the

Picts

Benjamin Hudson

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the
Picts

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Preface and Acknowledgments

When James Campbell invited me to write this book, my first thought was a statement made almost a century ago by John Fraser, the Jesus Professor of Celtic at Oxford, who began his essay "The Question of the Picts" with the declaration "For a people who played no very great part in the history of Europe the Picts might very well be thought to have already received their due attention at the hands of historians and others." Since Fraser wrote those words the Picts have engaged the interests of even more generations of archaeologists, art historians, and linguists. Each year brings a new crop of studies on topics of Pictish life and work; so much so that no one book can hope to incorporate all the information and speculation. Was there anything left for an historian to say?

This book is an attempt to answer that question in a brief survey. What is currently known about the Picts is re-examined to answer the questions: who were the Picts? and what part did they play in the early Middle Ages? In keeping with the spirit of the series *Peoples of Europe*, this book uses different methodologies, from transnationalism to comparative history, to study the Picts within a European-wide context. These new ways of looking at the subject allows us to move beyond the historiography of an earlier era because ideas about nationhood or ethnicity need to be re-examined in the light of new understandings of organization, movement, and political dynamics. Complexity increases with the admission that we know very little about the Picts.

Of course, this begs the question "why bother with a book about the Picts?" Early in the twelfth century Henry of Huntingdon dubbed them the Vanishing People of Britain and the tag has remained. One answer is their very prominence. For almost five hundred years the Picts were the premier predators of Britain. In addition to confronting the mighty Roman Empire, they fought other incomers throughout the centuries. More intriguing are the remains of their vibrant culture. The Picts were

the premier sculptors of Britain and among the finest in Europe using designs ranging from Christian religious imagery to still-mysterious geometric figures and fabulous creatures. References to the Picts in literature show that their royal courts were the destinations for Irish and Anglo-Saxon poets. After the end of the ninth century, when the Picts are usually consigned to the dustbin of history, we discover that the archdeacon of Huntingdon was wrong and that the Picts did not disappear. From the reworking of their history at the courts of the Scots kings Macbeth and Malcolm Canmore to their appearance in story and song such as John Buchan's story "No Man's Land" or the Pink Floyd's recording of "Several Species of Small Furry Animals gathered together in a cave and grooving with a Pict" they remain a part of our cultural horizon.

There remains only the happy task of acknowledging those individuals and institutions whose assistance has been invaluable in the writing of this book. I thank the editors of the *Peoples of Europe* series, Professor James Campbell and Sir Barry Cunliffe, for the opportunity to write this book, for their comments on it, and for their much appreciated encouragement. James Campbell read the entire manuscript in draft and asked those questions that authors find awkward, but essential. My son Robert kindly placed his interest in photography at my disposal and all the photographs used here were taken by him. He and my daughter Alison are veterans of visits to symbol stones and battle fields. As always, my wife Aileen has been a source of encouragement as well as a tireless proof-reader. A grant from the Institute for Arts and Humanities at Penn State provided some funding for research in Scotland. Thanks also to the librarians and staff of the Pattee/Paterno Library at Penn State, the Queen Mother Library at the University of Aberdeen, the Bibliothêque nationale de France, Trinity College, Dublin, and the Bodleian Library, Oxford. Tessa Harvey has been a superb editor. Any errors are, of course, my own.

Methodology

One of the difficulties facing anyone who works on the early period of European history is being consistent. The few surviving records are in manuscripts of different dates and have variations in spelling, explanation, and presentation. Often the particular meaning of a word is more a matter of conjecture than certainty. There is no one method that will satisfy everyone, often not even the person employing it.

Chronology is a particular problem, especially during the medieval period when the materials we consult are themselves trying to reconcile the chronology of the texts they are following. Unless otherwise noted the chronology of the *Annals of Ulster* is followed in this study. One reason is not only that these chronicles occasionally preserve the older form of their exemplar, but also because these annals cover the entire period, unlike the cognate *Annals of Tigernach*, which contain a gap that begins in the middle of the eight century. This leads to reconciliation among the various dates that are proposed for some events. Of course for affairs concerning the Anglo-Saxons, primacy is given to Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*.

