

# Pictish Symbol Stones

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Wonderful carved stones have been found across the Scottish countryside. Some are clearly Christian in nature, with their giant, intricately carved crosses, but others are more enigmatic with their incised symbols displayed across undressed surface. Even more intriguing, often those same symbols find their way into the margins of the Christian cross slabs, on the reverse, on the edges, and even sometimes tucked in around the Christian symbols. Many people's interest in the Picts has been precipitated by the Pictish symbols, but what are they and what do they mean?

## Classes of Stones

First, let us discuss how Pictish symbols stones themselves are categorized. In 1903, Allen and Anderson published *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, which proposed a method of categorizing the stones that is still used today. Class I Stones are undressed boulders or standing stones that use an incised line to form the Pictish Symbols. Class II Stones are stones that are neatly dressed, often into a rectangular cross slab, are often carved in relief, display Pictish symbols as well as a cross, and may include additional Christian symbols or narratives. These stones often very closely resemble the carpet pages of medieval manuscript Bibles. Class III stones are carved Pictish crosses that do not include symbols at all. Two additional classes are proposed, but rarely discussed: Class IV is used by some authors for stones are those with a Christian cross but no other ornament while others use it for symbol carvings on cave walls and other fixed natural rock. Class V has been proposed for those symbols that appear on non-fixed stones or other atypical symbol-bearing surfaces. We will focus only on those symbol-bearing items, that is, Classes I and II plus the small symbol-bearing objects.



Strathpeffer – Arch and Eagle



Rosemarkie Cross – three symbols & a cross

## What Constitutes a Symbol?

Many carved stones have their entire surface covered with animals, crosses, interlace, biblical stories and more, making it difficult to determine which elements are meant to be Symbols and which are simply decorative elements. Indeed, even the experts do not always agree on what constitutes a symbol. To be interpreted as a symbol, an element must be used as a separate and symbolic statement, that is, not take part in the general narrative of the stone. (For example, there are many stones depicting a hunt. On those stones, the horses and deer are part of the narrative, but on other stones, those animals appear as a separate motif and can be interpreted as a symbol.) Generally, Pictish symbols are found in pairs or multiples of two and a proposed symbol should take part in one of these statements. Additionally, to be considered a symbol, most scholars require that a motif used multiple times, but this criteria is debatable and somewhat fluid as new Pictish stones are discovered every few years.

I have found that it is useful to think of the Pictish symbols as belonging to three general types – animals, objects, or geometric shapes, so that is how I will discuss them here.

## Common Symbols

### *Animals*

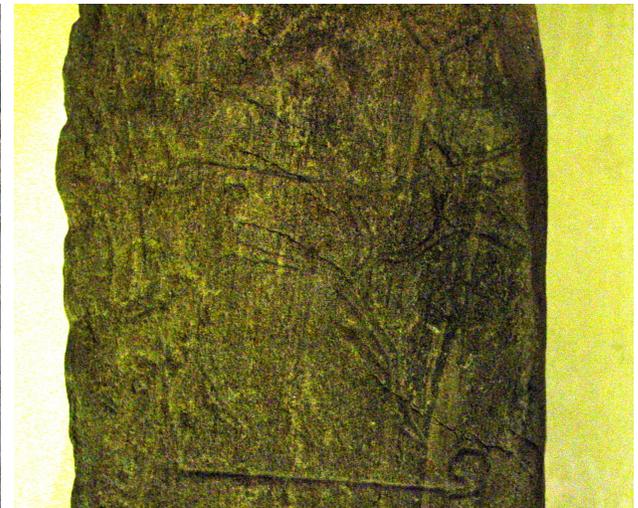
The Picts clearly were very familiar with the animals in their immediate surroundings. The animals, even when used as symbols, are often realistic enough to be identified as a particular species. For example, in many cases, the “fish” symbol is specifically a “salmon” symbol, based on details of its morphology. However, many animals are embellished with the addition of spiral or wavy decorations on their joints and bodies. Some common animal Symbols are illustrated below but this is not a complete list – Boars, Eagles, Horses, Geese and more also appear as Pictish Symbols.

