



Scotland's Irish Origins

Author(s): Dean R. Snow

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Ireland in the Early Christian period (A.D. 400–1177) was made up of at least 120 chiefdoms, usually described in surviving documents as petty kingdoms, typically having about 700 warriors. One of these petty kingdoms was Dál Riata, which occupied a corner of County Antrim, the island's northeasternmost part. Around A.D. 400, people from Dál Riata began to settle across the Irish Sea along the Scottish coast in County Argyll. Other Irish migrants were also establishing footholds along the coast farther south, as far as Wales and even Cornwall, but the migrants from Dál Riata were especially noteworthy because they were known to the Romans as "Scotti" and they would eventually give their Gaelic language and their name to all of what is now known as Scotland.

So far as we know, the only people already living in Scotland in A.D. 400 were the Picts, who were first mentioned by Roman writers in A.D. 297. This was in connection with an attack along Hadrian's Wall, in which the Picts had the help of Irish (Scotti) allies, so ties across the Irish Sea must have already been strong. Roman sources predictably describe their Pictish adversaries as barbarians and mention their use of blue paint, which some historians

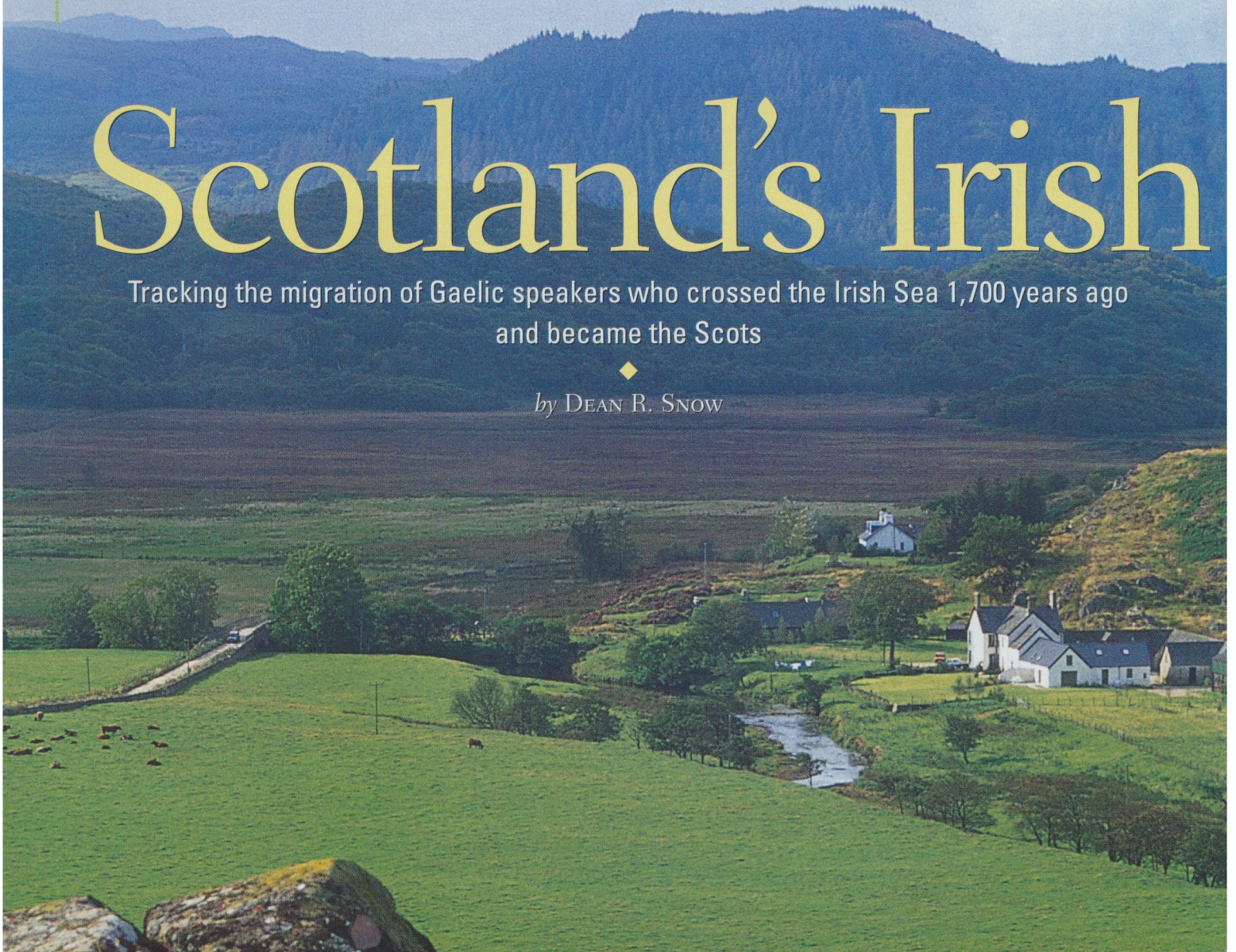
later interpreted perhaps too literally (Mel Gibson and his friends show up in the film *Braveheart* slathered with gallons of it). More likely the Picts were heavily tattooed.

