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Britain and the beginning of Scotland¹

Dauvit Broun

Until recently it was generally held that Scotland first began to take shape with a union of Picts and Scots under Cinaed mac Ailpín, who died in 858. For example, Edward James in his *Britain in the First Millennium*, published in 2001, referred to how ‘a king of Dál Riata, Cinaed mac Ailpín (Kenneth mac Alpine), definitively united the Picts and the Scots into a new kingdom’, so that ‘in the middle of the ninth century the kingdom of Scotland is unified, under Cinaed mac Ailpín (840/2–858), a Gaelic rather than a Pictish king’.² Cinaed was the common ancestor in the male line of kings of Scots from around 890 until 1034. This alone could explain how he came to be regarded in the tenth century as one of the kingdom’s founding figures. If so, he would only have gained this status retrospectively. Be this as it may, there is no longer a consensus about his role, or about whether he was a Gael or a Pict. Some have abandoned the notion of Cinaed as founder but have still retained the idea that a new, united kingdom emerged in the end of the ninth century—‘a homologated kingship of Picts and Scots’, to quote Archie Duncan in 2002.³ The only point that is not disputed is that by the tenth century the inhabitants of what had been the Pictish kingdom spoke Gaelic rather than Pictish. Cinaed mac Ailpín, however, is no longer regarded generally as the principal agent of this fundamental change.

The idea that a new entity, a united kingdom, was formed—rather than an expanded Gaelic realm or the Pictish kingdom ‘under new management’, as it were—is centuries later than the ninth century. In John of Fordun’s *Chronica*

¹ This is very nearly the lecture exactly as delivered. (References are less than minimal!) I am very grateful to Nerys Ann Jones for a perceptive comment about a key point in the lecture which I have made more explicit in this text, and to Joanna Tucker for reading through the text and saving me from error. It goes without saying that I am wholly responsible for any mistakes or other shortcomings that remain.

² E. James, *Britain in the First Millennium* (London, 2001), 138, 230.

³ A. A. M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots* (Edinburgh, 2002), 15.

Gentis Scottorum of the mid-1380s, we are told that, ‘with the consent of God it came about that [Cinaed mac Ailpín], the first of all the kings to take over the whole northern area of Albion as sole ruler [i.e., Scotland north of the Forth], successfully formed one kingdom out of two’.⁴ It was also claimed (in the same passage) that Cinaed himself ‘compiled the laws which are called the laws of mac Ailpín ... some of which remain and are current among the peoples [of the kingdom]’.⁵ Cinaed previously had appeared simply as the Scottish king who destroyed the Picts. Here he was portrayed as architect of a new realm.

This treatment of Cinaed was probably older than Fordun by a little over a century. There are reasonable grounds to suppose that Fordun here was merely following the earliest detectable continuous narrative of Scottish history written probably in the 1260s by the Frenchman Richard Vairement: Vairement came to Scotland with Alexander II’s queen, Marie de Couci, in 1239. An earlier attempt to present Scotland as a merger of two kingdoms is in a king-list in which kings of Scots from Cinaed onwards are portrayed as the successors of both a long series of Pictish kings and a list of reges Scottorum. This was one of Vairement’s sources, and can be dated to the reign of Alexander II (1214–1249). Cinaed’s role as lawgiver may also be a little older than Vairement’s history. The ‘laws of mac Ailpín’ are mentioned in an addition to the Chronicle of Melrose, datable probably to sometime between 1246 and 1264. There it is explained that Cinaed is called the first king of Albania (referring presumably to the landmass north of the Forth) ‘because he was the first to establish the Scottish laws which they call the laws of mac Ailpín’.⁶

It would appear, therefore, that Scotland’s beginnings as a union of Picts and Scots to form a new kingdom—an idea that was still widely accepted until

⁴ Fordun, IV. 8. Sic quidem Deo concedente factum est ut totum sub circio finem Albionis in monarchiam omnium regum primus suscipiens unum feliciter regnum compegerit e duobus. Translation from Watt (gen. ed.), vol. ii, ed. John and Winifred MacQueen, 295.

⁵ Iura uero que leges Macalpine dicuntur componens obseruari statuit quarum hactenus quedam restant ac inter populos cursum habent

⁶ ... quia primus leges Scoticanas instituit quas vocant leges mac Alpin.

recently—was initially formulated in the mid-thirteenth century. As such it coincides with the period when the idea of Scotland as a kingdom equal to any other was actively espoused for the first time (for example, in requests to the pope for coronation and anointment). This can be taken a step further. The reinterpretation of Cinaed mac Ailpín in the mid-thirteenth century as unifier and law-giver can be seen as a significant element in the narrative that was being fashioned to reflect the emerging idea of Scotland as a sovereign kingdom. It gave Scotland's jurisdictional integrity a point of origin.

The link with Scotland's situation today, potentially on the threshold of statehood, needs no emphasis. What happens, though, if we set aside the narrative of a united kingdom under Cinaed mac Ailpín, and look for Scotland's beginnings before Scotland's independence was fully articulated in the mid-thirteenth century? In this lecture I will seek to explore ways in which a British dimension may be regarded as pivotal for understanding the beginning of Scotland. In the first part I will consider the earliest stage in the emergence of an idea of Scotland in its most basic sense as the country we recognise today. This will centre on the late twelfth century. In the second part I will turn to the origins of the earliest idea of Scotland that can be detected—the notion of Scotland as the country north of the Forth. This will focus on the Picts in particular. It will soon become apparent that in both parts the evidence is too exiguous to allow for demonstrable conclusions, and that my argument is largely based on inference. The overall intention is to use as wide a range of material as possible to develop fresh perspectives that can help us to think more freely about Scotland's beginnings.

