I

EARLY MEDIEVAL SCOTLAND

An observer of the political configuration of the island of Britain in the sixteenth century would be aware of the existence of two well-defined and long-established kingdoms. The peoples of England and Scotland were often suspicious of one another, sometimes even at war, but both realms could boast a sequence of monarchs stretching back far into the mists of time. From such a vantage point, the development of the two kingdoms might seem an inevitable consequence of historical processes centuries earlier, but in fact there was nothing inevitable about it, especially in the case of Scotland. Rather, the creation of the medieval realm was a remarkable achievement in view of the political, cultural and geographical factors which conspired against it. Other Celtic lands, most notably Wales and Ireland, never achieved unity under a single line of rulers as Scotland did, nor did circumstances ever exist there in which warring tribes and dynasties could be assimilated into a single political entity, even though the ethnic and linguistic diversity of Ireland and Wales was less marked than in Scotland. The Scottish achievement was all the greater for being realised in a land of which large parts are mountainous and suffer very heavy rainfall, rendering them inconducive to settled patterns of agriculture and incapable of sustaining a large population. Land communications between different regions of Scotland were seriously impaired by the existence of extensive areas of barren upland and long firths and sea-lochs, while

the relative ease of seaborne travel tended to encourage contact with outsiders rather than fellow-inhabitants of another part of Scotland. One of the principal themes of this book is an exploration of how these problems were overcome, what impact cultural and physical barriers continued to have on the course of Scottish history, and the extent to which an identifiable Scottish nation was born in the later Middle Ages.

The people known as the Scots originated in Ireland. Some had presumably already crossed the North Channel by the time that Fergus Mor mac Erc, king of Dalriada, moved his power base from the coastal region of what is now County Antrim to Argyll sometime around 500. The old Irish territories of Dalriada continued to be ruled from Scotland until the middle of the seventh century, but the future of the Scots was to lie in the geographical area to which their name was ultimately to be given. Their cultural dominance from the middle of the ninth century onwards must not, however, conceal the fact that Dalriada was but one of the territorial and political divisions of early Scotland, and rarely the most important or most powerful. Indeed, the word 'Scotland' is somewhat inappropriate when used in connection with the early medieval period, for writers of that time normally use the word 'Scots' to refer generally to the inhabitants of Ireland, and by extension to Irish colonists elsewhere. Even the Latin *Scotia*, often taken in a twelfth- and thirteenth-century context as referring to the whole area north of the marshy isthmus between the long firths of Forth and Clyde, was capable of a more restricted meaning, not necessarily including the territory of the old kingdom of Dalriada where the Scots had originally settled. Although in this volume the word 'Scotland' is used in its familiar modern sense, it was not until the thirteenth century that the whole area ruled by the king of Scots came to be called 'Scotland', while the idea that the Scots were a distinct race rather than being a people of Irish origin was first fully articulated only during the crisis of the Wars of Independence.

When the kingdom of Dalriada was establishing itself on the western seaboard in the early years of the sixth century, most of the landmass north of the Forth and Clyde, and probably Orkney and parts of the Hebrides too, were occupied by the Picts. Few peoples in the early Middle Ages have engendered more controversy than

the Picts, and hardly any aspect of their society can be established on an indisputable basis. Their principal material remains consist of a fine series of stones with distinctive, if now largely impenetrable, symbols incised or sculptured in relief on them. We also have several lists of their kings with indications of how long each reigned, although in their present form they date from a later period. The deeds, and more especially the deaths, of many of these kings are recorded in Irish annals, which enables historians to place what is essentially a bare list of names into a chronological context. However, although the Picts appear usually to have been territorially and militarily superior to their neighbours, their culture and political organisation effectively disappeared after the sudden overthrow of the native rulers by Kenneth MacAlpin, king of Scots, in around 843.

Later sources suggest that Pictland was divided into seven provinces. It would be convenient if these could be made to correspond to the historical earldoms, which were clearly of ancient origin, but the connections have never been fully and satisfactorily established. From the evidence of other Dark Age societies, it would be reasonable to suppose that the rulers of the Pictish provinces were semi-independent potentates or perhaps tribal chiefs, albeit owing some allegiance to a high king; by this theory the names in the regnal lists would broadly constitute a series of over-kings with the addition in some versions of rival claimants to that dignity. There is, however, no evidence that the Picts had firm political divisions of this sort. Although the Roman writer Ammianus Marcellinus and the Northumbrian monk and historian Bede draw an apparent distinction between the northern and southern Picts, all the Pictish kings mentioned in foreign sources also appear in the regnal lists, and so arguably the rulers of individual provinces, later sometimes called *mormaers* or great stewards, were, as that title implies, merely royal officials with little effective independence of action.

