and drapery realism.

On the Arming of David scene (1 Samuel 17:38–9), the lad is flanked by tall Saul with a regal halo and a bearer, both of whom step forward, raising their hands above David's head like the men at Forres, Saul blessing and the bearer proffering a helmet (Illus 5). Behind them are smaller soldiers, static, in profile, one arm gesturing forward. The soldier on the left points his spear non-aggressively, while both clutch their shields, features of the assistants at Forres. David rejects the bow and shield, lying beneath his feet. Trusting in God, he subsequently rejects the sword, helmet and spear. Possibly represented on the stone is the object floating top left, which resembles a sword hilt.

On the dish, David stands independently, holding his sword; on the monument his arms are upraised, held aloft by the officiants. This Insular variation offers potential for multivalent exegesis, as explored by Farr (1997: 104–39) with regard to f 114r of the Book of Kells, a similar composition which illustrates the 'Arrest of Christ' or Passion prelude (Illus 6). Here the pose indicates prayer, Moses with arms uplifted by Aaron and Hur winning the battle against Amalech (Exodus 17:8–12) and ultimately the Crucifixion, Christ's victory over death. These three associations are explained by 5th-century Maximus of Turin (Sermo XXXVIII.3): 'The appearance of the man himself when he raises his hands depicts a cross. For this reason we are instructed to pray with raised hands … then our prayer will be heard more quickly …. By this example the holy man Moses, when he waged war against Amalech was victorious not with weapons, not with the sword, but after they had lifted him up to God, with his hands.'[2] The pose thus fortifies young David in rejecting his weapons before battle with a reminder of Moses'

Illus 4 Cyprus plate, Byzantium, 629–30. The Anointing of David. Samuel anoints David with Jesse to the right and his brothers on either side. 'Floating' sword, staff and heifer below. (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence)

Illus 5 Cyprus plate, Byzantium, 629–30. The Arming of David. Saul blesses David while a soldier raises the helmet. Static soldiers to either side, with spears and shields, that on the left pointing his spear towards the officiant. (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence)

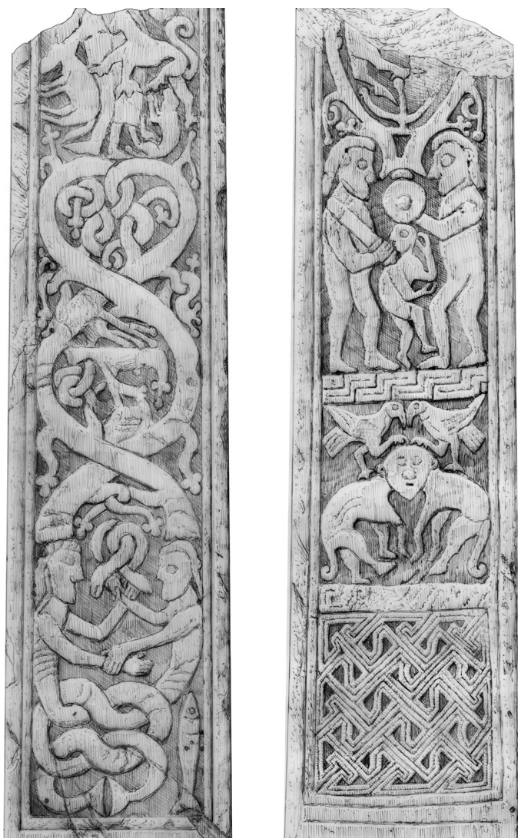
martial victory through the power of prayer, all subsumed beneath the great cross above.

The Arming of David provides a possible interpretation for the cross-shaft SAC558 at St Andrews (Illus 7). On face (c), a small figure wriggles between two solemn men, one holding a shield and the other a sword. David iconography on the shaft is confirmed by the scene on face (a), where a person is flanked by what looks like a sheep and dog, while a lion pounces upon his chest (Geddes 2020). Further links to the Forres cross-slab are the entwined mermen beneath the vine scroll, linking arms and tails. Identifying the Arming of David theme at both St Andrews and Forres is significant for several reasons. It establishes this rare scene as a firm attribute of Pictish kingship, not solely dependent on its exotic relationship to a unique Byzantine plate but probably derived from a more accessible manuscript source. Like the two almost similar images of David and the Lion found on the St Andrews sarcophagus and at Kinneddar (Henderson 1998: 130–1), it strengthens the royal links between the Picts in Fife and those along the Moray Firth, possibly late into the 9th century.

The Cyprus Anointing and Arming plates provide a starting point for recognising the centrality of David, and allow us to trace a development from the Forres stone to the Scone seal. The link might be called 'David grows up'. Sandler (2020) has plotted how regular psalter illustrations of Psalm 26 or prefatory miniatures that show the Anointing of David gradually change to illustrating contemporary coronations. Emphasis changes from David's first boyhood anointing by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:11) to his adult ceremony at Hebron as king of Israel (2 Samuel 5:3). The importance of the boy is highlighted in the 8th–9th-century St Petersburg flyleaf (St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Cod. Q. v. XIV. I, 1r). Here the original scene showed David as an adult being anointed by Samuel, anticipating Christ's baptism by John. At some later stage a small child was sketched in between the two standing figures, a reminder of the historical event. The

Illus 6 The Book of Kells, Trinity College Dublin, MS A.1.6 (58) f 114r. The Arrest/Passion of Christ. (© The Board of Trinity College Dublin)

late 12th-century Hunterian Psalter (Glasgow University Library, MS Hunter 229 (U.3.2), f 46; Sandler 2020: 265–6) still shows a child, in a short tunic. He receives the unction from Samuel but his later coronation as king is anticipated by the other celebrant holding a crown above him, and another holding the sceptre. In the late 13th-century Windmill Psalter he is still a child, wriggling like the St Andrew's figure, between Samuel and Jesse (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.102, f 24v). In the Rutland Psalter (London, British Library, Add. MS 62925, f 29r, *c* 1260) he has become a fully fledged king, receiving unction and crown, and although seated he is no longer swamped by the officiants. Finally, in the Glazier Psalter, 1220–30, he is the



Illus 7 St Andrews Cathedral Museum SAC558 (a and c). (John Borland © Historic Environment Scotland)

dominant figure, broad-shouldered and squeezing to the side his officiants, who are by now contemporary bishops with mitres (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G.25, f 4r; Sandler 2020: 272–3). The scene is no longer a biblical anointing but a medieval coronation. Schapiro (1960: 180–5) commented that this crowning of David has become 'an image of the crowning of an English king' pertaining 'more to current English practice than to the Bible'. This David is in every way ready to become the dominating figure of Alexander III on the Scone seal in 1249.

