

# A Pictish ‘serpent’ incised slab from Jarlshof, Shetland

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with Anna Ritchie and Ian G Scott

## ABSTRACT

*The identification and dating of a supposed Norse grave slab of 10th-/11th-century date from Jarlshof, Shetland, consisting of two decorated fragments picked up on the beach beside this multi-period settlement site in the 1930s, are rejected by the authors of this paper in favour of a Pictish attribution, a late 6th- or early 7th-century date, and a probable architectural function. On the basis of a detailed examination of the two fragments of the so-called ‘Jarlshof Serpent’ (front and back), alternative reconstructions of the incised motifs are considered, leading to the conclusion that they probably represent a hybrid in the form of a horse-headed serpentine creature with the body conventionally decorated in the manner of the Pictish salmon symbol. The use of such hybrid symbols by the Picts, as well as the growing evidence for their erection of symbol stones in association with structures, are discussed. The paper ends with a brief consideration of the implications of this reattribution for the traditional ‘minimalist’ interpretation of the Pictish settlement-phase at Jarlshof.*

## INTRODUCTION

James Graham-Campbell

### BACKGROUND

On the occasion of the 17th Viking Congress, held in Lerwick in 2013, James Graham-Campbell delivered a paper on ‘Death and Wealth in Viking Age Shetland’ which included a brief survey of the stone sculpture attributed to this period.<sup>1</sup> Attention was drawn to the remains of a supposed 10th-/11th-century Norse grave slab from Jarlshof, consisting of two decorated fragments picked up on the beach beside the well-known multi-period settlement site in the 1930s (Canmore ID 513). Although published by J R C Hamilton in 1956 as being of Viking-Age date (see below), this identification was rejected by Graham-Campbell in favour of a Pictish attribution, with advice from Isabel Henderson – in anticipation of this joint paper intended to bring the true nature of this neglected, but important, sculpture to wider attention.

## DISCOVERY AND PUBLICATION

These ‘two fragments of symbol-bearing slab’ (Illus 1) were first noted in print (and illustrated) in 1946 in the anonymous ‘Introduction’ to the Royal Commission’s *Inventory of the Ancient Monuments of Orkney & Shetland*, where they were included in the paragraph devoted to Romilly Allen’s ‘Class I’ Pictish symbol stones from Shetland (see now Historic Environment Scotland, Canmore ID 514: Jarlshof 1). They were more fully published a decade later in John Hamilton’s report on the Jarlshof excavations, in which they were catalogued by him (1956: 189, pl xxxvii, 1–2) as:

*Grave Slab Fragments.* The larger is a corner fragment measuring 18½ ins. in length and 8 ins. in width [470mm × 203mm]. One face is rough and unworked; the other is smooth and bears a portion of an incised representation of a coiled sea horse or serpent. Both edges are chamfered.

The smaller fragment measuring 6½ ins. by 6 ins. [165mm × 152mm] is similarly worked, the incised representation being that of the head of the animal

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with clearly defined pointed ear and mane executed in a series of S scrolls. Two edges show trace of chamfer.

Although registered among the excavated finds from Jarlshof, these fragments are in fact stray finds (NMS: X.HSA 782; 'Excavation Find', Canmore: SC 1224039):

on the eroded beach [were discovered] two fragments of a sculptured sandstone slab by Mr. John Bruce and Dr. Richardson.<sup>2</sup> The fragments suggest an ornate grave slab with chamfered edge, of 10th or 11th century date, inserted in the mound above the ruins of the older broch settlement. A burial was actually discovered beneath the west gable wall of mediæval Jarlshof and tradition may have facilitated the acceptance of the mound as a convenient burial place in the 18th century (Hamilton 1956: 189).

John Hamilton's belief that these fragments are the remains of a Norse grave slab thus provided him with 'some confirmation' for his theory that the most likely explanation for the absence of any Viking-Age burials at Jarlshof was that 'the dead were buried, if they were interred close to the settlement at all, to the west on the promontory which has been entirely eroded away' (Hamilton 1956: 189), with the existence of a 10th-/11th-century grave in this area serving for him to create a link to the burial 'beneath the west gable wall of mediæval Jarlshof', which was constructed 'towards the end of the 13th or early in the 14th century' (Hamilton 1956: 190).

It will be noted that Hamilton offered no parallels, or any references, in support of his identification of the Jarlshof fragments as part of a Norse grave slab, while ignoring their previous publication as Pictish by RCAMS (as cited above). The result has been that the 'Jarlshof Serpent' has escaped the attention of students of Pictish sculpture and, indeed, it seems to have passed without any further consideration in print until 2009, when Anna Ritchie (in Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9, 45, no. 129) perceptively noted that the chamfered sides made it more 'likely that it decorated a building rather than marked a grave'. There is therefore an immediate problem in supposing the Jarlshof fragments to be of Viking-Age date because there appear to have been no

buildings of this period on this part of the site to be eroded by the sea (Hamilton 1956: 'Master Plan'), quite apart from the fact that there was no Norse tradition of decorating stone buildings (cf Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Graham-Campbell 2013). Even as a potential (if rare) grave slab in an Insular tradition from Scandinavian Scotland, it contrasts markedly with the 10th-/11th-century example from Iona, Argyll, with its Norwegian runic inscription and incised 'expansional' cross (Barnes & Page 2006: 243–9, SC 14, with refs).

Not surprisingly, however, Ritchie was influenced by Hamilton's Viking-Age date in proposing that the Jarlshof fragments 'may be a rare example in the Northern Isles of carving inspired by Scandinavian art styles' (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9), suggesting that 'the decoration on the lower part of the body is similar to the "stopped plait" ornament on Viking-Age stones in the Isle of Man' (see below). She added (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9) that 'this possibility is strengthened by O'Meadhra's recognition of a Scandinavian motif-piece in Ringerike style amongst the slate graffiti from Jarlshof (1993, 436)'. The fact remains, however, that the head and neck of the 'Jarlshof Serpent' bear no similarity to the animal heads characteristic of the Ringerike style – or of any other potentially relevant style of Viking art (cf Wilson & Klindt-Jensen 1966; Graham-Campbell 2013). Indeed, it was Ritchie's opinion (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9) that the incised design on the Jarlshof fragments 'most resembles a sea-horse such as that on a stone from Ness in Orkney' – an accepted Pictish symbol (see below).

## DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

Isabel Henderson

The two surviving fragments of Hamilton's 'Jarlshof Serpent' stone are both in good condition, such as to suggest that they were most probably found on the shore soon after they fell out of the exposed section. The carved surfaces are remarkably smooth and clean, with abrasion largely confined to areas adjacent to the fractures; the incision used on both fragments is deep, fluent and controlled, evidently the work

of an experienced sculptor (Illus 1). The reverses are uncarved and share some scaling of the top surface revealing a rust-brown layer (Illus 2).

