

# Picts and Romans

If anyone had doubts about the origins of the Picts, the Romans were not among them. A document dating from the early fourth century called “The Barbarian Nations that sprang up under the [Roman] Emperors,” claims that they created the Picts.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside the title, the text is essentially a roll call of the peoples living outside the empire with which the Romans had contacts and its thesis is clear even before the completion of the inventory of 53 “nations” located beyond the imperial frontiers. This is a jumble of anciently known peoples together with nations which had recently appeared in the written records. As well as such fresh names as the Picts and Alemanni there are older names such as the Caledonians and Persians. The tract shows Roman bigotry (a barbarian was a barbarian regardless of antiquity or achievements) together with a keen awareness that they were not living in isolation and that some knowledge of the people outside their borders might be helpful.

Fifteen hundred years later there was less certainty about the Picts. In 1971 the BBC broadcast a television program, accompanied by a book, with the title *Who are the Scots?* Various authors contributed chapters describing the different peoples who had settled in Scotland,

<sup>1</sup> “Gentes barbarae quae pullulaverunt sub imperatoribus,” in *Geographia latini minores*, ed. A. Riese (Hildesheim, repr. 1964): 128–129; the text is attached to an official list of Roman provinces. See also Ralph W. Mathisen, “Catalogues of Barbarians in Late Antiquity,” in Ralph W. Mathisen and Danuta Shanzer (eds.), *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World* (Burlington, VT, 2011): 17–32 (at p. 22).

beginning with the earliest inhabitants and culminating with the francophone emigrants of the High Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> With one exception, the chapter titles are simple, such as “Britons and Angles” or “Scots of Dalriada.” The exception is a chapter with the title “The Problem of the Picts.” The phrase was an acknowledgment of an influential book called *The Problem of the Picts*, edited by F.T. Wainwright and published in 1955, based on a collection of papers originally delivered at a conference in Dundee in 1952 held under the auspices of the Scottish Summer School of Archaeology. The individual essays fell into four categories that have largely defined the avenues of inquiry since then: history, archaeology, art history, and language. A dozen years later, Isabel Henderson published *The Picts* which drew together the separate topics into a continuous narrative. In those works, as in subsequent English-language studies, the Picts were limited to Britain and their history begun in the last centuries of the Western Roman Empire.

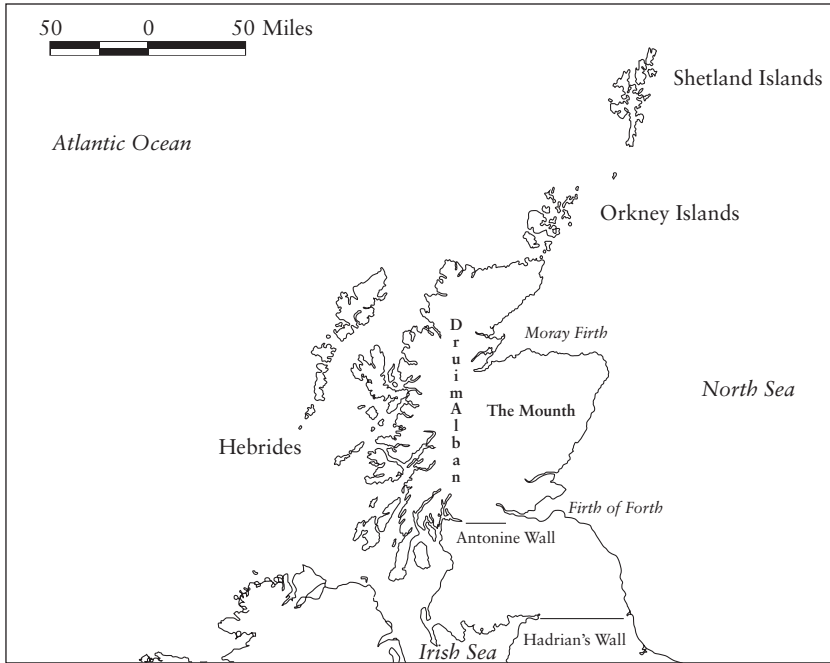
## Before the Picts

The peoples of northern Britain were a military concern for the Romans even before the appearance of the name Pict.<sup>3</sup> Tacitus gives an account of the peoples of northern Britain in his *Agricola* where he uses the generic term Britons (which in its widest application referred to everyone in the island) while mentioning specific peoples such as the Caledonians and Borestras. When Claudius Ptolemy (the second-century geographer better known as Ptolemy of Alexandria) described Britain north of the Antonine Wall in his *Geographia*, he identified 16 peoples living in what is now Scotland.<sup>4</sup> Suggestions on the locations of these groups place the Caereni, Cornavii, Lugi, and Smertae in the region of what is now Caithness and Sutherland, while the Decantae and Carnonacae were in Ross. Between the Moray Firth and the Firth of Forth were the Caledonii, the Vacomagii, the Taexali, and the Venicones in the east, with the Crenoes and Epidii in the west. The southern peoples, between the Antonine

<sup>2</sup> Gordon Menzies (ed.), *Who are the Scots?* (London, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of this period a useful guide is Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Following the translated extracts in I.A. Richmond, *Roman and Native in North Britain* (London, 1953): 150–153.



Map 1.1 Northern Britain.

and Hadrian walls, were the Novantae and Selgovae in Galloway and Dumfriesshire, the Damnonii to their east, and the Otadini in what is now Lothian.

The Romans constructed two walls – today called after the emperors Hadrian and Antonius – as part of their efforts to impose some control over their northern boundary in Britain (see Map 1.1). Building walls was not unique to Britain, of course, and they are found either on their own or in connection with other defenses, as at the Danube. They do show that the Romans felt that their opponents were too dangerous to be left unchecked. The earlier and more southerly barrier is now called Hadrian's Wall, built between AD 123 and 133 on roughly the same latitude as the southern boundary of Denmark. The more northerly construction, built a generation later, is known today as the Antonine Wall; situated between the inlets of the sea at the firths of Clyde and Forth, it lies farther north than Moscow. The two walls represent different levels of investment as well as longevity. Hadrian's Wall initially was constructed of stone in the east and turf in the west,

with the later replacement of the turf by stone. An entire military zone was created to service it and Hadrian's Wall not only had portals, but also garrisons that were still stationed there in the fifth century. By contrast the Antonine Wall was built completely of turf and it is essentially a large ditch where the excavated soil was used on the southern side to make the defensive work. Compared with the southern wall, it was built hurriedly and cheaply. The debate continues on how long the Antonine Wall was an active feature of the Roman military establishment, but within the total time of Roman occupation in Britain it was brief, with possibly a total of 20 years of garrisoning. Except for a few decades, Hadrian's Wall was, so far as the Roman administration was concerned, the divider between barbarism and civilization.

