

Pictish chains and Welsh forgeries

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ABSTRACT

The Pictish silver chains can be shown to be 12 in number, and not 10 as often stated. The evidence of a Welsh chronicle that the chains were royal insignia is worthless, because the chronicle is an 18th-century forgery.

PICTISH CHAINS

A striking feature of Pictish art is the series of massive silver chains found at locations from Inverness to Lanarkshire. Two of these (the double-linked Whitecleugh chain from Lanarkshire, and the Parkhill chain from Aberdeenshire) have typical Pictish symbols engraved on a broad ring which may have acted as a fastener (Stevenson 1955, 100, 111). Henderson (1967, 212) has stated that only three of these chains were found north of the Forth/Clyde line and suggests that the others were perhaps taken south as booty; she further suggests that the chains were made from melted-down silver gilt of the Roman period and that, although their use is unknown, they were ‘probably neck ornaments’.

These chains have prompted the speculation of historians. Duncan (1975, 52) comments that they ‘take us back to the world of heroic deeds, gluttony and chieftainly generosity depicted in Welsh, Irish and Anglo-Saxon literature’, and he speaks of them as ‘adornment of the male person’ and ‘a mark of power and social distinction’ obtained by the arts of war and peace, which produced wealth used primarily for display.

All this may be true. The chains are certainly impressive objects. In 1991 one of them (the Whitecleugh chain in the Royal Museum of Scotland) was amongst items shown at the great Celtic exhibition in the Palazzo Grassi, Venice (Moscati 1991, 752, 794). Yet it is curious that scholars disagree as to how many of these chains exist. Stevenson (1955, 100) gave locations of 10 chains. The Ordnance Survey’s *Britain in the Dark Ages* (1966, 60–1; and Table 1, below) lists 13. Henderson (1967, 212) also gives their number as 10. Duncan (1975, 52) speaks of ‘some ten massive chains’. Laing (1993, 102) refers to only nine.

The purpose of this note is twofold. First, it sets out to ascertain how many of these chains really exist. Second, it discusses Isabel Henderson’s suggestion that the chains were emblems of royal rank.

If we compare the Ordnance Survey’s list of 1966 with that given by Laing in 1993, five points emerge. First, Laing does not mention the Herit’s Dyke, Queen’s Park, and Drumlanrig Castle chains. Second, he refers to a chain from Weston Boreland, Berwickshire: this must be the one from Walston Borland, Lanarkshire. (Lloyd Laing now kindly informs the writer that this

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TABLE 1

Pictish chains listed by the Ordnance Survey's *Britain in the Dark Ages* (1966, 60-1), in order of the pre-1974 county names

Aberdeenshire	1	Parkhill, near New Machar
Berwickshire	3	Herit's Dyke, near Greenlaw Hordwheel, near Abbey St Bathans Whitlaw, near Lauder
Dumfriesshire	1	Drumlanrig Castle, near Penpont
East Lothian	2	Haddington Traprain Law, near East Linton
Inverness-shire	1	Caledonian Canal, near Inverness
Kincardineshire	1	Nigg parish
Lanarkshire	2	Borland, near Walston Whitecleugh, near Crawfordjohn
Midlothian	1	Queen's Park (by Holyroodhouse), Edinburgh
Peeblesshire	1	West Linton parish
	—	
	13	

Note: Some place-name spellings on *Britain in the Dark Ages* differ from other Ordnance Survey maps. On the seventh series one-inch map, for example, 'Herit's Dyke' appears as 'Heriot's Dyke', 'Hordwheel' as 'Hordweel', and 'Whitecleugh' as 'Whitecleuch'.

chain was attributed to West Linton, Peeblesshire, until reprovenanced in the 1950s (Stevenson 1956). The Ordnance Survey list thus counts the same chain twice.) Third, although Laing describes a silver chain of intersecting links from Gaulcross, Banffshire, this should not be added to our list, as its technique is quite different from that of the Pictish massive chains. Fourth, Laing states that only the Parkhill and Whitecleugh chains have Pictish symbols on them: the Ordnance Survey, in contrast, gives the Drumlanrig Castle and Whitecleugh chains as the only ones with such symbols. On this point Laing must be right. His statement agrees with Stevenson's description of 'typical symbols engraved and enamelled on a broad open ring that may have fastened the two ends to form a choker neck-ornament' on the Aberdeenshire example and one from Lanarkshire (Stevenson 1955, 111).

