THE PICTISH ARTS SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER 41 WINTER 2006

PAS Conference 2006

Saturday 28 October, Elmwood College, Cupar, Fife

Some forty Pictish enthusiasts met for the annual conference in Cupar this year to hear five talks on varied aspects of Pictish studies in the assembly hall of Elmwood College, which proved a conveniently sized and sited venue.

Dr Barbara Crawford, acknowledged expert on the Scandinavian influence on Scotland, presented the first paper on *The Impact of the Norse on Pictland*, a closely-argued examination of the latest research and discoveries in the field, not all of which can be summarised here. Stressed was a re-emphasis on the terror and destruction wrought by Viking raids from the late 8th century onwards. A tendency among scholars to see the monkish chroniclers' accounts of bloody plunderings as exaggerated in recent years, with an emphasis rather on settlement and trade, was discounted. A healthy scepticism about such 'scepticism' marked Dr Crawford's approach, and indeed it would be difficult to see how such events as the repeated raids on Iona and other monasteries, or such events as the 825 martyrdom of Bláthmacc, tortured to reveal the hiding place of Columba's relics (an event notorious enough to be commemorated in distant Reichenau), could be seen in other than negative terms. Many raids will have gone unrecorded. The layer of burning and shattered Pictish sculpture at Portmahomack, though not yet definitively dated, may be eloquent testimony to such a raid on a major Pictish house. The personnel of monasteries (and indeed secular sites, as recorded for Dumbarton), carried off as hostages or slaves, could themselves be 'loot'.

The Vikings are always written of in negative terms, with Latin *piratus* used to gloss 'Viking' in the writings of contemporary Ireland, England and France. Events in Scotland are less fully recorded,

Speakers and chairmen at the Cupar Conference (left to right): Johnathan Coulston, John Borland, Barbara Crawford, James Fraser, Jane Geddes, David Henry, Sheila Hainey (Photo: Joy Mowatt)

but the records of raids and invasions is still a lengthy one. The written evidence is supplemented by findings of Insular artefacts in Scandinavia itself. Some of these are clearly Pictish, though the exact origin-points of objects decorated in this essentially international style are seldom clear.

That the Viking impact on the Pictish kingdom was radical and (probably) terminal, has long been suggested, with the disastrous battle of 839 in particular, with its slaughter of the Pictish ruling class, paving the way for Cináed mac Ailpín's takeover. The Scottish identity of Cináed, the location of Fortriu as the heart of the Pictish kingdom (actually in the north?), the impact of the Earls of Orkney (whose takeover of the Northern Isles and parts of the main-land – on the back of earlier landtakings? – is inadequately documented) and the dating of the earliest Scandinavian settlement in various parts of Scotland are all in lively dispute at the moment. Archaeological evidence is constantly on the increase, however, and it is to be hoped that the somewhat confusing state of Viking studies (not a fault of Dr Crawford's very clear talk!) will start to become more resolved in the future.

The second paper, by Dr James Fraser, was another detailed interpretation of written sources (handouts were provided to make things clearer for the audience), on *The winning of the West, Pictish-style*, a summary of some of the speaker's work for the forthcoming first volume of the University of Edinburgh's projected 10-volume history of Scotland. The 'winning' in question was the well-known conquest of Dál Riata by Óengus son of Fergus (or Onuist son of Uurguist), the powerful 8th-century ruler, whose career is by far the best known of any Pictish king. Both his struggles with Pictish rivals, and his conquest of Dál Riatan strong-holds and slaughter of Scottish opponents are recorded in detail in the contemporary chronicles, though not so exhaustively that varying interpretations of them cannot be made. Dr Fraser's arguments (which, though clearly explained, are too complex to go into here) were convincing, notably his suggestion of Bede's famous passage on Pictish matrilinear succession being a reflection of *contemporary* events, and I look forward to seeing his ideas set out in what should be an invaluable contribution to early Scottish historiography, drawing as it will on the explosion in research on early medieval Scotland in recent decades.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, Dr Birgitta Hoffman (who has been working on the Gask Ridge Roman Frontier project), could not be present to deliver the third talk, on *When Roman Glass met Pictish Style? Developing new glass-working techniques in Pictish Scotland*, but her paper was delivered with admirable clarity by the PAS's own Sheila Hainey. The basic premise was the stimulation of an 'industry' in late Iron Age and Pictish Scotland making personal ornaments (beads, toggles, bangles) by the availability of scrap Roman glass, derived especially from broken glass vessels. These were of little value to the Romans beyond their contents, but were an important resource for native craftsmen as they seem (never?) to have actually *manufactured* glass, though they seem to have been able to colour it. As this source of raw materials died out after the end of Roman Britain, finds of these ornaments become less common on native sites, and glass seems to become a 'luxury' material used largely for only prestigious manufactures (eg mount-inlays).

There were two talks after lunch, the first by Dr Johnathan Coulston (Classics Dept, St Andrews University), taking a 'cocked-eyed Romanist view' of *Military equipment in Pictish art and the northern military tradition*. As an icon of warfare in a warlike society, military equipment is a frequent motif on Pictish, as on Roman sculpture, though a much larger amount of actual weaponry has survived from Roman contexts. Northern Britain was not utterly cut of from the rest of barbarian Europe in its approach to warfare, and the Deskford carnyx, and the late use of chariots (eg at Mons Graupius, but also in early Irish tales such as the *Táin*) are paralleled elsewhere. Chariot use is perhaps a reflex of the lack of large horses, as opposed to the ponies seen on Pictish stones. Dr Coulston chose to examine three aspects of equipment in particular: crossbows, shields and helmets.

