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28 AUG 2001

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# GUARD

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## Hilton of Cadboll Chapel Site Excavation of Pictish Sculpture

### The excavations

A team of archaeologists from Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division will be excavating at Hilton of Cadboll chapel site from August 20th for about four weeks. The main aim is to recover and remove for study the hundreds of surviving fragments of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab, which dates to around 800 AD. It is hoped that the results of the recovery and study of this material will allow the unfinished replica sculpture to be accurately completed and also provide information that will enable local and national bodies to better understand, interpret, present and appreciate the significance of the sculpture and chapel site.

The chapel site and immediately surrounding area is cared for by Historic Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Ministers.

### The Hilton of Cadboll Pictish cross-slab

The main part of the Hilton of Cadboll Stone was given to what is now the National Museums of Scotland in 1921. What originally would have been the side bearing a cross was defaced in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was converted into a tombstone for Alexander Duff and his three wives (the tombstone was then not used). Despite this later damage, what survives on prominent display in the Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh is one of most famous and accomplished of Pictish sculptures.

The main part of the Hilton of Cadboll stone has been moved several times over the last 350 years, reflecting peoples' changing notions of its cultural significance. In or around 1676 the cross-slab was apparently standing upright

(we don't yet know whether this was its original site - there are some indications it was not) when it was felled. The surviving back-face presumably fell face-down, whilst the 'barbarous mason of Ross' (the verdict of Hugh Miller in 1835) chipped off the cross-face to create Duff's memorial. The significance of the sculpture was first recognised in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when it lay in the vicinity of the chapel site (and was described in 1856 as being in a shed). In the later 19<sup>th</sup> century the landowner removed it to Invergordon Castle. When he was selling the Castle in 1921, his descendant, Captain Macleod, gave the stone to the British Museum in London. There was extensive national outcry for it to be returned to Scotland as a result of which it was given to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in Edinburgh.

More recent local interest has resulted in the erection of a magnificent reconstruction of this stone. The sculptor, Barry Grove, based his reconstruction of the back-face on what survives, although he had to speculate what the bottom of the stone looked like. At the time of carving, this was lost. Until 1998, no evidence existed for what any part of the cross-face might look like, although it was assumed that it would be as splendid and complex as the other Pictish sculptures on the Tarbat peninsula. Minor excavations in 1998 led to the discovery of several fragments of carving, clearly chipped off a significant Pictish sculpture. The possibility was that more survived.....

### Exciting new discovery

Early in 2001, Historic Scotland was able to fund further limited work. Not only were hundreds more fragments of sculpture recovered, clearly from the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab, but the bottom of the cross-slab was also located. Fragments from a small number of other sculptures have also been found. What is particularly exciting is that the bottom of the cross-slab is still carved on *both* sides. This will help enormously when experts try to piece together this giant, stone, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

This discovery meant that there was the potential to find sufficient information to enable Barry Grove to complete his carving of the reconstruction, based on real evidence. This fortunate coincidence of interests led Historic Scotland, the National Museums of Scotland, Ross and Cromarty Enterprise and Highland Council to agree to fund further work at the site.



In excavating this site, we also hope to find out more about the context of the sculpture; not least, we want to find out whether this is where it originally stood and its subsequent history.

### Community Study

Historic Scotland is also funding a community study by Dr Siân Jones of Manchester University. From mid-August to mid-September she will be living in the Hilton-Balintore area undertaking a local community study which aims to gain greater understanding of the social value of archaeological monuments like the Hilton of Cadboll stone. Further details are available locally.

### The Picts

The Picts were among the early inhabitants of what is now Scotland, primarily living in the North and East. They are famous world-wide for their stone sculptures, which date from the around the 5th to the 9th centuries AD. They were the descendants of the Iron Age tribes indigenous to this area before the Romans arrived in Britain, and were nicknamed *Picti* (often thought to mean "the painted ones") by classical authors. No one knows what they called themselves as they left very few documentary sources or inscriptions. Converted to Christianity, their stone carving often combined their characteristic Pictish symbols, animals and mysterious abstract shapes with Christian designs and symbolism.

