

# Two Unrecorded Early Christian Stones

by K. A. Steer

## I. PEBBLES

In November 1967, a few months after the publication of the Royal Commission's *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, Mr I. C. Lawson, the Secretary of the newly formed Tweeddale Society, drew the writer's attention to an inscribed stone which at that time was built into a retaining wall at the rear of the small public garden that fronts on to the street known as Old Town, within the burgh of Peebles, immediately to the west of St Andrew's (Church of Scotland) Church. Although Mr Lawson had been aware of the existence of this stone since childhood, no record of it seems to have been published; and at the time when the burgh was being surveyed by the Commission's staff it was screened from view by a vigorous cotoneaster shrub.

The stone is of considerable interest since it is an Early Christian tombstone of unusual form in a particularly good state of preservation (Pl. 9a). The likelihood is that it originally stood in a graveyard on the site of the Cross Kirk, Peebles,<sup>1</sup> but scarcely anything is known about its subsequent history. Mr Lawson's father recalls, however, that until 1932 it was incorporated in the wall of a tenement property which occupied the site of the present garden, and which was demolished in that year in order to allow the road to be widened. The tenement was erected about 1780, and the stone may have been built into the fabric at the outset, for although the walls of the Cross Kirk itself were left untouched for some years after the building was abandoned in 1784, the adjoining claustral buildings, which probably overlay part of the ancient graveyard, were being used as a quarry for building material from the seventeenth century onwards.<sup>2</sup>

In view of the importance of the stone it was obviously desirable that it should be extracted from the wall in which it was embedded in 1967, in order that it could be properly examined and preserved. When the facts were placed before them, Peebles Town Council generously agreed to sponsor this operation which was carried out by the Ministry of Public Building and Works. Subsequently the stone was cleaned under the supervision of Mr W. R. Adams, the Ministry's Chief Conservation Officer in Scotland, and it has now been placed on permanent display in the Chambers Institution, Peebles.

The stone is a kite-shaped water-worn boulder measuring 19 in. long by 8½ in. wide at the top, and from 1¾ in. to 3½ in. in thickness. The flattish front and the edges may have been artificially smoothed, but it is impossible to be certain of this in the absence of tool marks. The edges have sustained some secondary damage, particularly at the pointed end and along the right-hand side, but fortunately the carved areas have not been affected. The shape of the stone, and the presence of carving on both front and back, show that it was intended to stand upright in the ground, probably at the head of the grave. Details of the carvings are as follows:

*Front.* A pocked and reamed Latin cross with barred terminals which is straddled

<sup>1</sup> Another Early Christian stone, inscribed LOCVS SANCTI NICOLAI EPISCOPI ('The place of Saint Nicholas the bishop') is reported to have been found on this site in 1261, but is now lost. If the stone was

genuine, and not a medieval invention, the name Nicholas must be a mis-reading (cf. *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, Nos. 377 and 480).

<sup>2</sup> cf. *ibid.*, ii, p. 204.

by a two-line inscription (fig. 1) reading NEITANO/SACERDOS '(Here lies) Neitan the priest (or bishop)'. The letters are semi-uncial with the addition of a few Roman capital forms, as in contemporary manuscripts; measuring from 1 in. to 2 in. in height they are well executed with a flat chisel. On the other hand the lay-out of the inscription is untidy, the end of the first word and the beginning of the second overlapping on to the adjacent edges of the stone.

Neitan is a native British (i.e. Brittonic and Pictish), and not Anglian, name, equivalent to the Irish Nechtan, while the weakening of the second declension nominative ending *-us* to *-o* is paralleled in both British and Gallic inscriptions of the period.<sup>1</sup>

*Back.* A cross of similar form to that on the front but smaller and inferior in execution.

*Top.* The upper edge of the stone rises to a slight peak in the centre, and round this a channel has been cut to produce a low oval boss. No precise parallel is known for this feature and its significance is uncertain. Since the stone itself is not cruciform it is hardly likely that the boss derives from the suspension-knob of a pectoral cross, as has been suggested in the case of small bosses on the upper arms of Anglian crosses at Carlisle and Kirkburton.<sup>2</sup> And what appears to be a somewhat similar lump on the top of an early cross-slab from Gallen Priory, Ferbane, Ireland<sup>3</sup> is elsewhere described as a tenon for the attachment of a head-piece.<sup>4</sup>

Memorial stones from Manor Water<sup>5</sup> and Yarrow<sup>6</sup> show that Christianity was practised in the Central Tweed basin by the sixth century, and Professor Thomas has postulated the existence of a sub-Roman diocese in this region, perhaps based on an earlier tribal division.<sup>7</sup> Assuming that the lost Cross Kirk stone was genuine, it seems likely that it too, belongs to the

