

6. INCHCOLM ABBEY, FIFE.

*Fragments of an Early Christian Cross-slab.*

Certain articles which have been found at various times amid the ruins of Inchcolm Abbey, Fife, are set out for display in the Refectory. Included among these exhibits are the weathered fragments of an early Christian cross-slab.

<sup>1</sup> *Sculptured Monuments of Iona, etc.* (Edinburgh, 1881), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *P.S.A.S.*, LXI (1926-27), 143 *seq.*, fig. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 160, fig. 20 (1).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 159, fig. 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 157, fig. 17 (1).

<sup>6</sup> *Argyle-Inveraray* (Blackwood, 1845), p. 25.

These form the subject of this note, in which it is intended to amend the existing records pertaining to them.

This sculpture was first noted in 1856;<sup>1</sup> a similar record was published in 1903.<sup>2</sup> An illustration, which appears in both records, shows the lower sinister side of a cross-slab. The accompanying text implies that one large fragment was then in the Chapterhouse. The existence of such a stone half a century ago is not improbable but is inconsistent with the stones which survive to-day. Only three small fragments are preserved now and they are completely detached from one another (Pl. LXVI, 1). The differing conditions of the stones also suggest that many years have passed since they were broken. The three fragments can only conform to the description published, if set out in their respective positions in the pattern and this the dexter panel, not the sinister as previously illustrated. For better display they have been reconstructed again to form the larger fragment indicated in the following description (Pl. LXVI, 3).

The pieces form the right-hand part of the lower half of a cross-slab, measuring 23 ins. long, 13½ ins. wide and 4 ins. thick when reconstructed. A plain cross is indicated, with the panel on the dexter side of the cross-shaft filled with diagonal key pattern. The narrow panel on the right edge of the slab has been decorated with interlaced work.

It is interesting to note that the lines of the design on these fragments are strongly pitted (Pl. LXVI, 2). This effect suggests a clue to the technique employed in the preliminary preparation of this particular piece of sculpture. The procedure would be to sketch first the design on to the stone. Guiding lines would then be retraced by "jumping"<sup>3</sup> a succession of shallow, closely-set holes over them. In this way the working drawing would be fixed, thus ensuring that the pattern would be under control and not obliterated before its completion. These cavities would be dressed down eventually to form the sunk field of the panel.

This "jumping" technique produces an effect similar to mechanical drilling and as such was unusual in Britain at this period. It is a significant mannerism and such a practice here suggests a craftsman employing a technique which he had learned elsewhere.

Now the drill was used extensively by early classical Greek sculptors and later by the Romans to accentuate the important lines of their sculpture. In the early centuries of the Christian Church the traditional Hellenistic use of the drill again became popular in the Eastern Empire. In time, this popularity extended westwards into eastern Italy.

The Inchcolm stone is related in style of ornament to the St Andrews series and it is possible to detect this same drilling technique on several cross-slabs in that collection (Pl. LXVI), 4. A comparative study of those particular stones shows that they are all alike in character. The strict symmetry of the designs and the almost mechanical exactness of the composition is outstanding. All are produced from a very limited selection of geometric patterns. This arrangement contrasts strongly with contemporary native works freely adopting new ideas. In these symmetry has been unconsciously avoided but differing motives have been balanced and blended one with the other. The restrained quality of the former group appears to result from a mind disciplined by custom.

This form of sculpture which is worked on one single plane depends only on

<sup>1</sup> *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (Stuart), vol. 1, pl. cxxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (Romilly Allen), p. 366, fig. 384.

<sup>3</sup> A mason's term—when "jumping" the mason rotates the jumper or drill as he strikes it with his hammer.

the play of light and shade for its effect. This means that these designs could be carried out quite easily by any competent craftsman, not necessarily a sculptor. It seems probable that these two features, first the tooling and secondly the arrangement of pattern have a connection with one another. This evidence suggests that these cross-slabs might well be the handiwork of an itinerant craftsman accustomed to working in a classical tradition.

W. NORMAN ROBERTSON, *Ministry of Works.*





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Inchcolm Abbey, Fife.



3. Inchcolm Abbey, Fife.



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4. St Andrews, Fife.

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