

The Meigle Stones: A Biographical Overview¹

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THE wider Tayside geographical region is immensely fortunate in having three of the key assemblages of early medieval Pictish sculpture – St Andrews, St Vigeans and Meigle – which by a stroke of fortune works out at one each for Fife, Angus and Perthshire. There may be finer single monuments elsewhere, for example Nigg,² Shandwick,³ Hilton of Cadboll⁴ and Sueno’s Stone, Forres,⁵ and larger corpora at Iona and Govan,⁶ but nowhere has the quality and range in depth of the aforementioned three centres. The term ‘collection’ as applied to Meigle includes both present and absent sculptures.⁷ The total of 33 stones includes seven that were lost in the nineteenth century but are always considered part of the collection, in addition to the 26 on display in the Museum. This paper is not seeking to catalogue each of these stones – a project requiring much more space – but rather to give a general overview of the collection and its biographical trajectory, whilst following just some of the key pieces, to bring out some salient, defining points and to demonstrate how the meanings and forms of sculptures changed over time. We are fortunate

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1 I am grateful to the Society for inviting me to present a version of this paper at their *Early Medieval Meigle* conference, held at the Kinloch Memorial Hall, Meigle on 13 April 2013 and for all the helpful questions and comments garnered from the audience that day and later from Lesley Abrams, John Borland, Martin Cook, Jane Geddes, Isabel and George Henderson, David Henry, Simon Taylor, Nick Evans, Adrian Maldonado and an anonymous referee. I owe an immense debt to Doreen Hall, in this case including her reconstruction view of Vanora’s Tomb.

2 Henderson 2001; *ECMS* 75.

3 *ECMS* 68.

4 James *et al*, 2008.

5 *ECMS* 149; McCullagh 1995; Sellar 1993; Jackson 1993.

6 For Iona, see RCAHMS 1982; for Govan, see Ritchie 1994.

7 Throughout the paper the numbering of the Meigle stones follows that established by *ECMS*. For the full corpus of drawings of the extant sculptures at Meigle, see RCAHMS 1994: 98-102. For all the drawings and photographs of all the sculptures, see the RCAHMS’s CANMORE website entries for the individual stones (listed under NO24SE25).

with Meigle in having snap-shots of the social role of Pictish sculpture in the early medieval period, in the later medieval period and in post-medieval and modern times. It is a biography that also encompasses the reuse of prehistoric standing stones. I use the term snap-shots deliberately: the variability of evidence survival means that the biographical approach cannot recover all that happened to, around or with a carved stone monument. Thus the cultural biography of the Meigle stones has periods of evidenced activity separated by longer lacunae of evidence. This does not mean the gaps can be ignored or elided but that a more nuanced understanding of the social re-valuing of early medieval sculpture by subsequent generations needs to be explored.

The Early Medieval Period

Here I consider the birth and early uses of the sculptures as early medieval, Christian sculptures. In terms of chronology we are dealing principally with the eighth to tenth centuries, whilst acknowledging the sculptures are part of a longer trajectory of human behaviour. The long acknowledged defining characteristic of the Meigle assemblage is its robust imagery of animals and hybrid monsters, often with a violent tone and a sense of imminent threat of damnation, which seems to go hand-in-hand with a largely (but not exclusively) burial monument function. However, that does not mean that the carving lacks the vigour and humour of human creativity, both of which are triumphantly demonstrated by one of the collections masterpieces, Meigle 2 (see Figure 1a). The clear parallels this cross-slab has with metalwork models has been long recognised – reduce it in size, cast it in gold and bedeck it with jewels and precious stones and it would grace any altar. However the cross-slab also has clear affinities with manuscript models. The way one of its human figures adapts itself to the available space, wrapping itself around the cross shaft as if it were an opening initial letter in a manuscript, is a breathtaking execution (see Figure 1b). It reinforces the cross as salvation because the figure reaches down to offer a helping hand to a second person, to pull him up beyond the reach of the jaws of a denizen of Hell. It has the space-pushing and subversiveness we tend to associate with later manuscript marginalia, particularly in the continuation of the story on the other side of the cross, where the ever ready-to-pounce creatures of sin are making their way up and over the shaft (see Figure 1c). Certainly these are amongst the most compelling scenes the Meigle sculptures have to offer.

To return to the burial monuments; the art-historical dating of the sculptures spans the 8th to 10th centuries and give us a broad indication of



Figures 1 a-c. Meigle 2 cross-slab: a: general; b: a helping hand; c: the creeping danger of sin (Mark Hall)

when some people were buried there. The early medieval burial ground is presumably, at least in part, beneath the present, long-standing graveyard. This is certainly given credence by the concentrated presence of the sculpture here, by the presence of Vanora's Mound in the graveyard and by the discovery of cist burials close to this mound in the early 19th century (and possibly in association with cross-slabs 1 and 2).⁸ A suggestion that the earliest phase burials were close to the settlement site is raised by the report of a souterrain, observed in 1878 partially beneath the manse garden and under the road in front of it.

I will return to Vanora and her mound below. Suffice to say here that the mound is clearly a burial mound. It could be prehistoric in date but almost certainly represents the earliest phase of Pictish burial on the site, either as a new cairn or as a re-used prehistoric one. Recent study of the landscape context of the Inchyra symbol stone and the St Madoes cross-slab demonstrated that early medieval church foundations and sculptures were no strangers to prehistoric cemeteries. The Inchyra stone was found capping a burial next to a Bronze Age cairn and less than half-a-mile away a further such cairn was visible until the late 19th century, when it was excavated by Hutcheson.⁹ We know that the Picts living in Meigle were attuned to an ancestral presence as they re-used a prehistoric standing stone with cup-marks for the magnificent cross-slab no. 1.

We know that for people of high status burial under round and square barrows was not uncommon in the mid-first millennium AD. From aerial photography of cropmark sites, over 70 barrow cemeteries have been identified across Scotland, with a noticeable concentration across Tayside.¹⁰ Significant examples have been excavated at Redcastle, Lunan Bay, Angus; Forteviot, Perthshire and, most recently in local terms, at Bankhead of Kinloch, just 3km, less than 2 miles, west of Meigle, and excavated in 2012.¹¹ The site included both round and square barrows, which appear to be Pictish but closer dating is pending post-excavation analysis and carbon dating.

