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THE 'PICTI' AND 'SCOTTI' IN THE *EXCIDIVM
BRITANNIÆ*¹

REV. A. W. WADE-EVANS

THE *Excidium Britannicæ* brings its story down in chapter xiii. to the death of Maximus the usurper at Aquileia, which event is known to have taken place in the summer of A.D. 388. In the following chapter it is stated that as a result of this rebellion Britain, *i.e.* Scotland as well as England and Wales, was drained of all its armed soldiery, its military supplies, its cruel *rectores*, rulers (or *praepositi*, overseers, as they were called before) and its able-bodied youth, so that there was literally no human material left in the island capable of defending and ruling it, whether officer, soldier, or civilian; or even a single weapon. The *Excidium Britannicæ* would have us believe that Maximus, in this supreme effort of his life, exhausted the island of Britain of every available source of defence and authority, and that what he took away with him never returned. This incredible statement is actually emphasised as the narrative continues. The citizens, having no able-bodied men, were in need of soldiers; having no soldiers, had to send for them; having no *rectores*, rulers or overseers, failed to hold the Wall of turf; having no weapons, had to have patterns left them for their manufacture. Britain, thus helpless, became exposed for the first time to the attacks of two savage nations from across the sea, the Scotti from the north-west, and the Picti from the north, and remained prostrate under these attacks for many years.

We are told that the Picti and Scotti differed partly in

¹ The above article is to be read in conjunction with that entitled 'The Romani in the *Excidium Britannicæ*,' which appeared in the *Celtic Review* for August 1913 (pp. 35-41). In these two articles the facts are submitted to a fresh examination, so that everything previously written by me on this subject should be checked by reference to this new series of essays. Also every prior essay should be checked by reference to a later.

their customs, but were alike in their thirst for blood, and also in a preference for covering their hang-dog countenances with hair rather than the least decent portions of their bodies with decent clothing.

The Scotti were natives of Ireland,¹ and that they are regarded as such in the *Excidium Britannicæ* is shown in chapter xxi., in which they are distinguished from the Picti as *grassatores Hiberni*, Irish freebooters. Where, however, the author of the *Excidium Britannicæ* supposed the habitat of the Picti to be is uncertain. All he says is that they were a transmarine race, who came to Britain over the sea from the north, shared with the Scotti in the capture of ‘ Scotland ’ as far as the Wall in and after A.D. 407, and began to settle for the first time ‘ in the extreme part of the island ’ subsequent to their defeat by the Britanni after A.D. 446. He may have supposed them to have come from the Orkney Islands or Scandinavia ;² in any case Britain was not exposed to their attacks until the revolt of Maximus late in the fourth century, nor was the island ever occupied by them until the fifth.

Both Picti and Scotti are described as transmarine, attacking an island which was wholly Romano-British, *nomen Romanum tenens*, retaining the Roman name, from John o’ Groat’s to Land’s End. ‘ Borne by wings of oars, by arms of rowers, and by sails bulging with wind, they break across the bounds.’ When defeated by the Romani, it is *trans maria*, beyond the seas, that they are put to flight,

¹ The Scotti appear for the first time in history under this name in the account by Ammianus Marcellinus (xx. 1) of an invasion of Roman Britain by the Picts and Scots in the year 360. ‘ They were probably mixed bands of Goidels, *Cruithni* or Picts of Ireland, and *Fír Ulaid* or True Ultonians. These last had been crowded into the north-east corner of that island in consequence of the conquest of Oriel or southern Ulster some years previously by Celts from the direction of Meath.’ It is probably from the northern half of Ireland that we have the name Scotti.—*Celtic Britain*, 3rd ed., 243 ; *The Welsh People*, by Rhŷs and Brynmor-Jones, 87, 101-2.

