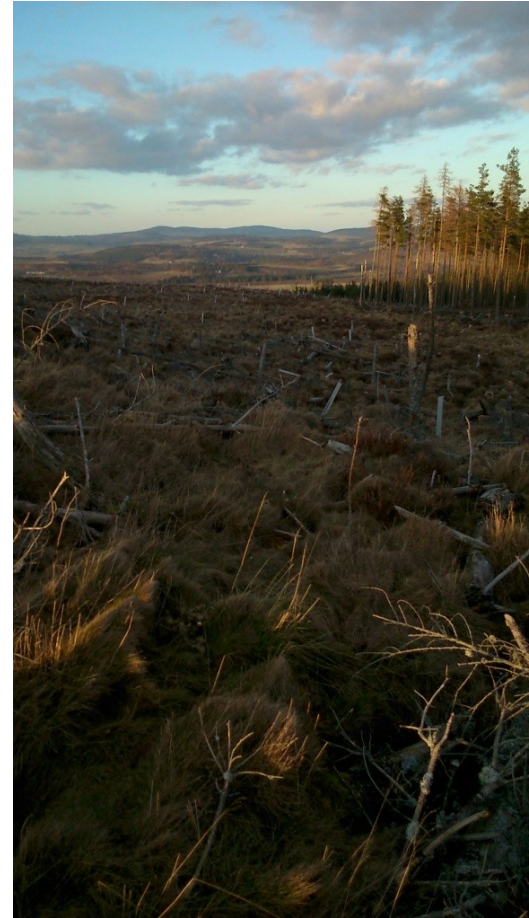# Pictish Place-names in the North-East
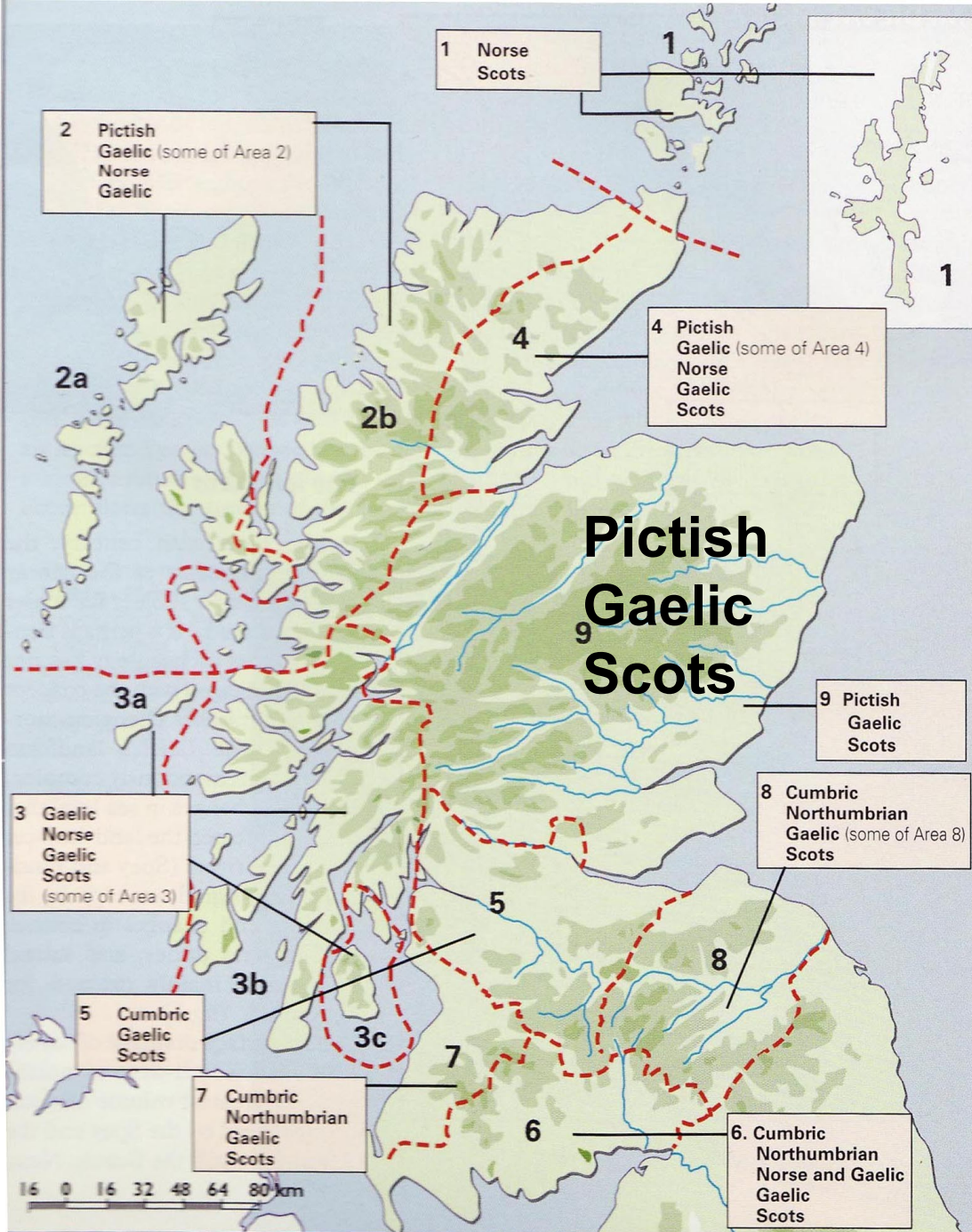
FINZEAN, BIRSE