Even though the Antonine Wall was effectively abandoned in the second half of the second century, Roman interest remained north of Hadrian's Wall. An outpost was the fortress built at Bremenium (now High Rochester) in Northumberland and it was occupied from the first to third centuries. The final Roman occupation of those lands came in the early third century, at the very end of the reign of Emperor Septimus Severus. He led a campaign for which the ostensible reason was to put down attacks from beyond the Wall. The emperor rebuffed efforts for a peaceful settlement in order (so the contemporary historian Herodian claimed) to give his indolent sons experience in warfare. Eager to avoid confrontation, the princes north of Hadrian's Wall sent envoys to treat with the emperor. Herodian noted that the ambassadors from the northern tribes were clothed only with iron bands round their necks and stomachs; otherwise they wore only tattoos that covered their entire bodies.<sup>5</sup> This sounds similar to the claim made three centuries earlier by Julius Caesar, who noted that the Britons wore few clothes and were covered in designs made with blue ink from the woad plant (*Isatis tinctoria*). Despite the determination of Severus, by the reign of his son Caracalla the imperial administration made Hadrian's Wall its northern extent.

Herodian's contemporary Dio gives an ethnic background to the expedition of Septimus Severus. He claims (book LXXVII) that the two principal peoples living north of Hadrian's Wall were the Caledonians and the Maeatae; the latter lived next to the wall while the former lived

<sup>5</sup> Herodian, *History of the Empire from the time of Marcus Aurelius*, ed. and trans. C.R. Whittaker, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1969): i, 358.

beyond them.<sup>6</sup> The appearance of the Maeatae is a new grouping from the outline given by Ptolemy. Dio describes both of them as among the principal races of Britons. Both Herodian and Dio remark on the mountains and swamps inhabited by the northern peoples. Dio makes the added comment that the northerners did not touch fish, which seems supported by modern archaeology which has not found much evidence for mounds of fish bones (see chapter 4).

## North and South

Anyone who traveled the length of Britain at the end of the third century, on the eve of the first appearance of the use of “Pict” for a people in Britain, would have been aware of a contrast between two general cultural areas marked by Hadrian’s Wall. South of the wall were wide, paved roads that connected towns with markets, houses, government offices, and intersected with other roads leading to ports where ships sailed to continental Europe. North of the wall were a few paths (so inadequate for the Romans that Severus’ troops had to build military roads for their use) leading to scattered fortified encampments usually on elevated ground and known by the Romans as *oppida* (sing. *oppidum*). Dio claimed that the inhabitants lived in tents. Security north of Hadrian’s Wall was available to an individual within his own people, while to the south this security was mandated by imperial forces. The south had harbors, grain storage, and land reclamation projects (such as the Roman drainage of the Fen country), but the north had none of these except possibly the last, and then only in a small and irregular fashion. To the south there was also high taxation, requisition of goods, and conscription of men to fight battles far from their homes. In the north there were the goods paid to the local prince which were, in turn, used to maintain his household retinue and distributed among his subjects in public displays of gift-giving. South of Hadrian’s Wall was a culture that borrowed from the great civilizations of the Mediterranean in its art, literature, and scholarship. In the north was the continuation of traditions that had endured for centuries, with an art that was admired by its southern neighbor and a warrior ethos that celebrated the individual. The division is apparent in the perception of Britain after the end of direct

<sup>6</sup> Dio, *Roman History*, ed. and trans. Earnest Cary, 9 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1914–27): IX, 262; the identification of the wall with Hadrian’s Wall is confirmed by Dio’s claim that it cut the island in half, which it almost did.

imperial administration. The sixth-century historian Procopius (*Historia Bellorum*, VIII.20) believed that Britain was actually two islands, with the northern part, called *Brittia*, lying opposite the mouth of the Rhine.<sup>7</sup>

Equally important was the change in physical geography. There is a greater percentage of arable lands south of Hadrian's Wall and comparatively fewer to the north. Unlike the broad sweep of the coastal shelf that extended from east to west on a gradually inclining trajectory in Roman Britain; north of Hadrian's Wall the land suitable for cultivation or prime grazing was confined to coastal strips; the most expansive were found along the eastern coast. Snaking their way round the great sea inlets now known as the firths of Forth, Tay, and Moray, these lands were home to most of the population and are where most of the surviving Pictish symbol stones are found. The lands north of the Wall are much balmier than they should be because of warm water flowing from the Gulf of Mexico known as the Gulf Stream. This current divides at the Pentland Firth with the flow along the eastern coast of Britain known as the North Atlantic Drift. The short growing season in the north meant that the main cereals were barley and oats while crops such as wheat could be grown only in small pockets. What was lacking in arable was compensated by grazing. Hills are prime land for raising livestock, and animals flourished on sloping pastures where their diet was enhanced by the minerals in the grass. There were also fish along the coasts and rivers such as salmon, while shellfish and seaweed were gathered along the shores. Last to be mentioned are the mineral deposits, the copper and iron in Galloway or the gold in Rhynie. But for centuries the single most impressive physical feature was the great Caledonian forest. Not only did it provide wood for building and fuel, but it was an effective defensive barrier because of the difficulty of traveling through it. Interspersed among the woods were wetlands of various types, and together they made any movement slow especially for large numbers of men such as formed the Roman armies.

Hadrian's Wall was a division in another way, and that was demographically. South of the Wall there had been changes in population as well as construction during the centuries of imperial rule. Population movement is often mentioned but is rarely studied. The Roman strategy of moving troops from one part of the empire to serve in another, the establishment of retirement communities (*coloniae*) for those troops in

<sup>7</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*, ed. and trans. H.B. Dewing, 7 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1914–40): vi, 358.

disparate lands (Boadicea's rebellion was directed towards, in part, the veterans settled at the *colonia* at Colchester), and the general movement of people throughout the empire looking for work, profit, or safety meant that the population of Britain south of Hadrian's Wall by the fourth century was different from that north of the wall. Inscriptions give some indication of the diversity as they show that civil servants, military officers, and common soldiers upon whom the imperial administration relied were immigrants: Romans, Syrians, and Greeks as well as Gauls and Germans. A section of Hadrian's Wall from Carrawburgh to Brough on Noe was manned by the *cohors I Aquitanorum*.

