

The horseman and the falcon: mounted falconers in Pictish sculpture

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ABSTRACT

Three examples of mounted falconers in Pictish sculptures – at St Andrews, Elgin and Fowlis Wester – are considered in terms of the origins of this tradition in the Mediterranean and Germanic worlds. These images reinforced the power and status of the secular aristocracy, but may also be interpreted as images of Christian redemption.

INTRODUCTION

The significance of the falconer in Pictish sculpture has not yet been satisfactorily considered and deserves a study in its own right. Mounted falconers are not illustrated elsewhere in Britain and Ireland until 10th-century examples appear in Anglo-Scandinavian sculpture. While the bird of prey appears as a motif on its own, the sport of falconry on horseback does not appear as a sculptural motif until it is seen on early medieval Pictish monuments. Even so, the mounted falconer is an infrequent motif. It is the purpose of this article to examine the iconography of the Pictish falconry motif and attempt to interpret the significance of the image.

THE MOUNTED FALCONER: THREE PICTISH EXAMPLES

The three extant Pictish mounted falconry¹ scenes are found on the reverse of the Elgin Cathedral cross-slab, the Fowlis Wester cross-slab, and the long panel of the St Andrews Cathedral ‘sarcophagus’. The Elgin and St Andrews falconers are part of a larger hunt composition. A stag coursing scene is depicted at Elgin and a lion hunt at St Andrews. The falconer of Fowlis Wester is contained within an equestrian cavalcade.

These monuments are generally attributed to the period between the early and mid-ninth century.² According to Alcock (1993, 232), the earliest Insular representation of falconry is found on the Elgin cross-slab. However, Henderson (1986, 101) suggests a date of about the mid-eighth century for the sarcophagus at St Andrews, while other sources attribute this to around AD 800. This suggests that the sarcophagus falconer is one of the earliest examples.

On Elgin the horseman carrying a hawk on his extended forearm is accompanied by two hounds and another bird of prey (illus 1). Below the horseman is a stag pursued by a hound and a second horseman. The two horsemen at the bottom of the slab are cut off where the slab meets the ground. At Fowlis Wester the uppermost horseman is accompanied by a hound and, below them, two horse-

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ILLUS 1 Equestrian scene with Pictish symbols on the cross-slab at Elgin Cathedral (*Copyright: reproduced by permission of T E Gray FSA Scot*)

men ride abreast, the foremost bearing a falcon (illus 2). The St Andrews 'sarcophagus' mounted falconer is part of an elaborate hunting scene with a complex symbolism (illus 3).

There are certain similarities between the mounted falconers of these monuments. Upon all three the horses are moving forward at the characteristic 'Pictish' gait. In other words, one foreleg is lifted as is the diagonally opposite hind leg. The other foreleg and hind leg are on the ground. This produces an illusion of forward movement, what Alcock (1993, 231) terms a 'trot'. The rider is also depicted in a manner typical of Pictish riders. He sits well forward, his foot pointing between the horse's forelegs.

On the St Andrews and Elgin examples, it is the uppermost horseman of the hunting scene that holds the falcon. This position indicates his status relative to the other figures within the scene. The status of horsemen in Pictish sculpture is generally indicated by placing the most important horseman at the top of the composition and often by making him larger than accompanying figures as on Meigle no 2 in Perth & Kinross. On the Elgin and Fowlis Wester sculptures, the uppermost horseman is the largest. The horseman bearing the falcon at Fowlis Wester may be part of the uppermost rider's retinue.

