EARLY MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE FROM THE FAROES:
AN ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

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Introduction

In 1930 the distinguished Manx archaeologist Philip Kermode, en route to and from Iceland, briefly visited the small museum in Tórshavn where he saw six cross-marked stones from the island of Skuvoy.¹ In the following year he published measured drawings, based on rubbings and photographs supplied by museum curator M. A. Jacobsen, with very brief comments on some of the stones (Kermode 1931, 373–8). Kermode described the burial-ground on Skuvoy, mentioning the cross-marked stone there which was believed to mark the grave of the local chieftain Sigmund Brestisson, who began the conversion of the islands at the end of the tenth century. He added that ‘other slabs were found [there], which are not yet in the Museum’ (ibid., 377). Following correspondence with Dr Poul Norlund, director of the National Museum in Copenhagen, he included photographs of two stones in its collection, one of them from Skuvoy and the other an unprovenanced slab which was also believed to be of Faroese basalt. A chance meeting with Joannes Patursson of Kirkjubøur allowed Kermode to include a drawing of one slab from that historic site (ibid., 373 and fig. 1, no. 1). The Copenhagen museum archive also provided a stylised drawing dated 1828 of a lost slab, then at the church on Svinoy (ibid., 378). Jacobsen himself published an article on the Skuvoy stones in Faroese in 1933.

Since then these stones have been briefly mentioned in connection with the question of possible Irish hermit occupation of the Faroes before the Norse landnam (Dahl 1970). In his consideration of this subject Arge (1991) illustrated photographs of two of the stones. In a work on western Scottish sculpture published in 2001, the present writer drew attention to the remarkable similarity between Kermode’s

¹ Kermode (1931, fig. 1 on p. 374) claimed to illustrate seven crosses from Skuvoy, but his nos. 2 and 7 are two faces of the same pillar (infra, no.(10)).
unprovenanced slab in Copenhagen and another at the Hebridean monastic site of Iona. No other early medieval stones from the archipelago have been published in English-language sources, except for the rune-stones described by Stoklund (2005).

The Fourteenth Viking Congress, held in Tórshavn in July 2001, brought together a large international group of scholars including Barbara Crawford. They were able to examine Kermode’s six cross-marked stones from Skuvoy and six others from the same site, all then on display in the National Museum of the Faroes (Føroya Fornminnissavn). A fragmentary outline cross with runic inscription from the same island (Arge 1982) was discussed in a Congress lecture by Marie Stoklund (2005). The Skuvoy burial-ground itself, and the cross-marked boulder supposed to mark Sigmund Brestisson’s grave, were visited by many of the delegates. During the excursion to Kirkjubøur mention was made of the cross-slab from the Líkhús (Arge 1991, 104–5), now stored in the medieval bishop’s palace, which had been drawn by Kermode. The discovery of another cross-marked stone, found in the floor of a building at Sandur during excavations, was described in Símun Arge’s lecture. The present writer compared the unprovenanced slab in Copenhagen with its counterpart on Iona, but this seemingly strong evidence for early Irish activity was immediately refuted by the state antiquary, Arne Thorsteinsson. Geological examination during the re-cataloguing of Faroese material in Copenhagen has shown that the stone is of gneiss rather than basalt, and therefore not Faroese in origin (see below, appendix).

The writer was able to examine the Skuvoy stones in Tórshavn on St Olaf’s Day 2001. Following the return of many Faroese artefacts from Copenhagen in 2002, the stones, with the exception of the rune-inscribed fragment, were transferred to the museum store. They were re-examined there in 2003, with assistance from Símun Arge, through whose good offices the Kirkjubøur slab was also examined, by kind permission of the present Joannes Patursson. A brief stay on Skuvoy allowed further examination of Sigmund Brestisson’s stone, as well as shielings which illustrate the extensive resources of its medieval economy. The stone found at Sandur is known only from a published photograph. The two stones in Copenhagen were examined in the National Museum store in March 2006, through the kind offices of Marie Stoklund, Vivian Etting and Anne Pedersen.

The writer gave a very brief indication of the complexity of this material in the publication of the Papar conference organised by Barbara Crawford at St Andrews in 2001 (Fisher 2002, 39–40, 57). He included