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Social Identity in Early Medieval Britain

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Studies in the Early History of Britain

11 Christian Monumental Sculpture and Ethnic Expression in Early Scotland[1]

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> From the chronicles and books of the ancients we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown ... Thence they came, twelve hundred years after the peoples of Israel crossed the Red Sea, to their home in the west where they still live today. The Britons they first drove out, the Picts they utterly destroyed, and, even though very often assailed by the Norwegians, the Danes and the English, they took possession of that home with many victories and untold efforts: and, as the historians of old time bear witness, they have held it free of all bondage ever since.
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> *Declaration of Arbroath*, 1320[2]

In the fourteenth century Scottish ethnicity was understood as a straightforward history of conflict and triumph. There is no sense of ambiguity or intermingling in this view of Scottish origins, much less is there any sense that Scottish identity was constructed. In recent years notions of race and ethnicity have proved integral to our understanding of how the Scottish nation developed, and still colour our understanding of contemporary Scottish society. Rather less attention has been paid to how ethnic differences were expressed during the

formative centuries from the sixth to eleventh centuries. This chapter reviews the categories of evidence which provide access to ethnicity in early medieval Scotland and examines the social context of such ethnic expressions. Archaeology contributes a significant component of the evidence,[3] but historical and linguistic sources are equally important. Overall, I hope to demonstrate that the Church provided an important setting for the display of ethnicity, because it was a focus for the display of political power.

From an archaeological perspective the most conspicuous elements of this religious display consist of sculptured stone monuments – crosses, gravestones and decorated architectural features. This sculpture is especially significant because it survives so well. Although this sculpture was devotionally inspired, it is possible to examine how the different peoples who inhabited Scotland identified themselves and constructed their identities through it. Indeed, the religious sculpture is such an important archaeological resource for this question of ethnic identity, that this chapter will also consider why the Church was so influential in this process and whether it is appropriate to give monumental sculpture ethnic labels.

One of our few points of certainty in early medieval Scottish history is that its early development was competitive and violent.[4] However, despite the fact that scarcely any of the early Scottish kings died in their beds, we must allow that war was not the only means of competition. Off the battlefield, other resources were mobilized to achieve political objectives. This chapter will focus on these other non-militarized arenas of political discourse, which embrace religion and economics. In many instances these discourses were expressed in material form and in such cases archaeology often provides our only insight into the represented social processes.[5] Ethnicity is a case in point. Regional variation in the material record is not a constant feature of medieval Scotland. So where regional variations can be identified as ethnic distinctions, they assume an historical importance, which may be indicative of a particularly abrupt social change. Of course, the attribution of ethnic meanings to stylistic differences, whether by ourselves or by the Scottish barons, may be a misreading of the evidence.[6]

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3. The problematic nature of the relationship between ethnicity and archaeology is a point to which we will return.
4. Two of the most respected overviews of recent years make this explicit in their titles: L. Alcock, *Economy, Society and Warfare* (1987) and A. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men* (1984).
5. For a general discussion of the material component of socially situated practices see J. Barrett, 'Fields of discourse: reconstituting a social archaeology', *Critique of Anthropology* 7 (1987/1988), 5–16.
6. Ethnicity, like any social construct which has a meaning beyond the confines of academic debate, is a difficult concept to employ without being glib or superficial. My understanding of ethnicity derives from anthropological and sociological studies which regard ethnicity entirely as a social construct that

Modern historic knowledge of early medieval Scotland was largely mapped out at the end of the nineteenth century,[7] but current understanding depends upon the critical advances made by historians and archaeologists since the Second World War.[8] Accomplished though this history is, we appear to have entered a new era of critical scholarship in which work on familiar materials is producing startling new insights.[9] Among the most important developments in political history has been Dauvit Broun's work on the origins of the Pictish provinces and the significance of the kingdom of Alba (or Scotia), the kingdom ruled by Gaels (Dalriadic Scots) but largely based in Pictish territory.[10] One theme underpinning these advances is a concern to see ethnic identity as a cultural construct rather than to accept that it is biologically determined.

The social picture in early Scotland was extremely complex, so it is not surprising that there has been a tendency to accept medieval statements about population shift and ethnic origins at face value, particularly when making up maps (Figure 15). The prevailing orthodox history of northern Britain during the sixth to tenth centuries recounts the emergence of regional ethnic identities (Pictish, Dalriadic, British, Anglian and Norse) and their eventual suppression by the Scottish state.[11] Rather than see ethnicity as an epiphenomenon of little lasting significance, I would like to suggest that ethnicity in early medieval

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contd.

    owes nothing to genetics and everything to specific historical circumstances. From this perspective ethnicity is composed of a variety of cultural components including the conceptual (e.g. language, myth and kinship system) and the physical (e.g. subsistence method, clothing and shelter), all of which are open to modification, manipulation and conflicting interpretations. Following Marshall Sahlins's *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities* (Ann Arbor, 1981), the process of reproducing ethnicity is also the process by which it is transformed.

7. W.F. Skene, *Celtic Scotland* (3 vols, 1876–80); A.O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (2 vols, 1922).

