

A World Without Artists? In Search of Medieval Welsh Stone-Carvers

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Kyllell a edyw ymwyf, a llynn ymual, ac amsathyr y neuad Arthur. Namyn mab brenhin gvlat teithiawc, neu y gerdawr a dycco y gerd, ny atter y mywn. – “Knife has gone into food, drink into drinking horn, and there is a throng in the hall of Arthur. Except for the rightful son of the king of the land, or a craftsman who brings his craft, let them not be allowed inside” (Bromwich and Evans 1992:4, Author translation).

Introduction

Celtic art has captured the minds of viewers for centuries. From gleaming gold-chased, bejeweled brooches to the intricate knot-work of illuminated Insular manuscripts, to richly-carved stone crosses, the art work and monuments of the Celtic lands have been much studied, copied, and popularized over the ages. Graves and hoards unearthed from throughout the Celtic lands reveal dazzling objects of exquisite craftsmanship.

While anecdotes of famed craftsmen surface occasionally in the literary sources, such tales are fairly scant. Many art works remain unsigned. Inscribed stones and carved crosses may record the name of the person commemorated, or the name of the patron, but *not* usually the name of the maker. While many studies of Celtic art have focused on smaller portable objects, such as brooches and cauldrons, I wish to focus on another category of Celtic art: the medieval carved stones and crosses of Wales.

Famed for their intricate carvings, these monuments have been examined from many viewpoints. However, one understudied narrative is the agency of the stone-carver. While some monuments contain the Latin word *fecit*, “he made,” most have no evidence relating to the identity of the maker(s). Thus, the main question addressed in this essay is: in the absence of named

or “visible” artists, how can we discuss the agency of the nameless maker?

I will argue that although the specific *identity* of the stone-carver may forever remain a mystery, the *agency* of the maker is still discoverable and visible through different theoretical lenses. Alfred Gell’s research forms the basis of my approach to this subject. Gell’s *Art and Agency* invites us to step back and approach the question of artists and agency from an anthropological theory of art. Approaching this question first from the angle of the material index, that is, the “visible, physical ‘thing,’” Gell applies the notion of “the abduction of agency,” arguing that the material index, as the product of manufacture, functions as the outcome or instrument of social agency (Gell 1998:13-15). Abduction is from the Latin *abducere*, literally meaning “to draw out from.” Critically, the abduction of agency from the index is the drawing out of the artist’s agency from the artifact they made, whether or not the artist left any clues as to their identity.

Additionally, to further elaborate this argument, I will interweave a few sources on artistic agency, phenomenology, cognitive archaeology, monuments, and memory. Overall, I aim to demonstrate that, by focusing less on the identity of the maker and more on their skill and their choices in material and patterns, we can see something of the maker’s agency.

The Place of Craftsmen, Materiality, and Phenomenology

Craftsmen and Monuments in Medieval Wales

In the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, craftsmen were granted certain privileges¹. Along with the rightful heirs of chieftains, craftsmen were allowed to enter the court of a king after the feasting had already started. The gates remained barred to all other comers. The words *cerdawr*, “craftsman,” and *cerdd*, “craft, art” designate skilled work in general and hint at the status of craftsmen in medieval Wales (National Library of Wales). More specific information is found in a 7th century Old Irish text, the *Uraichect Becc*. This work, a corpus of law codes (in Binchy 1958:44–54) discusses the

hierarchy among the craftsmen who created the stone crosses...It deals with the concept of *nemed* (‘sacred status, privilege’) including that belonging to the pos-

sessors of a craft or a profession. According to later [Welsh] glosses on the tract, the craftsman responsible for the creation of a free-standing cross was the *saer*... They were [“freemen”], but relied on patronage, and can be considered ‘dependent professionals.’ (Redknap and Lewis 2007:121).

Overall, however, the literary evidence for the social standing of craftsmen in medieval Wales is generally rather vague, though the words typically used to describe these practitioners – *saer* and *cerdawr* – are masculine.

Turning to the material evidence, we encounter many questions and few definitive answers. The full corpus of medieval Welsh inscribed stone monuments and sculpted crosses includes some 500 examples, dating from roughly the 3rd century to the 15th century AD. While these monuments served in varying specific capacities during that time period, all had commemorative functions. Serving as grave- and boundary-markers, these monuments were categorized by Welsh archaeologist and antiquarian V.E. Nash-Williams (1897-1955). His typology, despite its shortcomings, has remained influential.

David Petts’ discussion of Nash-Williams’ major groups of monuments is straightforward (Petts 2003: 195-200). Group I stones consist of monuments dating to the 5th to 7th centuries; the inscriptions, in Latin and/or ogam (early Irish script), recorded the name and patronymic of the person commemorated and were often paired with the phrase *hic iacit*, “here lies.”² Group II stones, a “fuzzy category” as Petts terms it, date to the 7th to 12th centuries and are marked with rather simple crosses. Group III stones (sculpted crosses and cross slabs) date to the 9th to 11th centuries; such monuments often record individual names without patronymics. Additionally, Group III stones may contain an appeal to passers-by to pray for the soul of the individual commemorated.

