



*Fig.6.1 Sueno's Stone. West face: cross with panel below. (Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland)*

## SUENO'S STONE AND ITS INTERPRETERS

David Sellar

Sueno's Stone is one of the most intriguing monuments in Scotland. It stands on the outskirts of Forres, by the road to Kinloss and Burghead. It is a monument which invites superlatives as well as speculation. Alexander Gordon, writing in 1726, hailed it as one of the most stately monuments of its kind in Europe.<sup>1</sup> More recently Joseph Anderson called it, with pardonable exaggeration, 'a unique monument, the most interesting and inexplicable of its kind in existence, either in this country or any other'.<sup>2</sup> The standard description of the Stone remains that of Romilly Allen in *Early Christian Monuments*.<sup>3</sup> He described it as 'an upright cross-slab of red sandstone, of rectangular shape, 20 feet high by 3 feet 9 inches wide by 1 foot 2 inches thick at the bottom, sculptured in relief on four sides'.<sup>4</sup> The obverse, or west face, is intricately interlaced, and bears a Celtic cross, set above a badly weathered panel containing various shadowy figures (Figs.6.1,6). The reverse, or east face, depicts a battle scene, intense and vivid, unique in the British Isles (Fig.6.2). Line by line, panel by panel, are portrayed warriors on foot and warriors on horseback, scenes of combat and scenes of execution. A particular feature is the abundance of decapitated bodies and severed heads. The narrow north and south sides bear vine scroll ornamentation and further interlacing, with some figures at the foot.<sup>5</sup> Sueno's Stone ranks as a Class III monument in the accepted typology for the early Christian and Pictish monuments of Scotland: that is, it belongs to the same tradition as the earlier Class I and Class II monuments, but does not carry any Pictish symbols.

It is generally assumed that the Stone now stands at or near the spot where it was originally erected, although it seems likely, both from its condition and from the lack of reference to it before the 18th century that it must have lain buried for many centuries.<sup>6</sup> Lachlan Shaw noted that early in the 18th century, 'the corn land round it being alway ploughed up, it was like to fall; But Lady Ann Campbell, late Countess of Moray, caused it to be set upright, and supported with several steps of free stone.'<sup>7</sup> In the process the lowest line of sculpture on the reverse side disappeared from sight, to be revealed again in 1926 when the Stone was reset in position by the Ministry of Works. More recently, worries about deterioration in the condition of the Stone and fears for its safety were increased by a nearby housing development and the opening of a by-pass in the vicinity of the Stone. Historic Scotland launched an open competition to design a protective covering. This attracted a large number of entries, and in 1991 a glass and steel canopy was placed around the Stone. Although the Stone remains *in situ* some of the sense of place has inevitably been lost.

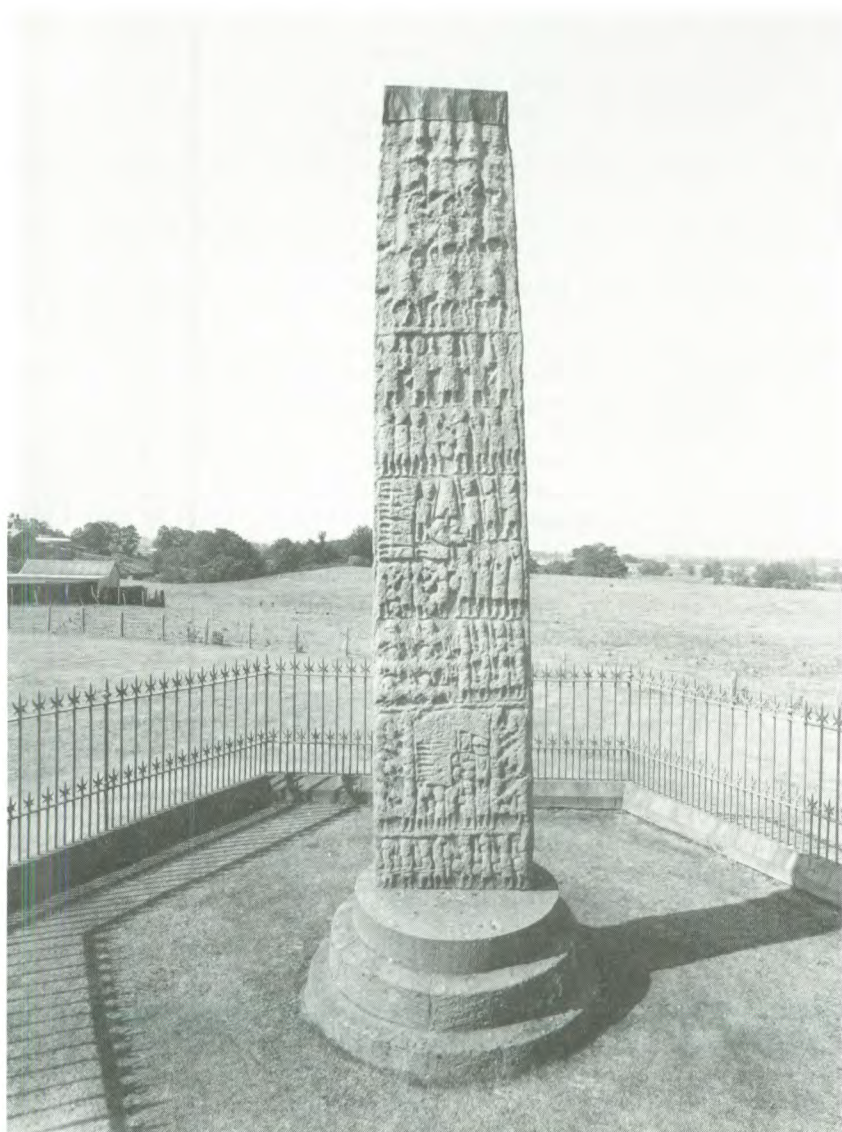
Sueno's Stone inspires awe as well as admiration. Yet the reason for its

