Warrior

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Pictish Warrior AD 297–841

Paul Wagner • Illustrated by Wayne Reynolds

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PICTISH WARRIOR AD 297–841

INTRODUCTION

The Picts have captured the public imagination in a manner unlike any other ancient people. Exotic and mysterious, their name conjures up images of sun-worshipping naked warriors, covered in blue body paint, storming down from the icy north to tear the Roman legionaries down from Hadrian's Wall. They emerged from a murky past to dominate northern Britain for over 500 years, and then vanished just as mysteriously, becoming mere legend and leaving their successors to puzzle and argue over their curious artefacts.

While there are elements of truth in this picture, the Picts hold an important place in the history of Britain for more prosaic reasons. They represent a high point of Celtic civilisation, remaining free and unconquered beyond the borders of the Roman world, and rising to become the first barbarians to form a recognisable 'nation'.

There is no denying that the aura of mystery that surrounds the Picts is well deserved. They are first mentioned by name in AD 297, though it is clear from the context that they had been a problem for the Romano-British for some time. But for how long? Why were they not mentioned before? Were the Picts indigenous to northern Britain, or Celtic incomers? Was 'Pict' their native name, or a Roman nickname? Was their language Celtic? If so, was it related to British or Gaelic? Did they really adopt matrilinear succession? Did they paint their bodies? What were the meanings of Pictish symbols? Why were the 'symbol stones' set up? Were they pagan or Christian? And how and why did the Picts disappear?

Who were the Picts?

The word 'pict' is usually said to derive from the Latin *pictus*, meaning 'painted', in reference to the Picts' habit of tattooing their bodies. While there seems no reason to doubt that the Picts followed this practice, as an explanation of the word it is somewhat inadequate. There seems no need for the Romans to invent a new name for a tattooed people, for they

A fanciful engraving of a Pict from 1590.

A (slightly) better reconstruction by Robert Havell, 1815.

were familiar with many such tribes, and none of the Latin descriptions actually use the word *pictum* to describe Celtic tattoos.

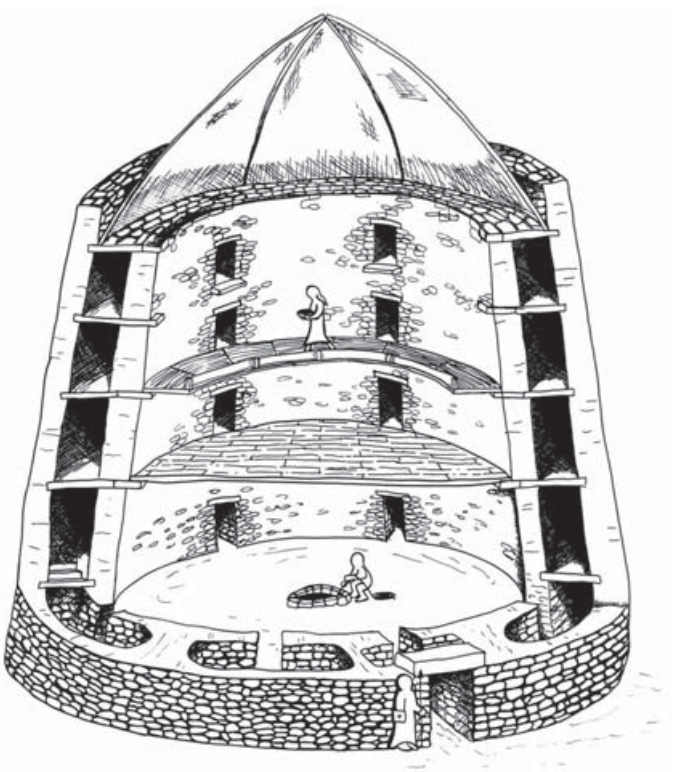
There are several alternative interpretations of the meaning of 'pict'. The 4th-century military historian Vegetius recorded that the British word *pictas* referred to a camouflaged scout boat, coloured sea-blue or *pictae*. In Welsh, this boat was a *peithas*, the sailors were *peithi*, and the Picts were *peithwyr*, while medieval Irish chronicles called it a *picard*, and interchange the name *Picti* or *Pictones* with *piccardach* or *picars* ('pirates').

The way the Romans used the word, however, was as a tribal name, such as 'savage tribes of *Scotti* and *Picti*'. Pict in Old Norse is '*Pettr*', Old English '*Poehta*' and Old Scots '*Pecht*', all of which seem to be variations on a real name, not a slang term for either 'painted' or 'pirate'. It thus seems likely that *Picti* was a proper name, and the punning reference to bodily decoration was merely a happy coincidence.

