

The Catstane

by Anthony Rutherford and Graham Ritchie

In the latter part of 1699, during his tour of Scotland, Edward Lhwyd visited the site of the Catstane. His description of it, contained in a group of letters published as an appendix to Henry Rowlands' *Mona Antiqua Restaurata*, is worth quoting in full:

'We collected a considerable number of inscriptions in Scotland, and some in this kingdom (i.e. Ireland), both Latin and Irish. But I could meet with no antiquary, hitherto of either country, that could interpret those in the Irish. One monument I met with, within four miles of Edinburgh, different from all I had seen elsewhere, and never observed by their antiquaries. I take it to be the tomb of some Pictish king; though situate by a river-side, remote enough from any church. It is an area of about seven yards diameter, raised a little above the rest of the ground, and encompassed with large stones; all which stones are laid lengthwise, excepting one larger than ordinary, which is pitched on end, and contains this inscription in the barbarous characters of the fourth and fifth centuries, *In oc tumulo jacit Vetta F. Victi*. This the common people call the *Cat-Stene*, whence I suspect the person's name was *Getus* . . . ' (Rowlands 1766, 313–14).

The Catstane is still (at the time of writing) *in situ* near Kirkliston, Midlothian; it is an impressive rounded boulder standing 75 m from the right bank of the River Almond at some 600 m NNE of Boathouse Bridge and the same distance NW of the terminal complex of Edinburgh (Turnhouse) Airport (NGR NT 148743; RCAMS 1929, 94–5, no. 130). The stone is irregularly trapezoidal in cross-section, with a girth at base of 3.65 m, standing 1.3 m above ground level. Judging by the sketches made by James Drummond in 1860 (pl 10), it tapers in concave fashion below ground level, but one cannot say whether it was deliberately shaped so. The four sides of the trapezoid form four flattish faces; the inscription is on the E face. The monument has been the subject of description, speculation and excavation on many occasions in the past, with two valuable papers appearing in early volumes of these *Proceedings* (Simpson 1862; Hutchison 1866). Recent interest has centred on the interpretation of the inscription and on its status as a pre-historic standing stone reused in Early Christian times.

The inscription now reads:

IN OC T
MVLO IAC T
VETTA F
VICTR

The letters are about 50–75 mm high and still for the most part well-defined. The condition of the inscription deteriorates from the left edge to the right, where it becomes weathered; and there are signs of modern damage beneath the L of line 2, and between the T and A of line 3. All of the letters given above are distinct, save that the cross-bars of the T's in lines 1 and 2, and the tail of the R, are a little faint.

The lettering, in debased Roman capitals, may in general be compared with that of the Yarrow Stone (NGR NT 348274; RCAMS 1957, 110–13), but tends to be more regular, and is

rather better preserved. Note particularly the ligatured MV (reversed on the Yarrow Stone) and the characteristic L with oblique foot. The reversed N is not common, but is found, for instance, on the Newchurch stone (Nash-Williams 1950, 118, no. 171). The O's are neat and small, some way above the base lines, a feature occasionally found elsewhere (e.g. Nash-Williams 1950, 146, no. 229; 186, no. 307). The fifth letter in the fourth line has been read by most writers since Lhwyd as an I, but it is indisputably an R with an almost horizontal tail, as on the Yarrow Stone and the inscription at Manor Water (NGR NT 192307; RCAMS 1967, 176, no. 376). The epigraphic style suggests a date in the late fifth or early sixth centuries, inclining perhaps to the former.

A little can be said about the missing letters. There seems to be no certain trace of the necessary V at the end of line 1, nor is there any trace of a triple ligature (cf Nash-Williams

