

LANGUAGE AND CUSTOMS

SCOTTISH FOLK-LORE AND FOLK LIFE

Studies in Race, Culture and Tradition.

By Donald A Mackenzie p. 30

Bede as a Pict - Columba used interpreters in Highlands - Pictish and Gaelic language - No trace of Irish pantheon in Scotland - Culture mixing in Dalriada - Translated place-names - Dual organization in Dalriada, Gaul and Pictland - Pictish law of inheritance - Mother-right and exogamy - customs - "Handfasting" and "bundling" - Twin tribes of Caledonians - Father-son succession introduced in Scotland - Early Celtic settlers in Scotland - The Picts and brochs - No Picts or brochs in Ireland - Irish theories regarding the Picts - Pictish civil king and priests king - Byzantine cultural influences reach Scotland.

Bede,¹ the "father of English historians", informs us that in his day there were four languages in Britain - "the language of the Britons, of the Picts, of the Scots and of the Angles", that is, Old Welsh, Pictish, Gaelic and Northumbrian English. Bede himself may well have been of Pictish descent, for in the *Book of Deer* mention is made of another Bede who was an Aberdeenshire mormaer ("see-lord").

When St. Columba in the sixth century sojourned among the Picts of northern Scotland he had to make use of interpreters. In Skye, according to Adamnan (I, xxvii) a decrepit and aged man, the chief of the mysterious "Geona cohort", was brought to him and it is stated that "after being instructed in the word of God by the saint *through an interpreter*, the old man believed and was baptized". When in Lochaber, St. Columba preached to a man and his family "through an interpreter" and all were baptized.² There is no mention of interpreters at the Pictish court at Inverness when Columba interviewed King Brude. The explanation may be that the ruler and his senate were bilingual. But evidently the masses of the people who spoke Pictish (a P-Celtic language) could not hold converse with the Gaelic-speaking (Q-Celtic) Irish missionary, Columba.

Thus, although the Picts spoke a Celtic tongue, Irish cultural influence was before the Christian period stemmed back by the language barrier. After the spread of Christianity pagan mythology was an unlikely importation into Scotland from Ireland. It should not surprise us therefore to find that the Danann pantheon of Ireland is absent in Scotland and that there are no references to the association of Danann deities with fairies in Scottish folk-lore, as is the case in Ireland. Even in Dalriada (Argyll), which was occupied by Scots from Ireland, tradition of Danann deities is wanting. But there was evidently both culture mixing and the mixing of peoples in the area. The Irish intrusion, beginning late in the second century of our era, was a very gradual one. There must have been a good deal of intermarrying and apparently there was a long bilingual period. P-Celtic place-names and surnames were translated into Q-Celtic (Gaelic). Professor W. J. Watson shows that Ptolemy's *Epidion Akron* (Mull of Kintyre), a P-Celtic place-name meaning "horsemen's cape", was translated into Q-Celtic (Gaelic) as *Ard Echde*. The reference is to the Epidii, a clan or occupational name from epos, a horse, Kintyre is the home of the MacEacherns, "whose name", Watson says, "is an Anglicization of *Mac Each-thighearna* (Son of the Horse-lord)".³ The Gaelic word for a horse is *each*, Old Irish *ech*.

¹ W. J. Watson, *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* pp. 136 et seq.

² Adamnan, *Life of Columba*, Book II, Chapter XXXIII.

³ W. J. Watson. *History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland* (London 1926), p. 24.

In the history of Dalriada there are traces of the dual organization of society which appears to be due to Pictish influence. There were two royal families - those of Knapdale and Lorne - and Dalriada was now ruled by one representative of one house and again by that of another.

Pictish dualism is of very special interest, because it appears to throw light upon the neglected problem presented by Julius Cæsar, who wrote regarding the Gauls, or a section of them.

"The most remarkable feature about their poetical organization is the existence everywhere of two great antagonistic parties. Nor merely do these parties divide each independent tribe, but the cleavage extends to every territorial division and sub-division, and may almost be said to permeate every individual household." ¹

The Picts were in the north divided into the Orc (boar) and Cat (cat) clans, and Orkney was known to the Irish as Inse Orcc ("Isles of the Orcs"), while Shetland was Inse Catt ("Isles of the Cats"). There were also "Cats" on the mainland. When the Norsemen imposed their place-names, they called the north east extremity of Scotland "Katanes" ("Cat Cape"), and the sea between it and the "Isles of the Orcs", the "Pictland Firth" ("pettaland-fjordhr"), now the Pentland Firth, obviously being aware that the "Cats" and "Orcs" were Picts. The sea from Orkney to the north of Ireland was in Irish Muir n-Orc ("Sea of the Orcs"). A headland on the Pentland Firth is referred to as "Cape Orcas" by Diodorus Siculus, who had it from Pytheas or his contemporary Timæus (fourth century B.C.). Modern place-names in Sutherland refer to Pictish occupational areas.

