

What was life like in AD 1000?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

As we have arrived at the end of the second millennium, I thought I would try to find out what Scotland was like at the end of the first one, and who better to tell me than Dr Alex Woolf, lecturer in the History of Culture of Britain and Ireland from 400 to 1200 AD. I started by asking him to tell me what the social life of the people would have been like.

“Almost everybody would have lived on farms. Kings and bishops would have had bigger farms than everybody else, maybe several of them which they would have moved between. Perhaps around the royal centres, the episcopal centres and the houses of the great earls there would be more of a concentration on horses. Some people have suggested that the abandonment of hill-forts round about 800–900 and the movement to Lowland palace sites round about Forteviot is connected with people of high status being keen on horse-breeding and wanting to have lots of horses surrounding their houses. You might imagine you would know you were getting near to a great man’s house because the number of cattle and then of grain would disappear and you would see paddocks with horses in them.”

Would have been a great deal of undrained land and forest?

“There would have been a lot of swampy, marshy land, particularly in the Central Belt, which would not have been the centre of population which it is today — it would have been a very boggy area — and there would have been a great deal of woodland in the uplands, a lot of which are now seen as bare grazing ground for sheep and the ordinary landscape would have been generally more wooded. The amount of woodland in the eastern Lowlands had increased enormously since the beginning of the Viking Age. In the period between about 700 and 900 almost no new woodland had started to grow in the eastern Lowlands, but from about 900 onwards a lot more trees appear. A lot of this was probably small woods on farms, because people would need wood for fuel and also for building materials and tools — for making the handles of implements, wicker huts and things of that sort.”

Were there woods in the Western Isles that we wouldn’t imagine today?

“I think by this time the Outer Isles had already lost most of their trees, although in the most mountainous areas you might have had more woodland on a small scale because of course the final disappearance of the trees comes with the sheep. But the machairs and the agricultural land were denuded of decent timber, and that’s probably one of the reasons why when we begin to see various territorial lordships on the west coast emerging 200 years or so after the millennium, most of the lordships have some mainland territory and some isles territory.”

What might have been the population of the area now known as Scotland?

“At a guess, somewhere between a quarter and half a million.”

And again, what of the Western Isles?

“On the west coast the population would have been a good deal higher than it is now, partly because it was much more integrated into wider economies, the western sea-routes that led from Norway through Orkney and down through the Western Isles, through the Minch and down to Dublin, Bristol and Chester. There were major trade routes in this area. One interesting phenomenon that seems to be turning up in the archaeology of the Western Isles now is that a lot of people living in the Outer Isles were using pottery made in Wiltshire during the first century or two of the second millennium. That seems to suggest that there was trade even with Dublin or Bristol — Dublin in the sense that it had a lot of trade with Bristol and it would go through there.”

Remind me about the Lewis chessmen.

“The Lewis chessmen were probably twelfth century, and were made in Trondheim.”

What about the climate?

“It was beginning to get better. There was a definite warm spell in the middle of the twelfth century, and there had been a cold spell probably in the middle of the ninth century, so we are moving back into the warm. It was probably slightly warmer than now.”

So probably populations are moving north, moving west, into the tougher terrain, up the hills?

“That’s what’s happening. It may be the reason why you see the Norsemen losing their territory at this period. The great bulk of the population were Gaelic speakers in the eastern Lowlands. As the weather or the climate became better, these people were moving into the Highland area, the enclaves the Norse had dominated.”

So the Gael would have been moving into the relatively sparsely populated areas of the north and west?

“Yes, the Norse arrived at a climatic low, and indeed some people have suggested that it’s one of the original motivations for the Norse invasions.”

You mentioned pottery from Wiltshire. Have there been any other notable finds that date from the end of the tenth century?

“We begin to see more coinage appearing in Scotland. Money wasn’t made in Scotland until the middle of the twelfth century. In the late tenth century we see more English coin and a little bit of other foreign coin turning up in places like Fife and so on. In the late tenth century and early eleventh century we see a good deal more of that. Of course one of the big things that people living in the Kingdom of the Scots would have been aware of at this time was that they had got control of Lothian, still populated largely by its Northumbrian-Anglian population. That had a number of effects. One, it made the southern part of the kingdom much stronger than the northern part, which became somewhat isolated and out-balanced, but also it meant that there were all sorts of interactions now between the Scottish aristocracy and the kinds of cultural developments that had occurred in the English world — like coinage and the beginnings of towns.

“One of the interesting things that’s not quite understood about English moneying and coining, starting in the 930s onwards, is that a number of the people making the coins have Gaelic names. It’s long been noticed that many moneyers in Anglo-Saxon England were foreigners. They were mostly people from the Continent — they

were thought to be experts coming in from the outside to help with the technology. But that can't apply to the Gaels, because there was no coinage in the Gaelic world."

