

6. The Sculptured Stones of Govan and Renfrewshire

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In April 1994 members of the Pictish Arts Society travelled to Paisley to join members of Renfrewshire Local History Forum in a day devoted to the study of some examples of what is now called the Govan School of sculpture. Compared with the magnificent craftsmanship and original symbolism of the true Pictish stones what we have in Govan and the surrounding area is late, derivative and much of it inferior in execution. The stones of the Govan School come towards the end of a long tradition in sculpture rather than at the beginning. They are nevertheless very intriguing, and well worth a visit. Though some of them may lack the delicacy and intricacy of earlier work, the interlace patterns are simple and bold. The animal carving is vigorous and attractively "chunky." In Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson's classic work (now, of course, re-issued by a P.A.S. member) the stones were simply designated as Class 3. (1903 and 1993) There are, however, stylistic similarities within a fairly well defined geographical area which justifies the use of the term 'school.'

Historically they are rather puzzling. There is a large number of stones - more than 50 altogether - with a concentration of over 30 at a single site, namely Govan Old Parish Church which is absolutely and totally absent from historical records. Probably because of that, the collection has received rather less scholarly attention than other groups of stones, and has been virtually ignored by cultural tourists who make pilgrimages to Aberlemno, Meigle and St. Vigean's. In the last few years Tom Davidson Kelly, the minister at Govan Old, has really worked hard at promoting Govan. It was largely through his efforts that a major Conference was held there in May 1992. The very distinguished speakers took a fresh look at the historical context, the art-historical background and the artistic achievement of the Govan School. The papers from the Conference, copiously illustrated with newly commissioned photographs are due to be published soon. In the meantime this may serve as a short introduction.

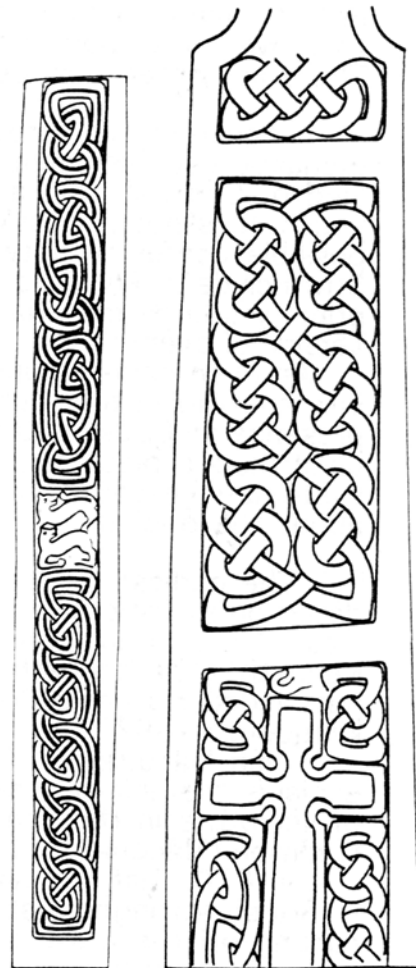
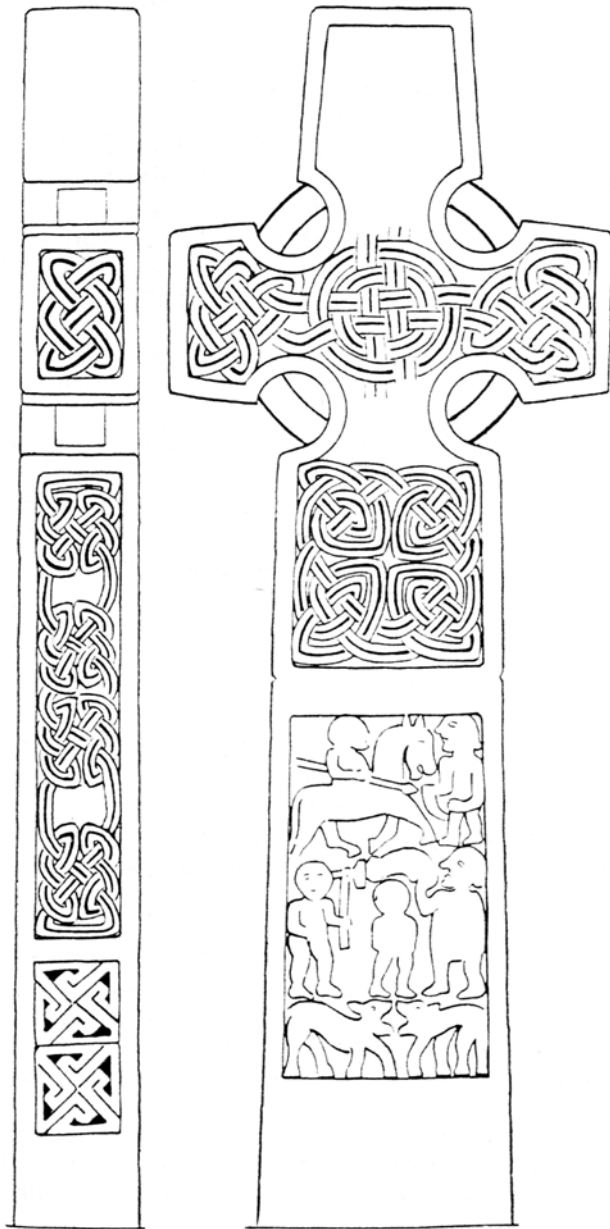
It is generally agreed that the Govan stones were produced in the 9th, 10th and early 11th centuries, and that they are characterised by a fusion of artistic styles.

