

Music & Archaeology

Exploring links between Irish High Crosses and Sardinian musicians

by Greer Ramsey

The City of Armagh has long been associated with St Patrick and the introduction of Christianity. With Christianity came a new range of skills, buildings and monuments. Written records appear for the first time and monasteries dotted the landscape. As a symbol of these new Christian beliefs, many of the monasteries erected large stone crosses. Initially the crosses were simple affairs, but by 10th century they towered over the onlooker and had become elaborately carved and decorated.

In the monasteries of Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise stone masons produced two of Ireland's most impressive 'high crosses' - Muiredach's Cross at Monasterboice, Co Louth, and the so-called 'Cross of the Scriptures' at Clon-

macnoise, Co Offaly. Muiredach was an abbot, while the 'Cross of the Scriptures' derives its name from the fact that its carvings are based upon stories from the bible. Among the many carved figures on

these two crosses are several musicians, including one playing a strange set of triple pipes. These are the only two images of this unusual instrument in Ireland. Despite having examined the crosses several times over the years, I never noticed the piper. Perhaps it was easier to admire them as impressive examples of stone sculpture, rather than thinking more deeply about any meaning the carvings were attempting to convey. In any case, the idea that 10th century Irish crosses might contain images of musicians, is not a connection that immediately springs to mind.

The next time I saw the image of the piper, from the Clonmacnoise cross, was in Armagh. The event was the William Kennedy Piping Festival which celebrated its tenth anniversary in November 2003. The revival of uilleann piping in the County owes much to the hard work and dedication of the Armagh Pipers Club. Founding member, Brian Vallely, had illustrated the Clonmacnoise piper to use as the logo for the Club as well as featuring it throughout the Festival in programmes and promotional literature.

Mastering not only the skills of furniture, watch and clock making, he turned his attention to the uilleann pipes which he both played and made. Kennedy is credited with a number of technical innovations which improved the uilleann pipes and made them easier to play.

A wide variety of bagpipes are played at the Kennedy Festival each year which vary in style and technique. This can involve sheer physical effort, necessary for example to blow the highland pipes. Pipers must also possess manual dexterity and co-ordination, commodities tested to their limits in order to master the uilleann pipes. The Kennedy Festival has also encouraged pipers from further afield to take part in the festival. This has included musicians from France, Bulgaria, Spain, Italy and the Mediterranean island of Sardinia.

The Sardinian Pipes

When I sat in the Glengannon Hotel, near Dungannon, some eight years ago I had no idea what to expect from Luigi Lai and his Sardinian pipes. Perhaps they would have some incredibly large bag or drone like other European sets? Nothing could have been further from the truth. Carrying on stage what looked like a case for a snooker cue, he produced three small pipes of varying lengths which were blown directly from the mouth. As he played, his puffed cheeks mirrored exactly the piper from the Clonmacnoise cross. This unexpected connection between medieval Ireland and the island of Sardinia was there for all to see.

The Sardinian triple pipes or launeddas is a remarkable instrument. The body of the pipes is made from hollow cane tubes with reeds attached to their end. The reeds are held inside the mouth and



Pl 1. Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly, north side



Pl 2. Muiredach's Cross, Monasterboice, Co. Louth, east face

macnoise, Co Offaly. Muiredach was an abbot, while the 'Cross of the Scriptures' derives its name from the fact that its carvings are based upon stories from the bible. Among the many carved figures on

vibrate when blown, giving the pipes their distinctive nasal sound. One pipe acts as a drone providing background harmony to the tune played on the two chanter pipes with their characteristic finger holes. In the absence of a bag, the player's cheeks act as a reservoir of air and by master-



Pl 3. Luigi Lai from Sardinia playing the launeddas at the William Kennedy Piping Festival in Armagh, 1997.

ing the technique of circular breathing, the pipes are continually blown without stopping to draw breath. This is also the same method used to play the Aboriginal didjerydoo. In Sardinia pupils practice this technique by blowing bubbles into a glass of water through a straw for several minutes at a time.

