

The Picts - who were they ?



The Picts lived north of the Forth Estuary in the part of Scotland then called Pictland. They were the local iron age and early historic people and were named the Picts (*Picti*) by the Romans.

Most of our information about life in Pictland comes from the intricate carved stones and precious metalwork that they left

behind. The only other sources of information we have are copies of their king lists, written down by monks, in Latin, and several references in the writings of the Romans and of their neighbours, the Anglo Saxons, the Scots and the Welsh.

Pictland ceased to be a separate kingdom by the end of the 9th century AD. It was united with the Kingdom of the Scots, to become Alba. This joint kingdom eventually became part of modern Scotland.

Pictish Sculpture

Carved stones in Pictland provide us with much of the information that we have about the people who lived here, including, of course, their excellent craft skills and their fine artistic ability. The stones may be divided into four categories:

Incised symbol stones - these were natural undressed stones, with geometric and animal symbols unique to Pictland incised with pointed chisels onto the boulder's smoothest face (start in 6th century AD)

Simple grave-markers - incised with the Christian cross onto natural, undressed stones (7th century AD)

Cross slabs - shaped and dressed slabs, carved in relief to display elaborately decorated crosses, Pictish symbols and figurative scenes (7th - 9th centuries AD)

Christian monuments - mostly cross slabs and grave-markers, carved with the same range of designs as the symbol-bearing cross-slabs but without the symbols (7th -9th centuries AD).

Pictish Symbols

The symbols carved onto the stones are unique to Pictland. We do not know what the individual symbols or the combinations of symbols once meant. Some researchers suggest that the incised stones are memorials to the dead, or that they announce allegiances, marriages or land ownership.

Geometric and abstract symbols such as the crescent and V-rod, double discs and Z-rod, and mirror and comb occur frequently on incised monuments. The symbols can be presented as simple outlines or can be decorated with dots, curved lines and scroll patterns.

Not all artists carved symbols the same way. Compare the crescent and V-rod symbols on the stones from Garbeg Farm, Little Ferry Links and Wester Balblair (on the opposite side of the plinth). The crescent and V-rod is the most common symbol found on carved stones from Pictland..



Crescent & V-rod



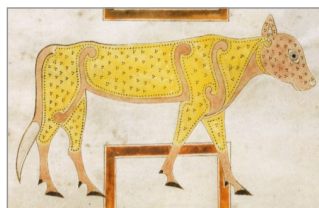
Double disc & Z-rod



Mirror & Comb

Pictish Animal Art

The animal symbols are very accurately represented. They really give us a sense of each animal's character, for example, the gracefulness and sense of movement suggested by the figure of the Ardross wolf. Naturalistic animals represented in Pictish art include salmon, snakes, eagles, stags, boars, bulls, and a bear.



the calf of Saint Mark depicted in the 8th century Echternach Gospels, now in Paris.

Scroll markings appear to have been used to emphasise the animals' muscles and body structure. These markings were copied by monks illuminating the earliest the Gospel books, such as,

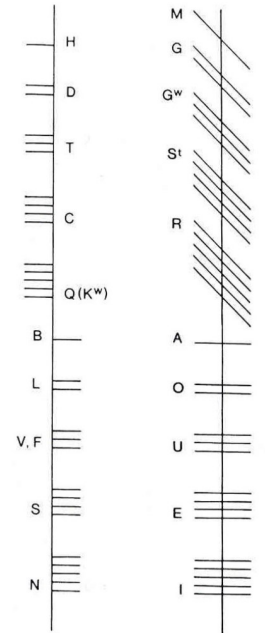
Pictish Cross-Slabs

These slab monuments were shaped, dressed and carved in relief on both sides, and are the special contribution of the Picts to the international Christian culture of the 7th to 9th centuries. Finely carved spirals and interlace patterns often decorate the surfaces. Christian crosses appear alongside the earlier Pictish symbols, and biblical imagery shares space with scenes of hunting, hawking and figures on horseback. The stones sometimes include inscriptions in Ogham, an early medieval script, found also in Ireland, Wales and Cornwall.

Some important local examples can be seen at Elgin Cathedral, Brodie Castle, Rosemarkie, Nigg and Shandwick.

Ogham

Ogham has a 20 letter alphabet. It uses strokes positioned on either side of a line to create the letters. Individual vowels and consonants can be identified, but the meanings of the inscriptions are not always understood because they are worn or incomplete.