If the idea of Scotland's jurisdictional integrity was a novelty in the mid-thirteenth-century, the very idea of the Scottish kingdom as a single country was not much older. This can readily be appreciated by considering what 'Scotland'

meant to the king's subjects in the twelfth century and beginning of the thirteenth. For a start, it appears to have been a commonplace to regard the Firth of Forth and the River Forth as the southern limit not simply of an ancient historic core but of 'Scotland' itself. Historians have become accustomed to refer to the landmass north of the Forth as Scotia (which, of course, is simply the Latin for 'Scotland'). This is certainly convenient, but it should not obscure the fact that, for those living in the twelfth century, there was no 'Scotland' in our sense. We capture best the force of this earlier sense of Scotia and how a new idea of Scotia emerged if we render Scotia as 'Scotland' throughout this period.

But the situation in the twelfth century is even more bewildering. 'Scotland' also referred specifically to a region bounded by Drumalban in the west and the Spey in the north, as well as the Forth in the south. This is made explicit in the text of an assize on the procedure for dealing with accusations of theft which Alice Taylor has recently discussed in her new edition of *Leges Scotie*. She has argued compellingly that it is an updating of an assize of David I (1124–1153) by his grandson William the Lion (1165–1214). Another example is in an account of William's last journey from the north down to Stirling, where he died in December 1214. We are told that 'he returned from Moray to Scotland, and then from Scotland he proceeded into Lothian'. When, then, did 'Scotland' start to be used of the kingdom as a whole?

The first clear-cut examples in a Scottish chronicle of 'Scotland' including all the country south of the Forth to the Tweed and Solway is in material written into the *Chronicle of Melrose* in 1218 or soon thereafter. Events in Berwickshire a couple of years earlier, in 1216, are described as occurring in 'southern Scotland', and a vision in Galloway in the same year is located in 'western Scotland'. A distinction between north and south of the Forth,

however, may still be detected in material entered in 1222 when a journey from Edinburgh as far as Aberdeen was referred to as going into *profunda Scotia*, ‘deep Scotland’.

In the twelfth century, therefore, ‘Scotland’ was only one of the regions—we could equally say ‘countries’—ruled by the kings of Scots. The other ‘countries’ each had a different history of becoming part of the Scottish realm. Galloway and Moray, for example, had kings of their own in the early twelfth century. Moray was conquered by David I following the death in battle of its last king in 1130. Galloway was subdued in 1160, and subsequently split between two brothers (probably in 1176 or 1178). This led eventually to the creation of the earldom of Carrick and the lordship of Galloway. The lordship of Galloway was later divided among heiresses following the suppression of a rising in 1235. Despite falling under the king of Scots’ authority, however, Galloway (and also Carrick) still retained distinct arrangements for the administration of justice for the remainder of the thirteenth century. Lothian, by contrast, had been ruled by the king of Scots for part of the tenth century and most of the eleventh century. To the west of Lothian, most of the old kingdom of Strathclyde had been controlled by Scottish kings since at least the winter of 1069–70, with the exception of Alexander I’s reign (1107–1124) when it was ruled by his younger brother, the future David I. Both Lothian and Strathclyde show that it was perfectly possible to be securely part of the Scottish realm for many generations before 1200, without being part of ‘Scotland’. Indeed, there are references in the late twelfth century to the region south of the Forth as part of England and to Glasgow as in ‘northern Wales’. Both these statements were by leading churchmen who lived in these areas. There is no suggestion, however, that they regarded this as incompatible with loyalty to the Scottish realm. No-one at that time in Scotland would have expected that kingdom and country should be one-and-the-same.

When and how did this change? If we want more substantial evidence than fleeting indications in a chronicle, we must turn to charters. These begin to survive in significant numbers from the 1160s. The increasing use and archiving of charters shows that it had become desirable, although not yet necessary, to have your title to a perpetuity (typically a landed estate) recorded in writing. The form, script and appearance of these documents followed English practice. One aspect of charters in Scotland catches the eye. When land (or other property) was given (e.g., to a monastery) it was often said to be held freely and peacefully. This could be expanded (in the ‘sicut’ clause) to say that it would be held as freely and peacefully as any other land or similar property was held in the region or the kingdom. John Hudson has commented that this is a distinctive feature of Scottish charters. Geoffrey Barrow has observed that from the last years of the twelfth century the phrase ‘kingdom of the Scots’ or ‘kingdom of Scotland’ is frequently found in this context. As a result, the land in question was said to be held as freely and peacefully as any other similar property was held in the Scottish kingdom. Law and custom in relation to landholding was apparently assumed to be the same throughout the realm. This was new: here, it seems, we have the beginning of a sense of the kingdom as a uniform jurisdictional entity rather than as separate ‘countries’ with their own laws and customs. This was fundamental for incubating what became the modern sense of ‘Scotland’. By defining landholding in relation to the kingdom, those who drafted and authorised these charters (and this included the lord of Galloway) presumably thought of the kingdom as a ‘land’ itself—a single country. A few charters, especially early on, tried to avoid this by referring to ‘the kingdom of the king of Scots’. Many, however, referred explicitly to the ‘kingdom of Scotland’, *regnum Scotie*.

