## President's Letter

As I write today, May 19, the funeral is taking place in Durham for Professor Dame Rosemary Cramp (1929-2023). I remember her as a generous if slightly daunting role model whose attention to aspiring juniors was gratefully received. She gave me several guiding prods in my early days while her publications have served as a core for my later teaching. It is hard to realise now what it was like to be a female academic in 1956, particularly in a male dominated subject like archaeology, when she founded the Department of Archaeology at Durham University with Eric Birley. She was a pioneer working with steely conviction. From a university background in medieval English literature, she became the renowned excavator of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow (1959-88), uncovering the complexities of the location where Bede wrote *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the eighth century. In her department she pursued the rigorous application of scientific methods to archaeology. For a Pictish audience, perhaps her most monumental contribution has been the vision and completion of the *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Sculpture.* She steered the direction, financing and authorship of this project across decades, giving Anglo-Saxon art the cultural visibility which it deserves. It's both a reproach and a goad for Scotland that we have not yet matched her achievement. A new corpus for early medieval sculpture in Scotland would indeed be in honour of her example.

Your membership really makes a difference. The Society is in the happy position of holding sufficient funds to support Pictish art projects in a meaningful way. We provided a pump primer for the Skinnet Stone scheme. The Northern Pilgrims' Way Group has just announced that they have been granted the balance of the funds to complete their project to install a reconstruction of the Skinnet Stone in a field on the outskirts of Halkirk, not far from its original setting. There will also be three information panels about the stone and a couple of benches to allow people to sit and admire it. All of this still has to receive planning permission but no obvious obstacles are in sight.
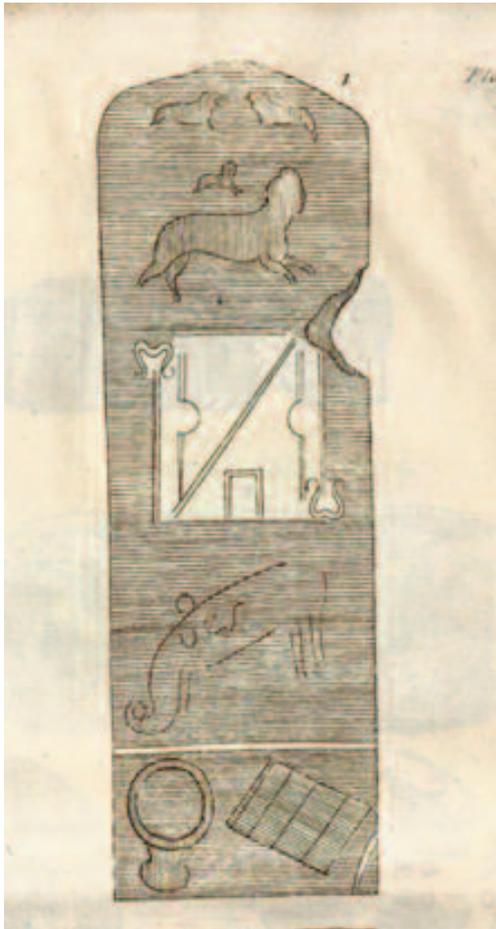
This is a Symbols issue. Publication of the Newsletter is accompanied by a bench-mark supplement on the symbol stones discovered since the production of Iain Fraser's *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland* in 2008. It's a fully illustrated catalogue of 15 stones, most of them quite spectacular works of art. The Society is very grateful to Elspeth Reid and John Borland for producing this invaluable addition to Pictish studies.

Members will receive it as a PDF but we recommend that you purchase a bound paper copy to keep on your shelf. It will be available for purchase from the PAS website (£4) and we shall have a batch to sell on the fieldtrip for those attending.

