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# A sculptured fragment from Pittensorn Farm, Gellyburn, Perthshire

Mark A Hall, Isabel Henderson and Simon Taylor

## Introduction

A fragment of presumably Pictish sculpture was discovered at Pittensorn Farm and reported to Perth Museum and Art Gallery in August 1994. It was subsequently allocated to the museum after due treasure trove process. This paper sets out the circumstances of the discovery, describes the sculpture and offers an assessment of its artistic connections, function and location in its landscape.

## Discovery

Chance and serendipity played a large part in the fragment coming once more to light, as with its companion pieces found in Gellyburn and now in Perth Museum and Art Gallery (Calder 1951) and the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh (Hutcheson 1886). It reminds us, if reminding is necessary, of the need for constant vigilance and, perhaps, for more sympathetic and better resourced field-work (in line with national and local research agendas).

In July 1994, Bob Jarvie (Principal Officer, Exhibitions, Perth Museum and Art Gallery) was seeking a garden shed. Placing an advert in a local newspaper, *The Courier*, elicited a reply from Mr Davidson of Pittensorn Farm, near Gellyburn, Murthly (see Illus 1). Mr Jarvie went to see the shed. Whilst discussing the transaction Mr Jarvie noticed a carved stone fragment lying beside the back door. Mr Davidson said he had found it within the last 5 years whilst gardening close to the west wall of the farmhouse (NGR: NO 0860 3905). Mr Jarvie suggested an official visit from Perth Museum and Art Gallery staff, to which Mr Davidson agreed. He was more than willing to part with the stone there and then, saying it had no real significance to him beyond looking nice enough to retain by the house. His ready cooperation was appreciated.

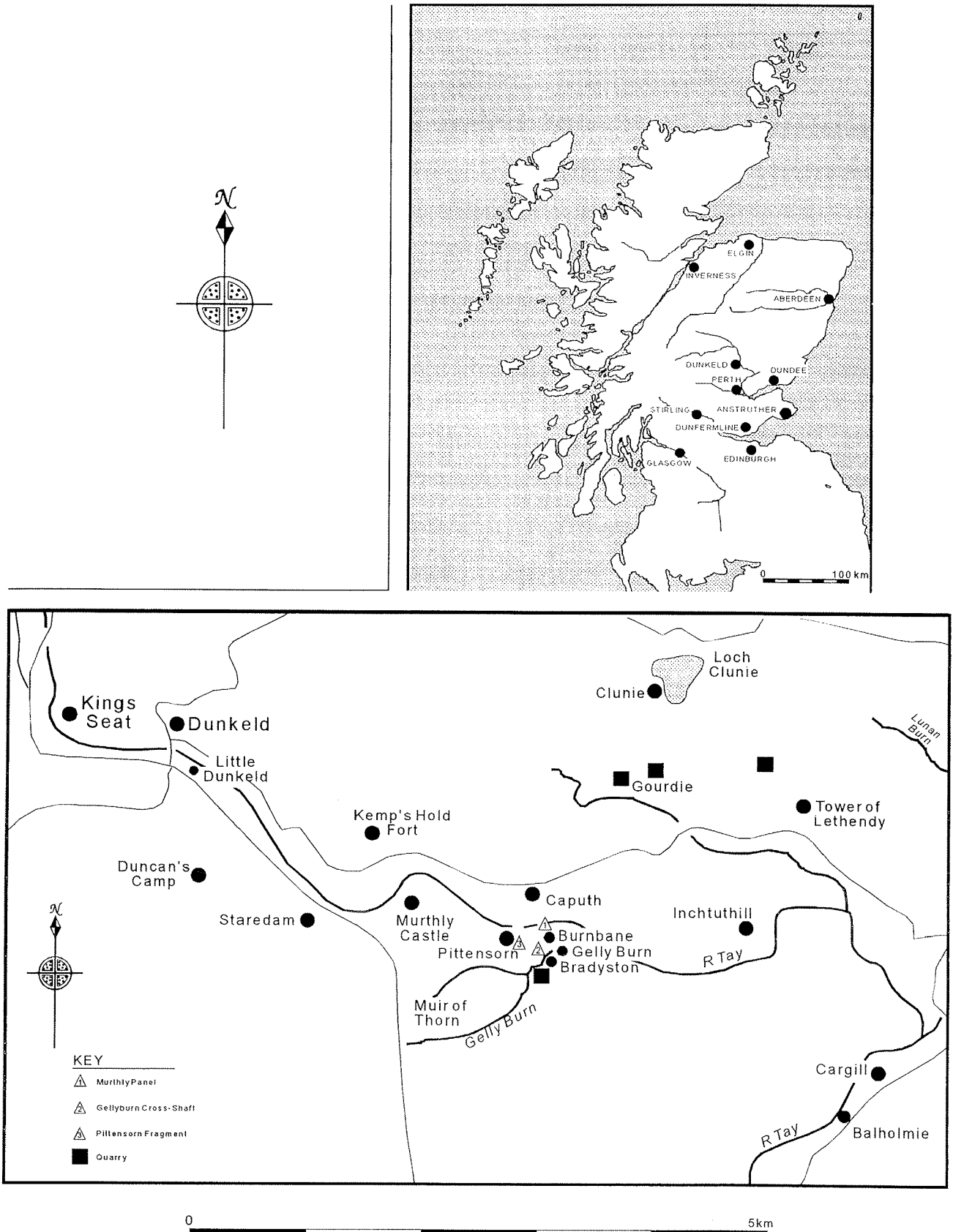
The following day Mr Jarvie informed Mike King (now with Fife Council Museums) who made