Crossbows are seen on a number of Pictish cross-slabs: Shandwick, Glenferness, the lost Meigle 10 and St Vigeans 1, in all cases as hunting weapons. This weapon was presumably either a survival of the *archiballista*, known as early as the 4th-century BC among the Greeks, or a native development. Since there is no direct evidence of use in Roman Britain, the former is a surprisingly likely scenario. In many parts of

the world, bows are flexed initially by attaching a temporary tiller. Making the tiller a permanent feature is a natural development, the problem then being to devise means of releasing the arrow and stretching the string between shots. The resultant weapon is ideal for hunting, as it can be used from a kneeling or lying position, and can remain flexed for as long as it takes to get into position for a shot (or for prey to wander into range). The stirrup attached to the front end of the tiller, which helps with flexing as the foot can be braced in it, and which holds the wooden parts of the crossbow off the ground, does not seem to be known before the 11th–12th centuries.

Shields are of diverse types on Pictish stones. The long flat body shield with central umbo, often with curving sides, common in Iron Age northern Europe, is seen also in Pictland, eg at Collessie, though in a rather smaller form. This small rectangular shield occurs also in representations of native warrior-gods from Hadrian's Wall, eg the well known representation from Maryport, Cumbria. It is seen again on distance slabs of the 2nd century from the Antonine Wall. The *Agricola* mentions the 'short' shields of the Britons. Pictish representations are not only rectangular, but square (eg Eassie, Brough of Birsay), round, prefiguring the Highland targes of later centuries (as on Aberlemno 2), or even 'notched' as on the St Andrews Sarcophagus. Some are also very small, virtual 'bucklers', presumably reflecting diverse local traditions and/or fighting styles.

There was a northern European Iron Age tradition of large round wooden shields with central umbos, seen especially in the spectacular bog sacrifices of military equipment which Scotland sadly lacks, eg from Vimose or Illerup (Denmark). Such shields gave rise to later traditions of Anglo-Saxon (and eventually Viking) equipment. In Pictland, however, round shields are *always* shown as small (the example on Meigle 6 being perhaps the largest in relation to its bearer). Perhaps because they were always leather-covered?

Of helmets, there is little to say in a Pictish context except to note a marked lack of evidence for them (but only five are known from Anglo-Saxon England).

The final talk by Dr Jane Geddes (Dept of Art History, Aberdeen University) summarised her recent research into *New discoveries at St Vigeans*, research which will form part of the basis of Historic Scotland's long overdue expansion, rearrangement and reinterpretation of the important but still too little appreciated St Vigeans collection, which has been barely touched since it was moved into its present setting of a modified cottage in the 1960s.

All the stones were found in and around the parish church of St Vigeans on its striking site of a (presumably) natural, prominent steep-sided mound with its top flattened to receive a church. The site lies between the confluence of two burns – a typical early Christian site. The present church, surely standing over its Pictish predecessor(s), is of 12th-century origin, greatly expanded in the late Middle Ages, when it served as the parish kirk of Arbroath, and enlarged again during a drastic Victorian 'restoration'. It was at this time that most of the Pictish stones were discovered, re-used as building rubble in the floors and walls of the church. The stones were often broken up, the result of making them a convenient size for re-use rather than malicious defacement. A number of probable Pictish stones remain built into the church and nearby walls, identifiable by their colour and shape, and Dr Geddes has made a systematic search for likely examples. It is to be hoped Historic Scotland will consider removing these into the museum collection.

A geological study of the stones has been carried out, identifying all of them as Lower Old Red Sandstone, but derived from a number of quarries. Several groupings have been identified, of which eight have been suggested. Most of these are from local sources, but an important group of monuments of hard-wearing, close-grained grey sandstone is not. This 'special' group includes St Vigeans 1 (the Drosten Stone), 8, 15, 29 and two medieval stones. Stones from elsewhere in Angus at Kirriemuir and Nevay are of the same origin. In an important reinterpretation SV 29, though grossly mutilated when recut to form a 17th-century lintel, is now seen as a fragment of a house shrine, like that from St Leonard's School in St Andrews, rather than a hogback. The Drosten Stone (SV 1) is of course famous for its inscription (on which more than 70 articles have been published, with widely – indeed wildly – differing 'translations'). It implies literacy, hence monastic culture, and the commemoration of important individuals,

presumably Pictish given their names and the symbols on the back of the slab. Their decoration includes motifs found also at Termonfeckin, Co Louth, possible evidence of direct contact between the Irish house and St Vigeans, with perhaps the transfer of relics of the 7th-century saint Féchín of Fore (Latin *Vigeanus*, *a quo* Vigeans) to Angus. This might speculatively provide a background for the commission of a series of major sculptures, including the putative shrine (SV 29), a small marker cross (SV 15) and the major cross-slab (SV 1), which is reported to have formerly stood by the entrance to the kirkyard. The name St Vigeans itself, the place identified by the name of a saint alone, a form seen elsewhere in Scotland only at St Andrews, implies the presence of a major cult centre. The saint's name as toponym perhaps replaced Pictish *Aberbrothoc*, transferred to the nearby small town and its 12th-century Tironensian abbey, in the same way 'St Andrews' evidently replaced *Cennrígmonaid* at the Fife site. The Drosten inscription's most recent interpretation sees it as an admixture of Latin and Old Irish (with Pictish names). This mix (with Irish names) is found also in inscriptions at Termonfeckin.

SV 9, the arm of a huge free-standing cross, also repeats the Termonfeckin interlace on its boss, though geologically it is of the (poor quality) local red sandstone, not surprisingly the largest group among the surviving sculpture. SV 7, tragically mutilated but formerly a massive cross-slab of the highest quality, is of the same stone, and includes two (or more) scenes from a cycle depicting the 'Desert Fathers' Paul and Anthony, in Pictish style, but possibly adapted ultimately from Coptic models. Féchín was known as the *alter Antonius* in Irish hagiography, the 'other' or 'second' Anthony, giving an appropriate context for the employment of the cycle.

