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ON THE ORIGIN OF THE PICTS

Andrew Carnie

The term *Picti* was first used in the year 297 by Eumenius (Dickenson, 1977; 16) to refer to the peoples in the north of Britain. Since then, scholars have attempted to define the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic background of the people who came to be known as the Picts. The data available is sparse—the Picts left little as a cultural record. We have no literature or histories, and almost no examples of their language. We are, therefore, dependent on a few scattered sources. The “origin legends” prepared by British and Irish writers, place names and other philological data, stone inscriptions, a few classical accounts, and archaeological remains provide our only information. The net conclusion of each of these sources is that the Picts were not in fact a homogeneous race. Our task then is to match up archaeological, linguistic and historical evidence to describe the make-up of the people called Picts.

The Name

The problem of the Picts is so controversial that even the origin of the name *Picti* has been questioned. Some scholars claim that *Picti* is a Latinized form of the tribal Pritani (cf. Henderson, 1967) a name which later referred, in mutated form, to the entire island of Britain [/*pr̄itani*/ </*britani*/ </*Britain*/] (Chadwick 1949; xvi-xvii). However, most scholars now regard *Picti*, meaning “painted [or tattooed] ones” (Smyth, 1984; 44) to be simply a Roman nickname for all the peoples living

North of the Antonine Wall.

The Historical Evidence

Most historical accounts of the early Picts consist of reports of their attacks on the northern Roman border and occasionally give us clues as to the make-up of the legions' adversaries. For example, Cassius Dio reports that there were two tribes: the *Mæatæ* and the *Caledonii* (Henderson, 1967; 18). Ammanius Marcellinus also mentions two tribes: the *Dicalydones* and the *Verturiones*. Professor Wainwright claims that these groups were confederacies of tribes. The *Mæatæ* were to become, according to Wainwright, the *Verturiones*, who in turn became the people of *Fortrinn*, or *Fortriu* in the Irish Annals (Wainwright, 1955; 50). This kingdom may be associated with the Southern Pictish kingdom mentioned by Bede (Dickenson, 1974; 24) which eventually became part of a united Pictland sometime between 550 and 685 (Henderson, 1967; 20 and Dickenson, 1974; 21). The name *Caledonii* was used as a confederacy name for the Picts before the third century (Wainwright, 1955; 11 & 50). These confederacies were almost certainly preceded by small independent tribes, such as those mentioned by Ptolemy in the first century AD. According to Wainwright:

...Cornavii, Smertae, Deantae, Caledonii, Vacomagi, Taexali, Venicones...and North Damnonii...we may fairly describe them as Proto-Picts in the sense their descendants were historical Picts (Wainwright, 1955; 49).

These names prove to be of a variety of origins: *Taexali* may be pre-Celtic, as the name does not seem to be Indo-European; *Smertae* is apparently continental in origin (Wainwright, 1955; 136); and the *Cornavii* and *Damnonii* can be linked with tribes with similar names in what is now England (cf. Cornwall and Devon). All of this suggests that the tribes from which the Picts came were of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The Legendary Evidence

The legendary sources tend to represent the Picts as a single racial unit from the beginning of time. It is important to remember that these legends are not the origin myths of the Picts themselves, but rather those made by their literate neighbours. Most are Irish and contain Irish propaganda (Smyth, 1984; 60). They also seem to have "...the element of fiction, even fantasy..." (Wainwright, 1955; 11). Nonetheless, there does appear to be some element of truth in the stories. For example, all of the legends have one thing in common: the Picts were soldiers who married Irish women (Skene, 1867; xcvi). This may be an attempt to account for the linguistic and ethnic mix of the Picts, or alternatively, it may simply be Scottish propaganda (Smyth, 1984; 84).

A continental element in the composition of the Picts is supported by several of the myths. The Book of Ballymote legend has the Picts coming "...originally from Thrace to France...and from there to Ireland" (Chadwick, 1949; 85). We can speculate that this is a folk-memory connecting the Picts (or at least some of them) to a continental source. Along a similar line,

Professor Chadwick reworks Bede's version of the story:

...then the Picts come from 'Scythia' to Ireland. The [Irish] tell them that the country will not hold them both and direct them eastwards to Britain. But they have no women; and so they appeal to the Scots for them. But they can obtain their request only by promising that, whenever doubt arises, they will choose their king by the female, rather than the male ancestry of the kings (Chadwick, 1949; 86).

Evident in these is an Irish component of the Picts. They appear to have come from Ireland before they went to Britain (not to be confused with the much later Dál Riata). Parallel to this, Irish mythology shows the Fomori, who lived in Ireland, being expelled to the island of Mull, where they continued to torment the Gaels and *Tuatha Dé Danann*. We might link these Fomori with a part of the Picts (Chadwick, 1949). This Irish segment of the Picts, which seems to have been ignored by recent writers, may be pre-Celtic--which the Fomori were also supposed to be. That the Picts marry Irish women also indicates a heterogeneous culture. Archaeological evidence supports this: the people who built the chambered graves in the neolithic age were almost certainly Proto-Picts from Ireland (Dickson, 1974; 12).