## The Picts Appear

The first reference to Picts in Britain comes at the end of the third century AD, three and a half centuries after the establishment of Roman rule in the island. Eumenius, a teacher of rhetoric in Augustodunum (now the city of Autun) in Gaul is believed to be the author of an oration, composed around 296, in praise of a Roman general named Constantius "the Pale" (*Chlorus*). Constantius had recently returned from Britain to Gaul in the wake of restoring imperial control after the island had fallen away from Rome's control and into the hands of independent rulers or usurpers in the later third century. His military campaigns from 293 to 296 began with the defeat of the usurper Carausius' army in Gaul, followed a few years later by the defeat and death of his subordinate Allectus. Eumenius' congratulations included an ungenerous assessment of the fighting skills of the Britons with reference to their enemies:

In addition to that, a nation [i.e. the Britons] which was then primitive and accustomed to fight still half naked, only with Picts and Hiberni [i.e., the Irish], easily succumbed to Roman arms and standards, almost to the point that Caesar should have boasted about this one thing only on that expedition; that he had sailed across the ocean.<sup>8</sup>

This was not the end of Constantius' association with the Picts. After his death in 306 at York while preparing to lead an invasion north of Hadrian's Wall, a panegyric written around 310 remembered him: "For it was not he who had accomplished so many great feats thought it

<sup>8</sup> C.E.V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers (eds.), *In Praise of the Later Roman Emperors*, the Panegyrici Latini (Berkeley, 1994): 126.

worthwhile to acquire – I won't mention the forests and swamps of the Caledonians and other Picts – either nearly Hibernia or Farthest Thule or the Isle of the Blest themselves, if they exist ...”<sup>9</sup> In these verses the name *Picti* clearly refers to peoples living beyond the imperial frontier of Britain. This was the same area where, less than a century earlier, the historian Herodian described the last campaign of the emperor Septimus Severus who had descended on Britain in order to deal with predations by the peoples beyond Hadrian's Wall. He noted that the mere fact of Severus' arrival so terrified the miscreants that they immediately sued for peace.<sup>10</sup> That conference was unsuccessful for the supplicants because the emperor was determined on a war for the moral well-being of his son. Worth recalling are two asides made by contemporary historians. First, Dio calls the people who lived beyond Hadrian's Wall Britons, who, he implies, were physically indistinguishable from the Britons living under Roman administration. Second, Herodian notes that they were tattooed and scantily dressed, wearing only iron bands round their necks and waists, from which they carried their weapons.

In order to understand the phrasing in the panegyrics on Constantius it is necessary to realize that Roman political control in Britain had been as chaotic as elsewhere in the empire in the previous half-century, popularly known as the “era of the barrack emperors.” Prior to Constantius' deployment of his troops to the island, Britain had been for some time under the control of local rulers of whom the latest had been Allectus. Among his villainies, in the eyes of the imperial authorities, was to allow the northern defensive line of Hadrian's Wall to fall into disrepair. When Constantius was made a Caesar, or junior ruler and emperor-in-training, in 292, he was assigned the northwestern section of the empire as his area of operations. After regaining control of Britain, he had ordered the repair of Hadrian's Wall, but unfortunately, beyond his major achievements, almost no details survive for Constantius' expedition and its aftermath. Nevertheless, his elevation to the status of Augustus in 306 apparently was due in no small measure to his success against the Picts, among others.

Why does the word *Picti* abruptly appear at this time as the name for the people beyond the Roman frontier of Hadrian's Wall? The word is Latin and it derives from *pictus* (picture). Despite valiant efforts to make connections with earlier population or place names (and there is the

<sup>9</sup> Nixon and Rodgers, *In Praise of the Later Roman Emperors: 226–227*.

<sup>10</sup> Herodian, *History of the Empire*: i, 358.



possibility of a connection with the Pictones of Gaul), the choice of the word says as much about the men who were controlling the administration of the empire as about those they named. A good example is Constantius' superior, Emperor Diocletian, who halted the slide towards anarchy and oversaw the rescue operation in Britain. The new men were drawn from the provinces rather than from Italia and had risen to positions of eminence (often from extremely humble origins) through their own abilities. They were passionately proud of being Roman and contemptuous of anyone outside the empire. At the same time they were men in a hurry whose education was acquired "on the run," so to say. Not surprisingly the most popular form of historical writing among them was not elegant narratives such as those of Pliny, replete with literary allusion, but the *breviarum* or digest with its succinct information in which the essential facts were elaborated. The "new" Romans were quite blunt in their language; not for them the delicate nuances of their predecessors trained in classical literature. To take one example, they called the gold coin that was the standard currency of the age a *solidus*, "a solid bit."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly these new men had little knowledge of the ethnic diversity among the so-called savages beyond their northern frontier, but they knew what they read, and that included Caesar's *Gallic Wars* and Tacitus' *Agricola*. In their mind the northern peoples were the direct descendants of Caesar's Britons, whose heirs had challenged the great Agricola at the battle of *Mons Crampius*. Britain, of course, was famous for its painted people and no less an authority than the "Divine" Julius had noted in his *Gallic Wars* that the Britons painted themselves with the dye from woad. If Herodian is to be believed (and he was a contemporary of the events he described), then the practice of body decoration – whether painting or tattooing – had become a visible difference between the Britons living within and outside Roman control. The Romans had a horror of bodily disfigurement, believing that tattooing, body-painting, and body-piercing were the signs of barbarians or primitives. They did practice tattooing, but as a form of punishment. A captured runaway slave, for example, was tattooed on the face as a proclamation of his crime. In the eyes of the new men who staffed the imperial service, anyone outside the civilizing influence of Rome was no better than a slave. So the name *Picti* was clearly meant to differentiate between the civilized Britons (those within the bounds of the empire) and the barbarians who lurked beyond Hadrian's Wall.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London, 1971): 28.

The name Pict was such a novelty when first used that it had to be paired with a more familiar appellation, hence “Caledonians and other Picts.” The individual groups covered by the collective name *Picti* continued to be mentioned in the records. The name Caledonian, for example, was used by Roman writers, and writing almost a century later Ausonius (d. 395) used the names Caledonian and Briton when referring to people in Northern Britain, as in his *Mosella* (*Epistulae* XXVII.3.36) where he noted that “the Caledonian shore is under the Briton’s gaze.”<sup>12</sup> This is the only reference to Britons beyond Hadrian’s Wall after the first appearance of the name Pict. The fifth-century poet Claudian used both *Caledonii* and *Picti* to describe the peoples outside Roman control in Britain.<sup>13</sup> Later in that century, Sidonius Apollinaris includes the Caledonians, Britons, Picts, Irish, and Anglo-Saxons as the inhabitants of Britain in one of his poems.<sup>14</sup>

The name Pict was only one of the various collective designations being coined at this time. The barbarians had been observing their successful, gigantic rival and during the late third/early fourth century they were coming together into large groups or confederacies when the situation demanded. In turn, the Romans were coining new names to describe these new situations. Just before the term *Picti* was employed to describe people living north of Hadrian’s Wall, the term *Tervingi* (an early name for the Visigoths) is used as a collective term for several independent Germanic peoples who were cooperating against the Romans; it is used in a panegyric for the emperor Maximian delivered around 291. A generation after the panegyric about Constantius, the name *Scoti* (“Irish”) appears for the first time in the fourth-century history of Ammianus Marcellinus. In a similar fashion the name *Alemanii* has been shown to be a collective term for several distinct groups in a particular region.<sup>15</sup> These “unions of convenience” were not entirely new, as Julius Caesar

<sup>12</sup> Ausonius, *Decimi Magni Ausonii Opera*, ed. R.P.H. Green (Oxford, 1999): 217): “Sunt et Aremorici qui laudent ostrea ponti et quae Pictonici legit accola litoris, et quae mira Caledoniis nonnumquam detegit aestu” (it is not clear if his “Pictonic coast” means Britain or Atlantic Gaul); and 128 (*Mosella*, l. 68): “Tota Caledoniis talis patet ora Britannis.”

