Dundee’s Medieval Carved Stones
The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum

Opening Times
Monday to Saturday, 10am-5pm
Sunday, 12.30pm-4.30pm
Last entry is 15 minutes before closing.

How to find us
The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum is located in Dundee city centre, close to City Square and a short walk from both the Overgate and Wellgate Shopping Centres.

The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum
Albert Square
Meadowside
Dundee
DD1 1DA

Tel: +44 (0)1382 307200
Fax: +44 (0)1382 307207
Email: themcmanus@leisureandculturagedundee.com

All images © Dundee City Council, unless stated otherwise
Contents

Adding a New Dimension to Dundee’s Medieval Carved Stones 2
3D Laser Scanning 3
Medieval Dundee & the Story of the Stones 4
Fish Scales Stone 6-7
Ionnes’ Stone 8-9
Lady’s Head Stone 10-11
Matilda’s Stone 12-13
Rosette & Shield Stone 14-15
Ship Stone 16-17
Wool Shears Stone 18-19
Geometric Cross Stone 18-19
Further Reading 20
The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum has had eight large and finely carved sacrophagus lids in its possession for many years. The coffin lids represent some of the finest examples of such carvings from the middle ages, and offer us a glimpse of high status burial in the medieval period in Scotland. Thanks to support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, some of Dundee’s treasures are coming out of storage for the first time in generations.

Left: Laser scan of the Wool Shears Stone, lit to enhance the geometric design
Right: The scanner emits its powerful laser while recording the Lady’s Head Stone
3D Laser Scanning

3D laser scanning is a technique that is increasingly widely used in archaeology and conservation studies. Using laser reflectance to plot millions of measurements in 3D coordinates, laser scanners allow the production of digital models of objects that can be manipulated and displayed in a wide number of ways. Often, stripping the colour away from a 3D object that would ordinarily be recorded by a standard photograph allows detailed features to be highlighted, while digital models can be rotated and lit from any angle to allow fine features to be accentuated. This technique is similar to the ‘raking light’ sometimes used by photographers to show details on carved stones, but has the advantage that lighting can be applied from any angle, or multiple angles simultaneously, with the digital object itself positioned in the most suitable way. As such, laser scanning is often seen as the best way to record and depict objects that are difficult to move, or access.

Laser scanners come in a huge variety of forms, and each has its own strengths as well as weaknesses. Some laser scanners are designed for recording buildings and landscapes, and have a range of hundreds of metres, but the scanners used to record the medieval stones are designed to provide measurements at the sub-mm resolution, allowing every groove and scratch on the stones to be recorded.

The data collected during laser scanning is very large! Many hundreds of millions of measurements were recorded to produce the 3D models of the stones, and powerful computers were required to process the data.
Located on the north bank of the River Tay, Dundee has long been an attractive site for human habitation. Dundee was granted Royal Burgh status in the 12th century by King William I ‘The Lion’. The grant gave merchants and tradesmen exclusive rights to conduct internal and external trade.

In 1328 David I granted the burgesses of Dundee a monopoly in trading wool and hides over the sherrifdom of Forfar. The trading economy allowed craftsmen and merchants to flourish, especially those working in the cloth-based trades because of strong economic ties with Flanders, the Low Countries and Germany.

The grave slabs featured here were most likely placed over elite burials inside St Mary’s Church, founded in around 1198 and burned and rebuilt several times over the centuries. Only the tower (left, now known as the Old Steeple) and nave survived a catastrophic fire in 1841. The symbols on the stones may identify the rank or profession of the individual, and may also have helped a largely illiterate population understand whose grave was being marked. The stones featured here probably represent only a small proportion of the original number.

The Old Steeple, Dundee

The stones have been in The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum’s stores for many years, and were brought to the Old Steeple in central Dundee for the laser scanning project. They were made accessible
to the public on Doors Open Day in September 2013, when the laser scanning began. Members of the public voted for their favourite stone; the Lady’s Head Stone was most popular, and is now on display in The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum.

Charles C. Maxwell’s *A Historical and Descriptive Guide to Dundee* (1858) describes how some of the stones were rediscovered: the cover of a stone coffin and a flat inscribed slab were dug from under the old Session House in 1821. The text also mentions monuments built into the wall around the churches and other monuments ‘lying about’. One stone is described as having an inscription to ‘William the Long’.

In 1838 during construction of a drain on the north side of the old East Church the stone with the inscription to Ionnes was found. During excavations for foundations for the new East Church in 1842, the Ship Stone was found. Also discovered was the stone with an inscription to Matilda. The other stones seem to have also been discovered at this time, as well as a hollowed out coffin now stored on the first floor of the Old Steeple, in the antiquities room.

Also described in Maxwell’s *Guide* are stones with hunting horns, compasses and squares. What happened to these stones is unknown.

The names we have used for the stones are the names they were given when in storage, and the curators had access to 19th century drawings but not the stones themselves - so some of the names are a little confusing! For example, the so-called Geometric Cross Stone does not feature a geometric cross, and the Rosette and Shield Stone actually features a rosette and sword. However, using the same names will maintain consistency for future researchers.
This cope stone features a stylised fish scale design. A chevron pattern runs down the centre of the stone and a sword with a five-lobed pommel is carved along one side.
Fish Scales Stone

One end of this coped stone is missing. Here, the end of the stone is rough and unfinished, while the other end features a Greek cross (with four arms of equal length) within a circle.

