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Mysterious Symbols in the North: An Analysis of Scotland's Pictish Symbol Stones

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Mysterious Symbols in the North: An Analysis of Scotland's Pictish Symbol Stones

Abstract

During the Roman occupation and conquest of regions that today form England and Scotland, Roman generals and historians wrote of the people they found living in these frozen regions of the world. The Romans referred to these populations as Pictii or the 'painted people', but provided little information about them. Nearly two thousand years after the disappearance of any mention of Pictish culture, the rocks that they inscribed with symbols are found in the archaeological record and scholars wonder about the meaning of these symbols. The distribution of some common symbols throughout Scotland may help provide an answer. In this study I investigate several characteristics of Pictish symbols, their distribution, and relationships.

"The much-discussed 'problem' of the Picts is a multiple one — such matters as origin, racial composition, language, and even distribution, are involved in it. Since the Picts existed in the protohistoric period, two quite separate approaches to their study are indicated. The historian may concern himself with references from late classical sources, the lives of certain early British saints, the writings of Bede, annalistic entries, the so-called 'Pictish Chronicle' (a tangle of regnal lists, difficult to use and of dubious accuracy in parts), and a variety of sources not earlier than the full medieval period. The archaeologist can examine the material culture of the Picts, provided that he can first isolate and identify it; at present it consists mainly of a scatter of small artifacts in various media, some distinctive objects which are 'proto-Pictish' rather than Pictish in the historical sense, localized variants of sites {e.g., earthhouses or 'souterrains'} proper to north Britain at this time, and Pictish art." (Thomas 1963, 31)

Scotland stands distinguished as one of the only places that the illustrious Roman Empire failed to conquer, despite much time and manpower devoted to the effort. This victory was mainly due to the people who occupied the area at the time, a group whom the Romans called the *Pictii*, or the 'painted people'. Other than the limited information about their guerilla warfare tactics and the names of some of the people, very little is known about the Picts. However, they did leave behind a large number of symbols, carved into stones of various shapes and sizes, the meaning and purpose of which still baffle researchers. While many theories exist concerning these symbols, the purpose of this paper is to explore distribution, context, and other analyses conducted from a handmade database in the hopes of assisting the theoretical framework.

The Picts lived in the northern reaches of the British Isles, although they arrived later than both the Irish and the Bretons, according to ancient historians. The Venerable Bede in his 734 A.D. 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People' claimed that the Picts had sailed from Scythia, which is theorized to be somewhere in Scandinavia, and met the Irish (called *gens Scottorum*). The Irish claimed that their land had no room for new settlers, but recommended the empty land across the sea. Once the Picts had settled this new land, they were still without wives, and so they returned to the Irish for help. The Irish agreed, but only on the condition that the Picts select their kings from the maternal line when in doubt, rather than the paternal line (Bede, i. 1).

This early history was preceded by even earlier scholars, but provided even less information. The Roman historian Tacitus received a second hand report about the area from his father-in-law, Agricola, who was the general in charge of conquering what is now Scotland. After Agricola was called back following a series of unsuccessful battles with the Picts, Tacitus fired back at his government with a triumphant report of his father-in-law's accomplishments and a scathing review of the corrupt government who had decided to pull him back. His small ethnography consists of a few stunted descriptions of various groups of Picts as well as a supposed transcription of a speech given by a Pictish leader before battle, which was most likely to have simply been written by Tacitus himself.

Other contemporary information about the Picts comes from kingdoms close by, both the Irish and the people of Dal Riata, who lived on the western coast of Scotland closer to England. From the annals of these kingdoms we learn more about the Pictish language as well as about their kingship and organization. Allegedly, there were seven Pictish kingdoms, named after the seven

sons of their founder *Cruithne*, with the most powerful of them all being the kingdom of Fortriu. In the Annals of Ulster, the ‘heathens’ or Vikings are mentioned to have “won a battle against the men of Foirtriu, and Eóganán son of Aengus, Bran son of Óengus, Aed son of Boanta, and others almost innumerable fell there” (839). This passage could help solve the mystery of what exactly happened to Pictish civilization, if their most powerful kingdom was brought low not by total conversion to Christianity alone, but by the violent takeover by invading Vikings.

Archaeologically, the Picts left one variety of artifact that remains well spread across the country, although comparatively little else besides. Occasional building remain, along with graves, but these are few and far between compared to the inscribed stones. Their symbols, both mysterious and familiar, depict some common animals as well as indecipherable designs. On some stones, the symbols are accompanied by Ogham writing, a type of writing perpetuated most famously by the Irish that uses hashed marks along a line to represent letters. This writing does not clarify any meaning in the symbols, instead typically describing a nearby location or name. The beauty of the marks as well as the enigma they present attract many to marvel at the stones and attempt to discover a meaning, but as of yet no Rosetta Stone of Pictland exists and the interpretations presented remain a simple speculation.

However, this does not mean that people do not attempt to put definite academic parameters in place. Pictish symbol stones are grouped into two main categories, class 1 and class 2. Class 1 symbols are generally found on unworked stones and contain only the pictograph. These stones date from the early 6th century through the 8th century, and were likely still being produced while the Picts were being converted to Christianity. Class 2 symbols are located on stones that have

Leah Tray

been formed into a more or less rectangular shape and are marked by a cross on one or both sides (Allen and Anderson 1903).