The scenes on both plates of anointing and arming prepare the child for his ultimate destiny as an adult king after a great battle, a concept appealing to Emperor Heraclius and understood by the patron of the Forres stone. In addition to their visual parallels, the Cyprus plates provide a possible historical parallel for the patron of the Forres stone. Stamps on the plates can be dated to 613–629/30. An occasion for their creation would be the triumphant return of Emperor Heraclius to Constantinople in 628, after his heroic beheading of the Persian general Razatis in single combat. Emphasising the link between David and the present emperor, the plates depict Byzantine architecture, the imperial halo and *sparsio* (the emperor's gifts at imperial games). Heraclius saw himself as the 'new David' and even named his son David. This episode and allusion were brought to the West, recorded in the Chronicle of Fredegar whose continuation extended until 768 (Wander 1973: 103–4; 1975). These plates therefore provide an explanation for the Forres stone glorifying a small child in an otherwise military context, and for associating that scene with types of inauguration, whether anointing or arming. They also show the David and Goliath story adapted for a particular purpose, to glorify their Byzantine patron. Some similar evolution was taking place at Forres: key episodes of David's and Moses' iconography were being transformed into a Picto-Scottish context. Summing up the evolution of the David cycle from Early Christian to Byzantine, Weitzman (1970: 111) concludes: 'The creativeness of the medieval artist is by and large not to be measured by the invention of new subject matters or new compositional principles – which does take place though extremely seldom – but by the manner in which established iconography and established compositional principles are adapted, transformed or recast.'

This biblical scene, heavily worn as if venerated by observers kneeling before it, precedes the contemporary battle on the east face. At Ingelheim, the Rhineland palace of Charlemagne and Louis the Pious, Ermoldus described the 9th-century epic murals. Old Testament scenes of 'the achievements of David' accompanied recent Frankish heroes at war. 'Here the first Charles is painted, master of the Frisians in war, and the grand deeds of his warriors along with him ... Here the Saxons stand opposite, contemplating battle, but he brings it on, dominates,

and subjects them to his law' (Noble 2009: 176). Such a fusion of past and present, particularly relating David to the victory of recent kings over the heathen, was as relevant in the Holy Roman Empire as it was in north-east Scotland.

## THE EAST FACE

During the 8th to 9th centuries, the cross-slab was the predominant Pictish art form, with Forres representing its last phase. Typically slabs displayed a large cross on one face, perhaps flanked by humans, animals, monsters or common utensils. The back was an open canvas, often with large Pictish symbols at the top and a vigorous contemporary hunting scene or procession below, interspersed with a variety of other monsters in a free-floating composition. With the possible exception of the Aberlemno battle sequence, reportage was not favoured (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 59–85, 135). Apart from David, biblical scenes were rare (Alexander 2017, vol 1: 453; vol 2: 587–701). Thus the east face of the Forres stone is a rarity, with no symbols or monsters but only a visceral depiction of war, laid out in panels which ostensibly define episodes (Illus 1 & 9; Appendix). The iconography is unique to this location. Rather than a metaphor for generalised conflict, its vivid details suggest it was instigated by contemporary events. The exact story can still not be deciphered but several lines of enquiry may bring the truth nearer. These are: reading the stone, including layout, use of space and biblical illustration; the application of the Bible as text; early medieval heroic literature as a model for battle narrative; and the archaeology of Viking funeral rites.

### READING THE STONE

This section deals with the process of visually absorbing the east face, exploring how the eye and mind decode its composition (Illus 1). The enormously tall rectangle is divided into four horizontal panels within which most of the scenes are arranged in horizontal rows of tightly packed figures. Henderson & Henderson (2004: 135–6) saw the size as emulating the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius in Rome and the rectangular illustrations comparable to the in-set framed scenes in the 4th-century Vatican Virgil (Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica, Vat. lat. 3225). The size indeed has imperial pretensions, a memorial to an event of epic proportions, but the layout can be found closer to home in time and space. At Tours, Alcuin of York (735–804) assembled Bibles from various regions and periods, using both Early Christian and Byzantine sources, in order to produce a revised and corrected Bible text (Kessler 1977). Some of his assemblage must have been illustrated, providing exemplars for the 9th-century Tours Bibles (Weitzman 1970: 105–6). In the latter, rectangular illustrations cover the entire page, divided into horizontal frames and filled with stocky figures who proceed from left to right in a stately, well-spaced frieze. This arrangement is found in the Moutier Grandval Bible, London, British Library, Add. MS 10546 (*c* 830–40); Vivian Bible, Paris Bibiliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 1 (*c* 846); Bamberg Bible, Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 1 (834–43); and deriving from the lost Tours Bible, the Bible of San Paolo fuori le Mura from Reims/Soissons(?) (*c* 866–75). As on the stone, in some of the manuscripts the narrative breaks out into full-page illuminations filled with different scenes stacked loosely around the space (Gaehde 1975: 365–6; Dodwell 1993: 67–74). The San Paolo Bible shows the storming of Jericho as a full-page melee (f 59v), but the scenes of David and Goliath form part of a strip (f 83v, Koehler & Müterich 1999: 137–9).[3]

Although much of the east face is startlingly original, there are a couple of conventions deriving from illustrated biblical sources. Three trumpeters parade at E2.4. Henderson (2008: 183) has shown how pairs of trumpeters at Hilton of Cadboll and Aberlemno can be sourced in those instances from the frontispiece to the Vespasian Psalter, showing David surrounded by his musicians (London, British Library, Cotton MS Vespasian A I, f 30v). However, the Bible of San Paolo fuori le Mura (f 59v) provides a pair in military context, storming Jericho with the trumpets of war (Dodwell 1993: pl 53; Koehler

& Müterich 1999: 137). The other convention concerns the clash of champions, specifically the fight between David and Goliath. Although there are at least 88 figures on the east face (including the concealed bottom row), only 20 actually fight, and in every case it is one-to-one combat involving decapitation with sword and shield rather than a collision of armies. This, and the disposition of the spectator guards correspond to many other Goliath death scenes, including a Cyprus plate. The largest Cyprus dish, of the battle scene with Goliath, uniquely changes format to an arrangement in tiers and larger size (Illus 8).

The same change applies to the stone, where the military scenes occupy an entire side, and are set in horizontal rows within panels. On the plate, David's soldiers lean in while Goliath's shy away (an arrangement also on London, British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius C VI, ff 8v, 9r; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale Cod. gr. 139, f 4v; St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Cod. gr. 274 (Weitzman 1970: 99–101). Such a frieze-like arrangement of one-to-one combat and supporters advancing or retreating is shown three times on the stone, at panels E2.2, E4.1 and E4.2 (Illus 1 & 9b). There is no suggestion on the stone that the multiple fights actually represent David and Goliath, as seen for instance on the Ardboe cross (Co. Tyrone; see Alexander 2017, vol 2: 725). There is no sling and most combatants are of equal height (apart from E3.2 and E4.2), but the disposition of supporters and insistence on single combat with sword and shield suggest a model from biblical iconography.

