

A cross-slab from New Scone, Perthshire

Dorothy M Lye* and Ian Fisher†

In 1978 a stone which had been in the garden of Mrs McPhail, 19 Angus Road, New Scone, Perthshire (NO 138263) was identified as an early Christian cross-slab (pl 59). There are no firm details about the original discovery of the stone, but it had certainly been held since 1920 by the McLagan family of 'Maxwelton', Broughton Terrace, Kinnoull, Perth, who gave it to Mrs McPhail's sister, their housekeeper, on her retiral to Scone 30 years ago. The McLagan family owned an old-established business in St John's Place, Perth, adjacent to St John's Kirk, and it is possible that the place of origin was the graveyard of the Kirk (*Discovery & Excavation* 1979, 45).

The stone, now in Perth Museum, is part of a free-standing cross-slab of fine-grained yellowish-grey sandstone, 0.49 m by 0.4 m by up to 0.1 m in thickness; it is virtually intact in width, though it may have been dressed back on one edge where a segmental cut 95 mm across has been made vertically. This shows distinct chisel marks and is probably of fairly recent origin. The bottom edge also appears to have been re-worked in comparatively recent times, whereas the top has been broken irregularly. The stone has been examined by Mr G H Collins of the Institute of Geological Sciences, Edinburgh; the sandstone is from the Lower Old Red Sandstone formation, which includes most of the rocks of the Midland Valley of Scotland, and more precisely it appears to belong to either the Garvock or the Arbuthnott Group – probably the latter, and in this case it may well have come from the area to the N of Dundee, where these rocks have been extensively quarried for centuries.

* The Old Manse, Bridge-of-Earn, Perth.

† Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 54 Melville Street, Edinburgh.

Both sides of the stone have been decorated. Face A (pl 59a) bears a panel containing a long-shafted cross potent, above a blank area 0.11 m in maximum surviving height. The ornamental panel is contained within a flat moulding, with a second parallel groove along the base. The cross is of double-square hollow type (Romilly Allen no 98A; Allen & Anderson 1903a, 49), with firmly-channelled beaded surround springing at the base from the frame moulding. Its shaft is flanked by panels, each comprising two conjoined squares of key-ornament similar to Romilly Allen no 995 (Allen & Anderson 1903a, 358). The decoration appears to have been neatly worked with a fine-pointed chisel to a maximum depth of about 4 mm. On Face B (pl 59b) there is a long-shafted cross with round hollow armpits, treated with the same beading as on Face A; in this case, however, the central reserves are not linked and a detached lozenge-shaped boss is thus formed at the centre of the cross-head. The cross is flanked by two elongated panels of diagonal key-ornament, now greatly weathered but apparently resembling Romilly Allen no 936 (Allen & Anderson 1903a, 343). The bottom of the slab is incomplete, but the horizontal members at the base of the left panel suggest that only a little of the ornament has been lost. At the top of Face B there are remains of the edge-moulding of a panel of key-ornament placed to the left of the top arm of the cross.

This slab, with its neat geometrical design and a cross on each face, has no obvious parallels in surviving early sculpture from Perthshire and Angus, but is very closely related to the work of what has been called the 'rule and compass' school at St Andrews. Many of the cross-slabs produced by this workshop (Allen & Anderson 1903b, 350-63, 510-13; Hay Fleming 1931, 1-52) show comparable undecorated crosses flanked by strips of key-ornament, although the characteristic spiral-ornament of the school is not used on the Scone slab. The combination of cross potent and round-armpit cross on the latter is also found on St Andrews 3, 21 and 34, and crosses potent of almost identical form, with narrow connecting bars and strongly beaded edges, are seen on nos 21, 24 and 34. Round-armpit crosses are numerous at St Andrews (eg nos 3, 7, 8, 21-3, 34-5), beaded edges being found on nos 21-3 and 34-5. No 23 provides a particularly close parallel for the narrow constrictions of the Scone cross, although none of the examples at St Andrews display its complete separation between the central reserves in the arms and the centre of the cross-head. St Andrews 23 also shares with Face A of the new slab the use of double panels of key-ornament 995, although the squares are linked without the cruciform breaks found at Scone; single squares of this pattern are used on St Andrews 7, 9, 21, 22, 27 and 60. The key-ornament of type 936 on Face B is much rarer, and Romilly Allen listed only one occurrence, at Kells, Co Meath, where it is used in a horizontal strip at the foot of the W face of the shaft of the South or Tower Cross (Allen & Anderson 1903a, 343; Henry 1933, pl 58,2). It is also used, however, on St Andrews 55, a small fragment discovered in 1909 (Hay Fleming 1931, 46 & fig 8), and what appears to be the same pattern, although identified by Allen as type 937, occurs on Invergowrie 1, now in the National Museum (Allen & Anderson 1903b, 255-6, fig 266a), a cross-slab which approaches the geometric precision of the St Andrews slabs. Finally, although the double moulding below the ornamental panel on Face A cannot be matched in the surviving cross-slabs at St Andrews (many of which are incomplete), it is paralleled on the back of the large cross-shaft no 19 (Hay Fleming 1931, fig 27).

In view of these numerous resemblances, the cross-slab from New Scone may be identified as a product of the St Andrews school, and accordingly dated to the ninth or early tenth century (Henderson 1978, 55-7). As noted above, it may have come from the vicinity of St John's Kirk, but there is no evidence for the existence of the church before the 12th century (Cowan 1967, 163), and no other stone of early Christian date has been recorded in the Perth area. In the post-Reformation period a funerary slab was transported several kilometres from Perth to

Lethendy, presumably by river, for use as building-material (Fisher & Greenhill 1972), and it is possible that the Scone cross-slab reached Perth by a similar process. Several of the carved stones now in the Cathedral Museum at St Andrews were found at the Kirkhill, overlooking the harbour, and the Cathedral burial-ground is only a little further away, so that the stone may have been removed on a coastal trader, either as ballast or as a curiosity. Detailed geological examination of the cross-slabs at St Andrews may establish whether this is probable, or whether a St Andrews carver was brought to work at an unknown burial-ground in the Perth area.

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