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Darkness Visible

The Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, from the Bronze Age to the Picts

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Chapter 3

THE PICTISH AND LATER CARVINGS

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Pictish symbols

Pictish symbols are among the most striking features of Scottish archaeology, with a rich tradition of study extending from the mid-nineteenth century to the present (eg Stuart 1867; Allen and Anderson 1903; Henderson and Henderson 2004). Combining stylised but highly accomplished images of animals with a complex and recurring set of more abstract motifs, they represent a highly evolved communicative system that emerged in north-east Scotland during the mid-first millennium AD. Despite the large assemblages of later prehistoric and Roman Iron Age material recovered from the Sculptor's Cave, it is the Pictish symbols carved around its twin entrance passages that gave the site its name. It was also these carvings that first drew Sylvia Benton to the cave in 1928, initiating the first programme of excavation.

The term Picti, first recorded in a Latin poem by Eumenius in AD 297 (Nixon et al 1994), was used by the Romans to describe peoples living beyond the Roman province, north of the Forth and Clyde, during the Late Roman Iron Age. Initially, it most likely applied to a broad range of communities whose potential for coordinated corporate action was quite limited (although it evidently included the ability to come together militarily for raiding inside the province and for resistance against Roman aggression). The creation of a unified Pictland came much later, probably in the wake of the Pictish victory over Ecgfrith of Northumbria at the Battle of Nechtansmere in AD 685 (Fraser 2009; Woolf 2017), following which the Picts became one of the major early medieval kingdoms of the British Isles. The political heartland of this consolidated Pictish kingdom was Fortriu, now understood to be centred on the Moray Firth (Woolf 2006; 2007), a region which undoubtedly encompassed the Sculptor's Cave.

The association between the carved symbols and the Picts is founded both on the geographical distribution of the symbols, which are overwhelmingly concentrated in north-east Scotland and the Northern and Western Isles (plausibly equating to the extent of Pictland in the eighth century; cf Woolf 2017: 216), and on their chronology, which spans the transition to Christianity in the later first millennium AD (although they probably originated much earlier; see section 3.1.3). Although found on the walls of a handful of caves (section 3.5.4), on a few natural outcrops and on a small number of portable objects, Pictish symbols are overwhelming found on free-standing stones and it is with these that past scholarship has been primarily concerned. These symbol stones, of which around 200 are known, are conventionally divided between Class I (undressed stones bearing symbols) and Class II (elaborately carved cross-slabs incorporating a range of Christian iconography). The examples at the Sculptor's Cave, as we shall see, share much in common with the imagery on the Class I stones, but with significant differences that will be explored below.

3.1.2 The meaning of the symbols

A huge amount of ink has been spilt in debates over the meaning of Pictish symbols. They have been argued to be, *inter alia*, symbols of clan affiliation, profession, totem or rank (eg Thomas 1963; Foster 2004: 70; Carver 2008: 94). In recent years, however, there has been an increasing tendency to see the symbols as a form of language, based on three key strands of evidence.

The first was an important analysis by Ross Samson (1992) which suggested that the frequency of various symbols and symbol pairs reflected similar frequencies among personal names and name elements in northern European societies of the period. The pairing of motifs on symbol stones, according to Samson, thus represented two-part (di-thematic) personal names. Following this initial breakthrough, Katherine Forsyth (1995) sought to situate the symbols as a writing system parallel to the broadly contemporary emergence of ogham script in Ireland and runic writing systems in Scandinavia. Importantly, Forsyth (ibid: 87) pointed out that 'the overwhelming majority of monumental inscriptions consists largely or solely of personal names' (rather than tribes, totems etc). Forsyth has provided the most exhaustive attempt to date to elucidate the structure of this putative writing system, defining a series of core symbols (those that form the symbol pairs) and qualifiers; most obviously the mirror and comb symbols which have been suggested to indicate that a given name is female (Samson 1992).

Most recently, a statistical analysis of the symbols concluded that they 'exhibit the characteristics of a written language', with individual symbols representing specific words (Lee at al 2010: 2545). Although the conclusions of this particular analysis have been disputed on the basis that the methods used cannot definitively prove that any given symbol system represents a written language (Sproat 2010), it nonetheless provides independent support for the view that the symbols *could* represent a written language.

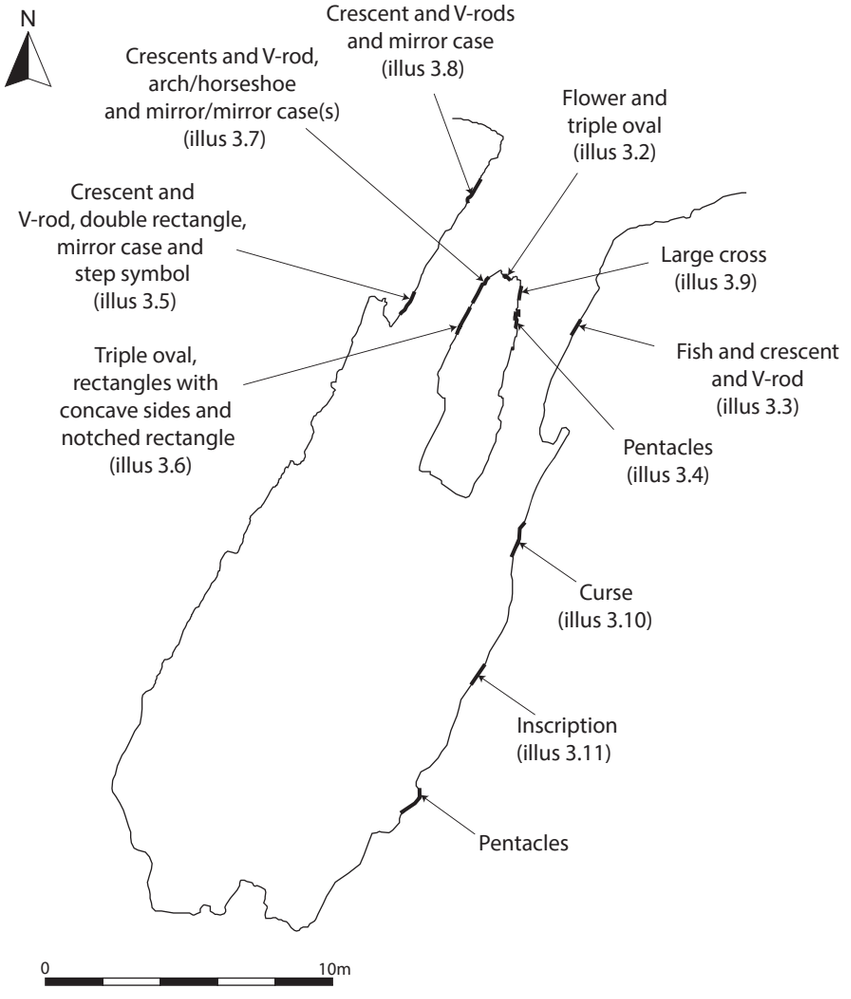

Illustration 3.1
Location of the Pictish symbols and selected other carvings within the Sculptor's Cave

The recognition that the symbols represent a simple form of written communication and that the symbol pairs are most likely personal names is an important step forward, even if it does not necessarily explain the meaning of any given symbol stone. Individual stones might, for example, have acted as funerary monuments, territorial markers, genealogical statements or religious dedications, or may have served a range of other purposes associated with power, status and religion (cf Foster 2004: 76–7). Away from the monumental symbol stones which have dominated past scholarship, the prevalence of symbol pairs is much less obvious in caves (D V Clarke 2007: 31), natural rock surfaces and portable objects (cf Fraser 2008: 138–9), suggesting that the symbols could also be used more flexibly, beyond the simple recording of personal names. Indeed, David Clarke (2007) sees the Class I symbol stones as a specific (and late) manifestation of a broader communication system. It is thus entirely possible that the symbols were widely used in a range of perishable media such as body art (Thomas 1961: 57) or textiles (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 84). Certainly, the presence of incised symbols on animal bones from the Broch of Burrian and Pool, Sanday (Fraser 2008: 139) suggests that such motifs were at least occasionally used to decorate a range of perishable organic materials which have not survived in the archaeological record.

3.1.3 Chronology

Although Class I symbol stones have conventionally been seen as originating in the sixth or seventh centuries AD, with Class II appearing from the mid-eighth century (eg Fraser 2008: 1), it has long been suspected that the symbols themselves have earlier origins. Charles Thomas (1961), for example, argued for a fifth-century date, based on perceived links to animal art of the Late Iron Age, while some of the objects represented by the symbols (eg mirrors) appear to significantly pre-date the sixth to eighth century floruit of the symbol stones (D V Clarke 2007: 35).

The earliest secure date for a Pictish symbol is currently provided by an ox phalange decorated with a crescent and V-rod from the settlement of Pool in Orkney, AMS dated to cal AD 410–570 at 95% probability (Noble et al 2018: 1336). An even earlier date is suggested, however, by recent excavations at the sea-stack of Dunnicaer, Aberdeenshire, where a series of radiocarbon determinations have been obtained for a rampart which is thought to have been the source of several carved stones recovered during the nineteenth century (ibid: 1339). Bayesian modelling of these dates suggests that the rampart was constructed around *cal AD 250–400* at *95% probability* (ibid). It is possible, therefore, that Pictish symbols were being carved as early as the third century AD.

