Badenoch, 411 – 1215 AD

How Gaels blended with Picts, allied with Robert the Bruce and occupied what became Macpherson clan lands

Reynold Macpherson, 19 January 2011

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Introduction

The founder of Clan Chattan was Gillichattan Mohr (big servant of St. Chattan). He was an educated Gael from Ireland who probably arrived in 1215 to develop and manage the Ardchattan Priory (see right) in Loch Etive (see front cover) on the west coast of Scotland. Gillichattan's family network expanded as Clan Chattan in the wider district of Lochaber, multiplied over time and migrated to Badenoch in the Highlands and Moray and Inverness on the east coast. There they became a confederation of clans captained by the Macintoshes. Clan Macpherson, a senior clan of the Old Chattan group within the confederation (with the Davidsons and McPhails) (Allison, 2007, p. 47), occupied the Highland district of Badenoch.

This chapter considers the prior inhabitants of Badenoch, the Highland Picts, and how they were required by political forces to integrate into Clan Chattan. It is shown to be part of a wider process facilitated by kings and missionaries. The people of Pictland gradually integrated the incoming Gaels of the Kingdom of Dál Riata to eventually form the Kingdom of Alba in 847 AD (Moffat, 2005).

This chapter argues that by the time Gillichattan Mohr arrived to administer Ardchattan Priory in Lochaber, the process of inter-culturalism (guided by kings interested in a united 'Alba' and Irish missionaries interested in peace and saving souls) was already well advanced and generally being achieved without resort to the more extreme form of politics practiced in earlier eras; military action.

The Picts

Where are the Picts today? The answer is, as given by leading Pict historian, Elizabeth Sutherland (1994, p. xxi) "Here, alive and well, in us." Recall, as Roman power faded in Caledonia, Pict power grew. When the Romans finally departed in 410 AD the Picts had developed interlinked tribal networks with an understandably militant culture. Might was right.

Self determining federations of tribal groups emerged, one of the most coherent being the Pictish Kingdom of Fortrui based on Inverness, the Moray and its hinterland. The other Pictish Kingdoms recorded included Cait (or Cat) based on Caithness and Sutherland, Ce, situated in modern Marr and Buchan, Circinn, apparently situated in modern Angus and the Mearns, Fib, known to this day as 'the Kingdom of Fife', Fidach, whose precise location remains unknown, and Fotla, modern Atholl.

The kingdoms of Pictland (Oram, 2006) were long pressured by the Scotti (or Scots or Gaels) from Ireland. As early as 258 AD the Romans recorded their raids into Caledonia. Once the Romans departed the raids gradually became a steady trickle of migration. By about 500 AD, the sons of Erc, King of the ancient Irish Kingdom of Dalriada ('race of Riada'), namely Fergus, Loarn, and

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[1] References are used sparingly with extensive use made of Wikipedia.

Angus, had each established a kingdom in the Western Isles and Argyll with their headquarters at Dunadd. The Dalraida invited St. Columba (see right) to establish a Christian monastery on the Isle of Iona in the mid-500s. It became one of the most famous centres of learning in Christendom for the next two centuries. Kings asked to be buried on Iona for centuries in the belief that the sacred ground would wash away their sins and guarantee their swift passage to heaven.

St Columba was part of the first of a wave of Irish missionary monks who brought Christianity to the Picts, preaching peace, forgiveness and promising salvation. He and his successors served as diplomats to the warlike Picts, helping them to understand and collaborate with the Scots (or Gael) immigrants. These Scots from Ireland did not make significant political progress in their first three centuries in Pictland. They suffered setbacks when they turned to military means and lost key battles to the Britons in the south and the Picts in the west. The Picts continued as the strongest force in Pictland for another 300 years until the 800s, both numerically and politically (Sutherland, 1994). This was the period of greatest influence for the fierce Picts of Fortriu, the likely descendents of the Varomagi and, once integrated with Gael immigrants, the probable ancestors of Clan Chattan.

