

Summary

Background

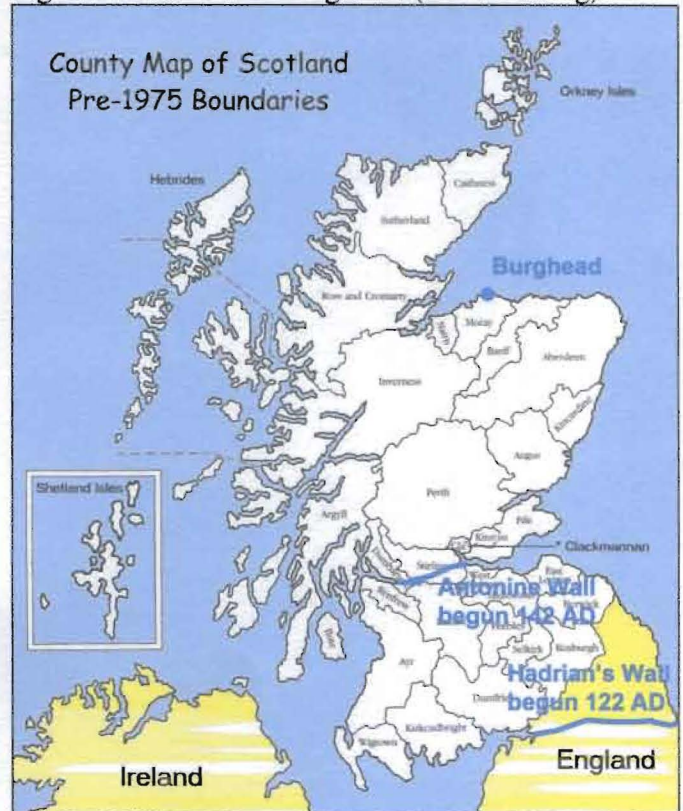
I hypothesized that each Pictish image is a rebus of consonant-vowel letters that can be isolated and read using the syllabary of Val Camonica in Italy. A test with an abstract image worked (Harris, 2018). Burghead Bull should be a better test because it so closely resembles a real bull.

Figure 1: Burghead Bull, displayed in the British Museum of London. (Photo C. Clerk)



Christine Clerk wrote her dissertation on the development of the fortress at Burghead. It occupies all of a small peninsula that juts into Moray Firth east of Inverness. Around 400 BC, Picts constructed a palisade around the peninsula, and dug three ditches with dykes across the neck. It is the largest of all Pictish forts. The image of the bull was found in a deep well within the fort in 1809, perfectly preserved (Clerk, 2019).

Figure 2: Location of Burghead. (Ramsdale.org)



Decipherment of Burghead Bull of Moray Firth in Scotland

Thirty similar carvings of bulls in sandstone were found in 1809 during the demolition of the fort to create the town of Burghead. Most were lost, but six remain: two in the Visitor Centre in Burghead, two in Elgin Museum, one in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and one in the British Museum in London (Wikipedia).

What they mean is unknown.

The date of writing was after the construction of Antonine Wall around 148 AD that led to Pictish writing and before Danes conquered in 1108 AD. On stylistic grounds, the British Museum dates its picture stone to 7thC to 8thC AD.

In the image below, note that both rear hooves are made with three lines, while the front hooves have four lines. This imbalance suggests that the hooves are letters.

Pictish writing goes left to right, top to bottom, and that is how I shall proceed.

