



## Forthcoming events

In recent years, with the occasional exception of a wild and stormy night, we have been blessed with what one could fairly call a 'full house' in Pictavia for our winter talk. It was not uncommon for committee members to have to put out more seats to accommodate those wishing to attend. Because of those occasional weather glitches, we decided in 2013/14 to break for three months between December and February so that speakers, committee organisers and you, the members didn't have to battle through blizzards. As it turned out, the winter of that year was significantly less snowy than previous years but as the problem could easily occur in any subsequent winter and as the change to our calendar didn't have a detrimental effect on attendance, we decided to stick with the winter break.

Thus far, attendance at our 2014/15 talks has been disappointingly and consistently low, despite a range of speakers and topics being easily of the same calibre as previous years. Although we do of course welcome non-members to all of our events, our annual conference and our talks are run by the Society FOR the Society. If they are to continue, they will need your support.

The spring season of talks commences in our new venue, Brechin Town House Museum in March, so please come along and bring a friend!

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**Friday 20 March**

*Professor Jane Geddes*

### **The Pictish Church at Tullich, Aberdeenshire**

Tullich Church, dedicated to the Pictish saint Nathalan, is home to an impressive collection of early medieval sculpture including a fine Pictish symbol stone, no less than 16 cross-incised slabs (the largest assemblage of such sculpture in Pictland) and a massive stone font. Recent excavation, which brought to light two of the cross slabs, also produced carbon dating showing activity on the site between the 7th and 9th centuries. A close investigation of the Tullich stones and their location suggests the site was a vital centre for missionary activity in Deeside with connections all the way back to the mission centres in the west of Scotland, including Iona.

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**Friday 17 April**

*Tasha Gefreh*

### **Iona on the Holy Frontier: the space of early medieval crosses**

Tasha, a postgraduate in History of Art at Edinburgh University, is in the final stage of her PhD thesis titled

'Place, Space and Time: Iona's Early Medieval High Crosses in the Natural and Liturgical Landscape.' Among other things, she has examined how the changing light throughout the day played a part in how the high crosses functioned, a feature incorporated into the lighting of the recently refurbished museum on Iona. In this talk, Tasha will look at how Iona's free-standing crosses were used to distinguishing the sacred core of the enclosed monastery, discussing the ways in which they display connections to the Holy Land.

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**Friday 15 May**

*Cynthia Thickpenny*

### **Symbol Stones and Medieval Land Organization in Pictish Speyside**

The davoch is a Scottish unit of land measurement which first appeared in written sources in the Middle Ages but could it be older? Using the symbol stones in the Strathspey parish of Inverallan, where matching symbol pairs correspond on the map to individual davochs, Cynthia will examine whether this medieval unit of land organization may in fact have its origins in the Pictish period.

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## **Award of Honorary Degree to Tom E Gray**

A special event occurred in the lounge of a house in Corstorphine on Monday 16 February 2015. Tom E Gray, long recognised for his photographs of Pictish stones, was awarded an Honorary Degree by Aberdeen University in recognition of his endeavours in advancing our collective knowledge about early medieval stones. In a small intimate ceremony watched by family and a few friends, Tom received his degree from the Pro-Chancellor of Aberdeen University, the Very Reverend Professor Iain Torrance, who had travelled to Edinburgh specially for the occasion. There might not have been the pageant of a full graduation ceremony but the key participants were fully robed in their academic gowns adding to the splendour of the event.

After wartime service as a navigator in Bomber Command, Tom left the RAF in 1947 and began a career in photography, initially photographing extensively in museums and galleries before moving to Kodak's Professional Photography Division in 1960. His interest in history and archaeology had started as a schoolboy and Tom used his spare time to photograph historic villages, buildings and industrial sites including a number of views of streets and premises in West Lothian and Edinburgh in the

1940s and 50s, creating some very atmospheric and artistic images. He documented a number of industrial sites, such as Port Glasgow shipyards and Broxburn shale oil works before they stopped production. He also wrote articles for various magazines on everything from badgers and crafts to historic buildings.

Early retirement in 1986 meant that Tom was able to travel across the country photographing Scotland's early medieval sculpture, including Pictish stones. He further developed a technique that had been pioneered by RCAHMS in the 1960s which involved using flash lights (even in daylight) to increase the definition of the carved incisions. This enabled him to capture even the faintest details. The quality of his work was soon recognised and sought after for publications such as *The Art of the Picts* by Isabel and George Henderson. Today Tom's imagery continues to provide the most up-to-date record of these important stones.

Spanning a fifty year period from 1947 to 1998, there are some 1,500 photographs by Tom Gray now deposited in RCAHMS. The Collection is known as the Tom and Sybil Gray Collection (in memory of his wife) and all images are now digitised and available online in the Canmore database at [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk).

Following the ceremony there was a Pictish stone birthday cake to celebrate Tom's 91st birthday. A very special occasion for all! *Lesley Ferguson*

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*Norman Atkinson*

## The Dunnichen Stone

The last talk before our winter break took place in our new venue, Brechin Town House Museum, on 21 November 2014, and was delivered by former PAS President Norman Atkinson. His chosen subject: the Dunnichen Stone. If anyone was in any doubt that a subject as narrow as one single Pictish symbol stone (and a weel-kent one at that) could both entertain and enlighten, then Norman's talk was the one to dispel any such fears.

Many of us are familiar with the illustrated gazetteer published by Patrick Chalmers in 1848, *The Ancient Sculptured Monuments of the County of Angus, including those at Meigle in Perthshire and one at Fordoun in the Mearns* (Norman was at great pains to give this book its full title), which includes the first published illustration of the Dunnichen Stone. However, Norman informed us that the first published account of the stone and its discovery was by James Knox in 1831 in his book, *Topography of the Basin of the Tay*. In truth, Knox merely mentions the stone in passing, noting that, like a stone at Glamis, 'On a stone which was found at Dunnichen, there is a mirror, and also a comb'.

