**Alex Woolf**

**Pictish matriliny reconsidered**

In the early middle ages kings were primarily war-leaders and often, perhaps usually, one king succeeded another in office when he or his adherents had killed his predecessor. Given this brutal fact of royal life, and death, it was nevertheless common, though not universal, for new kings to be kinsmen of previous kings. Amongst the Picts, it has often been argued, this kinship was generally counted in the female line, a practice which, if true, would make this people unique within early medieval Europe. In 1984 Alfred Smyth attempted to set out the case against the hypothesis of matrilineal succession,1 but his arguments were resoundingly rebuffed in a review article by David Sellar published in this journal.2 In this article I hope to show that, while some of Sellar’s criticisms of Smyth’s argument may be justified, nevertheless Smyth’s basic premise holds true.

As both Smyth and Sellar agree, there are three main strands of evidence for the argument that Pictish royal succession was determined matrilinearly.

1) Bede’s account of Pictish origins.3
2) The absence of father-to-son succession in the Pictish king-list before the end of the eighth century.
3) The known relationships between some Pictish kings and some non-Pictish kings.

Following Smyth and Sellar, I shall examine each of these strands of evidence in turn, beginning with the Pictish origin-legend.

As Bede recounted it, the Picts, bringing no women with them, arrived in Ireland from Scythia and were given wives by the Irish on condition that they left Ireland for northern Britain and that, *ubi res ueniret in dubium*, ‘when the issue might become uncertain’, royal succession should be decided through the female line.4 Bede’s source for this legend seems to have been Irish in origin5 and it is therefore appropriate to turn briefly to Irish versions of this story.6 The most

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4 Ibid.
6 For a discussion of Bede’s Pictish and Iona sources see A. A. M. Duncan, ‘Bede, Iona and the Picts’, *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages: Essays Presented to Richard William Southern*, e dd. R.
important study of the Pictish origin-legend, which exists in a number of versions, is that of Gearóid Mac Eoin. Mac Eoin’s work has been further developed by Molly Miller. Mac Eoin examined the three Middle-Irish versions and one Old-Irish version of the tale of how the Picts got their wives from the Irish in an attempt to ascertain the different relationships between the various versions of the story. This wife-giving episode is incorporated in versions of both the Gaelic origin-legend and the Pictish origin-legend. Although the version of the tale told by Bede is older than any of the extant Irish versions Mac Eoin argued that the variations between the Irish accounts go back, ultimately, to the period before the production of Bede’s own source, and thus almost certainly back into the seventh century. Mac Eoin has argued that the surviving narrative which is closest in content to his primary ‘O’-text is that preserved in a mid-ninth century poem by Mael Mura Othna, *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*. The poem recounts how, after arriving in Ireland, the sons of Mīl were attacked by Cruithni (Picts) and that all but one of their women-folk were carried off, thus necessitating that they themselves find wives elsewhere and end up intermarrying with the Tūatha Dé. This early version of the legend of the loss of women by the Gaels is introduced to explain why the sons of Mīl married into the local population. Mac Eoin has argued that those versions of the story which are incorporated into the origin-legend of the Picts, recounting matrilineal succession-rights, are datable to after the middle of the ninth century and, in part at least, may have been politically motivated in legitimising Gaelic ascendancy in ‘Alba’.

What separates Bede’s version of the episode from the later Irish versions is his use of the qualification ‘when the issue might become uncertain’. The significant question here is whether this was in Bede’s source, and in the original version of the Pictish origin-legend, or whether it originated with Bede. Bede would seem to be a century closer to the original source than any of our extant alternatives and, significantly, lived at a time when the Pictish kingdom was still flourishing. This may not be conclusive evidence that Bede’s version of the story was closer to the original form, but it would be fair to say that this is a strong possibility.

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9 This poem is found in *The Book of Leinster*, formerly *Lebar na Núachongbála*, vol. iii, edd. R. I. Best and M. A. O’Brien (Dublin 1957), lines 15990-16158.
Bede concluded his account of the wife-giving episode with the words: ‘and it is well known that the custom has been preserved amongst the Picts to this day’. Might this suggest that such an occasion, ‘when the issue lay in doubt’, had occurred within living memory at the time that he wrote? Let us look at the Pictish succession in Bede’s lifetime. Most kings in the Pictish king-lists are identified by patronymics. It has been noted, however, on linguistic and historical grounds, that the parent indicated for the brothers Bridei (Brude) (706-24 and 728-9), Derile or Derelei, may have been female. The linguistic argument is based upon the suggestion that the first element of the name, Der-, is derived from an older *duchtair (cognate with Gaulish duxtir) and means ‘daughter’. The historical argument is centred on the apparent existence of an alternative parental name existing for these two brothers. AU 710.4 reads:  

Immbairecc apud gens Comghaill ubi .ii. filii Nechtain m. Doirgarto iugulati sunt.

‘Conflict among Cenél Comgaill in which two sons of Nechtan son of Dairgart were killed.’

