

An Enquiry into the Original Inhabitants of Britain.

THE history of the earliest inhabitants of any country, is always involved in obscurity. Destitute of writings, their original and transactions soon perish in tradition. This is the case as to the first

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occupiers.

occupiers of Britain. Yet antiquaries have determined on this matter, in the most decided manner; and, as is usual in such inquiries, adopt various systems, which they endeavour to support with all their learning and ingenuity. On a candid investigation, the generality of these different theories fall to the ground, unsupported by any positive evidence, nay, often defective in probability.

If this has happened with regard to the Aborigines of our island at large, it has taken place no less in respect to those called *Picti*.

Some judge them to be the descendents of the ancient inhabitants of South Britain, who leisurely migrated, or were driven by the Roman conquests to the northern extremities of the island, and there made a distinguished stand, in support of their liberty and independence.

Others view them as emigrants from the shores of the Baltic, who, some centuries before the Christian aera, or some years after that period, invaded the Shetland and Orkney islands, landed from these, and occupied a great part of the sea coasts of Scotland, and penetrated to the Humber, in England.

These different opinions have been supported with erudition and address. If Camden is on the one side, the venerable Bede, Ricardus, and our Scots historians, are on the other.

It is rather bold to think of elucidating this part of our national antiquities, after these learned persons: But, with all regard to their abilities, I respectfully submit to the Antiquarian Society a few observations; which, if they do not banish doubt, perhaps may throw a small portion of light on this obscure subject. At any rate, the design will not be condemned, however imperfect the execution.

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The first particular account we have of Britain and its inhabitants, is from Julius Caesar, who was nine years in Gaul, which, from vicinity, trade, and other connections, maintained continual intercourse with Britain. He landed twice on the island, and has given a relation of the manners, customs, and religion of the natives. It is curious, and justly considered authentic; as the British allies in Gaul, and the prisoners and hostages he carried to the continent, would supply him with the best materials.

In this detail, Caesar mentions a practice they had of painting themselves: "Omnes vero se Britanni vitro inficiunt, quod caeruleum efficit colorem; atque hoc horribiliore sunt in pugna adpectu*."

It is well known, that many nations and tribes on the continent of Europe, adopted the same practice; as the Aarii in Tacitus, the Agathyrsi in Virgil and Mela, the Iapodes in Strabo, and the Sarmatians and Dacae in Pliny. However, though the Roman writers mention this practice of these nations, they do no more; but they apply it as a distinguishing characteristic to the natives of *Britain*, and, instead of omitting this particular, they dwell on it.

Propertius writes:

Nunc etiam infectos demens imitare Britannos,
Ludis et externo tincta nitore caput.
An si caeruleo quaedam sua tempora fūco
Tinxerit, idcirco caerulea forma bona est?
Ut natura dedit, sic omnis recta figura,
Turpis Romano Belgicus ore color †.

Pomponius

* Caesar de Bello Gallico, lib. v. cap. xiv.

† S. A. Propertii Elegiarum lib. ii. Ad Cynthia, Eleg. xviii. v. 23.

Pomponius Mela, in his account of *Britain*, describes this custom, in almost Caesar's words: "Sed sunt inculti omnes---incertum ob decorem, an quid aliud, vitro corpora infecti *."

Pliny describes the same custom, with an additional circumstance, that the *British* women used it in some religious institutions: "Simile plantagini glastum in Gallia vocatur, quo Britannorum conjuges nurusque toto corpore oblitae, quibusdam in sacris et nudae incedunt, Æthiopum colorem imitantes †."

Tacitus mentions the "colorati vultus Silurum ‡."

Martial thus expresses himself:

Claudia caeruleis cum sit Rufina Britannis
Edita, cur Latiae pectora plebis habet?
Quale decus formae! Romanam credere matres
Italides possunt, Atthides esse suam §.

And in another epigram:

Barbara de Pictis veni bascauda Britannis;
Sed me jam mavult dicere Roma suam ++.

Herodian informs us of the same practice: "quia ipsa notant corpora pictura varia, et omnifariam formis animalium ||."

"Ammianus

* Pomponii Melae de Situ Orbis, lib. iii. cap. vi.

† C. Plinii Naturalis Historia, lib. xxii. cap. i.

‡ C. C. Taciti Julii Agriculae Vita, cap. xi.

§ M. Val. Martialis Epigram. lib. xi. Ep. liv. de Claudia Rufina.

