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## Literacy in Pictland

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Discussions of early medieval literacy on the continent are framed, necessarily, in terms of a contraction from the Roman period. But what of the regions beyond the territory of the former Empire, areas without the legacy of imperial bureaucratic and personal literacy? Work by Harvey<sup>1</sup> and Stevenson<sup>2</sup> has demonstrated that through contact with the Roman world the Irish developed a literacy using a script of their own devising – ogam.<sup>3</sup> The introduction of Christianity promoted a different kind of literacy, in the roman alphabet, but orthographical studies have shown a degree of continuity with the earlier form. The nature of this roman-alphabet literacy in Ireland has been ably discussed by Jane Stevenson<sup>4</sup> and Thomas Charles-Edwards.<sup>5</sup> This chapter is an attempt to extend the enquiry to that other Celtic-speaking region beyond the *limes* – Scotland. In many respects, Gaelic-speaking Dál Riada (Argyll and adjacent islands) is part of the Irish sphere; discussion will focus instead on the Brittonic-speaking east, that is, Pictland (the rest of Scotland north of the Forth–Clyde line, including the Outer Hebrides and the Northern Isles). Since the Picts were politically, linguistically and culturally eclipsed by their Gaelic-speaking neighbours in the second half of the ninth century, AD 900 provides a convenient terminus.

The first obstacle to a study of literacy in Pictland is the complete lack of any surviving Pictish manuscripts. Of course, few enough pre-900 manuscripts survive from anywhere in the British Isles.<sup>6</sup> More difficult to explain away is the lack of any texts from Pictland preserved in later manuscript copies. Kathleen Hughes addressed the question in detail and came up with a number of reasons particular to Scotland why putative Pictish manuscripts would have failed to be preserved, from the predations of Edward I to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Presbyterian lack of interest in the history of the early church.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding these potential losses, she concluded

that the reason why Pictish material demonstrably had not been available to Scottish historians of the thirteenth century was that it had never existed in the first place. Although she provided a plausible explanation for why texts have not survived, equally one might add the four hundred years of Pictish political, administrative, cultural and linguistic obsolescence before 1300. Taking into consideration the abandonment or even suppression of Pictish identity, identified by Broun and Wormald as attendant on the ninth- and tenth-century Gaelic ascendancy,<sup>8</sup> there seems ample reason why such manuscripts would not be preserved.

Since what we know of Scottish history in the post-Pictish period suggests that any earlier documents would be extremely unlikely to survive, we are at a methodological impasse. The evidential outcome would be the same whether the texts were never written in the first place, or whether they had all been lost in the intervening period; thus the absence of manuscripts can tell us nothing. As the archaeologists remind us, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence; but neither is it licence to posit Pictish scriptoria churning out documents, only for them all to perish subsequently.<sup>9</sup> Have we any reason to think the inhabitants of eastern Scotland were any more literate in the seventh and eighth centuries than they were in the third and fourth?

Without digressing into the contested ground of the earliest Pictish Christianity, one can assert the growing consensus that possibly by the early, and certainly by the late, seventh century the church was well established in Pictland.<sup>10</sup> No biblical or liturgical texts have survived from the Pictish church,<sup>11</sup> yet it is inconceivable that they did not exist: the church simply could not have functioned without them. Equally one might ask, where are the contents of the great library at York? The material remains of the Pictish church, including *de luxe* ecclesiastical metalwork such as the Monymusk reliquary,<sup>12</sup> and, above all, the impressive body of monumental sculpture,<sup>13</sup> indicate a vibrant ecclesiastical culture open to influences from Ireland, England and beyond. The argument is not, as Hughes complained, that 'outstanding stone-work necessarily presupposes outstanding scriptoria',<sup>14</sup> but simply that, artistically and intellectually, the monuments could have been produced only in a milieu familiar with manuscripts. There are numerous depictions on Pictish sculpture of figures holding or reading from books – as at Nigg, St Vigean's 11 and 17, Aberlemno 3 and Invergowrie<sup>15</sup> – or in the case of Pabil, carrying book satchels (Fig. 1).<sup>16</sup> The point has been closely



Fig. 1 Detail of cross-slab from Papil, Shetland, showing figures with book-satchels.

argued by art historians at a number of levels, from the general observation that the layout of cross-slab panels reflects a manuscript-derived aesthetic to the more specific contention that the Picts developed skills in setting out interlace, key and spiral patterns on other media before they first applied them to relief sculpture in the early eighth century.<sup>17</sup> In one very specific instance, distinctive imagery and multi-layered symbolism prompted R. B. K. Stevenson to argue for the late eighth-century presence near Meigle, Perthshire, of an illuminated medical manuscript 'and a library through which ideas came, as they did to Jarrow, Iona and the rest, from afar and were redistributed'.<sup>18</sup> The artists may not have been learned in Latin, but the sometimes ambitious iconographic programmes of the great cross-slabs reflect the calibre of Pictish theology and biblical exegesis.

The extant physical evidence is supported by the few scattered documentary references to the state of the Pictish church. The early eighth-century snap-shot provided by Bede presents the Pictish

church as literate in Latin.<sup>19</sup> There is nothing in either the physical or documentary evidence to suggest that the Pictish church was intellectually or culturally deviant. In enquiring about Paschal doctrine King Nechtan is described as having 'no small measure of knowledge on these matters' after 'assiduous study of ecclesiastical writings'.<sup>20</sup> In the light of this it may not be exceeding the evidence to see Nechtan, who later retired to a monastery,<sup>21</sup> as a philosopher-king in the Aldfrith mould.<sup>22</sup> The response to Nechtan's enquiries, reproduced in full by Bede, is a long letter presupposing mature ecclesiastical literacy.<sup>23</sup> Bede presents Pictish monasteries as possessing existing computistical texts and able to copy and adopt new ones. A natural extension of computistics is the annal-keeping at the monastery of Applecross, in north-west Pictland, posited by Henderson for the seventh century;<sup>24</sup> and the rudimentary historical writing, similarly discerned by Mrs Anderson, in mid-eighth-century Fortrenn.<sup>25</sup> To assert the use in Pictland of biblical, liturgical, computistical and exegetical texts in Latin should be uncontroversial. Is there anything to indicate the use of literacy beyond the confines of the church?

