

An abstract artwork featuring a central red square with a grey shape inside it. Above the square are three grey shapes, and to the right is a large grey shape. The background is a light, textured surface with various grey shapes and lines.

# ANCIENT LIVES

OBJECT, PEOPLE AND PLACE IN EARLY SCOTLAND.

ESSAYS FOR DAVID V CLARKE ON HIS 70TH BIRTHDAY

edited by

Fraser Hunter and Alison Sheridan

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# Expiscation! Disentangling the later biography of the St Andrews Sarcophagus

*Sally M Foster*

## **Abstract**

Replicas may complicate but also help to complete the biographies of their parent objects. Disentangling the antiquarian history of the St Andrews Sarcophagus introduces an unexpectedly precocious and productive programme of early 19th-century replication of archaeological objects for the purposes of archaeological science ('expiscation'), and its subsequent commodification. Credit for this goes to the pioneering actions of George Buist, a newspaper editor and intellectual then based in Fife (eastern Scotland). New archival and documentary research, physical examination of surviving plaster casts and scientific analysis of the original Sarcophagus provide a tantalising glimpse into the interest and energies of early antiquarian societies and their web of connections across Britain and Ireland. They also highlight how the poor or non-existent documentation of past conservation and display practices can hamper our ability to understand the composite biography of both the casts and the subject being cast. This study also demonstrates how the fabric of plaster casts can tell us more about their stories too, not least about their technology and the decisive role of the under-appreciated craftspeople who made them.

**Keywords:** *Antiquarianism, cultural biography, Early Medieval sculpture, entanglement, facsimiles, plaster casts, replication, George Buist, St Andrews Sarcophagus*

The production and exhibition of replicas of archaeological material was a very significant and serious enterprise for museums, art schools and international fairs, particularly between the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London and the First World War (Foster & Curtis 2016). The majority of the replicated objects were plaster casts of sculptures (Classical, Late Medieval and Renaissance, but also some Early Medieval: McCormick 2010; 2013). In Britain and Ireland much of this activity was driven through the offices of the Department of Science and Art in London and its South Kensington Museum (what we now know as the Victoria & Albert Museum). They promoted a correct way of teaching art that would improve



design and architecture as well as improve public taste, and they did so through the use of reproductions (Levine 1972; Morris 1986). Facilitated by government grants, the production of such plaster casts of sculpture flourished in Victorian and Edwardian times. This powerful and influential bureaucratic engine (Foster 2014) risks masking the very specific and local sets of relationships that were responsible for much of what happened on the ground and at the institutional level elsewhere. It is clear that individual antiquaries, landowners and local societies also played a very important and largely independent role in creating replicas (Foster 2013). In this respect, the production in 1839 of plaster casts of the so-called St Andrews Sarcophagus (henceforth Sarcophagus), one of the most accomplished surviving Pictish sculptures, testifies to an unexpectedly precocious programme of replication of archaeological material culture for the purposes of archaeological science. The story of these casts also contributes to the birth of interest in Early Medieval material culture, and to the international demand for, and trade in, its replicas.

There are a number of reasons to revisit earlier work on the modern history of the Sarcophagus and the casts that were made of it (Foster 1998a). These include further research as part of a project looking at the composite biographies of plaster casts and their parent objects (Foster & Curtis 2016), McCormick's (2010, 65) revelation that casts of the Sarcophagus were on display at the Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853, and Goldberg and Blackwell's (2013) exploration of the different histories of the Norrie's Law hoard. The latter serendipitously led us to recognise linkages within a wide network of people, places and objects, where a certain George Buist (1805-60) is the key figure and is revealed as an unsung archaeological pioneer. (Foster et al 2014 brings these stories together and provides a wider context for what follows here.)

'Expiscation' (literally translated as 'fishing out') – the process of finding out by skill or laborious effort – was one of Buist's trademark terms. It sounds old-fashioned now but encapsulates what he saw as the overall purpose of 'multiplication of fac simile models ... of remarkable relicts' and, indeed, of publication (Muniments of the University of St Andrews UY8528/1/21(a)). As a fellow expiscator of carved stones and their biographies, with his work on recasting the earlier significance of the Sarcophagus (see below), I hope David Clarke will therefore enjoy what follows and, between this and the complementary joint paper that it has spawned, will appreciate my fun and tribulations in attempting to expiscate this monument's *later*, antiquarian biography through a re-examination of the histories of its mid-19th-century casts.<sup>1</sup>

The backbone of this research is new information obtained through detective work in museum and other archives (see Acknowledgements), wider reading (including more extensive use of contemporary newspapers than hitherto), re-examination of the surviving casts from the perspective of what their fabric tells us about their manufacture and later history, and scientific analysis of the

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1 Perhaps surprisingly for such a very important monument, there have been no further attempts to cast or replicate the Sarcophagus in its entirety. The only other casts in the collections of National Museums Scotland (NMS) are those made in 1922 (NMS X.IB 192) and 1937 (NMS X.IB 245); these are parts or all of stone 3 (Foster 1998a, 40-1).

surfaces of the original Sarcophagus (courtesy of the Historic Environment Scotland Conservation Directorate) to explore the extent to which the fabric of the Sarcophagus bears witness to its post-discovery history.

## Disentangling the histories of the casts

To date, scholars generally interpret the Sarcophagus as a composite stone shrine, probably of the second half of the eighth century, built for and on behalf of at least one Pictish king, perhaps Oengus son of Fergus (d. 761), within the royal monastery of St Andrews (Fife, eastern Scotland). Surviving are one long panel (stone 1), one complete short panel (stone 2) and parts of what is thought to be a second short panel (stone 3), and three corner-slabs (stones 4-6), each decorated on their outer surfaces only. Assuming that it *was* a shrine – and Clarke et al (2012, 45, 95) suggest architectural alternatives – the so-called Sarcophagus originally comprised nine components: two long side panels and two short end panels, held together at the corners by tenons on their lateral edges that slotted into the grooves of four corner-slabs. The broad faces of the corner-slabs would frame the long panels, the narrow faces the short panels (Fig 1a). A presumed lid does not survive (Henderson 1998).

