

# The Apotropaic Symbolled Threshold to Nevern Castle – Castell Nanhyfer

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*SUMMARY* Excavations in the summer of 2011 at Nevern Castle revealed a new southern entrance to the castle constructed of clay mortared slate in the final quarter of the twelfth century. The threshold was formed of vertically seated slates, imitating the natural bedrock. Thirteen of these slates had designs inscribed into one or both faces. Their location, the absence of such inscribed slates from the rest of the site and the nature of the symbols, which could not normally be seen, suggests that they were apotropaic in nature. This paper presents record and interpretation of this unusual 'in situ' apotropaic symbolled threshold deposit.

## Introduction

The ongoing debate about the role of castles as instruments of military functionalism or social display (Stocker 1992, Coulson 2003, Platt 2007) has led to a greater emphasis on interpreting castles in a more holistic manner appreciating their social, domestic, administrative, economic, semiotic as well as military qualities (Creighton and Liddiard 2008). In practice, however, the interpretation depends on the nature and extent of the surviving evidence. This is a challenge to excavations such as that at Nevern Castle in north Pembrokeshire, where only limited traces of masonry survive on a heavily ploughed site, little or no bone is preserved in the acid soil and, less than 5 miles from the sea, and the ironwork is corroded to unrecognisable lumps. The interpretation of the castle as an integral part of the social landscape of Wales in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century is, however, made easier by a contemporary text 'A Journey Through Wales and A Description of Wales' (Thorpe 1978) written by Giraldus Cambrensis book following his tour through Wales in 1188 with Archbishop Baldwin raising men for the third crusade. Giraldus's text demonstrates that in 12<sup>th</sup> century Wales, belief was as important as physical reality; good, evil and supernatural forces were a very real part of people's everyday lives in this period.

*'in these parts of Pembroke, in our own times, unclean spirits have been in close communication with human beings. They are not visible, but their presence is felt all the same. First in the house of Stephen Wiriet then, at a later date, in the house of William Not they have been in the habit of manifesting themselves, throwing refuse all over the place, .....of annoyance to host and guests alike ripping up their clothes of linen and their woollen ones too, and even cutting holes in them.'* (Thorpe 1978, 151)

During their tour of Wales, on March 28<sup>th</sup> 1188, Giraldus and Archbishop Baldwin stayed the night in Nevern (Nanhyfer) Castle. Entering the castle they would have crossed over the castle threshold which was excavated in the summer of 2011. A number of the slates recovered from this threshold had had designs hastily scratched (incised) on them. This 'graffiti' appears to communicate the ideas and concerns of those labouring to build the castle, but in five seasons this is the only place in the castle where such 'little bits of soul-

fossil' (Butler 1913, 234) have been recovered, thus what they depict as well as their position in the perimeter defences would appear to be significant. No comparative examples have been recovered the numerous large scale castle excavations in Wales; Aberystwyth, Dryslwyn, Dolforwyn, Caergwrle, Flint, Laugharne, Loughor, Montgomery, Rumney which took place or were published in the 1980s and 1990s. The best parallels come from Inchmarnock and Tintagel Castle but these were not recovered in situ. Consequently these incised slates from Nevern have been cleaned, recorded and are here published ahead of the rest of the excavation to encourage the publication of other examples of similar ephemeral evidence, which appears to relate to the ideas and beliefs of the castle builders and, as these are not masons marks and have no functional purpose, appear to speak to the world of beliefs and ideas which so filled the world of 12<sup>th</sup> century men such as Giraldus Cambrensis.

## The Site

Nevern Castle is an earthwork with traces of slate walling and deep rock-cut ditches, on a spur on the north side of the valley of the river (Afon) Nyfer. In the twelfth century it was the centre of the cantref and medieval lordship of Cemais, in north Pembrokeshire (Figure 1). The double rampart and ditches on the northern side and single massive rampart and ditch on the western side cut off the end of the spur in a manner reminiscent of an Iron Age or early medieval promontory fort (Figure 2).

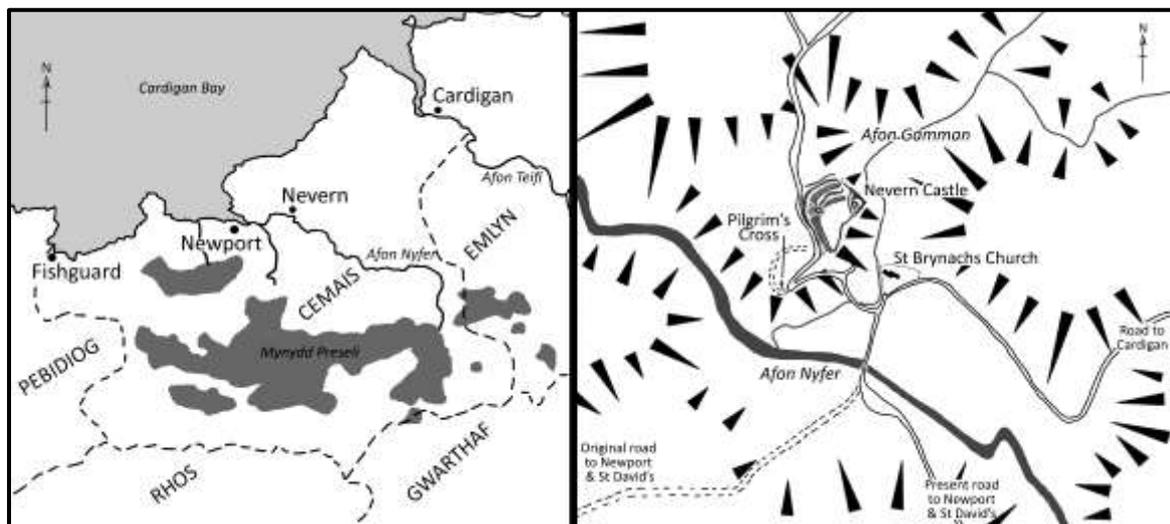


Figure 1: Nevern Castle Location

At the north-western angle of the ramparts is a substantial 8m high motte. The south and east sides are defended by naturally precipitous slopes plunging down to a stream, Afon Gamman. A substantial rock cut ditch (6-8m wide and deep) cuts off the eastern tip of the site. This 'Inner Castle', the term used by King and Perks (1951), has remnants of man-made slate walls present on all sides (Figure 2).

## History

Prior to the early twelfth century the cantref of Cemais was controlled by the Welsh lord Cuhelyn Fardd (Geraint Gruffydd 1975/6, 199). In the early twelfth century Henry I

encouraged the Anglo-Norman annexation of Pembrokeshire. In 1108 Flemings took control of the cantref of Rhos and Gerald of Winsor captured the cantref of Emlyn, whilst in 1110 Gilbert FitzRichard took control of the commotes of Ceredigion (Jones 1952, 27-8). As part of this campaign Robert FitzMartin took control of Cemais circa 1108-10 and created Nevern as the caput for his new barony of Cemais. The motte on this site is almost certainly the castle that he established. George Owen suggested that he also founded a borough of eighteen burgage plots on this site (Miles 1998, 10). Subsequently he established the abbey of St Dogmaels (Hilling 2000, 26) nearly 6 miles north east of Nevern.

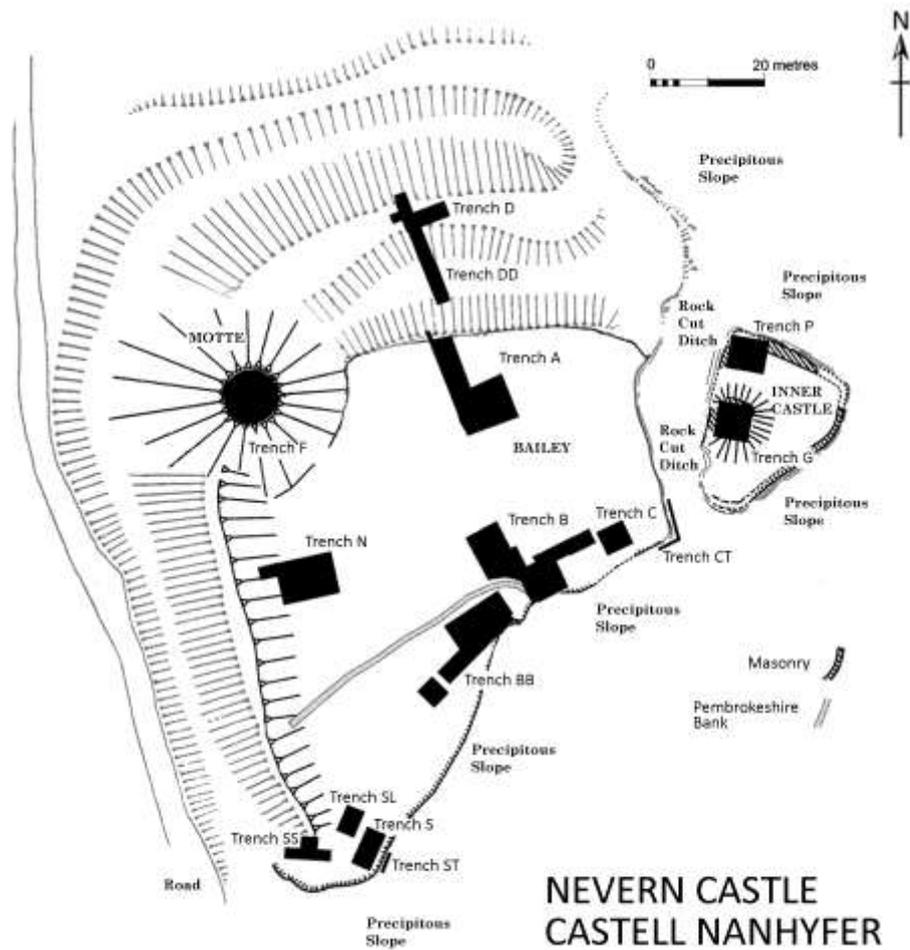


Figure 2: Nevern Castle with area excavated 2008-2011 marked.