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LANGUAGES OF SCOTLAND as witnessed by place-names

From S. Taylor 'Reading the Map: Understanding Scottish Place-Names', *History Scotland* vol. 2 no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2002), 13.

Bede, writing at Jarrow c.730 A.D.

'At the present time there are five languages here [in Britain], just as the divine law is written in five books ... These are namely the languages of the English, of the British, of the Gaels, of the Picts as well as of the Latins; through the study of the scriptures Latin is in general use among them all'

In the original: *Haec [in Brittania] in praesenti ... quinque gentium linguis ... Anglorum uidelicet Brettonum Scottorum Pictorum et Latinorum ...*

Bede, *Historia gentis Anglorum ecclesiastica /The ecclesiastical history of the English people*, Book1, Chapter 1.

There has been much debate about Pictish over the centuries – the problem being that so little of the language has survived

Best overview: Katherine Forsyth**, *Language in Pictland* (Utrecht 1998) – an e-book on the University of Glasgow system.**

See also now: Guto Rhys**, '**Approaching the Pictish Language: Historiography, Early Evidence and the Question of Pritenic**', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015.**

Basic article underpinning all modern scholarship on the subject: K. H. Jackson, '**The Pictish Language**', in *The Problem of the Picts***, ed. F. T. Wainwright (Edinburgh 1955; reprinted Perth 1980, with Addenda and Corrigenda pp. 173-6), 129–66.**

Ogham in Scotland

with thanks to Katherine Forsyth for the images.

Gurness, Orkney

Brandsbutt, Inverurie Aberdeenshire

Afforsk, Aberdeenshire

Formaston, Aboyne, Aberdeenshire (detail)

The consensus amongst scholars today is that Pictish is a P-Celtic language closely related to British, and therefore to modern Welsh. It may well be treated by Bede as a separate language rather than a northern dialect of British more on political than linguistic grounds – as in the old adage 'a language is a dialect with an army and a navy' – and we might add 'a monarch'.

Celtic languages are divided into two groups

P-Celtic

- Welsh (the modern descendant of medieval <u>Brittonic</u> or <u>British</u>)
- Breton
- Cornish †
- <u>Pictish</u> †

Q-Celtic

- Irish (Gaelic)
- (Scottish) <u>Gaelic</u>
- Manx †

Those underlined were once spoken in at least part of what is now Scotland.

† = extinct; but note that both Cornish and Manx are being revived.

P & Q Celtic

- Early Celtic lost the letter *p*

Hence Latin *pisc-is*, Gaelic *iasg* 'fish' or Latin *pater*, Gaelic *athair* 'father'

- Later in some Celtic languages *kw- > p*

These are the P-Celtic languages.