Changing Forms and Functions: The Influence of Christianity

During the early medieval period, c. 400 to 1000 AD, Wales was characterized by relatively small kingdoms, each with its own leader (Middle Welsh: *unben*) or lord (*arglwyd*). Similarly, religious communities were organized by the ecclesiastical equivalent of the secular kin-group. This combination of local

monastic communities and small kingdoms led to the establishment of highly individualized and local traditions. However, starting in approximately the 5th century, a more organized and institutionalized form of Christianity was introduced and precipitated changes in the forms, functions, and inscriptions of the inscribed stones, especially from the 7th century onwards. Since there is a paucity of early literary sources for the development of Christianity in Britain and Ireland particularly before the 12th century, scholars have relied on other forms of evidence, namely place-names, cemeteries, and monuments such as the inscribed stones.

In Wales, many of the earlier monuments, i.e. Group I stones, marked a burial site; the inscription *hic iacit* emphasizes the physical proximity of the grave. Like their Irish counterparts, Group I stones served a dual role as both burial markers and boundary stones; “[t]he grave stands as a testimony to a close link between land and kinship” (Petts 2003:205). Group II stones, those incised with “simple” crosses, “continue to mark the immediate physical proximity of the grave, [although] it is no longer expressed in words. They may mark a grave but they do not label the individual within it” (Petts, 2003:201). On the other hand, Group III stones, the sculpted crosses and cross-slabs, provide the most striking contrast. Instead of emphasizing the physical proximity of the grave or genealogical identity, Group III stones emphasize praying for the soul of the person commemorated (Petts 2003: 201-202). These shifts in the form and function of monuments and the change from commemorating the *body* to commemorating the *soul* reflect the changing religious attitudes and approaches to death and burial in the 7th and 8th centuries. Furthermore, starting in the 7th century, the practice of using secular and ecclesiastical land charters expanded as the church began to grow in power and influence; it is hardly a coincidence, then, that Group I stones became rarer at this time.³ Sculpted crosses and cross slabs still continued to serve as boundary markers of church land; additionally, they acted as religious statements within the landscape (see Wood 1998:21 and 118).

Monuments in the Landscape: Memory, Phenomenology, and Materiality

Monuments are durable memories made manifest in the landscape. Those with inscriptions and carvings are set up for

people to “read;” objects accrue meanings and significance over time through interactions with people. Thus, meaning and memory are fluid. Just as memory and meaning are shifting processes, the ways in which people encounter these monuments can change – in different light levels, in varying weather conditions, inside or outside, with different people. Experiencing – with *all* the senses, whenever possible – monuments and carvings in their landscape settings is a fundamental part of archaeologist Christopher Tilley’s approach to landscape phenomenology. Tilley discusses how experiencing the individual standing stones of Brittany reveals subtleties glossed over by lumping them all together in a homogenous category. Individual stones have unique qualities or shapes, and thus offer multidimensional experiences – “[t]he stones are dynamic even when they are so obviously fixed” (Tilley 2004:38).

These sorts of phenomenological considerations are harder to take into account in this essay, as I rely on illustrated catalogues of the known inscribed and carved stones of Wales. Furthermore, many of the Welsh monuments are no longer *in situ*. However, this is not an insurmountable issue, as I believe that some phenomenological aspects – even if these are limited to brief discussions about the stones in their present locations – can be gleaned from the catalogue entries and accompanying photographs and line-drawings. For example, a cross-carved stone dating to the 10th or 11th centuries at Llanfrynach (Figure 1) is decorated on one face with 5 groups of carvings; the other face bears the inscription *ioh̄is* (Redknap and Lewis 2007:200-202).⁴



Figure 1: Cross-carved stone, Llanfrynach, Breconshire (reproduced from Redknap and Lewis, 2007:201).

In its present location, affixed to the north wall of St. Brynach's church, this monument can be experienced only from the front and sides while the back face bearing the inscription is not visible at all. The stone itself, deep red, medium-grained, locally derived sandstone, bears flecks of mica and quartz. This monument, if it had ever stood outside, would have offered different viewing experiences depending on the weather. For instance, on a sunny day, the stone would have glittered with reflected sunlight; perhaps this quality enhanced the visual effects of the carvings and may represent a deliberate choice of materials by the patron, craftsman, or both.

An example from Caerhun, Caernarfonshire in North Wales, offers a different viewing experience (Figure 2). Located in the area of *Maen y Bardd* (The Bard's Stone) Neolithic burial chamber, this cross-incised locally derived natural boulder sits *in situ* beside the Roman road running between Caerhun and Caernarfon (Edwards 2013:262-64). The incised ring-cross, stylistically dated to between the 7th and 9th centuries

has proved almost impossible to record...because of weathering and lichen cover. However, in late afternoon sunlight, traces can still be made out and it was more clearly visible when first noted [in 1973] and when [Edwards] first saw it in the 1980s (Edwards 2013:264).

