

## SCOTLAND: A BRIEF HISTORY

### PART 1-FROM END OF THE ICE AGE TO THE TENTH CENTURY AD

#### **Beginnings**

During the first 3000-4000 years the landscape was heavily forested and probably occupied by small communities of hunter-gathers.

#### **Neolithic Period**

About 5000 years ago (c 3,000 BC) Standing Stones started to appear. This was the Neolithic period or New Stone Age. The island of Orkney contains a particularly high concentration of Neolithic monuments, which is probably a reflection of the population density in turn attributable to the fertile soil and abundance of fish. Another abundant resource is that of stone, which the people used to commemorate their lives and beliefs.

By way of example, Orkney has two henges with associated stone circles, both of which have double entrances. These are the Ring of Brodgar and the Stennes Stones which both seem to have belonged to an extensive religious assemblage and/or commemoration of the dead centring on Loch Stennes. Brodgar is currently comprised of some 27 standing stones compared with possibly about 60 originally. Stennes has only 4 stones now standing. The existence of these monuments indicates a hierarchical social structure able to marshal and manage a considerable workforce.

Near to Brodgar is Maes Howe, which is probably the finest example of prehistoric architecture in northwest Europe. The present mound, made up of clay and stones is about 24ft high and 115ft in diameter. Within the mound lies the tomb itself, approached by a passage 31ft long. The ceiling is not mortared notwithstanding some of the stones weigh up to 30 tonnes each. It is possible that Maes Howe contained no human remains; that the dead were deposited in the tomb and removed after the flesh had decayed with the bones permanently deposited in another site, all of this in context of a culture of venerating ancestors.

In 1850 a violent storm exposed the Stone Age site of Skara Brae on Orkney, which is the best-preserved Neolithic village ever discovered. This village was built underground (to afford protection against wind and weather) around 3100 BC to accommodate what was probably a tight knit community. All the dwellings are laid out the same way and contain dressers and cells for storage; there may also be inside toilets as well. However, each house incorporated a lockable door to afford privacy. There is also a separate workshop with evidence of stone tool manufacturing.

Evidence suggests that the Maes Howe people were very sophisticated and did not have to expend valuable time hunting for food-it was already there in abundance. This provided the time for exquisite stone carvings.

The Neolithic people were the first farmers; they cleared the land and controlled the environment.

## **Iron Age**

About 1000 BC technology changed. Blacksmiths mastered the technology to make agricultural tools and weaponry from metal. Products were made using bronze, gold and iron with the latter in particular used for weapons of destruction.

Also at this time Brochs were developed, possibly originating in Skye. The word Broch is derived from a Norse word meaning fortified place. These structures were hollow wall circular tower forts comprising walls about 12ft. thick, which enclosed a central court about 25-35ft in diameter. Brochs may have been built for defence or as a status symbol. The development of these buildings may suggest a change in social structure with a 'lead' family resident in the Broch and the rest of community living in satellite buildings nearby.

At this time Crannogs were a popular form of dwelling. These are Iron Age circular wooden dwellings built on lochs and are unique to Scotland and Ireland. A Crannog has been re-created on Loch Tay using knowledge obtained from excavating the nearby Oakbank Crannog. The rationale for these buildings is not fully understood but influences may be (a) security and/or (b) status symbols. To date about 400 crannogs have been identified in Scotland; 18 on Loch Tay, 20 on Loch Awe and 10 on Loch Lomond. However, there are nearly 30,000 lochs in Scotland so there may be many more crannogs yet to be found.

In the South East of Scotland there is a dearth of crannogs. One major site in this area is Traprain Law a distinctive dome-shaped hill lying 4½ miles (7 km) east of Haddington in East Lothian. It is 221m (725 feet) in height. This is a high status site, which dates from the Iron Age and comprises a dense spread of dwellings. It may have been the capital of the local tribe, the Votadini.

## **The Romans**

The Romans arrived in AD 79, an event that coincides with the first recorded (written) history. The invaders had various excursions north of the Hadrian's Wall line, with frontiers at The Gask Ridge and the Antonine Wall. The latter ran from Bo'ness near Edinburgh to Old Kirkpatrick on the Clyde and was built of turf on a stone base with a 12 ft ditch. The fact that turf was used in such quantity suggests that the native people must have already cleared the local landscape of woodland. There were 16 forts along the Antonine Wall. At Bearsden near Glasgow is the remains of a Roman Bathhouse built for soldiers at the nearby fort. Bathers had the option of a sauna or steam range with cold plunge at the end to close the pores. In common with other Roman sites, the baths at Bearsden used a furnace to provide under floor heating. Waste water was used to clear the latrine. Sewage has been analysed and found to contain fig, coriander and opium poppy.

The Antonine Wall would have sent an evocative message of the might of Rome to the local tribes. However, when the Romans arrived there were about 12 tribes in Scotland but the Roman presence seems to have had the effect of coalescing these groups into just one; the Kingdom of the Picts who had converted to Christianity by the time of the Roman departure from Britain.

### **After the Romans**

The Picts appear to have left no written record. However, they were excellent stone carvers examples of which can be found in the museum at Meigle in Perthshire. The Picts used symbols together with abstract geometric shapes to record their daily life. Biblical scenes featuring King David, Daniel in the Lion's Den and carvings of strange and horrible monsters also feature.

### **Britons, Angles, Gaels and Picts**

By 700 AD the country was split into four language/ethnic groups: Britons, Gaels, Angles and Picts.

The Britons spoke a form of Welsh and were based in a stronghold at Dumbarton, near Glasgow. By AD 900 these people seem to have moved to Govan where the Parish Church is a now a repository for a famous collection of carved stones produced between the mid 9<sup>th</sup> and mid 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Govan was the centre for the Kingdom of Cumbria.

The Angles came from Northern Europe. They took over part of Southern Britain in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and spoke Old English. The Angles established the Kingdom of Bernicia, which stretched from Newcastle upon Tyne in N.E. England to the Firth of Forth (Edinburgh). The biblical scenes in the famous Rothwell Cross are evidence of the Angles Christian beliefs. Their language is closely allied with that known as Lowland Scots. The Angles took on the Picts but were heavily defeated at the Battle of Nechtansmere on May 20<sup>th</sup> AD 685 and their King, Ecgfrith was slain. Thereafter, the expansion of the Angles/Northumbrians was halted.

The Gaels had a power base at Dunadd, Argyll in AD 500 under Fergus Mor. It is believed that the Gaels invaded from Ireland but another school of thought suggests that these people had been in residence for 1000 years prior to that time. Dunadd may have been selected because of its location in the Kilmartin Glen, which is full of prehistoric monuments. The Gaels of Dunadd were very sophisticated and a highly skilled metalworkers. The Gaelic kingdom of Dalriada was predicated on a stable form of kingship which enabled these people to take control of other parts of Scotland and spread use of their language. Gaelic is still spoken in parts of West Scotland today.

The Picts controlled an area from Stirling to the Moray Firth. The Norse (Vikings) arrived at end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. About 100 years later the Pictish Kingdom had become known as Alba. The rulers of Alba were descended from Kenneth McAlpine who established a unified Scotland in AD 843. In AD 904 King Constantine II defeated the Vikings at the Battle of Strathcarron and thereafter secured peace. The Picts then converted to the Gaelic language. Later, in AD 934, Constantine II was besieged at what is now Dunnottar Castle (near Aberdeen) by King Aethelstan from England, the outcome of which seems to have been a negotiated compromise.

Acknowledgements: Various sources including:

- The BBC
- Historic Scotland
- Orkney and Shetland: An Archaeological Guide by Lloyd Laing, David & Charles

