

THE AFTERLIFE OF STONE MONUMENTS

(The reference numbers in the text refer to the numbers in the *Corpus of Early Medieval Inscribed Stones*: see note at end)

Stone is really useful; if you leave it lying around for long enough, someone will find a use for it. The subject of this article is the reuse of early mediaeval inscribed stones (EMIS), though given that they were erected originally to mark a Christian burial, the concept of “left lying around” is tenuous. Dating from the 4th to the 14th centuries, these markers range from plain river boulders with an incised cross to tall, elaborately carved “Celtic” crosses. Their reuse is occasionally the same as their first use as grave markers, sometimes as grave covers (P83). Though not in the cases of MN2 – reused roman masonry from Caerwent walls – and G92, a roman milestone of the 4th century inverted and recarved to commemorate the 6th century Cantusus. CM29 at Clos Teg Farm was a reused Neolithic / early bronze age standing stone with cup marks. Ancient stones can be a palimpsest of recarvings from such early times, through the mediaeval period, and into more the recent in the case of B3, which was recut with an epitaph for the 2nd Baron Glan Usk died 11/1/1928.

Following the roman custom, these interments were often along the sides of the roads. As the roads fell into disrepair, it was the stones that marked the way. Croes Antoni cross-base (G118) indicates the location of the mediaeval road. But they were also enlisted to repair and improve the routes themselves, for example as footbridges / clapper bridges: across a small brook at Ceilwart Isa Farm (MR1); most famously the 10th/11th century Ilqui and Ilci Crosses (G84 and 85) a clapper bridge at Cwrt-y-defaid. CN14 once a footbridge across Glan-mor Stream, was subsequently used to support milk pails at Llyn-y-gele Farm; at St. Kennox Farm, Llawhaden, P56 was a footbridge in the farmyard.

Indeed, it is on farms that we find a range of uses for EMIS: most mundanely in walls, more ambiguously in field boundaries where they may have been considered to have some intrinsic authority - B21 Cae Gwynlliw. At Llangyfelach, G52 had been intended as a gatepost, but too much was knocked off the top, so it became a mounting block for horsemen; utilised for a similar purpose was MR16 at Blaen-y-cwm farm. CM25 at Capel Mair was in three fragments, each with a different use, including masonry in a cowhouse wall and as a drain cover. At Llangynwyd, G53 in the farmyard of Sychbant, is part of an 11th cross shaft, hollowed-out to use as a trough with drainage hole added. At Tyddyn Hollard, CN21 was part of the pigsty wall; at Llannor, CN32 was over the stable door, and CN33 formed the lintel over the cowhouse door; CM21 stood in a field as a cow-scratcher. Perhaps there was a perceived blessing in such uses.

They also became landmarks in the landscape: P59 – Martin’s Haven, Marloes – functioned as a waymarker and prayer station for those landing or sailing from there. Perhaps there are such pilgrimage connections with those stones which are incised with the names of saints. P16 stood on the pilgrimage route to St. Davids. The Stone of the Two Ox-eyes (G7) sited between two barrows dominated Hirfynydd Ridge which linked the roman forts at Neath and Coelbren. Llanfaelog (AN11) was located with reference to an ancient route. Occasionally, EMIS were set on cairns, as with CM24 and CD28.

Given their “religious” nature, it is not surprising to find their reuse by, and in association with churches. The great majority of surviving examples are built into the fabric of the building, seemingly just for construction purposes as at Defynnog (B5), lower string course of tower and (B6) as lintel of doorway into ringing chamber. Given apposite size and dimensions, reuse as lintels and window sills is quite common: for example, at Corwen (MR3), Llangadwaladr (AN26), Llanfaglan (CN24) and Llandanwg (MR10). At Neath Abbey (G9), an 8th century stone, already reused in the 9th century as a memorial, was utilised in the 15th century in a buttress supporting the monks’ reredorter. At Merthyr Old Church (G114), the stone was “dressed down and fitted” into a quoin. Similar “dressing” at Heneglwyns (AN6) where the stone was trimmed on all four sides, suggests reuse just as masonry. At Llanmadog (G56) the 7th/9th century stone was part of a stone bench running along the south chancel wall; whilst B45 was utilised as a footstool for bellringers. It had previously been moved in the 1860s by vicar of St. Davids, Trallwng, to his grounds for convenient examination by the Cambrian Archaeological Society. CN7 was used as a kerbstone in the Deanery garden of Bangor Cathedral.

However, when the stone is “interred” or built into the foundation - St. Cyngors Church (AN39), Llangefni - or as a threshold stone – Euddogwy (CM15) – one is tempted to surmise on a more symbolic use of these stones. A reused stone forms part of the upper step under the altar at Llanfihangel Ysceifiog (AN22 and AN23); and another at Llanfrynach (P29) was recorded in 1708 as lying under the altar in the chancel of the church; this practice is reminiscent of the burial of relics in church foundations and under altars. At Stackpole – Church of S. James and St. Elidyr – (P137), the stone was trimmed on all four sides for reuse as an altar slab, then whitewashed. Elsewhere - St. David’s Cathedral (P96 and P97) - they are found as altar fronts. P114 was built into the footings of the 13th century chapter house of St. Dogmael’s Abbey. G14, the Stone of Baptism, was reused as a font.

