

WHO WERE THE PICTS?

By Ken McNaughton

The Macnachtan Clan is thought to descend from Nechtan, a Pictish King. The Picts were a confederation of Celtic-speaking peoples who lived in what is today eastern and northern Scotland in the early-years-CE to 900CE. Pictland achieved a large degree of political unity in the late 7th and early 8th centuries [1].

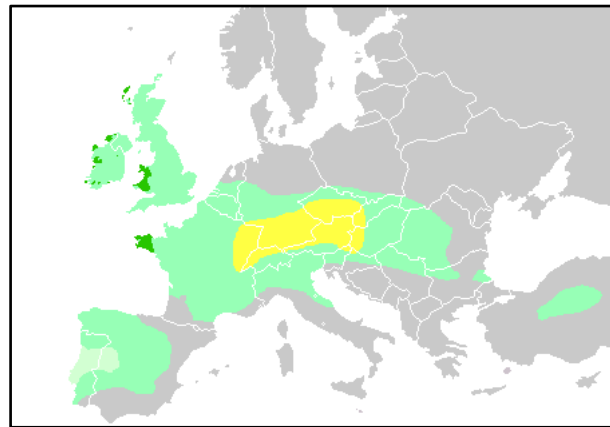
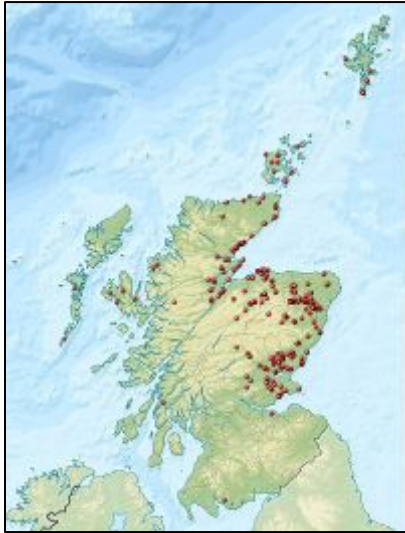


Figure 1. Distribution of Celtic peoples: Core territory by 6th century BC (yellow), maximum expansion by 275 BC (pale green), Celtic languages widely spoken today (dark green)
[QuartierLatin 1968, *The Ogre*, Dbachmann; derivative work Rob984].

The Celts were a collection of European peoples identified by their use of the Celtic languages and other cultural similarities. Their movements are shown in Figure 1. The earliest undisputed direct examples of a Celtic language begin in the 6th century BC. With the expansion of the Roman Empire and migrating Germanic tribes, Celtic culture and languages became restricted to Ireland, the western and northern parts of Great Britain (Wales, Scotland, and Cornwall), the Isle of Man, and Brittany. The Romans recorded references to the Picts, but these may have been biased.

Picts are assumed to have been the descendants of the Caledonii and other Iron Age tribes (800 BC-100CE) that were mentioned by Roman historians, or on the world map of Ptolemy (150CE). The Caledonians were a Celtic tribal confederacy in what is now Scotland during the Iron Age and the Roman Era (which collapsed in 476CE). These Caledonian Britons were enemies of the Roman Empire, which was the occupying force then administering most of Great Britain as the Roman province of Britannia. The Caledonians, like many Celtic tribes in Britain, were hillfort builders and farmers who defeated, and were defeated by the Romans on several occasions. The Romans never fully occupied Caledonia, though several attempts were made.

In 83 or 84CE the Caledonians' defeat at Mons Graupius is recorded by Tacitus. In 98 he recorded the physical characteristics of the Caledonians as having reddish hair and large limbs. In 180 they took part in an invasion of Britannia, breached Hadrian's Wall and were not brought under control for several years, eventually signing peace treaties with the governor Ulpius Marcellus. In 197, Dio Cassius records that the Caledonians aided in a further attack on the Roman frontier. The Caledonians are next mentioned in 209, when they are said to have surrendered to the emperor Septimius Severus after he personally led a military expedition north of Hadrian's Wall in search of a glorious military victory. There is no further historical mention of the Caledonians for a century. In 305, Constantius Chlorus re-invaded the northern lands of Britain. The event is notable in that it includes the first recorded use of the term Pict to describe the tribes of the area.



