

Saint's Dedication and Early Medieval Cross-Marked Stones On the Isle of Barra

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ABSTRACT: *The West Coast of Scotland has a diverse range of early medieval cross-marked stones, featuring a variety of topographical settings, stone types, and chronologically distributed forms of crosses. This paper presents the results of a project, funded by the British Academy's Researchers-at-Risk Scheme, to investigate early medieval cross-marked stones on the Isle of Barra.*

An essential aspect of the cross-form analysis in this paper is the result of re-dating previously unrecorded cross types on the Isle of Barra by comparing them with similar crosses documented in volumes of the British Academy's Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture series and the Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales. By identifying links to the founder of the site through dedications to Saint and datable cross-type materials, I have built up a comprehensive understanding of the significance of this site, which evolved differently between the 7th and 10th century AD.

Crucially, this study has facilitated an understanding of the links between cross forms and Saints, suggesting that crosses either coexisted with Saints or were added to sites already made famous by a Saint.

KEYWORDS: *Early Medieval Cross-Marked Stones; the Isle of Barra, Saint's Dedication, Datable Cross-Type Materials.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The research is mainly restricted to the West Coast of Scotland because it has rich corpus of early cross-marked stones, and their size varies considerably. The scope of the study includes the Isle of Barra, and 2 sites with stone assemblages Cille Bharra and Pabbay.

Every place that has been discussed contains an ecclesiastical element: *cill* is the locative case of *cell*, meaning 'church' [1], *cill* stands first in compounds, followed by the name of the Saint commemorated by the dedication (Cille Bharra); *papi*, priest – Pabbay, priests isle is true for Pabbay [2].

The island in total bears 8 slabs marked with early medieval crosses. Isle of Barra contains a diverse range of early medieval cross-marked stones of different types in a variety of geographical settings. This site contains material evidence for early medieval ecclesiastical activity.

The rich variety of cross forms raises several questions: are early medieval crosses from Barra site-specific, or do they represent common cross forms found at several sites? Did these stones coexist with Saints, or were they added to sites already made famous by Saints?

In this article I propose a central thesis linking cross forms to the cult of Saints and emphasise the importance of a thorough analysis of cross forms bearing similarities to Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture in England and early medieval stone sculpture in Wales.

The idea is that certain types of crosses can be dated on the basis of their characteristics and similarities to known examples of early medieval slabs in England and Wales. My argument is that the types of crosses and their association with Saints indicate a particular period when the cult of Saints may have been important at the site. This approach has led to the development of a novel method that reveals previously undocumented similarities in cross forms and provides additional evidence for chronological links between the stones and the cult of Saints.

It is important to clarify that this study focuses solely on discussing and comparing the cross forms, suggesting their dating, while excluding other aspects such as topographical setting, site reuse and monument type from consideration.

II. THE PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In early medieval studies, early medieval cross-marked stones have been considered as some material evidence for early ecclesiastical activity at the same time noting that rough crosses and bullaun stones are particularly enigmatic and unsatisfactory as pointers to early ecclesiastical activity [3]. Some research is devoted to the analysis of individual stones, which consider stone crosses, and cross-slabs as the most abundant form of evidence for the successful spread of Christianity [4,5].

Other studies present information about the carved stones from the southernmost islands of Argyll to the most northern of the Hebrides, where monuments and evidence of place names have been discussed in the light of the introduction of Christianity to Western Scotland [6].

III. METHODOLOGY

This research involved searching the National Library of Scotland's Historic maps [7], together with the catalogue of the National Record of the Historic Environment [8], and the digitised volumes of the Ordnance Survey Name Books[9]. Volumes from the British Academy's Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture series [10, 11,12], the corpus of early medieval inscribed stones and stone sculpture in Wales [13, 14], and early medieval sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands [15] provide a substantial basis for the cross-form research in this paper.

The study brings several issues up to date: How should one approach the study of recurring and slightly different features in the association between cross types and saintly dedication across sites? Could there be chronological links between crosses and Saint? Are there site-specific features that distinguish these crosses from those found elsewhere? How did the types of crosses dedicate a Saint change over time? Can this information be used to reassess the dating of sites?

Some of my ideas for developing this methodological approach to dealing with early medieval cross-marked stones and the individual stylistic differences within and between stones and groups of stones were influenced by David Petts's studies comparing the range of monuments found at Iona, Lindisfarne, Hartlepool and Portmahomack [16]. An important methodological guide to the development of the idea of archaeological material evidence was the work of Ann Elizabeth Hamlin [17].