8. A.M.M. Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (1975) is still the best single volume on the Middle Ages. F.T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Problem of the Picts* (1955) serves as the model for interdisciplinary historical investigation and despite recent advances contains much useful information. P. McNeill and R. Nicholson (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Scotland c. 400–c.1600* (1975) provides an indispensable geographic perspective. The *Scottish Historical Review*, 73 (1994), on the theme 'Whither Scottish history?' contains a series of important historiographical articles which provide useful perspectives on the advances of Scottish history in recent years.

9. The two recent volumes edited by Barbara Crawford – *Scotland in Dark Age Europe* (1994) and *Scotland in Dark Age Britain* (1996) – illustrate the vitality of some of this work.

10. D. Broun, 'The origins of Scottish identity', in *Nations, Nationalism and Patriotism in the European Past*, eds C. Bjørn, A. Grant and K.J. Stringer (Copenhagen, 1994), 35–55.

11. Straight historical accounts can be found in Duncan, *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom*; Smyth, *Warlords and Holymen*; and B. Crawford, *Scandinavian Scotland* (1987). S. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (1996) is a reliable, well-illustrated archaeological introduction.
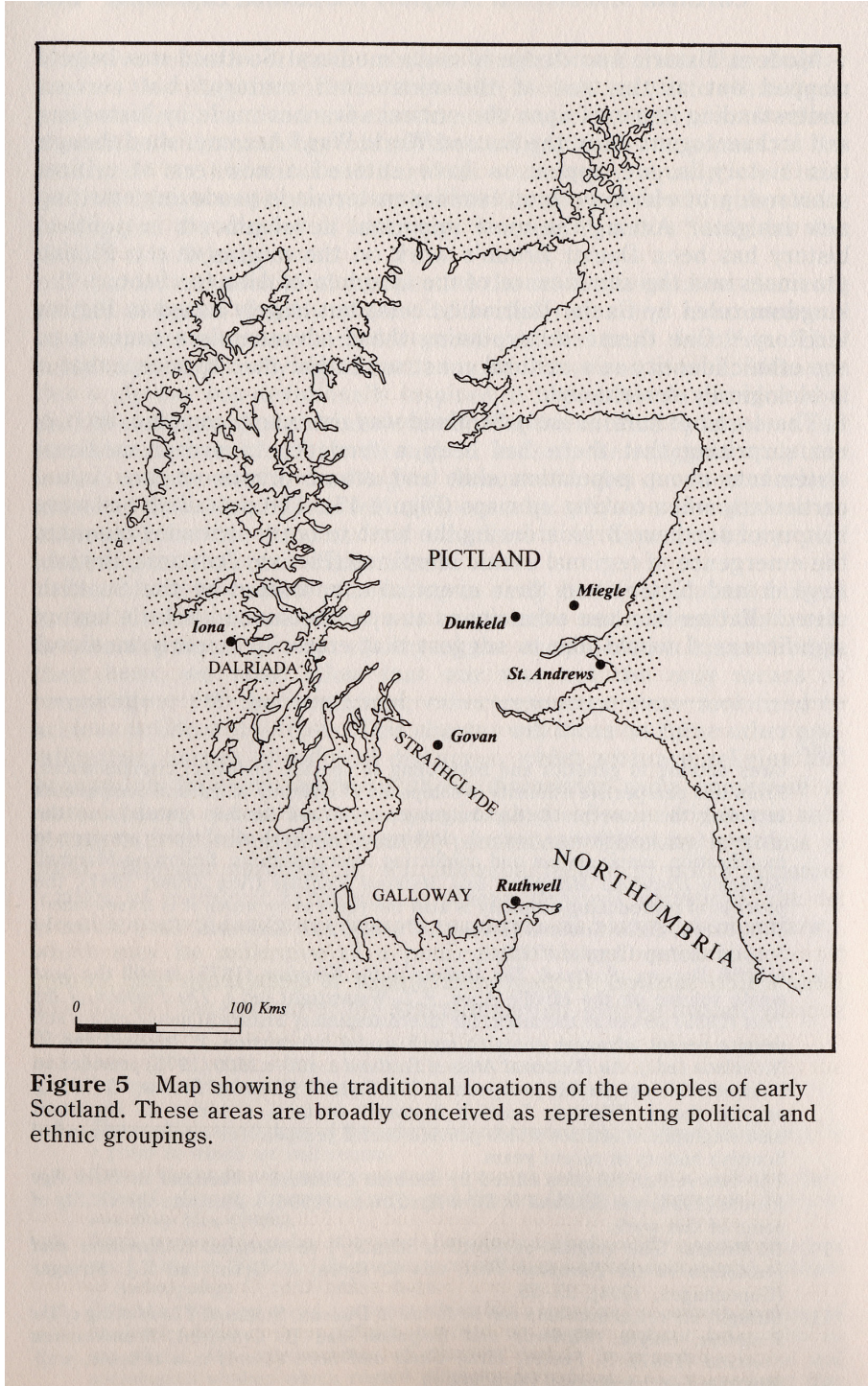
Figure 5 Map showing the traditional locations of the peoples of early Scotland. These areas are broadly conceived as representing political and ethnic groupings.

Scotland provides one of the clearest guides to the arenas where political struggles were taking place. One of these arenas focused on religion and centres of Christian worship.