The Welsh recaptured Ceredigion in 1136, following the battle of Crug Mawr (Jones 1952, 51-2); this may have given them control of much of northern Pembrokeshire including Nevern (Davies 1991, 46), and after 1156 this meant control by Rhys ap Gruffydd (The Lord Rhys). In 1171, after reaching agreement with Henry II, Rhys was given the rank of Justiciar, allowed to retain his ancestral lands of Deheubarth but required to return all other lands to their Anglo-Norman lords (Maund 2006, 173-4). It is highly likely that soon after 1171 the ownership of the castle passed to William FitzMartin (Robert's son) who married Angharad, the Lord Rhys's daughter. Following the death of Henry II in 1189 and the probable departure of William FitzMartin on crusade with Richard I (Bruce Coplestone Crow pers. comm.); in 1191 the Lord Rhys captured Nevern Castle, ignoring the solemn oaths he had previously sworn on holy relics not to do so. Control of the castle then swapped back and

forth between the Lord Rhys and sons (Hywel Sais, Gruffydd and Maelgwn), with the Lord Rhys being held prisoner in the castle during 1194 (Jones 1952, 175) before his death in 1197. It is recorded that in 1195 Hywel Sais slighted Nevern Castle to prevent it falling into Anglo-Norman hands (Remfry 2007, 99, 185) and by 1204 Anglo-Norman forces had regained control of north Pembrokeshire. Nevern Castle disappears from the written record in 1195 and it is likely that a new castle and borough had been established in Newport by 1204 (Murphy 1994).

## **The Excavation**

An initial survey of Nevern Castle (Castell Nanhyfer) together with observations on the history and visible archaeological features on the site was published by King and Perks in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (1950-51). Following a geophysical survey by Chris Caple and Will Davies in 2005 (Caple and Davies 2008) archaeological excavations directed by Dr Chris Caple, for a partnership of Nevern Community Council, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park and Dept of Archaeology, Durham University, started in 2008 and have continued on an annual basis [www.neverncastle.com](http://www.neverncastle.com) (Caple 2009a; 2009b, 2011). All the visible and excavated features of the castle have been shown to be of twelfth century date. Two major phases of activity have been identified:

### *Early twelfth century (site phase 4)*

The castle was created by William FitzMartin between 1108 and 1136, with the construction of the motte and adjoining banks and ditches on the north and west sides cutting off this promontory. On the south edge of the site traces of a smaller, shallower bank and ditch (BB) was uncovered beneath later twelfth century buildings. On top of the motte (F) evidence for a large four post structure, a watch-tower probably similar to that on the motte at Abinger, has been recovered. Behind the northern bank (A) traces of wooden buildings were overlain by late twelfth century occupation debris. On the west (N), a series of shallow post holes cut down through the compacted slate surfaces behind the western rampart signified at least one wood framed building. Between the inner and outer north banks (DD) a sunken roadway was uncovered which provided the main access into the castle through a gateway between the motte and the inner north bank in this period. On the top of the outer north bank (D) post and stake holes for a sequence of wooden palisades was uncovered.

### *Early to Mid-twelfth century (site phase 5)*

The silting up of the roadway between the north banks suggests a period of decline or even abandonment of the castle after this initial phase of occupation.

### *Mid to Late twelfth century (site phases 6 and 7)*

The castle was rebuilt by William FitzMartin in the period AD 1171 – 1195 using slate mortared with the local clay subsoil. The wooden watch-tower on the motte was demolished and a 9m diameter, straight sided, round tower with a first floor entrance was constructed (F). The eastern corner was cut off from the rest of the site with an 8m wide rock cut ditch, the Inner Castle (P) thus created was defended with an encircling wall of clay mortared slate. Subsequently a substantial square tower (G) overlooking the ditch was added. Uniquely the south and north corners of this tower were rounded, a stronger form of construction necessitated by building in clay mortared slate. This rounded corner

technique was also used on a number of twelfth century Anglo-Norman halls such as the ones at Llantrithyd (Cardiff Archaeology Society 1977) and Pennard Castle (RCAHMW 1991, 288-296). Wooden defences along the north and west banks were replaced by slate walling, whilst on the south side of the castle, overlooking the steep slope down to the valley a series of substantial stone buildings were constructed overlooking a revetting wall cut into the hillside. A Great Hall (BB) 22 x 8m and a separate Great Chamber (B) 10 x 6.5m had been constructed of clay mortared slate, a substantial as yet unexcavated building was also present. The slate and clay wall building is a traditional Welsh construction form, whilst the exactly squared gritstone blocks used to create the doorcases of these buildings are typically Anglo-Norman, thus these buildings appear to show a fusion of Anglo-Norman and Welsh building traditions. There were ephemeral traces of a clay-floored building in the south east corner (C) and a stone foundation of the west side of the bailey (N). Later medieval and post medieval ploughing has removed all building traces from the centre of the site.

Excavations in 2011, in the south western corner of the site (SL, SS, ST, S) (Figure 3) revealed the late twelfth century entrance to the castle. When William FitzMartin redeveloped the castle in stone, he abandoned the earlier northern entrance to the castle, created a new road (now the modern road) snaking up the valley side (Figure 1) which continued around a large square tower at the south corner of the castle (robbed out in the post medieval period) and then turned sharply through a gateway in the curtain wall (Figure 4). This is similar to the defensive arrangements which originally existed at Bridgend Castle in the Vale of Glamorgan (RCAHMW 1991, 330). Only the west side of the gateway formed of squared gritstone blocks (S5), and the threshold of this entrance, composed of vertically set slates, (S6, S16), remained (Figure 5). When this feature was excavated several of the slates were found to have designs inscribed on them. Some examples of inscribed slates had also been recovered from the rubble layer above (S3), though these derive from the threshold (S6, S16) and had been grubbed up during the demolition of this late twelfth century feature in 1195 and the later and post medieval stone robbing.

