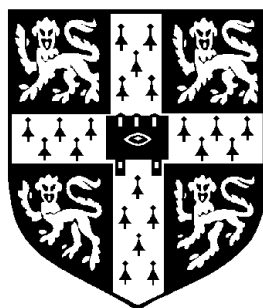


KATHLEEN HUGHES MEMORIAL LECTURES 11

ALEX WOOLF

‘The Churches of Pictavia’



HUGHES HALL  
&  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Hughes Hall was founded in 1885 as the Cambridge Training College (CTC) for graduate women schoolteachers. It is therefore Cambridge's oldest Graduate College, consisting currently of around 50 Fellows and some 400 student members, men and women, who study for doctoral or M.Phil. degrees or for the postgraduate diplomas and certificates offered by the University. We also have an increasing number of mature undergraduates in a variety of subjects. As a result, the academic community of Hughes Hall is now extremely diverse, including students of over 60 nationalities and representing almost all the disciplines of the University. Enquiries about entry as a student are always welcome and should be addressed initially to the Admissions Tutor, Hughes Hall, Cambridge, CB1 2EW, U.K. (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>).

An important step in this transformation came with the granting of Cambridge degrees to women in 1948: the CTC was then given the status of a 'Recognised Institution', the crucial first move towards integration with the University proper. The College took the name of CTC's charismatic first Principal, the celebrated women's educationist, Elizabeth Phillips Hughes. Apart from Miss Hughes's Welsh heritage, there is no known connection between the College and the scholar now commemorated in this series of lectures.

Kathleen Winifred Hughes (1926-77) was the first and only Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge. Previously (1958-76) she had held the Lectureship in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles which had been created for Nora Chadwick in 1950. She was a Fellow of Newnham College (and Director of Studies in both History and Anglo-Saxon), 1955-77. Her responsibilities in the Department of Anglo-Saxon & Kindred Studies, subsequently the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, were in the fields of Irish, Scottish, and Welsh history of the early and central Middle Ages. Her achievements in respect of Gaelic history have been widely celebrated, notably in the memorial volume *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe*, published in 1982. The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lectures both acknowledge her achievements and seek to provide an annual forum for advancing the subject. Each year's lecture will be published as a pamphlet by the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic on behalf of Hughes Hall.

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The Churches of Pictavia

© Dr Alex Woolf

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## **PREFACE**

The Kathleen Hughes Memorial Lecture was initiated as an annual event by Hughes Hall as the result of an anonymous benefaction in her memory and to mark the establishment of the Welsh Assembly. This benefaction came to the College as a result of an initiative taken by our Fellow, Dr Michael J. Franklin, Director of Studies in History and in Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic.

Each lecture will be published, both on the College's web-site (<http://www.hughes.cam.ac.uk/>) and as a printed pamphlet, to coincide with the following year's lecture. Hughes Hall is grateful to the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic for acting as hard-copy publisher.

Hughes Hall hopes that this academic initiative will make a significant scholarly contribution in those areas which fall within the research interests of Kathleen Hughes, and that the series will continue for many years. We are pleased that it continues to be a fixed point in the College's calendar.

**Sarah Squire**  
President  
Hughes Hall



## THE CHURCHES OF PICTAVIA

It was a great honour to be invited to give the 2012 Hughes Lecture but it also presented me with something of a dilemma. The Lecture was originally established, in 2000, as an annual lecture dedicated to Welsh History. Since Scott Gwara's lecture, fourth in the series,<sup>1</sup> the remit seems to have expanded to cover not only other parts of the Brittonic-speaking world but also Gaelic history.<sup>2</sup> When I received an invitation from Sarah Squire, the President of Hughes Hall, which hosts the lecture, I was asked specifically to speak on the Picts. The great advantage of Pictish studies is that the data base is so small it is possible to introduce undergraduates to all of it in the course of a relatively short module. You can actually show them what the historian has to work with. The disadvantage, however, is that this dearth of material often makes it difficult to find something new to say about them. Original research is largely the result of a researcher immersed in the subject having a new insight through comparative analysis or in trying to answer an unexpected question from a student, a member of the public or a colleague outside of the discipline. Only within the fields of archaeological field work and toponymic survey, neither of which are among my strengths, is there opportunity for systematic research.