### *The casts are born*

Interested ‘gentlemen’ established the Fifeshire Literary, Scientific and Philosophical Society (henceforth Fifeshire Society) in late 1837. Among its objectives was the opening of a ‘Library and Museum open to all members ... in the County Town [Cupar] as soon as possible, in order to be able to procure and preserve communications and specimens illustrative of the subjects [of the Society]’. Mr. Thomas Shaw ‘Writer, Cupar’ and Mr. Ewing ‘Nurseryman’ were elected ‘Conservators of the Museum’ (*Fifeshire Journal* 16 Nov 1837, 1, 3). The chair highlighted the potential of the county for research and discovery – an emphasis on the local that later Society documentation reinforces (eg *ibid* 10 May 1838, 1). November 1837 also heralded the arrival in Cupar of George Buist as editor of the *Fifeshire Journal*. The son of the Rev J Buist,<sup>2</sup> born at Tannadice in Angus, Buist was educated in St Andrews and Edinburgh before going on to edit newspapers in both Perth and Dundee. Buist quickly dominated Fife literary and scientific circles, just as he did when he arrived in Bombay in 1840 to edit the *Bombay Times* (Campbell 2009, 42-5; Morrison-Low 2005). By 8 May 1838 when the Society’s museum opened, he was a curator, the self-acknowledged lead figure (*Fifeshire Journal* 10 May 1838, 1; Buist 1854, 234).<sup>3</sup>

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2 This corrects Foster 1998a, 50, where I followed Hay Fleming in his suggestion that Rev George Buist, Professor of Church History at St Mary’s College, St Andrews, and convenor of the St Andrews Literary and Philosophical Museum, was Buist’s father (Hay Fleming 1931, 3). Confusingly, George Buists abound in the records of the Fife antiquarian societies.

3 Notices in the contemporary newspapers are the main source of evidence for the workings of the Fifeshire Society (*Fifeshire Journal*, *Fife Herald*); while its list of subscribers and album of visitors to the museum survive in Cupar Library, its minute books are lost (Fifeshire Literary, Scientific and Antiquarian Society 1838-67; 1838).

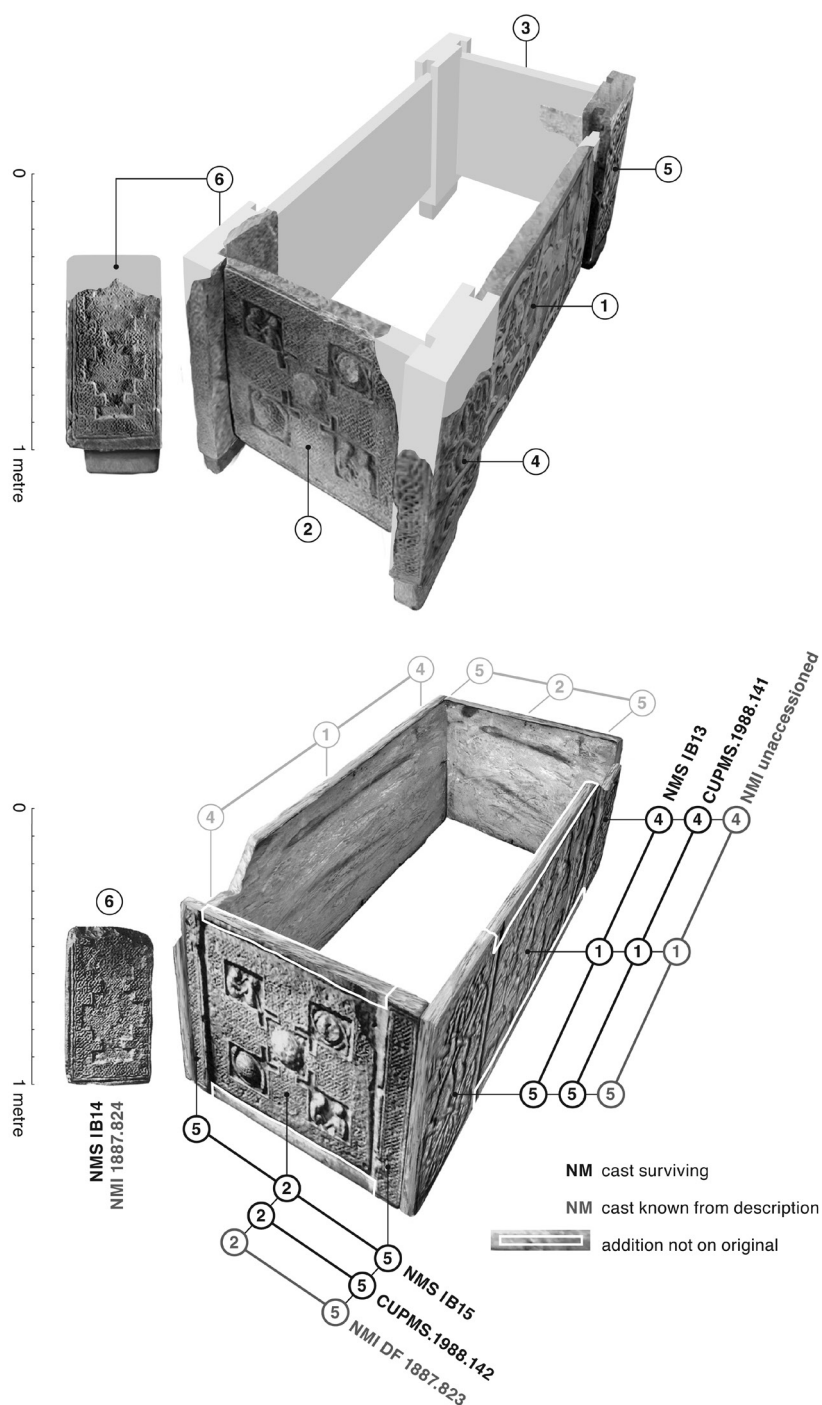


Figure 1. Schematic reconstructions summarising the form of (a) the St Andrews Sarcophagus as presently displayed in St Andrews Cathedral Museum with (b) the reconstructed Cupar cast, based on the surviving casts and descriptions. Graphic by Christina Unwin, © Sally Foster (incorporating photographs in (a) that are Crown Copyright (Historic Environment Scotland). Licensors canmore.org.uk and B Keeling; and in (b) © National Museums Scotland)

