

3. MEDIEVAL ORIGINS OF THE MODERN CELTS

By the time the demise of the Roman Empire in 5C AD Celtic speech had broadly succumbed to Latin on the Continent only remaining alive in the British Isles. By 500AD, some hundred years after the end of the Roman Empire, we find three distinct Celtic peoples, the Britons, Gaels and Picts, each of which was divided into separate and independent small kingdoms. By 1100AD, some six hundred years later, Celts remained only on the western and northern fringes of Britain. The Picts had disappeared, the Britons had split into the Welsh, Cornish and Bretons, whilst the Gaels had even then hardly begun to split into the later Irish Gaels, Manx Gaels and Scottish Gaels. These six peoples formed the nucleus of the medieval Celtic countries of Scotland, Mann, Wales, Cornwall and Brittany and will be given separate treatment below.

3.1 BRITONS (5C–7C)

The Britons (or British to use a more ambiguous term) were the inhabitants of Roman Britain south of the Forth-Clyde isthmus. They had lived for over 350 years under Roman rule and indeed had even been made Roman citizens by 212AD and had become romanised. It is conjectured that Latin became the everyday language of the towns and areas of south-east of England (roughly a line from York to Southampton) by the end of the Roman period, but that subsequently these romanised populations may have fled to the Continent. There is no doubt, however, that following the abandonment of Britain by the Roman government in 410AD, the remaining western areas of the Roman provinces that had not succumbed to the German conquerors display a predominantly Celtic linguistic character.

The first and basic clue is the retention of the Celtic language despite the admixture of terms of Latin origin such as the Welsh *pont* ‘bridge’, *fffenestr* ‘window’, *ysgrifen* ‘writing’, *diawl* ‘devil’ etc. Secondly, despite the persistence of a number of Latin names such as *Arthur* (*Artorius*), *Custennin* (*Costantinus*), *Emrys* (*Ambrosius*), *Geraint* (*Gerontius*), *Gwidol* (*Vitalis*) etc, they are outnumbered by purely Celtic names such as Welsh *Arthnau*, *Brochfael*, *Cadwaladr*, *Cadwallon*, *Cynfarch*, *Cynfelyn*, *Cynfael*, *Gwrgi*, *Hywel*, *Rhiwallon*, *Tudyr* etc. Thirdly, what we see in the much later attested medieval Welsh law and here and there in Breton sources is the existence of a law of kinship that owes nothing to Roman common law.

The Britons referred to themselves as *Brithon* ‘Briton’ (from which we get the W. *Brython* and B. *Brezon* and *Brezoneg* ‘Breton language’) but with the advance of the Germanic English they were cut off from each other: firstly the south-western British branch (which became the

Cornish) split after the defeat of 'Dyrham' near Bath in 577, or perhaps later, by early 7C; secondly the western British branch (which became the Welsh) and the north-western branch (which became the Cumbrians) became separated after the defeats of mid 7C. A great number of Britons must have fled westwards during the wars of 5C and 6C, but not only westwards, but overseas to the safety of other parts of the Roman Empire. A branch of Britons settled in the peninsula of Armorica in western Gaul and became the Bretons, and another branch settled in Galicia in north-western Spain.

The Welsh, Cornish and Breton branches survived for much longer and are thus much better known, and even if Cornish went out of circulation in 18C it survived in a few fossilised phrases into 20C and has been the object of a revival. Though accounted separate languages there is evidence that there was much intercomprehension between the language of 12C Welshmen and Bretons and that the latter was still mutually intelligible with Cornish into 17C. This is not the case at the present-day between Welsh and Breton (the degree of difference which can be construed as being roughly equivalent to that obtaining between German and English).