3.2 Pictish carvings at the Sculptor's Cave

3.2.1 General

The Pictish symbols at the Sculptor's Cave are located primarily on the walls of the twin entrance passages (illus 3.1), while later carvings and other graffiti extend into the main body of the cave. Despite careful inspection with floodlights by Ian Shepherd during the 1979 excavations, no definitively Pictish carvings have been found in the cave interior (Fraser 2008: 106; though see section 3.2.4). Given that the interior walls are significantly less eroded than those of the exposed entrance passages, it seems highly probable that the present distribution of the carvings is a genuine reflection of their original locations.

The entrance passages are today large enough to walk through comfortably. During the early medieval period, however, they would have been partially clogged with (now excavated) later prehistoric deposits. This would have raised the floor level by up to 1.8m in the West Passage and 1.5m in East Passage, with a pronounced mound under the entrance canopy (see illus 2.7–2.9). Indeed, Allen and Anderson (1903: 130), who visited the cave prior to any removal of deposits through excavation, describe the passages as being '8 feet' (roughly 2.5m) high, in contrast to their height of roughly 5m today (illus 1.4). We thus must envisage the creation of the carvings in this setting; being somewhat closer to ground level and having possibly been carved from a crouched position.

There have been a number of previous recordings of the Pictish symbols in the Sculptor's Cave (principally Stuart 1867; Allen and Anderson 1903; Fraser 2008; RCAHMS 2011), each containing a somewhat different selection of carvings. This is partly because of the relatively poor condition of many of the symbols, which has led to some being unrecognised or omitted from the various studies, but also because of disagreements over which carvings should be considered as genuinely Pictish (table 3.1). As a result, it is hard to confirm a definitive corpus. Indeed Fraser's (2008: 106–7) descriptive list does not tally exactly with the numbers of symbols depicted in the accompanying illustrations (which are mainly from Stuart 1867). Based on the carvings visible in the cave today, however, we can be reasonably confident in identifying some 24 symbols (table 3.1), several of them arranged in pairs or groups. The most common symbol is the crescent and V-rod, of which there are five clear examples and one further, heavily eroded, example where only the crescent can be discerned (although, judging from the wider corpus, the likelihood must be that this did originally have an accompanying V-rod). Next most common is the mirror case, of which three clear examples appear, along with a further more tentative example that could be either a mirror or mirror case (see illus 3.7C); like the crescent and V-rod, the mirror case is one of the most common symbols in the overall Pictish corpus. Taken together, these groups form 46% of the identifiable symbols at the Sculptor's Cave. The remaining symbols represent a wide range, with no more than two examples of each (table 3.1). Two fish symbols are the only animal motifs. The following sections describe the main groups of carvings identified on illus 3.1.

Table 3.1
Pictish symbols in the Sculptor's Cave as recorded by Fraser (2008), RCAHMS (2011) and in the present study. *Interpreted as 'probably not Pictish' (Fraser 2008: 106)

	Fraser (2008: text)	RCAHMS (2011)	Present study
Crescent and V-rod	3	5	5
Crescent (isolated)	1	–	1
Mirror/mirror case	3	4	4
Fish	1	2	2
Triple oval	2	2	2
Pentacle	2	2	2
Rectangle with concave sides	2*	2	2
Flower	1	1	1
Step	1	1	1
Double rectangle	1	1	1
Notched rectangle	–	1	1
Arch/horseshoe	–	1	1
Tree/feather?	–	–	1
Total	**17**	**22**	**24**

3.2.2 Flower and triple oval (illus 3.2)

The first carvings that would have been seen when approaching the cave form a symbol pair on the canopy of rock above and between the two entrance passages. These comprise a Pictish 'flower' symbol and a much smaller triple oval. Despite their prominent position, the pair was first identified only during the Shepherds' work (Shepherd and Shepherd 1979: 15). The carvings are unusual among the Sculptor's Cave corpus in being located on what is either an artificially enhanced or (more likely) fortuitously smooth, flat surface. There are no other examples in the Pictish corpus of a flower and triple oval pairing.

The flower is a highly stylised Pictish motif, essentially comprising a curvilinear frond, occasionally embellished (as in the Sculptor's Cave example) with secondary fronds and often containing internal decoration. Although not among the most common of the Pictish symbols, the flower is distributed reasonably widely on Class I stones from Angus to the Western Isles and is usually paired with other symbols. It also appears on the walls of Doo Cave at Wemyss, Fife (Fraser 2008: 81.2; Hambly et al 2019). While Laing and Laing (1984: 268) have suggested that the symbol has its origins in stylised plant iconography depicted on Roman artefacts, such as a fourth-century silver dish from Corbridge, a range of other speculative interpretations have included its identification as some form of wooden churn or 'sprinkler' (Brodie 1996: 24), or even the hindquarters of a seal (Thomas 1963: 57). More convincing, perhaps, is Thomas' suggestion (ibid) that the symbol probably belongs to the group of motifs portraying metal objects, in this case perhaps an

Box section 3

STRUCTURED LIGHT SCANNING OF THE CARVINGS

Lindsey Büster, Adrian Evans, Tom Sparrow, Rachael Kershaw, Andrew S Wilson and Ian Armit

The position of the Pictish symbols in the entrance passages at the Sculptor's Cave makes them highly vulnerable to weathering and erosion. The surface of the coarse-grained sandstone is particularly susceptible to delaminating in large sheets; enough to destroy entire symbols in a single event. Furthermore, exposure to rockfalls and damage (intentional or otherwise) by visitors creates further risks to the long term survival of the carvings. In order to digitally document and preserve them for future generations, some of the most important carvings were subject to structured light scanning during fieldwork in 2014 (see illus 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.9; Büster et al 2019a).

Scanning was undertaken using a *Mechscan* (illus B3.1): a specially commissioned macro structured light scanner produced by Mechinnovation Ltd (Leamington Spa). This scanner has a field of view of 30–110mm and approximate point to point distance of 0.01–0.05mm, capturing up to 2.6 million points per scan; individual carvings required between 39–140 scans each, taking between 4 hours and 12 hours to complete. The weight of the scanner (*c* 30kg) made its transportation to site a major logistical exercise (illus B3.2). Scan data was captured and processed using LMI Technologies (Vancouver) *FlexScan 3D* software.

Colour photographs of the carvings were taken to complement the greyscale scan data; these were then enhanced using synthetic Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI). This uses light sources at various angles to illuminate details not visible under static lighting conditions (Earl et al 2011). RTI can be done in the field, but in the case of the Sculptor's Cave carvings, it was created digitally using a combination of photographs and structured light scan data. Synthetic RTI of the structured light scans was achieved by creating 3D models from these ortho-images, and artificially lighting them using open source *Blender* software (illus B3.3). RTI files were created using open source *RTI Builder* software and open source *PTM (Polynomial Texture Mapping) Builder* algorithms (ibid), which allowed for interactive light source control and export of images using *RTI Viewer* software.

Some new details of the carvings were observed using combined structured light scan data and virtual RTI. The scan of the

Illustration B3.1
Structured light scanning of the salmon and V-rod in the East Passage

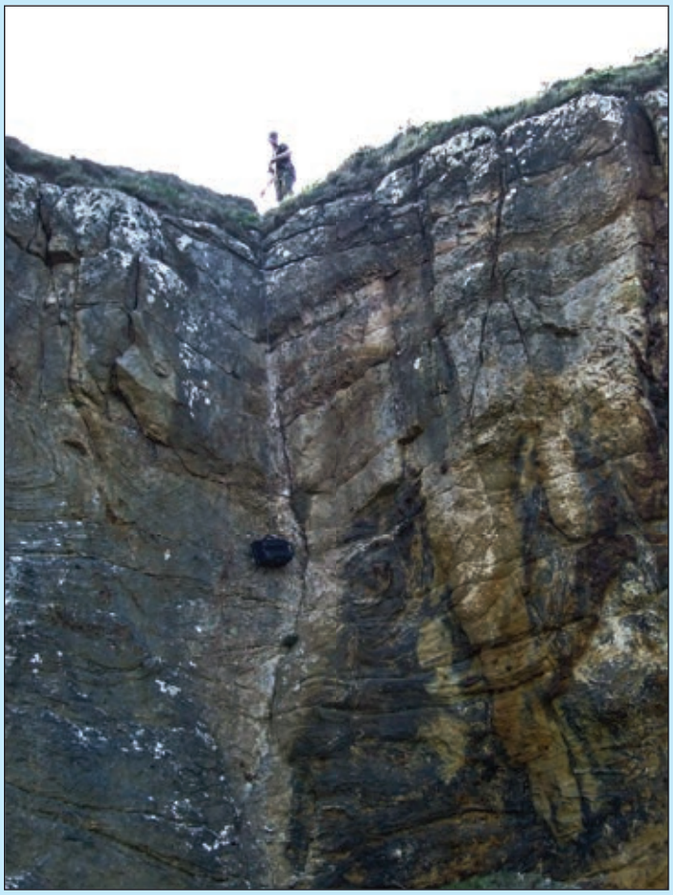

Illustration B3.2
Lowering the *Mechscan* structured light scanner to the Sculptor's Cave

upright fish revealed, for example, additional fins on the upper and lower sides of its body (illus 3.3B, C).