The Picts lived mainly in eastern Scotland, north of modern Edinburgh. We know their homeland both from the distributions of Pictish place-names (which typically begin with "Pett" or "Pit") and the distribution of Pictish symbol stones, which were Pictish equivalents of a medieval coat of arms, each typically bearing the crest of a petty king and that of his father. The rugged west coast was only lightly occupied by Picts or some other Celtic-speaking people. Settlers from Dál Riata apparently established themselves along the west coast without much opposition. By A.D. 490 the population of Scotti was large enough that the head of the little kingdom moved the family seat across from Ireland. The Scotti alternately cooperated with and fought against the Picts for the next few centuries until the two were unified into a single kingdom under Cináed (Kenneth) mac Ailpín in A.D. 844. After that the Pictish language disappeared, along with the symbol stones and other archaeological traits that had distinguished them from the Scotti.

Scotland's Irish

Tracking the migration of Gaelic speakers who crossed the Irish Sea 1,700 years ago
and became the Scots

by DEAN R. SNOW



WHAT PROMPTED THE SCOTTI to leave Ireland? What attracted them to what is now Scotland? How did the two populations become one speaking Gaelic rather than Pictish? And what are the archaeological signatures of it all? Most archaeologists agree that Scottish Dál Riata was founded from Irish Dál Riata, not the other way around. Most agree that the archaeological evidence for the movement is almost invisible. Most agree that the spread of dominant Scottish society at the expense of the Picts in Scotland involved the movement of dominant warriors, a considerable amount of language switching to Gaelic from Pictish (which was related more closely to the language spoken by the Britons to the south), and only a modest amount of migration by individuals. Finally, most agree that the movement was accompanied, at least part of the time, by the spread of Christianity from Ireland to Scotland.

Small numbers of pioneering men and their families probably moved first, followed by others. The very first moves might have been nothing more than raids. There was probably some return migration, but a net positive flow from Ireland to Scotland over a period of decades or a couple centuries. Initial settlements were probably unopposed in this thinly populated part of northern Britain. Intermarriage with Picts followed and although we cannot yet specify the process, the Gaelic language of the immigrants proved to be dominant in the long run.

Languages of dominant societies tend also to dominate, and I am assuming that this is what happened in the case of Scottish expansion. Political, economic, and linguistic supremacy must be considered separately, but in this case they appear to have traveled together.

If the origins of Dál Riata are to be found in the north of Ireland, then it makes sense to look there for clues as to why people moved across the Irish Sea. Finbar McCormick of Queens University, Belfast, who works with both archaeological evidence and the findings of palynologists, argues that there is clear evidence in the pollen record of a prolonged period of forest regeneration from about 100 B.C. to A.D. 340, just before the beginning of the Early Christian period. If the forests were coming back, farming and the human population must have been in decline. But the evidence shows that agriculture revived and human populations expanded again after the middle of the fourth century.

McCormick also observes that ringforts first appear in significant numbers after the beginning of the Early Christian period, sometime after A.D. 400. Ringforts—in Northern Ireland they are often called *raths* if they are earthen only, or *cashels* if clad in stone—are to some degree misnamed, for they were apparently used to contain and protect cattle and people around farmsteads. They were used for military purposes only if one regards protecting cattle against rustlers and people against slave raiders as such. Whether one built a *rath* or a *cashel* was probably determined in large part by the availability of stone.

Origins

By A.D. 490, immigrants from Dál Riata, a petty kingdom in northeastern Ireland, had crossed to Scotland and established their family seat, the fortress of Dunadd in Argyll.

