


Mysterious Symbols in the North: An Analysis of Scotland's Pictish Symbol Stones

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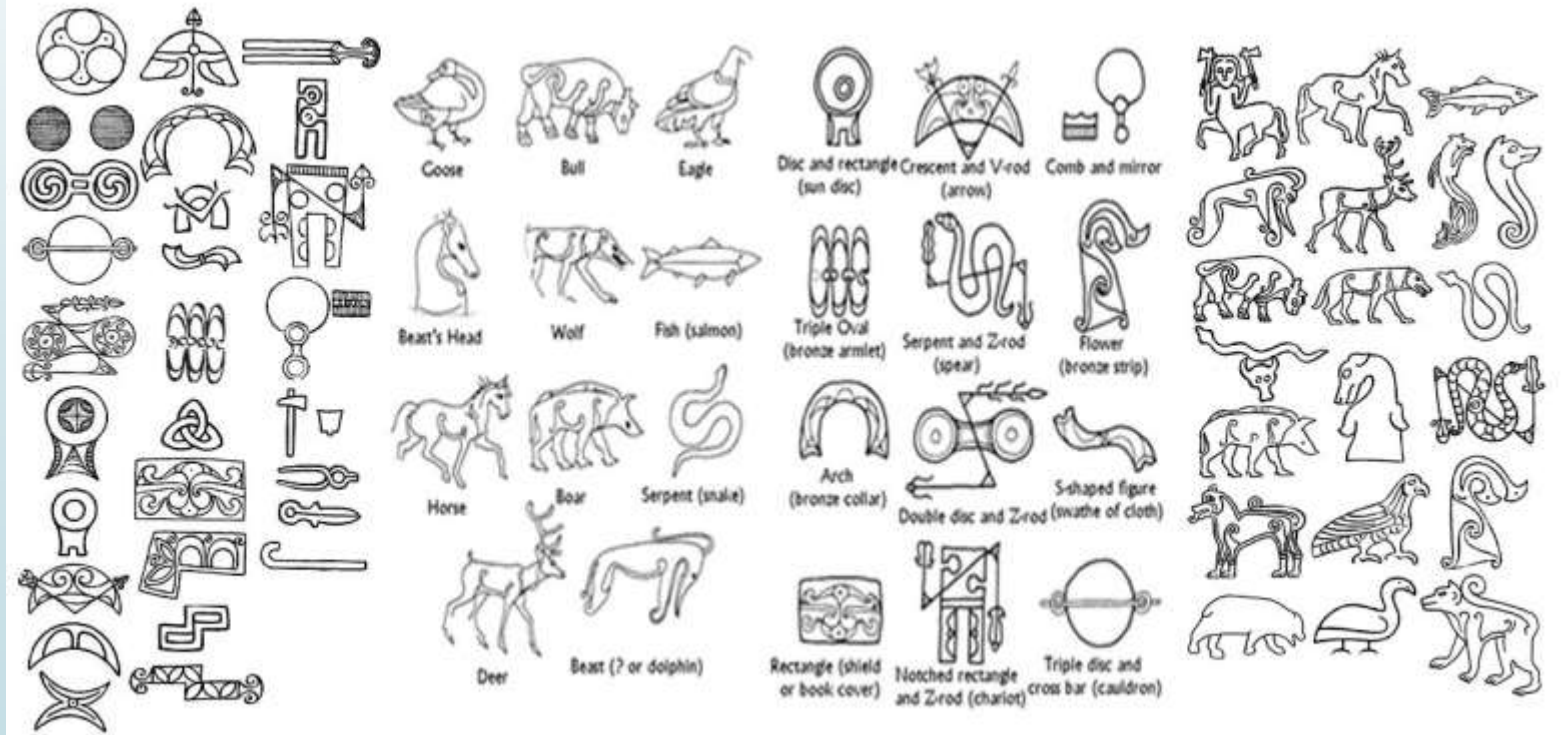
History

- Romans first made contact during the later days of the Roman Empire
- *Pictii*, or the Painted People
 - Occupied the North of Scotland
 - Origin story written by the Venerable Bede



