THE ENIGMA OF THE PICTS[1]

The Picts are the first chapter in Scottish history. Indeed, they are really more of a foreword or a preface: for it is only with their merger with the kingdom of Scotti of Dalriada (in Argyllshire) in 843 A.D. that we have a kingdom called 'Scotland' for the first time. The language and customs of these Scotti (Irish migrants from around the fifth century A.D. or earlier) came to dominate the culture of the new kingdom, at the expense of that of the Picts and it is with the decline of the Picts that 'Scot'tish history begins. Nonetheless many elements of Pictish culture must have gone into the making of Scottish civilisation. But there is much disagreement as to what Pictish civilisation was really like. This 'enigma' of the Picts (as I will call it), the controversy and unanswered questions surrounding the identity of these previous occupants of Scotland, have a compelling and fascinating quality, for academics as much as for the general reader. So I suppose I had best begin by stating that I am a scholar behind whom stretches a long and noble tradition of failure! Many scholars have set out to solve the enigma of the Picts, some great names among them, but there is still little agreement. It would certainly be vain of me to suppose that I will do any better in attempting to resolve the problems.

Yet superficially the subject does not seem so problematical. The task in hand is that of identifying the general political, linguistic and cultural personality of the people, or peoples, who lived to the north of the Forth-Clyde line from the first century B.C. (around when the first historical details were collected) to the ninth century A.D. (when the Pictish kingdom disappeared). For this task we have a number of accounts by outsiders (Roman, Irish and Anglo-Saxon writers), some archaeological finds, place-names, the odd inscription and a large number of pictures in a distinctive style carved on standing stones. Admittedly a small quantity of evidence, often somewhat contradictory, however this can be the case with the evidence for many early historic peoples. Historians have done much with much less.

Pictish studies have, however, become notorious as a graveyard for good scholars. Not for nothing did John Buchan have an imaginary scholar, in one of his stories, ruin his reputation with theories regarding the Picts! They have become something of a byword in unsolved historical mysteries. In 1955 Frederick Wainwright was moved to write a book not simply on the Picts, but on The Problem of the Picts[2] perhaps still as adventurous a title as should be given to a general work on the subject.

Why should this be so? Well it must be said from the outset that at least

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1 This article was a lecture given to the Sydney Society for Scottish History on 26 February, 1987. It has been slightly revised and updated for publication by the author.

2 F T Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (London, 1955).

a large part of the 'problem' is one of scholars' own making rather than anything inherent in the subject. As Isabel Henderson has sensibly observed: 'where the facts are so few theories have abounded and the ingenuity and industry expended upon them limitless.'[3] Nothing attracts scholars so much as an unsolved mystery. Numerous theories have been put forward. Theories which, as another scholar has dryly observed: 'seem to have made little impression upon any but their authors.'[4]

For a while serious-minded scholars were afraid to say anything at all about the Picts except in the most guarded and pedantic terms - Wainwright's splendid book, for example, was very difficult (albeit rewarding) reading on account of its scrupulous accuracy. In recent times, however, a new orthodoxy has arisen, which argue that the perceived differences of the Picts from their neighbours is an error on the part of over-active scholarly minds and that the Picts were simply a normal 'Celtic' people, not dissimilar to neighbouring Celtic groups. This new, what I will term 'rational', viewpoint, exemplified by the work of Alfred Smyth, too hastily sweeps aside the problems of the identity of the Picts, however, and fails to identify the crucial issues involved in the use of the name 'Pict' by a historic kingdom formed around the sixth century A.D. The latter question is crucial and will be subject of my discussion.