Structured light scanning was also undertaken of casts of the carvings made in 1979, using a structured light scanner (built in -house at the University of Bradford), with a field of view of 15–50cm and a resolution of 100µm, supporting *FlexScan 3D* software (eg illus 3.8). The casts are large, brittle and unwieldy, and have themselves deteriorated during more than three decades in storage. Digital recording thus also serves to preserve them and the information they contain.

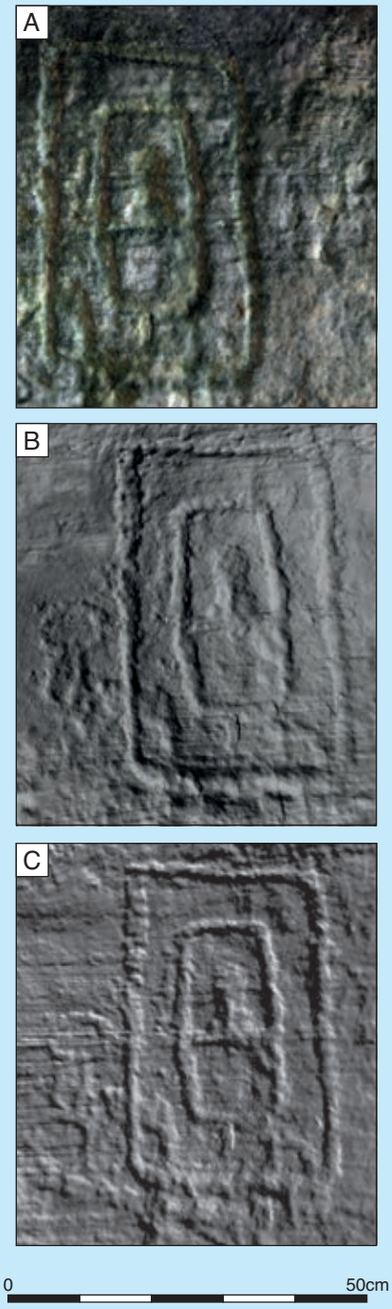

Illustration B3.3
Paired double rectangle and mirror/mirror case symbol (and partial crescent and V-rod) on the west wall of the West Passage: (A) photograph, (B) decimated structured light scan data, (C) virtual RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) rendering from structured light scan data (courtesy Fragmented Heritage and Visualising Heritage, University of Bradford)

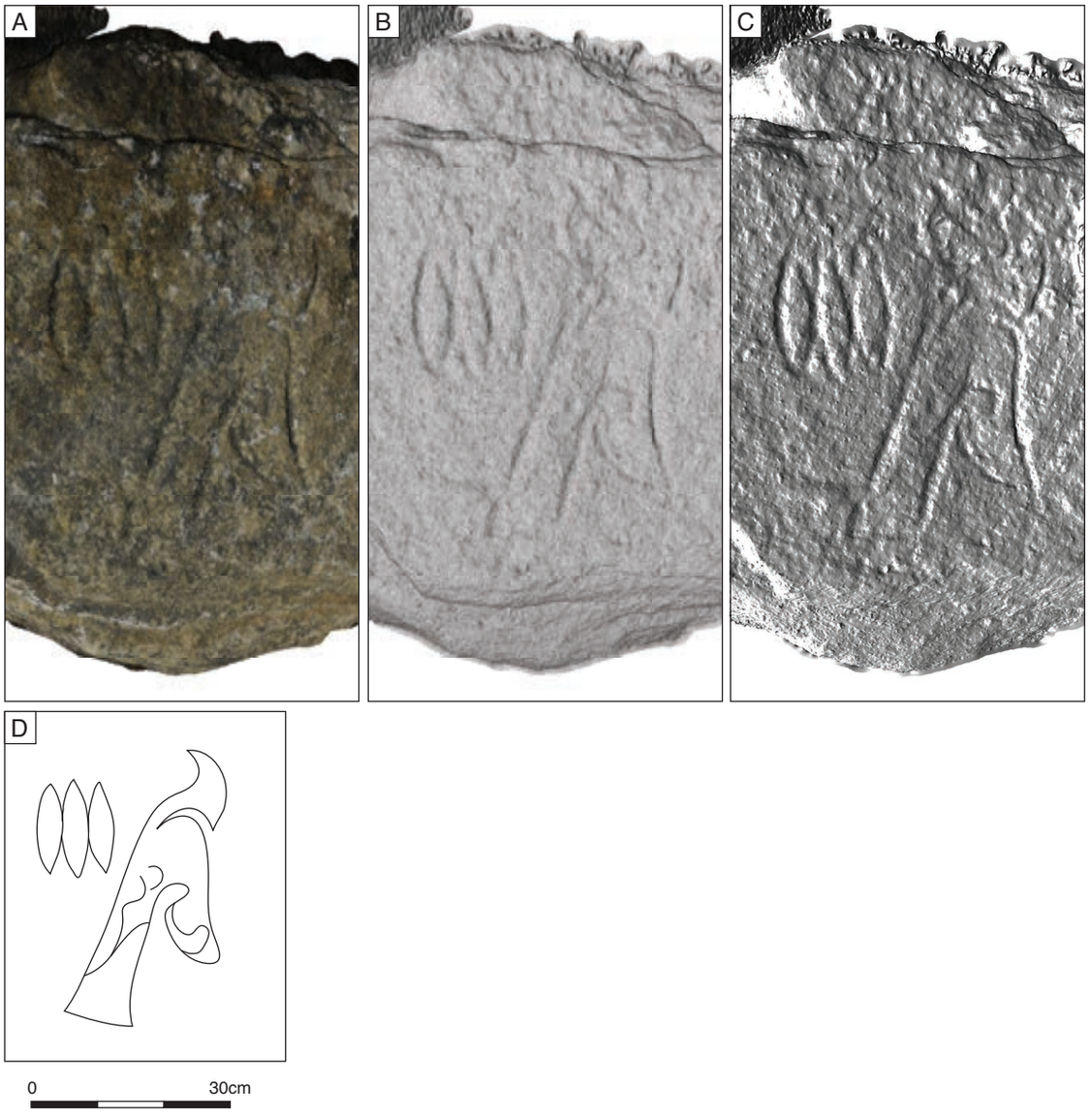

Illustration 3.2
Symbol pair formed by 'flower' and triple oval on the canopy of the rock between the two entrance passages: (A) photograph, (B) decimated structured light scan data, (C) virtual RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) rendering from structured light scan data (courtesy Fragmented Heritage and Visualising Heritage, University of Bradford), (D) the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

archaic form of bronze harness mount (cf Fox 1958: 130 and plate 75), although the resemblances are hardly definitive.

The triple oval symbol comprises, as the name suggests, three identical conjoined vertical ellipses (or vesicas) arranged horizontally; unlike most of those found on symbol stones (eg Glamis Manse; Fraser 2008: 54), the Sculptor's Cave examples are void of internal decoration. The symbol has been interpreted as representing an armlet of the 'massive metalwork' tradition (eg Thomas 1963: 57), though Hunter (2006a: 150) suggests that this is unlikely based on the 'marginal resemblance' and different geographical distributions of the two phenomena.

3.2.3 Fish and crescent and V-rod (illus 3.3)

The most prominent group of symbols encountered on entering the cave through the East Passage comprises a symbol pair formed of a vertical fish motif and a crescent and V-rod; a second, much fainter (but more usual, horizontally positioned) fish motif appears a little further south along the cave wall. The fish, which is the only animal represented among the Sculptor's Cave carvings, is a relatively common symbol, featuring 14 times on Class I stones (Hicks 1993: 196) and occurring widely across eastern Scotland from Caithness to Angus (Alcock 1988: 18). Although it occurs often as part of a symbol pair, the Sculptor's