#### DESCRIPTION

*Fragment 1 (NMS: X.HSA 782B): the head and neck of a maned animal (Illus 1)*

A remnant of a chamfered edge has survived above the head. The curved edge to the right of the head may also be chamfered (see below), but this chamfer was not recorded in the recent publication (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9, 45, no. 129). The left profile of the animal head is damaged, with loss of the nose and jaws. Only a portion of the right-hand section of the eye socket survives. The brow has a shallow curve defined by a double contour line which meets a similar contour line at the left edge of a pointed ear. The curved neck begins under the jutting ear. Slender at first, it expands to contain gradating lengths of hair,

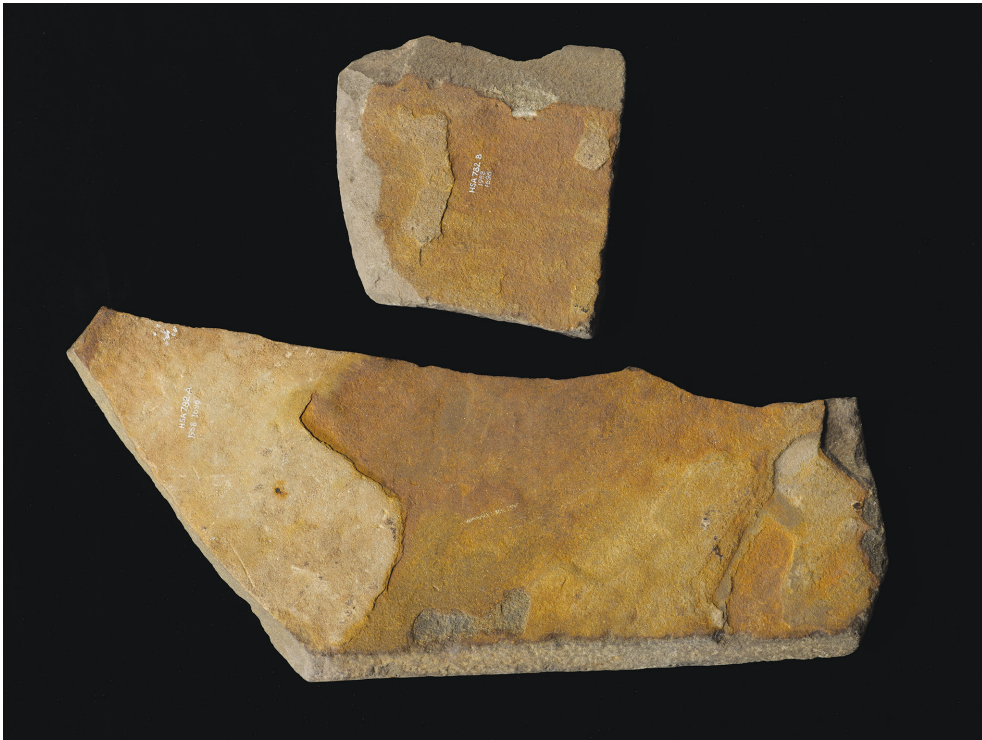
lightly curled at the ends, to form a mane. The lengths are contained within a narrow moulding cut so deeply as to be in false relief. In spite of the damage to the head, the shallow brow, the jutting ear and the fully expressed mane suggest that the head, when complete, represented a horse.

*Fragment 2 (NMS: X.HSA 782A): a section of a widely curved serpentine body divided into two equal parts by a median line running along its length (Illus 1)*

The lower horizontal edge of the fragment and a section of the edge at right angles to it have a chamfered edge of the same depth as the trace of a chamfer on the upper edge of Fragment 1. Above the median line, the curve of the body is decorated with a bold pattern of curves and concave V-shapes, the units of which are gradated so that they become smaller as they reach a double concave curved edge which encloses the decorated section of the divided body. Adjacent to



ILLUS 1 Two fragments of Pictish incised slab from Jarlshof, Shetland (© National Museums Scotland)



ILLUS 2 The uncarved surfaces of the two fragments of incised slab from Jarlshof (Illus 1) (© National Museums Scotland)

this closure is a small single concave curve with a tight double convex curve, at approximately right angles to it. A short distance along the curve is a remnant of a single parallel curve.

The carvings on the two fragments share the depth of their incision, the use of double-curves and the skilful gradation of forms. In addition to these technical and stylistic similarities, the fragments are recorded as having a distinctive chamfer of between 28mm and 32mm deep on one edge of Fragment 1 and on two edges of Fragment 2 (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9). There would therefore seem little reason to doubt that they are part of the same monument of uncertain overall dimensions, displaying designs carved by the same sculptor. Nevertheless, the fragments are not conjoined, and that the designs could be arranged in a different relationship to each other, be parts of two different animals incised on the same slab, or have been carved on different slabs, are all possibilities.

#### THE ANIMAL TYPE

Although the fragments were described by Hamilton as together comprising the 'Jarlshof Serpent', a creature with a horse's head and a serpentine body is not strictly a serpent, but a hybrid made up of two different species of animals, and so belongs to a well-represented group of hybrid animals in Pictish art which combine features of eagles and lions, and more commonly, horses, dogs, serpents and fish. The latter group subdivides roughly into hybrids with dog heads and those with horse heads, but the combination of species can differ within that division. In studies of Pictish sculpture these hybrids have been given many names including, most recently, 'S-dragons' and 'S-beasts' (Scott & Ritchie 2015: 182) in an attempt to avoid using names like hippocamp, fish-monster and sea-monster which carry cultural connotations. Even 'dragon' sets up false associations, and

'beast' has come to be associated with the Pictish symbol formerly named conventionally as a 'swimming elephant'. Names with an S-element usefully describe their consistent shape but are unduly uninformative. The distinctive feature which characterises these creatures is that they are hybrids and any name should bring this feature to mind. Hybridisation in art is primarily a means of depicting creatures of supernatural strength and was greatly favoured by Pictish sculptors – one has only to look at the Pictish beast symbol (Illus 3) which is made up of parts of animals with no core species (Henderson 1997:

15, 32 and *passim*). In this discussion, which admittedly does not provide a neat solution to the more general problem of nomenclature, I will refer to 'dog-headed hybrids' and 'horse-headed hybrids', both of which have serpentine bodies, and attributes of a fish, ending with either a tightly coiled tail, or a fully expressed fish tail.

A characteristic of the majority of both dog-headed and horse-headed hybrids is the division of the body by a median line running along the side of the body. This convention most probably has its origin in the naturalistic lateral line of the anatomy of fish that is clearly marked on salmon.



ILLUS 3 The 'Craw Stane', Rhynie, Aberdeenshire: a Pictish symbol stone displaying a naturalistic salmon and a Pictish beast, without the later standardised internal body-markings (© Crown copyright: HES)

It almost invariably features in the design of the Pictish salmon symbol as, for example, on the 'Craw Stane', at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire (Canmore ID 17199; Fraser 2008: no. 43.1) (Illus 3). The line, which runs along each side of the body from the gills to the base of the tail, is made up of a series of sensitive cells that detect potentially hostile movement in the water, and so is essential to the survival of the fish. The Picts cannot have known of the function of the lateral line, but they obviously regarded its representation as essential to their naturalistic visual depictions of fish. The presence of a lateral line serves therefore as a signifier for a fish element in a hybrid.

