THE PICTISH ARTS SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER 95 SUMMER 2020

The strangest of times

2019 was an excellent year for PAS. Our membership grew. Our Brechin lectures were all well-attended; indeed it was not uncommon to have to put out more seats. All 3 events of our Forfar conference, the Friday evening reception in the Meffan Institute, the conference itself and the Sunday fieldtrip were also well-attended. And to top it all off, our joint crowd-funding venture with North of Scotland Archaeological Society (NoSAS) to raise £20,000 to save, conserve and display the Conan Stone was a resounding success. Indeed we surpassed the target by more than £2,000!

So as we entered 2020, all was looking rosy. Our new Brechin Lectures organiser Kelly Kilpatrick had arranged an exciting spring lecture season and was already turning her mind to the autumn line-up. Despite a recent move with her family to Galway, which would mean she would never be able to partake of the lectures, Kelly was enthusiastic to continue in the role. Now that's commitment to the PAS cause!

Our 2020 conference organiser Jane Geddes had sorted out pretty much every detail of that event: venue, caterers, speakers, fieldtrip coach hire and itinerary all in the bag. Well done and thanks Jane!

Conservation of the Conan Stone was well underway and a joint conference to mark its move to Dingwall Museum, organised in conjunction with NoSAS and the Scottish Society for Northern Studies (SSNS), scheduled for Inverness in early May was already close to being sold out within days of the tickets going on sale. (I would like to thank my NoSAS and SSNS counterparts, especially Anne MacInnes and Ian Giles for their outstanding organisational skills.)

All was indeed looking rosy. As we neared the date of the March lecture and made final arrangements for the joint conference, we were aware of the growing media coverage of Covid-19, a virus whose name had only recently become known to the world. Any initial thoughts of media hype were soon dispelled as this disease spread from country to country, continent to continent. Epidemic became pandemic and it became apparent that bringing 30+ people together in Brechin or 100 in Inverness would not be a good idea. Reluctantly we cancelled our spring events. It seemed like a drastic move but within a couple of weeks, the prohibition of such gatherings became Scottish Government policy and law. We made the right call.

Unless you have just returned to Earth from the International Space Station, the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown will have had an enormous impact on your daily life. The PAS Committee continues to plan for the future. All of our spring lecture speakers have agreed to re-scheduled dates in the autumn. Preparations and provisional bookings for the October conference are all made. And the joint Conan Stone conference is merely postponed until next May.

However, it is still far from certain if and when we will be able to action any of the above plans. Even if restrictions have been lifted by the autumn and public gatherings are permitted, we will have to weigh up the wisdom of holding such events. We might be able to limit numbers in Brechin Town House Museum, space the seats out and ask everyone (except the speaker) to wear a mask. We could certainly utilise all the available space of our conference venue to spread the audience out but it's difficult to see how we could safely offer a buffet lunch. It is equally difficult to see how we can safely pack 30 conference delegates into a minibus for a conference fieldtrip. So we are looking into the possibility of alternative ventures, such as on-line lectures.

On the plus side, our 'call to arms' to the membership has resulted in a bumper crop of newsletter contributions, as can be seen in this edition. In fact it is my hope that we can increase the frequency of the newsletter to bi-monthly or thereabouts. So if you sent something in and it's not in this edition, it will be in the next one. And if you haven't sent something in yet, please do so now and help us to keep the membership entertained and edified during these strangest of times. *JB*

Birthday Greetings!

We send many happy returns to Flora Davidson, who recently celebrated her 96th birthday. Flora is a long-standing member of PAS and almost certainly our oldest member. She has been a regular attendee at our conferences and Brechin lectures for decades. In addition to her interest in all things Pictish, Flora is author of *Glen Clova Through the Ages* (now sold out) and co-author with daughter Dr Elspeth Reid of *The Post-Reformation Gravestones of Angus, Scottish Social History in Stone 1560-1715* (a few copies left).

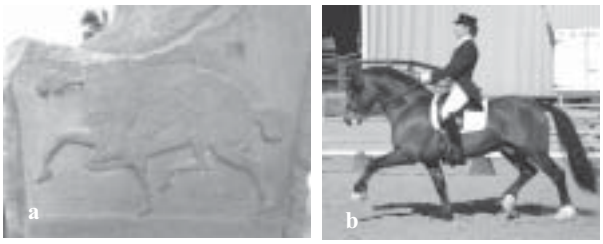
Happy Birthday Flora!

The Pictish Seat: Rider Position in Relief-Carved Equestrian Scenes

The following article is based on two lectures of the same name, given at Groam House Museum on 25 July 2019 and the Pictish Arts Society Conference at Forfar on 5 October 2019.

Experts praise the anatomical accuracy of carved animals on Pictish sculpture. Isabel and George Henderson noted that the Picts used stylised lines on the animals' bodies to communicate the contours of their musculature and joints, while Carola Hicks pointed out that in Class I symbol stones, even the position of an animal's four legs, in relation to each other, are accurate – a feat for any historical period pre-dating Eadweard Muybridge's photographic discoveries about equine gait.[1] Leslie Alcock made the same observation about the horses depicted in equestrian scenes in later, Class II stones: the majority of surviving carvings show horses trotting, and this gait is depicted correctly.[2]

However, what about the human riders themselves in these scenes and their physical positions? To the modern eye, these men look bizarre, with their legs resting in front of their bodies, their calves draped over their horses' shoulders. This differs from horseback riding positions that we are used to seeing today, in which riders keep their legs directly underneath their bodies (**1**). As a lifelong, experienced horsewoman, the Pictish manner of riding puzzled me. One of my riding instructors once told me that no matter the type of riding (jumping, with a short stirrup, or riding dressage or Western with a very long stirrup and straighter leg), the rider's entire leg must remain underneath their body, so that if the horse were to suddenly disappear from existence underneath the rider, the rider could fall in this position and supplely land on their feet. Pictish riders, by contrast, ride with their legs out in front, and in such a situation would land on the ground on their rear ends. Why were Pictish riders depicted as sitting this way in carved equestrian scenes? Is it possible that the Picts, despite their natural depictions of animals, were simply terrible at making images of people? Second, no one has yet confirmed whether these Pictish riders were riding bareback with just a cloth pad for cushion, or if they rode in saddles. If they rode in saddles, did these Pictish men also use stirrups, or some other support for their feet? I have combined my skills as an art historian with my practical knowledge, as a horsewoman, of the effects of horses' motion and physical structure on their human riders' bodies in order to answer these questions. In doing so, I have confirmed that Pictish artists accurately represented how Pictish men actually rode, and that they did so without saddles or stirrups.



1 (**a**) *Pictish equestrian carving in comparison with a modern rider.* (**a**) *Meigle 5* (**b**) *Welsh Cob performing dressage*

Approximately 28 Pictish stones depict surviving equestrian scenes, leading to a total of 70 individual riders. As noted above, most of these horses were clearly depicted as trotting. Knowledge of equine gaits and stylistic comparison between stones made it possible for me to confirm this even on damaged sculptures, so long as two or more of a horse's legs survive. I found that only a handful of carved Pictish horses move at other gaits, and riders on trotting horses share the same position: their thighs rest

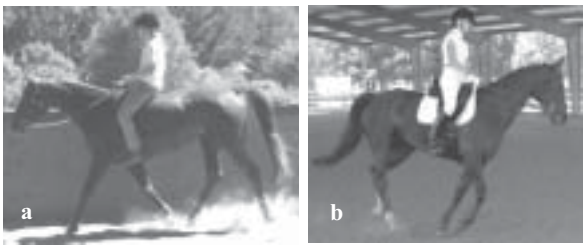
forward in front of their hips, and with a soft bend in the knee, their calves drape across the sides of their horses' shoulders. The men's feet often flop gently, so that their toes are lower than the heels (**1**). Rarely, the bottom of a rider's foot is positioned parallel to the ground, or his heels are lower than his toes, but in both of these cases, the rest of a rider's position matches that of riders' with flopping feet.

