
The Scoonie hunt and other horsemen

The Scoonie cross-slab was unearthed in the old churchyard of Scoonie, just south of the A915 at Scoonie Brae, on the NE outskirts of Leven, Fife. In 1866 it was gifted to the Society of Antiquaries, according to Canmore's website. Today it is wall-mounted in a dimly lit spot in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh, with its back containing a hunting scene on display. The cross side cannot be



1 *Scoonie, Bob Henery*

viewed as it is up against the wall, but Romilly Allen noted in 1903: 'The details shown in Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* [1867] have entirely disappeared.'¹ Made of sandstone, this Class II cross-slab measures 1.06m x 0.7m x 0.1m (3'6" x 2'4" x 4").

Its original height is uncertain as the stone is broken at the top and the Pictish beast was possibly the lower of two large symbols. A bottom section may be missing too. Pieces could have been removed to provide building material, as occurred at several church locations, where they are still being found.

A dominating Pictish beast hangs over the hunting scene like a protective shield, the tip of its snout/beak touching the uppermost rider's face. Facing in the opposite direction to the huntsmen, it is tipped slightly forward so that its 'forelegs' droop lower than the rear 'legs', which touch the stag's antlers. The contiguity suggests a close connection between the message of the symbol(s) and the hunt.

There is no doubt about this being a hunt, given that the fleeing stag has a spear lodged in its side. Hunting scenes have been ascribed to other cross-slabs on the grounds that they depict multiple riders accompanied by dogs, although there is no quarry. This assumes

that whatever message was conveyed by a hunting scene was understood implicitly even though the quarry is absent. St Orland's Stone and cross-slabs at Rossie Priory and Fordoun have been thus described.²

But there are instances where the presence of dogs and horsemen does not connote a hunt, e.g. on the fragment retrieved from Dull churchyard they accompany a line of footsoldiers. Even running hounds do not necessarily equate with a hunt (see the panel below the infantry on the Dupplin cross). So some hunting scene attributions are possibly inaccurate.³ Incontrovertible hunts are depicted on the cross-slabs known as Hilton of Cadboll, Elgin, Aberlemno 3, Kirriemuir 2, and within the melee on Shandwick.

The Scoonie hunting scene is interesting for what might appear to be its egalitarian depiction of huntsmen and their mounts. Three very similarly-sized, -coiffed and -accoutred riders on three very similar horses are arranged with the topmost figure on the left of the space directly behind the stag and above the second figure, while the lowest figure rides out in front, at a slight angle, as though containing the quarry by a flanking movement. More usual among Pictish cross-slabs is to find a size hierarchy of horsemen and/or a distinct range of trappings, where the pre-eminence of the topmost figure is emphasised by being the largest or by sitting on the largest saddle-cloth or by holding the hawk. Such a tableau is so arranged as to highlight one principal participant, usually top centre.



2 *Scoonie, author's tracing omitting ogham*

Being atop other riders or being the foremost rider is an easily understood message about social and political status. The Scoonie cross-slab does not quite fit this schema; however, the uppermost rider clearly speared the stag as the lower two riders still hold their weapons.⁴

It is tempting to view the Scoonie cross-slab as an early stage in the development of hunt iconography, predating an emphasis on social differentiation. The hunt is fulfilled, the stag speared and the dogs move in. On some cross-slabs the deer, or both deer and hounds, are detached from their pursuers. When relegated to the bottom of a stone it would seem that the chase and its outcome, and whatever that signified to those 'reading' the pictures, are less relevant than the ranking of equestrians above.

In the neighbouring Fife parish of Largo is an example highlighting hierarchy and seemingly losing the coherence of the hunt motif. Three horsemen are stacked vertically on Largo cross-slab, more or



3 Largo, ECMS

less on a par in size; however, the uppermost horseman is seated on a big square saddle cloth, the middle figure on a smaller, triangular saddle cloth, while the lowest figure has none. Distinctions in standing are made plain to see. Two deer placed at the bottom of the stone, one casting a backward look, might be a cursory signifier of a hunt but they are segregated from pursuit by a large intervening Pictish beast. The middle and lower riders head towards another large symbol, a vertical double-disc and Z-rod.

