Some Pictish symbols: leatherworking diagrams and razor holders?

*Chris Lynn*  

**Abstract**

In the course of an examination of the combinatory characteristics of Pictish symbols, a series of suggestions arose which may constitute insights into what objects some of the hitherto obscure symbols originally represented. Some symbols appear to represent aspects of leatherworking, specifically the manufacture of cases for mirrors and crescentic knives, others were probably derived from late Roman bronze razor holders.

**Introduction**

Pictish symbols, many carved in pairs on pillar stones in NE Scotland, probably from the 5th to the 8th century AD, form an interesting and as yet partly unresolved puzzle. This can be approached on the basis that the symbols were probably derived from objects that were familiar to the people of the time, but which may not have survived in that form in the archaeological record. The symbols find no parallel in Ireland and were carved at a time when the Ulster Cycle was taking shape. It is interesting to see what monuments Ulster’s neighbours to the NE were creating at this time in a region with which there were many contacts including documented ecclesiastical visits.\(^2\)

The challenge of the symbols can be divided into two main areas: what do the individual obscure symbols represent and what was the overall purpose of the symbol stones? This paper is concerned solely with the first question though the work began as an attempt to address the latter. The pairings of the symbols were examined to see if some of the symbol

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\(^2\) For example ‘Adomnan in his life of St Columba tells the story of how one of the earliest of these crosses…was made by the saint himself when he marked the gates of the hilltop fortress near Loch Ness, the northern base of the powerful pagan Pictish king Bridei, with “the sign of the Lord’s cross”…’ (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 159).
types tend to occur more frequently than average together or if some symbols tend to avoid one another. This was considered initially as a question of patterns of combination and little attention was paid to what the symbols represented or why they were carved on stones in pairs, though it was hoped some insight into their purpose might emerge in a further stage. So far the study has concentrated mainly on the more numerous Class I stones on the assumption that they are generally earlier (and the depicted symbols are therefore closer to their origins) than the more elaborate and somewhat stylized Class II stones. The study was to be based mainly on the pairing characteristics of the three most common symbols: Crescent and V-Rod, Double Disc and Z-Rod and Elephant (or Pictish Beast). This approach, which is not pursued here, is open to question because there is little evidence, apart from numeric superiority, that the Pictish symbol carvers regarded these three symbols as more important than other symbols or that they in some way dominated three constituencies or preferential groupings of other symbols.

While some patterns in symbol type associations do emerge, both of affinity and avoidance, they are complicated to explain and difficult to interpret. A continuing problem is that we don’t know what many of the more numerous symbols are – what object or thing do they represent? Suddenly, in the course of this lengthy analysis several ideas arose which seemed to provide worthwhile insights into the origins of some of the symbols that are worth putting on record. First, so that the context and rationale of what is suggested may be apparent it is proposed to summarise the available information already published for the more obscure symbols (those that it is proposed to illuminate).

The Pictish symbols in summary

This research on Pictish symbol stones has relied almost exclusively on Alastair Mack’s *Field Guide to the Pictish Symbol Stones* (1997). The logical and comprehensive presentation of the data in that book and some of the interpretations suggested there triggered the further insights proposed here. As background to what follows the information about the individual symbols will be summarised directly from Mack (1997), concentrating on the more obscure symbols and only for completeness listing those where it is obvious what they are, for

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3 Detailed research had already been published on this aspect, for example in Jackson (1984).

4 Initial capitals are used in references to defined symbols.
example animals, fish and birds.

Pictish symbols mainly occur carved on (generally) standing stones believed by some to mark burials, and are now grouped in two classes: Class I stones are unworked natural slabs or pillars with incised symbols. Class II stones are shaped slabs or pillars which are carved in relief with a cross on one face and with the symbols and sometimes other scenes on the other face. At the time of writing (Mack 1997) there were 181 Class I stones and 61 Class II stones. Some 40 different symbols (see below) are known and most of these appear on stones of both classes. Some symbols are common, with 30 or more examples known, whereas others are represented by only one or a few examples. It is generally believed that the Class I stones are earlier because of their relative simplicity though the symbol carvings are often finely executed. It is suggested that the Class I stones span the period from the 5th or 6th century to the 8th and that the Class II stones overlap in time, dating from the mid- or late-7th century to the 9th (Mack 1997, x).^5

There are almost always two different symbols on each intact stone, constituting a pair. Frequently, however, a Mirror-and-Comb appears as a third symbol which is regarded as ‘additional’ to the main pair (Mack 1997, xi). It is suggested that the pair of symbols represented the family names of the parents of a person commemorated, or the person’s own symbol with that of their husband or wife. When there is only one pair on a stone it may be that it was erected to commemorate a man: where the pair is accompanied by a Mirror or Mirror-and-Comb, it is suggested that the person commemorated may have been a woman (Mack 1997, xi).