In other Celtic languages *kw- > c*

These are the Q-Celtic languages.

Examples

- P-Celtic Welsh *pen* 'head'

- versus

- Q-Celtic Scottish Gaelic *ceann* 'head',

- both from Early Celtic **kwenn-* 'head'

But there are some differences between British and Pictish

- e.g. original Celtic *w*

  becomes *f* in Gaelic,

  becomes *gw* in British (and *g*),

  BUT it is retained (usually spelled *u*) in Pictish, hence Pictish *U(u)rgust* but Gaelic *Fergus;* and the first element means 'man', which in Welsh is *gŵr*.

Some typical Pictish royal personal names:

Bredei (Gaelicised as *Brude*)
Drost/Drostan (cf *Tristram*)
Talorc/Talorcan
U(u)rgust (Gaelic equivalent *Fergus*)
Unust, also *Unuist, Onuist* (Gaelic equivalent
         Oengus, now *Aonghas*, Scots and English *Angus*)

These occur in annals and king-lists, sometimes in Pictish orthography (spelling), sometimes in Gaelic orthography.

Place-name map: language zones

Pictish (*lingua Pictorum*, British, Pictish British)**:**
zones 2, 4, 9
Aberdeen, **Aber**foyle, **Ar**broath (earlier *Aberbrothok*), Cupar, **Perth**

British (*lingua Brettonum,* Cumbric, Brittonic, Brythonic): **zones 5, 6, 7, 8**
**Aber**corn, **Aber**lady, Blantyre, Lanark, Lar**bert**, Glasgow, **Part**ick, Govan
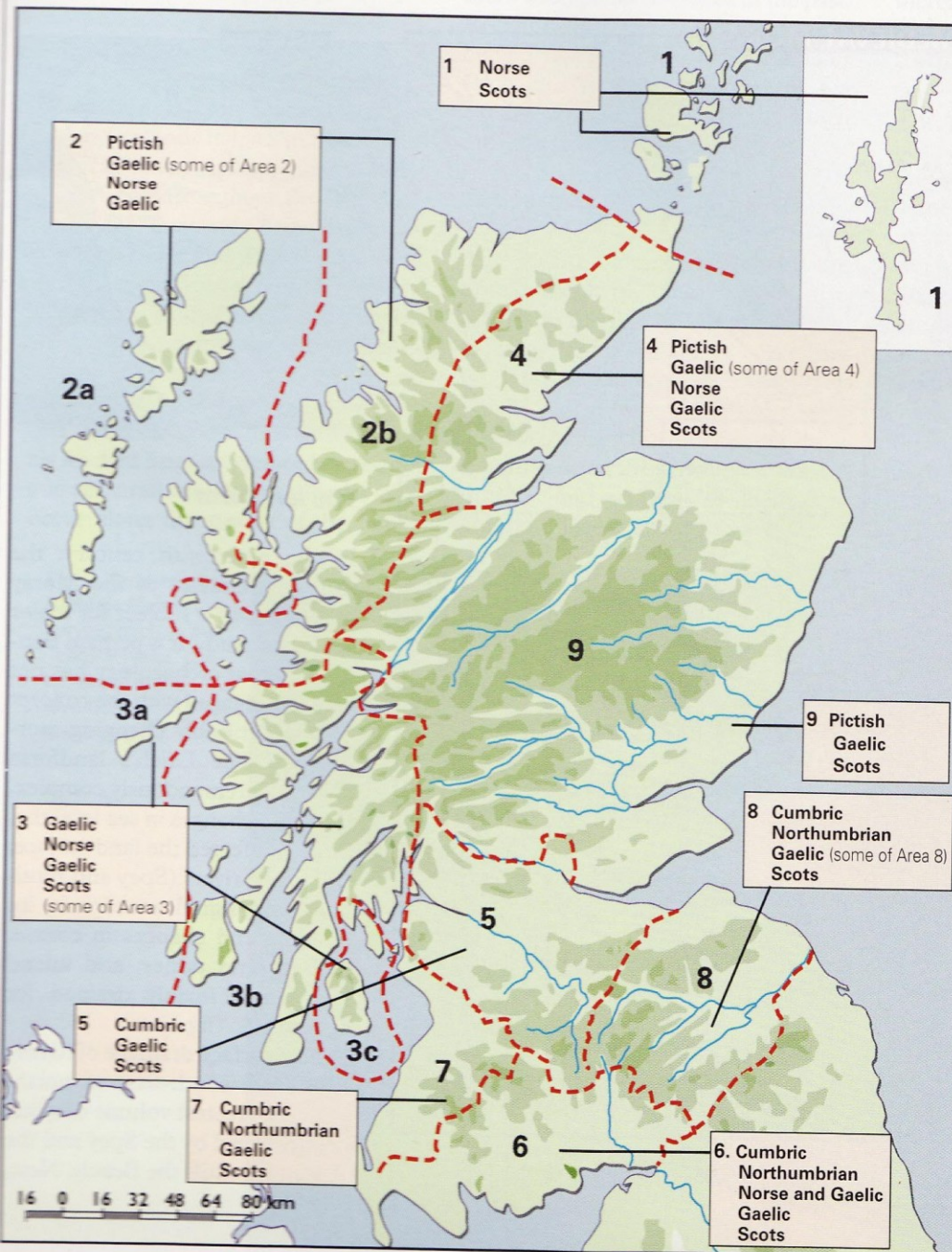
Taylor, S., 2011, 'Pictish place-names revisited', in *Pictish Progress: New Studies on Northern Britain in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Stephen T. Driscoll, Jane Geddes and Mark A. Hall (Leiden and Boston [Brill]), 67-118.

