Pictish Social Structure and Symbol-Stones

An anthropological assessment

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If the Picts were matrilineal and polygynous, as has been maintained, then they must have been divided into small groups of matri-clans practising patrilateral cross-cousin marriage based upon avunculocal residence. This logical deduction then suggests that their symbol-stones commemorate political alliances between lineages. Each lineage has one symbol, alliances are only contracted between two lineages at a time, thus there are two and only *two such symbols on the memorial stones. However, marriage alliances employ one additional symbol—the 'mirror'—in order to signify the giving of bridewealth. Occasionally, two or more* pairs *of lineages set up memorials which are normally class* II* *monuments.*

'It is unwise for a scholar to stray too far from fields with which he is familiar, and no problem is at once so seductive and so treacherous as that of the Picts.' This quotation from F. T. Wainwright's introductory chapter to *The Problem of the Picts* should rightly be borne in mind when setting forth yet another theory on the Picts. So far, the scholars in question have been archaeologists, historians and philologists, as in the above-mentioned book. What has a social anthropologist to say in this matter? My plea is that the Picts have a remarkable similarity to a people in China, the Na-khi, who also have matrilinearity and pictographs. This is pure coincidence and no parallels are to be drawn from it but since my interest has been focussed on the question of kinship and symbolism among the Na-khi it seemed possible that a similar examination of the Picts might reveal something that had escaped attention. It so happens that only two things are known to be definitely Pictish: their list of kings and their symbol stones. This is why there is a problem and why it is so treacherous: too many possibilities exist. Although this paper, too, must be speculative since we know so little it is confined to exploring the possible relationship between these two known facts.

The first section is devoted to examining the effects the Picts' kinship system would have on social structure, especially political institutions. The second section deals with the symbol stones, their meaning and significance in Pictish society. It is argued

* Class I have incised symbols only; Class II often have symbols in relief, with a cross; Class III are purely Christian monuments, with no symbols.

that the symbol stones have a political meaning and the bridge to an understanding of them is the kinship system. For this reason we have to examine their kinship in some detail. (See Henderson (1967) which also contains a select bibliography.)

It seems to be widely agreed that the Picts were matrilineal. The evidence rests on literary sources. Bede tells us that they chose a king from the female royal lineage rather than from the male. This is confirmed by the *Pictish Chronicle* which shows that the royal succession was not patrilineal: sons do not succeed fathers. The classical writers, including Julius Caesar, lend support to this idea besides implying that the Picts were polygamous. It is on these two points that we shall endeavour to reconstruct the kinship system. This may seem far-fetched but because kinship does form a system it is possible to discard certain combinations of features as highly unlikely. What will be shown is that there is only one combination that can meet the requirements of the Pictish case.

In considering any type of kinship system there are three key variables: (*a*) the type of descent, (*b*) the type of marriage, (*c*) the mode of residence of the family. All three should be specified if we wish to describe the kinship system fully. It is not the case that kinship is primarily a means of regulating marriage: it is a way of allocating social roles and, first and foremost, it is a social device for recruiting groups for whatever purpose be it political or economic or religious. When members of such a group are related to each other through females only, this method of tracing relationships is known as *matrilineal* descent; when recruitment is through males it is called *patrilineal*. Both systems are unilineal, *i.e.* only one sex is used for tracing descent. If sex is ignored in tracing descent, as in our society, it is named *cognatic*. Over time, the unilineal descent principle produces groups called *lineages* in which all members can trace their descent from a common ancestor or ancestress. Where several lineages regard themselves as having common descent but are unable to demonstrate this they are called *clans*. This term is not the same as the Gaelic *clann* which refers to the cognatic descendants of the founding ancestor.

The unilineal and cognatic kinship systems represent the two major branches of kinship. Of the two main forms of unilinearity, it is assumed that matrilinearity is the earliest for the simple reason that it is impossible to get a direct transition from patrilineal to matrilineal descent whereas the reverse is both logically possible and historically attested. Today, matrilinearity is quite rare possibly because of the tendency of this system to change with increasing prosperity. It was never typical of Indo-European cultures.

The other variables, marriage and residence, are independent of descent although certain combinations are more likely than others. All societies regulate marriage. Where marriage is prohibited within a group it is termed *exogamy* although the size of this group may vary from the elementary family to the whole society. Some societies are divided into two intermarrying halves called *moieties*. Such moieties may comprise groups of lineages called *fratries*. In unilineal societies one can never marry into one's

own lineage and the closest possible arrangement that does not infringe the rule of incest prohibition, forbidding sexual intercourse between kinsmen, is that of cross-cousin marriage. Here the preferred match is either with mother's brother's daughter or with father's sister's daughter, as far as a man is concerned. It should be remembered that marriages are primarily alliances between families for political, economic and other reasons that have little to do with the wishes of the two principals. Where multiple spouses are allowed, the term *polygyny* is applied for several wives and *polyandry* for several husbands. The latter form is extremely rare.

Although kinship allows group formation not all kin groups live together even if they do meet from time to time. It is important to distinguish between *local descent groups* who live with each other and *descent lines* which are merely the theoretical representations of kin relationships. Everyone has kin (dead or alive) but the important ones are generally those with whom one lives. Now residence has little to do with lineages *per se*. A married couple may live with the wife's parents (*uxorilocal*), the husband's parents (*virilocal*), with the husband's mother's brother (*avunculocal*), or with none of them (*neolocal*). The actual choice will depend on a number of factors.

There are three ways in which local descent groups could come about, logically speaking:

(*a*) patrilineal descent and virilocal residence

(*b*) matrilineal descent and avunculocal residence where succession of male authority is from mother's brother to sister's son.

(*c*) matrilineal descent and uxorilocal residence with matrilateral cross-cousin marriage and succession of male authority passing from father-in-law to son-in-law.

Of the other logical possibilities, patrilineal-uxorilocal has not been recorded while matrilineal-virilocal is extremely rare. (See Leach 1961, Ch. III.)

Having spelled out the possibilities of kinship systems, let us return to the Picts and consider their system. It is perfectly feasible that they were indeed matrilineal. If so, this must represent an older tradition than the incoming Celts, since no society has been known to switch from patrilinearity to matrilineal descent, directly. The Picts may well have been non-Indo-European. Bede says that at first they obtained their wives from the Scots and this could be true if they practised lineage exogamy, in which case an interesting situation arises. This will be discussed later.

