



Folklore of the Picts

There are two different ways of looking at the word myth - as an entirely fictitious account of something or someone, or, as in mythology, basic and fundamental tales and legendary material that underpin whole religions and cultures. I intend looking at some of the fictitious ideas about the Picts and comparing these with what we know, or think we know about the history of this ancient tribal confederation and later I will make a suggestion about the fundamental beliefs that perhaps underlay how the Picts saw the world. The first important fact about the Picts is that we actually know very little about them on the surface. No matter what language or languages they spoke we have no written accounts of them in their own words, we have to rely on annals and commentaries from furth of Scotland for any contemporary accounts of the Picts. This has led to the situation where the mystery surrounding the Picts has allowed the most remarkable speculation about them to flourish. For instance in the 17th and 18th centuries when the modern study of archaeology began to form and there was great interest in everything antiquarian, anything that was ancient and unknown in certain parts of Scotland was called Pictish. One example should serve to show this process. Near Butterstone between Blairgowrie and Dunkeld is a vast earthen dyke which is still marked on some maps as Pict's Dyke. What it is in fact, is a 12th century deer dyke - built to help ensure good hunting for the nobility of the day. A few hundred years later its use had been forgotten so as it was old and mysterious it was called Pictish. There are other Pict's Dykes, Pict's Ovens and a plethora of Picts' Houses - these latter are often souterrains which Wainwright established were Pictish in the 1950's. Brochs, those superbly designed defensive structures which are unique to Scotland were known as Picts' towers and I shall return to them later. However this wholesale use of the Picts as a generic term for the ancestors with its fanciful ideas was nothing new. The Picts have been the subject of quite remarkable amount of what can only be described as creative mythologising. Nature abhors a vacuum it is said, so the vacuum of actual knowledge about the Picts has led to a great deal of creativity in attempting to fill it.

A particular example of this has been investigated by Rivet and Smith in their excellent book the Place Names of Roman Britain to which I will return in a moment. An account of the origin of the Picts which comes from the Irish Book of Invasions or Conquests states that the Picts were descended from a Scythian named Gelon, son of Hercules and were called Agathyrsi. They supposedly landed in Leinster in Ireland, helped the King of Leinster to win a battle against the Tuatha Fidhbhe (Fife?) then were forced to sail north to settle in Scotland, taking Irish wives on the condition that in any disputed succession the female line would be dominant. Now Rivet and Smith's explanation of the term Picti clearly explains what has happened here. The great Roman poet Virgil who lived in the first century BC had written about a couple of northern European tribes who he referred to as the "picti Galeni" and the "pictone Agathyrsi" - "picti" and "pictone" meaning painted or possibly tattooed - and all Roman writers were raised reading Virgil. It is Rivet and Smith's contention that in fact the Roman writers who referred to the Picti were in fact conditioned by their education and when they came across a tribal name that was a bit like Picti they naturally treated it as if it were in fact Picti. That name Rivet and Smith reckon was Pexa - a term that turns up in the Ravenna Cosmography, a collection of geographical information put together from military sources around the 8th century. The name Pexa is in a list of forts supposedly from the Antonine Wall and is dated from the close of the 2nd century, a hundred years before Ammianus Marcellinus makes what has been accepted as the first reference to the Picts. It is worth noting that Ammianus Marcellinus makes three references to the Picts - two as Picts and one as Pecti. Rivet and Smith are convinced that Pexa is not a place name but a tribal name. When we compare Pexa with the names we know were given to the Picts by others the situation becomes a bit clearer - Old English gives Peohta, Old Norse Pettr and Welsh gives Peithwyr. Add in the fact that the oral tradition in Scotland always calls them Pechts and the idea that Picti was a name given by the invading Romans to a people who painted themselves is suddenly exposed as very weak indeed.