In some respects the modern Scottish preoccupation with ethnicity is not surprising.[12] More widely, the past decade has seen a huge growth of archaeological interest in ethnicity and national identity and a corresponding growth in the number of books on the subject. Much of this energy has been focused on identifying how recent and contemporary politics have influenced our understanding of the past.[13] An almost equal amount of energy has been expended searching for ways of recognizing ethnic and national identities in prehistoric societies.[14] These efforts have certainly led to a much greater awareness of the influences of nationalist politics on our work and of the potential for reconstructing identity latent within the archaeological record.

As archaeologists we must establish that differences observed in the archaeological record in, for example, pottery styles or dress were meaningful to contemporaries and understood as expressions of ethnic difference. However, one of the key problems which prehistorians have come up against is the lack of independent validation of their identifications of ethnicity. For instance in concluding a study of prehistoric ethnicity, Siân Jones writes that even if one follows a non-normative programme of stylistic analysis, 'it will be necessary to employ independent contextual evidence in the interpretation of ethnicity, as the significance of material culture in terms of ethnicity is culturally and historically specific'.[15] In observation of the early medieval period, archaeologists have primarily used notions of ethnicity which allowed them to chart the movements of populations, by and large without questioning whether these distinctions mattered to contemporary peoples and without critically examining the ethnic labels they use.

As medievalists we are fortunate to have contextual evidence in the form of contemporary writings, like the *Declaration of Arbroath* or Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, which make it clear that ethnicity was socially meaningful. The significance of ethnicity is one of the dominant themes of Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe*,[16] a survey which not only recognizes ethnicity as a cultural construct, but

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12. In 1997, Scots voted for devolution from the United Kingdom and a parliament of their own.
13. For example, J.A. Atkinson, I. Banks and J. O'Sullivan (eds), *Nationalism and Archaeology* (1996) and P.L. Kohl and C. Fawcett (eds), *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology* (1995).
14. For example, P. Graves-Brown, S. Jones and C.S. Gamble (eds), *Cultural Identity and Archaeology* (1995).
15. S. Jones, 'Discourses of identity in the interpretation of the past', in (eds) Graves-Brown *et al., Cultural Identity and Archaeology*, 73.
16. R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe* (1993).

uses it as an analytical tool in discussing the social transformation of medieval Europe. According to Bartlett, in the tenth century, the primary badges of ethnicity were customs, language and law.[17] Interestingly he argues that the vulgar criterion usually used today to define ethnicity, i.e. race, was perceived as being less important than it is now. This is not because kinship and bloodstock were unimportant, but because the outward signs of race were not sufficiently obvious to serve as useful markers. Within medieval Europe gradual changes in skin tone and physical attributes were commonplace – Germans could look French, Nordic or Slavic – and therefore were far less significant in determining identity and social standing than were the cultural criteria. From an analytical perspective one feature which cuts across customs, language and law is that they are all malleable: granddaughters of Picts could become Scots by changing their speech and their clothes.

Bartlett's three media of ethnic identity – language, law and custom – provide a valid structure for reviewing the evidence for ethnicity in early medieval Scotland. In theory all should provide us with access to contemporary perspectives on the question of how peoples in northern Britain distinguished themselves from one another, but the evidence for each category does not survive equally well.

Language history is a topic which requires more detailed consideration than I am able to provide here, so I will be brief. It is clear, in contemporary texts from the time of Columba in the sixth century to that of Macbeth in the eleventh, that language was seen as a natural index of social affiliation. Bede, for example, uses language groups, not political divisions or kingdoms, to underpin his geography of eighth-century Britain. Dramatic changes in the geography of language are obvious in texts and place-names.[18] From the place-name evidence it is possible to identify areas with distinctive linguistic histories. In areas of Pictish and Cumbric speech, the native languages were overlain and eventually displaced by Gaelic, English and Norse and this gave rise to complex patterns of overlapping language use. In the absence of more direct documentary evidence, place-name studies have become the backbone of Dark Age political geography. But at present the process of language change is only understood at a broad-brush level; we are only beginning to see the potential for fine-grained analyses of particular locales or name types, exemplified in the work of Taylor on Fife[19] and by Clancy on *annatt* places.[20]

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17. *Ibid.*, 198–9.
18. W.J. Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (1926, reprinted 1986); K.H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (1953); W. F. Nicholison, *Scottish Place-Names* (1976).
19. S. Taylor, *Settlement-Names of Fife* (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 1995); and 'Place-names and the early Church in eastern Scotland', in Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Britain*, 93–110.
20. T. Clancy, 'Annat place-names in Scotland and the origins of the parish', *Innes Review* 46 (1995), 91–115.

Despite the difficulties of providing precise chronological control, these analyses can reveal the dynamic relationship which existed between language use, military fortunes and regional politics. We will return to place-names, because they provide crucial evidence for the growth of religious centres and the propagation of devotions to specific saints.