The symbol stones occur throughout Pictland and are most common: around the City of Dundee in Fife, in Perth and Kinross and in Angus; in a band stretching north-westwards from Aberdeen; in Moray and on the east coast stretching from around Inverness northwards through Ross and Cromarty, Sutherland, Caithness and into Orkney. There are some ten scattered outliers in western Scotland. The symbols are here described in summary in descending order of frequency following Mack’s 1997 catalogue (to which the reader is

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^5 The symbols sometimes occur on metal objects, for example the terminal rings of a silver chain from Parkhill, Aberdeenshire and on a pair of leaf-shaped silver plaques from Norrie’s Law, Fife (Fraser 2008, 138).
referred for fuller information). The suggestions about the interpretation of the symbols are those from Mack (1997), showing where considered opinion had evolved to at that time.

![Crescent and V-Rod](image)

**Fig. 1 Crescent and V-Rod.**

*Crescent and V-Rod (86)*

The V-rod is almost certainly an arrow, but the crescent is not a bow: its lower end is curved (Mack 1997, 2). A majority of V-rods have one end shaped like an arrowhead and the other end is flighted (Fig. 1). Most have twin curlies behind each end-piece, but these are probably decorative. The Crescent (7) on its own is similar to the crescent of the Crescent and V-Rod but lacks the ‘arrow’ or V-Rod.

![Crescent on its own](image)

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6 Iain Fraser’s illustrated catalogue (2008) is also invaluable.

7 The number with each symbol is the total of that type known on both Class I and Class II stones in 1997.
There is no doubt that the Mirror and Mirror-and-Comb (Fig. 2) are exactly what they appear to be (Mack 1997, 4-5). The Combs often have carefully carved teeth on one or both sides. The Mirror-and-Comb pair or Mirror alone is (nearly) always additional to another pair of symbols.

Like the commonest symbol its origin is uncertain; ‘It must certainly represent something specific...’ (Mack 1997, 6). The discs usually contain smaller concentric discs, often with a central dot. The joining bars have concave sides (Fig. 3). The Z-Rod resembles a ball-ended Iron Age type spear with a spearhead at the upper end. The ball or flight end is usually twin-curlicued and on the shaft behind the spearhead are sets of ‘floriations’ or forward-facing curlicues (Mack 1997, 6).
Fig. 4 Double Disc.

**Double Disc** (21)
This is the same as the previous symbol but it lacks a Z-Rod (Fig. 4). Three of the Class I Double Discs are ‘notched’ in one or both discs, a variation that does not appear on any Double Disc and Z-Rod symbols.

Fig. 5 Elephant.

**Elephant** (or **Pictish Beast**) (54)
The Elephant is a long-snouted beast with spiralled feet and a spiral-ended antenna that thrusts back from the top of its head and a drooping, spiral-ended tail (Fig. 5). ‘Like most symbols its origin is a mystery...It may be an object symbol rather than an animal
Anderson remarked that unlike the animal symbols which appear on Class II stones the Class II elephants are sometimes filled with interlace or fretwork or spirals as are...many of the Class II crescents and double discs...The origin of the elephant is therefore likely to have been an object, not an animal’ (Mack 1997, 8-9).8

Fig. 6 Horseshoe.

_Horseshoe_ (20)

This is one of the very few object symbols (Fig. 6) that can pretend to have a recognisable origin.9 Mack (1997, 10) relays a suggestion by Thomas (1963, 57) that two of the Class I Horseshoes (Rothiebrisbane, Aberdeenshire and Crosskirk, Caithness) might be representations of hinged bronze collars of the second century.10 The Horseshoe may be an early symbol; there is only one Class II example.

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8 Quoting Allen and Anderson (1903) _The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland_ I, lxii-lxiii.

9 Horseshoes were unlikely to have been current in Scotland at this time.

10 Counties and administrative divisions are as given in Mack (1997).
Mack (1997, 11) noted that the Mirror Case appears to lack a recognisable origin, ‘No known artifact resembles it, and it is called the mirror-case only because it looks a little like one...’. Almost all the Mirror Cases are rimmed and some are decorated (Fig. 7). The bases are approximately rectangular, most with sides of concave arcs, ‘...the flared bases and the symbol’s shape may show that the origin was indeed a case for a mirror. If made of leather or textile such cases could have been pulled down over mirrors as protective coverings.’ (Mack 1997, 11). It seems likely that these are indeed mirror cases. Among the symbols are many definite mirrors so the existence of cases for such vulnerable artifacts would not be surprising. The mirror was probably inserted handle first down into the case (as usually depicted), so that the handle is housed in the narrower base and the wider mirror in the round part which was open at the top. The rectangular gap at the bottom of some examples may have been used to push the mirror by its handle up out of the case.