Further north in Fife, the crumbling Mugdrum pillar was once a free-standing cross and so deemed later in the evolution of Pictish sculpture. Horsemen fill its tiered panels, the hounds and quarry are confined to the bottom one, yet the spirited scene represents almost a third of the shaft's height, suggesting that here the motif of the chase was going strong, still to current taste and with some enduring relevance.

Hunting scenes are often thought to be vehicles for the Christian message. The stag is Christ the persecuted, or it is the Christian soul, or the hunt represents the Christian soul in pursuit of salvation.⁵ It can always be interpreted to suit Christian iconography, but was that the original intention behind Scoonie's unembellished

hunt? Recognisable Biblical allusions on cross-slabs are fairly common – but did a cross-slab demand that all motifs contain Christian symbolism? Surely not, when Pictish symbols, and sometimes huge, repeated symbols, are allowed. Certainly not in the battlefield scene on the Aberlemno churchyard cross-slab.

It seems likely that secular images could co-exist alongside religious ones. Hunters and horsemen first appear in stone when the cross appears, but may represent native culture, given their conjunction with symbols. Religious connotations of the hunt may have built up as Biblical and apocryphal knowledge deepened, or at least as the desire to announce that knowledge increased by transmitting it on stone, 'whatever the social function of that traditional iconography may have been'.⁶

The relatively simple hunting activity on three sculptured stones from Fife (Scoonie, Largo, Mugdrum) stands in contrast to complex depictions on the much larger cross-slabs of Aberlemno 3 and Hilton of Cadboll whose central panels contain a compartmentalised hunt with many elements. On Aberlemno 3 there is no major variation in horseman size, but the topmost rider is in pride of place and his large head extends into the panel border above bringing it into close contact with a Z-rod belonging to a large double-disc. This feature where a rider's head touches or protrudes into the space above is found elsewhere.

On Hilton of Cadboll, the topmost and largest figure sits sideways on the mount with an escort alongside, possibly a realistic touch since someone would need to control the horse. This principal figure is variously interpreted as a Pictish lady of prominence, perhaps a queen, presiding over a secular 'real' hunt; or she is the Virgin Mary, or he is Jesus, both sited above an allegorical hunt, this one for sinners' salvation.

Possession of horses or participation in riding was obviously emblematic of elite status, while hunting deer would be an actual activity for the horse-owning and horse-riding stratum or strata of society.⁷ There are real-life social, secular reasons for the hunt: it affirms group identity, it can be a public parade of status and power, it provides training for battle, and it adds to the food supply.⁸



4 *Hilton of Cadboll*

If the motif of riders allows social differentiation to be made visible, that may partially be the point – to aggrandise the chief. A leader and entourage usually proceed in descending order, the lower, the lowlier, with size/acoutrements diminishing. For example, on Meigle 4 the attendant riding behind and below is a half size version of his leader, minus his leader’s large saddle cloth; on Meigle 1 the last rider on each diagonal register is similarly pint-sized.

There was no doubt a symbolic function to carving equestrian scenes on a cross-slab. On the one hand, it confirmed the high status of the horsemen (horsewomen) through association with the Christian cross. Occasionally the principal rider is even incorporated into the shaft or arm of the cross to drive home the point (always on horseback - a mount is a required badge of rank).⁹ On the other hand, a display of armed hunters or horsemen at the back of the cross proclaims that the church has guardians to protect it. Of course the families controlling secular power may well have been the same ones as wielded ecclesiastical power, and interdependent.

Apart from definite hunting scenes and where hunting might be implied through synecdoche, some cross-slabs illustrate a procession or a military show of strength. On Meigle 2 the noticeably large, armed chief on his noticeably large saddle-cloth is set centrally above a lower row of horsemen. Here a three-abreast wall of armed cavalry, spear to the fore, presents a united front. Needless to say, they get no saddle-cloths, unlike the higher-ranking horseman following close on their heels.

Alternatively, one could read the ‘story’ on Meigle 2 in separate lines, as with the Aberlemno battlefield scene. At the top, the chief is preceded by an attendant angel signifying his Christian status and providing heavenly protection. In the register below, the chief is preceded by attendant warriors signifying his lordly status and providing earthly protection. Equally-sized saddle-cloths for both might support this second reading.



