

Crossbows on Pictish stones

by John M Gilbert

Crossbows are depicted on several Pictish stones (Anderson 1881, 123-4). The clearest portrayal occurs on 'The Drosten Stone', St Vigean's no. 1, which probably belongs to the 9th century (Cruden 1964, pl 47). At the foot of the back panel a hunter is shown crouched and firing his bow at an approaching boar (pl 23b). The hunter is cloaked or more probably disguised and

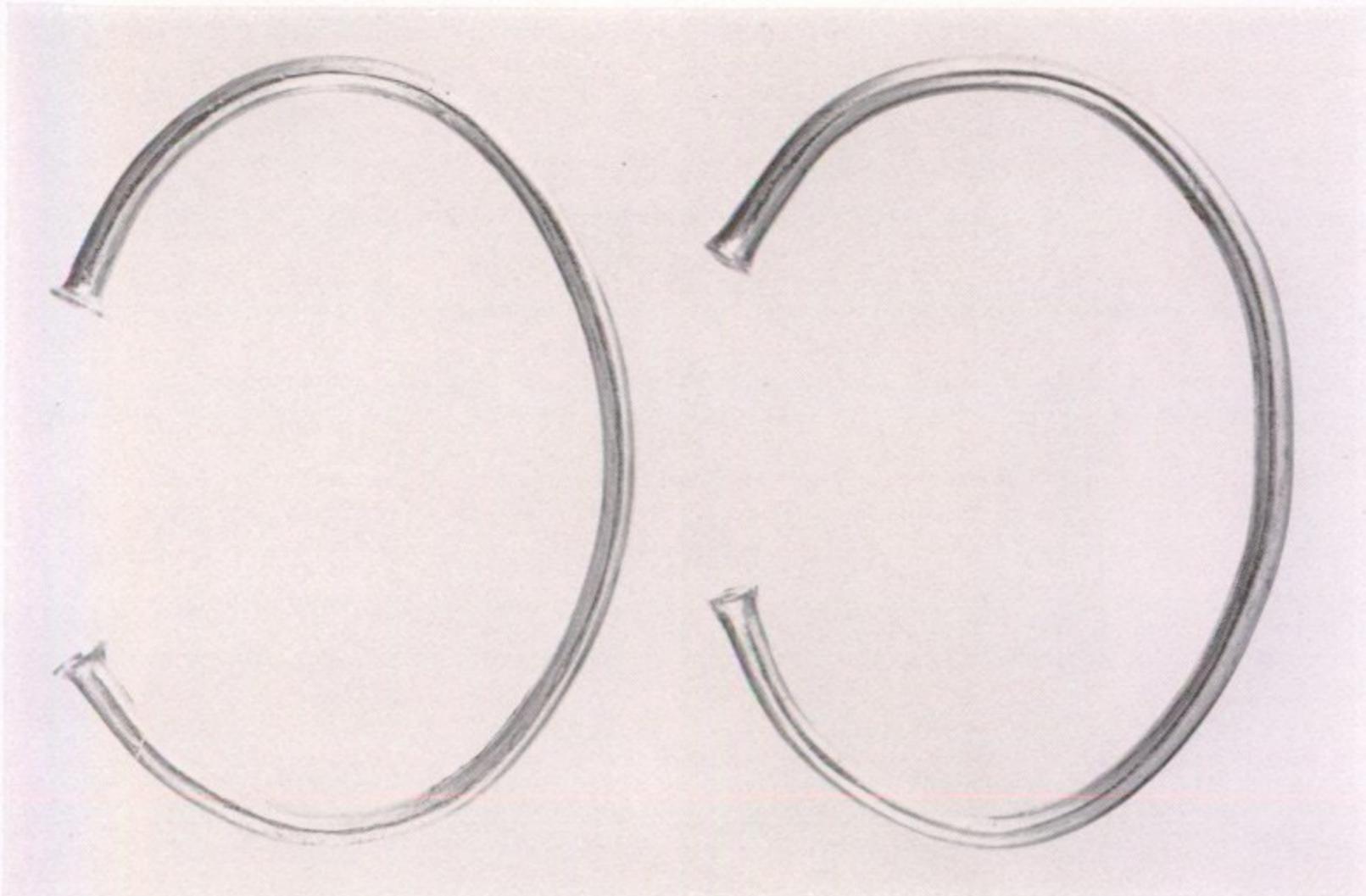
holds the bow resting on the ground in front of him. One hand holds the bow string and the other directly below holds the end of the 'arrow' and is not stretched forward to hold the wooden part of the bow as one would expect. If this were a conventional bow it would not fire, since on releasing the string the arrow would still be held by the bowman. The hunter, therefore, must be holding not the arrow but a strip of wood attached to the front of the bow, and the arrow must be set in that strip of wood. On releasing the string the arrow would then be propelled along the line of this piece of wood. In other words the hunter is using an elementary type of crossbow. In this example the bow was fired by letting go the string rather than by moving a catch which released the string. On closer examination it is possible to detect that on this stone the arrow is marked in the middle of the strip of wood and that the strip of wood is rounded at the front of the bow whereas the arrow is pointed. It is not, however, possible to tell what type of head is placed on the arrow. This type of bow would be ideal for stalking, that is for lying concealed in wait for the game, since it would require less strength, less space and less movement to fire.

Similar bows are carved on the back panel of the Shandwick stone and on the back of the Glenferness stone (Allen and Anderson 1903, 68, 115, figs 69, 120). These bows are readily distinguishable from the short bows portrayed on the 7th- or 8th-century Ruthwell Cross and on the 10th-century Sueno's stone (Allen and Anderson 1903, 150, figs 467A, 156A; Stuart 1867, i, pls XIX, XX, and ii, pls XVIII, XIX).

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REFERENCES

- Allen, J R and Anderson, J 1903 *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*. Edinburgh.
 Anderson, J 1881 *Scotland in Early Christian Times*, vol II. Edinburgh.
 Cruden, S 1964 *Early Christian and Pictish Monuments of Scotland*. Edinburgh.
 Stuart, J 1867 *The Sculptured Stones of Scotland, 1856-67*. Aberdeen.



a Gold armlets from Kilmallie (scale 1 : 1)



b 'The Drosten Stone', St Vigean's no. 1