

A reconsideration of the origins of early Insular monumental lettering of the mixed alphabet type: the case of the ‘Lapis Echodi’ inscription on Iona

G Charles-Edwards*

ABSTRACT

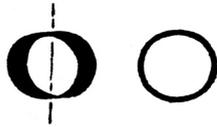
The inscribed letterforms of Britain contemporaneous with Nash-Williams’s Group I inscriptions, AD 400–600, of Early Christian Monuments of Wales show features that cannot be described as calligraphic. They show little scribal awareness in their execution. There are among them ‘mixed alphabet’ inscriptions that combine features of informal cursive hands with simplified and angular minuscule letters; in the course of the seventh century the haphazard mixed alphabet style improves to the level of deliberate design. This article examines one Iona survivor – the small ‘Lapis Echodi’ chi-rho cross-slab – in relation to this non calligraphic mixed-alphabet group. In it careful comparisons are made between epigraphic and scribal letterforms, with analytical diagrams based on the surviving manuscript pen-forms that represent the type of Insular bookhand that preceded those written in canonical Insular half-uncial. If it is possible to establish the existence of this earlier pre-canonical hand as an influence on epigraphy, it is hoped to refine the wide dating bands that presently exist.

Wales has the largest combined concentration of sub-Roman and post-Roman inscriptions in Britain – the latter overlapping the Latin/Ogham bilingual inscriptions – some of which include minuscules. The use of roman capitals for inscriptions was gradually abandoned. The precise evolution of informal minuscule and formal majuscule Roman scripts in Britain is obscure, making it difficult to assess the script models used by lettercutters.¹ In his *Early Christian Monuments of Wales* [ECMW] V E Nash-Williams places the bilingual inscriptions in his Group I, covering the period AD 400–600+; in the Latin texts we find letterforms from different alphabetical sources freely mixed together. Nash-Williams describes them as ‘mixed alphabet.’ They are uninfluenced by strict scribal practice, and cannot be described

as calligraphy, or ‘beautiful writing’. Yet in discussing the intrusive letters that gradually appear among the debased Roman capitals of the Group I inscriptions, Nash-Williams associates them with scribal ‘half-uncial’, despite the extraordinary variety of disparate and non-calligraphic forms that he brings under the over-large umbrella of this term. Uncial and its offshoot half-uncial are skilled scripts written with a broad-edge pen, giving strong contrast between thick and thin strokes. Their letters have an inflected line compared to those we see inscribed on stone, which are uninflected and monoline (illus 1).

On this broad assumption of Nash-Williams’s a close association has been made between the scriptorium, a workshop in which was practised the most precise and refined calligraphy, and

* Department of History, University of Wales, Bangor, Gwynedd LL57 2DG

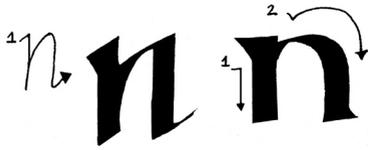


ILLUS 1 An uninflected monoline O compared to a calligraphic inflected letter

the stonemason's workshop in which were cut inscriptions which appear aesthetically valueless to the modern eye. There is an obvious association between the style of eighth-century half-uncial books and inscriptions, but it is difficult to relate the mixed alphabet letters of seventh-century inscriptions to any definite point in the hierarchy of Insular scripts, at the top of which lies Julian Brown's canonical Phase I and Phase II Insular half-uncial.² The chief characteristics of eighth-century Insular half-uncial, a bold wedge serif, strongly contrasting thick and thin strokes, and widely spaced letterforms, are not to be found in British inscriptions of the sixth and seventh centuries. During the course of the seventh century, we know from manuscript sources that scribal half-uncial was progressing towards a canonical style, but lettercutting seems to have worked with an alphabetic repertoire of its own, adapted to the limitations of a difficult craft. It seems reasonable to guess that, as it was not possible to cut lettering of calligraphic quality, hence they did something else. In the whole corpus of *ECMW* there is only one example, and that late, of an inscription which might be called *V*-section, that is, cut with an edged chisel replicating the thick and thin strokes of a broad-edge pen. The majority are pocked and smoothed in lines of equal width. C R Gordon established that the carving technique of north-east Scotland was similar, his assumption being that the iron tools used were better employed as punches rather than being continually tempered and ground to provide an edge that would be lost in a few strokes.³

