

# A fragment of a Pictish symbol-bearing slab with carving in relief from Mail, Cunningsburgh, Shetland

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## ABSTRACT

*A fragment of carved stone found in March 2008 is likely to be part of a Pictish cross-slab of 8th- to 10th-century date. It bears a double disc and Z-rod within a frame and part of an interlace design, carved in incision and low relief. This is the fifth symbol-bearing monument known from Shetland and the only one to bear this particular symbol. Each disc is infilled with a cross of arcs, but it is uncertain whether this is purely decoration or whether it has Christian meaning.*

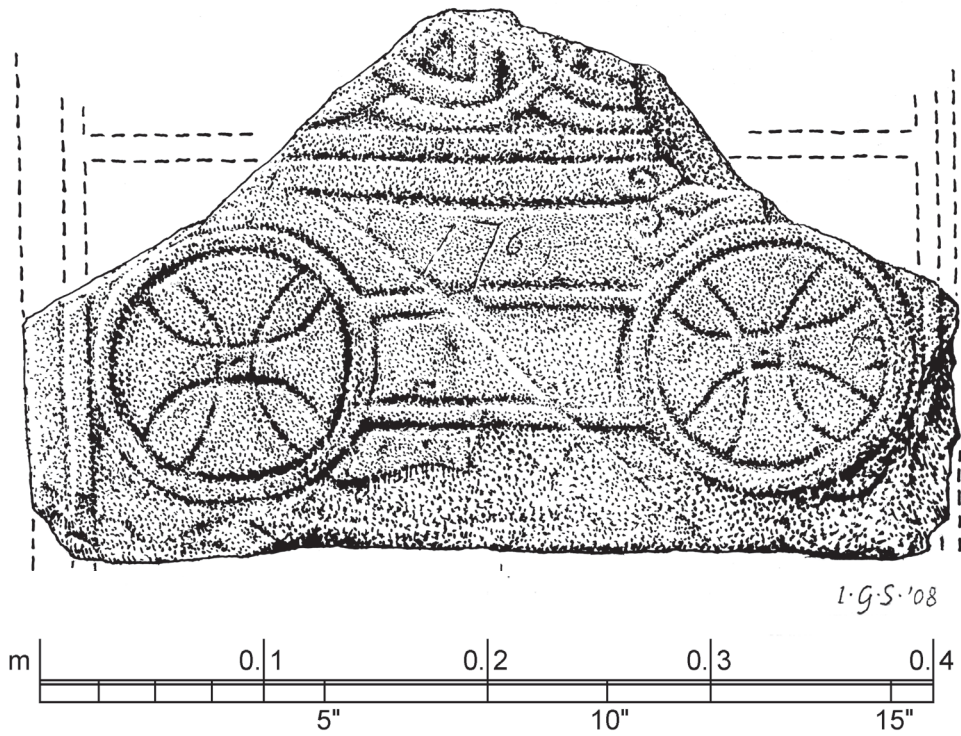
## INTRODUCTION

A fragment of a Pictish symbol-bearing slab was found on 1 March 2008 by Malcolm Smith of South Voxter, Cunningsburgh, while digging a grave in the graveyard at Mail, Cunningsburgh, Dunrossness in Shetland (NGR HU 43302790; The Shetland Museum accession no. A42.2008). The slab was found amongst many other stones at a depth of about 2m, immediately west of the site of the medieval church and close to the spot where the stone bearing the incised wolf-headed figure was found in 1992 (Turner 1994). Malcolm Smith reported that it is only in this area of the graveyard that stones are encountered below ground level, typically in profusion, whereas elsewhere there are no stones. The grave from which the new carving was recovered is about 7.3m north of the south wall of the graveyard and 5.5m from the west wall. The slab of fine-grained red sandstone measures 0.45m by 0.27m and is 34–7mm in thickness, and it is no. 5 in the catalogue of carved stones from Shetland (Scott & Ritchie 2009). The nearest source of sandstone is the Helli Ness area to the north-east of Mail, but it is also available to the south at Sandwick.

This is the most recent in a series of discoveries in the Mail area that relate to Pictish and Norse times. The fragment is part of what was once a large slab, although its width is unlikely to have been much larger than the surviving width of 0.45m, and it may have been cut down deliberately into a roughly pedimental shape (illus 1 & 2). The date of 1769 has been added in shallow and informal incised figures, and this may have been the date at which the stone was modified, perhaps to serve as a foot-stone for a grave, with the date referring to other information on a contemporary memorial at the head of the grave. If the slab was reused as a grave-marker, the choice of this particular portion of the stone may have been guided by the cruciform decoration within the two discs, which could be seen as the Christian cross of arcs. Alternatively, the entire slab may have been reused as a gravestone, perhaps with initials carved on the upper part of the slab, and later broken into fragments. The depth at which the surviving fragment was found suggests that it was subsequently placed in the bottom of a new grave.