erection remains a mystery. This paper seeks to chronicle some of the interpretations, old and new, plausible and ridiculous, which have been put forward by way of explanation. Most commentators have assumed that the Stone portrays a real event rather than a scene from scripture or mythology, or one merely copied from an earlier exemplar. Douglas Simpson wrote of the 'astonishing array of closely martialled military scenes', and thought it was 'hard to escape the conclusion that all this sculpture on the reverse of Sueno's Stone depicts an actual historical event — a victorious battle which the monument was erected to commemorate.'<sup>8</sup> He commented on 'the deliberate ruthlessness of the stone', comparing it to an Assyrian bas-relief.<sup>9</sup> Others have drawn comparisons with Trajan's triumphal Column in Rome, or with the Bayeux Tapestry.<sup>10</sup>

The interpretation with the longest pedigree is that associated with the traditional name of the Stone. Sueno's Stone is said to commemorate a great victory won in the early years of the eleventh century by the Scots under King Malcolm II (1005-34) over Scandinavian invaders — often referred to as 'Danes' — under their leader Sueno. A version of this interpretation was still in circulation, with official backing, at the time of the Society's Conference in Moray in 1987. 'The Monuments of Forres', a pamphlet published by Grampian Regional Council, noted that 'Many theories of [the Stone's] origin have been suggested. The one most often quoted is that it celebrated a victory over the Norsemen around the year 1008, but where was the battle fought? The Vikings were finally expelled from Burghead in 1014, that being their last stronghold on the mainland.'<sup>11</sup>

Little of this, I fear, is to be believed. The practice of ascribing outstanding ancient monuments — standing stones, stone circles, duns, brochs and the like — to real or imaginary events in the past, and particularly, in the case of Scotland and Ireland, to struggles against 'the Danes', the generic term used to describe all Scandinavian invaders, belongs to a well documented antiquarian tradition which passed rapidly into folk-lore. So far as Sueno's Stone is concerned the story begins with Alexander Gordon who first recorded and depicted the Stone in his pioneering *Itinerarium Septentrionale or, a Journey thro' most of the Counties of Scotland and those in the North of England* published in 1726.<sup>12</sup> Gordon's book is divided into two parts: part one 'Containing an Account of all the Monuments of Roman Antiquity, found and collected in that Journey'; and part two 'An Account of the Danish Invasions on Scotland, and of the Monuments erected there, on the different defeats of that People.'

In his 'Account of the Danish Invasions on Scotland' Gordon relies on those two sixteenth century purveyors of historical fiction, George Buchanan and Hector Boece. He relates Malcolm II's campaigns against the 'Danes' in some detail and describes the resulting monuments in various parts of Scotland.<sup>13</sup> The name of the leader of the Danes is given as Sueno, although he stays firmly in England, sending various lieutenants



*Fig.6.2 Sueno's Stone. Battle scene on the east face. (Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland)*



north to fight the Scots. One army under 'Olavus' [Olaf] and 'Enecus' [Angus] ravages Moray, and inflicts a severe defeat on the Scots at Kinloss, four miles from Forres. Later, however, this army is defeated by Malcolm II in a great battle at Mortlach (the modern Dufftown, over twenty miles from Forres). On Sueno's Stone Gordon comments, 'Why this Obelisk was rais'd, or how to explain the several Figures thereon, I am at a Loss, but cannot forbear thinking that it was erected by the *Scots* after the Battle of Murtloch'.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that the Stone commemorates not only the battle, but also the failure of the Danes to establish permanent settlements in Moray. 'The Tradition concerning this Stone,' he writes, 'favours my Conjecture, it being still call'd King *Sueno's* Stone: *Olavus* and *Enecus* the *Danish* Generals at *Murtloch*, being sent thither by *Sueno*'.<sup>15</sup> Gordon's assertion that the name 'King Sueno's Stone' already attached to the Stone in his time is of interest, but his ascription of its erection to events at Mortlach, so many miles away, strained even 18th century credulity.<sup>16</sup>

The original, unvarnished, and conceivably accurate account on which this is ultimately based is to be found, like so much else, in the pages of John of Fordun, writing towards the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Fordun chronicles the struggles of the Anglo-Saxons under Ethelred the Unready against the *Danes* under their leader 'Suenus', that is, Sweyn Forkbeard, king of Denmark and father of Canute. Later he writes that shortly after his accession (in 1005), Malcolm II defeated a *Norwegian* army and fleet, and founded a bishopric at Mortlach near the spot where he had won the victory. This is the sober foundation which underlies the later elaborate accounts which conflate Dane and Norwegian, Malcolm and Sueno, Mortlach and Forres.

