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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SUENO'S STONE



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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SUENO'S STONE

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1 Summary

1.1 Introduction

Sueno's Stone, on the northern outskirts of Forres, is a 6.5m-high cross-slab, the tallest piece of early historic sculpture in Scotland. It probably dates to the late first millennia AD. (The name Sueno, current from around 1700 and apparently in tribute to Svein Forkbeard, an 11th-century Danish king, is entirely without foundation.) In 1991 the stone was enclosed in a glass shelter to protect it from further erosion.

The cross-slab is carved from a local yellow sandstone. One face bears a relief carving of a ring-headed cross, the shaft of which is filled with interlace decoration. Below the cross, there is a scene that has plausibly been interpreted as representing a royal inauguration. The other face seems to depict a great battle. The sides of the cross slab are carved with inhabited vine-scroll decoration.

The scheduled area covers a small (75 x 30 m) rectangular grassed area around the stone. Next to the glass shelter is small stone slab built wall that incorporates a bench for viewing the stone and two interpretation panels.

1.2 Statement of significance

Early medieval carved stones are the most enduring and dramatic material expression of Pictish culture available to us. Within this corpus, Sueno's Stone stands out as what must always have been a major example of the type, because of its sheer scale and the complexity of its narrative. It 'invites superlatives as well as speculation'.¹

Sueno's Stone has enormous cultural significance on several counts:

- Its completeness and survival as monumental sculpture on its original site: the majority of Pictish sculpture is fragmentary (i.e. no longer monumental), and only a fraction of it is still directly associated with its original location. In addition, it is one of the few early historic sculpture sites whose immediate archaeological context has been explored.
- Its importance as an example of Insular art, demonstrating the skill of the sculptor and hinting at lost art in other media. The cross-slab therefore helps provide an insight into the minds, cultural resources and foreign contacts of the Picts, and reminds us that they were not remote barbarians. Its scale and ambition is important too, as it is the largest of its type known to survive.
- Its importance as a resource for understanding the society and culture of the Picts. Sueno's Stone embodies a complex narrative with scenes of battle rarely found in Pictish art. Furthermore, it shows what is interpreted, uniquely in early historic sculpture, as a royal inauguration.

¹(Sellar, 1993, p. 97)

2 Assessment of values

2.1 Background

Description

The cross-slab is composed of yellow sandstone, possibly quarried from the nearby coast. It measures over 6.5m high by 1.2m wide by 0.4m thick, and is set into a massive (partly underground) socket stone. The monument would have stood at the western approach to the Burghead/Lossiemouth 'island', the heartland of Pictish Moray. In this location it may have marked the main eastern approach into medieval Forres and to its early medieval precursor. This wider setting is substantially impacted upon by modern development (road infrastructure and housing).

The carved detail

The front (west) face is dominated by a relief carving of a ring-headed cross, filled with, and surrounded by, interlaced spiral knotwork. Beneath the cross, at the bottom of the shaft, two bearded figures face each other and stoop over what appears to be a central seated figure. Two smaller attendants stand behind the two figures. The scene has been interpreted as a royal inauguration or enthronement.

The back (east) face is divided into four unequal panels depicting scenes of warfare:

- The top panel shows a number of horsemen, possibly a leader and his guard, arriving for battle.
- The great central panel is divided into three sections: the top section appears to depict a battle scene with the combatants fighting on foot; the middle section shows an object, which has variously been interpreted as a broch, a fort or a church bell, to the left of which are a number of headless corpses; the bottom section of the great central panel depicts a group of horsemen fleeing from infantrymen.
- The lowest two panels appear to show the final defeat of the defending army. The first depicts piles of headless corpses and severed heads below an object, interpreted as a bridge or a tent, and the bottom panel, which is now obscured by the stone collar, may show the dispersal of the defeated army.

The narrow sides of the stone are covered with interlaced designs that have far more vitality than those on the cross face. In particular, the upper part of the south side bears delightful spirals of foliage in which small human figures are perched.

Brief history

The following notes outline our current understanding of Sueno's Stone based on interpretation of available evidence. However it is acknowledged that providing a biography for the stone, as with many other similar sites, is a fraught business.