Niall M Robertson

Our thanks to Niall for his excellent summary of the conference papers. This is a great service, not only as a reminder for those who attended, but also invaluable for informing others of the interesting day that we experienced.

The success of the event was due mainly to the efforts of the organiser, Sheila Hainey and her husband, John Ansell, who put in a lot of hard work on our behalf, for which we are extremely grateful.

The Pictish Arts Society at 18 – what next?

In 1988, following the conference – *The Picts – A New Look at Old Problems* – held in Dundee in 1985, a group of enthusiasts got together to form the Pictish Arts Society. It was more than 30 years since an academic conference had explored the *Problem of the Picts*, and 11 years since Isabel Henderson had published *The Picts*, but few lay people seemed to know (or care) much about the magnificent stones that are our most visible reminder of a people whose contribution to the development of medieval Alba is still rarely recognised. The Society came into being to encourage recognition and study of the Picts and their art, and to bring awareness of a significant part of the history of Scotland to a wider audience.

Over the last 18 years, the Society has run lecture series, first in Edinburgh, then at both Edinburgh and Pictavia. The Edinburgh audience dwindled to a handful, and the series there is currently in abeyance. The audience at Pictavia continues to average over 30, with members travelling from as far afield as Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness to join those who have shorter journeys to get to Brechin.

From the beginning, a newsletter was published, combining news about stones, book reviews and short articles on various aspects of Pictish Art. In 1992, the Society began publishing a journal, which initially was an expanded version of the newsletter. In March 1993, in response to demand from the membership, a newsletter was started. Over the years, both the newsletter and the journal have suffered many difficulties; however the newsletter in its current form appears regularly four times a year, while the journal has not appeared for several years. At the moment, the committee is attempting to revive the journal.

In 1993, Dunnichen Hill was under threat from quarrying. The southern slope of the hill has been generally accepted as the site of the Battle of Dunnichen, at which the Pictish king Bridei comprehensively defeated the Northumbrian Ecgfrith on 20 May 685. For several years, Robbie the Pict had celebrated the anniversary of the battle by turning Letham Village hall into the 'Electric Temple' to stage a great musical event. That year, however, he had decided to find

larger premises, and the Society decided to hold its own Dunnichen Day celebration, and held its first annual conference in the Hall, which was the closest venue to Dunnichen Hill. For many years, the Society's conference travelled to a different venue each year but it was always held on the nearest weekend to Dunnichen Day. Eventually, as more and more conferences covering the early medieval period in Scotland converged around that date, we moved the conference to autumn, but continue to hold our AGM, with several talks and an afternoon visiting stones as a Dunnichen Day celebration.

From the outset, field trips have been organised in conjunction with the conferences, and occasionally as one-off events. These involve visits to stones in the field, to sites associated with stones, or sites of archaeological significance for the Pictish period. From time to time, these have involved weekend trips. The trips have proved very popular, and usually involve protracted discussion of each and every site on the route. A real highlight is when a new stone is recognised during the course of a trip.

There have been occasional publications too. These include a series of field guides, several volumes of conference proceedings and *A Pictish Panorama*, a collection of papers and an invaluable bibliography of writing on the Picts. The Society's website is currently undergoing redevelopment, and that will also offer opportunities for publishing information and perhaps short papers. We have had forays into producing merchandise too, including mugs, tee-shirts, ties and rulers among others. A major change in the Society's status came when we became a registered charity, allowing us to apply for grant funding and to claim Gift Aid.

As a step towards broadening the scope for news-gathering/transmission and organising more field trips, we have initiated a system of Mormaers, each responsible for an area comprising one of the old Pictish provinces. We hope that this will allow us to collect more information about stones and items of interest to our members from Pictland. In the future we hope also to hold more field trips in areas we have rarely been organised enough to visit.

While the Society has seen some significant changes over the years, we have also seen changes in the legislative framework within which the Society, as a charity, operates. We carry public liability insurance to cover each of our events, have made some progress in standardising risk assessment for all our activities, and had to come to terms with all the implications of new legislation governing charities and protecting our members. The amount of administration required to run the Society has increased dramatically – the number of volunteers to carry out what is often very dry work has not. While the committee would dearly love to expand the programme of talks and events on offer, there is a limit to what a small group of volunteers can do. One possibility, which would allow us to improve the Society's offering would be to employ someone to handle the day-to-day administration, freeing up time to improve the range (geographically as well as in terms of content) of Society events, and to improve communication with members. This would be a very big step for the Society, and the committee would like to know the views of the membership on this point. We would envisage trying to find sources of finance in addition to membership fees, and would like to seek membership approval for investigating the implications of such a move. If you have any views on the matter, please get in touch, by writing to the committee c/o Pictavia.

PAS Committee

Promoting PAS

A new promotional leaflet for the Pictish Arts Society is currently in preparation. It is hoped that by spring 2007 this will be ready for distribution.

It will help to raise the profile of the PAS and, importantly, encourage more people to join as members. Membership subscriptions are an important source of income. At present, however, we have no central database of who displays our material and so no mechanism for ensuring that they are kept supplied. The first task, therefore, is to start compiling the database so that it is available for the advent of the new leaflet.

It would be useful if members could advise me of all museums, heritage centres, relevant (probably historical) visitor attractions and the like in their area with a view to asking them if they would be willing to take the promotional material of the PAS for display. Please also

advise me of any which already display our material so that the database will be as full and accurate as possible.

I have already asked Mormaers to work on this and some good information is coming in but some members live in areas outwith the historical Pictland. Wherever you live, if you can think of a possible source for displaying our material, please let me know.

Please submit your information or suggestions to me at the Pictavia address.

