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State and Society

*The Emergence and Development of
Social Hierarchy and Political Centralization*

Edited by
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13 *Power and authority in Early Historic Scotland: Pictish symbol stones and other documents*

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During the early Middle Ages the north British people known as the Picts erected hundreds of carved stone monuments mostly in what is now eastern and northern Scotland. These sculpted stones are the most complex surviving expressions of a people who, although possessing only a rudimentary literacy, were nonetheless developing the social and political institutions of a medieval state. In this chapter I will offer an interpretation of these monuments, which links them with this developing social complexity and exposes aspects of this historical process which may not be discovered in the surviving documentary record. In so doing I hope to suggest some of the potential that these artefacts offer for the writing of history.

Historical synopsis

The documented history of the native peoples of northern Britain begins with the Roman military campaigns of Agricola, but it is not until half a millennium later that texts from native hands survive. The Agricolan campaigns of the late 1st century AD were intended to expand the Roman province of Britannia northwards and, like later efforts, they were a failure in that no civil administration was ever established among the Iron Age peoples of northern Britain. The only direct contacts between the northern barbarians and the Empire were the short episodes of surveillance when the linear frontiers of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall were occupied, which were separated by occasional punitive expeditions (cf. Breeze & Dobson 1978, Hanson & Maxwell 1983). These ancestors of the Picts, who in the account of the Agricolan campaigns are styled 'the most northern dwellers upon earth, the last of the free' (Tacitus 1970, p. 30), remained always beyond the Imperial boundaries.

Living on the periphery of a great empire, there was of course some commercial contact, which is represented by the small quantities of Roman goods which are found on native sites (Robertson 1970). The nature of this contact is

unclear, but to judge from the quantities of goods it was far less intensive than the contemporary relations across the German frontier (Hedeger 1979, Pearson 1984, pp. 81–6). As a result the most significant legacies of the Roman world were not visible, material changes, but the more elusive ideological changes associated with the practice of Christianity. Clearly the Picts were not converted by the Roman army, but just how and when Christianity was adopted by the Picts are difficult questions, answers to which are hinted at in the symbol stones, as we will see.

Beginning with the classical geographers and continuing with the early medieval writers, we may distinguish the presence of at least four different cultural groups who by AD 600 coexisted within the boundaries of modern Scotland. The *Gwŷr y Gogledd*, men of the north, who occupied most of southern Scotland up to the Forth–Clyde isthmus, were linguistically and socially related to the southern British Celts who eventually came to be known as Welsh. During the 6th century control of some of the British territory on the east coast was lost to Anglian immigrants from the continent. North of the derelict Antonine Wall were found the Picts and Scots. The Scots of Dal Riada claimed an Irish ancestry and maintained strong linguistic, political, and dynastic links with their cousins in north-east Ireland. The Picts seem to have occupied all of the region north of the Forth with the exception of the Scottic portion of the western highlands and islands (see Fig. 13.1). Despite various attempts at conquest, these peoples all maintained separate political identities until the mid-9th century. At that point it was possible to distinguish an Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria extending virtually from the Humber to the Forth; a British kingdom of Strathclyde centred at Dumbarton, near modern Glasgow; the Scottic kingdom of Dal Riada occupying the Inner Hebrides and adjacent coastal areas; and Pictland whose political geography is more obscure. Containing as it does vast tracts of mountainous country and remote islands, it is inconceivable that Pictland formed a single political or even cultural unit. Minimally we must accept Bede's division into northern and southern provinces (*HE* 1968, III, 4), but this is probably an oversimplification. Since some areas were too remote for any central government to control until the 18th century we should imagine a number of independent petty kingdoms in the highlands which on occasion fell under the dominion of the more powerful kingdoms of the fertile coastal regions. Traditionally the origins of the medieval kingdom of Scotland has been identified with the conquest of the southern Pictish kingdom by the Scottish king Cinaed Mac Ailpín (Kenneth Mac Alpín) and the subsequent union of the two realms in the mid 9th century. But regardless of how politically astute we imagine Kenneth to have been, he cannot be credited with the entire creative act of making a kingdom. Indeed the sudden appearance of a kingdom possessing the apparatus of a state, albeit in rudimentary form, poses something of a problem for the medieval historian. A. M. M. Duncan, an authority on Scottish history, has summarized the historians' view of the problem as follows (1975, p. 110):

The kings of Scotia and of Scotland stamped unity upon the four or five

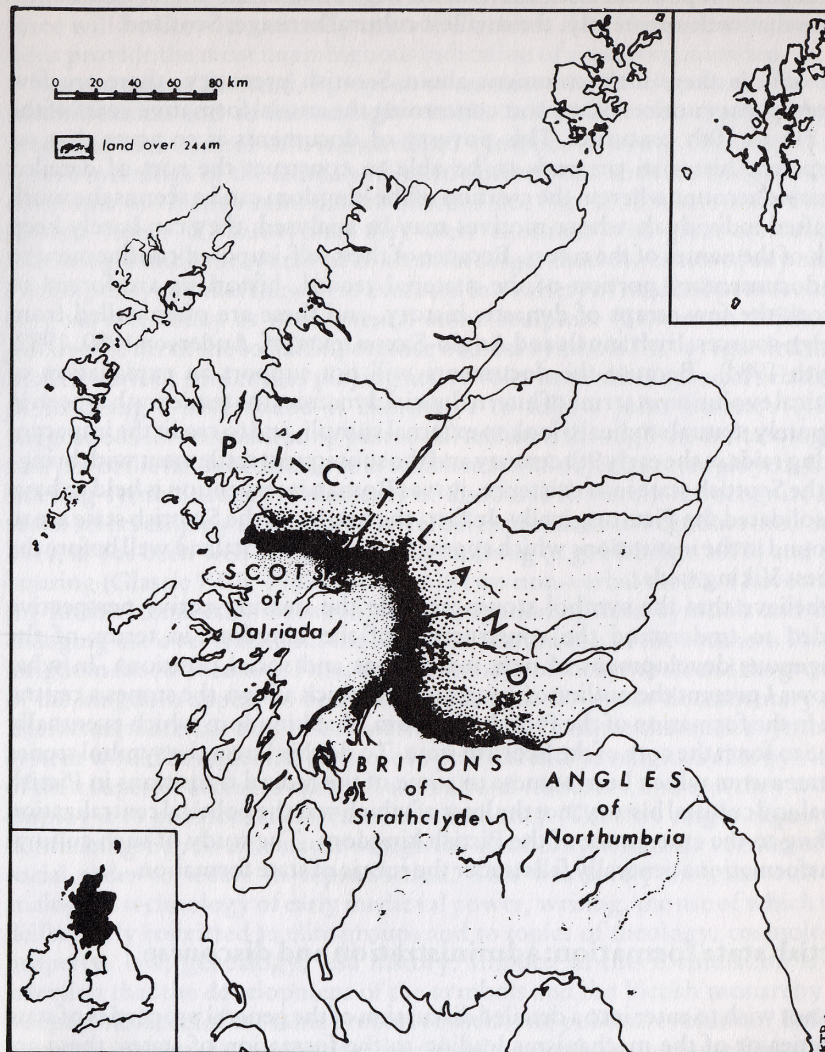


Figure 13.1 Political map of north Britain c. AD 600.

disparate peoples north of the Tweed and Solway; yet the precocity of a single kingdom of Scotia or Alba in the mid-ninth century . . . seems to excite little comment. . . . The only Celtic realm with well formed and independent political institutions at the beginning of the 'high middle ages' was that with apparently, the smallest cultural heritage, Scotland.

