

Pictish Period

c. 300 – c. 840 AD

The Picts were people occupying the northern parts of Scotland in the late Iron Age and Early Historic periods. The name comes from the word 'pictii' which was the Roman nickname for the people in this area, first used in 297AD. 'Pictii' means 'painted people', as the Romans claimed the people of Scotland painted or tattooed themselves.

Some of the classic monuments from this time are carved Pictish symbol stones. These impressive stones are carved with symbols and animals. Traditionally, they have been divided into 'classes.' Class 1 stones, also called symbol stones, are irregularly shaped and have incised animals or symbols. Class 2 stones, also known as cross slabs, are shaped into large rectangular slabs with the decoration left standing proud (or in 'relief'). These decorations include Pictish symbols, Christian crosses, intricate Celtic designs and sometimes scenes showing people hunting or Bible stories. Class 3 stones have a cross, scenes, but no Pictish symbols.

The style of the artwork can be broadly dated by comparing to similar more closely dateable material. Decoration on Class 2 stones is similar to early Christian manuscripts such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, which was produced around the turn of the 8th century.

There are many symbols that are unique to the Picts. These include the 'crescent and V rod' and 'double-disk and Z rod' (see the image of the Invereen stone). Nobody really knows what these mean but it has been speculated that they represent names of people or groups.

From the scenes depicted on stones and the finds from sites dating to this period we can tell that hunting, feasting and jewellery were important to the Picts. Some highly elaborate examples of metalwork including brooches and neck-torques have been found.

Pictish sites include the early monastery at Portmahomack, hillforts such as Craig Phadrig (Inverness) and Burghead, and barrow cemeteries such as at Garbeg and Tarradale. There have been very few discoveries of domestic structures however.

Things to think about:

What could Pictish symbols and art mean?

What can we learn from pictures of the Picts?



The symbol stone from Invereen includes abstract Pictish symbols. It is now in the NMS, Edinburgh

See also:

Box 3 object sheets: Pictish Carved Stone, Antler Comb, Viking Ring Money and Arabic Coins
CT Silver Currency Production

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