

# Pictish Life

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The study of Pictish history can be both fascinating and frustrating – the Picts have left us a great number of beautiful artifacts, but no written records with which to help interpret them. Other than short ogham inscriptions and fragments of documents preserved in later compilations, what we know of the Picts comes from external sources and archeological finds.

## ***Who were the Picts?***

The Picts were the people who lived in the north and east of Scotland from about 500 CE into the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Pictish King Lists that are preserved in medieval annals give the Kingdom a much longer history than that, but many of the initial kings are probably apocryphal or legendary and the first independently verifiable kings begin appearing in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Other than their names and approximate regnal dates, we know very little about the reigns of the Pictish kings, and most of that is from Irish annals. The independent Kingdom of the Picts ends sometime after 843 CE when Kenneth mac Alpin claims the thrones of both Pictland and Dal Riada.

## **Textual sources**

**Tacitus** - 97AD – *Agricola* (11) – “The red hair and large limbs of the inhabitants of Caledonia point clearly to a German origin.”

**Ptolemy** – second century – *Geographia* – includes the names and rough locations of many of the tribes of Britain, including Caledonii, Venicones, etc.

**Eumenius** - 297AD - panegyric on Constantius Chlorus - “A nation, still savage and accustomed only to the hitherto semi-naked Picts and Hibernians as their enemies, yielded to Roman arms and standards without difficulty.”

**Anon. Roman** - 310AD - panegyric to Constantine (25) - “Caledonians and other Picts”

**Ammianus Marcellinus** - late 3<sup>rd</sup> c - *Res Gestae* (26.4.5) “the Picts, Saxons, Scots and Attacotti were harassing the Britons with constant disasters.” And *Res Gestae* (27.8.1) – “When the Picts, Attacotti, and Scots, after killing a general and a count, were devastating Britain without resistance, Count Theodosius routed them and took their booty from them. 1 ... serious news which showed that Britain was brought into a state of extreme need by a conspiracy of the savages,” and *Res Gestae* (27.8.5) – “It will, however, be in place to say, that at that time the Picts, divided into two tribes, called Dicalydones and Verturiones”

**St. Patrick** – c450AD - Letter to Coroticus (9) “Like our enemies, they live in death, allies of the Scots and the apostate Picts. Dripping with blood, they welter in the blood of innocent Christians” and (13) “Far from the love of God is a man who hands over Christians to the Picts and Scots.” And (16) “There people who were freeborn have, been sold, Christians made slaves, and that, too, in the service of the abominable, wicked, and apostate Picts!”

**Gildas** – early 6<sup>th</sup> c - *de excidio et conquestu Britanniae* - Mentions of the Picts and Scots can be found throughout chapters 14-21. - (19) – sometimes translated as “foul hordes of Scots and Picts” but a fuller translation gives: “No sooner were they gone, than the Picts and Scots, like worms which in the heat of mid-day come forth from their holes, hastily land again from their canoes, in which they had been carried beyond the Cichican valley, differing one from another in manners, but inspired with the same avidity for blood, and all more eager to shroud their villainous faces in bushy hair than to cover with decent clothing those parts of their body which required it. Moreover, having heard of the departure of our friends, and their resolution never to return, they seized with greater boldness than before on all the country towards the extreme north as far as the wall. To oppose them there was placed on the heights a garrison equally slow to fight and ill adapted to run away, a useless and panic-struck company, who clambered away days and nights on their unprofitable watch. Meanwhile the hooked weapons of their enemies were not idle, and our wretched countrymen were dragged from the wall and dashed against the ground.”

**Aneurin** – c600AD - Y Gododdin (stanza 22) – “Noble his nature, foreign horseman, Cian’s one son, from beyond Mount Bannawg. / Gododdin could not say, after battle, when there would come a keener than Llif.” And possibly stanza 25 – “Hero, shield firm below his freckled forehead, his stride a young stallion’s. / ...Before burial beneath Eleircht Fre, there was valour in his breast, / His blood poured over his armour, undaunted Buddfan fab Bleiddfan.”

**Isidore of Seville** - d.636AD - *Origines* (also called *Etymologiae*) (19.23.7) - “The race of Picts has a name derived from the appearance of their bodies. These are played upon by a needle working with small pricks and by the squeezed-out sap of a native plant, so that they bear the resultant marks according to the personal rank of the individual, their painted limbs being tattooed to show their high birth.”

