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Notice of PAS AGM 2020

The Annual General Meeting of the Pictish Arts Society will be held online via Zoom on Friday 20 November to consider the following business:

1   Apologies for absence

2   Approval of the 2019 AGM Minutes (see PAS Newsletter 93)

3   President's and Secretary's Joint Report (see this newsletter)

4   Treasurer's Report: Presentation & Approval of Annual Accounts (see this newsletter)

5   Appointment of an Independent Examiner

6   Other Honorary Officers' Reports:

    a) Membership Secretary

    b) Editor

7   Election of Honorary Officers:

       a) President

       b) Two Vice Presidents

       c) Secretary

       d) Treasurer

       e) Membership Secretary

       f) Editor

       g) Events Organiser

       h) Archivist

  8 Election of Committee: minimum six, maximum twelve

9   Any other competent business

Note: Business will begin immediately after that evening's online lecture at approx. 20.30. A link to join the Zoom lecture & AGM will be sent out to members beforehand.

Please send nominations for committee, and notes of any matters you wish to raise, to:

Honorary Secretary
Jennifer McKay
119 David Douglas Avenue
SCONE
Perth PH2 2QG

Alternatively, email:
info@thepictishartssociety.org.uk

We would strongly recommend you to contact anyone you intend to nominate beforehand so that they are not called upon out of the blue.

Treasurer's Report

As can be seen on the enclosed spreadsheet, this year the Society has come close to a break-even position even after making a significant donation of £1,500 towards the preservation of the Conan Stone. The only other item of expenditure out of line from the previous year is Internet costs. This is due to two years' costs being met this year as our accounts have to be prepared on a cash basis, not allowing accruals for items known to be due but not paid.

Income has remained much the same, but there were additional takings from the sale of books, cards and other item donated by members. Other income has increased as a result of good attendance to the lectures in Brechin.

In view of the foregoing no amendment to membership fees is proposed.

Hugh Coleman

Membership renewal time again!

As the Joint Report (p.2) says, this has been a challenging and highly unusual year - I'm sure every member has noticed that already! Following the cancellation of our 2020 spring lectures and May's Joint Conference, we have endeavoured to maintain services to members by upping the output of the newsletter. We have also overcome the cancellation of live autumn lectures by moving them online. We will also hold this year's AGM online, immediately after the November lecture. However, we decided that an online conference – a whole day in front of your computer – was not an appetizing prospect. So we have held this year's arrangements over until October 2021, in the hopes of being able to come together in Aberdeen then. We can but hope.

We know that cancellations and postponements are disappointing and we thank you for your understanding and patience. We hope we can count on your continued support as we try to move forward in these unusual times.

The paper edition of the *Newsletter* contains a membership renewal slip. For members who receive a pdf newsletter, the form may appear as separate attachments. We hope you will renew your membership of PAS and please help us by renewing promptly.   *JB*

Joint Report from the President and Honorary Secretary

In football parlance, the Pictish Arts Society 2019/20 year has been a season of two halves, two very different halves indeed. The pre-Covid-19 half unfolded with a successful conference and a well-attended autumn lecture series. As well as being supported by members, the Brechin lectures have attracted an increasing number of regular non-members and putting out extra seats has become a regular occurrence. We were also buoyed by the resounding success of our joint venture with the North of Scotland Archaeological Society (NoSAS) to save and conserve the Conan Stone, a wonderful if incomplete Pictish cross slab with symbols, which had been discovered in the spring. Our crowdfunding appeal not only reached but surpassed the £20,000 target.

The second or 'Covid half' saw the postponement of all live events: the Spring lecture series, a joint conference on the Conan Stone, organised in conjunction with NoSAS and the Scottish Society for Northern Studies (SSNS) which was to be held in Inverness in May, and of course this year's PAS conference in Aberdeen.

The 2019 annual conference and AGM took place in the Reid Hall, Forfar. The Friday evening social event was held in the Meffan Institute, Forfar, thus affording an opportunity to admire and enjoy the Meffan's excellent collection of carved stones. On Saturday an impressive line-up of speakers at the conference covered an eclectic mix of topics: Rome's North-western Frontier; the northern Pictish church after AD 850; rider position in relief carved equestrian scenes; ethnic identity in Roman and late antique Britain; hogbacks and hammerhead crosses of Viking age Strathclyde and Northumbria; hirdmen and hansel; and concluded with former president, Norman Atkinson on The Picts: Angus and Gowrie. The Sunday charabanc outing took in a varied selection of stones around Angus with visits to the stones at Glamis Manse (a rare pleasure these days), Eassie, Brechin Cathedral, St Vigeans, Camus and Pitmuies.

The AGM heard that membership continues on an upward trajectory, having reached 127 including 5 overseas members. The major focus of interest of the AGM was the agreement of PAS to collaborate with the North of Scotland Archaeological Society in the funding of the conservation and display of the recently discovered Conon stone in Easter Ross. The Treasurer intimated that there was money available for other projects to rescue and conserve neglected Pictish carved stones, should the opportunity arise. The newsletter editor asked members to contribute copy for the newsletter. There were a few changes to the committee with the election of Sheila Fraser and the retiral of Stewart Mowatt after many years of sterling service. Kelly Kilpatrick agreed to take on the organising of speakers for Friday lectures and Jane Geddes agreed to organise the 2020 conference in Aberdeen. The Society's book collection, a set of PAS Journals and newsletters had been donated to Angus Archives, thus making them publicly available.

As we approach the 2020 AGM, membership stands at 140, its highest ever total. Clearly, interest in the Picts is increasing! We thank all of you for your support and we thank our dedicated Membership Secretary Elspeth Reid for her diligence in chasing up those of you who are late to renew (dig dig).

Our Facebook page has around 8,500 followers and it receives as many as 2,000 hits when new photos are uploaded. The Society is very grateful to vice president David McGovern for managing the Facebook page and his oversight of all matters IT, including our latest innovation – online lectures, committee meetings and a planned AGM for 2020 via Zoom. Indeed we would like to recognise and pay tribute to all the committee members for their input throughout the year.

With the arrival of Covid-19 in early 2020, the Society had to postpone the Spring lecture programme. All speakers then kindly agreed to give their papers at Brechin in the autumn but as Covid persists and lectures still cannot be held physically, we have turned to Zoom. Our first Zoom lecture was delivered in September; attendance was lower than we had hoped and we encourage members who have not yet downloaded Zoom to give it a go; to sceptics we say it's not rocket science and while not the same experience as being in the room, it is an acceptable substitute. We published the Autumn Lecture programme in Newsletter 96 and will send out reminders to members during the week of each lecture.

The committee has now held its first Zoom meeting and it went very well. The great advantage was that committee members who

live too far away to attend a meeting in Forfar were able to participate. And to turn adversity to further advantage, Kelly Kilpatrick has suggested we approach speakers who are based outwith Scotland to give lectures via Zoom in Spring 2021. The ability to expand our pool of potential speakers in this way is to be welcomed as the Society looks to the future and inevitable changes to our *modus operandi.*

The success story of 2020 has been the Society's involvement with fund-raising for the conservation and display of the Conon Stone. Unfortunately, the Conon Stone conference arranged for May in Inverness had to be postponed, but we have hopes it will go ahead at some future date. We hear that the stone is now conserved and in Dingwall Museum. In all likelihood it will be on display by the time of our AGM.

Continuing with our theme of postponements, the annual conference which was planned for Aberdeen in October has been put off until 2021. Meanwhile, we wholeheartedly thank Prof Jane Geddes for all the work she has done by way of planning and preparation and we hope that we can run the conference she has planned with minimal changes, albeit possibly in a bigger venue to allow for social distancing.

One thing unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic is the PAS Newsletter. Bill Stephens edited edition 94 in the spring of 2020 and we thank him for his contribution. By way of compensation for all the cancellations and post-ponements in 2020, it was decided to increase the frequency of newsletters from quarterly to bi-monthly. This saw John Borland returning to the roll of Editor. To help us attain this increase in output, we asked for contributions from the membership and we have been very pleased with the generous response. We would also like to thank David Henry for agreeing to design, print and distribute twice as many issues of the newsletter as he would normally do. The newsletter will continue to appear bi-monthly, probably until the end of the year. But as ever, the Editor continues to encourage members to send him material for publication.