The militant nature of the Pictish kingdoms was illustrated in 685 AD. Under the leadership of Bridei mac Bili from Inverness, the Pict King of Fortriu, they combined to contest the northward expansion of the Angles led by the Northumbrian King, Ecgfrith. At the Battle of Dunnichen, probably at Dunachton, near Kingussie in Badenoch, the Venerable Bede noted that the Picts "made show as if they fled, and the king was drawn into the straits of inaccessible mountains" (St. Bede, 1994). The feigned retreat led into an ambush. There was no Christian forgiveness shown. The Pict army ruthlessly killed or enslaved all members of the Angle army (probably depicted on the Aberlemno Stone, above right).

The names of 50 Kings of the Picts are known between 448 and 847 AD. It was Kenneth MacAlpin (see right) who united the Kingdom of the Picts with the Kingdom of the Scots (or Gaels) in 847. His kingship was conferred through his mother, a Pictish princess. Pictish society was one of the very few matrilineal societies of ancient Europe, quite unlike the Irish and British. Picts were highly organized, very artistic and environmentally aware, not 'dark little savages' (Sutherland, 1994).
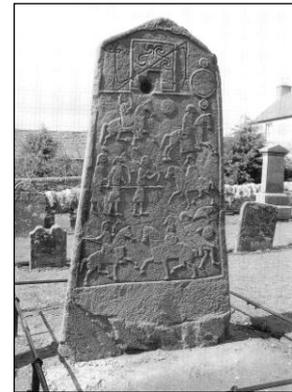
Unifying the Picts and the Gaels

MacAlpin came to power after a desperate battle against the Vikings in 839 that created a succession crisis. The King of Fortrui, Uen, his brother Bran, Áed mac Boanta and others 'too numerous to count' were killed. MacAlpin promptly killed three other rivals to start his reign in 843, and a fourth in 848. Another account explains that he killed the members of all seven Pictish royal houses to secure the throne. Whatever the systematic elimination of real and imagined rivals, he then began the process of uniting the Picts and Gaels, first against the Vikings and later against the English.

MacAlpin's grandsons, Donald II of Scotland (ca. 889-900) and Constantine II of Scotland (before 879 - 952) continued the unification process. They encouraged educated Gaels to migrate from Ireland to help 'civilize' the Picts, as they saw it. Pictish power was probably shared with the Gaels from the 800s, with Badenoch and Moray Picts contributing strongly to MacAlpin's national defence strategy. Viking raids were still extremely destructive and MacAlpin had to work hard at coordinating Pict and Gaelic forces against them. On the other hand, nothing unites like having an external enemy.

MacAlpin's other legacy was a royal dynasty that defined the Kingdom of Alba as a territorial precursor to modern Scotland. When his grandson Constantine II (see right) was crowned on the Stone of Destiny, he took the title 'King of Alba', Alba being the Gaelic name for the territory north of the Forth and south of Moray. Through

Constantine II's reign (900–943), Gaelic culture was integrated with and gradually replaced Pict and Norse royal traditions and prerogatives.

Constantine reinforced the internal coherence in his kingdom with an aggressive foreign policy. For example, when the Wessex king Æthelstan (895 – 939, see right) defeated the Vikings at York in 928, he took the view that Æthelstan had become a serious threat to Alba. He married his daughter to Olaf III Guthfrithson, King of Dublin and York, which also allied him to the powerful Earls of Northumbria. He then persuaded his relative, King Owen of Strathclyde, to join in a strike against Æthelstan's Anglo-Saxon army. The plan back fired badly.

The defeat of the combined Norse-Alba force at the Battle of Brunanburh, probably in 937, confirmed Æthelstan's England as a fully unified kingdom. On the positive side, the outcome weakened both armies, further military adventures were impossible and forced these kings of the British Isles to consolidate their boundaries and rebuild their economies through agriculture and trade.

Reconciling Gaelic, Pictish and Catholic values in the Kingdom of Alba

Constantine abdicated in 943, retired to the Culdee monastery of St Andrews and died in 952. He was succeeded by Kenneth MacAlpin's son, Malcolm II (1005–1034, no portrait available) who defeated the Northumbrians at the Battle of Carham in 1016 and moved the border south. The Earls of Northumbria and Bernicia's ancestors had once ruled most of southern Scotland as Kings of Northumbria and had controlled large parts of the south-east. Malcolm II annexed the Lothian (the rich lowlands around Edinburgh to the south of the Firth of Forth) and ruled this Greater Alba until he was murdered by his own nobles in November, 1034.