**Adomnan** - late 7<sup>th</sup> c - Life of St Columba - (I.1) Intro, (I.7) “And the saint, in like manner, prophesied of the king of the Cruithne, who was called Echoid Laib, and how, after being defeated, he escaped riding in his chariot,” (I.29) “the saint began to sing the 44th Psalm, and at the same moment so wonderfully loud,” (II.8) “a certain priest named Iogenan, a Pict by race,” (II.10) “Of a poisonous fountain of water to which the blessed man gave his blessing in the country of the Picts,” (II.20) “Regarding Nesan the Crooked” (II.24) “Of the death of some wicked men,” (II.24) “the holy man specially recommended a certain exile, of noble race among the Picts, named Tarain,” (II.28) “How an aquatic monster was driven off... the river Nesa”, (II.32) “a journey beyond the Dorsal Ridge of Britain,” (II.33) “Of the boy whom the holy man raised from the dead, ... in the province of the Picts, a certain peasant... learned through an interpreter the word of life preached by the holy man,” (II.34) “Concerning the illness with which the Druid Broichan was visited for his detention of a female slave,” (II.35) “Of the manner in which St. Columba overcame Broichan the Druid and sailed against the wind,” (II.36) “the sudden opening of the door of the royal fortress,” (II.38) “lived in the district which borders the shores of the Aporic lake,” (II.43) recommended him in the following terms to King Brude,” (II.47) “have twice been ravaged by a dreadful pestilence throughout their whole extent, except among the two tribes, the Picts and Scots of Britain,” Plus many comments about goings-ons in Dal Riada, but be cautious! The Cruithni he mentions are often the Cruithni of Ireland, not Scotland!

**Bede** – Northumbrian 731AD - (I.1) “This island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine law was written, contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth. The Latin tongue is, by the study of the Scriptures, become common to all the rest” and the origin legend, (I.12) “Whereupon they suffered many years under two very savage foreign nations, the Scots from the west, and the Picts from the north” and comments about the Antonine Wall, (I.14) “The Picts, both then and afterwards, remained quiet in the farthest part of the island, save that sometimes they would do some mischief, and carry off booty from the Britons,” (I.15) “Then, having on a sudden entered into league with the Picts,” (I.20) “They fled in disorder, casting away their arms, and well satisfied if, with their naked bodies, they could escape the danger,” (II.5) “Oswy, brother to the former, held the same dominions for some time, and for the most part subdued and made tributary the nations of the Picts and Scots, which possess the northern parts of Britain,” (III.1) “For all the time that Edwin reigned, the sons of the aforesaid Etheifrid, who had reigned before him, with many of the nobility, lived in banishment among the Scots or Picts, and were there instructed according to the doctrine of the Scots, and received the grace of baptism,” (III.3) “keep Easter Sunday... the island called Hii, ...had been long since given by the Picts,” (III.4) “When the nation of the Picts received the faith, (I.6) Of King Oswald’s wonderful piety,” (III.24) “likewise subdued the greater part of the Picts to the dominion of the English” (III.25) “except only these and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons,” (III.27) “Eghert... was a great benefactor, both to his own nation, and to those of the Scots and Picts among whom he lived a stranger,” (IV.3) “Wilfrid filling the bishopric of York, and of all the Northumbrians, and likewise of the Picts,” (IV.12) a bishop “in the province of the Picts” (IV.26) “that same king, rashly leading his army to ravage the province of the Picts, much against the advice of his friends, and particularly of Cuthbert, of blessed memory, who had been lately ordained his op, the enemy made show as if they fled, and the king was drawn into the straits of inaccessible mountains, and slain with the greatest part of his forces” (V.19) Bishop Wilfred, (V.21) “Abbot Ceolfrid sent the King of the Picts architects to build a church, and with them an epistle concerning the Catholic Easter and tonsure... This letter having been read in the presence of King Naitan, and many more of the most learned men, and carefully interpreted into his own language by those who could understand it,” (V.23) “The Picts also at this time are at peace with the English nation, and rejoice in being united in peace and truth with the whole Catholic Church,” (V.24) “In the year 565, the priest, Columba, came out of Scotland, into Britain, to instruct the Picts, and he built a monastery in the isle of Hii... In the year 698, Berthred, the royal commander of the Northumbrians, was slain by the Picts... In the year 711, Earl Bertfrid fought with the Picts.”

**Nennius** – 9<sup>th</sup> c Welsh - The Irish version of the *Historia Britonum* of Nennius (also called *Lebor Bretnach*): (CELT edition - pg 29) “Four races inhabit the island of Britain, viz.: the Gaels, the Cruithnachs *Picts*, the Britons, and the Saxons,” (pg 43) Picts occupying parts of Britain, (pg 51) “The seven sons of Cruithne”, multiple vague mentions of Cruithnians, (page 127) Origin legend and poem that mentions six sons and a daughter (Elair?) (page 157) King List, (pg 246) Duan Albanach.

**Irish Annals** – Annals of Ulster, Annals of Tigernach, Annals of the Four Masters, Fragmentary Annals of Ireland, Chronicon Scotorum

Historia Norwegiae – late 12<sup>th</sup> c – “The Picts, who were only a little bigger than pygmies, worked great marvels in city-building each evening and morning, but at noontide they were utterly bereft of their strength and hid for fear in little subterranean dwellings.”

