

Picts offer historians a picture of non-Roman Briton culture

February 11 2015

History has never been too kind to a group of early British Isle inhabitants referred to as the Picts, but the often mischaracterized, always mysterious people may serve as a historical laboratory to explore how the island's culture might have developed without Roman intervention, according to a Penn State historian.

Although the Picts' legacy stretches back centuries before the first encounter with Rome, the group enters the historical record as Roman forces begin to push their empire's frontiers into northern England, according to Benjamin Hudson, professor of history and medieval studies. By the fourth century A.D., Romans typically referred to the fierce warriors who lived north of Hadrian's Wall—Rome's nearly 80-mile long defensive line in England—as the Picts.

"The big myth is that the Picts were somehow different from the native Britons, the people that Julius Caesar met when he came over to England," said Hudson. "They weren't different—they were merely Britons that the Romans didn't conquer."

Pict society, then, could offer historians an idea of how the Britons lived before the Romans invaded England and how the culture may have evolved without Rome, according to Hudson, who writes about the group in *The Picts* (Wiley Blackwell 2014).

"One of the many neglected aspects of Pictish society is what it can tell the historian—one of the questions we have about what happened after

the Roman occupation of southern Britain is why the Britons reverted so quickly to the type of organization they had prior to the Romans," said Hudson. "If you look at the Picts you find that the identity and the organization of the Picts is similar to southern Britain after the Romans left, but Roman writers weren't interested in that part of history."

Throughout history, the Picts have often suffered from the biases of the times, which led to the over-generalization of their society. Roman historians portrayed the Picts as warriors and savages. The name Pict is a pejorative from a Latin term for picture. The Picts used body art, something that horrified and intimidated the invading Romans. More recent historians may have created an image of the Picts as helpless victims of progress and warfare. The truth, according to Hudson, is probably much more nuanced.

As much as they are known for their [body art](#), the Picts are also known for the variety and quantity of sculpture and artwork that they left, a proficiency that defies their early reputation as uncivilized warriors.

"They have almost as many monuments as does the area south of Hadrian's Wall," said Hudson. "Some of these are miniature on the Stonehenge model, standing stones. Some of them are in burial mounds made in concentric circles."

That is only one of the mysteries of Pict sculpture, however. The monuments are adorned with symbols that have yet to be translated.

"Despite claims to the contrary, nobody has yet come up with a translation of the Pictish symbols that satisfies everybody else," said Hudson. "Are we looking at pictographs or are we looking at something from more of a Scandinavian context?"

The Scots, who eventually invaded the territory controlled by the Picts in

the mid-ninth century A.D., eventually absorbed the once-fierce people into their own culture.

"The Picts didn't go out with so much of a bang as they went out with a whimper," said Hudson. "When the Scots King—Kenneth McAlpin—moved his troops from western Scotland to eastern Scotland, we find that he amalgamated the Pictish people he found there and suddenly they took on the name of their conquerors. For a time they were called the Picts, and then Scot-Picts and then, eventually, just Scots."

Hudson has taken several trips to Scotland as part of his research for the book. He also used texts from the era, such as the Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical Histories, the Annals of Ulster and Annals of Tigernach, among other documents that chronicle Pictish history.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Picts offer historians a picture of non-Roman Briton culture (2015, February 11) retrieved 7 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-02-picts-historians-picture-non-roman-briton.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.