The next published account, and a more forthcoming one, appeared in the New Statistical Account of

Scotland in 1845, publishing a note written some twelve years earlier by James Headrick, minister of Dunnichen parish. Headrick gives more information, stating the stone was found 'on the East Mains of Dunnichen'. He also noted its association with human bones in a stone-lined grave, suggesting the Dunnichen Stone had been used (or re-used) as the lid of a cist.

Chalmers' account states the stone was found in 1811 but he then corrects this date to 1805 on an erratum slip. Many subsequent scholars do not pick up on this correction and, as his is one of the more widely referred to accounts, the wrong date of 1811 has, and continues to have wide currency. Chalmers' location details are also slightly changed and less specific, stating the stone was 'dug upon one of the farms of the Dunnichen Estate'. This somewhat generalised location is then repeated by Andrew Jervise, pretty much word for word, in *Land of the Lindsays* in 1853. However in a note published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (PSAS)* in 1853, and in his *Memorials of Angus and the Mearns*, published in 1861, Jervise is more specific, stating that the stone was found 'in a field called the Cashel or Castle Park'.

So, with more than one published date of discovery and discrepancies regarding the Dunnichen Stone's find spot, it is not surprising that confusion has crept in. Going through all the accounts to glean all relevant information and using the Ordnance Survey 1st Edition map of 1868, which shows features like the Castle Park and indeed the now lost 'castle' or tower, Norman was able to confirm where the stone was found and showed us pictures of the much-changed location as it looks today.

Having covered the stone's discovery and early biography, Norman turned his attention to its carving: the double disc and Z-rod with a so-called flower symbol above and a mirror and comb below. He rightly praised the symbols as being beautiful exemplars of their type, especially the flower, which possesses a fluid elegance lacking in most if not all of those carved in relief on cross slabs (Ulster, Golspie and Glamis 4). In truth, it is often the case that when Pictish symbols are carved in relief on cross slabs, something gets lost in translation.

Norman also noted the prominent vertical channels incised on either side of the symbols, almost certainly a secondary phase of carving, as the right hand channel cuts through the right hand disc. He mused if they might relate to the burial cist with which the stone was associated. He also touched on the parallel striations on the back of the stone, believing them to be the result of passing ploughs when the stone lay face-down in the ground.

After its discovery, the stone was moved to the grounds of Dunnichen House, where it stood until 1967, when concerns were raised about its conservation. Amazingly even in this modern time,

confusion manages to creep in regarding the stone's location. The records of the Department of Environment state that the Dunnichen Stone was moved to Arbroath Abbey in January 1967, with the intention of it being displayed in St Vigean's Museum, and indeed the RCAHMS database Canmore includes a note from the Ordnance Survey noting the stone at St Vigean's. Yet Norman remembers a friend photographing the stone, still in the grounds of Dunnichen House, in July 1967 and even showed us that photo.

The DoE records show that they received a request from the McManus Galleries in Dundee to have the stone on loan, and by early 1972 it was on display there. Around that time, the local press reported that some in Angus wanted the stone to be returned but this was to be a slow-burning issue. Indeed it was not until 1997 that Norman, as Head of Cultural Services with Angus Council, oversaw the Dunnichen Stone's arrival in the Meffan Institute in Forfar, initially on a ten-year loan. Eighteen years later, it remains on display in the Meffan, forming the centrepiece of what has become an exceptional and beautifully displayed collection of Pictish sculpture.

JB

## Can you believe it?

'The Loch Ness Monster really does exist – the fact was reliably recorded by a Christian monk 2,000 years ago.' This assertion was made a few years back, in the STV documentary, *Scotland Revealed*. Of course, it was a wildly inaccurate statement. There were no monks in Scotland 2,000 years ago – indeed, Christianity had still to be invented, and as for the monster – well, we shall see later. Unfortunately, this misrepresentation of the historical record is far from unique. It was just disappointing to find it in a serious and supposedly historically accurate TV program. Perhaps they should have consulted a real historian, rather than, as was the case, the local tourist officer. Written sources surviving from the early centuries can give historians a valuable insight into that remote period. However, in the hands of inexperienced scholars, or casual readers, they can be extremely misleading. In order to interpret them correctly – and they do require interpretation – it is necessary to appreciate how and why they were constructed. It also helps to have knowledge of the literary customs and practices of the day. Without this information, their value as historical documents is severely compromised.

In order to illustrate some of these points, it is useful to take as an example the text that was presumably the one being alluded to in that TV documentary, namely, Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, written a mere 1,300 years ago, around the end of the seventh century, and widely used (and more often misused) as a source, by historians and lay people alike. The

Columba in question was, of course, the Irish saint whose foundation on Iona was eventually instrumental in spreading Celtic Christianity across northern Britain and beyond. However, Columba was not the first to introduce Christianity to the Picts, nor did he convert the general population, or even the king himself, as is sometimes claimed. These facts are quite clear from the text – it is always a good idea to read a book before quoting it.

Adomnan wrote his *Life* a century after Columba's death, taking his information, as he informs us, partly from earlier written accounts, and partly from oral sources, some of whom are said to have known Columba personally. A simple calculation shows that, if true, these latter sources must have been very young when they met the elderly Columba, and very old when they recounted their tales to a youthful Adomnan, who himself was an old man when he wrote them down. The opportunities for inaccuracies and exaggerations to creep in, somewhere along the way, are obvious.

The story from the *Life* which is most frequently referred to is the one which supposedly tells of Columba's confrontation with a monster in Loch Ness. It is often cited as evidence that Columba travelled to Inverness, and that he did so by way of the Great Glen, and even that the Loch Ness Monster exists. However, reference to the appropriate text (*Book II, chapter XXVIII*) shows that the episode with the monster took place on the River Ness, not the loch, and that it occurred while Columba was 'living for some days in the province of the Picts', and not while he was en route there. These frequent misrepresentations of Adomnan's account again demonstrate the value of actually consulting the book.

It is a useful and informative exercise to consider this particular chapter in more detail. In it, Adomnan describes an incident where Columba and his companions were approaching the River Ness, with the intention of crossing it, when they happened upon a group of local inhabitants burying the body of a man, who, they explained, had been attacked and killed by a monster while swimming in the river, just a short time before. Using their boat, and with the aid of a hook, these people had recovered his body and brought it ashore for burial.

