

An incised cross on Hirt, Harris

by Mary Harman

In June 1977 during a survey of the cleitean on Hirt, St Kilda, undertaken for the National Trust for Scotland, an incised cross was found on a stone forming part of the ceiling of a cleit. The cleit, no. 74, lies just to the N of the main street, between the Amhuinn Mhor and the graveyard, at NGR NF 09979934. There are no features that distinguish it as different from the other cleitean in the village area, and the age of the structure is not known. The stone with the cross is a ceiling lintel in the N half of the cleit. Both of the visible edges are broken, and both ends of the stone are hidden, resting on the wall head. One arm only of the cross is visibly complete: two opposing arms run off the broken edges of the stone and the fourth is partially concealed. The cross (fig 1A and pl 16a) is delineated by a shallow groove which forms the outline of the cross shape, the complete terminal having a pointed end, and has L-shaped lines in the angles; these are longer on the arm partly concealed by the wall head, suggesting that the long axis of the cross is parallel with that of the slab.

There is a second cross on a stone built into the front wall of cottage 16, at the W end of the village. It is a simple cross formed by two grooves and outlined by a continuous groove (fig 1B, pl 16b). It appears to have been built into the wall on its side, and the position of the stone, at one corner of the E window of the cottage, does not suggest that any significance was attached to it. The cottage was built in 1860 or 1861, and the cross was noted by Sands (1878, 82) during his visit in 1875, and again by Williamson and Boyd (1963, 144) during their visit in 1957.

It seems reasonable to suggest that both crosses are probably connected with the chapels which once stood on the island. Martin, who visited the island in 1697, mentions (1753, 43–6) three chapels, which he marks on his map, and says 'Each of them is built with one end towards the east, the other towards the west, the altar always placed at the east end; the first of these is called Christ Chapel, near the village; it is covered and thatched after the manner of their

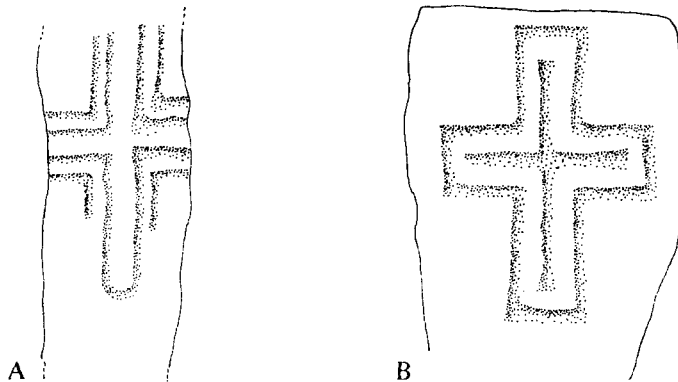


FIG 1 Hirt: incised crosses from cleit 74 (A) and cottage 16 (B)
(scale 1 : 10)

houses. The churchyard is about a hundred paces in circumference, fenced in with a little stone wall; within which they bury their dead. The inhabitants, young and old, come to the churchyard every Sunday morning, the chapel not being capacious enough to receive them; here they devoutly say the Lord's Prayer, Creed, and Ten Commandments. The second of these chapels bears the name of St Columba, the third St Brianan; both being built after the manner of Christ's Chapel; having churchyards belonging to them, and are a quarter of a mile distant from each other.' The population at the time of Martin's visit numbered about 180.

MacAulay, who visited the island in 1758, marks the chapels on his map in positions similar to those on Martin's map, and gives some further information (1764, 69-72): 'The largest church was dedicated to Christ. It was built of stone, and without any cement: its length is twenty-four feet, and its breadth fourteen. This was in former times the principle place of worship in the isle, and here they continue to bury their dead.' Of Columbcille, he says it 'has neither altar, cross nor cell within its precincts' but that St Brendan's chapel 'has an altar within, and some monkish cells without it. These are almost entire and must of consequence be of later date, than the holy places dedicated to Christ and Columba.'

By the time MacCulloch visited the island in 1815, (1824, 177) only the very obscure traces of two chapels remained, though MacKenzie, minister of St Kilda from 1829 to 1843, says (1911, 6, 23). 'There are two or three keills, where there are the ruins of small churches, one of them dedicated to Mary, another of them to Brenan.' MacKenzie was responsible for the building of the great oval wall around the burial ground.

