

An anthropomorphic carving from Pictish Orkney

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ABSTRACT

An exceptional example of Pictish anthropomorphic art was recently discovered in Orkney, incised on the surface of a cattle bone artefact that is interpreted as a gaming piece. The find is described and compared with related objects, with conclusions that may hold implications for the origins of hnefatafl and the meaning of some Pictish symbols.

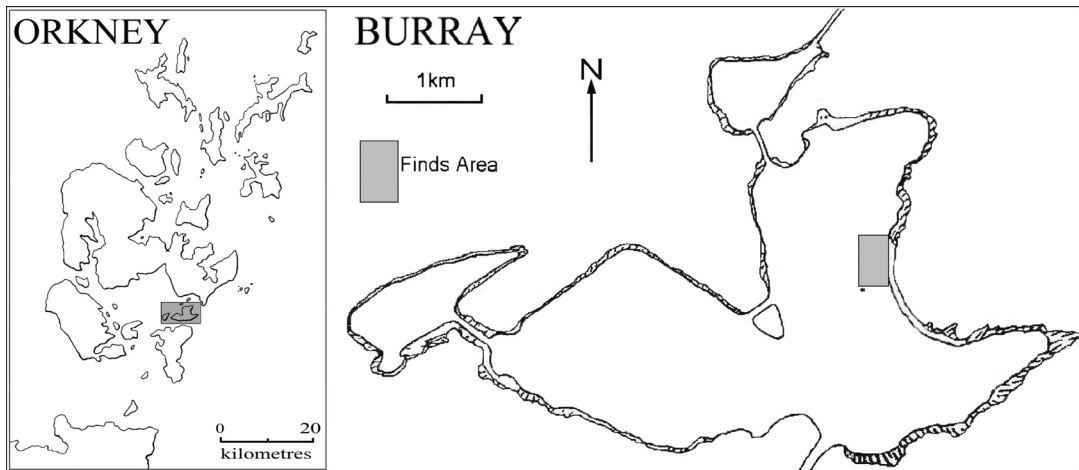
Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggats with 'em?

(Hamlet, Act V, Scene 1)

BACKGROUND

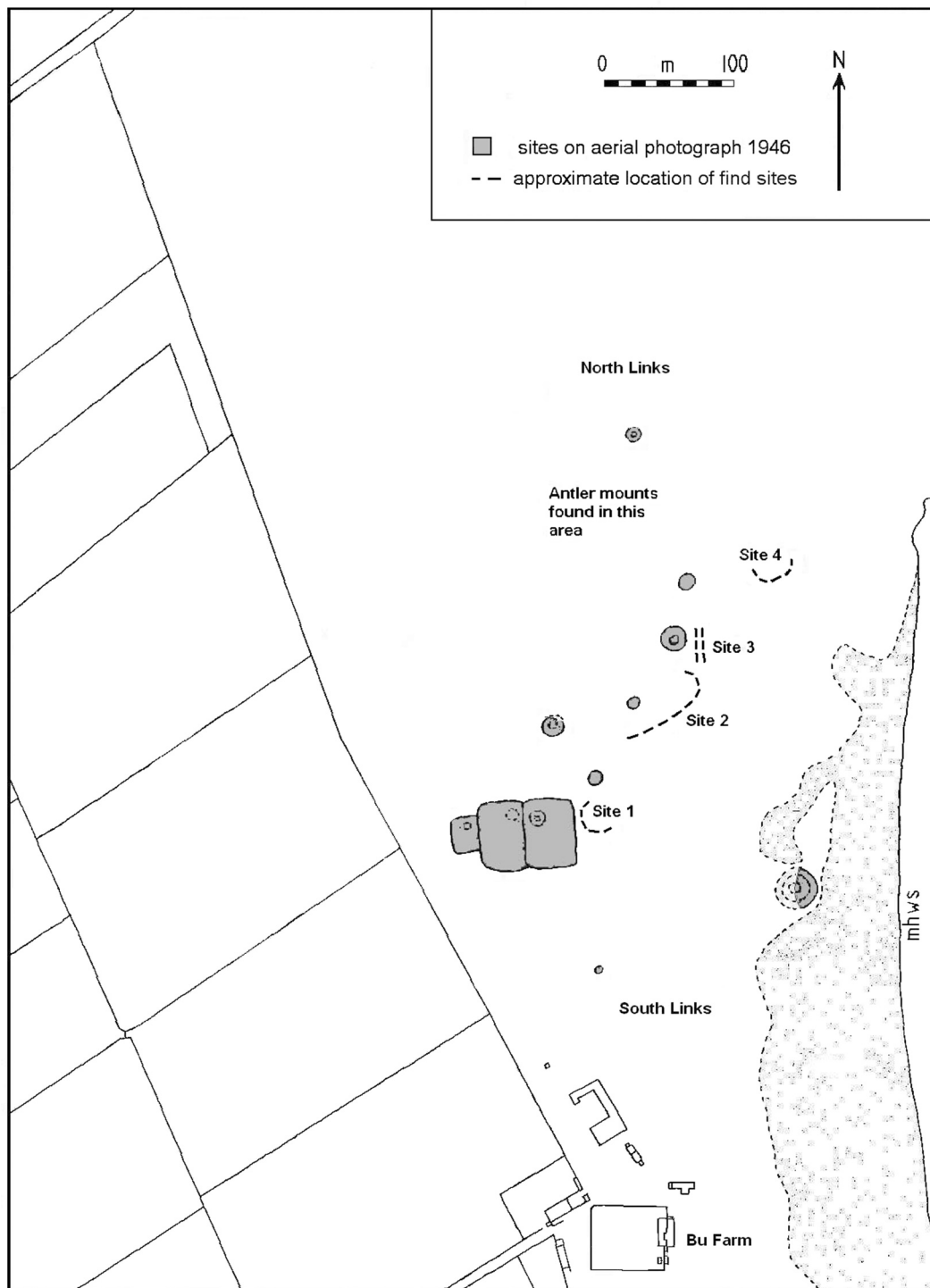
Bu Sands is an area of fixed sand dunes in a bay lying on the east coast of the island of Burray in Orkney (illus 1). The North Links at the Bu are the most important source of high quality building sand in the county and are also used recreationally as a motocross track. The extraction works and blow-out subsequent to motocross activity led to the exposure of