By comparing and studying the forms of the crosses with other similar crosses from Anglo-Saxon stone sculpture in England and early medieval stone sculpture in Wales, it is possible to argue that there should be a link between the founder of the site through the dedication of Saint and the types of crosses. This gives us a picture of 'sacred landscapes' that developed in different ways between the 7th and 10th century AD on the island of Barra.

IV. LINKS BETWEEN ST BARR'S DEDICATION & EARLY CROSSES

The cult of St Barr is associated with Cille Bharra (Barra, NGR NF 7051 0738, Canmore ID 9767 Site Number NF70NW 3) and Pabbay (Barra, NGR NL 6072 8745, Canmore ID 21384 Site Number NL68NW 2) where four stones have been found at each site.

Barr is a highly problematic Saint to deal with. As it stands, both in Barra and in Caithness, we seem to see in Barr reflections of the Irish Saint Fionnbarr or Bairre of Cork [18]. But this is deceptive.

Medieval churchmen seem to have based their understanding of their local Saint Barr on the Cork Saint, mainly because his written Life was known and influential. The names Barr and Fionnbarr belong to a cluster of names and forms of names that all seem to be related in some way: Finnian, Finnio, Uinniau and even Bairrhind. All appear to go back to an original primitive Gaelic name, *Uendubarros*, 'white crest'. Inside this Saints' names and nicknames probably lies the man who Adomnán tells us was Columba's teacher. Adomnán calls this man Uinniau, Finnio and Findbarr.

This Uinniau was associated with the Vinnian who wrote a Penitential. He seems to have been influential in Ireland in the mid 6th century AD [19].

It is not known where he came from, although Southwest Scotland has been suggested. It is clear, however, that the Scottish commemorations reflect this Saint, Columba's teacher, and not the Saint of Cork. The most likely way to understand this in the Hebrides is that a cult of St Columba's teacher grew up, encouraged by Iona, and this is what we see at Barra. His name is incorporated both in the island's name, an Old Norse name *Barr-ey*, 'St Barr's Island' and in the Gaelic name for the parish church, Cille Bharra [20].

Let us come back to the analysis of the material of the crosses. Here we see the stone with a sunken Latin cross, found at Cille Bharra [21] (Fig 1). It is executed with a deep U-section groove or with forked terminals. The cross bears similarities to the stone that was first utilized for an Ogam inscriptions and then was partially reshaped and reused as a roman-letter, Latin-inscribed monument with cross from Caldly Island, Wales [22] (Fig 2), and the cross-carved stone from Glan Beuno, Waunfawr, Wales [23] (Fig 3).

The last dates from the 7th-9th century AD. Given the similarity in form of the crosses, the date of the last one can be assumed to be the same as that of the cross at Cille Bharra.

A further suggestion comes from consideration of incised linear Latin cross with expanded cross-arms terminals from Waunfawr, Glan Beuno [24] (Fig 3). The surface of the boulder in the area of the carving is very smooth and the incised lines of the cross have been rubbed smooth and it is possible that this is the result of pilgrims touching the monument [25]. In the case of Cille Bharra, it is possible that the sunken Latin cross with extended cross-arms may have marked a stop on the pilgrim route too.

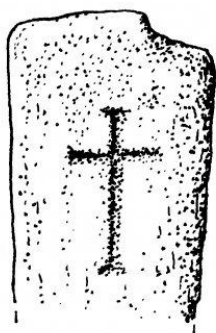


Figure 1 Sunken Latin cross associated with St Barr. Cille Bharra, Barra [26]



Figure 2 An incised linear Latin cross with expanded bifid cross-arms terminals. Caldy Island 1 C, Wales [27]



Figure 3 An incised linear Latin cross with expanded cross-arms terminals. Waunfawr, Glan Beuno, Wales [28]

The cross-marked stones at Pabbay (Barra, NGR NL 6072 8745, Canmore ID 21384, Site Number NL68NW 2) are the subject of much debate. On Pabbay, a small uninhabited island south of Barra, about 200 metres back from the sandy beach of Pabbay's Bagh Ban is a small, steeply sloping hill, on the south-west side of which is the symbol stone. The Christian symbol, an incised Latin cross, appears together with the 'flower' symbol and a crescent and V-rod symbol on a stone from Pabbay (Fig 4). Other stones are scattered around it, but a deeper cross at the top of the slab, alongside the symbols, distinguishes it from the surrounding stones.

