

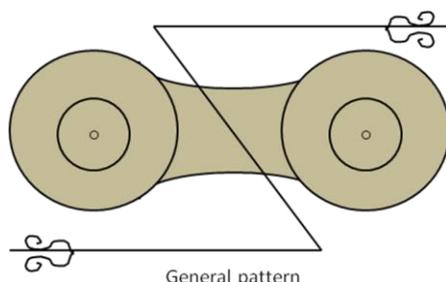
Mithraic Symbols Decoded - Z-Rod & Double Disc

Z-Rod & Double Disc is the popular name for what historically has been determined as two (or more) shapes that look like a Z shaped rod and, in the main, two separate but inter-connected circles or discs. In fact, the Z-Rods in the Z-Rod & Double Disc configuration comprise a reverse-Z but the “z” description is traditional and convenient. It is most unlikely that the carver even considered the notion of a Z or reversed Z - it is just the way the Symbol was created. The Z-Rod is never seen on its own (just like the V-Rod) - it is combined with either the Double Disc formation or with a Serpent or a Notched Rectangle. This tends to confirm a particular meaning conferred to the “Z”, or its components, which is not adversely modified (or lost) when combined with other Symbols – more likely enhancing their meaning.

To decode this composite set of Symbols it is useful, initially, to disassemble into components. Just as the V-Rod is not, in the context of Pictish-Mithraism, a rod at all but directional arrows, the “arms of the Z” can be considered to be directional arrows. In many instances there are directional finials; generally they are more elaborate compared with the V-Rods – in fact, more floriated. Suggestions have been made that these might represent lightning and that does have a Mithraic context with the Leo Grade. Alternatively, these shapes may have multiple meanings.

This is the fourth most prolifically used Symbol set on Pictish Stones and, like V-Rods & Crescents, not restricted to any specific geographic area. Several Stones have both V-Rod and Z-Rod Symbol sets on them, often juxtaposed as on the Invereen and Fiscavaig Stones as shown in the Section on V-Rods and Crescents. This juxta-positioning is discussed in the Section on Symbol Groups.

With the Z-Rod / Double Disc Object Category being almost as numerous as the V-Rod / Crescent Object Category immediately there is a supposition that these are Symbols of important meaning and both are geographically well distributed. However, unlike the V-Rod & Crescent accounting for 87% within its Object Category the Z-Rod & Crescent is only 57% within its Object Category. This suggests a fundamental difference in how the objects are decoded with the V-Rod & Crescent together portraying a very specific message and the Z-Rod and the Double Disc components sometimes combined with others maybe giving a wider range of messages.



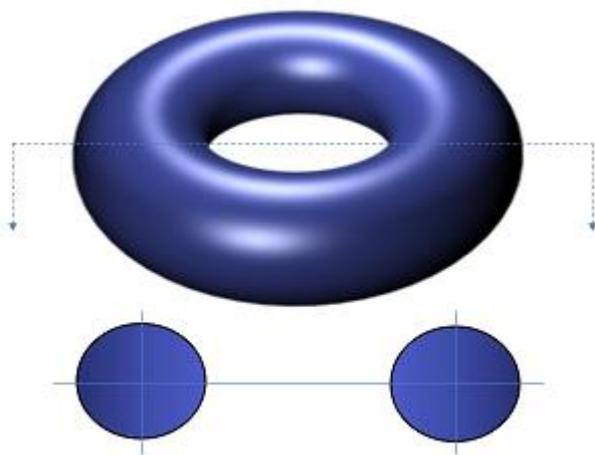
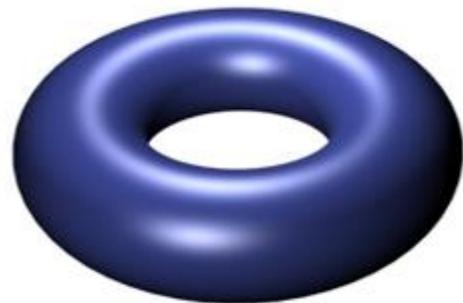
Most examples of this Symbol set have the orientation shown here in this general pattern. A few are rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise and only one (discovered so far) is rotated 45 degrees counter-clockwise.

