



PAS Annual General Meeting

As agreed last year, this year's AGM will be held at the conference in October. As this means timetabling the AGM around what we believe will be an exciting conference, we will need to be fairly disciplined! The office bearers' reports will be published in the next edition of the newsletter, and we would ask that you read them and let us know of any comments or issues that you may wish to raise in advance. We also ask that anyone who wishes to stand for election to the committee please let us know.

PAS Conference

The programme for this year's conference focuses on early Christian sites in Pictland. Over recent years, evidence for an extensive network of such sites has been growing, and we look forward to talks on a group of these, together with poster presentations to enliven the lunch break. Registration forms are included with this mailing, and the provisional programme is as follows:

9.45 am — Registration and Coffee

10.15 am — Opening Remarks

10.30 am — Adrian Maldonado

The Chicken and the Egg: The relationship between burial and Early Christianity

11.15am — Martin Carver

Pictish Sculpture and Pictish People on the Tarbat Peninsula, Easter Ross

12.00 pm — Lloyd Laing

Pictish and Norse Christians at Ballachly, Dunbeath, Caithness

12.45 pm — Lunch and poster session

1.45 pm — AGM

2.30 pm — Jill Harden and Strat Halliday

Rona—not just a Saint's Isle

3.15 pm — Sarah Thomas

*The late medieval re-use of early chapel sites –
a case study of Cladh Aruisg and Glen Hinnisdal chapels on Skye*

4.00 pm — Steve Thompson

An early medieval complex in just three days? Time Team's excavation at Baliscate, Mull

4.45 pm — Vote of thanks and close

PAS winter programme 2010–11

provisional dates:

2010 – 15 October; 12 November; 10 December 2011 – 21 January; 18 February; 18 March

New cross from St Kilda – update

As reported in *PAS Newsletter* 49 (Winter 2008, p.9) RCAHMS discovered a new cross-slab on St Kilda in the last hour of the last day of their trip. Spotted thanks to a chance ray of the sun, it was found in a location previously considered to be well-recorded.

With the boat getting ready to sail from Village Bay, the team had only minutes to photograph the cross which was understandably very worn, having been in re-use carved-side up as a drain cover for potentially hundreds of years (1).

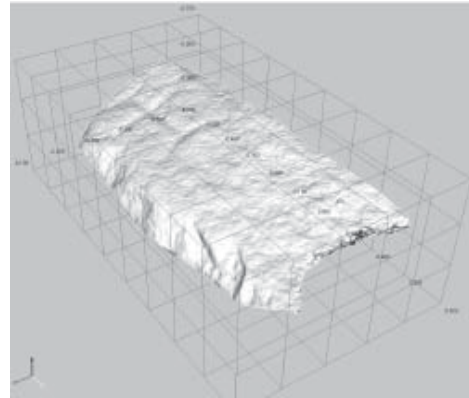


© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS

1 *St Kilda Cross in situ*

Returning in the spring of 2009 the Commission took the opportunity to make a better record of this exciting and important new find. Taking a pair of stereo photographs – one taken slightly offset from the other – my colleague James Heapher was able to create a metrically accurate 3D digital model of the stone using Topcon's Image Master software. The results were similar to if not as sophisticated as what one would get from a laser scanner (2).

Using this 3D model in conjunction with more traditional methods, we have now been able to produce an accurate drawing of the stone (3) which bears a cross with expanded terminals to its arms and a curved tapering terminal at its foot. The top of the stone appears to be broken

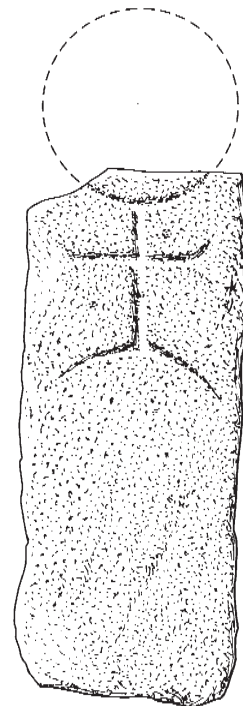


© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS

2 *3D model of the stone*

but retains part of a curve similar to that at the foot of the cross. However although incomplete this arc does not appear to taper, raising the possibility that the head of the cross may have terminated in a complete circle, parallels for which exist in Highland Perthshire and Caithness.