A literate viewer may start to read the east face like a book, top down and left to right, but on a public monument aimed at an illiterate populace that order may not be so obvious. Alcock (2003: 393) points out that the west face cross 'about three times human eye-height, impels the viewer to look up in awe'. Roman equivalents such as Trajan's column, and the 11th-century Bernward's column at Hildesheim, read from the bottom up. The two leaves of Bernward's bronze doors at Hildesheim read down on the left and up on the right, thereby providing a typological exegesis through adjacent panels (Kessler 1977: pl 5). Reflections on the Ruthwell and Monasterboice

Illus 8 Cyprus plate, Byzantium, 629–30. David and Goliath, the battle. (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence)

crosses demonstrate that they can be read in various directions, the pairing of different scenes resulting in multivalent levels of exegesis (Cassidy 1992: 71–93, 95–166; Ó'Carragáin 2005; Stalley 2020: 105–23). On the Forres stone, the direction of events can also be read in several ways, with possibly different outcomes: victory or exhausted defeat. A notable feature of the battle line-up is that at E2.2, E2.4, E3.2 (with one exception), E4.1 and E4.2, the winner is on the right, and the loser, head often already detached, stands on the left with his troops turning away. Likewise the cavalry procession in E1 and mixed manoeuvre in E2.5 proceed from right to left. Consistently, the direction of victorious travel is right to left. In almost all the manuscript depictions that direction is reversed: victor David and the Israelites stand on the left while Goliath and the retreating Philistines are on the right (Weitzman 1970; Wander 1973). The Pictish victors at Aberlemno churchyard drive their foe to the right. Two exceptions to this standard design, both early and late, show the direction is not invariable: at 3rd-century Dura Europos Goliath sprawls on the left, while David hacks on the

right (Weitzman 1970: 103); in the 12th-century Stephen Harding Bible, Dijon, Bib. Mun. MS 14, f 13,[4] Goliath is on the left, for both his death and beheading, while David is on the right. In Pictish art, on the other hand, processions typically if not invariably proceed from right to left: at Hilton of Cadboll, St Andrews sarcophagus, Meigle 1, 2, 11, Dupplin cross and Papil shrine. The difference is that, in reading a book, the eye travels from left to right but in walking around a monument, the auspicious Celtic direction is *dessel*, sun- or clock-wise, the viewer's right hand nearest the stone (Ó'Carragáin 2005: 62, 261). It is this *dessel* direction that allows the events to be seen as a victory.

## APPLICATION OF THE BIBLE AS TEXT

While visual parallels from book illustration cover a few aspects of the Forres composition, the Bible itself offers signposts for the construction of a military event. Maldonado (2021: 179) points out that monuments with massed ranks of figures which are similar stylistically, namely the Irish high crosses and the Apostles' stone from Dunkeld, represent Bible stories, so the account of David and Goliath is the second source to examine. It provides several insights but is not an entirely comfortable fit.

Paraphrasing 1 Samuel 17:2–57, the armies muster and Goliath challenges the Israelites to a single combat (E1, E2.1, E2.2). David taunts Goliath as a gentile who defies the 'armies of the living God'. At Forres the leader on the west face is blessed by God; the enemy appear to be heathen. David boasts that, with God's help, he will decapitate the uncircumcised Philistine and carcasses of the host will lie around (E2.4, E2.3). The Philistines flee when they see their champion dead (E2.2, E4.1, E4.2). Only two structures are mentioned in the chapter and only two shown on the stone: the Gates of Ekron where Philistines were slaughtered, and their tents (E3.1) which were spoiled by the Israelites after further pursuit of the enemy. This may privilege the interpretation of the conical structure on the stone (E2.3) as a gateway, although the possibility of a furnace will be discussed below. David carries to Jerusalem the head of Goliath 'in his hand' (E2.4). God will hear war trumpets (E2.4) and promises to bring victory (Numbers 10:9).

The Forres monument may be framed but is not formed by the battle between David and Goliath. In a similar way, Byrhtferth of Ramsey framed his contemporary account of the Battle of Maldon (911) with biblical typology, seeing the hero Byrhtnoth as a 'type' of Moses and the Vikings as fulfilment of Jeremiah's prophecy that the kindreds of the north would rise against the Israelites (Exodus 17:12; Jeremiah 25:8–9). Lapidge (1991: 56) notes about Maldon that 'any attempt to extract accurate historical details from this typology is doomed to disappointment'. This serves as a caution about interpreting sculpture that is steeped in allusions as history.

## HEROIC LITERATURE

Caviness (2020: 408) remarks: 'Decoding involves knowledge of the sources that were used to encode the cycle', and it will be suggested below that rather than biblical quotations a great epic poem may have accompanied and explained the stone. If contemporary poetry is taken as a model, events may be episodic rather than proceeding in chronological order. The nine scenes of single combat, of which four occupy centre stage, deal with individual feats of valour within an army. The way they rhythmically repeat between set pieces of group action is reminiscent of the finest Insular elegiac literature, where the struggles of named heroes are immortalised through recitation by the bard. Whereas the *Dream of the Rood* is inscribed on the Ruthwell cross to provide a vernacular commentary (Ó'Carragáin 2005: 308–31), here the local voice that sang out the names of the heroes is silent.

The medieval Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* provides insights referring to contemporary culture. Its exact date of composition is debatable, but the use of both Old and Middle Welsh language indicates that its content was evolving between the battle itself around 600, and the 11th century (Dumville 1988; Koch 1997: 2–129; all quotations are from Jarman 1988). Located between Edinburgh and Catterick, Yorkshire, and deriving

from a Brittonic language similar to Pictish, it provides perhaps the closest literary parallel for the Forres monument. Throughout, the bard Aneirin intervenes to mention his role of perpetuating the tale of the heroes. Such a spoken or sung litany would have immortalised the memory of the champions at Forres.

Verse XLVIII:

> About the men of Catraeth
> I, yet not I, Aneirin …
> Sang Y Gododdin
> Before the next day dawned.

Although describing the progress of a doomed battle between the native Gododdin people and invading Anglo-Saxons, the poem's structure does not follow a straight narrative and instead stanzas shift in time and place while maintaining the insistent drum-beat of elegies for individual warriors. Alcock (2003: 176) has observed that the Forres scenes do not necessarily follow a simple progress like the lines of events at Aberlemno. The repeating rows of single combat flanked by supporters echo the many verses of the *Gododdin* which are linked by a chain of repeated lines such as 'The warriors went to Catraeth, embattled, with a cry'. Verse XXXIIIA can be read alongside panels E1, E2.5 and E2.2:

> Warriors went to Catraeth, embattled, with a cry,
> A host of horsemen in dark-blue armour, with shields,
> Spear-shafts held aloft with sharp points,
> And shining mail-shirts and swords.
> [Praising Rhufon Hir] He took the lead through armies
> Five fighters fell before his blades.

Single elegies like that for Rhufon Hir are given for many other named heroes, like all those fighting in single combat on the stone.

The Irish *Táin* employs a similar structure for recalling unique deeds of heroes, in the chapter 'The Companies advance'. Their roll-call is recited in a comparably repetitive way. Many times Mac Roth tells Aillil about the enemies he has seen:

> 'Another company came,' Mac Roth said, 'a troop three thousand and more, with a great swarthy fiery-faced champion at its head, awesome and terrible [he carried a shield, spear, and sword], a purple cloak was wrapped around him and a gold brooch on the shoulder. A white hooded tunic covered him to the knee.' 'Who is that, Fergus?' Aillil said. 'The beginner of battle,' Fergus said, 'a man created for war. He falls on his enemies like a doom: Eogan mac Durthacht, king of Fernmag' (Kinsella 1970: 227).

Some soldiers are picked out for their fair appearance, perhaps like the victor on E4.1:

> [A troop] with a white-breasted well-favoured warrior at its head ... He wore a gold crown on his head, and a red-embroidered tunic. A cloak of great beauty wrapped him round, fastened on the breast with a gold brooch. He carried a gold-rimmed, death-dealing shield and a spear like the pillar of a palace. A gold-hilted sword hung at his shoulder (Kinsella 1970: 234).

These Irish descriptions add a blaze of colour to the clothing and weapons, a reminder that the undifferentiated troops at Forres would become identifiable by the application of paint.

