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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ST VIGEAN'S MUSEUM: VIG007



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh
EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

VIG007, ST VIGEAN'S

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

This Statement supplements the general Statement of Significance for the St Vigeans Collection and focusses on the particular importance of VIG007. VIG007 is a Pictish cross-slab 1.65m high, found in the graveyard of St Vigeans church. Although the back and sides of the slab have suffered mutilation, it remains one of the finest and most polemical statements of Pictish art. On each side of the stone is a monumental cross carved with a rich variety of interlace and spiral patterns. Flanking the cross shaft on the front are four delicately carved narrative scenes, which pointedly contrast the virtues of good Christian clergy and bad pagan priests. The choice of these non-Biblical subjects indicates issues of current concern to the patrons in the 8th century.

Part of a collection of 34 early medieval carvings and more medieval architectural sculpture, found in the church walls and in the graveyard, VIG007 was removed to the adjacent Historic Scotland museum at Kirkstyle in 1961.¹

1.2 Statement of significance

- Among the surviving Pictish stones and the St Vigeans collection, VIG007 is outstanding for the intricacy of its ornament, and its erudite subject matter, which is clearly intended to guide a well-educated priesthood.
- Pictish culture has lost its own written record but this stone reveals the wealth of literary and artistic references which were available to its artists. The scenes derive from the Lives of Simon Magus, Saints Antony and Paul, and the *Peristephanon* of Prudentius.
- It is rare for Pictish stones to display a coherent programme of linked scenes which can sustain complex exegesis on many levels. The careful arrangement of these narrative scenes, linked by related themes of correct priestly conduct and false pagan practice, shows such advanced skills at exegesis.
- Although the stone has suffered some mutilation, the quality of carving is extremely delicate and precise, both in the complex arrangement of interlace and spiral patterns, and in the physical details of the figures.
- Notwithstanding its priestly character, the back of the stone once displayed the characteristic Pictish symbols, while a falconer holding his block adds a secular endorsement to the reforming clerical message.²

¹ NRS, DD27/536, p. 104 is an inventory of the collection 'in new museum' prepared in 1960. The deed of transfer of the stone to the government was 24 October 1961. NRS, 1956-75, DD.27.536. The museum opened in 1962: NRS, 1962, DD.27.3825.

² Ordnance Survey Name Book, St Vigeans, prepared for the 1865 O.S. map edition. Copy in National Monuments Record of Scotland.



2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

VIG007 is a monumental cross-slab. Although considerably cut down, it is now 1.67m high, 920mm wide and 195mm thick. It is made of medium/coarse-grained sandstone with clay or quartz clasts and is livid reddish pink in colour. The stone type comes from the vicinity of St Vigean.³ Reused in another structure at some point in its history, it is severely mutilated with roughly symmetrical, stepped indents cut into each side. The back has suffered both natural lamination and deliberate defacement of the major cross design. In spite of this damage, it remains one of the most monumental and imposing Pictish cross-slabs whose surviving detail reveals the overall quality of the composition.

The stone was first recorded 'about seven feet from the south wall of the church' mostly buried in the ground, forming the remnant of a complex grave. It was lifted out in the 1840s and moved to various parts of the churchyard and church until it was removed in 1961 with the rest of the St Vigean collection to the museum in Kirkstyle.

The carved detail

The front is dominated by an elaborate interlace cross. This consists of four squared arms of equal length with a circle at the intersection. External spirals spring from each of the circular armpits. The cross head is separated from its shaft by semi-circular indents. Beneath the spiral-filled shaft is a square-base pedestal of interlace. The spirals interlock the four orders of creation: fish-like creature, birds, beasts and bearded men.

On each side of the shaft are two scenes of carefully delineated human

³ Miller and Ruckley, in Geddes.

figures in profile. On the top left, two men in fine robes and leather shoes face each other, and between them is a naked man, upside down, with his hands at his sides and a curly top-knot on his head. His head rests on a square block, presumably a rock. The scene appears to represent the Fall of Simon Magus.

On the bottom left, two priests, with the Petrine tonsure, process towards the cross shaft.⁴ They wear hooded cloaks and carry short rod-like objects which may be candles or tapers. They may be celebrating a festival of light such as Candlemas or the New Fire of Holy Week.

On the upper right, two men sit on chairs facing one another. Between them, they hold up a disc with a line down the middle: the shared bread of the Host. Above the bread is the remnant of a bird beak: the raven. The scene depicts Saints Antony and Paul in the desert, being brought their bread by a raven, and sharing it.

