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The following paper, *Decorative Minutiae in the Pictish Social Landscape*, is an essay assignment submitted by the author on March 23, 2012 at the University of Glasgow, for her second-semester specialism course in the M.Litt. in Medieval Scottish Studies. It was reviewed by one internal and two external markers, and received an A mark. It is uploaded here in its original, uncorrected state.

The author wrote this paper under the supervision of Katherine Forsyth, who suggested the topic and set the author the task of identifying a relative chronology of how stone-carved Pictish symbols related to each other in their detailed, formal aspects, first in clusters on single sites, and from there in a wider geographical spread across larger regions within Pictland. In addition, the author herself also identified and explored another, parallel avenue of study: how the Picts signaled social and political links on individual sites and across the wider landscape through deliberate manipulation of variable symbol decoration on their carved stone monuments.

In future versions, the author would make two changes to the arguments in this paper:

1) Arguments based on value judgements of carving quality or the carvers' skill (as seen in the comparison of the beast symbols at Inveravon) would be left aside, in order to fully disengage from previous scholarly theories of symbol degeneration and decline. However, the author would maintain neutral observations of chronological change in the Picts' treatment of symbol form and decoration, based on the more secure comparisons made between incised and later relief-carved symbols, as well as metalwork motifs.

2) The author would leave the Clatt stone out of the comparison with the Rhynie beast symbols, as the form of the former is not similar enough to the latter. Instead, the Pictish beast symbol at Mortlach would be offered as a more secure and similar example (as suggested by Katherine Forsyth in her supervisory feedback after submission of the paper in 2012). Because Mortlach was located on the main routeway through the Mounth to Rhynie and would become an important ecclesiastical site in the later Middle Ages, this comparison of the beast symbols' internal decoration at Rhynie and Mortlach provides firmest evidence for Rhynie's far-flung power and influence as a political centre in this region of Pictland.

Cynthia Thickpenny

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Decorative Minutiae in the Pictish Social Landscape

Convenor: Dr. Katherine Forsyth

Essay Assignment for the Medieval Scottish Studies MLitt Specialism, Semester 2

School of Humanities

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In my first specialism essay, I investigated the symbol stones, parishes, and davochs of Moray, and found links between them suggesting that the northern Pictish landscape was partially preserved in later medieval boundaries, both secular and ecclesiastical. I will now reorient my perspective to other parts of Pictland, focusing on specific stones, their symbols, motifs, and relationships with other sculptures both nearby and far-flung. Until now, many scholars have examined the symbol stones in two different ways: 1) through archaeological investigations of their function in the landscape, with little reference to the symbols themselves, or 2) in abstract art historical studies of symbol and motif distribution, and their nebulous development and gradual decline, this time divorced from the local contexts in which the stones were erected.¹ While both approaches are useful springboards for further study, they neglect a crucial detail. Every stone was created for human reasons. The choice of symbols, their combinations and appearance, decorative motifs, and even carving methods were not made in a vacuum. The symbols comprised an evolving, but coherent semantic system with subtle, often local manifestations. Stones certainly marked buildings, boundaries, burials or ritual centres—but the Picts also fashioned them in deliberate reference to each other, within small groups on shared sites, or scattered across the landscape. In preparation for my dissertation, I intend to trace such relationships, imitations, and innovations on individual stones in order to highlight connections between them. Because the symbols reflect the agency of their patrons and stone-carvers, small

¹ See Iain Fraser and Stratford Halliday, 'The Early Medieval Landscape', in *In the Shadow of Bennachie, A Field Archaeology of Donside, Aberdeenshire*, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in association with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 2007); R.B.K Stevenson, 'Pictish Art', in *The Problem of the Picts*, ed. F.T. Wainwright (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1955), pp. 97-128; Gordan Murray, 'The declining Pictish symbol – a reappraisal', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 116 (1986), pp. 223-253.

artistic details have deep implications that may increase our knowledge of both the symbol system and the Pictish social landscape itself.

In response, I have formulated a methodological approach based on the comparison of symbol stones at different scales in the landscape, both local and regional. In this essay, I will focus on case studies of small ‘clusters’ on single sites, namely Inveravon, Tillytarmont, and Rhynie. Each case study will highlight the relationships and disconnects between the symbols themselves, their presentation, quality, and decorative motifs. From this data, I will attempt to deduce the relative chronologies of stones within each cluster, and determine if patterns arose from direct emulation of onsite exemplars or from wider artistic idioms that evolved (rather than declined) over time. This type of artistic analysis is new, for it approaches the symbols not as an abstract code disembodied from Pictish society, but as embedded in the Picts’ social awareness and wedded to their deliberate choices of motif and style, which *could* have advertised such messages as group identity, status, social connections or pretensions. My preliminary investigations have uncovered a complex network of models, traditions, and decorative minutiae that have hitherto gone unnoticed, and there is not room enough to address them all. While the discussions below leave many questions unsolved, my methodology will provide the necessary tools for finding answers later in my dissertation research.

Before I launch into my case studies, it is useful to review the common frameworks of analysis that scholars have applied to the symbol stones. Though they tend to neglect the symbols in detail, archaeological investigations of findspots and nodal places in the landscape offer crucial insights into the stones’ functions. In contrast, some art historical paradigms are less helpful, and

require radical re-conceptualization. These fall into three interrelated categories: prototype theories, heraldic explanations, and searches for symbol origins. The most powerful of these is the prototype paradigm, first advocated by R.B.K. Stevenson. His argument stems from an art historical theory developed in the 19th century, in which the first exemplars of an object or artwork—the prototypes—are considered superior in motif, skill, and complexity, after which all subsequent iterations degenerate into inferior, standardized, copy-cat productions increasingly divorced from the founding tradition.² Stevenson argued that the most elaborate internal decorations of the crescent and v-rod first occurred on a lost prototype stone, the closest extant approximation to which is the Golspie Class I stone, which he dated to the seventh century.³ The Golspie crescent and v-rod is decorated with intricate peltas, and therefore Stevenson believed this pattern was ‘the most convincing starting-point’ for the symbol, because it ‘[contained] a majority of the details found in the others, details which would be hard to combine.’⁴ Afterwards, this design supposedly degenerated and separated into the decorative components visible on other Class I crescent and v-rods.⁵ Stevenson organized these components into three groups, those with peltas comprising Group A, paired spirals in Group B, and the simple ‘dome-and-wing’ in Group C.⁶ The groups blur into each other, but Stevenson’s labels do provide a helpful tool for categorizing and describing varieties of the symbol’s internal motifs.

However, Stevenson’s prototype paradigm is deeply problematic. Because he only examined symbols on a broad scale across Pictland, he flattened and obscured the tiny, local details that

² Mansel Spratling, ‘On the Aesthetics of the Ancient Britons,’ in *Rethinking Celtic Art*, eds. Duncan Garrow, Chris Gosden and J.D. Hill (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2008), p. 189.