Not only is there little comment about Scottish precocity, there are few contemporary notices of any sort concerning the crucial formative years of the late 8th to 10th centuries. This poverty of documents is so acute that no competent historian pretends to be able to construct the sort of detailed narrative account wherein the creation of the kingdom can be seen as the work of gifted individuals whose motives may be analysed: they can barely keep track of the names of the rulers. Because of their self-imposed confinement to the documentary portion of the material record, historians are forced to rework the few scraps of dynastic history, and these are often culled from foreign sources: Irish annals and Anglo-Saxon texts (cf. Anderson 1980, 1982, Smyth 1984). Because the documents will not support an explanation of political evolution in terms of internal social dynamics the tendency has been in the purely textual studies to look to external stimuli, and to credit the impact of Viking raids in the early 9th century and the subsequent settlement with bringing the Scottish state into existence, just as Roman intervention is held to have consolidated the Picts originally. In fact, the origins of the Scottish state are to be found in the institutions which appear to develop in Pictland well before the earliest Viking raids.

I believe that the symbol stones provide the missing native perspective needed to understand the construction of the kingdom in terms of the indigenous development of new institutions and social positions. In what follows I present the outline of an argument which allows the stones a central rôle in the formation of the Pictish kingdom, that kingdom which eventually came to form the core of the Scottish state. To do this I treat the symbol stones as statements which bear witness to some of the radical transitions in Pictish social and cultural history; not the least of which was the political centralization leading to the emergence of the Pictish kingdom. The study of such cultural transformations generally falls under the rubric of state formation.

Pictish state formation: administration and discourse

I do not wish to enter into a detailed discussion of the general properties of state societies or of the mechanisms leading to the formation of states: these are issues too involved to grapple with here. Recent discussions of these matters (e.g. Cohen & Service 1978, Jones & Kautz 1981) illustrate both the range of scholarly opinion on the topic – from environmental determinism through various manifestations of systems theory to purely ideological explanations – while at the same time making the particular point that each society has a unique historic trajectory, a trajectory which is likely to deviate from all

generalized models of state formation. Nonetheless, Runciman identified a few very general features that are characteristic of state societies (1982) and which are of some use: first, that control of economic resources will be centralized in the hands of an élite minority; second, that military or coercive force will be likewise centrally controlled; third, that administrative institutions provide the most unambiguous indication of a state organization.

For the case of Pictland, I propose to associate the development of a royal administration and an increasingly visible, self-aware aristocracy with the invention and control of a standardized symbolic system. The origins and arcane meanings of the animals, fantastic beasts, and abstract designs which constitute the Pictish symbols are obscure (see Fig. 13.2): there is no Pictish Rosetta stone. We know that they were executed with great consistency following a uniform syntax over areas far larger than the limits of any single Pictish polity and that they were executed in a variety of media, but most often they survive today as monumental stone sculpture (Stevenson 1955). To discover some of the social importance of these symbols I have regarded them in their various contexts as playing active rôles in mediating social relations. In so doing I have found it instructive to follow John Barrett's (1988) suggestions for reconstituting past social relations through the archaeological analysis of the fields of discourse in which material objects are employed. Considering symbol stones as elements of discourse is merely to recognize that social actors employ a range of non-verbal expressions to negotiate their daily lives, as has been well documented for clothing (e.g. Hebdige 1979) and folk housing (Glassie 1975, 1982) to cite only two non-verbal media. I have made the further connection between the propagation of these symbols and their changing use over time with the birth and maturation of the southern Pictish kingdom for two reasons. First, the phenomena of the symbols and the growth of the kingdom appear to be synchronous in so far as our documentary and artefactual materials may be compared. Second, I assume that such a symbolic system would be under the control of a political and/or religious élite by virtue of their superior access to material and cultural resources, and that they would employ it to promote and secure their authority. Thus we might expect the dominant group to articulate through the symbol system their version of the social order to secure its reproduction. This was surely the case with the analogous technology of early medieval power, writing, the use of which was deliberately restricted to élite groups and to topics of theology, cosmology, property, law, genealogy, and history. Implicit in this formulation is the assertion that the development of the symbols and the Pictish monarchy are inseparable facets of the same process of social and political evolution. Before, however, we can turn to consider the rôle of the symbols, we must first review the documentary evidence for the development of Pictish royal institutions and their implications in terms of state formation.

It is possible to identify some of the structural characteristics of states in the contemporary documentary evidence concerning the southern Pictish kingdom, but for the most part such references are too brief and too infrequent to be analysed in depth. For instance, in the annals there are numerous references to

