

ART. IX – *Beacon Hill, Aspatria: an early Christian carved stone rehabilitated*  
BY DAVID PETTS

IN 1789, in the course of a series of investigations into the early British monuments of Cumbria, a Mr Rigg opened up a barrow known as Old Parks on Beacon Hill (NY 7413 4185), close to the town of Aspatria. The finds were drawn and subsequently published by Major Hayman Rooke (Rooke, 1792). Inside was a cist, consisting of several large stone slabs, containing an extended inhumation with a range of grave goods, including a sword decorated with silver inlaid flowers, an elaborate strap-end and a bridle set (Edwards, 1992, 43–45). Recent excavations on the same site have revealed some more Viking objects and confirmed a broad later 9th/10th century date for the burial, of which there are several known in the region (Abramson, 2000). However, it is set apart from other similar graves, as carved on two of the stones from the cist were a number of inscribed symbols (Fig. 1). Unfortunately, these stones have been lost and are known only from Rooke’s illustrations.

On the first stone (c.80 x 50 cm) are two concentric ring patterns: one consisting of two outer rings and a smaller central roundel, and the second only having one outer ring. There are other carved marks visible on Rooke’s illustration of the stone, but they are not definable as any particular motif, though there is arguably a fragmentary saltire pattern. On the second stone (c.92 x 45 cm) are four ring crosses and four more concentric ring patterns. Three of these concentric ring-marks and possibly one of the rings are connected to a narrow stem. On this second stone there are a number of other carvings: Rooke identified two marks as possibly representing the letters M and D. There is also a carved grid pattern (5 squares x 5 squares), a straight line with four equal lines running perpendicularly off it, another possible cross mark with a rectangular border attached to a curved stem, a series of loops centred around a figure of eight mark, as well as other random markings. Little is known of the way in which these marks were carved, beyond Rooke’s observation that the rims of the circles and the crosses were cut in relief. As the stones are now lost, it is impossible to pursue this line of enquiry further.

Rooke suggested in his original description of the stones that these carvings were contemporary with the interment, and represented early Christian symbols carved some time after the arrival of Augustine in A.D. 597. The author of the prehistoric section of the *Victoria County History Cumberland* dismissed this interpretation: “We need not linger to argue the question with the Major’s shade: his theory will hardly find a supporter at the present day”. (Ferguson, 1901, 242). He instead preferred to interpret them as examples of prehistoric rock carvings common in Northern Britain, and they have been subsequently related to the prehistoric tradition of single-grave rock art (Simpson and Thawley, 1972, 91). However, an examination of other local examples of such rock-carvings makes it clear that not all the Aspatria carvings belong to this class of carvings (*ibid.*, figs. 6–7; Frodsham, 1989, 8). Although the most common form of prehistoric rock carving, the “cup and ring” mark is characterised by the frequent use of concentric ring marks, they tend to have

evenly spaced concentric rings around them and are often found in clusters. Whilst there are no exact parallels, the concentric rings with stems may well be prehistoric (cf. Simpson and Thawley, 1972, figs. 6.20, 7.32).

The simple ring-cross is not completely unknown in the repertoire of rock art, however in Britain they are exceptionally rare. In a recent survey of over 900 prehistoric rock art sites in Britain bearing motifs more complex than simple cup-marks only five examples bear such crosses, including Toftfills (Grampians), Wolfhill (Perth and Kinross), Duncrosik (Stirling) and Rowton Rocks (Derbyshire) (Morris, 1989). However, even these examples are clearly very different in form from the Aspatria example. They are simple inscribed crosses delineated by a single incised line (Morris, 1981, Plate 49). This is in contrast to the Aspatria crosses, which are carved in relief, with sunk angular interspaces.