On the lower right, a bull stands on a plinth, kneeling beneath him is a famished naked man with hair sticking up in clods, and his tongue licking the blood flowing from the wound he has pierced in the bull's neck. This is an accurate depiction of the Taurobolium, a pagan Roman sacrifice to the goddess Cybele, as described by the 5th-century author Prudentius in his book *Peristephanon*.⁵

The back is almost obliterated but it is clear that there was originally a monumental interlaced cross, similar to that on the front. It was described shortly after its excavation in the 1840s as having figures of 'different sorts of animals' and the 'usual Z-shaped figure or symbol'.⁶ Still visible on the lower left is a man with deeply bowed head holding in his hand a small padded square block on a stalk. This is likely to be the block or perch for a flat-footed bird of prey like a hawk, so the figure was a huntsman. It is possible that a series of five deep diagonal incisions on the edge of one narrow side could be the damaged remains of ogham.

A lost fragment, VIG026, photographed in Allen and Anderson with a plain border and diagonal key pattern, could be the lower left edge of the cross arm on the front.⁷

Brief history

For history of the whole site, see general St Vigean's Statement of Significance, Appendix 1, Timeline.

⁴ The Petrine tonsure refers to shaving the crown of the head in a bald circle, approved by Rome. This contrasted with the so-called tonsure of Simon Magus which was used by Irish Celtic monks, of uncertain style but probably with hair cut back from ear to ear.

⁵ Prudentius A, 1953, *Peristephanon Liber, Crowns of Martyrdom*, trans H J Thomson, Loeb edition, London, para 10.1001-50, p.294-99.

⁶ OS

⁷ Allen and Anderson, 1903, 2, pt.III, 279.

In 1622 William Dempster writes about a cross to St Vigean in the churchyard. There are several cross-slabs and crosses in the collection.⁸ Patrick Chalmers gives the first written and illustrated account of VIG007 in 1848 but his imprecise description leads to a somewhat confusing account of the recent history of the stone. 'The supposed grave of the architect [of Arbroath Abbey] was marked by a "large built cross" or rather two crosses, which stood about seven feet from the south wall of the church, and about like distance from each other and removed "because they encumbered the ground"'. A part of one of these crosses forms the footstep in which is placed the cross which is shown in this plate [VIG001]... For the other cross said to have been part of the architect's monument, see pl. VI [VIG007]'⁹ Chalmers dug it up and illustrated it in its present mutilated state.

1851-54, Henry Laing made casts for the Society of Antiquaries, of Drosten's stone VIG001, 002,007, 008. These are now in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh.¹⁰

Before 1865, it was recorded in the Ordnance Survey name book, leaning against the angle of the church, dug up by Chalmers because 'it encumbered the ground'.¹¹

At the restoration of 1872, it was moved inside the church, built into the west wall of the north aisle.¹²

In 1961, the stone, along with the rest of the collection was placed under guardianship and moved to the adjacent museum at Kirkstyle.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of VIG007 is high, due to the clarity and quality of the surviving areas of carving.

Its eventual location, within the churchyard of St Vigeans, can be pinpointed with some accuracy seven feet from the south wall of the church. Chalmers in 1848 recalls the 18th-century minister Mr Aitkin describing the famous grave marked 'by a large built Cross or rather *two* Crosses which stood about seven feet from the south wall of the church and about a like distance from each other', removed 'because they encumbered the ground.' This supposed location is now the site of a memorial to Revd. William Duke erected after his death in 1915. The vicinity of his grave is full of potential evidence for the shrine site.

The current stone parish church was begun in the 12th century and extended over many building campaigns throughout the middle ages and eighteenth

⁸ Dempster, 1627, XIX, ii, 648.

⁹ Chalmers, 1848, *Ancient Sculptured Monuments of the County of Angus*, iii, 7, pl.vi, no.4.

¹⁰ Laing, 1851-54, 294-96; 1856, 153-54.

¹¹ Ordnance Survey name book, St Vigeans, 91. Chalmers, 1848, 7.

¹² Allen and Anderson, 1903, 2, pt.III, 267. Duke, 1870-72, 494.

century. At each stage of rebuilding, the Pictish stone collection was cannibalised to construct the church fabric, but VIG007 was sufficiently valued to remain by the tomb until the 1840s.

2.3 Historical values

Iconography

The selection of iconography on VIG007 reveals profound information about Pictish interests and social values.¹³ Each feature of the erudite iconography on this stone reveals evidence about religious, liturgical and social issues within the context of the 8–9th-century Pictish church. Unlike most Pictish cross-slabs which include a scattering of monsters and disparate motifs, here all four scenes on the front seem to form a programme which involves the priesthood, contrasting pagans and Christians.