The question arises: which was carved first on the stone - the Latin cross or the 'flower' and the crescent and V-rod symbol? Before the discussion begins, it is important to note that this is interesting from the point of view of measuring cultural changes that were obviously driven by Christian conversion and are in some way related to the rise of the cult of St Barr. If linear Latin cross had been carved on the stone at the same time as the two symbols it would quite clearly place this stone within the Christian era – but the cross, although only incised does not appear to be contemporary with the symbols. Its incisions are much deeper and wider, and while the center of each symbol is on the center line of the slab's face the cross rises not from the very crest of the crescent and V-rod but little to the right. Both the heavier incising of the cross and its off-center position give it the appearance of being a later addition [29]. The symbols on Pabbay may have been carved in pre-Christian times.

This is supported by the analogy of the 'flower' symbol on the cross-marked stones from Pabbay with a rough sandstone pillar carved on one side with incised symbols, including the same 'flower' symbol from Dunnichen, Angus (Fig 5), dated to the 7th century AD. Furthermore, each face of the Dunnichen stone has grooves and

holes that do not appear to have been part of the original design, which we also see on the cross-marked stones from Pabbay. In addition, the crescent-and-V-rod symbol on a stone from Pabbay finds an analogy in a small natural flattened pillar from near Moor of Garden (Fig 6), which has the crescent-and-V-rod symbol carved together with another symbol, also dated to the 7th century AD [30]. This evidence clearly suggests that the symbols on the cross-marked stones from Pabbay date from pre-Christian times.

Meanwhile, the linear Latin cross displayed on the slab from Pabbay is related to the Latin cross on the slab in Llanfihangel-y-Creuddyn, Llantrisant Church, Wales [31] (Fig 7) and might be dated the 8th-9th century AD. A more deeply incised Latin cross at the top of the slab (Fig 4) suggests that there was some involvement in ecclesiastical activity. The symbol stone, together with another cross-marked stone with a similar sunken cross was placed at the foot of the southern slope of the grass-covered sandy mound on whose summit a chapel was situated [32]. Two other stones stood near the southern edge of the summit. The position of the crosses at the top of the slabs suggests an upright position. The fine Pictish pin is evidence of a secular population that probably occupied the site before any widespread ecclesiastical activity [33]. In this context, it is reasonable to suggest that the form of a small surviving hermit's chapel associated with the cult of St Barr, which flourished at Barra, may have been marked by a symbol stone with linear Latin and other cross-marked stones with a sunken cross.

In conclusion, the cross-marked stones at Pabbay illustrate significant cultural changes brought about by Christian conversion. The symbols on the cross-marked stones from Pabbay are likely to date from pre-Christian times, supported by parallels with similar symbols from Dunnichen and Moor of Garden in the 7th century AD. The deeper and off-centre Latin cross on the Pabbay stone suggests that it is a later addition, probably from the 8th or 9th century AD. This indicates a transitional period when Christian symbols were added to existing stones, reflecting the spread of Christianity and its integration with earlier cultural elements. The presence of a Pictish pin also suggests a blend of secular and ecclesiastical influences during this period of cultural transformation.

In addition, an examination of the material of the other two cross stones with semicircular upper arms and incised Latin crosses from Cille Bharra (Fig 8) suggests that they were site-specific crosses. Firstly, it should be noted that the development of similar crosses at other research sites considered in this paper on the west coast of Scotland has not been identified. This raises the question of whether they are evidence of early Scandinavian Christian conversion. Their possible dating may be paralleled by stones from Wales and the Isle of Man.

Notably, there are slight analogies with the freestanding cross from Llanbadarn Fawr, St Padarn's Church, Wales [34] (Fig 9), which suggests a date in the late 10th century AD. In this case they could be attributed tentatively to early northern Viking conversion. However, analogies with an early piece in the outline of the stone in Maughold Churchyard on the Isle of Man (Fig 10) suggest a very different time frame for the setting of the stones, relating to the pre-Scandinavian period. The similarity of the two stones is evident in their shape and, interestingly, in the case of the stone in Maughold Churchyard, a line is cut across the top of the head, above which is a small linear cross [35].

As we can see, there are two completely opposing narratives for dating Cille Bharra's two cross stones with semicircular upper arms and incised Latin crosses. The only certainty, it seems, is that they were site specific crosses. If we assume that they are evidence of an early Northern Christian conversion, the cruciform stones seem to embody a certain transformation of the cult of the Saint in the new conditions created by the Scandinavian presence. They offer a continuity of the cult that existed before the Scandinavian settlement, since the island was named after him. This is a clear indication that his church was already there.

