

Power & Politics
in
Early Medieval
Britain and Ireland



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EDITORS

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Introduction :
reworking historical archaeology

Too often historical archaeologists see artefacts through the fragile veil of surviving documentary sources without critically assessing how this influences their vision of the past. Whether it be Schliemann viewing Hissarlik through Homer's eyes, the broch digger's contemplation of the *Tain*, or any excavator drawing upon contemporary historical literature, the relationship is the same: the text intercedes. Thus at the heart of the practice of historical archaeology lies an ambivalent relationship between the archaeologist and the artefact. On the one hand, we expect richer, deeper interpretations from historical archaeologists than we do from prehistorians, yet such interpretative efforts are not likely to satisfy the criteria historians establish for historical knowledge: archaeological events are imprecisely dated and the identification of an individual's actions nearly impossible. So it would seem that artefacts provide the archaeologist with material for composing glosses on the historian's text. This marginal activity is the result of accepting traditional history and its definition of the archaeologist's role. Neither of these things ought to go unchallenged, especially if archaeologists are to make meaningful contributions to historical knowledge.

In collecting these papers we hope to encourage archaeologists to recognise their assets and to embrace the difficulties presented by the task of integrating historical and archaeological knowledge. These difficulties, as they pertain to the early medieval period, form the subject of this book. As is evident from their papers, the contributors, while not by any means following a single approach, do share an awareness of the theoretical and methodological issues involved in historical archaeology. For the most part the papers avoid abstract argument, but consider the problems of working with artefacts and documents through the discussion of specific groups of archaeological material. This is by design, for we feel that any consideration of historical archaeology should adhere to the undisputed strength of the discipline: the ability to discover new information about the past through excavation and analysis. Lurking within any discussion of the practice of historical archaeology there is the question of how valuable even these discoveries are to the study of history. Does archaeology make a meaningful contribution to the study of the Middle Ages?

We believe that medieval archaeology has matured to the point where to refute in detail Peter Sawyer's dictum, that archaeology is an expensive way of telling us what we already know, would be superfluous if not regressive. But if the importance of archaeology is beyond question, the nature of its contribution remains an open issue. Judging from written histories, archaeology

produces knowledge of particular past living and working conditions, but little more. The traditional task of filling in the detail to a picture sketched from documents remains the principal activity of medieval archaeologists. Sadly this remains true even when conscientious efforts are made to integrate archaeological data into historical discussion, as for instance in *The Anglo-Saxons* (Campbell 1982). Here the archaeology is highlighted in short picture essays, which, although internally coherent, are isolated from the main text. The physical layout of the book serves as a graphic metaphor for the peripheral status of archaeology within historical endeavour. Surely a discipline which can attract historical attention, while eluding meaningful interpretation, requires reworking.

Some of the many reasons for the present state of play are touched upon in these essays. Here it is necessary to recognise that a major reason for the peripheral status of archaeology lies in the failure of archaeologists themselves to exploit the potential of their material. This failure can to some extent be blamed upon a defective view of history – one which is uncritically elitist. If as archaeologists we perceive history as the exploits of named individuals, then archaeology can only provide the occasional footnote and colourful detail. The contributors to this volume have a more sophisticated view of history and a more critical approach to the past. They are interested in employing archaeological material to write about the evolution of society, the growth of political institutions and the development of ideas, in short the essence of social history.

It is perhaps unfair to categorise these writers, especially since we noted above that there is no firm consensus of approach displayed in their contributions. However, two major influences may be discerned within this collection of papers. The first reflects a belief that the prime source of knowledge about past society is drawn from documents and maintains that any social model must be informed by a familiarity with the historical literature. As a theoretical perspective it is internal, since it emphasises the contemporary account as the basis of interpretation. The second influence, the New Archaeology, in some of its various guises, appears in a number of these papers. The willingness to employ constructs which lack direct documentation gives the New Archaeology its external theoretical quality. This second influence need not conflict with the first; ideally they should complement one another. Both influences are positive in that they implicitly argue that the true task of the archaeologist is to contribute to the understanding of specific social processes using material evidence. This means looking to documentary sources not for labels or landmarks but for *context*: using writing to grasp the values and meanings ascribed to the material world by past society.

The first tradition can be traced back at least as far as Collingwood. In particular Collingwood's desire in *Roman Britain and the English Settlements* (1936) to explain the development and collapse of Roman Britain, as distinct from its military conquest, serves as an example for blending archaeology and documents into history. Even if his findings have been superseded, Collingwood's treatment of the subject-matter guaranteed that subsequent students

of the early Middle Ages would become familiar with his work, while his status as a philosopher of history provides the approach with added credibility. Essential for the practice of historical archaeology in the tradition of Collingwood is an intimate knowledge of the documentary record, which provides the interpretative framework for the material record. Instances where archaeological interpretation goes far beyond identification and labelling in an effort to achieve some degree of historical synthesis are exceptional. Influential exceptions have been Rosemary Cramp's *Beowulf and Archaeology* (1957), Hugh Hencken's Lagore crannog excavation report (1950), and Leslie Alcock's *Dinas Powys* (1963). The last example is significant precisely because it is *not* in itself a documented site, but is one which none the less has had some of its lost history restored through the analysis of artefacts and judicious use of documentation.

In this collection, Professor Alcock's paper attempts to push the documentary approach to its inferential limits in order to generalise about the fortified centres of political power in the Celtic west. Professor Cramp sets out what she believes are the aspects of Early Northumbrian politics which can be most usefully examined archaeologically, as well as defining those which should be left to the historians. Richard Warner discusses how, with the use of the documentary record, the material evidence for royal residences may be extracted from a complex archaeological record and demonstrates its importance for an understanding of the changing political landscape of early historic Ireland. Michael Spearman outlines the case against accepting David I as the principal force behind the foundation of Scottish towns and provides an example of using archaeology to gain a critical insight into the documentary record.

If the documentary approach is taken to its logical extreme, it becomes subject to the criticism that those members of society who did not express themselves through writing are systematically excluded. Permitting documents to authorise or define the legitimate subjects of study imposes severe limitations on research, especially in the poorly documented early medieval period (see Driscoll in this volume). Any extension of research beyond the confines of the documented past must acknowledge the New Archaeology as a source of analytical techniques and of ideas designed to control the theoretical constructs drawn from outside the documentary record. The prominent use of computer aided statistical methods in the papers by Viva Fisher and Julian Richards on Anglo-Saxon mortuary practice serves to illustrate directly how items of material culture were drawn upon to define both individual and group identities. These sophisticated analytical techniques work because they are grounded on specific theories about the relationships between material culture and society and thus contribute to our understanding of politics on the community level, something which has been lost entirely to documentary historians. Similarly, on a larger scale, Christopher Arnold's paper suggests how changing burial practices may reflect the development of regional politics in early south-eastern England.

The idea that material culture plays an active role in the construction and maintenance of social relations is a strongly flowing undercurrent in many of these contributions. That this interest in the social implications of material culture should be the most common indicator of New Archaeology signifies the importance of the shift in emphasis from systems theory to social theory. The challenge of recognising the political aspects of material culture use has been met through the deployment of fairly precise concepts of power and ideology. For instance, the paper by Margaret Nieke and Holly Duncan suggests that the fostering of specialist craft production at centralised fortified strongholds was an essential component of Scottic political strategy. Similarly Richard Hodges and John Moreland argue that the appropriation of continental architectural forms for Anglo-Saxon churches was part of a deliberate attempt by the ruling class to acquire religious legitimacy. Archaeological resources contribute information vital to these two discussions of power and ideology, showing that such topics can no longer be regarded as the exclusive domain of historians. These papers and the collection as a whole are evidence of the maturity of early medieval archaeology and indicate that the division of the past into strictly bounded domains of history and archaeology needs reconsideration.