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- ~“The Pictish race (*gens Pictorum*) sailed from Scythia, as they assert (*ut perhibent*) into Ocean in a few long-ships, and were carried by the wind beyond the furthest bounds of Britain, reaching Ireland and landing on its northern shores. There they found the Irish race (*gens Scottorum*) and asked permission to settle among them, but their request was refused... The Irish answered that the island would not hold them both; ‘but we can give you some good advice as to what to do’, they said, ‘We know of another island not far from our own, in an easterly direction, which we often see in the distance on clear days. If you will go there, you can make a settlement for yourselves. But if anyone resists you, make use of our help’ (*nobilis auxiliaries utimini*).
 - And so the Picts went to Britain and proceeded to occupy the northern parts of the island, because the Britons (*Brettones*) had seized the southern regions. As the Picts had no wives, they asked them of the Irish, who consented to give them, but only on condition that, where the matter came into doubt (*ube res uenireet in dubium*), they should elect their kings from the female royal line rather than the male. And it is well known that the custom has been observed among the Picti to this day.”

The Symbols



Classifying the Stones

- Class 1 – unworked stones that possess only basic symbols. Typically date from 6th to 8th centuries
- Class 2 – worked stones typically found with a cross on one or both sides



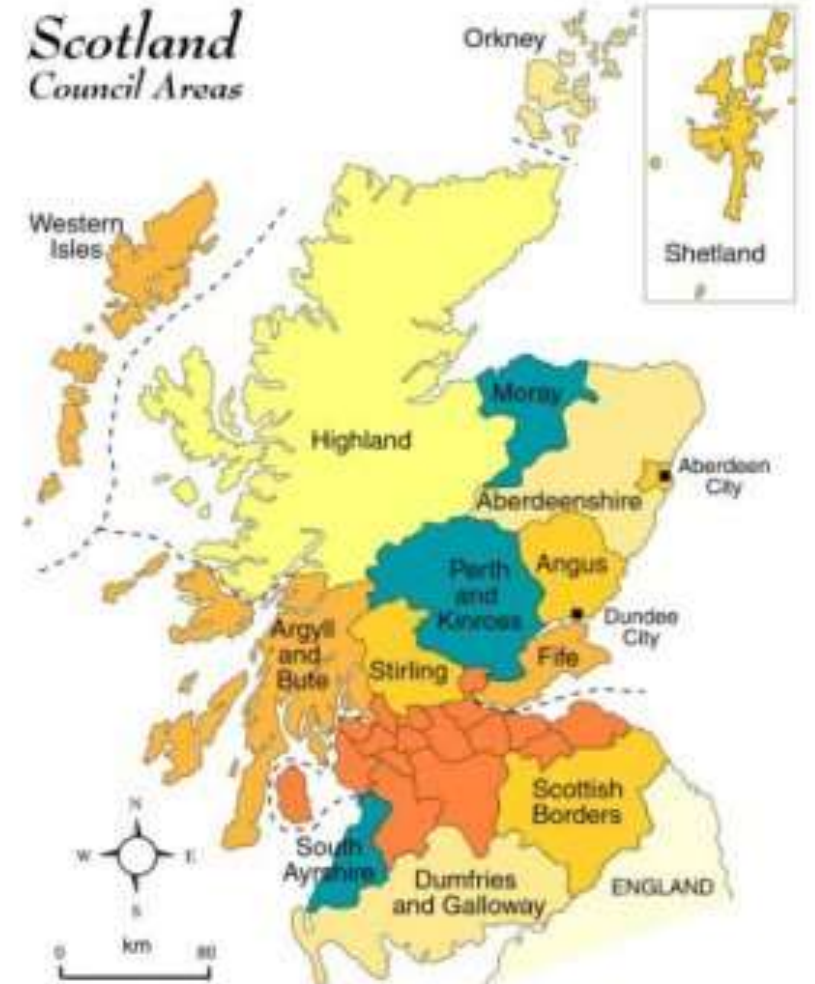
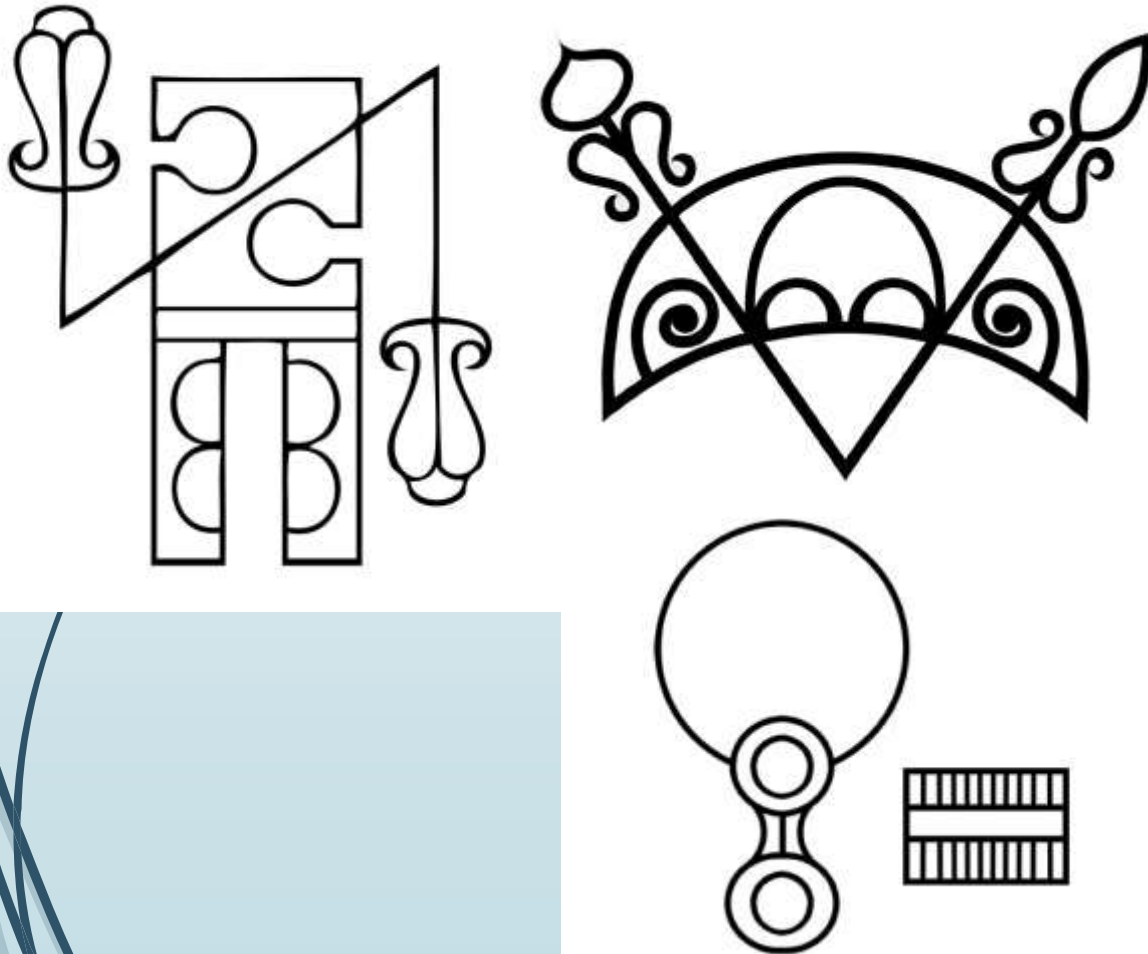