And to conclude with another appeal: if there is anyone who would be interested in joining the committee, the President would like to hear from you. Please intimate your interest to:

<johnborland60@aol.com>

Jennifer McKay & John Borland

A new cross slab for St Vigeans – update

As reported in *PAS Newsletter* 95, David McGovern was commissioned to carve a new stone in the style of a Pictish cross slab for the village of St Vigeans as part of the 'Arbroath 2020' celebrations to mark the 700th anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath. All of the 'Arbroath 2020' events have been postponed until next year, including the formal unveiling of David's carving. However the stone has been erected in the shadow of the Kirk, at the entrance to the new cemetery. So the next time you are in the area, go check it out. David tells us he is about to start on a companion stone to be installed nearby. *JB*

A monk on Aberlemno 3 and a re-assessment of this cross-slab's intended use

On the reverse face of Aberlemno 3 cross-slab are four distinct panels of carving (**1**).* From the top down these show:a pairing of Pictish symbols; a hunting scene; a centaur; and David rending the jaws of a lion. I suggest here that within the hunting scene stands a figure that until now has not been identified as an ecclesiastic. This ecclesiastic is situated on the left-hand edge of the panel, thus the hunt is facing toward this figure, and he is shown at a 45 degree angle to both the huntsmen and the viewer of the scene (**2**).

1 *Reverse face*

He has previously been described as 'a probable beater with a shield'[1] and 'a foot-soldier with a notched shield'.[2] I dispute these classifications, proposing that he is re-classified as an ecclesiastic. This argument is based upon him having the following attributes: the book he is holding in his hands; his Petrine tonsure; ecclesiastical clothing; a lack of facial hair; and a lack of weaponry. A detailed argument as to why these are attributes for an ecclesiastic of the period and how this information is gleaned from
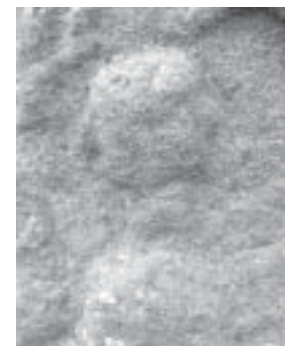
2 *Reverse face, hunting scene, ecclesiastic on the left-hand edge*

contemporary primary sources and archaeological reports is available upon request.

3 *The book held by the ecclesiastic*

That the object held in his hands is a large, open book (**3**) and not a shield can be seen by the curvature of the book's edges illustrating the curve of the pages of an open book rather than the straight edges of a square Pictish shield depicted elsewhere, e.g. the Brough of Birsay stone from Orkney. That this book is large is deduced from the fact that it requires the ecclesiastic to use both his hands to hold it open. Large Gospel books, e.g.*Lindisfarne Gospels*, were placed opened for the congregation to see during liturgy; thus an open book in the hands of an ecclesiastic indicates a reference to something written in a liturgical book. He

4 *Ecclesiastic's head showing tonsure and ears*

also has a Petrine tonsure, highlighted by his exposed ears (**4**), this being in stark contrast to all the other figures in this scene who have long hair (**5**).
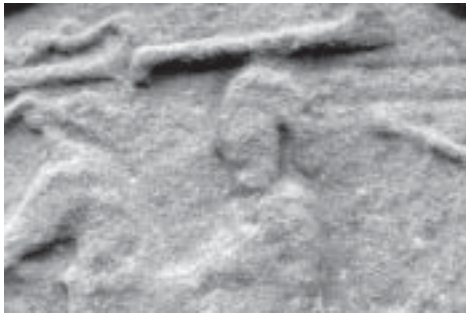
5 *Detail showing long hair of other figures in the hunting scene*

His clothing is only knee length and plain, however this can still be an ecclesiastic's tunic (**6**). That an ecclesiastic should be present in a hunting scene demonstrates the ecclesiastical intellectual life wherein ecclesias-tics would be able to interpret alleg-orical imagery, as well as Gospel parables or the psalms. In this instance I suggest that the hunting scene refers to Psalm

6 *Detail showing ecclesiastic's tunic*

42[3] wherein a soul thirsts for God like a deer thirsts for water. This interpretation is deduced from the method of hunting shown (**2**). The hounds harry a deer until it is exhausted at which point the hounds are called off and the deer's natural reaction is to seek water, the nearest source of which would be where hunters await their prey, e.g. archers such as the one portrayed on the 'Drosten' stone, St Vigeans 1. Such an interpretation linking hunt scenes on Pictish sculpted stones with this psalm has previously been proposed for scenes on other stones, but never for Aberlemno 3.[4] Furthermore, the angle at which the ecclesiastic is stood draws the viewer of the stone into the scene creating more of an engagement with the subject matter than merely looking at an every-day hunting scene.

I suggest that the front and the reverse faces of this cross-slab are for two separate audiences and that this indicates Aberlemno 3 once stood

within a church building. The reverse face requires a high level of ecclesiastical learning to understand both the reference to Psalm 42, as described above, and to interpret the centaur in the panel below the hunting scene. Knowledge of the Desert Fathers was central within contemporary monasticism, therefore ecclesiastics would know that when trying to locate St Paul, St Antony is guided by a centaur.[5] Also, the depiction of a centaur carrying an axe and branches may derive from a medical treatise, indicating the centaur Chiron who was knowledgeable about medicinal drugs.[6] It is entirely reasonable that such a book would have been present in the infirmary or library of a monastery. The front face has a much simpler Christian message of Christ, as the cross, being worshipped by angels. I suggest that it also depicts a warning of Hell at the base of the cross, where a human and an animal are eaten by beasts. Therefore the front of the cross-slab is suitable for a lay congregation, whereas the reverse depicts messages for theologically-trained personnel.

In order to ensure that the intended audience viewed the correct face of the cross-slab during liturgy, I propose that this cross-slab stood as part of church architecture. Although, to date, there has been no discovery of a seventh to ninth century church at Aberlemno, there is evidence that churches were built throughout Pictland at this time. Another cross-slab I suggest had this function is Meigle 2, which will be the subject of a separate article to follow. I suggest it too has a simple Christian message on its front face and more complicated theological messages on its reverse face, and thus was created with two separate audiences in mind. Indeed, can other cross-slabs be re-assessed as having been used in this way within Pictish churches?

Sarah Louise Coleman

Endnotes

1 Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests* (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2003), p.386

2 Ibid, p.415

3 Using the King James Version of the Bible; in Catholic Bibles this is Psalm 41-42

4 Clarke, Blackwell, and Goldberg, *Early Medieval Scotland, Individuals, Communities and Ideas* (Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland, 2012), p.154

5 Jerome, Life of Paul, the first hermit in Early Christian lives (Penguin: London,1998) ch.7

6 Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004) p.13

Denoon:
a royal centre in Strathmore?

Built on an outlying hill on the north side of the Sidlaw Hills range is the multi-period fort of Denoon Law. Although the summit is only 200m OD, the flanks of the hill fall away steeply on all sides and it is thus a good defensible location, and the remains of the ramparts suggest a substantial Iron Age fort that has been re-furbished and strengthened possibly in early medieval times (Canmore 32139).

Alexander Gordon visited the fort in the early 18th century and described it as 'encompassed with a stupendous Wall of Stone and Earth, 27 Foot high, and no less than 30 Foot thick' (Gordon 1726, 164) (ie more than 8m high and 9m thick), and he could see traces of buildings inside the fort. Such a well-defended fort might conceivably have been a royal centre for the Glamis/Meigle area, and significantly it lies at the north end of a route across the Sidlaw Hills, which would link it with the early ecclesiastical settlements around Dundee. The route is shown on the 1860s six-inch map (Ordnance Survey 1865) and is likely to be of some antiquity: it follows Denoon Glen southwards and over the pass between Balkello Hill and Balluderon Hill.

A kilometre from Denoon Law along the glen, the traveller passes the site of an early chapel near Wester Denoon, which has yielded fragments of two cross-slabs (Canmore 79892, 318084). Norman Atkinson has identified the likely site of the burial ground as close to and north-west of Wester Denoon farm, where the first stone was found (Atkinson 2010; Norman Atkinson pers comm). Wester Denoon 1 was found in 1994 close to the Denoon Burn and at the head of Denoon Glen, while a fragment of a second cross-slab, Wester Denoon 2, was found in 2009, reused in the wall of a bothy at the farm

itself (**1**). The farm lies less than half a kilometre from the likely chapel site, and there may well be other carved stones utilised as building material on a farm whose history goes back at least as early as its dovecot of 1711 (Canmore 166295; 318084). Despite their fragmentary state, both surviving cross-slabs are of considerable interest, though very different in style and probably widely separated in time (both are in the Meffan Museum, Forfar).