The mounted warrior or huntsman is a motif frequently found on Class 2 Pictish stones and occurs on a great many Class 3 stones. Horsemen are depicted on some of the Govan stones too, in poses that are reminiscent of Pictish Sculpture. There is a hunting scene on the Govan sarcophagus that is similar to Pictish hunting scenes. The horses on the Inchinnan sarcophagus lid are much cruder but they have the vigour that is associated with Pictish animal sculpture.

There are several cross shafts of the Govan School. The Arthurlie Cross, for example, has lost its head, but there is enough left to show that its head was similar in shape to that of the complete Barochan Cross. It has a ring within circular arm-pits, a feature associated with West Highland crosses in the Hiberno-Scottish style.

The cross head from Lesmahagow is circular with the arms of the cross carved within the circle, reminiscent of crosses from the Whithorn area.

the Barochan Cross



the Arthurlie Cross

Drawings reproduced from "The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland" by J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson.

Similarities to Anglian stones can be seen in the ring twist and double beaded interlace techniques.

Then there are the hogback stones. They are supposed to show Scandinavian influence. In fact, they are not found in Scandinavia itself but are associated with peoples of Scandinavian or Hiberno-Norse ancestry in Britain.

The big question is "How did all these influences come to be exerted in North Strathclyde - an area which in ethnic terms was supposedly British in the 9th and 10th centuries when the stones were produced?" One would expect to find some sort of answer to that at Govan Old Parish Church which, with its big collection of stones, must have been a major cult centre at that time. Unfortunately, the origins of the foundation at Govan are obscure. (MacFarlane 1965) According to tradition it was founded in the 6th century, which would make it roughly contemporaneous with other local foundations - St. Kentigern or Mungo's foundation at Glasgow, St Mirin's at Paisley and St Conval's at Inchinnan. St Mungo and St Mirin were British saints. St Conval was reputedly a Scot from Ireland; about the only thing we know about him for sure is that he died in 612 at Inchinnan. There are other local dedications to him in the Levern valley and at Irvine.

According to Fordun's Chronicle, which is a mediaeval compilation, a monastic establishment was founded at Govan in 565 by Constantine a king of Cornwall who abdicated and took up the religious life after a wild youth. It is not impossible. There is the ethnic link. But there is also a possible confusion between the Dumnonii of Cornwall and the Damnonii of Strathclyde in Fordun's sources (if, indeed he had access to now lost primary source material and was not simply repeating the traditional version of events.)