5 *Meigle 2*

To return to the Scoonie cross-slab, the carving is mostly incised, which suggests it belongs to an early stage, although skill, or lack of it, is not necessarily proof of chronology. The Scoonie hunt moves from left to right and there are later hunts, albeit in the minority, which also depict a left to right movement: for example, Shandwick, where the hunting, fighting and assorted animals occur beneath a dominating Pictish beast; the single huntsman on Nigg; the riders on Kirriemuir 2.

Noteworthy too is the gait of the Scoonie horses. They do not quite exhibit the high leg-action of the archetypal Pictish horse; yet the stag is in classic ‘prancing’ pose with the foreleg raised high. Here the pace is consistent. In other hunting scenes deer run for their lives at full pelt with hounds in racing pursuit; yet horses are out of synch. The horses are generally shown with the controlled and elegant gait of the Pictish trot.¹⁰ Since the movement of deer and hounds is realistically portrayed, and since galloping horses are occasionally portrayed, the sculptors’ preference for the high-stepping, stylised trot indicates a feature of some significance. It might be an indicator of social superiority, and even ethnicity.¹¹



6 *Meigle 5*

another rider outside the cross, both riding in impeccable Pictish trot. Coming along behind is a rider at the gallop. On St Orland’s Stone the cavalcade (moving left to right) is arranged in two registers of high-stepping steeds, with the exception of the rearmost one on the lower row. It is the only one to gallop.¹² Similarly the pint-sized, bottommost rider on Meigle 1 follows along behind at a gallop.

On the Rossie Priory cross-slab three central horses within a cross-shaft trot in typical style, but of the two peripheral horses, one gallops, the other stands still. Conceivably they were designed to fit the available space rather than to convey a different message about the riders, but nevertheless the outsiders are depicted differently from those in pride



8 *Kirriemuir 2, Bob Henery*

of place in stylised pose inside the cross. Merely elegant variation, or a demonstration of inferior horsemanship or of an inferior horse, and so proof of a person of lesser distinction? Or again, the one at the back may have had a different function to perform for the group, such as a messenger.



7 *St Orland's Stone, ECMS*

There are two cross-slabs which pointedly highlight galloping. On the Aberlemno churchyard stone, the ‘Northumbrian’ leader abandons sword and shield to gallop off, signifying an ignominious rout. However, on Kirriemuir 2 the vigorous huntsman charges full gallop at a stag, with spear poised in the air to strike, displaying prowess, it would seem; on the same stone the upper horseman’s mount walks in decorously controlled contrast, a picture of dignity and noble bearing (rather like age versus youth, or maybe two facets of a perfect proto-knight).

The procession of three horses on the recumbent Meigle 11 exemplifies that very pronounced high-stepping of much Pictish horse sculpture.



9 Meikle 11

But this distinctive gait of a century or more was to wane. Later, or presumed to be later, depictions of horses are either walking or static with all four hooves on the ground. This alters the shape of the space available to the sculptor, a possible reason for the rider's leg on the walking or stationary horse to dangle straight down, rather than being carved in the customary position with leg well forward.

Or did the different configuration mean that something specific about horsemanship had changed – a new fashion, or military riding, or the introduction of saddles, or the end of Pictish horse training?



10 Dunkeld 2, ECMS



Girths are visible on the Kirriemuir 2 horses, but may hold in place traditional saddle-cloths not saddles. The two mounts that survive on the military face of Dunkeld 2 seem to bear the large feathered hooves of heavy horses, one explanation for a change in step; but this does not apply to other stones, nor to the narrow side of Dunkeld 2 where a third horse, walking, has the customary small hooves of a riding horse.

The Dupplin free-standing cross is now thought to have been erected around 820, since it seems to refer to the death of Constantin. There the horse of the chieftain/king is in static pose; a sole horseman is depicted; his leg dangles. Is this now a sign of Scottic influence, bringing a change in artistic convention if not a change in the actual practice of horsemanship? Many sculptured stones from the west of Scotland depict a single horseman on a walking horse.

