

Two Cross-inscribed Stones from Reask, Co. Kerry, at Adare Manor

THOMAS FANNING

The early monastic enclosure at Reask, near Ballyferriter, Co. Kerry¹, well-known as the location of a fine cross-decorated pillar-stone, also held, in the last century, a number of other cross-inscribed slabs and pillars. By the time Crawford compiled his list of early cross-slabs and pillars in 1912², at least three of these stones had found their way to other locations, and this had led to some confusion as to their present whereabouts.

Only two stones now remain in situ at Reask, *i.e.* the Reask pillar-stone (Crawford's **a**) — Macalister incorrectly states that it was removed to University College, Cork³ — and a small cross-slab not recorded by Crawford. Another small cross-slab (Crawford's **c**) had also stood on the site until a few years ago. It has recently been discovered, though in a damaged condition.⁴ A fourth cross-slab (Crawford's **d**) was removed to University College, Cork, sometime in the last century, and is still on view there. Another stone (Crawford's **e**) recorded by him as being still in situ in 1912 has since disappeared. From the proportions given it appears to have been of the pillar-stone type. Two further stones, (Crawford's **b** and **f** respectively) were removed to Adare Manor, Co. Limerick, *circa* 1855⁵. Both can still be seen there and, as they were never adequately recorded, form the subject of this note.⁶

The first stone (Fig. 1, A) is a small narrow pillar of sandstone, 114 cm. long. It stands in a grove of trees in the manor grounds, alongside a group of five ogham-stones. The west face of the stone is decorated with a simple Latin cross measuring 46 cm. by 13 cm. The grooving is well executed, having a depth of 1 cm. and a width of 2.5 cm. Both the arms and head are carried out fully to the edge of the stone, and the shaft ends in a slightly expanded terminal. Below the cross, vertically inscribed and reading from top to bottom, are the letters DNS (a contraction of DOMINUS) in an early form of Irish script.

On the opposite (east face) is a similar cross measuring 41 cm. by 13 cm., well grooved, with the arms and head also extending to the edge of the stone. There is a small dot in each angle of the arms and traces of two others on the top of the stone. The shaft is carried into the O of the letters DNO (an abbreviation of DOMINO)

¹ The exact position of the site can be located on the O.S. 6-inch scale map of Co. Kerry, sheet 42, 56 cm. from the western margin and 30.8 cm. from the southern margin; marked as Calluragh Burial Ground (disused).

² H. S. Crawford, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 42 (1912), 232.

³ R. A. S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, vol. II, Dublin 1949, p. 97.

⁴ During recent excavations by the National Parks and Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works, under the direction of the writer — for a preliminary report see *J. Kerry Archae. Soc.*, forthcoming.

⁵ See, Caroline, Countess of Dunraven, *Memorials of Adare Manor*, Oxford 1865, pp. 153-156, stones nos. 1 and 5.

⁶ The stones were drawn and recorded by the kind permission of Lord and Lady Dunraven and with the valuable assistance of Mr. Thomas Pierce, of Adare. The writer also wishes to acknowledge the help given with the drawings by Miss Joyce Raftery and Mr. Kevin O'Brien.