The concept of an Insular hierarchy of scripts envisages an undergrowth of informal minuscule hands, improving by a series of step-changes of increasing formality, to the height of perfection in the grand half-uncial of the Gospel books. Clearly we should search for the source of the mixed alphabet style somewhere in the minuscule undergrowth. That a canonical style of Insular half-uncial had not yet been established during AD 400–600 seems to be confirmed by the later manuscript sources that have survived, showing the hand as still formative during AD 600–650. As we have no manuscript survivors from Wales until the ninth century, perhaps more use may be made of the evidence of pre-canonical letterforms that we find in these Group I inscriptions, and those contemporary with them elsewhere. Katherine Forsyth has recently discussed the inscribed stones of sub-Roman southern Scotland as an integral part of the epigraphic corpus of the Brittonic-speaking world.⁴ Newly-published corpora have emphasized the value of such inclusiveness.⁵ From the simple debased capitals of the Whithorn inscriptions via the mixed-alphabet Yarrow stone to the earliest of the Iona inscriptions, the same movement from two-line capitals to four-line letterforms with ascenders and descenders, that we see in the Welsh inscriptions, takes place. The movement suggests a scaling down in the repertoire, abandoning any concept of grand Roman monumental capitals, in favour of the more practicable letterforms of bookhands.

In discussing inscriptions contemporary with Nash-Williams's Group II of AD 600–800, in contrast, and acknowledging wide variations within the term 'bookhand', John Higgitt has rightly pointed out the existence of distinctive monastic house styles, and some cases of clear imitation of the penned lettering of the particular scriptorium, cut in stone. He cites the examples of Lindisfarne, with its decorative Insular capitals on parchment and stone, and Wearmouth/Jarrow with its cut and written versions of italianate models, 'The only Northumbrian monasteries to which surviving



ILLUS 2 The formations of half-uncial and minuscule serifs

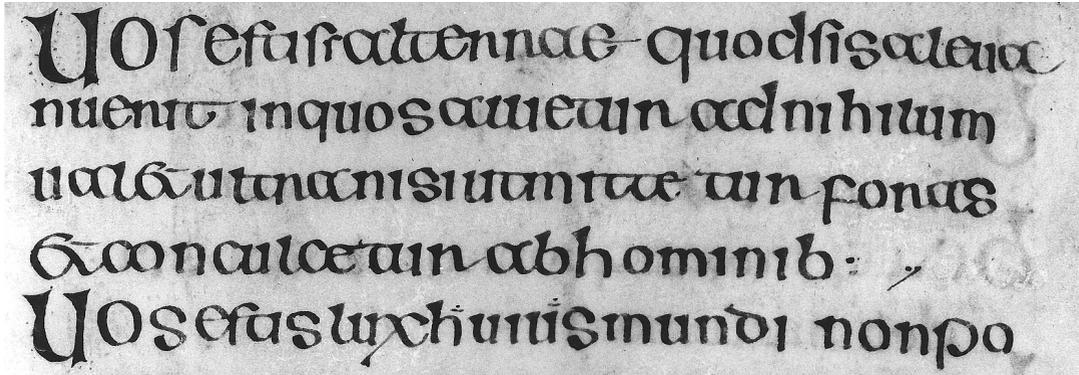
manuscripts can be attributed with any degree of confidence'.⁶ In Scotland, similarly rare but perhaps a century earlier, we have the valuable pairing of the inscription 'Lapis Echodi' (hereafter 'Echodi') at Iona with the manuscript RIA S n, the 'Cathach' also known as the Psalter of Saint Columba.⁷ In this case the problem of precise identification of script, when it has been transmuted to inscriptional form, is aided by some other relevant manuscript survivors. Long ago Bieler noticed that early Insular majuscule and minuscule were known from the same place 'in only one instance – Iona'.⁸ In the case of 'Echodi' and the Cathach, both inscription and manuscript have strong cursive features mixed with prototype half-uncial characteristics, that may be characteristic of a period before the establishment of canonical Insular half-uncial in the second half of the seventh century.