One emotion we surely share with the Picts themselves is delight at discovering old symbol stones. The Picts sought out and treasured prehistoric cup-marked stones, for their antiquity and possibly spiritual value. Their excitement at finding for instance the ancient boulders which became Aberlemno 1 and Meigle 1 would be matched by ours at the discoveries in the new catalogue. Each age has come across the symbol stones in their own way, with the sixteenth-century Hector Boece attaching Arthurian legend and barrenness to Meigle 3. In his exploration of principally Roman antiquities, Alexander Gordon was the first to illustrate the strange 'obelisks' which he believed to be Danish, in his *Itinerarium Septentrionale* of 1726. This image of the Maiden Stone (below and p. 5) is the earliest illustration of a Pictish monument, showing what Gordon understood about the art; the Borland and Reid catalogue provides the latest examples.

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*The Maiden Stone, from Alexander Gordon, 1726,* Itinerarium Septentrionale, *London, pl. 59 (after p.162).*

**JANE GEDDES**

***Symbols in Phrygia. From Object to Symbol, tombs in the Archaeological Museum, Istanbul***

Pictish symbols are presented to us as a *fait accompli,* their vocabulary, pairing and display is fully formed from the start. In some cases the symbols are recognisable, in some cases they remain inscrutable, perhaps simplified beyond recognition from an existing object. Whereas the Picts provide few intermediate stages to hint how their symbols were originally chosen or developed, the process of transformation from object to symbol can be traced step by step on the Phrygian tombs in Istanbul where occasional inscriptions help to explain who the tomb and symbols are for. Although there would be no direct process of transmission between Pictland and Phrygia in the second century AD, these examples show two cultures reaching towards similar answers to similar problems: how to memorialise their kinsfolk or demonstrate identity and status through a pictorial language.

The process starts with a remarkable example of complete realism. In Leiden Museum is the unique Simpelveld sarcophagus, from near Limbourg, carved in about 160-180 AD. The cremated remains indicate it was made for a genteel lady of about 35-40 years old, and beside her ashes were glass and ceramic vessels, a gold pin, a bead necklace, a stylus (conveying the deceased's literacy), a silver mirror, a knife, a pair of scissors and three finger rings. The most elaborate is a gold ring inscribed IVNONI MEAE ("To my Juno"). Juno was the goddess of marriage, so it's possible this was a wedding ring or gift from the deceased's husband. What makes it remarkable is that both the woman and her home were realistically carved inside the tomb. (2.4 x 1.05m). She lies on a couch or *lectus*. Her hair is dressed in the style of Faustina, wife of Emperor Marcus Aurelius, which suggests a date between 160 and 180 AD. To her right on one of the short ends is a wicker chair of a type known as a *cathedra*, common in the Germanic provinces. A large chest on a pedestal is next. This was the *arca*, the home's safe, which contained the family's documents and cash. Opposite the lady is a low table bearing three large vessels, adjacent to a three-legged table named a *mensa Delphica* after the tripod stool the Pythian priestess sat on to pronounce the oracles of Apollo at Delphi.
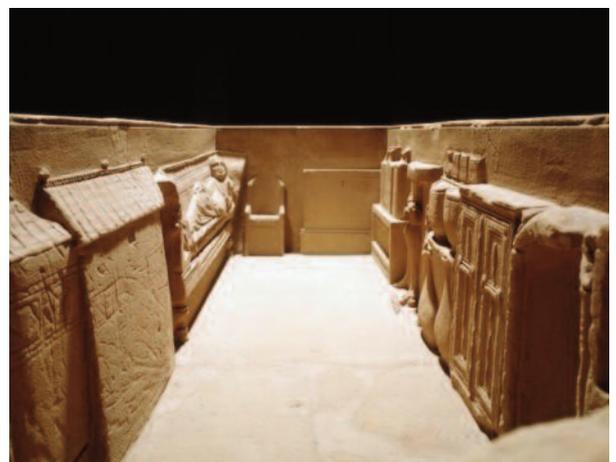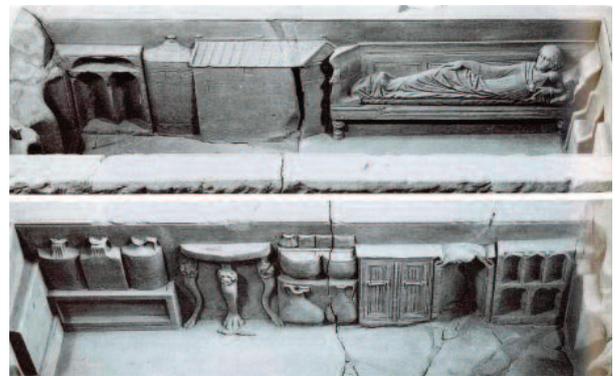




