DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/ai.0212

Texts in the landscape

James Graham-Campbell & Kris Lockyear

The Institute's members of UCL's "Celtic Inscribed Stones" project describe, in collaboration with Wendy Davies, Mark Handley and Paul Kershaw (Department of History), a major interdisciplinary study of inscriptions of the early middle ages from the Celtic areas of northwest Europe.

There are at least 1200 stone monuments known from the Celtic-speaking regions of northwest Europe (Scotland, Ireland, Wales, Brittany, the Isle of Man, and parts of western England) which were inscribed with text during the early middle ages (*c.* AD 400–1100). They were created mostly for funerary, commemorative and legal purposes, in both the Celtic vernaculars and Latin, using either the Roman or Irish ogham alphabets,[1] with occasionally both on the same stone (Fig. 1). These monuments are thus distinct from the early medieval rune stones of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings, which are also known from Insular contexts,[2] although there is some overlap on the Isle of Man, as there is also with Anglo-Latin inscriptions.

Some of the stones are clearly funerary because their inscriptions begin with the standard Late Antique formula *hic iacet* ("here lies . . ."). Others may be either funerary or commemorative, given that their inscriptions call for prayers for the dead, using either the Latin *ora pro* ("pray for . . .") or the Irish *oroit do* (Fig. 2). Some inscriptions consist solely of a name (Fig. 3), or the formula "of X son of Y". This use of "son" highlights the fact that only around 5 per cent of the British stones, and even fewer of the Irish stones, record or commemorate women. Brittany, with a possible five female commemorands out of 25 stones, is thus exceptional in this respect. Other inscriptions record the gift of property, as at Kilnasaggart in Ireland, and land also played a prominent role in the ogham-stone tradition because early Irish law codes make it clear that such stones served as proof of ownership in court cases. There are also some lengthier inscriptions, notably the Welsh "Pillar of Eliseg" (the local name), which records the genealogy and recent actions of the kings of Powys.

Figure 1 *Three Welsh memorial stones of fifth- or sixth-century AD date from the churchyard at Clydai, Pembrokeshire, with vertical Latin inscriptions, although those at either end of the row are bilingual, with additional ogham inscriptions (the cross on the left-hand stone was added later).*

This large corpus of Celtic inscribed stones offers unique primary evidence to historians, archaeologists, historical geographers, palaeographers, epigraphers, art historians, medieval Latinists and Celtic linguists. However, their geographical distribution is far from even, with nearly two-thirds of the stones located in Ireland.

Within Ireland, inscriptions in Roman script are widely distributed, although more than half come from the major monastic site of Clonmacnoise in the Midlands. On the other hand, the distribution of ogham stones is much more focused upon the south of Ireland, with only a few examples in the north. In Britain, the distribution of ogham inscriptions, along with those in other scripts, appears to be largely coastal in both Wales and Dumnonia (the post-Roman kingdom in southwest Britain). However, it is uncertain to what extent this is the result of sea-borne influence or whether it just reflects a concentration of population in coastal areas. The two main exceptions to this pattern in Britain are the inscribed stones from the Roman towns of Wroxeter and Silchester. In the north of Britain and in Scotland, the Pictish inscriptions are concentrated along the east coast, with the British inscriptions to the south forming two concentrations, one in the Rhinns of Galloway and the other in a north–south line from Edinburgh to Hadrian's Wall. The Isle of Man also has a small but important group of inscriptions.

Work on the Breton inscriptions continues, but it is clear that there are three main concentrations: on the northwest coast of Brittany, around Plourin; in the far east, at places such as Bais and Retiers; and on the south coast, near Crac'h and Langombrac'h. There are also some isolated inscriptions, both in inland areas such as Guer and Sainte-Tréphine, and in coastal areas such as Louannec and Plouagat. What this distribution means – and how it might affect our understanding of the place of epigraphy in early medieval Brittany – remain questions in need of answers.

