

Columba and Jonah – a motif in the dispersed art of Iona

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IN Le Musée d'Archéologie Nationale, château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye, France, there are two bronze objects (no. 52.74 (a) and (b)), which over the years have puzzled archaeologists and art historians. Each consists of two mirror-image D-shaped plates of c. 20cm, and – apart from minor details – they are identical: one side forming the back and one the front piece, both decorated with raised interlaced bosses, and a third plate forming the straight side edges, ending in a projecting beast's head. The plate illustrated here (Figure 1) is in pristine condition apart from the nail-holes, which show distinct marks of having been brutally torn apart. The French Revolution was long blamed for the fierce treatment of the bronze objects.

The items, which arrived at the museum in 1909 from the private collection of Victor Gay, were quite clearly Celtic, specifically of Irish origin, and as such belonged to the 8th century, as described by Françoise Henry.¹ She also gives an account of the technique applied to form the objects, known to archaeologists and artists as the 'lost wax method'. A plate of wax is pressed into a fixed matrix where the main shape and decor is carved out. When the wax form is taken out it can be further decorated in details, if needed, before it is covered in clay. The clay form is then burned, so that the wax is absorbed by the clay. While still hot, the form is filled with melted bronze. When cool, the clay form is cracked open and cannot be used again. The original matrix can, however, be used to make other clay forms with similar features as the first, or perhaps with some more or less minor alterations added to the details.²

Suggestions of any further provenance or practical application for the two objects in Saint-Germain amounted to little more than speculation until

1 Henry 1938.

2 Henry 1938, 71.



Figure 1. One of the mounts (numbered 10-523372) from Le Musée d'Archéologie Nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, with permission.

the great art historian John Hunt convincingly established how the items were used in an Irish setting.³ The bronze objects from Saint-Germain, he claimed, would be forming part of a double-winged terminal or finial on the point of a gable of a roof-shaped structure that most probably would have been a large shrine or sarcophagus. Hunt was able to demonstrate Irish stone art in early churches and tombs showing what he believed to be the pointed gable end of roofed shrines, in the shape of the building shown in folio 202 V, the 'Temple Page', in the *Book of Kells*. This is the temple of Jerusalem, with a hip roof and a ridge crest with two snake-like animal heads opposing each other at each end. (See Figures 2 and 3)

The inspiration behind the Irish-Scottish steep hip-roofed shrines, both in the form of large sarcophagi and much smaller reliquary shrines, is probably found in the many sarcophagi and coffins of late antiquity,⁴ while the fierce animal heads as terminals of the roof's ridge poles might have parallels in the carved gable finials on buildings, such as the wooden church on Iona, as suggested by H G Leask.⁵

Although there are many examples of pointed gabled shrines, the terminals in Saint-Germain are unusually large, the largest examples from the period in Irish art. All the known 8th-century Irish shrines are portable. However, from Northumbria we know that the wooden chest made in AD

3 Hunt 1956.

4 Blindheim 1986, 2-3.

5 Leask 1955, 43-7.



Figure 2. The temple of Jerusalem in the Temptation of Christ scene in the Book of Kells (from Henry 1947, see also Henry 1974, plate 68).

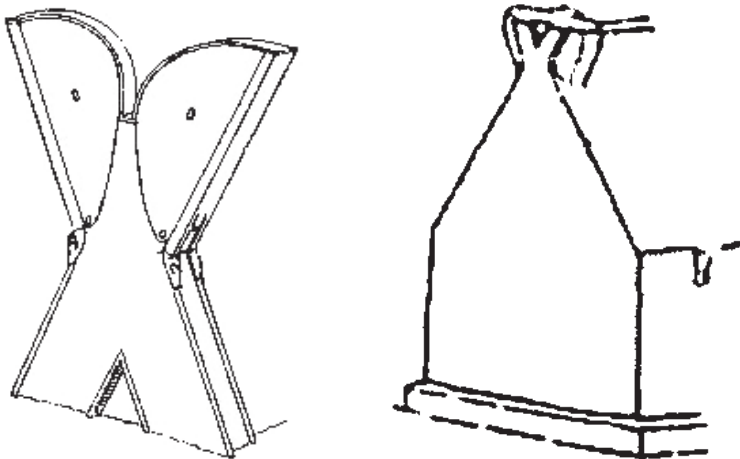


Figure 3. John Hunt's suggested use of the terminals (after Hunt 1956, 154).

698 to contain St Cuthbert was big enough to contain his body, and Bede (Bk IV, Ch. III) refers to an exceptionally large 'wooden monument ... a dwelling house' over the grave of St Ciadda.⁶ It is only fair to assume that the person commemorated with the only known gabled house-shaped reliquary from the 8th century would have had an unusual status within the Irish community.

By 1956 it was apparent that Hunt had given an explanation to the background of the two objects that could be regarded as final. Any further scholarly work on their function and provenance could only happen on the basis of additional circumstantial evidence. As a matter of fact, such evidence had long been unearthed as far away from France and Ireland as the south-west coast of Norway.

The finds at Gausel

In 1883 the farmer Samuel Gausel was clearing stones from a field on his farm Gausel, just south of Stavanger, when he came across a small mound that contained a grave. Samuel Gausel himself dug up the grave and passed the metal artefacts over to a local blacksmith who sold the objects to the Museum of Bergen. The Museum made contact by letter with the farmer, kindly asking him to see if he could find anything more in the grave, and he consequently forwarded a few more objects he had found. The grave unearthed by Samuel Gausel is nowadays regarded the second richest female burial from the Viking period found in Norway, after the famous Oseberg burial. The artefacts found on Gausel indicate an inhumation grave of a very high status woman. The head of a horse placed in the grave links it to other high status burials on the west coast of Norway, where horses or heads of horses have been buried alongside the dead. Among the objects in the Gausel burial are some bronze and silver brooches and arm-rings that probably were produced in Norway. They are of unusually high quality and indicate the owner's elevated position in a local setting. The imported goods, however, are what give this grave special significance, for here are unusual objects of such value that, in order to obtain them, the owner would have had exceptionally good contacts and a very high position in society.