a follow-up visit to Pittensorn Farm. On 1 August 1994, Mr Davidson gave the stone into the care of Perth Museum, pending treasure trove allocation, and the find was reported in *Discovery and Excavation 1994* (see King 1995). By 30 January 1995 the Queen's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer had endorsed the Treasure Trove Advisory Panel's decision of allocation to Perth Museum (with a reward valuation of £750) where it now has the accession number 1995.319. In 1996 a photograph was supplied, on request, to Dr I Henderson. Subsequently, at the request of Perth Museum, Dr Henderson provided a preliminary assessment of the artistic context of the Pittensorn fragment. From this it was clear that the piece was of sufficient interest to publish a fuller account not least because what survives does not appear to be part of a readily identifiable type of monument.

## Description

The stone is a grey, cross-bedded sandstone, sculpted in relief, on one side only. The fragment as a whole measures 335mm (max) in height x 250–350mm in width x 100mm (max) in thickness. The carving is set within a frame varying in width from 20–23mm. The frame is incised with a single medially placed line. The surface of the carving is badly worn but the depth of the frame seems to match the depth of the figurative and animal relief carving. The relief carving is flat and level with the frame, that is to say the relief has been achieved by removing the background to the designs. The effect is of one-plane relief, but it is possible that the extent of the surface wear could be deceptive in this matter. For the description that follows see Illus 2 and 3.

The fragment is dominated by two confronted profile figures filling the uppermost angle of the framed area. They appear to be unclothed. Their heads touch the top of the frame and the back of



*Illus 1. Location of Pittensorn and key places mentioned in the text (Dave Munro, SUAT).*

the left-hand (facing) figure touches the side edge of the frame. The backs of the heads of the figures are rounded in outline. Their noses are protuberant. The hair-line, ear and eye of the left figure are

just traceable. Both figures have their arms raised to shoulder height. They grasp each other's right wrists with their left hands. The left-hand (facing) figure may hold aloft a rectilinear object, possibly a



*Illus 2. Photograph of the Pittensorn sculpture (Paul Adair, Perth Museum and Art Gallery).*