The choice to turn this natural boulder into a monument is interesting. Given the quality and visibility of the ring-cross carving, perhaps the stone-carver used this as a "practice run" for another monument or wished to assert his presence in the landscape. Or, perhaps the marking of this stone with a Christian symbol was an important act in itself. Since the area contains a variety of Neolithic and Bronze Age monuments, this act may have served to make a religious statement in the landscape. Regardless of the intentions of the stone-carver, to walk along this route-way is to journey through an area heavy with memories.

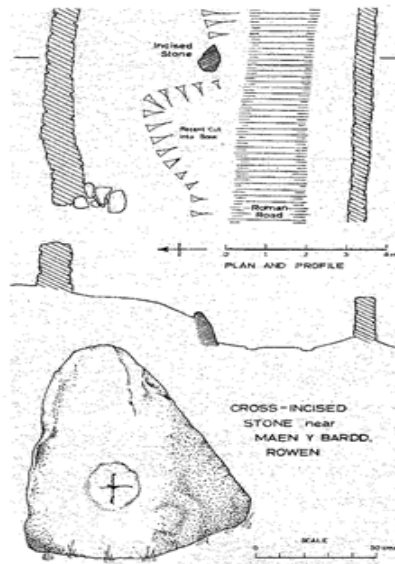


Figure 2: Cross-incised stone, Caerhun, Caernarfonshire. Following Edward’s remark about the low visibility of the cross, I have included the line-drawing and plan of the find-spot (reproduced from Edwards 2013:263).

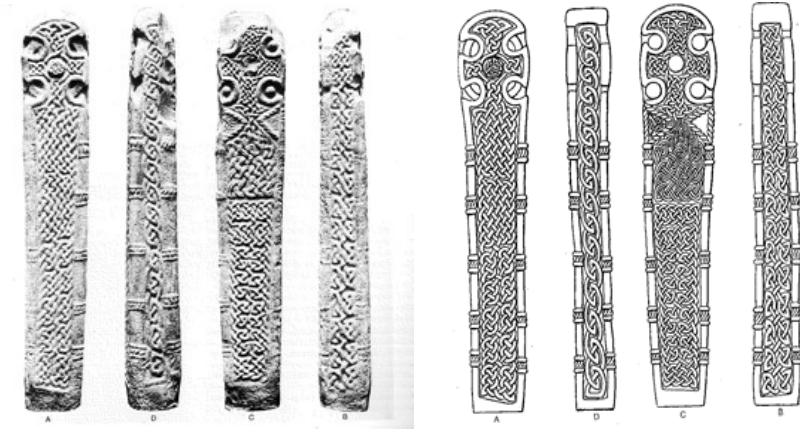
Tilley raised the provocative question of why stone would be used to build such monuments? Cohen provides equally provocative answers. “Stone is primal matter, inhuman in its duration. Yet despite its incalculable temporality, the lithic is not some vast and alien outside. A limit-breaching intimacy persistently unfolds” (Cohen 2015:2). Medieval authors, Cohen rightly notes, thought about materiality in ways that may seem strange to us. Stones are entangled in narratives that stretch *far* back beyond human conceptions of time; yet the “inscrutable forces materialized by rock and earth combine with vanishing yet legible human histories” (Cohen 2015:203). In Wales, hillsides linked to the stones beneath them offer portals into *Annwn*, the mysterious Otherworld.⁵ Cohen records a medieval English tale of how a traveler encountered a hillock-portal to the Otherworld while journeying through Yorkshire late one night.⁶ Stones and the earth thus possess “a queer vivacity – and perhaps, even, a kind of soul” (Cohen 2015:211). Unworked stone also functions as a symbol of the divine in many medieval texts. However, Cohen offers scant comment on the qualities and associations of *carved* stones, beyond saying “[l]ithic sculpture tends toward the anthro-

pomorphic...[and] the lithic archive bequeathed by the Middle Ages includes engravings that dance with their viewer into non-human realms” (Cohen 2015:13).

Exploring the problem of the “aniconic,” especially in Greek antiquity, Gaifman proposes spectrums of aniconisms and iconisms, rather than binary oppositions, as the Greeks lacked a clear distinction between these categories. Gaifman’s observations about representation, divine associations, and place-making with reference to the Greek *stelai* can be extended to the stone monuments of Wales. Stone monuments offer a multitude of interpretations. Furthermore, they can act as “place-making” objects, visible and tangible artifacts associated with intangible legends about deities. Those monuments with inscriptions and carvings also served as focal points and meeting areas and therefore were powerful vehicles for transmitting memories and messages. Gaifman notes that the “simple verticality of [these monuments underscores their] capacity to set apart a specific space” (Gaifman 2012:185).