John Borland, RCAHMS



© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS

3 *Latest drawing of the stone; scale 1:10*



Angus Pictish Trail

Angus Council has kindly provided PAS with copies of the new edition of the popular leaflet, *Angus Pictish Trail*.

These are distributed to members with the mailing of this Newsletter.

Arbroath – St Ninian’s burials

The last talk of the winter season at Pictavia was given by Alastair Becket of Guard Archaeology on the subject of ‘Swings and Roundabouts in Victoria Park, Arbroath – why medieval cemeteries and playparks don’t mix’.

For those of our members who are unfamiliar with Arbroath, the park lies beside the shore south-east of the Abbey, east of the harbour area and barely a mile in a direct line from St Vigeans, which lies inland of the Abbey. At the east end of the park, the Seaton cliffs rise abruptly. A footpath leads near the edge of the cliffs up to the old fishing village of Auchmithie. Also known as St Ninian’s Heugh or St Ninian’s Croft, the east end of the park contains the site of a medieval chapel dedicated to St Ninian and a well bearing the saint’s name.

In 1989, a find of human bones was reported when goal posts in the park were moved. Anecdotally, such finds are not uncommon in the area, although rarely reported to the authorities. However in January 2009, work began on a children’s playpark towards the east end and human bones were once again uncovered. The police and a forensic pathologist were called in, and, since the bones were obviously old, contact was made with the County Archaeologist and Historic Scotland, and resulted in Guard being called in to examine the site.

There was clear evidence for the presence of two bodies, parts of which had been removed by the police. From the opened area came a fragment of polished haematite and a fragment of a possible 11th-century jug handle from Yorkshire. The bones were reasonably preserved in the alkaline, sandy soil. The graves were cleaned up to reveal the skeletons.

Evidence for Victorian landscaping, dating to the period just before the park opened in 1897 was found, making it difficult to establish whether or not stones that seemed to frame one of the graves were in fact contemporaneous. A great deal of disarticulated bone or bone fragments were found distributed all the way down through the trench, suggesting that there may have been many burials in this area, intercutting over an extended period of time. In the immediate area, these were not cisted graves. The two reasonably clear skeletons were

laid approximately east west, on slightly different orientations and at somewhat different depths. One was all that remained of an adult male. To him probably belonged a skull removed by the police. Three stones possibly had lain around the head area, and no grave goods were found in the grave cut. The other was a young adolescent, who was probably between 10–14 years old at death. This individual had dental enamel hypoplasia, which often indicates childhood stress such as disease or malnutrition. The seventh cervical and the first thoracic vertebrae were deformed, suggesting a congenitally defective spine which may have led to the unusual position in which the body had been laid, partly on the side with the right arm tightly flexed to the shoulder, supported on stones. White quartz pebbles had been laid in a line in front of the face and this flexed arm. A small iron buckle, about 50mm across was found close to the rib and a small T-shaped piece of iron found within the ribcage may have been a strap-tag. Neither was diagnostic as to date.

Possible cist slabs were found in the spoil heaps left by the council workers, and traces of a possible wall were found in the area.

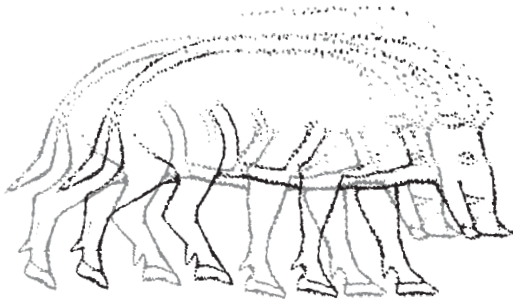
Post-excavation analysis of the finds is not yet complete. However, it seems probable that Victoria Park overlies a cemetery of medieval date, in use for an extended period of time. The 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of the area shows the supposed site of St Ninian’s chapel as close to St Ninian’s Well, but on the other side (north-east) from the graves. Old cottages shown in 1901 possibly used stone from this chapel. According to the first *Statistical Account*, no vestige of the chapel remained, but a part of the burying ground was still visible (in the form of ‘coffins of stone’). A poorly preserved skeleton found 200 metres away from the present discovery in 1988 was dated to AD540–630.