Like the horsemen, the falcons at Elgin, Fowlis Wester, and St Andrews are of the same formulaic type. The bird of prey is depicted in profile with a prominent hooked beak and its legs astride. This type of bird is characteristic of Pictish representations of birds of prey elsewhere such as in the Aberlemno no 2 battle scene and on the reverse of the St Vigeans no 1 cross-slab, both in



ILLUS 2 Equestrian scene with Pictish symbols on the cross-slab at Fowlis Wester (*Crown Copyright: reproduced by permission of Historic Scotland*)



ILLUS 3 Hunt scene from the St Andrews Cathedral 'sarcophagus', with (right) 'David rending the lion's jaw' (*Crown Copyright: reproduced by permission of Historic Scotland*)

Perth & Kinross. The detail of the plumage of the falcon can still be made out on the St Andrews sarcophagus hunt scene. The examples at Elgin and Fowlis Wester are too weathered to distinguish any demarcation of features. However, based upon the similarities to the St Andrews falcon, the Elgin and Fowlis Wester birds are also likely to have been so detailed.

ORIGINS AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE MOUNTED FALCONER MOTIF

The introduction of falconry to British sculpture points to influence from the East. The earliest extant European evidence of the sport is the late Roman floor mosaic at Argos in Greece of about AD 500 (Akerström-Hougen 1974, 28ff, pl III & IV; Kitzinger 1993, 11). The earliest literary evidence for falconry also comes from Greece, in passages from Xenophon and Aristotle that suggest that the Persians practised the sport (Epstein 1942–3, 500; Smith & Ross 1910, vol IV).

The few pictorial representations of falconry in the ancient European world suggest that the sport was not widely practised. Falconry was introduced most likely by the Visigoths who invaded the Mediterranean area around AD 400 and was adopted by the Romans and the Romanized ruling-classes who settled in northern Gaul (Akerström-Hougen 1974, 100). The earliest reference to falconry in the Early Christian period (c AD 400–800) is in *Eucharisticos* (c 459) by Paulinus of Pella who expresses his wish to possess a swift hound and splendid hawk (Epstein 1942–3, 504). Paulinus also describes hawking as one of the pastimes of wealthy youths of the time.

The German Franks had regulations referring to falconry in the *Lex Salica* (c 500) confirming that the practice was well established by the sixth century (Epstein 1942–3, 504). The Burgundian Laws (c 500–5), Laws of the Ripuarian Franks (c 530–70) and Langobardian Laws (c 643) established a hierarchy of fines according to the different types of hawk (Hicks 1986, 162; Epstein 1942–3, 506–7). Also, in early medieval Welsh law a hierarchy of falcons is set out according to the rank of persons allowed to own them (Jenkins 1986, 183).

The earliest evidence of falconry from Britain appears to be Anglo-Saxon. Hunting with falcons has long had royal connections. Falcons were prized as gifts between secular and ecclesiastical notables (Oggins 1981, 173–208). This is suggested by a letter sent by King Ethelbert of Kent to Boniface, Archbishop of Mainz, during the first half of the eighth century. Ethelbert requests from Boniface a pair of falcons to be bred and trained for hunting crows (Talbot 1954, 142–4, #44).

Mercian and West Saxon charters of the eighth and ninth centuries set out the obligations of leading landlords to make provisions for the royal huntsmen, their servants, horses, hounds, and hawks (Hicks 1986, 162–3). This illustrates the association with royal privilege of the sport. Asser describes King Alfred as practising every branch of hunting and instructing his falconers, hawkers, and dog-handlers despite the Viking troubles and his ill health (Keynes & Mynors 1983, 91). In the first half of the 12th century, the scholar Adelard of Bath wrote a brief treatise *De cura accipitrum*, a dialogue on how to train, rear and treat the illnesses of hawks (Gibson 1987, 8; Swaen 1937). In Adelard's treatise falconry is again considered to be an essential part of a young man's education.

An indication that falconry may have been practised as early as the late seventh century in northern Britain is a representation of a standing figure with a falcon on his wrist and a perch beside him on the Bewcastle cross (late seventh or eighth century). Kitzinger (1993, 10–11) interprets this figure as one of the earliest representations of falconry in Britain. This figure is thought to represent St John and his Evangelist symbol, the Eagle. An alternative interpretation is that this figure is a falconer of royal or high status (Henderson 1994, 52).