Furthermore, in Vita Sancti Servani, king-lists D and K, and Andrew of Wyntoun’s Original Chronicle, the king who elsewhere is called Bridei (Brude) son of Derile is made a son of Dergard or Dargert. Further to this, Culross, the monastery which the Vita Sancti Servani tells us was given to Serf by Bridei son of Dargart, is described in an Irish genealogical tract as being hi Srath Érenn hi Comgellaibh. It would thus appear that Bridei and Naiont sons of Derile were also known as sons of Dairgart and were in some sense members of gens Comghaill. One might be tempted to regard Derile and Dairgart as forms of the same name, but despite the similarity (but not identity) of the first

10H.E. I.i: quod usque hodie apud Pictos constat esse seruatum.
11What follows is drawn largely from a forthcoming paper by Thomas Owen Clancy entitled ‘Philosopher king: Nechtan mac Derile and the Pictish Church’. I am grateful to Dr Clancy for allowing me to read and use this material. The issue of Derile’s gender is also touched upon in M. O. Anderson, Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland, 2nd edn (Edinburgh 1980), 175-6. For the Pictish forms Bridei and Naiont (or Neiton) see Kenneth Jackson, ‘The language of the Picts’, The Problem of the Picts, ed. F. T. Wainwright (Edinburgh 1955), 129-66, at 143 and 145.
15P. Ó Riain, Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae (Dublin 1985), 181. Alternatively the mention of Strathearn here might suggest that this locational phrase relates to the period of composition of the text.
element, Der-/Dair-, it is hard to see how -gart might become -ile, and while Daigart is an etymologically sound Gaelic form, the form Derile does not seem to have any parallels as a hypocorism. The probability exists, therefore, that Bridei and Naiton were the son of a Cenél Comgaill dynast, Daigart, and a Pictish mother, Derile. Since it was Naiton who was responsible for introducing ‘Roman’ practices into the Pictish Church (choosing Bede’s own monastery, Monkwearmouth-Jarrow, to write to for guidance), and Bridei who may have founded Culross (and who certainly appears on the guarantor-list of Cāin Adomnáin), it may have served the purposes of Bede, or perhaps of the compiler of his source for the Pictish origin-legend, to emphasise the legitimacy of a change of dynasty which may have been opposed by other factions within the Pictish kingdom. The possibility that these two Pictish kings were recorded in the chronicles and the king-lists with a matronym may serve to indicate that for them their mother’s descent was more important than their father’s and that this fact distinguished them from their predecessors. We might compare them with the Danish king Svein Estridsson (1047-74), the son of Earl Ulfr and of Estrid, sister of Knútr the Great (1016-35), whose matronym was used to emphasise his link to the patrilineal Skjöldung royal line. If Bridei’s succession had been questionable, and this doubt had hung over his pious brother also, then ecclesiastical authors more concerned with promoting Catholic orthodoxy than dynastic rectitude may not have been above reworking the ‘episode of the women and the Picts’ in the Gaelic origin-legend in order to produce a version of the Pictish origin-legend to bolster the progressive Catholic party within Pictland.

In discussing legitimacy of succession we come to a point which might have distinguished the Picts from the Anglo-Saxons and the Irish; the legitimacy, when no obvious heirs in the male line presented themselves, of candidates connected to previous kings through descent in the female line. There are several occasions when succession to various Welsh kingships appears to have been legitimised or bolstered with reference to descent in the female line. For example the second dynasty

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16 Dr Clancy’s paper (see above, n.11) deals with this family and its affiliations in greater detail.
17 H.E. V.xxi.
19 Earl Ulfr was slain during Knútr’s lifetime and Svein did not become king until 1047. We do not know Svein’s date of birth but it is thus possible to imagine that he might have grown up in a single-parent family, which would provide an alternative hypothesis for his use of a matronym.
20 By the time of the completion of the Historia Ecclesiastica in 731 Naiton had ceased to reign in Pictland (AU 729.2), but the need to stress his legitimacy may still have been desirable to those who wished to preserve his reforms. Alternatively Adomnán’s Iona might well have wished to protect Bridei’s position in the 690s thus creating a context in which Bede’s version of the story might develop the parallel relationship with the Irish versions of the story identified by Mac Eoin.
of Gwynedd, starting with Merfyn (ca 825-44), was linked to the first dynasty through his mother Etthil. This was rare, but closeness to a former king was sometimes preferred to strictly patrilineal descent when the nearestagnates belonged to a distant or hostile segment of the dynasty. Such successions were not strictly within the bounds of the Welsh law codes as they come down to us but they seem to have been tolerated at least.

Among the Irish and Anglo-Saxons, however, no circumstances seem to have legitimised this kind of succession. When Irish thrones were usurped by non-agnates, an attempt was usually made to prove an agnatic, patrilineal link, even if it had to be located far back in the mists of time. In reality some of these intrusive kings were probably closely linked maternally to the dynasts whom they succeeded, but this does not seem ever to have been presented as a legitimate claim by those responsible for drawing up pedigrees. A good example of this is Congalach Cnogba, king of Tara (944-56), whose pedigree went back ten generations before it reached another king of Tara but who was in fact the sister-son of his immediate predecessor, Donnchad Donn (919-44) and the grandson of the great Flann Sinna (879-916).

Among the English, however, a different strategy seems to have been adopted. Ecgberht (802-39) seems to have had patrilineages going back, mutually exclusively, to both West Saxon and Kentish origins. His contemporary, Cenwulf of Mercia, also has a genealogy which is worth investigating. Before his time all Mercian kings since the mid-seventh century had claimed descent from the brothers Penda and Eowa, the sons of Pybba. Cenwulf claimed to be descended from a third brother, a son of Pybba, Cenwalh. Now Bede, the ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ and Historia Brittonum together give us quite a lot of information about Penda and his kinsfolk but none of these sources mentions a brother called Cenwalh, whom, in the conditions of the English Midlands at that time, one might have expected to have been styled king at some point. An argument from silence can not be conclusive in such ‘Dark Ages’, yet there is circumstantial evidence to suggest that this relationship may

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have been fabricated. Bede,27 and the ‘Chronicle’,28 do tell us that Penda and Eowa had a sister who was married to the Gewissan king Cenwalth. Cenwulf’s pedigree seems to separate him by the right number of links from Pybba but, on balance, it seems to present a son-in-law as a son of the flesh.

