

A fragment of stone-carving of early christian date in the Cathedral Museum, St Andrews

by W Norman Robertson

An interesting fragment of stone-carving is on display in the Cathedral Museum at St Andrews (pl 16c), consisting of two pieces which together form a still larger part of the original sculpture. Both pieces were found in the Priory ground by Lord Bute during the excavation of the ruins of the conventual buildings in 1893-4. In the Museum Inventory which Dr Hay Fleming compiled in 1930, these carvings were listed as Class A Monuments nos 28 and 29 (Fleming 1931, 30, fig 46). The two fragments were joined together later when it was noticed that it was possible to link the one stone to the other. The stone now measures approximately 609 mm wide by 444 mm high, its maximum thickness about 180 mm. On the back of the stone, the surface is uneven and waterworn, and it may not have been flat originally.

Just discernible in the carving is a single human figure wearing a robe and evidently sitting on a chair. Around him there are several kinds of creatures, some fanciful and characteristically Pictish in style. The figure is now unfortunately headless and some evidence is also lost at the feet, due to the presence of a square recess cut in a late re-use of the stone. Nevertheless, enough exists to show that the figure is that of a musician. His two hands are clearly visible plucking the strings of the harp-like instrument which rests on his knee. The surviving animals in the composition are arranged in pairs and consist of two beasts with longish legs, the remains of another two animals on a larger scale and two lively-looking reptiles (fig 1). This fragmentary sculpture undoubtedly represents one more example of the familiar Old Testament scene depicting David playing on his harp. The appearance of the different creatures with him in the composition suggests that the sculptor may have had in mind the words of the ancient canticle 'Benedicite omnia opera' when he produced this work. To the left of the figure-work on the fragment, there is a remnant of badly-weathered interlacing decoration. It is not part of an interlace pattern, rather it resembles the trailing stems of a vine-scroll design. Unfortunately, it is now impossible to determine the precise purpose it served in the complete composition.

Lastly, from the surviving evidence, it appears that the carving is part of a stone which was assembled with other elements in a manner similar to carpentry. Enough is preserved of the fragment to show that a tongue measuring 38 mm wide and 50 mm thick ran along its edge for fitting into a matching groove. On the outer face of this tongue and aligned with it, there is also some evidence of a narrow bead moulding. Apparently its main function was to fix the width of the tongue and so ensure that the panel fitted firmly and correctly into the grooves in the adjoining members. At the same time, this moulding served as a useful border to enclose the carved work on the panel (fig 2A).

This tongue and groove technique is an interesting feature of the construction of the well-known St Andrews tomb-shrine in the same museum (Radford 1955). On this particular monument, the surviving frontal of the tomb-chest has tongued edges which fit neatly into grooves

