

WINNER OF THE SOCIETY'S
1999 ESSAY PRIZE

Alasdair Ross

Pictish Matriliney?

In the first book of his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, written before 731, Bede described royal Pictish succession practices:

Cumque uxores Picti non habentes peterent a Scottis, ea solum condicione dare consenserunt, ut ubi res ueniret in dubium, magis de feminea regum prosapia quam de masculina regem sibi eligerent; quod usque hodie apud Pictos constat esse seruatum. [As the Picts had no wives, they asked the Scottis for some, the latter consented to give them women, only on condition that, in all cases of doubt, they should elect their king from the female royal line rather than the male; and it is well known that the custom has been observed among the Picts to this day.]¹

Many theories have been built around this statement although modern contributors to the debate on Pictish matrilinear succession are essentially divided into two camps: those who favour this ethnographic model include Henderson, Sellar, Miller and Anthony Jackson² (although they do not agree on one particular type of matriliney), whereas the champion of the opposing cause is Smyth who argues for a form of patrilinear kingship.³ Neither school of thought has been able to conclusively demonstrate that their particular viewpoint is correct. However, by reviewing the arguments advanced, both for and against, in conjunction with contemporary evidence from the Pictish period, it may be possible to arrive at some sort of consensus regarding the rules of succession to Pictish kingship.

The case for supporting 'peculiarities' within Pictish kingship was clearly set out by Wainwright in 1955. This was based on a number of key pieces of evidence: firstly, one line of Bede's statement concerning the Pictish origin legend (and rejecting the rest of the paragraph as 'literary invention'); secondly, he held the 'historical section' of the Pictish Chronicle to disprove patriliney because no Pictish king ever followed his father in the kingship until the last few years of the kingdom; thirdly, evidence from classical writers that suggested polyandry among the peoples of Northern Britain whose women were supposedly sexually promiscuous and, finally, the argument that marriages between Pictish princesses and foreign princes or kings resulted in at least four Pictish kings having foreign fathers, thus suggesting that the right to Pictish kingship was passed on by the mother.⁴ Of these four observations, the classical evidence is perhaps the least convincing since such comments belong to a common 'barbarian' identification package utilised by many classical writers when describing 'peripheral' races as they attempted to define their own centrality and 'civilisation'.

Wainwright's general line of reasoning was followed by Henderson in 1967 although, like Chadwick⁵ she chose to re-interpret Bede's statement by suggesting that his qualification "*ubi res ueniret in dubium*" (in all cases of doubt) actually meant something like "whenever the throne is vacant", without providing any linguistic proof. In addition, Henderson highlighted a possible flaw in Wainwright's theory of Pictish polyandry; namely, that there are no contemporary early medieval church references, outwith Bede, to any sort of peculiar Pictish marriage customs. She then advanced the theory that the early Christian church in Pictland banned this practice whereupon the Picts resorted to exogamy with princes from Dál Riata, even though she admitted that there was very little evidence for this.⁶

The next step forward was taken in 1973 by Anderson who constructed a hypothetical matrilinear genealogical table of Pictish kings from the P-list which was consistent with annalistic dates.⁷ However, it could be argued that her construct involved excessive genealogical manipulation of

royal bloodlines. For example, if the genealogies of the four competitors for the 'throne' of Pictland in the five years between 724 and 729 are examined, in the first generation Anderson's model requires an otherwise unrecorded Pictish princess to marry a Northumbrian prince. They then produce one Picto-Northumbrian princess (again unknown) who, in turn, has to have two daughters by two different fathers (all again unknown). The first of these daughters then marries into the Strathclyde dynasty and she is required to have been the child whose father was the hypothetical lord of Dunnichen, but not necessarily king of Círchenn, thus giving Brude mac Bili his claim to Fortriu. The second daughter marries a royal Pict. Either the Pict or the daughter could have been called Derelei.⁸ Eventually, through another two generations and another three hypothetical daughters these bloodlines produce the four claimants to the Pictish throne between 724-729. Any line of argument which requires the invention of seven princesses, eight marriages and at least one royal male in only five generations is perhaps untenable.