Courtesy Kilmarin House, Pict, Scotland (www.kilmartin.org)



According to legend, the Giant's Causeway, a promontory of basalt columns, was the site from which Scotti departed from Dál Riata, in what is now Northern Ireland's County Antrim, and crossed the Irish Sea to the west coast of Scotland.

We know from documents that cattle were the principal measure of a man's wealth in the Early Christian period, and that cattle rustling was widespread. But cattle had been part of farming in Ireland since the Neolithic. Why did they take on such significance as indicators of wealth and prompt the construction of hundreds of *raths* and *cashels* after A.D. 400? McCormick concludes that while previously cattle were used mainly for meat, the advent of enclosures marks the beginning of serious dairying. The energy yield of dairy cattle is about four times that of beef cattle. The population of dairy farmers grew rapidly, leading to competition for pasturage and increased cattle raiding, especially in northeasternmost Ireland. A check of a data base of sites in Northern Ireland, made possible by

Queens University's Michael Avery, was revealing. Of 5,459 sites classified as *raths*, *cashels*, or other enclosures, nearly one-half (2,516) are of the Early Christian period. Moreover, almost one-quarter (564) of the Early Christian cases are in County Antrim, home of Dál Riata.

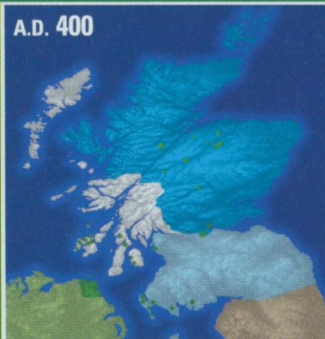
The Scots and the Picts are generally thought to have practiced very similar economies, but if McCormick is right about the importance of dairying among the Scots, they could have had a significant adaptive advantage. If cattle were important and at least partially explain the dominance of Dál Riatan migrants, perhaps we should expect to find large numbers of *raths* and *cashels* in Scottish Dál Riata. Alas, they are not there. But there is fortunately at least one plausible ecological explanation for this as well. McCormick argues that the land in western Scotland is so unproductive that the potential densities of human and cattle populations were too low to make the concentration of herds in enclosures practical. Whatever the reason, we know that Gaelic speech and Irish society spread into Scotland, but we cannot use *raths* and *cashels* as archaeological signatures of that spread. Nor did *souterrains*, underground structures used by the Irish for storage and refuge, move with them to Scotland. On the other hand, some of the poorly dated structures referred to as *duns* in Scottish Argyll look more than a little like Irish *cashels*, and the late ones could easily have been built by Dál Riata immigrants. Dunadd, a fortress in Argyll, was used, if not founded, as the capital of Scottish Dál Riata after A.D. 490.

Neither can archaeologists use characteristic portable artifacts to track the Dál Riata incursion. A bronze brooch, Irish in style, was found in the crannog at Loch Glashan, and molds to produce the same kinds of brooches have turned up at Dunadd. Artificial islands, crannogs are typically Irish sites, and there are a few examples in Scotland. But for the most part neither the kinds of archaeological sites that are common on the Irish side of the sea nor portable artifacts like brooches are frequent enough in

Take Your Pict

From A.D. 400 to 1000, northern Great Britain saw the withdrawal of Roman forces, arrival of the Scotti from northeastern Ireland, disappearance of the Picts, formation of a united kingdom of Scotland, and colonization by the Norse.

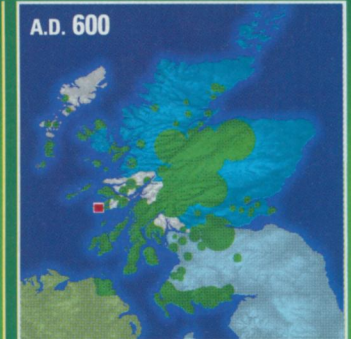
-  Sparsely populated areas
-  Irish
-  Dál Riatans (Scotti)
-  Other Celtic Speakers
-  Picts
-  Roman Occupation
-  Angles
-  Norse



A.D. 400
Settlers from the Irish petty kingdom of Dál Riata were beginning to establish themselves in what would later be called Scotland. Picts were well established north of other Celtic speakers except perhaps on the west coast and in the Hebrides.



A.D. 500
Departure of Roman legions in A.D. 407 left Britain to Picts, other Celtic speakers, and growing numbers of Irish settlers. Enough Scotti were in place by A.D. 490 to allow them to move the seat of Dál Riata from across the Irish Sea.



