

# G19: The Mystery Men of Scotland

## The Vanishing Picts

WC 3001

In 1921 an anonymous Boy Scout with a talent for both history and doggerel, wrote a marching song which he called *National Anthem of the Ancient Britons*<sup>1</sup>. To the tune *Men of Harlech*, the boys bellowed out the following words while they tramped up hill and down dale:

*What's the use of wearing braces ?  
Vests and pants and boots with laces ?  
Spats and hats you buy in places  
Down the Brompton Road ?  
What's the use of shirts of cotton ?  
Studs that always get forgotten ?  
These affairs are simply rotten,  
Better far is woad.  
Woad's the stuff to show men.  
Woad to scare your foemen.  
Boil it to a brilliant hue  
And rub it on your back and your abdomen.  
Ancient Briton ne'er did hit on  
Anything as good as woad to fit on  
Neck or knees or where you sit on.  
Tailors you be blowed !!*

*Romans came across the channel  
All dressed up in tin and flannel  
Half a pint of woad per man'll  
Dress us more than these.  
Saxons you can waste your stitches  
Building beds for bugs in britches  
We have woad to clothe us which is  
Not a nest for fleas  
Romans keep your armours.  
Saxons your pyjamas.  
Hairy coats were made for goats,  
Gorillas, yaks, retriever dogs and llamas*



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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.frivolity.com/teatime/Songs\\_and\\_Poems/woad\\_ode.html](http://www.frivolity.com/teatime/Songs_and_Poems/woad_ode.html)

*Tramp up Snowdon with your woad on,  
Never mind if you get rained or blowed on  
Never want a button sewed on.  
Go it Ancient B's !!*

***Isatis tinctoria***

In a strange sort of way, this Boy Scout marching song sums up much of what we have been talking about these last few weeks. First, it imposes English history on the rest of the British Isles; second, it divides that history into a more detailed view starting with the Romans and lumps all these rest into a grab-bag labelled "Ancient B's"; and third — and this is the reason I have quoted both stanzas here — it perpetuates the stereotype of the Ancient B's dressed in nought but woad.



**Woad — the indigo of Europe<sup>2</sup>**

*Woad* is the European version of indigo which is extracted through a long and complicated process from the plant *Isatis tinctoria*. It is weaker than the dye from the Asian and African plant, *Indigofera tinctoria* but has the same properties of preserving the cloth dyed with it and acting as an antiseptic. In fact, it is possible that the ancient Celts wore woad as a prophylactic before going into battle to help protect them from infections in flesh wounds. Dyeing cloth with indigo is also a long, complicated and smelly process involving stale urine as a principle ingredient.



***A tattoo said to be done with indigo***

I do not know if indigotin was used for tattooing among the Celts. Most ancient sources describe them as tattooed but whether the tattoos were blue or black is usually not stipulated. Most tattoos use pigments — in the past, for example, ground lapis lazuli was also used for blue — but some dyes such as saffron and henna as well as indigo can also be used.

<sup>2</sup> <http://my.net-link.net/2E/EB/rowan/Woad%20Page/woadpage.html>



*The Callanish Stones, Isle of Lewis (photo: Lynne Kennedy<sup>3</sup>)*

### **The Mysterious Picts**

There is an excellent site on the web, subsidised by the Scottish government, called *The Pictish Arts Society*<sup>4</sup> which gives a plain-English, well-presented explanation of who the Picts were and, as might be expected, an introduction to Pictish art. The author/s of the page are at pains to dispel the long-standing myth that the Picts were "mysterious" or their origins unknown.

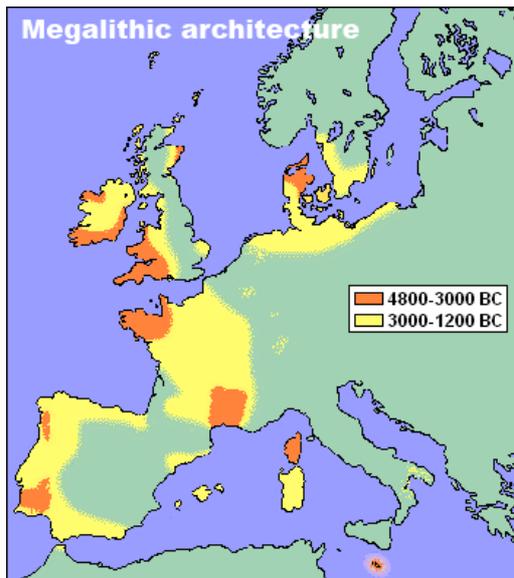
*Due to a lack of historical resources written by the Picts themselves, they were for a long time seen as a mysterious and enigmatic people. This impression was enhanced by the fact that the unique art of the Picts was perceived as having come into existence with no obvious predecessor. ....In fact we now know that the Picts were in all probability simply the descendants of the original inhabitants of the northern part of the British Isles, the people who raised the great megalithic structures of Calanais, Stenness, Brodgar and Maes Howe and the earlier chambered cairns at Clava near Culloden.*

