

# Pictish Ogam Stones as Representations of Cross-cultural Dialogue

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*The Pictish Ogham stones of eastern Scotland represent an interpretive conundrum. Their inscriptions visually match their Irish counterparts but do not align with traditional conventions of use, and the juxtaposition of foreign script and indigenous symbol suggests an ancient dialogue rooted in the visual register. This paper presents a survey of these stones and situates them in a broader archaeological and historical context. Their role as reflectors of a core-periphery mode of interaction and documents of cultural negotiation is considered, and their position in a changing cultural landscape is evaluated.*

## Introduction

The Picts, as agents of a rich but perennially perplexing and ill-understood symbolic culture, confront linguists and archaeologists with a wealth of conundrums. No objects exemplify these problems more than the so-called Pictish ogam inscriptions. These inscriptions visually match their Irish counterparts but do not align with traditional conventions of use, and the juxtaposition of foreign script and indigenous symbol suggests an ancient dialogue rooted in the visual register. This paper situates the inscriptions in a broader archaeological and historical context. Their role as reflectors of interaction and documents of cultural negotiation is considered, and their position in a changing cultural landscape is evaluated.

## The Picts and their Stones: A Contextual Overview

Any consideration of the Pictish ogam stones must necessarily be situated within their cultural and historical contexts, and a brief overview of Pictish history will be provided here. The Picts inhabited northern and eastern Scotland during the Late Iron Age and Early Medieval periods, and their territorial distribution can be approximated based on the distributions of place name elements, Pictish stones, and Pictish hoards. They likely spoke a Brythonic language, though no clear examples of it survive and it is not known what they called themselves. The Romans referred to them as the *Pictii*, a term first used by Euminius in 297 C.E. to describe the painted or tattooed people known to live in the regions now associated with Pictish territories.<sup>1</sup> Foster noted that the label may have been “a generic term for people living north of the Forth-Clyde isthmus who raided the Roman Empire,” though such potential ambiguity has not prevented some interesting renditions of its referent(s) in academic and popular literatures (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

Details of the emergence of the Pictish confederation – an admittedly problematic term that nonetheless appears to accurately reflect Pictish social organization – remain uncertain. Whatever its origins, the Pictish confederation is generally believed to have encompassed multiple distinct kingdoms.<sup>3</sup> The *Poppleton Manuscript* contains a kinglist and sociopolitical observations that have been used to propose multiple Pictish kingdoms;<sup>4</sup> the Gaelic quatrains in *Lebor Bretnach* as well as assorted Irish legends have also been used in support of this claim.<sup>5</sup> However, the validity of these original sources is nothing if not questionable. What is clear is that the Picts were not politically united despite their shared traditions. The kingdom of Fortriu – located somewhere near Moray and one of the seven described in the aforementioned sources – appears to have dominated for some part of Pictish history, but the duration and scope of its power remain uncertain. There is some evidence of a pan-Pictish royal structure which involved



Figure 1: “A Young Daughter of the Picts,” a painting that is attributed to Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues (c. 1585).

a tripartite system composed of local kings, overkings presiding over some subset of lesser kings, and a king of overkings who held power over them all.<sup>6</sup>

A stone from the Borough of Birsay, Orkney, appears to represent this proposed royal structure (fig. 2). Moffat observes that the stone contains a representation of “a file of three warriors...all of them wear long robes and carry a shield, spear, and sword [sic]. But there are subtle, and crucial, differences between them.”<sup>7</sup> These differences are what some see as evidence of a tiered royal structure, with the most highly ranked king placed in the front of the procession. He has a more elaborate hairstyle and appears to wear a crown, and his robes and shield are more elaborate than those of the others. Moffat points out that the distinctive facial features on each individual suggest that they are portraits, and posits that this likely represents