*The Simpelveld sarcophagus in Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden. (Photos: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden)*

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Its legs are decorated with lion heads. Next is a sideboard with four small bowls on the top shelf, two fat vessels in the middle and two tall jugs on the floor beneath. Then comes a cabinet with two smart doors and cluster of small niches of varied size. There are a couple of more niches opposite, followed by the big house with pantiled roof and a smaller annexe (Waters-Rist and Jeneson 2017, 3).

This aristocratic lady was buried alongside carved replicas of her home and daily life. At the other end of the Roman Empire, in Phrygia (west-central Turkey), such reminders of life were provided on tomb slabs for artisans and ordinary working people. Many are displayed in the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul. The noble house was reduced to simply a door in a gable while, instead of a 3-D recreation of the home, the daily objects were portrayed either in a simple but realistic form or reduced down to symbols. A few of these stele lingered on until the fourth century but their height of fashion was second to third century AD.



*Grave stele. 'Tamousa and Heraclides [made this grave] in memory of their daughters Nymphe and Prepouse'.*
*From Prusias ad Hypium (Bursa), Roman period. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Inv 767T, Mendel Cat 1081. (Photo: author)*

This stele is like the end of a house with its pediment and acroteria. Below are duplicate sets of objects: laurel wreath, mirrors, wool baskets with handles, distaffs in the baskets and spindles below. The inscription commemorates two sisters, the grave erected by their parents.

Next is a blacksmith at work, seated on a block, with hammer, tongs and anvil like an inverted pyramid. The inscription refers to his name Hephaistion



*Grave stele 'Dead Hephaistion the hero, son of Papas, farewell.' From Bursa, early Roman period. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Inv 5366 T. (Photo: author)*

and his father's name Pappas. Hephaistion was the name of Alexander the Great's best friend, but Hephaistos was the Greek god of black smithing. Those tools are familiar in Pictland from Abernethy and Dunfallandy.

On the third slab, several of the previous objects are being piled up on four door panels, still recognisable but now arranged in disparate groups, floating on the stone surface. Top left are spindle and distaff, Z-shaped key and lock plate. Top right, a wool basket with comb on top, mirror and another Z-shaped key. Below left is a padlock and pair of sandals. Lower right are three perfume bottles (alabaster jars) on a chest with keyhole. Other similar designs confirm that the latter is actually a chest for containing the bottles.

*Door shaped grave stele. Dorylaion (Eskisehir) 2nd cent. AD. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Inv 670T, Mendel cat 1069. (Photo: author)*