Fig. 1, on left. An example of a Class 1 stone. (Aberlemno)

Fig 2. on right. A Class 2 stone. (Woodwrae)

In order to place the following theories in context, we will first look at a theory from the early 20th century. Originally, scholars would present their findings at the annual meetings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on new finds and new developments in Scottish history. In 1914, this meeting took place focused on the ‘Problems in Scottish Archaeology’. The second speaker, one Mr. Ludovic M’Lellan Mann, spoke not only about several new Beaker type vases he discovered, but also proposed a theory solving the eternal ‘Problem of the Picts’ and their ephemeral symbols. He wrote that quite simply, Pictish symbols were a bastardization of Early Christian art that had migrated up from the continent, becoming more simplistic on the way. The

symbol of the fall of Adam, for instance, was present indeed in Pictavia, only the figures of Adam and Eve had become two circles, and the tree of knowledge had become absent. Additionally, over time, the circles bridged into a ‘spectacle’ shape and the z-rod that went through them was meant as the tree, in a highly stylized form (Mann, 1914). Obviously, this fits into the same idea that many archaeologists used at the time that ideas only migrated from place to place, instead of having independent origins and separate cultural meanings. This theory is clearly absurd, but it displays the sort of academic caliber that was dedicated to the subject in the early 20th century.

One great difficulty that many scholars experienced with the stones was dating them accurately, which was likely some of the issue with many of the early theories, as most assumed the symbols were created at a much later date than they actually were. “The date and origin of Pictish Symbols” by Lloyd and Jennifer Liang in 1984 discusses this in great detail, again from the *Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, although now a respected journal instead of merely a yearly gathering. They cover several of the reigning theories about the dating of the symbols and refute most of them, before presenting their own hypothesis on the dates. The first theory they cover has to do with Northumbria, and the manuscripts found there that feature some very similar looking symbols. These manuscripts were dated to around the 7th century, and since people were operating under the framework that ideas spread mainly via migration or trade, the symbols were supposedly inspired by these manuscripts and as such dated 7th century or later. However, the authors argue that the similarities in the symbols only appear on Class II stones, and if we are to hold to the presupposition that Class I stones predate the Class IIs, then it can only be true that Class I stones were generally created prior to the 7th century. Their next argument involves the Norrie’s Law

hoard, a collection of hack silver found in Fife County. This collection of silver pieces contains both crafted silver as well as rudimentary ingots and coins, and is of interest due to several Pictish symbols that are inscribed on silver leaf-shaped plates of unknown purpose. The historical significance of this find, one of the only of its kind so far north in the British Isles, led naturally to its fame, and people attempting to sell their own ‘finds’ from the alleged same area for both money and prestige. Apparently, this caused an incorrect date assigned to the hoard – a bronze Roman coin was added to the hoard by a farmer, which held a 7th century date. All the other coins found within the actual hoard itself all dated to before the 4th century, although they ranged up from the first Roman emperors. The authors attribute this false addition as another way the symbols were incorrectly dated. However, all of their evidence involves inconsistencies in the data, rather than an outright rejection of the migration theory. Much of the theoretical prevalence of American authors was slow to reach the UK, and Binford’s processual theories were no exception. While archaeologists in the US were becoming much more scientific in their practice and analysis, many other foreign archaeologists were much more reluctant to abandon the theoretical frameworks of V. Gordon Childe and other early 20th century greats.

Despite the later date of the previous paper, the authors display less adherence to Binford’s theory than the following author, writing in 1963. Charles Thomas wrote ‘Interpreting the Pictish Symbols’, a comprehensive account of the symbols themselves and how they might be interpreted. The theories in this work are far better thought out than any theory popular in the early 20th century. This particular work attempts to prove the idea that the stones are memorials by classifying different symbols and the layouts they are typically found in. Much like Binford, he takes the