A ring of jet (or possibly shale) will originally have come from northern England and it could have found its way to Gausel via trade. Likewise, the fine mounts from a horse harness, a bronze vessel and drinking-horn terminal mounts – all of them Insular – could have been acquired through trade. If so, they tell a tale of contact between Gausel and the new areas of opportunity that had started to open up because of Viking activities across the North Sea in the British Isles.

6 Hunt 1956, 157.

Egil Bakka has in several articles discussed the artefacts from the Gausel grave.⁷ He sees the selection of the high quality imported objects as a chieftain's first pickings from a large loot.⁸ Bakka comes to this assumption not only because of the quality of the objects but also because among them are artefacts that are not usually trade goods since they are likely to have had a religious function. Such artefacts include the remains of an Irish hanging vessel which may be a type of lamp used within a sacral setting.⁹

Two quite weathered and unassuming ornamented objects are of particular interest, for Egil Bakka manages to establish that the remains from Gausel (see Figure 4) are nearly identical to the bossed front pieces of the two bronze D-shaped objects at Saint-Germain. They are so similar that they must have been made from the same matrix. There are a few relatively minor differences in decoration, such as in the braiding of the snake bodies, but these

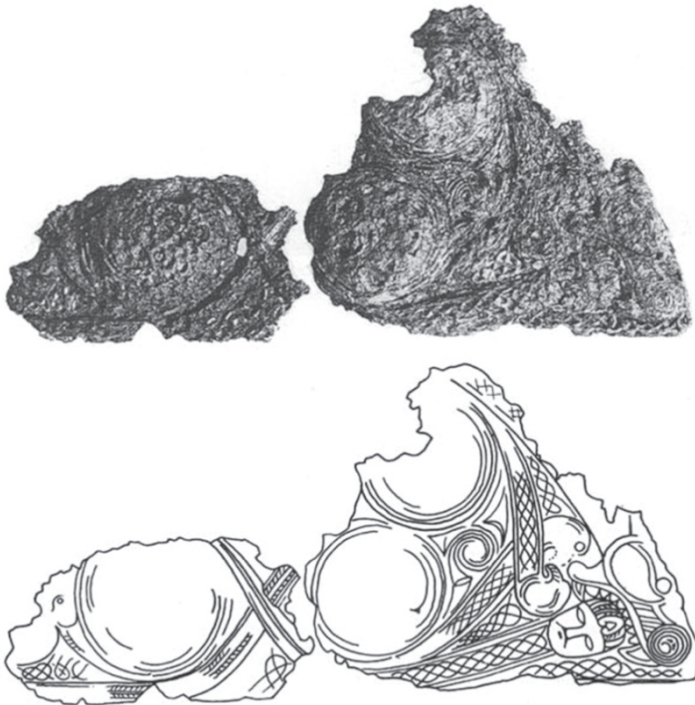


Figure 4. The mount from Gausel (from Bakka 1993, 265).

7 Bakka 1969 and 1993.

8 Bakka 1993, 284-5.

9 Bakka 1993, 262-4.

could easily have been made at the wax plate stage in the production process, as described above. All in all, from the general form down to the smaller details, the mounts from Gausel and Saint-Germain are extremely similar.¹⁰

The grave found in 1887 was rediscovered in 1997 as part of a large archaeological investigation of the Gausel area, and an excavation was conducted on the remains of the grave. This unearthed a few additional minor items and confirmed Bakka's analysis of the grave (see Figure 5).¹¹ Based on typology and stylistic judgements, Bakka believes that the Irish objects were

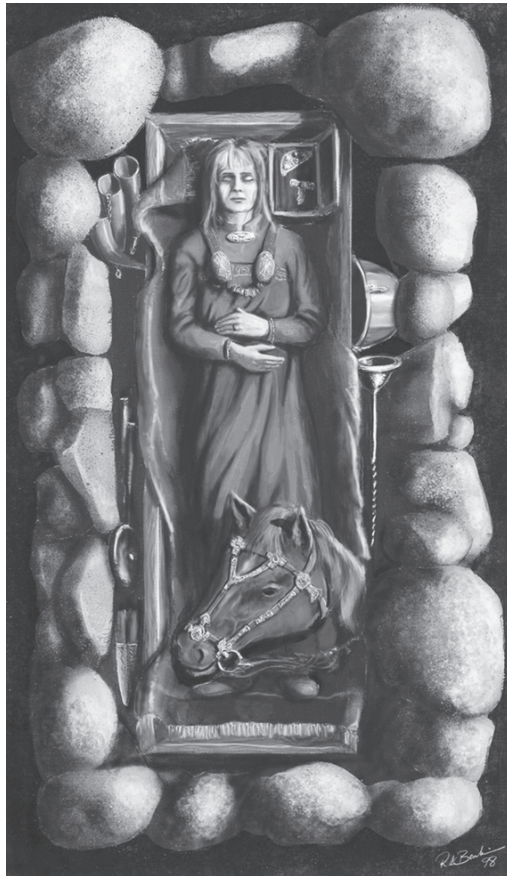


Figure 5. Suggested reconstruction of the grave of 'the Queen of Gausel' (from Børsheim and Soltvedt 2002, 191). The finial is seen in the upper right corner.

