Scotland's 'Mysterious Picts' and Iceland's 'Saga Vikings'

– How Sources and Contexts Shape Research Agendas

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This article compares the research traditions surrounding the Picts of early medieval Scotland to those concerning Icelandic society in the 9th to the 13th century. The aim is to illustrate how the different types of written sources that have survived from these two areas have created diverging research agendas. This is studied through the two main issues that have been prevalent in research, i.e. the origins of the people and the date of the emergence of their culture.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine how the study of two separate societies, which share a number of important traits, has produced two very different research contexts within historical archaeology. The societies under examination are the Picts in early medieval Scotland and the Scandinavian settlement society in Iceland between the late 9th and the 13th century. These two areas have been chosen for comparison, as they were both complex societies for which archaeological material – for entirely different reasons – has been rather limited and the written sources are problematic and difficult to interpret. In this article, the source materials and the way in which they have been approached will be examined for both societies, beginning with the Picts and then moving on to Iceland. The focus is placed on two main issues relating to the early phases of the Pictish and the Viking periods, i.e. the origins of the people and the date of the emergence of their culture.

The Picts

The Picts are mentioned in written sources from the late 3rd to the 9th

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century. Their name, derived from the Latin word *picti*, was first recorded in a Roman panegyric from AD 297. *Picti* is translated as the 'painted' or 'tattooed' people and was intended to distinguish those living north of the Roman border from the Romanised Britons further south (Fraser 2011, s. 26; Foster 2014, s. 1–4; Fig. 1). This well-known text, together with other written sources, created an awareness of the Picts as a strong presence in early medieval Scotland. As will be demonstrated below, the difficulty of identifying and understanding Pictish archaeological remains however meant that early research was dominated by rather basic questions. Without satisfactory answers, the Picts came to be viewed as 'enigmatic' and 'mysterious'. These ideas have now been abandoned by scholars, but have left a lasting impression in the popular sphere. This mindset can be illustrated by recent newspaper headlines, such as 'A glimpse of the mysterious Picts' (The Scotsman, October 27, 2018), 'Mysterious "Pictish" stone discovered' (Press and Journal, February 26, 2019) and 'Dark Ages Fort Built by Mysterious "Painted People" Found in Scotland' (LiveScience July 31, 2017).

In 1955 the influential volume entitled *The Problem of the Picts* was published, under the editorship of F. T. Wainwright. Wainwright pointed out that fundamental questions such as 'Who were the Picts?' and 'where did the Picts come from?' were unanswered at this time. It was not his aim to address these issues, however, as he did not believe this to be possible (Wainwright 1955a, s. v; Wainwright 1955b, s. 9–10; Fraser 2011, s. 15–16). His view was the result of the culture-historical paradigm, which was current in prehistoric archaeology at the time. According to this school of thought, 'sharply defined archaeological provinces correlate at all times with definite peoples' and societies were increasingly seen as 'distinct cultural units' (Fraser 2011, s. 16; Hakenbeck 2008, s. 12–13). Archaeology in Scotland was moreover greatly influenced by Gordon Childe, who argued that a 'culture' corresponded to 'a community sharing common traditions, common institutions and a common way of life', and if these requirements were fulfilled it could be called 'a people' (Childe 1933, s. 197–99; Fraser 2011, s. 17). As a result, Picts were rarely introduced into archaeological discussions, and because of the difficulties of identifying archaeological remains from the Pictish period, some scholars even argued that 'the Picts never existed outside the written sources' (Wainwright 1955b, 2–3; Fraser 2011, 17).

Wainwright was frustrated by this situation, and argued that the Picts were clearly a genuine people who deserved to be studied (Wainwright 1955b, s. 2–3; Fraser 2011, s. 17). This would be achieved by identifying a number of characteristic features from the available source materials, and in this way reveal

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Figure 1. A 19th-century illustration of a Pict. Source: William Howitt, John Cassell, John Cassell's Illustrated History of England: From the earliest period to the reign of Edward the Fourth. Red. John Frederick Smith, Publisher W. Kent and Co., 1857. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caledonian-pict.jpg

the Picts as a homogenous people (Wainwright 1955b, s. 9–12; Fraser 2011, s. 18). The method employed was interdisciplinary, although Wainwright himself did not use that term (Crawford 2011, s. 3). In the book, he brought together leading scholars ('The Wainwright Five'), who examined different types of evidence from the Pictish period. Wainwright himself contributed two chapters, one entitled 'the Picts and the Problem' and one concerning 'Houses and Graves', while S. Piggot discussed 'The Archaeological Background', R.W. Feachem

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'Fortifications', R.B.K. Stevenson 'Pictish Art', and finally K.H. Jackson who examined 'The Pictish Language' (Wainwright 1955 b and c; Piggot 1955; Feachem 1955; Stevenson 1955; Jackson 1955).