The fourth stone is carved in intaglio and has reduced the objects still further, to the extent that you practically need to know what they are before understanding the composition. They almost look like hieroglyphs. On the panels of this door are groups of objects, now somewhat floating about, and reduced to the barest outline. There is no more braided willow on the basket, the vases project directly from
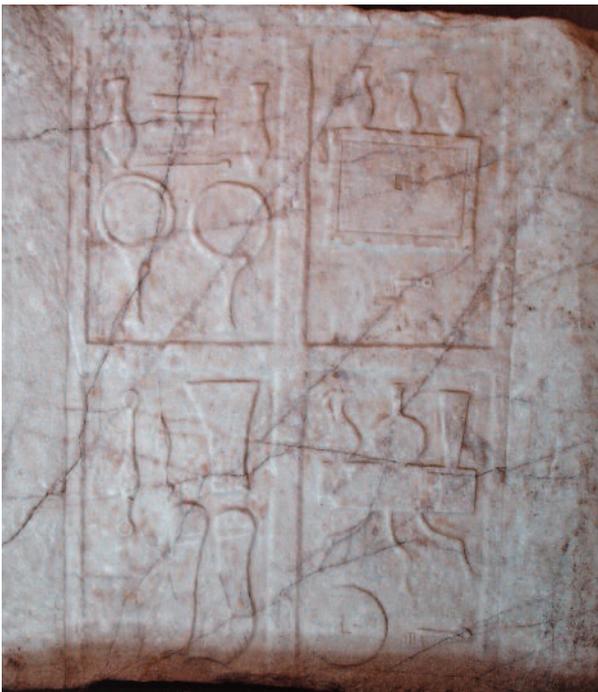


*Door shaped grave stele. Dorylaion (Eskisehir) 2nd cent. AD. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Inv 671T, Mendel cat 1068. (Photo: author)*

their store cupboard rather than sitting correctly on its surface, the comb has no teeth, the cupboard has no structure.

On the top left are a comb between two perfume bottles, a hair pin and two mirrors; top right, perfume bottles on their chest with its keyhole and key; below left, the spindle, distaff and wool basket with two sandals below; and lower right, a wine jug (*oenochoe*), a round-bellied vase and a goblet, placed on a three-legged table like that in the Simpelveld sarcophagus, with lockplate and key below. Because these objects relate closely to the previous tomb, their shapes can still be recognised, and they have a strong female connotation.

On the fifth example, even their cataloguer Mendel (1914) hesitates to make some identifications. Their reality has been severely pared away, reducing them to more inscrutable symbols. The portal shape is quite clear, with two dolphins playing with a 'crescent form' in the tympanum. Top left is an odd snake-like form; Mendel suggests a courgette or aubergine, perhaps an unlikely marker for a grave. Then a heron eating a fish. Below left is a pinecone, and below right Mendel suggests perhaps a pomegranate although it could be a shortened form of the spindles seen above. These symbols are simplified to the point of becoming unintelligible. This sequence of images has demonstrated how a commemoration as realistic as the unique Simpelveld



*Door shaped grave stele. Phrygia, 2nd cent. AD. Archaeological Museum, Istanbul. Inv 2214T, Mendel Cat 1071. (Photo: author)*

sarcophagus can be replayed at a more common and cheaper level. The Phrygian stele themselves show a range from objects aiming at a high degree of naturalism to laconic symbols.

R.R.R. Smith (1988) sums up the characteristics of the Phrygian tombs series. They are a false door, the mere representation of the deceased's tomb, a symbol of the tomb he/she never had. They may add occupational attributes such as education with a diptych and stylus; female virtue with spindle, distaff, wool basket, comb and mirror; and occupations such as tools, plough and fish. Inscriptions refer to name and family relations, the attributes being a 'crude, silent biography that complemented the inscription'.

These Phrygian grave markers are far away from Pictland, and a cursory look has not found a group of similar Roman objects in Britain, but they share several features with the grammar and vocabulary of Pictish stones. First of all they adopt the slab form, and several Pictish stones show a tendency towards the gable profile, with a pediment at the top (as at Aberlemno and Nigg). Many of the same objects are repeated on several stones with a range between naturalism and symbolism. Objects tend to be grouped in pairs or triples. Objects can be placed in seemingly random floating contexts, nonetheless respecting their allotted space carefully. Lastly, and most obviously, many of the symbols are shared between Pictland and Phrygia, not least the mirror and comb (see right). Is it just possible the Pictish stepped rectangle forms came from a Roman key? Where Greek inscriptions are available, the mirror and comb definitely apply to women, and even where inscriptions are lacking, they are accompanied by other female attributes like the spindle, distaff and wool basket. The inscriptions commemorate one or more people, relating them to their family. As is so often the case, light can be thrown on Pictish art by comparisons from abroad but the Picts retain their unique artistic skill and imagination.

