

# How late were Pictish symbols employed?

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## ABSTRACT

*It is suggested that certain features enable particular relief-decorated stones displaying Pictish symbols to be dated within chronological horizons, and that this indicates that Pictish symbols continued to be employed in Scotland into the 10th century or beyond, survival perhaps lasting longer in the north.*

## THE PICTS AND THEIR SYMBOLS

Two problems have long beset the study of Pictish sculpture: what was the meaning and purpose of the symbols that figure in the repertoire of stone carving, and how long were they in use? Both questions are in a sense related, for the time-span of their use might cast some light on whether they had a political or social significance and also on the extent to which traditional cultural attributes of the Picts survived the Gaelic political dominance usually assumed to be associated with the formation of Alba in the ninth century (though on this see Broun 1998). Although there is still considerable debate about the precise origins and meaning of the symbols, in recent years there has been a growing consensus that the symbol-combinations are personal identity indicators, whether representing personal names in a literal sense (Samson 1992), in the guise of ‘name statements’ (Forsyth 1997), or a combination of both (Cummins 1995, 135–7).

The occurrence of Pictish symbols in stone carving does not necessarily mean that they were devised simultaneously with their appearance on stone — the symbols may have been in use long before their first appearance in an imperishable medium. That symbols were being carved on stone and bone in the fifth to sixth century AD is apparent from the finds from Pool, Orkney (Hunter 1997, 32–4). These, and other instances of what Alcock has termed *ur*-symbols, imply that whatever the date of the first carving of the Class I stones, symbols were being developed by the sixth century, if not earlier (Alcock 1996; see also Laing & Laing 1993, 107–8). This would seem to cast doubt on the idea that all the symbols were devised at one time, perhaps, as has been suggested, under the rule of Bridei mac Maelchu (d. c 585) (Henderson 1958; Foster 1996, 79).

## CHRONOLOGY AND PICTISH SCULPTURE

Many problems beset the chronology of Pictish sculpture, not the least of which is the fact that with the possible exception of the Dupplin Cross (Forsyth 1995; Alcock & Alcock 1996), and St Vigean's 1 (the ‘Drosten’ stone — Clancy, 1993), both of which have inscriptions which provide dates in the first half of the ninth century, the chronology of Pictish sculpture floats in a sea in

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which the anchors are provided by the traditional art-historical methods of comparing details of design and style and relating these to their occurrence in other media perceived as datable. This methodology is seriously flawed, since ornamental devices in manuscripts or metalwork may not have the same chronological spread as the same devices in sculpture, and motifs and designs in one geographical region may have been fashionable at other dates elsewhere. Additionally, there are very few closely datable sculptures in early medieval Britain as a whole.

The traditional classificatory scheme for Pictish sculpture has been that proposed by Allen & Anderson (1903, 3–4), who defined three ‘classes’: Class I comprised undressed stones with incised symbols; Class II, dressed cross-slabs with symbols in relief and Class III, dressed relief monuments lacking symbols. Henderson (1987) has added to this Class IV, stones with only incised crosses. As they lack symbols, Classes III and IV lie outside the scope of this paper.

Whatever date is seen to mark the beginning of the Class I stones, there is a general consensus that they were still being erected in the seventh/eighth century (eg Henderson 1967, 115; Foster 1996, 78) and it is usually assumed they were still being carved at a time when relief sculpture was being produced, conventionally in the eighth century. On their own, the symbols on the Class I stones cannot be dated, though if developmental sequence is followed, they can be roughly arranged in an evolutionary if not chronological sequence (Murray 1986). Only in a few cases where the symbols are associated with other incised designs, notably ogham inscriptions or crosses, can an independent means of dating be arrived at. Of course the associated inscriptions or crosses may have been added at a later date, and are usually not closely datable in any case.