With few exceptions, the inscribed stones and carved crosses of Wales are vertically-oriented monuments. For example, an elaborately-worked 10th century pillar cross known as the “Neuadd Siarman Cross” stands at 5’10” from tip to base (Figures 3 and 4).⁷ Redknap and Lewis note “Stones [such as this] often stood in the vicinity of springs, both often associated with saint’s traditions” (2007:230). Before the spread of Christianity in Wales in the 5th and 6th centuries, springs were associated with Celtic deities, and thus were considered bounded sacred spaces. *Cerrig derfyn*, “boundary stones,” may have delineated these areas. The sacred springs tradition continued in the Christian period under the guise of holy wells associated with Celtic saints. Carved from local, fine-grained, gray sandstone, the “Neuadd Siarman Cross” bears elaborately carved plait-work on all four sides; there are few spaces without ornamentation (see below). Sandstone, common in Breconshire, is a suitable material for carving blocky pillar shapes; this stone type is also resistant to weathering, and above all, fairly easy to carve. The tooling is picked, with small circular depressions 3-4mm in diameter being visible – traces of the craftsman at work (Redknap and Lewis 2007:227). Acknowledged as the results of impressive technical skills, Celtic art, especially knot- and plait-work have effects on the senses – they are enchanting objects that invite the viewer to try and trace the path

of the strands in these deft kinetic patterns “frozen” in stone. How can patterns get us thinking about production and, ultimately, the agency of the maker?



Figures 3 and 4: The Neuadd Siarman Cross (reproduced from Redknapp and Lewis 2007:228-229).

Production, Facture, and Skill

Production: Medieval Stone-Carving

While the themes of the processes of production, facture, skill, technology, and the question of the maker’s agency are not mutually exclusive, we will first focus on stone carving from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Immerzeel explored the processes involved in making Late Antique Roman sarcophagi in workshop settings and guides the reader through previous approaches stressing the assembly-line-like nature of workshops. Noting that the size of the sarcophagus certainly played a role in what designs were used, Immerzeel also points out that interaction between stone-carvers and their clientele is evident, with the main goal being an individualized, recognizable sarcophagus (Immerzeel, 2003:48-49).⁸ While Immerzeel briefly mentions the tools of the stone-cutting and carving trades, Redknapp and Lewis provide more thorough descriptions of the medieval craftsman’s toolkit, which in some respects was similar to that from Late Antiquity.⁹

Redknapp and Lewis used the term “incised” to refer to:

...marks produced by driving a chisel or punch obliquely into the surface in cutting movements to produce a linear mark. The term ‘picked’ (‘pecked’ is synonymous) is used for marks produced by a pick-hammer or a hand-held point, which ‘stabs’ or hits the surface more or less vertically to produce a series of small depressions of craters... This latter method was used both for lettering and decoration (Redknap and Lewis 2007:122).

The toolkit of the medieval stone-carver included a wooden mallet, a variety of iron chisels and points (“the early medieval sculptor [would] have had a close relationship with the smith who made and tempered them”) pick-hammers, stenciling tools and even painting implements, as some crosses and other monuments were brightly painted (Redknap and Lewis 2007:127).¹⁰

In general, the Welsh monuments are derived from local stone, usually found in the immediate vicinity or between 10 and 30 miles away. “Exotic” stone types, however, are occasionally found; these are explained as imports, “glacial erratics or the re-use of previously imported Roman building material” (Redknap and Lewis 2007:125). Much like the Roman sarcophagi of Immerzeel’s study, Welsh monuments were likely roughly carved at the source, then transported – probably by water – to somewhere for the carvers to add finer details.

Basing their conjectures on experimental archaeology and observation of recent stone carvings, Redknap and Lewis point out that

once transported, many stones would have undergone preliminary working, marking up and cutting with the face of the stone horizontal on the ground, or lying propped up against an earthen bank... Some of the finishing of detail on freestanding crosses may have been done when the monument had been set in its vertical position¹¹ (Redknap and Lewis 2007:125).

Carving “styles” have been used to form regional groupings of stylistically similar monuments and “workshops.” The use of local stone types hints at local production, but as far as I am aware, the locations of these workshops have not yet been identi-

fied (J. Knight, in Redknap and Lewis 2007:131-138).¹² Patronage of these workshops came from the upper-classes and, in later periods, the church – “[n]ew patterns were developed, and carved stones, deft metal work, and illuminated manuscripts poured out of the monasteries to demonstrate the power of the new faith” (Tetlow 2013:16). Commissioning such monuments was clearly an investment in time, resources, and manpower for both the patron and the stone-carver(s). Monuments with dedicatory inscriptions problematize the search for named stone-carvers. The use of a personal name, especially on carved crosses, could refer to the commissioner, the name of the deceased (though given the context, this is less likely), or possibly, the maker. The handful of monuments bearing personal names often do not provide enough context or clues to decide if the name inscribed on the monument is that of the patron, the person commemorated, or the carver. The *Corpus* volumes provide linguistic discussions on the usually masculine names appearing on the crosses, e.g. “Brancu” – “raven-dear” and “Belgint” – “pertaining to the race of wolves.” We thus know the meanings of these *names*, but we know next to nothing about the person’s *identity*. These individuals usually appear nowhere else in the historical record other than on these monuments. Owing to this ambiguity, we will next focus on the themes of facture and skill.