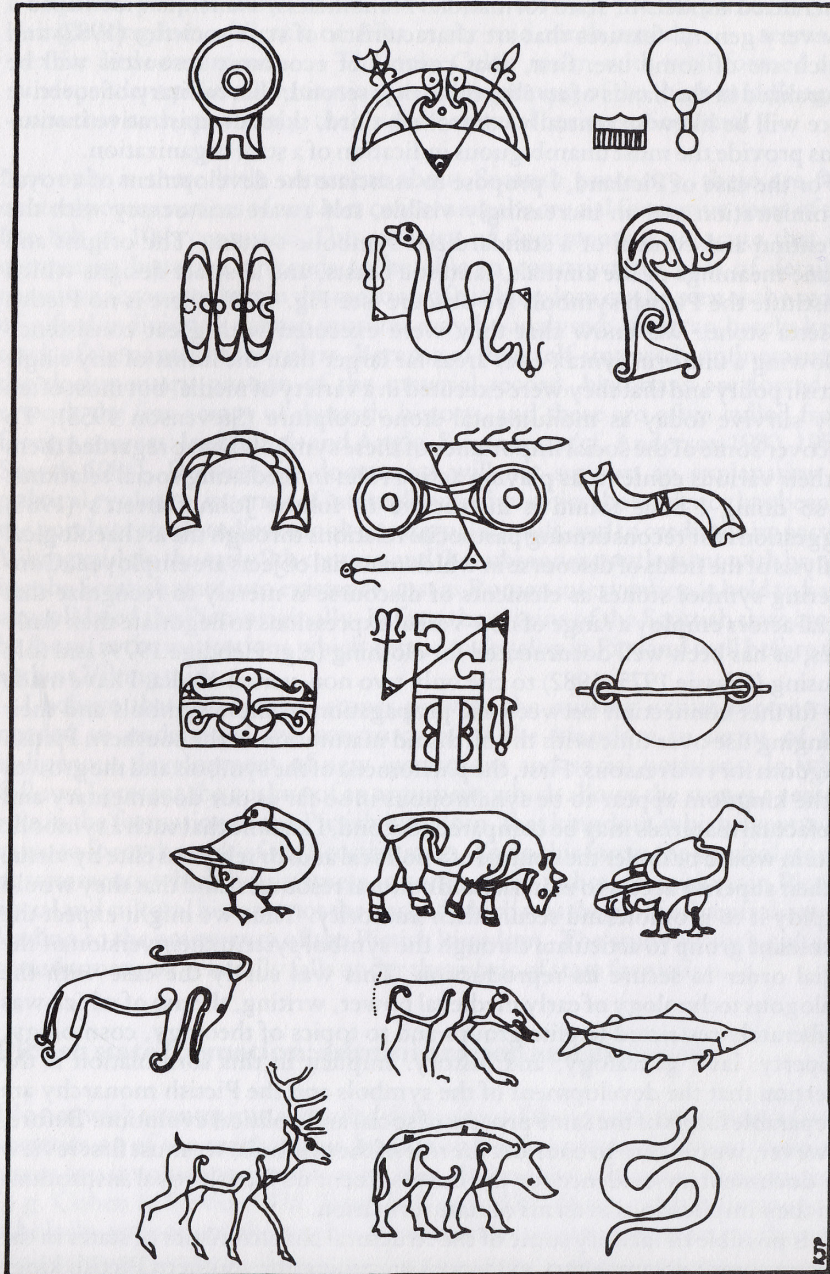


Figure 13.2 Some of the more common Pictish symbols as found on the class I stones.

military campaigns and there can be little doubt that the Picts did field formidable armies (cf. Anderson 1922, Anderson 1980), but the organization and composition of such groups are not revealed in the annals. We may infer that, like their neighbouring Celts, the Irish and British, whose heroic literature has survived, Pictish armies were composed of aristocratic warriors in the retinue of their lord. Our knowledge of economic and administrative affairs is likewise restricted to what may be gleaned from words or phrases. The most interesting annalistic note referring to an administrative office occurs in 729 when some of King Nechtan's men are described as *exactatores*, a term which strongly suggests some tax-collecting capacity, and in the words of Wendy Davies that the 'Pictish kings were developing some real machinery of government' (1984, p. 70). Further evidence of economic and administrative organization must be inferred from documents which post-date the Pictish period by some centuries. Barrow has noticed in the early Scottish charters of the 11th and 12th centuries, traditional forms of tenurial obligations which he interprets as evidence of well established estates going back into the Pictish period (1973, pp. 7–68). He has further suggested that the well known pit- place-names (from *pett* meaning portion or share) refer to portions of these estates. Even more interesting, however, is the suggestion that these estates were organized into a system of pre-feudal shires administered by thanes. That is to say that by the mid-9th century, and possibly as early as the 7th, there existed royal officials (thanes) to oversee the most valuable economic resource, agriculturally productive land. It seems to be possible to distinguish two levels of royal administration: thanes or *moirs* who were directly concerned with control of agricultural production on royal estates and regional governors, represented by the *mormaer*, 'great steward'. By the 10th century annalistic sources give us evidence of the existence of this higher stratum of royal officials, mormaers or great stewards, but to judge from the available references to their actions in annalistic sources these great stewards may be regarded as a Pictish innovation of some antiquity (Jackson 1972, pp. 102–10, Duncan, p. 110). *Mormaers* apparently governed quite large regions, not just estates but whole straths. They seem to have exercised military duties as well as looking after the king's fiscal interests. Thus is our evidence that economic and military resources were being administered by office holders who were responsible to the crown.

There are parallel developments in Scottish ecclesiastical organization, which again point to Pictish structures pre-dating the 9th century *adventus Scottorum* (see Anderson 1982). Donaldson's examination of the documentary evidence for bishops before the reign of David I (1124–53) revealed the existence of a diocesan church organization with sees at St Andrews, Dunblane, Dunkeld, and Brechin, all of which are in southern Pictland (1953). He concluded that this form of hierarchical church organization owed little to Irish or Columban monasticism and had developed from an earlier British Church. This is after all what Bede tells us (*HE* 1968, III, 4) and is what late medieval hagiographic traditions of east and central Scotland would lead us to believe (MacQueen 1981). This is not the place to explore the origins of the Pictish church, but it seems to have grown out of a seed planted by

Romano-British Christianity (cf. Thomas 1971, 1981), albeit one which took some centuries to mature. Thus we should imagine that the conversion of the Picts was part of a more general north British pattern of culture change, which saw the eclectic adoption of certain (perhaps imperfectly understood) aspects of 'Roman' culture. The conversion process, when better understood, may come to be seen as typical of the cultural transformations brought about by contact between imperial or commercial empires and peripheral peoples. Such changes often include the creation of new religions shaped from a blend of traditional beliefs with indigenous interpretations of foreign beliefs. In cases where the new religion assumes a messianic character and becomes politically potent, the phenomenon has been termed a *revitalization movement* (Wallace 1966). We have no way of knowing if messianic qualities were prominent in the Pictish formulation of Christianity, but such a religious response would not be out of character amongst people aware of the material splendour of the Roman Empire, but living at the limits of its direct cultural impact. Of course, elsewhere in Celtic Britain the evidence for this acculturation extends beyond religion and includes the adoption of elements of Roman material culture (Alcock 1971) and the practice of using imperial terminology to glorify titles, place-names and personal names (cf. Campbell 1979). Pictish acquaintance with literacy must date to this conversion, but we are not in the position to study these cultural transformations from texts any more than we are able to understand their changing attitude to the Church other than through the medium of the symbol stones.

In these isolated particles of information we may discern the distinguishing characteristics, which Runciman has described as the necessary preconditions for statehood; these are the hallmarks of a rudimentary state or, as the political anthropologists would have it, a proto-state. Thus we observe in the invention of the specialized governing positions of *mormaer*, thane, and *exactatores* the crucial development stage, the 'emancipation from real or fictive kinship as the basis of relations between the occupants of governmental roles and those who they govern' (Runciman 1982, p. 351). None of the documentary sources can, however, inform us of the means by which these social institutions were installed or how they developed. This to a large measure is because the Picts did not appreciate writing as an important expressive medium; another more potent symbolic system was used for authoritative statements.