Stewart Mowatt, Hon Secretary

Picts *versus* Romans

PAS members may have been surprised at an item which appeared in February this year in the *Newsletter* of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

In the section dealing with new books, notice was given of *The Roman Conquest of Scotland: the Battle of Mons Graupius, AD 84* by James Fraser. It was accompanied by an illustration of part of the battle-scene from the Pictish stone in the kirkyard at Aberlemno. This was a good choice visually, but a poor choice academically, because it gives a clear impression that the battle-scene illustrates a military clash between the Picts and Romans (the latter presumably being the helmeted troops).

This is not the first time that the Aberlemno battle-scene has been linked with the Romans. It occupies a full page in the book *Roman Scotland* by David Breeze, and although not mentioned in the text, the implication is that it shows Picts *versus* Romans on the field of battle. The date of the stone, however, dictates that it cannot show Roman troops, either at Mons Graupius or at any subsequent contest.

In fairness to Dr Fraser, it should be pointed out that although he does employ the Aberlemno battle-scene to illustrate his book, he does not suggest any association between it and the Romans, referring to it as providing 'later native evidence'. It is indeed later than Mons Graupius – by almost exactly six centuries.

Graeme Cruickshank

Newsletter editor

In response to enquiries about the identity of the editor of PAS Newsletter, it is no secret that the present incumbent is David Henry.

Pictish Arts Society at Pictavia Winter programme 2006/07

Barbara Robertson

There was a good turnout at our first meeting of the season on 20 October to hear renowned printmaker Babs Robertson give an entertaining and informative talk about her work and how it is influenced by the local landscape, its early history and its monuments, such as Pictish symbol stones.

Babs trained as an illustrator/printmaker at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee and since then has built a formidable reputation as a printmaker. Her distinctive prints are almost always on show somewhere (often in concurrent exhibitions in several galleries) and are to be found in many public and private collections. She works in her cottage studio at Douglastown, in central Angus, which houses her treasured antique Columbian printing press.

Her speciality is a rare type of relief printing from linoleum using only one block which she cuts and prints progressively – colour over-printed on colour – developing the composition in stages and using a range of subtle colours to achieve an almost painterly effect. This technique was spectacularly pioneered by Picasso in a series of prints made when he first tackled the medium. It is unlike conventional colour relief-printing where a separate block for each colour would normally be employed, or in traditional Japanese woodcut-printing where separate blocks are used, even when a mix of colour and gradations might be applied to an individual block.

Sometimes Babs employs 20 or more separate overprintings, a very high-risk procedure demanding much planning and complete concentration throughout the process of producing an edition, which can take several weeks to complete. Unlike Picasso, who relied on a master craftsman to print his work, Babs prints her own blocks, and the amount of effort required in the presswork for each print dictates that normally her editions are strictly limited to 16 copies.

She also described and demonstrated the use of V- and U-sectioned steel gauges, the two main types of tool used for cutting the lino – heavy-duty, thick 'battleship linoleum' still manufactured in

Gotland Sheep – *linocut by Barbara Robertson. Original image about 39cm wide. Unfortunately this monochrome reproduction does not do justice to the muted, subtle colouring or the intricacy and texture of the various elements of the design.*

Kirkcaldy. The V-tool being used for cutting lines and for fine work, the U-tool for clearing larger areas of the surface. Babs explained that when cutting a block she felt a great affinity with the carvers of Pictish symbols.

After her absorbing presentation we were able to examine a selection of her fine prints.

Moira Greig

Another good crowd attended on 17 November and took to the air to enjoy *Picts from a different viewpoint.* Courtesy of Moira and her excellent aerial photography, we were able to appreciate historic sites in Aberdeenshire, Moray and Angus as viewed from above. Many types were shown – including hillforts, Roman camps, settlements, barrow cemeteries, early churches – some of them still possessing visible remains, others revealing themselves only as cropmarks. Moira showed several stunning shots of coastal promontory forts, some of our most impressive sites seen from the ground (or the sea), and it was surprising to discover that they lost none of their impact when viewed from above. In all, the presentation was a veritable visual feast and we wished we could have had more time to linger over many of the fascinating views.

As well as discussing the archaeology, Moira also told us something of the practicalities involved in aerial survey and techniques required for successful aerial photography. She started flying in a Cessna, but, since the introduction of new regulations affecting light aircraft, she had switched to using helicopters. These proved to be much better suited for the purpose as it was much easier to have uninterrupted views of the ground when sitting by the open door, although it could be very cold, especially in winter when taking advantage of shooting sites under snow which can sometimes dramatically enhance their archaeological features.

Next meetings

15 December Mark Hall
Playtime in Pictland: the material culture of gaming in early medieval Scotland

19 January Alex Woolf
Kings, Kingdoms and Kingship among the Picts.

All meetings at Pictavia on Friday evenings. Doors open at 7pm, talks begin at 7.30. Tea, coffee and biscuits available before and after.

Migvie and Tomachar revisited

Two stones now at Migvie church would seem to have served as the focus for open air courts. Philip Astor, in his note on the splendidly restored Migvie church (PAS Newsletter 40, 5), mentions the tradition that the High Court of Justice was held on Tomachar, the original site of the **Mill of Newton** stone. *Tom a Char* is then Gaelic for 'hillock of the chair' (*Primitive Folk-Meets,* p 265), from the Gaelic *cathair* for throne or chair. It is a curious coincidence that a stone at Migvie was the locus for another open-air court:

> the Earl of Mar held three head courts 'at the stone of Migveth in Cromar'. (*Primitive Folk-Moots,* p192)

Though it is at least plausible that the **Migvie** cross-slab was this 'stone at Migveth', it is by no means certain. So I hope nobody interprets the above remarks as justifying Historic Scotland's decision to leave the **Migvie** cross-slab in the open-air. After all, it was discovered 'a few feet below ground level at the spot where it now stands', a circumstance that no doubt helped preserve the stone from centuries of erosion.