The substantive land law in question, like the charters themselves, was in its essentials derived from English practice. This is no surprise, given that the lords

in whose name these charters were produced were, like the kings of Scots themselves, part of an Anglo-French elite. This elite was French by virtue of language, and because some retained interests in North-West France, even after the loss of Normandy in 1204 (as Keith Stringer has shown); and it was English, insofar as the elite as a whole identified themselves as English, as John Gillingham has emphasised. The emerging rules regarding inheritance and lordship that were shared by this elite not only allowed incomers to become embedded in their new surroundings but also offered opportunities for the head of leading kindreds in a province to secure his own family's position. A British dimension to this new sense of the Scottish kingdom as a single country is not difficult to find, therefore, at least in the background. This Anglo-French elite, moreover, would have been acutely conscious that there were two kingdoms in Britain. As David Carpenter has observed, the higher you were in Scottish society, the more likely you were to be aware of developments in England. Would this, however, have been sufficient of itself to promote a new sense of the Scottish kingdom as a single country?

Let us look more closely at the incidence of statements in the 'sicut' clause that land (or other property) was to be held as freely and peacefully as any other similar property in the 'kingdom of Scotland' (or 'of Scots'). The database of the 'People of Medieval Scotland, 1093–1314' makes it possible to investigate this across the entire corpus of extant charters. This shows, unsurprisingly, that it was very predominantly a feature of 'private' charters, especially those recording gifts. It is found, however, in just over 20% of them over the whole period. This is not as high as might be expected if this feature was simply a result of more careful drafting. Another point to note is that the 'sicut' clause referring to the Scottish kingdom is not associated with particular beneficiaries. It may, therefore, have been prompted by the landholding donors themselves.

A notable increase in the use of this feature can be detected from the 1180s. As many as 23% of all examples of the regnal ‘sicut’ clause in private charters in the database could date from between 1185 and 1200. It should be stressed, of course, that such a figure cannot pass muster as a statistic. The database can only serve to highlight trends for further scrutiny. This shows that, before the 1180s, the feature is almost entirely confined to charters of people who were particularly close to the king, such as Donnchad (Duncan) earl of Fife, the king’s justice north of the Forth and a regular witness of royal documents, or Agnes countess of Mar, who Matthew Hammond has shown was probably related to Countess Ada, the mother of Kings Mael Coluim IV (1153–1165) and William the Lion (1165–1214). The earliest undoubtedly authentic example of the ‘kingdom of Scotland’ (or ‘of Scots’) in this context is in a charter of Countess Ada herself sometime in or between 1153 and 1159.⁷ The significant increase from the 1180s in defining landholding by referring to the ‘kingdom of Scotland’ or ‘kingdom of Scots’ would seem therefore to be because this phrase became more common in the ‘sicut’ clause of charters of major landholders outside immediate royal circles. If this isn’t simply a quirk of survival, then this suggests that it was at this point that the Anglo-French elite in Scotland began to think more consciously of the Scottish kingdom as having standard laws and customs in relation to landholding and lordship.

It might be said that this development was bound to happen. The fact that it ‘took off’ as significantly as it did from the 1180s is, however, worth considering more deeply. Could this reflect an intensification of royal justice in Scotland? Alice Taylor has pointed out that there was no consistent term for a sheriff’s jurisdiction until *ballia* emerged in the 1180s. She has shown that this coincided with royal enactments enhancing or consolidating the sheriff’s

⁷ Hammond no. 3/5/3: <http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/factoid/8679/#> (accessed 21 November 2013). Note also a charter of Bishop Robert of St Andrews from the same period, or slightly earlier, has a ‘sicut’ clause with the more cumbersome expression ‘kingdom of the king of Scots’. PoMS, H2/10/18 (<http://db.poms.ac.uk/record/source/1255/>; accessed 27 November 2013).

position in the administration of justice. In 1184 attendance at sheriff courts was insisted on—except for the very greatest lords (i.e., earls, abbots, bishops), who were required to be present only when the justiciar presided. In 1180 it was enacted that the sheriff or a king's serjeant should attend baronial courts. It was explained, however, that a lord could still hold his court if neither sheriff nor king's serjeant was available: the minimal requirement, by implication, was to inform the sheriff that the court was taking place.

There is more to this assize than simply controlling baronial jurisdiction. Its purpose seems not only to have been to ensure that baronial courts were conducted properly but, in the process, to reduce the risk of barons having cases taken away from their court because of a claim that justice had not been done. The presence of the sheriff or a king's serjeant would have ensured that justice was done; even if they could not attend, the court was valid if the sheriff had been informed that it was taking place: the requirement to inform the sheriff may also have helped to limit the risk to the baron's court from complaints about unreasonable delays. As we will see, this approach to baronial jurisdiction was in marked contrast to what barons would have experienced in England.

David Carpenter has taken this further by considering the contrast between royal government in England and Scotland more generally in the thirteenth century. He found Scotland to be a haven for lordly power, free from the constraints and threats of the precociously centralised English state. He concluded that this 'gave the Scottish nobility every reason to embrace a sense of Scottish identity and history, thus marking off Scotland from England'. Could the wider adoption from the 1180s of the Scottish kingdom as a point of reference for landholding and lordship in the 'sicut' clause be the first clear indication of this process at work?

Henry II's administrative and legal reforms would have made it obvious to anyone with interests in both Scotland and England that the kingdoms were becoming fundamentally different, particularly in relation to landholding and lordship. This may be all that is required to explain why, in the 1180s, it began to make sense to those outside royal circles to regard the Scottish kingdom as a land of common laws and customs in this context. According to this view, the Scottish kingdom came to seem united almost by default simply because the landed elite experienced it as a kingdom that was not England—a kingdom where local lordship operated without any significant disturbance. The use of the 'sicut' clause with reference to the Scottish kingdom, however, was never routine: it was a matter of choice. Could it, therefore, be an occasional reflection of a wider commitment to the Scottish kingdom's separateness from English royal jurisdiction?