The Norse world?

"It was just beginning in the Norse world. Dublin had started coins in 995, the reign of Sitric Silkybeard, the first Gaelic-speaker to have coins of his own. It may be that some of these English mints were being used as sinecures for exiles. In the early years of Canute's reign, about 1015 to 1025, one of the moneyers was a man called Crinan."

What can we conclude from that?

"That the English government had diplomatic relations with the Gaelic world, and that Gaels were active at relatively high levels within the administration of England, whether as honoured guests or as civil servants. This probably meant that many of these people were returning or sending gifts back to their relatives; it probably meant that many of these ideas were reaching Scotland."

What about the proportion of monks, of religious, in the community as a whole? Was it high? Ten per cent? Fifty per cent? Or was it really very small?

"It's probably quite small. A number of factors around the time of the Viking Age in the ninth century may have affected this. One is this absence of new tree growth between about 700 and 900 which seems to coincide with the great period of the Pictish monuments, and may well represent the fact that in the late Pictish kingdom there was very intensive land use, aimed at producing surpluses for large monasteries. After about 900, after the Gaelic conquest of Pictland, there is far less monumental sculpture, and this may be linked to the Céli Dé movement, who were much stricter in their demands on monastic life."

I am tempted to wonder if this increase in religious asceticism could be connected with the coming of the millennium.

"It may well have been. Certainly people did believe that the millennium was likely to be connected to the Second Coming. Of course there were debates then just as nowadays — people debating whether the real millennium is 1999–2000 or 2000–2001. The big debate for Christian millennarians was whether the millennium was the millennium of Christ's incarnation or Christ's passion. They were not sure whether it was in 1000 or in 1028 that they were going to have to run for cover. Yes, certainly there was a great feeling that something was going to happen that was going to shake the world up, possibly the Second Coming or maybe just the beginning of the period described in the Book of Revelation. What we see at this period is a great increase in pilgrimage. We begin to hear a lot more about Scots going to Rome at the time of Kenneth II. And Macbeth himself went to Rome, the only Scottish king who had ever been there."

Is there any increase in preaching?

"We have almost no evidence for this period about the secular clergy. The parish system as we have it now seems to be largely a development of the twelfth century. We don't really know what preceded it. There have been various debates about this. An Irish historian has recently suggested that lay people were all damned, that the real view within the Gaelic world was that you were only really a Christian if you were in holy orders."

I meant to ask you to sketch in the political situation. Who was King of Scots in 999?

"Cinaed III son of Dubh. He came to the throne in 997 by killing his cousin Constantine the Bald, Constantine III, who was the last of the Kings of Scots descended from Aed the son of Kenneth mac Alpine. Up until this time the kingship had always alternated between the descendants of the two sons of Kenneth mac Alpin. Constantine was killed by Cinaed III and doesn't appear to have had any immediate successors of his own line. So Kenneth's reign is possibly a time when there was an attempt to unify the kingdom under a single power base. This seems to have not met with applause in all parts of the kingdom, because it was in his time that you first hear of kings in the north — in Moray, but called by the Irish chroniclers, nevertheless, kings of Alba."

That accounts for the middle bit of Scotland. What about south of Forth and Clyde?

"South of Forth and Clyde, we have a king of the Cumbrians called Owein, who was based on the Clyde, perhaps with the main church of his dynasty being at Govan, or maybe at Lanark, but also ruling as far south as Penrith in Cumbria. He'd succeeded his brother Mael Coluim in 997, so it's a change of rulers in the same year. He seems to have generally worked quite closely with the Scottish kings. He may have been related to him, the fact that his brother was called Mael Coluim, not a traditional Cumbrian name, suggests that he was related to the king of Scots. He would have ruled the area roughly running from Govan to Penrith — based along the motorway if you like!

"The south-east was inhabited by the Angles. The Northumbrians had been there since the fifth century. Northumbria itself had been broken up in the Viking Age. The area south of the Tees had been ruled from York but the area north of the Tees from Bamborough. In the course of the late tenth century, increasingly large parts of what was to become Lothian were taken over by the Scots kings. They seem to have finally got East Lothian firmly under their belts in the reign of Kenneth II, which ended in 995, and during this period, around the year 1000, they were pushing towards the Tweed.

"What we would have been seeing happening in the area was small numbers of Gaelic lords being set up as thanes to administer the territory. But there are one or two little clusters of Gaelic place-names, which suggests that perhaps in these areas there was a little bit of ethnic cleansing and wholesale settlement, perhaps in these areas there were estates which had been closely associated with the lords of Bamborough, whose people felt they had to get out, because their allegiances were suspect. But the bulk of the population seem to have stayed where they were."

