

## **Pictish Symbol Stones – Case Study Aberlemno**

**Features** - together the three sites at Aberlemno (three Stones by the roadside at Crosstoun, one in the churchyard and one at nearby Flemington Farm) and nearby Woodwrae have Class 1 and 2 Stones covering many of the selected features for Case Studies (Dyce and Strathmartine appear to be the only other locations with both Class 1 and 2 Stones). These features are variously church location, near a river, open views, biblical story, a range of Symbol designs, people, animals, fantastic beasts and the possibility of the equivalent of a “cathedral” type setting. Woodwrae is included with this Aberlemno grouping as it is thought the Stone is from the Aberlemno location.

The Class 2 church yard Stone has on one side a Latin Cross surrounded by beasts with exaggerated claws, Hippocamps and other creatures. The intertwined animals are in a style similar to that found in door frames to some church doors in Norway around 1000 CE (cast copy examples are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). The reverse has at its top a Z-Rod and Notched Rectangle adjacent to a Triple Disc Symbol with an extensive battle scene below – supposedly recording the 685 CE Battle of Dunnichen. This face of the Stone is laid out in registers with a “one- off” scene in the lower right of a foot soldier being attacked by what appears to be a crow / raven.

At the top of the church yard Stone is a Z-Rod with Notched Rectangle (this is one of the simplest of the nine examples identified so far) which represents the same elements as the more numerous Z-Rod and Double Disc i.e. the flame-like rods. However, the flame directions are different from the other eight examples. Compared with the Z-Rod orientation when with Double Discs, the rods here are rotated ninety degrees counter-clockwise. Moving to the interpretation – the rods represent Cautes and Cautopates and their torches; in the morning or spring equinox there would typically be an upward flaming torch and in the evening or autumn equinox a downward extinguishing torch.

The Notched Rectangle represents the Roman Mithraeum with side benches and end wall which typically housed the Tauroctony.



These combined Symbols (Notched Rectangle and Z-Rod) are reminiscent of the practicing of the Mysteries of Mithras within an enclosed (often underground) Mithraeum – for Pictish-Mithraism the enclosed, or indoor, Mithraeum is replaced by the Open-Air Mithraeum. This symbolism could be instructional as to the origins of Pictish-Mithraism and the practice of Roman Mithraism in a Mithraeum. Perhaps placing this object at the top of the Stone has some significance in that the viewer looks skyward – perhaps expanding the symbolism of the Z to indicate the travel of the soul which would typically be shown by the arrows in the V-Rod & Crescent.

Adjacent to the Z-Rod and Notched Rectangle is the Triple Disc – in general pattern (there are 15 of these objects) a large circle with two small circles on either side of a central axis. Kintradwell, near Brora has an almost identical example which also looks like a water container with a form of carrying ring on each side. Water and proximity to water are important in Roman Mithraism and this attribute may have been brought forward into Pictish-Mithraism. However, placing this Symbol at the top of the Stone would enable a prompt to look for the Zodiac and Capricorn in the night sky. The Triple Disc represents the Zodiac with Cancer and Capricorn Constellations (the gates from and to Heaven) 180° apart.

Variations of the so-called sea horse – the Hippocamp - are rare on Pictish



Symbol Stones and only seen on Cross Stones. The Aberlemno carving is very clear as a pair of intertwined beasts with front legs, manes and fish-like or dolphin-like tails. Its meaning relative to Standing Stones is unclear.

Although not dis-similar to the “sea-goat” or Capricorn (the decode for the Pictish Beast) there is no apparent Pictish-Mithraism context when displayed in this intertwine.

Just above the tails is a Triquetra with flat rather than rounded sides. The Symbol has ancient Germanic and Celtic art use as well as in Christianity from early time to the current day. Its use on this Stone and at St Vigean and Meigle Class 2 Stones is probably Christian as it is not seen on Class 1 Stones.

