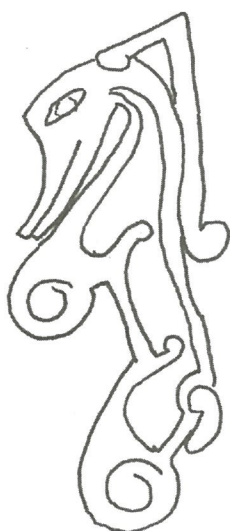

Did a beaked whale inspire the ‘Pictish beast’?

Colin D MacLeod and Ben Wilson

Introduction

The Picts form a significant element of Scottish history. The Pictish period started around AD 300 and lasted until the Pictish kingdom came to a formal end in AD 843. During this time, and for some time afterwards, a wealth of Pictish art and stone work was produced. Many stones, with a wide variety of inscribed symbols, have survived (Henderson 1967). Each individual stone often has a variety of symbols inscribed upon it. The function of these stones is unknown, but several theories, such as memorial stones or boundary markers, have been hypothesised (Samson 1992). While some symbols are easily recognisable (eg snakes, salmon or a stag—see Henderson 1967), others are more abstract. One such symbol, the origin of which has aroused discussion, is the ‘Pictish beast’ (Illus 1). This creature, also known as the ‘swimming elephant’, is one of the more common symbols found on Pictish stones and has been found on 44 symbol stones from Orkney to Perthshire (Henderson 1967; Jackson 1989). The ‘Pictish beast’ is one of only three symbols which appear on more than 20 stones (Foster 1996). As such a common symbol, the identification of what the ‘Pictish beast’ represents may help to shed light on the meaning of this symbol and the function of the stones on which they are inscribed.

In this paper we suggest a possible origin of the ‘Pictish beast’ and offer a reason for the carving’s stylised form.



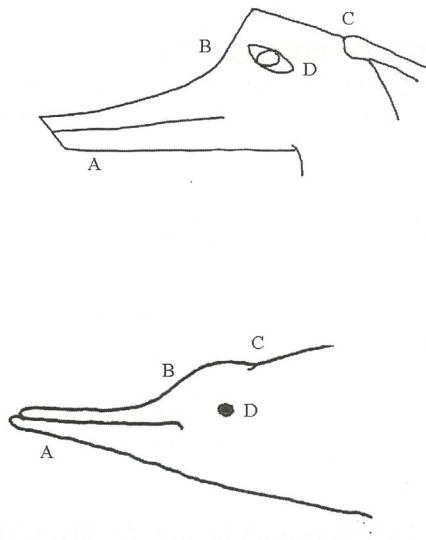
Illus 1 ‘Pictish beast’ or ‘swimming elephant’ Meigle no 5, Perthshire.

What is the origin of the ‘Pictish beast’?

Due to the accurate depictions of familiar animals (snakes, stags, salmon, etc), it seems unlikely that the ‘Pictish beast’ is based on any native or domestic land animal. Thus, for example, it is unlikely to be based on the horse. Another possibility is that the ‘Pictish beast’ is a stylised depiction of an elephant (Samson 1992). This hypothesis is based on the presence of a ‘trunk’ on the head and the likelihood of descriptions reaching Scotland with the Romans, who were familiar with African elephants. Depictions of such animals based on second-hand sources would be expected to be stylised. However, the ‘trunk’ is clearly divided into an upper and lower section, a characteristic not seen in elephants. In addition, there is no evidence of large ears, which would likely be included in any description, even a very vague one, of an elephant. Furthermore, the fin-like appendages do not seem suitable to support a heavy land animal.

Instead, the carved limbs seem better suited to an aquatic creature, hence the alternative name of ‘swimming elephant’. Two aquatic possibilities are the sea-horse and the marine mammals, particularly the cetaceans (whales and dolphins). Sea-horses, which occasionally reach Scottish coasts or could have been brought in from abroad, seem an unlikely model due to the absence of other animals of similar size on symbol stones. Thus cetaceans may be more probable.

Samson (1992) notes that the ‘Pictish beast’ could be a dolphin. Such an origin would explain the fin-like appendages, an apparent blowhole and blow (spout) on the top of the head (Illus 2) and a long snout divided into an upper and lower section. Dolphins are common in Scottish coastal waters today (for example in the Moray Firth where they can frequently be seen within 50m of the shore), and were almost certainly similarly common during the first millennium AD. In other areas of the UK, large numbers of dolphin remains have been found in association with an Anglo-Saxon site indicating a familiarity of coastal people in the past with dolphins (J Herman pers comm). With such familiarity, it would be expected that dolphins would be depicted with similar accuracy to other native aquatic animals, such as the salmon. Therefore, if a cetacean species is the origin of the ‘Pictish beast’, another candidate is needed. The heads of one particular group of cetaceans bear a striking resemblance to that of the ‘Pictish beast’. These are the beaked whales, which are a group of approximately 20 species of oceanic whales. These animals are rarely seen alive as they usually live far from shore (Mead 1989; MacLeod 2000).

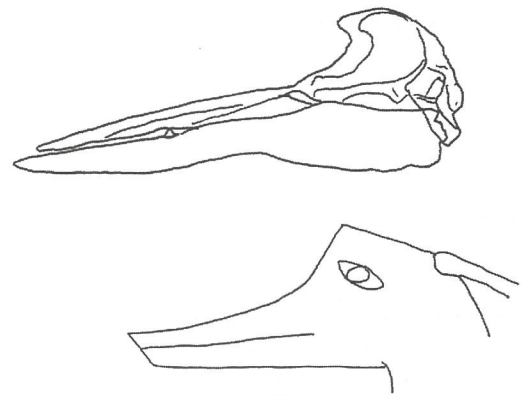


Illus 2 Comparison of features of the head of the 'Pictish beast' from Meigle no 5, Perthshire and the head of a beaked whale of the genus *Mesoplodon*. A long slender beak, B no crease between forehead and beak, C blowhole, D eye.

