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Some thoughts on Pictish symbols as a formal Writing System

Katherine Forsyth

Introduction

In recent years the cool breeze of Revisionism has been blowing through Pictish studies. Professional Pictologists, such as Isabel Henderson, Anna Ritchie, Alfred Smyth, Leslie Alcock and his pupils, have been at pains to downplay the exoticness of the Picts and to stress instead their common heritage with other barbarian peoples of northwest Europe. While they certainly haven't ignored the symbols, it would be fair to say that the Revisionists have not dwelt upon them. Their aims are laudable, and their general approach surely correct, but, as our honorand reminds me, it is impossible to get to grips with the Picts without addressing the question of the symbols. They are the one thing unique to the Picts, and without some sense of their significance our understanding of the Picts will never be more than partial.[1]

In addition to their immediate aesthetic appeal, the enigmatic symbols attract those of a romantic or mystic bent, or those with a taste for the exotic. The sense that their code could be cracked **if only the key could be found** draws anyone with a love of problem-solving. Yet, entertaining and enjoyable as it is to approach the symbols as a glorified crossword puzzle, the solution of which is an end in itself, this approach is nothing more than antiquarianism (as argued by Samson 1992). As scholars, our concern must be to understand the symbol-stones not for themselves but for what they tell us about Pictish society. The archaeological analyses of Jim Inglis (1987) and Elizabeth Alcock (1989) have begun to elucidate the position of symbol-carved stones in the social landscape of Pictland, and we must hope for further detailed work in this vein. As Stephen Driscoll has shown (1988), it is possible to gain some understanding of the social function of symbol stones as monuments without attempting to interpret specific carvings. Yet the investigation of meaning can be deferred only so long.

Most writers have been content to make only general statements about meaning. The first major systematic investigation was conducted in the early 1960s by Charles Thomas. He argued that the symbol stones referred to individuals in general terms describing social status and tribal membership (1963). His article incorporated a number of important observations – most notably the identification of different types of 'statement' following 'quasi-grammatical rules' – though certain of his conclusions are open to question (Henderson 1971, Samson 1992). The author himself modified his position when he returned to the topic two decades later (1984). In response to Thomas's original paper, Henderson asserted that 'personal rank of the individual' was not the only possible interpretation and suggested that ownership of land was a valid alternative (1971). The only other large-scale study to date is Anthony Jackson's *The Symbol Stones of Scotland* (1984), an idiosyncratic work with a number of fatal inadequacies (for a sustained critique, see Driscoll 1986). Jackson's interpretation of the stones as recording matrilinear marriage alliances has not found general acceptance.

The most recent contribution on the subject is an important article by Ross Samson (1992). While accepting that each 'statement' (of paired symbols) referred to a specific person, Samson questions two fundamental assumptions of previous writers: namely that each symbol referred to a class of data (the **kind** of person, rather than to a specific person), and that each symbol was self-sufficient in conveying one fact and thus that the syntax of each 'statement' was additive (1+1). He rejects the type of interpretations put forward by Thomas – along the lines of
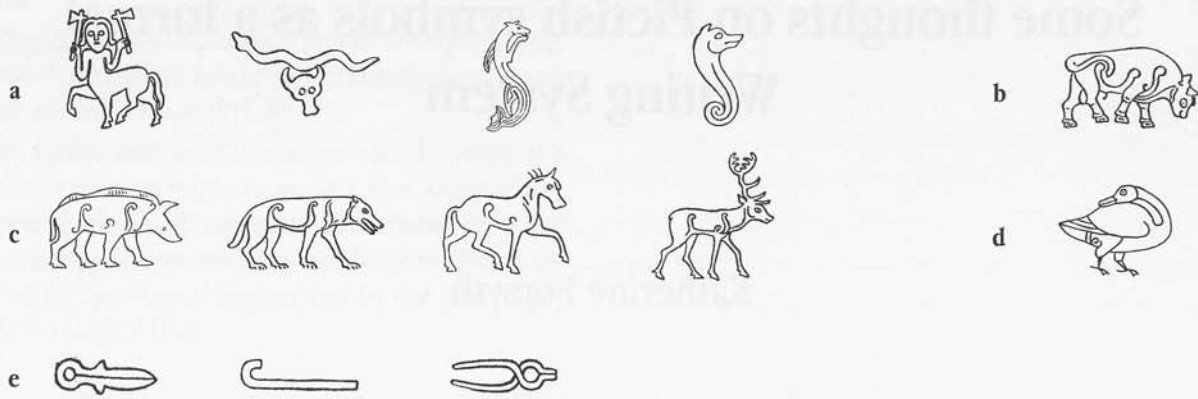
1   a *rejected animal designs*   **b** *Burghead bull – rejected*   **c** *mammals functioning as symbols, though in a limited fashion*   **d** *goose symbol*   **e** *representational objects – rejected*

2 *Suggested inventory of genuine symbols – classified according to basic outline and complexity: core symbols (**a–d**), associated symbols (**e**):*   **a** *discoid*   **b** *rectangular*   **c** *crescentic/curvilinear*   **d** *animal*   **e** *representational*   **f,g,h** *uniquely occurring 'core' symbols*