Early medieval Celtic law provides good insights into questions of ethnicity, because the kin-based principles upon which it was constructed required careful definition of family and group member-ship. In Ireland, the impact of both the Vikings and the Anglo-Normans is apparent.[21] The similarities between Scotland and Ireland might lead one to expect an equally rich legal history for Scotland; this is not the case. David Sellar has surveyed the early survivals within Scottish legal traditions of the modern era and has shown that while their influence is interesting, the legacy is not great.[22] Although Patrick Wormald has recently reminded us of the political and ethnic overtones of the few bits of evidence pertaining to the ninth-century proclamations of law in Scotland,[23] too little survives to provide a well-rounded view of the different legal traditions.[24] The absence of this potentially revealing category of evidence is all the more annoying, given the ubiquity of open-air court sites as reflected in place-names, folk traditions and archaeology.[25] Clearly such places, whether based at ancient prehistoric barrows or on purpose-built mounds, served as a key element in the administrative apparatus of early medieval lordship.[26]

The notion of custom is the most difficult of the three ethnic criteria to focus on, because any description of an anthropological culture must embrace multiple aspects of learned behaviour and meaningfully-constituted social practices. Here I will limit myself to three social fields where custom resides that can be studied archaeologically: housing, attire and religious practice. Each has a potential for revealing ethnicity, but each has intrinsic archaeological limitations in Scotland.

Domestic architecture and settlement form are the stock-in-trade of most archaeologists interested in social questions. Anthropologically we know that houses are one of the most significant repositories of

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21. F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (1988).
22. D. Sellar, 'Celtic law and Scots law: survival and integration', *Scottish Studies* 29 (1989), 1–27.
23. 'The emergence of the *Regnum Scottorum*: a Carolingian hegemony?', in Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Britain*, 140–2.
24. 'Leges inter Brettos et Scotos', *The Acts of the Parliament of Scotland, vol. 1 (1126–1423)* (1844), 663–5, stands alone as a legal testament to the interrelationships between different legal traditions.
25. G.W.S. Barrow, *'Popular Courts' in Scotland and its Neighbours in the Middle Ages* (1992), 217–46, examines the evidence for the north and east of Scotland; the potential of detailed local historical study to fill the gaps in the west is illustrated by A. Campbell of Airds, 'Hangman's Hill', *West Highland Notes and Queries* ser. 2, no. 13 (1995), 3–9.
26. S.T. Driscoll, 'The archaeology of state formation in Scotland', in *Scottish Archaeology: New Perceptions* (1991), eds W.S. Hanson and E.A. Slater, 81–111, especially 93ff.

learned behaviour, because they structure activity both within and without the dwelling.[27] Where the evidence is available, the lived-in environment provides solid grounds for detecting and analysing significant social practices, including those we might categorize as 'ethnic'. In spite of recent advances in the settlement archaeology including attempts to distinguish cultural traditions,[28] significant obstacles remain to be overcome. Superficially we appear to be able to identify regional differences in settlement forms which roughly accord to those areas occupied by the different peoples as indicated by historical and place-name evidence. For instance, the dry-stone fortified homesteads known as duns are predominately a phenomenon of Argyll, the area of Dalriadic settlement and Gaelic speech,[29] while classic bow-sided Scandinavian long houses are found in those areas of Norse settlement as evidenced by burials, hoards, small finds and place-names.[30] When looked at in more detail, however, it appears that geographic and climatic influences may override cultural ones. Critically examined, there is not much to link the 'Pictish' house from Buckquoy, Orkney with that from Easter Kinnear, Fife, apart from radiocarbon dates.[31] In the case of these two sites, it can clearly be agreed that raw materials and landscape have been more important in determining the form of these houses than has any notion of a 'Pictish' architectural template.

Not only does the variable geography of Scotland introduce problems, but the main obstacle to using architecture for our purposes is that lack of modern excavations which allow detailed comparisons, let alone more complex spatial analysis. In the case of the Pictish province, there is little on the mainland with which to compare the

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27. H. Glassie, *Folk Housing in Middle Virginia: A Structural Analysis of Historic Artifacts* (Knoxville, 1975); P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

28. L. Alcock, 'A survey of Pictish settlement archaeology', in *Pictish Studies Settlement: Burial and Art in Dark Age Northern Britain*, eds G. Watson and G. Friell (1984), 7–42; I. Armit (ed.) *Beyond the Brochs* (1990); and S. Foster, 'The state of Pictland in the age of Sutton Hoo', *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. Carver (1992), 217–34.

29. Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (hereafter RCAHMS), *Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments* (7 vols, 1980–92); L. and E. Alcock, 'Reconnaissance excavations in Scotland 1974–84: 2, excavations at Dunollie Castle, Oban, Argyll, 1978', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 117 (1987), 119–47.

30. A. Fenton and H. Palsson (eds), *The Northern and Western Isles in the Viking World: Survival, Continuity and Change* (1984); C.D. Morris and D.J. Rackham (eds), *Norse and Later Settlement and Subsistence in the North Atlantic* (1992); and B. Scott, 'The Viking move west: houses and continuity in the Northern Isles', in *Meaningful Architecture: Social Interpretations of Buildings*, ed. M. Locock (1994), 132–46.

31. A. Ritchie, 'Excavation of Pictish and Viking-age farmsteads at Buckquoy, Orkney', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 108 (1976–77), 174–227; S.T. Driscoll, 'A Pictish settlement in north-east Fife: the Scottish Field School of Archaeology excavations at Easter Kinnear', *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal* 3 (1997), 74–118.

middle-ranking site of Buckquoy. We cannot say how it might have differed from socially analogous settlements in Moray or Angus. At a more exalted level, in the architecture of the elite, we would be justified in expecting self-conscious expressions of social status; unfortunately, sites of the highest status have been excavated either badly or on a small scale. The Northumbrian *villa regalis* of Yeavering stands alone in having been both extensively excavated and published.[32] Faced with such archaeological gaps, the settlement evidence remains a field to be exploited in the future, but is not yet particularly useful in our search for ethnic identity.