The earlier fragment, Wester Denoon 2, belongs to the lower part of a cross-slab and is carved in low relief on one broad face only with the base of a cross-shaft outlined by a roll moulding and filled with competently designed diagonal key-pattern. A slightly thicker roll moulding runs down either side of the carved face, which is 0.48m wide. Completely filling the space on either side of the shaft is the spiral tail and lower body of a hybrid creature, each set facing the cross. These are unusually large and beautifully executed equable spirals, formed by extending the two narrow roll mouldings that defined the creature's body above into a long tail with a lateral line, which gives the spiral a radius of six cords. The spirals fit their spaces so tightly as to give the impression that they are wedged in place. Each body expands upwards from its spiral, and incised within the expanding body is a clear zig-zag line, like that on the serpent on the symbol stone from Dairy Park, Dunrobin, recognised by Isabel Henderson as a portrayal of an adder (Canmore 6567; Graham-Campbell & Henderson 2018, 201). But here on Wester Denoon 2, the rapidly expanding body indicates that this is not simply a serpent but a hybrid serpentine creature which probably had a dog-head rather than a serpent-head. In discussing the 'serpent' incised on two fragments of stone from Jarlshof in Shetland, Isabel Henderson has clarified the nomenclature and character of those animals in Pictish art which combine features of more than one species, and she suggests that our name for them should include the term 'hybrid': thus dog-headed hybrid or horse-headed hybrid rather than the old terms such as S-dragon or fish-monster (Graham-Campbell & Henderson 2018, 192-5, 199-200). This excellent convention will be followed here.

In most known cases where the cross-shaft is flanked by hybrid creatures, their heads are carved deliberately to touch, or almost touch, the cross-arms. This can be seen from the single dog-headed hybrids on the
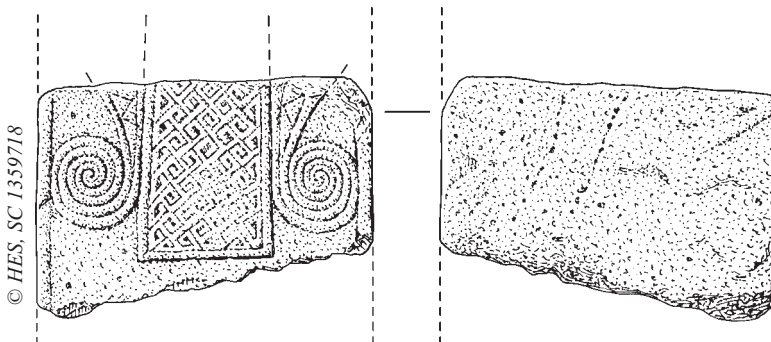
1 *Wester Denoon 2, scale 1:10 drawing by John Borland*

*2 Tealing, scale 1:10
drawing by John Borland*
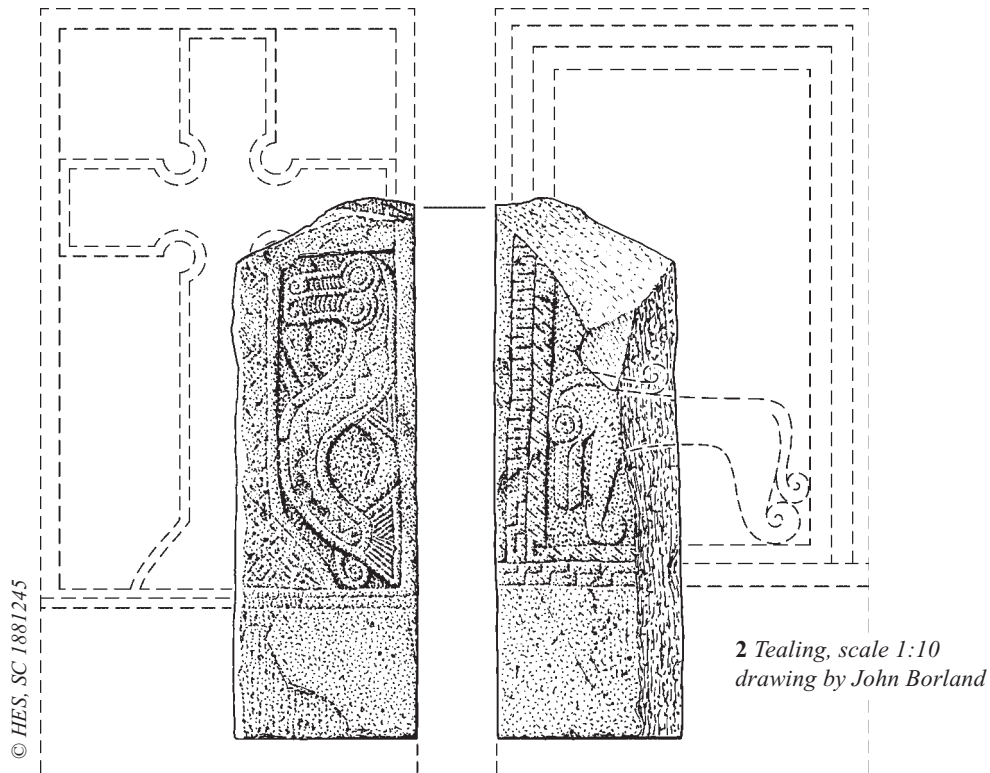
stones from Appiehouse and Newark, and the horse-headed hybrid on the fragment from Ness, all in Orkney (Canmore 332531; 3033; 3002). On the Skinnet cross-slab from Caithness, where there is an equal-armed cross set on a long shaft, the dog-headed hybrids are carved below and touching the lower arm, and their jaws grasp the outline moulding of the shaft and extend into the interlace filling the lower arm (Canmore 318992).

Given the proportions of the cross-shaft and spirals on Wester Denoon 2, it seems likely that here the flanking serpentine creatures were relatively elongated with their heads probably facing the shaft, just below the cross-arms at a height of some 0.60m above the base of the shaft. At least eleven dog-headed hybrids have spiral tails, of which the one surviving spiral on Skinnet is closest in scale to the Wester Denoon spirals, and that on the cross-slab from Ulbster is perhaps the prototype at least for the far north (Canmore 8431). Others have fishtails rather than spiral tails as do most of the horse-headed hybrids. Body markings on profile hybrid creatures are normally on the dorsal side of a lateral line, but the Wester Denoon creatures appear to have a central band of zig-zag markings, which suggests that we are viewing them from above rather than in profile.

Particularly germane to this suggestion is a fragment of cross-slab carved in relief from Tealing (**2**). Here the fragment shows only the panel to the right of the cross-shaft, which is occupied by a boldly executed hybrid creature grasping the head of a serpent with a small spiral tail, and both heads touch the underside of the cross-arm (Canmore 318083). This is a serpent-headed hybrid with a rayed fishtail, a triangular dorsal fin, two ventral fins and zig-zag markings incised on its thick body, the entire creature seen from above, with its head turned to face the cross-shaft. It has large outlined goggle-eyes, a double-corrugated snout and prominent outlined nostrils. Diagonal key pattern fills the cross-shaft, which is bordered by a thick roll moulding and which expands into a flared pedestal base. A circular armpit separates the shaft from the right-hand arm. When the stone was first removed from the outer wall of Tealing church some time between 1895 and 1911, more of the upper part of the fragment survived than can be seen today: the armpit was intact and more carved surface on the arm showed that the ornament flowed unbroken between arm and central cross-head (Hutcheson 1896, 47-8; Hutcheson 1911; Crawford 1939). The arm abuts the double moulding which frames the entire carved area on this face.

The other broad face has an elaborate double-step pattern border within a thick roll-moulded frame, and a horizontal Pictish beast with a goggle eye faces left with its forehead against the border and a long straight snout, like those on the northern cross-slabs from Shandwick and Golspie. The surviving narrow face has been dressed secondarily to a plain surface, but there is the remains of a groove along the right-hand edge, which suggests that the face originally completed the corner mouldings visible on the

adjacent broad faces and may have been ornamented.

The later and smaller cross-slab from Wester Denoon, no. 1, is carved in higher relief than no. 2 and shows most of the cross-face apart from the top portion above the side-arms, which is missing (**3**). Within a wide flat-band border, the cross is outlined by a roll moulding, including the circular armpits, and is filled with a continuous heavy interlaced cord with a median

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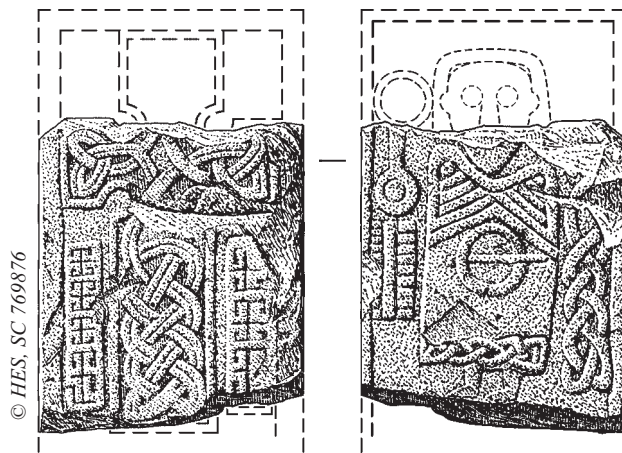
3 *Wester Denoon 1, scale 1:10 drawing by John Borland*

line. Either side of the shaft is a narrow panel of an unusual square key pattern. On the reverse within a roll-moulded frame is a large frontal figure wearing a decorated robe and what may be a huge penannular brooch, clearly a person of importance, but sadly only the hairless chin survives of the face. This eminent person of uncertain sex is flanked on the left by mirror and comb symbols and on the right by a somewhat inept three-cord plait.