The Scoonie cross-slab was found, like many other Pictish sculptured stones, at a church. Scoonie church stood 'on a small but conspicuous rounded hill, which may well be the eponymous *sgonn*'.¹³ (Gaelic '*sgonn*' a lump-like hill). The Largo cross-slab was found in two locations, one part near the northern boundary of Largo parish, which may correspond to a very old territorial border. The other part was a mile away serving as a drain cover to the south of Largo estate.¹⁴ A third Fife monument, the Mugdrum pillar, was 'once a magnificent and conspicuous land-mark on the eponymous ridge (*druim*) of Mugdrum & still in situ near the western boundary of Mugdrum's lands, and probably indicated to those travelling along the coastal route towards Abernethy from the east that they were entering the core lands of the church of Abernethy.'¹⁵ Interestingly, these locations mirror recent findings from Aberdeenshire – where research suggests that Pictish sculpture is mainly found at church sites, near parish boundaries, and on routeways¹⁶ – even though Aberdeenshire stones are predominantly Class I symbol stones. It seems that sculptured stones served more than one function.

In seeking art-historical clues about how cross-slabs came into being, evolved and spread geographically and chronologically, we risk misreading their context and telescoping centuries. But rushing dogs, the fleeing deer, jaws tearing at its flesh, a spear in its flank, the fanfare of trumpets, a cavalcade on the move, created immensely vivid, action-packed images in stone, not to mention exotic creatures, contorted animals, Bible stories, intricate stone interlace, symbols and predominant cross. Although we still do not know for certain what they were for or whom they were for ('the monks, the local farmers, or visitors?')¹⁷ the sculptured stones were undoubtedly a wonder to behold.

Elsbeth Reid



11 Dupplin cross

Notes

- 1 JR Allen & J Anderson, *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, III, p.347, reprinted Pinkfoot Press, 1993. A photo on <http://nms.scran.ac.uk> under 'Scoonie' shows faint features on the cross.
- 2 *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland*, ed I Fraser, RCAHMS, 2008
- 3 Dogs attacking deer without any hunters in sight, e.g. Meigle 12, St Vigean's 8 & Burghead 7
- 4 The ogham running down the right hand side of the hunting scene avoids slicing the stag's foreleg and head and may be contemporaneous. It can be read as EDDARRNON, similar to inscriptions at Brodie and at Newton, Culsalmond, and possibly in Roman lettering on Fordoun. It is perhaps an epitaph or a name, e.g. St Ethernan, the saint of the Isle of May.
- 5 L Alcock, 'Image and Icon in Pictish Sculpture' in *The Age of Migrating Ideas*, eds RM Spearman & J Higgitt, 1993, p.233
- 6 G Henderson & I Henderson, *The Art of the Picts, Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland*, 2004, p.129
- 7 R Beck, *Scotland's Native Horse, Its History, Breeding and Survival*, 1992: the convex crest on Pictish horses makes it 'obvious that these horses are meant to be stallions'. On Kirriemuir 2 male attributes are noticeable.
- 8 A Carrington, 'The Equestrian Motif in the Early Medieval Pictish sculpture at Meigle, Perthshire' in *Pictish Arts Society Journal* 8, 1995, pp.28-43
- 9 Balluderon, Edderton, Fordoun, Rossie Priory
- 10 Beck, op cit, p.131, points out the 'advanced and sophisticated equitation' of this highly collected gait. Videos and photos of diagonal trotting and pace are under 'Horse gait' on <http://en.wikipedia.org>. Hilton of Cadboll horses show pace leg action.
- 11 But 'Northumbrian' horseman also (Aberlemno churchyard stone)
- 12 The chief horseman is absent and the hole left is surprisingly deep.
- 13 SR Taylor, *The Place-Names of Fife*, vol.2, p.527: 'a possible Pictish origin for this problematical name'.
- 14 Information from Canmore website <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk>
- 15 Taylor, op cit, vol.4, p.642
- 16 M Gondek & G Noble, 'Together as One: The Landscape of the Symbol Stones at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire' and I Fraser & S Halliday, 'The Early Medieval Landscape of Donside, Aberdeenshire' in *Pictish Progress, New Studies on Northern Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, 2010, eds S Driscoll, J Geddes & M Hall
- 17 SM Foster & S Jones, 'Recovering the biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab' in *A Fragmented Masterpiece*, 2008, p.209, in reference to Tarbat peninsula: 'We must also consider who the audiences for these messages might have been: the monks, the local farmers, or visitors?'