<sup>13</sup> Claudian, *Panegyric on the Fourth Consulship of Honorius*, in *Claudian Claudiani Carmina*, ed. John Barrie Hall (Leipzig, 1985): 62.

<sup>14</sup> Sidonius, *Sidoine Apollinaire*, ed. André Loyen, 3 vols. (Paris, 2003): i, 57–58 (ll. 89–90).

<sup>15</sup> John Drinkwater, *The Alemanni and Rome 213–496 (Caracalla to Clovis)* (Oxford, 2007): 45.

had discovered several centuries earlier when his invading legions arrived in Britain. On his first invasion a surprised Caesar saw his hopes of swiftly picking off individual kingdoms dashed when the Britons (with far more sophistication than the Romans were willing to credit to primitives) temporarily united and forced the Romans to retreat to the continent after penning the invaders in the southeastern corner of Britain. To prevent such unpleasant surprises the Romans had become masters of the tactic of divide and conquer, but the despised barbarians had learned the equally important lesson of cooperation.

### The Barbarian Conspiracy of AD 367

During the period from late antiquity to the early Middle Ages, the Picts are frequently found in conjunction with another people called the *Scoti*, in other words the Irish. The panegyric on Constantius merely mentions them in the same passage as enemies of the Britons. A generation later, the Roman soldier and memoirist Ammianus Marcellinus describes the two peoples as allies.<sup>16</sup> In the hands of later writers it became a cliché, although it is not clear at this point if the Scots in question were colonists from the Irish kingdom of Dál Riata, later situated along the western Scottish coast and in some of the islands of the Hebrides, or were some other group of Irish settlers. They need not have been in northern Britain, for the tale “Expulsion of the Déisi” claims that at roughly this time an Irish clan from Meath emigrated and settled in southwest Wales under the leadership of an Eochaid Oversea.<sup>17</sup> Of course the *Scoti* need not have been in Britain at all, and they could have sailed directly from Ireland. What the panegyrics for Constantius the Pale do show is that the Picts had been added by the Romans to their list of enemies. More revealing is that the Roman writers are in no doubt that the Picts were the main adversary in Britain, with or without various allies.

This was merely one aspect of the increasing Roman paranoia throughout the fourth century about attacks on their borders. In Britain this was made worse by the island’s apparent use as a semi-penal colony for troublemakers from other parts of the empire, who needed to be removed from their homes and put somewhere they would cause less trouble.

<sup>16</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*, ed. John C. Rolfe, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: 1950–52): ii, 2.

<sup>17</sup> P.C. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogical Tracts* (Cardiff, 1966): 4.

According to the fifth-century historian Zosimus, after the third-century emperor M. Aurelius Probus defeated the barbarians in Gaul, he deported captives from among the Burgundians and Vandals to Britain around 278.<sup>18</sup> Ammianus claims that the imperial administration in fourth-century Britain was disturbed by scoundrels such as Valentinus, the brother-in-law of the aforementioned Maximian, who had been placed on the island under the equivalent of police observation.<sup>19</sup> This might help to explain the unfortunate attitude that some people had towards anybody from Britain. Ausonius, for example, wrote the famous passage “there is nothing good in Britain,” although the phrase was used in connection with one Silvius for whom he had a special dislike.<sup>20</sup>

Constantius the Pale’s brief career had been unusually concerned with Britain. In light of his death at York while preparing an expedition to attack the area north of Hadrian’s Wall, the restoration of imperial control in the last years of the third century might not have been as final as his eulogists claimed. Even in the comparatively benign years of the first half of the fourth century there are suggestions that in Britain, as elsewhere in the western provinces, all was not well. There was the constant danger of treason, for one, and Constantius’ son Constantine “the Great” issued a law that anyone who allied with barbarians against Rome or even shared their loot was to be burned alive.<sup>21</sup> Legal threats within the empire were accompanied by negotiations outside it. Constantine’s son Constans (emperor 337–350) tried diplomacy by treaty in 343 when he made a pact with the Picts and Scots to keep the peace. This was not necessarily a sign of weakness. As the empire was threatened by other more worrisome foes, the “buying off” of a nuisance on the extreme northwest frontier was a sensible course of action. Peace was kept for 17 years, but it was broken in 360 when the Picts ravaged the frontier lands, apparently the area immediately around Hadrian’s Wall. Among the few scraps of information we have about this incident is the formation of an alliance among the Picts, the Scots, and the Attacotti. This raid, which must have been destructive in order to be

<sup>18</sup> Zosimus, *New History*, ed. and trans. Ronald I. Ridley (Sydney, 1982): 21 (I.68).

<sup>19</sup> Ammianus Marcellus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*: ii, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Ausonius, *Decimi Magni Ausonii Opera*, ed. H.G.E. White, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1919–21), repr. 1985): ii, 216: “Nemo bonus Brito est.”

<sup>21</sup> Clyde Pharr (ed.), *Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions* (New York, 1952): 7.1.1 (c. 323).

recorded in Ammianus' history, was the beginning of warfare between the Picts (with or without their allies) and the Romans that was to last almost a century, continuing after the withdrawal of the legions from Britain. St. Jerome claimed that the Attacotti lived in Britain and were cannibals.<sup>22</sup> The suggestion has been offered that they were actually an Irish group who had settled round the Severn, encouraged by the Romans in order to enlist them as auxiliary troops, which would explain why they are found on the continent where they met St. Jerome.