We can readily envisage such a cemetery in Meigle being utilised by several generations of privileged, elite individuals (cf. Redcastle). Within the mounds, bodies may have been interred in textile coverings, in stone-lined cists or in wooden coffins. The organic materiality of these traditions rarely

8 Jervise 1859, 245.

9 Hall 2012, 94; Hutcheson 1903, 238-9.

10 Alexander 2005, 105-7 (and without equating female with low status); see also Winlow 2011 and Grieg *et al.* 2000.

11 For Redcastle see Alexander 2005. I am grateful to Martin Cook for discussing the Bank Head barrows, the final report of which is forthcoming in the *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*. For the Forteviot excavations, see Campbell and Driscoll forthcoming.

survives. We know though from a tenth-century Irish elegy that in the late 7th century, the Pictish king Bridei was buried in a 'block of hollow withered oak'.¹² Folk of much lower status were less elaborately dealt with; close to Redcastle, at Hawkhill, three female burials of the 6th-9th centuries were found in a simple pit dug into the site occupied by an Iron Age round-house and souterrain.¹³

The sculpture at Meigle is certainly a product of Christianisation, representing a later phase of burial tradition in Meigle serving the needs of the social elite in an evolving political context. The new traditions had a measure of respect for previous ones, as a sense of ancestry lent legitimacy to a new political structure. The deliberate retention of what later became known as Vanora's Mound (see Figure 4) is an indication of this, as is the creation of Meigle 1 if we can assume its incarnation as a standing stone marked some aspect of an older cemetery. Whilst the Pictish stone burial monuments in Meigle may well have furnished entirely new graves, we cannot rule out that some were additions to reused graves, with or without the insertion of new burials. The later Vanora tradition is an important reflex of this, indicative of an existing cemetery landscape of mounds and sculptures, adapted to Arthurian tale-telling as a method of defining a community identity (as will be discussed further below). We might, in fact, think of the sculptures as community heirlooms, an important way in which new meanings could be articulated for old things.¹⁴

The characteristic, defining monument type at Meigle is the so-called recumbent monument. The importance of this group has been long recognised and no one has done more to explore their meanings than Isabel Henderson. Across Scotland there are some 12 or so such presumed gravestones, though none has yet been found in association with a contemporary grave. Meigle has four examples, numbers 9, 11, 12 and 26. Generally they are wedge-shaped, tapering towards the foot end. Meigle also has a variant (in no. 25) of the so-called 'hogback' gravestone, in origin from an Anglo-Scandinavian recumbent tradition. This is in some respects perhaps the most unique monument to survive in Meigle (see Figure 2a-b). It is certainly very different from the other early members of the Scottish hogback corpus,¹⁵ so given how poorly understood the whole group is and the fact that it encompasses a variety of monuments that is rather obfuscated by the title, it is perhaps time we did not think of the Meigle example as a hogback but simply a recumbent monument.

12 *Betha Adamnáin* (regarded by some as taking poetic license given its late date).

13 Alexander 2005, 107

14 cf. Gilchrist 2013 on medieval heirlooms.

15 Ritchie 1994, Ritchie 2004, Crawford 2006, Lang 1975, Lang 1984, Lang 1994.



Figure 2. Meigle 10 (Mark Hall)

This problem has been recognised for some time¹⁶ and re-conceptualisation of the term and the sculptures is underway.¹⁷ The tegulated or tile pattern on Meigle 25 is the key link to hogbacks, but in this case does not define this monument as a hogback. Its overall shape echoes the Pictish recumbents and the defining serpent or dragon that runs the medial length of the upper surface also carries Pictish echoes. It was noted above how little we still know about burial monuments and furniture just before and during the conversion period.¹⁸ It was also noted that documentary sources indicate that King Bridei was buried in a wooden coffin. It may have been such established traditions that informed this idiosyncratic monument at Meigle. Other parts of Europe are more fortunate in having survivals of these traditions. Instructive here is a series of Alemannic wooden coffins from SW Germany. One of them, a child's, is on display in the Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart. It dates to the sixth century and was excavated (as grave 259) in Kreiss Tuttlingen, Oberflacht (Figure 3). The coffin lid has sloped slides and the flat upper

16 Ritchie 2004.

17 I am grateful to Lesley Abrams for discussing with me the problem of hogbacks and for sharing with me a draft of her paper, in preparation, *The Problem of the Hogbacks*.

18 Notwithstanding recent upsurges in our knowledge and understanding, particularly evidenced by Maldonado 2011.



Figure 3. Oberflacht wooden coffin. (Landesmuseum Stuttgart)

surface is filled with a two-headed serpent or dragon (with a head at either end), clearly protective in the manner of Meigle. A total of 58 wooden coffins were excavated, several bearing this two-headed serpent design.¹⁹ Although the Meigle serpent does not have two heads Pictish art was no stranger to dual headedness; Henderson has observed that ‘all Pictish representations of griffins have heads on the end of their tails’.²⁰ The sixth century was a period of conversion in Alemannia and such coffins as well as preserving an older tradition may have been understood differently in a conversion episode. The shaping of the wooden coffin, through a skeuomorphic process, may have led to stone monuments comparable to that at Meigle. Continental traditions

19 I am grateful to Dr Klaus Georg Kokkotidis of the Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart, for information on the coffins and permission to reproduce the image. See also Paulsen 1992 (on the wooden coffins) and Schiek 1992 (on the excavations). The excavations took place in the late 19th century and only a handful of the coffins survive, scattered across several museums (with four in the Landesmuseum Württemberg). For a useful English summary of the Oberflacht evidence, see Carver and Fern 2005, 290-8, where it is used to elucidate the wooden coffin remains of Sutton Hoo Mound 17 (*ibid.*, 132-53).