As with most stones of this type, the original date and patron is unknown, however, on stylistic grounds and supported by some archaeological

evidence, Sueno's stone is thought to have been erected on this site around 850 – 950.²

Timothy Pont's 'Mapp of Murray' (c.1590) apparently depicts two large standing stones to the north of Forres.³ Later maps (Gordon 1654 for Bleau, Roy 1747–55; Ainslie 1789) repeat this depiction of two stones; Ainslie's map captions them as 'two curiously carved pillars'.⁴ However, written sources (Pennant 1769; Old Statistical Account 1795) make no mention of a pair of stones and refer only to Sueno's stone, the name coming into common usage from c 1700.⁵ William Daniell illustrates Sueno's stone alone as Obelisk at Forres, engraved circa 1819.⁶

The issue of a putative second stone is, therefore, complex and still open to debate. However, what seems reasonable is the assumption that Pont and subsequent sources are accurate in recording Sueno's stone at least, on or near its present site from around 1590.

The earliest recorded repair history for Sueno's stone comes circa 1700 when Lady Ann Campbell, countess of Moray ordered some work to stabilise the position of the stone and stone steps to be placed around its base.⁷ Daniell's view of 1819 shows the stone leaning at an angle, which indicates ongoing stability issues.

In 1923 the stone was taken into state care, and in 1991 the glass box erected to protect the stone.⁸ A more detailed account of the timeline relating to Sueno's stone is given at Appendix 1 Timeline with the summary of archaeological investigations at Appendix 2 Summary of Archaeological Investigations.

2.2 Evidential values

The evidential value of Sueno's Stone is very high. Its exceptional size, completeness and state of preservation combined with its (probable) retention of its original site makes it a cultural resource without many parallels.

Sueno's stone is unusual in having been subject to a programme of modern archaeological investigation. This yielded some evidence regarding the immediate site which has been interpreted as a series of post-holes, possibly associated with the erection of the stone.

While there are various accounts of finds during the 18th and 19th centuries, including skeletons and artefacts, the locations are not known.⁹ There has

²(Foster, 2004, p. 111)

³(Pont, c.1590)

⁴(Blaeu, 1654), (Roy, 1747–1755), (Ainslie, 1789)

⁵(Pennant, 1769, p. 165), (The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791–1799, pp. (The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791–1799, pp. XVIII, Parish of Rafford, 346)

⁶(Daniell, c 1819)

⁷(Gordon A. , 1727, pp. 158–9), (The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791–1799, pp. (The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791–1799, pp. XVIII, Parish of Rafford, 346)

⁸(McCullagh, 1995, p. 703 & 697)

⁹(McCullagh, 1995, pp. 699–700)

been some modern archaeological study of part of the surrounding area, but this has not thus far identified burial or other sites in the vicinity.¹⁰ To best current knowledge, burials around Pictish stones are not common, though many stones may not be in their original location while many allegedly in their original position have not been investigated. A fuller account of the archaeological work undertaken at the site is given at Appendix 2 Summary of Archaeological Investigations.

As well as the archaeological potential for Sueno's Stone to provide evidence about how such sites were used, it also provides evidence in the scenes it depicts of many aspects of life and culture of the Picts: these aspects are discussed more fully in the following three sections.

2.3 Historical values

Sueno's Stone, and other carved stones, are of exceptional importance because of their contribution to our understanding of the society, religion culture and lifestyle of early medieval Scotland when other forms of evidence (artefacts, documents and contemporary accounts) are sparse. Study of the figures and scenes depicted gives an insight into material culture, social structure and custom.

As with other later Picto-Scottish sculpture, the emphasis of the content has here moved from hunting scenes to military images, possibly reflecting a strengthening and formalisation of royal power (cf. the Dupplin Cross). Sueno's 'enthronement' scene presents a unique survival of a depiction of such a ceremony.

While we (as yet) do not comprehend exactly the complex messages the stones convey, clearly many were intended to promote particular narratives. Sueno's Stone, with its scenes of battle and the possible enthronement appears to have a clear narrative role, presumably also of relevance to its setting.

The conflict depicted is often thought to that between Cinaed mac Ailpín, or a descendant, and the Picts of Moray, where the Gaels succeeded in their submission. Here the enthronement scene is seen as the inauguration of a mac Ailpín king surrounded by clerics. Another interpretation is that it depicts the battle fought by Dubh mac Ailpín, who was killed at Forres in 966. There is a tradition that his body lay beneath the bridge at Kinloss before his burial, and this bridge is perhaps shown on the stone with Dubh's head picked out with box around it.¹¹

Depictions of battle scenes are rare in Pictish and Insular art (cf. Aberlemno Churchyard cross slab) likewise the evidence of mass beheadings.