++ M. Val. Martialis Epigram. lib. xiv. Ep. xcix. Bascauda.

|| Herodiani Historia, lib. iii.

Ammianus Marcellinus mentions the Scots and *Picts* among the inhabitants of *Britain*: "In Britannis cum Scotorum Pictorumque gentium ferarum excursu, rupta quiete, conducta loca limitibus vicina vastarentur, et implicaret formido provincias praeteritarum cladum congerie fessas *." And he names the two tribes the *Picti* were divided into: "Illud tamen sufficit dici, quod eo tempore Picti in duas gentes divisi, Dicaledonas et Vecturiones †."

Claudian, in his poems, frequently mentions these as natives of the northern parts of the island, and this practice.

Facta tui numerabat avi, quem littus adustae
Horrescit Libyae, ratibusque impervia Thule.
Ille leves Mauros, nec falso nomine Pictos
Edomuit, Scotumque vago mucrone secutus ‡.

Ille, Caledoniis posuit qui castra pruinis,
Qui medios Libyae sub casside pertulit aestus,
Terribilis Mauro, debellatorque Britanni
Littoris, ac pariter Boreae vastator et Austri.
Quid rigor aeternus coeli, quid frigora profunt,
Ignotumque fretum? maduerunt Saxone fuso
Orcades, incalluit Pictorum sanguine Thule.
Scotorum cumulos flevit glacialis Ierne §.

Quantum, te principe, possim,
Non longinqua docent, domito quod Saxone Tethys
Mitior, aut fracto secura Britannia Picto ||.

Inde

* Am. Marcellini Rerum Gestarum, lib. xx. cap. i.

† Am. Marcellini Rerum Gestarum, lib. xxvii. cap. viii.

‡ Cl. Claudiani de III. Conf. Honorii Aug. Paneg. v. 52.

§ Cl. Claudiani de IV. Conf. Hon. Aug. Paneg. v. 26.

|| Cl. Claudiani in Eutropium, lib. i. v. 394.

Inde Caledonio velata Britannia monstro,
 Ferro Picta genas cujus vestigia verrit
 Caerulus, oceanique aestum mentitur amictus,
 Me juvit Stilico, totam cum Scotis Iernen
 Movit, et infesto spumavit remige Tethys.
 Illius effectum curis, ne tela timerem
 Scotica, ne Pictum tremere, ne litore tuto
 Prospicerem dubiis venturum Saxona ventis.*

Venit et extremis legio praetenta Britannis,
 Quae Scoto dat fraena truci, ferroque notatas
 Perlegit exangues Picto moriente figuras †.

In all these quotations, those the Roman writers considered as the Aborigines of the island, are called *Britanni*; and their characteristic practice is uniformly mentioned. Some attention may be given to Martial's description †, where he calls them *Picti Britanni*; yet no one can consider him, as describing by these words a foreign upstart nation. He only mentions the original natives of South Britain, by their well known practice. Claudian also adopts the same expression §: "Nec falso nomine Pictos edomuit."

It is to be observed, that Martial lived about the year 94, and Claudian about the 398, when the supposed *Pictish* emigrants are said to have become powerful. But, if the form of expression or epithet conveys no idea of foreign *Picti* in the early era, and only calls the original natives by that name, the same mode of expression or epithet, used by the Roman writers in a later era, may be justly supposed to describe the descendants of the same people, in the same island.

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- * Cl. Claudiani de Laudibus Stiliconis, lib. ii. v. 246.
- † Cl. Claudiani de Bello Getico, lib. xxvi. v. 416.
- ‡ M. Val. Martialis Epigram. lib. xiv. Ep. xcix.
- § Cl. Claudiani de III. Conf. Hon. Aug. Paneg. v. 54.

To this it may be added, that, when Herodian, who flourished about 240, describes* the customs of the *Britanni*, he mentions no foreign tribe or colony, but the *Britanni* of that country Severus was to invade. To these he ascribes the practice of having various figures marked on their bodies, which is illustrated by the description Claudian gives of the *Picti* †.

These observations receive additional strength, from Marcellinus's naming the two tribes the *Picti* were divided into ‡, *Dicaledones* and *Vecturiones*.

Without entering into a description of the import of these words, and changing an historical into an etymological enquiry, *Dicaledones* may justly be considered the same as *Caledones* or *Caledonii*, who inhabited *Caledonia*, and are the names of a people and country peculiar to the island of Britain, and which once prevailed in the southern, as well as the northern parts of it.