20 Henderson 1996, 27.

also include tegulated, recumbent monuments. In the church of Saint-Loyers des Champs, near Argentan, Normandy is the raised tomb of St Lotharius (Loyer). Long-house shaped with a tegulated roof and plain, hipped, short sides, it also has an access hole cut through at one end where the roof meets the straight side beneath. Crook suggests that this gave the faithful access to the holy relics beneath,²¹ possibly including strips of cloth, so-called *brandea*. Crawford discusses the spread of similar shrine tombs in Scandinavia, citing several 11th century examples including Botkyrkja, Sweden, and Norderhov, Norway, noting the ultimate inspiration as Late Antique 'houses of the dead'.²² The house-shape and the use of tiling need not exclusively signal Scandinavian taste; it may be drawing inspiration from existing house-shaped recumbent monuments (paralleled by elaborate house-shaped metalwork shrines) and older traditions in wood. However as part of the process of Scandinavian acculturation and assimilation we are seeing, these elements clearly had an appeal in northern Britain. Hogbacks may in part be a response to or be inspired by already established monumental stone shrines in and around churches. In some cases bears were added as end supporters and that this served to express a new cultural context, a bringing in of something to the Christian fold, is perhaps worth further exploration outwith this paper. However, where we encounter such monuments, as at Meigle, we are not necessarily seeing Scandinavian burials or patronage but an expression of older indigenous tastes, possibly hybridised with developing Scandinavian fashions in northern Britain.

The Pictish recumbents exhibit a narrow slot cut into the head end of the upper face, a feature that also defines recumbents as composite monuments. In other words the slot was primarily intended to hold an upright cross, possibly of wood or perhaps a small, elaborate housing for a relic. Being removable, these may have facilitated the addition, on special occasions, of objects associated with the deceased. The large, square, off-set recess on the end face of Meigle 11 is often regarded as a much later modification of the stone, possibly related to reuse as masonry, but, as the Hendersons have observed, 'it could have held a metal attachment to secure a venerable object to the surface of the slab. There were two such attachments on the west face of St John's cross on Iona.'²³ Thus we can also say that it is possible that recumbents also served a secondary, reliquary, role through these recesses.

Meigle 26, like the other recumbents, has a rich repertoire of images including a hunt scene, fabulous monsters and devouring beasts. This is often

21 Crook 2011, 54 and pl. 3.3.

22 Crawford 2005, 7.

23 Henderson and Henderson 2004, 200.

interpreted as violent and secular and thus in keeping with the presumed secular nature of the site.²⁴ That said, we should be a little wary of not seeing Christian storytelling and symbolism in secular and violent scenes. The hunt, for example, was a widely recognised metaphor of Christian conversion from Late Antique times.²⁵ The bears devouring a human on side panel A are fully amenable to a Christian, Biblical interpretation.²⁶ In *Kings 2* (23-25) the Elisha Cycle tells of the incident at Bethel: 'while he was on the road-up, some small boys came out of the town, and jeered at him. 'Go up bald head!' they shouted, 'Go up bald head!' He turned round and looked at them, and he cursed them, in the name of Yahweh. And two she-bears came out of the wood and savaged 42 of the boys.' In addition, *Wisdom 11:18* talks of God exacting vengeance on idolaters by unleashing savage lions or hordes of bears upon them.

Leaving the recumbents, the other site-defining and more plentiful monument type at Meikle is the cross-slab, of which there is a huge diversity in size and subject matter, though some are only fragments. Of course, the use of some of them as grave markers, either in a primary or secondary role, cannot be ruled out, and we can perhaps incline to accept some of the smaller examples as being eminently suitable as upright grave markers. This is not to exclude other possibilities. Christine Maddern's study of early medieval name stones from a series of Northumbrian cemeteries (including Lindisfarne and Hartlepool) posits the idea that some of the stones may have actually been placed in the grave. This is quite a long-lived phenomenon in the biography of sculptures: in 1908 Macalister observed that at Clonmacnoise, Ireland, 'the local peasantry' adapted the remains of early medieval sculpture, with which they were enamoured, as new tombstones, including 'burying them with the coffin in newly-made graves.'²⁷

For size, range of imagery and sheer ebullience the two key cross-slabs are numbers 1 and 2. Both the main faces are defined by their slab-filling crosses in high-relief carving, especially no. 2, which is redolent, as suggested above, of metalwork crosses covered in precious stones, known in Latin as a *Crux Gemmata* or 'jewelled cross.'²⁸ Both cross-slabs are populated by familiar elements of Pictish art: hybrid monsters; scenes of the hunt; and, on no. 1, mirror and comb, snake and horizontal z-rod, salmon, Pictish beast (which occurs several times at Meikle, including on at least one lost stone) and horse's head Pictish symbols.

24 Henderson 1982.

25 For example, Loverance 2007, 142-4.

26 RCAHMS 1994, 101, illus. D.

27 Maddern 2013; Macalister 1908, quoted in Swift 1994, 24.

28 Henderson 1982.

Significantly there are two pieces of sculpture (10 and 22), one (10) now lost, that confirm the presence of an impressive building. Meigle 22 appears to have been part of an architectural frieze, its excellent state of preservation suggesting it may have been an interior rather than an exterior frieze. Its central figure has been interpreted as a depiction of the horned Celtic god Cernunnos,²⁹ but as Henderson has pointed out, 'a figure clasping long coils of hair and having interlaced fish-tail legs can be interpreted more mundanely as a three-dimensional rendering of a *Book of Kells* fantasy.'³⁰ Sadly lost is Meigle 10. Its original function may have been as a panel for a shrine or, more likely, a screen, either across the chancel or defining an area in the nave. It is worth noting that cross-slab no. 2 has tenon-like projections down the sides (and across the top) which may have allowed it to be fitted into a screen,³¹ but equally may have facilitated the holding of the sculpture in a wooden frame whilst the sculptor worked on it. Prior to its loss, Meigle 10 attracted a good deal of attention from antiquarians, probably because of its unique depiction of a two-wheeled, covered cart, which may represent Elisha ascending to heaven,³² albeit the presence of a third person in the cart problematises that interpretation,³³ and the accompanying, devouring bear may be another Elisha reference. Long regarded as a unique depiction of a wheeled vehicle, it has been joined by the identification of a similar vehicle on the recently conserved Skinnet stone, now on display in the new Caithness Horizons Museum in Thurso.³⁴ Though perhaps originally intended as a panel, Meigle 10 had several re-uses recorded in post-medieval documentation. It formed part of Vanora's monument in the graveyard and later was used in the Stables Court building in the village. It was removed from there in the 1830s and placed in the church for protection; ironically it was destroyed there in the fire that consumed the church in 1869 (a church which had only been rebuilt a century earlier). Both pieces of sculpture suggest an impressive stone church, though not necessarily a monastery. We know that from at least the twelfth century the church was dedicated to St Peter. This does not prove its earlier dedication,

29 Mackenzie 1929. The interpretation was repeated by Ross 1974, 185-6. Hicks 1993, 149, interprets the figure as a siren.

