HISTORY OF SCOTLAND

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THE FORMATION OF SCOTLAND

Geologically, Scotland belongs to North America. During the Cambrian Period it lay on the continental shelf of a landmass scientists call Laurentia. The ancient Iapetus Ocean sat between it and a continent called Baltica, which later became Scandinavia and the Baltic, and these two converging plates gradually overran the Iapetus through the Cambrian and Ordovician periods. Around four hundred million years ago during the Devonian Period, as the first amphibians were crawling out of the ocean, the Scottish segment of the Laurentian plate met Avalonia—most of England and Wales—which had earlier joined with Baltica. This convergence pushed up mountains which ultimately formed the West Highland and Grampian mountain chains.

Scotland now lay at the centre of the world in a supercontinent called Pangea, where it remained throughout the Permian and Triassic periods. As mammals replaced the dinosaurs during the Tertiary Period, the tectonic plates carrying Laurentia and Eurasia began to split apart and separated Scotland from Laurentia. This recession opened the Atlantic Ocean. On Scotland's west coast, sinking oceanic crust caused another period of volcanism and created new mountains on Skye, Rum, Mull, Jura, and Arran. Then came ice. During the past two and a half million years, Scotland has been buried in ice at least five times.

Today, all this geological history can be read in Scotland's landforms, with ancient mountains in the north and south eroded by the intervening ice ages. The passing of ice scoured wide postglacial valleys between them, leaving fertile glacial till soils. The Highlands, valleys, and lowlands are separated by massive faults, or breaks in the crustal plates. The different plate history of each area left behind a patchwork of distinctive rocks: Lewisian gneiss (one of the world's oldest metamorphic rocks), Iona marble, coal, granite, obsidian, and jasper. The history of life is written in Scotland's fossils of plants, dinosaurs, fish, corals, and mammoths.

As the world's major ice sheets began to retreat about eighteen thousand years ago, grasslands expanded, forests took over, and animals moved in to the newly-productive lands—followed by human hunters. With the melting ice, the sea rose and lands that had once formed a continuous mass were gradually overtaken by rising waters. By 8,000 years ago, Britain and Ireland had become islands cut off from Europe, and Scotland was surrounded on its northern and western shores by other islands, large and small.

ANCIENT BRITONS

The first human evidence in Scotland was discovered in Lanarkshire in the central south. Flint tools here have been dated to around fourteen thousand years ago, but these first people may have retreated to more hospitable areas when cold conditions made a brief advance. Remember that Britain was still part of mainland Europe until about eight thousand years ago, although the ocean was rising with the melting glaciers. About ten thousand years ago, small family groups of hunters, fishers, and gatherers created

seasonal settlements around the British coast, using boats for fishing and travel, gathering shellfish, and travelling inland to exploit sources of good toolmaking stone, animals and edible plants.

With abundant resources it became possible to create permanent settlements, and with the arrival of new populations of farmers during the Neolithic period (beginning around 7,000 years ago), larger villages and a more complex culture replaced the hunter-gatherer lifestyle. The newcomers were skilled seafarers—they had to be, as Britain and Ireland were now cut off from Europe by the North Sea. Seeking the best agricultural land, some settled in the Hebridean Islands, and further around the west coast others discovered the rich soils of Orkney. They created a communal society so successful they had the leisure time to construct massive stone religious monuments. By five thousand years ago—long before the Egyptian pyramids were built—communal tombs culminated in the magnificent Maes Howe chambered cairn. Along with nearby standing stones and other Neolithic monuments, it lies in an extensive sacred landscape on the main island of Orkney.

Domestic structures were hardly neglected, as the nearby Skara Brae cluster of nine houses (and Northwest Europe's earliest known stone house at the Knap of Howar on Papa Westray) attest. Huge henges with standing stones at Stenness and Brodgar stunned more southerly visitors, and probably inspired the builders of Stonehenge west of London and Carnac in Brittany. During this period, Orkney was at the centre of cultural development in Britain. And it was not an outpost: many of the Scottish islands still shelter magnificent structures from this era. At Callanish on the Isle of Lewis, the henge and beautiful standing stones of Lewisian gneiss are of similar date to those on Orkney, attesting to the extent and prosperity of Neolithic civilization.