3.2 BRITTONIC SURVIVAL IN ENGLAND

There is a vigorous ongoing debate concerning the way in which lowland Britain was taken over by the Germanic peoples after the fall of the Roman Empire, a change that led to the formation of England and the English people. This change occurred broadly within a 250-year period (410–660AD). Originally it was thought that the change had denoted a wholesale ethnic change with Britons exterminated or ejected from their lands which were then settled by English (the 'cataclysmic' interpretation), but especially since the 1960s it has become more fashionable to view the English conquest as the imposition of an elite on a largely powerless and indifferent mass of static Brittonic peasants (the 'continuistic' interpretation). The 'cataclysmic' and 'continuistic' interpretations perhaps provide overly polarised explanations of how the changeover occurred from Brittonic to English during the period, and it is well within the span of possibilities that various regions experienced a variety of outcomes. Neither interpretation is unrealistic, but one should judge them according to the evidence we have from a broad knowledge of linguistics, history, archaeology and even genetics.

Even if nearly every author has a tendency to favour either a 'cataclysmic' or a 'continuistic' interpretation, it seems likely that an emerging consensus will dampen down the uncompromising stances of either side and recognise that there was an element of cataclysm as well as an element of continuity in the process that saw lowland Britain becoming England. The continuistic

interpretation, especially popular amongst English archaeologists, may simply reflect the bias of the *longue durée* (long term) type of analysis imposed upon archaeologists by the nature of the material remains which cannot reconstitute dramatic historical events occurring in a short-lived period of a few years.

An absolute extermination of whole populations is very unlikely, but the flight of natives before the English or their expulsion by the latter constitutes a quite reasonable hypothesis to explain events. In England, outside Cumbria and Cornwall, the persistence of Brittonic populations has been suggested in a few saints' lives and law codes, and more certainly in a number of place-names containing *eccles* 'church' (loaned from Brittonic and denoting a Christian settlement) and *walh* from English in the not uncommon place-name *Walton* (though many derive from the common noun *wall*). Surrounded by English-speaking populations, deprived of political and societal power, it is unlikely any enclave of Brittonic speakers survived in England proper beyond 800 AD. Introductory accounts of the retreat of the Britons before the English are Jackson (1953), Myres (1986), Snyder (1998: Chap.14), Charles-Edwards (2003: Intro. & Chap.1).

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3.3 CUMBRIANS (7C–11C)

The Cumbrians begin to take shape as a distinct branch of the Britons from 7C, after they were separated from their fellow Welshmen by English advances towards Cheshire and Lancashire. Indeed the name of their land (Latin *Cumbria*, English *Cumberland*) points to them having shared the same ethnonym with the Welsh, namely *Cymry* ‘compatriots’. The many Brittonic rulers of the Old North (*Yr Hen Ogledd*) of Welsh tradition were whittled down by English advances until, by 9C, only the dynasty of Strathclyde remained. Buffeted by English, Pictish and Scottish Gaelic rivalries, this Brittonic kingdom was dealt a heavy blow by the Scandinavians in the 870s and was forced into a union with the expanding kingdom of Scotland in 890 (the last client king ‘Owen’ is heard of in 1018). Thereafter it formed a dependent principality closely associated with the Scottish crown and became thoroughly gaelicised (in the north) or anglicised (in the south) so that by 12C the only remains of the language were in some items of legal vocabulary (one of which, *mercheta*, to this day in Welsh and Breton, means ‘courting’, or literally ‘collecting girls’) and in a number of place-names in southern Scotland and northern England are some place-names such as *Penpont*, *Penrith* etc. Notwithstanding the dearth of native records from Cumbria, there is good reason to believe that ‘Y Gododdin’, the most celebrated medieval Welsh poem, was a Cumbrian poem before it was transferred to Wales. The best introductory account of details of Cumbrian history is Smyth (1984).