**Poppleton Manuscript** - 14<sup>th</sup> century Hulne, Alnwick – compilation of the Pictish King List and some associated texts. First is *de situ Albanie* (an introduction to the following texts), followed by *Cronica de origine antiquorum Pictorum* (one of the versions of the Pictish origin legend), and a fairly complete Pictish King List. Additional sections include King lists from later in Scottish history.

### **Oxford English Dictionary:**

Pict, *n.* and *adj.* - *Brit.* /p kt/, *U.S.* /p k(t)/ Forms: . OE **Pehtas** (plural), OE **Peohtas** (plural), OE **Pihtas** (plural), OE **Piohtas** (plural), OE **Pyhtas** (plural) - Also (in sense A. 1b) with lower-case initial. [< post-classical Latin *Picti*, plural (a297), identical in form with and probably < classical Latin *pict*, plural of the past participle of *pingere* PAINT *v.*<sup>1</sup>, on account of their alleged habit of painting or tattooing their bodies, but compare also the native names *Pictavi* and *Pictones* in Gaul (Poitou). The forms represent a later reborrowing from post-classical Latin. Compare SCOT *n.*<sup>1</sup> No self-appellation of the Picts is known, but their traditional name in Welsh is *Prydyn* (Old Irish *Cruithin* Picts) < a variant of the British base of Welsh *Prydain* Britons (see BRITAIN *n.*<sup>1</sup>). **A. n.1. a.** *Sc. Hist.* A member of a Celtic people, first mentioned in the late 3rd cent. A.D., who inhabited what is now northern and eastern Scotland (cf. PICTLAND *n.*). At some point after the 9th cent. the name of the Picts fell out of use as a contemporary designation. **b.** Chiefly in forms. A member of an imaginary race of small dark people, identified in Scottish folklore with the ancient Picts, and often believed to dwell underground (cf. *Picts' house* *n.* (a) at Compounds); a dwarf, gnome, troll, etc. Identification of the Picts as supernatural beings was possibly strengthened (in later use) by association with PIXIE *n.* **COMPOUNDS - Picts' house** *n.* *Sc. Archaeol.* any of various ancient dwellings in northern Scotland and the northern and western Isles, formerly thought to have been built by the Picts, *esp.* (a) an underground dwelling (cf. WEEM *n.*); (b) a circular stone fortified dwelling. **Picts' wall** *n.* now *Eng. regional (north.)* Hadrian's Wall.

## **Origin legends**

Bede, Nennius, and some of the Irish Annals record a story about how the Picts came to live in Northern Britain.

Bede Ecclesiastical History of the English People - Book I Chapter I

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-book1.html>

This island at present, following the number of the books in which the Divine law was written, contains five nations, the English, Britons, Scots, Picts, and Latins, each in its own peculiar dialect cultivating the sublime study of Divine truth. The Latin tongue is, by the study of the Scriptures, become common to all the rest. At first this island had no other inhabitants but the Britons, from whom it derived its name, and who, coming over into Britain, as is reported, from Armorica, possessed themselves of the southern parts thereof. When they, beginning at the south, had made themselves masters of the greatest part of the island, it happened, that the nation of the Picts, from Scythia, as is reported, putting to sea, in a few long ships, were driven by the winds beyond the shores of Britain, and arrived on the northern coast of Ireland, where, finding the nation of the Scots, they begged to be allowed to settle among them, but could not succeed in obtaining their request. Ireland is the greatest island next to Britain, and lies to the west of it; but as it is shorter than Britain to the north, so, on the other hand, it runs out far beyond it to the south, opposite to the northern parts of Spain, though a spacious sea lies between them. The Picts, as has been said, arriving in this island by sea, desired to have a place granted them in which they might settle. The Scots answered that the island could not contain them both; but "We can give you good advice," said they, "what to do; we know there is another island, not far from ours, to the eastward, which we often see at a distance, when the days are clear. if you will go thither, you will obtain settlements; or, if they should oppose you, you shall have our assistance." The Picts, accordingly, sailing over into Britain, began to inhabit the northern parts thereof, for the Britons were possessed of the southern. Now the Picts had no wives, and asked them of the Scots; who would not consent to grant them upon any other terms, than that when any difficulty should arise, they should choose a king from the female royal race rather than from the male: which custom, as is well known, has been observed among the Picts to this day. In process of time, Britain, besides the Britons and the Picts, received a third nation the Scots, who, migrating from Ireland under their leader, Reuda, either by fair means, or by force of arms, secured to themselves those settlements among the Picts which they still possess. From the name of their commander, they are to this day called Dalreudins; for, in their language, Dal signifies a part.