This would not be the only indication that the Anglo-French elite in Scotland at this time were keen to prevent the king of England's authority reaching north of the border. The crucial background here is William the Lion's capture in 1174 in the great rebellion against Henry II, and the terms for his release known as the Treaty of Falaise. As a result of the treaty, William the Lion went to York in August 1175 to meet Henry II and (in Roger of Howden's words), 'brought with him all the bishops, earls, barons, knights and freeholders of his land, from the greatest to the least of them, to do homage and allegiance and fealty there to the king of England and his heirs forever, against all men'.⁸ Howden was a royal clerk with recent experience of working for Henry II in his dealings with Scotland and Galloway. Regardless of how many Scots actually thronged into York Minster, the intention was clear: from Henry II's perspective every freeholder in Scotland had recognised Henry II's lordship. In the Treaty it was stipulated that those who performed homage and fealty in person would

⁸ *Gesta Henrici II*, i. 94-5

undertake to obtain the fealty and allegiance to Henry II of anyone who was absent. It was unprecedented for a king of Scots' authority over his people to be undermined like this. When Richard I, on acceding to the throne in 1189, agreed to cancel the Treaty of Falaise for the considerable sum of 10,000 marks, William the Lion could not raise this from his own resources: as William of Newburgh, writing at about this time, put it, he 'scraped together that sum from his subjects'.⁹ The fact that this was paid up promptly suggests that there was, indeed, an eagerness to keep English royal authority out of the Scottish kingdom. The Scottish barons certainly knew how to say 'no': they had refused Henry II's demand two years earlier for a levy to fund a crusade, even though King William had already agreed to it (according to the earliest of Howden's accounts).¹⁰

The willingness to get the Treaty of Falaise rescinded may be explained as a reaction not only to the greater domestic power of a king of England, but specifically to Henry II's 'drive to extend the prerogatives of the crown' (to use Ralph of Diss's words).¹¹ Diss saw this 'drive' as among the reasons why Henry faced rebellion in 1173–4. A notable aspect of this was Henry's measures to make royal justice more accessible to freeholders generally, both through new procedures and by recruiting personnel who could represent the king judicially around the country. Some of this would, no doubt, have been welcomed by local lords as much as anyone else—but not all of it. For example, when Henry II decreed in the first decade of his reign that anyone complaining of default of justice in their lord's court could bring this to the attention of royal justices, the resources were increasingly available to make this a real option for many people. John Hudson has drawn attention to how this particular measure was described in a poem of the mid-1170s as 'causing the barons ... much grief,

⁹ RRS, i. 54 n.6 citing Chr, Stephen. i. 304.

¹⁰ Duncan, *Making of the Kingdom*, 234–5

¹¹ *regiae titulos dignitatis ampliare procurrans*: Stubbs, ii. 371

whereby everyone lost his court through a false oath...'.¹² In the poem the role of royal justices was as yet limited to when the complainant had worked through the hierarchy of lordship above the court where he claimed he had been denied justice; by the end of Henry II's reign, however, it seems such cases could be heard immediately by royal justices. This slipstreaming of the procedure can be seen as part of a range of even more innovative measures that had been introduced after the war of 1173–4. One of these, the regular circuits of justices from 1176, would have made it even easier for freeholders to bring cases that could lead to lords losing their court 'through a false oath'. In Scotland, it will be recalled that the assize of 1180 would have had the opposite effect. By the time Ralph of Diss was writing (no later than April 1186, I would argue), Henry II's drive to extend his prerogatives had reached a new degree of intensity.

The Treaty of Falaise was itself one of the earliest moves by Henry II towards a radical redefinition of English kingship in the aftermath of the rebellion. There is no indication that Henry intended on the back of it to extend his legal and administrative reforms into Scotland. Nevertheless, it may be guessed that the Anglo-French elite in Scotland recognised that English kingship had changed, and feared for the future. It will be recalled that all freeholders in the Scottish kingdom were now deemed to have acknowledged Henry II as their lord, both those at the ceremony at York in 1175 and those who were absent from it. In these circumstances it could have made sense for barons seeking to resist a potential intensification of English royal authority in Scotland to define their position north of the border explicitly in relation to an alternative kingdom as a separate unified jurisdictional entity: this would have offered the best chance of keeping the more alarming aspects of Henry II's legal and administrative

¹² For the poem and the reference to Diss see John Hudson, *The Oxford History of the Laws of England*, vol. 2, 871–1216 (Oxford, 2012), 512, 518; Van Caenegem, *Lawsuits*, no.420H; Diceto, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Stubbs, i. 371.

reforms at bay, not only during Henry II's reign, but afterwards. According to this line of argument, therefore, the spread beyond immediate royal circles of the idea of the Scottish kingdom as a single jurisdiction and a united country could have been boosted, and maybe even triggered by Henry II's reforms, and sustained by the continuing contrast between Scotland and England as experienced by the Anglo-French elite.

Here, then, it is possible to recognise a seminal British dimension to the beginning of the idea of Scotland as a single country corresponding to the kingdom's territory—the very beginning of 'Scotland' as we understand the term today. An even more elemental British dimension, however, can be discerned in the origin of the earlier idea of 'Scotland' as the country north of the Forth. This is revealed by the Gaelic name for Scotland: Alba.

Alba did not always refer specifically to northern Britain. There are instances in the Chronicle of Ireland in the ninth century, for example, where the word plainly refers to the island of Britain. From 900, however, Alba was used regularly in Irish chronicles to refer to the kingdom of Cinaed mac Ailpín's descendants. It is difficult to say how much of a semantic shift this represented for the word Alba. The Chronicle of Ireland at this point probably acquired its information on Scotland from Dunkeld, so this use of a word for 'Britain', Alba, as the kingdom's name could reflect Scottish usage. Let us examine this change in terminology more closely.

