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Iona in the kingdom of the Picts: a note

In his poem on the martyrdom of the cleric Blathmac mac Flainn in a raid by Vikings on the island of Iona in 825,¹ the Rhineland poet Walahfrid Strabo describes that island as *insula Pictorum*, or perhaps more accurately, as being off the shore of the Picts: *insula Pictorum quaedam monstratur in oris*.² This description has not, to my knowledge, been much noticed.³ That Walahfrid drew on fairly detailed local sources seems clear from the poem taken as a complete text. Why then was he so mistaken as to think of Iona as a Pictish island? It is highly unlikely that he was drawing on Bede's account of Bridei son of Mailcon's gifting of the island to Columba, as the text nowhere else betrays the influence of Bede's descriptions of the island, or indeed, much knowledge about Columba at all.⁴ Given that he was writing c.840, and drawing on recently received information from a source acquainted with Iona, we should confront the possibility that he was describing contemporary political reality.⁵

In fact, this description is far from unlikely for the first four decades of the ninth century. Although we know of the existence of rulers of Dál Riata during this time, the probability that the kings of the Picts, Constantin son of Uurgust and his brother Unust, had exerted dominion over Dál Riata is a strong one. A previous paradigm based primarily on the later Scottish king-lists, in which these two men were seen as Gaels who intruded themselves into the Pictish kingship, has been impressively overturned by Dauvit Broun, who has argued that

¹ For the annalistic notice, see *The Annals of Ulster, to A.D. 1131*, ed. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (Dublin 1983) [AU] 825.17: *Martre Blainhicc m. Flainn o genntib in Hi Coluim Cille*. The poem was edited by E. Dümmler in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini* ii (Berlin 1884) 297-301; see also W. M. Metcalfe, *Pinkerton's Lives of the Scottish Saints* (revised and enlarged, 2 vols, Paisley 1889) ii, 293-7; Further comment and bibliography on the text may be found in J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* (rev. edn, New York 1979) 445-6.

² Dümmler, p. 299; Metcalfe, p. 295; for the translation 'in the shores of the Picts', see A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1922, rev. edn. Stamford 1990) I, 263.

³ My attention was drawn to it by a passing notice in J.-M. Picard, 'Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* and the cult of Colum Cille in continental Europe', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 98C (1998) 1-23, at p. 7.

⁴ See *ibid.* for further discussion. For Bede's account, see *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, Bk. iii, ch. 4: *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1969) 222.

⁵ I have suggested elsewhere that his source for Blathmac's death was Diarmait *dalta* Daigre, abbot of Iona 814-c.831; see T. O. Clancy, 'Diarmait *sapientissimus*: the career of Diarmait *dalta* Daigre, abbot of Iona 814-c.831', *Peritia* [forthcoming].

they should rather be seen as kings of the Picts whose reigns were inserted in the Dál Riata king-lists by later generations.⁶ This, coupled with several re-examinations of the expansion of Pictish power during the eighth century, has dramatically altered our sense of Pictland in the period around 800. Certainly, Constantin's son Domnall may well have ruled in Dál Riata, perhaps as an under-king; Dauvit Broun's attractive solution to the intractable problems of the king-list evidence for the period suggests he may have reigned there from 811 until his death in 835.⁷ Given the dynastic control this suggests, it may be that from the point of view of those living in Dál Riata, like the monks of Iona, their overlord may well have been the king of the Picts during these years, and their island, albeit temporarily, capable of description as *insula Pictorum*. If we accept Walahfrid's poem as reflecting a real situation, rather than his vague sense of British geo-politics, it may be our best evidence for the westward extension of Pictish hegemony that some have suspected.

Iona is not the only western region to appear as Pictish in early ninth-century texts. In the *Historia Brittonum*, the original version of which dates from much the same time (829/830), Loch Lomond is described as being *in regione Pictorum*.⁸ While it is uncertain in whose territory it had previously lain (until c.700, probably that of the Britons of Dumbarton, sometime thereafter, perhaps Dál Riata⁹), it had certainly not been in Pictish possession. It may even be that Dál Riata had never recovered sufficient independence from Pictish overlordship since a century earlier, and the crushing of Dál Riata by Unust son of Uurgust (see AU 736.1, 741.10).

Several authors have pointed recently to the impressive power of Unust, and his dominance of northern lordship during his reign.¹⁰

⁶ D. Broun, 'Pictish kings 761-839: integration with Dál Riata or separate integration?', in *The St Andrews Sarcophagus: a Pictish masterpiece and its international connections*, ed. S. M. Foster (Dublin 1998) 71-83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79-82.

⁸ J. Morris, ed., *Nennius: The British History and Welsh Annals* (Chichester, 1978) 16; for discussion of the political context, see T.O. Clancy, 'Govan, the name, again', in *The Report of the Society of the Friends of Govan Old* 8 (1999) 8-13.