As a cross slab, Sueno's stone is an overtly Christian monument and can therefore give clues to the role and practise of religion. The designs have the capacity to inform us of the devotional foci of the patron who erected it, and

¹⁰(McCullagh, 1995)

¹¹(Sellar, 1993, pp. 107–109), (Foster, 2004, p. 111)

how this relates to the rest of Scotland and Britain at the time. It has been argued that the stone was re-erected incorrectly in the early 1700s and that the great cross should be facing east and not west.¹² Against this, the extent and nature of the work undertaken for Countess Anna, is not known for certain and the archaeological investigation of 1991 did not provide conclusive evidence of re-erection.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

Little art work associated with the Picts survives in media other than sculpture (e.g. metalwork, manuscripts and textiles), and we therefore look to sculpture for clues to what has been lost. Clearly the Pictish elite could call upon highly skilled sculptors; their work provides us with an insight into Pictish society, cultural resources and foreign contacts. It also reminds us that the Picts were a part of early medieval Europe, not remote barbarians.

For example, the inhabited vine-scroll decoration on the sides of the stone is a distinctive form of decoration that the Picts borrowed from the Northumbrians. The Picts developed their own masterful style of vine-scroll decoration (cf. Hilton of Cadboll), and although its treatment on Sueno's Stone may be individual and quirky (it is inhabited by humans rather than birds and animals – a feature only found elsewhere in the *BOOK OF KELLS*¹³) it is also highly sophisticated and developed.

The stone's soaring height and the intricacy of its decoration are particularly impressive. The decoration, even at high (and inaccessible) levels, is very sophisticated and of high quality.

2.5 Landscape and Aesthetic Values

Sueno's Stone is one of a very small number of Pictish stones that stand in their original locations, although its setting has altered considerably. The aesthetic significance of Sueno's Stone has changed over time, relative to its changing landscape setting and the cultural context of its observers.

Original aesthetic

When first erected the stone would have stood on a more prominent mound than it currently does. It would have been situated in an open landscape, perhaps cultivated, but with little structural evidence of human activity. Archaeological activity appears to be concentrated around the stone itself, suggesting that it could have been seen unencumbered for some distance, perhaps alongside the other stone which allegedly stood with it. Other than the small amount of information, which archaeological investigation has provided, we know very little else about the original landscape context of the stone.

Historic aesthetic

The stone continued to be a significant landscape feature into the 18th century. This is underlined by early attempts to conserve it and keep it

¹²(Jackson, 1993, p. 91)

¹³(Book of Kells, c 800)

upright. The provision of steps by Lady Ann Campbell added to the site's biography and to its aesthetic. These were repaired in the 19th and 20th century, although they concealed the original base and the bottom panel of carving, perhaps demonstrating that keeping this prominent stone in place and upright was deemed more important than making sure all its constituent parts were visible up close.¹⁴

Present day aesthetic

Today the stone stands in a grassy area on the outskirts of Forres. Open countryside lies to the north, beyond the A96 trunk road, while to the south trees screen the stone from the housing estate known as Sueno's Park. Despite the encroachment of the modern world, the stone has remained a prominent feature, retaining a sense of place within an open site with commanding views of the landscape to the north. Most people who encounter the stone, however, view it from the A96, which passes very close by. Visitors to the site tend to encounter it close up, and cannot see it from any great distance away as they approach, as may originally have been the case. From the monument, they have little sense of the world beyond the site. The manicured grounds around it and the glass shelter make for a planned and regulated setting, at odds with the martial imagery depicted on the monument.

Aside from its size, the most distinctive feature of the stone is its modern glass shelter. This is the most prominent of a series of conservation measures, which have influenced the modern aesthetics of the site. A low wall and cast iron railings were added in the 19th century, and prior to this a tight fitting metal cap was secured to the stone. The glass shelter was the first measure to address the effects of environmental damage on the stone. Previous measures had focused on preventing it from falling over. In each case, the focus has been on retaining the link between the stone and its find spot, which was in evidence even before it was known that it had always been in this location.