Further west, near the harbour, lies the supposed site of St Mary’s chapel, and three long cists have been found at various points in the vicinity. Again, these appear to have been widely spread.

It seems as though a large number of people were interred in the area between the Abbey and the sea, over a period long predating the founding of the Abbey. Possibly the proximity of a holy site made this a favoured place for burial; but if that was the case, the site was one in existence before the foundation of the Abbey in 1178.

Sheila Hainey

Dunadd – double-boar



In the second edition of *Focus*, the magazine of the Technical and Conservation Group of Historic Scotland, there is an informative article by HS Stone Conservator, Colin Muir, outlining the history of the management of the carved rock outcrop at Dunadd and its recent reassessment in June 2009.

The boar carving recorded in 1904 was first protected in 1928 by a metal box with a glazed lid. This was replaced in 1969 by a toughened glass cover on short bronze legs rather like a coffee table. This, in turn, was dispensed with in 1979 when it was decided to protect the original area by covering it with a 100+ mm thick cast-cement replica. This weighed about 1 tonne and was brought to the site by Naval helicopter. Its expected life-span was reckoned to be 25 years but after 30 it was decided to remove the cast to allow access for conservation evaluation and academic study. The stone was also recorded photographically and by 3D laser scanning.

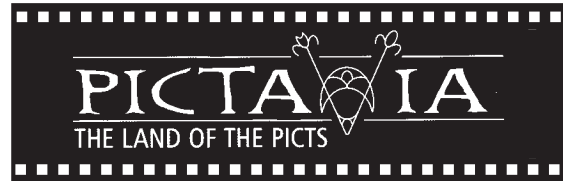
The freshly exposed stone surface was found to be in good condition and there appeared to be no discernable changes in the carving when comparing the 3D scans with earlier photographs. When work was completed the cast was repaired and relaid over the bedrock.

The excellently illustrated, concise report ends with the following conclusion:

Whilst the capping of the original site with a replica was an unconventional, and indeed controversial decision, it has proven to be a very successful method of preventative conservation. It has effectively protected one of Scotland's most important cultural sites from human and environmental impact for over a quarter of a century, with minimal maintenance. Within that time the cast has been sacrificially subjected to heavy foot-wear, elemental weathering, incised

graffiti and malicious damage intended for the original. The present replica will need to be replaced in the next 5 years, This will provide an important opportunity to utilise the 3D data acquired, reassess the capping technique, and adapt where possible, to avoid latent issues such as a salt-rich cement materials.

‘Centurion’ – veni, vidi



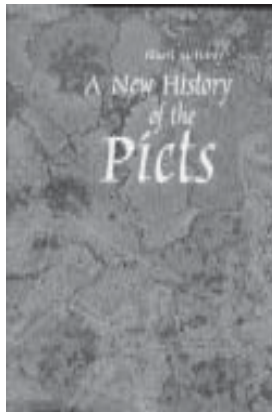
A special preview screening of the film *Centurion* (see PAS Newsletter 51, 8–9) was held at Dundee Contemporary Arts Cinema on 10 April, prior to its general release later that month. This free event was organised by Pictavia, which is run by the Economic Development Unit of Angus Council, and tickets were enthusiastically snapped up ensuring a full house and an expectant audience.

However, for the non-psychopathic, viewing was an uncomfortable experience as the film's flimsy storyline proved to be merely a vehicle for an unrelenting blood-bath of unmitigated brutality and horribly violent killings. How such fare can be regarded as entertainment and worthy of a 15 certificate is hard to understand, but even more puzzling is why Pictavia saw fit to host the event in the first place and what that organisation hoped to gain from promoting this rubbish?

According to Pictavia's upbeat assessment, 'over 200 film fans enjoyed' the screening (www.pictavia.org.uk), but, judging from the palpable relief and mass exodus at the end, very few people were inclined to stay for the last part of the event to interact with three appropriately armed and uniformed members of the Antonine Guard, two of whom had worked on the film as extras and historical consultants.