The Romans were to learn that the Picts were formidable opponents not just in ferocity, but also in forming effective alliances, as their campaigns for the remainder of the century were to show. By mid-century the Romans were so concerned about what the Picts were preparing to do that they employed agents known as *arcani* to discover their plans. The sole reference to these individuals is found in a brief aside made by Ammianus, who reveals that the Romans had been using a spy network, called the Secret Service (Latin *arcanus*) to keep an eye on the Picts.<sup>23</sup> How members of the *arcanus* operated is suggested by the career of one Hariobudes who was sent by the emperor Julian to gather information about the Germanic King Horter.<sup>24</sup> Even though Horter was a staunch Roman ally, this did not spare him from the usual Roman mistrust of "barbarians." Hariobudes was chosen because he spoke the language fluently (his name suggests that he might have had some ties to the region). He roamed throughout Horter's realm and looked for any activity that might suggest a threat to Rome, but found none. There is no indication of Hariobudes' disguise, but one possible choice would have been a merchant. Since large groups of people such as battalions assembling for invasion, needed goods, it would be the obvious place for a traveling merchant. The clandestine career of Hariobudes matches Ammianus's brief account of the *arcani* in Britain, although he simply says that they spied on the barbarians by roaming over as much territory as possible and reporting any threatening movements to the Roman authorities.

This tactic seems to have gone badly wrong in Britain and the authorities were completely unprepared for the storm that broke in 367 in what the Romans described as a *barbarica conspirator* or Barbarian Conspiracy.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Rance, "Attacotti, Déisi and Magnus Maximus: The Case for Irish Federates in Later Roman Britain," *Britannia* 32 (2001): 243–270.

<sup>23</sup> Ammianus Marcellus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*: ii, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Ammianus Marcellus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*: i, 406.

Sometimes popularly known as the Pictish Revolt, Roman fears of a confederation of savages were justified when the Scots and Picts attacked south of Hadrian's Wall, where they were joined by the Attacotti, while the Franks and Saxons ravaged the north coasts of Gaul. At least one legion mutinied in order to join the rebel alliance and the imperial officials received a glimpse of how loyal were many of its subjects. One general named Nectaridus was slain and another named Fullofaudes was captured in an ambush. The rebellion succeeded, at least briefly, and for some time (now thought to be more a matter of months than years) the Picts and their allies were in control of Britain.<sup>25</sup> After other commanders had been unable to restore order, the emperor Valentinian dispatched Count Theodosius to put down the rebellion. Theodosius landed at Richborough and fought his way to London. Part of the difficulty was the Roman deserters/mutineers who either had joined the rebellion or decided to profit from the disorder by scavenging in irregular companies. That the Barbarian Conspiracy of 367 was a temporary rather than permanent success was due to the selection of Theodosius to lead the *reconquista*. Rather than executing summary justice on the malefactors from the garrisons, he simply gave them the opportunity to return to their barracks. Then he seems to have moved into the countryside where he systematically dealt with the chaos. His triumph was remembered and Claudian's panegyric on the third consulship of his grandson Honorius recalled how his ships had sailed the northern seas to conquer Picts and chase Scots with his sword.<sup>26</sup>

After imperial control was re-established under Theodosius' supervision, the hunt for scapegoats began. Among those who found fingers pointing at them were the *arcani*. The spies who had been sent out to the Picts were discovered to have changed sides, and instead of reporting to the Romans, they gave information to the enemy. Details about the charges are sketchy, but it seems that the barbarians were just as aware as the Romans of the usefulness of information about the plans of their enemies; and they had used their knowledge to plan both when and where they would attack. Whatever the specific details, Theodosius promptly disbanded the *arcani*. The sparse and vague information, which is capable of sustaining different interpretations, suggests that the Pictish invasion had been planned over a long period of time and the raiders

<sup>25</sup> Ammianus Marcellus, *Rerum Gestarum Libri*: ii, 50–56.

<sup>26</sup> Claudian, *Claudii Claudiani Carmina*, ed. John Barrie Hall (Leipzig, 1985): 55.

were not moving aimlessly around the countryside, but aiming for selected targets. This would explain why Roman resistance collapsed so quickly and also why one entire legion mutinied and joined the invaders. Little wonder that the Roman authorities were so panicked.

## Late Fourth and Early Fifth Century

Within fifteen years the Picts felt sufficiently recovered to move against the Romans again. Once more the information is barely more than an announcement. One of Theodosius' officers named Magnus Maximus, who also hailed from what is now Spain, stopped another invasion by the Scots and Picts in 382.<sup>27</sup> His triumph encouraged him to declare himself emperor and lead troops from Britain to adventures on the continent. For five years he was successful, but was eventually defeated and slain. Magnus' connection with Britain might have been more than official. He reappears in Welsh literature as Maccsen Wledig (the name means "Prince Magnus") in the tale called *The Dream of Maccsen Wledig* where he is described as the emperor of Rome. The inscription on the pillar of Eliseg has a passage that seems to mean Magnus had a daughter named Severa, while he also appears in other genealogies.<sup>28</sup>

Sometime around the end of the fourth/beginning of the fifth century (the chronology is very vague at this point), the Picts, now in alliance only with the Scots, renewed their raids on Roman Britain. The Roman poet Claudian's eulogy of the great Vandal general Stilicho claims that large fleets were sailing from Ireland and that Stilicho gained a major victory over them on the western coast of Britain; a location has been suggested somewhere between Morecambe Bay and the Solway Firth.<sup>29</sup> This might be the same episode that the sixth-century author Gildas is referring to in his *Ruin of Britain* when he claimed that the Scots and Picts allied for attacks on Roman Britain.<sup>30</sup> There might have been more than a military aspect to these raids. While the debate continues on the period when the *Scoti* began making settlements on the western British

<sup>27</sup> For a helpful summary and discussion of the various records of his reign see Peter Salway, *Roman Britain* (Oxford, 1981): 401–409.

<sup>28</sup> P. Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogies* (Cardiff, 1966): 2; 10, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Salway, *Roman Britain*: 419 suggests a date *c.*398.

<sup>30</sup> Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Documents*, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Chichester, 1978): 21; 93, 14.

coast, from Brecknock to Argyllshire, the movement of troops to the continent in the late fourth and early fifth centuries would have been opportune times. In addition to the well-known settlements in what are now Wales and Scotland, place names suggest that smaller, less successful plantations were made.

Gildas claims that the Picts and *Scoti* were sailing to reach targets in Britain and he specifically mentions coracles.<sup>31</sup> These were light oval-shaped vessels with a wooden frame over which were stretched hides that had been treated to repel the water. Alliances between the Picts and Scots were military cooperation for commercial convenience. An aspect of these raids was the capture of slaves, and the best-known of these raiding parties came from Ireland to Britain and took captives including St. Patrick. Of course the raids were not new and had been going on for some time. A “Count of the Saxon Shore” had been set up more than a century earlier to guard eastern (imperial) Britain from raids. The danger from the west appears to have increased during the fourth century, as Ammianus Marcellinus suggests, and new fortresses had been built at Cardiff (to guard the passage from St. George’s Channel into the Bristol Channel) and Lancaster (on the eastern side of the Irish Sea).<sup>32</sup>

In connection with raiding is the interesting problem of the “Pict” boat, which the Roman military historian Vegetius mentions as a special kind of boat used round Britain. The passage describing the boat (bk. IV, ch. 37) is not entirely clear and it will accommodate more than one translation, but it seems to refer to a vessel – the Pict boat – that was a scouting craft with 20 rowers on each side. If this number is correct, then this was a substantial vessel, similar in crew to the Viking raiding ships. The Pict boat was unique in its camouflage; everything – hull, crew’s clothing, and tackle – was colored blue in order to blend in with the sea.<sup>33</sup> These Pict boats were used to find enemy craft and then take a report back to the main fleet, which could intercept the raiders. Of course there need not have been any connection of the boat with a people called Picts (setting aside the possibly that the original use of the boats by the Picts was copied by the Romans) and the name could simply refer to the painted (*picturatus*) vessel.