The burghal pride attached to the Museum in Cupar is apparent in the Society's desire to enlarge and improve their museum within a year, opening it 'with as much éclat as possible before the Caledonian Hunt, so that it may be seen to advantage by the strangers then in town' (*Fifeshire Journal* 15 Aug 1839, 2; the Royal Caledonian and Fife Hunt ran over Cupar Race Course on 1-2 Oct 1839). When it reopened in 1839, the museum included the Sarcophagus, sharing a space with Cape deer, antelope and goats' heads, and an elk head from Nova Scotia, alongside local fossils (*ibid*, 3 Oct 1839, 2). The Sarcophagus was on loan for a few weeks from the St Andrews Literary and Philosophical Society (henceforth the St Andrews Society), itself only founded in April 1838. Buist had already tried to get a cast made, failed, and wanted to borrow the Sarcophagus to have another go, although it was only on 6 November that he suggested to the Fife Society that they get a cast made. This, he informed them, would cost about £4, or roughly £3,000 in present day terms (*ibid*, 14 Nov 1839, 4; *Fife Herald* 14 Nov 1839, 3):<sup>4</sup>

*There is no modeller or moulder in St Andrews; – but were the slabs removed for a few weeks to Cupar where abundant in-door accomodation [sic] can be provided for these & for those who may be engaged in copying them models in clay or casts in plaster could easily be procured & multiplied ad libetum [sic] without damage to the sculptures ...by which means a step will have been taken for the expiscation of information in reference to one of the distant and least known branches of Archaeology' (letter in Buist's hand: Muniments of the University of St Andrews UY8528/1/21(a) 1839).*

On that same day, Buist announced his resignation from the Society. He was about to move to India, but clearly found the time beforehand to oversee the production of the casts, for they were on display by 19 Dec 1839, as reported in the *Fife Herald*. Buist himself is the undoubted author (*pace* Hay Fleming 1931, 5 n1). His full statement, an extract of which follows, is rich in description and explains the pragmatic philosophy behind its reproduction and display:

*MAGNIFICENT SARCOPHAGUS. – .... Now stands the sarcophagus, or at least there stands its plaster image, a fac-simile of the original, complete in all its parts, even to the colour of the blocks – a splendid resting-place for some of the mighty of Scotland's earlier days. It is 6 feet in length; over the middle its breadth is 2 feet 10 inches; and over the extremities, which project in the form of pilaster to support the top, it is 3 ½ feet. Its depth throughout is 2 feet 4 inches ... The undiscovered portions have been very judiciously supplied by the Cupar Society, causing duplicates to be cast of those which are entire; not that there is the slightest reason to believe that any two portions of the stone were alike, where variety was so much courted, but that this completes and exhibits at once the form and size of the sarcophagus, without the slightest tendency to mislead – the fact being noted on the descriptive ticket – as a conjectural restoration would have been sure to have done. In future, no one desiring to illustrate the antiquities of Fife will dare venture to do so without giving a faithful drawing of the Cupar Restoration of the St Andrews Sarcophagus.*

4 Calculated using the website *Measuring Worth*, [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com), accessed 31 January 2016.

*We hope that the liberality of its members, and the extension especially of the system of life membership, will speedily relieve the funds of the Society, which have been drained by the expense attendant upon this valuable relic. The St Andrews Society, we trust, will no longer allow the “disjecta membra” [scattered fragments] of this monument of the fourth century to be scattered about. The artist (Mr Ross of Cupar) who has executed the cast, deserves the highest credit for the fidelity and beauty of the execution (my emphasis).*

### *Replicating the manufacture of the casts*

The subsequent history of the casts is very much a story of two halves and a bit – and more, as we shall later see. Although details of their provenance have not travelled with them, casts that accord with the *Fife Herald* descriptions survive in the St Andrews Museum (CUPMS.1988.141 and .142) and in the collections of National Museums Scotland (henceforth NMS) (NMS X.IB 13-15).<sup>5</sup> Examination of these casts provides important clues for their manufacture. As will unfold, we can be confident that the Ross workshop in Cupar made both these sets of casts. Just as examining the casts tells us about aspects of their manufacture and later biographies, the surviving original carved stones also have their story to tell about the casting process and its aftermath.

### Reconstruction

The surviving casts indicate what Ross did to reconstruct the form of the original monument. He took moulds of the decorated outer faces of stones 1, 4 and 5 and created a single plaster cast from these of the long side, minus tenons. For the cast, Ross swapped stones 4 and 5 around; this arrangement could never work in practice but may have been an aesthetic decision, since the broken corners of stones 1 and 4 could then ‘match up’. Since the long panel is less tall than the surrounding corner-slabs, he added blank space above and below the outer carved mouldings. He took several casts of the narrow face of stone 5 and one of the short panel, stone 2. Framing stone 2 with stone 5 on the left and right sides, he again created a single plaster cast, this time for the short end of the ‘coffin’.<sup>6</sup> For display at Cupar, we assume he created two versions of his composite casts, to complete the reconstructed box form (Fig 1b). How the Fifeshire Society mounted the casts for

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5 At some point after the move of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland to its premises in Queen Street in 1890, and during R B K Stevenson’s tenure (as Assistant Keeper 1938, then Keeper 1946-78), Museum staff carefully cut up the long and short sides of their cast into three sections each, at the junctions of the panels and corner slabs, and then painted their fronts and sides after remounting. The reason for this seems likely to have been the recognition that the composite cast was inaccurate in the way in which it arranged (and duplicated) the component parts of the Sarcophagus. These actions suggest that the intrinsic value of the 1839 cast was less valued than the ability to recycle the existing casts for display, but the resultant cross-section is a boon, revealing aspects of Ross’ manufacture (see below).

6 Stone 3 was undoubtedly deemed too fragmentary to cast (assuming that it travelled to Cupar) and the largest part (3a) was in York at this time, having been removed there by a visiting antiquary in 1836 (Foster 1998, 40-1).



display is not clear from the surviving examples but there is certainly no evidence for the introduction of a modern lid. Since they would have been visible, it seems likely that Ross painted both the inside and outside of his casts.