The conviction of E A Lowe that Insular minuscule evolved from half-uncial is understandable if one envisages Insular writing as a peculiarly Christian phenomenon expanding its range of scripts from the starting point of an initial imported model, as of a gospel book or psalter, in a continental half-uncial.⁹ In Britain this starting point we might estimate to occur sometime after the conversion of Constantine.¹⁰ In Ireland the Roman mission of Palladius preceded the mission of Patrick in the fifth century; thus some pure Roman, rather than provincial Roman, script models did arrive in Ireland. But we can only speculate on the nature of native Welsh or Irish manuscript half-uncial, and its development during the period of Nash-Williams's Group I, as our first evidence of minuscule letters is epigraphic,

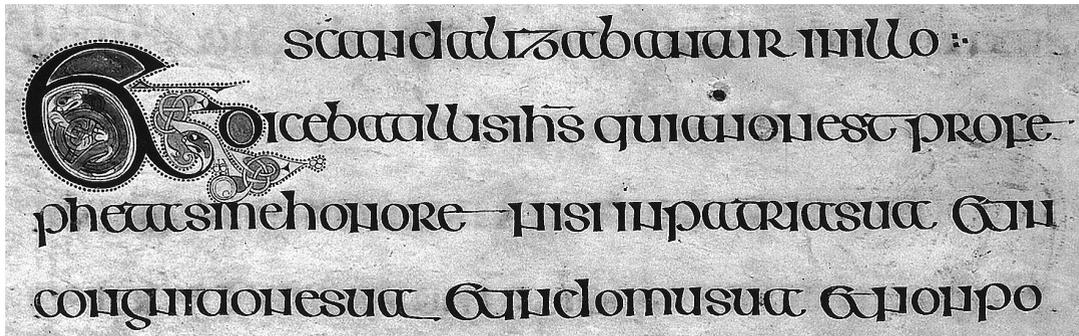
and our first Irish manuscript evidence from c AD 600. At that point the Insular half-uncial hand had not been perfected as a script. It is Nash-Williams who most clearly expounds the theory whereby, in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries a change in Insular epigraphic practice is believed to have come about whereby Roman capitals were discarded for monumental use, and replaced by letters modelled on half-uncial style book hands.¹¹ But it is difficult to associate our seventh-century inscriptions with high-class book arts. The highly specialized and precise skills of large brush Roman lettering on prepared stone were lost. They were replaced with substitutes that were not calligraphic, and on a smaller scale on stones that were but roughly prepared, if at all. Unless a stone surface was dressed to present a flat plane, measuring and marking up to ensure correct placement of letters could not be done.¹²

However, when we look closely at the earliest surviving Insular evidence, of the Springmount Bog Tablets and TCD MS. Ussher I, written in fluent cursive half-uncial with strong cursive features, and compare them with our first manuscript written in prototype half-uncial, the Cathach of c AD 600, it is evident that the hand in which all three scribes are fluent is technically a minuscule and not a majuscule. The half-uncial of the old or invalid scribe of the Cathach is laborious, has no habitual system of serif or bow construction, and at the point where his hand relapses into minuscule we see a true calligraphic quality which is absent in his more formal hand (illus 2 & 9).¹³ It is important to establish that when we see minuscule letters on Nash-Williams's Group I stones, or contemporary relations in Britain, of the fifth to seventh centuries they pre-date the evolution of canonical Insular half-uncial that has triangular wedge serifs and vertical-axis **O**. To back-date the term 'half-uncial' to cover them is to miss a palaeographical turning.