### **Deer**

Eassie - detail of Deer



Grantown – detail of Deer



## Salmon

Dunrobin – Salmon, “Tuning Fork,”  
Mirror, Comb



## Wolf

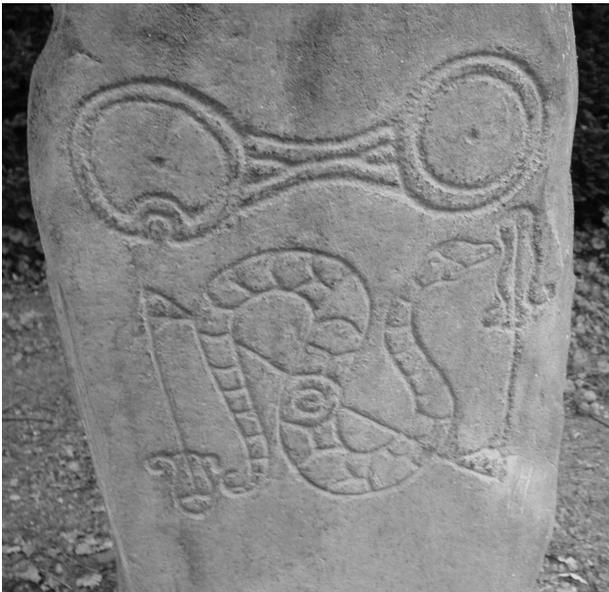
Ardross – Wolf fragment



## Snake

*Below:* Newton House I – Double Disk,  
Snake and Z-rod

*Right:* Aberlemno I – Snake,  
Double-disk and Z-rod, Mirror, Comb



## *Pictish Beast*



The Pictish beast is an odd creature among the animals. Usually, the Picts used an extraordinary amount of realism in depicting their animal symbols. However, there does not seem to be any living animal that correlates to the Pictish Beast and yet it appears over and over with a very well-defined appearance. It always has a long, beak-like snout, a large almond shaped eye, a long "ear" that often ends in a lobe or curl, "feet" that curl in around themselves like coiled snakes, and a tail.

Theories about the Pictish Beast abound – Is it a water kelpie? Some sort of Pictish spirit/faerie/god? The Loch Ness Monster? – but no convincing answer. The beast does seem to be a cheerful creature, though, with many if its depictions sporting the slightest of smiles.

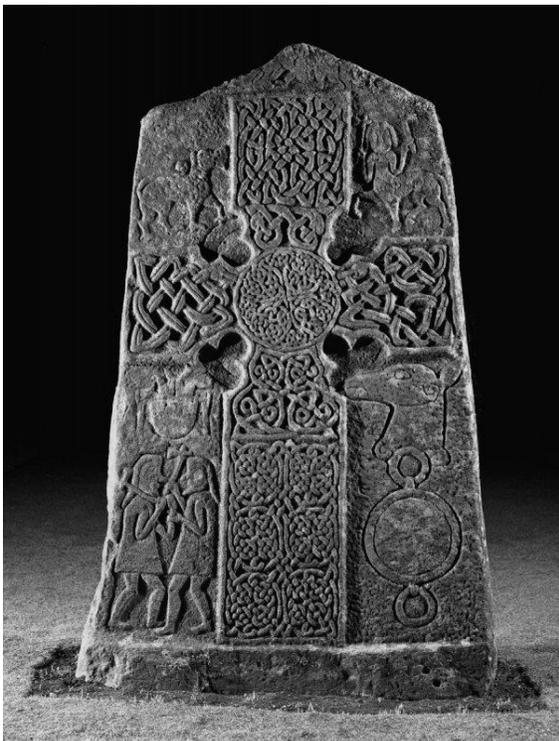


*Top Left:* Meigle – side detail – "mirrorcase," Pictish Beast  
*Top Right:* Aberlemno 5 – Arch, Pictish Beast  
*Below:* Rhynie, the Crow Stane – Salmon, Pictish Beast



## *Objects*

### **Cauldron**



Cauldrons were important in Celtic life as a symbol of plenty and, in some cases, resurrection. The Glamis stone presents an excellent example – not only is there a Cauldron symbol, but there is a cauldron seen from the side, complete with two pairs of legs sticking out of it! I think there is also an argument for this symbol to represent a bucket as well, based on a description of a bucket in Adomnan's *Life of Columba* (II.15), but there are places where it is clearly meant for a cauldron

*Top Left:* Kintore – Salmon, Cauldron  
*Top Right:* Lindores – Caldron, Crescent and V-rod, Victorian additions  
*Bottom Left:* Glamis II from CANMORE – beast, centaur, cauldron with legs, men fighting, deer's head, cauldron.

## Anvil, Tongs, Scissors

Tools of various sorts also appear on the Pictish stones, but it is controversial whether these represent true symbols or not. Sometimes they appear to function as symbols, other times it is less clear. Whether they are counted as a symbol or not depends on the source you consult. The “Tuning Fork” is seen on several stones, but it is unclear what it is meant to be – tuning fork, broken sword, and blacksmith’s tongs have all been proposed. The last option may be the most plausible as it often appears in association with a hammer and/or anvil. See also the “tuning fork” on the Dunrobin stone, above.