It is worth drawing attention now to something the significance of which will be apparent later: that is, the Double Disc (and Z-Rod) looks like two Mirror Cases joined together base to base. A similar thought occurred to G. Lloyd-Morgan (1980), quoted by Laing and Laing (1984, 268), who thought that the Double Disc might represent a lidded mirror, and to Henderson and Henderson (2004, 79).
Fig. 8 Rectangle or Wallet.

Rectangle or Wallet (17)
This may be an early symbol. The Rectangle is usually horizontal and is almost always bisected horizontally or decorated or both (Fig. 8). It may represent a kind of container with a flap (Mack 1997, 13). L. and J. Laing interpreted the Rectangle as a comb case, citing the example from Clyneirkton, Sutherland (Laing and Laing 1984, 265, fig. 2, c). There are definite combs among the symbols so by analogy with the Mirrors, comb cases are to be expected.

Fig. 9 Triple Disc.

Triple Disc (14)
This symbol consists of a large ring with a smaller one at each side and could represent a cauldron seen from above (Fig. 9). Some examples have what appears to be a suspension bar and in others the small lateral rings appear to be linked to the large one as they would be on a
cauldron (Mack 1997, 15). One could add that the symmetrical patterns sometimes seen within the large rings, for example on the Triple Disc from Monymusk, Aberdeenshire, look like those that might form on the surface of a liquid being heated from below (Mack 1997, 15, fig 7).\textsuperscript{11}

![Fig. 10 Serpent and Z-Rod.](image)

\textit{Serpent} (9) and \textit{Serpent and Z-Rod} (14)

The Serpents and Z-Rods, whether Class I or Class II, are similar in appearance and their serpents, three of which are ‘scaled’, are more formally laid out than the simple serpents, as they would have to be to mesh with the Z-Rod (Fig. 10). The Z-Rod is similar to the ‘spear’ of the Double Disc. One end is sometimes spear-pointed with curlicues and the other is often a curlicued ball. The origin of the Serpent and Z-Rod could be ‘the bronze serpentine armlet common in eastern Scotland in the second century, which would have been worn by many of the Pictish nobility’s ancestors.’ (Mack 1997, 16-17).

\textsuperscript{11} I do not propose to comment further on this symbol as the received explanation is plausible.
Fig. 11 Divided Rectangle and Z-Rod.

*Divided Rectangle* (6) and *Divided Rectangle and Z-Rod* (10)
The divided rectangle may represent a chariot (Mack 1997, 17 quoting Thomas 1963, 53-54). A majority of the more intact examples have a circular re-entrant on each side that may represent wheels and four of the Class II examples have in each projection a pair of closed semi-circular re-entrants which may represent the bodies of horses (Fig. 11). The Z-Rod might be a spear like the Z-Rod of the Double Disc, but some look more like flighted arrows (Mack 1997, 17-18).

Fig. 12 Tuning Fork.

*Tuning Fork*
This may represent a divided sword of a type that reached Scotland in the first century (Mack 1997, 20, quoting Thomas 1963, 52-53). The pommel is pelta-like and similar to those of first century swords, but the blade is invariably divided, usually for almost its entire length (Fig. 12).
Fig. 13 Disc.

Disc (8)
Four of the eight examples of this exclusively Class I symbol (Fig. 13) contain three smaller discs in triangular formation; another has three small discs with no enclosing ring (Mack 1997, 20-21).

Fig. 14 Flower.

Flower (8)
This symbol (Fig. 14) is like a broad-based flower or plant with heads shaped like convex trumpet-mouths, hanging over to one side (Mack 1997, 21-22).
Fig. 15 Dog’s Head.

Dog’s Head (1)
The one example is on a stone from Rhynie, Aberdeenshire (no 5). Facing left and lacking decoration it resembles a glove-puppet (Fig. 15). A similar shape is engraved on the two leaf-shaped silver plates from the Norrie’s Law, Fife hoard and another now lost was on a crescent-shaped plate from Monifieth, Angus (Mack 1997, 22-23).

Step (6)
Five of the Step symbols are Class II and are decorated. The example on the Monymusk cross slab has pelta-like projections at its ends (Mack 1997, 23).

Fig. 16 Ogee.

Ogee (5)
Three examples of the Ogee (Drimmies, Aberdeenshire and Kintradwell, Sutherland, nos 1 and 2) are very similar with internal lines and collars around their centres (Fig. 16) while the example from Mortlach, Moray, no 2 resembles a double snap-hook (Mack 1997, 23). 12

Triple-Oval (5)

12 I suggest that the Mortlach example is a double snap-hook.
This symbol may represent an armlet, but if so it is of an unknown type (Mack 1997, 24-25).

**Fig. 17 Double Crescent.**

*Double Crescent* (4)

‘This symbol may be of the same origin as the crescent and V-rod, but its crescents are usually longer and more slender’ (Mack 1997, 25).