## **Pictish Chronicle**

The Pictish Chronicle is the name for the regnal list of Pictish Kings preserved in several manuscripts. There are slight differences between the versions, partially due to a presumed difference in the information available to the annal compiler or transliteration errors and partially due to later transcription errors and accidents of survival. The most complete text is found in the Poppleton manuscript. Some of the information can be verified by comparison with the surviving Irish Annals but other kings are only known from the King lists.

While generally I do not approve of Wikipedia as a source, they actually have a reasonable (and free) copy of the King List:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Kings\\_of\\_the\\_Picts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Kings_of_the_Picts)

The Pictish King List starts well before the historical period and includes both legendary and historical kings. It starts with Cruthni and his seven sons, legendary kings who supposedly founded the kingdom and gave their names to the kingdoms of Pictland.

“Cruithne, son of Cing, pater Pictorum habitantium in hac insula, c. annis regnabat. He had seven sons. These are their names, viz., Fib, Fidach, Foltlaig, Fortrend, Caitt, Ce, Circing.” (Nennius, CELT edition)

Following these are a few more legendary kings and then the “thirty Brudes” – twenty-eight kings in a row who all have Brude as a component of their names. The names are also paired, using the same base name with and without “ur” as a prefix.

*Brude uruip Brude grid  
Brude grith Brude urgrid  
Brude urgrith Brude mund  
Brude muin Brude urmund*

Following the Brudes are a few more kings of dubious veracity and many of these kings are reported as having improbably long reigns. In the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, we finally reach Bridei maqq Maelchon (d.583), the first king to be independently verified by appearing in Adomnan’s *Life of Columba*. A long list of kings follows, until about 846 when Cináed mac Ailpín becomes “King of Picts and Scots” and in about 900, Domnall mac Causantín is the last king to be called King of the Picts. Later kings are called “King of Alba” or “King of Scots.”

*Bridei filius Mailcon  
Gartnart filius Domelch  
Nectu nepos Uerd  
Ciniach filius Lutrín  
Garnard filius Wid  
Breidei filius Wid  
Talorc frater eorum*

*Tallorcen filius Enfret*  
*Gartnait filius Donnel*  
*Drest frater ejus*  
*Bredei filius Bili*  
*Taran filius Entifidich*  
*Bredei filius Derelei*  
*Necthon filius Derelei*

(A selection from the Poppleton Manuscript)

However, while the Pictish King List is extensive, it does not provide very much information other than the names of the men who kings. The case is somewhat muddled by sometimes uncertain dates, omissions and additions of information in the annals, and reports of kings who ruled “together” or concurrently in different parts of the Kingdom.

There are some arguments that some of the names in the King List are women’s names, since “son of” could be of a woman or a man, but that is still debated and is often associated with the question of whether the Picts were matrilineal.

In reading the Pictish King lists, it becomes quickly apparent that kingship did not pass from father to son as in most Western societies. The Pictish origin legends preserved in some Irish annals explain that heirs were to be chosen from the female line when there was any question of inheritance, but the non-patrilineal pattern occurs more frequently than not. This may be due to a pattern of matrilineal succession, but without complete genealogies and histories, it is impossible to say exactly what qualified a man for kingship and a purely matrilineal system is unlikely. It’s possible that members of several royal houses were eligible for the throne. The term nepos (nephew) appears occasionally, so there may be some cases where a man’s sister’s son inherited the throne, again implying that the female line was important. We do know that some of the Pictish kings did not have Pictish fathers, so there is evidence that the mother’s lineage could independently qualify a man for the throne. Eanfrith, a Northumbrian prince, fled to Pictland for a time in his youth and apparently fathered a son, Talorgen filius Eanfrith, who later became King of the Picts. Another Pictish king, Brude Mac Bile, was the son of a Welshman, the king of the Strathclyde Britons (Dumbarton).