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3.4 CORNISH (7C–11C)

Unlike the Cumbrians, the Cornish survived into the Modern era, but despite our greater familiarity with Cornish, its early medieval history is quite patchy and difficult to interpret. Cornwall appears to owe its name to its geographical character as an elongated peninsula (*corn* being ‘horn’ in Brittonic) rather than to any ‘tribal’ Celtic name such as the Cornovii known elsewhere. It originally formed part of Dumnonia (the land of the Dumnonii) which covered all

the south-west of England west of the Somerset Levels and Exeter, which was borrowed by the English as Devon. At some point in 8C–9C eastern Dumnonia was conquered and settled by the English and was thenceforth known as Devon(shire) whilst western Dumnonia, west of the Tamar river remained wholly Brittonic and was thenceforth distinguished as Cornwall (Cornish *Kernow*, Welsh *Cernyw*, Latin *Cornubia*). There certainly was a king of Cornwall named Doniert who died in 875, but thereafter Cornwall seems to have become integrated into the emerging state of England since Edmund, the English king, in 944 styled himself “King of the English and ruler of this province of the Britons.” Cornwall still had a native auxiliary bishop of its own in the early 10C (Conan), but the setting up of an independent Cornish bishopric at Saint Germans between 994–1046 seems to have been an accommodation that was not long-lived. The history of early Cornwall is complicated by the existence of both a Cornwall and Dumnonia (French *Cornouaille*, *Domnonée*) in Brittany and the indifferent use of Welsh in Old English sources for both the Cornish and the Welsh of Wales. Arthur, the semi-legendary leader of the Britons in their struggle against the English invaders of Britain came to be particularly associated with Cornwall and with the Cornish fortress of Tintagel. Similarly the romantic tale of Tristan and Isolde, which would later take such a hold on the European imagination, seems to have been originally set in Cornwall (though, again in this case, king Mark can also be located in Brittany).

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3.5 WELSH (6C–11C)

The broad mountainous peninsula of western Britain only becomes Wales after the Britons there become separated from their Cumbrian and Cornish countrymen in 7C. In fact the ancient name Briton (Welsh *Brython*) only slowly becomes replaced by *Cymro* ‘compatriot’ during the early Middle Ages, which in the plural *Cymry* ‘compatriots’ gives its name to the country (though a respelling in the later Middle Ages artificially distinguishes *Cymru* ‘Wales’ from *Cymry* ‘(the) Welsh’). The borders of Wales are confirmed by the monumental earthwork named Offa’s Dyke (Welsh *Clawdd Offa*) erected under the Mercian king Offa in the 790s and remain substantially the same until 11C when the Welsh recapture lands in the north-east up to the defenses of Chester.

Of all the Brittonic lands it is Wales which preserves the greatest amount of early medieval literature although much is likely to have been lost during 11C when the Norman French were

carrying out their depredations. Very few texts of Welsh origin predating the Norman French irruption into Wales survive, however the native Welsh literature written later testifies to a large measure of continuity with the pre-conquest period (compositions of the pre-conquest period, include poetry, genealogies, annals, law and tales – though some were originally Latin – and despite being incomplete constitutes a rich source for the history and attitudes of early medieval Wales and even in some cases and parts of Britain where the Welsh). There has been a tendency, most especially in Brittany, but also in northern England/southern Scotland, to supplement gaps in the evidence relating to other early medieval Brittonic societies by using Welsh sources: this can prove to be a very unsound way of proceeding, even if a very cautious comparison between these societies can be enlightening. It must always be remembered that Wales was less integrated into the civil administration of the Roman Empire than were the southern lowlands of Britain whence the ancestors of the Cornish and the Bretons are likely to have originated, so that we should perhaps not expect them to have shared the same institutions from the beginning. The Welsh seem to have borrowed much from the Romans without having abandoned their own cultural institutions and characteristics. Certainly, the Welsh laws do not seem to owe much to Roman law but rather more to a kin-based society.

The cumulative weight of the native literary evidence and of Welsh place-names gives us a fairly general appreciation of the broad lines of early medieval Welsh society back to the 6C. What is surprising is that this relatively rich body of ancient traditions on various regions and localities of Wales is completely missing immediately one crosses Offa's Dyke even within eyesight of Welsh-speaking districts. What this reveals is the local bias of traditions and the lack of far-ranging enquiring scholarship in the body of early medieval texts of Welsh origin. The exception, the 9C *Historia Brittonum*, is pedestrian and incomplete in its achievements compared to Bede's earlier *History of the English People*. The fullest all-round accounts of early medieval Wales are Lloyd (1939) and W. Davies (1982).

