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## The iconography of the devil: St Vigean's, Eassie and the Book of Kells

The slab numbered 7 at St Vigean's, Angus, preserves one decorated face; the other has been largely obliterated and the monument as a whole has been partially cut away.<sup>1</sup> A cross on the intact face (Fig. 1) has a rectangular base and is flanked on the left by four standing figures in two registers, between whom is a fifth, inverted, figure. Two figures to the right of the cross, identifiable as SS Paul and Anthony, sit facing each other in the act of sharing bread. Below them a crouching figure wields a knife as though to stab the breast of a horned ox or bull and his tongue is extended as though to lap the animal's blood (Fig. 2). In the Hendersons' view, the juxtaposition of this scene with that of Paul and Anthony

explores ideas set out in St Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, 10, where he contrasts the New Covenant of the Christians with the Old Covenant of the Jews: 'For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins ... (whereas) ... we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all'. The gruesome appearance and actions of the St Vigean's crouching man suggest that the sculptor intended to repudiate not only the faith of the Jews but pagan sacrifices in general.<sup>2</sup>

The Hendersons' interpretation of this scene of blood sacrifice can be enlarged upon, for the shape of the man's tongue has a demonic connotation. Its counterpart is the tongue of the devil in the Temptation miniature (fo.202v) in the Book of Kells (Figs 3, 4).<sup>3</sup> In both cases the tongue is unnaturally, if not grotesquely, extended and has an emphatic upward turn. In Kells, by implication, the devil addresses Christ and his extended tongue may be significant of speech. But whether lapping the blood of sacrifice or tempting Christ, both sculptor and painter have

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<sup>1</sup> J. R. Allen and J. Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, 3 parts (Edinburgh, 1903; repr. in 2 vols, Balmavies, 1993), iii, 268-9.

<sup>2</sup> G. Henderson and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts, Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (London, 2004), 140-2.

<sup>3</sup> For the Kells image see now Bernard Meehan, 'Looking the Devil in the eye: the figure of Satan in the Book of Kells folio 202v', in *Making and Meaning in Insular Art: Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Insular Art*, ed. Rachel Moss (Dublin, 2007), 268-74.



Fig. 1 St Vigean's, Angus, no. 7. Crown Copyright: RCAHMS.



Fig. 2 St Vigean's, Angus,  
no. 7; detail.  
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(Tom and Sybil Gray  
Collection).

characterised the diabolical in common terms.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, that the cross-shaft on the St Vigean's slab bears spirals ending in the heads of animals, birds and men has caused Isabel Henderson to observe that 'The use of human heads as spiral terminals is precisely what one would expect to find in the Book of Kells'.<sup>5</sup> Unable to find an example, she concludes that St Vigean's no. 7 discloses a Pictish sculptor behaving like a Book of Kells artist although not executing a design used in that manuscript.<sup>6</sup>

The genuflecting pose of the St Vigean's man can be that of Longinus (and Stephaton) in Crucifixion iconography, exemplified in Ireland in metalwork and sculpture although not, apparently, in surviving manuscripts.<sup>7</sup> Longinus and Stephaton are shown otherwise on the surviving (if incomplete) Crucifixion from Abernethy, Perthshire,<sup>8</sup> but that the lost Crucifixions of Scotland used the genuflecting pose is implicit in its appearance at St Vigean's. The St

<sup>4</sup> The devil may be further represented at St Vigean's by a winged figure depicted frontally on slab no. 1: G. Henderson and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, 156, pl. 105.

<sup>5</sup> I. Henderson, 'Pictish art and the Book of Kells', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe, Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. D. Whitelock *et al.* (Cambridge, 1982), 79-105, at 90.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> C. Bourke, 'The chronology of Irish Crucifixion plaques', in *The Age of Migrating Ideas, Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland*, ed. R. M. Spearman and J. Higgitt (Edinburgh and Stroud, 1993), 175-81.