The *Battle of Maldon* is an elegy to the heroic death of Byrhtnoth and his Anglo-Saxon companions slain by Vikings in 991 by Anlaf (probably Olaf Trygvasson) in Essex. The poem begins with an Anglo-Saxon muster on horseback, Byrhtnoth thereafter dismounting to fight (all quotations are from Alexander 1966). This can be read alongside panels E1, E2.1 and E2.2.

E1. The cavalry procession; lines 17–21:

> Then Bryhtnoth[5] dressed his band of warriors,
> from horseback taught each man his task,
> where he should stand, how keep his station.
> He bade them brace their linden-boards aright,
> fast in finger-grip, and to fear not.

E2.1. After the ride, the leader stands with his men; lines 21–4:

> Then when his folk was fairly ranked Bryhtnoth alighted where he loved best to be

> and was held most at heart – among hearth companions.

E2.5, E3.2. The clash; lines 108–12:

> Out flashed file-hard point from fist,
> sharp-ground spears sprang forth,
> bows were busy, bucklers flinched,
> it was a bitter battle clash. On both halves
> brave men fell, boys lay still.

E2.2, E2.4, E4. Single combat with the leader; lines 129–32:

> Bryhtnoth war-hard braced shield-board,
> shook out his sword, strode firmly
> toward his enemy, earl to churl,
> in either's heart harm to the other.

E2.3, E2.4. The bodies lie; lines 181–4:

> Then they hewed him down, the heathen churls,
> and with him those warriors, Wulfmaer and Aelfnoth,
> who had stood at his side: stretched on the field,
> the two followers fellowed in death.

E2.2, E4.1, E4.2. At Maldon, while some warriors fought to the death, others slunk away; likewise the losers at Forres; line 185:

> Then did the lack-willed leave the battle field
> ... they wheeled from the war to the wood's fastness.

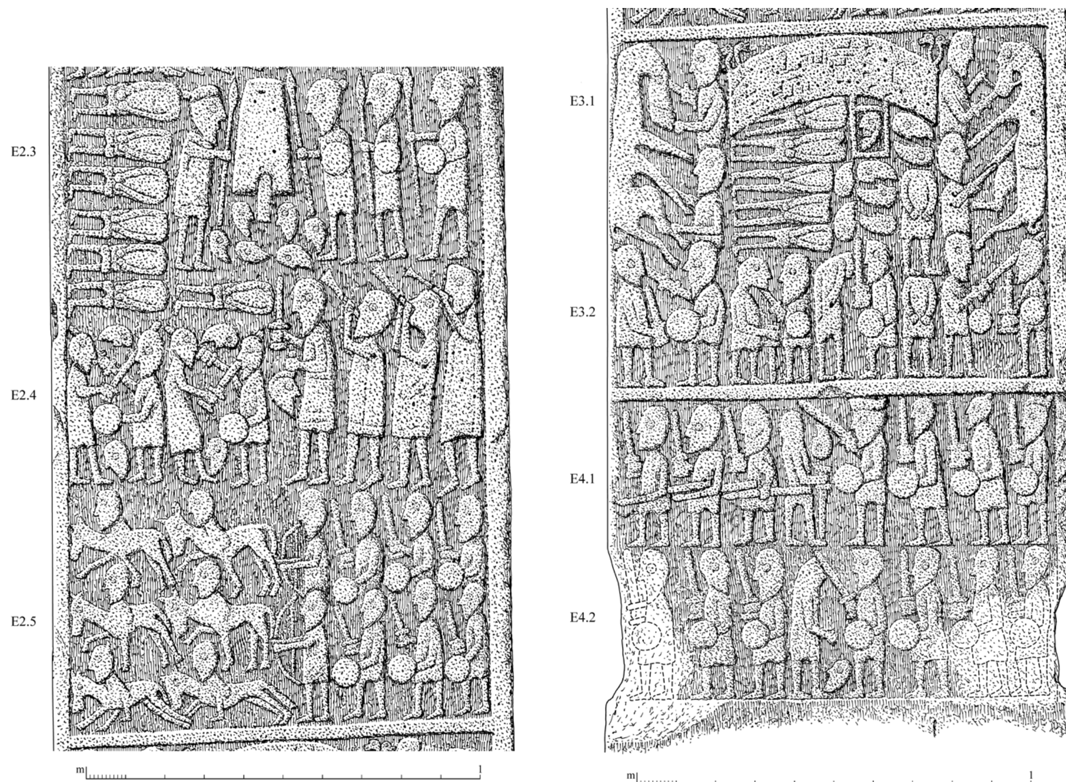
Later sources about the Battle of Maldon bring it even more in line with the stone. The 12th-century *Liber Eliensis* adds that the Vikings 'just managed to cut off Byrhtnoth's head as he fought. They took this away from there with them as they fled to their native land' while monks brought his body back to Ely and put a mass of wax in place of his head (Kennedy 1991: 63). This brings to prominence one particular head from the battle, like the framed head in panel E3.1.

These texts allow the viewer to 'read' and even 'hear' the stone like a petrified poem. The panels divide it into verses. E1 and E2.1 provide the rousing muster and address; the similar layout of E2.2, E3.2, E4.1 and E4.2 reads like the *Y Gododdin* and *Táin*, with a repeating first line followed by words of praise for named heroes; the processions of E1 and E2.5 are interludes beaten by the pounding of feet and hooves; while the gore of E2.3 and E3.1 allows the poet to pause for a panoramic commentary on the horrors of warfare: 'On Friday the carnage was reckoned / On Saturday their joint action was swift / On Sunday blood-red blades were shared out / On Monday blood flowing up to the thighs was seen' (Jarman: LXX A & B).

These sources record heroic defeats and are a reminder that defeat, as well as victory, can be memorialised. Byrhtnoth's widow Aelflaed created a great narrative tapestry for him and his noble death was recalled in several later sources (Budny 1991). Both Sellar (1993: 107) and Jackson (1993: 94) read the Forres story as a defeat for the local Northern Picts by the incoming Scots from the south, using the visual vocabulary of the conquered, 'their own symbolic code'. That (unrecorded) military defeat is now considered an outmoded understanding of the transition from Pictland to Alba (Noble & Evans 2022: 249–89). The new, positive interpretation of W3 as the Arming of David, and reading the structure *dessel*, now point to a victory for Christians, not against Picts but against heathen Vikings.