## Timeline

### *Selected dates of interest to Pictish history*

80AD: Agricola invades northern Britain  
84AD: The Battle of Mons Graupius - Romans defeat the northern Britons  
c122AD: Hadrian's Wall constructed and manned by the Romans  
c140AD: Construction of the Antonine Wall.  
367AD: Picts attack at Hadrian's Wall, Stilicho's Pictish Wars  
397AD: St Ninian's mission to the Southern Picts, establishes Candida Casa at Whithorn  
500AD: Battles between the Picts and Dal Riadians  
c540AD: Gildas writes *De Excidio Britanniae*  
563AD: St Columba founds Iona and preaches to the Northern Picts  
583AD: Bridei mac Maelchon, the first independently verifiable Pictish King, dies  
617-633AD Edwin is King of Northumbria and Oswald, Eanfrith, and Oswiu, princes of Northumbria, are in exile in Pictland  
638AD: Northumbrians defeat the Goddins and capture Edinburgh  
653-657AD: Talorcan mac Eanfrith rules as King of Picts  
672AD: Picts defeated by Northumbrians under King Ecgfrith  
682AD: Pictish King Bredei attacks the Orkneys  
685AD: (May 20) The Battle of Dunnichen or Nechtansmere, King Ecgfrith of Northumbria defeated by the Picts. See the Aberlmo II cross-slab.  
697AD: Law of Innocents is written by Adomnan, one of the guarantors is Brude mac Der-Ilei  
706-724AD: Nechtan filius Derile King of Picts  
711AD: Picts defeated at plain of Manaw by northumbrians, Nechtan sends to Northumbria for religious counsel  
717AD: Nechtan mac Der-Ilei adopts Roman Christianity, stone churches built, including at Rosemarkie  
731AD: Bede completes his Ecclesiastical History of the British People  
735AD: Oengus mac Fergus, King of the Picts, invades Dal Riada and burns Dunadd  
741AD: Oengus controls all of Dal Riada  
747AD: St Andrews founded  
752AD: Battle of Asreth in Circenn between rival Picts  
793AD: First Viking raid on Lindesfarne  
795AD: First recorded Viking raid on Iona, multiple other Viking raids  
811-820AD: Constantin mac Fergus king of Picts  
829AD: After repeated Viking raids, St Columba's relics are moved from Iona  
839AD: Battle between the Picts (Eoganan mac Oengus) and the Vikings results in a Pictish defeat  
843-7AD: Kenneth mac Alpin becomes King of Picts and Scots  
858AD: death of Kenneth mac Alpin

“We must not assume that Pictish Society was static over centuries – just the same old problematic Picts whether it is AD 400 or 900” (I. Henderson *The Picts: Written records and Pictorial Images* in: *Stones Symbols & stories*, page 44)



## Geography

Pictland is generally agreed upon to consist of the lands north of the Firth of Forth and the Clyde, except the region in the southwest occupied by the Dal Riadians. Ptolemy provides an early description of the locations of many tribes, but his knowledge is second-hand and dated at best. Later sources, including some King Lists and *de situ Albanie*, list the names of seven Pictish regions or sub-kingdoms, said to be named for the seven sons of Cruithni: Fib, Fidach, Foltlaig, Fortrend, Caitt, Ce, & Ciring. Some of these regions are known to correspond to specific areas, like Fib which is modernly called Fife and is still often referred to as “the Kingdom of Fife” and Cait which corresponds to modern Caithness and Sutherland. The locations of other regions or kingdoms are less clear and the map below must be interpreted as a rough approximation at best. Recent research suggests that Fortriu may actually belong in the region of Moray.























Left: Britain c.400CE [http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/maps/4th\\_kingdoms.html](http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/maps/4th_kingdoms.html)  
Right – Britain c.600CE [http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/maps/600\\_kingdoms.html](http://www.earlybritishkingdoms.com/maps/600_kingdoms.html)  
(another map available at - <http://www.britannia.com/history/ebkmap.html>)

## Alphabet and Language

According to Bede, the Picts had their own language and missionaries to their territories needed a translator. However, very little is known about this language since there are no written texts in Pictish, only surviving place-names and short ogham inscriptions. Pictish has been argued to be everything from p-Celtic to q-Celtic to indigenous British to a non-Indo-European, but that discussion is beyond the scope of this survey. p-Celtic seems to be the (current) consensus (sort of). For more on Pictish names and language, see the books by Nicholaisen and Calise and visit ‘A Consideration of Pictish Names.’

Ogham alphabet from <http://www.ancientscripts.com/ogham.html>

|                                                                                     |                                   |                                                                                     |                                         |                                                                                     |                                        |                                                                                       |                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
|    | <b>n</b> <i>nin</i><br>"ash"      |    | <b>q</b> <i>ceirt</i><br>"apple tree"   |    | <b>r</b> <i>ruis</i><br>"elder"        |    | <b>i</b> <i>idad</i><br>"yew"       |
|    | <b>s</b> <i>sail</i><br>"willow"  |    | <b>c</b> <i>coll</i><br>"hazel"         |    | <b>z</b> <i>straif</i><br>"blackthorn" |    | <b>e</b> <i>edad</i><br>"aspen"     |
|    | <b>f</b> <i>fer</i><br>"fern"     |    | <b>t</b> <i>tinne</i><br>"holly, elder" |    | <b>ng</b> <i>getal</i><br>"broom"      |    | <b>u</b> <i>ur</i><br>"heath"       |
|   | <b>l</b> <i>luis</i><br>"rowan"   |   | <b>d</b> <i>duir</i><br>"oak"           |   | <b>g</b> <i>gort</i><br>"ivy"          |   | <b>o</b> <i>onn</i><br>"furze"      |
|  | <b>b</b> <i>beithe</i><br>"birch" |  | <b>h</b> <i>huath</i><br>"whitethorn"   |  | <b>m</b> <i>muinn</i><br>"vine"        |  | <b>a</b> <i>ailm</i><br>"pine tree" |