10 Bakka 1993, 266-7.

11 Børsheim and Soltvedt 2002, 185-6.

collected in the period c. 830 to c. 850, and in the light of the Norwegian items it is likely that the grave was dug c. 850×60.¹²

Over the years, the area just south of Stavanger has turned out to be an exceptionally rich area archaeologically, not the least because of an unusual concentration of Insular material in graves from the early Viking period. The two neighbouring farms to Gausel, Jåttå and Soma, have also produced some remarkable finds of this kind. However, nothing is quite comparable to Gausel, where there are also three high-status boat graves from the Viking period. They are from very disturbed mounds, but at least one has quite safely been dated to c. AD 850, about the same dating as the 'queen's' grave with the Irish objects.¹³

Items from loot

Before knowing about any Viking involvement, Hunt was convinced of the use of the finials kept in the Saint-Germain museum:

'No doubt these fragments represent the last remains of the shrine of some Irish missionary saint from the treasury of some French cathedral or abbey, perhaps destroyed during the Revolution'.¹⁴

Bakka finds it unlikely that the Irish finial was purpose-built in France. He suggests that the reason for a pair of the decorative plates ending up in France could be down to the sharing or dividing up of Viking loot.¹⁵ Some of it, he argues, fell into the hands of Vikings who stayed on in Ireland and later on suffered defeat, so that the objects again came into Irish ownership. An Irish monk could in turn have taken it to a safer location in one of the monasteries in France founded by Irish monks.

Bakka's suggested explanation of a carved-up Viking booty seems reasonable. It is, however, not absolutely necessary to imagine an event involving a Viking defeat and renewed Irish ownership of the artefacts. It could well have been Scandinavians themselves who brought the finial to France. Place-names like *Doncanville* (containing 'Duncan') and *Le Mesnil-Patry* (including 'Patrick') in the Cotentin, Normandy, prove that some of the Scandinavians who ended up here must have spent time long enough in Gaelic-speaking areas to have brought Gaelic personal names with them,

12 Bakka 1969 (unpaginated); Børshem and Soltvedt 2002, 186.

13 Børshem and Soltvedt 2002, 194-220.

14 Hunt 1956, 157.

15 Bakka 1993, 269.

either names of slaves or their own mixed offspring.¹⁶ They could also have brought objects such as the finials with them, which by that time were possibly treasured family heir-looms.

There is scholarly consensus that the finials will have been made within an Irish cultural setting, and most authorities ascribe them either to the late 8th or early 9th centuries. In the following I will argue for a more specific provenance in the geographical periphery of the Irish cultural sphere, namely Iona around the year AD 800. I believe that the peripheral setting is important because it can explain the distinct imagery and techniques in the finials and related objects, and Iona as the centre for the cult of St Columba can explain the motivation behind the iconography.

Iona as a centre of artistic innovation

Isabel Henderson has convincingly argued for the influence Pictish art had on 'mainstream' Insular art; an influence which was fundamental, long-lasting and mutual:

'... the relationship between the Pictish animal art of the late eighth century and mainstream Insular art is precisely the same as it was in the seventh century, when aspects of the Pictish incised designs, having their own strongly motivated function, were absorbed into the repertoire of Insular art, and Pictish artists, in turn, responded to and no doubt contributed to the decorative style of the earlier gospel books and the metalwork that lay behind it'.¹⁷

Further, Henderson has demonstrated how Iona was a meeting-place between Irish, Northumbrian and Pictish artistic traditions and she has shown how decor and motifs expressed on Pictish stones turn up in the *Book of Kells*.¹⁸

Although Ionan art reflects such deep-rooted traditions there is, however, also a decisively novel and inventive element in the artistic expression in the late 8th century. It has long been accepted that Iona was the starting point for the transformation of the early tradition of the free-standing wooden crosses into ambitious high stone crosses. Ian Fisher argues that the group of early large crosses on Iona, and notably St John's Cross, are highly innovative

16 Fellows-Jensen 1994, 81-2.

17 Henderson 1996, 38.

18 Henderson 1982.

constructions that convey the impression of being early and experimental, and not derived from any established tradition of stone-carving.¹⁹

The dating of stone monuments is notoriously difficult; in most cases dates can only be approximated on the basis of comparative studies. Although the Viking raids did not bring an end to monastic life on the island,²⁰ the historic event of Viking raids may establish an end date of about 800 for exceptional undertakings like the high stone crosses on Iona.²¹ At the same time that the early high crosses were being constructed in the middle or second half of the 8th century,²² an Iona scriptorium produced the magnificent *Book of Kells*. It is possible that an incomplete manuscript was finished at Kells in Ireland because of Viking attacks, or that it was finished on Iona not long before the raids commenced.²³



Figure 6. Part of St John's Cross, Iona. (Photo by the author.)

19 Fisher 1994, 42-43.

20 Jennings 1998, 42.

21 Fisher 2001, 12.

22 Dunbar and Fisher 1995, 5.

23 Henderson 1982.

Due to the difficulties involved in moving such heavy and fragile constructions, the high crosses are most likely to have been produced on Iona. The place of origin of art produced on other, more easily transported media is not so evident, and we lack firm evidence for an art-form such as metalwork from this period from Iona. There has been relatively little excavation on Iona, so the lack of metalworking debris is not surprising.²⁴ It is, however, becoming increasingly apparent that the intense productivity and outstanding creativity that took place on Iona in the form of stone sculpture and manuscript illumination will similarly have produced ornamental metalwork. As a matter of fact, metalwork is likely to be the stylistic inspiration both for the scribes who produced the *Book of Kells* and the sculptors who carved the three-dimensional ornamentation found on the early high crosses.²⁵ The snake-and-boss decor of St John's Cross (see Figure 6) and St Oran's Cross is closely paralleled with the Saint-Germain and Gausel finials, and Fisher says that the further links of these objects with the *Book of Kells* (and with the Pictish cross-slab at Nigg) make an Iona provenance likely for the finials.²⁶