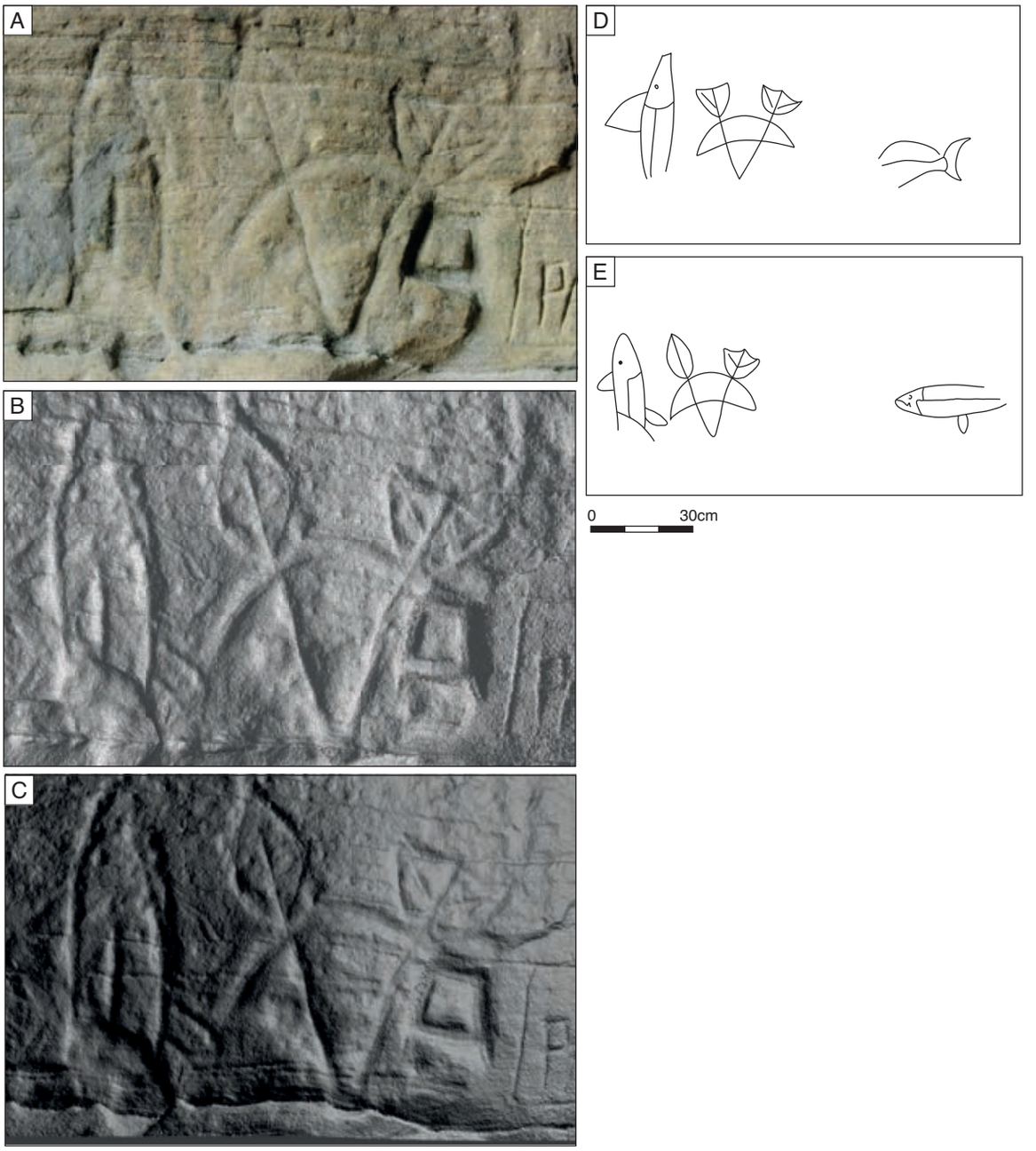

Illustration 3.3
Symbol pair formed by fish and crescent and V-rod symbols on the east wall of the East Passage: (A) photograph, (B) decimated structured light scan data, (C) virtual RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging) rendering from structured light scan data (courtesy Fragmented Heritage and Visualising Heritage, University of Bradford), (D) the same motifs (with additional fish symbol) redrawn from Stuart (1867: plate 37), (E) from the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

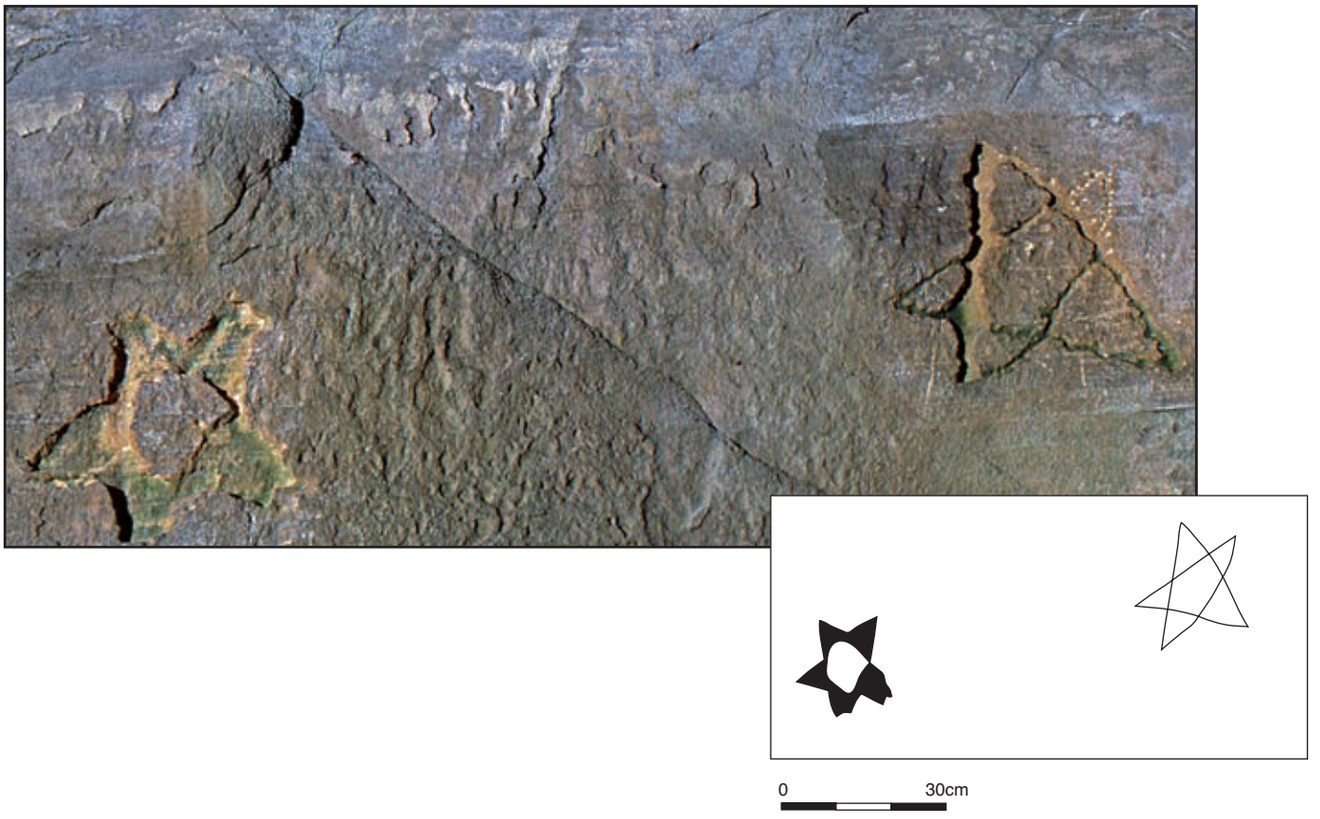

Illustration 3.4
Two pentacles on the west wall of the East Passage (Shepherd archive); inset: the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

Cave example is the only one in the corpus paired with a crescent and V-rod. The only other example of a vertically placed fish motif in the Pictish corpus comes from Jonathan's Cave at Wemyss (Fraser 2008: 68).

Only the top half of the northernmost fish at the Sculptor's Cave is visible and, although the lower part may have been lost to erosion, this may be a deliberate attempt to depict a salmon in the act of leaping from the water. It is also worth noting, however, the unusual beak-shaped nose of the Sculptor's Cave example, which is suggestive of a bottle-nose dolphin, like those still observed along the Moray coast today; the position of the fins, however, suggests that a salmon is the more likely interpretation. The scan results (illus 3.3) are suggestive of some re-carving of the right upper side of the salmon and also indicate that the lower fin on the same side cuts across the accompanying crescent symbol, demonstrating some internal stratigraphy to the carving.

The accompanying crescent and V-rod is relatively common in the repertoire of Pictish motifs, occurring on more than 20 symbol stones (Foster 2004: 71). In this example, the lower right portion of the crescent has been damaged by a later carving. The leaf-shaped terminals of the V-rod motif have led to its interpretation as a broken arrow and this is quite convincingly the case for the Sculptor's Cave example, since (*contra* Stuart's drawing, illus 3.3) the two terminals are quite different and suggestive of an arrow tip (on the left) and fletching (on the right) respectively. Others, however, would prefer to see V-rods as representing sceptres, based on comparison with depictions in illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* (Stevenson 1993: 17). The V-rod here does indeed feature large, stylised leaf-shaped terminals, but the intricate decoration which normally fills the associated crescent is absent.

3.2.4 Pentacles (illus 3.4)

Two pentacles are located high on the west wall of the East Passage. The spacing of around 0.35m between them suggests that they are not intended as a symbol pair. The northernmost pentacle is depicted by Allen and Anderson (1903: fig 135a) as containing a central dot, though this feature is absent in recordings of the carvings by both Stuart (1867: plate 37) and RCAHMS (2011). Although pentacles are not included in what is usually regarded as the formal repertoire of Pictish motifs, an example carved alongside a crescent and bird on a pebble from the Broch of Burrian, North Ronaldsay (Fraser 2008: 139), effectively proves the motif's Pictish credentials. Moreover, Alcock (1996) considered pentacles part of his original *ur*-symbol repertoire,

Illustration 3.5
Crescent and V-rod, double rectangle, mirror case and step symbol (photograph: Mhairi Maxwell and Clara Molina Sánchez, reproduced with permission); inset: the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

albeit one that did not become established in the more formalised corpus featured on the Class I symbol stones.

