Resistance to Roman Rule: Scottish Autonomy through Feminine Agency

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Resistance to Roman Rule
Scottish Autonomy through Feminine Agency

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Abstract

The historical narrative as it exists today maintains the precedent of excluding accounts of powerful women. This lack of gender representation is present across geographic regions and eras of human existence and is often the product of the passage of time, as the transmission of literary, archaeological, and oral records is an incomplete process. However, this loss of powerful and autonomous women is also an outcome of bias within scholarship, both ancient and modern. Historians are products of societal paradigms and these intrinsic biases and beliefs shape the recounting of historical events. Thus, the institution and continuation of patriarchal systems of oppression have disregarded women from the historical record.

This undergraduate thesis attempts to reinvestigate the power dynamics of ancient Scottish women within the historical narrative in order to counter the gendered biases of previous historiography and research. Through the coalescence of historical and archaeological evidence across the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, the Roman occupation of the British Isles, and the early medieval kingships of the Picts, a new interpretation of Scottish women can be offered. Scottish women, from the foundations of Celtic civilization through the institution of Christianity, transcended the oppressive influences of external patriarchal systems and maintained positions of reverence, power, and autonomy throughout the historical record.
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Introduction

What does it mean to be a woman in the ancient world? Were women forced into societal roles of submission, or were they presented with the opportunity to possess autonomy over their own lives? Throughout the historical record women have been marginalized and continuously sequestered to positions of subservience and passiveness. Due to the transmission of the historical narrative and the loss of information that comes with the passage of time, the patriarchal standard of the oppressed female has been maintained. It has not been until recent years that scholarship has started to question the roles that women played in ancient society. Through innovative approaches to questioning and working beyond the historical record (through the inclusion of writings beyond the scope of history including religious and creative texts, oral tradition, and archaeological material), researchers have begun to uncover evidence that women of antiquity may have in fact held power.

Ancient Scotland is a critical example of this shift within research and the transformation of the modern conception of historical precedent. This remote region epitomizes the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire, both geographically and culturally. The Romans were never able to fully conquer the Celtic tribes and subsequently, these ancient people were never fully Romanized. In Celtic Scotland, the native tribes fought against the imposition of imperial expansion and maintained a deep reverence towards women. However, due to the lack of a written language until the institution of early Christianity in Scotland, and limited textual sources from the Romans, ancient Scottish women have been omitted from the historical record.

In order to reestablish these women to the historical narrative, I believe it is crucial to revisit the remnants of these ancient and enigmatic tribes. This undergraduate thesis will examine the literary record and material culture that encompass the Roman presence in Scotland, as well
as the preceding history of the Late Bronze Age to Early Iron Age, culminating with Pictish society in the early medieval period. By analyzing archeological remains, the sparse historical texts from contemporary Roman and later Pictish sources, and seeking commonalities with other Celtic tribes, I believe that the voices of these marginalized women can begin to be restored.

In the first chapter I explore the foundations of Scottish society and how in the dawn of Celtic identity, women were revered. The existence of prehistoric female figures represents the power of femininity in the obscure religious beliefs of the ancient Scottish tribes. In the second chapter, I focus on the presence of women during the Roman occupation of Scotland. I analyze Tacitus’ representation and bias concerning native Celtic women in the *Agricola*, including female sexuality, the roles of women during and after Mons Graupius, and the influence of the Boudiccan revolt in the native response to the campaigns into Scotland. I also offer examples of other powerful and autonomous women during the Roman occupation of Britain, not as evidence of correlations between the two regions but as examples of feminine authority and freedom in the British province during this era. In the third and final chapter, I argue that the autonomy and power that Scottish women held throughout the previous eras of history continue into the institution of Christian society during the Pictish period. The Venerable Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* and Pictish relief sculpture both emphasize the importance of women in early medieval society, and despite the oppressive nature of Christianity and kingship structures, women were respected and enacted palpable change throughout Scotland.

It is paramount to reinstitute these powerful women to the historical record. By offering a new interpretation of the historical narrative and existing material culture of ancient Scotland, a more complete understanding of the native Celtic understanding and respect of feminine authority, both in the divine and in society itself, can be inferred.
Chapter 1
Venerating Women at the Dawn of Scottish Society

1. The Bronze Age

In order to understand the importance of female power and the respect for women with influence in society, whether civically, religiously, or militaristically, an analysis of the foundations of Scottish culture must be done, beginning with the Late Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age. This era of history is often shrouded in mystery: understanding the lives, societal structures, and beliefs of people from thousands of years ago is a daunting and an arduous process. There is no written record and archaeological findings are difficult to interpret. Analysis of this time period is further complicated by the marked changes over time and the utter lack of an “inexorable march towards increased centralization or social coherence”.¹

The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age Scotland was an era marked by domesticity through fortified settlement. Household structures that date to this time period seem to be primarily constructed in the form of a roundhouse, or “a circular structure that was built with wooden, turf, or stone walls and roofed with thatch or turf”.² While there are variations in style across the Scottish landscape, which is evidence for the cultural and stylistic complexities of this time period, the basic shape and function seems to be consistent. The roundhouse is in fact so distinctive to the British Isles that its prevalence is a critical piece of evidence against the “traditional ideas of large-scale folk migration during the Iron Age, since population movements on such a scale would surely have introduced continental styles of architecture”.³ These domestic

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structures were eventually constructed on a monumental scale, encouraging the potential for social integration and, to modern researchers, the possibility of strong communal or family ties within each roundhouse. In order to maintain the safety and security of the familial or tribal unit, or perhaps offer a show of strength, roundhouses were eventually fortified as brochs or broch villages.

Large agrarian settlements were established alongside the fortified roundhouses. Even in times of tribal conflict, it seems that many native Celtic individuals had developed permanent farming and stock-rearing practices. This extensive adoption of farming practices assisted in the radical deforestation of the Scottish landscape that had begun in the Early and Middle Bronze Age. The ancient Caledonian forest that once covered the majority of the Scottish Highlands had been decimated in creation of agricultural lands and building projects for the tribal nations. By Agricola’s campaigns in the 80s AD, over half of the natural forestation had been destroyed.

One of the many difficult features of this era of history is the issue of understanding and interpreting women’s roles in Scottish society. Archaeological finds that are often used to understand gendered differences in cultures and communities that predate a written record are not easily discernable in the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age material culture. Burials and associated grave goods are sparse and, in some cases, the grave goods seemed to be haphazardly buried with the individual. J. D. Hill posits that this use of material culture was evidence of a social practice to radically distinguish between different Celtic individuals.

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differentiation or even social status does not seem to be of prime importance in these burial sites. However, Celtic reception and depictions of women are not lost in the archaeological record for this era. The veneration of femininity and female sexuality can be seen in the ritualistic practices of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age.

2. Female Representation and Religion: The Ballachulish Figure

Women’s roles, while difficult to understand in the context of daily life and societal structures in Scotland, are represented in the prehistoric religious practices of the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. One of the most evocative archaeological finds for this era is a ritualistic representation of a woman. The Ballachulish Figure, pictured in Figure 1, is an almost life-size oak and quartz carving. The figure was found in a peat bog near Loch Leven in the north-western region of Scotland, and radio carbon dating places the figure between 700 and 500 BC, marking the Ballachulish Figure as not only one of the oldest representations of a female form, but one of the oldest depictions of a human ever uncovered in the Scottish archaeological record.7

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The Ballachulish Figure stands at approximately four and half feet tall, and has a flat chest with pronounced female anatomy from the waist down. Researchers have interpreted her as either a young girl or as a young female deity. Figure 2 is a photograph of the carving from

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8 Ibid.
the 1880 excavation. After the Ballachulish Figure was retrieved from the waterlogged peat bog, the wooden figurine was not kept in a moist environment and suffered intense warping and distortion. The image taken from the initial recovery of the figure gives scholars the opportunity to examine the smaller, carved details that were lost, due to the lack of proper conservation. The figure was still attached to its wooden base, the labial region was visible, and researchers have interpreted the carved objects in her hands as phallic symbols.