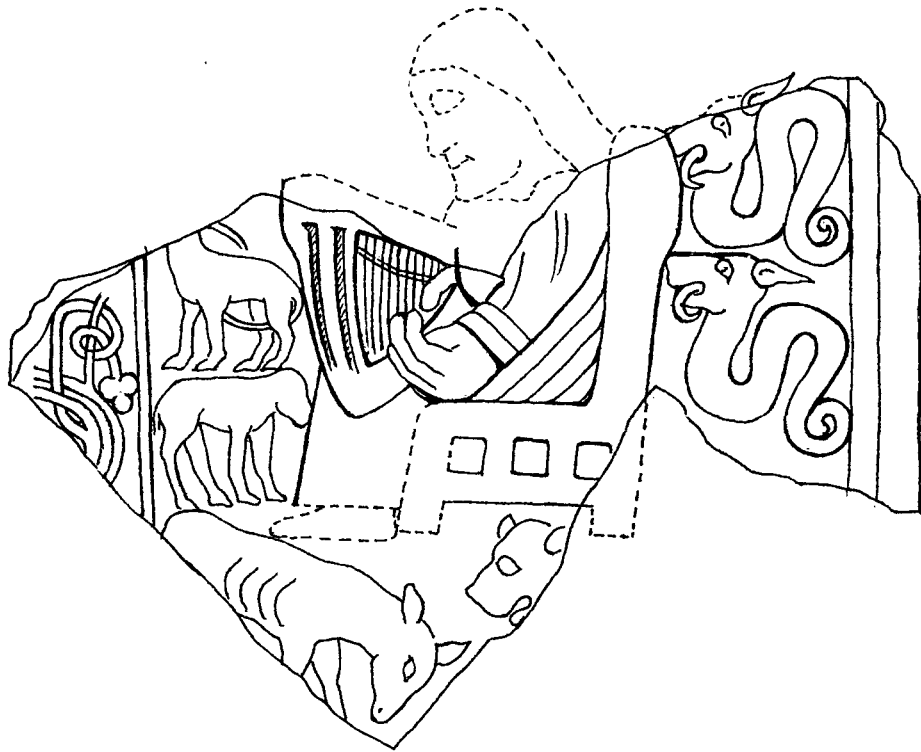


FIG 1 St Andrews: fragment of sculptured stonework

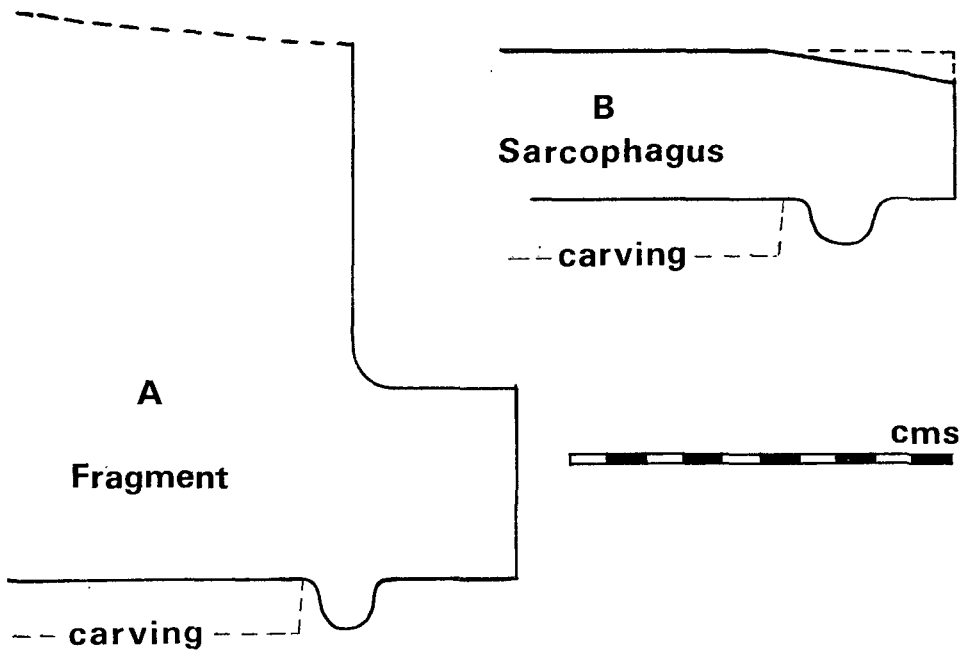
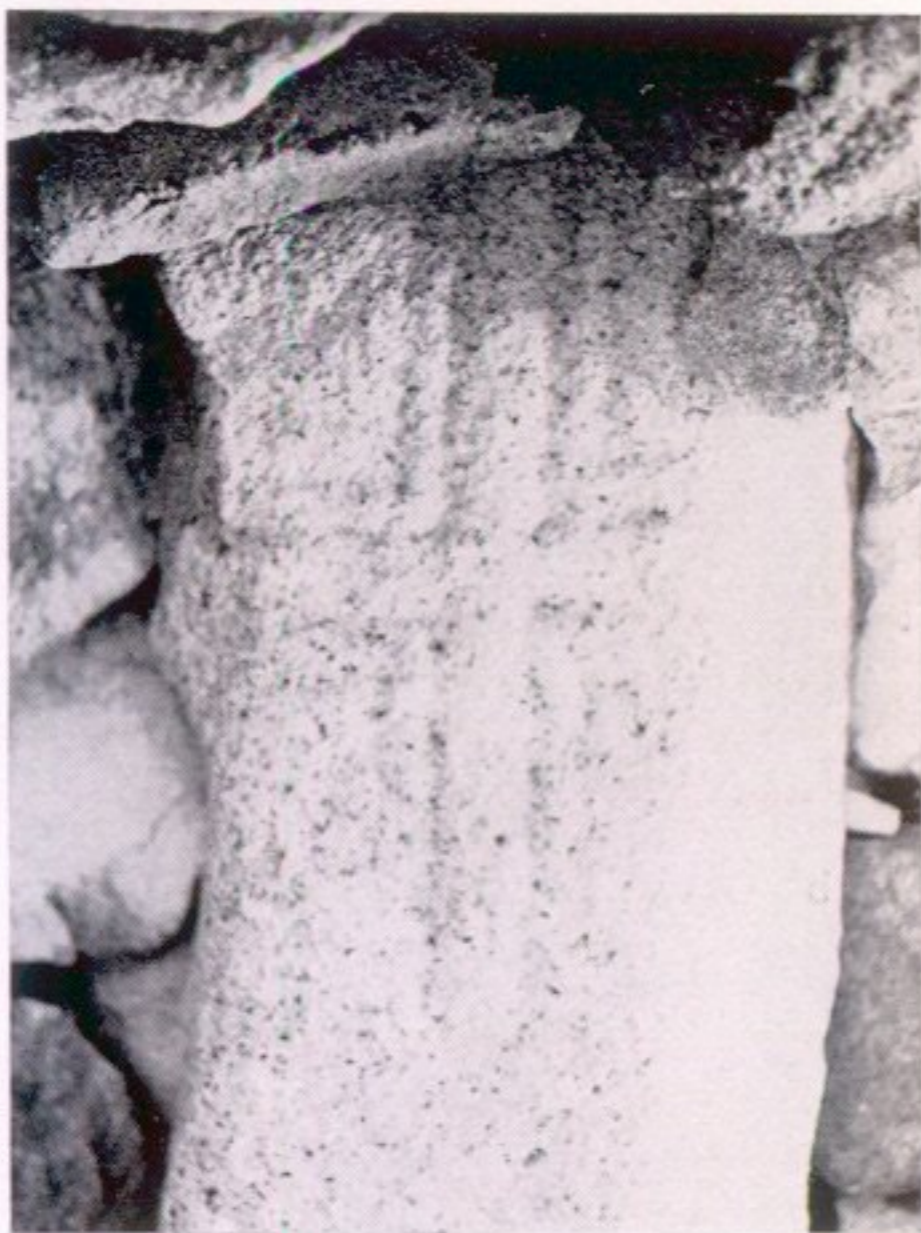


FIG 2 St Andrews: sections of tongued edges

in the upright corner-posts. Furthermore, the tongue on each edge incorporates a bead moulding which prevents the panel from entering too far into the groove. It also frames the whole composition in exactly the same way as that suggested by the bead moulding on the fragment (fig 2B). Although this form of jointing appears to have been used fairly frequently in sculptured stonework of this date, only a few examples of it belonging to this period are known today. For this reason, it seems that the fragment under discussion is part either of the St Andrews tomb-shrine or of another monument of similar construction.