Underlying much scholarship on the subject of literacy is an implicit belief in humankind's 'will to write': the assumption that once the technology of writing is available to a given society, its, to us, manifest advantages will necessarily lead to its being adopted, and that through time its use will be maximized wherever possible.<sup>26</sup> Thus a society's lack of literacy will be interpreted as a lack of exposure or access to literacy rather than as cultural indifference or outright hostility.<sup>27</sup> Not only is this to substitute possibly inappropriate cultural priorities,<sup>28</sup> but such technological determinism also denies an active role to knowledgeable social actors.<sup>29</sup> Does the elevation of administrative literacy to the normative standard, or even universal goal, stem from an overly restrictive conception of political organization and administration? The role of literacy in enabling the development of embryonic state structures has been acknowledged, but does an emphasis on writing as a technology of social control blind us to the possibilities of orally conducted government in a society which attaches greater importance to interpersonal relations?

As so often, a telling counter-example is provided by early medieval Ireland, where there is ample evidence for 'literary' literacy in Latin and the vernacular, but apparently no evidence for what could be termed 'administrative' literacy.<sup>30</sup> The very limited role accorded written evidence in Irish vernacular law is in keeping with attitudes

prevalent elsewhere.<sup>31</sup> More striking, however, is the failure of the church's apparent attempts to introduce the charter to Ireland in the seventh century.<sup>32</sup> Elsewhere in Europe churches and monasteries employed their literacy to record and formalize donations and to secure them against the claims of later generations. Irish churches appear not to have done this. Rather, in Ireland, it seems, complex transactions of wealth and resources in the church, in secular society and between the two were effectively administered without written texts. Clearly, a high level of literacy in one sphere cannot be taken to imply literacy in another. To see Nechtan as versed in theology and computistics is one thing; to argue on this basis that he would have used literacy to govern his kingdom is unwarranted. There is no reason for assuming that his *exactatores* ('tax-gatherers'?), killed at the battle of *Monith-Carno* in 729,<sup>33</sup> need have been competent in using written documents.

Margaret Nieke has written of the use of writing by 'the secular authorities' in Dál Riada as 'just one of a series of measures these early rulers were taking to strengthen their control over the kingdom.'<sup>34</sup> I find myself unable to endorse her view. The annals to which she refers are primarily ecclesiastical documents whose interest in secular affairs is a natural reflection of the church's position in the world; the genealogies are manifestations of existing oral genres of propaganda put into writing by the clergy. There seems no evidence for 'practical' secular literacy in Dál Riada, no bureaucratic record-keeping, administrative or legal writing. Whatever its original purposes, the usefulness of the *Senchas Fer nAlban*<sup>35</sup> as a practical document has surely been overstated. It is better seen not as a 'Domesday' survey, but rather as a propagandistic statement of ethno-political ideology framed in genealogical terms. Certainly, this was the reason for its preservation. The document is indeed 'unique within the Celtic lands',<sup>36</sup> and even if it did have its origin in an actual administrative survey, it was an unprecedented early experiment in a genre which appears not to have been pursued in either Scotland or Ireland.

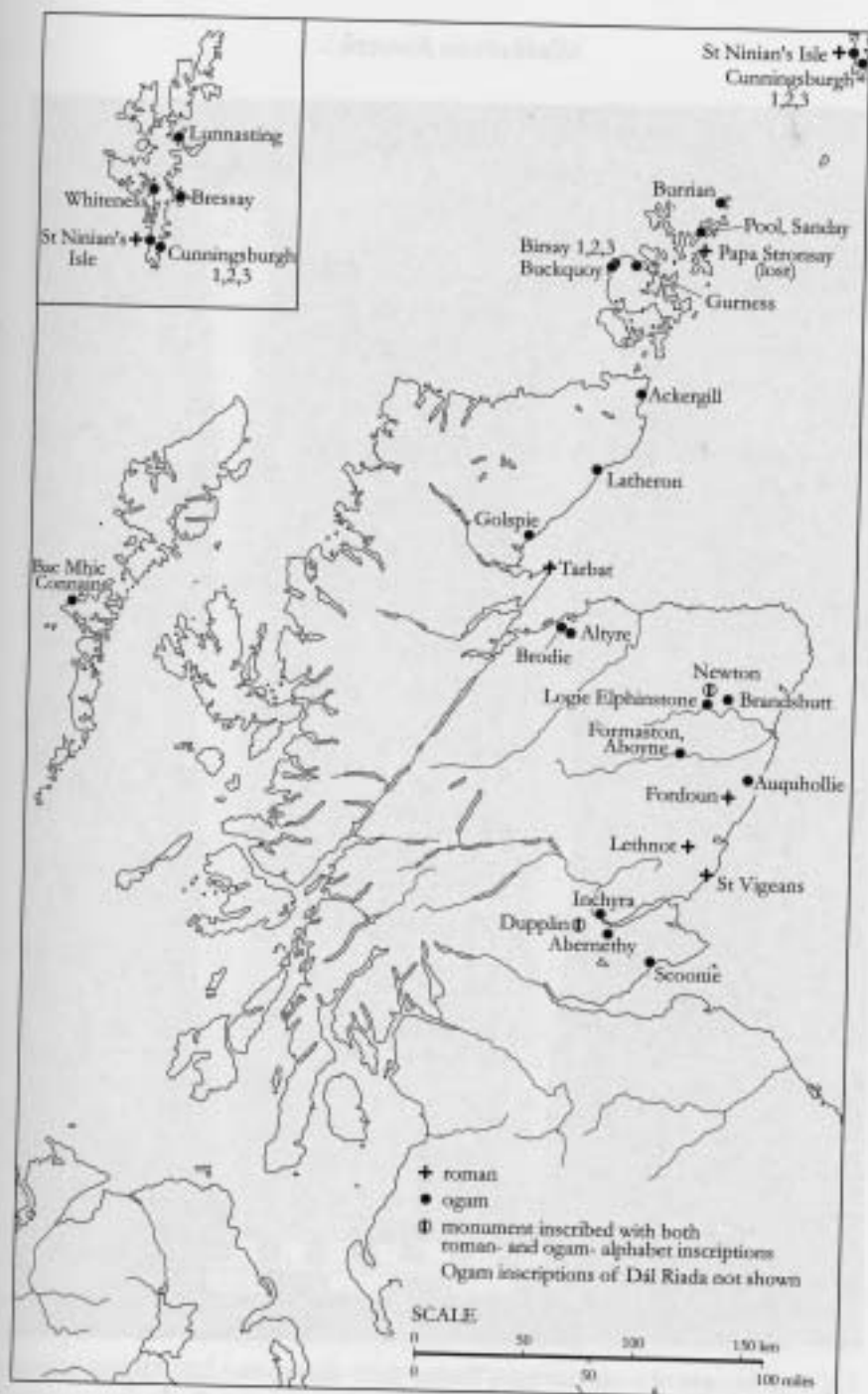
Dalriadic attitudes to literacy appear to have been drawn, not surprisingly, from Ireland. But what of Pictland? The Picts were in a position to draw on the cultural heritage of both Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. From which did they derive their ideas about writing? Or did their unique historical position lead them to attitudes of their own? As in Ireland, there is no evidence for Pictish adminis-