With a putative early medieval fort on Denoon Law, a significant early chapel with Pictish sculpture just a kilometre away near Wester Denoon and an attested route southwards across the Sidlaw Hills, the Denoon area is a good candidate for a royal centre for lower Strathmore. Well-placed to act as a way marker for the southern end of this route is the isolated cross-slab at South Balluderon known as Martin's Stone or St Martin's Stone (Canmore 31864), which must once have been an impress-ive monument some 3m high. From here it is only 3km east to the early church site at Kirkton of Tealing and a little over 2km south to that at Strathmartine. If one were to seek tangible traces of the journeys in southern Pictland of Boniface/ Curetàn in the early 8th century, the sites and sculpture mentioned here would make a good beginning but that is another story.

Anna Ritchie

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The Northern Picts
at the University of Aberdeen

The Northern Picts project at the University of Aberdeen was established in 2012 to investigate an area stretching from Aberdeenshire to Easter Ross, covering the probable extent of the Pictish kingdoms of Fortriu and a territory of Pictland known as Ce. The project, funded by a donation to the University of Aberdeen Development Trust, was designed to take on the challenge of finding new archaeological sites in a period with few identified sites either in the written sources or the archaeological record. A new project in 2017, the Comparative Kingship project funded by the Leverhulme Trust has also contributed to an unprecedented research focus on the Picts. To date the University of Aberdeen has investigated a whole series of Pictish sites in northern Scotland through large-scale excavation, survey and targeted fieldwork. There have been some spectacular successes such as the (re)discovery of a Pictish period silver hoard at Gaulcross, Aberdeenshire, led by Aberdeen and the National Museum Scotland, but this short update will focus on some of the major sites investigated by the University of Aberdeen that reveal more regarding iconic elements of the archaeological record of the Picts – their symbol stones and power centres.

Dunnicaer

Many of the Aberdeen projects have involved examining the context of the Pictish symbol stones. There are over 200 stone monuments with symbols known from eastern and northern Scotland. Since the 19th century there have been repeated attempts to decipher the meaning of the symbols, with interpretations of them ranging from symbols of rank or tribal identity to memorials to the dead, as well as countless 'fringe' ideas and speculation. Current consensus is this was a system that expressed names or identities of some kind and that this was an elite form of expression found in both settlement and burial contexts. An important part of our work has focused on providing better contexts and dating for this tradition of monument.

From 2015-17 fieldwork by the Northern Picts project targeted the findspot of a series of Pictish stones found at a coastal site known as Dunnicaer, just to the south of Aberdeen. The relatively simple designs found at Dunnicaer and in other contexts such as caves have been suggested as the earliest examples of the symbol system, but there has been little in the way of absolute dating. The symbol stones at Dunnicaer were discovered in the early 19th century when stone was removed from the sea stack for building material and later when in 1832 a group of youths found a low stone wall on the stack and threw a number of stones from the wall into the sea. Few people have visited Dunnicaer since the 19th century, for the site is cut off at high tide and surrounded by sheer cliff faces. With the support of a professional climber, the Northern Picts team conducted three seasons of fieldwork on the stack. These demonstrated that the site was the remains of a promontory fort with a timber-laced rampart enclosing a series of buildings inside. Severe coastal erosion has removed a large part of the site, leaving only a small stump of rock jutting into the North Sea. Finds from the settlement included Roman pottery and glass – all rare imports this far north of the frontier – along with burnishing stones for metalworking. Even more surprisingly, Bayesian modelling of the radiocarbon dates suggests activity at the promontory started in the period *cal AD 105–225* and the site ended *cal AD 350–450*. Fort building is rarely attested in the Roman Iron Age in Scotland, but Dunnicaer flourished during this period and reached its height in the same period that the Romans first mention the Picts (in AD 297). While it is impossible to directly date the Dunnicaer symbol stones, the youths described finding them in a wall surrounding the site. The rampart around the southern edge of the stack which best fits that description was constructed in the period *cal AD 245–380*, suggesting that the symbol stones may date to this timeframe too – i.e. much earlier than many scholars had countenanced for this tradition.

'Royal' Rhynie

Of key focus to the Northern Picts project has been the environs of the of Rhynie, Aberdeenshire. The place-name Rhynie includes a form of the Celtic word for 'king', **rīg*, and our work at the site suggests the Rhynie valley was an elite Pictish centre from the 4th to 6th centuries AD. Rhynie has long been known for its particular concentration of Class I Pictish stones and in March 1978 farmer Kevin Alston ploughed up a spectacular stone known as the 'Rhynie Man' in a field on Barflat farm just to the south of the modern village. That summer the council archaeologist Ian Shepherd took aerial photographs of a series of enclosures around the Craw Stane, another Pictish stone that unusually still stands *in situ* in the same field as the Rhynie Man was found.

Excavations around the Craw Stane at Barflat farm from 2011-17 by the universities of Aberdeen and Chester found that this stood towards the entranceway of the enclosure complex which, in an early phase, comprised ditches (and presumably banks) surrounding a low glacial knoll. In a later phase an elaborate timber wall of oak posts and planks was built and inside stood a series of buildings. The excavations revealed a rich material assemblage including sherds of Late Roman wine amphorae imported from the eastern Mediterranean, sherds of glass drinking beakers from France and one of the largest assemblages of metalworking production evidence known from early medieval Britain. The metalworking evidence includes moulds and crucibles for making pins, brooches and even tiny animal figurines that resemble the animals carved on Pictish stones. An iron pin shaped like an axe, resembling the axe carried by the Rhynie Man, was also discovered. This remarkable find which was one of a number that could directly relate objects found on the site to the iconography of the stones. The axe that the Rhynie Man carries appears to be a form associated with animal sacrifice and the fearsome figure on the stone may be a pagan deity associated with cult practices. On the outskirts of the village, a few hundred metres north of the Barflat site, we have also found traces of the contemporary cemetery and uncovered the remains of Pictish burial mounds, including the partially preserved remains of an adult female buried within one of the barrows. Another burial monument, a cairn, is the recorded findspot of one of Rhynie's Pictish stones carved with a warrior. Two square enclosures, found next to the cemetery, may have been shrines or places for conducting ceremonies associated with veneration of the dead.

Since 2017 the University of Aberdeen has been investigating the wider environs of the Rhynie valley funded by Historic Environment Scotland, targeting three hillforts overlooking the Barflat complex: Cairnmore, Cnoc Cailliche and Tap O' Noth. The investigations at Cnoc Cailliche showed that this small fort (0.11ha) was constructed and occupied around 400-200 cal BC, but the two other sites showed phases of occupation that overlap with the Barflat complex. Cairnmore is enclosed by the remains of two stone walls, the inner enclosing an area around 0.2ha. An evaluation by Murray Cook in 2010 suggested a phase of occupation in the period AD 410-630 and University of Aberdeen

excavations from 2017-19 have confirmed that dating, while also revealing evidence for internal buildings, a large palisade at the edge of the inner bank and occupation spanning the 4th to 7th centuries AD, which directly overlaps with occupation at the Barflat complex.