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3.6 BRETONS (5C–10C)

The Britons who crossed the sea to settle in Gaul became known as Bretons and their country Brittany (the French correspondents *Breton* and *La Bretagne* refer to either Bretons/Brittany or British/Britain whence the usual collocation *La Grande Bretagne* for Britain). There are, arguably, three main strands of historical interest concerning medieval Brittany.

Firstly why, when and how was north-western Gaul (France) transformed into a little Britain? The interaction between the incoming Britons and the native Gauls is a matter of burning controversy: elite cultural diffusion ('continuity') or ethnic replacement ('cataclysm')? What relation was there between the earliest Bretons and the Germanic Franks who conquered Gaul and created the earliest kingdom of France in 5C? What was the nature of the Christian organisation of early Brittany? The best introductory accounts of the settlement of Brittany are Chadwick (1965), Fleuriot (1980)¹ and Giot et al. (2003).

Secondly the period of the revolt of Nomenoe against the French emperor which saw the establishment after 849 of an independent Breton kingdom which lasted as such until its destruction by Norsemen in 913–36. The political success of the Breton rulers at this time saw the annexation of the French-speaking counties of Rennes and Nantes which facilitated the adoption of many Carolingian influences in politics and in culture. See Smith (1992).

Thirdly, we see the establishment of a duchy and not a kingdom of Brittany on the return of a Breton ruler in 936.

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3.7 GALICIAN BRITONS (5C–8C)

¹ In French, not available in English.

Britons fleeing the English advance in Britain had settled as a group in Galicia in north-western Iberia (Spain) by mid-5C. Their bishops, bearing Brittonic names such as *Haeloc*, are attested in the Spanish Visigothic kingdom as late as 8C. This Galician branch appears to have ceased to have constituted a distinctive group within a few centuries, all that remains is the church – once a bishopric – of Santa Maria de Britonia in Galicia.

3.8 IRISH (4C–12C)

The term Gael (anciently *Goidel*) the self-designation of the Irish is not attested before 7C and oddly enough is supposed to derive from the Brittonic word which means ‘wild’ and so it would seem to have originally be an exonym (that is a name bestowed by others, as opposed to an endonym, a self-bestowed name). The Gaels, speaking a Q-variety of Celtic constituted the major indigenous portion of the Celtic inhabitants of Ireland during the Roman period. And whilst some areas had been colonised by Britons (Irish *Breatan*) in the south, e.g. *Dúnbreatan* in County Waterford, and to a greater extent by Picts (Irish *Cruithin*) in the north-east, these were thoroughly gaelicised early in the medieval period.

By the late Roman period it was the Gaels themselves who were colonising parts of western Britain, Cornwall and Devon, Wales, Mann and parts of Scotland. In the southern parts of Britain, the Gaels were incorporated into the Brittonic populations and Gaelic kings slowly became Brittonic. The bilingual 5C inscription of Castellldwyran names a king of south-west Wales bilingually as Brittonic *Voteporigis* and as Gaelic *Votecorigas*; by 9C the Gaelic origin of this dynasty had been censored by Welsh genealogists. On the other hand, in the Isle of Man and in Scotland Gaelic colonisation resulted in the permanent takeover of the land by the Gaels and the origin of the Scots and Manx people. The connections between Scotland and Ireland were so continuous and unbroken that we can talk of a Gaelic language continuum that lasted until the beginning of the present century. In the 1870s, Irish speakers from County Antrim attending the fairs on the Isle of Arran in Scotland were able to converse quite easily with the local Gaels. As Colm Ó Baoill says, it is only because the terms Irish and Manx are so commonly used in English that we fail to see that these ‘languages’ are called by the same name by their speakers (*Gaeluinn*, *Gaeilge*, *Gaeilig*, *Gàidhlig* according to dialect).