## VIKING FUNERAL RITES

This analysis has left until the last those awkward items, the composite scenes of E2.3 and 3.1, which do not fit conveniently into the templates so far proposed (Illus 9). The following suggestions remain tentative but at least offer a view different from the many solutions provided by previous scholars. In scene E2.3 six corpses, wrists bound, are laid out in a row on the left, their heads scattered in front of the conical structure. This is flanked by one man on the left brandishing a spear, and three on the right holding spears and round shields. A product of some sort emerges from base of the structure, indicated by parallel lines emanating from the aperture. The seventh body forms part of E2.4, his head borne by the tall victor below. Panel E3 is an orgy of




ILLUS 9A AND B Forres cross-slab, E2.3–E4.2. E4.2, now concealed, is reconstructed from a photograph of 1926 (https://canmore.org.uk/collection/1214766). (John Borland © Historic Environment Scotland)

decapitation. On the bottom row are four pairs of swordsmen, in each case either severing the neck of the opponent or having done so. An arched feature at the top is best understood as a canopy with finials at either end, such as the tented canopy over the dead King Edward in the Bayeux Tapestry, or the roof finials on the Skog tapestry (Southwick 1981: 12), not the cross-section of a burial barrow, nor the unhistorically arched bridge preferred by Duncan (1984: 140). Beneath this are five corpses, wrists bound, laid out in a row, their severed heads adjacent. A sixth head is distinguished within a frame apparently hung beneath the canopy. This is presumably the head of the decapitated warrior still standing in combat below. Stacked to the right are two bodies, their heads immediately above, under the canopy. Forming a balanced composition in each upper corner is a horse with bowed head. Its muzzle is held by a man who, with his other hand, clearly shafts his sword into the animal's skull. His assistant watches over the back legs, that on the left possibly hamstringing the beast. Such ritualised animal sacrifice may also be taking place on the north side at N3.3, where one man grips a floppy large quadruped, the size of a hound, while behind him is a companion flourishing two swords.

Decapitation of prisoners with the celebration of head trophies was a common occurrence in war, in this case preceded by David and Goliath, but also relished in Insular poetry and annals. Numerous accounts are cited by Southwick (1981: 14) and Sellar (1993: 106–7). The Annals of Ulster refer to victories over the 'Foreigners' in which scores of heads were taken in Ireland (AU, in 865, 926, 933). Singling out the leader's head for special treatment was the case for

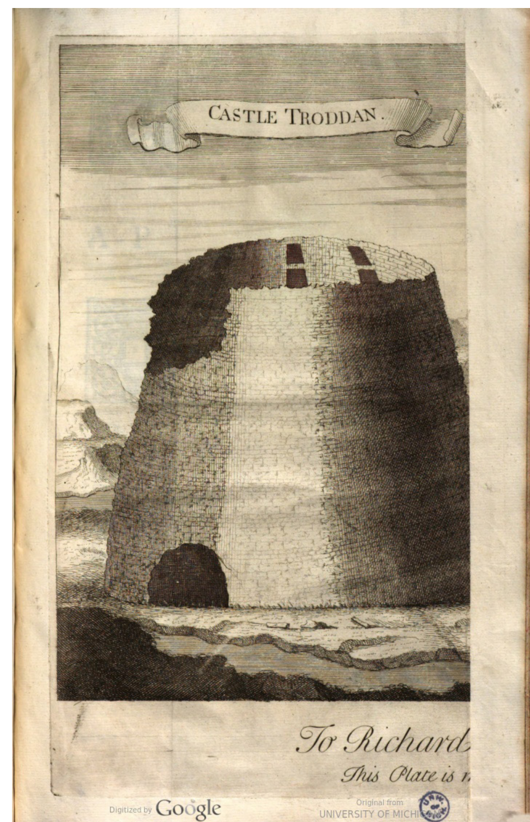
Oswald of Northumbria, dismembered by the pagan Mercians in 641/2 (Farmer 1990: 369, note p 164), King Edmund by the Viking Ivar in 869 in East Anglia (Ridyard 1988: 211–26), and Byrhtnoth at Maldon by the Viking Anlaf in 991 (Kennedy 1991: 63, 74). On the North Cross at Ahenny there is a funeral procession led by a man bearing a cross, followed by a corpse draped over a horse, his head carried reverentially by a follower to the rear (Stalley 2020: 100–2). Alcock (2003: 34–5) remarks on the ritual humiliation of binding prisoners in an Insular context, the Annals of Ulster recording six instances between 698 and 739 with the Pictish king Oengus son of Fergus binding the sons of King Selbach in chains in 736. Confirming all these literary sources was the archaeological find of 50 decapitated bodies, not bound but stripped of their clothes, executed and buried in an adjacent pit, heads piled up away from the bodies, on Ridgeway Hill by Weymouth. The episode probably took place during the reign of Ethelred the Unready, 978–1016; all these young men were of Scandinavian origin and were probably Vikings executed by Anglo-Saxons or were mercenaries fighting for the English, executed by other Vikings. Fifteen decapitated bodies with hands bound were found at Chesterton Lane, Cambridge, from the 7th to 9th centuries (Loe et al 2014: xx, 8–9).

The feature of animal sacrifice, common in pagan Scandinavia, prompts a consideration of Viking burial practice, and its possibly unique depiction in a foreign land by Christian artists. Without specifying details, a pagan element has been noted by Alcock: 'The pictorial face of the stele presents a great ceremony which, it appears, may be practised by pagans and (nominal) Christians' (2003: 177). Jackson (1993: 95) claimed it was between the Christian Scots and pagan Picts (a state far from the historical situation).

### *The conical structure and canopy*

Central to the entire east face is a conical object with an arched aperture at its base and some effluviant or substance emerging from it. Romilly Allen (*ECMS* II: 150) saw it a 'like a quadrangular Celtic bell'; Mackie (1975: 205) suggested it represents a broch, perhaps Dun Alascaig over 30 miles to the north. Although Forres lies well to the south and east of broch territory, the structure certainly bears a resemblance to another artist's rendering of a broch, namely Dun Trodden at Glenelg, illustrated in Gordon's *Itinerarium* of 1726 (Illus 10). Southwick (1981: 11–12) calls it a 'tower, broch or fortress', with a 'ladder, stairway or battering ram' in front of the opening, the scene representing the besieging of an important stronghold, perhaps Burghead, or alternatively (and anachronistically) a bell tower like those in Ireland or at Abernethy and Brechin.

Ian Keillar via pers comm with Ian Shepherd (1993: 85) was the first to suggest that it could be 'Nebuchadnezzar's furnace' and this incineration theme opens a whole new area of cultural



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ILLUS 10 Dun Trodden broch, from Alexander Gordon's *Itinerarium* 1726: 169. (© Courtesy of the Hathi Trust)

considerations. Campbell-Howes (2023) has proposed it is a real or symbolic furnace used to melt down the swords of the vanquished, but weapons are noticeably absent from the structure. In Insular art the fiery furnace is rarely shown and only on the Moone cross are the Hebrew Children shown within a semicircular domed oven (Alexander 2017, vol 2: 706, fig 5.32). It is rather the Early Christian depictions that show them within a rectangular shaft furnace, with arched vent at the base, like the one painted in the Capella Greca, Catacomb of Priscilla from the 4th century (Illus 11; Spier 2007: 175–6, illus 5a).

But that fiery furnace is a symbol of God's deliverance through faith; the other biblical representation is hell-fire, the destination for unbelievers. The Utrecht Psalter illustrates two types of furnace, a conical beehive and an open rectangular shaft, both with a stoke hole at the base (Illus 12 & 13).[6] Its illustration of Psalm 20:9–10 (f 11v) readily applies to the pagan invaders: '… all them that hate thee. Thou shalt make them as an oven of fire, in the time of thy anger. The Lord shall trouble them in his wrath, and fire shall devour them.'[7] The drawing shows the ungodly being herded by soldiers wielding spears (as on the stone) into the mouth of a flaming furnace, shaped like a conical beehive. Psalm 9:18 (f 5r)

ILLUS 11 Three youths in the fiery furnace, *c* 320–40. Catacomb of Priscilla, Via Salaria, Rome. (© Alamy Ltd)

ILLUS 12 Hell as a beehive furnace. Utrecht Psalter, Psalm 20:9–10, Utrecht, University Library, MS 32, f 11v. (© Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliothek)

Illus 13 Hell as a rectangular open furnace, on right. Utrecht Psalter, Psalm 9:18, Utrecht, University Library, MS 32, f 5r. (© Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliothek)

is equally explicit: 'The wicked shall be turned into hell, all the nations that forget God.'[8] Here the Hell furnace is a square tower with arched entrance into which sinners, bound by the hands, are prodded by a spear-wielding angel. Complementing activities on the stone, in the same illustration is a besieged city where prisoners are being decapitated at the tall gate tower.