But who were the Picts? The simplest answer is 'the inhabitants of northern Britain from AD 297–858', which might be factually accurate but is otherwise unenlightening. It does, however, draw attention to the first puzzling thing about the Picts; that they are absent, at least by name, from the first two centuries of Roman interaction with northern Britain.

In the first centuries AD the land north of the Forth was peopled by two broad cultural groups. In the central Highlands was a tribal confederacy of Britons, most notably the *Caledonii*, whose ancestry dated back to the 8th century BC, when timber-laced hill forts, ironworking and the other marks

A cloaked and tartan-trousered Caledonian, from a bronze fragment dating from around AD 217.

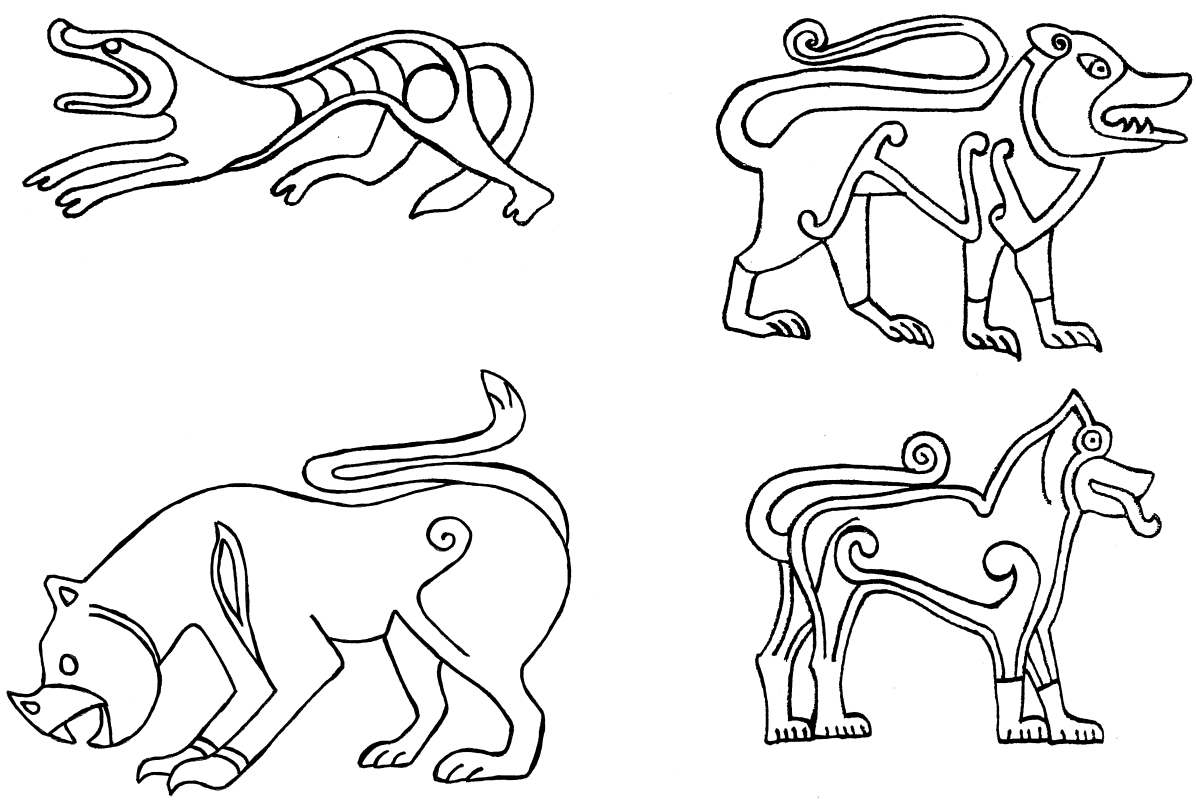


Brochs were a type of circular dry stone fort with an inner courtyard of about 10 metres (32 ft) in diameter, containing a central well. The 3.6 metre-thick (12 ft) walls had internal stairs and chambers, and there may have been wooden floors or balconies on the upper levels and a thatched or hide roof. Brochs are sometimes compared to medieval castles, but perhaps a better parallel would be the similarly sized stronghouses of the 16th century Border Reiver clans.