Undismayed by the monster lurking beneath the surface, Columba bravely ordered one of his companions, Lugne Mocumin, to swim across the river and fetch a small craft from the opposite bank, so that he and—the rest of the party could be ferried across in it. Lugne dutifully obliged and leapt into the water and began swimming, but was soon attacked by the monster. At this point Columba raised his hand, made the sign of the cross, and ordered the monster, in the name of God, to desist. The terrified monster complied and fled at great speed, allowing Lugne to complete his mission safely. All the onlookers, including the local

heathens, were suitably impressed. No doubt, Lugne was, too.

We might take a moment to wonder what sort of creature this monster was. Known aquatic predators, such as sharks, crocodiles, and killer whales, are so uncommon in the River Ness that it is not unreasonable to discount them completely. The absence of a suitable candidate species has led some poor gullible souls to assume that, by default, it could only have been the famed monster of Loch Ness, albeit, some distance away from its traditional haunt in the loch. But what are we to make of the veracity of a tale which has to resort to invoking the presence of the Loch Ness Monster, no less – and for the purpose of making the story appear more credible than it would otherwise be?

Taking a different tack, a very basic forensic examination of the account reveals an obvious anomaly. If the terrified local inhabitants had just used a boat to recover the body of the unfortunate victim and bring it ashore, then it is reasonable to assume that their boat was now located on this near bank of the river. So why was it necessary for Columba to send poor Lugne swimming across the river to fetch another one? The answer, of course, is straightforward.

Lugne had to enter the water, otherwise he would not have been attacked by the monster, and if he had not been attacked by the monster, Columba would not have had the opportunity to save him. If Columba had not saved him, there would be no story to tell. And that is exactly what this is – a story. It is not the account of a real event. It is a parable, intended to illustrate a point, and the medieval conventions for such tales did not require them to be logically consistent.

As far as the monster is concerned, anyone familiar with medieval texts or illustrations will instantly recognise it as a fairly standard metaphor from that period, representing evil, amongst other things. The message being preached by Adomnan was that, if you put your trust in God, then He will save you from all the evils and perils that are personified by the monster and you will not suffer the same fate as the recently deceased non-believer did. It is quite clear that the monster in the story was metaphorical, not biological – Nessie is exonerated.

While serious historians do not believe that the monster physically existed, they often fail to appreciate the logical consequences which inevitably follow on from that fact. Accepting that the monster was merely the product of Adomnan's creative mind inevitably has a serious impact on the rest of the story. The recovery and subsequent burial of the victim's body can be seen to be no more than an invention, necessary to fit the requirements of the narrative. Without the existence of the monster to do the killing, there is no reason to believe that the incident really happened. Moreover, on the strength of this account,

can we even be sure that Columba ever crossed the River Ness?

If Adomnan invented the monster, and its victim's unfortunate demise and burial, then it must be considered likely that he fabricated the rest of the story, too. To be convincing, any fictitious tale has to be underpinned by a suitable and believable setting, and the River Ness provides an ideal location for this particular story. It is deep enough to conceal a monster and is too deep to ford, for most of its length, but normally flows sufficiently slowly to be swimmable. There are not too many other rivers in the north which match these basic requirements quite so well. When Adomnan chose the River Ness, it was not because of events which had actually happened there, but because it suited his fictitious storyline.

Suggesting that the entire story is a fiction is not to imply that Adomnan was being dishonest or deliberately misleading. He was simply employing an established literary technique for getting a message across. This same technique is still used today, even in some academic publications. For example, it is common practice in works on psychology and sociology to include entirely fictional case studies, in order to get ideas across. This is perfectly acceptable as long as the points being illustrated by the stories are valid – and so it was in Adomnan's day. The mistake made by many modern readers, including some professional historians, is to accept these fictional stories as being factual.

The core of each story – the narrative part – is an essential component of that fiction, necessarily there to support and legitimise the more fanciful part. Of the more than a hundred short chapters in Adomnan's *Life of Columba*, almost all involve the presence of angels, or concern miracles allegedly performed by Columba, or else feature improbably unerring predictions made by the great man. Not surprisingly, most of these elements are too far-fetched to be considered reliable by any serious historian.

However, it is too simplistic a solution just to strip away the obvious fantasies from the accounts, and then assume that the remaining text is factual. To use some analogies, it is not like scraping the burnt bits off a slice of overcooked toast to make it more palatable – a generally acceptable practice. It is more like picking the maggots out of a piece of over-ripe meat – and few of us would wish to dine on such newly 'cleansed' produce, if we valued our health. Adomnan's *Life* carries similar, if only metaphorical, health risks for the historian. The presence of monsters, miracles, and angels should alert us to the likely contamination of the entire text.

Turning briefly to a tale which does refer to Columba venturing on to Loch Ness (*Book II, chapter XXXV*), we find that, at the start of his voyage, he was confronted with a violent headwind, supposedly

conjured up by the druid, Broichan, in order to demonstrate his superior powers in controlling the elements. Columba, though, appealed to God, and with His help, he set sail on the loch, miraculously travelling at great speed against the wind. Before very long, the tempest abated to no more than a breeze, and veered round to a more favourable direction to help him on his way.

Loch Ness lies in the steep sided Great Glen, which stretches from coast to coast in a SW/NE direction. The prevailing south-westerly winds are channelled, often fiercely, along the glen, sometimes for weeks at a time – fine for anyone wanting to sail north-east towards Inverness, but a major problem when making the return journey. Medieval travellers who used, or purposely avoided, the route would have been well aware of this problem, so where better to locate a story of Columba's miraculous ability to exercise control over adverse winds? Again, a setting has been selected for its suitability for the story, and does not necessarily relate to an historical occurrence.