He probably violated the Pictish tanist pattern of inheritance by naming his grandson Duncan (see right) as his successor, having murdered other potential claimants. He believed that the right of kings to rule the lives of others came from God and that this divine right was inherited by the first born son.

Another tanist tradition that Malcolm II flouted was that kingship had to alternate between Moray and Atholl. Traditionally, leading families could, if necessary, select the best candidate from among the high born – 'the tanist choice'. Like his three predecessors, Malcolm II ruled Alba alongside the King of Strathclyde, who ruled much of the south-west, and alongside the Norse-Gael kings who ruled the western coastal areas and the Hebrides. But his nearest and most dangerous rivals were the Kings or Mormaers of Moray, once Kings of Fortrui, Pictland (Oram, 2006).

Duncan did succeed to the throne, as King Duncan I (1001-1040), and established a tradition of the king being both spiritual and secular leader. He proved inept as a military leader in a campaign south to Durham. When he led another campaign north, to continue his grandfather's persecution of Moray, his own men were turned by the Mormaer (Earl) of Moray, Macbeth (see right). Why?

Duncan I's army almost certainly included levied men and clan leaders from the Strathspey and Lochaber, the Pictish ancestors of the Macphersons. They were from MacBeth's power base in Moray. MacBeth also had opportunity; he was probably the power behind Duncan's throne. Hence, Duncan was probably killed 14th August 1040 by his own men at Pitgaveny, near Elgin. Nevertheless, his eldest son, Malcolm Canmore ('big

head' or 'long neck') and his second son, Donalbane, both became kings after MacBeth.

MacBeth ruled as King of the Scots and as King of Alba for 14 years, with earlier sources also referring to him as King or Mormaer of Moray and as the King of Fortrui. Quite unlike the Shakespearean character, he appears to have ruled wisely, steadily imposing law and order and encouraging Christianity.

He strengthened his claim to the throne by marrying Kenneth III's granddaughter Gruoch. In 1045 he defeated and killed Duncan I's father Crinan at Dunkeld. He was secure enough to travel to Rome in 1050 to attend a papal jubilee. He also made brave and successful forays over the border into Northumbria.

In 1054, however, he was challenged by Siward, Earl of Northumbria, who was promoting Duncan's son Malcolm Canmore, his nephew, for the throne of Alba. Macbeth was finally killed at the Battle of Lumphanan in Aberdeenshire in August 1057 by Malcolm Canmore who then became King Malcolm III (1057-1093).

Malcolm III (see left below) immediately and treacherously killed MacBeth's stepson Lulach in 1058, a potential rival. He married Ingibiorg, the widow of Thorfinn Sigurdsson (Earl of Orkney), in search of peace with the Norse communities in the north and west, acknowledging the Vikings as a primary external threat to Alba. After her death, probably about 1069, Malcolm III married Margaret, Scotland's only royal saint (see below right), signaling the other primary external threat to Alba, Norman England. The greatest internal political threat to Malcolm's Alba, however, was the continuing tension between the increasingly Gaelic MacAlpin dynasty and traditional Pictish culture in Moray and its Highland hinterland. The 7m high Sueno's Stone in Forres, Moray (right above) was once thought to commemorate MacAlpin's incorporation of the Picts (Sutherland, 1994, p. 244) but is now thought (Jackson, 1993) to commemorate a major victory by the men of Alba, the Gaelicised Picts of the lands south of the Mounth, over the once all powerful Picts of Fortrui. It also signaled the end of tanistry and succession rotated between the houses of Athol and Moray. The Picts of Badenoch would have had to accept Gael overlords and immigrants.

The reign of Malcolm III (843–858) was also notable for the close relationship between the Gaelicised King and the Catholic Church and for the strong infusion of Anglo-Saxon culture brought to Alba by the Queen Consort, Margaret. She was a highly focused Anglo-Saxon princess who had a transformative influence on her savage husband. When her uncle, Saint Edward the Confessor, the French-speaking Anglo-Saxon King of England died in 1066, Margaret's youthful brother Edgar Ætheling tried in vain to claim the English throne. Harold Godwinson was elected king instead and was then killed by an arrow in the eye at the Battle of Hastings in 1066. England was lost to the Norman invaders led by William of Normandy, 'the Conqueror'. As Anglo-Saxon royals, Edgar and Margaret had to flee.