Examples of mounted falconers are also found in Viking-age sculpture in northern England. For example, on the early 10th-century Sockburn no 3 cross-shaft fragment, County Durham (Lang 1972, 235–48, pl XXI, 2; Cramp 1984, Part I, 136–7; Part II, pl.130, #710), a horseman holds a

falcon on his extended left wrist. However, the Sockburn falcon is not in profile as in the Pictish examples, but is frontal with wings extended. This suggests that different artistic models were used for the later Anglo-Scandinavian example.

Similar representations of predatory birds to our examples can be found in Insular manuscript illumination. This form of the bird of prey is used to portray the Evangelist Symbol of St John, the Eagle, in the *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*, as well as in Northumbrian-influenced manuscripts such as the *Echternach Gospels* and the *Trier Gospels* (Domschatz Codex 61, folio 1v).

The predatory bird also appears at an earlier date as a Pictish 'symbol'. Examples occur on stones at Tilltarmount no 5, Aberdeen, and the Knowe of Burrian, Orkney.

The motif of the bird of prey in Celtic contexts may have been ultimately derived from Near Eastern or Eurasian art in which a bird with a prominent hooked beak is used as an artistic motif (Hicks 1986, 154). This type of bird image spread throughout Germanic Europe and by the fourth and fifth centuries AD was adapted by the Franks in a highly ornamented form for such objects as brooches. Hicks (1986, 156) has suggested that enamelled bronze brooches in the form of predatory birds of about the second and third centuries found throughout the Roman Empire and Britain may be one source of bird imagery in Britain. This type of bird was used in Anglo-Saxon metalwork of the sixth and seventh centuries such as the Sutton Hoo purse lid bird. Similar to the examples of predatory birds in Insular manuscripts and in Pictish sculpture, the Anglo-Saxon birds are characterized by stylized indication of plumage.

The ultimate origin of the chase motif is in late Imperial and early Mediterranean art such as mosaic pavements from Roman villas. For example, boar and deer hunts are illustrated in the Little Hunt, Piazza Armerina, Sicily (c AD 310) (Lavin 1963, pl 110), and a mounted hare hunt using falcons appears on a fifth-century mosaic from Carthage (Lindner 1973, 128, fig 57). Late Antique silver plates are also a rich source of chase imagery such as an example depicting a king hunting on horseback from the sixth/seventh century (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris) (Toynbee 1986, 49, no 65). The Insular chase motif is a hybrid of classical, Carolingian and English artistic influence and models of preceding and contemporary generations. The Pictish hunt motif derived from models that had arrived in Britain by the late eighth century, and that had travelled north through a complex network of artistic exchange, probably arriving in Pictland via monastic contacts with Northumbria.

Hicks (1986, 164), suggests that the source for the mounted falconer on the St Andrews sarcophagus may be a Carolingian model. For example, the ninth-century *Utrecht Psalter* contains certain illustrations of hunting and riding that are similar to those in Pictish sculpture. Hounds pursue a stag in the illustration accompanying Psalm 42 (Psalm 41, fol 24v), and in the vignette for Psalm 90 (Psalm 91, fol 53v) a horseman and hounds chase a stag (Van der Horst & Engelbert 1984, 81). At the bottom right of the illustration for Psalm 40 (Psalm 39, fol 23r), hunters prepare for the hunt along with their hounds, horses, and falcon (Dewald 1932). The falcon is held on the wrist of a man standing beside his horse. This suggests that the falcon would have been carried by the horseman.

The evidence for the influence of Carolingian art upon Insular sculpture has been examined most recently by Henderson and by Harbison (Henderson 1994a, 48–54 & 1994b, 85–8; Harbison 1992, vol I). The latter has suggested that Carolingian fresco cycles were an important formative influence upon Insular sculpture (Harbison 1992, vol I, 311). A series of frescos associated with the Carolingian palace at Ingelheim, under Louis the Pious, and described by his court poet, Ermoldus Nigellus (around AD 826), may once have portrayed hunting scenes (Nelson 1992, 137–80). The hunts of the Carolingian royal court described by Ermoldus are similar to the hunts portrayed in Pictish sculpture with large retinues of horsemen, hounds, footmen, and musicians.