An even earlier foundation date for Govan has been postulated putting it into the Ninian era, but really the first hard evidence of a Christian presence at Govan is the stones themselves. These have been located and unearthed in piecemeal fashion. There has been no comprehensive and systematic excavation in the precincts which might reveal information about the origins.

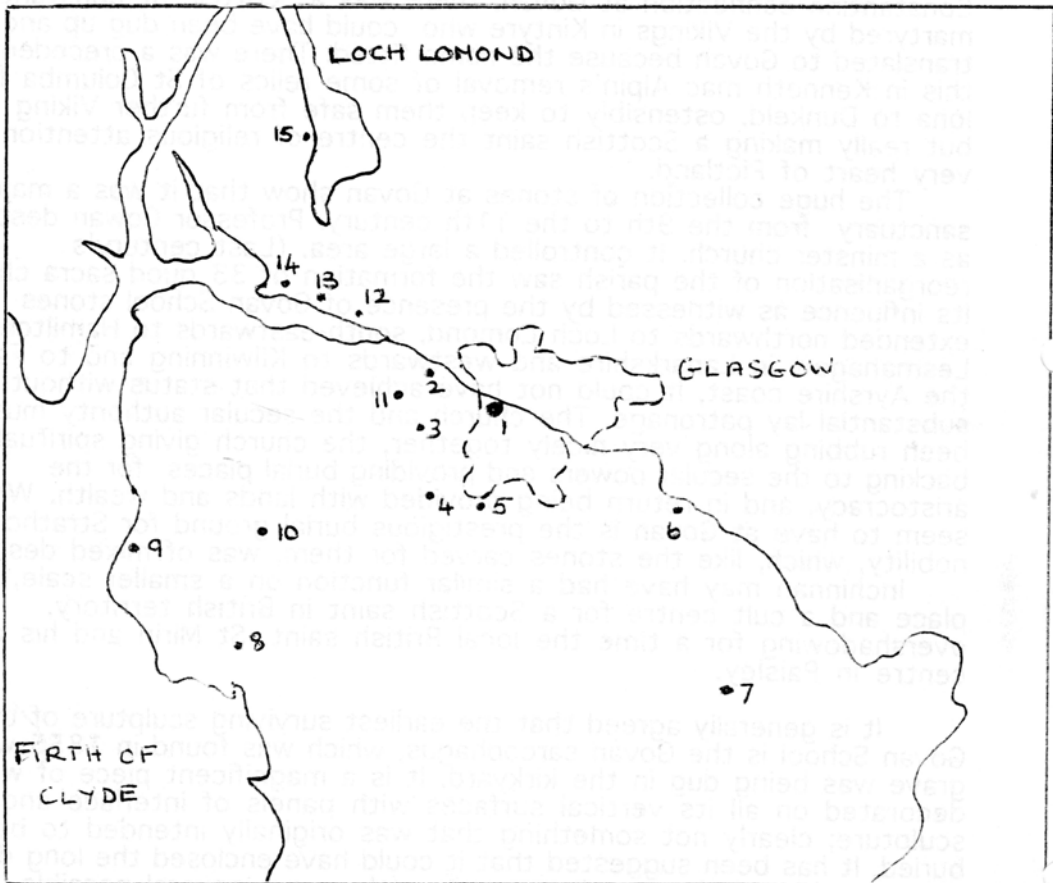
The earliest of the stones is thought to be the sarcophagus which is dated on stylistic grounds to the second half of the 9th century. There was a Constantine who loomed large at that time, Constantine mac Kenneth. (The Kenneth in question being Kenneth mac Alpin). Constantine succeeded his uncle Donald as king of the combined Picto-Scottish kingdom in 862.

