

Painted pebbles in early Scotland

by *Anna Ritchie*

Painted pebbles are a class of artefact unique to northern Scotland in the first millennium AD. They are small rounded beach pebbles of quartzite, which have been painted with simple designs in a dye which is now dark brown in colour. It is the stain of the dye rather than the dye itself which has survived, and it has consequently proved impossible to analyse the constituents used. The pebbles selected for painting range in size from 18 mm by 22 mm to 65 mm by 51 mm.

Excavations over the last ninety years have yielded a total of nineteen painted pebbles, all from sites in the Northern Isles or in Caithness. With the exception of one example from Buckquoy in the Orkneys, all have come from broch sites where there are extensive remains of post-broch buildings. The Buckquoy pebble (no. 13; pl 42) was associated with the occupation of a house dated by stratigraphy and by an ogam-inscribed spindle-whorl to the late seventh and early eighth centuries AD. A similar date is assigned to one of the painted pebbles from

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Jarlshof (no. 19), which came from the secondary cobbling in the entrance to the late wheelhouse-period byre. The other two pebbles from Jarlshof were associated with the occupation of wheelhouse 1 and belong to the earlier part of the wheelhouse period at Jarlshof, dating approximately to the third to fifth centuries AD (nos 17-18).

Eleven painted pebbles were found during Sir Francis Tress Barry's excavations of brochs in the Keiss area of Caithness (nos 2-12). There is some confusion surrounding their provenance, and it is impossible now to be certain which of the broch sites are involved. According to Barry, they came from four brochs (Barry 1899, 191), whereas Anderson, who published the excavations, states that three brochs were involved (1901, 145). Anderson illustrates five pebbles, captioned 'from the Keiss broch' (1901, fig 22; identifiable with nos 2, 3, 5, 8, 11), but the original plate in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of London shows that the caption contains a misprint and should read 'from the Keiss brochs' (Brown Portfolio, p 67). Accompanying this plate in the Brown Portfolio is an unpublished coloured drawing labelled 'Painted stones from the Keiss brochs 1895-7', which illustrates three pebbles, nos 4, 7 and 10. Anderson states that three pebbles came from the Wester broch (1901, 121), and the source of his information was probably a letter addressed to him from J M Joass, dated 30th September 1895 at Golspie, which is in the possession of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland (Joass 1895). Included in this letter are sketches of four painted pebbles, three of which are captioned 'Wester broch' (nos 3-5) and the fourth 'Road broch' (no. 2). The Caithness Inventory supports this attribution of some pebbles at least to the Wester and Road sites, but records five from Wester and three from the Road broch (RCAMS 1911, nos 513 and 517); the source of this information is unknown. There is a label on pebble no. 6 which reads 'Wester', so this may be one of the five mentioned in the Inventory, together with the three identified from the Joass letter (nos 3-5).

Some facts at least emerge from these confused records. Of the eleven painted pebbles in the NMAS collection attributed to the Keiss brochs, eight can be identified from illustrations dating to before 1901 (nos 2-5, 7-8, 10-11). Some of the pebbles came from excavations at Wester (nos 3-5 and probably no. 6) and at the Road broch (no. 2). Barry himself is convincingly specific in stating that all the painted pebbles came from secondary buildings outside the brochs and were found separately (1899, 191); they can therefore be dated to the post-broch period.

The excavations at Burrian in North Ronaldsay yielded two painted pebbles (nos 14-15), but there is no record of their precise provenance on the site; there was secondary occupation within the broch itself, and post-broch buildings outside the broch were also explored.

A painted pebble was found during the recent excavations at Crosskirk broch in Caithness (no. 1); it came from a midden deposit behind a refacing of the inner wall of the broch and belonged to the period of the occupation of the broch (information from Dr H Fairhurst).

An early date has been attributed to the pebble from Clickhimin in Shetland (no. 16), but the implications of its provenance are arguable. It was found in a midden layer on the beach outside the wall of the ring-fort, and was assigned by Hamilton to the fort period, *c* 400-0 BC (1968, 8, 79), although in this trench, which was *c* 20 m square, only two other objects attributed to the fort period were found in the same layer (a fragment of incised whalebone and a sherd of pottery). Redeposition of objects as a result of water disturbance is perhaps a possibility here.

Dating contexts are thus known for seventeen out of the total of nineteen painted pebbles; two may be as early as the last few centuries BC, while the other fifteen belong to the period between the abandonment of brochs, broadly *c* 200 AD, and the eighth century AD. It is surely legitimate therefore to regard painted pebbles primarily as a constituent of material culture in N Scotland in the historical Pictish period.

The motifs employed on painted pebbles are simple though carefully executed. The most common motifs are dots and wavy lines (nos 1, 3–5, 7–8, 14–15, 16–18), and small circles appear alone on two examples (nos 13, 19). A pentacle motif appears on no. 3, and this, together with the involuted line motif on no. 16, has been linked with the art of the Pictish symbol repertoire (Thomas 1963, 46–8); the pentacle has also been found incised on a pebble from the broch of Burrian, a site which has also yielded an example of Pictish symbols incised on an ox phalange (Traill 1890, 352, 361; Ritchie, J N G, 1969, 132, pl 10b, c). The crescents on several of the Keiss pebbles provide another close link with Pictish art (nos 6–7, 9), and triangles appear on nos 9–10. The motifs used on painted pebbles are mostly curvilinear, and all are eminently suited to the medium of paint applied to convex surfaces of very restricted size.

Painted pebbles are inherently non-functional artefacts in the literal sense, and their interpretation must necessarily be speculative. Hamilton has suggested that they were designed to be sling-stones made more potent by the addition of magic or tribal emblems (1968, 79, 104), citing classical Greek evidence in support of the idea. Thirteen surviving examples is not a very impressive total for sling-stones, and there is independent local evidence to support an alternative explanation, that painted pebbles were charm-stones, which seems to the present writer to be more plausible.