It would therefore be unwise to assume that this is an accurate description of Columba's departure from the province of the Picts, and to cite it as evidence that he journeyed back to Iona via the Great Glen is unjustified. Furthermore, even if it was a factual account, nowhere does it state that he travelled the whole length of the loch, merely that he 'was carried safely to the wished-for haven', which could have been any of the several loch-side settlements, many of which were only easily accessible by boat.

Loch Ness was perhaps the only suitable inland location for such a story. Though Adomnan does record Columba performing this same trick on several other occasions, these all concern sea voyages on the west coast, where the winds were just as troublesome (*Book II, chapter XLVI*). Again, travellers of the time would have been in awe, as well as envious, of this miraculous power, quite literally a godsend. And once more, the locations chosen as settings for these stories were no accident. Columba was undoubtedly an historical figure, but it is likely that the picture which Adomnan paints of him, his deeds, and his travels, is a largely fictitious one. As a writer, Adomnan was equally adept at producing works of fiction or non-fiction, and his *Life of Columba*, which is unashamedly hagiographic, slots more comfortably into the former category.

So, how much can we learn from his *Life*? Using it as an historical source for research into the Pictish period is rather like using the novels of Charles Dickens in order to gain an understanding of Victorian England. Only the purely descriptive, non-narrative, elements of the stories can be regarded as being in any way accurate, though still seen subjectively, through the eyes of the author, while all the events and actions described are almost certainly fictitious, probably in their entirety.

It follows from this that it would be most unwise to attempt, as has frequently been done, to establish Columba's itinerary in Pictland solely on the basis of these tales. The background picture of Pictland which Adomnan paints, and the locations he mentions, are more likely to be based on his own extensive travels, rather than those of Columba. As for the narrative content, it is worth bearing in mind that, in the Latin original, almost all of the stories begin with the phrase, '*Alio in tempore*', or some close variation thereof, and that this readily translates into English as, 'Once upon a time'.

Ron Dutton

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*Dr Clare Ellis*

### **Early historic Baliscate, Isle of Mull: the archaeological evidence for a monastic establishment**

Our last meeting at Pictavia before its closure was held on 17 October, 2014, when our speaker brought us up to date on the excavations at Baliscate on the island of Mull.

Noted in 2008 by two local volunteers working with the 'Scotland's Rural Past' project, the remains of a sub-rectangular building within a rectangular enclosure, with another enclosure nearby, were visible through the turf. The site, surrounded by woodland on a ridge about a mile south of Tobermory, was examined by RCAHMS and identified as belonging to a group of sites described as early chapels. In 2009, *Time Team* carried out a brief investigation of the site. (Steve Thompson of Wessex Archaeology gave us a summary of 'just three days' work at the site at our conference in 2010 – see *PAS Newsletter 57* for the report.) Clare headed a four-week dig at the site in 2012, with enthusiastic help from the local community, and she talked about the results of this work.

*Time Team* had confirmed the presence of an early wooden building with associated burials, one of which gave a C<sup>14</sup> date of AD 610–675, overlain by the later stone chapel. They also uncovered a leacht – a cairn built to serve as the base of a cross – associated with the stone chapel. Leachta are known in Ireland, but so far, few have been identified in Scotland. The enclosure covered about 210x100 metres, with levelling for the chapel. An entrance through the vallum and an associated hollow way leading to it were also noted. A number of graves, for which no dates were obtained, were thought to have been associated with the stone chapel.

Clare first summarised work on the cemetery, where 18 grave cuts were identified. Dateable remains were obtained from three of these, and these gave a date range of AD 680–870. The grave cuts were all oriented more or less east-west, and no grave goods were found, features that point to these being

Christian burials. One long cist was noted, along with several burials where head stones and/or 'head boxes' (stones placed either side and above to protect the head) were found. Adrian Maldonado has suggested that the use of such devices first appeared in the seventh century in response to a growing anxiety over salvation and the need for the body to be preserved intact.

Some fragmentary remains were recovered, allowing for the tentative identification of a probable male aged over 45 years, four other adults and two juveniles. These finds would not be at odds with what we might expect from the cemetery of an early historic monastic centre. Inchmarnock, for example, has yielded evidence suggestive of the presence of both adult males and youngsters being schooled in letters and illumination.

A number of intercutting graves were observed. Such an arrangement may reflect a desire for burial as close as possible to a venerated object – a structure, well, or saintly burial. It may also represent the difficulties imposed by the need for burial within an enclosed area of consecrated ground. This would contrast with the extensive 'open field' cemeteries where space was apparently available for each grave to occupy fresh ground, such as that at the Catstane, Ingliston. The graves at Baliscate post-date the early phase of the site, but are earlier than the stone and turf chapel whose remains were first identified here.

The leacht identified by *Time Team* may cover an earlier burial. It may have originated as a simple cairn, and the white pebbles which seem to have been placed on the leacht and eventually become incorporated in it may have been left by pilgrims to the site. However, as leachta are extremely rare in Scotland, permission to investigate further this part of the scheduled site was not granted. It was not possible to get any direct dating evidence for the leacht but *Time Team* did find a small fragment of carved stone, possibly part of an eighth-century cross, overlying its remains. There are other similar structures in the woods around the chapel site, and other possible examples exist elsewhere in the Western Isles, so it may be possible to get more detailed information about this class of monument in future.

The graves were cut through cultivated land, with earlier arid marks clear in the cemetery area. A bedding trench for a palisade that curved round the enclosure included in its fill metal-working debris and then a layer of domestic waste. The latter included grain dated to around AD 465–610. Areas given over to industrial work, food production, burial and worship find parallels at a growing number of Pictish period monastic sites that have been identified across Scotland from Iona in the west to Portmahomack in the east, Barhobble in the south to Applecross in the north. The construction techniques of the palisade-topped enclosure banks (one of which

can be dated to before the ninth century) find clear parallels at Iona. The entrance through the enclosing palisade bank was carefully revetted with stone and had a cobbled road surface, where wheel ruts could still be seen. A 'gateman's cell' revetted into the bank at the gateway has parallels at several Irish monastic sites. At 1.37 hectares, the enclosure could easily have held a small daughter house of Iona.