Facture and Skill

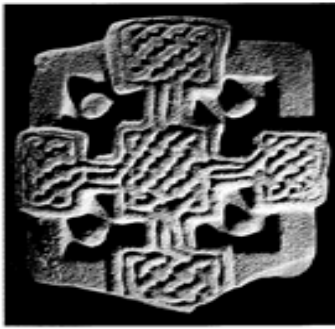
Our viewing of intricately carved crosses or memorial markers centuries after their making leads to certain assumptions and to certain ideological blinders – “We approach the work as an achieved unity, and project that unity into [the past] as something like the work’s ‘intention’ or final cause. But the situation *before* the fact is not that simply unified” (Summers 2003:73). As noted in the last section, the processes and persons involved in the making of carved stones and crosses – artifacts of Celtic art – are many. By calling them *artifacts*, we in some sense acknowledge the processes that brought them into being, even if these processes often tend to be overlooked.¹³

While artifacts can, of course, be appreciated simply for their aesthetic values, to more fully understand the question of *how* (and *why*) a work came into being is to situate the work in historical, political, and social contexts. Summers discusses the

relation between facture and value; “artifacts may also be distinguished by further elaboration, by ornamentation and figuration, and by metaphorical ‘brilliance,’ that is, by the display of ingenuity and skill” (Summers 2003:84). Aesthetic valuations aside, the nameless craftsmen who carved the 5th or 6th century memorial stone of Votecorix employed a different set of technical carving skills than those who carved the 9th century cross-head from Llandeilo Fawr (Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 5: Memorial stone of Votecorix. Left: Plate from Nash-Williams, Right: Line-drawing from Edwards, 2007: 203. The ring-cross was carved immediately before the inscriptions in Latin and ogam.



CM19.1 Llandeilo Fawr 2 A. (Crown copyright: RCA/DMF)



CM19.3 Llandeilo Fawr 2 C. (Crown copyright: RCA/DMF)



Figure 6: Cross-head at Llandeilo Fawr, Carmarthenshire (reproduced from Edwards 2007:240).

To reiterate an important point: the facture or appearance of any artifact has its basis in the habits and skills of the artisans. The Greek term *techne* is often used to discuss the skills needed to create such works. The Welsh word *medr* carries much the same weight; it means “skill,” “ability,” or “authority.” However, when we now use the terms technology, technique, or technical, the meanings of these words are bound up in our modern perceptions; the “technical” often describes the “mechanical” and is usually placed opposite the concept of artistic design.

Writing on the themes of skill, production, technology and agency, Tim Ingold argues for rethinking our modern notions of the technical. He traces the transition of the “withdrawal of the producer... from the centre to the periphery of the productive process” (Ingold 2000:289). In sum, our notions of the “technical” have changed from artisans and their tools, guided by their hands through learning the processes of making, to the artisan as external and the pre-programmed actions of machines. Returning to our question of finding the agency of the nameless stone-carver, it

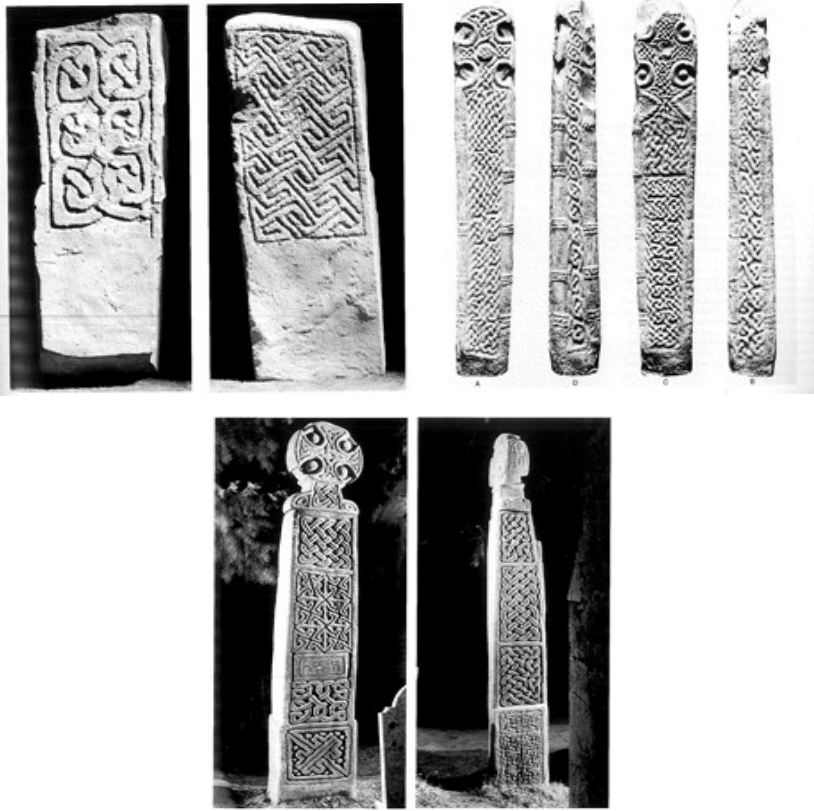
is useful to think about the processes and tools involved in stone-carving. Tools by themselves, of course, cannot *do* anything – “The tool has an impact on [material]...only so long as it is animated by an *intention* that issues from the user...tools [thus] mediate an active and purposeful engagement between persons and their environment” (Ingold 2000:319). Makers thus demonstrate a form of *agency* by using their hands and tools; their tools act as extensions of their thought processes and skills. This form of agency is worth emphasizing, particularly as most stone-carvers *did not sign their names*. Consequently, while the *identity* of the maker is not visible, their *agency* is apparent.