Alexander Gordon's comments on the stone in the kirkyard at Aberlemno (Fig.6.3) provide another striking example of the tendency to attribute outstanding monuments to the 'Danish' wars. He gives an account, drawn from George Buchanan, of 'the first remarkable battle' fought between Scots and Danes, at Luncarty, near Perth, in the reign of Kenneth, father of Malcolm II. The outcome of the battle was in doubt and the Scots began to flee. 'That Day had certainly prov'd fatal to the *Scots*, had not Heaven interpos'd in their Behalf, and sent them a speedy and seasonable Assistance; for when the Case was desperate, and even at the last Extremity, a Man of ordinary Rank, surnam'd *Hay*, with his two Sons, vigorous of Body and Mind, and of great Affection to their Native Country, were tilling a contiguous Field through which many of the *Scots* directed their Flight: The father snatching the Yoak from the Necks of the Oxen, and each of the Sons seizing what came next to hand, no sooner beheld the thick Companies of the fugitive Scots, but they endeavoured to stop them, first by Reproaches, then by Threatnings'.<sup>18</sup> According to Gordon 'the *Danish* stones of Aberlemny' were believed to commemorate a victory over the Danes, and he says of the stone in the churchyard there



Fig.6.3 *Aberlemno kirkyard stone. Battle scene on reverse. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS)*

(Fig.6.3), 'I cannot think that there is much Improbability in conjecturing, That the two Horsemen, on the upper Part thereof, may have been designed as Emblems of part of the flying Army of the *Scots*, at this battle of *Luncharty*; and the Three Figures on Foot with the roundish weapons arresting the other Horseman may represent *Hay* and his two sons, the said roundish Weapons, may, probably, have resembled the Yoaks where-with they put a Stop to the Fugitives.'<sup>19</sup> In this way the fabulous origin legend of the Hays of Erroll — who are, in fact, of impeccable Norman descent, coming from La Haye-Hue in the Avranchin, and arriving in Scotland in the twelfth century<sup>20</sup> — was combined with stories of the 'Danish' wars to explain the stones at Aberlemno. A more credible recent interpretation of the Aberlemno kirkyard stone which also associates it with an actual event will be considered below (p.113).



*Fig.6.4a Glamis Manse cross-slab. Obverse. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS)*

Not all the sculptured stones of Pictland were ascribed to the Danish wars. The cross-slab by the Manse at Glamis (Fig.6.4a,b) was supposed to commemorate the murder of Malcolm II in 1034 and was called his gravestone:

‘On the front is a cross; on the upper part is some wild beast, and opposite to it a centaur; beneath, in one compartment is the head of a wolf; these animals denoting the barbarity of the conspirators: in another compartment are two persons shaking hands; in their other hand is a battle-ax: perhaps these are represented in the act of confederacy. On the opposite front of the stone are represented an eel and another fish. This alludes to the fate of the murderers, who, as soon as they had committed the horrid act fled. The roads were at that time covered with snow; they lost the path, and went on to the lake of Forfar, which happened at the time to be frozen over, but not sufficiently strong to bear their weight: the ice broke, and they all perished miserably.’<sup>21</sup>





Fig.6.4b Glamis Manse cross-slab. Reverse. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS)

The Pictish stones at Meikle (Fig.6.5) were explained by reference to the Arthurian cycle of stories. 'These Stones', writes Gordon (here following Hector Boece) 'are said to be placed there as a Sepulchral Monument for Queen *Vanora*, and are, at this Day, called her Grave-Stones.'<sup>22</sup> 'Vanora' is the medieval Scots form of 'Guinevere'. Gordon continues, '*Buchanan* represents her as an Adultress, and the Country People have still a Tradition (whether true or false I cannot determine) that she led a very lascivious Life, and was at last devour'd in a Wood by Wild Beasts, and, indeed, many of these Stones seem to have given Colour to this Tradition, unless, perhaps, the Carvings, upon the Stones (as it sometimes happens) may have given Rise to the story.'<sup>23</sup> In this way the motif of Daniel in the Lions' Den, taken from the Old Testament (for this is what is represented at Meikle), came to illustrate the fate of Arthur's adulterous queen.

That no credence at all can be given to the traditional account of Sueno's Stone, elaborated by Gordon' out of Boece and Buchanan, should now be





