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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOCKNAGAEL BOAR STONE



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Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925

Principal Office: Longmore House, Salisbury Place, Edinburgh EH9 1SH



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

KNOCKNAGAEEL BOAR STONE

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Knocknagael Boar Stone is a slab of slate which bears the 'mirror-case' and boar Pictish symbols. It probably dates to the mid to late first millennium AD. It is named after the farm it where was historically located; though from 1991, it has been located in the foyer of Highland Council Headquarters. Its current access is limited to visitors who have to either request to be escorted to it, or view the carvings through glass from the outside (best seen at night when illuminated).

1.2 Statement of significance

- The Knocknagael Stone is a classic example of a Pictish symbol-bearing stone, the precise symbolism of which is a subject of much debate and interest.
- The stone itself and its (separate) context have the potential to provide an insight into political, social and religious developments in northern Pictland and how these relate to wider developments in contemporary society.
- The striking image of the boar, so finely executed, is of particular art historical interest because of the relationship of animals in the related media of sculpture, metalwork and manuscripts, and the debate about the date of such art and the direction of artistic influences in northern Britain. Such Pictish art may have originated in this part of Scotland, and Knocknagael is a consideration in this debate.
- The present location in the Council offices does little to enhance the appreciation of the full significance of the sculpture, but protects the sculpture from the harmful effects of the elements and other threats.
- It is the only symbol-bearing stone in Historic Environment Scotland's care in Highland and further north and west; one of a small group of such sculptures in north-east Scotland.

2 Assessment of significance

2.1 Background

Description

The monument is a massive, irregular slate boulder incised on one face with the image of a boar and, above this, a so-called 'disc and rectangle' or 'mirror-case' symbol. It measures 2m x 2.2m x 0.31m. The monument stood in a field on the farm of Knocknagael, near a road, until 1991, but it was likely not the original location.

Carved detail

The carved detail on the stone is finely executed by a skilled carver. The incised boar and mirror-case are likely Pictish symbols, especially since they are paired vertically.

The scale of the stone with the dominating large image of the boar is physically impressive.

The boar is naturalistic but stylised. The boar's body decoration is based on observation; for example, the lobate scrolls reflect musculature and movement at joints. Importantly, such scrolls provide art-historical links with Insular manuscripts and metalwork of the seventh and eighth centuries. It has long been argued that these animal designs originated in northern Scotland and from here influenced art elsewhere in northern Britain, not vice versa. The mirror-case is a simple geometric symbol of two concentric circles with a centre point on top of a slight trapezoid.

Brief History

The following outlines our current understanding of Knocknagael based on interpretation of available evidence. However, it is acknowledged that providing a biography for the stone, as with many other similar sites, is a fraught business.

As with most stones of this type, the original date and patron is unknown, however, on stylistic grounds, Knocknagael Boar stone is thought to have been erected between the fifth and seventh centuries.

Archaeologists and others debate the historical context in which such a symbolic system might have been created, rapidly promoted and used over large parts of Pictland. It seems that the growth of Pictland and the appearance of this standardised system occurred at the same time, under the control of a political and /or religious elite. If a historical context is sought for this, we might look to the reigns of Bridei son of Mailcon (d. around 585), King of at least northern Pictland, and his immediate descendants, or the late 7th-century activities of Bridei son of Bili who began an exerted campaign to forge a single Pictish people living in a single Pictish kingdom under a single Pictish king.

The monument was taken into guardianship in 1949.

Fenced in the 1930s, in 1962 it is recorded as enclosed by a high wire fence (vandalism was a recurrent problem).

By March 1991, in a joint venture, it was transferred for safety to the foyer of Highland Regional Council Chambers, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness.

In December 2010, it was descheduled.

Archaeological Overview

The monument is first shown at the site in the 1st Edition OS map of 1875. Upon its removal to the Highland Council office, it was noted that the ground was disturbed and likely not the original site of the stone due to the presence of natural gravel subsoil. The monument seems to have been placed in its former location during the 19th century. Beginning in 2009, archaeological work was undertaken near the former site of the monument. No archaeological features or finds were found near the monument location.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Knocknagael Boar's Stone is high. Its exceptional size, well-carved symbols, and state of preservation makes it a cultural resource without many parallels.

Knocknagael is unusual in the appearance of a boar symbol. There are only three other examples of the boar symbol incised. (Dunadd, Clune Farm, Old Scatness Broch) It is the sole (surviving) example of the incised boar with a symbol. The combination of the boar and mirror-case is important for the contribution to the understanding of Pictish language.

While the archaeological context is lacking for this stone, it was likely near the original site. The erection of such a stone in this area suggests the distribution of the Pictish symbols starting in this area.

2.3 Historical values

Knocknagael Boar stone, and other carved stones, are of exceptional importance because of their contribution to our understanding of the society, religion, culture and lifestyle of early medieval Scotland when other forms of evidence (artefacts, documents, and contemporary accounts) are sparse. Study of the symbols and the craftsmanship of the stone gives an insight into the material culture, social structure and custom.

While as of yet, we do not comprehend exactly the complex messages that the stone conveys, it is likely a response to local conditions and resources, which is important in the distribution of stones, typically classed as part of a 'national' scheme. For example, a boar is also incised on stone in Dunadd, which is outside of the normal distribution of Pictish symbols, especially since the boar is comparatively rare.

