

### III.

#### A PICTISH SYMBOL STONE FROM GOLSPIE, SUTHERLAND.

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*Read January 30, 1943.*

In the middle of April 1942 Mr John P. Morrison was cultivating a field behind Golspie village when his tractor encountered a large flat stone covering a cavity which he thought to be a drain or a small chamber. On removal the stone slab was found to have figured on its lower side incised symbols, a rubbing of which was at once sent on to me by Mr George Murray, Architect of the Sutherland Estates and Honorary Curator of the Dunrobin Museum, Golspie.

The stone was taken under the protection of Mr Roderick Badden,

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tenant of the field, and the cavity was filled in to enable agricultural work to continue until such time as a favourable opportunity presented itself to examine it.

In July I took occasion to visit the site and found it under a vigorous

O.S. Sheet CV. II.

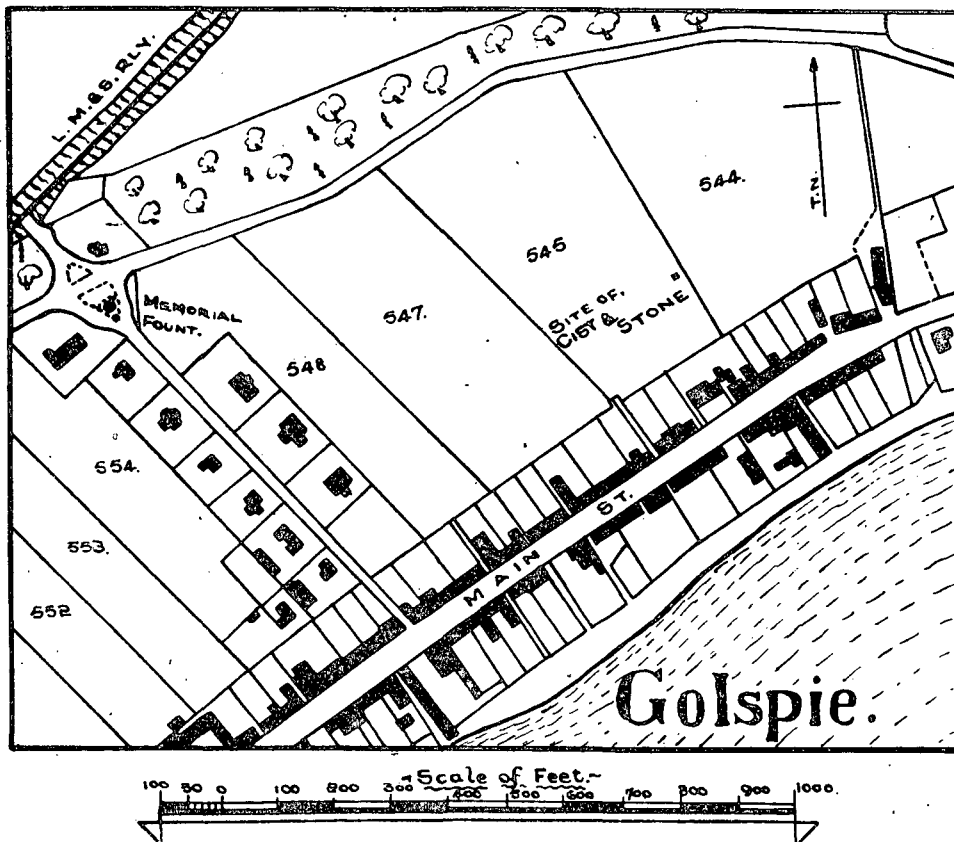


Fig. 1. Plan of the locality.

*By permission of H.M. Stationery Office and the Director of the Ordnance Survey.*

growth of potatoes. Happily, however, the spot was within a few feet of the north-west boundary wall of the field and, as it had been carefully marked, it was located without difficulty.

The field in which the discovery was made is quite level, and forms part of the 25-foot terrace on which the village of Golspie is built. It is entered by way of Myron's Lane, and is marked No. 545 on the 25-inch Ordnance Survey sheet 107 (fig. 1). The site is 71 yards north-west of the garden wall to the rear of the houses forming the landward side of

Golspie Main Street, and it lies 8 feet south-west of the wall separating the fields Nos. 545 and 544.

The flat stone had been lying athwart a small cist of light construction, which had suffered some damage in the removal of its cover (Pl. VII, 1). The stone chamber measured about 3 feet long by 13 inches wide and 14 inches deep. It was constructed of four red sandstone slabs, the largest of which was about 3 inches thick. The covering slab was only a few inches below the plough level and only the deeper digging of the mechanical tractor caused it to be dislodged. The bottom was roughly laid with pieces of flat red sandstone. The long axis of the cist lay at  $272^\circ$  east of north magnetic.

