

A Decorated Stone Spindle-Whorl from Glenshee

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The following is an examination of a stone spindle-whorl (SF33, Figure 1) found in 2015 during excavation at Lair, Glenshee, in northeast Perth and Kinross. The site consists of several Pictish stone and turf longhouses of the Pitcarmick type, dating from broadly the 7th-10th centuries AD (D Sneddon pers. comm., 26 October 2016). The spindle-whorl was found in the western end of Building 3, Trench 23, within an artefact-rich occupation layer along with pottery (SF27), flint (SF37), pieces of burnt bone (SF38), a possible iron knife (SF 40) and other corroded pieces of iron (SF36) (Strachan & Sneddon 2015, 21). Radiocarbon dating puts Building 3 within the range of AD 680 to 965 placing the spindle-whorl solidly within an early medieval context. The sandstone whorl is complete with a circular profile and relatively flat sides giving it a rectangular cross section. The object measures 36 mm in diameter, ranges from 4 to 8 mm thick and weighs 16.2 g. There is a single central hole measuring approximately 11 mm in diameter. The whorl is made of a beige, fine-grained sandstone not native to the Glenshee area (E Campbell pers. comm. 27 October 2016) which may have come from a region of red sandstone 25 km south of the site.



Figure 1: Lair Spindle Whorl (photo courtesy of York Archaeological Trust)

The Decoration and Markings

One face of the spindle-whorl is heavily marked (Figures 1 & 2). While some markings appear to be accidental gouges and scratches, a number appear to be deliberate carvings. Some of these are deep and highly visible, whilst others are light and faint. This lack of consistency suggests a number of episodes of carving, perhaps by more than one hand. The carvings are often overlapping making it unclear where one carving ends and another begins. The incisions do not indicate any predominant orientation. For the purpose of this report the spindle-whorl has been loosely divided into three areas: Area 1, Area 2, and Area 3 which are indicated by dashed lines on Figure 2.

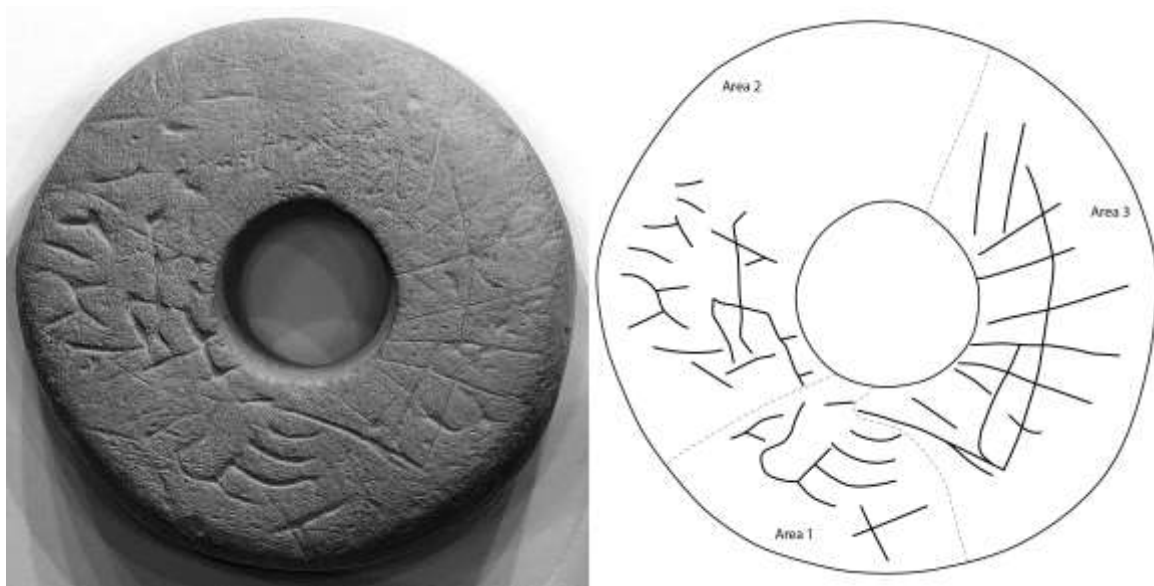


Figure 2: Image extracted from RTI (courtesy of Heather Christie/Stuart Jeffrey Glasgow School of Art) and incisions described in the text