The original slab was probably a relatively tall and narrow slab, similar in width both to

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ILLUS 1 Fragment of carved stone from Mail, Cunningburgh (drawn by and © Ian G Scott)



ILLUS 2 Fragment of carved stone from Mail (photographed by and © Brian Smith)

a fragment of an ogham-inscribed slab also from Mail (Scott & Ritchie no. 53) and to the Papil cross-slab (no. 29). The Mail fragment is carved on one face within plain frames of which parts of two survive, and it is impossible to be certain which way up the fragment should be seen. The reverse is plain and undressed, and the surviving portion of the left-hand edge is plain but dressed. There is part of a panel of interlace set above a panel containing a double disc and Z-rod symbol, one of the most common Pictish symbols. There is an unexpected angle to one of the strands of interlace in the centre of the surviving portion, which makes an abrupt turn rather than continuing under the adjacent strand, and thus reconstruction of the overall design of the panel is difficult. The Z-rod and the interior decoration of the discs are carved with a single incised line. The surviving portion of interlace and its adjacent frame are carved in relief. The shape of the double disc is defined by two loosely parallel lines creating an effect of false relief. Such mixtures of technique are common in Pictish sculpture. What remains of the Z-rod with its upper terminal is also incised. The surface of the stone has flaked away beneath the double disc and the lower horizontal bar of the Z-rod has largely been lost, but there is a suggestion of a leaf-shaped terminal beneath the left-hand disc.

This is the first example of a double disc and Z-rod symbol on a stone monument in Shetland and indeed north of the Dornoch Firth, although the double disc symbol without a Z-rod occurs sporadically between the Dornoch Firth and Orkney (Mack 1997: 6–7). The double disc and Z-rod symbol is found in Shetland on small stone discs from Jarlshof and Eswick (nos 17 & 21). On such portable artefacts, however, the Z-rod always crosses the bar at right angles, whereas on monuments it crosses at an oblique angle, as on the Mail fragment. The carving was carried out by means of pecking, probably with a punch and mallet, and there has been little attempt to smooth the resultant U-shaped grooves.

Framed animal and figurative motifs are a feature of the carving of the cross-slabs from Papil and Bressay (nos 29 & 54), in the case of Papil forming the base of the cross. The Papil slab is, like the Mail fragment, decorated on one side only and of similar width. It is possible that the incomplete panel of interlace on the Mail fragment represents the base of a cross, in which case it might be seen as part of a cross-slab. It may be noted that the symbols on the slab from Breck of Hillwell (no. 2) were carved towards the foot of the stone and that there are decorative panels beneath the crosses on both Papil and Bressay cross-slabs. There are symbols beneath the crosses on a number of northern cross-slabs, for example three in Caithness: Skinnet 1, Latheron 1 and Ulbster (Blackie & Macaulay 1998: 10–12).

The treatment of the surviving terminal of the Z-rod is restrained, which is in keeping with the geometric decoration of the discs. The leaf-shaped terminal is pointed, and there are just two basal spirals, with no other decoration along the shaft. Nor is there is a spandrel at the angle of the Z-rod as is common on Z-rods elsewhere.

The decoration within the two discs is unusual. It consists in each case of four intersecting arcs, with a dot in the centre of the intersection. The carving appears to be contemporary with the outline of the discs and is similarly deeply cut. An arc of seven peck marks near the top of the right-hand disc appears to have been a mistake on the part of the sculptor, who quickly realized that the arc should start farther to the right. Despite the resemblance of this design to some versions of the Christian cross, there is some doubt as to whether the Christian symbol was intended here, because there is no known example of a Pictish symbol incorporated into the Christian cross, let alone a Christian cross incorporated into a Pictish symbol. The fact that symbols appear on cross-slabs indicates that they were not incompatible with the teachings of the Church, but they and the cross were kept

separate in the overall design of the cross-slab. The construction of the heads of the crosses on the Papil and Bressay cross-slabs was based on similar crosses of arcs and may even have inspired the Mail design, but this similarity cannot be taken as proof that the Mail discs contain Christian crosses. The crosses on the Papil and Bressay slabs are accentuated by decoration between the arms of the cross, but the reverse of the Bressay slab has a single disc with arc decoration very similar to that on the Mail discs. There is no precise parallel for a double disc decorated like Mail, but the cross of arcs within a circle on the cross-slab from Skinnet, Caithness, is very similar, even to the central 'dot', which Henderson and Henderson suggest should be seen as representing the fastening rivet on a metal cross (2004: 161–2, fig 233). The Mail discs are linked with a straight bar rather than the concave-sided bars more common on cross-slabs, although the Mail bar is slightly wider at one end than the other. Perhaps the best parallel, particularly because it is local, is the central cross of arcs within a circle created by the multi-cruciform design on the rounded base of silver bowl no. 1 in the St Ninian's Isle hoard (Small et al 1973: 47, pl XVII; Henderson & Henderson 2004: 109–10, fig 156). That there was an interest in Shetland in crosses within circles may also be seen on four other silver bowls from the hoard (conveniently drawn for comparison in Henderson & Henderson 2004: figs 150–5) and three stone discs from Jarlshof (Scott & Ritchie 2009: nos 23, 25 & 27), all based on the simple equal-armed linear cross. The simplicity of these designs makes an attribution to Christian influence uncertain.

