

The Face on the Turoe Stone

By JENNIFER FOSTER¹ and MAGDALEN BATTEN²

Re-examination of the Turoe stone, Co. Galway, Ireland, a small granite pillar decorated with Celtic art, has revealed a possible, previously un-noticed, stylised boar's head.

Keywords: decorated stone, Celtic art, Ireland, Iron Age, boar's head decoration

The Turoe stone is a small, rounded pillar of granite, 1.68 m high; it may originally have appeared shorter as the lower section is undecorated and it may have been sunk lower in the ground. It is now set in a field in Bullaun, Co. Galway, Ireland, but is not in its original position. It probably came from a late Iron Age hillfort, the Rath of Feerwore, 3 km away from its present site but the exact location is unknown. It was moved in the late 19th century to form a garden feature for Turoe House. There are also fibre-glass casts in the British Museum (Fig. 1) and the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin.

The pillar has been beautifully dressed to have a domed top. Above the undecorated base is a rectangular step pattern which is decorated with patterns typical of late Iron Age art (usually referred to as Celtic or La Tène art). The motifs on the domed top half are contained in four outlined sections, divided by grooves (Duignan 1976, fig. 2), facing north, south, east, and west (Fig. 2); the wide east and west facing sections are curved at the top with a flat base, while the two north and south sections consist of two thin, curving triangles which run together at the top of the stone. Each of the sections forms a distinct panel.

The decoration is three-dimensional; the main designs are in low relief with lower voids between. Duignan was convinced that the decoration was originally painted (1976, 204). The motifs used in the panels are typical of late Iron Age British art with many common motifs (Fox 1958; Joy 2008) such as

palmette derivatives, yinyangs, spirals, curved sided triangles, and trumpet shapes combined to form a flowing tendril design. The design is asymmetrical.

The Turoe stone is one of five large stones in Ireland decorated with Celtic designs (Megaw & Megaw 1989, 208; Raftery 1994, fig. 109). One from Mullagmast, Co. Kildare has four sides with distinct panels on each side, so distinct that they could have been designed by different artists (Megaw & Megaw 1989, fig. 352). Most similar to the Turoe stone is the Castlestrange stone in the grounds of Castlestrange House, Athleague, Co. Roscommon, again moved to be a garden ornament. It is a smaller domed rock (height 50 cm) with incised curvilinear ornament (Raftery 1994, fig. 102).

The date of the Turoe stone is slightly uncertain. The design was originally thought to be La Tène II in date, with affinities with stone carvings in Brittany; however, Duignan (1976, 210) plausibly argued that it shows 'an advanced stage of insular Celtic art', ie that it dates to the later Iron Age or early Roman period with derivations from insular British art, especially the mirrors. Like most later British Celtic insular art, the lower sections between the raised areas of the design panels (voids) have become important in their own right (Joy 2008, 81–3) with motifs such as curved sided triangles, trumpet shapes, and spirals. Typical of most Celtic art (*ibid.*, table 5.1), the design covers the entire surface with both positive motifs and voids.

The stone could therefore date to the 1st centuries BC/AD. However, stone objects decorated with Celtic art are decidedly rare in Iron Age Britain; it is found mainly as decoration on portable objects, especially metalwork (Gosden & Hill 2008, 6). Across Europe there are few Iron Age stone sculptures and those that

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Fig. 1.
The Turoe stone cast at the British Museum; the east facing side (photo: Sophia Adams, with permission from the British Museum)

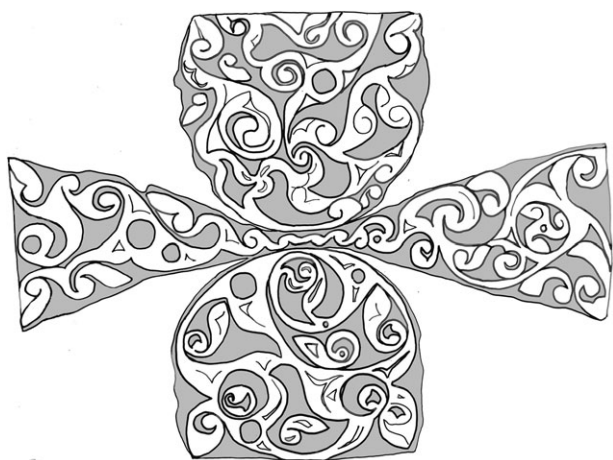


Fig. 2.
The design on the Turoe stone, with the voids in dark grey, the west facing side is at the top (after Duignan 1976; graphic: J. Foster)