trative literacy, but unlike Ireland, there is no evidence for written vernacular literature in Pictland, despite the claim that extant texts of Brittonic poetry 'had their genesis in a Strathclyde scriptorium sometime in the latter half of the seventh century'.<sup>37</sup> The roots in the Pictish period of the precocious political development of the kingdom of Scotland have been remarked upon,<sup>38</sup> but was this achieved through Anglo-Saxon-style administrative literacy (the traces of which have not survived), or, perhaps more remarkably, without recourse to the technology of writing? These important questions are not easily answered on present evidence.

In assessing Pictish attitudes to the uses of literacy, the scatter of indirect documentary references, mentioned above, and the nebulous testimony of the sculpture permit nothing more than the vaguest of statements. The only other material is a heterogeneous corpus of inscriptions. As the only written documentation to survive from Pictland this epigraphic material assumes an importance far greater than its volume suggests. As concrete realizations of literate skill and the physical manifestation of attitudes to literacy, inscriptions have the potential to make a major contribution to the debate. The extant Pictish inscriptions come from a greater range of social contexts than the other material discussed so far: from public statements on grand monuments to informal graffiti scratched on slabs, from domestic as well as ecclesiastical and landscape sites, and from areas of the country, such as Shetland and the Outer Isles, for which there is no documentary evidence at all. Their potential is, however, tempered by the fact that they are few in number, often fragmentary and frequently difficult to interpret.

Two alphabets were in use in Pictland, roman and ogam, and thirty-seven inscriptions survive in one or other of them (Map 1). Two monuments (Dupplin and Newton) are inscribed with both. There are eight roman-alphabet inscriptions extant in Pictland, thinly scattered from the Tay to Shetland.<sup>39</sup> All, bar one, are on formal public stone monuments. As an item of *de luxe* metalwork, the exception, the inscribed silver chape from St Ninian's Isle, also has a display aspect. No informal roman-alphabet inscriptions survive in Pictland. The cross-slab from Papa Stronsay, inscribed DNEDI (for *domine dei?*), is now lost and cannot be dated. The Newton stone remains undeciphered and presents many problems. Though the text offers no clues as to date, as a monument it sits most happily with the individual inscribed memorials of Celtic Britain, most of which date





Map 1 The inscriptions of Pictland

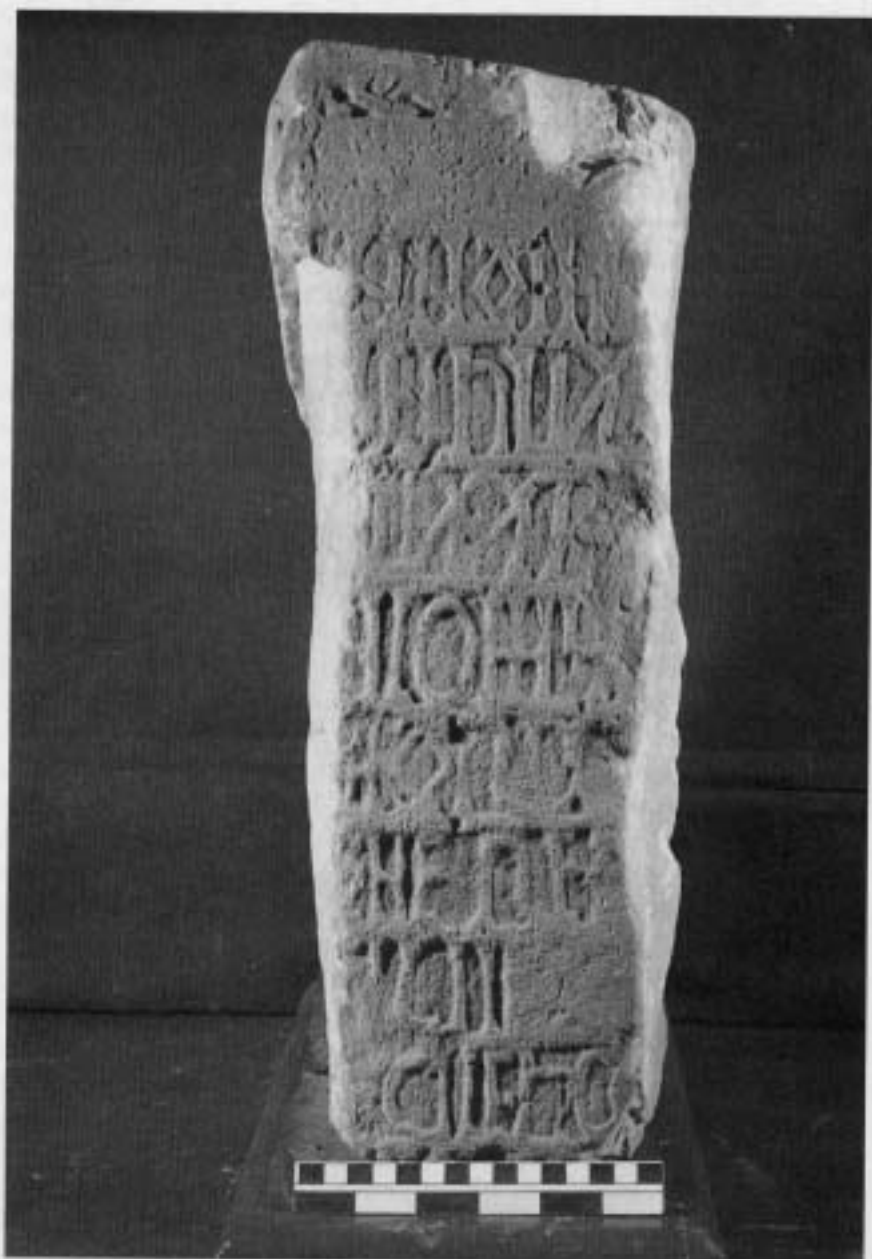


Fig. 2 Fragment of cross-slab from Tarbat, Ross-shire (0.48m tall). Carved in relief:  
*In nomine IHU XPI crux XPI in commemoratione Reo[. . .]*