Fig.6.5 Meigle, no. 2. Daniel in the lions' den. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS)

clear. Yet the story of Sueno died hard. The Rev. Charles Cordiner, for example, believed that Sueno's Stone had been erected to celebrate the final liberation of Burghead, eight miles away on the coast, after a century and a half of Scandinavian occupation. The evacuation had been followed by a 'treaty of amicable alliance' concluded between Malcolm II and Canute 'or Sueno king of *Norway*'. Cordiner suggested that the panel below the cross (Fig.6.6) portrayed that reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> That fine historian, W F Skene, noted that the connection of the Stone 'with the name Sweno is no older than Hector Boece', but still preferred a Scandinavian explanation.<sup>25</sup> He suggested that the Stone commemorated the death of Sigurd the Powerful, jarl of Orkney, recorded in *Orkneyinga Saga*, after a skirmish in which he had defeated the Scottish leader Maelbrigte Tooth. Maelbrigte was killed and decapitated, and his severed head fastened to Sigurd's saddle strap; but as Sigurd rode home the protruding tooth which gave Maelbrigte his byname gashed Sigurd's leg, causing the wound from which he died. This event, if historical, must have taken place about 900 AD. Sigurd was buried at 'Ekkialsbakki' which has usually been taken to refer to the banks of the river Oykel. Skene, however, suggested that Ekkialsbakki should be located further south, perhaps on the banks of the Findhorn; that Sueno's Stone had been erected to commemorate the story of Sigurd and Maelbrigte; and that one of the scenes on the Stone portrayed Sigurd riding home with Maelbrigte's head at his girdle. Skene also suggested that the panel below the cross showed two figures, Sigurd and Maelbrigte, 'engaged in apparently an amicable meeting' before the conflict.

More recently Euan Mackie has accepted the argument that Sueno's Stone is 'a Pictish monument, or cenotaph, commemorating a great victory — depicted on the back — over the Norsemen; the identity of the enemy is suggested by the traditional name of the stone.'<sup>26</sup> Mackie suggests that the object depicted in the middle of the central panel on the reverse of the Stone, above five severed heads, is a broch (Romilly Allen, for what it is worth, described the object in question as 'a quadrangular Celtic bell'<sup>27</sup>). 'It is quite possible,' Mackie writes, 'there was a well preserved broch on or near the battlefield which was shown on the stone.' This may be so, but Mackie surely strains credulity when he suggests that the broch in question is Dun Alascaig on the south shore of the Dornoch Firth, over thirty miles from the Stone in a direct line. 'Perhaps', says Mackie, 'the presumed defeat of Sueno took place there.'<sup>28</sup>

I myself put forward another interpretation to the Scottish Society for Northern Studies in 1979, and the Conference of Scottish Medieval Historians in 1981. In common with other observers I took the view that Sueno's Stone commemorated an actual event. There is an urgency about the great battle scene on the reverse of the Stone which suggests an immediate secular purpose. There are, in any case, no obvious parallels



*Fig.6.6 Suenu's Stone. West face: detail of panel below cross. (Crown Copyright: Historic Scotland)*

for the iconography of the battle scene, with minor exceptions. The motif of the severed heads tallies only too well with accounts of warfare in Scotland and Ireland in which the heads of the slain figure as trophies. The *Annals of Ulster* refer to this custom on several occasions.<sup>29</sup> In 865 AD [*recte* 866] they record a victory by Aed son of Niall over the Foreigners [Scandinavians] at Lough Foyle 'and twelve score heads were taken there-

by'; in 926 AD a victory by Muirchertach 'of the Leather Cloaks', son of Niall, over the Foreigners when 200 were beheaded; and in 933 AD a victory by the same Muirchertach over the Foreigners and the Men of Ulster, in which again twelve score heads were taken.<sup>30</sup> In Scotland, the Chronicle of Melrose records the end of a MacWilliam rising in 1215 with the presentation of heads as gift by the victor, Ferchar Mac an tSagairt, to the new king, Alexander II:

in quos irruens Machentagar hostes regis valide prostravit  
quorum capita detruncavit et novo regi nova munera praesentavit.<sup>31</sup>

As late as the seventeenth century the bard of Keppoch, Iain Lom MacDonald, avenged the murder of the young chief of Keppoch and his brother, and took the heads of the murderers to MacDonald of Glengarry at Inverlochry castle. The heads were washed *en route* at a well by Loch Oich, still known as *Tobar nan Ceann* (The Well of the Heads) and marked by a monument.

I suggested that Sueno's Stone did indeed commemorate a real battle in which a great victory had been won, but that the vanquished were not Scandinavians but Picts. I put forward the hypothesis that the Stone marked the final victory north of the Mounth by the Scots over the Picts. The victorious leader may have been a king of the dynasty of Kenneth mac Alpin, perhaps even Kenneth himself. Alternatively, he may have belonged to the stock of the Mormaers of Moray, ancestors of Macbeth, who claimed descent from the tribe of Loarn in Dalriada, and may have infiltrated north and west by way of Laggan or the Great Glen. On this view, Sueno's Stone would commemorate a battle which took place in the mid-ninth century, although its erection need not have been exactly contemporary.

