The Picts and Their Symbols

The Picts, the "painted people", first mentioned in Roman sources, emerged as a dominant power in northern Britain from around AD 300 to 900. Their territory stretched from north of the Firth of Forth into the Highlands and Northern and Western Isles. Although written evidence about them is limited, the Picts left a remarkable artistic legacy in their carved stones.

The most distinctive feature of Pictish art is its symbol tradition: a collection of abstract and naturalistic designs, including animals and recognisable objects such as mirrors and combs. More than 200 examples are known, particularly across eastern and northern Scotland. Symbols also appear on metalwork, bone, cave walls and other objects.

What did these symbols mean? Their precise meaning remains uncertain. Suggestions have included religious beliefs, rank, group identity, marriage alliances and memorials. Some evidence, particularly from Christian cross-slabs, suggests that symbols may have identified individuals, perhaps conveying names or the identities of important people.

As you explore the Pictish stones at the University of Aberdeen, look closely at the symbols and ask: what stories, identities or meanings might these remarkable carvings have conveyed?

1495 UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

Pictish Symbol Stones

at the University







Tillytarmont 5



Dead Man's Howe



Cairnton



Dunnicaer



Cairn o' Mount

Sir Duncan Rice Library
Ground floor and
lower ground floor

The library is usually open weekdays and weekends but it has variable opening hours. For current hours check **www.abdn.ac.uk/library.**

You will need to ask at the Welcome Desk to visit the Dunnicaer stone on the lower ground floor.



Tillytarmont 1



Tillytarmont 6



Fairy Green

James MacKay Hall
Entrance and display case

The hall is open on weekdays 9:00-17:00, but is sometimes closed for events.

Enter from College Bounds: walk through the archway and through the doors straight ahead.

