

The Dalston discoid marker

GEORGE THOMSON

Summary

A small, round, sandstone artefact found, but known for some time, in Dalston church is described and compared with similar objects from other parts of Europe. It is suggested that this example is most likely to be the head of a discoid gravemarker of the ninth- to twelfth-century, although alternatives including a churchyard cross fragment or gable finial are also considered. The probable significance of the eight-armed cross on the recto, representing regeneration or resurrection, and oak leaves on the verso, signifying longevity, is explained. This complex decoration makes it an artefact of some importance.

Introduction

Lying on a window ledge in St Michael's Church, Dalston (NGR NY 370501) there is a small, round, red sandstone artefact. The broken edge on part of the perimeter suggests that it was once part of a larger object. It measures 25.5cms in diameter and tapers top to bottom from 5cms to 7cms thick. The recto (assumed front face) has a central small, encircled, incised cross pattée in a recessed circle 4cms in diameter and a raised radial design of forked arms with cross bars. The verso is even more unusual with a raised rim 2cms wide and a raised design comprising a central incised cross pattée with arms measuring 5.2cms and a cross formed from four shapes that resemble oak leaves (Figures 1-4). Its location suggests that it has not been considered to be an artefact of any significance, although it was noted by Ryder who suggests, in his discourse on the medieval cross slab grave covers in Cumbria, that it may be a twelfth-century fragment.¹

If the Dalston stone is indeed a medieval discoid gravemarker it is an object of some importance. There are relatively few of these artefacts in Britain and those with complex designs are extremely rare. Only two other early discoid gravemarkers with such carving have been recorded in England, Scotland or Northern Ireland. One is at St Mary's Priory on Devenish Island, Co. Fermanagh (Fig. 5), thought to be medieval.² It is mounted on a wall with only one face of the stone visible. This is presumed to be the recto. A raised voided Greek cross occupies the central area. In two of the diametrically opposite quarters there are paired heads, probably skulls, and incised double scrolls within the triangles of the other two quarters. The raised outer rim has a repeated pattern of chevrons. The skulls and scrolls define an outer Greek cross that extends to the inner rim. The other marker was found in 2007 lying flat on the grass to the west of the building in the graveyard of Collace Parish Church in Kirkton of Collace, Kinrossie, Perthshire (NGR NO 197320). This is a worn and chipped, small, circular, carved stone cut from local red sandstone and pierced with a regular series of six holes (Figs. 6-7). It has a slightly bevelled perimeter with diagonal scores just



FIG. 1. The Dalston discoid marker – recto.



FIG. 2. The Dalston discoid marker – verso.

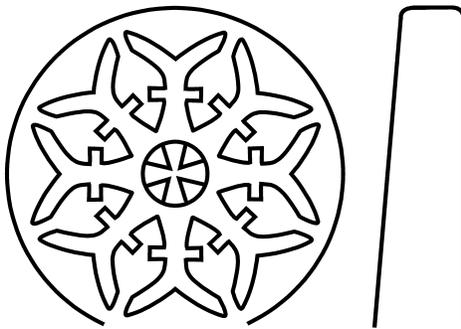


FIG. 3. The Dalston discoid marker – recto and section.

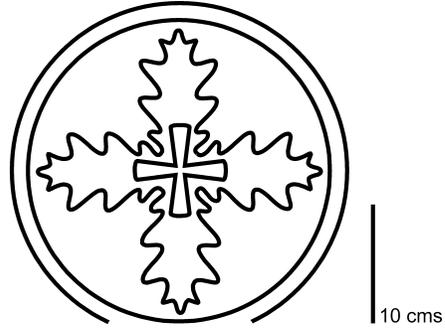


FIG. 4. The Dalston discoid marker – verso.

reaching the two faces, possibly representing rope work. One face, presumed to be the front face or recto, has a central low relief cross pattée within a circle. The six evenly spaced holes are positioned so that the upper and lower pair are precisely horizontal. A Seal of Solomon is cut in low relief, the slightly rounded points of the star extending just beyond the rim of the disc head. The points of another smaller star shape extend from the acute angles of the larger form, giving the impression of it lying below the larger one. The reverse side (verso) has a slightly larger encircled cross pattée in relief. A Seal of Solomon echoes that on the recto but has triplet decoration in the acute angles. Although very little of the shaft remains, there is a suggestion of very short projections (arms) near the junction with the disc head.³ Unfortunately this artefact has since disappeared from the churchyard.