³ Stevenson, ‘Pictish Art’, pp. 104-6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-4.

betray links between individual stones (often on examples just a few feet apart from each other). In doing so, he divorced the stones from their physical contexts and the human choices that affected their style, composition, and decoration. He overlooked, as Mansel Spratling described in his essay on Celtic art, the Picts' 'own aesthetics...what they considered to be the legitimate framework, means and content of expression.'⁷ These issues were later compounded in Gordon Murray's 1986 article, 'The declining Pictish symbol – a reappraisal', in which Murray expanded the study to include the double-disc and z-rod and Pictish beast. By tracking a 'declining sequence' in the form and internal decoration of all three symbols, Murray asserted that each was invented in a different region of Pictland.⁸ While Murray rightfully warned against strictly lineal conceptions of decline and reminded that devolved symbols could have existed in the same historical moment as 'classical' versions, he dismissed as meaningless any level of analysis smaller than a regional one, and argued that patterns of stylistic transmission are also unrecoverable.⁹ However, by employing my new methodology, I have found it not only possible, but also *imperative* to track the transmission of patterns or styles from stone to stone and site to site. The Picts carved the stones for communal display, in relation to each other. Broad, bird's-eye-view maps of symbol decline cease to make sense because they collapse too many valuable details.

The prototype paradigm unravels further when Stevenson's distribution maps are compared with Murray's. Murray rejected the pelta as a prototype motif and instead broke the crescent and v-rod into his own subdivisions, D (dome-and-wing), S (inverted spirals or scrolls), and E ('everted

⁷ Spratling, 'Aesthetics', p. 185.

⁸ Murray, 'Pictish symbol', p. 223.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 224, 226.

spirals or scrolls’).¹⁰ His reorganization reveals the fatal flaw in the prototype theory: universal categories of decline exist only in the eye of the modern beholder. It is questionable whether a Pict of Fife had awareness of decorative practices in the Orkneys or would have recognized modern claims of artistic similarities there. Local or regional milieus were likely more important. As a result, Stevenson and Murray’s maps are too arbitrarily structured and subjective, with every new classification resulting in a different distribution pattern. For example, Murray charts his spiral motifs with marked evenness across Pictland, while Stevenson’s appear almost entirely north of the Mounth.¹¹ This instability causes the prototype paradigm to fall apart. Furthermore, Stevenson and Murray’s artificial corpus of decline presents the symbols as though their Platonic models and degeneration were somehow distinct from the communities that used them. In doing so, they bypass evidence of artistic influence and evolution, which hints at relationships amongst the Picts themselves.

Two related theories, of heraldry and symbol origin, can be dealt with more briefly. Heraldic theories depict the symbols as static templates, and in Charles Thomas’ complex proposal, they represented ‘deceased individuals,’ and signified their ‘totems, family heraldry, social ranks, statuses, or professions’.¹² Again, heraldic explanations are risky in that they may dismiss stylistic variety as no more than corruptions or mistakes. In contrast, origin studies seek only to pinpoint the objects or animals that provided the initial inspiration for symbols. For example, Craig Cessford proposed that earlier, Celto-Roman dragonesque brooches developed into the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 229; See Murray, pp. 228, 230-1 for diagrams of his crescent and v-rod pattern categories.

¹¹ Stevenson, ‘Pictish Art,’ p. 105; Murray, ‘Pictish symbol,’ p. 232.

¹² Ross Samson, ‘The Reinterpretation of the Pictish Symbols,’ *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, 145 No. 1 (1992), p. 40.

Pictish beast, but also toyed with the possibility that dolphins or mythical aquatic creatures played a role.¹³ Both heraldic and symbol origin theories are problematic for numerous reasons, and whether or not one agrees with them, they are ultimately circular and offer no information about how both carvers and patrons operated and interacted on the ground.

In complete contrast, scholars Katherine Forsyth and Ross Samson have articulated a different theoretical lens that frees the stones from the prototype theory and allows specific connections between them to be recognized.¹⁴ Their paradigm underpins my methodological approach: whatever the symbols meant, the system itself operated in the same structured, yet flexible manner as a writing system. While Stevenson assumed that a symbol's outline was 'of less significance than the internal enrichment,' it was the outline that most likely contributed to the symbol's basic meaning, while the artistic embellishment conveyed secondary social messages.¹⁵ Indeed, the Hendersons remarked that the symbols appear 'as fixed and settled in shape from the start as are 'A', 'B', 'C''.¹⁶ The Hendersons further observed that the symbols' internal designs drew on the vast La Tène repertoire found throughout the Iron Age West.¹⁷ This endless list of motifs, including the pelta, S- and C-spiral, hatching, sprung-palmette and vesica appear on the

¹³ Craig Cessford, 'The Origins of the Pictish Beast', *Pictish Arts Society Journal*, 16 (2001), p. 28; Craig Cessford, 'Pictish Art and the Sea,' *The Heroic Age: A Journal of Early Medieval Northwestern Europe*, 8 (June 2005) <<http://www.mun.ca/mst/heroicage/issues/8/cessford.html>> [accessed 22 March 2012].

¹⁴ Katherine Forsyth, 'Some thoughts on Pictish symbols as a formal writing system,' in *The Worm, the Germ and the Thorn: Pictish and Related Studies Presented to Isabel Henderson*, eds. I. Henderson and D. Henry (Brechin: Pinkfoot Press, 1995), pp. 85-98; Samson, 'Reinterpretation'.

¹⁵ Alastair Mack, *Symbols and Pictures: the Pictish Legacy in Stone* (Brechin: Pinkfoot Press, 2007), p. 194.

¹⁶ George and Isabel Henderson, *The Art of the Picts: Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2004), pp. 59-60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

symbols, and must have adorned other manmade Pictish objects.¹⁸ The spiral, dome, wing-shape, and pelta were likely part of the Picts' everyday visual vocabulary for generations. And because they typically occur in pairs, the symbols were *not* an alphabet, but Latin letters are a convenient analogue that helps contextualize the nature of internal decoration.

Alphabets are not composed of heraldic templates or prototypes, and if the same letter is embellished in different ways, this does not indicate degeneration. Ross Samson argues similarly that if the Pictish symbols were not based on rigid 'physical templates', then 'one must suppose mental templates and thus a widely recognised symbolic content' that permitted a variety of decorations within set shapes.¹⁹ It is also possible that the symbols had lower or higher registers for different purposes, as did contemporary Latin scripts in the Insular world.²⁰ A quick comparison between the scrappy, undecorated Covesea cave carvings and professional grandeur of the Golspie Class I stone bears this out.²¹ The crux, however, lies in the choices that Picts made in the adornment of their symbol stones, and why. Again, a comparison with writing systems provides a possible answer. An 'A' remains an 'A', whether it is capital, lowercase, cursive, printed, uncial, or half-uncial in form. One scribe may add serifs, while another may round the top, reflecting their individual preference and training. By comparing abbreviation marks, decorative flourishes or changes in letter shapes, palaeographers can distinguish between hands, registers, types of documents, scribal schools, and chronological changes in medieval scripts—all of which reflect the documents' historical contexts and functions. The analogy is not

¹⁸ See E.M Jope, 'Glossary', in *Early Celtic Art in the British Isles: Text* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 379-385.