Muir, in 1858 (1858, 20) found 'not even the merest trace of the little thatched temple', in the burial ground, and was shown the site of St Columba's chapel in an enclosed cultivated plot. Kennedy, writing to Thomas (1874, 704) and repeating a story told by Miss Euphemia MacCrimmon in 1862, records that 'Trinity was the name of a temple which stood where the burial ground is now. Some of the inhabitants remember seeing it; it had two doors, and the roof was covered with green turf.' According to the story, which was also known to most of the people evacuated in 1930, all the inhabitants of the island save three were burned in the church at an unspecified time in the past; the two men responsible were marooned on Stac an Armin and Soay, and the surviving woman taken away; in another version this tragedy occurred in a large underground 'temple' (MacQueen and MacInnes 1961, 215-18).

Sands, after a lengthy visit to the island in 1875, states (1878, 82) that there is not a vestige of the chapels to be seen, 'but old men remember when the ruins of one, sixteen feet in height, stood in the churchyard. One of the stones, having a cross incised on it, may yet be seen built into one of the cottages.'

Mathieson (1928, 124), when collecting information for the first Ordnance Survey 6 in map in 1926, had the sites of Christ Church and St Columba's Chapel pointed out to him by the factor, John MacKenzie, and of St Brendans by the ground officer, Neil Ferguson. This is the first large scale map on which the chapel sites are marked, and that of Christ Church is placed, not inside the burial ground, but a little to the north of it, beside the souterrain. Mathieson also states that this church had a tower ascended by an inside stair, but gives no authority for this statement.

As the above accounts show, Martin and MacAulay agree on both the names and sites of the chapels; though MacAulay may be repeating Martin, some of his information is new. Confusion arises over the dedications in the 19th-century accounts, but not over the positions, and it is clear that the site of Christ's Church is within the burial ground and not where Mathieson placed it; this is corrected in the recent editions of the Ordnance Survey maps. No mention of the chapels is made by Monro, who travelled through the Western Isles in 1549, but his note on Hirt is brief, though he does say (1934, 77-8) that the people were 'scant learnt in ony Religion',

