Shedding new light on the Picts of ‘Dark Age’ Scotland

Gordon Noble

The Picts were first mentioned in late Roman sources in AD 297 as a collective name for troublesome, barbaric peoples, living north of the Roman frontier. They were a noted enemy of Rome and were involved in the ‘Barbarian Conspiracy’ of AD 367-8 when Roman Britain was brought to its knees by raiding and plundering by a collective of groups living beyond the northernmost Roman frontier. In the post-Roman era the Picts went on to become the dominant kingdom in northern Britain, forming the precursor to the medieval kingdom of Alba and latterly of that of Scotland itself. Unfortunately the Picts have long remained an enigma. They have left behind major legacies including their iconic symbol stones (Figure 1), but other than this, the archaeological and historical record for this region c.300-900 AD is very difficult to uncover.

The Northern Picts project at the University of Aberdeen was established in 2012 to investigate an area of Northeast Scotland stretching from Aberdeenshire to Easter Ross – an area that would have been part of Pictland (Figure 2), but one that was formerly thought to have been a relative social and political backwater. However, in 2006 historical scholarship by Alex Woolf suggested that the Pictish overkingship of Fortriu rather than being located in central Scotland was actually in the Moray Firth region, part of the area targeted by the Northern Picts project. The project, funded by charitable donations to the University of Aberdeen Development Trust, was designed to take on the challenge of finding new archaeological sites in a period with few identified sites either in the written sources or the archaeological record. To date the University of Aberdeen has investigated a whole series of Pictish sites in northern Scotland through large-scale excavation, survey and targeted fieldwork and radiocarbon dating. This article will highlight some of the successes of the University of Aberdeen project to date.

Scaling the heights: Dunnicaer
Many of the Aberdeen projects have involved examining the context of the most iconic element of Pictish archaeology – the Pictish symbol stones. There are over 200 stone monuments with symbols known from eastern and northern Scotland (Figure 3). Since the 19th century there have been repeated attempts to decipher the meaning of the symbols, with wide-ranging interpretations, of them as symbols of rank or tribal identity to memorials to the dead, as well as countless ‘fringe’ ideas and speculation. Current consensus is this was a system that expressed names or identities and that this was an elite form of expression found in both settlement and burial contexts. An important part our work has focused on providing better contexts and dating for this tradition of monument. From 2015-17 fieldwork by the Northern Picts project targeted the findspot of a series of Pictish stones found at a coastal site known as Dunnicaer (Figure 4), just to the south of Aberdeen. The relatively simple designs found at Dunnicaer and in other contexts such as caves have been suggested as early examples of the symbol system, but there has been little in the way of absolute dating. The carved stones from Dunnicaer were discovered in the early 19th century when stone was removed from the stack for building material and later when in 1832 a group of youths found a low stone wall on the stack and threw a number of stones from the wall into the sea (Figure 5). Few people had visited Dunnicaer since the 19th century, for the site is cut off at high tide and surrounded by sheer cliff faces. With the support of a professional climber, the Northern Picts team conducted three seasons of fieldwork on the stack. These demonstrated that the site was the remains of a promontory fort with a timber-laced rampart enclosing a series of buildings inside (Figures 6). Severe coastal erosion had removed most of the site, leaving only a small stump of rock jutting into the North Sea. Finds from the settlement included Roman pottery and glass – all rare imports this far north of the frontier – along with burnishing stones for metalworking. Even more surprisingly, Bayesian modelling of the radiocarbon dates suggests activity at the promontory started in the 2nd century AD and ended by the 4th century. Fort building is rarely attested in the Roman Iron Age in Scotland, but Dunnicaer flourished during this period and reached its height in the same era that the Romans first mentioned the Picts in AD 297. While it is impossible to directly date the symbol stones, the youths described finding the stones in a wall surrounding the site, probably the rampart of the fort that was dated to the mid 3rd century to the late 4th century AD, suggesting that the symbol stones
may date to this timeframe too – i.e. much earlier than many scholars had countenanced for this tradition.