Figure 2. Photograph of Ballachulish Figure from 1880 excavation. 600 BC. “Ballachulish Figure.” Ballachulish, Inverness-shire. National Museums Scotland.
The Ballachulish Figure was found near a coastal lake that, throughout the historical record, was known as a sacred location, as well as a dangerous, and sometimes fatal, crossing point. Loch Leven contains straights to the sea, creating a treacherous path across the water. The Ballachulish Figure would have overlooked the dangerous and sacred passage between Loch Leven and the sea.\(^9\) This geographic association has led scholars to interpret the carving as a goddess of protection or passage, one who would help Early Iron Age travelers cross bodies of water safely and securely. This interpretation is furthered by the position that the figure was found in during the time of excavation. Archaeologists found the carving:

“[Lying] face down on gravel under more than 3m (10ft) of peat, below a collapse wicker structure, where it had been placed… The sharp outlines of the carving, when first found, show that it did not lie for long on the surface but must have been buried deliberately in the peat or dumped in a stagnant pool”.\(^{10}\) This deliberate burial of the figure may be indicative of a ritualistic sacrifice. The purposeful “death” and internment of the feminine carving may have served as an offering to the dangerous waters and passage of Loch Leven, allowing travelers to safely cross the tumultuous straights.

While the theory behind the Ballachulish Figure representing a goddess of passage and safe travels is interesting and well supported by the geographic location and the placement of the object, I would also argue that the carving may have been intended to be a fertility goddess. It is difficult to ignore the graphic and pronounced nature of the female and male reproductive organs. Perhaps the visual intensity of both the phallus and the labia were indications of the importance of sex and reproduction in Celtic ritual, thought, or society.

In either interpretation, the fact that the Ballachulish Figure is of a female individual, whether human or divine, is important in and of itself. The very existence of this carving may be

\(^9\) Ibid.
indicative of Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age reverence and respect for women within religious or ritualistic contexts. The theorized importance, whether as a goddess of protection or of fertility (or both, as it would not be unheard of in ancient pantheons for a deity to be associated with more than one ideological concept), could be evidence and precedent from the foundations of Scotland for Celtic tribes and communities giving ideological significance, importance, and respect to divine females, and perhaps to women more broadly.

3. Iron Age Transitions

The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age are an equally fascinating and perplexing period of Scottish history. The lack of a written record coupled with the sparse archaeological remnants that do not indicate the existence of cultural and social melding gives an enigmatic sense to the people and cultures that existed and developed during this era. A concrete understanding of early life in the northernmost regions of the British Isles may never be fully realized. But, the fragmentary record that does exist today indicates that these prehistoric communities were resourceful builders, farmers, and warriors who practiced rituals that may hint at ancient reverence for divine women, a theme that progresses through the Scottish Iron Age and into the early medieval period. The isolated nature of Scotland’s tribal system allowed for powerful and uniquely Celtic developments in architecture, ritualistic practice, and belief systems concerning women. However, something much more formidable than the tribal systems had encountered was on the horizon for the Scottish Iron Age, a force that would jeopardize the innate Celtic nature of the developing northern societies: The Romans.
Chapter 2
Confronting the Patriarchy

1. Pushing North

As the Roman Empire continued to gain authority and prestige as an almost unconquerable military force throughout the Mediterranean, the need for expansion began to surpass the geographic confines of Italian and Gallic territory. Roman emperors, beginning with the campaigns of Julius Caesar in 55 BC, pushed their troops across the English Channel and started the tumultuous process of Romanizing the British Isles.

The imperial army came face to face with aggressive and militaristic Celtic tribes. Depictions of the native population emphasized traditional Roman interpretations of barbaric people, ranging from the “primitive” social structures, physical appearances, and methods of combat.

“All the Britons, indeed, dye themselves with woad, which produces a blue colour, and makes their appearance in battle more terrible. They wear long hair, and shave every part of the body save the head and the upper lip. Groups of ten or twelve men have wives together in common, and particularly brothers along with brothers, and fathers with sons; but the children born of the unions are reckoned to belong to the particular house to which the maiden was first conducted”.¹¹

These native populations were fierce and ultimately their representations in Latin literature became sources of propaganda for the Roman military: a volatile enemy that threatened the very foundations of Roman civilization warranted a continued imperial presence abroad. Despite the forceful, and to the Roman consciousness, barbaric nature and resistance that became

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emblematic of the native population, emperors continued to expand their regional and cultural
domination of the British Isles.

Over a century had passed since Caesar’s first foray onto British soil and much of
England had come under Roman dominion, either through the establishment of client kingdoms
and peace treaties, or the military subjugation of the native population. As the Roman army
continued to push further north, the native tribes with whom the imperial forces came into
contact became less willing to accept imperial control. The most prominent military campaign
into the northern territories was completed by Agricola, a provincial governor during the Flavian
era. The savageness and resistance of the native people, as well as the land itself, permeates the
accounts of his military campaigns. Tacitus’ description of the Scottish landscape mirrors the
untamed nature of the northern tribes:

“Nowhere is the dominance of the sea more extensive. There are many tidal
currents, flowing in different directions. They do not merely rise as far as the
shoreline and recede again. They flow far inland, wind around, and push
themselves among the highlands and mountains, as if in their own realm”.12

Further, the Scottish tribes that Agricola and his army faced in the famous battle of Mons
Graupius “were a totally different proposition to the more amenable, loose-knit societies to the
south. Some kind of federation was agreed, under the overall banner of the Caledonians”.13
These warriors were not so easily defeated, and ultimately, could not be fully conquered.

12 naturam Oceani atque aestus neque quaeerere huius operis est, ac multi rettulere: unum
addiderim, nusquam latius dominari mare, multum fluminum huc atque illuc ferre, nec litore
tenus ad crescere aut resorberi, sed influere penitus atque ambitre, et iugis etiam ac montibus
inseri velut in suo. Tacitus, Agricola 10.7. Birley, A. R., translator. Tacitus Agricola and
13 Kamm, Antony. The Last Frontier: The Roman Invasions of Scotland. Tempus Publishing
The ferocity of the northern tribes continued to be a pressing matter, even after Agricola’s success at Mons Graupius. Hadrian ordered the creation of a barrier that would separate the northern threat from the Romanized British province, indicating that the northern tribes were still resistant to peace and able to fight invasions prompted by the desire for tribal subjugation. By 122 AD, Hadrian had come to Britain while on his provincial tour, “where he had made many changes and was the first to build a wall, 80 miles long, which would separate the barbarians and the Romans”.\(^{14}\)

The Roman desire for expansion could not be satiated, even with the physical representation of northern and southern separation. Imperial military forces continued to fight with the northern tribes in the unrelenting pursuit for territorial conquest. Scotland, however, would never fulfill its alluring promise of yet another foreign region that could come under Roman dominion. Hadrian’s Wall was the last permanent outpost that the Romans reached, leaving the northern territory as a place that was to be forever shrouded in mystery, resistance, and to the Roman paradigm, barbarism. “Perhaps if the tribes had not been so warlike, the mountains so high, the lack of economic benefit so obvious, geographical and social difficulties so great, Rome might have triumphed”.\(^{15}\)

This very lack of Romanization is where I establish my argument. The intense and persistent resistance to the presence of the imperial army, as well as the cultural and religious shifts that accompany the process of Romanization, allowed for the northern tribes to maintain their ancient Celtic roots. One aspect of this, which I argue has not been adequately researched,

is the continuation of powerful women and respect for women in Scottish society and religion from the Iron Age communities that predate the Roman imposition. While evidence is sparse, indications of these women can be found in the literary record, religious iconography, and potential cultural similarities between the northernmost regions of ancient Britain, and the Romanized southern territories.

2. **Representations of British Women in Tacitus’ *Agricola***

To the dismay of researchers who focus on the history of Roman Britain and Scotland, there is no written record from the Scottish perspective until the introduction of early Christianity. One of the only surviving accounts that documents the interactions between the Roman army and the Scottish tribes is Cornelius Tacitus’ *Agricola*, circa 98 AD. This work, while transmitted in its entirety and powerfully informative, hosts an inherent bias as a Roman source. The references to tribes, warriors, and the brief mentions of women are all from the paradigm of a Roman author, one who is conveying a narrative which concerns an intense and, to the Romans, barbaric adversary. When reading and analyzing *Agricola*, scholars must be mindful of the propagandized depictions of the elusive northern foe, as well as the potential for hyperbolic Roman glory.

