

ANCIENT PICTISH MONUMENTS IN ANGUS AND PERTHSHIRE

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COMPARATIVELY little attention has been paid to a form of Ancient Monument of Pictish origin, of which important examples have survived. These bear sculptured scenes and symbolism of considerable artistic merit, and are clearly of great value in the light they may throw on the customs of the early inhabitants of certain regions of Scotland. Much work still needs to be done, however, in the way of extended and careful comparison, and in interpretation of the symbolism. In this connection Dr. Chalmers remarks: "The Sculptured Stones of Scotland form a class of remarkable Monuments, that have long alike excited the curiosity and baffled the ingenuity of the learned and the speculative."¹

A good general idea of the character of these monuments and their situation is given by Pinkerton, who writes: "It is well known that there exist in various parts of Scotland, but chiefly on the east side, from the river Tay as far as the county of Sutherland, singular erect stones, generally with Crosses on one side, and upon the other Sculptures not ill executed for a barbarous age. These chiefly abound in the county of Angus, the centre of the Pictish domains."²

Although the centre of Pictish power varied at different times, the later Pictish kingdom lay to the north and east of Scotland, in contrast to the Scottish kingdom centred in Argyll. The Pentland Firth, the name being a Norse form of "Pictland", indicates the northern boundary of the sphere of influence, which extended in the south to the Firth of Forth. As regards the sculptured stones we are considering, so many fine examples have been found in Angus and Perthshire that until recently this area was regarded as the main source. Isabel Henderson has

¹ Patrick Chalmers, *The Ancient Sculptured Monuments of the County of Angus*, (1848), p. 3.

² John Pinkerton, *Enquiry into the History of Scotland* (1790).

shown, however, that while this was where the richest development took place, earlier work of a more primitive kind was done further north, particularly in Aberdeenshire, and even in Caithness, Sutherland and the Isles.³

The problem of the age of these sculptured stones is of great interest, but one of considerable difficulty, leading to marked difference of opinion among authorities. Archdeacon Aglen says: "The question of the date of these monuments is as perplexing as it is attractive."⁴ He suggests that, as a first step, the stones may be conveniently arranged in three classes, namely:

Class I

Stones incised with Pictish symbols, without cross.

Class II

Pictish cross-slabs, in which the symbols remain, generally in relief, but with cross.

Class III

Stones known as high crosses, in which the Pictish symbols have disappeared, leaving only Christian emblems.

The Pictish kingdom first came under Christian influence at the beginning of the fifth century, so that stones with crosses must be later than this date. The change in the art form would, however, only take place gradually, and Stewart Cruden expresses the view that stones of a purely Pictish symbol type were commonly being produced in the seventh century.⁵ This tendency was really inevitable, because apart from the innate conservatism of the early craftsman, some districts were much more remote than others and, at a period when means of communication were difficult, kept to traditional forms longer. The influence of Christianity is considered to have become predominant in Pictavia about the middle of the ninth century. The Pictish stones which we are to examine here are of the intermediate type, in which pagan and Christian symbolism both occur, and are generally regarded as belonging to the eighth century.

An important feature in the design of these monuments, to which Stirling Maxwell draws attention, is that in contrast to

³ Isabel M. Henderson, *The Origin Centre of the Pictish Symbol Stones*, Proceedings of Soc. of Antiquaries of Scotland (1957-58), pp 44-60.

⁴ The Ven. Archdeacon A. S. Aglen, *The Sculptured Stones of Meigle* (1923), p.3.