In this case, bums on seats were no measure of audience approval, but do bring to mind the only (and unfortunately) memorable line in the film – uttered by a disgruntled Roman looking out from the walls of Inchtuthil – “This is the arsehole of the world!” Much the same description could be applied to the film's contribution to civilisation.

Book review



A New History of the Picts

Stuart McHardy

Luath Press, Edinburgh, 2010

ISBN 9781906307653 192pp, hb £14.99

A New History of the Picts is a bold title, given that new books covering Pictish history have been averaging at least two a year for the past ten years. Does McHardy deliver something completely new?

First of all, McHardy paints with a very broad brush indeed. Almost inevitably, given the constraints of publishing a popular book, critical assessment of many of the sources and authorities on whom he relies is lacking. Given that, some sections of the work could easily have been cut to make way for a more focused argument of what appears as the main thesis.

For example, it is disappointing that he rehearses arguments against work that belongs to an older generation, illustrating the 'imperialist' view of history by reference to Sheppard Frere's 1987 *Britannia: A History of Roman Britain*. It would be only fair to acknowledge that a great deal has changed in the mindset of both historians and archaeologists as the notion of Britain as an imperial power, modelled on an imagined Rome, has disappeared from the consciousness of the majority who were born after that strange pinkish red started to disappear from school maps of the world. Although there still appears to be a disproportionate amount of data on Roman sites in Scotland, it would be fair to say that over the last twenty to thirty years a great deal of work has been undertaken at native sites. Unfortunately, the amount of dating evidence gathered has been disappointing, as has the

collection of artefacts, but this seems more to be a function of the survival of material in conditions which prevail across much of the country.

McHardy contends that the Roman sources reveal that repeated attempts were made to invade the lands north of Hadrian's Wall, and that each of these was repulsed by fierce warrior tribes. His approach to this material is somewhat ambiguous; he is aware of some of the difficulties of using, for example, panegyrics as literal reports of actual events, but does not give details of why he chooses to use some aspects of works and not others into his argument. Neither does he examine how his thesis fits with the archaeological evidence which shows that there is no evidence for any hasty retreat from, or of any violence offered to, any of the Roman military establishments in the area.

In the period after the Roman departed, the Picts remained essentially a tribal society. McHardy puts forward the views of Hedeager on tribal society, when perhaps he could have made more use of documents such as, for example, the early medieval Irish and Welsh law codes to illustrate the nature of contemporary and neighbouring tribal societies which were gradually developing into kingdoms. A brief note on what is known about the evolving nature of kingship would have clarified the stages through which McHardy sees the Pictish tribes passing. He views the influence of the developing power of Northumbria as providing a stimulus to political development in a way that the Romans failed to do, with the church of Rome as a powerful agent in the process, especially after the synod of Whitby. Some of the major landmarks in the conflict between Northumbrian and Pict, with the increasing records of individuals identified as leaders or as kings among the Picts, McHardy rattles forward through the centuries that led to the coalescence of Scots and Picts into the kingdom of Alba, still with an emphasis on capability rather than primogeniture in the choice of king.

McHardy has some interesting points to make, but a greater focus on and development of his argument, that the Picts bequeathed what was essentially a tribal warrior society as a lasting legacy to the Highlanders of the north, would have made for a much easier book to review.

Sheila Hainey

‘Westray Wife’ homecoming

Scotland's earliest human face, the Orkney Venus has been on the road being temporarily displayed at venues across Scotland. The 5,000 year old figurine- also known as the Westray Wife, was discovered last summer by archaeologists working on the Historic Scotland excavation at the Links of Noltland, on the Orkney island of Westray. The figurine is the only known Neolithic carving of a human form to have been found in Scotland.

Measuring 41mm by 31mm – the Venus is made from sandstone and depicts a human face and body. The name comes from its resemblance to prehistoric carvings from elsewhere in Europe – often referred to as Venus figurines.

The touring exhibition opened in March at the Chapel Royal at Stirling Castle before progressing to Kilmartin House in Argyll and then on to Urquhart Castle. The figure returned to Orkney in May to be displayed at the Westray Heritage Centre, where it will remain until the autumn when it will complete its tour at the Orkney Museum in Kirkwall until October.