To understand the seat – or the area of the rider's bottom that contacts the horse and is a means of maintaining balance and communicating with the animal – in Pictish sculpture, and how the seat relates to the position of any rider's legs and torso in general, we answer three questions: 1) how does a horse's gait affects its rider's seat and overall position, 2) how do saddles alter rider position, and 3) and where do the Picts fit, or don't fit, in the history of saddles and stirrups in Europe from the ancient period onward?

All horse breeds possess four basic gaits (the ways in which the limbs move relative to each other). The first gait is the walk. It is slow and smooth, with the horse alternately moving both legs on the same side of the body forward together. This is seen on the Bullion Stone from Invergowrie (the famous drinking rider). The next gait is the trot, which is faster and bumpier. Here, the horse's legs move forward in alternating, diagonal pairs (right front and left hindleg move forward, and then the left front and right hindleg). The horse is repeatedly airborne at the trot, making it a jaunty gait used often at parades. Next comes the canter, a smoother, gently rocking, and still faster gait, in which the horse pushes forward off its hindlegs in a manner similar to skipping. Finally, the horse gallops (the simplest way to describe a gallop is a very fast canter). A few Pictish horses are depicted in the canter or gallop (which is not discernable), as on the back of the Shandwick cross-slab and the back of the Aberlemno churchyard cross-slab (**2**). Pictish riders' leg positions differ with gait: when trotting, the men's legs rest forward on the horse's shoulders, but while cantering or galloping, their legs are always depicted as hanging directly below their hips, under their own bodies at the horse's belly, much like riding positions today.

Rider position also changes whether one is mounted with a saddle or without (bareback). When riding bareback, a rider's bottom and thighs make full contact with the horse's back, making the angle between the rider's legs wider

2 *Aberlemno 2 reverse: detail of galloping horse and rider, with rider's leg and foot behind the horse's shoulder.*



3 *The author riding bareback on her mare Nellie.* (**a**) *thighs drifted subtly forward (but lower legs pulled back into the preferred modern equitation position) and the seat and torso tilting back. Compare with* (**b**) *showing leg position in dressage saddle, lacking forward thigh drift.*

(similar to straddling a barrel). In response, a rider's thighs will naturally 'drift slightly forward and their upper body may – or may not lean slightly back'.[3] This slight shift helps to narrow the angle between the rider's legs slightly and to tilt their seat (or the triangular area between the pubic bone and the two seat bones) slightly backwards, encouraging the torso to follow. This rearward tilt increases the rider's comfort, balance, and effectiveness, because it prevents concussion against the horse's withers, or the bony ridge of the shoulder blades, which lie directly in front of the rider and are prominent in some animals, even when cushioned by a cloth pad. At the bumpy trot, this bareback position becomes particularly necessary. Saddles, by contrast, lift the rider above the horse's back, shielding the rider from the withers and automatically narrowing the angle between their legs without the need for a forward drift in the thigh. This happens because saddles, by definition, contain a rigid core called a 'tree', which is typically made of wood and simultaneously lifts the rider and distributes their weight across the horse's back. The narrower angle between the rider's thighs makes it physically easier for their legs to hang down

from the hip sockets, below their body in the manner we are accustomed to seeing today (**3**). However, if Pictish riders were indeed bareback, the extremely pronounced forward position of their legs, with calves and feet over the horses' shoulders, is still more extreme than the positions I myself adopted in frequent bareback riding as a younger woman or see today, including casual 'backyard' riders and driven equine sport competitors alike (**3**).

4 *Manuscript illumination of later medieval knights charging with legs braced forward against stirrups, over their horses' shoulders.*

This raises the question as to whether the Pictish riding position stemmed from a particular use of saddles and/or stirrups. The Pictish leg position appears, at first, similar to and later photographic records of riders dating from before the early 20th century. The leg position we are familiar with today (bent directly under the rider's body rather than aligned forward in front of the vertical) is actually a recent development, and an outlier in equestrian history in the West. Illuminated manuscripts from the Central Middle Ages depict knights riding with very long stirrup leathers (the strap connecting the stirrup to the saddle). This allowed an elongated leg position, with the knee straight or slightly bent. When simply sitting or riding forward (not charging) on their horses, I have found that in such illuminations, knights' legs hang straight down or are held slightly forward in front of their hips, in this second case closer to the horses' shoulders than is the norm in riding today. Later medieval knights were also depicted as riding in saddles with very high pommels (the front of the saddle) and cantles (the back of the saddle), which helped secure them during jousting and shock warfare (using a stabilised lance) (**4**). This helped to hold the rider in position and prevent him from falling off when his lance or other weapon made contact with his target during the charge.[4] I have noticed that medieval illuminations of mounted knights in the act of charging typically depict them as pushing their legs forward in front of their hips, over their horses' shoulders, by straightening their knees and jamming their feet into their stirrups (**4**). I must discuss this further with modern-day jousters and conduct more research into scholarship on later medieval military riding, but it is my observation, as an equestrian familiar with the physics of riding, that this position would have helped these men to distribute the physical impact of contact with the enemy throughout a larger area of their bodies, which otherwise would concentrate in their lower backs and potentially their kidneys, as their bodyweight was pushed backwards against the cantles of their saddles.

While Europe eventually moved away from shock warfare, this later medieval tradition of riding with a long stirrup leather and the leg at least slightly (and sometimes exaggeratedly) in front of the vertical, achieved by pushing the foot against the stirrup, survived in military riding as well as leisure equestrian sports until the early 20th century. You can easily spot this in military and royal portrait paintings from the 16th through the 18th centuries. Photographs of British servicemen from the Crimean War as well as American cavalrymen from the American

5 *'Captain Halford, 5th Dragoons', 1855, detail of photograph by Roger Fenton from the Crimean War*

Civil War up to the late 19th or early 20th century also demonstrate this (**5**). This seat was deemed more 'secure' and did not change until the earlier 20th century, with the innovations of Federico Caprilli (1868–1907), an Italian cavalry officer and military riding instructor who argued that cavalrymen should shorten their stirrups to create a greater bend in their legs and a more forward lean in their torsos, in order to improve their horses' balance and comfort when jumping over obstacles.[5] The American general, Harry D. Chamberlain, improved upon this by stressing the importance of a bent, supple leg, held underneath the rider's body at all times when riding[6] – what we now see as the norm today, whatever the style of riding and equestrian sport (jumping, dressage, Western, et cetera). Therefore, we cannot expect historical depictions of riders, Pictish or otherwise, to match the position we are taught today.

We might now be tempted to argue that the Picts were simply riding in saddles in the manner common in Europe before the 20th century: with a long stirrup leather and a straighter leg, jammed forward into the stirrup, bringing the legs closer to or directly over the horse's shoulders. However, if so, I would expect Pictish artists to clearly depict these saddles and stirrups more clearly. As part of their penchant for naturalism, Pictish carvers accurately rendered other small material details, such as the metal chapes at the end of their riders' scabbards, the bridle leathers and their exact location on the horses' heads (as in Fig. **1** and on stones with minimal weathering such as Meigle 3 and the Aberlemno churchyard cross-slab), as well as the riders' leather shoes (**1**), which match manuscript illuminations of shoed clerics and archaeological survivals. If Pictish riders used saddles and stirrups, they would have depicted them clearly in their carved images. Instead, they only show us cloth pads.

