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Early Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland before the Thirteenth Century

The civil engineer and archaeologist John Romilly Allen (1847–1907) delivered the Rhind lectures of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1885, and published them in book form in 1887. The art of pre-Norman Britain and Ireland had long been a subject of fascination for him, and in this highly illustrated book he considers the wider European context of British art, and the chronology of Christianity from the Romano-British period onwards. There is a particular focus on the Celtic crosses of Ireland, and the meaning of the sculpture on their faces, shafts and bases. Allen continues his analysis into Norman architecture up to the end of the twelfth century. The final chapter considers the symbolism of medieval bestiaries, and Allen ends with a plea for the establishment of a Museum of Christian Archaeology to bring together in one place all the different manifestations of British Christian art.

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Thirteenth Century
Cambridge University Press

J. Romilly Allen

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Frontmatter

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Early Christian Symbolism in Great Britain and Ireland before the Thirteenth Century

J. ROMILLY ALLEN



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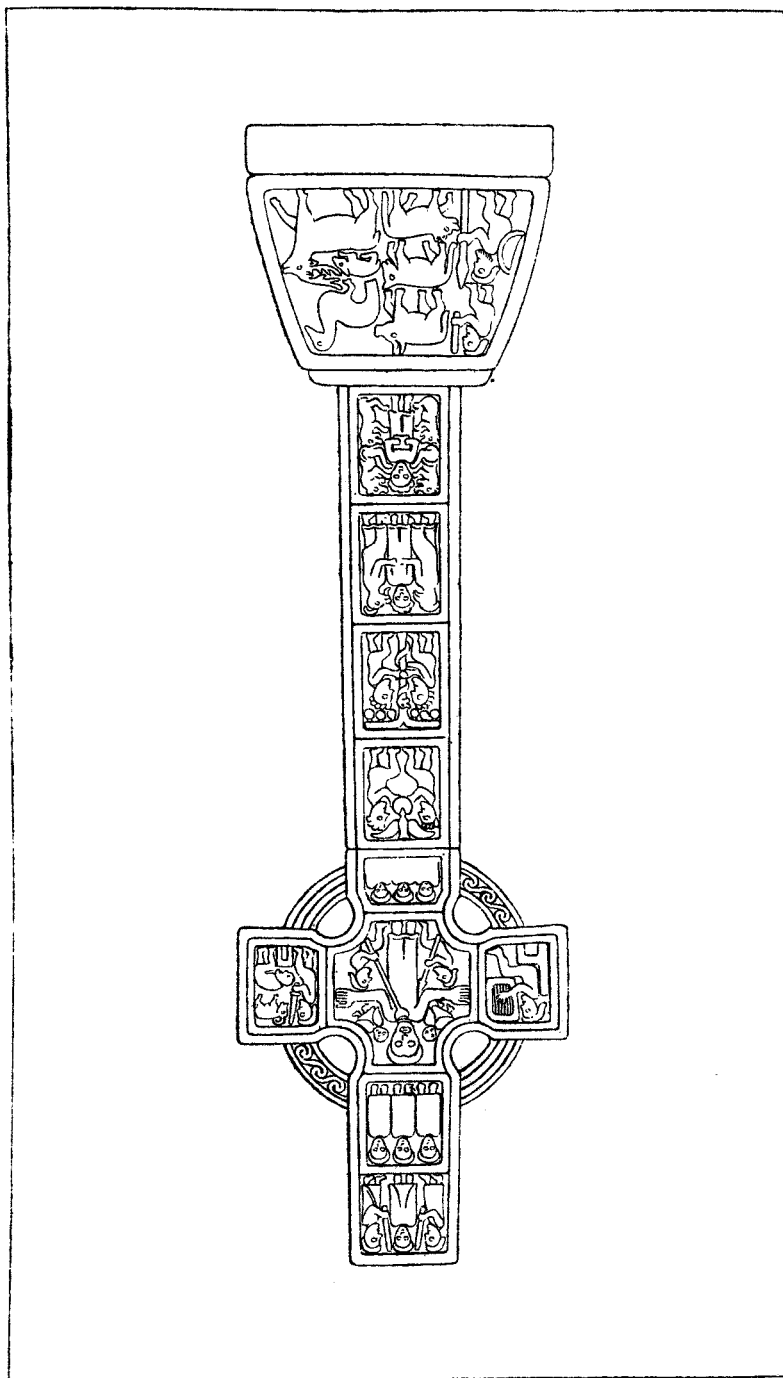
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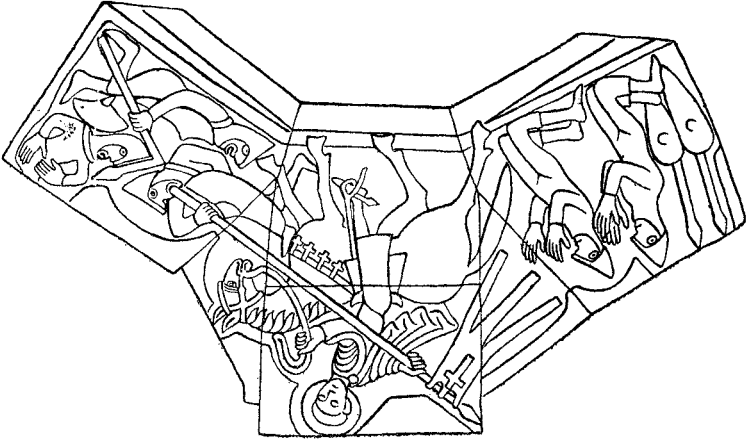
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St. George overcoming the Pagans.
Sculptured above Doorway of Fordington Church, Dorsetshire.