I also put forward, very tentatively, an interpretation of the panel on the obverse side of the Stone beneath the cross (Fig.6.6), which Skene thought might represent Sigurd of Orkney meeting Maelbrigte, and Cordiner supposed to be Malcolm II and Sueno (above p.105). This panel has suffered considerably from the elements or defacement, or both, and it is difficult now to make out the scene which it depicts. Lachlan Shaw, following Gordon, described it as bearing 'two human figures of a Gothish form.'<sup>32</sup> Romilly Allen called it 'a group of five men, one in the centre, the two tall figures facing each other and bending over him, and two smaller ones at the back.'<sup>33</sup> Given the key position of the panel beneath the great cross one might expect it to represent a scriptural scene, and this perhaps remains the most probable explanation. Nevertheless, it has not yet proved possible to identify the scene as such, nor to point to a clear iconographic parallel in Scotland or Ireland. It is therefore possible that this panel, like the battle scene on the reverse of the Stone, represents an actual event. If so, it must be one of considerable significance. I pointed out that the scene





*Fig.6.7 Seal of the Abbey of Scone: the inauguration of the king of Scots. (Crown Copyright: RCAHMS)*

on the panel, indistinct though it is, bears a striking resemblance to that on the common seal of the Abbey of Scone, thought to represent the inauguration of the medieval kings of Scots (Fig.6.7). Could the panel represent the ceremonial inauguration of the king of Scots after the final defeat of the Pictish monarchy?

Gaelic rulers in Scotland and Ireland (and the Isle of Man) were inaugurated, rather than crowned and anointed, in a ceremony which has pre-Christian origins.<sup>34</sup> A late description of such a ceremony occurs in Hugh Macdonald's seventeenth century 'History of the Macdonalds':

I thought fit to annex the ceremony of proclaiming the Lord of the Isles ... There was a square stone, seven or eight feet long, and the tract of a man's foot cut thereon, upon which he stood, denoting that he should walk in the footsteps and uprightness of his predecessors, and that he was installed by right in his possessions. He was clothed in a white habit, to shew his innocence and integrity of heart, that he would be a light to his people, and maintain the true religion. The white apparel did afterwards belong to the poet by right. Then he was to receive a white rod in his hand,



Fig.6.8 The inauguration of O'Neill at Tullaghoge (c.1600). (Copyright: National Maritime Museum)

intimating that he had power to rule, not with tyranny and partiality, but with discretion and sincerity. Then he received his forefathers' sword ... signifying that his duty was to protect and defend them from the incursions of their enemies in peace or war, as the obligations and customs of his predecessors were.<sup>35</sup>

In Ireland the ceremony of inauguration continued until the sixteenth century, and is described in similar terms. There is a late representation of the inauguration of the O'Neill on the 'Stone of the Kings' at Tullaghoge in Tyrone (Fig.6.8).<sup>36</sup> In Scotland the kings of Scots continued to be inaugurated in the traditional manner until the fourteenth century. Alexander II and Robert the Bruce both petitioned the Pope for the privilege of being crowned and anointed. Alexander's request was refused but Bruce's was granted. However, permission arrived too late for king Robert himself, and the first Scottish king to be crowned and anointed was his son David II.<sup>37</sup> There can be little doubt that the kings of Kenneth mac Alpin's line or, for that matter, the Mormaers of Moray, would have been inaugurated in the traditional manner appropriate to Gaelic dynasts.

The Scone seal (Fig.6.7) is the only known depiction of a royal inauguration in Scotland. Professor Duncan, describing the inauguration of Alexander III in 1249, commented on the seal as follows:

The seal clearly shows that the king was vested in his robe by a bishop and unmitred cleric, the Bishop of St Andrews and the Abbot of Scone respectively. Behind both of these are secular figures, two earls whose identities are indicated by the shields of arms under the king's feet — Fife, the king, Strathearn — and who had presumably enthroned him. Three figures are shown above them; one is a cleric offering to the king a small house, a reliquary shrine, for the taking of an oath; another may be a layman and holds something long, narrow and two-dimensional, the rolls of the king's genealogy; the function of the third figure is not clear.<sup>38</sup>

The parallels between the panel on Sueno's Stone, the Scone seal and the representation of the inauguration of O'Neill may not be exact, but they are sufficiently close, especially given their widely differing dates of execution, to prompt reflection. My suggestion, therefore, was that Sueno's Stone commemorated a great battle in the north, presumably near Forres, between Scots and Picts, which marked the end of Pictish power and the supplanting of the Pictish royal line by a new dynasty of Scottish rulers. The new rulers were inaugurated after the fashion of Gaelic dynasts in a ceremony of profound religious and political significance which may be depicted in the panel below the cross. This would suggest a date c.850-950 AD for the erection of the Stone, a date compatible with the art historical evidence.

When I put forward these suggestions in 1979 and 1981, I expressed surprise at the comparative lack of interest in the Stone. However, unknown to me, Leslie Southwick had also been working on the Stone, and later in 1981 his booklet 'The so-called Sueno's Stone at Forres' appeared. This is a model of its kind, combining description and observation with historical and art-historical research. Southwick also believes that the Stone represents a historical event and points to contemporary evidence from France and Germany which shows that great victories might be portrayed in works of art.<sup>39</sup> Traversing some of the ground covered earlier in this paper, he points out that the association with Sueno is spurious, and that there is no certain Scandinavian connection. He writes, 'It is not known what event the scenes of war on Sueno's Stone might represent or why it was erected', but goes on to speculate that the Stone may have been set up to commemorate a campaign against the Orkney Vikings or, alternatively, that it may celebrate a victory by the rulers of Moray over 'the Scottish Kings south of the Mounth'.<sup>40</sup> The dissociation of the Stone from a necessary Scandinavian connection is welcome, but the suggestion that it commemorates a victory over the kings of Scots may be doubted. Even allowing for the thesis of two kingdoms north and south

of the Mounth in the ninth and tenth centuries, with the dynasty of Kenneth mac Alpin in the south (and this has not won universal acceptance), it seems unlikely that the kings of Scots, when they eventually gained full control, would have allowed a monument celebrating their earlier defeat to survive. Southwick considers the panel beneath the cross to be 'too defaced to attempt a reasonable interpretation'.<sup>41</sup>