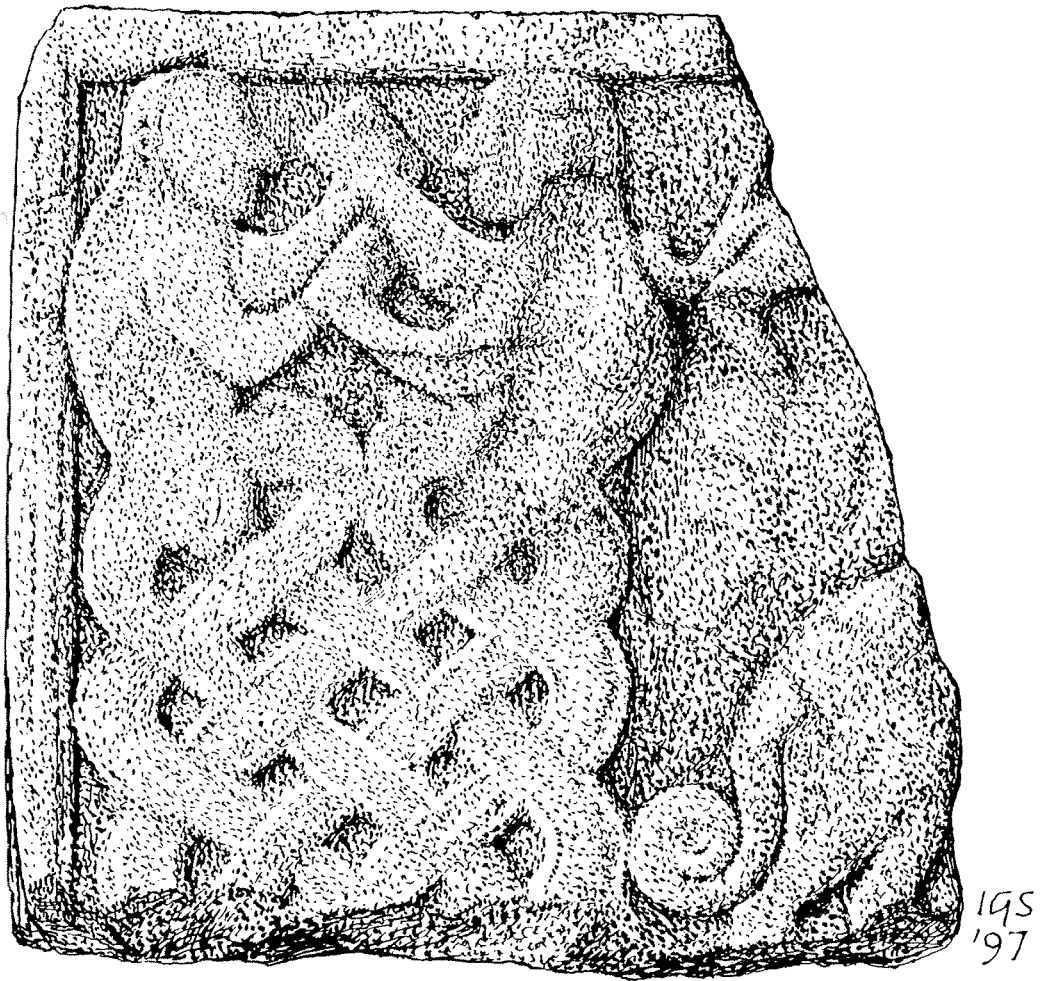
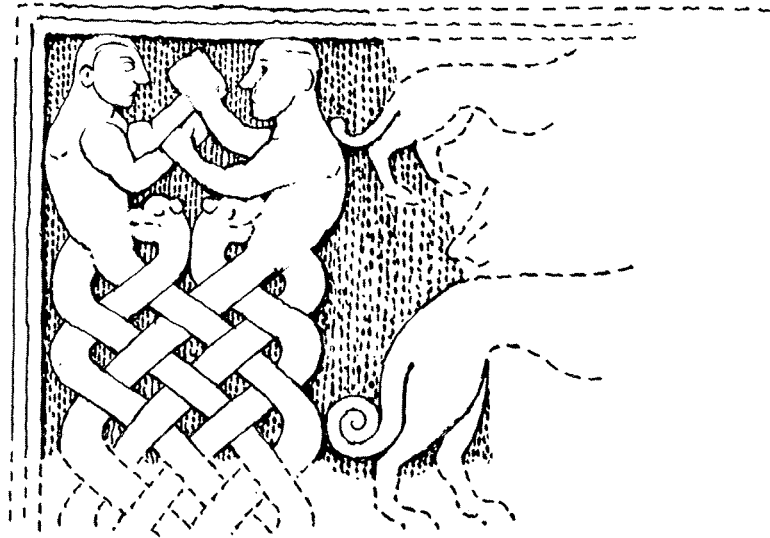
book, but the straight edges are more probably created by the folded over fingers of the figures' clenched knuckles. The legs of the figures are elongated to form a six-cord plait with two animal-headed snakes that bite their genitals (a motif observed independently in November 1997, by Isabel and George Henderson, and, at a later date, by Ian G Scott). All the 'strands' of the interlace are double contoured. Although one cannot tell for how long the plait was extended, the balance of the motif would allow for it to be virtually complete. The legs of the figures would have ended in feet naturally disposed, moving respectively to the right and left. The nearside feet of the figures would have met in a heel to heel position at the centre of the bottom of the motif. The offside feet would be symmetrically placed, facing outwards, at the corners. The snakes' bodies would have ended in simple points or possibly fish tails. Both types of loose-ended snake-plaits are found on an

edge of the symbol-bearing slab at Rosemarkie (Allen and Anderson 1903, III, 67).

To the right of this motif there are remnants of further sculpture. The bottom right of the fragment shows the hindquarters and long coiled tail of an animal moving to the right. The monument would, obviously, at least have extended in height to allow for the completion of the legs of this animal. The space required for this would conform to the length of the extension of the legs and serpents interlace conjectured above. At the top right of the fragment is the haunch of a smaller animal whose curved tail touches the back of the right-hand figure. There may be carving between the two animals but the forms are not decipherable.

### **Artistic context**

The motif of confronted profile men, holding each other's wrists and with their legs interlaced, occurs



*Illus 3. Drawings of the Pittensorn sculpture (Ian G Scott).*

