



HISTORIC  
ENVIRONMENT  
SCOTLAND

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EACHDRAIDHEIL  
ALBA

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## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# BRANDBUTT SYMBOL STONES



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## BRANDBUTT SYMBOL STONES

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## 1 Summary

### 1.1 Introduction

Brandsbutt Stone, Inverurie is a massive block of whinstone, 1.06m x 1.27m x 0.91m, bears a crescent and V-rod above a serpent Z-rod. The stone once made up a field-dyke but has now been pieced together, to reveal an ogham inscription to the left of the symbols. It has been transliterated as IRATADDOARENS-.

### 1.2 Statement of significance

It is a fragmentary example of a Pictish symbol stone, but the surviving carved surfaces are well preserved.

- One of a small group of Pictish carved stone monuments (with or without Christian imagery) that carry ogham inscriptions. Amongst other things, these provide important evidence for the nature and extent of early literacy in Scotland, and the languages that were being used (crucially, the relationship between Pictish and Gaelic).
- An important example of the Pictish practice, found particularly in north-east Scotland, of reusing prehistoric sites to create spaces that were presumably used for ritual activities.
- The biography of the stone is indicative of changing public attitudes to ancient monuments.
- The visitors' ability to fully appreciate this monument is compromised by its modern setting within a housing estate.

## 2 Assessment of Significance

### 2.1 Background

The monument comprises a Pictish symbol stone situated in the western outskirts of Inverurie, some 65m south-west of the former steading of Brandsbutt.

The stone is a dark whinstone, triangular in shape and measuring 1.07m high, 1.27m wide and 0.91m thick. It seems that it may originally have formed part of a prehistoric stone circle. The inscribed face of the stone shows to the right the serpent and Z-rod and crescent and V-rod symbols and on the left a boldly-incised ogham inscription, interpreted as reading: IRATADDOARENS.

#### Carved detail

The stone is incised on the south-east face. There are two Pictish symbols carved slightly off-centre of the stone. The top one is a crescent and V-rod. The crescent has a central pelta and a spiral in each wing. The right end of the V-rod is arrow-pointed while the left end is more rounded – an unusual shape. The serpent loops right to left and is one of the three scaled serpents, decorated with a stylised representation of scales. The Z-rod ends are curlicued half-circles.

To the left of the Pictish symbols is a line of Ogham.

### Brief History

The following notes outline our current understanding of Brandsbutt based on the 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, it is likely that this stone had multiple lives: as a re-used portion of a stone circle, as a Pictish monument, as a statement of transition of power with the ogham inscription, as built into a dyke and then its reassembled form of a Pictish monument.

The field dyke was likely prior to the mid-nineteenth century.

Prior to 1903, the dyke was taken down.

1924, the Monument was first scheduled

In 1948, the monument was taken into guardianship.

### 2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Brandsbutt Stone is very high. Its exceptional size, multiple historic reuses, relative completeness with multiple languages present make it a cultural resource without many parallels.

### 2.3 Historical values

Brandsbutt Stone, like other carved stones, is of exceptional importance because of the contribution to our understanding of the society, religion culture and lifestyle of early medieval Scotland, especially when other forms of evidence are sparse.

The Picts are thought to have reused one of the stones from a prehistoric stone circle (about 25m diameter, around 13 stones) to create a symbol-incised stone. The reuse of a prehistoric monument with the addition of Pictish symbols is limited to a small handful of the existing approximately 700 prehistoric cairns and stone sculptures.

Such Pictish sculptures are imprecisely dated, but probably belong to between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. In some instances they are associated with burials, but the precise original context and function of this stone is not known. We might anticipate a cult centre or centre of population nearby.

We cannot be certain that the inscription and symbols were carved at the same time, but it is conceivable that they were and that their intended messages are complementary. Early medieval inscriptions in Scotland are

rare, and come in either Roman or ogham script. More than 30 ogham inscriptions have been found in Pictland, dating to between the 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century (the majority 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century), but in general they are poorly understood. The choice to have both ogham and Pictish symbols on the same monument is worth further investigation.

While we cannot be sure what the inscription means, such ogham inscriptions normally refer to individuals with Celtic personal names and seem likely to be memorials, or relate in some way to statements of land ownership (eg the monuments may be acting as boundary markers). The inscription is possibly a rendering of Ethernan (Adrian). If so, this begs important questions about the date and role of this monument. This may be to the similar purpose of the Pictish symbols which 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. 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).