Superficially the most obvious change is that Pictish terminology was dropped. Cinaed mac Ailpín himself and his brother, and also his sons (who died in 876 and 878), are described in Latin as 'king of the Picts', rex Pictorum. Their grandsons were each rí Alban, 'king of Alba'. Picti independently of the royal title is used for the kingdom's inhabitants for the last time in 875. In 918 they are no longer Picti but fir Alban, Gaelic for 'people of Alba'. The Gaelic term

for the ‘Pictish people’, Cruithentúath, appears for the last time in 904 in a lone version of the chronicle. How is this disappearance of references to Picts to be explained?

On the face of it the answer seems to lie with the Gaelicisation of Pictland. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle provides compelling evidence that the advance of Gaelic had changed the kingdom’s identity at much the same time—at least from an English perspective. In the chronicle under the years 920 and 934 ‘Scotland’ and ‘Scots’, originally the English words for Ireland and Gaelic-speakers, were applied respectively to the former Pictish kingdom and its people. From then on, where there had once been *Peohtas* (‘Picts’), there were *Scottas*. It seems natural to explain this as a consequence of the death of the Pictish language and victory of Gaelic. The kingdom, indeed, was explicitly identified as Gaelic, not only by its English neighbours, but in the genealogy of the kings of Alba themselves. The earliest extant texts of the royal genealogy can be dated to the late tenth century; there is no difficulty, however, in supposing that ancestry from Gaelic kings of *Dál Riata* was asserted earlier. The possibility that this Dalriadic ancestry was a biological and not just a political reality cannot be ruled out (despite my attempt to do so, which Thomas Charles-Edwards has shown was misguided).

The simplest answer to how Alba, ‘Britain’, became the kingdom’s name, therefore, would be that Alba in this context referred to Gaelic Britain. This is encouraged, on the face of it, by the use in contemporary chronicles of the phrase ‘Ireland and Alba’ to encompass the Gaelic world (for example, in death notices of abbots of Iona in 980 and 989 as ‘heir of Columba in Ireland and Alba’). But there is a problem. Whenever any light is thrown on what Gaelic Alba or English Scotland, or the Latin reflexes of these vernacular terms (*Albania* and *Scotia*), meant to any of the kingdom’s inhabitants before the

thirteenth century, time and again it is the landmass north of the Forth, or a part of it. Gaelic was spoken much more widely in Scotland (as revealed by surviving Gaelic place-names). The regular geographical limitation of Alba or ‘Scotland’ does not suggest that the primary meaning of Alba in this context—and therefore the reason why it was deemed to be suitable as the kingdom’s name—was because Cinaed’s grandsons and descendants claimed to rule all the Gaelic-speakers of Britain. Indeed, there is no text that explicitly promotes such a hegemony. This includes *Míniugud Senchusa fher nAlban*, ‘Explanation of the Genealogy of the People of Alba’, whose genealogical scheme was probably, from a tenth-century perspective, confined to the leading kindreds in what had been the Pictish kingdom. (This is clearest in an early-eleventh-century text associated with *Míniugud Senchusa fher nAlban*.) It seems unwarranted, therefore, to translate the title as ‘Explanation of the Genealogy of the People of [Gaelic] Britain’, as David Dumville has done. By contrast, Alba is already found before the tenth century referring to a kingdom corresponding to Scotland north of the Forth (as we will see shortly). There can be little doubt, therefore, that this was what Alba meant when it appears from 900 in Irish chronicles as the kingdom of Cinaed mac Ailpín’s descendants. The Forth as the country’s southern limit remained a core feature of the kingdom’s identity into the thirteenth century, despite its territorial expansion south of the Forth during the tenth.

How, then, is the use of the Gaelic word for ‘Britain’ as the kingdom’s name to be explained? The earliest explicit appearance of Alba for the landmass north of the Forth is in a Gaelic stanza describing how Cruithne divided Alba among his seven sons. Their names correspond to Pictish regions, with Fife in the south and Cait in the north. (The word Cait survives in English Caithness, and in the Gaelic for Sutherland: *Cataibh*.) The only region that cannot be identified as certainly Pictish is Fidach. Although this is attested as a Gaelic personal name

(in the genealogy of St Fínán of Kinnitty),¹³ it may simply mean ‘woody’ here: it need not be an established area-name at all. The equation of Alba in the stanza with Pictland is confirmed by the name of the sons’ father, Cruithne, which is the Gaelic collective noun for ‘Picts’. I have argued elsewhere (and repeatedly!) that this stanza was the source for the addition of Cruithne and his seven sons to the beginning of a Pictish king-list written probably during the reign of Cinaed mac Ailpín’s son, Cusantín, between 862 and 876. (I will return to this king-list later.)

This is not the only indication that Alba was the Gaelic for ‘Pictland’. If we return to the contemporary chronicle material, and look at it afresh without any prior assumptions, it would seem natural to suppose that the title *rex Pictorum* for Cinaed mac Ailpín’s sons and *rí Alban* (‘king of Alba’) for his grandsons must refer to essentially the same kingship. If so, then *rí Alban* need be no more than a Gaelic rendering of Latin *rex Pictorum*, ‘king of the Picts’. The proposition that Alba meant ‘Pictland’ before the tenth century could also suggest a solution to the puzzle of how ‘Scotland’ (Alba, Latin *Albania* or *Scotia*) could refer merely to the region between Moray in the north, the Forth in the south and the mountains of Drumalban in the west. It is striking that this represents the bulk of Pictland beyond the chief Pictish kingdom of Fortriu, which Alex Woolf has shown was located around the Moray Firth rather than Strathearn. It might therefore have originally been ‘Pictland’ in the sense of being ‘the rest of Pictland apart from Fortriu’, in the same way as ‘Germany’ stood originally for the bulk of German speaking lands beyond Austria—i.e., as a catch-all term to refer to a significant area of lordships or communities that collectively lacked a distinctive identity of its own.¹⁴ In the case of Pictland, a name for this area beyond Fortriu could have arisen once it fell en bloc under

¹³ CGSH, 36 (§211)

¹⁴ I owe this suggestion to Alex Woolf.

the power of the king of Fortriu, possibly in the aftermath of the Battle of Nechtansmere in 685 (although other scenarios are possible).