The invitation, therefore, left me in something of a quandary. I had not written anything on the Picts since early 2007, and had had no recent blinding insights. Having been invited to give a lecture in this prestigious series, an opportunity which I could hardly turn down, I was unable simply to step up to the plate with a sample of my current research. In search of inspiration I turned to the works of the honorand to see which aspects of Pictish studies had interested her. Understandably, given the shortness of her life and the lack of material to work with, Hughes made only two short ventures into Pictish studies. One of these, the posthumously published Hunter Marshall lecture, entitled 'Where are the writings of Early Scotland?', dealt with Pictish literature, or rather its absence, alongside

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<sup>1</sup> Gwara, *Education in Wales and Cornwall*.

<sup>2</sup> A full list of published lectures appears on the cover of this booklet, and can be accessed from the Department's website: <http://www.asnc.cam.ac.uk/publications/hughes.htm>.

other northern British lost literatures.<sup>3</sup> The other was her Jarrow Lecture, 'Early Christianity of Pictland', given in 1970.<sup>4</sup> This latter paper focused on the apparent lack of development of Pictish Christianity at the time at which Bede was writing his *Historia Ecclesiastica*. In both papers she drew particular attention to the absence of surviving texts emanating from Pictish religious houses, contrasting this situation with that pertaining to works authored by Irish or Anglo-Saxon authors.

In what follows I want to focus on the development of the churches of Pictavia in the eighth and ninth centuries and perhaps persuade readers that the poor showing which Hughes attributed to seventh-century Christianity was not reflected in this later period.

At the outset something needs to be said about the extent of Pictavia. By the time of Bede the Picts were perceived as the people dwelling north of the Firth of Forth on the eastern side of Scotland. On the west coast the Gaelic polity of Dál Riata extended at least as far north as the southern side of the Ardnamurchán peninsula. North of this, on both the mainland and the islands, it is unclear whether contemporaries regarded local populations as Pictish or Gaelic and the cautious scholar will maintain an open mind on the subject. Again, by Bede's time, a Pictish polity apparently built upon the hegemony established by kings of Fortriu seems to have been regarded as more or less co-extensive with Pictish settlement. What we cannot be certain of is how far back this situation can be imagined to have prevailed. The term *Picti* first appears in Roman sources towards the end of the third century AD. Before this, the term *Brittani* had been used generally for all inhabitants of Britain with much more local tribal identities designating specific political groupings.

One of the many valuable contributions which James Fraser has made to our understanding of early Scotland is his cutting of the Gordian knot linking the *Picti* of Late Antiquity to the Pictish kingdom of the Early Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> The generation of Piggott, Wainwright and Jackson, whose collaboration in producing *The Problem of the Picts* is often taken as the starting point for modern Pictish studies,<sup>6</sup> sought the origins of the eighth-century kingdom in the archaeology of the

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<sup>3</sup> Published as chapter one of Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Middle Ages*, pp. 1–21.

<sup>4</sup> Jarrow, 1970, reprinted in *Celtic Britain*, pp. 38–52.

<sup>5</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 44–54, building on observations originally made in *id.*, 'Adomnán, Cumméne Ailbe and the Picts'.

<sup>6</sup> Wainwright, *The Problem of the Picts*.



later Roman period. This, to a large extent, was the origin of what they perceived as the ‘Problem’. Part of the ‘problem’ they encountered was caused by their wholesale adoption of the culture history paradigm equating ‘archaeological cultures’ with peoples known from the historical record, though in doing this they were no different from the vast majority of prehistorians working in the 1950s. More significant for our present purposes was their assumption of an essentialist Pictish identity which either came into being, or was recognised for the first time by the Romans, in the third century and which continued until the extinction of the Picts in the ninth.<sup>7</sup> Fraser’s contribution has been to emphasize the two distinct phases and usages of the term *Picti* in our sources. The first of these, which we can label ‘Late Antique’, includes the usage up to the time of Gildas.<sup>8</sup> In this period, it is argued, the term *Picti* was in no sense an ethnonym but a description for barbarous non-Romanised inhabitants of northern Britain. It was used loosely and non-specifically covering a variety of tribes and individuals from whom other, Romanised, Britons wished to distance themselves.<sup>9</sup> The second usage was that which first appears in the works of Adomnán and Bede (and perhaps Stephen of Ripon<sup>10</sup>), when the term was used by Latin writers to denote those north British peoples subject to the kings of Fortriu. This usage, Fraser argues, may have been one to which the elites within this Verturian hegemony were quite happy to subscribe. The significance of this for understanding our sources lies in the observation that Bede’s perception of the Forth as the ancient frontier between Picts and Britons may reflect the relatively recent establishment of the post-Nechtanemere scope of Verturian overlordship.<sup>11</sup> Prior to 685, when the Bernicians were driven south of the Forth by the king of Fortriu, Pictishness may have been situationally constructed, with a variety of British groups each regarding more northerly and, to their eyes, less civilised neighbours as *Picti*.<sup>12</sup>