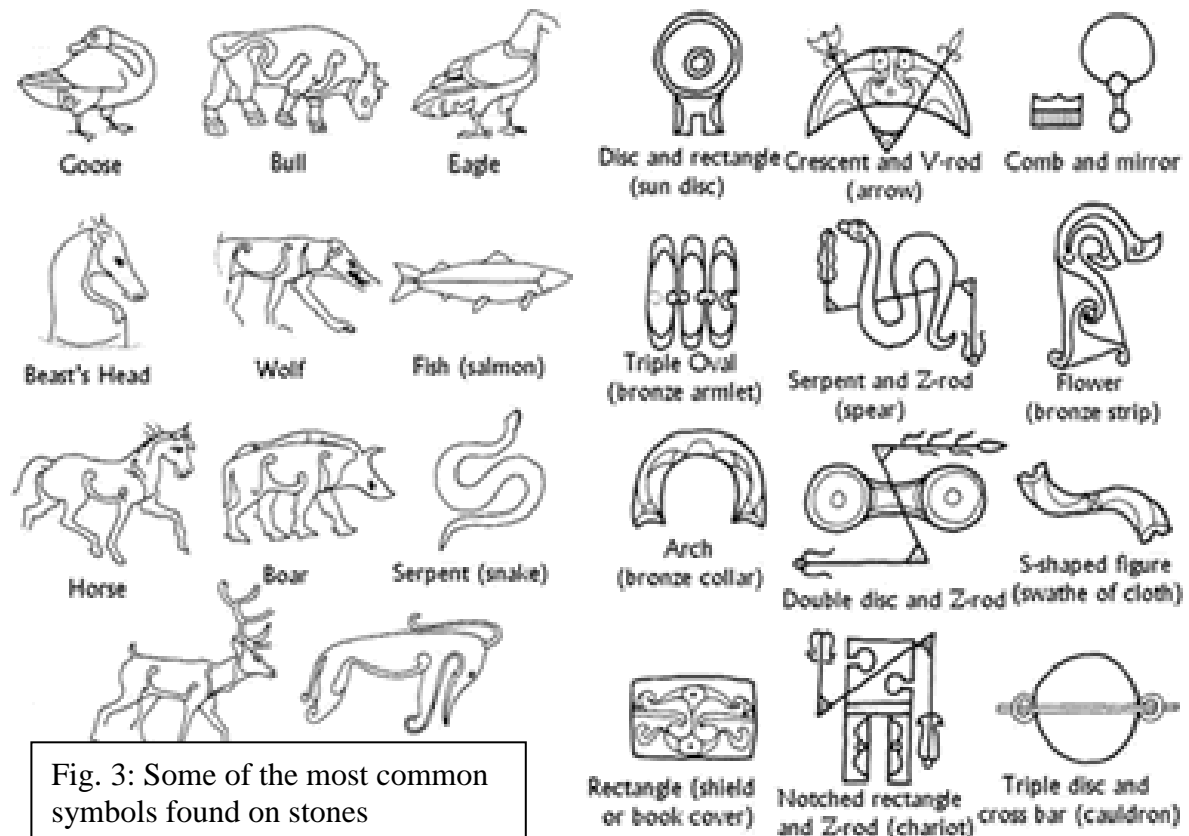
evidence and then extrapolates meaning, although he spends significantly less time on environment than Binford might have in the same situation. For most of the paper, Thomas goes into great detail cataloging and sorting the various symbols into groups, deciding on the classifications of ‘animal’ and object’ and investigating how many of them show up on Class I stones versus Class II, as well as whether they appear on the typical ‘field-monuments’, cave walls, or what he terms *art mobilier*, which are smaller portable pieces of stone, bone, pottery, or metal. Afterwards, he discusses various theories on how the symbols might be interpreted, including as a language and a system of names.

K. Forsyth’s, *Some thoughts on Pictish symbols as a formal Writing System* includes a brief history of the attempted interpretations up to 1995. Before Forsyth delves into her thoughts, she mentions that initial analysis of the symbols suggested that the Picts used them as personal markings, referring to “individuals in general terms describing social status and tribal membership” (Forsyth 1995: 85). This analysis interpreted the symbols as different types of statements that followed “quasi-grammatical rules” that would describe the individual in a set way based on the orientation and order of the symbols. As a response to this analysis, another scholar, Henderson, added that land ownership could also be a possible interpretation, using the same way of looking at the symbols. Additionally, the interpretation least well-received is “Jackson’s interpretation of the stones as recording matrilinear marriage alliances”, which Forsyth (1995: 85) explains suffers from serious evidential inadequacies. Finally Forsyth mentions R. Samson, whose theory on the symbols being a kind of di-thematic additive structure of recording personal names inspired her to consider the possibility of a language, rather than just pictographic ideas.

Forsyth goes on to discuss the possible ‘genuine’ symbols and what they mean when paired with each other. Her ideas are drawn from her studies of ogham writing, and she accords many similarities between the two as she attempts to format the Pictish symbols into writing. In Forsyth’s attempts at describing what the symbols were saying, if they were indeed writing, she allows that the entirety of the Pictish language could not possibly be represented in full, but perhaps could record simple statements such as “so-and-so was here” or “erected by so-and-so” (Forsyth 1995).

Having been an inspiration for Forsyth’s idea, Samson’s interpretation of the symbols should also be acknowledged. Samson begins by lamenting the lack of intelligent discourse of the subject of the symbols, and discounts some of the more ridiculous theories. The theory that the symbols are commemorative references to deceased Picts is said to have too broad of a focus – nearly every Pict would have the same or similar name, and while not impossible, it is highly unlikely. He also mentions several other theories, such as pagan altar symbols representing myths, territorial markers, or in reference to marriage alliances and lineages, before refuting them in order to bring up his main idea. His main argument entails the use of the symbols as a system that uses di-thematic elements (the pairs that Forsyth mentions) to represent double syllabic names (Samson 1992: 30). He maintains that the symbols were possibly tombstones, and he stresses that developing the social context of the stones is the preliminary step in deciphering their meaning (Samson 1992: 34).

D. V. Clarke, writing somewhat later in 2007, elected to take a different approach to the ever elusive issue of the Pictish symbol stones. He focuses on the idea that the stones had multiple lives, something archaeologists commonly gloss over or ignore in their studies. The class 1 stones are suggested to have had symbols inscribed upon them at multiple times in history, and also exerts the concept that the stones were moved, re-oriented, or changed for the new needs of the time. Additionally, Clarke discards the concept of the stones as burial markers, and instead substitutes the idea that the symbols were a reaction to Christian missionaries converting the Picts in the area. This theory only applies to class 1 stones, those without crosses, drawing similarities between the Picts and other groups undergoing missionary conversion, such as the Jews, who asserted their identity through the use of symbols as well. As far as class 2 stones, Clarke states “in this view the



use of the symbols on Class II stones would be as a subordinate component in the start of a new symbolic language aligned with the emergence of Christianity and built around the imagery of the cross” (Clarke 2007: 36).

