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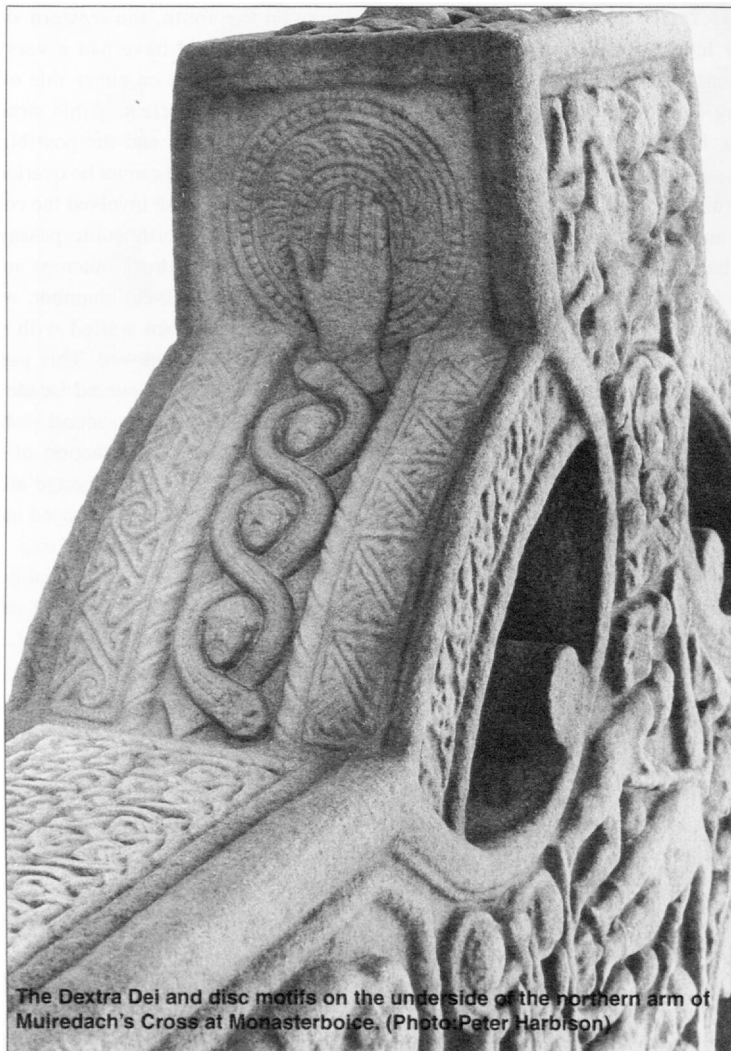
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MUIREDACH'S CROSS: DEXTRA DEI AND DIVINE BULLS



The Dextra Dei and disc motifs on the underside of the northern arm of Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice. (Photo: Peter Harbison)

A letter in *Archaeology Ireland* 30 from Ciaran Ó Sabhaois prompts DR CHRIS LYNN to comment on an iconographic detail the Right Hand of God found 'hidden' on the underside of the northern arm of Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice and an apparently very different motif under the southern arm of the same cross.

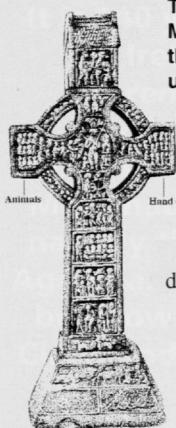
LIKE MANY OTHER *Archaeology Ireland* readers I have been to Monasterboice several times, but only noticed the Hand of God at the recent 'St Patrick' exhibition in the Ulster Museum, where the lighting on a nineteenth-century full-scale copy of Muiredach's Cross picked out the feature very clearly. What struck me as interesting about this, besides the hand itself, was the 'object' which it appears to be supporting. The feature is excellently illustrated in Francoise Henry's *Irish Art, 800 - 1020 AD*, plate 80, and it inspired the design on the dust-wrapper of R.A.S. Macalister's *Monasterboice*.

The Hand of God and the circular disc

One looks up, as Ciaran Ó Sabhaois says, at the back of a right hand on the underside of the north arm of Muiredach's Cross. The hand is holding up (or, if you prefer, attached to the underside of) a circular object which fills the entire square panel on the underside of the arm against the cross ring. Where the wrist of the hand meets the rising cross ring, a rectangular panel runs down the ring, containing two intertwined snakes or serpents, one running up the ring, the other down. The serpents twine around three youthful heads, which Ciaran suggests may represent Hananiah, Azariah and

Mishael, and it is possible that this panel on the underside of the ring was meant to be connected with the hand supporting the circular object on the underside of the arm. Serpents, heads, hand and circular disc may have been part of a single composition. I have nothing to say about the snakes and heads (a similar feature occurs under the southern side of the ring of Muiredach's Cross and on the ring of the high cross at Durrow, Co. Offaly), but I did wonder what might have been represented by the circular disc apparently being held aloft by the Hand of God. Macalister suggested that the object represented clouds, from which the hand appeared to be descending, but it seems too regular and geometric to be clouds. Helen Roe thought it might be a nimbus framing the hand: the object, however, appears as a complete disc, separate from, and above, the hand.

