Notes

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On the Nature of the Picts

The purpose of this note is draw attention to some of the arguments made by James E. Fraser in a number of his recent publications, the implications of which, to my mind, have not been taken on board by many of us who have research interests related to the people known as Picts in the historiography of the early middle ages. The key observation of Fraser’s which forms the focus of the present piece is that there was no continuity of use of the Latin term Picti from its usage in late antiquity—that is from its first appearance in the late third century until Gildas’s use of it in De Excidio, a little over two hundred years later—and its use in the late pre-viking age, in the writings of Bede, Adomnán, the Iona chroniclers and other texts drawn from this milieu through to its disappearance as a contemporary signifier in the later ninth century. Fraser argued that the Latin term had been revived in the later seventh century—excavated from the earlier sources which we and the scholars of that period share (probably principally the writings of Patrick and Gildas since the Roman panegyrist and Ammianus were little known in seventh-century Britain and Ireland)—in order to provide a collective, inclusive term for those northern British peoples who had been drawn into the hegemony of the kings of Fortriu in the decades or two on either side of their decisive victory over the Northumbrians at Nechtanesmere in 685.1 For the earlier writers Picti had been a loose pejorative term that had come into existence when it became necessary to distinguish the barbarous peoples of northern Britain from those Britons who had by now become mundane and compliant provincials. The term actually appears in remarkable few surviving sources and it does not seem to have been regarded as an ethnonym.2 Gildas provides the fullest account of these late antique Picts, describing them as ‘transmarines’ who seize the north of Britain from the British of


2 Anna Ritchie usefully collected these references, four in continental Roman sources, in her Graam House Lecture, Perceptions of the Picts: From Euménus to John Buchan (Rosemarkie, 1994), 3–5.

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the Roman period and are first contained behind the turf wall and subsequently advance beyond that and have to be contained behind the stone wall. Thus for Gildas, one is left to presume, the peoples of the intramural zones must have been regarded as Picti. This seems to be a very different perspective from that of our seventh- and eighth-century sources though it may have been viewed by the political establishment of Forthriu, in the wake of Nechtanesmere, as an inspirational precedent.

If this analysis is correct, and I find it entirely convincing, then it raises questions about certain aspects of Pictish studies. The key text which has most influenced the study of the early medieval Picts is Bede's Historia Ecclesiastica. In Book I he famously lists the four peoples and five languages of Britain in his day. The peoples are Angli, Britones, Scotti and Picti. To each of these he ascribes a language and adds Latin as the fifth language which, in his words, binds all the peoples together in study of the scriptures. This passage has encouraged us to view Picti as a group analogous to the other three groups in Bede’s list. If Fraser is correct, however, the early medieval kingdom of the Picts had only come into existence in the course of Bede’s life-time—he was about twelve years of age at the time of Nechtanesmere—whereas the other groups had each been evolving for several centuries by the time he was writing. The dominance of the kings of Forthriu in northern Britain seems to have come to an end with the devastating viking attack of 889 following which after a chaotic period their hegemony was usurped by a new dynasty which seem to have made the Tay basin its core territory. After two generations this new dynasty, the Alpinids, abandoned the use of the term Picti for their imperium, replacing it instead with a term rendered in Gaelic as Alba, meaning 'Britain'. They themselves were identified by their English neighbours as Scotti (Old English Scottas). The Vortigernian hegemony, then, lasted for something like 160 years and the idea that there was a regnum Pictorum for a little over two hundred years. This raises the question of whether there was enough time for a self-consciously and distinctive ‘Pictish people’ to emerge and, even were this so, for them to become the majority population in every province of Pictavia.

Archaeologically the implications we should draw from this are that any hunt for a distinctive Pictish material culture before about A.D. 700 is probably misguided, as is the somewhat equivocal use of the term proto-Pictish for Roman iron age and late antique material in Scotland. Was the culture of sixth- and seventh-century Pictie, for example, any more ‘proto-Pictish’ than the culture of sixth and seventh-century culture of Tunisia was ‘proto-Islamic’? It is possible, of course, that some cultural elements did spread across Pictavia under the auspices of the

5 Alex Wooff, From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070 (Edinburgh, 2007), 87–121.
Vertuvian hegemony in the course of the long eighth century, and we might look to some of the distinctively 'Pictish' sculptural features as probable examples of this, but their origins will be located in specific regions and will not have sprung from a widespread homogenous culture of the preceding era. It would be particularly satisfying if we were able to identify the origin of such features in the original region of Fortriu, encompassing Inverness and Forres, but once the imperium had been established there is no reason why all the shared cultural features should spread outwards from the core to the peripheries. The Mercian heartland around the middle Trent, for example, does not seem to have been the most culturally innovative area of their imperium.