This little digression has been intended to indicate how the English and Irish, unlike the Welsh, felt it necessary to go to fictional lengths to deny that their links to the dynasty ran through the female line when these links are likely to have been real factors in governing transmission of power. Might Bede’s statement, ‘when the issue might become uncertain’, not indicate that the Picts simply followed the practice of their fellow Britons? Indeed, might Bede not be specifically addressing the succession of Bridei and Naiton which might have seemed less than legitimate to his English audience?

Why the Britons might differ from the Irish and English is not clear. The obvious source of such a change might be the Senatusconsultum Orfitanium of Roman Law, passed in the time of the Emperor Marcus (161-80), and in the year when Orfitus and Rufus were consuls, which overturned the purely agnatic inheritance-laws enshrined in the Twelve Tables and allowed for property-rights to be transferred through women.29 If British kingship developed at least in part from late Roman landlordship then elements of late Roman property-law might have influenced the practices of royal succession. The degree to which the political culture of Pictland had sub-Roman models might be more questionable, but pan-Brittonic customs may have arisen in a variety of ways. Suffice it to say that, whether a Roman origin should be sought for the practice or not, Welsh respect for the occasional female link within largely patrilineal chains seems to match Bede’s comments on Pictish succession better than supposing that he was wrong when he wrote ‘in cases of doubt’ and should have written ‘always’. Bede was not a stupid man.30

The next issue to be examined is that of the absence of royal fathers in the Pictish king-lists before the end of the eighth century: in my view this is the strongest evidence that Pictish kingship, or its succession-rules at any rate, were rather odd. The appearance of

27H.E. III.vii.
30Chadwick, Early Scotland, 89, suggested that Bede ‘had not a very clear grasp of the principle of matrilinear succession’ in an attempt to explain away the awkward phrase ‘when the issue might become uncertain’.
brothers succeeding one another, on several occasions, puts paid to any idea that we are looking at a formally rotating over-kingship like that of Tara between 734 and 1002, or an ‘oscillating’ competition between dynasties, which was Smyth’s solution to the problem. We must certainly look at non-rotating kingships for comparisons. Smyth’s attempt to compare Pictish royal succession with that of Leinster fell foul of Sellar because of the lack of an unequivocal and canonical king-list for the Laigin, but (to be fair to Smyth) if the evidence for the Laigin were more like that surviving for the Picts, comprising a single document purporting to be a list of Leinster kings and only a quarter of the annal references with which to cross-examine it, then we should probably have a more suitable comparison. The Pictish king-list is a very peculiar document. Most of the king-lists which are concocted for various early medieval kingdoms, by modern scholars, are constructed from genealogies and chronicles. A genealogy read out aloud (as at the inauguration of Alexander III in 1249) has an obvious function in establishing the current king’s right to rule, but what good is a list which shows little or no connection between the kings? One can only suppose, as Dauvit Broun has argued for the description of the Pictish provinces, that its function is to affirm the enduring unity of the territory of the kingdom. A king-list requires that a kingdom has existed over several generations or ensures that that is how it will appear. In this light, if Anderson and others are correct in suggesting that the list was originally compiled in or near 724, the perceived unity of the kingdom may be of relatively recent date.

The distribution of Class I Pictish symbol stones might suggest that much of what we regard as southernmost Pictland was only marginal in the sixth and early seventh centuries. Adomnán, in his *Vita Columbae*, could be interpreted as drawing a distinction between Picts in the North and *Miathi* in the South, which might reflect the same cultural divide. It may be that, whilst ethnically distinctive Picts had occupied

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33D. Broun, ‘The seven kingdoms in *De situ Albaniae*: a record of Pictish political geography or imaginary map of ancient Alba?’ (forthcoming). I am grateful to Dr Broun for letting me see this paper in draft.
37*Adomnan's Life of Columba*, edd. and trans. A. O and M. O. Anderson (Edinburgh 1961; rev. edn Oxford 1991); for *Miathi* see 18a-19a. The only firm location of the Picts is during Columba’s visit to
the territory north of the Forth for some time, a defined Pictish kingdom only emerged during the struggle with Bernicia and Dál Riata in the course of the seventh century. Such a situation might have encouraged a compiler of a king-list working in the late seventh or early eighth centuries to pick individual famous, but not necessarily related, leaders from the Pictish past and claim for them a wider kingship projected back into prehistory. But perhaps not.

A useful step is to see how other king-lists look. Below I have produced some Anglo-Saxon lists, for which we have good supporting information. (Genealogical charts are provided at pp.166-7, below.)

Key: f.r. = son of a king; i. = intruder from a neighbouring dynasty; ? = father unknown, c = father known but not a king, (w) = widow of previous king

### Kent from the later sixth to the mid-ninth century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Æthelberht</td>
<td>Eadric</td>
<td>Æadberht</td>
<td>Ecgberht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eadbald</td>
<td>Muli</td>
<td>Æthelberht</td>
<td>Ealhmund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Æthelwald</td>
<td>Sigeher</td>
<td>Eardwulf</td>
<td>Æadberht</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eorcenbert</td>
<td>Oswine</td>
<td>Eammund</td>
<td>Cuthred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecgberht</td>
<td>Swafheard</td>
<td>Sigered</td>
<td>Baldred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hlothhere</td>
<td>Wihtred</td>
<td>Heabberht</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 23, sons of kings 10, unknown father 7, intruders 5.