archaeological remains at Bu Sands between 1987 and 1990 (Smith et al 1988). Surface finds were collected from the area on a number of occasions, with four site locations noted by Beverley Ballin Smith around OS grid reference NGR: ND 476 975 (archive notes at Orkney Museum) but this area was not examined in the archaeological survey of Orkney's coasts by EASE (Moore & Wilson 1997).



ILLUS 1 Site location

* Bayview, Birsay, Orkney KW17 2LR



ILLUS 2 Aerial photograph results

The finds recovered were predominantly animal bones but included Iron Age pottery, stone tools and iron-smelting debris; the finds have been deposited with the Orkney Museum in Kirkwall. The most notable items from the area published hitherto are four decorated antler mounts and a stone 'egg amulet' found by holidaymakers in 1990 (Hunter 1993). In 1993, reports of human remains becoming exposed led to the site being briefly examined: presence of at least four human burials was confirmed and a small number of finds collected but no further investigations were undertaken; further midden deposits were reported exposed in July 1996. No controlled excavation of the site has been undertaken and there have been no additional reports of finds, nor any further evidence of archaeological material remaining in situ.

Examination of aerial photographs, taken by the RAF in 1946, has indicated the existence of a number of circular features – both earthworks and parchmarks – in the finds area. These features were located to the Ordnance Survey grid and

were compared with the locational notes made by Smith; the results are shown as illustration 2 and the similarity in distribution of the two sets is striking. A large rectilinear ditched feature with internal structures was also observed to the south of the area shown and is likely to have been the original Norse 'Bu' but this area has been destroyed by sand extraction (W Budge, pers comm). No record was found of any military installations in the area nor of any other previously known archaeological structures that would explain the observed features, although one circular coastal feature may be an old firing range remembered locally (W Budge, pers comm).