The cheering conclusion of the above is, therefore, that there seem to be 12 Pictish silver chains, and not 10 as stated by most authorities. In place of Isabel Henderson's 10 chains (three discovered north of the Forth, seven to the south), there are 12 (three discovered north of the Forth, nine to the south). Her suggestion that the southern ones came from the north as booty is, perhaps, strengthened by the revised figures.

We have a recent bibliography for nine of the 12 chains (Laing 1993, 102). Of these nine, eight are in the possession of the Royal Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh; the other (from Nigg) is in the Anthropological Museum in Aberdeen. Of the three chains not listed by Laing, it is agreed that the chain from Herit's Dyke, near Greenlaw, Berwickshire, is a Pictish one; it was discussed in an earlier volume of the *Proceedings* by Smith (1881, 69). But any published notes on the chains from Drumlanrig Castle, Dumfriesshire, and from Queen's Park, Edinburgh, are unknown to the writer. Neither of these was mapped by Stevenson and present information on them can only derive from the Old Name Book of the Ordnance Survey (information from Lloyd Laing). In addition, it is not yet certain whether the chain attributed to Walston Borland, Lanarkshire (and formerly to West Linton, Peeblesshire), is not in fact from Weston Boreland, Berwickshire, as Laing claims.

WELSH FORGERIES

We may now go to the main purpose of this note, which queries the suggestion by Henderson (1967, 159) regarding the function of the chains: ‘according to a medieval source, prior to the death of Rhodri Mawr (died 877) the Welsh kings did not wear crowns but instead had gold chains. The word used is “hual”, which has the meaning “a fetter, gyve or shackle”, a description which fits the massive Pictish silver chains well. However, to attribute characteristics of Welsh society to the Picts is no more justifiable than it is to attribute features of Irish society to them.’

The caution expressed here is fortunate, because the alleged ‘medieval source’ is *Brut Aberpergwm*, the ‘Aberpergwm Chronicle’ written by the notorious literary forger Edward Williams (1747–1826), alias ‘Iolo Morganwg’, the Welsh equivalent of a Chatterton or Macpherson. This can be shown as follows. *Brut Aberpergwm* states that Rhodri divided his kingdom between his sons Cadell, Anarawd, and Merfyn, who were called the ‘Three Diademed Princes’ (*Tri Thywysawg Taleithiawg*) because they wore diadems ‘as kings in other countries would do, where before that kings and princes of the Welsh nation wore only gold chains’ (*fal y gwnelai Frenhinoedd yng Ngwledydd eraill, lle cyn no hynny ni wysgynt Frenhinoedd a Thywysogion Cenedl y Cymry namyn hualeu euraid*) (Jones 1870, 688). Elsewhere, Iolo says in his ‘third series’ of triads that Morgan the Rich of Glamorgan, Elystan Glodrydd of ‘twixt Wye and Severn, and Gweithfoed of Ceredigion were called the ‘three fettered monarchs (*hualogion Teyrnedd*) of the island of Britain’ because they ‘wore fetters (*hualeu*) as the chief princes of Britain used to do, and not diadems, that is, crowns’ (Bromwich 1978, 30).

Iolo claimed *Brut Aberpergwm* to be a 12th-century chronicle surviving at Aberpergwm, near Neath, Glamorgan. Yet no copy of it pre-dates the two in Iolo’s own hand in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth (MSS Llanover C34 and 26). Though based on the authentic ‘Chronicle of the Princes’, it is certainly one of Iolo’s forgeries, as Sir John Lloyd pointed out in 1928 (Lewis 1971, 476). The third series of ‘historical’ triads, also said to be old, is another of Iolo’s inventions (Parry 1955, 302).

The passage quoted by Isabel Henderson as a ‘medieval source’ is, then, an 18th-century forgery; and as evidence for any royal function of the Pictish silver chains it is quite inadmissible. However, no slight is intended by this statement to Isabel Henderson (from whom the present writer received many kindnesses when a research student at Cambridge). She is far from being the only modern scholar to have been misled by Iolo Morganwg’s inventions. They still appear in the standard edition of Chaucer’s works, published in 1988 by Oxford University Press, as the writer has pointed out elsewhere (Breeze 1997, 79, n. 47). No doubt Iolo’s forgeries will carry on misleading archaeologists and literary scholars outside Wales for some considerable time to come.

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