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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DYCE SYMBOL STONES



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

DYCE SYMBOL STONES

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The collection of early medieval sculpture at Dyce includes five stones: two of which bear symbols. The collection was rehoused in a shelter in the west end of the old church which they had reused in the foundations of the church-wall. The other, cross-incised stones, were found during grave-digging.

1.2 Statement of significance

- The Dyce Stones are the most tangible evidence for the existence of a significant early medieval church at the site, a predecessor of the existing medieval parish church. The fact that they have retained their association with their find-spot enhances our appreciation and understanding of what might have been there in Pictish times.
- The conversion of the Picts of north-east Scotland by Irish missionaries (and others?) is a poorly understood historical process, but place-names and sculpture, as at Dyce, hint at the work of locally-based priests.
- The sculpture is regionally distinctive, yet it can be shown to belong to the Insular art tradition that extended across the peoples of Ireland and Britain.
- Some of the incised stones are worth further attention as they have features that are difficult to catalogue.
- The ogham inscription, exceptionally clear but frustratingly opaque at present, has the potential to provide important clues for the nature and currency of literacy and language at a period when historical documents do not survive.
- The diverse range of sculptures from the one site is unusual in a north-east Scotland context. There is the possibility, but no more than that on present evidence, that a pagan burial site was adopted by the Christians.
- Despite the encroachment of modern development, the site is reasonably rural and surprisingly beautifully set beside a bend in the River Don, helping visitors regain some sense of why an early church site would have been located here.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

The collection of early medieval sculpture comprises of two large Pictish sculptured stones, wall-mounted rehoused in a protective shelter in the west end of the old church, of St Fergus, in 2004. The first is a Class-1 symbol stone, bearing the 'beast' symbol above a double-disc and Z-rod on one side. The second is a Class-II cross-slab, with the main face carved in relief with an ornate cross, flanked on left by a crescent and v-rod above a triple-disc, and on the right, by a 'mirror-case' above a double-disc and z-rod. The second also bears an ogham inscription on the side. Additionally, the display also

included four small cross-incised stones, although it remains unclear whether or not these are technically in state care. An additional fragment was discovered in the process of rehousing.

Carved detail

The earlier of the two large sculptured stones is a Class-I symbol stone, hewn from a slab of pink-red granite, of roughly rectangular shape, rounded at one end and measuring 1.67m by 0.7m. It is sculpted on one face with incised lines and, at the top, the beast symbol, and, below, the double-disc and Z-rod symbol. Each disc is embellished with an inner circle and central dot.

The other large stone is a Class-II symbol-incised cross-slab measuring 1.37m by 0.6m. Carved from a slab of mica-rich grey granite with mica bands visible across the surface, it has clearly been damaged and reworked in the past; a chunk of the missing portion on its left side today survives as a separate fragment. Its main face is carved in relief with an ornate Latin cross and four Pictish symbols. To the left of the cross, forming one pair, is a crescent and V-rod above a triple disc, and to the cross's right is a 'mirror-case' with, below it and extending under the shaft, a double-disc and Z-rod. An ogham inscription, incised along the entire length of the right hand side of the stone, reads:

EOTTASSARRHETODDEDDOTSMAQQROGODDADD.

The meaning is opaque, but the portion following the MAQQ ('mac' or 'son of') may be a (Brittonic) Pictish personal name – rogododd. The portion preceding the MAQQ defies interpretation but one of the words is also likely to be a personal name.

Of the four other smaller stones, two are cross-incised grave-markers whilst a third could have been part of a corner-post from a slab-built shrine.

Brief History

c. later 6th century/ later 7th century AD - the historical context in which the Pictish symbolic system was created is unclear, though it seems that the growth of Pictland and the appearance of this standardised system occurred around the same time, under the control of a political and/or religious elite. A possible historical context may be the reign of Bridei mac Máelchú (died c. 585), king of at least northern Pictland, and his immediate descendants, or that of Bridei mac Bili, who led his army to victory over the Angles at the battle of *Nechtanesmere* (near Dunnichen, Angus) in 685 and forged a single Pictish people living in a single Pictish kingdom under a single Pictish king.

13th/14th century? – St Fergus' Church is built at the site. Little is known of St Fergus, who appears to have been an early missionary working in north-east Scotland. A local cult can be inferred from the distribution of place-names, and it is possible that an earlier church, perhaps a monastery, stood at the site in earlier times. **Aberdeen Cathedral** is recorded as being in possession

of a 'silver arm of St Fergus with his bones', gifted by the rector of Dyce, but this was lost at the Reformation (1560).