There is no generally accepted agreement of what constitutes a discoid marker. Several views have been expressed, some inclusive others much more conservative. The

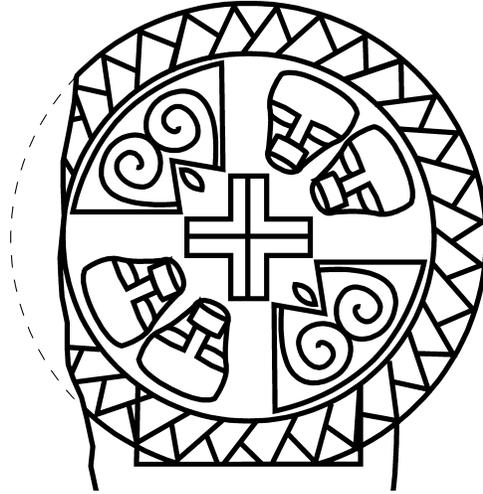


FIG. 5. Medieval discoid marker, Devenish Island, county Fermanagh, Ireland

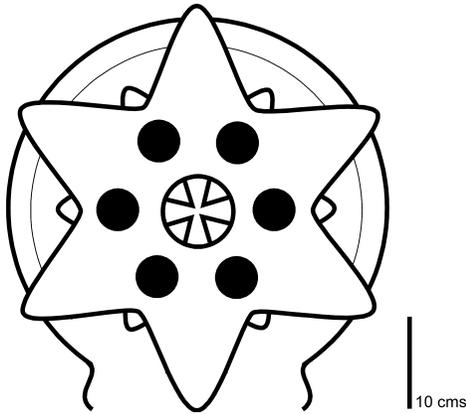


FIG. 6. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Collace, Perthshire, Scotland – recto.

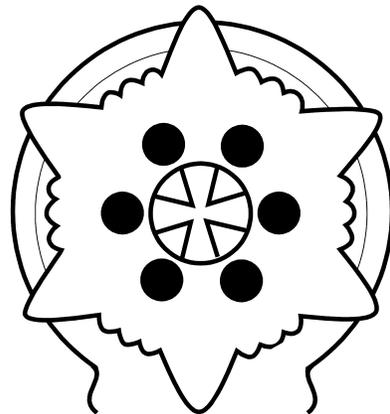


FIG. 7. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Collace, Perthshire, Scotland – verso.

difficulties of attributing artefacts to one of several groups of discoid markers and their relationship with crosses have been discussed at length by the author.⁴ Problems arise in terms of both function and morphology. Most of the disc head and shaft artefacts in Cornwall and Brittany, and several scattered elsewhere in England, are wayside markers. They have no connection whatsoever with funerary commemoration, even although some have been reused as headstones.⁵ The variety of gravemarkers that incorporate a significant circular element in their design is so extensive that it is questionable whether a single epithet is appropriate. Discoidal designs range from the simple round head and shaft types found throughout much of western Europe, to headstones in the eastern USA with more complex and possibly anthropomorphic

forms.⁶ Many European round head and shaft gravemarkers are Christian memorials, carved with crosses. Several early English examples of what are usually referred to as 'rounded-headed' markers have been described and illustrated, including Cumbrian ones from Ainstable and Cleator, none of which resemble the Dalston artefact.⁷ Lewis and Edwards and Redknap refer variously to 'ring-heads', 'circle-heads' and 'ring-and-circle heads' in their works on early-medieval Welsh sculptured stones.⁸ In west Ulster the cruciform design on some headstones often becomes more dominant and to these the term 'wheel-headed cross' is frequently applied. The Celtic high crosses are morphologically distinct being formed principally of a cross, usually comprising a vertical shaft continuing as part of the top arm, the circular element being very much secondary.⁹

The definition is, perhaps, more a matter of semantics, especially when most discoid gravestones are really only one type of head and shaft gravemarker. It is probably best to apply the term discoid to any of these objects in which the circle forms the most dominant part of the design.

Dating many of the medieval and early post-medieval discoid gravemarkers is almost as contentious as their taxonomy. This problem is discussed at length by Cramp in the context of Anglo-Saxon stone sculptures in the counties of Durham and Northumberland.¹⁰ Very few medieval discoid gravestones have inscriptions. An example from Nebian in the Hérault has lettering on the horizontal and vertical shaft of a cross.¹¹ Others from Saint-Guilhem-le-Desert, also in the Hérault, have lettering on the periphery of the disk and in four horizontal lines on the verso.¹² An interesting stone from La Panouse de Cernon, in the L'Aveyron has border lettering on the recto as well as on the edge.¹³ Virtually all of the discoid memorials in the French Languedoc date from the Middle Ages. Most are probably *circa* ninth- to twelfth-centuries with some of a later date.¹⁴ Many of the Portuguese and Spanish stones are also medieval but in Navarra, the Pyrénées Atlantique, and less commonly in other parts of northern Spain, there are discoid gravestones of the sixteenth to the nineteenth-century.¹⁵ There are modern ones, made since the 1970s, in the French Basque region, prompted by the work of the Lauburu Association, Bayonne to encourage the maintenance and development of Basque culture.¹⁶ Several similar medieval and early post-medieval discoid stones have been found in northern France, the Luxembourg region of Belgium (up to the early eighteenth-century), Norway and Sweden.¹⁷ Larger discoid gravemarkers of similar design have been found in Hessen, Germany and the Czech Republic.¹⁸ The wide distribution of discoid gravemarkers is not generally realised and new discoveries are regularly being made and reported.

