

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

“The Gods and Myths of the Picts”

The Picts lived in northern and eastern Scotland in the Iron Age and early medieval period. Their language and culture has not survived, but they have left behind some of the most visually stunning and enigmatic sculptures of the first millennium. The Pictish symbol system remains a mystery, and Pictish carvings of unusual hybrid figures and beasts have traditionally been compared with Christian visual and literary imagery, but this research re-examines the evidence, and demonstrates that these figures and monstrous animals are representations of Pictish gods and mythological narratives.

This paper explores the evidence for pre-Christian religion and ritual in Pictland, comparing the contexts of carved gods on early Pictish monuments with the iconography of Iron Age Celtic and Romano-Celtic gods in northern Britain, highlighting socio-religious connections between the Picts and the native Celts who lived between the Roman walls. Depictions of Pictish deities are found on both early incised Pictish stones (Class I) and later relief-carved monuments (Class II, III), traversing the Conversion Period. On cross-slabs and later sculpture these figures are usually associated with otherworldly beasts. Although this mythical imagery is generally presented in a non-linear fashion, much of it is repetitive, suggesting that these gods and mythical animals represented well-known mythological narratives in Pictish culture, and that this mythology continued to circulate in the oral culture of the Picts into the Christian period where it came to be used in meaningful combinations with Christian iconography. Comparison of this mythical imagery with Celtic and Indo-European mythology highlights extensive points of overlap between pre-Christian belief in Pictland and Indo-European mythology more broadly, demonstrating the immense significance of the Pictish sculptural material in providing a means for reconstructing this otherwise lost belief system.

Your SASA Event Host:

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