Between the 5th and 8th centuries the Celtic-speaking communities in the Atlantic regions emerged as a reasonably cohesive cultural entity. They had a common linguistic, religious and artistic heritage that distinguished them from the culture of the surrounding polities. Insular (British and Irish) Celtic culture diversified into that of the Gaels (Irish, Scottish and Manx) and the Celtic Britons (Welsh, Cornish, and Bretons) of the medieval and modern periods. The Picts were one of these Scottish peoples. Early medieval sources report the existence of a distinct Pictish language, which today is believed to have been an Insular Celtic language, closely related to the Brittonic spoken by the Britons who lived to the south.

Figure 2. Distribution of Pictish Stones of Classes I and II, as well as caves containing Pictish symbol graffiti.
[David Lloyd, 30 July 2010].

Where the Picts lived and what their culture was like can be inferred from early medieval texts and Pictish stones (Fig. 2). About 350 objects classified as Pictish stones have survived. A Pictish stone is a type of monumental stele, generally carved or incised with symbols or designs. Located in Scotland, mostly north of the Clyde-Forth line and on the eastern side of the country, these stones are the most visible remaining evidence of the Picts and are thought to date from the 6th to 9th century, a period during which the Picts became Christianized. The purpose and meaning of the stones are only slightly understood, and the various theories proposed for the early Class I symbol stones—those that are considered to mostly pre-date the spread of Christianity to the Picts—are essentially speculative. They may have served as personal memorials or territorial markers, with symbols for individual names, clans, lineages or kindreds, although there are several other theories and proposed explanations. Many later Christian stones from Class II and Class III fall more easily into recognizable categories such as gravestones.

A Pictish stone was found in the Highlands southeast of Inverness at Dunachton, dated to the seventh century (Fig. 3). The place name of Dunachton may derive from Dun-Nechtán or “fort of Nechtán.” There were three Pictish kings called Nechtán between 550 and 839. It is assumed the symbol stone was originally erected close to its present site. It was first recorded as being recovered during the demolition of a stable in 1870. The Battle of Dun Nechtain or Nechtansmere between the Picts and Northumbrians in 685AD was believed to be held in the Grampian Mountains east of the Strathspey area. However, recent research has suggested that descriptions of the battlefield location and recorded movement of troops involved indicate the battle took place in the Dunachton area. This theory is strengthened by the close relation of the name of the battle and the local place name. The battle ended with a decisive Pictish victory that severely weakened Northumbria’s power in northern Britain and marked the Pict’s independence from Northumbria, which never regained its dominance in the north.

The archeological record suggests that Pictish society was not readily distinguishable from its British, Gaelic or Anglo-Saxon neighbors. In the main, the evidence is of Celtic tribes being led by kings. Most descriptions of Celtic societies portray them as being divided into three groups: a warrior aristocracy; an intellectual class, including professions such as druid, poet, and jurist; and everyone else.

Figure 3. Pictish stone at Dunachton with deer's head facing right [Canmore ID 14913].



The religion of the Picts before their conversion is supposed by the majority of writers on this subject to have been that which prevailed in the rest of Britain and in Celtic Gaul—Druidism—although only place names remain from the pre-Christian era. According to Electric Scotland [2], Caesar wrote:

[Druids] “attend to divine worship, perform public and private sacrifices and expound matters of religion. A great number of youths are gathered round them for the sake of education, and they enjoy the highest honor in that nation; for nearly all public and private quarrels come under their jurisdiction; and when any crime has been committed, when a murder had been perpetrated, when a controversy arises about a legacy, or about landmarks, they are the judges too. They fix rewards and punishments; and should any one, whether a private individual or a public man, disobey their decrees, then they exclude him from the sacrifices. All these Druids have one chief, who enjoys the highest authority amongst them. When he dies, he is succeeded by the member of the order who is most prominent amongst the others, if there be any such single individual; if, however, there are several men equally distinguished, the successor is elected by the Druids. Sometimes they even go to war about this supremacy.

