



Sueno's Stone

Sueno's Stone is the largest and most spectacular of the many carved stones that have survived from the early medieval period in Scotland. It stands in a purpose built glass shelter on the north eastern edge of the town of Forres.

The most striking thing about Sueno's Stone is its enormous scale. It stands over 21ft high and carries intricate carving that completely covers the front and rear faces of the stone, and its sides. The western or front side of the stone carries a huge ring headed cross, the body and surrounds of which have been filled with interlaced knotwork designs. The base of the cross is a few feet above the base of the stone, and the gap beneath it carries carvings of two bearded figures facing one another, with a smaller figure between them and others behind them.



The rear or eastern side of the stone is very different. Here you are confronted with what amounts to a Bayeux Tapestry in stone: an account of a battle told in a series of horizontal strips set within panels which are displayed one above another down the length of the stone. Similar techniques have been used elsewhere, especially on the Pictish symbol stone at Aberlemno Kirk, but it is the sheer scale of the battle being depicted, and the scale of the stone that has resulted, that makes Sueno's Stone unique.

The uppermost panel shows nine mounted warriors in three lines and has been interpreted as showing a leader arriving for battle with his personal escort. The second panel shows two lines of warriors on foot, the lower line apparently in the midst of combat, with those on the left turning to flee, signifying defeat. The next strip within the panel shows warriors besieging a broch, while on the left is a pile of headless corpses, whose detached heads are depicted in front of the broch. The final strip in this panel shows a scene in which warriors on foot are routing mounted warriors.

The third panel shows another pile of corpses underneath a curved object, by one interpretation a bridge. One element of this panel is thought to depict the defeated chieftain, again without a head, while the bottom strip shows more of the enemy running away. As one commentator wrote: *"This is war reporting on a monumentally self-confident scale"*.

Opinions differ about which battle the stone is meant to depict. Some say it represents the defeat of the Picts by the Scots of Dalriada under Kenneth Mac Alpin in 841, which would mean it was not actually a "Pictish" symbol stone: as histories are always written by the victors. For the philosopher Hector Boece, writing in the 1520s, the stone signified a battle involving the forces of the Norse King Swein Forkbeard (or "Sueno") against Scots. Other theories involve more historically likely encounters between Norse and Picts or Norse and Scots, and the battle known to have been fought at Forres in 966 in which King Duff or "Dubh" of Alba fought for control over Moray.

Duff was subsequently murdered and his body hidden under a bridge at nearby Kinloss. If you subscribe to this theory then the arched structure shown on the stone is the bridge under which Duff's body was hidden. The truth, of course, is that no-one really knows which battle the stone depicts, but trying to guess is half the fun.

The slab used to make Sueno's Stone weighs over seven tons and was probably quarried at Covesea, on the coast 11 miles to the north east. It could have been brought most of the way to its current site by boat. Most commentators agree that the stone is standing close to its original location, though it has been suggested that it might originally have been one of a pair, perhaps flanking some ceremonial entrance. The main source for this theory is a map of Moray drawn by Timothy Pont in the 1590s. This shows, quite clearly, two pillars standing just to the north of Forres.

Or Pont may simply have been mistaken. Either way, it seems that Sueno's Stone fell or was pushed over at some time, perhaps in the 1600s, and became buried. It was only uncovered again in the early 1700s, before being re-erected near where it had been found. The Victorians protected the stone with iron railings and a cap made of lead sheeting, and in the 1990s full protection was afforded by the glass box in which the stone now stands. This can make photography awkward, but it does ensure that the stone will still be here for future generations to enjoy.

Meanwhile, of course, the thought that the other half of a matching pair may still be waiting to be unearthed somewhere nearby is an intriguing one.