

Two New Pictish Symbol Stones from Orkney

by J. N. Graham Ritchie

A fragment of a Pictish symbol stone was discovered on the Sands of Evie, Orkney, by Mr J. L. Wilson in October 1967. The fragment (Pl. 10a) is of Rousay flagstone, measuring 0.28 m by 0.23 m and 0.09 m in thickness, and on one side bears pecked decoration comprising part of a mirror symbol. Almost the complete mirror handle survives; it is key-hole shaped with a slight expansion at the base of the key-hole, by which the handle has been attached to the plate, only about a quarter of which remains.

A second stone with Pictish symbols was brought to the writer's attention by Mrs H. Walker, assistant custodian of the Ministry of Public Building and Works' museum at the Broch of Gurness, Orkney. The stone (fig. 1) was found during the excavation of the Broch in 1935, but the nature of the ornament does not seem to have been noted hitherto. The three symbols, incised on a block measuring 0.27 m by 0.19 m and 0.29 m in thickness, are two rectangular figures and the motif known as the 'circular disc and rectangle with square indentation'. The angular motifs, which flank the more recognisable symbol, are a rectangle within a rectangle, and a rectangle with two small rectangles abutting its shorter sides. There are also two incised lines, which may be part of an incomplete motif. The stone was found on top of a wall at the eastmost break in the rampart, overlooking the inner ditch, the wall being a partition between two cubicles. The stone is thus associated, albeit loosely, with the second period of occupation of the site. This is poorly dated, but its stratigraphical position, between the building of the broch itself (period 1) and the ninth-century Viking buildings to the south of the broch (period 3), is quite certain.

These two stones may be added to the five surviving Pictish symbol stones from Orkney (fig. 2). A lost carving of an eagle on a cist at Oxtro Broch, and the stone and bone objects, decorated with incised symbols, from the Broch of Burrian may also be included (Pl. 10b, c). The mirror symbol is one of the most common of the Pictish repertoire. Fox distinguished two main groups, namely those with a bar-handle with a ring at each end, for example on the stones from Greens and the Knowe of Burrian (nos. 3 and 5), and those with shaped handles.¹ It is to the second group that the fragment from the Sands of Evie belongs, and it may be compared particularly with the symbols at Clynmilton No. 1 (Sutherland) and Aberlemno No. 1 (Angus).² The three incised motifs from the Broch of Gurness are more difficult to parallel in Orkney. Rectangular symbols occur on the stones from Redland and South Ronaldsay (nos. 7 and 8), but in both cases they are highly ornamented internally with curvilinear designs. The rectangle within a rectangle may be compared with symbols incised on the wall of the Sculptor's Cave at Covesea (Morayshire) and possibly the Doo Cave at East Wemyss (Fife);³ divided rectangles and other simple rectilinear figures may be found in the Doo Cave, Jonathan's Cave and the Court Cave (Fife).⁴ The circular disc and rectangle with square-indentation is found at the Broch of Burrian, Greens, South Ronaldsay, and possibly at the Brough of Birsay (nos. 2, 3, 8 and possibly no. 1). It has been

¹ *Archaeol. Cambrensis* c (1948), 39 f.

² ECMS III, 39 f., fig. 36; 205, fig. 221.

³ *ibid.*, 129 ff., fig. 135 c; 373, fig. 389.

⁴ *loc. cit.*, 370 ff., figs. 389-90.

suggested that the notched or indented symbol is a northern variety found in Orkney, Caithness and Sutherland.¹

The Pictish symbols found in Orkney are of some interest as more than half have been found in recorded contexts. Two have been found in burial deposits (nos. 1 and 6), while the pebble from the Broch of Burrian was found in a cist half-filled with red ashes (no. 2). Four have been found during the excavation of brochs (nos. 2, 4, and 6) and a probable broch (no. 5), and it has been recorded that no. 7 may originally have been taken from the Broch of Redland. The pebble from Burrian and the lost slab from Oxtro are clearly secondary; the context of the decorated

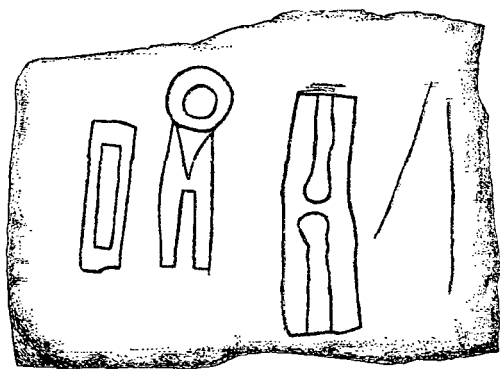


FIG. 1. Symbol Stone from the Broch of Gurness.

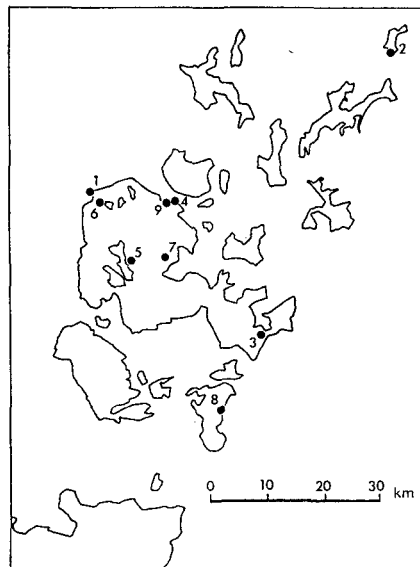


FIG. 2. Distribution of Symbol Stones in Orkney.

bone from Burrian is not recorded, although it is placed by the excavator in the second phase of occupation on the site. It might be suggested that the Gurness stone provides a date between about the late fifth and eighth centuries A.D. for the huts clustered at the base of the broch. Although the find-spot of the stone is known, however, it is not certain that it was intended originally for use in the partition wall. The decoration differs from the two groups of Orkney examples, namely the monumental slabs (nos. 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8) and small talismanic pieces such as the Burrian objects (no. 2), comparable perhaps with the stone disc from Jarlshof (Shetland),² and it may be that the simple incised ornament of the Gurness stone is more in the nature of a trial for a larger scheme.