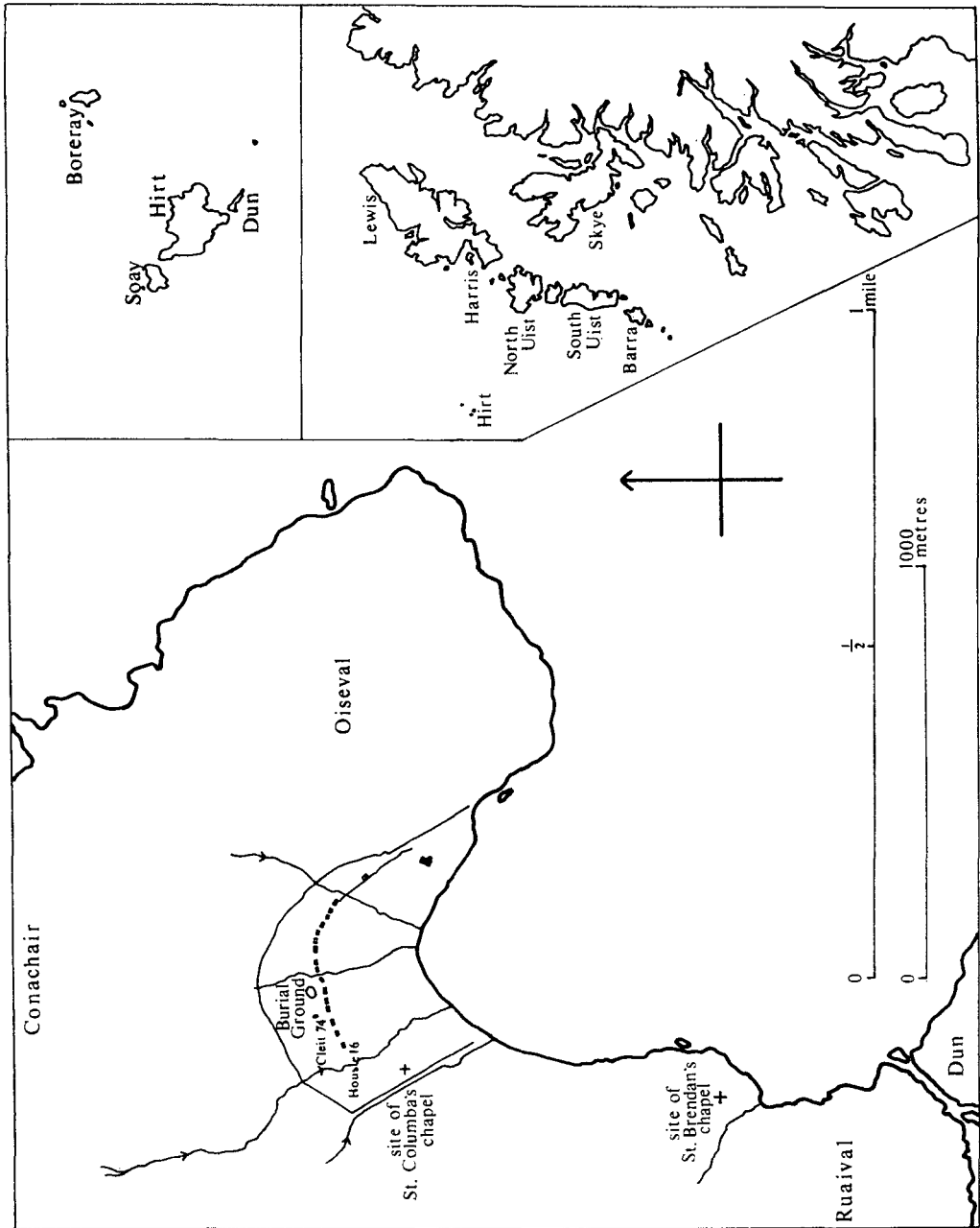


FIG 2 Hirt: location maps

and were visited once a year by a chaplain. The chapels were probably standing then; the dedications, and MacAulay's 'monkish cells' might suggest their foundation in the early Christian period; this, together with the survival of place-names of Norse origin, would imply either continuity of settlement since that time, or such close contact with the Long Island that, in cases of depopulation such as that described by Euphemia MacCrimmon, names would be remembered; but MacLeod's steward and his retinue would undoubtedly have learned many place-names during their summer sojourns on the island and may well have been responsible for their survival during any brief gaps in the occupation.

It seems unlikely that either of the two crosses was brought from St Brendan's chapel to the village area; Sands states that the one in cottage 16 was taken from Christ Church, which may also be the source of the one in cleit 74, being much nearer than St Columba's chapel; MacAulay's description would support this, unless he was thinking of free standing crosses when noting their absence at St Columba's chapel.

The latin cross on the stone in cottage 16 is not an uncommon form, but the outline shape found on both stones occurs more rarely. An exhaustive survey of the literature has not been possible, but no similar ones have been noted from the Western Isles. There is an outline cross of similar size on a broken slab from Kildalton, Islay, found face downwards under the base of the great cross there, and donated to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1923 (cat. no. IB 193). Stone 11 from St Ninan's Isle, ornamented by a single open-ended outline cross, is considered by Thomas to be pre-Norse, probably 8th century (1973, 28, 36), but four other slabs with outline crosses on them from Skuö, Faeroe, published by Kermodé (1931, 374, 377) were found in a graveyard only used between the 10th and 14th centuries. Nash Williams illustrates and describes (1950, 116, 190, 191) three similar outline crosses from Llanwnda, Pembrokeshire, nos 328, 329 and 333, the last being a double outline cross; one, 323, from Llanllawer in the same county, and one from Llangunnor, Carmarthenshire, 162, which has a simple latin cross within the outline. To all of these he assigns a date between the 7th and 9th centuries, but warns that, as with simple linear crosses, they may have been used locally to the end of the Christian period. On the basis only of these approximate parallels, it would appear that, while the crosses on Hirt could be the product of a pre-Viking Christian community living on the island, they are not unlikely to be the work of a Norse dominated population, influenced by a tradition acquired elsewhere in the Celtic Christian area.