Three-dimensional dog-headed serpents swirling out from bossed ornaments are found on a mount fragment from what probably was a Viking grave at Romfohjellen, Sunndal, Norway (see Figure 7).²⁷ Fisher illustrates how the metalwork motif from Saint-Germain/Gausel and Romfohjellen is echoed in stonework on the tomb-shrine known as the St Andrews Sarcophagus,²⁸ on the cross-slab from Nigg, Ross and Cromarty, and on St John's Cross, Iona, where a snake-like monster bites over the head of a reptile-like creature.²⁹

Worth mentioning here as a secular piece of metalwork with similar motifs and techniques is the Londesborough brooch, which is unusual among penannular brooches in that all of its fine decoration is cast work and no filigree is used.³⁰ Chip-carving is applied on the panels, with complex geometric patterns of interlace encircling raised bosses, and in between are interlaced animals with hatched bodies and pronounced eyes and jaws. Ragnhalla Ó Floinn points to the parallels exhibited in the fangs and gaping jaws found on the Saint-Germain finials, the Helgö mount (see below) and in

24 Excavations have proved that metalworking was certainly being undertaken in the 7th century at the hillfort of Dunadd, near Kilmartin (Lane and Campbell 2000, 106-33).

25 Ryan 1987, 64.

26 Fisher 2001, 15-16.

27 Ryan 1989, 145-6.

28 In the book *Early Medieval Scotland: Individuals, Communities and Ideas*, Alice Blackwell, David Clark and Martin Goldberg have argued that the St Andrews Sarcophagus is not a sarcophagus.

29 Fisher 2001, 20. See also Henderson 1987.

30 British Museum, MLA 1888, 7-19, 101; Londesborough Collection.

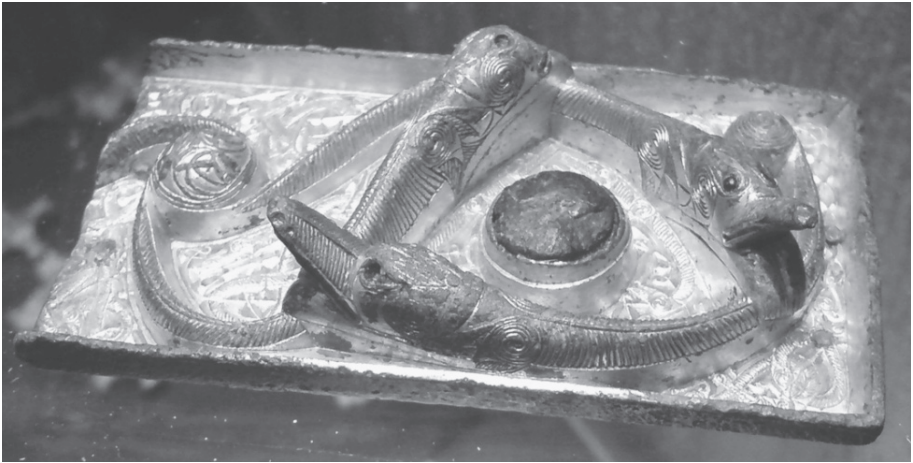


Figure 7. Mount fragment from Romfohjellen, Møre og Romsdal, Norway, now in Historisk Museum, Oslo. (Photo by the author.)

the *Book of Kells*, where the birds on the brooch also ‘have distant relatives’.³¹ Ó Floinn further makes a note of how the unique raised bosses recall larger shrine fittings, which makes him suggest:

‘The brooch could have been produced as a part of a suite of metalwork for a senior cleric, a king-abbot perhaps. There is sculptural evidence for the wearing of such brooches by ecclesiastics.’

Although the iconography on the stone crosses and in the manuscript illuminations is strikingly similar to metalwork such as the mount fragment from Romfohjellen and the Londesborough brooch, it does not prove that the latter two were also produced on Iona in the late 8th century. Undisputable proof will not be provided here; however, what may possibly classify as circumstantial evidence comes in the form of motivation behind the artwork. Is there anything in the iconography that may point to Iona?

The jaws-clamped-over-head motif

At one end of the finials, clearly seen also on the Gausel remains, is a human head being gaped over by a monster with an impressive line of teeth (see Figures 1 and 4). On the St- Germain mount the motif is repeated 2/3 down the panel in a smaller version. The teeth are mirrored at the opposite

31 Ó Floinn 1989, 93.

end of the finials, but there the wide-open jaw is stretched over the tail of one of the snake-like creatures, like on the mount from Romfohjellen.

On the island of Helgö in Lake Mälaren, Sweden, a mount or terminal which may be from a crozier was found during excavations in the 1960s (See Figure 8).³² The mount was found together with other highly exotic items, among them a small bronze Buddha, during excavation on a location which had been settled and had been used as a trading centre from c. AD 200 to c. 800. Helgö is often interpreted as the immediate forerunner of the trading centre of Birka. The date AD 800 is intriguing in the context of how the terminal must have made its way there at the very beginning of the Viking expansion westward to the British Isles. An ecclesiastical object like this will have started its journey towards Sweden not as a trade good but rather as loot from a Viking raid on a church or a monastery. Clearly, we cannot operate with an absolute date for the end of Helgö as a trading centre but it is still worth noting that the only documented raids on monasteries before 800 are on Lindisfarne, Rechrú and Iona.