The ground in which the cist was placed was of sand, free of pebbles. It was noted that the stratification of the sand beyond the immediate vicinity of the cist was undisturbed, indicating that the burial was probably an isolated one. The little tomb was empty, but its appearance was quite consistent with the suggestion that it had previously been despoiled. The flat stone covering it was obviously not the original cap-stone. Not only was it lying across the cist, but its dimensions would have been ample to cover a chamber more than double the size. But to the circumstance of the slab having been subsequently utilised as a cover-stone no doubt its preservation is due.

The flat stone is of mud-coloured, very thin-bedded, micaceous sandstone with prominent laminations, flaking readily, though not entirely on account of exposure to the air, nor was much of the scaling of recent origin (Pl. VII, 2). The slab is  $2\frac{3}{8}$  inches thick and it has been neatly trimmed with square-cut top corners. It measures 4 feet  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches along one side and about 6 inches less along the other, while it is of fairly uniform width, varying only from  $23\frac{1}{2}$  inches at the top to 24 inches at the bottom.

On one face are incised five symbols lightly scribed, the markings being not more than mere scorings, which might have been engraved by the rounded point of a small nail (fig. 2).

At the top of the stone is a crescent symbol with downward horns, the tips being  $19\frac{1}{2}$  inches apart. The central portion,  $5\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide, is ornamented with a geometrical design of curved lines, which is balanced on each side by another pattern of spiralised curves.

Through the central portion of the latter pass the arms of a V rod symbol terminating at a common point 6 inches below the crescent. Within the right angle so formed is incised a 1-inch circle, and from the points of intersection of the arms and the crescent an arc of a circle has been traced, somewhat sketchily as though the result of an afterthought. The ends of the V rod are ornamented, one with a sceptre while the other is lanceolate, the tip of the design being flaked off.

The design is somewhat uneven in its detail. The figures inside the

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crescent on both sides of the lines of the V rod are not symmetrical; the semicircular hoop on the right is not repeated on the left; the curves on the under side of the tips of the V rod only superficially correspond; the lower curve of the crescent is imposed on the right arm of the V rod, whereas the left rod is superimposed on the crescent.

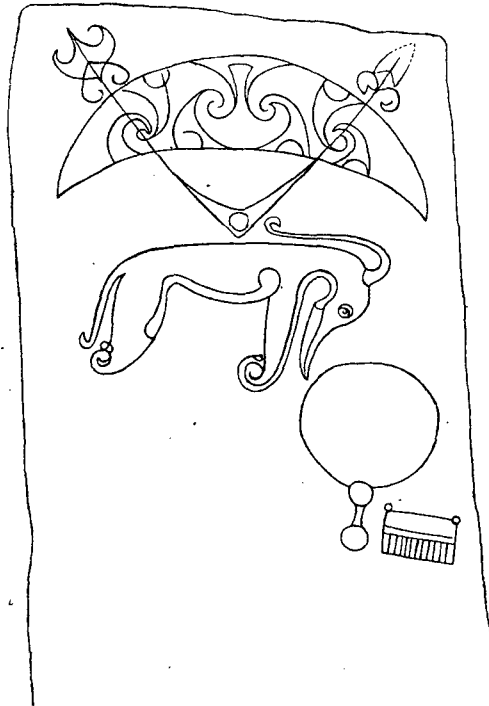


Fig. 2. Tracing of the symbols.

Directly below the V-shaped rod and centrally placed on the stone is the "elephant" symbol facing to the right, characteristically and vigorously portrayed.

To the bottom right and practically touching the "tusk" of the "elephant" is the mirror symbol 7 inches in diameter, while to the right of its handle is a single-edged comb with thirteen teeth. On its upper corners are small circular loops, as if for suspension.

On the blank space at the lower end of the stone and on the same face are four groups of scorings as though the sculptor had been sharpening his tool on a fresh surface, as a stone mason might sharpen his chisel on the block which he was hewing.

That the stone was deteriorating through flaking before or at the

time the symbols were engraved may be seen on the left of the handle of the mirror, the scoring of the line of the frame appearing on a flaked surface.

The reverse side of the slab bears no sculpturings.

On a stone of comparatively rough surface the markings are surprisingly regular in their execution.

The arcs of the crescent were evidently scribed by a compass method, the centre of the outer being the point of intersection of the arms of the V rod. The arms are set exactly at right angles, although as they are projected through the crescent they incline slightly inwards.

The mirror outline is also evenly traced, though no central point could be detected on the stone. It is probable that it may have been sketched round a circular template, a suggestion which is strengthened by the probability that the same pattern was used to trace out the arc within the two arms of the V rod.

This Golspie stone, though characteristic of many of the Pictish symbol stones, has some rather unusual features.

The little round pellets at the lower extremities of the legs of the fantastic animal are very rare, if not unique, as also is the loop which terminates the scroll.

The loops on the top corners of the mirror also do not appear to be prevalent elsewhere, while the tool scratchings on the lower part of the stone have seldom been noted.