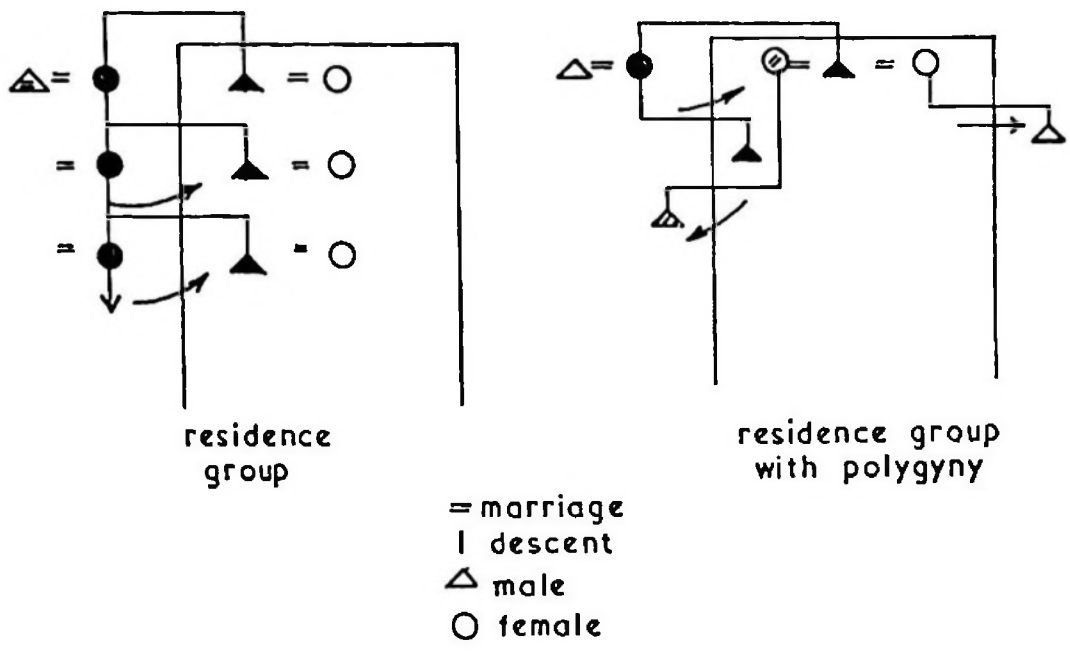
Let us assume our two propositions that the Picts were matrilineal and polygynous. What sort of residence pattern would it take? There are two possibilities with matrilinearity. Uxorilocal residence is the most probable form when the means of gaining subsistence rests primarily upon women's activities, *e.g.* primitive agriculture. It is also likely when women have high status and there is an absence of movable property, cattle or other valuables. However, polygyny is incompatible with uxorilocality. Why is this so and how could it come about?

When property increases or where the men's contribution to the economy becomes

predominant, then virilocal residence is promoted. This is the case in pastoral economies, with the use of plough animals, or where there is an abundance of game. Other factors which encourage virilocality are warfare, slavery and political integration. When there is a concentration of wealth in men's hands there is often a transition from matrilinearity to patrilinearity as well. Polygyny may be regarded as the concentration of women in men's hands also and this is perfectly possible in virilocal communities. However, when uxorilocality is practised the only form of polygyny could be sororal polygyny (the marriage of two sisters to one man). For a matrilineal society this would be a waste of potential man-power and unacceptable. If fertilisation was all that was required then marriage could be dispensed with. However, marriage is basically a means of obtaining alliances between families—it is a social compact first; later, it is the means of creating new families.

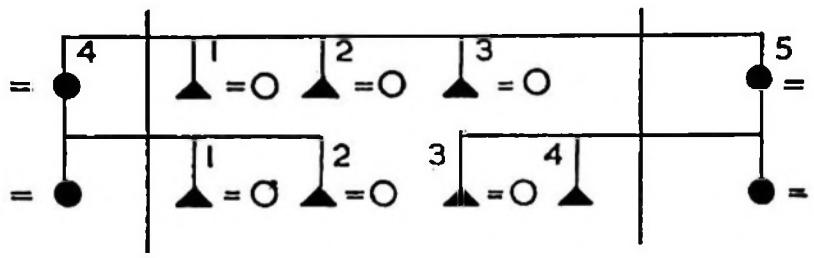
Avunculocal residence only arises as a *replacement* of uxorilocality and it stems from similar causes as does the transition to virilocality. Hence they are alternatives to one another and they may be regarded as being equivalent in all respects save the rule of descent, one being matrilineal, the other patrilineal. In both cases men live with their unilineal male relatives while their wives come from elsewhere and are often separated from their kin. Men can in fact derive every benefit from avunculocal residence that they can from virilocal residence—wealth, political power, military prestige, slaves and polygyny. (See Murdoch 1949 Ch. II and VIII.)

In the Pictish case, taken over the long view, we may postulate that they practised all three modes of residence: uxorilocality in pre-historical times which gave way to avunculocality in historic times with the increasing prosperity of the society to virilocality in the final phase which inevitably led to the abandonment of matrilinearity and the final dissolution of all that was distinctive of Pictish society. Our interest in this societal form of the rake's progress lies in the central phase: avunculocality and polygyny. Let us examine this further.



The classical anthropological example of avunculocality is the Trobriand Island society. This unusual form of residence requires that a boy leave his natal home on or before marriage and take up residence with his mother's brother. Thus instead of going to live with his wife's parents (uxorilocality) which is the usual practice in matrilineal societies, they both take themselves to the husband's mother's brother's home. In this way it is possible for the society to retain its matrilineal lineages, clans and moieties but the families will be avunculocal extended families. Such a local group consists of matrilineally related men with their wives and dependant children but with no adult children.

It will be seen that polygyny makes little difference to the strength of one's own matrilineage since no matter how many wives a man may have his sons must go to his wives' brothers, to other lineages in fact. It follows that not only could there be rivalry between brothers to attract their sisters' sons to come and live with them but that the residence group is inclined to be unstable. The reason why nephews are attracted to come to their uncles' in the first place is because they inherit the lineage property from their mother's brother. One solution to the problem of fraternal rivalry is for the brothers to live together and hold the property in common while ranking the brothers according to age.



Succession, along such lines, would pass from brother to brother before descending to the eldest son of the eldest sister and then repeating the process. The tangled claims to succession may easily be imagined and the feuding this would give rise to. An irritating feature of such a system is that the sisters, on whom the brother relies for his supporter and successor, are living in a different group. There is a way to reduce this uncertainty—to control whom one's sister marries. The best way is to restrict the choice of intermarrying lineages by encouraging cross-cousin marriage. (Fox 1967 Chs. IV & VIII.)

There are three possible variations of marriage system:

(*a*) symmetrical cross-cousin marriage—where two local descent groups exchange women: a man marries his mother's brother's daughter who is also the sister of his own sister's husband.