The discoid stone on Devenish Island is the only medieval discoid marker in Ireland of which the author is aware. The greatest concentration of British medieval discoid gravemarkers is in Kent, where more than one hundred have been found, although many of these are fragmentary and we cannot be certain whether the incomplete ones are gravestones or wayside markers. These are catalogued and described by Stocker. Most of the Kent discoids are similar to the southern European artefacts. Although it is a relatively uncommon type of gravemarker, there are discoid gravestones of the seventeenth- to early nineteenth-centuries, scattered throughout England.¹⁹ Only

seven have been recorded from Scotland.²⁰ One of the greatest concentrations of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century discoid headstones is in Ireland, in the counties of Cavan, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone.²¹

The Dalston discoid stone was unearthed during the restoration of 1890. It was reported to have been found in the foundation of an Early English buttress.²² Few medieval records of Dalston survive. It is known that there was a church at Dalston in 1196 and this may have led Ryder to believe that the discoid marker was of that date. The post-medieval restoration was undertaken between 1743 and 1751, probably not the first.²³ It is believed that the original church was built of the same red sandstone from Shawk quarry.

Wilson comments that it was unusual for there to be no medieval graveslabs outside or inside the church.²⁴ Regrettably, this is the norm in most post-Reformation parish churches and churchyards with medieval origins. Only a few early funerary memorials survive in smaller churches throughout England, Scotland and Wales. He does note, however, that the raised ground round St Michael's is due to centuries of burials that probably go back to before the Middle Ages.

The design and its significance

Many of the southern European and some German medieval discoid gravemarkers are carved with patterns and designs that include circles, interweaving, astronomical signs and other geometric shapes (Figs. 8-9). The frequent occurrence of crosses, including *croix à virgules* ('*croix Basque*'), points to an obvious Christian association and some authors have suggested that those from the Languedoc have a connection with the Knights Templar or Cathares.²⁵ More rarely, natural forms occur including human heads, animals and plants. It is exceptional to find the complexity of design applied to the Devenish, Collace and Dalston stones on medieval discoid markers, other than on the southern European discoids, and especially on those in Pyrénées Atlantique, Portugal, northern Spain, and some in Germany.

Some elements of the Dalston design are found on south and central European discoid markers. The most obvious of these is the cross. The Christian significance of the two incised cross pattée is obvious. Much more interesting, and perhaps more significant, are the bifurcated ends of the radiating design on the recto of the Dalston artefact, reminiscent of the treatment of the cross on several discoid gravemarkers in Basse-Navarre and Soule (Figs. 10-11). This can also be seen on markers in Bohemia (Czech Republic), including one at Dorf Biov (Fig. 12). In the four-armed form this is a cross fourchée (fourchy or fourche), commonly used in heraldry. The eight-armed cross on the Dalston stone recto is the Baptismal cross or 'Wheel of the Year'. This comprises the Greek symbol chi (X), superimposed on a four equal-armed Greek cross. The eight arms of the cross symbolise regeneration or resurrection. Many baptismal fonts are eight-sided for this reason.

The four arms of the cross on the verso of the Dalston discoid stone can be interpreted as four oak leaves. Plant-based designs occur very infrequently on discoid markers.



FIG. 8. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Sorapuru, Basse-Navarre, Pyrénées Atlantique, France.

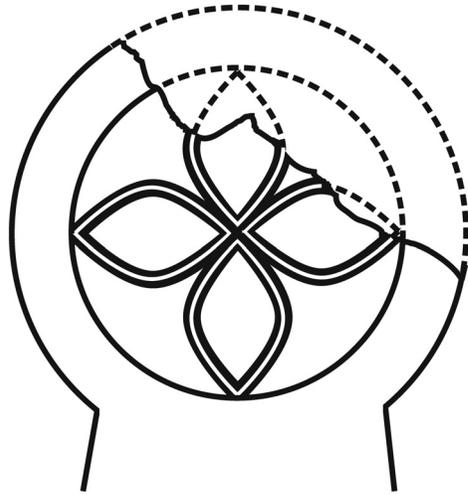


FIG. 9. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Butzbach, Hessen, Germany.