Be this as it may, the argument that Alba could denote ‘Pictland’ before the tenth century still leaves some important loose ends that need to be tackled. Why would the Gaelic word for ‘Britain’ be used as if it meant ‘Pictland’? And why, if the kingdom of Alba was simply Pictland in Gaelic guise, did it become so emphatically Gaelic that an overtly Pictish identity ‘disappeared’?

I have suggested elsewhere that if the Pictish word for ‘Pictland’ (which is not known) was understood also to mean ‘Britain’, then this would help to explain the switch from Alba as ‘Britain’ to Alba as ‘Pictland’: Alba in its new context would then have been a translation-borrowing (or calque) on this lost Pictish name for their own country. There is a suggestive parallel. Welsh writers in Latin before about 1130 frequently referred to Wales as Britannia. They also continued to use Britannia for the island of Britain (or just Roman Britain). But we should pause for a moment. Britannia was not a calque on the Welsh word for Wales. Indeed, there was no word in Welsh in this period exclusively for Wales. Cymry, of course, is the modern Welsh for the ‘Welsh’ and for ‘Wales’ (depending on how it is spelt). Thomas Charles-Edwards has drawn attention to how Cymry was used ambiguously in the poem, *Armes Prydein Vawr* (‘The Great Prophecy of Britain’), which he dated compellingly to sometime in or between 927 and 942: he argued that Cymry denoted not simply the Welsh, but also ‘included’ ‘other Britons as one people, Cymry’.¹⁵ A similar pattern is evident in other parts of the Brittonic world, with Latin Britannia and vernacular Cymry used for a specific kingdom or territory as well as implicitly for the island of Britain and the Britons as a whole. Strathclyde is an example, referred to as both Britannia and Cumbria (from Cymry). British identity in

¹⁵ Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Wales and the Britons, 350-1064* (Oxford, 2013), 529

these instances reflected a sense of being the true indigenous inhabitants of the island, to whom it rightly belonged, in opposition to incomers, particularly the English. The key question for understanding how Gaelic Alba came to be used for ‘Pictland’, therefore, is not whether this reflects the lost Pictish word for their country: it is whether the Picts, too, regarded themselves as the ‘true Britons’ (as it were), and (if so), in opposition to whom. What was so British about Pictland that made it seem readily acceptable to use the Gaelic word for ‘Britain’, Alba, to refer to it, and to do so routinely after 900?

It would be attractive to see this as simply another instance of part of the Brittonic world using the word for ‘Britain’ in another language to denote their particular country or kingdom. On the face of it this is perfectly plausible: it is now generally agreed that the Picts spoke a ‘P-Celtic’ language: indeed, toponymists have found it difficult to identify even a handful of elements in Scotland’s Brittonic place-names that were distinctively Pictish rather than British. But there is an indication that the Picts were seen as in some sense distinct from the Britons. In Old Welsh there were two related words, Prydain and Prydyn. Prydyn may originally have referred to Britain north of the Forth: it is cognate with Cruithne, the Gaelic word for Picts which we have met earlier. If so, then Prydain may have originally denoted Britain as a whole, or Britain south of the Forth: it is cognate with Latin Britannia. The exact semantic significance of these terms is muddled by the fact that Prydain and Prydyn were used interchangeably in some of our earliest texts (including *Armes Prydein Vawr*). This instability is striking. The crucial point, however, is that both words, Prydain and Prydyn, survived: one did not subsume the other. It was possible, therefore, to use either word to refer to ‘Pictland’ in particular, depending on context. This could not be done for any other Brittonic country, with the possible exception of Roman Britain as a whole.

The reason why it may have made sense to single out ‘Pictland’ in this way and distinguish it from ‘Britain’ could be that the River Forth and the boggy terrain immediately north of the river was perceived as dividing the island of Britain in two. This was exaggerated wildly in the medieval imagination: Matthew Paris (d. 1259), in his celebrated map of Britain, portrays the landmass north of the Forth as an island linked to the rest of Britain by Stirling Bridge alone. This division of Britain at the Forth was a constant feature in later medieval maps (although not as vividly as depicted by Matthew Paris). This was not a medieval cartographical quirk: it is noteworthy how the idea of this division of Britain could arise independently. At one chronological extreme we have Tacitus, *Agricola*, chapter 23, where he refers to the enemies of Rome being pushed back north of the firths of Forth and Clyde ‘as if into another island’. At the other extreme, Walter Bower in his *Scotichronicon*, writing in the 1440s, recounted a story in which someone at Glastonbury Abbey described Bannockburn as fought ‘beside the royal burgh of Stirling in Scotland, lying on the boundary of Britain’.¹⁶ Bower added that ‘it is said that the bridge over the Forth at Stirling lies between Britain and Scotland, forming the border of both’.¹⁷ This idea that the island of Britain was almost cut in two at Stirling vividly conveys the difficulty of crossing this area before modern times. Apart from the Drip Ford (and later Stirling Bridge nearby), the only route readily available by land to travellers on the move between north and south was through the River Forth at the Fords of Frew. We can assume that anyone local would have known how to negotiate their way through this difficult terrain. For anyone else, however, it must have seemed a formidable obstacle: the easiest passage was by boat across the Firth of Forth. It was, presumably, through the memory of experiencing this, and sharing it with others, that the fissure at the Forth became such a vivid image for people far away from the Forth itself. The