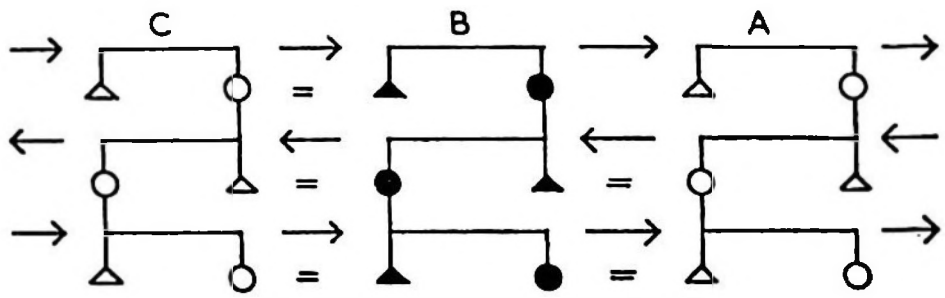
(*b*) patrilateral cross-cousin marriage—where two local descent groups exchange women but the cycle is only completed after one generation: a man marries his father's sister's daughter.

(*c*) matrilateral cross-cousin marriage where exchange between two groups is precluded; a man marries his mother's brother's daughter

The question is which form would an avunculocal residence favour? The first type demands moieties since it operates by a process of sister-exchange. This form is

hard to combine with avunculocality and quickly leads to many complications in any but the simplest society. Although the other two types of marriage system require two groups to exchange their women, there must be at least three intermarrying lineages if the system is to function at all. Either form may be practised with either type of linearity but there will be a difference in the resulting social structure in the two cases.

In the patrilateral case the rule is that ideally a girl should marry into the group her mother's mother married. If A receives a woman from B in one generation then it should give one back in the next generation. It follows that if in the first generation B gives a woman to A, then B males cannot receive women from A and so they must go elsewhere; also A females cannot marry into B. Thus, at least three lineage groups are required for everyone to get married.



In the matrilateral case, while three groups are again the minimum, the exchange of women is asymmetrical. The women can only move one way. If B takes a woman from A, he can *never* give one back. In this case the wife-giving groups are always distinct from the wife-receiving groups. Such a society is made up of a hierarchy where wife-givers are generally superior to wife-receivers and the marriage system keeps it that way. In this way permanent superordinate-subordinate relationships are made and maintained, the groups so formed being matrilocal descent groups. As this is not compatible with polygyny, nor with avunculocality it follows that Pictish society must have opted for patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. This alternative will be examined in more detail.

The rule of exogamy, common to most societies, states that one must give women away to other groups if one wants wives for oneself since incest is not allowed. Underlying this rule there seems to be implicit a further rule: *wife-givers are usually superior to wife-takers.* In other words, the giving away of women places the receivers in a debt relationship. Of the three types of marriage system discussed above, the first—sister-exchange—cancels the debt immediately while the last—matrilateral cross-cousin marriage—never allows the debt to be extinguished and hence wife-givers are always superior even when bridewealth is paid by the receivers as a kind of tribute. The patrilateral case is half-way between these two systems. Here there is a temporary dominant-subordinate relationship that can be reversed or equalised in the next generation.

Why should a society adopt a patrilateral marriage system? One explanation is that the society consists of egalitarian but competitive lineages. No lineage is accepted

as being inherently superior for all time but for various reasons, generally political, it may be advantageous to dominate other lineages or be their clients for a short time. In this way there is no rapid change in relative status between lineages. The reason for practising exogamy is, as in most gift-exchanges, that the women exchanged serve to express, cement, or create alliances. The actual marriages may be only part of a series of ceremonial exchanges between lineages or clans, and as such, are indistinguishable from the political system of the society. It should be noted that the exchanges discussed here depend very much upon the level of social organisation in question. Thus, at the level of clan organisation it may be that direct exchange is being practised, A gives women to B and B reciprocates, while at the local lineage level delayed exchange occurs: A1 gives to B1 but must wait a generation before B1 returns a woman, meanwhile A1 receives wives from B2, B3, etc.

Where a lineage is involved in such wife-exchanges with several groups then there will always be women coming in and one may enjoy superiority over those lineages that have not reciprocated. Simultaneously one will be in debt to other groups. When one wishes to stop being indebted to a particular group one pays them back and the cycle begins all over again. Should one wish to mitigate some of the debt then bridewealth or material goods may be handed over in exchange for the gift of a woman. This does not completely cancel the debt but it reduces one's subordination.

In such a system, polygyny is a viable way of extending one's alliances and ensuring a flow of wives into the group although it does not increase the numbers of the male lineage group itself. In fact, polygyny creates problems for the matrilineage since one may not be able to repay one's debts if there are not enough sisters to go round. It is then likely that bridewealth payments would have to be made in order to compensate for a shortage of women. There are, however, a number of ways round this problem. In the first place, it is not necessary that the women given away are real sisters—they could be classificatory sisters *i.e.* women classified as sisters. There are two sources: (*a*) adoption of girls as sisters *e.g.* orphans or slave (*i.e.* kinless) women to use in exchange, (*b*) foreign women (*i.e.* non-matrilineal women) could be married and their children claimed as siblings to one's sisters' children. The latter device, transparent patrilinearity, would quickly lead to a break-up of the matrilineal principle and the overt adoption of patrilinearity. Such a temptation would apply particularly to dominant or chiefly lineages who wish to retain their numbers and not to be indebted to creditor lineages. It is common when chiefs wish to consolidate their power that they go over to patrilinearity first, while the bulk of the population retain their matrilineal principles. It is then only a question of time before there is a complete transition to patrilinearity. Such changes tend to be unidirectional, from matrilinearity via avunculocal residence to patrilinearity. It is indicative of increasing male control, increasing wealth and prosperity which may eventually result in a cognatic society where control over resources is a more important principle of social organisation than the kinship system.

All this has relevance to Pictish society. It would seem reasonable to argue that in

their hey-day the Picts were avunculocal. What would be the structural consequences of this? The society would consist of several matrilineages, roughly equivalent in status because of the marriage system, though because there were kings there could have been a royal lineage but its status would be that of *primus inter pares*. Succession would be along a line of brothers before descending to the sisters' sons. Problems would arise here in deciding which nephew was to succeed and conflicts are likely to occur, which if not settled by a strict rule might be settled by force. In which case the most powerful lineage claimant may press his claim and this would, in the last analysis, depend upon the number of allies available. This brings us to the central issue in social organisation: the method of group formation.

We have seen that avunculocal residence entails the movement of young adults (who are also the warriors) to their maternal uncles' home. For maximum strength it is desirable that brothers live together and avoid rivalry. The household would thus consist of the brothers, their wives, dependant children, retainers and slaves plus their sisters' sons with their wives and dependants plus their own sisters' sons, wives and dependants. This matrilineal household would, of course, fluctuate in size depending on the age structure of the group. Its corporate nature rests on fraternal loyalty, the hopes of the nephews in the succession and the matrilineal bond. What effectively holds such a group together is wealth or the prestige of the group, each factor being mutually reinforcing. The key factor is wealth: indeed, this is the reason for avunculocality in the first place. The problem is where does the wealth come from? Since the Pictish area is not noted for its abundance of natural resources, whatever wealth there was is likely to have been hotly fought over. The nature of this wealth is most probably the classic trio of gold, women and cattle. The only difficulty is to obtain them and the two standard ways are raiding and trading. The other side to the coin is to keep what one has acquired. In both cases alliances are useful, especially in the avunculocal case where one's precious women and their sons are residing with another group.

