

TEO, ISSN 2247-4382
91 (2), pp. 47-57, 2022

The Work of the Church in Scotland During the First Christian Millennium

Ștefan NEGREANU

Ștefan NEGREANU

“Hilarion V. Felea” Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Arad, Romania
Email: negreanus@yahoo.com

Abstract

During the first Christian millennium, the land of Scotland inhabited by Picts and Scots, was the scene of several invasions and internal struggles, but also of the Christianization work, started by some locals and missionaries sent by the pope or the surrounding nations. Names like St. Ninian, St. Columba, St. Kentigern and others are the pillars on which the right faith has been based in the first centuries in Scotland. These will be the ones who help, at the turn of the 2nd and 3rd millennium, their descendants who went through the hardships of breaking with the Church of Christ, to slowly return to the right faith.

Keywords

Church, Scotland, Picts, Christianization, first millennium, Vikings.

“Read your story properly and you will see the whole law of God engraved there in letters of fire, like the burning fire; The Lord writes His law so that even the illiterate can read it in spirit. He wrote it and sealed it once in the Holy Bible, but he is tireless in renewing His law in the lives of every people”¹.

¹ Sf. Ierarh NICOLAE al Ohridei și Jiceii, Fericitul Arhimandrit JUSTIN POPOVICI, *Taina și semnificația bătăliei de la Kosovo*, Editura Anestis, 2013, p. 12.

This word of Saint Nicholas Velimirovici proves to us that the reading of the true meaning of this period of the first Christian millennium and of the earthquakes that delimit it can be made only in a spiritual key.

I. Brief history

When the Romans came, the population of the north of the British island was made up of Celtic tribes, whom they called Picts - from *pictus* in Latin, meaning painted, as they used to tattoo their body skin. Related to the southern Britons and speaking a similar language, the Picts were separated from them by the Roman walls erected by Hadrian and Antoninus. However, as in the case of the free Dacians separated by their brothers from the mountain-borders of Roman Dacia, the Picts were also in constant contact with Britain. Unlike other ancient tribes, they remained in the same territory, free from the invasions of migrants. Tacitus calls them "the last of the free"².

Attempts by the Romans to conquer Scotland led to the unification of the tribes of the Picts against the same enemy - Rome. If in the time of Agricola, Scotland meant dozens of independent clans, at the end of Roman rule in Britain the Picts were gathered into two large kingdoms - the North, the Black Picts and the South - the White Picts³.

In the third century in the southern part of today's Scotland the Scots settle, a tribe of Irish Celts who came from the other large island of the British archipelago and who, along with the Picts, constantly attacked Roman Britain⁴.

In the 6th century, north of the River Tweed, four tribes disputed the territory: the Picts, the Britons, the Scots, and the English, the latter two more recently arriving in this part of the island. The strongest for a long time proved to be the Picts.

In the middle of the sixth century, when St. Columba arrives on the island of Jonah, the Scots of the same kin, under the leadership of King Aidan, will unite with the free Britons against the Saxons and Picts. The

² Alfred P. SMYTH, *Warlords and Holy Men, Scotland AD 80 – 1000*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1984, p. 1.

³ Alfred P. SMYTH, *Warlords and Holy Men...*, p. 34.

⁴ Lloyd and Jennifer LAING, *Anglo – Saxon England – Britain before the Conquest*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1979, p. 44.

Scottish Chronicle tells of prayers made by the monk of Jonah and his disciples for the victory of the Scots and British armies⁵.

In the 7th century, Anglo-Saxon kings began their conquest of the Picts. One hundred years later, victory was not yet on the side of the English, and the natives almost always managed to drive them out of their territory.⁶

Although with common roots, the Irish more or less peacefully invaded Scotland, both militarily and through missionaries. The Picts were not always open to this migration, an example being the expulsion of the Irish priests sent by St. Columban in the Pictia⁷.

After 860 the Vikings began to attack Scotland and Pictia. At the end of the ninth century, the Irish managed to unite and drive away - at least for a time - the Vikings to Scotland and York⁸.

In the 10th century the Vikings attacked Scotland again and the kings became vassals of the kingdom of York, paying tribute or giving land in exchange for peace⁹.