Personal names are a greater problem. Names of persons active in northern Britain during the early Middle Ages have been spelled in various fashions, depending on the inclination of the author. Rather than confuse the reader with a name form that may or may not have been used, in this work modern English equivalents for names are given, or a familiar form. Thus the francophone-derived modern Kenneth rather than the Old/Middle Irish form Cináed, and similarly the name Fergus rather than the plethora of variations such as Urgus or Forcus. Since this was a society in which one was identified by one's father, Latin *filius* or Old/Middle Irish *mac* have been abandoned to be replaced by the more awkward, but neutral "son of." Similarly, place names are given in modern form even when, as in the case of Deer Abbey, the location of

the later medieval foundation with that name might not be the same as that for the earlier church. If a modern name is not known, then the form found in the sources is employed.

The texts cited in the notes usually are chosen because they have the text in the original language together with an English translation. Occasionally a text without a translation is used either because there is no suitable translation or because that edition is particularly important for the casual reader to know. On all these points absolute consistency has not been achieved.

Abbreviations

CIIC	R.A.S. Macalister, *Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum*, 2 vols. (Dublin 1945–49); vol. 1, reprinted with a preface by Damian McManus (Dublin 1996)
CPS	W.J. Watson, *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh 1926)
ECMS	J. Romilly Allen and Joseph Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, reprinted with introduction by Isabel Henderson, 2 vols. (Balgavies 1993)
EHR	*English Historical Review*
ESC	Sir Archibald Lawrie, *Early Scottish Charters prior to 1153* (Glasgow 1905)
ESSH	Alan Orr Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* AD *500 to 1286*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh 1922), re-edited with corrections by Marjorie Anderson (Stamford 1990)
KCS	Benjamin Hudson, *Kings of Celtic Scotland* (Westport 1994)
KES	Marjorie O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh 1973)
MGH	*Monumenta Germaniae Historica*
PSAS	*Proceedings of the Society of the Antiquaries of Scotland*
RRS	*Regesta Regum Scotorum*, gen. ed. G.W.S. Barrow (Edinburgh 1961–)
SHR	*Scottish Historical Review*

Introducing the Picts

The best known pictures of the Picts come from a book about North America. Among the members of an expedition to Virginia in 1585 was Thomas Harriot who had been commissioned to gather data about the new land. His *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* was a report of his findings, which his patron, Sir Walter Raleigh, hoped would entice people to invest. Accompanying the expedition was the artist John White, who later became the governor of the lost Roanoke River colony.[1] His watercolors of the people and countryside of this new world became famous and were included in printed editions of Harriot's narrative. Among the images of colorful birds, a Potomack (sic) fishing expedition, and a Powhatan chieftain are pictures of a Pictish warrior, his wife, and daughter. All three are covered in designs and wearing metal bands around their necks and midriffs with no other clothing. The man holds a sword, small shield, and a severed head while the women have swords and spears. White had never seen a Pict, of course (he had never seen a Powhatan chief either), but based his pictures of the early inhabitants of Britain on "an old history" and his own imagination. The illustrations were included "to showe how that the inhabitants of Great Bretannie have bin in times past as sauvage as those of Virginia," in other words that the Native Americans differed little from the inhabitants of Britain at the beginning of the Middle Ages. As the cult of the "noble savage" began to develop, some European

[1] Thomas Hariot, *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia. Thomas Hariot. The 1590 Theodor de Bry Latin Edition* (Charlottesville, 2007).

The Picts, First Edition. Benjamin Hudson.
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writers thought that "primitives" wherever and whenever found represented the unsullied spirit of true humanity.[2] While there are many representations made by the peoples themselves, they do not have the popular appeal of White's paintings, which are best known through a later reworking by Theodor de Bry, who published Harriot's account and redrew White's images for publication.

As White's watercolors reveal, the Picts have been the mystery savages of Britain for a long time. The name *Pict* was coined by the Romans for a people who lived in northern Britain beyond Hadrian's Wall. The name first appears at the end of the third century AD and for the next 600 years they fought the Romans, southern Britons, Irish, Anglo-Saxons, and Vikings. The Picts were more than just warriors; they had an artistic culture that was acknowledged by their name: "the painted people." Their art ranged from monumental stone carvings to designs on jewelry. They were also the last people in the British Isles to convert to Christianity. White's inclusion of the Picts with the native peoples of North America is testimony to their place in the minds of educated men by the sixteenth century. One did not have to travel far to find further examples. White's older contemporary the antiquarian John Leland referred to Hadrian's Wall as "the Picts' wall," a name based on his reading of the sixth-century author Gildas' *Ruin of Britain*, and knowledge of medieval maps; that of Matthew Paris has both the Hadrian and Antonine walls separating the Picts from the southern lands. He seems to be unaware that it had been built centuries before the name "Pict" was first used to describe anyone in the British Isles.[3] Leland was not alone – moving back a millennium to the sixth century, Gildas believed the Picts to be so wild and primitive that only a physical structure such as a wall was capable of keeping them at bay. The sheer extent of the construction was enough to increase respect for the people it was thought to have held back. Even a cursory reading of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (a work that every educated person in the British Isles after the eighth century was expected to know) leaves the impression of the Picts as formidable warriors with few rivals.