The dog-headed and horse-headed hybrids appear on Pictish sculpture either as singletons or confronted pairs. The Perthshire cross slab Meigle 1 (Canmore ID 30838; Fraser 2008: no. 189) has

an impressive array of both types on its cross face (Illus 4): two singletons, one a horse head with a horse's forequarters and a fish tail, and the other a dog head with a coiled tail, both with lateral lines, and a confronted pair made up of a horse head and a dog head, both with fish tails and lateral lines. The singletons, as we shall see, can, in certain contexts, be considered for inclusion in the repertoire of the Pictish symbols. The confronted pairs are also symbolic but stand for different narratives, determined by their context. Pairs of confronted animals have a long history in art as being protective, and their symbolism is carried over into a variety of Christian contexts (Bailey 2011; Whitworth 2014). Although some of the design components of the paired hybrids are clearly related to those of the singletons, they are a later development used in relief sculpture



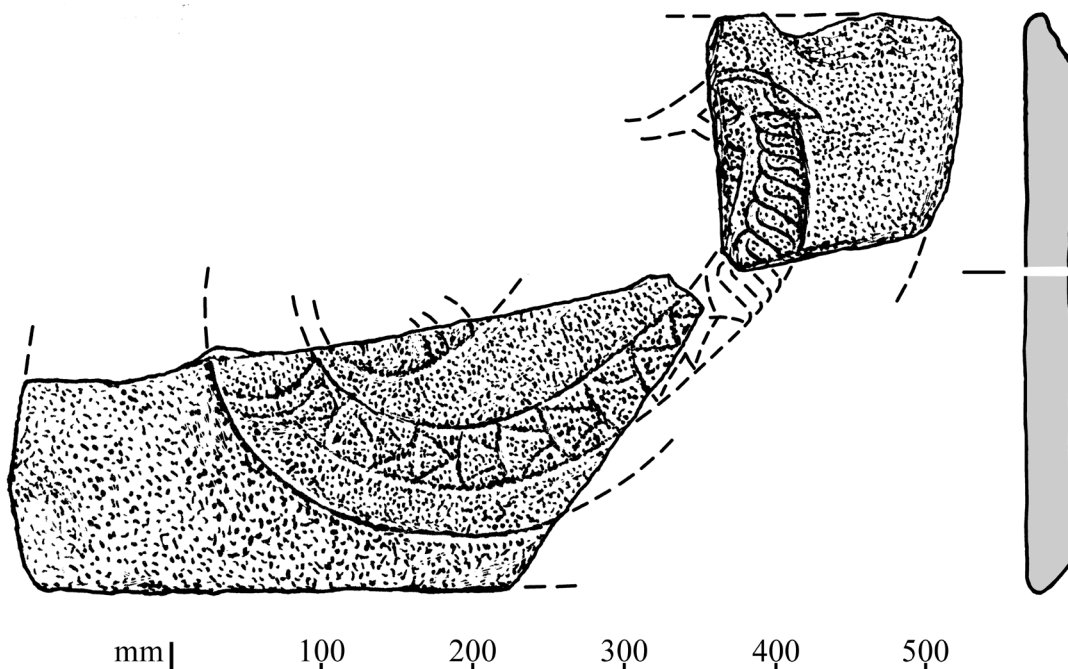
ILLUS 4 The cross slab Meigle 1, Perthshire, with its impressive array of dog-headed and horse-headed hybrid animals flanking the cross shaft; the top half of the reverse displays a variety of Pictish symbols (© Crown copyright: HES)

and so have no direct bearing on the early development of the singletons. A comprehensive, fully annotated description and analysis of both singletons and pairs has been published by Ross Trench-Jellicoe (2006).

#### THE DESIGNS ON THE 'JARLSHOF SERPENT' FRAGMENTS

Although the muzzle is damaged, the head and neck fragment almost certainly depicts the head of a maned horse; the mane is stylised and the surviving curvature and length of the neck is not that of a naturalistic horse. As most recently reconstructed, the head is positioned after a small hypothetical extension of the mane so as to attach it to the right end of a section of the serpentine body with the lateral line of a fish (Illus 5). The upper side of the line is filled with incised decoration tailored to fit the tapering end of the left side of the body. This decoration is considered by Anna Ritchie (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9) to be similar to the form of interlace

known as 'stopped plait' – presumably because the V-shaped lines do not go over and under the curves but are unattached – as found in Cumbrian (and Manx) Viking-Age sculpture, being a 'peculiar development' which Richard Bailey describes as having its 'seeds ... in earlier Anglian sculpture' (Bailey 1980: 205–6, fig 59). To the present writer, the pattern resembles more closely the central 'vertebral' feature of another equally distinctive pattern known as 'ring-chain', derived from 'the Scandinavian Borre-style repertoire' (Bailey 1980: 217–18, fig 60), if lacking the integral rings. In fact, neither of these analogies is exact and depends on a partial resemblance to elements of patterns used on free-standing crosses. The Jarlshof pattern can be related more appropriately to the body-marking of the Pictish serpents which make up the serpent and Z-rod symbols. For example, on the handsome carved symbol stone at Newton, Aberdeenshire, where the rearing serpent penetrated by the Z-rod has finely incised parallel curves across its body with V-shapes forming part of K-shapes on either



ILLUS 5 Reconstruction drawing by Ian Scott of the 'Jarlshof Serpent' (Scott & Ritchie 2009) (© Crown copyright: HES (drawing by Ian G Scott) (scale 1:5))

side of a circular central motif (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 34, illus 31; Fraser 2008: no. 38.1). Curves and V-shapes are also carved, in heavy broad incision, on the body of the snake on the symbol stone at Brandsbutt, Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008: no. 7). Other Aberdeenshire examples with related simpler patterns, all very worn, are found at Inverurie, Inch and further north at Knockando/Pulvrenan, Moray (Allen & Anderson (1903) 1993, vol 2: fig 178; Fraser 2008: nos 26.1 and 160.2).

The location of the decoration on the body, as currently reconstructed (Illus 5), on the ventral side of the lateral line, opposite to the mane on the dorsal side, raises a difficulty, and it is one which on a carving that otherwise gives an impression of a sensitive response to the elements of the design is a jarring note. Both dog-headed and horse-headed hybrids, with fish elements, whether single or paired, invariably have body-marking on the dorsal side of the body, above the lateral line. Where the decoration represents stylised fish scales or other markings, these are also located on the dorsal surface above the lateral line. Impressive examples of scales correctly positioned are the dog-headed pairs from Kilduncan, Fife, and on Dyke, at Brodie Castle, Moray (Trench-Jellicoe 2006: illus 16 and 17).

The confidently carved hybrid from Ness, Tankerness, Orkney, is analogous to the Jarlshof body fragment (Scott & Ritchie 2015: no. 13). The head is damaged but the closed jaws and slightly downwards inclination favour a representation of a horse head rather than a dog head. Ness has a lateral line dividing the body and its marking consists of closely set curves carved in strong false-relief running down its back. The fragment of a salmon symbol from Drumbuie, near Inverness, has diamond shapes decorating its upper surface, and even the salmon on the Portsoy, Moray, cylindrical stone observes this convention (Fraser 2008: nos 109.2 and 209). To decorate the ventral surface, the belly, on the inner lower curve, as indicated in the published reconstruction of the Jarlshof fragments (Illus 5), is anomalous, particularly when on the head, as at Jarlshof, there is a firmly delineated mane to indicate the side of the

lateral line on which it should be carved (Scott & Ritchie 2009: no. 129).