Since recruitment of males to the local descent groups takes place when the sisters' sons are deemed to be men and not boys, it is clear that such a transition would be important and might be marked by initiation ceremonies where the boys undergo ordeals (*e.g.* tattooing) to prove their manliness. As the elders of the avunculocal residence would be the lineage heads they would function as the ritual leaders on this and other ritual occasions. It is doubtful if such initiation ceremonies would be on a large scale since the effect would be to create age-sets of youths whose primary loyalty would be to each other instead of their lineage.

Mere residence does not confer loyalty unless it has been life-long. In the present case the newcomers to a group may not even know each other and some means would have to be found for creating bonds. It could be that some form of ancestor worship (unlikely in the matrilineal case), totemic observances or worship of the gods might suffice. Only totemic gatherings are likely to fulfil this requirement since one may assume that the other gods and spirits are common to all the society. Totems can be

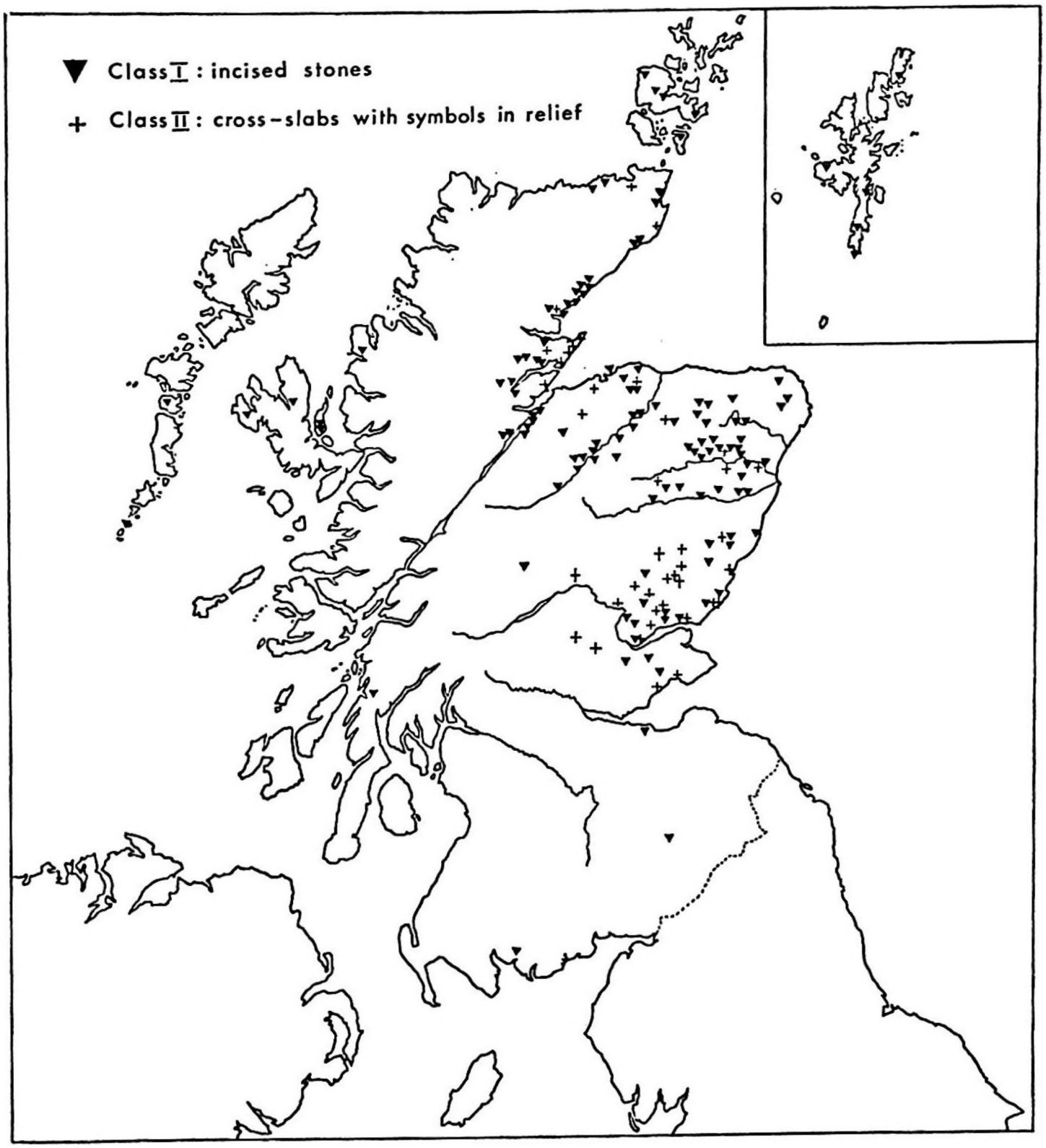


FIG. 1 Distribution map of Pictish symbol stones.

anything one chooses to call a totem, they do not have to exist objectively. Totems act as badges, a differentiating factor between people that serves as a means of identification. It is likely that the matrilineages would have some means of indicating corporate identity either by wearing an emblem, or painting it on their shields, their bodies, or on other objects. The difference between a badge and a totem is a slim one, resting only on the beliefs of the people, *e.g.* the Australian aborigines' *churinga*, an abstract design incised on their boomerangs which sometimes represented the totem of the clan which was believed to be shared by all members—human and totemic alike.

We now come to a consideration of the Pictish symbol stones which, it is suggested, fall into this category of emblems or totems. The symbols mainly occur on prominent standing stones which could be regarded as 'feast-stones', visible records of some feast. What sort of occasion would warrant their erection? What do the symbols mean?

From what we have been saying about the importance of the matrilineage descent groups, it is most likely they who erected them to commemorate themselves. The symbols could represent the local lineages—the three generation avunculocal unit. There are several reasons for putting up such a stone. It could be to commemorate a victory or success although it could serve as a gathering place for such celebrations or for rituals. However, the most probable reason is that these stones commemorate a pact and coalition between lineages—an everlasting witness to their treaty of alliance.

Such suggestions must account for the distribution and types of symbols employed by the Picts. It is assumed that the Pictish symbols do not represent an attempt to use language in which each symbol stands for a word. At this stage, no interpretations are offered for the meaning of individual symbols: they are taken to be merely conventional signs. Further negative assumptions are that the stones have nothing to do with burials or the status of individuals in the society. These points are spelled out to emphasise the collective nature of the symbols and the holistic approach towards them that has been adopted. If these symbols reflect anything, they must represent something that was of vital importance to the society and were not pure decoration. It was in order to gauge the vital areas of Pictish society that so much space was devoted to social organisation. Now we must judge its relevance.