[2] Sam Smiles, "John White and British Antiquity: Savage Origins in the Context of Tudor Historiography," in Kim Sloan (ed.), *European Visions: American Voices*, British Museum Research Publication 172 (London, 2009): 106–112.

[3] John Leland, *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the Years 1535–1543*, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith, 5 vols. (London, 1964): v, 60; the name is incorrectly used for remains at Bowness (v, 51).

There are two assumptions behind the historical views and popular perceptions of White or Leland, which have continued to the present and which this book will examine. The first is that there was a single race of Picts, a homogeneous population which extended throughout the northern part of Britain with exactly the same beliefs, costumes, methods of waging war, and patterns of everyday life. Connected with that supposition is a second one, that the Picts lived unchanged in a state of chronological grace for 600 years from the first appearance of the name Pict to the last "king of the Picts" at the beginning of the tenth century. Like the characters encountered by St. Brendan in his famous voyages, the political geography never altered in the land of the ageless Pict while military evolution and cultural development were unknown even as the societies round them were undergoing momentous transformations. Simply observing the significant alterations in culture and political geography of the other peoples in the British Isles during the same period leads to the conclusion that something similar was happening in northern Britain. To give just a couple of examples from the last years of the Imperial Roman administration to the beginning of the High Middle Ages, there were important movements of people (such as the Anglo-Saxons) as well as advances in technology (stirrups) together with changes in religion (Christianity).

As the following chapters show, there were many aspects to the peoples known as "the Picts." One of these is also the best known: the Picts were the ruthless warriors of Britain for almost five centuries. Their raids south of Hadrian's Wall hastened the end of Roman control of Britain. The fourth-century soldier-turned-memoirist Ammianus Marcellinus claimed that much of the turmoil in Britain involved the Picts somewhere. Moving forward several centuries, the destruction of an invading Anglo-Saxon army at the battle of Dun Nechtan in 685 ended the northern expansion of the Northumbrians. This paved the way for successful Pictish princes such as the eighth-century empire-builder Angus son of Fergus to ally with the Anglo-Saxons on conditions of equality; together they forced terms on the neighboring kingdom of Strathclyde. The victory at Dun Nechtan was even more impressive because the Angles were at their military peak and had conducted a successful raid on Ireland.

The martial aspect to the Picts must be set beside their art. Unlike many warrior societies of the period, which are known only through written descriptions of victorious battles, these fighters had a culture that valued the creative. Whether sculpture stones or intricate metal work, the Picts produced some of the finest pieces of art in the early Middle Ages. Artistic

remains reveal technical and cultural development, as well as suggesting centers of political or ecclesiastical patronage. The "Pict at home" is literally visible on massive boulders (the sheer size of which sparked comment from early travelers through Scotland who remarked on their magnificence) to small rocks that can be held in the hand where there are obscure symbols, animals both real and fantastic, and scenes of everyday life such as the hunt or craftsmen with the tools of their trade. Imaginative sophistication, often in the area of ecclesiastical sculpture, provides insight into the classes of people and society in general. Stone carving in the northeastern Atlantic was ancient and the Pictish symbol stones have aspects in common with other northern European sculpture, such as the Gotland Picture Stones. The important symbol stones remain intriguing, yet controversial, sources of information. The individual images on the stones have been collected, collated, and sorted, often in efforts to show that they support someone's particular theory in connection with social organization or political succession. Recent archaeological excavations have produced new interpretations of the symbol stones' importance for understanding settlement patterns as well as evidence of the relationship between land divisions and political organization.