The Norman invasion of England swept right up to the borders of Alba. Margaret and her mother, Agatha, widow of Edward, were on a boat heading for Hungary when they were shipwrecked on the east coast of Scotland. Along with many other Anglo-Saxon exiles, including Edgar, they sought Malcolm III's protection.

Margaret later married Malcolm and they had eight children, six boys and two girls. Each child had claims on both the Alba and English thrones. More importantly to this chapter, Margaret and her children, helped transform
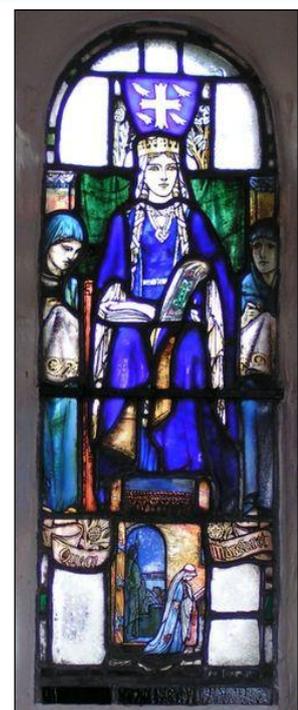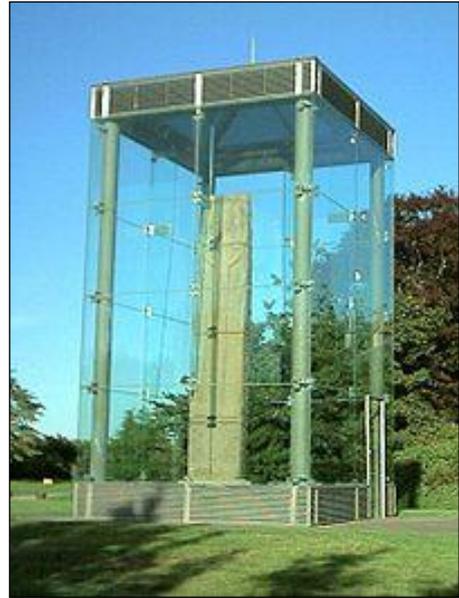
the culture of their royal courts. The rough blend of Gaelic, Pict and Norse manners and processes gradually gave way to the religious values and legal sophistication of Anglo-Saxon and Continental courts.

Margaret died in November 1093 and was canonised in 1250 by Pope Innocent IV for her holiness, fidelity to the Church, work for religious reform and charity. When her son King David I came to the throne (1124 – 1153, see right), the influence of Norman values significantly accelerated and the Catholic Clan Chattan gained a strong foothold in Loch Etive and then Lochaber.

The Founding of Clan Chattan

One account has Gillichattan Mhor living in the reign of Malcolm III (843–858). A systematic review of the earliest written records (Williamsson, 2003) tends to confirm instead that Gillichattan Mhor was the baillie of Ardchattan lands, his father was 'Archibald the Clerk' and that he came "from Connaught, a province of Ireland, into Lochaber, in the year of our salvation 1215." This chronology coheres with Church records that show that Archattan Priory was founded in 1230 by Lord Duncan McDougall of Argyll, 137 years after Malcolm III died in 1093.

There are even less plausible dates in other oral traditions, although they often cohere on events. Of the many accounts reviewed by Williamsson, one deduced that Gillichattan Mhor "was born before 960." This seems far too early. Another account claimed that a son of Gillichattan Mhor was forcibly relocated into Arkaig and Glenloy in the Locaber district in about 843 by Kenneth MacAlpin, who reigned from 843 to 858. There is yet

another oral tradition that Clan Chattan were given lands at Loch Arkaig and Glenloy in the Locaber district during Malcolm II's time (1005–1034) and that Torcastle (see right, now a ruin) became the seat of the chief. While these dates appear a little early, the general description of a staged migration coheres with the Murdoch Mckenzie of Ardross' description written in the 14th century. It is also the account favored by the authoritative Clan Macpherson historian, Alan G. Macpherson (1985, pp. 12-13).