¹⁹ Samson, 'Reinterpretation', p. 37.

²⁰ Forsyth, 'Writing system', p. 93.

²¹ *Ibid.*

perfect, but I will conduct a similar form of analysis in my case studies below. The way symbols were ‘written’, *in comparison* with others, yields information about ‘the thought processes that [went] into their making’ and the nature of display in the Pictish landscape. A Pict did not carve a pelta on his crescent and v-rod because he lived within a specific moment of symbol decline, but because the motif was meaningful to him or his community. I intend to track these choices through comparisons of individual stones, and later in my dissertation research, attempt to explain them.

But as discussed above, comparisons can become subjective. The Picts certainly had their own standards, and the modern terms ‘classical’ or ‘degenerate’ may do them disservice. However, there is no other way to effectively study the stones without comparing them. To defend my methodology, I must therefore establish an objective vocabulary for real distinctions in quality, style, carving skill, and motif. Complete objectivity is impossible, but the field of art criticism provides tested methods for ‘making intelligent comparisons’ between similar objects.²² Art critics first attempt a neutral ‘language of analysis’ that includes ‘form descriptors’ and basic comments on composition.²³ Form descriptors are such nouns and adjectives as shape, line, texture, contour, depth, thick, thin, jagged, and smooth.²⁴ Descriptions of composition ‘deal with perceived relationships among forms’, including ‘similarity’, ‘contrast’, ‘direction’, ‘symmetry’, ‘balance’ and so on.²⁵ Together, form and composition comprise ‘style’, or the ‘distinguishing

²² Edmund Burke Feldman, *Practical Art Criticism* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), p. 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art*, sixth ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), pp. 40, 44.

²⁵ Feldman, *Art Criticism*, p. 29.

characteristics' between works of art.²⁶ In my case studies, I have adopted and applied these terms as a historian, in hopes that I may describe the symbol stones without letting my modern viewpoint adulterate my conclusions.

Nevertheless, it is still necessary to judge a symbol stone's quality. There is no other way to make coherent statements about exemplars or models, innovation, emulation, carving skill, and artistic tradition—and what this reveals about the social landscape. In the art world, good critics establish 'grounds of judgement' to justify their opinions in the most politic way possible, and so I have established my own grounds for the Pictish stones.²⁷ Firstly, I will assess whether the symbols maintain common compositional conventions. For example, if a mirror occurs upside down or a beast points to the left, this is cause for notice. Secondly, I will address the correlation between artistic quality and carving skill. Physical technique (an artist's professional training, confidence, and control of the stone surface, or lack thereof) often coincides with artistic skill (whether the craftsman showed creative, original expression, or emulated a nearby stone in a derivative way). These grounds of judgement are imperfect, and they flirt with subjectivity, but I hope they will keep my methodological approach as impartial as can be. With these strategies in mind, it is now possible to introduce my case studies of the stone clusters at Inveravon, Tillytarmont and Rhynie. These clusters showcase the benefit of analysis at small, single-site levels, yielding hitherto unnoticed insights that can later be transferred to other Pictish stones.

²⁶ Barnet, *Short Guide*, p. 86.

²⁷ Feldman, *Art Criticism*, p. 38.

In the 19th century, three symbol stones were unearthed from the foundations of Inveravon's old parish church in upper Strathspey.²⁸ A fourth stone was later discovered in the churchyard.²⁹ The four stones at Inveravon were likely carved by different hands, and at least one is clearly later than the rest—suggesting long-term use of the site, different skill levels amongst the carvers, and a marked change in artistic conventions over time. In addition, one stone seems to emulate and imitate another. The historian can thus speculate about the social context, relationships between commemorands, and even place the stones in a tentative chronology.

The finest stone is Inveravon 3 [Fig. 1]. It survives only as a fragment about 1 foot long by 7 inches wide, and was dug from the old church foundations.³⁰ All that remains is the head, neck and partial limb of a Pictish beast. The flowing contour lines are shallow and of generally uniform thickness, with only slight variations in depth. The stone surface is very smooth, and whether it was purposefully split to achieve this effect is unknown. The beast appears well proportioned and balanced, with a seam line that runs from the top of its foreleg, along the under-neck, and widens into a lobe at the jaw. According to my grounds of judgement, the stone is of remarkable quality. The symbol maintains general Pictish standards, pointing to the right. The carver possessed both artistic skill and technical expertise, and was in complete control of his subject and the stone surface. His confident, original work was so 'flawless in its linear grace' that it is tempting to argue that Inveravon 3 was the earliest stone in the cluster.³¹

²⁸ Canmore, 'Inveravon Old Parish Church and Churchyard', Site Number NJ13NE 7.00, NGR NJ18287 37599.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland: A Classified, Illustrated, Descriptive List of the Monuments, With an Analysis of Their Symbolism and Ornamentation*, vol. 3, (Edinburgh: Neill & Co., Limited, 1903), p. 154.

³¹ Henderson and Henderson, *Art of the Picts*, p. 227.

Whatever the case, its patron had access to a professional (and probably expensive) stone-carver who was well trained in a specific artistic tradition, to which Inveravon's other symbol stones may be compared.

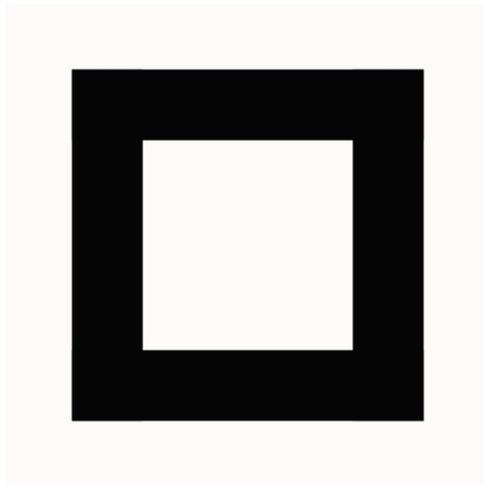


Fig. 1. Inveravon 3

Picture credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 1828 3757. Image removed due to copyright issues.

Of the group, Inveravon 2 is most similar to the beast fragment in carving skill and presentation.