In addition to these theories, the last two decades have also seen anthropological evidence from other societies being advanced as possible models for Pictish kingship. Boyle argued for a line of double descent between matrilineal and patrilineal, with exogamy within the sub-group of those belonging to the royal lineage, while endogamy was preferred within the wider tribal group. Drawing on Bemba, Masai and Plateau Tongan matrilineal examples, he then suggested that evidence for identical practices among the Picts could be supported by the special ecological conditions which existed within Pictland between the 6th and 9th centuries.⁹ A similar line of reasoning was followed by Anthony Jackson, although he preferred to argue that the Picts chose matrilineality because this system is particularly suited to long-distance trading peoples. However, some of the additional arguments Jackson presented to strengthen this stance are seriously flawed. For example, he attempts to turn linguistic differences into ethnographic differences by linking patrilineality directly to Irish Q-Celts and emphasising that the Picts were P-Celts; therefore, different from the Irish.¹⁰ The obvious flaw in this

theory is that while the Picts were not the only P-Celts living in Northern Britain at this time, none of the other P-Celtic tribes or kingdoms have ever been associated with matrilinear practices.

In addition, it could be argued that the use of comparative evidence drawn from cultures separated from the Picts by almost 1500 years and many thousands of miles is somewhat teleological. If anthropologists knew for certain that similar matrilinear circumstances existed in Africa during the same historical period as the Picts, then their case might be slightly stronger. Indeed, in 1982 Miller recognised this problem: namely that known African examples of matriliney were late stories, perhaps developed as a reaction to 18th-century European queries.¹¹ Miller also developed a somewhat different approach to investigate matriliney, by reference to a number of different origin legends, and argued that the Pictish kings were drawn from various patriliney which were all connected by a matriline maintained by the marriage of daughters.¹²

Basically, this requires marriage between cousins, whose son then becomes king. However, like many of the other matriliney theories, Miller's thesis again demands the invention of many people for whom there is no actual evidence and perhaps places too much reliance on a stereotypical genetic model which requires a sister to produce a child of each sex and her brother to produce a son. In addition, although some of the arguments Miller used to support her theory were persuasive, her conclusion that Bede was the earliest source of the Pictish foundation legend may not be correct:¹³ she did not account for the archaic, verbal language forms found in one of the Gaelic versions of the legend.¹⁴ The appearance of this much older language in a later text could suggest that Bede was not the earliest of the sources she discussed.

In total contrast, during 1984 Smyth argued that many of the matrilinear theories were seriously flawed. Firstly, he pointed out that Bede's origin legend did not describe a system of regular matrilinear succession as such, but one only applied in exceptional circumstances. This is an important

qualification which is often ignored by pro-matriliny theorists. For Smyth, the Pictish origin tale was a story foisted onto the Picts by the Gaels, setting out Gaelic rights to Pictish kingship. Secondly, he argued that the two known kings of the Picts who came from outwith Pictland, Talorgan and Brude mac Bili, were in fact 'puppet kings' put into positions of power in Pictland during periods of respective Northumbrian and Strathclyde domination over the Picts. The third argument advanced was that the title 'king of the Picts' referred to overlordship of a number of different tribes, and Smyth then compared the Pictish king-lists to the Leinster king-lists where the title of overlord was competed for by six different tribal groups. This Irish model, if theoretically applied to Pictland, could therefore explain why virtually no fathers of Pictish kings preceded their sons in the kingship.¹⁵

The publication of Smyth's book provoked a response from Sellar who was not convinced by his arguments. Basically, Sellar reiterated the theories outlined by Wainwright and then proceeded to attack Smyth's comparative usage of Leinster overlordship and Pictish kingship on a number of grounds. However, the force of Sellar's response is somewhat lessened by his rejection of the importance of possible biases within Bede's statement and by his use of late 17th-century anthropological Ashanti evidence from Ghana as a possible model for Pictish kingship.¹⁶ Once again, the relevance of such evidence to the historical Pictland might be questioned. Whatever the case, it is clear that all of these summarised arguments are heavily dependent on the testimony of Bede. Whether one wholeheartedly accepts what he states (Boyle and Sellar) or rejects it (Smyth), it is perhaps un-historical to accept only part of his statement as true (Wainwright) or to suggest that he actually meant something completely different (Chadwick and Henderson).