The remaining symbols are listed below for completeness: they are in general not obscure in terms of the object or animal that they depict or represent.

Salmon or Fish (18 examples)
Eagle (15)
‘Beast’ (2)
Boar (3)
Bull (9)
Horse (1)
Stag (1)
Bull’s Head (1)
Deer’s Head (6)
‘Helmet’ (1)
Twin Disc (2)
Square (1)

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13 The significance of this observation will become apparent below.

14 This remains an enigmatic symbol.

15 Possibly a cast bronze strap distributor?
Anvil (2)
Hammer (2)
Pincers/Tongs (2)
Sword (1)
Shears (1)
Wheel (2)

SUGGESTED INTERPRETATIONS OF SOME OF THE OBSCURE SYMBOLS

Divided Rectangle, source of material for Mirror Case and Wallet

The key to understanding the nature and origin of some of the more obscure symbols depended initially on identifying what one of them might be. This led to conclusions about some of the other arguably related symbols that cumulatively and consistently seem to reinforce one another. It had been surmised in the past that the Divided Rectangle might be the gate to a fort or that it could represent a chariot (Mack 1997, 17). What it actually seems to be is a piece of material with the makings of a Mirror Case (two circles with rectangular protrusions) and a rectangular area cut out of it (Fig. 18). This confirms, with a little faith, that the Mirror Case is indeed what it purports to be (as suggested by earlier commentators). Further, the rectangular piece cut out of the Divided Rectangle (when folded over) may well be the raw material for what appears elsewhere as the common Wallet or Rectangle symbol. Since the Mirror-and-Comb symbols often appear together, we can be fairly confident that the Wallet or Rectangle is in fact a comb case (this identification was already proposed by L. and J. Laing 1984, 265, Ill. 2).

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16 The discussion of possible interpretations of the symbols is rehearsed below in the same order as the thoughts occurred in order to show how one idea led to another. The external evidence on which some of the identifications are based was not available until recently.

17 The ‘chariot wheels’ are always staggered in relation to one another, probably to optimise the area of material available for the mirror cases.

18 The Wallet and Mirror Case frequently appear paired, seldom with one another, but with some of the other 30-odd symbols, showing that as main symbols they are generally independent of one another, unlike the mirrors and combs they were intended to house.
One Mirror Case from Advie, Badenoch and Strathspey is described by Alastair Mack (1997, 11 and 105, fig. 27) as being gathered up at the base like a piece of material, others appear to have had a rectangular notch cut out of the base, for example that on the stone from Sandside, Caithness (Fraser 2008, 78). It was suggested above that this notch was to facilitate extraction of the mirror from the case (by pushing), but in no such Mirror Case is there any hint that the lower ring of the mirror handle is visible. The lower rectangular parts of the Mirror Cases are narrow in relation to the round upper parts so it is probable that the mirrors were inserted and withdrawn through the upper, round edge of the case: even so, the ring of the mirror handle should be visible in the notch below. It is possible, therefore, that the Mirror Cases and presumably also the Wallets or comb cases, when depicted as symbols, were imagined to be empty?

**Double Disc is material for a one-piece Mirror Case opened out and awaiting sewing**

A question arose as to why it is only the Serpent, and the Divided Rectangle and the Double Disc that are frequently accompanied by a Z-Rod? What did the Z-Rod signify, what difference does/did it make? It would appear that only those three symbols are entwined with a Z-Rod, therefore they are all probably closely related in some way; in fact they are probably all the same substance; that is a Serpent or a Serpent’s skin (or other fine leather). This can be further substantiated by some Divided Rectangles and Z-Rods which have a series of opposed semicircles on either side of the gap left by the removal of the central rectangle, for example, Clynemilton, Sutherland and Arndilly, Moray (Fraser 2008, 97 and 103). These are unlikely to indicate of the presence of horses in a cart-like chariot as earlier suggested; rather they could be stylised representations of the markings on a snake’s (adder’s) back. Many of the
Wallets have supplementary decoration, but some also exhibit semicircles matching those which would have been cut out of the patterned Divided Rectangle, for example, that on the stone from Golspie, Sutherland (Fraser 2008, 99). Thus, some at least of the Mirror Cases and comb cases (Rectangles or Wallets) could have been imagined and depicted as made of snakeskin.

As noted earlier it is clear that many Double Disc and Z-Rods and Double Discs are carved to look like two Mirror Cases joined together, base to base, without a central gap: ‘The erect “mirror case” symbol…is only distinguishable from one half of the “double disc” symbol by the latter normally being placed horizontally’ (Henderson and Henderson 2004, 79). This may arise from an artistic tendency to treat similar shapes in a similar manner in terms of outline and decoration, for example mirror handles often resemble the Double Disc symbol, as on the Newbigging Leslie, Aberdeenshire stone (Fraser 2008, 34). It could on the other hand deliberately reflect some direct connection between the meanings of the symbols. A likely explanation for the Double Discs (and Z-Rods) is that they represent a stage in the manufacture of a Mirror Case where the whole case, consisting of two sides joined at the bottom, has been cut out longitudinally in one piece from a single length of material. The extant Double Discs show no relic snakeskin pattern: it could be that they were embossed (decorated) as Mirror Cases before being folded up and sewn edge to edge. It seems fairly certain that this is the explanation of the origin of the Double Disc symbol: it is material, probably leather, cut out and pre-embossed, ready to be sewn up as a Mirror Case.  