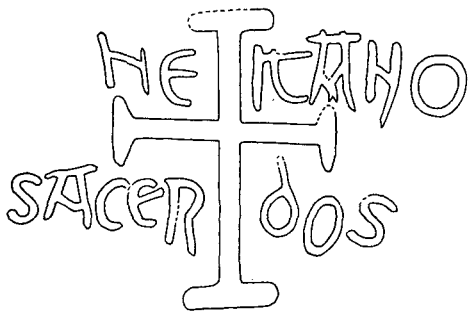


FIG. 1. Early Christian Stone, Peebles; inscription.

FIG. 2. Early Christian Stone, Iona; inscription.



period before the introduction of Irish monasticism into Northumbria in A.D. 635, but on epigraphic grounds the Neitan tombstone must be somewhat later in date, probably late seventh or early eighth century. Its importance is, therefore, that it demonstrates that Peebles continued to be a centre of Christian worship after the penetration of the Tweed valley by Anglian settlers and the establishment of the monasteries of Lindisfarne and Old Melrose. Unfortunately Neitan's precise status is uncertain since the designation *sacerdos* is ambiguous. Originally the word usually meant 'bishop', but between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the seventh it gradually came to mean simply 'priest', and in Gaul by the year A.D. 800 it was employed almost exclusively in the latter sense. In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation*, which was

<sup>1</sup> cf. K. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953), 192.

<sup>2</sup> W. G. Collingwood, *Northumbrian Crosses of the Pre-Norman Age* (1927), 87 and figs. 105 and 125.

<sup>3</sup> F. Henry, *La Sculpture Irlandaise*, ii (1933), pl. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland* xxxviii (1908), 637.

<sup>5</sup> *Inventory of Peeblesshire*, No. 376.

<sup>6</sup> *Inventory of Selkirkshire*, No. 174.

<sup>7</sup> M. W. Barley and R. P. C. Hanson (eds.), *Christianity in Britain, 300-700* (1967), 103 ff.

written within the proposed dating limits of the Neitan stone, the term *sacerdos* often means 'bishop', just as its derivatives *sacerdotalis* and *sacerdotium* often mean 'episcopal' and 'episcopal office' respectively. On the other hand there are a number of instances in the same work where the meaning is clearly equivalent to *presbyter* ('priest').<sup>1</sup>

For information about the stone, and help in compiling this note, the writer is grateful to the Rev. Dr James Bulloch, Miss Rosemary Cramp, Professor Gordon Donaldson, Mr J. H. Hendrie, Professor K. H. Jackson, Mr I. C. Lawson and Monsignor David McRoberts.

## II. IONA

During a visit to the little museum in the Nunnery at Iona in September 1966, the writer noticed an Early Christian inscribed 'grave-marker' which had not been present when he made an inventory of the contents of the building in the previous year. Enquiries failed to elicit the circumstances under which the stone arrived in the museum, but fortunately it can be safely assumed that it was found in the vicinity of the Abbey, since Professor Charles Thomas observed it in a stone-heap there in 1956: at that time, however, the inscription was hidden from view. Presumably, therefore, the stone comes from the same graveyard in the Abbey that has produced a number of other Early Christian memorials.

The grave-marker in question (Pl. 9b) is a roughly-trimmed wedge-shaped block of Torridonian sandstone,<sup>2</sup> measuring 14 in. long, 10½ in. wide at the top, 8 in. wide at the bottom, and 3-4½ in. thick. It was no doubt picked up on the beach at Iona, where boulders of similar material may be seen at the present time. On the front there is a *chi-rho* monogram consisting of a pocked and reamed outline cross with expanded ends and a graceful trumpet-shaped *rho*. Along the upper edge in semi-uncial lettering (fig. 2) there are the words LAPIS ECHODI, 'The Stone of Echodius', but the other edges and the back of the stone are plain.

