

The Glens Of Antrim In Medieval Times





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Index

Acknowledgements1

Introduction 2

Dál Riata 6

The Early Church10

Ringforts and Fortified Outcrops14

Vikings! 18

The Anglo-Normans and the Glens of Antrim 21

The Bissets and the Bruces27

Clann Eòin Mòr 33

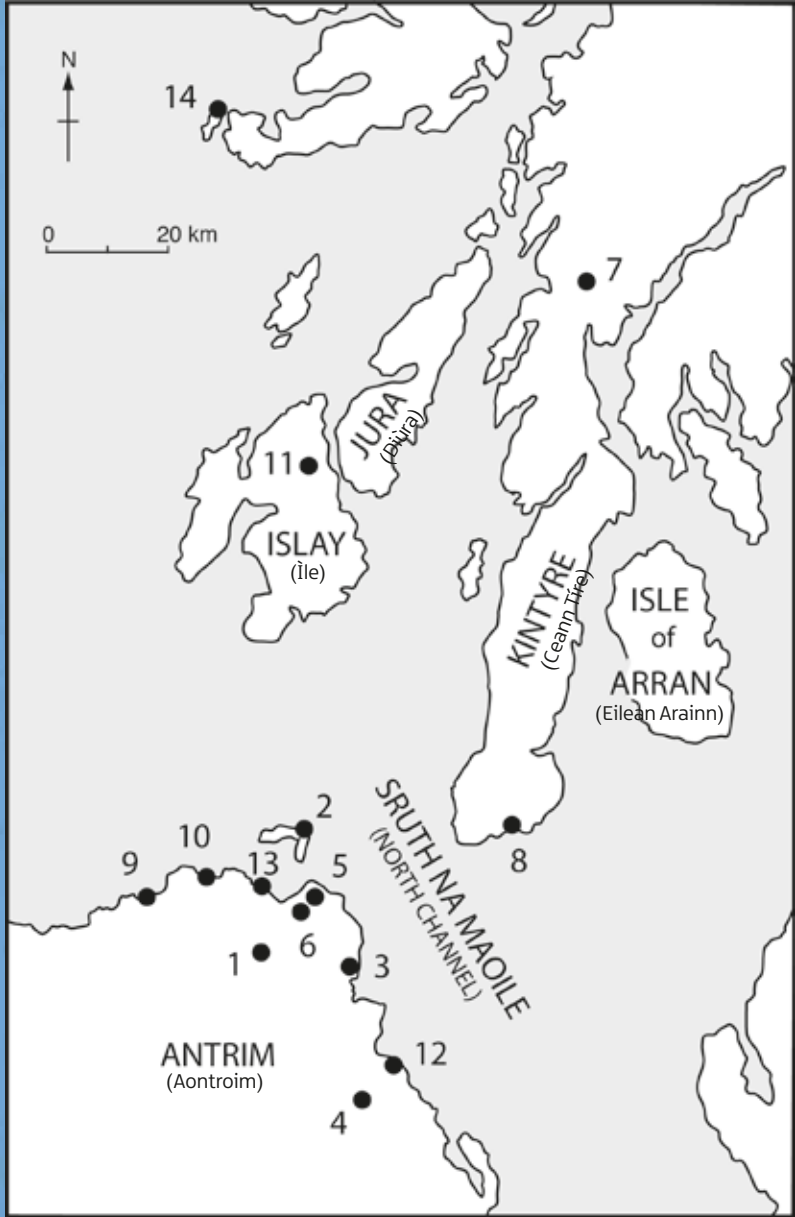
Further Reading.....39

Language and Landscape Representing otherness

This book was published through a collaborative project called The Heart of The Glens Landscape Partnership (HoGLPS), which has been kindly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and managed through Causeway Coast and Glens Heritage Trust. Aspects of our shared heritage, its interpretation and presentation have long been a challenge on the island of Ireland, especially when related to the use of Gaelic language. However, one of the themes of the HoGLPS was to look at projects that presented the ‘language of landscape’. HoGLPS have also established, as a guiding principle, that the landscape, as we relate to it, is in fact a ‘people-scape’. Almost everything in our landscape has been impacted upon and by people and community. It is well accepted that most of the place names and a vast number of surnames are also of Gaelic in origin. How we represent this sense

