Lost Cultures: Living Legacies

Episode Title: The Picts: The Mysterious Painted People of Scotland

Episode Summary:
Of all the cultures covered on this podcast, why did the Picts come closest to actually being lost? How did these "painted people" from what is now known as Scotland largely disappear from the historical record? Fascinating recent discoveries have helped people to better understand this tribe, who the Romans once faced with fear on the fields of the British Isles. Guests Tim Clarkson and Gordon Noble share what history is known about the Picts of Scotland, as well as theories that are guiding current research — including the fact that this once nearly lost culture may have plenty of living legacies after all.

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Dr. Gordon Noble: I grew up in Northeast Scotland myself, but no one taught us about the Picts or history going that far back. It wasn't until I went to university and I studied art history and we did a course on early medieval art and sculpture and metal work, and the like, and we learned about the pictish stones then. As soon as I saw those, I was absolutely hooked (laughs). I was like, “That is absolutely amazing.” And people were like, “Oh, don't go and study the Picts. There's nothing to know. And people have been trying to crack the Pictish stones for more than a century. That's where madness lies, (laughs) essentially. So I went off and did a master's and then I did a PhD on earlier prehistoric archeology. It was only about 12, 13 years ago that I was really like, “You know, this is something I need to pursue and get back to what really sparked my interest in archeology and the heritage of this area.” Little did I know at the time that this would become the main focus of my career at the moment. A lot more teachers in this area are getting contacted now to say, “Oh, how do I find more about the Picts?” And “I want to tell my pupils about it.” So hopefully things will change and people will learn more about these things at an earlier age. My name's Gordon Noble, and I’m professor of Archeology at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland.

Alisha Prakash (Host): It’s quite possible- that just as Dr. Noble hadn’t heard of the people known as the Picts, you may also be unfamiliar with them.

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Alisha Prakash (Host): If so, there’s good reason for that…

Alisha Prakash (Host): Welcome to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies… a podcast from Travel + Leisure. I’m your host, Alisha Prakash.

=== Part 2: Series & Episode Intro. ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up from bed to full volume, then back down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): What can we learn about a place by delving into the people who once lived there? In what ways do cultures build upon each other as populations come and go? How
do they complement each other, interact, and leave their marks on the people that come after them? And are cultures truly ever lost, even if the people move on?

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**Alisha Prakash (Host):** With most of the cultures we’ve discussed on this podcast we’ve found that, despite efforts by some, they were never really lost. Usually, people found ways to preserve their cultures as best they could under adverse circumstances. But of all the cultures discussed on this show, the Pict people from what is now Scotland probably come closest to having actually been lost. That said, newfound interest in the Picts has led to newfound knowledge. As a result, pieces of the Pict legacy are perhaps more clear than they’ve been in several centuries. But there’s still plenty that is shrouded in mystery.

**Music: Incidental music changes then continues under the start of Part 3.**

=== Part 3: Our Story Guides. ===

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Just a moment ago, we met Dr. Gordon Noble, one of two guides joining us for this episode to help us learn about the Picts. Now, let’s meet the other one…

**Music: Incidental music continues, then fades out under guest.**

**Tim Clarkson:** It all started off really in my early twenties. I’d always had an interest in ancient history – you know, the Romans and the Vikings and after them I began to get an interest in King Arthur, who obviously is a famous figure of legend. But there is a theory that he may have actually existed in the early medieval period as a kind of war leader, after the Romans left Britain, and that he was fighting the Anglo-Saxons – or, really, English – who invaded after the Romans left. I started reading a bit about King Arthur and the possibility that he may have been a real figure of history. And in doing so, I came across mentions of the Picts up in Scotland who were around there at the time that King Arthur was supposed to have been fighting his wars down in England. I found that I was then less and less interested in King Arthur, and more and more interested in the Picts. And interest in them really hit peak in the late 80s when I was in my late 20s. And I started going on holidays up to the Highlands of Scotland, which is where the homelands of Picts were in ancient times. And I started visiting while I was there various monuments that the Picts have left behind. They’ve left behind these fabulous carved stones, which are quite unique. That really sort of got me into the idea of doing proper academic research on the Picts and then it just carried on from there. I’ll decided to do my master’s degree
in the early medieval period in that northern part of Britain where the Picts were. And then the PhD after that.

**Music: Incidental music begins as bed.**

**Tim Clarkson:** I am Tim Clarkson. I'm a historian and author, specializing in the early medieval period in primarily Northern Britain which includes Scotland.

