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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERLEMNO CHURCHYARD CROSS SLAB



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERLEMNO CHURCHYARD CROSS SLAB

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Aberlemno II, standing within Aberlemno churchyard in Angus, is a Class II Pictish upright cross-slab of Old Red Sandstone. It stands at an impressive 2.28m tall and dates to the late first millennia AD.

The front face exhibits a quadrilobate Christian cross, carved all in relief, including numerous interlace decorated panels as well several zoomorphic creatures, beasts and hippocamps. The back face exhibits three Pictish symbols at the top and a probable battle scene below. The sides are undecorated.

The stone is freely accessible on foot as a visitor attraction in the churchyard, although between the last working day of September and the first working day of April each year it is covered with a wooden box to protect it from wintery conditions and frost damage.

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

Aberlemno II stands prominently within Aberlemno churchyard. Its significance can be summarised as follows:

- It may be said to represent the highpoint of lowland Insular fusion in Pictish art, likely carved in the late eighth century, exhibiting some of the most complex of all knotwork on a Pictish carved stone.² It is perhaps the finest cross-slab in its class.
- Other than a partially drilled hole and a fully drilled hole through the upper portion of this cross-slab, the latter perhaps to aid in the movement of the stone,³ it stands as one of the most complete of all Class II Pictish carved stones. Its current excellent state of survival allows for it to be one of the most easily experienced Pictish stones, although not necessarily the easiest to interpret.
- Its quality of carving, in both relief and incision, and the variety of motifs and styles present, highlighting both Celtic and Anglian tradition, demonstrates the cultural significance of this Pictish stone. This stone communicates to us that the Picts were not an isolated or primitive culture.
- This cross-slab demonstrates advances in the technical and architectural knowledge of the Picts, as is evident in its pediment,

¹ Fraser 2008, 1

² Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 211-12

³ Ritchie 1995, 8

tapered sides and the impressive cutback that better reveals the cross.⁴

- This stone is one of a very few Pictish symbol stones to depict a battle scene. It is interpreted as symbolising a battle between the Picts and the Angles, and usually thought of as representing the Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen) in 685 AD, where the Picts were victorious.⁵ However, this once 'seductive idea' is now unlikely, as the battle location is now thought of as being in northern Pictland.⁶ Nonetheless, its rarity in this sense attests to its cultural significance, particularly as its iconography allows for a window into Pictish society and the Picts tumultuous relationship with the Angles, as well as also perhaps with the Vikings.⁷
- It is an explicit expression of Christianity in southern Pictland. The mixing of Pictish symbols and Christian iconography on this cross-slab is deliberate, and therefore perhaps designed to convey complex messages during a time of conversion.
- It is part of a grouping of stones located in and around Aberlemno, and notably in an area which became a major route way.⁸ The wider area within Angus contains a significant number of Pictish carved stones.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

The cross-slab is carved from yellowish Old Red Sandstone, rectangular and tapering with a pediment. The stone is consistent with a local source in the Aberlemno – Finavon Hill area.⁹ It measures 2.28m in height, 1.27m wide across its base, 0.90m wide across its top, 0.20m in thickness and 0.29m in thickness at the centre of the cross, as the cross protrudes in relief by 0.09m.¹⁰ It is carved in relief and incision. It stands within the churchyard at Aberlemno, and so the later church and the surrounding village of Aberlemno provide its current immediate landscape setting.

The Carved Detail

The front face (west), carved all in relief, is dominated by a large ring-headed Christian cross, including four round hollows at each angle of the cross and a connecting ring. This cross is divided into five main areas. The upper arm of the cross has triangular interlace, the left and right arms are carved with key pattern, the centre of the cross is carved with seven interweaving spirals in a circle (or three interconnected triskele), the lower arm (upper part of cross-shaft) is carved with looping interlace, and the rest of the lower arm (lower part of the cross-shaft) has three panels of highly complex circular interlaced

⁴ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 209

⁵ Mack 1997, 61

⁶ Foster 2014, 40; Woolf 2006

⁷ Trench-Jellicoe 1999, 619

⁸ Ritchie 1995, 8

⁹ Miller and Ruckley 2005, 289

¹⁰ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 209-10

knotwork.¹¹ This face clearly demonstrates a rich variety and complexity decoration.