Around three thousand years ago, the infiltration of Celtic people bearing iron tools from Central Europe—and a deteriorating climate along with a growing population—combined to create an increasingly violent and unstable society. Religious building gave way to the construction of fortifications and the enigmatic brochs of northern Scotland, such as those at Jarlshof and Scatness in Shetland. Defensiveness increased in the first century AD with the southern invasions of the Romans, who despite their best efforts were never able to subdue Scotland.

THE PEOPLE

The first Scots were Mesolithic hunters, later joined by waves of Neolithic migrants from southern Europe. Around 2,700 years ago, Celtic influences—including the glorification of warfare and the Gaelic language spreading from central Europe—began to replace the older culture. The art of the mysterious Picts may have been one aspect of this Celtic shift although many archaeologists insist the Picts themselves descended from the Neolithic people already living in the eastern parts of Scotland.

As the Roman decline began in the southern parts of Britain during the fourth century, Gaels from Ireland—the Scoti, or Scots—established the kingdom of Dal Riata on the western coast of what was to become united Scotland in AD 844. Allied with the Picts and finally replacing that culture, they successfully repelled Roman incursions. By 878 Norse raids had forced the abandonment of Iona, and these Scandinavians from Denmark and Norway had established settlements in the northern islands and coastal areas.

Finally, the Anglo-Saxons, many of them also descended from Roman families, infiltrated from the south and established their influence and language in the Scottish culture we know today.

THE HISTORIC PERIOD

The departure of the Roman armies from Britain after the fourth century opened the opportunity for the Gaels to expand their influence in Scotland and Wales. By the fifth century, Ireland was exporting the Christian religion along with its language and customs into the western islands and mainland. The arrival of Irish missionaries—especially Columba, and his establishment of a monastery on Iona—ultimately led to the pacification and conversion of most of Scotland in the sixth century. This culminated in the creation of a single kingdom under Cináed (Kenneth) mac Ailp'n in 844 as the Irish Scots and Picts united to defend against incursions by the Anglo Saxons and Norse.

Repeated incursions of Viking pirates beginning in 794 forced the evacuation of Iona's influential monastery to inland Kells, Ireland. Other monasteries in the Islands were similarly attacked, but most survived until the later Norse visitors settled down and became less feisty. Many were farmers and traders, and relatively peacefully became part of the Scottish patchwork, giving names to many places and inserting words of the Norse tongue into the language.

Orkney and Shetland lost most of their Pictish culture to Norse incursions by a thousand years ago. However, both groups of islands gained new economic importance as staging areas for Norse raids into the British mainland, and the first King Magnus was able to wrest control of Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides and surrounds from the Scots in 1080. The Hebrides remained part of Scandinavia until 1266 following the Battle of Largs, when the Treaty of Perth returned them to Scotland, but Orkney and Shetland remained part of Norway until 1469. Even today these islands retain a strong Norse identity.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the concentration of land and wealth in the hands of aristocrats caused much hardship among ordinary Scots, particularly the island crofters (small farmers). The Jacobite Rebellions pitted Scot against Scot throughout this period, culminating in the deafeat of the Young Pretender, Prince Charles, in the devastating Battle of Culloden in 1745. From the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, the Highland Clearances saw the weathy landowners evict the crofting population of the Islands and Highlands in order to replace their small rents with more lucrative sheep grazing. Thousands were left homeless. Many of those who had seafaring skills, a sense of confidence—or were simply too desperate to stay at home—set off to explore and settle distant lands, leaving empty crofts to the winds. By the nineteenth century, Stromness was a final port of call for voyages to the new worlds of North America and Australia, and many of the managers of the fur-trading Hudson's Bay Company were recruited from Orkney. In the twentieth century, Orkney and Shetland played a key role in the two World Wars, the exploitation of offshore oil, and new environmental technologies which have helped create a new prosperity for Scotland's people.