Destruction of the sinners' bodies by hell-fire was doubly appropriate because Vikings and other pagans frequently performed spectacular cremations on funeral pyres. This custom was viewed with opprobrium by the Church, a ritual deserving the death penalty for its perpetrators in Charlemagne's *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* of 782 (Effros 1997). Panel E3.1 appears to expand on pagan ritual with bodies laid out under a canopy adjacent to the sacrificial horses. Ibn Fadlan (2012: 50–4) records the most vivid account of a Viking funeral in a foreign land, observing the burial of a Rus leader in 921–2. He mentions some of the features present on the stone: the corpse was laid out formally under a canopy followed by the sacrifice of his best horses and dog, stages shown in panel E3 and possibly N3.3. The Rus warrior was subsequently cremated in his boat with much ceremony. At Heath Wood, Ingleby there is the only known Scandinavian cremation cemetery in the British Isles, with 59 barrows. It is believed to belong to the Great Army, which over-wintered nearby at Repton in 873–4. In mound 50 a sacrificed complete horse, its bones with no sign of butchery, and dog were included with the adult and juvenile (Richards et al 2004: 77–9). Sacrificed horses were also buried in Viking graves in Scotland, with dogs similarly found on Orkney. At the inhumation boat grave at Kiloran Bay, Colonsay, from about 870, the horse skeleton was complete and uninjured, implying it was stabbed to death, perhaps after hamstringing had immobilised the beast (Graham-Campbell 2021: 272–2, 274–5). This looks similar to the activity at Forres, where the horses appear to be stabbed through the eye while a second officiant holds the back leg. A horse and human burial was recorded from Ballindalloch in 1851, only 26km south of Forres, although Graham-Campbell (2021: 275–6) discarded this example as unreliable antiquarian evidence and too far from other Scandinavian sites, which are mainly in the north and west of Scotland. So, while E2 may show the eschatological destruction of the ungodly through a furnace of hell-fire, panel E3 may show Viking

burial rites in their own terms, attested by the description of laying-out by Ibn Fadlan and the archaeological evidence at Heath Wood. In spite of a defeat in presumably hostile territory, it appears that Vikings on an incursion in Estonia managed to carry out considerable funerary rites, including boat burial (Price et al 2016), and Viking horse sacrifice was taking place in Scotland. To find an explicit allusion to pagan sacrifice on a Christian monument would be remarkable but not unique. The cross-slab VIG007 at St Vigeans shows with disapproval the Roman bull sacrifice of the Taurobolium (Geddes 2017, vol 1: 98–100).

## THE CROSS AND ORNAMENT

### *West: the cross face*

The cross faces west, illuminated at the going down of the sun as a memorial to the dead. The slab has a raised, narrow rectangular frame down both sides (Illus 1). The top is deeply eroded, its details no longer visible. The face is divided into four panels, each marked by a narrow horizontal band: W1, the cross-head with apparently plain background; W2, the shaft flanked by interlace panels; W3, the figurative event; W4, a framed rectangular panel of smooth ashlar.

The head is a ring cross with circular armpits, lateral arms meeting the circle, and the top arm extending considerably above it. At its centre is a boss defined by double incised lines. Smaller bosses are placed at the narrowest part of the cross arms; in the upper two armpits are suggestions of shallow small bosses. Any surface pattern which may have existed in this area is too eroded to see. The exceptionally long shaft rests on a narrow rectangular base. The shaft and its side panels are filled with myriads of knots.

*The cross shape* is unusual, although precedents can be found in Pictland. Almost a subordinate version of the Forres cross is at Edderton, Ross & Cromarty.[9] Completely unornamented, it has a long shaft, similarly shaped head, extended upper arm, central boss of double incised lines, and flat bosses in each of the armpits. On its other face are the familiar Pictish riders, in relief and incised, below a smaller cross. Many of the cross-slabs at St Andrews, decorated with geometric ornament, have a ring cross and extended upper arm (SAC 549, 560, 561, 563, 609). The narrow rectangular base, in spite of its obvious simplicity, is relatively rare on cross-slabs, but one is depicted on the Pictish symbol stone at Elgin which also has an elongated upper arm, but no ring (*ECMS* II: 134). The Isle of Man produces a number of stones showing Pictish features, which are dated to the 9th or 10th centuries (Wilson 2018: 43–7). On Maughold 69 an unornamented ring cross stands on a narrow rectangular base and, like the Forres stone, has an unusual disposition of bosses (Wilson 2018: 27, 42). Most bosses on ring crosses serve a skeuomorphic function of 'pinning' the arms to the ring, like rivets on a wooden or metal cross. Or, on manuscript carpet pages they are placed in the centre of the arms, like the nails on Christ's hands and feet. At Forres, the smaller bosses are tucked into the narrowest part of the arms, clustering close to the central double-ringed boss. At Maughold, they are placed within the outer ring, again in a non-functional position. Andreas 131, at 193cm high, is one of the tallest cross-slabs on the island, its elongated shaft standing on the rectangular base. The cross-head is the same type as Forres, but without the ring. They share the same disposition of ornament: the three upper arms are plain while interlace covers the entire shaft and base (Wilson 2018: 76).

*The interlace*, which forms a mesmerising carpet across the majority of the slab, is made of only two simple patterns. If painted, it must have looked dazzling. Allen (*ECMS* II: 150) identified on the shaft No. 657a, a spiral knot in four columns, repeated on 37 registers. Across the base is the circular knot No. 412, in two registers, repeated ten times in each row, forming the pattern No. 702. The side panels contain the same knot No. 412, in two columns, down 18 registers. The shaft knot No. 657a is found on the Aspatria shaft 1c, Cumberland, two rather irregular columns in seven registers (*CASSS*, II: 53–4 Complete pattern A, turned and irregularly set out, seven registers). It is also found on the Aspatria hogback, 6c. The animal ornament on the hogback, with its Jellinge features, places the carving firmly in a

10th-century context. In Ireland, the knot pattern is rare, recorded only on a cross-shaft panel at Clonmacnoise (Harbison 1992, vol 1: 56, cat 57; vol 2: fig 162). The circular interlace used across the base and side panels at Forres is used on its own at Drainie 9, forming the arm of a cross (*ECMS* I: 278; Byatt 2014: 18), and in discrete panels on the back of Nigg (Canmore ID 15280).