Between AD 800–975, there is a gap of around 80–150 years with no dated activity at the site. The cemetery appears to have fallen out of use in the early-eighth century. Elsewhere, Viking raids are reported to have depopulated monasteries – it is possible that the site at Baliscate was abandoned in those uncertain times. However, the leacht, and possibly two other cross bases in the woods around the chapel site are as yet undated. The quartz pebbles from the leacht were probably placed at the cross base as tokens of prayer. The association of white quartz with the dead goes back into prehistoric times, and appears to have been adopted at early Christian sites in the west. A bullaun stone bowl, placed against the enclosure of the later chapel, is similar to examples associated with ecclesiastical sites elsewhere in Scotland and in Ireland. Bullaun stones (rounded beach cobbles) were also found on top of the leacht. The turning of such stones within the stone bowl invoked a blessing or a curse — an Irish attested custom condoned by the church for centuries. Taken together, these may indicate some activity at the site that involved processional activity around the enclosure.

Baliscate, from at least the early-seventh century (and probably earlier) until the latter part of the ninth century was home to a significant and hitherto unknown Christian community. There then appears to be a gap in the occupation of the site. A possible Norse-style longhouse, built of stone and turf with rounded corners, was accompanied by a grain-drying kiln. This had burned down some time between AD 1042 and AD 1220, attested to by C<sup>14</sup> dating of charred oats found within the kiln chamber. The kiln was a substantial one, larger than would be required to meet the needs of a simple farmstead. Barley was also present, and the roof over the bowl had been constructed of hazel withies supporting a turf topping.

In the medieval period, probably the 13th century, a stone-footed building was constructed of turf held in place by withy panels. This had an earthen floor and was associated with domestic finds. In the late 13th or, more likely, the early-14th century, the leacht was extended over pottery which gave a date of c.AD 1270, bringing it next to a building of stone and turf, the later chapel.

The site was extensively remodelled around this time, with an enclosure about 15x18 metres, with an entrance to the east. The function of this building is not, however, confirmed. When it burned down, it

contained sacks of grain – surprising if this was indeed a chapel in regular use. However, this may represent a late phase of this building’s history, with the focus of the parish moving into Tobermory. The building at Baliscate may have been reduced to use as a tithe barn, or have ceased to have any ecclesiastical function by the later-14th century. The excavation at Baliscate suggests that much more work needs to be done on the small chapel sites of the west to uncover how they really functioned in their communities. *Sheila Hainey*

## ***Picts, Gaels and Scots: Early Historic Scotland***

**Sally M. Foster**

Sally Foster’s *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (Edinburgh: Birlinn) was first published in 1996. This is a welcome second revision — the last was published in 2004 and has been long out of print. As a basic guide to current thinking on the early history of the Picts and their neighbours, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* has long been valued, and the new edition is equally to be recommended. A brief comparison to the earlier editions reveals what might be termed a new ‘Problem of the Picts’: the rate at which new discoveries and interpretations of older work has accumulated has been astonishing. If anything, the pace of acquisition of new data on the Picts and their contemporaries is increasing. Sally has done well to include some of the latest discoveries in this comprehensive survey of the latest thinking on early medieval Scotland. As we have come to expect, the book is well written and calculated to appeal to a wide audience. The many illustrations are well provided with clear captions and, where necessary, concise explanations. This is a book that should appeal to anyone interested in the Picts. Be warned, however, we may be looking for another edition before another ten years are out! *Sheila Hainey*

## **‘Some narrow passes in the midst of inaccessible mountains’**

The Highland Hill Forts article by Ron Dutton in *PAS Newsletter 72* mentions the site of St Eata’s chapel between Torr Alvie and the River Spey and that it may have been founded by monks from Kinloss, a daughter house of Melrose Abbey.

Eata, one of the monks from Lindisfarne who established the Northumbrian monastery of *Mailros*, four kilometres down river from the later Cistercian abbey, was Prior here and then Abbot in 651. He later became Abbot of Lindisfarne and then Bishop, exchanging this for the Hexham diocese in 685, the year before he died.

This is a date well known to PAS members when Ecgrith was lured into ‘some narrow passes in the

midst of inaccessible mountains’ and killed along with the greater part of his forces. Ever since reading Alex Woolf’s 2006 paper, ‘Dun Nechtain, Fortriu and the Geography of the Picts’, I’ve been intrigued by the proximity of Dunachton, his proposed location of the battle, and a chapel dedicated to a Northumbrian Saint. There is also a ‘St Eata’s Well’ shown on the first edition Ordnance Survey map close by and another chapel dedicated to the Saint at Achnahatnich near Coylumbridge.

A late-18th century ‘Survey of the Province of Moray’ refers to ‘St Eata at Kinrara’ as one of the three chapels in the Parish of Alvie, with Mackinlay’s ‘Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland’ also mentioning this as well as that at Achnahatnich. Whether the dedications are to St Eata or are a corruption of another name such as Ethan or Ite, as Watson suggests in his *Celtic Place Names of Scotland*, is uncertain but the possibility that it is the Northumbrian Saint is curious.

Could it be that the dedication dates from c.715 when the Pictish Church was realigned to that of Northumbria by Nechtan son of Derilei to commemorate the battle? Alternatively, the chapel could have been established much later by monks from Kinloss, after its foundation by David I in 1141, with its location perhaps influenced by the previous Northumbrian connection, but I can find no reference to this ever being part of the Abbey’s estates.

On the south bank of the Spey between St Eata’s chapel site and Dunachton is Dalnavert. It is mentioned in a 1338 charter as Dalnafert, in the *Rentall of the Lordshipe of Badzenoche at Uitsunday, 1603* as Dallavertt, on Molls map of the ‘East Part of the Shire of Inverness with Badenoch etc’ as Dalhavert, on Gordon’s mid-17th-century map as Dalnavert and on Roy’s Military Survey Map as Dalnaperst, with the first edition Ordnance Survey Map giving it as Dalnavert. Watson states that it derives from *dail na bhfeart* or ‘dale of the graves’ with Iain Taylor in his *Place Names of Scotland* more accurately translating it as ‘haugh of the graves’.