This realisation also allows us to revisit the problem of Ninian, Whithorn and the conversion of the southern Picts. If Ninian belonged to the Late Antique

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<sup>7</sup> See now Fraser, ‘From Ancient Scythia to *The Problem of the Picts*’.

<sup>8</sup> For the early references to the Picts, see Ritchie, *Perceptions of the Picts*.

<sup>9</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 48–9.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen uses many of the tropes associated with the earlier usage but writes after the establishment of the Verturian hegemony.

<sup>11</sup> The ‘ancient’ aspect of the description reflects Bede’s awareness that the English now occupied the south side of the Forth.

<sup>12</sup> See also Halsall, ‘Northern Britain and the Fall of the Roman Empire’, pp. 9–10.

period, as he surely did, then it may be that the peoples in the environs of Whithorn, where he was later culted and believed to have held episcopal office, may well have been perceived of as Picts by southern neighbours (and even missionaries), even if they held themselves to be Britons. Bede, writing during the period when the rulers of Fortriu had appropriated the Pictish label, may have assumed, anachronistically, that all references to the *Picti* in his sources were to residents of the lands north of the Forth. Modern scholarship has had similar difficulty imagining Galloway Picts, but on the grounds that they do not share a material footprint with the peoples of the Northeast. If, however the north-easterners only began to monopolise the Pictish label from the later seventh century, then this should not be a problem.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of this important rethinking of the evidence relating to Pictish ethnogenesis we can see that the establishment of a self-conscious Pictish identity probably went hand in hand with the conversion and Christianisation of the northern tribes and the expansion of the Verturian hegemony. Hughes' observation of the lack of a distinctive character to Pictish Christianity in the seventh century should not surprise us. Amongst the English there were no native bishops for nearly fifty years after the mission of Augustine, the first being Ithamar of Rochester, consecrated in or after 644, and the East Anglian bishops Thomas and Boniface, consecrated in the late 640s and early 650s respectively.<sup>14</sup> Deusdedit in Kent and Cedd amongst the East Saxons were both consecrated in or around 652 or 653.<sup>15</sup> English bishops remained a minority for some time after this. Indeed the earliest English bishops seem to have been none too successful. Deusdedit (whose name suggests that he may have been a child oblate brought up amongst the Roman missionaries) in any case seems to have had little authority if any beyond Kent, whilst both Cedd and the Wini abandoned their original sees when offered cushier postings by friendly kings.<sup>16</sup> Pope Vitalian's decision to send the Cilician Greek Theodore and his companion the African Hadrian to take charge of the English Church in succession to Deusdedit may have reflected his assessment of

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<sup>13</sup> For a recent restatement of the position that equates the appearance of the term *Picti* with Pictish ethnogenesis, see Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 31–6.

<sup>14</sup> *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (ed. Colgrave and Mynors), III.14 and III.20. In a somewhat equivocal article Richard Sharpe comes close to suggesting that Ithamar may in fact have been a Briton, 'The Naming of Bishop Ithamar'.

<sup>15</sup> *Bede's Ecclesiastical History* (ed. Colgrave and Mynors), III.20 and III.22.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, III. 23 and III.7

the competence of English prelates.<sup>17</sup> Similarly the Irish tradition of the ‘orders of saints’ imagined most bishops to have been of foreign origin into the sixth century.<sup>18</sup> A wider comparative study of missionary-period episcopacy, extending to Scandinavia and the Slavic World, might produce interesting results in this regard but it is probably safe to say that a fully native church was unlikely to arise until its prelates were all born of native Christian parents. This inevitably would take some time.

