

ANNEXE 2

PICTISH STONES, EAGLES AND THE ROMAN ARMY - A CONNECTION?

Each Roman Army Legion carried an Eagle standard. This annexe explores the prospect of a Roman Army connection involving Eagles carved on Pictish Stones and the people who carved these objects.

Of the 22 **bird** objects on the Scottish mainland and Orkney Stones, 16 are **Eagles**; 5 face right, 9 face left, on a Meigle Stone the bird is contorted (looking over its back) and the Oxtro Stone has not been seen since supposedly being built into a wall. As the direction of facing does not suggest the bird looking at anything in particular and the positioning on the Stones does not seem to reveal anything specific, the conclusion is that the direction is not significant.

In each instance the Eagle is not alone – there are **Symbols** (in the context of this website, objects that can be decoded with Mithraic interpretation) and other carvings, particularly with Christian significance, on this set of 8 Class 1 and 7 Class 2 Stones. With such a mix of objects it is useful to identify which Eagle Stones might have a direct connection with the Roman Army and which might serve other purposes. The following table gives a summary:

Location/Name	Facing	Class	Symbols & Notes
Fyvie (2)	R	1	Part of a Z-Rod & Double Disc. Incomplete eagle.
Brough of Birsay	R	1	Parts of a V-Rod & Crescent, Pictish Beast, Mirror Case. Incomplete eagle.
Tillytarmont (4)	R	1	Pictish Beast.
Strathpeffer	R	1	Horseshoe/Arch.
Knowe of Burrian	R	1	V-Rod & Crescent, Mirror.
Tyrie	L	1	Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle.
Inveravon (1)	L	1	Mirror Case, Mirror and Comb. Stylistic (?) dots on the eagle and the Mirror Case.
Birnie	L	1	Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle
St Vigeans (2)	L	2	Mirror, Comb, Serpent & Z-Rod.
Latheron	L	2	A predatory bird (eagle) appears to be grabbing fish?
Nigg	L	2	Pictish Beast.
St Vigeans (1)	L	2	Z-Rod & Double-Disc, Crescent, Mirror, Comb. Eagle beak appears to be biting fish (salmon?) beneath it.
Mortlach (1)	L	2	Serpent – perhaps; unclear. Bird appears to be an eagle with a distinct hooked beak
Fowlis Wester	L	2	V-Rod & Crescent, Z-Rod & Double Disc. Bird indistinct but considered to be an eagle.
Meigle (5)	?	2	Mirror Case, Pictish Beast on narrow side of stone. Looks like a contorted eagle on the ground perhaps with something in its beak.
Oxtro	Not applicable		Lost slab is said to have an eagle on it.

References to Stones with a name and number e.g. Mortlach (1) are those used in the RCAHMS publication “The Pictish Symbol Stones of Scotland”.

Following Severus's Campaign, The Roman Army formally left Scotland around 212 CE and finally withdrew from Britannia around 410 CE. It seems unlikely that any people who stayed on in Pictland after being in the Roman Army would positively broadcast that affiliation by carving Eagles on Class 1 Stones. According to many accounts Class 2 Stones appeared around the 7th century succeeding Class 1. Even if that period was revised back to the 6th or even 5th century then direct involvement from Roman Army personnel is still not in the correct time frame. As a consequence we can rule out a direct connection between Roman Army members, in service, and Eagle carvings on Class 2 Pictish Symbol Stones. However, this does not suggest the possibility of any religious purpose of Eagle carvings being placed on Class 2 Stones being disconnected from the Class 1 Stones – Class 2 are “transition” Stones between pre-Christian and Christian beliefs so have Class 1 carvings on them. Some Class 2 Stones such as St Vigean's (2) and Nigg seem to have the Eagle in a hunting or outdoors scene – not a format associated with Eagles on Class 1 Stones.

Of the 8 Class 1 Stones with Eagle carvings, none shows an Eagle alone. 5 are in the North East corner of Scotland, where there is the highest concentration of Pictish Symbol Stones, 1 is in Strathpeffer and 2 in the Orkneys.

Here is some more detail on the Stones and their locations:-



Curiously named the Raven Stone, the **Tyrie Stone** by the Water of Tyrie was recovered from the foundations of the NE corner of the old parish church. Carved with a Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle plus the Eagle, it now stands in the porch of the new church built in 1800. Tyrie is by the Water of Tyrie that connects to the Water of Philorth that comes out east of Fraserburgh.