REFERENCES

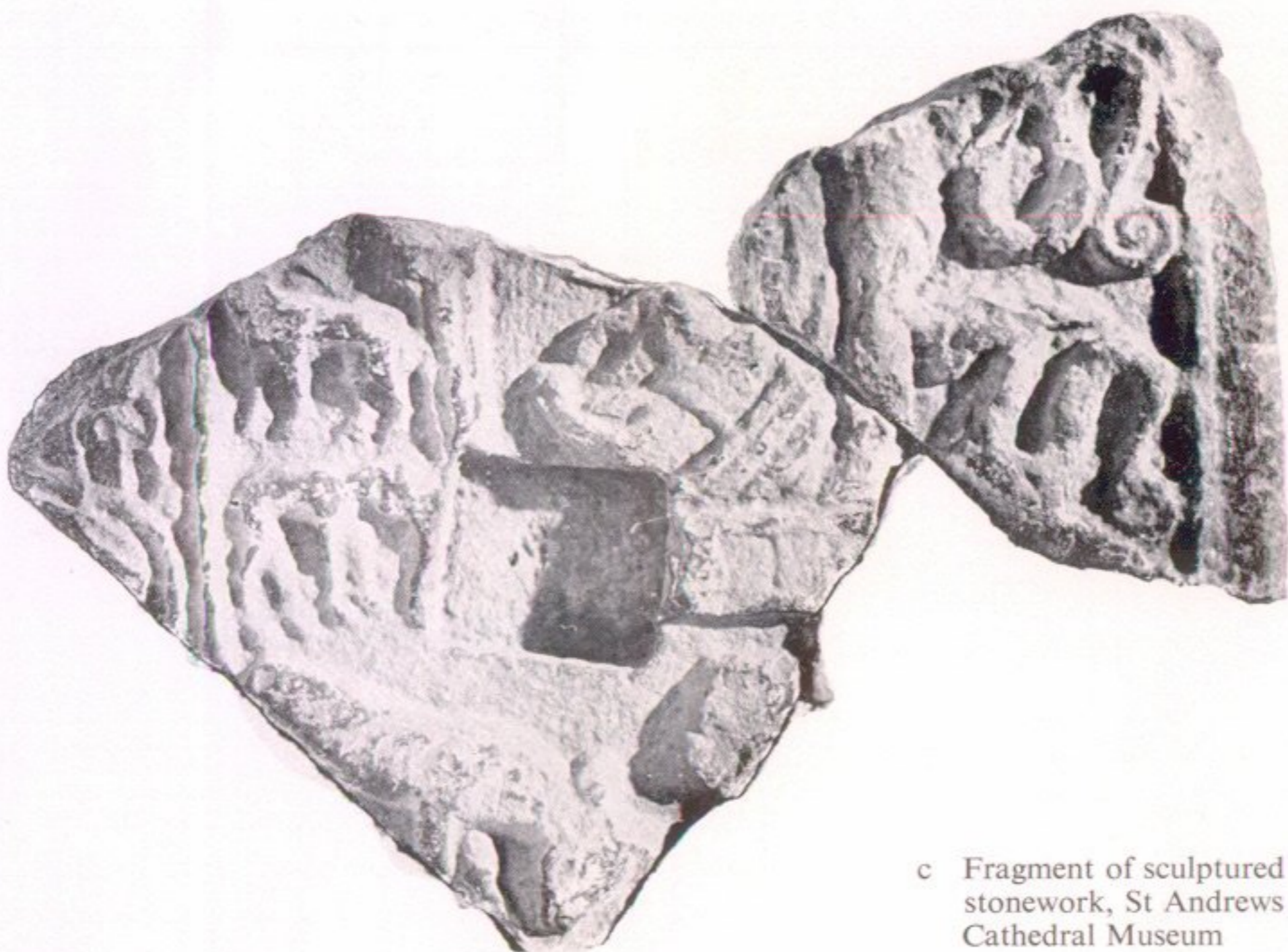
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a Stone in cleit 74, Hirt



b Stone in cottage 16, Hirt



c Fragment of sculptured stonework, St Andrews Cathedral Museum