The setting for the roadside Stones is high open land with long distance views in all directions – to the north is the River South Esk. In the vicinity are the remains of a cairn, cist and fort.



Of the two Class 1 roadside Stones the circles incised on one are basically indecipherable. The other Stone has four Symbols on one side with cup marks low down on the other.

With an elongated Latin Cross surrounded by bosses at its arms then a Celtic style circle the Class 2 Stone is enhanced with angels holding books on the Cross side and a biblical connection on the reverse – a representation of David pulling apart the jaws of a lion. Like the Class 2 Stone in the church yard, this is also arranged in registers on the reverse.

Alongside the biblical scene is a centaur carrying what looks like an axe over his shoulder and perhaps a tree. The middle section is a hunting scene with trumpeters (itself in a three register layout) surmounted by a Z-Rod with Double Discs and a V-Rod with ornate Crescent.



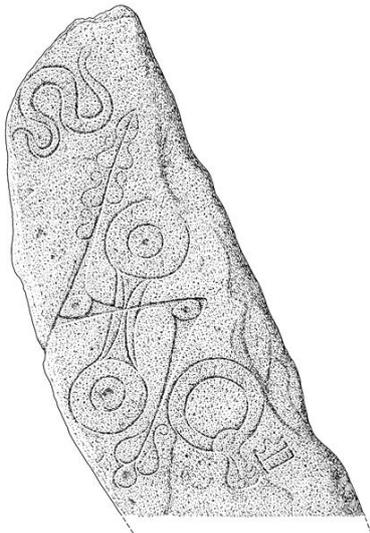
Looking skywards then down to the back of the roadside Class 2 Stone, one's gaze drops firstly onto the V-Rod and Crescent then the Z-Rod and Double Disc. Compared with many, these are rather ornate with the carver taking the pattern used on the Cross side to infill the Crescent. In Pictish-Mithraism decoding the V comprises two arrows (one taking the soul from beyond the Celestial Sphere at birth, the other returning it at death) with the Crescent primarily being the view to the sky. The direction of the arrows is suggested by the flame designs as used in all the Z-Rod and Double Disc objects. 20 instances of the V-Rod & Crescent are at the top of Class 1 Stones – appropriate positioning for explaining one of the fundamental principles of Mithraism –

here carried onto a “transition” Stone and no less appropriate in a Christian explanation of “Heaven”.

For Pictish-Mithraism the Z-Rod and Double Disc have been decoded as:

- the upper rod signifying morning and the spring equinox (the torch held by Cautes),
- the lower rod as evening and the autumn equinox (the torch held by Cautopates),
- the connecting rod being Mithras (connecting together the day, the months between equinoxes and time itself),
- the discs being multi-depiction with Mithras as Sol Invictus and the Sun (Sol) in balance plus being the Moon and Sun in harmony or tension plus representing the components of the universe – the Earth at the centre, the Planets and the Celestial Sphere. More importantly, in the majority of instances of this Symbol, the three-dimensional view suggested by the “waist” effect of the lines between the discs represents a contained universe – Heaven is beyond that material universe. This Aberlemno example is unusual as the lines joining the discs are parallel – maybe the carver had space limitations as rod connecting the Z Rods themselves is short so the usual position for the “waist” effect lines is not available.

Again looking skywards then down, this time from the front of the roadside Class 1 Stone, one sees a serpent then the Z-Rod and Double Disc that dominate this Stone (complete with three concentric circles in the “double disc” part – the Earth, Planets and Celestial Sphere plus the “waist” effect giving a three dimensional depth) followed by the Mirror and alongside it a Comb.

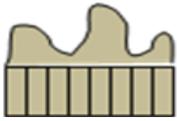


cup marks low down.