⁵ Stewart Cruden, *The Early Christian and Pictish Monuments of Scotland* (1964), p. 17.

most of the stones found in Ireland at about the same period, the Scottish ones were designed to stand erect and could therefore be sculptured on both sides. He continues: "There are also in Scotland more variety and elegance in the form of the crosses and a more frequent use of figure subjects. The earlier ornamentation consisted mainly of beasts and interlaced ornaments, with symbols which still await explanation. In the later examples foliage plays an important part in the design. Both types are of great beauty."⁶

We are dealing, in fact, with a unique art form. The two broad surfaces of these standing stones are treated as being of equal importance. More or less as a matter of pious etiquette the side bearing a cross is regarded as being the front, but usually offers less scope artistically than the figure subjects shown on the back. While there is no arbitrary assignment of territory, the front in these eighth century stones is in the main Christian, while the back is Pagan. The two elements intermingle, but with a side devoted to a large cross covered with conventional ornamentation, there are only small spaces between the arms for the intrusion of figure subjects or other pagan emblems. On the reverse side, however, there can be a marvellous riot of monsters and other scarcely recognizable creatures; of a large variety of real or mythical birds and fish; of hunting scenes with horses, hounds and deer; of battles in progress with men mounted or on foot wielding many kinds of weapons with great vigour; and of curious half-human figures engaged in a host of mysterious activities. Altogether the scope is wide and fascinating, including much symbolism in addition to the features already mentioned. Perhaps the most prominent feature is that of the wonderful horses, which often look like mettlesome thoroughbreds and were evidently used by the Picts in large numbers.

These stones record in pictorial form the most ancient life in Scotland of which any illustration remains. Joseph Anderson notices that customs and fashions are represented of which there is no other distinct evidence. For instance, that the horsemen of the period rode without spurs or stirrups, cropped the manes and tails of their horses, used snaffle-bridles with cheek rings and

⁶ Sir John Stirling Maxwell, K.T., *Shrines and Homes of Scotland* (1937), p.18.

ornamental rosettes, and sat upon peaked saddle-cloths; that, when journeying on horseback, they wore peaked hoods and cloaks, and when hunting or on horseback, armed, they wore a kilt-like dress, falling below mid-thighs, and a plaid across the shoulders. They also used covered chariots or two-wheeled carriages with poles for draught by two horses, the driver sitting on a seat over the pole, the wheels having ornamental spokes.

In a just tribute Stewart Cruden says: "The achievements of the Pictish sculptors present a unique contribution to European art. The particular independent genius of these artists resides in their mastery of both closed and open composition, and an instinctive urge to pattern-making. Control of unexpectedly violent conjunctions of diverse themes is another characteristic. The vitality and freshness, and the communication of the artist's enthusiasm and familiarity with his subject enliven the spirited horsemen who step out so blithely across the sheets of stone. The hunting scenes are rendered with great precision and delicacy, and they demonstrate command of open composition with movement. On the other hand the strict and unfaltering control of interlace of remarkable complexity proves the highest technical skill combined with a notable aptitude for changing pattern." He concludes by saying: "These stones are the national monuments of the Picts, and an astonishing manifestation of their genius. In beholding them and in recognising the details of their apparel and accoutrements, we are as near to the Picts as one can be."⁷ And yet these men, who seem so close to us in spirit, and whom we can understand so well through their monuments, lived well over a millennium ago, for their sculptures, being so entirely their own in character, must antedate the Dalriadic conquest of the ninth century.

The symbolism of the triple circular disc, as seen at Aberlemno and at Glamis, both in Angus, and elsewhere, is of great interest. Normally there is a large circle in the centre, representing a mirror, with a smaller one on either side presumably intended for handles. This design was found at an early date on the Continent. Thus on a monument engraved in Montfaucon's *Diarium Italicum*, the mirror is found among the supposed emblems of the trade

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 15-16.

of a smith, being of polished silver or other metal. So far as Scotland is concerned, Pinkerton suggests that the mirror indicates a monument to a female. But Chalmers observes that the symbol is found on both male and female monuments. The explanation may be that it denotes a memorial to one of the Pictish royal house, in which succession was in the female line.

A symbol frequently present resembled two sceptres, either joined together at an angle or connected by a cross line, the one often termed a V-rod and the other a Z-rod. Sometimes the sceptres surmount a serpent. At Aberlemno, as is also commonly the case elsewhere, this symbol is associated with the mirror one, and strengthens the view that they are both parts of royal insignia. Dr. Anderson notices that the V-shaped rod presents a remarkable resemblance to the manner in which two floriated sceptres are held in the hands of royal personages in early illuminated manuscripts, with the lower ends touching in front of the breast and the floriated ends spreading apart over the shoulders. On the Pictish stones they are reproduced in almost diagrammatic form.