Another aspect to the Picts is their North Sea or northern European context. While it is true that the world for many people was little more than the immediate neighborhood where they lived and died, few people were in complete isolation. Warriors accompanied by their retinues fought battles sometimes a hundred miles or more from their homes while artists could travel even greater distances to be trained or to pursue their craft. Especially after the conversion to Christianity the Picts were drawn into an international community and their clergy subscribed to ideas, symbols, and rituals found from the Mediterranean to the North Sea. Before that, however, the Picts were by far the most northerly of the Romans' neighbors and were a part of a world that was bounded on the north by the sub-Arctic seas. Pictish fleets are mentioned several times in the Irish annals and the people were acknowledged as a formidable presence along the eastern Atlantic. Naval power allowed them to indulge in diplomacy, initially to form confederations against the Romans and then to deal with two powerful groups of immigrants to Britain: the Irish colonists on the west coast in Dál Riata and the Angles on the east coast moving northwards from the Tyne. Because of their northern situation the Picts were also the first to face the raiders/settlers from Scandinavia now known as the Vikings, who hastened the demise of Pictish (as well as others') political independence.

We cannot hope to "know" the peoples called the Picts, but certainly we can progress in understanding and recognizing some features of their society. This approach means asking many questions, few of which can be answered definitively, and exploring new topics, which in turn leads to a willingness to consider new possibilities. A useful example is the Picts as a maritime power because their activity along the eastern Atlantic leads to a reconsideration of diplomatic sophistication on the part of people whom the Romans dismissed as savages. The alliance with the Irish and the Saxons in the Barbarian Conspiracy of AD 367 temporarily ended Roman control of Britain. Another aspect of new topics is the reading of familiar works for unusual information. Religious literature such as Adomnán's *Life of Columba*, for example, has been read for ecclesiastical and political information, but it is also a useful social and cultural record for slavery, attitudes to illness, and recreation. Even personal names make a contribution, providing echoes from Gaulish deities to Christian saints. To add to the material which has been available for centuries, new discoveries are appearing with an increasing number of excavations. To take one example, in the mid-twentieth century very little was known about housing and habitation during the early Middle Ages in northern Britain, but since then there has been a comparative avalanche of information due to excavations. A willingness to use new approaches to the investigation of a marginal society such as the Picts demonstrate how different types of material – chronicles, symbol stones, remains of fortifications or settlements, and artifacts – can be revealing when assembled together, leading to new and illuminating themes. In short, an appropriate subtitle for this volume would be "Questions about the Picts."

Despite their battle prowess, the independence of the Picts was gone by the mid-ninth century. Are they to be included among history's losers, making an appearance in the historical records of late Roman/early medieval Europe before vanishing from them? Certainly that was the verdict in the twelfth century, long after the last "king of Picts" had died, when an archdeacon of Huntingdon named Henry rewrote the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and added his famous aside on enumeration of the five languages spoken in Britain with the comment that the language of the Picts disappeared as completely as the people.[4] A harsh verdict on peoples who had fought the mighty Roman Empire and

[4] Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. T. Arnold, Rolls Series 74 (London, 1879): 12.

destroyed the armies of their neighbors while creating beautiful sculptures and brewing ales "red as wine." This was an obscure period, and a question is how to interpret the surviving chronicle entries, king lists, and legends. Were the Picts conquered in brutal battle defeats or was there a gradual merger of Scots and Picts? Did a distinct Pictish people continue, as suggested by the tenth-century Anglo-Saxon historian Aethelweard who claimed that Picts fought at the Battle of Brunnanburh in AD 937, or was he merely indulging in rhetorical embroidery? By the twelfth century, the Picts had entered into the literary world, and Henry of Huntingdon's contemporary Geoffrey of Monmouth has them as the foes of King Arthur in his *History of the Kings of Britain*. Throughout the Middle Ages the Picts reappear in literature in increasingly fantastic situations. Failure and success are relative terms.

Pictones, a Diversion

Even where the search for the Pict begins is a matter which needs to be revisited. Traditionally a hunt for answers starts with Roman rule in Britain, when the name *Pict* appears for the first time at the end of the third century. The name had a greater antiquity, however, and three centuries earlier as Rome began to expand north of the Alps, Julius Caesar allied with a people on the Atlantic coast known as the *Pictones* who were not in Britain, but in what is now France. When Caesar campaigned in Gaul during the period 60–50 BC, among the kingdoms along the Atlantic coast were the Pictones; one of their kings was named Duratios. They inhabited the region south of the river Loire on the borders of what, centuries later, became the medieval duchy of Aquitaine. The form of the name *Pictones* shows that the Romans had borrowed, not coined, it. The element *-on* indicates that the name came originally from the Greek, to which was added the Latin population termination *-es*. The Pictones were situated in the corridor that linked the Atlantic Ocean with the Mediterranean Sea or, to phrase it culturally, linking the Celtic Atlantic with the Hellenized/Romanized Mediterranean zones. They were economically sophisticated with a distinctive gold coinage (which they had been minting since the second century BC) used for trade throughout Atlantic Europe (including the British Isles) via their ports at Ratiatunni (modern Rezé) and Corbilo.