Clothing and articles of personal adornment have been shown to be some of the most revealing artefacts we have from the early Middle Ages. Despite the sometimes coarse and racist analyses by archaeologists, dress remains a fertile field for ethnic analysis. Sensitively used, Migration Period funerary practices constitute one of the best avenues through which we may study the negotiation of status in small-scale political groups.[33]

Apart from the first generation or so of Norse settlers, the residents of Scotland more or less stopped putting things in graves after the Bronze Age, thereby depriving us of the best contexts for reconstructing dress and interpreting how transferable objects of personal adornment might have been used to express identity. From the perspective of ethnic identification, this is most unfortunate because the objects of dress we *do* have (pins, brooches and their manufacturing waste), which might have provided signs of regional social and political developments, are too mobile. They can and do turn up anywhere in the country. Even where manufacturing sites have been examined, it is clear that the styles which art historians had confidently assigned to particular groups were swapped around, thus 'Anglo-Saxon' motifs were present at the Mote of Mark in the Wigton peninsula, while 'Pictish' and 'Germanic' motifs are mixed with 'Dalriadic' at Dunadd in the heart of Argyll.[34] What the metalwork shows is that by the seventh century, there were common decorative styles which were available throughout northern Britain and were also current in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England. Elements of this common vocabulary were put together in subtle ways to convey information about social position and affiliation which we are only beginning to understand.[35] The subtlety of the positioning and selection of articles included in Anglo-Saxon burials would seem to suggest that without

32. B. Hope-Taylor, *Yeavering: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria* (1977).
33. R. Samson, 'Social structures from Reihengräber: mirror or image', *Scottish Archaeological Revue*, 4 (1987), 116–26.
34. E. Campbell and A. Lane, 'Celtic and Germanic interaction in Dalriata: the 7th-century metalworking site at Dunadd', in *The Age of Migrating Ideas*, eds J. Hugget and M. Spearman (1993), 52–63.
35. Margaret Nieke, 'Penannular and related brooches: secular ornament or symbol in action?', in Hugget and Spearman (eds), *The Age of Migrating Ideas*, 128–34.

similarly precise information, a detailed social analysis of the ethnic dimension in Celtic metalwork may be beyond us.[36]

These deficiencies in the documentary and material records are compensated for by the quality and quantity of early medieval monumental sculpture with which Scotland is blessed. This most remarkable collection, known as the *Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (*ECMS*) after the title of the nineteenth-century corpus,[37] is explicitly ecclesiastical and was erected in public contexts.

The findspots and the imagery of this sculpture indicate that the Church provided the setting for the most informative material displays of ethnicity. Before asking why churches provided especially potent places for such displays, we must look to the coherence of the Church itself.

In northern Britain, unlike England and northern Europe, the key religious distinctions of the early Middle Ages were not between Christians and pagans, but between competing authorities within the Church. We are shown by Bede that the path to conversion could lead to spectacular disputes, such as that unleashed at the Synod of Whitby in the mid-seventh century, in which the source of religious authority and the path to belief seemed more important than belief itself. There are hints that similarly deep religious fault lines were present throughout northern Britain. It is unfortunate that we can say so little about the progress of conversion in the North, because the source of evangelization was clearly an important factor in establishing communities of belief. Even without detailed knowledge of the coming of Christianity, it seems that neither the process of conversion nor later variations in organization and practice can be adequately explained by the traditional dichotomy of a Roman party and a Celtic one.

There are two categories of evidence which appear to reflect a complex structure in which politics and religious practices were interconnected. First, the propagation of saints' cults which exhibit a connection between local political and ethnic concerns. Second, the large numbers of Christian monuments erected between the seventh and tenth centuries suggest, through their stylistic differences, that 'schools' of sculpture might reflect secular patronage. Before returning to the saints let us consider the sculpture at greater length.

These monuments exhibit stylistic characteristics which allow us to recognize regional distinctions with confidence since they are geographically stable. Moreover, as has been long recognized, the broad distinctions in the distributions seem to correspond to the various ethnic regions, which have been constructed through historical and place-name studies. This is not the place to argue about stylistic

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36. As for instance has been outlined by E.J. Pader, *Symbolism, Social Relations and the Interpretation of Mortuary Remains* (1982).
37. R. Allen and J. Anderson, *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland* (3 vols, 1903, reprinted 1993).

origins, to fret about dates or speculate about patrons of particular stones. For this discussion, it is enough to recognize the broad distinctions apparent in the sculptural traditions. Since the nineteenth century, these differences have been seen as expressing ethnic distinctions.