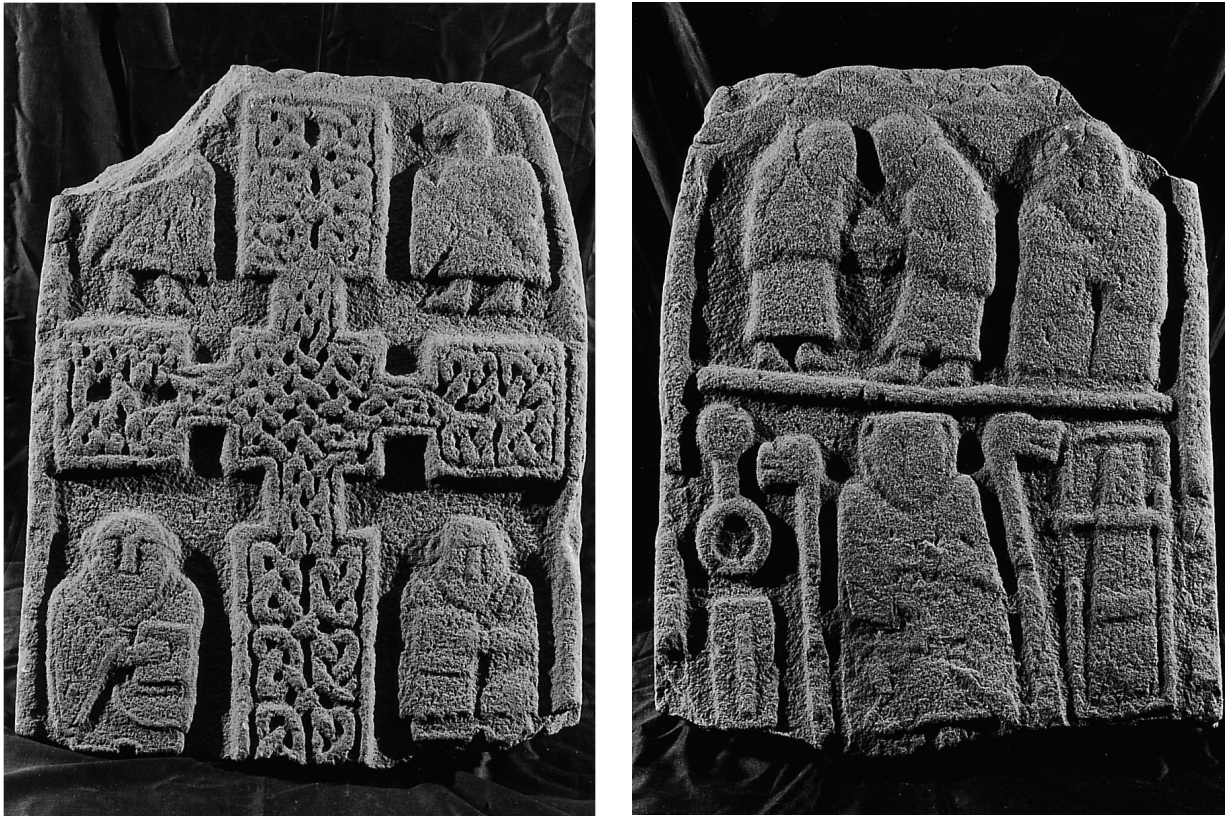
The most useful monuments for the dating of occurrences of Pictish symbols, then, are the Class II relief cross-slabs. Although in the past suggestions have been made that some Class II stones were being erected at the end of the seventh century (eg Curle 1940), the current consensus of opinion dates none of them prior to the eighth. Both Henderson (1982) and Maclean (1998) among others have suggested that Pictish Class II relief sculpture began in the earlier eighth century as a result of Northumbrian influence.

In two other papers the present writer has argued that there is no firm evidence to date any of the Pictish relief sculptures of Class II before the end of the eighth century, and has suggested that artefact types depicted on the stones, ornamental devices not current elsewhere in sculpture until the Viking period (ie later ninth century onwards) and types of animal and figural ornament, all point to the majority of relief sculptures in Scotland being carved in the ninth and 10th centuries, a few possibly in the 11th (Laing 2000).

## THE LATEST SYMBOL STONES

There are a few late sculptures from Pictland which combine Pictish symbols with other devices that can be seen to belong to the Viking period. The majority of these are in the north — while there is good evidence that symbols were regularly employed on sculpture in southern Pictland around the middle of the ninth century, with some possible exceptions discussed below, it is only in the north that they can be argued as still remaining current in the 10th century, perhaps due to a social or cultural conservatism not apparent in the south, where the full impact of the Gaelic overlordship would have been more apparent. In the discussion that follows the nomenclature for stones and the references to Allen’s pattern numbers follow Allen & Anderson (1903).

There are two approaches to dating: first, through the identification of design elements that are in themselves datable from occurrences elsewhere, and secondarily through the identification of design elements which are not in themselves closely datable but which can be matched on



ILLUS 1 Kirriemuir 1, Angus (front: left, back: right) (Photographs by Tom Gray, courtesy of the Meffan Institute, Forfar)

monuments elsewhere which display other datable features. Given the longevity of some designs, this latter method is not wholly satisfactory, but has a corroborative value.

In Southern Pictland there are five stones which display symbols which may be dated with some degree of confidence to the end of the ninth/beginning of the 10th century or later: Kirriemuir 1 and 2 (illus 1 & 2), Monifieth 1 and 2 (illus 3 & 4), and Meigle 5 (not illus). Of these, Kirriemuir 2 was recognized by Henderson (1978, 56) as 'late' (by implication ninth century or later).

There are external clues to the dating of Kirriemuir 2 and Monifieth 2. The mounted warrior on Kirriemuir 2 (on the back, top) carries a sword with straight guards and domed pommel (illus 2b). This type of sword is found on a few other Pictish stones (notably at Shandwick, discussed below), and seems to have started to replace in the later ninth century the type with down-curved guards and upturned pommel represented for example on Aberlemno 2, Angus. The sword type has been discussed by Davidson (1962, 57 and pl XI-XIII) and Bone (1989, 66). The Kirriemuir type of sword appears in English sculpture in the 10th century, for example at Middleton 2A, Yorkshire (Lang 1991, 183 and pl 677), or the Nunburnholme Cross also in Yorkshire (Lang 1991, 189–93 and pl 721), dated to the late ninth or 10th century. Variants of the type with a pommel shaped like a flattened hemisphere were current in the 11th century, namely Petersen's (1919) types W and X, represented in London as Type VII (Wheeler 1927), and it is with these later variants that the Kirriemuir sword most closely corresponds.