### Bernician/Northumbria from the later sixth to the mid-ninth century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Father</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Spouse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Æthelfrith</td>
<td>Aldfrith</td>
<td>Æadberht</td>
<td>Osred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwin</td>
<td>Eadwulf</td>
<td>Æthelwald</td>
<td>Eardwulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eanfrith</td>
<td>Osred</td>
<td>Æthelwald</td>
<td>Eardwulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswald</td>
<td>Cenred</td>
<td>Alhred</td>
<td>Ælfwold</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oswiu</td>
<td>Osric</td>
<td>Æthelred</td>
<td>Eanred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecgfrith</td>
<td>Ceolwulf</td>
<td>Ælfwold</td>
<td>Æthelred</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 24: sons of kings 13, non-royal fathers 6, unknown fathers 3, intruder 1.

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38 The exact chronology of the Bernician advance along the southern shores of the Forth is not recorded but is likely to have occurred in the early to mid-seventh century.

39 Eadwulf’s ancestry is not given in any of our English sources. The obituary of Eadulf appears at AU 717.2. This almost certainly stands for Eadulf son of Ecgwulf. No king Ecgwulf is known from Bernician records but an Ecgulf appears in Historia Brittonum, ch. 61, in the pedigree of King Eadberht. This seems to be the same individual who appears in the Anglian Genealogies (see n. 25) as Ecgwald. AU 741.7 contains the entry Ingulatio Ernani nepotis Eculp, which would appear to refer to the killing of Earnwine son of Eadulf recorded in Historia Regum attributed to ‘Symeon of Durham’, thus giving us a pedigree Earnwine son of Eadulf son of Ecgwulf. For Historia Regum see Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia, ed. T. Arnold, 2 vols (Rolls series: London, 1882, 1885) ii, 38.
PICTISH MATRILINY RECONSIDERED

Mercia mid-seventh to early tenth century

Eowa c.  Ceolred f.r.  Ecgfrith f.r.  Ægbert i.
Penda c.  40  Ceolwulf c.  Ecgfrith f.r.  Berhtwulf ?
Oswiu i.  Ceolwulf ?  Ceolwulf c.  Burgred ?
Peada f.r.  Æthelbald c.  Beornwulf ?  Ceolwulf ?
Wulfhere f.r.  Beornred ?  Ludeca ?  Æthelred ?
Æthelred f.r.  Offa c.  Wiglaf ?  Æthelflæd (w)

Total 24: sons of kings 6, non-royal father 5, fathers unknown 9, intruders 2, royal widow 1.

Gewisse/[West]-Saxons mid-sixth to early tenth century

Cerdic c.  Cerwic f.r.  Æthelheard ?  Æthelwulf f.r.
Cynric c.  Cenwealh f.r.  Æthelheard ?  Æthelwulf f.r.
Ceawlin f.r.  Ceawlin f.r.  Æthelheard ?  Æthelheard f.r.
Ceolric c.  Seaxburh (w)  Æthelheard ?  Æthelheard f.r.
Ceolwulf c.  Æthelheard ?  Æthelheard f.r.  Æthel heard f.r.
Cynegils f.r.  Æthelheard ?  Æthelheard f.r.  Æthelheard f.r.

Total 24, sons of kings 10, non-royal fathers 8, unknown 5, widow 1

This information can be tabulated as below.

The paternity of kings in early England

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>kingdom</th>
<th>royal fathers</th>
<th>non-royal fathers</th>
<th>paternity unknown</th>
<th>intruders</th>
<th>royal: non-royal + intruders</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kent</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernicia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.86:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mercia</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1:1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wessex</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.25:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.44:1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the tables it is clear that succession by a son of a previous king was only one of a variety of possibilities, occurring in less than three-fifths of the cases above. It should also be observed that if we were to break down the lists into period-blocks, we should see significant patterns appearing. In Kent, from 762 to 855 no king is known to have been the son of a Kentish king. In Mercia the sons of royal fathers are

40Pybba, the father of Eowa and Penda, is nowhere said to be a king and probably was not, but the possibility of his royal status cannot be ruled out.

41It should be noted that whilst some of these kings whose paternity is unknown may well have been the sons of previous kings they seem in many cases to be those whose claims were considered dubious and thus, on balance, fewer of them are likely to be kings' sons than not.
bunched into the period from 655 to 716 (61 years out of \( \text{ca} \) 300\textsuperscript{42}). Among the descendants of Cerdic, whatever they called themselves at various times, no king from 687 to 802 had a son who himself became a king, and of the nine preceding rulers only four are known to have been the sons of kings. Yet all these dynasties were patrilineal; since we have more genealogical information about them than we have for the Picts, most of the kings can be shown to have had patrilineal claims (see genealogical charts at the end).