It is a large slab about 5 feet long and 1.5 feet wide, and was also found in the church

foundations [Fig. 2].³² Part of the rock had naturally split or was broken to provide a flat,

smooth surface for three symbols, a crescent and v-rod, triple-disc, and mirror and comb. The

incised lines are steady, clean, and of a generally uniform depth and width. In composition the

symbols are of equal proportions, and are symmetrical in outline and internal decoration. The v-

³² Allen and Anderson, *Early Christian Monuments*, p. 153.

rod points to the right, as is most common, and the crescent contains a plain dome-and-wing motif. Again, artistic skill coincides with technical expertise, and Inveravon 2 is a high quality, albeit simple specimen, and was doubtless drawn with a compass and straightedge by an experienced craftsman. The seam line on the beast fragment is reminiscent of the rim on Inveravon 2's mirror, but without viewing the stones in life, it is impossible to tell if the same hand carved them both. Nevertheless, there was at least one (and probably two) patrons at Inveravon whose carvers worked in a similar artistic tradition, perhaps in the same time period.

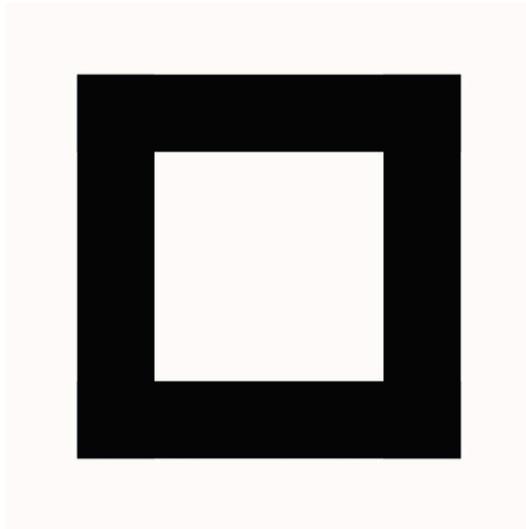


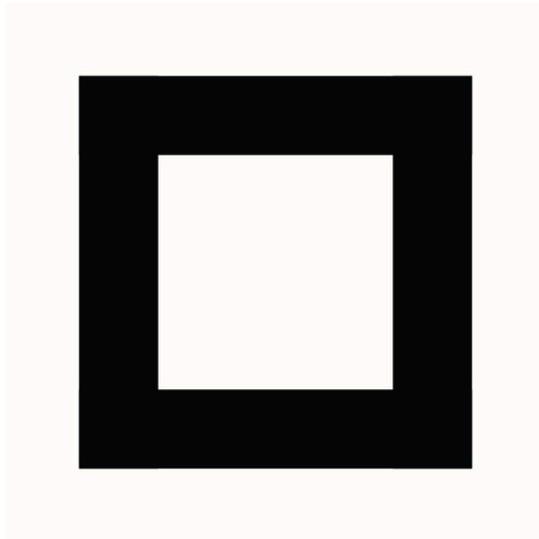
Fig. 2. Inveravon 2
Picture credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 1828 3757. Image removed due to copyright issues.

In contrast, Inveravon 4 and Inveravon 1 are very different in appearance. Indeed, they both could support Stevenson and Murray's theories of symbol decline, but the local situation was far more complex. Like Inveravon 3, Inveravon 4 also sports a Pictish beast, and was found in the churchyard instead of the old foundations [Figs. 3 and 4].³³ A crescent and v-rod with a central pair of 'inverted' spirals is positioned above the beast. Surface damage makes analysis difficult, but initially this stone appears to have been carved in a separate style from Inveravon Nos. 2 and 3. However, closer examination reveals another possibility: its craftsman was either an artist of lesser talents or had deliberately carved in a lower register. Just like Inveravon 2 and 3, the contours lines are thin and generally even. The symbols are likewise balanced in symmetry and proportions, and directional conventions were maintained. Nevertheless, the carver's design was also less accomplished than that of Inveravon 2 and 3. The wide spiral at the beast's armpit is unusually high and open for a Pictish joint scroll and the crescent's spiral motif is somewhat lopsided. The carver also struggled with the cracked, ragged surface at the top of the stone, and accordingly the bottom arc of his crescent and v-rod is wobbly and uneven. Despite Inveravon 4's lower technical quality, however, there is no reason to believe that it was carved at a significantly later date than its more graceful neighbours.

Instead, Inveravon 4 might have been carved in reference to the finer beast fragment (Inveravon 3). Such a connection would have deep implications for our knowledge of the Picts' monumental practices. The proportion and shape of the beasts' heads are alike, with a tightly angled, swanlike neck and bulbous forehead. Both beasts' eyes are similarly situated, and it is possible that Inveravon 4 also shared a central dotted pupil. Inveravon 4 is missing one major

³³ Canmore, 'Inveravon, Inveravon No. 4', Site Number NJ13NE 7.04, NGR NJ 1828 3737.

detail, however, and that is a seam line from under-neck to jaw. If the beast fragment had survived intact with a second symbol, its influence on Inveravon 4 might be more certain. There is significant precedence for ‘copying’ of beast symbols in Aberdeenshire, however (discussed below), and this then begs the question: if the carver of Inveravon 4 did use Inveravon 3 as a model, why did he do so? He may have emulated a wealthier man’s monument already onsite, or both stones belonged to a multi-generational kin group, or perhaps they represent higher and lower registers used for different functions. These speculative possibilities highlight the localized details that Stevenson and Murray’s prototype theory overlooks.



Figs. 3 and 4. Inveravon 4
Picture credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 1828 3737. Images removed due to copyright issues.

Finally, Inveravon 1 was likely the latest stone in the cluster, and shows how symbol conventions changed over time [Fig. 5]. Found in the church foundations, the stone is 5 feet long and 3 feet wide, with a mirror-case over an eagle, to the right of which is a small mirror and comb.³⁴ Compared to the other Inveravon stones, its contour lines are deep and plastic, forming closed cells punctuated by chiselled dots. The spiral on the eagle's shoulder is too high and points in the wrong direction, indicating a distance from earlier Class I joint scrolls. The biggest change, however, is in the proportions of the mirror symbol. The handle no longer has a join, and its head is much smaller than the typical 'La Tène' type, as seen on Inveravon 2. This is not evidence of degeneration, however, but evolution. Such mirrors occurred elsewhere in Pictland, [see Fyvie 1, Fig. 6] and were stepping-stones in the transition from Class I to Class II, and from the La Tène to Insular style. Class II monuments with fully developed interlace also exhibit such small, long-handled mirrors in their symbol repertoire [see Formaston, Fig. 7]. The eagle symbol supports this hypothesis, for it is indicative of early Celtic and Germanic artistic melding. Eagle brooches with the staring eyes, curved beaks, and cloisonné cells appeared in Late Antique and early medieval 'barbarian' contexts on the continent. At Dunadd, Anglo-Saxon influence resulted in the production of eagle-headed penannular brooches that are markedly similar to the Inveravon motif.³⁵ This stone was thus not a product of decline, but of benchmark of wider creative change in Pictland, on a specific site that was valued locally for a long period of time.