¹⁶ qui locus est juxta burgum regium de Strivelyne in Scocia ad fines Britannie constitutus: *Scotichronicon*, vi. 356

¹⁷ Dicitur enim quod pons Striveline de Forth situatur inter Britanniam et Scociam utriusque marginem apprehendens: *ibid.*

impression that this nearly formed an island would appear, indeed, to have gained such a hold on the way this part of Britain was imagined that even someone like Walter Bower, whose abbey of Inchcolm sat in the Firth of Forth itself, could entertain the idea that it constituted the northern limit of Britain.

The Picts are, of course, the people of Britain north of the Forth par excellence. The principal means of identifying them is the corpus of over two hundred sculptured stone monuments that are distributed from the Western and Northern Isles to Fife in the south: indeed, there is one example a couple of miles inland from the southern shore of the Firth of Forth, the only one south of the Forth. The symbols also adorn caves and metalwork. They also appear in two places carved onto living rock, but not in Pictland itself, so this activity presumably represents a different context from the use of these symbols on monuments. It is the use of these symbols specifically on stone monuments that enable us to identify the Picts.

The majority of the monuments are undressed stones with incised symbols (the so-called 'Class I' stones). Some symbols are also found on dressed slabs with an ornate cross on one face and often a secular scene on the other (the so-called 'Class II' stones). The coincidence between the Forth and the southern limit of Pictish symbol stones (bar the single outlier) hardly seems to warrant any comment: what would be more natural than that these stones are located where the Picts lived? It would be unwise, however, to presume that the Picts could not help using these symbols on monuments any more than they could help speaking their native tongue. Sculpture is a deliberate act, requiring specialist skill and patronage. The discipline involved in their production can be seen in the notable consistency in the style of Class I stones. There is also a common layout: either symbols are deployed as pairs (sometimes with a mirror or mirror and comb), or a single animal is depicted. A range of symbols are repeated

across the corpus. The meaning of the symbols may be impossible to retrieve, but the mere fact of their existence on these monuments could be seen as pointing to a conscious decision by Picts to distinguish themselves from others. These ‘others’ must have included the Britons south of the Forth. Indeed, Katherine Forsyth has recently argued that the symbol stones were specifically inspired by a desire to be different from the Britons. Let us consider this further.

The ‘Class I’ stones have been described as archaeologically the exact equivalent of the inscribed memorial stones that are found throughout Celtic Britain. Katherine Forsyth has taken this further by suggesting that they are best understood as part of a wider movement of inscribed monuments that flourished between the fifth and early seventh centuries. This is consistent with some recent archaeological evidence from Rhynie in Aberdeenshire that suggests that the sculptured stones there may date from the sixth century. Elsewhere in Britain the inscriptions are predominantly, although not exclusively, in Latin letters. Seen in this light, the Picts’ use of distinctive symbols looks like a conscious decision to avoid an explicit association with Romanitas. This has led Katherine Forsyth to suggest that ‘it is tempting to see the contrasting monumental traditions of southern Scotland and Pictland—Latin-inscriptions versus symbol stones—as an epigraphic manifestation of a mutual desire to distinguish themselves from one another’.¹⁸ Pictish distinctiveness continued after the seventh century, including Class II stones: Forsyth has calculated that about 15% of monuments in England had runes, less than 1% in Ireland used Ogham, whereas Latin letters were the rule in Wales. Pictland, by contrast, stands out for its ‘marked preference there for non-roman script’.¹⁹ This is not because Pictish sculptors were cut-off from outside influences: Isabel Henderson has shown how Class II stones can be seen as part of a wider artistic

¹⁸ Katherine Forsyth, ‘The Latinus Stone: Whithorn’s earliest Christian monument’, in Jane Murray (ed.), *St Ninian and the Earliest Christianity in Scotland* (Oxford, 2009), 19-41, at 34.

¹⁹ Katherine Forsyth, ‘Literacy in Pictland’, in Huw Pryce (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies* (Cambridge, 1998), 39-61, at 54.

world. It would seem that the development and maintenance of these symbols was a matter of choice. On the basis of Katherine Forsyth's recent work, it is possible to see this as representing a sustained rejection of Latin forms of self-identification in a secular context, marking a deliberate move to be distinct from Britons in the south. This would be even clearer if, as Katherine Forsyth has suggested, the symbols were used on these monuments to name individual Picts, in much the same way as Latin letter inscriptions south of the Forth named individual Britons.

James Fraser has also suggested that 'there is good reason to believe that many Picts in the early eighth century had convinced themselves that a mutual lack of interest in 'the Romans', however they defined them, was central to their ethnic identity'.²⁰ He pointed, for example, to Bede's report of King Naiton's letter to Abbot Ceolfrith in the early eighth century, in which Naiton is said to have referred to his people as being 'separated for a long time from the Roman language and nation'.²¹ Fraser emphasised that Pictish churchmen nonetheless participated fully in Latin culture. Romanitas was only problematic in a particular situation—a situation that was presumably linked intimately with monumental sculpture. If we ask what context would most readily have involved the commemoration of significant individuals in a way that was intended to endure in the landscape, the answer that readily comes to mind is some combination of kinship and landholding.

