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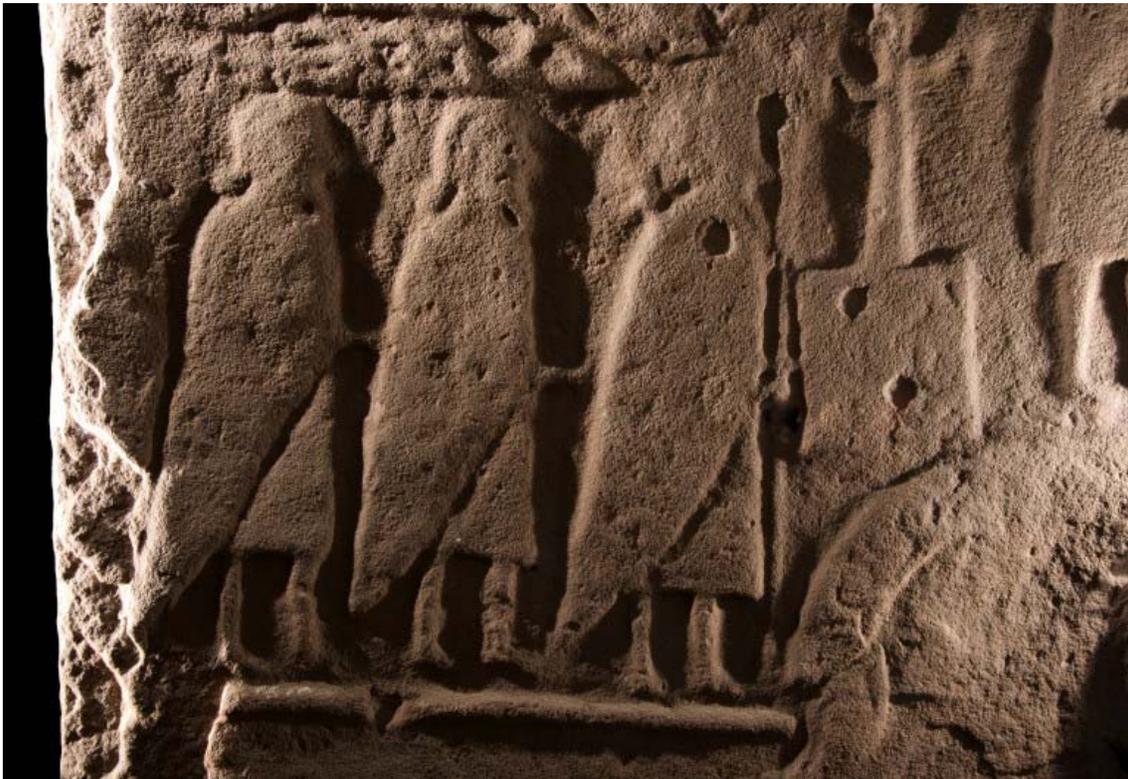
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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EASSIE SCULPTURED STONE



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

EASSIE SCULPTURED STONE

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The Eassie Stone (NO 3526 4745), standing within the remains of Eassie Old Church in Angus, is a Class II Pictish upright cross-slab of Old Red Sandstone. It stands at 2.03m tall and dates to the second half of the first millennium AD. This cross-slab is one of the finest in its class.

The front face exhibits a quadrilobate Christian cross, carved all in relief, including numerous interlace and key-pattern decorated panels. There is also one angel, with the remnants of a second figure opposite it, and a human figure, as well as a stag, a four-legged beast and a dog on this face. The back face exhibits two definite Pictish symbols, four human figures, a tree, three cattle and two more probable symbols. The back face is damaged and therefore particularly difficult to interpret. The sides are undecorated.

The stone is freely accessible on foot as a visitor attraction inside the ruins of the old church, although it is now enclosed within a protective structure.

1.2 Statement of significance

The Pictish symbol stones, cross-slabs and crosses of early medieval Scotland are perhaps the most extraordinary and beautiful of all carved stones in the British Isles. These stones, carved by the Picts, or 'Painted People', 'offer remarkable testimony to their artistic skills and insights into Pictish life and artistic contacts'.¹

The Eassie Stone stands relatively discretely within the corner of a ruined church. Its significance can be summarised as follows:

- It is an explicit expression of Christianity in southern Pictland.
- It is one of the earliest Pictish carved stones of this form, probably late seventh century AD, thus important for highlighting the development of Pictish monuments.²
- Erected at a time when Pictish kings were actively promoting the development of the Pictish church during the late seventh/early eighth centuries.
- Other than some damage to the top right of the front face and some damage to the top as well as bottom right of the back face, it stands as one of the most complete of all Class II Pictish carved stones.
- It can demonstrate connections to Insular art and art found on other mediums.
- It exhibits complex circular knotwork on its cross-shaft, similar although inferior to that found on the cross-shaft of Aberlemno II.
- Architecturally the stone is moderately significant, as it appears it may have a pediment. The clarity of the cruciform in relief is also noteworthy.