30 Henderson 1982, 96.

31 As observed by Ritchie 1995, 5-6.

32 An observation first made by Anderson 1891, 158-9. For early antiquarian drawings, see, for example, those of Charlotte Hibbert, reproduced in Henry and Trench-Jellicoe 2005, figure 15.7.

33 Aglen 1926, 5.

34 I am grateful to John Borland for drawing my attention to the identification of the wheeled vehicle on the Skinnet stone. For comparison, see the pair of chariots depicted on the lower panel of the east face of the base of the Cross of the Scriptures, Clonmacnoise, Ireland (Harbison 1992, 48-53, figs 132-5; Stalley 1996, pl. 5a).

but Peter is a recognised early dedication and may lend some weight to an important early church. Although a monastic establishment is doubtful we do know there were scribes working in Meigle in the 9th century. One of the scribes was named Chana (son of Bargoth) and he is referred to in one of the versions of the St Andrews foundation legend as writing in Meigle for King Pherath (or Urad or Ferat), who reigned 839-42. The same king is mentioned on one of the St Vigean sculptures, no. 1, the so-called Drosten stone.³⁵ The presence of Chana (or Thana)³⁶ the scribe could indicate a monastic scriptorium, but given that the reference also describes Meigle or *Migdele* as a *villa* it seems much more likely that Meigle was the centre of a (royal?) estate, presumably boasting a royal hall or palace, an essential part of which would have been a royal chapel or church. The scribe's name is certainly Gaelic and suggests that perhaps the new language was taking hold there, to replace Pictish. At any rate it is certainly in marked contrast with the concentrated survival of Pictish place names around Meigle. Analysis by Simon Taylor has revealed that Meigle and its hinterland boasts a clutch of Pictish and Pictish derived names, essentially describing or rooted in the names of landscape elements,³⁷ a concentrated survival indicating that Gaelic was slower to replace Pictish than in some other places. Meigle itself was *Migdele*, from **mig*, 'bog' and *dol*, 'water meadow', giving 'the water meadow by the bog', and suggestive of productive land for pasture. The Pictish names in the area include Coupar (from *Cooper*, 'confluence'); Cardean (from **cair*, 'fort' or **carden*, 'wood' or 'enclosure/encampment'); Airlie (from **are*, 'east of') and Newtyle and Nevay (from Old Celtic *nemeton*, 'sacred place', Gaelicised as *neimhidh* or *neimheadh*). Taylor has suggested (at the Meigle Day Conference) that what may have permitted this concentrated survival of Pictish names around Meigle was the relative political and ecclesiastical neglect from the eleventh century onwards. Although on the border between the dioceses of Dunkeld and St Andrews, Meigle was equally remote from the centres of both dioceses and so, though clearly significant, possibly of lesser importance in the early years of the Gaelic-speaking kingdom of Alba. Perhaps this relative neglect meant that the in-roads of Gaelic suggested by the presence of Thana/Chana were not accompanied by the social or tenurial changes which produced place-name replacement elsewhere.

35 Clancy 1993; see also Geddes, forthcoming.

36 Taylor and Márkus 2009, 575, give Chana and Thana as orthographic variants in different manuscript versions of the St Andrews Foundation Legend B. In their introduction to Legend B they give 'Thana or Chana, son of Dudabrach' (p. 565), and in their translation of the text give 'Cano son of Dudabrach' (p. 579).

37 For the full analysis of Pictish naming elements, see Taylor 2011, 67-120.

The Later Medieval Period

Given what I have already said about Meigle 10, this is a fitting point to turn to the later medieval use of the sculptures. My focus in doing so will be Vanora's Mound (see Figure 4) and Meigle's role as an Arthurian cult centre.



Figure 4. Vanora's Mound, Meigle churchyard. (Mark Hall)

Documentary references going back to the early sixteenth century and the pen of historian Hector Boece described the Mound, furnished with elements of Pictish sculpture.³⁸ These were probably at least numbers 2, 10, 11 and 12 and possibly some of the smaller fragments, some of them probably added over time rather than in a single construction phase. This sepulchral monument was regarded as being the tomb of King Arthur's Queen, Guinevere, known locally as Vanora or Wanda.³⁹ The story narrates that she had been abducted

38 Boece's account is discussed in Stuart 1867, 22. Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum* was published in 1527. A hypertext critical edition by D F Sutton of the 1575 edition is available, in Latin and English, at <http://www.philological.bham.ac.uk/boece/>

39 *Ibid* (for Wanda) Taylor and Márkus 2009, 600, have shown that Macquarie's assertion (1992, 123) that *monumentum* in the St Andrew's Foundation Legend B meant a royal burial in Meigle (with an inference of the placing of sculpture) is a misinterpretation of the text, which instead refers to a possibly genuine document recording a mid-9th century grant of land to St Andrews. They note that the same word, *monumentum*, is used in version A of the Foundation Legend to describe 'Alexander I's act of having an Arab steed led to the altar of St Andrew to symbolise and fix the memory of his grants of land and other rights to the church there. This mirrors, in grander fashion, King Hungus's act of carrying a divot to the same altar to symbolise basically the same grant.'



