

An enamelled plaque from Borve, Benbecula

David H Caldwell*

The museum has just acquired a gilt bronze enamelled plaque from Borve, Benbecula, in the Outer Hebrides (fig 1). It measures 61.5 mm by 61 mm and is decorated with the figure of Christ. Round its edge is a border infilled with pale blue or turquoise enamel. There are some specks of red which suggest that it was originally of that colour. The designs on the rest of the plaque have been reserved against a background of deep blue enamel, the colour of lapis lazuli. Much of the enamel and gilding is now lacking and the bronze bears a green patina.

Christ is depicted facing to the front, his beardless head in a cruciform nimbus, inclined

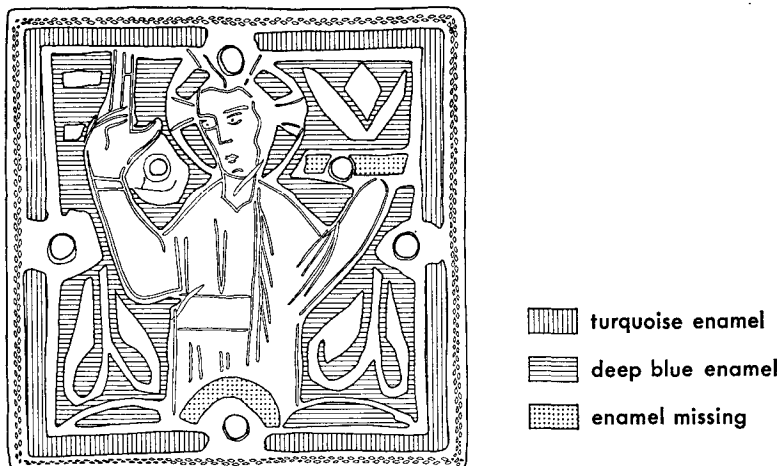


FIG 1 Enamelled plaque from Borve (scale 1 : 1)

* National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh

to one side, and his enormous right hand raised in blessing. It is probable that the artist has intended to depict a book in his raised left hand but the whole is clumsily contrived. His figure is bordered by engraved lines and further incisions are used sparingly to articulate his face and clothing and suggest that he is seated. On either side are crude foliage designs and the edge of the plaque is outlined by two rows of closely placed dashes applied with a roulette.

In design and execution it is typical of much of the poorer quality Western European enamel work of the 13th century, thought to have been fashioned in the workshops of Limoges in France. The four original holes pierced at the centre of each edge for rather large rivets give a clue as to what it was intended for. One of the main products of the Limousine enamellers was altar crosses which often had a figure of Christ in the round on the front and a representation of the vision of St John on the back with Christ in glory surrounded by the lion, bull, winged man and eagle. This plaque is the central element in such a scheme and has been fastened to the centre-back of a wooden cross – hence the position of the rivet-holes to match up with the arms of the cross. It can in fact be compared quite closely with a rather similar plaque on the back of a cross in the Musée de Tessé in Le Mans, France. This cross belongs to sub-group three of ‘Les croix à revêtement de cuivre estampé ou gravé avec Christ couronné en relief’, distinguished by Dr P Thoby (1953, 38–9, pl XXII, no 36). The cross is a cross potent with the plaque centrally placed on the back and the evangelical symbols in the terminals of the cross-arms. The plaque is similar in the main points of its design to the one from Benbecula, even to the provision and placing of its four large rivet holes. The major difference is that in this case Christ is represented in an aureola.

There are a number of other crosses identified by Thoby as belonging to this group all with similar iconographic detail, but unfortunately most now lack one or more of the plaques on their reverses. We might also, however, compare the rectangular plaque on a similar cross of Thoby’s sub-group 4, in the Musée de la Société Polymathique in Vannes, France (Thoby 1953, pl XXIV, no 45). In this case there are eight rivet holes round the edge but Christ is shown facing frontally, one hand raised in blessing, the other holding a book.

Crosses such as the two just noted in Le Mans and Vannes were produced in great quantities and exported for use in churches throughout Europe. A figure of Christ in the round from Ceres churchyard in Fife (National Museum, LE 7; Peddie 1883) attests to their presence in Scotland. This plaque from Benbecula is yet further evidence but in this case there is reason to believe it served a secondary purpose as well. For one thing, the finding of it, as explained below, seems to show it was associated with a burial, and it has had two extra holes punched roughly through it on either side of Christ’s head. It is possible it has been re-used as a decoration for some sort of dress.

It was found by Mr T Sidwell in 1943 when he was stationed at the RAF base at Borge and I am grateful to him for remembering the following details of its discovery. It was got in excavations conducted by him into the Teampull Bhuirgh (the church of the castle). This ruin is recorded in the *Outer Hebrides Inventory* (no 341) but in 1943 the site was completely infilled with sand and only a small fragment of masonry stood out to attract Mr Sidwell’s curiosity. He started to dig a hole about three by two feet wide and at a depth of about eight to ten feet came upon a black layer which he interpreted as the floor. This excavation was against the inner side of one of the chapel’s side walls. From here he tunnelled (the tunnel later collapsing) along to the corner with the east wall and came upon an ‘altar’ about three feet away from it, about three feet high and four feet long. This was open at one end and was free from sand so that he could crawl inside it. He found a skeleton alongside with its feet actually sticking into the ‘altar’, feet to the east and head to the west. The plaque was on its chest. Also associated with the skeleton (which seemed to be of a very tall person) was a rusty piece of iron which Mr Sidwell thought was a sword or dagger

hilt, and a piece of 'grainy coloured bone' like an 'elongated ostrich egg'. Both of these are now missing. In the centre of the top of the 'altar' was a piece of grey slate stone containing cubes of iron pyrites and it and the stones around it were held together by lime mortar. This was later broken up by vandals though a piece of the stone with pyrites was preserved. Mr Sidwell also dug below part of the 'floor' at the end of the chapel and discovered an area of skeletons about eighteen inches apart and the same above or below each other.

REFERENCES

- Peddie, J M D 1883 'Notice of a Crucifix of Bronze, Enamelled, Found in the Churchyard of Ceres, Fife', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 17 (1882-3), 147-51.
Thoby, P 1953 *Les Croix Limousines de la Fin du XIII^e siècle au début du XIV^e siècle*. Paris.