Early Medieval Carved Stones at **Brechin Cathedral**
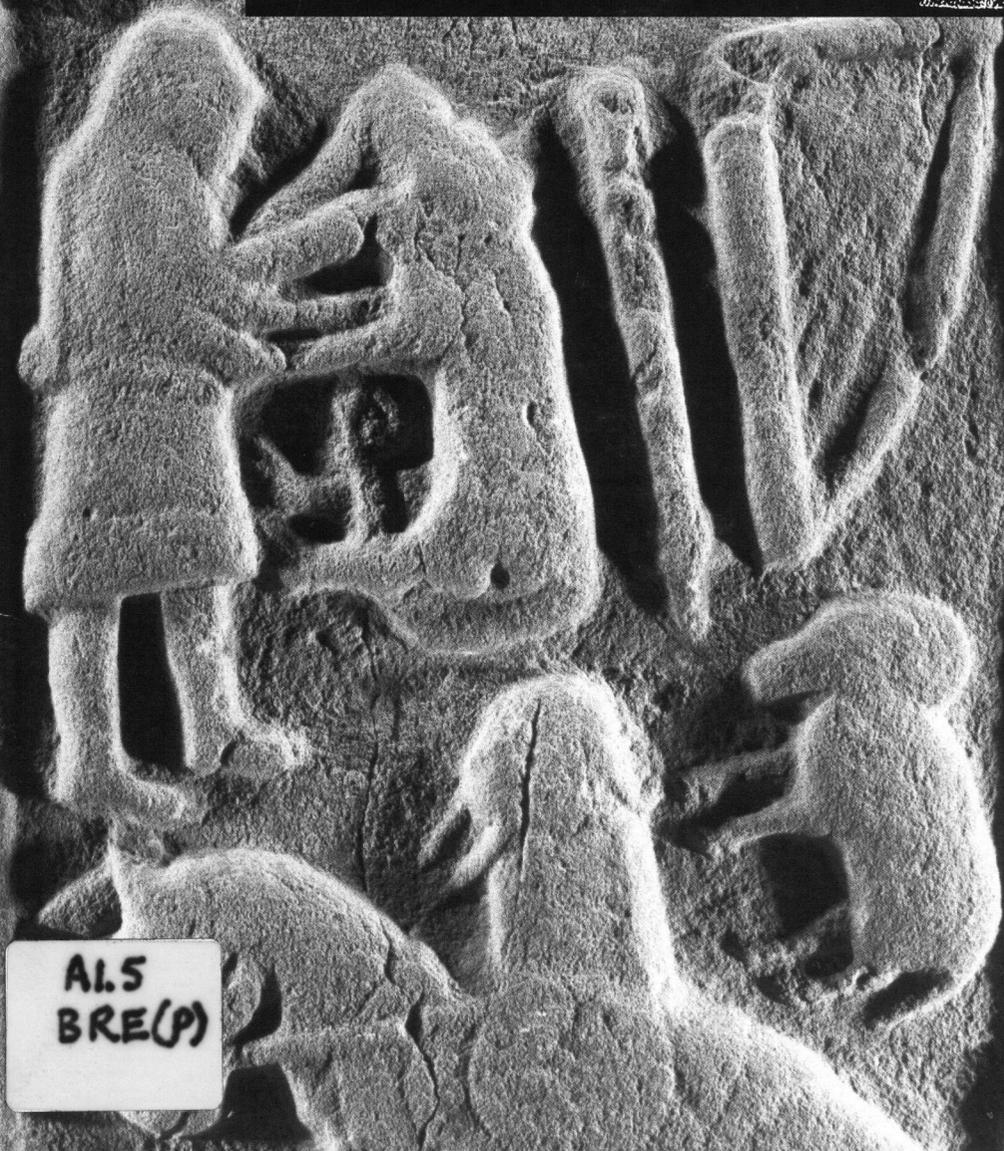
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Brechin Cathedral

For well over a millennium, Brechin has been an important religious centre. The area was a key location for the Picts, tribal inhabitants of north-east Scotland in the early Middle Ages. Some examples of their magnificent legacy of stone carving, typically representing symbols charged with religious and military power, are housed in Brechin Cathedral.