The conversion of Ireland to Christianity did not occur overnight and congregations of believers had probably settled through the influence of trade with the Roman Empire long before Palladius was appointed their bishop by the Pope in 431. Patrick (*Patricius*), the traditional apostle of Ireland was active in the still pagan northern part of Ireland in the second half of 5C. He was a

Christian Briton who had been captured by Irish raiders. The meagre evidence of that period makes us see 6C as the time at which Ireland became a Christian country. The main catalyst for the spread of Christianity seems to have been the continuing prestige of the Roman Empire carried by the British and Gaulish Churches (there had been Irish colonies in Cornwall and South Wales since 5C). An influential 6C penitential code was attributed to the British saint Gildas and it has been persuasively argued that the celebrated 6C *Finnian* was none other than the British saint *Gwynio*. It would seem that many in the traditional learned classes converted to Christianity and soon established monasteries endowed with lands by the kings. It is suspected that previously holy sites and wells were appropriated by Christianity (a case in point is that of the goddess *Brigantia* who seems to have been euhemerised as a saint, the celebrated *Brigid* of Kildare). Mother monasteries established daughter monasteries and soon monastic federations, often associated with particular kingdoms, were to characterise Irish Christianity. And whereas British Christianity in 6C suffered the blows of loss of territory to the English, Irish Christianity was to flourish in this period. Indeed, following the move of Columbanus (†615) to eastern France around 590, there was a remarkable extension of missionary activities in 7C in what is now present-day Germany and Switzerland by monks of Irish origin (then usually known as Scots). This Irish golden age of evangelising contributed to the christianising of the Germans and explains the survival of the oldest examples of the Irish language in the form of glosses on Latin manuscripts in Germany and Italy (the Würzburg, Sankt Gall, Milan, Turin glosses dating from 8C–9C). There is evidence that the Irish monastic diaspora directly superseded and earlier 5C and 6C monastic diaspora of British monks (indeed a number of manuscripts contain glosses in both Old Irish and Brittonic).

The infamous Norsemen or Vikings (I. *Lochlannaigh*) first appeared as sea raiders in 795 and were constant attackers of Ireland, especially its monasteries, in early 9C. In the 830s large fleets established raiding bases at the estuaries of large rivers which were soon fortified harbours known as in Irish as *longphort*. Coastal trading towns grew on the site of these fortified harbours at Dublin (841), Cork (mid 9C), Wexford (c.921), Waterford (917), Limerick (922) and by 900 these had developed into the first Irish towns (though initially inhabited by Norse) and these Norse minted the first Irish coins. Throughout 9C and 10C the Norse kings of Dublin were heavily involved in wars in northern Britain by which they brought back valuables and slaves (indeed the same family ruled Dublin and York until 952). By 1000 the Norse had mostly converted to Christianity and were being assimilated to Irish life. Little by little, Irish kings imposed their rule on these towns, with Limerick falling in 967, and Dublin submitting in 1052 (many years after the celebrated victory over them by the Irish at Clontarf of 1014, traditionally seen as their final demise).

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3.9 MANX (5C–13C)

The Isle of Man was originally a Brittonic kingdom one of whose late 8C kings, Gwriad, is recorded at the cemetery of Maughald. Gwriad's son, Merfyn Frych, went over to Wales in 825 and founded the dynasty which ruled the kingdom of Gwynedd until the end of Welsh independence in 1282. Ogam inscriptions attest the early presence of Gaels in Mann, but the precise relationship between Gaels and Britons is unknown, as is what happened immediately after Merfyn left for Wales. By the late 9C, the Norse had taken control of the Isle of Man and they were to rule Mann for centuries. Norse Mann was intimately linked to the Norse kingdoms of Dublin and Orkney which kingdoms enjoyed supremacy over much of the Norse settlements in western Britain. In 1079 Godred Crovan established his rule on Mann and the Hebrides (even controlling Dublin for a while) and founded the kingdom of Mann and the Isles which his descendants ruled until 1266. In 1164 Somerled (Scottish Gaelic *Somhairle*) established the kingdom of the Isles (Hebrides) thus leaving Godred's descendants in control only of Mann. The kingdom of Mann owed allegiance to the king of Norway and when Magnus VI ceded his domination over the kingdom of Mann and the kingdom the Isles to the king of Scotland in 1266. Thereafter Mann would be ruled from Scotland or England.