Seen in this light, one factor in the so-called Pictish Reformation, comprising Naiton’s famous letter to Ceolfrith (*ca* 715) asking about Easter Tables and architects, and the expulsion of the *familia* of Iona across the Spine of Britain in 717, may have been the process of nativization.<sup>19</sup> That this debate was not simply about the Easter Question would seem to be suggested if we accept that the Annals of Ulster’s statement about Easter being changed in *ciuitate Eo*, under the year 716, refers to Iona.<sup>20</sup> The Ionan *familia* may have posed a particular obstacle to nativizing the Church hierarchy in both Northumbria and Pictavia by virtue of the fact that they seem to have sent out bishops consecrated in Iona and that many of these prelates, perhaps all of them, may have been Uí Neill dynasts.<sup>21</sup> As long as a Church managed from Iona operated in this way, the chances of local recruits rising in the ranks would have remained very small indeed. When compared to the models of episcopacy pilgrims and students would have encountered in Gaul and Italy, and beyond, this would have looked irregular and frankly inadequate from a pastoral perspective. Seen in this light we can imagine that the development of the Pictish Church probably followed a fairly regular pattern. Following a colonial missionary model in the first two or three generations came a relatively rapid process of nativization which was partly organic but nonetheless punctuated by moments of crisis.

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<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, IV.1

<sup>18</sup> For this, generally overlooked, phase of the conversion of Ireland, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 233–40, and *id.*, *Wales and the Britons*, pp. 181–8.

<sup>19</sup> Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*, pp. 275–82.

<sup>20</sup> *The Annals of Ulster* (ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill), *s.a.* 716. The term *ciuitas* is nowhere else used to refer to Iona in the chronicle record and the unique Latin form *Eo* might suggest that this entry in fact refers to Mayo of the Saxons, rather than Iona.

<sup>21</sup> The best discussion of the personnel of the Iona community remains Máire Herbert’s *Iona, Kells and Derry*.

Hughes's focus on the seventh century has encouraged the view widely held by the public, and sadly by a few people who should know better, that Christianity among the Picts was only ever skin deep and that they remained an essentially pagan people. Her focus on the first century of Pictish Christianity was, of course, constrained in part by the materials. As Bede and the 'Iona chronicle' dry up, textual evidence for the Pictish church becomes very slight indeed, limited to a handful of obits. This situation has been compounded by some modern readings of passages like those found in the *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba* and Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia* which ascribe the ethnonemesis of the Picts to their poor performance as Christians.<sup>22</sup> It should not be forgotten that to writers schooled in notions of providential history this would be the only explanation for the fall of a *gens*. It is exegesis, not evidence.

The textual evidence is not, however, the sum of the evidence relating to the Churches of Pictavia and what I hope to explore in what follows is some of the other evidence that points to flourishing Church settlements. The categories of evidence that are of interest here are archaeology, place-names and sculpture. I am an expert in none of these fields but hope to make some suggestions as to how historians of the Picts can incorporate the findings of specialists in these fields into the narratives they construct.

In archaeological terms, until recently, no Pictish church site had undergone significant investigation. That all changed with Martin Carver's excavations at Portmahomack in Easter Ross between 1994 and 2007.<sup>23</sup> Carver was originally drawn to the site by what he thought might be traces of an early medieval emporium similar to those which sprang up in England, Jutland and Frisia in the seventh and eighth centuries. Work in the field rapidly demonstrated that this was not the case, and on the low rise surrounding Tarbat Old Kirk he found the traces of a settlement with accompanying cemetery that lasted from the sixth to the ninth or tenth centuries. For some of this period, perhaps all of it, activity of an ecclesiastical nature was ongoing at the site as evidenced by sculpture and by what seem to be the remains of a building used for manuscript production. We still await

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<sup>22</sup> For the *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba*, see Hudson, 'The Scottish Chronicle'. For Henry, see *Henry Archdeacon of Huntingdon: Historia Anglorum* (ed. Greenaway), I.8.

<sup>23</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack* is a superb account of the project. We still await the full publication of the excavation reports.

the full publication of this site and it remains the only Pictish ecclesiastical site to have undergone significant archaeological investigation.<sup>24</sup>

When it comes to place-names very little work has been undertaken with regard to the churches of Pictavia. This is largely because the generic elements most often denoting ecclesiastical sites in Scottish place-names appear, in the area north of the Forth, to be predominantly Gaelic. There are a number of issues here. First of all, a Gaelic generic may have replaced a generic in an earlier language as the Gaelicization of Pictavia progressed. One also has to bear in mind that since the Picts appear to have been converted, by and large, by Gaelic-speaking missionaries the ecclesiastical place-name generics in their own language may well have comprised in part, or as a whole, Gaelic loanwords. This means, for example, that the assumption that names including a first element 'kil', in the modern toponymy of eastern Scotland, reflect a coinage in Gaelic *cill*, is not a given, since there remains the possibility that they may rather have been coined using the hypothetical borrowing into Pictish. Since the second, or specific, element of such names is often a personal name it gives no clue as to the original language since annalistic and hagiographical texts make it quite clear that Pictish names might easily be Gaelicized.<sup>25</sup> If we could somehow pick such names apart, it would be really interesting to know whether the culting of non-Columban Irish saints, such as Brigit, represented in many such place names, dated back to Pictish times.