Two further pentacles can also be seen inside the cave, high on the east wall (illus 3.1). These seem less likely to be genuinely Pictish for two reasons. First, they are far removed from all the other known Pictish symbols in the cave, which entirely avoid the interior, and, second, they occur in an area of dense graffiti beside the initials 'GC', which probably stands for 'Gordon Cumming', suggesting that they may have been carved during the mid-late nineteenth century by a member of the local land-owning family who we know had a close interest in the caves. Ultimately, however, the antiquity of these particular carvings must remain uncertain.

3.2.5 Crescent and V-rod, double rectangle, mirror case and step symbol (illus 3.5)

Another crescent and V-rod occurs on the west wall of the West Passage, where it is associated with a large double rectangle and a mirror case symbol. The symbols in this area are arranged seemingly informally, along a broadly horizontal plane, with no obvious symbol pairing. The crescent and V-rod is smaller and

Illustration 3.6
Photograph of (A) triple oval, with inset drawing of symbol pair formed by this triple oval and rectangle with concave sides, (B) symbol pair formed by notched rectangle and rectangle with concave sides, and previously unrecorded tree/feather symbol on east wall of West Passage

simpler than the example in the East Passage (section 3.2.3); the crescent is unfilled and the V-rod lacks elaborate terminals. The mirror case too is rendered only in a simple outline, with no internal decoration. A simple cross to the upper left of the crescent and V-rod motif is discussed in section 3.3.2.

The double rectangle, measuring approximately 0.44m by 0.22m, is by far the most visually dominant motif among this group and is indeed the largest of all the Pictish symbols within the cave. At the centre of the inner rectangle is a small 'keyhole-shaped' depression (which could plausibly represent a heavily eroded mirror case or double disc, though there are no other examples of such a configuration in the corpus). While the rectangle motif is not uncommon in Pictish art, there are few parallels for the double rectangle form, the closest perhaps being an example on the Class I symbol stone at Newton of Lewesk, Aberdeenshire (Fraser 2008: 36).

Visual comparison of the double rectangle with other carvings in the cave (supported by the structured light scan in illus B3.3) attests to its rendering with more deeply incised lines, which could indeed indicate some form of re-cutting after the initial carving. It also has distinctive individual pick marks visible within the lines, indicative of a technique that is not evident elsewhere in the cave. The size and dominance of the double rectangle at the Sculptor's Cave, together with this evidence for deeper than usual (re-)carving, would seem to signal some special importance relative to the smaller symbols around it.

Rectangle symbols have sometimes been interpreted as shields (Ritchie 1969; Fraser 2008: 36) as carried, for example, by Pictish warriors on the stones from the Brough of Birsay, Orkney (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 65, fig 78) and Fowlis Wester, Perth and Kinross (Fraser 2008: 122). Alternatively, they may in some cases represent books, or perhaps more specifically the Bible (Samson 1992: 40). One further possibility, and one that accords with the position of the Sculptor's Cave example within the entrance passage to a cave, is that it could represent a door (the central 'keyhole' in this case being read more literally). If this was the case, then the carving may have served to mark the entry point between two worlds.

To the left of the double rectangle, above the mirror case, is a step symbol

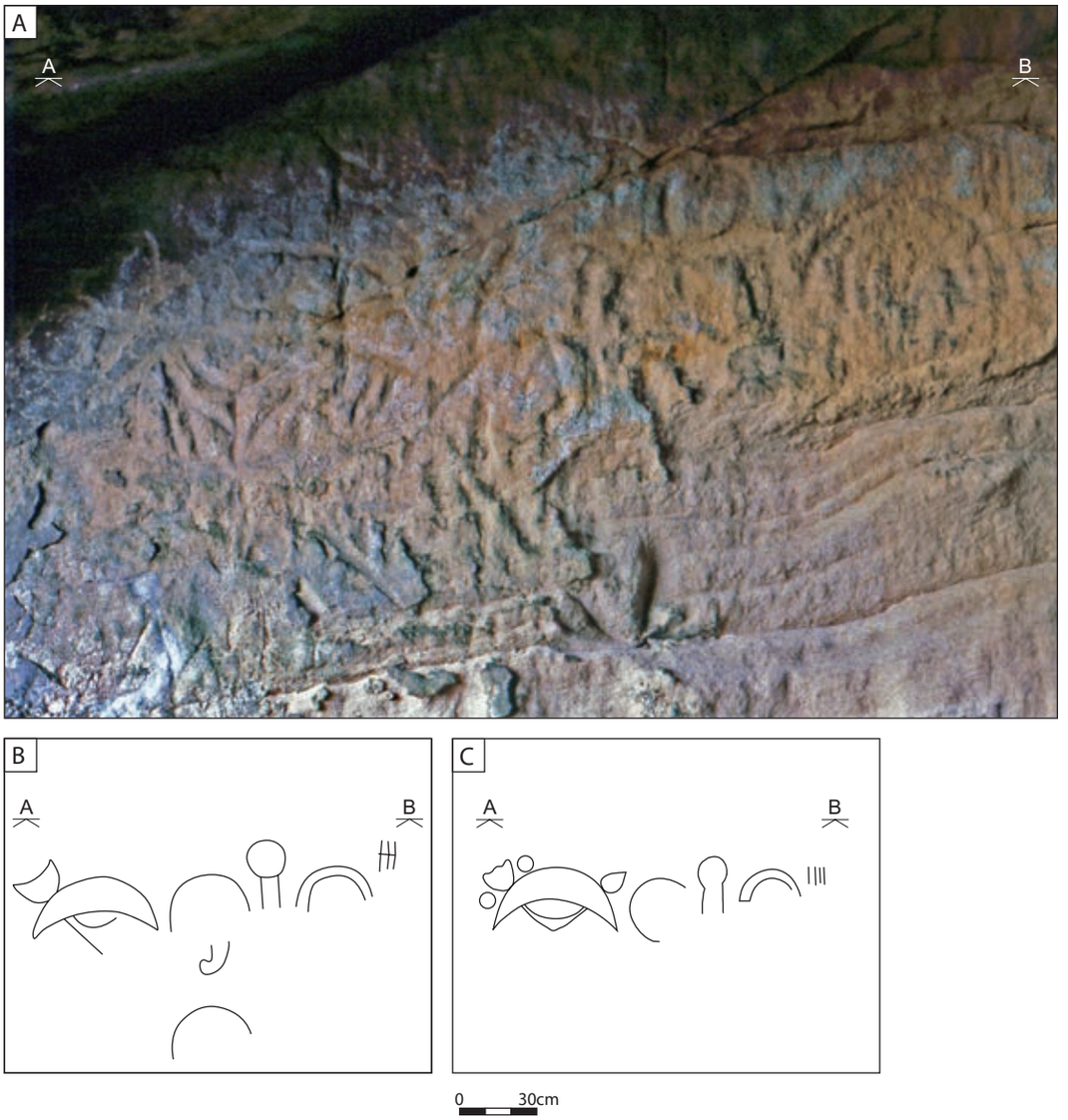

Illustration 3.7
Crescents and V-rod, arch/horseshoe and mirror/mirror case(s): (A) photograph taken in 1979 (Shepherd archive), (B) the symbols (with additional crescent) redrawn from Stuart (1867: plate 37), (C) the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

(upper left on illus 3.5, inset). Like the double rectangle, this is an uncommon motif, though examples very similar to the one here can be seen on two Class I stones from Ardjachie Farm, near Edderton on the Dornoch Firth, and Dalnavie Farm, near Ardross (Fraser 2008: 86–7). In the case of the Ardjachie example, the step is paired with an equally unusual spoked wheel symbol on what appears to be a prehistoric cup-marked standing stone (ibid).

3.2.6 Triple oval, rectangles with concave sides and notched rectangle (illus 3.6)

High on the east wall of the West Passage, inside the modern wooden door, are two symbol pairs and a fragmentary symbol. On the right (south) of the group is the first symbol pair, comprising a small 'rectangle' defined by two concave lines, and a triple oval symbol (illus 3.6A). Although Fraser (2008: 106) suggests that the former is 'probably not Pictish', its occurrence as part of a clearly defined pair with a recognisably Pictish symbol (ie the triple oval) would seem to suggest otherwise.

Around 0.4m to the left (north) and at a slightly higher elevation is a second symbol pair, comprising a rather larger (but otherwise identical) 'rectangle' and a smaller notched rectangle (illus 3.6B). Once again, the pairing of the concave-sided symbol with a more conventional (albeit by no means common) Pictish form strengthens the argument that this is a genuine Pictish symbol pair.