The carvings in Area 1 are deep and stand out as the most coherent group of lines. These carvings appear to be intentional and consist of an ovoid or sub-rectangular outline with the lower side flat and the upper somewhat concave. Four slightly curving lines of similar length project out from the underside, roughly parallel with one another. If this is the correct orientation, these lines could plausibly be interpreted as the body and limbs of a quadruped such as a horse or deer, however, this is highly uncertain. Just above the ovoid 'body' are additional lines that may be associated, perhaps intended to represent the horns or antlers of the supposed animal. Further deeply incised lines of similar type are within Area 2 which are particularly tangled and perplexing. On the outer edge of the whorl is a set of lines of similar length and depth. It is not clear if these are intended to be read together as a series of figures, in which case they could be read as the Latin letters K, I, and K or H. However the resemblance

is slight and, especially given the extreme rarity of 'K' in this period, likely to be merely coincidental. The possibility that these markings could be runes is highly unlikely as well given that their resemblance is so slight.

Also in Area 2 are additional incisions near the inner edge of the spindle-whorl, underneath the three characters previously described. These lines create geometric and convoluted figures that cannot be easily described nor understood. It is possible that they are merely natural weathering of the stone, however, one particular component is a rectangular-like feature with a cross-like motif in the centre which is perhaps deliberate. There are additional slight scratches and gouges, which could be attributed to natural abrasion, but the rest of Area 2 is relatively clear of markings. Moving clockwise, Area 3 contains a series of lightly, but deliberately, carved vertical and horizontal lines that create a radial design. A long line runs at a slight curve for about 38 mm, approximately mid-way between the inner and outer edges of the whorl. Roughly bisecting this main line are a series of 8 lines. Five of these lines radiate from the central hole to the outer rim. Beyond this are 2, maybe 3, lines parallel to one another lying at a sharper angle. These may or may not be associated with the previous 5 lines. It has been suggested that this carving may be an inscription in the ogham script but, for the reasons set out below, this is rather uncertain. At the other end of the mid-line is a deeper and longer line connecting the mid-line to the ovoid figure in Area 1. It is unclear whether this was deliberate and to where this line is associated. Furthermore, there is an additional shorter incision running above and parallel to the mid-line that crosses through three of the bisecting radial lines

Significance & Discussion

Spindle-whorls are evidence of domestic textile production traditionally associated with feminine gender roles. Used to add weight and momentum at the end of a spindle for hand-spun textiles they are widely found throughout the archaeological record. They are believed to have been highly personal items, enough to be frequently included as grave goods. At the Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Castledyke South, Barton-on-Humber, spindle-whorls were found at the hip of female skeletons suggesting that they were held in a belt or girdle (Foreman 1998, 294), further indicating that they were important enough to be kept close to their owners. In the British Isles they are found throughout the Neolithic to later medieval periods within burial and household contexts as well as stray finds, a trend that is evident in other periods and locations, including within Roman, Merovingian, Scandinavian, Germanic and Gaulish cultures (Green 2012, 98-100; Jesch 1991, 14). The decoration on these whorls is incredibly varied, from detailed and patterned paintings, carvings and moulds to minimal markings. Bronze Age clay spindle-whorls from Troy depict a multitude of highly individualised geometric and stylistic designs many of which resemble the casual doodles on the Glenshee whorl (Schliemann 1875, PL XXIII-PL XXXI).