Tap O' Noth is one of the most spectacular forts in Scotland. The summit oblong fort is the second highest hillfort in Scotland and one of the best examples of a vitrified (heavily burnt) fort known. The summit fort is surrounded by a massive 16.75ha enclosure, the latter being the second largest hillfort in northern Britain. Within the larger fort hundreds of hut platforms were recorded in earlier surveys. The excavation of the oblong fort was an exercise in extreme archaeology with the vitrified walls and areas of the interior tackled over two gruelling seasons. The excavations on the summit revealed the buckled and heavily burnt wall-faces of the vitrified fort and a well. Dating evidence showed that the construction and destruction of the site lay in the period 400-100 cal BC and there was no hint of later reuse of the site, despite a comprehensive set of radiocarbon determinations. The results from the larger fort then were all the more surprising and exciting. Due to its size and elevation scholars have suggested its construction and occupation dated from a time when the climate was warmer, possibly during the Bronze Age. Excavations in 2019 turned that notion on its head – with radiocarbon dates from two platforms and the rampart spanning the 3rd to 6th century AD period, dates broadly contemporary with the Barflat complex and Cairnmore. A LiDAR and photogrammetry surveys also suggest that many more house platforms are contained within the lower fort – perhaps as many as 800 – making Tap O' Noth potentially one of the most densely occupied hillforts known in Britain. The rampart belongs to the latter part of that span of radiocarbon dates making it the largest early medieval hillfort we know from Britain. The Tap O' Noth discovery has the potential to shake the narrative of this whole time period. The number of platforms on the site suggest an urban-scale population and in a Pictish context we have nothing to compare this to. More hut platforms need to be tested to assess if they are all of similar dates, but potentially the larger fort at Tap O' Noth enclosed a huge settlement contemporary with the Barflat complex. The results of the excavations in the Rhynie valley give us an unexpected and unparalleled insight into an elite landscape of the Picts of the c.4th-7th century AD.

Mither Tap

The Pictish period has been difficult to contextualise due in part to the huge dearth of settlement evidence from this period. After the 3rd century AD settlement is exceptionally difficult to trace. Compared to the hundreds if not thousands of Iron Age roundhouses, we literally have a handful of Pictish settlements known from the lowlands, which is why the evidence from sites like Dunnicaer, Tap O'Noth, Cairnmore and Barflat and particularly Tap O'Noth with potentially hundreds of hut platforms, are so important. One of the few site types that may reveal settlement evidence are the hillforts and promontory forts of the region. However, there is no clear morphological signature for a Pictish enclosure. The evidence from the Rhynie valley, for example, shows the diversity of enclosed sites constructed in this period. More frustratingly, however, is the limited number of known and dated sites. As a result, our work trying to find Pictish sties has had many misses as well as hits. Dozens of enclosed sites have been sampled, with the majority showing Iron Age rather than early medieval phases of occupation.

Very occasionally we have place-name evidence or historical evidence to help target our work. That was the case with one site investigated in the summer of 2019. The place-name Bennachie, the site of a hillfort known as the Mither Tap, has been translated as 'Mountain of Ce'. Ce is mentioned in an ancient legendary section of the Pictish king-lists. The place-name evidence suggests Bennachie could have been the pre-eminent site in this region. The site and region is also possibly referred to in the two lost Gaelic sagas: *Orgain Benne Ce*, 'The Ravaging of Bennachie', which hints at a catastrophic battle or event at the site; and *Orgain Maige Ce la Galo mac Febail*, 'The Ravaging of the Plain of Ce by Galo son of Febal', which suggests further conflict in the region around Bennachie.

The hillfort of the Mither Tap consists of two large, but now collapsed, stone walls (an upper and lower citadel) surrounding a distinct granite torr that is highly visible in the surrounding landscape. The site was investigated in the 1870s by Christian Maclagan, one of Scotland's earliest female archaeologists. Maclagan's 1881 publication on the site provided a detailed plan of the fort showing the upper and lower ramparts, traces of possible roundhouses in both citadels and the location of a well within the lower citadel. Small-scale excavations conducted as part of path improvement by Forestry

Commission Scotland confirmed activity in the 1st millennium AD at the site, but no large-scale modern work had been carried out at the site. In June 2019 the Northern Picts team undertook another extreme archaeology season trekking up the hill to evaluate the site more comprehensively. Excavations of the well, forgotten since the 19th century, exposed steps leading down to a small walled chamber, and miraculously after removing 19th century backfill, the well started functioning again, collecting water runoff from the hill. Within the lower citadel we found extensive midden deposits full of cattle, pig and even fish bone with traces of large platforms built up within the lower fort to create level stances for buildings. In the upper citadel of the fort we found more evidence for early medieval occupation and the finds from across the site included evidence for high-status metalworking and locally made pottery, an extremely rare find from Pictish sites. Radiocarbon dating shows that the Mither Tap was in use in the 7th and 8th centuries AD, a time when it may have taken over as one of the regional centres of this part of Pictland after the demise of Rhynie.

Towards the base of Bennachie on the northeast side of the hill lies Aberdeenshire's most impressive Pictish cross-slab, the Maiden Stone carved with an elaborate interlaced cross and a series of relief Pictish symbol carvings. The dating of the Mither Tap helps contextualise the landscape around a major carved stone monument of the Picts.

Burghead

Since 2018 one of Northern Picts' main fieldwork projects has been on the spectacular promontory fort at Burghead. This fort would have covered an area of around 5.5ha before the southern portion of the site was destroyed during construction of the modern village in the 19th century. The interior remains largely intact and is divided into an upper raised citadel and a lower citadel, both of which are enclosed on their seaward-side by a grass-covered rampart. Well-known finds from Burghead include nearly 30 bull carvings and an impressive well. Excavation at the site occurred in the 1860s and 1890s revealing the complexity of the defences – with timber-laced ramparts over 8m wide and 6m high investigated by antiquaries James MacDonald and Hugh Young. There had been relatively little in the way of modern excavations at the site though, other than the work of Alan Small in the 1960s who thought that much of the interior of the remaining parts of the fort had

been destroyed. However, small-scale sampling in 2015-17 by the Northern Picts project revealed preserved floor layers of partially intact early medieval buildings within the fort. As part of the Leverhulme Trust funded Comparative Kingship project, which builds on the work of Northern Picts, the investigations were scaled up in 2018-19 and in trenches in the upper and lower citadels further early medieval buildings with intact floor layers have been revealed under up to 1m of 19th century overburden. At the western, seaward, end of the site, 2018-19 work (funded by Historic Environment Scotland due to coastal erosion threatening this part of the site) showed that exceptionally well-preserved stretches of early medieval rampart survive to around 3m in height. The rampart remains have revealed clear evidence for their destruction by fire. Timber-laced ramparts of this scale and complexity rarely survive and the Burghead example ranks amongst the best in Europe. Finds from our excavations to date have included dress accessories, pieces of weaponry including a sword hilt, iron tools, bone pins and metal-working evidence. From the floor layer and midden of a building came two Anglo-Saxon coins of King Alfred, pierced for wearing. Over 40 radiocarbon dates have been obtained thus far from our work at Burghead showing that the site was occupied from at least the 6th century AD and was destroyed in the 10th century AD – a quite obscure period when the Pictish realm had become the expansionist Gaelic kingdom of Alba. Local tradition recounts that the site was destroyed by the Vikings – can continuing work at Burghead shed any light on the fate of this major centre, and of the northern Picts in this new era?   *Gordon Noble*

Further information

Keep up to date with Northern Picts and Comparative Kingship on our social media pages: <**https://www.facebook.com/groups/NorthernPicts**>
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See also <**https://aberdeen.academia.edu/GordonNoble**> for other downloadable articles
Rhynie: Post-excavation ongoing, but see chapter in the project book, *The King In the North: The Pictish Realms of Fortriu and Ce.* <**https://birlinn.co.uk/product/the-king-in-the-north/**>. Chapter 3 in this book also briefly discusses Mither Tap and Burghead.

Rome's secret weapon against the Picts?

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The Vindolanda leather mouse.

Among its many claims to fame, the fort of Vindolanda in Northumberland boasts the largest collection of leather artefacts from Roman Britain. In addition to boots, shoes and sandals, archaeologists recovered hundreds of leather offcuts, scraps from the on-site production of these leather goods.

Earlier in the year, during lockdown, curatorial staff at Vindolanda took the opportunity to examine these remnants more closely. Imagine their surprise when a crumpled oddment was carefully unfolded to reveal a life-like and almost life size silhouette of a mouse, complete with marks representing eyes and fur.

Scholars believe the mouse may have been a child's toy or perhaps even a practical joke. Talk of it being a secret weapon to frighten off marauding Pictish "elephants" has been dismissed as purely speculative.   *JB*

In Search of a Symbol System

PAS Newsletter 96 carried a most thought-provoking article examining the potential for establishing a system of 'rules' (those inverted commas appearing in the title) for the usage of the Pictish symbols. The stated aim of the project was to define the criteria for assessing which Pictish designs are symbols, and attempting to establish a set of rules for their use (as opposed to attempting to interpret their meaning). A by-product was to be the creation of a new inventory of Pictish symbols, appearing on a range of materials. This expansive topic was recently the subject of an M.Litt. dissertation by Hugh Levey, and he was good enough to provide us with a summary of his preliminary findings. They range from hard statistics to more philosophical considerations, such as speculating as to whether factors such as rough execution and loose syntax indicates an early phase of symbol-system development, or if it is simply a reflection of the work of some less skilled and poorly tutored Picts.