The bias within *Agricola* extends beyond the cultural gaze of barbaric enemies and problematic women. Agricola, the namesake of the work, was the father-in-law to Tacitus, and the work itself was composed as a funerary oration. “For the time being, this book, intended to honour Agricola, my father-in-law, will be commended, or at least excused, as a tribute of dutiful

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16 The biography for Tacitus in the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Agricola* and *Germany* states that both of Tacitus’ first works survive in their entirety, unlike other works of his and other authors of antiquity.
affection”. While Tacitus was a historian, it is difficult to ignore the possibility of implicit bias when writing a final farewell for his father-in-law. Tacitus may have exaggerated Agricola’s military success in order to secure a powerful and lasting image of the military commander for the Roman people. Tacitus’ bias is further complicated by the political transitions that occurred at the time that *Agricola* was written. Domitian, the last of the Flavian dynasty, was assassinated and Trajan, following Nerva’s short emperorship, was appointed as the new Roman Emperor. Tacitus and Agricola were “strong supporters of the Flavian dynasty” and for the sake of ensuring personal security, and a positive, lasting memory of his late father-in-law, *Agricola* needed to function as a defense for the militaristic and aristocratic men under the control of Domitian. “To some extent the *Agricola* is a justification of the service of loyal members of the aristocracy, even to a ‘bad’ emperor”.

Despite the difficulties of Tacitus’ *Agricola*, it is a critical source for understanding Roman-Scottish relationships. *Agricola* functions primarily as a military narrative, but it does offer insight to cultural and societal structures in Scotland, as well as the potential affiliations between the northern and southern regions of the British Isles. Women are mentioned briefly and sporadically throughout *Agricola* and it is easy to move past their inclusions without much thought or analysis. However, their presence in this work cannot be dismissed.

I argue that the women within *Agricola* fulfill two functions: one of traditional female subservience and weakness, and one that emphasizes the importance of female power and

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19 Ibid.
Roman discomfort with this concept. These two representations may be indicative of the roles that women did in fact hold during the Roman occupation of the northern territories but, due to the biased nature of Tacitus’ work, the true societal positions and responsibilities for women are unknown.

Tacitus’ portrayal of submissive women is graphic and stresses the importance and the weakness of female sexuality to the Roman paradigm. “Wives and sisters, even if they escape being raped by Romans as enemies, are seduced by men posing as friends and guests”. To Tacitus, a native Scottish woman was marked by her sexual purpose and her sexual nature. A woman could be used for male pleasure and domination which, in the context of military expansion and subjugation, was common. Raping a woman could be interpreted as male domination over the female population, or as a literal and metaphorical attack on the native male population’s property: rape could be seen as the defilement of women as both wives and as child bearers. Or, if a woman did not suffer sexual assault, she would likely be seduced by imperial invaders and would be unable to distinguish between the desire for genuine hospitality and underhanded motives to gain territory and control. In this depiction, a northern foreign woman was nothing more than an object of sexual domination and an emblem of the barbaric patterns of behavior that were no match for the sophistication of the Roman Empire.

It is interesting to posit if women did use their sexuality while interacting with the Romans, but not as a result of submissive behavior. Rather, the sexual affairs between the Roman men and the native women may not all have been rooted in brutal displays of power or

20 *hi per dilectus alibi servituri auferuntur; coniuges sororesque etiam si hostilem libido

deceitful measures, but some relationships undoubtedly were built from romantic and sexual love, or the desire to build authentic connections between the two cultures. Marriages between foreigners and Roman citizens are documented throughout the historical record, so much so that a male Roman citizen and a foreign woman were often granted *conubium*, or the right to intermarriage.²² Allason-Jones references the presence of mixed marriages in Roman Britain, especially in regard to the transmission of the Latin language.²³ It may be possible that military men married native Scottish women while on campaign in northern territories without the incentive of increasing imperial territory.

Even though *Agricola* includes violent descriptions of female passivity and submissiveness, there is evidence of female power despite “barbaric” customs and patriarchal impositions of the Roman Empire. In Calgacus’ speech, women are referenced as important figures in native warrior beliefs and motivations.²⁴ “The Romans have no wives there to fire them, no parents to taunt them if they flee. Most of them have no home country, or an alien one”.²⁵ In this context, women were a source of inspiration for native military success. Their physical presence in Scotland, and likely near the battle sites themselves, literally kindled the

²⁴ Several of the sections that regard women, either as submissive or as powerful, are written in the voice of Calgacus, the leader of the northern tribal army. As Tacitus heard his accounts of the battle of Mons Graupius secondhand, it is highly unlikely that the words are true. Rather, the speech is likely one of two possibilities: Tacitus’ reconstruction of what mattered to Scottish tribes as a play on existing customs in Scotland that he was aware of, or a fabrication of an enemy that was unlike the Romans: a romantic depiction of the native adversary to the imperial army. In either case, researchers and readers still need to be careful with presentation of this native Scottish voice.
passion for protecting one’s family, either as property or as loved ones. To Calgacus, a woman encouraging military efforts offered more incentive for success than blind expansion and conquest.

The power of Scottish women in relation to battle goes beyond the motivation for military success. In the aftermath of Mons Graupius, Tacitus briefly mentions the presence of women on the battlefield.

“The Britons dispersed, men and women mingling their cries of grief, dragging off the wounded, calling out to survivors, abandoning their homes and in their rage even setting fire to them, choosing hiding-places, and leaving them again at once”.

Women near or on the battlefield would not have been a new concept during the Roman occupation of Scotland. The site of Mons Graupius, though never found, was likely surrounded by native communities. The Scottish population that survived could come to the site of the battle and collect their dead. Allason-Jones offers a different interpretation of this passage. “The Roman army was not the only army in history to have had families with it on the march… there may have been women and children at Mons Graupius”. The northern army was made up of a variety of tribes, not just the Caledonians. The families from further regions of Scotland may have accompanied their warrior husbands and fathers. Women would have likely held positions of familial authority while the husbands were off fighting: they would have provided community structure and supported and protected the other members of their family or tribe. If Tacitus’

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account is correct, these women would have also held the responsibility of retrieving their lost family members for funeral rites and burial. Lastly, this vague mention of women on the battlefield at Mons Graupius can lead to the tempting, though thoroughly unsupported, idea of northern female warriors during the Roman occupation. Unless Tacitus had included a section mentioning women in the ranks of the native fighters, or burial sites for women with military grave goods dating to this time period have been unearthed and positively identified, it is impossible to state whether women had fought the Roman invaders in the 80s AD.

Boudicca, the queen of the Iceni who led a revolt against the Roman legions in Britain, is the final representation of women in Tacitus’ *Agricola*. The revolution, culminating with native unification and the mass destruction of Londinium, occurred just twenty years prior to the battle of Mons Graupius and shook the Roman Empire to its core.29 This unprecedented female authority in the British province permeated Roman consciousness, and Tacitus’ *Agricola* is no exception. Tacitus includes the history of Boudicca’s revolt in order to display the barbaric nature of the native British tribes: a formidable enemy, no less a woman, had inspired terrible destruction in Romanized territory:

“Stirred up by mutual encouragement of this kind, with Boudicca, from royal stock, a woman, as their leader - for they do not distinguish between the sexes when choosing commanders - the whole people launched a war. Hunting out the soldiers dispersed among the forts and taking their defenses by storm, they burst into the *colonia* itself, which they saw as the seat of their enslavement. No form of the savagery common to barbarians was omitted: they were enraged, and they had conquered. Had not Paulinus rapidly come to the rescue as soon as he heard of the uprising in the province, Britain would have been lost”.

Tacitus’ account demonstrates the fear that the Roman people must have felt about this powerful native woman and the potential threat of others like her. Rather than undermining her authority, the destruction, and almost permanent expulsion of Roman authority over Britain, left in her wake is underscored. If a woman, one who was on equal footing with her male counterparts, could incite such violence, a stronger imperial presence must be needed. The forthright portrayal of Boudicca’s power, coupled with the propaganda concerning the heightened savagery of the northernmost tribes, likely assisted with the militarization of unconquered terrain.