Figure 5. Meigle 2 cross-slab, face D, once interpreted as showing Vanora's fate. (Mark Hall)

by the evil Pictish king Modred and held prisoner at Barry hillfort, 3 miles to the north. Rescued by Arthur she was deemed to have been somewhat too willing a captive of Modred's and so she was sentenced to be torn apart by wild beasts, the folk interpretation put upon the Daniel in the Lion's Den scene on the back of Meigle 2 (see Figure 5). This legend is variously reported by later antiquarians, as we will see when we turn to our third biographical snapshot. For now I want to stick with the medieval phase of the re-purposing of at least some of the sculpture (see Figure 6). Rather than dismiss this imaginative reinvention of the mound and its attendant sculpture as a misguided local episode, I offer a different view of it as one rooted in international cultural ideas and demonstrative of the fluidity of meanings that attach to material culture. Such meanings frequently change with alterations in social context and circumstance.

One element of the story recorded by Boece notes that if any woman walked across the mound she would become barren. Later accounts (discussed below) suggest an inscription to that effect. This rather smacks of a late addition to the story, one aimed at trying to control folk practice around the site, a practice more likely to invoke the mound as bringing fertility rather than barrenness, one which perhaps proto-Reformation and Reformation Church authorities



Figure 6. Artist's impression of the later use of sculpture around Vanora's Mound (Mark Hall)

sought to control. A fertility ritual is much more in keeping with medieval folk practices, which as popular expressions around Arthurian legends across Europe were current from at least the 12th century. Such interest is certainly testified to by the monk historian Lambert of St Omer, Normandy. He wrote his encyclopaedia, *Liber Floridus*, or 'Book of Flowers', between 1090x1120.⁴⁰ The universal history section of the *Liber Floridus* notes that there was a 'palace of the soldier Arthur in Britain, in the country of the Picts, constructed with marvellous art and variety, in which may be seen sculptured all his deeds and wars.' This has been widely accepted as a description of Arthur's O'on,⁴¹ a Roman temple at Carron, near the Antonine Wall. It was visited by king Edward I c1296, one legend suggesting he renamed it after King Arthur, in reality probably an acknowledgment of an existing attribution. There is also a reference to the site as 'furnum Arthur' in a 1293 charter of Newbattle Abbey, Midlothian.⁴² The surviving drawings do not show the traces of sculpture – eagles, victories and inscriptions – that had been recorded. Although I take on board the observation by the Hendersons⁴³ that what survives at Meigle does not fully tally with the *Liber's* description, it seems worth pointing out that neither do the descriptions of Arthur's O'on and given that we are left with only a small part of what was probably at Meigle (even in the twelfth century) it is tempting to wonder if Meigle as an Arthurian cult centre was being described by the *Liber Floridus*.

Meigle certainly had other elements of such a cult. Three miles south-east of Meigle lies the mansion of Arthurstone, originally Scots, *Arthur Stane*, its name derived from the huge standing stone (presumably a glacial erratic) which was removed in 1791 for the construction of Arthurbank Farm, and its location recorded (as 'Stone of Arthur') on Stobie's map of 1783.⁴⁴ *Arthurstane* occurs in the documentary record as early as 1460, when it is cited in the rental book of Coupar Angus Abbey⁴⁵ and, therefore, is solid evidence that the Meigle Arthur stories were not literary inventions by Boece (though he may have introduced elaborations of course).

40 For the *Liber Floridus*, see Delisle 1903 and the Ghent University website: <http://www.liberfloridus.be/> See also Dumville 1976.

41 Steer 1960, 91; Loomis 1957, 4; Padel 1994, 6.

42 Hall 2006, 61.

43 Henderson and Henderson 2004, 220-1.

44 Stobie, *Counties of Perth and Clackmannanshire*.

45 I am grateful to Simon Taylor for sharing his work with me on the *Arthurstane* name and its reference in *C.A. Rent. i* no. 124. The rental also refers (*C.A. Rent. i* no. 13) to a *Croftarthur*, presumably near to the stone. These are significant additions of evidence to my previous discussion of the Arthur cult manifest at Meigle: Hall 2005, 81-4, and additional references there.

The naming of elements in the landscape after Arthur and the very physical construction of Vanora's tomb on top of or around her Mound, as well as making sense of the sculpture in Meigle, suggests visitors may have been both expected and encouraged to see and interact with that landscape and its monuments, as clearly happened with Arthur's O'on, already mentioned. They are not the only examples of Arthuriana in Scotland, and we might also mention the 12th-century tale, *Fergus of Galloway*⁴⁶ and the Church of St Mary, Stow, in Wedale in the Borders. According to a marginal note added in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century to the *Historia Brittonum* of Nennius,⁴⁷ Arthur brought to the church, from Jerusalem, an image of the Virgin (apparently used on his shield to bring victory in a battle at Stow), fragments of which were preserved there. Such physical material culture manifestations of Arthur are a very direct parallel for the profusion of material culture essential to the cult of saints. It also encompassed the discovery of Arthur's remains at Glastonbury Abbey, round tables at Winchester, Rome and Jerusalem, the skull of Gawain, the mantle of Craddock, and the swords of Lancelot and Arthur.⁴⁸ Such legendary, heroic, relics were often held in churches and gave widespread pilgrimage traffic using such places the opportunity to see holy shrines and relics of Christian heroes and their lives. The adaptation of an already semi-legendary and mythical figure into the historicisation of the British against Anglo-Saxon struggle helps to explain the persistence and development of the idea of Arthur beyond that early medieval period focus.⁴⁹ Geoffrey of Monmouth's imaginative additions certainly helped to popularise internationally the matter of Arthur, although such popularisation was not confined to book transmission but is also exemplified by the embodying of tales within local communities. Meigle remains a particularly vivid example. As has been recently observed medieval people appear to have accepted figures such as Arthur as being as historical as Charlemagne or Alexander, but also used them 'as a way to enter an ideal and imaginary world which they could try to reproduce or at least copy and paste to their own present society.'⁵⁰

The Post-Medieval and Modern Period

The Vanora episode continues beyond the later medieval period and excites antiquarian interest in Meigle from the late seventeenth century. At

46 Guillaume Le Clerc, *Fergus of Galloway*; Hall and Owen 1998.

47 For the Arthurian Wedale reference in the *Historia Brittonum*, see Stuart 1867, lxvii; for fuller discussion, see Dumville 1976 and Clancy 2000.