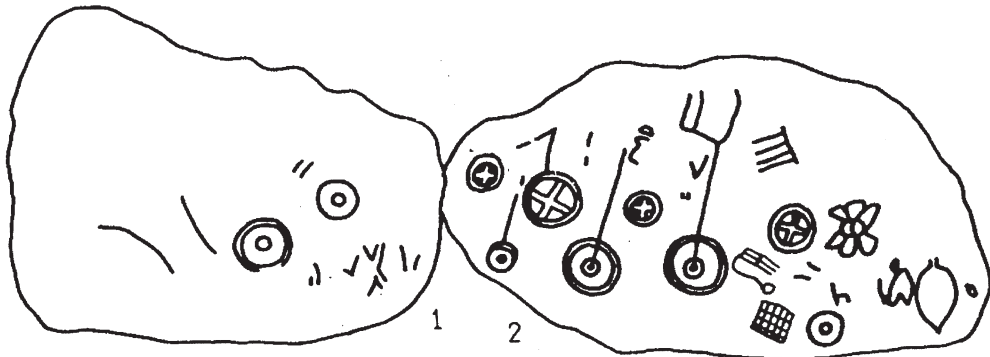


FIG. 1. The carvings from the stone cist at Beacon Hill, Aspatria.

Another similar motif is found on Scandinavian rock art, where the ring-cross is the second most common motif. However, this rock art tradition is entirely independent of the Atlantic rock art tradition. The symbols on the Swedish and Norwegian carved images also include ships, elks, anthropomorphic figures, footprints and carts. They constitute a fundamentally different symbolic repertoire to that used in Britain (Tilley, 1991). Again the ring crosses used on these carvings are marked with simple incised lines, rather than the false relief technique used on the Aspatria examples.

Other elements of the Aspatria carvings, such as the more simple discs and possible grid patterns may be of prehistoric origin. They bear broader similarities to the range of motifs used on Atlantic rock art, though the grids are also very uncommon. However, it is clear that although there are a very few examples of ring crosses known from rock art in Britain they are very rare, and carved in completely different manner. Indeed the rarity of this cross-symbol on rock art in Britain suggests that these few examples, like the crosses from Aspatria, may bear further examination and a reconsideration of a possible Early Christian origin.

There are other possible examples of early medieval additions to prehistoric rock arts known from Britain, which suggests that this may be real possibility. A good example is the addition of three Viking runes to the cup and ring marks from Lemmington Wood (Northumberland) (Beckinsall, 1997, 52). Another example is a

standing stone from Torran (Argyll) which bears a cup mark, as well as two peck-incised ring crosses on the north-west and south-east faces (RCAHMS, 1999, 81, no. 230). A more complex palimpsest of rock art of prehistoric and early medieval date can be found nearby at Dunadd (Argyll), where a boar of 7th or 8th century A.D. date is carved adjacent to a ritual footprint and a number of prehistoric cup marks (Lane and Campbell, 2000, 18-23; RCAHMS, 1999, 89-90). There are therefore good parallels for the addition of later early medieval carvings to earlier prehistoric rock art.

If these carved crosses are not prehistoric, then what date are they? It has been suggested that they may be of Viking origin on the basis of the relief cutting of the rims and crosses (Frodsham, 1989). Again, an examination of Anglo-Saxon and Viking stone carvings from the north of England fails to reveal any convincing parallels, in either content or technique (Bailey and Cramp, 1988). This re-assessment of the markings suggests instead that they may be, as originally suggested by Rooke, of Early Christian origin.

The closest parallels are with the pre-Viking inscribed crosses of the Isle of Man (Kermode, 1907). The clearest range of parallels comes from the early ecclesiastical site at Maughold. The clearest similarities are amongst those crosses of Kermode's pre-Scandinavian Class 1 stones (Kermode, 1907, 15-16) (Fig. 2). This category includes a number of ogham-inscribed stones, suggesting a broad pre-eighth century date. They tend to be carved on relatively unhewn blocks of stone, and show none of the fine working found on later Anglo-Scandinavian cross-slabs. The simple form of a circle-headed cross with a stem is paralleled on Maughold 10 (Kermode, 1907, 104, Pl. VII. 9). However, unlike the Aspatria example, this is a simple incised form. Crosses in outline with a circle are known from the same site (Maughold 21, *ibid.*, 108, Pl. IX. 20). These two crosses share a similar cross-shape to the Aspatria example, but differ in their simple incised execution. The false-relief technique used on the Aspatria stone does have features in common with other stones from