Although a cemetery has yet to be discovered close to Dalnavert, according to Mackinlay, St Eata’s chapel ‘one time existed in a burying ground’. Aerial photographs have also revealed a large area with round and square barrows the other side of Torr Alvie and almost equidistant between the site of the chapel and Alvie Kirk. The Old Statistical Account for the Parish of Alvie mentions ‘a number of tumuli on each side of the high-road, nearly opposite to the manse; curiosity prompted some of the neighbouring gentlemen to open the most conspicuous one, where they found the bones of a human body entire, and in order, with two large hart-horns across’. The Ordnance Survey Name Book of 1871 gives further details: ‘Human remains, together with pieces of sword blades, buckles etc. were discovered about 1800 when several earthen mounds were investigated

prior to cultivation of the field. According to tradition, a battle was fought in the vicinity at some unknown date.'

When Alvie Kirk was rebuilt in the 19th century 'no less than one-hundred-and-fifty skeletons were found beneath the floor of the church, lying head to head. No trace was found of coffins of any kind having been used, and the probability is that the bones were those of Highlanders killed at a very remote period at some skirmish or battle in the neighbourhood, and all laid to rest at the time uncoffined and unshrouded.' For Highlanders might we read Picts?

When canoeing the Great Glen on my way to the annual conference in Thurso last October, I took the opportunity to visit the Garbeg cemetery above Drumnadrochit where one of the barrows was excavated in 1975 following the discovery of stone fragments incised with a crescent and v-rod and possibly the crest of a Pictish beastie. They are displayed in Inverness Museum. A full-size replica of what it could have looked like now stands in the Urquhart Castle visitor centre foyer.

Most of the Pictish cemeteries identified to date only seem to have a few barrows. Garbeg is the largest having 21 spread over an area of about 5,000 square metres. The Croftgowan site may be larger still with barrow cropmarks stretching for about 300 metres alongside the former 'high road', part of the 'King's Road between Stirling and Inverness' shown on Roy's Military Survey map. Unfortunately most of the field has been deep ploughed.

The Strath of the Spey narrows here between the steep slopes of Creag-na h-Uamha (382 metres) and Ord Ban (428 metres) with Loch Alvie, the Bogach, Torr Alvie (358 metres) and the floodplain of the River Spey occupying most of the space between. The 'pinch point' here is indicated on Taylor and Skinner's survey map of 1776 and shows the road on a raised area between the Loch and the Torr corresponding to the Croftgowan Pictish barrow site.

Unfortunately, no symbol stones have been discovered at Croftgowan but one was found at Dunachton, now standing in the walled garden of the Lodge. Inscribed on this is a deer's head. Might there be some connection with the 'hart-horns' reported to have been discovered in one of the Croftgowan barrows...? *Bill Stephens*

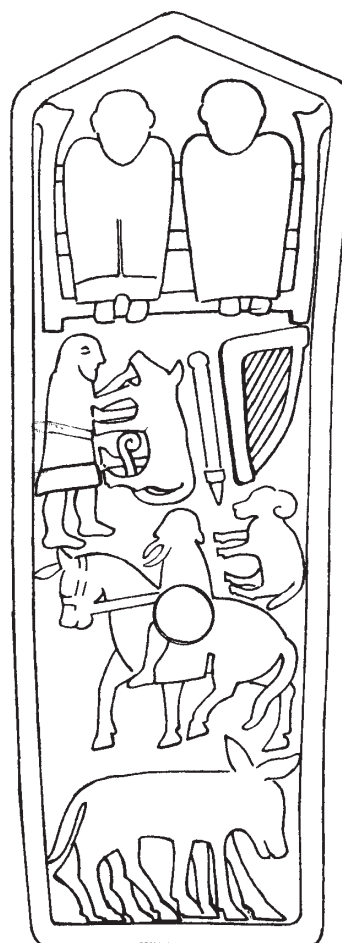
More details will be found in a fully referenced paper intended for the PAS on-line journal.

### PAS Newsletter 75

The deadline for receipt of material is  
**Saturday 16 May 2015**  
Please email contributions to the editor  
**john.borland@rcahms.gov.uk**

## Four legs good, eight legs better (pace Orwell)

Being interested in Pictish carved stones, we are accustomed to oddly-shaped animals, not caused by any lack of skill in the carvers, but formed on purpose to express something that we struggle to comprehend. Did the sculptors set out to astound their audience; can we assume a didactic Christian message on a cross-slab; are there lost sagas and myths that featured such creatures; is there sculptors' playfulness behind fantastic animal forms?



1 Aldbar cross-slab back, ECMS III, p 246

In Brechin Cathedral, Angus, stands a very fine cross-slab of red sandstone with relief sculpture on both sides (1). JR Allen described it 'of nearly rectangular shape but expanding upwards, and with a pediment at the top, 5 feet 6 inches high by 1 foot 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches wide at the top, and 1 foot 7 inches wide at the bottom by 5 inches thick', and he provided a line drawing in *ECMS III*.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-19th century it apparently stood in the kirkyard at Aldbar, near Brechin, but by the end of the 19th century it was 'within a small mortuary chapel' at Aldbar Castle, before making its way into the Cathedral at Brechin.



At the top of the back are two ecclesiastics, or saints, side by side on a double seat. They face front, enveloped in thick vestments, their head and feet still protruding but arms almost worn away.

Below, a figure is 'rending the jaws' of what must be a lion, since the accompanying items are all emblems of David, namely a staff, harp and ram. Fitted underneath this cluster is a left-facing horse with a rider carrying a round shield. Of note are the horse's ears, one upright and one well forward, which is unusual. The rider sports long mustachios, similar to those of foot-soldiers on the great Dupplin Cross and horsemen on the small Benvie cross-slab.

Finally, at the bottom we come to an oddly-shaped animal. It has all the appearance of a donkey/ass with long ears flopping forward and backward, except for the fact that it has eight legs (2). JR Allen offered a reasoned explanation: 'a beast with a double set of legs, perhaps a conventional way of representing two beasts abreast of each other'. Given the small quantity of Pictish sculpture to have survived the centuries, maybe there was such a convention but we have no other example of it.