There has been much debate about the precise purpose of these monuments. One suggestion is that they were used to mark royal burial places. Another is that sometimes they were boundary crosses, so that in Chalmer's view the one at Keillor may indicate "the ancient march of the great Earldoms of Strathern and Angus," to which he adds, "nor is it far from the present boundary line of Perthshire and County Angus." In several cases there seems a fair measure of certainty that the stones stand upon the site of battles in which the Picts were victorious, notably over the Danes, in other words that they were a very early type of war memorial. Royal insignia might, of course, also be incorporated among other symbols on battle or boundary stones.

ABERLEMNO, Angus (Plate 1)

This parish, between Forfar and Brechin, where the Lemno water joins the South Esk, has two very remarkable eighth century stones in its churchyard, showing reliefs of combats, of which the finer will be considered here. Aberlemno is a natural defensive site, for in addition to being at a river junction, the ground here rises to 517 feet in the Turin hill.



PLATE I. ABERLEMNO, ANGUS

As is usual, one front of the stone here is largely occupied with a bold cross of which the shaft reaches to the bottom and the other arms to the extreme edge. The cross, which is cut in high relief, has its whole surface covered with elegant and elaborate ornamentation, partly geometrical and partly curvilinear. The background is also completely covered with decoration, consisting of jumping deer at the top and wonderfully interwoven dragon-like creatures lower down.

The reverse face, which is shown in the illustration, has at the top a curious device, part geometrical and part ornamental. A rectangle, with a border and ornamented with scroll-work, has cut across it a Z-shaped symbol. It will be noticed that although, in this last, the shafts are being represented, they have been reduced to single lines without thickness. The floriated heads are differentiated, but while this feature is still clearly visible, some simple patterning in the angles of the symbol has been practically worn away.

The main feature of this side of the monument, occupying the central and lower parts, is a battle scene in which three rows of combatants are shown. First we see two horsemen, moving from left to right, the one in front at a gallop. The foremost figure, evidently the senior in rank, is considered to be a warrior in armour, wearing a helmet having a nasal. The man following him is bare-headed, and holds the reins of his horse with his right hand; his left arm is raised to brandish a spear. High up between the two riders is a circular disc like a shield with a small boss in the centre. This disc appears to be mounted upon the spear of the second horseman, but may possibly have had some symbolic meaning which is now lost.

In the second row three warriors on foot, in hauberks or coats of mail, the leading one armed with a sword over his shoulder and a target or shield, the next with a spear carried horizontally and a shield, and the third with a spear held vertically, are moving from the left to oppose a horseman advancing from the right. The mounted warrior wears a helmet with nasal, and besides a sword and shield, is armed with a spear or lance with which he is attacking the leader of his opponents on foot. These may be just generalised battle scenes, but it seems more probable that they

record actual noteworthy incidents in which national leaders took part, so that they become in some measure citations of honour.

In the bottom row there are first two warriors on horseback charging one another, both armed with spear and shield, but with the one on the left bare-headed while the one on the right has a helmet with nasal. Finally, completing this third row of figures, is a man who seems to be staggering backwards, with his round target falling from his hand, and with a great bird of prey pecking at his breast. It may well be that this is a case of unconventional perspective, and that the warrior is actually lying dead, but is shown in a more or less upright position with the sensible idea of making the best use of the limited space available. For a similar reason the inclination of his body backwards may be a device to allow room for the bird of prey to be included in the scene.

The stone at Aberlemno is traditionally associated with the battle of Barry, at which Malcolm II defeated a force of Danes. The stone is really of much earlier date, but may well be a kind of war memorial, for other battles were fought here. Barry Hill is crowned with an Iron Age camp, and Robert Chambers describes the military works there as being "of an ancient rude character". The fort must have remained in use for a long period, for many bronze axes have also been found round about.