A further group of place-names may provide more illumination. These are names containing the British element *aber*, a river mouth. While this is not specifically an ecclesiastical name it is notable that the element appears disproportionately in what seem to have been church settlements with an early medieval origin.<sup>26</sup> In 1995 Bill Nicolaisen suggested that the prevalence of such place-names suggested that the Picts had a 'particular preference for settlement near confluences and river mouths, possibly ... because of the cultic association of

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<sup>24</sup> Interim reports and other material are available on line at [www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/gsp/alumni/carver/tarbat.html](http://www.york.ac.uk/archaeology/gsp/alumni/carver/tarbat.html)

<sup>25</sup> One need only compare the various versions of the Pictish king list to see British and Gaelic orthography at work on the same names; for editions of these lists, see Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*.

<sup>26</sup> The standard reference works for Scottish place-names remain Watson's *History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* and Nicolaisen's *Scottish Place-Names*. A useful cautionary essay is Barrow's 'The Uses of Place-names and Scottish History'.

these places.’<sup>27</sup> It seemed clear from this statement in print and from his presentations at various Scottish events that Nicolaisen imagined such cultic associations to be pagan. The inspiration for this analysis seems to have been the second element of the name ‘Aberdeen’, which is fairly certainly the river name \**Devona*. This means ‘goddess’, and Nicolaisen seemed inclined to take it at its etymological value rather than simply as the name of the river. Another assumption lying behind his reasoning seems to have been the view, not unique to him, that surviving Pictish place-names reflected places where the Picts liked to have settlements. Prehistorians long ago demonstrated that Britain has been fully settled since the Bronze Age at least, if not the Neolithic.<sup>28</sup> Surviving Pictish settlement names depend upon the fact of ‘survival’ rather than the fact of ‘settlement’. That such places retained their Pictish names through periods when most settlement names were coined in Gaelic or Scots is what marks them out, rather than the fact of their foundation in the first place. In this light what is important to note is how many of the Aber- names appear to have been important Church settlements: Aberdeen itself, which became an episcopal see in the twelfth-century; Abernethy, famous for its Irish-style round tower, Mael Coluim mac Donnchada’s submission to William the Conqueror,<sup>29</sup> and according to Thomas Clancy, perhaps the place where *Historia Brittonum* was translated into Gaelic;<sup>30</sup> and Aberlour, where St Drostan’s well still provides the water of life.<sup>31</sup>

Two examples from outside of what we generally think of as Pictavia may also serve to make these points. The first is at Applecross, earlier *Apurchrosan*, on the mainland opposite Skye, where the Bangor cleric Mael Rubha founded a church in 673.<sup>32</sup> This site retained its British Pictish name, in one form or another, to the present despite being in an area of Scotland that has been Gaelic-speaking for most of the intervening period.<sup>33</sup> At the other end of Pictavia, indeed across the

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<sup>27</sup> Nicolaisen, ‘Pictish Place Names’, p. 13. An expanded version of this argument appeared in *id.*, ‘On Pictish Rivers and their Confluences’.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Davidson and Carter, ‘Soils and their Evolution’, pp. 58–61.

<sup>29</sup> *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, Volume 7, MS. E* (ed. S. Irvine), *s.a.* 1072.

<sup>30</sup> Clancy, ‘Scotland, the “Nennian” Recension of the *Historia Brittonum* and *Lebor Bretnach*’.

<sup>31</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Professor Chris Wickham for supplying me with a bottle whilst I prepared this paper for publication.

<sup>32</sup> *Annals of Ulster* (ed. Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill), *s.a.* 673.5

<sup>33</sup> Watson, *Celtic Placenames*, pp. 78, 124, 288 and 458.

