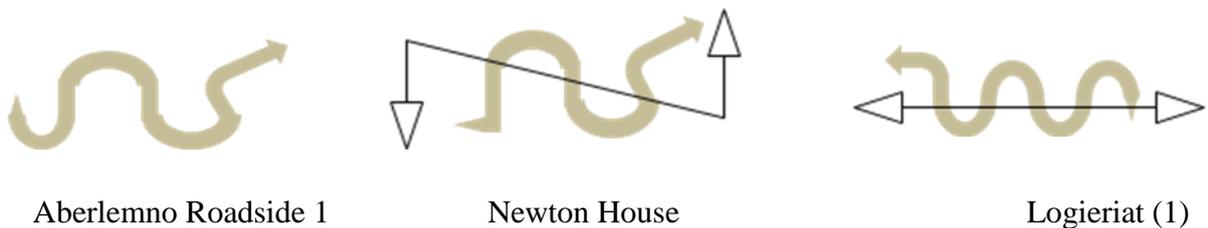


Mithraic Symbols Decoded - Serpent / Snake

In the Object Category of “Serpent” (also called Snake) 5 of the 21 objects identified are indistinct leaving 21 which have yielded 17 designs. Not all are Serpents alone. This Category includes 6 designs that have a form of Z-Rod across a serpent (almost half the known snake objects) where the line connecting the arrows is horizontal or almost horizontal (shown in Appendix A as Group 2), in Group 3 there are 3 examples of a single arrow across a serpent and one (classified in “Others”) where the Serpent is shown vertically with the Z-Rod in line.

Here are some examples of the different formats for Serpents on Pictish Stones:-



There is no particular consistency in the orientation of the Serpents on the Stones regarding which way the head and tail are facing but they all have two or more body curves and distinct head and tail ends - there is no doubt what the carving is.

In Roman Mithraism the Serpent is present in the Tauroctony sculptures such as the one in the British Museum where the snake is on the flank of the bull drinking its blood just beneath Mithras' dagger. On a relief in Modena, Northern Italy Mithras is shown as the Time-god with a Serpent intertwining his body with its head above his. Mithras has been referred to as the God of Infinite Time with a key predecessor being a lion-headed, human bodied, winged Time-god called Aion by the Greeks and Zervan in Persian literature but known in Mithraic terms as Leontocephalous Kronos (the personification of endless time). The latter links back to Zoroastrian teachings with which there are Mithraic (Persian version) linkages. Also, these lion-headed statues are entwined by a Serpent with, typically, 7 coils (maybe an allusion to the 7 Planets and 7 associated Mithraic grades).

Because the Serpent casts its skin annually it was considered to be a Symbol of regeneration. In Roman tradition snakes were seen as tokens of life beyond the grave. Snakes are also said to represent wisdom.

Turning briefly to some astronomical connections, 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 (*circa* 4000 BCE to 2000 BCE) Hydra was considered to extend further by including Sextans, Crater and Corvus; more like 180°. The origins of the Mithraic Mysteries relate back to this time period so this notion of an extended hydra is relevant. Also, the serpent has been associated with the brightness in the Milky Way – a connection perhaps with the soul's exit and entry points of Cancer and Capricorn.

Considering the profile of the serpent (snake, hydra etc.) in the symbolism of Roman Mithraic statues and paintings it is maybe surprising to see so few of these shapes on the Pictish Stones. But, maybe not - faced with the ability directly to see this shape in the Open-Air Mithraeum perhaps there is less of a need to depict it on the Stones. To the knowledgeable the Serpent formation can be seen in the sky at night.

Decoding the Serpent Symbol in the context of a transition from Roman to Pictish-Mithraism reveals several possibilities. On Pictish Stones the Serpent on its own (that is without rods or arrows across it) could represent the rod of Asclepius (single serpent) or the staff of Hermes (two intertwined serpents known as the Caduceus which in Roman mythology was carried by Mercury the messenger of the gods). The Roman Mithraic Corax grade has Mercury as its associated Planet – hence another linkage to the snake or serpent. The Leontocephalous (lion headed human) statues have intertwined snakes. The so-called Pictish Beast is another Symbol potentially with a connection with a beast from Persian mythology - the Mushhushshu also known as the furious snake – which has an association with the Hydra Constellation.

Not discounting the foregoing but by focusing on just one of the Symbols in the Serpent Object Category it is useful to consider the components in Group 2 – a form of Z-Rod across a Serpent with a line connecting arrows at each end. Examples of these are on Stones such as the Brandsbutt Stone; the Picardy Stone; St Vigeans; Drumbuie and Newton House examples. In the Section above on Z-Rods & Double Discs it was noted that in almost all cases the line shapes are the reverse of a Z (they have been called Z-Rods for convenience). In the case of those Serpents with what is a “Z” shape across them the “Z” lines and snake are on the same axis – a 90° rotation is needed to equate to the “Z”. What the components of the Z comprise in Mithraic terms is described above – basically the torch bearers Cautes and Cautopates connected together by a line representing the day, the 6 months between the equinoxes and time itself.

The Serpent has several interpretations in Pictish-Mithraism as derived from Roman Mithraism. When crossed by a Z-rod it reflects the Constellations connecting Cautes and Cautopates who represent the equinoxes. In the context of the ladder with seven steps or gates the goal when the soul returns on mortal death to gain immortality is, in fact, the eighth gate which can be represented by the head of the snake beyond the spheres of the seven Planets and in the Celestial Sphere. A snake is wrapped round a lion-headed figure know as a Leontocephalous. The Mithraic Corax grade could also be alluded to by the serpent – that first grade has Mercury as its associated Planet and Mercury is often depicted holding a Caduceus in his role as the messenger of the gods.