<sup>31</sup> Gildas, *Ruin of Britain*: 23; 94,19.

<sup>32</sup> James Campbell, *Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1982): 15.

<sup>33</sup> P. Flavius Vegetius Rhenanus, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, ed. Alf Önnersfors (Leipzig, 1995): 240–241.



The Romans were using different ploys in their dealings with the peoples beyond their control in the British Isles or newly settled in imperial territory by the last decades of the fourth century. It was not just usurpers who were moving outside the island and troops from Britain were being recruited to serve both at home and abroad. St. Jerome met the cannibalistic Attacotti while the latter were serving in the Roman forces in Gaul. Recruitment was not restricted to the peoples within the imperial boundaries. This change is visible in the Old Welsh genealogies for the men living north of Hadrian's Wall. Genealogies contain sobriquets showing signs of service, such as the phrase *pes-rut* (scarlet cloak). A scarlet cloak was worn by Roman officers and the practice of using the trappings of command to incorporate their foes into imperial service (or at least flatter them) was an old one. A prince named Padarn Beisrud (for *pes-rut*, "red cloak"), is the ancestor of Cunedda, the king credited in later Welsh materials with leading the "Men of the North" (i.e., beyond Hadrian's Wall) to Gwynedd, and he is found in the genealogy of the famous eleventh-century Hiberno-Welsh prince Gruffudd son of Cynan.<sup>34</sup>

Roman interest in their northern neighbors was also changing as can be seen from geographical materials. Where to meet the barbarians, rather than niceties about their internal composition, was now the main consideration. This is clear when comparing Roman geographical texts of different ages.<sup>35</sup> Ptolemy's second-century *Geography* has the names of assembly places in connection with specific peoples, but both the *Ravenna Cosmography*, a seventh-century compilation based on materials later than Ptolemy's, and the third-century *Antonine Itinerary* gives merely lists of towns.<sup>36</sup> A reason why the *Ravenna Cosmography* and the *Antonine Itinerary* dispense with tribal names and merely recite "towns" in relation to geographical position is that the Roman officials had less interest in the internal organization north of Hadrian's Wall. It is interesting that both those documents used information composed either while or soon after the Antonine Wall was an active Roman outpost. The names of the "towns" are probably the names of *loci* or assembly places north of Hadrian's Wall where imperial officials would recruit or pay their "allies."

<sup>34</sup> Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogies*: 44 (Cunedda); 36 (Gruffudd).

<sup>35</sup> I.A. Richmond, "Fourth Century AD and After," in *Roman and Native*: 150–155.

<sup>36</sup> A.L.F. Rivet and Kenneth Jackson, "The British Section of the Antonine Itinerary," *Britannia* 1 (1970): 34–82.

One *locus* was the Tay, apparently the river Tay, and it is also mentioned in the sixth-century Irish devotional tract called *Columba's Breastplate*, which has a line that describes how kings shout round the Tay, apparently a reference to a meeting with an acclamation.<sup>37</sup> How to pay allies outside the imperial boundaries became more difficult after a fourth-century prohibition on melting down money for the purpose of selling the bullion out of the empire; the same edict also ordered that ships bound for foreign ports and roads leading to the borders were to be watched.<sup>38</sup> This required a flexible interpretation of the aforementioned law. One solution might be visible in the hoard of silver fragments from Roman objects found north of Hadrian's Wall at Norrie's Law in Fife, which had to be in pieces in order to circumvent the prohibition.<sup>39</sup>

## Picts and the Last Days of Roman Britain

What can be seen in hindsight as a momentous decision was made in AD 408 when the emperor Honorius (grandson of the General Theodosius who had put down the Pictish Revolt) removed Roman troops from Britain. The decision to entrust the guarding of Britain to troops based in Gaul might have been seen at the time as a temporary expediency, but it would prove to be permanent. During the following decades there was a continued dwindling of imperial resources away from western Europe generally, and the fifth century is now regarded as the period of transition from classical antiquity to the Middle Ages in Europe. For Britain, this ushered in the an "heroic age," the era of men such as the missionary St. Patrick or the former-soldier-turned-bishop Germanus, or even the legendary Arthur. Despite the fame of individuals this is a difficult period for the historian. The scarce and often obscure documents from the fifth and sixth centuries are later supplemented by an avalanche of literary productions dealing with the period that might or might not contain scraps from genuine historical materials that have since disappeared.

By the end of the fourth century even the records maintained at Rome are vague about events in Britain; that is, of course, if Britain appears in

<sup>37</sup> P.L. Henry, *Saoithiúlacht na Sean-Ghaeilge* (Dublin, 1978): 195.

<sup>38</sup> Clyde Pharr, ed., *Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmundian Constitutions* (New York, 1952): 9, 23, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Lloyd Laing, "The Hoard of Pictish Silver from Norrie's Law, Fife," *Studia Celtica* 28 (1994): 11–38; he suggests that the metal was a votive offering (p. 35).

them at all. Little can be said for certain about what was happening in the south of Britain, much less beyond the frontiers of imperial control. The jostling for power among successful commanders such as Magnus Maximus, which led to local or regional civil wars, must have been as confusing to contemporaries outside the island as they are obscure to us. An example of how little is known comes from the aforementioned campaign in Britain of the great Roman general Stilicho. Stilicho was a Vandal, the son of a captain who had served Emperor Valens. He was one of Emperor Theodosius' leading generals, and after his master's death effectively administered the government of the teenage heir Honorius. Yet only in the verses of the poet Claudian do we learn that Stilicho had been in Britain where he defeated the Picts.<sup>40</sup> No date or place or any other detail is given. While current opinion places his campaign around 395 this is difficult to reconcile with his itinerary at that time, when he concentrated on dealing with the Goths under the leadership of his former comrade Alaric. Various other times can be put forward, such as the period after the defeat of Magnus in 387, when the imperial presence needed to be re-established. Nevertheless, all that is known about a campaign by the leading soldier of the Western Empire comes from an aside in verses composed by a court poet with the intention of flattering an emperor. The confusion increases when comparing the scattered accounts of local commanders defying imperial authorities with authors such as Claudian. The latter clearly had a confused idea of the geography and peoples of the British Isles. Referring back to his panegyric on the fourth consulship of the emperor Honorius (AD 398), for example, Claudian claims that the reconquest of Britain by Honorius' grandfather Theodosius caused the Orkney Islands to be stained with the blood of Saxons and that ice-bound Ireland wept for the slain Scots even as Thule was warmed by the slaughter of Picts.<sup>41</sup>