With many thanks to Ben Russell, Martin Henig, Fraser Hunter and Roger White for their suggestions.

*Further Reading*

Mendel, G. 1914, *Catalogue des Sculptures, Greques, Romaines, et Byzantines, III,* Constantinople (https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6313390k.texteImage)

Smith, R.R.R. 1988, 'Phrygian Doorstones', review in *Classical Review,* 38, issue 2, 349-50

Waelkens, M. 1986, *Die Kleinasiatischen Tursteine*, Mainz

Waters-Rist, A., and Jeneson K. 2017, 'The Lady of the Simpelveld Sarcophagus: an osteo archaeological approach' *Babesch*, 92, 187-208 https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321487901_The_Lady_of_the_Simpelveld_Sarcophagus_an_Osteo-Archaeological_Approach

**SHEILA HAINEY** provides the lecture summary:

**Helen McKay**: *The Pictish Beast: analysing its attributes towards an identification*

Or: *Goat, Horses and the Pictish Beast*

Helen began by acknowledging some of the suggestions as to the identity of the Pictish Beast that have been put forward over many years: a dolphin, a capricorn, an elephant, a kelpie. Evidence to favour any one of these is difficult to find. Instead, Helen suggested that by considering its attributes, we may be able to identify the beast.

Although all of the Beasts appear to be slightly different, they are all clearly drawn after a particular model, equally recognisable. The Beast is one of the frequent symbols to appear on Pictish stones; the crescent and V-rod is at the top of the list, with the



*The Maiden Stone, Chapel of Garioch, showing the Pictish Beast, mirror, comb, notched rectangle, Z-rod and centaur. Photo: Visit Aberdeenshire*

Beast and double-disc and Z-rod more or less equal second.  The Beast makes up 9.6% of symbols on Class I stones, rising to 19.2% on Class II.  Helen noted a change in the ratio of right facing to left facing from 27:2 to 11:15 and suggested that an increase in left facing images was responsible for the change in percentages.

The proportion of the Class II left facing Beasts accompanied by riders is much higher than for right facing.  Noting the riders, Helen went on to ask why there is no horse symbol.  The only possible candidate is the one at Inverurie, which appears alone and may not be a symbol.  The Beast is not simply a horse—we have plenty of evidence that the Picts could, and did, carve realistic horses.

Helen compared panels on the Nigg cross-slab and the St Andrews Sarcophagus, where the programme of the carvings seems to run in parallel.  In particular, she noted the eagle above the Beast at Nigg, and compared that with a winged gryphon attacking a horse at St Andrews, concluding that this was a clear indication that the Pictish Beast could in some circumstances be equated to a horse.

She then turned to the location of the Beast symbols.  On Class I stones, there are concentrations close to the Spey, around Inverurie, and in Angus and Gowrie.  On Class II stones, the main concentration is in Angus and Gowrie.  Helen noted that place-names associated with the Caledones and Maeatae seem to lie outside of this area, and put forward the suggestion that the symbol carvers were the original Verturiones, suggesting dates of mid-third to mid-fifth centuries for Class I and mid-fifth to mid-seventh centuries for early Class II.  Within this area, the Beast is more common around Meigle and Strathmartine, while the double disc and Z-rod is commoner further east in Angus.  Does this reflect a territorial division?  Helen suggested that the Beast was linked to Gowrie.  In early documents, this area appears to be Mag Circinn, with 'Gowrie' not attested until 1130 AD.  It is difficult to establish whether these territorial terms referred to originally Pictish territories or perhaps Gowrie later replaced Circinn.  She had found an early reference to Gowrie in the work of Taliesin: 'Ravens shall wander in Prydein, in Eidin , in Gafran, in the quarter of Brechin'.  A later pedigree claims descent of the Gabranaig (the men of Gowrie) from sons of Eochaid Buide, a king of Dál Riata whose name appears to have been derived from 'ech' meaning horse.  Eochaid was son of Aedán mac Gábráin.  The Gabranaig thus appear to have traced back to an eponymous ancestor.