Tacitus also used Boudicca’s influence to give evidence, though likely fabricated, of native solidarity and the importance of tribal success. Calgacus, in an attempt to rally support to fight the invading Romans uses Boudicca as an example of native power. “The Brigantes, with a woman as their leader, set a colonia in flames and stormed a fortress. If their success had not made them careless, they could have thrown off the yoke”.\textsuperscript{31} The emphasis on female leadership is powerful. For Tacitus, Boudicca’s almost complete success in Britain may have inspired the native unification for the battle of Mons Graupius.\textsuperscript{32}

Tacitus’ \textit{Agricola}, while sparse in its recollection of Scottish women, is an important source for understanding the Roman conception of native and barbaric femininity. The imperial paradigm of understanding a woman as a submissive member of society is felt throughout Tacitus’ account. But his work offers insights to the potential existence of respected and perhaps powerful women in Scottish society. These women could serve as cultural mediators through the

\begin{flushleft}
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possibility of marriage, offer inspiration to their warring male counterparts and provide support and protection for the communities in the absence of a male presence, and serve as a source of fear to the Roman understanding of British subservience and the existence of hostile tribes in the untamed Scottish territory.

3. **Femininity and Celtic-Roman Religion: Brigantia**

   The archaeological record from the Roman occupation of Scotland is as equally sparse as the literary record.\(^{33}\) The native tribes in the northern territories left few physical remains and attempts to identify artifacts that are representative of Celtic women and their roles in society have proven to be a difficult process. Burials that date to this time are mainly cremations with few, if any, associated grave goods that do not seem to stress gender differentiation.\(^{34}\) Religious iconography, however, does seem to be an area of significance when identifying femininity in the material culture, as well as evidence for the continuation of native respect for divine women throughout the Roman occupation of Scotland.

   One of the oldest and most prominent feminine goddesses from the northern Celtic pantheon is Brigantia.\(^{35}\) She was a native deity to Northern Britain and Scotland and was the mythological, and later the physical, representation of the Celtic North: a location deified and by the period of Roman occupation, a location incarnate. She was seen as a symbol of unity, liberty,

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\(^{35}\) Due to the widespread and ancient nature of her presence in the north, she is referenced by a number of different names including Brigantia, Brid, and Britannia. For the purposes of continuity within this thesis, I will refer to her as Brigantia.
and strength, one that transcended geographic and cultural barriers throughout tribal England and Scotland.\textsuperscript{36}

Brigantia’s importance as a unifying goddess was also present during the Roman occupation of the northern regions of the British Isles. Once the army had become a prevalent and semi-permanent force along the Scottish Borders, native religious beliefs began to be adopted into Roman religion. Religious assimilation was common during the Roman Empire and the interactions with Scotland were no exception. The intense social connectivity that was brought on by military expansion and settlement was often accompanied by the transmission of cultures and religions between the Roman army and the native population, which encouraged soldiers to forge new relationships with local gods.\textsuperscript{37} Roman legions would equate the native deities of the region with the gods and goddesses of the Roman pantheon. Brigantia was often associated with “Artemis, aid woman to Leto in the birth of Apollo” as well as Minerva and Juno, and her assimilation with the Roman pantheon did not end as the ideological construct of her Celtic foundations.\textsuperscript{38} Roman worshippers began creating visual representations of the goddess in the form of a human, an innately Greco-Roman religious practice.

“It was a Roman conceit to give the spirits of areas human form, often for political reasons. There is no evidence of such a cult before the Romans and certainly no evidence that deities were conceived as human: hidden faces and figures occur in much Iron Age Celtic art, but recognizable humans were exceedingly rare in pre-Roman Britain”.\textsuperscript{39}

The adoption of Brigantia as a Romanized goddess can be seen in the votive statue from Birrens, Scotland. This sculpture was found in a shrine outside of a southeastern Roman fortification. The site dates to the Flavian era of construction in Scotland, likely in the early 80s AD during Agricola’s campaigns and was continuously occupied by the Roman military throughout the Antonine Period.40

Figure 3. Sculpture of Goddess Britannia, Birrens, Dumfriesshire, 120-180 AD. "Sculpture, of Goddess Britannia." National Museums Scotland.

The base of the statue has an inscription in Latin which reads, “Sacred to Brigantia: Amandus, the engineer, fulfilled the order by command”. It is important to note that the Celtic name of the goddess is preserved in the inscription, but, as seen in Figure 3, her clothing and associated objects are entirely Roman in design. The integration of Roman symbols of the divine with the conservation of the Celtic name highlights that foreign deities could be adopted and worshiped by the Romans without a complete loss or a complete disregard for the native origins.

According to Julia Farley, Brigantia’s appearance demonstrates an interesting mix of Roman elements. Her wings are reminiscent of Victory and her armor and headdress is indicative of the militaristic Minerva. “The globe and pointed stone at her feet are symbols of Juno Caelestis. Yet she is none of these”. The visual connections with the other Roman goddesses allow for Brigantia’s original and divine associations to be preserved through the transformative process of Romanizing native religions. Craft, prophecy, protection, and fertility are all still present within the goddess, but she can now be understood, as well as respected and worshipped, by both the northern Celtic tribes and any individual who understood the symbols of the Roman pantheon.

Brigantia’s associations with unity and connectivity proved to be powerful throughout the Roman occupation. Her feminine influence transcended the confines of Celtic religion and her presence as a protective female power was not undermined or discarded by the imperial army. Rather, she represents the continuation of Celtic respect and veneration of divine women into the Roman era of Scottish history.

4. Cultural Correlates

The lack of evidence concerning women in Scotland during the Roman occupation can be frustrating, and it is tempting to draw conclusions between representations of female authority and respect in the southern regions of the British province to the northern territories. However, it is critical to remember that regional and tribal differences did exist, even if there were similarities in social structures, lifestyle, art, and religious practices. Even though it was possible for women in some instances to hold positions of authority in southern Britain, these examples do not imply that Scottish women had the same opportunities. Nonetheless, it is interesting and, in my opinion, important to discuss the representations of powerful, autonomous women in the lower regions of the British province, as evidence that women in Britain, if not definitively in Scotland, were able to hold positions of authority and autonomy while interacting with the oppressive and patriarchal regime of the Roman Empire.

Boudicca, though addressed earlier in the section concerning Tacitus’ Agricola, deserves further inquiry, as her influence during the Roman occupation of Britain is unmatched. As stated previously, Boudicca led a pan-tribal revolt against the Romans. Following the death of her husband, Prasutagus, Boudicca was beaten, and her daughters raped in order for the Roman commander, Suetonius Paulinus, and his legions to gain control of Icenian land and resources. Boudicca led the bloody rebellion against the Romans in retaliation for the heinous, even by

43 Please refer to this article for more information about the linguistic, cultural, and anthropological differences regarding the term “Celtic” and the importance of understanding the historical significance of a common Celtic identity, and how the native community of the British Isles should not be understood as a homogenous ethnic or cultural group. McDonald, Maryon, et al. “Celtic Ethnic Kinship and the Problem of Being English [and Comments and Replies].” Current Anthropology, vol. 27, no. 4, 1986, pp. 333–347. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2743049.
Roman standards, deeds.\textsuperscript{45} It should be noted that there is no suggestion that Boudicca became the ruler of the Iceni or attempted to claim the throne for herself. Rather, she “acted on behalf of her daughters, whose rights were recognized by the Iceni if not by the Romans".\textsuperscript{46} There is no doubt that Boudicca was a powerful and effective leader. Even though the written accounts of her actions are decidedly Roman and derogatory towards her ability to possess \textit{imperium}, her authority as a military commander is difficult to discredit.\textsuperscript{47} There is another aspect to Boudicca’s ability to command the native forces that, in my opinion, may have offered even more respect to her formidable presence. According to Cassius Dio, Boudicca was more than the ruler of the Iceni tribe: she was a woman of religion, possibly a Druid.\textsuperscript{48}

“When she had finished speaking, she employed a species of divination, letting a hare escape from the fold of her dress; and since it ran on what they considered the auspicious side, the whole multitude shouted with pleasure, and [Boudicca], raising her hand toward heaven, said: ‘I thank thee, Andraste, and call upon thee as woman speaking to woman’”.\textsuperscript{49}

Boudicca’s potential power as a religious woman is fascinating, especially in respect to the importance placed on femininity and female iconography within Celtic religion. While the

\textsuperscript{45} Ancient historians such as Tacitus (\textit{Annals} and Cassius Dio discuss the severity and brutality of the actions against Boudicca and her two daughters.


inclusion of this passage could have been an attempt to further the barbaric nature of Boudicca within the Greco-Roman consciousness, it is entirely possible that this religious connection could have strengthened her power and authority when calling on support from the native tribes in the British province. A woman with deep spiritual connections could have held immense respect in Celtic society: this perhaps serves as evidence between archaeological remains of divine female figures and the literal practice of respecting religious women.