“How Things Shape the Mind,” Art and Agency

Patterns and “How Things Shape the Mind”

The nameless makers of the Welsh monuments demonstrated their agency by using their tools and their learned skills. Additionally, stone-carvers probably had some say in what designs were carved or what materials were used. However, to my knowledge, no records from Wales of commissions detailing what type of stone or patterns the patrons requested survive.

The intricate patterns of the three monuments shown below enticingly catch the viewer’s eye, inviting them to trace the flow of the designs (Figures 7-9). As Adam Tetlow notes, “[t]he intricacy and harmony of these patterns demonstrates a high level of artistic ability” (2013:42). Celtic art, whether taking the form of spirals, key-patterns, zoomorphic designs, or knot-work, has intensely complex geometric qualities; yet all of these pattern variants can be reduced to a single element: the line.



Figures 7-9: Top Left: 9th or 10th century pillar from St. Sulien's Church; Top Right: Neuadd Siarman Cross. Bottom: 10th or 11th century cross with inscriptions ("D[omi]n[u]s," not shown) and "Hauen," (a personal name, most likely that of the patron) (reproduced from Edwards 2007:191, 399; Redknapp and Lewis 2007:228-9).

Learning to draw these patterns takes away some of the mystery of the design; we also gain a new appreciation for how this learning process "becomes rooted over hundreds of hours [of practice] in the muscle memory of the hands" (Tetlow 2013:8). Finding variations of these pattern types throughout the Celtic lands suggests a shared and trans-temporal cultural knowledge of these designs, employed across a wide variety of decorated media: from pottery to jewelry to sword scabbards. The stone monuments above bear variations of knot-work; the *only* rule in Celtic art that is never broken is that knot-work winds under and over itself. All knot-work can be laid-out on a grid or lattice composed of three layers – primary and secondary grids of dots and a ter-

tiary grid of diagonal lines (Tetlow 2013:32).¹⁴

Mathematician Peter Cromwell emphasizes the geometric and symmetric qualities of Celtic knot-work, comparing it to weaving patterns in basket-making, while Tetlow proposes that “[by] tracing [the paths of the lines] we will see into the minds of the Celtic artists” (Cromwell 1993:37 and Tetlow 2013:1). Tetlow’s proposition is further elaborated and supported in Lambros Malafouris’ book, *How Things Shape the Mind*. Much of the emphasis in cognitive archaeology seems to be searching for an ancient mind *behind* the artifact, but as Malafouris argues, this is “committing the same ‘category mistake’ as the foreign visitor to Cambridge or Oxford, who having seen the colleges, the libraries, and the departments, asks to be shown the university” (Malafouris 2013:25).

Instead, we should view the processes involved in making objects as the mind *with* the artifact, as the material entanglement of mind and object. The mental processes involved in making artifacts and the designs upon them also shape the maker’s mind and spill out into the world in the form of the made object. The use of tools offers unique insights into “an integrative cognitive system whose constitutive parts, states, and components are spread beyond skin and skull” (Malafouris 2013:169). In sum, Malafouris poignantly points out that materiality and production processes can allow us to think about makers thinking about thinking, thus enabling room for the agency and cognitive processes of the maker to be evident in the archaeological and art historical records. Returning to the intricate geometric patterns discussed earlier, some might argue that mathematical art would impose constraints upon the artist. As Cromwell notes, “the reader may feel that this...rigidity would lead to a dull and sterile art form...but a geometric framework in no way hinders the artist. There is still [plenty] of room for imagination and creativity to express themselves” (Cromwell 1993:47).

Agency Elaborated: Objects and Makers

The elements of knot-work can be combined in dizzyingly complex ways, as we see on the four faces of the Neuadd Siarman Cross (Figures 3 and 4) and the other monuments shown above. The power of these designs – both as testaments to the creative skill of the carvers, and as aesthetic objects – are bound up in the processes of their making. Like Summers and Ingold, Alfred Gell

has argued for a re-viewing of art objects: beyond having only aesthetic value, artworks can also be seen as a kind of “technology,” as “objects that *do* things, and have some *effect* or *agency* within society” (Garrow and Gosden 2012:25-26).