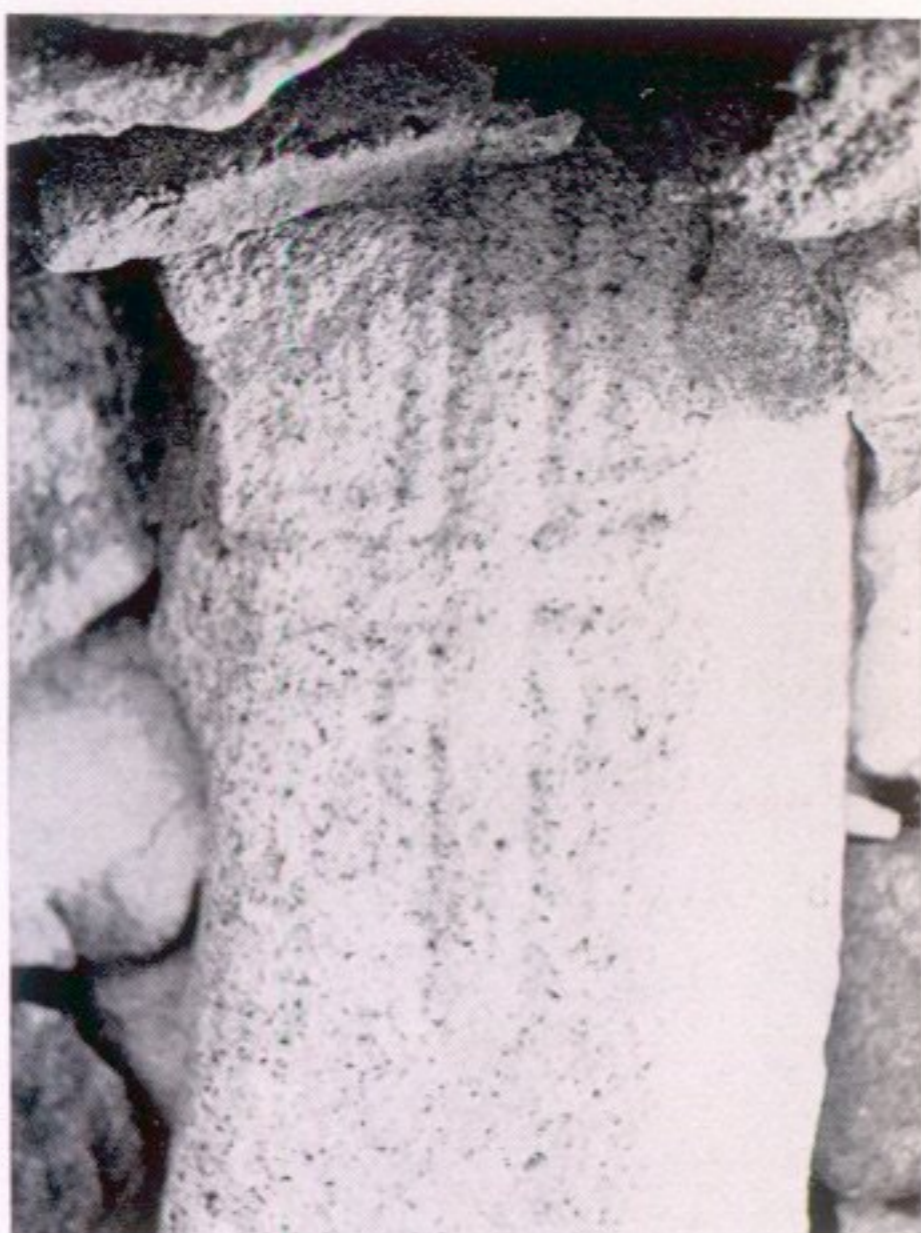
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would never have noticed the cross in cleit 74 had I not been staying on the island in connexion with a project supported by the National Trust for Scotland. The photographs were taken on film kindly provided by the Department of the Environment for this project, through Mr P R Ritchie, and I am grateful also to Mr K Taylor for lending me his tripod. I am indebted to Mr G Simpson and particularly to Mr I Fisher of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland for suggesting to a novice in the subject numerous sources of possible comparative crosses, and regret that I have not pursued all of them. Mr I G Scott, also of the above Commission, gave me valuable advice on the drawing of the crosses.