Before the island was explored by the Romans, to the north of the Brigantes, Lucan wrote, and calls the southern *Britanni*, *Caledonii*.

Aut vaga cum Thetys, Rutupinaque littora fervent,
 Unda Caledonios fallit turbata Britannos §.

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Martial

- * Herodiani Historia, lib. iii.
- † Cl. Claudiani de Bello Gallico, lib. v. 418.
- ‡ Am. Marcellini Rerum Gestarum, lib. xxvii. cap. viii.
- § M. Annaei Lucani Pharsalia, lib. vi. v. 67.

Martial considers the same *Britanni* as *Caledonii*, in an epigram addressed to Q. Ovidius, going to Britain:

Quincte Caledonios Ovidi visure Britannos*.

Florus his cotemporary, informs, that Caesar, in his second invasion of Britain, “eodem rursus Britannos sequutus in Caledonias Sylvas †.” And Dio Cassius, in his history of Severus, divides the *Britanni*, into *Caledonii* and *Maetae* ‡. Claudian also mentions the *Picti* in *Caledonia* §.

Thus we find the *Britanni*, the inhabitants of South Britain, are, from the earliest accounts of the island, called *Caledonii* and *Picti*; and that there was a *Sylva Caledonia* in the neighbourhood of the Thames. We also find all these names given, at a later period, to the people and country in the north of *Scotland*. This renders it highly credible, that the *Britanni*, called *Caledonii* and *Picti*, by Lucan and Martial, are the same people with the *Caledonii* of Dio Cassius, the *Picti Dicaledones* of Marcellinus, and the *Picti* of Claudian, though in the northern part of the island. These names of the natives run through the whole of their history, as written by the same people, who were particularly acquainted with them. In later times, the northern part of the country and people, were distinguished by these primitive names of *Picti*, *Caledones*, and *Caledonia*, in contrast to the provincial *Britanni*, who, by adopting the Roman fashions, had, in a great measure, lost their original names, and neglected their characteristic customs, which the northern *Britanni* continued to retain.

* M. Val. Martialis Epigram. lib. x. Epig. xlv.

† L. Annae Flori Epitome Rer. Rom. lib. iii. cap. x.

‡ Dionis Cassii ΣΕΒΗΡΟΣ.

§ Claudiani de IV. Conf. Hon. v. 26. &c. De Laud. Stilico, lib. xi. v. 246. &c.

tain. This alteration among the subjects of the empire began to take place under Agricola*, and no doubt had been daily gaining ground.

Marcellinus and Claudian give additional evidence, that the *Picti* were not foreigners, but natives; and, if natives, they were, agreeable to the Roman ideas, the same race of people who possessed South *Britain* at Caesar's invasion.

Ammianus then considers the *Picti* as inhabiting the inland country, when he mentions the Franks and Saxons attacking the sea coasts opposite to Gaul †. This happened about the 364; and, by 367, when Theodosius was the Roman General in Britain, the Saxon rovers had sailed north, invaded the Orkneys, and were there defeated by Theodosius, as Claudian informs ‡. This shews that both these writers were, at this period, well acquainted with the state of *Britain*, with the inhabitants who occupied, and foreign enemies who invaded it. Had Claudian judged the *Picts* to have been foreigners, he would have mentioned it; yet, instead of that, he appears to think they are native *Caledonians*, defeated in *Thule*.

Whatever is the meaning of the word *Thule*, it is uniformly, among the ancients, the name of a place, either in, or far to the north of Britain, involved in darkness, and its shores washed by a boisterous ocean. Hence Virgil's epithet of “Ultima Thule §;” the “refluo circumfona gurgite Thule,” of Statius ||; and Claudian's

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* C. C. Taciti Julii Agricola Vita, cap. xxi. D. Jun. Juvenalis Satyrae, Satyra xv. v. iii.

† Am. Marcellini Rerum Gestarum, lib. xxvii. cap. viii.

‡ Cl. Claudiani de IV. Conf. Hon. v. 31.

§ P. Virgilii Maronis Georgic. lib. i. v. 30.

|| P. Papinii Statii Sylvar. lib. v. Abscantii in Priscillam, &c. v. 91.

