

A late medieval West Highland cross-head in Aberdeen

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The incomplete cross-head described in this note forms part of an exhibit of medieval sculpture in the Anthropological Museum at Marischal College, University of Aberdeen (catalogue no 17392). Although no details of its provenance are known, it may be identified on stylistic grounds as a product of the late medieval West Highland workshops described by Steer and Bannerman (1977).

The fragment (pl 34) is carved from grey-green schist containing occasional veins of carbonate, which from superficial examination appears to be identical to the chlorite-schist, obtained from the Loch Sween area of mid-Argyll, that was used for the majority of West Highland carvings (Steer & Bannerman 1977, 195–200). It measures 80 mm in thickness and 0.52 m in height including the top 0.15 m of the shaft, whose width at the junction with the disc is 0.17 m. The disc-head has a diameter of 0.37 m and the original span across the arms was about 0.56 m, but this has been reduced to 0.45 m by the loss of the right arm. The top arm has also been broken off but the left arm is intact and is of double-lugged form, incorporating two ovoid projections conjoined at the base. On each face there is a continuous flat edge-moulding 18 mm in width and bevelled on the inside to a depth of 20 mm to the almost flat field from which the carving rises in false relief.

On the front (pl 34a) there is the figure of the Crucified Saviour, set in the disc-head except for the lower parts of the legs which extend into the shaft. The figure is placed frontally, with the head slightly inclined to the right and the arms fully extended and raised a little above the horizontal. The rood is not represented, but nail-holes are clearly indicated in the crossed feet and palms of the open hands. Round the head is a plaited moulding, probably the crown of thorns, above shoulder-length hair, while a beard is represented by a stippled band running down from the ears to below the mouth which, like the eyes and nose, is lightly incised. The front of the body is somewhat worn, but the incised ribs are well preserved at the sides, as are the pleats of the knee-length loin-cloth, which extend on to the flat background. In each of the four quadrants of the disc there is a conical boss, divided into five segments by lines spiralling from the centre. The left arm of the cross-head is filled by a curving stem terminating in an oval leaf in each of the projecting lugs.

The back of the disc (pl 34b) is filled by two pairs of confronted lions set almost symmetrically. The upper pair has sheared off, except for the under-parts and hindquarters of the sinister animal, whose tail ends in a trefoil leaf, but the lower pair is almost intact. Each animal raises one forepaw to meet that of the other, and although the facial features are worn, the ears show that the heads are turned to the spectator. The tail of the dexter beast is destroyed, except for traces of a foliate terminal above its back, but that of the other animal curves up and divides, one branch ending in three stalked leaves above its back and the other branch in a trefoil leaf placed close to that of the surviving animal of the upper pair. Each lug of the surviving cross-arm is filled by a demi-palmette leaf linked to the edge-moulding. At the top of the shaft, and with its heads extending into the disc, there is a double-headed eagle with its wings spread and its tail visible below the splayed legs, which end in clawed feet.

Both edges of the shaft have been decorated. On the right edge (pl 34c) there is a double-beaded

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three-cord plait which terminates in an unbeaded horizontal band below the junction with the disc-head leaving one strand unattached. On the left edge (pl 34d), an undulating plant-stem with demi-palmette leaves continues from the shaft on to the lower segment of the disc-head, where it terminates below the side-arm.

Although it displays some unusual features, there can be no doubt of the West Highland origin of the Aberdeen cross-head. The disc-head is characteristic of late medieval crosses from that area, although the unique double-lugged form of the cross-arm was perhaps influenced by a different type, such as the Inveraray Cross with its fleur-de-lis terminals (Steer & Bannerman 1977, fig 7.4, pl 12c), or the cross-heads of unusual form, one now damaged and the other lost, at Saddell, Kintyre, and Kilmore, Dervaig, Mull (White 1873, pl xii; RCAMS 1980, fig 174). In style and attitude the figure of Christ is again typical of West Highland carvings (Richardson 1927), and while the absence of a rood is uncommon, it can be paralleled in the fine 16th-century cross at Kilmartin and in others of the same period from Kilbride and Taynuilt (*ibid*, figs 3, 5, 17-18), as well as in the Saddell cross mentioned above. The spiral-fluted bosses, presumably intended to represent stars, are not found in this position in other cross-heads, although the sun and moon appear in some other carvings (Steer & Bannerman 1977, pls 27B, D, 32), but formally they seem to be inspired by the bosses or pellets often found in the armpits of Early Christian crosses in the West Highland area, such as the cross-slab from Killean, Kintyre, in Campbeltown Museum (RCAMS 1971, fig 139, & pl 42E).