² ‘ The Picts came and occupied the islands, which are called Orcades, and afterwards from the islands devastated many regions and occupied them in the northern part of Britain, and they remain there to the present time, holding a third part of Britain.’—*Historia Brittonum*, ch. xii. Bede thought that the Picti had come originally from Scythia, *i.e.* Scandinavia.—*Hist. Eccl.*, i. 1.

and it is *trans maria*, beyond the seas, that they accumulate the plunder acquired by them year by year; and in chapter xix. we read how 'the foul hordes of Scotti and Picti eagerly come forth from the coracles in which they sail across the sea,¹ as when the sun is high and the heat is increasing dark swarms of worms emerge from the narrow crevices of their holes.'

When a legion had arrived from Rome in answer to an appeal from the citizens for help, and had driven out the foe with great slaughter, it commanded the citizens to build a Wall across the island between two seas, which Wall being made of turf proved of no advantage. This Wall, of course, is really that of Antonine, built from Clyde to Forth about A.D. 143. Thus, although the foe had been completely cleared out of Britain, the supposed building of this Wall, sometime after A.D. 388, must have meant to the author of the *Excidium Britannicæ* that the defence of the north of Scotland was now abandoned. Such is the story of the first devastation of Britain by the Picti and Scotti.

Whilst the legion was returning home, the Picti and Scotti again come over the water to commence their second devastation, and again do the Romani arrive in answer to another appeal from the citizens and drive the invaders with great slaughter 'beyond the seas.' The Romani, however, will not be troubled any further by such laborious expeditions, for which reason they leave Britain for ever. Before departing they cause another Wall to be built in a straight line from sea to sea, this time of stone, which Wall historically is that founded by Hadrian about A.D. 122; and they also place towers on the sea-coast towards the south against other enemies, which towers of course are the forts of the Saxon Shore, all built before A.D. 306.² The

¹ The original has *trans tithicam vallem*, across Tethys's valley, which is a poetical way of describing the sea. Tethys was a sea-goddess, wife of Oceanus, and mother of water deities. Compare the expression which follows—*in alto Titane*, when the sun is high, from Titan, the sun-god.

² Constantius Chlorus, colleague and representative of Diocletian in Britain, formed a coast defence of forts, some old, some newly erected, extending from the

building of the second Wall must imply that now the defence of the whole country north of it was surrendered. Such is the story of the second devastation.

In chapter xix., as the troops of the Romani were leaving for ever (the tyrant Constantine left Britain in A.D. 407), the Picti and Scotti renew their attacks over the water for a third devastation and seized the abandoned country north of the Wall in place of the inhabitants. It is important here to give the exact words, which are these: *omnem aquilonalem extremamque terrae partem pro indigenis muro tenuis capessunt*, they seize the whole of the northern and extreme part of the land as far as the Wall instead of the inhabitants. From this we are to believe that, whereas the Britanni had been the masters (under the Romani) of the whole island of Britain till A.D. 407, from that year the northern part of the island as far as the Wall of Hadrian was taken over by two foreign nations, the Picti and Scotti. Although these nations, however, *seized* the country north of the Wall, they did not as yet *settle* in it, but proceeded at once with their attack on southern Britain.

The Picti and Scotti being now, A.D. 407 and shortly after, in possession of Britain, north of the Wall, the object of the citizens was to ward them off the country to the south of it. To this end (so the text would seem to read) the Wall was manned. The wording is somewhat curious: ‘ There is stationed *in edito arcis*, on the height of the citadel,¹ an army, slow to battle, unwieldy for flight, inept by reason of its quaking heart, which languished day and night in its foolish watch. In the meantime the hooked weapons of their naked enemies are not idle, by which the

Wash to the Isle of Wight. It consisted of some nine, each planted on a harbour and garrisoned by a regiment of horse or foot. The new system was known, from the name of the chief assailant, as *Litus Saxonicum*, the Saxon Shore.—Dr. Haverfield in *Social England*, 103, and *Cambridge Medieval History*, i. 378.