An assessment of the recovered finds assemblage was undertaken at the beginning of 2004, funded through the Community Environmental Renewal Scheme, with the intention of creating a teaching and handling collection for the Orkney Museum. During the initial cataloguing phase of the project, as the finds were recorded, the bones were examined to identify species and body parts represented, to



ILLUS 3 The artefact

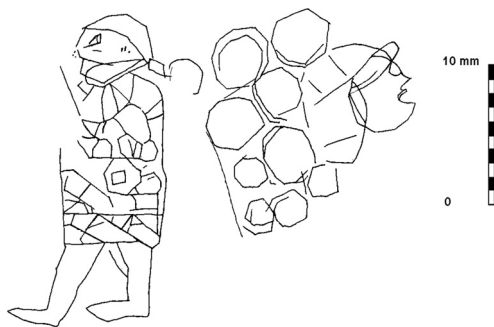
ascertain condition and to find any evidence of butchery marks or bone-working. Notable finds included a polished stone axehead fragment and a discoid stone counter; one particular bone was found to have a distinctive design incised into its surface (illus 3).

FIND DESCRIPTION

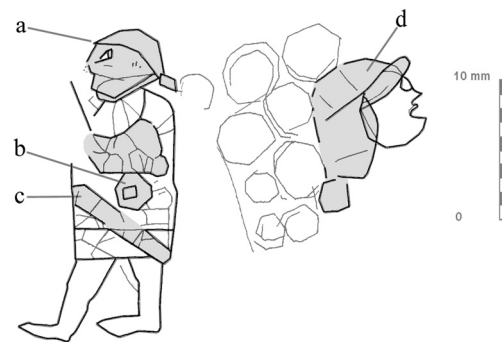
The carved bone is the proximal left phalanx from the forelimb of an ox, recovered as two separate fragments. The reconstructed object is 53mm in height and 30mm in diameter and the surface condition of the bone is generally good. The epiphyseal fusion state indicates an age at death of over 18 months for the animal (Schmid 1972, 75; Amorosi 1989, 64). There is a splinter missing from the front of the carving, possibly from gnawing by a dog in antiquity, and an area of the volar surface has been lost, probably due to the modern machining that caused the main fracture. Apart from the surface carving, there is no evidence of the bone having received any working to smooth the outline or produce a more level base, although a small area at one corner of the proximal epiphyseal surface appears slightly abraded. There is evidence of processing to remove soft tissue from the bone (Lawrence, forthcoming), in the form of fine cuts and scraping around the attachments for the interphalangeal ligaments, although

this anatomical area is not considered to be of importance for food.

The design (illus 4) lies on the sides and back of the bone and the carving was clearly executed with a sharp-bladed cutting tool such as a knife, demonstrating a high degree of confidence in execution. Close examination shows the lines to have been predominantly straight incisions, with multiple cuts used to give the appearance of curves. Curved incisions do appear on the piece but are infrequent. The main motif is a standing human figure 22mm in height that appears upright when the bone is placed on its proximal epiphysis. The figure wears a thigh-length tunic showing details such as cloth-folds around the arm and decoration around the hem. The robust nature of the upper face may be intended to convey the nasal or faceplate of a helmet, the skull continuing over. The figure is shown with a ponytail depicted protruding behind and below the head, which may suggest that the helmet is merely tied-back hair but the overall appearance is certainly more similar to a helmet than to simple human features (illus 5, feature a). A sword scabbard (illus 5, feature c) crosses the lower part of the figure, suggesting that it is suspended from a belt or baldric. There is a hexagonal motif (illus 5, feature b) with a central rectangle prominent beneath the figure's elbow and it is likely that a circular object is intended here representing a shield with a square central boss slung from the figure's shoulder or possibly



ILLUS 4 The carved design



ILLUS 5 The carving, highlighting major features

on his elbow; similarly small shields are known from other examples of Pictish anthropomorphic art, such as the mounted figure from Bullion, Dundee (Fraser & Ritchie 1999, no 73). The figure clearly represents a warrior and the line in front of the chest may then be the edge or haft of a weapon, especially if the notch apparent above the damaged area is a carved point, and it is possible that the line between the figure's legs is a spear shaft. The small size of the shield need not suggest use of any particular weapon, even if such shields may be specific to close range formal combat (see for example Curle 1940, fig 14). The hexagonal object may possibly represent a purse, book satchel or belt-pouch but these seem less likely because of the shape, the central square boss and the location. The thigh-length tunic with decoration around the tunic hem and the ponytail are both commonly shown in Pictish carvings.