Cartimandua is another fascinating and authoritative woman from the period of Roman occupation in Britain. Unlike Boudicca, Cartimandua was a Roman sympathizer and was not only looked on favorably by the Roman military commanders and historians, but she was a powerful ally for gaining control of hostile tribes and territories in the northern regions of Britain. The history of Cartimandua’s rule over the Brigantes is difficult to ascertain, but, Tacitus’ use of the term pollens nobilitate or powerful and noble lineage, may reference that Cartimandua rose to power because of her noble and influential status. In fact, Cartimandua may have been “descended from a royal family whose connections were wide and powerful but in which the male line had failed”.  

Cartimandua’s role in the political and geographic changes to Roman Britain is interesting for two reasons. First, she was likely to have been aware of the security that would come with forging an alliance with Rome. If Cartimandua’s position as a tribal queen was acknowledged by Rome, her authority and her people would be protected by the imperial invaders, the likes of which “had shattered in a single summer the most important British

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kingdom, and then turned to crush the fierce and raw communities of the south-west”.

Second, Roman military commanders in Britain were repeatedly interested in Cartimandua’s civil and militaristic affairs, so much so that “Cartimandua may well have been one of the eleven monarchs whose submission to Claudius is recorded on triumphal arches in Rome and Cyzicus”.

The native queen was not in control of a solitary tribe. In actuality, the Brigantes themselves were “a loosely federated group of tribes and sub-tribes in northern Britain who had, perhaps, only been brought together under Cartimandua’s authority in the early-mid-first-century AD”. By forming an alliance with the creator of this pan-tribal association, the Romans would have far less hostile communities to face and far more territory to easily colonize as they continued their expansion throughout Britain.

The importance of this territorial access to the Romans can be seen in the conflict between Cartimandua and her consort, Venutius. The Romans were quick to respond to the civil war that erupted between the Brigantian queen and her husband. According to Statius, auxiliary forces, infantry, cavalry and the governor of Britain himself came to the aid of Cartimandua. The imperial presence in this otherwise native civil war can be justified by the importance of the northern territories. Once Cartimandua had been rescued and Venutius had made peace with the Romans and been given control of the kingdom, the Romans had access to terrain that allowed for “the northward advances of Cerialis and Agricola”.

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The final representation of women during the Roman occupation of Britain does not center on the political and military authority of the preceding women. Rather, this example may indicate the presence of female autonomy in Celtic society, especially regarding a woman’s control over her sexuality and her sexual desires.

Cassius Dio in his *Roman Histories* references a conversation between Julia Domna, the wife of Emperor Septimius Severus, and the wife of the Caledonian leader, Argentocoxus. Severus and Argentocoxus were reportedly discussing the presence of adultery laws in the British province and the apparent ineffectuality due in large part to the cultural norms of the native population.

“In this connexion, a very witty remark is reported to have been made by the wife of Argentocoxus, a Caledonian, to Julia Augusta. When the empress was jesting with her, after the treaty, about the free intercourse of her sex with men in Britain, she replied: "We fulfil the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women; for we consort openly with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest." Such was the retort of the British woman”.

Interestingly, Argentocoxus and his wife are presumably Caledonian, a northern Scottish tribe whose ancestors fought against the Romans in the battle of Mons Graupius. While this interaction does not give any indication of the wife’s power and authority, the witty retort does offer insight into the potential for female autonomy in this Scottish tribe. The wife of the Caledonian leader is quick to say that she, and other women in her community, are free to select

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their sexual partners instead of entering forced relationships or, stronger still, pursuing sexual pleasure through illicit means. If this comment is true, and not a fabrication on part of Cassius Dio, this could indicate some form of freedom for women in this section of Celtic society: female sexuality and female sexual pleasure were controlled by women, not the men of their family or the men of their community.

5. Transition to Late Antiquity

It would be cause for celebration if I were able to offer tangible evidence, either in the literary or archaeological record, of women holding positions of power in Scotland during the Roman occupation. Unfortunately, the existing narratives, both literary and material, cannot offer definitive support for the existence of Scottish women holding similar positions of power to those in Britain. Yet their presence and importance in the historical and archaeological record cannot go unnoticed. The brief mentions of female autonomy may indicate the presence of some forms of freedom or personal power in Scotland. Further, the presence of continued respect for divine, feminine figures points to reverence for femininity, even if it solely existed in religious contexts. However, as the historical narrative progresses into Late Antiquity and the establishment of Christianity during the early medieval period, the representation of women in Scotland changes drastically. With the institution of the written record in Scottish territory and a more complete archaeological record, there is evidence of Scottish, and more specifically Pictish, women holding positions of authority and respect.
Chapter 3
Pictish Resilience through Feminine Agency

1. The Roman Withdrawal

Following the withdrawal of Roman forces from the unconquered regions in northern England and Scotland, the two hundred years of sporadic military invasions and fluctuating territorial gains came to an end in 211 AD. These untamed areas of Great Britain would forever remain the furthest imperial frontier that could not be suppressed by Roman dominion. The lack of foreign invaders and pressures allowed the native population to foster their traditional Celtic belief systems, which they had fought to preserve through generations of resistance. This included an intense continuation of religion, art, and a society that not only supported, but revered, powerful women.

After Caracalla’s official decision to remove the Roman army from the Antonine Wall in 211 AD, the northern tribes did not halt their fight against the imperial oppressors, and continued to threaten provincial stability throughout later antiquity. Through the subsequent military encounters, the northern warriors were dramatized to create a barbaric foe, one worthy of imperial military intervention. The people north of Hadrian’s Wall were often referenced as a cohesive cultural, religious, and linguistic group, and the stereotypes that followed suit were attributed to those who lived beyond the grasp of Rome. Those who warred with the Romans were described as “extremely savage and warlike, they are armed only with a spear and a narrow shield, plus a sword that hangs suspended by a belt from their otherwise naked bodies”.

people were intensely focused on military success, and the need to maintain powerful, militaristic leaders resonated through the Roman depictions: “Their form of rule is democratic for the most part, and they are very fond of plundering; consequently they choose their boldest men as rulers”.\(^{59}\) A volatile enemy that threatened imperial safeguards needed to be subjugated, and by stressing prowess in combat, the Roman military commanders could justify their battles with the native population, despite the official decrees for abandoning the northern frontier.

The Romans intensified their propaganda about the northern tribes and distributed accounts of a brutish population who rejected the normalcy of Romanized civilization. For instance, Herodian discusses the cultural emphasis on nudity and widespread acceptance of tattoos that became a stereotyped trait in ethnographic descriptions of the Caledonians, and later, of the Picts.

“Strangers to clothing, the Britons wear ornaments of iron at their waists and throats; considering iron a symbol of wealth, they value this metal as other barbarians value gold. They tattoo their bodies with colored designs and drawings of all kinds of animals; for this reason they do not wear clothes, which would conceal the decorations on their bodies”.\(^{60}\)

Later Roman ideology included the belief that body disfigurement of any kind was a symbol of barbarism.\(^{61}\) The image of the tattooed, northern population would have fostered the image of a primitive, uncultured society. This was exacerbated by Cassius Dio, who described the Picts as a

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boorish people who “dwell in tents, naked and unshod, possess their women in common, and in
common rear all the offspring”.\textsuperscript{62} This not only removed any sense of sophistication from the
tribes that existed beyond imperial control but undermined the potential for gender equality in
the north, and a woman’s ability to hold power that existed beyond her sexual status. These
descriptions of polygamous, disfigured, and coarse people circulated across the Empire, and
allowed the Romans to create barbaric enemy, whose stereotypes were perpetuated through the
passage of time.