Other symbol stones have served as the locations for open-air courts. In February 1557, the Sheriff Court of Aberdeen was held

> 'apud le Standland stanis de **Huntlie**'. (*ibid*)

But proving the existence of old courts is difficult, as records are sparse, and often we have to rely on place-name evidence, or folklore, which may well be based on place-names anyway. As open-air courts were often held at standing stones, or stone circles, or on hill-tops, the sites of ancient courts may be indicated by the Gaelic element ***comhdh·il***, meaning court or meeting, especially when attached to a standing stone or stone circle on the summit of a hill.

Unfortunately, the Gaelic ***comhdh·il*** has been anglicised in many different ways, often with an English meaning far removed from that of ***comhdh·il*****:** eg Cuttle, Cothill, Camhill, Candle, or Camphill. For example, Camhill in Cupar Fife is probably a corruption of ***comhdh·il***:

> In 1449 the sheriff of Fife was Robert Levingston of Drumry, and '*At this time the Sheriff-court did sit on the Camhill (now called the Mutehill) of Cowper.*' (Sibbald, *History of Fife and Kinross*).

So the original Gaelic name for the court at Cupar was ***comhdh·il***. (By the time this note is read, I expect many readers will have taken the opportunity to explore Camhill while in Cupar for the PAS ***comhdh·il*** or meeting on 28 October!)

Kaim Hill, Lindores

Apparently the word *kaim* may mean a comb, a ridge, a hill, a camp, or a fort (in Scots), or a kame (geological). Thus Kaim Hill could refer to **a** comb-like hill, or a hill topped by a fort, and so on. Or it could be a corruption of ***comhdh·il*****.** Kaim Hill, Lindores, is in fact a ridge, so either the geological Kame or the Gaelic ***comhdh·il*** would fit well here. So it is at least possible that **Kaim Hill, Lindores** (the symbol stone) was the locus for open air courts.

Monymusk

The same goes for the **Monymusk** symbol stone**,** said to have been found in *Campfield Lyes. Campfield* is another possible corruption of ***comhdh·il*****.** Apparently the location of Campfield Lyes is quite unsuitable for a military Camp, being low-lying by the river Don.

Craigmyle or Cothill

The **Craigmyle** symbol stone is sometimes known as the **Cothill** stone, as it stands beside Cothill farm, which is on the crest of a hill. The name *Cothill* may derive from ***comhdh·il***.

Bob Henery

Music at Migvie

Philip Astor was interviewed at Migvie Church by Helen Needham for the *Radio Café* programme broadcast on Radio Scotland on 15 November. He spoke about the restoration of the church and the inspiration behind his work and the involvement of local artists and craftsmen.

The church was also the venue for a recital 'The Uncommon Harp', given by Scottish harpist Ruth Wall on Saturday 18 November. The audience was advised to 'come equipped with warm clothing' for the performance in the beautiful, atmospheric but cold church. Ruth specialises in playing traditional and new music on the 33-string Scottish lever harp.

The Lost Gospels of the Picts

was the subject of a *Twenty Minutes* programme broadcast on Radio 3 during the interval of the Prom on 15 August. Produced by Louise Yeoman and presented by Stuart Kelly, the programme's purpose was to present the Picts as literate, learned, civilised and creative people to counteract the popular misconception of them as 'tattooed, woad-daubed barbarians', a 'kind of hangover' from the Iron Age.

At Portmahomack, site of the first identified and excavated Pictish monastery, Martin Carver, director of the ongoing excavations there, drew attention to the discovery of a craft-working area on either side of a kerbed 8th-century road. Evidence for the production of vellum has been unearthed there – quantities of small rounded white pebbles, round which hides were wrapped to tie them for stretching; rows of sharpened cattle metapodial bones used as pegs on the stretching frame; a curved knife for scraping; pumice stone for smoothing; hearths with remains of ash of tiny spirobis shells, astringent and alkaline, for whitening and hardening the leather.

Carver also spoke about the form and proportions of the Pictish cross-slabs which were obviously inspired by the carpet pages of contemporary illuminated gospel books. The commemorative Latin inscription on the fragment of a Tarbat cross-slab (TR13), relief-carved in Insular majuscules in exactly the same style as those in the Lindisfarne Gospels, together with the discovery of two bone stylae, for writing on wax tablets, are regarded as the principal evidence for the existence of literacy at Portmahomack and it is reasonable, therefore, to suppose that the parchment produced there was for use by scribes and illuminators at a scriptorium on the site.

Alex Woolf described the type of manuscripts and documents likely to have been produced in Pictish scriptoria, where the main activity would have been the copying of standard biblical and liturgical texts. Other texts might have been original compositions, saints' lives and their miracles, and perhaps rules for independent churches, lists of kings, pedigrees, genealogies, poetry and saga material, and praise poems for kings. Wintoun's Chronicle has a description of a 10th century book-shrine cover displayed on the altar of St Andrews cathedral – perhaps the last sighting of a Pictish book.

George and Isabel Henderson spoke about the evidence in the iconography of the sculpture showing that the Picts had access to illuminated manuscripts and that copies of the gospels must have been in circulation and produced in Pictland. The representation of the four evangelists and their symbols carved on the cross-slab at Elgin Cathedral is the clearest example of gospel iconography transcribed to stone. Isabel Henderson stressed that among contemporary Western European peoples the Picts are to be regarded as normal rather than mysterious.

So what became of their books? Carver was not keen to be drawn on the effect of the Viking raids. George Henderson thought that the Reformation in Scotland was very destructive being more violently anti-image than elsewhere, but there could also have been actual suppression of Pictish culture by the Scots to bolster their own claims to northern Scotland.

