

## The Pictish people

Roman invaders were the first to call the people in the far north of Britain 'Picts', meaning 'the painted people'. This raises the interesting idea that some Picts may have painted or tattooed their bodies. If this was the first use of symbols that later appeared on stones, it has left no evidence.

The Romans portrayed the Picts as naked barbarians. This was an exaggeration even then. Certainly, by the 9th century AD, the Picts' own engraved stones show a very different picture. Some stones, probably later than those at Inveravon, show scenes from the life of the ruling classes of the time. The men often had neatly trimmed beards and styled hair. They wore fine tunics and adorned themselves with massive jewellery, rode horses to the hunt and enjoyed a drink.

However, most people were farmers, who no doubt wanted only to be left in peace. This wish was rarely granted. 'Nobles' fought among themselves for leadership. Pictish lands were threatened by the Northumbrians to the south and the Scots to the west. When a new enemy, the Vikings, attacked in the 9th century AD it marked the last crumbling of power in the hands of the true Pict. Control then passed to the Scots.



## Pictish symbol stones

Nearly 200 symbol stones and cross slabs have been found in Scotland north of the Forth. Almost half of these are in the north-east. They are generally found on good agricultural land and are often near earlier ritual monuments.

## A lost code

Almost 1500 years ago a Pictish craftsman took a large slab of Moray slate. He marked out a pattern with a line of small dots. Then, following this guide, he engraved the likeness of an eagle into the rock, along with three other symbols. Perhaps this was to be a memorial to an important person, describing his lineage and rank.

Many similar carvings are found throughout Scotland. The same symbols occur over a wide area, sometimes on jewellery as well as stones. Evidently, they had an important meaning for the people of the time.

Symbol stones may have accompanied a burial. They were often placed near much older sacred sites. Sometimes they, in their turn, were later incorporated into Christian places. The 'eagle' stone at Inveravon was built into the old St Peter's church. When this was demolished the stone was placed on the south wall of the new church and three other stones were put with it.



## Reaching the site

Take a small turning to the W (right) off the A95, about 7 miles SW of Aberlour. Signposted "Church of Inveravon". There is a parking place on the right just before the church (NGR NJ 183 376).



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# The Inveravon Stones

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

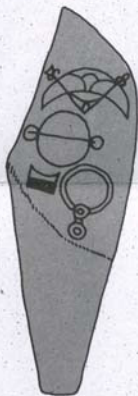


## ST PETER'S CHURCH, INVERAVON

The church was built in 1808, using parts of an earlier church. It is not normally open to view. There is a fine gothic mausoleum in the graveyard. It was built in 1829 by William Robertson of Elgin, for the MacPherson-Grants. The four symbol stones are fixed to the south wall of the church.

### THE SYMBOL STONES

Symbols usually occur in pairs on complete stones. Some symbols are easily recognised, but others are more enigmatic. In either case, the deeper meaning to the Pictish people may never be fully understood. A mirror and comb are sometimes added to the pair of symbols.



#### First stone from left

This stone stood in the middle of the churchyard in 1903 and was later moved to the wall.

- 1 Crescent and V rod. This could be interpreted as a broken arrow and a shield.
- 2 Triple disc and cross bar. This is thought to represent a cauldron viewed from above. The two small circles are lugs and the bar supports it over the fire.
- 3 Comb and mirror. This sort of mirror was made of bronze and was first used in the late Iron Age/Roman period, about 2000 years ago.



#### Second stone

This stone was described for the first time in 1903. It was found in the east wall of the churchyard. It had been shaped into a block, destroying some of the carving, but its beauty is still evident.

- 4 The snout of a 'Pictish beast'. These are sometimes thought to resemble elephants, as drawn by someone who had never seen one. However, the long curving 'beak' could also suggest a dolphin.



#### Third stone

This stone was the first to be described at the church, in 1856.

- 5 Disc with 'handle'.
- 6 An eagle.
- 7 Mirror and comb. This type of double-sided comb was already an ancient design in the Pictish era, and is still used today.



#### Fourth stone

This stone seems to have been the last to be added to the collection, probably some time in the 20th century.

- 8 Crescent and V rod, worn.
- 9 Pictish beast, very worn.

#### Further Reading

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A Small (ed), *The Picts: a new look at old problems*, Dundee (1987).