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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERLEMNO SCULPTURED STONES: ABERLEMNO IV



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

ABERLEMNO SCULPTURED STONES: ABERLEMNO IV

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Aberlemno IV, standing by the roadside within Aberlemno in Angus, is a Class I Pictish symbol stone of red sandstone. It stands at approximately 1.80m tall and probably dates to the second half of the first millennium AD. It is a rude pillar in shape and is the middle stone of the three roadside carved stones in Aberlemno.

The front face exhibits what appear to be either badly worn or erased, or unfinished, Pictish symbols. The stone is unworked.

The stone is freely accessible on foot as a visitor attraction by the roadside in Aberlemno, although between the last working day of September and the first working day of April each year it is covered with a wooden box to protect it from wintery conditions and frost damage.

1.2 Statement of significance

The Pictish symbol stones, cross-slabs and crosses of early medieval Scotland are perhaps the most extraordinary and beautiful of all carved stones in the British Isles. These stones, carved by the Picts, or 'Painted People', 'offer remarkable testimony to their artistic skills and insights into Pictish life and artistic contacts'.¹

Aberlemno IV stands prominently on the roadside within Aberlemno. Its significance can be summarised as follows:

- Its original location is likely to be close, if not similar, to its current location. The current location is situated on a ridge and notably is perhaps indicative of a significant route way.²
- It stands as a part of a group of three Pictish stones on the roadside in Aberlemno, as well as close to Aberlemno II.
- It has been noted that it stands close to a cairn of stones, with human bones and coffins found in the nearby field.³
- The area of Angus contains a significant number of Pictish carved stones.

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

The symbol stone is carved from a boulder of red sandstone. The stone is consistent with a local source in the Aberlemno – Finavon Hill area.⁴ It measures approximately 1.80m in height and tapers

¹ Fraser 2008, 1

² Ritchie 1995, 8

³ Jervise 1859, 192

⁴ Miller and Ruckley 2005, 289

from its base towards its top. It is carved all by incision. It stands by the roadside (B9134) on a prominent route way along with Aberlemno I and III, and the surrounding village of Aberlemno and the modern road provide its current immediate landscape setting.

The carved detail

Only one face, the front, of this stone is incised with Pictish symbols. There appears to be two distinct but difficult to interpret carved areas. The upper of the two areas exhibits what appears to be the trace of a crescent, perhaps the 'remains of a mirror or other discoid symbol',⁵ and the lower area exhibits the traces of two circular depressions or lines. Notably however, John Stuart described this stone as no longer exhibiting any traces of figures and he also suggested that it perhaps never had any in the first place.⁶

Brief history

The following is designed to highlight the brief history of Aberlemno IV. Providing a full biography for the stone is not possible at this stage in our understanding, as is common with early medieval carved stones. A fuller account of the timeline of the stone is given in Appendix 1, and any further details of archaeological investigation are presented in Appendix 2.

Assigning the name of a patron or carver, or even a date to Aberlemno IV is difficult. This is the same with most carved stones of this period. It is probable that it was erected between the sixth and seventh century AD, although this is made all the more challenging to determine due to the poor state of carvings present on the stone.

There is modest evidence for antiquarian interest in this symbol stone. For example, Thomas Pennant noted this symbol stone in 1772,⁷ and in 1832 James Skene produced a sketch of the stone alongside a sketch of Aberlemno I.⁸

Sometime around 1857 it is noted that a small cairn of stones, human bones and remains of coffins were found in close proximity to the stone.⁹

In 1912 the stone was passed into guardianship,¹⁰ thus providing evidence with regards to early concern for its preservation. Due to on going concern about the safety of Aberlemno IV, designs were

⁵ Fraser 2008, 48-9

⁶ Stuart 1856, 24

⁷ Pennant 1776, 167

⁸ RCAHMS n.d.

⁹ Jervise 1859, 192

¹⁰ Foster 2004, 1

drawn up in 1913 for shelters to house the stone, including the other three from Aberlemno.¹¹

In 2002 the stone was digitally recorded with 3D laser scanning technology,¹² thus demonstrating a welcome engagement between carved stones and digital technology.

2.2 Evidential values

Aberlemno IV is by no means the finest example of a Class I Pictish symbol stone, primarily due to the nature of its carvings. It does however still have fundamental evidential value, being that its carvings are Pictish.

The stone more than likely stands in its original location on a prominent ridge,¹³ perhaps signifying the location of a major route way, which now connects the modern areas of Forfar and Brechin. It has been stated that we should 'not lose the ability to recognise this on the ground',¹⁴ thus highlighting the significance of this stone's landscape setting, both immediate and beyond, as well as past and present.