¹ Fraser 2008, 1

² Foster 2004, 1 and 3

- Although not currently standing at its original location, it appears to have retained its original setting, which perhaps indicates the site of an early Pictish church.³
- The high relief carving on the front face is indicative of a style that is thought to have been transmitted from contemporary metalwork,⁴ although little metalwork survives.
- The stone possibly depicts a hunting scene, without horses, and other complex Biblical imagery.
- The mixing of Pictish symbols and Christian iconography on this cross-slab was a deliberate choice, and therefore perhaps designed to convey complex messages during a time of conversion.
- This stone communicates to us that the Picts were not an isolated or primitive culture

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

The cross-slab is carved from brownish-grey sandstone and is rectangular in shape with what may be a pediment. The stone is consistent with a local source similar to that of the Balmashanner sandstone.⁵ It measures 2.03m in height, 1.02m wide and 0.23m thick. It is carved all in relief. It stands within the ruins of Eassie Old Church, close to a road (A94) between Meigle and Glamis,⁶ and the church and churchyard provide its immediate landscape setting.

The Carved Detail

A large ring-headed Christian cross dominates the front face, with four lobes interconnected at each angle of the cross by four circular rings of which forms the ring of the cross. The left and right arms of the cross are decorated with triangular interlace, the upper arm with interlace and the lower arm with irregular interlace. The centre of the head of the cross is decorated with key-pattern and the cross-shaft is decorated with complex circular interlaced knotwork. This face clearly demonstrates a rich variety and complexity decoration.

Providing the background to the cross are six different panels inhabited by a variety of carvings. To the top left is an angel and to the top right are the damaged remains of another indeterminate figure. The angel to the left has beautifully carved wings. The panel to the left of the cross-shaft exhibits a (naked) man with a cloak who is armed with a spear and a shield. To the right of the cross-shaft is a stag, a four-legged beast with its tail between its legs, and below them a hound that appears to be moving at speed.⁷ The man and the animals are moving in the same direction from left to right. The two bottom panels are undecorated.

³ Foster 2004, 3

⁴ Henderson 1993, 216

⁵ Miller and Ruckley 2005, 288

⁶ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 218

⁷ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 219

The back face is damaged and so some of the carved detail remains only in part. To the top are two Pictish symbols: a double disc and z-rod and a Pictish Beast, sometimes referred to as the elephant.⁸ Below these are three cloaked figures (wearing vestments)⁹ carrying a rod each, and in front of them is a tree in a pot next to a man with a rod over his shoulder. Below this to the left are two cattle with the hindquarters remaining of a third. To the left of the cattle is badly damaged, although two Pictish symbols may be apparent. They are the remains of a horseshoe and perhaps another Pictish Beast.¹⁰ The organisation of the carved detail on the back face seems almost 'chaotic'.¹¹

Brief History

The following is designed to highlight the brief history of the Eassie Stone. Providing a full biography for the stone is not possible at this stage in our understanding, as is common with early medieval carved stones. A fuller account of the timeline of the stone is given in Appendix 1, and any further details of archaeological investigation are presented in Appendix 2.

Assigning the name of a patron or carver, or even a date to the Eassie Stone is difficult. This is the same for most carved stones of this period. It is generally thought that it was erected in the 8th century, however it may pre-date this, and therefore provide valuable evidence for the initiation of the Pictish cross-slab tradition.¹²

Charles Cordiner found the stone in stream near the church in the late 18th century.¹³ It was removed and placed inside the ruins of church,¹⁴ probably around 1842,¹⁵ where it still stands today. The ruins of Eassie Old Church are mainly post-Reformation, although a church has been on record on this since the 13th century.¹⁶

The stone was subject to antiquarian interest in the early 19th century and is evidenced in sketches by James Skene,¹⁷ and by the late 19th century it passed into guardianship.¹⁸

By the start of 20th century there began to be concerns about the condition of the stone and its safety in the ruins of the church, and by 1912 works for its protection had been undertaken.¹⁹ In the 1940s concerns were raised about effects of weather, and lack of shelter, and in the late sixties a shelter was

