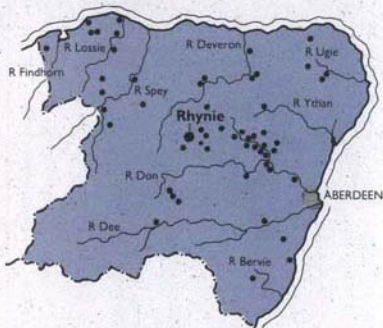


The Picts

The Rhynie man was carved in a tribal society dominated by several grades of warriors, chiefs and kings. In many ways Pictish times were a continuation of the Celtic iron age of the last few centuries BC. Elaborate defended settlements were built on hilltops or coastal promontories and the crafts of fine metalwork and stone carving were encouraged. Good agriculture was also practised, possibly using an under-class of bondsmen.

The tradition of stone-carving among the Picts of eastern Scotland may have been inspired by contact between the Picts and their neighbours to the south in late Roman times (the fourth or fifth centuries AD). Powerful carvings of animals and objects were produced, first incised on rough boulders and, later, combined with the Christian cross, on prepared slabs. The Rhynie figure may belong to a time when the two traditions overlapped.



Pictish stones

Many Pictish stones were probably erected as memorials to dead chiefs or other prominent persons, the symbols showing their rank. Several of the later stones with crosses may have been preaching sites.

The Rhynie area is particularly rich in Pictish stones, eight having been found in all, although not all of them survive. They form an unusual group.

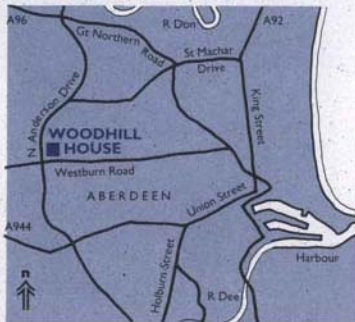
Warrior or Saint?

In 1978, on the farm of Barflat, Rhynie, a boulder was ploughed-up on which was carved the striking figure of a man. He stands in profile, wearing a sleeved tunic which falls to just above the knee and pointed shoes or leggings. He is walking forward, while carrying over his shoulder an axe. The head is portrayed very vividly, with a large nose and fierce, pointed teeth. This stone is almost without parallel in Pictish art and so is difficult to date accurately.

The solitary incised figure is similar to the single animal symbols found on early Pictish stones carved between c 500 and 700 AD. However, the preparation of the surface and the possible tonsure on the man's head could suggest a later date, between c 700 and 850 AD. Thus the Rhynie man could be a memorial to a Pictish leader, a figure from a Pictish legend or, if carved in the eighth century, even the Christian symbol representing St Matthew. In any event, this is the earliest known figure carving from Grampian.

Visiting the stone

The Rhynie man stands in the entrance foyer of Woodhill House, the headquarters of Grampian Regional Council, and can be viewed between Mondays and Fridays during normal office hours (8.30-5.30).



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The Rhynie Man

*Sixth in a series of leaflets
on the Archaeology of N.E. Scotland*



Pictish figure from Barflat, Rhynie

This kite-shaped gabbro boulder, 1.78m tall, was discovered on the farm of Mr Gavin Alston. Incised in a firm, positive line, 10mm wide, is the arresting figure of a man, 1.03m in height, standing or walking slowly to the right.

Hair

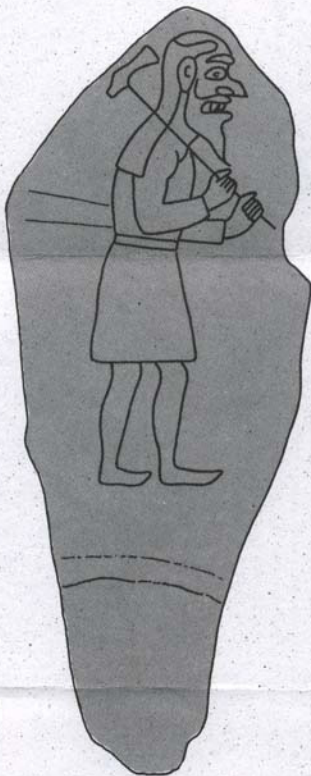
Some form of headdress or special haircut is indicated by this careful carving. The line looping down from the crown to the right-angles on the back may even represent a tonsure.

Earlier carving

The two parallel lines behind the figure are part of an earlier design, largely ground away by the preparation of the surface for the figure carving. There are also faint modern plough scratches above these.

Tunic

The tunic is a sleeved garment, belted at the waist. The man is wearing pointed shoes or leggings.



Head

The carving of the head, which represents one quarter of the height of the figure (as apposed to the normal one seventh) is achieved in three basic but supremely confident lines. Note the eyebrow, prominent nose, mouth with two large triangular teeth, protruding bottom lip and the long, pointed beard.

Axe

The very thin shaft which carries this axe may suggest that the weapon is a ceremonial one, perhaps a symbol of authority.

Hands

The hands have been carved very accurately and show the thumbs protruding over the narrow axe shaft.

Further reading

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IAG Shepherd *Exploring Scotland's Heritage: Grampian*, Edinburgh (1986).

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A Small (ed) *The Picts: a new look at old problems*, Dundee (1987).

Pictish figures

Representations of single figures occupying most of the available space on a stone are extremely rare in Pictish art. Two other incised examples are known. One was found in Rhynie in the 18th century and another, at Balblair, Inverness. Both appear to have lacked the power of this carving. A lost stone from Strathmartine, Angus possibly depicted a similar figure, carrying a cross. The other two parallels, from Golspie, Sutherland and Glamis, Angus, are both parts of larger compositions involving combat and so differ from the Rhynie man's solitary, almost statue-like quality.