



THE PICTS RE-IMAGINED

Julianna Grigg

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The Picts Re-Imagined

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ARC HUMANITIES PRESS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN (print): 9781641890915

eISBN (PDF): 9781641890922

eISBN (EPUB): 9781641890939

arc-humanities.org

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Glossary

Bothy (bothie): a small hut or shelter usually built in the uplands and used in summer during stock grazing.

Broch: Iron Age drystone tower or roundhouse with hollow walls and internal wooden platforms; mostly found in the north of Scotland with some lowland examples.

Clientage: a social institution reliant on a vertical relationship between a patron and client expressed in mutual obligations of service, goods, or labour from the client in return for protection, land, or privileges from the patron.

Crannog: a partial or artificial fortified island built on lochs, rivers, or in estuaries with a timber platform dwelling; a recent reconstruction can be seen on Loch Tay.

E-ware: high-fired granular pottery, often with quartz inclusions, from western and central Gaul. Generally takes the form of amphora or containers and its distribution into Britain is dated to between the sixth and seventh centuries.

Firth: a long, narrow inlet of the sea, linguistically related to the Scandinavian fjord.

Hacksilber: silver coins or fragments of cut or damaged jewellery, ingots, and plate found in hoards and interpreted as bullion to be melted down for re-use.

Loch: Scottish term for a lake or a sea inlet.

Penannular brooch: an unclosed ring or horseshoe-shaped clothes fastener with a long hinged pin, made from a variety of metals and designs.

Samian ware: glossy, red-figured fine Roman pottery usually from southern and eastern Gaul dating between the first to third centuries.

Sceat (*pl.* *sceattas*): small silver coins minted in Frisia, England, and Jutland during the Anglo-Saxon period; their chronology is yet to be resolved but is generally dated to the seventh and eighth centuries.

Strath: a wide and shallow river valley, whereas a glen is usually a narrower and deeper valley.

Transhumance: act of moving livestock to mountainous grazing land during the summer.

Introduction

“At the present time there are in Britain ... five languages and four nations—English, British, Irish, and Picts. Each of these have their own language; but all are united in their study of God’s truth by the fifth—Latin.”

Writing in ca. 731, from a small but important monastery in Northumbria, Bede’s geopolitical perspective has largely informed our understanding of the Picts. His *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is the primary source for any study of the British Isles in this period. To each of his linguistic nations Bede parcels out a territory, origin myth, and identity. Along with the other contemporary discursive source on the Picts, Abbot Adomnán of Iona’s *Life of St Columba*, it has promoted a vision of an isolated people adrift from time: more denizens of a Celtic Twilight than participants in the dynamic cultural shifts that Bede and Adomnán ascribe to their own people. Countering this vision has proven difficult without Pictish texts, but is currently being overcome. New archaeological finds and research approaches are radically altering our perspective. The Picts are now being re-imagined as cultural agents, ably negotiating their place among the four contesting nations to often dominate the northern British political landscape.

When and Where?

The Picts appear in documentary records between the third to tenth centuries, after which they transitioned into

the kingdom of Alba in alliance with their Dál Riata (Scots) neighbours. Terms used to define this period vary across the disciplines and, while the chronological span includes the late Iron Age to the medieval period, for simplicity it will here be referred to as Early Medieval. The territory of the Picts corresponded to modern eastern and northern Scotland and included Orkney, Shetland, and the Outer Hebrides. It is a landscape delineated by lochs, rivers, seaways, glens, pastures, forests, and mountainous ranges through which people travelled and ideas and goods were disseminated. The Firth of Forth provided a southern border with the Gododdin Britons (Brythonic Celtic-speaking) who by ca. 600 CE were displaced or engulfed by Anglo-Saxon expansion from Bernicia. In the south-west, the Strathclyde Britons (also Brythonic speakers) mostly held on to the stronghold of Alt Clut (Dumbarton) over this period and controlled the region around the River Clyde and Loch Lomond. The mountain range known to Adomnán in Latin as *Dorsum Britanniae* (Gaelic *Druim Alban*) defined a western boundary that separated the Picts from the Gaelic Dál Riata (Goidelic Celtic-speaking) whose territory included Argyll and most of the Inner Hebrides. Boundaries shifted throughout this period as groups coalesced, neighbouring polities flexed their military muscle, and territory was ceded or taken by force or diplomatic negotiations. At the same time, neither borders nor language isolated these northern political groups from each other or the cultural changes that affected emerging kingdoms across the Latin west.