The task of these scholars was not easy due to the challenging nature, and lack of, available evidence. Wainwright pointed to the low number of excavated sites and the difficulty of even identifying settlement sites to excavate (Wainwright 1955c, s. 89; Crawford 2011, s. 7). The symbol stones, the one type of archaeological material that was at this time attributed to the Picts, could not be interpreted (Stevenson 1955). The written sources were also obscure, often written by outsiders and preserved in later manuscripts (Evans 2011). The Pictish language was another complication, as it was then seen to be of non-Indo-European origin and therefore different from neighbouring languages (Forsyth 1997, s. 23). Consequently, the Picts were difficult to understand and did not seem to fit in with nearby peoples. This impression was further emphasised by the Pictish origin legend contained in Bede's Ecclesiastical History (c. 731), according to which the Picts came from Scythia. This idea, although now refuted, was heavily debated in the 1950s (Sellar 1912, i:1; Fraser 2011, s. 23).

Making use of all these different source materials, the Wainwright Five could not, despite their efforts, satisfactorily identify the Picts in the archaeological material. They therefore concluded that they were most likely not a homogenous people deriving from a single culture, but must rather have been made up by a number of groups present in the Iron Age (Wainwright 1955b, s. 11–14; Fraser 2011, s. 18–20). This lack of 'homogeneity' constituted the Pictish 'problem' and was, as argued above, the result of the culture-historical school of thought. Nonetheless, the results presented in *The Problem of the Picts* were ground breaking and dominated this field of research for the next 25 years (Crawford 2011, s. 3).

In current academic research, with the arrival of new theoretical approaches, the Picts are no longer viewed as problematic, but are now on a par with any other historic people. In 2011, a new edited volume, entitled *Pictish Progress*, was published to mark the 50-year anniversary of Wainwright's book. In this publication, new research on all key areas, including place-names, sculpture, metalwork, burial, and symbol stones, is presented (Driscoll, Geddes, Hall 2011). This is the first full review of the position of the Wainwright Five and provides a comprehensive overview of the evidence of the Pictish period, and it is therefore a highly significant contribution to research.

Iceland

Let us move on to the settlement of the Scandinavians in Iceland, from

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the Settlement Period (AD 870s–930) to the Commonwealth Period (AD 930–1262/64). Iceland's outstanding written sources meant that early research, even archaeological excavations, was to a large extent dominated by these (Friðriksson 1994). The most important written sources for the early history of Iceland include *Landnámabók* ('Book of Settlements') which describes the discovery of Iceland and provides a list of early settlers (Pálsson and Edwards 1972); *Íslendingabók* ('Book of the Icelanders') with a short historical survey (Grønlie 2006); and *Íslendingasögur* ('Sagas of the Icelanders') where many of the well-known stories of the Commonwealth Period are found, including the grand narratives of *Egil's Saga* and *Njal's Saga* (Hreinsson 1997).

The value of these sources, above all the sagas, has been greatly debated, as they are literary constructions, often written down several hundred years after the events described, above all in the 13th and 14th centuries (Sigurðsson 2005). Early scholars viewed the sagas as accurate reflections of the past. This view was increasingly questioned in the course of the 20th century, and from around the 1950s to the 1980s, the majority of saga scholars saw the sagas as 'imported' written texts and consequently argued that they could not be used as sources to the past (Byock 1992 s. 45–47; Sigurðsson 2005). Despite this shifting approach, these texts have formed the core of Icelandic history and have been a strong force within Icelandic nationalism (Hennig 2011, 63–4; Byock 1992, s. 45–47; Goodhouse 2013). Saga manuscripts seem to have been in circulation in Icelandic society between 1300 and 1600 and 'semi-public' saga readings were a 'favourite pastime on Icelandic farms'. Later on in time, interests in the sagas remained high and a general belief in the historicity of the sagas was present also in the 19th and 20th centuries (Helgason 2005, s. 65–66, 75–76). The early history of Iceland has moreover been seen to represent the 'Golden Age of the Icelanders' (*Gullöld Íslendinga*), a time of high culture and 'self-ruling' free farmers, as after the end of the Commonwealth Period Iceland was subordinated to Norway/Denmark and remained so until 1944 (Halink 2014; Hennig 2011; Byock, 1992, s. 47–48).