According to Hector Boece, in his *History of Scotland*⁸ the tradition connected with the Aberlemno monument is that an army of Danes landed in Lunan Bay, plundered Brechin and the country between Montrose and Arbroath, but were met by Malcolm at Barry with forces from Dundee. After their defeat they were cut off from their ships, with the coast in arms against them. They had to retreat towards the north of Scotland, where they had reserves. Following the high ground, the Danes are said to have reached Aberlemno. Here they rallied and fought another action in which they were utterly routed, the remnant of their army escaping by night. Fordun, in his *Scottish Chronicle*,⁹ describes Malcolm II as a warlike and successful Prince, who triumphed in person three times over the Danes.

⁸ Hecctoris Boëtii, *Scotorum Historiae*, Parisus (1575), fo.20.

⁹ *Forduni Scotichronicon*, Lib. IV, cap.43.

ROSSIE ISLAND, *Angus* (Plates 2 and 3)

In the mouth of the South Esk, where it reaches the sea at Montrose, is Inchbrayock or Rossie Island. On the south side of the island, and close to the water's edge, is an old burial ground in which stood a fine sculptured slab. This monument has now been removed to the Montrose Museum, to which it was presented by the Rev. Robert Mitchell in the name of the heritors, and where it has been fixed in a modern stone base.

This upright cross-slab of red sandstone is roughly rectangular, but tapers slightly towards the base. It is 2 feet 5 inches high by 2 inches thick, and is 1 foot 7 inches wide at the top by 1 foot 4 inches wide at the bottom. It is carved in relief on both sides.

The main feature of the front is a cross which has a square centre, and arms with rectangular heads, the whole being boldly conceived. The centre of the cross is embellished with a diagonal key pattern, developing into spiral-work on the four arms. A ring connecting the arms has its quadrants ornamented with rows of pellets.

In the four corners of this side of the stone are features which all appear to be decidedly non-Christian, thus forming a contrast to the cross. (1) At the top on the left is a serpent which has tied itself into a very ornamental knot. It is very like one on a stone from Murthly in Perthshire,¹⁰ which is now in the National Museum of Antiquities at Edinburgh. (2) On the right here is a similar serpent with its body interlaced to form a more elaborate pattern of irregular plaiting. (3) At the bottom on the left is a four-legged reptile-like beast, which is either being attacked by a smaller creature, or is perhaps a female suckling its young. (4) On the right here is a very remarkable group. A tall beast-headed man in a long tunic, with his hair in a queue, has seized the similar pigtail of a shorter figure with a human head. Meanwhile the smaller man appears to be grasping the free arm of the taller one. A struggle is, in fact, evidently in progress.

¹⁰ Some of these creatures also strayed down the east coast of Scotland from Angus and were found south of the Border, for example the Laidley Worm of Spindleston, near Bamburgh, Northumberland, and the Loathly Worm of Lambton in County Durham.



Drawn from nature & on stone by "A. Johnston"

PLATE 2. ROSSIE ISLAND, ANGUS (Front)



PLATE 3. ROSSIE ISLAND, ANGUS (Back)

The back of the stone has decoration which is extremely animated. At the top on the left is a kind of Loch Ness monster, with a very long neck and a tail curled between its rear legs. Its body is curved to the right at both ends to partly enclose two discs which are very like the worm patterns on the reverse side, and may be the creature's young.

Approaching from the right, and perhaps about to attack the monster, is a very lively figure of a man mounted upon a horse or ass, armed with a long spear and a sword, and holding a circular targe with a boss in the middle. Below the horseman is an animal with long ears, probably intended to represent a deer, with its legs doubled up beneath the body. It appears to be bounding into the air to escape an extremely agile-looking hound, which is in close pursuit. One very like this is to be seen at Ulbster, Caithness, and there are others elsewhere.

Along the upper part of the right edge of the slab is another younger deer jumping away from a hound with a curly tail, which is also pursuing it swiftly. Below this second dog is a crudely carved creature which is almost certainly intended for another member of the pack of hounds engaged in the hunt.