A folk memory from the island suggests that the triple pipes have been played in Sardinia for the last few hundred years, while a small bronze statue of a

launeddas player from the island (7-11th century BC) harks back to a much more ancient tradition. All this evidence points to the likelihood that the launeddas originated in Sardinia.

Armies, saints and scholars.

In addition to the two Irish crosses, triple pipes occur on three Scottish crosses of approximately similar date. The pipes are also illustrated in two English



Pl 5. Bronze statue of musician playing the triple pipes (National Museum of Archaeology, Cagliari, Sardinia).

(12th century) and one Spanish (13th century) manuscript. This leaves a large gap in both time and distance between the first known appearance of the pipes

in the Sardinia Bronze Age (7-11th century BC) and their arrival in Ireland or Scotland (8-10th century AD).



Pl 6. English Bestiary from Canterbury (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Bodl 602, fol 10r).

Archaeological excavation has shown that the chances of recovering organic material, like the launeddas, are slight. This may partly explain why no older examples of the instrument have been found. To suggest that knowledge of the triple pipes in Europe was restricted only to Ireland, Scotland and Spain, may also underestimate the full extent of their original distribution.

In the Mediterranean area sets of double reed pipes quite similar to the launeddas but lacking the additional drone were known from the Roman world. These are illustrated on beautifully decorated pots dating to the first few centuries BC. As the Roman army conquered Europe, they had the chance to influence other cultures including Britain, where they pushed north to the English/Scottish border. Finds from Roman Britain include the remains of a single reed pipe from Ashton, Northamptonshire and a set of double pipes carved on a Roman distance slab on the Antonine Wall. Separated by only a small stretch of water, trade and travel contacts between mainland Italy and Sardinia must have been a regular occurrence. It is highly



Pl 4. Mouthpiece of the launeddas showing the three split cane reeds, each with a blob of tuning wax. When played, all three reeds are held inside the mouth.

likely that soldiers from Sardinia fought in the Roman army bringing with them an instrument which reminded them of home. With no evidence to suggest that the triple pipes were invented independently in Britain or Ireland, it may well be that they were carried north by a Roman army marching to the tune of the pipes!

In addition to these military-driven contacts, scholars have argued that Mediterranean influences of a more spiritual nature can be detected in the carvings and style of the Irish stone crosses. Connections with Italy also reflect missionary travels beginning as early as the middle of the 6th century. Many such journeys resulted in the foundation of monasteries, among the most celebrated being Bobbio in northern Italy, established by St Columbanus. From the 9th century onwards pilgrimage to the tombs of the apostles in Rome was a favoured journey. In their role as evangelists, scholars and lay pilgrims, Irishmen traversed Europe and acted as a mechanism for cultural diffusion. This brought them into contact with music and musical instruments, including possibly the triple pipes.

The devil calls the tune!

Towering over the casual onlooker, the carvings on Irish high crosses may at first glance seem no more than elaborate decoration. Yet this decoration has form and meaning which can be deciphered and read rather like a Bible in stone. Both Muiredach's Cross and the 'Cross of the Scriptures' contain scenes of the Last Judgement based upon Matthew 25.34-42: 'Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed ... inherit the kingdom prepared for you ... Then shall he say unto them on his left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels'.

This story is most elaborately depicted on Muiredach's Cross. The central figure is Christ. To his right a musician, interpreted as David, plays the 'harp' to a group of seated and kneeling figures.

These represent the saved who have a place reserved for them in heaven. In marked contrast are the group of forlorn figures to Christ's left. The first is the triple piper, back to back with a devil holding a trident who herds the evil souls, in all their nakedness, towards their eternal damnation in hell - almost like the exodus of children with the pied-piper of Hamelin!