From the late 10th century Brechin had close associations with Scottish kings and it was given special privileges by Kenneth II, who reigned from 971-95, which enhanced its importance as an ecclesiastical foundation. The free-standing Round Tower, its doorway framed by religious carvings, was built following the establishment of Brechin as a major centre for the Christian church and is one of only two examples of this building-type to survive from medieval Scotland.

Brechin Round Tower. SC1021349

The Round Tower

The only complete building to survive on the site from the early Middle Ages is the Round Tower. This is situated at the south-west corner of the later Cathedral church. Although there were more examples of free-standing round ecclesiastical towers in medieval Scotland, the only other to survive is at Abernethy (Perth & Kinross) on the south side of the River Tay. This type of structure survives in greater numbers in Ireland, where over one hundred examples are known to have been built. Although there has been much debate about their purpose, they probably functioned principally as bell-towers. They may also have been used as safe-houses for important liturgical items, often made of precious materials.

Built of massive blocks of irregular sandstone masonry, the tower rises over 25m to a conical cap added in the later medieval period.

The Doorway

The round-headed entrance doorway is constructed of four massive masonry blocks and is set some height above ground-level. The jambs are slightly splayed and there are decorative bands of pelleting around the edges of the surround. The outer sides of the arch are flanked by two projecting panels which may originally have been intended to be carved with religious figures. To either side of the sill are two projecting panels carved with animal-derived motifs, the one on the left a fantastical winged beast evidently holding a human leg in its mouth. The main faces of each jamb are carved with an ecclesiastical figure or saint, and the head of the arch is carved with an imposing figure of the crucified Christ. One interpretation of the doorway is that it refers to the idea of redemption through Christ and the Church, with damnation represented by the man-devouring beast.

The two carvings to either side of the sill are related to local traditions in Pictish sculpture but the other elements show evidence of wider cultural influences. The figure of Christ can be compared to ivory carvings typical of central European art of the 10th and 11th centuries. There are also intriguing similarities between aspects of the doorway and the 'Mary Stone' housed inside the Cathedral church, such as the distinctive use of pelleting as a decorative motif. Although there has been debate about whether the Round Tower could be 12th century, the character of its masonry and the form of the carvings around the doorway make an 11th-century date more probable.
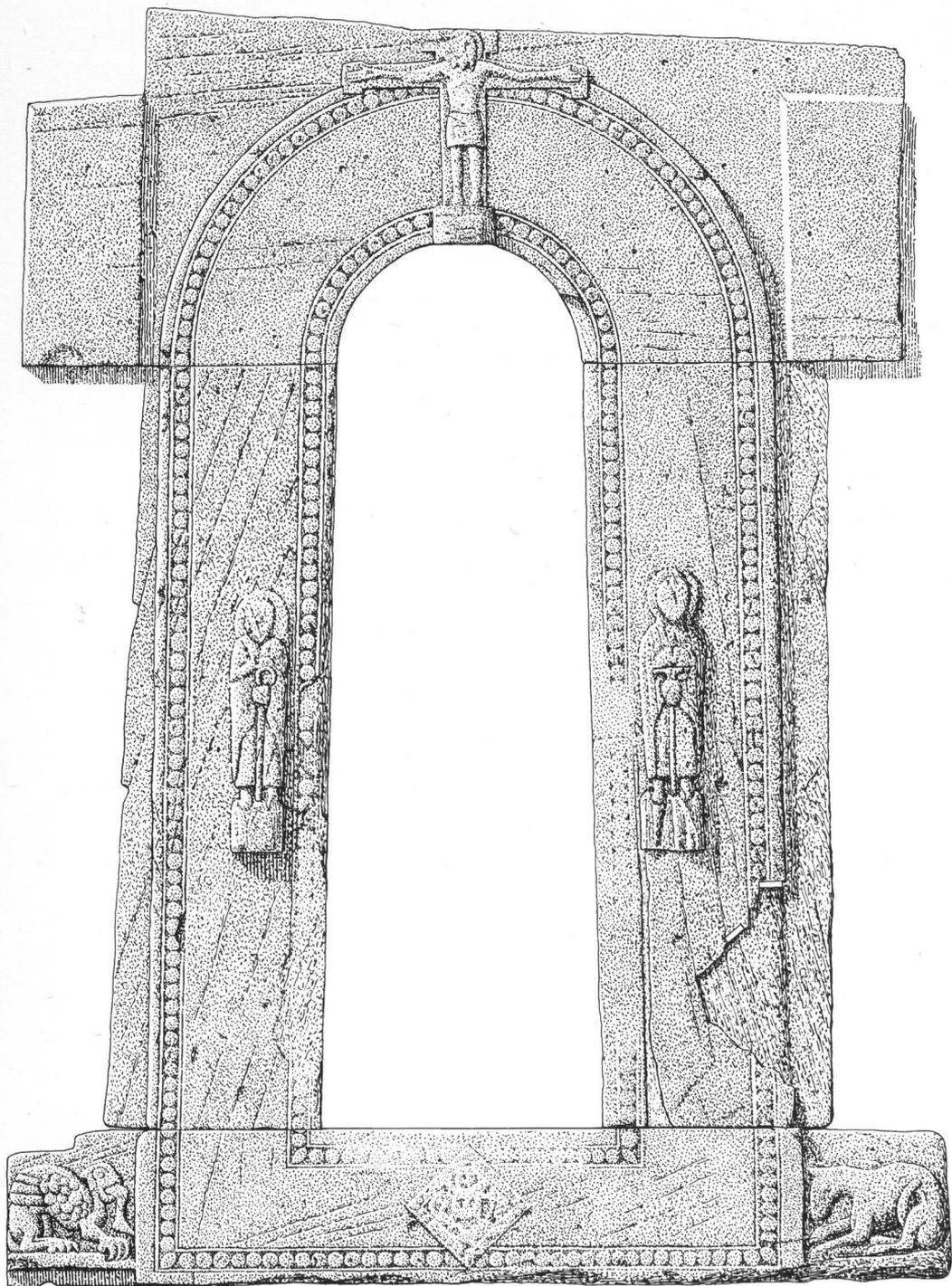