Fig. 3 Fragment of cross-shaft from Lethnot, Angus (0.24m tall), inscribed [. . .]  
*fili Medici.*

from the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>40</sup> Palaeographic and art-historical criteria can be used to date the remaining inscriptions, and though none is datable with precision, they appear to range from the mid-eighth to the mid-ninth centuries. Following Okasha's dating, they are: Fordoun (eighth century, text incomplete: personal name, perhaps text in vernacular); St Ninian's Isle (late eighth century: Latin with personal names);<sup>41</sup> Tarbat (late eighth or early ninth century, text incomplete: Latin with fragmentary personal names) (Fig. 2);<sup>42</sup> Lethnot (ninth century, or late eighth, text incomplete: Latin with personal name) (Fig. 3); St Vigeans (early ninth century, personal

names only, or perhaps with minimal connecting text in the vernacular); and Dupplin (early ninth century, text only partially legible: Latin with personal names, accompanying ogam inscription illegible).<sup>43</sup>

The ogam inscriptions of Pictland are both more numerous and more heterogeneous.<sup>44</sup> Twenty-nine are extant, scattered throughout Pictland, including the Western and Northern Isles (a further six from Dál Riada are excluded from the following discussion). These include two pillars and one slab with text only, four 'Class I' Pictish symbol stones, five 'Class II' cross-slabs with Pictish symbols, four cross-slabs, one free-standing cross, five small fragments of carved stone, four building slabs inscribed with graffiti, two knife handles and one spindle whorl. A minority have been dated using archaeological or art-historical methods, and range from the sixth century (Pool) to the tenth century (Whiteness). The majority fall somewhere in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, though in individual cases the date is sometimes little more than a guess. Six are too fragmentary to be of linguistic significance, containing no more than three or four letters in sequence (Abernethy, Birsay 2, Birsay 3, Cunningsburgh 2, Cunningsburgh 3, Whiteness). A seventh is too weathered to be read at all (Dupplin). Two others are highly weathered and are legible only in snatches (Auquhollie, Brodie). This leaves only twenty, about two-thirds of the total, which are completely or substantially legible.

By its very nature, the ogam script is prone to damage and confusion and presents many problems of interpretation. In our case, the problems are compounded by the sparseness with which the Pictish language is otherwise attested. Thus the usual difficulties of handling epigraphic material are sorely exacerbated.<sup>45</sup> None the less, some Pictish ogams can be fully interpreted without difficulty, many can be substantially interpreted. Only a minority resist all explanation. In the case of this last group, much of the blame must rest with our ignorance rather than any deliberate obscurity on the part of the carvers of the texts.

The inscriptions are all fairly short and consist entirely or predominantly of personal names. The substantial inscriptions comprise two inconclusive pieces of graffiti (Pool and Birsay 1); three texts consisting of a single Celtic personal name (Ackergill, Bac Mhic Connain, Scoonie) (Fig. 4); two slightly longer texts containing single Celtic personal names and additional material either incomplete or not wholly legible (Cunningsburgh 1, Newton); four texts of the form X

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MAQQ Y, 'X son of Y', with the X and Y being personal names, mostly identifiably Celtic (Altyre, Golspie, Latheron, St Ninian's Isle); one text has been recently reinterpreted as a Christian blessing in Old Irish (Buckquoy);<sup>46</sup> and one text, consisting of five letters carved in a circle, appears to have cryptic or magical rather than straightforwardly linguistic meaning (Logie Elphinstone). The remaining seven present varying degrees of difficulty. One is legible but unintelligible (Brandsbutt); one is largely unintelligible but may contain attested personal names (Inchyra); a third is inconclusive (Gurness). Although one word remains obscure, the Pictish text of the Burrian cross-slab can be tentatively read as 'X made this cross'. The Bressay inscription appears to identify the slab as the cross of a woman with a Norse name; a man with a Celtic name is also mentioned, though it is not known whether he is the person commemorated or the craftsman. Two of the words in the Lunnasting text are obscure, but the other two are probably Celtic male personal names. The Formaston stone also contains known Celtic male personal names.

How are we to interrogate this evidence? Similar methodological problems of an archaeological nature affect inscriptions in both scripts and these must always be borne in mind. An unquantifiable amount of material will have failed to survive, but not at a uniform rate across all categories of evidence. For instance, small inscribed chattels in bone and wood will be under-represented in comparison with large stone monuments. While it can never be proven, it is at least possible that blank panels on some stone monuments once bore painted texts. Two likely contenders are the cross-slabs Meigle 5<sup>47</sup> and St Andrews 14,<sup>48</sup> the latter having a panel in the usual position for texts on Irish crosses.<sup>49</sup> Patterns of survival and recovery are rendered uneven by local variations in such diverse factors as geology, modern agricultural improvement, antiquarian and archaeological interest. It is thus impossible to quantify how representative the sample is and distribution maps can be used only with extreme caution. The small size of the sample, the many centuries it spans and the great range of sites from which it comes make it difficult to generalize about Pictland.

Beyond the presumption, at a crude level, that a highly literate society would leave more written material than one with little emphasis on writing, to what extent is it possible to use inscriptions for evidence of literacy? A number of attempts have been made to