The reuse continues outside of the church building itself: at Lannor (CN29) the stone sits in the western jamb of the churchyard gate; at Llangaffo (AN30) as a paving slab on approach to north door of the “new” 19th century church; in 1746, one is recorded as part of a stile in Llanddewi Brefi churchyard.

By extension, EMIS have been used in association with holy wells: at Ffynnon Llonwen (P23), the 7th/9th century stone built into the drystone wall superstructure of the well has had a fish symbol carved upon it. There are strong associations with healing and baptism as with rituals at St. Canna’s, Llangan. At Llanrhidian, the Leper Stone is associated with healing: lepers seeking a cure would rub against it; whilst sitting upon it supposedly cured headaches. As healing places, they were a good place to collect your herbs. At Llandaf, G36, a 10th/11th century stone featured in the end wall of the dairy well, Bishop’s Palace; whilst G47b, on the green at Llangenith, formed the capstone of the village well. F. Jones in *The Holy Wells of Wales* records its associations with feasts and pilgrimages. At Pen Arthur Farm (P103-6) and Cwm Gwenffrwd (G6) the “holy well” stones were subsequently moved for re-reuse; the latter, travelling to the colliery manager’s house at Bryn Cefneithan, then on to the garden of Miss Parsons at Neath.

This use of the stones in gardens and as collections housed in grottos is exemplified by G7 and G10 which were moved to the Groll by Lady Mackworth who had all such curious stones brought to her grotto in the grounds. At Towyn, MR25 was in 1771 being used as a gatepost before being moved to

the grotto of a neighbouring gentleman. Whilst B35 may have a dubious claim to having been used as a garden roller – being itself a reused roman pillar – normally such stones were displayed as garden features: Llanllyr (CD20), Goldengrove (CM24), Court Herbert (G8), Pool Park, Llanfwrnog (D1) and Cefnamlwch (CN2). Others have more complex histories: AN46 Ty'n Rhosydd Farm was a field gatepost, then became a chopping block for sticks, then a garden feature at Trawscawen Park, now a museum object in Gwynedd Museum, Bangor. B51 (Penymynydd) an ogham incised stone was, to quote T.H.Thomas, “removed from its ancient position and used as a gatepost or some such purpose.” He moved it to his lawn. B2 at Crickhowell had been a footstone across a ditch, became a feature in Glan Usk Park, but now sits in Brecon Museum.

Occasionally, stones become features inside people's homes, such as AN48, built into the conservatory wall at Maen Hir. In Carmarthen, CM1 was by Pantdeuddwr Cottage door being used as a whetstone. More recently and controversially, R2, which had been at the old vicarage in Clyro, travelled to The Mason's Arms in Hay, and sometime after 1985 was set as a lintel for the fireplace, in the State Room of Hay Castle by Mr. Booth. In an industrial setting, G117 was built into the back of a limekiln at Ogmere Castle.

F1 was collected by the Pennant family having been a gatepost, then a garden feature, then a collection piece at Whitford House; following the clear-out of Whitford, the stones have found sanctuary amongst the pews at the back of St. Mary and St. Beuno's Church. Others moved to “safety” include G114, St.Leonard's Church, Newcastle, which was being attacked by “mischievous” boys. G28 at Capel Brithdir, a 5th/6th century stone was rescued after being used as a cock-shy. The 6th century Pompeius Stone (G86) at Eglwys Nyrnid, Margam, was used as a target for stone-throwing boys and was “mutilated in other ways”. More exotically, at Llangian (CN25), St. Clydai (P14) and possibly Ramsey Island (P99), the stones were adapted for use as sundials. At Ynysmaengwyn Mansion, MR27 shows evidence of having been built into an outhouse, used as gatehanger, re-used as a milestone AND used as a sundial.

Artistically, such stones as B39, Neuadd Siarman, Maesynys, have a certain “wow factor”. One might see these intricate and beautiful “Celtic” crosses with their mysterious interlace patterns as suitable pictorial material for postcards and as a key ingredient in the tourism industry. But on a more sublime level they have been used as an inspiration by artists working in a variety of media. The letters carved upon them can add to this sense of mystery especially where ogham has been used – the fairy language.

