THE GRAMMAR OF THE PICTISH SYMBOL STONES

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The Picts inhabited most of Scotland in the first millennium of the Common Era. While we know from such evidence as place names (Nicolaisen 1972, 1996) that they spoke a Brythonic Celtic language, aside from these place names, the king lists (see Cummins 1995), and a handful of ogham inscriptions that have so-far eluded decoding (but see Cummins 1999:60-68), nothing else is known of their language (compare Forsyth 1996, 1997a).

1. THE PICTISH SYMBOL STONES. The most extensive and most identifiably Pictish artifacts that these people left behind are the symbols that they carved on a number of stones and other articles. These display a remarkable degree of consistency and are reproduced in typical forms in table 1 (from the compilation of Sutherland 1997, who draws her figures from Allen and Anderson 1903).
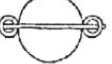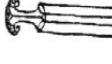
Where the interests of linguistics enter the picture is in the enigmatic combinations of these symbols throughout Pictland. Usually in pairs, one over another, these combinations strongly suggest the communication of some form of information adhering to a set of rules. As Thomas points out:

> Statements containing two symbols, or Pairs, do not appear to conform to any random distribution (this could almost certainly be demonstrated mathematically by a simple matrix analysis) and it may be assumed that selective rules are at work. There is a noticeable emphasis on the use of Object, rather than Animal, symbols. Repetition of complete pairs exists, and among the actual symbols used, both Animal and Object, certain symbols occur disproportionately more often than others. (Thomas 1963:37)

Such observations indicate to the linguist that some form of rule-based grammar is involved; and one mathematical matrix has been worked out by Jackson (1984), although with an interpretation that is not widely accepted (Forsyth 1997b:85). Of course, before we attempt to ascertain what might have meant, we must first determine the level of grammar on which this information was being conveyed.

1.1 THE SEMANTIC LEVEL. The first (and perhaps the most obvious) level suggested for the grammar of the Pictish symbol stones is the semantic, or more precisely the

lexico-semantic. In this approach, each symbol relates to some precise designation that maintains a particular meaning.

Table 1: Pictish symbols				

Thomas (1963) interprets the symbols as funerary. Since there are not enough such symbols to represent individuals or indeed individual names, he suggests that they "must perforce do this in terms of . . . status and . . . group-affiliation" (Thomas 1963:87). Moreover, he posits quasi-grammatical rules to account for their distribution, considering them to be personal nouns and adjectives.

Henderson (1971), while accepting the semantic and even the grammatical basis

for the symbols, suggests that they may have referred rather to the ownership of land. Along somewhat similar lines, Jackson (1984) expands upon the grammatical basis and presents an impressive hypothesis that the paired symbols represent marriages within the Pictish matrilineal system. Unfortunately, the hypothesis suffers from some rather serious problems (Driscoll 1986).

More recently, Samson (1992) proffers the hypothesis that the symbols alone reveal nothing – only the symbols in combination have significance. Each combination supposedly refers to an individual memorialized on the stones. Indeed, such pairing of thematic elements does reflect the construction of names used in contemporary Irish and Anglo-Saxon, and a statistical analysis of such elements appears to support the hypothesis. The drawback to this approach, however, lies in the fact that these symbols do occasionally occur singly; nor are they restricted to funerary contexts, but are even found "on a number of portable objects, including a silver pin and silver plaques from Norrie's Law, Fife, and the terminal of the silver chain from Whitecleuch, Lanarkshire" (Ritchie and Ritchie 1981:164; see also 172-74).

1.2 THE ORTHOGRAPHIC LEVEL. One significant breakthrough in Samson's argument is that it takes the debate off of the semantic level *per se* and onto a morphological one. As noted by Forsyth, "for the first time . . . the symbols represented **language** rather than **ideas**" (1997b:87). This suggests to her that the symbols might reside on a level of writing – an orthographic level.

In examining how such a system might work, however, Forsyth has to acknowledge serious problems for each type of known orthographic system. First of all, a logographic system would not work because there are simply not enough symbols. While the number of symbols would certainly support a syllabary, Pictish words and names were not restricted to two syllables each. Likewise, although the number of symbols could support an alphabet, the "brevity of the extant texts . . . all but precludes an alphabetic interpretation for Pictish symbols (unless one is prepared to accept the unlikely scenario that the symbol statements represent pairs of initials)" (Forsyth 1997b:93).