*Left Top: Migvie detail – Shears*

*Bottom Left: Strathmiglo detail – “Tuning Fork”*

*Bottom Right: Abernethy – Hammer, “Tuning Fork,” Anvil, partial Crescent and V-rod*



## *Geometric*

### **Rectangle**

A relatively common Pictish symbol is the imaginatively named “rectangle.” While one cannot say with absolute certainty, this may represent a book or a book satchel similar to that carried by many monks on Pictish carved stones. Books were a precious commodity in early medieval Britain and clearly important to the Picts based on how they are portrayed on the Pictish stones, so it is entirely reasonable that they could have been obtained symbol status, like the cauldron or the shears.



*Top:* Golspie Stone – Rectangle, Pictish Beast, man with an axe and knife, Dog (?), Salmon, Flower, Crescent, Double Disk, entwined serpents, ogham along border.

*Bottom:* Clynekirkton 1 – Crescent and V-rod, Rectangle

## Crescent with or without V-rod

The Crescent, with or without the V-rod, is a very common Pictish Symbol. Like all of the symbols, its meaning is a mystery. Its shape, however, immediately suggests the moon. How the V-rod would be incorporated into this lunar theory is unclear, however.

*Right:* Gellyburn 2 – broken ornament (probably a cross-head), Crescent and V-rod, Pictish Beast. Note that the Pictish Beast's hindquarters extend past the relief area the artist had originally cleared, leaving a line across the hindquarters, just below the tail. Also of note – in the crescent, in the central portion between the arms of the V-rod is a mushroom-shaped motif called a pelta. This motif is used on several Pictish pieces and is a common Celtic design element.



*Above:* Stone Disk from Ness of Burgi - Crescent within incised 'T-fret' border Stone (image from Art of the Picts, pg 90)



## Double Disk with or without Z-rod

The Double Disk or Double Disk and Z-rod is one of the most common symbols, but it is entirely unclear what it is meant to represent. Some older texts call it the “spectacles” but that is clearly not the original artist’s intent.



*Top Left:* Sandstone Disk from Jarlshof, Shetland – Double Disk and Z-rod

*Bottom Left:* Inchyra – Double Disk (with notches), Salmon

*Top Right:* Dunnichen – Flower, Double Disk and Z-rod, Mirror, Comb

## ***Possible Modifier Symbols***

There are some elements of Pictish symbols that do not occur alone and that may in some way modify the meaning of the other symbols. Unfortunately, without knowing the meanings of the stones themselves, theories on how they would be modified descends into simple speculation.

### **Mirror and Comb**

The Mirror and the Comb are important medieval toilet implements and are immediately recognizable among the Pictish symbols. The Mirror can appear without the Comb, but the Comb does not appear independently, excepting those cases where the stone is broken and it is likely that the mirror is simply lost. Theories about the meaning of the Mirror (and Comb) include that it denotes a female burial/memorial or that the memorial stone was raised by a woman because mirrors and combs often appear alongside female figures on the Pictish stones. However, they could also denote rank, modify a name, or provide some other additional information.

*Left:* Drimmies – partial symbol, Ogee, Mirror Comb



### **Floriated rods**

Another potential modifier is something we have already seen – V-rods and Z-rods. These sticks with little leaf-like projections are called “floriated rods.” They can appear in combination with several different symbols and seem to modify the symbol in some



unknown way. V-rods can appear with Crescents or Arches and may Z-rods appear on Double Disks and Snakes (see those categories above for examples). There is only one instance of a floriated rod appearing independently of any symbol, and that is on the back of one of the handpins from Norries’ Law. The handpins are

very similar, but the less-fine example may be a copy of the first and is marked on the back with the floriated Z-rod. This instance may provide hints to the meaning of the floriated rods... or perhaps not. There simply is not enough information to reach a firm conclusion.



## ***Oddballs***

Some things on the Symbol Stones are just... different. Here's a collection of things that are just enough out of the ordinary to warrant comment.



### **Bulls**

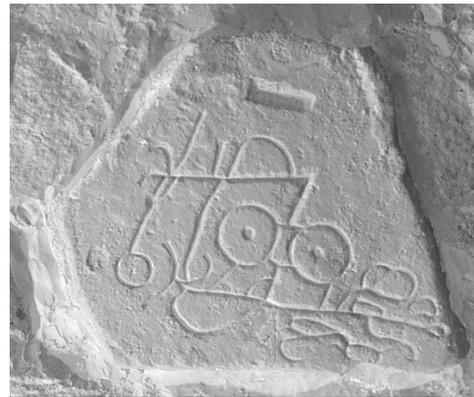
Bulls are an animal and so it would be tempting to place them with the other animals as a symbol. However, they fail one of the essential tests of whether an image is a symbol or not; they never appear in conjunction with another symbol as a symbol pair. Bulls always appear on a small, undressed slab and always appear alone. Therefore, they seem to be more totemic than a proper part of the symbol set. They are, however, definitely Pictish and so worth examining, independent of their status as a symbol. *Right: Burghead 5 from the British Museum.*

### **“Proto-Symbols”**

Some symbols seem to be very poorly executed and adhere less strictly to the “expected” forms of the symbols. It is thought that these “proto-symbols” represent very early drafts of the symbols. Examples of “proto-symbols” can be seen at Dunnicaer, the Wemyss caves, and the Sculptor’s Cave near Covesea.