The depiction of a penannular brooch worn by a facing female figure on Monifieth 2 (illus 4) is generally known, but the precise type, with squared terminals decorated with a lozenge,



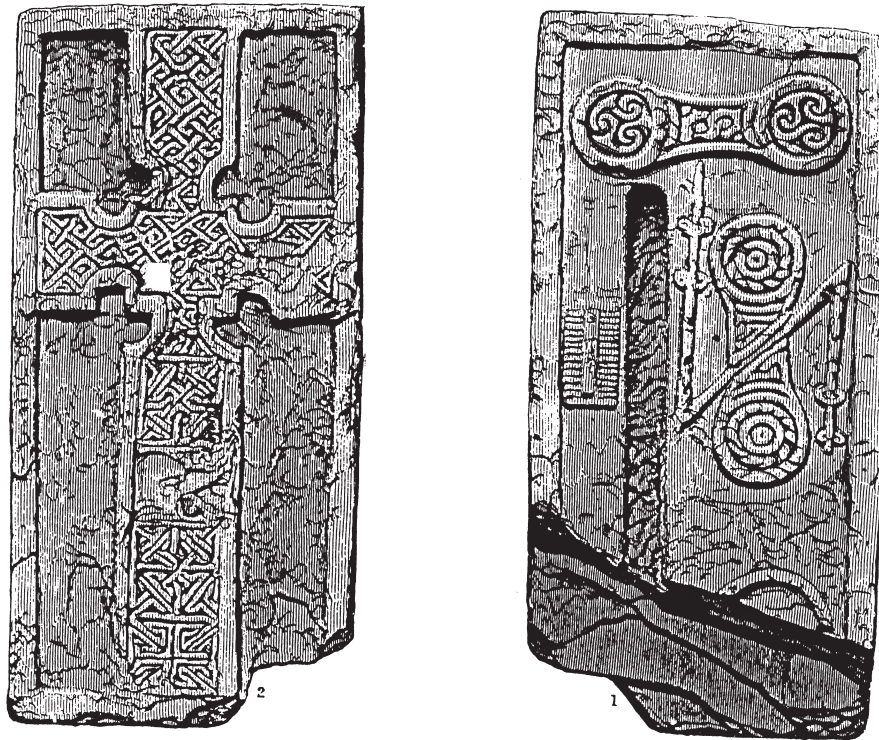
ILLUS 2 Kirriemuir 2, Angus (front: left, back: right) (Photographs by Tom Gray, courtesy of the Meffan Institute, Forfar)

belongs to the present writer's Class Gd, and is well matched by a surviving example from Aignish, Lewis (Laing 1993, no 95). That the simple G brooch was current in the later ninth century is apparent from the association of one with the Trewhiddle Hoard, deposited c 875 (Wilson & Blunt 1961, pl XXVIII,b). There are many ornate variants from Ireland, all of the ninth century, for example the Killucan, County Westmeath brooch (Smith 1914, 238).

Monifieth 1 (illus 3) displays two 'late' features. First, the key pattern on the head extends across the arms, instead of running into the contiguous arm. This feature is also found on Kirriemuir 1 and 2. It occurs on Manx stones of the Viking period (series illustrated in Kermodé 1907, fig 30), and in England has been seen as a feature of Anglo-Scandinavian work (Bailey 1980, 219). Secondly, Monifieth 1 uses diagonal fret, which also points to a ninth-century or later date, as does the crudeness of the symbols. Henderson (1983, 258) has suggested that the diagonal key pattern is a feature of the early 10th century, though given its occurrence on the Dupplin Cross, this seems too late a date for the inception of its use in sculpture.

Two of the stones, Kirriemuir 2 and Monifieth 1, share a key pattern (Allen's pattern 967), also found on Strathmartine 3, St Vigean's 2, Dunkeld 3, Meikle 7, 24 and 28.

The third of the 'late' Class II stones, Monifieth 2 (illus 4), while generally stylistically close to Monifieth 1, shares no design element in common with it, but shares Allen's pattern 899 with Menmuir 1 and St Vigean's 11, pattern 753 with Aboyne, and pattern 1114 with Meikle 6. Menmuir 1 is distinguished by its use of the 'bifurcating strand' in its interlace, a device which does not appear before the Viking period (Bailey 1980, fig 7d and discussion). St Vigean's 11 and Menmuir 1 employ frontal clerical figures, a device probably originating in Ireland and of ninth-



ILLUS 3 Monifieth 1, Angus (after Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 241)



ILLUS 4 Monifieth 2, Angus (after Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 242)

or 10th-century date (Hicks 1980, 19; Bailey 1980, 23 for their appearance on Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture). Similar figures are found on Kirriemuir 1. Aboyne displays projecting spirals on the corners of the limbs of the cross, and knotwork in the interlace which is typical of the Viking period, and is discussed below. Meigle 6 on its own has no particular features that are diagnostically late, though the crudeness of the symbols, the diagonal key patterns, the elongated cross base and coarsely executed horseman all point to a late date.