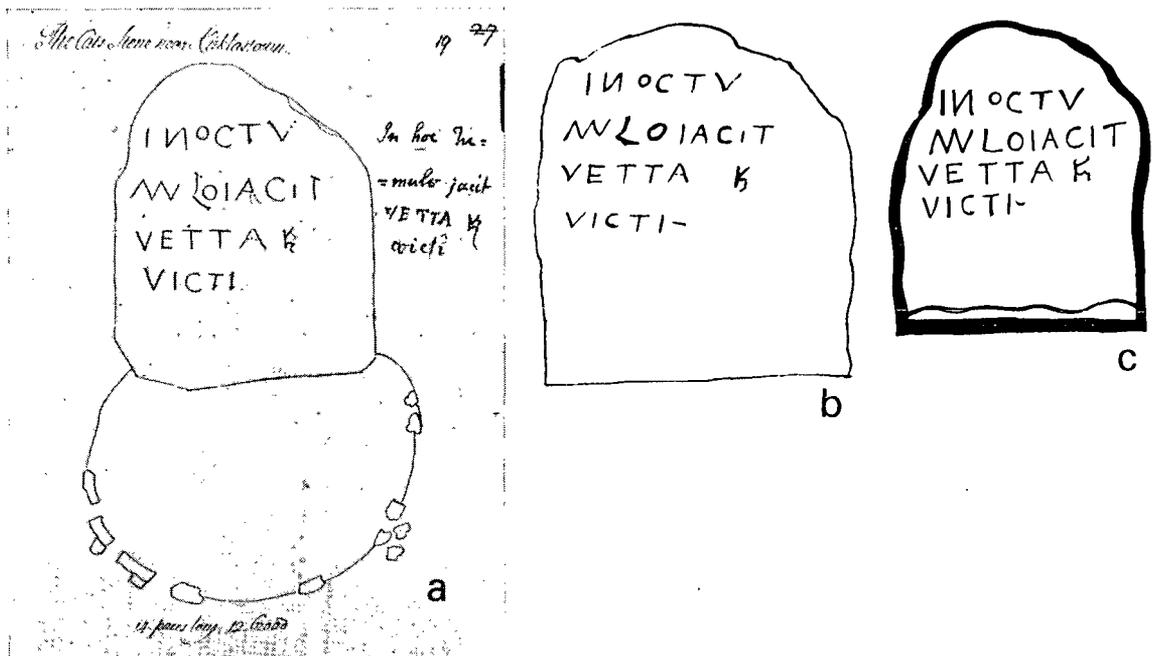


FIG 1 The Catstane, Midlothian; the inscription

1950, 174, no. 289) at the beginning of line 2. On the other hand, Lhwyd's drawing clearly indicates that he saw it, so we may reasonably assume that it has been weathered away over the last two hundred and fifty years. Between the C and T of line 2 there is certainly enough room for an E; IACIT is admittedly much more common in inscriptions of this kind, but note the IACENT of the Yarrow Stone. Lhwyd seems to have seen an I, but there is no reason to assume that this was not simply the vertical of an E. Lhwyd gave Rowlands no more than 'F.' at the end of line 3; but the drawings all clearly show what appears to be a half-uncial F with conjoined I. This is no longer visible, but is perfectly credible (cf Nash-Williams 1950, 180, no. 299). After the final R there appears to be nothing sure. Approximately 200 mm to the right (under the F of the preceding line) is a roughly horizontal mark which might suggest a horizontal I; there is a similar mark to the right of the F in line 3: both are too uncertain to be admissible though neither would provide any great difficulties in interpretation. It should be noted, however, that Lhwyd had already

correctly noted the 'horizontal I' on Welsh inscriptions of this kind; it would be curious if he were to have overlooked the same feature here. The lack of an H in (H)OC is purely orthographic: note the IC on the Latinus stone at Whithorn, and Nash-Williams' nos 44, 73, and 127 (1950, 69-70, 82 and 102).

The interpretation of the inscription is simple enough in broad outline: 'In this tomb lies X, son/daughter of Y'. One might just note here, in view of what follows, that 'tumulus' in this context need mean no more than 'tomb'; compare Radford's remarks on the Yarrow Stone (RCAMS 1957, 112). The names, however, provide some difficulties. VETTA is quite distinct, and cannot be disputed epigraphically, but parallels are difficult to find, either as a Latin or as a British name. If one assumes error of some kind, one or two rather weak possibilities suggest themselves: Latin VETTIA, for instance, well-attested but usually Italian and aristocratic. Abandoning these, one is left with an apparently unattested, presumably British, personal name; it would most probably be feminine, although a masculine a-stem is not entirely out of the question. One must mention here the fairly common masculine personal name VETTO, probably Celtic, found especially in Latin inscriptions of the Iberian peninsular (cf CIL II, nos 529, 601, 823, 829, 1074, 1075 and 3844); well known in the plural as an ethnicon. Note too that this name (accepting a Vulgar Latin confusion of B and V) occurs on a Roman inscription from Rough Castle, Stirlingshire (CIL VII, 1092=RIB 2144). A feminine form, BETTA, may occur on a Gaulish ring (Le Blant 1865, 557, no. 669B), but in the absence of a modern description one cannot say that this is not rather Frankish. VICTR- is just as difficult. It looks most like a truncated or syncopated Latin genitive. In the former case, the genitive of VICTRICIUS would fit neatly as would that of VICTRIX (or var. VICTRIS). In the latter, there are more possibilities: any one of VICTOR, VICTORIA, VICTORIANUS, VICTORINA, VICTORINUS, etc could yield a genitive in VICT'R-. On the grounds of frequency and probability, one puts forward, very tentatively, the following: 'In this tomb lies Vetta, daughter of Victricius'.