**Royal Rhynie**

A major focus of the Northern Picts project has been the environs of the village of Rhynie, Aberdeenshire. The place-name Rhynie includes a form of the Celtic word for ‘king’, *ríg*, and our work at the site suggests the Rhynie valley was an elite Pictish central place from the 3rd to 7th centuries AD. Rhynie has long been known for its particular concentration of Class I Pictish stones including a spectacular example known as the ‘Rhynie Man’ found during ploughing in a field just to the south of the modern village, next to an in situ stone known as the ‘Craw Stane’ (Figures 7 and 8). Excavations around the Craw Stane from 2011-17 found that this monument, and perhaps Rhynie Man, stood at the entranceway of a defended settlement of the Pictish period. A late phase of this settlement included an elaborate enclosing timber wall of oak posts and planks and inside stood a series of large timber buildings (Figure 9). The excavations revealed a rich material assemblage including sherds of Late Roman wine amphorae imported from the eastern Mediterranean (Figure 10), sherds of glass drinking beakers from France and one of the largest assemblages of metalworking production evidence known from early medieval Britain. The metalworking evidence included moulds and crucibles for making pins, brooches and even tiny animal figurines that resemble the animals carved on Pictish stones (Figure 11). An iron pin shaped like an axe that resembles the axe carried by the Rhynie Man was also discovered, a remarkable find which was one of a number that directly relates to the iconography of the stones themselves. The axe that the Rhynie Man carries is a type that has been associated with animal sacrifice and the fearsome figure on the stone may be a pre-Christian deity associated with cult practices. On the outskirts of the village, a few hundred metres north of the Craw Stane complex site, we have also found traces of a contemporary cemetery and uncovered the remains of Pictish burial mounds including the partially preserved remains of an adult female buried within one of the barrows. Another burial monument, a cairn, is the recorded findspot of one of Rhynie’s Pictish stones that shows a warrior carrying a spear (Figure 12). Two square enclosures, found next to the cemetery, may have been shrines or places for conducting ceremonies associated with veneration of the dead.
Our findings at the Craw Stane complex were exciting, but these turned out to be just the tip of the iceberg for the archaeology of the Picts in this valley. Overlooking Rhynie is the spectacular hillfort of Tap o’ Noth (Figure 13). The upper fort of Tap o’ Noth is Iron Age in date, but the lower slopes of the hill is enclosed by a massive 16.75ha enclosure, the second largest hillfort in northern Britain. Due to its size and elevation, scholars had suggested that this lower fort dated to the Bronze Age, constructed when the climate was warmer. However, excavations from 2019–2022 have shown that this massive hillfort was in fact contemporary with the elite settlement at the Craw Stane complex with over a dozen platforms and the rampart now excavated and dated to a period stretching from the 3rd to 7th centuries AD. It may have been the presence of such a large-scale site of settlement, whether a permanent settlement or a site of seasonal assembly, that allowed the royal centre in the lowlands to develop. Over 800 house platforms have been identified on the hill making this one of the largest settlements of this era known in Britain and Ireland (Figure 14). The results of the excavations in the Rhynie valley give us an unexpected and unparalleled insight into an elite landscape of the Picts of the 3rd to 7th centuries AD, and as yet there are few parallels to compare this evidence to.