“ratibus impervia Thule †.” But, having no positive evidence concerning its position and extent, they greatly varied on these points. For, as they considered Thule as the most remote place they heard of, its situation was always changing from *Britain* to the Polar regions. Yet they generally thought it was either in Britain or its vicinity, and mentioned it promiscuously in that manner.

Strabo rather hesitates, but at last seems to consider Ireland as *Thule* §. Mela verges to the same opinion, as he places it opposite to the Belgic shore ||. Juvenal meant by *Thule*, that part of *Britain* conquered by Agricola and Lucullus, when he writes,

Gallia caudicos docuit facunda Britannos ;
De conducendo loquitur jam rhetore Thule ++.

Silius Italicus entertained the same idea :

Caerulus haud aliter, cum dimicat incola Thules,
Agmina falcifero circumvenit arta Covinno ∞.

Neither Juvenal, nor Silius, could intend by *Thule*, the Shetland, or Orkney islands, but that country in *Britain* which was the scene of the Roman campaigns in their days, into which Roman literature had been introduced, and where the inhabitants fought in chariots. This was in *North Britain*.

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† Cl. Claudiani de III. Conf. Hon. Aug. Panegyris, § 53.

§ Strabonis Rerum Geographicarum, lib. ii.

|| Pomponii Melae de Situ Orbis, lib. iii. cap. vi.

++ D. Junii Juvenalis Satyrae, Satyra xv. § iii.

∞ Silius Italicus, lib. i.

The geographer Ptolemy understood by Thule the Shetland islands, or some imaginary country in the north seas.*

Other writers vary from these; so that, on the whole, their notions were obscure and undetermined. It met with similar treatment from the ancients, that the Terra Australis Incognita has done from the modern geographers and historians. They have wrote about it, sketched it in their maps where they judged it was situated, and any discoveries made in the south latitudes were judged no part of this continent, but contiguous to it, until Captain Cook's voyages undeceived the public.

However uncertain the ancients were, it appears evident, that it was not uncommon among the Roman writers to call Scotland and the northern parts of it *Thule*. This was also Claudian's idea. He mentions the Orkneys as the place where the invaders from the Baltic, the Saxons, were defeated. But the scene of action with the *Picts* or *Dicalidones* was in *Thule*, or their native country *Caledonia*, which retained that original name, to distinguish it from the Roman provinces to the south of Adrian's wall, then called *Britannia*, and the natives *Brittones*, as appears from the *Notitia*, and *Britannicani*. †

Having thus endeavoured to determine, at least one situation of *Thule*, forgive the mentioning a conjecture concerning that part of Scotland Claudian names Ierne. May it not be judged to be the place that Juvenal calls *Juberna* ‡? It cannot relate to Ireland, as the

* Ptolæmei Rerum Geog. cap. iii. Albiones, &c. Europae, Tab. I.

† Notitia utraque dignitatum cum orientes tum occidentes ultra Arcadii Honorii- que tempora, lib. ii. Notitia Proconsul Africae, &c.

‡ D. Junii Juvenalis Satyrae, Satyra ii. v. 139.

the Romans never invaded that island. Juvenal probably alludes to his cotemporary Agricola's fifth campaign, when he attacked that part of Scotland opposite to Ireland, and traversed these shores to the northward, three years before his conquest of the Orkneys. If this conjecture is well founded, Jerne can be no inland place, but on the sea coast.

The passage in Juvenal deserves to be considered.

Illuc heu miseri traducimur; arma quidem ultra
Littora Jubernae promovimus, et modo captas
Orcadas, ac minima contentos nocte Britannos.

By comparing this passage with the 24th chapter of Agricola's life, the poet elucidates the historian, who in return illustrates the poet.

It appears credible by this induction—That, from the first invasion of the Romans, until *Britain* was relinquished by them, they named the country *Britannia*, *Caledonia*, and sometimes *Thule*:—That they named the inhabitants at large *Britanni*, *Caledones*, *Picti*:—That they did not give these names to one peculiar part of the island or people, but applied them to the inhabitants and country on the banks of the Thames, as well as to these benorth the *Grampians*, however they might be divided into the different tribes of *Iceni*, *Brigantes*, *Vecturiones*, et *Maeatae*.