James Graham-Campbell has questioned whether the object actually is a crozier at all since it has so little in common with known Irish croziers from the eighth to the eleventh centuries.³³ The lack of known parallels could in itself indicate that the mount might have been designed and produced somewhere on the outskirts of the Irish cultural domain. The nearest parallel to the mount is the knop of the fragmentary and intriguingly named 'Crozier of St Columba' at the National Museum in Dublin, which has, according to Peter Harbison:

'... a knop decorated with interlace of a kind which would fit well into the first half of the ninth century, and it bears a close resemblance to the Helgö crook in that it once had four square or rectangular inlays around the widest part of the knop'.³⁴

Further, the patterns on the enamel-inlaid socket closely resemble a number of the decorative patterns found in the *Book of Kells*.³⁵

Here, however, we are going to focus on the main motif of the mount, namely the head of a man either being eaten or disgorged by a creature with wide-open jaws. The depiction of the gaping monster is strikingly similar to the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials. The head of the creature has a stylized

32 Historiska Museet, Stockholm, Z5075: 1000.

33 Graham-Campbell 1980, no. 315.

34 Harbison 2004, 32.

35 Ibid., 30.

eye and teeth bared on heavily hatched jaws that end in enamelled bosses or spirals respectively. On both objects the oversized upper and lower front teeth bite over the human head at the level of the temple. Two beasts protrude from the crook and the larger has a dog-like appearance which is very similar to the beast-heads protruding from the Saint-Germain mount. However, on the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials the human heads are turned the opposite way to the Helgö mount. Here the man's body is swallowed by the beast, while on the finials the head is at the end of a snake-like appearance winding round and becoming part of one of the bosses. Writing about the Helgö mount, Harbison notices the similarities between the mount and the finials, but gives much significance to the fact that the head is turned differently.³⁶ While he finds it likely that Jonah from the Old Testament may be represented on the Helgö mound, he finds this interpretation difficult to accept for the finials. We shall soon return to the discussion on the Jonah motif; but first it should be suggested that the differently turned heads might not spring from dissimilar motifs, but rather be the result of different needs in artistic design. The Helgö mount has a very simple design compared to the finials, where the jaws-clamped-over-head motif is interwoven into a complex design with snakes and bosses, all relating to each other. The head on the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials is at the end of a snake body similar to the way in which the head of what is usually interpreted as Christ is mounted at the end of a snake-like depiction in the *Book of Kells*, folio 34r, the Chi-Rho monogram. In other words, the differently turned heads may come down to artistic necessity rather than dissimilarity in inspirational motifs.

The jaws-clamped-over-head motif is used elsewhere in both Pictish and Irish art, and it is usually interpreted as illustrating the story in the Old Testament about the reluctant Jonah who was swallowed by a *ketos*, a 'great fish', which in Pictish iconography is depicted as a *hippocamp*, or a sea-horse, as seen for instance on the Dunfallandy cross-slab.³⁷ For three days Jonah languishes inside the creature's belly before he prays for mercy. God then talks to the *ketos*, which vomits Jonah up on dry land. Jonah now pays back God's mercy by finally obeying the call to prophesy to the people of Nineveh, the capital of the ancient Assyrian empire. In the New Testament Christ himself interprets the story of Jonah as a parallel to his own story.³⁸ Like Jonah spent three days in the belly of the fish, Jesus will spend three days in the grave.

The stylized gaping monster in both the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials and the Helgö mount has a snake-like body and there is a possibility that it

36 Ibid. 2004, 32.

37 Jonah 1:17.

38 Matt. 12:39-40; Luke 11:29-32.



Figure 8. Mount from Helgö, Sweden. (Foto: Gabriel Hildebrand/Statens historiska museum. With permission.)

is not meant to be a *ketos*, but rather the sea-monster Leviathan in the Old Testament.³⁹ Leviathan was depicted in Anglo-Saxon art from c. AD 800 as 'hell-mouth', the gigantic mouth of a monster that would swallow the condemned on Judgment Day. The motif is widespread in medieval European art, as for example on the famous early-13th-century stained glass window in the cathedral at Bourges. If Meyer Schapiro is right, the hell-mouth image, which was mostly used in England before 1200, was inspired by Fenrir, the giant wolf from Norse mythology who at Ragnarök will swallow Óðinn.⁴⁰ Any Norse inspiration behind a possible hell-mouth on the Helgö mount and the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials is chronologically highly unlikely. However, a hell-mouth also appears on Pictish stone slabs and is possibly linked to the imagery on a miniature on folio 188r in the *Book of Kells*, where two monsters on the strokes of the letter 'm' lock their jaws over the heads of two intertwined figures.⁴¹ There is, however, good reason to believe that other parts of the *Book of Kells* allude strongly to Jonah and the *ketos*.

On one of the pages of the genealogy of Christ, folio 201r, there is, in line with six plump birds that may represent doves, a strange human figure with fish fins and a pair of fish tails. A similar half-man, half-fish (but with only one tail) figure is found on folio 213r. Although the figures may just be page-filling drolleries,⁴² Françoise Henry regards them as allusions to Jonah, and for folio 201r she notices an interesting constellation, namely that the fish-man grabs the letter 't' in 'qui fuit' ['who was (the son) of'] on the line where the name 'Iona' is entered, as if to draw our attention to the line with the Hebrew form of 'Jonah', with the meaning 'dove'.⁴³ P. Meyvaert supports the idea that this is a *nota-bene* illustration, directing our attention to the name Iona.⁴⁴ As has been noted by O'Reilly, the name Iona/Jonah was used in exegesis to describe St Peter, whose original name was Simon bar-Jonah.⁴⁵ The predominant tradition in clerical circles on the island which is now accidentally named Iona⁴⁶ would have been a strong association between the names Jonah and Columba. The Irish abbot, scholar and missionary Columbán (c. 543–615) several times made the point that Columbanus, the Latinised form of his own name – meaning 'dove' plus the diminutive/hypocoristic suffix *-án* – made him a

