Maddern, Christine Turnhout Brepols 2013 pp. xviii, 306 €90.00 (hardback) 978-2-503-53218-9 (hardback) review Encoding finished

This is a book about the cultural and religious background to a corpus of short epitaphs placed on small rectangular stones in largely monastic contexts in early medieval Northumbria.

It is most certainly not a book about those stones themselves. There are only twenty-nine in the corpus under consideration, but even so the book does not print the texts of a single one of the inscriptions, and illustrates only a small sample of the stones. The lettering is considered in a single short section that starts at the bottom of page 67 and has finished before getting to the second half of page 68. Accordingly, and unnecessarily, readers are almost compelled to have with them the relevant volumes of the Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture. In such volumes a reader would also find the other monastic inscriptions of early medieval Northumbria which are not included or discussed in this volume, most notably those of Whitby.

This is only half a complaint, derived from a wholly misleading book title. As already stated, this book is not really about these inscriptions and would have been a more successful book if it had not even tried to be. What this book is actually about is a consideration of the early Anglo-Saxon Christian liturgy of the dead, and of the apocalyptic and eschatological ideas and texts written in and circulating in seventh and eighth century Northumbria. Those topics form the subject matter of chapters 5 to 8 which are the core of this book, and are a detailed and broadly successful discussion of the evidence for the liturgy in use, eschatological concerns, and detailed discussion of the theology of the resurrection and the afterlife. These chapters are far and away the best sections of the book. That being said one is not left with the impression that Maddern is at the forefront of Bedan studies (for example), and relevant bibliography such as Peter Darby's Bede and the End of Time (Ashgate, 2012) is missing.

The central thesis of the book, however, is that this corpus of name stones was borne out of a period of heightened eschatological concerns with the stones operating as a request for prayers for the dead, and the focal position of the decorative cross referencing the central position of Christ as saviour on the Day of Judgment (51).

Even at this high level Maddern has difficulties. As she notes (at 174) only three of her corpus of inscriptions actually include a request for prayers (although by page 178 it is four), an absence made all the more notable by the often empty spaces left behind on the stones, and by the frequency of prayer requests in inscriptions from Ireland (orioit do in Old Irish) and elsewhere (ora pro me and variants in Latin). Further, her own argument is that many of these name stones were buried in the grave (especially at Hartlepool) and in some instances placed pillow-like under the head of the deceased. As such the living were not expressly asked for prayers through these stones, and nor could the stones have operated to supply a name after the completion of the funeral rights and the covering of the grave. For Maddern this practice of burying the inscription is highly unusual and somehow likely to be linked to the monastic context of her sites. She does not cite the multiple parallels from Gallen Priory in Ireland, or Rome, or the parallels from Couville, Neuss, Augst, Angouleme, Amiens, Lyon, Antigny, Lagny-Le-Sec, Retiers, Bais and Visseiche from across Gaul from Switzerland to Brittany and in most cases from distinctly non-monastic contexts. Many of these examples in Gaul were collected and discussed by Edmund Le Blant in the mid-nineteenth century, with some further examples collected and cited in this reviewer's, Death, Society and Culture. Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, A.D. 300-750 (Oxford, 2003), at 172.

As for the use of a focal cross, the difficulty here is that this is in no way specific to this corpus of Northumbrian stones. Crosses were used on tens of thousands of epitaphs across the late antique and early medieval worlds. It is absolutely correct that such crosses are most often not centrally placed on the carving field, but instead are placed at the top, beginning or end of an inscription. Even so, the symbol is still being used as a sign of belief in Christ. It should be made clear, however, that the placing of text around a central cross is far more common and far more widespread geographically than Maddern is aware. Some fourteen years ago it was pointed out that this practice can be seen in inscriptions in Gaul, North Africa, Spain, and the Balkans as well as England and Italy (Handley 2003, at 4).

This lack of understanding of the wider non-Insular early medieval world is repeatedly laid bare. It is not just found in describing Julian of Toledo as Mozarabic, or being confused as to which of Neustria and Austrasia properly belong with a geographic subheading of "Western Francia." It is evidenced by the almost complete lack of understanding of the continental corpora of inscriptions and sculpture. Maddern's visible continental researches appear to have been limited to perhaps four or five articles, and the discussion of Italian and Frankish evidence covers approximately four pages of text. The bibliography does not even include the multi-volume series of the early medieval sculpture of France, the pre-Carolingian Christian inscriptions of Gaul, or the medieval inscriptions of France. [1] Nor does it include the multi-volume series of the early medieval sculpture of Italy, the Christian inscriptions of Italy, the medieval inscriptions of Italy, or the Christian inscriptions of Rome. [2] It is necessary to note these absences in the light of the claims to engagement with the continental evidence made by Maddern (and the publisher).

Familiarity with this material would have raised the question as to what, if anything, makes the corpus of 29 Northumbrian epitaphs special or different, and would have saved her from errors such as when Maddern (at 128) cites Jacques Le Goff on a 5th-century epitaph from Briord, reading its reference to "redemption" as redemption of the dead person's soul. If Maddern has been bothered to find and read the inscription she'd have seen that the language in question is found as part of the manumission of a slave and not within the funerary part of the inscription.
Sooner or later it will cease to be acceptable for Insular scholars to be so myopic. Unfortunately, that time has not yet arrived and Maddern is still operating in a scholarly tradition that is comparative within the Isles and interdisciplinary but desperately uninformed as to the position on the Continent.


The book was also in dire need of some sort of either peer review, or proof reading, or copy editing. This is not because of typos, but because of the book's continual habit of going down rabbit holes to no end. The discussions of parallels of the iconography of the four beast symbols of the evangelists or of the Agnus Dei are prime examples. Not one of the name stones in her corpus includes a lamb or an evangelist symbol. Maddern resorts to the argument that the imagined viewer would have transposed in their mind's eye the four evangelist symbols into the four quadrants of the cross, but this is unnecessarily speculative and necessarily nonsense. Someone, somewhere should have just put a line through these sections and the many like them. The section most in need of a red line through it is the conclusion to chapter 3, two-thirds of which is word-for-word identical to the conclusion to chapter 2.

As a study of seventh and eighth-century Anglo-Saxon attitudes to death, the resurrection and the end of time this is a distinctive, useful and valuable contribution. As a study of the epigraphy of some of early medieval Northumbria's monasteries it is significantly less valuable.

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Notes:
1. Recueil général des monuments sculptés en France pendant la haut Moyen Âge (IVe-Xe siècles)(4 volumes, Paris, 1978-1987); Recueil des inscriptions chrétiennes de la Gaule antérieures à la Renaissance carolingienne(3 volumes to date, Paris, 1971-); Corpus des inscriptions de la France médiévale, 26 volumes to date, Poitiers/Paris, 1975-).
2. Corpus scultura altomedievale (25 volumes to date, Spoleto, 1959-); Inscriptiones Christianae Italiæ (17 volumes to date, BAri, 1985-); Inscriptiones medii aevi Italiæ (3 volumes to date, Spoleto, 2002-); Inscriptiones Christianæ Urbis Romae, new series, (10 volumes to date, Rome, 1922-).