

Sculpture and Identity in an Early Medieval Welsh Region: South-West Wales

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In the early medieval period south-west Wales was part of what has been termed an 'Irish Sea Province' (Moore 1970), though it was also open to contacts with both Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent. It is generally agreed that at the end of the Roman period Irish settlements took place on the south-western peninsula between the Rivers Teifi and Tywi, an area which became the kingdom of Dyfed and was culturally defined by the presence of commemorative inscribed stones with Irish ogham and Latin inscriptions. To the north of the Teifi was the kingdom of Ceredigion, most clearly evidenced in the late eighth and ninth centuries, and to the east a region known as Ystrad Tywi. Documentary sources for the history of the period c 750–1100 are sparse. In the ninth century the rising power of the kingdom of Gwynedd in north-west Wales had an increasing impact on the south-west, culminating in the reign of Hywel Dda (Hywel the Good, d. 950) who united the south-west as the kingdom of Deheubarth. The second half of the tenth and eleventh centuries was a period of considerable dynastic instability and the increasing mobility of rulers which ended with the Norman invasion (Davies 1982; Maund 1991). Viking incursions and Anglo-Saxon contacts are also evident. It has been argued (Davies 1990, 35–47) that the frequently changing and fragmented nature of political control, as well as geography, resulted in the continuing strength of local and regional identities. These are evident in the pattern of major local churches and saints' cults and in the distribution of the early medieval sculpture associated with them.

The most important ecclesiastical site in south-west Wales was St David's, a monastery which

by the ninth century was the seat of a bishop. The diocese was initially centred on Dyfed, though by the twelfth century, if not before, the cult of the patron saint had expanded and it claimed to be the most important see in Wales. A regional bishopric centred on Ystrad Tywi is also evident at the monastery of St Teilo at Llandeilo Fawr in the ninth century. There are also indications of a bishopric at the monastery of St Padarn at Llanbadarn Fawr in Ceredigion. In addition it is possible to discern regional monasteries such as Penally, also associated with St Teilo, in south-east Dyfed, and some with more local saints' cults, for example St Dogmaels (Llandudoch) on the border between Dyfed and Ceredigion. All these sites have their own distinctive sculpture, mainly crosses and cross-slabs, which not only demonstrates the importance of secular and/or ecclesiastical patronage at those foundations at the time they were carved, but also reveals something about their cultural identity and contacts.

St David's

St David's has the largest collection of early medieval sculpture in the south west spanning the ninth to the late eleventh or early twelfth centuries (Edwards 2001). The sculpture found on the site itself consists of a fragmentary cross-slab, two fragmentary crosses and a variety of grave-markers (ECMW nos 377–383). Further associated monuments have been discovered elsewhere in the vicinity (ECMW nos 372–376) helping to identify a network of early medieval chapels and cemeteries, which, by the end of the period, had

become a focus for pilgrims (James 1993). Although some other influences are apparent on certain monuments, in their forms and motifs the carvings most clearly indicate affinities with sculpture in Ireland and western Scotland, for example at Iona (Fisher 2001, figs. 11–12), demonstrating the significance of continuing cultural contacts around and across the Irish Sea some centuries after the Irish settlements at the end of the Roman period. The importance of St David's within Dyfed may also be discerned in the distribution of sites elsewhere in the kingdom with similar sculpture, sometimes using stone from the St David's area. These include some of the bishop houses of Dyfed recorded in the Welsh law books (Charles-Edwards 1971), for example Llawhaden (*ECMW* no 323), and sites, such as St Edrens (*ECMW* nos 391–394), otherwise unmentioned in the documentary record. St David's is the only church in south-west Wales to show such a large area of influence. The distribution of sculpture associated with other major ecclesiastical foundations in south-west Wales is very localised.

St Dogmaels

There are several pieces of sculpture associated with St Dogmaels and a small area to the south-east (*ECMW* nos 385–386, 388, 302, 308) and up the coast to Llanllwchaearn in Ceredigion. These monuments are pillars or slabs, some very rough, others carefully shaped. The ornament is characterised by encircled crosses, either crosses of arcs or Maltese crosses, with handles which may represent liturgical *flabella*, and spirals, otherwise rare on sculpture in Wales. Comparisons may be made with similar monuments on pre-Viking monastic sites, mainly with easy access to the Irish Sea, for example Maughold (Isle of Man), Whithorn (south-west Scotland) and the west coast of Ireland (Trench-Jellicoe 1998, illus 6). Some of these also have chi-rhos and ogam inscriptions (Swift 1997, 73–83), early features which the St Dogmaels monuments do not share. Close dating is difficult, since it is dependent upon typological and art-historical criteria, but a broad date between the late seventh and early ninth centuries for the St Dogmaels group seems probable. Like St David's the sculpture of St Dogmaels and its

environs suggests the continuing importance of cultural contacts around and across the Irish Sea in the identity of the region.