3   a,b *symbols modified by a 'notch'*

'an individual who was **a king** and **a poet**', or '**a dead warrior** and **member of the eagle clan** (commemorated by **a woman**)'. Instead Samson argues that there is no reason why the sense need be general (eg a tribe or social status) rather than specific (eg a personal name). Furthermore, he argues that the primary sense unit was not the individual symbol but the symbol pair: the symbols made sense not individually but only in combination (ie 1+2 = 2+1, but 12 is not the same as 21). His ingenious theory of symbols representing the two elements of a di-thematic personal name has much to recommend it, but is impeded, at least for now, by the fact that only a small proportion of the historically-attested Pictish personal names are di-thematic (though, admittedly, our knowledge of Pictish personal names is limited). Samson's hunch that the symbol texts are personal names is very plausible, though to concur with the general hypothesis need not require an acceptance of the specifics of his model. The comparative evidence of contemporary epigraphic practice elsewhere in the British Isles and Scandinavia shows that, with the exception of a small minority of Christian Latin texts of purely liturgical or exegetical significance, the overwhelming majority of monumental inscriptions consists largely or solely of personal names. Surely, then, the burden of proof lies on those who would have the Picts carving anything else, especially since the texts of roman and ogham alphabet monumental inscriptions in Pictland are preponderantly personal names (Okasha 1985, 1996; Forsyth 1996a).

It was reading Samson's article, and realising that it contained a major conceptual innovation in suggesting, apparently for the first time, that the symbols represented **language** rather than **ideas**, which inspired me to look seriously at a problem I had previously ignored. At the time I was working on the ogham inscriptions of Scotland (Forsyth 1996a) and had been struck again and again by the many contextual similarities between the use of ogham and the use of Pictish symbols. Could these similarities, I wondered, provide a clue to the nature of the Pictish symbol system? Specifically, could the formal correspondences I detected between the two schemes be attributable to the fact that, like ogham, the symbols were, a writing system?

For all its unusual appearance, ogham is an alphabetic script which can be shown to depend for its inspiration on the Latin alphabet (for an introduction to ogham, see McManus 1991). Though the form of the letters is novel – each character consists of a bundle of between one and five strokes placed in one of four positions relative to a base-line – the system operates in exactly the same way as our own alphabet. Where it differs from the Latin alphabet is that there **is** a connection between a character's appearance and the sound it represents in the Irish language. Letters are assigned to one of the four groups (and thus four positions relative to the line) on the basis of how they are pronounced. Within each group they are ordered first to fifth. For instance, the vowel group, A O U E I, consists of bundles of short strokes **on** the line, other groups sit **above**, **below** or **across** the line. The formal purity of the original alphabet came to be disrupted when a series of additional characters, or *forfeda*, were invented to cater for later developments in the sound system of Irish (Sims-Williams 1992). These supplementary characters took baroque forms unrelated to the simple parallel lines of the original system. It was the example of the 'mathematically' structured ogham script which caused me to look again at the formal structure of the Pictish symbols.

A Structured System

Agreement has not been reached on exactly how many 'genuine' symbols there really are. The total is frequently stated to be 'about fifty', Elizabeth Alcock put it at between sixty and sixty-five (1989, 11). I believe the symbols to be neither as numerous nor as heterogeneous as is generally maintained. In fact there may be only about thirty 'core' symbols. How are we to decide what is and is not a symbol? Despite the variation in internal decoration, which relates to date and context, all are agreed on the remarkable continuity of individual symbol designs across the country and through time. At least as important, however, is the continuity of syntax. As Diack recognised (1944) and Thomas further explained (1963), the fundamental syntax of extant symbol texts is that of the symbol pair, the elements usually arranged vertically above one another, almost touching.[2] This is the key to defining the members of the system. The conventional style of the designs is a clue, but the acid test is whether or not an example is found in combination with another recognized symbol (the

mirror and comb qualify by association).

The geometric symbols are easily identified as such by their common graphic style. More difficult are the various creatures which appear on Pictish sculpture. Most authorities agree that Romilly Allen was mistaken in including among the symbols the centaur, the bull's-head-and-serpent, the hippocamp and sea-horse (**1a**) (Allen and Anderson 1903, II, 58–79). Not only do these occur exclusively on later (Class II) monuments, but, more importantly, they do not combine in pairs to form statements.[3] The key criteria for inclusion in the inventory of 'core' symbols is that the design must appear at least once in paired combination with another recognised 'core' symbol. Straight-off, this excludes the famous Burghead bull plaques (**1b**).[4] Though rendered in the same style as recognised 'core' animal symbols, they never appear in combination with another symbol. They may well be related in meaning to the symbol system but they are not of the same standing as the 'core' symbols and must be set to one side. Also excluded on the same grounds are the lone warrior figures (eg Rhynie Man). More problematic are the boar and the wolf, both of which appear in combination (and therefore must be counted symbols) but also appear singly: boar solo – Dunadd; boar combined – Knocknagael; boar fragment – Dores; wolf solo – Ardross; wolf combined – Newbiggin Leslie, perhaps Keillor. The stag appears only once, in a pair, on the stone from Grantown; the horse appears only once, alone, on a stone from Inverurie. The marked rarity of these mammal symbols (only eight extant examples in total) (**1c**), and their geographical concentration in and around the Great Glen, as noted by Alcock (1989, 15), and the fact that they never appear on Class II monuments, is in marked contrast to the half-dozen remaining animal symbols which are (a) widespread, (b) relatively frequent (occurring at least ten times each), (c) as common on Class II as on Class I and (d) never appear singly. These creatures are: 'the Pictish beast', 'the beast's head', the fish, the eagle and the serpent (**2d**). It is moot to which sub-category the goose belongs (**1d**): it does not appear alone, but neither does it appear on Class II nor is it common. There are only three paired occurrences (Easterton of Roseisle, Gleneagles, and probably Tillytarmont), more than the mammal symbols, but markedly less than the other creatures.