What they all have in common is symmetry about the axis at right angles to the circles and lines connecting the circles that are almost always curved into their centre line. This could be specific styling, even decoratively stylistic, but is consistent. Unless there was a recorded “standard” for the Symbols or pure coincidence the alternative is that each engraver understood a specific construction to show whatever the circles or discs were intended to depict. The carving on the Stones is pictorially two dimensional (even where some Class 2 carvings are “raised” in relief) not using projections, such as orthogonal, or other techniques to imply depth or distance or give perspective.

However, with the centre line symmetry and the “waist” effect of the curved lines joining the outer circles there appears to be a 3-D representation of a solid torus cross-section (a cut through dough-ring or bagel shape). This applies to those double discs with the same content in each disc (which is the majority) including those that have off-centre circles (such as Invereen, Struan and Congash).

This is how the 3-D effect is created on a 2-dimensional surface:-

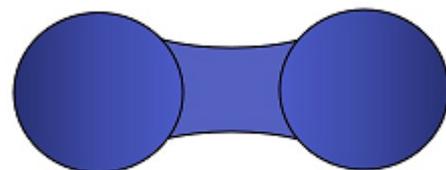
A dough-ring shape is created by taking a circle then sweeping it vertically through 360° which produces this shape. →



This is a cross-section through
← the dough-ring shape.

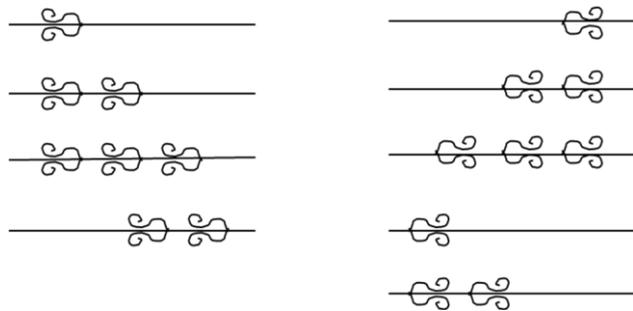
It is 2-dimensional, looks like 2 circles and there is no suggestion of depth.

The 2-D view can be given a three dimensional aspect to appear more like a cut through dough-ring by connecting the circles with the curved lines. This “waist” gives the 3-D effect. Looking at this in reverse, the 2-D drawing with a 3-D effect can be translated back into the dough-ring shape. This has important implications for the decoding of the Double Disc Symbols.



In researching the 56 objects that broadly follow the general pattern above, 29 were found to be too indistinct to be drawn. Examples not drawn include: Kirriemuir (2) – double disc with a rod terminating in a three leaf clover style motif; St Vigeans (1) and Meigle - “Z-rod” reversed resembling a conventional Z; Edderton – no central circle in one end and non-concentric in the opposite end plus right-angled “Z”; Clach Ard – non-concentric circles at both ends; Fiscavaig – no inner concentric circles, one rod terminates in a three leaf clover style motif; Rodney’s Stone – circles at each end surround “Celtic” style patterns. Wantonwells is indistinct but appears to have discs with 7 radial segments. Dingwall has offset concentric circles like Invereen & Struan but with indistinct rods. However, 26 have been drawn and 18 designs emerged which are distinguished by the variants of “flame” numbers and directions. These are shown on pages 29 to 37 of Appendix A.

All of the Z-Rods terminate in “flame” patterns which appear to be more than



just decorative finials. The adjacent illustration shows the variants for the left and right side horizontal parts of the “Z”. There is symmetry top to bottom in a third of cases, maybe not a high figure but enough to suggest there may be a reason for such symmetry. There is a high

consistency in the shape of the flame elements with only Tullich being noticeably different but that may be more due to the carver than a particular reason for a slightly different shape – the rest of that slab has some inaccurate carving, especially the Mirror circles.