“The Druids take no part in warfare; nor do they pay taxes like the rest of the people; they are exempt from military service, and from all public burdens. Attracted by such rewards, many come to be instructed by their own choice, while others are sent by their parents. They are reported to learn in the school a great number of verses, so that some remain there twenty years. They think it an unhallowed thing to commit their lore to writing, though in the other public and private affairs of life they frequently make use of the Greek alphabet. Beyond all things, they are desirous to inspire a belief that men’s souls do not perish, but transmigrate after death from one individual to another; and besides, they hold discourses about the stars, about the size of the world and of various countries, about the nature of things, and about the power and might of the immortal gods.”

The conversion of the Picts to Christianity would have involved a transition period. Older beliefs would have persisted, would be incorporated in the new religion, and some would still persist today, albeit in disguised form. When the Germani clans settled in Spain around the 4th century BC, the people supposedly switched beliefs when the chief of the clan chief switched [3], and it’s possible the Picts behaved the same way. Christian monks and priests may have concentrated their efforts on the Pictish elite.

Pictland was influenced by Christians from Iona, Ireland and churches in Northumbria, as seen in the reign of Nechtan mac Der-Ilei, who ruled between 706 and 732. The reported expulsion of Ionan monks and clergy by Nechtan in 717 may have been related to the controversy over the dating of Easter and the manner of tonsure, where Nechtan appears to have supported the Roman usages, but may equally have been intended to increase royal power over the church.

The major religious sites of eastern Pictland are associated with Pictish kings, which argues for a considerable degree of royal patronage and control of the church. Like the Emperor Constantine (272-337), Pictish kings may have found that Christianity gave them political advantage. The Visigoths were able to unify Spain in the 6th century when they converted to Christianity and maintained a strong link with Rome. Charles the Great (748-814) or Charlemagne, King of the Franks from 768, who came along just after King Nechtan, found it very useful to align himself with the Pope in Rome [4]. Charles became King of the Lombards (now part of northwest Italy) from 774, and Emperor of the Romans from 800. He united the majority of western and central Europe.

The cult of saints was, as throughout Christian lands, of great importance in later Pictland. While kings might patronize great saints, such as Saint Peter in the case of Nechtan, many lesser saints, some now obscure, were important, perhaps related to earlier Pictish beliefs. The Pictish Saint Drostan appears to have had a wide following in the north in earlier times, although he was all but forgotten by the 12th century. Saint Serf of Culross was associated with Nechtan's brother Bridei mac Der-Ilei. It appears, as is well known in later times, that noble kin groups had their own patron saints, and their own churches or abbeys (The first written records of the Macnachtan Clan describe how the patriarch Malcolm and his three sons, who lived in 13th century Argyll, donated two churches to the Inchaffray Abbey in Perthshire [5]. This may have been calculated to give some advantage in the afterlife).

The Viking Age brought great changes in Britain and Ireland, no less in Scotland than elsewhere, with the Vikings conquering and settling the islands and various mainland areas. In the middle of the 9th century, Ketil Flatnose is said to have founded the Kingdom of the Isles, governing many of these territories, and by the end of that century the Vikings had destroyed the Kingdom of Northumbria, greatly weakened the Kingdom of Strathclyde, and founded the Kingdom of York. In a major battle in 839, the Vikings killed the Pictish King of Fortriu, a major part of Pictland. The Vikings also killed the Pictish King of Dál Riata. At its height in the 6th and 7th centuries, Dál Riata encompassed a large territory of what is now Argyll and part of County Antrim in Northern Ireland and Southern Pictland. In the aftermath, in 848, Kenneth MacAlpin became king of the Picts. By 900, the resulting Pictish over-kingdom had merged with the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata to form the Kingdom of Alba (Scotland).

During the reign of MacAlpin's grandson, Caustantín mac Áeda (900–943), outsiders began to refer to the region as the Kingdom of Alba rather than the Kingdom of the Picts. Although the Pictish language did not disappear suddenly, a process of Gaelicisation was clearly underway during the reigns of Caustantín and his successors. By a certain point, probably during the 11th century, all the inhabitants of northern Alba had become fully Gaelicised Scots, and Pictish identity was forgotten. Later, the idea of Picts as a tribe was revived in myth and legend [6].

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6. Extensive use was made of Wikipedia to expand and explain major terms in its section on Picts.

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