

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 500CE into the 9th century CE. Bede and other contemporary writers considered the Picts to be a distinct nation but we know very little about them compared to what we know about the Anglo-Saxons and other peoples of Britain. The Pictish King Lists that are preserved in medieval annals give the Kingdom a very long history than but many of the initial kings are probably only legendary and the first independently verifiable kings begin appearing in the early 6th century. Often all we know about Pictish kings is their names and approximate regnal dates 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, becoming King of the Picts and the Scots.

A Very Selected Timeline:

- 80CE: Agricola invades northern Britain
- c122CE: Hadrian's Wall constructed and manned by the Romans (Antonine Wall c140CE)
- 367CE: Picts attack at Hadrian's Wall, Stilicho's Pictish Wars
- 397CE: St Ninian's mission to the Southern Picts, establishes Candida Casa at Whithorn
- 563CE: St Columba founds Iona and preaches to the Northern Picts
- 583CE: Bridei mac Maelchon, the first independently verifiable Pictish King, dies
- 617-633CE: Oswald, Eanfrith, and Oswiu, princes of Northumbria, are in exile in Pictland
- 653-657CE: Talorcan mac Eanfrith rules as King of Picts
- 672CE: Picts defeated by Northumbrians under King Ecgfrith
- 682CE: Pictish King Bredei attacks the Orkneys
- 685CE: (May 20) The Battle of Dunnichen or Nechtansmere, King Ecgfrith of Northumbria defeated by the Picts. See the Aberlemno II cross-slab.
- 697CE: Law of Innocents is written by Adomnan, one of the guarantors is Brude mac Der-Ilei
- 706-724CE: Nechtan filius Derile King of Picts
- 711CE: King Nechtan mac Der-Ilei sends to Northumbria for religious counsel
- 717CE: King Nechtan adopts Roman Christianity, stone churches built, including at Rosemarkie
- 731CE: Bede completes his Ecclesiastical History of the British People
- 735CE: Oengus mac Fergus, King of the Picts, invades Dal Riada and burns Dunadd
- 793CE: First Viking raid on Lindesfarne
- 795CE: First recorded Viking raid on Iona, multiple other Viking raids
- 839CE: Battle between the Picts and the Vikings results in a Pictish defeat
- 843-7CE: Kenneth mac Alpin becomes King of Picts and Scots

How do we know about the Picts?

We know about the Picts from three main sources of information: contemporary texts, Pictish symbol stones, and archaeological finds.

The contemporary texts are mostly from Irish annals and British religious writers. Entries in the annals are limited to short comments about battles and regnal dates with little explanatory text. Bede writes his Ecclesiastical History of the English People in 731CE, identifying the Picts as one of the nations of Britain and providing their origin legend. Adomnan's Life of Columba includes several narrative episodes that involve Picts and can be an important source. Other clerics mention the Picts, but usually in the context of being incensed at their behavior (often their taking of Christian slaves) and generally don't have much useful to say about Pictish society or material culture. (See also the "Pictish Life" handout)

Pictish symbol stones will be discussed in more detail below and in Eithni's "Symbol Stones" handout, but they are carved monuments with designs that range from simple incised lines to elaborate 3D designs. While often the stones only contain enigmatic symbols, they can contain images of people, livestock, and other items of daily living that can be useful for understanding Pictish material culture.

Until relatively recently, there were few finds from a secure Pictish site. Happily, Dr. Gordon Noble at the University of Aberdeen has been doing extensive work in excavating known and suspected Pictish sites. The excavations at Tarbat in Portmahomack are also exciting as they include evidence for a Pictish monastery, complete with workshops that produced luxury goods like metalwork and vellum.

What do we know about Pictish names and language?

We have a few sources for Pictish names, but none of them are extensive. The Pictish king provides the names of the kings in chronological order, but that is limited to royal and presumably male names. I generally 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

Pictish names also occur in various contemporary texts; many have been collected in Heather Rose Jones' "A Consideration of Pictish Names" <http://www.heatherrosejones.com/names/pictish/index.html> Finding this list to be skewed to male names, I have compiled the evidence I could find for female names here: <https://eithni.com/pictish-names/>

Regarding Pictish language itself, according to Bede, the Picts had their own language and missionaries to their territories needed a translator. He says, "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." This tells us that while there were Picts who were literate in Latin, a distinct Pictish language existed. There has been some disagreement about the nature of Pictish language but p-Celtic seems to be the (current) consensus (sort of). However, very little is known about this language since there are no written texts in Pictish, only surviving place-names and short ogham inscriptions that are often limited to "X son of Y" – very similar to the format of the King List. Ancient place-names provide some clues as they sometimes contain Pictish words or components. Identifiably Pictish place-name components include:

- 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”

Did the Picts practice matrilineal succession?