Setting aside the question of how much value the verses of Claudian have for official operations in Britain, he is a useful representative of how Britain was perceived in the imagination of the average "Roman on the street." He knew the island was surrounded by savages, with the Roman authorities (i.e., the military) holding back the swarms of Picts, Scots, and other barbarians. He remarks on the "tattooed life flowing out of the dying Pict" as an example of the success of Rome in dealing with the primitives who would dare to attack it. After the mid-fourth century more than mere paranoia was stoking the belief of Romano-Britons that

<sup>40</sup> Claudian, *Clavdii Clavdiani Carmina*: 215.

<sup>41</sup> Claudian, *Clavdii Clavdiani Carmina*: 62.

they were under concerted assault from the peoples beyond their borders. The imperial authorities had lost control of the island in the mid-fourth century due not just to turmoil within their own ranks, but also to invasions led by the despised peoples outside the frontier. For the “primitives” outside the imperial frontiers, Roman Britain must have seemed a promising location. Looking towards the south from the other side of Hadrian’s Wall, the important point to Picts or Scots about the Revolt of 367 was that it had succeeded even if only very briefly. There was not as much loyalty among the population as the Romans liked to pretend and the imperial forces had to fight their way back into the island.

## St. Germanus and the Picts

But was this a time of pandemonium in Britain? How damaging were the raids of the Picts? How quickly was the fabric of Roman Britain collapsing? While writers such as the later historian Gildas reinforce the idea of chaos, it is helpful to look at the different impression of life in Britain that is found in the *vita* (Latin for *Life*) of St. Germanus.<sup>42</sup> Germanus came from an aristocratic provincial family in Gaul and had served as a soldier before devoting himself to a religious life. His *Life* was written after his death by a man named Constantine who does not seem to have known Germanus personally, but who gathered his material from the saint’s acquaintances. Constantine claims that Germanus visited Britain at least twice in order to put down the Pelagian heresy. Pelagius was a Briton who had studied at Rome around AD 380 and developed a doctrine of Christianity that argued for the essential goodness of humans, which meant that they could achieve a state of grace through their own efforts, a direct refutation of the doctrine of original sin. These views became very popular and St. Augustine of Hippo devoted much of his later career to fighting Pelagius’ doctrine. During the second quarter of the fifth century, a synod was held in Britain about 429 at St. Albans (named after the first Christian martyr on the island) for the purpose of formulating plans to deal with the threat. In contrast with

<sup>42</sup> Constantinus of Lyon, “Life of Germanus of Auxerre,” trans. F.R. Hoare, in T.F.X. Noble and T. Head (eds.), *Soldiers of Christ* (University Park, PA, 1994): 75–106; and Constance of Lyon, *Vie de Saint Germain d’Auxerre*, ed. René Borius, *Sources Chrétiennes* 112 (Paris, 1965). For discussion see E.A. Thompson, *St. Germanus* (Woodbridge, 1984).

the description of chaos implied by Claudian and Gildas, Germanus' travel to and through Britain shows a peaceful and prosperous land with wealthy individuals who could support an intellectual class. The idea of continuity with Rome can be seen in the best-known episode connected with his visit, the so-called Alleluia Victory.<sup>43</sup> An invading force of Picts and Scots were advancing against the native British levies who had replaced the Roman forces. Germanus had been a military officer before his entrance into religious life and he was asked to lead the Britons, who were some distance away and outnumbered. The British force was stationed in what had been a Roman army camp situated in a mountainous district with a river nearby; the *vita* specifically mentions that Germanus inspected its outer-works. The bishop traveled to meet the troops during Lent, and the actual battle was fought either on Easter Sunday or the next day. Germanus' military expertise is clearly apparent: he sent out scouts to report on the invaders' movement and when battle was imminent, he moved his troops out of camp in order to intercept the enemy in a valley. As the Picts and Scots attacked, Germanus ordered the troops to shout "alleluia." The sound of the collective roar as it echoed in the valley terrified the invaders (according to the *vita*) who fled. Setting aside the miraculous element, this might have been a standard military tactic. A similar episode is described by Tacitus during the campaign of his father-in-law Agricola in Galloway. Roman troops were preparing to move against the northern tribes at night when there was an attack on the lines. Agricola gave a command that was relayed along the ranks at such a volume that the attackers were led to believe their opponents were more numerous, and they retreated. Returning to Germanus, his battle took place roughly twenty years after the legions had been removed by Honorius, so it is just possible that the British troops included veterans from the *colonna* who could have been drafted into fighting the enemy as well as local levies.<sup>44</sup> The cultural significance of the battle for Constantine's audience is that the Picts and Scots are presented as an armed mob, while Germanus' Britons show proper military discipline by fighting in formation, most visibly by remaining in place as the enemy advanced towards them. The contrast between Roman-trained troops

<sup>43</sup> Michael Jones, "The Historicity of the Alleluia Victory," in J. France and K. deVries (eds.), *Warfare in the Dark Ages* (Aldershot, 2008): 209–219.

<sup>44</sup> There might be a religious aspect and this passage has been read as part of the orthodox victory over Pelagianism; see Gerald Bonner, "The Pelagian Controversy in Britain and Ireland," *Peritia* 16 (2002): 144–155 (at p. 147).

and their savage opponents was a staple of Roman military literature. The Alleluia Victory suggests some modification of popular opinions of this time. The incursions of the Picts and Scots were not always by small raiding parties, but instead could be significant invasions; the Britons were so certain of defeat that they were cowering within ancient fortresses. But several centuries of Roman rule had not disappeared. The Britain of Germanus was a civilized and intact society still preserving the structure of a Roman province. It was not destined to last long.