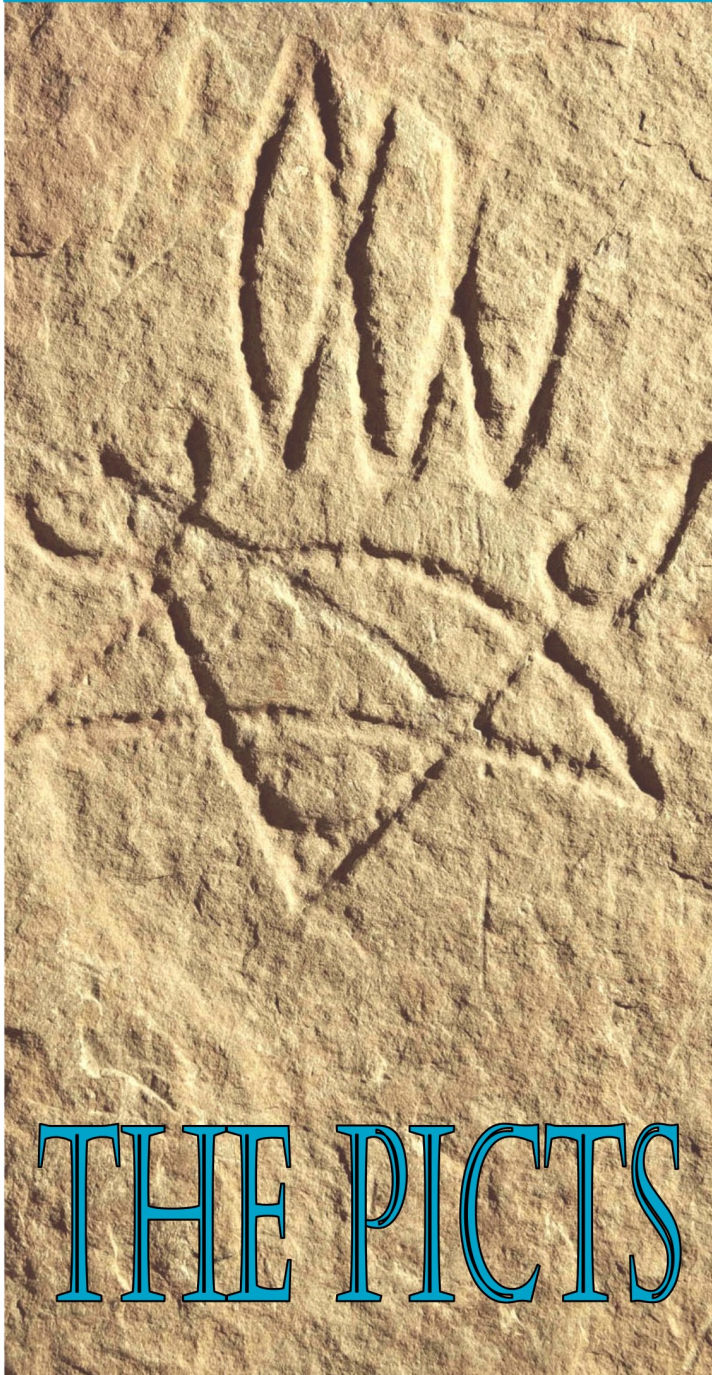


Rodney's Stone at Brodie Castle has Ogham inscriptions running the entire length of each edge. Most are too worn to decipher, but they may contain the name of a Saint, Ethernan said to have died among the Picts in 669.

Fine Metalwork

The Picts are well known for their fine metalwork. They produced exquisitely decorated pins and penannular brooches. These were usually in gilded bronze or silver with the distinctive interlace decoration. Local examples include the items from the Croy Hoard, and this brooch terminal fragment found at Urquhart Castle.



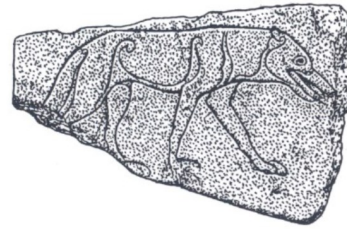


THE PICTS

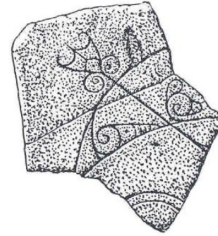
Pictish Stones in Inverness Museum



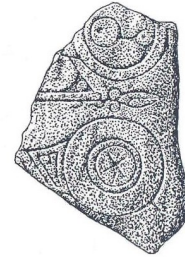
Beast head, Ardross



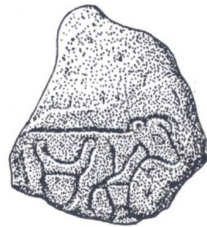
Wolf, Ardross



Little Ferry Links, Golspie



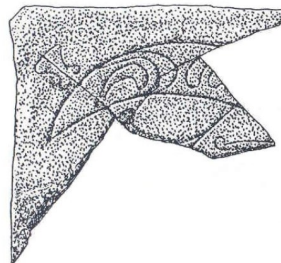
Torgorm, Conon Bridge



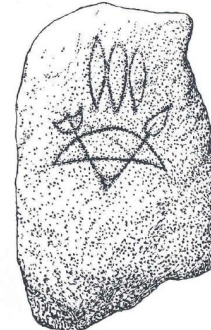
Bull, Kingsmills, Inverness



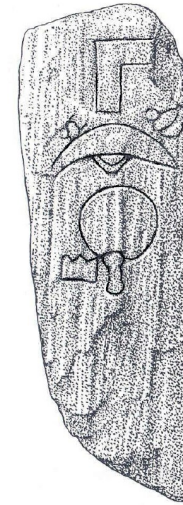
Cullaird Farm, Scaniport



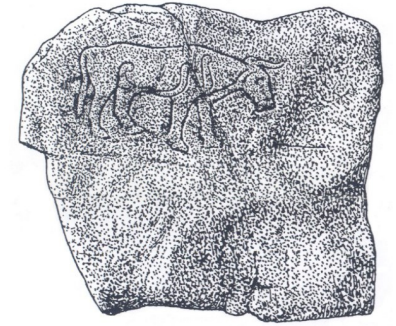
Garbeg Farm, Inverness



Wester Balblair, Beauly



Dalnavie, Ardross



Bull, Lochardil, Inverness. (Loan)

Drawings © Ian G. Scott

Places to visit

There are many more symbol stones and cross slabs to be found in the local area.

- Highland Council HQ, **Knocknagael Boarstone**
- Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie, **Cross slabs**
- Tarbat Discovery Centre, Portmahomack, **Pictish Site**

Other Pictish stones:

Dunrobin Castle, Dingwall, Strathpeffer, Nigg, Shandwick, Edderton, Ardgay, Creich & Golspie.

In Moray, visit Brodie Castle & Elgin Cathedral.



Rodney's Stone
Brodie Castle



Cross Slab
Elgin Cathedral



Eagle stone
Strathpeffer