On these bases, it appears reasonable to infer that Gillichattan Mhor was appointed by Lord Duncan McDougall about 1215 to manage the development of Archattan Priory, which formally opened in 1230. It can also be inferred that Gillichattan Mhor was an educated manager of Church communities and property, and probably prepared some of his own male children and grandchildren for similar service. He would have been a first generation immigrant from Ireland and literate in Gaelic. He would have managed the priory and its lands and been held responsible for all non-religious matters.

Ardchattan was a self-sustaining community of Valliscaulian monks that "practiced a harsh form of the Carthusian rules. It was an ascetic lifestyle and the houses were limited to 20 monks. They made their livelihood from relics and tithes from endowments" (Stevenson, 2000). The Ardchattan lands are about seven miles from Oban, on the north side of Loch Etive, to the east of Isle of Mull, and just across the water from Ireland. They are located in the parish of Lorn in the old district of Lochaber (see map below) that abuts Badenoch.

Little is absolutely certain until 1291when the Clan Chattan was confirmed as established in Lochaber. These lands were part of Eva's dowry to Angus Macintosh, along with the hereditary chiefship and command of the Clan Chattan. When Angus and Eva made an enemy of Angus Og McDonald of Islay they moved out of Torcastle and withdrew north east into the Highlands - to Rothiemurchus in Badenoch. The Camerons then claimed that the Arkaig lands in Lochaber had been abandoned, and under right of conquest, that they now owned the lands and castle.

This triggered a four hundred year feud with the Clan Chattan which lasted
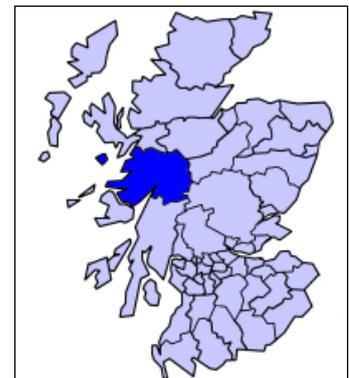
until a confrontation at Arkaig in 1666. The Camerons finally agreed to pay the Macintoshes for the alienated land.

Summary

Clan Chattan was a network of families established by Gilliechattan Mhor, the Baillie of Archcattan Priory, on the banks of Loch Etive. The Clan expanded, migrated from Lochaber to Badenoch, and with political sponsorship explained in the next chapter, continued to expand. By the 14th Century, as Skene (1890, p. 330) observed; "Crossing the Mounth [the Grampians] we find the Highland districts of Mar and Buchan occupied by the Clan Chattan, who likewise, with their branches and dependent septs, extended over Strathdearn, Strathnairn, and Badenoch, into the district of Lochaber".

Conclusion

The leaders of Clan Chattan were traditionally engaged as lay managers of Church communities and assets. These Gaels settled among the more numerous Highland Picts, and as part of the gradual integration, adopted their culture of militant independence (see their early heraldry right).

The migration of Clan Chattan occurred well after Pictish tanistry had started fading and the locus of national power had moved south from old Pictland to the increasingly Gaelicised court of the Kings of Alba.

The founders of Clan Chattan were Gael administrators of the Catholic Church and part of the unification process promoted by the Kings of Alba. The likely events in the early history of Clan Chattan will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter, from 1230, when the founder Gillichattan Mhor was almost certainly managing Ardchattan Priory.
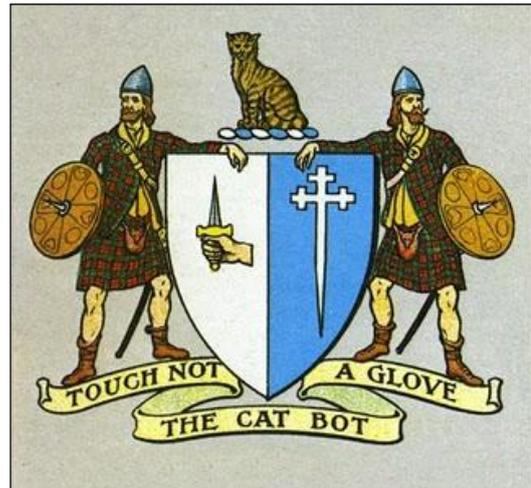
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