The analysis of the symbols is based upon the collection of information made by Romilly Allen in *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (1903). While care has been taken to check his distributive analysis, no attempt has been made to check all his statements with regard to the originals. Thus errors of analysis may result from over-reliance on the given figures, though this should not affect the total view put forward.

The most significant feature of the Pictish symbol stones is that the symbols occur in pairs and only in pairs. This, given the above analysis, is not really surprising since lineages only exchange women between pairs. We do not find that lineages give women to two different groups simultaneously and on the same occasion. Before continuing, a few objections have to be met.

Firstly, we have to establish that the symbols only occur in pairs. If one looks at

Romilly Allen's summary tables (pp. 79–128) it would appear that symbols can appear once, twice, thrice, *etc.*, up to as many as eight symbols on one stone. In fact, single symbols do not occur on whole monuments although they are still listed when part of a symbol occurs even on a fragment. We need say nothing of the double symbols, neither when they occur once nor when four pairs are grouped around the cross in class II monuments; these are simply multiple pairs. It will be noted that odd numbers of symbols, 5, 7, 9, do not appear, although 3 does. Here we have our first problem.

How can we reconcile the statement that symbols occur in pairs when there are stones with three symbols on them? If we make the reasonable assumption that it is impossible to count symbols on broken, defaced or badly weathered stones as representing the true number of symbols made upon them (there are half a dozen to which this particularly applies here) then it can be stated that *all the recorded examples with three symbols upon them contain one pair plus the so-called 'mirror (and comb)' symbol.* There are no reliable exceptions to this rule. We may discount Romilly Allen's somewhat arbitrary selection of the symbols worth mentioning, not that this affects the argument significantly. In over thirty cases of triple symbols, each contains the mirror and sometimes the comb. The only other occurrence of three symbols is either upon damaged stones or in the case of twice-repeated symbols in a pair. In other words we never get a triplet that does not have the mirror symbol—a surprising feature when one considers the possible permutations of the fifty-odd symbols used. The occurrence of a symbol given twice upon the same stone is explicable as the reunification of a separated lineage, what is termed fusion of segments.

The admission that triplets appear seems contradictory to the statement that symbols only come in pairs. This is not so paradoxical as it may sound. If we find that no other symbol is joined to a pair but one particular symbol then it is obvious that this one symbol must have a common meaning independent of the pair with which it appears. The 'mirror and comb' symbol is just such a one. Its peculiar mode of occurrence has often been noted, *viz.* that it is placed lowest and last of a group of symbols. It is here suggested that this additional symbol was used to denote those alliances in which bridewealth was handed over by the wife-receiving lineage, thus indicating that partial compensation had been made. The symbol is quite reasonable since it is a feminine article and of some worth. It is to be noted that some pairs of symbols occur with a 'mirror' and sometimes without it. Its addition in no way alters the fact that two main symbols are used each time on the monuments. For this reason we can leave this symbol to one side when discussing the other combinations.

There are some eighty different pairs of symbols recorded while the number of repeated pairs is over forty. To illustrate the range of combinations the following table lists the pairs found in class I and class II monuments. The code numbers used are those given by Romilly Allen (p. 57–8). The number of repeats is given before the bracket while the sign * denotes 'mirror'. The arrangement is made in order of

frequency with the commonest symbol given first in each case. This table is purely classificatory. (For illustrations of the symbols see fig. 3, p. 139.)

TABLE I

Class I	Class II
6(8–31)**,5(8–17)*,3(8–5)**,3(8–23), 2(8–1),2(8–4)*,2(8–9)*,2(8–12)*,(8–3), (8–6),(8–7),(8–21),(8–46).	6(8–5)*,4(8–31),2(8–3),(8–6),(8–7),(8–14), (8–21),(8–35),(8–39),(8–46).
3(5–31)*,2(5–41)*,2(5–45)*,(5–4)*,(5–11), (5–38)*,(5–39)*,(5–44)*,(5–46)*. 2(31–12),(31–41).	4(5–31),3(5–39),(5–3)*,(5–4),(5–9),(5–13).
(41–4),(41–6)*,(41–12). 2(3–45),(3–21),(3–40). (4–6)*,(4–14),(4–15). (12–1),(12–6),(12–14)*,(12–17)*,(12–40). (17–1),(17–37),(17–38)*.	(31–3),(31–6),(31–17),(31–18),(31–23)*, (31–39)*,(31–41),(31–45). (41–35),(41–40)*,(41–44)*,(41–45). (3–9),(3–10),(3–18),(3–23),(3–44),(3–croc). (4–20),(4–39),(4–46).
2(40–6)*,2(40–23).	(44–27),(44–40),(44–46). (45–40)*,(45–46).
(6–23),(6–34).	(43–19),(43–42).
(9–21),(9–38).	(9–10)*. (9–19)*.
(7–14),(7–15)*.	
(25–26).	(25–26).
(21–10).	

From the above table it is clear that symbol 8 (crescent and V-shaped rod) is combined with more, and more different, symbols than any other. Secondly, it will be seen that symbol 5 (double disc and Z-shaped rod) is most often associated with the 'mirror (and comb)' symbol (No. 24).

With respect to the two commonest symbols, 8 and 5, we may judge that 8 was superior to 5 not only on the grounds of having more alliances but that 8 generally received bridewealth (symbol 24) whereas 5 more often had to give it than receive it.

It is not possible to conduct a rigorous geographical distribution analysis because of the small numbers involved and the bias introduced by the preponderance of class I stones in Aberdeenshire and class II stones in Angus. This distribution of symbols could be chance and not a correct picture of the original placement of symbol stones. It may be remarked that it is perfectly possible that the Picts broke up some of these symbol stones when an alliance was formally annulled.

One way of analysing these alliances is to put them in diagrammatic form (fig. 2). If we represent the three commonest symbols, 8, 5 and 31, by circles which overlap

