P is for Picts! [The A—Z of Scottish History, contd.]

I've touched upon this fascinating people briefly in my very first A to Z article on the Kingdom of Alba, however they certainly warrant their own feature! The Picts were ancient people who inhabited the eastern and north eastern areas of Scotland (north of the Firth of Forth) appearing in the written record from the third century AD to the tenth. Their name derives from the latin name *Picti* meaning *painted* due to their custom of body painting and tattoos.

The origins of the Picts is still a bit of a mystery, but it is largely believed that they were descendents of the Caledonii, pre-Celtic aborigines. They were known to have a distinct Pictish language that was similar to Brittonic, the language spoken by the Brits in the south. A Pictish confederation came into being in Late Antiquity from the combining of several tribes and grew in size, widely speculated as a result of the threat from the Romans, who were perpetually fearful of the continuous attacks from the Picts and Scots. A united "Pict-land" had been established by the 7th century, which had already been penetrated by Christianity. In 843, the Kingdom of Alba was created when Kenneth MacAlpin, king of the Scots, also became king of the Picts.

Like most societies in Europe during this period, the Picts were farmers living in small communities. Their diet relied heavily on cereal crops such as wheat, barley, oats and rye and vegetables like kale, cabbage, onions, leeks, peas and beans and turnips. Fish, shellfish, seals and whales were exploited along coasts and rivers and the importance of domesticated animals suggests that meat and dairy products were also a large staple in the diet of ordinary folk.

Loch Tay Crannog

Early Picts have been associated with piracy and raiding along the coasts of Roman Britain, however at this time the line between traders and piracy was unclear so Pictish pirates were likely honest merchants on other occasions. It is believed the Picts would have lived in Brochs or roundhouses, but these existed long before the arrival of the Picts.

They also would have lived in Crannogs, artificial islands built on lochs and other waterfronts.

What I love most about the Picts are the remarkable Pictish symbols that they left behind. At least 50 designs have been discovered, carved on stones, cave walls, bones and stunning silver jewellery. The purpose of these symbols seems to have been to convey identities, most likely personal names. The most conspicuous examples of Pictish artwork is seen on the many Pictish stones that are located all over Pictland, from Inverness to Lanarkshire. Pictish metalwork is also found throughout Pictland (modern day Scotland) and also further south; the Picts appeared to have a considerable amount of silver available, probably from raiding further south, or the payment of subsidies to keep them from doing so.

The Whitecleuth Chain, dating

The Aberlemno Serpent Stone from 400—800AD

The Picts are a fascinating people and recent research has helped to provide answers to some of the most common questions posed about them. Thanks to large-scale archaeological investigations we know much more about their symbol stones, their lifestyle and where they lived. However, there is still much to be uncovered.

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