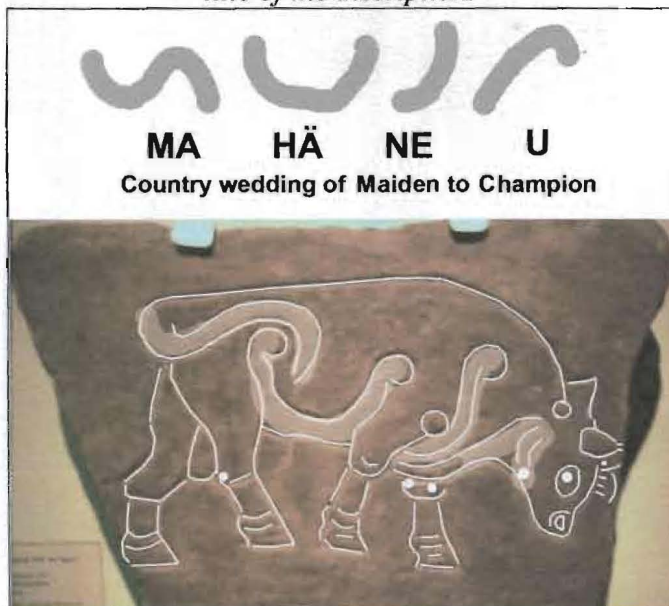
Title of Pictish stone

Four large letters march across the bull, MA HÄ NE U (Figure 3):

Maa-häät Neiton Urhohon

Country wedding of Maiden to Champion.

Figure 3: Four large letters across the bull spell the title of the inscription.



Champion, a male warrior, is imaged as a champion bull. The text continues with finely inscribed lines, outlined in white.

Every bull Pictish stone has the same curly-Q design in the center of the bull that spells 'wedding of maiden to champion'. Each Bull stone announces a wedding. The stone likely was erected in a prominent location so that attendees could prepare.

Text of Burghead Bull in British Museum

Country Wedding of Maiden to Champion

Thus: to plan our celebration feast for Country Maiden.

The countryside will produce pine beer-casks for her great wedding. Our gallant Battle Maiden will join an escort.

One man from the country will speak; the best speaker, the best beer-man, High Father. Then a procession of many people will herd cattle pulling *ahkias* to the wedding, valiant families to the wedding, a thousand real men.

The first family will join a hundred countrymen to go and fetch beer for the wedding party; hornless cattle from Hand also. They will meet Hand's dear friends at the wedding.

Maiden will meet our best champion, War, will meet a thousand of Hand's men, will escort the men, the best blades of Hand.

Table beer from Maiden for the country folk, the best of people. A wedding celebration feast, the first for many valiant champions. Table beer in casks for the wedding. Cattle from the countryside will drag much food for the men.

Protagonists in the inscription

The scribe identifies four people by an epithet, none by their birth name:

Maiden (Neidon), Battle Maiden, Country Maiden, the bride

Urho (Champion), the groom, pictured as a bull.

Hand (Käden), leader of the country, who is the actual groom.

High Father (Ylätaaton), the best speaker

Decipherment of Burghead Bull of Moray Firth in Scotland

War (Soan), champion of the army

Image of Bull

The inscription in large letters suggests that a bull represents the groom in marriage.

Cattle are mentioned thrice: cattle pulling sleds full of people, hornless cattle from Hand, cattle pulling sleds full of food. No mention of a bull.

It may relate to the Cretan myth of Zeus, the first ruler of Minoan Crete, who changed himself into a beautiful white Bull (Taurus) to win the affection of princess Korea of Tyre, later named Europa.

Pictish syllabary

The syllabary comes from Val Camonica in Italy. The following chart shows letters from two decipherments.

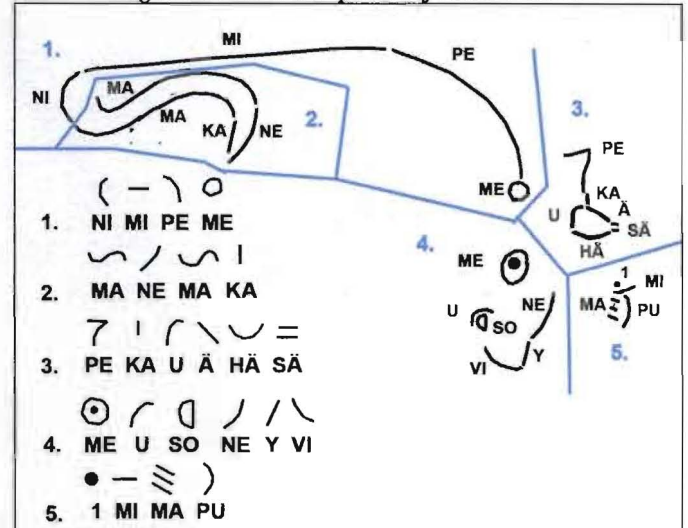
Figure 4: Chart of Pictish syllabary from two decipherments.