Providing the background to the cross are four different panels inhabited by a variety of beasts, 'laid out in an almost pedantic spirit, but with wonderful clarity of cutting'.¹² To the top left is a crouched backward-looking beast seemingly biting a serpent, common on Pictish art.¹³ To the top right is a similar type beast with an elongated snout.¹⁴ The lower panels either side of the cross-shaft are particularly intriguing. The left panel contains three identical quadrupeds, arranged in a reverse S-curve and one above the other. The right panel is perhaps the most interesting as it contains two different designs. The first, to the top of this panel, contains two insect-like beasts bound and symmetrically opposing one another. Both with elongated beaks. The second design, to the bottom of this panel, contains one hippocamp confronting another, with touching hooves. These serpentine-like creatures have the upper half of a horse with the lower half of a fish, and in this case, the mane of the horse is replaced by the dorsal fin of the fish. There is also the inclusion of a triquetra design within this panel, above the tails of the hippocamps.

The back face (east), carved in relief and incised (although only for the spears and bridles), depicts a vivid battle scene as well as Pictish symbols at the top. The symbols are, from top left to right, a z-rod overlying a notched rectangle, and a triple-disc. Below these is a battle scene. This comprises nine figures, with five on horseback, four on foot, and one of the latter is presumed dead. These contestants appear to be differentiated by the wearing of a helmet or not, with the Angles (perhaps) deduced to be wearing the helmets. This deduction stems from the similarity between the Coppergate helmet from York and those apparent on the stone.¹⁵ The Angles also appear to be wearing split hauberks. The figures are aligned in three rows, one above the next, perhaps suggestive of a right and left flank with infantry between,¹⁶ or 'concurrent skirmishes'.¹⁷ At the top there is a fleeing figure on horseback, with discarded sword and shield, apparently followed by a Pict on horseback. In the middle there are three Picts, two with spears and one with a sword, advancing towards an Angle on horseback. Significantly, the bottom scene depicts a mounted Pict advancing towards a mounted Angle, with another deceased Angle being pecked at by a large bird. This ultimately suggests a Pictish victory, hence the historic view that this stone was perhaps depicting the Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen).

¹¹ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 210-12

¹² Henderson and Henderson 2004, 38

¹³ Laing 2000, 108

¹⁴ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 210

¹⁵ Foster 2014, 40

¹⁶ Mack 1997, 61

¹⁷ Henderson and Henderson, 2004, 134

Brief History

The following is designed to highlight the brief history of Aberlemno II. 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 Aberlemno II is difficult. This is the same with most carved stones of this period. Stylistically however, Northumbrian links are evident in its art. Correspondence between the Northumbrian Ceolfrid and the Pictish King Nechtan, regarding a request for Northumbrian masons, attests to the Northumbrian influence present in Pictland.

It is probable that this stone was erected in the late eighth century AD. During its lifespan, a hole was drilled through the entirety of the stone. The function of this hole is currently up for debate.

The stone was subject to antiquarian interest from Hector Boece in the late sixteenth century.¹⁸ Alexander Gordon made an engraving of the stone in the early eighteenth century,¹⁹ and notably, Charlotte Wilhelmina Hibbert drew it during the first half of the nineteenth century.²⁰

Although the stone now stands in the churchyard, it may once have stood at the roadside,²¹ or perhaps at an earlier church at Aikenhatt.²² Its current foundation was created in 1898 during works to improve the churchyard, but until then it was deeply sunk into the ground.²³ This perhaps indicates that it must have been in the churchyard for quite some time by the end of the nineteenth century.

Due to ongoing concern about the safety of Aberlemno II, designs were drawn up in 1913 for shelters to house the stone, including the other three from Aberlemno.²⁴

In 1914 the stone was taken into care and in 1974 the owners gave permission for its removal to a safer more appropriate location in Aberlemno.²⁵ There are no plans for the stone to be moved at present; though it is being closely monitored for any signs of deterioration.

¹⁸ Boece 1575, Book XI

¹⁹ Gordon 1726, Pl. 53

²⁰ Henry and Trench-Jellicoe 2005, 230

²¹ Mack 1997, 62

²² Foster 2004, 1

²³ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 213

²⁴ Foster 2001, 21-3

²⁵ Foster 2004, 1-2

In 2002 the stone was digitally recorded with 3D laser scanning technology,²⁶ thus demonstrating a welcome engagement between carved stones and digital technology.