Three years later two further interpretations of the Stone appeared. Anthony Jackson considered the Stone within the broader framework of the Picts and their monuments. Jackson's background lies in social anthropology, and he sought in his *Symbol Stones of Scotland*, published in 1984, to combine the insights of that discipline with his observation of the sculptured stones of Pictland to put forward a model of Pictish society.<sup>42</sup> In a chapter on Sueno's Stone, Jackson put forward a suggestion similar to my own, namely that there was no valid reason to associate the Stone with Sueno, and that the Stone might well commemorate a victory over the Picts. Some traces of earlier explanations of the Stone remained in Jackson's insistence that it celebrated a great *Christian* victory: Christian Scots against *pagan* Picts. Victory of Scots against Picts there may have been, but to stigmatise the northern Picts as still pagan in the ninth century is at variance with the historical record.

Jackson, however, went much further in his interpretation. He wrote that 'closer examination of the grouping of figures [in the battle scene] shows that the number 7 plays a crucial role in the actual composition'.<sup>43</sup> He believed that the defeated side could be shown to 'have 28 ( $7 \times 4$ ) plus 14 ( $7 \times 2$ ) dead, making a total of 42 ( $7 \times 6$ ) as opposed to the winners 56 ( $7 \times 8$ ). This makes a grand total of 98 figures or ( $7 \times 14$  or  $7 \times 2 \times 2$ ), which is a large number of 7's.' He pointed, in particular, to the two sets of seven decapitated bodies, which he believed must represent seven royal Pictish lineages, one for each province of Pictland. According to Jackson, however, these scenes of execution referred not to a single event but to two separate occasions. Building on later tradition which spoke of a treacherous massacre by Kenneth mac Alpin of Pictish notables after a banquet at Scone, Jackson suggested that the scene depicted towards the foot of the Stone recorded that event and showed the decapitated bodies of the murdered leaders of the seven Pictish lineages lying under a tent. The scene in the central panel, however, depicted a later judicial execution of seven lineage leaders in northern Pictland after a great victory of Kenneth mac Alpin against the Picts which was the immediate cause of the erection of Sueno's Stone. This panel 'is the heart of Sueno's Stone and depicts the execution of the Paramount king of Northern Pictland while his six confrères lie bound and beheaded. This judicial execution is accompanied by the tolling of a bell [Mackie's broch] and a fanfare of trumpets. The central position of the bell in the composition suggests that this was also a triumph for Christianity in putting down the pagan Picts'.<sup>44</sup>



Jackson suggests that the line of five figures at the top of the central panel represents the victorious Kenneth mac Alpin with five Scottish southern provincial kings. He also most ingeniously deduces the composition and line of command of the rival Scottish and Pictish armies from the carvings on the Stone, commenting that it appears that the northern Picts had no infantry and the southern Picts no cavalry, and speculating on the reasons for this. In a final paragraph which considers the scene beneath the cross, Jackson suggests, again like myself, that this may portray a royal coronation [*recte* inauguration], with king Kenneth as the central figure.<sup>45</sup>

In his paper delivered at Forres and reproduced in this volume, Jackson adheres to and elaborates on his earlier interpretation. He argues that when the Stone was re-erected it must have been put up back to front, and consequently now faces in the wrong direction. He re-iterates his belief that the Stone was erected to commemorate the victory of southerners over northerners, and suggests that it 'was erected by Kenneth MacAlpin to tell the Picts *in their own symbolic code* that they were vanquished.'<sup>46</sup> He points again to the crucial position of the object, be it bell (as he suggested earlier), broch or fort, in the dead centre of the monument. He repeats the theory that the scene below the cross represents a 'coronation' scene, and suggests that the elongated figures on either side of the central figure may represent the Scottish national saints Columba and Andrew. He concludes, 'It [the Stone] is a *definite statement about the end of a particular era* — the end of the dominance of the Pictish lineages in the royal line of succession to the kingdom of the *Picts*. There can only be *one* man for whom this was an all-important message: Kenneth MacAlpin, the first king of *both* the Picts and the Scots.'<sup>47</sup>

A quite different, but no less ingenious interpretation of Sueno's Stone by Professor Archibald Duncan also appeared in 1984.<sup>48</sup> In a short article on the kingdom of the Scots in the Dark Ages, Duncan noted the fate of one of Kenneth's successors as king of Scots, Dubh, who reigned from 962 to 966. According to contemporary sources, Dubh was killed at Forres in 966 by the men of Moray. 'These events must have been the subject of some long-lost Gaelic epic or lament,' writes Duncan, 'of which we hear an echo in a brief Latin annal telling that Dubh lay slain under the bridge of Kinloss and that the sun did not shine until his body was recovered for burial.'<sup>49</sup> Duncan suggests that the 'remarkable monument ... with the irrelevant name Sueno's Stone' commemorates this event. He believes that the central figure 'with a helmet and a quilted coat' at the top of the middle panel of the battle scene (whom Jackson took to be Kenneth mac Alpin) is king Dubh, surveying the field of battle. Beneath, a church bell watches over the bodies of the slain. Below again, six men on horseback are in full flight. 'But the battle continues with three fighting couples on each side of an arc which is the bridge of Kinloss', writes Duncan, his 'bridge' being