The geographical realities of Scotland must, however, have militated against a united Pictish kingdom. The Mounth, the great eastward extension of the Highland massif which almost reaches the coast near Stonehaven, was a formidable obstacle, and even as late as the early thirteenth century royal control over the areas to the north of it was fitful. It is surely possible that in practice a distinction between the northern and southern Picts, perhaps even

between individual provinces, would have been meaningful in political terms, although powerful rulers might be able to dominate on both sides of the Mounth simultaneously. Even if it is, on balance, unlikely that separate lines of kings emerged, the experience of contemporary Dalriada would suggest that rival dynasties, each claiming descent from a common ancestor, could easily have developed in Pictland, and our sources are so exiguous that it is very dangerous to assume that semi-independent rulers did not hold sway in some areas, as they certainly did in the north and west of Scotland in later centuries. Even if a *mormaer* was theoretically a royal agent, he was surely the effective lord of his province under all but the most powerful kings.

One of the striking features of the Pictish king-lists is that, at least until the ninth century, no king was the son of a previous king of the Picts. Bede states that succession was matrilineal, at least when the identity of the next ruler was in doubt; in other words the claim to the throne was passed through females rather than males, although it is noteworthy that the names of very few Pictish women have come down to us. Some elaborate genealogical diagrams have been constructed to show how this unusual system might have worked, but other scholars have challenged the whole concept of matrilineal succession, noting that in most early medieval societies it was unusual for a king to be succeeded immediately by his son because the latter tended to lack the experience and personal following necessary to become an effective warlord in a predominantly martial society. The controversy need not concern us here, except that matriliny may explain how some Pictish kings appear to have come from ruling dynasties elsewhere in the Celtic world; the principle of matrilineal succession may, therefore, have had the effect of encouraging contact between different peoples, thereby perhaps facilitating the later consolidation of different ethnic groups into a single kingdom.

The union of the kingships of the Picts and Scots by Kenneth MacAlpin has traditionally been regarded as the beginning of the Scottish realm, and there has been a tendency (by no means always followed) to give regnal numbers to the kings from Kenneth onwards. The convention that Kenneth's reign marked a fresh beginning is a very old one, for the king-lists clearly regard him as having been the first of a new regime, even though he was probably not the first king of Dalriada to exercise lordship over the Picts. The

previous three centuries had seen many fluctuations in the respective fortunes of Pictland and Dalriada, and of the dynasties within the Dalriadan ruling house, and although the great mountainous spine of Druim Alban served as a physical barrier between western and eastern Scotland there can be no doubt that the Picts and Scots came into contact on many occasions through both marriage and battle. What made Kenneth MacAlpin different is, therefore, unclear, except that he founded what was to be a permanent patrilineal dynasty, which with the benefit of hindsight may have seemed significant to the compilers of the king-lists. Several years elapsed before Kenneth subdued his remaining Pictish rivals, but the changed political configuration brought about by his achievement was to prove permanent.

From the last decade of the eighth century Britain and Ireland came under assault from Scandinavian raiders, and it is possible that this provided the circumstances for Kenneth's takeover of Pictland. Opinions differ as to the intentions of the Vikings and over whether their raiding was more violent than that of other contemporary bands of warriors, but there can be no doubt that the Norse invaders caused severe material destruction, particularly to the island monasteries of western Scotland which were both temptingly wealthy and peculiarly exposed to attack from a seafaring foe. Equally it is certain that many Scandinavians settled in the British Isles and indulged in the peaceful activities of agriculture and trade. Shetland, Orkney and the north-east corner of the Scottish mainland were colonised by Norwegians in considerable numbers, as is seen by the disappearance of all but a handful of non-Norse place names; settlement in these areas was understandable because the climatic and agricultural conditions were similar to those in Norway itself, Orkney and Caithness being particularly fertile. Norwegians also settled on the western seaboard, probably to a much lesser extent, although place-name evidence does not conclusively reveal whether the Gaelic language survived the initial onslaught of Viking incomers or made a comeback in the Hebrides only later.

The arrival of the Vikings put pressure on both the Scots of Dalriada and the Picts, especially those north of the Mounth. The appearance of Norwegians on the western seaboard may have encouraged the Scots to move eastwards, which would explain why Norse settlers seem to have established themselves on the west coast

so easily. The Picts may have collapsed under the joint threat, especially if (as seems likely) the Dalriadan dynasty known as the Cenél Loairn attacked northern Pictland at the same time as the Cenél nGabráin under Kenneth invaded the more southerly regions. Irish annals report that in 839 a fierce battle was fought between the Norse and the Picts (or at least those south of the Mounth), and this may have weakened the Pictish establishment to such an extent that it could be eclipsed by the Scots within a few years. However, later tales of how treachery assisted Kenneth's destruction of the Pictish nobility tell us little about what happened to the Picts as a whole. It is surely likely that many survived, albeit now under different rulers; it was not until around 900 that the notion of a Pictish realm disappears from contemporary sources to be replaced by the Gaelic name of Alba.[1] The kingdom of the Picts did not become Scottish overnight.