	A	Ä	E	I	O	Ö	U	Y	Pictish
	• 1	: 2	= 20	50	○ 100	◊ 200		◇ 10,000	
Vowels	a	ä	e	i	o	ö	u	y	
H	ha	hä	he	hi	ho	hö	hu	hy	
J	ja	jä	je	ji	jo	jö	ju	jy	
K	ka	kä	ke	ki	ko	kö	ku	ky	
L	la	lä	le	li	lo	lö	lu	ly	
M	ma	mä	me	mi	mo	mö	mu	my	
N	na	nä	ne	ni	no	nö	nu	ny	
P	pa	pä	pe	pi	po	pö	pu	py	
R	ra	rä	re	ri	ro	rö	ru	ry	
S	sa	sä	se	si	so	sö	su	sy	
T	ta	tä	te	ti	to	tö	tu	ty	
V	va	vä	ve	vi	vo	vö	vu	vy	

Lines 1 to 5

The back of the bull divides into five phrases.

Figure 5: Transcription of lines 1 to 5.



Pictish script, punctuation added.

1. NI: MI PE-ME
2. MA-NE. MA KA
3. PE-KA U Ä HÄ-SÄ.
4. ME U SO-NE Y VI.
5. 1, MI MA PU

Finnish decipherment

1. Niin: miettiä peijaa-mme
2. maa-neidosta. Maat kasvavat
3. petäjä-kaljat uurea äijeästä häät-sä.
4. Meiän urhean sota-neito yhdyttää viejän.
5. Yksi mies maasta puhuu;

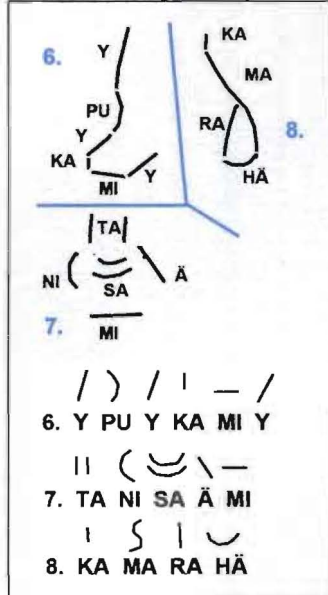
English translation

1. Thus: to plan our celebration feast
2. for the Mighty Maiden. The countryside will produce
3. pine beer-casks for her great wedding.
4. Our gallant Battle Maiden will join an escort.
5. One man from the country will speak;

Lines 6 to 8

The first hind leg has three phrases.

Figure 6: Transcription of lines 6 to 8.



Pictish script, punctuation added.

- 6. Y PU, Y KA MI, Y-
- 7. TA. NI, SA Ä MI
- 8. KA NA RA HÄ

Finnish decipherment

- 6. yli-puhja, yli-kalja-mies, ylä-
- 7. taatto. Niin saatto äijäin miehien
- 8. kaita nautaa raitoa häihin.

English translation

- 6. the best speaker, the best beer man, High
- 7. Father. Then a procession of many people
- 8. will herd cattle pulling *ahkios* to the wedding.

Notes

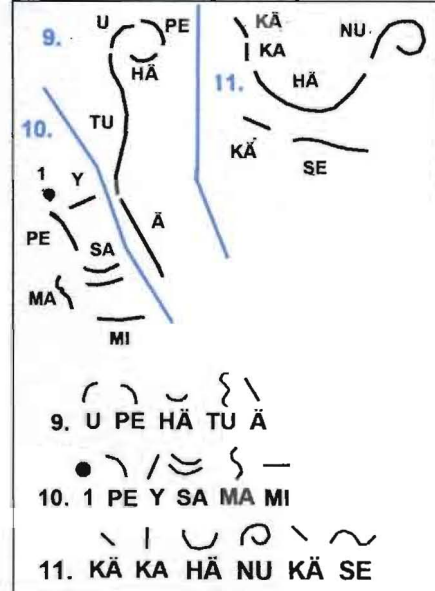
- 8. *raito* = 'a line of reindeer pulling an *ahkio*.'
- 8. *ahkio* is a type of sled without runners, suitable for carrying goods or people in deep snow, usually drawn by a man or a reindeer. They can be of any size.