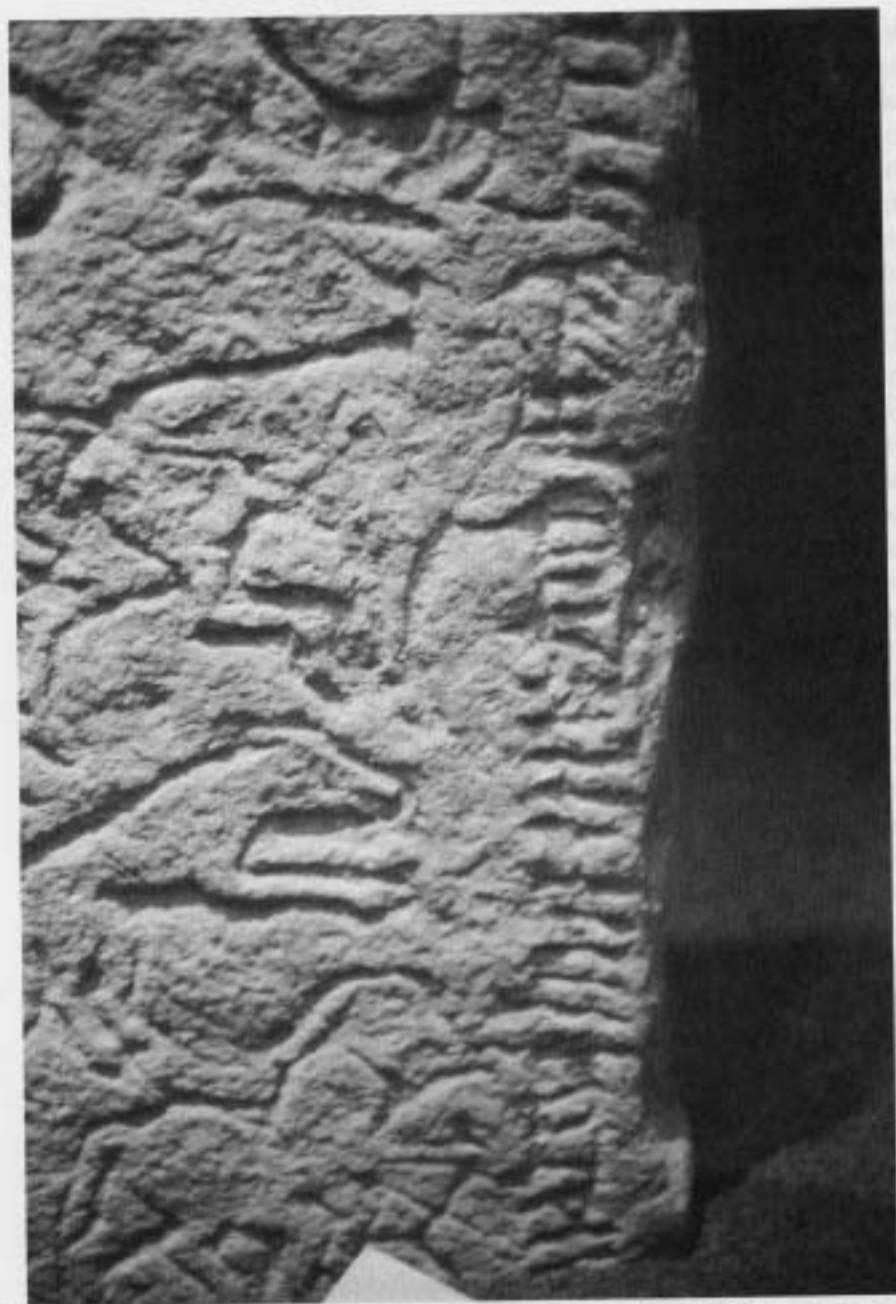


Fig. 4 Detail of cross-slab with hunting scene from Scoonie, Fife (1.07m tall). It is inscribed with a Pictish symbol and, vertically up the right edge, in ogam with the male personal name *Eddarmonn* (Ethernan).

evaluate the literate skills of the carvers of individual texts,<sup>50</sup> and examples of undoubtable solecisms have been identified in botched and muddled inscriptions,<sup>51</sup> though these are very rare. Not every irregularity is an error, however, nor each deviation from Classical norms a mistake. The recurrence of certain inverted or reversed letter-forms on post-Roman inscriptions in western Britain, for instance, suggests a regional fashion rather than straightforward palaeographic incompetence.<sup>52</sup> A further consideration is that concerns of design and display on elaborate public monuments may override those of straightforward legibility.<sup>53</sup>

Even if we can be sure our variant is a 'mistake', whose skill are we measuring? That of the *scriptor* who drafted the text, that of the *lapidarius* who carved it on stone or that of the patron, with whom rested ultimate 'quality control'? Only at the informal end of the scale, where graffiti and other texts are composed and executed by the one individual, can levels of literacy be more simply discerned. But such texts are often in poorly attested vernaculars and it is difficult to distinguish casual sloppiness from illiteracy. The only Pictish inscriptions in this category are in ogam, and we are sorely ignorant about the norms of ogam palaeography. We are not in a position to evaluate the orthographical accuracy of most of the roman-alphabet inscriptions of Pictland, but they are skilfully carved in accomplished and sometimes ambitious scripts,<sup>54</sup> the carving of display capitals in relief at Tarbat being particularly impressive.<sup>55</sup> Higgitt has emphasized the two-way connections between the epigraphic and manuscript traditions at Insular monasteries,<sup>56</sup> but to what extent can individual monuments be taken as representative of more general levels of literacy either within or beyond centres of excellence? Public inscriptions need not necessarily reflect the highest of literate standards in a society and, in fact, poorer inscriptions may reflect a 'democratization' of literacy, as do the non-standard spellings on some eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Scottish grave-slabs.<sup>57</sup>

A disturbing example of the lack of correspondence between epigraphic and manuscript accomplishment is provided by the Dál Riadic monastery of Iona. There is ample evidence for liturgical, historical, literary and scientific writing there,<sup>58</sup> and a strong case exists for the Iona origin of one of the greatest early medieval illuminated manuscripts – the Book of Kells.<sup>59</sup> Thus the island provides an almost unique opportunity to evaluate how the highest standards of learning and manuscript production might be reflected in

the epigraphic tradition. The comparison is instructive. What strikes one most forcibly is the remarkable *lack* of inscriptions on Iona. The high degree of ecclesiastical and secular patronage is clear in the extensive corpus of ambitious stone sculpture, yet only a tiny percentage of the extant monuments is inscribed.<sup>60</sup> Only one of the great high crosses bears a text, a short and extremely weathered inscription which is perhaps to be interpreted as a request in Irish for a prayer on behalf of the patron or craftsman of the cross.<sup>61</sup> Apart from one early Latin grave-marker,<sup>62</sup> the only other inscribed monuments are seven rather unprepossessing recumbent grave-slabs dating from the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>63</sup> These are incised with a simple cross and a request in Irish for a prayer on behalf of the deceased, who is identified by his name only. The letters are uneven and the layout casual, but the quality of the script cannot be attributed, as we have seen, either to an absence of fine models or to a lack of skilled carvers. The small percentage of inscribed slabs on this hyper-literate little island reflects a positive choice to leave most grave-slabs anonymous. The well-documented case of Iona alerts us to the fact that neither quality nor quantity of inscriptions is necessarily an indication of level of interest or skill in literacy.