Anthropomorphic figures, shown both standing and mounted on horseback, are known from several examples of Pictish carved stones and predominantly depict adult men accoutred either for war, for the chase or as clerics. Some examples show figures in action scenes – in combat, eg Glamis 2 (Fraser & Ritchie 1999, no 55), Aberlemno 2 (*ibid*, no 48), Shandwick (*ibid*, no 141); hunting, eg Kirriemuir 2 (*ibid*, no 61), Shandwick (*ibid*, no 141); or from Biblical tales (the St Andrews sarcophagus). Others show simple individuals, eg Mail (Fraser & Ritchie 1999, no 199), Rhynie 3 & 7 (*ibid*, no 39) and Golspie (*ibid*, no 115). Almost every non-clerical example is an armed adult male with a beard and the known single figures predominantly face to the right. Close-Brooks & Stevenson (1982) noted the appearance of Pictish carved figures as wearing short tunics and with beards and prominent noses. Aitchison (2003, following Stevenson 1955 and Alcock & Alcock 1992) recently suggested that hair styling may have been indicative of social status and he also considered that the pronounced noses had been misinterpreted as helmets, the presence of which (on carvings of Picts) he

dismissed, following Cruickshank (1994; 1995). It is of course possible that this piece of Pictish art, known as the Peedie Pict ('peedie' is a commonly used Orkney term meaning small), does not necessarily portray a Pict.

Behind the main figure appears a design of circular motifs seemingly retained away from the figure by a faint straight line. This initially looks like a circular pattern to fill the dorsal surface but leads to a further human face on the opposite side to the main figure. The second face is also in profile and also faces toward the volar surface. This face is executed in a more naïve style and has an almost cartoonish appearance but it also seems, from the surrounding lines, to be wearing a helmet (illus 5, feature d), although here this detail may have been intended to represent hair or mere continuity of the circular pattern. It is possible that the circular motifs are a crest and the 'lump' protruding from the front of the figure is most likely a visor. The presence of this second figure may explain why the full-length warrior faces left.

Closer examination of the aforementioned line retaining the circular area suggests that it may be associated with a circle behind the main figure. A provisional interpretation is that these elements of the carving represent the outline of a third individual, executed much more lightly than the rest and perhaps not fully realized as a permanent carving but rather a preliminary, unsatisfactory sketch. Microscopic comparison of the three main areas of carving – the main full-length figure, the second head and the circular pattern in between – suggests that they result from separate episodes of carving and indicates a sustained interest in the artefact by its creator (Lawrence, forthcoming).

There is no sign that any further working of the bone was intended: the apparent motifs are completely drawn and fitted within the object's sides without any markings for further cuts. Although the designs indicate that it was intended to be seen from all sides whilst upright, the bone retains its natural shape unaltered. It is likely then that this bone represents a finished

item, whether as a simple piece of graffiti or as a functional object.

RELATED OBJECTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Three other decorated cattle phalanges are known from Orkney, all of which have their designs incised two-dimensionally into their surfaces: two from the Broch of Burrian in North Ronaldsay (Traill 1890; MacGregor 1974a) and one from the Pool excavations, Sanday (Hunter et al, forthcoming). Of these three, one from each site bears the well-known Pictish ‘crescent and V-rod’ design, the one from the Broch of Burrian with the ‘mirror case’ on the reverse, the Pool example possibly with a ‘comb’ below; the third has an unclear design that may be the terminal of a ‘Z-rod’ (compare for example slab 1 from Dunnicaer, described by Alcock & Alcock 1992, 278–9 and illus 36). All these are carved so that the design is upright when the bone is on its proximal epiphysis and did not apparently require any significant further shaping: they must all be considered to be related functionally. The Late Iron Age attribution of the Pool example suggests a provisional date between AD 500 and 700, which range also seems plausible for the other examples.

A number of similar finds have been reported from terp mounds in the Netherlands. Roes (1963) describes horse phalanges with circular ornamentation, while Munro (1889) notes ‘bones of the foot of an ox are covered with concentric circles, apparently for ornamentation’, and this immediately suggests a particular similarity with the rear part of the carving from Bu.

Addyman & Hill (1969) describe a phalanx ‘trial piece’ from Saxon Southampton (Southampton Museum finds reference A1993.19.71) inscribed with runes of ‘Frisian type’ (Page in Addyman & Hill 1969, 86–8). These runes read ‘*catae*’ (ibid) and it may not be coincidental that the term ‘*catt*’ is associated with the Pictish inhabitants of both Caithness

and Shetland, possibly as a tribal motif (Watson 1921; Nicolaisen 2003, 139). This may reinforce the suggestion by Smith (2003) of Iron Age trade across the North Sea.

