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Landscape, Materiality and Heritage

An Object Biography

Tim Edensor

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces readers to the Barochan Cross, identifies the key themes, and approaches and lays out the book's structure.

Keywords Interdisciplinarity • Multiple stories • Composite biography
• Object • Landscape • Heritage

From 1965 to 1975, I spent most of my school holidays at my grandmother's small cottage in Renfrewshire, situated between Bishopton and Houston. Days were spent exploring the local area by car and on foot, trips fuelled by my nan's insatiable curiosity for local history, geography and culture. One of our favourite excursions was to the old Barochan Cross, sited on the summit of a nearby hill. We would first picnic in the nearby Barochan Burn, interspersing our meal with paddling and fishing for minnows and bullheads, and resting on the green, grassy banks of the stream. Afterwards, we would leave the glen and walk to the summit of the steep grassy mound to see the cross and take in the views in all directions (see Fig. 1.1). Three and a half metres high, the cross was sculpted out of local sandstone in the ninth or tenth century CE. In January 2021, driving past the hill for the first time in several decades, I was disconcerted to see that the cross was no longer there. I urgently tried to find out the fate of the cross, and I was relieved to find that it still existed. My



Fig. 1.1 The Barochan Cross, 1941, courtesy of Historic Environment Scotland

explorations disclosed that the cross had been subject to an abundance of interpretations, practices and relocations over its long life, and these continue to surround the ancient artefact. Indeed, the site on the top of the hill on which I had encountered the cross was not its original location (Fig. 1.2).

Like many other ancient sculpted stones, it has experienced widely varying fortunes. Like most of these artefacts, it has not remained in situ at the site at which it was first installed some eleven hundred years ago (Fraser, 2005). Some crosses have been recycled as building materials while others have been subject to iconoclastic destruction and



Fig. 1.2 Location of the Barochan Cross

defacement, regarded as idolatrous monuments before and during the 17th Reformation. Some have eroded to become undistinguished stony lumps, with others removed to museums for exhibition, classification, inspection or storage.

The stories I uncovered about this particular early medieval sculpture shape the organisation of this book. In tracking the biography and itinerary of the Barochan Cross, I explore how this venerable object has been sited and resited in diverse spaces, enmeshed in different historical processes, interpreted by various fields of interest and subject to the activities

of distinctive communities of practice. The stories I relate both reveal larger social, political, historical and cultural processes and adopt what Emilie Cameron (2012: 578) refers to as ‘a politics of valuing the local, the situated, and the specific’. The chapters into which the account is organised follow distinct themes that emerged as research proceeded. Each of these discussions emerged from an inductive process involving an extensive literature and archive search, site visits and interviews with scholars and locals, and each draws on diverse theoretical sources to explore distinctive elements of the cross and its history. Of necessity, the approach is interdisciplinary. As well as employing theories from my own discipline of human geography, I also incorporate arguments and ideas from archaeology, history, anthropology and heritage studies so as to honour the highly variegated story of this single object and investigate it from multiple perspectives. Stories are included that veer from the scholarly to the amateur, the vernacular and the mythic. These different conceptual and theoretical resources are augmented by descriptive passages that seek to depict the embodied sensory experiences and affective impacts of the object. There are also conjectural sections that explore overlooked aspects and seek to fill in missing and sometimes unknowable details. This is an invariably messy story.

In this book, the cross is presented as a multi-storied object. The adoption of a broader temporal frame refutes a sole focus on a specific period of origin and usage. The cultural biographies of artefacts extend from the period of their creation to the present day, revealing how people reimagine things in accordance with changing social and spatial contexts. For as Mark Hall (2015: 183) insists, a focus on the changing meanings, locations, uses and feelings of early medieval stone sculptures such as the cross ‘breaks down the straitjacket of traditional periodization’ and ‘disrupts cohesive, generalized definitions of the function and meaning of sculpture’. This broad temporal perspective also discloses that rather than considering clean breaks from prior habits of thought and practice, people incorporate, amend and augment understandings from the past, and continue to do so (see Williams et al., 2015). In addition, the notion of a ‘composite biography’ also underlines the relational quality of an object (Foster & Jones, 2020). No object is an island. It shares characteristics and origins with other artefacts of a similar vintage, is grouped together with other things through institutional procedures, may be augmented or lose parts as part of a larger assemblage, may inspire replicas and is emplaced within distinctive, sometimes shifting spatial contexts. This spatial