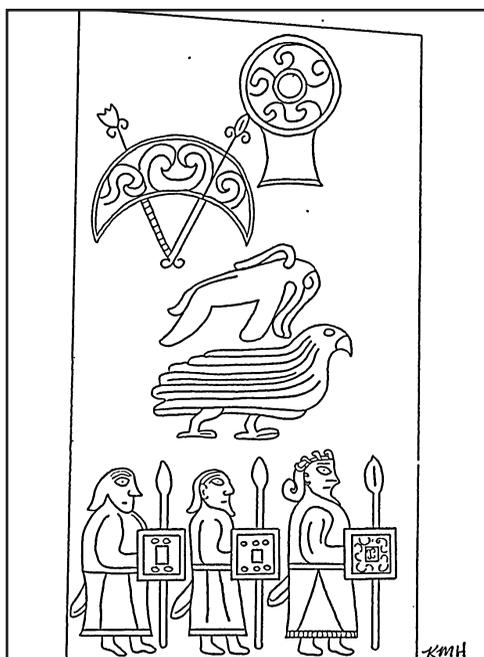


Figure 2: An illustration of the engravings found on the Birsey Stone, including the file of three warriors commonly taken as evidence of a tripartite political structure (drawing by K. Hudson).

political relationships in the northern reaches of Pictland.<sup>8</sup>

Archaeologically, it appears Pictish populations were organized into relatively small settlements that exploited a variety of floral and faunal domesticates, though some lived in crannogs built on the lochs, and reconstructions of these dwellings indicate a considerable amount of architectural and social complexity. Historical documents and surviving oral histories suggest that Pictish communities were involved with raiding and engaged in frequent military skirmishes; these sources also suggest that they were accomplished seafarers and warriors, skills which likely contributed to their repeated success against Roman forces and caused the fourth century C.E. Roman chronicler Ammianus Marcellinus to comment on their roving and devastating actions.<sup>9</sup>

Technologically, Pictish capabilities were similar to those of populations living elsewhere in northern Europe. Extensive metallurgy is attested by both utilitarian and non-utilitarian items. In particular, their silverwork – which was often created from recycled Roman materials<sup>10</sup> – is renowned for its intricacy and beauty, and the pieces they produced included heavy chains and intricate items adorned with the same symbols that occur on the carved stones. Hoards such as those uncovered at Norrie’s Law<sup>11</sup> and St Ninian’s Isle<sup>12</sup> included brooches, hand-pins, earrings, pendants, arm-bands, decorated bowls, and engraved spoons. The Picts were also renowned for their intricately carved symbol stones, and it is to these materials that we will now turn our attention.

### The Pictish Ogam Inscriptions

The ogam characters were clearly a cultural borrowing of some sort. They originated in early Medieval Ireland, and were used to record an archaic form of Old Irish from as early as the fourth century C.E. Even

the numerous inscriptions found in Wales record Irish, often in combination with Brythonic Latin inscriptions. Only in Pictland were ogam characters deployed in inscriptions not written in Old Irish. What language, if any, was recorded in these inscriptions is a longstanding matter of controversy. An older view – that they recorded a pre-Celtic, pre-Indo-European language labeled “Pictish” – has now been definitively set aside,<sup>13</sup> and it seems very likely that the Pictish ogam inscriptions do not encode any language. They are thus not true writing, in the narrow sense, since the characters do not consistently stand for linguistic units, and often seem to be simple gibberish. On the other hand, they often contain quite language-like sequences of consonants and vowels, and even some forms which contain provisionally identifiable (Irish) words, and proper names. For example, it is hard not to identify the sequence MAQQ with the Old Irish word for ‘son’ (macc), which frequently occurs in Pictish ogam inscriptions.

We may take the inscription found on the Lunnasting stone in Shetland as representative of this combination of traits (fig. 3). The stone was found in 1876 by Rev. J. C. Roger at a location “some miles from any known ruin.”<sup>14</sup> Forsyth notes that the remains of a possible monastery have been located at Chapel Knowe, Lunna, but the connection between this site and the Lunnasting stone are indirect at best.<sup>15</sup> The monument itself is made of sandstone. It is 1120 mm long, 200 – 330 mm wide, and 40 mm thick; these dimensions would have allowed it to be stood upright or laid flat on top of another surface.<sup>16</sup> A single cruciform shape, potentially Pictish in origin, occurs on the left-hand side. The higher degree of wear on this marking suggests that it may predate the accompanying ogam inscription, though the dating of incised stones is necessarily problematic and thus it is difficult to determine the accuracy of such a proposed ordering.

