The crosses on the front of the cross-slab of Rossie Priory, Perthshire (Fig. 5.1) and that of Glamis no. 2 (Fig. 5.2) afford an excellent exercise in recovering essential plans for major artefacts of Insular art. They are two of a kind in provenance, in style, in the designs backgrounding the cross forms, even in the notably identical patterns of interlace encircled at the intersection of upright and arms. They also put this question plainly: how much, and on what basis, can we invoke ‘distortion’ or ‘inaccuracy’ of workmanship when arguing for a rigorous and cohesive scheme of line and proportion underlying the form of each cross, or of other objects. This paper proposes to add one item, called here ‘coherent geometry’, to the inventory of elements of two Pictish cross plans. This geometry is associated with the early Insular (Hiberno-Saxon) tradition, being essentially an extension to findings, based primarily on the study of symbols by Robert B. K. Stevenson in F. T. Wainwright’s *The Problem of the Picts* (1955, 97–128).

Begin with asymmetries where symmetry can be expected. The two arms of a decorative cross should be mirror images of each other in form and size. Lay a straight-edge across a photograph of the Glamis no. 2 cross (or a taut string across the slab) and immediately an imbalance becomes obvious: the arm on the left is lower than the one on the right (Fig. 5.2). The interlace designs filling the arm-extensions are unmatched, making the imbalance in their extensions doubly noticeable. Both sides of the stem and the top of the cross, on the other hand, are well aligned. Apply the same simple test to the Rossie Priory cross, and the observations are the opposite: it is the alignment of the upper and lower boundaries of the cross-arms that is good, while the right sides of the top and shaft are misaligned. In both figures a symmetrical outline of these features has been drawn over a photograph. Accordingly, the incursive arcs (the ‘armpits’) of the cross outlines are regular (and simple) in the Rossie Priory cross, but quite irregular (and also less simple) in the Glamis no. 2 cross. We can put these asymmetries down to ‘distortion’ or ‘inaccuracy’, provisionally at least.
Fig. 5.1: Rossie Priory cross-slab, Perthshire, with schematic drawing superimposed on a photograph. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Drawing: Ingrid Shearer.)