*Left: Double Disk and Z-rod from Dunnicaer* (image from STAMS (Accessed 05/01/06)):

<http://www.stams.strath.ac.uk/research/pictish/database.php>



### **Reused stones**

The Picts re-used existing standing stones for some of their sculpture, particularly the Class I stones, so the erection of some of the physical monuments sometimes significantly pre-dates the Pictish period. The Picts were not above recycling their own stones either - Logie Elphinstones 2 shows distinct signs of a previous symbol set underneath the currently legible set. While it appears an attempt at erasure may have been made, deeper portions of the original design were simply incorporated into the new symbol set.

*Left: Logie Elphinstones 2 – Ogham, Crescent and V-rod, Double-Disk and Z-rod. Underlayer: Double Disk (and Z-rod?), Other symbol(s)?*

## Portsoy Stone

The Portsoy stone is a fascinating little piece. It is a small symbol-bearing object that does not have any apparent purpose. It has been identified as a whetstone, but that identification does not seem to make sense when there are carvings on both faces and the sides do not show any obvious signs of wear. It was in the British Museum by 1922 and was “probably” found in Portsoy, but little to nothing is known about its original context.

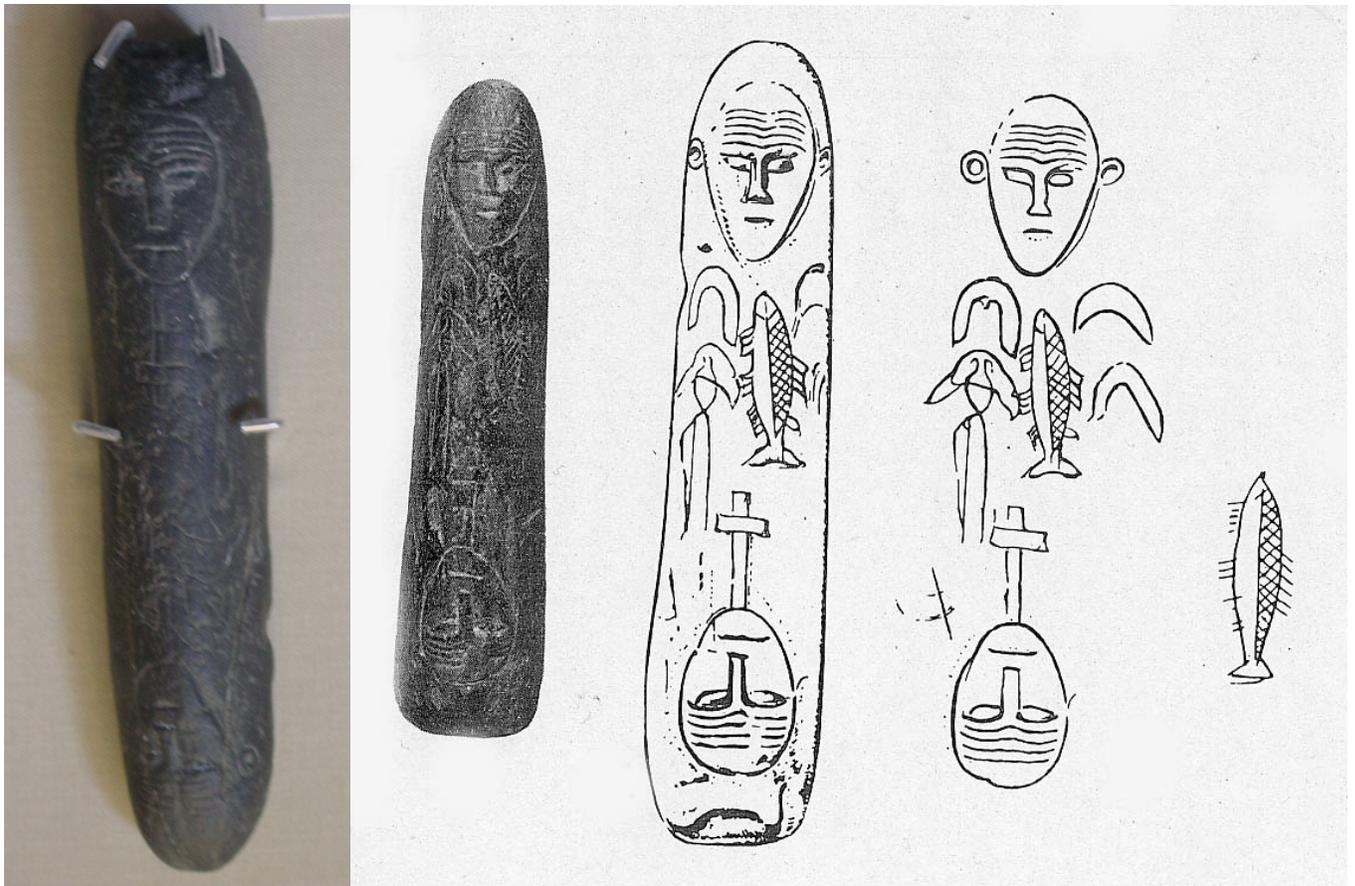
The engravings are made on a long, thin black stone, about 5.5 inches long. At either end is carved a face with pronounced brow ridges on the forehead. Most of the designs are picked out with simple incised lines, but there seems to be an attempt at relief carving on the faces, which look remarkably like the man on the Golspie Pin (right). Between the faces are a fish, several U-shaped figures (that are arguably either crescents or arches, at least one with signs of a V-rod), and a cross that seems to be suspended from one of the faces. The back of the stone simply shows a fish. Unlike the fish symbols on the larger Pictish symbol stones, the fish on the Portsoy stone have cross-hatching covering the top half of their bodies.