Like other Norse areas, the benefits of sea power gave the Isle of Man more political weight than its small landed area would suggest. Ragnvald Godredsson, ruler of Mann and the Isles (r. 1187–1226) was a power to be reckoned with in the seas between Britain and Ireland who patronised religious houses round the shores of the Irish Sea and maintained diplomatic relations with the rulers of surrounding lands and beyond. He was praised both by Irish bards and Icelandic saga-men as a great warrior. It is unclear what was the precise relationship between the Gaels and

the Norse during the Norse era from the 9C to 13C but, like other Norse-dominated areas in western and northern Scotland, by 1300 Mann had become a wholly Gaelic-speaking country.

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3.10 SCOTTISH GAELS (5C–11C)

The origin of the Scottish Gaels harks back to a post-Roman dynamic Irish settlement the period on the western coast of Scotland known as *Oirthir Gaedheal* ‘the Gaelic edge’ (present-day *Argyll*, the west coast of Scotland all the way to Ardnamurchan). The Gaels were certainly present in Scotland by 6C and the made their presence felt under their forceful king Aedán mac Gabrán of the late 5C who raided far into the land of the Picts. The Scottish Gaels seem to have subsequently split under different rulers and were not able to progress much politically against the Picts. Traditionally, it is held that it is Kenneth mac Alpin who united Argyll and the Pictish kingdom in the 840s as the new kingdom of Scotland (Latin *Scotia*). The term Scot originally meant an Irish person but as they took over the northern part of Britain that land became known as *Scotland* (the Gaelic name of the country is *Alba* originally meant ‘Britain’). However – as Smyth (1984: 179) has shown – Kenneth mac Alpin had been preceded as ruler of both peoples by other Argyll rulers in the previous generation, namely Constantin mac Fergus (†820), who ruled from the Pictish lands rather than Argyll. Kenneth mac Alpin’s fame rests upon the fact that he dispensed with the last instances of Pictish resistance to the Gaels early in his reign and that he was the ancestor of a long-lasting dynasty kings of the new united kingdom of Scotland.

The sudden Gaelic dominance of the Picts can be explained by the pressures of Scandinavian attacks on the western coasts which saw the famed monastic community abandon Iona between 807–49. But Gaelic influence had been infiltrating into Pictland since at least 7C especially due to the organised expansion of churches of Columba of Iona (in 717 the Pictish king Nechtan had expelled Ionan clergy from his lands). The distribution of the Gaelic ecclesiastical term *cill* ‘church’ in Scotland suggests that by early 9C Gaelic population had already in significant numbers infiltrated southern Pictland and the Moray Firth, though not the easternmost parts of Pictland between Elgin and Dundee (Nicolaisen 2001: 165–68, 183–86). From the 9C onwards, under Gaelic rulers, and – presumably – an influx of Gaels escaping the Scandinavian depredations of the west, the Pictish language eventually gave way and eventually all the people

Scotland became Gaelic speaking. The best introductory account of early Scottish Gaelic history is Smyth (1984 Chaps. 4 & 6), Laing & Laing (1993 Chap. 2).

The Norse Vikings began making their presence felt all around the western seaways through violent raids and depredations by the beginning of the 9C. Though there is no clear account of exactly how the raids turned into settlements, it is generally agreed that by 900 the Norse had settled extensively in the Northern Isles (Shetland and Orkney), most of the northern extremity of Scotland (from Beaulieu northwards), all over the west coast, the Western Isles (Outer Hebrides, Tiree and many other islands). Initially, the Norse appear to have completely supplanted the pre-existing Celtic populations of Gaels and Picts, but later as the centuries wore on they became gaelicised so that by about 1300, at the latest, the Western Isles were completely Gaelic speaking. The same phenomenon occurred, no doubt earlier, on the Scottish mainland, though Caithness (Scottish Gaelic *Gallaibh* '[the] foreigners'), the north-eastern tip of the original Sutherland retained its Norse language into the modern period after it was replaced by Scots and English. The Norse language – usually termed Norn – survived even later in Orkney and Shetland, but were also replaced by Scots and then English.