³⁴ Allen and Anderson, *Early Christian Monuments*, p. 152; Canmore, 'Inveravon, Inveravon No. 1', Site Number NJ13NE 7.01, NGR NJ 1828 3767.

³⁵ Ewan Campbell, *Saints and Sea-Kings: The First Kingdom of the Scots* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 1999), p. 52.

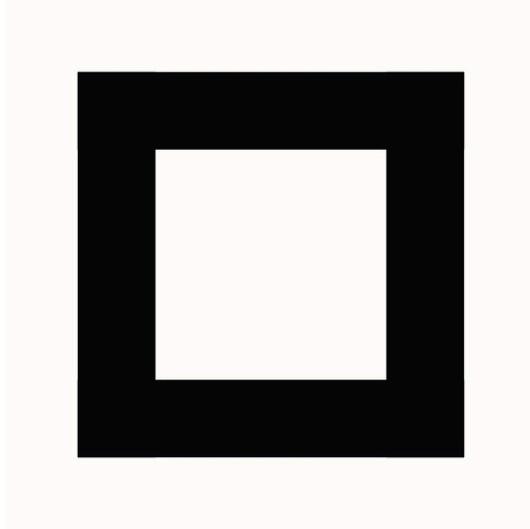


Fig. 5. Inveravon 1

Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 1828 3767. Image removed due to copyright issues.

The Inveravon cluster demonstrates how a community utilized a shared space, whether they hailed from a multi-generational kin group, occupied different economic strata, emulated the monuments of wealthier and more important neighbours, employed professionally trained craftsmen, or hired local blacksmiths with simple carving tools. Humans decorate not only for aesthetic pleasure, but also to display aspects of their identity. Thus, the Inveravon symbols most likely communicated subtle social messages through motif, style, and carving technique. By reorienting the scholarly focus on such specific, local contexts, I hope to glean new knowledge of how the symbol stones functioned in the Pictish social landscape. And so far, my strategy has been equally fruitful in the study of other symbol clusters.

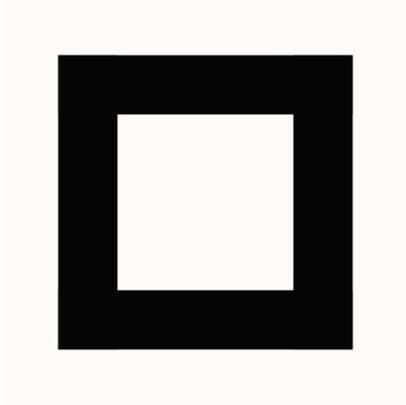


Fig. 6. Fyvie 1
Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 7684 3777
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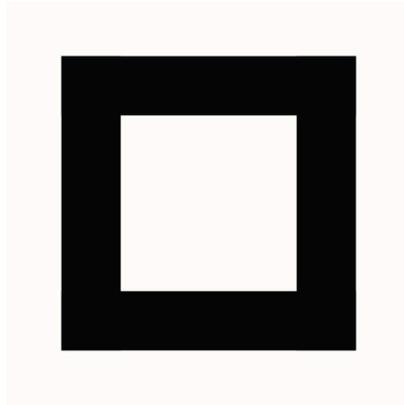


Fig. 7. Formaston
Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 5412 0014
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Unlike Inveravon, four of the five stones from the Tillytarmont cluster in northeast Aberdeenshire are so badly weathered that it is impossible to place them in a relative chronology. Nevertheless, two of the stones were undoubtedly connected because they shared the same symbol pair, dimensions, and if the drawn reconstructions are accurate—perhaps the same style or carving hand as well. Where the Inveravon beast stones provoked mere speculation, Tillytarmont proves that some stones were carved with deliberate connections to each other. The cluster was ploughed up from Donaldstone Haugh, a finger-like strip of land that extends in the crook of the Rivers Isla and Deveron.³⁶ There is no extant church site there, but the name element ‘tarmont’ may derive from the Gaelic ‘termonn,’ a word that designated the sanctuary

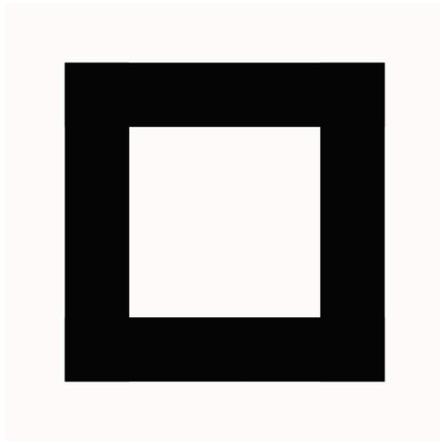
³⁶ Mack, *Symbols and Pictures*, p. 137; Canmore, ‘Tillytarmont, The Goose Stone,’ Site Number NJ54NW 11, NGR NJ 5297 4645.

boundaries of early ecclesiastical sites.³⁷ It was likely a burial place, for most of the stones were found within ten metres of each other, with a square cairn also unearthed nearby.³⁸

As at Inveravon, the Tillytarmont symbols vary in carving skill and artistic style, but this analysis must remain tentative because of the damage they sustained. On Tillytarmont 5, a serpent and z-rod, horseshoe, and mirror and comb are barely discernable. RCAHMS' reconstructed images [Figs. 8 and 9] indicate that the mirror might have been similar to that on Inveravon 2, with a circular rim of decreasing width. In contrast, Tillytarmont 4 stands apart from the cluster in both artistic quality and condition [Fig. 10]. The stone contains an eagle symbol (which is vastly different from Inveravon 1, and probably earlier) over a Pictish beast. The symbols' contour lines are of near perfect thinness and depth. Like Inveravon 3, the beast has a seam line on its under-neck, but its style is different: the iris of the eye is articulated and the forehead projects at an angle. Its carver exhibited great skill and artistic vision, giving his eagle detailed and accurate feathers, expressive eyes, and an effective joint scroll. The shape of the stone is also unusual: it is almost round instead of rectangular. Whoever its patron and whatever its purpose, Tillytarmont 4 was meant to stand apart, and does not appear to have been emulated by any of the other stones. Despite its quality, however, this is not the most intriguing member of the cluster.

³⁷ Alasdair D. Ross, 'The Province of Moray, c.1000-1230' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 2003), p. 101.

³⁸ Mack, *Symbols and Pictures*, pp 126, 137.



Figs. 8 and 9. Tillytarmont 5
Picture Credits: Canmore, NGR NJ 5331 4716. Images removed due to copyright issues.

