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THE PICTISH ART OF THE ARCHER GUARDIAN

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The particulars of religion in pre-Christian Pictland have quite understandably eluded researchers. The basic problem is the lack of reliable writing: Aside from some rather obscure ogham inscriptions (Forsyth 1996, 1997), no written evidence has survived directly from the Picts themselves (see Forsyth 1998).

Nonetheless, from what little evidence we do have, it appears that the Picts were not significantly different from other Celts, particularly from the Celts in the British Isles. Indeed, Hutton goes so far as to suggest that "the Picts were probably another set of Celts, indistinguishable in their culture from the other tribes of Britain" (1993: 149). In matters of religion, Laing and Laing point out that "in general terms their beliefs would have fallen into line with those of other pagan Celtic peoples" (1993: 21).

Taken within the greater context of Celtic religion, there are some sculptured stones that appear to shed light on Pictish theological thinking. These include both "realistic" (nonsymbolic) representations and the famous symbol stones.

Realistic Representations

The most important evidence for Pictish religion is found in the sculptured stone known as Meigle 10 (in the classification of Allen and Anderson 1903). While this stone was lost in a church fire in 1869, there had been five sketches made of it (see J.N.G. Ritchie 1997). Perhaps the most reliable of these is the drawing of Chalmers (1848), a representation that avoids some overly dramatic and dubious portrayals found in others. This drawing is shown here in figure 1 (from J.N.G. Ritchie 1997: figure 2).

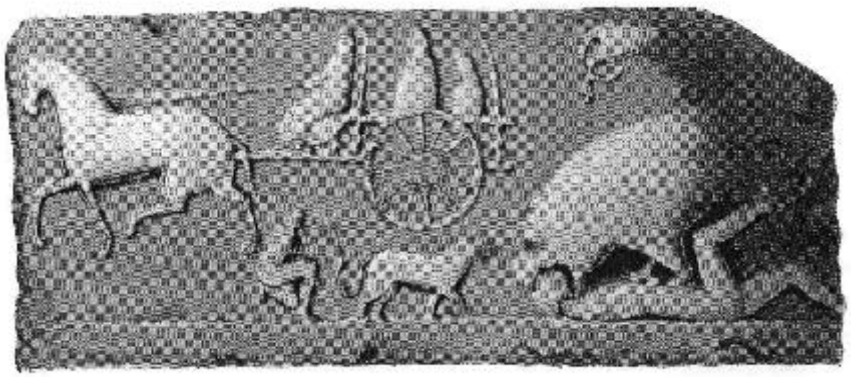

Figure 1: Meigle 10
(From R.N.G. Richie 1997: 121: from Chalmers 1948)

Cummins notes that the "dimensions of this stone, which was illustrated several times before it was lost, suggest that it may have been the front panel of a sarcophagus like that at St Andrews" (Cummins 1999: 190). As such, it could certainly also have been a decorated slab used in a cist. Certainly, the subject matter is consistent with a funerary context.

On the stone, we find three interrelated scenes: (1) One human figure is driving two other, smaller human figures in a horse-drawn vehicle from right to left in the upper left and middle portions; (2) a large beast is standing on and apparently devouring a human figure in the lower right portion; and (3) a kneeling human figure is aiming a crossbow at a retreating animal in the middle lower portion (with another animal in the upper right, also moving to the right). There is nothing overtly Christian in these actions; nor was the stone itself a part of any identifiably Christian monument (compare also Hicks 1993: 154).

In the first scene, the canopy on the vehicle identifies it as a *carpentum* – a formal processional carriage borrowed from the Romans (see Laing and Laing 1984: 277-78). In a funerary context, this would be quite consistent with the Celtic belief in a translation of souls to the otherworld, noted even by classical writers (compare Koch 1995: 25, 29-30). It is noteworthy that the driver is depicted as larger than the two passengers. Since "where the figures are concerned big is best" (Sutherland 1994: 176), we can surmise that

a deity is translating mortal souls.

In the second scene, we find the alternative to translation – the capture of the soul by what we may term the Decapitating Beast. This is no simple act of devouring though, for the Beast stands atop the human in a position that enables it simply to snap off the head. One of our most secure bits of knowledge about Celtic religious belief is that the head was seen as the home of the soul, and severing the head was a means of obtaining the soul of the deceased (see Ross 1996: 94-95). This image brings to mind the Gaulish monsters of Noves and of Linsdorf (see Megaw and Megaw 1986: 170-71) as well as the beasts in Meigle 26 (see Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 318B), which may devour the body but must leave the severed head captured and intact, as we see in figure 2.