2.2 Evidential values

Aberlemno II is an exceptional example of a Class II Pictish cross-slab. It stands out in the archaeological record as a near perfect surviving example of Pictish art on stone. Its completeness and state of preservation, as well as its battle scene, are of great importance to its current and future potential in research and education.

Unfortunately however, it is not known whether the cross-slab is in its original location. Therefore any association with buried remains, built or landscape features is difficult to prove with certainty.

In general however, there is limited evidence to suggest a connection between Pictish burials and carved stones. Work undertaken in the late nineteenth century to re-set the stone on a new foundation within the churchyard uncovered nothing of archaeological interest beneath the stone in its current location. This of course does not help assessment should the stone have been located elsewhere.

This cross-slab probably had the role of a prayer cross and would have been 'erected under the patronage of secular or ecclesiastical aristocracy'.²⁷ Aberlemno II has the potential to provide evidence of aspects of Pictish society, such as culture, religion, battle and daily life. This will be discussed in the following sections.

2.3 Historical values

Aberlemno II and other Pictish carved stones, although carved with beautiful but generally unintelligible symbols,²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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. Aberlemno II is notably significant in its display of what is generally accepted as depicting a battle scene.

The battle scene on the back face displays numerous figures, some on horseback. This type of scene is rare on Pictish carved stones, although mounted hunting scenes do occur. The survival of the detail of the battle scene allows for interpretation of the iconography, and as a result of this, it is generally accepted that the battle scene represents warfare between the Angles and the Picts. The specific battle it depicts or memorialises remains contested, although some have suggested that it possibly represents the

²⁶ Carty 2005, 368-69; Maxwell 2005, 172

²⁷ Foster 2004, 1

²⁸ Henderson 1967, 157-8

²⁹ Henderson 1967, 158

Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen),³⁰ or even perhaps the Picts struggle with the Vikings.³¹

Evidence for the identity for combatants of this battle can be deduced from the carved detail. The artistic styling of the helmets, particularly their nose guards, is clear in the carving, thus allows for the identification of one set of combatants from the other (see 2.1.2 above). This tentative cultural identification would not be possible if it were not for the high precision of carving present on Aberlemno II, thus highlighting its historical value. Although the battle is yet to be securely identified, the carving provides insight into the material culture of warfare, as well as the political struggles of the early medieval period in Scotland.

Aberlemno II is a cross-slab and 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 late 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.

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. 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 Aberlemno II can be summarised as follows:

The architecture of the sculpture is impressively complex. The pediment, tapering sides, protruding cross and artwork are all evidence of highly skilled craftsmanship. On the back face the peak of the pediment exhibits the heads of two opposing dragons whose long slender bodies border either side of this face. This design can also be seen in a similar layout on the back face of the Dunfallandy Stone,³² although on Dunfallandy there is also a human head between the beasts, which both have fish tails.

The two backwards-facing beasts at the top of the front face are not unique to Aberlemno II, as this type of creature may also be seen on the Dunfallandy Stone for example.³³

³⁰ Mack 1997, 61

³¹ Trench-Jellicoe 1999, 619

³² Fraser 2008, 122

³³ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 79

The design comprising two opposing insect-like beasts to the top of the right panel on the front face is also of great interest. This design is paralleled in the Book of Durrow (St John prefatory page), as well on a closure screen (or altar frontal) from Wearmouth, dating to no earlier than 674 AD.³⁴

The hippocamp design to the bottom of the right panel on the front face is also to be found at Wearmouth on doorjambs, as well as on a fragment of sculpture from Tarbat, although the heads are facing away from one another on the Tarbat piece.³⁵ These designs, carved into the panels either side of the cross, highlight a transitional phase in Pictish art, and most notably, they readily illuminate a connection between Pictland and Northumbria.