“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.” Bede – Ecclesiastical History, Book I, Chapter I

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 Bede and 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 see kings followed (often after a gap) by their brothers, nephews, or grandsons, so there was some genetic lineage involved in eligibility. We also know that some of the Pictish kings did not have Pictish fathers, so the mother’s lineage could independently qualify a man for kingship. (For example, Eanfrith, a Northumbrian prince, fled to Pictland in 617 CE and apparently fathered a son, Talorgen filius Eanfrith, who was King of the Picts 653-657CE. Another Pictish king, Brude Mac Bile, was the son of a Welshman, the king of the Strathclyde Britons (Dumbarton).) There are also cases of kings who ruled together or over 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. A purely matrilineal succession is unlikely, however.

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 and usually includes Christian iconography.

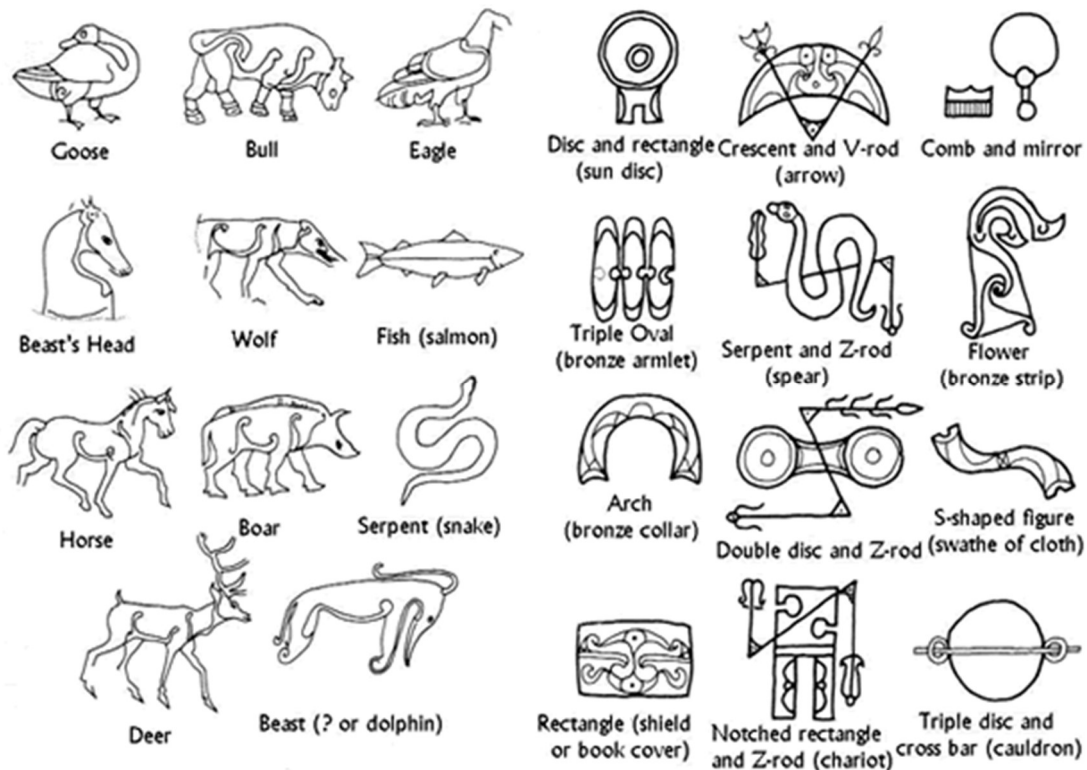
The non-symbol carvings are often looked over in favor of the enigmatic and diagnostic symbols, but the Class III stones and the non-symbol content of Class II stones can also be very important because they can contain images of people, animals, furniture, activities, food, battles, books, stories, and other information about Pictish life and artistic influences.

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 there have been many theories regarding the meaning of the symbols, most fail to

account for all the evidence and so their meaning remains controversial. I think the most compelling argument can be made for the symbols as name elements. (See Samson, R. 'The reinterpretation of the Pictish Symbols', in: Journal of the British Archaeological Association, 145 (1991), 29-65.)

A Sampling of Pictish Symbols



https://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/media/4037/symbols_big.gif

What do we know about Pictish religion?

"There people who were freeborn have, been sold, Christians made slaves, and that, too, in the service of the abominable, wicked, and apostate Picts!" St. Patrick, Letter to Coroticus, page 16

While the Picts are commonly thought of as being heathens throughout their existence, they were converted to Christianity relatively early. The Southern Picts received a mission from St. Ninian in c397CE and the Northern Picts by Columba in c563CE. St. Patrick's condemnation of them as "apostate Picts," however, gives us some reason to believe that conversion was not always permanent or universal. Further, when they were Christian, they followed the Celtic Christian traditions until King Nechtan converted the kingdom to Roman Christianity in 717CE.

Whatever the native religion was, there is effectively no remaining evidence. There are some mentions of Pictish traditions in hagiographies, but those are seen through an explicitly Christian lens. Adomnan mentions Pictish "wizards" when he discusses Columba's mission to the Northern Picts, but does not provide details about their rites or beliefs. There seems to have been a reverence for holy wells and other watery spots, but nothing can securely be said about the beliefs or rites of the Picts. Beware any sources claiming to know the truth about Pictish Wicca, but ask me about the Loch Ness Monster.