Pictish symbol stones and symbolic discourse

Writing and Christianity are inseparably linked in the barbarian west including the Celtic west. It is therefore surprising that so little evidence of Pictish writing exists, despite the probable 7th century origins of the conversion. Kathleen Hughes in an essay entitled 'Where are the writings of early Scotland?' was 'driven to conclude that there had been little written history and written literature in early Scotland and that history was mainly oral' (1980, p. 17); *a fortiori* for Pictland. There exists only one manuscript which *may* be

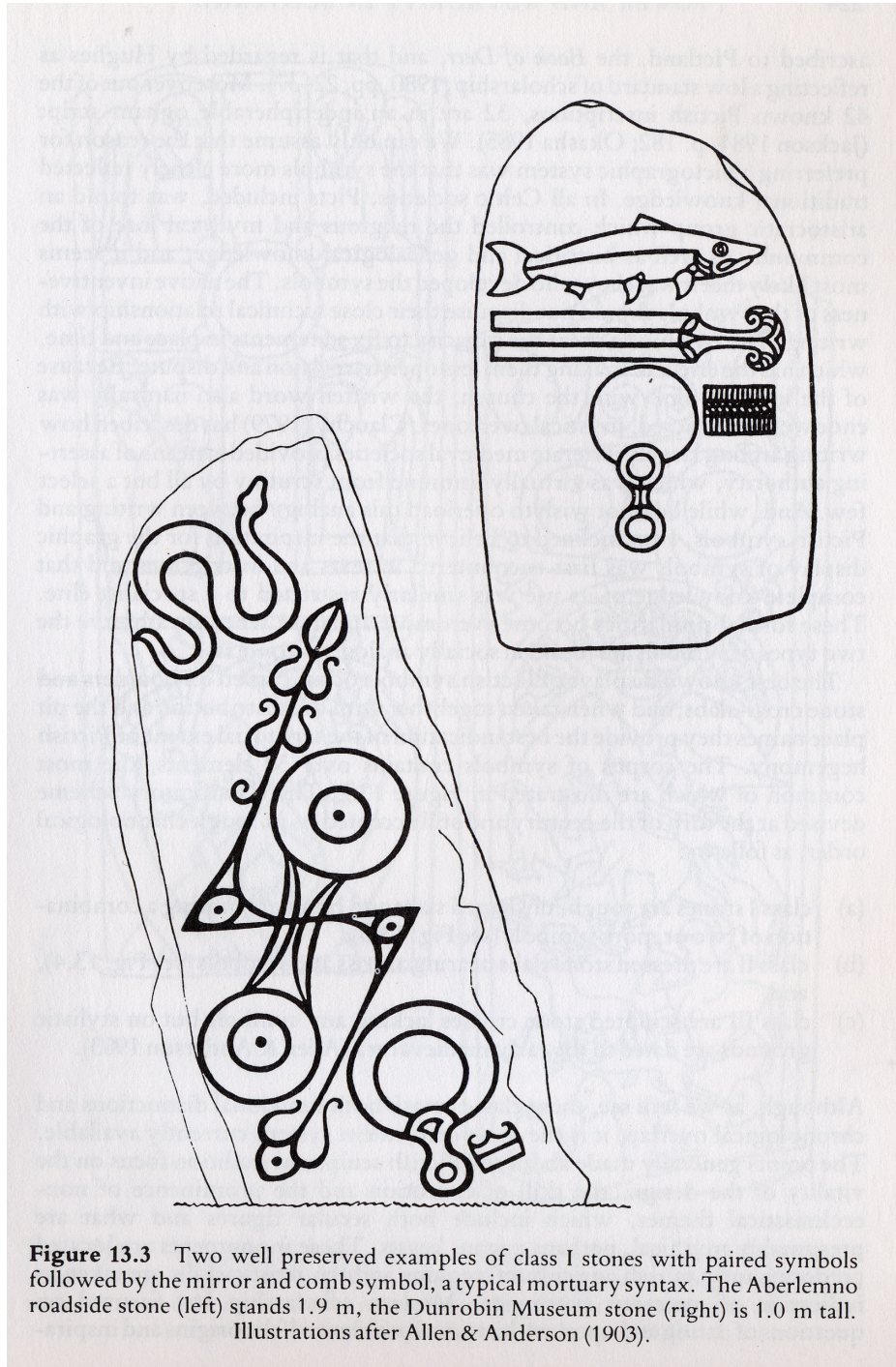


Figure 13.3 Two well preserved examples of class I stones with paired symbols followed by the mirror and comb symbol, a typical mortuary syntax. The Aberlemno roadside stone (left) stands 1.9 m, the Dunrobin Museum stone (right) is 1.0 m tall. Illustrations after Allen & Anderson (1903).

ascribed to Pictland, the *Book of Deer*, and that is regarded by Hughes as reflecting a low standard of scholarship (1980, pp. 22–37). Moreover out of the 42 known Pictish inscriptions, 32 are in an indecipherable ogham script (Jackson 1984, p. 182; Okasha 1985). We can only assume that the reason for preferring a pictographic system was that the symbols more closely reflected traditional knowledge. In all Celtic societies, Picts included, was found an aristocratic group which controlled the religious and mythical lore of the community as well as historical and genealogical knowledge, and it seems most likely that it was they who developed the symbols. The native inventiveness of the symbols should not disguise their close technical relationship with writing. The two media share the capacity to fix statements in place and time, which has the effect of making them less open to revision and dispute. Because of the intimate link with the church, the written word also naturally was endowed with sacred, mystical overtones. Clanchy (1979) has described how writing among largely illiterate medieval societies provided a means of asserting authority, which was virtually immune from scrutiny by all but a select few. And, while I do not wish to overload this analogy between writing and Pictish symbols, I am inclined to believe that the inspiration for the graphic display of symbols was first encountered in texts and inscriptions and that complete knowledge of its use was similarly restricted to a specialist élite. These formal similarities become even more apparent when we observe the two types of symbols are found in socially analogous contexts.

The best known displays of Pictish symbols occur carved on boulders and stone cross-slabs; and when taken together with the distribution and the place names they provide the best indication of the territorial extent of Pictish hegemony. The corpus of symbols contains over 30 elements, the most common of which are illustrated in Figure 13.2. The classificatory scheme devised at the turn of the century and still accepted is, in rough chronological order, as follows:

- (a) class I stones are rough, unshaped slabs and boulders bearing a combination of two or more symbols (see Fig. 13.3),
- (b) class II are dressed stone slabs bearing a cross and symbols (see Fig. 13.4), and
- (c) class III are sculpted stone crosses lacking any symbols but on stylistic grounds are dated to the early medieval era (Allen & Anderson 1903).

