

Original Locations of Symbol Stones

Many of the Symbol Stones have been moved from their original locations others have remained in significant sites e.g. with high geographic visibility. Some sources give insufficiently accurate pin points; in other cases Stones have been broken up and parts dispersed; some Stones are just lost. However, these locations give wider context to the Stones and their use in support of the Open-Air Mithraeum.

Appendix E categorises the original and currently very visible locations of the majority of those Stones that are not in museums and other public buildings. The association between Stones and Saints is in the page “Towards Pictish-Mithraism then Transition to Christianity”.

Pictish Symbol Stones located in museums makes them highly accessible for raising public awareness of them and for the study of their artistic and symbolic carvings but the feeling of their geographical location cannot be there. A whole set of new dimensions (physical and otherwise) appears when the Stones are seen in their original locations. Field visits to the Stones and predecessor monuments show a geographic context with Stones often being on very raised or open terrain, prompting the viewer to consider 360° views – clearly something that cannot be done indoors. Views from Stones to other contemporary (and earlier) constructions suggest purposes beyond the Stone alone. For example, looking south from the Picardy Stone there is an uninterrupted view of Bennachie with the remains of an Iron Age fort on its summit. From the Craw Stane at Rhynie not only is there a clear panoramic view but “line of sight” to the Tap o’Noth, a hill with a partially vitrified Iron Age fort (there are photographs in the Rhynie Case Study).

Standing at these sorts of locations makes one wonder about what the Stones were used for and can be quite an experience – the concept of Open-Air Mithraeum crystallises.

Many Stones are in, under or near churches. This suggests some form of continued reverence, acceptance or superstition on the transition from Pictish-Mithraism to Christianity by the people living in Pictland at the time. Maybe few surprises here as churches were built over Mithraea in Italy and elsewhere. Also, traditionally transitions have occurred with the recognition and sometimes absorption of previous religious beliefs into the new one – potentially Celtic into Mithraic and most certainly Mithraic into Christian at the time of Constantine the Great and just after in the early 300s CE. When earlier Christian churches were replaced, sometimes Pictish Stones were discovered in the foundations.

Symbol Stones have been re-used as grave slabs, others have been built into walls (inside and out), protected from the weather in porches, propped up against walls and been re-erected in churchyards and graveyards. Others can be seen at the sites of now derelict churches.

All of this suggests no fear coming from the location of the symbols of an older religious belief being used in the one that has, in effect, replaced it. Rather than giving lists of original locations here, the reader is encouraged to look at Appendix E to see the wide range which covers not only churches but stone circles, brochs etc.

Some Symbol Stones, in their original locations, are near water. Guy de la Bédoyère in "Gods with Thunderbolts" states that "a Mithraeum could be built anywhere so long as running water was available". Isabel Henderson in "Origin Centre of the Pictish Symbol Stones" plotted the locations of the Class 1 Stones; the majority in Aberdeenshire and Moray are located by or near rivers in particular the Don, Urie, Deveron and Spey. Jocelyn Toynbee commented variously on "the river of death that all must cross and of the voyage of souls over the Ocean to the Blessed Isles; streams, too, bring cleansing and fruitfulness, "other-worldly" as well as material". "the far-distant boundary river which divides the living from the dead". "the great primeval stream, the cleansing and fertilising source of life, both here and hereafter". Almost all the Sutherland Stones are coastal.

It seems reasonable that the proximity of Pictish Stones to water and the building of Mithraea near water further tends to support a relationship between Mithraea and Pictish Stones. Maybe many modern churches are near water because their medieval predecessors (which they replaced) were built at Symbol Stone sites which do seem to be located by water for religious belief reasons.

Another aspect when considering original locations concerns saints. For some locations there is foundation by a specific saint, such as St Nathalan at Tullich, the bulk are dedications.



An example of a combination of a Pictish Symbol Stone near a church and with an open view is at Dunfallandy near Pitlochry. This is the view from the Standing Stone which has the church behind it.

This is the view towards the River Spey from Inveravon Church between Aberlour and Grantown on Spey. There are four Symbol Stones located in the church porch (for many years mounted on the church wall) which are discussed in the Case Studies web page.