It is understandably hard to distance oneself from a deeply engrained textual aesthetic concerning uniform letter-height, even letter and line spacing, and balanced layout of text within panels, and thus to avoid inappropriate value judgements about seemingly eccentric inscriptions (this is particularly true of unfamiliar ogam). There is a contrast between the generally neat and orderly Anglo-Saxon inscriptions and their Irish counterparts, which are relaxed almost to the point of dishevelment. The distinction does not result from greater literacy, more advanced technical ability or higher aesthetic standards on the part of the English, but, as Higgitt has explained, reflects differing manuscript practice in the two cultures, with the Anglo-Saxon taste for *de luxe* manuscripts contrasting with more utilitarian attitudes to the written word on the part of the Irish.<sup>64</sup> Significantly, the influence of both strains can be detected in the corpus of Pictish roman-alphabet inscriptions.

Much more difficult to assess is the readership of inscriptions.<sup>65</sup> Taking into account Wormald's warnings about the 'fallacy of the intended audience',<sup>66</sup> Higgitt has argued that 'most early medieval inscriptions in Britain and Ireland had a practical function and some sort of readership in mind'.<sup>67</sup> He concludes that, while a few inscrip-



tions address a restricted, learned, clerical audience, 'many more seem to concern a much wider public – in some cases literally an audience – that could be reached through the medieval habit of sharing texts by reading them aloud'.<sup>68</sup> This potential for participation in literacy by those unable to read is, of course, as true of manuscripts as of inscriptions.

For all the suggestiveness of the epigraphic evidence, its testimony regarding literacy remains unsatisfactorily inconclusive. While it is possible to evaluate the standard of individual inscriptions, and to speculate on authorship and audience, the fundamental and insurmountable problem is that it is simply impossible to quantify what is essentially qualitative evidence. The extant inscriptions constitute random snap-shots of information which it is impossible to systematize into a general picture. They embody high levels of writing skill and an interest in communicating through literacy, at certain kinds of site in certain parts of Pictland at certain periods, but they simply will not tell us how many people could read or write. That is not, however, the only, nor even the most interesting, question, that the historian can ask.

Ramsay MacMullen has asserted that 'knowing how to communicate in writing is one thing; doing so is another'.<sup>69</sup> The distribution of inscribed monuments in the pre-Norman British Isles indicates that there is no simple correlation between the extent of non-epigraphic literacy and the incidence of inscriptions. For instance, according to Okasha 72% of surviving Anglo-Saxon sculpture comes from the north, yet the same area contains 80% of the roman-alphabet inscriptions.<sup>70</sup> If the sample is limited solely to (non-runic) lapidary inscriptions from the ninth century or earlier, i.e. the period of the historical Picts, the figure rises to 100%.<sup>71</sup> Yet no satisfactory reason has been provided as to why Southumbria should be completely lacking in such monuments. The geographical spread of roman-alphabet inscriptions in Ireland is more even, but still there is remarkable clumping at some sites, all of them monastic. Macalister lists about 430 early medieval lapidary inscriptions in the roman alphabet, of which over 250 come from a single site, the monastery and pilgrimage focus of Clonmacnoise.<sup>72</sup> Subsequent discoveries at Clonmacnoise mean that the figures need to be revised upwards.<sup>73</sup> Why should this one site have more extant roman inscriptions than the rest of the post-seventh-century British Isles put together?

MacMullen has discussed how, in the Classical world, inscribing

activity was not a direct reflection of literacy as such, but rather an indication of the 'epigraphic habit'. He rejected political and economic factors as primarily responsible for fluctuations in the number of inscriptions, and prioritized instead 'very broad psychological shift[s]', such as a declining faith in posterity.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, work on inscribed memorials in Pictland, south-west Britain and Scandinavia has emphasized cultural motivations, characterizing the emergence of this type of monument as an expression of new social statuses and linking its decline to the rise of alternative sources of authority.<sup>75</sup> Thus an examination of the inscriptions of Pictland holds out the exciting possibility of recovering aspects of Pictish social structures and *mentalités*. The extant epigraphic corpus has already been discussed. To compare it with contemporary inscriptions elsewhere in the British Isles reveals a number of ways in which the Pictish material differs markedly.

In contrast to the other Celtic-speaking regions, Pictland lacks individual inscribed memorials of the kind dated to the seventh century and earlier, the distribution of which stops suddenly at the Forth.<sup>76</sup> In fact, the appearance in Pictland of book-hand roman-alphabet inscriptions in the middle of the eighth century is at least a generation later than in neighbouring Dál Riada, southern Scotland and Northumbria. One of the most striking things about Pictland is the marked preference there for non-roman script. Elsewhere, after the seventh century, lapidary inscriptions in non-roman scripts are only a small minority of the extant total: ogams represent less than 1% of the later Irish epigraphic corpus and in England runes account for roughly 15%,<sup>77</sup> while in post-seventh-century Wales there are no non-roman inscriptions at all.<sup>78</sup> Yet in Pictland they are in a distinct majority; there are three-and-a-half times as many ogam as roman inscriptions. The carving of ogam begins at least two centuries before roman, and continues to the end of the period. Not only is it used more, but ogam is used in different ways. While ogam was the only script in monumental use in Ireland before the seventh century, thereafter it assumed a very marginal position, and is never found in formal contexts.<sup>79</sup> In marked contrast, ogam in Pictland enjoyed an elevated status as a formal epigraphic script and is to be found prominently displayed on grand public monuments, such as Brodie, Scoonie, Brandsbutt, Altyre and Bressay. There are also cursive examples of the script, for instance Burrian, Birsay and Buckquoy. Scraps of ogam graffiti and the handful of ogam-inscribed personal

belongings from domestic sites give a tantalizing glimpse of lay literacy in the script.

The largely complementary distribution of roman- and ogam-alphabet inscriptions in Pictland, and the fact that only the latter appear in non-ecclesiastical and informal contexts, are our two main leads in investigating the use of the two scripts. One could speculate at length, but a key consideration must be the apparent difference in patterns of sculptural patronage in Pictland. Like Wales, Pictland lacks collections of the 'mass-produced' monastic grave-slabs typical of both Ireland and England.<sup>80</sup> Instead we find large and sometimes elaborate monuments with presumably dedicatory texts.

There is no doubt that the great cross-slabs of Pictland are Christian monuments – their most prominent feature is the Christian cross, and they display well-known scriptural scenes – but this notwithstanding, Pictish sculpture has a remarkably secular tinge. The most common imagery is that of the horseman and the hunt which, even if it can bear a Christian message, is still a celebration of the activities of the warrior aristocracy. Military might, kingship and violent animals are the common images, and scriptural iconography, though present, is less prominent than on either Irish or Anglo-Saxon monuments. If the cross-slabs are the fruit of a partnership between the secular nobility and the church, then in the ogam inscriptions we may be hearing the voice of the secular magnates, proclaiming their name and lineage. Their motivation for choosing the ogam script remains opaque. It may have stemmed from the choice of the vernacular, or perhaps even had an artistic objective. It is clear from the symbol stones that the Picts had a developed spatial aesthetic and this would have been disrupted by panels of horizontal text. Vertical ogam was much more discreet and could be tucked away at the side, or better still up the edge, without disrupting the design. If there was indeed lay literacy in ogam then use of that script may have given access to a wider audience.

