

## Did You Know?

The Picts were a strong and dominant civilisation for hundreds of years, and yet they left very little evidence behind. This doesn't mean that we don't know anything at all about them. You may know that they fought naked and covered their bodies with ornate artwork, but did you know these fantastic facts?

### Pardon?

We don't know which language the Picts spoke. When Saint Columba tried to convert them to Christianity, he wrote about needing a translator. The only spoken languages in Britain at that time were English, Latin, Gaelic and whatever language the Picts spoke. Columba spoke the first three, and so we have to assume that the Picts spoke something else entirely. Other than a few place names and mysterious carvings that they can't decipher, archaeologists know nothing about their language.

### They Buried Their Dead

This may seem obvious, but many very early civilisations didn't bury or celebrate the dead in their tribes. In 2017, researchers released a reconstruction of a Pict man who had been murdered in a brutal attack nearly 1,400 years before. He had been laid out at the back of a cave in a burial pose.

### They Were Mysterious

In 1978, a large stone slab was uncovered. It had been carved with a detailed picture of a man carrying an axe. It was nearly 6 feet tall and named the Rhynie Man after the area where it was found. Archaeologists believe it is from somewhere around 700 CE. The man is wearing a headdress and tunic and has a beard. He also has a long, pointed nose. Roman writings tell us that Picts only had moustaches and never wore clothes. It is unclear who they were drawing in the image. Glass from France and Anglo-Saxon metal has also been found on the site. It is possible it was a place for the Picts to trade with other people.



## Ahoy! Matey!

The Picts weren't restricted to land. During the Medieval period, they were feared on the seas as well. Archaeologists discovered an Iron Age fort in 2015. It was at the top of a stack of rocks and could only be reached by climbing ropes up the cliff face. It was most likely used to watch the sea for attackers and was nearly impossible to attack itself. The Picts didn't really engage in long sea journeys. Instead, they scoured the coasts looking for villages and towns to plunder for food and treasure.

## Ouch!

The most famous Pictish king was probably Kenneth MacAlpin, although not much is known about him. By 850 CE, the Vikings had started to remove the Picts from power. MacAlpin became king during this time and tried to unite the Vikings and Picts. Most of the Pict leaders didn't want this. They wanted to fight to keep their land. Legend says that MacAlpin invited the leaders to a feast. He sat them all on benches that had been booby-trapped to drop them all into pits filled with spikes. It's unclear whether this is true or not, but he was certainly not somebody you would want to annoy!

### RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Which languages other than Pictish, were spoken in Britain at that time?
2. When was the Rhynie Man uncovered?
3. When was the Rhynie Man created?
4. What facial hair did the Picts have?
5. Who was perhaps the most famous Pictish king?

### VIPERS QUESTIONS

**S**

Why is the fact that the Rhynie Man is wearing a headdress and tunic unusual?

**S**

Why was it almost impossible to attack the Iron Age fort?

**V**

Find and copy a word with a definition closest to "take part in".

**V**

Which word in the text tells you that MacAlpin tried to bring the Vikings and Picts together?

**I**

Why was MacAlpin not somebody you wanted to annoy?



## Letter from A Roman

Dearest Claudia,

I am writing this letter at the first chance I have had to sit down. Firstly, I wanted you to know that I am alive and well. Although the battle didn't go to plan, I have escaped with only a few minor cuts and a broken finger. They have all been washed with wine and bandaged, and I am sure I shall live to fight again.

I suppose I should consider myself lucky. Today, I fought against the vicious Picts and lived to tell the tale. Not many can say that. I was surprised to learn that the rumours are true. Their warriors turned up wearing nothing but their iron chains and a smile. How they can fight in such a cold winter with nothing on just staggers me! Not that their nakedness is obvious. Their bodies are covered in the most exquisite artwork I have ever seen. Even the galleries in the palaces of Rome can't compare. Each design is a unique swirl of patterns, animals and stories all woven into one picture. There were times when I had to force myself to keep fighting. My natural reaction was to stop and admire them. Perhaps this is their plan?

For a while, we thought that victory would be ours. We arrived with hundreds of mounted men and hundreds more on foot. Our prefect ordered us into our positions in the middle of a clearing, and we waited. Even though we were surrounded on all sides by thick woodland, it seemed impossible to sneak up to us. In the end, they didn't try to.