This breakdown of the Forres cross-slab into its constituent parts shows that its key elements (slab form, cross shape and interlace) can be found locally, often on the finest Pictish symbol stones such as Nigg and Elgin, but also Drainie and Edderton. What distinguishes it from these earlier models is a complete change in aesthetic. The proportions have stretched to an enormously elongated slender shaft (from cross base to tip, 4.71m), exceeding even that of the 10th-century Gosforth high cross (total height 4.42m). The decoration combines a relatively plain cross-head and an overwhelming blanket of repetitive interlace below. Signs of this blanket coverage had appeared earlier, for instance on the Rosemarkie 1, Shandwick and perhaps Applecross cross-slabs. The difference with these monuments is that their designs teem with variety, specifically rhythmic combinations of key pattern, spirals and interlace, plus symbols at Rosemarkie and Shandwick. The two panels of insistent key pattern at Rosemarkie are beginning to show a simplification in motifs, but this may have been a factor of their function, as possibly part of an altar or shrine (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 47, 52, 206). The combination of blanket interlace and a reduced selection of designs is a feature of crosses in the Wigton area. Here a range of knot designs (not those used at Forres) is spread completely across cross-shafts in rows of two to four units and many registers. On several, the shaft is carved, the head is plain and there are pellets in the armpits. Examples are from Craiglemine, Kirkinner 1, Whithorn 2, 5, 7, Wigton (*ECMS* II: 480–94) and Monreith (Canmore ID 62773). Wilson (2018: 63, 66, 71–2) also observes this aesthetic emerging in the Manx crosses, particularly Lonan 73. The cross panel thus tells two stories: the constituent parts of its design can be found within an established Pictish repertoire, but its aesthetic comparisons point towards those parts of western Scotland and the Isle of Man that came under Viking influence during the 10th century.

*Figures, weapons, accoutrements*

There are two different *figure styles*: lanky, energetic with often a hair curl at the nape of the neck on the cross and narrow faces; short, stiff and stubby on the east face. The slim, long-limbed figure style looks back to the Book of Kells from around 800. Proportions are like the archetypal painted man or 'Pict' on f 130r (Henry 1974: pl 49, 74; ff 130r, 253v). Heads are characterised by an incised line framing a pointed beard, hair projecting in a curled tail at the back of the neck, and slender swan-necks. The classic Irish hero is described in the Tain as: 'fair and graceful and tall … handsome and slender. He had light yellow hair cut and curled neatly and reaching down in waves to the shallow between his shoulders … the brow broad, the jaw narrow' (Kinsella 1970: 225–6). On the west face, the stooped, striding pose of the officiants can be seen on the Pictish cross-slabs at Kirriemuir 2 (Canmore ID 32300) and Eassie (Canmore ID 32092). The Eassie hunter and Golspie giant (Canmore ID 6564) employ the vigorous stride seen among the climbers in the vine scrolls.

Rows of somewhat repetitive stubby figures can be seen on the Apostles' stone at Dunkeld (Canmore ID 79388), Drainie 8 and 13 (Canmore ID 16507 and Canmore ID 16486) and the trumpeters at Barochan (Canmore ID 43098). A relentless line-up of sword-brandishing warriors can also be seen on Lindisfarne 37C (*CASSS* I: 206–7), and the hogbacks at Lowther 4A (*CASSS* II: 130) and Gosforth 4A (*CASSS* II: 105–6). These comparisons place the battle style within the era of Viking invasions and settlement, from the later 9th to the 10th centuries.

Vine scrolls, a symbol for communion wine, inhabited with animals are frequently found in Northumbria and some in Pictland, but humans are far rarer, deriving ultimately from classical Roman putti like those at Hexham 21, which may be late Roman or late 7th century (CASSS I: 185–6).Within the columns of canon tables in the Book of Kells humans struggle up through

a tangle of plant tendrils (ff 1v, 2r, 3v; Henry 1974: pls 2, 3, 6). Stiff-limbed Carolingian counterparts are on the canon tables of the Harley and Soissons Gospels (800–25; London, British Library, Harley MS 2788, f 11r; before 827. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 8850, f 7v). In the context of such slaughter and pagan practice, the apparently armless men desperately striving for the vine scroll with their mouths perhaps emphasise their hunger for the saving Eucharist.

Low on the south side (S3) are two earnest characters proffering what look like books. Whereas books would tend to indicate men of the Church, with perhaps tonsure and vestments, in the Book of Kells the book holders are evangelists or apostles but, apart from their location, they have no other religious attributes (ff 8r, 29r). They offer the Word of God. Pairs of apostles offering books are shown in the 8th-century St Gall Irish Evangeliary (St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. MS 51, p 267).[10] The Forres men might therefore be clerics but given the military nature of their context, they could be settling a treaty, even though those sword-marks exactly level with them on the adjacent face, perhaps drawn to ratify vows, must have been made long after the battle took place (Loggie et al 2024: 229, 237, Illus 4). Cordiner (1788: np), although believing the stone commemorates the final liberation of Burghead after a century and a half of Scandinavian occupation at the time of Malcolm II and Canute, saw on the sculpture suggestions of evacuation followed by a 'treaty of amicable alliance' optimistically illustrated by good fellows shaking hands on the inauguration scene. Fiona Campbell-Howes (pers comm) pointed out that such a treaty followed Alfred's victory over the Danish King Guthrum in 878, after the Battle of Edington. At Wedmore Guthrum agreed to baptism and was then obliged to leave Wessex. There is no evidence this agreement was written down but it was followed shortly by the written Treaty of Alfred and Guthrum, c886/890, setting out areas of mutual respect (Keynes & Lapidge 2004: 84–5, 171).

The pairs of mermen on the north side (N3.2) appear to be irenic in intent, their clasped hands implying harmony. A merman with entwined tail, and men with interlocking arms and legs, are illustrated in the Book of Kells (f 201r, 188r; Henry 1974: 65, 61) and on the St Andrews cross-shaft SAC558, where affronted mermen are found in the context of David the shepherd and the proposed Arming of David (Illus 7).

The two figure-styles are so distinct that they might suggest craftsmen trained in two generations. One consistently uses forms that can be compared with earlier Pictish work; he is operating in a familiar milieu. The other grapples with innovative demands from a patron, a battle array never seen before in terms of size or complexity. The stone faces towards the past and the future. However, the frontal David with arms upraised on the west face is closely comparable to the central leader at E2.1. Only the hairstyle of the assistants on W3 differ from the trumpeters on E2.4. A single artist would be capable of adapting his figure style to very different functions and available space.

*Weapons and accoutrements* are set out very schematically. Unlike the clearly distinguished troops on the Aberlemno stone, here there is no obvious difference in appearance between the two armies on the east face. Soldiers wear short tunics, prisoners are stripped naked. The leader and his supporters on panel E2.1, the only frontal figures apart from David, appear to wear thickly padded tunics, similar to those at Dull (*ECMS* II: fig 329). The victor on E4.1 wears some raised headgear. This is not identifiable from other contemporary evidence in Scotland; it is not a helmet, diadem, or laurel wreath and at this period is not likely to be a crown. A type of early medieval 'pill-box' hat has been found at Leens, in the Netherlands which could produce the profile seen on the Forres stone (Brandenburgh 2010: 68). However, early Irish texts refer to kings and some nobility wearing *minds*, often of gold, as a token of rank. These might be a gold strip or else a woven gold headband. Or it might be a *cennbarr*, a headband studded with gold, worn by both Irish and Vikings (Whitfield 2006: 17, 26). Given the general lack of detail on the carving, a specific item is not to be expected, but it appears to distinguish a person of rank.