Probably more importantly, it has also been demonstrated that the framework for Bede's testimony concerning Pictish matriliney could have been borrowed directly from an old Gaelic origin tale. In 1964 Mac Eoin produced a comparative study of the five different Gaelic versions of the story relating

the origins of the Cruithni, and the two British versions produced by Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth. His textual analysis concluded that Bede's version of the tale concerning Pictish matriliney seemed to be modelled on a late seventh, early eighth-century altered version (text Vy) of an earlier story (text Vx). In turn, text Vx was based on a much earlier verse account (text O), *Can a mbunadas na nGaedel*, which was originally written to explain how and why the Goidels married women from the Tuatha Dé Danann. Text Vy changes this original tale so that the Cruithni arrive in Ireland later than the Goidels and take wives from among them on the condition that sovereignty among the Cruithni would be passed on in the female line.¹⁷

These findings led Duncan to argue that the Pictish information related by Bede was supplied by a person familiar with different sources and that this person was attempting to present the Picts in a favourable historical light.¹⁸ Such a candidate, he suggested, could have been the Northumbrian bishop of Mayo, Egbert, who spent his latter years in exile among the Picts and on Iona and was thus familiar with all three kingdoms. According to Duncan, the transmission of this Pictish material would have occurred when king Nechtan and Egbert wrote to Ceolfrith of Jarrow c.713-714 to justify Pictish royal interference in the Dionysiac Easter and tonsure controversy between Rome and Iona.¹⁹ Therefore, part of the passage could be an original composition (by Nechtan or Egbert) and the remainder borrowed directly from one of the foundation legends of the Cruithni (Mac Eoin's text Vy). If Duncan's argument is correct, Nechtan and Egbert (and hence Bede) must have had a good reason for wanting to state that the practice of matriliney "has been observed among the Picts to this day."

One possible clue towards understanding the motivation behind this statement can be found by studying Nechtan mac Derilei's name. In 1982 Ní Dhonnchadha investigated the guarantor list of Cáin Adomnáin and noted that although the pedigree of Brude mac Derilei (Nechtán's brother and also king of the Picts) was unknown, Derilei seemed to be a feminine genitive in old Gaelic and therefore a matronymic.

According to the philological rules of old Gaelic it is unexplainable as a patronymic.²⁰ If correct, it could be argued that between c. 696 and c. 724 Pictland was ruled by two brothers who traced their ancestry, and possibly their right to rule, through a woman. Therefore, if Duncan's and Ní Dhonnchadha's theories are conflated, it is possible that Bede's information may have been a political statement, issued from Pictland, regarding Nechtan's right to be king of the Picts. Indeed, even if Bede was aware that matriliney was not the norm in succeeding to the Pictish kingship, how willing would he have been to dispute Nechtan's claim while the Pictish king was attempting to bring the Columban church into line with Roman (and Northumbrian) practices?

In this respect, the period 724 to 729, immediately after the end of Nechtan mac Derilei's reign as king of the Picts, could also be of crucial importance towards understanding Bede's statement, particularly the section that states: "in all cases of doubt, they should elect their kings from the female royal line rather than the male." It is generally agreed that king Nechtan retired into monastic life in 724 whereupon Drest became king of the Picts.²¹ Within two years Alpín seized the kingship from Drest and, between 726 and 729, the annals record a possible total of seven battles between various factions or tribes of the Picts. Eventually, and seemingly by right of conquest, Oengus mac Fergusa became king of the Picts c. 729 after defeating Drest (727), Alpín (728) and Nechtan mac Derilei (729) and eventually killing Drest (729).²² If, as seems likely, the right to the title 'king of Picts' was in doubt during this period, it is equally evident that on this occasion the Picts did not resort to deciding the succession by matriliney; instead, the issue was decided by a prolonged series of battles between competing kin-groups. Therefore, it could be argued that Bede's statement is of no relevance regarding succession to Pictish kingship shortly after the end of the reign of Nechtan mac Derilei in 724.