2 Aldbar cross-slab, donkey detail

However, we do have several examples of animals represented abreast of each other in a conventional way, such as the two-abreast horses and riders on Fowlis Wester 1 and Hilton of Cadboll slabs, three-abreast horses and riders on Meigle 2 and Meigle 26, and yoked horses in drawings of lost Meigle 10. These figures are carved adjoining one another in a series of planes, indicating depth (3). Similarly, dogs on Meigle 2 and people on Fowlis Wester 1 are slightly offset to give a 3D impression of standing one next to the other.

When you examine the Aldbar donkey, you will see that it has four legs on the near side and four legs on its far side, i.e. four legs are continuations of the body (top face of the stone) while the other four legs are cut back to show they belong to the far side of the animal's body. This would suggest one beast with eight legs. What can we make of this?



© Bob Henery

3 Meigle 26 detail, three-abreast

Norse sagas tell of the eight-legged horse Sleipnir and two c.8th-century picture stones found on the island of Gotland, Sweden, depict an eight-legged horse being ridden into the afterlife, it is thought, by the deceased man to whom the stone was raised (or by Sleipnir's owner, Odin). There is certainly nothing obvious to connect an Aldbar ass with mighty Sleipnir! (4)



Wikimedia Commons

4 Ardre VIII: 'Ardre Odin Sleipnir'

Closer to home, the lost sculptured stone from Inverkeithing, Fife, apparently bore a beast with extra legs, also in its bottom panel. In the 18th century Gordon made a drawing of it, published in his *Itinerarium Septentrionale*.<sup>2</sup> This round-headed creature seems to have seven legs (5). Unfortunately, the insubstantial detail to its left makes it rather uncertain whether the seven legs might not belong to two intertwined animals, rather than to a single animal. But this is not a realistic, recognisable animal in the way that the Aldbar one is (apart from the leg count), which has no parallel in the Pictish corpus of sculptured stones.

Considering the standard Christian iconography and conventional horseman on the Aldbar cross-slab, we should of course look for a Christian source for its eight-legged donkey. One candidate is the ass on which Jesus entered into Jerusalem. According to

Matthew 21:2–7, Jesus rode ‘sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass’.<sup>3</sup> Here the rephrasing of the first statement may be to emphasise in poetic form the humbleness of Jesus’ mount. (Hebrew poetry favoured repeating a phrase with some elegant variation.) But debate has long surrounded the question of how Jesus could be riding two asses at once.<sup>4</sup> The double legs of the Aldbar donkey can scarcely resolve that knotty problem.

The imagery on the Aldbar cross-slab is perfectly usual until your eye reaches the bottom panel. This riderless ass, or asses if indeed animals ‘abreast of each other’ were intended, cannot be readily interpreted. It might refer to a myth, perhaps a local one, since it is not preserved elsewhere, but I can reach no proper conclusion – and all suggestions are welcome.

#### Postscript

The foremost leg of the donkey is unfinished; it is a broad lump needing further work before it would correspond to the other legs, which are quite neatly shaped and hoofed. As it happens, it is also bottom right on the cross side that the key pattern gets out of hand. Did something happen to our master sculptor and an apprentice had to finish off the work as best he could?

*Elsbeth Reid*



5 *Itinerarium Septentrionale*, Plate LV, 3

#### Notes

- 1 JR Allen & J Anderson, *ECMS III*, pp.245–47 (reprint, The Pinkfoot Press 1993). One bottom corner of the cross-slab is missing and I assumed that it had happened since the *ECMS* drawing, but J Stuart’s earlier drawing of the stone (Plate LXXXI), which appeared in his 1856 volume of *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, shows that the corner had already gone by then. Both Stuart’s volumes are available on: [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).
- 2 See ‘Item SC 1050149’ on the Canmore website for the most faithful drawing of the Aldbar cross-slab (by J Borland). It shows David’s long hair, missing from earlier drawings. Under ‘Aldbar Chapel’ you will also find the masterly photographs of Tom Gray.
- 3 Alexander Gordon, *Itinerarium Septentrionale, Or, A Journey Thro’ Most of the Counties of Scotland, and Those in the North of England* (1726). Jack RF Burt featured the lost stone in ‘A Report on a Sculptured Stone from Inverkeithing’ in *Pictish Arts Society Journal* 2, Autumn 1992, pp.5–10.
- 4 Also prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 ‘ascendens super asinum et super pullum filium asinae’ (Vulgate).
- 4 Google shows the discussion to be ongoing.