Armed with an idea of what the symbols have been theorized to mean, the distribution of a few key symbols can now be examined. In a collection of over two hundred symbols, the most common symbols were the double rectangle and z-rod, the crescent and v-rod, the Pictish Beast, and the mirror and comb. These symbols were found all over Scotland, although some of them were found in more concentrated locals. The mirror and comb, for example, describes a paired set of symbols, one which appears to be a hand mirror and the other a small hashed design said to look like a comb.

The mirror occasionally appears alone, although according to the data instances of the solo mirror occur almost completely on the eastern coasts and island, with none to the west. The mirror and comb together, however, appears in an even spread across the country, although with a predominance of appearances in Highland Sutherland, Moray, and Aberdeenshire. The one area where mirrors appear exclusively by themselves is the northern island of Orkney, which may indicate something about its remote position. The comb never appears by itself, making it unique in that its presence is only possible in a pair, something which few other symbols show.

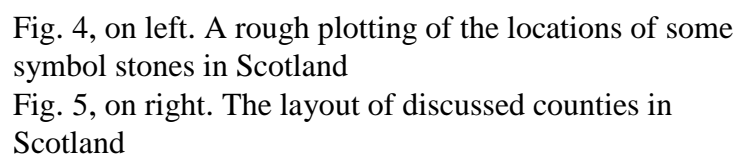
The double rectangle and z-rod is another prevalent symbol, making appearances in nearly every province save the most northern islands and areas around the highlands. It makes 22 appearances on stones in Aberdeenshire, higher than any other symbol both within the area and in general. When examining the theory that these symbols are di-thematic pieces of a double syllable

system of names, both this and the following symbol would be so common as to refer to a large number of people, perhaps similar to the current name John Smith.

The crescent and v-rod appears most frequently across the country, making 79 appearances in total. Similar to the double rectangle and z-rod, the crescent and v-rod shows up most commonly in Aberdeenshire, although with 19 appearances instead of 22. Since this symbol is so common, it is often synonymous with Pictish culture, showing up in most pictures and information describing the Picts. Again, this commonality explains a large part of the argument against the double syllable name theory, due to just how many Picts would have held the same or very similar name.

The Pictish Beast, perhaps the most mysterious of all the known symbols, appears most frequently in Aberdeenshire, Angus, Perthshire and Kinross, and Moray. This symbol evokes a great deal of confusion for most scholars and laypeople, as despite its animalistic form, it is unclear what the symbol is meant to represent. Theories range from elephants to seahorses to dolphins, although none of these creatures are common or even present in the northern reaches of the British Isles. Both the Pictish Beast and the crescent and v-rod stand out as the only symbols to make appearances in highly populated city areas, with one in Aberdeen proper and the other in Edinburgh, respectively. Both of these areas were likely to have been inhabited more heavily during the Pictish era as well, Aberdeen especially, although naturally without the same kind of population density found in the areas today.

Aberdeenshire has by far the most symbols present within its borders. Of all the symbols mentioned above, every single one of them shows up in the region, with both paired and unpaired mirrors and high amounts of the other three symbols. Due to Aberdeenshire's location in the most



In order to test the idea that class 1 symbol stones were an identity-reaffirming response to Christian missionaries, the distribution of the classes across Scotland need examination. Overall, the class 1 stones are much more prevalent, numbering at 173 stones as opposed to class 2, which only numbers 60. Many reasons exist for this phenomenon to occur. For instance, class 2 stones are often much more intricate and involved, as the stones themselves are usually worked into a rectangular shape and the inscribed symbols typically include raised marks as opposed to an inscription. Class 1 stones are usually conceivably easier to produce, requiring less manpower in general to raise and create. Also, these class 2 stones were most often found in front of churches and sites of Christian presence – perhaps, during the era of their creation, other Picts who resented the evangelizing may have purposefully destroyed these markers of faith in order to express their frustration.

Similar to the individual symbols previously discussed, the majority of class 1 stones are found in Aberdeenshire, with 56 total present. Moray, to the slight north and west of Aberdeenshire, comes in second with 20. Both of these provinces also exhibit 5 class 2 stones as well, which is quite a significant difference. Angus and Perthshire and Kinross, on the other hand, exhibit a much higher ratio of class 2 stones, with 22 and 15 respectively. Both of these provinces sit slightly to the south of Aberdeenshire and Moray, and as such are closer to the Roman frontier and eventually, the influx of missionaries. This could explain the larger amount of Christianized stones, and caters to the idea that class 1 stones were produced most heavily in ‘pagan’ population

Leah Tray

centers to lash out at Christianity. Class 1 stones are also found in every province except Nairn, which only has a single class 2 stone.