Caesar was most interested in the usefulness of the Pictones for his campaigns, which was considerable because they were a naval power

and competed in the Atlantic seaways with other maritime peoples, such as the northern kingdom of the Veneti who lived in what is today Brittany. Since the Veneti controlled the sea lanes to Britain, their destruction became the next stop on Caesar's itinerary. The Pictones quickly allied with Rome and were ordered to provide ships for Roman legions in preparation for the forthcoming confrontation with their northern neighbor. They happily seized the opportunity to make a new friend while destroying an old rival. Caesar's trust went only so far, and however friendly the Pictones might seem, he had his own men sail the vessels. This almost led to disaster because the Veneti had stout ships and they were experienced in sailing them. Rome was a land, not sea, power and the Romans had almost no experience sailing in the Atlantic Ocean. They overcame their naval incompetence by directness. Instead of outmaneuvering the enemy, they used extended grappling hooks to cut the rigging. The destruction of the Veneti at the battle of Morbihan Bay in 56 BC allowed their rivals the Pictones to assert their supremacy on the waters of the Bay of Biscay and, more importantly, access to the salt pans of Bourgneuf Bay.

Roman control of the Pictones increased during the following three and a half centuries as they were incorporated into the province of Aquitainia. The geographer Strabo (*c.* 54 BC–*c.* AD 24) claims that in addition to their shipping, the Pictones exported timber.[5] The Pictones appear to have gradually abandoned their maritime-orientation following Caesar's campaigns in the last century BC. Their trading ports at Rezé and Corbilo eventually were eclipsed by the town of Poitiers in the fourth century AD. The town was originally called Lemonum, possibly because it was located within a forest of elm trees. The location of the town on a plateau above the rivers Boivre and Clain might explain why the Romans used it as an administrative center. Poitiers' increasing importance appears to have been the deliberate result of Roman investment, with the construction of an enormous amphitheater, aqueducts, and baths. Even though the Pictones had become absorbed in the province of Aquitanica Secunda by the fourth century, they retained their identity. They do not seem to have been "romanized" in depth and their name continued to be found in the records. By the third century AD, remembrance of the Celtic origin of the Pictones came from place names, such as the abandonment of Limonum as the name of their chief town in favor

[5] Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1917–32): ii, 215–217.

of Pictavi, which was occasionally called Civitas Pictavorum. By the fifth century they were referring to themselves as Picts once again, and had produced a famous Church Father, Hilary of Poitiers (*c*.300–*c*.368) who was instrumental in combating the Arian heresy.[6] In choosing the name Pict, the Romans might have been making a comparison between the people of northern Britain and those round the Bay of Biscay, but, if so, they fail to state this directly.

Historical Sources

Something needs to be said about what information is preserved about the history of the Picts in Britain. Two important collections of information, in English translation, were compiled by Alan Orr Anderson with the titles *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers* and the two volumes of the *Early Sources of Scottish History*.[7] While the former is limited to writers in what is now England, the latter includes material from Irish, Welsh, Scandinavian, and continental sources. The materials range from genealogies to items from chronicles, often with explanatory notes.

Turning to individual works, the history of the Picts is written from materials composed by their neighbors and enemies. Only a few of the more important are mentioned here. The earliest information comes from Roman writers, many of whom give only the barest evidence. An important historian for this topic is the former soldier turned memoirist Amminanus Marcellinus (*c*.325–*c*.395). The surviving sections of his history, the *Res Gestae*, cover the important fourth century as the Roman authorities were faced by an increasingly sophisticated foe north of Hadrian's Wall. Amminanus had served in Gaul, certainly during the reign of the Emperor Constans II and possibly for the Emperor Julian. His work shows the intrigues and strategy from the viewpoint of some who was familiar with both. A second author who needs to be mentioned is the panegyrist Claudius Claudianus (*c*.370–*c*.404). His poems in praise of the Emperor Honorius and his leading general (and father-in-law)

[6] A. Riese (ed.), *Geographia latini minores* (Hildesheim, repr. 1964): 143.