An example of a mounted falconer on a Lombardic relief panel from the church of San Saba in Rome (mid eighth century) (Haseloff 1971, 58, pl 56a) is similar to Pictish examples: depicted in

profile and bearded; holding the falcon on an extended hand; and riding a horse of the same general type as Pictish horses. The falcon is also in profile, with a hooked beak, and feathers indicated in a stylized fashion much as at St Andrews. Examples of mounted hunting scenes are also found in eighth-century North Italian Lombardic sculpture such as the Cività Castellana hunt (Haseloff 1971, pl 56b).

Celtic and Northumbrian monks were known to have visited the Continent and brought back books, paintings, and church furnishings (eg Bede's description of the items brought back to Britain by Benedict Biscop, founder of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, and Abbot Ceolfrith on their visits to Rome; Meyvaert 1979, 63). The Irish monk Alcuin was a scholar in Charlemagne's court and Irish monks founded monasteries throughout Europe. Cramp has established parallels between English and Italian sculpture and Harbison between Irish and Italian sculpture (Cramp 1986, 125–40; Harbison 1992, vol I, 221–2). Northern Italian art may have influenced the development of sculpture in Britain through contacts established between English clerics travelling to Rome and English royalty's connections through marriage to Lombard dukes (Cramp 1986, 298, 305).

The equestrian figure can also have Christian and royal significance. Like the hunt motif, the equestrian figure appears to be ultimately descended from late Roman tradition. The image of a mounted emperor or general defeating enemies was adopted into the Early Christian repertoire to illustrate aspects of divine victory and authority, such as the fifth- or sixth-century Barberini diptych and the fourth-century Kertch dish (Toynbee 1986, pl 14). Horsemen of a similar type, contemporary to Pictish representations, are found in English contexts. These reflect the knowledge of the Late Antique mounted ruler image such as the eighth-century Repton Stone horseman (Biddle & Kjolbye-Biddle 1985, 233–92) and the horsemen on a ninth-century frieze from the church at Breedon-on-the-Hill, Leicestershire (Jewell 1986, 95, pl LIIIe).

FALCONRY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CELTIC LITERATURE

Early Irish and Welsh literature provide possible parallels for the significance of riding and hunting in Pictish society.³ The skill and courage needed for hunting was considered training for warfare. The first feat of courage of the young hero destined to become a king is demonstrating his prowess at the hunt. For example, in the 'sovereignty tales' of Lugaid Laígde and Níall Noígíallach both prove their worthiness to be king through the trials of a perilous hunt after a magical deer.⁴ Likewise, the boy-hero Cú Culainn in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* displays his prowess to King Conchobar by hunting stags and swans. The great hunter-warrior hero, Finn, first shows his bravery by pursuing stags on foot (Meyer 1881–3, 195). In the Welsh *Mabinogi*, the hunt becomes the setting for a demonstration of laws regarding status when Pwyll disputes the ownership of a kill with the King of Annwn.⁵

In early Irish legal texts of about the seventh and eighth centuries (Kelly 1988, 1), the hunt is associated with the privileged classes. Where hunting and trapping are allowed they are circumscribed by law (Binchy 1978, CIH, 320.28–322.33; Kelly 1988, 106). There appear to be strict laws concerning the right to the kill and the inciting of hounds to chase the prey (Binchy 1978, CIH 321.5–7). One of the weekly pastimes of the king includes hunting and horse-racing (Hancock 1865 AL i, 334–5). The education of the young noble or prince also includes hunting and riding (Kelly 1988, 87).

