

Badenoch, 11000 BC - 68 AD

Long before becoming the clan lands of the Macphersons

Reynold Macpherson, 19 January 2011



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Introduction

The traditional lands of the Macphersons are in Badenoch, a district in the Highlands south of Inverness that straddles the Strathspey (valley of the Spey River). The U-shaped valleys show signs of having been sculpted by ice.

This chapter summarizes how the area came to be inhabited and how the culture of the earliest settlers evolved (Moffat, 2005). There were no people in Scotland during the Old Stone Age or Palaeolithic period. The landscape was buried under ice until well after the peak of the last Ice Age, about 16,000 BC.

Mesolithic Hunter-Gatherer-Fishers

The first people arrived late in the long Middle Stone Age or Mesolithic period that lasted from when the ice started retreating to when hunter-gatherer-fishers first started farming. The ice retreated steadily between 12,500 and 11,000 BC. It was gradually replaced by lichen, then tundra, grasses and eventually wildwood. These ecosystems supported caribou, reindeer, deer, aurochs, pigs and elk, and their predators; wolves, lynxes, bears, and nomadic hunter-gatherer-fishers. DNA testing shows that the current population of Britain is primarily descended from the Mesolithic people that migrated from the Iberian Peninsula, Spain and Portugal today.

Mesolithic paintings in caves in Spain show that they hunted bison (see right). Small extended family groups followed their food sources. Some eventually walked across the land bridge then connecting Europe to Britain. The land bridge was eventually swamped as the ice melted, giving Britain its current coastline.

One of the earliest hunter-gatherer-fishers' camp found in Scotland is half way up Ben Lawers by Loch Tay, close by a deer migration route. The artifacts, flints and tools unearthed dated from around 7,000 BC (Denison, 2001). Similar finds have been made in Strathspey, once another deer migration route. Late Mesolithic people started constructing more permanent and defensible camps near abundant food sources (see right, a reconstruction of a crannog).



Neolithic Farmers

The New Stone Age or Neolithic period began with the beginning of farming and ended when the first bronze tools and weapons were manufactured. During this period, family groups of hunter-gatherer-fishers combined to become larger clan-like farming communities. For example, about 50 miles south of Strathspey, in Balbridie, Aberdeenshire, a huge Neolithic timber hall was built between 3,900 and 3,700 BC. It was huge; 26m by 13m (Fairweather & Ralston, 1993). Its internal partitions, stone artifacts and grain macrofossils suggest that it was a

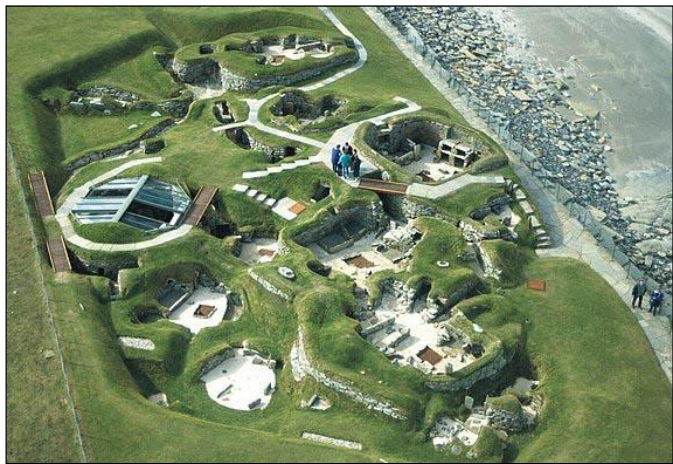
¹ References are used sparingly with extensive use made of Wikipedia.

giant live-in communal granary (see right). It was built in an area of rich soil, close to a strategic ford on the River Dee and near an ancient trackway, the Elswick Mounth. Since wheat exhausts soil quickly, the community must have practiced rotation farming and eaten a mixed European-style diet of cereals, vegetables and meat.



Balbridie was a major centre of a farming clan that used stone technology. It is likely that similar communities were developing about the same time in Badenoch. For example, across the Dee River, at Crathes, a similar structure 20m by 6m was found that dated from 3,950 - 3,650 BC. A few miles from Balbridie, at Pitglassie (a 'patch of green land'), the community lifted the turf of a large circle sometime between 3,750 and 3,500 BC. They marked the area with 11 or 12 posts, cleared the stones, built funeral pyres and buried the remains of cremations. They then enclosed the area with a stone cairn. The site predated the wood and stone circles built in later periods. It may have been the first area in Scotland that demonstrated the deep relationships between a clan, its land, its economy, its identity and its religious beliefs.

Similar cultural patterns were seen in the late Neolithic community established between 3,200 and 2,300 BC at Skara Brae on the island of Orkney (see right) despite the major differences in resources and location. It was built on the coast. It had homes with a common design linked by covered passages. It had chambered cairns for burying and honoring the dead. Up to 100 residents were farmers, fishermen and traders of flints, cattle, sheep, barley, wheat, fish and shell fish. They evidently had a close-knit collective identity that revered its ancestors, family ties and the land, until they abandoned the site and it was covered and preserved by sand.



