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A Fragmented Masterpiece

Recovering the Biography of the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish Cross-Slab

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Appendix 2

An incised horse's head at Jessie Port, Hilton of Cadboll, Ross and Cromarty

GEORGE and ISABEL HENDERSON

In view of the importance attached by Suzanne Miller to Jessie Port as the likely source of the raw material used by the sculptor of the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab (see Chapter 7.2.1), the existence of a potentially early example of Pictish sculpture, on bedrock on the foreshore at Jessie Port, deserves consideration (NH87NE0015 Highland Council SMR). A photograph of the carving of a horse's head in the

records kept by the Highland Archaeology Unit in Inverness caught the attention of Heather James. The photograph had been deposited with the Unit in 1984 by John Foster of Fearn. At that time the carving was commented on by the then regional archaeologist, Robert Gourlay. He judged it as probably modern, due to its good state of preservation on the exposed seashore, and, more disputably, because 'its shape



Illustration App 2.1

Carving of a horse's head at Jessie Port, Hilton of Cadboll (© George Henderson)

A FRAGMENTED MASTERPIECE

is not like ancient carvings'. Further enquiries with local residents have taken knowledge of the carving back to the 1920s.¹ Local people appear to believe, like Gourlay, that it is 'modern', but no resident has yet come forward with verifiable claims to its origin. More positively, local residents have lately found and photographed a well cut and shapely scroll on a rock face further along the shore, between Creagan Dubba and Tarrel Bothie.

The carving of the horse's head is on bedrock on an outcrop of sandstone near the south end of the bay known as Jessie Port, about 1km north-east of Hilton, below the cliff and slope dominated by the isolated house, Ros-Mhor. The carved horse's head has many features associated with the Pictish incised animal designs:² its size, 250mm by 250mm; its careful placing within the flat surface available for carving; and most notably, the economic vigour of the design. The strictly profile head is carved with a single fluent line. The head is held high, at right angles to the neck. The nostril and muzzle, and the bold curve of the lower jaw are accurately delineated, capturing the essential nature of a horse's head. Where the incision is deepest, it has the hollow section of much incised Pictish art. The crisply carved forelock, which lies outside the contour of the head, is paralleled in two of the Burghead bulls³ and, most relevantly, on the Inverurie horse symbol stone,⁴ the only surviving horse among the early incised animal designs of Pictland. The heavy head of the Inverurie horse compares well with that at Jessie Port, but there are significant differences. The Inverurie horse has a conspicuous eye, and the lobes and scrolls which articulate its head and body are absent from the Jessie Port carving. Its eye is missing, possibly through wear or original light incision. The short upward-pointing ear is not connected to the head or neck by curvilinear linking lines. Such internal curvilinear marking is typical of the Pictish incised animal style, and without it the connection with Pictish art is weakened.

The representation at Jessie Port of the horse's head only, cut off at the base of the neck, may identify the carving as an additional example of the Pictish beast-head symbol, of which eleven are known, three on metalwork, seven on upright stone slabs, and one recorded on the wall of the now destroyed Doo Cave, East Wemyss, Fife.⁵ The head at the bottom right of the reverse of the lost Monifieth plaque (known from an antiquarian drawing)⁶ has decorative scrolls on its forehead, suggesting a ram, while the famous Norrie's Law silver leaf-shaped plaques display dog heads.⁷ The majority of the stone carved beast-heads, notably the

masterly example from Stittenham, Ross-shire,⁸ now in Inverness Museum, appear to represent deer. The example on Glamis no 2⁹ has strikingly the same noble lift of the head as the Jessie Port design. The beast-head symbol at the top of the reverse of the cross-slab, Meikle no 1,¹⁰ has probably rightly been identified as that of a horse.

The majority of the surviving beast-head symbols, in metal and stone, have elaborate scrolls or spirals terminating the design at the base. This feature is absent in the Jessie Port carving. A shallow inverted curve is all that is now visible at its base. Unlike the Pictish animal symbols, which regularly appear in solitary state, the beast-head symbol is usually accompanied by other symbols,¹¹ and there is now no sign of these at Jessie Port. Yet another unusual feature of the Jessie Port horse's head, in the Pictish context, is its being cut on flat bedrock, although there is a distinguished parallel for carving on bedrock, in the boar symbol on the hill at Dunadd, Argyll, alongside ritual footprints.¹²

The location of the Jessie Port carving worried Robert Gourlay, since he supposed waves and sand-blow would have long ago eroded an ancient carving. The flat surface on which the horse's head is cut can be covered by tossed-up sea weed, but itself appears to stand clear of the main force of the high tide. A case might be made for changes having occurred in the shore line over 1400 years, and that the carving might originally have been farther back from the sea, to explain its good preservation.

In design and artistry the Jessie Port horse's head stands up well to critical scrutiny. However, as indicated above, in a number of respects it fails to correspond to the extant examples of the Pictish beast-head symbol.

Notes

- 1 Thanks are due for information and practical assistance to Susan and David Findlay (Fearn), John Foster (Fearn), Dolly Macdonald (Hilton), William MacRae (Portmahomack), Uisdean Ross (Hilton), and Jon Trefler (Highland Archaeology Unit).
- 2 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 75.
- 3 Nos 3 & 5, Allen & Anderson 1903, pt 3, 118–24.
- 4 Allen & Anderson 1903, pt 3, 170 and fig 182.
- 5 Allen & Anderson 1903, pt 3, 373 and fig 389.
- 6 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 225, illus 322.
- 7 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 89, illus 112.
- 8 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 59, illus 69.
- 9 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 36, illus 33.
- 10 Henderson & Henderson 2004, 71, illus 85.
- 11 For example Rhynie no 5, Henderson & Henderson 2004, 63, illus 75.
- 12 Lane & Campbell 2000, 18–22.