**Music: incidental music fades up to a dramatic pitch as we head into Part 4.**

=== Part 4: Looking Back. ===

**Music: incidental music fades back to bed.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So who exactly are the Picts?

**Tim Clarkson:** The Picts are one of the ancient peoples of what we now call Scotland. They were around in the early medieval period, which is basically the first millennium AD or of the Common Era. And they first appear in history around about the year 300.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** In AD 297, there's a praise poem that refers to the Picts being an enemy of Rome. And that's kind of back-projected in history, but it's the first reference we know of to that term.

**Tim Clarkson:** They are mentioned by a Roman writer who says that the Picts were causing a lot of trouble for the Romans, who had at that time conquered Britain and had been there for quite a while.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** This praise poem was by an orator named Eumenius and was written for Flavius Valerius Constantius "Chlorus", the Roman emperor at the time. In the poem, Eumenius described how the “Picti and Hiberni” were the enemies of the Britons. “Hiberni,” by the way, is a form of the Latin name for the Irish.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** And before that, the groups recorded by the Romans were groups such as the Caledonians or the Maeatae. And before that, a whole series of, for want of a better term, tribal groups referenced on Ptolemy's map, for example, in the second century.
**Tim Clarkson:** The Picts were one of a number of peoples who were raiding the Roman part of Britain, trying to take away loot and slaves. The word that we have for them in this old Roman document is a Latin word, “Picti.”

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** It's a nickname, essentially. It means “the painted people.” So it's a pejorative nickname by the Romans indicating that these were barbarians who tattooed themselves or painted themselves and were uncivilized and un-Roman. The barbarians of the North essentially.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** But why exactly were these enemies of Rome referred to as “painted” in the first place? As Dr. Noble mentioned, it may mean they literally painted their bodies... or it could mean they were permanently tattooed.

**Tim Clarkson:** That in itself is one of the mysteries or puzzles about the Picts, because it's hard to find any sort of definite description of what this word “Picti” meant. The usual assumption is that it's something to do with putting designs or artwork on skin. Now, whether that just meant painting designs on the skin or actual tattooing with, you know, needles and printing those designs on the skin, it's hard to say. There are a couple of clues that I think point more to tattooing than just to body painting. There is a Roman reference to a Roman legion that had sort of earned its reputation by fighting the Picts. And this description says that the soldiers of this legion used to watch the designs on the skin of the dying Pict who they'd slain in battle. And to me, that sort of sounds more like a permanent design on the skin rather than just something painted. There is another reference from Spain in the 600s. Spain had been part of the Roman Empire. This is a clergyman, who's referring to the Picts as a people who use needles to imprint designs on their skin. Now, that's quite a specific reference to tattooing as far as I'm concerned. And I think that permanent designs on skin would be something that would be more noticeable in those times, and more worthy of comment than just merely body painting. And certainly, in terms of giving an entire people a name that represented something like that, to me, it's something quite permanent that they're doing to their skin.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** Roman sources talk about the Caledonians, the predecessors of the Picts being tattooed, so it's more than possible.

**Tim Clarkson:** So it looks as though the name Picts is conjured up or invented by the Romans. And then the name seems to have been adopted by the Picts themselves. We don't actually know what they originally called themselves, but they seemed to have adopted this almost sort of slang nickname that the Romans gave to them.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** But while the prevailing theory is that the Picts adopted a nickname given to them by the Romans, are there any other suspicions about the origins of the name?

**Tim Clarkson:** It's possible that the name was coined by the Romans, because they had heard a name that the Picts used for themselves that sounded like Picti. Something that sounded in Roman ears like their Latin word Picti, but in the language of the Picts. And maybe meaning
something similar, it's hard to say. We don't really know what the Picts called themselves, and the Picts have left really no written records, certainly of their early history. and everything about the meaning of that name is guesswork and a bit of speculation as well.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** What's interesting though is that that name and that identity seems to represent some sort of coming together or forging of, of a new identity in the North, replacing all those previous names of various groups living North of the frontier. So it could well be, as we find elsewhere in the frontier, that the group at the fringes of empire are essentially coming together to resist Rome. And indeed, throughout the fourth century, in that kinda late Roman occupation, there's a series of battles between the Picts and the Romans – or raidings, certainly. In AD 367, the Picts get together with other groups like the Saxons and the Scots and the Francs and raid across the frontier and bring Roman Britain to its knees for a couple of years before order is reinstated.