The zoomorphic designs on the left panel of the front face are reminiscent of designs found on the Lindisfarne Gospels.³⁶

The complex circular interlaced knotwork present on the lower three panels of the lower arm of the cross are remarkable in their intricacy. They represent the highpoint of insular fusion within the art of southern Pictland. A parallel for this knotwork, although earlier, can be seen on three panels of the lower arm of the cross-shaft of the Eassie Sculptured Stone.³⁷

Battle scenes involving horses of the type carved on Aberlemno II may have parallels on Franks Casket as well as on Sueno's Stone, a Class II Pictish symbol stone from Forres in Moray.³⁸ Although battle scenes are rare, the carving of horses is not. For example, on a nearby Class II stone, a hunting scene is carved into the back face of Aberlemno III.³⁹

Parallels for the two Pictish symbols on Aberlemno II can also be identified. The triple-disc can be found incised, although probably an earlier version, at Navidale, a Class I stone.⁴⁰ The notched rectangle and z-rod combination can be found at Tyrie, also a Class I stone,⁴¹ although it is slightly different in detail on the Tyrie symbol stone.

The above discussion of the artistic parallels and the associated geographical spread of the iconographies carved therefore attests to the artistic value of Aberlemno II.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

As with the majority of early medieval carved stones, its aesthetic significance has changed over time. This is relative to its changing landscape setting, but more importantly, to its changing audience. Those who view the stone today

³⁴ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 38

³⁵ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 38

³⁶ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 38

³⁷ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 218

³⁸ Henderson and Henderson 2004, 135

³⁹ Fraser 2008, 48

⁴⁰ Fraser 2008, 102-3

⁴¹ Fraser 2008, 44-5

will have a different experience to those who viewed it in the past within its original landscape setting.

Artistically, Aberlemno II is aesthetically significant due to the nature, complexity and survival of its artwork. Each design is masterfully carved with precision and presented clearly. Its current state of preservation is remarkable.

Original Aesthetic

Although probably moved, and the original location uncertain, it can be said with a degree of confidence that this stone would originally have shared a near immediate landscape setting with the three Aberlemno roadside stones, as it currently still does within the village of Aberlemno. The four carved stones at Aberlemno would more than likely have been intervisible within their original landscape setting, making for a landscape of high aesthetic and cultural value.

Historic Aesthetic

It appears that this stone continued to be a significant landscape feature throughout its life, with notable reference made to it by Hector Boece in 1575.⁴² Latterly, and ultimately to improve its aesthetic, as well as to allow for it to be fully appreciated, it was removed from its sunken position in the churchyard and redisplayed in the late nineteenth century on a new foundation.⁴³

Present Day Aesthetic

The stone currently is located within the churchyard of Aberlemno Church and therefore stands within an overtly Christian and sacred location. Only a few hundred yards to its north stand the three Aberlemno roadside stones (B1934 Forfar – Brechin road). This arrangement probably retains the links between Aberlemno II and its neighbours from the early medieval period. The hole drilled through the upper portion of the cross-slab invites various discussions of its purpose, as well as the destruction, or not, of the stones aesthetic value.

The stone can be appreciated comfortably and safely on foot within the churchyard. Notably however, for six months of the year it is housed beneath a wooden case to protect it from the winter elements,⁴⁴ thus impacting on its potential to have year round publically accessible aesthetic value. It does however stand as a significant reminder of Angus' Pictish past.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The stone stands within the churchyard of Aberlemno Church. No natural heritage significance, particular to the stone, is apparent.

⁴² Boece 1575, Book XI

⁴³ Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 213

⁴⁴ Foster 2001, 23

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social Values

Community Values

Since the late nineteenth century Aberlemno II has clearly been revered within Aberlemno. This is evident in its removal and relocation onto a secure foundation, in order to allow it to stand more safely and be admired by all who visit. The stone stands prominent within the churchyard of the community, thus ascribing further significance to Aberlemno Church and the churchyard. It is undoubtedly a local landmark that is experienced by the community on a daily basis, and particularly more so on a Sunday.

Spiritual Values

As an explicit manifestation of Christianity, this stone has undeniable spiritual and religious value. Its location within a Christian churchyard crystallises its religious value. The stone is impressive in scale and so has continually been easily accessible as an expression of the Christian religion within this region. On the other hand however, the meanings conveyed by its three Pictish symbols continue to provide the stone with a tantalising and enigmatic quality.

Use Values

Economic

The stone is located on the route way between Forfar and Brechin (B1934) mainly used by local traffic. The A90 has superseded this route and so removes the possibility of large numbers of the travelling public having a chance drive-by encounter with the site. However, as the stone is part of a grouping of four carved stones in Aberlemno it is likely that this will encourage people to visit the site and so lead to a modest contribution to the local economy. Those of the Christian faith in particular may be drawn from afar to visit the stones and may wish to practise personal devotions.