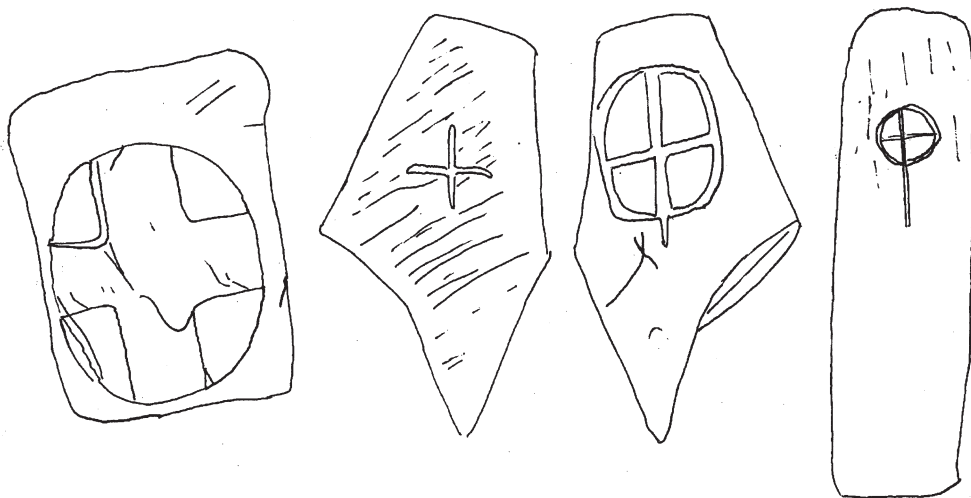


FIG. 2. Carved crosses from the Isle of Man.  
Left to right: Maughold 20, Lonan Old Church, Groudle 9A, B, Maughold 10b.

Maughold, such as crosses 28-33 (Kermode, 1907, 113-4), which show a range of inset cross interspaces and bosses, seemingly similar in execution to the Aspatria stone.

Whilst the closest parallels to the Aspatria carvings come from the Isle of Man, they have wider parallels in the repertoire of early Christian carvings from Western Britain (Nash-Williams, 1950) (Fig. 3). The simple disc pattern is found on a pillar stone in the churchyard at Mathry, Pembrokeshire (*ibid.*, 346). This stone is a bilingual Type 1 stone with a Latin text on one side, and on the opposing face an ogham inscription. It is on this latter face that the double-outline circle is inscribed. It is not clear whether the Mathry example is carved in relief. There is no reason to believe that the 5th-7th century inscriptions are contemporary with the incised circle, which is probably of 7th-9th century date.

It is easier to find parallels for the ring-crosses. Two examples of ring-crosses from Brecknock are almost exactly the same as those from Aspatria as depicted by Rooke. A pillar stone at Llanafan Fawr is inscribed with a carved ring-cross with an incised roundel and sunken angular interspaces, giving the rim and crosses a relief carved effect (*ibid.* 45). A very similar cross is also found on the unusual fragmentary pillar-stone from Llangamarch (*ibid.*, 57) and Llanspyddid (*ibid.*, 63). Nash-Williams dates all these pillar stones to the 7th-9th centuries. Other connections between Breconshire and Aspatria have been noted: the unusual conjunction between an *orans* figure and a cross known from the churchyard at Aspatria (Bailey and Cramp, 1988, 51) has only one parallel outside Merovingian Gaul, from Llanfrynach, Brecknock (Nash-Williams, 1950, 56).