With the Stones being the terrestrial part of the Open-Air Mithraeum described elsewhere in this website then the Z-Rod combinations are very significant. Mithras in known paintings and sculptures (most especially the Tauroctony) is a central figure accompanied by Cautes and Cautopates. In Mithraism, Cautes represents the morning star and Cautopates the evening star. The morning star is associated with the east (bringing dawn and light at the beginning of the day). The evening star is associated with the west (bringing dusk and night at the end of the day). In pictures and sculptures Cautes and Cautopates are holding torches (they are often called the torch bearers). Cautes typically to the right of Mithras holds a lit torch upwards, Cautopates to Mithras’s left holds an extinguishing torch downwards – again reinforcing the symbolism as morning and evening. Close study of the Symbols on the Pictish Symbol Stones shows many examples where the seemingly floriated ends of the upper part of the Z-Rod appear to be flames from torches; hence the “flame” comments above.

Other than direction, the variants of “flame” styles seem artistic with no further meaning.

The torches mark the beginning and the end of the day so the innermost parts of the torches are connected by the joining line of the “Z”. Typically, this connection lies across the centre line of the circles or discs. Several suggestions have been made about the circles – Sun and Moon, other paired items in harmony or tension (like ying/yang), Heaven and hell, decorative. An alternative could be the Sun (Sol) with Mithras (Sol Invictus) – in Mithraism there is a distinct difference. The Sun is one of the Planets being, in some interpretations, located halfway between the Earth and the Celestial Sphere giving equitable illumination (and heat) to the Planets on either side of its circular path. Sol Invictus (more specifically recorded as Deus Sol Invictus - the unconquerable Sun God), is the creator of the universe, the Mithras who knows about the precession of the equinoxes, the God who has the power to rotate the entire universe. He is in balance with the Sun hence the two are shown together. In the pre-Roman versions of Mithras – Mithra is the God of contracts; in the Roman version he, Mithras, can be considered to be in contract with the God Sol, the Sun. Alternatively, or in parallel, the discs could be the universe (especially in concentric-circle or so-called “circle and dot” versions) with the Earth at the centre.

With representations of the torches of Mithras’ companions, Cautes and Cautopates, prospectively found as the floriated rods in the Z-Rod and Double Disc Symbol then it seems reasonable that Mithras should also be represented. With his power (in Mithraism) to rotate the universe and his status as a God then he would be central to the Z-Rod symbolism but arguably outside it.



Theologically a God would be beyond the universe suggesting that Mithras would be connected to Cautes and Cautopates but beyond the Celestial Sphere. Here they are shown with overlaid with respective Z Rod arrows.



Pictures courtesy of Wikipedia commons

Cautes

Cautopates

Cautes and Cautopates have further symbolism. In addition to their representing the beginning and end of the day (during which the Sun shines) they also signify the spring and autumn equinoxes. In the Tauroctony pictures and sculptures they are usually shown with their legs crossed – Cautes left over right with the left pointing away from Mithras; Cautopates right over left with the right pointing away from Mithras. The crossed legs could symbolise the crossing of the celestial and ecliptic equators at the time of the equinoxes; the different crossing formats distinguishing the two equinoxes. This is arguably an additional symbolism for the arrow parts of the “Z” giving this Symbol grouping a daily meaning (morning and evening) plus a 6-monthly meaning at the equinoxes. Additionally, making a Zodiac relationship, Cautes is in Taurus and Cautopates is in Scorpio.