Fig. 19 Tuning Fork from Abernethy, Perthshire and Kinross

19 Some of the circles of the Double Discs have deliberate notches in the edge. I would suggest that this feature was incorporated to ease extraction of the mirror from the completed case.
**Tuning Fork is a snakeskin cut longitudinally**

If, as suggested above, the pattern of opposed semicircles on some of the Divided Rectangles (and Z-Rods) is evidence that those at least were made of snakeskin, then attention must turn to the Tuning Fork symbol, which is sometimes depicted with similar opposed semicircles. The best example of their occurrence is on the stone from Abernethy, Perthshire and Kinross (Fraser 2008, 119).20 The Tuning Fork, therefore, is probably a snakeskin split along the underside and opened out with the head in place or adapted into a handle, having had a long strap-like strip removed from along the line of its back. On the Abernethy example two definite ‘eyes’ appear prominently where they would be expected on a snake, near the top of the object (Fig. 19). It is unclear whether this was supposed to be an artifact in its own right (like a strop) or, as in the case perhaps of the Divided Rectangle, a demonstration as to how something else had been obtained. None of the other symbols, it seems, could readily have been formed from a long narrow strip of snakeskin.21

It might be expected that, if some snakeskins imagined as used in making some of the Mirror-and-Comb cases, Tuning Forks and Divided Rectangles exhibit markings arguably characteristic of an adder, then some of the depictions of complete Serpents might also have the same opposed semi-circular markings. Several of the Serpents associated with Z-Rods do show regular patterns along their bodies sometimes described as scales: the example from Brandsbutt, Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008, 15) has what appear to be hoops encircling the body; the Serpent on the stone from Newton House, Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008, 35) appears to be divided into segments; similarly the Serpent on one of the Tillytarmont, Aberdeenshire stones (no 5, Fraser 2008, 43) is divided into segments by hoop-like lines; the stone from Balluderon, Angus (Fraser 2008, 50) carries a Serpent marked with what appear to be a row of interlocking triangles along its back. None of the markings on these Serpents looks exactly like the rows of opposed semicircles on the putative worked skins, but at least they have

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20 The example from Kintore 3 (Fraser 2008, 28), looks as if it could be Pincers rather than a Tuning Fork.

21 It may be noteworthy that on many of the stones which have Serpents or Serpents and Z-Rods the eyes are figured prominently, for example Brandsbutt, Aberdeenshire, Newton House, Aberdeenshire and Drumbuie, Inverness (Fraser 2008, 15, 35 and 83). The decorated Step symbol from Monymusk with its pelta-like ends and decoration (Mack 1997, 23), by analogy with the Tuning Fork, may be a piece of (folded) snakeskin.
regular patterns. Adders have a regular pattern of large dark squares or diamonds joined corner to corner along their backs surrounded by lighter bands of zig-zags: this is more like the pattern of opposed semicircles on the (arguably) worked snakeskins on some symbol stones than the patterns of segmental divisions on the complete Serpents.

Fig. 20 Griffin head Roman razor case from England

Flower symbol is probably a late Roman bronze razor case

Continuing the theme of personal grooming evidenced by the number of Mirrors-and-Combs and their cases, I think it likely that the Flower symbol could be derived from a late Roman type of bronze razor handle which had an overhanging griffin head (Fig. 20, for reference see end notes). While the griffin heads could have been adapted as flowers it is possible that there was in circulation a similar type of razor holder with overhanging flowers from which the Pictish symbol was adapted directly.

Fig. 21 Dog’s head, top of Roman razor holder from Scotland.
Dog’s Head symbol is a direct copy of a Roman razor handle
The Dog’s Head is a very clear symbol that occurs only once on a stone. It droops to the left at the top of a triangle, described by Alastair Mack as looking like a glove puppet (1997, 23). In may well be that something did indeed fit up inside the base – a sharp iron blade. This is definitely a late Roman bronze razor handle (Fig. 21, for reference see end notes). The Deer’s Head on a stone from Dunachton, Badenoch and Strathspey (Fraser 2008, 74) looks as if it too could be a Roman razor handle and the head and neck of ‘Deer’ on a stone from Ardross, Ross and Cromarty, no 2 (Fraser 2008, 86) also looks as it could have been adapted from a razor handle.

Fig. 22 Roman Dolphin mount from Scotland.