**Tim Clarkson:** And the Romans at that time, they've got a lot of trouble elsewhere in their empire, closer to Italy, and into Rome itself. They're starting to pull troops out, and they're basically washing their hands of Britain after ruling it for the best part of 400 years. And they're leaving the people of Britain to their own devices and basically saying, "You've gotta rule yourselves now. We can no longer protect you. You gotta sort things out yourself and set up your own forms of government."

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** And then, the Romans withdraw from Britain in the early fifth century, but that Pictish identity goes on. And then we have Irish sources, we have Anglo-Saxon sources et cetera. But they tend to be very limited, you know? Irish annals, for example, are one-liners about Pictish kings dying or being engaged in battle. So it's really like piecing together a history of a people from a number of tweets that have survived a nuclear holocaust, essentially. very, very, very limited information, so the Picts have always had this mysterious allure because of the lack of knowledge and this quite exotic name associated with them.

**Tim Clarkson:** It's in the fifth century that we seem to find the Picts emerging as a political power up there in the northern part of Britain. We hear of at least one king of the Picts. So we know that they've got at least one kingdom established up there. They're becoming quite a major player on the political scene of the British Isles of Britain and Ireland. Then we get into the sixth century. And we start to get quite detailed documentation about the Picts. We hear about more of their kings, one particular king who lived in the sort of far northeast of what is now Scotland. He was a very powerful king at the time. A lot of other territories under his rule, like the Orkney Isles, off the top of the coast of Scotland. We hear of him through religious writings that are mostly concerned with a saint called Columba who had come over from Ireland to try and convert the Pagan peoples of the northern part of Britain to Christianity. One of his missions was to the Picts, and he is said to have met this king at, uh, this king's fortress and tried to convert him to Christianity. Because the Picts at that time were Pagan. Then we find that Christianity does start to take a foothold amongst the Picts. And by the time we move on into the 600s, they are starting to become what we might call quite a major Christian power,
really. At that time, most of Western Europe was adopting Christianity. So, it's not just Britain. It's Ireland, it's France, and Germany as well. They are sort of using Christianity as a kind of look back to the Roman Empire, which in its later phases had been a Christian empire. So they are using Christianity, to an extent, as a way of giving themselves a sort of connection with this great imperial power of the past, which in turn would sort of enhance their status in a way. They are expanding their power, and coming into contact with other powers in the northern part of Britain. One of these powers is the Scots, who at that time have a kingdom in the west of Northern Britain in an area called Argyll. The Scots have their homeland there, and have set up powerful kingdoms of their own in that area. And they're having dealings with the Picts, sometimes hostile, sometimes intermarriage between royal families, but sometimes warfare and invasion. And the Picts are also having contact with the English, who have got a kingdom called Northumbria, which is south of Edinburgh, capital of Scotland now. The English, their ancestors had come over to Britain from Germany after the end of Roman rule in Britain, but they had set up their own kingdoms in Britain and were also looking to expand, and this English kingdom of Northumbria was trying to expand northwards, and inevitably came into contact with the kings of the Picts expanding southwards, so they had a few wars around the late 600s and early 700s. And so that brings us into the eighth century. And in that century, we see the high point of the power of the Picts. One Pictish king in particular takes over pretty much the whole of that northern part of Britain, what we would now call Scotland. He at one point is ruling the Scots. The most dominant and most militarily powerful king in Northern Britain at that time.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** The King that Clarkson is referring to was known as Óengus mac Fergus – or "Angus son of Fergus." And his reign lasted from 732 AD until his death in 761.

**Tim Clarkson:** He sort of sets the scene for the later power of the Picts, because the authority that he had, the great regional power that he wielded was continued by some of his successors who followed him as kings of the Picts. So by the time we get into the early 800s, the Picts are still the dominant power in the north. Most of the time, they've got the Scots, sort of as vassals of theirs really. And it's really only when the Vikings arrive around the first half of the 9th century, another set of invaders who've come from Scandinavia, from Norway, and Denmark. And they come as raiders. They are very fierce warriors. They sail over to Britain and cause a lot of havoc to the political setup. They have a battle between a Viking army and an army of Picts and Scots who are joined together as allies. And in that battle, the Vikings kill the king of the Picts and his vassal, the king of the Scots and after that, we find that there's a period of political chaos and various characters come forward to try and become the new king of the Picts. Eventually, a guy called Kenneth sets up a new royal dynasty of the Picts, but by that time the Picts and the Scots are kind of merging together. So after being enemies in previous centuries, like 200 years before, they're now almost merging together as one people. And it may be the pressure of the Vikings is kind of forcing them to join, and not be separate people anymore. And by the end of the 9th century, the king of the Picts is starting to call himself the King of Alba. Now, Alba seems to be the name of a new kingdom that incorporates the Picts and the Scots together as one people. We then start hearing less and less about the name Picts and more and more about this name Alba, this new kingdom. And when we get into the 900s, we find that the
name Picts pretty much vanishes off the scene altogether. Strangely enough, the people of that kingdom start calling themselves Scots even though quite a lot of them have Pictish ancestry. And that’s one of the mysteries of the Picts, as to why the name vanished when they themselves were still there. It was just that their kings, we think, decided that a new political order had to be brought into place. And as part of that, the old Pictish identity was somehow redundant and was replaced by this idea of this unified Pictish Scottish nation that eventually became Scotland. And that really brings us to the end of Pictish history.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Let’s back up for a moment, though, to get Dr. Nobles’ take on the later history of the Picts, based on the scant evidence left behind…