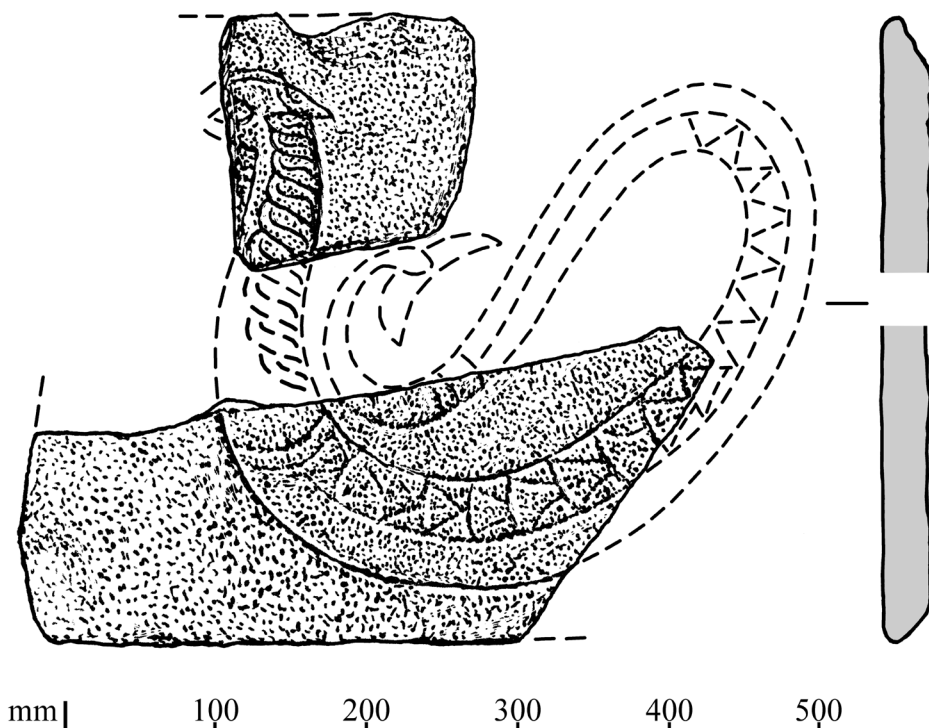
There is a way in which the two fragments can be repositioned so as to correct this anomaly. It involves ‘sliding’ – to use Ian Scott’s useful word when we first discussed what I proposed – the head fragment over to the left of the body fragment, with the head being positioned with the trace of a chamfer on its upper edge, parallel to the well-preserved chamfer on the lower edge of the body fragment (Illus 6). The strip of pattern then falls correctly, dramatically positioned on the wide curve of the back, the centre of gravity of the body design, between the development, respectively, of the thinner neck and tail.

If, as is probable, the lines of carving in the space adjacent to the closure of the strip of pattern are indicative of a tapering tail, then to accommodate the trajectory of its curve requires a considerable amount of space. This space has to be found by raising the neck of the creature into an erect, rearing position, a characteristic of the depiction of serpents in the serpent and Z-rod symbol. This produces a striking design giving the hybrid a commanding head position clear of its body (Illus 6). As presently reconstructed (Illus 5), the head merely looks back at its tail.

Conventionally, the tail should coil in the same direction as the head, creating an S or reversed S-shape. For example, the tail of the left-facing head of Ness, Orkney, coils anti-clockwise, whereas the right-facing head of the Ulbster, Caithness, singleton has its tail coiled clockwise (Fraser 2008: no. 104).

Either version of the tail can be accommodated by the space made available on the complete Jarlshof slab after moving the head fragment to the left, but the more usual anti-clockwise coil could be anticipated from a sculptor of evident experience. The alternative to a coiled tail would be a fish tail. There are aspects of the design that supports this conjecture. First, there is a small hint of a carved line cut, as Scott recently observed, deep into the surface of the slab, towards the bottom of the mane, that could belong to the tip of a fish tail. Second, the wide curve of the body expresses movement forwards, propelled as it were by a waving ‘heraldic’ fish tail. Scott’s drawing, which he kindly agreed to





ILLUS 6 Conjectural reconstruction by Isabel Henderson (2015) of the Pictish horse-headed hybrid on the Jarlshof slab (drawing by Ian Scott) (© Ian G Scott (scale 1:5))

make for this discussion (Illus 6), provides the necessary increased height for an erect rearing head position, an extension of the length of the mane, the reduction of the decoration to a zig-zag pattern allowing a natural continuation of the lateral line, and a waving tail elegantly curved so as to complement the wide curve of the body. A clockwise coiled tail, such as Scott sketched in with a light broken line in his drawing for the Scott & Ritchie (2009) publication (Illus 5), would also allow for a longer tail, likewise pleasingly curved, but ending in a stationary coil (Canmore ID 514: SC 1135143). The faint sketch of the tail was not picked up in the publication, but can be seen when the online image is magnified. A correctly coiled anti-clockwise tail cannot be fitted into the Scott drawing, but there is plenty of space for it if the head fragment has been moved to the left end of the body, with the decoration correctly located on its back. On balance, the care given to express the horse's mane suggests

that the rest of the carving would be expected to conform to the classical hybrid of a sea-horse where the body finishes with a fish tail.

After these diverse conjectures it must be emphasised that what survives of this carving on the two fragments is a powerful work of art worthy of a place in the symbolic art of the Picts, comparable in controlled execution to the finest examples of the Pictish beast, a similarly hybrid creature. The published reconstruction (Illus 5) presents the Jarlshof hybrid in a compact self-protecting position with an anomalous departure from the conventional location of decoration, incompatible with the quality of the execution.

#### A FURTHER CONSIDERATION OF THE CHAMFERS

As noted earlier, the recent description and illustration of the fragments record that 'parts of three sides survive with a distinct chamfer 28–32mm deep'. The cross-sections of the three