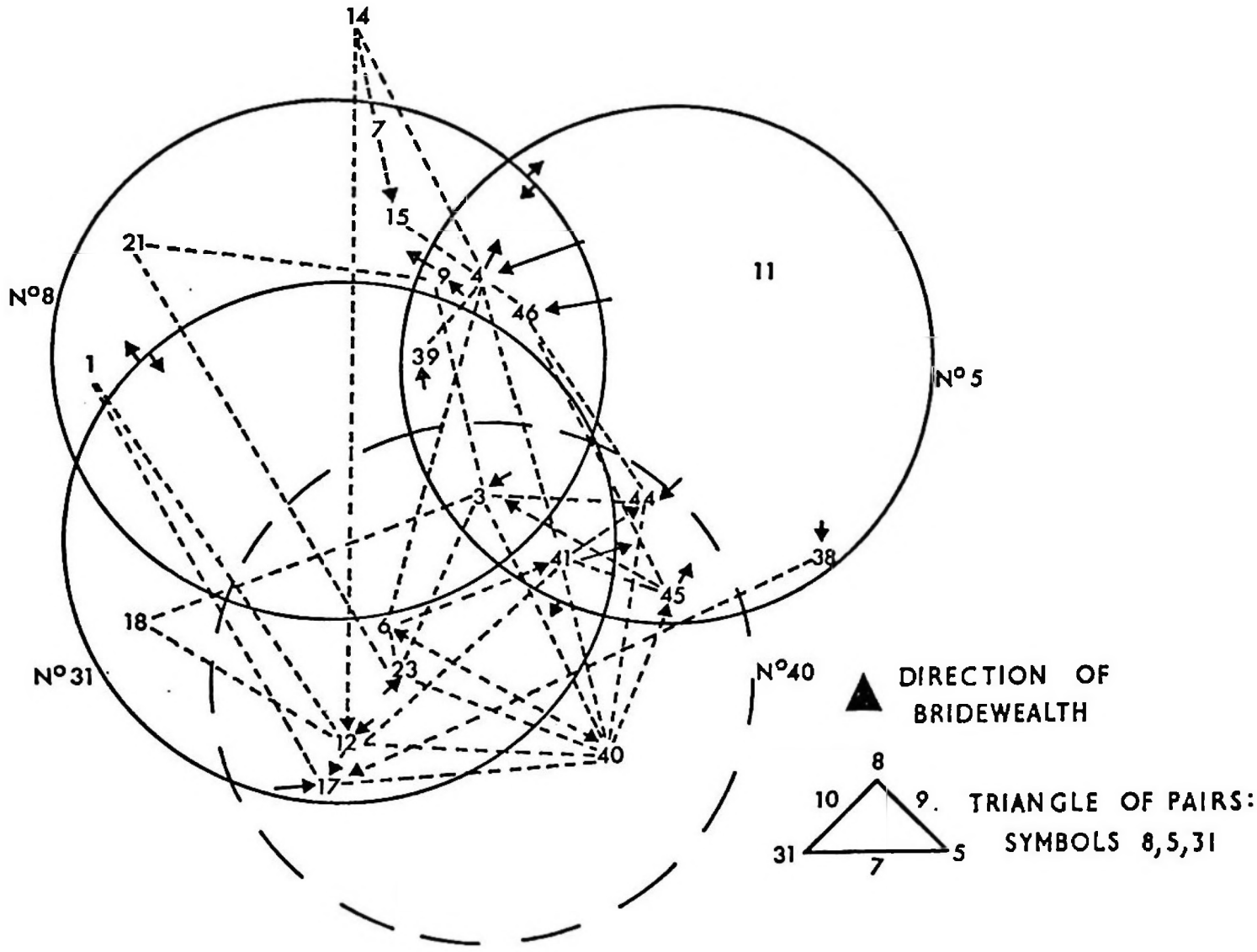


FIG. 2 Diagram showing symbols shared by the three symbols, 8, 5 and 31. The circle for the non-inclusive symbol 40 is given a broken outline. Paired symbols are joined by a dotted line.

and mark in the appropriate spaces the other symbols which are paired with them, then the accompanying diagram results. A small triangle indicates how many times the three commonest symbols are paired, *e.g.* 8/31 occurs ten times. If the symbols which are also paired with each other are connected by straight lines, a pattern may be seen to emerge. Symbols 8 and 5 share symbols 4, 9 and 46; symbols 5 and 31 share symbol 41 exclusively; symbols 8 and 31 do not have any common symbol to themselves; on the other hand symbols 8, 5 and 31 all share symbols 3 and 39, while each has certain symbols not common to the others. What this diagram tells us are the types of combinations of symbols that are and are not found on the monuments.

It will be noticed that there is one symbol, No. 40, that is not combined with the three commonest symbols. If a broken circle is placed around those symbols combined with symbol 40, not only does it separate certain interrelated symbols but it cuts the three circles in an interesting way. We now have two pairs of circles: 8 and 5, 31 and 40. The only symbol common to all four circles is No. 3. It will be seen that all the symbols enclosed by circle No. 40 *receive* bridewealth. The arrows on the diagram denote the direction in which bridewealth is given; the assumption being that the lower symbol of the pair, which is closest to the 'mirror (and comb)' symbol (No. 24), is the giver since bride-givers are superior to wife-receivers who give the bridewealth. In fact, with one exception (No. 11) all the symbols enclosed by circle 5 and all those enclosed by circle 40 receive bridewealth. However, six of these symbols get their bridewealth from 5 while two symbols return bridewealth to 5.

The complex of relationships within circle 40 are worth studying. These nine symbols are related, often in pairs, with most of the remaining symbols: 18, 1, 21, 14, 9, 4, 46 and 38; only 7, 15, 39 and 11 (which is an isolate) are indirectly connected. That is to say, the majority of the symbols are found as a member of a pair with either symbol 8, 5, 31 or 40. Although the diagram does not illustrate all the known symbols, sufficient have been given to show clustering of combinations and also the non-occurrence of certain pairs.

What does the diagram mean in real terms? The symbols stand for lineages and the pairing denotes alliances. The use of the 'mirror (and comb)' denotes the giving of bridewealth between two lineages. The case where no pairs are to be found between symbols either means they could not form an alliance because the lineages were too closely related or because they did not wish to—which it was will depend, perhaps, on factors we cannot discover. Nevertheless, these omissions should be considered in a fuller analysis.

So far, we have suggested that lineage 8 was superior to lineage 5. There is another point worth noticing connected with the lineage 40: its symbol is a bird. The three lineages associated with it and lineage 5 are 41, 44 and 45 which are represented by a fish, a snake, and a snake with a Z-rod; lineage 5 has a double disc and Z-rod. The only other symbol common to lineage 5 and 40 is No. 3—a plain double disc, which is also shared with lineage 31: represented by another animal—the 'elephant'. Lineage

31 shares only one other symbol with lineages 8 and 5, *viz.* No. 39—the 'Pictish beast'. There are a few other animals not shown on the diagram and these are paired as follows: 34–6; 35–8, 35–31, 35–41, 35–3, 35–46; all these would tend to fall within the ambit of lineage 40. While lineage 38 seems to fall outside the following generalisation, it looks as if lineages 31 and 40 contain most of the animal symbols within their orbits, but only when those symbols are associated with lineage 5. The suggestion that arises from this is that while lineages 31 and 40 are closely allied, lineage 40 is inferior to lineage 5.

It is interesting that lineages 8 and 40 between them are related to most of the other lineages and that themselves only have lineage 3 in common. The same is true of lineages 5 and 31 except they are related to each other and also have lineage 39 in common. Are these remnants of a moiety or fratres system?