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** So we know of the Picts for six centuries or so, late Roman origins, and then they go on to become these powerful kingdoms occupying northern Britain up until the late ninth century, early 10th century. Because of the limited historical sources, we know that there were Pictish kings. There appeared to be an over king since the seventh century, for example – again, very limited information. And equally, the kind of end of the Picts is also kind of shrouded in mystery to an extent, in terms of, it's very peculiar what happens to references, which just seem to really come to an end in that late ninth century context. And already by the 12th century, there was lots of mythology about the Picts, with Norwegian sources, for example, describing them as pygmies, you know, tiny people who lived in the ruins of prehistoric structures up in the northern isles, and they only came out certain times of day. And also, the idea that they were killed by the Scots… The Scots are from Western Scotland, and they spoke Gaelic, and is the origin of the name of Scotland today. It was in 12th century sources that the Scots massacred the Picts, very much in a kind of ‘Game of Thrones’-style event where they were invited to dinner and they were massacred by the Scots. But there’s nothing in contemporary sources that suggest that. So, what scholars think today is that it’s more of a change in the regime at the top. So there’s some sort of merging of the royal lines of the Pict and the Scots in the eighth and ninth centuries AD and the Gaelic kings and lineages come to the fore. Likewise, Gaelic seems to become the main language, and Pictish clearly dies out, certainly by the 10th, 11th centuries, so there seems to be a language change. There seems to be changes in kings and the ruling elite and that Pictish identity disappears. So again, that's something that people have been hugely interested in, and yet we have very little sources to reveal much more about how that process actually happens.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Before we go on, let’s pause to note something unusual about how it is believed the Picts chose their kings…

**Tim Clarkson:** There's a kind of, uh, legend or a tradition that was around in the time of Picts. They chose their kings through the female bloodline, not through the male blood line. Which, in those days, would be quite an unusual way of choosing your next king. In most early medieval cultures in Europe, certainly at that time, the normal succession would be father to son. The king would die, his son would become the next king. Amongst the Picts, what seems to be going on is that the sons aren't succeeding the fathers as kings. A king dies and it's not his son who succeeds him, it's his sister's son, or his brother if they had the same mother. It's called
matrilineal succession where the female bloodline is more important in choosing the next king than the male bloodline. People are quite fascinated by that, and kind of wonder if it means that the Picts had a special status for women as a whole, and that women perhaps had more authority or legal right amongst Pictish society than they did, say, amongst the Scots or amongst the Irish or the Anglo-Saxons. I'm not convinced that there's any sort of implication for the status of women in Pictish society from this mystery of whether they chose their kings through the female line or not. But that whole thing is another of those enigmas and puzzles that surround the Picts, that draws people in. It's all part of this intangible legacy they've left.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So, given that they essentially disappeared from the historical record at a certain point, what may have been the best first clues that eventually led to the current knowledge of the Picts that's now available – still relatively limited, but certainly much expanded from what it once was? After all, let’s remember that other than relatively brief mentions in texts from societies the Picts came into contact with at some point, they didn’t leave many clear indications of their existence for those who didn’t know to look for them.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** Well, I think the real interest in the Picts in terms of rediscovery of that Pictish identity was the interest in their symbol stones. That was the only thing that you could really grasp onto when you were looking at the archeology of the Picts, was that there are about 200 of these standing stones across eastern Scotland, more or less in the territories that we think the Picts occupied.

**Tim Clarkson:** They are the most enduring legacy of the Picts, and certainly the most visually stunning legacy probably of any of the peoples of early medieval Britain.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** From Fife up to the Northern Isles and Western Isles, you find these monuments with these really enigmatic carvings on them.