Henderson (1978, 56) discussed Kirriemuir 2 and concluded that the key pattern across the arms, and the bottom panel of confronted beasts ‘betrays lateness’, while pointing out that the rest of the design is similar to that on the stone from Eassie. Believing Eassie to be eighth century,

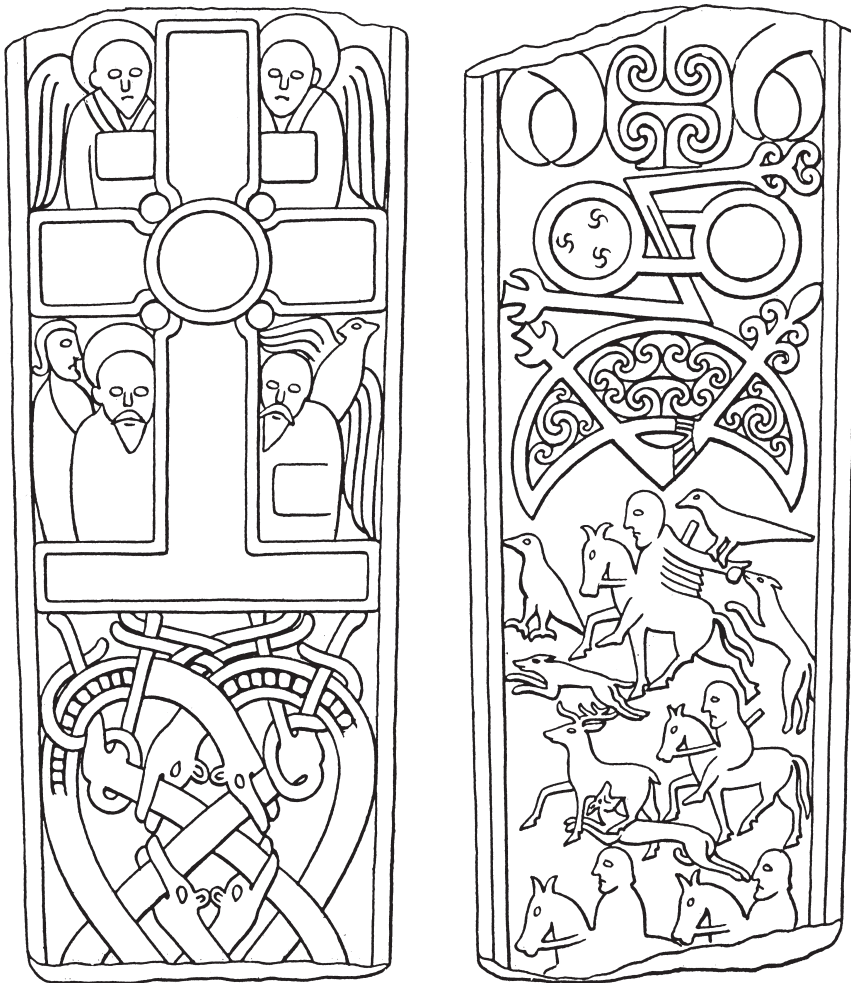
she has seen Kirriemuir 2 as a ‘sophisticated re-working of an old model’ (ibid). The treatment of the drapery on Kirriemuir 2 she has seen as a regional imitation of English drapery styles, as represented at Rothbury, a monument which has been assigned by Cramp (1978, 8) to the first quarter of the ninth century. This type of tubular drapery, however, is also found much later in Ireland, for example on the Market Cross at Tuam, County Galway, where inscriptional evidence points to a date in the early 12th century (Harbison 1992, I, 383). Tuam shares with Kirriemuir 2 the device of confronted animals, and a pair of virtually identical animals appear on the cross from Dysert O’Dea, County Clare, usually also dated to the 12th century (Harbison 1992, I, 384, II, fig 262). The Dysert O’Dea cross also shares with Kirriemuir 2 diagonal key pattern, though in a different form. A date as late as the 11th or early 12th century is possible for Kirriemuir 2 on the basis of these analogies, and the form of the sword pommel, as discussed above, would not be out of keeping with this.

One further monument may be grouped with the above, Meigle 5. This slab has symbols (stemmed disc or ‘mirror case’ and Pictish beast) incised on the side of the slab. The symbols employ double outline, a device current in the Viking Age: Stevenson (1955, 128), in discussing Monifieth 4, argued that the double outlined animals there were in the ‘Anglo-Danish style of 10th-century Northumbria’. As Kenworthy (1980, 359) has noted, the double outline style is perhaps due to Jellinge influence from the end of the ninth to the first half of the 10th century. Meigle 5 has also been seen as of this date by Lang (1974, 215), who argued that the form of the animal heads at the base of the cross were distinctive, and match those on the hogback at Meigle, no 25. Meigle 5 additionally has a blank panel below the rider on the reverse, which probably originally carried an inscription; this is located above the pointed base not now visible on the stone (but shown in RCAHMS 1994, 102, fig E).

The northern monuments are more informative. They comprise Elgin, Brodie, Shandwick, Ulbster, Skinnet and Rosemarkie 1, the last a monument usually assigned to an earlier date due to its links with Nigg and other monuments of the later eighth/early ninth century.