### Plasterers' techniques

More aspects of the individual plasterers' techniques and hand(s) are visible in the fabric of the casts, not least a series of rather obvious plasterers' tool marks on the sculptured surface of the long side in St Andrews Museum. Gelatine moulds were particularly useful for moulding sculpture with deep undercuts (Bilbey & Cribb 2005, 163) and would be the obvious choice for stone 1, at the very least. If plaster moulds were used, there was one mould per face, since no vestigial seams from piece moulds are visible on any of these. Having obtained a mould of the carved surfaces of each face, the gaps between these moulds needed to be joined (probably with pliable clay) to enable a single-piece casting of either the long or short sides of the Sarcophagus. A similar material would have been used to extend the height (top and bottom) of stone 1. A distinctive recess around all the edges of the long side in St Andrews Museum demonstrates the use of thin fillets of wood to define the edge of the overall cast (Fig 2), presumably held in place by a larger wooden frame during the casting process. There is little surviving evidence for use of timber fillets on the surviving casts in the NMS collections, the side and upper edges of which have instead been reworked using a tool with broad serrated teeth while the plaster was green. To strengthen the heavy casts, about halfway through



*Figure 2. The lower right-hand corner of the cast of the long side of the Sarcophagus in St Andrews Museum (CUPMS.1988.141), showing the distinctive ledge around its edge and layers of paint. Photograph © Doug Simpson*

pouring plaster into the mould Ross laid a series of apparently unmeshed iron rods (7 mm square in section) lengthwise, presumably coated to prevent rust. These are only visible because the NMS casts have been cut up (as described in footnote 5).

It is to the original Sarcophagus that we have to look for more details of the casting process, specifically how Ross cast such a three-dimensional sculpture. Research by Welander in 1996/7 first paid attention to an unusual whitish deposit, with an occasional blue-green tinge, that is visible on the front of stones 1 and 5 (Welander 1998). A single X-ray fluorescence (XRF) analysis by the British Museum identified the surface treatment as lead white, while a Historic Scotland stone conservator noted that small plugs of potter's clay underlay this white layer in certain places, particularly in heavily undercut or perforated details. Welander suggested the clay represented vestiges of the casting process, being used to allow easy release from undercutting or other obstacles. He also noted that the white layer must be later, but how much later was unknown.

For this project, Historic Scotland (as it was still then known) kindly widened the chemical analysis of the surfaces of the surviving fragments of the Sarcophagus using portable XRF (27 readings) and Near Infrared spectroscopy (NIR: 151 readings) (Historic Scotland Conservation Group 2012). Their results, when indicating cultural as opposed to natural (geological) factors, can be interpreted as follows.

First, the XRF confirms that the whitish layer largely still covering stones 5 (broad face, some slight traces on narrow face) and 1 is likely to be lead white ( $\text{Pb}_3(\text{CO}_3)_2(\text{OH})_2$ , hydrocerussite) with some barium sulphate. Lead white was a common inorganic pigment. Barium sulphate was used as a colourant in its own right and as a substance to extend paint from the late 18th century, becoming more common in the early 19th century (Bankart 1909, 7; Campbell 2000, 159-60). Its low concentrations here suggest it was a contaminant rather than a deliberately-applied substance. The NIR analysis showed no discernible chemical difference between the white and blueish areas of the front of stone 1. No chemical trace of this was found on stone 4, despite the visibility of the same surface treatment in earlier photographs (eg Allen & Anderson 1903, III, fig 365). We can probably attribute this to the stone having undergone a different conservation history from stones 1 and 5, which involved the removal of this layer. Conservation records for the Sarcophagus as a whole prior to 1996 are slight to non-existent (Welander 1998), yet its display history is demonstrably complex (Foster 1998a, 50-62), involving reconstruction and removal of previous attempts to construct the incomplete stone 4.

Second, the XRF data suggest that a faint white deposit observed on the back of stone 1 is likely to be gypsum ( $\text{CaS}_4.2\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ). This was widespread on all the stone surfaces that Ross cast in 1839. NIR also suggested the presence of gypsum on the rear of stone 1 and both sides of stone 2, but there was a difference with the front of stone 1. Ross used gypsum to create the casts, but what is less certain is whether he used gypsum to take the moulds from the Sarcophagus, particularly when gelatine was more practical for at least one of the stones. The Sarcophagus was in a plasterer's workshop and would have come into contact with gypsum-

covered surfaces. The wash used to clean the stones after moulding, to remove the releasing agent, could also have contained some gypsum. But if the moulds were made with gypsum, and the lead-white coating post-dated the casting, it could explain why gypsum levels were lower on the face of stone 1. Stone 3 was not cast by Ross; and it had a very different conservation history to the other stones. The XRF only analysed stones 3a and 3c, but the SO<sub>3</sub> levels which indicate gypsum were very low relative to most of the other samples, and the NIR signals were also mostly from stone rather than from any patina or surface treatment.

Clearly then, at some point during or after the 1839 casting process, the front of stones 1, 4 and 5 (the impressive, long side of the Sarcophagus) were painted with a product that included lead white. Who did this, why, when, and on whose authority? The most obvious reasons for applying it are:

- a. as a releasing agent to help lift the mould from the original;
- b. as a pigment to cover any residual materials left after the casting process on what, with its deep relief, would have been a technically challenging series of faces to cast; and/or
- c. as a pigment to improve the appearance of the main surviving face of the monument.

We cannot exclude the possibility that the St Andrews Society applied the white lead to the Sarcophagus on its return; but Ross' workshop, with its undoubtedly ready access to decorators' paint, seems the most likely place for this to have taken place, immediately after the casting. Welander (1998, 66) doubted that the custodians would have been 'so cavalier with their new prize ... for any reason as prosaic as "improving" its appearance'. Option (a) is unlikely because there is relatively little gypsum on the lead white surface, although the presence of some supports the argument that the layer was applied in the plasterer's workshop. The good condition of the surviving white layer suggests to me that it was not damaged or discoloured by the casting process, which makes options (b) and/or (c) more likely. As well as using clay to plug the undercut sculptures,<sup>7</sup> a clay slip is a likely releasing agent for Ross to have used. Since Ross could easily have washed this off with water, we can conclude that the paint was a deliberate attempt to improve the appearance of the Sarcophagus' most impressive side. Conceivably, the moulding process also caused some discolouring that Ross wanted to mask (*pace* Welander 1998, 67), perhaps even damage caused by Buist in his earlier failed attempt to cast it (see above). The final resemblance, closer to more familiar classical sculpture, may be telling, too, of the normal expectations for ancient sculpture: we are within a generation of the arrival of the Parthenon (Elgin) Marbles in Britain, of which Edinburgh's Trustees Academy already had an extensive cast collection by the mid-1830s (see Naik & Stewart 2007). I suspect that this hypothetical whitening of the stone was all at Ross' initiative rather than on Buist's instruction.