No one knows the precise meaning of the Pictish symbols - they have puzzled and perplexed scholars for generations. It seems likely that the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab was erected to commemorate an important event or individual, perhaps the female aristocrat who watches over the hunt.

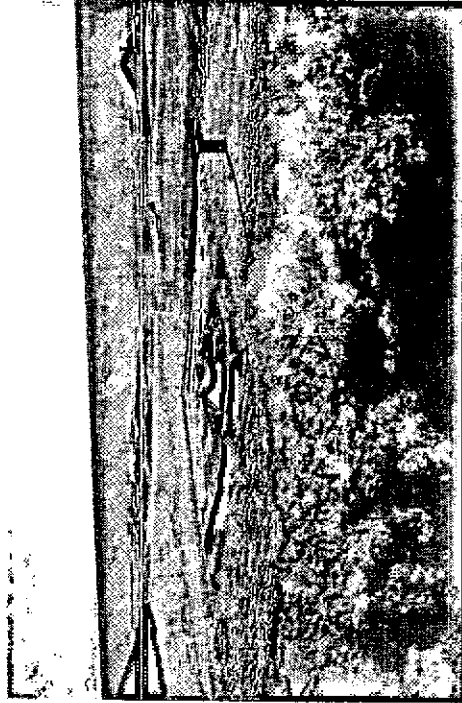
### Pictish Trail

Pictish sculptures are found mainly on the east coast of Scotland and have a particular density in Angus and Perthshire. Other Pictish stones in this area can be found at Nigg, Rosemarkie, Shandwick and Tarbat (in the Discovery Centre). These and other sites form part of Highland Council's Pictish Trail.

### The future of the sculpture from the excavations

The newly discovered sculpture from Hilton of Cadboll cannot be properly conserved and studied unless it is removed from the site. The material from the 1998 and earlier 2001 excavations was allocated to the National Museums of Scotland through the formal Finds Disposal process in May 2001. This formal process, which has been in operation since 1904, enables excavated artefacts to be transferred from State-funded excavations to museums throughout Scotland. Criteria, analogous for those of the

Treasure Trove Advisory Panel, exist for how finds should be allocated. The Finds Disposal system seeks to ensure the integrity of assemblages of material from the same site. Finds from a site, let alone the same object, will not normally be split and allocation will normally be made to the museum which already possesses the earlier finds - the National Museums of Scotland in the case of the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab.



By 28 August it is anticipated that the bottom of the stone will have been fully uncovered, and that a final decision can then be made as to whether or not to lift it. Unless there are good conservation or curatorial reasons why this stone should not be lifted, it is anticipated that this will take place afterwards, as soon as is feasible.

The implications of the donation in 1921 of the main part of the cross-slab to the National Museums of Scotland is a subject that can continue to be explored after the excavations have been completed. Its outcome will not be affected by the lifting of the bottom of the cross-slab.

If left in the ground, the sculpture cannot be studied properly as a whole, it cannot be presented to the public, and the necessary information will not be available to enable the completion of the reconstruction project. The maximum cultural and education benefits of this discovery can only accrue if it proves possible to lift the sculpture.

### The site after excavation

After excavation, the site will be restored to its former contours. Decisions about how/if to improve the presentation of the site will obviously await the outcome of the discoveries, but options for Historic Scotland to explore will include placing an accurate replica of the bottom of the slab somewhere on the site.

### Community Site Tour and Meeting, 28 August

For final details of this meeting, please enquire locally. Historic Scotland, the National Museum of Scotland and their funding partners welcome this opportunity to present what has been discovered, to explain the background to this project more fully, to answer any questions and to explore the future options for the site.

[www.guard.arts.gla.ac.uk/1078/](http://www.guard.arts.gla.ac.uk/1078/)

This work is sponsored by Historic Scotland, the National Museums of Scotland, Ross & Cromarty Enterprise and Highland Council.

For further information please contact Historic Scotland Press Manager, Barbara Fraser, Tel 0131 668 8685.

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