*Right:* The head of the Golspie Pin, NMS

*Bottom Left:* Portsoy Stone, British Museum

*Right:* Motifs on the Portsoy Stone - Image from Thomas, Plate II.



## Strange Creatures

Even excepting the Pictish Beast, the Pictish Beastiary is a strange, strange world. Odd birds lurk in inhabited vines, man-headed beasts stalk game, bird-headed men stalk men, dog and bird headed men fight each other and a beast watches googly-eyed while a griffin devours its prey... and that's just for starters!



*Top Right: Murthly Stone*

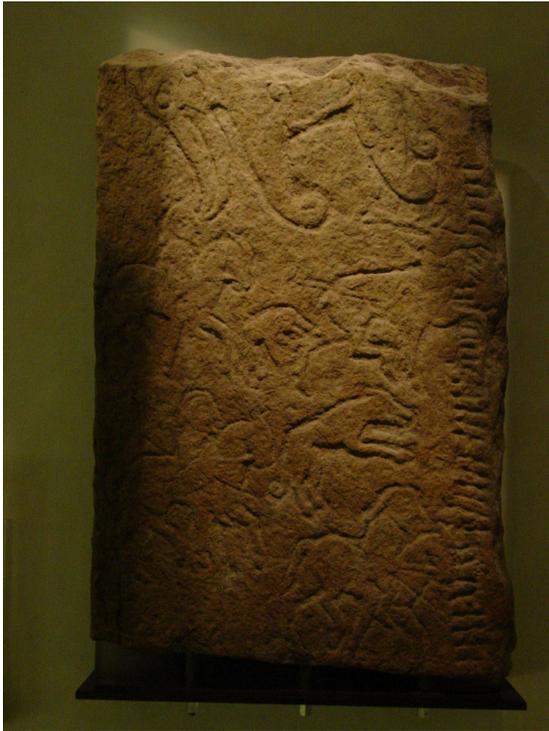
*Bottom Right: Woodwrae Stone*

*Bottom Left: Calf Stone, Tarbat*



## Common Themes

Common themes on the Class II and III Pictish stones include hunting, battles, biblical stories, and saint's lives.



*Clockwise from Top Left: Scoonie (hunt), Aberlemno II (Battle of Dunnichen), Nigg (Saints Anthony and Paul in the Desert), Meigle 2 (David in the Lion's Den), Groam House Fragment (another David?).*