Theories on the Symbols

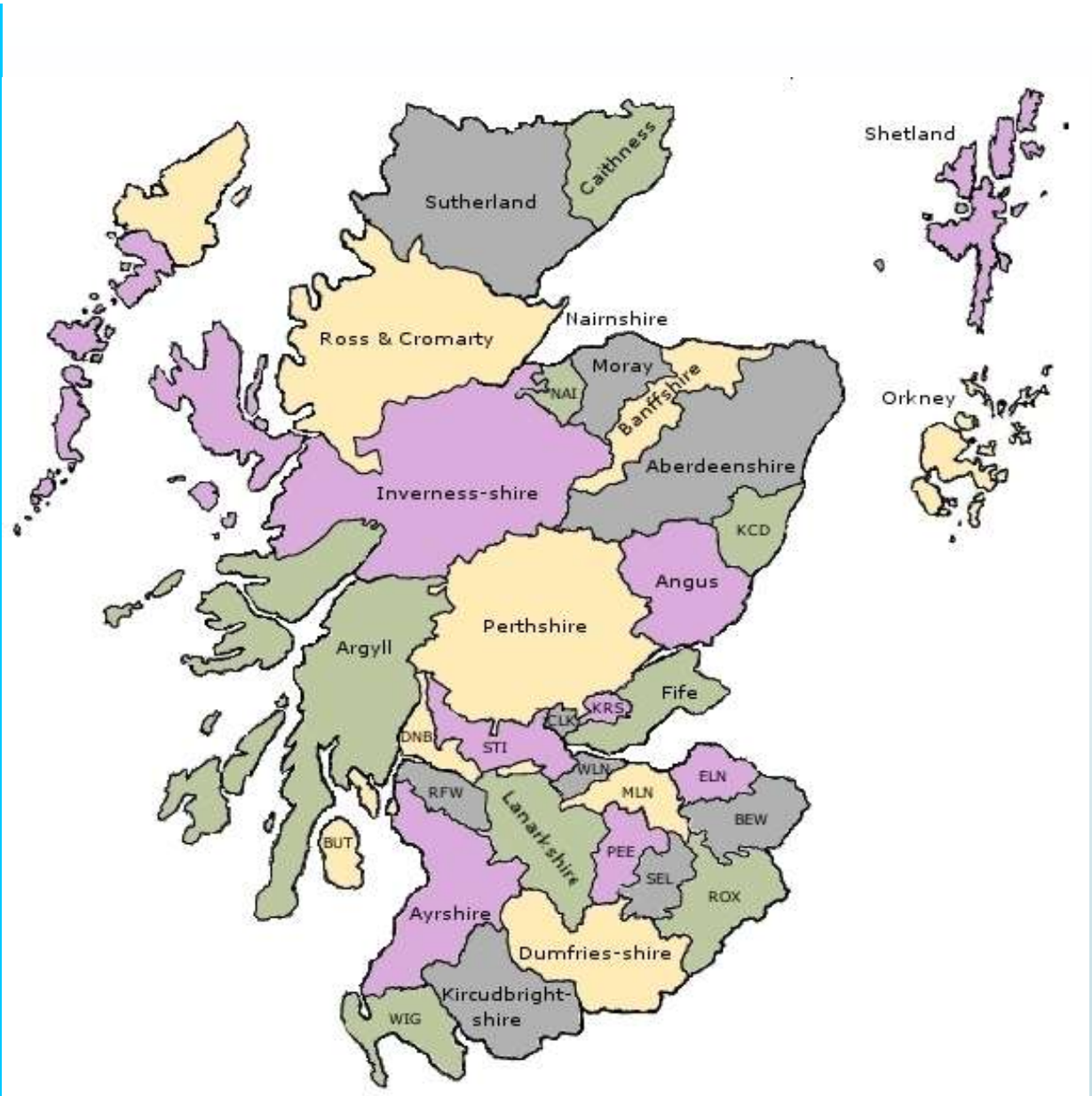
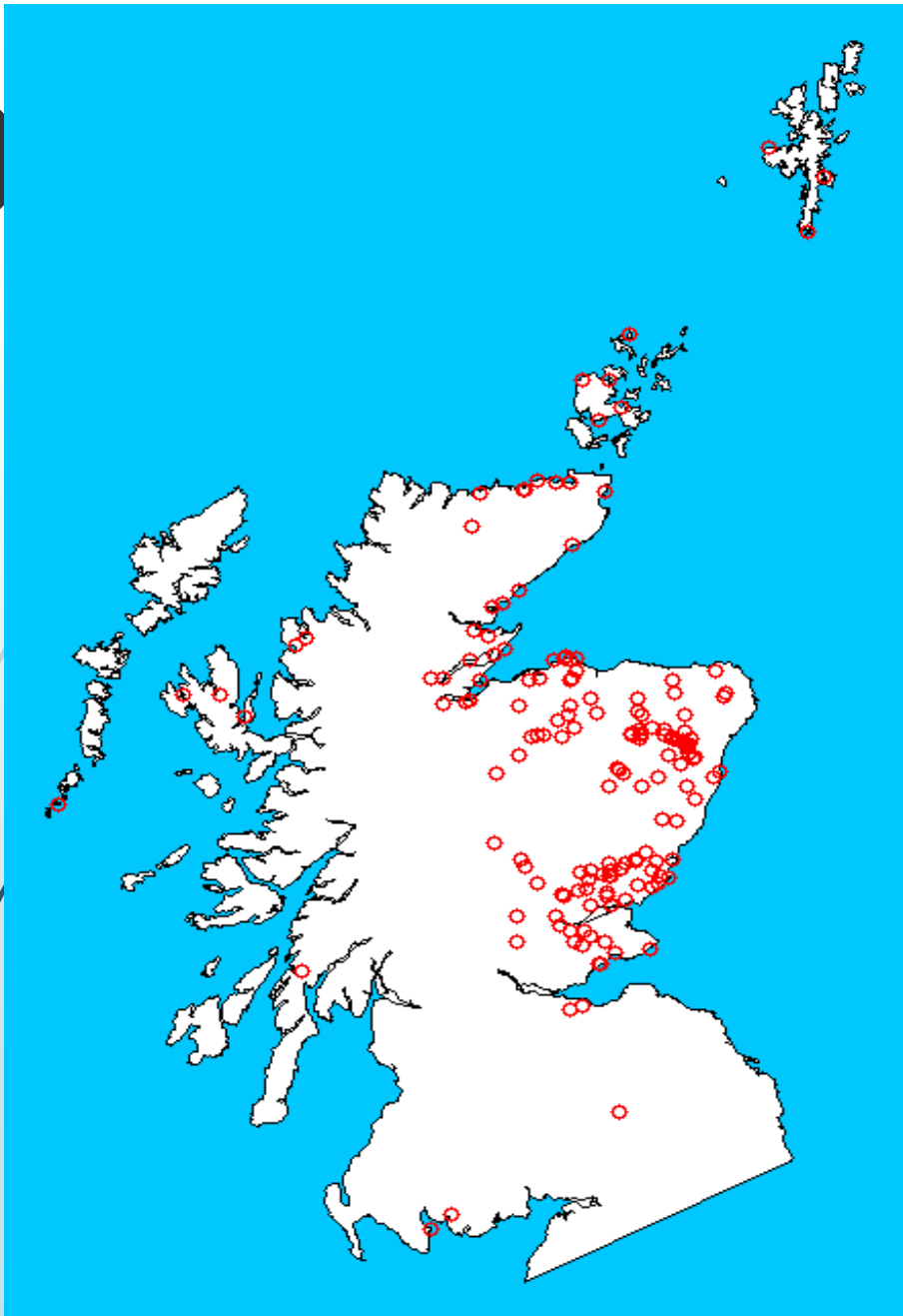
- ▶ Commemorative symbols for departed Picts
- ▶ Recording matrilinear marriage alliances
- ▶ A language following quasi-grammatical rules
- ▶ Land ownership symbols
- ▶ Di-thematic additive structure of recording names
- ▶ A response to Christian missionaries, reasserting identity