Forth in the occupied South Bank, lies Aberlady. This is almost certainly the site of the Northumbrian Church settlement of Pefferhame,<sup>34</sup> since it lies at the mouth of the Peffer Burn and sports the remains of a fine pre-viking age cross shaft.<sup>35</sup> This name is often perceived as a locally-coined British name surviving from pre-Northumbrian times but, like a number of Brittonic names on the southern shore of the Forth, it is perhaps more likely the name by which the site was known by the Picts across the water and inherited by the Scottish kingdom.<sup>36</sup> What it takes for names to survive massive language shifts is the durability of the thing described across the period of shift. Famously topographic features such as hills and rivers are more likely to retain earlier names than settlements. In Anglo-Saxon England the retention of elements of the names of some walled Roman cities and forts may likewise reflect their existence as immutable objects in the landscape as much as any continuity of settlement. The Gaelicization of Pictavia, whilst still mysterious in detail, was unlike the Anglo-Saxon conquest of much of Britain in that both parties were Christian and shared many ecclesiastical traditions. It is clear from texts, such as the Scottish king-lists,<sup>37</sup> the life of Saint Serf<sup>38</sup> and the St Andrews foundation legend,<sup>39</sup> that the kingdom and the Church in the twelfth century sought to demonstrate continuity from the Pictish period.<sup>40</sup> Whilst secular settlement and landholding will inevitably have undergone much change, not so much because of any conquest or process of ethnic replacement but because property is subject to the vagaries of inheritance, partition and exchange, ecclesiastical estate centres, whose owners were the immortal saints, were likely to remain fixed points in the landscape and also, perhaps, more likely to have their names fossilised in textual rather than oral transmission. Thus Pictish habitative names, as opposed to the names for topographic features, which survived the Gaelicization of the toponymy may in many, perhaps most, cases reflect ecclesiastical rather than secular estate centres. What this suggests is that many of these ecclesiastical centres experienced

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<sup>34</sup> *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia* (ed. T. Arnold), II, 101, *s.a.* 854.

<sup>35</sup> <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/54866/details/aberlady+st+mary+s+chapel/>

<sup>36</sup> Other examples may be the *caer* names, Crammond and Carriden.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*.

<sup>38</sup> ‘*Vita Sancti Servani*’ (ed. A. MacQuarrie).

<sup>39</sup> Edited and translated in Taylor with Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife: volume 3*, pp. 564–99.

<sup>40</sup> For a general discussion of this continuity, see Broun, *Scottish Independence and the Idea of Britain*.

considerable continuity across the period and that they were probably significant establishments.

The main evidence for the existence of significant and wealthy Church settlements in Pictavia, however, remains the sculpture. I am no art historian and have to confess to finding myself slightly irritated by the continuing grip maintained on the imagination of many otherwise sane academics and enthusiasts by the Pictish symbols. Nonetheless the sculpture has something to tell us. We are very lucky to have two extremely useful works of recent production to guide us through this material, George and Isabel Henderson's great work *The Art of the Picts* and the very handy Royal Commission volume edited by Iain Fraser which provides a corpus of the material, laid out geographically.<sup>41</sup> The Hendersons are remarkably, and one should stress admirably, cautious about securely dating any of the sculpture. They suggest that most of it probably belongs to the seventh to ninth centuries but do not eliminate the possibility that some might be as early as the sixth.<sup>42</sup> They suggest that, although the inscribed images on undressed stones may have begun to have been produced before the relief sculpture on dressed slabs, there is no reason to suppose their production ceased when the latter began to be produced.<sup>43</sup> Indeed the landscape context of the two types of monument is generally somewhat different and context rather than date may explain the different techniques employed upon them.

For my purposes the clusters of high quality cross slabs and associated sculpture found at some sites in Scotland should be taken more seriously as indicators of ecclesiastical centres of significance. Since Pictish sculpture has tended to be the preserve of either those trying to decipher the symbols or art historians tracing the history of motifs, the simplest observation is often overlooked. The sheer bulk of high quality sculpture at some of these sites implies that they were churches on a par with more famous Insular Church Settlements like Clonmacnoise, Whithorn or Monasterboice. Perhaps the most extensive of these sites is that now known as St Vigeans, but probably the original settlement of

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<sup>41</sup> Henderson and Henderson, *The Art of the Picts*; Fraser, *The Pictish Symbol Stones*.

<sup>42</sup> Their cautiousness extends to not stating this anywhere categorically and one must infer this conclusion from reading the book as a whole. As Mrs Henderson said to me on one occasion, 'You are not supposed to look things up in it. You are supposed to read it from cover to cover.'