Category 1

Those names which can be described as wholly Pictish (or P-Celtic), i.e. coined by Pictish-speakers. These include, amongst others, place-names containing the following words:

*ABER 'river- or burn-mouth' (e.g. Aberdeen)
*CĒT 'a wood' (e.g. Keith)
*CUPER ''confluence' (e.g. Cupar, Fife)
*MIG 'bog, marsh' (e.g. Migvie)
*PERT 'wood, grove' (e.g. Perth)
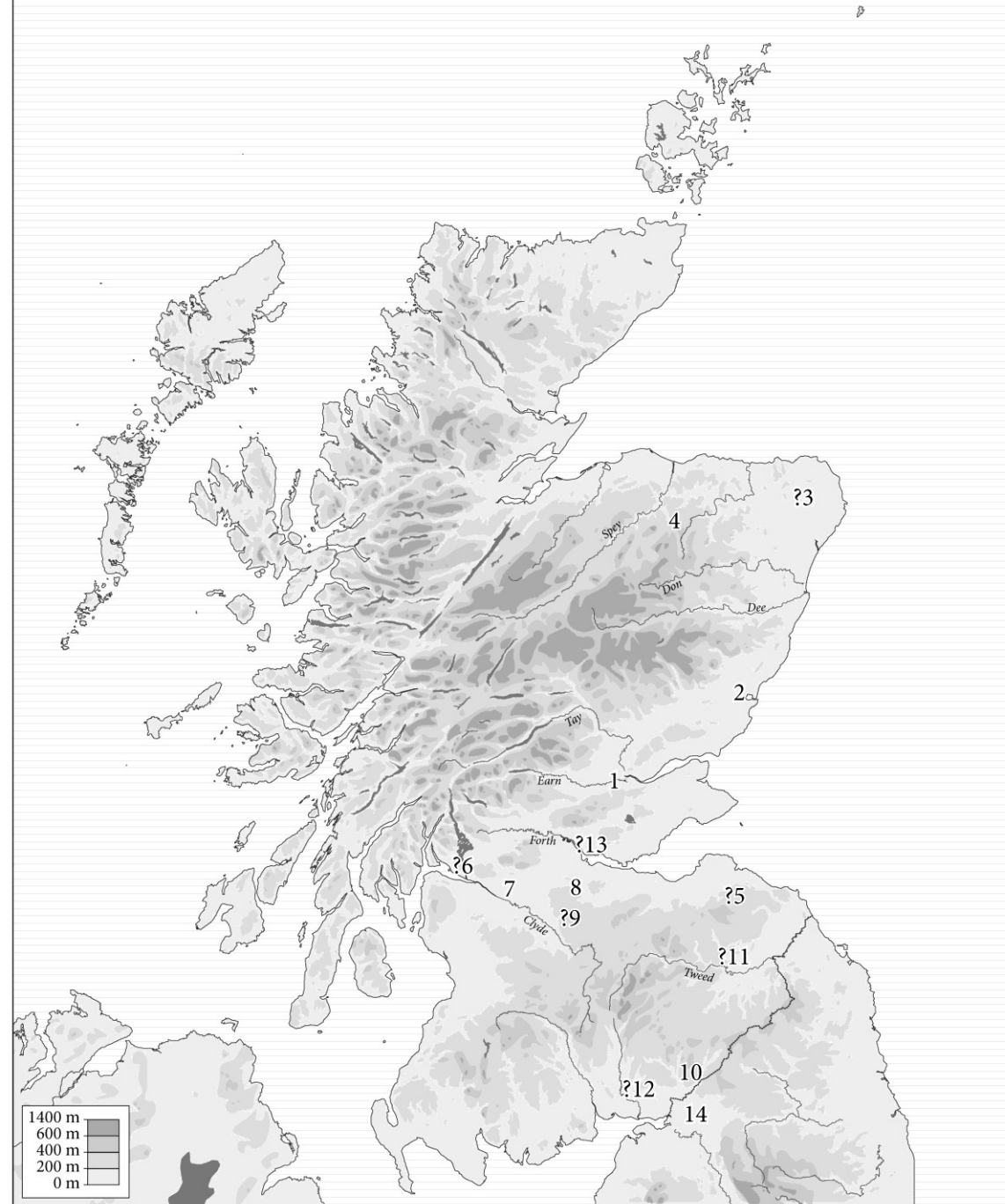
Distribution of place-names containing Pictish and British *pert* related to Welsh *perth* (f.) 'hedge, (thorn-)bush, brake, thicket, copse'.

