



HISTORIC  
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**Property in Care(PIC) ID:** PIC003

**Designations:** Scheduled Monument (SM90004)

**Taken into State care:** 1912 (Guardianship)

**Last reviewed:** 2015

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

# ABERLEMNO SCULPTURED STONES: ABERLEMNO I



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# HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

## ABERLEMNO SCULPTURED STONES: ABERLEMNO I

### CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1	Introduction	2
1.2	Statement of significance	2
<b>2</b>	<b>Assessment of values</b>	<b>3</b>
2.1	Background	3
2.2	Evidential values	4
2.3	Historical values	4
2.4	Architectural and artistic values	5
2.5	Landscape and aesthetic values	6
2.6	Natural heritage values	7
2.7	Contemporary/use values	7
<b>3</b>	<b>Major gaps in understanding</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Associated properties</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Keywords</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>8</b>
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	
	Appendix 1: Timeline	10
	Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations	11

# 1 Summary

## 1.1 Introduction

Aberlemno I (NO 52277 55918), standing by the roadside within Aberlemno in Angus, is a Class I Pictish symbol stone of Old Red Sandstone. It stands at 1.83m tall and dates to the second half of the first millennium AD. It is a rude pillar in shape and is the northernmost of the three carved stones by the roadside in Aberlemno.

The front face exhibits a series of common Pictish symbols, and the back face is carved with probable cup-markings, thus suggesting it is a reused prehistoric standing stone.

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 winter 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'.<sup>1</sup>

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

- Aberlemno I is a reused prehistoric cup-marked stone.<sup>2</sup> This is not uncommon and demonstrates that prehistoric monuments were perhaps significant to the Picts.
- It is likely that it stands in its original location, notably on a ridge that is perhaps indicative of a significant route way.<sup>3</sup>
- It stands as a part of a group of three Pictish stones on the roadside in Aberlemno, and is 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.<sup>4</sup>
- The clarity, precision and survival of the Pictish symbols are remarkable. They are deeply and confidently incised, resulting in one of the best surviving Class I Pictish symbol stones.

The above bullet points summarise the key significances of Aberlemno I; a more detailed discussion of the monument's significance across a broader range of values is given in the following Assessment of Values.

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<sup>1</sup> Fraser 2008, 1

<sup>2</sup> Fraser 2005, 58

<sup>3</sup> Ritchie 1995, 8

<sup>4</sup> Jervise 1857, 192

## **2 Assessment of values**

### **2.1 Background**

#### **Description**

The symbol stone is carved from a reused pillar of red sandstone. The stone is consistent with a local source in the Aberlemno-Finavon Hill area.<sup>5</sup> It measures 1.83m in height, 0.91m wide and 0.23m thick. It is carved all by incision. It stands by the roadside (B9134) on a prominent route way along with Aberlemno III and IV, and the surrounding village of Aberlemno and the modern road provide its current immediate landscape setting.

#### **The Carved Detail**

The front face is dominated by a series of incised Pictish symbols. To the top a serpent, the middle a double-disc and z-rod, and the bottom a mirror and comb. The depth of the carvings allows for them to be fully appreciated. The back face exhibits several cup-markings of a probable prehistoric date.

#### **Brief History**

The following is designed to highlight the brief history of Aberlemno I. Providing a full biography for the stone is not possible at this stage in our understanding, as is common with many 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 I is difficult. This is the same with most carved stones of this period. It is probable that it was erected between the sixth and eighth century AD.

Robert Edward recorded three crosses, perhaps Aberlemno I, III and IV, on a map in 1678.<sup>6</sup> The three crosses stand to the west of the road in this map yet currently they stand to the east of the modern road.

The stone was subject to antiquarian interest throughout the 18th and 19th century, resulting in several early drawings from C. Cordiner, P. Chalmers, J. Skene and J. Stuart, for example.<sup>7</sup>

Sometime around 1857 it is noted that a small cairn of stones, human bones and the remains of coffins were found in close proximity to the stone.<sup>8</sup> In 1912 the stone was passed into guardianship,<sup>9</sup> thus providing evidence with regards to early concern for its preservation. Due to ongoing concern about the safety of Aberlemno I, designs were drawn up in 1913 for shelters to house the stone, including the other three from Aberlemno.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Miller and Ruckley 2005, 289

<sup>6</sup> Edward 1678

<sup>7</sup> RCAHMS n.d.

<sup>8</sup> Jervise 1857, 192

<sup>9</sup> Foster 2004, 1

<sup>10</sup> Foster 2001, 21-3

In 2002 the stone was digitally recorded with 3D laser scanning technology,<sup>11</sup> demonstrating a welcome engagement between carved stones and digital technology.

In 2007 a drawing of Aberlemno I was nominated as one of Scotland's favourite archive images as part of the HLF funded *Treasured Places*.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 Evidential 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 for example. 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.

Aberlemno I is an exceptional example of a Class I Pictish symbol stone. It stands out in the archaeological record as a near perfect surviving example of Pictish art on stone. Its completeness and state of preservation are of great importance to its current and future potential in research and education. Considered as part of the Aberlemno group the stones can demonstrate the evolution of Pictish carving from Class I to Class III.