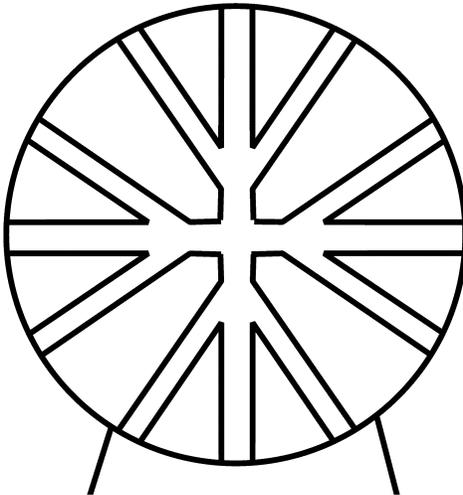


FIG. 10. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Ostabat-Asme, Basse-Navarre, Pyrénées Atlantique, France.

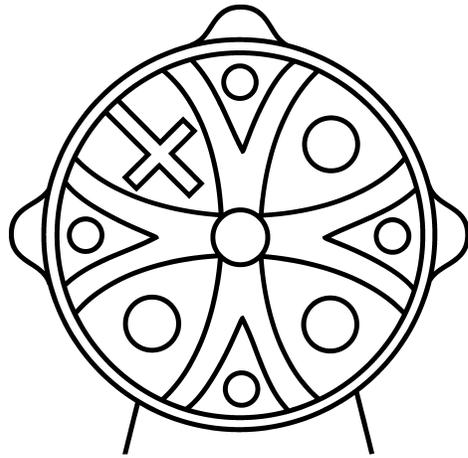


FIG. 11. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Abense-de-Haut, Soule, Pyrénées Atlantique, France.

Lang refers to the central design of two ringed crosses (not discoid markers) from Whitby Abbey as ‘petal crosses’ but it is questionable if these are foliate.²⁶ One of the most complex is at Cintra (Sintra), Portugal (Fig. 13). This has a central flower with four petals and a radiating design of eight leaves, irregularly positioned within a circle that may represent a thorned branch. Oak leaves have not been reported on medieval gravemarkers and they are uncommon on those of the post-Reformation period. On earlier post-Reformation gravestones the oak leaf symbolises longevity and

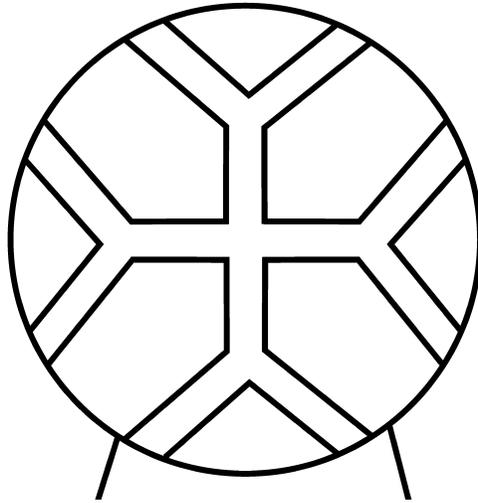


FIG. 12. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Dorf Bilov, Czech Republic.

suggests that the deceased died elderly. They are found on German-Pennsylvanian artefacts where a four-leaved cross symbolises strength of body, mind and character. The symbolism of the oak also has biblical origins. Jacob buried the ‘foreign gods’ of his people under an oak tree at Shechem (Genesis 35:4). However, there is a recently restored early medieval discoid gravemarker at Conesa, Tarragona, Spain with a carved relief cross design.²⁷ The upper and side arms of the cross terminate in what could be oak leaves (Fig. 14). While this is also the most likely explanation of the pattern on the Dalston stone, it could simply be a rather unusual interpretation of a cruciform design.



FIG. 13. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Cintra, Lisbon, Portugal.

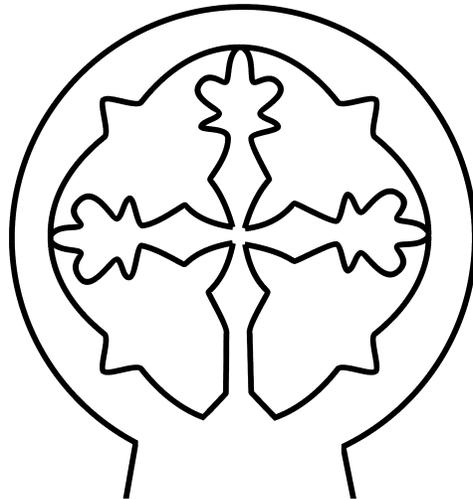


FIG. 14. Medieval discoid gravemarker, Conesa, Tarragona, Spain.