This symbol stone perhaps had a role as a boundary marker and would have been 'erected under the patronage of secular or ecclesiastical aristocracy'.¹⁵

2.3 Historical values

Aberlemno IV and other Pictish carved stones, although carved with beautiful but generally unintelligible symbols,¹⁶ are of incredible historic value. Pictish symbols are explicitly identifiable as indicators of Pictish culture, yet without the discovery of 'contemporary literary reference' they will remain difficult to understand.¹⁷

Aberlemno IV displays no Christian iconography, although this does not necessarily mean that it was carved within a society devoid of Christianity. It is however not of a direct historical value to Christianity.

This stone only displays Pictish symbols. The language of which remains difficult to fully understand and translate.¹⁸ Subsequently,

¹¹ Foster 2001, 21-3

¹² Carty 2005, 368-69

¹³ Ritchie 1995, 8

¹⁴ Foster 2001, 31

¹⁵ Foster 2004, 1

¹⁶ Henderson 1967, 157-8

¹⁷ Henderson 1967, 158

¹⁸ Forsyth 1997, 85-99

this stone does not have the ability to highlight any significant historic event as of yet.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Evidence for the Picts predominantly comes from their art, and particularly from carved stones. These carved stones are clearly products of accomplished sculptors and may provide evidence of a structured society. Skilled sculptors must have been commissioned to create these masterpieces, most probably at the behest of the Pictish elite. With the lack of other significant evidence for the Picts, these carved stones therefore give an insight into Pictish society, foreign contacts and cultural resources.

The architectural and artistic value of Aberlemno IV can be summarised as follows:

The stone is unworked and therefore of negligible architectural value. However, if indeed the crescent shaped carving is a mirror, as is suggested by Fraser,¹⁹ or a crescent, parallels for these can therefore be drawn. A complete crescent may be found on Daviot, a Class I stone from Aberdeenshire.²⁰ If it is a mirror, a parallel can be found on Sandness, a Class I stone from Shetland.²¹

Although based on tentative identifications in the case of Aberlemno IV, the above discussion of the artistic parallels and the associated geographical spread of the iconographies carved therefore attests to the artistic value of this carved stone.

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

As with the majority of early medieval carved stones, its aesthetic significance has changed over time. This is relative to its changing landscape setting, but more importantly, to its changing audience. Those who view the stone today will have a different experience to those who viewed it within its original landscape setting.

Artistically, Aberlemno IV is aesthetically insignificant due to the lack of clarity and poor survival of its carvings. Its current state of preservation is fair.

Original aesthetic

Although found in a field close to the road (B9134), but now situated on the roadside, its original location was more than likely close to where it is now standing. This location is a ridge that became a significant route way,²² and presently there are two more stones seemingly specifically also sited on this route way in Aberlemno. These are Aberlemno I and III. It is therefore highly

¹⁹ Fraser 2008, 48-9

²⁰ Fraser 2008, 18

²¹ Fraser 2008, 48-9

²² Ritchie 1995, 8

possible that Aberlemno IV shared its immediate original landscape setting with these two stones. Its original landscape relationship with nearby Aberlemno II is not known, although they all must have shared the original surrounding landscape of Aberlemno, and perhaps all have been intervisible.

Historic aesthetic

The stone was appreciated for its aesthetic values during the late historic period. This is evidenced in antiquarian interest such as its mention in 1772 by Pennant,²³ or in a sketch from Skene.²⁴ The stone was also subject to excavations in and around its vicinity, thus indicating an intrinsic value and archaeological significance being placed upon it during the nineteenth century.²⁵ Concern for its artistic aesthetic was expressed at the start of the twentieth century, and is evidenced in the creation of blueprints to house the stone.²⁶

Present day aesthetic

The stone currently has an immediate landscape setting of the B9134 Forfar to Brechin road, on which also stands Aberlemno I and III. Nearby is Aberlemno II in Aberlemno churchyard.

The stone can be appreciated comfortably and relatively safely on foot by the roadside as the dyke has been moved behind it. Notably however, for six months of the year it is housed beneath a wooden case to protect it from the winter elements,²⁷ thus impacting on its potential to have year round publically accessible aesthetic value. It does however stand as a significant reminder of Angus' Pictish past.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The stone stands by the roadside in Aberlemno. No natural significance is apparent.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Social values

Community

Since the late eighteenth century the stone has attracted antiquarians to visit the community of Aberlemno to experience it and its associated stones. The discovery of human remains in close proximity to it in the nineteenth century clearly must have sparked greater interest in the cultural significance of the stone.

²³ Pennant 1776, 167

²⁴ RCAHMS n.d.

²⁵ Jervise 1859, 192

²⁶ Foster 2001, 21-3

²⁷ Foster 2001, 23

This is subsequently attested to in the ongoing debate in the community regarding whether or not the stone should be removed from the roadside for its own protection.²⁸ This stone, along with the other two stones on the roadside, does not stand alone in the community. They exist as a group that can demonstrate the evolution of Pictish carving from Class I to II. Aberlemno IV is therefore a significant attribute to the community of Aberlemno.