39 Psalm 74:13–14; Job 41; Isaiah 27:1.

40 Schapiro 1980, 264.

41 Henderson 1996, 46–7.

42 Rynne 1994, 318.

43 Henry 1974, 200 and note 95.

44 Meyvaert 1989, 6.

45 O'Reilly 1994, 347–50.

46 The modern island name *Iona* comes from an 18th-century misreading of *n* for *u* in Adomnán's *Ioua* in his *Vita Columbae*. See Watson 1926, 88.

namesake of Jonah.⁴⁷ Adomnán repeats the point with cognates in his *Vita* about St Columba: '... what is pronounced *iona* in Hebrew and what Greeks calls *peristera* and what in Latin is named *columba*, means one and the same thing...', and he comments at length on the appropriateness of the meaning 'dove' of the divinely-given name which St Columba carries. Adomnán ends with '... he with dove-like disposition offered to the Holy Spirit a dwelling in himself'.⁴⁸

The inspirational occasion

It seems to be an accepted view that the *Book of Kells* was made as a tribute to St Columba. G.D.S. Henderson states: 'In its general ecstatic visionary quality and in the specific slant of its iconography, the *Book of Kells* is at least consistent with the interpretation of St Columba offered in his official biography'.⁴⁹ O'Reilly concurs: '... an eloquent tribute to a monastic founder and heavenly patron who was so pre-eminently 'full of the Holy Spirit'.⁵⁰

What was the possible inspirational occasion in the second half of the 8th century which initiated the great codex in a way similar to Eadfrith's *Lindisfarne Gospels*, which was created in honour of the relics of St Cuthbert's arrival to the monastery in 698? A very likely event would have been the translation of the remains of the abbey's founding father. Columba's earthly remains were still in a humble outdoor grave when Adomnán wrote his *Vita*. Although certain secondary relics associated with Columba were treasured, such as books written by him and the white tunic he wore when he died, no cult seems to have existed around his corporeal relics. We do not know when, during the following century, the relics of Columba were translated. Fisher has argued that the inspirational occasion for the translation of St Columba's remains might have been the enactment of the *cáin* in 753.⁵¹ The promulgation of the *cánai*, or law codes, were important events which strengthened Iona's position economically and as a centre for pilgrimage, and great men are known to have participated in the events. The *cánai* of Adomnán were promulgated in 727-30, and the annals then mention explicitly the circuit of his relics. The enactment of the *cánai* of Columba took place in 753, 757 and 778.⁵² Fisher has suggested that the little chapel next to St John's Cross (see Figure 9) could have been built to mark St Columba's grave when his remains were exhumed

47 Layzer 2001, 78.

48 Anderson and Anderson 1961, 5.

49 Henderson 1980, 194.

50 O'Reilly 1994, 397.

51 Fisher 1982, 47; Fisher 1994, 47; see also Meyvaert 1989.

52 Fisher 1994, 34.

and enshrined.⁵³ The dating of the chapel, however, is somewhat late for a mid 8th century event. When the chapel was restored in 1962 the original parts of it were dated to the 9th or 10th century.



Figure 9. St Columba's Shrine, behind a replica of the St John's Cross, Iona. (Photo by the author.)

53 Fisher 1982, 48.

Reasserting the Iona-Kells hypothesis and the dating of the *Book of Kells*, Françoise Henry lands on a date between 790 and 820.⁵⁴ As argued above concerning the Ionan stone crosses, it does not look likely that major undertakings like the codex will have been initiated and possibly completed by the Ionan scriptorium in the midst of repeated Viking raids. If, therefore, we focus on the early part of the time period suggested by Henry, there was a particular occasion well worth commemorating for the monastic *paruchia* on Iona, namely the bicentenary year for the death of St Columba, the year 797. Adomnán tells us that Abbot Columbanus commanded the celebration of the Eucharist on St Columba's day, the 9th of June, probably because the feast of the founding father by then already was an important annual event in the community on Iona.⁵⁵ Could the explosive activity of artistic innovation and creativity within the Columban *paruchia* all have taken place with the incentive to celebrate the bicentenary?⁵⁶

The organisation of what was tremendous artistic activity on Iona sometime in the second half of the eighth century would have been an economic and logistical challenge. The effort must have been conducted by an inspired leader with extraordinary managerial and artistic skills. The one in charge would have been the *scribnidh* or scribe of the community, an office which carried equal importance to that of the abbot.⁵⁷ The scribe behind the tribute in copper, stone and vellum is anonymous. However, if it is correct that the intense artistic activity may have taken place toward the end of the eighth century, there is a chance that the mastermind could have been Connachtach, 'an eminent scribe and abbot of Ia', who, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, died in 802, possibly during the Viking raid that very year.⁵⁸ It is rare to hear of scribes in the annals, and the mention of Connachtach could be because he was murdered, although the murder itself is not mentioned. On the other hand, it can also be that Connachtach was such an extraordinarily brilliant scholar, artist and coordinator that his death merited a note.

St Columba's shrine?

Although, as argued earlier, the choice of motif links the Saint-Germain/Gausel finials to St Columba, one cannot claim for certain that they belong to

54 Henry 1974, 216-18, seconded by Lewis 1980, 139, note 1.

55 Adomnán's *Vita*, 3.12 ('Quasi die solempni'); 2.45 (Anderson and Anderson 1961). See also Warren 1881, 141 and Lewis 1980, 158.

56 Suzanne Lewis (1980, 139) argues that the Book of Kells 'may have been initiated but not finished in time to celebrate the second centenary of St Columba's death in 797'.