We hope that one result of the new vigour shown here will be to enhance the credibility of medieval archaeology within the discipline and within historic studies in general. It has been mooted frequently that medieval archaeology could in theory serve as the testing ground for archaeological thought because of its relationship with another source of knowledge, history. This presumes a degree of interpretative independence which is neither desirable nor possible. Historical archaeology should be in the vanguard of archaeological practice, because the richness of our material should permit a level of interpretation which cannot be matched by our prehistoric colleagues. It is precisely our access to contemporary values and beliefs through documents which enables us to produce interpretations which are subtler, more specific, more historical and thus more human and, perhaps, even more interesting. After all, the relationship between the archaeologist and the data resembles far more closely that of the historian than that of the anthropologist. The apparent failure of medieval archaeology to realise the potential of its data should not be taken as a cause for despair and isolation, rather it should be acknowledged as the major challenge confronting all historical archaeology.

The ideas which led to this book were at first only snatches of lunchtime conversation between the editors and John Barrett. The eventual outcome of these discussions was a conference held in Glasgow in February 1984 entitled *Early Historical Archaeology: Emergent Political Groups and Kingship*. This was organised by the Glasgow University Archaeology Society, whose turn it was to host the joint Glasgow and Edinburgh students' societies conference. The chosen topic, the politics of early medieval kingship, was selected for several reasons. It is a popular topic, one which is of importance to both archaeologists and historians and one of those (rare) issues which is of interest to both Celtic

and Anglo-Saxon scholars. Behind this choice lay the intention of providing a focus for discussion which could reveal distinctions in the sorts of past created by historians and archaeologists. The desire to expose the true nature of the relationship between history and archaeology through direct confrontation can now be seen to have been optimistic if not downright naive. The papers in this volume make it clear that the disciplines are too cunningly intermeshed to have been untangled in the course of a single day. Four of the papers, those by C. Arnold, R. Cramp, M. R. Niekke and H. B. Duncan, and R. Warner form part of this volume. The remaining papers have been solicited in order to expand the scope of the debate.

The conference and this volume would not have been possible without the help of several members of the Glasgow University Archaeology Society. In particular we must thank Irene Cullen, Neil Curtis, Iain Banks and Miriam Macdonald. We must also thank other postgraduate students, Nicholas Aitchison, Duncan Campbell, Alan Leslie, Colin Richards and Ross Samson, who have all cheerfully suffered our editorial work over the past few months. Special thanks are also extended to John Barrett for his encouragement and ready advice. We are grateful to Patrick Wormald and Leslie Alcock for chairing the conference, and to Professor Francis J. Byrne, James Campbell, Michael Clanchy and Wendy Davies for their oral contributions. Thanks are also due to Leslie Alcock for much help with publication matters. Financial support for the conference was generously provided by the Glasgow Archaeological Society and the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow.

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The relationship between history and
archaeology: artefacts, documents and power

This chapter is about working with documents and artefacts of the Early Historic period in Britain and Ireland. It is intended for scholars who believe that their central task is to use both texts and artefacts to write histories which account for the greatest possible portion of society. Simply stated, this problem may be conceived of in two ways: as a philosophical question or alternatively as a methodological one. From the methodological perspective, the integration of various sources of information generates the major difficulties, because information about the past derives from different materials – parchment, pots, inscriptions, postholes – each drawing upon the interpretation of a specialist. This widely held view does not question the value of disciplinary boundaries, but sees boundaries as an intrinsic property of the intellectual architecture necessary for the progress of knowledge. Viewed, however, as a philosophical problem, at issue is the procedure by which we create history from documents and artefacts. Here, interpretation of the past hinges on the theory by which we understand the interrelationship of human action, society and material culture, and takes it as axiomatic that our knowledge of the past derives from the present. I will not undertake a detailed discussion of general social theory here, but the arguments which follow are informed by my sympathy with the philosophic perspective.

Conventional history and archaeology tend to view the question of integrating historical and archaeological knowledge as, for the most part, a methodological problem. This imposes specific limitations on the ability of conventional practitioners to perform the integration adequately. This chapter examines the nature of those limitations as part of the effort towards improving our ability to interpret documents, artefacts and society.

Two premises define the objectives of this chapter. First, it is beneficial to disregard the conventional disciplinary boundaries of historical scholarship; and, more importantly, it is essential to examine critically the assumptions about past society which are implicit in those boundaries. Particularly problematic is our use of literacy, a concept with a specifically modern meaning, as the organising principle governing the study of the past. In other words, the modern formulations of history and archaeology may, through their very structure, inhibit our understanding of the past. In this instance the erosion of disciplinary boundaries would be a constructive process. Second, use of social theory generated by anthropology and sociology is the means to achieve this critical vantage point. By this I do not wish to replace one set of methodological constraints by another: rather, since it is society we are studying, I suggest

that we take note of the social scientist's understanding of the way in which society works. At various points, this chapter relies upon the work of anthropologists and sociologists for insights into the workings of material culture, the social construction of reality and social reproduction. These excursions into the social sciences should be judged both in terms of their coherence and in terms of the explanations these bodies of theory generate.

Accepting these premises entails acceptance of, or at least recognition of, certain philosophical attitudes and observance of certain practices. For myself, these may be summarised as a continual concern with the assumptions, goals and motives of my study. Critical theory is a term describing this concern with understanding the cultural attitudes of the analyst *vis-à-vis* the object of study. It is a recognition that we always introduce an interpretative framework or theory of society in order to make sense of disparate facts about the past. It requires that we acknowledge what theory we use and why we favour it. This is of course the position outlined by E.H. Carr in *What is History?* (1961). Scholars who fail to discuss more or less explicitly their assumptions and theory arouse suspicion and distrust because of the many possible interpretations of their silence. This silence is unfortunately institutionalised in the publication practices of medieval history and archaeology.

One possible reading of such silence on theoretical matters is as an ignorance of the historicity of our values, and is apparent in the use of contemporary values to interpret the past. In its most extreme form an image of our society is reproduced in the past, producing a history which may be termed 'Whigish'. Statements about past society found in this sort of history are of little use. Silence on theoretical issues may also indicate an empiricist outlook, which considers thought and reality as distinct entities. Assuming the existence of a single, ethically neutral, objective interpretation of those facts which constitute reality means that attention is laid upon the means by which that interpretation may be arrived at and agreed upon. It has been suggested that an emphasis on methodology is symptomatic of this perspective (Saitta 1983), which may explain why we find more written about the techniques of excavation and analysis of medieval sites than on their interpretation. A third possible reading of that silence is as an expression of the idea that knowledge flows from the accumulation of fact (naïve positivism) and that the structure of the explanation is derived unambiguously from the facts. This is perhaps best exemplified by the production of corpuses of artefacts and documents which lack any interpretation beyond date and means of manufacture.

It is important to be equally clear about why we study history as about how we study it. Historiography shows that history does not exist as some objective reality external to the contemporary world, and anthropology suggests how the past and present may be related. Henry Glassie, taking a cue from Malinowski's metaphor of myth as a primitive social charter, writes:

History is myth because its elements are infinitely capable of new orderings and these new orderings selectively explain the present in terms of the past and guide us in the creation of the moments out of which the future witlessly unfolds. (1977, 1)

Myth here is not a synonym for fiction, but describes a means of comprehending the world. It serves to emphasise that history is a creative social process and that the 'tie between the present and the past is what the former does with the latter, not how the former grew from the latter' (Leone 1982a, 182). Moreover, if history is critical, it provides commentary on the present, if uncritical, it reaffirms the present, neither of which is politically neutral. These ideas will be useful to bear in mind when we turn to consider the relationship between writing and power.