of ‘otherness’ presents challenges. When dealing with identities of people and places, we thought of how the personal and family names of important historical characters could be represented in a way that they themselves would recognise. Many of the sources of Gaelic names used today are the now more familiar anglicized forms. Many of these sources were written by English observers unfamiliar and in some instances indifferent to the Gaelic language. Thus names were often misheard, poorly understood and misrepresented in a new way that was alien to those who held them. During the discussion phase of this book it was agreed that were possible to employ Gaelic spellings to these names, so that they are reconnected to their own sense of self, as the holder of that name would have understood. There is in increasing precedent for this kind of approach amongst

academic work. Campbell, Fitzpatrick and Horning (2018) have employed a similar approach stating “the best course of action was to employ Irish spellings for selected place-names, people and titles that would originally have been spoken and recorded in Irish, rather than rely upon the, perhaps, more familiar, but arguably less honest and certainly less accurate English renderings”. In most cases, when the name is first mentioned, if an English rendering exists we have placed it in. Thereafter, in many cases, the Gaelic form will be used. A glossary of pronunciation of the Gaelic forms of the names is also provided using an English language phonetic spelling. Campbell, E. Fitzpatrick E. and Horning A. (2018) Becoming and belonging in Ireland ADc. 1200 – 1600; Essays in identity and cultural practise, Cork University Press, Ireland.



- | | | |
|---------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| 1 Armoy | 6 Drumadoon | 11 Finlaggan, Islay |
| 2 Bruce's Castle, Rathlin | 7 Dunadd | 12 Glenarm |
| 3 Castle Carra | 8 Dunaverty | 13 Kinbane |
| 4 Deer Park Farm | 9 Dunluce | 14 Iona |
| 5 Doonmore | 10 Dunseverick | |

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Introduction:

In 1569 a dynastic double-marriage took place on Rathlin Island. Local tradition holds that the venue for the festivities was at the enclosure known as “The Castle” at Ballycarry. While the architect of the enterprise was Somhairle Buidhe MacDomhnaill, Sorley Boy MacDonnell, who had been making arrangements since the previous year when an English source reported that he had spent two days in the Glens “cutting wattles to build in the Raghlins”, perhaps to construct housing for the guests.

News of the weddings undoubtedly generated horror among the Tudor administrations in Dublin and London, for these fourteen days of merriment represented the blood-connection of three major Gaelic lineages – MacDomhnaill, Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill – supported by the Caimbeul lordship of Argyll. Rathlin would have undoubtedly provided a splendid setting for the weddings, particularly in the summer. But there was also a more strategic reason why the island was chosen for this great meeting – its location in Sruth na Maoile, also known as the North Channel. On a clear day standing on the cliffs at Bruce’s Castle on Rathlin one can look to the north and see Ìle

and Islay, Diùra (Jura) and Cinn Tìre (Kintyre) in Argyll, some 20 miles away, and then to the south towards An Bhinn Mhór (Benmore) and Baile an Chaistil (Ballycastle), only 5 miles in the distance.

People in the Glens of Antrim were relatively isolated from the rest of Ireland by the difficult terrain of the Antrim Plateau on the west and a high promontory in the Glenarm area to the south, a geographical isolation that would only be broken by the construction of the coast road in the 1830s. Despite the dangerous nature of the sea prior to that time, external contact had tended to focus on Islay and Kintyre.