The radial decoration on the Glenshee spindle-whorl was brought to attention due to its visual similarity to the ogham script. This resemblance is most likely coincidental, as will be explained later. Spindle-whorls with similar carvings that have been described as 'ogham-like' include one from the Broch of Burrian, North Ronaldsay, Orkney (Figure 3, National Museums Scotland X.GB 58). This whorl is dated to c. AD 400-800 and has seven radial lines arranged along a circular stem line, a resemblance to ogham that MacGregor states is purely coincidental (1974, 92). Another example is a whalebone disc, 99 mm in diameter, from Foshigarry, North Uist (Figure 3), decorated with interlace designs as well as a circumferential line along its outer edge with seventy-four short radial lines at varying angles (Hallén 1994, 217). Hallén's suggestion that the incisions were intended to imitate ogham is refuted by Forsyth (1996, 512-13) who states that the resemblance is too slight to be certain. A lead spindle-whorl from Colchester, Essex (Figure 4) displays similar linear markings that have been described as 'early writing', but are also a mere resemblance rather than genuine ogham.

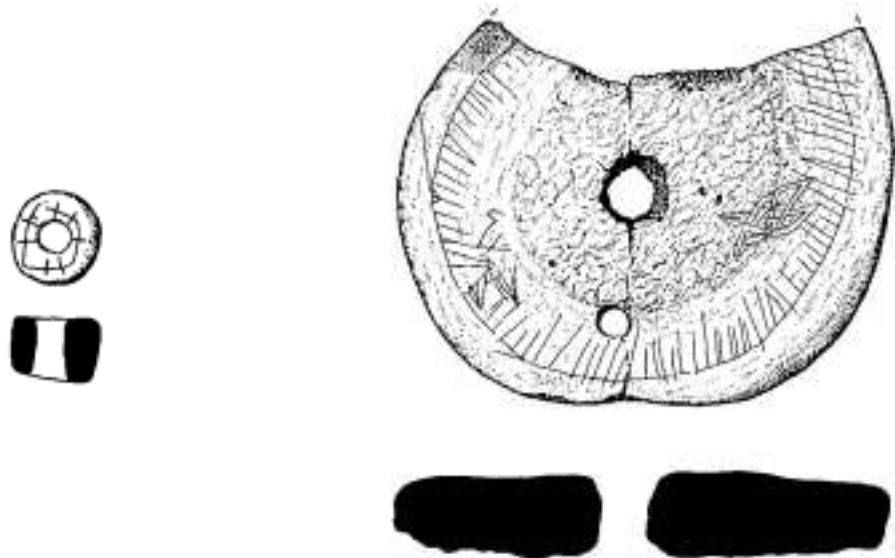


Figure 3: Left: Broch of Burrian. (MacGregor 1974), Right: Foshigarry, North Uist. (Hallén 1994)



Figure 4: Colchester, Essex (Colchester Treasure Hunting)

An apparently unpublished stone spindle-whorl found in Fintray, Aberdeenshire (Figure 5) (British Museum 1906, 0421.202) has similar radial lines expanding out from the central perforation but without a central stem line. This spindle-whorl is dated from the Neolithic to Bronze Age illustrating that this type of linear decoration may be widespread. There are a high number of spindle-whorls from Scandinavia of varying shapes with renditions of this type of decoration. These include a cylinder-shaped one from Jæren, Rogaland county, Norway (Arkeologisk Museum, Stavanger, S1531), a dome-shaped whorl from Voss, Hordaland, Norway (Universitetsmuseet i Bergen, B6288r) and a disc-shaped wooden spindle-whorl from Oslo (Figure 6) that also displays a runic inscription (Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, C31266h; MacLeod & Mees 2006, 51). A conical spindle-whorl from Kvam, Hordaland, Norway (Figure 7) (Universitetsmuseet i Bergen, B14979_1) has three horizontal lines circling around its sides and is nearly identical to a steatite whorl from Jarlshof, Shetland (National Museums Scotland, X.HSA 422; Treasure Trove, TT 8/07) which is decorated with a horizontal groove running through linear incisions (Heald 2007, 175). From Jarlshof and Dunrossness, Shetland are a number of Pictish stone discs with intricate designs and ambiguous carvings resembling the markings on the Glenshee spindle-whorl (Figure 8, Scott & Ritchie 2009, 16-17; National Museum of Scotland GA.425).