The regional distinctions can be appreciated by reference to monumental crosses from Iona, Govan, Meigle and Ruthwell. With the exception of Ruthwell, the crosses are part of larger collections of sculpture from major religious establishments, probably with connections to the local royal houses. Iona, without question the most significant religious centre in Argyll, had clear royal associations and is widely regarded as a centre from which the classic ring-headed cross form (Figure 16) developed in the seventh and eighth centuries.[38] Although Meigle in Angus has almost no contemporary documentation, the sculpture there is presumed to derive from a Pictish monastery, perhaps under royal patronage.[39] Among the huge collection of eighth- to tenth-century sculpture are several monumental crosses (Figure 17) which assume the typical Pictish cross-slabs form. Govan, in Strathclyde, possesses another large, but ahistoric, collection of sculpture which includes a range of monumental crosses of both free-standing and slab form (Figure 18). The sculpture[40] has been used to propose that the site was linked to the Strathclyde royal house of the tenth and eleventh centuries. Anglian royal patronage is harder to detect north of the Tweed (the modern Scottish border), but the cross (Figure 19) which survives at Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire testifies to a period of Anglian dominance of the Solway region.[41] These examples demonstrate a widespread interest in monumental religious sculpture and illustrate the distinctive regional preferences in monument form. Naturally, when one looks closer there is ample evidence for artistic cross-fertilization throughout northern Britain and Ireland. Moreover, the distributions of these stones exhibit large gaps. While this does not undermine the general point about regional preferences it does suggest that the appropriate scale of analysis should be finer than the typical culture area maps, such as that reproduced in Figure 15.

38. RCAHMS, *Argyll: An Inventory of the Monuments, vol. 4 Iona* (1982), 17–19; R.B.K. Stevenson, 'The chronology and relationships of some Irish and Scottish crosses', *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 86 (1956), 84–96; and D. Kelly, 'The relationship of the crosses of Argyll', in Hugget and Spearman (eds), *The Age of Migrating Ideas*, 219–29.

39. A. Ritchie, 'Meigle and lay patronage in Tayside in the 9th and 10th centuries AD', *Tayside and Fife Archaeological Journal* 1, 1–10; RCAHMS, *South-East Perth* (1994).

40. A. Ritchie (ed.), *Govan and Its Early Medieval Sculpture* (1994) is an up-to-date survey and discussion of the artistic and historical context of the collection. On the royal connection see W. Davies, 'Ecclesiastical centres and secular society in the Brittonic world in the tenth and eleventh centuries', in *ibid.*, 92–102.

41. B. Cassidy (ed.), *The Ruthwell Cross* (Princeton, 1992).

Figure 16   St Martin's Cross, Iona
The sculpture features snake-boss ornament on one side with a sequence of biblical scenes, some of which, like the musicians, had a clear secular resonance. (By courtesy of the RCAHMS, Crown Copyright.)

Figure 17   Meigle Cross no. 1
The slab has been made from a cup-marked standing stone. Opposite
the cross are Pictish symbols: above a scene of mounted hunters,
intermingled with fantastic beasts. (By courtesy of the RCAHMS, Crown
Copyright.)

Although the stylistic treatment and skill of the sculptors varies
considerably, one of the most consistent features is the tendency to
draw upon decorative motifs found in secular and ecclesiastical
metalwork, making full use of the broadly available repertoire. Such
treatment establishes an implicit link with the aristocracy who owned
and used such precious objects. In Pictland, the identity of the
sponsors of many of the stones is even more obvious. There are
frequent representations of the elite as warriors and hunters. Such
images are integral to the iconographic schemes of Pictish stones,
although not unique to them. Hunting is represented in some way in
the sculpture of all parts of early medieval Scotland, but the warrior
motif is largely confined to Pictish and British sculpture.

The ECMS were certainly linked to religious observance but they
seem to indicate more than religious enthusiasm. I would argue that
they were consciously used to help define the political landscape. As
public statements of devotion they carry considerable ideological
weight, especially in those areas of Pictland and Strathclyde where the
aristocracy feature prominently on the sculpture. Nevertheless,

Figure 18   Govan, the 'Sun-Stone'
Note the snake-boss swastika on one side of the roughly-shaped slab; on the opposite a mounted warrior, much eroded, is surmounted by an interlace cross. (© T.E. Grey)

surprisingly little attention has been directed towards the analysis of the social and political content of the sculptures. One way of assessing this is to consider their wider context within the bounds of religious observance. As far as we can tell the Church had its own political dimension, linked to patterns of patronage, internal organization and doctrine. Competition between various saints' cults is the clearest sign of this political dimension, but this dimension is likely to go deeper.

The regional character of certain Scottish saintly cults, as evidenced by dedications, has long been recognized, even if we are only beginning to see modern critical scholarship brought to bear on the problem.[42] At a macro-scale, the four major cults which survived into the later Middle Ages – dedicated to Andrew, Columba, Kentigern and

42.   S. Taylor, 'Place-names and the early Church in eastern Scotland', in Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Britain*, 93–110.

Ninian – all have early medieval origins, distinctive spheres of popularity, and clear ethnic associations. The *vita* of our best known saint, Columba, leaves little doubt as to why his cult was promoted by the kings of Dalriada – not only did he come from the royal lineage of Dalriata but he was also successfully involved in royal politics.[43] However, it is not the large cults which I want to focus on; rather, I wish to draw attention to the cohesion of some of the lesser saints' cults. The case of St Serf, who is found predominantly in southern Perthshire and western Fife, is a representative example.