This is a chapter in four parts, each of which is shaped with the Early Historic period in mind. Part I examines how the relationship between history and archaeology has been constructed. It consists of a brief critique of the conventional academic formulation of the distinction between documents and artefacts. It is argued that the academic disciplinary divisions impose our literate values on past cultural practice in order to claim that there exists a natural division between documents and artefacts. This is primarily because documents happen to be the cultural expressions we are most adept at reading. For the Early Historic period documents are the most complex and specific (surviving) media of communication, but writing did not (and indeed does not) have a monopoly of expression. This leads directly to Part II, which examines how political power may be mediated through the technology of writing. Establishing the link between writing and power makes it apparent that literacy must be considered as a phenomenon with unique properties derived from the specific political circumstances of its use. Moreover, since writing is just one instance, albeit a special one, of human agency creating a material record, we should be able to extend that knowledge about the link between power, human action and writing to the material record in general.

Establishing the connection between power and artefacts means first of all learning to 'read' them as we do documents: as expressive things actively involved in mediating social relations. Part III is an introduction to the methods of 'reading' artefacts which have been pioneered by American historical archaeologists working in the anthropological paradigm. This is a fairly recent development, which must be placed in the broader context of Binford's New Archaeology (Schuyler 1978; Ferguson 1977). The chapter concludes with an outline of an analysis of Pictish symbol stones which puts into practice those ideas about reading artefacts and about relating them to human action and power.

1. History and archaeology: a created relationship

The past as we know it is a cultural construction and as such the methods of its construction are constantly subject to revision. If the historical record is to be interpreted as a record of human social and political action, then a theory of historical archaeology must acknowledge two fundamental points. These bald assertions will be developed in due course; here they serve to introduce my arguments, and as a point of departure for the following discussion.

1. Documents and artefacts are both components of material culture, in so

far as both are instances of human action imposing form on nature. If we are interested in human action, then we must determine the nature of human action before examining its specific manifestations, such as pottery, charters and so on.

2. Documents and artefacts are both means by which social relations are negotiated, which is to say that artefacts, like documents, articulate social relations, are utilised as expressive media and therefore should be conceived of as socially active (not passively, as labels or markers). Understanding the social meaning of either documents or artefacts is achieved via examination of specific contexts of use, production and discard. Here the point is that the meanings of artefacts are defined by their social context (Foxon 1982; Hodder 1982c).

The conventional formulation of the relationship between history and archaeology segregates artefact-making from writing. These activities are seen as so distinctive as to be institutionalised in separate academic disciplines. The histories of the two disciplines are well known, yet the basis of this division is taken for granted. The rare scholarly statements referring explicitly to the epistemological relationship of document to artefact emphasise that making texts and making things are different sorts of human phenomena. This emphasis on difference makes it difficult for the conventional formulation to accommodate either of my two theoretical points. The validity or usefulness of the separate disciplines is never questioned by conventional practitioners because the distinction between document and artefact is believed to be so fundamental (cf. Wainwright 1962; Dymond 1974; Sawyer 1983b; Rahtz 1983). In failing to grasp the congruence of documents and artefacts as products of thoughtful human action, we are left with investigative methods which run parallel and appear to converge somewhere on the horizon but, like railroad tracks, never really meet.

At the risk of caricaturing the conventional attitude, there are certain typical expressions which are revealing. The objectivity and reliability of archaeology is proclaimed in the maxim 'the spade doesn't lie', and in statements such as:

Archaeological facts, because they are usually unconscious evidence not created with communication in mind, are often thought to be less prone to misinterpretation than written evidence with its conscious or unconscious bias. (Addyman 1976, 311)

The disciplinary turf once marked out is defended with xenophobic fervour by leading scholars. An historian writes:

. . . the two disciplines should use their own techniques on their own material and only then see what measure of agreement there is, and to what extent the different types of evidence can complement each other. (Sawyer 1983b, 47)

A recent defence of archaeological independence set the model of archaeology as a natural science in opposition to the subjectivity of historical scholarship (Rahtz 1982, 1983). In presenting archaeology as a scientific test for documentary history, Rahtz not only swallows the epistemological flaws of the New

Archaeology, but at the same time robs archaeology of any explanatory power *a priori* (Driscoll 1984).

The conventional position contains two unstated and thus unexamined assumptions. First, that the division between document and artefact is natural because the mental processes at work in each instance are different: therefore the disciplinary boundaries are epistemologically valid. Second, that artefacts can only be known at the functional level, since meaning and intention are so remote from form. They are assumed to be incommunicative about social matters in sharp contrast to documents. When we turn to look at the work of certain American historical archaeologists in Part III, it will become clear that neither assumption can be sustained. Indeed, the entire endeavour of the scholars in question (James Deetz, Henry Glassie and Mark Leone) requires their rejection, since all three stress the common mental threads running through all sorts of human activity.

If the division between document and artefact is not 'natural' then it must be cultural, that is to say a product of our own culture. The origin of the division can perhaps best be understood as an imposition of our literate values and biases on the past. In Part II, I argue that it is restrictive to conceive of literacy as an undifferentiated skill which a society simply does or does not possess. The ability of writing to channel power dictates that it has specific social and political associations, in short that it has a history and a historically specific meaning. In this sense literacy is like other seemingly natural and unproblematic concepts such as time (Evans-Pritchard 1940; Leone 1978), space (Hall 1966; Goffman 1959; Kuper 1972) and gender, all of which require critical examination before they can be applied to a society other than our own. The case of gender is instructive. Scholars working from a feminist perspective have criticised the 'naturalness' of the notion of gender as it defines appropriate behaviour of the sexes, and they argue that gender is a cultural construction with political implications not unlike those of 'class' (Harris and Young 1981; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Viewed with a critical understanding of gender serious deficiencies and distortions are apparent in the usual presentation of women in archaeological literature (Braithwaite 1982a; Conkey and Spector 1984), to say nothing of the historical literature. This suggests that a critical examination of the concept of gender must precede its use as an analytical term in historical scholarship. A similar critical analysis of literacy must precede any discussion of the role of documents in a given society.

The deconstruction of the conventional view of the relationship between history and archaeology as complementary but separate disciplines serves several purposes. The point is to recognise that documents and artefacts are the products of similar mental processes, which are to be understood by using similar analytical frameworks. Ideally such an approach helps to avoid prejudicing social analysis at the outset. Such an analytical framework must accommodate both documents and artefacts, yet be derived from a general social theory independent of the specific methodologies of history, archaeology, anthropology or sociology.

I am here asserting that the analysis of material culture should be linked to a precise notion of human action, and should be interpreted through its role in negotiating social relations. *Social reproduction* describes the continuous renewal and transformation of the social system including its institutions, patterns of social relations, values, cultural practices and its whole cognitive structure. Social reproduction is achieved through human action of all sorts and is therefore a continuous process. Both building a house and writing a charter contribute to social reproduction in that they draw upon existing knowledge about society and reassert it. In the case of building a house, the location of the kitchen *vis-à-vis* the bedroom is an expression of cultural practices associated with eating and sleeping and actively intervenes to organise those practices (Bourdieu 1973; Glassie 1982). A charter likewise seeks to create and regulate certain cultural practices associated with tenancy, ownership and production. Social reproduction is a process carried out by individuals acting more or less pragmatically. It does not function like a xerox machine; change is constantly occurring. As Sahlins says, 'At the last, all structural transformation involves structural reproduction, if not also the other way around' (1981, 68).

'Every social actor knows a great deal about the conditions of reproduction of the society of which he or she is a member' (Giddens 1979, 5). Human action is the 'continuous flow of conduct' of motivated and conscious behaviour, governed by cultural norms. This cognitive view of society as developed with specific reference to material culture is discussed in Part III. Attendant on this notion of meaningful human action are the 'unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences' which contribute to the real outcome of any given act (Giddens 1979, 55–6). It is essential to recognise that 'People act upon circumstances according to their own cultural presuppositions, the socially given categories of persons and things' (Sahlins 1981, 67), if our model of society is not to be populated by complete dupes. One of the great tasks of twentieth-century anthropology has been to demonstrate that the cultural practices of so-called primitives exhibit as much rationality as our own when examined in the light of their own beliefs and systems of knowledge. We must expect that the societies we study will have sources of knowledge radically different from our scientifically dominated sources. Sahlins uses the term 'mytho-praxis' to refer to societies whose most valid form of knowledge is that encoded in myth (1983); might not that also be true of some Early Historic societies?