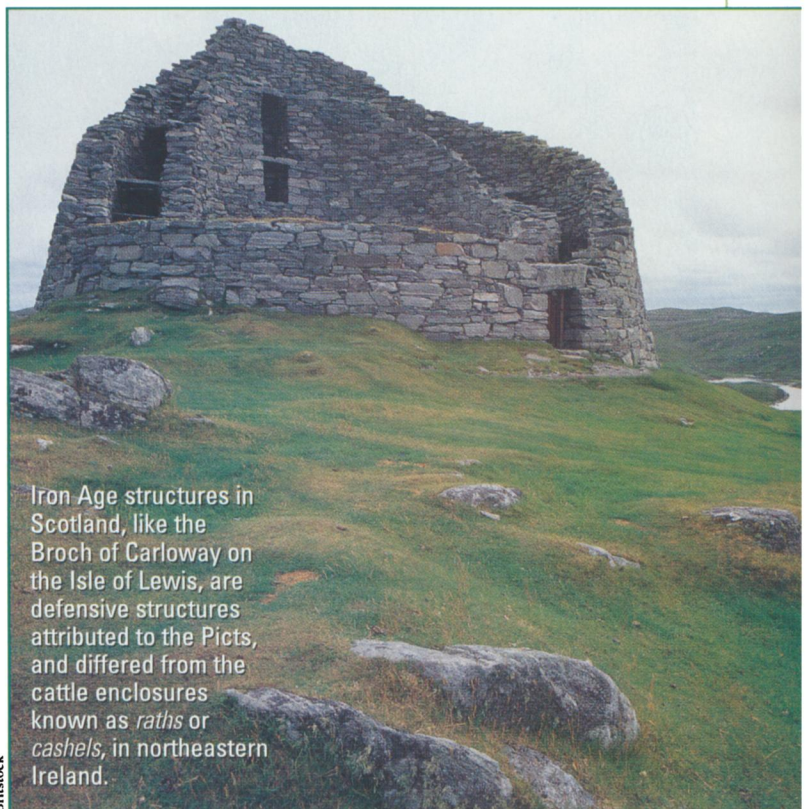
A.D. 600
Colum Cille left Ireland and established a monastery on Iona in 563 (red box). From this time on expansion of the Irish Scotti was assisted in part by the spread of Christianity.

western Scotland to provide a convincing archaeological signature of the migration. Souterrain ware, typical of northeastern Ireland during the Early Christian period, was apparently also made by a few specialists in Scotland from the end of the eighth until the twelfth century. But this was after the Scotti were already established in Dál Riata, and this early commercial ware remained mostly restricted to the Irish side. In Scotland archaeologists find instead imported food storage vessels (known as French E-ware) that might have been valued more for their contents than themselves. More of these have been found at Dunadd than anywhere else in Britain. Clearly, none of this marks Scottish expansion as neatly as archaeologists would like.