In general the name 'Pict' is taken as describing the occupants of Scotland north of the Forth-Clyde line, prior to the Scottish takeover of 843 A.D. Objections have been raised to this usage, however, as it is a Latin name - from the adjective pictus, meaning 'painted', (evidently referring to the alleged early Pictish practice of tattooing designs on their bodies) and is not known from any source before 297 A.D. The Latin origin of this term should not be doubted: attempts have been made to explain the name as a native word (derived from the Celtic collective term priteni), but these do not seem at all likely in linguistic terms and I would suugest that the attempts are largely inspired by scholarly discomfort with the idea that a people would name their nation by a foreign, rather than indigenous, term. This, we will see, should not be a matter for discomfort. Prior to 297 sources refer only to individual groups or tribes and most often refer to all by the name of the largest group in the region, the Caledonii. Wainwright therefore developed a cumbersome jargon of 'Picts' (post 297) and 'proto-Picts' - which is used for those earlier people who are evidently the same as those who after 297 would be called 'Picts'. This seems needlessly pedantic and makes a lot out of a date which may be meaningless - the name might well have been in use long before 297. One recent book states: 'the Picti appear to be an amalgam of two tribes, the Caledonii and the Meatae their political transformation into Picts may be assumed to have been complete early in the fourth century'[5].

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3 I Henderson, *The Picts* (London, 1967), 12.

4 Wainwright, *op. cit.*, 132-3.

5 G and A Ritchie, *Scotland: archaeology and early history* (London, 1981), 159.

Here the terminology has taken over from sense. A non-existent political event of major proportions has been imagined to explain the simple first usage of a name. A panegyric of 310 A.D. talks of 'Caledonians and other Picts' - implying, in fact, that 'Pict' is simply a blanket term covering groups still retaining individual identities. Indeed the Meatae appear as a definite sub-group of Picts in the seventh century writings of Adomnan (as the Miathi)[6] There is no solid evidence of political merging until a century or so later - with the formation of the 'Kingdom of the Picts'. If there is 'Pictish' culture in the fourth century A.D. then it is doubtless also there earlier.

What was the cultural ancestry of the people whom we call Picts?

To begin with we should not assume that there was one single culture within Pictland. Even the formation of a 'Pictish Kingdom' after the fifth century A.D. need not imply a common culture or language at all levels - how many nations have that? We have come to expect consistent cultural identities for the early historic cultures of the British Isles: a consistent pattern of an incoming Celtic culture having overlaid the previous civilisation with a single Celtic language, broadly similar religious system and single political/social structure by the beginning of the historic period.

The past controversy surrounding Pictland was where some scholars disputed that the region had actually undergone such a change to a fully Celtic culture. Some customs of the Picts are not recognisably Celtic: for example, neither the habit of tattooing their bodies[7] nor the tracing of succession through the female line (semi-matriliny: with the crown passing by preference to the kings brother, rather then his sister's son) are practices found amongst the Celtic peoples - or any other Indo-European group. There is also possible evidence for a non-Celtic language from the north of Scotland.

Nonetheless, that there was a large Celtic element amongst the Picts is undeniable. Early attempts were made to prove that the Picts all spoke a pre-Indo-European language. Other attempts were made to prove that the Picts spoke Gaelic - those largely by disgruntled Scottish historians, peeved at the Scots Gaelic language being *Irish* in origin (which it certainly is)! It is now universally accepted that place-name elements such as pit- (as in Pitlochrie) which means a 'Parcel of land', and aber- (cf. Aberdeen) meaning 'estuary' (also found in the Welsh place-name Aberystwyth, for example), and some Pictish words quoted by the historian Bede[8], indicate that a Celtic language

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6 Adomnan, *The Life of St. Columba*, ed. A O and M O Anderson (Edinburgh, 1961), 227.

7 Caesar says that the Celtic Britons painted their bodies with woad and Alfred Smyth (*Warlords and Holy Men*, London, 1983) has used this point to question whether the Pictish tattooing was 'non-Celtic'. He is missing the point as tattooing is not painting (though he may be right in general terms, as the Classical sources may be confusing the two. It is interesting to note, however, that the 1992 find of a frozen Bronze Age man on an Italian glacier provides evidence that the pre-Celtic peoples of Europe practised tattooing.