The Picts had not only dual organization but descent by the female line. Bede gives an explanation current in his day of this peculiar custom by stating that the Picts were under agreement to take their wives from Ireland. Apparently Pictish dualism and mother-right were accompanied by the custom of exogamy, the prohibition of marriage within blood or clan kinship. In the lists of Pictish kings the names of fathers given include Picts, Irishmen, Britons and one Angle, Anfrid, elder brother of Oswald and Oswy, who reigned in turn over Northumbria. Some modern writers would have it that this Pictish law of succession is indicative of a primitive state of society, but a similar system prevailed in ancient Egypt throughout its long history.

The Caledonians appear to have likewise had a system of "mother right" with the custom known in Indo-Aryan literature as "svayamvara" - the selection of husbands by young women. Dio Cassius tells that when the Emperor Severus was in Scotland his wife, Julia Augusta, had a conversation regarding the Caledonian custom with a local lady. He says that at the time adultery was so common in Rome that he, when consul, found a list of no fewer than 3000 cases.

Dio writes: -

"A very witty remark is reported to have been made by the wife of Argentocoxus, a Caledonian, to Julia Augusta. When the empress was jesting with her, after the treaty, about the free intercourse of her sex with men in Britain, she replied, 'We fulfil the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women; for we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourself be debauched in secret by the vilest. (Dio's Roman History Book LXXV11 (translation in Loeb Library series by Earnest Cary, Vol.1X, p.275).

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¹. Cæsar's Gaelic War (VI, 11), translation by the Rev. F.P. Long (Oxford, 1911), p. 172.

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The custom here referred to may be connected with that of “ handfasting ”, which was formerly common in the Highlands and other parts of Scotland. In Wales, where the custom as also known, it has been recorded of some couples that “ they do not engage in marriage until they have previously tried the disposition and particularly the fecundity of the person with whom they are engaged ”. Campion² states that “ they can be content to married for a yeare and a day by probation, and at the yeare’s end to return to her home upon any light quarrels, if the gentlewoman’s friendes be weake and unable to avenge the injurie.”³ The custom known as “ bundling ” is another associated custom.

That there was Caledonian as well as Pictish dualism is suggested by reference to the “ Dicalydones ”,² the twin tribes of Caledonians. Ultimately the Caledonians were incorporated in the extended Pictish kingdom with other peoples. Bede, as stated, refers to the two sections of the Pictish subjects as the “ northern Picts ” and the “southern Picts”.

1. Dio’s Roman History Book LXXV11 (translation in Loeb Library series by Earnest Cary, Vol.1X, p.275.

2. Historie of Ireland, p. 23.

3. Gomme, Exogamy and Polyandry, pp.390 et seq.

4. Ammianus Marcellenus, XXV11, 8; J. Rhys, Celtic Britain, pp.297-9.

To what extent the Pictish law of descent by the female line contributed to the change of dynasty in the ninth century is not certain. It is generally assumed that the succession of King Kenneth mac Alpin, a Galloway Scot, to the throne of the Picts was due to his descent from a royal Pictish heiress. He reigned as "King of the Picts" and not as "King of the Picts and Scots," as some have assumed. The royal succession of son to father was, according to Fordun, introduced by King Kenneth 11 (971-95).

The various Celtic settlers in Scotland did not all reach it by the same route - that is, through England. In the Lothian area the Votadini seem to have been an outlying branch of the Brigantes, whose country extended from Hadrian's wall to the midlands of England. In early Welsh Votadini was *Guotodin*, and in Gaelic *Fotudâin*. The Damnonii of Ayr, Renfrew, Lanark and Stirlingshire appear to have migrated by sea from Devon, the country of the Dumnonii, like the Irish Fir-Domnann. But the Caledonian and other peoples north of the Forth and Clyde apparently reached Scotland by sea from the Continent. In his 1934 Munro lectures, Professor V Gordon Childe connects the Caledonians with the Belgae. They used chariots in war, but no chariots were possessed by the Picts, who, according to Gildas, Bede and Nennius, first settled in the north of Scotland.

The Picts were a seafaring and agricultural people. Their distribution in Scotland coincides with the distribution of those circular stone-built strongholds known as brochs which have so much in common with the *nuraghi* of Sardinia - double walls, spiral staircases always opening on the left, inner courts about thirty feet in diameter, conduits and drains, difficult entrances with "guard chambers", and defensive out-works. Brochs and *nuraghi* situated in villages were apparently occupied by the ruling caste of a people, who, like the seafaring Greeks, were pirates as well as traders. There are no brochs in Ireland, Wales or England. Those who would have it that the Picts did not erect the brochs have yet to discover the mysterious unnamed people who occupied the Pictish area as late as the Roman period when, as archaeological evidence proves, there was contact with Roman civilization.

The still earlier archaeological evidence provided by the recently excavated Bronze Age people in the north were not broch-builders, but that a broch-building people were sudden intruders in the early Iron Age. We know of no other northern intruders of that period except the Picts. In this connection the place-names "Cape Orcas" of the fourth century B.C. is significant. It testifies to the early arrival of the Picts.