The story of the Scythian Galen and his Agathyrsi can obviously be traced back to the same tradition and given the Latin training of the monks who actually composed the annals we are forced to rely on, it is clear that the Classical bias of so much indigenous scholarship that still exists, has a very long history indeed. Today we still suffer from the fact that far too much of our limited resources are spent on excavating Roman remains in Scotland. In historical terms it is fair to say of the Romans in Scotland that they came they saw, they left. It is the fact that they were important to English history that has created this distortion and hopefully it is something

that can be addressed in the near future. However one has to have sympathy with the monks who created the annals, they tended to look to Biblical sources to supply early history - it was a form of legitimisation that could ignore whatever traditional sources said in previously non-Christian societies - and this particular attitude lasted a very long time. The added benefit was of course that it underlined the importance of the Christian view of the world.

In 1879 a book was published called the History of Ancient Caledonia written by John Maclaren from Dunning, near the ancient Pictish capital of Forteviot. In this Maclaren takes one of the wilder explanations for the mysterious origin of the Picts - the idea that they were one of the lost tribes of Israel. According to him Daniel and Lazarus arrived at Montrose in the distant past, bearing with them the Stone of Destiny and founded a new nation. The fact that he has them accompanied by a man called McIntyre gives the game away - clan names of this sort are less than a thousand years old. However this serves as an example of the approach taken to trying to provide a background history of the Picts.

Other versions of the origins of the Picts have them coming from Denmark, or the Baltic area generally, and several writers have suggested that the Picts spoke a Germanic language - this has been given as the reason people in the North east use "f" instead of "wh" i.e fit instead of whit and I have had people tell me this in the last couple of years!

The dominant idea in all of these theories is that the Picts came from somewhere other than Scotland at sometime in the distant past. This is a variant of the diffusionist concept of European history which at its simplest can be described as everything good and civilised originated around the Mediterranean and we poor savages lived in poverty and degradation till we were subjected to various invasions by superior, aristocratic peoples culminating in the noble Romans spreading out from Italy and giving us the benefits of their advanced and sophisticated society. This is tosh. Colin Renfrew's book Language and Archaeology gives the lie to this preposterous idea which has dominated so much scholarship over the past two to three centuries. The truth is that ideas spread very quickly and that much of prehistory is better understood by the spread and development of new ideas, new ways of farming or making pottery for instance, rather than a militaristic analysis which tries to understand human development in terms of conquest alone.

Historians tend to like to deal with the knowledge of the past by putting it in boxes. Even today there are lecturers in Scottish Universities who tell their students they must never, ever refer to anything as Pictish before 297 when Ammianus Marcellinus first mentions them. This is a bit akin to Bishop Usher's famous calculation of the beginning of the world according to an analysis of the Bible - he came up with I believe 3pm June 4th 3004 BC or something similar. The idea that the Picts sprang into existence in 297 when the Romans noticed them is patently silly but sticking to historic references does not even support this idea. Apart from the work of Rivet and Smith on the name Pict/Pexa there are other historians who see the situation differently. Given that the first reference to the Pict by the bold Ammianus actually talks of the problems Julius Caesar had in fighting Picts and Britons surely we can put the Pictish period back somewhat. In fact this has been suggested by Alfred Smyth in the New History of Scotland in the volume Warlords and Holymen. In this he suggests that the Pictish period be opened at AD80 after the Battle of Mons Graupius between the Romans and the Caledonians a battle won by the Romans according to the Romans There are several 4th century references by Roman writers to Caledonians and other Picts which makes it clear that the Picts are nothing other than the Caledonians by another name. Taking the dawn of the Pictish period as AD 80 allows us to resolve another wee problem. Until a couple of decades ago the Brochs were accepted as Pictish. Then radio-carbon dating put them into the period of about 100BC to 100 AD and therefore outside the Pictish period as previously defined. If we accept Mons Graupius as a suitable opening date for the Pictish period we can then bring the brochs back into the picture. However the problem of the Picts suddenly springing into existence remains though now we can say that they were either descendants of the Caledonians or the same people with a different name. I agree with Smyth that this is a better date for the start of the Pictish period and if it is accepted it will open up new possibilities in the dating of the Pictish stones. After all there are no comparative dates for the class I stones which are clearly pagan in nature, both the wonderful and unique animal sculptures and the highly stylised geometric designs we all know so well. And in passing I should say that the dating of the Class II stones by comparison with sculpture in the Northumbrian church rests on problematic grounds given that Northumbria was Christianised from Iona where the Book of Kells was created on forms and models that come straight from the traditions of Pictish Art. It is one of the great mistakes of British historiography that the Insular Celtic tradition of illuminating manuscripts is presented as being predominantly Irish and English when anyone "wi a pair o een in their hied" can see they are derived from Pictish Art. This however is part of the twisted traditions of British historiography which allow the standard text books on insular Celtic history and culture to ignore the longest lived classical Celtic warrior society - a society that lasted in Scotland till the 18th