The slab from Elgin (illus 5) has frequently been dated to the eighth century (eg Henderson 1998, 109), but a 10th-century date is much more probable. It has debased symbols on the reverse and employs on the front quadrupeds with lateral tendrils (additional to the tendril-like interlacing of limbs and tails), which should probably be seen as due to the influence of Viking art styles, particularly Jellinge. If this is the case, they are unlikely to pre-date the early 10th century. They display the double outline characteristic of Jellinge work, and the pellet infilling of their bodies is a type of ornament employed in late ninth- or 10th-century metalwork in Scotland and Ireland, for example on the Clunie Castle, Perthshire, brooch (Laing 1993, no 29; Youngs 1989, 115, no 110) and frequently in Manx sculpture of the Viking period, for example at Ballagh 77, Michael 100, 101, Braddan 109 and Jurby 99 (Kermode 1907; Kermode’s original numbering followed here). The same device was still employed on the Irish Aghadoe ivory crosier of the earlier 12th century (Henry 1970, 114 and fig 9), on which the intertwined animals have a general similarity to those at Elgin. Curle (1940, 106) compared the Elgin creatures to those on the slab from Colerne, Wiltshire, but the similarity is not close — the Colerne beasts are much more closely related to the crossed beasts that figure on one of the St Ninian’s Isle ‘pepperpots’ (Wilson 1973, 60–4; Youngs 1989, 109–10, nos 99–101) or the nose guard of the Coppergate helmet (Webster & Backhouse 1991, 60–3, no 47), and also display the herringbone infill that is typical of eighth-century Insular metalwork.

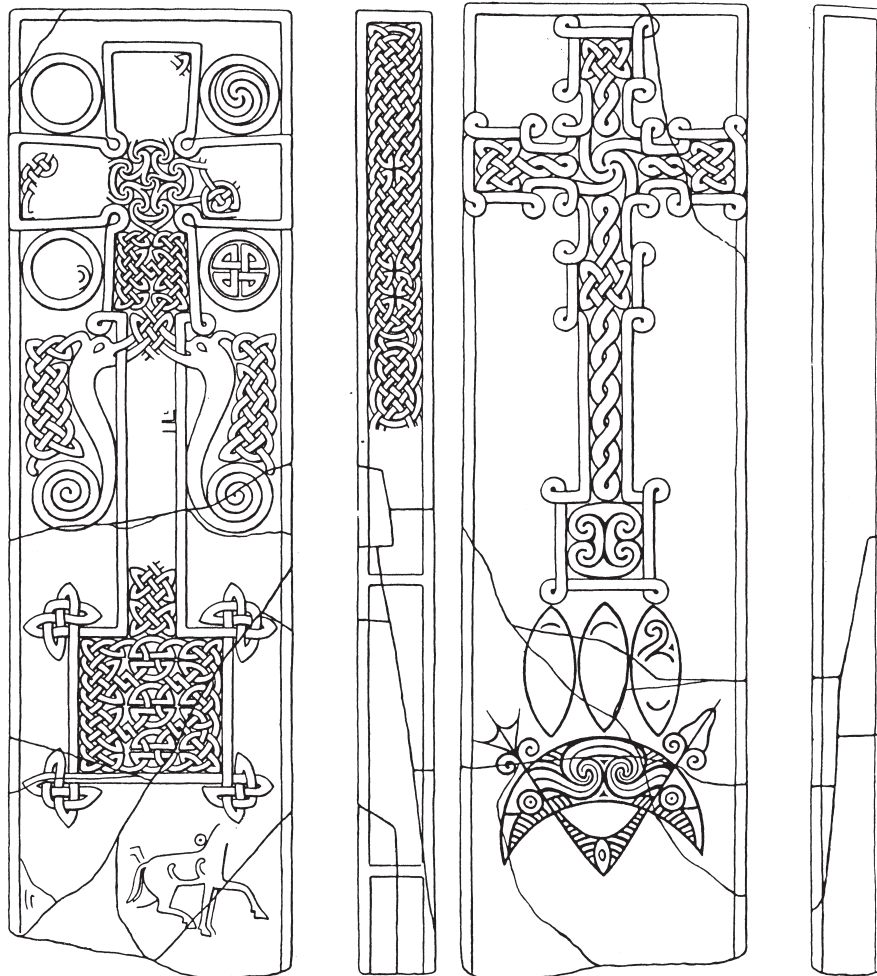
The resemblance of the facing clerics on the Elgin slab to those in the 10th-century Book of Deer (probably Pictish) was noted by Hughes (1980, 28), who pointed to the fact that the evangelist portraits hold books, as do St Luke and St John in Deer.



ILLUS 5 Elgin, Moray (after Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 137)

The iconography of the Elgin slab and that found on f. lv in Deer was also considered by Geddes (1998, 538–9), who put forward an alternative interpretation for these compositions otherwise unique in Insular art. It is notable that the two angels at the top of Elgin have book satchels round their necks — book satchels thus carried appear in Deer on the lower of the two figures in f. lv, and as Geddes has noted appear on the Bressay, Shetland, stone (probably correctly claimed by Stevenson (1955, 128) to be a late ninth- or 10th-century copy of the Papil stone), and on the Cross of the Scriptures at Clonmacnoise. The Cross of the Scriptures has been dated by an inscription to c 904–16 (Henry 1980), though this date has been disputed by Harbison (1992, I, 382), who does not accept the reading.

The Skinnet slab (illus 6) has a cross outlined with a cable which has loops at the corners. This is a very unusual device, but is found on the Type B slabs at Clonmacnoise, which have been dated by inscriptions to a horizon between the late ninth century and the end of the 10th century (O’Floinn 1995, 254). There is no other Pictish slab that employs this device, though lateral loops or scrolls at the corners are observable on the stones at Formaston, Migvie, Aboyne and Dyce 2. Of these, Migvie is a symbol stone (with very unusual symbols) as is Dyce 2, and both Migvie and Aboyne have the interlace pattern crossing the arms, which has been noted as a Viking-period feature. The symbols at Skinnet appear to have been carved at the same time as the cross.