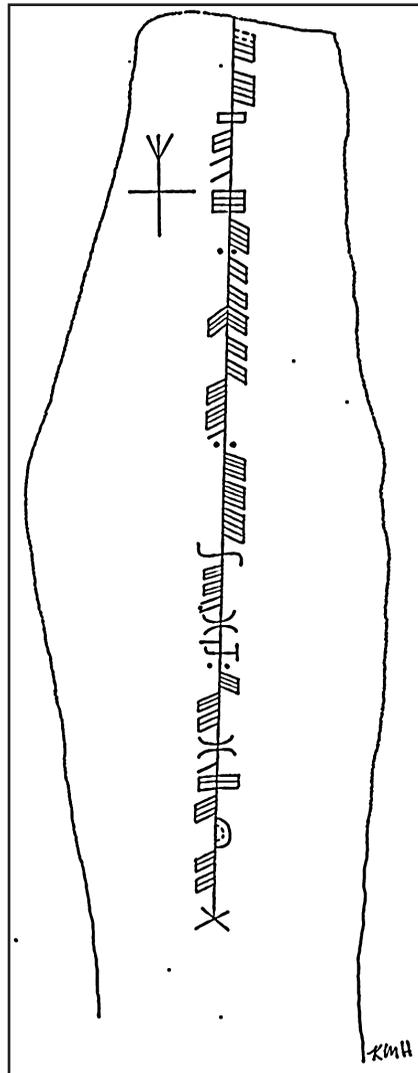


Figure 3: An illustration of the engravings found on the Lunnasting Stone, including the ogam inscription and the accompanying cross motif (drawing by K. Hudson).

A transcription of the Lunnasting ogam text is provided below. It was positioned in the center of the stone’s broad face and positioned about a third of the way up the surface.<sup>17</sup> The lettering is said to have a calligraphic quality,<sup>18</sup> though this has not aided in its interpretation. It is the longest single (i.e. fully articulated) ogam inscription in Scotland with 38 characters.<sup>19</sup>

ETTECUHETTS: AHEHHTTANN:  
HCCVVEVV: NEHHTONN

The strokes are clearly bound, and word boundaries are indicated by pairs of dots. The occurrence of four words is unquestioned, but their meaning – particularly when considered in combination with each other – remains unclear. The first two words have eleven letters each while the last two words have eight each, but this symmetry could be the result of coincidence and should not be assumed to have a talismanic function.<sup>20</sup>

The final word in the inscription, NEHHTONN, is generally thought to be a common Pictish name.<sup>21</sup> The –TANN ending of the second word suggests that it might also represent a personal name of some sort and, if this proposed interpretation is correct, the inscription would have an X – NAME – X – NAME structure analogous to that found on the Bressay stone.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore possible that the first word represents a label that was applied to the stone itself while the third indicates a familial or social relationship,<sup>23</sup> though these proposed categories of significance represent a best guess based on the presence of –TANN in the second word and the composition of other Scottish ogam inscriptions rather than an interpretation based on an understanding of the words themselves. Francis Diack proposed that the last two words mean “vassal of Nehtonn,”<sup>24</sup> but the overall meaning of the text remains determinedly unclear.