Due to the location of the Picts in Scotland, their regnal succession has been compared most closely with that of Dál Riata, and this has exaggerated the significance of father son succession. Gaelic polygyny increased the likelihood of men fathering sons of a great variety of ages and, this aside, Dál Riata is remarkable amongst kingdoms in Britain for the number of sons of kings who themselves become kings. Comparison with Gaelic kingships in Ireland is instructive. Smaller kingdoms, such as that of Dál Fiatach in Ulster, like Dál Riata, are characterised by a very high proportion of kings being the sons of former kings. Medium-sized kingdoms like the Clann Cholmáin kingdom of Mide are slight less regular; seven out of twenty-eight kings in the period from 743 to 1027 were not sons of former kings. A closer parallel with the English examples can be found if we turn to the over-kingships of Munster and Connacht. Of the fifty-four kings of Munster before 1024 thirty were not the sons of former kings and one is of unknown antecedents. Of the fifty-eight kings of Connacht between Amalgaid son of Fiachra and Tadg son of Cathal (d. 1030) twenty-five were not the sons of former kings.\textsuperscript{43}

As in the cases of the Mercian and West Saxon dynasties this pattern of succession can be explained fairly simply. These dynasties were successful at expanding territorially at a time when Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic society lacked the capacity for government through a ministerial class. Conditions forced the dynasties, rather than simply ruling the increased territory through a unified kingship dependent upon localised royal agents, to allocate conquered \textit{regiones} to their kinsmen, as kingdoms in their own right.\textsuperscript{44} To maintain their success in relation to other dynasties it was, however, important to prevent total fragmentation.

\textsuperscript{42}The exact total of years here is not clear since we do not known for sure when the sons of Pybba began their rule.
\textsuperscript{43}A New History of Ireland, vol. ix, edd. T. W. Moody \textit{et al.} (Oxford 1984), 130 (Clann Cholmáin) 132 (Dál Fiatach) 136 (Munster) 138 (Connacht); for Dál Riata see list at 457-9.
\textsuperscript{44}This is the process known to anthropologists as predatory segmentation. For a theoretical discussion of its workings see M. D. Sahlins, ‘The segmentary lineage: an organization of predatory expansion’, \textit{American Anthropologist} 63 (1961) 322-45.
and somehow to maintain a sense of unity and common interest. In order to ensure that this could happen competition for the leadership of each ‘confederacy’ of regiones had to be open to the rulers of all the various segments. As descent from the founders became more distant, so the chances of successive kings being close kinsmen declined. The one Mercian father-son succession after the lifetime of Penda’s grandsons, that of Offa by Ecgfrith, is explicitly said by Alcuin to have been achieved by extensive kin-slaying. Among the West Saxons the accession of Ecgberht in 802 is followed by a suspiciously long silence before we hear of him again in 825. Since our source is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle compiled under the auspices of Ecgberht’s grandson and ultimate successor, and within living memory of his reign, it is unlikely that we are dealing with the results of simple ignorance here, and since all later claimants to the West Saxon throne were to be his descendants, we might suppose that his ‘missing years’ were spent reducing his cousinage. In Ireland it is significant that after the reign of Flann Sinna the kingship of Mide, shared in the decades previous to his reign by six collateral branches of the dynasty, was held exclusively by his own descendants. In Connacht Conchobar son of Tadg (848-72) seems to have effectively eliminated collaterals from the over-kingship in the same way.

Viewed from this perspective the Pictish list, at first showing few apparent links between kings and then moving towards a tighter patrilineal succession, seems less peculiar, indeed very like the West Saxon, Mercian, Munster and Connacht succession. The problem lies in the early part of the list. If we follow the Anglo-Saxon and Gaelic segmentary model, we ought to expect a clear cluster of closely related kings forming the original core of the dynasty at an early point in the list, such as that found in Mercia before 716. Regardless of where, chronologically, we look for this phase in the Pictish list it does not seem to present itself. Where is the Pictish Ceawlin or their Pybbingas?

The list was apparently compiled initially in the very late seventh or early eighth century, and we may have been over eager in ascribing a true historical horizon as early as Bridei son of Mailcon. The earliest kings can be verified by use of the Irish chronicles, but similar texts may have been available to the compiler of the list. Bridei’s appearance, it could be argued, might have been necessitated by his importance in the Colum Cille story, but, if he was not connected with the dynasty which

46 See esp. Miller, ‘The disputed historical horizon’.
spawned his namesake, the son of Bile, problems might have arisen trying to wed an ecclesiastical tradition of rulers based around the Moray Firth, with whom Iona had most contact in the missionary period, to the records, or traditions, of a dynasty which came to prominence in the South in the mid- to late seventh century. A precise solution to this problem will probably always elude us. Among the Irish, Welsh and English we have more genealogical material, without which royal succession would appear far more chaotic than it does. For the Picts we are simply short of data.

While we have seen that it is not unusual for early medieval kings, or at least provincial over-kings, to be the sons of collaterals who did not themselves attain the kingship, it remains curious that not one single Pictish king before the late eighth century should have been the son of a previous king. Perhaps the sons of Pictish kings did not feel the need to pursue their claims. In Welsh and West Saxon laws it seems that achieved status, based on wealth or service, might remain as ascribed status, at least to some degree, in subsequent generations. If we were to imagine that the sons of Pictish kings continued to receive, for example, the honour-price of kings, and no doubt other privileges, it might explain why they did not feel the urge to compete for the kingship, while at the same time explaining why groups of brothers, the grandsons of kings, fearing that they might not pass royal status on to their children, might all need to compete for the prize.

Finally we should turn to the Pictish kings who were sons of foreign kings. In the period before ca 720 there are only two Pictish kings who would seem to have fathers who were kings outside Pictland, Talorcan son of Eanfrith and Bridei son of Bile: the former, possibly a son of Eanfrith king of Bernicia (633), and the latter the son of a king of Dumbarton. The suggestion that Gartnait and Drest, the sons of Donuel, were brothers of Domangart king of Dál Riata (d.673) is far from necessary as Domnall/Dyfnwal was a common name amongst both Gaels and Britons at this time. The apical figure of the lineage to which most other seventh-century Pictish kings seem to have belonged bore this name, and indeed it has not been established that Donuel even represents Gaelic Domnall.