A belief in the efficacy of attractive pebbles as aids in curing sickness survived in Scotland until recent times; often known as 'cold-stones', these were natural pebbles selected for their aesthetic shape and colouration, and they were used particularly to 'help' in curing sick animals (Hutcheson 1900). Water into which such a pebble had been dipped was believed to have healing powers when given to sick cattle to drink; the pebble acted as an omen as well, for if it dried quickly the animal would recover swiftly, and if it dried slowly the animal would make only a slow recovery. One such stone preserved in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland (NMA cat no. NO 17) belonged to a farmer in Angus in the 1870s; it is an oval light brown pebble, 42 by 63 mm, which the farmer kept in a small leather bag suspended round his neck.

The belief in charm-stones was so strong in early medieval Iceland that a law was incorporated into the twelfth-century *Gragas*, or law-book, forbidding the practice on pain of minor outlawry (Steffenson 1968, 192). Magic stones also figure in Icelandic sagas (e.g. *Laxdaela Saga*, Magnusson and Pálsson 1969, 191–2) and in later Icelandic folk-tales (Simpson 1972, 46–7).

More important than this medieval and later evidence for charm-stones is the tradition preserved in Adomnan's *Life of St Columba* which indicates a belief in holy stones at a period contemporary with archaeological finds of painted pebbles. Adomnan recorded a story about St Columba which originated when the saint was in Pictland c 565 AD, visiting the court of king Bridei (Anderson and Anderson 1961, 399–405; book II chap 33). He took a white stone from the river Ness, blessed it, and instructed that the water into which it had been dipped be given to sick people in order to cure them. The stone was kept in the royal treasury and was used many times to cure people – though it could never be found when needed by people 'whose time had come', including Bridei himself.

It is likely that this story reflects a contemporary climate of thought in Pictland in which the idea of pebbles acquiring special properties was by no means alien. Columba's pebble was not painted, but it does provide a convincing context for the painted pebbles found on archaeological sites.

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CATALOGUE

- 1 *Crosskirk, Caithness* ND 025701
Dots over entire surface
Information from Dr H Fairhurst; *DES (1970)*, 19-20
- 2 *Road broch, Keiss, Caithness* ND 348615 NMA GA 503
31 mm diam; encircled cross on one side, curl and dot on the other
Joass 1895; Anderson 1901, fig 22; Thomas 1963, 46-7, fig 3, 14; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 4
- 3 *Wester broch, Keiss, Caithness* ND 338583 NMA GA 502
54 by 41 mm; solid dots on one side, pentacle motif on the other
Joass 1895; Anderson 1901, fig 22; Thomas 1963, 46-7, fig 3, 11; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 3
- 4 *Wester broch, Keiss, Caithness* ND 338583 NMA GA 504
39 by 32 mm; solid dots over entire surface
Joass 1895; Brown Portfolio, p 67
- 5 *Wester broch, Keiss, Caithness* ND 338583 NMA GA 511
65 by 51 mm; solid dots over entire surface
Joass 1895; Anderson 1901, fig 22; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 2
- 6 ? *Wester broch, Keiss, Caithness* NMA GA 509
43 by 39 mm; crescent, arc and two circles on one side, curving line on the other
Labelled 'Wester'
- 7 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 505
28 by 22 mm; solid dots and circles on one side, solid crescents and dot on the other
Brown Portfolio, p 67
- 8 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 506
48 mm diam; solid dots over entire surface
Anderson 1901, fig 22
- 9 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 507
42 by 28 mm; triangle on one side, crescent enclosing solid crescent on the other
Thomas 1963, 46-7, fig 3, 10
- 10 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 508
22 mm diam; solid triangle on one side, circle enclosing triangle on the other
Brown Portfolio, p 67
- 11 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 510
41 by 35 mm; two curls on one side, subdivided semicircle on the other
Anderson 1901, fig 22; Thomas 1963, 46-7, fig 3, 12
- 12 *Keiss brochs, Caithness* NMA GA 512
55 by 46 mm; arc and cross with dots between arms, decoration on one side only
Thomas 1963, 46-7, fig 3, 13; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 7
- 13 *Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney* HY 243282
40 by 35 mm; circles over entire surface
Medieval Archaeol, 15 (1971), 137; Ritchie, A, forthcoming
- 14 *Burrian, N Ronaldsay, Orkney* HY 762514 NMA GA 67
22 mm diam; 'crazy-paving' lines over entire surface
Traill 1890, 352; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 5; MacGregor forthcoming

- 15 *Burrian, N Ronaldsay, Orkney* HY 762514 NMA GA 67
22 by 18 mm; five circles on one side, two solid dots on the other
Traill 1890, 352; Hamilton 1968, fig 37, 6; MacGregor forthcoming
- 16 *Clickhimin, Shetland* HU 463408
65 by 46 mm; curving and involuted lines over entire surface
Hamilton 1968, 79, 86, fig 37, 1
- 17 *Jarlshof, Shetland* HU 398095 NMA HSA 4105
60 by 59 mm; involuted lines and solid dots on one side, curving lines and solid dots on the other
Hamilton 1956, 64, pl xv, c; Thomas 1963, 46, fig 3, 9
- 18 *Jarlshof, Shetland* HU 398095 NMA HSA 4107
26 mm diam; solid dots over entire surface
Hamilton 1956, 84
- 19 *Jarlshof, Shetland* HU 398095 NMA HSA 4108
32 by 23 mm; circles over entire surface
Hamilton 1956, 77, fig 39

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