Picture of Tyrie Stone courtesy of Scottish Churches Historic Research (SCHR) Ltd.

Tyrie

This map extract is based on data provided through www.VisionofBritain.org.uk and uses historical material which is copyright of the Great Britain Historical GIS Project and the University of Portsmouth.



Tillytarmont (4) with the Eagle and Pictish Beast carvings was found in a field at the confluence of the River Isla and River Deveron.

Photo courtesy of uoamuseums

Nearby are several Roman Sites – Burnfield, Auchinhove and Muiryfold. A potentially Roman Army built road between Portsoy and Huntly would have passed close to Tillytarmont.



Location of Muiryfold Roman Camp ↑



Location of Burnfield Roman Camp ↑



↑ Location of Auchinhove Roman Camp ↑

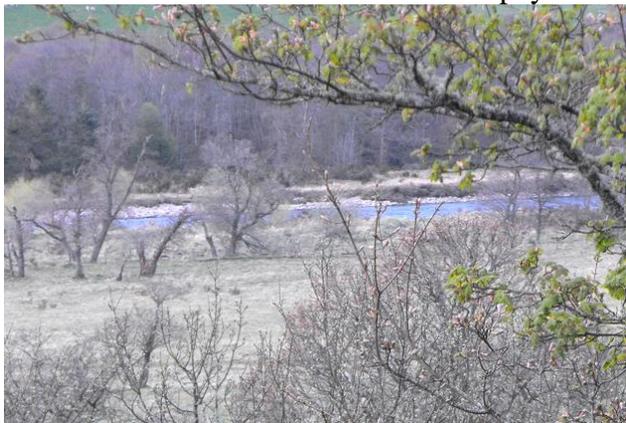
Photographs taken by the author in October 2015.



The **Fyvie Stone** with the Eagle and partial Z-Rod & Double Disc is set in a wall of the current parish church built in 1808 on the site of an early-Medieval predecessor. Fyvie is by the River Ythan; further upriver is the Glenmailen / Ythan Wells Roman site.

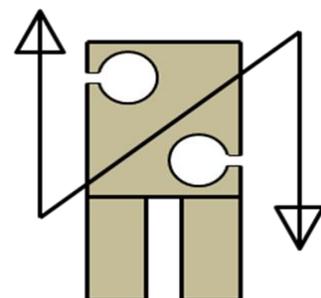
This is a section of a photo courtesy of Peter Ward – Wikipedia CC. Four Stones – three Class 1 and one Class 3 are set into the east gable.

One of 4 Stones in the local church, **Inveravon (1)** is unusual with what seem to be stylistic dots on both the Eagle and on the Mirror Case. This Stone was located either in the wall or foundations of the preceding (1568) church. Until 2011 the Inveravon Stones were clamped to the church's south wall – now in the porch. It is near the south bank of the River Spey.



The very weathered **Birnie Stone** is located in the grounds of Birnie church near the River Lossie and Thomshill Roman Site. Hoards of Roman silver have been found at Birnie. Like the Tyrie Stone, this Stone is carved with a Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle plus the Eagle.

Alongside is a sketch of the Birnie & Tyrie Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle Symbols.



In addition, uncovered in 2013 by the River Spey near Craigellachie, little referenced and not yet displayed, the **Dandaleith Stone** is carved with a Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle (similar to that on the Birnie and Tyrie Stones), an Eagle, Mirror Case and V-Rod & Crescent.



Near Strathpeffer and actually known as “**The Eagle Stone**” with an Eagle and a Horseshoe/Arch Symbol is a Stone that was moved to its current location in 1411. The following is courtesy of Wikipedia CC – “One old tradition is that the stone marks the site of a Scottish clan battle that took place in 1411 between the Clan Munro and a branch of the Clan MacDonald and that the stone commemorates a Munro victory as it is marked with their symbol, an Eagle.”

Currently it is near the River Peffery and would also have been near that river when in its supposedly original location in an old churchyard at Fodderty.

Photo courtesy of Anne Burgess – Wikipedia CC

Thought to date from the 8th century, the **Brough of Birsay Stone** on an uninhabited, tidal island in the Orkneys has an Eagle, Pictish Beast, Mirror Case and V-Rod and Crescent as well as three warriors. According to the www.orkneyjar.com website it seems likely that the Stone was once a cross-slab; making it Class 2.