In between the scene of the translation of the souls to the otherworld and that of the capture of the soul by the Decapitating Beast, we see a kneeling figure with a crossbow. This figure is quite obviously repelling the beast in front of it and appears to have repelled the figure in the upper right as well, for that beast is retreating from the scene with its tail between its legs. We should note that the archer is not hunting the beasts, but driving them away from the carpentum. Nor is he interested in saving the person being decapitated – only in protecting what is behind him.

Figure 2a: Noves

Figure 2b: Linsdorf

Figure 2: Two Gaulish Monsters
(from Megaw and Megaw 1986: 170-71)

Figure 2c: Meigle 26 (from Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 318B)

This figure we may call the Archer Guardian. His sole function appears to be guarding the frontier between this world and the otherworld, and as such he has a rather close parallel in the Pagan Germanic religions in the form of Heimdall, "sitting tirelessly at the end of heaven to guard the rainbow bridge" (Davidson 1964: 173).

There are actually quite a few other archers depicted on Pictish realistic stones, as shown in figure 3.

On the Drosten Stone (figure 3.a from Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 250B), the archer is at the bottom of the stone, perhaps signifying the border with the underworld, and he is apparently hunting, although not all of the animals depicted are appropriate to the hunt. Even less appropriate to the hunt are the animals on the Glenferness Stone (figure 3.b from Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 120), on which the archer appears right next to a crescent with V-rod over a double-disk with a Z-rod which in this case is clearly in arrow, the significance of which will be apparent from the discussion of the symbols stones below. The Shandwick Stone (figure 3.c from Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 69) at first glance appears to be a hunt, but it involves a battle on the left, a strange figure with an odd hat and drinking horn in the middle, and a figure with a human head and torso coming out of a goat's back leading the procession – clearly this is no simple hunt.

Figure 3.a: Drosten Stone
(from Allen and Anderson 1903: fig. 250B)

Figure 3.b: Glenferness Stone
(*ibid*.: fig. 120)

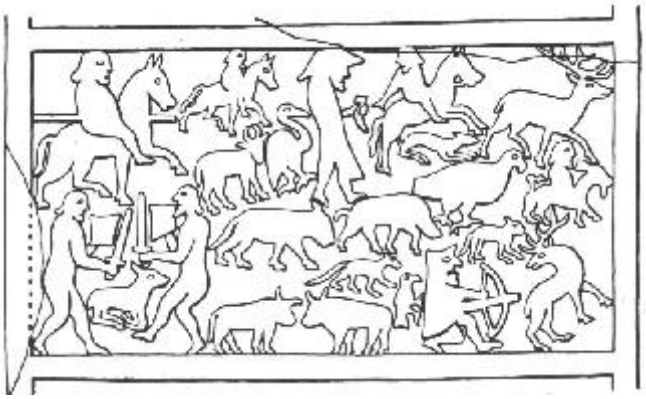

Figure 3.c: Shandwick Stone (*ibid*.: fig 69)

These figures are dressed in a cloak with a peaked hood, and it is highly significant that the only other figures clothed this way in the Pictish sculptures are clerics (compare Allen and Anderson 1903: 13-14). Thus, there seems to be some religious significance that carries over into Christianity through the usual processes of syncretism. Indeed, the bare-headed archer on the roof of the Great Hall at Darnaway Castle in figure 4 stands "Beneath a familiar pair of cloaked and hooded clerics" (A. Ritchie 1994: 16). In a more Pagan tradition, these hooded clerics and archers are dressed like the *genii cucullati*, gods of healing (?) that are found elsewhere in Britain (Hutton 1993: 215-16, Ross 1996: 242-43).