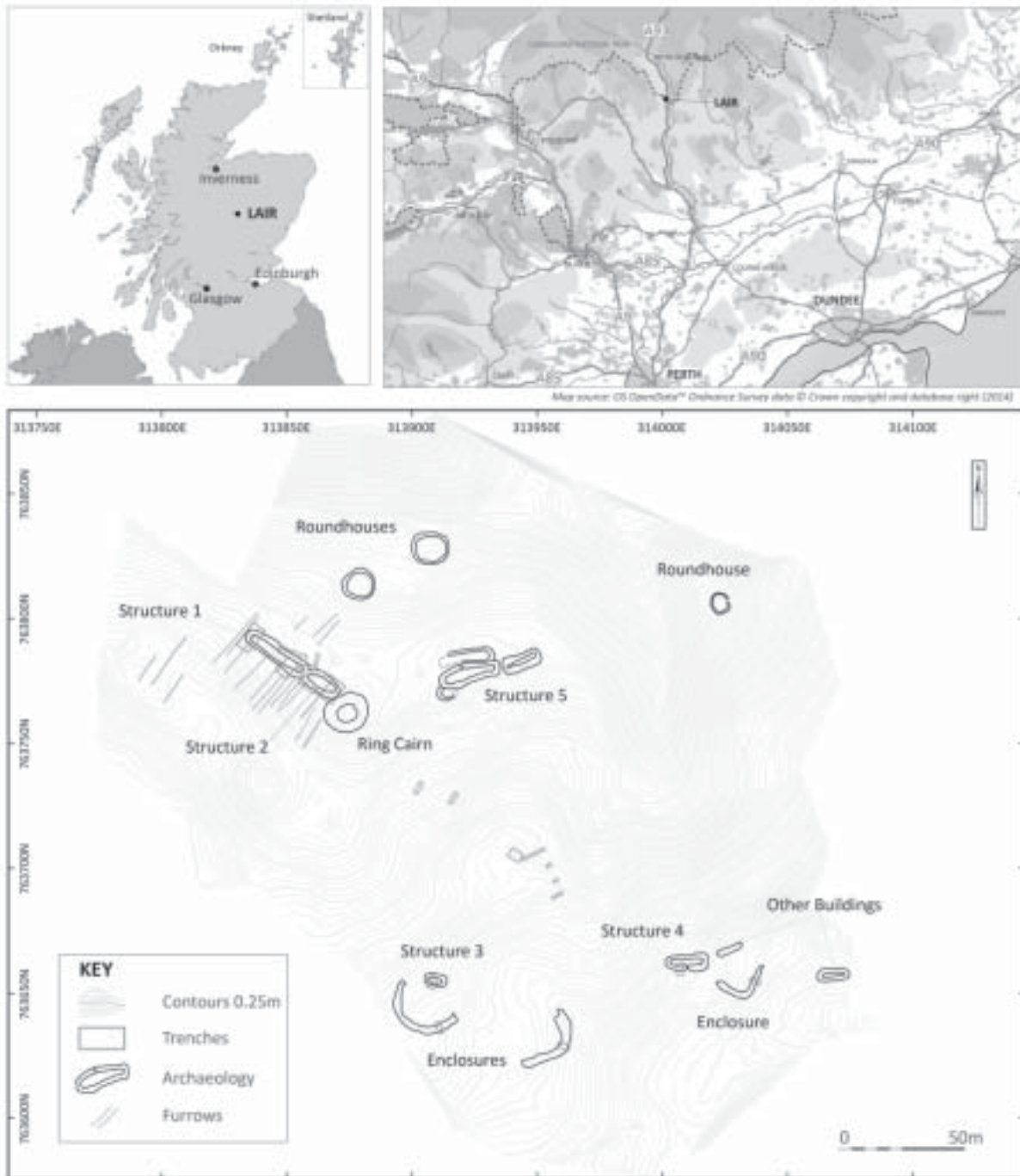
## The Glenshee Archaeology Project and Pitcarmick longhouse excavations

The distinctive landscapes of Glenshee and Strathardle in north-east Perth and Kinross are remarkably rich in archaeological remains and the extensive survival of well-preserved prehistoric, medieval and later archaeological remains were brought to light by survey in the late 1980s by the RCAHMS published as *North-east Perth: an archaeological landscape* (1990).

An important finding was the identification of a previously unrecorded type of monument, named Pitcarmick-type buildings after the Strathardle estate, consisting of largely turf-built longhouses. The buildings were found to range from 10–30m in length and to have rounded ends, often with bowed sides and being wider at one end compared to the other. Their size and morphology suggested byre-houses and it was noted that they were rarely found near later medieval sites such as fermtouns, although they commonly shared location with prehistoric roundhouses.

The question of their date was finally resolved with excavations at Pitcarmick estate by the University of Glasgow in 1993–4, however only recently published in *PSAS* (Carver et al 2012). This work confirmed that the longhouses were constructed with turf-and-rubble layered walls with timber roof supports and contained hearths at one end with animals stalled either side of a paved drain at the other. They dated to the period c.AD 700–850, and had been reused between c.AD 1000 and AD 1200, prior to being truncated by later medieval and post-medieval ploughing.

Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust developed the Glenshee Archaeology Project as a programme of community archaeology with the aim of rekindling interest in this neglected though rich topic, by investigating a group of Pitcarmick-type buildings at Lair (NGR: NO 139 637) around 7km south of Spittal of Glenshee and about 40km north of Perth. The project has been delivered in partnership with Northlight Heritage and supported by a number of funding bodies including The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Gannochy Trust, Cairngorms National



1 Location map and plan of Lair

Park, the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, the Hunter Archaeological and Historical Trust, and Historic Scotland.

The excavations at Lair from 2012 to 2014 have focused on two turf longhouses, located close to a prehistoric ring cairn, confirming that these date to c.AD 650–800, while excavating two smaller longhouses with substantial stone foundations to their turf walls, along with a number of other landscape features such as clearance cairns and boundary walls.

The excavation work was complemented by a study of pollen from nearby peat by Richard Tipping of Stirling University. This confirmed that crops (oat, barley and rye) were central to the rural economy at Lair for some 400 years. However this appears to have ceased after c.AD 1000, when grass heath continued to be maintained and grazed.

The project has also involved a place-name study of the glen, by Peter McNiven of Glasgow University. Given the wealth of Pictish-age settlements in the area, this surprisingly revealed that only one place-name – *Persie* (meaning parcel of land, or garden) – appears to have a Pictish origin, the majority of place-names being Scottish Gaelic or Scots in origin.



2 *View of structures 1 and 2*

The importance of the Pitcarmick-type buildings sites in Glenshee and Strathardle are their rarity, as there are very few known buildings in this elusive period of Scottish settlement history. For the period AD 400-1100 it has been estimated that there are fewer than ten houses known on the Scottish mainland.

The project has involved local residents, students and volunteers from further afield in the excavations and included outreach activities for the visiting public and local schools, along with a series of public presentations. The results of the 2014 excavations are available to download at [www.glenshee-archaeology.co.uk](http://www.glenshee-archaeology.co.uk) – along with reports from previous years.

*David Strachan<sup>1</sup> and David Sneddon<sup>2</sup>*

Notes: 1 Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust; 2 Northlight Heritage



3 *Bird's eye view of excavation*

**Pictish Arts Society**

<<http://www.thepictishartsociety.org.uk>>