In seeking to localize the Aberdeen cross-head more closely, the most helpful feature is the decoration of the edges. Most West Highland crosses had plain edges, although in the Campbeltown Cross they are carved with fine plant-stems (*ibid*, fig 118), but all four surviving cross-shafts of the Kintyre school (*ibid*, Nos 281(1), 285(2 & 3), 296(2)) are decorated on both edges with frets, interlace and plant stems. The MacEachern cross-shaft in Kilkerran churchyard and that at Saddell both include sections of three-cord plait (White 1873, pls viii, xxxix), which in the former has one strand stopped against another, as in the Aberdeen carving, while in the cross-shaft from Kilchousland now in Campbeltown Museum (*ibid*, pl xv; RCAMS 1971, No 281(1)) both the plant stem and plait ornaments of the edges correspond closely to those of the Aberdeen cross-head, except that the plait is triple- and not double-beaded (Steer & Bannerman 1977, fig 10, nos 5-6). The Kilchousland cross-shaft provides a further point of comparison, for an unpublished surface-flake from the upper part of the shaft, which backed on to a lost fragment recorded by White, bears a sword rising in false relief from a flat background. A similar treatment can be seen in what remains of the head of the cross at Saddell, and it seems that in some of the crosses of the Kintyre school an open style of carving was favoured which contrasts with the crowded profusion of motifs on the graveslabs produced by the same workshop. A flat sunken field as a background for the Crucifixion also appears on a cross-head from Kilchoman, now in the Museum of Islay Life, Port Charlotte (Graham 1895, no 53; Richardson 1927, fig 10(2)), but this is a crude product, further removed from the mainstream of West Highland carving than the example under discussion.

Other features of the Aberdeen cross-head support its attribution to the Kintyre school, which was active from the second quarter to about the end of the 15th century (Steer & Bannerman 1977, 44-50). Thus the chubby lions with their foliated tails resemble those on the Kintyre graveslabs rather than the more agile beasts of the Iona and Loch Awe schools. Although most Kintyre animals occur singly, a confronted pair of lions with the forepaws joined in a similar attitude is found on the Kilchousland shaft (White 1873, pl xv), and pairs of rampant lions are carved on some of the graveslabs. The lightly incised facial features of the Crucified Saviour can also be matched in some of the Kintyre animals.

The prominence given to the two pairs of lions on the back of the cross-head is unparalleled in the corpus of West Highland carving, and along with the similarly unique double-headed eagle it raises the possibility of an heraldic significance. The latter creature does not appear in the armorials of West Highland families, but was recorded in 1610 as the crest of the Campbells of Loudoun, a family which since the early 15th century had been settled in Ayrshire (Johnston 1977, 149). If the principal workshop of the Kintyre school was at Saddell, as suggested by Steer and Bannerman (1977, 50), the transport of a cross to Ayrshire would be no more difficult than that of a graveslab to Nereabolls, Islay (*ibid*, 46), but there is no other evidence to support this tantalizing possibility of an extension of West Highland sculpture into southern Scotland. While a conventional heraldic shield is found on the Campbell of Lerags cross of 1516 at Kilbride, Lorn (*ibid*, pl 35D; Richardson 1927, fig 2), the back of the cross at Saddell shows that pseudo-heraldry was being used in the Kintyre school for decorative purposes, and the double-headed eagle should probably be regarded as one more example of the numerous fantastic creatures in the bestiary of the West Highland stone-carver.

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a Front



c Detail of right edge



b Back



d Detail of left edge