survive are mainly statues of humans, although heads and reliefs are more widespread (Venclová & Royt, 2014, 98). The fact that this is a sculpture in stone suggests that it could date to the Roman period, perhaps made by a skilled mason trained in Roman art work, but using Celtic designs. Raftery suggested that a range of iron chisels and heavy hammers must have been used (1994, 1623) on such a hard stone though these tools would also have been available in the late Iron Age. However, the designer was clearly someone who intimately understood the complex Celtic designs. Of course, designer and sculptor may not have been the same person.

The affinity to insular art metalwork suggests a late Iron Age or Roman date but it is difficult to suggest how late it may be as Celtic designs continue in Ireland until the 7th century AD and subsequently transfer from metalwork to manuscripts, some dating to the 8th century AD. The *Book of Durrow*, for example, (c. AD 675) has triskeles, commas, and trumpet shapes on its decorated pages.

THE BOAR'S FACE

In 2013 one of the present authors (JF) taught a Continuing Education course on prehistoric art. She was marking part of the course work, where students had to identify motifs on illustrated pieces of Celtic art, such as spiral, comma, triskele, yinyang, trumpet, and curved sided triangle. The Turoe stone was one example, the illustration used being that by Duignan (1976, fig. 2). The student (MB) had marked a triskele, comma, yinyang, and curved sided triangle on her copy of the Turoe stone but, in addition, she marked an ear and a face. Closer examination by JF suggested that there *was* an animal face on the east facing side of the stone (Fig. 3). What Duignan described as 'single-boss domed trumpets filling the base angles' (1976, 204) are, in fact, the ears.

There are two reasons why this face has never been seen before: one is that this side is more weathered and is rarely photographed; also the sun shines directly onto it, meaning that it is less easy to see the design. The other reason is that the face is upside down so it is not at all obvious. The face was clear on the drawing but would it be so clear on the three-dimensional stone? The original Turoe stone is now very worn, particularly on one side, presumably by weather, although it may also have been used as a rubbing stone by cattle. Fortunately, the fibreglass cast in the British

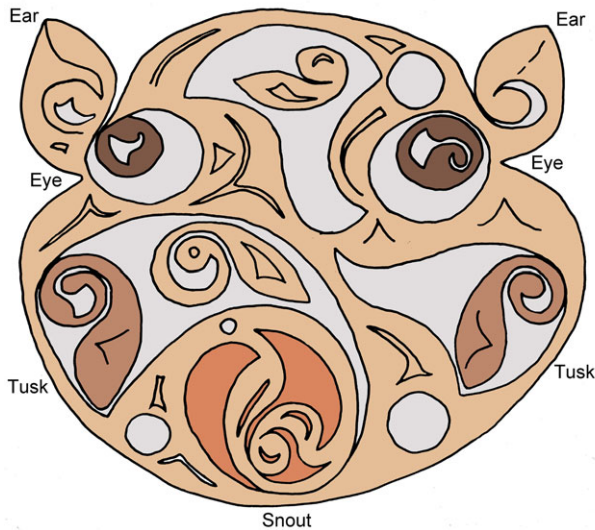


Fig. 3.
The boar's head on the Turoe stone (after Duignan 1976;
graphic: J. Foster)

Museum shows the details of the decoration (Fig. 4). Obviously, the face is less clear because the design stretches around the whole width of the curved side and onto the top of the dome and it is upside down. However, it was possible to see the face, though it was quite difficult to photograph.