The Pictish question has been greatly confused by those theorists who would have it that the Picts of Scotland were the same people as the "Cruithne" of Ireland. Irish scholars have of late regarded it apparently as almost a national necessity to prove that the Picts were of Irish origin. In doing so they find it necessary to discredit such a reliable authority as Bede and, indeed, to assume that every scrap of evidence which does not accord with their theory must have been "invented". Even Ptolemy is now spoken of in Ireland as "unreliable" and some actually credit the view that the tribes or nations located by him in Scotland are mere inventions, although the names of most of them have survived in existing place-names. A very notable example, for instance, is "Mertae" in Sutherland. That the true form was "Smertae", the name of a Gaulish people, is indicated by the surviving hill-name *Carn Smeart*. Other survivals are dealt with by Professor W. J. Watson, who discovered the "Smertae" evidence.¹ If the Ptolemy tribal names have not survived in Ireland, the reason may well be that

¹. History of the Celtic Place-names of Scotland, pp. 10 et seq.

the change of language in that island was of very much earlier date than in Scotland. The Britons of Ireland ceased to speak their pre-Gaelic language after the overwhelming conquests of the Gaelic people. At a later period the Norse place-names were similarly obliterated, so that only a very few now survive.

Both Dr. MacBain and Professor W. J. Watson agree that "Picti" cannot be separated etymologically from "Pict-ones", the name of the people on the Bay of Biscay who provided Julius Cæsar with ships ¹ to aid him in the naval war against the Veneti of Brittany, who were apparently their rivals. The Veneti had as allies the English Channel seafaring peoples between modern Brittany and Holland and received aid from the Britons of England.² A branch of the Pictones apparently seized the naval bases in Orkney and the north of Scotland for operations, both trading and piratical, in the North Sea and the western sea route. It may be that the Pictones were not long settled in western Gaul when the Picts migrated to northern Scotland.

The Picts³ were known to the Norse as "Pettr", and in Old Welsh "Peithwyr" means "Pictmen". In Old English the rendering is "Peohta" and in Old Scots "Pecht". Apparently "Pect" is the correct form of the national name. The Pictones of western Gaul are once referred to by Ammianus as "Pectones". The theory that "Picti" is derived from the Latin "painted" or "stained", is evidently wrong. A Roman pun in the national name cannot be regarded as evidence that the Picts perpetuated a Roman nickname! The national name was manifestly P-Celtic. There is no primitive "p" in Irish, a Q-Celtic dialect.

The Irish "Cruithne" was the Q-Celtic rendering of the pre-Roman name of the Britons, which was "Pretani", in Greek "Pettanoi". Among the Britons who settled in Ireland were the Brigantes, the Dumnonii (in Irish "Fir-Domnann") and the Setantii (Cuchulainn's pre-Irish name "Setanta" indicates that he was one of the Setantii from the neighbourhood of modern Liverpool). The "Cruithne" of Ireland were Britons not Picts. In Irish a P-Celtic name like "Pict" or "Pect" would have been rendered in Q-Celtic as "Cicht" or "Cecht". There was never a people in Ireland so named. Nor were there Irish peoples known as "Ores" or "Cats", the names of the two Pictish clans. The philological evidence, like that regarding physical characters, demonstrates that the Picts were not an Irish people and that there is no trace of genuine Picts in Ireland except as visitors.

In Irish literature we find the famous heroes like Cuchulainn and Ferdiad received their military training in Skye, Alba (Scotland). Alba was likewise regarded as a place of high culture which gave a student from Ireland a reputation. When Queen Medb visited the prophetess Fedelm and asked, "Whence comest thou? the answer received was, "From Alba, after learning prophetic skill".⁴

According to Bede, the southern Picts (the Pictish military aristocrats and their subjects south of the Grampians) were converted to Christianity by St. Ninian, who late in the fourth century or early in the fifth established himself at Whithorn in Galloway and there erected a church which was dedicated to St. Martin of Tours.

¹. De Bel, Gall., III, II.

². Ibid., III, 9 and IV, 20.

³. W. J. Watson, History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland, pp. 59 et seq.

⁴. Joseph Dunn, The Ancient Irish Epic Tale Táin Bó Cúalnge, p. 15 and pp. 233, 239, 241, 266.

Cultural influences "flowed" from the continent to early Scotland by various routes. Apparently it was across the North Sea that the pre-Christian faith which involve the taboo upon pork as food was carried. By the same sea route must also have come in early Christian times the art motifs of the Pictish sculptured stones of eastern Scotland and the pigments used in illustrating the illuminated Celtic or Gaelic church manuscripts, including lapis-lazuli from Constantinople (Byzantium), the European "clearing house" for that semi-precious Asiatic stone, malachite, &c. The carriers of cultural elements from the Near East may never have been numerous, but evidently they became influential.¹



¹. See my Scotland: The ancient Kingdom and Buddhism in Pre-Christian Britain.

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