

CONCEIVING A NATION, SCOTLAND TO AD 900, BY GILBERT MÁRKUS. EDINBURGH:
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Constructing an early history of Scotland is by its nature difficult. Existing beyond (and part of) the Roman world, associated with various migration myths, and drawn ever deeper into Anglo-Saxon and later Scandinavian affairs, it can be very difficult to present a full and persuasive history of early Scotland. It is however a necessary endeavour. The field of early Scottish history has changed drastically since Alfred Smyth's *Warlords and Holy Men*. New approaches, and new methodologies, have opened up whole areas of thought and historical analysis that challenge previous accepted positions. The understanding of Roman relationships with barbarians beyond their borders is recognised now as being much more nuanced and sophisticated than previously thought, as is their presentation of Caledonians in classical ethnographic writings. The field of linguistic analysis and the development of place names present important depictions of the early peoples that called Scotland home. There have also been a number of important archaeological investigations (e.g. Rhynie, Dunnicaer, and Portmahomack).

Gilbert Márkus' book is most welcome, and attempts to provide an update to how early Scotland can and should be studied. There are elements here to praise. The book is strongest when thinking through linguistic variations between the early Celtic languages, and when exploring archaeological sites and finds. Rather more images of these artefacts and landscape features would have aided their scholarly exploration, but this is certainly where the book is most useful. There are a number of arguments attempted here, some of which are persuasive, when building on language and archaeological analysis. Throughout the book it is the discussion of the Picts that is most valuable, and certainly Markus' thoughts here encourage the reader to reassess previous interpretations (e.g. 261-278).

There is however a crucial issue that runs throughout the work that is worth recognising immediately. The use of ancient and early medieval writings is not consistent. The majority of written sources that are drawn upon (particularly in the opening three chapters) needed to be set out with much greater care, and to be placed more firmly in their immediate political and literary backdrop. This is a curious fault to find as in the preface to the work Márkus urges us to do exactly that (p. viii). The writings associated with Adomnán are set out with greater care (see chapters 3 & 4), but even here the discussion would have benefitted from a more rigorous disentanglement of contemporary political realities. This certainly impacts the quality of the analysis, and lends certain sections of the book a superficial edge.

The work is divided into six chapters, the first two looking at the early history ('Trade, Culture and Empire in the Early Centuries' 1-53 & 'The Development of Sub-Roman Kingdoms' 54-110). The following three chapters take a somewhat more thematic approach ('The Church in Early Medieval Scotland' 111-150; 'Adomnán and His World' 151-187 & 'Laws and Societies' 188-227). The final chapter focusses on the Scandinavian influence and heritage, as well as an excellent section concerning the disappearance of the Picts ('Vikings and the Formation of Scotia' 228-278). The use of the psalms as a structural skeleton does not provide the structural cohesion needed to tie the various chapters together, and although the case study of Adomnán is enlightening, it appears strangely out of place unless there are accompanying studies for each period discussed.

The first two chapters are of rather mixed quality. The opening sections of both are good (1-7 & 54-58), engaging well with linguistic evidence, and setting out a clear sense of how important language can be in studies of the ancient and early medieval world. There is also a useful integration of archaeological evidence as well. However, both are weakened by a lack of structure to the ideas, and an inconsistent engagement with the contemporary writings. In the first chapter, when looking at Rome, very little is offered concerning classical

ethnography. If writings such as Tacitus' *Agricola* are to be examined, then there needs to be a much greater exploration of how Roman writings follow pre-set models, and how closely they match the reality. Márkus spends quite some time tackling Tacitus (13-21), who remains one of the most important and influential ancient historians. He is however given rather short shrift. This is odd because not only are his writings so important for the understanding of how Romans perceived 'others' from beyond their borders, but also because he paints vivid images of the Britons and the Caledonians. The use of archaeology to challenge Tacitus' perspective is appropriate (and fruitful; 19-21), but Tacitus and his works needed to be placed much more firmly in their immediate milieu. Márkus also draws upon the *Historia Augusta*, which he refers to as 'a collection of biographies of second- and third-century emperors' (28). Although strictly speaking this is true, there are vast differences in the historical merit of each of these biographies, with complex discussions over their veracity. This needed to be set out with greater care if it is to be used to explore what is said of imperial attitudes towards Caledonia. The discussion of Romanization in the second chapter would have benefited from a more rigorous exploration of exactly what that entails (58-64) and although the structure offered by Bede is valuable, much like with Tacitus, his writings needed to be treated with greater care (64-66). The exploration of the Scotti and the Picts (77-85; 102-110) provides useful overviews and clear detailed analysis. A reading of these pages gives an important sense of this complex and shifting political landscape. This is however followed by a long and somewhat circumlocutory description of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria (85-101), that distracts from the approach Márkus is making.