However, if the years around the start of Brude mac Derilei's reign are examined, the claim might make more sense. It is possible that between c. 653 and c. 671, Pictland was ruled by at least two, and possibly three, kings [Talorcen (653-

657), Garnait (657-?663) and Drest (?663-671)] who were probably related in some way to the powerful Northumbrian kings Oswald and Oswiu. Smyth, arguing for patriliney, makes them puppet kings²³ while the matriliney school of thought prefers a different scenario; namely, that an exiled Northumbrian prince, Eanfrith, married a Pictish princess and that these three kings, who were products of that union, then received their claim to be kings of Picts through their mother/grandmother.²⁴

Although either of these theories could be correct, and Talorcen could have been the son of Eanfrith of Northumbria,²⁵ Smyth's version is perhaps the more logical given that both the annals and Bede state that the Northumbrian kings had subdued the nations of the Picts and Scots, for the most part, and made them tributary.²⁶ More importantly, either of these two scenarios would perhaps imply either a prolonged break, or radical change, in whatever method or line of succession the Picts were using before this period. Even after Drest was expelled by the Picts from the kingship after the death of Oswiu,²⁷ no king of the Picts is mentioned in either the annals or other contemporary accounts until the reign of Brude mac Derilei (d. 706).²⁸ It is possible that Tarachin (expelled from Pictland 697) could have been a king of Picts although the Annals of Ulster (AU) and Tigernach (AT) disagree on his title. AT states "Tarachin arna scriss assa flaitius" (Tarachin expelled from his principedom), whereas AU reads "Tarachin de reghno expulsus est" (Tarachin was expelled from the kingship).²⁹ If both AT and AU are based on an Iona chronicle, then one of them obviously contains a scribal error. The problem is deciding which one.³⁰ Whatever the case, it is possible that in the latter half of the 7th century there was a complete break in the 'normal' Pictish succession. Consequently, after Nechtanesmere the successive kingships of Brude and Nechtan mac Derilei, based on matrilinear descent, may have represented something quite new which Nechtan chose to justify in his famous letter.

One final important consideration to be made at this stage is the ancestry of Brude mac Bili (c. 671-693). For the pro-

matriliney theorists, Brude is the product of a marriage between a Picto-Northumbrian princess (theoretically a grand-daughter of Eanfrith) and a member of the ruling dynasty from Ail Cluaithe (Dumbarton).³¹ Alternatively, Smyth argues that Brude was a satellite king imposed on the Picts during a short period of North British domination over that kingdom.³² Once again, either theory could be correct although both are highly conjectural. In addition, both are dependent on copies of the Pictish king-lists, many of which have been tampered with, for evidence that Brude was ever actually king of the Picts. It should be noted that he is never awarded this title in AU and AT where he is always referred to as "rex Fortrend" (king of Foirtriu).³³

Nevertheless, the pedigree of Brude mac Bili is often quoted by those advancing pro-matriliney arguments because he is described in the *Historia Brittonum* as 'fratruelis' of Ecgrith, king of Northumbria. This word is seized on as proof of an inter-connecting matrilinear line although it requires the invention of two Pictish princesses, one Picto-Northumbrian princess and a Pictish prince.³⁴ Indeed, Anderson later admitted that her genealogy "strained the chronological evidence to its limits."³⁵ Although 'fratruelis' seems to have had different meanings in Insular and continental Latin, both Miller and Sellar favour the definition provided by Isidore of Seville, "a mother's sister's son."³⁶ This naturally assumes that the meaning of this word did not change between the early seventh century and the early ninth century, when the *Historia Brittonum* was probably compiled.³⁷

