

Like most Pictish cross slabs, the reverse face tells a story, with a mixture of abstract symbols, naturalistic people and objects, and fanciful beasts. We don't know what the story is, but it would have meant something to people looking at the stone. Many of the motifs have affinities to Pictish carvings from further south and east. It is possible that pigments were used to colour parts of the decoration.

Later re-use of stone as grave marker

Kneeling warrior with possible animal head

Probable cauldron (below sword)

Wolf-like beast facing a lion-type beast with claws



Probable serpent & Z-rod symbol

Double disc & Z-rod symbol

Hippocamp or sea monster

Centaur holding two single-bladed axes

Two oxen

Drawings by John Borland © HES

The cross side has two large facing beasts at the top, with intertwining snakes coming from their mouths. No similar beasts are known on other Pictish stones, though some have facing animals. The cross and the sides of the stone are filled with interlace patterns, most very worn now. Similar patterns can be found in gospel books of the time.



Eagle Stone, Strathpeffer

A small cluster of Pictish symbol stones is known from the local area. Other cross slabs in Easter Ross are at Rosemarkie and the Tarbat peninsula, both sites of Pictish monasteries. We don't know if this is the case for the Conan cross slab.

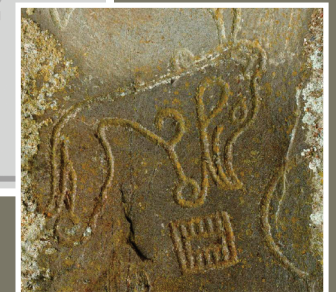
Torgorm Symbol Stone (Inverness Museum) © IMAG



### Pictish Symbol Stones in Easter Ross



Cotterton Symbol Stone (private possession) © Andrew Dowsett





This Pictish cross slab was found in 2019 during a gravestone survey at the site of the previous parish church above an old ford across the river near Conon Bridge, 5 kms south of Dingwall. It was carved over 1200 years ago. The stone survived in part because in 1796 a section of it was re-used as a grave marker.

The survey also found a small stone with a simple cross etched into the surface at the entrance to the graveyard probably re-used as a threshold. Simple stones such as this one are hard to date without any context. It may be a very early preaching cross from the time Christianity came to this area (perhaps in AD 500s or 600s), or may be later in date.



© Graciela Ainsworth

### Who were the Picts?

The Picts were a native people in much of Scotland, with the name first recorded by the Romans in AD 297. A number of kingdoms evolved over time, with Fortriu centred around the Moray Firth, perhaps based at Burghead. In the 800s the Vikings spread south from Orkney and the Dal Riata Gaels expanded northeast from Argyll. The Gaels and Picts merged in the mid 800s, and gradually Pictish language and culture disappeared. This part of Easter Ross would then have been a frontier area, between Vikings/Norse to the north and the emerging kingdom of Alba to the south.

While we have evidence of Pictish sculpture and religion, we have no evidence yet of secular Pictish sites in Easter Ross. Nor do we know who commissioned the Conan stone. There is still much to find out.

### Find out more...

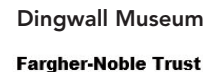
- Learn about the finding of the stones from the NoSAS blog [nosasblog.wordpress.com](https://nosasblog.wordpress.com) (search on Conan stone)
- See the Pictish Trail leaflet and website [highlandpictishtrail.co.uk](https://highlandpictishtrail.co.uk)
- Visit the Groam House Museum and Tarbat Discovery Centre museums and their websites for discussions about Pictish stones: [www.groamhouse.org.uk](https://www.groamhouse.org.uk) [www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk/resources](https://www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk/resources)
- There are lots of books about the Picts and their sculpture. A good starting point is Martin Carver's *Surviving in Symbols*. A visit to the Pictish Nation. A recent book, *The King in the North*, by Gordon Noble and Nicholas Evans focusses on the northern Picts.



## Conan Cross Slab



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### Acknowledgments

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