The stone more than likely stands in its original location on a prominent ridge,<sup>13</sup> 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',<sup>14</sup> 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'.<sup>15</sup> Due to the clarity and confidence of the carvings on Aberlemno I, it therefore has the potential to clearly highlight and identify some of the various differing symbols within Pictish art – a pictorial language unique to Pictland during the early medieval period.

## 2.3 Historical values

Pictish symbols are explicitly identifiable as indicators of Pictish culture, yet without the discovery of 'contemporary literary reference' they will remain difficult to understand.<sup>16</sup> Aberlemno I and other Pictish carved stones,

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<sup>11</sup> Carty 2005, 368-69

<sup>12</sup> *Treasured Places* n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Ritchie 1995, 8

<sup>14</sup> Foster 2001, 31

<sup>15</sup> Foster 2004, 1

<sup>16</sup> Henderson 1967, 158

although carved with beautiful but generally unintelligible symbols,<sup>17</sup> are of great historical value.

Aberlemno I displays no Christian iconography, although this does not necessarily mean that it was carved within a society devoid of Christianity. As a reused prehistoric standing stone this Pictish symbol stone highlights a potential important relationship between the Picts and the prehistoric monuments they must have encountered in their landscapes.

Other than the cup-marked back face this stone displays Pictish symbols, the language of which remains difficult to fully understand and translate.<sup>18</sup>

#### 2.4 Architectural and artistic values

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

- This stone is architecturally basic, as it has been utilised in its natural unworked form. It was once a cup-marked prehistoric standing stone. Its natural shape however, as a prominent pillar, is significant, as this may have attracted the Picts to adopt and subsequently re-carve it.
- The symbols incised on Aberlemno I can be found elsewhere in Pictland, particularly on carved stones and metalwork. They are artistically beautiful and enchanting. The parallels are numerous and the discussion below aims to highlight some of the most significant of these. This list is not exhaustive, rather it is indicative.
- The double disc and z-rod design can be seen on a Class I stone from Dyce in Aberdeenshire,<sup>19</sup> and also a slight variation of this can be found on the back face of Aberlemno III,<sup>20</sup> with the latter perhaps indicative of a later interpretation of the same symbol.
- The mirror and comb can be found on a Class I stone at Nether Corskie in Aberdeenshire, alongside a mirror case, and notably this stone is probably a reused standing stone.<sup>21</sup> Dunnichen, a Class I symbol stone also from Angus, exhibits both the double disc and z-rod and the mirror and comb combination, along with a flower but not the serpent<sup>22</sup> Dunnichen ultimately displays a close resemblance to Aberlemno I through their sharing of similar groups of symbols.
- The serpent can be found in conjunction with a mirror and comb, as well as a flower, on Knockando II from Moray,<sup>23</sup> again displaying a close resemblance to Aberlemno I through its group of carvings. The serpent can also be found at Ulbster in Caithness in the Highlands.<sup>24</sup> Here it is displayed on a Class II stone amongst a variety of other Pictish beasts and symbols, as well as the Christian cross.

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<sup>17</sup> Henderson 1967, 157-8

<sup>18</sup> Forsyth 1997, 85-99

<sup>19</sup> Fraser 2008, 13

<sup>20</sup> Fraser 2008, 48

<sup>21</sup> Fraser 2008, 34

<sup>22</sup> Fraser 2008, 52

<sup>23</sup> Fraser 2008, 112

<sup>24</sup> Fraser 2008, 78-9

- Pictish symbols, similar to those on Aberlemno I, are found on other mediums, such as metalwork and jewellery. For example, the serpent can be found on the back of the Erchless pendant from Inverness-shire,<sup>25</sup> and the double disc and z-rod can be found on the terminal ring of a Pictish silver chain from Whitecleugh in Lanarkshire.<sup>26</sup>

The above discussion of the artistic parallels and the associated geographical spread of the iconographies carved attests to the artistic value of Aberlemno I.

## 2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

As with the majority of early medieval carved stones, our appreciation of its relationship to the surrounding landscape and aesthetic significance has changed over time. This is relative to the 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 the context of the meanings and association of earlier landscape settings.

Aberlemno I is aesthetically significant due to the clarity, confidence and survival of its carvings. Its current state of preservation is excellent.

### **Original Aesthetic**

Currently, this stone stands in what is thought to be its original location on a ridge that became a significant route way.<sup>27</sup> Presently, there are two more stones seemingly also specifically sited on this route way (B9134) in Aberlemno. These are Aberlemno III and IV. The original intended relationship and intervisibility of this group of stones (probably including also Aberlemno II, the churchyard stone) is not known with certainty. However, it seems likely that they were perceived and intended as a group.

### **Historic Aesthetic**

The stone was appreciated for its aesthetic values during the late historic period. This is evidenced in the antiquarian drawings of the stone in its current roadside location.<sup>28</sup> 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 19th century.<sup>29</sup> Concern for its artistic aesthetic was expressed at the start of the 19th century and is evidenced in the creation of blueprints to house the stone.<sup>30</sup>

### **Present Day Aesthetic**

The present day environs of Aberlemno I, shared with stones III and IV, is by a quiet country road, and the group is still perceived as features against the skyline.