However, even if the usage of 'fratruelis' in the *Historia Brittonum* is identical to that found in Isidore's writings, this does not automatically mean that Pictish royal succession was matrilinear. The term could be applied to the relationship between Ecgrith and Brude if Brude's father Bili had married a sister of Ecgrith's mother who was Northumbrian. Such a scenario is purely hypothetical and ultimately probably unprovable, but has the slight advantage of requiring the invention of only one person as opposed to four. Incidentally, this theory might also account for the statement that Brude mac Bili was fighting for the heritage of his

grandfather in 685,³⁸ rather than the heritage of his great-grandmother. It would provide a very different context for the nature of the relationship between the two men without recourse to a connecting Pictish matrilinear line of descent.

If this theory is correct it leaves something of a problem: the Pictish kings cannot be connected either through matriliney or patriliney, because sons never seem to follow their fathers in the kingship until the very end of the historical Pictish period. The definition of what was meant by 'rex Pictorum' is somewhat elusive. While it is well-known that there is some evidence for sub-kings among the Picts,³⁹ we do not know how many there could have been at any given period. Even if the existence of these sub-kings is used to argue that the title 'king of Picts' was a type of overlordship, perhaps broadly similar to early Gaelic examples, it is difficult to decide whether all sub-kings always competed for the right to be 'king of Picts', or whether the title was decided by different means. However, if a large group of sub-kings did compete for the title 'king of Picts', it might explain why sons never seem to follow fathers in the overlordship.⁴⁰

Ultimately, the case for matriliney among the Picts is unconvincing. It can be argued that Bede's statement is primarily based on an altered Gaelic foundation legend which was originally concerned with explaining the relationship between the Goidels and the Tuatha Dé Danann in Ireland. The Pictish version of this tale could have been propaganda to explain and defend a contemporary situation, rather than a statement concerning tradition. The creation of so many hypothetical princesses, daughters of princesses, marriages and occasional princes is not based on sound evidence, and the use of matrilinear examples from other, much later, societies seems inappropriate. The case for patriliney is equally unconvincing, although later alterations to the king-lists may be partly responsible for this. On balance, perhaps the best argument is one first advanced by Smyth; namely, that the kingship of the Picts was an overlordship which was either shared, or competed for, by a unknown number of kindreds or sub-kings.

Notes

I would like to thank Colm Ó Baoill and Sonja Cameron for their comments on a draft of this paper. Since this essay was submitted in August 1998, a wider-ranging study on Pictish matriliney has been published [cf: Alex Woolf, 'Pictish matriliney reconsidered', in *Innes Review*, 49, 1998, 147-67].

- 1 Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (editors), *Bede's ecclesiastical history of the English people*, (Oxford, 1969), pp. 18-19.
- 2 The relevant works are: Isabel Henderson, *The Picts*, (London, 1967), W. D. H. Sellar, 'Warlords, Holymen and Matrilineal Succession', in *Innes Review*, 36, 1985, 29-43, Molly Miller, 'Matriliney by treaty: the Pictish foundation legend', in editors D. Whitelock, R. McKitterick and D. Dumville, *Ireland in Early Medieval Europe*, (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 133-61 and Anthony Jackson, *The Symbol Stones of Scotland*, (Stromness, 1984).
- 3 Alfred P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, (Edinburgh, 1984).
- 4 F. T. Wainwright, 'The Picts and the Problem', in editor F. T. Wainwright, *The problem of the Picts*, (London, 1955), pp. 1-53, (pp. 25-28).
- 5 Nora K. Chadwick, 'Pictish and Celtic Marriage in Early Literary Tradition', in *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, VIII, 1958, 56-115, (p. 68).
- 6 Henderson, *The Picts*, pp. 31-33.
- 7 M. O. Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland*, (revised edition Edinburgh, 1980), p. 169.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 175. Anderson noted that Derelei could have been a woman's name in Old Gaelic although she seems to have preferred the theory that it was a non-Celtic patronymic.
- 9 A. Boyle, 'Matrilineal succession in the Pictish Monarchy', in *Scottish Historical Review*, LVI, 1, No.161, 1977, 1-10, (pp. 5-9). It was argued that this special ecological condition was a Pictish economy based on fishing.
- 10 Jackson, *Symbol Stones*, pp. 81-82.
- 11 Miller, 'Matriliney by treaty', p. 158, fn. 50. Miller's solution to this problem, that the Picts were a composite people and therefore different to African matrilineal tribes, is not wholly convincing.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 153.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 156.
- 14 Gearóid S. Mac Eoin, 'On the Irish Legend of the Origin of the Picts', in *Studia Hibernica*, 4, 1964, 138-154, (p. 149).
- 15 Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, pp. 60-69.
- 16 Sellar, 'Warlords', pp. 39-41.
- 17 Mac Eoin, 'On the Irish Legend', pp. 152-154.
- 18 A. A. M. Duncan, 'Bede, Iona, and the Picts', in editors R. H. C. Davis and J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Writing of History in the Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 1981), pp. 1-42, (p. 20).
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 27.
- 20 Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, 'The Guarantor List of Cáin Adomnáin, 697', in *Peritia*, 1, 1982, 178-215, (p. 214).
- 21 A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, 2 vols,