II. The Church

There are few records of the Church's work in Scotland in the first four Christian centuries. Of these, the most important but also the most controversial is the *Scottish Chronicle*. This testifies to the early Picts who converted to the Christian religion. In 203, during the reign of Emperor Severus, King Donald of the Picts sent a message to Rome asking for missionaries to teach him the new faith. Donald will be baptized and with him several noble¹⁰.

From the mist of the little-known history of the Scottish church of the first centuries, the luminous face of *St. Ninian* shines like a sun, to which a multitude of heathen were illuminated and warmed.

⁵ Lloyd and Jennifer LAING, *Anglo – Saxon England*, p. 209.

⁶ *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. I, c. 500 – c. 700, edited by Paul FOURACRE, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 250.

⁷ *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, p. 251.

⁸ Anne-Christine LARSEN (ed.), *The Vikings in Ireland*, The Viking Ship Museum, Roskilde, 2001, p. 21.

⁹ Jean Anne HAYES, *Anglian Leadership in Northumbria, 547 AD through 1075 AD*, doctoral thesis, Louisiana State University, 2005, p. 92.

¹⁰ Raphael HOLINSHED, *The Scottish Chronicle or; a Complete History and Description of Scotland*, vol. I, London, 1805, p. 119.

Saint Ninian was born in what is now called Cumberland, the land north of Hadrian's Wall - on the border between Roman Britain and Scotland, probably in the second half of the 4th century. We find sporadic mentions of this in historians such as Sulpicius Severus or Bede, but the most important source is the *Life of St. Ninian* written by Aelred de Rievaulx, a 12th-century English monk who lived in Scotland during the first part of his life, where he collected information about Scottish monks and kings.

As a young man, Ninian took the road to Rome.

“There, after living in a praiseworthy form for many years and learning enough of the Holy Scriptures, he reached the heights of virtue and, carried by the wings of love, rose to the contemplation of spiritual things. The pope, hearing that some parts of western Britain had not yet received faith in the Savior, and others had heard the word of the gospel from heretics or ill-taught men in the law of God, moved by the Holy Spirit, ordained him bishop and blessed him, and sent him as an apostle to the Gentiles named above”¹¹.

St. Ninian will begin the great work of Christianizing the Picts, but he will soon need more missionaries. Thus, St. Ninian began a work of preparation of the living from Candida Casa, a monastery founded by him, to send them later to preach. Once in the pagan areas, the missionaries settled among the Picts, confessing Christ through their own lives.

Scotland after St. Ninian had two great pillars of faith in its lands: St. Columba and St. Kentigern. They were contemporaries of each other and, moreover, they knew each other. St. *Columba* was an Irish royal vine. He settled on the island of Jonah, founding a monastery, from where he set out on a Christian mission to the tribes in the north of the island. However, the work of the saint did not go smoothly, as he came to have many opponents, first of all among the idolatrous priests of the Picts. Thus, in his life written by Adamnan is recounted the attempt of the Druids to prevent him from holding the evening service by shouting. St. Columba will begin to sing Psalm 44, and his voice will cover all the noise of the adversaries, arousing astonishment and fear¹².

¹¹ Aelred DE RIEVAULX, *Vita S. Niniani*, <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/celtic/ctexts/ninian.html>.

¹² ADOMNAN, *Life of St. Columba*, book I, chapter XXIX, <http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/basis/columba-e.asp>.

Hailing from a noble family of Britons in northern England in the sixth century, St. Kentigern arrived with the Christian mission in the area of today's Glasgow. He founded a monastic settlement that soon became famous. Life of hardship and prayer will be intertwined with the work of returning the Glasgow Picts to God.

“And thus, putting on the shield of faith, the helmet of hope, the breastplate of righteousness, and girded with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, he began to attack the city of the enemy and plunder his ships, showing great power in battle by the Lord, who is our refuge. And, in short, neither his foot, nor his hand, nor his tongue ceased to preach salvation until all the borders of those lands had reached God, and His name was mentioned everywhere”¹³.

In the eighth and tenth centuries, the church was closely linked to secular power and vice versa, in a sense that made them both flourish. The Pict monasteries were founded by kings immediately near their palaces. And palaces were in almost the whole territory, as the Pict monarchs were peripatetic, moving their court every few months, in order to have better control over the people¹⁴. Unlike England, the Picts brought stonemasons and built strong churches. Their traces are preserved to this day, and next to each or at crossroads you can see the stone crosses that dotted the country in those days. Kings and people went to monasteries on feasts, and church leaders attended all royal ceremonies¹⁵. The leaders took care to endow the churches with many gold and silver ornaments, which will attract the greed of the Vikings¹⁶.