2. The Emergence of the Picts

Generations after the initial withdrawal from Scotland, the northern warriors were still
considered to be one ethnic group. Those who continued to fight the Romans are first cited as
Picts in the \textit{Panegyric of Constantius} from 297 AD. The panegyric describes Constantius
Chlorus’ military success in Great Britain, “In addition to that, a nation which was then primitive
and accustomed to fight, still half-naked, only with the Pict and Hiberni easily succumbed to
Roman arms and standards”.\textsuperscript{63} ‘Pict’ was first interpreted as a classification for the heavily
tattooed northerners, though recent scholarship argues that ‘Pict’ may have come from the word
\textit{Pecht}, or ‘ancestors’ in the native language of Celtic Britain.\textsuperscript{64} It is important to note that the

\textsuperscript{62} “διαιτῶνται δὲ ἐν σκηναῖς γυμνοὶ καὶ ἀνυπόδητοι, ταῖς γυναιξίν ἐπικοίνοις χρώμενοι καὶ τὰ
γεννώμενα πάντα κοινῶς ἐκτρέφοντες” Cassius Dio, \textit{Historiae Romanae} 77.12.2. Translation:
\textsuperscript{63} “ad hoc natio etiam tunc rudis et solis [Britanni] Pictis modo et Hibernis adsueta hostibus
adhunc seminudis, facile Romanis armis signisque cesserunt” \textit{Panegyric of Constantius}, 11.4.21-23.
Attribution is given to Eumenius as the true author of this work is unknown.
\textsuperscript{64} Mark, Joshua J. “Picts.” Ancient History Encyclopedia, Ancient History Encyclopedia
Picts in actuality never referred to themselves by this term. ‘Pict’ was exclusively used by foreigners, first the Romans and later the Christian missionaries.

The Picts continued to serve as powerful foils to the Roman presence for the next two centuries. Roman propaganda from earlier historical accounts resurfaced, and contemporary writers continued to portray the northern tribes as savage, militaristic threats whose defeat in combat was to be celebrated:

“…their loyalty attested by their defense of Raetia and their mass of spoil from Vindelicia; next the legion that had been left to guard Britain,10 the legion that kept the fierce Scots in check, whose men had scanned the strange devices tattooed on the faces of the dying Picts”.65

The Picts were a relentless adversary, constantly challenging the Roman occupation of Great Britain. The official withdrawal followed “the sack of Rome in 410” which “directly led the Emperor Honorius to leave Britain to its own devices”.66

After the Romans had removed all forces from Britain, the indigenous population that remained faced an intense social and economic decline. The end of Roman governance destroyed Britain’s economic system including urban trade and manufacturing. “The whole structure of Roman life and the provincial hierarchy failed, very suddenly and irrevocably”.67 Through this tumultuous period, the Picts were often viewed as icons of a derelict, dark age society, one that could not foster a rich culture or an enlightened population. Rather, barbarism seemed to engulf

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the British Isles: ancient art gained popularity once again and “the virtual absence of historical documents” was akin to the resurgence of prehistory.\textsuperscript{68} However, when the literary and archaeological records concerning the Picts in the centuries following the loss of Roman civilization are examined, the early medieval period does not signify this traditionally held perception of rampant cultural and societal decline.

In actuality, the Picts cultivated a society that transcended the preconceived notions of brutality and a lack of sophistication left in the wake of the Roman influence. They were a diverse group of northern tribes which fostered a multifaceted culture, one which held intense respect for military strength, art, and religion. One of the critical aspects of Pictish society that emphasizes progressiveness rather than decline during the early medieval period is the legacy of female empowerment. Native women in northern England and Scotland were celebrated throughout the historical record, extending from the foundations of civilization through the Roman occupation. The Pictish period was no different: these women transcended the boundaries of Roman domination and patriarchal standards that were prevalent in the imperialized provinces. Women functioned as leaders in their communities and became the catalysts for religious reform through the institution and enforcement of Christianity in Pictish society.

3. **Representations of Pictish Women in the *Historia Ecclesiastica***

After the Roman forces were officially recalled from Britain, the literary record in the north ceased to exist, intensifying the stereotypes of the Picts: an uneducated and uncultured group plagued by illiteracy. Information concerning the Picts comes mainly from sources who

were observers of Pictish society, with the archaeological record as the only information from the communities themselves. By the sixth century AD, there is little doubt that Christianity had become a prominent force in northern Britain, thus reintroducing the written record and offering insightful accounts of Pictish life. The purveyors of Christian doctrine wrote extensively on the social structures present in the northern region, including the positions and collective reception of women. The information that can be garnered from these ecclesiastical writers highlights the importance and power that women held. While some women were subjected to the stereotypical roles set by patriarchal standards, the Christian literary evidence highlights women who moved beyond the position of the submissive, docile wife and mother, and came to hold power and lead religious reforms within their society.

The ecclesiastical record attests to the importance of women in Pictish communities prior to the introduction of Christianity. Bede provides one of the most powerful pieces of evidence for women holding positions of authority and prominence in northern society. After the Picts had settled in northern Britain and Scotland, they asked their allies, the Irish leaders, to send wives.

“Having no women with them, these Picts asked wives of the Irish, who consented on condition that, when any dispute arose, they should choose a king from the female royal line rather than the male. This custom continues among the Picts to this day”.

This account is critical to understanding the legitimacy and potency of female power in Pictland Scotland: Bede was an eye-witness to the practice of claiming kingship through matrilineal succession, giving immense validity to the power of Pictish women.

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Unfortunately, not all women were able to rise to positions of authority and prominence during the Pictish period. The interests of the kingships, including the importance of propagating the royal bloodline and creating alliances between different tribes and kingdoms, often led to the resurgence of patriarchal necessities that would allow for the mistreatment of women through Christian precedent. One such example of a woman who was cast from her position of royalty for the betterment of her husband’s success, is the east Anglian princess, Aedilthryd. Aedilthryd was married to Ecgfrith, the king of Deira. Her story in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* is presented as “a classic example of a royal woman opting for a monastic life in order to preserve her virginity,” as this was one of the few avenues a woman could pursue in order to secure a position of societal power.\(^1\)

“For a long time Aedilthryd begged the king to allow her to retire from worldly affairs and serve Christ the only true king in a convent. And having at length obtained his reluctant consent, she entered the convent of the Abbess Ebba, King Egfrid’s aunt, at Coludesbyrig, where she received the veil and clothing of a nun from the hands of Bishop Wildfrid”.\(^2\)

While it is tempting to interpret Aedilthryd’s agency as a woman claiming a position of religious and cultural reverence by dedicating her life to Christ, it is far more likely that she was forced out of her prominent marriage.

Rather than Christianity offering a woman the ability to gain authority in her community, the religious precedent of a woman joining a convent may have allowed Ecgfrith to divorce

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Aedilthryd without gaining ill repute. As Fraser states, “After twelve years of childless wedlock, and having become the most powerful man in Britain, Ecgfrith may have been finding it inconvenient to be married to Aedilthryd and eager for a new marriage and new political opportunities.” Shortly after the termination of their marriage, Aedilthryd lived out her days as an abbess, and Ecgfrith forged new alliances with another royal household, allowing him to become the king of Northumbria in 670 AD.

Despite the oppressive use of religion in the life of Aedilthryd, Christianity became a critical component of female empowerment in Pictish society. Women were supported by ecclesiastical doctrine and were able to become leaders and champions for the implementation of Christianity, both at its inception and during its reformation. Women in royal households were able to become political and religious figureheads for the adoption of Christian doctrine. Ruling women sometimes offered protection to missionaries and church leaders in areas that had not yet been converted to Christianity, giving protection in areas where they may have been faced with violent resistance to the new religion. By garnering support from the queens, “the most prominent priests in early Christian Britain and Ireland were probably chaplains attached to royal and noble households”.

Bede depicts such an arrangement through the marriage of King Edwin of Northumbria to the Kentish princess, Ethelberga. In the hopes of securing an alliance to Kent, Edwin promised to not only adopt Christianity for himself, but:

“When Edwin’s messengers returned with this reply, he gave an assurance that he would place no obstacles in the way of the Christian Faith, and would afford complete freedom to Ethelberga and her attendants, both men and women, priests

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and servants, to live and worship in accordance with Christian belief and practice”.

Ethelberga’s, and her kingdom’s, insistence on preserving Christianity not only increased conversions within the highest levels of society, but also gave protection to the budding religion: the Christian population was able to practice their faith freely, with little fear of persecution. Through this alliance and support, Christianity took on a powerful role within Northumbrian leadership. Paulinus, a bishop from Kent who had accompanied Ethelberga to Northumbria, became a spiritual counselor to the queen and spread the holy word throughout the northern province.

“Therefore, directly he entered the province he began to toil unceasingly not only by God’s help to maintain the faith of his companions unimpaired, but if possible to bring some of the heathen grace and faith by his teaching”.