¹ This expression seems hardly adequate to describe a manning of the Wall of Hadrian throughout its whole length. We may have here a covert reference to some particular part of the Wall, and possibly a place-name, *Pencaer*, *Pendinas*, or what not. (Uxelodunon or Uxelodunium, at the mouth of the Ellen on the Cumberland coast, means high fort or high town.—Rhŷs, *Celtic Britain*, 3rd ed., 234.)

wretched citizens were dragged *de muris*, from the walls, and dashed to the ground. . . . Why should I say more? They abandon their *civitates*, cities, and their *muris celsus*, high Wall.' There were flights, dispersions, massacres. The citizens are butchered like so many lambs. Their very existence becomes like that of the beasts of the field, for they even preyed on one another for barest necessities. In addition to these external calamities there were civil tumults, for food became so scarce throughout the whole country that none was obtainable except such as was acquired in the chase. Thus did famine follow in the wake of the third devastation.

Whilst this double horror of war and famine was still prevailing, the miserable remnant of the Britanni make a final appeal to Rome, despatching a letter to the powerful Aetius.¹ They begin thus: *To Agitius in his third consulship come the groans of the Britanni.* But the appeal proves of no avail. Now Aetius was consul for the third time in A.D. 446.²

The famine, severe and well remembered, continues to press the wandering and vacillating people, which forces many of them to yield for the sake of a morsel of food. There were others, however, who would not yield, but issuing from mountains, caves, defiles, and thickets, carried on the war unceasingly. They would not yield, and at last, trusting in God, won a signal victory, which checked for a space the audacities of the foe. This victory was the

¹ We know from Constantius's *Life of St. Germanus* (Bk. II. ch. i. § 62) and from Bede (*Hist. Eccl.*, i. 21) that about this time St. Germanus of Auxerre went to Ravenna to intercede for the peace of the Armoricans, against whom Aetius had enlisted the services of the Alani. As St. Germanus had only just returned from Britain, he may well have acted as emissary on behalf of the Britanni on the same occasion. Mr. Anscombe thinks that the letter was sent by the Britanni of Armorica and not by those of Britain, and that the author of the *Excidium Britannie* ignorantly referred it to the insular Britons.

² 'Aetius might be addressed *ter consul* not only in 446, but in any year thereafter until his fourth consulship and death in 454.'—J. E. Lloyd's *History of Wales*, 99, n. 25. The chief point, however, is this, that A.D. 446 is the earliest possible date for the despatch of the letter.

first ever inflicted by the Britanni on the Picti and Scotti, and terminated the third devastation.

It is clear that this third devastation begins in A.D. 407 with the capture of north Britain as far as the Wall, continues at once with the breaking down of the defence of the Wall, and the subsequent ravaging of southern Britain, and ends sometime after A.D. 446 with the first triumph of the Britanni. This means that the third devastation lasted at least forty years from A.D. 407.

The northern nations now withdraw. What did they do? Here again the exact words are all-important, which are these: *revertuntur ergo impudentes grassatores Hiberni domos post non longum temporis reversuri. Picti in extrema parte insulae tunc primum et deinceps requieverunt praedas et contritiones nonnumquam facientes*—the shameless Irish freebooters, therefore, go back to their homes, to return again before long. The Picti, then, for the first time, settled down in the extreme part of the island and continued to do so, with occasional pillagings and devastations.

Let us see precisely what these words are meant to convey. We have been told that the Picti and Scotti had captured northern Britain as far as the Wall at least forty years previously. *Capessunt pro indigenis*, they took it in place of the natives. And yet not until after their defeat subsequent to A.D. 446 did the Picti begin to settle in the country they had taken; and as for the Scotti, they are made to go back to their homes in Ireland, as the use of the word *Hiberni*, Irish, at this point indicates. Whereas settlements of Picti in north Britain are mentioned, we are not told of any such on the part of the Scotti, but rather the contrary: *revertuntur grassatores Hiberni domos*, the Irish freebooters go back to their homes. Our author’s idea seems to be that the Picti and Scotti were so engaged in ravaging *south* Britain for the forty or more years from A.D. 407 that they in the meantime neglected *north* Britain, so that not until their defeat sometime after A.D. 446 did the Picti busy themselves with making north Britain their

permanent home, and as for the Scotti they withdrew to their native Ireland. The Scotti left Britain alone to return again before long; the Picti indulged in occasional foragings and depredations.