If the Mail double disc is seen as decorated with Christian crosses, this fragment has a huge importance in being the sole example of physical combination of Pictish symbol and Christian symbol. In terms of date, the stone is unlikely to have been carved before the late 8th century, and, as it is hard to envisage the use of symbols continuing after the full Norse

settlement of Shetland in the 10th century, a 8th- to 10th-century bracket may be suggested for its creation.

## MAIL, CUNNINGSBURGH

Situated on the south-east coast of Shetland, Mail lies in a fertile area with good soil and access to fresh water, with a sheltered natural harbour at Aith Voe and steatite quarries along the Catpund Burn that are known to have been in use from prehistoric times into the Norse period. It is part of an area known by the Scandinavian place-name of Cunningsburgh, or Coningsburg as it was formerly, which means 'king's fort', and it seems likely that this area was a power-centre in Pictish times.<sup>1</sup> The only surviving candidate for a Pictish royal fort is Burranness at Mail, a tidal islet that was once linked to the mainland (the name means 'promontory of the fort') and on which are the robbed remains of an earlier Iron Age broch (RCAHMS 1946: no. 1187). There are settlement remains on the adjacent mainland and extending beneath the graveyard of Mail (NGR HU 43242792), and a number of carved stones have been found in or near this ancient graveyard, including ogham and runic inscriptions (nos 50, 51, 53 & 76 in Scott & Ritchie 2009) and three Pictish symbol-bearing stones (nos 5, 6 & 50). A small hooded figurine of Pictish date (no. 14) was found amongst the ruins of the Burranness broch (Ritchie et al 2006: 61–3). Two more runic inscriptions came from the west side of Aith Voe, about 1km from Mail (nos 73 & 74; Barnes & Page 2006: 117–31).

Blaeu's *Atlas* of 1654 places a church on the west side of Aith Voe (Irvine 2006: pl 8), labelled S. Pauls K, which Cant identified as the old church of Cunningsburgh 'probably at Mail' (1975: 19). However, its location on the 1654 map places it farther north and closer to the findspots of the two runic inscriptions (nos 73 & 74) as marked on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1880 near the farm of North Voxter. Two items of supporting evidence may

be cited in favour of this location. Firstly, a record exists from 1603 of the old kirk at Mail having been misused as a cow byre (Goudie 1879: 134–5), confirming that it is likely to have been out of ecclesiastical use prior to Pont’s survey of 1592 upon which the Blaeu map was based. Secondly, the more northerly of the two ‘Sculptured Stones’ marked on the OS map at North Voxter is said to have been found ‘close to the old burial ground’ (Goudie 1879: 145), and this may have been the location of the church marked on Blaeu’s map. There was also another burial ground closer to Mail at South Voxter (RCAHMS 1946: no. 1184). Unfortunately, the ministers responsible for the Dunrossness entries in the *Statistical Account* of the 1790s and 1841 were not apparently interested in antiquities and have nothing helpful to relate even on the subject of their earlier churches. Following Southesk (1884: 206), Allen and Anderson attribute the provenance of a fragment of symbol stone with an ogham inscription to ‘near an ancient church, Mail’s Air, Aith’s Voe’ (no. 50; Allen & Anderson 1903: 16–17, Cunningsburgh no. 2). Mail Ayre is marked on the OS map of 1880 as a little beach to the east of the South Voxter burial ground. There seems, however, to have been some confusion over the use of the name Mail’s Air or Mail Ayre, for Goudie uses the name for the Sands of Mail to the west of the Mail burial ground (1904: 67; 1912: 67), which is how the name is used today (Brian Smith pers comm). The location of the name may have shifted periodically to reflect the sandiest beach of the time. The 1880 map distinguishes clearly, however, between the Sands of Mail to the west of Burranness, the Beach of Mail to the east of Burranness and Mail Ayre to the east of the next promontory with ‘Site of Burial Ground’, reflecting the information given to the Ordnance Survey officers at the time and recorded in the OS Name-Book. It may be noted that Barnes and Page, in trying to sort out the location of the Cunningsburgh runic stones, suggested that the symbol/ogham stone (no. 50)

was found at North Voxter rather than South Voxter (2006: 118–19). At this remove, and with such sketchy records, the precise provenance of this interesting stone must remain uncertain, but South Voxter seems to the present author the most likely.