The immediacy and attractiveness of the naturalistic animals may have contributed to the over-emphasis on the animal component of the system. Textbook illustrations of the symbol inventory (eg Jackson 1984 fig 1; Laing and Laing 1993 fig 78) usually show a selection of 'animal symbols' and a selection of 'geometric symbols' giving the impression that the system was equally divided between the two. Yet, as shown above, the animal component of the system is much less prominent than such illustrations suggest. As Hicks notes, they are in a definite minority (1993, 196).

As for the geometric symbols themselves, it is clear to one and all that the 'mirror' and the 'comb' do indeed represent mirrors and combs, literally or metaphorically. So accurate and detailed are the representation of these objects that archaeologists have been able to categorize them using the typology of contemporary combs and mirrors recovered through excavation (Foster 1990, 162–5; Fox 1948; Henry, 1965, 170; Lloyd-Morgan 1980). As for the other symbols, much fun has been had over the years trying to identify which object is represented from which angle, an endeavour reminiscent of the photo-puzzles in children's comics (the greatest exponent being Thomas 1963, but see also Laing and Laing 1984, and many others). Yet, no matter how ingenious the identification, and objectively convincing to its proposer, none can be tested: one man's 'chariot-and-ponies seen from above' is another man's 'Pictish tower'. Surely the very accuracy of the 'mirror' and 'comb' symbols, and of the realistic animals, counts against the other symbols being represent-ational. Noteworthy too, is the fact that, as discussed below, the realistic mirror and comb do not function in the same way as the pair-forming 'core' symbols.

Allen's identification of the crozier on St Vigeans 4 is undoubtedly correct (1903, II, 71; III, 241) but, since this Class II fragment is too small to be sure, there is no compelling reason to regard it as a symbol (rather than say a personal attribute of the hooded figure, analogous to David's attributes of harp, hurley and ball (Henderson 1986)). Another uniquely occurring representation is equally doubtful as a symbol. A pair of shear appears under the left arm of the cross at Migvie (Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 191–2). In the upper quadrants are a symbol pair, but there is no *a priori* reason why the shears must be a

symbol since their opposite number to the right (a single horseman) is not. The only other immediately recognizable objects with a claim to be genuine symbols are the 'hammer' and 'anvil' (or more likely 'crucible'?) which occur twice only (Class I, Abernethy; Class II, Dunfallandy). Both times their position on the stone is subordinate and perhaps their role is consciously modelled on the mirror and comb. The tongs appear uniquely on the stone from Dunfallandy. They may be an embellishment of the hammer and crucible or an item in their own right (**1e**).

Henderson recognized that there are three categories of symbol: animals, recognizable objects, and abstract geometric figures (1971, 54). The animals I would divide in two: the 'mammals' and the (non-mammal) 'creatures'. The mammals play only a minor role and for all that the mirror and comb are very frequent, in fact they are the only recognizable objects (other than the very rare hammer and crucible) which occur in 'proper' symbol statements, and then, not in primary combination with another symbol, but always subordinate to a symbol pair (**2e**). With the exception of the five or six 'creatures', the Pictish symbol inventory overwhelmingly comprises abstract geometric designs (**2**). Allen's triquetra is easily ruled out, but exactly how many geometric symbols there are remains subjective: are the 'two discs' (not joined) a variant of the 'double-disc' (joined), or a separate symbol? Accepting, for the sake of argument, these two as variants of a single symbol gives a total of fifteen symbols, three of which may be modified by the addition of V- or Z-rods, to give a total of eighteen (**2 a–c**). Then there are the five unique symbols (**2 f-h**)[5], the five common 'creatures' one of which may be modified by a Z-rod (**2d**), and a further four mammals which do not occur on Class II. To include them all gives a basic inventory of thirty-three 'core' symbols. Added to this is the category of special modifying symbols (**2e**), the mirror and the comb (to be taken separately since the mirror can occur alone) and the hammer and crucible (which only occur together).

The mirror (and comb) appears to qualify the statement as a whole but there are two phenomena – rods and notches – which qualify individual symbols. Four symbols (the crescent, the double-disc, the serpent, and the notched rectangle)[6] appear in two forms, with and without an over-laid 'rod', either in the shape of a V or like a Z or N. The different kinds of rods are applied with

complete consistency, the crescent receives a V, never a Z; the double-disc, serpent and the notched-rectangle receive a Z or N, never a V. With the sole exception of the lone Z-rod on the reverse of the Norrie's Law handpin these rods never occur alone. Thomas (1963) took these rods to be broken arrows and spears and thus to represent death in some way. Anderson adduced comparative evidence that they should be seen as floriated sceptres (1903, I, xxxiv), an interpretation forcefully restated by Stevenson (1993, 16–18). Perhaps they, too, are to be taken as representational, like the mirror and comb.