Clarke's theory of multiple lives has some merit as well. Many of the stones have indications of being moved, or found somewhere besides their original place. Aside from massive standing stones and symbols inscribed on cave walls, many symbols have their home on small more mobile stones. These smaller stones often find themselves reused as part of the wall of a building or fence, or even part of an ancient road. Most of this might be attributed to medieval era farmers using whatever stones they could find to construct their homes, regardless of any historically significant symbols inscribed on their faces. Perhaps they even added to the symbols over time, although aside from craftsmanship, these later additions might be impossible to discern from the ancient ones.

Since the symbols are so well distributed, it could indicate that the creation of the stones began in a population center like Aberdeenshire, and spread in popularity throughout the rest of the Picts from there. Alternatively, investigating one of the other theories places some interesting implications on Aberdeenshire. For instance, taking the theory that the symbols are indicators of double syllable names written as grave markers would imply that Aberdeenshire has a great deal more celebrated dead than any other province. Perhaps, in that case, a great battle took place in that area, or the province was a cultural location for burying the important dead. In other archaeology, several large Pictish era strongholds have been located along the north-eastern coast, in such places as Burghead and the current location of Dunnotar Castle. The Picts obviously had

a large presence here, but how significant was it compared to the lowlands and highlands of Scotland?

Though the study of the distribution of Pictish symbols throughout Scotland gives no headway to the question of what the symbols mean, it does ask some prescient questions about the creators of the symbols themselves. Aberdeenshire remains a highly populated area in modern day, but not so much as the Glasgow or Edinburgh areas. How did this shift come about, if the large amount of symbols in the area really indicates a large population? What do the prevalence of class 2 stones in Angus and Perthshire and Kinross mean? How were the various groups of Picts distributed across the British Isles, and how much communication was there between the lowlands and the highlands and islands?

It might also be useful to examine the symbols in the context of rock art in the wider world. Experts in rock art classify three categories: pictographs, petroglyphs, and earth figures. Pictish symbols fit in the petroglyph category, because they are carved physically into the rock rather than painted on like pictographs, or carved in the ground itself. Pictographs are one of the most popular examples of rock art in the public imagination, the most famous examples of which that come to mind are the Lascaux caves in France, as well as the beautiful Aboriginal rock paintings that pepper native Australia. Both of these sites date far earlier than our Pictish symbols, but they do bring an interesting set of questions to mind. Why use paint rather than carve symbols into the rock itself? The sites mentioned are all situated in protected, sheltered environments, places where one might imagine it is possible to live inside of or below, and experience the art on a more everyday level. Paint would also be easier to use, especially on the scale seen in these cave art pictographs. So

why did the Picts not use paint? A few of their symbols even appear on cave walls, in sheltered areas where paint would not be subject to the commonplace rain of Scotland, but these are still carved into the rock face, even in places where it seems inordinately difficult to access the carving's location.

In Lascaux, the major issue encountered by modern science is the preservation of the magnificent art found throughout the cave, made difficult by a type of fungus that flourished in the increased presence of humans walking through to admire the art. The ancient, pre-historic paint that covers massive swathes of the cave walls suffer from black streaks of this fungus, leading to more and more conservation efforts and eventually the construction of an entirely new artificial cave, where visitors experience the art and cause no further harm to the originals. While most of the pieces are just paint, there are some that are engraved, although this has not necessarily contributed to an improvement in conservation. "In the first sector, the figures are on calcited limestone surfaces too hard or too irregular to be engraved. The walls are adorned with paintings realized by pigments application and also spray technique. In contrast, in the second area, the limestone surfaces, not covered with calcite or locally calcited over, are soft surfaces. The works are engraved and painted by spray technique. It is worth noting that the very nature of supports may explain the conservation status of some works, already damaged at the time of the discovery" (Mauriac, 2011). This brings up the interesting idea that engravings were likely a preferred method of creating art, but not always possible due to the surface texture of the cave wall.

What do these experts say about the interpretations of rock art in other areas? Just like anything else in archaeology, most interpretations derive from pure speculation made within the

parameters of evidence. Religion remains the ever popular explanation, claiming that the symbols and motifs are spiritual in nature. Another explanation given to petroglyphs, such as the cup and ring marks in Northumbria, concludes that these somehow represented important places on the landscape, and how the locals interacted with them.

A unique example of petroglyphs being used over pictographs appears in several Native American histories. Various regions have different art and placement of art, although the interesting thing about many of these regions is that some surviving American Indian tribes still carry the interpretations passed down from many generations back. Assistance from ethnographic sources as well as the traditional methods of dating and categorizing has led to a more complete picture of the rock art in specific regions, although this is by no means perfect. Additionally, the history of rock art creation did not end in some long ago unknown era, but has continued up until relatively recently, with some etchings in the Colorado area displaying European style clothing and paraphernalia into the 1800s.

Consulting with modern descendants of these native groups leads to interesting connections between modern cosmologies and the art. For instance, Clifford Duncan, a Ute elder famous for interpreting the rock art in his father's ancestral territory, had this to say about rock art in general:

“The spirit is within the rock art, and reveals a story that is talking to us if we are open in the right way. . . . Each tribe has a story.... So you listen to the rock art, and you listen with your soul.... What you read in the rock art, is what remedies there are for the next generation.