One of the achievements of Marxist inspired sociology has been to illuminate the intergroup dynamics occurring within a society. In any society, even the simplest, there exist different interest groups based upon age, sex, birth, social status and so on, each of which have distinct views on how society should work and their own means of validating knowledge. Thus social reproduction involves competition. The patterns of action or strategies adopted by groups and individuals may be termed *discourse*. The term is useful because discourse implies a more or less continuous pattern of behaviour governed by 'cultural

presuppositions' which are not always conscious. It suggests an analogy with speech and its relation to grammar. In order for discourse to be useful to the archaeologist or historian it must refer not only to verbal, face to face negotiations, but to every medium by which social relations are negotiated. It must include both mundane practices such as the wearing of specific clothing (cf. Hebidge 1979) and the preparation of food, as well as exceptional activities which we might wish to label as historical, like writing a law or staging a revolt. A good example of this, involving material culture, is Mauss' *Essai sûr le don* (1954), where gift giving is studied as a means of asserting political superiority and creating social obligations. An example of the discursive properties of material culture drawn from personal experience may help to show how objects are actually involved in negotiating social relations. A trowel is not only a device for spreading mortar or scraping earth, but because of these associations it comes to signify masons and archaeologists. Thus seeing a trowel in someone's pocket is likely to guide how we address them (especially if we are archaeologists or masons).

To sum up, in this scheme, logically the products of knowledgeable action (like writing or housebuilding) are *necessarily* linked to social discourse and the strategies of social reproduction.

II. Literacy and power: the technology of writing

The advent of literacy is generally regarded as the threshold of civilisation. Historians and archaeologists have expended considerable effort documenting the major cultural transformations accompanying writing, the chief of which is the growth of extensive political entities: city states, kingdoms, empires, and so on. However, the notion of literacy normally used is a taken for granted, common sense one vaguely denoting the practice of reading and writing. Recently more precise formulations have been sought which develop from an awareness that '. . . writing is not a monolithic entity, an undifferentiated skill; its potentialities depend upon the kind of system that obtains in any particular society' (Goody 1968, 3). In other words, since the meaning and practice of literacy vary from culture to culture, our attitudes to literacy are not transferable.

The identification of literacy as the hallmark of civilisation has tended unconsciously to connect it with rational thought, self-awareness and progress. That is to say literacy, as we conceive of it, is a constructive, stabilising social force. Clearly such a notion of literacy is of little use in assessing the significance of writing in Early Historic society (or any other). To accept our notion of literacy as universal is to deny that the importance and meaning of writing stems from the particular social and political context in which it is practised.

If we are to discover the significance of writing in Early Historic society, we should approach it as a medium of social discourse. It is my general thesis that artefacts and documents should be approached similarly so as to reveal the link between power and discourse. The case for literacy is presented first because it should be easier to demonstrate this link between power and cultural

expressions if we start with the familiar example of the technology of writing.

Power is a term so frequently used to mean so many things, that it is worth clarifying the specific notion of power that I wish to use in describing properties of social discourse. This brief definition is drawn from the extensive writings on the subject by Anthony Giddens and Michael Foucault (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982; Cousins and Hussain 1984). Power is a property found in the matrix of social relations and is reciprocal, not one sided. It affects both master and slave, lord and client:

Power relations are relations of autonomy and dependence, but even the most autonomous agent is in some degree dependent, and the most dependent actor or party in a relationship retains some autonomy. (Giddens 1979, 93)

According to Giddens, power is logically linked to human action and refers to the 'use of resources, of whatever kind, to secure outcomes' (1979, 347). Power is manifest in social relations where there is an asymmetry in the ability to command material resources (to allocate goods and facilities) and in the ability to exercise authority over others. It is important not to conceive of power negatively, as restriction or coercion. In some instances the asymmetry of power relations can be termed domination, but power may not be reduced to simple domination. The point of this elaborate definition is to suggest why power is intrinsic to all human relationships and to emphasise that power is expressed through the various forms of material culture, in so far as material culture is a medium of social interaction. The implications of this definition for the study of the development of Early Historic kingdoms should be clear. The technical properties of writing enabled power relations to be expanded beyond the confines of kinship, either real or imagined.

In an article entitled 'The Consequences of Literacy', Goody and Watt (1963) provided what can be termed a handbook on the technical properties of writing which was, in fact, a guide outlining cultural changes which could be expected to accompany literacy. They drew upon evidence from the invention of writing in the Ancient World and, more pertinent to the Early Historic period, from the introduction of writing to traditionally oral, non-literate societies under Western colonialism and Islamic imperialism.

Goody and Watt were not concerned to examine any particular case and thus did not explore the link between writing and power in a specific historical situation. Their cross-cultural approach gives the impression that they believed the consequences of literacy to be broadly similar regardless of historical circumstances (since corrected in Goody 1968). Nor did their study allow them to consider how writing is seized as a political instrument. These reservations aside, it is a groundbreaking survey. Its influence may be judged from the number of scholars inspired to study the social contexts of literacy in specific situations (e.g. Goody 1968). Of particular relevance here is Michael Clanchy's 'Remembering the Past and the Good Old Law' (1970), which examines the changes in medieval English legal practice associated with the proliferation of writing. He recognises that '... the extension of writing is not

in itself a measure of progress . . .' (1970, 176). And more to the point, he notes the political implications of written law, which were to make the crown (and attendant arbiters of the written word) more powerful. Clanchy's paper is a useful introduction to the historical analysis of the political impact of literate technology.

Having said that writing is to be understood from the historical and social contexts of its practice, it is nonetheless worth reviewing the general properties which may be ascribed to literacy. The special skills of reading are learned skills, and imply formal teaching if not institutionalised education. Frequently an expertise in letters precludes participation in normal food and craft production. The equipment and facilities for writing, like parchment and books, tend to be expensive. Thus in Early Historic Britain and Ireland where literacy was restricted to a tiny portion of society (Wormald 1977), literate individuals represented a significant social and economic investment. Literate knowledge tends to be the privilege of the elite, not least because the elite tend to control the material means of literacy. Not surprisingly most documents produced before the age of print reflect these social and economic facts. The close association between the written word and the powerful provides the idea of documents with authority. Restrictions on learning literate skills ensure that written knowledge is privileged. In addition, the religious context of literate education makes all writing to some extent sacred and even arcane.

In societies where very few are literate, documents are simultaneously authoritative and mysterious and those possessing literate skills stand in a special position within the network of power. With respect to the text, the interpreters are essential for the propagation of the written expression and are powerful in that they may recall details with as much accuracy as is convenient. The autonomy of those with literate skills is ensured by the production of further texts requiring interpretation. With respect to their audience, interpreters are clearly dominant by virtue of their privileged access to knowledge, which is constrained only by the extent to which their reading is believable.

As compared to speech, the written word has a more abstract and general relationship to its referent. Writing extracts the referent from its context in a particular speech community located in time and space. Objectification describes this process whereby ease and subtlety of expression are sacrificed for intelligibility. It is a necessary trade-off if the ideas represented by words are to be understood beyond the speech community.

Fixing events in ink makes it difficult to accommodate changing social and political situations; it establishes a sort of past which is alien to oral tradition. It alters the perception of time by introducing a chronology which is abstracted from the time of daily routine and extends beyond cyclical annual time.

We may shift away from these general properties of literacy to the relationship between writing and power by turning to look at the capacity of literacy to transform social relations. The transformations are not automatic consequences of the technology, but are the results (perhaps unintended) of efforts to extend power. Writing above all facilitates the expansion of social relations

beyond the kin group and those which may be maintained by face to face contact. The obvious administrative advantage in political terms is the ability to transcend limits of time and space and maintain relationships in several places at once. This advantage is not without its drawbacks. The objectification of social relation freezes what was once fluid and introduces a degree of alienation. Criticism of authority becomes easier because flaws are more readily identified in writing than in speech, and are easier to voice since they may be directed against a document not *ad hominem*.