Serf's principal centre of devotion was at Culross, in south-west Fife. Although we can only speculate as to Serf's particular appeal for the region, the dedications indicate active patronage extending across Fife into Southern Perthshire. The concentration of dedications cuts across the Pictish kingdoms of Fortriu and Fothrif and the later medieval earldoms of Strathearn and Fife. Thomas Clancy has identified similar concentrations of dedications to St Drostan in Badenoch and Strathspey, to St Uinniau in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire and to St Mael Rubha in Wester Ross, Skye and Lorn.[44] If we impute a political motive to the patronage and sponsorship of saints' cults, then these lesser cults may represent the eroded footprints of ancient polities, perhaps petty kingdoms. The point here is that we have traces of religious activity which operated on a scale which corresponds to that occupied by different groups ('schools') of stylistically linked sculpture.[45] Broun's recent demolition of the framework of Pictish political geography requires that we discover more complexity within the political landscape.[46] The spread of cults is one way of exploring these obscure polities.

If we had *vitae* for some of these less exalted saints, with their tightly clustered dedications, we would find that they had been selected for two reasons; first, that they were credited with the evangelization of a people or petty kingdom, and second, that they had kin-links with the ruling dynasties. What I would like to suggest is that the politics associated with the development of small kingdoms

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43. R. Sharp (ed.), *Adomnan of Iona: Life of St Columba* (1995), 355; M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (1988).
44. J. MacQueen, 'Myth and legend of the Scottish Lowland saints', *Scottish Studies* 24 (1981), 1–22, draws attention to the geographical focus of some of the lesser saints. Thomas Clancy is engaged in a more detailed investigation of some of the other lesser Scottish saints and I am grateful to him for showing me a draft of his work in progress – T.O. Clancy, 'Scottish saints: national identities in the early middle ages', in R. Sharpe and A. Thacker (eds), *Local Saints and Local Churches* (forthcoming). He documents the evidence in detail and shows more restraint in using this material than I have.
45. Ritchie, 'Meigle and lay patronage' is a recent study of one such Pictish group.
46. D. Broun, 'The origins of Scottish identity in its European context', in Crawford (ed.), *Scotland in Dark Age Europe*, 21–32.

Figure 19 The Ruthwell Cross
One of the most complex pieces of early medieval sculpture to survive; its obelisk shaft contains biblical scenes framed by Anglo-Saxon runic and Latin inscriptions. (J. Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland* (1856), plates xix and xx.)

provided the contexts for mobilizing the ethnic components which we see in both the ECMS and saints' cults.

Power in early medieval Britain was not exercised simply through the sword, but through a complex interplay of kin-relations, bonds of lordship and effective control of material and ideological resources.[47] Elsewhere I have argued that the monumental sculpture of early Scotland shares many qualities of early texts such as charters, sagas and saints' lives which not only recorded events or beliefs, but were actively used to mediate social relations.[48] One social transformation in which monumental sculpture appears to have been active was in the development of estates. This process of estate formation can be charted across northern Britain as it ultimately led to the shift away from military conquest (the dominant mode of political control), to be replaced by a system in which power was more clearly associated with the control of agricultural wealth. Here I wish to draw attention to the role of monumental sculpture in the development of estates. Among the earliest of the ECMS is a unique set of stones, the Class I Pictish Symbol Stones,[49] which use an abstract symbolic code carved on rude stone pillars to establish a link between the best land, burials and the Pictish nobility. The stones are part of the enabling technology by which prominent individuals were presenced in the landscape and were one of the means through which large estates were first defined. These early estates appear to survive into the twelfth century, when documentation of landholding becomes more common and they are recorded as *thanages* – places held by officials of the king or of regional magnates (earls or *mormaers*).[50]

The point of this digression is that Symbol Stones help to identify an important strategy for gaining control of and maintaining landed resources which would otherwise be lost to us. These monuments therefore represent evidence for the early exercise of power which was not explicitly military, although the raising of fighting men must have been an important duty of those holding the estates, whatever

47. This territory has been charted by a number of influential scholars including L. Alcock, *Arthur's Britain* (1971); W. Davies, *Patterns of Power in Early Wales* (1990); C.P. Wormald, 'Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship: some further thoughts', in *Proceedings of the First Symposium on Anglo-Saxon Studies at Kalamazoo*, ed. P. Szarmach (Binghampton, 1985), 151–81.

48. S. T. Driscoll, 'Power and authority in early historic Scotland: Pictish symbol stones and other documents', in *State and Society: The Emergence and Development of Social Hierarchy and Political Centralisation*, ed. J. Gledhill (1988), 215–36.

49. E.A. Alcock, 'Pictish Class I Stones: where and how?' *Glasgow Archaeological Journal* 15 (1989), K. Forsyth, 'Language in Pictland, spoken and written' in *A Pictish Panorama*, ed. E.H. Nicoll (1995), 7–10.

50. G.W.S. Barrow, 'Prefeudal shires and thanes', in *The Kingdom of the Scots* (1973), 1–68; A. Grant, 'Thanes and thanages from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries', in *Medieval Scotland: Crown, lordship and community*, eds A. Grant and K. Stringer (1993), 39–81; and Driscoll, 'The archaeology of state formation in Scotland'.

their title. Moreover, they are regionally quite restricted and imply that such changes in lordship followed separate histories of development in different areas.

The later ECMS represented by the monumental crosses also exhibit an uneven distribution, which fits well with this idea of separate histories and the use of sculpture as part of a particular strategy followed by some of the petty kingdoms. The monumental crosses represent a distinct stage in the development of lordship and the formation of hereditary aristocracy. The explosion of sculpture was part of a strategy to define and secure new positions of privilege. The strength of this proposition can be appreciated by considering who erected the sculptures and why, and by thinking about who saw them and how they were influenced by the carved images.