⁸ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 219; Mack 1997, 64

⁹ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 219

¹⁰ Fraser 2008, 52-3

¹¹ Henderson 2008, 174

¹² Foster 2004, 2

¹³ Fraser 2008, 52

¹⁴ Jervise 1857, 247

¹⁵ Foster 2004, 1

¹⁶ RCAHMS n.d. (b)

¹⁷ RCAHMS n.d. (a)

¹⁸ Foster 2004, 1

¹⁹ Foster 2004, 1

constructed to safely house it in the southeast corner of the church.²⁰ In 1987 the stone had a new glazed shelter (on only two sides) placed around it for protection.²¹

2.2 Evidential values

The Eassie Stone is a fine example of a Class II Pictish cross-slab. It stands out in the archaeological record as a potentially early surviving example of a Pictish Class II stone. Its completeness, complexity and good state of preservation, as well as its hunting scene and Christian iconographies, are of great importance to its current and future potential in research and education.

The stone more than likely stood in a similar landscape location to its current location in Eassie. Although moved from, at least, its original location to a stream and then into Eassie Old Church ruins, it seems to have continually had a relationship to a church at this site. This is assuming that the 13th century church was founded on an earlier, perhaps Pictish, church.

This cross-slab probably had the role of a prayer cross and would have been erected under elite patronage – secular or ecclesiastical aristocracy. The Eassie Stone has the potential to provide evidence of aspects of Pictish society, such as culture, religion and daily life (in this case hunting). This will be discussed in the following sections.

2.3 Historical values

The Eassie Stone and other Pictish carved stones, although carved with beautiful but generally unintelligible symbols,²² are of great historic value. Pictish symbols are explicitly identifiable as indicators of Pictish culture, yet without the discovery of ‘contemporary literary reference’ they will remain difficult to understand.²³ The details revealed in the numerous other carvings however can help in the elucidation of the culture, religion and lifestyle of the people of early medieval Scotland.

As a cross-slab it is therefore an explicit manifestation of Christianity in Pictland. It provides insight into the beliefs and religious practices of the population in this region during the second half of the first millennium AD, as well as in the surrounding areas, and to some extent the rest of the British Isles. Whoever had this stone carved and erected was overt in their devotion to Christianity, thus providing intelligible links between elite patronage and religion in Pictland.

This stone is notably significant in its display of what is a probable hunting scene on the front face, although without horses, and the role of the cloaked man here is more difficult to determine. At the very least, it demonstrates the use of hounds in the practice of hunting deer. There may however be a more

²⁰ RCAHMS n.d. (a)

²¹ Muir 2005, 175-6

²² Henderson 1967, 157-8

²³ Henderson 1967, 158

symbolic or religious meaning behind why the Picts chose to depict hunting scenes on their carved stones.

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This stone provides further tangible historical reference to Christianity in the complex Biblical messages it appears to convey in its iconographies, such as in the figural scene on the back face. It is suggested that the three figures here may be advancing towards the tree; therefore they are perhaps depicting a scene of Genesis 18 where three men or angels meet Abraham at an oak tree.²⁴ This stone therefore has the potential to demonstrate how early ideas of Christianity, although complex, may be manifest in material culture.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Evidence for the Picts predominantly comes from their art, and particularly from carved stones. These carved stones are clearly products of accomplished sculptors and may provide evidence of a structured society for example. Skilled sculptors must have been commissioned to create these masterpieces, most probably at the behest of the Pictish elite. With the lack of other significant evidence for the Picts, these carved stones therefore give an insight into Pictish society, foreign contacts and cultural resources.

The architectural and artistic value of the Eassie Stone can be summarised as follows:

- The architecture of the sculpture is notable. Its size, intricately carved cross, probable pediment and artwork are all evidence of highly skilled craftsmanship. The stone perhaps signifies to beginning of the Pictish cross-slab tradition.
- The lower panels of the cross-shaft are carved with beautiful and complex circular interlaced knotwork. Although inferior to, it has a parallel in the cross-shaft of the later Aberlemno II from Aberlemno, which is only approximately 13 miles north-east of Eassie.
- The angel carving to the top left of the front face may be paralleled in the Dunfallandy Stone in Perth and Kinross,²⁵ or on a cross-slab from Kirriemuir in Angus.²⁶ The carving of angels is fairly common on Pictish carved stones, although it is noted that the most 'iconographically charged' are to be found on Aberlemno III in Angus.²⁷ If Henderson and Henderson are correct, then the other figure at the top right of the front face, now broken, is not an angel as previously identified,²⁸ but

²⁴ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 143

²⁵ Fraser 2008, 122

²⁶ Fraser 2008, 56-7

²⁷ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 152

²⁸ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 218-9

perhaps a symbol of the devil.²⁹ If this damaged carved figure does indeed represent a devil, this would elevate the artistic value of the stone, as this would perhaps indicate a depiction of Psychomachia,³⁰ (the struggle between the vices and virtues).