Figure 2 *Irish grave-slab of eighth- or ninth-century AD date from Tullylease, Co. Cork, calling for prayers for a man with an Anglo-Saxon name, Berechtuine.*

The project

The "Celtic Inscribed Stones" project (CISP), based at UCL, is undertaking a major interdisciplinary study of this material with the primary aims of:

- creating a comprehensive database of all known extant and lost inscribed stones, to be made available to scholars in a

Figure 3 *The Gallmau stone from Lanrivoaré, in northwest Brittany, is a small Iron Age stele, inscribed vertically downwards with a single Breton name in Insular decorative capitals of the seventh or eighth century AD, preceded by a cross.*

standardized and searchable form
- publishing a corpus of the inscribed stones of early medieval Brittany, in a traditional paper format.

CISP is a joint project of UCL's Department of History and the Institute of Archaeology, which began in 1996 under the direction of Professor Wendy Davies in collaboration with Professor James Graham-Campbell. Three Research Fellows, Dr Kris Lockyear (Archaeology), Dr Mark Handley and Dr Paul Kershaw (History), currently work full time on the project, the first two under the Institutional Fellowship Scheme funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, and the third funded by UCL. Dr Lockyear was appointed in May 1996, Dr Handley in March 1998, and Dr Kershaw in September 1998. Initially, Dr Katherine Forsyth also held an Institutional Fellowship, from September 1996, before leaving the project in June 1998. The CISP Management Committee is advised by an interdisciplinary panel of 23 scholars from France, Britain and Ireland.[3]

One of CISP's main objectives is the compilation of an accessible, comprehensive and authoritative database of all known Celtic inscriptions from the early middle ages. By gathering this material together in one place and making it readily available, our goal is to turn what is a largely under-exploited body of evidence into a far better known and readily usable resource. A further objective is to study the physical aspects of the inscribed stones, especially their position in the landscape, but also the nature and extent of the re-use of earlier monuments, notably the Iron Age stelae (standing stones) of Brittany (Fig. 3).

The Brittany survey

The fundamental reference work for early medieval Celtic inscriptions remains Professor Macalister's great *Corpus inscriptionum insularum celticarum*, published in Ireland during the 1940s.[4] However, Macalister's published work did not extend to the equivalent stones from Brittany, although early on he had mooted the possibility of undertaking such a study, on completion of the Insular Corpus.[5]

As a result, the Breton stones have not been considered alongside the Insular material, as they should be, given that the form of some of their inscriptions is paralleled in Britain and Ireland and is otherwise unknown on the Continent. It would benefit Breton and Insular studies to make the Breton material more widely available for comparative study. CISP has thus been focusing on the production of a detailed and fully illustrated corpus of the early medieval inscriptions of Brittany (Fig. 4), to be published as a monograph.

Antiquarian and other accounts have been searched, Dr Forsyth having undertaken a period of detailed library work in Brittany in March 1997. Regular consultations have taken place with Breton colleagues, with whom excellent working relationships have been established. All the extant stones have now been examined in the field, initially by Drs Forsyth and Lockyear, with subsequent checking by Professor Davies, who has also consulted the earliest maps of the locations of the stones (those of the ancien cadastre), dating from the early nineteenth century. Four sites of lost stones (Fig. 5) have also been visited and over a dozen potential members of the corpus have been eliminated.

A visit to Brittany by the whole CISP team is planned for June 1999 to complete the field record. This research archive, to be deposited at UCL, already consists of over 2000 photographs of the stones, with details of the inscriptions recorded by means of squeezes (wet-paper impressions) and rubbings; the locations of the stones have also been systematically recorded.