The circular object or disc is carved in relief and is composed of seven distinct, contiguous, concentric rings with a circular area at the centre. The fingers of the Hand of God underlie the central disc. The rings are hidden only by the thumb and by the palm of the hand near the junction with the cross ring. The inner and outer groups of three rings both consist of two plain fillets enclosing a ring of beads. The fourth ring, enclosed by the two sets of three,



The east face of Muiredach's Cross showing the position of the panels under discussion.

is very wide and is composed of at least ten overlapping semicircles, each defined by three raised bands around a central pellet. The bases of the semicircles lie on the next ring inwards, i.e. towards the centre of the

disc. They give the impression that the object, seen from below, is to be imagined as if turning clockwise.

At first, the only thing that the circular panel reminded me of was the small circular shields of Early Christian period type which appear elsewhere on carvings in the hands of warriors, for example Saul and David on the same cross. The shields, however, are much smaller and lack the detail of the disc apparently held aloft by the Hand of God. That the disc could be a shield seems to be a most unlikely interpretation, but it does bring to mind the fact that shields were sometimes used as symbols of the cosmos in the iconography of the ancient world. While there is no evidence beyond its shape that the object represented on Muiredach's Cross is a shield, a possibility arises that it could be a 'cosmic' symbol. Are we in fact looking up at the Right Hand of God holding up the heavens?

The disc as a cosmic symbol

Three points can be introduced in support of this possibility. Firstly, the position on the underside of the cross arm is the only place on the cross where a hand could easily be represented as supporting something which is itself on high. The hand and disc motif does not occur in other 'vertical' positions on crosses. Secondly, the seven concentric rings on the disc correspond closely with the imagined 'orbits' of the seven moving heavenly bodies known in ancient astronomical systems, for example the *Almagest* of Ptolemy of Alexandria. The stationary earth was at or near the centre, with the Moon in the innermost orbit, then Mercury, Venus, the Sun (in the fourth concentric zone, corresponding with the wide band of overlapping semicircles), Mars, Jupiter and Saturn on the outside. It may also be

significant that according to some Jewish traditions God was imagined as residing in the highest or seventh of Seven Heavens. It is possible that the overlapping sets of semicircles in the fourth or middle ring represented the sun moving clockwise round the sky in its appropriate orbital position. Helen Roe thought that this band might represent light rays radiating from the hand, so there is a degree of overlap in our interpretation of this part of the symbol.

It was suggested above that the way in which the semicircles in the fourth zone overlapped gave the impression that the object was to be imagined as if turning clockwise. All right, it is only an even chance, but this is also the direction in which the heavens appear to turn in a day when viewed from a 'stationary' earth. There is, in addition, ample Scriptural evidence to place the Right Hand of God in



Above: The fighting animals on the underside of the southern arm of Muiredach's Cross. (Photo : NMS)

the heavens: for example, Isaiah 48:13, 'My own hand laid the foundations of the Earth and my right hand spread out the Heavens'; or Psalm 19.1 'The heavens proclaim God's splendour, the sky speaks of His handiwork'. Beyond its cosmic significance, astronomical lore was of practical, even necessary, interest in major ecclesiastical establishments for calendrical purposes.

It is also worth recalling that the stability of the heavens may have been of some concern to the early Irish; in a well-known figure of speech in the *Táin* the warriors say, 'We will hold out...until the earth gives under us, or the heavens fall on us and make us give way'.

The *Táin* connection

The following may be testing the limits of

reasonable speculation, but it may be of interest to note that underneath the south arm of Muiredach's Cross, in the position corresponding to the Hand of God on the north arm, and also 'supported' by the intertwined serpent motif on the ring, are two animals of indeterminate species, variously described as fighting or playing. If the placing of the Hand of God and disc underneath the north arm was meant to suggest that the symbols were above, heavenwards, is it possible that the two animals in an identical position underneath the south arm were similarly intended to be thought of as in the heavens?

From onomastic evidence it has been suggested that the final redaction or collation of the *Táin* took place in County Louth. This could have been around the time when Muiredach's Cross was carved, early in the tenth century. Is it possible that the two animals on the underside of the southern cross arm are fighting rather than playing and that they might be the cosmogonic (creation myth) bulls of the *Táin*, the Donn Cuailnge and the Finnbennach? They do seem to have bovine bodies and are unlike the cats elsewhere on the cross, but the heads look somewhat human or even demonic (specially adapted for fighting?) and they could in fact be playing. The inclusion of a powerful symbol from the *Táin* on a piece of sacred Christian iconography seems so inappropriate as to be out of the question. But we must also remember that the ancient tales were kept alive and written down in the very monasteries where the high crosses were designed, carved and erected.

It is also worth noting that the base of the cross carries the signs of the Zodiac, astrological symbols which are not of Christian origin. Moreover, Patricia Kelly has suggested that by the time the tale was written down the divine bulls of the *Táin* may have become symbols of the futility of warfare. In the *Táin* the victory of the Ulaid is pyrrhic, there has been great slaughter, the sovereignty goddess is a figure of ridicule, the bulls are lost to both sides, and before it dies the Donn turns on the women and children of its own people.

I put forward the suggestion that the Right Hand of God on Muiredach's Cross is to be thought of as holding up the heavens not as an alternative to Ciaran Ó Sabhaois's but as an additional possibility. It is often the case that the designers of sacred architecture delighted in building a variety of layers and types of meaning into individual motifs and