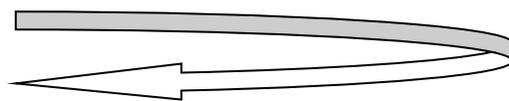


Pictish Symbol Stones – Case Study Rhynie

Features - eight Stones discovered with church, saint, river and open space associations. Two were discovered in the foundations of an older church another is most likely in its original open location, the remainder found in what is now the village and ploughed up in farmland. One lost and seven currently viewable in three locations. Collectively maybe a contender for “cathedral” type classification.

The “Craw Stane” was apparently given this name as the Pictish Symbol Stone is the only place for a long distance that a crow could sit on and have a wide view. Hence the set of photographs to illustrate the point which equally would apply to a number of people congregating looking outward and to an inward, focal point view from miles around - aspects probably of significance in Pictish-Mithraism. Given the vantage point, the Stone seems under-utilised in way of adornment of carvings but maybe the simplicity is specific with the Salmon having Celtic meaning for knowledge and wisdom and the Pictish Beast with its Capricorn decode may have acted as a pointer to that constellation.



In the left hand side lower photograph the Hill of Noth rises to a peak – the Tap o’ Noth – where there is the remains of a vitrified fort and very wide views across what is now Aberdeenshire including the Craw Stane and other forts.

Crop marks followed by geophysical investigations surrounding and adjacent to the Craw Stane have revealed what would have been Bronze and Iron Age structures. With the Iron Age finishing in more remote parts by the end of the Roman period this Stone could have been erected at the time of a Roman withdrawal bridging a prospective move from so-called pagan beliefs (using the Salmon) to those of Pictish-Mithraism (using the Pictish Beast representing Capricorn).

Now badly worn, the Stones placed on either side of the gate at the north end of Rhynie village square were found in an area that is now the south end of the village.



One has a Z-Rod & Double Disc – a fundamental Symbol used to explain the Mysteries of Mithras – the carving on the other Stone is of a man carrying a square shield and spear. Also within the area occupied by the village there was a Stone recorded over two hundred years ago as having a Pictish Beast, V-Rod & Crescent and what looked like a Mirror Case.

At Barflat Farm next to the old kirkyard, two Stones were ploughed up in the late 1970s. The partial Stone has a Pictish Beast and what has been assumed to be a Comb but in style is more like a simple Decorated Rectangle with other indecipherable lines. Only three Pictish Symbol Stones show axe-wielding figures – two are engaged in what looks like a fight on the Glamis Manse Stone on the Cross side of what was most likely a reused Class 1 Stone i.e. “upgraded” to Class 2; a striding figure holding an axe in front is at Golspie and the example at Rhynie is incised on a large Stone which has been relocated to Aberdeenshire Council offices. Their significance is difficult to assess.

Rhynie Old Church is by the Water of Bogie – two Stones were discovered in the foundations during the church’s demolition. Unlike several other locations where Symbol Stones have been found when demolishing an old church to replace it with a modern building (typically Victorian era), this one was demolished and its replacement built in the nearby village of Rhynie. The kirk yard continues as a burial place. Originally known as St Luag’s church it is difficult to ascertain whether that church was dedicated to the Saint or founded by him. St Luag, a contemporary of St Columba, has several other names including St Moluag (the “mo” prefix being an endearment simply for “my dear”). He came from Ireland to Scotland in 562 establishing a community at Lismore then at Rosemarkie and Mortlach – these later became the Roman Sees of the Isles, Ross and Aberdeen. In his time he seemingly founded one hundred churches in what we now call Scotland.

At other locations associated with St Luag (St Moluag) and with potentially contemporaneous Symbol Stones one, Alyth, is a simple Stone with a Cross but Clatt has Class 1 Symbols only. So no pointers to suggest St Luag had actually established a church at Rhynie – not least as the Stones in the vicinity are all Class 1 and one might expect some Christian iconography at a Mithraic to Christian transition location.

As well as a broad array of typical Pictish Symbol Stone objects on the Rhynie Church Stones, there is a “one-off” which variously has been described as a dog, otter and seal. It is listed in this publication as a “Beast’s Head” in the absence of no absolute clarity in the carving. When this Stone was moved to its current location thirteen shallow cup marks were discovered. These only appear on Class 1 Stones except in the case of Meigle number 1 a Class 2 Stone that is a re-used pre-Pictish era standing stone.

With a location having wide open views (from it and to it), line of sight to/from a hill top fort, an adjacent river, a number of Symbol Stones with the general array of objects used in Pictish-Mithraism (V-Rod & Crescent, Z-Rod & Double Disc, Mirror, Comb and Pictish Beast), at least one Celtic religious belief object (the Salmon on the Craw Stane) plus identifiable Bronze and Iron Age structures Rhynie could be a contender for what the author has called a “cathedral” site. In other words it has an importance greater than that of a single Stone site that may also not have the pre-historical attachments and topography of Rhynie.

Furthermore this is arguably a specifically Class 1 “cathedral” location – there are no known transition Stones i.e. Class 2 so there may have been a time gap between the end of the Pictish-Mithraism era and the establishment of a Christian Church. Not untypically the original Church is located at or nearby a Pictish Mithraist site and named after a Celtic Saint. A continuum of religious beliefs can be argued for Rhynie from those of the Bronze and Iron Age people, to Celtic “pagan”, Pictish-Mithraism, Celtic Christianity, and Roman Christianity to Church of Scotland.