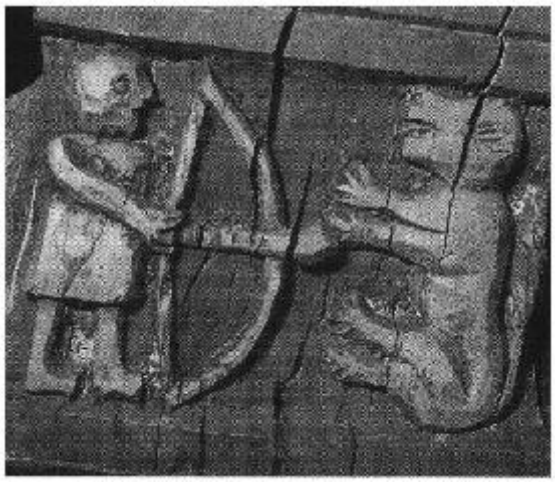

Figure 4: The Great Hall at Darnaway Castle
(from A. Ritchie 1994: 16)
(Crown Copyright, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland)

Returning to the processes of syncretism, we find rather clear evidence of this figure on the Ruthwell Cross, a detail of which is found in figure 5 (as reconstructed by Meyvaert1992: figure 3).

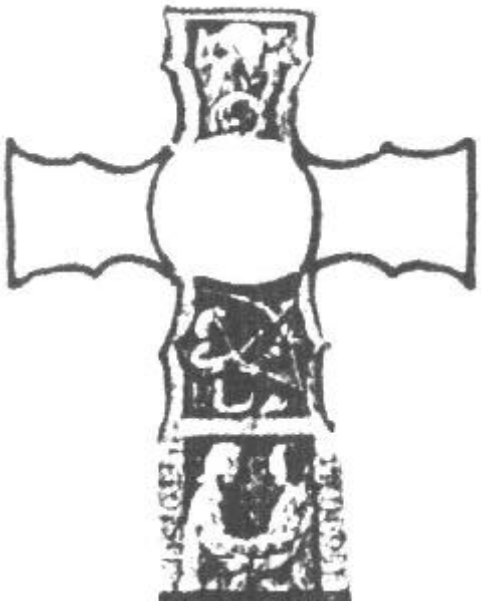

Figure 5: The Ruthwell Cross
(detail from Meyvaert 1992: fig. 3)

It is significant that the eagle occupies the top panel and the Archer Guardian the bottom. The eagle throughout the Celtic world was considered sacred among all of the

birds for it could not only visit the otherworld and speak the divine language, but its "vast wing-span and powerful, high flight epitomize the huge span of the sky" (Green 1986: 188). The Archer Guardian, on the other hand, protects the realm of God and the Christ (who would be represented in the center of the cross) from the new Christian underworld of hell, and he thus occupies the lower panel. Thus, we find the type of syncretism noted by Laing and Laing when they suggest: "Some of the puzzling scenes on Christian Pictish stones may refer to pagan myths" (1993: 23).

The Symbol Stones

Turning from realistic art to the symbol stones found throughout Pictland, we see that formerly enigmatic symbols take on a striking new clarity in the light of the Cult of the Archer Guardian. This is particularly the case with the only symbols that maintain superimposed designs – the so-called V-rod and Z-rods illustrated in figure 6 (from Sutherland 1997, in turn from Allen and Anderson 1903).

Figure 6.a: Crescent with V-Rod

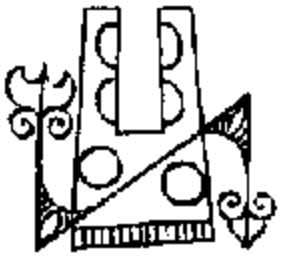

Figure 6.b
Notched Rectangle
with Z-Rod

Figure 6.c
Snake with Z-Rod

Figure 6.d
Double-Disk
with Z-Rod

The V-rod is quite clearly an arrow that has been bent to an angle of about 90˚ and placed over a crescent. The crescent has been widely regarded as a symbol of death (compare Sutherland 1994: 103-107), and the arrow is bent in precisely the manner that one would bend a spear or other such votive offering in a ritual deposit (compare Green 1995: 470-71, Maier 1997: 241). This very widespread combination – the only one with a V-rod – is thus quite consistent with the Cult of the Archer Guardian and probably represents a symbolic invocation of the Archer upon the death of an individual.