Relief-carved crosses are also known from Dumfries and Galloway. A series of such sculpted stones have been recovered from Whithorn (Craig, 1997, 435-7). Although there are no precise parallels to the Aspatria carvings, crosses carved in relief on pocked backgrounds have been found (*ibid.*, 7, 8). Craig has dated these to the 10th to 12th centuries on the basis of the cross types, rather than on the method of carving, and none of them are ring-headed crosses. The closest parallel (*ibid.*, 13) is the circular cross found on an incomplete stone vessel. This cross is carved in relief against a pocked background, but unlike the Aspatria example has widely splayed arms. It has been dated provisionally to the late 8th century on this basis. Interestingly this piece was not produced in local stone, but instead utilised sandstone found commonly in the areas of Northumberland and Cumbria which belong to the Carboniferous Calciferous Sandstone Measures.

It is impossible to find convincing parallels for the other carvings on the Aspatria stone. There is a grid-pattern on the carved stone from Tregaron, Cardiganshire (Nash-Williams, 1950, 133), but unlike the Aspatria example it is framed by the edge of the stone and fits in with the overall decorative scheme of the stone. It is possible that the grid is some form of rough, incised gaming board, and the incised line with perpendicular off-shoots may be an incomplete example of the same (for examples of graffiti gaming boards see Croft, 1987).

Although the crosses and discs are similar to Early Christian stones there is a difference between the Aspatria stone and the Welsh stones in the positioning of the carvings themselves. Most Welsh Type II stones are often shaped and tend to contain only one carving. The Aspatria stones are unique in the number of carvings on them.

