

The Object Agency

Religious syncretism in Anglo-Scandinavian stone sculpture

In my last post, I wrote about **object agency** and **object biography**. Having introduced the concept that the meaning attached to objects can be as important as their function, what I really want to do now is take that concept a bit further and explore the way that the relationship between object and viewer was manipulated in the past, and used to project a message to the community. To do this, I'm going to use a case study of the Gosforth Cross, an Anglo-Scandinavian standing stone sculpture situated in Cumbria, UK.



(<https://theobjectagency.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/gosforth-location.png>)

Cumbria, UK. Home of the Gosforth Cross. Photo credit: Google Maps

Standing stone sculptures were used to memorialise the dead and reinforce the authority of the ruling elite, and they make a very visual example of the use of an object to project a message. In a future post, I will come back to the topic of Anglo-Scandinavian stone sculptures to talk about the significance of landscape, and the difficulties faced by museums in recreating or re-establishing the cultural context once the object has been isolated for museum display.



(<https://theobjectagency.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/gosforth-cross.jpg>)

The Gosforth Cross – Tenth-century stone cross, standing at nearly 5m tall. Photo credit: Archaeology in Europe

In this post I also want to dive into the area of **religious syncretism**, particularly during the period of Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian cultural contact and integration. Standing stone sculptures fulfilled both a memorial and authoritative role in the landscape, punctuating the open space and working to impose a new societal order. They also drew together strands of Norse paganism and Christianity, and Scandinavian and native artistic styles. Sculpture represents the end result of a series of choices regarding design, quality, material and size, but it is also indicative of the relationships that occurred for its production. The relationships between commissioner, patron, mason and the work's intended

audience reveal information about the social structure of the community and the wishes of the secular or ecclesiastic elite.

The work of art historians and archaeologists on the deconstruction of artistic motifs from the Anglo-Scandinavian period has contributed to the validity of artistic sources as historical record. The reciprocal nature of artistic influence at the time of contact between the Anglo-Saxon population and the Scandinavian settlers can be seen as evidence that the two cultures coexisted for a time. It also indicates that as the populations integrated over time, they eventually developed their own distinctive Anglo-Scandinavian style.

The evolution of the Viking Age

Between the eighth and eleventh centuries, Scandinavian raiding of England, Scotland, and the Irish Sea zone evolved into a pattern of settlement and colonisation which is reflected in language, structures, trade, custom, religion and material culture. The extent to which Scandinavian settlement occurred in England and the significance of cultural contact between the Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons has been contested by archaeologists and historians (See: Hadley 2000).

The monuments represent the emergence of a new style and a new culture as they drew together innovations from England and Scandinavia. Lesley Abrams, in her work on Anglo-Scandinavian cultural contact, has noted their significance:

The declaredly new style of these monuments seems to have referred very deliberately to Scandinavia, but they were not simply copies of artefacts from home, since stone carving, although not unknown, was apparently little practised in the native tradition of the immigrants... (Abrams 2012: 36)

The adoption of monumental stone sculpture by the incoming Scandinavian settlers is significant, as it suggests a group of people willing to adapt to local traditions and perhaps recognising methods of imposing power on the existing community.

Religious syncretism

Stone sculpture in Anglo-Scandinavian England is a visual representation of religious syncretism, as scenes from Christian and Norse religions were combined or depicted side by side on monumental works which projected authority across the English landscape. Abrams (2012: 20) has suggested that stone sculpture was used by the Scandinavian settlers as a means of projecting their own identity onto the surrounding community or landscape – literally monumentalising their identity.

The detection of religiosity in the archaeological record may, according to Mithen (2004), be severely limited by:

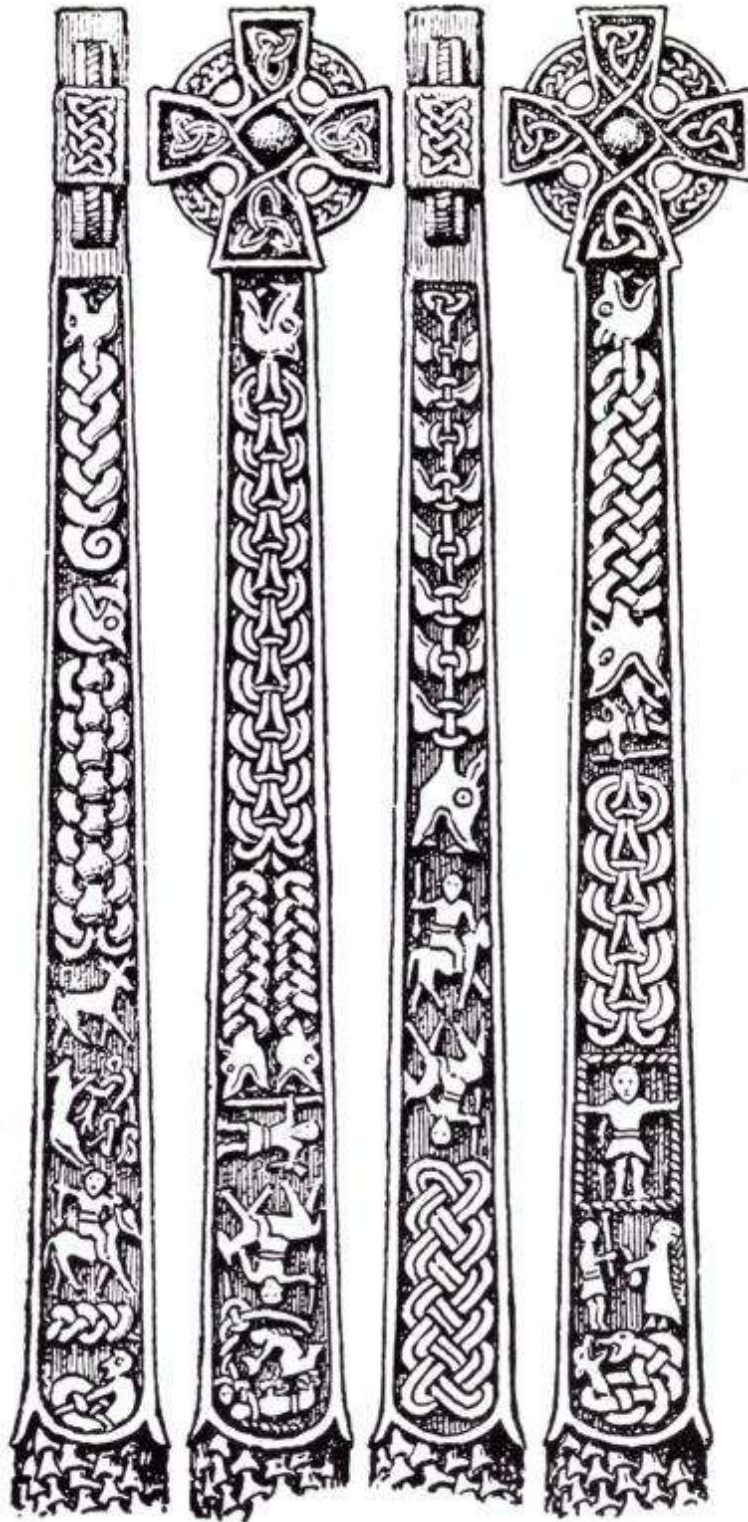
- poor preservation,
- limits of inference, and
- the simple absence of any material residues from religious behaviour

These problems are more exaggerated in pre-literate societies than societies with extant written texts which refer to religious ritual or meaning. In an emerging society such as the Anglo-Scandinavian hybrid group, however, the detection of religious syncretism and conversion in the archaeological record may not produce the same problems as for a pre-literate society. Anthropologists researching modes of religiosity have suggested that formal religious ideology may appear in the archaeological record but is not always able to be identified as the rituals may have been archaic and merely replicated with no

personal understanding of the original meaning (See: Mithen 2004: 21). In the context of Anglo-Scandinavian contact, the innovative nature of iconographic selection and depiction would indicate careful decision making on the part of the patron and/or sculptor and a deep awareness and understanding of both Christian and Norse themes. It may be that religious syncretism is able to be recognised and identified more readily in the archaeological record than an isolated religion that does not accept outside influence.

The Gosforth Cross

The Gosforth Cross, first recorded in 1799, is a stone sculpture which stands at nearly five metres high and is in the county of Cumbria. It was carved from a single piece of St Bees sandstone in the tenth century, and is likely to be situated still in its original location at the south of the church. It is significant owing to the quality of the carving, the innovative use of iconography and design, and also its size and survival. The cross is a stone slab which tapers toward the end, and has a cruciform-style cross at the top. The pillar is cylindrical at the base, with the upper section carved to make four sides in a 'staff-rod' type which is associated with north-western Mercia and has been argued to be of Anglo-Saxon origin.



(https://theobjectagency.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/pic_04.jpg)

An archaeological drawing of the carvings on the Gosforth Cross. Photo credit: Archaeology in Europe.