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7 The St Andrews Sarcophagus is the only Pictish sculpture that is undercut to any extent: I G Scott, pers comm.

### *The 'thicker' histories of the casts from Cupar*

I now question my 1998 theory that the four sides of the 1839 Cupar cast were later split up and ultimately ended up half in Edinburgh and half in St Andrews. From the stories of individual casts that follow – which are very difficult to reconcile – it seems that Ross' workshop produced casts additional to those displayed in the museum in Cupar.

#### Newcastle upon Tyne

Hay Fleming (1931, 5) refers to a cast in Newcastle, in the Black Gate Tower, which he thinks was probably made in 1839 too, but offers no opinion on provenance.<sup>8</sup> We know that Sir Walter Calverley Trevelyan, a Northumbrian antiquarian (Goddard 1929, 161-3), donated a cast to the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle in 1848. It may be significant that this coincides with when the Society first leased the

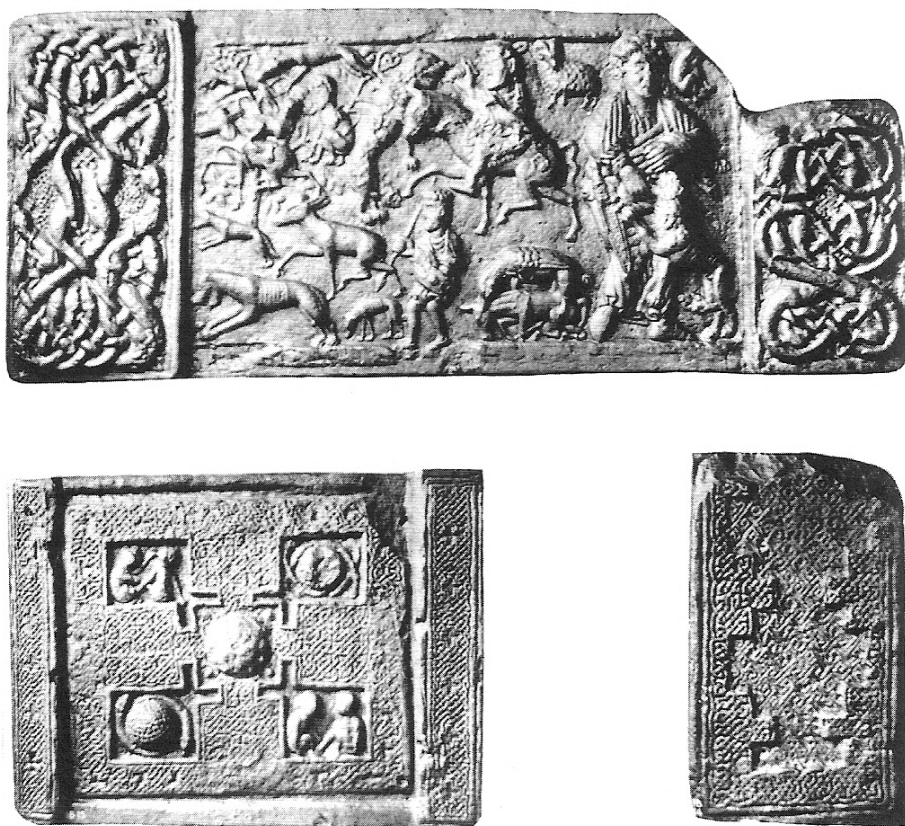


Figure 3. The Sarcophagus casts held by the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland as photographed in 1936 or before (Mowbray 1936, pl I). © National Museums Scotland

8 Radford (1955, 5 fn) is probably reading Hay Fleming wrongly when he states that a part of the actual Sarcophagus went to the Black Gate Tower.



Norman Castle Keep for its activities, so its museum must have been redisplayed at this time. The Newcastle cast was last recorded in their collection in 1931 and lost by 1956 (detail in Foster 1998a, 53).

## Edinburgh

The surviving casts in the NMS collections were ‘presented by subscription of Fellows of the Society [of Antiquaries of Scotland], 1849’ (Wilson 1849, 73 nos. 5-7) (Fig 3).<sup>9</sup> We must therefore consider the significance of this acquisition in the context of Daniel Wilson’s efforts to establish a national museum of archaeology, a key plank in his ambition to popularise archaeology and generate nationalism (see eg Ash 1981, 101-3). At this time he was actively seeking new material from across Britain for the Society’s collections, which he redisplayed and catalogued in 1849. To judge from subsequent Catalogues (*Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 1863, 50 no 17; 1870, 84 no 19; 1876, 118 no 31; 1892, 260 nos IB 13-15), the casts were on permanent display (Fig 4) and only taken off display in the 1970s (David Clarke, in litt).



Figure 4. Wall-mounted casts of the St Andrews Sarcophagus on display in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in George Street, before the 1890 move to Queen Street. Keeper Joseph Anderson in foreground, with the casts above his assistant, George Black, in the corner. © National Museums Scotland

<sup>9</sup> At the time of writing, the NMS electronic catalogue does not include this information and my earlier research also missed it. I have gleaned no further information about this from the Society’s minutes, correspondence or communications, bound copies of which survive in the library of the NMS. The Society’s 1890 retrospective list of donations for this period omits the casts.



## Dublin

The descriptions of the casts displayed in the Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853 suggest that these matched those now in Edinburgh (Anonymous 1853, 143-4, cat nos 1877-9; Sproule 1854, 477 no 33): a long side (like NMS X.IB 13), a short side (like NMS X.IB 15, although from the description it is not clear if the end panel was framed by any narrow faces of the corner-slabs); and a cast of the broad face of stone 6 (like NMS X.IB 14), ‘decorated with the same intricate knotwork’ as the end panel.