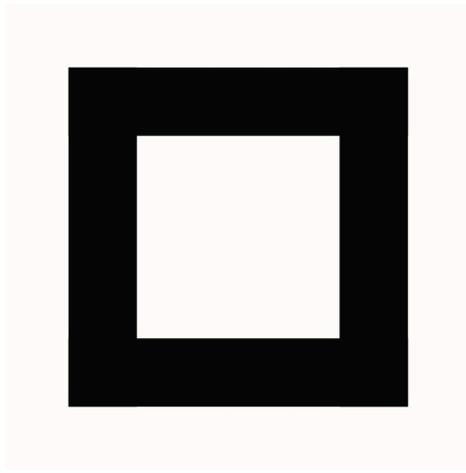


Fig. 10. Tillytarmont 4
Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 5331 4724. Image removed due to copyright issues.

Tillytarmont 1, 2, and 3 are much alike in their correctly rendered (see the z-rod on No. 2), plain, and unfussy symbols, perhaps carved in the same style. The stones are worn and pitted, and so unfortunately my analysis must rely on reconstructive sketches.³⁹ Tillytarmont 1 is a 4-foot tall slab with a socket base, and goose, mirror, and mirror-case symbols [Fig. 11].⁴⁰ The mirror appears to be a plainer, unrimmed version of that on Tillytarmont 5 and Inveravon 2. However, Tillytarmont 2 and 3 are far more remarkable [Figs. 12 and 13]. These stones have identical symbol pairs: a crescent and v-rod over a double-disc and z-rod. Sadly, the crescent decorations are lost. The stones' overall dimensions are also similar to each other, at approximately 4 feet high, and 2 and 1 feet wide respectively.⁴¹ This further distinguishes them from the rest of the cluster, which are mostly taller slabs. Tillytarmont 2 and 3 echo the connections between the beast stones of Inveravon, and were clearly linked with each other, and recent studies of post-Roman monumental traditions might contextualize this phenomenon.

³⁹ For photographs of Tillytarmont 1 and 2, see Iain Fraser, ed. *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 2008), p. 42.

⁴⁰ Canmore, 'Tillytarmont, The Goose Stone', Site Number NJ54NW 11, NGR NJ 5297 4645.

⁴¹ Canmore, 'Tillytarmont, Tillytarmont Nos. 2, 3, And 4', Site Number NJ54NW 1, NGR NJ 5297 4705.

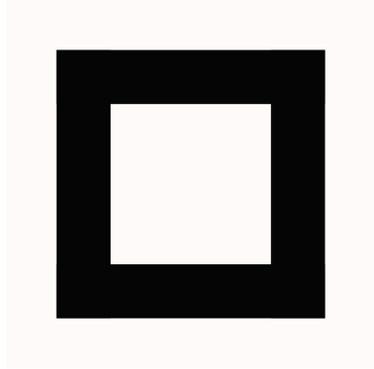
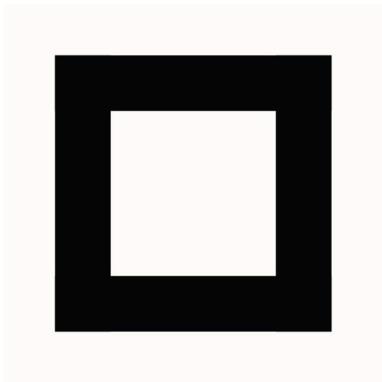


Fig. 11. Tillytarmont 1
Picture Credit: Canmore. Image removed due to copyright issues.



Figs. 11 and 12. Tillytarmont 2 and 3
Picture Credits: Canmore, NGR NJ 5297 4705. Images removed due to copyright issues.

In the Late Antique and early medieval periods, personal names in runic, ogham, or Latin letters were commemorated on monumental stones in Scandinavia and the British Isles (including

Pictland), and the Pictish symbols may have been part of this tradition.⁴² On the Dingle Peninsula in Ireland, it is even possible to trace blood relatives through ogham inscriptions from two ecclesiastical sites, Ballinrannig and Ballintaggart.⁴³ For example, Ballintaggart III was inscribed with the name, DOVETI MAQQI CATTINI, while his brother may appear on Ballinrannig VI as CCICAMINI MAQQI CATTINI.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Ballintaggart VIII commemorates one CUNAMAQQI AVI CORBBI, while Ballinrannig VII belongs to a relative or the same person, CUNAMAQQI CORBBI MAQQI MUCCOI DOVVINIAS.⁴⁵ Though these ogham inscriptions straddle two sites, they can be compared to Tillytarmont 2 and 3, whose matching symbols might have commemorated the same person, different family members, or kin generations. Even if the stones did not represent personal or group names, their motifs and symbols must have expressed social (or functional) connections of some kind. My observations of Tillytarmont and Inveravon are not earth shattering, but they do demonstrate the benefit of studying symbol stones at close range, instead of plotting them on broad, pan-Pictish prototype maps which subsume minute details that the Picts might have thought important. Furthermore, in future research, my methodological approach will also apply to similar clusters such as Logie

⁴² Forsyth, 'Writing system', p. 87; See Ross Samson, 'Reinterpretation', for a discussion on the Pictish symbols as di-thematic names.

⁴³ Judith Cuppage, *Archaeological survey of the Dingle Peninsula = Suirbhé Seandálaíochta Chorca Dhuibhne: a description of the field antiquities of the Barony of Chorca Dhuibhne from the Mesolithic period to the 17th century A.D* (Ballyferriter: Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibne, 1986), pp 251, 264-5.

⁴⁴ Judith Cuppage, *Archaeological Survey*, p. 265; Robert Alexander Stewart Macalister, *Corpus inscriptionum insularum Celticarum*, vol. 1 (Dublin: Stationary Office, 1945-1949), p. 149; Niall Kenny, 'Materiality and Meaning: Ogham Stone Monuments of the Dingle Peninsula', *Journal of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society*, Series 2, Vol. 5 (2005), pp 84-5; Note: According to Kenny, the stones of Ballintaggart are all rounded, pink pulvinars from Minard Beach, while those of Ballinrannig are carved on other types of stone. Kenny has researched and remarked on the connection between materiality, stone source, and separate group identity in Ballintaggart. However, the ogham inscriptions still point to connections between some commemorands at Ballinrannig and Ballintaggart.

⁴⁵ Cuppage, *Survey*, pp. 252, 265; Macalister, *Corpus*, pp. 149-50.

Elphinstone and its spiral motifs, Inverurie parish's common carving style, and the stones of Clyne and Inverallan parishes, where Class I specimens were found on separate sites but have matching symbol pairs.

Finally, in my case study of the Rhynie cluster in Donside, I discovered more concrete evidence that motifs carried semiotic force in the social landscape. While the evidence of artistic links between Inveravon's beasts is shaky and provisional at best, the beast symbol on the Craw Stane at Rhynie probably influenced two (or even three) other Pictish beasts in Aberdeenshire, including one in the Rhynie cluster itself. Amongst Aberdeenshire's twelve extant and undamaged beast symbols, the Craw Stane and its 'satellites' are also unique and more unified in appearance. Archaeologists recently discovered that the Craw Stane marked an extremely high status site that probably commanded authority in the region, and its 'copy-cat' beast symbols may reflect this centre's sphere of influence, artistic or political.⁴⁶ In contrast to Inveravon, where artistic links seem limited to a single site, the Craw Stane shows that the Rhynie cluster had at least one external connection in the Pictish Donside.