The south-western peninsula of Scotland was also settled a little later in the 10C by the Norse who had already settled in Ireland and the Isle of Man. These Norse, mixed with Gaels formed a mixed group called *Gall-Ghaidheil* 'foreign Gaels' which ethnic name was transferred to the region ending as English Galloway. Ultimately, like in many other areas, the language which prevailed was Gaelic. It is somewhat ironic that in 20C Gaelic survived only in areas which had once been predominantly or even completely Norse, and anthropologists, linguists and historians have been quick to link certain features – both physical and cultural – of the 20C Scottish Gaels to their surmised Norse ancestry.

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3.11 PICTS (3C–9C)

The Picts of early medieval Scotland, a native people distinct from the Britons and the Irish, seem always to have aroused curiosity and inspired all kinds of esoteric theories as to their origin.

They were first noted under that name at the end of the Roman Empire and the name Pentland Firth, between Orkney and Caithness, surmised to be Norse *Pettarlan* (E. Pictland) meant that the Picts were still a recognisable people in the early 9C. However, their existence as a people was not to last following the 9C political union with the Gaels and they were subsumed into the new Gaelic-speaking kingdom of Scotland never to be heard of again except as a semi-legendary doomed race.

There is no disagreement that the Picts had a language which in the early medieval era was considered distinctive, however since there are hardly any extant documented remains of the language and many of those remains are puzzling there is no wholesale consensus as to the nature of their language. In all likelihood the Picts were those northern Britons who were never conquered by the Romans and their language developed from a dialect akin to the language of the southern Britons (the ancestor of modern-day Welsh), this can be supported by certain lexical similarities between Welsh and the place-names of Pictland that are not found in Ireland, e.g. *aber* in Aberdeen and Aberystwyth; Scottish Gaelic *monadh* ‘mountainland’ cognate to Welsh *mynydd* ‘mountain’ found in in Monadh Liath. From its distribution in eastern Scotland and its absence in Ireland, the obsolete Scottish Gaelic *peit* ‘share’ found in many names, such as Pitlochry, is demonstrably a loan from the language that preceded Gaelic, namely Pictish. Furthermore, the fact that the word contains a <p> confirms that Pictish was a form of P-Celtic (an important diagnostic in differentiating varieties of Celtic), again confirming the closeness of Pictish to Brittonic rather than to Gaelic.

While it can no longer be doubted that there existed a Celtic language in Pictland in this period, there has been a stubborn conviction among some scholars that Pictish was a non-Indo-European language, i.e. a language that preceded the coming of the Celts. Prof. John Rhys of Oxford proposed this explanation in 1892, followed by Prof. Heinrich Zimmer of Berlin in 1894. Comforted by the existence of non-Indo-European Basque in the Pyrenees, their hypothesis was based on:

1. a number of indecipherable inscriptions dating to the seventh-ninth centuries in the heart of the kingdom of the Picts, and
2. a supposed non-Indo-European matrilineal succession of kings based on a sentence of the seventh-century contemporary northern English historian Bede.

Alfred Smyth, in his book *Warlords and Holy Men* (1984), fatally weakened the view that the Picts had matrilineal succession for their kings and excepting a number of personal-names the indecipherable inscriptions of Pictland remain for the moment just that: mostly indecipherable (with unconvincing attempts to decipher them by resorting to Basque or to Norse). The best introductory account of Pictish history is Smyth (1984 Chap.2) and for the problem of the Pictish language Jackson (1955), Forsyth (1997).

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