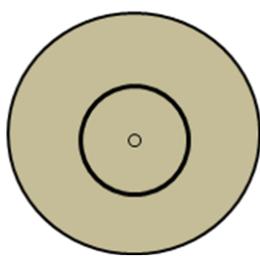


Mithraic Symbols Decoded - Mirror Case

There are 19 Mirror Case Objects plus one that is a Notched Mirror Case. One design looks more like a Tuning Fork; the remainder (18) are quite distinct. Two broad Patterns emerged – “hollow”, that is with an open circle on a base, and “solid”. The 17 Designs are arranged into 3 Groups.

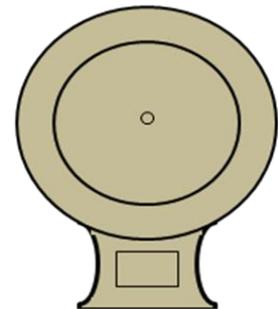
On the assumption that these shapes are mirror-like the conclusion has tended to be that they have a female association. This has been reinforced by these Symbols often been linked to the Mirror being accompanied by a Comb. Undoubtedly the shapes accord with Roman style mirrors in use not only in the first millennium CE but centuries before. As with the Mirror there is again the possibility of decoding this Symbol as something to do with the Nymphus Grade, the second in the seven step ladder whereby the initiate becomes the bride of Mithras. With the associated Planet being Venus perhaps we should be looking for an astronomical interpretation.

Group 1 Mirror Case Designs are of the solid pattern variety with concentric circles most notably in the Inverurie (1), Westfield and Knocknagael examples each of which has a small central dot or circle, an intermediate circle plus the outer one. All of these bear a strong resemblance to the Discs with the Z-Rods – a comparison is below:-



Disc detail from
Eassie Z-Rod &
Double Disc
←

Inverurie (1)
Mirror Case
→



Group 2 Designs are also of the solid pattern but they have small circles of varying numbers on Designs each of which is unique. Ardnilly has 4 small circles arranged within triangles in a tilted square. Both Inverurie (2) and Drumbuie (2) have 4 small circles within the main circular portion of the Symbol and a central small circle; additionally Inverurie (2) has a small circle on either side of the supporting base. Dyce has two sets of 3 small circles plus another central one – altogether 7 small circles. Drumbuie has a more elaborate construction with a central portion not dissimilar to Drumbuie with an added outer area with partially circular lobes (10 in all) each with a small circle. Examples of 4 dots or circles could represent seasons, elements or winds.

Group 3 Designs are all hollow each having a slightly differing style of base supporting the ring. Two that have not been placed in Groups are the Newton of Lewesk non-concentric design and the Sandside Notched Mirror Case.

If the rings are deconstructed their decoding may be made easier. Firstly a common feature for all the Mirror Cases is the supporting base. The hollow and solid patterns for the upper, circular parts give another two distinctive components. By looking to Mithraic iconography and statues there are shapes that align with the Mirror Cases – two, in fact. Mithras was in legend born from a rock, more precisely born from a cosmic egg appearing from a rock.

Additionally the Mithraic beliefs are portrayed in sculptures and paintings with Mithras stepping out of the rock with the globe in one hand alluding to a cosmic event, touching the Zodiac and holding the world in Atlas-like fashion. On a relief at St Aubin in France, the gods of the four winds and four elements are present to honour the birth of Mithras – the ruler of the cosmos.

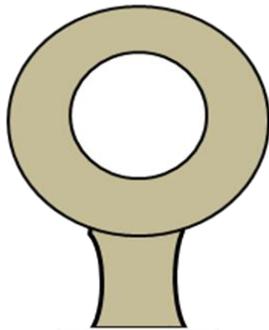
In the Great North Museum in Newcastle there is a sculpture (from Housesteads on Hadrian's Wall – picture below courtesy of GNM) of Mithras being born from the cosmic egg from the rock and holding the Zodiac in his hands. This is of great significance in decoding the Mirror Case and, to an extent, the Mirror designs on the Pictish Stones.



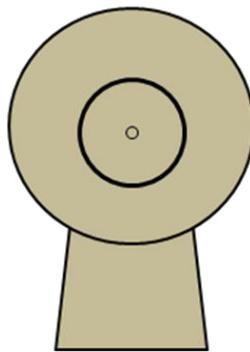
This sculpture was once in a Mithraeum on Hadrian's Wall and so has an established relevance to Roman Mithraism which tracks across into Pictish-Mithraism. The rock birth would have been a fundamental point to make to an initiate – the start of Mithras' life on Earth. The grip on the Zodiac would have enabled his connection with the cosmos. That grip looks more than static; could it be he is being shown poised to rotate the Zodiac and universe.

Looking at some of the Mirror Case Objects one can see how the components of the sculpture shown above could be translated into Pictish Symbols. First of all using the Tillytarmont and South Ronaldsay Design the combination of Mithras appearing from the rock and holding the Zodiac could have been explained from this object. Arguably there is an allusion to arms being outstretched in the dough-ring shape as well as the 360° of the Zodiac.

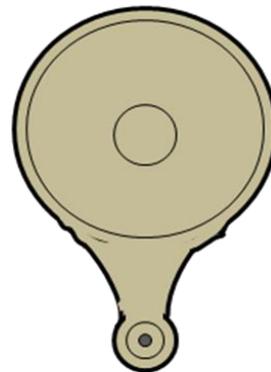
From the Group 1 set (“Solid” pattern) the example from Knocknagael suggests the birth from the rock with some added symbolism. That addition is the set of concentric circles which are typically seen with the Z-Rods – the Earth, Planet and Zodiac/Cosmos/Celestial Sphere/Universe could be explained to an initiate of Pictish-Mithraism not only by looking at the Stone but the sky beyond. If we add in an example from the Mirror Object Group, on this occasion from The Maiden Stone, the same combination of rock birth and Zodiac plus the elements of the Z-Rod Disc appear. This explanation for the latter design reinforces the difficulty in separately decoding the meaning of some of the Mirror and Mirror Case Object – maybe there is a duality of purpose.



Tillytarmont & South
Ronaldsay Mirror Case



Knocknagael
Mirror Case



Maiden Stone
Mirror

The Mirror Case components can be seen in Roman Mithraic sculpture and show a combination of the rock birth of Mithras and his supporting the universe by holding the Zodiac – potentially to rotate the universe (contained within the Zodiac). The carving of these objects onto the Symbol Stones shows a straightforward translation into Pictish-Mithraism and complement the decode for the Z-Rod & Double Disc.