Concepts of time and the past are altered by literacy. Evans-Pritchard's famous discussion of the non-literate Nuer (1940) perhaps typifies the 'primitive' view of time which has been variously described as reversible, cyclical or unprogressive (see Goody 1977). Time reckoning for the Nuer is 'less a means of co-ordinating events than of co-ordinating relationships, and is therefore mainly a looking backwards, since relationships must be explained in terms of the past':

Time perspective is here not a true impression of actual distances like that created by our dating technique, but a reflection of relations between lineages . . . The events have therefore a position in structure, but no exact position in historical time as we understand it. (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 107–8)

For all societies the past is an important source of knowledge about the present and writing is just one means of producing that knowledge. Sahlins describes how the Maori rely upon mythology for guidance in formulating ways of coping with the present. Mytho-praxis is the system of knowledge drawn upon by heroic societies like ' . . . Maori, who think of the future as behind them, [and] find in a marvellous past the measure of the demands that are made to their current existence' (1983, 526). The distinction we make between history and myth, which both purport to explain how the present came to be, hinges upon the concepts of time characteristic of literate and non-literate societies. Not only does writing alter perceptions of time, but it can undermine the appeal to tradition as a source of legitimation, because, being less flexible, it is likely to be inconvenient at times. It does, however, introduce a new mode of legitimacy: progress. Christianity, the religion of the book, can only have encouraged a linear, progressive concept of time: it is after all a religion with a clear beginning and pre-ordained end.¹

This review of the cultural implications of the technology of writing prepares us for a closer look at the political status of literacy in Early Historic society. If we are interested in understanding the production, interpretation and preservation of documents by the Church and aristocracy it will be profitable to consider writing as a resource drawn upon in social discourse. The advantages of controlling the medium should be apparent. We can recognise that certain documents such as annals, genealogies, Easter-tables and charters are means of summoning the past, while admitting that it is difficult to understand precisely how some of this material was used. It is attractive to argue that the use of these 'historic' documents with their implicit association

with a linear, progressive concept of time was part of a conscious attempt to control the past, not just a by-product of the control of a system of knowledge. In a society with restricted literacy the literate non-reversible concept of time must have been likewise a restricted concept.² Indeed, written means of producing and reproducing knowledge seem unavoidably in conflict with traditional oral means of knowing about, and drawing upon the past in the same way that time would have been a contentious concept. Thus we might well expect that one area of conflicting social discourse would be over the uses made of the past. This expectation leads us to an issue of critical importance for understanding the development of Early Historic kingdoms. According to the documents, the expansion of political territory was achieved by military might, but how was the hold over formerly sovereign groups sanctioned and maintained? Is it a coincidence that the radical political reorganisations of the seventh and eighth centuries are coeval with the florescence of the Irish and Saxon Churches with their radical notions about time, the past and social destiny? Or that documents of all sorts become increasingly common then? If an opposition to this literate, progressive discourse of expansion is to be postulated it may be identified in appeals to traditional, oral and familiar values.

At this point, it is instructive to move away from the generalisations and look at a specific instance which illustrates for the Early Historic period the link between documents, discursive practice and power. Donnachadh Ó Corráin's study of the historicity of the Irish *ard-ri* (high-king) led him to consider the political context of a group of documents which purported to refer to the past:

It would appear that the Irish had developed a sense of identity and 'otherness' as early as the seventh century and had begun to create an elaborate origin legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country. This was the work of a mandarin class of monastic and secular scholars whose privileged position in society allowed them to transcend all local and tribal boundaries. (1978, 35)

Ó Corráin identifies the creation of origin legends as an aspect of the political reality of the expansion of a few tribal groups (*tuatha*) at the expense of their neighbours. He shows how writing by both ecclesiastics and laymen enhanced the credibility, if not the authority, of the created tradition. And, most importantly, he shows the conscious invention of tradition to be an authoritative discourse seeking to silence opposition. In the creation of this myth emphasising the common origins of the Irish, we are seeing the redefinition of the sphere of acceptable political activity, a redefinition which corresponds to real expansive tendencies and which pre-empted the use of tradition by weaker *tuatha* to support claims of autonomy.

This selective, synthetic use of the past is precisely what Talal Asad says we should expect of dominant groups. According to Asad, power (unequal access to resources) enables the authoritative discourse to silence or render impotent competing discourses and thereby ensures that society is reproduced

according to the designs of the dominant group. In his words, authoritative discourse is:

. . . materially founded discourse which seeks continually to preempt the space of radically opposed utterances and prevent them from being uttered. (1979, 621)

Before we can go on to show that other, non-written forms of material culture are utilised discursively, it must be demonstrated that artefacts are expressive and that we can interpret them. This is the subject of Part III.

III. Anthropology and historical archaeology

In crossing the Atlantic one encounters a significant shift in the orientation of archaeology. It is most immediately recognised through spatial analysis: the archaeologists are sited in the anthropology departments. Although those interested in the historic past have not always had offices next door to ethnographers, for the past two decades anthropology has governed the research aims of historical archaeology and has elevated it 'from a discipline that regarded digging in the ground as a way of verifying historical records, and of supplementing them with otherwise unavailable data, to a social science' (Leone 1983, 2). This transition is only part of a broader trend which has seen the rise to prominence, if not predominance, of social history (Hobsbawm 1971) and the emergence of anthropology as an important influence on historical thought.

It is interesting to note the shift in emphasis which has occurred since Keith Thomas (1963) felt obliged to review the achievements of anthropology for historians, and challenged historians to learn about the Nuer. Recent reviews of the state of history have taken for granted that anthropology could be a source of insight into historical problems (Stone 1979). When anthropology has been the focus of attention in recent discussions of historical practice, the emphasis has been not on justifying the relationship, but on improving it (Cohn 1980, 1981). Medievalists have been perhaps a little slow to embrace anthropology and have required the occasional push (Davis 1981), but it scarcely needs mentioning that some of the most provocative recent studies of the early Middle Ages acknowledge explicit debts to anthropology. A casual list of topics includes kingship and inaugural ritual (Nelson 1977; Wormald 1986), oral literature and traditional law (Clanchy 1970, 1979; Wormald 1977; Dumville 1977a), non-capitalist economics (Hodges 1982) and mortuary ritual (Pader 1982; Bullough 1983).

The benefits to the early medieval historian of a working familiarity with anthropology are numerous. There are important areas of mutual interest, such as the maintenance and evolution of political systems, and ritual, religion and ideology as social forces. Anthropological concepts and analytical techniques are useful because they were developed in the first instance to understand societies that are every bit as foreign to Westerners as Picts and Saxons are to us. On the other hand, a failure to acquire a working knowledge of anthropology can have serious consequences. At worst it can permit us to impose

anachronistic notions from one society upon another, as we have seen in the case of literacy. Or it can lead to the historian simply borrowing the odd ethnographic titbit to add rhetorical flair to an argument. It is in this context that the work of anthropologically trained American historical archaeologists is valuable. In the best of their archaeology we find archaeological methods employed to examine issues of historical importance through questions suggested by anthropological concepts of culture. Indeed, various approaches to American historical archaeology can be grouped into loose schools using differing concepts of culture as the distinguishing criteria.

One of these schools is best represented by the work of Stanley South (1977) who has followed Binford's programme for a scientific prehistoric archaeology, and has rigidly employed it to study colonial America. This produces an archaeology very much like Rahtz's *New Medieval Archaeology*: both aim to discover universal patterns of human behaviour through the scientific logic of hypothesis testing. Following Binford, the fundamental questions are generated by the concept of culture as a mechanism of environmental adaptation. As practised by South the social science of historical archaeology has two related failings. First, it sees human action overwhelmingly as a response to environmental stress. Secondly, South has been unable to integrate documents significantly into the practice of historical archaeology. The view that human nature is shaped primarily by environmental pressures relegates documents to the study of particular historical events; a similarly defective view of human nature is responsible for Rahtz's avoidance of documents. This first failing leads directly to the second fault: the inability to ask particularly interesting questions or the tendency to ask ones to which people like Sawyer already know the answers. South's work is mentioned, not because it holds the promise of integrating history and archaeology, but because it shows how a specific (in this case empiricist) concept of culture can guide research, and also because it serves to preview the potential of Rahtz's *New Medieval Archaeology*.

