

The context of the Dupplin cross: a reconsideration

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ABSTRACT

The recent discovery of a Latin inscription on the Dupplin Cross allows a new reading which augments earlier interpretations of the monument. The name of Constantine – king of Pictland and Dalriada – allows the cross to be dated to the period before AD 820, and identifies the cross as possibly the earliest historically dated example of Insular sculpture in Scotland.

When we described the political context of the results of excavation and aerial reconnaissance at Forteviot (Alcock & Alcock 1992, 236–41), we included an account of the Dupplin cross and its chronology, and speculated on the significance of its proximity to the royal site of Forteviot. At that time, the weathered inscription on the cross had not been recognized. In consequence, the only apparent indicator of date was the absence from the cross of ‘Pictish’ symbols, such as are common on the sculptured stones of eastern Scotland. The disappearance of these symbols from the sculptor’s repertory had generally been attributed to the political and social changes initiated on the accession of the Alpin dynasty c AD 850. It was considered that this event created an art-historical horizon (Stevenson 1955, 122; Henderson 1975, 11; but note Curle’s emphasis that this was a gradual process (1940, 105), and Henderson’s more subtle analysis in 1978).

In response to this concept of a chronological horizon, we assigned the Dupplin cross, and also the Forteviot arch, to the period of the Alpin dynasty’s takeover of Pictland. Moreover, within this historical context – which we described as ‘a special crisis for royalty in eastern Scotland’ – we attributed a precise symbolic purpose to the cross: namely, that a ‘public monumental statement was needed; and that was made by the erection of a carved high cross at Dupplin’. In particular, the David scenes on the cross referred ‘to the divine sanction of royal power’, while other panels, including the most prominent, stressed the material sanction of ‘naked armed might’.

That iconographic analysis may still stand; but the recognition of a Latin inscription by Dr Katherine Forsyth (1992, 283; 1995), makes it necessary to reconsider our suggestion that the royalty celebrated on the cross was Kenneth or his successors. ‘It is tempting’, Dr Forsyth wrote, ‘to identify this [inscription] as a reference to Custantin (ie Constantine), son of Fergus (or Wuirguist). He assumed the kingship of Pictland in 789, and that of Dalriada by 811’ (Forsyth 1992). He died in 819/20. Although the rest of the inscription is too weathered to be read, it may be concluded that, because Custantin’s name stands at its head, he must be the subject of a sentence which continued ‘erected this cross/monument . . .’.

In other words, we have here a cross with a good historical date not later than 820. But it bears no Pictish symbols; and moreover the principal figures – a royal horseman and his foot soldiers – are stiffer than those commonly found on Pictish Class II stones and assigned to the later eighth and

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earlier ninth centuries. The Dupplin cross is indeed a characteristic Class III stone in terms of the received classification. We can conclude only that some Class III stones do antedate the conventional 850 boundary; but this is not to say that the carving of crosses with Pictish symbols ceased around 820. And there is the further caveat, that we should be cautious about linking artistic developments to dynastic changes.

The Dupplin cross, with its historically-based dating bracket, gives us the first real date in Insular sculpture. But it is a date in isolation (with the possible exception of the Drosten stone: Clancy 1993). It certainly does not entitle us to say that by c 820 Pictish symbols had vanished throughout eastern Scotland, and lively pictorial sculpture had been replaced by a stiff formalism.

Finally, the royal symbolism of the Dupplin cross must be affirmed, but now with a new element: the name of the ruler who is celebrated. Behind the garbled forms of CUSTANTIN, Castantin and Cusaintin we can read the Roman Imperial name of Constantine. The Constantine of the Dupplin cross appears to have been the first ruler north of the Forth/Clyde isthmus to have borne – or to have adopted – that name. It is nothing new to suggest that some of the riders on the sculptured stones of



ILLUS 1 Dupplin Cross: left, panels with, top, largely eroded CUSTANTIN inscription; bottom, David with lamb, lion and bear; right, military displays of foot soldiers (© National Museums of Scotland)

eastern Scotland were kings (or rarely queens). At Dupplin we surely have a depiction of a royal equestrian, and one with a most distinguished name.

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The essay above was written some years ago, as an immediate follow-up to Dr Forsyth's reading of the Latin inscription on the Dupplin Cross. Since then, analysis of the secular and religious implications of the cross has continued, developing earlier discussions from Alcock (1982, 215–29; and references therein) and Alcock & Alcock (1992, 223–7). The Editor has most generously agreed that we might briefly summarize our present interpretation in four propositions.

(1) Dr Forsyth's reading of the Dupplin Latin inscription implies that either Constantine son of Fergus erected the cross, or that he was commemorated by it.

(2) The style of the martial figures at Dupplin are comparable with the figures of a potentate accompanied by two, or more probably three, lesser persons on the fragmentary chancel arch from a lost church at Forteviot, implying broad contemporaneity between the two.

(3) The foundation-legend of St Andrews relates that the three sons of Oengus son of Fergus, brother and successor to Constantine, met St Regulus, bearer of the relics of St Andrew, at Forteviot; and subsequently Oengus founded a church (*basilica*), and set up a cross there.

(4) The written version of the foundation-legend is late, and has been regarded as being of dubious worth; but the contemporary epigraphic and stylistic evidence authenticates the account of the building of a church and erection of cross by one or other of the sons of Fergus.

If these propositions are accepted, they reveal the artistic importance of the sons of Fergus in the two decades around AD 820.

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