48 Fleming 2000, 30.

49 Green 2007.

50 Cangemi and Corbellari 2012, 52.

that time the Rev. Kirkwood recorded the Vanora legend, briefly describing cross-slab number 2 and Vanora's death-scene. He also described a second gravestone, presumably cross-slab no. 1, as marking the place where her servants were buried. Around the same time an anonymous account collected for *MacFarlane's Geographical Collections* reported the Vanora connection and noted her dwelling place as Barrey (*sic*) Hill, 3 miles to the north. In 1726 and 1727 antiquary Alexander Gordon published his account of Scotland's Roman remains, the *Itinerarium Septentrionale or A journey through most of the counties of Scotland and those in the north of England* and in it noted the Vanora tradition connected to several stones in the churchyard at Miggle (*sic*).⁵¹ In 1772 Thomas Pennant wrote, in his *Tour of Scotland*, of the belief that the grave had once been surrounded by three stones forming a triangle although by the time of his visit they had been 'removed to different places'. In connection with this, Pennant's illustrator, Moses Griffiths, produced an engraving of the Meigle 10 slab.⁵² In 1765 the poet Thomas Gray, in his words '...passed through Megill, where the tomb of Queen Wanders, that was riven to dethe by staned-horses for nae gude that she did, so the women there told me, I'm sure.'⁵³ In 1795 the *Statistical Account* described Vanora's tomb as a grand sepulchre, but interprets it rather than describes it, as having been composed of lots of stones skilfully bound together. It goes on to note that 'many other stones, which originally belonged to the monument, have been carried off or broken in pieces, by the inhabitants of this place.'⁵⁴ Before the end of the 18th century then we seem to have the end of folk practices (or at least their giving ground to Enlightenment antiquarianism) around the so-called Vanora's Mound. With the loss of this significance a more utilitarian re-use of the sculptured fragments took over and various fragments were built into the church, the manse, a malting kiln and a stables building. Skene's drawings of 1832 record some of these remains in situ. Skene notes that Meigle 10 was built into the wall at Stable Court or mews, cross-slabs 1 and 2 were in the churchyard, recumbent 12 was built into the manse, recumbent 11 was upright in the churchyard, where recumbent 9 was prone, with both being built into Stable Court shortly afterwards.⁵⁵

Stable Court was part of Meigle House, then the residence of Patrick Murray, who was a great advocate of the stones. It seems as if he had Meigle

51 Gordon 1726; Kirkwood and MacFarlane's accounts are recorded in Campbell 1975, 46 and 47-8 (edited from MS Carte 269 in the Bodleian Library), and also Mitchell and Clark (eds) 1907, 220.

52 Pennant 1772, 177-78 and plate XVIII (*sic*.)

53 Gray's visit is noted in Henderson and Henderson 2004, 220 and fn 66, with reference to Toynbee and Whibley (eds) 1935, II, 891.

54 See OSA 1799, 426-7, for the decayed state of Vanora's tomb.

55 Skene 1832.

10 and the other stones built into the walls of Stable Court removed; it was there that Charlotte Hibbert must have done her drawing. This is a point of information established by David Henry, which corrects the assumption that it was at Arthurstone House.⁵⁶ In fact Murray did not acquire Arthurstone until c1835, after he was visited by both Hibbert and Skene. Before leaving Meigle House Murray had the stones placed in the church for safe keeping only for them to be lost in the fire of 1869, along with several pieces that had been long before built into the church walls. The silver lining of this particular cloud was that the fire revealed several additional pieces of sculpture not previously recorded, namely Meigle 6, 7, 26, and 27, along with several pieces already recorded as part of the fabric of the church, namely Meigle 20-22 and also 3. Both Jastresbski and Gibbs, the illustrators respectively of Chalmers's *The ancient sculptured monuments of the county of Angus including those at Meigle in Perthshire...* (published in 1848) and of Stuart's *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* volume 1 (published in 1856) showed Meigle 3 with a tenon, which it had lost between the fire and its recording for Allen and Anderson's *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (published in 1903). The tenon is thought to have been cut during the early medieval period because its measurements would fit a socketed recumbent slab, but it may have been modified during the later medieval period as part of Vanora's monument.

There is at least one other Vanora episode in Meigle. In the 1920s the Meigle branch of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute made themselves a new banner, of blue felt with sewn-on silk panels. The border panels of animals and abstract motifs are stylistically influenced by a variety of 'iconic' examples of early medieval art, including the Book of Kells and the Bayeux Tapestry. The central panel depicts Queen Vanora in a contemporary Art Deco style (the Meigle branch was founded in 1928) with a lion to right and left and in poses of worship rather than immanent violence (see Figure 7). At the same time the branch worked on a book, *Our Meigle Book*, published in 1932, encompassing local history and folklore, including Vanora. The local interest in Vanora was clearly strong and, as depicted here, she is a symbol of pride in an ancient past, one that could be seen to exemplify a strong woman with whom it was suitable for a women's society to be identified.

The mid-19th century saw a flurry of antiquarian recording activity, including by Chalmers, Stuart, Hibbert and Skene, with the period ending fittingly with the detailed recording of Allen and Anderson's *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* published in 1903.⁵⁷ However, that is not where the

56 As noted in Henry and Trench-Jellicoe 2005, 232.

57 Chalmers 1848; Stuart 1854; Skene 1832; ECMS 1903. The most detailed account of Hibbert's interactions with the Meigle stones is Henry and Trench-Jellicoe 2005.



