

Property in Care (PIC) ID: PIC261

Designations: Scheduled Monument (SM90239)

Taken into State care: 1936 (Guardianship)

Last reviewed: 2016

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

PICARDY SYMBOL STONE



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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

The monument comprises a Pictish symbol stone, not far from the village of Inch in Aberdeenshire, between Myreton and Netherton farmhouses. It stands in the middle of a field, surrounded by a modern enclosure. It is possibly in its original location.

The stone comprises a rough slab of whinstone measuring about 2m high, about 0.5m thick, and measures some 0.9m wide at base, tapering to about 0.6m wide at the top. The south face of the slab is incised with three Pictish symbols: at the top of the slab, a double-disc and Z-rod; below this, a tightly coiled serpent and Z-rod; and below the serpent and Z-rod, a simple mirror. Excavations around the stone in 1856 showed that it stood on a low cairn, 1.9m in diameter, near which was a long grave.

1.2 Statement of significance

- The Picardy 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 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 fact that the stone is apparently still standing in its original location make it particularly significant.
- There is potential to examine the stone further within its setting and see how and if it relates to other monuments surrounding it.
- The mirror symbol on the stone suggests it is among the older of the stones in its group, according to a chronology of this type of symbol

2 Assessment of significance

2.1 Background

Description

An irregular pillar of granite, possibly still standing in its original position. Three Pictish symbols are incised on it: from top, a double-disc Z-rod, a serpent Z-rod and a mirror. It is found near a low circular cairn and a grave found nearby; the records of the antiquarian excavation of both are too imprecise to establish a certain relationship.

Carved detail

The three Pictish symbols were incised by a skilled carver, particularly since granite is a hard stone that is difficult to work with. The symbols are on the south face.

The double-disc Z-rod is not elaborate: each disc has a concentric circle and centre point but no other ornamentation. The top arm of the z ends in an almond-shaped point; the top arm has two and a half fletches of half circles with rounded terminals. The terminal at the bottom arm is rounded.

The serpent Z-rod has a different orientation than the above Z-rod. The S-shaped serpent has its head to the top of the Z-rod. The middle of the S-shaped serpent is under the Z-rod.

The mirror consists of a concentric circle. The bar handle has a ring at both ends, connected by a twist.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of the Picardy Stone is very high. Its exceptional size and state of preservation with the retention of its original site makes it a cultural resource without many parallels.

It would appear that this stone is still standing where it was carved, and possibly erected, by the Picts. Antiquarian excavations, reported third-hand by Stuart (1856), apparently showed that the stone stood on a low circular cairn, 1.9m in diameter, and that there was an extended, east-west orientated grave in the immediate vicinity. It is not clear from the surviving sources whether the cairn, stone and burial form part of a unitary burial monument (highly possible), whether the stone was inserted into a prehistoric cairn, whether the stone and cairn were prehistoric, reused by the Picts, or whether later burials congregated around the stone.

A programme of geophysical survey around the Picardy symbol stone was recently undertaken as part of The Rise and Fall of the Picts: Survey and Excavation at the Early Power Centres and Symbol Stones of Northern Pictland Project. The survey revealed a number of potential features which may be significant to the understanding of the function of site and stone, including possible burial mounds and square barrows. There needs to be ground-testing of the potential features to verify and test the results since the features could be geological.

Stone decay: the granite is hardwearing but a natural weakness vertically through the pillar shows the potential danger to the stone. Currently, a technique of pinpointing (the application of a fine

mortar mix to infill the open edge of the fracture) is being employed to mitigate the damage from rainwater penetrating the split.

2.3 Historical values

Picardy Stone, and other carved stones, are of exceptional importance because of their contribution to our understanding of society, religion, culture and lifestyle of early medieval Scotland. The rich corpus of stone sculpture of Scotland is highly important, especially since 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.

Such sculptures are imprecisely dated, but probably belong to between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. In some instances they are associated with burials (as here) and there is a growing tendency to assume that they were personal memorials, or perhaps marking boundaries of land. We might anticipate a cult centre or centre of population nearby.

While as of yet, we do not comprehend exactly the complex messages that the stones convey. 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.