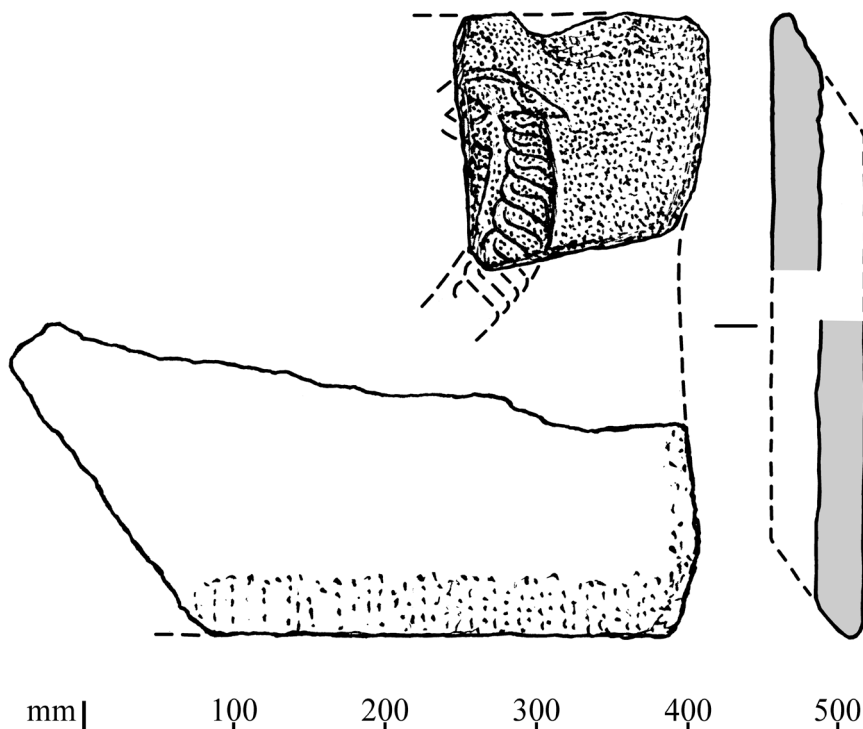
chamfers are shown in the illustration (Illus 5): one at the lower edge of the body fragment, a second on its left edge and a third on the upper edge of the head fragment (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9, no. 129). If this is correct then there is no physical reason why the head should not be repositioned on the left, as described above, so as to correct and enhance the design (Illus 6).

On a recent inspection of the two fragments, by myself, Anna Ritchie and Ian Scott, a further look at the head fragment suggested that a fourth chamfer might have been missed. This new observation, if correct, raises difficulties. If the head fragment is positioned to the left of the slab, a chamfer on its right edge would be internal. If the head is positioned at the right, as in the reconstruction published in 2009 (Illus 5), the trajectory of its right edge, indicated there by a broken line, suggests a curved edge. Such a curve is also difficult to accommodate within a slab format. If it is not a chamfered curve, then

it would have to be explained as a damaged and worn internal fracture. The extent and nature of the trace of a chamfer on the right-hand edge, described by Hamilton (1956; see above), is left unspecified. There is physical evidence of damage to the lower right-hand corner of the fragment and of more forceful damage to the top upper right-hand edge.

If the reconstruction favoured here – where the hybrid animal looking ahead to the left moves forward in a powerful fashion, with the run of the strongly carved mane and decoration working together on the dorsal surface cannot be accommodated – then the most defensible alternative is that the fragments belong to two different hybrid animals, carved on different slabs, parts of their backs surviving, one with a mane, and the other with a generously curved decorated back.

Another suggestion, made by Ian Scott, proposes that the head and body belong to two



ILLUS 7 Alternative tentative reconstruction by Ian Scott (2015) of the Pictish incised slab from Jarlishof (© Ian G Scott (scale 1:5))

different animals with the head fragment being incised on one side of the slab and the body fragment on the other. If the body fragment is turned over so that it is blank, with the vertical chamfer on the right, then this would allow the newly observed chamfer on the right edge of the head fragment to be roughly aligned with it (Illus 7). The alignment, of course, still does not have the status of a conjunction.

A photograph of the head fragment set upon a rough plank was taken, presumably close to the time of its discovery, and is available on Canmore's digital record of small finds at Jarlshof (Canmore: SC 1224393). Here the curve of the right edge is evident, and its lighting gives an impression that it has been roughly dressed. I have not been able to locate a similarly early photograph of the body fragment, but the two fragments are shown photographed in studio conditions in a photograph taken in 1938 (Canmore: SC 1220372), where the curve of the right edge of the head fragment is clearly shown.<sup>3</sup>

In this scenario, the irregularity of the inferred vertical chamfer contrasts with the straight horizontal chamfer on the lower horizontal edge of the body fragment, but the condition along the length of the vertical chamfer, in the gap between the fragments, is beyond recovery. In Scott's new reconstruction the curve of the trajectory requires a slight conjectural compensatory concavity so that it can join up with the surviving vertical dressed edge of the body fragment. A closer comparison of the surfaces of the reverses of the fragments, and a further comparison, including measurement of the depth and angle, between the sections of what has been interpreted as a vertical chamfer, would have a bearing on the validity of this suggestion, which Scott, at present, describes as a 'tentative reconstruction'.

An objection to this tentative reconstruction, where the incised designs are carved on different sides of the slab, is that the colour and condition of the carved surfaces of the two fragments appear so similar, as does the depth of the incision (Illus 1). It is also perhaps unlikely to be the case that the slab had carving on both sides as a degree of differential exposure would be expected. At our recent inspection it was noted that a layer of parts of the uncarved surface had peeled away leaving

a rust-coloured layer exposed (Illus 2). There is minimal evidence for this wear, and consequent discolouration, on the incised surfaces.

Such an arrangement, with carving on both sides of the slab of the same type of sinuous creature, would be unusual, whereas a composition of pairs on the same side has numerous precedents, such as on the 'Craw Stane' (Illus 3) and on the symbol stones at Newton and Brandsbutt, also from Aberdeenshire, mentioned above. The separation of the designs raises the possibility that we have here a trial piece, with one side displaying a partial sketch for a head. However, there is nothing about the carving of the head, or any means of determining how it was placed on the complete slab, to support this view. The elements of the head that survive are fully expressed, worked with firm precision that gives a strong impression of belonging to a completed design.

#### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOG-HEADED AND HORSE-HEADED HYBRIDS

In 2011 a cross slab carved in relief on both a cross-bearing face and the reverse was recovered from the floor of a house at Appiehouse on Sanday. This is the first relief cross slab to be found in Orkney (Scott & Ritchie 2015: 181–3, no. 12, illus 6). Its front face is carved with an equal-armed cross, set in a base. The animal ornament to the left of the shaft is congested and very worn but appears to be a juxtaposition of fantastic animals. To the right of the shaft, occupying the whole background space, is a single dog-headed hybrid, facing left towards the cross. The serpentine body has a lateral line and ends in an anti-clockwise coiled tail.

The Appiehouse dog-headed hybrid is markedly close in design and proportion to the hybrid on the Ulbster, Caithness, cross slab (Fraser 2008: no. 104). The case made for the Ulbster hybrid being a Pictish symbol lies in its close association on the slab with a group of six other classic forms of Pictish symbols. To qualify as a symbol a degree of repetition in design is required, and the close resemblance between the singleton dog head with coiled tail on Ulbster and Appiehouse strengthens the case

for this hybrid being regarded as part of the corpus of symbols. In her recent full discussion, Anna Ritchie makes the pertinent observation: ‘Whether or not they are symbols ... what is important here is that the S-dragon/hippocamp/fish-monster is a definitively Pictish motif’ (Scott & Ritchie 2015: 182). Yet another example of a dog-headed hybrid in Orkney is carved in relief on a battered cross slab recovered in late 2016 from the Norse cemetery site at Newark in Deerness (Canmore ID 3033; for images of the cross slab, see Archaeology Orkney 2016). It is virtually identical in design, scale and location on the slab, to that on the Appiehouse cross slab.