In the county of Sutherland some sixteen symbol stones have hitherto been recorded, most of which are preserved in the Dunrobin Museum. Of these, seven were found in the immediate neighbourhood of Golspie, and of the remainder all but one within a range of 7 miles to the north.

Of the Sutherland examples the magnificent relief slab from Craigton, Strathhalladale is the only one bearing the "elephant" symbol, whereas eight of them have the crescent, all with the accompanying V rod. Eight of them, again, bear the mirror symbol, only three of which, however, have the attendant comb.

No other example portrays the five symbols of the latest discovery in juxtaposition, although two others are recorded from Fyvie and Rhynie, Aberdeenshire.

The stone has now been mounted and set up in the Dunrobin Museum.

Thanks are due to Mr J. P. Morrison and Mr Badden for courteously granting facilities for examination of the finds, and to Mr George Murray for his generous assistance.



2. The Symbol Stone.

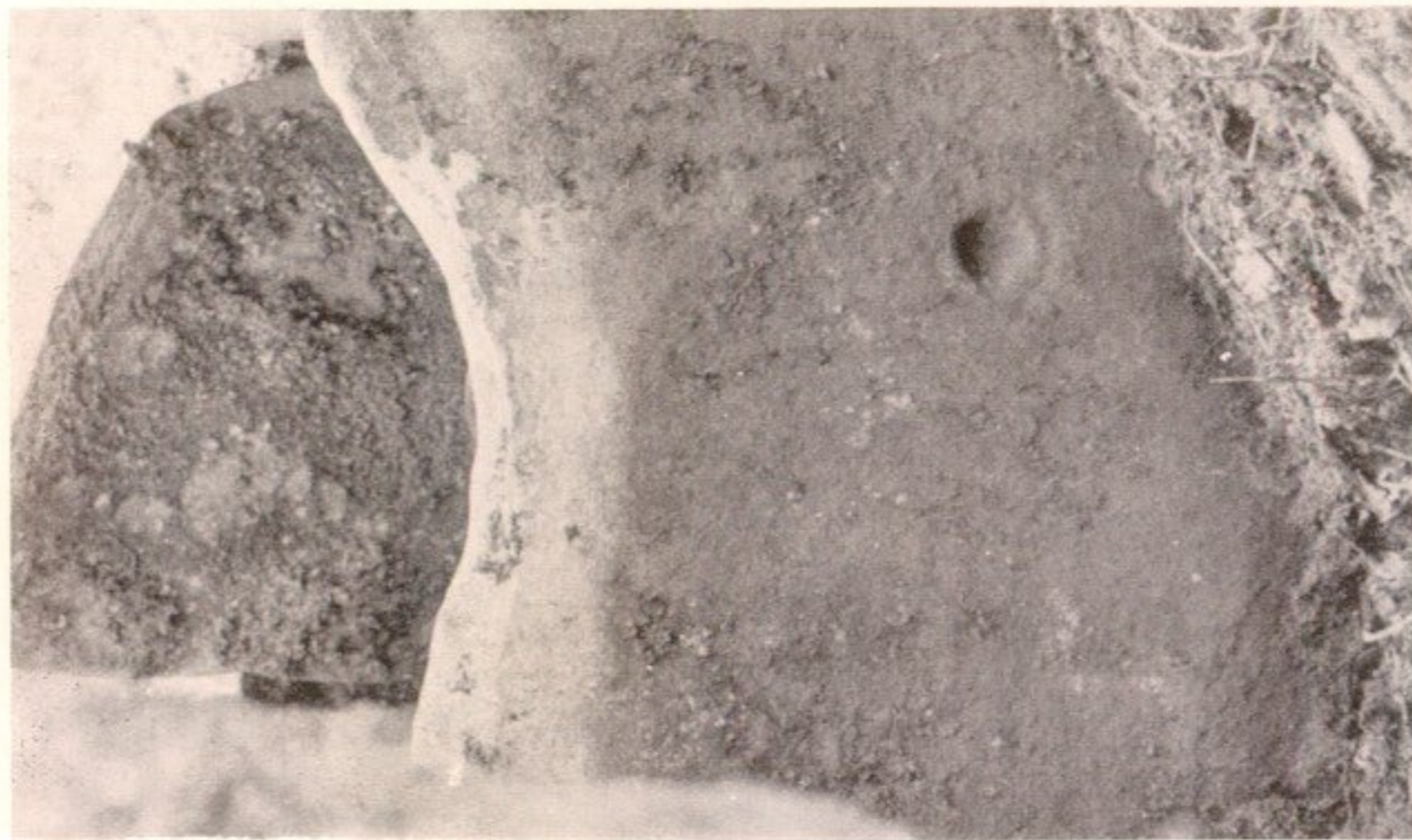


1. View of cist.

J. M. DAVIDSON.

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[Facing p. 30.]



2. The carved slab (outer face).



1. Megalithic cist, Ardnamnock, from the south.