It seems reasonable to assume that there was something special about the relationship between the coexisting communities at the end of the 10th century AD. This is suggested by the cross forms, which can be seen as site-specific crosses. It is likely that the preservation of the cult of the Saint in the Old Norse name of the island, Barra, suggests that the Scandinavian settlers would have respected the church of the island they settled on when they were already living on the island and no longer just seasonal raiders. A parallel might be sought in the area around Dublin where the relatively prolific local churches of pre-Viking Ireland seem to have survived and thrived in Scandinavia-settled areas [36].



Figure 4 Symbol-stone with an incised Latin cross associated with St Barr. Pabbay, Barra [37]



Figure 5 Pictish Symbol Stone. Dunnichen, Angus [38]



Figure 6 Pictish Symbol Stone. Logie Elphinstone [39]



Figure 7 Linear Latin cross. Llanfihangel-y-Creuddyn, Llantrisant Church, Wales [40]

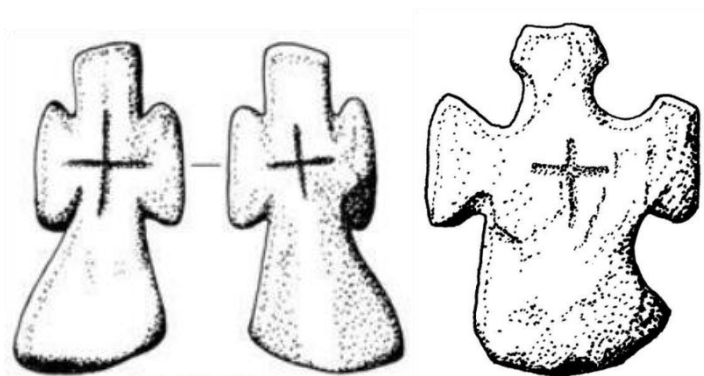


Figure 8 Crusiform stones associated with St Barr. Cille Bharra, Barra [41]



Figure 9 A small free-standing cross. Llanbadarn Fawr, St Padarn's Church, Wales [42]



Figure 10 Pre-Scandinavian cross. Maughold Churchyard, Isle of Man [43]

In conclusion, the analysis of the Cille Bharra cross-stones suggests that they were site-specific, possibly related to early northern Christian conversion. The contrasting dating narratives and analogies with stones from Wales and the Isle of Man highlight the complex cultural and religious influences at play. If these stones are seen as evidence of early Scandinavian Christian conversion, they represent a transformation of the cult of the St Barr in response to the Scandinavian presence, but also show continuity with pre-existing religious practices.

In summary, stones serve as tangible markers of a period of transition, embodying the evolving spiritual landscape shaped by Christianisation and the enduring legacy of St Barr. The study of cross-marked stones at Cille Bharra and Pabbay sheds light on the profound cultural changes catalysed by Christian conversion. The presence of pre-Christian symbols alongside later Christian additions reflects the complex process of religious assimilation and adaptation. These stones symbolise the dynamic nature of religious expression and the enduring influence of St Barr in the midst of an evolving landscape.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that a comparative analysis of cross forms with those from the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Series and the Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones and Stone Sculpture in Wales provides a solid basis for redating the crosses. This cross-based approach has made it possible to explore how cross forms are associated with Saint on the island of Barra.

Putting links to Saint's dedication and dateable material of the early medieval cross slabs at the heart of 'stone narratives' the research highlighted the development of crosses within secular sites into a wider sacred display shaped by ecclesiastical activity.

The crosses from Cille Bharra, Pabbay (Barra), suggest that they may have been added to a site already made famous by St Barr sometime between the 7th and 9th century AD. The cruciform stones seem to reflect an ecclesiastical community in an area linked to the cult of Saint Barr and the continuity of religious practices in new conditions marked by the Scandinavian presence at the end of the 10th century AD.

Based on the redating of the Cille Bharra (Barra) cruciform stones, it reflects the continuity of the cult of St Barr and a church community from at least the 7th century AD, marked by earlier Latin crosses, into the late 10th century AD and beyond, tracing the uniqueness of these stones, which could be understood as site-specific crosses. The importance of St Barr into the 10th century AD and even longer speaks to the staying power of his cult.

VI. Acknowledgements

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