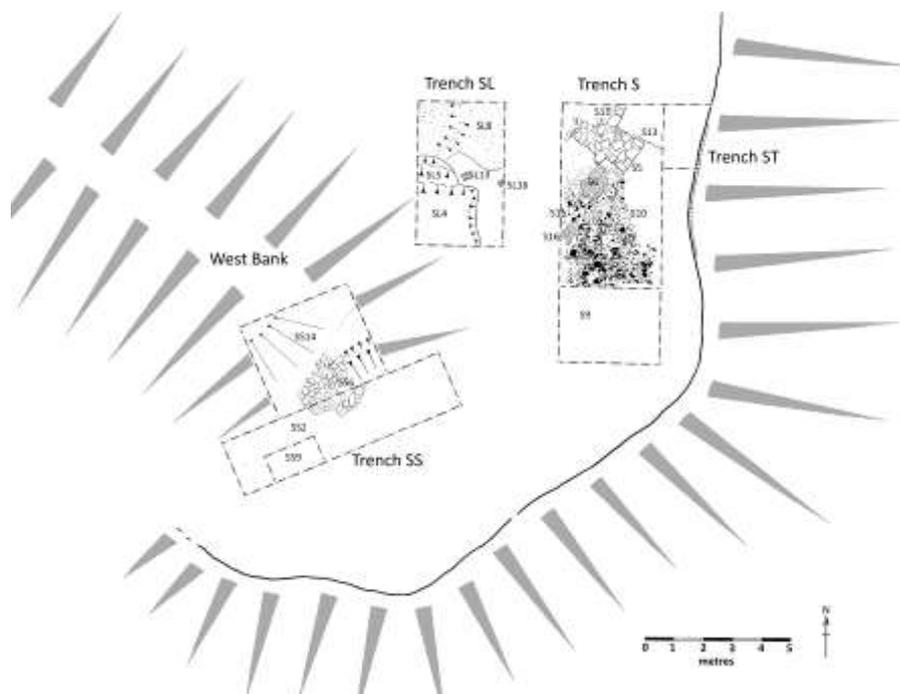


Figure 3: Plan of the Trenches SS, SL, S, and ST

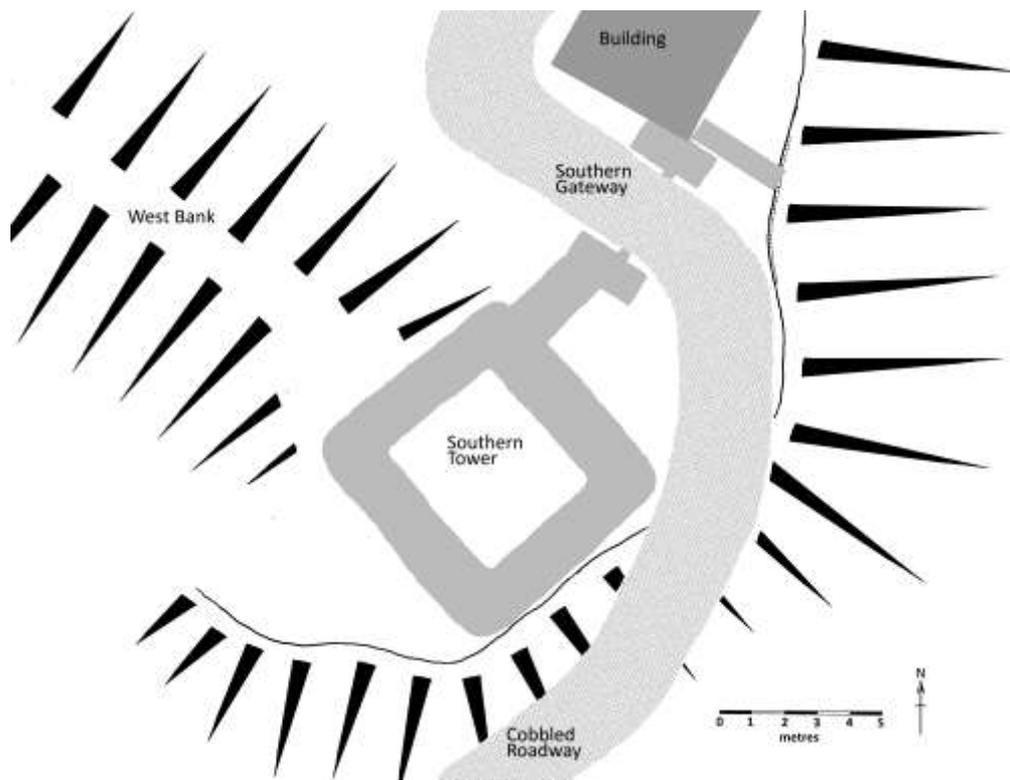


Figure 4: Reconstructed plan of the late twelfth century castle gateway



Figure 5: The gateway with pitched slate deposits S6 and S16 in place

## Recording

The incised slates were cleaned, recorded (Tables 1 and 2) and given unique NCIS numbers. The images in this report were created in 'Photoshop'™ from overhead photographs taken in raking light. The incised designs have been clearly indicated with black lines whilst the images retain the texture of the slate. The descriptive vocabulary for the incised marks is that used for apotropaic symbols reported on late and post medieval buildings, or developed for this study.

Table 1: Catalogue of Inscribed Slates from Nevern Castle

NCIS Number	Context	Dimensions (mm); length, width, thickness	Description (marks are on one side of the slate unless otherwise stated)
1	S (3)	345 x 270 x 32	Rectangular slate, Nine Men's Morris board scratched on one side, overlain either with a partial grid pattern or a series of five diagonal crosses.
2	S (3)	485 x 315 x 50	Large semicircular slate, deliberately curved edge, possibly half of an earlier (grave) marker? Weathered surface inscribed with a partial Nine Men's Morris board, overlain with partial concentric circular lines, diagonal lines and wave form lines. A separate diamond in cross motif and a series of five crosses or T shapes.
3	S (3)	680 x 400 x 55	Large semicircular slate, deliberately curved edge, possibly half of an earlier (grave) marker? Surface inscribed with a pentangle and groups of short parallel lines. Possible warrior figure and irregular shape filled with parallel lines.
4	S (6)	255 x 180 x 60	Small smooth grey slate with freshly incised designs. On one side a warrior figure wielding a sword, a crudely scratched horse with discernible mane and tail, a diagonal cross in a rectangular box and a tapering point with serrated sides (dragon tail?). On the reverse a repeatedly scored partial grid pattern with overlying diagonal line, a separate group of three wavy lines and a series of short parallel lines,
5	S (6)	345 x 220 x 26	Irregularly shaped slate inscribed with an expanded arm cross in a diamond, overlain a series of parallel vertical lines, and numerous chisel / gouge marks, plus a separate zigzag design.
6	S (6)	300 x 155 x 32	A sub triangular slate with natural brown staining on one side into which was freshly scratched a diamond shape within which as a butterfly cross with central small diamond. A separate diagonal cross lay to one side. On the reverse were two parallel zigzag lines (dragon tail?) and a series of short parallel lines.
7	S (6)	395 x 265 x 50	Stone with one clear shaped curved edge, possibly a broken fragment of a larger circular stone, an earlier (grave) marker? A few incised lines, including a zigzag and a small group of parallel lines.
8	S (6)	415 x 258 x 30	Crude semi-circular slate, possibly a fragment of an earlier circular (grave) marker? One large and two smaller butterfly crosses plus a partial grid pattern, some chiselled / gouged marks and other crossing lines.
9	S (16)	635 x 270 x 50	Rectangular stone with curved top, possibly fragment of an earlier circular (grave) marker? A partial grid or net of lines is inscribed across the face of the stone overlain by another fragmentary grid



