

THE CALF OF MAN CRUCIFIX

by L. M. Angus-Butterworth

THE antiquities of the Isle of Man reveal an interesting blending of cultures. Norse influence was strong, and Beckett observes that unlike the armed Viking invasions of England, the evidence points here to friendly intercourse between Norway, Scotland, the Western Isles and the Isle of Man.¹

The Norsemen referred to the Hebrides and the Isle of Man as the *Sör-eyjar* or Southern Islands as distinct from Orkney and Shetland, which they termed the *Nordr-eyjar* or Northern Islands. The first part of the title of the bishopric of Sodor and Man, which originally formed part of the See of Trondhjem, derives from the place-name.

The most important antiquities of the Isle of Man are twenty-six Norse crosses decorated with runes and interlaced patterns, and it should be noted that the nearest point on the mainland is Burrow Head in Scotland, sixteen miles away, compared with about seventy miles to Liverpool. Now at the village of Whithorn on Burrow Head is a museum which also has a striking local collection of early crosses. It is accordingly evident that the whole area was particularly rich in this respect, due to missionaries coming here from Iona in about A.D. 600.

Even more remarkable than any of these crosses is the most famous of Manx carvings, the Calf of Man Crucifix. This very striking work was found in the kind of remote spot favoured by hermits in early times. The Calf of Man, a small island of 616 acres off the south-west coast of the Isle of Man, is now National Trust property, noted for its bold and picturesque scenery and its bird life. Here in 1773 a curious and beautiful representation of Christ on the Cross was unearthed by some workmen engaged in recovering, for use in walling, stones from the ruins of a *keeill* or ancient chapel.

¹ S. J. Beckett, *The Fjords and Folk of Norway* (1915), pp. 130-134.

The site of the chapel is not now known, but Magaw considers that it may well have been near the present "Jane's House" overlooking the Cow Harbour in the Calf Sound, since slab-lined graves of early Christian type were uncovered there in about 1890, and a manuscript map of the islet in 1771 shows that this was formerly the site of the "Mention house" and farm steading.² It is fascinating to think that some of the pieces of the carving that are still missing may yet be found in this area although, because of the nature of the terrain, the chance is remote.

The tenant of the Calf at the time of the discovery of the stone was John Quayle, Clerk of the Rolls to the House of Keys, the Manx Parliament. By good fortune he was known for his interest in antiquities, so the carving was kept for him instead of being cast aside. It remained in the possession of his descendants until 1956, when it was bought for £750 by the National Art-Collections Fund and presented to the Manx Museum at Douglas, Isle of Man.

A very interesting feature is that Kermode, a leading authority, firmly believed that the stone was actually carved on the Calf of Man. Perhaps the talented sculptor found the solitude there conducive to his patient work. Kermode says: "An artist was engaged on the Calf Island upon a small monument which for fineness and delicacy of workmanship exceeds anything that is known of stone of that early period, while in respect of the treatment, which is early Byzantine art, it is unique. The carving is from one sixteenth to one eighth of an inch in relief, the diagonal lines exceedingly fine."³

The Calf of Man carving, which was found two feet below the surface of the ground, measures 26 inches high by 9½ inches wide in its incomplete state. Originally it was probably about 30 inches high by 16 inches wide. The surviving portion has a uniform thickness of about 1½ inches. It is of local Manx "slate", a material which must have been very hard to cut, but which lent itself to the execution of fine detail. The strength and toughness of the

² B. R. S. Magaw, "The Calf of Man Crucifixion", *Journal of the Manx Museum* (1958), vol. VI, no. 75, pp. 57-58.

³ P. M. C. Kermode, *Manx Crosses, or the Inscribed and Sculptured Monuments of the Isle of Man from the end of the 5th to the beginning of the 13th century* (1907), pp. 125-127.

material may have helped, too, in its preservation. The stone is not a true slate in the strict geological sense, but rather a fine-grained lower Palaeozoic gritstone.⁴

Only the front face of the stone has been treated, the rear being plain. The front has the upper half occupied by a sunken rectangular panel with a plain flat border, which when perfect was probably about 16 inches square. This panel contains the representation of the Crucifixion. The figure of Christ is shown fully draped, but without a nimbus. The body and limbs extend quite straight along the shaft and arms of the cross, with the feet not together as in so many later representations, but each pierced with a separate nail. The head is upright, with the eyes wide open, and with long hair parted in the middle and a forked beard.

On Christ's right stands a bearded soldier with a spear. He is helmeted and clothed in a tunic with short sleeves of the kind worn by Roman legionaries, but has bare feet. No doubt this figure was balanced on the other side by one of the sponge-bearer, but unfortunately the latter has now been broken away and lost.

By analogy it seems likely that there were angels or cherubim in the upper corners at either side of the head. At most what remains of these, on the side above the soldier, has been described by Kermode as looking like the top of an angel's wing, and by Cumming as "the Divine hand pointing to the act of Crucifixion".

The detailed carving of the stone is delightful and highly elaborate. J. Romilly Allen says that it is "one of the most delicately executed pieces of sculpture I remember having seen, and almost resembles engraving".⁵ He adds: "There is a circular wreath of interlaced work on the breast, and the whole of the drapery is covered with ornament."

Kermode also comments upon the richness of the ornamentation of Christ's robe, the *tunica palmata*. This is covered with a simple but effective design of fine diagonal lines with, below, alternate rows of small pellets bordered by heavy cords. Kermode states that the garment "is fastened at the breast by a circular brooch, decorated with a figure-of-eight plait", but some authorities, as

⁴ Information kindly supplied, March, 1969, by Mr. A. M. Cubbon, B.A., F.S.A., Director of the Manx Museum, Douglas.