The lower part of the stone, below the vigorous hunting scene just described, is devoted to more serious matters. On the left a bearded gentleman, with an amazed expression on his face, is being attacked by a man with long hair, armed with a handsome sword complete with scabbard, and holding in his right hand a remarkable object like a bill-hook furnished with teeth. This may well be a return to Christian symbolism, perhaps depicting Samson slaying a Philistine with a jaw bone of an ass, although his weapon seems more likely to have come from an alligator. The figure being attacked has a long cloak wrapped round him so that his arms are not visible, and has a cowed hood thrown back from his head. Behind the warrior is another bearded individual, apparently kneeling, and possibly intended for a wounded or slain Philistine. This last has the front of his body covered by what may be his shield, but elaborated into a fanciful pattern.

Many of the other sculptured stones in the north-east of Scotland have decoration which is more elegant in a formal way

than that found on the Rossie stone, but for variety of subject and vigorous animation it is surely unrivalled.

MEIGLE, Perthshire (Plate 4)

The church of Meigle stands by the river Isla, five miles north-east of Coupar Angus, and close to the borders of Perthshire and Angus. A large number of symbol-bearing and sculptured stones formerly stood in the churchyard here, but to protect them from weathering they were removed to the nearby schoolhouse. The building was acquired by public subscription through the efforts of Sir George Kinloch, Bart., at the end of the last century, and became the Meigle Museum. In 1936 the Museum and the collection of monuments it contained were made over to the Ministry of Works. Shortly after the end of the second World War, in 1949, the building was repaired and the stones were re-arranged.

The exceptionally fine monument in the form of a cross-slab in red sandstone, of which only the back is illustrated here, is 8 feet 1 inch high, by 3 feet 3 inches wide, and is 6 inches thick. Unfortunately the details of the front are too much worn to be made out, but the main feature is a cross extending the full height. The head of the cross is boldly carved, with arms that end in squares. This shape dictates that the top of the whole stone must be square. A ring connecting the arms, and the cross itself, are ornamented with well-placed bosses that look very decorative. The shaft of the cross is unusually wide to allow room for three pairs of beasts to be placed facing each other in symmetrical fashion, one pair below the other. Next is shown a centaur holding in each hand what looks like a cross or crucifix, but may be a form of axe, and two branches of a tree.

The reverse side, with which we are specially concerned and which is shown on the illustration, is in a surprisingly good state of preservation. At the top is a horseman riding with a pair of hounds. In front of him is an angelic figure with raised wings. Below, on the left, are three horsemen riding abreast, followed on the right by one or two other figures on horseback, accompanied by what may be more hounds.

In the central position on this side of the stone is Daniel in the



PLATE 4. MEIGLE, PERTHSHIRE

den of lions. The beasts are licking and pawing the prophet in a cringing and fawning fashion, depicted in a very convincing and realistic manner. Daniel seems to be patting the two lower lions on the head or perhaps bestowing a benediction.

While the theme of Daniel and the lions would be something quite likely to be chosen for portrayal, one cannot be sure that it is a correct interpretation of the sculpture in this case. Elsewhere at Meigle are stones associated with Queen Guinevere, and Archdeacon Aglen remarks that: "The figure of Daniel has not unnaturally been identified with the hapless Queen, who, according to one variation of her story, was torn in pieces by wild beasts." As shown, the lions do not appear to be more savage than those that have been circus trained, and the artists who carved these scenes were never at a loss in showing violent action. On the other hand Christian commentators may be misled by pagan representations from an earlier tradition.

At the bottom of the slab on this side is a bullock or horned beast straining backwards in an attempt to withdraw its head from the jaws of a dragon-like creature. Behind the creature, and leaning on it as if a disinterested spectator, is a man with a club over his shoulder.

Two other stones at Meigle used to lie one on the other in the churchyard on a mound called Queen Wander's grave. The name is a corruption of Guanora or Guinevere, the consort of King Arthur. The stones, badly defaced, do not have a cross in either case, so are no doubt early in date. A curious tradition or superstition is recorded in connection with this grave and the stones.