As we now know, the indigenous people of the region — that is, those who came there after the Ice — could not have belonged to clades of R1b since this was a Neolithic intrusion into Europe. However, The Callanish Stones, for example,

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<sup>3</sup> Photo at [www.pbase.com/highlandrover/image/63727499](http://www.pbase.com/highlandrover/image/63727499) (personal homepage: <http://www.highlandrover.com>).

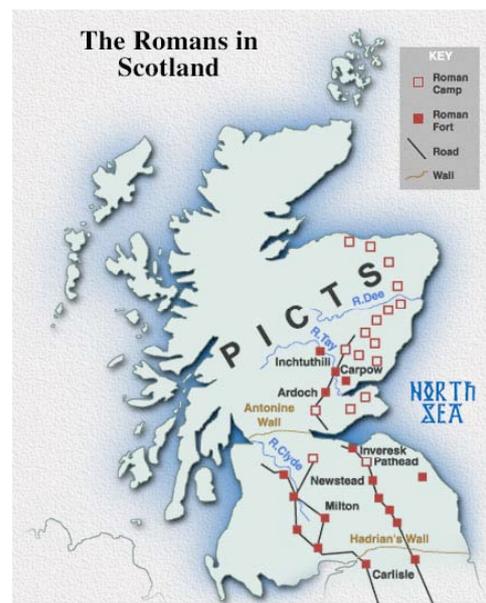
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pictart.org/index.htm>



mentioned on *The Pictish Arts Society* web site do fit the R1b time-frame in that they were erected in the period 2900 BC and 2600 BC and were in use down to about 1700 BC. However, we cannot be sure the Picts were the descendents of the Megalithic people or even how and when those people came to Scotland. Megaliths are widely distributed over Europe, especially around the Portugal-Galicia-Brittany-British Isles region, all of which have a very high proportion of R1b in present-day populations. However, the recent discovery of R-L21 has raised further questions in that R-L21 is almost exclusively

negative in Iberia and positive in Scotland and Ireland. It will be interesting to see where this research leads...

Whatever their origin, the Picts first enter our history book from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD when they were described as Picti — or painted people — by Roman observers. Probably the best-known and earliest reference is by Tacitus in his history of his father-in-law's campaigns in Britain. In *Agricola* he also describes the battle of Mons Graupius in AD 80. Despite their victory at this unidentified place, the Romans quit Caledonia almost immediately afterwards and withdrew south of the Antonine Wall.



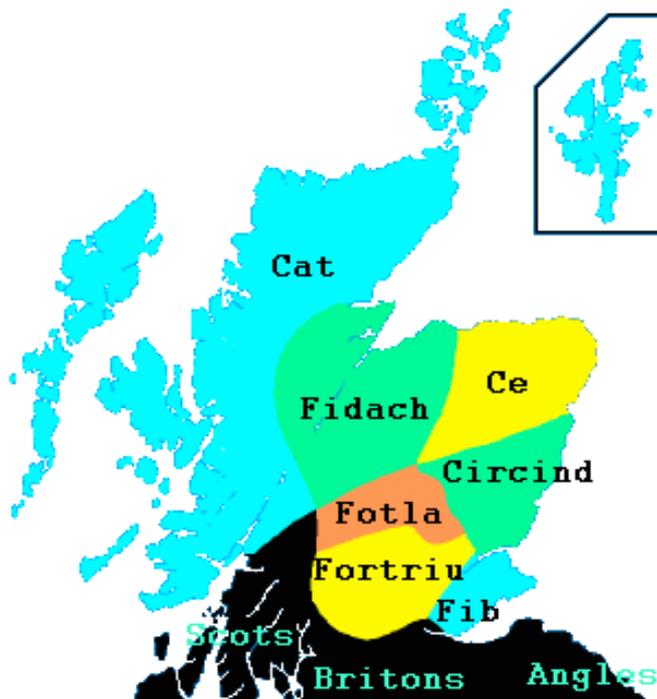
Generally speaking, the Roman name "Picti" and the image of a "painted people" has captured the imagination of history. Whether this "paint" referred to tattoos or to woad body-paint, or both, was not made clear by the early historians. Interestingly, although the Roman invention of this name is the generally accepted view, traditional lore in Scotland sometimes describes these people as *Pechts* which in turn has suggested the word 'Picti' might have been taken by Roman observers from a tribal name, Pexa.

