

Language in Pictland, Spoken and Written

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"Why, man," said Oldbuck to Lovel, "there was once a people called the Piks—"

"More properly *Picts*," interrupted the Baronet.

"I say the *Pikar, Pihar, Piochtar, Piaghter, or Peughtar*," vociferated Oldbuck; "they spoke a Gothic dialect —"

"Genuine Celtic," again asseverated the knight.

"Gothic! Gothic, I'll go to death upon it!" counter-asseverated the squire.

"Why, gentlemen," said Lovel, "I conceive that is a dispute which may be easily settled by philologists, if there are any remains of the language."

Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*,
1816, Chapter VI.

Jonathan Oldbuck and Sir Arthur Wardour were neither the first nor the last to fall into heated dispute over the question of the Pictish language. The controversy has proved enduringly attractive not least because there is more at stake than philological niceties. If language is the touchstone of ethnicity, then to determine the nature of the Pictish language would be to establish a key fact about the make-up of Scottish ethnic identity, **the** key fact in the eyes of those who would prefer not to have to trace their national origin to what they regard as a mere Irish colony! As William Ferguson has said, to some scholars, the shadowy Picts 'were evidently plastic people who can be moulded into any desired shape' (1991, 22), and over the years the Picts have been tailored to the needs of several different ethno-linguistic agendas.

In Scott's lampoon, the antiquary Oldbuck champions John Pinkerton's view that Pictish was a Germanic language, the ancestor of modern Broad Scots (Pinkerton 1789). A more persistent nineteenth century theory was that it was from the language of the indigenous Picts, rather than the Dál Riadic incomers, that Scottish Gaelic was descended, and that Pictish was thus a Q-Celtic¹ language which had reached Scotland independently of Ireland (Skene 1836; Fraser 1923, 1927; Diack 1944). Even a cursory glance at the evidence proves both of these theories are contrary to the facts.

That the nature of Pictish is still open to dispute is a reflection of the meagre and fragmentary nature of the evidence. The language is attested almost solely in the form of proper names (of people, places, or population groups). These remains are, however, quite sufficient to indicate conclusively that Pictish was a P-Celtic or Brittonic language similar to, but not identical with, the British dialects spoken further south. This is not to imply that the question of the Pictish language has been settled, far from it. There is still room for debate over the precise relation between Pictish and the other members of the P-Celtic group, and over the extent, if any, of a pre-Indo-European component to the language. Reconciling the apparently contradictory testimony of material of widely differing date and origin presents a technical challenge to Celtic scholars, but there is general consensus on the broad outline of the Pictish linguistic picture.

Classical accounts of the geographical nomenclature of northern Britain, preserved in the writings of Tacitus, Ptolemy and others, indicate that already by the arrival of the first Roman forces there were Celtic speakers throughout Scotland: from Kintyre, the land of the *Epidii* ('horse-folk') to Orkney (*Orcades*) 'islands of the young-boar-folk'. The earliest named individuals have Celtic names, *Calgacus* 'Swordsman' and *Argentocoxos* 'Silver Leg', as do most of the tribes, *Cornavii* 'promontory-folk', *Venicones* 'Kindred hounds' i.e. 'noble kindred' (Koch 1980).

While the majority of the names can be identified as Celtic, not all can be assigned to a particular branch. None **must** be Q-Celtic, and some are definitely P-Celtic, so it is probably safe to conclude that the speech of the immediate ancestors of the historic Picts was non-Goidelic. This tallies with the testimony of Adomnán that in the sixth century the Irish-speaking Columba needed an interpreter to communicate with Picts, and the account in the *Life of St Findan*, that a ninth century Orcadian abbot could converse with a fugitive Irishman only because he had studied in Ireland in his youth (Thomson 1986).