The provisional conclusion which we reach is that, while the Pictish ogam inscriptions are not true writing, they represent a stage in the development toward literacy; the people who deployed them did not fully control them as an alphabetic system, but were aware to some degree of their sound values, or at least of their conventional sequencing. The occurrence of ogam inscriptions on Pictish stones demonstrates that the idea of

ogam writing, the shapes of the characters, and indeed perhaps even some specific sequences of characters, were taken over<sup>25</sup> by the Picts, but that the borrowing stopped short of the general concept of their ability to represent linguistically meaningful sounds. We propose that they represent a preliminary step toward literacy, of a particular sort.<sup>26</sup> They are also an instance of the phenomenon of partial transfer of cultural practices at a distance, in which the borrowing – in this case, of a system of symbolic representation – is a partial one, attenuated, filtered and reinvented in consequence of the geographical and cultural remoteness of the borrowing culture from the source of the borrowed material.<sup>27</sup> There are, we believe, other instances of such ‘imperfect’ borrowing at a distance. The Old Irish ogam letters themselves may in fact be another such instance, though of a quite different source; in this case, the idea of using symbols to stand for language was borrowed from a remote source, but the symbol shapes themselves came from an adapted indigenous symbol system which was superimposed on that concept.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Pictish Ogams and the Question of Writing*

The focus of previous work on Pictish ogams has been primarily restricted to the question of whether or not they constituted ‘writing;’ we are persuaded by arguments from specialists that they do not). They may not even have been deployed as a symbolic system in the more general sense, in which the characters have a fixed, conventional interpretation, or a grammar which constrains their patterning. We also believe, though, that the attention to this narrow question has eclipsed some other interesting questions that might be posed about them. Supposing that they are not writing in the narrow sense, as seems likely, nor even a *system* of symbols, we may still wonder what they may have meant to those who used them. Furthermore, we believe,

it may be possible to make some progress toward answering that question by close consideration of the fact and context of their deployment.

One striking feature of the Pictish ogam inscriptions is the fact that a large portion of them occur on stones which also contain inscriptions drawn from the inventory of Pictish pictorial symbols. An outstanding example can be found on the Logie Elphinstone 2, which contains both Pictish and ogam compositions. The spatial association of these texts suggests a related semantic connection, and consideration of the composition of the ogam inscription indicates that its purpose was not likely to be literary in the traditional manner.

The Logie Elphinstone 2 (fig. 4), sometimes referred to as Logie 2, is a Class I symbol stone located in Aberdeenshire. More specifically, it is a garden ornament for the Logie Elphinstone House, and this function may have protected the stone from the damaging fate that befell many of its contemporaries.<sup>29</sup> The twelfth volume of *The New Statistical Account of Scotland* references Class I stones located near each other on the Moor of Carden,<sup>30</sup> and Forsyth expanded on this history by noting that they were built into one of the plantation's enclosing walls around 1821 before being erected in the garden where they can be found today.<sup>31</sup> One of the original four was broken while being used as a hearthstone and, of the remaining three, the one possessing the ogam inscription is the tallest.<sup>32</sup> Some have speculated that they may have originally been part of a standing circle,<sup>33</sup> though there is no evidence for this other than the Stuart's description of their original position.

The lower Garioch region where Logie 2 is located contains the greatest concentration of Pictish symbol stones in Scotland.<sup>34</sup> The stone itself is blue granite that was possibly water worn prior to its carving and

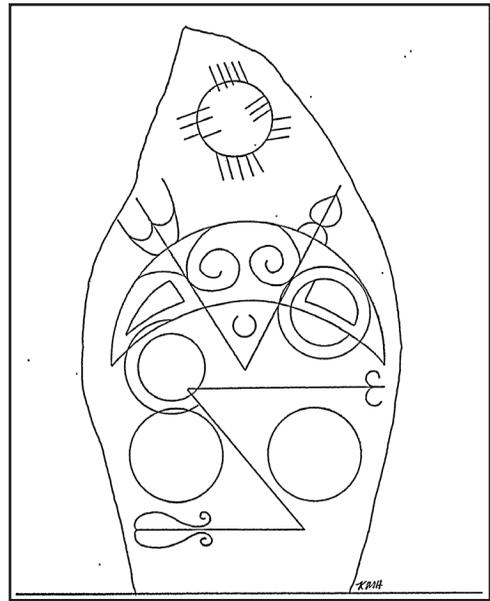


Figure 4: An illustration of the Logie 2 stone, including the ogam inscription and the accompanying Pictish motifs (drawing by K. Hudson).