**Tim Clarkson:** And these symbols are probably the most mysterious aspect of the Picts, and certainly the aspect of the Picts that most people encounter first. But the interesting thing about these symbols is that they are quite sort of standard over a huge area. The entire area where we know the Picts lived, which stretches from one side of Scotland right over to the other, and over to the islands on the west and to the islands on the north side – this remarkable standardization of these symbol designs we find carved on these stones.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** They're usually pairs of symbols, they're abstract symbols in some cases, things like what we call Double Discs and Crescents and V Rods and all these strange names that archeologists have come up with to describe these symbols, but also occasionally things like animals or objects like mirrors and combs.

**Tim Clarkson:** So you have two symbols or you might sometimes have three, so there's some kind of communication or message going on there. These symbols have been carved on these stones for a purpose to say something to people walking past. And those people would
presumably understand what the message and the meaning of these symbols was. But we don't have any way of decoding what these symbols mean, although they are some kind of alphabet.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** So, since the 19th century and before, people have been trying to understand what on earth the symbolic system meant and trying to crack the code behind that. And it was that interest in those in the 19th century that really led people to try and discover more about the Picts. It was in the 1860s that, really, that link between the symbol stones and the Picts began to be made in a more concrete fashion.

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***AD BREAK***

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**Alisha Prakash (Host):** I'm Alisha Prakash, and you're listening to Lost Cultures: Living Legacies, a podcast from Travel + Leisure.

**Tim Clarkson:** The first, or the earliest set of symbol stones are these, uh, rough boulders that we see quite often still in the places where they were set up, in the landscape, in fields or whatever. They seem to have been put up in the fifth and sixth century. They are then superseded in the seventh and eighth centuries by a second type of symbol stone which are not rough boulders, but shaped slabs, where the stone has been shaped into virtually a rectangular slab that is then placed upright in the ground. And it's got the Pictish symbols on one side, and possibly scenes of hunting or scenes from the Bible or some kind of religious imagery. And then on the other side, they're carved with a huge cross, very ornate with lots of Celtic scrollwork and patterns and things around it. So they're known as cross slabs, and the standard of carving is so fine, even now after more than 1000 years of standing in the landscape, that they are quite breath-taking. And not surprisingly, frequently photographed by tourists who visit those parts of Scotland where these stones are found.

We come to the third group of stones. Now, these don't have the old symbols. What we do have is a big cross on one side, and then on the other side, it might be, again, sort of Biblical scenes or patterns, Celtic scrollwork or something. But the important thing about those stones is the Pictish symbols for some reason are no longer required on these monuments. So there's some reason why the Picts at that time decided that the old symbols no longer had relevance to the way they were commemorating people with these big stone monuments. But, again, the standard of craftsmanship is absolutely breathtaking, and there are similar standards of craftsmanship on other carved stones from around that time, in other parts of Britain, in England and Ireland and Wales, but the Pictish stones, some of them are enormous things. There's one that's six meters tall. It's got a battle scene carved on it, running all the way down with hundreds of little figures fighting, and they're all carved. And you see a monument like that and you think there's something really special about the culture that produced that. And that's all part of what makes the Picts so fascinating.
Alisha Prakash (Host): Thankfully though, symbol stones, as fascinating as they may be, are no longer the only clues to go by in the search for more information about how the Picts lived…

Dr. Gordon Noble: It was only in the 1960s that people began to find Pictish sites—things like high status forts and a few burials. And still it’s very limited number of sites. So we've probably got a few dozen preserved skeletons from this time period, less than 20 dated forts of this time period. And again, very little in the way of rural settlement. But there has been progress in the last decade, in particular with more and more settlements being found. Sites like Rhynie and Burghead and Aberdeenshire that we've been leading excavations on. So finally, I think we're beginning to make some progress and understand more about the Picts and their lifestyles and their traditions. And, finding some quite amazing revelations in terms of links to the Mediterranean, the scale of society at this time period,

Tim Clarkson: The archeological excavations that have been happening in recent years, are uncovering a huge amount of information about the settlements of the Picts, especially what we would call the elite settlements, high-status settlements. For instance, there's a very large fortress on the eastern coast of Scotland, a place called Burghead. They have found that it was a very important Pictish fortress, obviously a place where kings would be possibly living there and certainly use it as part of their sort of defensive network. There are also elite high-status ecclesiastical settlements that have been excavated. There's a Pictish monastery at a place called Portmahomack, a bit further north from Burghead or from the eastern side of Scotland. That's been shown now through excavation to be a very, very important Christian ecclesiastical site throughout the Pictish period, and probably one of the major monasteries of the Picts, if not for a time, the major monastery for their kingdom.