A further 'modification' is the notch. Two symbols, the crescent and the double-disc very occasionally appear with a small penannular notch, as if a bite had been taken out of them (**3a**). Crescents and double-discs can be modified by both rods and notches, but I know of no examples of a single symbol bearing both. The same phenomenon may be reflected in the square notch at the base of some 'mirror-case' symbols, and perhaps even in the two circular notches sometimes seen on the body of the 'notched-rectangle' (**3b**). The problem is knowing whether the notched and unnotched, rodded and rodless versions were variants of a single symbol or separate symbols in their own right. It is important to note that while modification with the mirror (and comb) was widespread, only certain symbols were modified by rods or notches. This suggests that the significance of these modifiers was restricted rather than pervasive.

As far as I can discern, from the very outset all scholars have assumed the geometric symbols to be stylized representations of actual objects. This may well be, but for the sake of argument I would like to assume, for a moment, that they are **not representational** at all but are purely abstract geometrical figures. As long as they were understood to represent real objects, the symbols have been illustrated (and thought of) in no particular order, and no attention has been given to the formal visual relationships between them. There are, as Romilly Allen tacitly acknowledged in the order in which he set them out (1903, II, 58–79), correspondences between the form of certain symbols. For instance, the 'disc-and-notched-rectangle' could be taken as half a 'double-disc' on its end. The way the two are juxtaposed on Westfield 1, a Class I stone at Falkland Palace (Henderson 1979, 26–7), brings

this home most forcefully. Taking this idea a little further, the geometric symbols can be divided into one of three categories depending on whether their fundamental shape is based on complete circles, crescents/curved lines, or rectangles/straight lines (**2 a–c**).

Within each category, the symbols can be viewed as transformations of a single basic shape and arranged loosely in order of increasing complexity. To take the rectilinear group: the simplest outline is that of the rectangle itself, transformed with one move it becomes the L-shaped-figure, once more and it is the stepped-rectangle, bent over it becomes the tuning-fork, and developed even further it becomes the notched-rectangle. A similar mathematical progression may be ascribed to the sequence: single-disc, double-disc, triple-oval, triple-disc-with-bar, disc-and-rectangle.

Of course there is considerable subjectivity in this. Perhaps there are more than four basic categories, perhaps the divisions are to be drawn differently. It scarcely matters at this stage. My aim is merely to suggest an alternative way of conceptualizing the symbols in which the whole series is generated by structured transformations from a number of basic forms. This formal sequence is at least possible, even if how I have chosen to order them here may be contested.[7] I'll stick with the above categories, though, for the moment: discoid (**2a**), rectilinear (**2b**), curvilinear (**2c**) and 'creatures' (**2d**), with the representational symbols in a separate subordinate category of their own (**2e**). Having imputed inter-relationship between the basic forms of the symbols, perhaps we can go on to ascribe correspondences between symbols with the same degree of complexity (ie view the system as a matrix with correspondences down the complexity column as well as along the row of form). Could the third element of the rectilinear group stand in the same relation to the first as the third element of the discoid group does to its first?

A sceptic might argue that such a division is arbitrary and that one could as easily divide our own alphabet into categories of letters comprising solely straight lines (X, T, A), predominantly curves (S, O, C), or a mixture of both (B, Q, R), or draw up progressions along the lines **p q b d** or **I L F E**. We know such patterns to be meaningless (since there is no direct correlation between pronunciation and outline), and could discern as much

from the fact that the combinations in which letters actually appear bears no relation to their shape. Preliminary observations of the Pictish symbol combinations, however, suggest that this division into categories is not arbitrary, but actually operative in the system. Firstly, one member from each category, and only one, also appears in a form modified by a V- or Z-rod (double-disc, notched rectangle, crescent and serpent). Secondly, the category to which a symbol belongs appears to effect the kind of symbols with which it is combined. For instance, symbols more commonly combine with members of other categories and rarely with members of their own category (leaving aside the four or five exceptional cases of symbols combining with versions of themselves). Leading on from this, each of the most common symbols (crescent, double-disc, and beast) occur more commonly with the members of one category than those of the other, eg the double-disc is more commonly found with animal symbols, rarely with rectilinear; the inverse is true of the crescent (based on statistics in Allen and Anderson 1903, II, 110–27; Jackson 1984, 240–6; Samson 1992, 36, 52). Such patterned connections are merely impressions at this stage and need to be tested statistically. They may or may not have bearing on the meaning of the individual symbols but they might well point the way to an understanding of how the system was originally conceived and constructed.

The four sub-categories I discerned immediately brought to mind the four groups or *aicmi* of ogham letters. I'm not suggesting that the discoid Pictish symbols are all 'stop' consonants and the creatures all vowels[8], but I do wonder if the simple transformative structure behind the ogham alphabet might have been an inspiration to the person who invented the Pictish symbol system. The Irish invented ogham when contact with Latin literacy led them to desire a script for their own language (Harvey 1987, Stevenson 1989). This notion that each language should have a script of its own was widespread in Ancient and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean World (a few of the many examples are: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Etruscan, Germanic Runes and Rhaetic). Ogham is visually very different from the Latin alphabet which inspired it, even if at a fundamental level they operate in the same way. Perhaps ogham provided the basic concept of groups of 'mathematically' structured forms, and the indigenous art

of the period provided the graphic elements from which the Pictish system was constructed.