[7] Alan Orr Anderson, *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers* AD *500 to 1286* (London, 1908); and *Early Sources of Scottish History* AD. *500 to 1286*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1922). The latter was issued in a limited run of 600 sets, but was reissued in 1990 by Paul Watkins, Stamford, with a preface and corrections by his wife M.O. Anderson (ESSH).

Stilicho give a useful impression of how Britain and its peoples were seen elsewhere in the Empire.

By the sixth century information about the peoples north of Hadrian's Wall was not coming through a Roman filter. This means that there was more interest in the peoples described as Picts rather than a mere list of clichés for savages. Nonetheless, information remains sparse and obscure, often little more than a name. This is clearly seen in a work that is always cited as a primary source of information about the Picts by the British writer Gildas (*c.*495–*c.*550) who is the link between the antique and medieval worlds. Of the tracts credited to him, his *Ruin of Britain* (*De Excidio Britonum*) gives a retrospective view of the end of Roman rule in Britain and even though the importance of the Picts is emphasized, they make only a couple of appearances. While this work is regularly quoted as though it were history, it is actually a sermon whose theme is the evils of his day. In order to make his point, he calls upon history and gives a brief summary of the end of Roman Britain and the role played by the Picts and Scots. Difficult to interpret and clearly confused in some places, the *Ruin of Britain* is an essential and obscure narrative of fifth-century British history. Gildas spares little sympathy for his villains (such as the Picts), but his account became even more significant for subsequent history because it was used as a source for the Anglo-Saxon writer Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* and, a little later, the British history attributed to Nennius with the modern title *History of the Britons* (*Historia Brittonum*).

Moving completely out of a Mediterranean or Christian context, vernacular materials appear by the sixth century. Although the eulogies on fallen warriors are formulaic (the name of the warrior with some comment on him) in the sixth-/seventh-century poem *Y Gododdin* they give an insight into the society that developed north of Hadrian's Wall. The text is obscure and there are debates about almost all passages, but the general outline is that a force from the kingdom of Gododdin, located round what is now Edinburgh, was destroyed in a major battle fought in what is now Yorkshire. The authorship of the poem has traditionally been ascribed to Aneirin who, together with Taliesin, was considered one of the foremost bards of Britain. The verses offer evidence of northern warrior society. Otherwise information about northern British history after the sixth century comes to us in bits and pieces such as the obits found mainly in the Irish chronicles.

Two of the most important works were not intended to be used as political histories: the *Life of Columba* by Adomnán and Bede's aforementioned *Ecclesiastical History*. The two men were contemporaries

living at the end of the seventh and early eighth century (Adomnán died in 704 and Bede in 735) and both were clergy serving important churches, the former at Iona and the latter at Wearmouth/Jarrow. Adomnán was the head of the church of Iona whose interests ran to the law; his fame in the Middle Ages was as author of a treatise forbidding attacks on noncombatants in times of war, known as the Law of Innocents or *Cáin Adomnáin* (Law of Adomnán). Adomnán's *Life of Columba* is the *vita* (life) or saintly biography of Columba or Colum Cille, the founder of the church on Iona, composed at the end of the seventh century. This is an important work for social history, as the saint's power is demonstrated through meetings with a prince, healing the ill, and banishing monsters or other creatures of evil. Since the action is important, there is little chronological guidance and only occasionally an indication of location. The value of Adomnán's work is not only that he led a church involved with the Picts, but that his position as head of the church meant that he was involved with missions active throughout northern Britain. Other Irish missions were also active in the region and snippets of what might or might not be valid information are found in other saintly *vitae*.