## How the Symbols Were Used

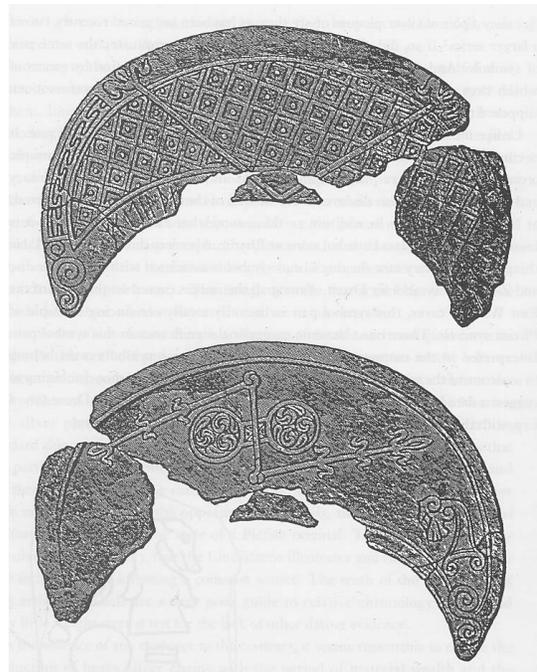
When investigating questions about the Pictish symbols, their usage, and their meaning, prominent cross slabs and impressive incised stones are often the foundation upon which theories are built. However, in addition to these striking monuments, there exists an important body of smaller artifacts which also bear symbols and which merit serious consideration. Pictish symbols have been found on jewelry, pebbles and bones, pieces dwarfed by the traditional symbol stones but still providing a potentially important source of information about the symbols and their use in the everyday lives of the Picts. (Thomas catalogues and illustrates most of the small items (which he calls “art mobilier”) in his article “The Interpretation of the Pictish Symbols.”)

### *Smaller Symbol Stones*

In addition to the large symbol stones, there is a collection of smaller stones decorated with symbols. This includes stone disks (see Crescent and Double Disk examples above), the Portsoy Stone, the Broch of Burrian pebble, the Erchless Pendant, and painted pebbles from the Keiss broch.

### *Metalwork*

Several pieces of Pictish metalwork are marked with Pictish Symbols. Most famous are the Parkhill and Whitecleugh heavy silver chains with their enamel-filled symbols on the terminals. There are also several symbol-marked items from Norries’ Law, including the pins illustrated under Floriated Rods and the leaf-shaped plaque with a Double Disk and Z-rod and a Beast’s Head (see the clothing module for pictures). The Monifieth Crescent (pictured to the right) was a bronze plaque of uncertain purpose that showed a Crescent and V-Rod and Double-Disk and Z-Rod with a Beast’s Head, but it is now sadly lost (image from ECMS Part I, page lxxxv).



### *Bone Items*

Several small bone items include Pictish symbols, including the Broch of Burrian bone and the Pool bone pin, which may be a gaming piece and a clothing fastener, respectively. A relatively recent find, the phalange from Bu Sands, Burray, is carved with a Pictish figure and motifs, but no symbols, and may also be a playing piece of some sort.

## **The Meaning of the Symbols**

Now we are left with perhaps the most essential question about the Pictish Symbols - what do they *mean*?

### ***Statistical Woes***

Statistical arguments underlie many arguments about the meaning of the Pictish symbols, however, this method has some serious potential flaws. We have no proof that the existing symbol bearing objects (including the symbol stones and/or small artifacts) represent a statistically significant sample of the original distribution or composition. The limited sample makes statistics treacherous - it is difficult to determine whether “patterns” observed are indeed patterns or simply accidents of survival. Even assuming the currently known symbols could constitute a representative set, new finds or the selective inclusion or exclusion of certain stones have the potential to profoundly impact the statistics. Do you include just the large symbol stones, or the smaller stones too? Do you include jewelry? How about proto-symbols? What do you do with the carvings that may or may not actually represent a symbol, like those that only appear once or only on their own? What about items like the Monifieth Crescent and several Burghead Bulls that were known but are now lost? The possible permutations are endless. Early on, Anderson recognized the danger of forming hypotheses without including all of the evidence, observing that “it becomes evident that none of the conjectural hypotheses suggested by selected examples will stand the test of a general application.” (ECMS Part 1 xxxix)

### ***The Problem of Pairs***

Appearing as part of a symbol pair is one of the standard tests for whether a motif is a symbol or not. However, a single appearance of a symbol does not necessarily make it an anomaly or disqualify it from being a symbol. It may be a simple just an accident of history that no other example of that symbol has survived or has yet been discovered. To determine if an image should be considered as a symbol or not, it may be more important to examine how the potential symbol is used, rather than how often it appears.

A number of symbol-bearing objects only display a single symbol (like the Burghead Bulls) or only one symbol per face (as in the Broch of Burrian bone). In these cases, it seems that the symbols can function independently and a symbol pair is not necessary to convey the desired meaning. On several occasions, symbol pairs on small items are spilt onto opposite sides of the object. Potentially, this could imply two separate independent meanings or perhaps even opposite or antagonistic meanings.