<sup>43</sup> The traditional classification of these monuments into Class I and Class II is eschewed by the Hendersons on the grounds that it implies both a chronological and a qualitative distinction that may reflect modern presumptions more than historical reality.



Arbroath (earlier Aberbrothoc), where remains of at least eighteen cross slabs and a number of free standing crosses and recumbent monuments dating probably to the eighth to tenth centuries survive.<sup>44</sup> ‘Vigean’, the dedicatee, is usually assumed to have been the seventh-century Irish saint Féichén of Fobar,<sup>45</sup> though this identification is not secure. When c. 1178 the Scots King William the Lion founded an abbey in honour of the recently martyred Thomas Becket the core endowment was ‘Aberbrothoc and all its shire’ together with its church and teinds (tithes).<sup>46</sup> This tends to reflect the fate of many of the great Pictish churches: at some point in the twelfth century what must have been their original endowment is granted to a new or reformed house either founded nearby or elsewhere in Scotland. The presence of the impressive twelfth-century abbey at Arbroath, William’s foundation, overshadows Saint Vigeans, located just over a kilometre upstream, where the parish church sits somewhat precariously atop a forty-foot mound. The sheer quantity of high quality ecclesiastical sculpture from St Vigeans, however, bears witness to the level of craft specialisation, and thus agrarian exploitation, present at the site in Pictish times. It seems likely that the sculptors themselves were in either monastic or clerical orders of some kind and came from a part of the community sheltered from the daily round of agrarian chores. Like the scribes who produced the great insular codices such as the Book of Durrow or the Lindisfarne Gospels, these men, and they were almost certainly men, dedicated their labour to the glorification of God. The presence of such specialists reveals to us the less obvious presence of the numbers of others whose labours, earthly and spiritual, supported them. The potentially pagan origin of a handful of the motifs which appear in Pictish art have tended to obscure the fact the flourishing of the material culture which has transmitted those motifs to the present is almost entirely the product of the wealth and stability of the great churches of Pictavia.

As well as St Vigeans, we can point to Meigle, not far away in Strathmore, where the museum houses some sixteen cross slabs and a number of recumbent

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<sup>44</sup> For the official Royal Commission record, see Canmore at <http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/search/?keyword=St+Vigeans&submit=search&show=all>. A new definitive publication by Jane Geddes is due out later this year *The Early Medieval Sculpture from St Vigeans, Angus*. For the time being a useful educational guide can be found online at <http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/investigating-st-vigeans.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> His obit appears at AU 665.3.

<sup>46</sup> Barrow, *Regesta Regum Scottorum II*, no. 197 (pp. 250–2).

and fragmentary pieces.<sup>47</sup> The slabs here tend to be larger and of a slightly different form than those at St Vigean, but the decoration clearly belongs to a broadly similar tradition. The differences here are perhaps what is significant, suggesting a different group of sculptors attached to this site. These two sites show the greatest collections of Pictish ecclesiastical monuments in single locations but this may reflect the gathering together by antiquaries or local presbyteries of monuments originally scattered over a slightly wider area.<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere in Pictavia it is not unusual to find sculpture spread around what may have been the limits of a church's lands or pastoral territory. His work at Portmahomack has encouraged Carver to see the great cross slabs of Easter Ross, such as those at Nigg, Shandwick and Hilton of Cadboll, as marking out the limits of some sort of territory or sphere of influence of the Church settlement he excavated,<sup>49</sup> perhaps the equivalent to the Islandshire appended to Lindisfarne.<sup>50</sup> Something similar might be argued for the four cross slabs now held in the museum at Dunrobin Castle in Sutherland, gathered together in the nineteenth century from four nearby sites, Golspie, Clynekirton, Collieburn and Lothbeg, which might mark out a territory centred on the lower reaches of the Brora River, one of the few areas of extensive arable land along the Sutherland coast.<sup>51</sup> A similar, though more fully argued, case has been made by Edwina Proudfoot for the various sculptural fragments surrounding the important Church Settlement of Abernethy.<sup>52</sup> One could go on but these examples should serve to show that the happy coincidence of survival and curation at St Vigean and Meigle should not incline us to dismiss the possibility that other ecclesiastical establishments of equal wealth and pretension existed across much of Pictavia.