Figure 7. Meigle Women's Rural Institute branch banner, 1920s (Mark Hall)

story ends, as further fragments (Meigle 8, 14, 30, 31 32, 33) were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. Meigle 8, found outside the schoolhouse in 1888, is a fragment of a cross-slab. Meigle 30 was first recorded in *ECMS* and remains undetermined; it may be part of a scroll, part of a serpent or part of ram's horn, possibly from a cross-slab, possibly from a panel. Meigle 14, part of a cross-slab (a second piece of which was lost in the fire), and Meigle 32 were both first recorded by S Cruden in 1964.⁵⁸ Meigle 33, part of a distinctive cross-of-arcs cross-slab, was found in 1989 in the graveyard by the redoubtable Niall Robertson.⁵⁹ Scholarship on the sculptures reached a new plateau in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, with defining and lasting contributions from: Anna Ritchie, with her 1995 paper on Meigle in volume 1 of the *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal*; Isabel Henderson, in various papers, including her exploration of *Pictish Art and the Book of Kells*, and books, notably their 2004 magnum opus, *The Art of the Picts*, written with George Henderson; and the RCAHMS, with illustrations by John Borland, in their 1991 survey of SE Perthshire.⁶⁰

The other key development at the end of the 19th century was the acquisition of the schoolhouse to serve as a museum, which took place shortly after the fire (and was certainly up and running before 1888 when John Reid visited).⁶¹ The schoolhouse was converted for the display of the sculptures by the local laird, Sir John Kinloch, a modern equivalent to those 9th-century lay patrons. Just as the Arthurian cult site brought visitors in the medieval period, so this fresh heap of the sculptures – and I mean that in a good way – sought to bring visitors into Meigle to celebrate the sculptures from a different perspective, in the cultural context of post-Enlightenment education and a refashioning of local identity as an aspect of national identity. This appearance, though certainly recognisable today, is not as unchanging as it seems and in reality has been revised or revamped several times in an attempt to widen the social access to and appreciation of the Meigle sculptures and their significance. In 1947 a major re-ordering required an entirely new floor to be built in the museum, recorded in several photographs (available online at the RCAHMS Canmore website). Less drastic revamps have taken place in the last few decades, with minor adjustments to plinths, layout and lighting levels. In 1997 a long overdue new guide book appeared, penned by

58 Cruden 1964.

59 Robertson 1989.

60 Ritchie 1995; Henderson 1982; Henderson and Henderson 2004, especially 93-6; RCAHMS 1994.

61 Reid 1889, 232.

Anna Ritchie and usefully summarising in an accessible way much of the new thinking (including her own of course) on the sculptures.⁶²

Quo Vadis?⁶³

But what about the future for the Meikle stones and for Pictish and early medieval studies more generally? Well if the audience for the April 2013 Scottish Society for Northern Studies Early Medieval Meikle Conference and the similarly over-subscribed audience for the Scotland in Early Medieval Europe Conference held by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in February 2013 are anything to go by the future is bright. There is clearly a huge appetite for finding out about this part of our shared past. This will no doubt be fuelled by the on-going Scottish Archaeological Research Framework (ScARF) project⁶⁴ inviting the widest possible collaboration and by the strength of integrated scholarship in Scotland's archaeological institutions. Vocal public support is vital for the momentum to be maintained, especially in these challenging economic circumstances. However, narrowing the focus a little to Meikle and Pictish sculpture, what might be explored in the years ahead. Drawing the various strands together we might point to three, interlinked aspects: biography, landscape and performance.

Highly desirable is the wider application of a cultural biography approach and linked to that a fuller exploration of the landscape context in which the monuments reside. This twin approach has the scope to both deepen our fine grained understanding of how the function and purpose of sculpture changed within early medieval times as well as capturing the ongoing, reinvented importance of these stones down to our own times, often punctuated by long periods of neglect and forgetfulness. Several studies of Perthshire monuments, including those at Crieff, Forteviot and St Madoes,⁶⁵ have shown a rich vein of analysis here, but further afield we have the recent study of the Strathdon landscape by Ian Fraser and Strat Halliday⁶⁶ and the soon to be published study of the sculpture from neighbouring St Vigeans,⁶⁷

62 Ritchie 1997. The most recent guide to the Meikle stones is the much condensed one, 'Guide to Meikle', based around colour photographs, included in Harden 2010, 70-6.

63 In the apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (Vercelli Acts XXXV, trans. James 1924), Peter asks this question of Christ, whom he meets in vision as he attempts to flee Rome in the face of the threat of crucifixion. Peter returns to Rome to be crucified upside-down. I use the St. Peter association and the intent of the question to extend its meaning to cover the possible future of the Meikle sculptures.

64 For the medieval section of ScARF, see <http://www.scottishheritagehub.com/content/medieval> (the medieval church is discussed particularly at section 4.4).

65 Hall *et al.* 2000; Hall 2012; Hall 2011; Hall and Scott forthcoming.

66 Fraser and Halliday 2007; Fraser and Halliday 2011.

67 Geddes forthcoming.

a site and sculpture collection that the understanding of which has been so reinvigorated by the lively, imaginative and engaging re-display of the stones in 2010. Before this renewal at St Vigean, the sculptures at Whithorn were re-displayed, a big improvement on the previous displays.⁶⁸ Hilton of Cadboll was explored in great, rewarding detail;⁶⁹ and since then Nigg has been re-conserved and re-displayed in 2013, followed shortly afterwards by the re-display of the early and later medieval sculptures of Iona in the Abbey Stones Museum⁷⁰ and the on-going redisplay of the sculptures at Govan. Meikle is on the agenda for a re-display, and hopefully it will be one that preserves the airiness and intimacy of the space, which in turn facilitates such close contact with the material.

Although the critical issue of the nature of the early medieval settlement (including its Church and burial practices) at Meikle remains open and has certainly not been solved by the sculpture beyond there clearly being a church there, it will remain pivotal for a further exploration of the nature of the settlement at Meikle. The documentary references to Meikle are now accepted as pointing to a royal centre or estate, complete with royal scribe (see discussion above) and certainly with a church (which by the twelfth century was in non-royal hands, being donated to St Andrews by Simon de Meikle c1178x1187).⁷¹ That same donation charter also tells us that the church had a chapel adjacent, a chapel which speculation suggests may have been the reliquary shrine of a particular saint. The dedication of the church to St Peter is perfectly acceptable as an early dedication, but doubt has been expressed on this point.⁷² In any event any reliquary chapel is most likely to have carried a dedication to an Insular saint. There are other possibilities; although described as a chapel in the twelfth century it may have had a different, original function. Henderson postulates the possibility of a baptistery from the iconographical links of Meikle 22.⁷³ The nature of early medieval church and monastic sites in Britain and Ireland has received much investigation in recent years, with vital contributions from the excavation campaigns at Whithorn, Portmahomack, Inchmarnock and the Isle of May, with additional studies exploring other evidence sources – texts, sculptures and placenames – notably at Deer, Aberdeenshire. The breadth of the evidence is such that the hitherto uniform

68 Hall 2007.

69 James *et al.* 2008.

70 Hall 2013 and Yeoman 2013.

71 *RRS ii*, 254-55; Macquarrie 1992, 123-24; Geddes forthcoming.