The ogham inscriptions are not particularly enlightening, as most of them consist mostly of names (X son of Y) and sometimes a very small amount of additional text. (See a compilation of Pictish ogham inscriptions: <http://tinyurl.com/pictishinscriptions>.) Latin letters were also known in Pictland and would have been used in the books brought by the monks. Its use on Pictish monuments, however, is limited. The best example is on the Dragon Stone from Tarbat (pictured below right) but faint lettering is also seen on the Drosten Stone (St Vigean's 1) and on the Dupplin Cross.

Place-names provide a small amount of additional information.  
 Aber – river meeting/mouth – Aberdeen “mouth of the River Don”  
 Carden – thicket – Kincardine - copse-end  
 Dol – meadow or valley  
 Lanerc – glade, clearing – Lanrick  
 Monadh – hill, hilly area – Rigmonad “king’s hill”  
 -pefr – beautiful, radiant – Aberpeffer “radiant rivermouth”  
 Pen – end - Peanfahel “wall-end”  
 Pit/Pett – portion or parcel of land – Pitlochry “stony portion”



## Food Sources and Livestock

Like for most early societies, we do not have any Pictish recipes and so the information about what they ate comes from archaeological sources, including the symbol stones.

Animals that appear on the stones: Horses, Dogs, Cows, Sheep, Boars, Chickens (Scots Dumpy?), Deer, Salmon, Ducks (Pinkfoot), Bears. The symbol stones clearly show that there were at least two different sorts of horses in Pictland – tall, elegant riding horses and small sturdy little ponies.

Animals from archaeological evidence: cats (for mousing and for fur at Howe), gannet, cormorant, auk, beached whales, various fish and mollusks.

Foods that are supportable for medieval Northern Scotland:

**Vegetables:** Parsnips, Cabbage, Carrots, Turnips, Celery, Spinach, Radishes, Peas, Beets, Leeks, Onions, Fava beans, Chickweed, Mushrooms, Seaweeds

**Fruits:** Apples, Lingonberries, Sloes, Plums, Bilberries, Elderberries, Cherries (sour), Cloudberry, Rowanberries, Blackberries, Raspberries, Crowberries, Hawthorn berries, Strawberries, Rose hips.

**Grains:** Spelt, Rye, Barley, Oats, Millet, Buckwheat

**Meats:** any of the animals listed above, except perhaps cats, plus probably squirrel, and various wildfowl.

**Dairy:** from cows, goats, sheep

**Herbs and seasonings:** Salt, Garlic, Chives, Mint, Lesser Celandine, Juniper, Dill, Coriander, Hops, Mustard, Fennel, Watercress, Cumin, Horseradish, Lovage, Parsley, Thyme, Marjoram, Caraway.

**Oils:** Linseed, Rapeseed

**Other:** Chicken and other bird Eggs, Vinegar, Honey, Hazelnuts



Adomnan II.24: “when some days of the autumn months had passed, he ordered a sow that had been fattened on the kernels of nuts to be killed, none of his other swine having yet been slaughtered: he ordered also, that its entrails should be immediately taken out and a piece quickly roasted for him on the spit”

*Left:* Tarbat fragment showing a Scots Dumpy chicken and the tail of an animal, probably a fox



## **Material Culture**

### ***Buildings***

Pictish houses seem to most commonly be stone-based roundish buildings. Often, habitation sites are used for centuries and so Pictish sites are layered on top of Iron age sites and below Viking or medieval ones. While there is evidence of continuous habitation in some of the brochs from Neolithic times until as late as the 1700's the Picts did not build the brochs. Likewise, although souterraines are sometimes referred to as being "Pict's Houses" and may have been used by the Picts for storage facilities, their construction pre-dates the Picts. Some Pictish settlements have been excavated, particularly in Orkney, and there is the relatively recent discovery of a Pictish Monastery at Tarbat, Portmahomack. The wall in the basement crypt appears to belong to the original Pictish church and could date from the sixth century.



### ***Furniture***

There is limited evidence for furniture, but several chairs or benches appear on Pictish stones, usually occupied by clerics or other high-status figures.

*Above:* Crypt under St Colman's Church, Tarbat. The flat wall is of Pictish date.

*Bottom, Left to Right:* Kirriemuir 1 (woman in a dragon-headed chair with a loom beside her), Stone at Brechin Cathedral (two clerics on a bench-seat), Meigle 27 (man on a chair with a servant seated on the floor behind).