- (Edinburgh, 1922), i, pp. 221-222.
- 22 Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, p. 74.
- 23 *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.
- 24 Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 169.
- 25 Anderson, *Early Sources*, p. 176.
- 26 Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's ecclesiastical history*, p. 231.
- 27 Anderson, *Early Sources*, p. 181.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 211. Also see Ní Dhonnchadha, 'Guarantor List', p. 214 for an earlier reference to Brude mac Derilei as king of Picts.
- 29 See: Whitley Stokes (translator), *The Annals of Tigernach*, 2 vols., (Felinfach, 1993), i, p. 175 and Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (editors), *The Annals of Ulster*, part 1, (Dublin, 1983), p. 157.
- 30 It should be noted that Adomnán [cf: Richard Sharpe (translator), *Life of St Columba*, (England, 1995), II 23] describes the death of a Pictish noble called Taran on Islay and uses the event to glorify the prophetic powers of Columba. It might be questioned if Adomnán is utilising a recent incident to embellish the miraculous powers of the saint. See: T. O. Clancy, 'Columba, Adomnán and the cult of saints in Scotland', in *Innes Review*, 48, 1, 1997, 1-26, (p. 10) for similar examples. If this is the same person being described, and the unusual name perhaps confirms this, two sources agree that he was a noble or prince, rather than king.
- 31 Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 172.
- 32 Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men*, p. 66.
- 33 Stokes, *Annals Tigernach*, p. 169, p. 172 and Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *Annals Ulster*, p. 155.
- 34 Anderson, *Kings and Kingship*, p. 169.
- 35 M. O. Anderson, 'Picts - the Name and the People', in editor Alan Small, *The Picts - A New Look at Old Problems*, (Dundee, 1987), pp. 7-14, (p. 10).
- 36 See Sellar, 'Warlords', p. 37 and Molly Miller, 'Eanfrith's Pictish Son', in *Northern History*, XIV, 1978, 47-66, (p. 55).
- 37 D. Dumville, 'On the North British Section of the Historia Brittonum', in *Welsh Historical Review*, VIII, 1977, 345-354.
- 38 Anderson, *Early Sources*, p. 194.
- 39 *ibid.*, p. 236.
- 40 If we return to the period 726-729, one source (*ibid.*, p. 222) states that Oengus mac Fergusa was king of Fortriu when the series of conflicts began to decide who would be king of the Picts. If this territorial designation is correct, he then fought a number of battles against men who could presumably raise a host from an area outwith Fortriu. As each of these three men (Drust, Alpin and Nechtan) also fought each other, and all are designated 'king of Picts' at some point during these four years, presumably they each had separate resources of armed men or kin-groups that they could call on. Possibly all of these men were also sub-kings of different territories or kindreds.