When the Crystal Palace Company purchased casts of sculpture from Dublin for permanent display at Sydenham (London), so that visitors could see examples of art and architecture of all civilisations (Kenworthy-Browne 2006), they did not purchase the Sarcophagus casts. All or parts of the cast were on display in the basement of the Royal Irish Academy’s (henceforth RIA) Museum of Irish Antiquities in 1876 (Royal Irish Academy 1876, 8) and two portions were later displayed in the Science and Art Museum in 1890 (Ball 1890, 37-8). The present database of the Art and Industry section of the National Museum of Ireland (henceforth NMI) has a record of two items each described as a ‘plaster-cast, part of the ancient cross at St Andrews, Scotland’ (DF: 1887.823 and .824).<sup>10</sup> The 19th-century museum register notes that these were transferred from the museum to the RIA in June 1894, but neither they nor the NMI can now trace any further record of them. Their recorded dimensions of 2’ 8 ½” x 2’ 4 ¼” (82 x 72 cm) and 1’ 2” x 2’ 1” (37 x 64 cm) are telling, however. The first of these closely matches the dimensions of the cast of the end panel now in St Andrews Museum (CUPMS 1988.142; see below). The St Andrews Museum cast notably includes only one narrow face of a corner-slab in its composite cast, is mounted in what looks to be a 19th-century wooden frame, and is not painted on its rear.<sup>11</sup> The second set of measurements is very close to the NMS stone 6 cast (NMS X.IB 14: 37 x 61 cm). By 1890 the Dublin cast of the long side of the Sarcophagus was therefore no longer on display and the absence of an 1887 accession number for anything matching its dimensions would suggest it had disappeared beforehand.

Fortunately, we have a relatively full appreciation of the context in which the Sarcophagus casts were acquired for display in Dublin, and the behind-the-scenes activity that led to this. The Dublin Industrial Exhibition of 1853 was the first international exhibition to include a section devoted to antiquities, and it was particularly noted for its prominent promotion of ancient Irish art (Ó Floinn 2012, 149). The Sarcophagus casts were part of a group of casts and stones selected by the Fine Arts Committee of the exhibition, under the chairmanship of Lord Talbot de Malahide, a politician and prominent antiquary who was active in both Ireland and Britain (Seccombe 2004). De Malahide’s objectives and methods are documented in various sources, including the business-reporting pages of *Antiquaries Journal* (9 (1852), 381, 396-8; 10 (1853), 65). The aim was to ‘popularise [the] ... objects of archaeology’, ‘illustrate the natural connexion [sic] between the aboriginal

10 The short end of the Sarcophagus and the broad face of stone 6 could well be described as such by someone unfamiliar with their background and detail of their form.

11 Without removing the cast from its frame it is not possible to tell if it was intentionally cast this way.

inhabitants of Great Britain and those of Ireland’ and to ‘unite the display of monuments’ that could not otherwise be displayed together, noting the value of creating faithful representations because the originals were ‘becoming every day more dilapidated, and exposed to injury’.

Very few British antiquities, whether casts or original, were selected for display, so the question is why the Sarcophagus was included, and how the casts were obtained. We know that to encourage contributions in general, the Dublin exhibition’s Executive Committee sent its two secretaries to Britain and around Europe. The Assistant Secretary John C Deane visited Edinburgh, Kirkcaldy, Dundee and Stirling while in Scotland (Sproule 1854, 9), actively seeking casts of objects:

*An application from Mr J. Deane, for permission to take casts of certain objects in the Museum, for the Dublin National Exhibition of 1853, with the offer of other casts in exchange, was submitted to the Council, and it was remitted to Mr. Chambers and Dr. Wilson, to meet Mr. Dean [sic] in the Museum, with power to authorise the taking of any casts that might be desired, provided they could be done without any risk of injury to the originals* (Society of Antiquaries Council minutes, 5 Nov 1852)

In 1851, Wilson’s *The Archaeology and Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* had first brought the Sarcophagus to serious antiquarian attention, so Deane and his colleagues could have been aware of the Sarcophagus from this, and in visiting the Museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland they could also have seen their Sarcophagus casts, acquired in 1849. If he hatched the idea in Edinburgh, Deane must have made arrangements for the casts to be made in Fife rather than using Edinburgh’s existing copy, since the Dublin catalogue (Sproule 1854, 479, no 96) does not list the Sarcophagus among the casts that the Society of Antiquaries supplied per its Secretary, D Wilson.

### St Andrews Museum

In 1988 the casts now in the St Andrews Museum were passed to North-East Fife Museums from the McManus Museum in Dundee, who have no surviving record of when or how they acquired them, but we can infer that this took place after 1911.<sup>12</sup>

### Glasgow

The minutes of the Glasgow International Exhibition Association of 10 September 1900, planning for the 1901 Exhibition, refer to the intention to cast a stone or stones at St Andrews, per Messrs D and J Mackenzie, but there is no evidence that this took place.

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12 The catalogue of [cast] sculptured stones of Scotland that was published to coincide with the opening of Dundee’s new Sculpture Galleries does not mention them (Martin 1911).

## Mapping the casts

The early Victorian production and circulation of casts of the Sarcophagus is therefore far more complicated than I had previously realised, and the documentation is patchy (Fig 5). We know that:

- Ross made two each of the composite casts of a long and a short side in 1839, two each of the long and short sides, immediately displayed in Cupar;
- Trevelyan had a cast of some part of the Sarcophagus by 1848;
- the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland had a composite long side and short side, and a broad face of a corner-slab by 1849, which NMS still have; and
- the NMI had the same (or near version of same) from 1853 to 1894 (although their long side disappears from the record some time beforehand) and there is no record of the casts in either the NMI or RIA after that;
- North-East Fife Museums Service had a cast of the long side and short side (with one narrow face of a corner-slab only) by 1988, which Dundee acquired at an unknown time and from an unknown source.

This begs the question of how many casts were ever made, when, where and by whom, which is critical if we are to populate the biography of the Sarcophagus. The options for the casts first mentioned in 1848, 1849 and 1853 are:

- a. purchase/gift of a *duplicate* cast already made in 1839, whether from Ross or the Fifeshire Society;
- b. purchase/gift of a duplicate cast from Ross, *made to order* from the surviving 1839 moulds;
- c. purchase/gift from the Fifeshire Society of a part of the 1839 cast formerly on display in the Cupar Museum; or
- d. purchase of a newly completed casting from the original, or from a cast.