Like the Anglo-Saxons and the Irish, the Picts had two scripts at their disposal for different purposes. Uniquely, however, they had a third writing system, which they used more widely than either. I have argued elsewhere that the famous Pictish symbols have claim to be regarded as a script,<sup>81</sup> but it is not necessary to accept this contention to see that the Picts *used* the symbols as they did alphabetic scripts. Thomas has shown how, in archaeological terms, the Class I Pictish symbol stones are the exact equivalent of the individual inscribed



Fig. 5 Two re-used prehistoric standing-stones moved to Newton House, Aberdeenshire, in the early nineteenth century (2.05m tall). One is inscribed with a pair of Pictish symbols, the other with an ogam containing the same name as at Scoonie and with an undeciphered inscription in what is presumably some form of the roman alphabet.

memorials found throughout the rest of the Celtic-speaking British Isles (Fig. 5),<sup>82</sup> and a close examination of the Class II symbol-inscribed cross-slabs suggests that the symbol statements, in my opinion almost certainly personal names, refer to the patron in the manner of alphabetic inscriptions elsewhere. In a few instances the patron appears to be depicted armed on horseback, or peacefully at her loom, with a symbol statement label at his or her shoulder (Kirriemuir 2 and 1, respectively) (Fig. 6).<sup>83</sup> A parallel may be drawn between the two-, three- or four-symbol statements appearing on certain cross-slabs and the listing of secular patron, ecclesiastical supervisor and master-craftsman on Irish high crosses (and possibly at St Vigean's?), or of patron, honorand and saint on certain Welsh ones.



Fig. 6 Reverse of cross-slab from Dunfallandy, Perthshire (1.58m tall), showing figures 'labelled' with Pictish symbols.

Precise comparisons are difficult because of the complexities of dating, but *if monastic grave-slabs are left out of the equation*,<sup>84</sup> Pictland has a sizeable proportion of the inscribed Insular monuments from the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries. Leaving aside the 160-odd Class I symbol stones, many or most of which are probably earlier, if one adds to the total of Pictish ogam and roman-alphabet inscriptions the fifty-seven or so symbol-inscribed cross-slabs<sup>85</sup> then Pictland becomes the region by far the most richly endowed with inscribed crosses/cross-slabs. Peter Harbison has identified the middle of the ninth century as the point at which Irish kings began to exploit the power of the written word by recording their patronage

on inscribed crosses.<sup>86</sup> If the Dupplin cross is correctly dated to the beginning of that century, then Picts had beaten them to it by a generation.<sup>87</sup>

What then can be said in conclusion about literacy in Pictland? The direct evidence is limited, but none the less we can perceive that the Pictish churches were probably as literate as their peers, no more, no less. The surviving evidence is not enough to make positive statements about the extent, nature and quality of Pictish ecclesiastical literary culture, but to deny the existence of literary culture is to fly in the face of that evidence. While the introduction of the roman alphabet was attendant on the arrival of Christianity, writing in ogam may pre-date Christianization. The lack of ecclesiastical association may in part account for the remarkable prominence of ogam in post-seventh-century Pictland. The adoption of the script by the Picts reflects an active desire to use literacy in their own vernacular. Why they should contemplate a vernacular literacy, rather than a Latin one, is a question that remains to be answered, but the difficulty of generating an orthography for a previously unwritten language should not be underestimated and testifies to a certain linguistic sophistication on the part of those who attempted it.<sup>88</sup> The factor which above all others distinguishes Pictish attitudes to literacy is, of course, the creation of the unique symbols, a complex and independent-minded response to Latin-letter literacy on the part of a culture well able to produce alphabetic writing when it so desired.<sup>89</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 A. Harvey, 'Early literacy'; 'Latin'.
- 2 J. Stevenson, 'Beginnings of literacy'.
- 3 For a general discussion of ogam, see McManus, *Guide*.
- 4 J. Stevenson, 'Literacy in Ireland'.
- 5 Below, pp. 62-82.
- 6 For pre-800 manuscripts, see Lowe, *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, esp. vol. 2.
- 7 Hughes, 'Where are the writings?'
- 8 Broun, 'Origin of Scottish identity'; Wormald, 'Emergence of the *regnum Scottorum*'.
- 9 Sims-Williams, above, pp. 18-20.
- 10 Hughes's argument that the Pictish church expanded only in the early eighth century, set out in her 'Early Christianity', has been searchingly criticized by Henderson, 'Early Christian monuments', esp. p. 48.



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- 11 The only ninth-century manuscript surviving from eastern Scotland is the Book of Deer (Cambridge UL MS li.6.32); see Hughes, 'Book of Deer'.
- 12 Youngs (ed.), 'Work of Angels', pp. 134-5.
- 13 *ECMS*.
- 14 Hughes, 'Where are the writings?', p. 11.
- 15 *ECMS*, pp. 75-83, fig. 72; 271-2, fig. 282; 275, fig. 288; 214-15, fig. 228; 255-6, fig. 277 respectively.
- 16 *ECMS*, pp. 10-15, fig. 6.
- 17 Henderson, 'Shape and decoration', p. 212.
- 18 R. B. K. Stevenson, 'Further thoughts', p. 24.
- 19 In *HE* I. 1, pp. 16-17 Bede emphasizes that *all* the four peoples of Britain are united in their use of Latin.
- 20 *HE* V. 21, pp. 532-3.
- 21 'A. Tig.', s.a. 724.
- 22 I owe this suggestion to Dr Thomas Owen Clancy, University of Glasgow.
- 23 *HE* V. 21, pp. 534-51. For a discussion of the context of this letter, see Duncan, 'Bede'.
- 24 Henderson, *Picts*, pp. 167-8. See also Hughes, 'Early Christianity', p. 45.
- 25 Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, 2nd edn, p. 101.
- 26 A view justly criticized by Houston, 'Literacy', p. 33.
- 27 A notable exception is Greg Woolf's study of varying native responses to Classical literacy in Mediterranean Gaul: 'Power'.
- 28 See Woolf, 'Power', p. 85, for 'the shift in the moral valency of writing'. For the possibilities of an early medieval 'barbarian counter-culture' indifferent to literacy see Wormald, 'Uses of literacy'.
- 29 Such 'need' need not be bureaucratic. See Woolf, 'Power', p. 88, for the use of literacy for ethnic or cultural self-definition.
- 30 Cf. Charles-Edwards, below, p. 62.
- 31 F. Kelly, *Guide*, p. 204. For changing attitudes to the value of written documents in England, see Clanchy, *From Memory*.
- 32 J. Stevenson, 'Literacy in Ireland', pp. 27-32.
- 33 *AU*, s.a.
- 34 Nieke, 'Literacy', p. 248.
- 35 Bannerman, *Studies*.
- 36 Nieke, 'Literacy', p. 246.
- 37 Gruffydd, '*Rhaeadr Derwenydd*'. See also J. T. Koch, 'Thoughts'.
- 38 Duncan, *Scotland*, p. 110.
- 39 For full references, see Okasha, 'Non-ogam inscriptions'; for Dupplin, see Forsyth, 'Dupplin'.
- 40 C. Thomas, *Mute Stones*, chs. 2-3.
- 41 See also Brown, 'St Ninian's Isle'.
- 42 See also Higgitt, 'Pictish Latin inscription'.
- 43 The cross-slab from Brechin, inscribed *S MARIA M[ATE]R XHI*, is dated on art-historical grounds to the late ninth or early tenth century, and is therefore outside the Pictish period proper.
- 44 Padel, 'Inscriptions of Pictland'; Forsyth, 'Ogham inscriptions'.