## ***Books***



Far from being illiterate savages, the Picts clearly had an appreciation for books and the written word, as shown by their treatment of books on the Pictish stones. There is also evidence for book construction at Tarbat, including tools for vellum making, showing that books were not simply an imported luxury. They are, however, strongly tied to the Christian Church. There has been speculation that the Book of Kells or the Book of Durrow were made in Pictish Scotland based on some artistic similarities with the Pictish stones, but the tenth century Book of Deer is the earliest manuscript that can be placed within Northern Scotland.



Books were probably protected in bags when not in use or when traveling. (See the clothing module for more info.)

*Above Left:* Angel from Aberlemno III

*Above Right:* Lion from the Book of Durrow – note the internal body spirals the mirror Pictish examples

*Right:* Monks with croisers and a satchel from the Papil Stone



## ***Lighting***

The Picts probably burned oils from plant or animals as their primary source of light. No candles are known from Pictish contexts or seen on any of the Pictish Stones.



*Left:* Lamp from Culblean Hill 1000BC-1000AD, granite

*Below:* Logboats from the NMS



## ***Boats***

There are several boats of possibly Pictish date in the National Museums of Scotland, Perth Museum, and Elgin Museum and St. Orland's Stone, although greatly degraded, depicts a large boat.



### ***Bowls and Vessels***

The most common material for food vessels would have been pottery or wood. Simple pottery pieces could be made through coil construction and much of the pottery found at Pool seems to have been made locally using this method, but other pieces at Howe are wheel-turned and imported from the mainland. More elaborate examples of vessels are known from the St Ninian's Isle Treasure and probably represent a set of church plate rather than dishes for personal use. The treasure includes a number of penannular brooches and a collection of small silver bowls. Most of the bowls are simple silver dishes with pecked ornament, but some have further gold and enamel embellishments.



### ***Charms or Gaming pieces?***

Several small Pictish finds could be construed as dice, divination tools, charms, gaming pieces or counters of some sort, but their use is uncertain.



*Left:* Broch of Burrian Bone - Crescent and V-Rod on one face and Notched Mirror Case on the other. Ox Bone (Image from ECMS Part III, page 26)

*Right:* Painted pebbles from Keiss, Caithness; the Broch of Burrian, North Ronaldsay, Orkney; and Jarlshof, Shetland c200 and 800 AD.

## ***Tools***

Compared to most garment pieces, shoes are relatively well represented in the archaeological record for Pictish Scotland. There is even an early medieval leather-worker's box preserved at the NMS which includes awls, blades, and needles. None of those tools appear on as Pictish symbols, but shears are known to be used in symbol-like ways. Shears of this form were found in the Oseberg Ship burial amongst the other textile arts tools and were likely used for shearing as well as for household use. Blacksmiths' tools also appear on the Pictish stones infrequently.

*Bottom Left:* Migvie detail – Shears

*Right:* Abernethy – Hammer, “Tuning Fork,” Anvil, partial Crescent and V-rod



## ***Music***

Harps and horns are seen on several Pictish stones and a tuning peg is known from Skaill. The harps almost always appear with a figure who may be King David, but since a triangular harp is represented, instead of the rectangular-shaped lyre that David is usually seen with, this may be an indication that the local preferred stringed instrument was substituted for the usual Biblical lyre.

*Right:* Base of a Cross-shaft in the NMS. Note also the low chair that the harpist sits upon.





## **Religion**

Very little is known about the indigenous Pictish religion. Adomnan mentions Pictish “wizards” when he discusses Columba’s mission to the Northern Picts, but does not provide few details about their rites or beliefs. The little he does report needs to be viewed carefully as he is a Christian monk reporting on the miracles of a missionary saint. He tells us that the Picts believed a particular spring to be possessed by a devil, a particular wizard was resistant to freeing his slave girl, and that there were some formal pagan rites associated with burial, but little else. From other comments, we know that the eating of horseflesh was associated with pagan faith but not necessarily as a religious observance. Some small Pictish finds could be seen as totems or amulets and the circular ogham inscription on one of the Logie Elphinstones (right) has been interpreted as a charm, but its meaning is unclear.



Very early, the Picts are converted to Christianity - the Southern Picts by St. Ninian c397CE and the Northern Picts by Columba c563CE. St. Patrick’s condemnation of them as apostate Picts gives us some reason to believe that conversion was not always permanent or universal. The Picts followed the Celtic Christian traditions until King Nechtan converted the kingdom to Roman Christianity in 717CE.

## **The Painted People**

The earliest report of tattooing comes from Claudius Claudianus in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century who personifies Britain as a woman “clothed in the skin of some Caledonian beast, her cheeks tattooed, and an azure cloak” and mentions in *de bello Gothico* “the strange devices tattooed on the faces of the dying Picts.” Tattooed is translated from “ferro Picta” or “ferroque notates” implying the application of an iron needle instead of simple painting. This is the only classical source for the Picts being tattooed, but it has been repeated so often as to be part of the mystique around the Picts. However, it should be noted that these uses occur in a poem, so it is possible that there is some artistic license in play here, as painting/tattooing was seen as a classically barbarian thing to do.