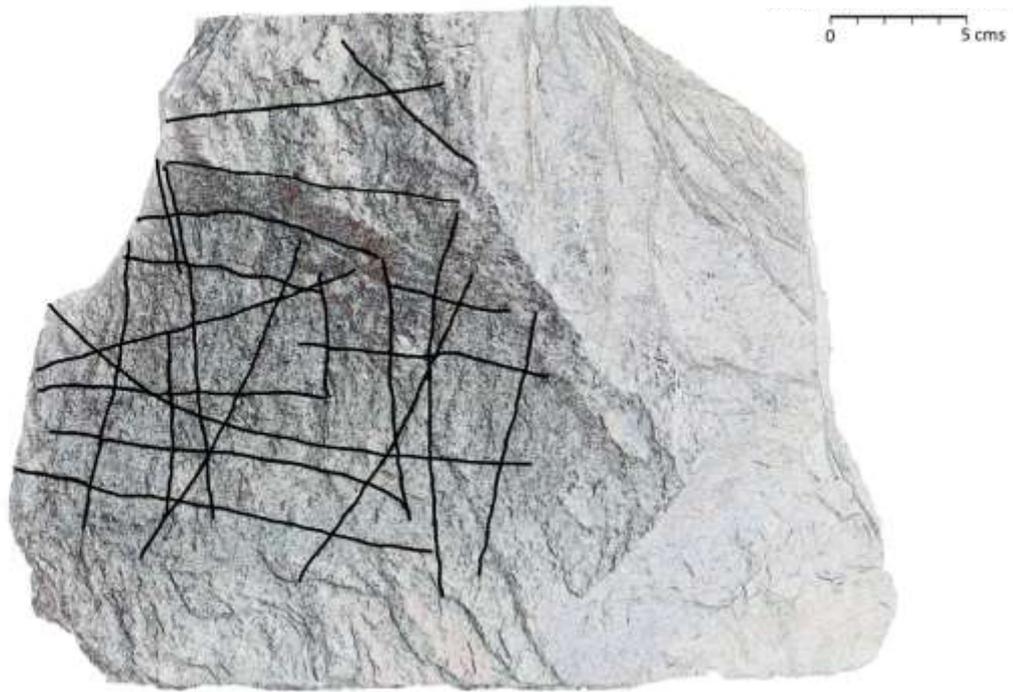


Figure 6: NCIS 1

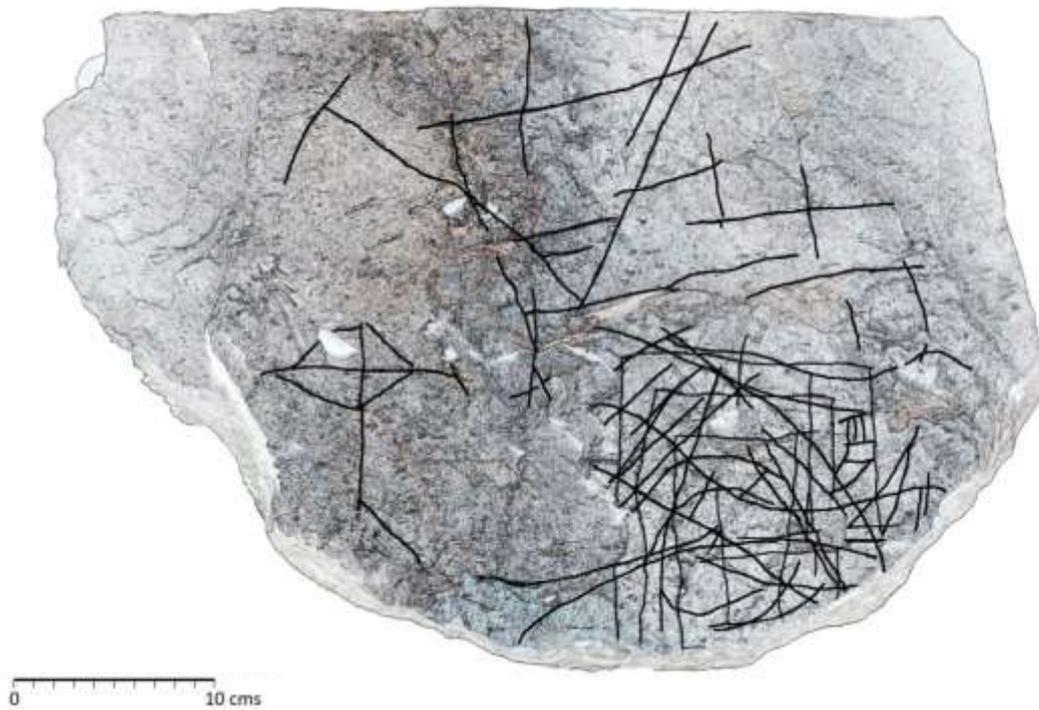


Figure 7: NCIS 2



0 10 cms

Figure 8: NCIS 3

0 5 cms

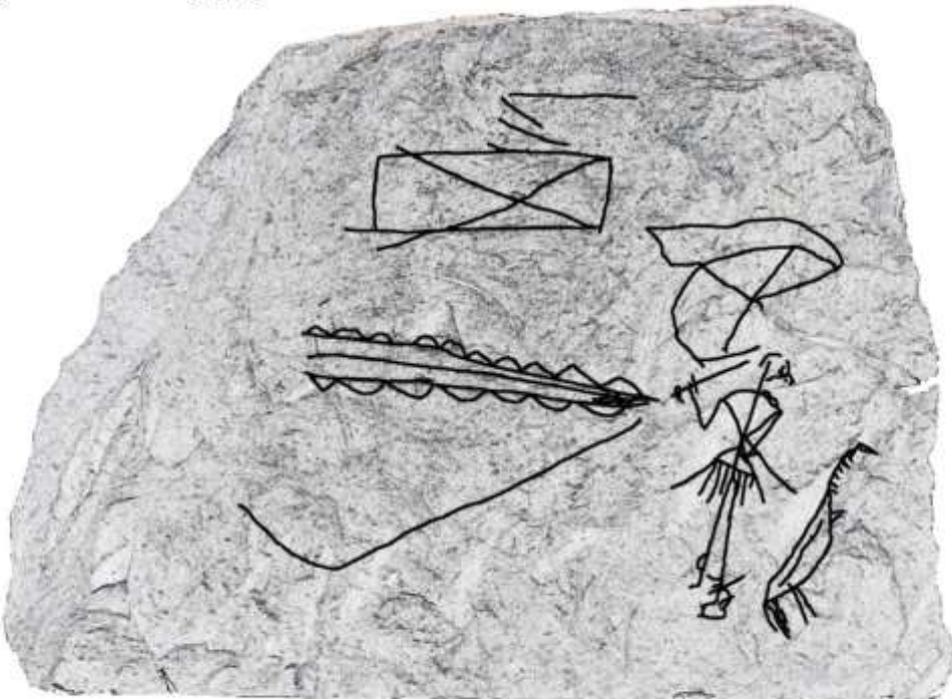


Figure 9: NCIS 4



Figure 10: NCIS 4 reverse

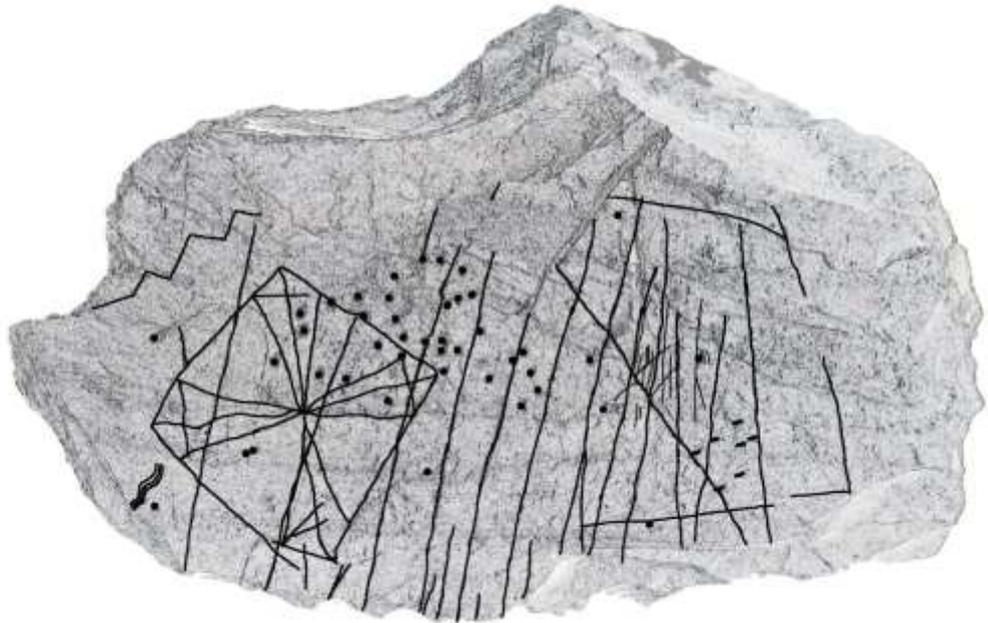
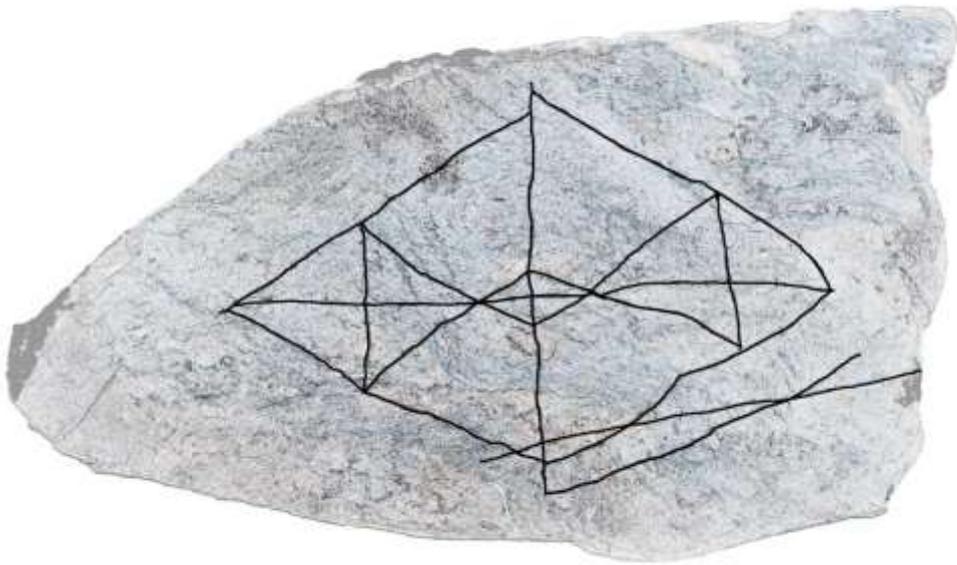


Figure 11: NCIS 5



0 5 cms

Figure 12: NCIS 6



0 5 cms

Figure 13: NCIS 6 reverse



Figure 14: NCIS 7

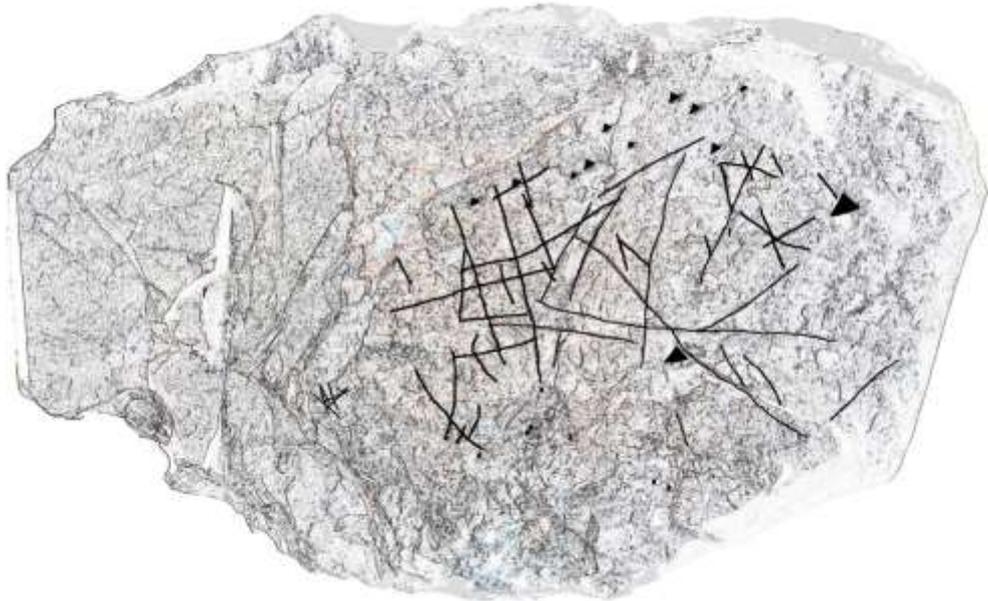
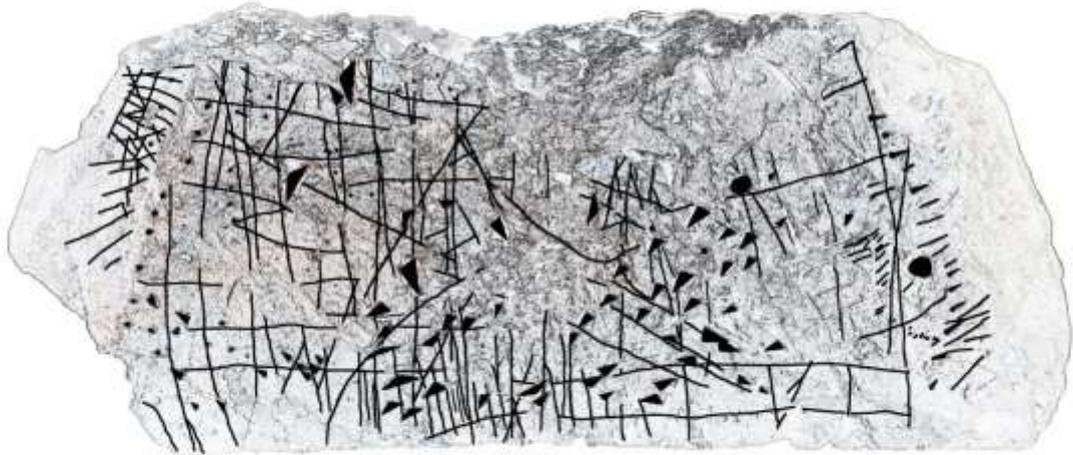