The archeology seems to be finding quite a lot about how ordinary Picts lived as well. The ordinary Picts tend to be quite invisible in history, because they don't tend to get written about by the people who are writing at the time, the monks and the chroniclers at the time were more interested in what kings and bishops were doing and less interested in the people who farmed the land and kept everything going. But archeology is helping us to understand the distribution of Pictish settlements and where the population lived. The kinds of areas, the kind of landscape that they chose for their homes. It's through archeology at the moment that quite big strides are being made in our understanding of the Picts. That's likely to continue for quite a while. One of the main ones is the Northern Picts Project which is run from the University of Aberdeen, and they're quite instrumental in a lot of these excavations that are going on at the moment.

Indeed, on social media, you can actually keep up to date with the things they're finding each week.

Alisha Prakash (Host): As both our guests describe, while many of the details about Pictish history are still somewhat mysterious, many of the broad strokes have at least come into better focus in recent years—though even those can surely be debated among scholars who have differing interpretations of the available information. But let’s return for a moment to those burial sites that Dr. Noble mentioned earlier…
**Dr. Gordon Noble:** You begin to get these field cemeteries developing by the fifth century, and that's quite interesting in itself because there are very few cemeteries known prior to that until you go back to the late Bronze Age, really, a good thousand years or more before that. So it does seem to mark a period when people are perhaps laying more definite claims to land or marking the importance of lineage and inheritance. And you begin to get these quite impressive burial monuments being built – square and round cairns – quite different to what you find in most other regions. Although generally they cover east-west burials, similar to late Roman practices of burial or at least we think was developing elsewhere. So it is an interesting period in which, perhaps, an emphasis on the importance of particular families and ancestry being important. And that's really interesting if you think about what's going on in that time period in terms of establishment, certainly in a post-Roman context, of the first documented kingdoms and kingship in this part of the world. Rulership obviously being important. And so that these field cemeteries might be part of that process in which particular families or groups come to the fore and are able to increase their rulership over larger and larger groups, broadly speaking, as time goes on. But again, because of lack of archeological investigation and soil conditions in Eastern Scotland is quite acidic, we don't always get very good preserved human remains in these monuments.

And unlike English examples further South, they didn't bury their dead with grave goods, so that's frustrating, but actually quite similar to what you find in Wales and Ireland at the time period, that limits what you can say about the identity of the dead and limits the kind of recovery of objects associated with dress and identity and the like. But the monuments themselves tell you a lot about the investment in the dead and, more and more again, being found of these cemeteries as time progresses. So things like aerial photography in the 1970s and onwards identify more of these cemeteries and now developer funded archeology where you're building motorways or supermarkets are beginning to uncover cemeteries that we didn't know about. So, the Picts identify themselves through their mortuary archeology.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** According to Tim Clarkson, the lack of “grave goods” fits with the generally accepted idea that most Picts were probably Christian by about 650 AD, as Christianity tended to forbid such items — other than personal adornment, like rings. Yet, even though Pict burial sites may not include grave goods, other excavations are turning up items of interest…

**Tim Clarkson:** There are quite a few artifacts being found even now from the excavations that are going on at the moment. So they're finding small items of jewelry and personal ornament and things like that. All of which help - to build up a picture of how these people lived, how they looked, and what their appearance was like. As well as the stones, there have been over the years - not so much recently, but certainly in the past - some kind of iconic discoveries. There was a hoard of silver found quite a long time ago, which was adornment silver jewelry really, some of it, carved, inscribed with these same symbols that we see on the stones. And you see photos of this silver ornamentation now, and it looks stunning. You know, if you saw it displayed in a jewelry store, you'd think it was just fantastic — the level of sophistication of the artwork and the craftsmanship, it's like what we see on the stones. It's a really, really high-level of artistic talent producing this kind of stuff. And even when it's not an actual artifact, it may be just, a fortress on top of a hill is excavated. Just by looking at how the ramparts were built, how
the gateways were set out, how the interior buildings were laid out, and what the interior buildings were used for… all this can be discovered through archeological excavation and can give us real insights into what was going on on these settlements. So every bit of archeology that's unearthed goes with the rest to help us to build up this all around picture of how these people lived.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** Dr. Noble told us about two specific excavations he's worked on that have been extremely enlightening…