The face is probably that of a pig or boar, a very common animal in Celtic art. There is a pointed ear on either side and between them two large round eyes with slightly off-centre circular pupils with central trumpet shapes. Below, in the centre of the base is the snout: a circle made of a trumpet shape and a comma with a swirling centre. On either side are the tusks: lobe patterns with spirals. The face is very wide with bulging cheeks. This may seem incongruous with boars which have a narrow bone structure to their faces; however, the live animals have very bristly faces which gives the impression of fat cheeks.

Why is the face upside down? The stone could not have been set up the other way; it was obviously designed to be seen with the domed top. The first possibility is that there was a deliberate attempt to hide the design so that very few people would know it was there, a hidden face. This is a typical hidden Celtic face (Megaw 1970); hidden faces are found on many objects: of humans; animals such as boars and cattle; and birds, particularly birds of prey and owls (Foster 2014). A second possibility is that the designer and the stone mason were two different

people and, by mistake, the design was inverted; or perhaps it fitted better into the shape that way up. Another suggestion is that the boar is pictured looking upwards, although apparently pigs are unable to raise their heads to look up (Sophia Adams pers. comm.). Perhaps the artist chose to ignore this fact.

Is it possible to interpret this scene? There are many stories of boars in Celtic literature, such as Twrch Trwyth in the *Mabinogion*, an enormous boar who could never be conquered (Davies 2007). A possible explanation for the Turoe image is the story in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogion* (Jones 1955, 63–5) in the tale of Math fab Mathonwy. The story is about a man called Llew Llaw Gyffes who was pierced by his wife's lover using a poisoned spear, but he turned into an eagle and flew off. His father Gwydion searched for him; one day he followed a sow who was acting strangely. Every morning she rushed to feed under an oak tree, eating rotten flesh and maggots falling from the tree. Gwydion saw Llew in the tree in the form of the eagle, from whom the maggots were falling when he shook himself. He persuaded the eagle down, turned him back into a man, and, with time, he recovered. It is possible that the Turoe stone relates to a version of this story with the pig looking upwards for the maggots to fall down. The comma shape on the pig's brow could represent a maggot. It is also possible that the opposite west facing section of the stone contains the face of a bird of prey (Fig. 5), with a long curved pointed beak and two eyes, one a spiral the other an open circle. This can only be seen, like the pig, if the stone is viewed upside down. There are also several comma shapes which could represent maggots.

One problem is that the *Mabinogion* was written down about 1000 years after the Turoe stone was created. Also, it is a definitely a Welsh compilation; the story of Llew is not reflected in the Irish stories while the Turoe stone was found in Ireland and was presumably made there. However, the survival of folk tales is very erratic and it is possible that some of these tales were more widespread in the past.

CONCLUSION

There are many questions about the Turoe stone: was it a boundary marker or a memorial stone? This stone would have been permanently on display in the landscape, a rare phenomenon in Celtic art which is mainly on portable objects, suggesting that the landscape was