The information from the Romans is scanty; but, having none else, we must be satisfied with it. However, as they possessed less or more of the island for about 478 years, they had the best avenues of intelligence; so their accounts are to be judged authentic, and we should estimate every addition as doubtful, and the creature of fancy. Yet modern writers give an account of a colony of
Goths

Goths, who came from Germany or Scythia, to the Western Isles or Orkneys, and from thence established themselves under the name of *Picti*, along the eastern coasts of Scotland. Some make this emigration to have happened about 330 years before the Christian aera; others place it about the year 68 after that period; others bring it so low as the year 306. All give a particular narrative of their wars with the Bretons, Scots, and other inhabitants where they fixed. But as this migration and history are unknown to the Romans, we cannot view them in any other light, than as fabricated by weak and frivolous men, ignorant of the sources of genuine information, or willfully perverting them, and full of vanity. Nor can we consider in any other point of view, that almost universal extermination they are said to have suffered by the Scots, under Kenneth II. These details are not supported by any evidence, but assertion alone, they therefore deserve no serious answer; but we are candidly to class them with the productions of Annius of Viterbo, that amused the world for a time, but now are justly neglected as impositions.

This censure, it is hoped, will not be condemned as too severe. By looking with a superstitious eye to historical tales, only venerable from antiquity, the ancient history of our country has more the appearance of fable than truth; nay, in fact it is so. Now it becomes time to emancipate ourselves from these trammels, and with freedom and honest criticism, to select truth from falsehood, and no longer to defend created history, but remain satisfied with the authentic, though imperfect portion that has escaped the injury of time. This neither condemns nor precludes ingenious conjecture, that is consistent with historical evidence, and supported by public monuments or national peculiarities. An ample field remains for the antiquary and man of science, and it ought not to remain uncultivated.

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There is but one objection that is of any importance, against the idea, that the *Picti* were descended from the ancient *Britanni*. The objection is, That the language in Shetland, Orkneys, on the east coasts of Scotland, and as far as the Humber, to which the *Picts* reached, is Scano-Gothic, or the broad Scotch, distinct from the Saxon or Gaelic, which shows the *Picts* were a Gothic nation.

It would appear singular in the history of language, that the dialect of a nation, exterminated 700 years ago, (for we must take all the tale together), should continue national to modern times, and among their conquerors too, who spoke a very different language. But if we argue from language, the many British words used along the east coasts of Scotland may be adduced, to prove the inhabitants to have been of British descent. In this neighbourhood these words are used, and said to be British: Cau-zea, Shanmorn, Shanbride, Aber, Main, Avon, Cruinach, Din, or Dun, Tar, Curugh, Duffus, or Duffyrha. Perhaps it might be no difficult task for the intelligent in these subjects, to prove that the *Britanni* and *Caledones* spoke only different dialects of the same original. At least it is evident, that the names of places where the *Picti* inhabited, remain in the ancient *Caledonian* dialect to this day. Buchanan noted this in his time.* This affords a proof, that one language once prevailed over Scotland, and that the present change in the low parts of the country, was brought about by causes that operated without a Gothic colony of *Picti*, and after that mark of discrimination was applied to any inhabitants of Scotland.

History gives the fullest evidence, that the Danes and Norwegians frequently invaded the east coasts of Scotland. Most of these were rather temporary descents, than that they established colonies.

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* *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* lib. ii. cap. xx.

Where these were fixed, their language in a great measure remains, as in Shetland, Orkneys, and part of Caithness. But by those transient invasions, many would remain in the country, and communicate a small share of their language. The Saxons from England made frequent inroads into Scotland, and sometimes conquered to the Frith of Forth. In a series of years, there would be also considerable communications from trade. But the great alteration in our national language took place after the Norman invasion of England, and during the Barons wars, when many Saxons of all ranks fled to Scotland, found protection, and obtained grants of lands. From these connections with the Saxons, the English language prevailed so much in the lowlands of Scotland, that in the reign of Robert Bruce, it was written in greater purity, in the history of that monarch, by Archdean Barbour, than by his cotemporaries Chaucer and Gower.

These circumstances fully account for the number of Saxon and Gothic words, in the provincial language of the lowlands of Scotland, or the broad Scots. It is a cause adequate to the effect. There is no reason to create a Picto-Gothic colony for producing this change, or to mention a Scano-Gothic language, particularly as many of the words called Gothic are pure Saxon, borrowed from England, and gradually crept northwards along the coasts, from the greater or easier communication: A few other words might have been introduced in the course of trade and navigation, from the promiscuous foreign breed of people, occasionally mingling with the lowlanders, neither of which took place in the highlands.

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Observations