Lines 9 to 11

The second hind leg and belly has three phrases.

Figure 7: Transcription of lines 9 to 11.



Pictish script, punctuation added.

- 9. U PE HÄ, TU Ä.
- 10. 1 PE Y SA MA MI
- 11. KÄ KA HÄ; NU KÄ SE.

Finnish decipherment

- 9. urheata perhettä häihin, tuhatta äijää.
- 10. Ensin perhe yhdyttää sata maa-miehiä
- 11. käydä kaljaa hääväen; nuteja Kädestä se'ä.

English translation

- 9. valiant families to the wedding, a thousand real men.
- 10. The first family will join a hundred countrymen
- 11. to go and fetch beer for the wedding party; hornless cattle from Hand also.

Notes

- 11 *se'ä* meaning 'also' from *sekä*.

Lines 12 to 16

The first foreleg has five phrases.

Figure 8: Transcription of lines 12 to 16.



Pictish script, punctuation added.

12. NE Y KÄ VI HÄ [SÄ].

13. NE Y ME Y U, SO,

14. Y TU KÄ MI

15. SA MI

16. Y KA KÄ

Finnish decipherment

12. Ne yhdyttävät Käden viljoa häissä.

13. Neito yhdyttä meiän ylä-urho, Soan,

14. yhdyttävät tuhat Käden miestä,

15. saattavat miestä,

16. ylä-kalvat Kädestä.

English translation

12. They will meet Hand's dear friends at the wedding.

13. Maiden will meet our best champion, War,

14. will meet a thousand of Hand's men,

15. will escort the men,

16. the best blades of Hand.

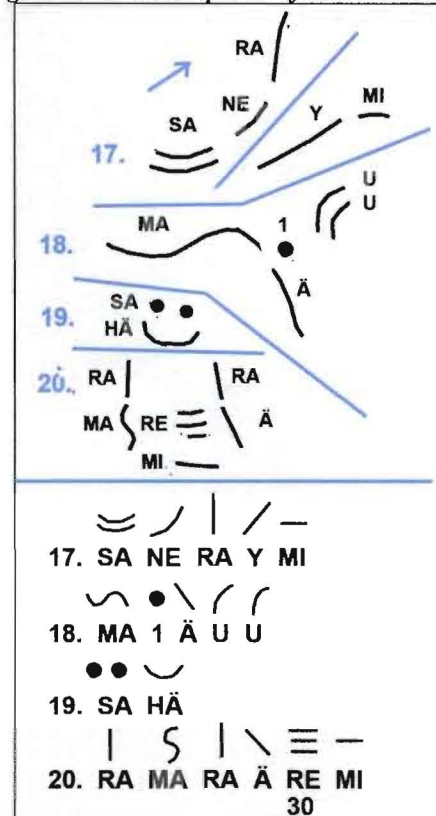
Note

12. SÄ, two horizontal parallel lines, is inferred from letter VI above letter HÄ.

Lines 17 to 20

The second foreleg and neck have four phrases.

Figure 9: Transcription of lines 17 to 20.



Pictish script, punctuation added.

17. SA NE RA, Y MI.

18. HÄ-RI, 1 Ä U U.

19. SA SA HÄ.

20. RA MA RA Ä RE MI.

Finnish decipherment

17. Sahti Neidosta rahvahan, yli miehien.

18. Hää-riemujuhla, ensin äijän urhean urhoa.

19. Sahti saaveihin häiden.

20. Raavas maista raahaa äijän rehua miehien.

English translation

17. Table beer from Maiden for the country folk, the best of people.

18. A wedding celebration feast, the first for many valiant champions.

19. Table beer in casks for the wedding.

20. Cattle from the countryside will drag much
food for the men.

Notes

19. The image of beer in a keg is two bubbles in a wide champagne glass without the stem. The scribe used double dots to infer that SA was doubled.

Bibliography

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