Alan Macquarrie of Glasgow University has put forward a theory that explains the link between Govan and Constantine, and the sudden flowering of sculpture in the 9th century where there was no previous sculptural tradition. (Macquarrie 1990)

In 870, Olaf and Ivar, kings of the Norse colony in Dublin besieged the British stronghold at Dumbarton for 4 months, eventually reducing it by cutting off the water supply. (Professor and Mrs Alcock found evidence of that siege when they excavated at Dumbarton.) The British king of Strathclyde, Arthgal map Dyfnwal was

one of many prisoners taken back to Dublin. In the following year he was executed "by counsel of Constantine mac Kenneth, king of Scots." Arthgal's son Rhun who was married to Constantine's sister became king of Strathclyde - perhaps, as MacQuarrie suggests, having accepted Constantine as overlord and making Strathclyde a client kingdom.

Distribution of Govan School Stones



- | | |
|--------------|----------------|
| 1 Govan | 9 Fairlie |
| 2 Inchinnan | 10 Lochwinnoch |
| 3 Stanely | 11 Barochan |
| 4 Arthurlie | 12 Mountblow |
| 5 Capelrig | 13 Dumbarton |
| 6 Netherston | 14 Kilmahew |
| 7 Kesmahagau | 15 Huss |
| 8 Kilwinning | |

There was a well documented exodus of disaffected Strathclyde aristocracy to Wales in the 890's. They may have left because they were unhappy with Scottish dominance in Strathclyde politics. They established the cult of St Kentigern in Wales at a time when his cult centre in Glasgow was eclipsed by the emergence of Govan as a major cult centre dedicated to a St Constantine. It would have been politically expedient to focus attention on Govan, making it a symbol of Scottish cultural and religious domination of Strathclyde. If there was not already a St Constantine connection at Govan, there was a Scottish St Constantine martyred by the Vikings in Kintyre who could have been dug up and translated to Govan because the name fitted. There was a precedent for this in Kenneth mac Alpin's removal of some relics of St Columba from Iona to Dunkeld, ostensibly to keep them safe from further Viking raids, but really making a Scottish saint the centre of religious attention in the very heart of Pictland.

The huge collection of stones at Govan show that it was a major sanctuary from the 9th to the 11th century. Professor Cowan described it as a minster church. It controlled a large area. (Last century's reorganisation of the parish saw the formation of 33 quod sacra churches.) Its influence as witnessed by the presence of Govan School stones extended northwards to Loch Lomond, south-eastwards to Hamilton and Lesmahagow in Lanarkshire and westwards to Kilwinning and to Fairlie on the Ayrshire coast. It could not have achieved that status without substantial lay patronage. The church and the secular authority must have been rubbing along very nicely together, the church giving spiritual backing to the secular powers and providing burial places for the aristocracy, and in return being provided with lands and wealth. What we seem to have at Govan is the prestigious burial ground for Strathclyde's nobility, which, like the stones carved for them, was of mixed descent.

Inchinnan may have had a similar function on a smaller scale, a burial place and a cult centre for a Scottish saint in British territory, overshadowing for a time the local British saint, St Mirin and his cult centre in Paisley.

It is generally agreed that the earliest surviving sculpture of the Govan School is the Govan sarcophagus, which was found in 1855 when a grave was being dug in the kirkyard. It is a magnificent piece of work, decorated on all its vertical surfaces with panels of interlace and animal sculpture; clearly not something that was originally intended to be buried. It has been suggested that it could have enclosed the long dead remains of some Constantine or other (there are several possible candidates) placed in a prominent position within a 9th century chapel. It is made of sandstone and it does not show signs of having stood in the open for centuries. It does have, though, a drainage hole in the base which would seem to indicate that it was intended to receive a newly dead occupant. The status of such an occupant can be guessed at by the richness of the sculpture. It must have been someone with wealth enough to commission it and with prestige enough for his sarcophagus to be accorded a prominent position in an existing building. One of the sculpted panels depicts a rider following a stag. As Professor Cramp emphasised at this year's Dalrymple lectures, hunting is associated with royalty and the aristocracy. It is likely that the sarcophagus was made for one of Strathclyde's 9th century ruling elite.