The importance of the sagas is enhanced by their interconnectedness with the Icelandic landscape. The Scandinavians are described as the first humans in a previously unsettled area, which they turned into 'a cultural landscape through the naming of places, either induced by natural features or by remarkable events' (Hennig 2011, s. 64). Sagas have very strong local connections as their stories often relate to particular areas, as seen for example in *Laxdæla Saga* ('The Saga of the People of Laxárdalr') and place-names can be clearly linked to specific people and events, such as Ingólfshöfði where the alleged first settler Ingólfr

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Arnarson (Fig. 2) is said to have taken land, and Mossfell, the farm of the legendary Egil Skallagrimsson (Hennig 2011, s. 64; Zori and Byock 2014; Grønlie, 2006, s. 4). This is made even more important by the fact that a high percentage of saga place-names and even specific farms are identifiable still today, and to Icelanders these place-names are understandable in their original meaning (Hennig 2011, s. 64).

Archaeology as a discipline arrived rather late in Iceland. It experienced an important period of expansion particularly after the 1990s with the arrival of stricter heritage laws. In 2002, Archaeology was introduced to the University of Iceland. As part of this move, there was a strong desire to establish an archaeology independent of the saga narratives. Adolf Friðriksson, for example, presented a detailed study highlighting the problems of overreliance of the written evidence for the interpretation of archaeological remains, while also acknowledging that the written material should not be automatically dismissed (Friðriksson 1994, s. vii–viii; see also Helgason 2005, s. 75–76). Another issue discussed by Friðriksson was the phenomenon which he aptly described as 'popular antiquarianism'. Archaeological remains are often rather visible in the virtually treeless Icelandic landscape, and together with the strong connections between sagas and specific points in the landscape, Icelanders tend to have strong views on how the archaeology should be interpreted (Friðriksson 1994, s. vii).

This legacy of the sagas on archaeological interpretation can be illustrated through the example of assembly (*thing* site) research. Attempts to identify archaeological *thing*-site remains began much earlier in Iceland than in Scandinavia. These scholars, especially in the 19th century, were, however, reliant on written sources, above all the sagas, and their results have been rather heavily criticised (Friðriksson 1994, s. 105–108). A desire to move away from these sources inspired a new wave of assembly research together with a programme of archaeological excavation. It is interesting to note that while this research has produced many interesting results, assembly sites in Iceland are still to a large degree evaluated in the context of the written sources (for a summary with references, see Sanmark 2017, s. 17).

The same tendency of overreliance on the written sources can be seen in scholarly approaches to the origin of the Icelanders. According to the written sources, the Icelanders stem from Norwegians above all, and the first settlers are said to have left Norway because of their opposition to King Haraldr *hárfagri* (Fairhair). Scholars now see this is as a later 'founding myth' rather than 'reliable historical information' (Hennig 2011, s. 63–64), but despite this little research on settlers and influences from other areas has yet been carried out. There are of cour-

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Figure 2. Statue of Ingólfr Arnarson in Reykjavik. Created by the sculptor Einar Jónsson in the early 20th century. Photograph: Jennica Einebrant Svensson.

se many reasons for this, and much of the evidence does point to Scandinavia. The Icelandic language for example is undoubtedly a Scandinavian language (Byock 2017, s. 22–24), and the archaeological remains are also overwhelmingly Scandinavian in character, for example the long houses, burials, and material culture (Gräslund 2009; Friðriksson 1994; Hayeur Smith 2000; Vésteinsson 2005, s. 20). Icelandic society was not, however, identical to that of Scandinavia.

