

The Picts



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Who Were the Picts?



The Picts were the indigenous people of northern Scotland. They were not a single tribe but a group of tribes who are thought to have come originally from Scandinavia, settled first in Orkney, and then migrated south. They lived in Scotland, before, during and after the Romans came.

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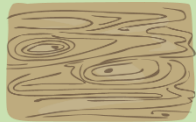
They are first mentioned as 'Picts' by the Roman writer Eumenius in 297 CE, who referred to them as 'Picti' (the painted ones), because of their habit of painting their bodies with dye - a bit like modern-day tattoos. Some people debate whether this is the true origin of their name, however, and it is now thought that they probably referred to themselves as 'Pecht' - the word for 'the ancestors' - and this is where the name Pict has come from.



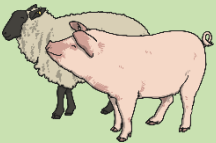
What Were They Like?



They spoke a language called Pictish. No one speaks Pictish today so we do not know much about the language.



They lived in tightly-knit communities and built their homes out of wood.



The Picts were also thought to be excellent farmers, growing crops and keeping animals for food and clothing. Certainly, horses were important to the Picts as they are depicted on many of their carved stones.

What Were They Like?



Pictish Symbol Stones

- The Picts are famous for their 'Symbol Stones'. These symbol stones give us clues about them.
- No one really knows what some of the symbols mean but people have suggested they may represent names, status or family groups.
- Their skill in stone carving is evident from the many engraved standing stones that still exist throughout Scotland and are housed in some museums.
- These carved stone slabs are the only record the Picts left of their history; the rest of their story is told by later Roman, Scottish, and English writers.

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What Were They Like?



The Picts were very skilled craftsmen. They made useful and beautiful objects which they covered with their own designs. They used geometric patterns and unusual symbols in their decoration. The symbols were often of wild beasts. It is not always clear what the meanings of the symbols are. Sometimes there are several explanations about what a symbol might mean.



Some historians credit the Picts with building structures such as the Ness of Brodgar, which can still be seen in Scotland in the present day.

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Pictish Dress



- While it is nearly impossible to say anything conclusive about their dress, there is some evidence of what the Picts wore as shown on stone carvings that have been found.
- From the carvings we can tell that they wore tunics and would have been very covered up, especially the women, who are depicted wearing ankle length tunics. The men also wore tunics but of varying lengths.
- We also know that they must have worn cloaks or capes as brooches and pins (which would be used to fasten these) have been found.

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Pictish Jewellery



- Pictish silversmiths made fantastic jewellery decorated with the same symbols that were carved on their symbol stones.
- Massive Pictish silver chains weighing over 1.5 kg and fastened with decorated silver rings may have been made for nobles or warriors to wear on special occasions.
- A silverwork hoard found at Norries Law, near Largo in Fife, included brooches, pins, earrings and pendants with the symbols filled in with red enamel to make them very striking.

Pictish Jewellery



Rogart Brooch



Pennanular Brooch

Straight Pins - Straight pins could be used to fasten any number of garments as well as hairstyles. Bone, wood, and silver pins are known from early Scotland and several of them are clearly Pictish, as evidenced by the incorporation of Pictish symbols in their design.

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Pictish Jewellery



- A spectacular hoard of Pictish silver containing eight decorated bowls, silver spoons and 12 penannular brooches was discovered buried in a wooden box in a ruined chapel on St Ninian's Isle in Shetland. It was possibly put there to hide it from Viking raiders.
- There are also several Pictish finds that include amber beads. The find from the Broch of Brodgar included a great number of amber beads.

The Picts at War



The Picts held their territory against the invading Romans in a number of fights and, although they were defeated in battle, they won the war. Scotland holds the distinction of never falling to the invading armies of Rome, even though the Romans attempted conquest numerous times.

They established themselves in small communities made up of families belonging to a single clan, which was presided over by a tribal chief. These clans (known as 'kin') acted in their own interests, often raiding each other for cattle, but banded together when threatened by a common enemy and elected a single chief to lead them. The kin (which comes from the Gaelic word for children) would continue to follow and protect their chief, but that chief would obey the warrior all had agreed upon as group leader.

The Picts' Legacy



The Picts exist in the written record from their first mention in 297 CE until around 900 CE, when no further mention is made of them. Just because there is no mention of them in written history after this, it does not mean that they mysteriously vanished or were conquered by the Scots and annihilated; it simply means that no more was written about them as they merged with other groups. By the 11th century the Pictish identity had become a part of the Scottish people.

The Picts' Legacy

Many Scottish place names have their roots in Pictish times.

Pictish Word	Meaning	Found in...
Pett (pit)	Portion or share	Place names- Pittenweem and Pitlochry Some examples include people's names - Pitcarmick, Pitewan, Pitcalman - or their job – Pit-skelly, which means the story-teller's share or place.
Carden	Thicket	Place names - Kincardine and Urquhart
Aber	River mouth	Place names - Aberdeen and Aberdour

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The illustration shows the lower half of a person. They are wearing blue and white checkered trousers and a green and yellow plaid skirt. They are also wearing white socks and brown shoes. The background is filled with dense, repeating cursive text, which appears to be a form of calligraphy or a decorative pattern.