Discussion and conclusions

Although the above analysis suggests that the Dalston artefact had a funerary purpose, three alternatives must be considered. One is that it was a churchyard cross, as suggested by Roberts. It also could have been a wayside marker or a gable finial, possibly from the medieval church building.

The Anglo-Saxons established a custom of erecting a cross instead of a church where people would gather for prayer. The churchyard cross, therefore, often predated the building.²⁸ However, of the very few graveyard discoïd cross heads that survive in England, France and Germany, none are as small yet so elaborately carved as the Dalston stone. Discoïd gravemarkers invariably have short shafts. The shafts of churchyard and wayside crosses usually are significantly longer, or were so when originally cut. From the many discoïd markers examined in the south of France, Spain and Portugal it is clear that, when the shaft of a discoïd marker tapers towards the point at which it is attached to the disc head, we can be fairly certain that it was short. However, when the sides are parallel, the shaft could be either long or short (Fig. 15). In the case of the Dalston stone, the damage to the place where the shaft would have been attached is such that it is impossible to determine its width, length or shape without further information. Indeed, it is somewhat unusual for little or nothing of the shaft of a discoïd marker to remain. Another unusual feature of the Dalston artefact is the taper in thickness on one side only from bottom to top. It could be that the stone from which the disc was cut was uneven, but the complexity of the carving suggests that the mason would ensure that he would acquire the stone he really wanted and that this is a deliberate part of the design.

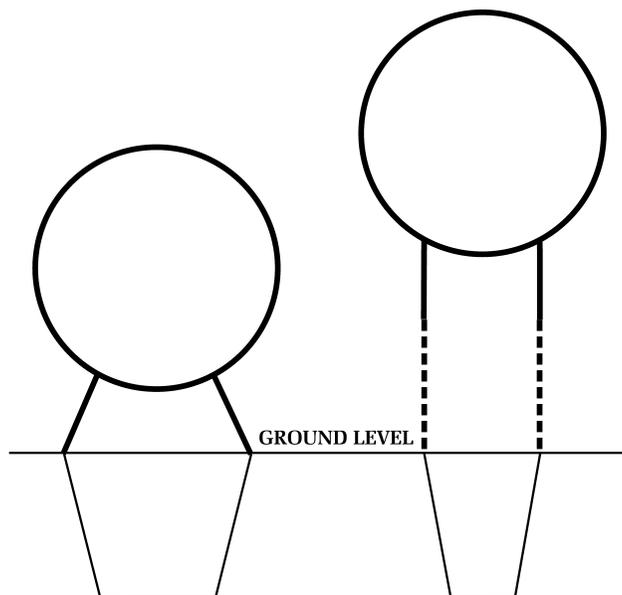


FIG. 15. Discoïd gravemarkers with tapered, short shaft (left) and discoïd wayside marker with parallel possible short or long shaft.

It is almost impossible to distinguish between medieval discoid gravemarkers and discoid church gable finials when removed from their original location. They could be very similar in both form and decoration. However, it would seem to be rather superfluous to cut complex designs, such as those on the Dalston stone, on something that was positioned high up on the building where it would not be seen. If the date of the artefact is about the same, or earlier than the original church, it is unlikely that it was part of the building, having been found under the structure.

The four-armed cross on the Dalston discoid stone, perhaps symbolising resurrection, would support very strongly the conclusion that it is funerary. The oak leaf cross on the verso is a little more problematic but could possibly indicate that it marked the grave of someone who died in old age. Alternatively, this part of the design could be simply decorative. Although we cannot be certain, the balance of evidence points to the Dalston artefact being a very early discoid gravemarker. The date of the object is less clear. The Dalston stone is rather smaller and much thinner than contemporary gravemarkers of the twelfth- to fifteenth-centuries elsewhere in Europe. It could be contemporary with the late twelfth-century church at Dalston but, as it was found below the Early English buttress, it is more likely to have been cut sometime before, probably prior to the late twelfth and possibly between the ninth and mid-twelfth-centuries. Brown suggests that graveyards often preceded the building of the church, so it may have been located there. This would make it contemporary with those in the French Languedoc.

Acknowledgements

I thank Mr Robert Roberts, Dalston for his helpful comments. This research was supported by a grant from the University of Cumbria, where the author is an Honorary Research Fellow.

Craignish, The Loaning, Waterbeck, Lockerbie DG11 3EY

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