Figure 4 *This imposing Breton stone, from the commune of Crac'h in the Morbihan, commemorates one Herannuen, daughter of a man by name of Heranal, a son of whom appears to be featured on another stone, at Languidic, some 20km away. The upper part of this inscribed slab was first noted in 1854, standing beside the road down to the crossing of the estuary of the River Auray, not far from the site of the (possibly royal) chapel at Lomarec. Its two pieces were reunited a few years later, the lower part having been recognized outside the nearby chateau of Plessis-Kaer where it was serving as a seat. Today, they are cemented together and the monument stands an impressive 2.7m tall in the courtyard of the Château Gaillard, Vannes, the home of the Société Polymathique du Morbihan, to whom it was presented in 1858.*

The inscription, incised on the front of the stone, is fitted around the shaft of a cross, which is itself surmounted by two crosslets; there is a second cross on the back. The text is arranged in four vertical lines and most of its letters are well preserved, but there is some wear, as well as possible loss at the fracture, which has rendered some of them uncertain. The inscription is therefore largely, but not completely, comprehensible and the CISP transcription reads as follows:

LAPIDEM
HERANN//UEN
FILHERA[N/H]//AL
AMSE[.]//RANHUBRIT

This may be rendered: "lapidem herannuen fil(ia) hera[n]al a(nnum) m(enses) se[p](tem) ran hubrit", which may be translated as "the stone of Herannuen daughter of Heranal; (she lived) one year seven months; (buried in) Ran Hubrit". This new reading varies considerably from those offered in earlier publications of this stone.

The wedge-shaped finials and other features of the lettering identify the script as "Insular half-uncial" and suggest that this striking monument, whether it be funerary or commemorative, was carved in the seventh or eighth century AD.

The Breton stones volume

The inscriptions of Early Medieval Brittany is to be published in an innovative manner, with parallel English and French text, by Celtic Studies Publications Inc. (Boston), with the active participation of the publisher, Professor John Koch (now of the Centre for Advanced Celtic Studies, Aberystwyth). He will contribute textual and linguistic commentary, which will be augmented by Professor Gwenaël le Duc (of Rennes II University), a well known specialist in early Breton and Breton Latin literature, who will also be responsible for the French translation. Much of this work is in advanced draft form and is intended for publication in the year 2000. All of the current team, and Dr Forsyth in the past, have contributed to the creation of this volume in a fully collaborative way.

The CISP database

The database was designed by Drs Forsyth and Lockyear after extensive consultation with likely users. Dr Lockyear was then responsible for the implementation of the design (using Visual dBase), which has been greeted with acclaim. The database incorporates details of present and former locations, physical characteristics, full texts and readings, with reference to previous work, as well as to existing collections of relevant data; images are included where available. The electronic database allows both systematic searching and periodic updating as research progresses.

Apart from the Breton entries, which incorporate the results of the fieldwork described above, information is drawn primarily from existing publications, theses, and archived records.

The first public demonstration of the database took place at the 4th International Insular Art Conference in Cardiff (September 1998), where Drs Handley and Lockyear gave presentations, and all three Fellows provided demonstrations. The response was gratifyingly enthusiastic, both from the electronically inexperienced – who took pleasure in discovering the benefits of rapid comparison of alternative readings and of image with interpretation – and from the experienced who were pleased with such features as, for example, the selective bibliographical detail. Currently, a UCL student in the Department of Computer Science, Ms Bilkis Georgadis, is contributing to the project by designing the user interface.

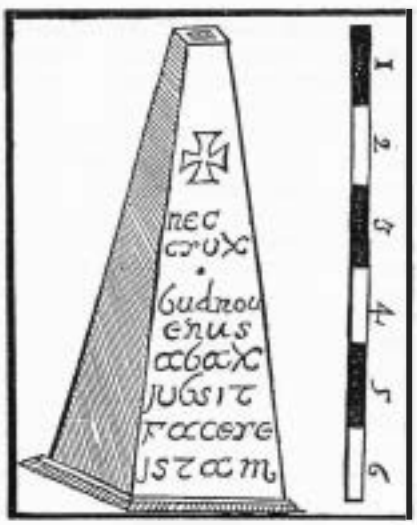

Figure 5 *Lost Breton stone from Landunvéz, as published in 1640 by Albert Le Grand in his work on the life of St Budoc, when its crosshead was already missing; it bore a ninth- or tenth-century inscription recording the erection of "this cross" by an unknown Abbot Budnouenus (scale in Breton feet, slightly longer than English feet).*

Progress

During the first two years of the project, alongside the Brittany survey, work concentrated on the collection and computerization of the non-Irish material, constituting just under a third of the total corpus. When that was completed, except for the ogham stones from Scotland, work began on Ireland. Entry of the Irish data progressed rapidly, and now more than half of the database is complete.