The closest thing we have to a native origin legend is The Pictish Chronicle. The chronicle commences:

Cruithne son of Cing, father of the Picts who dwell in this Island...had seven sons. These are their names:

Fib, Fidach, Foclaid, Fortrenn, Cait, Ce, Circinn...and they divided the land into seven divisions, as Columcill...said seven men of Cruithne's family divided Alba into seven divisions...' and the name of each of these men is that which his country bears (Chadwick, 1949; 81)

Sometime between the middle of the ninth and tenth centuries Bishop Andrew listed seven provinces which we can equate with these seven kingdoms (Chadwick, 1949; 35). The most important fact found in this document is that the writer recognized that there were divisions among the Picts, but it is obvious that he interpreted these differences as being political rather than ethnic or cultural. The chronicle, like the Irish tales, recognizes a continental origin for at least part of the Picts, and it gives as a common place of ancestry, for both the Scots and the Picts, Albania (in the Balkans) (Skene, 1867; xcvi). This seems to be a variation on the Scythian and Thracian myth. Once more, this might be an acknowledgement to the immigrant status of the Picts. The king list in The Pictish Chronicle also provides us with some useful information. The peoples of mediaeval Scotland, modeling themselves after the Irish, legitimized their kingship by creating a regnal list, some of which may be true but a portion of which is certainly fictional. The king lists often seem to show a division between the North and South Pictish kingdoms which may represent a later political manifestation of the Caledonii and Verturiones confederacies. The list also provides some evidence for the matrilineal system of succession in

Pictland, a structure that is mentioned in some legends and in Bede's work. Of this matrilineal system, little is known, but a king rarely had a father who was also king, and many surnames indicate that some rulers were even foreigners (Skene, 1867; cv). If this practice in fact existed, it would go a long way toward proving a non-Celtic, non-Indo-European influence. Celtic invaders might have adopted such a system from a larger indigenous population (Wainwright, 1955; 151). Alfred Smyth in Warlords and Holy Men, a recent study of early Scottish history, calls into question the reality of the matrilineal system of succession, and thus questions the degree of non-Indo-European influence. However, we can state tentatively that if there was such a system of succession, it may show a non-Celtic—perhaps non-Indo-European— influence among the Picts. These Proto-Pictish peoples, therefore, were probably an indigenous, pre-Celtic population living on the island. All of these legends may have an undercurrent of reality to them; they seem to indicate plurality within Pictish society, and may even reflect memories of actual settlements and invasions. However, it is difficult to match accurately these memories of cultural infusions with archaeological, historical, and linguistic evidence.

The Archaeological Evidence

Archaeology provides the most concrete evidence that a variety of peoples inhabited the area which was later called Pictland. In Stuart Piggot's essay in The Problem of the Picts (in Wainwright, 1955), he dates the first human settlement in Scotland to the middle of the second millenium BC. These settlers are identified

as a lithic people, probably fisherpeople living on the coast. They were a northern Eurasian tribal people like the Inuit and Lapps. Later colonists arrived in the same millenium whom we identify as "warrior cultures" and as the builders of chambered tombs (Wainwright, 1955; 54-5). These warriors/builders may have come from the continent, some place between the Elbe and the Rhine. They certainly were not Celts, as it was much too early for such Indo-European divisions to have occurred. Following this period of settlement, from the beginning of the first millenium BC to the beginning of the seventh century BC, we see approximately four hundred years of cultural stagnation. There appears to be no major changes in the make-up of the people, and the country seems to have been singularly insular (Wainwright, 1955; 56). Between 600 and 400 BC, we see Halstatt C and D influences, which are associated with the Celts. There does not seem to be any evidence of settlement, so this appears to be a borrowing of Celtic culture. This may indicate some kind of trade with north-western Germany (Wainwright, 1955; 56-7). In the third and fourth centuries BC, we see the start of the first true Celtic settlement. This late Bronze Age invasion is marked by the distinctive "flat rimmed ware" (Wainwright, 1955; 59). This invasion seems to be of an "essentially military character" (Chadwick, 1949; 58), as shown by the distribution of the vitrified forts. In Early Scotland Chadwick says that "[these forts] are continental rather than British...[as they] have seldom been found in England" (Chadwick, 1949; 56-7). These people formed a dominant warrior aristocracy over the indigenes, who undoubtedly formed the bulk of the

population (Wainwright, 1955; 153). Place names and classical accounts of their typical Celtic chariot warfare methods show this aristocracy to be essentially Celtic (Smyth, 1984; 57).