ILLUS 6 Skinnet, Caithness (after Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 29)

The stone at Brodie (illus 7), which Stevenson (1955, 121) classed as ‘Late Boss Style’ on account of its ‘peppering of very small bosses’, has a number of decorative devices found on very late monuments, notably Allen’s pattern 714, found at Collieburn, which has additionally a distinctive type of 10th-century interlace with pellets. This device is encountered for example on a stone from Llanddwei’r Cwym, Brecknock (Nash-Williams 1950, no 47), and was dated by Nash-Williams (*ibid*, 45) to the 10th century, though it also occurs at Merthyr Mawr, accompanied by an inscription dated to the 11th century (*ibid*, no 239). It is a common feature of Norse sculpture in the Isle of Man, for example on Thorstein’s Cross at Braddan (Kermode 1907, 86 — renumbered 112) or on the Sigurd slab from Ramsey (Kermode 1907, 96 — renumbered 122). Allen’s pattern 1108, also present at Brodie, is found in Ireland on the 10th-century sculpture at Monasterboice and in the late ninth/10th-century Gospels of MacDurnan (Henry 1967, 43–4; for the dating O’Floinn 1995, 254).

The ‘Pictish beast’ symbols that appear on the stones at Brodie, Ulbster, and Shandwick belong to Group D of Murray’s typology (1986, 248), which he pointed out was the only form found in Caithness, Sutherland, Ross and Cromarty, and which he assumed to belong to the end of the series. The double disc and Z-rod symbols on the stones at Brodie (illus 7) and Rosemarkie 1 are categorized by Murray (1986, 239) as ‘poor forms’, and again can be seen as typologically



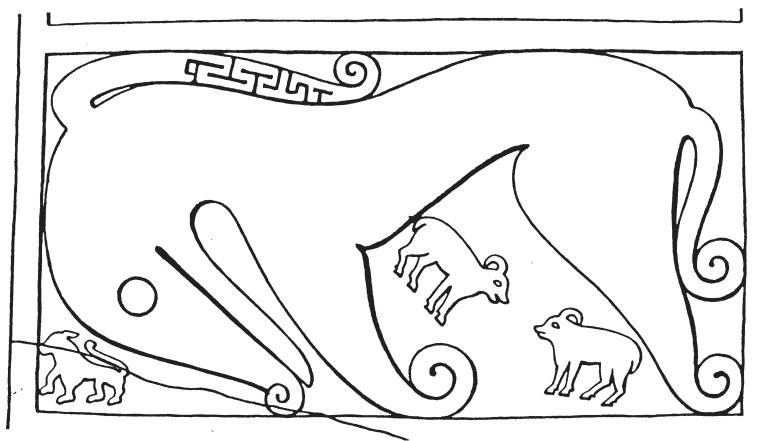
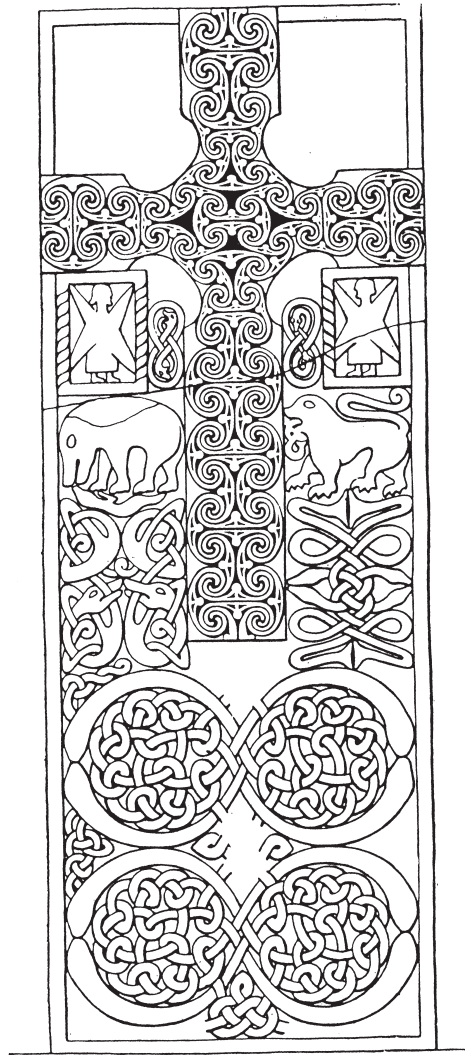


ILLUS 7 Brodie, Moray (front: left, back: right) (Photographs by Tom Gray)