Below: detail of the sword’s five-lobed pommel
A foliated cross head is carved in relief with a rosette in the centre. There is a large shield just below the cross head which covers the stem of the cross and extends onto the sloping sides of the stone. The shield has three small shields carved in relief on its surface, which have been identified as the arms of the Hay family.
The Latin inscription on this stone reads ‘HIC IACET. IONNES. FILIUS. PHILIPPI CISSORIS’ which can be translated as ‘here lies John, son of Phillip Cissoris’ (or Taylor).

On the right hand side of the stone, running behind the shield, is a sword carved in relief. In common with the other swords depicted on this collection of stones, it has a five-lobed pommel.

Below: laser scanning makes the inscription easier to read
The sloping sides of the stone each feature a sword, one pointing downwards and the other pointing upwards. On the right side, the hilt of the sword is visible with its five-lobed pommel, and the blade features a cross-shaped design.

There is a small cross lightly incised on the top of the stone that may not have been part of the original design - it almost appears to be graffiti.

This stone is incomplete – only around half of its probable total length survives.
Lady’s Head Stone

This stone features a high relief cross with a diamond shaped head with a dot pattern reminiscent of metal work. Carved in the centre is a woman’s head, and two further heads are carved on the sloping sides of the slab. The little faces with rather blank expressions are facing forward, with close-set almond-shaped eyes.

The heads on the top and left side of the stone are each wearing a barbette – a band of linen that passes under the chin with the ends fastened over the crown of the head. A tall band of stiffened linen around the temples forms a closed, round hat known as a toque. Vertical lines incised on the toque may indicate pleating or goffering of the linen. This style became popular around the middle of the 13th century and can be seen in manuscripts and on effigies both in Britain and in Europe.

The third head, on the right side of the stone, wears what looks like a floral circlet or coronet over a short veil or cap.

The Lady’s Head Stone was chosen by public vote to go on display in The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum; you can find it in the Landscapes & Lives Gallery on the ground floor.
Matilda’s Stone

This stone is carved in relief with an eight-rayed cross with a flower motif. To the left of the cross shaft is a pair of shears, the tips of which are holding a bodkin – a large needle. The shape of the bodkin is echoed in relief at the top of the cross shaft.

Along the length of the shaft is an incised inscription: ‘Ora Pro A (N) I (M) Matild Filia (sic) Thome’, which can be loosely translated as ‘Pray for the soul of Matilda, daughter of Thom.’

Below (left): a pair of shears holds a bodkin (large needle)
Below (right): eight-rayed cross with flower motif
This coped stone is carved in relief with a cross with a long shaft terminating in a fleur-de-lis just below a smallish diamond-shaped head with a human face in the centre. The face is similar to the design on the Lady’s Head Stone (see p12-13), but is not carved in such high relief. The details of the face are not clear, but whomever it represents is facing forward and may be wearing a triangular-shaped hat or hood. To the right of the cross is a sword with a five-lobed pommel.
This stone features a small ship with a large floriated cross. The shoots attached to the stem of the cross transform it into a ‘Tree of Life’. There is a small animal climbing the rigging, and from the ship, a hand points upwards to the cross. There is also a small figure praying in the prow of the ship. Above the ship’s rigging, a hand grasps a sword that points downwards towards the ship. A short-handled axe is carved on the left side of the stone.

This stone is the best recorded of the collection, and has been compared to the Ardrossan Sarcophagus lid (above), found in North Ayrshire in 1911.
Top: detail of the floriated cross
Right: detail of the ship and its passengers
Far right: detail of the axe
WOOL SHEARS STONE

The smallest of the stones, this coped stone is carved in relief with a lattice pattern on both sloping sides. A much eroded pair of shears, enhanced below by clever lighting of the laser scan data, is carved in relief on one side of the stone. Could they be a symbol of a life cut short?

Left: the eroded wool shears are just visible at the end of the stone

GEOMETRIC CROSS STONE

There is some disparity between this stone and its 19th century description and sketch, which shows an elaborate geometric cross, a sword and an inscription. This stone fits the description only by being broken in half.

The only visible carvings are two enigmatic symbols on one of its sloping sides: one appears to be something like an open book inside a circle; the second is formed of three circles, giving the appearance of a round plate or dish with handles viewed from above.

On the end of the section with the symbols there is a circle with botanical appendages, carved in relief in much finer detail than the carvings incised on the stone.


Maxwell, A., 1891 *Old Dundee, ecclesiatical, burghal and social, prior to the Reformation*. Dundee: David Kidd.


In 2013, The McManus: Dundee’s Art Gallery and Museum was awarded a grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund to move a collection of medieval carved stone coffin covers out of storage, to carry out laser scanning of the stones, to deliver a programme of associated activities, and to place one of the stones on permanent display.

The laser scanning was conducted over a series of open days in the Old Steeple, enabling members of the public to take part in the process. Free hands-on workshops were held for those wanting to learn about laser scanning and illustration in more detail.

A further public open day was held to share the results of the project, including a hands-on session for kids which ensured that anyone could participate, regardless of age!

The project has contributed to new research and interpretation of the stones. The results will be published in the Tayside & Fife Archaeological Journal.

This project was supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund.

We are grateful to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland for granting permission to reproduce the 19th century drawings of the carvings.