Discovered in 1936 and on display at the Orkney Museum, Kirkwall the **Knowe of Burrian Stone** has a V-Rod & Crescent, Mirror and Eagle. It was originally sited by the east side of the Loch of Harray.

Picture extracted from a photograph in the Orkney Image Library.



Using the foregoing information, three aspects should help determine any early Pictish Stones / Eagles / Roman Army connection:

- The Eagle itself
- Associated Symbol objects
- Geographic Location

Every member of the Roman Army whether Legionary, auxiliary or non-military would have understood the significance of **the Eagle** - a prominent symbol (a symbol of pride) on a standard carried specifically by an eagle-bearer. Much more than just a symbol of a legion, a lost standard was a grave occurrence. Not just totemic either – the bearer would motion with the standard to indicate a move, a change of tactic or formation. Therefore, a conclusion could be that someone in or from the Roman Army could have carved an Eagle or caused the carving of an Eagle on a stone. Evidence of a style of carving similar to that on the Pictish Symbol Stones has not been found elsewhere by this author. Perhaps that suggests, for Class 1 Stones at least, that, conversely, the carving on these Stones was executed by an existing inhabitant of Pictland. The design cues are similar to the other Symbols on the early Pictish Stones - maybe suggesting a common source for those designs?

Associated Symbols on the 8 Stones mentioned above include (by frequency) Z-Rod & Double Disc (x 1); Comb (x 1); Horseshoe/Arch (x 1); V-Rod & Crescent (x 2); Mirror (x 2); Pictish Beast (x 2); Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle (x 2); Mirror Case (x 3). Additionally, the Dandaleith Stone has 1 each of a Mirror Case, V-Rod & Crescent and Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle.

All of these have interpretations in the context of Pictish-Mithraism. Symbols on these “Eagle” stones that describe the principles of Mithraic beliefs are the V-Rod & Crescent, Mirror, Z-Rod & Double Disc, Pictish Beast, Comb and Mirror Case. The Horseshoe/Arch is one of the Symbols that represents the internal layout of the types of temple used in Roman Mithraism (Mithraeum). There are 3, so far discovered, examples of the only “composite” Symbol i.e. representing a Mithraic belief and internal layout of a Mithraeum – the Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle. These are on Tyrie, Birnie and Dandaleith Stones– maybe they add a particular significance to these Eagle stones; perhaps their locations might suggest what.

With their widely distributed **Geographic Locations**, determining a location based common factor across these Eagle Stones is made more difficult. All are near water but this is not untypical of Pictish Symbol Stones anyway. The two Orkney Islands Stones are on a tidal island and by a fresh water loch. The remainder (including Dandaleith) are by water courses of varying sizes. A very relevant geographic consideration is proximity or accessibility to Roman sites.

Some common factors may arise from taking the aspects of rivers and Roman sites together.

The original location of the **Tyrie** Stone was near the Water of Tyrie which is linked to the River Ugie that comes out at Peterhead. The Water of Tyrie also drains, via the Water of Philorth, into the Loch of Strathbeg, between Rattray Head and St Combs. No known Roman sites in this location but it is near what could have been suitable naval landing points. There is a view that the Roman military (a combination of Army and Navy) would have moved troops by land but equipment/provisions/supplies by water including inland by river. Both could have been transported by sea to coastal areas. Although not near a discovered Eagle stone, Durno is near the River Urie and could have been served by it.

Fyvie (another location of an Eagle stone) is on the River Ythan – upriver is the Ythan Wells / Glenmailen Roman site which is to the right in this view with the River Ythan in the middle ground. It drains into the North Sea at Newburgh.

Perhaps the River Ythan was sufficiently navigable to be used for taking supplies to these sites.



Auchinhove Roman site is adjacent to the River Isla, Muiryfold is nearby, up a hill and overlooks the Isla. Burnfield is by the River Deveron, just beyond its confluence with the River Isla. The Deveron comes out at Banff Bay. As mentioned earlier the Eagle and Pictish Beast Stone originally at **Tillytarmont** is at the confluence of the Rivers Isla and Deveron. Potentially Auchinhove, Muiryfold and Burnfield could have had their supplies river fed.

1982 to 1990 excavations suggest a Roman site is at Thomshill by the River Lossie. Nearby is **Birnie** – the location of one of the Eagle Stones and a Roman silver coin hoard find. The River Lossie comes out at Lossiemouth and would have been navigable up to this area.