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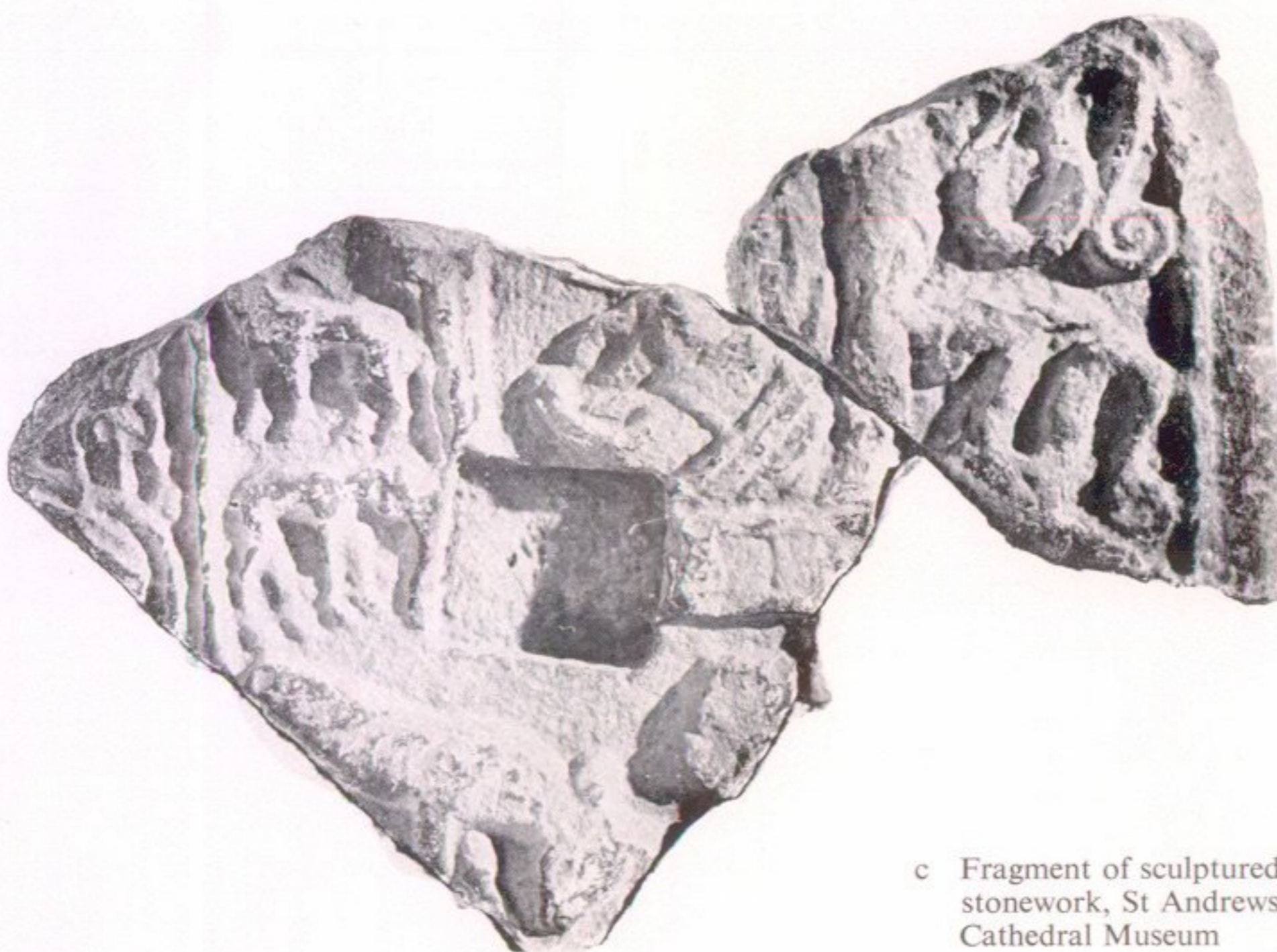
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a Stone in cleit 74, Hirt



b Stone in cottage 16, Hirt



c Fragment of sculptured stonework, St Andrews Cathedral Museum