If we relied solely on the evidence of the Pictish place-names that survive to the modern period we might conclude that Pictish was merely the northern off-shoot of the British language spoken in Cumbria and Wales (Watson 1926). As Nicolaisen has stressed, this material is an important indication that Pictish was not isolated, but to a certain extent part of a British linguistic continuum. The distribution of *Pit*-place-names (fig. 4), however, is a reminder that in some respects Pictish was distinct (Nicolaisen 1972). It is clear from Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* (eighth century) and Cormac's *Glossary* (ninth century) that contemporaries in England and Ireland regarded Pictish as a separate language.

Detailed philological study has shown that, while Pictish is closer to British than to any other Celtic dialect, occasionally it diverges from British in ways that are closer to Gaulish (or even in a few cases, Irish) (Koch 1983; Jackson 1953, 1955). On the strength of this it has been classed as an independent member of the Gallo-Brittonic family (Stokes 1890; MacBain 1892, 1897, 1902; O'Rahilly 1946; Jackson 1955). The disruptive effect on north-south communication of the Roman invasion may be one reason why Pictish diverged from British. Analysis by Koch and Jackson, however, suggests that the separate development may have begun as early as the first century BC, and therefore reflects a pre-Roman ethnic divide at the Forth (Koch 1983, 216).

Much has been made of the allegedly pre-Indo-European aspects of Pictish language and culture. To an extent this is yet another reflection of the 'plastic Picts' syndrome identified by Ferguson. By labelling the Picts as non-Indo-European and thus mysterious and exotic the romantic nationalist was able to preserve their exclusivity and 'otherness'. There are two principal variations on the non-Indo-European Pictish theory. Firstly, some have argued that Pictish **was** non-Indo-European (Rhys 1892, 1898; Zimmer 1898; MacNeill 1933, 1939; Macalister 1940). The evidence cited above demonstrates that this is patently not the case. The other version, that put forward by the great Celtic scholar, Kenneth Jackson, and widely reproduced in the standard accounts of the Pictish language, is that there were, in fact, **two** languages spoken in Pictland, one for everyday use, the Gallo-Brittonic language of the incoming Celtic élite, and the other, the pre-Indo-European language of the aboriginal population, reserved for ritual or epigraphic purposes (Jackson 1955). Jackson's theory has proved highly influential, so it is worth considering in some detail.

Firstly, it should be stated that the survival of Basque to the present proves that there is nothing inherently implausible about the survival of a pre-Indo-European language in northern Britain until the early medieval period. Secondly, the question of whether or not the Picts practised matriliney or any other supposedly non-Indo-European custom, such as tattooing, is largely irrelevant to the issue of the kind of language they spoke. Thirdly, whatever language the Bronze Age inhabitants of Scotland spoke it is not improbable that a few of their pre-Celtic words should have survived into the later language, just as a small handful of British words were borrowed into Modern English.

Jackson compiled statistics to show that there was a strikingly large proportion of non-Indo-European forms among the northern British names preserved by the Classical authors. Since then it has been plausibly argued that a number are indeed Celtic after all, and that Jackson's figures are too high. Nor is there any longer linguistic or archaeological support for his tentative suggestion that 'non-Indo-European Pictish' was stronger in the North. The highly garbled transmission of the king-list means that little weight can be attached to the few names appearing there for which no satisfactory 'Celtic' explanation can be found. Even if it is accepted that Columba's adversary, the Pictish king *Bruide* had a non-Celtic name, the significance of this is diminished by the fact that his father was called *Maelchon* (cf. Welsh *Maelgun*, Irish *Máelchú*).

Were it not for the presence of the inscriptional evidence, which forms the main plank in Jackson's argument, the handful of names 'not clearly Celtic' could be explained away as the remnants of a non-Indo-European substratum. These inscribed texts are the only contemporary documents from Pictland and so their testimony is very important and not to be dismissed lightly. There are ten extant inscriptions in the Roman alphabet: three solely in Latin and therefore giving no information on the nature of the vernacular; four contain native names but are too fragmentary to indicate much with certainty; one, the Newton Stone, though presumably in some form of debased cursive script has yet to be deciphered. This leaves only two, the inscribed silver chape from St Ninian's Isle, Shetland, and the panel of text on the Class II cross-slab from St Vigean known as the Drosten Stone. There is considerable doubt over the interpretation of the former, and the latter exhibits Irish orthography and is therefore not a straightforward witness to the nature of Pictish.