We must presume from their findspots, predominantly in church-yards, that these stones were erected at places of worship. Moreover, in the absence of stone architecture, such monuments were among the most permanent statements that could be made. As I have mentioned, the secular imagery on the Pictish and British stones may have been intended to commemorate particular patrons and certainly implies elite sponsorship. Beyond the actual moment of erection, which *might* commemorate specific grants of lands or privileges, the monuments contributed to establishing a setting which was used to reinforce the position of the patrons.

The ECMS would have provided the backdrop against which key ceremonial events were conducted, such as baptisms, marriages and funerals. Given what we know about the social dynamics of early medieval society, such ceremonies were critical for the development and propagation of aristocratic authority. Such events could be politically charged insofar as they related to issues of heirship and inheritance and of dynastic networks and lordship. This political aspect is self-evident for those stones which clearly show secular patronage, but even where the patrons were not secular, we should remember that major religious houses worked much like the rest of the aristocracy in restricting access to high office to a noble elite. The overarching message of the ECMS proclaims divine support for the lives (and souls) of the patrons, their families and their political enterprises.

If we are to allow these monuments any active social influence, then we must also consider who saw them and what they thought. These stones are found in and around churches, but also may have been located along prominent routes, as for instance with the Maiden Stone, Chapel of Gairoch. These were of course public monuments, executed in the most spectacular visual form available. Perhaps such sculptures were paralleled by tapestries, paintings and other perishable media, but these stones were certainly more accessible than the internal fittings of lordly residences would have been. We can surmise that the primary audience was composed of other nobles, branches of the kindred and other members of the aristocracy. The non-noble locals

constituted an important secondary audience. Few of them might have witnessed the ceremonial activities, like a marriage, first-hand, but all would have nevertheless appreciated the association with the events. People from further afield would have been a less critically-appreciative audience, but would have recognized the monuments for what they were: emblems of legitimate lordship. Not the least because similar monuments using some of the same imagery and decorative motifs were being erected all around northern Britain and Ireland.

To summarize, our most reliable material evidence of ethnic expression in early medieval Scotland is found on monumental sculpture erected at places of worship. These monuments appear to be manifestations of local aristocratic support for the Church. In these monuments we see the mobilization of selected stylistic traits directed primarily towards an audience composed of noble peers and local subjects. From their distribution and locations, these monuments seem to indicate a relatively localized political discourse. If they were all about local politics, why do they appear to be drawn along 'ethnic' lines?

I believe that the answer relates to the role which Christianity assumed in centralizing religious activity and identifying it with the secular land-owning elite. In the past, archaeological interest in early medieval ethnicity has been concerned with the reconstruction of the boundaries of the petty kingdoms in North Britain. I regard this as misguided, insofar as it is impossible to locate ethnic groups by collecting and sifting traits. We need to recall that ethnicity is not an inherent quality but a cultural construct, fashioned from the available cultural resources and influenced by contemporary political concerns. Particular groups may have been signified by selected traits for only a short period of time. On the other hand, if we focus on transient expressions specifically in order to identify moments of significant discourse, when political and religious modes of expression were united to make authoritative social statements, then we have made some progress in understanding the processes at work here.

Both the appearance and decline of ECMS can be understood with reference to their political context. Initially they serve to provide a new means of legitimizing an emerging aristocracy. The consequences of this activity, which probably reached its peak in the ninth century, was to create a nation of small regions, which accentuated the natural topographical distinctions. Regional identities were created based around places and monuments intended to bolster the legitimacy of local elites, and this included creating a bond between a local community and the ruler. The Church provided a particularly effective setting since it too sought to establish communities which embraced all but were dominated by a few.

In this chapter, the sculptural decoration that I have been labelling as 'ethnic' can be seen to have its origins in the *aristocratic* and the *Christian*. It marks social distinction within groups rather than serving as an intentional marker of cultural difference between groups such as

the Picts and the Scots. While it remains convenient to describe the sculpture using terms such as Pictish (as I have here), we should recognize that the sculpture only acquired its ethnic significance through its political associations. The danger is that in labelling a particular style as Pictish or Scottish we are making the same sort of retrospective attribution of ethnicity as did the authors of the *Declaration of Arbroath*. Where they saw the march of warriors, we see migrating sculptors. While these visions are simple and convenient for descriptive purposes, neither is particularly helpful in understanding the development of early medieval Scotland.

Ironically, a desire to avoid the ethnic character of this sculptural tradition may have been one of the factors responsible for the end of the monumental sculpture. By AD 1000, monumental sculpture had all but ceased to be carved, except for tombstones. The monumental crosses were replaced by an even more effective medium for social expression, church building. As Scotland moved towards statehood, its society became increasingly stratified and the distances between classes became more marked, despite the continued importance of the agricultural economy and local kin networks. Resources were re-directed away from carving and into the construction of the earliest surviving stone-built churches,[51] which provided a setting for more elaborate ceremonial events to which access could be restricted. The architectural language which was employed was firmly European in its conception and execution, leaving less space for local expression.

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51. G. Donaldson, *Scottish Church History* (1985), 1–10.