The most influential of the various schools of American historical archaeology has adopted a 'cognitive' definition of culture as the mainspring of their practice (Keesing 1974). James Deetz is perhaps the best known advocate of this approach. Deetz begins with the idea that 'culture is socially transmitted rules for behavior, ways of thinking about doing things' (1977, 25). This definition shifts the locus of human action (and therefore the focus of the scholar's attention) away from an environment objectively defined by the scholar into an environment constructed from the perceptions of its historical inhabitants. In rejecting an external empiricist view of the world in favour of an internal one, that sees the world as a coherently ordered system of meanings constructed from arbitrary symbols, Deetz is approaching a structuralist position (cf. Leach 1970, 1976). Consequently, it is inadequate to view material culture simply as a passive reflection of behavioural responses to environmental stress as Binford does. Because material culture is part of the system of meanings and is, therefore, loaded with symbolic value, material

culture actively contributes to maintaining the system or to renegotiating it (i.e. 'social reproduction'). Knowing this, Deetz chooses to distinguish his concept of material culture from the conventional restrictive view that material culture equals artefacts:

A somewhat broader definition of material culture is useful in emphasising how profoundly our world is the product of our thoughts, as *that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior*. (1977, 24, his emphasis)

Two important analytical benefits are derived from this viewpoint. First, it suggests that the forces which shape the patterns of social life act on all aspects of a cultural system. This Deetz has argued for colonial New England, where he found the same structural principles (analogous to a grammar) governing the form of ceramics, houses, gravestones, and concepts of individuality, privacy and afterlife (1977). The structuring principles in this case may be called 'the Georgian mindset', a term which is taken from the control and symmetry found in Georgian architecture, and which aptly expresses the link between the patterning of material culture and mental structure. This is not a static formulation. Deetz saw, in the shift from a pre-Georgian ('medieval') mindset to a Georgian mindset, that the structuring principles govern both form and change in form.³ Second, by postulating the existence of shared structuring principles, the techniques developed for studying language can be seen to provide a way to understand the patterning and meaning of artefacts. Recalling that we construct language more or less unconsciously from a grammar, and that grammar is a set of structuring principles allowing us to order arbitrary sounds into meaningful expressions, we should recognise that material culture is no less an instance of arbitrary form being given meaning through a cultural grammar. And, of course, the meaning of artefacts, like that of speech, is entirely a matter of historical and social context.

Deetz's work consists of provocative suggestions, fascinating correlations and compelling examples, but ultimately is disappointing because he fails to satisfy the self-imposed demands of his method. Context, all important to the notion of meaning, is not under control. He does not look at the whole cultural system, but selects only a few classes of artefacts. This procedure ultimately leaves the reader in doubt as to the universality of the structuring principles. Typically, his work is as mysterious as it is provocative. It is never made clear how the structuring principles are revealed to the investigator, and more importantly, we are never offered any explanation as to *why* the particular principles embodied in the Georgian mindset were originally adopted and proliferated in these particular circumstances (Leone 1982b, 744–5; 1983, 4–5).

Closely related to Deetz's work is that of folklorist Henry Glassie. In *Folkhousing in Middle Virginia* (1975), the context is tightly controlled; the analysis follows a single class of artefact as it developed in a small region over two centuries. The project avoids Deetz's faults by selecting a less ambitious, even parochial, topic and succeeds by stressing the empirical observations and

analytical technique. Glassie's idea that 'culture is pattern in mind, the ability to make things like sentences or houses' (1975, 17) resembles Deetz's concept of culture, and through it Glassie follows Deetz in linking his work directly to that of linguists like Noam Chomsky. Glassie derives an architectural grammar capable of generating the various house types found in the study area. This grammar, existing unconsciously in the mind of the builder, is articulated in the houses that constitute the empirical basis for Glassie's study of the Middle Virginian mind. Equipped with the detailed knowledge of the structuring principles (the architectural grammar), he is able to address the question of why this particular set of principles (which incidentally are part of the Georgian mindset) came to be adopted. This is precisely the question which Deetz has failed to pose. Glassie relies on the structuralist theory of Levi-Strauss to explain how the architectural decisions mediated social and environmental relations. Through the contemporary documents, he connects the attitudes he sees expressed in the architecture with the changing material circumstances of politics and economics, and thus satisfies the need to place the architectural expressions within the larger context of cultural values.

Glassie's work has important ramifications for historical archaeology. By 'reading' the houses, direct expressions of a substantial portion of Middle Virginians were rescued from the historical oblivion to which these people had been consigned by scholars relying exclusively on documents. The principle weakness of *Folkhousing*, which does not detract from its importance, is Glassie's failure to develop a set of questions which link the documents and artefacts. His handling of the two sorts of evidence is stratified, so that various kinds of evidence are called upon successively to amplify, complement or confirm what has come before. In his words:

It is not that literary commentary is valueless, but rather that its use is corroborative. Old writing can not be used to construct the epistemologically essential synchronic record that will account for most people (writing is a rarity, making artifacts is universal); but once the synchronic account has been developed, the written record can return to utility as a qualifying supplement. (1975, 11-12)

Glassie seems here to be accepting as legitimate the existence of a dissonance between the past as recorded in documents and in artefacts, but has at least avoided the literate prejudices. In emphasising the artefact he has mitigated the ethnocentric literate bias, and provided a more valid, 'democratic' (as he terms it) history; he has not, however, sought to question the usefulness of the document/artefact opposition. In fact, he exploits it; the purely documentary perspective provides a foil for his approach. The degree of synthesis that Glassie achieves with documents and artefacts is a result of his thick descriptive style, and as a result it is only incidental to his main concern with interpreting the houses.

Both Glassie and Deetz demonstrate by example that, 'the only sound way to ground the importance of [archaeological] research is to know the history of the area and to array one's hypothesis against the documents and work of

established historians' (Leone 1982b, 755). Indeed, archaeologists who fail to use the documents to construct a context for their artefacts are little better than antiquarians. Without wishing to promote a formulaic methodology, it is reasonable to suggest that archaeologists should develop specific methods of interrogating documents and artefacts simultaneously:

What is needed is a set of questions linking the archaeological and documentary records in complementary fashion. Their absence is the major weakness in conventionally practiced historical archaeology. (Leone 1983, 3)

In this respect Glassie and Deetz are conventional.

I have emphasised the work of Deetz and Glassie in order to show their achievements and limitations. Many of the limitations have been remarked upon by Mark Leone (1982b, 1983), who has sought to resolve the principal difficulty of the cognitive or structuralist approach: the inability to explain *why* a specific pattern, competence or mindset was adopted. For Leone, the answer is to link the mental structures shaping material culture with the realities of power via a Marxist concept of ideology. As I noted earlier, Giddens makes a similar suggestion when he argues that human action necessarily concerns power, but he would not accept the concept of ideology used by Leone and neither should we.

Leone's belief in the importance of ideology betrays his materialist perspective, and also explains his dissatisfaction with the concept as it is normally used by archaeologists. The weakness of conventional notions of ideology, which understand it as synonymous with religious and philosophical codes, is their isolation from the material world. In other words, if ideology is only a passive reflection of society, not directly related to the *material* conditions of life, it is not recoverable, and therefore not of interest to the archaeologist. This summarises the rationale behind the 'ladder of inference' associated with Smith (1956) and Hawkes (1954) as well as Binford's view that ideology is epiphenomenal. In contradistinction, Leone presents his concept in two points:

The first is that ideology, being neither world view nor belief, is ideas about nature, cause, time, person, or those things that are taken by society as given. Second, these ideas serve to neutralize and thus to mask inequalities in the social order; ideas such as the notion of person, when accepted uncritically, serve to reproduce the social order. Ideology's function is to disguise the arbitrariness of the social order, including the uneven distribution of resources, and it reproduces rather than transforms society. (1984, 26)

This concept of ideology, while useful for gaining a critical understanding of an instant in time, a particular institution or even the design of formal gardens (Leone 1984) can be subjected to two criticisms.