Careful graphic analysis of the habits of these three earliest scripts, and comparison with the later scripts of the manuscripts Durham



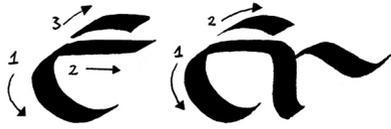
ILLUS 3 Durrow and Kells hands adjacent for comparison: a. Durrow (above), b. Kells (below). Copyright Trinity College Library Dublin



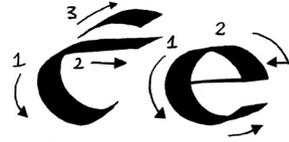
A.II.10, c AD 650, and the Book of Durrow, c AD 675, provides a clear sequence of development towards the canonical Phase I half-uncial of the Book of Durrow (illus 3).¹⁴ In the Book of Durrow we see a consistent understanding of spacing, and of the exact replication of repeat elements such as bows, bars and serifs, although there is not the strict adherence to placement on the writing line that we find in Phase II manuscripts like the Lindsarne Gospels. Added to the fact that the minuscule letters cut in Welsh inscriptions from the late sixth century onwards do not bear a strong resemblance to formal half-uncial, this would seem to confirm that formal Insular half-uncial of calligraphic quality did not come into being until the second half of the seventh century. As Bieler and Brown suspected, our earliest Insular manuscripts might have been written in a type of formalized cursive lacking

triangular serifs and heavyweight downstrokes, and may have been written on papyrus or tablets rather than vellum.¹⁵ What then are we looking at in the non-capital and certainly non-calligraphic cut lettering of Insular monumental inscriptions made before the establishment of a canonical Insular half-uncial? The long-standing association of epigraphic with penned manuscript forms may never have been a worthwhile comparison in the case of Group I inscriptions. Is it possible that these inscriptions were designed and carried out by writers and craftsmen – such as smiths and wrights – who had a basic literacy, but who were not specialists in broad-pen use from a scriptorium?

If we focus our attention on the Roman period as a whole, and examine the wide range of scripts for different purposes, written with different tools on different materials, that came



ILLUS 4 Ligatures in pre-canonical manuscripts

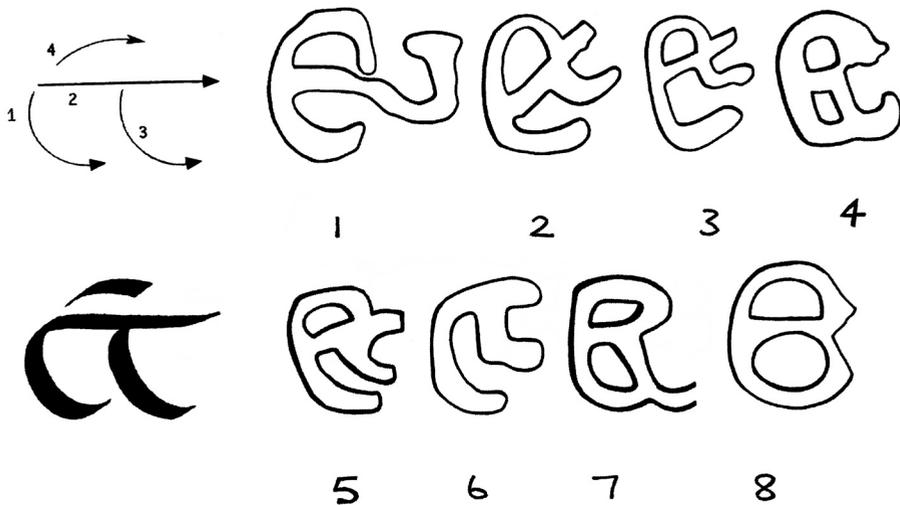


ILLUS 5 The pen-movements and pen angles of half-uncial in comparison to minuscule and the left-bow break of cursive hands like TCD MS. Ussher I