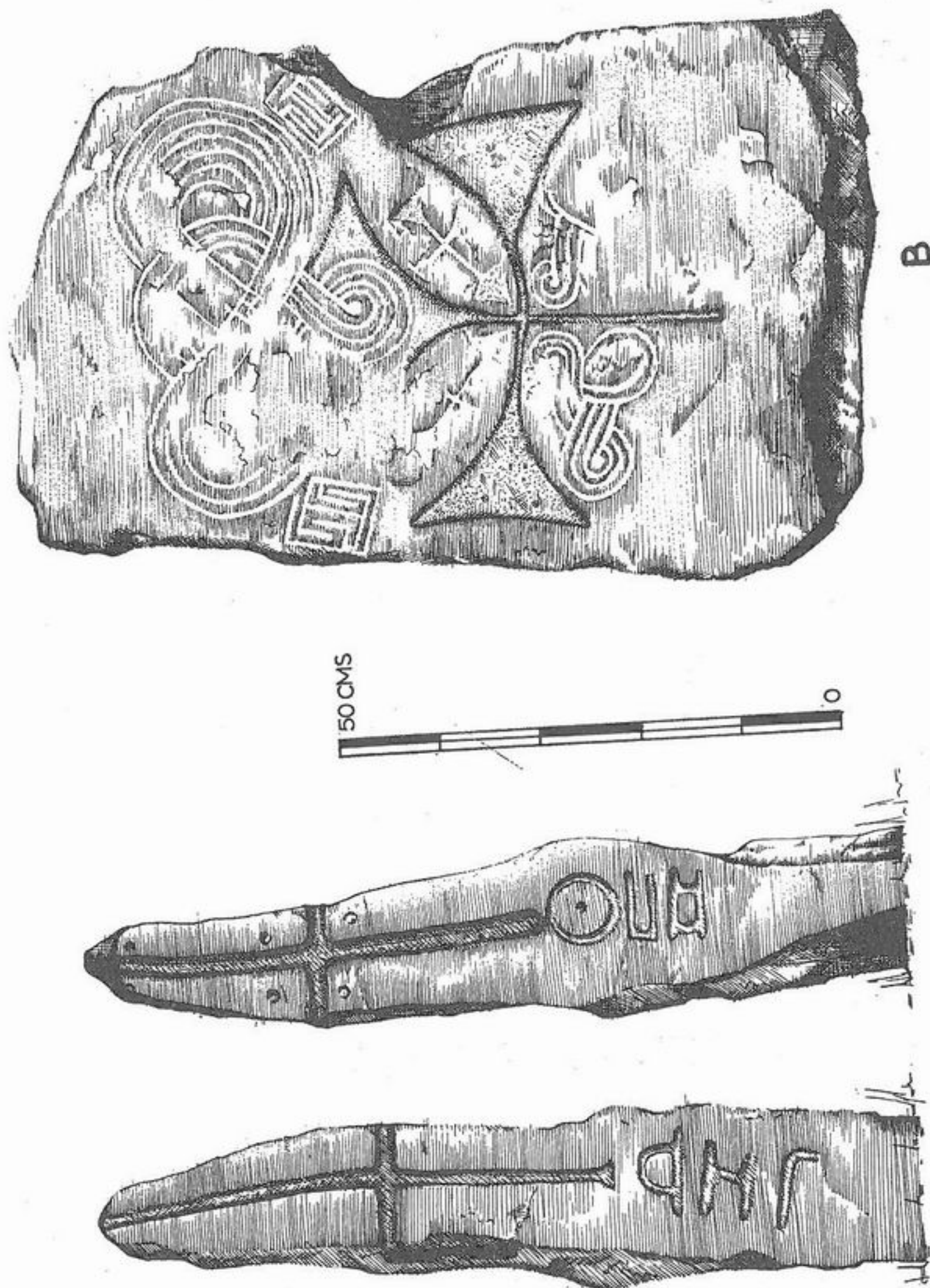


Fig. 1. Cross-inscribed stones from Reask, Co. Kerry, now at Adare Manor

which are executed in an early form of Irish script. The grooving of the letters is neither as deep nor as wide as the cross, and a dot in the centre of the letter O probably indicates the use of a compass in its execution.

The north face of the stone is undecorated but bears a rectangular groove or slot about 23 cm. from the top of the stone (Plate I). This slot is 14 cm. long, 5 cm. wide, and about 4 cm. deep, narrowing in width at the back to less than 2 cm. There are signs of wear on the side of the slot. The south face of the stone is completely plain and unlike the other faces, shows no traces of dressing or shaping.

