



The Picts

The Picts are often described as being savages who tried their hardest not to become civilised. However, these first impressions need to be examined further to have an accurate idea of what life was like for the Picts.

Around 2,000 years ago, the Picts were one of the main tribes in Scotland. The Romans controlled most of Britain at that point. They said that the Picts often fought naked. They were covered in paint and tattoos. This might be why they were given the name Picts. The Latin word for “painted ones” is *picti*. Despite their appearance, they were ferocious warriors who managed to keep the Romans out of Scotland for a long time. At the time, the Romans were the greatest army the world had ever seen, and yet the Picts managed to keep them at bay. That doesn’t sound like a group of people who were simply savages.

What is perhaps most strange about the Picts is that they left behind very little. During the 10th century, they seem to have vanished into thin air. We know that the name Picts was given to them by the Romans. However, they didn’t use it themselves. Julius Caesar was apparently fascinated with them and their culture. After he fought against them in battle, he wrote about them in his journal. “They 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 their body, save the head and the upper lip.” Woad is a flowering plant and one of only a couple of natural ways to dye something blue. It is unlikely that somebody as impressive and organised as Julius Caesar would be impressed with a tribe of savages.

It seems that the Picts considered iron to be valuable and a sign of wealth. According to Roman texts, they wore it in chains around their waist and throats. The more iron they wore, the more wealthy they were. They considered it more valuable than gold, possibly because it was also very practical. They could use the chains to carry weapons or food and water.

Evidence suggests that the tattoos and blue war paint weren’t just a blanket covering. They were often intricate designs of animals and patterns. In fact, the Romans believed that the Picts fought



naked so that they could show off the exquisite artwork.

The Picts first showed their cunning and organisation the first time they fought the Romans. Almost as soon as the battle started, the Picts retreated into the woods, and the Romans declared victory. However, that night while the Romans were setting up camp, the Picts burst from the forest and slaughtered the entire Roman army.

So, the Picts had detailed art, a rich culture and were very organised in battle. It seems unlikely that the Picts were the savages that history remembers them as.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. What do you think of when somebody is described as a “savage”?
2. Find and copy a word from the text that describes the Picts as fierce and aggressive.
3. What is a “sign of wealth”?
4. Which word tells you that the designs on their bodies were very detailed?
5. Write a definition for “cunning”.

VIPERS QUESTIONS

R

What did the Picts use to colour themselves blue?

S

Why were the iron chains more useful than gold?

R

When did the Picts seem to disappear?

R

Where did the Picts wear their chains?

P

Using the evidence in the text, do you think the Picts were disorganised savages? Explain your answer.

Answers:

1. Accept answers that recognise savage as being feral, unruly, aggressive etc.
2. Ferocious
3. It shows that somebody has a lot of money or is higher ranking
4. Intricate or exquisite
5. Sneaky and skilful

R: Woad

S: The Picts could use them to carry things

R: The 10th century

R: Around their waists and throats

P: Accept answers that use information from the text to support their argument either way