

The Pictish World

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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 9th 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 6th 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.

Did the Picts practice matrilineal succession?

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 myths preserved in some Irish annals explain this as being due to a pattern of matrilineal succession, but without complete genealogies it is impossible to say whether that was indeed the case, or whether kingship was passed by some other means, perhaps between several royal houses. 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. There are also cases of kings who ruled together, or in different parts of the Kingdom. Throw in the uncertain dates of many of the annals, and it becomes most difficult to determine exactly what the criteria for kingship were.

What are the Pictish Symbol Stones?

Many people become interested in the Picts after seeing the Pictish symbol stones. These come in three classes: Class I stones have only incised Pictish symbols, Class II stones have Pictish symbols in conjunction with Christian symbols and are often carved in relief, and Class III stones are of Pictish make, but do not include symbols at all. Class I stones are undressed stones and are often very simple in composition. Class II stones, on the other hand, are precisely dressed slabs whose intricate carving often resembles a life size carpet page from a manuscript.

What do the Pictish symbols mean?

The symbols themselves fall into three categories: abstract geometrical designs, recognizable items, and lifelike animals. There is much debate over what exactly constitutes a symbol, but there are about two dozen images that are used in symbol-like

ways. Pictish symbols almost always appear as pairs and may or may not include a mirror and comb, a special symbol that seems to function as a modifier of some sort. However, while many people have put forth theories regarding the meaning of the stones, most of the theories fail to account for all the evidence and so their meaning remains controversial.

How do I learn more about the Picts?

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.

- **Eithni's resources** – www.eithni.com SCA-Pictish-subscribe@yahoo.com
- **Northern Picts** – Prof. Gordon Noble www.facebook.com/groups/NorthernPicts
- **Pictish Symbols – Art and Context** – facebook.com/groups/296035837625365
- **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/>
- ***Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland* and *Archaeologia Scotica*** online for free at <http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/library/psas>
- **Tarbat Discovery Center** – see the results of an ongoing dig at a Pictish monastery www.tarbat-discovery.co.uk
- **Librarything.com** – I am slowly putting my Pictish collection online, including reviews of the books. Search for “Eithni”
- **DealOz.com** – The best book search on the web - use at your own risk.
- **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
- **A Pictish Panorama** Eric Nicoll 1874012105. A bibliography of books and articles about the Picts, through 1993.
- Sources with which to use great caution: W.A. Cummins, Lloyd and Jenny Laing, any gaming books, any webpage without dense citations, any source claiming to discuss Pictish religion. In some cases, these sources can be used, but be aware that they often have an agenda and so are not necessarily reliable.