Other examples of the working of cattle phalanges are a type found widely in excavations, including one from Bu Sands. These each have a small circular hole drilled through the centre of the proximal epiphysis either for use of the phalanx as a handle or to take a peg, permitting the securing of the bone in place on another object, such as a gaming board. Helmfrid (2000) has suggested that the term *halatafl* used in the Norse sagas refers to a perforated playing board for the game of *hnefatafl*. The occurrence of perforated gaming boards such as those from Ballinderry, Ireland, and Brough of Birsay, Orkney (Curle 1982, find 274) may be important in this respect and the possibility of using areas of turf or sand as outdoor playing boards may be relevant. In any such case, a peg-bottomed item, if not a tool of some kind, must necessarily have been oriented with the proximal epiphysis as its base.

Still another relevant find type is of cattle phalanges that have been smoothed across the proximal epiphysis and whittled around the margins (eg from Pool; Hunter et al, forthcoming). This formed a shape similar to that of bone and antler pieces from the Broch of Burrian (MacGregor 1974a) and a stone piece found at the early Christian period site of Kiondroghad on the Isle of Man (Gelling 1969), all of which have been interpreted as gaming pieces. Such pieces are distinguished from the Peedie Pict by being carved in three dimensions and it is tempting to suggest an analogy with Anderson and Allen’s Types 1 and 2 symbol stones (Allen & Anderson 1903).

It is unlikely, though not impossible, that the Peedie Pict will have been carved before a more elaborate artefact was to have been made from the piece: subsequent alterations, however, could only have been made to the epiphyses, either by drilling or trimming. The Peedie Pict is therefore either a piece of casual

whittling, an attempt at a design in a trial piece, decoration to identify the bone as a particular object, or a figure that has intrinsic meaning. The confidence of execution and the use of similar bones elsewhere suggest greater intent than might be the case for ‘doodling’ but such activity cannot be satisfactorily ruled out. Interpretation as trial pieces or motif pieces seems unsustainable because the size and shape of the bones does not lend itself to accurate reproduction or transference of the design to any other artefact and the simplicity of the crescent and V-rod and mirror case examples certainly makes them unlikely precursors for any later carving.

Ethnographic parallels for uses of whole cattle phalanges are few. The use of cattle phalanges as ‘buzz’ toys is known among the North American tribes (Culin 1975, 751–7). However, this requires that cords be attached mid-shaft, which would obscure the carvings and is therefore unlikely as an explanation of the Pictish examples. Another possible use is as the object in a game such as ‘hide the button,’ or ‘*neivie-nick-nack*’ (Gomme 1894, 189–90, 410–11; an Orkney version is recorded in Marwick 1991, 169) in which an identifiable object hidden in the palm of one hand or the other must be located by an opponent, but these finds would probably be too large for such a function. Similarly, cattle phalanges would be more cumbersome than those of the seals used in the Inuit bone game *Inukat* or *Inugaktuuk*, played using seal phalanges and metapodials (Grunfeld 1975, 163).

There must be an inherent aspect of the cattle phalanx that makes it particularly well suited to some function that can be improved by decorative or symbolic carving. The shape of cattle phalanges permits them to stand upright on the proximal epiphysis and the identifiable carvings on all the known decorated examples are clearly carved for this orientation. This distinguishes them from casual carvings on stone slabs and will have facilitated use as game pieces or as decorative or votive figurines.

[Any potential symbolism simply deriving from the bone as part of an ox cannot be supported from any other evidence except the well-known pictorial representations of living animals, such as those at Burghead, Moray (Hunter & Ritchie 1999, no 153), and it is most likely that cattle phalanges were used simply for their availability and convenience of form.]

MacGregor (1974b) and Roes (1963) note the collection and use of cattle phalanges in 20th-century Friesland as skittle-like targets in a throwing game (‘*loggats*’) and this is very clearly shown in the elder Breughel’s 1560 painting ‘Children at Play’. The Peedie Pict could even have been ‘kingpin’ in such a game. The minor signs of surface damage present on the artefact need not have been caused by repeated blows from skittles play but the epiphyseal abrasion may be due to wear against an abrasive surface, such as might occur on a stone gameboard.