From Taylor 2011

Pictish *mig-

*MIG: 'bog, marsh'; Watson relates it to the Welsh word and place-name element *mig-, mign*, plural *mignoedd* 'bog' (1926, 374). Amongst the examples he gives (374–6) are **Meigle**, Gowrie PER (*Migdele*); **Midmar** ABD (*Migmarre*); **Migvie** ABD (*Migveth'*) and **Strathmiglo** FIF. The furthest north example is **Migdale** (*Miggewethe* 1275), Creich SUT. It is rare in areas outwith historical Pictland, with possibly four independent examples in southern Scotland ...

MIDSTRATH, Birse

Migstrath 1180 x 1184 *RRS* ii no. 251 ['inflated or tampered with'; part of the lands of Birse (*Brass*) granted to Aberdeen cathedral by King William]

Megstratht 1511 *Abdn. Reg.* i, 373 [2 ploughs (aratra), grassoums (gressuma) £5 6 s. 8 d.]

Midstrath c.1636 x 1652 R. Gordon *draught of the Birs* MS

BIRSE

ecclesiam de *Brass* 1157 *Abdn. Reg.* i, 6

terras meas de *Brass* 1180 x 1184 *RRS* ii no. 251 ['my land of Birse' granted to Aberdeen cathedral by King William]

(lands of) *Brass* 1242 *Abdn. Reg.* i 16. [royal lands of Birse and Fetternear in free forest]

Brass 1511 *Abdn. Reg.* i, 371 [371-9 for full details]

Brassmoir 1511 *Abdn. Reg.* i, 371[2 ploughs (aratra), grassoums (gressuma) £6]

Brassbeg 1511 *Abdn. Reg.* i, 371[2 ploughs (aratra), grassoums (gressuma) £5]

Birs beg c.1636 x 1652 Robert Gordon *The draught of the Birs* MS

BIRSE

Pictish? Old Gaelic *bras* adj. (of persons) 'boastful, defiant; great, forceful, violent', and is unlikely to be a place-name element. However, the Welsh cognate *bras* (adj.) in place-names can mean 'big, bulky, fertile' Owen and Morgan (*Dictionary of the Place-Names of Wales*, 2007, xxviii) e.g. Foel Fras, which they render into English as '(the) big bare hill' .