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** We've been excavating a site called Rhynie, which was the project that really made this whole endeavor take off. So there were a number of these symbol stones, including the Rhynie Man, which is this fantastic carving of an individual carrying an axe over their shoulder. And that was found in 1978 by the farmer plowing his field, and he hit this big stone and he uncovered this individual. So we were like, “What on earth is that?” And in the same year they flew over the site and they identified enclosures where the stone was found. But no one had investigated until we started work there in 2011, and, indeed, we had no big expectations of what we might find there. But over the course of five seasons of excavation, we found this incredible Pictish settlement dating from the late Roman period, the fourth century through to the sixth century. And there we found timber buildings inside the enclosures. We found one of the standing stones that's still there today with a carving of a so-called Pictish beast and a salmon on it stood at the entranceway to the settlement. And we found the stone socket for what might be the Rhynie Man also standing at the entranceway. And then inside we found shards of amphorae that are fifth, sixth century in date. And they came from the Eastern Mediterranean for holding wine. So the Picts were drinking Mediterranean wine. They were importing glass from Western France for drinking goblets. We found high status dress accessories, most importantly, huge assemblage of metalworking waste. So they were part of a huge production center that was producing high status brooches and pins and the like. So that was an incredible discovery. And a site that was completely undocumented and previously unknown. Most recently we've been looking at a hill fort that overlooks that site called Tap o’ Noth. And this was a site that was known for years as the second largest hill fort in Northern Britain. It's 17 hectares in extent, and was thought to be late Bronze Age in date so well before the Picts. But we began excavating there in 2019, and through LiDAR survey and photogrammetry survey, we discovered there was about at least 800 houses within that hill fort. And our excavation so far, we've now dug about a dozen of these houses and they all date from the late Roman period. So again, in that period when the Picts are first mentioned through again to the sixth century. So now we've gone from knowing nothing about Pictish settlement in that landscape to a site that has 800 houses of that time period. If we think about, we've got a few dozen known houses in the rest of Scotland, then it shows you what we can find through new archeological work, but what those sites also show you is the difficulties of survival. So the houses on Tap o’ Noth are built without earthfast posts and things like that. They seem to be turf walls, floor layers and hearths. Which, you know, Scotland has been intensively cultivated over the last few centuries, and any Pictish houses of that style would just be removed. And I think that's why we're lacking so many sites in terms of just the way they built their houses was different to what came before. So it's a big difficulty in identifying the sites. But again, Rhynie,
Tap o’ Noth shows you what we can find if the circumstances and the funding is there to launch these investigations.

**Music: Incidental music fades up to full volume as we head into the next part.**

### Part 5: Today/Destinations.

**Music: Incidental music fades down to music bed and continues under narration.**

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** In recent years, some studies have claimed that around 10% of Scottish men have DNA markers that connect them to the Picts. We asked our guests about this…

**Music: Incidental music continues under guest, then fades out.**

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** It’s one I get asked about all the time. People often post saying, “Oh, I’m 10% Pictish,” or “50% Pictish,” or the like, and you know, there may be inheritance from Pictish lines, undoubtedly in Eastern Scotland. But the thing is, it’s all based on modern DNA patterns. It’s based on analyzing the DNA of all the modern people living in Europe and saying, “Well, there’s a particular grouping of DNA types in Eastern Scotland, and therefore that must be a Pictish signature.” But obviously we know from historical sources, there was a whole series of incoming populations – the Normans and Gaelic settlers from the West. And I think about all the modern populations coming into Scotland in the last century or so. So I think it remains to be seen what that modern DNA evidence actually tells us about people’s relationship to these communities living almost a thousand years or more ago. And so what we really need more of is ancient DNA from Pictish burials to begin to piece together how the ancient signatures in Eastern Scotland would relate to the modern DNA sequence. There’s some work in our department on that, looking at genetics of Pictish burials, and I think a few other projects are also beginning to look at this. The numbers of burials, again, is a big limiting factor. There’s only a certain number of burials, and obviously we need to preserve skeletal materials as much as we can for future generations. So, it’s slow progress, but again, hopefully in the next few years we should be able to say more about that, and begin to piece together that genetic jigsaw.

**Tim Clarkson:** I’ve not myself done much research onto the sort of genetic side, the ancestry side. But I’ve been in contact with people for whom this is a really important part of the way that they unearth their own ancestry. And to me, it’s absolutely no surprise at all to find that a large portion of the people who are inhabiting Scotland now are descended from the Picts. Because even though the Picts seem to vanish from history around the time that the Vikings were around, they didn't vanish from the land. They stayed. It was just that they changed their identity. Because they stayed, their descendants carried on living on the land, and are therefore
still around today. I don't know what proportion or what percentage of Scotland now could claim to have Picts ancestry, but I imagine it would be quite a sizeable amount. And, no surprise really, 'cause the Picts were obviously quite a numerous people. They inhabited a huge area of Scotland. And there must be a lot of their genetic heritage still around today.