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 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.

1856 Antiquarian excavations by Charles Elpinstone Dalrymple.

1923 – Monument first scheduled;

1936 – taken into guardianship.

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.

The majority of symbol-incised stones are found north of the Mounth, with a particular concentration in north-east Scotland. This raises questions about where the system of symbols may have developed, and why. Current thought suggests 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).

Usually the mirror is the lowest symbol of a set of three. The mirror symbol is less frequently found than a mirror and comb symbol as is found on Picardy. The mirror symbol has recently been organised into a relative chronology with increasing elaboration. The lack of elaboration may signify that the Picardy Stone is older. Fourteen examples of the mirror symbol with that type of handle exist. It is likely to be based upon a native mirror type although no surviving examples exist.

As a whole, the Pictish sculpture of Aberdeenshire has been described as being in 'restrained monumental taste' (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 194): as a group, its value has to be assessed in its own terms.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

The Picardy Stone is one of a very small number of Pictish stones that stand in their original location, although its setting has altered considerably. The aesthetic significance of the Picardy Stone has changed overtime, relative to its changing landscape setting and the cultural context of its observers.

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

Original aesthetic

When first erected, the stone might have stood on a low cairn. The carved stone commands a good view of the Dunnideerhillfort,

which may have been the stronghold of the local Pictish chief. It is likely that the placement of the stone into the landscape was intentional due to similar choices found in other stones: more research into that needs to be undertaken. There are possibilities for archaeological record of human activities. It may be connected to burial rituals as human remains have been associated with it.

It would have been situated in an open landscape, perhaps cultivated, but with little structural evidence of human activity. Archaeological activity appears to be concentrated around the stone itself, suggesting that it could have been seen unencumbered for some distance, especially since it may have been situated on a cairn. Other than the small amount of information, which archaeological investigation has provided, we know very little else about the original landscape context of the stone.

Historic aesthetic

The stone continued to be a significant landscape feature into the nineteenth century. This is underlined by the antiquarian excavations. While not scientifically recorded, the excavations of Charles Elpinstone Dalrymple add to the site's biography and to its aesthetic.

Present-day aesthetic

Today the stone stands in a field. The vista surrounding the stone is roughly unchanged: there is a commanding view of the landscape to the north. It is especially significant that of forty-one Pictish symbol stones found in Donside, only four are considered to be in their original location: Ardlair, Nether Corskie, the Picardy Stone and the Craw Stane.

A modern fence protects the stone from stock. However, this is fairly tight around the stone and impedes appreciation of the stone from a distance.

2.6 Natural heritage values

There is only a small area surrounding the site. There is no great natural significance.

2.7 Contemporary/use 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) who were not conquered by the Romans and who laid the foundations for the modern Scottish nation.

The Picardy Stone appears on several lists of accessible Pictish Stones as advertised by the Council and various tourism agencies.

Pictish sculptors, it can be inferred, played a particularly important role in society.

Contemporary value has not been formally assessed.

Spiritual values:

Symbol-incised stones are thought to have had a ritual function. Little is known of the original archaeological context of many symbol stones, but a few are known to be associated with burials, several with cairns on which the stones were erected, as seems to be the case here. It is not known whether these monuments were created under the influence of Christianity, a new religion at this time, or in reaction to it. The east-west orientation of the burial beneath the Picardy Stone conceivably suggests Christian influence. The stone itself carries no overt Christian symbolism.

The precise meaning of such symbols remains the subject of debate but scholarship is leaning towards a commemorative function particularly in locations with burials such as this.

Modern social value has not been assessed.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- The precise nature and date of the cairn associated with the stone, ditto the burial, and their relationship to the erection of the stone, its carving and use.
- Wider archaeological context –what is in immediate and wider vicinity, including where the people lived who used the stone, etc.
- Precise date of carvings.
- Meaning of the Pictish symbols.
- Why is the stone known locally as the Picardy Stone?

4 Associated properties

See www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology for stone circle trail that also includes hillforts and Pictish symbol stones (site information panels and leaflets have been produced as part of this initiative).

5 Keywords

Picts, early medieval, symbol stone, cairn, burial, north-east Scotland

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