As David Kirby pointed out, the domination of Pictland by Oswiu, claimed by Bede, might allow us to count his nephew Talorcan as an

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47 Charles-Edwards, Early Irish and Welsh Kinship, 364-5.
48 I owe this last point to Professor Dumville.
intruder," but Smyth probably went too far when he suggested that the latter’s accession to the Pictish throne in 653 occurred as a result of the battle of Winwæd two years later! One might as easily venture that the accession of a kinsman to the Pictish throne enabled Oswiu to rebel against Penda, just as it may have been Pictish might which propelled Eanfrith, and perhaps Oswald, into power twenty years earlier. Or alternatively, and the precise chronology suits this scenario better, it may be that it was the presence of a potential dynastic rival ruling in Pictland which provoked Oswiu’s subsequent invasion. Bede tells us that Oswiu subjected the greater part of the Pictish people to his rule, but that this did not happen until after the battle of Winwæd which was fought in November 655. An attack on Pictland in the years following Winwæd would almost certainly have been directed against Talorcan.

Again, Molly Miller suggested by analogy with Gaelic practice that Talorcan’s name might be a diminutive of Talorc, a name born by a son of Uuid, who ruled the Picts from 641 to 653, and might suggest some connection between them. Talorcan’s Pictish name probably indicates that his mother’s kin were Pictish and since Eanfrith’s son ascended to the throne some twenty years after his father’s disastrous, and apostate, kingship of Bernicia, it is possible that Talorcan was brought up in Pictland. As the son of a foreigner fathered on a native woman he would be what the Irish called *glasfhine*, ‘grey kin’, and may, like the sister’s sons of the legendary Cormac mac Con Corb, have been entitled to the rights of his mother’s patrilineage.

The second king whose father was apparently not Pictish is Bridei son of Bile. The father of this man is said to have been a king of Dumbarton, but how reliable are our sources? The information that Bridei was the son of a king of Dumbarton comes from a poem preserved in the tenth-century *Betha Adamnáin* The poem is attributed to Adamnán and seems to call Bridei son of Bile ‘son of the king of Dumbarton’. The tenth-century Harleian collection of genealogies name two lines providing kings of ‘Ystrad Clud’ (‘Strathclyde’, not a

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50Alternatively, the account of Eanfrith’s trusting visit to Cadwallon (accompanied only by twelve retainers) might suggest that he and Osric were originally installed by the victorious British king (*H.E. III*. i.).
51*H.E. III. xxiv.*
55mac rígh Ala Cluathi.
term found in seventh-century sources). These two lines are linked there by Dyfnwal Hen. The first line reads [R]iderch hen map Tutguall map Cinoch map Dumgual hen (Rhydderch Hen son of Tudwal son of Clyno son of Dyfnwal Hen), and the second [R]un map Artgal map Dumgual map Riderch map Eugein map Dumgual map Teudebur map Beli map Elfin map Eugein map Beli map Neithon map Guipno map Dumgual Hen (Rhun son of Artgal son of Dyfnwal son of Rhydderch son of Owain son of Dyfnwal son of Tewdwr son of Beli son of Elffin son of Owain son of Beli son of Neithon son of Gwyddno son of Dyfnwal Hen) and eight further names. A ‘Hoan, king of the Britons’ is said to have slain Domnall Brecc of Dál Riata in 642, and in the verse on the battle of Strath Carron preserved with The Gododdin this same killing is attributed to a force led by a grandson of Nwython. Identification of Hoan with the grandson of Nwython has led scholars to assume that this is the Owain son of Beli son of Neithon of the Harleian collection. Bridei son of Bile has been taken to be his brother. It should, however, be noted that no source other than the verse from Betha Adamnáin (if we allow that) names any Bile or Beli as king of Dumbarton in the seventh century.

Molly Miller noted the possibility that the ancestors of Owain and Brude son of Bile/Beli, Neithon and Gwyddno, might also appear in the Pictish king-lists. Miller suggested that Neithon son of Gwyddno might be the same person as Nectan nepos Uerb (602-21) and that Gwyddno might well be the same person as the Uuid who was the father of Gortnait (631-5), Bridei (635-41) and Talorc (641-53). The possibility

56P. C. Bartrum, Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts (Cardiff 1966), 10.
57The opening initials of both pedigrees are missing from the manuscript, probably having been left blank for the rubricator to complete.
59W. F. Skene, Chronicles of the Picts, Chronicles of the Scots (Edinburgh 1867), cxxi, and A. O. Anderson, Early Sources of Scottish History AD 500-1286, reprint with corrections, 2 vols (Stanford 1990) i, 192 n.1, and most subsequent scholars; note, however, Anderson, Kings and Kingship, 171, in which it is suggested that Bridei was the son of Beli son of Elffin.
60This is the form in list B (Anderson, Kings and Kingship, 262); list A has Nectu (ibid., 248).
61Miller, ‘Eanfrith’s Pictish son’, at 53-6. Miller’s argument is based upon the suggestion that Uuid represents a Pictish (and hypochoristic?) form of the name Gwyddno, and that nepos Uerb indicates not that Nechtan’s grandfather was named Uerb but that Uerb was the apical figure of the dynasty whose name is masked in the obscure phrase Fer map Confer, ipse est uero olitauc... at the end of the pedigree of Rhun map Artgal, which she amends to Fer map Con. Fer ipse est Uerb. Clitauc... (‘Fer son of Con. Fer who is Uerb. Clydog...’). R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, The Roman Inscriptions of Britain, vol.1, Inscriptions on Stone (Oxford 1965), no. 635, from an altar recovered at Ilkley, Yorkshire, records a female deity Uerbeia, possibly the tutelary goddess of the river Wharfe. It should be noted that Miller uses different absolute dates in her article than those used in the present
that Talorc’s mother was connected with Talorc has already been noted, and she may well have been a granddaughter of Uuid/Gwyddno, though by which of his sons is not clear. If this were the case it might well give us our apical point in a dynastic pattern similar to that provided by the Pybbingas and Ceawlin in the Mercian and West Saxon pedigrees.