These occasional forays must have extended over no *very* small period of time, for during the pauses between them 'the island was becoming rich with so many resources of affluence that no age remembered the possession of such before, with which resources of every kind luxury also grows.' And again during such pauses 'kings were anointed not in the name of God but such as surpassed others in cruelty, and shortly afterwards were put to death by the men who anointed them, without any inquiry as to truth, others more cruel having been elected.'

All this went on until it was suddenly announced that the old foes of the Brittani had again arrived with the intention of thoroughly destroying the country, and of dwelling in it from one end to the other as was their custom. The exact words are: *penitus delere et inhabitare solito more a fine usque ad terminum regionem*—thoroughly to destroy and to dwell in the country from end to end as was their wont. This is the only indication given us that the Picti and Scotti had inhabited southern Britain from end to end as well as ravaged it. We have been told that they had made three devastations, that they had seized the abandoned northern portion as far as the Wall, and that one of them, the Picti, had colonised 'the extreme part.' It now appears that they had also *inhabited* from end to end. Nevertheless, although the Picti and Scotti had inhabited the land from end to end, yet on their defeat which terminated the third devastation both of them are distinctly said to have withdrawn, the Irish freebooters to their native Ireland, and the Picti to Scotland to colonise 'the extreme part.'

Unfortunately no details are given of this fourth devastation, but it will be borne in mind that it commenced no very small interval after A.D. 446, and that no Scotti have been made to *settle* permanently in the island. It may

indeed seem strange that the Picti and Scotti should seize Scotland as far as the Wall with the final withdrawal of Roman troops in A.D. 407, and that not until after A.D. 446 should the Picti begin to settle for the first time, no mention being made of any permanent settlements of Scotti,¹ but rather the contrary; nevertheless, this is clearly what the narrative implies.

Whilst the announcement of this beginning of a fourth devastation is still in their ears, the Britanni are afflicted by that deadly and well-remembered pestilence, 'which in a short time without any sword lays low such a multitude of them that the living are unable to bury the dead.'²

¹ According to the traditional account the Scotti did not begin settling in Scotland until about the close of the fifth century. 'It was in 502 (according to the Annals of Ulster) or 496 (according to the Four Masters) that Feargus Mor mac Earca cum gente Dalriada partem Britanniae tenuit (Tigernach).—Nicholson's *Keltic Researches*, 80. The Scotti 'took up their abode in Cantyre and the island of Islay, the part of Ireland from which they came being the nearest district to Cantyre and known as that of Dal-Riada. The migration began during the last years of the fifth century, under a prince called Fergus mac Ercae; and it was not long before the newcomers spread themselves over much of what is now known as Argyle.'—Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, 3rd ed., 156-7. Bury, on the strength of the *Epistola Patricii*, argues that there were settlements of Scotti in north-west Britain before the middle of the fifth century.—Bury, *St. Patrick*, 315-16. However this may be, the *Excidium Britanniae* implies no such settlements previous to a lengthy interval after A.D. 446. It is unfortunate that no details are given of the fourth devastation, but one may surmise that now for the first time the Scotti are intended to commence settling.