Llandeilo Fawr

In contrast, the cultural milieu suggested by the sculpture at Llandeilo Fawr in the more geographically isolated Ystrad Tywi appears very localised. It was an important foundation in the 9th century but was later totally eclipsed. The sculpture consists of two fragmentary monuments, one a cross, the other a cross-slab (*ECMW* nos 155–156), both with an unusual form of cross-head with a rectangular ring. The form may be derived from cross-carpet pages in Insular gospel books, notably the Lichfield Gospels which are known to have been displayed on the altar of St Teilo at Llandeilo Fawr in the ninth century (Alexander 1978, no 21).

Penally

Penally to the south-west is also associated with St Teilo but the sculpture demonstrates completely different cultural affinities which are unmatched anywhere else in Wales. It has two large freestanding crosses. Penally 1 (*ECMW* no 364) has a cross-head type found elsewhere in Wales but also widely distributed in the Danelaw in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. The cable mouldings are reminiscent of metalwork. Uniquely in Wales the cross is decorated with vine-scroll ornament demonstrating contacts with Anglo-Saxon England. Unusually, the interlace is triple-stranded, a type common on the Carolingian continent, though the patterns are Insular. There is also unique plant ornament on Penally 2 (*ECMW* no 363). The layout is like vine-scroll but the leaves are more like Carolingian acanthus. The borders on the frontispiece of the Anglo-Saxon manuscript *Bede's Life of St Cuthbert*, donated c 937 by King Athelstan to the shrine of St Cuthbert, show some comparable features (Temple 1976, no 6, illus. 29). The animal ornament, generally rare on Welsh sculpture, has parallels with Anglo-Saxon beasts and Insular ribbon-animal ornament. The comparisons would tend to suggest a date in the late ninth or earlier tenth century.

But what is the cultural milieu of these monuments? These ambitious crosses demonstrate the patronage of secular rulers and/or ecclesiastics who had contacts with Anglo-Saxon England and possibly the Continent. Anglo-Saxon documentary sources indicate that from the reign of Alfred (871–899) Welsh rulers are recorded at the court of the Anglo-Saxon kings where they submitted as *subreguli* and paid tribute. The most famous of the Welsh kings to do this was Hywel Dda (d. 950) who went on regular visits to the court of Athelstan and made a pilgrimage to Rome in 929 (Kirby 1976). One could imagine Hywel Dda, for example, bringing back objects from his travels such as a metalwork cross which could have inspired aspects of the Penally crosses which combine Anglo-Saxon and/or Continental features with Celtic ones. The crosses may also indicate that by the end of the ninth century patronage for the cult of St Teilo had switched from Llandeilo Fawr to Penally.

Discussion

How may we interpret this evidence? In south-west Wales it is clear that different groups of early medieval sculpture associated with major church foundations reflect local identities, as at Llandeilo Fawr, or, in the case of St David's, a wider regional identity. But is it possible to say more than this? It is important to bear in mind the problems of reading cultural identity from archaeological artefacts and material culture in general. It is difficult to tell to what extent the cultural contacts revealed by the sculpture reflect wider cultural identities and how far cultural contacts may lead to a redefinition of cultural identity. To take modern analogies the purchase of a Japanese television does not make one Japanese, but the increasing influence of American culture may be leading to a gradual redefinition of facets of cultural identity in Britain. Returning to south-west Wales in the early Middle Ages, the sculpture of St David's and St Dogmaels suggests the continuing importance of an Irish element in the cultural identity of Dyfed throughout the period. The case of the sculpture at Penally, which demonstrates contacts with Anglo-Saxon England, and possibly the Continent is harder to interpret. It may be a case of demonstrating the status, power and influence



Penally 1.

of the patron and the foundation through the erection of monuments incorporating exotic ornament, but could it be more than this? In adopting such motifs could the patron have been choosing to take on some of the trappings of a different cultural identity which could also have been influential in other forms which have left no mark in the archaeological record?

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