century. And it is worth noting that as late as the 16th century there are references to Highland warriors being known as "Picts or Redshankes".

I have made reference to the oral traditions concerning the Picts which included from Fife the statement that they were "wee red-haired fowk, awfy strong that biggit aa the auld castles in the land". It is within the oral tradition that we can glean another way of looking at the Picts. First however I would like to go back to 3,500 BC and the building of Calanais. This magnificent lunar temple was created before the Egyptians raised the pyramids and could only have been created by people with very sophisticated mathematical and engineering skills. In fact the oral tradition has kept a story of the builders of Callanish and I believe that due to the inherent conservative nature of the oral and storytelling traditions in pre-literate societies there is much we can learn from them. It is also true to say that most history is little more than propaganda written by winners of particular military, social or economic struggles. But whether or not the stories of black men sailing to Lewis to raise the stones of Callanish and the founding of a new religion there are true, the very existence of these stones serves to show that the people who were here long before the Pictish period were highly civilised, if pre-literate. And there is no reason for believing other than that these were the ancestors of the Picts. The megalith builders of Scotland and Ireland also had a distinct form of spiral art, probably best seen at New Grange and Knowth in Ireland, where there are many people today who believe the Irish and Scottish Picts are essentially the same people. However the oral tradition gives us other hints to the past and by comparison with the great mythological materials gathered in Ireland and Wales in the late Dark Ages and early medieval period we can possibly glean some further knowledge of the Picts. The Class I stones in particular depict a series of symbols that are associated in Welsh, Irish and Highland Gaelic traditions with figures who can only be understood as representations of the Mother Goddess. These symbols include the Deer, the Boar, the Cauldron and the Adder. The deer are associated in Highland tradition with the Cailleach, who is one aspect of the oldest mythological figure we have, the Boar has associations with both the Welsh goddess Cerridwen and with the corpus of Arthurian tradition as does the cauldron and the adder is strongly associated with the Irish goddess Bride, christianised as St. Bridget who in all probability is indigenous to Scotland as well. I will be going into this material in depth at the PAS conference in June but at this point I can say that research in this area has led me to what can only be described as pagan priestess or even druidess groups who although an integral part of Pictish life had counterparts throughout the Celtic world, Scandinavia and beyond.

There have been great advances in archaeology over the past couple of decades and one recent piece of evidence is worth noting. Work done on settlements in the Pictish period has led to the discovery that villages of the period in east Scotland are not surrounded by any defensive structures. What this means is that they were not subjected to attacks which somewhat contradicts the picture we are generally given of Dark Age Scotland which is supposed to be a time of constant inter-tribal strife. I would like to finish with a reference to a particular Pictish Symbol Stone, the one at Glamis Manse in Angus. On a recent TV programme hosted by the comedian Craig Ferguson the minister of Glamis claimed that a depiction of two Picts holding another figure upside down in a cauldron was a reference to ritual drowning. Another interpretation comes from Irish tradition. We know that the peoples of Ireland and Scotland have been in regular communication since the Stone Age so it is not unlikely that they developed similar mythologies. Apart from the general importance of the cauldron in Welsh and Irish early literature there is a direct reference to dead warriors being dipped in the cauldron of the Dagda, the Good or Father God, which brought them back to life allowing them to fight again though they were deprived of the power of speech. It is my contention not only that this is a more likely explanation of the panel on the Glamis Manse stone but that through using the comparative methodologies of archaeology and applying them to mythological and folkloric material and utilising our increasing archaeological knowledge we can learn a great deal more about the Picts. Though we end up with theories that we might never be able to prove absolutely I think that the increase in understanding will be worth while and that we can gain a clearer picture of who the Picts were and how they lived and thought.

