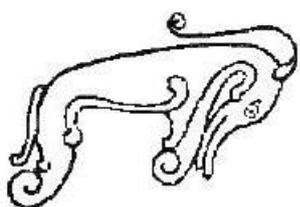
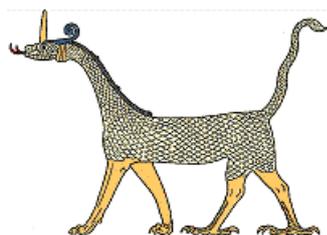


Mithraic Symbols Decoded - Pictish Beast

As a stylised animal the so-called Pictish Beast stands alone – by reason of its popularity on the Stones and by being different from all the other animals on the Stones whether zoomorphic or otherwise. Like many of the foregoing groupings of Symbols it has a fairly well “standardised” design on the Stones – both Class 1 and Class 2 – so it, like them, endured in use for about 300/500 years. Only one stylised drawing is shown here to the left. There is no need for more as they follow a general pattern except for being left or right facing and of varying angle of incline. They all feature a “lappet” and typically a dolphin like snout (hence why they are sometimes referred to as “Pictish Dolphin”. Of the 51 examples over 2/3rds are right facing with exceptions at Fyvie, Balluderon, Largo, Tealing, Glenferness, Scoonie, Nigg, Shandwick, Golspie, Dunfallandy, Ulbster and Meigle (5). All have plain bodies except the right facing, weathered beast at Glenferness which has some interlace and Brodie with Celtic continuous line styling and the left facing Nigg “beast” which too has Celtic styling but of a more angular line than at Brodie. Navidale is so worn that the carving can barely be seen.



Various descriptions have been given to this Symbol ranging from the non-committal Pictish Beast to the very specific Pictish Dolphin and less practical Pictish Elephant. Benchmarking is almost impossible - but not quite. Like the V-Rod and Z-Rod, the design is localised broadly to the North East of Scotland but, unlike the Z-Rod and V-Rod there are known shape similarities.



Mushhushshu

In Assyrian history there is a beast called “mushhushshu” or sirrush who was supposed to have protected many of the supreme Gods such as Marduk, the city God of Babylon.

Time wise, Marduk came to prominence around 1500 BCE – the same period as Persian Mithra and prior to the monotheism of Zoroastrianism. Mushhushshu had associations with other Gods; it is described as “crypto-zoological” made from a combination of animals that could never have existed in nature. Maybe too much of a coincidence or completely unconnected; maybe a design cue? If not a coincidence then this could suggest a linkage between the knowledge of the Stone Builders and a people who lived about 2,000 years before – in which case there is some difficulty in determining how that knowledge travelled – or that there was some form of continuum over two millennia.

Turning to Mithraic related possibilities there are many options. It is tempting to think of the Pictish Beast shape prospectively fitting a choice from the Leontocephalous (lion headed beast), the serpent (whether Serpens or Hydra or, terrestrially, a snake) or the lion (as in the Leo Grade or as symbolising a powerful beast). In Persian and Roman Mithraism the soul travels via the seven Planets in its journey to the Celestial Sphere then to Heaven with the Leontocephalous alongside the eighth gate (the gate to Heaven).

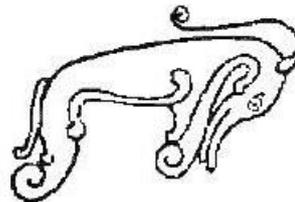
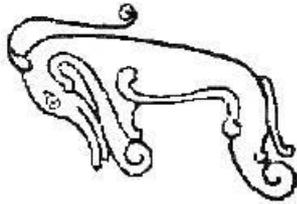
In decoding the more numerous Pictish Symbols it is important to think about the definition of “gate” – an opening permitting passage through an enclosure, means of access, entrance, leads to a place... So a gate can enable movement between one place and another. Therefore, when a gate is encountered something ahead of it is expected. In Mithraic terms, on death the soul leaves the person and travels towards the first gate (a Planet) with the functionality of the gate giving the expectation of reaching it, passing through then going to a next stage (another Planet). This sequence is repeated until the soul has traversed every Planet and after leaving the last one it goes towards the sphere of fixed stars (the Celestial Sphere) where it has the expectation of encountering an eighth gate – the final one which gives access to Heaven and the end of its journey.

This final gate is described by Porphyry as one of the holes in the sphere of fixed stars, astrologically the Gate of Capricorn. The gate through which the soul moves from Heaven towards its planetary journey on birth is Cancer – following the reverse, but previous, steps to the one described above on death.

Tracing this journey on death has been used to arrive at Capricorn and to consider how it is depicted – perhaps it is the inspiration for the Pictish Beast.

The story of Capricornus originated with the Babylonians and Sumerians. The Sumerians knew it as the goat-fish, or SUHUR-MASH-HA, while the Babylonian star catalogues dating back to 1000 BC mention the Constellation as MUL.SUHUR.MAŠ, also meaning “goat fish.” In the early Bronze Age, Capricornus marked the winter solstice and, in modern astrology, Capricorn’s rule still begins on the first day of winter. Generally depicted as terrestrial animal in the front part and in the hind part as aquatic animal, the Makara is a sea creature in Hindu mythology and is the astrological sign of Capricorn which is also known as the “sea goat”.

Drawings of Capricorn and the Pictish Beast are remarkably similar.



Enhancing the decode for this Symbol is the Pictish Beast's position relative to other Symbols in those cases where there are groupings. On Class 1 Stones the beast is often next to the V-Rod, usually beneath it, and next to the arch, usually below it. On Class 2 Stones the beast is more randomly placed, when on the cross side it is typically high up. These relational positions are explored in Appendix B concluding with the realisation that the connection is the Capricorn Constellation – the Pictish Beast representing the sea goat that is Capricorn, the directional arrows of the V-Rod & Crescent being the travel of the soul on birth and death, the Crescent representing the Milky Way – the home of the soul and the Capricorn Constellation being intersected by the Milky Way creating one of the Gates of the Gods through which the soul travels. In addition, and further enhancing what is a fundamental discovery linking several Symbols together was establishing the relationship between the Zodiac, Planets and Earth in the decode of the Mirror, above.

In Mithraic terms, therefore, Capricorn can be seen as the linkage between the V-Rod & Crescent, the Mirror and the Pictish Beast Symbols.

The arrows comprising the V-Rod represent the travel of the soul from and to Heaven via the Planets and the Celestial Sphere. The Crescent as well as showing the skyward view across the horizon portrays the Milky Way. Capricorn and Cancer mark the extremities of the Milky Way and lie near it. Capricorn astrologically is the Gate of the Gods through which the soul travels on its return following death and into immortality.

In the Mirror Symbols where the Double Disc meets or overlaps the Zodiac circle this point can be considered to be Capricorn – consistent with Capricorn in the south.

From its shape and positioning, the Pictish Beast can be seen as the sea goat which is the sign of Capricorn. On a Symbol Stone it could act as a “pointer” to that Constellation in the skyward view and enable, with reference to the V-Rod & Crescent, an explanation of the travel of the soul back to Heaven on death. With a fundamental Mithraic belief of the soul enduring in immortality on a person’s death the significance of signposting the portal to Heaven is reinforced.

These involved decodes show the degree and depth to which Symbols have been encoded. In other words when the Symbol is far removed from what it seems then a deeper drill down is needed because the representation is in layers. Whoever decided on the Pictish Beast to depict a Constellation must have had a very advanced knowledge of Mithraism and a highly developed capability to layer its concealment. This concealment of the mystery aspect of the cult is well exemplified here and the need for verbally teaching initiates is realised.