2. AN APPEAL TO CONTEXT. The greatest hindrance to a linguistic interpretation of the symbol stones has been a lack of appropriate context. Harkening back to linguistics in the early 20th century, we recall that in order for communication to be comprehended and analyzed effectively, we first need to know the "context of situation." As noted by Firth,

> The basic assumption of the theory of analysis by levels is that any text can be regarded as a constituent of a *context of situation* or of a series of such contexts, and thus attested in experience, since the categories of the abstract context of situation will comprise both

verbal and non-verbal constituents and, in renewal of connection,
should be related to an observable and justifiable grouped set of
events in the run of experience. (Firth 1968:175)

Indeed, there has been some recent evidence that may shed light upon the intended
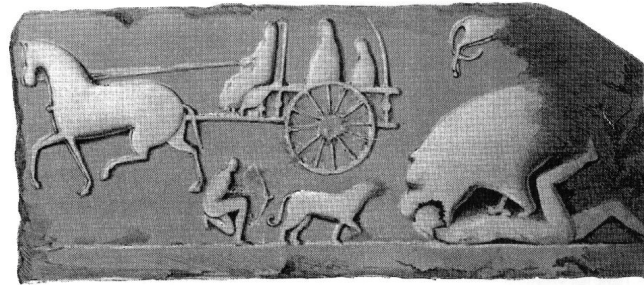
context of situation for these symbols and hence upon the appropriate level of
grammar for analysis.

2.1 THE CULT OF THE ARCHER GUARDIAN. While a full explanation of the context for
the Cult of the Archer Guardian is not possible in this forum, a brief summary of
some of the evidence may suffice. In a recumbent stone known as Meigle 10
(following the enumeration of Allen and Anderson 1903), we find a situation
depicted by Chalmers (1848) as in figure 1 (from Ritchie 1997:121).

Figure 1: Meigle 10

As explained with detailed justification elsewhere (see Griffen 2000), the figures
being transported in the formal processional vehicle – a *carpentum* (see Laing and
Laing 1984:277-78) – are souls undergoing the translation to the otherworld
according to widely held beliefs in the Pagan Celtic religion (compare, for example,
Green 1986:121-37). The scene in the lower right shows the alternative fate of the
soul – its capture by what we may term the Decapitating Beast through the removal
of the person's head. In the Celtic tradition, the head is the home of the soul, and both
the role of the head and its decapitation are also well attested in the Celtic tradition
(Ross 1996:94-95). In between these two scenes, we see the Archer Guardian, who
protects the otherworld and those being translated from the ravages of the
Decapitating Beast.

In the Christianization of Pictland, the Archer Guardian was taken over as the one
who guards heaven for the elect, at least according to the doctrine of predestination,
which was in fact prevalent in Britain at the time (see Hardinge 1972:61). We find
rather clear evidence of this syncretism in the Ruthwell Cross in figure 2 (detail from
Meyvaert 1992:figure 4), in which the Archer Guardian is shown in the lower panel
of the cross metaphorically between heaven and hell. The Celtic sacred eagle,
appropriately enough, is in the upper panel, for its "vast wing-span and powerful,

high flight epitomize the huge span of the sky" (Green 1986:188).

2.2 THE V-ROD AND THE Z-ROD. When we examine the symbols in table 1, we see that there are two types that stand out – those with the so-called V-rod and Z-rod (reproduced at the beginning of the table for ease of reference). The V-rod is quite clearly an arrow that has been bent to an angle of about 90° and placed over a crescent. The crescent is widely regarded as a symbol of death (compare Sutherland 1994:103-107), and the arrow is bent in precisely the manner that one would bend a sword or other such votive offering before depositing it – a ritual "killing" of the object (compare Green 1995:470-71, Maier 1997:241). This very widespread combination – the only one with a V-rod – is thus quite consistent with the cult of the Archer Guardian and probably represents a symbolic invocation of the Archer perhaps upon the death of an individual.
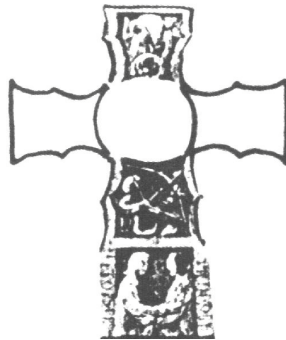
Figure 2: The Ruthwell cross

