

## -1Appleby Archaeology November 2009

Sheena Gemmell had an attentive audience at Appleby Archaeology for her talk on The Picts. Visitors and members listened intently as she built up a picture of who the Picts were, where they lived and their possible social organisation.

The Picts, a unique people, who inhabited northern Britain during the Dark Ages left few traces of their existence, though there are many myths and legends. They left one document, a list of Pictish kings, written in Latin. Other written references are in documents written by for example the Romans. Some fine silver artefacts have been found but burial and settlement sites are rare. Their principal legacy is more than two hundred large carved stones, many several metres high and some standing on their original site. They are often along, what were probably, ancient route ways. A series of slides of these magnificent stones was shown. There are two main classes of stone:- Class 1 stones with the carving incised on natural stone are the earlier and probably belong to the pagan period.. The symbols on class 2 stones are carved in relief, on dressed stone and some of them form cross slabs.

Bede, in the early eighth century refers to four races, the English, the Britons, the Scots and the Picts and suggests that the Picts had links with the Irish. This was political propaganda to prepare the way for the eventual take over of Pictland by the Scots, who originated in Ireland. The Romans mapped the distribution of the tribes in Britain and noted several groups in the north. By the third century the smaller tribes had been absorbed into the Caledonii and the Maetae and by the end of that century all were labelled as the Picts. They were the indigenous people who had lived in northern Britain from prehistoric times and there is no way of knowing what they called themselves.

Pictland was predominately north of the river Forth occupying the fertile land of the coast, east of the Grampians In an early medieval document, seven Pictish kingdoms were listed, three in the north from Aberdeen to Caithness and four in the south. One is remembered today when the county of Fife is called the Kingdom of Fife. Place names that include the element "pit" such as Pitlochray, and Pittenween indicate Pictish territory.

No one knows what language they spoke and there is no evidence of it having been written down. Study of lettering in ogham, an ancient Irish alphabet, on a carved stone has led scholars to think that the roots of the language are Celtic and were shared by Cumbric and Welsh. The language was lost after the incursions of the Vikings on the west coast pushed the Scots east and led to the Scots and the Picts forming one kingdom under Kenneth Mac Alpin in 833/4AD.

The Picts' social structure appears to have been fluid with the kingdoms uniting and separating, in response to circumstances. Control did not pass from father to son and it may be each kingdom took its turn to lead the others. The symbols on the stones and on a number of beautifully crafted objects, often in silver, have given us an insight into their lives and tell us that they were an artistic and imaginative people who could produce realistic animal carvings

and complex abstract designs. Many of these designs are reproduced in present day jewellery. A love of music, possibly accompanying story telling, is suggested by the frequent depiction of harps. The Romans had recorded the Celtic skills in horsemanship and this is evident from carvings of both warriors on horseback and of hunting scenes, some of which show women. The majority of the population would have been small farmers but it was a society that could support skilled craftsmen, musicians and hunting. The dress, hair styles, and jewellery depicted in their carvings tell us that there was a hierarchy with an aristocratic class.

Many of the symbols are difficult to interpret. A number of stones with incised carvings of bulls have been recorded at the site of a Pictish fortress, Burghead on the Moray coast. These may have formed part of the ramparts and signified power or perhaps they were the symbol of the group. The abstract symbols are challenging. They were often carved in pairs but where there is a third symbol it is usually a mirror and a comb .. What did they mean? Suggestions include marriage alliance, social rank, grave marks or phonetic symbols. Without knowledge of their language it is unlikely we will ever know.

Christian symbols are seen on the later carved stones. Bede and other sources inform us that St Ninian converted the southern Picts in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and that the northern Picts were influenced by the mission of St Columba in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. By the early 8<sup>th</sup> century there was a mixing of the cultures of the Picts and Northumbrians and Northumbrian symbols are combined with Pictish ones. In 710 AD Northumbrian masons were asked to build a church in Pictland. By the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century biblical scenes appear in carvings such as the sarcophagus at St Andrews where there are several depictions of King David who was thought of as a model King.

An example that illustrates how our understanding of Pictish history can be aided by studying the carvings is one of the Aberlemno stones. It is thought to commemorate a decisive victory, recorded by Bede, of the Picts over the Northumbrian's at the battle of Nechtansmere in 685AD. The stone, carved in relief, shows a battle scene. The different weapons and horsemanship of the opposing warriors are depicted. The defeated soldier's helmets are similar to one found at York and identified as Northumbrian.. The reverse of the stone is a cross slab combining a Christian Cross with Pictish artwork.

The speaker concluded her talk by emphasising that there are many more questions about the Picts than answers and that we may never know the answers to some of those questions.

The group thanked and warmly applauded Sheena for a fascinating insight into the lives of an enigmatic people.

The next talk will be on the Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December at 7.30pm, in the Supper Room, Market Hall, Appleby, when Matthew Town North Pennines Archaeology, will speak on '*Lancaster's Delftware Industry*' Recent excavations of an important post-medieval delftware pottery in Lancaster City.

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