**Alisha Prakash (Host):** So, whether they’re descended from the Picts or not, how can people who may be interested in their history today actually interact with what remains of the culture? And what is the general state of tourism around the Picts in Scotland these days?

**Tim Clarkson:** The starting point would be Edinburgh, capital city of Scotland. There's a museum there called the National Museum of Scotland. And they've got a large collection of original Pictish carved stones in there, all of them with sort of information panels telling you what they're about, and when they were carved and all that kind of thing. And in that museum, because it deals with the whole history of Scotland, you can see the Picts almost in context, because other parts of the museum deal with earlier and later periods of Scottish history. So you go into the bit where the Pictish stones are, and you see straightaway where the Picts fit into this broad sweep of Scottish history. And then, depending on where one as a tourist is planning to go in Scotland – if you were planning to concentrate on Picts sites and the stones, you'd be better off staying on the eastern side of Scotland. So from Edinburgh you could travel a short distance north into an area called Fife. There's a small city there called St Andrews that has a famous university, a famous golf course. They have a cathedral there, which has its own museum. And again, that has quite a lot of Pictish material in there, including one of the most iconic Pictish carved monuments, it's known as the St Andrews Sarcophagus. And it's a stone coffin which is made of separate square panels, each one really intricately carved with figures and designs and patterns.

**Dr. Gordon Noble:** And there's great smaller museums like Elgin Museum, Inverness Museum, Tarbat Discovery Centre - all good collections of picture stones and archeological material from that time period. And it's great to see that industry beginning to engage with the sources that we have and the material we have.

**Tim Clarkson:** You can go further north into Perthshire. And there are quite a few very interesting Pictish sites to see. You could spend quite a few days there. There's one in particular called the Meigle Museum, it's at a little village called Meigle. And it's a small museum, but it's got a huge number of Pictish carved stones in there, some of the most famous symbol stones are in there. And you can really see them close up. Also in that same part of the world is another of the most iconic Pictish monuments. It's at another little village called Dunning, and there's a church there called St Serf’s Church. And inside is an enormous cross, wonderfully carved with all kinds of Celtic designs, intricate patterns. It's a very, very impressive monument to see and to photograph. And it's got the name of one of the Pictish kings on it as well, which makes it quite unique. You can’t really see it very closely, but it's been spotted by archeologists. And then quite a short distance away, another small village called Aberlemno, they've got a few Pictish stones, just dotted around the village, not in a museum. There's a couple by the side of
the road as you come through. The most famous stone at Aberlemno is in the churchyard where all the modern graves are now. And it's just standing there. It's a huge stone slab with a big cross on one side, and on the other side is an amazing battle scene, three rows of action, almost like you'd read it in a comic book. We don't know what battle it is. One of the most popular theories is that this battle scene carved on this stone commemorates a great Pictish victory over the English of Northumbria in the year 685 – a battle that is supposed to have occurred not far away from this village of Aberlemno. And then you can go further north into Aberdeenshire. You've got that fortress I mentioned before, Burghead on the coast. Further north, beyond Inverness, you've got the monastery at Portmahomack, which is very well worth seeing. So all along that eastern side of Scotland, you can spend days following your own trail of Pictish sites, and seeing the most amazing monuments along the way. I'd always recommend people from overseas to hire a car because a lot of these little places where these museums are and these carved stones are really off the beaten track. It's an amazing landscape of stones, to just sort of travel around, and then you just look to one side of the road and you see this big stone just standing there in a field. And you think, "I've gotta go and see that." Yeah, you can have some fun seeking these places out.

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=== CREDITS ===

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades down to bed.

Alisha Prakash (Host): Thank you to our guests, Tim Clarkson and Dr. Gordon Noble. Be sure to follow Lost Cultures: Living Legacies on Apple Podcasts, Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. And we’d love your feedback. If you could, please rate this podcast and leave us a review. We’d really appreciate it. You can also find us online at travelandleisure.com/lostcultures. In our next episode, we’ll explore the Rapa Nui culture on the island of the same name, which many people know as Easter Island… so make sure to come back for that. Until then, enjoy your travels!

Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up for a moment, then back down to bed.

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Music: Lost Cultures theme fades up to full volume and plays out.