Pictish Beast derived from a Roman dolphin
A recent Scottish find of a late Roman bronze openwork mount looks like a dolphin (Fig. 22). While this is not the same shape as an Elephant, for example it has no hind legs, there are enough stylistic similarities to enable one to conclude (with L. and J. Laing 1984, 269 who quote Thomas 1961, 51-53) that the Pictish Beast is probably derived from a late Roman dolphin – long drooping snout, crest and curled-over ‘feet’ (originally the dolphin’s tail).22 (For reference see end notes).

Horseshoe and Ogee
Two other symbols on which we might throw some light on are the Horseshoe or Arch and the Ogee, both exclusively Class I symbols (apart from one Arch). It has been suggested by

22 Other symbols that might illustrate Roman influence the Eagle and perhaps the Square. For wider comparison of Roman motifs and Pictish symbols see Laing and Laing (1984, 267-269).
Thomas (Mack 1997, 10) that the Horseshoe might be a type of hinged metal collar on the basis that it sometimes exhibits a central knob that could have housed a pivot, for example on the stones from Percylieu and Rothiebrisbane, both Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008, 37 and 41). It could be suggested, because of the similarity of its surface treatment to some Horseshoes, that the Ogee is a Horseshoe with one limb swung open through 180 degrees, for example Drimmies, Aberdeenshire and Kintradwell, Sutherland (Fraser 2008, 20 and 101), thereby perhaps also confirming the identification of some Horseshoes as hinged collars. Many of the Horseshoes, however, are depicted as relatively wide Cs or Us and do not look as if they would require a hinged arrangement to get them off and on as a collar. It may be that the Horseshoe is a heterogeneous symbol: it may represent more than one ‘object’ type.

Some of the Horseshoes look as if they might be decorated leather (or snakeskin) cases, and others could be variants of the Crescent symbol. One from Migvie, Aberdeenshire is covered by a V-Rod, like a Crescent and V-Rod (Fraser 2008, no 34, p33) suggesting that it was imagined as animal skin by analogy with the other symbols that have a V- or Z-Rod. The Horseshoe or collar on the stone from Clynemilton, Ross and Cromarty, no 1 (Fraser 2008, 96) has a row of semicircles along the concave edge suggesting that it might be of snakeskin.

Fig. 23 Sub-triangular Roman razor holder.

Disc

There are some six examples of a circular Disc symbol, sometimes with three circles separated by dots symmetrically enclosed within the larger ring for example, Kinellar, Aberdeenshire and Rothiebrisbane, Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008, 27 and 41). This is very similar to another form of late Roman razor handle, essentially a rounded triangular plate with three large, near circular holes in it (Fig. 23, for source see end notes). The holes are
separated by swellings or cusps in the bronze that could be the origin of the dots on the Disc symbol. It is possible that the sub-triangular outline of the razor handle became round when carved as a symbol.

**Double Crescent, may be partly manufactured Crescent (and V-Rod)**

While these suggestions as to what some of the symbols were or represented may be of interest, they mainly contribute (if accepted) to our understanding of the purpose of the symbol pairs and what they might ‘mean’ by helping to rule out some possibilities. By the time, however, they became fixed on the stones the symbols may have evolved in meaning into realms altogether different from the objects or animals they depict.

The numerous Crescent and Crescent and V-Rod symbols (for the moment) yield no new insights beyond a suggestion that the V-Rod may be an indication that the Crescent is something to do with an animal or animal skin by analogy with the Z-Rods on the Serpents, and Divided Rectangles. Because the Z-Rod can be decorated with flights and curlicues and on some stones is very large we tend to envisage something like a lance. But if the Double Disc and Z-Rod represented a stage in the manufacture of a mirror case then some of the original Z-Rod ‘objects’ as envisaged would only have been the size of a small brooch or a pin (albeit perhaps carved to look like a tiny lance). The V-Rod on the Crescent and V-Rod then would have been more like the size of a pin than an arrow. Given the similar treatment of curlicues and flights on both types it is probable that the V-Rod and the Z-Rod are really the same symbol or part-symbol, the V shape clearly meshing better with a crescent than the Z?

![Double Crescent (and Tuning Fork or Pincers) from Kintore (no 3), Aberdeen.](image)

**Fig. 24 Double Crescent (and Tuning Fork or Pincers) from Kintore (no 3), Aberdeen.**
There are a few examples of the Double Crescent symbol and of particular interest is the one on the stone from Kintore, Aberdeenshire, no 3 (Fig. 24) (Fraser 2008, 28). The centres of the convex arcs join over a short distance and the concave curved margins are decorated with a series of (the now familiar) semicircles with the largest at the centre, seemingly mixed up and discontinued on the lower crescent. On the basis of the similarity with the opposed semicircles on some Divided Rectangles and Tuning Forks, this Double Crescent probably also represented a piece of split snakeskin or other material about to be stitched together (along the still-joined convex edges) to form a double-sided crescent-shaped object. The decoration on Crescent symbols is compatible with the tooling that might appear on leather (or snakeskin, given the pattern on some examples), but it is hard to think what the finished object might be – perhaps a small wallet to hold a crescentic object?