Minister for Culture and External Affairs Fiona Hyslop said:

This was a find of tremendous international as well as national importance, so it is fantastic that people have the opportunity to see the Venus first hand. By taking it on tour across Scotland we want to ensure that as many people as possible get to see the Orkney Venus and find out more about the vast amount of activity that is going on to protect and enhance our rich archaeological heritage.

As well as providing an overview of recent research on the Venus, the exhibition tells the story of the current excavations on Westray. The Links of Noltland is one of Orkney's richest and most threatened sites, with severe wind erosion causing the collapse of the dune system which has protected the archaeology for thousands of years.

Richard Strachan, Senior Archaeologist at Historic Scotland explains:

The Links of Noltland is one of the most fascinating sites in Scotland – with extensive evidence still surviving about the people who lived there from the Neolithic to the Bronze Age. The site is under our care, and each year archaeological teams record and preserve as much

information as we can from the site - as the wind strips away and uncovers different layers.

The discovery of the Orkney Venus was further confirmation of the importance of this site – and the secrets it may hold. It is extremely rare to find any replicas of the human form dating from this period – this is the first of its kind in Scotland, and certainly one of the best preserved.

Research is still ongoing looking at the possible origins of the figure – was it for example a sacred object or used for decorative purposes, and we hope that people will take the opportunity to come along and see this mysterious and extremely rare creature.

The Orkney Venus is a find of exceptional rarity and significance and has helped to emphasise the national and international importance of this site currently at threat from wind erosion. The team from EASE Archaeology are busy preparing for this season's excavations where they will concentrate on the Neolithic farmhouse and associated buildings and field system - including the 'cow-skull' building revealed late last year.

For those unable to make it to Westray, they can follow the progress of the excavations on the dig blog at www.westrayheritage.co.uk

The Orkney Venus also on <www.youtube.com/historicscotlandtv>.

Pictavia improvements

Following doubts about the future of Pictavia, Angus councillors have agreed to improve the centre and hope to increase the number of visitors to the facility near Brechin. Since opening more than a decade ago the original targets have not been met and the centre has run at a loss, however, it is estimated that it attracts over £500,000 to the local economy. Last year, with a marked increase in visitors, it performed reasonably well compared with other paid tourist attractions in Angus.

Enhancements to the building will include a revamped entrance, new kitchen facilities and an upgrade of the touch-screen computers.

We hope that the use of the premises as a base for PAS will be secure.

The deadline for receipt of contributions to **PAS Newsletter 56** is **17 August 2010**
Send articles, reviews, pictures etc. by email to <pas.news@btconnect.com>

Gleneagles threat

Sheila Fraser alerted us to a possible threat to the 'Goose Stone', the standing stone at Peterhead, Gleneagles (NN 924 098), which has a pair of Pictish symbols, a goose and a rectangle, carved on it.

In early March this year, work started on a scheme to create a safer junction on the A9 at Loaninghead, which will also provide access to new housing developments at Auchterarder and Gleneagles. In the first phase of this development, large earth-moving equipment operated in the field where the stone stands removing topsoil and creating a huge borrow pit. All of this happened round about and very close to the stone itself. Fortunately this Scheduled Monument has not been damaged and it is currently protected by temporary fencing, but, in its immediate vicinity, another Scheduled Monument only visible as a cropmark, identified as an enclosure some 40m in diameter and possibly a settlement site, has been extensively damaged due to the borrow pit. As neither planning permission nor Scheduled Monument Consent was given for the pit, all work round about the stone and the greater archaeologically sensitive area ceased from about mid-April. Meanwhile, Historic Scotland, Perth and Kinross Council, Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust and the offending developers are negotiating mitigation of the situation. It seems that the developer has agreed to fund remedial archaeological work to attempt to gain as much as possible from the ravaged site.

Margaret Evans

A number of our members will remember Margaret S Evans. Although she had mobility problems, she regularly managed to get to PAS conferences by public transport from her home in Kennoway. Margaret was a gifted artist, and her *Stone Carvings and Carved Stones in Fife* includes a number of Pictish carvings. The committee was saddened to hear of her death late last year. Margaret very generously left £500 to the Pictish Arts Society in her will, and we intend to use this in a way which will commemorate her love of our carved stone heritage.