The nineteenth century placement of the stone suggests antiquarian interest in preservation of the stone as well as access. It was placed near the public road that follows the line of General Wade's military road between Inverness and Fort Augustus, built in 1726.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Little artwork associated with the Picts survives in media other than sculpture.

For materials within the borders of modern day Scotland, a rich corpus in stone sculpture is associated with the Picts though little artwork associated with the Picts survives in other media (metalwork, manuscripts, textiles).

This is a substantial slab. The Picts may have appropriated a prehistoric standing stone or erected the slab themselves. The procurement of the slab, its erection and carving speak of access to technical and artistic skills that may have been limited to a few people in society at this time.

The depiction of the boar is rare in Pictish materials, where there are three other examples, but not as well incised as Knocknagael. There is still a mystery concerning exactly what the stone was visually communicating through the use of an undressed monumental slab with well-incised symbols.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Original aesthetic

In Pictland a unique range of at least 50 designs have been found incised, usually in groups of at least two, on a range of stones and other objects. Knocknagael is one of the 200 or so examples of these designs found incised on unworked stones. It is one of approximately 80 symbol-incised stones with animal designs which, with the exception of the so-called 'Pictish beast', represent broadly identifiable species, drawn in profile outline and correctly proportioned. Possibly 11 types of animal are depicted, but there are only four examples of the boar and these never appear in combination with other animals.

Leaving aside the suggestion that Pictish animal symbolism may have been used in a slightly different way to the rest of their symbols (such as the design above the boar), interpretations of this design system can be summarised as either suggesting they represent ideas (totemic symbols of lineage, indicators of rank, clan and profession, etc) or that they might represent a language. A mathematical, context-free study suggests that the symbols indicate a written language rather than religious imagery or heraldic arms.¹ While no more certain of the meaning, the presence of a written language may suggest memorials to the dead as is found in most of the other written inscriptions found on contemporary stone monuments in the British Isles (Latin, Old English, Old Irish, Runic, Ogham).

The mirror-case symbol has recently been organised into a relative chronology with increasing elaboration. Knocknagael with the simply incised mirror-case would likely be an earlier example, which would fit in the understanding that such Pictish art may have originated in this part of Scotland.

The other boar symbols are found at: Clune Farm, Dores; Dunadd; Old Scatness Borch. The stone from Clune Farm, Dores is likely the most associated with the Knocknagael representation of the boar as it comes from the relatively similar locale with similar care in the carving.

¹(Lee et al., 2010)

Knocknagael is not the only Pictish symbol in the close proximity: for instance, the fragment from Cullaird, Scaniport, the boar symbol fragment from Clune Farm, Dores as well as a bull symbol at Kingsmills and the two fragments from Lochardill and Torgorm now in the Inverness Museum.

Historic aesthetic

The stone stood in a field on the farm of Knocknagael until 1991. It was enclosed by a fence in the 1930s due to vandalism. It was placed by a road that was in use from the eighteenth century.

Present-day aesthetic

The Council Offices provide a sheltered, if rather visually unattractive, environment for the sculpture. All sense of its original context is lost.

2.6 Natural heritage values

As the stone has been removed from its historic site, there is no great natural significance.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social values

At the Highland Council offices the sculpture is sited close to a door that is used by Councillors and others for select events. The extent to which the importance of this sculpture is appreciated has not been assessed, although anecdotal evidence suggests its value is not recognised by all and there is a certain disregard for its proper curation (cigarettes apparently being stubbed out on its back face, for instance).

Community values

The Picts and their art are held dear by many people living in Scotland, and beyond. In some instances the motivation is political (the Picts being a distinctive 'Scottish' people, defined in no small measure by the unique aspects of their art – their symbols) who were not conquered by the Romans and who laid the foundations for the modern Scottish nation. Knocknagael is therefore a classic example of Pictish art and all this stands for.

The boar is used as the logo of the Inverness Field Club.

Spiritual values

Symbol-incised stones are thought to have had a ritual function. In some instances such monuments are directly associated with burials. Archaeologists debate whether the people who were buried in these were pagans or early Christians continuing earlier burial rites. Even if pagan, it is likely that these monuments were being created by people who would have been aware that some of their fellow Picts were Christian, if they were not already Christian themselves. The boar has been used in religious contexts in the British Isles from Roman times through Scandinavian/Viking

presentations. It may also be connected to warriors as boars had been used on fierce items such as the Sutton Hoo helmet.

Use values

As it is located in the Council Offices accessible only by special request, it is not likely that the stone is of economic use to the area.

However, it may be of special use for educational purposes since it combines heritage with modern use.

Corporate Value

The Council Offices provide a sheltered, if rather visually unattractive, environment for the sculpture. All sense of its original context is lost.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- The biography of the sculpture, particularly where it might previously have been sited, when it was moved and why (if the excavator is correct that it was not in its original location).
- The immediate archaeological context of the sculpture where it stood at Knocknagael and, if applicable, in earlier times (beyond the very limited confines of the guardianship area). In other words, why was it erected, where it was and how was it being used?
- Precise date of carvings and erection of monument.
- Meaning of the Pictish symbols
- Modern art historical analysis (note Henderson and Henderson 2004).

4 Associated properties

5 Keywords

Pictish symbol-bearing stone, animal art, boar, early religious beliefs (pagan/Christian), language, Inverness

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