Although, as we will see, these classes mask both functional distinctions and chronological overlap, it is the most convenient system currently available. The points generally made about the Pictish sculptural tradition focus on the vitality of the design, the skill of execution and the prominence of non-ecclesiastical themes, which include both secular figures and what are presumably mythical, perhaps pagan, beasts. These monuments are located predominantly in rich agricultural regions and the artistic skills are taken as indicative of generous patronage. Modern scholarship has focused on questions of dating and upon art-historical problems of the origins and inspira-

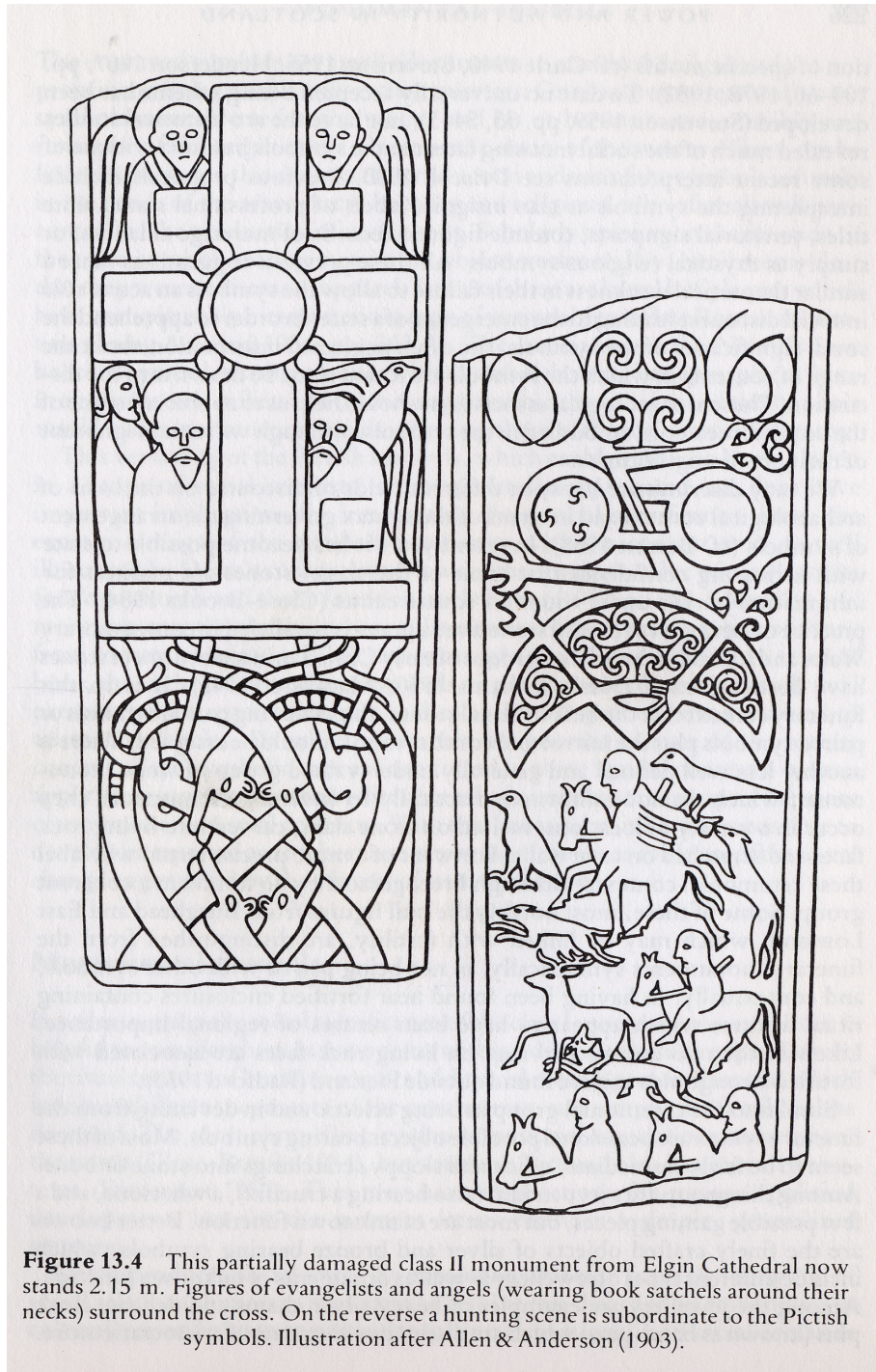


Figure 13.4 This partially damaged class II monument from Elgin Cathedral now stands 2.15 m. Figures of evangelists and angels (wearing book satchels around their necks) surround the cross. On the reverse a hunting scene is subordinate to the Pictish symbols. Illustration after Allen & Anderson (1903).

tion of specific motifs (cf. Curle 1940, Stevenson 1955, Henderson 1967, pp. 104–60, 1978, 1982). To date no universally accepted dating scheme has been developed (Stevenson 1959, pp. 33, 54–5), nor have the art-historical studies revealed much of the social meaning latent in the symbols but for a critique of some recent interpretations see Driscoll 1985. Previous proposals include interpreting the symbols as clan insignia, labels of professional status, élite titles, territorial signposts, totemic figures, records of marriage alliances, or simply as mystical religious symbols. All these previous suggestions share a similar theoretical weakness in their failure to allow the symbols an active rôle in social discourse leading to the emergence of a state. In order to apprehend the social significance of the symbols, the often neglected information about the range of contexts in which the symbols are found must be drawn into the discussion. These archaeological associations should help us to appreciate some of the implicit meanings embodied in the symbols, although we remain ignorant of their precise significance.

We may discriminate between different fields of discourse on the basis of archaeological context and in terms of the syntax governing the arrangement of symbols (cf. Barrett 1988). In recent years it has become possible to state with increasing confidence that some of the class I stones are markers for inhumation burials under round or square cairns (Close-Brooks 1984). The practice of raising a memorial stone over a grave is paralleled in contemporary Wales and Ireland, where large groups of early Christian inscribed grave stones have been recorded (Nash-Williams 1950, Macalister 1945). It is to this funerary context that the bulk of class I stones, those bearing paired symbols or paired symbols plus the mirror and comb symbol, should be assigned. There is another less well defined and generally under-valued group of stone monuments, which do not conform syntactically to funerary monuments; they occur in a variety of locations: incised on stone slabs, carved into living rock faces and scratched on cave walls. For want of a more precise term I will label these ceremonial contexts, although I recognize they do not form a coherent group. Some of these, most notably the bull figures from Burghead and East Lomond, which may be linked with fertility, are distinguished from the funerary monuments syntactically, in not being paired with other symbols, and contextually, in having been found near fortified enclosures containing ritual features which appear to have been centres of regional importance. Likewise the two known carvings on living rock-faces are associated with fortified strongholds and are found outside Pictland (Radford 1953).