**Northern power centres and the end of the Picts**

Since 2021 one of Northern Pict’s main fieldwork projects has been on the spectacular promontory fort at Burghead. This fort would have covered an area of around 5.5ha prior to the southern portion of the site being destroyed by construction of the modern village in the 19th century (Figure 15). Now the site is being slowly destroyed by coastal erosion prompting Historic Environment Scotland to fund a major project to mitigate loss through a large-scale rescue and research excavation focused on the remaining parts of the fort – the western end where an upper and lower citadel defined by grass-covered ramparts are still evident today (Figure 15). During the destruction of the 19th century nearly 30 bull carvings and a number of fragments of early Christian sculpture were found from Burghead and excavation in the 1860s and 1890s revealed that the timber-laced ramparts survived in places to over 8m in width and 6m high. There had been relatively little in the way of modern excavations at the site though other than work in the 1960s which suggested that
much of the interior of the remaining parts of the fort had been destroyed. However, small-scale sampling in 2015-17 by the Northern Picts project revealed preserved floor layers of partially intact early medieval buildings within the fort that set the foundations for the most recent project (Figure 16). The recent work has shown that the seaward ramparts are exceptionally well-preserved with wallfaces surviving to around 3m in height (Figure 17). The rampart remains have revealed clear evidence for their part-destruction by fire and subsequent repairs. Within the upper citadel ramparts the excavations have revealed multiple Pictish longhouses of stone and turf and have revealed a range of objects including an exceptionally rare early medieval bell, coins of the famous Anglo-Saxon king Alfred and a number of Northumbrian coins (Figure 18). Weaponry including a sword hilt and spear head have also been found in the upper fort. In the lower fort, accompanying the rescue excavations the team have been conducting a programme of evaluative strip-and-map excavations to provide contextual evidence for the activity in the upper citadel. Here over 12 Pictish buildings have been revealed to date including structures involved in metalworking and rich animal bone middens full of bones of cattle, sheep, pig and wild animal remains. Spectacular finds from the lower citadel include bone pins and combs, a garnet studded bronze ring and a range of other items of dress and adornment (Figure 18). Over 80 radiocarbon dates have been obtained thus far from our work at Burghead showing that the site was occupied from at least the 6th century AD and came to an end in the 10th century AD – a quite obscure period when the Pictish realm had become the expansionist Gaelic kingdom of Alba. Local tradition recounts that the site was destroyed by the Vikings – can continuing work at Burghead shed any light on the fate of this major centre, and of the northern Picts in this new era?

Recasting the Roman World

Hoard of metalwork have provided startling insights into ancient cultures, but unfortunately such hoards are relatively rare in Pictland and most were found in the 19th century. Two early Pictish hoards are known, one from Norrie’s Law, Fife, and the other from Gaulcross, Aberdeenshire. The Gaulcross hoard was originally discovered in 1838 at Ley Farm, Aberdeenshire, in a field that contained two stone circles of likely Bronze Age date. In 1837 the stone circles were ruthlessly removed in the Improvement era when a
A hoard of silver was found, seemingly in the ring cairn of one of the stone circles. A whole range of objects were found, but only three items were kept from the original hoard. The findspot of Gaulcross was investigated by the Northern Picts project in 2013 in an attempt to understand more about the place of deposition. Research-led metal-detecting by the Northern Picts team in collaboration with a local metal detectorist and the National Museums Scotland recovered more than 100 objects missed during the original discovery (Figure 19). The finds included late Roman coins, fragments of pins and bracelets, a terminal of a large silver penannular brooch with twisted hoop band, a silver ingot, a lunate pendant, pieces of silver chain and two silver hemispheres.

The Gaulcross hoard probably dates to the 5th or 6th century AD and the earlier objects in the hoard have a Roman provenance and include fragments of vessels from Roman silver dining sets and objects with late Roman military associations. The Gaulcross finds highlight how it was the wealth of the Roman Empire that provided the source for the objects of status throughout the Pictish period with Roman silver melted down, diluted and recast. The Roman objects may have originally come into native hands through looting, trade, through bribes to local groups to keep the peace, and perhaps even as military pay for those who went to serve in the Roman army. In the post-Roman period the silver was recycled and re-cast into high-status objects that underpinned the development of elite society in the post-Roman period. During the process of recycling, the Roman silver was remade into new objects, but its origin may not have been entirely forgotten. Some of these later objects referenced the late Antique world, with items such as hand-pins showing the adaptation of late Roman military styles both in terms of design and decorative techniques. New research on antiquarian finds like Gaulcross are providing new insights into the material culture traditions of the Picts and the relationship of the Picts to the Roman and late Antique world.

**The Picts Re-Imaginaed**

Overall, the work of the University of Aberdeen, over the last decade, has aimed to dramatically improve our understanding of the Picts through excavation and field survey. The projects undertaken have led to major new insights into the Picts, discovering new power centres and hitherto unrecognized site types, and has provided crucial new contextual and dating evidence for the iconic Pictish symbol tradition and poorly
understood forms of contemporary material culture. The project has resulted in major breakthroughs, but has also aimed to help improve public understanding of the Picts through exhibitions, popular publications and an active social media profile (@northernpicts on facebook and X). Through our ongoing work the project aims to create new discoveries and promote new ways of engaging with the Pictish past to both established and new audiences for a period that for too long has been a particularly poorly illuminated part of the ‘Dark Ages’.