The other area of Pictish studies that Fraser’s work impacts upon is the hunt for Pictish language. Bede’s statement about gentes and linguae has encouraged modern scholars to search for evidence of a distinct Pictish language. The problem with this search is that it even now tends to presume an essentialist Pictish identity. This can be seen in the compilation of the data set used to identify the Pictish language. During the long eighth century the Pictish kingdom seems to have been envisaged as covering most of the mainland of Scotland north of the Forth and some of the adjacent islands, fairly certainly Orkney and less certainly but plausibly Shetland and the northern Hebrides. After the middle of the eighth century it may also have extended to include the territory of the Scotti in Britain which modern scholarship calls Dál Riata, approximately Argyll and the southern Hebrides in extent. Since Gaelic subsequently came to be widely spoken in much of the mainland area ascribed to the Pictish kingdom, and was itself replaced in much of that area by Scots, evidence for linguistic strata pre-dating Gaelic across the whole of this geographical extent has been taken as evidence for the Pictish language mentioned by Bede. However, it might be safer to take on board Fraser’s careful formulation ‘that what Bede meant by lingua Pictorum was whatever tongue the ascendant Warterras [the Old English name for the people of Fortriu] identified as their own.’ The extent to which the place-names of regions east of the Spey and south of the Mounth might reflect this language is not as clear cut as many working in the field assume. This is not the place, nor I the scholar, to make definitive statements about the character of lingua Pictorum but caution should perhaps be observed when inferring that all, or even the majority of the subjects of the Vertuvian hegemony spoke the Vertuvian language. Thus the current orthodox, based almost exclusively upon place-name evidence and largely ignoring the epigraphic evidence, that Pictish was a dialect of British should perhaps be called into question. It may not be untrue but the evidence is less clear cut than is often assumed. In a the preamble to From Pictland to Alba, I tried to sound a

6 For the original extent of Fortriu, see Alex Woolf, 'Dún Nechtán, Fortriu and the geography of the Picts', SHR 85 (2006) 182–201.
7 Fraser, Caledonia to Pictland, 55.
note of caution by referring to the language recovered by onomastics as 'Pictish British' and leaving open the possibility that another language might have existed in the Pictish kingdom, but my phraseology seems to have been too subtle and my carefully phrased passage has been taken by some at least to mean that I ascribe to the 'Pictish is British' position which is attaining the status of orthodoxy at least among scholars working in Scotland. If there was another language spoken in Pictavia it remains to be seen whether this language was simply another variety of Celtic, perhaps more or less distinct from either Gaelic or British, or something more exotic altogether.

The main point of this note has been to call into question approaches to studying the Pictish regnum which presume an essentialist or even simply well-established Pictish identity shared by its population. Fraser's work demonstrates that the kingdom came into being quite rapidly in the later seventh century and the historical record suggests that it survived for only about six generations before disappearing. The destruction of Fortriu by the vikings shifted the political gravity south of the Mounth and whilst the 'traditional' name of the imperium was retained for two generations but ultimately without its Vertueran core the utility of Pictish identity came to an end. The Picts in the long eighth century had simply been those people, of various ethnic backgrounds, who had been subject to the kings of Fortriu. Once that empire crumbled they ceased to be Picts.

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8 My original note on 'Pictish British' is at pp. xiii–xiv. For unfortunate readings of that note see Fraser, Caledonia to Pictland, 51–2; A. G. James, 'P-Celtic in southern Scotland and Cumbria: a review of the place-name evidence for possible Pictish phonology', Journal of Scottish Name Studies 7 (2013) 29–78, at 34; Guto Rhys, 'Approaching the Pictish Language: Historiography, Early Evidence and the Question of Pictish', unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Glasgow, 2015), 119.