To finally identify whether the Picts rode bareback or in saddles with stirrups, and to understand their leg position in relation to this, we must review the history of saddles and stirrups Europe. Saddles and stirrups entered western Europe relatively recently. Widespread adoption of saddles in the Roman Empire did not occur until the second century AD, and these saddles had four horns (protrusions), with two in front of the rider and two behind to help secure the rider, and no stirrups.[7] Stirrups entered eastern and central Europe with steppe peoples in the seventh century AD, and in the eighth century and approximately AD 800, respectively, first the Scandinavians and then Franks of France and Germany had adopted them.[8] It was not until c.AD 1000 that stirrups came into more widespread use in England, as a result of warfare with the Danes.[9] The use of saddles and stirrups in medieval Ireland was inconsistent: early sources refer only to pads, and saddles and stirrups do not appear in archaeological contexts until the Viking period, as evidenced by the excavation of 10th-century wooden trees and stirrups from Viking Age Dublin, again as a Scandinavian import.[10] Later medieval textual accounts indicate uneven adoption of the saddle in Ireland as late as c.1400.[11]

This evidence makes it historically unlikely that the Picts were riding in saddles with stirrups in the eighth century AD, a likely date for many of the carved images. The peoples of northern Britain might have adopted the stirrupless saddle from the Romans or invented it on their own; however, without the stirrup to brace one's foot against, it is physically difficult for a rider to bring their legs in front of the vertical when sitting in a saddle. The rider must fight gravity and the saddle to hold their legs up. Attempting to solve the problem of gravitational pull by leaning the torso backwards, in order to bring the legs forward of the vertical in a fulcrum-like action, would cause the rider to bounce against the cantle (or the rear horns of a Roman saddle) without a counterbalance in front. Furthermore, the Picts would not have ridden on bareback pads that had stirrup straps and irons attached. Stirrups require a saddle, because its rigid tree distributes the weight of the stirrups across the horse's back. While bareback pads with stirrups exist on the market today, wise riders avoid them because they exert enormous pressure on the horse's back at the point where the stirrup straps are sewn to the pad, causing pain, understandable anger or distress in the horse, behavioural reactions, and over time, serious and potentially permanent injury. The Picts, therefore, most likely rode bareback with just their characteristically flamboyant, winged-shaped pads for cushion.

Compunctions related to 20th-century equitation (seat and riding style) training, a la Caprilli and Chamberlain, explain the difference in the bareback riding positions of the Picts and that which we are familiar with today. When I took riding lessons as a child and teenager, my

instructors used bareback riding as a training activity, instructing me to maintain the same position as I did when in the saddle, in order to strengthen my ability to keep this modern seat under any circumstance. Eventually my growing muscles adapted so that any other physical position still remains difficult for me to adopt. However, there are other ways to ride bareback that are far more comfortable and equally effective. This style of bareback riding exactly matches that of the Picts, and can be viewed in the native, North American bareback sport known as the Indian Relay. Indian Relay is a cultural activity and extreme sport that comprises teams of horses and riders, who gallop around a racetrack.[12] During a race, each team stands in a specific area or box along the side of the racetrack, near the starting line. The riders start mounted bareback on their first horse and gallop once around the track. When they reach their teams again, the rider leaps from the galloping horse to the ground and onto the second horse, which is being held by a teammate. The rider then gallops this horse around the track, exchanges mounts one more time, and finally crosses the finish line. Given the speed and danger of this sport and the lack of saddles, Indian Relay riders are some of the most skilled equestrians I have ever witnessed.

When cantering and galloping, Relay riders often let their legs hang from their hips in a relaxed way, at the horses' bellies and behind their shoulders, just as the Picts are shown doing on galloping horses (**2**). This is possible because these gaits are smoother than the trot, and so the withers do not cause the same amount of concussion. However, when cooling their horses out at the trot, Relay riders commonly tilt their seats backwards so that there is more body-weight on their seat bones. Their torsos follow, and like a fulcrum, their legs drift upwards and forwards over the sides of their horses' shoulders, in the exact same position as carved images of Pictish horsemen (**6**). This balanced seat position (with legs and torso as counter-weights) allows Relay riders to keep their seats away from the horses' bony withers, which one does not want to risk bouncing against at the trot.[13] As their lower-leg muscles flex and relax with the horses' movements, their feet often flop with toes downward, but sometimes lie parallel to the ground or have the heels lowered, all variations we see on Pictish stones. Readers may observe all of this for themselves by watching Youtube videos of Indian Relay races, waiting until the end of the clips to view the riders cooling their horses at the trot.[14] While some Relay riders may be veterans of the same determined, English equitation training as I experienced growing up, this may not be the case for all individuals – I have not had the chance to speak with anyone involved in this sport to ask. Whatever the case, these men commonly adopt a different, but very rational position when trotting their racehorses without saddles. The breed and size of the horse does not present a factor: Indian Relay riders use tall, thin ex-races horses, while the Picts depicted a range of equine sizes on their stones, from large, rounder-bodied ponies to the long-legged horses on the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab. To my knowledge, only one academic expert has commented on this phenomenon in bareback riding, without reference to the Picts. The late Professor Donald White of the University of Pennsylvania and curator at Penn Museum observed this position in ancient Greek art, describing an image from a fourth-century BC silver coin found in Taras,

6 *Indian Relay riders cooling their horses at the trot. Canterbury Park Indian Relay Heat 3 8.26.16*

Italy: 'The naked bareback rider sits on his horse with a curved spine bent back off the perpendicular and feet carried well forward of the knees. This approximates the bareback positions of the 19th-century American Indians and the daredevil riders competing in today's Palio horse race in Siena'.[15]

While there are no connections in time or culture between 21st-century Indian Relay riders, ancient Greek horsemen, bareback riders in the Italian Palio, and Pictish noblemen, the sport of Indian Relay provides an excellent opportunity to observe very effective bareback riding by expert horsemen, in motion, and the effect of different horse gaits and speed on the human body. It helps us break free mentally from the later medieval and modern European riding traditions in which we have been trained or with which we are just more visually familiar, in movies and out in the countryside. The Picts rode bareback, without saddles and stirrups, or other supports for their feet. They were master horse people and masterful artists, and we can trust their depictions of themselves and appreciate the insights they provide about the daily life of the Pictish aristocracy. *Cynthia Thickpenny*

Notes

1 George and Isabel Henderson, *The Art of the Picts: Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (New York: Thames & Hudson), 75; Carola Hicks, 'The Pictish Class I Animals', in eds. Michael R. Spearman and John Higgitt, *The Age of Migrating Ideas: Early Medieval Art in Northern Britain and Ireland. Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Insular Art held at the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh, 3-6 January 1991* (Edinburgh: 1993), 197.

2 Leslie Alcock, 'Image and Icon in Pictish Sculpture', in *Age of Migrating Ideas*, 231-32.

3 Brenda Imus, The Gaited Horse Bible: Buying, Training, and Riding Naturally Gaited Horses—Humane Techniques for the Conscientious Horseman (North Pomfret, Vermont: 2011).

4 For the purpose of the medieval high pommel and cantle, and a summary of scholarly debates about the relationship of the stirrup to shock warfare, see John Sloan, 'John Sloan: "The Stirrup Controversy"', *Internet History Sourcebook Projects*, Fordham University, 2019, https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/med/sloan.asp; Bernard S. Bachrach, 'Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup and Feudalism', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 7 (1970), 49-75.