No evidence of tattooing survives on any of the Pictish stones. It is possible that such details could have been painted on, but it seems that some trace of the practice should have survived. Of the surviving contemporary texts that mention the Picts, few sources are sympathetic to them. Gildas and St Patrick in particular have little good to say about them and it is likely that if the Picts truly were in the habit of tattooing themselves and running about half-clothed, this issue would have gleefully been addressed. Therefore, I am inclined to say that if Pictish tattooing or painting did take place, it was either in very



limited contexts (i.e. for battles) or before the historical Pictish Kingdom (i.e. before 500CE).

While the Picts may not have actually painted or tattooed themselves, appearances were clearly important. Mirrors, Combs and Shears appear as symbols on many Pictish stones and there are finds of combs and comb pieces from multiple Pictish contexts. Men and women on the Pictish stones are often depicted with well-coiffed hair and neatly trimmed beards.



## **Pictish Resources**

The internet is full of useful sources, but is also packed with misleading ones. For that matter, many of the books on the subject are also suspect. The following are good places to start.

### ***Webpages***

Life of Columba <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T201040/index.html>

Annals of Ulster <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100001A/index.html>

Annals of Inisfallen <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100004/index.html>

Annals of the Four Masters <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100005A/index.html>

Chronicon Scotorum <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100016/index.html>

Fragmentary Annals of Ireland <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100017/index.html>

The Irish version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius:

<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T100028/index.html>

Annals of Tigernach <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G100002/index.html>

Annals of Tigernach (translated)

[http://www.archive.org/stream/annalsoftigernac00stokuoft/annalsoftigernac00stokuoft\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/annalsoftigernac00stokuoft/annalsoftigernac00stokuoft_djvu.txt)

Bede's Ecclesiastical history <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/bede-book1.html>

Nennius' Historia Brittonum

<http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/17/14807/Historia-Brittonum>

St Patrick's Letter to Coroticus

<http://www.irishchristian.net/history/stpatrick/coroticus.html>

CELT: Corpus of Electronic Texts – this wonderful website includes many pertinent texts, including the Annals of Ulster, and provides searchable texts of many of them in the original language and in translation. <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/>

The ORB : Online Reference Book of Medieval Studies <http://www.the-orb.net>  
Firth's Celtic Scotland – Book of Deer, Celtic Saints, and other resources  
<http://www.cushnieent.force9.co.uk/>  
Tarbat Discovery Center – see the results of an ongoing dig at a Pictish monastery  
[www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk](http://www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk)  
A Consideration of Pictish names - Pictish names, a copy of the King List and more  
<http://heatherrosejones.com/names/pictish/>  
Pictish Trail – A drivable tour of some of the finest stones in the area north of Inverness  
<http://tinyurl.com/pictishtrail>  
CANMORE – the Scottish Government's database of historic monuments  
<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/search/>  
Groam House – the museum in Rosemarkie with some excellent publications online  
<http://www.groamhouse.org.uk/>

### ***Books and Journals***

The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland - J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson.  
1874012059. This is the Bible of Pictish studies – it can be hard to find and  
expensive, but it is worth the effort and expense!  
The Art of the Picts: Sculpture and Metalwork in Early Medieval Scotland - by George  
and Isabel Henderson 0500238073. Interesting commentary and stunning pictures  
throughout.  
The Work of Angels: Masterpieces of Celtic Metalwork - Susan Youngs 0714105546.  
This wonderful book includes many photos, but also important measurements and  
details of Pictish metalwork.  
Pictish Sourcebook: Documents of Medieval Legend and Dark Age History - J. M. P.  
Calise 0313322953. The original texts and translations of all the contemporary  
textual sources for the Picts – the best source for origin legends, king lists, Pictish  
personal names and Pictish place names.  
A Pictish Panorama Eric Nicoll -1874012105. A bibliography of books and articles about  
the Picts, through 1993.  
*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* and *Archaeologia Scotica* online for  
free at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/library/psas>  
Booklets from Groam House - <http://www.groamhouse.org.uk/index.asp?pageid=41172>  
Scotland's Native Horse  
Nicholaisen, WFH. The Picts and Their Place-names Groam House, Rosemarkie 1996  
09515-778-6-7

### ***Other Resources***

**SCA-Pictish on Yahoo! Groups** – this is a discussion list I run and the associated group  
webpage includes many useful and reputable links, some useful files, and lots of related  
pictures. To subscribe, send an email to  
SCA-Pictish-subscribe@yahoogroups.com or email me directly.  
**Librarything.com** – I am slowly putting my Pictish collection online, including reviews  
of the books. Search for “Eithni”