In the late 4<sup>th</sup> Century the Roman poet known in English as Claudian left a significant but oblique reference to the Picts when he said:

*"This legion, which curbs the savage Scot and studies the designs marked with iron on the face of the dying Pict...."*

That does not give us much to go on but it does lead scholars to believe that the Picts were not so much "painted" with woad but tattooed, a conclusion supported by the comment in 600 AD by Isidore of Seville that they decorated their bodies with designs pricked into the skin with needles.

## The origin of the Picts



Although most of what we know of the Picts comes from outside observers, there are two sources of information which come directly from the Picts themselves. Most of these are in the form of symbol stones, great slabs of stone intricately carved, some of which have brief Oghram inscriptions on them. We will look at some of these later.

The second indigenous source is the so-called *King List*. This starts with the father of the Picts, Cruithne...

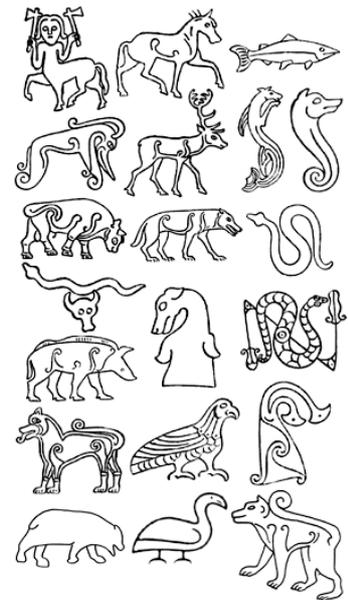
*"Cruithne son of Cinge, the father of the Picts reigned for 100 years. He had seven sons, whose names were Fib, Fidach, Fotlaig, Fortrenn, Cait, Ce and Circinn."*

*Cat ruled for twelve years over the area now known as Caithness, Sutherland, West Highlands and Northern and Western Isles. The name means 'Cat People'.*

*Fidach ruled for forty years over the area now known as Moray, Nairn and Ross. The name means 'Woodsmen'.*



*Goidel Glas*, created the Gaelic language by combining the best features of the 72 languages which had survived the destruction of Babel. This father of Gaelic and his princess wife were expelled from Egypt after the exodus of the Jews and found their way, first to Spain and later to the Emerald Isle. Coincidentally, there is another story of an Egyptian princess, also called *Scota*, who married Miled, better known as Milesius<sup>5</sup>, in Iberia. After her husband died, she and her eight sons sailed to Ireland where Scota eventually died in battle with the magical "little people" who had previously inhabited the island, the De Danann.



*Pictish animal symbols*

## The Pictish Stones

The other indigenous source of information about the Picts comes from their intricately carved stones. These are conventionally divided into two classes: the first, Class I are stones carved before the Picts were converted to Christianity some time between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries while Class II stones are post-conversion carvings, often with crosses and other Christian symbols inter-twined with the old Pictish ones.



*(Left) The Eassie cross-slab is one of the finest examples of a Pictish Class II cross-slab (from Eassie in Angus). (Right) A section of Sueno's Stone, Forres.*

<sup>5</sup> This is the origin of the so-called *Milesian O'* in Irish surnames, as in O'Neil, O'Malley etc.



*(Left) Rodney's stone (Right) the Abernathy Stone, a Class I stone*

An outstanding example of a Class II Pictish stone is the cross-slab found at Eassie in Angus. Another, and perhaps better-known, of the Pictish stones — and standing 7m high, one of the largest — is the 9<sup>th</sup> Century *Sueno's Stone* at Forres, in Morayshire.