5 Jim Wofford, 'The Evolution of the Lower-Leg Position', *Practical Horseman*, 2016, https://practicalhorsemanmag.com/training/cro-30296.

6 Ibid.

7 Dr Sophie Hay 'Details of the military four-horned saddle', *Twitter*, 2018, https://twitter.com/pompei79/status/1077333894217764864; R.S. Gawronski, 'Some Remarks on the Origins and Construction of the Roman Military Saddle', *Archeologia* 55 (2004), 1-40.

8 Wilfred A. Seaby and Paul Woodfield, 'Viking Age Stirrups from England and their Background', *Medieval Archaeology* 4 (1980), 87-89, 91-92, 102.

9 Ibid.

10 Finbar McCormick, 'The Horse in Early Ireland', *Anthropozoologica* 42 (1) (2007), 85-104.

11 Ibid.

12 The Indian Relay is a sport with historical origins and is of enormous cultural and personal importance for those who take part. Unfortunately, a discussion of the history, contemporary context, and cultural significance of Indian Relay is outwith the scope of this article. To learn more about the Indian Relay and its cultural significance, as well as upcoming events, readers can start by visiting the Horse Nations Indian Relay Council's website: *Horse Nations Indian Relay Council*, http://www.horsenationsrelay.com [Accessed 14 October 2019]. Readers also may learn more about Indian Relay in the following free documentary: Emerald Downs, 'The Love of the Game', *Youtub*e, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSa1kCXJblE.

13 I am grateful to the audience of my Groam House lecture (by the same title) on July 25th, 2019 for their thoughtful insights about these issues, for example the audience member who pointed out the greater anatomical necessity of this position for men and that her sons naturally adopted it when riding about bareback, as well as another audience member who noted that the muscular (and in some cases fatty) rise of tissue on both sides of horses' (and particularly round-bodied ponies') shoulders make a nice rest for a bareback riders' legs (otherwise blocked by a saddle's skirt) and further helps riders adopt this position—an anatomical feature of horses of which I am aware and an observation I also heartily agree with!

14 For another, very pronounced example of this position at the trot at the end of an Indian Relay race, not pictured in this article, watch from minutes 4:06 onward in the following video: Emerald Downs, '2019 Indian Relay Races: Day 3 - Consolation 1', *Youtube*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sAbGSbboNSw.

15 Donald White, 'A View of the Horse from the Classical Perspective', *Expedition* 53(3) (2010), 29.

captions

Picture credits

1a The author; **1b** Nikki, *Wikimedia Commons*
2 The author
3ab Courtesy of Sara Washington and Helayna Thickpenny
4 St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Ms. Vad. 302 II, fol. 35v
5 Library of Congress. Photograph by Roger Fenton
6 Courtesy of Canterbury Park racetrack

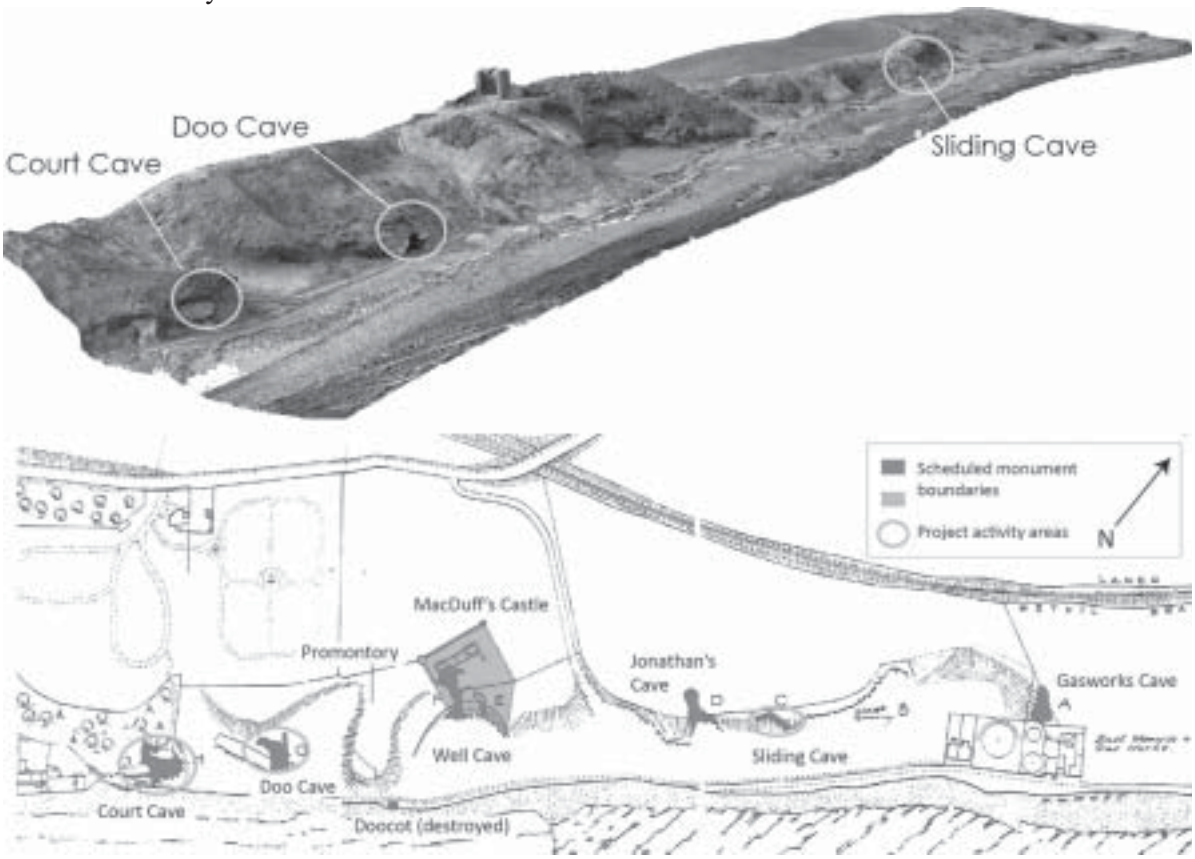
Archaeological excavation at the Wemyss Caves, 2019: preliminary results and discussion of new evidence from Court Cave and Sliding Cave

Introduction

In July 2019, a partnership of the SCAPE Trust, Save the Wemyss Ancient Caves Society and the University of Aberdeen carried out targeted archaeological excavation in Court Cave, Doo Cave and Sliding Cave: three of the seven Wemyss Caves that form part of Scheduled Monument SM817. The research objectives addressed two overarching questions. Firstly, to learn something of the potential significance of the buried archaeological resource in Court Cave and Doo Cave because no modern investigations have ever taken place within them; and secondly, to further investigate stratified deposits in Sliding Cave, previously dated to the 3rd–4th century AD, which have potential to contribute to wider research of national significance about the origin and dating of Pictish symbols. This article presents preliminary results and discussion of the excavations in Court Cave and Sliding Cave, two of the Wemyss Caves that contain Pictish symbols.

The Wemyss Caves are famous for their ancient carvings, including the largest collection of Pictish symbols found in one place in Scotland. Around 50 pictograms were originally documented in the mid- to late-19th century in five of the numerous caves along this coastline (Allen and Anderson 1903; Simpson 1867; Stuart 1867). Of these 26 survive in three caves: Court Cave, Jonathan's Cave and Sliding Cave. They closely resemble abstract symbols and animal representations more commonly found on Pictish symbol stones. However, the symbols have a particular affinity with those carved in the entrance passages of Sculptor's Cave, Covesea; inscribed on plaques at the promontory fort at Dunnicaer, Aberdeenshire; and found on further rare examples of portable stone plaques and bone objects, e.g. from Old Scatness, Shetland, and Pool on the Island of Sanday in Orkney.