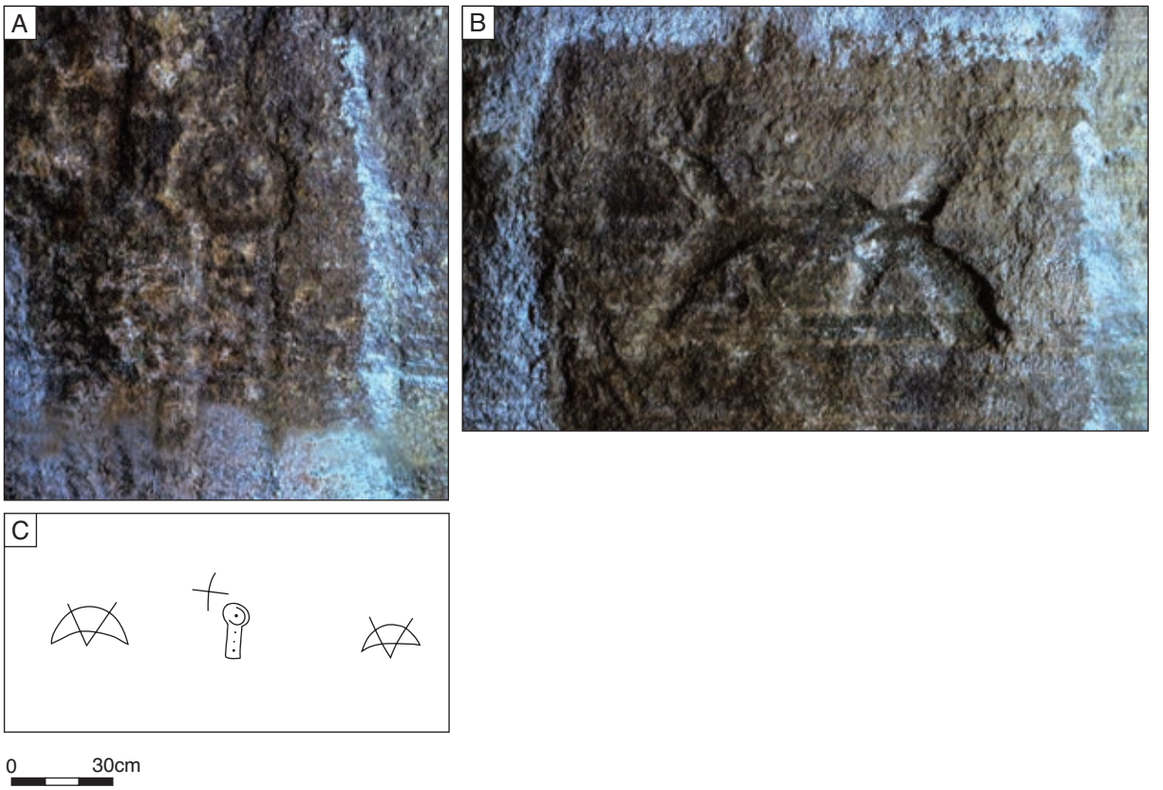

Illustration 3.8
Photographs of (A) mirror case, (B) crescent and V-rod on west wall of West Passage, (C) the same symbols based on RCAHMS 2011

One further fragmentary symbol can be seen immediately below the larger of the rectangles with concave sides. Although, superficially, this fragment recalls the 'fletching' on the terminal of a V-rod, it would be upside-down if this were the case. It seems preferable to ascribe it to some otherwise unknown symbol resembling a tree or feather (illus 3.6B).

3.2.7 Crescents and V-rod, arch/horseshoe and mirror/mirror case(s) (illus 3.7)

A series of heavily eroded symbols, arranged horizontally, can be dimly discerned along the east wall of the entrance area of the West Passage (to the north of the modern wooden door). These comprise (from left to right) a crescent and V-rod; a large but very faint mirror or mirror case; a further, smaller mirror case and an arch/horseshoe. Above and to the right of this last symbol are a series of four irregular vertical lines that do not conform to any known symbols and resemble numerous other markings in the cave that appear to be of natural origin. A further crescent (without surviving V-rod) was recorded by Stuart below the large mirror (or mirror case; illus 3.7B) but is not visible in the RCAHMS (2011) survey (illus 3.7C). None of the symbols appear to be arranged in pairs.

3.2.8 Crescent and V-rods and mirror case (illus 3.8)

High on the west wall of the West Passage, in the entrance area, are two small crescent and V-rods either side of a mirror case; the mirror case and northernmost crescent and V-rod are shown in illus 3.8A, B. There is no obvious pairing of the symbols.

3.3 Later carvings

3.3.1 General

In contrast to the confined distribution of the Pictish symbols around the cave entrance, the numerous later carvings, dating from the medieval period to the present, extend deep into the interior. While it is impractical to catalogue them all here, some are worthy of more detailed attention.

3.3.2 Simple crosses

A number of simple crosses are visible within the cave, notably on the west wall of the West Passage (Shepherd 1993: 80); examples can be seen in illus 3.5 and 3.8. Similar crosses can be seen in many caves across Scotland and could have been carved at any period, though there is a strong presumption that many may be medieval in date (Henderson 1987). Indeed, Ahronson's recent study (2018: 98) suggests that the marking of caves with crosses was a distinctive feature of 'early Christian northern Britain'.

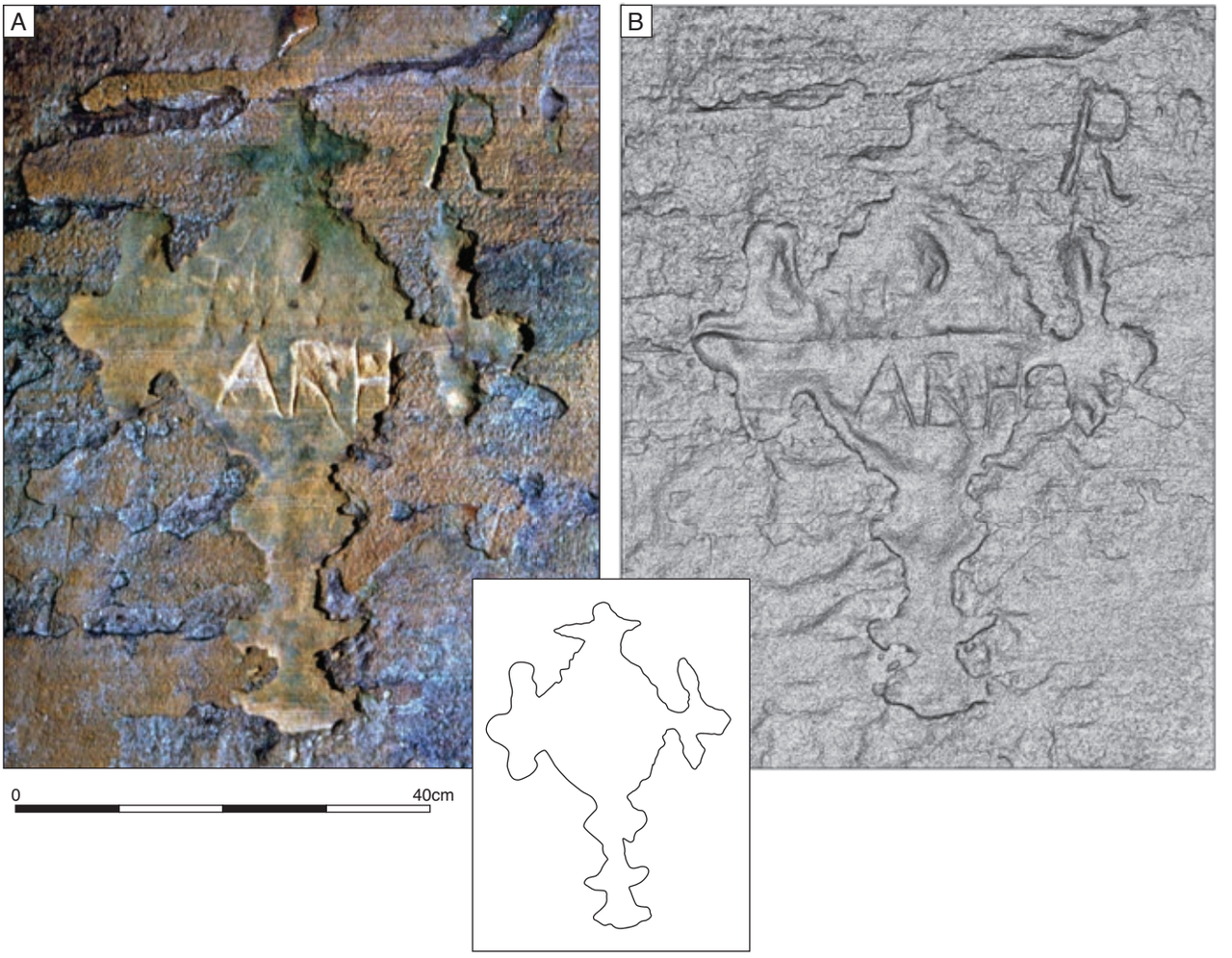

Illustration 3.9
Large cross on the west wall of the East Passage: (A) in situ, (B) scan of fibre glass cast taken in 1979

3.3.3 Large cross (illus 3.9)

A large cross on the west wall of the East Passage was first identified during the 1979 excavations. It is defined largely by a fragile and heavily eroded negative imprint on the cave wall, where the interior of the carving seems to have sheared away from the rock, and has been further damaged by modern graffiti. Referred to by Ian Shepherd (1993: 80) as a 'fine Russian cross', it probably dates to the twelfth century AD or later (R B K Stevenson pers comm to Ian Shepherd).