The Z-rod occurs superimposed upon only three symbols: (1) The "notched rectangle" is widely regarded as a chariot, and as such it is completely consistent with the carpentum in which the soul is translated to the otherworld or to heaven (compare Thomas 1963: 52-53); (2) the snake is a particularly holy creature in the Pagan Celtic religion because it travels between this world and the otherworld (in its underworld aspect – Sutherland 1994: 89-90); and (3) the double-disk symbol is a double-sun representation that in its broadest interpretation can certainly betoken this world and the otherworld and the path in between (compare Sutherland 1994: 107-108).

These symbols with the superimposed Z-rod thus make a firm connection between common Celtic religious belief and the Cult of the Archer Guardian. In each case, the Z-rod is a double-bent arrow (or spear) in which the central portion defines the boundary

between this world and the otherworld – the frontier guarded by the Archer. In its being bent into a "z" shape, the weapon continues in this world along the same course that it begins in the otherworld, demonstrating its guardian status across the border being protected.

In the context of the Cult of the Archer Guardian then, the symbols take on a theological significance. The crescent with V-rod is either a crescent (moon?) or a stylized bow with the "sacrificed" arrow – a clear reference to the Archer Guardian. By itself, it may well represent some sort of prayer (similar to a Christian collect) involving a petition for safety, just as one would expect in making a real deposit of a sacrificed object.

In combination with other symbols – and they generally do appear in pairs (see Thomas 1963; also, Jackson 1984) – we find an invocation and attribution. Again, this is similar to a Christian collect, recalling that Paganism initially borrowed from Christian liturgy in order "to supply its own deficiencies" (De Reu 1998: 27). For example, a pairing of the crescent with V-rod and the notched rectangle (carpentum) with Z-rod could well represent a prayer to the Archer Guardian, who ensures a safe translation to the otherworld. As such, it would be appropriate in a funerary context; but such invocations could occur in other contexts as well – just as a cross worn on a necklace may be taken as a general invocation and does not necessarily correspond to a cross over a grave.

Conclusion

There is actually quite a bit more evidence to support the Cult of the Archer Guardian at least in Pictish theology (and perhaps more generally in British or even Celtic). For example, the arrow appears to have taken on a taboo status as early as the Bronze Age, in which the military use of the arrow disappeared, although the chariot was still a viable instrument of war – a significant contradiction to contemporary military practice as witnessed in "the Catastrophe" in the Middle East (compare Drews 1993). Moreover, the abandonment of the military arrow came after a long period of development from the detachable shaft of the Paleolithic (Barton 1997: 132) to the highly elaborate barbed and tanged arrowhead of the early Bronze Age, and it occurred enigmatically in the midst of what has been described as the first European "arms race" (see Pearson 1993: 118).

Apparently, the arrow could be used against humans only in the context of a ritual execution/sacrifice, a practice decried by Strabo as being somehow as barbaric as the infamous wicker-man (compare Strabo 1923; 247-59). Certainly, after Vercingetorix, in a last-ditch effort in extreme desperation, called out the archers to be used against the Romans, the archers were surrounded and slaughtered in spite of the fact that they had been rendered harmless (Caesar 1917: 497-99) – a significant departure from Roman military ethics. Evidently, the use of Celtic archers against human beings on the field of

battle was seen as an insult or even as an atrocity that could not go unpunished.

There are also aspects of the behavior of the Archer Guardian on Meigle 10 that have profound implications for theological positions in Britain. The "election" of the two souls and the purely defensive posture of the Archer, who will neither save nor actively condemn the hapless Pict being decapitated, support the doctrine of simple predestination (that is, single-particular election) then prevalent in Britain (compare Hardinge 1972: 61). Moreover, the Cult as a whole appears to have maintained elements not only of predestination, but also of free will and the impermanence of divine punishment – positions that would resurface in Insular Celtic thought from Pelagius to John Scotus Eriugena to the Westminster Divines.

In this rather limited introduction to this Cult that apparently made the transition from Pagan to Christian, however, the evidence of Pictish art is in itself quite compelling. In the realistic sculptured stones, the archer figure maintains its own peculiar dress that corresponds to that of deities and clergy alike; and in Meigle 10 we find as clear a theological statement as we could expect from a written treatise. In the symbol stones, we find transparent Celtic religious symbolism in that the arrow is ritually bent in the V-rod (bow), and the arrow (or spear) is double-bent to form a boundary in the Z-rod with three other symbols, all of which are of religious significance and refer to the relationship

between this world and the otherworld.

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