The date of the stone is most probably seventh century, so that it is the earliest inscribed memorial so far recorded from Iona. Professor K. H. Jackson has kindly contributed the following note on the inscription:

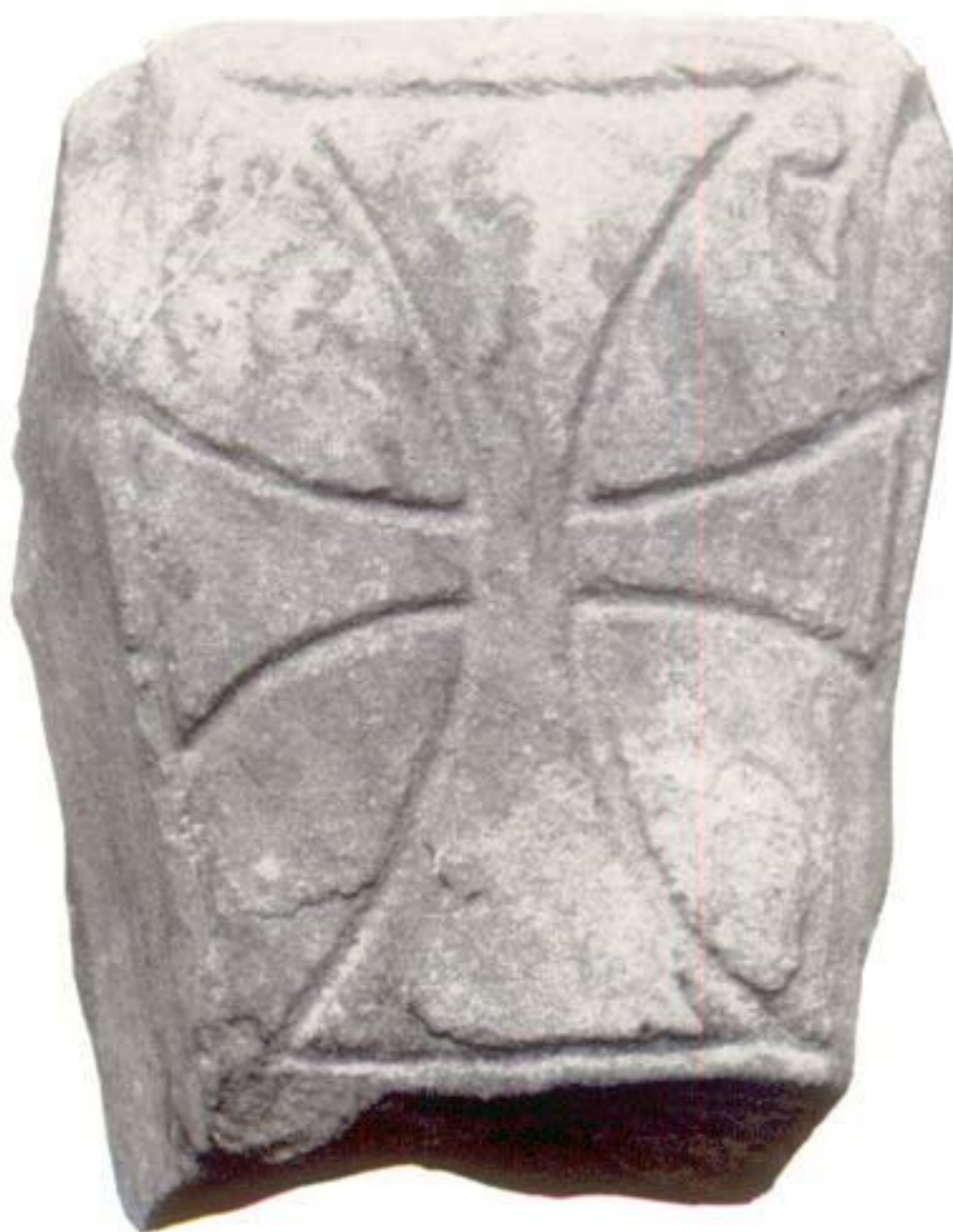
'The *a* of *lapis* may be any date in the seventh to early eighth century; the *s* is seventh century rather than eighth. The *chi-rho* need not be earlier than the seventh century; compare the *Initium et Finis* stone at Kirkmadrine, which can hardly be older than the early seventh century. Linguistically the name would not be older than the later sixth century nor later than the quite early eighth. *Echodi* has the Latin genitive termination in *-i*. There are several characters Latinised as *Echodius* in Adamnan, and the genitive occurs once as *Echudi*. The genuine *Irish* (sixth/seventh-century) form of the nominative occurs in the Appendix to Adamnan, *Echoid*, one of Columba's disciples who came with him to Iona in 563. The genitive in O.Ir. was *Echdach* (Latin *Echodi* and *Echudi* are based on the nominative); the name must have been something like *Equodix*, genitive *Equodicus*, in Primitive Celtic.'

<sup>1</sup> cf. C. Plummer (ed.), *Baedae Opera Historica*, vol. 2 (1896), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Mr G. H. Collins of the Institute of Geological Sciences for this identification.



a Early Christian tombstone, Peebles; front, back and top



b Early Christian 'grave-marker', Iona; front and top