



Julianna Grigg, *The Picts Re-Imagined* (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018). Print, 108pp., £11.95, ISBN: 9781641890915.

Review

Within modern popular culture, there is a tendency, which has its roots within nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship, to label the early medieval Picts as being somehow mysterious or unique. And even in most scholarly works, whether the emphasis is on their language, their system of social hierarchy, or their symbolic mode of expression, the differences between them and the other people of the British Isles are often the focal point. In *The Picts Re-Imagined*, the emphasis is instead on how very similar the Picts were to their neighbours, an approach which has gained momentum since the 1980s, and especially since the 2000s.

What follows is a very condensed yet concise overview of the history and historiography of the Picts. In the Introduction, Julianna Grigg begins with the current scholarly linguistic and geographical definition of the Picts; that is, the Picts were those speakers of a P-Celtic language who were located in the British Isles north of the natural Clyde-Firth boundary in the early medieval period. She then references how current developments within Pictish studies have rapidly changed our old conceptions, some of which continue to linger within both popular and scholarly works. The interdisciplinary nature of the source material is emphasised, and Grigg argues that this ought to be seen as an advantage, as it provides scholars with an excellent opportunity to integrate archaeological, onomastic, and literary histories.

The book is then divided into four chapters, each of which begins with an historical summary of the political events in the centuries or decades covered in that chapter, and followed by a discussion of various thematic strands broadly concerned with Pictish social organisation, the material evidence of their culture,

and the literary evidence of religious, political, and commercial aspects of Pictish society. Thus, Chapter One contains an overview of Pictish history from the first to the sixth centuries CE, and sections on the organisation of Pictish society, territorial divisions within Pictland, the archaeological evidence for different settlements, and both literary and archaeological evidence for the religious world of the Picts in the pre-Christian and conversion periods. Chapter Two is concerned only with the seventh century and the sections discuss political assembly locations, the Class I Pictish symbol stones, metalwork and the social class of smiths, as well as evidence for trade. Just as Chapter Two slowed the pace of events by concentrating just on a single century, in Chapter Three the scope is narrower again, as only the first half of the eighth century is covered (until the 740s) along with sections on political and ecclesiastical reform, Pictish origin myths, the Class II cross-slabs, and a short discussion of the role of women. Chapter Four, whose title, *Twilight of the Picts*, comes as almost a surprise at this juncture, takes the reader from the 730s to the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries via the apparent destruction of political authority within Pictland at the turn of the eighth and ninth century as a result of repeated Viking incursions. Grigg then quickly covers the complexities of the political, ecclesiastical, and social changes as Pictland became Alba over the course of the ninth century, while the remaining sections largely cover elite male status.

In a way, *The Picts Re-Imagined* is both deeply indebted to the pioneering interdisciplinary approach of F.T. Wainwright's seminal work, *The Problem of the Picts*, while also turning it on its head; for here the plurality of the sources for the Picts is not problematized, but celebrated. The different strands of evidence are not treated in isolation from one another, but integrated, and evidence of external contacts and influence in both directions is emphasised. The fact that Grigg dedicates so much space to the archaeological material, and especially very recent

archaeological sites (some of which are still current ongoing excavations), is to be greatly commended.

One thing that the shortness of this book (perhaps unintentionally) highlights, is just how brief a time, in comparison to their contemporary neighbours in the British Isles and the rest of Northern Europe, the Picts really had as an independent kingdom in the post-Roman early medieval world. In the seventh and eighth centuries, when all of these nascent kingdoms were developing and solidifying their own cultural and political identities, Pictland too was the locus of a flourishing identity and political independence. And yet the initial generation of Viking attacks between the 790s and the 820s seem to have been especially disruptive to Pictland, arguably even more so than to other kingdoms in the British Isles. They were so disruptive in fact, that it seems that key political and religious centres of authority were destroyed in northern Pictland, which in turn provided a window of opportunity for the Gaelic-speaking elites of Dál Riata in south-west Scotland to step into the resultant power vacuum during the mid-ninth century, and consequently change the very identity of Pictland itself. Grigg takes the reader through her summary of this complex political period with confidence, and presents both literary and archaeological evidence for the change in identity and authority within Pictland.

As with the other monographs in the Past Imperfect series, this very short work is intended to provide a critical overview of current research within the field, and any fair criticism can only be therefore limited to the structure of the book. Thus, some of the sections discussed within Chapters Two, Three and Four on aspects of social status among different classes would have been better introduced at an earlier juncture, and while the book certainly deals with the integrated literary and archaeological evidence in a chronological manner, the pace is very different

throughout the book and the *The Picts Re-Imagined* would have benefitted from being divided into sections of more equal chronological, if not physical, length. But considering just how slim *The Picts Re-Imagined* is, it is quite astonishing how much material is packed into its hundred-odd pages, and how extensive the references (in the endnotes) actually are. Any aspects of Pictish society which might have received fuller treatment elsewhere ought thus to be excused.

Of course, given the nature and scope of this work, *The Picts Re-Imagined* does not necessarily offer any new research, but Grigg has done a commendable job in summarising recent developments within Pictish Studies, and moreover doing so in such a concise, wide-ranging, and interdisciplinary fashion. This work is not just for the reader who is unfamiliar with either the period or the people, for whom serves as an excellent introduction to the most current scholarship on the period and the people, but indeed for all scholars of all periods who will be well-served by this rather useful and pleasingly written work.

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