The next identifiable movement of peoples is that of Iron Age Celts from what is now England via the Hebrides. This settlement started around the first century BC and was complete by the early Christian period. This culture is primarily associated with the distinctive "brochs" or round towers. In The Problem of the Picts Stuart Piggot documents their movement north from England in the first century BC (Wainwright, 1955; 58-60); legendary sources suggest that some Proto-Picts came from the Orkneys; Ptolemy's map places several tribes of Brittonic origin in North Britain (for example the Cornovii); and Dickenson identifies the Proto-Picts as "descendants of Iron age invaders" (Dickenson, 1974; 23). The result of all the archaeological sources discussed so far is that the Proto-Picts are in fact composed of several groups of people from diverse origins. First we have the Bronze age "Natives", then the continental Celts, and finally a Brythonic settlement (ie, Celts from England). There were also Pictish movements to and from Ireland. The largest was the historical invasion, during the sixth to tenth centuries, of the *Scotti* from Ireland to the west coast of Scotland. These peoples formed the Dál Riatic Kingdom. All this data on the Proto-Picts seems to point to a heterogeneous mix. Some scholars (Wainwright, 1955; 32) have suggested, however, that the uniform "symbol stones" present an argument against a cultural mix, but since these markers did not

appear until after the Picts achieved a political unity, Wainwright's objection does not dispute the claim that the Picts were composed of diverse local ethnic populations.

The Linguistic Evidence

Finally, we have linguistic evidence, in the form of place names, a few inscriptions and personal names. The data is not plentiful enough to make definite claims about the exact nature of the language, but we can make a few generalizations. The linguistic patterns in Pictland give us a clue as to the underlying racial patterns (Wainwright, 1955; 28). Kenneth Jackson claims that in Pictland there was more than one language at any given period and that each had influence on the others. This ties in nicely with our suggestion that the Proto-Picts came from diverse origins. Jackson goes on to identify three different linguistic influences. First, he identifies a non-Indo-European element which is to be found in the inscriptional material (Wainwright, 1955; 152). He feels that this language may have remained with the Picts right up until the union of Pictland and the Dál Riata in the late middle ages, if only for some ritualistic inscriptional purposes. Secondly, the linguistic make-up of the Picts and Proto-Picts is P-celtic. It is Jackson's view, which is in line with Piggot's archaeological finds (and perhaps with some of the legendary and historical evidence as well), that the P-celtic language arrived with the warrior Celts from the continent in the fourth century BC. He bases this claim on phonological evidence, such as the Gaulish (or Gallo-Brittonic) diphthongization which may be found

in some Pictish sources (Wainwright, 1955; 145), as well as morphological evidence that *Pit* and other words are part of a vocabulary that is "...distinct from [that of] the Brittonic tribes south of the wall..." (Wainwright, 1955; 148).

The final influence on the Picts comes from a late Q-celtic, or Irish, population which followed the foundation of the Dál Riata. Jackson claims that this powerful group would have had a great influence on the state of affairs of the Pictish Kingdom. It was the Irish who introduced their distinctive ogam script to the Picts, and it might be for this reason that many "Gaelicized" names, as well as Goidelic words (like *maqq*-cf. *mac*, meaning son), appear in the inscriptions, king lists and legends (Wainwright, 1955; 141). The Irish also introduced Christianity and Christian terms to the Picts, evident in words such as *crosc*, or cross. This influence, undeniably a late one, is nonetheless a part of Pictish multiculturalism (Wainwright, 1955; 141). There is one further linguistic source, another P-celtic influence, which Jackson all but ignores. We see this influence in a name such as *Lhanbride*, which as the borrowed Welsh *llan*, meaning enclosure (Scott, 22, 38). This influence might be linked to two sources: the British living just south of Pictland, and the 'broch builders' who invaded the north from Brittonic England.

We can say that there were at least four main languages spoken in the area now described as Pictland, and that each of these may tentatively be associated with an archaeological settlement. First, there was a lithic settlement of pre-Indo-Europeans. Second, we find a Celtic aristocracy taking hold in Pictland, and these

people probably spoke a continental P-celtic dialect. Then during the first century there is an Insular Brythonic migration northward which can be associated with the 'broch builders'. And finally, in the historical period, the Dál Riatic Irish invasion influenced the speech of the Picts. There are still many linguistic problems to be solved before this theory is complete: we must account for some pre-Dal Riatic Gaelic influences (Chadwick, 1949; 70); we must determine whether there was a language that came along with the mysterious introduction of the Halstatt cultures in the sixth century BC; and we must determine how long each language lasted.

The Conclusions

As suggested by the given evidence, the Picts were a multicultural, heterogeneous nation: tribal names can be tentatively associated with various archaeological cultures and technologies, and perhaps even languages; legendary sources, although notoriously inaccurate, may contain a subsurface of truth concerning the settlement of one or more of the various Proto-Pictish peoples; archaeological records demonstrate at least four distinct groups of people; and taxonomic labels can be assigned to the languages spoken by each grouping. Alfred Smyth describes Pictish culture as a society consisting

...of an indigenous servile population ruled by a warrior Celtic aristocracy whose origins may have lain in different parts of the wider Celtic world... (Smyth, 1984; 54).

To this I would add the later, but no less important, influence of the Dál Riatic Scots. The united Picts of the sixth to tenth centuries appear not to be one ethnic group, as their political unity would imply, but rather a very complex mix of local populations.

by *Andrew Carnie*

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