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<sup>25</sup> Henderson and Henderson 2004, 95

<sup>26</sup> Henderson and Henderson 2004, 88

<sup>27</sup> Ritchie 1995, 8

<sup>28</sup> RCAHMS n.d.

<sup>29</sup> Jervise 1857, 192

<sup>30</sup> Foster 2001, 21-3



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,<sup>31</sup> 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 heritage significance is apparent for the stone itself.

## 2.7 Contemporary/use values

### **Social Values**

#### Community

Since the late 18th century the stone has attracted antiquarians to the community of Aberlemno to experience it and its associated stones. The discovery of human remains in close proximity to it in the 19th century clearly must have sparked greater interest in the cultural significance of the stone. This is subsequently attested by the ongoing debate in the community regarding whether or not the stone should be removed from the roadside for its own protection.<sup>32</sup>

#### Spiritual

As the stone is openly accessible and easily encountered 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 three 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

Although the site is unstaffed it is freely accessible. There is a PDF leaflet briefly detailing early carved stones available online for download from Historic Environment Scotland. This is titled *Investigating – Early Carved Stones*,<sup>33</sup> and is also available in Gaelic. The stone is also featured in the

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<sup>31</sup> Foster 2001, 23

<sup>32</sup> Foster 2001, 21

<sup>33</sup> Historic Scotland 2009

*Angus Pictish Trail* leaflet.<sup>34</sup> Due to the clarity of this stone it clearly has an educational value with regards to generating discussions about the meaning of its Pictish symbols.

#### Corporate Value

Although the stone is in the care of Historic Environment 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 and potential vandalism. This is managed by covering the stone for six months of the year during the autumn and winter and so demonstrates best practice with regards to safeguarding the stone at the same time as allowing it to be experienced during the warmer months. Permission has been 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 it is widely discussed and referred to in other art historical literature.
- 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 stone's 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 I and both the symbol stone from Flemington Farm and the cross-slab from Woodwrae?<sup>35</sup>
- Does the stone have any associated sites or settlements?
- What do the Pictish symbols represent on this carved stone?

### 4 Associated properties

Other Pictish cross-slabs/crosses – Aberlemno II, III and IV; Flemington Farm; Woodwrae; Meikle Museum; St Vigean's Museum.

Other – Finavon fort.

Note – There is a high concentration of Pictish carved stones in the Angus area.

### 5 Keywords

Pictish; symbol stone; Pictish symbols; Insular art; Aberlemno; Angus; metalwork

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<sup>34</sup> Atkinson 2010

<sup>35</sup> See Fraser 2008, 48-9 and 62-3

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Timeline

- **c.6<sup>th</sup> - c.7<sup>th</sup> C.** – Aberlemno I 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,<sup>36</sup> and ultimately leading to a Northumbrian loss of territory in Pictland.<sup>37</sup>
- **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.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Fraser 2009, 383; Woolf 2007, 10

<sup>37</sup> Woolf 2007, 4

<sup>38</sup> Henderson 1967, 82

- **843** – Cináed mac Ailpín becomes king of the Picts.<sup>39</sup>
- **1678** – The stone is possibly recorded, along with Aberlemno III and IV, on a map by Robert Edward.<sup>40</sup>
- **1772** – Noted by Thomas Pennant.<sup>41</sup>
- **1788** – Illustrated by Charles Cordiner.<sup>42</sup>
- **1832** – Sketch produced by James Skene<sup>43</sup>
- **c.1857** – A small cairn of stones, as well as human bones and coffins are said to have been found nearby to the stone.<sup>44</sup>
- **1912** – The stone was passed into guardianship.<sup>45</sup>
- **1913** – Drawings created of a potential shelter for the stone.<sup>46</sup>
- **2002** – Archaeoptics Ltd undertook a 3D laser scan of the stone.<sup>47</sup>
- **2007** – A drawing of Aberlemno I was nominated as one of Scotland's favourite archive images,<sup>48</sup> highlighting its continual ability to capture imaginations.

#### Appendix 2: Summary of archaeological investigations

In around 1857 Andrew Jervise visited the site and noted that Aberlemno I stood a little north of a small circle or cairn of stones.<sup>49</sup> 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 of stone coffins and human bones in the field next to Aberlemno I.<sup>50</sup>

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

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<sup>39</sup> Woolf 2007, 351

<sup>40</sup> Edward 1678

<sup>41</sup> Pennant 1776, 167

<sup>42</sup> Cordiner 1788; RCAHMS n.d.

<sup>43</sup> RCAHMS n.d.

<sup>44</sup> Jervise 1857, 192

<sup>45</sup> Foster 2004, 1

<sup>46</sup> Foster 2001, 21-3

<sup>47</sup> Carty 2005, 368-69

<sup>48</sup> Treasured Places n.d.

<sup>49</sup> Jervise 1857, 192

<sup>50</sup> Jervise 1857, 192