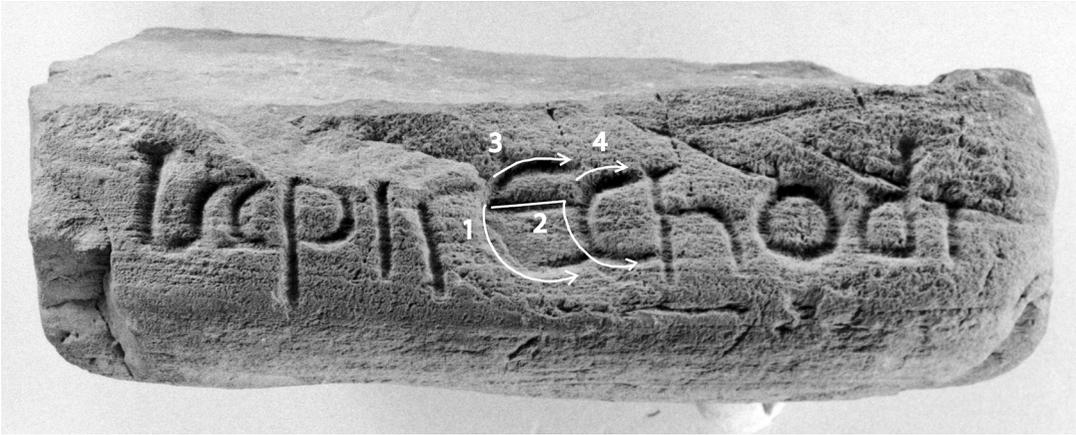
into Britain in the mid-first century, we see that the Roman script system was flexible and at its lowest level of common writing, simple. The majority of people who were capable of writing would have written in stylus on tablets, and the army records system was reliant on them: it is possible that penned calligraphic writing was the specialist practice of a much smaller number, engaged in the book trade. Bieler thought that the whole range of early Christian bookhands would have come into the early Irish church, from uncial down to the lowliest notational hands, and that, ‘Finally it stands to reason that in daily life churchmen in Ireland as elsewhere would write cursive’.¹⁶ Julian Brown has discussed the difficulty

of defining such a cursive and workaday hand, and has tried to clarify the confusing nomenclature. He described the carefully written type of exercises in *scrittura di base* that survive, then notes:

More numerous are the examples of the expert cursive script – called ‘quarter uncial’ in *CLA* and ‘cursive half-uncial elsewhere’, but better called ‘literary cursive’ – which was apparently the day to day handwriting of the professional scholar; presumably of the learned cleric; and presumably of the educated layman.¹⁷



ILLUS 6 The ‘et’ ligature, epigraphic and calligraphic, to show how far the cut version departs from calligraphy. Epigraphic examples 1 Llanwit Major 3; 2, 3 and 5, St Brides 1; 4 and 7, Merthyr Mawr 1; 6 Merthyr Mawr 2; 8 Llantwit Major 1. Taken from G. Charles-Edwards ‘The Palaeography of the Inscriptions’ Chapter 6 in *Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales* (Cardiff, 2005)



ILLUS 7 The 'Lapis Echodi' inscription. Copyright RCAHMS

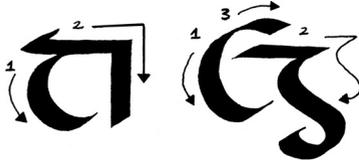
New Roman Cursive emerges from a relationship between Old Roman Cursive and wax tablet writing at about the time that Christian texts in continental half-uncial would have been coming into Britain; the cursive hands exhibit the tendency to ligature with loops. The ligatures that we see in our surviving pre-canonical Insular scripts are formed in the same way by the breaking of the left bow in bowed strokes to facilitate linkage by horizontal bars, and the persistent use of upward looped ligatures in the movement from one letter to the next (illus 4).

A great deal of our evidence for ligatured New Roman Cursive in Roman Britain is in uninflected linear writing, that is, made with a pointed instrument, on metal or wood. It must be emphasized that in order to carry out such ligaturing movements with a broad-edged pen on rough-surfaced Insular skins, a constant pen angle of 45 degrees or steeper must be adhered to. Very few of these rapid pen-movements are physically possible with the pen angle of half-uncial, that is to say near-horizontal (illus 5). New Roman Cursive features could only survive in minuscule with the slanted pen-angle. The strongest characteristic of the cursive ligatured **ec/cc** combination is the horizontal link that makes the cross-bar of the **e** conjoint with the lower quadrant of the bow of the **c** (illus 5). This

ligature is the longest-surviving one to transfer into epigraphy as the 'et' ligature, still being used in Welsh inscriptions to the end of Nash Williams' Group II inscriptions of AD 600–800 (illus 6).¹⁸