- The execution of the hunt scene is particularly beautiful. The processing male figure, common in Pictish art, moving from left to right is carved in intricate details. Similar processing figures are achieved in remarkably fine detail elsewhere, such as on a carved stone from nearby Kirriemuir in Angus,³¹ also associated with a hunt.
- It is also significant to note that there appears to be only other example of the horseshoe symbol on a Class II stone, at Migvie in Aberdeenshire,³² although on this stone it appears in conjunction with a v-rod.
- The cattle are carved in an artistically typical Pictish style, with intricate spiral work within their bodies, as are the stag and the four-legged beast. The Pictish Beast is incredibly distinctive to Pictish art. A remarkable and large parallel may be found carved on the back of the Maiden Stone in Aberdeenshire.³³ This symbol has been readily adopted in popular culture, as well as in mainstream advertisements. For example, there is a brand of beer named Kelpie that has the Pictish Beast symbol as its logo.³⁴

The above discussion of the artistic parallels and the associated geographical spread of the iconographies carved, as well as the contemporary use of a Pictish symbol, attest to the artistic value of the Eassie Stone.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

As with the majority of early medieval carved stones, aesthetic values have changed over time. This is relative to its changing landscape setting, but more importantly, to its changing audience. Those who view the stone today will have a different experience to those who viewed it within its original landscape setting.

Artistically, the Eassie Stone is aesthetically significant due to the nature, complexity and survival of some of its artwork. Each design is finely carved with precision and in most cases presented clearly. Its current state of preservation is good on its front face and less so on its back face.

Original Aesthetic

Although moved, and the original location uncertain, it can be said with a degree of confidence that this stone would originally have stood close by to where it currently stands. It is hard to imagine that the stone of this size would have travelled far to get into the stream where it was found in the late 18th century.

²⁹ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 152

³⁰ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 152

³¹ Fraser 2008, 56-7

³² Fraser 2008, 32-3; Mack 1997, 64

³³ Fraser 2008, 32

³⁴ Williams Brothers n.d.

Historic Aesthetic

It is unknown when, how, or why the stone found its way into the stream, but perhaps this happened during the Reformation. If so, the stone more than likely would have shared an immediate landscape setting with the pre-Reformation 13th-century church documented at Eassie.³⁵ The location clearly drew interest in the late-18th century, to the extent that it led to the discovery of the stone in the stream by Charles Cordiner.³⁶

Present Day Aesthetic

Today the stone stands in a corner of the ruins of Eassie Old Church, of which provides its immediate landscape setting. This location is close to a road that goes between Meigle and Glamis, and both these sites notably also have numerous Pictish carved stones.

Since 1987 the stone has been housed in a glazed protective shelter in order to protect it from further degradation. Two glazed panels and the corner walls of the church therefore surround the stone, although it can still be appreciated in this confined space.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The stone stands within the ruined remains of Eassie Old Church. The stone itself has no apparent natural significance (apart from its geology) though the churchyard, in its rural setting, has some modest natural heritage value.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social Values

Community

The stone stands in a fairly isolated location within the ruins of Eassie Old Church, although the churchyard itself is home to an interesting collection of monuments that must also draw interest. This region of Scotland is strongly identified with the Picts and their carved stones. Eassie therefore probably contributes to this sense of heritage, though there has been no significant assessment of the meaning of the stone for local or other communities. The proximity of Glamis and Meigle, both with Pictish carved stones, either side of Eassie perhaps allows for the Eassie Stone to demonstrate a potential link between all three of the communities.

Spiritual

Its relocation within a post-Reformation Christian churchyard crystallises its religious value, although it was probably associated with a pre-Reformation church at the same location. The stone is large in scale, with the fine carving of the cross surviving well. It has been easily accessible as an expression of the Christian religion within this region since the middle of the 19th century. On the other hand however, the meanings conveyed by its Pictish symbols continue to provide the stone with a tantalising characteristic.