Taking a statistical approach to the composition of symbol types, Levey produces lists in which the totals are quite revealing, and perhaps surprising to some. All of 81 individual designs were recorded, on 320 artefacts, giving more than 1,000 design occurrences. The high number of potential symbols begs the question as to whether variants were treated separately, or grouped under one standard pattern. For example, was the double-disc on the Newton stone, which has an accentuated notch cut into one of the discs, counted as a separate symbol, or grouped with the other regular double-discs? (Romilly Allen, while noting the abnormality in his *ECMS* inventory, does not consider it sufficient for it to be regarded as a separate symbol; one wonders if such was the case in this study.) Then there is the question of designs which occur in Class II but not in Class I, mostly animals, which Allen sometimes sees as symbols, a view which would be hard-pushed to garner much support among today's Pictish scholars.

As we all know, the task which Hugh Levey has set himself is no easy one, and he is appreciative of that. "The level of confidence that the correct identification of a Pictish design had been made was also recorded". Scores out of 10, perhaps? Alas, no details, for the moment. Making such an assessment is equivalent to poking a stick into a hornets' nest. To create a workable hypothesis, some basic tenets were established: symbols often appear in pairs, and some symbols would seem to play a supporting role to the paired ones, while single animals might belong to a different system altogether. This leads him to deduce that Pictish symbols may be divided into three distinct types: pairing symbols, auxiliary symbols, and lone symbols. Straight away, warning lights may be seen to flash.

Yes, there is a great preponderance of paired symbols, but there are also a number of instances of stones carrying three main symbols (or 'core symbols' as Ian Fraser has termed them), and even some (e.g. at Brough of Birsay) with four. As these 'extra' symbols are not auxiliaries but main symbols, the groups they form constitute additional categories, but these are not considered in this study. With regard to auxiliary symbols, the mirror and comb are cited as the most common of these, but it is really not that simple. Many regard the 'mirror&comb' (my rendition) as a single symbol, and there is another factor to take into account – the mirror often appears without the comb, but the comb never appears without the mirror. This could be regarded as an indication that the comb is auxiliary to the mirror, which is itself an auxiliary, and that implies a hierarchy among the auxiliaries.

Inevitably, Hugh Levey employs the Allen/Anderson classification system, though without providing either their or his own definition, or providing any explanation of what the terms Class I and Class II mean with regard to the basic categorisation of Pictish stones. This may be because they mean a range of things to different people and it is too thorny a topic to examine in a fairly brief article, even though the majority of authors have plumped for devising their own. He prefers to use the Class-defining numerals 1 and 2 rather than the traditional I and II, but as he also uses 1, 2, etc. for stones within a local group, it can get a little confusing. His first illustration is tagged as '1', meaning that the same numeral appears three times in a single short line, and given that the stone in question (the rugged symbol stone at Aberlemno) is commonly known as Aberlemno No.1, the count swells to four closely-spaced instances of this one digit.

Another point of mild contention is to refer to "Class I symbol stones and Class II cross-slabs", as if the latter lacked symbols, which of course they must have, by definition. There are those

who would agree with this approach, but also many who would not, and it rather flies in the face of the stance adopted by the multi-edition *Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland* and its various compilers over the decades, including Isabel Henderson, Graham Ritchie, and Ian Fraser, a cadre of Pictish scholars of the first order whose views on this matter should not be lightly dismissed. When Levey comments that "The classification system for Pictish symbol stones has served scholars well for more than a century", there are those who might quibble at the use of the word 'well', as I expounded in some detail at the 1995 PAS Conference in Edinburgh in a paper entitled 'Towards a new classification of Pictish symbol stones'.

Having created a hypothesis, all 81 possible designs were tested against the triage described above. It is claimed that "This method identified which Pictish designs conformed to the hypothesis [how?], suggesting that they were being used as symbols with a defined syntax [why?]". Building on this premise of un-explained validity, the opening sentence of the Findings section reads "The study confirmed the existence of the three types of Pictish symbols, and identified that they fulfilled different roles". This has the uncomfortable ring of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nonetheless, we are presented with a table which crunches the numbers. The list gives 43 'confirmed symbols' (the great majority pairing), with a further 5 possibles, but not their names as yet. A total of just 48 is way down on the potential of 81, and it would have been interesting to know on what grounds the absent 33 were rejected.

The general observations regarding pairing symbols are fair enough, but when it comes to the other two types, some of the statements are questionable. The auxiliary symbols total 6 (with no possibles listed), these being mirror, comb, hammer, anvil, pincers, and shears. This represents an odd admixture of implements which do not sit especially happily together as a single grouping. The mirror and the comb are ubiquitous, particularly when qualifying a symbol pairing, so no problem there. The others, however, are all comparatively rare. We have a hammer and anvil at Abernethy, appearing on either side of a (?)broken sword symbol, and hammer, anvil, and pincers at Dunfallandy – but it is important to remember that the latter example is a Class II stone, where symbols are scattered in relation to other narrative elements, making their relationship much more uncertain and debatable. If there is syntax at work here, it

is well shrouded, for no fewer than five tiny relief symbols flit about the two narrative scenes, clearly subservient to the dominant main trio of blacksmith's tools, which by contrast are executed by linear incision. In this context, the trio seem unlikely to be acting the role of auxiliaries, as Levey claims.

Pincers also appear on Rosskeen, though not as an auxiliary but as one of a pair. Might one more example of pincers exist on Kintore No.3? Allen sees one of the prongs as having a rounded end, unlike the normal clean snap of the broken sword (or tip of a 'tuning fork' if you prefer) which characterises this symbol. Furthermore, why are the V-rod (a once-broken arrow) and the Z-rod (a twice-broken spear) not considered to be auxiliary symbols? Because they overlie their main symbols rather than stand adjacent, they may be regarded as even more directly supportive of them in qualifying whatever message they convey.'

The final entry in the list of supposed auxiliary symbols to be cited is the pair of shears. The only known example occurs at Migvie, where it appears adjacent to a knotwork cross, along with two others. Of this trio, there seems no reason to regard the shears symbol as subservient to the other two (a double-disc & Z-rod, and an arc(h) & V-rod), as it has been afforded an equal degree of prominence, which is not indicative of auxiliary status. Thus of the six suggested auxiliaries, only the mirror and comb would seem to present a convincing case. Although the table states that there are no other possible candidates for the auxiliary category, the text contradicts this by allowing "possibly also a sword on living rock". This doubtless refers to Anwoth in Galloway, but the object is unlikely to be a sword as it has no handle to grip, and more probably represents a fastening pin (as Levey concedes later in the paper). The question is: why should it be considered to be an auxiliary? If the argument is that every trio of symbols comprises a pair plus an auxiliary, then deciding which one falls into the latter category is not always readily apparent.

The third and final symbol type is the lone symbol. (The axiomatic statement that "All lone symbols appear on their own" is surely unnecessary). Three animals are included here: the bull (the great Burghead herd, presumably), the horse (at Inverurie), and the questionable bear (at Old Scatness in Shetland). Not considered is another dubious but possible bear at Huntly (those powerful forelegs are suggestive), but it is paired, with a double-disc

& Z-rod. This list could well be expanded to include, for instance, the deer's head at Dunachton, and the steers at Kingsmills and Lochardill. Fragmentary stones leave the door open, such as at Ardross, *viz.* the wolf (No.1) and the otter, top half only (No.2). Moreover, the claim that "All lone symbols are specific animals" is not the case. For example, the Alyth stone exhibits a lone symbol in the shape of a double-disc & Z-rod, with nothing else in sight.

Also requiring consideration is the mirror on the rough pillar from Pitmachie, now at Newton House, which bears lengthy inscriptions in two different scripts, and was only recognised as a symbol stone a couple of decades ago. The insignificant positioning of the mirror, tucked 'round the corner' as it were, plus the presence of an enigmatic spiral, should not disqualify it from being regarded as a lone symbol, and a non-animal one at that. Three stones are cited as having the mirror&comb only, but this cannot really be regarded as a symbol pairing, being more of a two-part single symbol, and an auxiliary to boot. Moreover, these three examples (Kirriemuir No.1, Wester Denoon, and Kinneder) all have sizeable portions missing, and it would be unwise to assume that these lost fragments did not contain a symbol or two. What about the situation on Monifeith No.1, where both mirror and comb look like lone symbols, being separated from each other by a considerable distance? This illustrates the problem of attempting to impose rules of symbol syntax onto Class II stones, where often the knowledge of their meaning has apparently been lost, only a sense of their arcane importance lingering on.