The Wemyss Caves also have archaeological evidence of use extending beyond the Pictish period. This includes evidence of ard marks cut into raised beach deposits in front of the Well Cave sealed by soils radiocarbon dated to 750–410 cal BC, and two medieval burials *circa* 50m southwest of Jonathan's Cave radiocarbon dated to cal AD 890–1220 and cal AD 1020–1180 (Gibson & Stevens 2007). Local history



1 *Excavation locations marked on photogrammetric 3D model of the Wemyss Caves coastline and on the OS map used in the 1939 scheduling documentation.*

associated with the caves informs us that King James IV spent an evening with gypsies in Court Cave (Gib 1795, 532), which was also known as the Bark Cave because until the middle of the 19th century fishermen dried their nets in it after dipping them in preservative made from the bark of oak and birch (Rankin 1988). Into the 1960s, miners played the gambling game of Toss in Court Cave where bets were laid on the outcome of tossing two pennies in the air.

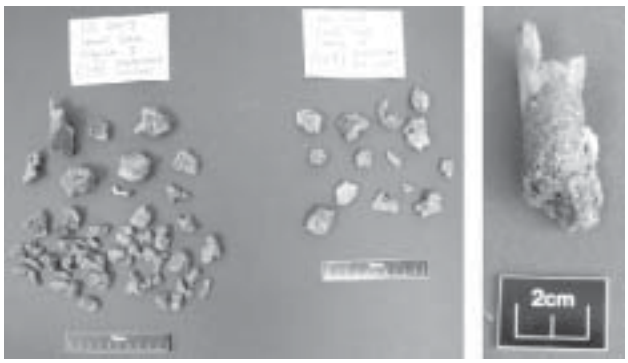
Court Cave

Two trenches were excavated inside the main chamber of Court Cave. Trench 3 located in front of the cave wall that bears the Pictish symbols, and Trench 2 located just inside the east entrance. Both recorded shallow highly compacted layers of relatively recent date and encountered bedrock approximately 30cm below the current cave floor. The uppermost deposits in the two trenches had a laminated structure typical of trample and contained a high proportion of coal dust. It is tempting to link them with the known use of the Court Cave as a regular place where miners played the gambling game of Toss up to the mid-20th century.

2 *Trench 3 in Court Cave positioned in front of the cave wall containing Pictish symbol carvings.*

In Trench 2, a single sherd of a Scottish White Gritty Ware green-glazed jug (14th–15th century) and five conjoining sherds from a Yorkshire Type Ware green-glazed jug (13th–14th century) were recovered from a slight hollow in the bedrock floor. This fortuitous survival of medieval material at the base of otherwise recent and shallow deposits indicates the bedrock floor of Court Cave was kept clean during this period, and it was not until the 19th century that material washing in from the rear and entrances of the Cave has been allowed to accrete on the cave floor.

Trench 1, located just outside the east entrance to Court Cave, may hold more clues as to activities in and in the immediate vicinity of



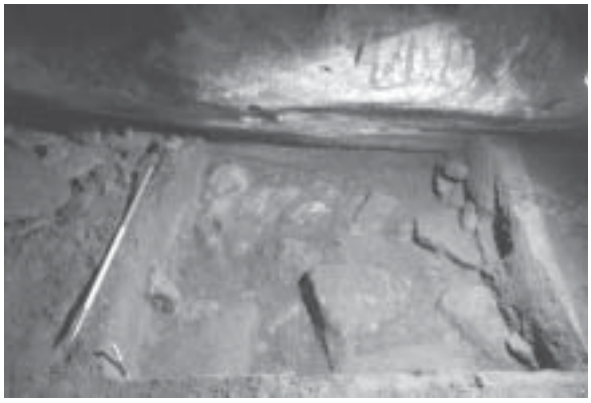
3 *Iron working residues from Trench 1 and detail of tuyère.*

Court Cave prior to more recent times. The trench was excavated 2.3m to bedrock, and contained deeply buried midden material including butchered animal bone, marine shell, and 5 pottery sherds from a Northern English Ware green-glazed jug, as well as evidence of iron working in the form of slag, a fragment of bloom and a fragment of tuyère (the nozzle through which air is forced into a smelter, furnace, or forge). Given the location of Trench 1, the most likely explanation for the relative depth of sediments and abundance of archaeological material is that it originates from deposits cleared out from Court Cave.

A radiocarbon date of cal AD 561–651 returned from a cattle astragalus lying on the bedrock at the base of the midden and the 14th/15th century pottery at the top of the sequence provide the parameters for the period over which the material was deposited. The animal bone comprised both domestic and wild species, and the presence of otter and grey seal may indicate some animals were being processed for their pelts. This is the first time that evidence for iron smelting or smithing has been identified in the Wemyss Caves. Caves and rock shelters are well-suited for metalworking as they provide stable temperatures, shelter from the elements and the low light levels required to judge temperature by flame colour. Elsewhere in Fife, ironworking debris has been recorded within Constantine's Cave (Wace and Jahu 1915) and other examples are known from around Scotland, but few are reliably dated to the medieval period. An exception is the Smelter's Cave, one of the Rosemarkie Caves on the Black Isle, where an *in situ* smithing hearth inside the cave was associated with occupation dating from 600–800AD (Birch 2017). In a further stage of analysis, we will apply luminescence dating to the tuyère fragment in the hope of refining the date of iron working at the Wemyss Caves.

Sliding Cave

The only securely dated context of cave deposits in a cave where there are surviving Pictish carvings has been, thus far, the Sliding Cave. Here, a date of cal AD 244–388 was obtained from barley in an undisturbed archaeological layer interpreted as a possible occupation surface of trampled clay (Gibson & Stevens 2007). The re-excavation of the 2004 Time Team trench in the Sliding Cave successfully located the 3rd–4th century occupation horizon, which lay directly upon the cave 'floor' of large rounded boulders, and sampled additional material from it for analysis and radiocarbon dating. The excavation also discovered a bone-rich layer below this occupation horizon that lay beyond the limits of the 2004 trench. Similar cultural deposits containing bone, shell and charcoal, in the same stratigraphic context were present in Trench 2 positioned adjacent to the two rectangle symbols found in Sliding Cave.



4 *Post-excavation photograph of Trench 2 showing position in relation to the rectangle symbols*

A total of six radiocarbon dates were obtained from short-lived wood charcoal sampled from each occupation layer. Four of these returned dates of 1st–early 3rd century AD, one was dated to cal AD 132–327, and one to cal AD 428–616. The spread of dates across the deposit suggests that it formed over several centuries, although all except one of the dates place the activity from the 1st to early 4th centuries AD. We can imagine the formation process of this occupation layer. A result of repeated use of the cave: the trampling in of material on the bottom of shoes and feet over an uneven boulder cave floor, occasionally disturbed by water ingress, and mixed with material washing into the cave, and rock falling from the caves sides and roof. It is hoped that micromorphological analysis will further our understanding of the character of the cultural layer.