Furthermore is the question of whether there was an extra dimension in some uses of stones, an added significance in some situations. Some stones acquire their own names and supposed characteristics: Crux Salvatoris at Llanilltud Fawr; Crux Christi at Margam; Maen Maddock (B50) at Ystradfellte. Or it is the stones which are the origin for the names of the fields, farms or settlements; in the case of the Pillar of Eliseg, the valley, district and Cistercian Abbey owe their names to it – Valle Crucis. Folklore and superstition attach stories, for example, R5, St. Mellig's Church Cross. The Goblin Stone (G99) at Merthyr Mawr, was in a field haunted by a ghost who compelled passers-by to insert their hands and feet into the holes of the monument, and make them pray. G27 at Gelli-gaer plays a role in the stories of people's lives, including drunken stonemasons, vandalistic colliers and the ghosts of golden warriors. Exemplifying these and other featured characteristics of reuse is the Bodvoc Stone (G77) on Margam Mountain – copy in place; original in museum having been used as a

target for firing revolvers. A 6th century stone it stood beside a well-defined trackway, was a clear landmark (it bears an OS benchmark) and mediaeval boundary marker. Carrying a list of names, it acts as a genealogy and an authoritative claim of “ownership”. It has been used as source for folklore tales, and even carries a curse; whoever reads the inscription correctly will die! (A warning for all linguistics scholars.)

These stones have been used socially, legally and politically both in their initial use and subsequent reuse. Individuals have appropriated them to enhance their personal status or claim some authority. They record gifts of land, as in the case of Llech Idris (MR23), the 1209 Grave of Bishops, which confirms lands from Llywelyn ap Iorweth to Cymer Abbey. Similarly, CD20 at Llanllyr House-formerly the site of a 12th century Cistercian nunnery - is an 8th/9th century stone which records a donation of land to the church, possibly recarved onto an earlier inscription which references a hermit in a deserted place. Whilst, “in situ”, some mark boundaries and others have been venues for the making of contracts, such as P16, Penwaun, mentioned in a deed of 1483. With its genealogies and symbols of land ownership, probably, the most politically dramatic and historically significant during several historic periods is the Pillar of Eliseg near Llangollen. Thrown down and re-erected on more than one occasion, strategically sited, it became a place of assembly and possible royal inauguration.

Stones move: the Llywel Stone (B42) an ogham and latin incised stone was rescued by a Reverend Price as farm workers were about to chisel holes into it for use as a gatepost; unfortunately, by the time he returned, it had been sold to the British Museum for £10. Thus, and by other means individual stones become parts of collections in museums, galleries or private collections – referred to as lapidaries on occasions. Nowadays, these venues include Margam Stones Museum and Abbey, Ewenny Priory, Merthyr Mawr Church, Llanilltud Fawr Church and the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. Their nature and subsequent reuse undergoes a subtle change. They are now seen as a whole, as a collection of artefacts, subject to academic study both as physical assemblages and in published collections such as *Lapidarium Walliae* 1876-9.

Whilst they were able to be studied individually in many cases before, they could now be more closely curated, catalogued, compared and contrasted. Their reuse by the academic world as objects of study is both extensive and diverse. Historically and archaeologically some stones are the only evidence of now lost settlements, as well as offering us genealogies and making connections with known historical figures. The complex messages they bear both epigraphical and pictorial are still the subject of much debate. Their sculpture, iconography and ornament feature in artistic and art history studies. Culturally further afield, MN3 and MN5 show Irish and Scandinavian, Scottish and Manx influences respectively; and in comparative studies, parallels with Armenian *khatch-kars* have been made. Theologically, MN5 at St. Arvan’s has iconography that throws light on belief and doctrine, whilst others shed light on prayers for the dead and Bible story knowledge (CD27). For linguists EMIS are a rich resource for studies in Ogham and Latin and more general questions about literacy; others focus on the geography of personal names; for geologists and lithologists it is the very fabric of the monument itself.

These stones are also “heritage objects”. In any television programme that deals with welsh history, a sequence showing EMIS seems compulsory. They are used as a visual shorthand for a certain kind of Wales. There has been, and continues to be, much political debate about the nature of Wales past, present and future. These stones have been conscripted into that debate, probably because of

their association with both the Age of Saints and the mediaeval period. This wholly unforeseen reuse of these stones means that they have become some sort of body that contains messages about nationality: EMIS as a meme. By extension, if one is Welsh, these stones are part of what it means to be Welsh, they are part of our heritage.

To conclude, these stones were a tactile material initially “worked” for a primary use: as grave markers. They were reused in a simple utilitarian sense of a material fit for purpose such as in construction and repairs; but some became objects of veneration, artefacts and resources for academic study. As collections they fulfilled those roles, but being in national collections - or just still in the national landscape - they became something more abstract, perhaps more powerful. Ironically, these stones - inert materials originally used to mark the burial site of someone who hoped for an after-life - have had an after-life of their own.

This article draws heavily on material from :

A Corpus of Early Mediaeval Inscribed Stones and Sculpture Stones in Wales

Volume 1 M. Redknapp and J.M. Lewis 2007

Volume 2 Nancy Edwards 2007

Volume 3 Nancy Edwards 2013

The reference numbers in the text refer to these volumes.

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