Now weathering so badly it has been encased in glass to protect it, this was generally believed by locals to have been a Viking monument. However, it has now been correctly identified although what event the carvings commemorate is not known. About 3 miles away and not far from Brodie Castle is the much smaller *Rodney's Stone*. This was discovered in 1781 when the foundations of the church at Dyke were being dug<sup>6</sup>.

These have all been Class II stones. An example of the earlier, Class I stone can be seen in the Abernathy Stone. The two symbols nearest the top are described as *Hatchet* (left) and rather anachronistically, *Tuning-fork* (in the centre)!

So, if the Picts have been there since the Year Dot — at least since the Neolithic — and their descendents are alive and well in Scotland, why have they effectively disappeared?

Of course the Scotti were not the first Irish to reach Alba: the Irish and Picts had been in frequent contact since the Mesolithic, so there must have been some interaction, both linguistic and genetic, for a very long time. Even so, from their arrival in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century to the take-over by Kenneth mac Alpin 350 or so years later, these settlers must have greatly influenced, indeed, assimilated the Picts on the west coast. After *mac Alpin's Treachery*, the Dal Riata replaced the depleted Pictish nobility and probably, Gaelic became the official language. Although both Scotti and Picts spoke Insular Celtic languages, we know from accounts of the Christian conversion of the Pictish king by St. Columba that an interpreter was needed so presumably the Dal Riata Goidelic (or Gaelic) language was not

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<sup>6</sup> It is generally believed the stone was named after the man who dug it up although the official version is that it was named in honour of a famous admiral of the day.

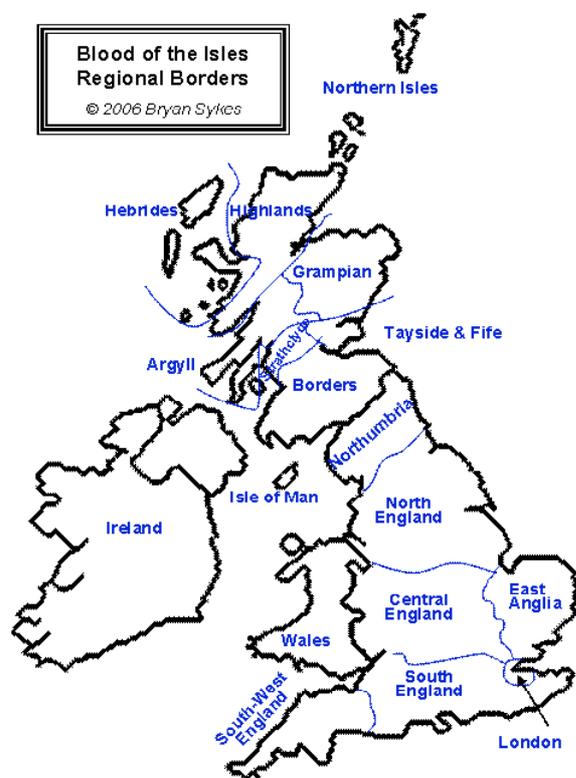
mutually intelligible to the P-Celtic Pict. However, as the Gaelic form of the language spread throughout the kingdom, so in effect, the Picts began to disappear, merged indistinguishably with the sons of Ireland. This disappearance of the Picts was not a sudden, over-night event but a long process of assimilation and cultural interchange, not all of it one-sided.

## The Genetic Genealogy of the Picts

Now we must ask, is there any way genetics can distinguish between the Scots of Irish origin and the indigenous Picts?

Just as there are special configurations of yHaplotypes known as the *Atlantic Modal Haplotype* and what Oppenheimer called, the *Basque Modal Haplotype*, so there are also, among others, the *Irish* and the *Scots Modal Haplotypes*. Furthermore, men who test positive to the SNP M222 belong to what has been labelled the "North West Irish Haplogroup". This has been closely associated with the 5<sup>th</sup> Century Ui Neill dynasty in Ireland — often referred to as the *Niall of the Nine Hostages* — although since this particular cluster is estimated to be about 3,400 years old, it clearly goes back much further than the famous Irish war-lord.

The **Scots Modal Haplotype** — for which there is as yet no SNP test although there are hopes one will be found any day now — comprises about 15% of the Scottish population which makes it as prevalent as the AMH in many other parts of Britain. Many genetic genealogists speculate that it is a derivative of the AMH.