The only other cave that bears numerous Pictish symbols very similar in form to those in the Wemyss Caves and where scientifically dated deposits are available is Sculptor's Cave near Covesea on the Moray coast (B, □ster & Armit 2018). The Sculptor's Cave has a grisly reputation as a place of death and violence following the discovery and excavation in the 1920s and 1970s of thousands of fragments of human bone, some showing signs of decap-itation, inside the cave. A re-assessment and radiocarbon dating programme of this material (Armit *et al.* 2011) has demonstrated that the human remains fall into two distinct chronological groups. The majority date to the Mid–Late Bronze Age, but the vertebrae that provided evidence for decapitation and other violent treatment of six individuals, were dated to cal AD 220–335. The authors do not discount a link between the Pictish symbols and the Late Iron Age ritual killing in the cave, but separate the two actions, not expecting the carving of the Pictish symbols to date much before the 6th century AD, although there were no surviving archaeological finds and deposits more recent than the 4th century AD.

Recent work by the University of Aberdeen at Dunnicaer promontory fort in Aberdeenshire, a site where plaques inscribed with Pictish symbols remarkably similar to those in the Wemyss Caves were discovered in the 19th century, has applied Bayesian modelling of radiocarbon dates from the excavations. The results show that the site was occupied between cal AD 200 and AD 400, and the rampart wall with which the symbol stones were associated was likely constructed between cal AD 285 and AD 350 (Noble *et al*. 2018). This is important because it provides a securely dated archaeological context for the use of Pictish symbols in the 3rd–4th century AD, and thus makes plausible the linking of scientifically dated Late Iron Age activity in the Sliding Cave and Sculptor's Cave with the carving of the pictographs on their walls.

Nearly 25 years ago Lesley Alcock wrote a prescient short article in the Pictish Arts Society Journal (Alcock 1996, 2–5) where he proposed that the variety of pictographs found in the Wemyss Caves and Sculptor's Cave, along with those inscribed on the plaques at Dunnicaer and a (then) recently discovered plaque from the Pictish phase of settlement at Pool, Sanday, could be ancestral to the formalised Class I

symbols on free-standing Pictish stone monuments. Alcock's argument was based on the overall differences between stylistic characteristics shared between symbols found in caves and on plaques to those found on free-standing stones. Current work at the Wemyss Caves together with renewed archaeological research by colleagues at the Sculptor's Cave, and a comprehensive programme of research into the archaeology of the Picts by the University of Aberdeen, is writing the next chapter of this story. Stratigraphic information and scientific dating from careful archaeological excavation is helping us piece together the timing of the origins of Pictish symbols and the varied contexts of their use.

Joanna Hambly
withcontributions from
Gemma Cruikshanks, Derek Hall, Gordon Noble, and *Catherine Smith*

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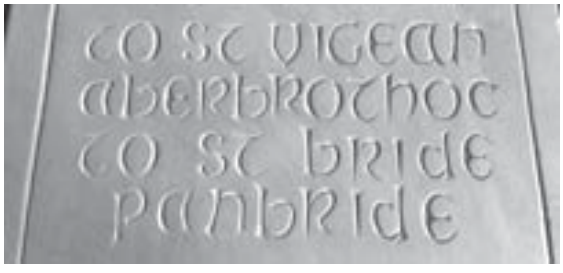
The things you learn on the internet (or not)

While stumbling around in the Internet jungle, the following text came to light in the journal *Celtic Life* for 5th June 2019, under the heading 'Story of the Picts'. This may seem a somewhat ambitious title for a brief article, but it picked up on one of the major elements of that story.

> *The Battle of Dun Nechtain was a pivotal moment in Pictish history that became a keystone in the evolution of the Scottish nation* [so far, so good]*, so it is not surprising that the event was recorded by the finest artists of their day.*

Can anyone enlighten me as to who these artists are, and where their work may be viewed? I did enquire of *Celtic Life,* but no reply has been forthcoming. *Graeme Cruickshank*

We have no idea of what they may be referring to Graeme ... *JB*



Carved inscription by David McGovern —
See 'A new cross slab for St Vigeans' on page16

PAS Newsletter 96

The deadline for receipt of material is

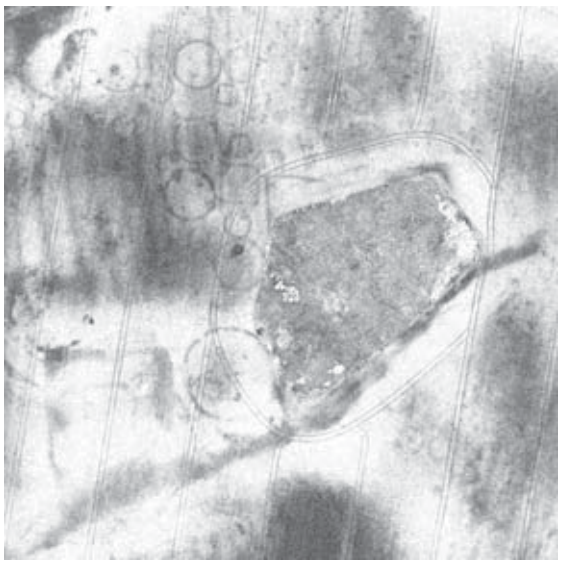
Saturday 18 July 2020

Please email contributions to the editor:
<johnborland60@ aol.com>

Barrow-loads of barrows: excavating a monumental Pictish cemetery at Tarradale on the Black Isle

The project

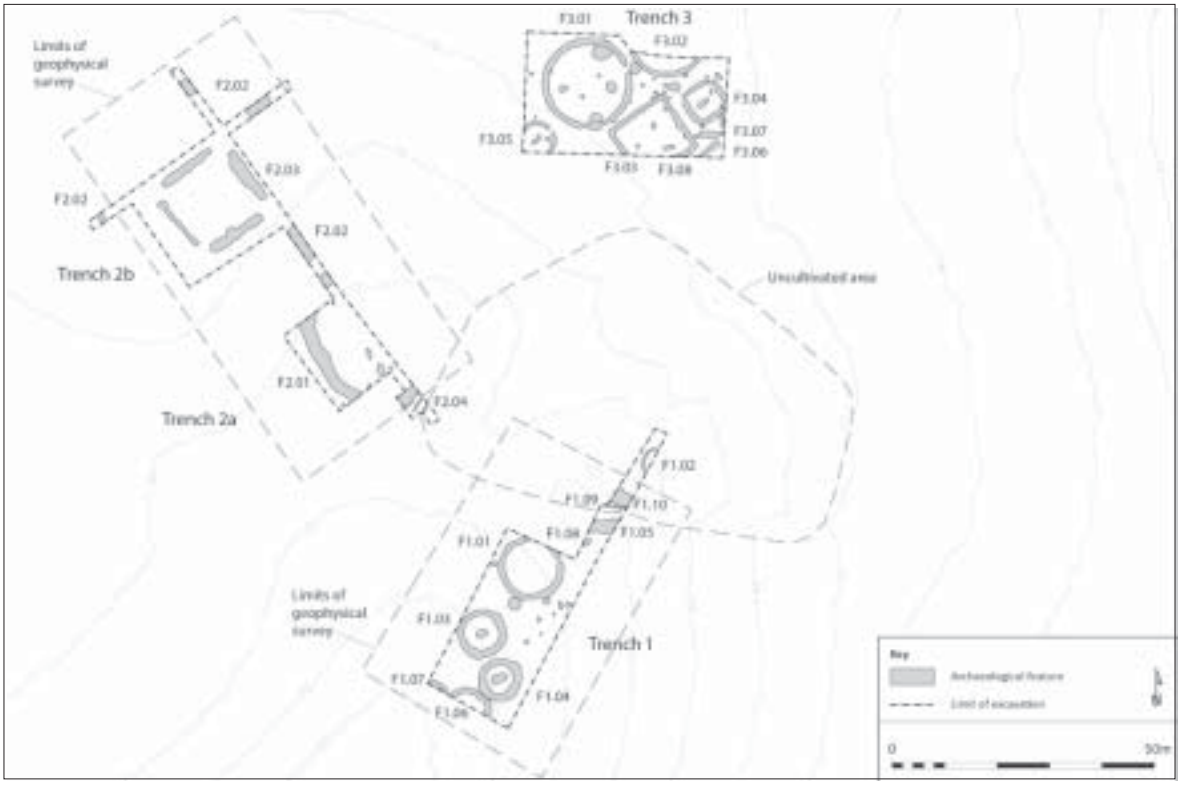
In 2017 the TARRADALE THROUGH TIME community archaeology project commenced a three-year programme of excavations in the Muir of Ord area aimed at investigating the survival of archaeological features of widely different ages that could be seen on aerial photographs. There was little indication of surface features or the degree of survival of the archaeology underneath the plough soil apart from what was found from intensive field walking. In 2017 the group excavated Mesolithic shell middens with spectacular results and in 2018 excavated an inland promontory fort and a somewhat enigmatic prehistoric site defined by a large circular ditch. In the first three weeks of September 2019 volunteers from the North of Scotland Archaeological Society (NoSAS) supported by members of the local community excavated a suspected Pictish cemetery in a field near Tarradale House. Aerial photographs had previously shown the possible existence of a number of barrow graves in the area but there was little to see on the surface as the mounds had been almost totally ploughed away. Only