According to the tradition of British histories, the ruling families in Scotland gave several saints, either pious or confessors. In the ninth century lived St. Drostanus, prince of the royal vine, who left all the glory

¹³ JOCELYN, a monk of Furness, *The Life of Kentigern (Mungo)*, chap. XIX, 154-156, [http:// www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/Jocelyn-LifeofKentigern.asp)

¹⁴ Jenny WORMALD (ed.), *Scotland: A History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, <https://books.google.ro/books?id=mFt2S33o8G8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=worml and+Scotland:+A+History&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjI98OdyNLLAhVD7XIK HQbSAgoQ6AEIKjAB#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹⁵ J. WORMALD (ed.), *Scotland: A History*.

¹⁶ J. WORMALD (ed.), *Scotland: A History*.

of this world, retiring to one of the monasteries of the north, and who kept the order of St. Columba. After a while he founded a monastery where he spent some time as abbot, but towards the end of his life he retired to the forests of Scotland, leading a life of asceticism and prayer. This is one of the pillars on which the people of the north of the island rested during the Viking invasions, many of whom were rushed to his relics for help and healing¹⁷.

Pictia was the first British land attacked by the Vikings, devastating especially the north and west of the country, and then seeking to settle on these lands, they founded real dynasties that launched attacks on Ireland and England. In addition to the stolen wealth, they took slaves from the locals, selling them as slaves in Scandinavia, Byzantium or the Arab-dominated areas¹⁸.

After moving the majority of the community from Jonah to Ireland, the Scottish kings were no longer crowned on the island, but chose a northern fortress. Their alienation from Jonah and her spirit had already begun, although a few monks from Jonah had settled in the north¹⁹. But this will make them try to extend their supremacy over the Picts. By the end of the ninth century the Scots of Dal Riata came to rule both the Scots and the Picts and part of the British territories, and the people mingled through mixed marriages and formed a single kingdom, called Alba²⁰. Its first king was Kenneth mac Alpin, who seems to have imposed his people, brought out the origin and removed the Pict nobles²¹. His successors to the throne were forced to fight other waves of Vikings who coveted Scottish lands. Names such as Donald, Constantine I and Constantine II have remained in history, through which Alba will be consolidated until the tenth century²².

¹⁷ Rev. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints, vol. VII: July*, Dublin, 1866.

¹⁸ Alex WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2007, p. 55.

¹⁹ Jean Anne HAYES, *Anglian Leadership in Northumbria, 547 AD through 1075 AD*, doctoral thesis, Louisiana State University, 2005, p. 70.

²⁰ J. WORMALD (ed.), *Scotland: A History*.

²¹ A.D.M.BARRELL, *Medieval Scotland*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p. 12.

²² J. WORMALD (ed.), *Scotland: A History*. It is interesting to note that both the Picts and the Scots, but also the ancient Britons will give the name Constantine to several rulers. In Ireland and England this name was not used, probably because the great Constantine had not ruled Ireland, and the Anglo-Saxons settled long after him. But the Britons kept his memory and not only the kings took his name, but also ordinary people, proof that the Britons and the Picts loved and cherished him.

In the last half of the ninth century, as a result of the new attacks by the Scandinavians, several Irish bishops and priests who preached the faith in Scotland were killed. Among them the names of the saints have been preserved: Adrian, Stalbrand, Geodianus and Gaius²³.

The chronicles record how the Scots understood to face the Viking danger:

“When King Imar was a boy and came to plunder Alba with three large troops, the people of Alba, laymen and clergy alike, fasted and prayed to God and St. Columba until the morning and... they gave much alms - food and clothing - to the churches and the poor and partook of the Body of the Lord from the hands of the priests and promised to do all the good that the priests would ask of them, and their banner of battle would be the rod of Saint Colombia... And many times, they proved victorious in battle, advancing prayers and almsgiving and entrusting themselves to the protection of St. Colum Cille.”²⁴

Compared to the Vikings settled in Alba, the natives were peaceful, not imposing Christian baptism on them. Thus, the Christianization of the Vikings in Scotland took place over at least two centuries, especially through mixed marriages, and pagan rituals perpetuated even after their baptism²⁵.