The southern part of the later Scottish realm had not, except fleetingly, been under the close control of either the Picts or the Dalriadan Scots. The British kingdom of Strathclyde or Cumbria was still in existence in the ninth century, stretching southwards from the northern end of Loch Lomond; from the middle of the tenth century it probably included the English Lake District, but earlier kings ruled over a much smaller, though fluctuating, area.[2] In language and political organisation its closest parallels were in Wales, and it was essentially a relic of the once more extensive territories of the ancient Britons, who had been forced westwards by the Anglo-Saxon invaders. Of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the most northerly was Northumbria, stretching from the Humber to the Forth, although at times it was divided between Deira (roughly Yorkshire) and Bernicia. Northumbrian expansion northwards was checked by the Picts at Dunnichen in Angus in 685, but in the eighth century the Angles attained at least a measure of supremacy in Galloway, the extreme south-western corner of the Scottish mainland.

The early history of Galloway remains obscure, despite a very important series of archaeological excavations at Whithorn, an ancient ecclesiastical site traditionally associated with St Ninian.

[1] D. Broun, 'Defining Scotland and the Scots before the Wars of Independence', in D. Broun, R. J. Finlay and M. Lynch, eds., *Image and Identity: The Making and Re-making of Scotland Through the Ages* (Edinburgh, 1998), 7.

[2] A. Macquarrie, 'The kings of Strathclyde, *c.* 400–1018', in *Barrow Essays*, 18–19.

Anglian control of the area may date from the third quarter of the seventh century, when Northumbria was still extending its sphere of influence, although it has been suggested that the great crosses at Bewcastle in Cumberland and Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, erected perhaps around 700, were primarily symbols of propaganda which demonstrate Northumbrian aspirations rather than real power.[3] An Anglian bishopric was established at Whithorn around 730, and a number of eighth-century bishops are known, although religious life at the site can be traced back to about 500 and possibly even earlier. Place names indicate an enclave of Anglian settlement around Whithorn, but it must have come under threat from Norse raiders and also possibly from Irish adventurers, to say nothing of the local native inhabitants. There was a serious fire at Whithorn in about 845, and although limited contact with Northumbria continued for a few years, it was greatly diminished even before York fell to the Danes in 866.

Strathclyde also came under Norse attack. In 870 the great rock-fortress of Dumbarton fell after a four-month siege, a very unusual event in Dark Age Britain. Aggressive actions by the Vikings in southern Scotland may have been aimed at securing a route between Ireland and eastern England via the waterways of Clyde and Forth, a more obvious line of communication to a seafaring people than might seem likely today. Norse successes posed a threat to the descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin, but also provided opportunities for southward expansion at the expense of the emasculated kingdoms of Strathclyde and Northumbria. Although both Constantine I in 876 and Idulb in 962 met their deaths in battles against the Vikings, and many raids are noted in near-contemporary sources, the way was now open for the Scottish kings to enlarge their territory and they may have entered into alliances with the Scandinavian rulers of York and Dublin in order to further this ambition.

Expansion southwards was both easier and potentially more lucrative for the kings of the MacAlpin dynasty than consolidation of the old Pictish and Scottish kingdoms. Norse settlers were now well established in the north and west, and it is likely that the rival Cenél Loairn was dominant in Moray. It was normally the rulers of Moray, sometimes termed kings by contemporaries, who made

[3] A. P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80–1000* (Edinburgh, 1989), 26.

alliances with other northern powers such as the earls of Orkney, while the MacAlpin kings turned their eyes towards Northumbria. Kenneth I is said to have invaded the lands south of the Forth on no fewer than six occasions, burning Dunbar and seizing Melrose, and many of his successors were to follow this policy of aggrandisement, terrorising neighbouring peoples and rewarding their own followers with the spoils of victory, although the sources do hint also at more constructive activities on the part of the kings, such as lawmaking and the establishment of ecclesiastical institutions. Nonetheless, the Scottish kings took advantage of the fact that the most powerful remaining English kingdom was that of Wessex, which was both distant and, moreover, separated from northern Northumbria by the Danes' possession of York. Although the precise chronology is impossible to ascertain, the influence of the Scots in Lothian was probably well established by the middle of the tenth century, when Edinburgh was abandoned to them, although later reverses such as the failure of Malcolm II to take Durham in 1006 may have served to revive the fortunes of the English aristocracy in the area. The need to establish relations with the house of Wessex, whose authority was steadily spreading northwards, led to both military confrontation and political agreements which left the Scottish king in effective control of the area north of the Tweed in return for an acknowledgement of the Anglo-Saxon monarch's superior power. The disintegration of Northumbria under Scandinavian pressure had, therefore, enabled both the rulers of Wessex and the descendants of Kenneth MacAlpin to fill a political vacuum, and the scene was set for the twelfth-century struggles over the location of the border with England.