The majority of Pictish inscriptions are written in the ogham script, which consists of groups of one to five short strokes placed in various positions relative to a vertical stem-line (figs 3, 32). In Ireland and in the Irish colonies along the Western shores of Britain there are approximately 370 ogham inscribed stones dating from the fifth to seventh centuries. Only a handful of stones of this early type exist in Scotland, the bulk of Scottish oghams are later (seventh to tenth century). When Jackson was doing his seminal work on the Pictish language it was widely believed that the ogham inscriptions were unintelligible, and therefore to be interpreted as an illiterate approximation of writing or as the written manifestation of a pre-Indo-European language. More recent work has demonstrated that the texts were indeed meaningful messages containing, in the main, personal names of recognisably Celtic character. Of the twenty-nine ogham inscriptions extant in the area of Pictland six are too weathered or too fragmentary to supply linguistic information. Once due allowance has been made for orthographic problems and physical damage, most of the rest may be analysed in terms of Celtic personal names or personal name elements (e.g. Dunodnat, Conmor, Edarnon, Talorg, Nechtan). Many difficulties still remain, but it would be fairer to say that the jury is still out on the small handful which have resisted explanation, rather than that the non-Indo-European verdict has been passed definitively. Beyond the inscriptions there is no evidence that Pictish was a written language. The ogham alphabet is not suitable for extended use in manuscripts, which in any case are most likely to have been written in Latin, the language of the Church.

In the foregoing discussion the Pictish language has been discussed as if it were a fixed entity when, in fact, over the course of the first millennium it underwent radical change and eventual extinction. The 'socio-linguistics' of Pictish is a complicated issue for which there is only the slenderest evidence. It is possible that Anglo-Saxon incursions south of the Forth led to an influx of aristocratic British émigrés, and a consequent strengthening of the British aspects of Pictish in the sixth and seventh centuries. A more important development was the steady Gaelicisation of Pictland. The Irish origin of the ogham script, and the tendency of Irish sources to substitute an Irish cognate for a foreign name, may make Pictish appear in the sources more 'Irish' than it really was, but nonetheless, the survival of Gaelic and the extinction of Pictish is incontrovertible proof of the increasing marginalisation of the latter. Whether Gaelic enjoyed prestige in the eyes of the Picts because it was associated with the Church or a successful warrior élite is a question which remains

to be answered, but the decline of the modern Celtic languages in recent times demonstrates that language change is a social not merely a demographic issue, and that invasions need not necessarily be invoked to account for language death.

The Pictish language may have outlasted the Pictish kingdom by several generations. We can speculate about a period of bi-lingualism during which Pictish lingered on in peripheral areas, reserved for informal or family settings, but of course this would be invisible in the written record. Pictish survives today only fossil-like in certain of the place-names of eastern Scotland and, perhaps, as an under-researched substratum influence on modern Gaelic. Future work on both these bodies of evidence may lead to the identification of new forms and thus increase the data available for Pictish. Probably the greatest advances will come, however, from further study of the evidence we already have. Our current goal must be an improved understanding of the names in the king-list, and, especially, the content of the inscriptions.

REFERENCES

All references are given in the Author Index of *A Pictish Bibliography* except:

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¹ The Celtic group of languages, which is a member of the Indo-European family, is classified as comprising two main branches — these are labelled 'P-Celtic' (which includes Gaulish and the daughter languages of British – Welsh, Cornish and Breton); and 'Q-Celtic' (which consists of the Goidelic (Gaelic) languages of Ireland, Western Scotland and the Isle of Man).