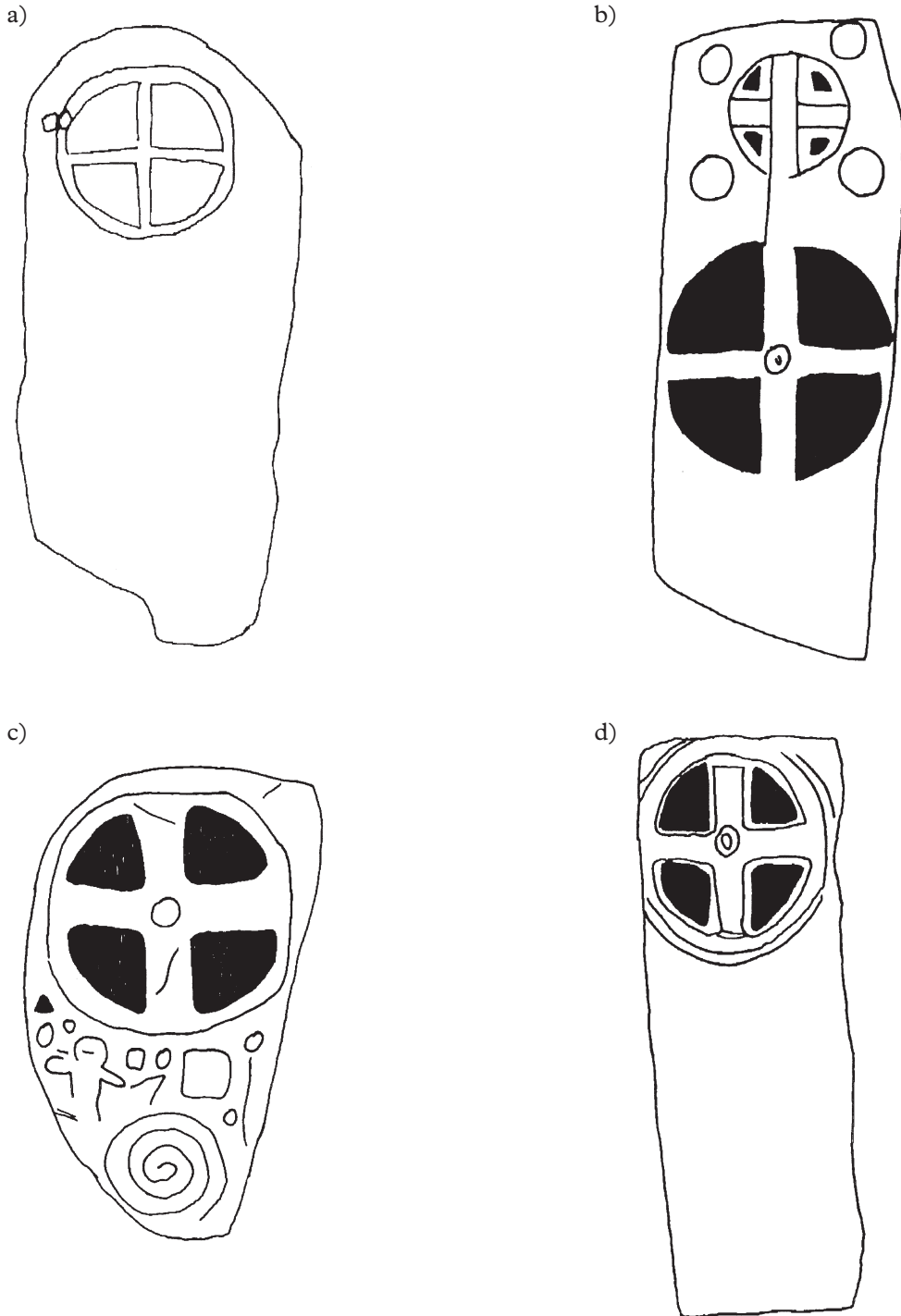


FIG. 3. Early Medieval Welsh Parallels for the carving from Aspatria. a) Mathry (Pembs.)  
 b) Llanyspyddid (Brecks.) c) Llangamarch (Pembs.) d) Llanafan (Pembs.)

It seems probable that Rooke was correct in interpreting these stones as Early Christian carvings. However, he was wrong in describing them as being contemporary with the burial in the cist, which is certainly Viking. This must mean that the stones were taken from elsewhere to build the cist. It is possible though that the inscribed gaming boards were carved at this point. An important question is whether the use of these stones was accidental or a deliberate re-use of Christian stones. Interestingly Beacon Hill is not the only Viking burial to incorporate an Early Christian inscribed stone. At Kiloran Bay on the north-west coast of Colonsay, a boat-burial within a stone cist was found (Anderson, 1907, 488). The burial was clearly pagan, being accompanied by the skeleton of a horse as well as a range of weapons and other grave-goods dating to the later ninth or tenth century. Two cross-incised stones were found in the cist. They were located to the west and east ends of the enclosure containing the boat burial. These stones seem to belong to the series of primary cross-marked slabs common throughout Scotland and the West of Britain and which seem to date to the seventh and eighth centuries A.D., and thus predate the burial (Thomas, 1971, 124-5).

The juxtaposition of pagan Viking burials with symbols of Christianity is relatively common in the area encompassing Cumbria, the Isle of Man and Argyll. As well as the Kiloran Bay example, the boat burial at Cronk-yn-How, on the Isle of Man is located on an earlier Christian cemetery site. Within Cumbria itself there is circumstantial evidence that the possible Viking burial from Eaglesfield was located within a Christian burial site (Cowen, 1948; 1967). The presence of Viking burials in Christian cemeteries or with Christian symbols need not imply that those being buried were practising Christians. Julian Richards has suggested that the visibility of Viking burials in the Isle of Man and Cumbria is due to the assertion of an actively pagan identity over a subordinate Christian population, and churchyard burial or the use of Christian symbols by Vikings should be interpreted not as an act of piety, but of domination (Richards, 1991, 118).

In addition to the stone from Aspatria there is also one other possible cross-marked stone in Cumbria, an example from Tebay, often known as the Brandreth Stone. This granite boulder has a small rough cross on one corner (RCHME, 1936, 226). Although tradition suggests that this and another, now missing cross, marked the border between England and Scotland there is no means of dating it, and it may be potentially of early Christian date.

In conclusion, the inscribed symbols do not appear to be of prehistoric date, and instead find their closest parallels in the inscribed early Christian monuments of Western Britain, dating from the 7th to 9th centuries. The closest parallels are from the Isle of Man, and may be a rare example of evidence for contact between Man and Cumbria prior to the Viking period. The Aspatria carvings appear to be the first examples of such Early Christian carving from Cumbria, and perhaps the shade of Major Rooke can now be vindicated.

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