The fish with a dog head on the symbol stone at Upper Manbeen, Moray, already has the basic elements of this hybrid and its portrayal, along with a mirror and comb, further supports an affiliation to other standard symbols in the context of a symbol stone (Allen & Anderson (1903) 1993, vol 2: 128–9, fig 134). Allen gives a formal account of the circumstances of his visit to record the symbol stone at Upper Manbeen and there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of his drawing of what he called the ‘fish-monster’ (*contra* Fraser 2008: 114, no. 164). Alastair Mack (1997: 103) gives a description of the nature of the flaking of some of the body of the fish-monster but its dual nature is not impaired. In a later update, Mack (2004: typescript revision) reports the presence of a serpent symbol above the fish-monster, so that Upper Manbeen is now seen to display the standard arrangement of two symbols and a mirror-and-comb.

#### DATING

It is argued above that the Jarlshof fragments belong to the corpus of Pictish sculpture which conventionally dates from the 7th to the 9th century AD. The carving is fluently incised on a naturally smooth surface, and, although not conjoined, they can confidently be considered as contemporary carvings, characteristic of what is regarded as the earlier phase of Pictish sculpture.

The stylised carving style of the mane on the head fragment, and the sinuous taper of the wide curve of the laterally divided body fragment, relate to characteristic aspects of the style of the

general repertoire of animal portraits, which now includes the notable local example of the bear from the Pictish settlement at Old Scatness.

This animal repertoire has been a mainstay for the relative dating of the Pictish symbol stones because its distinctive scrolled curvilinear body-marking, used to emphasise musculature, is also found in a number of extant Insular Gospel Books, notably in the design of the Lion Evangelist symbol in the *Book of Durrow*, thought to be the earliest manuscript in the group. The primacy of the Pictish animal design is currently generally accepted, but the dating of the Gospel Books is under revision, with a possible starting date into the early decades of the 8th century, with *Durrow* later in the series (Nees 2011; Netzer 2011). This need not affect the relative dating of the animal portraits, but the date horizon would be extended. A recent revival of the suggestion that the incised Pictish animals with muscle-defining scrolls could derive from the manuscript Evangelist Symbols is misleading, for the comparanda cited are taken from later dressed Pictish sculpture, ignoring the markedly more accurately applied scrolls used on the earlier incised carvings on unshaped stones (Henderson & Henderson 2004: illus 25–30; Moss 2018: 49, 52).

On the other hand, the accomplished curvilinear art of the South Ronaldsay, Orkney, symbol stone, incised with two abstract symbols (Fraser 2008: no. 173), has recently been dated to AD 400–650, on the basis of its use of ‘complex spirals, peltae and scrolls: older “heritage motifs” that were taken from Roman-period art’ (Goldberg 2015: 157, fig 147). For the present writer, the striking uniformity of the curvilinear art of the symbols, both animal and abstract, and their evident relationship to fully understood, earlier, repoussé metalwork forms, support an initial starting date for their carving on stone in the 7th century AD.

The visual impact of the assured technique of the Jarlshof design(s) is most probably attributable to its Pictish origin. The creature (or creatures), surviving only as fragments, charts a Pictish preoccupation with hybrid creatures comprised of fish with horse heads or dog heads. The primitive form, the incised dog-headed fish on the symbol stone at Upper

Manbeen, is followed in strong contrast by the elegant, faithfully copied, confronted classical hippocamps carved in relief on the Aberlemno Churchyard, Angus, cross slab (Henderson & Henderson 2004: illus 37; Fraser 2008: no. 51.2). The cross slab, Meigle 1, displays all possible hybrid combinations, single or paired, dog heads or horse heads (Illus 4), which thereafter were selected for use on many formats of Pictish

sculpture, including cross slabs or their margins, in a simple protective or peaceable role, or as part of other Christian iconography. Our incised fragments, I would suggest, belong to a phase just prior to the northern assimilation of the dog-headed hybrid to the corpus of Pictish symbols evident on the relief slabs at Ness, Appiehouse and Newark, Orkney, and Ulbster, Caithness (see above). Here we can observe, during the



ILLUS 8 Pictish symbol stone from the Dairy Park, Dunrobin Castle, Sutherland, with internal decoration of the symbols, the serpent having the naturalistic body-markings of an adder. (© HES (Tom and Sybil Gray Collection))

development of the Christian cross-slab format, the expansion of the symbol system to include a hybrid symbol, additional to the still flourishing Pictish beast of the symbol stones.

This development is demonstrable and if we were to take – moving backwards in time – the date of the mature relief sculpture at Portmahomack, Ross & Cromarty, as having been produced prior to the destruction of the monastery, radiocarbon dated to between AD 780 and 830 (Carver 2008: 64, 136–8, 208–9), and the inferred documented introduction in southern Pictland of relief stone sculpture by Northumbrian masons in the early years of the 8th century AD, then the Jarlshof fragments could take their place, on typological grounds, as being produced in the first half of the 7th century AD, along with the rest of the animal portraits (including quadrupeds, birds, fish and reptiles), which brilliantly exploit curvilinear art in incision to the point of producing work in semi-relief.

Recently published work (Noble et al 2018) has, however, shown that the Pictish symbol system had an earlier start than has previously been thought; a supportive typology of the symbol designs is promised. While in the past it has been possible to point to what could be regarded as earlier primitive forms of the symbol designs (for example, in Henderson & Henderson 2004: 171), these can now be securely dated to the 3rd and 4th centuries AD (Noble et al 2018: 1341). This has been achieved by employing the relatively new technique of Bayesian modelling, by means of which radiocarbon dates of excavated sites with Pictish symbol stones and other archaeological information can be combined and analysed to give more accurate and precise results (Noble et al 2018: 1335–9). The earliest and subsequent phases of the chronology of the symbol system can now be set on a scientific footing.

The Jarlshof fragments cannot benefit directly from this approach, but the case for their forming parts of a Pictish symbol is supported by their being attributable to a subsequent phase of the new chronology. This later phase is exemplified by the redating of the symbol stone found in the Dairy Park, Dunrobin, Sutherland, in 1977 (Canmore ID 6567; Fraser 2008: no. 139) (Illus 8). This monument has featured regularly in

previous discussions of the date and function of the symbol stones for it was erected over a rectangular cairn containing female remains in a long cist grave (Close-Brooks 1979). The burial was fully excavated, and two radiocarbon dates obtained, neither of which were later regarded as satisfactory. Noble et al maintain that there is nothing in the excavation report that prevents the view that the symbol stone was erected at the time of the burial, and the human remains have now been radiocarbon dated with ‘high precision’ to cal AD 575–625, at 95% probability (Noble et al 2018: 1341). While there is obviously no question of a direct relationship between the Jarlshof fragments and the Dairy Park monument, both share what is regarded as a defining characteristic of the development of the symbol system – the elaboration of the earlier plain designs by internal decoration (Noble et al 2018: 1341, 1343, fig 9). The small fragment uses stylised scrolls contained within the outline of the horse’s neck and the larger fragment elaborates the back of the serpentine body with a neatly applied strip of decoration.