The use of stone carving to convey a narrative sequence would have been familiar to Scandinavian settlers owing to the picture stone tradition from the homelands. The Gotland picture stones in particular are reminiscent of the way in which Anglo-Scandinavian carvings depict iconography, in that they are separated into registers surrounded by borders of chain, and with a non-sequential narrative which is

often said to be confusing to a modern audience unused to such a display. In his work on archaeological theoretical frameworks and cognition, Ian Hodder has suggested that material culture can be 'read' as a document can be, and that the meaning behind an object can be re-written through the addition or removal of part of the object (Hodder 2003). This idea of being able to read material culture as though it were a text is a really important one, and one I will come back to often.



(<https://theobjectagency.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/gotlandstone.jpg>)

The Gotland Picture stone. Photo credit: Weber University

The Christian iconography on the Gosforth Cross

The cross displays an innovative fusion of local and exotic styles, and the ribbon interlace in particular has been identified as being Anglo-Scandinavian, owing to its rarity in Scandinavia (Fuglesang 1986: 214). The body has geometric, regular ornament in the Borre style, and has ring-chain, cabled borders, interlace and plait designs on the faces, along with figurative scenes of animals and horsemen. The scenes are not regulated by borders, complicating an interpretation of the iconography and narrative.

A Christian scene can be clearly identified, however, on the east side of the shaft. A crucified Christ, with arms outstretched, is depicted with a stream of blood pouring down into the register beneath him. A female figure in profile is below Christ, carrying a horn-like object, and is depicted in a traditionally Scandinavian manner (Bailey 1996: 89). A spear can be seen in the hand of a male figure in profile, standing opposite the female figure. Beneath this scene, two intertwined beasts with open mouths are shown. The iconography of crucifixion and Christ in this scene, although recognisable to a Christian audience, is unconventional and rarely found on contemporary stone sculpture (See also the cross from Kirk Andreas, on the Isle of Man). The rendering of the crucifixion without the cross is also unusual, as is the pairing of the male and female attendants. Lang has argued that the female figure is Mary Magdalene and that the male is Longinus, who, in the passion story, was unable to recognise the divinity of Christ until Christ's blood flowed onto him (Lang 2002a: 102). These two figures represent converted heathens, and so it follows that their depiction would reach out to an audience in the midst of such a process.

This would link the depiction of Christian with non-Christian iconography and provide evidence of religious syncretism, as it would represent the changing religious nature of the Anglo-Scandinavian

settlements. It would also link the two religions and reveal parallels between the two for the audience of Christian, pagan and converted people in the community.

The deliberate selection of these two figures reflects the society for which the cross was created, and suggests a society in the midst of conversion from Norse paganism to Christianity, or at least a society in which the two co-existed.

The Norse iconography

The non-Christian elements of the cross are associated with Ragnarök scenes from Scandinavian mythology. Ragnarök is a destruction myth from the Scandinavian mythological canon which tells the story of the end of the world following the end of the Golden Age of harmony. After the end of the Golden Age, the world fell into trouble and greed, the end result of which will be the end of the world itself (a future event). The scenes of Ragnarök on the Gosforth Cross include a scene above the crucifixion of Viðarr avenging the death of his father, Odin. Also featured are Heimdallr, holding the horn which will wake the gods, the devil-god Loki and his wife Sigyn.

That both Christ and Viðarr are featured on the east side is significant to note, as it allows the audience to draw parallels between the two religions. There are many points of overlap between Norse pagan and Christian figures and stories, and so the careful use of certain themes or figures would have been intentional, in order to create a link between the two religions.

To conclude

It is important to note that because of a lack of sequential narrative in the imagery presented on the Gosforth Cross, a high level of recognition of stories and iconography would be required for the audience to appreciate any meaning. Abrams has suggested that even when Christianity was (very quickly) formally adopted by the incoming Scandinavian groups, some form of paganism lingered within the community for some time (Abrams 2000: 136). The fact that Christianity took much longer to be adopted informally than formally may suggest the need for the juxtaposition of Christian and Norse iconography on works such as the Gosforth Cross, which was made decades after Scandinavian settlement. This type of cross may have been needed to ease the path to full conversion and assimilation.

I would argue that the agency of these objects gave them the capacity to project very powerful messages to their viewers. In a future post, I will write about the way that their placement was meaningful, and a major part of their biography. I hope that in this post, and the one before it, I've been able to showcase the way that object agency and archaeological theory can be used to 'read' the objects.

Next week: museums!

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