Among the Iona inscriptions the very finely cut 'Lapis Echodi' along the edge of a small seventh-century memorial slab is a rare example in stone of the kind of mixed alphabet, irregularly spaced and ligatured letterforms that could have been written by a writer used to cursive in the period before grand formal half-uncial, well spaced, had come to be seen as the correct hand for monumental lettering (illus 7). Iona has several examples of the later type of very wide-spaced half-uncial inscriptions which can be compared with those of Clonmacnoise, whose lettering has been analysed and classified into Phases i–iv by Macalister.¹⁹ In this type of inscription we can perceive the practised hands of scribes: they are aware of the play of thick and thin strokes, they sometimes have calligraphic serifs leading in from the left, and letters do not ligature as they are so wide-spaced.

It can be seen that inscriptions like 'Echodi' belong to an earlier phase than these clearly calligraphic, well-spaced examples mentioned above. This would be consistent with the scribal calligraphic type coming into fashion



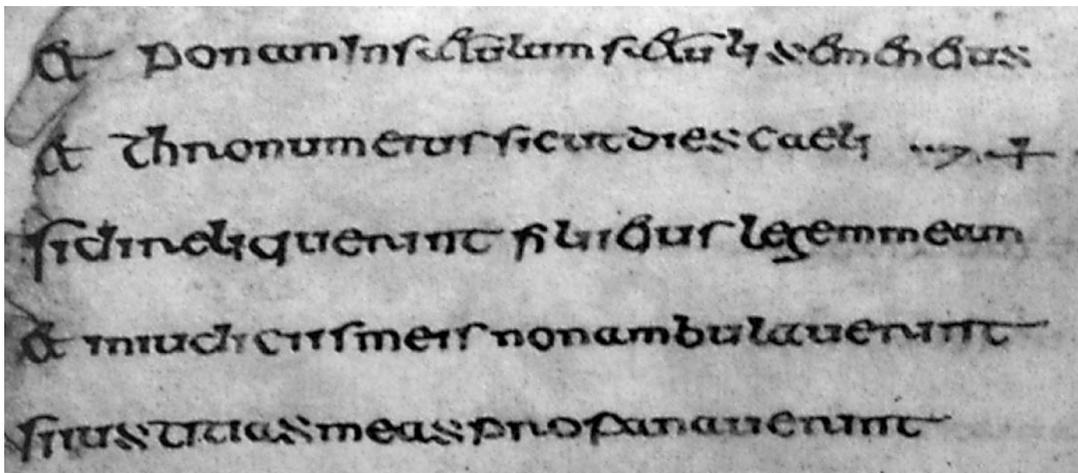
ILLUS 8 Ligatures of the Catamanus inscription

contemporaneously with Phase I half-uncial in the last quarter of the seventh century. The ‘Echodi’ inscription is a rare survivor of a homogeneous lettering style having mixed-alphabet letter forms with ligaturing in the form of conjoint strokes that do not persist into canonical Insular half-uncial as it was later cut on stone. The Anglesey Catamanus inscription, *ECMW* No 13 of c AD 625, also uses cursive ligatures (illus 8).

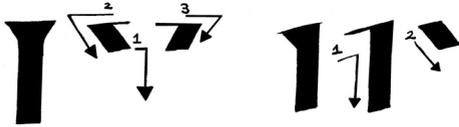
The nearest parallel to the opening assemblage of strokes in the first three letters of ‘Echodi’ is seen in the Cathach, where, in the diminuendo passages to mark the opening of each new psalm three letters are combined in a form of display that predates the first geometrical display letters of the Book of Durrow, c 675. This does suggest an inter-relationship between display writing styles in a manuscript and an inscription from

the same place at roughly the same time. In the Cathach, although an effort is made to write the text in a triangular-seriffed half-uncial, the underlying natural hand is a cursive minuscule that sometimes emerges within the text, and sometimes in the display sections (illus 9). The inscribed letters ‘Lapis Echodi’ which are linear and uninflected show a similar uncertain combination, with an attempt at a serif on **l** and **d** that is not calligraphic, rather that is centred over the downstroke instead of drawn in from the left (illus 10).