Flashes of blue streaking across the open land were the first signs that they were attacking. I still cannot believe how they broke us down. Their plan was simplicity itself. They would race up to a mounted soldier and attempt to attack him. When he turned to fight back, they would flee. Despite their orders, man after man pursued their blue attacker until our army was in disarray. Then, the Picts attacked all at once.

We managed to fight them off for a while and even seemed to be gaining





an advantage. Suddenly, they seemed to break rank and fled into the woods. We knew we were quicker than them, so we gave chase, but they made it to the woods first. They hadn't just fled in one direction, they surrounded us. We realised this too late, and they leapt from their hides and began to kill the men closest to them.

At this point, our prefect gave the call and we fled. Unlike the Picts, we didn't turn back.

I am confident that our army can defeat these painted warriors one day. I cannot help but admire their strength and bravery, and I sincerely hope that I don't have to fight against them anytime soon.

Yours,

*Marcellus*

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word in the texts tells you that the Picts were aggressive?
2. Find and copy a phrase that means "is still alive and can talk about it".
3. What does the word "unique" tell you about the Pictish designs?
4. If a soldier is described as "mounted", what does it mean?
5. Find a word that means closest to "disorganised and untidy"

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**R**

What does Marcellus compare the Pictish design to?

**S**

Why did Marcellus have to remember to fight?

**R**

What were the Romans surrounded by on the battlefield?

**I**

Why do you think Marcellus hopes to not have to fight the Picts again?

**R**

Who is Marcellus writing to?



## Pict Culture

The group of people known as the Picts were not a single tribe. Instead, they were a group of different tribes who fought together. This means that they had some beliefs that they all shared. Each tribe would also have had its own stories and culture. Archaeologists believe that the Picts originally came from Scandinavia.

Unfortunately, the Picts didn't leave behind much evidence of their lives. Most of what we know comes from the Ancient Romans. They lived in Britain at the time. The Picts also carved things into stone. It is possible that the Picts were the first native people of Scotland. They went on to form some of the most powerful medieval kingdoms in northern Britain.

We do know that the Picts built their homes from wood. They lived in small, tight-knit communities. There are lots of detailed carvings in stone. This means that they were able to work stone, but didn't build with it. Scotland is home to lots of large stone structures similar to Stonehenge in England. It is likely that the Picts were responsible for building most of these. One example is the Ness of Brodgar. It is even older than Stonehenge. This means that the Picts had been in Scotland for a very long time before the Romans invaded Britain.

It seems that the Picts formed themselves into clans with a chief ruling each one. These clans often fought for themselves against each other and would steal food and iron from other Picts. However, when somebody attacked from the outside, the Pict tribes got together and attacked as one army. This happened when the Romans tried to invade Scotland.

For most of their history, the Picts worshipped pagan and Celtic gods. These were often linked to nature. Most sites, such as the Ness of Brodgar would have been places for them to worship and carry out rituals. Their goddesses were incredibly powerful, and Pict women were treated as equals to their men. In most civilisations, the next king was chosen from the father's side of the family, because men were considered stronger. In Pictish society, the next chief was chosen from the mother's side.



When the Romans conquered England, they brought Christianity with them. The Picts didn't accept it at first, but over time they gradually accepted the church as their religion. Somewhere around 450 CE to 550 CE, the Pict leaders surrendered to Saint Columba and converted to Christianity. For the next hundred years or so, there were small battles when some Picts tried to hang on to their old ways of life. This included attacking saints and their followers.

## RETRIEVAL FOCUS

1. Where did the Picts originally come from?
2. Where does most information about the Picts come from?
3. Which gods did the Picts worship?
4. When did the Picts convert to Christianity?
5. How did Picts try to hang on to their old way of life?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

What is an archaeologist?

**S**

When would the Picts join together?

**V**

Find and copy a phrase that tells you Pictish communities were very close.

**S**

How were Pictish women different to most other civilisations at the time?

**I**

Why might Picts have attacked the saints that came to visit them?



## Salmon of Knowledge

Based on a Celtic and Pict legend

Once upon a time, there was a young boy named Fionn. He was brave and curious about the world around him. One day, he was sent to live with a wise man named Finnegas. Finnegas was a poet, and everybody knew how clever he was. He lived on the banks of the River Boyne but was known throughout the land.