To seek answers, we must return to the physical evidence for the surviving casts themselves, as well as consider what more we can glean about the individual circumstances in which the casts, or their acquisition, might have occurred. Slight but significant differences exist between the casts surviving in St Andrews and the NMS, differences that are common to each of the separate cast pieces in their collection, confirming that each assemblage of Sarcophagus casts was made at the same time and by the same hand. For example, all the edges and reverse of the casts in NMS bear distinctive comb marks (see above; Fig 6). Original paint survives on all the original faces of the NMS casts, although modern paint overlies the fronts of NMS X.IB 13 and NMS X.IB 15.<sup>13</sup> I could not inspect the reverse of the long side in St Andrews so I do not know whether it is painted, but the reverse of the short side, which is mounted in a wooded frame, is *unpainted*, so we might assume it was intended for wall mounting only. The long side has a cast recess

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13 The latest paint may date from when the designer Charles Burnet had the interior of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland redecorated: D V Clarke, pers comm.

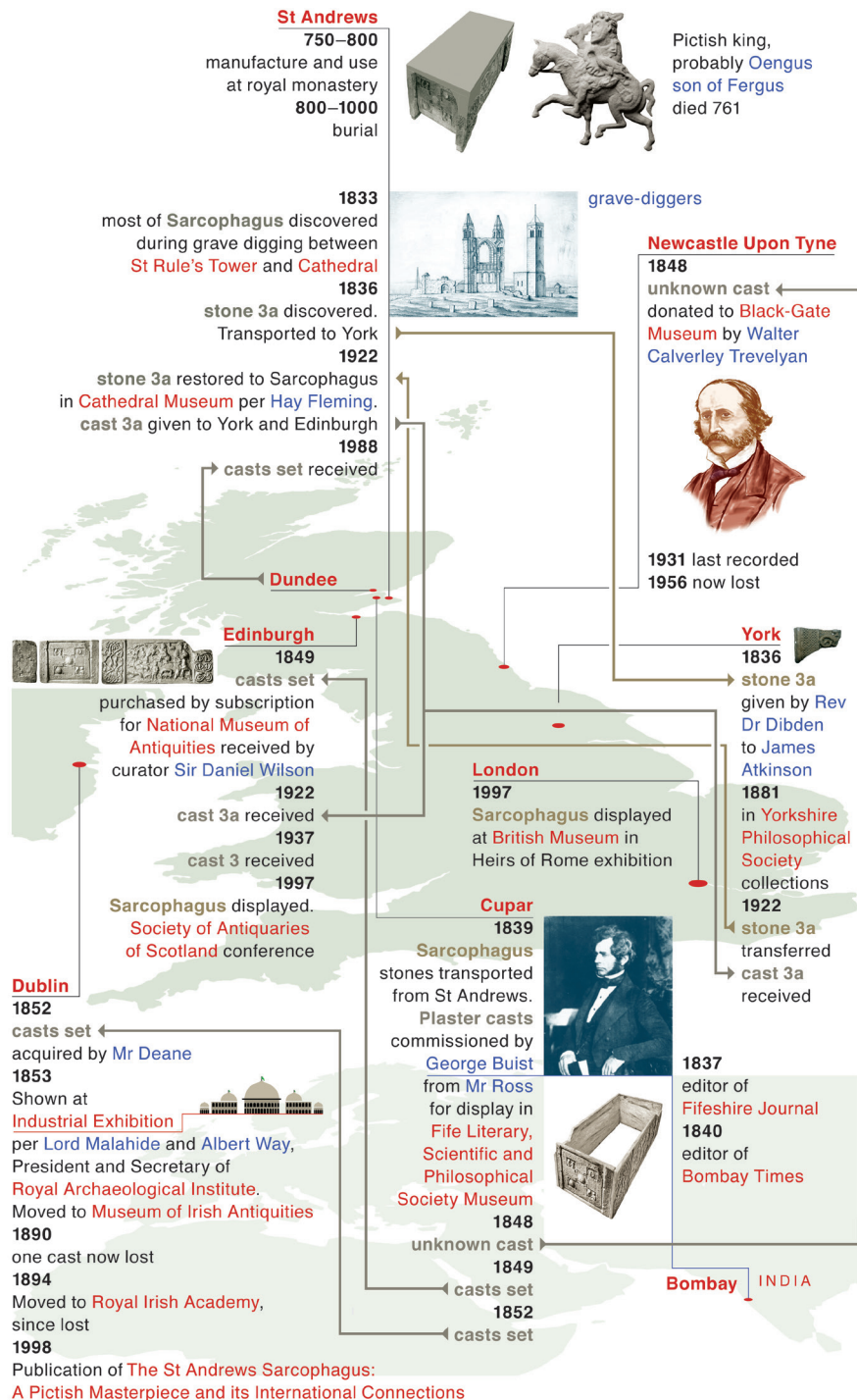


Figure 5. A summary biography of the St Andrews Sarcophagus. Graphic by Christina Unwin, © Sally Foster, incorporating images that are © B Keeling, Sally Foster, © Courtesy of Historic Environment Scotland (Artist Alexander Archer). Licensors canmore.org.uk, © Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland and © Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections Department



*Figure 6. An example of the distinctive comb marks on the outer edges of the casts in NMS. The smooth edge to the right had been cut in modern times and reveals the iron rods inside the plaster cast (painted over). Photograph: Sally Foster*

all around its outer edge, a characteristic of its casting process (see Fig 2). The distinctive comb marks visible around all the NMS casts are not visible on the edges of the St Andrews Museum long side (where accessible) but are visible on the rear and rear upper edge of the short end. The paint on the front of each of the St Andrews Museum casts is similar and looks to be of some antiquity, probably early Victorian; but the exposed lower edge of the long side in St Andrews Museum shows that there are two layers of paint (Fig 2). The lower may be an undercoat (perhaps shellac), rather than indicating a major time difference between the two, but the brown-green underlayer is similar to the earlier paint visible on the reverse of the NMS casts.