An important identification of the style of opening display letter, ligatured in triplets, has been made by Julian Brown. He recognises it as a Late Antique habit in ‘the informal script of Latin-speaking scholars during the last two centuries of Antiquity’. Describing a Bobbio grammatical text (*CLA* 3,397 a) where an enlarged letter enters into a ligature with the next – reducing in size until the normal body-height of the text letter has been returned to – Brown acknowledges that this habit, which became the Insular ‘diminuendo’, is to be seen in the Springmount Tablets (*CLA*, *Suppl* 1684), TCD MS. Ussher I (*CLA* 2,271) and the St Gallen Isidore (*CLA* 7,995).²⁰ As a model for use on stone this ligatured style had serious



ILLUS 9 The hand of the Cathach, writing minuscule within a pre-canonical half-uncial text



ILLUS 10 Epigraphic symmetrical line endings and calligraphic asymmetrical

disadvantages, easily giving rise to accidental spalling, and the alternative choices of disparate angular forms or the later wide-spaced half-uncial would represent a logical and practical improvement.

To sub-divide the category of Nash-Williams's Group I and II 'half-uncial' into specific sub-groups, taking advantage of the precise definitions of Phase I and Phase II, and establishing the precise characteristics of those more primitive cursive minuscule letterforms that precede them, could bring some order where there is great chronological uncertainty. Particularly this is needed in the borderlands between Groups I and II. John Higgitt's perception that specific contemporaneous manuscript/epigraphic practice may be localized, even if only in a very few cases, is helpful. Inscriptions in Scotland contemporary with Nash-Williams's Group I of the fifth to the seventh centuries show many similarities with them. The close analysis of the 'Lapis Echodi' inscription using the Cathach for comparanda shows that even in line-endings and ligatures we might discover a means of timing that mysterious progression from debased Roman capitals, via cursive minuscule to a formal half-uncial, that was achieved between AD 400 and AD 650. As our British evidence in this period is overwhelmingly epigraphic rather than palaeographic, the question of identifying the type of workshop milieu from which this evidence emerged is crucial. Both the Iona 'Echodi' inscription and the Anglesey Catamanus inscription of c AD 625 show similar signs of bold and eclectic adaptation of non-calligraphic letterforms. To look outwith the

scriptorium might give some new bearings in a fog-bound area.

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NOTES

- 1 Bischoff 1990, 83–90.
- 2 Brown 1993a, 206–9.
- 3 Gordon 1956.
- 4 Forsyth forthcoming.
- 5 Okasha 1993; Davies et al 2000.
- 6 Higgitt 1995, 229.
- 7 Fisher 2001, 128.
- 8 Bieler 1949, 275.
- 9 Lowe *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, II, xi.
- 10 Thomas 1993, 44.
- 11 Nash-Williams 1950, 12–13.
- 12 Susini 1973, 12, 21.
- 13 Charles-Edwards 2002.
- 14 Brown 1993a, 206–10.
- 15 Brown 1993a, 238.
- 16 Bieler 1949, 273.
- 17 Brown 1993b, 228.
- 18 Taken from Charles-Edwards 2005 'The Palaeography of the Inscriptions' in Chapter 6 *Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales*, vol 1. Cardiff, 2005.
- 19 Macalister 1909, 80; *ECMS Iona* Nos 1–4.
- 20 Brown 1993c, 203–4.

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MS. 57 The Book of Durrow
MS. 58 The Book of Kells
- Dublin National Museum*
SA 1914, The Springmount Bog Tablets
- Durham Cathedral Library*
MS. A.II.10 Gospels, fragment
- London British Library*
MS. Cotton Nero D.IV The Lindisfarne Gospels
- St Gallen Stiftsbibliothek*
MS. 1339 a.1. Isidorus, Etymologiae