So what were these places? As my usage has probably already betrayed, I am fully in agreement with Colmán Etchingham in his use of the term 'Church Settlement' for these important ecclesiastical sites in the insular world.<sup>53</sup> The lack

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<sup>47</sup> The Royal Commission inventory can be found at:

<http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/30837/details/meigle+meigle+museum/>.

<sup>48</sup> That is to say, from within the parish but not necessarily from within the kirkyard.

<sup>49</sup> Carver, *Portmahomack*, pp. 173–90.

<sup>50</sup> Craster, 'Patrimony of St Cuthbert'.

<sup>51</sup> The stones and their find spots are illustrated and described in Close-Brooks, *Pictish Stones in Dunrobin Castle Museum*.

<sup>52</sup> Proudfoot, 'Abernethy and Mugdrum'.

<sup>53</sup> Etchingham, *The Irish 'Monastic Town'*.

of textual evidence strongly suggest that we shall never know in detail the exact nature of any of these sites but they were almost certainly complex and multifunctional including some personnel living under coenobitic orders and others more engaged with pastoral activities. There are some hints that kings may have maintained residences in some of them, but this would not be unusual for the time.<sup>54</sup> Kings in this period were presumably peripatetic and would have spent some of their time at secular fortresses and others at lowland villas or major churches. These settlements must have been the largest permanently occupied places in Pictavia and doubtless drove economic and cultural innovation. Books were probably produced in them and, although no manuscripts of certain Pictish provenance survive, the eagle in the Early Insular Gospel book held in the Parker library is so similar to the eagles carved on a number of Pictish stones that it is hard not to imagine this book to have been made in Pictavia.<sup>55</sup>

Finally a couple of observations relating to the dates of the major sculptural collections. Art historians are naturally cautious about producing absolute dates but it seems to me that there are two possible criteria which might help produce *termini post-quem* for some of these monuments. Firstly, although ring-headed crosses are rare, and exclusively fragmentary and generally small from Pictish sites, the images of crosses on the cross slabs seem to me to predominantly represent free-standing ring-headed crosses and this would incline me to think that they postdate the emergence of such monuments at the major churches of the Gaelic West, such as Iona. These are usually said to date to 800 or later.<sup>56</sup> Secondly a feature of some sculpture, particularly at Meikle, but not exclusive to there and perhaps best exemplified by the St Andrews Sarcophagus, is the occasional appearance of what appear to be motifs ultimately drawn from Sassanian art; that is to say the art of late pre-Islamic Persia.<sup>57</sup> On the sarcophagus we see features such as the king slaying a lion from horseback with a sword and a griffon killing a deer. At Meikle there even seems to be a representation of an angel modelled on images

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<sup>54</sup> Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba*, pp. 312–20.

<sup>55</sup> Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 197B, p. 245; for an on-line image, see [http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/zoom\\_view.do?ms\\_no=197B&page=245](http://parkerweb.stanford.edu/parker/actions/zoom_view.do?ms_no=197B&page=245). Orcadian examples such as the Knowe of Burrian and the Brough Birsay are perhaps the most convincing parallels, but a number of these eagles are found across Pictavia; see Fraser, *Symbol Stones*, s.v. 'eagle'.

<sup>56</sup> Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands*.

<sup>57</sup> For the sarcophagus, see Foster, *The St. Andrews Sarcophagus*.

of Ahura Mazda! These eastern influences have contributed to the mystique of the Picts among modern enthusiasts. What I would like to suggest is that the medium by which these Iranian images were transmitted to the west was as a result of the plundering of the Avars by Duke Eric of Friuli and Pepin, king of Italy, on behalf of Charlemagne in the year 796.<sup>58</sup> The Avars reproduced many such Iranian images in their metalwork and these might well have provided the medium for the distribution of the motifs to the west after Charlemagne's sack of the Avar Ring.<sup>59</sup> The Pictish churches may have been more heavily influenced by these motifs partly as a result of their late development. By the time the major stone monuments were being erected at surrounding nations such as the Anglo-Saxons and the Gaels may well have already established a repertoire and grammar of iconography. The great days of the Pictish kingdom came at the very end of the eight century and the beginning of the ninth.

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<sup>58</sup> For which, see the Royal Frankish Annals *s.a.* 796: *Annales Regni Francorum* (ed. Pertz, rev. Kurz); translated in Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles*, pp. 74–5.

<sup>59</sup> *Catalogue of the Avar Treasure*, produced for Sotheby's.

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