This analysis suggests that there were both local and more widespread political alliances. It would be interesting to tie this in with the geographical distribution of the symbol stones, but it will not be attempted here. There do appear to be at least two polar regions: a north-west group and a south-east group, in which certain combinations are more prevalent and other alliances correspondingly less likely to occur. However, the diagram given here is not so specific in this matter since it gives the total occurrence of pairs of symbols for both class I and II monuments (*cf.* distribution map, fig. 1).

It is important to notice that the pair of symbols depicted on the stones are almost always placed very close together, if not actually touching, which supports the idea that they represent unions. Even on class II monuments, which have interlaced crosses on them, the symbols are generally carved in pairs. This raises the crucial question of why these symbols occur both on pagan and Christian monuments? Obviously the symbols must have been compatible with the native religion and Christianity. Since we have associated these symbols with kinship and politics, not with ritual, it is perfectly feasible that these secular symbols would have continued in use. The only significant difference is that *several* pairs of symbols appear with the crosses. This would seem to indicate a wider alliance or even a peaceful treaty between Christians. Thus the erection of class II monuments served the same purpose as before except they were conducted under the aegis of the Church.

The question arises: where did the Picts get the idea of commemorating their political alliances in such a way? Now the use of symbols to designate lineages, families, clans or tribes is an extremely common procedure which is found all over the world. Such symbols, crests or marks are used on property—houses, clothes, furniture, utensils, tools, and on slaves—as an identifier. These symbols may be abstract or naturalistic. Not infrequently these designs are tattooed on the body. It is believed that the Picts tattooed themselves, again for reasons of mutual identification most likely, in which case the principle was there. However, it is improbable that they simply transferred their symbols from skin to stone. Nevertheless, it would appear that they used symbols in this manner to identify their lineages. Any attempt at speculating what the symbols

actually meant is probably fruitless at this stage. Their derivation may be from many sources, *e.g.* badges or ornaments, manuscripts, or native invention quite simply.

Irrespective of the origin of the symbols themselves, there is the problem of why put them on stone, and why in pairs? It is likely that the actual erection of the monuments took place within a relatively short space of time. The reasons for saying this are that the symbols display a striking similarity all over Pictland and they display a remarkable technical mastery of stone-cutting. This may be put down to itinerant stone-masons who executed these monuments for the lineage heads. But why were they put up at all and why in this manner? We have seen that the display of the two symbols of a pair of intermarrying lineages indicates where wives and where new lineage members are coming from for a whole generation. Now this would not be altogether news even in newly-forming avunculocal communities. However, if it also bore witness to a standing permanent alliance, this would be different. It would be a public treaty. Furthermore, it indicated who was then superior—they came on top! Where an alliance was based on a new marriage arrangement then the bridewealth symbol could be added. It must be noted that we cannot divorce kinship and politics in this matter. One reason why this custom of erecting stones could become popular would be political expediency itself, plus the fact that there were stone-masons around. In the centralising and unifying period of Pictish history the leading lineages may have set the fashion, indeed they may have compelled it. There was more to setting up such stones than pure whim: they could have played an essential part in the unification of the Picts. It is not improbable that they were the result of a royal edict.

The reason for an edict commanding the lineages to erect stones stating with which other lineage they were in alliance/marriage arrangement would serve several purposes that all promoted Pictish unity. Firstly, the peculiar kinship system is difficult to maintain without strict observance of details and it becomes complicated when polygyny is allowed. Secondly, the strength of the matrilineages depends upon unity among brothers. The symbol stones are like nailing one's colours to the mast: they commit the lineages. Thus in the face of inherent weaknesses in the kinship system which are magnified with polygyny, of the wish to preserve the matrilineal succession as a Pictish custom and to unify the lineages by establishing stable alliances, the setting up of the symbol stones was an admirable device to come to terms with the basic instability of Pictish society. This sort of problem was not unique to the Picts: it faces all societies with matrilineal succession and especially if they have patrilateral cross-cousin marriage. Almost inevitably the system becomes too complicated and it collapses into a patrilineal based society.

The nearest ethnographic parallel to the Picts are the Haida and Tsimshian tribes of British Columbia. They were matrilineal and had clans, each with their own crests: bears, wolves, eagles, fishes. These family crests were tattooed upon the body and, more famously, they were carved upon their totem-poles. These carved poles had nothing to do with religion and they served many different purposes: houseposts,

house frontal poles, memorial and heraldic poles, mortuary poles, *etc.* The heraldic post, for example, displayed the crests of the clans to which the householder (generally a chief) belonged. The houseposts gave the crests of the clans to which a man was related by heredity or marriage. These North-west Coast Indians are famous for their 'potlatches', feasts at which clan heads demonstrated their rights to titles and crests.

Of course, nearer at home, the obvious parallel to the symbol stones are the heraldic devices used by the peerage. These blazons give the arms and bearings of the family and they are often composite in carrying the markings of two or more earlier families which have been acquired by inheritance or marriage. This heraldic system began somewhat obscurely in the thirteenth century, many centuries after the Pictish kingdom collapsed. Since British inheritance is patrilinear, the actual blazoning had a different function from that ascribed to the Pictish symbol stones, though it amounts to the same principle.

The above examples show that family crests are widely used in space and time. In both cases they serve as status symbols and are closely connected with the prevailing political system. There are no exact analogues of the Pictish stone monuments probably because few societies have had to cope simultaneously with the intractable difficulties of their kinship system and kingdom building in the face of external troubles. This is not to say that a matrilineal society cannot be stable nor that kingship is impossible: there are many examples of matrilineal states. Their problems of succession are no more difficult than that of other societies: they are different.

If we return to Bede's statement about the Picts receiving wives from the Scots, it is possible that they took wives from outside the tribe. This could be because they had no women to marry—either there were not any, or more likely there were none they were allowed to marry. The latter case could arise in two ways: either the unmarried women belonged to the 'wrong' clan or, possibly, the chiefs did not wish to marry inside the tribe since it put them under obligation to their subordinates. Whatever the reason, an interesting dilemma arises if they took women from an outside patrilineal tribe. As would be customary in both types of society, bridewealth would be given in exchange for the women. However, the children of these imported women, would according to Pictish custom, return to their mother's brother *i.e.* back to the tribe that gave the women. This would not be acceptable in a patrilineal society. Nevertheless, if a chief of the Picts married a foreign woman he would have the problem of what to do with the children. He could not claim them as his own without contravening custom and becoming patrilineal, neither could he send them away. They would have no right to succeed him either, but they would have to be accorded some kin status. The possibility arises if there was no sister's son to inherit his position that, in full accordance with this system, the chief's wife's brother be invited, *i.e.* the brother of the mother of the chief's children. He would, in other words, be a foreigner, from the tribe (Celts?) who provided the women. In such a way it is possible that Scots' princes were introduced into Pictish society—as local chiefs. The only sacrifice they

would have to make would be the denial of inheritance to their own children by, presumably, a Pictish woman. We know that later on non-Pictish princes married into Pictish noble families. This would make no difference to the succession in Pictish eyes but it might have caused disappointment on the non-Pictish side.