1 *Drone aerial photo showing barrows of different sizes and shapes*

their surrounding ditches appeared as ghostly cropmarks on the aerial photographs.

A small, but growing, number of barrow cemeteries has been identified in Scotland but only a few excavated. Aerial photographs show the remains of at least 28 square and round barrows at Tarradale, making it currently the second largest burial ground of this type in Scotland. The site could originally have been more extensive as parts of it have either been ploughed out or are too deeply buried to show in aerial photographs. Recent high-resolution photographs taken by drone have suggested the



drawn by Steve Birch

2 *Plan of barrow cemetery trenches*

drone photograph by Andy Hickie

3 *Trench 2b with ring ditch of possible Bronze Age barrow and Pictish causewayed square barrow*

existence of more barrows towards the perimeter of the field and possibly into an adjacent field. Our excavations showed that Tarradale was a barrow cemetery of monumental proportions and potentially one of the most important in Scotland.

Although we are still waiting for radiocarbon dates from the Tarradale excavation, the presence of round and square barrows and their spacing and distribution leaves little doubt that we are dealing with a Pictish cemetery potentially from the 5th or 6th century AD, an important period in the formation of early kingdoms in northern Britain. Tarradale lies in the eastern side of Ross-shire on the Beauly Firth and only six miles from Craig Phadrig, an important stronghold and regional capital in the Kingdom of Fortriu. Part of this centralisation of power was reflected in the creation of monumental cemeteries and Tarradale may have been the burial place of the local elite. No Pictish symbol stones have been found at Tarradale, although symbol stones, including cross slabs with symbols on them have been found in adjacent parishes, the nearest being the recently discovered Conan Stone three miles from Tarradale. However, in the same field as the barrow cemetery, a fortified settlement was excavated in the 1990s; no primary dating evidence for the Picts was obtained but on stylistic grounds pottery from the fortified site has been dated to between AD 300-800 so this may well be the settlement focus of some of the people buried nearby.

drone photograph by Andy Hickie

4 *Trench 3 showing barrows of dramatically different sizes and shapes. The grave where the skeleton was found is at the bottom of the picture in the bottom left of the diamond shaped barrow.*

The excavations

The TARRADALE THROUGH TIME excavation in September 2019 was a major research excavation to find out to what extent the features on the aerial photographs survive underground. We opened three large trenches (totalling almost half an acre) carefully chosen to explore the different patterns and sizes of the barrows. It soon became clear that the cemetery had been built on a vast scale. Trench 1, on the highest part of the site, revealed four large ditched barrows cut into the very stony soil. While aerial photographs had suggested some loss of barrow features in this area owing to plough damage and natural soil erosion downhill, we found the ditches and the bottom of the grave cuts to be relatively well preserved and, but no human remains or grave furniture survived.

In trenches 2a and 2b we investigated a very different soil type (a sandy substrate) with a very different pattern of barrows. Here we found a large segmented ring ditch some 30m in diameter, 1m-1.5m deep, and steep-sided, and while there was no sign of a grave within it, the presence of two fragments of beaker pottery (one from the ditch, plus an earlier topsoil find) hints at a Bronze Age date for this barrow. If this is correct, we believe that this earlier feature was still a prominent landmark in the landscape around 2000 years later when a large Pictish square barrow (17m across with causewayed corners and on stylistic grounds presumed to be Pictish) was laid out nearby (revealed in trench 2b).

The large square barrow in trench 2b had been more than quadrupled in size when it was surrounded by a second square enclosure of truly impressive proportions measuring 40m across, with ditches up to 7m wide and 2m deep. Whether this was constructed contemporaneously with the inner square or as a later enlargement and aggrandisement is not known, but the resulting double-ditched square barrow enclosure is the largest of its kind known in Scotland. No burial was found but it was abundantly clear that this prominent feature, still shown on an estate map of 1788, had been levelled in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth

century. If it was a burial mound (though a shrine or some kind of funerary meeting place are other interesting possibilities) it hints at an occupant of the highest, possibly royal, social status.

Trench 3 was a massive undertaking, opening an area 40m long and up to 25m wide, and as the hundreds of tonnes of soil were scraped back, an amazing array of ditches and pits emerged. A round barrow 7m in diameter (containing a clear central grave cut) lay a short distance from a larger (17m wide) round barrow, with another large example beyond. Close by, two neatly laid-out square barrows, c.8m wide with causewayed corners, were accompanied by a larger diamond-shaped, barrow 13m across. Sections across the barrow ditches revealed them to be only 1-2m wide and fairly shallow, and both within and without the barrows there were numerous pits and areas of burnt soil, as well as several unenclosed graves scattered between the monuments.

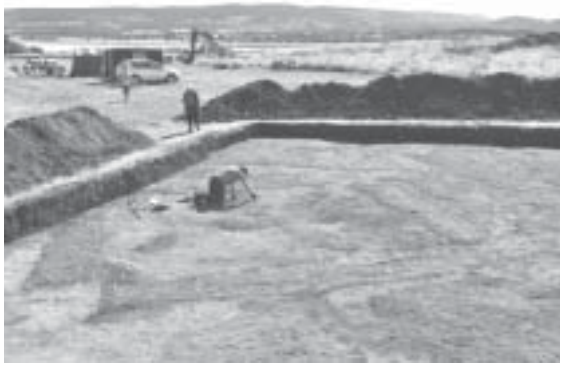


photo by Eric Grant

5 *Steve Birch, excavation supervisor, skipping lunch to investigate the interior of a square barrow*

Survival of graves

Despite the presence of these graves, the acidic local soil meant that any human remains that they might have contained have not survived. We decided to investigate two graves more closely, the first being an unenclosed cut lying between two square barrows. Here too, no human bone was found, but the outline of a log coffin was preserved as a dark stain in the soil, confirming that a burial had once been present. The second grave lay within but towards the side of the diamond-shaped barrow. It was initially difficult to discern during excavation if the bottom of this grave had been reached as the graves are difficult to define as a result of being cut into fairly homogeneous light-coloured sands and gravels and backfilled with the same material. However, we could see some intriguing blackened patches emerging, and, in true archaeological tradition, on the final day of the 2019 excavation, inspired trowel work by

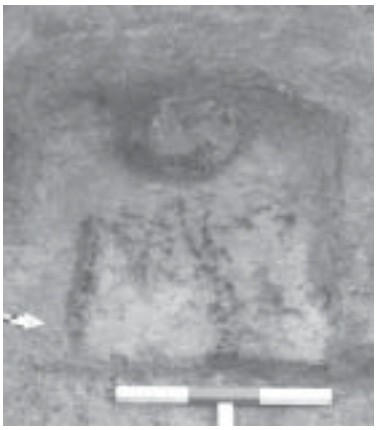


photo by Eric Grant

6 *Shadowy outline of skeleton within a log coffin in Trench 3*

Steve Birch, the director of the excavation, revealed the shadowy outline of a human skeleton.