The Z-rod occurs superimposed upon only three symbols (the second through the fourth symbols, respectively, in table 1): The "notched rectangle" is widely regarded as a chariot, and as such it is completely consistent with the carpentum in which the soul is translated to the otherworld or to heaven (compare Thomas 1963:52-53); the snake is a particularly holy creature in the Pagan Celtic religion because it travels between this world and the otherworld (in its underworld aspect – Sutherland 1994:89-90); and the double-disk symbol is a double-sun representation that in its broadest interpretation can certainly represent this world and the otherworld and the path in between (compare Sutherland 1994:107-108).

When we examine the Z-rod in these contexts, we find that they are all very much consistent with the cult of the Archer Guardian. The rod itself is an arrow (or spear) bent twice so as to define the boundary between this world and the otherworld – the boundary traversed by the carpentum and the snake, the boundary on the path between the two suns. Moreover, the bends allow it to take up its flight in the same

direction on this side as it began on the other side. It can thus be seen as representing the frontier defended by the Archer Guardian.

2.3 OTHER SYMBOLS. Once we establish the religious nature of these four symbols, other Pictish symbols fall into place with known Celtic religious beliefs. For example, the eagle (or any bird) was regarded as holy because it spoke a language of the otherworld and could also fly to and from the otherworld. Moreover, as noted above, the eagle's vast wing-span represented the sky itself. Other symbols will be treated further below in section 3.2.

Thus, we can readily surmise that the context of these symbols is intended to be religious. Moreover, it is consistent with the general religious beliefs for which we have evidence from throughout the Celtic world (as we would expect – compare Laing and Laing 1993:21). With the context of situation thus defined, we can now turn our attention to the issue of the grammar of the symbols.

3. THE GRAMMAR OF THE SYMBOLS. As noted above, the symbols are usually written together in pairs, although single symbols and three or even four symbols may also be found (beyond this, we are probably working with groups of two or three). Accordingly, the level of grammar should allow for one unit in isolation, for two units as the preferred configuration, and for an extension to three or four units. Furthermore, where the V-rod is used, the unit must be consistent with the invocation of the Archer Guardian (or of God in the syncretic period) on behalf of a deceased – or in some other dedicatory context, as this interpretation need not be restricted to funerary situations (no more than a cross on a necklace must correspond to one over a grave).

3.1 THE CLAUSE AS ASYMBOLIC UNIT. Quite important to the level of grammar, the unit must also be appropriate to a religious context; and where the V-rod is used, it must be appropriate to what one may be expected to say in an invocation to the Archer Guardian, especially (though not necessarily) where a death has occurred. The only Pagan Celtic invocation extant occurs at the beginning of the Tablet of Chamalières, as follows:

> I beseech the very divine, the divine Maponos Avernatis by means of
> the magic tablet: quicken(?) us, i.e. those (named below) [sic] by the
> magic of the underworld spirits(?). (Koch 1995:3)

Of course, in the process of syncretism, Paganism adopted rituals and concepts from Christianity "to supply its own deficiencies" (De Reu 1998:27), especially in matters of liturgy. The closest type of prayer in the Christian tradition to an invocation of the Archer Guardian would be the collect. We find just such a prayer in the introductory collect of the Lorrha (or Stowe) Missal:

O God, Who to Blessed Peter Thine Apostle didst bestow by the keys of the Heavenly Kingdom, the power to bind and loosen souls, and didst give the office of High Priest, receive our prayers of propitiation and his intercession. We ask O Lord for help that we may be freed from the bonds of our sins through our Lord Jesus Christ Who reigneth with Thee and the Holy Spirit, God throughout all ages of ages. (Dowling 1995)

When we reduce the collect to its essential formula, we find that it always expresses the construction:

$$\text{(MAY) GOD [WHO . . .] DO THIS}$$

Thus, we have two clauses, a petitionary clause with an embedded relative clause modifying the subject being invoked at the beginning of the prayer. The relative clause identifies the attributes of God most appropriate to the type of petition. This opening complex sentence may then be followed by further, related petitions, creating in effect a compound complex sentence.