For Dumnonia, the entries have been based on the primary published corpora, with a few additional sources.[6] For the Welsh material, a comprehensive review has been undertaken of the literature published before the appearance (in 1950) of the standard work on this subject, by V. E. Nash-Williams, together with the inclusion of more recent discoveries.[7] In this connection, the CISP team has benefited from working closely with Dr Nancy Edwards (University of Wales, Bangor) and Dr Mark Redknap (National Galleries and Museums of Wales, and an alumnus of the Institute), who are preparing a revised and updated edition of the Nash-Williams catalogue. The Breton entries are based on CISP's own current research, whereas the Irish material is drawn primarily from Macalister's *Corpus*, with some enhancement from subsequent literature, together with the inclusion of new finds, notably a further group of memorial slabs from Clonmacnoise.

A slimmed-down interactive version of the CISP database is planned to be available on the Web in autumn 1999, but the initial completion date is set for autumn 2001, with the release of the project's fully revised edition. An illustrated CD-ROM version of the complete database and a copy of the database manual will then be made publicly available at cost. The database will also be archived with the Archaeology Data Service of the Arts and Humanities Data Service. It is intended that periodic revisions and overall enhancements will continue to be issued.

The CISP team will be pleased to hear from anyone with additional sources of information, antiquarian or otherwise, including illustrations (prints, drawings or slides) that might also be scanned for incorporation into the database.

Conclusion

Inscriptions, by definition, are contemporary written records from a particular place and time. Thus, in regions such as Brittany, where we have so little written information before the ninth century AD, the epigraphic record can provide an invaluable series of insights into literacy, language change, systems of commemoration, the monumentalization of the landscape, gender and the proclamation of real or desired status (Fig. 6). By collecting and studying these "texts in the landscape", the project aims to present a new vehicle and tool for the study of Celtic societies in the early medieval period.

Figure 6 *The Prostlon stone from Locoal-Mendon, in the Morbihan, may have been raised for Prostlon, who was the daughter of Salomon, the ruler of Brittany in the late ninth century.*

Notes

1. The ogham script is a form of writing based on a stroke alphabet consisting originally of 20 letters made of straight grooves and notches that are usually carved on an angle of the stone slab, although a stem line is sometimes used.
2. The term "Insular" is used here as an adjective embracing both Britain and Ireland (in contrast to "Continental").
3. For further information, the CISP web page may be visited at: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/cisp.
4. R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus inscriptionum insularum celticarum* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1945–49).
5. R. A. S. Macalister, *Studies in Irish epigraphy*, vol. 2, 2 (London: D. Nutt, 1902).
6. The primary sources are: E. Okasha, *Corpus of Early Christian inscribed stones of south-west Britain* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993) and C. Thomas, *And shall these mute stones speak? Post-Roman inscriptions in western Britain* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1994); the most recent find is reported in C. Morris, "Tintagel: a survey of recent excavations on Tintagel Island", *Current Archaeology* **14**(3), 84–8, 1998.
7. V. E. Nash-Williams, *The Early Christian monuments of Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950). Subsequent finds include: D. P. Webley, "The Nant Crew stone: a new discovery", *Archaeologia Cambrensis* **107**, 123–4, 1958; A. Gresham, "A new Early Christian inscribed stone from Trawsfynydd, Merioneth", *Archaeologia Cambrensis* **110**, 154–5, 1961; R. Tomlin, "A sub-Roman gravestone from Aberhydfer near Trecastle", *Archaeologia Cambrensis* **125**, 68–72, 1975; and N. Edwards, "Bryn Gwylan, Llangernyw", *Archaeology in Wales* **27**, 58, 1987.