stands 1.37 m tall.<sup>35</sup> It contains two clear Pictish symbols – the crescent with V-rod and the double disk with Z-rod – that are positioned on the lower section of the stone. The remains of an additional double disk motif are faintly visible under the two elements described above, and it is possible they represent an earlier engraving event. Forsyth posits that this additional symbol represents an unfinished monument that was reused; the possible use of paint as a means of covering the evidence of this earlier function is proposed but unsubstantiated.<sup>36</sup>

The ogam inscription on Logie 2 is positioned above the carved Pictish symbols and in the center of the upper section of the inscribed face. Although it seems probable that the ogam inscription relates to the symbols, either contemporaneously or as a subsequent addition intended to amend their meaning, it is impossible to reconstruct the carving sequence. Forsyth notes that the lines used to carve the

Pictish symbols are broader, deeper, and smoother than those used to form the ogam inscription;<sup>37</sup> it is possible that this indicates separate carving events, though the tapering of the stone's upper portion could also have provided spatial constraints contributing to these differences. The inscription contains five groups of ogam characters arranged around a circular bar. The likely reading order is clockwise, but there is no clear indication of where the reading should begin.<sup>38</sup>

The reading proposed by Forsyth is QFTQU.<sup>39</sup> Her interpretation begins at the so-called “ten-o'clock gap” and then proceeds clockwise; the number of strokes found in each sequential letter is five, three, three, five, and three.<sup>40</sup> This makes it the shortest complete ogam monument in Scotland and it is possible, based on other short ogam texts in the region, that QFTQU represents some sort of personal name or title.<sup>41</sup> However, Forsyth is reluctant to force a name from this odd combination of letter and neglects to offer a translation. Padel offers several contradictory interpretations, but the most plausible of these is QADALT.<sup>42</sup> However, he proposes no significance for this word, and its fit with the number of letters that seem to occur at first glance is not clearly explained.

The lack of a plausible translation for the Logie 2 text is explainable if the ogam inscription is assumed to represent a Pictish appropriation of and engagement with the Irish literary tradition. The assumption that form must be linked with a particular linguistic or semantic core is inherently problematic, as studies of Mesopotamian cuneiform and Mayan hieroglyphs have shown. The literary biases of contemporary Western scholarship predispose researchers to the identification of writing, particularly when symbolic elements are drawn from a known script, but in regions of cultural contact and transition such interpretations

must be based on more than surface similarities.

The Pictish pictorial symbols have themselves recently been claimed to be an actual writing system.<sup>43</sup> The last of these reaches that conclusion on the basis of computational methods which have been widely and rather uncritically reported in the popular scientific press<sup>44</sup> which are sharply criticized by some linguists.<sup>45</sup> We take their claimed status as writing, in the narrower sense, as, at least, unestablished. That they are a symbolic system, however, is clear, in view of their limited inventory, their high degree of conventionalization, and the fact that they seem to exhibit a ‘grammar,’ which constrains their co-occurrence and results in recurrent patterning. This much can be established, even without an understanding of the signata of the individual symbols.

But why should these indigenous symbols have been deployed with such frequency on the same objects as alien ogam characters? We believe that the juxtaposition of the two can be viewed as significant in itself as an expression of cross-cultural dialogue, and a negotiation of cultural boundaries between the two cultures in contact. We believe, in fact, that this sort of dialogue is a very usual response to cultural engagement, and one that appears in Pictland in sufficiently diverse forms as to enable a typology of the phenomenon.

The dialogic nature of such artifacts is particularly clear in those cases where the symbolic treatment of the stone was effected in multiple episodes and by different groups. Such cases include stones originally assigned significance by one cultural group, for example, those erected or decorated with the emblems of that cultural tradition but then deliberately repurposed by another group. Examples would be:

- standing stones erected by earlier groups, but subsequently decorated with inscriptions or ornamentation by later groups,
- cross stones raised by Irish missionaries but defaced by Pictish symbols,
- the deliberate effacement or damaging of stones decorated with symbols belonging to one cultural tradition by bearers of another, and
- Pictish symbol stones purposefully incorporated into the construction of churches.