This led Helen to consider the 'gabor': a 'horse', or 'white horse' in early Irish.  The Dictionary of the Irish Language suggests several meanings for related words, including 'goat'.  However, goats are very rarely, if ever, to be found in Celtic art or mythology.  The *Mabinogion* includes a description of the complicated conditions that had to be met to encompass the death of Lleu Llaw Gyffes.  This included Lleu standing on the back of what may have been a white mare or a white goat.  This contrasts with other cultures where the goat features.  For example, Thor's chariot was drawn by two goats, which could be slaughtered and eaten, yet revive for the next day.  Heithrún was a goat which supplied the warriors in Valhalla with mead.  Celtic gods could provide equivalent unending supplies, but not involving goats.  Examples can also be drawn from Rome and Assyria of goats in the company of gods.  It may be that goats feature in the twelfth-century account of the madness of Suibhne, where strange (goat?) heads attacked him and drove him back into madness.

Helen noted that 'gabor' seems to be the root of a number of Celtic personal names, as well as of several group names.  Examples of place-names also come from a range of Celtic territories, including Gaul as well as the Insular world.  Ad Gefrin, in Northumbria, means 'near the hill of the goats' and was the site of a royal Anglo-Saxon settlement.

Ptolemy placed the 'Epidii', a group name with a horse element, in Argyll.  Later this was home to the Cenel n'Gabráin, who regarded Gabrán mac Domangairt as their eponymous ancestor.  Helen suggested that the Cenel n'Gabráin were in fact descendants of Ptolemy's horse people.

She moved on to consider a wide range of toponymics with 'gabor' derivations that are associated with the seaside, lochs, rivers and cascades.  In these she sees a connection between the white mare, the 'gabor' and the power of the water as manifested in the tides or in the force of a river.  The 'gabor' is also associated with royal sites, such as Lagore, or Ad Gefrin, or possible East Lomond in the parish of Kilgour (another 'gabor' name).  Here the idea of the white mare of sovereignty may be combined with that powerful force moving the waters of sea, lochs or rivers.

Helen pointed out that most Pictish symbols are either animal or geometric.  There are two mythical creatures: the Pictish Beast and the S-beast.  She suggests that the S-beast is related to the constellation Scorpio, while the Beast appears in the sky as the constellation Capricorn (the goat).  This was associated with the winter solstice in Bronze Age/Iron Age

times. The Celts with their horses subsequently displaced the goat from their mythology. The horse goddess, Epona Regina, probably Gaulish in origin, was celebrated in Rome on the 18th of December, the first day of Capricorn in Roman astrology. An interesting range of horse-related celebrations or ritual dances involving white mares at this time of year has survived: the Padstow hobby horse, the Welsh Mari Lwyd and the Manx Laare Vane for example. In continental Europe, the goat is still associated with mid-winter festivities.

In summary, Helen associated the Pictish Beast with the Gabor, the white mare of sovereignty. It was also the water horse, whose power drove rivers, cascades and tides. The Gabor replaced the goat of Capricorn in the Celtic west, tied to the critical period of the mid-winter solstice. We would expect to find the Pictish Beast as the white mare of sovereignty at royal sites, as we do at Rhynie. As the water horse, we might expect to find the Beast associated with river or sea crossings, as at St Madoes, Inveravon and the Brough of Birsay. On memorial stones, it may celebrate kings. We may even look to find it on stones associated with mid-winter solstice alignments.

## SYMBOL OF THE DAY

If you would like this feature to continue, please send in your favourite photos of a Pictish stone, and say why you like it. There could be many reasons; the light, a surprise discovery, a great trek to get there. Here's a starter.