For the present writer, it is also the quality of the Jarlshof carving, the carver’s control of the flow of the incised line, which can be compared with the stage of the carving of the Dairy Park monument, and it is to be hoped that the forthcoming complementary typology takes into account the development of the skills of carving and capacity for expressive design, both of which give this phase of Pictish sculpture its unique place in the history of early medieval art.

The hard-won new knowledge offers us an objective dating context of the late 6th to early 7th century AD for the Jarlshof fragments which, while not confuting the date proposed independently above, can now be used confidently to relate them to the growing corpus of comparative material available in the Northern Isles.

Given the range of Pictish art in the Northern Isles, from scratched pebbles and bones to exceptionally finely carved abstract symbols, figurative cross slabs and handsome church furniture, such as the Flotta, Orkney, altar frontal (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 209–10, illus 309), the recognition of an animal portrait phase

at Old Scatness and now Jarlshof comes as no surprise. We can reasonably anticipate firmer dating emerging from this region, particularly where relevant finds are being made in the context of excavations.

#### FORMAT, FUNCTION AND DISPLAY OF THE JARLSHOF FRAGMENTS

Dog-headed and horse-headed hybrids appear in the form of symmetrical confronted pairs on symbol-bearing cross slabs, on non-symbol-bearing recumbent grave markers, and on shrine posts. In addition, handsomely fish-tailed, serpent-bodied, dog heads serve as marginal animals on symbol-bearing cross slabs. To accommodate the designs on the Jarlshof fragments as belonging to a single creature, as reconstructed here, would require a slab of dimensions broader than its height. This would suggest that when complete it was a panel. The iconographically complex panel found at Portmahomack has a worked 'roll-top' upper edge and an unworked lower edge for insertion in a base or the earth. The overall iconography of the Portmahomack panel is of menace and protection, the latter represented in its famously naturalistic depiction of two adult cattle tending a calf (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 205, ill. 303). The Orkney horse-headed hybrid from Ness, which in several respects compares to that from Jarlshof, has a straight incised line on what may be the upper edge; and on the lower edge, a pecked line, below which is an unworked area similar to the Portmahomack panel. It too might be a section of a horizontal panel. Unworked areas at the bottom of panels for insertion in a plinth or in the earth are also found at Rosemarkie, Ross-shire. There is barely enough unworked stone for the Jarlshof body fragment to be so inserted.

Anna Ritchie has wondered if the format of the slab should be viewed as vertical, tall and narrow, rather than horizontal, with the lower edge of the animal fragment being the right-hand edge (pers comm). There would certainly be more uncarved stone available for insertion of the body fragment on what would then be the lower edge. A hybrid with a tightly coiled tail could be fitted into the space available, and the newly

proposed, somewhat irregular, curved chamfer could be more satisfactorily accommodated as part of a top edge. A disadvantage, of course, if the published reconstruction is so manipulated, would be that the anomaly between the location of the decoration of the body and the mane would remain. On balance, Ritchie thinks it preferable to see the smaller fragment either as part of a larger slab with two serpentine creatures, or as part of a separate second slab. She also draws attention to physical similarities in format with the Old Scatness bear stone which has a rounded chamfer along one edge (Bond 2010: 305, fig 6.5.1).

In determining the function and display of the Jarlshof fragments the most useful analogy is the remarkable Pictish animal carving of a profile bear recovered from the Pictish phase of the settlement at Old Scatness, not far from Jarlshof (Henderson & Henderson 2004: 229; Dockrill et al 2010). The bear is fluently carved on a slab with at least one vertical dressed edge, sharing with the Jarlshof fragments the natural smooth sandstone surface which in some areas has peeled away (Bond 2010: 304, pl 6.5.1; 305, fig 6.5.1). Its profile stance, with its heavy hindquarters, braced forelegs and menacing reach of the neck, is expressed with masterly naturalism, enhanced by the accurate use of the standard Pictish stylised body-marking to delineate the power of its musculature. The combination of naturalism reinforced by formal body scrolls makes it a notable contribution to the Pictish animal portraits, all of which must ultimately share their origin in native art (Henderson 1997: 13–14). The finds at Scatness include a fragment of another symbol stone which displays a salmon in a style that also belongs to this class of animal art (Henderson 1967: 107, fig 13). Although only a section of the lower body of the fish survives, the lateral line and two well-articulated fins are accurately delineated; it was found in the vicinity of Structure 11, part of the Pictish phase of the settlement (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 2, 14, no. 8; Bashford 2010: 306–7, pl 6.5.2 and fig 6.5.2).

The excavators suggest that the bear carving may have been displayed in a central living area of Structure 11 of the Pictish phase, for the dressed edge of the slab is similar to the dressed

edges of the orthostats which survive as part of its radial piers. The bear could therefore be part of one of the missing orthostats (Dockrill & Bond 2010: 364, pl 7.4; 366, pl 7.5).

The recent discovery that the impressive symbol stone at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, incised with a salmon and a Pictish beast (Illus 3), stood in relation to an entrance within the excavated Rhynie complex and that other sculpture at Rhynie had designated functions, is further evidence that the Picts used powerful animal art in architectural contexts either adjacent to entrances, or in indoor or otherwise selected protective settings (Gondeck & Noble 2011: 299). The Jarlshof carving, when complete, may also have been conceived as a piece of architecture, as Anna Ritchie proposed (Scott & Ritchie 2009: 9).

## CONTEXT

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According to Hamilton (1956: 106):

When Viking colonists arrived about A.D. 800 the site was still occupied by a few scattered families living in small huts on the landward slope of the mound and still making use of the old wheel- and passage-houses. The boundary wall enclosing this settlement influenced the siting of the new farmstead.

There is in fact no way of knowing how much of ‘the west side of the Pictish settlement’ at Jarlshof has been taken by coastal erosion, although already by the end of the 19th century, when John Bruce began his excavations (in 1897), half the broch had been claimed by the sea – together inevitably with many of the so-called ‘secondary structures’ – as can be seen from his published ‘Plan of Ruins’ (Bruce 1907: fig 1). Indeed, the suggestion that the ‘Jarlshof Serpent’ slab found on the beach derived from a significant building, by analogy with the bear carving at Old Scatness (see above), suggests that the main focus of Pictish settlement could well be missing, as already proposed by Anna Ritchie (1997: 41). From the excavated area, however, there are three incised sandstone discs, including one considered by Hamilton to have

‘a coiled serpent design’ and another with a definite ‘double disc symbol’ (Hamilton 1956: 84, pl xvii, c; Henderson & Henderson 2004: 88, illus 113–16; Fraser 2008: no. 213; see also Ritchie 1997: 42–3). These were not, however, discussed by Hamilton in relation to the nature and status of the Pictish settlement at Jarlshof. Indeed, a significant group of incised slates was mistakenly attributed by him to the Norse (Hamilton 1956: 106, 114–15, 121, pl xxi), apart from a cross-incised slate from an immediately pre-Viking context (ibid: 88, pl xvii, a), because Uaininn O’Meadhra (1993: 427–31) has since argued persuasively that ‘none of the other slate-motifs is necessarily Viking either’ (with the exception of the Ringerike-style ‘motif-piece’ mentioned above).