We can only speculate, however, about how the Picts' specifically saw themselves in relation to Britons in the south. Perhaps they made some kind of claim to be the continuation of the indigenous inhabitants of the island who lay outside the Roman Empire. This would only have been enhanced, presumably,

²⁰ James E. Fraser, 'From Ancient Scythia to the First Dundee Summer School: thoughts on The Problem of the Picts and the quest for Pictish origins' in *Pictish Progress. New Studies on Northern Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen T. Driscoll, Jane Geddes and Mark A. Hall (Leiden, 2011), 15-43, at 38.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 35: *longe a Romanorum loquella et natione segregate* (Bede, HE, v.21)

by the presence of Antonine's Wall, which to this day etches the landscape between the Forth and the Clyde. Be this as it may, in the ninth century there is a clear statement of one of the ways that Picts could imagine Pictland. It was as an ancient kingdom encompassing the entire mainland north of the Forth. It is striking that this corresponds so well with the location of Class I Pictish stones (especially if the islands were understood to go with the mainland—for example, Shetland is referred to in medieval Gaelic as *Innse Catt*, 'the islands of Cait': it will be recalled that Cait was the northern region of the mainland). This suggests a continuity of some conception of Pictishness focused on the landmass north of the Forth, even if it did not necessarily always take the form of an imagined ancient kingdom.

The statement that Pictland formed an ancient kingdom is found in the longer version of the king-list (which we have met briefly already). It was longer because of the addition of forty-four kings to the beginning of an earlier list. This not only endowed the kingship with an extended succession deep into the past; it also began with a portrayal of the kingdom they ruled as stretching from Fife to Caithness. This was achieved by forming Cruithne's seven sons—who, it will be recalled, each represented a Pictish region—into a single succession, beginning with Cruithne himself. The latest king in the original version of this king-list was probably Cusantín son of Cinaed mac Ailpín, who died as 'king of the Picts' in 876. This image of the landmass north of the Forth as an ancient kingdom was evidently created with him in mind as its current ruler.

It will be recalled that, in the earlier stanza-version of the legend of Cruithne's seven sons, the Gaelic word for 'Britain', *Alba*, was used for 'Pictland': from the tenth century, as we have seen, this usage of *Alba* became routine. And yet, if we see the longer king-list as a continuation of the deliberate distinction between north and south of the Forth represented by the sculptured symbol

stones, it would seem that the Picts had a keen sense of their country as separate from Britannia, or as an alternative Prydain. This idea of being a distinct and different ‘Britain’ could be explained if the Picts regarded themselves as more British than the Britons. They would not, like other Britons, have thought of their country as part of Britain, but as Britain par excellence.

Finally, how are we to explain the demise of Pictish identity? The eventual abandonment of Pictish symbols could point to the kind of fundamental social change that might also have triggered the widespread switch from speaking Pictish to Gaelic. Even if this was the case, however, it would be unwise to assume that Gaelic itself was intrinsically inimical to Pictish identity. For example, the names of the forty-four kings added to the king-list, including Cruithne and his seven sons, were rendered in Gaelic form, rather than in the Pictish forms found in the rest of the text. Plainly the author saw nothing incongruous about using Gaelic to enhance a core aspect of Pictish identity. This would be all the more striking, of course, if Cusantín son of Cinaed mac Ailpín—the king for whom, it seems, the longer king-list was written—was himself descended in the male line from kings of Gaelic Dál Riata: it will be recalled that his dynasty’s Gaelic identity was asserted in the earliest traceable text of the royal genealogy in the late tenth century. Be this as it may, when the Picts became Gaelic speakers their identification with the landmass north of the Forth would not have been disturbed: it will be recalled that this remained a key feature of the idea of ‘Scotland’ up to the thirteenth century. Indeed, the sense of being different from the rest of Britain would, if anything, have been enhanced. As Gaels the people of Alba would have been even more distinct from Britons than they had been as Picts. (There was still an ostensibly British kingdom based on the Clyde until the eleventh century.) Being Gaels would also have made them clearly different from the other main population-groups on

the island. This could explain why, once the Picts had turned to Gaelic, the kingdom's Gaelic identity was highlighted.

This evening I have examined the beginning of Scotland both in the most basic sense that we understand it today and in its earlier sense as the country north of the Forth. In both cases the initial germ was born out of a keen awareness of Scotland's position as part of Britain. The conception of the Scottish kingdom as a land of common laws and customs may first be perceived in the 1150s, but I have argued that it may only have caught on beyond immediate royal circles as an unintended consequence of Henry II's legal and administrative reforms in England. This hinges crucially on the fact that Anglo-French lords in Scotland had landed and family interests in England that would have given them personal knowledge of the impact of Henry II's drive to enhance his prerogatives. As far as the earlier appearance of Alba—the modern Gaelic for 'Scotland'—in anything like its current guise is concerned, this, too, can be explained as a continuation of a core aspect of Pictish identity, rooted in a sense of being distinctively British. Although I have argued that a British dimension can help us to understand the very beginnings of Scotland in its earliest and its modern senses, it is noticeable that in both cases the overriding concern was to accentuate Scotland's separateness from the south. This could explain the baronial interest in invoking the Scottish kingdom when defining landholding, and also account for the deliberate distinctiveness of the Picts.

Does this perspective on the beginnings of Scotland have any relevance for the referendum on Scottish statehood on 18 September? It would be unwise, of course, to draw too explicit a connection between the remote past and the near future. It could, however, serve to trigger questions that could be pursued elsewhere. One question that arises is whether Scottish independence should necessarily be understood as a rejection of Britishness as such. Could it, at least

in part, represent an assertion of a distinctive Britishness? This would be a challenge to nationalists who are inspired ultimately by the intimate association of nation with ethnicity that has its roots in the thinking of Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). It would also be a challenge to anyone who regards Britishness as indistinguishable from Englishness.