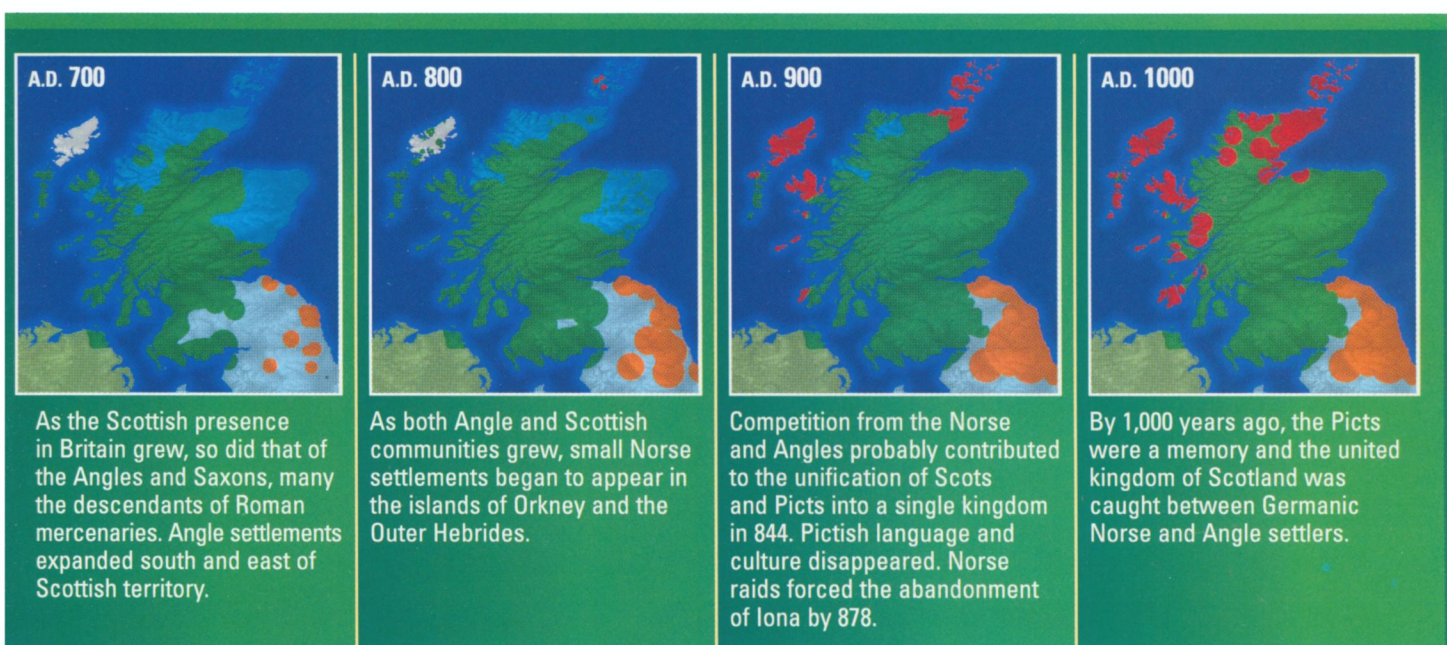
Christianity also moved across the Irish Sea. St. Patrick reputedly began his mission in A.D. 432, decades before the Dál Riatan center of gravity moved from Ireland to Scotland. Irish monasticism flourished between A.D. 520 and 620. Colum Cille, the monk also known as St. Columba, established his new monastery on the Scottish island of Iona in 563. From then on the Christian cross was carried increasingly by the people of Dál Riata. We should not be surprised that cattle dominate the animal remains recovered by archaeologists working at Iona. While Colum Cille had some success converting the Picts to Christianity, the Scots were the principal beneficiaries of his work. Offering solace in this life and salvation in the next to anyone that wanted it, the religion was very popular. For chieftains, the Celtic church of Colum Cille offered legitimization that traditional belief systems did not. It was the beginning of the symbiotic relationship between clergy and secular leaders that culminated in feudalism across much of Europe.

ALL OF THIS MAKES IT CLEAR that the Scots were doing what most migrants have usually done throughout human history. They were reinventing themselves as part of the process of expansion. The difficulty, of course, is tracking the movements of people who

are changing, sometimes dramatically, at the same time as they are moving. In this case Christianity left a clear archaeological signature. The first Christian carvings in Ireland were crosses on pillars and slabs. Tall, ringed crosses like that near what is, according to legend, the common grave of St. Patrick, Colum Cille, and St. Brigid in Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, appeared by the eighth century. In Scotland the stone expressions of Christianity gradually spread to the Picts as well. As part of this process, crudely shaped Pictish symbol stones bearing only what were probably the crests of local kings were replaced



Iron Age structures in Scotland, like the Broch of Carloway on the Isle of Lewis, are defensive structures attributed to the Picts, and differed from the cattle enclosures known as *raths* or *cashels*, in northeastern Ireland.



by more elaborate dressed and ornamented stones that also sometimes bore Christian symbols.

The changes were not painless. Scottish power and influence began to threaten the Picts and the Roman Catholic church threatened the Celtic church of Colum Cille. In the first half of the eighth century the Dál Riata Scots defeated the Britons, Iona accepted the Roman

rite of reckoning descent from a man to his sister's son could not survive in the face of the Scottish preference for descent to pass directly from father to son. By 844, the Picts and the Scots, linked by countless intermarriages and under constant pressure from the Norse, were ready to merge into a single kingdom. With that the process of Irish (Scottish) migration to northern Britain was complete, and from this time until the end of the eleventh century most Scottish kings were buried at Iona.