72 Mackinlay 1910, 221; Ritchie 1995, 4-5, for the caution on assuming an early dedication.

73 Cowan 1967, 145; Ritchie 1995, 4-5; Geddes forthcoming discusses the wider pattern of early churches and reliquary chapels. Henderson 1996, 9-10, discusses baptism iconography around M 22.



Figures 8 a&b. a Detail of masked figure on Meigle 11, b Detail of dog-mask on Meigle 1. (Mark Hall)

notion of a monastic establishment has begun to be questioned and refined.⁷⁴ There are ample resources (sculpture, placenames, text references and undoubtedly archaeology) which justify a major archaeological investigation to extend significantly our understanding of the spatial and operational dynamics of the church at Meigle, embedded in the landscape and in networks of power and especially royal patronage.

The third aspect I hope to see take flight is a fuller exploration of the way sculptures can articulate performance. Whether it is connected to the original phase of use of a monument or to later reuses, many sculptures record several aspects of performance (as the Vanora 'episode' at Meigle shows), and something I have recently explored through the question of mask depiction in Pictish sculpture,⁷⁵ reminding us that we need to see sculpture as embedded within its society of production; it was not just erected to be passively looked at but to be thought about, imagined about, and when appropriate used within a community's rituals and ceremonies.⁷⁶ On one of the long-sides of the recumbent Meigle 11 three high-stepping horses and their riders form a line and close behind them, partly tucked up into the top-right corner is a human-hybrid figure holding two serpents and possibly wearing an animal mask (see Figure 8a). Meigle 1, face C, includes a dog's head (shown upper left, just below the salmon's tail), perhaps a symbol but its stylised terminals are suggestive of a hooded dog-mask (see Figure 8b). There is no contradiction between the Pictish taste for hybridity in their art and the use and depiction of masks. Masks themselves are another facet of hybridity. As has been observed by Hedeager, 'masks that combine features of both sexes, or masks that have both animal and human attributes, are known from a wide group of pre-industrial societies where they communicate esoteric knowledge and *sacra*, the symbolic template of the whole system of values in a given culture. In these cultures masking is associated with 'rites of passage' or other rituals marking change and transformation and the masks themselves are regarded as objective embodiments of power or the capacity to will their use.'⁷⁷

74 Hill 1997; Carver 2004; Carver 2008; Carver forthcoming; Yeoman 1998; Yeoman and James 2008; Clancy 2008; Forsyth 2008; Lowe 2008; Ó Carragain 2009; Etchingham 2010; Woolf 2013.

75 Hall 2013. The two Meigle examples discussed in this paper were not captured by me for my 2013 paper, partly because of their eroded condition (especially Meigle 11). I am grateful to David Henry for discussions of both in front of the sculptures.

76 In a liturgical and religious community context, see Hall 2005, 64 and references there (for both hymn singing on Iona as cult performance and the role of dewars in keeping and showing relics, another facet of cult performance) and Ó Carragain 2005. For an example of adapted use of sculpture rooted in performance – sword strikes on early medieval Irish sculpture –, see Newman 2009.

77 Hedeager 2011, 128-9.

A further aspect of ritual performance around some of the slabs is suggested by the presence of oblique, triangular facets on one bottom corner of at least four cross-slabs and shafts, Constantine's (formerly the Dupplin) Cross, the Maiden Stone, the Golspie cross-slab and the Meigle 1 cross-slab. The facets that feature at the base of the shaft or slab form are all respected by the lay-outs of their respective carvings (except for the Maiden Stone, where the interlace carries over but does not fill the surface of the facet) suggesting a pre-existence on a standing stone or that they were part of the design of the Pictish sculpture or possibly that they were a coping mechanism for a flaw in the stone. All these stones also have large bases and the combination of base and facet may have facilitated the leaving of offerings, such as at Rogationtide, for the blessing of the fields, which would be a reinforcing of one of the functions of monumental cross sculptures, to endow the land with divine protection.⁷⁸

A key aspect of performance is also the question of sensory perception. We know that hymn singing to and around free-standing crosses took place at Iona, for example,⁷⁹ but other forms of ritual would have required the human voice and musical instruments (no strangers to depiction on Pictish sculpture). In terms of vision the colouring of stones is of huge importance. It is not credible to doubt that colour and texture were part of the Pictish aesthetic; see, for example, Ian Scott's suggested, indicative colouring scheme for the Hilton of Cadboll cross-slab.⁸⁰ Colour, of course, could have been achieved in other ways, along with variation in texture, by using a combination of materials. The top of Meigle 12 is decorated with a row of point-to-point recessed lozenges (and the lozenge was symbolic of the resurrected Christ), which the Hendersons have suggested could have been completed by the insertion of metal plaques or polished stone panels to resemble the lozenge shaped inserts of green and purple porphyry on Roman and Early Christian patterned stone floors.⁸¹ Such themes of colour are well worth exploring in any re-display of the Meigle sculptures, either via a digital format allowing visitors to experiment with different colour schemes or with a fully coloured replica. In trying to recover something of the sensuality of performance around sculpture then we need also to consider touch, either formal touching as part of ritual processes or informal in the case of personal devotion and visitation.⁸² In the final analysis

78 Neuman de Vegvar 2007. Goldberg 2012, 172-4, also comments on these facets as an element of the function of their respective monuments.

79 See n. 73 above and also, as a caution for not eliding performance with being outside, Ó Carragain and Ó Carragain 2011.

80 Harden 2010, p.11.

81 Henderson and Henderson 2004, 221 (and see p. 200 for the Christological significance of the lozenge).

82 Cf. Blackwell 2012, 29 on the ritual touching of brooches and reliquaries.

it is the use and re-use of sculpture, for whatever purpose, which keeps it alive from one generation to the next.

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