Within Pictland, the mountainous range known as the Mounth (Grampians) divided northern territories from those in the south. Trade routes undoubtedly reinforced cultural and political differences between the regions. The Great Glen, for instance, was a major trade highway between eastern Ireland and north-eastern Scotland since at least the Bronze Age and this was the same route taken by St. Columba when he visited King Bridei at the head of Loch Ness. For the southern Picts, landscape and propinquity facilitated contact between first the Romans and later Dál Riata, Strathclyde Britons, Gododdin Britons, and (their territorial successors)

the Bernician Anglians. Stirling guarded one of the few passable points into the southern Pictish zone with the Forth valley plain spread before it the focus for battle, invasion, and settlement throughout the medieval period.

What's in a Name?

Conventionally the ethnonym Pict is attributed to a late third-century Roman pejorative term meaning “the painted ones” on account, it was alleged, of their habit of painting or tattooing their bodies. For the Romans it appears to have defined the un-Romanized northern inhabitants of Britannia. Recent studies have made a strong case for identifying the name Pict with the early Welsh name for Pictland, *Prydyn*; a term from the same origin as “Britain”. The Gaelic word for Pict, *Cruithne* (which included the Gaelic speaking Dál nAraidi people of north-eastern Ireland), was also derived from *Prydyn*. This accords with philological and place-name research which has established extensive linguistic correlations between Pictish and early Welsh indicating that they both spoke a P-Celtic/Brythonic language (whereas Gaelic is Q-Celtic/Goedelic). It also puts to rest the proposition that the Picts spoke a non-Indo-European (i.e. non-Celtic) language which, in any case, was unlikely given the dominance of Celtic languages across the British Isles.¹ What would become defined as a distinct Pictish language by Bede was likely due to the amalgamation of distinct northern dialects that gradually evolved into a dominant form. There is also a shift in thinking about how Celtic came to be the primary language of the British Isles by the end of the Iron Age; this was interpreted as the result of large-scale invasion/migration of Celtic speakers. This diffusionist model is now largely replaced by a paradigm of gradual adoption (possibly in the Bronze Age) of a lingua franca trade language by indigenous groups. These models reflect an interpretive shift from a colonialist historiography to one of global mobilities.

The identity of the Picts, how they identified themselves and on what basis identity was ascribed, remains complex;

nor can we be certain how Bede envisioned his four nations beyond their linguistic difference. Changing concepts of ethnicity mean we no longer assert identity based purely on language or material culture—both of which can be adopted, shared, and appropriated by other social groups. Identity is now recognized as a fluid cultural construct. To be a Pict was probably a matter of constitutional belonging based on common descent, geography, shared laws, and political association; language and material expression contributed and consolidated rather than defined this identity. The theory of ethnogenesis has recently gained popularity among Early Medievalists as a way to understand this phenomenon—by which evolving constructs of ethnicity and identity drive social cohesion and change.² But while most scholars accept that culture is socially constructed they also recognize the limits of theoretical concepts to fully explain the dynamics of particular historical social and cultural change. Similarly, critical care should be taken to avoid anachronistic constructs of Early Medieval nationhood and cultural continuity to prove modern exceptionalism.³ Some of the most exciting work currently being done in Pictish studies is notable for a willingness to cross disciplinary boundaries and apply a range of methodological approaches. Asking new and different questions of old material is resulting in some surprising answers.

Pictish Studies as a Discipline

The Picts are receiving more concentrated interest than ever before. Some of this popularity stems from the recent discoveries of a Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, Easter Ross and the ceremonial complex site at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire. With new scientific and interpretive techniques, excavations like these are yielding diverse evidence of socio-cultural practices. They offer a challenge and an opportunity to revisit our assumptions on Pictish history.