Figure 15: NCIS 8



0 10 cms

Figure 16: NCIS 9



0 5 cms

Figure 17: NCIS 10

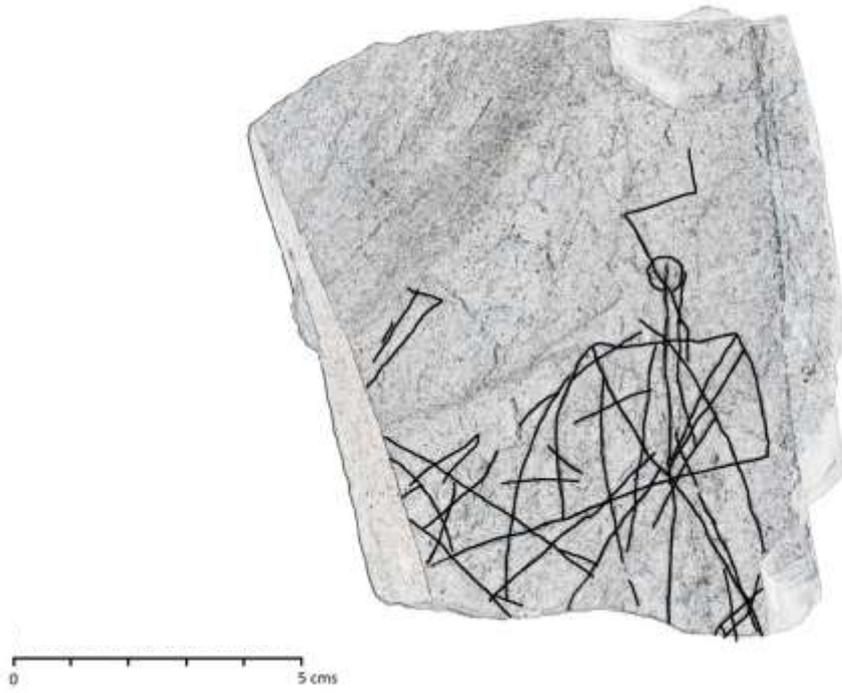


Figure 18: NCIS 11



Figure 19: NCIS 12

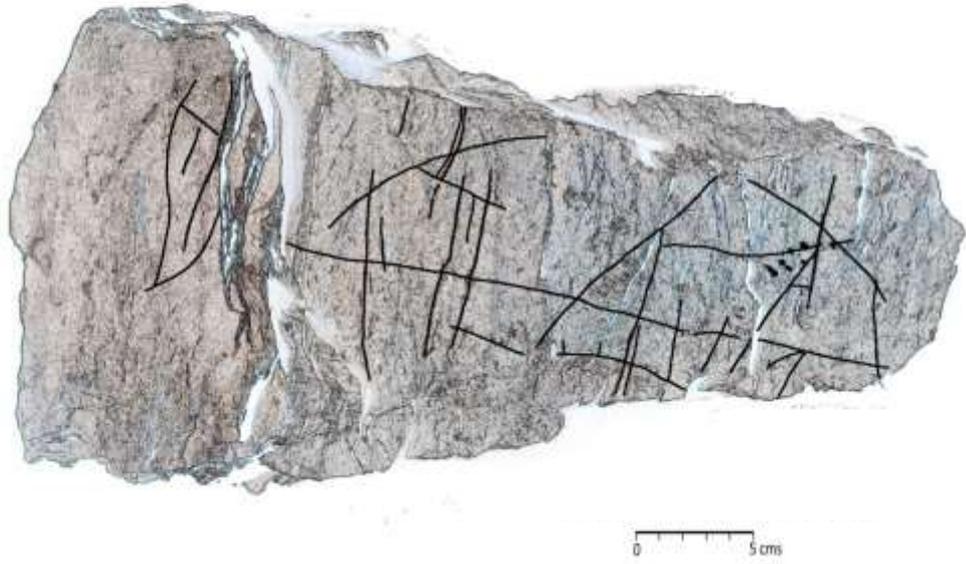


Figure 20: NCIS 13

## Analysis

The slates of this threshold were pushed vertically into the ground (pitched), so forming hard-wearing surface of the worn rounded upper edges of slates. This technique forms a hard wearing surface from easily split stone, used for example to form paths at Aberglasney (Blockley and Halfpenny 2002). This pitched form meant that the slates were buried in such a way that the incised images could not be seen.

The slates can be divided into two groups on the basis of size (thickness) and use (wear). One group NCIS2, NCIS3, NCIS5, NCIS7, NCIS8, and NCIS9 are substantial broken parts of larger stones with deliberately curved edges. These were probably originally circular stones roughly 0.5-0.6m in diameter with a small protrusion at the base, probably marker stones, possibly grave markers similar to examples of rounded headstones noted by Gilchrist at Strata Florida, Bordesley Abbey and St Leonard's church in Romney (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, 190) and are also present at St Michael's church in Llanfihangel Abercywyn, Carmarthenshire (Lord 2003, 113). The worn appearance of the stone surface and some of the incised marks indicate previous exposure and use. At Inchmarnock three pieces of a similarly worn and inscribed stone (IS76), though with holes through it, were interpreted as a work-surface or tabletop (Lowe 2008, 175). The fact that these slates have been deliberately collected together and buried at the threshold of the rebuilt Nevern castle suggests a symbolic function. Prior to burial the slates had been broken into fragments after the fresh designs had been incised upon them. The other group NCIS1, NCIS 4, NCIS6, NCIS10, NCIS11 are smaller slates 350mm or less with freshly inscribed designs or symbols, freshly broken edges and none have the deliberately chipped curved edges seen on the 'marker stones'. They appear to be 'companion stones', freshly created possibly to accompany and direct the powerful earlier 'marker stones' into this threshold. Similar images are inscribed on both 'marker' stones and 'companion' stones, though only the 'marker stones' had triangular pick marks peppering the worn surface .

The sites of Inchmarnock (Lowe 2008) and Tintagel (Thorpe 1988; Thomas 1993, Barrowman et al 2007) have produced a number of comparable slates bearing similar designs, though almost all are re-deposited in later contexts. Sites such as St Blane's church Kingarth (Anderson 1900), Dundonald Castle (Ewart and Pringle 2004) and Irish sites such as Nendrum and Gransha Co. Down (O'Meadhra 1979, 1987) have occasionally produced similarly incised slates. Though the early Christian origins and continued occupation up to the 13<sup>th</sup> century and beyond of most of these sites is notable, it is the slate geology which has provided a readily available material which preserves the images at these sites which is probably the connecting feature (Forsythe and Tedeschi 2008, 132). Though there are now these few sites with comparable material, many other sites may have originally had similar inscribed material on wood, parchment, fabric or leather, now lost through decay.

It is perfectly possible to suggest that these inscribed slates are the result of some late twelfth century workmen 'doodling' during their lunch-break when they were constructing the castle gateway. However, since a Nine Men's Morris board (SF1) was recovered in the second week of the first season of the Nevern Castle excavation, the volunteers and staff on the site have been alerted to the possibility of inscribed marks on

slates. Through a total of five seasons of excavation, with many tens of thousands of pieces of slate unearthed and examined, ONLY these slates from the threshold of the southern entrance to the castle have had incised designs on them. Thus, however tempting it may be to dismiss crude scratched images on slate as 'doodling' this is demonstrably not an activity for which we have any evidence elsewhere on this site. This threshold is the ONLY place in Nevern Castle where we find such marks. Other interpretations could include marks made by 'builders' sketching out envisaged construction work, but this does not correspond with the images depicted on the slates and as one of the referees for this paper noted of the designs 'They are not problem solving drawings, they are not geometric, they are also not drawn using either compasses or straight edges'. Thus they are not made for building purposes. If we seek to ascribe meaning to such marks, the literature for art history or that for archaeological graffiti (Baird and Taylor 2011) would suggest that there are always a range of possible interpretations. However, any such interpretation must account both for their presence at the threshold to the castle, the fact that the designs could not be seen by those entering the castle and that no similar marks occur anywhere else in the castle.