![Dynastic Diagram]

A conjectural seventh-century dynasty of Pictish kings (kings underlined)

Any such schema must remain hypothetical, but if it were accepted then it would allow for 68 of the 91 years between 602 and 693 to be filled by Pictish kings of the same dynasty. There is no need to suppose that the three kings who interrupt this succession, Cinioth son of Lutrin, and the two sons of Donuel, are intruders rather than members of the dynasty whom we simply cannot place. It may be that rather than seeing Bridei as the son of a Briton inheriting the Pictish kingdom we should see the second dynasty of Dumbarton as Pictish in origin.

In the account of the Nechtansmere campaign in Historia Brittonum Ecgfrith is said to have attacked fratruelum suum. This is usually taken as referring to their relationship through Talorc, but this is most unlikely. The word *fratruelis* has two common meanings: in Late Latin it means the sons of two brothers, but by Isidore it was defined as meaning the sons of two sisters. Miller writes ‘there seems to be no possibility that it [the word *fratruelis*] is used exactly and strictly in either sense’, but is this true? There are only two options which can meet the requirements: either Oswiu and Bile shared the same mother, and were thus half-brothers, which is chronologically very problematic.

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62His name is given as in list A (reading ch as th); Anderson, Kings and Kingship, 248.
63H.B. ch.57.
65Miller, ‘Eanfrith’s Pictish son’, at 55.
since Oswiu’s father Æthelfrith and Bile’s father Neithon died ca 618 and 621 respectively giving neither time to have fathered a son on the other’s widow who would himself have adult sons by the mid-seventh century. Alternatively Bile was married to a daughter of Edwin of Deira, an option which presents no difficulties, chronological or otherwise. In either case it is unlikely that Bridei’s mother gave him his claim to the Pictish throne. Indeed, one might speculate that he may have been helped into his kingship by Ecgfrith following the latter’s defeat of Drest in 672. What is curious about Bridei is that he was overlooked several times in the succession both of Dumbarton and the Picts, not becoming a king until he reached middle age. It may be that with the fall of Edwin in 633, when Bridei was still a child, his stock as potential candidate for kingship took a serious downturn. If he were a grandson of Edwin it would only have been with his aunt Eanfled’s marriage to Oswiu in the mid-640s that his connections would, once more, have made him the stuff of a king.

As a final note on Bridei we should remark that he is the first king to be styled ‘king of Fortriu’ in the Irish chronicle-record. This may imply that he was a ‘king with opposition’. Alternatively it might suggest that a new more centralised kingdom was developing in the south of Pictland which had to be distinguished from the outlying territories which, whilst Pictish in language and culture, were not part of the constituted polity.

To summarise; I argue that the ‘Picts taking Gaelic wives’ episode originally made no mention of matriliny. Bede, who is the earliest witness to the ‘matrilineal’ element, wrote that it was only when the succession was in doubt that the female line might be followed. This is exactly what other British dynasties seem to have done, although it appears to have been unacceptable to the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons. Such practice may have its origins in Late Roman law. The ‘intruders’ may or may not be intrusive, but, even if they were, intrusion was not unknown in the royal succession of other kingdoms. Good arguments can be made that both the established ‘intruders’—Talorcan son of Eanfrith and Bridei son of Bile—may have been acceptable members of a dominant patrilineal descent group. The absence of any Pictish kings named as fathers of Pictish kings before the 780s is the most curious fact of Pictish succession. Certainly comparison with other regnal successions shows that royal fathers were by no means usual before the mid-ninth century (Dál Riata seems to be exceptional in having seventeen of its first twenty-three kings as sons of kings), but the Pictish situation may require special explanation. The important point is that
this special explanation need not be matriliny. Clearly an alternating over-kingship like that of Tara is not an acceptable analogy because in the Pictish kingship groups of brothers succeeded one another. Perhaps, as I have suggested, the sons of kings were granted special status. Perhaps coalitions among the wider kin group prevented father-son succession in the fear that it might create an exclusive precedent (this, after all, is what lay behind alternating over-kingships like that of Tara). If this were the case, then brother-to-brother succession would not carry possession across the generation-boundary and would not have carried the same threat of alienation.