Several authorities have looked to the art style reflected in the animal and geometric designs for an indication of the symbol system's date of origin. Thomas preferred to see it well back into an Iron Age context, 'scarcely later than the second century AD' (1961, 57). The Laings have restated the debt the symbols owe to late Romano-British art (1984, 262), and for R B K Stevenson comparison with Insular illuminated manuscripts suggested their genesis perhaps as late as the seventh century (1955). Regarding the earliest dating, the recent discovery of the Clonmore Shrine (Bourke 1993, 14–16) underlines the fact that La Tène-style decoration is no longer a guarantee of prehistoric date (Bourke 1995): this Irish reliquary of cAD 600 is carved with La Tène spiral ornament which would have been thought at home on a sword scabbard from the last centuries BC ! As for the correspondences with seventh-century manuscript art, we must distinguish between the essential form of each symbol and the various actual expressions of it. To take up the analogy with writing, the distinction is like that between the combinations of lines which makes a T a T, rather than an L or an I , as against the curves, serifs, and variation in relative proportions which distinguish, say, *capitalis*, uncial and minuscule varieties. It is possible that a symbol system, invented in its essentials in the fourth or fifth century, may have been visually recast in contemporary style in the seventh. Stevenson's theory of 'the declining symbol' (1955), further developed by Henderson (1958) and Murray (1986), is a useful tool for the relative dating of individual examples and, perhaps for locating the origin of particular styles of symbol writing (in the way that analysis of Caroline minuscule allows the progress of the canonical form of the script across Europe to be charted (Bischoff 1990, 112–18)). But it does not necessarily tell us about the origin of the **system**. The date of a particular style of script may well be irrelevant to the date of the origin of the alphabet.

If we are looking for a historical context for initial Pictish exposure to ogham then one may be provided by the sixth century Irish Christian *peregrini* who voyaged to the Northern and Western Isles. Two mentioned by Adomnán, Cormac Ua Liatháin and Brendan of Clonfert (*VC* I.6, II.42, III.17), came from areas of Ireland where ogham was particularly popular at a time when ogham stones were still being erected. Ogham inscriptions of probably fairly early date have been found in North and South Uist, Caithness and at several sites in Orkney (Forsyth 1996a). The earliest datable ogham in Scotland came from the same archaeo-logical context as the earliest datable symbol stone, the sixth-century paved courtyard at the multi-period settlement of Pool, Sanday, Orkney (Hunter 1990, 1997).

Symbols in Use

Even if one rejects the formal, structural correspondences I am proposing between the two systems, the contextual similarities between ogham and symbols are undeniable. As Charles Thomas has already pointed out (1994), from an archaeological point of view the Class I pillars are exactly cognate with the other 'individual inscribed memorials' of the pre-mid-seventh century British Isles: the ogham pillars of Ireland (Macalister 1945) and the unfortunately labelled 'Class I' post-Roman inscribed stones of Wales and western Britain (Nash-Williams 1950). The rise and fall of this monument type reflects social, political and devotional changes in post-Roman Celtic society and the Class I Pictish symbol stones are most naturally seen as the local reflex of a more general phenomenon (Driscoll 1986). The mutually exclusive distribution of the post-Roman British monuments south of the Forth and symbol stones to the north appears to support this conclusion.

The similarities between the use of ogham and the use of symbols extend beyond the monuments, however. Like the symbols, ogham is found casually carved in a cave (at Blackwaterfoot, Jackson 1973) and on small slabs at settlement sites (Birsay and Pool, Forsyth 1996a).[9] Ogham appears on a number of utilitarian domestic objects including knives, combs and a spindle whorl (Holder 1990, Forsyth 1996a, 1996c). The symbol-inscribed objects are less obviously utilitarian, but the sample is small.[10] These domestic and informal examples provide important evidence that knowledge of both systems was not restricted to a narrow group within society. Their wide geographical distribution throughout Pictland is also worthy of note. When it comes to metalwork[11], however, the comparison is with the roman alphabet (Brown 1993, Michelli 1997). The only oghams on metalwork appear to be secondary (McManus 1991:132, Holder 1990).

Returning to the monuments, there is a tendency to regard the Class I stones as the apotheosis of the symbol system with Class II constituting some kind of falling away. In epigraphic terms, however, this is an entirely false impression. Symbols share Class II monuments with a wealth of other carving, which in some cases is given visual priority, but it would be quite wrong to think of them as marginal on these later monuments. Often the symbols are rendered on a massive scale and placed at the very top of the slab (eg Rosemarkie, Hilton of Cadboll, the Maiden Stone, Aberlemno Roadside cross-slab). **As symbols**, Class II examples continue to conform to the basic syntax familiar from Class I monuments: the vertical pair, with or without the qualification of mirror or mirror and comb. At first glance the cross-slabs may appear a confusing jumble of many symbols, but a closer examination reveals that the elements of each symbol statement are carefully differentiated from other pairs by scale and relative placement and, where present, the mirror and comb continue to appear in 'third' position (eg Golspie, Glenferness, Dyce 2, Meigle 1, Dunfallandy). These later texts have the same format as the early ones, the 'rules' continue to apply: the key difference is that some Class II monuments exhibit more than one symbol statement.