However, references to falconry are very infrequent in Irish tradition. The falcon or hawk is mentioned in early Irish glossaries, but not in relation to hunting. In the *Sanas Cormaic* there is an entry for *seig* meaning 'hawk' (Stokes 1862, 36). The entry under *seig* in *O'Davoren's Glossary* expands upon this, implying that the hawk is able to carry off a lapdog and as much as the clutch of

eggs of one hen (Stokes 1862, 117). These references may suggest that the uses of the hawk were becoming familiar to the early medieval Irish.

The word for hawk is often used as a laudatory term for a warrior. For example, Cú Culainn is described as *seig a marbtha* (hawk of death). In the story of the *Death of the Sons of Uisnech*, Deidre laments the death of her husband and his brothers by saying that their hounds and hawks will be without hunters (Stokes 1887, 147, 174). This implies that hawks were used for hunting by esteemed warriors. In the *Táin Bó Friach*, Froech sets out to rescue his stolen cattle accompanied by a large retinue which includes a falcon (*fid chuach*) and a hound (Meid 1967, 13). In the early Irish law tract of the *Senchus Mor* under *Breatha Comaithcesa*, the keeping of 'pet' animals and the *smacht*-fine for their trespasses are set out. This includes pet deer as well as *seineoin* (old birds) described as *sebaicc* (hawks) (Hancock 1865 AL iv, 114–15).

Early Welsh laws are much more detailed in reference to falconry and hunting. In the 10th-century *Laws of Hywel Dda* the Chief Falconer (*Penhebygdyd*) of the king's court is fourth in position in the court (Jenkins 1986, 14–15). The officers of the king's household were entitled to horses, hounds, and falcons. The worth of birds of prey is set out under the *Value of the Wild and Tame* according to the rank of the owner, type of bird, its age, and its training. The status of the owner is clearly reflected in value assigned to the bird.

The Welsh laws concerning falconry probably reflect Anglo-Saxon and Continental practices, especially in the hierarchical arrangement of ownership, and the equipment such as mews, jesses, and gloves. Also, the subjects of the king were expected to feed and house his horses, hounds, falcons, and huntsmen for certain periods of the year. Alcock (1993, 232–3) indicates that such duties were expected in High Medieval contexts which were based upon early medieval British or Welsh practices, and suggests that similar practices might have occurred amongst other Celtic peoples such as the Picts. In early Welsh tradition falconry occurs as a method of hunting birds such as ducks, herons, geese, and pigeons. For example, in the *Life of St Cadog*, in an episode in which the royal retinue is hunting ducks, the saint receives a grant of lands from Gewngarth, the king's foster son, for saving the king's hawk and its prey from an eagle.

THE MOUNTED FALCONER: CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR SYMBOLISM

In order to understand the iconography of the hunt and falconry we must consider its Christian symbolism as well as the secular (or social) symbolism. The falcon reinforces the status of the rider holding it and in this way might be part of an overall symbolism of sovereignty and power, both secular and ecclesiastical. The deer hunt has several general Christian interpretations. The deer pursued by huntsmen and/or hounds might be interpreted as the soul, pursued by Christ or persecuted by sin and evil in the form of the huntsmen and hounds (Alcock 1993, 233). The deer hunt derives Christian significance from the reading of Psalm 42 in which the stag 'thirsting for running waters' is a symbol of regeneration and salvation.

The St Andrews sarcophagus hunt scene has been interpreted as forming part of the 'cycle of David' (Henderson 1986, 92–3; 1994b, 77–81). At an earlier date, Curle (1936, 431–2) also interpreted the mounted falconer as a representation of David as a hunter in the St Andrews and Elgin examples. The similarities between the Elgin and St Andrews hunts indicates some sort of connection between the two. Henderson (1986, 931) suggests that the Elgin sculptor appears to have known models for David iconography. Even though no other David cycle contains the image of the mounted falconer, the connections to the David motif in the St Andrews hunt scene are established by the repetition of the lion; the similar attire of the rider to the figure of 'David rending the lion's jaws'; and the ram attribute of David behind the rider's shoulder. The motif of 'David rending the lion's

jaws' at St Andrews illustrates the account found in I Kings, 17.34–5 (Vulgate text) in which David saves a lamb from a lion and a bear. The motif can be interpreted as one of divine salvation and deliverance. In the early medieval period David was considered to be an Old Testament exemplar for worldly rulers (Bullough 1975, 239). The hunt and falconry in association with David may have connotations of divinely sanctioned kingship as well as salvation.