Places like Shavano have symbols of bear paws. A bear normally walks on all fours. But when there is something interesting, or something that a bear wants to see, it will stand up. The bear is always connected to something, either by sight, body, or the spirit. That is why the bear stands up. That is why he leaves his prints on the wall, because he was standing up. The bear prints on the wall have to be talking about something.” (Patterson 2016)

Utilizing Duncan's interpretations, Patterson explains that the odd shapes of many animals are purposeful, and that they are not designed to be natural or realistic. Instead, the artist portrays what he 'knows' of the animal on the wall – they portray the bear's paws as facing forward, instead of matching the bear's side profile, because they understand that the paws are the most powerful part of a bear, and are exaggerated in accordance to this belief. This crucial detail, only understood thanks to modern ethnography, explains a great deal about the worldview of the creators of the rock art, as well as their relationship to nature. The oddly formed creatures and people do not seem so odd in light of this basic concept.

In Southern Scandinavia, particularly in the two counties of Norway and Finland, there exists a very similar example of a people utilizing rock art. Just like the Picts, there are no surviving 'natives' of this group to give a modern explanation of what these symbols meant to them, or what they were used for, and as such they have been a mystery, although not quite on the scale of the Pictish symbols. The main reason for this could be that their symbols are more recognizable as real figures or representations of things extant in the real world, although of course the true cultural significance of these recognizable symbols is just as lost to us as the abstract Pictish symbols.

Some of the more popular explanations of Scandinavian art are similar to Pictish theories, but their placement and general understandable shapes have led to separate interpretations. These interpretations number high in the tens, if not the hundreds, but the most popular trends in recent years are as follows: "A specific set of cosmological beliefs, a variety of social relations regarding age, gender and status where identities are created, confirmed and transformed, specific activities

of ritual, social and practical character, cultural influences, or structures of power and social organization in the Bronze Age society (Ljunge 2010, 88)”. Magnus Ljunge chose in this particular chapter to investigate the Scandinavian symbols in the context of place and landscape, using the phenomenological approach popular in recent years. Instead of regarding landscape as the bare geological formation of the land, Ljunge wanted to explore the landscape as it might have appeared to those who inhabited it of old, and explore the ways that it “may be possible to reach an understanding of the process where landscapes are charged with meaning” (Ljunge 2010, 89). Ljunge is not the first to attempt a phenomenological approach even in his field, and quotes Christopher Tilley with that inspiration, but his research does focus on a particular side of rock art interpretation that few before him have attempted.

Ljunge explores the nature of cave art, in this case one of the few examples of pictographs in Norwegian rock art, rather than open air petroglyphs. One of the big problems in the field concerns the tendency to pigeonhole the interpretations into two camps – either completely functional or completely cosmological, and Ljunge offers some different interpretations. Since the cave art is frequently thought of as religious or ritual, he presents some functional analysis, more specifically with how humans used caves in general. “Human interaction with caves is characterized by a great deal of caution, due to a dangerous physical environment of narrow spaces, limited visibility, broken ground, special acoustics and the risk of falling rocks and stalagmites” (Ljunge 2010, 92). The placement of various pieces was heavily influenced by the geography of the cave. For instance, the more difficult to access areas may imply a degree of exclusivity to the art, or restricted access to the cave art in general (Ljunge 2010).

David Vogt had a similar issue with the frequency of pigeonholed interpretation, specifically with how most theories about Southern Scandinavian rock art assumed that they had something to do with worship of the sun. Instead, he posits the idea that the symbols are forms of communication, not just between individuals, but between the powers that be in society and the individuals within the society. The various locations in which the rock art appears represents the vast and changing nature of communication – those least accessible, such as cave art, was meant for only a select few, while the open air art was meant for the general population. “There is no logical passage from the symbol to the meaning, no causal relationship; this is one of the foundations of social semiotics. Consequently, the context is the most important element for understanding the carving phenomenon (Vogt 2014, 26)”. The direct meaning of the symbols is lost to us and nearly impossible to recover, but the context is still present, which is the most important element in understanding the past. We see this as of paramount importance in every archaeological excavation, but somehow this has faded in importance when studying rock art.

K. J. Sognnes attempts a similar goal for a very specific group of artwork, that in Leirfall in Stjørdal, Nord-Trøndelag, in central Norway. Leirfall is unique in that it includes a number of individual ‘panels’ of rock art dominated by footprints, and Sognnes claims that these provide the key to understanding the landscape in the minds of those who lived and worked there. Likely, in this particular area, the panels were carved over the course of many years, and Sognnes suggests that the lowest portions of the rock were still underwater when the highest panels were carved. To walk a path through the panels is a walk through time, although without a definitive starting and ending point and the panels, like all rock art, prove difficult to date precisely. That being said, the

general consensus on the dates of most of these engravings puts them well before the Picts, in definitively pre-Roman time periods.

Sognnes discusses the difficult path involved in accessing most of the carvings, one that forces the observer to climb over rocks and slippery lichen just to see the etchings themselves. Much of this Scandinavian art has a sense of directionality to it – the figures face different ways, and all the footprints seem to go in one direction, at least in independent panels. The size of the footprints may indicate that they were intended to represent children, and while they have a range of sizes, they are dominated by smaller ones. The path ends at an overlook, where many footprints are etched into the rock on the ground. Sognnes suggests this may be the area where leaders would



Fig. 6, Footprints at the upper part of Leirfall III (K. Sognnes photo)

stand to overlook their gathered people in the valley below, a place he calls the ‘rostrum’ (Sognnes 2011).