There seems to be a skin and grooming theme emerging, patterned snakeskin on one hand and razors, for the use of which the Picts were not renowned, on the other: Mirrors-and-Combs and their Cases form a large proportion of the symbols. Maybe the razors were not altogether prized as such unless as a prelude to tattooing or for use in de-fleshing animal skins and were incorporated into the symbol system primarily for the simple bold example images they provided of animals and geometric shapes?

It is proposed that the Crescent, on the basis of the existence of a few Double Crescents that were joined along their curved edges, was a high status case for a crescentic object. In the excavation of a parchment factory in the Pictish monastery of Portmahomack, Easter Ross an iron *lunellarium* or head-knife was found in an early medieval context. This was a crescent-shaped iron blade which would have been carefully honed, with a handle in the plane of the blade, in the centre of and at right angles to the rear edge that was used for de-fleshing hides (Carver and Spall 2004, 191-192 and Carver 2008, pl 7a). Here is a provenance, a date, an activity and a type of object that would completely fit the Crescent if it was a leather or snakeskin wallet. This is the only one of these knives from a Pictish context know so far, but Pictish mirrors are also rare and no one doubts that mirrors existed at that time. A tentative conclusion is that the Crescent and the Crescent and V-Rod were leather cases for iron head-knives.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{23}\) The Horseshoe or Crescent on the stone from Easterton of Roseisle, Moray (Fraser 2008, 108) has a large circular notch on the middle of the concave edge. If the symbol represented a case for a crescentic blade, the notch may have been intended to accommodate a sizeable handle attachment on this specimen. By contrast, the
V-Rods and Z-Rods represent needles and threads

The leatherworkers were clearly proud of their products and the designs wrought (or, in the case of snakeskin, already present) on them, a theme taken up by the stone carvers. The craft skills for incising designs on stones and for embossing them on leather goods had some overlap. Since we can now see the Crescents and the Double Discs as leather or snakeskin cases for small objects -for their cases to be cut (sometimes) transversely from a single snakeskin some of the mirrors must have been small- it is clear that the V-Rods and Z-Rods with these objects must also have been imagined as small in scale –not broken arrows or lances. As suggested above it seems that the V-Rod and the Z-Rod are the same symbol, the V version fitting better with the Crescent and the Z version with the Double Disc. It is highly likely, since they are (on this analysis) only associated with leather or snakeskin objects,24

Double Crescent on the stone from Park House, Aberdeen (Fraser 2008, 36) has a mushroom-shaped projection in the centre of each concave edge as if to protect the lower part of a thin handle, when (if) the material was formed into a wallet for a crescentic knife.

24 The Z-Rod (stitch symbol) with the Serpent may symbolize what is about to happen to the creature; it is raw material for the leatherworkers. It is not clear what the Z-Rod with the Divided Rectangle meant since the
that they represented needles and threads - stitches or the need for stitching or the fact that stitching had taken place. This would explain the forward- and backward-facing curlicues at the ends: they are probably the filaments or the components of the stitching, unravelling as they would tend to do at the ends of the cords (Fig. 25). Also, the lines forming many of the V-Rods and Z-Rods are very thin, like threads: metal (apart from wire) or wooden objects would have some thickness. Some V-Rods and Z-Rods do have thickness, but in these cases it could be that that artistic creativity has taken over from, or forgotten, accurate depiction of the original object. Why some Double Discs and Crescents do not have Z-Rods and V-Rods needs explanation, but does not invalidate the present interpretation. This will be an issue whatever the nature of the V-Rods and Z-Rods. Maybe in some cases the V-Rod or Z-Rod was simply regarded as superfluous or it could be taken as read? Perhaps it originally depicted the capacity to stitch as well as to cut out?

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to put on record what seemed to be useful identifications of hitherto obscure Pictish symbols. This is because of the widespread archaeological interest of the symbols and to enable specialists in Pictish studies to consider these suggestions in future researches. Having completed the primary objective, discussion here will be a series of footnotes restricted to considering briefly some of the more obvious implications of the suggestions.

Henderson and Henderson (2004, 170) note that the first comprehensive attempt in modern times to interpret the symbols was that of Charles Thomas (1963) who worked out in detail a way in which the symbols could have been used to display information about the rank and status of the person presumably commemorated by a particular symbol stone. Jackson

material of the Divided Rectangle is essentially what is left over after cutting out a Mirror Case as two separate halves and very likely a Wallet or comb case. Perhaps it was meant to indicate that the remnant of skin was not scrap, and that it could be further used in leatherwork as small fittings, straps and laces for example.