One plausible alternative interpretation is that the carved bones are lots for divination (cleromancy). In such a case, the bone may suggest a meaning to the operator when cast based partly on the incised design and its orientation (for example Tacitus, *Germania*, chapter 10). This would permit wide variation in the quality of execution without impairing usefulness and the use of an intact bone may have been necessary for ritualistic purposes. The use of unworked astragali and of other forms of shaped bone artefacts in this regard is well known, as for example among the Tswapong of southern Africa (Werbner 1989). In this context, the use of both symbols and recognizable figures might be explicable, especially if different surfaces can show different meanings. The simultaneous use of disparate objects as practised by the Tswapong may also help explain the function of decorated discs recovered from Pictish contexts such as those from Shetland and Caithness (summarized by Thomas 1963). It is possible that although the Peedie Pict is a (male) warrior figure, the other face possibly with no beard (and possibly emerging from clouds?) is intended

to be female, potentially giving separate interpretations to the two sides and, perhaps, intermediate meanings for the volar and dorsal surfaces; this would fit the suggestion of a dualistic philosophy as perhaps overstated by Jackson (1984). This interpretation of the artefact need not conflict with its function as a boardgame piece; indeed, in a Norse context, such a dual function would resolve the apparent confusion relating to translations of the *Hervera* Saga riddles discussed by Helmfrid (2000) that appear to describe ‘throwing’ of the king-piece in *hnefatafl*. Culin (1895, xvii–xxxvi) suggested that a magical or divinatory origin might be a common, even universal, attribute of games and, although this was not a view held by Murray (1951, 235), the Inuit seal bone game provides an example (Grunfeld 1975, 163).

CONCLUSION

There is not any specific evidence to suggest that the Peedie Pict was intended to represent any particular Biblical or Pictish character, an archetype or an abstract ‘warrior’. Although Pictish use of human images as religious idols has been suggested (Ritchie 2003, 3), an interpretation of the Peedie Pict as a cleromantic lot or as a gaming piece seems more likely to be correct. The degree of finishing that such an article might require may depend on the nature of use: a casually used skittles (or ‘*loggats*’) set, for example, might require less elegance in form than pieces for a high quality example. Smith (2003) has recently suggested that the forms of some bone artefacts indicate contact between Frisia and Orkney and it would seem probable that pleasant social activities should then have become common to both regions. Certainly the distribution of surface-decorated cattle phalanges seems very localized thus far.

The tradition of boardgame playing in Pictish Orkney is attested by the existence of a number of boards made with varying degrees

of formality, notably the rough stone examples from Buckquoy and Red Craig (Ritchie 1977, 199; 1987; Brundle 2004) and Howe (Smith 1994, 188–9). This type of gameboard seems to have existed later in a similar form throughout northern Europe, though with numerous minor variations, and was probably used in a game, best known from the Norse sagas as *tafl* or *hnefatafl*. This evolved into the Sami game of *tablut* that was its last recorded surviving member (Murray 1951, 55–64; Bell 1979, I.75–81; 1979, II.43–6). A distinguishing feature of this family of games is that just one counter needs to be distinguished from the others as a ‘king’, a role for which the Peedie Pict would be well qualified.

Although the finds of worked cattle phalanges, both decorated and pierced, may be interpreted as gaming pieces, if they are all ‘kings’ from a game such as *hnefatafl*, then the absence of ordinary pieces from Pictish contexts initially seems strange – from Norse sites they are relatively frequent, as for example the 23 from Scar, Sanday (Owen & Dalland 1999). In *tablut* there are 24 such ordinary pieces to just one king, as found in Grave 750 at Birka in Sweden (Arbman 1940; 1943). It is important to consider the limited finishing that the known Pictish artefacts have been given. The most likely explanation for the apparent absence of ordinary pieces is that the pieces are indeed found but that they are casually used items and their unworked appearance is not necessarily diagnostic of function: obvious possibilities include limpet shells, stones and other animal bones, perhaps especially the second phalanges of cattle.

If it is accepted that the Peedie Pict and similar finds, as well as the gameboards from Orkney, are pieces for a game of the *tafl* family and that the Wimose board comes from a different tradition (most likely the Roman game *ludus latruncularum*), then they are the earliest known examples. The possibility then exists that the *tafl* family of games may be Pictish in origin and later became widely known through trade across the North Sea to Scandinavia and

northern Europe; it might also be considered that the symbolism of the Peedie Pict may be related to the symbols inscribed on other cattle phalanges from Pictish Orkney.

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