



The astonishing stone in the kirkyard at **Aberlemno** demonstrates the full range of Pictish skill and artistry.

INVESTIGATING THE ABERLEMNO STONE

Information for Teachers





Aberlemno Stone

Pictish symbol stones are among Scotland's most distinctive monuments. Their elegant and vivid symbols and images can be found carved into boulders and slabs of rock, and on specially cut and shaped freestanding stones. Most of the stones which survive today were carved between around AD 500 and 800. Many stones have now been taken into museums to preserve them, but there are still a number standing in the landscape to surprise and delight us where they were positioned nearly 1500 years ago.

One of these is the beautifully preserved stone in the Aberlemno kirkyard. On one side of the stone is a boldly shaped cross, hewn from the stone slab and adorned with intricate knot work. But on the other side is a completely different story, the story of a battle. We can see horses, armour, weapons and the tale of a victory for one side and grisly defeat for another. It seems that this stone may be an unusual commemoration of an actual event, possibly the battle of Nechtansmere in AD 685. Other carved stones stand along the road nearby.

Practical information

- Location: In Aberlemno churchyard, just off B9134, 6 miles north-east of Forfar
- Parking: Small car park just south of the church
- Access: Short walk from car park to churchyard
- Nearest toilets: Forfar
- Note: The activities which follow focus on the stone in the churchyard. There are also three other stones nearby, right on the B9134. All the stones are enclosed within wooden boxes for conservation reasons and cannot be seen from 1 October – 31 March every year. Please do not let your pupils touch the stone, tempting as it may be! This stone is situated in an active churchyard; please encourage pupils to behave appropriately.

How to use this resource

This resource is designed to enable teachers or parent helpers carry out a simple investigation of the stone in Aberlemno kirkyard. Simple discussion points focus pupils' attention on what they can see and encourage pupils to interpret this evidence.

This activity guide should be used in collaboration with the much larger full-colour booklet *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009. This is available free of charge to teachers from Historic Scotland and can also be downloaded from the Historic Scotland website. This booklet sets the Aberlemno stones in the context of other Pictish stones and provides a wealth of additional suggestions for pre-visit, on-site and post-visit activities.

Call **0131 668 8793/8736** or visit www.historic-scotland.gov.uk for more details.

Suggested activities

- Measure the stone, so that back at school you can recreate a life sized or scale model of it.
- Draw one element from the stone. Back at school pupils can use these drawings as a basis for scale drawings of the stone or modelling work. Or they could be used to inspire imaginative writing or expressive art work. The symbols are a good motif for press printing work.
- 'Carve' a pattern or emblem from the stone into a tile of clay. These could then be fired and placed in the school playground.
- Design a pattern made up of intertwined animals, either real or mythical.
- Imagine you were reporting on the battle for the local newspaper. Write a short report of the battle, using the scenes on the stone as 'photographs'.

Further reading

- Historic Scotland Education, *Investigating Carved Stones*, Historic Scotland 2009.
- Anna Ritchie, *Picts*, Historic Scotland/HMSO 1995.
- Iain Fraser and John Borland, *The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland*, RCAHMS 2008.



Did you know...

The Picts may have coloured their stones with red clay or charcoal.

Background information

This may be read aloud to pupils either before the visit or on site.

- This stone was carved more than 1200 years ago by a group of people called the Picts. They were the people living in the north and east of Scotland between AD 300 and 900.
- We're not sure exactly what stones like this were for. It might have been a grave marker for someone important, but it could have been a territory marker, or a place for religious ceremonies.
- There are lots of Pictish stones like this one in Scotland. We know they are Pictish because they are carved in a similar style and show many of the same symbols or patterns.
- Nobody today knows what the symbols mean. They could be a kind of language, or they could represent names of people. A symbol like the double-disc might show when two families became connected through marriage. The stone might have been decorated or painted when it was new.
- This stone is very unusual, because it seems to be a record of an actual event. Maybe it was carved to remind people of what happened.



The story of a battle, carved in stone



The cross stands out from the stone background



The cross is surrounded by patterns

Discussion points

Teacher prompt

Have a quick look at the cross. Look for a symbol or pattern that you like. Show it to a friend.

Pupil response

Pupils' own responses.

Look at the side with the cross on it. What is the cross usually a symbol of?

A Christian symbol.

What does this tell us about the Picts?

They were Christians.

The cross seems to stick out from the background. How did the carvers manage to get this effect?

By carving away the stone around the cross shape – a huge amount of work.

How many animals can you see on this side?

Pair of 'sea horses' bottom right.

Two intertwined animals with 'beaks' or long thin snouts middle right.

Three animals biting each other's tails on the left side.

One beast either side of the top of the cross.

Total: 9 animals.

Are they real animals or mythical ones?

Mythical.

Why do you think that the Christian Picts carved mythical animals on their stone?

Perhaps to show that the power of the cross was stronger than myths.

Another idea is that the animals came from ancient stories, older than Christianity which the Picts still remembered.

Perhaps keeping their options open – maybe some people still worshipped strange beasts!

Look at the patterns on the cross. How many different sets of patterns are there?

Five sets of patterns: circles on cross shaft, looping pattern above them, diamond pattern on cross arms, spiral in centre of cross, triangular pattern at top of cross.

How are the patterns similar?

Three of the patterns loop over and under each other. All are very complicated.

Some historians believe that the carvers made these patterns so that you could 'lose yourself' inside them, and make your mind open to god and praying. Other people think they might have been traps for the devil!

The patterns are called 'interlace' – like shoelaces! Try following them with your eye.



The hole in the stone was added later for an unknown reason

<p>Look at the other side of the stone. What makes this side different from the first side?</p> <p>Is anything the same?</p>	<p>Completely different - no patterns, no cross, seems realistic.</p> <p>Two mythical animals make a frame and meet at the top.</p>
<p>What do you think is happening on this side of the stone?</p> <p>Some historians think you can 'read' the story of the battle like a comic strip from top to bottom. Try to tell the story, in 4 parts, from the top left:</p>	<p>It shows a battle.</p> <p>Warrior on horseback chases another man on horseback. The second man has thrown away his shield and sword.</p> <p>Three men on foot get ready to attack a man on horseback with a spear.</p> <p>Two horsemen fight each other with spears.</p> <p>A dead man is being pecked by a bird at the end of the battle.</p>
<p>Historians think this stone shows the battle of Nechtansmere, which took place near here in AD 685. In the battle, the Picts fought off the invading Anglo-Saxons from Northumbria.</p>	
<p>What are the differences between the two forces?</p> <p>Who do you think is winning? So which are the Picts?</p> <p>What weapons are they carrying?</p> <p>Why is this stone useful to historians?</p>	<p>Those on the left have long hair or drooping head dresses, are wearing tunics and carry curved shields.</p> <p>Those on the right are wearing helmets with nose-pieces and carry round shields.</p> <p>Picts probably the ones without the helmets (on the left).</p> <p>Short swords and long spears.</p> <p>Gives us an idea of how battles were fought in Pictish times.</p>
<p>Look for these symbols at the top of the stone:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Z-rod • 'triple disc' symbol <p>What do you think these symbols could mean? Why are they here?</p>	<p>Pupils' own ideas.</p>
<p>Which side of the stone do you think is the front or main side?</p> <p>Which side do you like best? Find your favourite part of it, and tell a partner why you like it best.</p>	<p>Probably the cross – important religious symbol.</p>