57 Warren 1881, 18-19.

58 Henry 1947 i, 61, 70; Lewis 1980, 158-9.

St Columba's shrine on Iona. However, if we accept the provenance of Iona, it begs the question who else from there but Adomnán and Columba would have been honoured with a shrine of such exceptional decor and dimension? After all, this is 'the only eighth-century gabled house-shaped reliquary yet known, and the largest Irish example of the period of which we have evidence'.⁵⁹ The circuit of Adomnán's relics is mentioned earlier in the 8th century, typologically most likely too early for the finials to have been made.

The community of Iona would have taken good care of Columba's relics. His shrine would have been a political and religious centre point:

'This was the shrine of the Columban paruchia's founding saint, and within any given monastic paruchia of the Gaelic Church, the monastery which housed the relics of the founding father was the caput or political centre of the said federation'.⁶⁰

The elaborately decorated St Andrew's Sarcophagus (if that is what is) hints at what the shrine for St Columba on Iona may have looked like. Similar composite 'corner-post shrines', all in Pictish areas, have been identified on the Moray Firth and on Orkney and Shetland, including groups from Papil and St Ninian's Isle.⁶¹ The construction technique makes use of stone corner posts with longitudinal grooves into which side-panels made of stone or wood are slotted. On Iona, two such sandstone corner-posts are found. They cannot be dated stylistically or archaeologically, and they were found at two different locations: one in a stone pile by the abbey and the other in Reilig Odhráin, the burial ground around St Oran's Chapel. However, they look very similar; each has grooves on adjacent faces and lower ends shaped to be sunk into the ground for stability.⁶² One of the possible pair has a hollow carved out in the top end, '... perhaps to take the tenon of a decorative finial'.⁶³ A third post, made of garnet-schist, with an elongated stem and with a massive butt and simple key-ornament, '... may have belonged to a stone shrine or supported a metalwork one, or formed a kerb round some place of special sanctity'.⁶⁴

Anna Ritchie attempted a (flat-roofed) reconstruction drawing of a shrine and comments about their use:

'These shrines were less than a metre long and were designed to hold the bones of a saint. By the time that a saint had been canonized, and the

59 Hunt 1956, 157.

60 Jennings 1998, 40-1.

61 Ritchie 1997, 61-2; Fisher 2001, 16.

62 Ibid., 59.

63 Ritchie 1997, 61.

64 Fisher 2001, 18.

decision had been taken to transfer his or her remains from the grave into a shrine, the body would normally have been reduced to disarticulated bones. The longest of these would be the leg bones, and all would fit easily into one of these shrines. An exception was St Cuthbert, whose exhumed body was found to be merely desiccated and still articulated in 698, and therefore required a full-length wooden shrine-coffin'.⁶⁵

Peter Yeoman elaborates further:

'Such a box would probably have been placed in the largest timber church at the monastery, and would have contained secondary relics such as Columba's tunic, with the bones themselves in one or more decorated caskets inside the box'.⁶⁶

The Viking raids on Iona and St Columba's sarcophagus

The *Annals of Innisfallen*⁶⁷ and the *Annals of Ulster* (AU)⁶⁸ record the following raids on Iona:

AI 795: *Orcaín lae Coluim Chille.*

'Ravaging of Iona of Colum Cille.'

AU 802: *I Columbe Cille a gentibus combusta est.*

'Iona of Colum Cille was burned by the heathens.'

AU 806: *Familia lae occisa est a gentilibus, id est lxxviii.*

'The community of Iona, to the number of 68, was killed by the heathens.'

AU 825: *Martre Blaimhicc m. Flainn o genntib in Hi Coluim Cille.*

'Violent death of Blathmac son of Flann at the hands of the heathens in Iona of Colum Cille.'

It is reasonable to assume that this disruption, destruction, robbery, massacre and the sheer fear that a raid was likely to be repeated will have had a tremendous impact on the community, and in our context it is unlikely that artistic production could have continued on Iona at any significant scale. What would have made Iona attractive to the Vikings were, of course, the treasures associated with a rich monastery and abbey, but the materials in

65 Ritchie 1997, 61-2.

66 Yeoman 1999, 80.

67 MacAirt, 1951.

68 MacAirt and MacNiocaill 1983.

the artistic work-shops in the form of tools, metal sheets and precious stones would certainly not have been left untouched by heathen hands.

As a monastery, however, Iona continued to exist through the worst years of the Viking raids and the later Norse settlement period.⁶⁹ In 807, in order to protect lives and valuables and a normal monastic life, some of the Iona community moved to the newly created monastery of Kells in Ireland. The *Book of Kells*, completed or not, probably left Iona in that move, possibly together with relics of the *paruchia's* founding father.⁷⁰ Others from the community, however, must have remained on Iona. In 814, the abbot Cellach returned to Iona after seven years at Kells. The island had now become a place where a Christian could obtain 'red martyrdom' in the hands of heathens.⁷¹ Cellach was followed by Blathmac, who did win his martyrdom in 825. For that year it is recorded that 'Blathmac, son of Flann, received the crown of martyrdom, for he was killed by the foreigners at Hi-Colum-Cille [i.e Iona]'.⁷² In a hagiographic poem, the Frankish monk and scholar Walahfrid Strabo (808–49) gave a detailed account of the events around Blathmac's death. The main intrigue in the poem concerns St Columba's shrine.⁷³

'See, the violent cursed host came rushing through the open buildings, threatening cruel perils to the blessed men; and after slaying with mad savagery the rest of the associates, they approached the holy father, to compel him to give up the precious metals wherein lie the holy bones of St Columba; but [the monks] had lifted the shrine from its pediments, and had placed it in the earth, in a hollowed barrow, under a thick layer of turf; because they knew then of the wicked destruction [to come]. This booty the Danes desired; but the saint remained with unarmed hand, and with unshaken purpose of mind; [he had been] trained to stand against the foe, and to arouse the fight, and [was] unused to yield.