Comparison with the roman alphabet-inscribed crosses and cross-slabs of contemporary Ireland and Wales may help explain the differences between the use of symbols on Class I and Class II stones (Macalister 1949, Nash-Williams 1950). Almost without exception, each ogham or roman alphabet-inscribed pillar refers to a single person: 'so-and-so (son of N, of the Y kin-group)'. From the seventh century on, however, the equation 'one monument : one person' does not always hold. Texts on crosses and cross-slabs often name two or three people – the person who caused the monument to be erected, the person whose soul is to benefit from this action, sometimes the saint who is invoked, or the cleric under whose jurisdiction it falls, or the master-craftsman responsible for the work. If each Pictish symbol statement refers to one person then the multiplicity of statements on **some** Class II slabs probably means more than one person is being referred to. This is certainly the conclusion to be drawn from the three human figures on the back of the Dunfallandy cross-slab, each one of whom is 'labelled' by their own symbol statement.

Symbols as writing

To accept the symbol system as some form of writing makes it much easier to relate it to contemporary monumental practice elsewhere. A side-benefit of this paradigm is that with its adoption, apparent conundrums evaporate.

The far-flung geographical distribution of highly standardized symbols has been justly remarked on, but till now explained as the result of a simultaneous imposition of a standard symbolism throughout Pictland by a central authority (see, most recently, Alcock 1996). This in turn has been taken as reflecting a precociously effective political institution (ie kingship). Yet if the symbols are a writing system the standardization of individual characters is no more surprising than the standardization of uncial D or ogham R throughout the British Isles. The sudden appearance of a fully-formed system, without a visible period of experimentation and development also ceases to be a problem.

There has been a tendency to discuss the Pictish symbol system as if it emerged piecemeal from a pool of designs which were only later structured and codified. The implicit model here is surely the fluid language of heraldry in which straightforward personal devices evolved into hereditary symbols and only later were reduced to a system of armorial bearings. Over time one can see the invention of new ways of differentiating between the ever-increasing number of coats-of-arms. To begin with the repertory of charges was small but by now they may be 'anything in heaven, earth or wonderland, from a double-headed eagle to a trivet' (Wagner 1946, 25). This fluidity around a central principle is in marked contrast to the fundamental stability of the Pictish symbol system. To the extant that they can be dated, the extant symbol texts show that all the elements of the system were in place by the first appearance on Class I stones and continued fundamentally unchanged to the last of the Class II cross-slabs. For this reason I think it more likely that the symbol system is like ogham. The individual ogham characters have meaning **only** in relation to the rest of the system, it is impossible to have one without predicating all the others. This shows that ogham was invented at a single point in time, it did not gradually form over a long period. I see no reason for thinking that the Pictish symbol system was any different.

Similarly the comparison with alphabetic script brings to mind the differences between different registers: the simple form of a cursive script need not imply a date any earlier than the baroque forms of a corresponding calligraphic display script. Rather, each style of lettering reflects forms appropriate to the context. Leslie Alcock has recently suggested that the simplest symbol examples, notably those found in caves, are earlier than the rest and stand at a previous stage in an evolutionary progression. These designs, recognisable as 'double-discs', 'Pictish beasts' or whatever, but lacking internal embellishment, he labels 'proto-symbols (1996). Until his hypothesis can be confirmed with datable examples prior to the rest the possibility will remain that these are merely informal, 'cursive' versions of the standard symbols.

To the extent that Pictland may be defined as the non-British, non-Gaelic areas of northern Britain, symbols are found all over Pictland and nowhere else (with only a handful of dubious exceptions). The exclusively 'Pictish' nature of the symbols indicated by their geographical distribution is supported by their chronological range: none appear to post-date the cultural eclipse of the Picts around 900. If the symbols are not writing and represent ideas rather than language *per se* then we must find some feature of Pictish society or culture which was universal and long-lived but exclusive to the Picts (otherwise might not we expect some borrowings by one or more of their neighbours?). If this **was** the case, the fact that the system was used apparently from the start in all the provinces of the Picts, might require us to posit some form of self-conscious 'pan-Pictish' cultural identity. The precociously early date of such sentiments would require no little explanation !

On the other hand, if the symbols do in fact represent the Pictish language then their distribution is easier to explain for it would simply reflect those places where Pictish was spoken. There is no need to postulate a self-consciously shared cultural package, merely a common language. The end of the tradition of carving symbols on public monuments could then be seen to coincide with the decline of Pictish as the language of the ruling elite. The mutually exclusive distribution of, say, Pictish symbols and Anglian runes, would reflect merely the mutually exclusive distribution of the Pictish and English languages. If the

symbols do record language, we might be able to explain why symbols are absent from the monuments of certain of the major ecclesiastical centres of Pictland. Their absence at, say St Andrews, may reflect the strong influence of Gaelic there from an early date (Taylor 1996, Clancy 1996).