The fate of Strathclyde is much disputed. The fall of Dumbarton must have weakened the British kingdom as a viable political unit, and the expulsion of Eochaid son of Rhun in 889 has been regarded as marking the end of the line of native British kings. Rhun had married a daughter of Kenneth MacAlpin, and it has been argued that from around 900 Strathclyde was bestowed on the heir to the Scottish kingdom as a means of recognising his claim and thereby (at least in theory) avoiding bloodshed between rival lines of the royal dynasty.[4] This theory is, however, based on very tenuous and

[4] Ibid., 216–18, 220–1.

much later evidence, and in any case it is not clear why the Scottish kings would have wanted to preserve Strathclyde as a separate realm, even for the purpose of its forming an appanage for their chosen successor, when other British kingdoms had disappeared on being absorbed into a larger political unit. It seems rather that an obscure line of native rulers, probably now based at the ancient centre of Govan rather than Dumbarton, continued until Owain the Bald died around 1018. Even thereafter Strathclyde was perhaps not totally subservient to the Scottish kings, for in the early twelfth century the future David I, invested as ruler of southern Scotland during his elder brother Alexander's lifetime, seems still to have regarded Govan as a threat.

All these early kingdoms had at some point come under the influence of Christianity, for Dark Age Scotland had received religious instruction from a number of different sources. In the fifth or sixth century St Ninian evangelised the people of parts of what is now southern Scotland. St Columba's monastery on Iona, founded in or shortly after 563, was to become the fulcrum of a community of religious houses across northern Britain; he and other Irish missionaries visited and probably converted the Picts, while St Aidan brought the Christian faith from Iona to the people of Northumbria. In the 680s the Northumbrian church established an episcopal see among the Picts at Abercorn. Although the bishop had to withdraw after the Anglian defeat at the battle of Dunnichen, the Pictish king Nechton sent to Northumbria around 710 for detailed guidance about the controversy over the date of Easter, and his espousal of Roman customs probably led to a church among the Picts which owed more to Anglian organisation than to Columban traditions; certainly Nechton saw fit to expel the Iona clergy from eastern Scotland. Other holy men, such as St Kentigern, the traditional founder of Glasgow, St Maelrubha of Applecross and St Donnan of Eigg all played their part in bringing Christianity to the peoples of the future kingdom of Scotland. Religious beliefs and practices had, therefore, been imported from a variety of places, and the traffic was by no means all one way.

The vibrancy of the Christian church in eighth-century Scotland is not in doubt, but the cultural milieu which produced the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells was greatly harmed by the beginning of Viking raids on the British Isles in the 790s.

Whatever the ultimate inspiration was for the Scandinavians' voyages to the west, there can be no doubt that many religious settlements suffered as a result. Iona had already been attacked at least three times when in 825 Abbot Blathmac was martyred for refusing to divulge the whereabouts of Columba's shrine. Some of Columba's relics were later transferred to Dunkeld by Kenneth MacAlpin, a move which reflects his own new-found authority over the Picts and perhaps marks a further stage of cross-fertilisation between different Christian traditions, but which also demonstrates the vulnerability of Iona. Norse settlement severed the lines of communication which had helped to bind together the different strands of Celtic Christianity, and it is difficult to assess either the spirituality or the organisation of the church in the very obscure period which followed.

There is, however, no doubt that the institutions of the church continued in existence, since many religious communities which are attested in the twelfth century were clearly very ancient. Some of the most prominent consisted of groups of Culdees or *célidé*, who owed their origin to an eighth-century Irish monastic reform movement, although there were also churches of secular priests which are broadly comparable to Anglo-Saxon minsters. There was an albeit hazy tradition of some sort of episcopal organisation, especially in the former Pictish kingdom, as well as sequences of abbots. Many communities doubtless fell under the influence of individual kin-groups, whose members used the endowment for their own ends, but this does not necessarily imply that they performed no pastoral function. We know nothing of how churchmen were perceived by their flocks, but worshippers surely cared much less than fervent reformers about matters such as irregular ordination. The strength of these ancient communities can be gauged by noting how long they survived and how much their presence influenced the twelfth-century ecclesiastical reforms which will be discussed in a later chapter.

The eleventh-century kingdom of the Scots was a somewhat uneasy amalgam of several different peoples, languages and cultures. It had been drawn together by a combination of circumstances and was to prove remarkably resilient as a political entity, despite its internal diversity. However, problems of geography made land