⁵ J. Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Symbolism* (1887), pp. 143-144.



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will be noticed later, have other views about this feature. Below is the device of the four-fold ring, looping externally and with the upper part reduced to fit into the limited triangular space available. Below this, on the skirt, we find the *triquetra* and double spiral.

An important detail is the treatment of the features. J. Romilly Allen, writing in respect of the Calf of Man stone and others, makes the comment: "The human features are ingeniously converted into spiral curves, beautiful as mere ornaments, but quite unlike the part of the body represented." This conventionalization was in fact no more extreme than in much modern sculpture. While artistically successful, the impulse for this method of treatment was then actually a religious one. The early Christian Church, after having for a long period prohibited any depiction of the diety, accepted representations which avoided being naturalistic. The clothing, too, was treated mainly as a surface for the display of elaborate decoration.

The unknown sculptor of the Calf of Man Crucifix was heir to more than one tradition. J. Romilly Allen has asserted that the leading features of the design were directly borrowed from illuminated manuscripts of a type found in the Eastern Mediterranean at least as early as the 6th century, the Calf sculpture itself being probably of the 8th century. He suggests that these illuminations had Byzantine characteristics. Recently, however, Professor D. Talbot Rice has stressed that there was, in fact, also a Syrian tradition, quite distinct from that of Byzantine art.⁶

As the stone was almost certainly carved on the island, and as the transport of anything other than manuscripts would have been difficult, it seems most unlikely that any other type of copy would have been available. It seems therefore to be clearly the truth of the matter that the sculpture was derived from an illuminated manuscript, and Magaw observes that there is here a close resemblance to the Crucifixion pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels of c. A.D. 700. Magaw adds: "The design may be dated confidently to the eighth century: it is indeed quite possible that the sculptor used as his model the cover of a treasured Gospel-Book which was then already old." This suggestion gives an attractive picture of a

⁶ D. Talbot Rice, *English Art, A.D. 871-1100* (1937), p. 101 *et seq.*

hermit using what was probably his only valuable possession to create a fine work of art in another medium.

Certain resemblances have also been noticed to a ninth-century bronze plate, said to have come from Athlone in the centre of Ireland and now preserved at Durham. Kermode, however, in speaking of this bronze plate, says: "This has been assigned, on the high authority of Dr. Petrie, to the 9th century. The ornamentation of the robes is of a different type (actually much cruder), consisting of bands of Celtic knotwork, spirals, and angular key-fret. The Calf of Man Crucifix is more realistic, and the ornamentation more archaic; we may regard it as earlier, and as designed by an artist who had derived his inspiration directly from Oriental sources".⁷ Nevertheless this linking-up of the work of a sculptor in stone with that of the bronze-smiths, through the common medium of the illuminators of manuscripts, reveals the exceptional fascination of problems involving the inter-relation of the fine arts. Miss Whinney, in a treatise on the subject dealing with a rather later period, remarks that it is of the greatest interest to find in the art of workers in one craft a reflection of the art of their brethren in another "only known to them in some medium other than that in which they were themselves working".⁸ It has indeed been suggested that the circular pattern on the breast of the Calf Crucifix, which Kermode took to represent a brooch, may in reality be a feature borrowed from bronze work and imitating the scroll-surrounded mount covering a rivet-head.

So far the use of the Calf of Man carving has not been fully established. Francis Grose had the extraordinary idea that it was part of a coffin lid, perhaps a surmise of local people at the time of his visit to the island. He says: "Lid of a Stone Coffin, found in the Calf of the Isle of Man. This curious representation of Christ on the Cross is supposed to have been part of the lid of a coffin. In all likelihood the person whose remains it covered was of no vulgar note."⁹ Actually we can probably get much closer to the purpose intended. As about a foot of the lower part of the stone was left plain, it was evidently intended to be set in the ground

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

⁸ M. D. Whinney, *The Interrelation of the Fine Arts in the Early Middle Ages* (1930), pp. xi-xii.

⁹ F. Grose, *The Antiquarian Repertory*, vol. IV (1809), p. 460.

or in a masonry base, the latter being the more likely. This probability has caused Professor Raleigh Radford to suggest that the carving may have formed the central panel of a masonry altar. A variant of this idea, which may be even more significant, comes from Mr. Cubbon, Director of the Manx Museum, who writes: "It may have been fixed to the wall behind the altar, forming a sort of reredos."¹⁰ Thus the general consensus of opinion is that the stone was associated, in one way or another, with an altar. From first principles this is the conclusion one would have expected.

It has been stated that no close parallel is known, either as regards subject or form. As regards subject, however, comparison may be made with the Norse sculptured cross (c. 900) at Gosforth in Cumberland, which is comparatively close at hand. But whereas the Calf of Man work is solely Christian in its features, the decoration of the Gosforth cross combines Christian with pagan elements.¹¹

As regards shape there is an unmistakable kinship with the very remarkable, probably 8th or 9th century "Monks Stone" found in the ancient churchyard at Papil on Burra Isle, Shetland, and now in the Shetland County Museum at Lerwick. This, too, has a plain base, suitable for fitting into some kind of socket, so that the installation in its complete state must have been very similar to that suggested for the Calf of Man Crucifix.

¹⁰ Letter dated 31 July, 1968.

¹¹ L. M. Angus-Butterworth, "Norse Sculptured Stones at Gosforth, Cumberland", *Ancient Monuments Society Transactions* (1943-45).

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