How might it work?

If the symbols **are** writing, how might the system work? There are three basic varieties among the many different kinds of writing systems of the world: alphabetic script (graphemes represent phonemes), syllabic script (graphemes correspond to syllables, often a consonant-vowel pair), eg Mycenean Greek, and logographic script (graphemes = morphemes, ie words), eg Chinese. Some systems are predominantly of one kind but incorporate aspects of another. The different bases of these different scripts is reflected in their outward appearance. For instance alphabetic scripts tend to have around 20–30 simple characters, syllabic scripts tend to have at least 50 and may have as many as several hundred, and a logographic script needs several thousand to function properly (Crystal 1987, 200–2).

If we had inscriptions consisting of row upon row of Pictish symbols then there would be no problem: we would recognise these as written texts, even if we had no way of reading what they actually said (cf Linear A), though we might live in hope! (cf the now-decoded Maya glyphs, Coe 1992). Furthermore, we would be able to say with reasonable certainty that the number of graphemes (between thirty and forty depending how they are counted) implied an alphabetic script. The brevity of the extant texts, however, all but precludes an alphabetic interpretation for Pictish symbols (unless one is prepared to accept the unlikely scenario that the symbol statements represent pairs of initials). A syllabic script is similarly ruled out since we know the Pictish language did not consist solely of words of two syllables ! If there were more elements in the symbol inventory then a logographic script would be a possible explanation. The various modifiers (rods, notches, mirror and comb) would fit very well into such a system, functioning, perhaps, in ways similar to the determinant in Egyptian hieroglyphs, or the radical in Chinese script, a non-phonetic marker indicating the semantic meaning of similarly pronounced words; or

alternatively, like diacritics in alphabets and syllabaries, distinguishing between two contrasting phonemes (say, voiced and unvoiced consonants, or long and short vowels). But to cover all the words of the Pictish language would require a hundred times as many symbols as we actually have.

The small number of elements in each statement coupled with the comparatively small number of symbols available means the system cannot have represented the entirety of Pictish language. If we are still to adhere to the theory that the symbol system is writing it must be that its semantic range was in some way limited. Given that symbols appear in a great range of monumental and non-monumental contexts their meaning must be of very broad application, despite its restricted range. It is hard to imagine that it is anything other than a personal identification: '(here lies) A', '(this belongs to) A', '(this was erected by) A', '(pray for) A, A'.

Samson concluded that the symbol pairs represented di-thematic personal names by analysing the frequency of symbols and symbol combinations in comparison with the frequency of personal names and name-elements among the neighbours of the Picts. I would argue towards a similar conclusion on the basis of comparison with the archaeo-logical contexts of the symbols and the contemporary uses of alphabetic writing elsewhere in the British Isles.

Before Samson's 1992 article, the most widespread explanation was that each symbol was the emblem of a tribe or lineage. There are two main reasons why the kin-group badge theory seems a less likely explanation than straightforward personal names. First, inscriptions on cognate monuments always refer to individuals. Often the tribal or kin-group affiliation of such persons is recorded but only as additional information situating that individual in society. I know of no instances of an inscription referring only to a group *per se*. If symbols (either individually or in combination) represent groups ('tribes', lineages, families) it would be impossible to specify a particular individual. Even if a person could be identified as the child of a union of two families it would not be possible to differentiate among siblings, and, in some cases, cousins. Second, perhaps more importantly, if the symbols are hereditary 'badges' of group identity then we would expect to see regional variation in their distribution reflecting the

regional power-bases of the major families. Also we would see fluctuation over the centuries as powerful lineages decline and obscure families rise to prominence – as we see happening so clearly in contemporary Ireland. The group emblem theory stands or falls primarily on a historically credible geographical and chronological distribution of the symbols.

Statistical studies to date have, to my mind, been inconclusive on the question of possible regional variation in the distribution of symbols and symbol combinations. It has been asserted both that there is and that there is not geographical variation but none have rigorously tested the patterns for statistical significance and often the numbers in question are very small. Study of the distribution of symbols over time is hampered by the lack of closely datable examples but it would at least be possible to compare Class I distribution with Class II for a crude 'early' vs. 'late' comparison. Statistical analysis of any variation in distribution from context to context would be problematic because of the small number of non-lapidary examples to have survived in the archaeological record, but a few observations are still possible (eg the absence of the mirror and comb from non-lapidary examples). It is true that names go in and out of fashion and that certain names are favourites of certain families but, in my opinion, given-names better explain the lack of gross regional variation and the apparent stability of the relative frequency of the different symbols through time (ie the symbols most frequent on Class I are also most frequent on Class II, etc.). As Samson's graphs show, the distribution curve of symbol combinations is very close to the distribution curve of individual personal names among the contemporary neighbours of the Picts (1992).