18th / 19th century – the symbol stones are discovered at the church site.

1872 – St Fergus' Church ceases to serve as the parish church of Dyce.

1882 - the first Ancient Monuments Act passes into law. Shortly after, Lieut.-Gen. Pitt Rivers, a leading figure in the movement to better protect Britain's archaeological heritage, is appointed the first Inspector of Ancient Monuments. He becomes actively involved in the Dyce Stones case, particularly the vexed question of whether they should be moved off-site. His ideas about the importance of retaining monuments in association with their find-spot crystallises during the case, and they are retained at the site.

1890 - the stones are removed from the dyke where they were discovered and redisplayed in a purpose-built shelter on the outside east face of the abandoned church.

1891 - the stones are taken into state care; 'the first ancient monument in Great Britain placed under the Ancient Monuments Act and protected through the agency of a local committee'.

1997 - during conservation works an ogham inscription is discovered on the symbol-bearing cross-slab. The RCAHMS subsequently (1999) records all the sculpture from the site.

2002 – all the stones are redisplayed under a new shelter on the inside west face of the ruined church.

2.2 Evidential values

All the stones are still associated with their find-spots, both symbol-bearing sculptured stones having reportedly been discovered in the church glebe. The *Old Statistical Account* (1794) notes that the cross-slab was 'in the church-yard dyke, [where] there is a stone six feet high, one side of which is a crucifix distinctly cut'. The symbol-bearing stone was 'recently recognised' in 1856 and thereafter built into the churchyard walls for its protection. The four smaller sculptures were all found during grave-digging. The number of Pictish carved stones still in their original locations is small, and decreasing. The rare ability to be able to visit and attempt to understand and appreciate why a carving was placed where it was in the landscape is important.

Nothing is known of the sub-surface archaeology in the immediate vicinity of the stones, for no detailed scientific exploration of the physical remains has been carried out at the site. However, disarticulated human bones were found during superficial ground-disturbing works in the church in 2002 prior to the re-display of the stones.

Topographically, the site occupied by the later medieval St Fergus' Church – a promontory overlooking a bend in the River Don - is in a classic location for

a significant early medieval ecclesiastical site. The ruined church and its immediate environs must surely have high archaeological potential.

2.3 Historical values

The main historical values of the Dyce Symbol stones relate to their ability to provide an insight into Pictish life and culture. This is chiefly conveyed by the design and artistic values of the stone itself, the ogham inscription which may link to historical figures, and how the stone relates to other carved stones of the period. All these aspects are discussed in Section 2.4 below.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The earlier of the two large sculptured stones is a Class-I symbol stone, hewn from a slab of pink-red granite, of roughly rectangular shape, rounded at one end and measuring 1.67m by 0.7m. It is sculpted on one face with incised lines and, at the top, the beast (a swimming elephant?) symbol, and, below, the double-disc and Z-rod symbol. Each disc is embellished with an inner circle and central dot.

The other large stone is a Class-II symbol-incised cross-slab measuring 1.37m by 0.6m. Carved from a slab of mica-rich grey granite with mica bands visible across the surface, it has clearly been damaged, and reworked, in the past; a chunk of the missing portion on its left side today survives as a separate fragment. Its main face is carved in relief with an ornate Latin cross and four Pictish symbols. To the left of the cross, forming one pair, is a crescent and V-rod above a triple disc, and to the cross's right is a 'mirror-case' with, below it and extending under the shaft, a double-disc and Z-rod. An ogham inscription, incised along the entire length of the right hand side of the stone, reads:

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The stones are notable for the range of different types of early medieval sculpture found at one place. In contrast to southern Pictland, only five symbol-bearing Class-II cross-slabs have been found in north-east Scotland (Dyce, Formaston, Maiden Stone, Migvie and Monymusk), a distinction that requires explanation. As a group, the Pictish sculpture from Aberdeenshire has been described as being in 'restrained monumental taste' (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 194). By contrast, large numbers of cross-marked stones have survived in this region; encircled equal-armed crosses predominate, and presumably reflect some sort of local ecclesiastical preference. This can be seen at St Fergus. However, it is difficult to find

parallels for the placing of four circles outside the cross, as seen on one of the stones. Cross-marked stones are difficult to date, but are thought to originate in the missionary work of the Irish church among the Picts (6th - early 8th centuries AD).