Category 2

This contains loan-words from Pictish/British borrowed into Gaelic but attested only in place-names Examples are:

*CAIR 'fort' e.g. Shanquhar (Gartley), Shampher (Strachan)
*CARDEN 'fort, encampment'? e.g. Kincardine

Other examples of Category 2

carden 'enclosure'? e.g. **Kincardine**, '(place at the) head or end of the enclosure', which occurs in 7 distinct place-names from the Forth to the Dornoch Firth. The first element is clearly Gaelic (Q-Celtic), *ceann* (Old Gaelic *cenn*) 'head'.

Kincardine O'Neil
Kyncardyn Onele 1233 *Abdn. Reg*. i, 51

Category 3

3. Those names which contain Pictish loan-words attested as common nouns in Scottish Gaelic, e.g. *bad* **('spot, clump'),** *dail*, **('haugh, water-meadow'),** *monadh* **('hill, hill-range, muir'),** *preas* **('bush'),** *pòr* **('seed, grain, crops'); + the now obsolete** *pett*

Balfour (*pòr* **)**
Baulds (*Bad* **1511;** *Baud* **OS 6 inch 1ˢᵗ edn) (***bad***)**
Dalsack (*dail***)**
Kinminity (*monadh***)**

Category 3

pett 'a land-holding, a farm'.

Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer:

chloic pette mec-garnait 'the stone of the son of Garnait

pett mec gobroig 'of the son of Gobrach'

pett malduib 'of Mael Dub'

pett in mulinn 'of the mill'

pett in puir 'of the crop-land'

Category 3
(Pictish loan-words into Gaelic)

Pitslugarty
Old Gaelic *pett* + ? a word related to *sluig* (v.) 'to swallow, devour'; *slugan* m. 'gullet, whirlpool'??

It is on an old route, known as the Pitslugarty road. On that road is also the Pitslugarty Well.

Category 3

Sometimes it is only historical context that tells us whether a name using a word borrowed from Pictish into Gaelic was coined in a Pictish-speaking or a Gaelic-speaking milieu.

e.g the Mounth: we can assume this was coined by Pictish-speakers, as it occurs in the Annals of Ulster for the year 782 as follows:

Dub Tholargg rex Pictorum citra Monoth ...

'Dub Talorg king of the Picts on this side of The Mounth ... [died]'

Category 4

False friends: place-name elements which look Gaelic, but which are used in a different way from that in which they are used in Ireland; e.g.

SRATH: early Irish *srath* 'grass(land); meadow by river, haugh'. However, in Scotland its chief meaning in place-names is 'broad valley', e.g. Strathmore, Strathearn, like its Welsh cognate *ystrad* 'valley'. cf MIDSTRATH (Birse)

Category 4

Fetter-names: contain Gaelic *foithir* , usually translated as 'a slope, a terraced declivity'. BUT it occurs in a remarkable number of high-status names in former Pictland: just some examples are: Dunottar, Fetterangus, Fettercairn, Fetteresso, Fetternear, Forteviot, Kineddar, Kingedward – all medieval parishes.

foithir is made up of 2 Gaelic elements: *fo* 'under' and *tìr* 'land'. The Welsh cognate is *godir* 'region, district, lowland, slope'. I suggest that behind this *foithir* in many eastern Scottish place-names is Pictish *uotir,* which may well have referred to some kind of administrative district in the Pictish kingdom.

foithir continued

This is of especial relevance for Birse because the element occurs combined with Birse in:

Fodderbris 1552 and *Fodderbirss* c.1636 x 1652.

Thi Gordon's MS map Aboyne Records [Alexander 1952, 279]

      Fodderbirss c.1636 x 1652 Robert Gordon 'Part of Birss' MS [shown as a settlement on the south bank of the Dee, opposite (and slightly downstream from) *Kincarn Oneill*]

Robert Gordon 'Part of Birss' MS c.1636 x 1652

image from http://maps.nls.uk/

Earliest Name

Dee < Old Celtic *deva, 'goddess'.

Photo: N. Corby from http://www.geograph.org.uk/