Jackson's 'tent'. 'Beneath the bridge lie more dead bodies and severed heads; one of the heads, that of Dubh, is framed to stress its importance.'<sup>50</sup> Duncan suggests that the panel below the cross, tentatively interpreted by Jackson and myself as a royal inauguration, and by Skene as the meeting of Sigurd and Maelbrigte, may represent the burial of king Dubh near the spot where the Stone was erected.

Although Duncan's account is radically different from that of other recent interpreters, it shares with them the assumption that Sueno's Stone depicts a real Dark Age battle. So convinced is Duncan of this that he uses the iconography of the Stone to illustrate contemporary army service and military apparel: 'The technology of war is faithfully represented here, but so too are the ranks of society and their obligation to fight for a leader.'<sup>51</sup>

The case for associating Sueno's Stone with a real Dark Age event has been greatly strengthened by an interpretation recently offered for the Aberlemno kirkyard stone (Fig.6.3) by both Southwick and Graeme Cruickshank. Alexander Gordon's unconvincing association of this stone with the origin legend of the Hays of Errol has already been noted (p.100). In an extended footnote to his work on Sueno's Stone, Southwick put forward an alternative explanation.<sup>52</sup> He suggested that the Aberlemno stone told a story in three stages, moving from top to bottom. A distinction should be made between the five long-haired, bare-headed warriors depicted on the left of the stone (as one faces it), and the four helmeted warriors on the right. Those on the left he thought might represent Picts and those on the right Northumbrians. He suggested that the figure at the top right was in full flight, having cast away his sword and shield. The helmeted figure at the bottom right was shown dead on the field of battle, his corpse 'carried for the raven like the knight in the border ballad "The Two Corbies"'. Perhaps, Southwick suggested, the Aberlemno stone was meant to represent a conflict between Pictland and Northumbria.

In his *The Battle of Dunnichen*, an earlier version of which was published in 1985 as *Nechtansmere 1300: a Commemoration*, Graeme Cruickshank suggests a very similar interpretation.<sup>53</sup> He too interprets the stone as representing a conflict between Picts and Northumbrians, in which the former were victorious. He notes that a helmet with a prominent nase, like those depicted on the stone, has been found in York and dated to the eighth century. The figure at the bottom right, his corpse the prey of ravens, would have been readily understood by contemporaries, argues Cruickshank, as a symbolic representation of defeat. Cruickshank suggests that the Aberlemno stone was erected, not long after the event, to commemorate the defeat of the Angles of Northumbria and the death of their king Ecgrith at the hands of the Picts in 685 AD at the battle of Dunnichen (or Nechtansmere), fought only four miles from Aberlemno. The fallen figure at the foot may even be Ecgrith himself. This interpretation seems entirely credible and has won some cautious acceptance.<sup>54</sup> If the stone in

the kirkyard at Aberlemno was erected to commemorate a real battle, the arguments for associating Sueno's Stone likewise with a historical event are considerably enhanced.

The display board set up beside Sueno's Stone in 1992 by Historic Scotland suggests that the Stone may have been carved in the ninth or tenth centuries. It notes three possible theories for its erection: to commemorate a battle in which the Picts were vanquished by the Scots under Kenneth mac Alpin; to commemorate a battle between a 'Picto-Scottish' force and marauding Norsemen; or to commemorate the death of king Dubh in 966 AD. It notes that the name of the Stone was invented in the eighteenth century and 'has no bearing on the origin of the monument. Only the stone itself and its location can give any hint of why and when it was created and on whose orders.' The 1991 number of *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* notes that 'excavation to date has not produced firm evidence for a date of erection, method of erection, or purpose'.<sup>55</sup> The mystery remains.

### Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Historic Scotland for permission to reproduce Figs.6.1,2 and 6; to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland for permission to reproduce Figs.6.3, 4, 5 and 7; and to the National Maritime Museum for permission to reproduce Fig.6.8.

### Notes

1. Alexander Gordon, *Itinerarium Septentrionale, or a Journey Thro' most of the Counties of Scotland and those in the North of England* (London 1726) 158.
2. Quoted in R Douglas, *Annals of the Royal Burgh of Forres* (Elgin 1934) 312.
3. Joseph Anderson and J Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1903).
4. *Ibid.*, pt.ii, 149-50.
5. A good modern description of the Stone is to be found in Leslie Southwick, *The so-called Sueno's Stone at Forres* (Moray District Library Publications 1981), discussed below p.110.
6. See Southwick, preface.
7. Lachlan Shaw, *History of the Province of Moray* (1775) ed. J F S Gordon (London and Glasgow 1882) iii, 106.
8. W Douglas Simpson, *The Ancient Stones of Scotland* (London 1965) 118.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Duncan MacMillan, Curator of the Talbot Rice Gallery, University of Edinburgh, himself a native of Moray, suggested a parallel with Trajan's Column in conversation; for comparisons with the Bayeux Tapestry see Southwick, *So-called Sueno's Stone* 15 and 17, and Duncan 'Kingdom of the Scots' in *The Making of Britain: The Dark Ages* ed. Lesley M Smith (London 1984) (discussed below, p.112) @ 140.
11. *The Monuments of Forres* (Grampian Regional Council, n.d.).
12. See above, note 1.
13. *Itinerarium*, 152ff.
14. *Ibid.*, 159.