- Top left: Simon Magus, a pagan wizard who attempted to fly with the power of the devil, is hurled to his death by the prayers of adjacent Saints Peter and Paul.¹⁴ Irish druids were known as magi, thereby associated with Simon Magus, and the haircut of Celtic priests was disparaged by Romanists as the ‘tonsure of Simon Magus’. Hence the contrasting hairstyles of Simon and the Petrine tonsured priests in procession below. The issue of Celtic versus Petrine tonsure was settled at the Synod of Whitby in 664, but took a long while to be rigorously applied.¹⁵ King Nechtan of the Picts enquired about these matters to Abbot Ceolfrid of Wearmouth-Jarrow in c.710.¹⁶ Simon Magus also symbolised the sin of pride, the purchase of office, and the false powers of pagan priests.
- Bottom left: The processing priests below are performing a cleansing and purifying ritual, replacing false light with the True Light. If they represent Candlemas (2 February), this celebration was introduced c.700, Christianising the pagan Roman revels of Lupercalia.¹⁷ If they represent the Easter procession, they are bringing new light and life to the Resurrection. The priests are clearly ‘Roman’ in their appearance.
- Top right: Paul and Antony, the early desert fathers, were exemplars for the early Celtic church in both Ireland and Scotland, where their images are common at this period. They represented a life of austerity and self denial. The miracle of bread in the desert was a gift from God. Their courteous decision to share the loaf simultaneously was

¹³ This is examined in detail in Chapter 7, ‘VIG007: a Sermon in Stone’ in Geddes (forthcoming).

¹⁴ He is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, 8:9-24, and more details are provided in the apocryphal *Passion of Peter and Paul*. J N Bremner, 1998, *The Apocryphal Acts of Peter: Magic, Miracles and Gnosticism*, Leuven.

¹⁵ One of the major issues settled at the Synod of Whitby, apart from the correct date for easter, was the correct tonsure for monks, who should follow the Roman regulations. Bede, III, 25, 26, V, 21, 22.

¹⁶ Bede, V, 21.

¹⁷ Lupercalia, a pagan Roman fertility festival held in February. During this festival men hit women with thongs called ‘februa’, meaning ‘the means of purification’, hence the name of the month. Dendy, 1959, 179-80.

emulated by monks at Iona, when the Eucharist was shared with visiting priests.¹⁸

- Bottom right: The Taurobolium scene is a unique visual depiction of a popular early medieval text, the description by Prudentius of a particularly gory pagan ritual. This is shown within a Pictish society where cattle slaughtering feasts were still performed, if not as sacrifices, then at least with exuberance on saints' days. This pagan ritual was hard to extirpate in Scotland and is still recorded in the 18th century in the Highlands.¹⁹ The aim of the bull sacrifice was rebirth, prosperous crops, and other fundamental desires taken over by the church.

The viewers' participation

After the Synod of Whitby, 664, the church in Britain underwent a lengthy process of becoming more aligned with the Roman rites, while at the same time trying to avoid alienating followers of the older Celtic rituals.

- When these scenes are viewed in conjunction with the swirling orders of creation on the cross shaft, the viewer begins to participate in the message of the cross. It is clear that many of these early carved monuments required audience participation, sometimes rotating around the stone, sometimes reading the scenes horizontally and vertically at the same time, as on the Ruthwell cross. VIG007 therefore invites the viewer to descend to their knees and read the scenes with a movement of the head and eyes, up and down, sideways and diagonally. With this movement, the viewer's head shifts according to the lines of a cross.
- In this way, the viewer is invited to contemplate many contrasting messages about good and bad practice among the priesthood. They contrast pride/humility; true light/darkness; true sustenance/ spiritual hunger and false nourishment; the well-dressed clergy of the Roman church and the Celtic church/ the naked priests; the Rock of Simon Peter/the rock which kills Simon Magus.

Literary and intellectual evidence.

VIG007 shows the local priesthood were well acquainted with important non-biblical texts such as the legend of Simon Magus, the *Peristephanon* of Prudentius, the Lives of Saints Antony and Paul. They were also able to demonstrate advanced skills at exegesis, linking these episodes together.

Historical

On a historical level, it is likely that this unique selection of scenes was made to highlight particular issues which were important to the community at the time, perhaps demonstrating a desire to promote good practice and extirpate

¹⁸ Adomnán, 1995, Book 1 Chapter 44, p.147.

¹⁹ Mackay, 1896, xxxviii, 280-81, 338.

the 'old ways' during a phase of reform.

Material Evidence

In terms of material evidence, VIG007 has particularly clear depictions of Pictish shoes, of a type actually excavated on Iona. It also shows tunics and cloaks with presumably embroidered decoration. The chairs are shown with sufficient detail to appreciate a complex use of joinery. The depiction of the falconer's block is sufficiently clear to understand how it is correctly held, then and now. This identification clarifies the appearance of 'tiny shields' held by other huntsmen on Pictish stones, like Kirriemuir 2 and Eassie: they are all perches for the bird of prey.