Postscript

The programme was recorded before the sensational discovery of an early 9th-century psalter in a bog at Faddan More, Co Tipperary, on 20 July.* Martin Carver's hope of finding a book preserved in the millpond at Portmahomack now seems less far-fetched than could have been imagined before this significant discovery. Perhaps George Henderson's hope of a 'relic of our Northern culture' turning up 'somewhere in Spain' is a better bet. We live in hope. After all, twenty years ago, no-one could have forecast the incredible number of carved stones that have been discovered here since then and the tremendous amount of interest that these discoveries have aroused. *DH*

* See special supplement to *Archaeology Ireland*, vol 20 no 3 (Autumn 2006)

Membership renewal – last call

Despite frequent reminders that PAS subscriptions for 2006–07 were due to be paid by 1 September, we have had a very poor response. Please support the Society by renewing your membership and pay before 28 February 2007 or you will be removed from the mailing list.

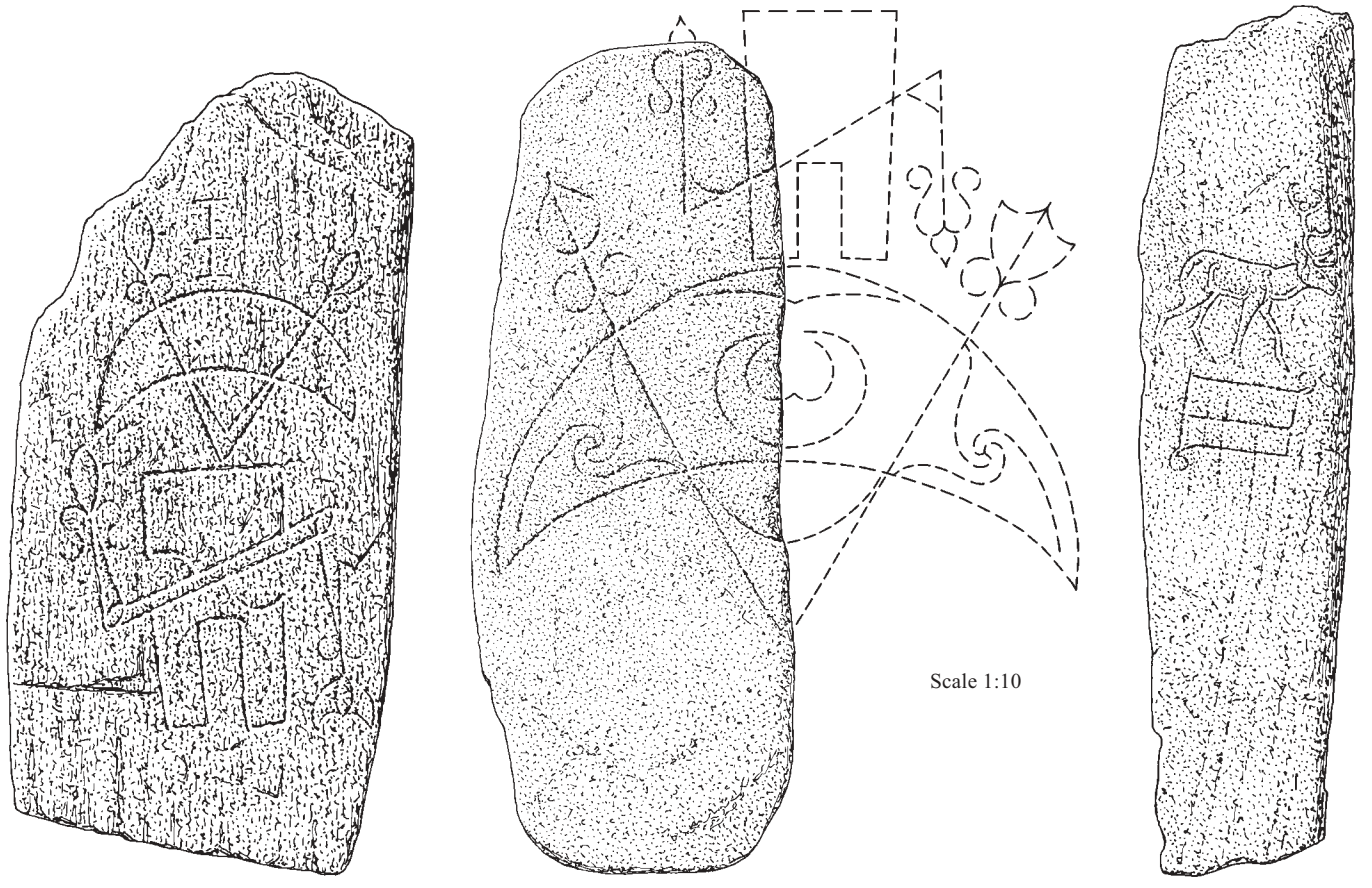
Rates and form on the back page of PAS Newsletter 40

Pictish Symbol Stones in the Central Highlands: Contrast and Compare

If you visited the Grantown-on-Spey area during the last few months, you may have seen figures walking to and fro across the hillsides. The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland has been updating its archaeological records of the Braes of Abernethy and those figures were members of our survey team, methodically quartering the ground. Whilst working in the area, RCAHMS also took the opportunity to record some of the Early Medieval sculpture in this part of the Central Highlands. This cluster of predominately Pictish symbol stones indicates that, then as now, this stretch of the Spey Valley provided good cultivatable land and the survey highlights both similarities and stark contrasts between some of the stones.

The **Inverallan** stone, found in the late 1880s during the demolition of the former church and now built into the wall of the burial ground, displays a crescent and V-rod above a notched rectangle and Z-rod. Although now badly weathered, it is evident that the symbols on this stone are poorly executed: the crescent, which lacks any internal decoration, is rather angular and asymmetric. Much of the surface within the left-hand horn of the crescent has fallen off and whilst deeper carving around this area may be the result of re-cutting in modern times, it could just as easily indicate that this problem occurred when the stone was originally carved. The nature of the carving is perhaps a reflection of the sculptor's ability but may in part be due to the fact that this slab of striated blue slate was a poor choice of medium in the first place.