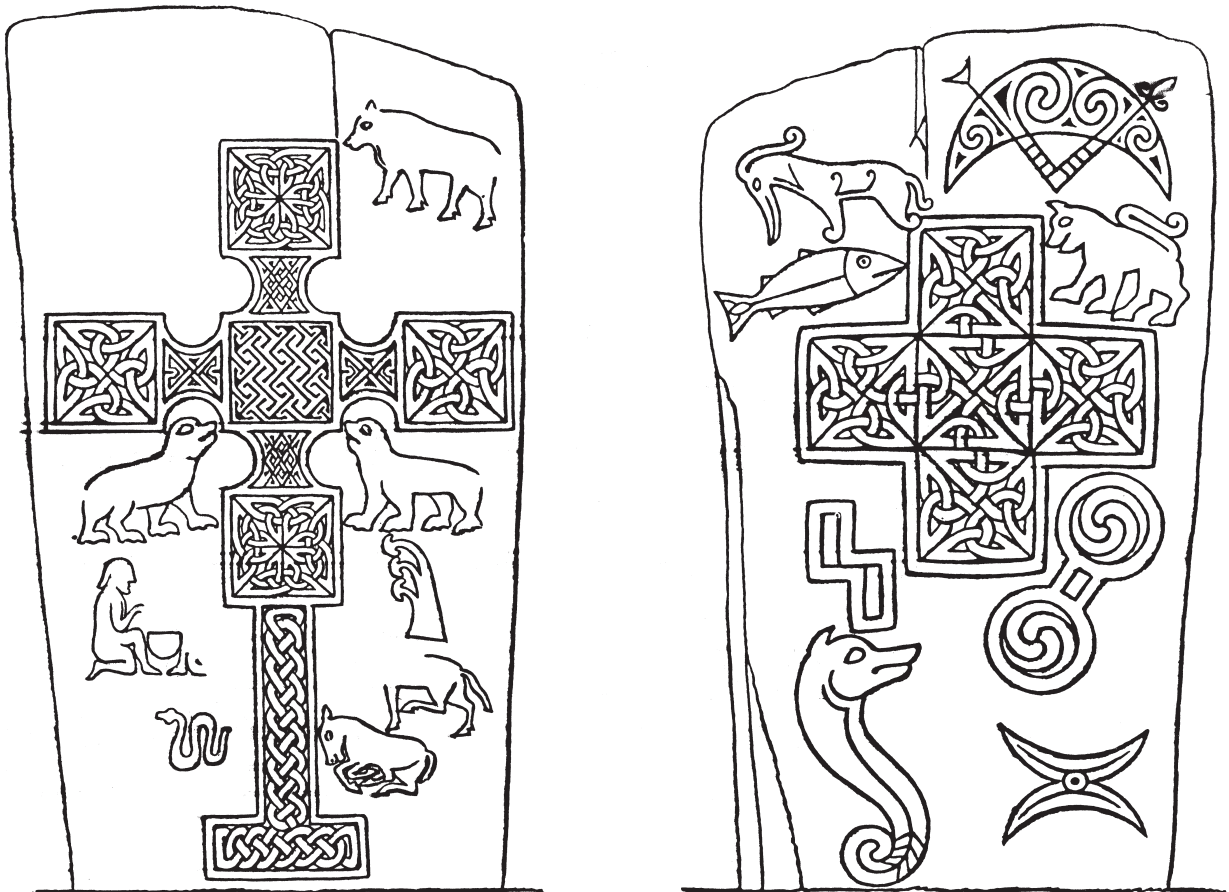
late. The crescent on the Elgin slab is aberrant but again is far from ‘classic’ forms (Murray 1986, 229 and illus 8, no 518).

The fine-line open interlace that infills the Brodie Pictish beast is a characteristic of Viking period sculpture and is found for example at Craigmoline in Wigtownshire (Bailey 1980, 223 and fig 66b). In Ireland similar interlace is found on the fragments at Emlagh, County Roscommon, dated to the 11th century or later (Harbison 1992, I, 384; II, figs 269–72).

The Shandwick slab (illus 8) shares Allen’s pattern 1055 with Elgin. It also displays a type of Viking period key pattern (Allen’s pattern 899) which is represented as a crest on the Pictish beast and which is encountered on a number of late monuments, including at Whithorn, and which in variant form appears in the Isle of Man on Viking-period sculpture, for example on Ballagh 77, Jurby 78, Andreas 73 and Braddan 86 (numbering as in Kermodé 1907). In southern Pictland the earliest occurrence is on the Dupplin Cross (c 820, see Forsyth 1995). The motif has been discussed by Bailey (1980, fig 7c and commentary). Allen’s pattern 974 which appears on this stone also figures on the stone at Farr, which uses other very late devices, and on a number of the stones from St Andrews (7, 8 & 14), which are probably of the 10th century. St Andrews 8 has along its left side a stepped key pattern usually regarded as a Viking-period feature (Bailey 1980, fig 7e), and indeed the use of key patterns on the edges of slabs seems to be a feature of this time. An edge diagonal key pattern also distinguishes St Andrews 7. St Andrews 14 has diagonal fret and flat, double-strand interlace of a type current in the Viking period.