Inspired by the work of these Scandinavian scholars, engaging in our own phenomenological description could prove a worthy examination. This author has personally examined many of these symbols, although not often in the correct frame of mind as needed for academic research. Additionally, most of the symbol stones had been moved at one time or another, thereby losing any spatial significance that their creators might have attributed to their work. Therefore, it seems prudent to recall the memory of a set of symbols that cannot be moved, and are forever engraved upon the wall of Covesea Cave until the wind and water scour the rock flat.

Covesea Cave, also known as Sculptor's Cave, lies on the northern coast of Scotland near the town of Elgin, and despite its proximity to a hub of civilization, the cave is not easily accessible. Similar to a great deal of northern Scotland's coast, the region contains a series of steep cliffs met by rocky beaches at their very bottom, which are accessible only at low tide. These beaches provide for an uneasy walk for the inexperienced – the rocks are fist sized or greater, and provide an easy place to break an ankle for the unwary. Additionally, many large boulders intrude in the path of least resistance, which can either be climbed over or swum around. From the easiest path down to the beach, it is at least a mile of treacherous terrain, and the whole venture one must be attentive of the ever incoming tide. Of course, the option exists to rappel down the cliff face itself, which brings with it a whole other host of exertions and dangers.

The trek, while difficult, brought many to the cave in the past and still does today. The cave itself sits on a small ridge where grasses and other plants grow, indicating that the sea rarely reaches so high. The location makes it an interesting area to store valuable goods for locals by sea

or land, as was seemingly part of its purpose after an archaeological excavation in the early 20th century. The answer to the question of what was stored, exactly, may be surprising. After two separate excavations, one in 1928 and the other in the 1970s, a great deal of the artifacts uncovered were actually human remains, with very few other examples of other material culture.

Both excavations, as well as further work on the cave, suggest that the space was in use somewhat continuously from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age and eventually up to when the Vikings were invading the area. The human remains from both excavations led to interesting conclusions and even more questions. From Sylvia Benton's excavation in 1928, very little remains of the hundreds of remains that reports claim she found, except 7 human vertebra. From the later excavation, the most interesting find was a pair of sub-adult mandibles found near the entrance of the cave. The vertebra from Benton's excavation display signs of decapitation, which might indicate use of the cave for deposition of bodies mutilated in a ritual way, or just a particular fashion of disposing of the dead. The juvenile mandibles have been suggested to indicate that the heads of children were once displayed at the entrance to the cave (Armit et al. 2011). Due to both the shape of the cave and the artifacts found within, it is unlikely that anyone inhabited the space, as it is a very dark and cramped cave with centuries of bone deposition. This is further emphasized by the location of the cave – the rocky beach and necessity of climbing no matter which way was chosen would make food transportation to anyone living at the site a very difficult task.

Leah Tray

The main interest in this cave for our analysis lies, of course, in the Pictish symbols within. The etchings on the walls are the most famous as well as the only things that still remain at the site. Several of the engravings have been identified as Pictish symbols, but the markings date all the way through the ages to modern day. The Pictish symbols include a crescent and V-rod, a fish, something that looks like a rectangular door lock, as well as some more abstract shapes. All of these symbols have faded with time, and are overshadowed in clarity by many of the more modern scribbblings of English speakers recording their presence. The symbols are located mainly on the ‘outer’ walls of the cave, those that receive the most sunlight. Since the cave itself is generally horseshoe shaped, little light reaches the back, and few of the modern