The dynamism of the subject today is in contrast to its centuries on the academic fringes. For eighteenth- and

nineteenth-century scholars the study of the Picts was fit only for the credulous. One of its nineteenth-century proponents, William Forbes Skene, earned later opprobrium for encouraging “patriotic Pictomania.” For the modern student a collection of essays edited by F. T. Wainwright in 1955 marks a turning point in the way the subject was studied. Both existential check and a catalyst to inquiry, *The Problem of the Picts* problematized every aspect of what was previously considered Pictish: language, art, architecture, and social organization. This publication re-opened questions as to whether Pictish was a non-Indo-European language and therefore its place on the curriculum of Celtic Studies departments. For some scholars this pessimism acted as a spur to unravel the complexities of the period through empirical analysis of the evidence. Nevertheless, the paucity of Pictish texts has undoubtedly acted as a deterrent to wider academic engagement with the Picts, with their culture rarely integrated into Early Medieval studies (or university courses). This legacy underlies the tendency to treat Pictish history and material culture as a *terra nullius* colonized by external influences: from Anglo-Saxon artwork to an Irish-led monopoly on Christianity. Comparative source choices, whether from Anglo-Saxon or Irish evidence, have also influenced how the Picts are studied and conclusions become accepted. This can be positive, but can also result in a lack of differentiation. In objective terms, what can be confirmed about Pictish history and their material remains is limited so interpretations of that evidence are often contested and consensus rarely universal. At the same time, it should be noted that as with the Picts, our understanding of other Early Medieval cultures is incomplete and constantly undergoing revision to assimilate new evidence and theories.

The last fifteen years has witnessed significant perceptual shifts in research on the Picts and Early Medieval history in general. One aspect is the integration of material evidence into the evidentiary corpus alongside a suite of interpretive methodologies. Another is a more critical approach to the documentary sources that drills down to

issues of reception and intentionality. Modern historiography seeks to identify Early Medieval people within mobile global networks by investigating the impact of neighbouring polities and the dissemination of ideas and technologies. It has resulted in the identification of a number of broad trends shared across Early Medieval polities such as: the use of political assembly; compensatory legislation based on honour-price; the development of centralizing kingship and the process of Christianization. Similarly, current studies are revealing a more nuanced structural relationship between “church” and “state.” For Pictish history, the repositioning of the home territory of Fortriu from the south to the north has comprehensively challenged previous assessments of Pictish politics. In addition, recognizing that the neighbours of the Picts spend far more time reporting on Pictish matters than on any other polity offers a critical pivot in how we view their development. Instead of labouring over the lack of Pictish texts as evidence of absence, we can see their political activities being carefully scrutinized by their neighbours whose own political ambitions relied on engaging with the Picts.

There are advantages in confronting the speculative nature of a Pictish history in that it affords an opportunity for continual reconsideration of the evidence and interpretative method. New approaches have re-framed the nature of Pictish studies as a series of challenges rather than problems. This has opened our eyes to what can be gleaned from a broader spectrum of sources.

Sources

The Picts become increasingly visible in contemporary documents from the seventh to early eighth centuries. Not only were Bede and Adomnán keen to share their perspectives on the Picts, chronicles also become particularly informative. Scholars attribute this surge of interest to the monastery of Iona, which kept a record of current events in northern Britain and Ireland, where it had established a network of churches.

This record is known as the “Iona Chronicle” and forms part of a composite chronicle known as the *Annals of Ulster* that probably incorporated information from Pictish sources.⁴ The *Annals of Ulster* is the most verbose of the chronicles but the *Annals of Tigernach* and *Clonmacnoise* also offer an occasional independent reference to Pictish affairs. Welsh and Anglo-Saxon chronicles also contain some early strata of information for this period. The Pictish king-lists are incorporated into a number of later manuscripts and, while problematic, usefully preserve a prescribed genealogy of kingship with a scattering of informative glosses. An Early Medieval layer is also present in a number of church foundation legends, saints’ lives, and martyrologies.