Such a formula is furthermore quite consistent with Pagan thinking, for we are naming God and asking God to fulfill our petition. The Pagans "believed in the gods because of the help they offered: they delivered prosperity, strength, a plentiful harvest, good fishing and victory in battle" (De Reu 1998:13-14). Indeed, the Pagan could make a petition directly to the intended divine being, without the awkward requirement of praying only to God while invoking the intercession of a saint.

What is of greatest importance to the linguist, of course, is the fact that we can identify the context of situation as originally a Pagan prayer invoking the Archer Guardian and making a petition. From the internal linguistic, grammatical perspective, moreover, we can further identify the formula as consisting of clauses in a complex or compound complex sentence. Thus, our level of linguistic analysis for the Pictish symbol stones is the clause structure.

This would seem reasonable, for the clause can stand on its own, providing independent information in the appropriate context – an invocation without petition or a petition without invocation. The usual form for a collect, however, is the main clause with the petition and the relative clause with the attributes – thus accounting for the majority of Pictish representations with two symbols/clauses. Where only two symbols occur, they are probably in the form of a general petition, asking for a blessing or protection in accordance with the first sentence of the Lorrha Missal's collect above.

Moreover, in the collect from the Lorrha Missal, we go beyond the general petition, introducing specific petitions appealing to the attributes described in the relative clause. If the Pictish symbol stones do indeed represent Pagan prayers parallel to such collects, this extension of the petition from general to specific would

account for the additional symbols. In these cases then, we end up with one or more further symbols/clauses.

3.2 INTERPRETING THE SYMBOL STONES. Thus far, we have the religious context of situation, transparent meanings for the symbols directly connected with the Cult of the Archer Guardian, fairly transparent meanings for some of the other symbols, and the level of grammar consisting of clauses used in invocation and petition.

At this point, then, we can suggest meanings for some of the more transparent combinations. Since these combinations appear on stones often with a funerary intent, we can supply a tentative structure, following that of the collect above, such as the following:

MAY THE ARCHER GUARDIAN, WHO . . .,
PROTECT THE DEPARTED UPON THEIR JOURNEY

Thus, the relative clause appropriate for the Z-rod and double-disk may be "who guards the border between this world and the otherworld," that for the arch may be "who guards the entrance to the otherworld," and so forth. Some possible (and highly tentative) interpretations based upon the broader Celtic symbolism are provided in table 2.

Table 2: Possible interpretations of combinations with the crescent and v-rod	
Double-disk and Z-rod	who guards the border between this world and the otherworld
Arch	who guards the entrance to the otherworld
Notched rectangle	who guards the vehicle of translation
Notched rectangle and Z-rod	who guards the vehicle of translation in its journey to the otherworld
Crescent	who watches over the dead / over archers
Pictish Beast	?
Cauldron	who enables resurrection in the otherworld
Snake and Z-rod	who guards the passage to the otherworld

Rectangle	?
Double-disk	who guards the passage between this world and the otherworld
Circle	who ensures life everlasting

Where the crescent and V-rod come second, we would have to assume (following the formula for the collect) that the prayer is being made to the first element. For example, the combination of the eagle with the crescent and Z-rod may be interpreted as an invocation of the eagle, whose wingspan covers the earth and encompasses the Archer Guardian. Of course, some petitions do not involve the Archer Guardian at all.

4. CONCLUSION. Without a context of situation, the identification of the appropriate level of linguistic analysis for the Pictish symbol stones is quite frankly impossible. While previous researchers may have been able to rule out certain grammatical levels, they have had no way of determining the level itself. Indeed, if one had suggested previous to the identification of the Cult of the Archer Guardian that the interpretation be religious and at the clause level, one could have supported that conclusion with no greater facility than any other.

As modern linguists, we tend to take the context of situation for granted, for our areas of inquiry have become rather limited to oral and written communication with precisely known or "neutral" context. It is when we go beyond the elicitation of familiar and comprehended verbal language that we see how important knowing the exact context, the exact intent, the exact style of communication really are.

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