Figure of Christ. SC1047429

Figure of ecclesiast or saint. SC1047436


Figure of fantastical beast. SC566768

Round Tower, doorway. Scale 1:15, developed view. SC1050077

The Mary Stone

This highly distinctive sandstone fragment, known locally as the 'Mary Stone', is the upper part of an upright cross-slab which probably stood in the vicinity of the early medieval ecclesiastical buildings at Brechin. It was dug up in a garden near to the Cathedral prior to 1856 and, although only its damaged upper portion survives, its carvings are relatively well-preserved. Evidently reused in the post-medieval period, it bears the inscribed date 1782.

The central portion of the cross-head bears the figure of the Virgin cradling the Christ-child set within a roundel carved with pelleting similar to that around the doorway of the Round Tower. Around the figures is an abbreviated inscription in insular characters: s[ancti].maria.m[ate]r.xr[ist]i (St Mary, Mother of Christ). The arms of the cross are occupied by a bird and two angels. In what is a particularly early use of this imagery, the bird is almost certainly intended as a dove representing the Holy Spirit. The pair of figures carved in the central portion below the roundel are haloed saints. On the left, St Peter can be identified by his key to the gates of the kingdom of heaven, and the other, with hand raised in acclaim, is probably St Paul. To either side of these figures are symbols of two of the Four Evangelists, each bearing the Gospels. They are the Eagle of St John and the Lion of St Mark, the latter carved in stylised form and of particularly ferocious appearance. Unfortunately the identities of the two damaged figures in the upper corners of the cross-slab are not clear. The other face of the stone has been cut off in reuse and the sides, although damaged, are each occupied by further figures. Like the doorway of the Round Tower, this monument has some connections with Pictish sculpture, such as the form of the head of the Lion of St Mark, but the figure of Christ shows the influence of international artistic styles from around the end of the first millennium. It is likely to date from the early 11th century.
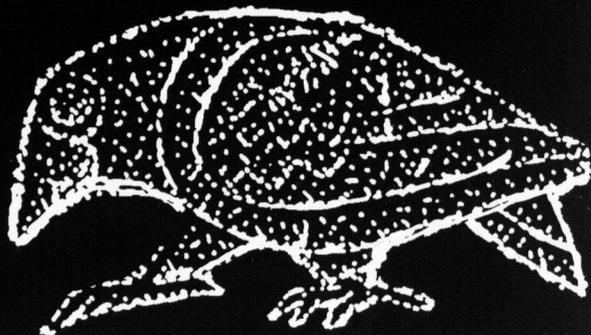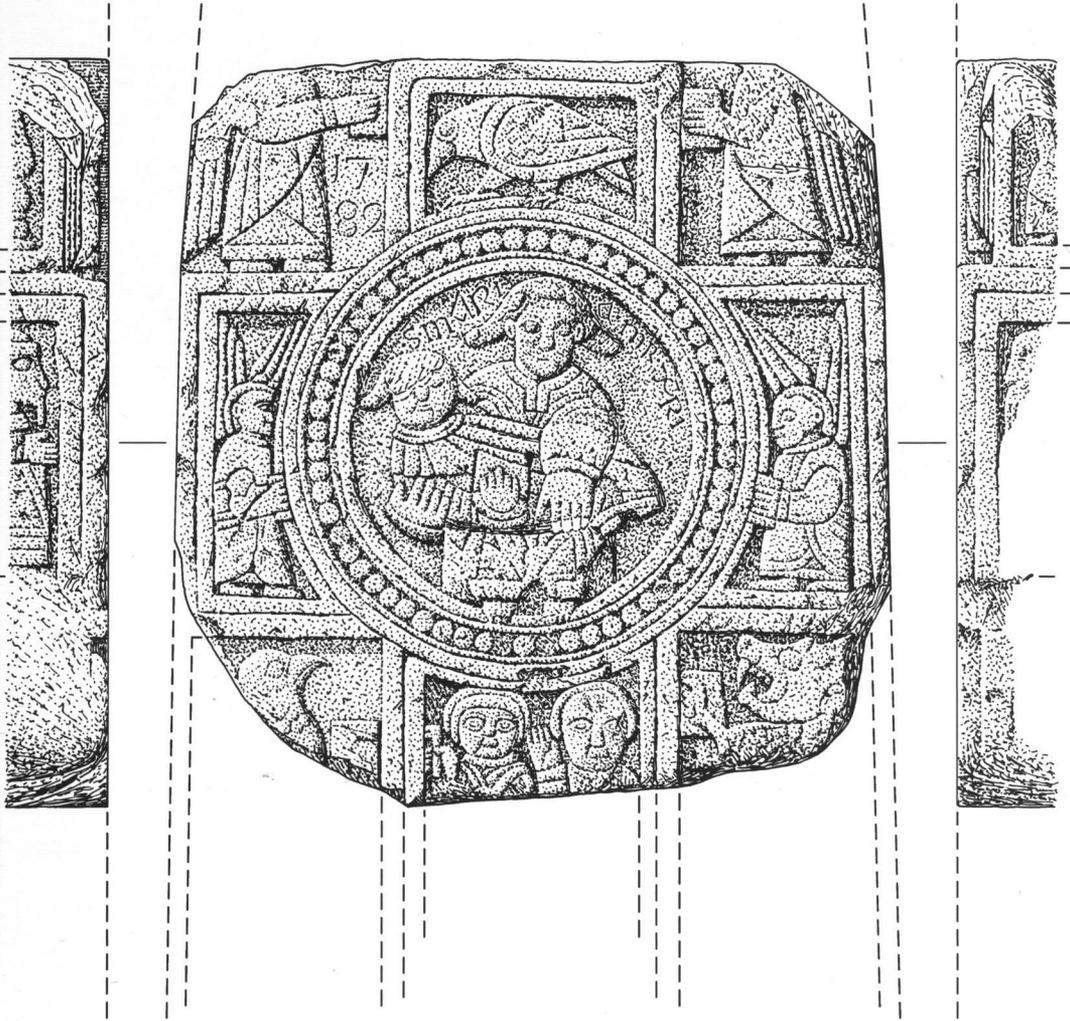
The Mary Stone. Scale 1:10. SC1050161