As we have noted, a natural corollary to increasing wealth and state formation in a matrilineal society is the greater desire of men for more control over affairs which, given the restraints of the kinship system, tends to promote avunculocal residence and polygyny. The next, but irretrievable, step is never far distant: the desire that one's *own* sons succeed to wealth and power. In matrilineal societies this step is usually taken first by the chiefs or the leading men and it may be some time before the rest of the society follows suit. But once done, it is irredeemable.

It is most likely that the Picts originally practised matrilocal marriage but had slowly gone over to avunculocal residence. This produces problems of recruitment, both of wives and followers, since they both come from the same lineage in any one generation. To a chief wishing to unite the various lineages into an effective fighting force there is the problem of maintaining alliances and morale, not to mention the jealousy of rival chiefs. As has been mentioned, it is difficult to keep a patrilateral cross-cousin marriage system going over many generations—not that there is any alternative if one wishes to keep matrilinearity and male privileges given by polygyny. The erection of the symbol stones might have been a means of staving off the disintegration of the system through confusion by giving clear guide-lines: such a point might have been reached by the sixth century. However, a century later the matter was complicated by the success of the Christian missionaries. It is clear that the Church would hardly approve of polygyny and it is doubtful if they would accept the practice of cross-cousin marriage. Should the priests have forbidden these two things then the advantages of the whole system is lost. It is unlikely that this would have occurred in any dramatic fashion but the point of the old customs would become gradually meaningless if the marriage alliances were discouraged. The need for alliances would not be lost but one might have to marry into new groups or into a wider circle to avoid first cousin marriage. The temptations and pushes towards patrilinearity must have been hard to resist.

By the eighth century, through various causes: the difficulty of the kinship system, the pressure from the Church, the attitude of 'foreigners' married to the Picts (especially in the royal circles), it is probable that some Picts were going over to patrilinearity or contemplating it. Such a state of affairs—traditionalists versus modernists—could lie at the bottom of the civil wars that rent the Picts in the eighth century. The issue would simply be: which is the correct form of inheritance and succession now? It is notable that this is roughly the time that the class II monuments appear to be gaining ground.

The Pictish kingdom came to an end about A.D. 850 and with it the cessation of the symbol stones, not unsurprisingly, although purely Christian monuments—the class III type—continued after the disappearance of Pictish power. If as has been argued

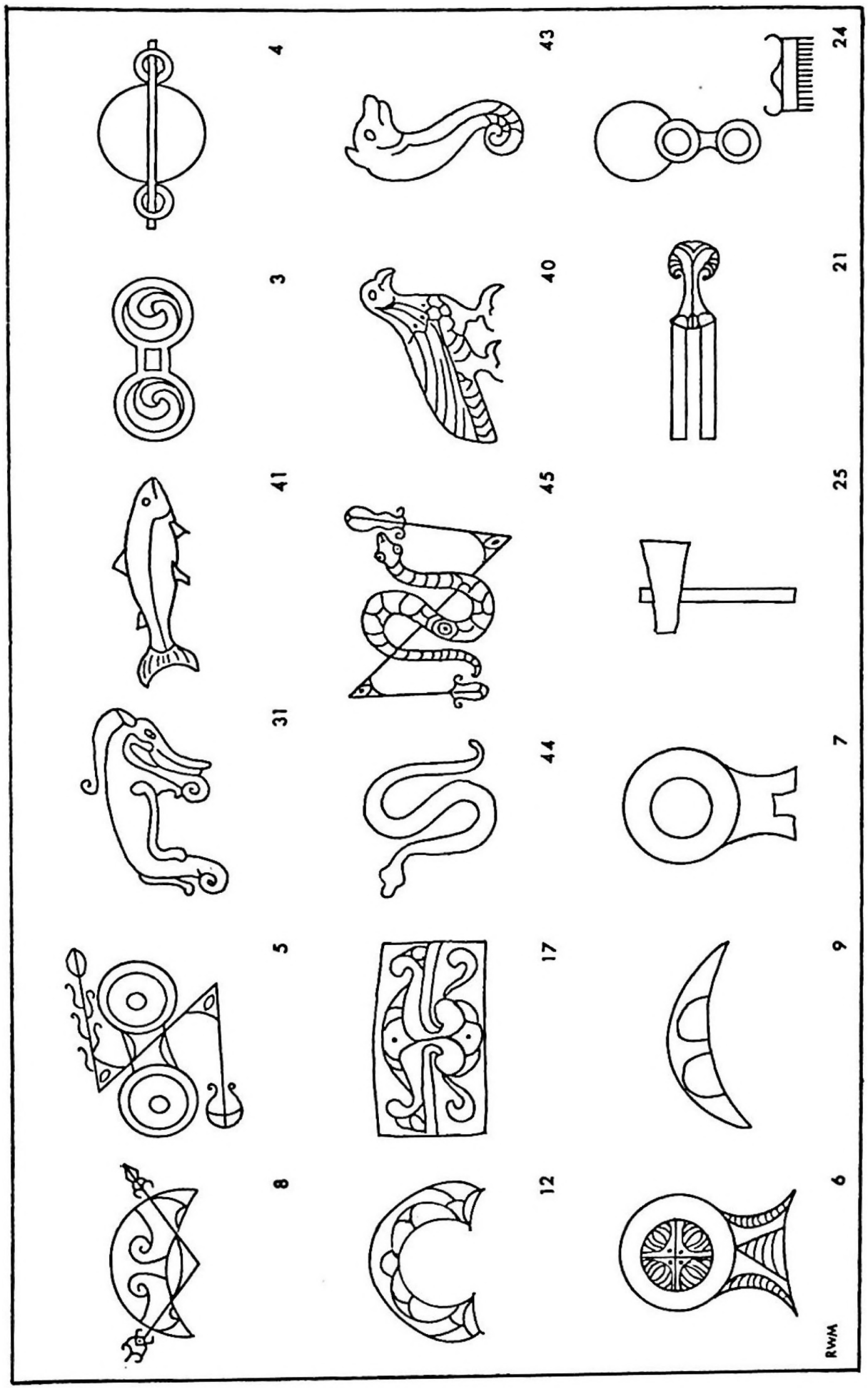


FIG. 3 Some of the most common Pictish symbols (with Romilly Allen's code numbers) arranged from left to right in the order of frequency shown in Table 1, page 132.

the symbols stood for political alliances between lineages, their function would be lost under their Scots overlords—if not banned outright, as many other aspects of Pictish life were, by Scottish decree. The sudden collapse of the Picts in the face of the Scots might have been due to the prior collapse of their old kinship network—the kingpin of their society.

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Editor]