Stuart McHardy

One of the main reasons we all find the Picts so intriguing is the lack of contemporary written records that tell us anything of them. Those records that do exist have mainly been extensively picked over - or so I thought (more on this later). However the lack of written records is to a great extent because we are dealing in the early Pictish period (Any time post 80AD will do me as being Pictish) with a pre-literate society. However this does not mean that there was no literature. What existed was oral literature - a marvellously nonsensical term that still works - a vast collection of material - sacred, profane, humorous, bawdy, informative, instructive the oral tradition encompassed all of human life. In terms of trying to understand the Dark Age past many people

have gained much from going to the great store of Celtic legend that was written down in the early Middle Ages and earlier in Ireland and Wales. Here in Scotland we seem to have had no one who did what the Irish and Welsh monks did in writing down the great tales of the native tradition. All is not lost though. Because the oral tradition is not only tenacious but highly conservative - you daur nae meddle wi the story ye were tellin - there are I believe scraps of information all over Scotland that did eventually get into print in Scotland if more than a millennium later than much of the Welsh and Irish material. Even if you do not like to think that the Picts were a Celtic people it is the storytelling of the Celtic Gaels and their Scottish descendants that preserved the treasures that I believe still lie waiting to be discovered. And where are these wee gems to be found? In a whole host of places almost all of them sharing one particular aspect. In books about towns and villages, glens and straths from aa the airts there are wee tales and poems about the Picts that were written down in local history books, guide books, reminiscences, place name studies and a whole range of different formats. The unifying factor is that they are tied to specific locales. The approach however has a proven track record in a roundabout way. By the time the remnants of the Norrie's Law hoard were recognised and saved the story of a warrior on a white horse and clad in silver armour buried in the tumulus already had a long provenance. True there were various versions of the story of Norrie's Law but they all pointed to some sort of buried treasure. The treasure for the Pictophile of course could ever be anything as mundane as gold or silver. We're far too high-minded for that. It's Information we are after. But if you go lookin you must be gey careful - a couple of hundred years back when the Picts began to be talked of every antiquity in the country seems to have been renamed Picts this or Pict's.

From prehistoric tumuli to mediaevald eer dykes all kinds of monuments were given the name of being Pictish, though some of them have turned out to be Pictish particularly the numerous weems or Picts' Houses we now call souterrains.

Again local history books etc often refer to structures of this type that had been filled in at some time previous to the book being written. Many of these books, from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were written by local ministers and dominies (schoolteachers) who were educated men. The great stimulus to this type of writing was Sir James Sinclair's Statistical Account of Scotland from the 1790's. This wonderful series of volumes is no great archaeological store-house though it is necessary reading if you are going to research any particular area. They are available in every reference library and give insights into all sorts of aspects of contemporary life - usually reflecting the interest of the author, so some are strong on wildlife, some on farming improvements and some on antiquities. So if you have the notion to go hunting for information on the Picts why not go to the histories of some part of Pictland that you fancy and start looking for references either to the Picts or to activities or locations that might concern the Picts . But be careful, there are such true wonders as the story from a book on Strathfillan which has the McGregor's fighting the Romans. But as I have heard it on good authority that Pontius' Pilate's mother was a Mackenzie....