In similar vein, another category not to receive consideration is a single main symbol plus an auxiliary, which cannot be regarded as a pairing. Again, examples are not hard to find; Craigton No.2 has a notched rectangle & Z-rod plus a mirror&comb, and Kintradwell No.3 has a crescent & V-rod plus the same auxiliaries, as does Park in Aberdeenshire. Thus a main symbol does not function as a pairing symbol in a significant number of instances. Still in debatable territory, Hugh Levey contends that it is unlikely for any of the geometric symbols to be representational. This directly contradicts what I wrote recently wrote in these columns (*PAS Newsletter* 95, p.15), but it is very much an open question, and perhaps always will be – safer not to be dogmatic, either way. He makes the valid point that the Picts were well capable of carving accurate depictions of animals, tools,

and personal objects. Very true, but I see no reason to exclude the possibility that a few apparently abstract designs are not in fact stylised versions of potentially recognisable objects.

Two symbols were considered for admission into two categories, these being the boar and the 'wheel'. The boar appears four times, each instance being different – on a monolith, being a paired symbol at Knocknagael; on living rock, as a lone symbol at Dunadd; on a hearth-stone at Old Scatness; and as an indeterminate fragment at Dores (though the National Museum's reconstruction rather begs the question as to it being a loner). It seems odd for Levey to say that although it appears alone at Dunadd, it should not be regarded as a lone symbol. Eh? To arrive at this seemingly illogical conclusion smacks of the methodology being skewed. Levey justifies it by saying that "If the role [of the boar] at Dunadd is as a *bona fide* lone symbol, it is the only Pictish symbol that belongs to more than one symbol type". That sounds as if he would prefer it to be bogus, so permitting him to retain his 'one symbol, one symbol-type' hypothesis, but rigid adherence to a 21st-century construct, which may be a long way removed from whatever the Picts had in mind, carries the danger of doing a disservice to his project and to our understanding of Pictish symbolism.

The so-called 'wheel', of which there are three examples, is also tricky to deal with, and the term has not won universal acceptance. Fraser's inventory is anything but decisive, calling it "a possible wheel symbol" at Kinblethmont, "a symbol resembling a spoked wheel" at Ardjachie, and "a rayed disc symbol" at Pulvrenan. It can be seen that the design is not identical in those three instances. Romilly Allen only knew of the latter example, which he described in somewhat cumbersome style as "a circle with a smaller concentric circle in the centre, the intermediate space being ornamented with radial lines"; no hint of it representing a wheel. Whatever it is, if it is to be regarded as a symbol, it appears as a fifth one (numerically) at Kinblethmont, where it is placed in a curious wrap-around position; as a paired symbol at Ardjachie; and as being paired with a pair at Pulvrenan, where it can hardly be auxiliary to the twin pair (of crescent & V-rods) when it is positioned directly above them. The one thing it is certainly not is a loner, but the basic question remains – is it a symbol?

A sharp intake of breath necessarily accompanies Levey's claim to have identified a new symbol – followed by an exhalation of disappointment that it is not the symbol which is new, but its interpretation, and a somewhat dubious one at that. The symbol in question, which is well illustrated in his article by a Tom Gray photograph, has been tagged as being a 'placard', but this would seem to be another fanciful anachronism, like the 'spectacles' and the 'tuning fork' symbols. A placard implies the public display of a written inscription for propaganda purposes. So what might this one at Cargill have said? (perhaps 'Northumbrians Go Home', had they penetrated that far north). Would it were a caption to the Aberlemno battle-scene! Following the stone's discovery in a dyke by the local schoolmaster, it was published (in *PSAS* in 1884) by Alexander Hutcheson, who offered a purely geometrical description of this element: "a rectangle with a vertical line proceeding from its lower side", his exact words being echoed by Romilly Allen in his great survey. Ian Fraser's 21st-century equivalent offers much the same, while Alastair Mack in his *Field Guide* reckons it to be a later addition. Whatever, Levey will have his work cut out in attempting to win support for his 'placard' suggestion.

It is part of the purpose of a critique to uncover deficiencies in a text, but this should not be allowed to unduly deflect away from what is worthy of praise. There are many aspects of this article which add to our knowledge, and benefit our understanding, of Pictish symbols. As to their importance, this is confirmed by the statement that "Whatever these monuments and their symbols represented, they would have done so in an unequivocal and formal way that the Picts would have seen and understood". That sentiment may be a well-established truism, but it is nonetheless worthy of repetition. It may be thought unfair to be overly-critical of the text at this juncture, being a Newsletter article which is only a stepping stone towards the final destination, and in which the author did not have the opportunity to develop his theories in any great detail. We are promised more from Hugh Levey at a future PAS event, an occasion which is awaited with eager expectation. In the meantime, we should express our gratitude to him for taking on a topic which modern Pictish scholarship has perhaps let drift for too long, and for presenting an intriguing framework by which to advance this study, which lies at the very core of Pictish art. *Graeme Cruickshank*

The Drosten Stone re-imagined – on Vancouver Island

Darren Anderson lives in British Columbia on Canada's west coast – Nanaimo on Vancouver Island to be precise. Having seen a lecture on YouTube by Prof Jane Geddes on the subject of the Drosten Stone, Darren was moved to recreate the carving, despite having never seen the original.

He got in touch with Jane to discuss his interpretation of the stone – also known as

St Vigeans 1 – and Jane put him in touch with PAS. Darren's sculpture is carved in basswood – a North American term for Lime - and stands around 575mm high. Here in his own words Darren tells us about his creative journey.

My introduction to the Drosten Stone was provided by chance through a random YouTube search. I came across Jane Geddes' 'The Drosten Stone, St.Vigeans: A cultural hybrid' lecture. I was instantly intrigued by the amazing work.

It quickly became apparent that the Drosten Stone is a tangible example of cultural heritage in the moment of social change and I think that

is why I was so taken by it. The piece is a physical integration of cultures, and I relate to it in a very personal way. It is, in a sense, a mirror of my own reflection and history.

I wanted to recreate the piece and explore the artistic journey for myself. Now I'm no stone mason and I have no stone working tools so I decided to recreate the piece in the medium I feel comfortable with – wood. I decided not to use any power tools to carve the piece.

I used two carving knives and a homemade gouge to complete the work. I spent days carving the light into darkness. Every day I worked on the piece I thought of how amazing and resilient the original master artist(s) were.

It took well over two hundred hours to carve the recreation. Now that I'm finished I can honestly say that I loved every minute. I did my best to respect the original work, but as you can see I added my own artistic licence to the piece as I moved along. It's my way of being a part of the creative process.

Thank you to the research, suggestions and inspiration provided by Prof Jane Geddes, the PAS, and George and Isabel Henderson's published work on Pictish art. I was inspired by all of your work and captivated by the Pictish culture as a result.   *Darren Anderson*

Picts and Pandemic

The disruption to normal life caused by Covid-19 prompts the question: 'How did the Picts cope with pandemic disease?' We know of one major pandemic in the mid-6th century: the Justinian plague which spread through Europe after reaching Constantinople in AD 541/2. DNA evidence has identified the causative agent as an antique strain of *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium responsible for bubonic plague, the great medieval pandemic which swept across Europe in the years following 1347. Over several hundred years, repeated waves of this infection continued to exact a heavy toll at each outbreak, culminating in Britain with the Great Plague of 1665/6. Why it should have then subsided and eventually disappeared is just one of the many features of bubonic plague that are not well understood. It seems clear that the Justinian plague shared much in common with the later manifestation, including its lethality. The disease spread along trade routes, reaching Ireland by AD 545. As with its successor, there were further major outbreaks before it seems to have disappeared in the 8th century.

Two major episodes in this pandemic in the British Isles are recorded in early sources including the *Annals of Ulster*, the *Annales Cambriae*, and the works of the Venerable Bede. The earliest mention in the *AU* is accompanied by the names of prominent figures who died of plague; *AC* notes the death of Maelgwyn of Gwynedd in the yellow plague of Ros in AD 547. (That was only a few years after Gildas warned the king that a terrible fate awaited him if he did not mend his ways.) Sporadic outbreaks are noted before the annals record that a pestilence of savage proportions again struck Ireland in AD 663 and note that it was present in southern Britain around the same time. On this occasion, many more individuals are named as victims. Bede also tells us of this outbreak; his own home monastery was among those grievously afflicted. Thus there are at least two phases of the pandemic around which we might expect to see evidence of some impact, although other outbreaks may also have occurred.