© Sheila Fraser

Looking north to the fenced stone now standing above the deep pit.



© Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust

A view of the stone from the west.

Pictish symbol language

'Pictish symbols revealed as a written language through application of Shannon entropy'

Rob Lee, Philip Jonathan and Pauline Ziman

Proc. R. Soc. A – published online 31 March 2010

doi: 10.1098/rspa.2010.0041

<rspa.royalsocietypublishing.org>

A paper by PAS member Rob Lee and colleagues has caused quite a stir since its publication earlier this year.

Lee *et al* regard the Pictish symbols as an 'enigmatic script', typified as consisting of short sequences of regularly placed symbols, of which other earlier examples are the inscribed pottery of neolithic China and the inscribed clay tablets of the Indus Valley culture. Whether any of these scripts represents a written language is difficult to determine as the symbol corpus sizes are usually small, often with disagreement over defining individual symbols, also inscriptions are usually brief, and there is no established means of assessing the level of communication when sample sizes are small.

However, this paper describes, a technique

that incorporates linguistic functions in order to quantify the level of communication in these small, 'incomplete' symbol datasets and thus differentiate between the different possible character types of writing.

Shannon entropy quantifies the information contained in a message or character, and can be applied to differentiate between datasets of random sematograms, such as heraldic arms, and datasets of more predictable lexigraphic scripts embodying the form of verbal language – logograms, syllabograms, alphabetic and code characters.

For the non-mathematician, this paper will probably present a more formidable challenge than that of the Pictish symbols themselves. However, if the mass of equations and jargon (e.g. 'two-parameter decision-tree technique') can be taken as read, thanks to the Royal Society's referees, the authors' conclusion is clear to all – that the Pictish symbols display the characteristics of a lexigraphic (written) rather than sematographic (pictorial) system of communication.

It seems that the Pictish symbols could represent either syllables or words depending on whether Mack's categorisation of symbols rather than Allen and Anderson's is used; the issue can only be decided when consensus on the composition of the symbol corpus is reached. Word or syllable, the total lexicon is small employing an extremely limited syntax, similar in constraint to the genealogical name lists.

Deciphering the symbols, however, is another matter entirely and remains the real problem of the Picts.

[We hope readers will access this paper online, and comments are welcome for publication in the next issue of PAS Newsletter. Ed.]

Birnie excavations

This year the last season of excavations on the Iron Age and Pictish site at Birnie will take place from 22 August to 17 September. Visitors are welcome during working hours: 9–6 each day except Saturday. There will be an **Open Day on Sunday 12 September**, with guided tours on the hour and various craft activities.

As usual, volunteer diggers are welcome provided they can work a minimum of three days and contact Fraser Hunter well in advance as spaces may be limited (tel: 0131 247 4053; email: f.hunter@nms.ac.uk).

Directions: The site is at NJ 208 589, on the Birnie to Elgin road. Coming from Elgin, heading for Thomshill, drive past the turn-off to the church and take the next right, opposite a small cottage. Just before some trees on the right, turn right into the field and park by the Portakabin. In wet weather, access to the field is difficult and the only parking is at Birnie kirk where a path leads down to the road which runs past the site (c.10 min walk).

Solution to crossword in PAS Newsletter 54

Across: 1 relic; 4 odium; 5 nears; 6 ago; 7 tie; 9 conquest; 11 Seychelles; 14 debated; 15 scripts; 18 dependable; 20 reigning; 21 Ronaldsay; 22 hosta; 24 night; 27 neeps; 28 Lochgelly; 31 Polar bear; 32 pets; 33 dram.

Down: 1 reconnoitre; 2 chemistry; 3 finalist; 6 Alexander; 8 ethnicity; 9 cured; 10 queue; 12 Latin; 13 swing; 16 Christianity; 17 bellows; 19 banishment; 23 ignites; 25 Inchcolm; 26 espalier; 28 lips; 29 guru; 30 yard.