So far so good, but what of the observation of James Mallory of Queen's University, Belfast, and many others that we have no archaeological evidence whatsoever for actual population movement from Ireland to Scotland? Artifacts and even architecture can move through trade and exchange even if people do not. But logically it seems less likely that people could migrate without also carrying along artifacts and building habits that archaeologists might later use to track their movements. The solution probably lies in the scale of analysis and logic of the expectations. If archaeologists insist that Scottish migration must be marked by a convenient trail of *raths* and *cashels* containing deposits of

Irish-style brooches they will surely be disappointed. On a more general scale, however, it is clear from archaeology alone that the trappings of Christianity—crosses, churches, and monasteries—spread into Scotland and that Pictish symbol stones disappeared. Gaelic



Crucible and mold: courtesy Kilmartin House Trust, Scotland; brooch, courtesy Glasgow Art Museum. Crucible and mold excavated at Dunadd attest the manufacture of jewelry at the site. Irish-style brooch, right, was found at Loch Glashan.

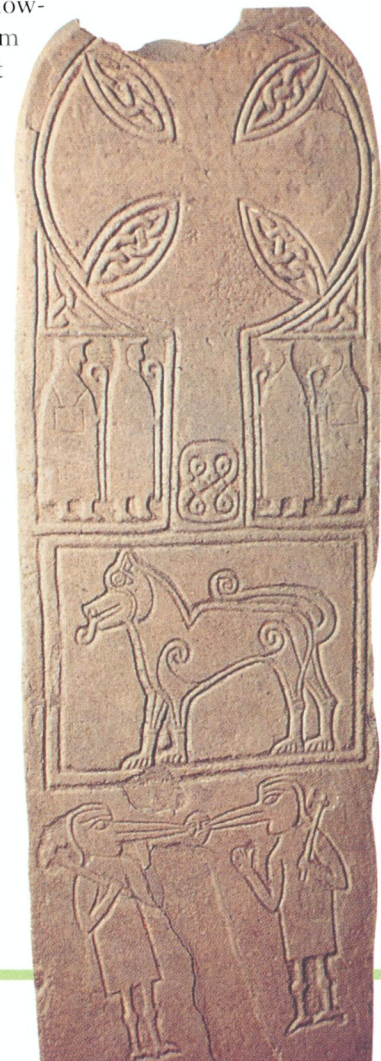


Easter, Columban monastic communities were expelled from Pictish lands, and the Picts temporarily defeated the Scots, all in quick succession.

Around the end of the century, a new threat changed everything. The Vikings began raiding Ireland in 795. Rich monasteries were favored targets, and they carried out their first raid on Iona in 802. They returned and killed 68 of the monastic community in 804. For the next 50 years the Vikings raided, established trading colonies, and began settling portions of both Ireland and Scotland. The Picts and Scots were able seafarers, but they were no match for the Vikings. Beleaguered monks packed up the shrine of Colum Cille, abandoned Iona, and moved back to safer quarters in Kells, Ireland, in 878. By this time Viking raiders were even besieging Paris.

The Norse threat may have accelerated the merger of Scots and Picts. The process was already advanced, facilitated by the patrilineal principle of Scottish descent and the matrilineal principle of Pictish descent. Politically expedient marriages were commonly arranged. Ambitious males could often claim descent through both prominent Scottish fathers and prominent Pictish mothers, as did four early ninth-century Pictish kings. Males tend to dominate in such arrangements, and the Pictish prac-

The older of two Pictish stones, left, from Clynekirkton bears family crests. The more finely made stone from Shetland, right, is later and combines Pictish and Christian symbolism, notably a stylized cross.



Clynekirkton stone: Britstock; Shetland stone: C.M. Dixon

All of this makes it clear that the Scots were doing what most migrants have usually done throughout human history.