3.3.4 Curse and inscription (illus 3.10, 3.11)

Perhaps the most striking of the more recent carvings is a seventeenth-century curse located on the east wall of the cave interior. Inscribed in deep, well-carved lettering, it appears to read:

> 'W ENDING . . . 12 of MAR 169[?] . . . CVRSED BE THEY YT HINDER [PLUNDER/PLINDER?]'

This rendering of the date is not, however, entirely certain; Stuart, for example, read it as '1653' (1867: xciv).

The curse can be linked to another inscription located on the same wall towards the rear of the cave, just north of the potentially modern pentacles (see section 3.2.4). It reads:

> 'DVMMI JHORN . . . MAR . . . 169[?]'.

The date and style of the lettering (and adjacent scroll) suggest that it was carved at the same time, and perhaps by the same person, as the curse. The individual concerned may be the local Elgin minister James Horne, who resigned his post following the Scottish Test Act of 1681 (although the date of the inscription is possibly rather late if this is the case; Janet Trythall pers comm). While the meaning of

Illustration 3.10
Seventeenth-century curse on east wall of the East Passage: (A) in situ, immediately after cast was taken in 1979, (B) scan of the fibre glass cast taken in 1979, with colour removed (courtesy Fragmented Heritage and Visualising Heritage, University of Bradford), (C) in situ today, showing the effect of the cast in promoting enhanced lichen growth in relation to the surrounding cave wall

Illustration 3.11
Seventeenth-century inscription on the east wall of the East Passage

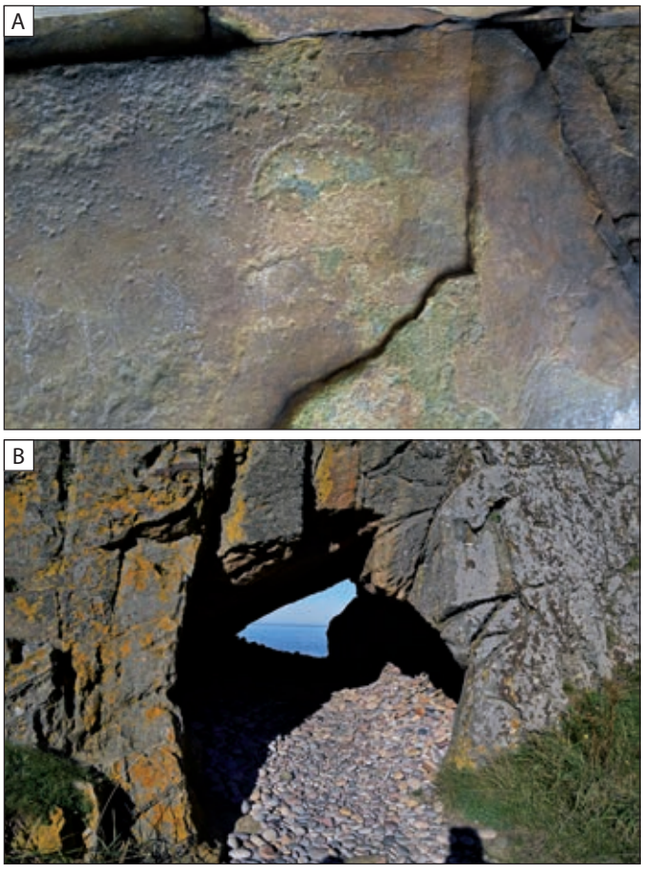

Illustration 3.12
(A) Eroded symbol in (B) the natural sea arch at Clashach Cove: the only other natural rock surface in Moray known to have had Pictish symbols carved on its walls. It is recorded as a crescent and V-rod by Fraser (2008: 106), but the V-rod is now very hard to discern

the curse is obscure, one interpretation is that it represents a warning to smugglers who may have been using the cave to store contraband (Gordon Cumming 1904: 68).

3.4 Recent and early modern graffiti

The walls of the Sculptor's Cave are also covered in graffiti dating from at least the nineteenth century to the present (illus 1.11, 3.9, B1.1, B3.1). Some of this has damaged certain of the Pictish carvings: notably the fish and crescent and V-rod symbol pair, which was defaced by the letters 'Xav' (short for 'Xavier') during the 1990s and was subsequently restored. Much of the graffiti, however, is concentrated within the cave interior, away from the Pictish carvings. What is, perhaps, most interesting is the way in which the prior existence of the Pictish carvings seems to have encouraged recent generations to leave their own physical mark on this particular cave; none of the other caves along the coast have anything approaching the concentration of graffiti seen in the Sculptor's Cave.

3.5 Discussion

3.5.1 The appearance of the carvings

The position of the symbols, set around the entrance area, would have made a striking sight for anyone approaching the Sculptor's Cave. Their present state probably does little justice to their original appearance. Many of the carvings now appear faint and highly eroded, which can make them seem rather crude in comparison to the symbol stones. It is important to remember, however, that their location exposes the carvings to severe wind erosion, which is particularly problematic given the coarse-grained nature of the sandstone geology of the cave. When first carved, the symbols would have been sharper, deeper and perhaps brightly painted; the abraded sherds of Roman samian pottery and fragments of orpiment recovered during Sylvia Benton's excavations could, for example, have provided the source of red and yellow pigments respectively (see sections 5.2.3 and 5.12).

In some cases, where survival is good, as with the flower and triple oval over the entrance canopy (section 3.2.2), the carvings can appear both 'stylish and orthodox' (Shepherd 1993: 81) and no less well-executed than those on many of the symbol stones. Others, including the various small symbols close to the double rectangle (section 3.2.5), seem small, simple and rather cursory in their execution. Potentially they may have been carved at different times for different purposes, or by different individuals with varying levels of skill.

3.5.2 Symbol pairs

Although there are perhaps four clear symbol pairs identifiable within the cave (the flower and triple oval (section 3.2.2), the fish

and crescent and V-rod (section 3.2.3), the notched rectangle and rectangle with concave sides, and the rectangle with concave sides and triple oval (section 3.2.6)), all are paired horizontally rather than vertically as is usually the case on the symbol stones. It is also striking that none of these symbol pairs is replicated elsewhere: if they represent personal names, as Samson (1992) and others have suggested, then they are apparently unique within the corpus or else represent alternative renderings. Along with the apparently informal layout of the remaining carvings and the presence of several highly unusual symbols (eg the pentacles, rectangles with concave sides and double rectangle), this suggests significant deviation from the more canonical representations on the Pictish symbol stones.

3.5.3 Dating the symbols

The unusual qualities of the Sculptor's Cave symbols raise the possibility that they may be chronologically distinct from the corpus of symbol stones. This is not of course a new suggestion. Along with those in the Wemyss Caves (see section 3.5.4), the apparent peculiarities of the Sculptor's Cave symbols have long led to their identification as potentially early forms (eg Henderson and Henderson 2004: 171). This idea was developed, for example, by Leslie Alcock (1996), who included both the Sculptor's Cave and Wemyss carvings among a group of what he termed '*ur*-symbols', which he saw as ancestral to the more formalised repertoire commonly found on Class I symbol stones. Also included within this group were the small and atypical symbol stones from the sea-stack at Dunnicaer, Aberdeenshire (Alcock and Alcock 1992: 276–82; Noble et al 2018), and certain symbols carved on portable objects. These *ur*-symbols are defined by a number of features, including a lack of decorative infilling, the presence of non-canonical symbols (such as the pentacle and triangle) and the use of central dots within certain symbols (as is recorded in a nineteenth-century illustration of one of the pentacles at the Sculptor's Cave; see section 3.2.4).

If we accept the recent re-dating of the Dunnicaer symbols to AD 250–400 (Noble et al 2018; see section 3.1.3) then there is no reason to suppose that the Sculptor's Cave examples could not date to an equally early period. If this were the case, it would no longer be necessary to postulate any significant gap between the cessation of funerary and votive activity within the cave and the carving of the symbols around the entrance. It is important, however, to exercise some caution. The AMS dates from Dunnicaer do not date the symbols directly (ibid) and, even if they do genuinely indicate a late third or fourth century AD for the carvings, the Dunnicaer symbols have little in common with those at the Sculptor's Cave beyond a general dissimilarity with the more canonical forms present on the main corpus of symbol stones. Nonetheless, a date for the Sculptor's Cave symbols around the end of the Roman Iron Age, sometime around AD 400, is certainly now plausible.

It is additionally worth noting that the symbols at the Sculptor's Cave need not all have been carved at the same time. One might argue, for example, that the prominent and somewhat more canonical symbol pairs (the flower and triple oval, and the fish and crescent and V-rod) might be later additions, although there is presently no way to test such a proposition.