Hamilton’s minimalist opinion of Pictish settlement at Jarlshof was doubtless much influenced by the views published by the distinguished Norwegian archaeologist, Haakon Shetelig (1940), adopted from his colleague, Anton Brøgger. In his (1928) Rhind lectures, Brøgger had concluded that the Norse settlers ‘came sailing to a land in which there were few people’ (Brøgger 1929: 67), with ‘the Pictish population in Orkney and Shetland’ having seemingly ‘lost its organization and power of resistance’ and having ‘perhaps also declined in numbers and wealth’ (ibid: 65). Shetelig himself observed (1940: 21) that ‘the islands were at most only very thinly peopled when the Norwegians made their first settlements’.<sup>4</sup> This interpretation has of course long since been abandoned (see Morris 1991: 78–80 for a summary) and the recognition of the ‘Jarlshof Serpent’ as a Pictish symbol, from an architectural context, will have an important role to play in any reassessment of the Pictish phase of this multi-period settlement, in the light of the excavations at Old Scatness.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Old Scatness and Jarlshof symbol-incised slabs taken together suggest a comparable status for these two neighbouring Pictish sites on the eve of the first Viking raids. At that time they would both have been flourishing settlements, the inhabitants of which would no doubt have possessed portable wealth of the type represented in the (not-so-distant) St Ninian’s Isle treasure (Small et al 1973).



## CONCLUSION

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The most likely explanation for the quality and visual impact of the Jarlshof fragments is that they were commissioned by an ambitious Pictish leader who shared the entrenched belief in the protective effectiveness of symbolic images of powerful animals, natural or hybrid, displayed for all to see, in or around power centres, in a style ultimately belonging to the symbol stones. For this purpose it was important to employ a sculptor experienced both in design and execution. That such a sculptor was available in the north of Scotland is amply supported in the quality of the work by symbol-stone cutters recovered in Orkney, including the accurately delineated eagle symbol from Knowe of Burrian (Fraser 2008: no. 168; Scott & Ritchie 2015: no. 3), which has the distinctive design traits belonging to the repertoire of Pictish animal art represented in the Old Scatness bear and salmon.

Hamilton called the 'Jarlshof Serpent' 'ornate' and, although the word is perhaps not one that an art historian would use, one can see exactly what he meant to convey. The reconstruction favoured here (Illus 6) removes a surprising anomaly in the otherwise accomplished design, as recently reconstructed. Conjecturally it presents the corrected arrangement of the body of the Jarlshof horse-headed hybrid in a design which would be appropriate to its intrinsic function as a supernaturally powerful guardian. As argued above, there is now a strong case that a singleton dog-headed or horse-headed hybrid can be regarded as a Pictish symbol. The use of sculpture incised with a formidable animal as a guardian in a structural setting has a conceptual parallel not only at Old Scatness but in the well-known contexts of the incised bulls at Burghead, Moray, and the boar carved conspicuously on the Dunadd fort, Argyll (Fraser 2008: nos 152.1–6 and 74).

If it is concluded that the surviving fragments of the 'Jarlshof Serpent', even when the mane on the smaller fragment and the decorative strip on the larger one are repositioned correctly, cannot provide sufficient evidence to allow them to be

interpreted as parts of a single animal carved on a single slab, then they must be assigned to two related hybrids carved either on different sides of the same slab, as Scott tentatively suggests, or on two separate slabs, perhaps within a structure or at an entrance.

The fragments known as the 'Jarlshof Serpent', supposed by Hamilton to have formed part of a Norse grave slab and recently catalogued under the heading 'Curiosities' by Scott and Ritchie (2009: 9, no. 129), should be returned to the original (RCAMS 1946) assumption that, along with the symbol-bearing discs, they belong to the Pictish phase of Jarlshof, being carved with incised designs relatable to Pictish symbols.<sup>6</sup> Recent excavation now gives them a local context in closely comparable high-quality incised Pictish symbols, bear and salmon, produced during the Pictish phase of the settlement at Old Scatness. The symbol stones are no longer thought of as exclusively field monuments. In the light of recent systematic work on the relationship of incised symbol stones to structures (Gondeck 2015), it is most probable that the fragments of the 'Jarlshof Serpent' belonged to a monument created for an eroded structure which stood immediately above where they were found on the beach.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

James Graham-Campbell wishes to thank Anna Ritchie and Colleen Batey for their encouragement in reaching his initial conclusions and, most particularly, Isabel Henderson for her consequent enthusiastic investigation, and subsequent reconstruction, of the 'Jarlshof Serpent' – and for sharing her expertise in Pictish art.

Isabel Henderson would like to thank James Graham-Campbell for recognising the importance of the Jarlshof fragments for Pictish art, and for drawing her attention to them, even if they have proved more puzzling than at first thought. Her sections of the paper have all greatly benefited from his comments and editing skills. Thanks also to Martin Goldberg, Fraser Hunter and Jim Wilson of the National Museums of Scotland for facilitating access to the fragments and new photography. Anna Ritchie and

Ian G Scott have shown admirable patience and open-mindedness throughout. Their exemplary cataloguing of the Pictish sculpture of the Northern Isles, accompanied by commentary and illustration, has put its study on a firm foundation. In particular, thanks are due to them both for taking time to take a second look, and to contribute to this discussion. Ian's willingness to illustrate her conjectural reconstruction is much appreciated, as is the engaging one of his own which benefits from his lifetime of observing the ways of stone and sculptors. Thanks also to George Henderson who recognised the quality of the carvings and readily provided helpful drawings of trial reconstructions.

We are both most grateful to John Borland for his expertise and invaluable assistance in preparing Ian G Scott's drawings for publication.

## NOTES

- 1 For a shortened version of this paper, omitting both Viking-Age sculpture and silver hoards, see Graham-Campbell 2016.
- 2 Dr J S Richardson was responsible 'from 1936 to 1939' for the continuation of 'the stripping of the Viking settlement so successfully begun by Dr. Curle' (Hamilton 1956: xiii); there exists a photograph of the fragments dated 1938 (Canmore: SC 1220372).
- 3 A further well-lit photograph of both fragments was taken in 1953 (Canmore: SC 1224039), presumably for publication in Hamilton's *Excavations at Jarlshof* (1956: pl xxxvii, 1–2).
- 4 The Brøgger/Shetelig hypothesis of 'an almost empty land' was widely adopted in the mid-20th century, although strongly resisted by Hugh Marwick (1951: 36–7); see Wainwright 1962.
- 5 Hamilton's 'Late Post-broch Huts' (1956: 85–8, fig 42) are considered by Turner et al (2005: 247) to be 'reminiscent of the Old Scatness Pictish buildings'.
- 6 Anna Ritchie (2018) has recently suggested that the provenance of a small fragment of a sand-stone slab with incised ornament on both faces (Scott & Ritchie 2009: no. 3) is also most likely to be from 'the eroding shoreline of Jarlshof', having been donated in 1861 to the Shetland Literary and Scientific Society by John Bruce of Sumburgh.

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