CONCLUSIONS

The representation of hunting, falconry, and riding reflected the interests of the ruling class. Images of these practices reinforced the social and political position of the aristocracy. These motifs reflected their power and status. Hunt, riding, and falconry motifs were also acceptable to the ecclesiastical milieu as they could be interpreted in a Christian manner. The social standing of kings and nobles was reinforced by patronizing publicly displayed works of art like the cross-slabs, reminding all of the wealth and power of the elite through images depicting activities exclusive to the nobility.

NOTES

- 1 The terms 'hawk' and 'falcon' are used throughout this paper. The word hawk can be used as a general term referring to any kind of predatory bird used for hunting. The term is used in this general sense in this paper. Falcons are the only birds that can catch prey in flight like ducks. In Welsh literary sources falcons are used in this manner for hunting. The falcon uses its talons to kill as seen on the St Vigean's no 1 cross-slab. This would suggest that it is the falcon that we encounter in the Pictish hunt scenes. See Hicks 1986, 164–55, n 59 for a discussion of the differences between falcons and hawks.
- 2 For discussions of the dating of Early Medieval Pictish sculpture see: Henderson, I 1972 'Sculpture North of the Forth After the Takeover by the Scots,' in Lang, J (ed) 1972, *Anglo-Saxon and Viking Age Sculpture and its Context* (BAR Brit Ser, 49), Oxford, 47–59; Stevenson, R B K 1955 'Pictish Art', in Wainwright, F T (ed), *The Problem of the Picts*, London, 97–128 and 1956 'The Chronology and Relationships of Some Irish and Scottish Crosses,' *J Royal Soc Antiq Ir* 86 (1956), 84–96; and Allen, J R & Anderson, J 1993 (reprint) *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland with an Introduction by Isabel Henderson vols I II*, Balgavies.
- 3 For a discussion of theories of what Pictish literary tradition may have been like see: Chadwick, N K 1953 'The Lost Literature of Scotland,' *Scott Gaelic Stud*, 7 (1953); Carney, J 1955 'Suibne Gelt and the Children of Lir,' *Stud Ir Lit Hist*, Dublin, Jackson, K H 1958 'The Sources of the Life of St Kentigern, in Chadwick, N K et al (eds), Cambridge; and Bromwich, R & Simon Evans D (eds) 1992 *Culwch and Olwen: An Edition and Story of the Oldest Arthurian Tale*, Cardiff.
- 4 For the story of Lugaid see: Stokes, W (ed) 1897 'Cóir Anmann (Fitness of Names),' *Irische Texte*, III (2) (1897), 285–444; Gwynn, E (ed) 1924 *The Metrical Dindsnecas Part IV*, (Todd Lecture Series XI), Dublin, 136–73, 11.37–140. For the Story of Niall see: Stokes, W 1903 'The Death of Crimthann son of Fidach (*Aidid Crimthaindmaic Fidaig*) and the Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Muigmedón (*Echtra mac Echach Muigmedóin*),' *Revue Celtique*, 24 (1903), 172–207.
- 5 For a discussion of this episode see: Charles-Edwards, T M 1978 'Honour and Status in some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales, *Ériu*, 29 (1978), 123–41 and Fife, J 1992 'Legal Aspects of the Hunting-scene in Pwyll,' *Bull Board Celtic Stud*, 39 (1992), 71–9.

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