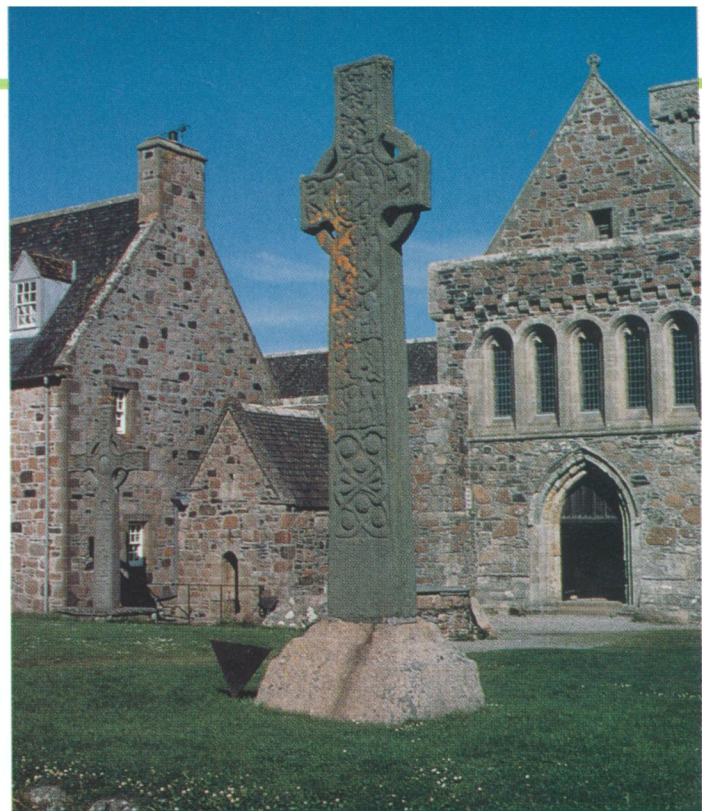
They were reinventing themselves as part of the process of expansion.

speech clearly replaced Pictish and we can track the process through the place-names of Scotland.

We can reasonably expect more evidence to emerge as archaeological research progresses. Dominant societies often retain traditional burial practices while taking on many of the domestic attributes of subordinate populations, so we may expect to find diagnostic Scottish burials in what otherwise may look like Pictish sites. Perhaps patterns of key differences in clothing or grave offerings will emerge as archaeologists uncover more Scottish and Pictish burials.

Recent research by James Wilson of University College, London, and his colleagues has shown little detectable genetic contrast between Irish and Pictish populations, so the Irish migration to Scotland in the first millennium A.D. left no clear DNA trail. The two source populations were already too close to allow the geneticists to distinguish them. The Norse and Anglo-Saxon migrations were another matter, and the male descendants of these populations are clearly distinct from Celtic ones. The contrast is particularly striking in the Orkneys, where the genes of migrating Norsemen are still easily identified in their modern descendants.

INVESTIGATING THE ARRIVAL OF IRISH SETTLERS in Scotland and the disappearance of the Picts in the first millennium A.D. may seem an odd switch for somebody who has spent decades studying the archaeology of the north-eastern United States, but this recent undertaking of mine was not without reason. Fifty years ago, archaeologists generally agreed that the Northern Iroquoians had developed in place over a millennium or more, and that no migrations were required to explain their long-term cultural development. This theory was a reaction against the excesses of earlier scholars who believed they could explain everything prehistoric by elaborate but unrealistic migration scenarios. By the 1990s, however, enough contradictory evidence had accumulated to suggest that this explanation was too simple. I wrote a series of articles arguing that an expansion of Iroquoian-speaking communities from the Pennsylvania Appalachians into what are now New York and southern Ontario better explained the archaeological, linguistic, biological, and ethnographic facts. The Iroquoian expansion probably involved the displacement, absorption, and occasionally the destruction of former residents of the region.



A Celtic tall cross at the monastery of Iona, which was founded by the Irish monk Colum Cille, St. Columba, in A.D. 563. Christianity spread along with Gaelic and eventually helped facilitate the merger of Pictish and Scottish societies.

Bristock

The ensuing debate convinced me that we cannot understand cultural evolution without a realistic understanding of human demography, and that we cannot understand human demography without allowing for migration. People are born and die, and along the way they form and dissolve social groups of vastly variable sizes, construct things, trade with one another, and engage in warfare. They also move about while doing all of this, sometimes covering great distances and often coupling their movements with social reinvention. If we cannot identify the archaeological signatures of historically known cases of migration and language spread by dominant societies, we have no hope of spotting them in the prehistoric record.

What the Scottish case and others like it tells us is that migrations by relatively small dominant societies are much more common in human history than many archaeologists have been willing to admit (much less assume), particularly in North America. Typically, the signatures of it have been explained away too easily as evolutionary change in place. There are so many good examples of change associated with the migration of whole societies or dominant subsets of them, that any major change over time that can be observed archaeologically is likely to have involved migration in one of its many forms, however minor. We should be assuming population movement as a first principle rather than denying it. ■

DEAN R. SNOW, a professor of anthropology at the Pennsylvania State University, has studied Iroquoian archaeology since 1969. His work in Northern Ireland and Scotland was supported by the British Council.