The fragment from nearby **Findlarig**, found in the 1860s and acquired by the National Museum of Scotland, is currently on loan to the local museum in Grantown-on-Spey. It bears the same two symbols but with the notched rectangle and Z-rod above the crescent and V-rod. Whether or not this reversal of order is of any significance, I will leave for others to argue. The difference in the quality of carving between the Inverallan and Findlarig stones is marked, the latter being finely incised with flowing curves, the sculptor



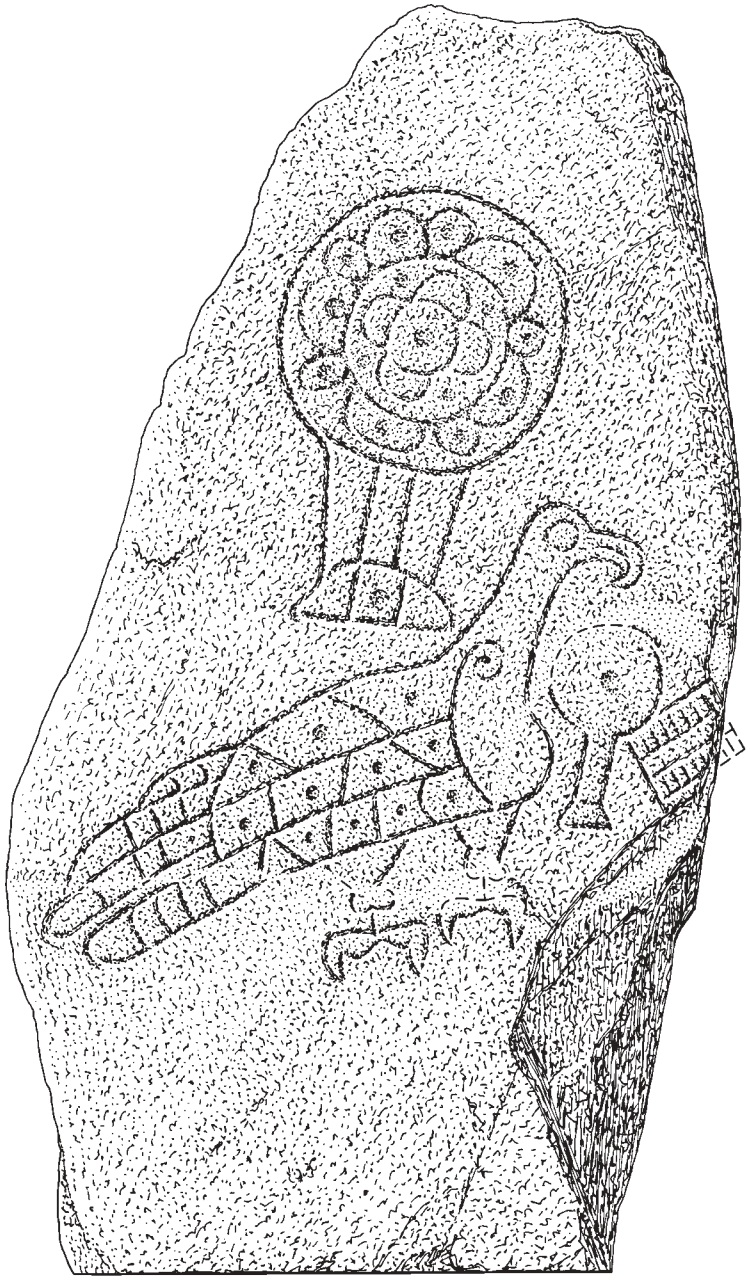
Inverallan *Findlarig* *Grantown*

Illustrations by John Borland. Crown Copyright: RCAHMS

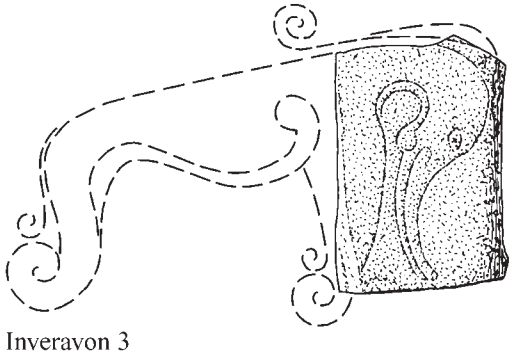
experiencing only minor problems when encountering the veins of harder quartz within this slab of mica-schist (note the slight deflection on the spiral within the left-hand horn of the crescent). However, the most striking contrast is the size of the crescent and V-rod symbol. When reconstructed, the Findlarig crescent measures 760mm from tip to tip, more than twice the size of that on the Inverallan stone. We could interpret this outsized symbol as having particular emphasis placed upon it but equally, the sculptor may just have been utilising the available area, in this instance making the most of what was clearly a wide slab.

The **Grantown** stone arguably reinforces the notion that the size of a symbol has no bearing on its significance. Like Findlarig, it too was discovered in the 1860s and acquired by the NMS. Being almost as thick as it is wide, this could better be described as a pillar than a slab of schist, and bears a figure of a stag above a rectangle with spirals attached to two opposing corners. The symbols are finely carved, the stag in particular is beautifully delineated yet measures no more than 200mm wide. Would anyone argue that this stone's symbolic message was in any way diminished by the diminutive nature of the figures?