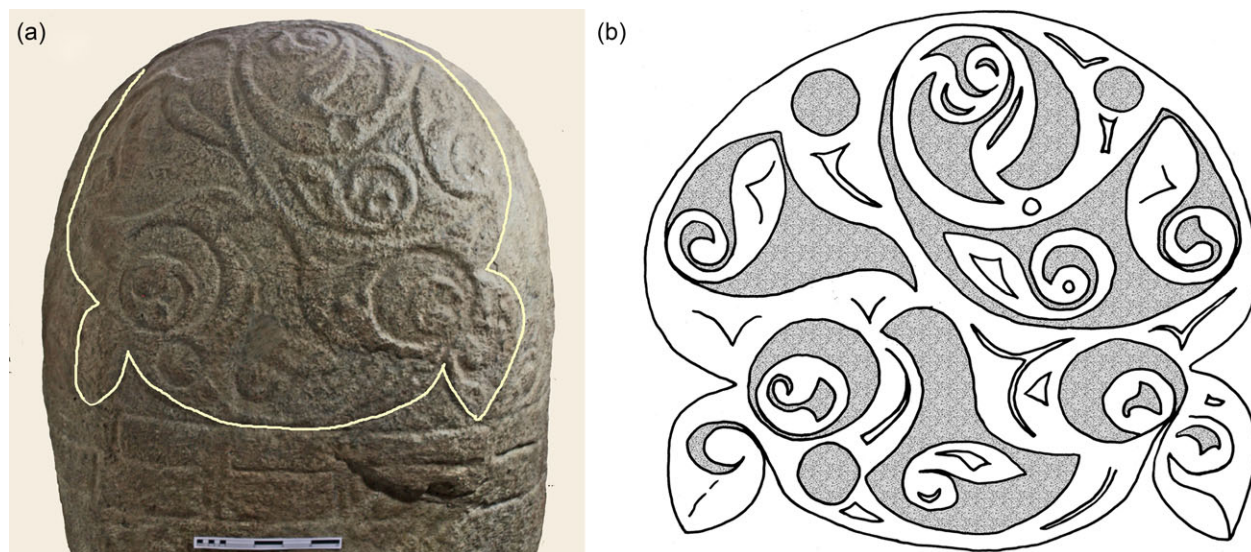


Fig. 4.

a. Detail of the Turoe stone cast in the British Museum; The east facing side with the boar's head outlined. The ears are downwards and the eyes can be seen clearly (photo: Sophia Adams, with permission from the British Museum); b. The boar's head as seen on the stone (after Duignan 1976: graphic: J. Foster)

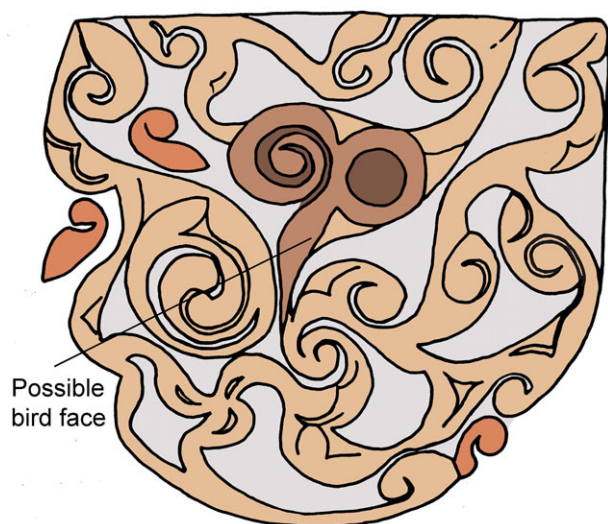


Fig. 5.

The possible bird's head on the west facing side of the Turoe stone (after Duignan 1976: graphic: J. Foster)

an important element in its construction. Perhaps this was an important ritual place. Another example of prehistoric landscape art is the Uffington White Horse (Miles *et al.* 2003). It could be that the boar/pig face helps to explain what this pillar was for. Perhaps it was erected beneath an old tree purported

to be the tree in which Lleu hid. On the other hand, were people at the time it was made able to see the face on the stone? Celtic art was intended to communicate but how understood was the symbolism? (Megaw & Megaw 2008, 41).

This is a very interesting discovery in the history of Celtic art studies. There are obviously many hidden faces in Celtic art, perhaps many more than have been recognised hitherto (Foster 2014). It is exciting that a beginner can recognise this without any experience in the subject, or perhaps that was the reason Magdalen saw the boar; she had no preconceptions to prevent her.

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RÉSUMÉ

Le visage sur la Turoe Stone, de Jennifer Foster et Magdaen Batten

Un ré-examen de la Turoe Stone, Co. Galway, Irlande, une petite colonne de granit décorée d’art celtique, a révélé une éventuelle tête de sanglier stylisée auparavant inaperçue.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Das Gesicht auf dem Turoe Stone, von Jennifer Foster und Magdalen Batten

Eine erneute Untersuchung des Turoe Stone, Co. Galway, Irland, einer kleinen Granitsäule, die mit keltischer Kunst verziert ist, hat einen möglichen, zuvor unbemerkten, stilisierten Eberkopf ergeben.

RESUMEN

El Rostro en la Piedra Turoe, por Jennifer Foster y Magdalen Batten

Un nuevo examen de Turoe Stone, Co. Galway, Irlanda, una pequeña columna de granito decorada con arte celta, ha revelado una posible cabeza de jabalí estilizada previamente desapercibida.