*Regional Borders Used in the Oxford Genetic Atlas Project*<sup>7</sup>

What history we do know tells us that the Picts in the north-east of the country remained strongest and least affected by the fusion of the Dal Riata and Pictish kingdoms. With this in mind, Bryan Sykes divided Scotland into regions. What he regarded as the heartland of Pictland were Grampian, Tayside and Fife<sup>8</sup>. In terms of

<sup>7</sup> from Campbell, KD: *Geographic Patterns of Haplogroup R1b in the British Isles*, after Sykes - [http://www.jogg.info/31/campbell.htm#\\_ftn17](http://www.jogg.info/31/campbell.htm#_ftn17)

<sup>8</sup> See *Blood of the Isles*, p.202 ff. Sykes abbreviated Tayside and Fife to "Tayside" for convenience sake....

mtDNA, these were almost identical, so much so that they could be considered one region. Furthermore, they were pretty much the same as other parts of Scotland, so that mtDNA would appear unable to distinguish Picts from others.

	R1b %	I %	R1a %	Other %
<b>SHETLAND</b>	66	10	23	0
<b>ORKNEY</b>	64	15	19	.02
<b>NORWAY</b>	30	28	34	18
<b>GERMANY/ DENMARK</b>	39	39	12	10
<b>SCOTLAND</b>	80	10	.02	10
<b>IRELAND</b>	90	7	0	3
<b>BASQUE</b>	89	.02	0	10

The Y-DNA analysis however, set this north-east region apart from the rest of the country. In the Grampian-Tayside area, Syke's y-DNA clan Oisin (R-M269) predominated, rising to 84% of males in Grampian. Looking back to when we were dealing with the Vikings in the Islands, remember that Capelli<sup>9</sup> and his colleagues

found that R1b reaches 90% in Ireland and 89% among the Basques.

What Sykes calls Wodan, more commonly known as Haplogroup I, reached 12% in Grampian and 18% in Tayside. Clan Sigurd — R1a — however was almost absent from the Grampian/Tayside area, reaching about 2% at the most. The conclusion Sykes drew was that there was almost no Viking admixture in this part of Scotland, a conclusion which fits with the archaeology and history of the region.

Of course, on the west coast, the Viking influence had been significant. Discounting the Viking genes, Sykes found that the female mtDNA patterns in Argyll were much the same as in the heart of Pictland and elsewhere in Scotland, leading him to conclude that the maternal bed-rock of Scotland remains Pictish in origin. On the male side, however, things looked very different: it looked as though there had been a 30-40% replacement of Pictish males by Gaelic Irish in the Dal Riata heartland in Argyll. Sykes<sup>10</sup> makes a serious pronouncement when he concluded:

*However the genetic signal, as far as I can judge, points to a substantial and, by the looks of it, hostile replacement of Pictish males by the Dalriadan Celts, most of whom relied on Pictish rather than Irish women to propagate their genes. The reason I cannot be more certain is itself very relevant to the myth of the Picts. It is precisely because they are genetically close to the Gaelic Irish that these estimates are so difficult. If they had been a relic people, a genetic isolate, then it would have been easy to distinguish them from the Irish Gaels. But, on the contrary, it is extremely*

<sup>9</sup> Capelli, C et al., "A Y Chromosome Census of the British Isles", 2003, *Current Biology*, Vol. 13, May, pp. 979-984.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, p.210.

*difficult, from which we can confidently conclude that the Picts and the Celts have the same underlying genetic origins.*

## The \$64,000 Question

So, the Picts did not disappear, they just became invisible as they melted into the general British community. Many of the people in the world today are their distant descendents — although I must confess, sometimes I feel a little sad that I am not one of them.

But that is not the end to the mystery of the Celts: if the Irish Celts and the Picts have *the same underlying genetic origins* as Sykes has indicated, then the \$64k question remaining in this course is to ask where might they have come from? The distribution of the newly discovered SNP R-L21 clearly negates our earlier belief that Ireland was populated directly from Iberia and indeed, there are suggestions that Ireland was populated from Scotland rather than via England or Wales, thus making the Dal Riada in effect a back migration.

This was not a problem when we believed the Celtic people in Scotland and Ireland, including the Picts, were the original people who had found their way there during the Mesolithic, probably stopping over in Doggerland for a time. But now the statisticians have told us they were not genetically who we thought they were because “R1b” had not entered Europe in time. We might have solved part of the mystery of the Picts — where they went to — but we still don’t know where they came from!

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