The Mary Stone. SC1021333

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Cross-slab Fragment

This enigmatic fragment of figurative carving in sandstone, of probable Pictish origin, bears the lower body and feet of a standing human figure set within a plain edge moulding (see below). The carving has been abandoned unfinished and the stone appears to have been cut down to serve as a building block. Perhaps the stone was found to be too flawed to be worth completing – as a noticeable fissure suggests – or unknown circumstances led to the work being abandoned. A comparison can be made with the ecclesiastical figures on the front face of the Aldbar Stone (see right and pages 11-12), which are carved in similar relief and are also set against a plain edge moulding, suggesting the fragment was originally part of an intended cross-slab.
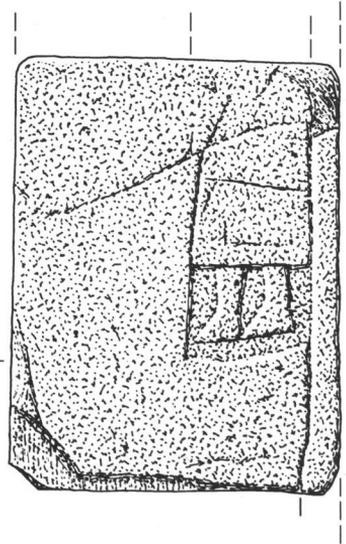
Top, The Aldbar stone, front face, figure of an ecclesiast. SC1021335
Left, Cross-slab fragment. SC1021325
Right, Cross-slab fragment. Scale 1:10. SC1050144
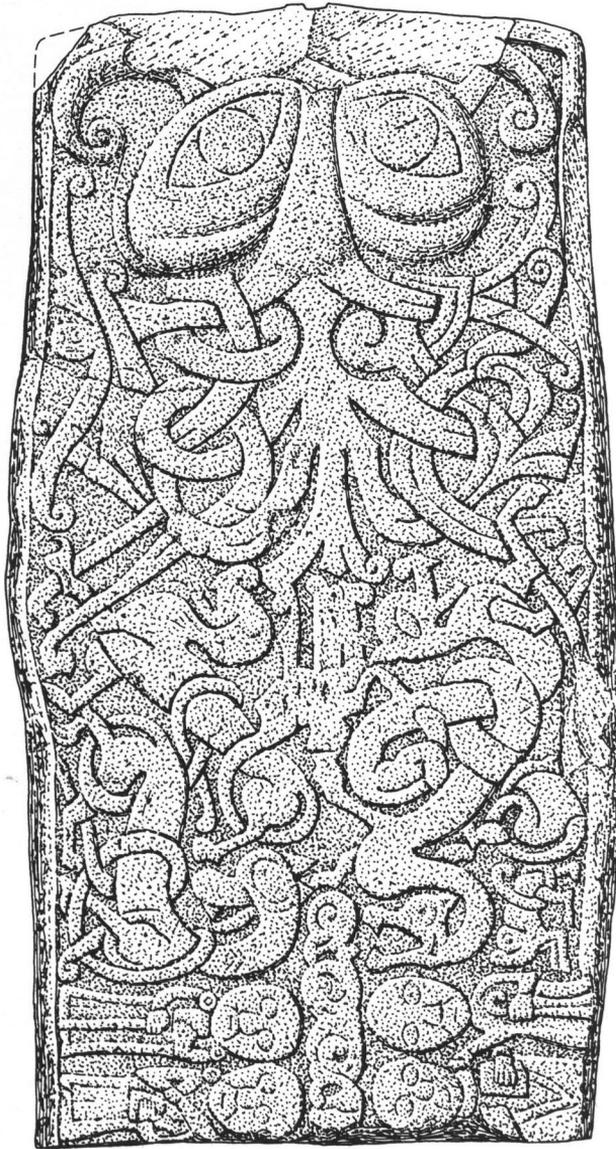
Recumbent Grave-marker

This elaborate carving in sandstone is an unusual variant of a type of recumbent grave-marker known as a 'hogback'. These are typically associated with locations in England and Scotland subject to Scandinavian settlement or influence in the 10th and 11th centuries. The short sides were often carved with bear-like figures or 'end-beasts' and in some cases the stone may take the overall form of a crouching animal.