The comfort and wealth of such farming and fishing communities improved significantly when they learned how to make clay pots and metal tools and weapons. Potters and blacksmiths were highly respected technologists who used fire to alter the basic properties of clay and rocks to make pottery, jewelry, weapons and tools.

The first pots made in Britain were Neolithic. They were made by hand with local clays and fired at relatively low temperatures in bonfires and pits. They were only plain round bowls but they transformed food processing, cooking and preservation. New shapes and vessels developed about 3600 BC that were decorated with round stabs and cuts. Heavier 'Impressed Ware' appeared just before 3300 BC with more elaborate rims and designs pressed into the clay using twisted cord, hollow reeds or bird bones. The Grooved Ware style (see right) first found at Skara Brae (c. 3,200 - 2,300 BC) apparently spread from north Scotland across Britain. It had fresh shapes, such as the large tubs found at Skara Brae, flat bases and geometric patterns grooved into the surface.



The Bronze Age

Turning rocks into metals in Scotland began in the Bronze Age (c. 2100-750 BC) that overlapped with the Neolithic period. Metalworking involved smelting ore to isolate the metal, mixing liquid metals to get alloys, molding and then shaping jewelry, tools and weapons. Bronze is three parts copper and one part tin. It is far easier to shape with precision and sharpen than flint or stone. While Scotland had scattered deposits of copper, silver and gold, they had to trade to get tin that came from Cornwall or the Continent.

The first metalworkers in Scotland were immigrants; the so called 'Beaker People' who were named after their elegant pottery found in burial sites (see right). They were Europeans who came to Scotland from Holland or via England, to live alongside rather than integrating with the locals. They stayed apart even in death. While the locals favored communal burial, the Beaker People were buried alone with artifacts and food for the afterlife.

On the other hand the Beaker People appear to have shared their metalworking technology without undue stress, and even adopted and developed the art of making stone circles, many centuries before the Druid religion developed in Britain. This shows that intercultural collaboration changes both cultures.

The Beaker People changed the Neolithic culture forever by creating new metal products, new trading opportunities, wealth accumulation and far more efficient tools and weapons. One cultural outcome of the Bronze Age was that Neolithic communities acquired warrior aristocrats who did their best to establish ruling dynasties.



The Iron Age

By about 750 BC, a new people started migrating from Central Europe across Britain; the Celts (see right, a romantic portrayal based on a Roman description). They brought horses and iron weapons. Iron was far superior and more plentiful than bronze. Cavalry with iron spears and swords were far more mobile and effective than foot soldiers often armed with farming tools.

These Celts were eventually cut off from their European origins by the rise of the Roman Empire and the Germanic migrations. Nevertheless, within 500 years, and again due to inter-culturalism, Iron Age Scotland had developed a Celtic-like tribal life constantly troubled by local wars or threats of war marked by the proliferation of weapons.

Numerous hillforts, stone hill fortresses, crannogs (forts built on stilts in lochs), and brochs (round tapering stone towers) were built in this period. Symbolic power might have been as significant as actual warfare in Iron Age politics.



Summary

Most people in Scotland's Iron Age were not warriors, except when mobilized for short campaigns. Most people were farmers, merchants or craftspeople living in tribal communities with intense local loyalties. Nevertheless, the Neolithic people farming in the Strathspey would have been heavily influenced by the Celtic culture, and would have wanted to acquire their iron weapons and tools and to learn how to forge them, but they were not of

Celtic descent. Genetically they are Iberian. Nevertheless, their culture and lifestyle came to so resemble that of the European Celts that they tended to be regarded as “Celtic” and today use the same term to define themselves.

In sum, Badenoch was first visited by Mesolithic hunter-gatherer-fishers, settled by Neolithic farmers, and then progressively influenced by Beaker and Celtic immigrants. While military action sometimes accelerated the process, inter-culturalism advanced slowly and unevenly through trade, particularly in the more remote areas. The coming of the Bronze and Iron Ages, however, accelerated the bonding of farming clans for mutual defence, including dynastic leadership provided by elite warrior families.

Conclusion

The more isolated clans living in the Highlands tended to make a virtue of fierce independence, only making alliances and trading for mutual advantage, and continuing to be loosely knit, unless they were threatened collectively. An example leads the next chapter, when the Romans probed into ‘Caledonia’ from 69 AD and then invaded ten years under Agricola (Tacitus, 93 AD). He deliberately provoked the ‘nation’ they called the Picts, including the tribe resident in Badenoch and Strathspey they called the Varomagi, and while he won a great tactical victory at Mons Graupius, he soon withdrew and failed to subjugate them.

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