The Mirror – the second most numerous Symbol on the Stones – is in Pictish-Mithraism decoding a representation of the Zodiac (here as a very clear ring) connected to a Double Disc with the overlap point arguably being Capricorn. A Knockando / Pulvrenan Stone has a similar layout except the centre is dominated by a weathered flower type Symbol. The reverse of this Aberlemno Stone has

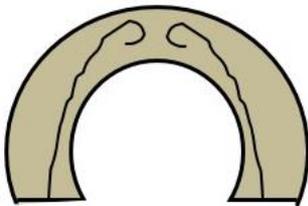
The layout of the Symbols and the size and dominance of the Z-Rod & Double Disc may have been prompted by the shape of the Stone – which may have originally have been vertical.

This example of the Comb appears to have seven lines. The number seven has important significance in Roman Mithraism. The modern day Planets known at the time were Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury and Saturn but were combined with the Sun and Moon to give the, then, known “Planets”. These seven Planets are associated with the seven steps in the ladder of initiation grades in the Roman Mithraic cult.



Looking back up to the Serpent there is arguably a linkage between the Symbol on the Stone and the sky, particularly night sky, views above it. The serpent in the context of the constellations can be Hydra, Serpens or Draco. Hydra as one of the 88 modern constellations stretches from Libra to Canis Minor (over 90° of the Celestial Sphere) but in the period when the equinoxes were in Taurus and Scorpio – Mithraic implications - Hydra was considered to extend further by including Sextans, Crater and Corvus (more like 180°). Perhaps the serpent Symbol is used to explain part of the Mysteries of Mithras such as the serpent’s head beyond the seven Planets so at the eighth gate, the Celestial Sphere, reaching into Heaven. It also represents eternal time.

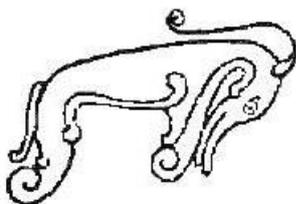
Nearby at Flemington Farm a Class 1 Stone was ploughed up in the early 1960s. The layout of the Horseshoe / Arch and Pictish Beast is the same as the Bruceton Stone about 20 miles away.



The Arch is the view into the Roman Mithraeum with its tunnel type shape and the Arch is also the shape at the so-called Tauroctony end which would have housed the Tauroctony statue.

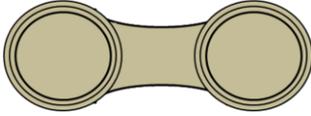
It could also represent the skyward view to the Zodiac.

The Pictish Beast is decoded as the “sea goat” which is Capricorn – astrologically the Gate of the Gods through which the soul travels on death into immortality. In Pictish-Mithraism, the connection between the V-Rod & Crescent, the Mirror and the Pictish Beast Symbols is Capricorn. On a Symbol Stone the Pictish beast could act as a “pointer” to the Capricorn constellation and, with reference to the V-Rod & Crescent, enable an explanation of the soul’s travel via the Celestial Sphere back to Heaven, and immortality, on death.



When Woodwrae castle (just west of Aberlemno) was demolished in the early 1800s a Stone was found that had been used for flooring. Central parts of the Cross seem to have been chiselled away and areas of the relief carvings on the reverse have been removed – predominantly, it seems, of the hunting scene. However, some unusual and “one-off” carvings remain.

On the reverse at Woodwrae are a bull (only one of two carvings known beyond Burghead), a Double Disc (the only one known with peripheral concentric circles), a hunting scene with two dogs or hounds (one looks as if it is attacking a large animal) and what looks like the remains of an L-shaped Rectangle.



On the Cross side there are five carvings of Beasts with Exaggerated Claws, Interlaced Animals, a beast with human legs in its mouth and a beast carrying some prey. The significance of these in Christian theology terms is not yet known – there is no arguable



Pictish-Mithraism relevance.

And finally for Aberlemno, perhaps the Stones at the church, Flemington Farm and the one once located at Woodwrae castle were erected with the others at the roadside (bearing in mind that this may well have been just a track – maybe just for access to the Stone site).