As mentioned before, Celtic art objects are seen as the results of impressive technical skills and have effects on the senses. Gell offers ideas as to why similar intricately-worked artifacts should have such effects – “[t]he technology of enchantment is founded on the notion of the enchantment of technology. The enchantment of [art as] technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us” (Gell 1994:44).¹⁵ Such art objects are displays of artistry explainable in magical terms; the artist or maker effectively becomes an “occult technician.”

Such enchanted patterns could be employed for a variety of purposes. Gell proposes that intricate patterns both attract and repel “evil spirits” – “[a]potropaic patterns are demon-traps... [Celtic] knotwork like this was regarded as protective in that any evil spirit would be so fascinated by the entwined braids as to suffer a paralysis of the will” (Gell 1998:84). Demons (Welsh: *ysbridion*) would become stuck in the net of knots. On the other hand, Wood states that such designs are symbols of the unending majesty and diversity of God’s creation (Wood 1998:79); from Wood’s viewpoint, we can draw parallels between the Creator and the processes of creating.

Combining Gell’s stance with Wood’s, Celtic knot-work can function as *both* apotropaic and Christian symbols. I do not find this particularly surprising, as Christianity in Wales incorporated and appropriated previous “pagan” traditions and forms of artistic expression. In this dual function as demon-traps and symbols of Christianity, these monuments have a “secondary” or relational agency. In addition to guiding people through the landscape, and helping to order their experiences, these monuments also provided protection, particularly those serving as boundary-markers of graves, fields, sacred springs, or churches. Monuments communicate meanings, memories, and messages; they have agency by virtue of *doing* these acts.

Just as the agency of art objects is relational, so too the agency of the maker is entangled in webs of relationships – for example, that of patrons, clients, and stone-carvers. As noted above, the medieval stone-carvers of the British Isles and Ireland were “dependent professionals” with varying skill sets and likely

worked in regional or local workshops. In general, however, we do not know the names or specific identities of these stone-carvers, but nonetheless, their agency is still visible through the use of their tools, artistic skills, and, as Gell argues, through the production of the art object, or “index.”

In Gell’s anthropological theory of art, the indexes dealt with are usually artifacts; manufactured objects are thus indexes of their makers. Gell adds in the components of patrons and recipients, noting that they too have social relationships with the index, as well as the artist –

Artists do not (usually) make art objects for no reason, they make them in order that they should be seen by a public, and/or acquired by a patron. Just as any art object indexes its origin in the activity of an artist, it also indexes its reception by a public, the public it was primarily made ‘for’ (Gell 1998:24).

Gell’s model of the “art nexus” provides a table of the various combinations of relationships between the artist, the index, the prototype, and the recipient (see Gell 1998 Ch. 4 for more details). While the questions of prototype, recipient and artist are difficult to answer here, we can project the agency of the artist backwards from the index, the object made by the hands and tools of the artist. In the earlier middle ages, stoneworkers were commissioned to carve fairly simple formulaic inscriptions on memorial monuments, usually without much artistic decoration. By contrast, in producing later church-commissioned stone crosses, medieval Welsh stone-carvers could take some creative license with the scenes and elaborate decorations they carved. Thus, the agency and creativity of the nameless craftsmen can be better seen with the broadening of the artisans’ skills sets. If these elaborately-carved crosses are seen as a type of “technology,” their enchanting power becomes heightened as the skills of the artisans become more diverse and creative. When a viewer stands before an object such as the Neu-add Siarman Cross, they cannot help but marvel at the “technical miracle” before them – “it is miraculous because it is achieved both by human agency but at the same time by an agency which transcends [that of the] spectator” (Gell 1994:49). The makers and owners of these objects thus have access to magical

(Otherworldly?) powers.

We have seen how nameless craftsmen were granted certain privileges in the tale of *Culhwch ac Olwen*. Irish sources imply that craftsmen were “dependent professionals” of ambiguous social status; “the artist may be a socially subordinate agent, a hired hand, but unless the artist wills it the index he has been hired to make will never come into existence” (Gell 1998:36). Medieval Wales may have been a world without named or visible artists, but their agency is nonetheless apparent.

Conclusion

Search of Medieval Welsh Stone-Carvers?

The “problem of attribution” is an evident barrier in studying the captivating artifacts of Celtic art. In contrast to more traditional art historical approaches to looking for makers of objects, the *identity and name* of the stone carver(s) may not have been important elements in Medieval Wales, particularly after the church became more powerful and organized. Recall the discussion of Nash-Williams’ groups of inscribed and carved stones and the changes paralleling the advent and subsequent influence of Christianity in Wales. Paradoxically, the *agency* of the stone-carvers became more apparent as the *identity* of the individual became less important with the growing power of the church and the shift to the emphasis on the *soul* versus the *body*. With the erection of elaborately carved stone crosses, artists were able to do more with their skills with different types of monuments and designs versus the formulaic inscriptions of the earlier classes of monuments. The Welsh monuments can be situated within wider contexts of “making” in the middle ages; the design and pattern-work form part of a corpus of shared and trans-temporal cultural knowledge of (nameless) artists manufacturing things from minute jewelry pieces to monumental stone crosses.