Until the eleventh century the Scottish church retained its centuries-old specificity, respectively without a strict ecclesiastical organization, with itinerant bishops, whose jurisdiction was not given by a particular place, but by the area in which they had their work, overlapping other bishops. The monasteries were run by abbots, who followed a system almost like that of kings²⁶. True to the traditions received from the first missionaries who Christianized them, the Scots would be considered simple people by Rome, as the church's services and ritual had not become as rich and pompous as the Roman ones²⁷. But the Creed and all the dogmas of the

²³ Vladimir Moss, *Lives of the British Saints*, <http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/books>, p. 9.

²⁴ Alex WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, p. 133.

²⁵ A. WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, p. 310.

²⁶ A.D.M.BARRELL, *Medieval Scotland*, p. 14.

²⁷ Michael RUSSELL, *History of the Church of Scotland*, vol. I, Gilbert & Rivington,

church were the same as those of the early Christian Church. In time, the Scots recognized the pope's supremacy by participating in the synods convened by him. It was not until the 11th century that the bishop of St. Andrews exercised authority over all other bishops, as a true archpastor, and was recognized by kings as "Maximus Scotorum Episcopus"²⁸. St. Andrews episcopal church kept a piece of the relics of St. Andrew, the first called, to whom the Scots had great piety, considering him their patron saint.

In the ninth century, a separate group had appeared in the Church of Ireland, the so-called *Culdees*. The hardships the Irish had gone through (invasions, conquests, civil wars) will make the most zealous of them think more about the soul and try to live a new life. Thus, arose and flourished the communities of *celi De* (culdees) - the servants of the Lord (in translation), who lived according to strict rules of fasting and virginity. Of the two original churches that housed them, the community of culdees will extend to the 840s throughout Ireland, and later to Scotland. Unfortunately, in time they came to no longer receive the ordinances of the mother church, moving away from it, alienating themselves from the veneration of saints and icons. Then they did not receive the seven Holy Sacraments of the church, thus being true forerunners of later Protestants.

Culdees were also highly regarded in Scotland for their austere and simple life, and some of the Scottish monasteries would house them, subject to the reforms initiated by them and supported by some of the Scottish kings. By the twelfth century they had attracted most of the Scottish monks²⁹.

In time, the life of the church began to decline in these places as well. Concerned about the disorder that existed in the church in his time, King Constantine I of Alba convened a synod. Among the decisions of that synod, we enumerate: priests were not allowed to get involved in worldly affairs, nor to have horses, greyhounds or falcons or hunting weapons. They had a duty to teach the believers, and improper conduct attracted them to a fine, and to the second offense - the defrocking³⁰. They regularly received money from the secular leadership so that they could live with their families.

London, 1834, p. 82.

²⁸ M. RUSSELL, *History of the Church of Scotland*, vol. I, p. 96.

²⁹ A. WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, p. 315.

³⁰ M. RUSSELL, *History of the Church of Scotland*, vol. I, p. 98.

Another monarch who wanted to restore the spiritual life of the people was King Constantine II of Alba, who, at the beginning of his reign, together with Bishop Cellach, climbed the Hill of Faith (name it will bear from then on) and swore that they would keep the laws and the ordinance of the faith, the Church and the Holy Gospel³¹. Towards the end of his life, the king retired from his reign in one of the monasteries of Alba, spending the rest of his days in prayer and hardship³².

This nation also offered sacrifices with the arrival of the Vikings. First of all, it is King Constantine I of Pictia, who, after a 14-year reign in which he tried to help the church, had to endure the repeated attacks of the Vikings on his people. Constantine I died on the battlefield in 876, saying the psalmist's words: "Do not deliver the soul of thy dove to the wild beasts"³³.

At the end of the ninth century, Bishop Adrian of St. Andrews is mentioned, probably of Irish descent. He did a great work among the people, strengthening them in the faith and converting the invaders. But their leaders, dissatisfied, sought to stop his zeal. St. Adrian retreats to the island of May, where there was an important monastery. After a while, the Vikings arrive in this place as well, but this time, their attitude is sharp: they kill St. Adrian and with him all the inhabitants of the monastery die for their faith. This happened around 874³⁴.