At night, the floodlit stone and glass shelter become even more prominent.

2.6 Natural heritage values

There is only a small area of mowed grass surrounding the site. There is no great natural significance.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Community values

Sueno's Stone has meant much to the people of Forres since Lady Campbell had it re-erected in the 18th century, helped by the discovery of skeletons in the vicinity. There was even an admission charge to view it in the 1860s.¹⁵

Discussions in the 1980s about whether to relocate the stone to the Falconer Museum in Forres, or cover it in situ, aroused much interest locally.

¹⁴(McCullagh, 1995, pp. 700, 702)

¹⁵(Watson & Watson, 1868, p. 269)

As a local landmark, it must still assert a certain influence on the community and, to judge by a 2007 Scottish country dance called 'Sueno's Stone', seems to still be a small inspiration.¹⁶

Spiritual values

As a 6.5m high cross-slab the stone undoubtedly had Christian religious and spiritual associations and most likely continues to do so for some people, despite the violent content of the other face. However, we do not have any information on whether people visit the stone for any form of spiritual interaction. Reviews on Tripadvisor concentrate on its impressive size and history – no mention is made of spiritual experiences.¹⁷ Due to the perceived 'enigma' of Pictish symbols the carved stones often assume spiritual connotations for some modern audiences. As Sueno's Stone does not have the characteristic symbols perhaps it doesn't have the same spiritual draw.

Use values

Anecdotally Sueno's Stone has thousands of visitors a year. Bearing in mind the easy access off the A96, this is quite believable. However, it is unlikely that many visitors go to the area specifically for the stone or that they contribute in any great way to the local economy.

Sueno's Stone is unusual for an unstaffed site in care in that it has an 'Investigating Sueno's Stone' PDF leaflet part of Historic Scotland's suite of leaflets to give information and ideas to teachers for school visits. It is also addressed in the more in-depth booklet 'Investigating Early Carved Stones'. It seems that the stone is considered to have a particular education value as probably the most impressive, certainly in size, example of the genre and due to the content on the non-cross side, which provides a useful springboard into discussing the history and interaction of the different peoples and tribes of the period. However, the download statistics for the last two years (only 6 in English and 4 in Gaelic) would seem to indicate that the site's lack of facilities acts against this use.¹⁸

Corporate value

Sueno's Stone can be considered best practice in conservation and management. A decision was made, after an assessment of the likely losses if a passive management scheme was followed, that a proactive route be taken. Numerous options, including relocating the stone, were considered but due to an underpinning desire to preserve the stone in its original setting and the great importance placed on this in heritage management the erection of a bespoke shelter was chosen.

Before the stone was enclosed in the shelter, a computer model was made to help predict potential problems and influence the design of the shelter. Once

¹⁶(Grant, 2007)

¹⁷(Tripadvisor)

¹⁸(Investigating Sueno's Stone: Information for Teachers, c.2009), (Investigating Early Carved Stones, c.2009), (Blyth, 2014)

the enclosure was complete the environment and stone were closely monitored to ensure the shelter performed as intended and that the long term preservation of the stone was assured. While the temperature and relative humidity fluctuated more, and reached higher values, than expected the monitoring indicated that the stone has been protected from pollution, the elements and vandalism.¹⁹

3 Major Gaps in Understanding

- Who ordered the stone to be carved and erected – and why and when?
- Were there two stones originally, and if so what happened to the second?
- Understanding of the wider landscape context, associated sites and settlements?
- Understanding of the narrative and individuals depicted, are these real events?

4 Associated Properties

(*other Pictish crosses/cross slabs*) – **Aberlemno** (churchyard and roadside); **Cossans** (St Orland's); **Dunfallandy**; **Dupplin Cross**; **Eassie**; **Elgin Cathedral**; **Fowlis Wester**; Glamis Manse; **Maiden Stone**; **Meigle Museum**; Nigg; **St Andrews Cathedral Museum**; **St Vigean's Museum**; Shandwick Stone.

(*other relevant Pictish sites*) – Burghead Fort (including **Burghead Well**); Covesea Cave; Craig Phadrig; Kinneddar; Portnockie Fort; **Urquhart Castle**.