Similar to the ceremonial group in being eclectic and in deviating from the funerary syntax are occasional portable objects bearing symbols. Most of these seem to be fairly immediate, quick and sloppy scratchings into stone or bone. Among this group are a jet pendant (also bearing a crucifix), a whetsone, and a few possible gaming pieces, but most are of unknown function. Better known are the finely crafted objects of silver and bronze bearing symbols, which include different types of jewellery as well as ornaments of unknown function. Among the jewellery are examples of heavy silver chains and delicate cloak pins (known as hand-pins) which are distinctive elements of aristocratic attire.

The engraved symbols are small adornments to standard designs and are not prominent, being visible only at close quarters. One has the impression that the symbols were directed at the wearer and his or her intimates, possibly as a reminder of the origin of the object or the status of the wearer. There can be little doubt that in this context the production and use of the symbols is firmly in the hands of the aristocracy, both lay and religious, who after all will have controlled the production of such goods. Scholarly opinion on the function of the other symbol-bearing metalwork objects varies widely, but it seems clear that they were not items of apparel. Some of these are laurel leaf plaques which have been plausibly interpreted as a type of votive object of late Roman inspiration (Laing & Laing 1984, pp. 263–4). The association in the Norrie's Law hoard of symbol-bearing plaques with a symbol-bearing handpin, places them in an aristocratic milieu and further suggests that the ritual use of the symbols was likewise in aristocratic hands including those of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

This versatility of the Pictish symbols, which enabled them to be employed in a range of social contexts, is not generally appreciated but does have important implications for interpreting their social significance. First, the exact meanings of the symbols must vary with the context as is so well illustrated by Deetz's comparison between the semantic value of candle sticks found in church and those found in one's home (1977, p. 51). Secondly, and more importantly, the ability to regulate the use of the symbols appears to vary from context to context. While anyone might scratch a symbol into a scrap of bone, the exclusive presence of symbols on precious metal jewellery and ritual paraphernalia suggests that public display of the symbols was restricted to aristocratic circles. So while we remain as ignorant as ever of the precise content of the symbolic expressions found in these special contexts, we can apply these suggestions about elite control of symbol use to interpret the more common monumental contexts. With this knowledge it becomes possible to develop interpretations of the mortuary symbol stones as evidence of the social change engendered by the process of state formation.

Monumental symbols

In order to grasp the social significance of the class I mortuary monuments it is helpful to consider them as statements within a discourse which expands from the ritual context of burial to acquire additional meanings over time and which involves different segments of the community, not simply the family of the deceased. The most compelling evidence for burial associations comes from the north (Close-Brooks 1984), but southern Pictland also has funerary contexts (Stevenson 1959). This may have implications for regional political development, but for the moment let us consider a simple, generalized situation.

Death produces social chaos by removing an actor from the network of social relations. Funerary rites exist to resolve this disorder by responding in culturally specific ways to particular spiritual, emotional, and social demands

(Huntingdon & Metcalf 1979). While not wishing to suggest that spiritual and emotional needs are insignificant, here we are concerned primarily with the question of social reproduction. Remembering that the dead do not bury themselves, monuments erected in memorial to the dead say as much about the aspirations and intentions of the living as the status of the dead. We may also note that an elaborate burial monument suggests that the person or persons responsible for its construction are concerned to display not only their relationship to the deceased but also their control of material and cultural resources. In the cases of the new social institutions introduced by the Pictish state, such a display might be expected by an heir whose position was not firmly established or was radically new and in need of some ideological reinforcement.

Initially the symbol stone operates in a field of discourse composed of the heirs, more distant kin including possible contenders and other interested members of the community. The statement is simple: by honouring the dead and by extension the deceased's social position the successor to the deceased and the heirs' supporters demonstrate both their sincerity and legitimacy. The monument establishes a permanent personal link between the heirs and the new ancestor, which is further strengthened by the deployment of symbols appropriate for the adornment of aristocrats and conduct of rituals. Incidentally, such a connection may support the frequently aired suggestion that some of the symbols carry genealogical meanings. Thus the heirs combine four different sources of legitimacy in a single act of raising a monument:

- (a) the supernatural, through the dead and the ancestors;
- (b) propriety of rank claimed through descent;
- (c) ideological sanction represented by the control of arcane signs; and
- (d) *de facto* right represented by the control of material resources and skilled labour needed to erect the monument.