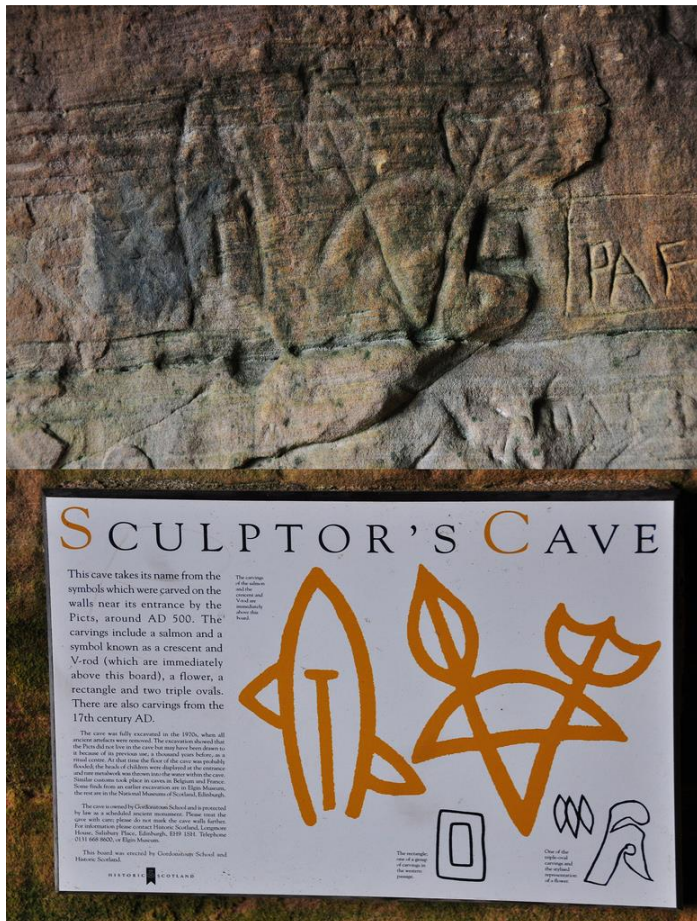


Fig 7, on left: Two of the most visible Pictish symbols in the cave

Fig 8, on right: A view of Sculptor's Cave from the ocean

etchings are present on the dark inner walls. They were clearly meant to be visible without the aid of a light, although the more abstract symbols are present on the walls of the opening that is further up the cliff face, and inaccessible by ground. Additionally, despite their semi-protected placement, the symbols show far more wear and look less elegantly carved than their cousins on the standing stones, perhaps indicating that these were either very early representations or very hasty scribbles done before it was time to race the tide back to dry land.

Their very existence indicates that the Picts utilized the cave, although it is not clear for what purpose. Could the fish symbol mean that they used the area for food? Unlikely, given the location and the archaeological evidence to the contrary. The remains and the symbols were perhaps contemporary with each other, or possibly separated by decades – radiocarbon dating proves imprecise at best. Indeed, the remains have been dated to two separate deposition points, one in the Late Bronze Age where most of the activity took place, and one in the Roman Iron Age, from whence the evidence for decapitation came (Armit et al 2011). Could the symbols simply represent what most other etchings in the cave do – that of a traveler proudly recording their presence in the difficult to access area? Or perhaps, the symbols could represent the gruesome ritual space that many have suggested it to be, which would hold implications for every other stone that the symbols were inscribed onto. After all, “the placing of rock art reinforced and/or transformed the meaning of specific places and by recognizing this we can initiate a discussion about the ambiguous nature of the rock art phenomena in both time and space” (Ljunge 2010, 88).

There are other examples of petroglyphs in the British Isles, the closest being in Northumberland. These petroglyphs, however, do not share the intricacy and patterned similarity that Pictish symbols display. Most frequently they are referred to as ‘cup and ring’ marks, pecked out on natural rock formations in the early Neolithic. Perhaps this served as inspiration for beginning the practice of carving symbols, but the Picts, living much later, clearly went above and beyond their ancient neighbors in both skill and quantity. They might have used far more sophisticated tools, especially once the Romans arrived, than the hammerstones and rock tools that experts have theorized were prominent in the Neolithic.

Many similar rock art finds itself inscribed, as seen in both the Northumberland art and the Southern Scandinavian art, on simple rock faces that are scoured clean by the elements. Most of the Pictish carvings, however, are found on standing stones or smaller rocks, perhaps indicating another purpose to their art. Even before the class 2 stones became more prevalent and were worked into specific shapes, Pictish symbol stones became dedicated works of art that were placed into the ground intentionally, with many of them requiring significant manpower to move. Few of the stones are associated with homesteads, and many of those that are located in gardens, for instance, are modern locations and not archaeological sites. Why spend a significantly larger amount of time on smaller surfaces if not to have some measure of portability?

That leads back to the database for the question – how many of these stones could actually be moved around? Based on a very rough calculation of the volume of each of the stones, leaving out around 35 stones that lacked precise measurements, the stones themselves are fairly normally distributed, although with a definite skew towards the smaller sizes. Only 20 stones might be

counted as 'massive', with 83 in the 'large' category. 101 stones were in the 'small to medium' section, and only 20 of those were what we might consider 'easy moved without strain'. All of these had a volume of less than 10,000 cubic centimeters, often due to the lack of thickness (clearly making them significantly less heavy than most of the other standing stones). All of these smaller stones were also typically single and alone, with an unknown origin, that are now either in museums or occasionally private collections. Some of these include fragments of larger stones, but it is unclear how large these older stones might have been. Many stones that were left out currently make their homes in walls of some description, making it difficult to measure their volume, but almost all of these were obviously portable enough for someone to move them from their original resting place in order to utilize them in a more functional way.

While some stones were clearly portable, it is unlikely that portability was their initial purpose. There are far more stones of the large variety that were designed to remain in one place for a long time, and this idea is echoed in cave art. Additionally, most of the smallest stones are Class I, except for a collection of 5 from Angus that were possibly all part of one larger piece at some point in time.

Pictish symbols will continue to remain a mystery, barring any amazing archaeological discovery like the Rosetta stone. However, scholars will not cease their studies into these enigmatic marks, and perhaps someday scholars will arrive at a consensus for their purpose. As far as this project goes, future work would involve the collection of more data, both on the stones as well as the associated archaeology that the Picts left behind. A more extensive database could be constructed as more symbols are discovered and catalogued. Further collection of data on the

symbols would allow for more comprehensive statistics on which symbols occur together, as well as where and how often they occur. Following Forsyth's ideas on the development of a quasi-grammatical language structure, it would be interesting to try and decipher what any of these symbols could be saying, according to her work. In the end, work on the symbols will not end until scholars can conclusively decide what they believe them to mean, thereby solving the last and greatest mystery of the Pictish people.

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