5 Keywords

cross-slab, shaft, vine-scroll, interlace, Picts, Insular art, battle, inauguration

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¹⁹(Muir, 2005), (Gordon S., 2014)

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Timeline

c.843 - Cineád mac Ailpin unites the kingdoms of Pictland and Dalriada to form the new kingdom of Alba.²⁰

c.850-950 - Sueno's Stone is erected, but precisely when and by whom is a mystery. A case has been argued for it having been set up by Cineád mac Ailpin or a successor to commemorate victory over the northern Picts. Another suggestion is that it commemorates a great battle between the Scots and the Vikings, who devastated Moray from 800 on (the Pictish fort at Burghead was destroyed in the 9th or early 10th century). A third scenario centres on a battle fought at Forres in 966 between the Scots and the men of Moray in which King Dubh was killed.

1590 - Timothy Pont's 'Mapp of Murray' (c.1590) depicts two large standing stones to the north of Forres. Ainslie's map (1800) also shows two stones and inscribes the location of Sueno's Stone as 'two curiously inscribed pillars'. However, neither the Statistical Account (1795) nor the New Statistical Account (1845) mentions a second stone, though both refer to Sueno's Stone. The cartographic evidence suggests that Sueno's Stone was standing in the vicinity of its present location from at least the late 16th century, contradicting

²⁰(Anderson , 1990, pp. 270–271)

a local tradition that the stone was discovered buried in the ground during the course of late 17th-century agricultural improvements.²¹

c.1700 - Lady Ann Campbell, countess of Moray (died 1734), has the stone re-erected - it was described at the time as 'like to fall'.²²

1726 - Alexander Gordon's *Itinerarium Septentrionale* makes first reference to 'King Sueno's Stone'.²³

1812/13 - eight skeletons with clothing and jewellery are recorded as being found in the vicinity of the stone. Subsequent discoveries include more skeletons (1823), weapons (1827), a Roman coin (1843), and stone coffins (1864). Where these were found is not known.²⁴

1923 - Sueno's Stone is placed in state care.

1926 - during archaeological investigations, more carved detail at the base of the stone is revealed.²⁵

1991 - a glass enclosure is erected around the sculpture to protect it from further erosion by the weather.

Appendix 2: Summary of Archaeological Investigations

During the 19th century numerous reports mention the discovery of skeletons and artefacts from the vicinity of the stone. These finds were seen to support the interpretation of the stone as a memorial to a battle, or a statement of conquest. However, the actual location of these finds is vague and modern archaeological work has found no corroborating evidence.²⁶

In 1926 investigations around the base of the stone by the Ministry of Works revealed the lowest panel of carving, previously hidden by the stone collar around the base of the shaft. The excavated pit was filled in and the collar replaced in 1927.²⁷

In 1978 a geophysical survey of the area around the monument found no archaeological features. In 1989 an archaeological assessment, undertaken in advance of, and during, construction of an adjacent housing estate, also found no significant archaeological features.²⁸

²¹(Pont, c.1590), (Ainslie, 1789), (*The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1791–1799*, pp. XVIII, Parish of Rafford, 346), (NSA, 1845, pp. Parish of Elgin, 247)

²²(Gordon A. , 1727, pp. 158–9)

²³(Gordon A. , 1727, pp. 158–9)

²⁴ 1812, skeletons (Watson & Watson, 1868, p. 269), (Sueno's Stone, Forres; Canmore ID 15866); 1827, weapon (Sueno's Stone, Forres; Canmore ID 15851); 1844, Roman coin (Sueno's Stone, Forres; Canmore ID 15862).

²⁵(McCullagh, 1995, p. 702)

²⁶ 1812, skeletons (Watson & Watson, 1868, p. 269), (Sueno's Stone, Forres; Canmore ID 15866); 1827, weapon (Sueno's Stone, Forres; Canmore ID 15851).

²⁷(McCullagh, 1995, p. 702)

²⁸(McCullagh, 1995, p. 703)

In 1990 excavation in the immediate vicinity of the stone was carried out in advance of constructing the glass shelter. These revealed a number of post holes, including two circles, supporting the possibility of there having been two stones originally. Radiocarbon dating suggested that some post holes were associated with the erection of the stone in the later first millennium.²⁹

Despite this archaeological work, we are still none the wiser regarding the stone's history.

²⁹(McCullagh, 1995)