Paulinus was able to operate between the boundaries of social status by offering Christian guidance to the royal household and converting people across the socio-economic divisions in Northumbria.

Christianity went beyond procuring the favor and protection of a royal woman in northern society. Pictish women became champions for the reformation of Christianity following the diversification of ecclesiastical beliefs. One of the most iconic examples of a woman enforcing this religious shift was Queen Eanfled. Eanfled was originally from Kent and came to

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76 “Cumque in provinciam uenisset, laborauit multum, ut et eos, qui secum uenerant, ne a fide deficerent, Domino adiuuante contineret, et aliquos, si forte posset, de paganis ad fidei gratiam praedicando conuerteret” Ibid.
the northern region of Britain in 649 AD.\textsuperscript{77} The Kentish princess married Oswy, the king who extended the Bernician and Deiran unification over Pictland and Argyll.\textsuperscript{78} From the foundations of their marriage, Eanfled proved herself to be a powerful ruler in her own right. She “was apparently a consummate politician” and “enjoyed significant influence with Oswy, successfully convincing him to found the monastery at Gilling”.\textsuperscript{79} Eanfled’s power over her husband did not stop at the foundations for a site of worship. Through her alliances with Kent, York, and other royal households, Eanfled brought about widespread Christian reform in Pictland Scotland.

Eanfled as well as her Kentish kinsmen and supporters practiced Christianity according to Roman customs which contradicted the religious doctrine promulgated by Irish missionaries. Many of these holy men were responsible for conversions across northern Britain, including that of Oswy, who was a devout follower of Irish doctrine. The two branches held differing opinions about several components of Christianity, the most of important of which was the date that Easter was to be celebrated.

“It is said that the confusion in those days was such that Easter was sometimes kept twice in one year, so that when the King had ended Lent and was keeping Easter, the Queen and her attendants were still fasting and keeping Palm Sunday”.\textsuperscript{80}

Despite the dual celebrations between the Roman and Irish practices, the differences were seemingly tolerated by everyone in the community. A unified understanding on when to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[77] Fraser, James E. From Caledonia to Pictland Scotland to 795. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007. Print. p. 188.
\item[79] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
celebrate Easter only became a matter of importance after Colman became bishop of Lindisfarne in 660 AD.

Tensions between the Roman and Irish practitioners of Christianity became stronger, leading Eanfled to forge relationships with royal leaders who shared her Roman Christian beliefs. She was loyal to Kent and York in the southern regions of Britain, both of whom celebrated Easter in accordance with Roman doctrine. By the 660s AD, Eanfled had found an ally in King Alchfrith, as Fraser observes: “they were united apparently by a desire for ecclesiastical reform, and the apostolicists at York certainly shared that desire. For Eanfled, this goal may have been shaped in part by the wish to remove a potential sticking point in diplomacy between Oswy and her Kentish kin”.

The discrepancies between the two opposing Christian factions came to an end through the public confrontation between King Oswy and the Irish practitioners, and Queen Eanfled and her allies at the Synod of Whitby.

“King Oswy opened by observing that all who served the One God should observe one rule of life, and since they all hoped for one kingdom in heaven, they should not differ in celebrating the sacraments of heaven. The synod now had the task of determining which was the truer tradition, and this should be loyally accepted by all”.

Eanfled became a leading role in the apostolicist reform. She forced her husband’s hand, earning the respect and support from Pope Vitalian. The Pope gifted her with a golden key supposedly

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made from the fetters of St Peter and St Paul. Rather than acquiescing to the Irish practices of her husband, Eanfled fervently supported the Roman beliefs of her birthplace and of her allies, ultimately creating widespread change that extended across her and Oswy’s domain.

Christianity, then, fulfilled a dual function in early medieval northern England and Scotland. Women could be oppressed by precedents in ecclesiastical histories, allowing men to gain religious support for their personal or political endeavors. But, women were also able to rise to positions of importance through this new religion. Christian sources recounted the critical roles of women in society, ranging from the practice of matrilineal succession rooted in the ancestral ties to Ireland, and women becoming leaders through the intense period of religious transition to become leaders for the influential, religious adoptions and reforms in Pictish society.

4. The Representation of Pictish Women in Relief Sculpture

Whether perfectly preserved or fragmentary, art is a powerful tool for understanding early medieval society in northern England and Scotland. The lack of a written record from the native voice diminished the Pictish perspective, including the Picts’ views on the gradual adoption of Christianity over ancient pagan traditions. Fraser Hunter and Julia Farley view Christianity as a life-altering force, one that transformed how people understood the world and their role in society and the religious scope. In Britain “from the fifth century onwards, becoming Christian changed the ways in which people used art and depicted their most sacred concepts”. But this introduction of new methods for expressing religious identity did not mean that pagan

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ideologies abruptly disappeared from Pictish society: religious coexistence was prevalent throughout Europe, and extended into physical, artistic representations of the coalescence of older belief systems with Christian doctrine.  

The importance of female leadership in religious contexts is no exception to the unification of Pict and Christian ideals: the native, artistic record gives more evidence for the importance of Pictish women in positions of power during the adoption and continued practice of Christianity. The confluence of two religious ideologies along with the continued representation of women, exemplify the power of female authority in Pictish society, and how women were champions of cultural and ideological shifts in their communities.

The Hilton of Cadboll, a Pictish relief sculpture, is one of the most potent examples of artistic representation for cultural and religious transition in northern society, and how the power and influence of women persisted in the face of intense social change. This Pictish stele was found on the periphery of the Portmahomack monastery in northern Scotland, northeast of Inverness and overlooking the Moray Firth. The site had been first inhabited in the Bronze Age, and occupation continued through the Iron Age. There is evidence of Roman influence in this region, as a camp was potentially constructed one mile from Tarbat Ness, an area that is just north of the monastery’s location. A Roman coin, an antoninianus of Tetricus II, was discovered in the Tarbat churchyard, dispelling the skepticism of Roman presence along the peninsula.

It is probable that following the naval excursion around Britain after the battle at Mons Graupius, the

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86 Carver, M. O. H. Portmahomack: Monastery of the Picts. Edinburgh University Press, 2016. p. 2, Figure 1.1.
Romans may have found landing points across the coastal regions, and, as Carver suggests, “would have returned, for slaves, skins, fur, cattle, punitive raids or diplomacy”.  

The occupation of the site did not end during the Roman presence in northern Britain. Cist burials and stone slabs in this area point to Portmahomack as a potential elite, Pictish center. The slabs “are much later in date than the lifetime of Columba, testifying to Portmahomack’s eventual emergence as a focus of the highest-level elite patronage in the eighth century and later, when a Pictish version of Columba’s achievements was being promulgated”. This monastery was a site of intense Christian worship that had been fully integrated into Pictish society. The artwork produced by the residents of this religious site exemplifies the coalescence of pagan traditions with Christian ideologies.

The Hilton of Cadboll is dated to approximately 800 AD and was likely constructed by the monks at Portmahomack to serve as a boundary marker for the monastic estate.

88 Ibid.
As seen in Figure 4, the artistic style of the relief is indicative of insular fusion, a common aesthetic that “brought together previously distinct art styles from a variety of sources,” in this case, Pictish and Christian.\textsuperscript{90} Objects that are highly decorated usually indicate high status, and the coalescence of various cultural motifs suggests elite connections across Britain.

and Ireland. But it would be irresponsible and far too simplistic to understand this cultural fusion as a by-product of Bede’s cultural melting pot. Therefore, the artistic configurations of pagan and Christian ideologies on the Hilton of Cadboll cannot be taken as representative for the whole of Pictish society: it is indicative of the cultural and ideological systems present in the region where it was created. With this in mind, the cross-slab is still representative of the breakdown of cultural boundaries through Christian conversion.

The motifs on the Hilton of Cadboll illustrate a wealth of diverse influences, ranging from local symbols of hunting and gender representation, to “the international symbol of the cross that once dominated the front of the stone, signifying the triumph of Christianity”. While the native symbols create a separateness between Pictland and the wider Christian world, the “similarity in motifs and themes with the apse-mosaics of Rome show how these crosses were also part of wider European Christian devotional art. Pictish sculptors used their carving skills and artistic heritage to glorify their God, their beliefs and their understanding of Christianity”.