Signs and symbols can have a wide variety of meanings, as demonstrated by any compendium of signs and symbols (Arnstein 1983, Liungman 1991, Becker 2000, Lehner 1950). A simple zig-zag symbol can have meanings as diverse as water, lightening or a dog, it is the cultural, chronological and geographic context which allows the archaeologist to understand the intended meaning. Our understanding of Anglo-Welsh twelfth century society, and in particular the signs and symbols used by the labouring poor of Cemais is very limited since we have virtually no other examples of their symbols, there is no written information and some symbols may have been secret even within that society. The absence of letter symbols suggests that the incisors of these slates were illiterate – robbing us of one of one the most readily understood groups of symbols. Their burial beneath the rubble of the castle's destruction, historically attested to 1195, but part of the construction of the threshold of the rebuilt castle of William FitzMartin effectively dates them to the period 1171-1195. These incised designs have primarily been interpreted through comparison with the symbols to which they have the greatest visual similarity; the apotropaic symbols inscribed onto wooden buildings of later thirteenth to eighteenth century date and incised slates from sites such as Tintagel and Inchmarnock, sites with similarities of date and culture to Nevern.

### *Symbols*

A large lexicon of symbols have been inscribed into these slates (Table 2) though since many of them are simple lines there is a considerable risk of ascribing symbolic meaning to either meaningless scratches (doodles) or functional marks on the slate. Some of the simplest categories of incision, the simple line (L1) or curved line (S1) are too ubiquitous to warrant meaningful discussion. Some pattern and figurative images were, however, clearly identifiable.

*Warriors F1.* The three warrior images are incised on NCIS 3, NCIS 4 and NCIS 11. Unlike the Tintagel warrior image IS 7, which carried a round shield and was consequently identified as a pre-conquest Saxon by Thorpe (1988, 76) and Thomas (1993, 115), NCIS 3 has a kite shaped shield and thus can be identified as a Norman warrior, though it does not possess a pointed domed helmet. The warrior figure on NCIS4 has a sword with pommel and straight

sword guard, an unspecific sword form which could be fifth to fifteenth century in date. The NCIS 11 image of a warrior can be interpreted as a spearman thrusting his weapon into somebody or something. The body forms on NCIS 4 and NCIS 11 are similar and stylised with an inverted triangle for the torso and a lower triangle forming the skirt, kilt or belted hauberk below the waist, similar to a figure illustrated by Laing (1996, 143), which is not clearly provenanced, and one recorded by Pritchard (1967, 117, 118) from St Mary's church (12<sup>th</sup> century) in Wallington, Hertfordshire. Later warrior or knight figures, such as those incised on the wall of St Albans Abbey are invariably more detailed and accomplished images (Rose et al 1998).

*Animals F2.* A single image of a horse on NCIS4, has some similarities, crude depiction, prominent mane and tail with the images of horses seen at Inchmarnock (IS48) (Lowe 2008, 157, 159).

*Zigzag (lightning) Z1.* The zigzag has been identified as an apotropaic symbol (Meeson 2005, 44, 46) symbolising lightening and/or supernatural power. The zigzag above the head of the figure in NCIS 11 could represent lightening and it is possible to read this image as seeking protection from or calling down lightening and vengeance upon a spearman attacking or entering the castle. The zigzag also appears clearly inscribed on an Inchmarnock slate e.g. IS73 (Lowe 2008; 170, 173), though no attribute or meaning is ascribed to the design. O'Meadhra only has two examples of zigzags from Ireland, both whetstones, one from Garryduff ringfort (72) (O'Meadhra 1979, 71) which could have a symbolic function, the other from Holy Island (113) is part of a complex motif-piece containing many designs.

*Double zigzag (dragon's tail) Z2.* This design occurs on NCIS4 and NCIS6, no comparable examples have thus far been identified.

*Diagonal cross in a rectangle X2.* The simple diagonal cross (X1) is so easily formed as to lack an unambiguous meaning save when used in a specific context. The diagonal cross in a rectangle, or between vertical lines, is far rarer and has a more specific use. This design is sometimes referred to as a butterfly cross or saltire in rectangle and is well attested as an apotropaic symbol (Easton 1999, 25-26; Roberts 2003, 102; Meeson 2005, 47; Binding and Wilson 2010, 53, 57, 58). A clear example on NCIS 4 and less clear example on NCIS 8 indicate that this symbol is in use by the twelfth century. A similarly clear example is also present from Inchmarnock IS35 and a possible one present on IS37 (Lowe 2008, 134, 169, 140). Since slate IS35 comes from a Phase 1 context, an early medieval use for this symbol is likely. The partially completed motif piece on the back of EMS 14 from Inchmarnock (Lowe 2008, 105-6), shows the saltire in rectangle motif used as part of a developing border pattern, with a sequence of nested inward pointing triangles in one of the quadrants of the saltire. This demonstrates a link between a symbol with a well understood apotropaic meaning and decorative patterned border. However, the extent to which the apotropaic meaning is associated with this symbol when used as a pattern is conjectural.

*Multiple lines (short) L3.* The numerous parallel short lines such as those which are present on slates NCIS 6 (rev), NCIS 3, NCIS 9 are reminiscent of ogham script, examples of which are/were visible on the early Christian stone monuments in the churchyard of St Brynach's church in Nevern (Edwards 2007, 390-401). Written over 500 years later, this is not ogham,

but a tradition of adding such marks to stone inscriptions, aping the earlier tradition, may have continued indicating taking ownership of the stone or invoking ancestors. They may equally well be marks created by scoring lines on a piece of wood or leather resting on the slate where the scoring marks having extended over onto the stone beneath, or could even represent tally marks.

*Multiple lines (medium and long) L2.* Frequently repeated parallel lines, a quickly and simply made expression, may again be tally marks, a swiftly struck expression of frustration, or a basic 'I am here' graffiti mark. They may also have a more complex meaning as there are often examples seen alongside apotropaic symbols in fifteenth to eighteenth century contexts (Harris 1999, 29-30; Roberts 2003, 99, 101; Meeson 2005, 42). Sometimes groups of lines cross creating a series of lines interpreted as Ms and are interpreted as Marian marks (Harris 1999, 30). Where these lines are seen running over an earlier design they may be intended to negate it, to strike it out, and may suggest that groups of parallel lines had a role or meaning of prevention, stopping activities, barring things from happening. They are however, invariably only recognised with this meaning when seen in combination with earlier designs. Parallel lines without an earlier design beneath cannot be confidently ascribed any single specific meaning.

*Shape filled with parallel lines L5.* This form of depiction seen in NCIS2 usually appears to represent a filled or solid shape, though it is unclear what object is represented. Similar examples are seen at Inchmarnock IS43 and IS52 (Lowe 2008, 148, 157).

*Cross C1:* Crosses (vertical and horizontal lines) are ubiquitous symbols, occurring with and without meaning. Clearly placed, centrally on relatively plain backgrounds and often heavily incised, they can constitute grave markers from the early Christian period. At both Inchmarnock (Lowe 2008, 174-175) and Tintagel (Thomas 1993, 103-104) there are a number of examples of such slates. The examples of crossed lines on the Nevern slates, NCIS2 and NCIS8, are faint and are not placed centrally on stone with plain background. Consequently they do not appear to signify grave markers. There is one example of a cross in a circle or diamond (C3) on NCIS2. Again its location on the stone and its faint nature does not suggest that it is the primary inscription. Similarly faint crosses in circles are seen from Tintagel 3429 (Batey 2007, 211-2) and ascribed to 'doodling activities' of the twelfth century. Crosses are seen inscribed into later medieval and post medieval buildings (Roberts 2003, 99, 102) where they may have a more generalised apotropaic role. Given their context, the Nevern examples may fall into this category.

*Multiple horizontal lines across a vertical line (ladder) C2.* These symbols are seen in fifteenth to eighteenth century contexts, such as that at Longport Farmhouse, and are ascribed an apotropaic function (Easton 1999, 30; Meeson 2005, 42; Robson-Glyde undated). A heavily over scored example is seen on NCIS4R as well as one on NCIS 13. Other examples come from Inchmarnock IS65, IS76 (Lowe 2008, 170, 172, 174). Again there is a strong visual similarity between these marks and ogham. It is possible, especially in locations such as Nevern and Inchmarnock where ogham marks are visible in the vicinity that these marks reference the earlier visually similar form and this symbol could have evolved from an ancient script as a symbol of ancestry with an apotropaic function.

*Expanded arm cross C4:* A single example, NCIS5, is enclosed in a diamond and has similarities of pattern with the geometrically divided diamond (A3) on NCIS6, which could be an abstract pattern derived from it. The expanded arm cross, variants with pointed ends to the arms have been variously described as 'cross of Golgotha' (Liungman 1991, 259) or fusil (fussily) cross (Lehrer 1950, 113), it is one of numerous variant cross form present throughout the medieval period – as demonstrated by the range of cross forms on early Christian stone monuments throughout Wales (Edwards 2007, Redknap and Lewis 2007). There is a closely comparable example from Tintagel on two joining pieces of slate IS5 and IS6 (Thorpe 1988, 74-76; Thomas 1993, 117) which, given its context 'among the stones fallen from the medieval chapel', has been interpreted as an alter panel from the eleventh (or twelfth) century chapel or estate church in the centre of the island.