- 45 For the difficulties of interpreting damaged and fragmentary inscriptions in Anglo-Saxon England, see Okasha, *Hand-list*, and Page, *Introduction*.
- 46 Forsyth, 'Spindle-whorl'.
- 47 *ECMS*, pp. 300–1, fig. 314b.
- 48 *ECMS*, p. 359, fig. 373b.
- 49 On the positioning of text on Insular crosses, see Higgitt, 'Words and crosses'.
- 50 For example, Okasha, 'Literacy'.
- 51 For example, C. Thomas, *Mute Stones*, p. 263.
- 52 Okasha, *Corpus*, pp. 18–28; C. Thomas, *Mute Stones*, figs. 7.2, 7.3.
- 53 As, for example, at Ruthwell: Okasha, *Hand-list*, pp. 108–12.
- 54 In T. Julian Brown's opinion, 'by the end of the eighth century, at the latest, Pictish scribes had little to learn about Insular handwriting, whether from Iona in the West or from Northumbria in the South': 'St Ninian's Isle', p. 251.
- 55 Higgitt, 'Pictish Latin inscription', 314–15; 'Stone-cutter', pp. 155–7; 'Display script'.
- 56 Higgitt, 'Stone-cutter'.
- 57 For their 'touching disregard for spelling' see Wilsher and Hunter, *Stones*, p. 7.
- 58 For discussion of the contents of the library at Iona see Clancy and Markús, *Iona*, pp. 211–22.
- 59 Henderson, 'Pictish art'.
- 60 RCAHMS, *Iona*.
- 61 St Martin's Cross, no. 83. R. A. S. Macalister interpreted it as *oroit do Gillacrist do ringe in chrassa* (*Corpus*, vol. 2, no. 1070); the RCAHMS could see only 'traces of lettering' (*Iona*, p. 206).
- 62 RCAHMS, *Iona*, pp. 182–3, no. 22 (probably seventh century).
- 63 *Ibid.*, nos. 22, 31, 37, 45, 46, 47, 68. The other inscription, no. 69, is a tenth-century runic one.
- 64 'Stone-cutter', p. 160, drawing on comments by Malcolm Parkes.
- 65 Cf. Page, *Introduction*, p. 15.
- 66 'Uses of literacy', 96.
- 67 Higgitt, '*Legentes quoque uel audientes*'.
- 68 *Ibid.*
- 69 MacMullen, 'Epigraphic habit', 233.
- 70 Okasha, *Hand-list*, p. 5.
- 71 Calculation based on Okasha, *Hand-list* and 'Supplement'.
- 72 Macalister, *Corpus*, nos. 1, 19, 170, 186, 521–967 (minus late examples and metalwork).
- 73 Edwards, *Archaeology*, pp. 170–1.
- 74 MacMullen, 'Epigraphic habit', 246. But see Meyer, 'Explaining the epigraphic habit', for an alternative socio-cultural explanation.
- 75 Driscoll, 'Power'; C. Thomas, *Mute Stones*; Randsborg, *Viking Age*, p. 25. For an alternative view of runic monuments as a response to social and religious change, see Sawyer, 'Viking-Age rune-stones'.
- 76 The solitary Auquollie ogam pillar and the anomalous Newton stone excepted. For southern Scotland, see C. Thomas, 'Early Christian inscriptions'.
- 77 Calculation based on Macalister, *Corpus*, and Okasha, 'Vernacular or Latin?'
- 78 *ECMW*.

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- 79 The sole exception is the eleventh-century runic-ogam slab from Killaloe (Macalister, *Corpus*, no. 54) which reflects later Norse attitudes to ogam seen elsewhere in Man and in the Northern Isles.
- 80 As at Clonmacnoise, Kilbreacan (Aran), Toureen Peakaun, Iona, Hartlepool, Lindisfarne and Whitby.
- 81 Forsyth, 'Symbols'.
- 82 C. Thomas, *Mute Stones*, p. 20. Though neither is in its original location, the current juxtaposition of the Newton symbol stone and the Newton ogam/Roman inscribed stone provides a striking comparison which demonstrates that these are indeed cognate monument-types.
- 83 *ECMS*, pp. 226-8, figs. 239-40.
- 84 See n. 80.
- 85 Ritchie and Fraser, *Pictish Symbol Stones*.
- 86 Harbison, 'Royal patronage'.
- 87 Forsyth, 'Dupplin'.
- 88 For contrasting attitudes to the prestige of Celtic vernaculars, especially as reflected in the epigraphic record, see T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society'.
- 89 I am indebted to John Higgitt, Richard Sharpe and Patrick Wormald, not only for their incisive comments on a draft of this chapter, but also for numerous stimulating discussions of, and disagreements over, the uses of literacy in early Scotland. All errors of fact and judgement remain, of course, my own responsibility.
- Since this chapter was written two further ogam inscriptions have come to light in Pictland: a small fragment of worked bone from Borinish, South Uist, and a large cross-marked stone from Mains of Afforsk, Aberdeenshire. Neither has yet been published.