The stones at St Vigean's provided lasting inspiration for the foremost scholar of Pictish art. The antiquarian and ultimately Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities, Joseph Anderson (1832-1916), began his education at St Vigean's school, opposite the church. His childhood memories led him to focus his life on Scottish antiquities, writing *Scotland in Early Christian Times*, The Rhind Lectures, Edinburgh, 1881; and the monumental *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 1903, along with J. Romilly Allen.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

VIG007 is one of an elite group of the finest Pictish cross-slabs. Its key design features are a complex interlace cross on both sides, a cross on a square-block base; complex figurative spiral patterns; four narrative scenes arranged on a logical order down the sides of cross, and symbols originally on the back.

- Monumental and complex interlace crosses with scenes down the sides are found locally at Aberlemno 2, Glamis Manse and Eassie. These are closest to VIG007 in terms of the richness and size of the cross. Other smaller versions are at Glamis Hunter's Hill, Kirriemuir 1 and 2, Woodrae, Dunfallandy, and also at St Vigean's VIG001 and 002.
- None of these crosses is accompanied by narrative scenes of such realism or complexity as VIG007 (see Historical Significance), most of them displaying a range of monsters.
- Furthermore, VIG007 has a monumental cross on both sides: this is much rarer among the symbol stones, found at Rossie, and in the far north at Skinnet and Ulbster. Skinnet shares the square base with VIG007.
- The unusual inhabited spirals on the cross shaft are found at St Maelrubha's, Applecross. Dedications to St Maelrubha are found in Angus at Kinnell and Kirkden, suggesting that the design influence came from Angus to the west. Given the disruption caused by Viking raids in the Applecross area after about 800, this artistic connection is likely to be before the Viking incursions.
- William Dalrymple noticed the very close similarity between the Paul and Antony scene at St Vigean's and that on an 18th-century icon at

St Antony's monastery in Egypt.²⁰ The two seated figures facing each other are also found at Fowlis Wester and Dunfallandy, Perthshire, influenced by St Vigean's but in slightly different context. The seated Antony and Paul scene is also found on early Irish sculpture, particularly at Castledermot; Kells, Cross of SS Patrick and Columba; Moone and Kilnarouane. This suggests that they all derive from an Egyptian icon which was circulating in the Celtic world. Given the additional vivid details provided at Fowlis Wester, of a reasonable palm tree and garments made of plaited palm leaves, it is likely an icon like that surviving in St Antony's Egypt, was available in Angus in the 8th century.

- Two priests, standing in profile and breaking bread together are shown on Kirriemuir 1. While they have no other attributes of St Antony and Paul, they are performing the consecration of the host, and on the Ruthwell cross figures in similar pose, without further attributes, are named as Antony and Paul. On display at the Meffan Institute, Forfar, along with two cross marked stones from Arbroath.
- No images are known (to this author) to depict the Taurobolium, although other scenes from the works of Prudentius are illustrated.²¹ They show images such as a bound man falling headlong, like Simon Magus, and a bull by an altar. The image on VIG007 is an accurate visualisation of the text itself.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values
See main St Vigean's Statement of Significance

2.6 Natural heritage values
See main St Vigean's Statement of Significance

2.7 Contemporary/use values
See main St Vigean's Statement of Significance

3 Major gaps in understanding

- When was the stone carved?
- Did the arrival of St Vigean's relics cause the foundation of the church site or were the relics brought to an existing place of Christian worship?
- What was the relationship of VIG007 to the group of stones connected to the cult of St Vigean, namely the shrine VIG029, Drosten's stone VIG001 and the recumbent made of the same stone as the previous monuments, VIG008?
- What happened on the site of 'the tomb of the saint' on the south side of the church?

²⁰ William Dalrymple, *To the Holy Mountain*, 2005, 304-305, 418-19.

²¹ Stettiner, R., *Die illustrierten Prudentius-handschriften*. Berlin. G. Grottesche verlagsbuchhandlung. 1905, 3-22, tafeln 161-163, 135, 136, 153. Burgerbibliothek Bern, Cod. 264 is the only illustrated *Peristephanon*.

- When was VIG007 cannibalised to form another structure? What was its secondary function?
- To what extent might this be a Pictish royal site? (Who was the elite huntsman on the back of VIG007?)
- Obvious future work is to explore the site where VIG007 was found, just south of the church.

4 Associated properties

Meigle Museum, Aberlemno Church, Meffan Institute Forfar, Glamis Manse, Eassie Church, Macmanus Gallery, Dundee, Montrose Museum

5 Keywords

Cross-slab, Pictish, symbols, interlace, key pattern, Insular art, archer, hunt, Simon Magus, St Antony, St Paul, Taurobolium, Prudentius,

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