Rather different is Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* with its study of the conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons and the progress of the church. Bede's importance for history is difficult to overstate, and we write history for the most part in imitation of his work. He used a linear chronological progress with *anno domini* (AD) dating and gave place names, often with alternatives in different languages, throughout the history. Bede wrote more than 60 works (of which only a few survive) on topics as diverse as history, science, and theology. Two important works for this study are his prose *Vita of St. Cuthbert* (completed about 720), on the career of the bishop of Lindisfarne, and his *Ecclesiastical History*, a history of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxons which was finished about 731. Bede's history was authoritative and popular, so much so that shortly after his death, a brief set of annals was written and attached to it. His influence was extended as the *Ecclesiastical History* was consulted for the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* and brief annals found in other texts such as those embedded in the *Historia Regum* of Symeon of Durham. Bede was interested in the peoples round the Firth of Forth because of the establishment of a bishopric at Abercorn late in the seventh century as well as the involvement of St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne, about whom he had composed a *vita* about a decade before his history. This shows that because Bede was writing a history of the Christian church among the Anglo-Saxons he includes external

information only when it is connected with events that touch on his theme. To take one example, Bede mentions three kings of Picts – Brude son of Maelcon, Brude son of Bile, and Nechtan – in his *Ecclesiastical History*. In each instance there is a connection with Bede's thesis, which is the conversion to Christianity of the Anglo-Saxons and the flourishing of the faith. Bridei son of Maelchon is the king credited by Bede with donating the island of Iona to Columba for the building of his church, and from Iona came several bishops for the peoples in Northumbria, beginning with Áedan. The second of the trio is Brude son of Bile who defeated the Northumbrian king Ecgfrith at the battle of Dun Nechtan and ended, so far as Bede could know, the political supremacy of the kingdom. Finally, the last individual, Nechtan, was the king who sent a request to the Northumbrians for aid in reorganizing the churches in his domain. In each instance there is a direct connection with one of Bede's preoccupations.

The main source of material for the Picts is the chronicles and annals of which the most informative are two Irish annals now known as the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Tigernach*. There is a growing consensus that they incorporate materials collected at some religious house(s) in Britain, and that the ultimate source for both records seems to be a now-lost compendium popularly known as the Irish World Chronicle.[8] Particularly visible in the *Annals of Ulster* is the incorporation of differing dates for events.[9] Both sets of annals now survive in late medieval (fifteenth-century) manuscripts and much of their information is common to both of them. There are items that are unique to each text and, for the *Annals of Ulster*, the language original to the earliest manuscript was not consistently modernized and it occasionally preserves forms consistent with an early medieval date of composition. One problem is that a section of the *Annals of Tigernach* is missing from the eighth to tenth centuries, so other works supplement the *Annals of Ulster* such as the seventeenth-century transcriptions of annals now known as the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, *Chronicon Scotorum*, and the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*. The information preserved varies according to the time span.

[8] For a reconstruction of what such a text might have included see T.M.O. Charles-Edwards, *The Chronicle of Ireland*, 2 vols. (Liverpool, 2006).

[9] Specifically addressing the problems of chronology see Daniel M. McCarthy, "The Chronological Apparatus of the Annals of Ulster AS 431–1131," *Peritia* 8 (1994): 46–79, and "The Chronological Apparatus of the Annals of Ulster AD 82–1019," *Peritia* 16 (2002): 256–283.

For the period from the mid-sixth century to the year 685 the notices are mainly obits, occasionally with some detail about the cause of death, together with an occasional notice of a battle or siege. From the year 685 to 741 the entries become comparatively copious with more detail of battles, pursuits, and captures. Afterwards, until the year 862, the notices revert to their previously laconic state concerned primarily with deaths. In addition to the annals and chronicles are stray items of information given in literature, geographical texts such as the *dindsenchus* (history of places), and genealogies.

A stylistic feature found in both Irish and Anglo-Saxon materials that has confused commentators is the use of the phrase *rex Pictorum*. Reading it as a collective name has led to the error that there was a single kingdom of all the Picts. In fact the phrase probably means simply "a king of Picts" rather than "the king of the Picts" providing evidence for a single kingdom. A comparison with the titles awarded to Anglo-Saxon kings in the Irish annals is instructive. The *Annals of Tigernach* describe the early seventh-century Edwin son of Aella as "king of the English" (*rex Saxonum*), the same term is used for his rival Penda, Penda's contemporary Oswy, and Oswy's son Ecgfrith; the *Annals of Ulster* use the same term for Oswy's brother Oswald. None of the men was king of all the Anglo-Saxons, despite later efforts to claim as much with the use of the term *Bretwalda*, but Edwin, Oswald, Oswy, and Ecgfrith were kings of Northumbria and Penda was king of Mercia. This explains why Brude son of Maelcon is described as king of the Picts in the *Annals of Tigernach* when he routed the army of Dál Riata, but his contemporary Cindaeladh or Cennalath is also called king of the Picts in his obit *c.* 581, as is Brude when he dies the following year.