The borders and bottom panel of the relief consist of intricate vines, triskeles, and trumpet-spirals, all of which are akin to the decorative elements of early medieval manuscripts, originating from Mediterranean Christian art. The vines surrounding the interior panels represent “the Eucharistic wine and Christ’s references to the vine in St. John’s Gospel”. Pictish style and tradition is still evident despite the overt, Christian influence. The vine-scroll, rather than fully mirroring the Christian manuscript decoration, is inhabited by undefined, yet fantastic creatures, a widely used motif in Pictish art. The combination of local pagan and Christian

91 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
iconography on the vine-scroll emphasizes the importance of integrating the native voice into ecclesiastical doctrine: Christianity was accepted, but Pictish influence did not fade.

The incorporation of native imagery does not end with the vines surrounding the relief. The top panel hosts three iconic Pictish symbols: the double disk, the v-rod, and two interlace roundels. The meanings of these symbols are indecipherable, as there is no record describing the function or interpretations behind these widely used motifs. Despite the lack of information, the presence of these symbols on the Hilton of Cadboll speaks volumes to the presence of insular fusion. These images are represented on monuments and personal possessions from northern communities, ranging from objects that only exhibit traditional, Pictish iconography to immense relief sculptures such as the Hilton of Cadboll that exemplify the coalescence of religious beliefs. As seen in Figure 5, a leaf-shaped plaque from Largo dating to the seventh century AD boasts the double disk symbol. This item may have been of high value: it is made from silver and with expert craftsmanship. Further, the small size of this artifact suggests it may have been a personal object, one that operated as a sign for Pictish unity, or allegiance to a particular tribe or family.

Figure 5. Silver leaf plaque with Pictish symbols, Largo, Fife, 7th century “Leaf-Shaped Plaque, 7th Century AD." National Museums Scotland.

Pictish symbol stones also exhibit the native iconography from the Hilton of Cadboll and the silver leaf plaque. These sculptures are found from the Isle of Skye to Inverness, as far north as Orkney, and to the remote village of Aberlemno. Despite the wide, geographic range between these monuments and potential for distinct meanings within each community, the double disk and v-rod symbols are strikingly similar, again giving evidence for a widespread Pictish heritage. There may have been cross-cultural connections throughout the Pictish region such as trade, marriage, and military alliances, and the presence of these symbols on the Hilton of Cadboll could represent the importance of maintaining the traditional voice of the Picts through the adoption of Christianity.

Figure 6. Symbol Stone with Double Disk and V-Rod, Isle of Skye. “Pictish Symbol Stone of Schist, from Fiskavaig, Skye.” National Museums Scotland.

Figure 7. Symbol Stone with Double Disk and V-Rod, Invereen, “Pictish Symbol Stone from Invereen.” National Museums Scotland.

97 Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, and Figure 9, respectively.
The central panel on the Hilton of Cadboll is an evocative depiction of the coalescence of Pictish and Christian ideals. The panel portrays a deer hunt, both as the traditional representation of hunting in Pictish art and possibly, Psalm 42. The hunt shows a deer in “full flight, panting as the psalm describes. When the hounds are called off, the deer immediately seeks the nearest...
water where the hunters are pre-positioned, awaiting their quarry”.

In the Christian interpretation, the exhausted deer represents the human soul, longing for God. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God”. The hunt, or perhaps the search for salvation depicted on the relief, is led by a woman.

The sculptors used standard, widely-recognized iconographical elements to indicate that the main figure is female. A mirror and a comb are often used as symbols of female identity in Pictish art. Further, the long, braided hairstyle, along with the front-facing riding position distinguishes her from the male hunters. This female figure represented the power that women maintained throughout Pictish society, both through the ancient traditions as well as and the adoption and enforcement of Christianity. Through the Pictish gaze, the presence of a woman, no less one who is leading a hunt, could symbolize the ability for women to hold positions of authority in the Portmahomack region. A woman may have commissioned the stone to serve as a boundary marker, and her physical presence on the relief may have been recognizable to the contemporary, local community. Thus, the relief may be evidence of a respected, powerful woman in Pictish society: women who had enough wealth to commission monuments due to their prestige and recognition as leaders of the Pictish people.

When the relief is analyzed from a strict, ecclesiastical context however, this woman may not have been leading a Pictish hunt but rather leading her followers to the salvation of the soul. The combination of inherently Christian symbols as well as the posture of the female figure

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101 Ibid.
overtly emphasize the church’s influence in the iconography of this monument.\textsuperscript{102} A woman in early devotional art and iconography may demonstrate that Christianity was accepted in the Pictish community; however, the traditional, political role of women was incorporated and even celebrated in the new religion of the region.

The dual expression of Christian and Pictish ideologies present in the imagery of the Hilton of Cadboll may illustrate the power that women once held in this transitory era of northern British and Scottish history. Women operated between the pagan and Christian worlds, and their leadership in both realms led to the coalescence of the Pictish mentality and Christianity. This solitary, feminine image exemplifies the role of women in Pictish society: she is a true, visual representation of the power, authority, and respect that women maintained throughout the early medieval period. Rather than succumbing to the patriarchal standards from the Roman invaders or the oppressive nature of Christian doctrine, Pictish women could be, and in fact were, respected and seen as leaders of the preservation of ancient culture and the adoption of the new religion of the Picts.

5. Conclusion

The Picts have often been characterized as an emblem of the obscurity and unenlightened existence of dark-age society. However, as I have tried to demonstrate, the continuance of native traditions and belief systems illustrates that life in northern England and Scotland following the Roman withdrawal was not plagued by barbarism. The complexities of Pictish communities are uncovered through the literary and artistic record of the early medieval period. The coalescence

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. As many “important people are sometimes shown facing towards the viewer, but in Christian art the Virgin Mary and Jesus are both depicted riding in this unusual way”
of Pictish traditions with Christian ideology highlights the continuation of the native voice. The new religion did not eradicate the Pictish perspective. Rather, the two cultures came together, allowing the northern community to maintain their ancestral roots and belief in powerful women, while gaining a religious connection that fostered inter-cultural relationships from the furthest reaches of Pictland Scotland. Women were not subjugated to the patriarchal standards of the Romanized world and the percolations of the male-centric world of the early medieval period. Rather, women resisted through the maintenance of ancient values and they became champions for Christian adoption and reformation. In the face of intense transition and misogynistic standards, women held positions of influence, respect, and power in Pictish society.
Conclusion

Through a reexamination of the historical narrative and the material cultural of ancient Scotland, the obscure depictions of divine and mortal women can be restored to the modern conception of Scottish antiquity. These women, whether solitary figures representing fertility and passage from the Late Bronze Age or Pictish queens championing religious and social reform, are evidence for the existence of respect for female influence and the presence of real, powerful women throughout Scottish history. Even in the face of patriarchal institutions, such as the Roman military presence and the traditional conceptions of early Christianity, native women were able to represent or maintain respect, autonomy, and in some cases societal authority.

By questioning the transmission of the historical narrative and analyzing evidence from sources other than the literary records written by oppressive forces throughout history, minority communities, such as ancient women, can be reinterpreted and possibly restored to the modern conception of the historical record. In the case of Scotland, closer examination of religious iconography gives credence to the representation of femininity and female power in eras of history that lack a native written record. Further, by questioning biases of Roman and Greek authors when brief mentions of Scottish tribal women are made, theories of true societal roles, without the implicit bias against the northern “barbarians” can be formulated, giving power to the women of the northern, unconquerable territories. And finally, by examining the Pictish period through a holistic lens that includes religious texts and archaeological remains, the acceptance of women’s transformative power and authority can be understood.

Finally, one of the most important lessons to learn from this reexamination of feminine power and respect in ancient Scotland is the connection between reinterpreting historical
precedent and modern-day empowerment. By restoring the voices of women to the historical record, the voices of marginalized communities today can be restored. It is paramount that scholars work to make the space for women, and other marginalized groups, to gain the recognition that they deserve in the modern understanding of our past. The untold, forgotten narratives of minority communities in antiquity, whether they consist of differences in gender, sexuality, social status, or ethnicity, will allow for everyone to learn from the complexity of humanity, all the while giving minorities the ability to learn about their past power, and move forward with a greater understanding of what they once had, and what they can once again possess. If we are ever to make progress as society, as culture, as humanity, we must learn the entirety of the historical record. The Scottish women of antiquity can help fuel this process.
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