Finnegas was a renowned poet, but he also knew more about the world than anybody else. This was one of the reasons why Fionn had been sent to live with him. It was hoped that Fionn would learn all that there was to know.

For many weeks, Fionn sat and listened to the old man's stories. Soon, he began to learn the tales and words of wisdom. He could recite them himself. Fionn felt very clever, indeed. In exchange for his knowledge, Fionn would help Finnegas around the house and would fish for the old man.

Despite his great knowledge, no man can know everything. Occasionally, Fionn would ask a question that Finnegas couldn't answer. This upset Fionn who wanted to know everything there was to know. "Is there a way I could learn every secret of the Earth?" Fionn asked, one day.

Finnegas sat and thought. He had been young and curious once and had asked the same question. In fact, it was the reason he lived next to the River Boyne. When he was younger, the druids had told him that the river held the secrets of the world. In a dark pool, under the hanging bough of a hazel tree, the Salmon of Knowledge swam. The druids said that the fruit of the hazel tree was magic. The seeds had given the fish the knowledge of every secret under the sun. Finnegas told Fionn that the first person, and only the first person, who tasted the flesh of the salmon would know all there was to know. Finnegas admitted that he had been trying to catch the fish for a long time, but had failed.

Telling Fionn the story gave Finnegas new hope. Sure enough, he caught the Salmon of Knowledge a few days later. Finnegas immediately rushed back to the hut and ordered



Fionn to cook the fish for him to eat. “Whatever you do, do not eat any of the fish yourself,” Finnegas said. He remembered that only the first person to taste it would become all-knowing.

Fionn roasted the salmon on a spit over a hot fire. The urge to taste it was almost irresistible, but Fionn kept his promise. Or so he thought. When Finnegas returned after collecting firewood, something seemed different about Fionn. He strode over and demanded to know if Fionn had tasted the flesh of the fish.

“I have not!” Fionn cried.

“What about the skin?”

Fionn shook his head. Suddenly, a look of panic washed over him. “I burned my finger on the fat and stuck it into my mouth to soothe it,” he muttered.

Finnegas hung his head and sighed sadly. “Then you are the chosen one. You are filled with the knowledge of the world.”

Sure enough, Fionn went on to become a wise and powerful leader. He led his people in battle and became one of their greatest warriors.

## SUMMARY FOCUS

1. Why did Fionn travel to live with Finnegas?
2. What did Fionn do after he arrived at Finnegas’s house?
3. Why did Finnegas understand why Fionn wanted to know everything?
4. Did Finnegas catch the salmon before or after he told Fionn the story?
5. What did Fionn do after he tasted the salmon?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

**V**

Find and copy a word that means to “retell something accurately”.

**R**

What seeds did the salmon eat?

**R**

Where did the salmon live?

**V**

What is a bough?

**I**

How did Finnegas feel when he realised Fionn had tasted the salmon? How do you know?



## 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 - Did you know?:

1. English, Latin and Gaelic
2. 1978
3. Around 700 CE
4. Moustaches
5. King Kenneth MacAlpin

S: The Picts didn't wear clothes, so it is unclear why they would draw a man wearing them

S: It could only be accessed by climbing up ropes. This would be very hard for an army to do without being attacked

V: Engage

V: Unite

I: He didn't treat his enemies very well according to legend

Answers - Letter from a Roman:

1. Vicious
2. Lived to tell the tale
3. They were all different
4. He was riding a horse
5. Disarray

R: The galleries in the palaces of Rome

S: He kept stopping to admire their artwork

R: Thick woodland

I: They were brave and difficult to fight against

R: (Dearest) Claudia



Answers - Pict culture:

1. Scandinavia
2. The Romans
3. Pagan and Celtic
4. Between 450 CE and 550 CE
5. They attacked saints and their followers

V: Somebody who studies human history

S: When somebody from outside tried to attack them

V: Tight-knit

S: They were treated equally to the men

I: The Picts didn't want to convert to Christianity

Answers - Salmon of knowledge:

1. Finnegas knew more than anybody else and Fionn wanted to learn
2. He sat and listened to his stories
3. He had been the same when he was younger
4. After
5. He went on to become one of the greatest warriors in his tribe

V: Recite

R: Hazel

R: In a dark pool, under the bough of a hazel tree

V: A large branch

I: He was sad/disappointed. He hung his head and sighed sadly

### Answers - The Picts:

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