J. ROMILLY ALLEN, F.S.A. SCOT.
BY

The Rhind Lectures in Archaeology for 1885.

BEFORE THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY.

GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

IN

CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

EARLY

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THE most pleasing duty which falls to the lot of the author is to thank those who have been kind enough to help him in his work. I have endeavoured to mention in the foot-notes all the various sources from which my information has been obtained. It is not too much to say, that had it not been for the previous labours of Miss Margaret Stokes, Professor I. O. Westwood, and the late H. O'Neill, the second and third Lectures could not have been written. In dealing with the Symbolism of the Norman period, the chief difficulty to be contended with was the entire absence of books on the subject to "crib" from (a school-boy term, for which I know of no suitable equivalent). In this dilemma I received invaluable assistance from the Rev. G. F. Browne, B.D., President of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, Charles E. Keyser, Esq., F.S.A., and Robert Blair, Esq., F.S.A., who sent me accurate descriptions of a large number of sculptured fonts and doorways hitherto unknown. Only those who have had experience of the way in which many archaeologists hide their information, as a dog does a bone, until they can go and dig it up again themselves, will understand how great an obligation is due for the help so generously accorded. The last Lecture, on the Medieval Bestiaries, was suggested to my mind first after reading Dr. Joseph Anderson's *Scotland in Early Christian Times* (2nd Series); and in pursuing my investigations in this direction, Dr. Anderson has from time to time given me hints as to the best line of inquiry to follow, and always placed his vast stores of knowledge most courteously at my disposal, for which I owe him a deep debt of gratitude. I have availed myself largely of the works of the late Thomas Wright, F.S.A., and of the French writers on the

PREFACE.

subject of the Bestiaries, amongst whom M. Cahier, M. Martin, and M. Hippéau should specially be mentioned.

The illustrations are printed from photo-blocks made from my own drawings. In all cases accuracy has been aimed at rather than artistic beauty, and therefore the plates must be looked at merely as diagrams.

I have to acknowledge the kindness of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in allowing me to make use of a number of blocks which illustrated my paper on "Early Christian Symbolism" in vol. xviii of their *Proceedings*; and to thank J. T. Irvine, Esq., F.S.A., for his excellent drawing of the font at Melbury Bubb, Dorsetshire.

Besides the gentlemen already mentioned by name, who have helped me in my work, there are numerous clergymen to whom I am indebted for answering letters making inquiries about the sculptures in their churches. I must also give my best thanks to the officials of the Manuscript Department in the British Museum for their kindness, especially to E. Maunde Thompson, Esq. F.S.A., and W. de Gray Birch, Esq., F.S.A.

With regard to the Lectures, the chief object held in view by the author has been to endeavour to make his countrymen take a greater interest in the art and monuments of the early Christian period in Great Britain. It seems to be forgotten that there was once a National School of Art in this country entirely distinct from that of Greece or Rome. Progress in the future will result from developing what is national in our art, and can never commence until the classical tradition is broken down. Great Britain, owing to its geographical position having made certain parts of it safe asylums for Christianity, whilst the rest of Europe was being overrun by Northern paganism, possesses a series of monuments which are quite unique, and of the utmost possible value, as illustrating history during its darkest period. Yet the authorities who direct our public Museums, especially the one at South Kensington, set their faces steadily against forming a representative series of casts and photographs illustrating Early Christian Art in Great Britain. In the meantime the monuments are in many cases wholly unprotected either from the weather or from wanton destruction at the hands of vandals. For instance, last summer, when visiting the Celtic Cross at Penmon in Anglesey, which has survived the destructive effects of time for a

thousand years, I found that tourists had amused themselves by making it a target to shoot at. What the pious reverence of countless past generations had served to protect and hand down safely to their successors, the brutal stupidity of the nineteenth century had mutilated in the space of a few minutes. Of course this sort of thing cannot go on for ever; and in the future, although our museums will be able to tell us much of the civilisation of Egypt, Greece, and Rome, there will be nothing to show how the bright light of Christianity spread over Great Britain, destroying Saxon heathenism in its course, and leaving its traces not only in the minds of lawless Vikings, but in hard stone of the Crosses of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

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