So far then, we can be confident that both sets of the surviving casts come from Ross' workshop and from moulds made in 1839, but how much time passed between casting them? The slight physical differences need not imply that the casts date from very different times – a day's difference might bring a slightly different approach or hand to their manufacture. The single surviving cast (NMS X.IB 14) of stone 6, although apparently painted a different colour from NMS X.IB 13 and NMS X.IB 15,<sup>14</sup> has the same distinctive manufacturing characteristics and was clearly made at the same time. We have to consider, however, whether the casts in Newcastle, Edinburgh and Dublin could be from a late 1840s' dismantling of part of the Cupar cast, and whether the casts now in St Andrews could have come from Newcastle or Dublin, or alternatively directly from Cupar. Or did Ross, at his own initiative or at the request of his patrons, multiply his casts (as Buist's initial proposal for casting had suggested) with the intention of selling them at a later stage? Assuming the Sarcophagus was not recast, gelatine moulds would have allowed the fabrication of a small number of repeat casts within a year or so of the moulding, while plaster casts would have been more durable.

14 Although does their modern paint seal a similar paint, leaving us only to see the undercoat elsewhere?



To judge from the Album of the Fifeshire Society, its museum, and by implication the Society, did not prosper for long. Like many early learned societies founded across Britain in the first half of the 19th century, it fairly quickly entered into terminal decline.<sup>15</sup> We can only guess what Buist thought when he visited it on 18 August 1846 while back on leave from India, but J M Mitchell visiting on 7 September 1847 left his verdict: ‘Let the entirety be labelled & dusted!’ (Fifeshire Literary, Scientific and Antiquarian Society 1838-67, f 18r, 20r). In 1871 its properties were transferred to Cupar’s Duncan Institute (*Fifeshire Journal* 13 Jul 1871, 5) with at least a part of the Cupar cast, if Hay Fleming is correct in claiming that a cast of the Sarcophagus disappeared from the Duncan Institute shortly before 1931. If other parts of the Cupar cast assemblage were ‘up for grabs’ or worth grabbing in the mid-19th century, antiquarian circles are likely to have known this. Trevelyan, donor of the 1848 Newcastle cast, was elected an honorary member of the St Andrews Society in 1841 and in return stated his eagerness to promote the interests of the Society (letter from Trevelyan to P Mudie, 16 Jan 1841: Muniments of the University of St Andrews UY 8528/3 1846-98); acquiring and displaying a cast of such an important local monument would have been a generous and visibly demonstrative way of doing so. If he ever visited the museum in Cupar, he did not sign the visitor’s book, so we have no record of whether he was aware of the existing casts in Cupar; but he knew people who would have been. It does appear to be the case, however, that both the Newcastle and Edinburgh casts were specially acquired for refurbishments of Society museums, where we can reliably assume the ambition was to include a representative range of important material for display.

The lack of correspondence with the Irish cast descriptions/measurements suggests that the RIA did not pass its casts to Dundee; it also requires the RIA to have rediscovered its long side and lost its cast of stone 6. Theoretically, the Newcastle museum could have transferred its casts to Dundee between 1931 and 1956. Still, it might seem simpler for the casts now in St Andrews to have been acquired from the Duncan Institute in or before 1931. Prior to 1976 the museum in Dundee had a wider regional remit than now, so accepting an object from Fife was not impossible (Christina Donald, pers comm). Yet even this requires further explanation. It remains unknown why the cast of the short side is not complete, why it is only painted on one side, and why it is mounted for wall hanging. The casts in Dublin are not the same as the ones now in Edinburgh, since they remained in Dublin until at least 1890.

## Conclusions

The stories associated with the later history of the Sarcophagus provide a tantalising glimpse of the interest and energies of early antiquarian societies, and the significance attached to casts of important objects for exhibitions, both permanent and temporary. Taken in tandem with the replication of the Norrie’s Law hoard

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15 According to the entries in its album, numbers of visitors were never high and decreased significantly within a few years of opening, the last entry being in 1867.

(Foster et al 2014), the pioneering actions of one man – George Buist – reveal an unexpectedly advanced and early programme of replication of archaeological material for scientific – ‘expiscation’ – purposes.

My confidence in 1998 about the present location of the two long sides and two short sides that formed the ‘coffin’ on display in Cupar was premature. While a part of it *could* have been sold to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 1849 or to Dublin in 1853, this cannot apply to both halves of the whole ‘coffin’ because Hay Fleming would not have been able to report in 1931 that the casts (whatever had survived) in the Duncan Institute had only recently disappeared (Hay Fleming 1931, 5). The casts now in St Andrews Museum could be part of it, although this is not without its own problems of interpretation. On these grounds, the simplest explanation is that Ross made more than two copies of each casting. Future work to establish the precise relationship between the NMS and St Andrews Museum casts would clearly benefit from side-by-side comparison of these with each other and with the Sarcophagus itself, laser scans of each, and scientific comparison of the plaster and paints of the casts. This does however mean we are witnessing for the first time the commodification of plaster casts of Early Medieval sculpture, as opposed to Classical and other sculptures.

This research has illustrated new ways in which the fabric of original monuments can illuminate their later biographies, but has highlighted how poor or non-existent documentation of past conservation and display practice can hamper our ability to assess this properly.<sup>16</sup> The white layer painted onto the Sarcophagus, probably in 1839, is a critical part of this monument’s biography (*pace* Welander 1998, 70) that merits mentioning in its interpretation.

We have also seen how the fabric of the plaster casts can tell us more about their stories: the technology and the decisive role of the plasterers themselves. The craftsperson’s role too often goes unrecorded and unacknowledged. While there is a swelling appreciation of their value within architectural and art-historical circles (eg Glasgow West Conservation Trust nd; *Mapping the Practice and Profession of Sculpture in Britain and Ireland 1851-1951*), their individual role in the creation of replicas for museums is very largely unsung (but see Bilbey & Cribb 2007, 167-8; Malone 2010; Dwyer 2011).

While many objects may be relatively static, replicas tend to circulate and be exchanged more widely, building histories around and onto themselves as they do so. This expiscation of the Sarcophagus and its early 19th-century casts has disentangled elements of their composite biography but thrown up new questions too. Such replicas are of interest in their own right, but also can impact directly on the thing at their heart, the original antiquity. More broadly, they offer critical insights into the early emergence of archaeology as a discipline, of the activities of antiquarians, and the development of curatorial practice, subjects of keen interest to our honorand.

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16 In line with modern conservation practice, Historic Environment Scotland curates the reconstruction of the missing upper panel of the ‘deer-heads’ corner-slab (stone 4), removed in 1996, as part of the monument’s history (ibid, 65).

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