³⁵ RCAHMS n.d. (b)

³⁶ Fraser 2008, 52

Use Values

Economic

The stone is located just off a prominent road between Perth and Forfar (A94), and therefore the possibility of numerous visitors having an encounter with the site is high if signage is heeded. The location also sits between the carved stones of Meigle and Glamis, so there is potential for daytrips to the region to take in numerous monuments. Those dedicated to the pursuit of Pictish art, and those of the Christian faith in particular may be drawn to this stone regardless of its location. It is unlikely that this stone has a great impact on the local economy however.

Access and Education

Although the site is unstaffed it is freely accessible close to a local farm. There is a PDF leaflet briefly detailing early carved stones available online for download from Historic Scotland. This is titled *Investigating – Early Carved Stones*,³⁷ and is also available in Gaelic. The stone is also featured in the *Angus Pictish Trail* leaflet.³⁸ Due to the complexity and nature of this stone it clearly has an educational value with regards to discussions of its iconographies and their meaning. This stone overtly displays features of early Christianity, and so may be used as a learning aid to demonstrate aspects of the beginnings of organised religion in Scotland.

Corporate Value

This stone demonstrates current best practice with regards to the conservation and management of a fragile cultural resource. Under the care of Historic Scotland it is now housed within a protective glazed shelter.³⁹ Although decay processes were noted from earlier photographs, this seems to have ceased now that the stone is protected from the elements.⁴⁰ This shelter also offers some protection against potential for vandalism.

3 Major gaps in understanding

There is no single academic thesis on this sculpture, although it is widely discussed and referred to in other art historical literature.

- What was the original location of this stone?
- Who had the stone created and who was the carver?
- Why was this stone created, and why was it erected in Eassie?
- Does this stone infer the location of an early Pictish church?
- What is the stones archaeological context?
- What is the purpose of the hunting scene iconography?
- What are the wider landscape relationships between the Eassie Stone and other carved stones from the Angus area?
- Can the complex Christian iconography be fully understood?
- Does the stone have any associated sites or settlements?

³⁷ Historic Scotland 2009

³⁸ Atkinson 2010

³⁹ See Muir 2005

⁴⁰ Maxwell 2005, 165

- What do the Pictish symbols represent on this carved stone?

4 **Associated properties**

Other Pictish cross-slabs/crosses – Maiden Stone; Dunfallandy Stone; St Orland's Stone; Dupplin Cross; Aberlemno II and III.

Other – Finavon fort.

Note – There is a high concentration of Pictish carved stones in the Angus area. Notably its collection of Class II carved stones.

5 **Keywords**

Pictish; cross-slab; Pictish symbols; Christianity; churchyard; hunting scene; Insular art; Eassie; Angus; interlace; knotwork; key-pattern; beast; angel; Pictish Beast

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Timeline

685 – Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen), resulting in the death of King Ecgrith of Northumbria and a victory for the Picts at the hands of King Bridei son of Beli,⁴¹ and ultimately leading to a Northumbrian loss of territory in Pictland.⁴²

c.700 – Eassie Stone is carved and erected, but precisely when and by whom is a mystery.

c.710 – Correspondence between Ceolfrid, Abbot from the Monastery at Jarrow, and King Nechtan of Pictland, in which Nechtan asks for the assistance of masons to help build a church in the Roman fashion.⁴³

843 – Cináed mac Ailpín becomes king of the Picts.⁴⁴

1246 – Eassie Old Church dedicated to Bishop David of St Andrews.⁴⁵

c.1786 – Charles Cordiner discovers the stone in a stream next to Eassie Old Church.⁴⁶

1832 – Sketches produced by James Skene⁴⁷

c.1842 – The stone was placed inside the ruins of the church.⁴⁸

1890 – The stone passes into guardianship.⁴⁹

1987 – The stone had a glazed shelter erected around it.⁵⁰

Appendix 2:

Although not specifically an archaeological excavation, the Eassie Stone would not have been found if it were not for the investigative actions of Charles Cordiner in c.1786.⁵¹

⁴¹ Fraser 2009, 383; Woolf 2007, 10

⁴² Woolf 2007, 4

⁴³ Henderson 1967, 82

⁴⁴ Woolf 2007, 351

⁴⁵ RCAHMS n.d. (b)

⁴⁶ Fraser 2008, 52

⁴⁷ RCAHMS n.d. (a)

⁴⁸ Foster 2004, 1

⁴⁹ Foster 2004, 1

⁵⁰ Muir 2005, 175

⁵¹ Fraser 2008, 52

Unfortunately, and due in part to no known archaeological inspection of the stone's immediate and surrounding contexts, the history of the Eassie Stone will remain difficult to fully determine.