relationality also foregrounds how the histories of many things involve their moving or being moved; in this sense, their biographies can also productively focus on the ‘object itineraries’ that identify such travels (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015). The stories of all objects are also shaped by their own properties and how these influence their longevity, but critically, also by the non-human agents that swirl around, colonise and penetrate them. Nothing lasts forever, but the enduring presence of an entity in the landscape depends upon how these agencies ravage and alter its constituency over time. Heritage objects in particular are typically managed to limit such deleterious effects, and a host of maintenance and repair techniques are mobilised by humans to secure their persistence, as I will describe.

My primary focus in exploring the shifting ways in which the Barochan Cross has been moved, utilised, cared for, interpreted, encountered, sensed, copied and appropriated is to think about its changing relationships with the physical and conceptual landscapes in which it has been situated. These different spatial settings have endowed the cross with fluctuating expressions of power and a changing range of meanings and feelings, and have shaped the stories that might be told about it. Furthermore, the cross provides an excellent example of how artefacts can serve as portals to wider theoretical explorations about landscape. Accordingly, I have sought to expand the divergent perspectives from which landscape might be considered, moving beyond what can be somewhat reductive debates and conceptions. In the following chapter, I first focus upon traditional scientific and classificatory approaches to landscape and follow this with an examination of the notion that a landscape is a text that can be read for the meanings imposed upon it, often by the powerful. I subsequently explore how objects are conscripted into broader landscapes of meanings, focusing particularly on heritage, military, memorial and religious landscapes. I move away from these representational and meaningful landscapes to consider how landscapes are also part of ordinary, everyday worlds within which routines, habits and tasks are undertaken, often unreflexively, shaping memory and modes of inhabitation. This is extended to take account of sensory and affective engagements with landscape, influenced by the rise of non-representational ideas that insist that much of social life is unconcerned with making sense of meanings and cognitive knowing. Finally, I examine how landscape, although it is a human concept, is certainly not solely a human product; it is continuously co-produced by infinite material, chemical, vegetal and creaturely

forces that emphasise the agencies of the non-human. While all these conceptions of landscape have their strengths and limitations, and none are able to provide more than a very partial perspective, each is useful in exploring the different dimensions of landscape. The utility of these divergent conceptual understandings is exemplified throughout this account by contextualising the relationship of the Barochan Cross to the landscapes in which it has been sited.

A secondary focus is to consider the cross as a particular object within the larger realm of heritage. The institutionalisation of heritage as concept and practice underpins how it has become a highly influential, specifically modern field of knowledge through which the past is understood and imagined. As such, heritage interpretation testifies to the concerns of the present. Though there are multiple ways in which heritage objects might be interpreted, all too often, the authoritative narratives offered by heritage institutions have been reductive and minimal. And yet imperatives and ideas amongst heritage professionals change, are contested and superseded, and their practices are supplemented by those of other human actors. The story of the Barochan Cross identifies reified interpretations and official procedures but also recognises the host of participants and practices that make heritage a process in which objects are enrolled in contesting, changing ways and with different ideals and aims in mind.

The book is organised as follows. The first chapter, the review of the divergent ways in which landscape can be conceptualised, provides a theoretical context for the organisation of the book into eight themed chapters, each focusing on the different ways in which the cross has been enlisted into different relationships with landscape. Subsequently, the second chapter investigates the scholarly interpretations of the Barochan Cross, while Chap. 4 seeks to imagine the encounter with the cross in the early medieval landscape in which it was sited. Chapter 5 explores the effects of moving the cross to the summit of a nearby hill to contribute to the creation of a romantic landscape. Chapter 6 discusses how the cross was recruited into a First World War memorial landscape. Chapter 7 examines the implications of enlisting the cross into a heritage landscape, with Chap. 8 enquiring into how it has been cared for through procedures of maintenance and repair. Chapter 9 considers how the cross has been relocated and recruited into a Christian realm, while Chap. 10 speculates about the future of the Barochan Cross, especially in terms of how a replica might be fashioned to restore its absence in the landscape. The book concludes with an overview of how my account has contributed to