The final group of source materials comes from the kingdom of Scotland. Setting aside the later historical or pseudo-historical accounts attributed to John of Fordun and Andrew of Wyntoun (which are discussed in chapter 7), there are the lists of kings and verse histories of the Picts. These "Pictish king-lists," are often cited as primary source documents. The arguments against accepting this view are made elsewhere, but a few observations will be useful here.[10] The keeping of lists of kings is ancient, but the medieval European tradition grew out of the Roman

[10] They are identified by letters of the alphabet and were collected by W.F. Skene, *Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots and other* (Edinburgh, 1867) and KCS: 240–291 with a discussion at pp. 77–102. An English translation of the so-called list A is in ESSH: i, cxix–cxxviii, with variations from other lists.

lists of consuls combined with the Christian tradition of remembering the leaders of the religious community, particularly bishops. The surviving lists of kings of the Picts (none of which is found in manuscripts earlier than the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century) are based on exemplars from the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. The earlier catalog, designated Y, assumed its present form around 1166 while the later, designated X, is around 1214–1249. The registers are actually a compendium of names gleaned from other sources. Comparison of the names with entries in the Irish annals suggests that they were one possible source of information. This led to a problem that, as Fraser noted, the number of kings of the Picts found for a span of 270 years in this early period would suffice for the following 700 years of Scottish history.[11] This is revealed when Talorgan son of Drostan, the king of Atholl, is found in the king lists together with his contemporaries Angus son of Fergus, the king of Circenn, and Alpín son of Ferant, the king of Fortriu. One reason why this was not immediately obvious is the slight variations in the forms of names between the annals and the king lists. This is more apparent than real because several name forms seemingly different are actually the same name. An example to be discussed in another chapter is Drust, which is one form of the names Drost and Drostan. A similar statement can be made for the names Talorgg/Talurg/Talorgan.

Questions and More Questions

As the foregoing discussion shows, there are many questions about the Picts and different answers are found throughout the centuries. Who were the Picts? Did the name indicate a specific ethnic group or was it merely a term of convenience for peoples who lived in a particular area? If it was geographical, where were the Picts? If ethnic, were the Picts survivors of an earlier culture that had flourished across Europe? The couple of examples given above show a continuing scholarly argument as to whether the language of the Picts was cognate with Old Welsh or a non-Indo-European tongue. Even their name provokes question. Why is *Cruithne*, the Old Irish name for them, used to describe people in both northern Britain and northeastern Ireland, but the Latin term *Picti* is used in the Middle Ages only for peoples living north of the firths of

[11] John Fraser, "The Question of the Picts," *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 2 (1927): 180n1.

Clyde and Forth? What, if any, was their connection with the Pictones of Gaul who gave their name to Poitiers? How did this warlike and innovative society function? Did they practice matrilineal succession to the kingship? Did their name come from the practice of tattooing? Even when there is evidence, either written or physical, interpretation can be uncertain. To take an example, sculpture of the important symbol stones, for instance, is an intriguing, yet controversial, source of information. On the one hand it is usually assumed that images of warriors, animals, vehicles, and scenes of everyday life are an invaluable source of information on what life was like, how the social contract operated, and what kinds of materials they did or did not have. On the other hand, these easily identifiable images might have another entirely different meaning, especially when accompanied by other figures whose meaning remains obscure. Fabulous beasts, geometric symbols, and an arcane writing system known as ogam (which used lines rather than alphabetic letter forms) have invited speculation. Interpretations of the obscure symbols have ranged from boundary markers to statements of lineage to hieroglyphs. Part of the problem is physical as many of them have yet to be photographed in usable form, while the past two centuries have been particularly destructive of material remains. So recourse often has to be made to the surviving (and uncertain) records found in eighteenth-century diaries and modern topographical reports. Many of these necessary materials are either unpublished or in rare printed editions in archives, necessitating personal consultation.

While much can be suggested, little can be concluded. Many books and essays claim to have discovered definitive conclusions about the Picts. The following chapters make no such assertions and, in contrast, merely survey the written and physical remains while asking questions. Definitive answers are few, but new techniques and methodologies, such as the incorporation of transnational and comparative methodologies along with the abandonment of the outdated theories favored by an earlier generation of scholars and their current disciples open new vistas on an important and intriguing people.