² This pestilence, which synchronised with the arrival of Picti and Scotti for the fourth time, no small interval after A.D. 446, and which inflicted such havoc among the Britanni, was *famosa*, well known. It is recorded as a local and a completed incident which occurred prior to the calling in of Saxon aid, so that there can be no question of confounding it with the celebrated European plague which raged for so many years during Justinian's reign in the mid-sixth century. Such a local pestilence among the Britanni was that in which Maelgwn, king of Gwynedd, died. Details of it are given in the *Book of Llan Dav*, 107, 110, 131, 144. It is known there as *y dylt melen*, the yellow plague, because it made yellow and bloodless all whom it attacked. It well-nigh reduced the country to a desert. The Britanni fled before it to Ireland and to the Continent. Amongst those who fled was Teilo, bishop of Llandaff, who went to Brittany, where he met his nephew, Oudoceus, who succeeded him at Llandaff as bishop. The time of the pestilence (considerably post-dated in the *Annales Cambriæ*) may be determined in this wise. Maelgwn, king of Gwynedd, and St. Teilo were both contemporaries of St. David, who was born in A.D. 462. That St. David was born in A.D. 462 and flourished in the last half of the fifth century is one of the most assured facts in early Welsh history (see my 'Rhygyvarch's Life of St. David' in *Y Cymmrodor*, xxiv. 1-73). And that Maelgwn, king of Gwynedd,

Finally, an assembly is held to deliberate as to the best and safest means of repelling the irruptions of the Picti and Scotti. All the counsellors, together with the *superbus tyrannus*,¹ proud tyrant, agree that the Saxones should be introduced into the island. After this we hear no more of the Picti and Scotti.

The *Excidium Britannicæ* does not tell us the number of years which elapsed between the Letter to Aetius and the advent of the Saxones. But as we know from the contents of the Letter that it could not have been written earlier than A.D. 446, the Saxones must have been admitted into the island some interval after that year. And the interval must have been a long one to have included the victory which terminated the third devastation and the unprecedented growth of wealth and luxury which followed.

The conclusions may be summed up as follows. The *Excidium Britannicæ* is clear as to the Picti and Scotti that they were both extraneous nations, who attacked the island of Britain from over the sea, the Picti from some transmarine quarter in the north, the Scotti of Ireland from the north-west. They differed partly in their customs, but were alike in their appearance, wearing hair on their faces and scant clothing about their legs. No mention is made of their being painted or tattooed. They sailed the sea in coracles.

Not until A.D. 383 was Britain exposed to the attacks of these foreign barbarians, but between that year and A.D. 407 they devastated the island twice, with the result that the defence of Scotland as far as the Wall of Hadrian was abandoned.

In A.D. 407, with the final departure of Roman troops, flourished contemporaneously with him in the same period is also indicated by the well-known fact that his famous descendant and successor in the *fifth* generation, to wit Cadwallon, perished at Rowley Water in 634. The plague, therefore, that carried off Maelgwn, must have occurred about the early sixth century.

¹ *superbus tyrannus*, proud tyrant, is commonly taken to be a covert reference to Vortigern, whose name resolves itself into *vor + tigern*, over-lord.

they commenced their third devastation with the capture of Scotland as far as the Wall. *Capessunt pro indigenis*, they took it instead of the inhabitants. They then proceeded at once to break down the feeble defence of the Wall, and to ravage southern Britain without mercy, and to dwell in it from one end to the other. This they continued to do until after A.D. 446, when they met with their first decisive check at the hands of the citizens. The Picti and Scotti withdrew, and so terminated the third devastation, which lasted at least forty years from A.D. 407.

During the third devastation the Picti and Scotti had had no leisure to deal with Scotland. Now, however, the Picti began to settle in north Britain for the first time, whilst the Scotti went home to their native Ireland. As yet there do not appear to have been any settlements of Scotti in Scotland.

After the third devastation, which terminated subsequently to A.D. 446, there followed no very small interval of time during which the Britanni became more affluent and luxurious than ever before in their history. The Picti, however, made occasional raids.

This interval of unprecedented wealth and luxury was brought to an end by the arrival of Picti and Scotti for a fourth devastation. No details are given.

Simultaneously with this fourth arrival there fell upon the Britanni a *famosa pestis*, famous plague, which carried off so many of them that the living were unable to bury the dead.

Finally, the Britanni, with the *superbus tyrannus*, proud tyrant, determined to call in the aid of the Saxones. How long this was after the Letter to Aetius in A.D. 446 we are not told, but the narrative of the *Excidium Britannicæ* from chapters xx. to xxiii. postulates no small period of time.