Boece states that the belief long prevailed that if a woman should tread on the tomb, she should thenceforth be barren, as was Guinevere; and he affirms, as of his own knowledge, that the women of the neighbourhood abhor the monument, and are unwilling even to look upon it. Bellenden gives the tradition in a completely unequivocal way when he says: "All women that stampis on this sepulture shall be ay barrant, but ony frute of thair wamb, siclike as Guanora was."¹¹

Archdeacon Aglen remarks that: "There is every reason for believing that the Celtic inhabitants of eastern Scotland would

¹¹ *Works of John Bellenden, D.D.*, Edinburgh (1822) edition, II, 86.

share the cycle of Arthurian legends with their brother Celts of Wales. And if this was the case, there was nothing strange in the legend of Guanora attaching itself to one or more of the monuments existing at Meigle."¹²

OTHER STONES

Pinkerton recounts a tradition, about which he was informed in a letter from the Rev. James Miller, sometime Minister of Eassie, near Glamis Castle.¹³ Mr. Miller wrote regarding a stone in his care commemorating one Martin and his nine beautiful daughters. He states: "At a period very far back, when this country was a forest, and that forest was the habitation of wolves, about three miles north-west from Dundee there lived a man whose name was Martin. He was blessed with a beautiful family of nine daughters, who were employed by their father in bringing water to slake his thirst from a neighbouring pleasant fountain. Once upon a time, according to his usual custom, Martin sent one of his daughters to the well for water, and she failing to return in the ordinary time, he sent another, and another, and another, and another, until all the nine were gone; and the unhappy father was then informed that they had been devoured by a Dragon," (*alias* a Wolf,—some wolf!—the beast must have been hungry!)

"Immediately Martin mounted his steed and proceeded to the fatal spot, where he encountered the murderer of his children. The animal fled, and Martin pursued. At the distance of about two miles west from the well the victory was completed, and Martin transfixing the animal with his spear. The stone bears a representation of the last scene of the conflict—Martin on horseback, piercing a dragon with his spear. Agreeably to this tradition the stream into which the water of this well runs is called Gory Burn, and the tract through which Martin pursued is named the Den of Bal Dragon."

Some of the theorists go much further than this in the explanations they give for the carvings on these stones. Thus Pennant says: "In the churchyard of Glamis is a stone supposed to have been erected in memory of the assassination of King Malcolm. On

¹² *Op cit.*, p. 13.

¹³ John Pinkerton, *Correspondence*, II, 425.

one front is a cross; on the upper part is some wild beast, and opposite to it is a centaur: beneath, in one compartment, is the head of a wolf; these animals denoting the barbarity of the conspirators: in another compartment are two persons shaking hands; in their other hand is a battle-axe: perhaps these are represented in the act of confederacy. On the opposite front of the stone are represented an eel and another fish. This alludes to the fate of the murderers, who, as soon as they had committed the horrid act, fled. The roads were at that time covered with snow; they lost the path, and went on to the lake of Forfar, which happened at the time to be frozen over, but not sufficiently strong to bear their weight: the ice broke, and they all perished miserably."¹⁴ If the highly moral ending to the story is not true it certainly ought to be.

In the course of this short paper it has only been possible to high-light a few of the most remarkable of these curious sculptured stones. It is to be hoped that before long it may be feasible to make a definitive survey of all the known Pictish stones, thus bringing up to date the great work of Romilly Allen at the turn of the century. But perhaps the time is not yet ripe, and meanwhile field-work continues.

In April 1962 a Pictish symbol stone was found during ploughing at Flemington Farm, Aberlemno, Angus, and presented to the Dundee Museums and Art Galleries by Mr. David Grant, who farms Flemington. It is of an early and rare type of which all previous examples, with one exception, have been found north of the Grampians. It has been examined and described by Dr. Isabel Henderson.¹⁵

Also in 1962 the attention of Mr. Alan Small was drawn to a stone discovered by a farmer at Fairygreen, Collace, Perthshire. The stone has now been placed in the museum of the University of Aberdeen. The symbols, which have been detailed by Mr. Small, include the mirror one discussed earlier.¹⁶ Each discovery of this kind makes a welcome addition to our knowledge.

¹⁴ Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, (1776), II, 173.

¹⁵ Proc. Soc. of Antiquaries of Scotland, (1961-62), XCV, 219-221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 221-222.

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