With eight stones, the Rhynie cluster is unusually large, and the stones were originally split between two areas, a southerly group near the Craw Stane, and a northerly group around a knoll to the south of Rhynie village.⁴⁷ The stones were all carved from hard granite or whinstone, which require considerable technical skills to handle.⁴⁸ This skill is most evident in the Craw

⁴⁶ Gordon Noble and Meggen Gondek, 'A Dark Age Power Centre at Rhynie' *British Archaeology* (September-October 2011), pp. 36-41.

⁴⁷ Fraser and Halliday, 'The Early Medieval Landscape', p. 122.

⁴⁸ Gordon Noble and Meggen Gondek, 'Together as One: The Landscape of the Symbol Stones At Rhynie, Aberdeenshire', proof for *Pictish Progress: New Studies on Northern Britain in the*

Stane [Fig. 13]. It stands in situ within an earthwork enclosure, on a ridge along the Water of Bogie.⁴⁹ The stone is very large, at 5 feet 7 inches tall and 3 feet wide, with a salmon and beast pair near the top.⁵⁰ The symbols' contour lines are crisp and neat. Their most remarkable aspect is their variance in thickness and depth, an effect the carver used to lend emphasis to parts of the animals' bodies, such as the salmon's fins, and the shoulder, flank and forehead of the beast. The outlines otherwise convey little embellishment. In composition the symbols are parallel to each other and angled upwards as if leaping. The beast's flank is rather narrow in comparison to its ribcage, and its back curves upward slightly. According my grounds of judgement, the craftsman who carved the Craw Stane possessed formidable skills and complete control of the granite surface, and also exhibited a streak of individual creativity. Instead of a typical Pictish joint scroll or spiral at the beast's elbow, the carver looped the line of the belly up and forward toward the shoulder, and then down again to continue an outline of the foreleg, forming a simple lozenge shape. This stylistic attribute is so unusual that imitations of it can be tracked on other symbol stones nearby.

Early Middle Ages, eds. Stephen T. Driscoll, Jane Geddes, and Mark A. Hall (Brill: 2010), p. 285.

⁴⁹ Fraser and Halliday, 'The Early Medieval Landscape', pp. 118-9, 122.

⁵⁰ Canmore, 'Rhynie, Craw Stane', Site Number NJ42NE 35, NGR NJ 49749 26345.

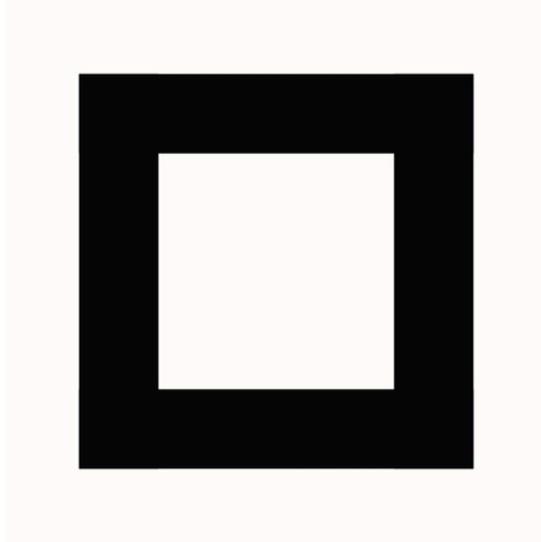


Fig. 13. The Crow Stane

Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 49749 26345. Image removed due to copyright issues.

Originally there were two other stones with Pictish beasts at Rhynie, but one has since been lost.⁵¹ Fortunately, the other beast, on Rhynie 8, survives completely intact [Fig 14]. It is a smaller copy of the Crow Stane exemplar, with an identical joint lozenge. Because the stone is weathered, it is difficult to assess its quality. The carver might have varied the width and depth of his contour lines in order to create shadow, but the stone is too pitted to tell. As on the Crow Stane, the Rhynie 8 beast angles upward with parallel legs, is narrower at the haunches than the ribcage, and curves up slightly along the back. However, small details suggest that it was carved by a different hand or in a different register: the ribcage is less full, the neck is thinner (which

⁵¹ Fraser, *Symbol Stones*, p. 38.

makes the head too large), and the curve of the back is more pronounced. Nevertheless, the Craw Stane and Rhynie 8 were definitely carved and erected in reference to each other. Rhynie 8 was ploughed up from the hillside directly below the Craw Stane, and some archaeologists believe that they once stood together on the ridge.⁵² Though they do not share other symbols in common, the message or function of these two stones might have been linked, as I have speculated about the beast stones at Inveravon.

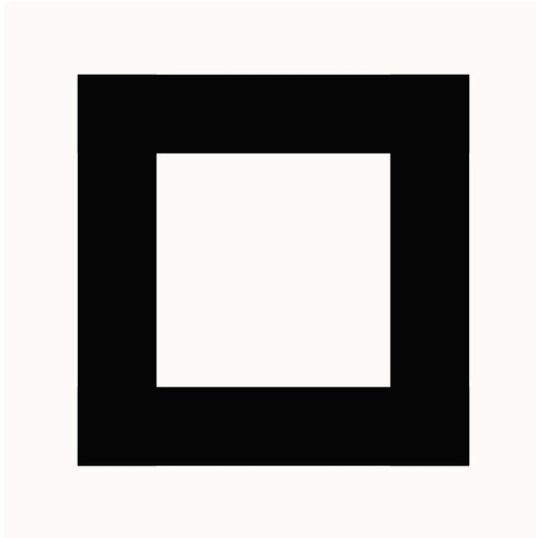


Fig. 14. Rhynie 8

Picture Credit: Canmore, NGR NJ 497 262. Image removed due to copyright issues.

This particular style of beast is not limited to the Rhynie cluster, however. Two more symbol stones in Aberdeenshire also have Pictish beasts with lozenge shapes, though in their case the

⁵² Fraser and Halliday, 'The Early Medieval Landscape', p. 119; Noble and Gondek, 'Together as One', p. 283.