First, Leone assumes that there is a single dominant ideology in a society, or that the dominant one is so successful as to be unassailable. If this is so, then it leaves no mechanism for competing ideological formations to develop and closes off the possibility of internally instigated change:

One can put the problem generally by saying that, if we believe in the social determination of concepts . . . this leaves the actors with no language to talk *about* their society and so change it, since they can only talk *within* it. (Bloch 1977, 281)

This implies that when the dominant ideology is working, social reproduction is perfect, since there exists no vocabulary for criticism. Leone's work has focused on capitalist societies with notoriously efficient ideologies; however, this special (capitalist) case may be modified into a more general concept of ideology which is both more pluralistic and more fluid. The second criticism is that it appears that social reproduction occurs only if the social actors are completely mystified. This forces us to imagine people as passengers of historical processes rather than makers of history. It is precisely this sort of attitude that E. P. Thompson has criticised because it denies historic actors the ability to act knowledgeably and meaningfully (1978, 173–6, 185). The notion of ideology and the understanding of the way it works can be retained only if first we recognise that the dominant ideology is not alone, but is competing with others; and second, if we treat the mystification as a kind of haze or mist, not a brick wall. In short, if we treat ideology as 'discourse'.

The position I am proposing is materialist in that the creation of documents and artefacts is treated as discursive practice which is ultimately grounded in the reality of power. It follows from ideas already introduced; people are constantly involved with the creation of their world; material objects and conceptual schemes are both the means and the results of the constructive process; and it is possible to read both documents and artefacts because they are the expressions of knowledgeable social actors. In the final section I illustrate the value of this approach for studying the archaeology of the Early Historic period.

IV. Artefacts and power: Pictish symbol stones

What follows are notes towards an analysis of the monumental sculpture tradition as it relates to the development of the Pictish kingdom. The notes are inspired by the techniques of reading the expressions embodied in artefacts discussed in Part III, and follow my belief that those expressions are best interpreted as social discourse. There are four general assertions about the stones which serve as the armature for the analysis. Supporting arguments for these assertions are revealed below; here they are simply stated.

1. The stones are conscious expressions about the state of the Pictish world. They constitute a discursive practice which seeks to connect the social order to the cosmic order and has as its goal the reproduction of that social order.

2. The technical properties of the carved stones and their context of use are the starting point of the analysis. Interpretation of the carved expressions reveal implicit references to power relations and suggest how the monuments contributed to the maintenance and legitimation of those relations. The location in the landscape and the resources drawn upon suggest that the monuments are expressions of the elite.

3. Changing standards of authority in social and political discourses are represented in the development and transformation of the monuments over time. The monumental expressions are not static but evolve to accommodate shifting political circumstances, thus charting the development of the kingdom.

4. The stones record fairly radical transitions in Pictish intellectual and social history. Not the least of these are political centralisation, the conversion to Christianity and the end of mytho-praxis. The stones act like documents to fix persons and events firmly in time and space, contradicting reversible time.

Pictish symbol stones have a long history of antiquarian and archaeological study and I have no intention of reviewing the scholarship here. Stevenson's pioneering archaeological analysis of the stones (1955b) and his more recent survey (1970) serve as useful introductions. Unlike most recent discussions they are relatively free of problems associated with art historical perspectives and existing social explanations. The art historical approaches are preoccupied with tracing 'influences' and confuse our aesthetic values with those of the Picts. The symbols are seen as mere decoration, exquisitely executed but inaccessibly remote. When social meanings have been sought in the stones, functionalist explanations have been favoured; for example as boundary markers (Henderson 1971), commemorations of marriage alliances (Jackson 1971, 1984), or burial monuments (C. Thomas 1963, 1984). Because all these explanations treat artefacts as socially inert or passive none of them are able to suggest how the stones might have been effective as social discourse. A failing common to all literature on the stones is that external forces are given priority over internal social dynamics, despite the widely acknowledged indigenous origin of the symbols themselves. This dependence on external influences reflects the failure to treat the stones as expressive media and to recognise that the symbols (whether of local invention, like the crescent and V-rod; or borrowed, like the cross) were not arbitrary, but had referents which were meaningful to Picts. For example, Charles Thomas' proposal that the stones were a local manifestation of Early Christian Celtic burial rites (1963, 1984) neither explains why the Picts should have copied their neighbours nor the specific form of the practice. Similarly, there is as yet no explanation for the incorporation of the cross into the local stone carving tradition which adequately examines it from an internal Pictish perspective.

In the discussion which follows, the details of artistic motif and chronology are omitted for the sake of brevity. Both issues are, to my mind, hopelessly mired in art historical wrangling. The relative chronology is secure enough, even if it does float in absolute terms. Of far more importance here are the questions of context, both historical and social. It is essential to recall that the stones were developed and flourished during the period which saw the growth and expansion of a strong Pictish monarchy (sixth to eighth centuries); a monarchy which was, however, eventually subjected to Scottish rule (during the ninth and tenth centuries). When considering the early stones, which I believe have a funerary context, it is well to bear in mind that the dead do not



Plate 1. The contrast between the rough hewn boulder and the carefully incised symbols of the Dunnichen stone is typical of Class I monuments. The stone's recent history may also be typical; a large proportion of the symbol stones like this one are known to have been moved from their original location since medieval times.

bury themselves. Among other things, burial rites serve to re-establish the social order in the wake of the chaotic intrusion of death. Such rites as accompany death may be seen as statements by the living about the social position of the dead as it relates to the surviving community, and to the status of the newly dead in the world of the ancestors. The later monuments are crosses, so their Christian inspiration is self-evident, but ought not to be seen

as purely ecclesiastical or as lacking in secular importance or inspiration. There is much still to be learned about the social fabric of Pictish society from these ostensibly religious monuments. It is generally believed that religious establishments (i.e. churches and monasteries) were scarce when the crosses were erected. We must imagine therefore that the crosses were among the central paraphernalia of the faith and neither peripheral nor incidental to the practice of the religion. Not only were they the most eloquent statements of devotion accessible to the illiterate, but they were the essential technical apparatus of Christian worship.

For this discussion I am following the established classification of the stones because it is well known, it accommodates most of the complete stones, and it orders them chronologically. Class I is earliest, Class III is latest. Class I stones are natural or rough-hewn boulders incised with one or more symbols drawn from a small and strictly observed repertory (plate 1). The case for regarding Class I stones as burial monuments has recently been reviewed, and is strong (Close-Brooks 1980, 1984). The symbols themselves may be abstract designs, representations of objects (e.g. mirrors) or animals (e.g. bulls), and they are not confined to the stones; occasionally they are found on pieces of fine metal and bone objects. Our ignorance of the precise meaning of the symbolic expressions does not prevent us from examining how the system of symbols was used. The choice of symbol and location of the stone (over an ancestor) are not arbitrary, purely decorative or sentimental, but constitute coherent expressions about the living as well as the dead. The ancestors, whom the deceased joins in death, carry a large share of the discursive load. They introduce the supernatural into the discourse and abstract the carved expressions from the mundane world of the living. The animal symbols, for the most part recognisable natural forms, provide their specific cultural referents (be they mythic, tribal, totemic or whatever) with a sense of naturalness. The identification of cultural constructs with nature is one of the ways of protecting assumptions held about the world from question. As representations of material things, some of the remaining symbols indicate familiar and sometimes awesome cultural practices (e.g. hammer and tongs for smithing). The selection of such categories of human activity for representation on the stones must mean they were appropriate also for the society of the dead, implying that these symbols had mythical meanings and the ability to call forth supernatural imagery. The most common symbols are abstract to the point that we can only guess at the material reality they might signify. They may indeed have no material referent but instead refer to purely mental structures, like social relationships or rank. The use in a ritual context of these symbols, which represent Pictish social concepts, extracts them from the ordinary profane world and gives them a sacred sanction through contact with the cosmic order.

