

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

The Picts

The Picts were a Celtic people who lived in what is now Scotland. Once again, this was a non-literate culture. It is not even clear what they called themselves; the name ‘pictii’ was given to them by the Romans because they had designs and images on their bodies. We are not sure whether these were painted or tattooed. The Picts had seven kingdoms in Scotland. One of the kings acted as ‘first amongst equals’ in decisions concerning the outside world, which largely concerned how to repel invaders and raiders, including the Romans, the Scots, Saxons from Northumbria and the Vikings. Despite being politically governed by both queens and kings, the Picts were matrilineal.

The Celts’ notion of property is at odds with the patriarchal model. Celts understood and used money, and did have personal property in the forms of jewellery, artefacts, weapons and livestock.¹ Horses were especially prized. Both women and men wore much jewellery and patterned cloth and dressed their hair. On the other hand, land was not seen as heritable property that could be ‘owned’ by an individual; in Scotland until the eighteenth century, land in the Highlands was held by the clan chief in the name of all the people. The chief was ‘first amongst equals’ and the land belonged to everyone. The Celts appear to have retained many of the practices, like communal living in extended families, that characterise hunter-gatherers and the people we have seen at Çatal Hoyuk and Ain Ghazal.

Celtic women had exactly the same rights as men and were often leaders. Women could be Druids, the highest caste in the society. Women, not men, gave their names to their children.

Fighting amongst the Celts – rather than between them and outsiders – seems to have had an almost playful air. Women joined in the ‘battles’, to the horror of Roman historians who witnessed this, and who misinterpreted what they saw. Men often fought stark naked, which also perplexed historians, who have sometimes attributed this to an intense spirituality. While the Celts were certainly spiritual, there is another explanation for this behaviour. These battles might have been a form of field sport akin to the American Indian ‘counting coup’. It is possible that the aim was not to kill but, in the case of men, to draw first blood, and of women, to take a lock of the opponent’s hair.

¹ They were said even to lend money on the promise of repayment in the Afterlife!

The Picts cast an interesting light on the disadvantage that matriliney has when confronted by the patriarchy, which may in part explain how the patriarchy came to be dominant. Many theories have been proposed concerning how it happened that Kenneth mac Alpin, a prince of the Scottii, came to rule over Pictland, from victory in battle to subterfuge. However, the most likely answer is that he married a princess of the Picts, and arranged for the Crown Princess in each of the Kingdoms to marry another prince of the Scottii. Since kingship in Pictland was conferred by the mother and in Scotland by the father, this neatly ensured that the male offspring of these liaisons would inherit the throne from both sides.² This suggests that the creation of male property rights over women through marriage allowed the patriarchy to marry the matriarchy out of existence.

² The union seems to have been arranged rather than forced. The Picts had been worn out fighting the Vikings in the north and east, and needed both reinforcements and to be sure that their western frontiers were secure, while it satisfied the Scottish desire for a unitary state, probably also for reasons of security.