In Norse times, the Cunningsburgh area provided an important economic resource as well as demonstrating the shift in power to the incoming Norse settlers. That resource was soapstone, or steatite, outcrops of which were exploited along the Catpund Burn (Turner 1998: 96, 108–11) and used to make a variety of vessels, weights and other equipment for local and export markets. To date, no Viking Age structures have been identified around Mail, despite the plethora of *garth* place-names that indicate the sites of former Norse farms, but a bone strap-end and part of a hog-backed antler comb of Norse type have been found close to the old burial ground (Watt 1993).

#### PICTISH SYMBOL STONES AND SYMBOL-BEARING CROSS-SLABS IN SHETLAND

Counting the incised wolf-headed figure as an example of the Hendersons’ formidable man symbol (2004: 123–5), the new Mail fragment is the fifth certain Pictish symbol-bearing stone from Shetland (the others are Sandness no. 1, Mail nos 6 & 50, Breck of Hillwell no. 2). There are also two fragments that are probably from symbol-bearing cross-slabs, one from Uyea (no. 4) and the other of uncertain provenance but very similar in style to that from Uyea (no. 3), both of which have spiral motifs on one side and parts of possible rectangle symbols on the other. Despite their lack of symbols, the two elaborately decorated cross-slabs from Papil (no. 29) and Bressay (no. 54) are undoubtedly Pictish in concept (though Bressay is probably post-Pictish in date), and there is plenty of other evidence for Pictish activities in the form of parts of slab-shrines, decorated discs, painted

pebbles, slate sketches and structures (Ritchie 1997; 2003; Turner 1994: 85–100). Among the surviving artefacts, symbols are found only on stone discs, apart from a crude crescent and V-rod on a flat pebble from Old Scatness (no. 9). Two discs, one from Jarlshof (no. 17) and one from Eswick (no. 21), exhibit the double disc and Z-rod symbol. The absence of symbols from the decoration of painted pebbles probably reflects the fact that these originated in pre-Pictish times. The repertoire of symbols known to have been in use in Shetland thus includes the rectangle (Sandness, Uyea, Mail no. 50, Breck of Hillwell), the double-disc and Z-rod (Mail no. 5, Jarlshof no. 17, Eswick), the arch (Sandness), the mirror (Breck of Hillwell), the crescent and V-rod (Old Scatness), the crescent (Breck of Hillwell) and the formidable man (Mail no. 5). Of these, the rectangle and the double-disc and Z-rod were apparently the most common symbols. There are also examples from Old Scatness of carvings of single animals in profile that may also have been used as symbols (Dockrill, forthcoming): one a crude rendering of a boar in fighting mood with his bristles erect, and the other an exceptionally fine depiction of a bear (nos 9 & 7). The art historical significance of this classic Pictish animal is discussed in Henderson and Henderson (2004: 229). A fragmentary pebble, also from Old Scatness, shows part of a salmon (no. 8).

Of the two most commonly used symbols in Shetland, the double-disc and Z-rod is otherwise found in mainland Scotland between the Firths of Forth and Dornoch with outliers in Skye, while the rectangle is found primarily north of the Dornoch Firth with an outlier in Benbecula (Mack 1997: 6, 13). These links between Shetland and the Hebrides echo those apparent in the distribution of ogham inscriptions, painted pebbles and figure-of-eight houses (Forsyth 1995; Brundle et al 2003: 96–7). The distribution of corner-post stone shrines provides a clear link between Shetland and east mainland Scotland, and Trench-

Jellicoe has drawn attention to common ideas of decoration, in particular to a complex artistic association between the Bressay cross-slab and the late 10th- or 11th-century Kilduncan cross-slab from Fife (2005: 540–2). It is clear that in Pictish times Shetland had close cultural links with both mainland Scotland and Western Scotland and may, like Orkney, have had its own regional king within the overall Pictish kingdom, and that these links survived into Norse times.

## CONCLUSION

The new fragment from Mail is an important addition to the growing corpus of Pictish material from Shetland. As an ancient burial ground that is still in use, Mail holds the possibility of more such finds in the future, even perhaps more of the same slab. It seems likely that the slab from which this fragment came was a cross-slab, whether or not the cross of arcs in the double disc is seen to be Christian in concept. Thus, while the Mail man carving and the Mail figurine may have belonged to an early Pictish phase of the Burray settlement, the new fragment may imply the presence of a church and graveyard dating as early as the eighth to tenth centuries, a sister church in southern Shetland to those at Pabil, St Ninian's Isle and Bressay.

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## NOTE

- 1 There is some evidence that as recently as the 16th century the name Cunningsburgh denoted a more restricted area in what is now known as South Cunningsburgh (Brian Smith pers comm).

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