One of the few scholars who has examined this aspect is Gísli Sigurðsson, who has argued that a substantial number of Icelandic settlers came from Scotland and Ireland. In his view, these people are all but excluded from the written sources, as they did not fit in with the medieval Icelandic political agenda of Scandinavian origin and identity. Sigurdsson has drawn attention to Gaelic speaking people mentioned in the written sources, Gaelic traditions present in Icelandic folklore, as well as Gaelic elements in Icelandic place-names. These hints in the evidence are further strengthened by genome studies, which have shown a significant presence of DNA from the British Isles (Sigurðsson 2000). It seems likely that further studies of this kind, and of the archaeolo-

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gical material, will be carried out in the future and may create a revised image of the Icelandic settlers.

Finally, to another hotly debated issue, the date of the first settlement. This issue too has been driven by the legacy of the written sources. According to *The Book of Settlements* and *The Book of the Icelanders*, the first settlers arrived in Iceland in the early 870s (Pálsson and Edwards 1972; Grønlie 2006). Since the arrival of modern archaeological dating techniques, this narrative has been questioned and debated. With the help of Icelandic tephrochronology it has been possible to show that the vast majority of settlements postdate the *landnám* tephra layer of 871± 2, which is in line with the written sources. There are, however, some settlement remains that seem to predate this. The most convincing example is found in the Settlement Exhibition in Reykjavik, where one of the preserved turf walls is clearly underneath the 871± 2 tephra layer (Goodhouse 2013). This is an interesting example showing the value of both types of source materials for the study of early Iceland.

Two separate research contexts

This article has provided a brief overview of two different research contexts and their resulting research agendas over the last century. As has been shown above, Pictish Scotland and Iceland in the Settlement and Commonwealth Periods share some important traits, but scholars have not always asked the same fundamental questions of the source materials and the resulting views of these two societies and their peoples are rather different.

One of the issues that has been approached differently in Scotland and Iceland is the date when the respective peoples first appeared. For Scotland, it was difficult to arrive at a clear date for the emergence of the Picts, as they could not be identified archaeologically. In addition, the earliest written sources referring to Picts are external and do not therefore provide evidence of when people in Scotland viewed themselves as such. Current scholars diverge between arguing that Pictish identity was the result of a gradual development over a long period of time (Fraser 2011, s. 34–36; Woolf 2017), or the possibility that a Pictish identity spread reasonably quickly from as early as the 4th and 5th century onwards (Noble et al. 2018). The situation in Iceland is not the same, since the written sources provide a clear date of the first settlements and archaeological investigation has refined the results, but not greatly altered them.

In Scotland, the uncertain origin of the Picts was seen as challenging and scholars worked hard to resolve this question. This was never the situation in Iceland, as the identity of settlers is so plainly expressed in the written sources, together with the overall Scandinavian profile of the archaeology. Iceland was more-

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over unpopulated prior to the 9th century, with the possible exception of a few Irish monks (Ahronson 2000), so archaeological remains have by default been seen as the result of Scandinavian settlement. It does appear, however, that a more open approach would provide a more nuanced view of Icelandic society and its members and the number of non-Scandinavian settlers. There is some irony in the fact that the origins of the Picts have been so hotly debated, when it now seems that this culture was not the result of major migration flows, while for the Icelandic settler society built on migration, origins are not generally discussed.

The written sources relating to the Picts are of a different nature than the Icelandic ones. The sagas provide personal and direct links, through people and places that can be pinpointed still today. The continuity of the language tradition also means modern Icelanders can understand these place-names. This is not the case in Scotland. There are Pictish place-names in many parts of Scotland, but they cannot be readily pinpointed or indeed understood by the wider English-speaking community, and in the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, no Pictish place-names have survived (Foster 2004, s. 31–32). This means that the link between Picts and nationalism in Scotland is much weaker than that observed for the saga period in Iceland. This also relates to the archaeology: in Scotland, Pictish sites were hard to identify, while in Iceland much archaeology is readily visible in the landscape. Such remains could in the past often be interpreted by applying knowledge from the sagas (accurately or not). Altogether, the issues addressed in this article can explain why Scandinavians in Iceland have never been viewed as 'mysterious', but rather the opposite. Icelanders know who they were and where they lived.

In conclusion, the interdisciplinary research agenda set out by Wainwright and his colleagues in order to move forward has proven to be worthwhile. This approach has become an important method for Iceland too, since the emergence of archaeology as a discipline in its own right, even if the written sources are not popular with everyone. However, it is the case in both areas, that applied with care and detailed analysis of all the primary source materials, an interdisciplinary approach is highly rewarding.

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