Unlike most surviving hogbacks, the Brechin stone is low in profile and its long sides are rounded. It has been damaged and one end is missing. The surviving portion shows a grotesque end-beast with large eyes and scrolled tendrils emanating from its snout. Fantastical interwoven animals are carved along the flanks of the stone. Its Christian context is expressed by two pairs of ecclesiasts (see drawing below), represented towards the opposite end of the stone from the end-beast, shown holding items such as a book, a crosier and possibly a bell. The form of its carvings – particularly the interwoven animals – has connections with styles which were typical of Norse art of the late 10th and early 11th centuries, suggesting an important cultural connection. Although this monument is difficult to place in a well-defined artistic context amongst surviving early medieval sculpture in Scotland, it seems probable it was made in the late 10th or 11th century.

Recumbent grave-marker. SC1021334

Recumbent grave-marker. Scale 1:10, developed view. SC1050164

The Aldbar Stone

This sandstone Pictish cross-slab was originally from Aldbar (Angus), some 3km south-west of Brechin, and is believed to have stood in the burial ground of Aldbar Chapel. The front face bears a ring-headed cross and square base carved with interlace and meander patterns. There are bird-like motifs in the upper corners and the shaft of the cross is flanked by a pair of ecclesiastical figures, each prominently clutching a book.

At the top of the other face are two authority figures, possibly derived from the Old Testament, shown seated on a bench. Below them is a figure that can be identified by the harp and the ram as King David, shown wrestling with a four-legged beast. In the Old Testament (I Samuel, 17), David is said to have killed a lion in order to protect his flock and it is probable the animal was intended to represent the lion. The story of David appears to have had particular relevance to the Picts, appearing on a number of Pictish monuments such as the great sarcophagus in St Andrews Cathedral Museum. The long thin object between the back of the lion and the harp may have been intended as the staff with which David was armed when he confronted Goliath. Although he is shown with what could be long hair down his back ending in a large curl, an alternative interpretation is that this form was intended to represent the sling and stone he used to slay his giant opponent. Below the figure of David is a bearded warrior on horseback carrying a short sword and shield. Armed horsemen are a common motif in Pictish carving and may be interpreted as figures of high status. They are almost always shown, as in this case, moving from right to left. In the context of the other imagery on the stone it is possible that the horseman was intended to represent Goliath. At the base is a horse or ass with a second and partly hidden beast shown behind it. The meaning of this is unclear, but it may be significant that David passed on a gift of an ass and a kid from his father Jesse to Saul (I Samuel, 16).