3.5.4 Pictish symbols in caves and on outcrops

Despite the large number of caves along the Covesea coast, several of which contain evidence for prehistoric human activity (Büster and Armit 2016), the only other known Pictish carving is at Clashach Cove, a natural sea arch approximately 1.5km west of the Sculptor's Cave which contains a single heavily eroded crescent and V-rod (Fraser 2008: 106; illus 3.12). Indeed, there are only a small number of sites across Scotland where Pictish symbols have been carved into natural rock surfaces. These include isolated examples associated with high-status sites outside Pictland: a boar at the Dalriadic royal site of Dunadd in the Kilmartin Valley (Lane and Campbell 2000) and a double disc and Z-rod at Trusty's Hill in Kirkcudbrightshire (Radford 1953; Toolis and Bowles 2017). Within the Pictish heartlands, however, symbols carved into natural rock are restricted to a handful of coastal cave sites. Given that more than 400 caves are recorded in Canmore, the occurrence of definitively Pictish symbols in only 8 of them would seem to suggest that carving on the walls of caves was extremely uncommon (although it is always possible of course that symbols could have been painted on cave walls).

Aside from the Sculptor's Cave, all the remaining examples are on the Fife coast, suggesting a relatively localised practice. Two caves at Caiplie each contain a single symbol (Canmore ID 34025): an arch/horseshoe in Mortuary Cave and a Z-rod overlying an unidentifiable symbol alongside numerous simple crosses in Chapel Cave, neither of which could be relocated by Fraser (2008: 66). Antiquarian excavations record at least five human burials of unknown date outside the Caiplie Caves, as well as quantities of animal bone (Stuart 1867: xc). Constantine's Cave, at Fife Ness (Canmore ID 35369), contains simple incised animal images but these cannot be definitively identified as Pictish.

The closest parallels to the Sculptor's Cave carvings, in terms of the number and type of motifs represented, are found along a 2km stretch of coastline at Wemyss in Fife (Ritchie and Stevenson 1993; Gibson and Stevens 2007; Hambly et al 2019). When documented in the mid-nineteenth century, five of these caves contained Pictish carvings (Simpson 1866; 1867) though two have since collapsed and other individual symbols have been lost to vandalism (Hambly et al 2019: 225).

There are roughly twice the number of symbols in the Wemyss Caves than in the Sculptor's Cave (49 compared to 26), although none of the individual caves at Wemyss has more than 17. As at the Sculptor's Cave, there are also later carvings, including numerous crosses. Given the larger number of carvings, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Wemyss Caves display a rather broader range of symbols, including several of the more conventional Pictish motifs (eg the 'Pictish beast', serpent, Z-rod, comb case and double disc) which are absent at the Sculptor's Cave. In general, the individual symbols at Wemyss seem haphazardly arranged, as is the case with many of the Sculptor's Cave symbols, in contrast to the careful pairing seen on the symbol stones. A striking and unusually deeply incised single rectangle with internal decoration in the Sliding Cave (Ritchie and Stevenson 1993: 207, fig 25.7) recalls the double rectangle at the Sculptor's Cave (section 3.2.5).

Excavations inside the Sliding Cave at Wemyss have produced evidence for human activity around AD 240–400 (Gibson and

Stevens 2007: 95–6), contemporary with Late Roman activity at the Sculptor's Cave. This date is also in keeping with the early chronology now suggested for the Pictish symbols at Dunnicaer (Noble et al 2018). The dating of activity at Dunnicaer, the Sliding Cave and the Sculptor's Cave thus provide mounting (albeit in the latter two cases circumstantial) evidence for the precocious emergence of Pictish symbols.

There are, however, significant differences between the Sculptor's Cave and the Wemyss Caves. In contrast to the situation at Covesea, the Wemyss Caves appear to have been relatively accessible during prehistory, and there is evidence for arable farming in their immediate vicinity (Guttmann 2002). Despite the occurrence of burials dating to the late first millennium AD (ibid), there is no evidence for the caves being used for funerary activity during the later prehistoric or Roman periods. The placement of the carvings at Wemyss is also quite different: rather than being restricted to the entrance, as at the Sculptor's Cave, the Wemyss symbols are found in various locations throughout the caves, although always 'on sunlit walls' (Hambly et al 2019: 244). The range and organisation of the symbols also differs. The only unambiguous symbol pair in the Wemyss Caves was a double disc and Z-rod and animal head, arranged vertically in the now-collapsed Doo Cave (Forsyth 1995: 95; Fraser 2008: 68), compared to four symbol pairs (each arranged horizontally) at the Sculptor's Cave. The relative lack of symbol pairs is particularly striking given the much larger absolute number of symbols found at Wemyss.

Perhaps the most striking difference between the two, however, is the paucity of crescent and V-rod and mirror/mirror case symbols from the Wemyss Caves, where together they comprise only 6% of the motifs (Hambly et al 2019: 226–7); at the Sculptor's Cave, by contrast, they make up 46% of the symbols. There are also many more animal symbols at Wemyss, especially in Jonathan's Cave; indeed, around 33% of the Wemyss carvings represent animals (ibid), compared to only 8% at the Sculptor's Cave. Thus, although the iconography of both the Sculptor's Cave and the Wemyss complex differ significantly from the standard Pictish corpus, they also differ significantly from each other, suggesting that we should not regard them as necessarily connected in terms of either the specific chronology of the carvings or the messages that they were intended to convey.

3.5.5 Interpreting the symbols

The symbols carved around the entrance to the Sculptor's Cave were evidently intended as a form of communication (cf Büster and Armit 2018). Working on the assumption that symbol pairs generally record di-thematic personal names (Samson 1992; Forsyth 1995; see section 3.1.2), we might suggest that certain symbols (including some of the most prominent) indicate named individuals. As we have seen, however (section 3.5.2), these 'names' are not otherwise recorded in the Pictish corpus. This might reflect the putatively early date of the carvings (and changing fashions in Pictish names) or it may suggest that the entities named, rather than representing the aristocratic Picts thought to be identified on the symbol stones, were perhaps ancestors or super-natural beings specifically associated with the cave.

Although the evidence for treating Pictish symbol stones as funerary monuments is weak (D V Clarke 2007), they do nonetheless appear in some cases to commemorate individuals and events, most obviously in certain Class II stones like the Aberlemno Churchyard stone, which is thought to celebrate the Pictish victory at the battle of Nechtansmere in AD 685 (Fraser 2008: 46–7). One possible reading of the Sculptor's Cave carvings, then, is that they were intended to memorialise some or all of the dead within the cave. This idea will be explored further in chapter 8.

Yet, as we have seen, the carvings are not limited to symbol pairs but encompass a range of seemingly informally placed groupings. This, along with the small size and simplicity of some of the symbols, suggests that they might communicate different forms of information from the more formal symbol pairs. Despite the uncertainties of chronology, it is likely that the carvings come at the end of the main period of human activity in the cave. It is tempting, therefore, to see them as a mark of closure, effectively putting the cave out of use for the living. Gondek has suggested that certain 'hidden symbols' on stones placed face-down in paving and other structural contexts at sites like Old Scatness in Shetland and Pool in Orkney might suggest they they served to 'close or redefine earlier activities' (2015: 101). It is not inconceivable that certain of the Pictish carvings at the entrance to the Sculptor's Cave formed a protective spiritual barrier intended to contain the dangerous forces inside.

We should also be wary of imposing too sharp a distinction between the Pictish and 'later' carvings. Given the uncertain chronology of the symbols, it is not impossible that some may have been carved in the fifth or sixth centuries AD at a time when Christianity may have begun to exert some influence in the region. If the double rectangle in the West Passage (see section 3.2.5) was indeed intended to represent a Bible, for example, then it might be seen in the same light as the simple crosses that have generally been regarded as later additions (see section 3.3.2). The Pictish and 'later' carvings may even have been carved by the same individual(s) in an attempt to Christianise the cave or act as warnings to the pious.

The interpretation of the symbols will be explored further in relation to the wider archaeology of the Sculptor's Cave in chapter 8.

3.5.6 Putting devils to flight

It is perhaps somewhat easier to offer interpretations for the carved crosses that convey an unambiguous Christian symbolism. Locally, there are associations of caves with early medieval saints: a cave near Lossiemouth, for example, was thought to have been used by the tenth century Saint Gervadius/Gerardine (Brown 1873: 327). This cave, 'ornamented with a Gothic door and window', was apparently destroyed by a 'drunken ship captain' in the eighteenth century (ibid) and cannot now be identified. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible, especially given the nearby presence of what was very possibly a Pictish monastery at Kinnedar, that the Sculptor's Cave may have been visited, perhaps even inhabited, at various times by religious individuals seeking seclusion (an association well attested in the folkloric and literary traditions of Britain and Ireland; cf Dowd 2018).

It is highly probable that some memory of the pagan funerary role of the cave would have persisted well into the

medieval period; the presence of human remains would most likely have remained obvious. The crosses may thus have been intended to control or contain the forces or spirits within: effectively 'putting devils to flight' (Ahronson 2018: 102). The site's murky pagan past may even have encouraged visits by Early Christian ascetics, in emulation of Saint Anthony of Egypt who was himself famously tormented by demons in a cave. The large cross in the East Passage (section 3.3.3) suggests that such visits may have persisted well into the early second millennium AD.