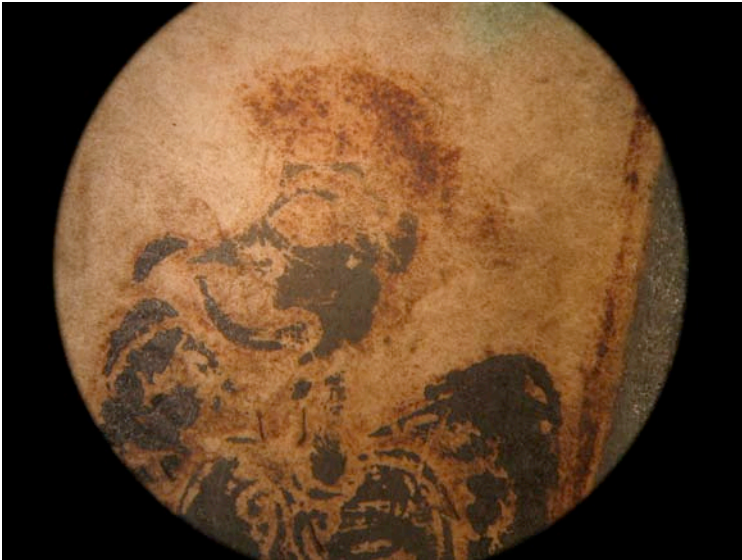
<sup>8</sup> G. Henderson and I. Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*, pl. 212.

Vigean's man is Longinus in antithesis, and his knife equates with the spear which Longinus invariably holds. Unlike Longinus, who by tradition was cured of blindness by contact with Christ's blood, the St Vigean's man seems to seek not a curative draught but gratification; that he faces away from the cross connotes blindness of a spiritual kind.



Fig. 3: The devil from the Book of Kells, folio 202v.; detail. Reproduced by permission of The Board of Trinity College Dublin.

Fig. 4: Detail of the devil from the Book of Kells, folio 202v. Reproduced by permission of The Board of Trinity College Dublin.



The relationship between the Book of Kells and St Vigean's no. 7 is underlined by the appearance elsewhere in Angus, on the Eassie slab, of a hunter who recalls the Kells devil in his leggy, rangy physique (Fig. 5). A winged figure is largely lost from the upper right-hand angle of the cross on the same face, and the Hendersons argue from its hoof-like feet that a devilish figure was depicted;<sup>9</sup> the dew-claws at the heels are specifically said to be shared by the devil in the Kells Temptation scene,<sup>10</sup> although the resemblance is scarcely a close one. But if the winged figure, seemingly an angel, in the upper left-hand angle on the Eassie slab be interpreted as the symbol of Matthew, the figure on the right – with appropriate hooves – might be the calf of Luke. The hooves of Luke's symbol on the *Soiscél Molaisse*, an early eleventh-century Irish book-shrine, are a plausible counterpart; like the surviving Eassie figure, and the symbol of Matthew on folio 290v of the Book of Kells, the symbols on the book-shrine have two sets of wings, albeit that Pictish angels can be similarly endowed.<sup>11</sup> The lost right-hand figure on the Eassie slab corresponded to that on the left at least in its skirted garment and in the disposition of one wing, and the two might have matched in their symbolism.

The depiction of two, as opposed to four, Evangelist symbols is not unparalleled. On another Angus monument, the Brechin cross-head, the symbols of John and Mark appear below the arms, and the spaces above are filled ostensibly by angels.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps, as George Henderson points out (pers. comm.), the symbols of Luke and Matthew were lost with the lower end of the Brechin slab. But the symbols might be expected to have occupied the angles of the cross, as they do at Elgin,<sup>13</sup> and it may be that John and Mark alone were represented at Brechin, and Matthew and Luke at Eassie. The end of Mark's gospel (folio 187v) in the Book of Kells carries the symbols of Matthew and Mark only; here, however, by analogy with folio 290v, a four-symbols arrangement appears to have been planned.

Isabel Henderson has suggested that 'a significant number of varied, specific, traits of composition and decoration' are common to Pictish art and the Book of Kells.<sup>14</sup> The Eassie slab is among the monuments which bear comparison with that manuscript, although no exact correspondence is claimed. However, in the case of St Vigean's

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> George Henderson (pers. comm.) points to their appearance on the Aberlemno roadside, Meigle no. 2 and Shandwick cross-slabs.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-8, pl. 215

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. 216

<sup>14</sup> I. Henderson, 'Pictish art and the Book of Kells', 105.



no. 7 and the devil in the Book of Kells, iconographies could be said to coincide.<sup>15</sup>

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Fig. 5 Eassie, Angus. Crown Copyright: RCAHMS.

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<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to George Henderson and Thomas Clancy for their comments, to Bernard Meehan for his comments and for help in other ways and to Tom Gray for permitting Fig. 2 to be reproduced.