8 Bede, *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, I.12, trans. L Sherley-Price

was spoken by most Picts. This was not a Gaelic dialect, but one closer to British or Gaulish Celtic. The Pictish language is said by Bede to be separate to that of the neighbouring North Britons, yet the words he gives from Pictish are also found in the language of their neighbours. It is possible, then, that the Picts spoke a dialect that was related to North British, but sufficiently different in pronunciation not to be mutually intelligible. The names and references indicate a Celtic element at least as far north as the Ness Valley and covering the area inland from the east coast. This corresponds well with the distribution of the settlements known as 'Vitrified Forts'. These are timberlaced forts of a common Celtic type (called by Caesar the murus gallicus and first identified archaeologically by Wheeler's excavations in southern Britain and France in the 'thirties). Occupation dates for these range from the eighth century B.C. to the sixth century A.D. and later in Pictland.

A second linguistic and cultural province has been postulated, however, corresponding with inscriptions in Irish ogham script (probably learned from Irish missionaries), but in an unknown language. These are mostly found in the very far north and the Northern Isles.

Some examples of this language are the following inscriptions:

'ettouchetts ahehhttanannhccvvevvnehhtons', on the Lunnasting Stone, and

'besmeqqnanammovvez' on the St. Ninian's Isle Stone.

The highlighted elements are known words. Meqq, a borrowing from Irish maqq (later mac), meaning 'son'. Nehhtons would be 'Nechtan', the name of more than one Pictish king.

These recognisable words raise the important point that the letters seem to have been given their original values by the writers (the meqq is probably an imitation of Irish inscription formulae). The language defies translation, yet it is thus not easily dismissed as misreading or scribble.

The map of Ptolemy (based on sources circa the first century A.D.) shows tribes with recognisably Celtic names in Caithness: the Lugi and Cornovii. As Jackson[9] rightly points out, these names are a serious obstacle to the northern non-Celtic language province argument: they being the most recognisably Celtic tribal names in all Pictland. These names may be Celtic, however, because they were names given to the northern peoples by the southern (Celtic) peoples from whom the Roman geographers would have obtained their information[10] but the evidence of the inscriptions must be said to be a weak basis for any argument regarding a separate province, of pre-

(Harmondsworth, 1990), 59.

9 K H Jackson, "The Pictish Language", in Wainwright, *op.cit.*, 135.

10 F T Wainwright, *Archaeology and Placenames and History* (London, 1962), 72.

Celtic language speakers. Nonetheless, the fact that these people were at the extreme edge of Celtic expansion does make the idea of a pre-Celtic survival plausible: the Basques in Spain are a contemporary example of a highland survival of such a group, and in the case of the far-northern Picts we are looking at a case much longer ago.

Prior to the formation of large nations in northern Europe, individual tribal kingdoms may have had varying cultural features which were swallowed up in the formation of larger political groupings. This process occurred at different times in different places, but when it did occur, in most places 'standard' Celtic or Roman political systems were adopted. Recent critiques of the Pictish 'problem' perhaps take too little account of the importance of the event of the formation of the Kingdom of the Picts: a point at which choices were made between political systems of the various tribes and the point at which the Roman collective term 'Pict' may have been chosen as a title for the political union.

Matriliny seems to have been the system of succession chosen, an event in contrast to the foundation of all other European kingdoms. Anthropologists have speculated that matriliny was the earlier system of the historic cultures of Europe, replaced by patriliny with the arrival of the Celts - here the case would seem to be the reverse. There are two principal sources which imply that a matrilineal succession system was used: the Pictish Chronicle (basically a king list) and the Historia of Bede. Both these sources provide information which has been communicated by the Irish, however, as the Chronicle is written in the Irish monastery of Iona and at least part of the report of Bede probably comes from the same source. Bede repeats a legend that the Picts traced descent through the female line because the earliest Picts had taken Irish wives (implying the greater worth of the Irish line). Smyth rightly dismisses this as being a piece of Irish bias - which does not, on the other hand, prevent it from being an Irish fiction to explain an existing institution. Bede's words are ambiguous on this point: 'when any dispute arose, they should choose a king from the female royal line than the male. This custom continues among the Picts to this day.'[11] Smyth argues that, while the king list may suggest that throughout the period of the historical kingdom of the Picts sons very rarely succeeded fathers as kings, we rely on an Irish myth to prove that matriliny was involved. This is a fair argument, but the Chronicle shows an unusual succession pattern which is best explained by the legend. Likewise the Chronicle would seem a very elaborate forgery if we were to imagine that it was authored just to support the false origin-legend. Likewise the fact that all the names of Pictish kings are expressed in the Irish patrinymic formula 'X mac X' is less suggestive of Irish sources of transmission for their names than the idea that 'son of' (a patrilineal title) was a fairly alien notion in Pictish royal titles - for which a borrowed Gaelic term was hence needed.