At least 38 swords are depicted. They are short, with a straight pommel and guard. Their closest parallel is to the sword on the stone from Inchbrayock, Montrose (Canmore ID 36230) and on the Govan sarcophagus (Canmore ID 353047). Ninth-century Viking swords were longer with straight or curved guards and, where it survives, a raised pommel (Petersen 1919). Likewise, both sides carry small circular shields, more like the Pictish/Scottish targe than the larger Viking shield, which covers more of the body and thigh (Alcock 2003: 169–70; Williams 2019: 25–6). Given the small size of the weapons on the stone, these details are likely to be an artistic convention based on familiar Pictish models, blurring any attempt to distinguish foreign enemy weapons.

Several warriors carry spears but these are not used in action: three of the leader's bodyguards at E2.1, all the attendants at the conical structure E2.3, and those retreating defeated at E4.1. These preferred weapons of combat make it more likely that those rather obscure objects on the Arming of David scene are the spear which is proffered not thrust on the right, and the rejected sword implied by its hilt.

The two archers (E2.5) are significant in a Picto-Scottish context. Hitherto Picts are shown using bows and apparently even a crossbow only for hunting (Shandwick, St Vigeans; Alcock 2003: 166–9), but here they appear in a military context. By contrast, showers of arrows were among the Vikings' most devastating weapons. Perhaps like the Irish, the Picts were impelled by Viking invaders to develop their war technology (Halpin 2010: 129–31; Williams 2019: 22–4), although the arrows of war are given an early mention in *Y Goddodin*.

This analysis of style and motifs places the monument on the cusp of transition from the rich heritage of early 9th-century Pictish cross-slabs to the more restricted ornamental repertoire of 10th-century sculpture. Figures on the west and side faces retain the elegant vigour of Pictish art, while the massed ranks of stubby warriors are part of the militarised world of the Viking age, as seen on numerous monuments both in and outwith Scotland (Maldonado 2021: 177–85). This artistic shift corresponds to the tumultuous political events of the later 9th century, when the Pictish kingdom lost its identity to both the Scots and the Vikings (Woolf 2007: 275–350; Loggie et al 2024: 237–40).

## CONCLUSION

Much still remains unknown about the Forres monument, but the evidence of pagan practice identified here demonstrates that it refers to a battle or campaign against the Vikings, not between Picts and Scots. The sequence of events appears to be more allegorical and poetic than literal, within a firm Christian framework. The cited poems are a reminder that this could be a cenotaph commemorating an epic defeat, such as the battle in 839 where the men of Fortriu along with King Wen of the Picts, his brother Bran, and Áed, king of Dál Riata, and 'others almost innumerable' were slain by the 'heathens' (AU 839.9). Woolf considers that this 'may be one of the most decisive and important battles in British history, but we know nothing of its details and even its location, although it is tempting to suppose that it took place in the heart of Fortriu on the shores of the Moray Firth' (2007: 66). On the other hand, identifying the Arming of David scene as a precursor to the fight, the gestural pose of Moses with his arms raised by Aaron and Hur as a signal of victory, and victors proceeding *dessel*, make it more likely that the Forres cross-slab celebrates triumph. It promotes victory over the heathen by a ruler who, like Emperor Heraclius, saw himself as the defiant David, destined for success by God. Archaeology, history and art history examine different types of evidence to build up greater understanding of this monument. Archaeology has provided dates for adjacent post holes, which suggest construction activity in the later 9th century. The very patchy documentary record (Loggie et al 2024: 237–40) mentions Viking attacks in this area from 839. In 866, Amlaíb and Auisle went to Fortriu, plundered the entire Pictish country and took hostages. With a short-lived triumph, in 870, Constantín son of Cinead killed Amlaíb, but in 875 he was defeated again, and killed the following year, possibly by yet another band of

Scandinavians (Woolf 2007: 107–12). The year 904 finally saw the tide turn: 'Ivar, Ivar's grandson was killed by the men of Fortriu, and a great slaughter was made around him' (AU 904.4). The *Chronicle of the Kings* adds that this took place in Strathearn, which, it is argued, could have referred to the River Findhorn (Woolf 2006: 192), which flows past Forres. Documents thus hail a victory for Constantín son of Áed, king of Alba, who ruled for 40 years, but there are no earlier Pictish records to broadcast their own triumphs rather than those of the succeeding Alpínid dynasty. Art-historical evidence reveals a time frame compatible with the other disciplines but pulls the subject matter towards an allegorical account where the enemy are not distinguished as 'Vikings' but seen as 'gentiles', interpreted in terms of contemporary Viking practice. Plucky David, like a contemporary ruler, entrusts himself to the will of God before the fight, but the battle itself is displayed by a roll-call of contemporary warriors whose names would resound like the verses of a poem. The decidedly different styles on the front and back of the slab indicate an artistic milieu in transition. The Forres memorial, in its favoured Pictish cross-slab format, influenced no (surviving) successors: patronage for this scale and type of monument appears to dry up in northern Scotland as rulership shifts from the Picts to the Scots. Maldonado calls this period of violent change 'the Crucible of Nations'. In that case the Forres cross-slab, Scotland's Bayeux Tapestry, stands as the anvil.

**Supplementary material:** appendix available online at https://doi.org/10.9750/PSAS.153.1412.

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## NOTES

1. See the 3D rotational model here: https://skfb.ly/6zUCK
2. Quoted in Farr 1997: 106–7, citing Maximi Episcopi Taurensis, Sermones, Sermo XXXVIII:3, ll.32–41, pp 149–50. Ed. A Mutzenbecher, 1962. *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina* XXIII. Turnhout: Brepols.
3. Folio numbers in the Bible of San Paolo fuoir le Mure are a problem, cited differently by various authors. The definitive and most recent account is Koehler & Müterich 1999 where they say the Joshua page is f 59v, but Dodwell says it is f 58v. Likewise, Koehler says the David page is f 83v but Harbison (1992, vol 3: fig 737) says it is f 81r. I am using Koehler's folio numbers.
4. https://arca.irht.cnrs.fr/iiif/104978/canvas/canvas-1252070/view
5. Alexander (1966) spells the name 'Brythnoth'. The other sources use 'Byrthnoth'.
6. Utrecht Psalter. https://psalter.library.uu.nl/page/1. Accessed 15 March 2024.
7. https://psalter.library.uu.nl/page/30
8. https://psalter.library.uu.nl/page/17
9. Highland Historic Environment Record, MHG8649 – Cross-slab – Edderton. https://her.highland.gov.uk/monument/MHG8649. Accessed 15 March 2024.
10. St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. MS 51: Irish Evangeliary from St Gall (Quatuor evangelia). https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/csg/0051.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AU: *Annals of Ulster*. https://celt.ucc.ie/published/T100001A/index.html. Accessed 18 March 2024.

*CASSS*: *The Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture.* https://chacklepie.com/ascorpus/. Accessed 18 March 2024.

*ECMS*: *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 2 vols. Ed. J R Allen & J Anderson. 1993. Balgavies, Angus: The Pinkfoot Press. (Reprinted from *The Early Christian*

*Monuments of Scotland: A classified, illustrated, descriptive list of the monuments with an analysis of their symbolism and ornamentation.* Ed. J R Allen & J Anderson. 1903. Edinburgh: Printed for the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.)

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