Examples of this final category include the stone infixed into the wall of the Bourtie parish church and those used to make a cross in the wall of the church in Fyvie.

We have previously examined one such artifact, the Tarbat stone, on which a Latin inscription has been superimposed on a Pictish symbol stone, apparently effaced by partial removal of the latter.<sup>46</sup> In all of these cases, a later cultural group has assigned value to artifacts precisely because of the significance with which an earlier group has endowed them, through symbolic treatment, even though they are unable to ‘read’ the earlier symbols, and have attempted to appropriate those significant objects by imposing their own symbology. These objects are thus to be read as dialogues between competing symbolic systems.

#### Pictish Ogams as Indicators of Cultural Negotiation

When considered within an anthropological framework, the Logie 2 stone and other Pictish ogams can be viewed as documents of cultural negotiation that reflect the development of – and resistance to – an emergent core-periphery mode of interaction. World systems theory is the most widely used framework for analyzing

inter-regional interaction, but it does not allow for the kind of selective and agentive behaviors suggested in the Pictish ogam stones. Many of its key features – including the beliefs that cores dominate peripheries through asymmetrical exchange networks and that peripheries are dependent on cores for cultural inspiration and innovation – are not conducive to analyses in which core features are localized and deployed selectively in ways that serve peripheral purposes.

The Pictish ogams provide clear evidence of ancient agency and intentionality. Their juxtaposition of traditional symbols and ogam-based inscriptions reveals that the Picts were regular participants in the broader cultural landscape of the British Isles and active negotiators of their cultural identity. The majority of Pictish stones are Class I and contain only traditional motifs that lack any evidence of external influence. These stones are clear evidence of the development of a distinct Pictish identity, but the incorporation of ogam-based inscriptions into the overall symbolic corpus of a stone reveals that this identity was actively considered and negotiated rather than received through the kinds of biased channels proposed by core-periphery frameworks.

The creation of ogam-based inscriptions rather than the simple borrowing of linguistically decipherable or “correct” ogam implies engagement with the concepts implicit in the Irish use of the ogam, namely the ability to abstractly encode information in a non-representative manner and assign it some kind of social significance. The distribution of the Pictish stones marks an arguably bounded space in which Pictish identity was developed and nurtured, but it did not represent an impenetrable barrier despite the ferocity with which they are said to have defended their lands. Rather, the ogam-based inscriptions reveal that those who inhabited

Pictland were both engaged with outside traditions – a necessary prerequisite for gaining any knowledge of the ogam system and its use – and selectively involved with the borrowing and subsequent nativization or incorporation of outside ideas into the Pictish context.

The ogam script seems to have been borrowed as an idea or suite of ideas rather than as a complete system, and the decipherment difficulties posed by these stones suggest that the ideas it represented were manipulated and explored by Pictish individuals. In essence, the presence of such seemingly nonsensical ogam-based inscriptions on Pictish stones adorned with otherwise normal symbolic elements suggests that these inscriptions were incorporated into the symbolic corpus, perhaps as whole segments adopted to mean something specific – such as the oft cited occurrence of phrases such as “son of” – or as a set of independent elements that were recombined according to some unknown guiding principle. In fact, it is possible such inscriptions were not intended to be writing at all and that the contemporary insistence that they are reflect the biases inherent in modern literate culture and views of what makes an ancient society complex.