In his paper presented to this Society in 1860, Simpson put forward the idea that the Catstane was 'the tombstone of the grandfather of Hengist and Horsa'. Despite his learning, Simpson's excursion into Old English philology was not a happy one. Nevertheless, we must at least register the possibility that the names could be Germanic. In the case of VICTR-, for instance, we might compare such Old English names as WIHTRED. The theory must meet two objections: firstly, that we know nothing at all of Old English epigraphic conventions at this period, and, secondly, that it is in the light of our present historical conceptions improbable. It must yet be borne in mind.

Lhwyd's description of the Catstane and its setting is quite specific, although the area has been considerably disturbed since then by agriculture and later by excavations. Cultivation has removed all trace of a large mound which formerly stood about 55 m to the W of the Catstane; Wilson recorded that it was excavated in 1824 and found to contain several complete skeletons (1863, 210-11). There are now no surface remains in the vicinity apart from the Catstane itself, but there can be no doubt that it stood on the perimeter of a low cairn with large horizontal kerbstones. The diameter of the cairn was 'about seven yards' (6.4 m) and the kerb-stones 'laid lengthwise, except one larger than ordinary, which is pitched on end' (the Catstane). This essential point in Lhwyd's description is clarified by James Paterson, who accompanied the antiquary on his visit to the site in 1699. He wrote: 'There is somewhat singular in the Situation of the Stone, on which this inscription is: Mr Lhwyd has oft seen a Circle of Stones, with a Large Stone in the Middle; but here we have nothing in the Middle; the Stone with our inscription stands upright in the Circumference of a Circle compos'd of somewhat lesser Stones lying flat. They are all rude and unpolished' (Paterson 1700; and cf Wodrow 1700). A drawing in the British Museum (Stowe

MS 1023, f 19^r, p 27) illustrates this point clearly; the Catstane is shown on the perimeter of an oval of much smaller stones but there is the implication that those on one side are 'laid lengthwise' as Lhwyd described. The measurements of the setting, however, are considerably larger than those originally recorded and below the cairn the dimensions are given as '14 paces long, 12 broad'.

The presence of one upright stone on the line of the kerb of a small cairn is unusual, but it can be almost exactly paralleled on Cairnpapple Hill, West Lothian (NGR NS 987717; Piggott 1948, 88-92, fig 5, pl xxi; Ritchie and MacLaren 1972, 10). Here it may be postulated that the North Grave, containing two beakers and wooden objects, was surrounded by a low slab-built kerb, measuring 3.7 m by 3.0 m overall; at the W end of this setting, however, and standing at one end of the grave, probably the foot, there was a large upright stone some 2.4 m in height. Certainly some supporting cairn material would have been necessary round the base of the stone to keep it standing (Piggott 1948, 90, pl xxi), but it seems possible that an independent cairn represented by the kerb- and standing-stone setting might, on a slightly smaller scale, be what Lhwyd and Paterson saw at the Catstane in 1699; this suggestion certainly tallies better with Lhwyd's description than do Thomas' reconstructed drawings (1971, 54, 62, figs 21 and 27).

Further information about the monolith depends on the interpretation of various excavations undertaken round it; Simpson and Hutchison did some small-scale digging in 1860 and found that it was buried to a depth of about 0.9 m into the ground. 'It was placed upon a basis of stones, forming apparently the remains of a built stone grave, which contained no bones or other relics, and that had evidently been already searched and harried' (Simpson 1862, 122-3). Simpson's paper was accompanied by a woodcut from a drawing made at the time by James Drummond; both the illustration and Drummond's original sketches (pl 10) throw some doubt on the precise form of the 'built stone grave'. More extensive excavation in the area was pursued by Hutchison in 1864, who discovered a long-cist cemetery on the SE side of the stone, a short cist, traces of 'an encircling rude wall' on the N side, and a pit containing four large stones, which he suggested may originally have formed part of the circular kerb-stone setting described by Lhwyd.

Drummond's sketches of April 1860 record one of the few excavations at the base of a standing stone in SE Scotland and as such it is worth trying to interpret the drawings in terms of present excavation knowledge and practice. Depending on size and the shape of the base of the stone, a monolith was normally supported in one of two ways: either in a hole dug into the ground of rather greater width than the base of the stone itself with the remaining space subsequently backfilled with stones and earth, or, if the base of the stone were flattish or rounded, it may merely have been chocked into position in a shallow depression by a few stones inserted round the bottom, or supported on a small stone foundation (MacKie 1973). In the case of the Catstane it is likely that it was set in a hole dug into the subsoil and that Hutchison's trench has cut straight through the wall of the stone-hole, discovering the packing at the base and round the sides of the upright. The stone-holes of the circle at Cairnpapple, for example, illustrate the variety of profile that may be expected; in sixteen of the holes there remained some evidence of packing, though the uprights had themselves been removed (Piggott 1948, 83-4, fig 7).