The distinct beaks of these whales bear a resemblance in both shape and proportion to the snout of the 'Pictish beast' (Illus 2). In addition, there is no crease between the forehead and the beak of the 'Pictish beast', a further similarity with beaked whales but not with other cetaceans (Mead 1989). The accuracy of carvings of other local animals, such as salmon where the lateral line is clearly shown, indicate that such attention to detail could be expected in Pictish artwork. The position of the eye and 'blowhole' (seen on top of the head with possibly a stylised whale blow emerging from it—the Picts could have observed whales blowing up columns of vapour in other coastal species of whales, such as minke whales) are also in the correct anatomical positions (Illus 2). Were the 'Pictish beast' a depiction of a beaked whale, it could represent one of three species recorded from Scottish waters. The most likely candidate is the Sowerby's beaked whale, *Mesoplodon bidens*. These animals which occur in the sub-polar and temperate waters of the North Atlantic, strand on the east coast of Scotland relatively frequently (MacLeod 2000). This species has a beak almost identical in form to the beak of the 'Pictish beast' (Illus 3 and 4). However, whilst the head is very similar to a Sowerby's beaked whale the rest of the body clearly does not wholly accurately represent a whale of any species.

Why are depictions of Sowerby's beaked whale so stylised?

Why should the Picts have represented other animals so accurately, but not the Sowerby's beaked whale? The answer may lie in the ecology of the species. Sowerby's



Illus 3 Skull of Sowerby's beaked whale (after Mead 1989) with the head of the 'Pictish beast' from Meigle no 5 for comparison.



Illus 4 Carcass of stranded Sowerby's beaked whale from the Scottish coast (Photograph by B Reid). A long slender beak, B no crease between forehead and beak, C blowhole, D eye.

beaked whales usually occur in waters over 200m deep (MacLeod 2000). Such waters are generally outside the North Sea, off the west and north coasts of Scotland, so it is unlikely that Picts ever saw this species in its natural environment. Instead the Picts may have encountered the occasional live animal in coastal waters or, more likely, a dead animal washed ashore. For example, in recent years (1988–1998) 13 Sowerby's beaked whales have stranded on the Scottish coast (Sheldrake *et al* 1994; Reid pers comm). In Scotland, strandings of this species occur most frequently on the North Sea coasts (MacLeod 2000), and indeed it was first scientifically described from a specimen found in the Moray Firth in the early 1800's, the time when early biologists first started to classify, name and describe animals they encountered (Sowerby 1804). Animals that are cast ashore today are often considerably decomposed and

their carcasses further altered by the destructive effects of waves and rocks on the shore. There is no reason to believe that similar strandings did not occur in Pictish times. As the head of these whales is shaped primarily by a solid skull, its shape remains most similar to the living form even after decomposition. However, the form of the softer body will change rapidly.

Thus depictions would probably have been stylised, and variation would be generated between depictions as carvings were made based on second-hand accounts, or from copying of other's interpretations. This may explain the variation or 'decline' seen in the 'Pictish beast' from one stone to another (see Samson 1992, 35). Similar stylisation can be found in other historical depictions presumably based on Sowerby's beaked whale (for example, see the 16th century drawing of Sowerby's beaked whale by Albrecht Dürer reproduced in Wurtz and Repetto 1998). Again, the head is most accurately depicted and allows the origin to be identified, while the body is stylised.

Discussion

Cetaceans seem a likely candidate for the origins of the 'Pictish beast' and of them Sowerby's beaked whale bears the closest resemblance. The distinguishing features of a beaked whale are clearly visible in the head of the 'Pictish beast', and furthermore modern strandings records show a close relationship between where this species most frequently comes ashore and where the Picts once lived.

A stranded Sowerby's beaked whale would probably have been of great interest to the Picts. If fairly fresh, it would have provided a bounty of palatable meat (this species has been eaten in modern times with no ill effects—Bloch pers comm), but even if only a skeleton or skull was found it would have still attracted attention. The size would be unlike any known Scottish land mammal (Sowerby's beaked whale reaches 5m or more in length—Mead 1984). Such a creature could have inspired local mythology, particularly of coastal Picts who may have viewed it as a sea-monster. Skulls or stories of stranded animals from the sea could easily have penetrated inland, accounting for depictions on stones in the heart of Scotland.

If the 'Pictish beast' represents a Sowerby's beaked whale it is one of the earliest records of this species, and indeed any species of beaked whale, anywhere in the world, and suggests that long before it was first described to science in 1804, these whales were known, at least in some form, to the inhabitants of Scotland. Further more it suggests that symbols, which at first glimpse may appear unrecognisable, may have represented real animals which the ancient peoples encountered (but which modern investigators are unfamiliar with) and that in interpreting such symbols careful consideration should be given to where and how the image may have originated.

Acknowledgements

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Abstract

The 'Pictish beast' is a symbol commonly found on decorated stones from the Pictish period of Scottish history; however its origins are unclear. This paper considers some possible origins of this symbol and identifies Sowerby's beaked whale as a possible candidate on the basis of anatomical similarities between the head of this species and that of the 'Pictish beast'. Such a whale would be large enough and uncommon enough to have been of interest to coastal Picts and result in stories or descriptions of a 'sea monster' found on a beach. The condition of stranded whales may have led to stylisation of the animal as only the head can be considered to be an accurate portrayal of this species. Variation in different depictions may be due to copying from other examples as few of the artists would have had first-hand experience with this species.

Key words

Pictish art
Pictish beast
Sowerby's beaked whale