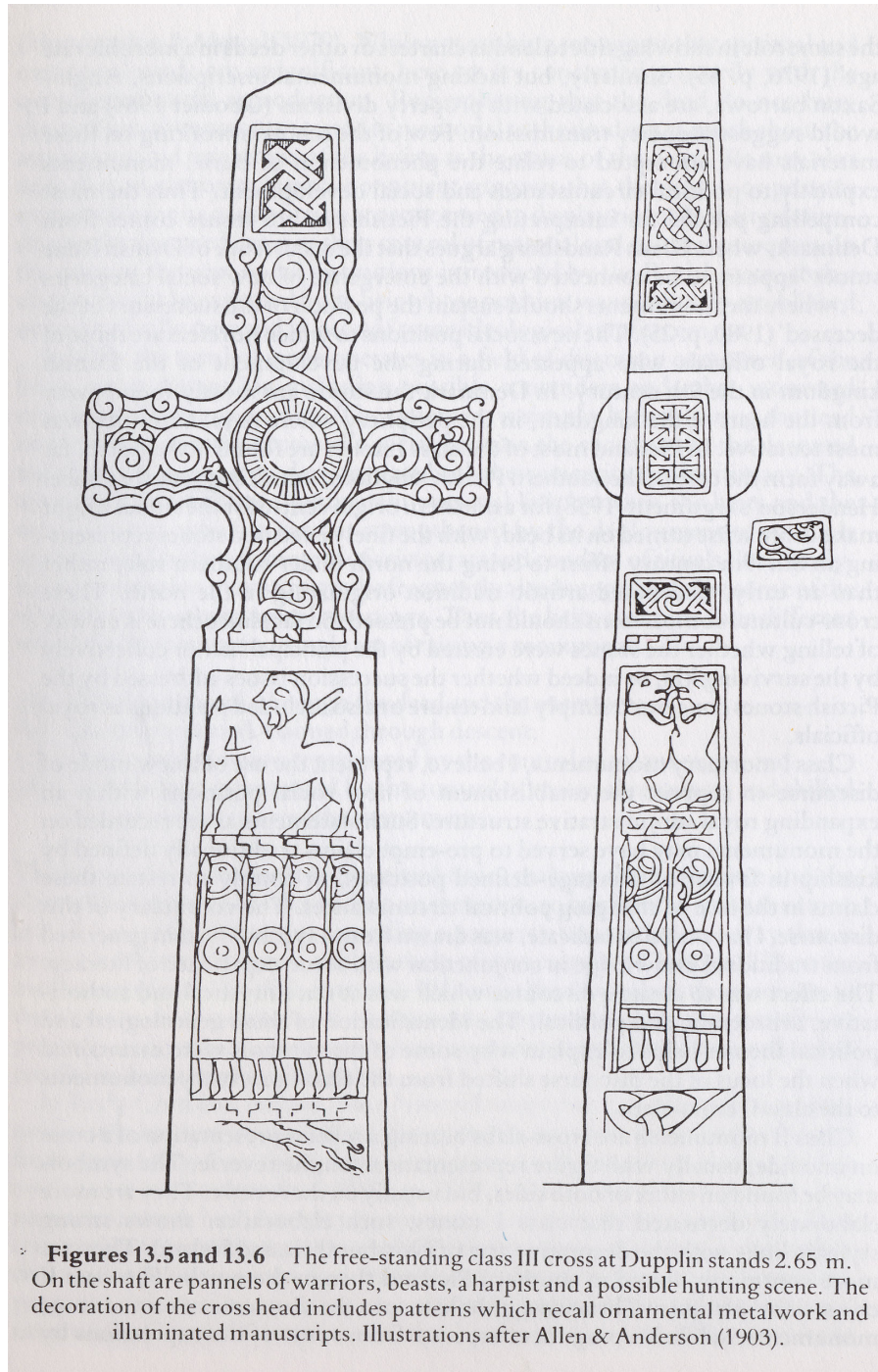
The stones fix individuals in place and time, making their existence and the claim of inheritance less dependent on memory, so in a limited sense the stone acts like an early charter by recording a property transaction in a way that is available for later reference, with the help of witnesses (see Clanchy 1979 on the mechanics of early English charters). Of course the stones lack the precision of documents, but instances of monuments concerned with the transfer of property and position, sometimes bearing arcane symbolism, are not hard to parallel in Early Medieval Europe.

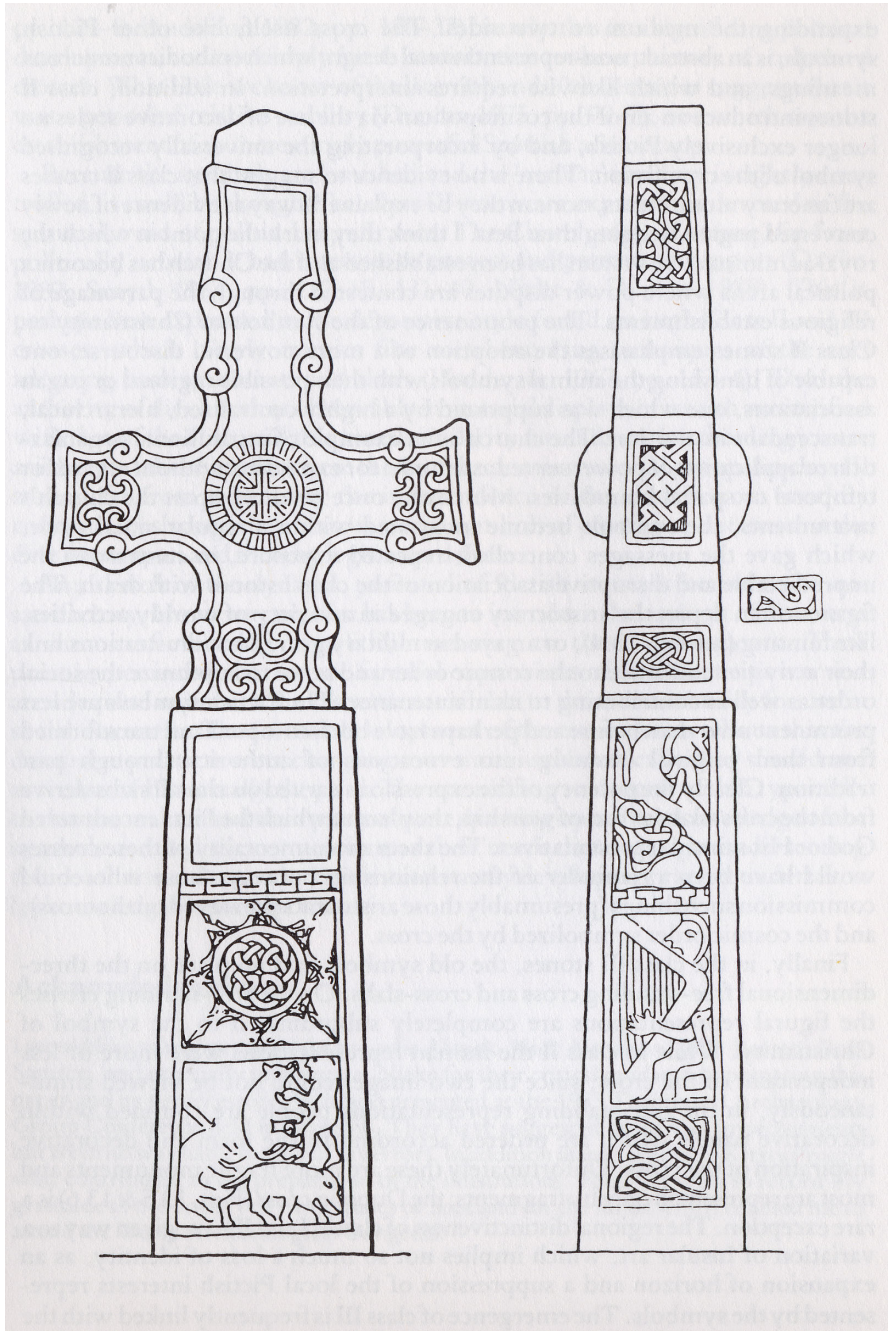
In Early Christian Ireland, Mac Niocaill notes that '... the use of written evidence in matters of title to land, for example, stands in direct line of descent from *ogam isin gallan*, the ogham inscription on the standing stone, used as evidence of a boundary line' (1984, p. 153) and thus postulates a precise connection between Irish funerary monuments and property transmission. This connection apparently stems from the legal importance of the burial mounds in the marking of property boundaries and the maintenance of hereditary property claims. Commenting on early Irish property law and the inscribed memorials, Charles-Edwards states that 'the inscriptions over the graves have