ILLUS 8 Shandwick, Ross (after Allen & Anderson 1903, figs 66 & 68)

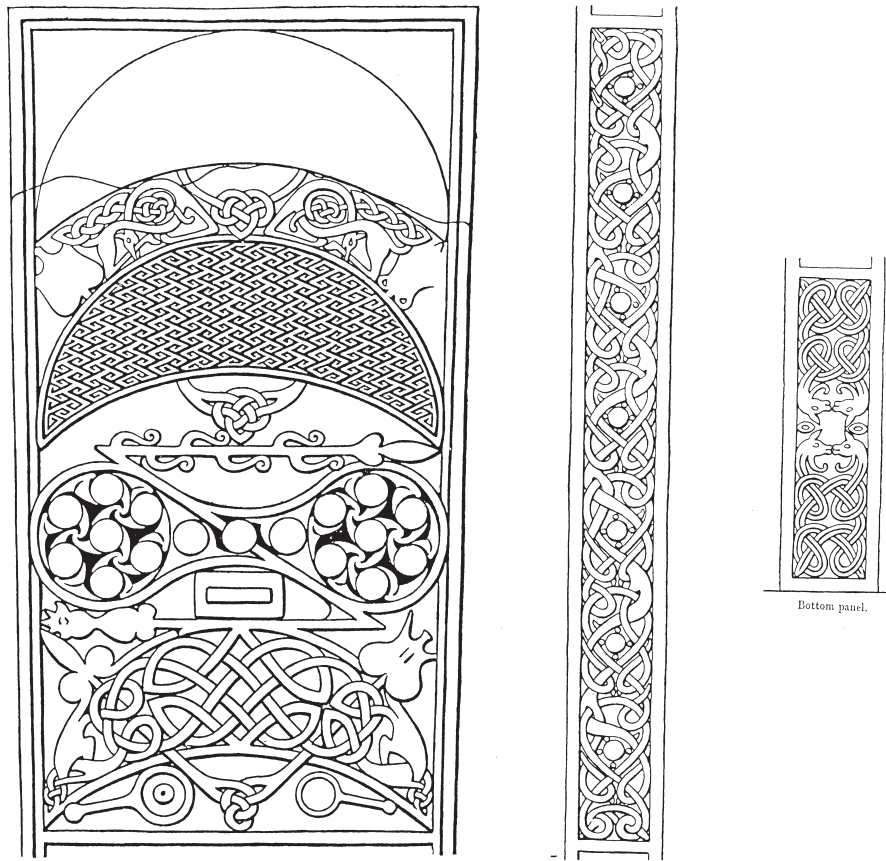


ILLUS 9 Ulbster, Caithness (after Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 31)

A warrior on the figural panel on the reverse of the Shadwick slab carries a sword with domed pommel and straight guards similar to that at Kirriemuir 2, discussed above, which is unlikely to pre-date the end of the ninth century. Shadwick shares Allen's pattern 1100 and 974 with Rosemarkie 1.

Many of the patterns represented on the Ulbster slab (illus 9) are peculiar to that monument, but Allen's pattern 958 is found on the Gaelic monument at Ardchattan (dated to the late ninth or 10th century, Laing 1995) as well as on Burghead 9 and 12, while pattern 733 is also represented at Burghead 8 (not 9, as listed by Allen) and at Forteviot 3. The Burghead fragments display nothing except the pattern, but Forteviot 3 is the arm of a free-standing cross, with pellet-infilled interlace of the type discussed above as being a characteristic of the 10th century and later.

Rosemarkie 1 (illus 10) displays an encyclopedia of designs, many of them peculiar to this one monument. The detailed iconography has been discussed by Henderson (1990), who has come out in favour of a late eighth-century date for the slab. Several of the ornamental patterns occur on monuments in southern Pictland usually dated to the later eighth century, but which the present writer (Laing 2000) would prefer to see dated to the ninth. There are also a number of designs which are matched only on late stones. Pattern 974 occurs at Farr, Reay and Shadwick, as well as on several of the later St Andrews stones (7, 8, 18, 20). The slab at Reay is distinguished by its elongated head and nimbus, which are stylistically in keeping with some monuments in the Isle of Man, for example the cross at Lonan (Kermode 1907, no 57). Allen's pattern 662 occurs on the 10th-century Barochan cross, which is a Govan School monument (for the school



ILLUS 10 Rosemarkie 1, Ross (after Allen & Anderson 1903, figs 62–5)

generally, Ritchie 1994; for Barochan, Spearman 1994, 41). Allen's pattern 969 is found at Farr, Kettins, Inchbrayock, Strathmartine 4 and St Andrews 4. Henderson (1990, no pagination) has drawn attention to the tendency towards bifurcation in the strands of interlace and animal bodies on Rosemarkie 1 (in particular of the animals on the middle panel on the left side; Allen & Anderson 1903, fig 65), which she has seen as a distinctive trait of the Rosemarkie 1 sculptor. But this feature is generally a characteristic of the Viking period, as Bailey (1980, 72) has pointed out, and also occurs at Farr, which, as noted above, shares pattern 974 with Rosemarkie 1. The Rosemarkie 1 side panel also employs pellet infilling in the interlace, again a feature of the Viking period, as noted above. Another 'late' feature of Rosemarkie 1 is the use of decoration along the edge of the slab, which is matched only by Sueno's Stone for its complexity (Henderson 1990). The decoration on Rosemarkie 1 has been compared with that on St Andrews 14 by both Stevenson (1959, 47) and Henderson (1983, 258).

## CONCLUSIONS

Although comparatively few in number, there are relief-decorated sculptures with Pictish symbols in Scotland that display features which are diagnostically late or which are found on other stones which display other late decorative features. The conclusion must therefore be drawn that Pictish symbols did not disappear with the rise of Gaelic supremacy, which might have pointed to deliberate suppression, but continued to be used long after the creation of Alba, some perhaps as late as the 11th or early 12th century.

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