15. Ibid.
16. Lachlan Shaw is sceptical (*Province of Moray* iii, 106-7).
17. *Johannis de Fordun, Chronica Gentis Scotorum* ed.W F Skene (Edinburgh 1871-2) book iv, chapters 35, 39-40.
18. *Itinerarium*, 150.
19. Ibid., 151.
20. G W S Barrow 'Scotland's Norman Families' in *The Kingdom of the Scots* (London 1973) 325, citing Sir Anthony Wagner 'The origin of the Hays of Erroll' in *Genealogists Magazine*, 1954, 1955.
21. The quotation is from Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Scotland* 2nd ed.(London 1776) ii, 173, cited in Stewart Cruden's *The Early Christian & Pictish Monuments of Scotland* (HMSO 1957) 3. Pennant was following in the footsteps of Gordon and Boece.
22. *Itinerarium*, 162.
23. Ibid.
24. Charles Cordiner, *Remarkable Ruins and Romantic prospects of North Britain* (London 1795) 'The Forres Pillar'. Cordiner was building on earlier writers such as Pennant. For Burghead see Shepherd 'Picts in Moray' in this volume. There is no evidence for an extended Scandinavian occupation of Burghead.
25. W F Skene, *Celtic Scotland* 2nd ed.(Edinburgh 1886-90) i, 337-8.
26. Euan W Mackie, *Scotland: An Archaeological Guide* (London 1975) 204.
27. *Early Christian Monuments* ii, 150.
28. Mackie, 205.
29. *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* edd. Sean MacAirt and Gearoid MacNiocaill, pt.i, text and translation (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies 1983).
30. The word 'heads' (*cenn*) appears in the original annal for 933 but has been accidentally omitted in the translation.
31. *The Chronicle of Melrose* (facsimile edition) edd.A O Anderson and others (London 1936) 60.
32. *Province of Moray* iii, 106.
33. *Early Christian Monuments* ii, 150.
34. For a recent discussion of the ceremony of inauguration in Ireland see Katharine Simms, *From Kings to Warlords* (Bury St Edmunds 1987), ch.3 'Inauguration-ceremonies, Titles, and the Meaning of Kingship'; for inauguration in the Lordship of the Isles see J W M Bannerman 'The Lordship of the Isles' in *Scottish Society in the Fifteenth Century* ed.Jennifer M Brown (London 1977) 224-5; also A A M Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh 1975) 115-6, 526, 552-6; and W D H Sellar 'Celtic law and Scots Law; Survival and Integration' (1989) 29 *Scottish Studies* 4 and note 5.
35. H Macdonald 'History of the Macdonalds' in *Highland Papers* ed.J R N Macphail (Scottish History Society, Edinburgh 1914-34) i, 23-4.
36. The vignette of the inauguration of O'Neill occurs in Dartmouth Map no.25 in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. It is described in *Ulster and other Irish Maps* ed.G A Hayes-McCoy (Stationery Office, Dublin 1964). I am most grateful to Ian Fisher, RCAHMS, for this reference, and to the Museum for granting permission to reproduce.
37. *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh 1975) 526, 553-4; and Ranald Nicolson, *Scotland: The Later Middle Ages* (Edinburgh 1974) 124-5.



38. *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* 555-6.
39. *So-called Sueno's Stone* 15-16.
40. *Ibid.*, 15, 18.
41. *Ibid.*, 9.
42. Anthony Jackson, *The Symbol Stones of Scotland: a social anthropological resolution of the problems of the Picts* (Kirkwall 1984).
43. *Ibid.*, 168.
44. *Ibid.*, 170. Cordiner (see note 24) seems to have been the first to suggest that the Stone might portray a formal execution.
45. *Ibid.*, 173.
46. 'Further Thoughts on Sueno's Stone', above p.94.
47. Above, p.95.
48. Duncan 'Kingdom of the Scots' (above note 10).
49. *Ibid.*, 139-40.
50. *Ibid.*, 140.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Southwick, 19, note 23.
53. Graeme Cruickshank, *The Battle of Dunnichen* (Pinkfoot Press, Balgavies, Angus 1991). A further booklet by Cruickshank entitled *The Aberlemno Battle-Scene* is promised shortly.
54. Anna Ritchie, *Picts* (HMSO, Edinburgh 1989) 22-7, considers the association of the Aberlemno kirkyard stone with the battle of Dunnichen to be very plausible.
55. 1991 *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland* ed. Colleen E Batey with Jennifer Ball (Council for Scottish Archaeology 1992) 38.