Also recorded were the four symbol stones from Inveravon where, incidentally, the Minister and Kirk Session are in the process of raising funds to have the stones removed from their current

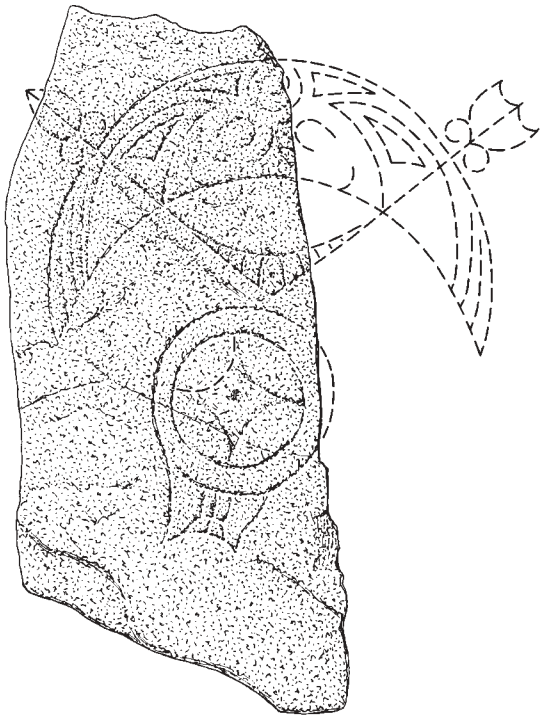


Inveravan 1



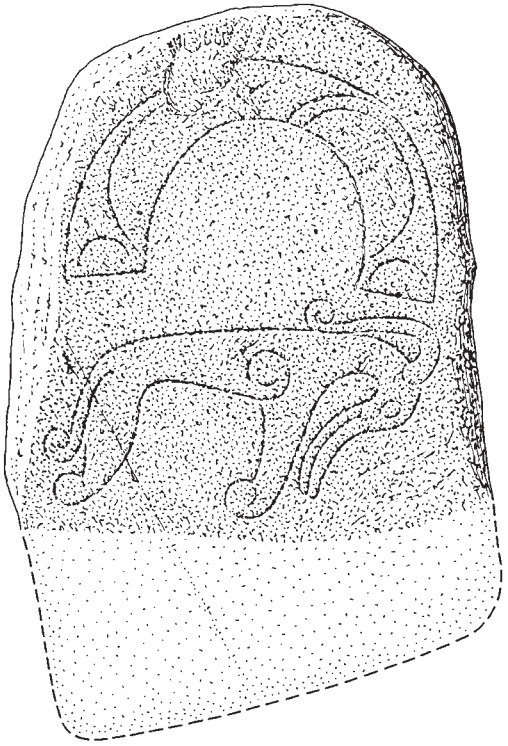
Inveravon 3

Scale 1:10



Advie

position against the south wall of the church, have them professionally conserved, and redisplayed within the church. **Inveravon 1** is a broken but complete slab of slate bearing a so-called 'mirror case', an eagle, and a mirror and comb. The 'mirror case' and eagle symbols are both large whilst the mirror and comb are small, tucked in to the space in front of the eagle.

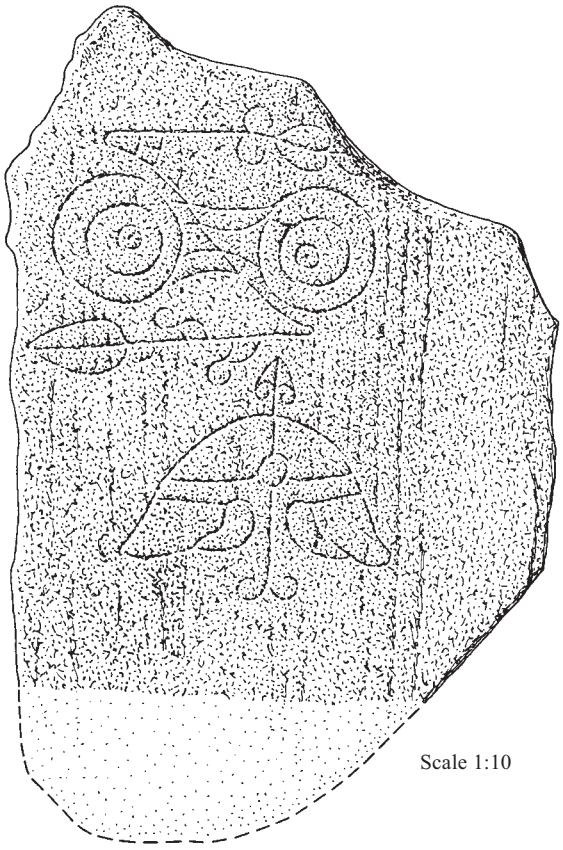


Congash 1

The mirror is not of conventional shape yet, despite the difference in scale, it and 'mirror case' are remarkably similar in shape, arguably reinforcing a connection. With the incised groove being in places 20mm wide, and the sunken dot decorations being big enough to accommodate the tip of a thumb, one could definitely describe the symbols as boldly carved. However, one would also have to say that they are rather clumsy and unrefined

In contrast, **Inveravon 3** is a small cut-down block of gneiss, bearing the head of a Pictish 'beast'. Although so little of this stone survives, the quality of the carving shines through, the incised channel being delicately cut, the curves of the 'beast' beautifully delineated. This was clearly an exceptionally fine symbol stone.

The **Advie** symbol stone was found in the old burial ground of that name around 1905 and is now built into the north wall of the church.



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Congash 2

Suffering terribly from active erosion, this slab schist bears part of a highly decorated and skilfully laid out crescent and V-rod above a 'mirror case'.

The symbol stones at Congash form the entrance to an enclosure in a field known as Parc-an-Caipel. Both slabs of gneiss, **Congash 1** bears a decorated horseshoe symbol above a Pictish 'beast', whilst **Congash 2** bears a double-disc and Z-rod above a curious symbol described by some as a helmet transfixed by an arrow. However, as this remains, to the best of my knowledge, the only known example of this symbol, it rather defies comparison.

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The deadline for receipt of contributions to PAS Newsletter 42 is 17 February 2007
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