The writer is indebted to Mr J. L. Wilson, the finder of the Evie stone, and to Lord and Lady Birsay, in whose possession the stone is, for permission to publish it. Mr Stuart Cruden has kindly given permission on behalf of the Ministry of Public Building and Works for the publication of the stone from the Broch of Gurness, and has provided information about its context. The writer is greatly indebted to Mrs H. Walker and Miss M. Anderson for drawing attention to the Gurness stone and for much kindness on the site, and to Dr Anna Ritchie and Mr I. Ralston for their assistance during the preparation of this note.

¹ *Archaeol. J.* cxx (1963), 59 f.

² Hamilton, J. R. C. (1956), *Excavations at Jarlshof, Shetland*, 84, pl. xvii c; *Archaeol. J.*, loc. cit.

CATALOGUE

1. Birsay, Brough of Birsay (Birsay and Harray) HY 239280, NMA IB 243
 Broken slab found at the W. end of a triple grave belonging to the earliest series of graves in the cemetery. Pecked on soft flagstone. Symbols: circular disc and rectangle, crescent and V-rod, 'elephant', eagle.
 Scene: three warriors wearing tunics, bearing swords, spears, shields.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 1, 4 f., fig. 57.
 Radford, C. A. R., *The Early Christian and Norse Settlements at Birsay, Orkney*, MPBW Guide (1959), 17, pl. 8.
 Wainwright, F. T., *The Northern Isles* (1962), 94, pl. xi.
2. Burrian, Broch of Burrian (North Ronaldsay) HY 762514, NMA GB 9 and GB 227 (Pl. 10b, c)
 (a) Flat oblong pebble of brownish sandstone with two incised crosses on one side and, on the other, a five-pointed star, three of the points contain small incised circles; there are also faint traces of a crescent. Secondary level of broch; in a cist, half-filled with ashes.
 (b) Phalangeal bone of ox with crescent and V-rod on its convex surface and circular disc and rectangle with square indentation on the opposite side.
 Broch, phase of occupation not stated.
 Another bone has incised marks showing no distinct form.
Arch. Scot. v, pt. ii (1880), 341 f., fig. 352, fig. 1, 364; 345, 361, figs. 16 and 18, 364.
Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot. x (1872-4), 5 f., fig. p. 6; 18 ff., figs. 2 and 4.
 ECMS III, 26, fig. 23; 25, fig. 22.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 193, 47, figs. 90 and 91.
Archaeol. J. cxx (1963), 47 f.
3. Greens (St Andrews and Deerness) HY 541031, NMA IB 203
 Symbols: Circular disc and rectangle with square indentation, crescent and V-rod, mirror. Incised on hard flagstone.
 Found close to the farm buildings at Greens in 1923.
Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot. LVIII (1923-4), 297 ff., fig. 2.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 651, 247, fig. 59.
4. Gurness, Broch of Gurness or Aikerness (Evie and Rendall) HY 381268, MPBW Museum, Gurness
 Symbols: Rectangles, circular disc with rectangle and square indentation. Found on top of a wall at the eastmost break in the rampart overlooking the inner ditch, the wall being a partition between two 'cubicles'. The account in *PSAS* xiv (1936-7), 9 ff., 'The Aikerness Stone', by J. Storer Clouston is misleading; the photograph, fig. 1 is heavily retouched, see p. 16 fn.
5. Knowe of Burrian (Birsay and Harray) HY 308168, Tankerness House Museum, Kirkwall
 Symbols: eagle, crescent and V-rod, mirror.
 Found during the excavation of a probable broch.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 21, 18, fig. 58.
6. Oxtro, Oxtro Broch (Birsay and Harray) HY 253268, lost
 Symbol: Eagle.
 Cists containing burnt bone and ashes were discovered during the excavation of the broch and an incised eagle was found on one of the cist covers.
 Said to have been built into the wall of one of the farm buildings at Boardhouse.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 11, 11 f.
7. Redland (Firth) HY 378171, NMA IB 24
 Symbols: Rectangular symbol, crescent and V-rod. Incised on hard flagstone.
 Found in a cottage near Redland: said to have come originally from near the Broch of Redland.
 ECMS, III, 20, fig. 16.
 RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 345, 98 f., fig. 151.

8. St Peter's Church (South Ronaldsay) ND 470908, NMA IB 2

Symbols: Front, rectangular symbol, crescent and V-rod. Back, crescent and V-rod, circular disc and rectangle with square indentation.

Incised on hard flagstone. Stone formed the sill of a window in the Church.

ECMS III, 20 f., figs. 17 and 17 A.

RCAMS, *Orkney*, no. 842, 290, fig. 366.

9. Sands of Evie (Evie and Rendall) HY 372264 (Pl. 10a).

Symbol: Mirror.



a Pictish symbol-stone, Sands of Evie



b Pebble with incised decoration, Broch of Burrian



c Bone with Pictish symbols, Broch of Burrian

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