St. Adrian sent several missionaries from the monastery to restore faith to the Picts deceived by superstitions and witchcraft. Of these, the most zealous was St. Monan, raised by St. Adrian from childhood and then ordained by him. He was sent by his bishop to the land of Fife, where the work bore much fruit. In 874, a year of martyrdom for Pictia, St. Monan was killed by the northern pagans, along with many Christians. His relics will be honored for centuries, through which great miracles will be performed, as recorded in the chronicles³⁵.

³¹ A. WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, p. 136.

³² A. WOOLF, *From Pictland to Alba: 789-1070*, p. 177.

³³ REV. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. IV: April, Dublin, 1866.

³⁴ REV. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. III: March, Dublin, 1866. The chronicles mention that the community of the monastery had six thousand six hundred monks, but other sources speak of a number of six thousand Christians killed that year in Scotland, and not monks of the same monastery.

³⁵ REV. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. III: March.

Among the saints of the tenth century, who remained in the hearts of the Scots for a long time, we mention St. Lolan, a confessional bishop who, through his prayers will help stop a Danish naval and land invasion. He wrote commentaries on Holy Scripture and hymns³⁶.

In the second half of the tenth century, in the county of Argyleshire, the spiritual life of the inhabitants will be renewed by the work of St. Munde, abbot and founder of monasteries. An indefatigable preacher of the faith, the saint formed many spiritual sons who continued his mission. There are many words left behind about love, almsgiving, silence and loneliness, preserved over the centuries in oral form³⁷.

At the end of the same century in the land of Fife Pious Kennocha lived. The only child of noble and wealthy parents, she gave up the easy and luxurious life and the many suitors, choosing solitude for God, in one of the monasteries of the kingdom. Through a severe asceticism, St. Kennocha will attain to the purification of the heart and unceasing prayer, the hagiographies recalling the many miracles she performed during his lifetime. The Scots built several churches for her after she fell asleep³⁸.

At the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries, a monk named Malrubius lived in a secluded part of Scotland. His life meant a harsh asceticism and unceasing contemplation of God. The new Viking invasions of the late tenth century brought much misery to the people. St. Malrubius saw his brothers bewildered and about to lose their faith. So, he left his wilderness and went down to soothe the souls of the Scots. In time he began a work of preaching the gospel to the Vikings, for which he would pay with his life, being killed by barbarians in the first half of the eleventh century³⁹.

At the end of the 11th century, under the direct work of Queen Margaret - the spiritual daughter of the Norman Archbishop Lanfranc of England, the church in Scotland was absorbed by Rome, its specificity being lost in time⁴⁰. Thus, the church will be institutionalized, with stable bishops and

³⁶ Rev. John Canon O'HANLON, *Lives of the Irish Saints*, Dublin.

³⁷ Rev. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. III: March.

³⁸ Rev. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. III: March.

³⁹ Rev. A. BUTLER, *The Lives of the Saints*, vol. VIII: August.

⁴⁰ Vladimir MOSS, *The Fall of the Orthodox England. The Spiritual Roots of the Norman Conquest, 1043-1087* (self-published online at orthodoxchristianbooks.com, 2013), p. 93.

parishes, and the monasteries will take over the Latin typikon and orders⁴¹. After much controversy, the Scots also accepted the celibacy of priests⁴². Culdees will be expelled from the church hierarchy, and the authority of Rome will be definitively imposed in the time of King David, son of Margaret, respectively at the beginning of the twelfth century⁴³.

III. Conclusion

From all this long enumeration of names and deeds belonging to the first Christian millennium, today remains the fruit of their bloody sacrifice or not: today's Scots regain the memory of the past that times and the enemy of mankind have tried for 1000 years to erase. Now the faces of the ancient saints appear, but not as dusty legends, but as men of God who work mightily for the return of as many of their followers as possible to the right faith.

If the Scots opened their hearts and land to receive immigrants today, among them, the Orthodox began a work of resurrection of the true Church of Christ in those territories. Scotland is today full of Orthodox churches and monasteries, after a real re-Christianization of this territory.

⁴¹ Philip SCHAFF, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. IV *Medieval Christianity. AD 590-1073*, CCEL, 1997, p. 70.

⁴² M. RUSSELL, *History of the Church of Scotland*, vol. I, p. 99.

⁴³ Vladimir MOSS, *Celtic Monasticism*, <http://www.orthodoxchristianbooks.com/articles/450/celtic-monasticism>.