The importance of sound statistical analysis to the future study of the symbols is clear. Though there have in the past been some statistical studies of symbol these have been rudimentary and, in some cases, fatally flawed. Jackson conducted a statistical study (1984), though his calculations are based on contentious views regarding which are the 'genuine' symbols (though some of his tables are useful). Other helpful collections of statistics can be found in articles by Murray (1986), Alcock (1989), and Samson (1992). What is required, however, is something altogether more comprehensive and searching. The total sample is

certainly large enough for meaningful statistical analysis, though comparisons within the sample, say of the context or combinations of a particular symbol of even medium frequency, will often be at the margins of statistical meaning. I am nonetheless confident that a comprehensive study of the spatial, chronological and contextual distribution of symbols, individually and in combination, using the techniques of multivariate statistics would produce a number of insights, particularly if the results were combined with analysis of comparative writing systems.

Conclusion

There are several hundred extant symbol 'texts' on a variety of media from a wide geographical area over a very long period of time. From this, the first thing we can deduce about the Pictish symbol system is that it worked! Whatever it was intended to convey, it performed its function sufficiently well that people all over northern Britain found it useful and continued to use it, generation after generation, for perhaps as long as four centuries (from the fifth or sixth century to the ninth or early tenth). This fact is all the more striking when we realise that throughout that period the roman and the ogham alphabets were also in use in Pictland (Forsyth forthcoming 1997). We have yet to discover the special role that only the symbols could perform which meant that the system was able to hold its own against the others for such a long time.

Looking at the way the symbols were used in practice I have highlighted the similarities between the use of symbols and the use of alphabetic writing in the British Isles in the same period. By adopting an essentially synchronic and de-contextualized approach to the system **as a system**, I have attempted to put forward an alternative way of thinking about its structure and, by implication, origins. If I have been unable to go beyond a series of impression-istic statements it is because to do otherwise would require a thorough and comprehensive statistical analysis of the entire body of symbol data – an undertaking currently beyond me. What I have tried to show is that there are new and different ways of approaching the problem and that one of these may lead to the much anticipated break-through. Until that happens, however, you may rest assured that the Picts will retain this, their last enigma.

Notes

1 At the beginning of my career in Pictish studies our honorand, in her role as undergraduate dissertation supervisor, offered me the following sage advice, 'avoid the symbol stones: there lies madness'. Until now I have conscientiously followed her advice; on reading this she may wish I had heeded it a little longer. I offer the following to her, a continuing source of inspiration, in appreciation of the many pleasurable hours spent discussing a shared enthusiasm.

2 Out of a total corpus of probably over 300 symbol statements there are only a tiny handful of intact objects bearing a single unpaired 'core' symbol. Most of the symbols carved on portable objects stand in pairs and, though possible relationships are often difficult to determine among the jumble of carving in some of the caves, there are unambiguous examples of pairs there too, for instance the 'double-disc and Z-rod' touching the 'beast's head' in the Doo Cave at Wemyss.

3 The Ulbster cross-slab has a hippocamp and a lion paired with two other symbols. Since these motifs occur nowhere else in symbol pairs and are derived ultimately from imported illuminated manuscripts, it can be taken that, at most, Ulbster is a late and isolated example of the one-off co-option of non-symbol designs. It may be that the paired layout of the non-symbols is inspired by the usual symbol statements and the four panels created by the arms of the cross, cf Migvie.

4 Unless otherwise stated, references to individual stones will be found in RCAHMS 1994 and in Allen and Anderson 1903, III.

5 Or is Monymusk's (horizontal) stepped rectangle with curved ends (**2g**) a variant on the (vertical) stepped rectangle?

6 Migvie's V-rod version of the arch is unique (**2h**). It appears in a pair, so qualifies as a 'core' symbol, but

remains rather doubtful in occurring only on this rather unusual Class II stone.

7   I have not included the goose symbol here nor the three uniquely-occurring geometrics (**2f**). The 'bow and arrow' is a bit strained as 'discoid', but the others would fit into the remaining categories easily enough.

8   Though, perhaps some of the rarer Pictish symbols have a status within the symbol system analogous to the baroque supplementary ogham characters, the *forfeda*: eg the three uniquely-occurring (Class I) geometric symbols which are particularly complex in their form – the 'bow and arrow' from Congash (Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 96–7), the double-hook from Mortlach (Simpson 1926, 274–8), and the embellished square on Kintore 4 (Woodham 1974).

9   There are symbols carved in the caves at Covesea, Moray (Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 129–31) and in Fife at Wemyss (Ritchie and Stevenson 1993) and Caiplie (Murray 1961); and on a slab from Gurness, Orkney (Ritchie 1969).

10 An ox-bone, presumably a divination token, from Burrian, Orkney, is carved with two clearly identifiable symbols (Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 25–6); the Portsoy 'whetstone', a ceremonial object of unknown purpose, is carved with what may be symbols (Thomas 1963, 48 pl II); and there are a small handful of incised or painted pebbles from various sites bearing symbols or symbol-like decoration (ibid, 46).

11 There are the seven pieces of symbol-inscribed metalwork extant: the brooch from Carn Liath, Sutherland (Ritchie 1989, 51); the bronze plaque from Monifieth (Laing 1993, 105 no 240); the clasps of two of the massive silver chains (Henderson 1979, Laing 1993, 101–2, nos 221–2); two plaques and a hand-pin from the Norries Law silver hoard (Youngs 1989, 26–8, Laing 1993, 78, 98–9, nos 121, 211–12). I omit for now the more dubious remains of the 'double-disc' plaques from Ballinaby, Islay (Laing and Laing 1993, 116 fig 91).

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