The problems with the traditional mindset of searching for the mind behind the artifact and the lack of relevant period sources influence our approach to the question of the maker in Medieval Wales. Consequently, I have aimed to demonstrate that while the *identity* of the stone-carver may forever remain a

mystery, the *agency* of the maker is still discoverable and visible through different theoretical lenses. Instead of seeing artifacts only in terms of the visual and aesthetic, by shifting our theoretical perspective, we can view artifacts as indexes of their makers. Focusing less on the identity of the maker and more on their skill, choices in material, pattern and design allows us to see their agency in the entrancing and enchanted artifacts they produced. In sum, in the absence of named or “visible” artists, we can still productively discuss the agency of the nameless maker in medieval Wales, a world without artists.

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Notes

- ¹The story of *Culhwch ac Olwen*, along with *Y Mabinogi* – the core of the Welsh mythological cycles – is thought to have taken complete form by the 11th century. These legendary tales survive in two works from the medieval period – the Red Book of Hergest, c.1382, and the White Book of Rhydderch, c. 1350.
- ²Other common epigraphic formulae include [*Requiescat*] *In Pace* (“May he/she rest in peace”), *Nomine* (“In the name of”), *Memoria* (“the tombstone of”), or *Hic Iacet* (“Here lies;” often spelled as “iacit” on monuments in Britain and Ireland).
- ³This transition in power relations from land and kinship groups to land and church demonstrates why it is important to see power relations and agency as historically and culturally specific, particularly in a period where there is less textual evidence to supplement the archaeological findings.
- ⁴The five groups of carvings are: 1. Cross with wedge-shaped arms of equal length, 2. Unclothed figure (likely Christ crucified) with arms raised above the head with a small sun and crescent moon, 3. Four-strand plaited knot-work flanked by wavy lines, 4. Elongated outline cross with four symmetrical dots in the middle, enclosed by the foot of the plait-work, and 5. Two trefoil knots and a bird (possibly a dove?). Redknap and Lewis note that the inscription *iohis* may be an abbreviated form of the name Iohannis, but this has been disputed.
- ⁵While *Annwn/Annwyn* is commonly translated as “the Otherworld,” its etymology makes the association with stone and the earth more apparent. Literally, *Annwyn* means “the not deep,” “the shallow Underworld” not far removed from this world which we inhabit.
- ⁶See also T. Llew Jones’ *Lleuad yn Olau* (“One Moonlight Night”), a book of traditional Welsh stories that opens with the titular tale of Guto and his strange encounter with the Otherworld fairy folk. The quotations that follow are my own translations. One moonlight night, as he was passing along a “huge old standing stone, that was placed on the moor by someone or other many centuries ago” Guto tripped into a fairy ring where “the magical music in his ears made him feel happy and carefree.” He danced the night away with the fairy folk, until “he had stepped out of the magical fairy ring. At once, the music fell silent and the fairies vanished like mist in the morning.”
- ⁷The name “Neuadd Siarman” refers to the approximate find-spot of this monument in 1809, a cottage called “Neuadd Siarman” or “Jarman’s Hall,” Maesmynys, Breconshire. The monument is currently located in the Brecknock Museum, Breconshire.
- ⁸Individualized sarcophagi became less important in the Christian period.

- ⁹Redknap and Lewis tried their hand at stone-carving to try and better understand the processes involved - “[Redknap] prepared a set of reference tool signatures using the same set of tools (punch, chisel, hammer-pick) in different ways to cut letters and interlace on samples of Breconshire Old Red Sandstone, and Pennant sandstone.”
- ¹⁰See also Willams, H., Kirton, J., and Gondek, M., eds. *Early Medieval Stone Monuments: Materiality, Biography, Landscape*. Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2015.
- ¹¹The authors also note, “This position was used recently by [sculptor D. Dauksta] re-creating a full-size replica of the [Neuadd Siarman Cross] from Forest of Dean sandstone.”
- ¹²One would think that we would find piles of stone detritus or flakes somewhere. Here, then, is clearly an area for further study.
- ¹³As Summers notes, “The word ‘artifact’ couples art with the idea of making, or of having been made. ‘Facture’ is from the past participle of the Latin *facio, facere*, to make or do...to consider an artifact in terms of its facture is to consider it as a record of its own making.” (74).
- ¹⁴For lessons in drawing such designs, see also George Bain’s *Celtic Art: The Methods of Construction* (1973), Aidan Meehan’s *Celtic Designs: Spiral Patterns* (1993), Iain Bain’s *Celtic Key Patterns* (1993), and Ian Stead and Karen Hughes’ *Early Celtic Designs* (1997).
- ¹⁵I recall once seeing a classmate’s T-shirt emblazoned with elaborate Gothic-*quadrata* script that read, “If you can read this, you have given me brief control of your mind.” Gell’s arguments make much the same point.
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