In the *Memorials of Adare Manor* this particular stone is simply provenanced to the townland of Reask, but Petrie states it was found in the burial-ground of Reask⁷ and Crawford lists it as being discovered in a field close to the graveyard. The accuracy of Petrie's statement is attested by a small drawing contained in the O.S. Memoranda dated 15th September, 1845.⁸ This sketch shows two stones in situ—the Reask pillar-stone and the stone under discussion here. Both the west face and the north face containing the small groove are shown. It would appear from this drawing that these two stones are the two *Monumental Pillars* represented on the O.S. 6-inch scale map for the area.

The second stone from Reask at Adare Manor (it is kept in the Manor itself) is a slab measuring 87 cm. by 59 cm., and is about 5 cm. thick (Fig. 1, B). It is a roughly shaped slab, also of the purple sandstone local to the Reask area, and is decorated on one face only. This face has a simple Greek cross, measuring 40 cm. by 40 cm., with widely expanded head and arms and a plain shaft. In the upper angles formed by the head and arms are two small crosses with expanded ends, both now barely distinguishable. All three crosses are executed by light pocking, leaving the design slightly recessed. Above the cross is a motif composed of multi-strand interlaced 'figures-of-eight', portion of which overlies the expanded head of the main cross and must, therefore, be secondary to it. This design has been partly obliterated by wear. On either side of this interlaced work are two small squares containing fret-patterns. In each of the lower angles of the cross a triple band of interlacing is arranged to form a crude triquetra knot. All this work is executed by finely tooled grooving, in contrast to the pocking technique used on the crosses.

This stone is described by Crawford, though he fails to mention the two small fret-patterns. It is illustrated in the *Memorials* and described as being discovered lying near the burial-ground at Reask. Crawford does not give any information as to its location, original or otherwise, but notes that a rubbing of it exists in the library of the Royal Irish Academy. Petrie gave it as his opinion, quoted in the *Memorials*, that the stone was sepulchral and, indeed, its shape and size would suggest that it could have been used as a recumbent grave-slab.

The simple Latin crosses inscribed on the first stone belong to one of the cross-forms current during the first centuries of the Early Christian Period, and can be paralleled at many of the early monastic sites along the western seaboard. Henry dates their use to the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., and suggests a slightly later date — end of sixth beginning of seventh — for the stones bearing contracted forms

⁷ G. Petrie, (ed. M. Stokes), *Christian Inscriptions in the Irish Language*, Dublin 1878, p. 5.

⁸ My thanks are due to Mr. Seán Ó Nualláin, M.A., Archaeological Officer, Ordnance Survey, Dublin, for this information.

of the *Nomine Sacra*⁹. She includes in this latter group the Reask pillar itself, on the side of which the contraction DNE (for DOMINE) is inscribed¹⁰. The Greek cross and curvilinear ornament on this stone have been compared to the decorative motives employed to embellish the MSS known as the *Cathach*, datable to the late sixth century. On the analogy of the inscriptions, therefore, one might tentatively suggest a somewhat similar date for this pillar-stone now at Adare Manor.

The ornamentation on the second stone is quite unusual, if not, in some respects, unique. The cross itself, with its attendant crosslets, finds a ready parallel on the small cross-slab still in situ at Reask. The interlaced designs, on the other hand, are rarely seen on such simple cross-slabs, and the only comparison known to the writer, although not a very close one, is on a slab from Cloon Lough, also in Co. Kerry¹¹. As already noted, the two designs — crosses and interlaced work — do not appear to have been executed at the same time nor by the same hand. Whereas the primary Greek crosses suggest that the stone is coeval with the Reask pillar, the secondary interlacing, and the very manner of its use on the slab, argues for the re-use of the slab at a possibly very much later date.¹²

⁹ F. Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian Period to A.D. 800*, London 1965, p. 57.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Pl. 15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Fig. 4, c.

¹² See this *Journal*, p. 40, fn. 11, where a late medieval date is suggested for it.



Pillar-stone from Reask, Co. Kerry, now at Adare Manor ; showing west and north faces
(*Photo: T. Fanning*)