If a Mithraeum had the monuments in the east end (the cult niche) then an observer’s view to the east from the narthex would typically (but not always in all known Mithraea) have Cautes on our right (Mithras left) and Cautopates on our left (Mithras right). The Sun rises (marking the day’s start) in the east, traverses south then sets in the west – at equinox time these events are 180° apart. Looking straight on at a Z-Rod & Double Disc on a Symbol Stone, the upper floriated or flame part of the Z-Rod could represent Cautes and the lower part Cautopates. With many outdoor Stones prospectively having been moved from their original locations e.g. within churchyards, it is difficult to assess whether there was a specific directional orientation when the Stones were first erected. However, this is being further investigated by the author.

Placing the components of this Symbol into a Pictish-Mithraism context, **the Z-Rod is not a rod but two inter-connected arrows, generally with flame patterns, representing the torches of Cautes and Cautopates (Mithras’s companions seen in the statuary of the Tauroctony) with the “reversed Z” enabling their interconnection.**

Cautes is the Symbol of life, light and day; Cautopates is the Symbol of death, darkness and night (not as unmitigated evils but as a necessary prelude to immortality). One faces east towards the morning star the other west towards the evening star – one’s torch is alight the other extinguishing signifying the beginning and end of the day; they further depict the spring and autumn equinoxes.

The connecting part of the “Z” is firstly the day, secondly the months between the equinoxes, thirdly time itself – the start is connected to the finish.

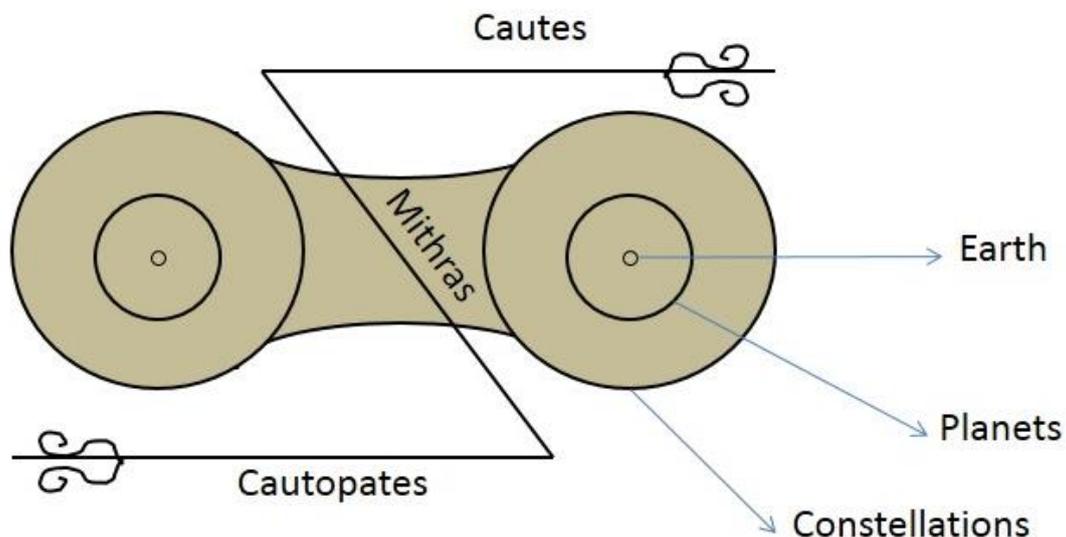
As a two-dimensional representation, the circles or discs can be multi-depiction - the Sun (Sol) and Moon (Luna) in harmony or tension; the Sun (Sol) and Mithras (Deus Sol Invictus – the unconquerable Sun God, the creator of the universe) in balance.

However, the Symbol takes on much greater meaning when the Double Disc is seen not just as two discs but, with the “waist” effect lines in between, as a three-dimensional representation of the cross-section of a solid dough-ring type shape. There is symmetry between the sets of concentric circles that form the Double Disc (consistent with the cross-section of a dough-ring shape) – the Earth is in the middle of the disc then the moving Planets then the fixed Celestial Sphere. Collectively these are the elements of a contained universe. Heaven is beyond that material universe with Mithras externally able to rotate the universe from outside – hence the Z-Rod overlays what we call the Double Disc but is the contained universe. Arrows representing Mithras’s supporters, Cautes and Cautopates, are also shown external to the contained universe.