Distribution of Symbols

- ▶ Taking symbols by region, I looked at the most common examples



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- Aberdeenshire has the highest proportion of symbols, with 8 double rectangles, 5 crescent and v-rods, 5 mirrors, and 4 mirrors and combs
 - Angus and Moray were tied with 12 of these symbols each, although Moray contains predominantly crescent and v-rods while Angus has a more even spread
 - The mirror and comb occurs over a wide area of Scotland. The mirror appears alone occasionally, but the comb never appears without the mirror.
 - Instances of the mirror appearing by itself seem relegated to the northern and eastern coasts.



Comparisons Elsewhere

- ▶ Southern Scandinavia
- ▶ Northumberland



A dark blue arrow points to the right from the left edge of the slide. Several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide, starting from the bottom and curving upwards and to the right.

Portability

- ▶ Size comparisons of the stand-alone rocks
 - ▶ Not in a wall
 - ▶ Not on a wall, like cave art
- ▶ Normal curve, skewed towards the smaller sizes
 - ▶ 20 'massive' rocks
 - ▶ 20 'very small' or 'portable' rocks



What does this mean?

- ▶ Throughout all my data, Aberdeenshire seems to have the most symbols present
 - ▶ More highly populated? Perhaps a refuge from Christian missionaries coming from the south and west, but more habitable than the highlands?
- ▶ The crescent and v-rod is one of the most prominent symbols, along with the double rectangle and z-rod and the Pictish Beast
- ▶ Maybe its religious
- ▶ Portability was perhaps a factor
- ▶ Prestige associated with raising standing stones and carving into them