The stones fix individuals and, by extension, their kin, firmly in space and time, making their existence less dependent upon memory. The stones, of course, lack the precision or rigidity of documents, while remaining arcane enough to require interpretation. Besides implying the decay of reversible



Plate 2a. The Aberlemno churchyard cross slab is one of the finest executed and best preserved of the Class II monuments. It stands 7.5 feet tall and bears on its west face a cross flanked with interlaced beasts. The closest parallels for the decorative techniques employed here are found in the Lindisfarne Gospel painted in Northumbria around AD 700.

time, Class I stones suggest the illusion of permanence and stability, a hardening of social relationships. One of the motives behind funerary ritual is to ensure that the social void left by the dead is filled, that roles and responsibilities left by the dead are taken up. A strong analogy can be drawn between Viking Age Danish rune stones, which Randsborg (1980) argues were erected by heirs to secure claims to property and social position, and Class I Pictish



Plate 2b. The east side of the Aberlemno churchyard cross slab exhibits two of the symbols over a depiction of a battle sequence which, it has been argued, represents the decisive battle between the Picts and Angles at nearby Nechtansmere in AD 685 (see Alcock, p.30).

stones. Both of these mortuary practices appear at the point of the emergence of kingdoms or early states. In the symbol stones, I think we may be seeing traditional motifs employed as part of the discourse associated with the new social positions engendered by the expanding Pictish monarchy. In terms of religious symbolism, given the inherent dating difficulties, there is no reason why the Class I stones need be seen as pagan (as they are often assumed to be).

Certainly at the time of their erection, however, the Church was external to the system of power.

Class II monuments are cross slabs bearing a relief representation of a cross on one side, usually with figure representations on the reverse (plate 2a, b). The symbols may be found on either or both sides, but only very rarely on the cross side, and are more elaborately decorated than in Class I. This elaboration shows strong stylistic links with the decorative arts of Northumbria and Ireland. The Class II cross slabs introduce the Church into the discourse, while keeping it separate from some of the expressions by expanding the medium to two dimensions – literally and metaphorically. The cross itself, like other Pictish symbols, is an abstract, non-representational design, which embodies numerous meanings, and which in turn requires interpretation. In addition, they introduce an air of the cosmopolitan via the use of decorative styles no longer exclusively Pictish. There is no evidence to suggest that Class II crosses are funerary monuments, nor can they be explained away as evidence of newly converted pagans hedging their bets. I think they mark the point at which the importance of the Church is outstripping that of the ancestors. The prominence of the symbols of Christianity on Class II stones emphasises the adoption of a more powerful discourse, one capable of banishing the animal symbols and their possible regional or tribal associations, one which was supported by a highly centralised, hierarchical, transcendent institution. The Church as a model of institutional organisation or application of power would have justified expansion without regard for temporal or spatial boundaries. Moreover, once installed upon the Church's monuments, the symbols became integrated within a regular ritual cycle which gave the messages controlled, repeated exposure, in contrast to the unpredictable and disruptive association of the Class I stones with death. The Class II stones may also indicate the institutionalisation of the change in the concept of time from a purely cyclical, unprogressive view to a precisely divided, linear, directional view which we associate with writing. The figures on the reverse depict the aristocracy engaged in a variety of worldly activities, such as hunts, which link daily activity and events with the supernatural and serve to justify the social order and the means of maintaining it. The Pictish symbols are less prominent now than before and perhaps have been co-opted and transformed from their original meaning into evocations of authority through the past. Clearly the potency of the expressions carved on Class II slabs derive from the cross slabs as foci of worship, the place at which the Picts encountered God. The sheer monumentality of these crosses would have been a reminder of the relationship between those who could commission such things (presumably those portrayed on the reverse), and the cosmic order symbolised by the cross on the front.

Finally, in the Class III stones, the old symbols find no place on the three-dimensional free-standing cross, and the figural representations are completely subordinated to the symbol of Christianity. While in Class II the human representations were more or less independent of the cross since the two images could not be viewed simultaneously, in Class III the representa-



Plate 3. The outstandingly well preserved Dupplin cross near Forteviot combines Northumbrian styles of interlace and cross shape, and a central boss like those frequently found on Irish and Scottish high crosses with typically Pictish human figures (metric scale).

tions of people are confined within decorative panels which are ordered according to the form and decorative inspiration of the cross (plate 3). The regional distinctiveness of Classes I and II has given way to a variation of Insular art, which implies not so much a loss of identity as an expansion of horizon and a

suppression of the local Pictish interests represented by the symbols. The emergence of Class III is frequently linked with the accession of the Dalriadic dynasty of Kenneth mac Alpin (Stevenson 1955b, 122–8). Surely this is a significant political development, and not simply for its contribution to the art history of sculptured crosses. What little we know of the later ninth and tenth centuries suggests that it was a period of relative stability (Duncan 1975, 90–7), one which saw the establishment of an increasingly powerful aristocracy.

Because the symbols are banished and the 'secular' imagery is tightly controlled, it could be thought that Class III stones are expressions devoted to the spiritual, void of political significance. The Church was, of course, far from politically neutral; it had interests to protect and patrons to support (Smyth 1984, 112–5, 131–40; Nieke and Duncan, this volume). This is perhaps best expressed in the Class III decorative style, which clearly mimics fine metal working techniques of the sort adorning both aristocrats and altars (Henderson 1967, 133–4). Thus the authority of the Church as observable in material displays of wealth was unified with that of the elite, and this visual similarity reminds us that the clergy were aristocrats whose interests were those of the dominant social group. So Class III stones, far from expressing the independence of the Church from worldly concerns, enshrined the ornate material symbols of prestige and status that the elite drew upon, and thereby legitimised them.

Inevitably such a quick sketch of the dynamic potential of Pictish stones is bound to be unsatisfactory. Experts will feel that my assertions require more developed arguments, while those unfamiliar with early Scottish history may feel equally sceptical for different reasons. For a more thorough discussion see Driscoll (1988); here, my purpose was only to introduce the concept of discourse as a means of interpreting the political meaning of these monuments. Their prominence and durability are crude measures of aristocratic power, and are adequate indices of the resources available to those in authority for use in social discourse. The formal development of the monuments tells us that the discursive standards were changing over time, as theoretically they should and as we know historically they did. The astonishing variation within types tells us that the makers and their patrons were drawing upon their knowledge of the symbols and stylistic conventions as their needs dictated, thus underscoring the idea that social reproduction is a constantly developing practice undertaken by knowledgeable social actors.

In this chapter I have argued that by approaching the historical record in its broadest sense as an assemblage of cultural expressions, we may improve our ability to understand the past. One specific aim has been to reject the selective approach of discriminating against part of the record on the basis of the presence or absence of writing. It has been argued by linguists and anthropologists interested in symbolic systems that the meaning of an object or concept is dependent upon its relationship within the system. If that is so, then to

extract one class of object from the system is to invite misunderstanding. A better alternative is to look at how documents function within the discourse with respect to architectural constructions, with respect to mortuary practice, with respect to jewellery and clothing, and so on.

Clearly, undertaking such comparison entails taking risks by stepping beyond the bounds of one's own speciality. I would hope, however, that mistakes made in such circumstances would be more easily forgiven than those produced by failing to look past one's own doorstep. Most importantly, this more dangerous approach is likely to produce a more socially aware history and books that are more interesting to read.

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NOTES

- 1 I owe this point to John Barrett.
- 2 Likewise John Barrett clarified this for me.
- 3 My brother, David, drew this to my attention.