Additionally, the principle of the travel of the soul from Heaven via the Celestial Sphere and Planets (as embodied in the V-Rod & Crescent Symbol) could be explained using the directional arrows of the Z-Rod.

Furthermore, the entire “Z” shape could be seen as a Serpent which, as a set of Constellations (principally Hydra) forms a connection between Cancer and Capricorn (the gateways of the soul).

The “Z” is overlaid across the cross-sectional representation of the universe (Double Disc) that contains the Earth, the Planets and the Constellations (on the Celestial Sphere):-

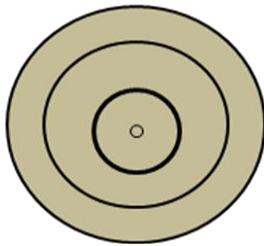


This Symbol set acts as the platform for deeper explanation and understanding via the Mithraic Grades; for example some circles are infilled with seven circles, the number of Planets (at the time).

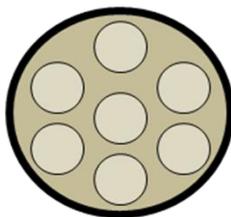
The symbolism on the Pictish Stone is structured in such a way that the observer can use this solid, terrestrial part of the Open-Air Mithraeum to guide towards the truly open part that is the sky and beyond. The observer's presence may be small but he is part of it; all the changes are happening around him – again, as with the V-Rod, he can become the focal point.

Looking at the Circles or Discs in more detail there are many hidden symbolic details many of which link to Mithraism. Some are just plain discs (such as in the middle section of the Aberlemno Kirkyard Stone). The discs on the Dyce and Dunnicaer Stones are three concentric circles – arguably the Earth at the centre (the “dot”), the first circle being the Planets and the second the Celestial Sphere.

On Stones at Inverurie Kirkyard (detail alongside) and East Balhaggardy there is a dot and three concentric circles – perhaps the above three constituents are there (and no more) with the dot showing from the centre point of a compass with the next circle out being the Earth; the Keith Hall Stone is another example of this configuration. In other words the Earth is being given a greater presence than just a dot. Overall all these circle / disc interpretations point to the purely symbolic – they most certainly are not scale realistic! Of the two circles on the Newton House Stone the left hand one has an, as yet, inexplicable indentation.



Occasionally the circles or discs are in-filled. On the Wantonwells, Inch Stone each circle has curved lines like a counter-clockwise rotating turbine. There is a dot with a close in inner circle and an outer circle. The seven curved lines are between the two circles. Seven is significant – the number of Planets and the number of Mithraic Grades.



An Aberlemno Stone also has a “seven” connection – each of the circles contains seven small circles (detail alongside); the Glenferness Stone is likewise. Whilst the Nigg Stone also has small circles within a larger one it is highly stylised with an additional circle within the envelope of the larger circle and the space where the inner line of the “Z” crosses.

The Dunnichen Stone has another variant on the theme – seven serially connected filigree style curls between the inner and outer circles; maybe the dot is a centre point, the Earth the inner circle, the Planets the middle curled circle and the outer the Celestial Sphere. Seven stars can be construed to be the Plough which is the bear which moves and turns the heavens around.

Two additional designs are part of the Z-Rod / Double Disc Object Group:-

The **Notched Double Disc** at Newton House has a notch similar to those on the Stone at Inchrya. However, unlike all other Double Discs (with and without Z-rods) it is not symmetrical – the single notch is out of the lower part of the left hand disc.

Artistic licence would be required to construct anything meaningful from the indistinct carving at what is classified as the **Z-rod & Rectangle** at Cullaird, Scaniport.