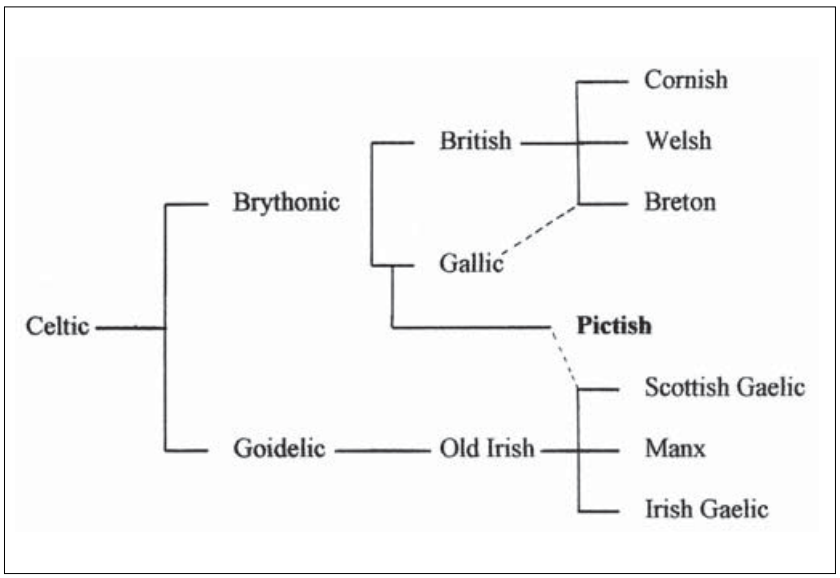
of Celtic culture first arrived in Scotland. In the Orkneys, Shetland, the Hebrides and the far north-west of Scotland another group built a different sort of fort, a type of circular drystone tower called a 'broch', of which over 500 were built between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD. Although the hill forts have a much longer ancestry than the brochs, both remained in use at the same time, and there were clear cultural and political divisions between the inhabitants.

Roman dealings with the Orkneys, recorded by Pliny the Elder and Tacitus, indicate that the broch-dwellers petitioned to be allies of Rome. The Orkneys made formal submission to Rome in AD 43, and later sent envoys to ask for Roman protection, the direct result of which was Agricola's invasion of Scotland and the battle of Mons Grampius in AD 84. After the battle, Agricola's fleet went on to receive the formal submission of Orkney. The brochs have yielded a rich diversity of high status Roman artefacts and local copies of Roman objects, suggesting Roman support and a sophisticated trading network, which could not have existed without Roman acquiescence.

Following Agricola's withdrawal, the Caledonian tribes fought a successful guerrilla war against the Romans, which eventually resulted in the construction of Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall. The following centuries saw escalating Caledonian raids until, in AD 208, Emperor Septimus Severus himself came to Britain to deal with the barbarians. Severus did not try to bring the Caledonians to battle, but aimed to wipe them out by systematic devastation of the landscape, hanging the native chiefs, burning the crops, killing the livestock, and destroying the hill forts by setting the timber-laced walls on fire, melting or 'vitrifying' the



Pictish predators. The top-left wolf, from 4th-century Orkney, is one of the earliest known Pictish carvings.



A possible relationship between Pictish and other Celtic languages.

stone. Severus' policy, in other words, was nothing short of 'ethnic cleansing', and it seems to have been extremely successful. There was nearly a century of peace, and when Scotland once more entered history it was ruled by the Picts.

There have been many explanations for this turn of events. Some believe that the Picts were merely the descendants of the Caledonian Britons, or the resurgent remnants of pre-Celtic aboriginals. Others believe they can identify a substratum of Gaelic place names, and conclude the Picts were an earlier Goidelic-speaking Celtic society. Others have seen a connection with the *Pictones* or *Pictes*, a seafaring tribe from the Biscay coast who aided Caesar against the *Veneti* (a Gaulish seafaring tribe from Amorica) and suggest they may have arrived in Britain in a migratory movement comparable to those that brought the *Belgae*, *Scotti* and Anglo-Saxons. Others, accepting mythological tales of Scythian origin, have postulated that the fathers of the Picts were Sarmatians in Roman service, who established a dynasty over the natives.

Some of these theories obviously fit the evidence better than others. For example, Gaelic speakers like St Columba could converse with the Britons of Strathclyde without difficulty, but needed translators to talk to the Picts, and Bede stated quite unequivocally that Pictish was a fourth, separate language alongside British, Gaelic and English. In 1955 Kenneth Jackson determined that Pictish belonged to the Brythonic branch of Celtic languages, with features found in Gaulish but not in British, and suggested a pre-Indoeuropean substratum based on a few indecipherable ogham inscriptions. There has been little advance on this analysis since, except a refutation of the non-Celtic element.

There are also a number of diversions that have confused scholars. For instance, Irish chroniclers refer to both the non-Gaelic inhabitants of early Ireland and the Picts as *Cruithni*. Some have used this to support the argument that the Picts were aboriginals, whereas in fact *Cruithni* is simply the Goidelic rendering of *Pritani* or 'Briton'. This has, in turn,