The *Life of Germanus* does not explain why the Picts and Scots were campaigning, but an active trade at this time was that in slaves. The Irish legend of Niall of the Nine Hostages, the eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill, claims that his raiding took him as far as the English Channel (and later legends extended it farther south). Raiders from the Irish mentioned by Gildas probably had slaves as well as loot. St. Patrick was the most famous of the unfortunates captured by these bands. Although medieval accounts place his home along the Clyde in the vicinity of Dumbarton, he himself claims that he was born of British parents in Britain in the vicinity of *Bannavem Taburniae*, possibly Ravenglass in Cumbria.<sup>45</sup> His family were Christian and his grandfather had been a priest. At the age of 16, Patrick was carried off to Ireland before escaping and, eventually, returning to Britain. He returned as a missionary to Ireland, where he spent the rest of his days. All this information is supplied from his *Confession*, an autobiographical account of his spiritual development. Patrick is also our source of information that the slave traveled in both directions. His letter to Coroticus survives, complaining about his soldiers' capture of slaves that included Christians; Coroticus may have been the king of Strathclyde named Caratauc who appears in the genealogy in the British Library MS Harleian MS 3859.<sup>46</sup> By the seventh century, Muirchú, in his *vita* of Patrick, describes Coroticus as king of Aloo, apparently for Ail Cloithe or Strathclyde. Patrick's letter also shows that the identity of a Pict was changing. Now it ran along religious lines as well, and a Pict was not a Christian. Patrick makes clear that he does not regard Coroticus as a fellow citizen of the holy Romans (i.e. a Christian), but is counted among the Picts, Scots, and other apostates as allies of the demons.

<sup>45</sup> A.B.E. Hood (ed.), *St. Patrick, His Writings and Muirchu's Life* (Chichester, 1978): 23; 41, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Hood, *St. Patrick*: 35–38; Bartrum, *Early Welsh Genealogies*: 11 (section 16).

## Summary

There were at least two groups of people in ancient Europe known as Picts, one in what is now Atlantic France and the other in Northern Britain. The former is mentioned in the last century BC and then fades from the historical record until the name Pictavia becomes common again with the career of the famous Bishop Hilary of Poitiers. Pictavia is found three centuries later and remains current until the final usage of it in a contemporary sense in the tenth century. In Britain the name Pict originally was applied to everyone living north of Hadrian's Wall by a writer living in Gaul at the end of the third century. The amount someone living in the center of Gaul knew about the geopolitical makeup of Britain in the late third century probably was not great, but he had heard about a group of people called Picts, most likely from returning soldiers. His informants almost certainly had fought in the British campaigns of Constantius the Pale. They had used a slang term "the tattooed" for their foes and that nickname for the barbarians who lived to the north of Hadrian's Wall had become popular. As the Romans made a practice of recruiting from throughout the empire, there is no reason to suspect that those soldiers had any specific information about the northern peoples. Their choice of the word Pict might have been based on observed similarities with another group of people, the Pictones of the Atlantic coast or based on the observation, made two generations earlier by Herodian, that those people were decorated with designs on their bodies. Regardless, the name was destined to endure both because of its easy retention and descriptive powers, and because of the bluntness of it. Novelty did not mean that it automatically replaced all the earlier terms and ancient names such as Caledonian or Maeatae continued to be used. Since the word Pict originally identified anyone who lived to the north of Hadrian's Wall, later English writers were correct when they spoke of the Picts of Galloway, an area that was beyond the boundary of Roman administration. So at its greatest extent, Pictland included not merely the kingdoms north of the Clyde–Forth line, but also the kingdoms that appear in later writing and are known as Gododdin, Strathclyde, and Rheged.

Returning to a purely British context, however, it is clear that the collective name Pict was a creation of the conditions that developed on the edges of the empire. Comparison with other "barbarians" in Europe (such as the Alemanni) reveals that the Romans were attempting to understand how disparate groups could make common cause; an ability that did not fit the Roman idea of the savages beyond the imperial frontiers.

Certainly contemporary authors among the Romans such as the soldier/historian Ammianus saw them as more than just howling primitives, and he places the Picts among the leaders in assembling the famous Barbarian Conspiracy of the mid-fourth century. These contacts continued and when the Picts began to convert to Christianity, new ecclesiastical contacts led to creative exchanges with their former allies the *Scoti* whose missionaries labored among the Picts north of the Grampians, and these opened the way for connections with Irish churches.

There is little doubt that after Constantius the Pale had restored Britain to imperial control the *Picti* became the Roman's greatest problem in Britain. Whether acting alone on raids or in alliance with other "barbarians" the resulting unsteadiness culminated in the events of the year 367. Success against Rome must have emboldened all parties. Afterwards the Picts became almost a cliché as a foe whom the successful Roman commander defeated; and we would like to know the Picts' version of events. A new name for the northern peoples shows that the campaigns of Constantius were as important as the encomium claims. Despite efforts by Roman historians such as Ammianus to present a Britain firmly under imperial control, the reality was of a Rome facing foes capable of competing with them as equals. This was clearly demonstrated in 367 when the barbarians made common cause and temporarily took control of Britain. The timing could not have been worse for the imperial forces. Even though they reasserted control, the illusion of invincibility was gone, with too few forces to guard too much territory. Roman efforts to deal with the threat on their northern frontier show how important Britannia was to them. While the debate continues on the question "Why were the Roman troops withdrawn early in the fifth century?" it is clear that the activities of the Picts were making life very difficult for their enemies.

There are echoes here of the confrontations of the past. Oddity and ferocity were two legacies of late antiquity that survived long after the imperial troops were withdrawn from Britain. Tattooing, for example, was noteworthy. The seventh-century Bishop Isidore of Seville (c.560–636) associated it with everyone in the British Isles. He notes in his *Etymologies* (IX.2.103) that the Irish took their name from the practice of tattooing themselves with various figures, using an iron prick and black pigment.<sup>47</sup> He returns to the theme in his catalogue of characteristics,

<sup>47</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi; Tymologiarum Sive Originvm Libri XX*, ed. W.M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1911).



which includes the tattoos of the Britons and the Picts (XIX.23). He elaborates on the Picts by noting that an artisan uses a tiny point and juice from a native plant to give the nobility scars that were identifying marks.

A generation earlier the Byzantine historian Procopius (c.500–c.565) remembered the wall that separated the Roman world from the savages of the north. Procopius is a good example of how a well-informed individual could be confused about Britain, because he thought the island was actually two islands – Britain to the south and a second island called Britta that was opposite the mouth of the Rhine – and he also believed that the souls of the dead traveled to Britta. In his *History of the Gothic Wars* (VIII.20) he remarks on “the long wall” (i.e., Hadrian’s Wall) that separated Britta into two parts.<sup>48</sup> Good land, civilized people, and an abundance of food were in the south (which Procopius reorients to the east). On the northern (Procopius’ western) side, however, were savagery, snakes, and wild creatures. So pestilential was the air that a man or animal traveling from the civilized to the barbarous sides of the wall would die instantly, because the air was poisonous.

Whether as the land of the tattooed people or a pestilential wilderness, the regions outside of Roman control were rarely viewed in benign terms. Even someone such as Bishop Isidore who would be expected to have some reliable information cannot even decide who has body decoration and who does not. Little wonder that the Picts would hold their title of “mystery people” for such a long time.

<sup>48</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars*: V, 264.