Access and Education

Although the site is unstaffed it is freely accessible, and there are two PDF leaflets detailing early carved stones available online for download from Historic Environment Scotland. They are *Investigating – The Aberlemno Stone*,⁴⁵ designed for teachers, and the more detailed *Investigating – Early Carved Stones*.⁴⁶ The latter is also available in Gaelic. Due to the complexity and nature of this stone it clearly has an educational value with regards to discussions of its iconography and meaning. This stone overtly displays features of early Christianity, and so may be used as a learning aid to demonstrate aspects of early organised religion in Scotland.

Corporate Value

Although the stone is in the care of Historic Environment Scotland, it is still standing within the landscape, and so it is subject to natural elements. This is managed by covering the stone for six months of the year during the autumn and winter, thus demonstrating best practice with regards to safeguarding the

⁴⁵ Historic Scotland, n.d.

⁴⁶ Historic Scotland 2009

stone at the same times as allowing it to be experienced during the warmer months.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- There is no single academic thesis on this stone, although it is widely discussed and referred to in other art historical literature.
- If moved, 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 Aberlemno?
- What is the stone's archaeological context?
- What is the battle scene depicted on the back face? Is this a real event?
- What is the relationship between the Aberlemno churchyard stone and the roadside stones?
- What are the wider landscape relationships between Aberlemno II and both the symbol stone from Flemington Farm and the cross-slab from Woodwrae?⁴⁷
- What was the purpose of the drilled hole?
- Does the stone have any associated sites or settlements?
- What do the Pictish symbols represent on this carved stone?

4 Associated properties

Pictish, cross-slab, Pictish symbols, Christianity, churchyard, battle scene, Insular art, Aberlemno, Angus, Angles, Northumbria, interlace, knotwork, zoomorphic, hippocamp, beast

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⁴⁷ See Fraser 2008, 48-9 and 62-3

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Timeline

685 – Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen), resulting in the death of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria and a victory for the Picts at the hands of King Bridei son of Beli,⁴⁸ and ultimately leading to a Northumbrian loss of territory in Pictland.⁴⁹

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.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Fraser 2009, 383; Woolf 2007, 10

⁴⁹ Woolf 2007, 4

⁵⁰ Henderson 1967, 82

c.750x800 – Aberlemno II is carved and erected, but precisely when and by whom is a mystery. Some have previously argued for it to have a seventh century creation.⁵¹

843 – Cináed mac Ailpín becomes king of the Picts.⁵²

1575 – Subject of antiquarian interest from Hector Boece.⁵³ He mentions Aberlemno II in *Scotorum Historia*, its first historical reference, although he wrongly suggests it depicts a battle between the marauding Danes and the Scots, perhaps the Battle of Barry.⁵⁴

1726 – Illustrated by Alexander Gordon, along with Aberlemno III, and recorded in *Itinerarium Septentrionale*.⁵⁵

1772 – Noted by Thomas Pennant.⁵⁶

1891 – The lower part of the cross face was buried under around 2 feet of earth in the churchyard.⁵⁷

1898 – Improvements made and the stone was re-set on a built foundation.⁵⁸

1913 – Drawings created of a potential shelter for the stone.⁵⁹

1914 – The stone was taken into care.⁶⁰

2002 – Archaeoptics Ltd undertook a 3D laser scan of the stone.⁶¹

Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

Although not strictly an archaeological excavation, the stone was removed from its sunken position and replaced onto a new footing in 1898.⁶² Nothing of archaeological significance is noted from this intervention.

Unfortunately, and due in part to limited archaeological excavation and inspection of the stone's immediate and surrounding contexts, the history of Aberlemno II will remain difficult to fully determine.

⁵¹Laing 2000, 111; Foster 2004, 1

⁵²Woolf 2007, 351

⁵³Fraser 2008, 46

⁵⁴Boece 1575, Book XI

⁵⁵Gordon 1726, Pl. 53

⁵⁶Pennant 1776, 166-7

⁵⁷Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 213

⁵⁸Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 213

⁵⁹Foster 2001, 21-3

⁶⁰Foster 2004, 3

⁶¹Carty 2005, 368-69

⁶²Allen and Anderson 1903, Part III, 213