There he spoke to thee, barbarian, in words such as these: – 'I know nothing at all of the gold you seek, where it is placed in the ground or in what hiding-place it is concealed. And if by Christ's permission it were granted me to know it, never would our lips relate it to thy ears. Barbarian, draw thy sword, grasp the hilt, and slay; gracious God, to thy aid I commend me humbly.'

Therefore the pious sacrifice was torn limb from limb. And what the fierce soldier could not purchase by gifts, he began to seek by wounds in

69 Jennings 1998.

70 Clancy 1996, 114–15.

71 Jennings 1998, 39.

72 Annals of the Four Masters (O'Donovan 1856) 823 (i.e. AD 825).

73 This connection is also hinted at by Ian Fisher (1994, 45).

the cold bowels [of the earth]. It is not strange, for there always were, and there always reappear, those that are spurred on by evil rage against all the servants of the Lord; so that what Christ's decision has appointed for all, this they all do for Christ, although with unequal deeds.'⁷⁴

From Strabo's more or less contemporary report it is evident that St Columba's shrine was still on Iona in 825. We learn that it was made of precious metal, and we understand that it was a heavy sarcophagus on pediments but it could still be moved and hidden under ground. Blathmac not only obtained red martyrdom for himself but also managed to keep the hiding-place of the shrine a secret to the 'Danes'.

It is most likely that the sarcophagus was partly vandalised during one of the Viking raids before 825. This could explain why the nail-holes on the Saint-Germain finials show distinct signs of having been brutally torn apart from its base. If we dare to take Strabo's account as true in the main, it can be deducted that the sarcophagus itself at that time was not taken away, but that marauders harvested what they could get at in a hurry. In 825, at a time when Iona repeatedly had been thoroughly searched and relieved of its more portable pickings, Vikings who had been on Iona before or had been told about the place came to collect the only valuable object left, namely the costly metal coating of St Columba's shrine. Clearly, the clerics on Iona had foreseen such an event and had taken precautions, and it seems that they were successful in their attempt to protect the shrine.

Columba's relics seem to have been on the move after this event. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, Diarmait, abbot of Iona, took the reliquaries of St Columba to Scotland, and two years after 'he brought them to Ireland'.⁷⁵ We do not know if this included the shrine itself. In the *Fragmentary Annals* for the year 848 (124-5), we learn that 'Indrechtach, abbot of Í, came to Ireland with the holy relics of Colum Cille.'⁷⁶ This record is probably connected to the *Annals of Ulster's* record for the year 849 concerning the relics of Columba that were removed from Iona and divided between Alba and Ireland.⁷⁷ This was done as part of a political manoeuvre by Cináed mac Alpin to transfer the administrative and religious centre of the Columban church to Dunkeld, the political centre of the new nation, Alba. However, concession was given to Irish interests, and some of the relics of Columba, as well as those of his biographer, abbot Adomnán of Iona, were translated to Kells, to the new

74 Translated by Anderson 1922, 265.

75 MacAirt and Mac Niocaill 1983, AU 829.3, AU 831.1.

76 Radner 1978, *Fragmentary Annals* 849, §238

77 MacAirt and Mac Niocaill 1983, AU 849.

monastery granted to the Iona community back in 804.⁷⁸ It is uncertain from where they were taken, but in 877 the *Annals of Ulster* records that ‘the shrine of St Columba and all his reliquaries arrived in Ireland, to escape from the Foreigners’.⁷⁹ It is clear that a shrine of one form or another was still associated with St Columba at this stage.

Columba and Adomnán were not allowed final peace in Ireland. The monastery of Kells was ravaged in 919, 946, 949, 968 and 969. Certain monasteries which were presumably named after important relics in their possession⁸⁰ were also attacked:

CS 976: ‘Scrín of Colum Cille was plundered by the son of Domnall son of Muirchertach.’

CS 977: ‘Scrín of Adamnán was plundered by Domnall ua Néill.’

CS 1037: ‘Scrín of Colum Cille and Damliac were plundered by the foreigners of Áth Cliath [Dublin].’

The Scottish relics of Columba were also on the move after they were translated from Iona to Dunkeld. Columba’s sarcophagus – whether the old one from Iona or a new one made for the church in Dunkeld – stayed in Dunkeld and only disappeared during the Reformation. However, relics of St Columba were carried before Scottish armies in a reliquary called the *Breccbennach* (‘the speckled or peaked one’). The sacred battle ensign, or *vexilla*, was carried to Bannockburn by the Scottish army; the intercession of St Columba aided the Scots to victory over the English. It has been thought that the 8th-century Monymusk reliquary⁸¹ is the *Breccbennach*, but David Caldwell has shown that this is unlikely.⁸² Even if the Monymusk reliquary is not the actual *Breccbennach* some remains of Columba will probably have been kept in a portable house-shaped reliquary which in form would have been similar to the sarcophagus which once housed the earthly remains of St Columba on Iona.

St Columba’s shrine in Dunkeld vanished during the Reformation. Similarly, nothing is left of what went to Ireland. No metalwork made on Iona during the same inspired artistic flourish that produced the stone high crosses and the *Book of Kells* seem to have survived in Ireland or Scotland.

78 Bannerman 1993, 42-3; Bannerman 1999, 73-4; Jennings 1998, 41.

79 MacAirt and Mac Niocaill 1983, AU 877.

80 Ó Murchadha 1997, 179.

81 National Museum of Scotland, RE14.

82 Caldwell 2001.

Ironically, only the possibly looted objects found in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and in Scandinavia remain as the most likely survivors from the metalwork tradition on Iona.

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