The **Inveravon** church location is by the River Spey near Ballindalloch. Downstream is the recently discovered **Dandaleith** Stone with an Eagle. The Spey flows out to the Moray Firth at Spey Bay and, with locks and canals could have been navigable as suggested by TC Bell in “Scotland’s Roman Heritage”.

Although the **Strathpeffer** “Eagle” Stone was seemingly in a churchyard at Fodderty, either way they are both on a river - the Peffery which flows into the Cromarty Firth at Dingwall. There are no currently known Roman sites in this location but the sheltered, inner end of the Cromarty Firth would have made a suitable naval landing point.

From all the above data gathering and analyses, three sets of **key connections** appear:-

- The Eagle plus Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle Symbol at Dandaleith, Tyrie and Birnie. Additionally, Fyvie has a Z-Rod & Double Disc.
- Stones near Roman sites for Birnie, Fyvie and Tillytarmont.
- Rivers (potentially navigable) that flow by or nearby Stones and are associated with known Roman sites including the Birnie, Fyvie and Tillytarmont locations. Additionally, Tyrie, Dandaleith and Inveravon are by rivers.

These give a strong thread between the Birnie, Tillytarmont and Fyvie locations i.e. the Eagle carving, Z-Rod Symbol, near Roman sites and rivers.

In deciding when these Stones were carved and by whom, the timing of the practice of Mithraism in the Roman army is of significant influence. With the appearance of Mithraism in the Roman Army (according to Tertullian) in the late first century, Agricolan camps (e.g. at Durno, the larger Ythan Wells camp and Auchinhove) would have been right at the beginning of the period of Roman Mithraism. Hadrian's Wall is considered to be the location where Mithraea would have been seen but was not begun until 122 CE. Later Severan sites are at Muiryfold and nearby at Deer's Den / Kintore plus earlier ones that were re-used.

Arranged in order of likelihood, here are three possible **explanations for who** may have carved the "eagle" Stones. However, the author offers no final conclusion.

1. Ex- members of the Roman army who "stayed" after army withdrawal.
This explanation is consistent with the author's conclusion in his website, pamphlet and draft book that "stayers" after the 212 CE withdrawal from Scotland created the initial set of Mithraic Symbols on the so-called Pictish Symbol Stones. Maybe the use of the Roman Army Eagle was a form of memorabilia but it does seem inconsistent that they would wish to immortalise their background in a land they seemingly had set to invade. The Z-Rod & Notched Rectangle composite Symbol at Dandaleith, Tyrie and Birnie shows a deep understanding of the Mithraic religious belief (in the Z-Rod representing Cautes, Cautopates and Mithras) and the Horseshoe/Arch representing the Mithraeum. Several of the original Stone locations are near to known Roman sites.
2. Members of the Roman Army whilst present in North East Scotland.
Considering the Eagle association with the Roman Army standard perhaps Army members wished to record their presence in a way not dis-similar to the prospect of Twentieth Legion, specifically, carving boars on Stones near the eastern end of Loch Ness (as discussed in Annexe 1). However, this explanation may present a timing issue. It has been assumed that when the Mithraic symbols were carved onto their respective Stones that the task was completed in a coherent way – someone with knowledge of the meaning of the Symbols (which, when in groups can cover a core range of Mithraic beliefs) applying them in a short period i.e. not spread over a long period or on different occasions. It could be tempting to suggest that the Eagle was carved first by Army personnel with the Mithraic Symbols added later by "stayers" but the author is unconvinced of this because of the consistent carving style.
3. People from the local population.
These could be in two timeframes - pre- or post- Roman Army presence. In each case, the relevance of the Eagle is not immediately apparent - not least as the focus has been on its inclusion on the Stones being related to Roman Army personnel. If consideration is given to pre-Roman Army presence then from where did the local population see Symbols that are an interpretation of Roman Mithraism? If post-Roman Army presence then there is a possibility that the Mithraic belief set had been communicated to people in the local population to enable them to do the carving of suitable objects – this seems unlikely as the acquisition of the beliefs to a Mithraic believer would have been over an extended period (by going through the grades). Also, there is an extremely low likelihood of a person not in or directly associated with the Roman Army having seen inside a Mithraeum (secrecy plus the nearest being on Hadrian's Wall).