The next two chapters look to the church, and although a case study of Adomnán appears out of place, this is one of the stronger chapters in the volume. Márkus clearly has a detailed knowledge and understanding of the abbot of Iona and the world he inhabits, and paints a clear and detailed image of his importance and influence. As Márkus writes he is 'the one

individual in the period of whom we can paint anything like a recognisable human portrait (151-152). There are some interesting observations made regarding the symbiosis of religious thought with Gaelic custom (*snádud*; 156-157), and Márkus introduces the reader to a wide collection of contemporary documents. The discussion of law (173-178) provides a good window into the possible social realities of the seventh and eighth centuries, and this then a strong part of the book. The third chapter is weaker, in part because it lacks the structure seen in chapter four, but also because Márkus attempts to cover far too much ground. The opening pages are a touch vague and unclear, and the discussion of Paganism (114) lacks detailed exploration and analysis. The topics covered are simply too big (e.g. conversion, pagan beliefs, notions of the past, religious authority and space and time). Each of these could be a chapter unto themselves, and by treating each in a fleeting manner, Márkus presents only a superficial engagement with each topic. It also allows for arguments to be raised in opposition to the points made. Márkus suggests that there is little difference between the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon church (see 136-137). This is an interesting argument to make, but ultimately not persuasive as it is suggested in such a fleeting manner. The churches are different; Bede was not making this up. It was not just division over the dating of Easter, but the style of their practice and preaching, and the very buildings they constructed.

The final two chapters are more clearly structured, and engage with an impressive variety of evidence. The fifth, looking at law, provides useful summaries and extracts from early medieval law codes. These certainly allow for an insight into the legal and social norms of this world, and highlight an important aspect of early medieval law, namely the shared focus on peace and remedy across different cultures. Comparative legal analysis here is crucially important because of the dearth of contemporary Scottish writings. The preference for the label 'Gaelic law' rather than 'Irish Law' makes sense (189-190), and the linguistic echoes found in Welsh law ask important questions about this world and its culture (e.g.

adauell/athgabail, rhaith/ráth, 191). There is much to be gained from reading this chapter, and looking at the wide variety of laws Márkus draws upon. There are a number of important secondary writings that would have allowed for great depth of analysis, but this is a successful summarising section. The final chapter looks to the Vikings and to the Picts, and this is the strongest section of the book. Here Márkus seeks to answer some of the important questions that are demanded of early Scotland. The opening presentation of Scandinavian culture is a touch too vague (228-231), but the thoughts on subsequent political relationship and identities is persuasive (233-238). The use of place name evidence, so important in studies of this kind, provides a useful depiction of possible changes to the political makeup of early medieval Scotland, through the use of Old Norse *vík*, *dalr* and *bólstaðr* (bay, valley and farm). This is certainly suggestive of cultural assimilation, as is the emergence of *Gallgoidil* ('Foreign Gaels', 242). The discussion of the fate of the Picts is excellent, and Márkus rightly notes that for whatever reason chroniclers seem to stop writing of *Cruithentúath* (the Pict-folk) towards the close of the ninth century (262). The final section provides useful thoughts concerning the fading of the Picts and the use of *Alba* by medieval writers (261-278).

To close, this is a work of mixed quality. There are certainly elements here that are very good, and provide important overviews and arguments. The discussion of the Picts is of great value. However, it is weakened by an inconsistent engagement with the contemporary evidence and a lack of clear structure. This renders some sections rather difficult to follow, and superficial in their depth of analysis. This is not the final word on early medieval Scotland, but it is a welcome book nonetheless.

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