Archaeologists and others debate the historical context in which the symbolic system developed by the Picts 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 perhaps 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 7<sup>th</sup>-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 clearance of the stone circle, and smashing of the carved stone and its incorporation into a field dyke, is linked to agricultural improvements that took place prior to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to 1903, the dyke was taken down and searched, revealing additional portions of the stone. In 1924 Monument was first scheduled; in 1948 taken into guardianship, and various sections of stone reassembled and parts of the dyke were removed. In 2000 Further sections of dyke were removed by Aberdeenshire Council, to expose the other two remaining standing stones from the stone circle, which are a short distance from the Brandsbutt Stone.

#### Archaeological Overview

Excavations in 1983 demonstrate that the two stones built into the dyke, plus the Brandsbutt Stone, have been moved from their original locations. The stone circle, of which five post-holes were recovered, stood a short distance to the east.

The reuse by the Picts of prehistoric sites for the location of their symbol-incised stones (ie those without overt Christian imagery) is a distinctive trait north of the Mounth. The Picts may have been deliberately trying to associate themselves with monuments of past significance, and in doing so created places where their own rituals could be enacted.

#### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

The carving of this slab speaks of access to technical and artistic skills that may have been limited to a few people in society at this time.

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, and the enigma of their meaning, their style reminds us that the Picts had cultural and historical connections with their neighbours and their society had a maturity and infrastructure sufficient to contribute in a significant way to an international art style.

##### Social overview

The bold ogham inscription (and possible related symbols) is clearly making a big statement about the individual who we presume to be named on it.

Recent thought not only connects the Pictish symbols but the ogham to a statement of identity, particularly since the stone marked a boundary of some sort. (Donside 326.) Perhaps the change in form suggests a political statement during a transition of power.

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.

The modern value has not formally been assessed, but the stone is the subject of vandalism (Glass fragments are often found round it).

#### 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

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. Brandsbutt is one of the 200 or so examples of these designs found incised on unworked stones.

The stone and some of its associated archaeology survives as a clearing within a 1980s housing estate. It is difficult to recognise and appreciate the topographical context of the circle/stone, or indeed its original rural context.

### Original Value

The possibility of carving of symbols onto pre-existing megaliths, potentially moving them, and disbanding the stone circle may reflect a concern for permanently displaying information and marking the landscape. The process of linking the monument to the much older stone circle but also changing the stone by carving the symbols and displaying them suggests the ephemeral value of what the stone meant to a specific group at a specific time.

There is a possibility that the stone marked out not the boundaries of territories, but certain places on the boundary lines such as cemeteries, cult centres at river confluences, route-ways or possibly even hosting grounds. (Donside 322)

### Historic Value

There is a pattern that Pictish stones stood on the haughland at the confluence of two major rivers that also served as parish boundaries in the twelfth century.

Fragments of the stone were reused as part of an agriculturally developed dyke.

### Present day value

Currently, the stone is displayed in a housing estate next to a walking path. Awareness of the importance of the stone to the community is unknown; however, glass fragments are frequently found broken all around it.

2.6 Natural heritage values  
These have not yet been assessed.

2.7 Contemporary/use values  
These have not yet been formally assessed.

## 3 Major gaps in understanding

- The archaeological history of the use of the stone circle, from prehistory onwards, is scarcely understood. Some of the surrounding area was stripped in 1983, but none of the observed features were excavated; the undeveloped area around the carved stone therefore retains high archaeological potential. In general, little is known about Pictish reuse of prehistoric sites as a whole.
- Cult of Ethernanus and any links it may have with Brandsbutt; early Christianity in north-east Scotland as a whole.
- Broader archaeological context: where did the people live who created and used this site in Pictish times?

- How much of the inscription and other carvings are we missing?
- Precise date of carvings.
- Meaning of the Pictish symbols.

#### 4 **Associated properties**

Stone circle at Broomend of Crichton, in nearby Port Elphinstone, contains a Pictish symbol-bearing stone (secondary location). For Pictish re-use of prehistoric site, **Loanhead of Daviot**. Note also later burial at **Clava**.

#### 5 **Keywords**

Picts, early medieval, symbol stone, ogham inscription, stone circle, reuse of prehistoric monument, St Ethernan, north-east Scotland

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