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11 Bede, *op. cit*, I.1, 46. My italics.

Institutions from the possibly non-Celtic northern element may have become imposed upon the Celtic south after the political union of the two provinces under the 'Pictish Kingdom'. The strong northern power base of the earliest Pictish king may explain this - the Life of St. Columba tells of the saint's contacts with the strong king Brude (Bridei) Mac Maelchon, who ruled out of Inverness. Inverness was also the focal point of the earliest type of Pictish symbol stones (Class One). This is a class of standing stones with incised symbolic designs. The symbols form a narrow vocabulary and are of very uniform execution. Clearly they are the monuments of a centralising dynasty - though attempts to read evidence of succession or territorial union into their symbolism should be regarded as highly speculative[12]. That the Class One stones lack Christian symbolism and are northern-based (both factors in contrast with later stones showing the same vocabulary of symbols), suggests a very strong link with the dynasty of the pre-Christian Brude.

We are not sure that Brude's kingdom was called the kingdom of the 'Picts', though later sources including Bede (before 731A.D.) and medieval Scottish sources would imply this term was adopted then, or soon after. Why the Latin name? Some groups do not have a collective term for their entire race or regional group and will not choose the name of a sub-group as a collective term as it might cause ill-feeling amongst those not of that group. The Romans in the earliest period called the Picts 'Caledonians', after the name of the largest group. But the kingdom was named after the later Roman collective term, 'Pict', which was not a native name. An Australian analogy may be fruitful here: in 1980s Australia the term 'Koori' was preferred by many to the term 'Aborigine', on the grounds that the former was an indigenous term. 'Aborigine' is still preferred by many indigenous Australians as a national term, however, on the grounds that the status of Koori as a universal term is unresolved - it is specific to a New South Wales-based group - and the meaning of 'Aborigine' has now gone beyond its former English usage to take on a 'national' meaning that no indigenous word exists for. By c.550 A.D. 'Pict' was probably a term which had undergone similar shifts in meaning and the event of its adoption as a national identity is a far more significant event that the 297 appearance of the name.

Leslie Alcock is correct to stress the 'normality' of Pictish material culture throughout the first millenium A.D[13] Attempts to use the symbols, or the distinctive northern Pictish structures called 'brochs' to suggest non-Celtic, or divergent groups are fallacious. But the process of imposing unity upon disparate tribal groups to create 'national' identities is a significant form of event. Attempts to harmonise social systems and ideas which are not archaeologically measurable may see periods of divergence from the norm. It

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12 In particular A Jackson, *The Symbol Stones of Pictland* (Stromness, 1984).

13 In A Small (ed.), *The Picts: a new look at old problems* (Dundee, 1987), 90.

would seem premature to dismiss the possibility that the Picts are an example where the camera of history arrived in time to 'snap' the process in transition. Colin Wells and Peter Glob have both suggested on archaeological grounds that Classical sources downplay the level of cultural plurality on the edges of the Celtic world. As we delve deelder into known cultures more 'problems' such as that of the Picts may emerge. If there is a major weakness of the 'rational' approach it might be that he seems to assume that a single, unified, cultural identity is more logical than a hybrid culture.

This, then, is our 'enigma' of the Picts. Do we see here a single Celtic culture as Smyth would suggest? Or do we see a Celtic and pre-Celtic mixture with a mid-first-millenium imposition of pre-Celtic customs from a northern power base? For the moment perhaps what we need to reconsider is the seemingly desperate need to bring clear solutions to questions of cultural identity, with such urgency.

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