The Pictish symbols are early examples of the Insular art style found in early medieval Britain and Ireland (c. AD 600-900). Therefore, despite being unique to Pictland, coupled with the enigma of their meaning, their style reminds us that the Picts had cultural and historical connections with their neighbours and that their society had a maturity and infrastructure sufficient to contribute in a significant way to an international art style.

Several design features link the five north-east cross-slabs into a distinct regional sub-group. Because of their regional peculiarity and transitional form these sculptures are difficult to date but Dyce has been dated to the mid-to-late 800s.

The carving of such sculptures speaks of access to technical and artistic skills that may have been limited to a select few in society at that time.

The ogham inscription is exceptionally well preserved. It is probably the last of the striking cluster of inscriptions in the Don/Urie basin (**Brandsbutt Stone**, Mains of Afforsk, Moor of Carden, Newton Stone), and the only one to come from a proven ecclesiastical site. However, it is impossible to tell if it is contemporary with the carving on the main face of the stone or was added later.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

Whilst the sculptures might not fall into the 'spectacular' category of Pictish sculpture found elsewhere in Scotland, the Class-II cross-slab is particularly ornate and the simple design of the cross-marked stones must be a reflection of contemporary attitudes towards embellished monuments.

The former parish church of St Fergus' is now some considerable distance from the modern community of Dyce, and isolated from it by modern roads and a large, somewhat unsightly quarry. Overhead is the seemingly never-ending 'buzz' of helicopters and planes landing/taking off from nearby Aberdeen (Dyce) Airport. That said, discovering the newly-conserved kirk, at the end of a rural track, comes as a pleasure, whilst the site itself, a green and pleasant spot overlooking an impressive bend in the River Don, adds to the satisfaction of having made the attempt to visit.

Historic Aesthetic

The Dyce collection is part of a small yet striking group of stones, particularly in Aberdeenshire: those that have been found in or near churchyards, reused in the foundations of a medieval church, incorporated into the churchyard wall or recovered in grave-digging. In Donside, thirteen are first recorded in these circumstances, such as Dyce, with an additional five more found close to a churchyard.

2.6 Natural heritage values
To be assessed

2.7 Contemporary values
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 – were never conquered by the Romans and laid the foundation for the modern Scottish nation.

The Dyce Stones clearly still have social meaning today. Although now somewhat remote from local communities, they have been retained on the site, and been recently re-displayed. This redisplay was done in tandem with a major programme of masonry conservation on the ruined medieval St Fergus' Church itself by the local authority. The presence of a still-used and well-tended burial ground adjacent to the ruined kirk indicates that the stones and the site as a whole retain a special place in the hearts and minds of the local community.

Spiritual values

All the evidence points to the site having been a fairly early, and certainly important, Pictish church. The presence of the symbol-incised stone may suggest that a pagan ritual site was adopted for this purpose because, in contrast to other sculptures, it lacks Christian symbolism.

The collection at Dyce is important for it shows the process of Christianisation, where Pictish symbols are allowed to coexist with overt Christian symbolism. That Christianity was no longer a threat but an ally to secular power, advertised through secular patronage.

The medieval St Fergus' Church was only abandoned in 1872, so there is over a millennium of Christian activity at the site.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- When were the individual stones created and by whom?
- What precisely was the link with St Fergus?
- Was there a secular or ecclesiastical community on the site in Pictish times?

The answers to some of these questions may well be revealed through a more detailed scientific exploration of the site as a whole.

4 Associated properties

(other Pictish symbol stones in Historic Scotland's care) – **Aberlemno Stones; Abernethy Round Tower; Brandsbutt Stone; Brough of Birsay; Dunfallandy Stone; Eassie Stone; Elgin Cathedral; Fowls Wester Stones; Hilton of Cadboll; Knocknagael Boar Stone; Maiden Stone;**

Meigle Museum; Picardy Stone; St Andrews Cathedral Museum; St Orland's Stone; St Vigean's Museum; Sueno's Stone

(other church sites in Aberdeenshire producing Pictish stones) – **Bourtie; Clatt; Inverurie; Kinellar; Kintore; Rhynie**

(other stones bearing ogham inscriptions in NE Scotland) – **Brandsbutt Stone; Mains of Afforsk; Moor of Carden; Newton Stone**

(other stones bearing ogham inscriptions in Historic Scotland's care) – **Brandsbutt Stone; Dunadd Fort; Dupplin Cross (in St Serf's, Dunning); Ruthwell Cross**

5 Keywords

Pictish; symbol-incised stone; symbol-bearing cross-slab; Insular art; ogham, St Fergus

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