Two patrilineages which dominated the over-kingship of the Picts in the seventh and eighth centuries can tentatively be identified, that of Uuid (discussed above) and that of Onuist son of Uurguist (d.761) (discussed elsewhere).\(^{66}\) Other kings may be attached to these lineages by links now lost to us. It must never be forgotten that we lack the sources of genealogical information available for many other kingdoms in Britain and Ireland. Others may be usurpers or leaders of resistance in the North. Bridei son of Mailcon and other northerners may have appeared more important to the community at Iona and found themselves intruded into documents at a later stage. Equally, however, we must accept changes of dynasty in times of internal dispute, and some of these may have been legitimised with reference to links by marriage to an earlier dynasty, as with the Welsh dynastic changes. The sons of Derelei, so important to ecclesiastical reformers like Adomnán and Bede, may have required a matronym to join themselves to the line of Bridei son of Bile, which led their supporters, the champions of Catholic orthodoxy, to emphasise the legitimacy of this form of succession, but this is not the same as saying that the Picts practised matrilineal kingship. There is simply not enough data to prove the case unequivocally either way. What I hope to have done is to lay out the evidence against the hypothesis, just as Sellar has laid it out in favour,\(^{67}\) in the hope that the reader will recognise that, given the rarity of matrilineal succession patterns generally, it is not likely, on balance, to have been the system practised by the Picts.

I should like to conclude by reproducing a genealogical and regnal chart, showing the descendants of Rhodri Mawr and the succession in Gwynedd and Dyfed from the early-tenth to the mid-twelfth century.

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\(^{66}\) Dauvit Broun, ‘Pictish kings 761-839: integration with Dál Riata or separate development?’, *The St Andrews Sarcophagus: a Pictish Masterpiece and its International Connections*, ed. Sally M. Foster (Dublin 1998), 71-83: see table 7 at 82 for a conjectural family tree of Onuist and his descendants, Pictish kings for all but 21 years in the period 729-839.

This chart (see next page) shows the scarcity of royal fathers, the use of marriages to link new arrivals to old dynasties, and the rivalry of northern and southern lines. It is my contention that, without the Harleian collection of genealogies or any Welsh chronicles, succession among the ‘kings of the Britons’ might look as strange as that amongst the Picts.  

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68I should like to thank Dr Dauvit Broun, Dr Thomas Clancy, Mr Michael Davidson, Dr Penny Dransart, Dr Stephen Driscoll, Professor David Dumville, Dr Katherine Forsyth, Mr David Sellar and Dr Simon Taylor who have all read various drafts of this paper and offered their comments. I should also like to thank the Research Seminars of the Celtic Departments in both the University of Glasgow and the University of Edinburgh where version of this paper were read. Errors and eccentricities remain my own.
Genealogical charts

1. Kings in descent from Rhodri Mawr.

This data is drawn almost entirely from Wendy Davies, *Wales in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester 1982), 124, fig.47, reorganised slightly for clarity.

Names in **bold** represent kings of Gwynedd and those **underlined** represent kings of Dyfed. Women’s names are italicised. It should perhaps also be noted that Edwin son of Einion was called king of Gwent and that there were several intruders into the kingships.
2. English royal lineages

The information in these charts is derived from Barbara Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England* (London 1990), 36 (Kent), 76 and 90 (Bernicia), 104 (Pybbingas) and 134 (West Saxon).

*The descent of the Pybbingas (Mercia).*

Mercian kings are shown in **bold**. One king, Beornred, cannot be fitted into this pedigree, but may nevertheless have a place here.

Pybba

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Cenhwalth    Eowla    Penda

Cundwalth   Osmd    Alveo    Peada   Wulfhere   Ethelred

Centwine   Eanwulf    Headberht   Ethelbald   Cenred   Ceolred   Ceolwulf

Cyrrewom   Thingfrith

Bassw    Offa

Cuthberht   Ecgfrith

Cenwulf   Ceolwulf
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*Kings of the Bernician royal line.*

Other kings of Northumbria include Edwin who was of the Deiran dynasty and Ethelwald whose antecedents are unknown, his son Æthelred, and Osbald of unknown origin Eardwulf and his son and grandson Eanred and Æthelred II, and a second Ælfwold. Some or all of these kings may have claimed descent from Ida. In the present context it is interesting to note that Alhred, the first of his line to take the kingship since Ida was the son-in-law of Oswulf.

Ida

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Ocg        Æthelric        Eadric

Eadhelm    Æthelfrith        Blæcmon

Ecgwulf    Eanfrith   Oswald   Oswiu       Boa

Leodwald   Eadwulf   Ecgfrith   Aldfrith   Bynhohm

Eata       Cuthwine   Osred   Osric       Eanwine

Eadberht   Cenred   Ceolwulf   Allhred

Oswulf

Ælfwald
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Kings of Kent to 762.
None of the subsequent kings can be securely fitted into this pedigree, but no alternative pedigrees exist, so later kings may belong to the same family. Also ruling in the period 616 to 762 over all or part of Kent were the kings Æthelwald, Mul (a West Saxon), Sigehere, Oswine and Swæfheard whose links to this dynasty cannot be demonstrated.

Æthelberht
   Eadbald

Eorcenberht
   Ecgberht
   Hlothhere

Wihtred
   Eadric

Eadberht
   Æthelberht

The West Saxon royal house.
Those who are named as kings in the West Saxon Regnal list are shown in **bold**. Five kings, Ætheheard, Cuthred, Sigeberht, Cynewulf and Beorhtric cannot be reliably placed in this pedigree, but some or all of them may nevertheless have been members of this lineage.

Cerdic
   (2 generations)

Ceawlin
   Cuthwine
   Cuthwulf
   Ceolwulf

Cuthwine
   Cefred
   Cenred
   Æscwine

(3 generations)

Ecgberht
   Æthelwulf
   Æthelstan
   Æthelbald
   Æthelberht
   Æthelred
   Ælfred
Eadweard