No complete bony structures had survived – the shape was purely a chemical deposit from the complete deterioration of the skeleton – but it was remarkably detailed, with each vertebra of the spine and the shape of the upper arms and shoulders, legs, and feet visible. Interestingly, the lower limbs seem to have been bound together before burial, and the whole individual was surrounded by the faint outline of a log coffin. The skull had survived slightly better, though it had collapsed in on itself. The skull was lifted for further investigation and it is hoped that if any teeth survive in the sand filling the cranium, we may be able to carry out isotope analysis to learn more about this individual's life.

The emergence of monumental cemeteries like Tarradale is seen as an important transition in the visibility of the dead in the archaeological record. The creation of larger barrows may be linked with the emergence of elites and kingship, and the aggrandisement of existing grave mounds with the increasing status of the deceased's descendants. Yet this kind of monumentality begins to disappear in the region from the 7th century onwards, possibly owing to the evolution of overkingship based in southern Pictland and the growing influence of Christianity favouring simpler burials close to churches. The TARRADALE THROUGH TIME project has dramatically shown that, elusive though the Picts may be, there is still considerable evidence beneath the plough soil of powerful elites.

Eric Grant
project leader of
TARRADALE THROUGH TIME

1. For more information on TARRADALE THROUGH TIME project see www.tarradalethroughtime.co.uk
2. Gordon Noble and Nicholas Evans (eds) *The king in the North: the Pictish realms of Fortriu and Ce,* Birlinn, Edinburgh 2019

No more spectacles – but is our vision any clearer?

One of the irritations of studying the Pictish symbols (as opposed to facing up to the fascinating challenges they present) is the adherence in some quarters to outmoded names, where the authors really should know better. Referring to a 'pair of spectacles' for the double-disc, a 'horseshoe' for the arc/arch, and a 'tuning fork' for the broken sword, are all thunderously anachronistic. As for the 'swimming elephant' ... okay, another time.

I happen to believe (though I would have a tough time proving it) that the corpus of Pictish symbols may be divided into just two categories: animal and object. The notion which I am promoting (and have been almost from the time when I first took up Pictish studies semi-seriously in 1966) is that all symbols are representational. In other words, there are no abstract symbols; these are all object symbols, it's just that there are some which we haven't recognised yet.

So what could be the object upon which the double-disc is based? There have been various theories over the years, some of which have been given an airing in these columns, ranging from the practical e.g. a rotating weaving mechanism, to the astronomical viz. pairing of sun and moon (leading on to the metaphysical, ying and yang, etc). If we are seeking an actual object from contemporary culture, a possible candidate appeared a year or two ago in the National Museum of Scotland's *Explore* magazine.

In the issue for Autumn 2018, at a time when the commemoration of the centenary of the ending of World War One was much to the fore, an article appeared called 'Archaeology on the Front Line', written by Margaret Maitland, who is senior curator of the Ancient Mediterranean at the Museum. In it, she described how she seized the moment and investigated a group of ancient Greek artefacts which came into the collections of the old Royal Scottish Museum during the Great War.

It often seems as if the First World War was all about trenches, and they certainly played a crucial role in determining strategy and troop movement. They were by no means confined to the Western Front, and it was while digging trenches in the Macedonian region of northern Greece that British troops would upon occasion discover archaeological remains. A number of officers in the British Salonika Force happened to be archaeologists, and even at a time of war they made an effort to record such discoveries and gather the finds to form a makeshift museum.

After the War, the Greek government gifted these objects to the British Museum. Other finds entered Britain via less formal channels. An Edinburgh tailor named Robert Gaddie was stationed at Chauchitza in northern Greece, and he took an interest in such matters. (There is even a photograph of him in uniform with a colleague, sitting in the ruins of Troy after the War.) Not only did Gaddie record the context of the finds he encountered, but he ensured that a selection reached the museum located only a matter of yards from his regular place of work at North Bridge in the centre of Edinburgh.

The full story is told in the book *Archaeology Behind the Battle Lines: the Macedonian Campaign of 1915-19 and its Legacy,* to which Margaret Maitland has contributed the relevant chapter. One of the objects from Chauchitza was a double-spiral bronze brooch (those are her fingers in the rubber gloves seen holding it in

the accompanying photograph). The common name for this type of object is the 'spectacle brooch'. Shades of the Pictish double-disc, perhaps? Trying to link it with the Picts is not easy, however.

These brooches are dated to the 8th/7th centuries BC, long before the Pictish period, and a whole continent away. However, that allows plenty of time for such an item of personal adornment to have found its way across the entire breadth of Europe and to have come into Pictish hands, perhaps as part of some trading deal, then to have entered Pictish culture while the symbols were still in a pubescent state, quite likely several centuries before the symbol stones began to be erected.

Of course, this is all highly speculative, but we do know for sure that the double-disc became one of the Picts' favourite symbols. At least it raises again the question of what the symbols stand for, which leads on to the biggest quest of all – what messages do they convey?

Graeme Cruickshank

Dr Oliver O'Grady

Oliver (right), Joe Fitzpatrick (centre) and Alice Roberts (left) on BBC's Digging for Britain in 2017, discussing the East Lomand Hill Fort excavation.
© Copyright BBC

PAS members will be saddened to learn of the untimely death of Dr Oliver O'Grady, who died suddenly in May. Oliver was a regular contributor to PAS events, sharing with us the results of his community excavations at Fortingall and East Lomond. I had the pleasure of collaborating with him on a number of occasions and was due to link up with him again to work on the Barochan Cross. He will be sadly missed and we send our deepest condolences to his wife and family. *JB*

A new cross slab for St Vigeans

2020 marks the 700th anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath and a full programme of street parades, concerts and other large-scale community events was planned to mark the occasion under the banner of 'Arbroath 2020'. Due to the current virus pandemic, these events have now been re-scheduled for next year.

As part of the celebrations, our very own David McGovern was commissioned to design and carve a new 'Pictish' stone for the village of St Vigeans. The completed stone (still in David's workshop at Monikie) takes the form of a cross slab with the figure of St Vigean (or St Fechin) dominating one side and a simple cross on the other, surrounded by panels of interlace and spiral bosses, accompanied by the inscription 'To St Vigean, Aberbrothoc, to St Bride, Panbride'. David based the font for the text on the inscription on the Drosten Stone, which is displayed in St Vigeans Museum.

The new stone, which stands 1.2m high and is 0.6m wide, is carved in St Bees red sandstone, which David informs us is a good colour match for the local stone, but with a much finer grain.

We look forward to marking the 701st anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath during Arbroath 2021! *JB*