*Tullich, Aberdeenshire. If you come on the field trip you will see that this double-disc and Z-rod is practically invisible. However, one snowfall and light swipe with a brush reveals all. (Photo: J. Geddes)*

## SEARCHING FOR SYMBOLS

There are several data sets with information about Pictish stones. Readers are welcome to send the editor details if you know of some more useful sites.

Historic Environment Scotland's *Canmore* (https://canmore.org.uk/) aims to provide the most comprehensive resource. Here Anna Ritchie has tagged the relevant stones with a new standardised label for the *Early Medieval Carved Stone Project.* It remains difficult to extract a compendium of all Pictish stones from the Canmore database.

*Pastmap* (https://pastmap.org.uk/), also created by Historic Environment Scotland provides a very user friendly map based approach, with data linking back to *Canmore* and Scheduled Monuments if these criteria are selected.

*Scran* (http://nms.scran.ac.uk/) is another service from Historic Environment Scotland collating catalogue material and images from museum collections.

Dr Robert Henery created the *Pictish Stone Database*, supported by Strathclyde University (https://outreach.mathstat.strath.ac.uk/outreach/pictish/). This provides a standardised catalogue for the symbol stones with references to the principal bibliographies. It has a specific field to list the symbol itself. Photos have been enhanced to remove interference from e.g. lichen. It contains a detailed section on statistical analysis of symbol distribution. At the time of writing, some links appear to be broken, in particular from the catalogue entry to the map.

The *Megalithic Portal* (https://www.megalithic.co.uk/ ) is invaluable because it covers the world, with a discrete section for the U.K. and Ireland. Created by Andy Burnham and supported by a voluntary team of editors, this is an interactive site which invites visitors to contribute. The map and filter function is easy to use and you may well find a photo from someone who visited the site in better conditions than you. It's also handy because it includes older prehistoric monuments so you can see the Pictish stones in their context.

*Stravaiging* (http://www.stravaiging.com/history/pictish/stones/) is often a useful site for castles and restaurants but it also has a section on Pictish stones. Its main feature is the aerial image from Bing maps, links to other nearby monuments, local Pictish place-names, advice to buy the O.S. map and the current weather situation.

*Archaeoptics*
(https://symbolstones.archaeoptics.co.uk/ ) aimed to create a symbol stone database with a clear mapping facility and photos. The database was begun in 1996 and contains material accessible between 1995 and 2004, 'mostly as an historic resource'. It also provides links to other websites.

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**Donncha MacGabhann,** *The Book of Kells. A masterwork revealed: Creators, Collaboration, and Campaigns,* Sidestone Press 2022, £60.00 (https://www.sidestone.com/books/the-book-of-kells ). While this new book studiously avoids the word 'Pict', the art of the Book of Kells is directly relevant to Pictish symbol stones. The author is an artist himself, and he has made a meticulous study of its draftsmanship and paintwork, identifying the genius of the great Scribe-Artist and his collaborator. From the website, you can read the whole book online, for free.

**UPCOMING EVENTS**

**June 17-18 Field Trip.** At time of writing, there are still a few spaces. Here is how to join: https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/up-the-dee-and-down-the-don-pas-field-trip-june-2023-tickets-618946434447

Aberdeen University Museum, Saturday evening. Up the Dee and down the Don Sunday. Picnic at Migvie Church with Paul Anderson playing his fiddle.

**October 7-8 Zoom Conference.** To be held across two afternoons. The theme is the **Bullion Stone**, that inebriated horseman from Invergowrie. Promoted by Victoria Whitworth. Rousing themes include alcohol, drunkenness, horse riding, mounted warriors, drinking vessels, and what Bullion Man is doing in the Carse of Gowrie.

**Lecture dates for 2023-24**, held on Zoom on Fridays at 19.30. Speakers to be confirmed.

20 October

17 November

19 January

16 February

15 March

19 April



*Rhynie Man, Aberdeenshire Council Office, Woodhill House. Not on our field trip itinerary. (Photo: Golux)*