What do we know about Pictish clothing?

Thus far, the archaeological finds of Pictish textiles has been disappointing. There are a few scraps of textiles here and there, but most of the information we have comes from depictions on the stones and archaeological finds of dress accessories. Like most of the early medieval peoples in Britain, the standard clothing seems to have been a tunic (long for women and knee length or longer for men), possibly trousers or hose for men, cloaks or coats, turnshoes, hoods, and satchels. Some of the stones include evidence for the placement of construction seams and others clearly show wide bands of contract fabric or possibly tablet woven or embroidered decoration at the hems. The St. Andrew's Hood is probably too early to be properly Pictish, but is close enough in shape to several hoods depicted on the stones that it's not an unreasonable model. Penannular brooches are found on stones and in Pictish hoards. There are some defining characteristics of Pictish brooches – an oval cartouche at the top of the ring, D-shaped cells at the terminals, and a pin that is made in one piece with the head bent backward over the ring (instead of having some closed loop arrangement as is seen on the Irish brooches). These brooches are distinctive enough that the Irish Cormac's Glossary tells us that the word for such brooches was "cartait" which is defined as "a brooch, i.e. in the Pictish language, i.e. a brooch the pin of which turns back/turns away." Shoes sometimes have a peculiar little tongue that reaches up the back of the ankle and seems to be a specifically Pictish fashion. Belts, amber beads, glass beads, jet beads, straight pins (including hand pins), and satchels are all common accessories. Please see Eithni's "The Well-Dressed Pict" for a fuller accounting of the evidence for Pictish clothing.

But what about nakedness, tattoos, and woad?

One of the enduring images of Picts is as wild, naked, painted or tattooed savages. Reports of tattooing begin with Claudius Claudianus in the early 5th century where "ferro Picta" or "ferroque notates" implies the application by an iron needle instead of simple painting. However, it should be noted that these uses occur in a poem, so it is possible that there is some artistic license or allegory 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, though it is possible that such details could have been painted on. While textual sources for the Picts are few, it seems that some trace of the practice should have survived if it occurred in the historic period. Of the surviving contemporary texts that mention the Picts, few sources are sympathetic. Gildas and St Patrick in particular have little good to say about the Picts and it is likely that if they 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.

What do we know about Pictish food?

Like many early medieval cultures, we don't have a recipe book or other direct evidence of Pictish food, but we can extrapolate from archaeological finds and what we see on the stones. Animals that appear on the stones include: Horses, Dogs, Cows, Sheep, Boars, Chickens (Scots Dumpy?), Deer, Salmon, Ducks (Pinkfoot), and Bears. Archaeological finds include a variety of grains and vegetables, either from carbonized remains or pollen analysis. See Eithni's "Pictish Life" for more details.

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
 - Pictish Life – textual sources for the Picts and information on their material culture
 - Symbol Stones – an overview of the symbol stones and theories about their meaning
 - The Well-Dressed Pict – a survey of the evidence for garments and accessories
 - Pictish Gown – a pattern for a proposed Pictish tunic, based on the stones
 - Librarything.com – most of my Pictish collection is online, search for username “eithni”
- **Northern Picts** – Prof. Gordon Noble www.facebook.com/groups/NorthernPicts
- **Pictish Symbols – Art and Context** – www.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** – <https://the-orb.arlima.net/>
- **Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland, Archaeologia Scotica**, and other excellent Scottish sources 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
- **Pictish Trail** - A driving route in Scotland, but the website is a great resource for starting your Pictish adventure virtually <https://highlandpictishtrail.co.uk/>
- **CANMORE** – Scotland's historic site database. <https://canmore.org.uk/>
- **SCRAN** – images from Historic Environment Scotland, including many of Pictish Stones. <https://www.scran.ac.uk/>
- **The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland** by J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson. 1874012059. This is the Bible of Pictish studies – it used to be quite hard to find and expensive, but it recently fell out of copyright! <https://archive.org/details/earlychristianmo12alle>
- **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** by Susan Youngs 0714105546. This wonderful book includes many photos, but also important measurements and details of Pictish metalwork. (used copies for under \$25)
- **Pictish Sourcebook: Documents of Medieval Legend and Dark Age History** by J. M. P. Calise 0313322953. The original texts and translations of all the contemporary textual sources for the Picts. (unfortunately pricey, usually about \$80)
- **A Pictish Panorama** by Eric Nicoll 1874012105. A bibliography of books and articles about the Picts, through 1993. (difficult to find, you may need to ILL)
- **The King in the North: The Pictish Realms of Fortriu and Ce** by Gordon Noble 978-1780275512. A look at some newer archaeology. In print and highly recommended (under \$20)
- Sources with which to use great caution: W.A. Cummins, Lloyd and Jenny Laing, any gaming books, any webpage without dense citations, and any source claiming to discuss Pictish religion. In some cases, these sources can be used (for images of stones and finds, for example), but be aware that they often have an agenda and so are not necessarily reliable.