

The Picts

The enigmatic, weathered, slab of pink granite known as the Maiden Stone survives from a tribal society that was dominated by various grades of warrior kings and chiefs. In many ways Pictish times were a continuation of the Celtic iron age of the later first millennium BC. Elaborate defended settlements were built on hilltops or coastal promontories; the crafts of fine metalwork and stone-carving were encouraged and there was probably even a Pictish navy. Good agriculture was also practised, possibly using an under-class of bondsmen.

Although the tradition of stone-carving may originate from contacts between the Picts and their southern neighbours in late Roman times (4th & 5th centuries AD), the Maiden Stone belongs to the end of Pictish times, the late 8th or early 9th century. This was when the Picts and the Scots, from Ireland, were gradually amalgamating. This was also the time when the Picts became fully Christian and when the centre of power moved to southern Pictland, principally Angus.

The location of this stone is significant, being placed in the Garioch, the heart of the Pictish province of Mar, and on the slopes of Bennachie, a hill crowned with a distinctive, dark age fort. The nearby place-names Pittodrie and Pitcaple are also indications of Pictish settlement.



Pictish symbol stones

Nearly 200 symbol stones and cross slabs have been found in Scotland, of which a large proportion (c40%) come from Grampian. They are generally found on good agricultural land. Although many theories have been devised to explain the symbol stones, they are most likely to have been erected as personal memorials, showing the rank of a recently deceased chief or other prominent person, and also giving to his descendants a form of title or claim to the land around the stone.

The Maiden Stone

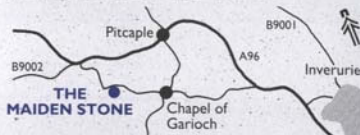
Twelve hundred years ago a Pictish mason completed one of the most spectacular pieces of sculpture yet seen. Every face of the tough granite slab had been cut back to form a series of complex designs and symbols which conveyed an important message to the local inhabitants. The 3.2m tall slab was set up a few paces E of its present site.

The overtly Christian statement which the cross on the west face represents (accompanied by the possible Jonah scene above) is tempered by the massive symbols on the east face which hark back to the pre-Christian insignia of rank seen on earlier symbol stones in the Garioch. The mason translated into granite a form of monument which was most successfully produced in the sandstone areas of south Pictland. Details of the Maiden Stone can be matched on several of the most important cross slabs in Angus and east Perthshire. For example, the centaur on the east face and the man on the west face are both similar to parts of the second stone at Meigle, while the huge notched rectangle is very similar to the one on the Aberlemno kirkyard stone.

The Maiden Stone also looks north, to Sueno's Stone in the heart of the great province of Moray, where the use of carefully cut mouldings to frame panels is most clearly developed. Such panels may derive from tapestries.

Reaching the site

The Maiden Stone lies beside the unclassified road that runs S of the A96 through Chapel of Garioch, 4.5 miles W of Inverurie. Visitors should park in the layby to the W of the stone and cross the road with care.



The Maiden Stone is in the care of the Secretary of State for Scotland and can be seen at all times. Please respect this ancient feature.



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The Maiden Stone

*Second in a series of leaflets
on the Archaeology of N.E. Scotland*



Flowing knotwork covers this face and runs over the little facet at the base on the east side.

Four fabulous beasts fill this panel, the largest being a centaur-like form. The others are rather worn.

The notched rectangle and Z-rod symbol. The former has been interpreted as either a stylized chariot or a gate-tower, the latter a broken spear.

A man stands between two fish-monsters with his arms outstretched, perhaps wielding a sword in his right hand. The monsters are derived from creatures carved on Roman altars; the scene may be of Jonah and the whale.



North Face

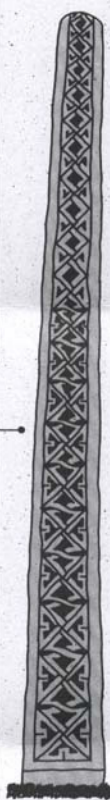
The 'Pictish beast' or 'swimming elephant' (! dolphin) has Roman prototypes; the scrolls on the body denote muscles.



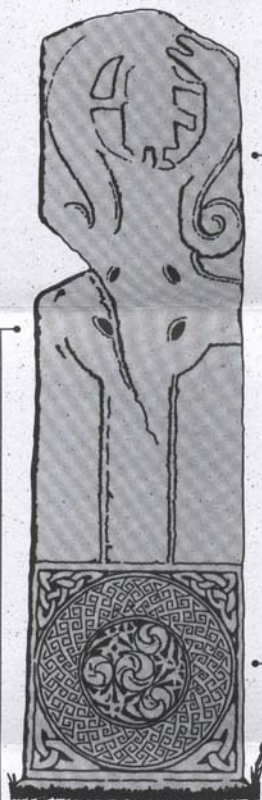
East Face

Interlaced work fills the whole of this narrow face.

The mirror and comb symbol, based on bronze mirrors and double-sided combs current in Pictish times.



South Face



West Face

A large, ring-headed cross with hollows at the angles. The interlace that originally covered the cross has been chiselled off, as have the carvings on either side.

A roundel with, at the centre, four triple spirals and three double spirals. The surrounding ring contains key pattern and the corners of the panel are filled with knotwork.

FURTHER READING

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THE LEGEND

A daughter of the laird of Balquhain, on her wedding day, bet a stranger that she could bake a large batch of bread before he could build a road to the top of Bennachie, 'or she would become his own'. When the stranger, who was in fact the devil, finished the road before the bannocks were done, she fled, turning to stone as he caught her.