Even with the evidence of some symbols appearing independently, the assumption that symbols must appear in pairs to construct a statement underlies several theories, particularly the theories that the symbol pairs mark boundaries between clans, record marriage contracts, or combine to form names. In fact, Sampson explicitly argues that “the mistake has been to interpret individual symbols as capable of standing alone.” However, we have examples of symbols doing exactly that – clearly conveying some piece of information in the absence of a clear symbol pair.

### ***The Problem of Portability***

Theories regarding the meaning of the Pictish symbol stones also include that they are markers of some sort - boundaries between two territories, grave markers, or memorial stones (Mack, Thomas, and others). However, even if some sort of clan territory identifier or memorial function is possible, it certainly cannot be the only purpose of the symbols, as many symbols appear on the smaller objects which are clearly meant to be movable and, while some regions have greater densities of certain symbols than others, no clear "clan boundaries" are evident from the current finds.

### ***The Problem of Power***

When considering the large symbol stones, especially the later cross slabs, alone, it is tempting to see the symbols as belonging to an elite tier of Pictish society. Indeed, the impressively carved stones are massive works of art that could only have been commissioned by the wealthy or the church. However, the small symbol-bearing objects, many of which are much less elaborate, show that use of the symbols was not the exclusive province of the nobility or clergy. While the Cross is a clear Christian symbol and Cauldron undeniably has significance in Celtic mythology, not all the symbols are so clearly linked to a religious or ritual purpose and their use on everyday items argues against a strictly religious use for the symbols. The Broch of Burrian bone and similar carvings could be used as dice and many of the small painted or carved pebbles could be used as counters, which does raise the possibility that they had some sort of role in games of chance and perhaps divination. Indeed, based on the wide geographic distribution of the symbols and the multitude of ways they are used as a decorative element, developing a theory that accounts for all their uses is difficult.

*"This versatility of Pictish symbols, which enables them to be employed in a range of social contexts, is not generally appreciated but does have important implications for interpreting their social significance. First, the exact meanings of the symbols must vary with the context as is so well illustrated by Deetz's comparison between candlesticks found in churches and those found in one's home."* Driscoll Power and Authority in Early Historic Scotland, p 227

### ***The Language Theory***

While a recent paper (Lee) has used the Shannon Entropy test to try to "prove" that the Pictish symbols are a writing system, this assessment still remains suspect. Again, there are the problems of statistics and now we add the issue of vocabulary. Even including all the marginally acceptable symbols, the vocabulary that would result is pitifully small. Even if they do represent words, or even short phrases, the two-symbol stones would only produce the most basic of statements. Further complicating this theory is how little we know about the Pictish language. Even if the symbols did have some association with Pictish words, it would be incredibly difficult to discern.

### ***The Proposals and the Modifiers***

There have been a number of theories regarding the floriated rods which seem to modify a select group of symbols but generally do not stand on their own. The exception to this rule is the Norrie's law handpin. On the back of the head of this pin is a well-formed, nicely centered Z-rod intersected by the pin shaft. This Z-rod has no symbol to modify on either face of the pin and so seems to convey some information in of itself. It is improbable that the Z-rod is simply a reused piece of silver, since it fills the space on the

pinhead so perfectly. It is also unlikely that the symbol to be modified was “forgotten” since it would be simpler to carve the primary symbol before the floriated rod. Interestingly, this also represents a case of a symbol (or at least symbol component) being used somewhere where it would be hidden when in use. While the use of an independent floriated rod is limited to this single example, its existence raises some interesting questions to be considered.

One theory about the meaning of the floriated rods holds that they make a distinction between living and dead entities (Thomas), but this poses several problems. If this were true, since not all symbol stones carry one of the “dead” indicators, they could not have an exclusive role in commemorating the dead. Conversely, the presence of floriated rods on some large fixed symbol stones makes it unlikely that they were only used as border markers (why would a “dead” clan need a border-marker?). The limited use of floriated rods with only the Crescent, Double Disk, Snake, and Arch is also problematic, since if they were a mortality marker on name-symbols, we would expect them to be more generally applicable. Further, markers of death would be somewhat odd to include on objects of personal adornment.

Other possible modifiers, the Mirror or Mirror and Comb symbols, have been proposed to indicate feminine gender or in some other way modify the associated symbol pair. However, while approximately one-fifth to one-fourth of the regular symbol stones include a Mirror or Mirror and Comb, those symbols do not appear on any of the small items. While this is reaching into the admittedly murky waters of statistics, this could be an important omission. Mirrors were a status item for both genders and it is unlikely that only men owned or commissioned the construction of small items and so the omission of the mirror symbol on the small objects may point to the Mirror or Mirror and Comb symbols having a non-gender-based meaning, like membership in a royal house or an occupation.