And in the far north you had the earls of Orkney?

"Indeed, in the far north the earldom of Orkney is thriving at this time. It first appears in real historical evidence from this period. The first mention is the death of Earl Sigurd at the Battle of Clontarf, which is mentioned in the Annals of Ulster. The far north seems to have been ruled from Orkney, Sutherland because it is the southernmost point of the Earldom, and certainly all of Caithness and the Northern Isles would have been Norse speaking. Sutherland probably was mostly Norse-speaking. It's not clear how much of the Gaelic that we

have there from later times was a survival from pre-Norse days or was introduced subsequent to re-conquest of the north in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The most southern Norse names further south, Dingwall for example, which had become a royal thanage in about the period we are talking about, Thingwallr, had become a parliament site, so one assumes there must have been some kind of Norse province based around the Dornoch Firth. It may well be that the Moray dynasty, the family of Macbeth and so on, had originally risen to prominence in the reconquest of Easter Ross. Names associated with their family appear regularly in Orkneyinga Saga. These are the kings of the Scots whom the Orcadians had business with.”

And the Western Isles?

“The Western Isles were probably divided in this period along the line that runs out from Ardnamurchan out to the bottom end of the Barra Isles. The area north of this, the Outer Isles, the Small Isles, and at least the northern and western parts of Skye, were pretty much solidly Norse in language and culture. They may well have been within the orbit of the Earls of Orkney. South of the Ardnamurchan line they were still ruled by people who were called Gall but who may well by this time have been Gaelic-speaking, with names like Gille Ciarain. And these seem to have been largely ruled by the same dynasty that controlled Dublin. We tend now historically to talk about the kings of Dublin but it’s by no means clear that Dublin was the centre of the kingdom. The annals refer to them simply as Rí Gall, the Kings of the Foreigners, but by 1000 they were Gaels. In 1000 the King of Dublin was Sitric Silkybeard the son of the great Olaf Cuaran, the great survivor of the tenth century. Sitric’s father had died as a monk of Iona in 981. Sitric had been ruling since the early 990s and seems to have probably controlled Kintyre, the entire southern Hebrides, maybe bits of Galloway as well as Dublin and Man.”

So could you sum up for me the languages spoken in Scotland?

“In Scotland at this period the northern part of the country and the west coast from Ardnamurchan upwards and on the east coast from the Oykell northwards people would have spoken Norse. In a huge stretch of territory from the Oykell to Ireland, including Galloway and all the lands north of the Forth, various dialects of Gaelic would have been spoken. In the area between Westmoreland and Govan you would have had Welsh being spoken, although it’s quite possible that there were substantial survivals of Anglian in this Cumbrian kingdom of Strathclyde and there may have been also minorities of Gaels in parts of it. The relationship of the Cumbrians with the people of Galloway it’s not entirely clear. And then Northumbrian English is spoken in Lothian and the whole of the south-east, although again with probably the odd community of Welsh- and Gaelic-speakers and increasingly a number of Gaelic lords.”

And Pictish?

“There was a possibility that Pictish was still surviving, bearing in mind that the Pictish kingdom kept its identity after AD 900. Very few languages die out in 100 years. People start saying ludicrous things about the Picts in the 1130s, which probably suggests there were no real Picts around by then. But it wouldn’t be at all surprising if they survived well past the millennium, perhaps into the 1040s or 1050s or maybe even a bit later.”

Coming on to the millennium itself, were there messages coming from Rome about the millennium, how to approach it?

“Rome was certainly trying to encourage more people to come to Rome on pilgrimage for the millennium and the other factor that was going on there was a great deal coming out of the central reforming church based around Rome and the Rhineland was a concept called where the Church was trying to stop people fighting each other, at least not fight on Sundays, or as one writer, Gerald of Armagnac suggested, if they must fight, to only hit each other with the flats of their swords. This seems to have had some effect. It doesn’t seem to have stopped people fighting each other enormously, but it does seem to have meant that a few more rules began to emerge.

“One of the big transformations in society in this period is that ethnic cleansing ceases to be the normal way of fighting wars. Whereas in a slightly earlier period a conquest by a different ethnic group would almost inevitably lead to that group’s language and culture eradicating the native culture, from about 1000 onwards this seems to have stopped. The classical example of this in Scotland is the fact that we remained Anglian-speaking and the Gaelic-speakers who moved down there eventually switched to speaking Anglian themselves. So in a way you could see that this kind of new civilised approach was the downfall of Gaelic Scotland, since the south-east was eventually to become the economic power-house and the kings were to adopt the local language. If Lothian had been conquered 200 years earlier, Gaelic would still be spoken to the Tweed.”

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