We might be tempted to fast forward and look to the later medieval plague to get some idea of its effects on social, economic and religious development across Europe. Historians of medieval England, where there is a quantity of surviving documentary evidence, have argued over this for several generations. There is a

considerable wealth of information available from continental sources, too. A general consensus seems to emerge that the pandemic probably accelerated trends that were already developing, rather than it initiating these changes. Thus it has been argued that a retreat from (fairly recent) settlements on marginal lands had already begun in the late 13th or early 14th century, with a reduction in population levels already underway by 1347. As climatic conditions began to deteriorate, crops failed with increasing frequency. The poorest people living on the poorest lands suffered most. Barely able to eke out a living in good times, there was no question of their setting aside stores to tide them over in times of dearth. Starvation had already reversed the growth trend in population before the repeated outbreaks of plague struck. Already, settlements on the most marginal lands were being abandoned. Across Europe, populations continued to decline over the next few centuries before a slow growth resumed. That plague played a major role is undeniable; perhaps a major decline was inevitable anyway as climatic conditions made the struggle for existence on any land but the best more and more difficult. That major social changes were underway in the years following the pandemic is also undeniable, but how far these were sparked or simply driven forward by the impact of plague is debatable. Wages rose and a greater degree of independence of movement obtained among the labouring classes, but to what extent this may have happened without the added impetus of the huge losses caused by the plague is still open to question. Religious life, too, was affected. Churchmen may to some extent have been protected from the real hardship that seems to have already been developing, but they were at least as vulnerable as the rest when plague struck. The impact on the priesthood and on monastic life was fairly well documented, and the resulting loss of devoted and literate holy men and women may have contributed to the increasing drive towards church reform. Elites were not spared either, with changes in land ownership noted more frequently.

Would we be justified in looking for any parallels in the Pictish period? We might – if we knew enough about pre-existing conditions. We have so few reliably dated sites on which to judge whether or not an expanding population suddenly faced a repeated series of heavy losses, or whether there was already a trend towards shrinkage. We also know so little about the number of religious settlements or the extent of the relationship between the church and secular elites – indeed we have no idea about the extent to which religion could play a role in comforting people faced with a terrifying and seemingly random death. But there may be signs of accelerated change that might be easier to detect than signs of the beginnings of a new trend.

So what effects might the plague pandemic of the AD 540s and its subsequent recurrences have had on the Picts, and what evidence might we hope to find? In the first place, it was lethal. Those who suffered the bubonic form of the disease may have had a fifty/fifty chance of recovery, while those who succumbed to the pneumonic (and most readily transmitted) or septicaemic forms died within a short period of the symptoms developing: a fatality rate of 100%. What were the chances that entire communities were wiped out? The answer to that is simple: overall, they were very low indeed. Even supposing that all members of a household of six were infected and suffered the bubonic form, the chances of them all dying would only be of the order of around 1.5%. The larger the community, the lower the likelihood of them all perishing. The chances of identifying such a site, and confidently dating it to a precise year are vanishingly small. However, *Y. pestis* was no respecter of rank or status. The real damage to communities was done when what might be termed 'key personnel' died. Skills and knowledge could very easily have been lost, to say nothing of those who may have been vital to the maintenance of the prestige and power of any given community, secular or religious. Such losses would have impacted on the ability of a settlement to thrive and retain its position among its neighbours, even leading to abandonment within a relatively short time. This indeed seems to have been a pattern which was seen in the later medieval plague. Equally, sites whose leading individuals survived may have seen a rise in fortune, taking advantage of others' decline. They could, perhaps, achieve a dominance hitherto denied. We might just be able to detect changes in the balance of wealth and prosperity at different sites clustered in the years following the major episodes of the pandemic (i.e. from the mid-6th and in the later 7th centuries).

The shock to trade might be easier to detect. Many links in the chain that led to trade goods from as far afield as the Mediterranean turning up at Pictish sites were vulnerable to the effects of a pandemic. Some parts of the system may never have recovered. A change in the array of

goods imported from the continent may well be associated with the impact of this deadly disease. Changing fashions in locally made goods such as metalwork, stonework or other more perishable items may reflect a loss of skilled craftsmen, and perhaps an increased mobility among the survivors. We might even find an increase in hoards of precious objects concealed but not retrieved because their owners died without leaving any clues as to their whereabouts. There may have been broader changes in the relationships between secular leaders and religious figures: do we have any evidence for this? Whatever the impact of pandemic plague on the trajectory of developing Pictish society, it is sobering to reflect that it probably killed off more people than the long series of conflicts that are reflected in the annals.

As a final thought, the *Annals of Ulster* tell us that a second wave of plague, comparable with that of the AD 540s, first appeared in Ireland in AD 665. It was still present, and claiming kings and abbots in AD 668. The following year we are told: 'Iternan and Corindu died among the Picts'. Of plague? *Sheila Hainey*

The Pictish boat carving on St Orland's Stone, Cossans, Angus
(Part 2)

In his article in *PAS Newsletter* 96, John Borland raised the possibility that the crew of the boat depicted on St Orland's Stone could be 'holy men'. Here evidence is presented to clarify that those figures are not ecclesiastics, but slaves.

The size of these figures indicates that they are of an inferior social rank to the person seated at the prow of the boat. The use of size to indicate social and/or military status is evident on many Pictish sculpted stones, e.g. the Dupplin Cross and the reverse face of St Madoes cross-slab. That the crewmen are larger than the two other passengers does not undermine their status as slaves. In the early historic period, as during the Roman period, slaves often held posts of importance. Evidence of the important posts slaves could hold is available from within primary source material from contemporary kingdoms surrounding the Pictish kingdoms, i.e. Hibernia, Dal Riata, Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the Nordic regions. These sources need to be examined as, to date, no documentary primary sources contemporary to St Orland's Stone are recognised as being Pictish. Being the crew of a boat transporting an important person, as indicated by the size of his head (the same visual technique is used in the disproportionate head size of Constantin on the Dupplin Cross), indicates that members of this crew are slaves of importance and thus can be shown as larger than passengers.

That the crew are all of the same size indicates that none is more important than the other, the tiller man being no more important that the rowers. Usually a distinction between the statuses of these two occupations would be expected. As there is no distinction in their size they are of equal social status, which can only be accounted for if they are all slaves.

The size of the figures also indicates that they are not ecclesiastics, as ecclesiastics are never represented as smaller than figures of other status on the same stone. Indeed they are often the largest figures on sculpted stones. For example, consider the ecclesiastical figures on Fowlis Wester 2, as well as on the sculpted stones within the collections at Meigle and St Vigeans.

1 *Detail of the Cossans boat carving by John Borland. Scale 1:5*

Now to the hair styling or rather the lack of hair. Where an ecclesiastic is portrayed a tonsure can always be found. For a few examples look at: the Aldbar Stone; Aberlemno No.3 (re-identification of a figure as an ecclesiastic in my article); the Dunfallandy stone; Fowlis Wester No.2; Kirriemuir No.1. On St Orland's Stone the crew are depicted as being bald. Are their shaved heads of significance? To answer this question, primary source material from non-Pictish contemporary kingdoms is again consulted. Within these a shaved head is indicative of enslavement.

These sources also show that slavery was a widespread practice in the early historic period. Furthermore, there is evidence of slavery being practised in a Pictish kingdom. In Adomnàn's *Vita Columbae* Broichan, the Pictish king Bridei's wizard, owns a slave-girl (*Vita Columbae* II 33).

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2 *Meigle No.27, detail of slave*

There is another depiction of a slave on a Pictish sculpted stone. On Meigle No.27 there is a small figure, seated in a curled up position on the floor behind the chair of a large seated figure. The size, posture and position of this figure indicate servility. This figure too has a shaved head, although with a thin band of hair left along the crown. Therefore, when all of the above evidence is considered it becomes clear that the three crew members in the boat represented on St Orland's Stone are slaves and not ecclesiastics.   *Sarah Louise Coleman*

The Pictish boat carving on St Orland's Stone, Cossans, Angus
(Part 3)

I expect that I will not be the first member of SWACS and PAS to take issue with the statement in your article in *PAS Newsletter* 96 that there is no-one on board the putative Pictish boat in Jonathan's Cave. Certainly it is difficult to see in ordinary lighting conditions, but the RTI images found at

<**http://www.4dwemysscaves.org/cave/index.php?ccode=jc**>

and indeed the 1902 photograph by John Patrick on our website show a single occupant forrard.

It is a matter of some importance to SWACS as we have adopted the boat, and its steersman, as our logo! And it features on the very becoming hats we sell in our online shop.

John Urquhart
SWACS

I stand corrected John – thanks for bringing it to my attention. I should have referred to your excellent interactive website! Can I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the excellent work done by SWACS – more power to your collective elbow.   *JB*

The Jonathan's Cave boat, complete with occupant, as depicted on a SWACS hat. Different colours are available.