### ***The Symbols as Names or Name Components***

Many, perhaps even most, theories assume that the symbols refer to names, either personal names or names of territories, clans or families. In one of the more convincing arguments, Sampson argues that the symbol pairs construct names similar to Anglo-Saxon names where common name elements can be mixed-and-matched to form valid names (AETHelstan, AETHelflaed, AETHelwahl, AETHelwulf, Wulfgar, Wulfstan, etc.). Based on the known Pictish names, this sort of name component system fits better than the arguments for a syllable based system, since many Pictish names have more than two syllables. It may also solve the dilemma presented by assuming that each symbol represents a full name, that is, that based on the known name and symbol distributions, certain names would seem to be over represented.(Diack) Just as in Anglo-Saxon names, certain name elements are more common than others in Pictish names (Drustan, Broichan, Nechtan, etc). When the distribution of the known Anglo-Saxon name elements and the known Pictish symbols are compared, they do show similarities, but as discussed above, this is treading on dangerous statistical ground.

Sampson’s argument does have a potential flaw – requiring multiple name components to construct a name fails to account for symbol-bearing objects that intentionally only have a single symbol. However, if we continue to take Anglo-Saxon naming practices as a guide, it may indeed be possible for some of the symbols to have an independent

meaning, function as an independent name, as well as functioning as a name component. For example, the Anglo-Saxon name component “wulf” can be used as a prefix, suffix, independent name, and name of an animal. It is possible, if difficult to prove, that Pictish naming practices could have followed a similar pattern.

## **Pictish Symbols Today**

An exciting aspect of Pictish Studies is that it is a quickly-evolving field. Interest in this period of history is high and modern excavations of Pictish sites are starting to take place. As there are more modern archeological investigations of Pictish sites, hopefully we will recover additional symbol-bearing objects. If recovered in datable layers, those objects can improve our understanding of the development of the symbols and hopefully shed some light on their meanings. In particular, symbols found in association with settlements may improve our understanding of how they were used in everyday life.

Pictish Trail – A drivable tour of some of the finest stones in the area north of Inverness

<http://tinyurl.com/pictishtrail>

CANMORE – the Scottish Government’s database of historic monuments

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/search/>

Tarbat Discovery Center

<http://www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk/>

Groam House

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

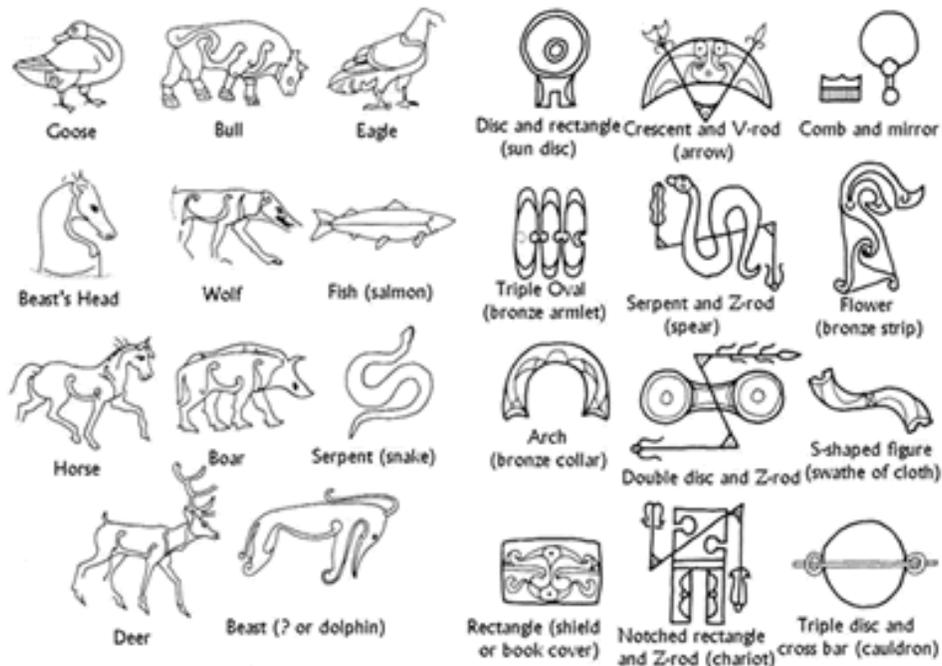


*Left: Hilton of Cadboll  
Top Right: Base of the Hilton of Cadboll stone – cross-face  
Bottom Right: Base of the Hilton of Cadboll stone – symbol-face*



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<http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology/sites/pictish/>

More at: [http://www.newscientist.com/data/images/ns/cms/dn18725/dn18725-3\\_800.jpg](http://www.newscientist.com/data/images/ns/cms/dn18725/dn18725-3_800.jpg)