A dialogic interpretation may be profitably applied even in those cases where the two opposing symbol sets on the stone may have been produced concurrently by members of a single group. In such cases, the symbolic polyvocality can be viewed as reflective of an internal dialogue that negotiated relationships and boundaries between indigenous and extraneous systems of symbols and their cultural implications. Examples of this process may include stones on which indigenous Pictish symbols co-occur with Irish ogam characters as well as stones on which traditional symbols share space with Latin inscriptions. Note that we assume that the ogam inscriptions and the Pictish symbols on the ogam symbol

stones were produced at the same time, and possibly by the same authors, though the definitive establishment of this can only be confirmed by application of new methodologies to the physical examination of the artifacts. We know, at least, that the ogams were not written by Irish speakers, since if that were the case, we would expect them to be written in Irish, as are, for example, the ogam stones of Wales.

### Concluding Remarks

The Pictish ogam inscriptions contain a juxtaposition of foreign script and indigenous symbol that suggests an ancient dialogue rooted in the visual register. The local appropriation of a foreign writing system and the ideas underlying its utilization reflect processes of interaction and cultural negotiation that originated in a shifting cultural landscape; perhaps more significantly, they reveal that the Picts were active agents rather than passive recipients of the sociocultural and political changes taking place at the time these stones were carved. It is our hope that the arguments presented here have returned some of this agency to its ancient possessors and demonstrated that the Picts were active participants in their cultural landscape. The Pictish stones represent instances of ancient dialogue and innovation, and a better understand of them can reveal the dynamic environment within which Pictish culture was created and shaped.

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Endnotes:

- 1 Smyth 2003.
- 2 Foster 1996:11.
- 3 See Broun 1998, 2005; Forsyth 2000; Foster 1996.
- 4 Skene 1867; Woolf 2007.
- 5 Van Hamel 1932; Woolf 2007.
- 6 Sadler 1998:17.
- 7 Moffat 2009:292.
- 8 Moffat 2009:292-293.
- 9 Ammianus Marcellinus 1986.
- 10 Wagner 2002:44.
- 11 For a discussion of Norrie's Law hoard, see Laing 1994.
- 12 For a discussion of the St Ninian's Isle hoard, see Barrowman 2011 and O'Dell 1960.
- 13 Forsyth 1997.
- 14 Brash 1879:365.
- 15 Forsyth 1996:402.
- 16 Forsyth 1996:402-403.
- 17 Forsyth 1996:403.
- 18 Forsyth 1996:403.
- 19 Forsyth 1996:404.
- 20 Forsyth 1996:413.
- 21 For a discussion of this interpretation, see Forsyth 1996:413.
- 22 Forsyth 1996:413.
- 23 Forsyth 1996:413.
- 24 Diack 1925.
- 25 Contained within the Ogam inscriptions are some sequences which seem to represent personal names (Forsyth).
- 26 The distinction between non-writing and writing is not a binary one, and the transition between the two of them is not abrupt, but gradual, with distinct internal stages. The fine structure of this process is the subject of work in progress by one of the authors (Hudson).
- 27 This phenomenon, too, occurs in variant forms across cultures. For example, the Rongo Rongo inscriptions of Easter Island have been similarly interpreted by some as an imitation of European writing, involving an even smaller degree of understanding of the functioning of the borrowed system; while the users of Pictish ogams understood the shapes of the individual symbols, and, apparently, even their sound values, in the case of the Rongo Rongo 'script' it may be that only the idea of linearly sequenced symbols was transferred.
- 28 McManus 1988, 1991
- 29 Forsyth 1996:385.
- 30 The New Statistical Account of Scotland 1845.
- 31 Forsyth 1996:385.
- 32 Forsyth 1996:385.
- 33 For a discussion of this possible interpretation, see Forsyth 1996.
- 34 Forsyth 1996:386.
- 35 Forsyth 1996:390.
- 36 Forsyth 1996:391.
- 37 Forsyth 1996:391.

- 38 A discussion of the issues relating to reading order can be found in Forsyth 1996 and Padel 1972.
- 39 Forsyth 1996.
- 40 Forsyth 1996:393.
- 41 Forsyth 1996:398.
- 42 Padel 1972.
- 43 Forsyth 1995; Lee et al. 2010.
- 44 Ravillous 2010; Viega 2010.
- 45 Liberman 2010; Sproat 2010.
- 46 Hudson and Harbert 2013.

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