Pictish imagery is sometimes difficult to interpret and motifs were often used in a kind of visual shorthand which may not have been intended to be read in an obvious sequence from top to bottom or left to right. The full extent to which the 'Aldbar Stone' represents specific elements of the story of David is a matter for debate. The form of the monument suggests it may be dated to the 9th or 10th century.
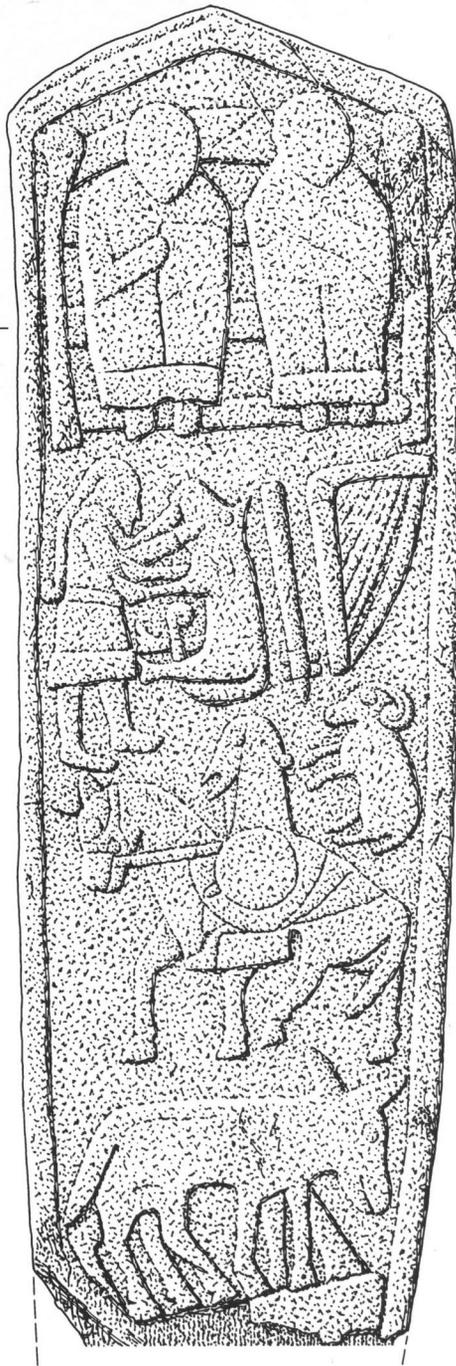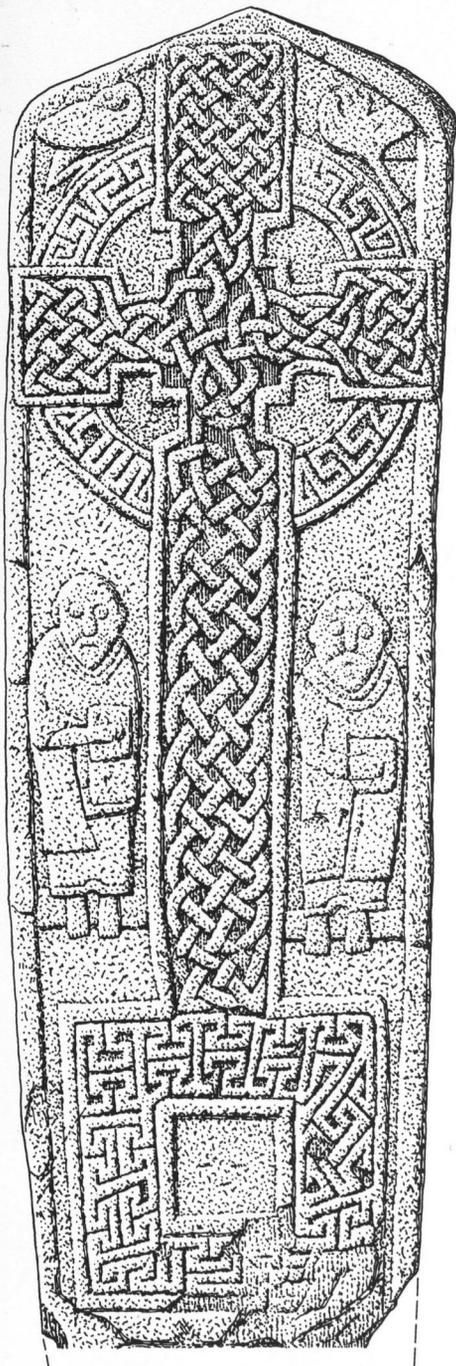
The Aldbar Stone, front and rear face. Scale 1:10. SC1050149

The Aldbar Stone, front and rear face. SC1021335 and SC1021336

Further Reading and Information

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Ritchie, A, *Picts: an introduction to the life of the Picts and the carved stones in the care of the Secretary of State for Scotland*, Edinburgh, 1989.

Brechin Cathedral

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www.brechincathedral.org.uk

Brechin Town House Museum

28 High Street
Brechin DD9 6ER

+44(0) 1356 625536
www.angus.gov.uk/history/museums/brechin/

Displays on the history of the Brechin area.
Monday, Tuesday and Thursday to Saturday 10.00 – 5.00
Wednesday 10.00 – 1.00

Pictavia

Haughmuir
Brechin DD9 6RL

+44(0) 1356 626241
www.pictavia.org.uk

Displays on local early medieval carved stones.
Easter to mid-October
Monday to Saturday 9.30 – 5.30, Sunday 10.30 – 5.00

Mid-October to Easter
Saturday 9.00 – 5.00, Sunday 10.00 – 5.00

The Pictish Arts Society – www.pictart.org is based at Pictavia and can be contacted by mail at the above address.

Brechin Cathedral

The Round Tower and carved stones described in this booklet are all at the Cathedral in the centre of Brechin in Angus, 12 kilometres west of the coastal town of Montrose. The Round Tower is in the care of Historic Scotland and can be viewed from the outside. The Cathedral is open daily.

Brechin

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