⁹ A series of encounters in what are probably the environs of Loch Lomond between Britons and Gaels are noted at AU 704.1, (vale of the Leven); AU 711.5 ('Lorgg Ecclet'); and AU 717.5 ('the stone called Minuire').

¹⁰ Clancy, 'Govan'; T. M. Charles-Edwards, "'The Continuation of Bede", s.a.750: high-kings, kings of Tara and "Bretwaldas"', in *Seanchas. Studies in Early and Medieval Irish Archaeology, History and Literature in Honour of Francis J. Byrne*, ed. A. P. Smyth (Dublin 2000) 137-45; K. S. Forsyth, 'Evidence of a lost Pictish source in the *Historia Regum Anglorum* of Symeon of Durham', in *Kings, Clerics and Chronicles in Scotland 500-1297. Essays in honour of Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday*, ed. S. Taylor (Dublin 2000) 19-34; A. Woolf,

Dauvit Broun has suggested that Constantin and his family may have been Unust's descendents, although this cannot be proved. Perhaps they continued, and entrenched, or perhaps reinvigorated, the overlordship in the west that Unust had begun?¹¹

One final clue to this situation lies in a series of notices in the Annals of Ulster in the 780s. After the death of Unust, and then his brother Bridei in 761 and 763 respectively,¹² there are signs of the re-emergence of Dál Riata in a battle between an Aed and a Ciniod in Fortriu which is noted in AU 768.7 – the former would be described on his death as king of Dál Riata in AU 778.7, the latter as king of Picts in AU 775.1. Further notices of the deaths of kings of Dál Riata appear in AU in 781.3 and 792.4. And yet a battle between Constantin and one Conall mac Taidg in AU 789.11 could be depicted as a battle *inter Pictos*. The death of Conall mac Taidg in Kintyre in a battle with another individual with a Gaelic name, Conall mac Aedáin, in 807.3, and his inclusion in the king-list for Dál Riata, suggests that this battle *inter Pictos* included as *Picti* rulers or those with ambition to rule Dál Riata. It may be that we should view the *regnum Pictorum* during this period as a geographically ramified entity, within which or under which could be incorporated the old kingdom of Dál Riata, and part or all of the old kingdom of Dumbarton.¹³ The designation *ri Fortrenn* becomes, in this scenario, emblematic for the kingship of an expansionist and shifting *regnum*, rather than a term which restricts Pictish power solely to the region of Fortriu.¹⁴

All this has ramifications for how we view Scottish history in the mid-ninth century. If, as Walahfrid's testimony may suggest, the *regnum Pictorum* extended fitfully across to the western seaboard from Unust's reign through the first four decades of the ninth century, the rise of a dynasty under Cinaed mac Ailpín whose origins may have

'The Verturian hegemony: a mirror in the north', in *Mercia: An Anglo-Saxon Kingdom in Europe*, ed. M. P. Brown and C. A. Farr (Leicester 2001) 106-11.

¹¹ See the important comments of David Dumville: 'The Gaelic overkingdom of Dál Riata was conquered by the Picts in 741 and incorporated into their own polity. In consequence, Pictland, by virtue of containing a Gaelic subkingdom, was open to Gaelic influence and settlement to a degree previously unimaginable.' *The Churches of North Britain in the First Viking-Age. The Fifth Whithorn Lecture, 14th September, 1996* (Whithorn 1997) 35.

¹² AU 761.4, 763.10.

¹³ For English observation from roughly the same period that the Orkney islands were likewise *insulae Pictorum*, see D. N. Dumville, 'A note on the Picts in Orkney', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 12.2 (1976) 266. See also the comments quoted in fn. 11 above.

¹⁴ Alex Woolf's superb recent demonstration that Fortriu is to be located to the north of the Mounth has profound implications for all Scottish history during this period: 'The world turned upside down: Dún Nechtain, Fortriu and the provinces of the Picts', paper given to the Medieval Scottish Studies Seminar, University of Glasgow, January 2004; and elsewhere.

been in the Gaelic west, but whose claims were to be *reges Pictorum* becomes less ethnically charged, and more an outcome of the expansion of power over the previous century.¹⁵ That this development was read in the tenth century as ethnically charged, and that at some point during the period after Cinaed's accession his descendants developed a consciously Gaelicist and anti-Pictish ideology is not in doubt, but that, as scholars have increasingly come to understand, says more about Cinaed's grandsons' generation or later, than it does about his own.¹⁶

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¹⁵ For further discussion of the context of this, and important new considerations of the transformation from Pictavia to Alba, see D. Broun, 'Alba: Pictish homeland or Irish offshoot', in *Proceedings of the 5th Australian Celtic Studies Congress, 21-24 July 2004*, ed. Pamela O'Neill [forthcoming].

¹⁶ I am grateful to Dr Dauvit Broun for comments on a draft of this note.