*Nine Men's Morris (Merels) Boards G4.* Two stones NCIS1 and NCIS2 have images of Nine Men's Morris boards with traces of a third on NCIS12. Two Nine Men's Morris boards (SF1 and SF8) had previously been recovered from the site. These boards had been deeply and repeatedly scribed making the board outline clear and usable. Given their functional natures, their recovery from occupation layers and the presence of gaming discs close by, it is considered certain that these complete boards were used to play the game of Nine Men's Morris which it has been suggested was introduced to Britain by the Normans (Parlett 1999, 109). More recently Ritchie has suggested that the game could have been a Norse introduction in the tenth century (Ritchie 2008, 119) since four complete boards and three fragments of boards have been recovered from Inchmarnock (Richie 2008). Two Nine Men's Morris boards were recovered from Tintagel; IS2 with boards on both sides (Thorpe 1988, 70-71; Thomas 1993, 114-5) and a fragment 2172 (Batey 2007, 202-3). All derive from twelfth or early thirteenth century contexts. Though previously considered purely as functional items, the Nevern boards; NCIS 2, NCIS 1 and NCIS 12, are poorly executed, the incised design had not been completed, part of the board was missing or it was drawn incomplete on an edge. From this and the freshly inscribed nature of the marks, very different to the worn and deeply incised board on SF1, it appears that these incised board designs had never been used as gaming boards and were representations and not actual boards. Berger (2004) has recently pointed out that a significant number of Nine Men's Morris / merels boards are inscribed on vertical surfaces, thus they cannot function as boards and probably have a symbolic meaning. Similarly Biller et al (2006, 353) have noted Nine Men's Morris boards inscribed on the vertical wall surfaces of the crusader castle of Krak de Chevaliers (Syria) and dated to the Christian period 1170-1271. This symbolic interpretation is enhanced with the presence of a merels board design as part of an apotropaic scheme present on the wall of a house constructed in 1575 in Goslar, Germany (Berger 2004, 12). The over-scoring of the symbolic Nine Men's Morris Boards from Nevern with later scratches and gouge marks appears to indicate deliberate mutilation, an attempt to obliterate (turn off) whatever the board represented. There are many examples of objects deliberately mutilated prior to burial, bending or breaking swords etc prior to them being buried in graves, offered up in rivers and lakes, is widely attested (Merrifield 1987). Could this mutilation be extended into symbolic form, a turned off, voided, cancelled or rejected image indicated by scoring through. Certainly Véronique Plesch has interpreted the long graffiti scratches (16<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century) across late medieval and Renaissance wall paintings as meant to 'cross them off and cancel them' (Plesch 2010, 152).

*Partial Grids (G2):* The partial grids on NCIS5, NCIS8, and NCIS9 may represent boards for chess or games such as *Hnefatafl* or the Welsh forms of taefel games; *tawlbwrdd* or *gwyddbwyll* (Parlett 1999). Unlike the boards at Inchmarnock (Richie 2008, and Tintagel; IS1 (Thorpe 1988, 70-1), none of the Nevern boards appear to have been completed and thus are again probably partial symbolic representations of such boards. Other interpretations such as partial representations of nets (for snaring evil spirits) or grids used for laying out decorative pattern schemes such as interlace are possible (O'Meadhra 1979, 80).

*Concentric circles R2.* Curves are not as easily inscribed into slate as straight lines, so the series of crude concentric circles scratched into NCIS2 appears to be a deliberately created image. It matches a similar design recovered from Tintagel 3429 (Batey 2007, 211-2) and ascribed to 'doodling activities of the twelfth century. Precisely drawn concentric circles, drawn with pairs of compasses from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries have been interpreted as apotropaic symbols (Roberts 2003, 99-100).

*Pentagram (Pentangle) A1:* A single example of a pentagram was present on NCIS3. Pentagrams have a wide variety of interpretations, often considered to represent the five wounds of Christ on the cross, they were initially a symbol for protection against evil (Becker 2000) only becoming associated with witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. An example from Inchmarnock IS35, which has four pentagrams on a single slab (Lowe 2008, 134, 169) was recovered from a Phase 1 context and provides an early medieval date and monastic context for this symbol. The symbol has a wide chronological and geographic spread, with examples from Roman Bath (Cunliffe 1988, 256) to 12<sup>th</sup> century Spain (Gerrard 2003, 333).

*Geometrically subdivided diamond A3:* Comparative examples come from Inchmarnock (Lowe 2008, 169-9) (IS61) and Tintagel (Thomas 1993, 114-115). Thomas suggests it could be another game board 'of the Achi kind' and the Inchmarnock example is associated with other scratches interpretable as a partial gaming board, though all the examples are small and Parlett (1999) offers no comparable game board. Given the context at Nevern a symbolic rather than a functional role is likely.

## Interpretation

Apotropaic symbols; marks such as concentric circles, spectacles, interlocking circles forming a daisy petal pattern, crosses, diagonal cross in a rectangle (butterfly crosses), zigzag lines or letters such as two overlapping VV (sometimes written as M or W) *Virgo Virginium* - invoking the protection of the Virgin Mary or AM (*Ave Maria*) and AMR (*Ave Maria Regina*), incised into the wooden beams of houses and were believed to protect the building from the entry of evil spirits. They were widely used in the sixteenth to eighteenth century where they specifically protected against witchcraft. Such symbols are traditionally found near doorways, windows and chimneys, potential entry points for malevolent spirits. Most previously recognised apotropaic symbols have come from standing vernacular buildings of sixteenth century and later date (Easton 1997; 1999, Roberts 2003, Meeson 2005, Robson-Glyde undated), though this dating reflects the lack of surviving earlier wooden buildings rather than representing a particular emphasis in this post sixteenth century period. Some simple symbols do not have a uniquely apotropaic interpretation, thus butterfly crosses are sometimes used as masons or carpenters marks; either identifying

work done by a specific craftsman so ensuring payment, or indicating pieces which with the same symbol should be assembled together. However, examples of butterfly crosses in caves such as Wookey Hole indicate that they can also have a clear apotropaic role (Binding and Wilson 2010). The context of the mark is often crucial in determining its interpretation. A small number of older examples show that apotropaic symbols were used well before the sixteenth to eighteenth century concerns about witchcraft. Vernacular architectural examples stretch back to fourteenth century and earlier e.g. Pear Tree Farmhouse, Yoxall (Meeson 2005), the twelfth/thirteenth century examples at Krak des Chevaliers (Biller et. al. 2006) and 12<sup>th</sup> century examples from the preceptor at Ambel (Zaragoza), Spain (Gerrard 2003, 333). The lack of extant earlier wooden buildings has hampered the search for earlier architectural examples. The recovery of this 'in situ' deposit at Nevern, allows the potential for reinterpretation of some of the inscribed slates at sites such as Tintagel and Inchmarnock, offers alternative explanations for a few of the inscribed materials identified by O'Meadhra (1979, 1987) and Laing (1996) and should encourage excavators to seek apotropaic evidence at the entrances to other sites, especially castles.

Apotropaic beliefs have been present throughout the Medieval period, either in the form of symbols on Anglo-Saxon objects (Dickinson 2005) or as amulets in Anglo-Saxon graves (Meaney 1981). Gilchrist has shown, through the continued deposition of amulets in graves in monastic cemeteries from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, that older beliefs in good and evil spirits existed alongside Christianity (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005, Gilchrist 2008). This syncretic Christianity which had absorbed earlier folk beliefs gave rise to the presence of grotesques in churches and the veneration of, and attribution of healing powers to, relics as well as supernatural powers to gemstones (Gilchrist 2008, 120). As the quotation at the start of this paper shows, it was also evident in the writings of churchmen, such as Giraldus Cambrensis, Archdeacon of Brecon. It is within this wider belief system that apotropaic symbols at thresholds and entrances to buildings, which had probably occurred from prehistory, continued to exist through the medieval period. Thresholds are traditionally considered liminal areas, a boundary between the inside and outside, good and evil, protected and unprotected (Parker-Pearson and Richards 1994, 24); crossing thresholds, as for example by a newly married couple, marks a major change in their world. Such portals between worlds needed protection. This is well attested archaeologically in the form of threshold deposits designed to prevent evil spirits from entering the building. These deposits can often be difficult to distinguish from foundation deposits and termination deposits (Hammerow 2006), but at Nevern the deposit was recovered 'in situ' under the threshold and thus is unambiguously a threshold deposit. Given the continuity of such beliefs, the question is perhaps why have we previously found such little evidence of apotropaic symbols at the entrances to buildings, especially those with a significant role of protection, such as castles? The more formal, aristocratic role of castles, their association with new technologies (sciences), which in the 12<sup>th</sup> century meant mortared masonry construction, siege warfare, entrance and tower design may have led to the hidden nature of the apotropaic symbols, and suggest their use by the labouring workforce rather than the masonry monuments of the master mason. The siting of chapels over castle walls in some 13<sup>th</sup> century; Kidwelly, Kildrummy and Dryslwyn (Caple 2007, 125) or over gateways into towns (Creighton and Higham 2005, 175-8), may seek to invoke spiritual protection but in a more formal Christian form. Elaide (1959, 49) has previously suggested that city fortifications began by being magical defences and observed that throughout Europe

medieval city walls were regularly consecrated in defence against the devil, sickness and death.