The Govan sarcophagus has no lid: at Inchinnan there is a lid with no sarcophagus. It is richly decorated but it is crudely carved in comparison. A line of little animals parades along each side. There is a chunky figure of eight at the foot and an equally chunky four chord plait at the head. On the top there is a small, plain circular armpit cross with three pairs of confronted animals and a fourth pair flanking a figure that is most likely Daniel in the lions' den. The corners of this tapering lid are cylindrical as if the complete work had been modelled on a corner post shrine. The lid may in turn have been the model for several of the Govan grave slabs which have carved discs at the corners. Grave slabs are the most numerous form within the Govan school. At Govan itself many of them have been re-used in the 17th century when they had initials, names and dates cut on them. There is a recumbent grave slab and a headless cross shaft at Inchinnan as well as the sarcophagus lid. All three were found in the kirkyard of Inchinnan Parish Kirk. When it was razed to the ground to make way for Glasgow airport, they were moved to a covered court at the entrance to the new Parish Kirk. At the moment they look a bit vulnerable to the house building that is going on very close to the church. They have been mounted flat on brick plinths at a height that makes them ideal as picnic tables.

It is highly dubious whether any of the Govan School stones are in their original positions. Of the several examples of stone crosses, the Capelrig cross and the Mountblow cross are in store at the Kelvingrove Museum. The shaft of the Kilwinning cross, which has somehow acquired a coat of blue paint is in Saltcoats Museum store. The broken pieces of the Stanely cross have recently been moved to a storage shed at Stanely Reservoir. The Nethererton cross which is late with debased sun and fish motifs on it is now in front of the Adam designed church at Hamilton. The Arthurlie cross, now headless, rescued last century from use as a bridge across a burn stands surrounded by roses and a railing at the edge of a housing scheme. The Barochan cross has been moved to Paisley Abbey. Their archaeological contexts can not now be explored. A plausible explanation for their existence is that they were set up to hallow places where people were in the habit of meeting for various purposes. It is not thought that they were individual grave markers.

The most exciting of the stones at Govan Old Parish Church are undoubtedly the hogbacks. There are five of them and they are all different, though at first sight they look like five giant tortoise shells. They have been moved from their original positions too, but in their case it does seem likely that they were individual grave markers. They are like tiled or shingled roofs over houses for the dead. Weird animals clasp the gables, and in one example straddle the ridge. As Anna Ritchie has emphasised they have no forerunners in Scandinavia. They seem to have developed first in Cumbria amongst people of Scandinavian descent, - 'a unique response to local tastes, influenced by contemporary architecture, by existing Christian traditions of house-shaped shrines to hold the relics of saints and by a love of animal ornament that was common both to the Scandinavians and to the peoples of the British Isles.' (Ritchie 1993) It shouldn't surprise us that there were wealthy aristocrats of ultimately Scandinavian origin requiring burial in Strathclyde at this time. (Smyth 1984) The mac Alpin dynasty included some very astute kings who had influence in Strathclyde if not actual power. They were good at playing off their neighbours

against each other; the Angles with their stronghold in Bamburgh; the Dublin Norse; the Danes based in York and the Saxons to the south. They would side with the Angles to keep the Danes in check, but combine with the Danes when the Saxons looked like becoming too powerful. It was much better for Picto-Scotland if the Dublin Norse and the York Danes were kept at each others' throats. The doomsday scenario would have been a united Scandinavian presence in the north of England and in Ireland ready to push north and link up with the Scandinavian rulers of Sutherland and the Western Isles. By allowing Danes and Norse passage through the central lowlands of Scotland the momentum for hostile action which might otherwise have petered out with the difficulties of crossing the Pennines was maintained and the doomsday scenario was avoided. The mac Alpin dynasty flourished and laid the foundations for the emergence of Scotland as a mediaeval state.

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Editors' Note: Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division carried out an excavation in the church yard at Govan Old Parish Church during the first two weeks of August 1994. It seems likely that the foundations of a pre-mediaeval building were located and the vallum of an early monastic settlement. We look forward eagerly to the excavation report.