Pictish studies have long embraced an interdisciplinary approach, mostly by necessity. Material evidence provides a substantial corpus of information for many aspects of Pictish culture and social organization. New archaeological discoveries are currently invigorating the discipline by increasing the stock of evidence and prompting a re-assessment of cultural development. In addition, new disciplinary methodologies in archaeology, cultural geography, and art history are unpacking the processes of social reproduction through Pictish artefacts and the constructed environment. This includes a pluralistic approach to the placement, intent, and semiotics of Pictish symbol stones and cross-slabs, forts, and precious metalwork. Place-name studies are also making a significant contribution with recent projects establishing the discipline on rigorous empirical principles. As a primary resource, place-name studies offer the potential to uncover evidence of Pictish language, administrative districts, tenurial organization, assembly, ecclesiastical sites, and cultural perceptions of the environment. As they primarily rely on medieval records it can be difficult to discern earlier toponyms; this is further complicated by the prodigality with which incoming or local groups re-named places or translated sites into the dominant language (through a process referred to as “folk-etymology”). Notwithstanding these issues, the application of careful philological method is increasing our

knowledge of Pictish church, settlement, landscape and administrative nomenclature.

Structure of this Volume

This book is intended to provide an overview of our current understanding of Pictish history and their material remains. It is structured chronologically, with each chapter providing a run-down of the history followed by short thematic discussions on Pictish culture and society. Unless otherwise referenced in the notes, information on the history and material remains is drawn from the volumes and databases listed in the further reading section. The historical discussion, in particular, takes its lead from the recent volumes by James Fraser and Alex Woolf for the *New Edinburgh History of Scotland* series. The notes cover some of the primary and secondary sources that explore an issue in more depth than is possible within this book. For those interested in pursuing the subject in more detail the further reading list includes some of the more recent histories on the Picts, translated primary sources (including poems mentioned in the chapters), and links to online sources and databases. There are also recent volumes on archaeology, Pictish art, and place-names. This book can in no way cover all the intriguing and enlightening discoveries and debates in Pictish studies. Some of the excavations discussed are current and will bring new evidence to the fore. Advances in source analysis and comparative studies will also continue to challenge our understanding of Pictish political agency and cultural practices.

After languishing on the disciplinary peripheries, Pictish studies are now undergoing significant revision. We can now say more about the cultural and political lives of the Picts than ever before. Pictish studies is also being recognized as a valuable case study for examining more generally the development of nations, identity and the geopolitical transitions that affected Early Medieval polities across the Latin west and underlie the modern world.

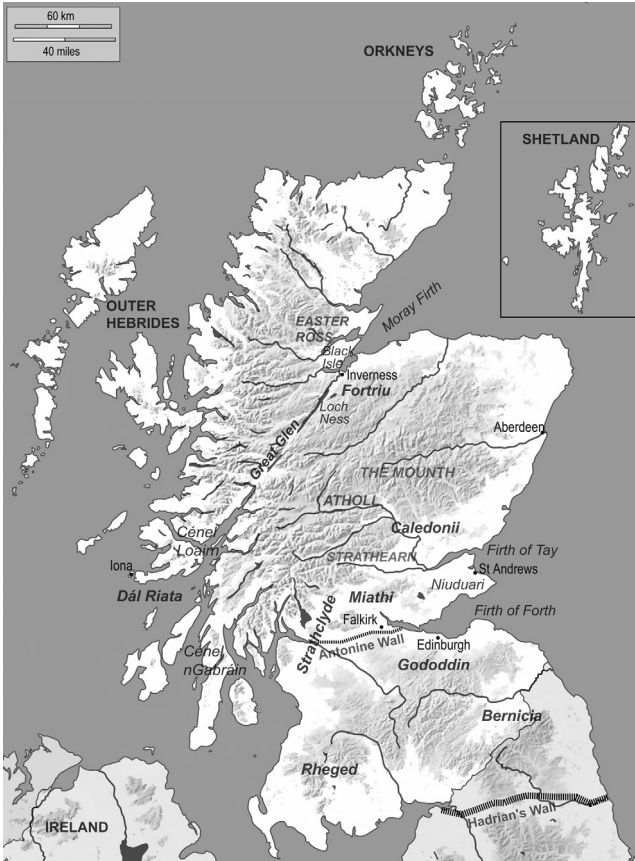
Notes

¹ Katherine Forsyth, *Language in Pictland: The Case Against "Non-Indo-European Pictish"*, *Studia Hameliana* 2 (Utrecht: de Keltische Draak, 1997).

² Andrew Gillett, "Ethnogenesis: A Contested Model of Early Medieval Europe," *History Compass* 4 (2006): 241–60.

³ Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

⁴ Nicholas Evans, *The Present and the Past in Medieval Irish Chronicles* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010).



Map 1. Northern Britain polities.