the same role in showing title to land as charters or other deeds in a more literate age' (1976, p. 85). Similarly, but lacking monumental inscriptions, Anglo-Saxon barrows, are associated with property divisions (Goodier 1984) and I would suggest property transmission. Few of the scholars working on these materials have attempted to relate the phenomenon of burial monuments explicitly to political circumstances and social development. Thus the most compelling parallel for interpreting the Pictish symbol stones comes from Denmark, where Klaus Randsborg argues that the occurrence of Danish Rune stones 'appears to be connected with the emergence of new social categories . . . where the monuments should sustain the position of the successors of the deceased' (1980, p. 25). The new social positions to which he refers are those of the royal officials who appeared during the development of the Danish kingdom in the 9th century. In Denmark the stones are mostly found away from the heart of the kingdom, in the periphery where royal authority was most tentative. In Pictland most of the class I stones are found in the north, far away from the core of the southern Pictish kingdom, which suggests that Isabel Henderson's argument (1958) for a northern origin centre for the stones might make more sense turned on its head, with the finely executed stones representing an 8th–9th century effort to bring the north under southern rule, rather than an early, undebased artistic tradition originating in the north. These cross-cultural comparisons should not be pressed too far, since there is no way of telling whether the stones were erected by the principal heir or collectively by the surviving kin, or indeed whether the succession issues addressed by the Pictish stones concerned simply land tenure or also included positions as royal officials.

Class I mortuary monuments, I believe, represent the use of a new mode of discourse to support the establishment of new social positions within an expanding royal administrative structure. Such statements as are recorded on the monuments may have served to pre-empt claims traditionally defined by kinship in favour of clientage-defined positions, or simply to restate these claims in the face of changing political circumstances. The vocabulary of this discourse, I have tried to indicate, was drawn from a symbol system generated from traditional knowledge in conjunction with some experience of literacy. The effect was to create a discourse which was at once mystical and authoritative, aristocratic and political. The identification of these genealogical and political themes helps to explain why some of the symbols were maintained when the locus of the discourse shifted from the class I mortuary monuments to the class II cross-slabs.

Class II monuments are cross-slabs bearing a relief representation of a cross on one side, usually with figure representations on the reverse. The symbols may be found on either or both sides, but usually on the reverse. They are more elaborately decorated than class I stones; such elaboration shows strong stylistic links with the decorative arts of Northumbria and Ireland. They are more commonly found in southern Pictland than in the north. The class II cross-slabs introduce Christian symbolism into the discourse of carved stone monuments, while keeping them separate from some of the expressions by





expanding the medium to two sides. The cross itself, like other Pictish symbols, is an abstract, non-representational design, which embodies numerous meanings, and which likewise requires interpretation. In addition, class II stones introduce an air of the cosmopolitan via the use of decorative styles no longer exclusively Pictish, and by incorporating the universally recognised symbol of the crucifixion. There is no evidence to suggest that class II crosses are funerary monuments, nor can they be explained away as evidence of newly converted pagans hedging their bets. I think they mark the point at which the royal administrative system has been established and the Church has become a political arena where power disputes are contested through the patronage of religious establishments. The prominence of the symbols of Christianity on Class II stones emphasises the adoption of a more powerful discourse, one capable of banishing the animal symbols with their possible regional or pagan associations, one which was supported by a highly centralized, hierarchical, transcendent institution. The church as an example of institutional organization or application of power served as a model for expansion without regard for temporal or spatial boundaries. Moreover, once installed upon the church's monuments, the symbols became integrated within a regular ritual cycle, which gave the messages controlled, repeated exposure, in contrast to the unpredictable and disruptive association of the class I stones with death. The figures often depict the aristocracy engaged in a variety of worldly activities, like hunting (see Fig. 13.4), or arrayed in military gear. Such illustrations link their activities and attire to the cosmic order and serve to legitimize the social order as well as contributing to its maintenance. The Pictish symbols are less prominent now than before and perhaps have been co-opted and transformed from their original meaning into evocations of authority through past tradition. Clearly the potency of the expressions carved on class II slabs derive from the cross-slabs as foci of worship, the place at which the Picts encountered God or His saintly representatives. The sheer monumentality of these crosses would have been a reminder of the relationship between those who could commission such things (presumably those aristocrats portrayed on the cross), and the cosmic order symbolized by the cross.

Finally, in the class III stones, the old symbols find no place on the three-dimensional free-standing cross and cross-slabs. On the free-standing crosses the figural representations are completely subordinated to the symbol of Christianity. While in class II the human representations were more or less independent of the cross, since the two images could not be viewed simultaneously, in the free-standing representations people are confined within decorative panels which are ordered according to the form and decorative inspiration of the cross. Unfortunately these are more fragile monuments and most are represented only by fragments; the Dupplin cross (Figs. 13.5 & 13.6) is a rare exception. The regional distinctiveness of classes I and II have given way to a variation of Insular art, which implies not so much a loss of identity, as an expansion of horizon and a suppression of the local Pictish interests represented by the symbols. The emergence of class III is frequently linked with the accession of the Dalriadic dynasty of Cinaed Mac Ailpín (Stevenson 1955,

pp. 122–8, Anderson 1982, pp. 126–32); surely this is a significant political development, and not simply for its contribution to the art history of sculptured crosses. What little we know of the later 9th and 10th centuries suggests that it was a period of relative stability (Duncan 1975, pp. 90–7), one which saw the establishment of an increasingly powerful Scottish aristocracy.

Because the symbols are banished and the 'secular' imagery is tightly controlled, it could be thought that class III stones are expressions devoted to the spiritual, void of political significance. The Church was, of course, far from politically neutral; it had interests to protect and patrons to support (Davies 1982, Smyth 1984, pp. 112–15, 131–40, Nieke & Duncan 1988). This is perhaps best expressed in the decorative style found on both Class II and III crosses, which clearly mimics fine metal-working techniques of the sort adorning both aristocrats and altars (Henderson 1967, pp. 133–4). Thus the authority of the church as observable in material displays of wealth was unified with that of the élite, and this visual similarity reminds us that the clergy were aristocrats whose interest were those of the dominant social group. So class III stones, far from expressing the independence of the church from worldly concerns, enshrined the ornate material symbols of prestige and status that the élite drew upon and thereby legitimized them.

Any sketch of the dynamic potential of Pictish stones is bound to be unsatisfactory. However, my aim has been to introduce the concept of discourse as means of restoring a political meaning to these monuments. Their prominence and durability are forceful expressions of aristocratic power and are adequate indices of the resources available to those in authority for use in social discourse. The formal development of the monuments tells us that the discursive practices were changing over time, as theoretically they should and as we know historically they did. The astonishing variations within types tells us that the makers and their patrons were drawing upon their knowledge of the symbols and stylistic conventions as their needs dictated, thus underscoring the idea that social reproduction is a constantly developing practice undertaken by knowledgeable social actors.

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