Figure 5: Fintray, Aberdeenshire. (British Museum, 1906,0421.202)



Figure 6: Oslo. (Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, C31266h)



Figure 7: Kvam, Hordaland, Norway (Universitetsmuseet i Bergen, B14979_1)

There exists a wide corpus of inscribed spindle-whorls. Amongst these include a large number from the continent with Gaulish, Gallo-Latin and Latin inscriptions, most of which contain erotic messages to women (Meid 1994, 52-56). There is a suggestion that these were not actual spindle-whorls but 'spinning-room amusements' given as gifts to women from their admirers (Meid 1994, 53). More relevant to this discussion is the 8th century spindle-whorl from Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney, (Figure 9) which is incised with an ogham inscription circling around its face reading (B)ENDDACTANIM(L), 'a blessing on the soul of L' (Forsyth 1995, 688). Runic inscriptions on spindle-whorls are more numerous and include a whorl from Lincolnshire with a particularly long prayer to Nordic gods in Norse runes (Figure 10, Daubney 2010), a steatite whorl from Stromness stating that 'Gautr carved the runes' (National Museums Scotland, BE 360; Holman 1996, 258-59) and a number of whorls from Norway containing personal names and often more personal messages. An example is the previously mentioned wooden spindle-whorl from Oslo (Figure 6) that states in runes, 'Nikulás loves well the woman called Gýriðr, step-daughter of Pétrs(?) -Ragna' (Kulturhistorisk Museum, Oslo, C31266h; MacLeod and Mees 2006, 51). An Anglo-Saxon jet spindle-whorl from Whitby Abbey, Yorkshire, is inscribed with a runic inscription transliterated as *Wer*, possibly a male personal name or the West Saxon *wær*, meaning 'token of friendship' (Page 1973, 171; Peers & Radford 1943, 74). These inscriptions illustrate that the whorls were highly personal possessions, ones that were continually handled, used and valued in societies in which textile manufacture was present.



Figure 8: Scatness, Dunrossness, Shetland (Top row). Jarlishof, Sumburgh, Shetland (Bottom row)
(National Museum of Scotland, GA.425)



Figure 9. Buckquoy, Birsay, Orkney. (Forsyth 1995, 685)



Figure 10. East Lindsey, Lincolnshire. (Daubney 2010)

Conclusion

The Glenshee spindle-whorl fits in with other decorated whorls but stands out due to its informal and casual quality. The doodles have a spontaneous graffiti-like element to them and suggest a complex biography of the object in which the decorations were done at different episodes of its life. Certainly some markings on the Glenshee whorl were deliberate incisions, in particular the possible quadruped animal. The radial carving also appears to be deliberate, possibly inspired by spindle-whorls such as the Broch of Burrian whorl. The possibility of an intended inscription cannot be ruled out but it is likely to be coincidental. If so, it may represent the two ogham letters I or R, followed by G or O (Katherine Forsyth pers comms, 24 January 2017), but it is highly ambiguous. Pictish ogham stones from the Perthshire sites of Dupplin, Abernethy, and Inchyra House, St Madoes (Forsyth 1996, 241, 333-59; Southesk 1895), illustrate that the ogham script was certainly known within the surrounding region of Glenshee. Therefore, it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that the spindle-whorl's incisions could be ogham or ogham-influenced but, as previously stated, this cannot be heavily relied on. Whether or not the carvings on the Glenshee spindle-whorl were meant to represent anything recognisable they can still be described as deliberate additions to the object either as intentional 'decorations' or casual doodles. The whorl remains a fascinating representation of early medieval material culture in Scotland and provides archaeologists with a connection to human agency of the past.

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