25 It will be pointed out that there is no clear distinction between the needles and the threads. I would suggest that when illustrated as symbols the needles and threads with their piercing qualities, have been ennobled more artistically into arrows and lances. The sharp corners of the V- and Z-Rods suggest that they are imagined as threads being pulled at an angle through a hole or holes in the material. The possibility that needles and threads might have been represented by symbols that looked like arrows and lances is not surprising given that, in the context of the symbols, the needles and threads were also intended to pass through skin.
(1984) suggested that the symbols recorded marriage alliances. Samson (1992) suggested that the symbol pairs represent bipartite names. A development of this view by Forsyth (1997) proposed that the shapes of the symbols conformed to the structure of a writing system. Pictish sculpture is seen as a means of control by those in society who had access to the cultural resources necessary for its production (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 170).

Other interpretations include that of Iain Forbes (2012) who suggests that the Pictish Druids were accomplished astronomers and that the hitherto impenetrable pictograms formed a complex set of astrological symbols. Perhaps the simpler the explanation for the symbol pairs on standing stones, such as the family names suggested by Mack (1997, x), the more likely it is to be correct? The symbols are unlikely to advertise services or wares available locally, but it is possible that some family or personal names that could be communicated by means of the symbols were craft-based, such as the Pictish equivalents of skinner, tanner, hunter, smith, cook or came from (totemic) animals - eagle(son), salmon, bull and so on.

The pervasiveness in the symbol pairs of the leatherworking symbols (Double Disc, Mirror Case, Rectangle, Tuning Fork, Serpent and Z-Rod, etc) is demonstrated by their frequency on the Class I stones listed by Mack (1997) where at least two symbols (a pair) survive. Out of a total of some 124 stones, 19 stones have no leatherworking symbols, 62 have one and 43 have two. Among the Class II stones on which at least two symbols survive, 12 have no leatherworking symbols, 29 have one and 18 have two.\footnote{On some Class II stones more than one separate pair can be identified: these have been counted as if they were on different stones.}

The earlier suggestions as to what the symbol stones in general might mean do not necessarily require revision in the light of the identifications offered here. I would suggest, however, that many of the symbols represent the working techniques and products of artisans in leather and perhaps metal. The context and origin of the symbol stones seem to lie in elements of a society familiar with late- or immediately post-Roman products as represented by the razor holders and some of the other metal objects. I would defer to L. and J. Laing (1984, 267-273) for discussion of the existence and consequences of late Roman influences in Pictland. The suggested interpretations of some of the symbols proposed here seem to reinforce their suggestions. The importance of the production of leather goods, including perhaps vellum, is underlined by the frequency of symbols probably representing cases
arguably for crescentic head-knives (Crescents and Crescents and V-Rods). The production of vellum for sacred writings must have been very significant at the time as a major technological and religious advance (Carver and Spall 2004, 187-193).

Obvious questions that arise include: why among the symbol pairs are mirrors and combs represented only by their cases (and they are usually not paired with one another) whereas when they appear as additional symbols they were always depicted as the actual objects uncased and were often paired? Why and in what circumstances did people begin to carve the symbols on the stones and how was uniformity of style and treatment achieved? Why do the leatherworking symbols represent small cases for personal artifacts such as mirrors and combs and for craft items such as crescentic knives when the use and production of more complex shoes, bags and hats of leather would have been more commonplace? Perhaps the symbol items were regarded as more ‘up-market’?

The symbols are fewer in types and overall numbers on Class II stones which were certainly Christian and in general probably later than the Class I stones. Several of the more elaborate Class II stones had their motifs laid out in consistent relationships in separately themed zones. On one face, the obverse, there is usually a cross and other Christian symbols that can be seen as exclusively devoted to religion. The reverse surface usually has several Pictish symbols carved at the top with a hunt or battle scene below, the latter representing warfare. The symbols such as Double Discs and Crescents could represent families or persons belonging to an affluent artisan class who were commemorated by the stones or who paid for them. It is more difficult to suggest an interpretation for the equally-frequent dolphin-derived Elephants: could they represent, for example, metal-workers, merchants, seafarers or fishermen?

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27 Perhaps uniformity arose because the symbols were already familiar from the (model) objects themselves or because they had been embossed on leather or wooden products for a time or had been used as tattoos?

28 There are, however, exceptions, for example symbols sometimes occur on the obverse with the cross, and sometimes there is a cross or a religious scene on the reverse.

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End Notes

Griffin Razor Holder

http://finds.org.uk or google ‘Roman razor griffin’ (one from Lincolnshire ID NLM -80 CAE2 or WLM –D 150 A3 and another, record LVPL– 29E 086 from the Selby area of N Yorkshire).

Dog’s Head Razor and Roman Dolphin Mount


Roman Triangular Disc Razor Holder