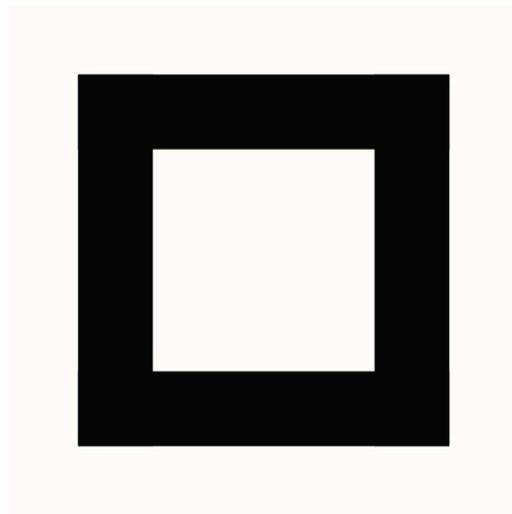
loop angles backwards toward the ribs instead of forward at the shoulder [Figs. 15 and 16]. In the parish churchyard of Clatt, which is close to Rhynie, there survives a partial beast symbol.⁵³ It is rather unusual in design, and the carver did not slavishly copy the Craw Stane. The beast's contour lines are extremely steady and even, with little or no variation in width or depth. Like the Craw Stane and Rhynie 8, the beast's decoration is spare—so spare, in fact, that the pupil-less eye is articulated only by a strange, visor-like oval extending from the forehead. As expected, the beast angles upward with a curved back, and its flank is narrower than its rib cage. However, the joint lozenge seems to have melded partway with a lobe or scroll, and extends from an elongated belly-line, angling backwards instead of forwards along the shoulder. The craftsman of Clatt 3 had probably seen the Craw Stane and Rhynie 8, but adapted their style with considerable artistic license. The similarities between the Clatt 3 and Rhynie beasts are much greater, however, than that of the Broomend of Crichie stone, which was found at the opposite end of the Don valley much farther to the east.⁵⁴

The Broomend of Crichie beast also has a lozenge which angles backwards, but it protrudes from a seam-line on the beast's belly and may be more of a fat lobe or scroll instead. Indeed, this may be no more than a parallel development, for this beast possesses a distinct stylistic trait that dominates in Angus—two extra 'legs' or spiralling hooks protruding from its limbs. Because of these hooks and the seam-line, the Broomend of Crichie beast is more ornate than those at Rhynie or Clatt, and it may not be part of their stylistic group at all. However, the Craw Stane, Rhynie 8, Clatt 3, and Broomend of Crichie have more in common with each other than most of the other beasts found in Aberdeenshire, including the one at Tillytarmont. These other beasts

⁵³ Fraser, *Symbol Stones*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Fraser, *Symbol Stones*, pp. 11, 16.

are varied in appearance, and though this comment is perhaps too subjective, many are clumsy or even lumpy in shape. Examples include the Ardlair beast, with its backwards shoulder spiral reminiscent of the Inveravon eagle, the left-facing Fyvie beast and its late mirror [see Fig. 6], and a shaky, lopsided specimen on Logie Elphinstone 3. These other beasts are evenly scattered throughout the Donside region, making the stylistic similarities between the Craw Stane, Rhynie 8, Clatt 3, and even Broomend of Crichie even more striking.



Figs. 15 and 16. Clatt 3 and Broomend of Crichie
Picture Credits: Canmore, NGR NJ 5389 2600, NGR NJ 7798 1970. Images removed due to copyright issues.

If Rhynie 8, Clatt 3 and Broomend of Crichie were carved in reference to the Craw Stane, why was the Craw Stane an exemplar in the first place? The Rhynie cluster is an outstanding test case because archaeologists have conducted major excavations of the site, in contrast to Inveravon or

Tillytarmont. The Craw Stane stood in an incredibly high status centre, with royal overtones that matched Dumbarton or Dunadd.⁵⁵ Aerial photographs revealed that the stone was surrounded by a series of enclosures, which may have been defensive.⁵⁶ In the outer enclosure, archaeologists found a fragment of a late fifth or sixth-century amphora (most likely for imported wine), a glass shard with ‘white trails’ from a drinking vessel, and bronze pins and amber beads that may be Anglo-Saxon in origin.⁵⁷ The Craw Stane (and perhaps Rhynie 8 as well) stood conspicuously at an entrance to this enclosure, near a large building that may have been a contemporary feasting hall.⁵⁸ Whatever its function and meaning, the Craw Stane would have been a familiar sight to numerous Picts in the Donside region. This revelation lends an archaeological context that cements the more nebulous, speculative connections between symbols that I deduced in my earlier case studies. It also raises many unanswerable questions. Was the findspot of Clatt 3 tied territorially to Rhynie? Did the same person control both sites, or did Clatt belong to political subordinates who owed allegiance to a regional lord at Rhynie? Was the patron of Clatt 3 related to the Craw Stane’s patron? Or were the similarities between these two beast symbols the simple product of admiration and emulation? The possibilities are endless, and none of them may be right. Nevertheless, the Rhynie beasts suggest that the symbols’ decorative minutiae were not random artistic spasms, and though we may never decipher the social messages they conveyed, it is enough to show that these patterns existed—at least for now.

Every symbol stone is a product of the choices its patron or carver made over a thousand years ago. In my case studies of Inveravon, Tillytarmont, and Rhynie, I have endeavoured to realign

⁵⁵ Noble and Gondek, ‘Dark Age Power Centre’, in *British Archaeology* September October 2011, p. 40.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 40; Noble and Gondek, ‘Together as One’, p. 299.

previous art historical approaches to the Pictish stones and isolate this human factor, which survives only in a faint, often puzzling web of artistic interconnections. In my preliminary surveys of the symbol stone corpus, many more patterns surfaced than there was room for in this essay. In sheer diversity and number they overwhelm older prototype theories, and yet have never before received attention. Some extend far beyond the cluster level. For example, while the Craw Stane may have influenced a few local beast symbols, more widespread artistic idioms dominated entire regions in other parts of Pictland. In Angus, and to a lesser extent in Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, many Pictish beasts have extra ‘legs’ or curling hooks that protrude from their limbs (as on the Broomend of Crichton stone). North of the Mounth, Pictish beasts are usually rendered with flat backs and horizontal bodies, while south of the Mounth they tilt upward at an angle. Terms such as ‘classical’ or ‘corrupt’ end the discussion prematurely, for these patterns may have emanated from an important exemplar stone or were simply a regional ‘handwriting’ that locals used out of force of habit or convention.

Symbol also changed over time, as the mirrors on Inveravon 1 and 2 have already shown. The triple-disc symbol underwent a particularly radical change. On Class I stones it appears most often with a horizontal bar that divides the central disc and passes through both outer discs. At some point, this model underwent a major shift, and on Class II stones it lost the bar and gained hinge-like attachments. There are even more examples than I have listed here, but instead of declaring entropy in the system, I intend to perfect my research methodology by visually interrogating the transmission and evolution of symbol models, decorative traits, and even carving methods at different levels in the landscape. This research will necessitate trips into the field, because photographs and drawings may misrepresent how the stones appear in life. More

patterns surely await discovery throughout Pictland, and I hope not only to find them, but also to understand the reasons for their creation, thereby opening a tiny window into the inner workings of the Picts' social landscape.

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