Spiritual

As the stone is openly accessible and easily stumbled upon by passing vehicles, it is fair to say that it has the possibility to attract people of many spiritual persuasions, particularly as they may attempt to engage with the little understood language of the Pictish symbols.

The meanings conveyed by its extremely difficult to make out Pictish symbols continue to provide the stone with a tantalising characteristic. It does however perhaps represent a time when paganism was giving way to Christianity in Pictland.

Use values

Economic

The stone is located on the route way between Forfar and Brechin (B1934), however the A90 now supersedes this route and so removes the possibility of numerous visitors having a chance encounter with the site. However, as the stone is part of a grouping of four carved stones in Aberlemno it is likely that this will encourage people to visit the site, and so lead to modest contributions to the local economy.

Access and education

The site is unstaffed but freely accessible. There is a PDF leaflet briefly detailing early carved stones available online for download from Historic Scotland. This is titled *Investigating – Early Carved Stones*.²⁹ It is also available in Gaelic. Due to the clarity of the carvings on this stone currently being extremely poor it therefore has a minimal educational value.

Corporate value

Although the stone is in the care of Historic Scotland, it is still standing within the landscape by the roadside, and so it is subject to the natural elements as well as debris from the road. The former is managed by covering the stone for six months of the year during the autumn and winter, thus demonstrating best practice with regards to safeguarding the stone at the same times as allowing it to be experienced during the warmer months. Permission has been

²⁸ Foster 2001, 21

²⁹ Historic Scotland 2009

granted for the removal of this stone to a more suitable location within Aberlemno, yet no solution for this has been met as of yet.

3 Major gaps in understanding

- There is no single academic thesis on this stone, although this may not be necessary in the case of Aberlemno IV.
- Is the stone in its original location?
- Who had the stone created and who was the carver?
- Why was this stone created, and why was it erected in Aberlemno?
- What is the stones archaeological context? Is there a relationship between it and the nearby human remains?
- What is the relationship between the Aberlemno roadside stones and Aberlemno II?
- What are the wider landscape relationships between Aberlemno IV and both the symbol stone from Flemington Farm and the cross-slab from Woodwrae?³⁰
- Does the stone have any associated sites or settlements?
- What do the Pictish symbols represent on this carved stone?

4 Associated properties

Aberlemno I, II and III; Flemington Farm; Woodwrae; Finavon Fort

5 Keywords

Pictish, symbol stone, Pictish symbols, Insular art, Aberlemno, Angus

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³⁰ See Fraser 2008, 48-9 and 62-3

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Timeline

- **c.6/7th** – Aberlemno IV is carved and erected, but precisely when and by whom is a mystery.
- **685** – Battle of Nechtansmere (or Dunnichen), resulting in the death of King Ecgfrith of Northumbria and a victory for the Picts at the hands of King Bridei son of Beli,³¹ and ultimately leading to a Northumbrian loss of territory in Pictland.³²
- **c.710** – Correspondence between Ceolfrid, Abbot from the Monastery at Jarrow, and King Nechtan of Pictland, in which Nechtan asks for the assistance of masons to help build a church in the Roman fashion.³³
- **843** – Cináed mac Ailpín becomes king of the Picts.³⁴
- **1772** – Noted by Thomas Pennant.³⁵
- **1832** – Sketch produced by James Skene.³⁶
- **c.1857** – A small cairn of stones, as well as human bones and coffins are said to have been found nearby to the stone.³⁷
- **1912** – The stone was passed into guardianship.³⁸
- **1913** – Drawings created of a potential shelter for the stone.³⁹
- **2002** – Archaeoptics Ltd undertook a 3D laser scan of the stone.⁴⁰

Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

Around 1857, Andrew Jervise visited the site and noted that Aberlemno I (which is just north of Aberlemno IV) stood a little north of a small circle or cairn of stones.⁴¹ He noted that this feature appeared disturbed, but that it measured 1.82m across and 0.76m deep in the middle. He also noted a conversation he had had with a local parishioner, in which he was told of the discovery

³¹ Fraser 2009, 383; Woolf 2007, 10

³² Woolf 2007, 4

³³ Henderson 1967, 82

³⁴ Woolf 2007, 351

³⁵ Pennant 1776, 167

³⁶ RCAHMS n.d.

³⁷ Jervise 1859, 192

³⁸ Foster 2004, 1

³⁹ Foster 2001, 21-3

⁴⁰ Carty 2005, 368-69

⁴¹ Jervise 1859, 192

of stone coffins and human bones in the field next to Aberlemno I.⁴²

Unfortunately, and due in part to limited archaeological excavation and inspection of the stone's immediate and surrounding contexts, the history of Aberlemno IV will remain difficult to fully determine.

⁴² Jervise 1859, 192