Apotropaic beliefs also led to the depositions of ritual objects (ritual middens) such as shoes (Swann 1969, Merrifield 1987, 131-4) or clothes (Eastop and Dew 2006) within walls and building spaces. Three approaches to defending the building against entry by evil spirits can be identified based on the nature of the artefacts deposited. Trapping the evil spirits using containers such as pottery vessels (Merrifield 1987, 120) or shoes (Merrifield 1987, 135). Spirits could be lured and detained with food (animal bones) and finally evil spirits, which after the 16<sup>th</sup> century usually means witches and their familiars, would be repelled through deposits of knives, pins (Merrifield 1987, 162) or predatory animals such as cats (animal bones) which would scare away spirits entering in the form of birds, or rodents (Merrifield 1987, 131). Witches bottles may be containers to trap spirits containing lures of cloth or food and pins to pierce and kill the spirit – so combining all the ideas. After the development of literacy written charms or tracts were also used or symbolic initials were drawn or incised invoking Christian purity which would repulse any evil spirit. At Nevern symbols rather than objects are used, and in a preliterate world, this does not include words or initials. If the same approaches are seen, warriors and crosses would clearly repulse evil spirits and representations such as multiple lines may represent fences for keeping evil out. Symbolic designs such as Nine Men's Morris boards could be used to detain or trap evil spirits - playing games to eternity, whilst grid patterns may represent boards or, in more abstract form, net in which to trap or detain the spirits. It should, however, be recognised that the crudity of the depictions and their limited number mean that such interpretations of these symbols remain speculative at present.

Meeson (2005 and, Easton (1997, 1999) have suggested that apotropaic symbols were inscribed by carpenters or builders, since some examples inscribed into wooden beams are covered later in the building process with lathe and plaster walls. Merrifield (1987, 134) records a man who, 'as a child, saw his father and a workman put an old worn out boot, that significantly did not belong to the family, in the rubble when laying the kitchen floor, at Wareham St Mary, Norfolk, in 1934-5', he could get no reason for this from his father, who seemed slightly ashamed of what he was doing.' This attests the long term nature of apotropaic beliefs and is another example that those in the building trade being involved. Given the position and the crude nature of the incised designs the most likely creators of this apotropaic deposit at Nevern were the labourers working on rebuilding Nevern Castle in stone in the period 1170-1195. Though there are many later examples of inscribed designs made with a pair of compasses, creating a flower design of interlocking circles such as that observed by Evans at the entrance of the chapel of Krak des Chevaliers (Evans pers. comm.) or the All Saints Church, Litcham, Norfolk (Champion 2011), the lack of even such a simple device in any of the Nevern designs suggests basic labourers, the local Welshmen of Cemais, rather than a master mason were responsible. In inscribing the slates they were articulating the beliefs and rituals associated with constructing new buildings, present in twelfth century Pembrokeshire. Unlike the visible decorative stonework of twelfth century churches and castles (Lord 2003), carved by stonemasons many of whom in Wales in the twelfth century would have been Anglo-Normans, the incised designs at Nevern were the hastily created imagery of local Welsh labourers, though like the carved

stonework it had a high degree of symbolic meaning, which time and social change have obscured.

### *Graffiti*

It is possible to consider the inscribed marks at Nevern Castle as graffiti. There has recently been increased archaeological interest in the subject of graffiti (Baird and Taylor 2011, Oliver and Neal 2010); a form of visual communication which uses words, symbols or images inscribed, drawn or painted onto surfaces, not initially/formally intended for such inscriptions. Graffiti usually asserts identity and can be considered to be the 'other voice', either those like slaves (Webster 2008), women (Benfield 2011), children (Huntley 2011) and the lower classes / uneducated in society (Giles and Giles 2007) who lack a strong identity, are rarely heard and who are asserting their presence and views. It may also include the educated upper and middle classes who are asserting personal views or causes in an informal manner or location (Zadorojnyi 2011; Baird 2011). Though sometimes considered subversive, deviant, uneducated vandalism, graffiti is most productively analysed when considered as an expression of identity (McDonald 2002) and communication which ranges from the functional (Baird and Taylor 2011) and tolerated (Owen 2010) to the censored. Graffiti is usually considered as communication between human beings since it normally takes place in public spaces, is meant to be read, and can lead to dialogues (Baird and Taylor 2011, 7-8). The Nevern Castle inscriptions were not to be read by other human beings, its context clearly indicates that it communicated with the supernatural world. Thus, it is closer to a written prayer or Roman curses (Cunliffe 1988) than traditional 'identity' graffiti. Owen (2010) identified similar graffiti in Tewkesbury abbey, used as a method of communicating with God, seeing it as a powerful direct physical connection that could be made between an individual and their God. Inscribed crosses and artefacts recovered from monastic graves also attest believers communicating with their God (Gilchrist and Sloane 2005). Scratched on slate and devoid of context Nevern and Tewkesbury graffiti are indistinguishable from traditional 'identity' graffiti, thus context is crucial in correctly identifying the original role of this material. Removed from its original context, as occurred at Tintagel, it is clearly extremely difficult to correctly identify or interpret this material. The hidden nature of many apotropaic symbols indicates that such beliefs were not mainstream religious ideas and were not formally acknowledged, thus apotropaic symbols are the 'other voice' of belief and their description as graffiti is highly appropriate.

### *Use*

When the castle was rebuilt in stone between 1171 and 1191, the change in access to the new southern gateway meant that the line of the road up to the castle was changed turning sharply in front of the pilgrims cross carved into the cliff face of the hillside. Comparison with other raised cross forms in west Wales such as Llanwnda (ECMW 415) or Llanddowror (ECMW 151, 152,) (Edwards 2007, 354, 235-7) might suggest a ninth to eleventh century date for the pilgrim's cross. Thus it is possible that when the new road was built up to the new southern entrance to the castle, it cut through early medieval buildings or graves associated with the pilgrims cross. The reused incised slates from Nevern Castle could have derived from this earlier ecclesiastic use. Further excavation and survey work around the pilgrims cross would be required to confirm or deny such an origin. Undoubtedly any marker stones from graves would have been considered too powerful for normal reuse but incorporation into a threshold deposit with appropriate apotropaic symbols could have

represented a suitable resting place for such stones. When rebuilding the castle in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century could William FitzMartin or his builders have wished to invoke the success of the warriors who had established the first castle on the spot over 60 years earlier? Would their grave markers give spiritual protection to the new site and thus when they were built into the threshold of the new castle would they protect and secure it from harm?

The defences of this castle, from the steep natural slopes to the man made bank, motte and ditches with their associated wooden and later stone towers and walls were substantial. They provided not just a physical barrier, but the 'marshal appearance' of the castle. Its size and strength formed a barrier in the mind of any attacking force and gave confidence to the defenders. Self-belief and morale was an important element in defending a castle under siege. Castles were often lost due to a loss of nerve by the defenders rather than physical breach of the walls; life in the twelfth century was not simply governed by the physical realities of stone walls and weaponry. Giraldus Cambrensis in his tour through Wales (Thorpe 1978) devotes almost as much of the text to supernatural beings and events as he does to the realities of physical, human and cultural geography of Wales and journey of Giraldus and Archbishop Baldwin through this land. The superstitions and beliefs of people were as real to him and his twelfth century contemporaries as any other part of their landscape. The apotropaic deposits at Nevern Castle provide a crucial and rarely seen archaeological evidence of the powerful beliefs in the supernatural. For those who knew about them, the presence of these symbols at the threshold of the castle, turning away evil spirits, would have been a source of strength and self-belief ensuring that those inside the castle were fully protected. It is interesting to note that the loss of the castle was indeed a failure in the self-belief of the defenders, though not one related to the effectiveness of this threshold apotropaic deposit. In 1195 the castle was slighted by Hywel Sais (Remfry 2007, 99), which archaeological evidence has shown meant setting it on fire and collapsing many of the stone buildings. Hywel appears to have abandoned defence of Nevern following his defeat at the castle of St Clears, where many of his warband (*teulu*) were killed or captured (Remfry 2007, 99, 185). The spiritual defences had failed at St Clears and a consequent lack of confidence led to the abandonment and slighting of Nevern Castle.

## Conclusion

The 'in situ' threshold location of the deposit from Nevern Castle, the nature of the incised designs, many of which are well attested apotropaic symbols, the fact that they were hidden from plain sight and that there are no other incised symbols (doodles) anywhere else on the site, clearly suggest that the inscribed slates from the threshold of Nevern Castle were a deliberately placed apotropaic deposit. Comparative analogies indicate that some of these designs bear comparison with frequently seen apotropaic symbols of the fifteenth to eighteenth century. The context, buried beneath the rubble from the castle's destruction, historically attested to 1195, provides the dating for these images, and means that a number of well-attested apotropaic symbols such as the diagonal cross in a rectangle or butterfly cross and zigzag (Easton 1997; 1999, Hall 2003, Meeson 2005) were in use by the late twelfth century. The lexicon of symbols for such deposits differs from the later fifteenth to eighteenth century examples, with a wider range of symbols, some such as the double zigzag 'dragon's tail' not previously recorded. Evidence for the use of the Nine Men's Morris Board as a symbol scratched on vertical surfaces is increasingly compelling. Since Nevern in the twelfth century would have been a largely illiterate society it is not surprising

that letter symbols were not used, they would have no meaning. Images such as the Nine Men's Morris boards and the warrior figures with kite shaped shield and waving a sword appear to be drawn from life in the twelfth century and contemporary with the occupation of the castle. Since not all the symbols can be readily paralleled with known symbols, it is possible that other marked slates have become incorporated into the deposit, even though their incised designs do not have a specific apotropaic meaning.

It is hoped that in publishing these incised symbols so soon after their discovery and ahead of the publication of the site as a whole, other examples of such symbols will be recognised and published, building up a larger corpus of comparative material. Only through such publications and associated debate will the present interpretation of such symbols be tested. Spiritual defence marks another important attribute of castles – which broadens our understanding of these monuments still further.

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