In 1860 Simpson found that the Catstane had been set upon a stony foundation and he suggested that this was the remains of a cist (1862, 122); Hutchison's description in 1866, however, is more elaborate: the Catstane 'stood over what was distinctly the side walls of a built grave identical in masonry and material' with a short cist found during the excavation of the adjacent long-cist cemetery in 1864 (Hutchison 1866, 187). This cist measured 0.7 m by 0.3 m and 0.5 m in depth, and was built of boulders. In neither case were any skeletal remains discovered

Drummond's sketches do not give a good impression of this feature, but one parallel for a rough slab-built setting within a standing-stone hole has been excavated at Orwell, Kinross-shire (NGR NO 149043; RCAMS 1933, 304–5, no. 577; *DES* (1972), 55–6). Here to one side of the stone was an irregular setting of stones (0.5 m by 0.3 m) containing a cremation deposit and, separated from it by a stone slab, there was a lower cremation deposit. Perhaps the Catstane setting was comparable and originally contained the remains of a burial deposited within the stone-hole when the monolith was erected. On the other hand, Hutchison may simply have taken for a short cist the bedding of the stone.

In his discussion of Early Christian cemeteries, one of Thomas' most percipient observations concerned the pre-Christian origin of a number of demonstrably Christian burial-grounds (1971, 53–8). The association of a short cist of Bronze Age date at Parkburn, Midlothian, for example (Henshall 1966, 208–9), and extended inhumations, aligned in a way that is unlikely to represent Christian burial, at the Early Christian chapel at St Ninian's Point, Bute (Aitken 1955), suggest a continuity of sanctity that has come to be accepted as normal on neolithic to Bronze Age sites. At the Catstane, the more carefully aligned long cists of a presumptively Early Christian cemetery follow in an area of Bronze Age activity represented by a standing stone and kerb-cairn of a recognisably second-millennium BC type. The continuity is even more forcibly demonstrated by the re-use of the standing stone for an Early Christian inscription.

The Illustrations

No drawing in Lhwyd's own hand, if he ever made one, seems to have survived. Apart from the verbal description given above, his reading is known from three sources: the sketch sent to Wodrow by Paterson, interleaved in the MS letter quoted above (fig 1, b), the plate which accompanies Hicks' brief article (1700, no. 4 on pl 2) and which is here taken from Simpson 1862, 126, fig 2 (fig 1, c) and a drawing, bound up out of order, in British Library Stowe MS 1023, f 19^r, p 27 (fig 1, a). This last is probably closest to Lhwyd's intentions, but all three agree in essential detail. Simpson's paper was illustrated by an engraving of a sketch made at the time of his excavation by James Drummond (Simpson 1862, 122, fig 1); the two original sketches (pl 10) are preserved in a notebook in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. The illustrations are reproduced by courtesy of the following institutions: The National Library of Scotland (fig 1, b); the British Library (fig 1, a); Crown Copyright, Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, Scotland (pl 10).

EXCAVATIONS NEAR THE CATSTANE, 1974

by Fionna M Ashmore

A series of trenches 65 m in length was dug in advance of levelling operations for a glide-path aerial for the new runway at Turnhouse Airport. The area to be affected contained no archaeological features though traces of ploughmarks were visible in the yellow sandy subsoil. It was decided to extend the trench towards the cemetery in order to attempt to correlate it with Hutchison's plan (1866, 193). A cist was discovered in a 5 m extension E from the main N-S trench. This cist lay at a distance of 17.45 m E of the Catstane and was formed of vertical freestone slabs set into the ground and with capstones formed of the same material. Due to the circumstances of the excavation it was not possible to open it but it appeared to be undisturbed and the capstones to be *in situ*.

Hutchison's plan of the excavations of 1866 (1866, 193) is purely schematic as regards distance and scale. He also fails to give measurements of the spaces between the rows of graves,

and indeed fails to give sufficient measurements to place the cemetery exactly in relation to the Catstane; all that is certain is that the third grave in his fourth row is about 20 yds from the Catstane. Thus his plan is of little use in attempting to define the position or extent of the cemetery, and the recently discovered cist cannot be related to those he planned, though it is almost certain that it is not one of those he discovered. Thomas' plan (1971, 54, fig 21) is also misleading as to scale; his third grave in the fourth row is shown as being some 21 ft from the Catstane instead of 20 yds. It is clear that Hutchison's plan and those based uncritically on it are to be treated with caution.

The primary purpose of the excavation was accomplished; the levelling for the glide-path aerial has not impinged on the cemetery, but it is unfortunately not possible to place the new cist in context nor to determine the exact position and extent of the cemetery. As a postscript it is perhaps of interest that the labourer assisting in the diggings was formerly the ploughman on the estate; he maintained that slabs of freestone and traces of shale were encountered only on the summit and northern slopes of the knoll on which the Catstane is placed, and that during the early years of the 1920s, after deep ploughing, several cartloads of slabs were removed.

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The Catstane, Midlothian; excavation in 1860