In Christian symbolism, the harp is the heavenly instrument. In marked contrast are the pipes and their association with evil, the devil and secular activities. Reed pipes played an important role in the pagan Greek and Roman world which may partly explain their later medieval associations. This musical scenario of good versus evil is also played out on the 'Cross of the Scriptures' at Clonmacnoise. This time, the piper is not central

to the Last Judgement scene but is placed on a side panel on the shaft of the cross. Crucially, the panel on the opposite side has David playing a harp or lyre. This is exactly in keeping with the suggested interpretation of the pipes as a symbol of secular activity and the juxtaposition of instruments representing good and evil.

The contrast between harpist and piper also finds expression in early Irish society, where reed pipes are first mentioned in 8th century texts. The only musician with independent legal status among a king's entertainers was the harpist, with the piper classified among the lower grades of entertainer. If the stone sculptures were intended for a general audience the suggested role of musical instruments as symbols of good and evil would have been widely understood.



Pl 7. Muiredach's Cross Monasterboice, Co Louth, east face

Early bagpipes

When examining the panel showing the piper on the 'Cross of the Scriptures' at Clonmacnoise, my attention was also drawn to the image usually interpreted as a contorted cat-like figure (see Pl 1- top left). It is just conceivable that this is what the carving represents, but a much more radical suggestion is that it depicts a set of bagpipes! The overall shape is very similar to primitive sets like those from Bosnia, where the bag is made from an animal's skin. What some people have interpreted as the creature's tail is remarkably straight and regular and compares favourably with the chanter on these droneless bagpipes. In making the bag for the Bosnian set, the holes corresponding to the position of the front legs of the animal skin are closed with wooden horns. The Clonmacnoise image may show something similar.

The purpose of the bag was to hold a large volume of air which was topped-up by blowing into it, making the pipes easier to play. Bagpipes were certainly known to the Romans from the first century AD. To a large extent, evidence for the bagpipe disappears until the 11th-12th century, when it is mentioned in Arabic and European sources. From the 13th century, when the drone is first referred to, the bagpipe is more frequently illustrated. If the image on the 'Cross of the Scriptures' is a bagpipe, it is in keeping with the expected evolution of the instrument - a droneless primitive bag and chanter. This would pre-date by many centuries the first illustration of a bagpipe in Ireland and would be the earliest representation of a bagpipe in



Pl 8. Bagpipe, Jayce, Bosnia (Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford).

Europe! With an overwhelming emphasis on musical instruments in Last Judgement scenes, a set of pipes is not out of place.

The Kennedy Festival 2004

The decision taken by the sculptors of the crosses at Clonmacnoise and Monasterboice to include a set of triple pipes was a deliberate one. Perhaps the Church believed that the enchanting music of the pipes cast a spell over those who heard them and by showing them in connection with the last judgement scene it acted as a warning. That the pipes may have had an effect on behaviour is an idea that was also current in Sardinia as explained by Bentzon who studied the lunnedas back in 1969. "There thus exists the belief that a launeddas with a

mouth piece of silver obtains a sound which penetrates the brain of people and makes them crazy, pregnant women abort, and the young girls loose their self control and cede without resistance to the desires of the launeddas player upon hearing it".

There is, of course, only one way to put Bentzon's theory to the test as Luigi Lai has been asked to play at the Kennedy Festival in Armagh City this November (2004). The chance to hear an instrument known about in Ireland over a thousand years ago should not be missed. It is a rare opportunity to see at first hand the connection between Sardinian and Irish High Crosses.

Suggested reading

Bentzon, A F W 1969 *The Launeddas: A Sardinian Folk-Music Instrument*. Copenhagen.

Buckley, A 1991 'Music-related imagery on early Christian insular sculpture: identification, context, function', *Imago Musicae* 8 (1991), 135-99.

Donnelly, S 2001 *The Early History of Piping in Ireland*. Dublin.

Harbison, P 1992 *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey*, 3 vols. Bonn.

Acknowledgments.

Pl 1, 2, & 7 Photographs courtesy of Dept of Environment, Heritage and Local Government.