A tradition that only fell out of use in recent times and one which was neatly summarised by Charles Brett in 1980 when he wrote: “Ironically it was the invention of the internal combustion engine that put an end to the old customs: men who were not afraid to rely on canvas are now afraid to rely on motor boats in the gale-torn and tide-swept waters of the western approaches”.

In the Early Medieval period this transport was undertaken using currachs, wooden ribbed vessels

covered in cattle hides, light and manoeuvrable.

In the Late Medieval period connections were further facilitated by the introduction of the galleys, the descendants of Viking vessels, clinker-built and open-hulled, with tall prows and sterns, and steered by means of a stern rudder. The galleys were quick-moving, powered by sail and – when becalmed, in bays or on rivers – by oar. Lightweight yet tough, the galleys could readily be beached in a suitable coastal bay; they could even be carried overland.

Communication was also facilitated well into the 19th century through the fact that the dialect of Irish Gaelic spoken in the Glens and Rathlin Island, was similar to the Scottish Gaelic spoken in the Western Isles. Indeed, it formed part of a continuum of language and culture that spanned across the whole of the Gaelic speaking world in Scotland, Ireland and the Isle of Man. Writing in 1873 Robert Mac Adam stated that “Even yet the Glensmen of Antrim go regularly to Highland fairs and communicate without the slightest difficulty with the Highlanders.

Having myself conversed with both Glensmen and Arranmen, I can testify to the absolute identity of their speech”.

In the period covered by our book, North Antrim and the Western Isles formed a sea-province and Gaelic-speaking cultural zone, reflected in the name of Argyll itself, Earra-Ghàidheal, “the coast of the Gaels”. This may have been the result of an invasion of the region by Gaelic-speaking people from Irish Dál Riata in the early centuries of the first millennium. Alternatively, it may have been part of a gradual assimilation of the indigenous Pictish population into the Gaelic world, with their adoption of a new language perhaps facilitated through trade and exchange with the Gaels of Irish Dál Riata. What we can say, however, is that by the time that history commences for the region linguistically we are dealing with a single people.

Archaeological research has demonstrated the nature of these connections and how they extend back into prehistory. The megalithic Court Tombs that were in use in the Neolithic between about 3700BC and 3550BC

(Oisín’s Grave, near Cushendall, for example) show a great deal of similarity to Scottish Chambered Tombs and it can be suggested that very similar societies must have existed on both sides of the sea at this period.

There was also a movement of raw materials and artefacts between Ireland and Scotland which may have represented trade and exchange mechanisms at work. For example, Taobh Builleach (Tievebulliagh), outside Cois Abhann Dála (Cushendall), and Brockley on Reachraidh (Rathlin) are the sources of a very fine grained igneous rock called porcellanite which was used for the manufacture of polished stone axes. Porcellanite axes are most common in the north-eastern quarter of Ireland but outside this area they are frequently encountered in Argyll and North-East Scotland. Conversely, pitchstone from the Isle of Arran is a very hard natural glass that is similar to obsidian and has been found in east Antrim, most notably at the site of two Neolithic Houses excavated at Ballygalley in the late 1980s.

The connection between Scotland and Ireland endured into the Bronze Age. The stone cist burials discovered in Church Bay on Rathlin Island, for example, are similar to those to be found in western and central Scotland. Iron was introduced to Ireland in the period around 600BC but while artefacts made from this metal have been discovered in Antrim, we have very little settlement or burial evidence, although the earthworks at Liosán Dubh (Lissanduff) in Port Bhaile an Tráigh (Portballintrae) and at Coshcrib, near Cushendall may both be ritual sites associated with this period.

Conversely, in Argyll we have a relative profusion of Iron Age settlement sites with numerous duns (from Gaelic dún), small dry stone circular enclosures, dating to this period. As we move across into the historic period around AD 500, we have more knowledge of what life was like in the Western Isles than we do for The Glens.



Galley

Galleys were the descendants of the Viking longships. Used in the Late Medieval period, they were essential for communication and transport between Gaelic Ireland and Scotland.

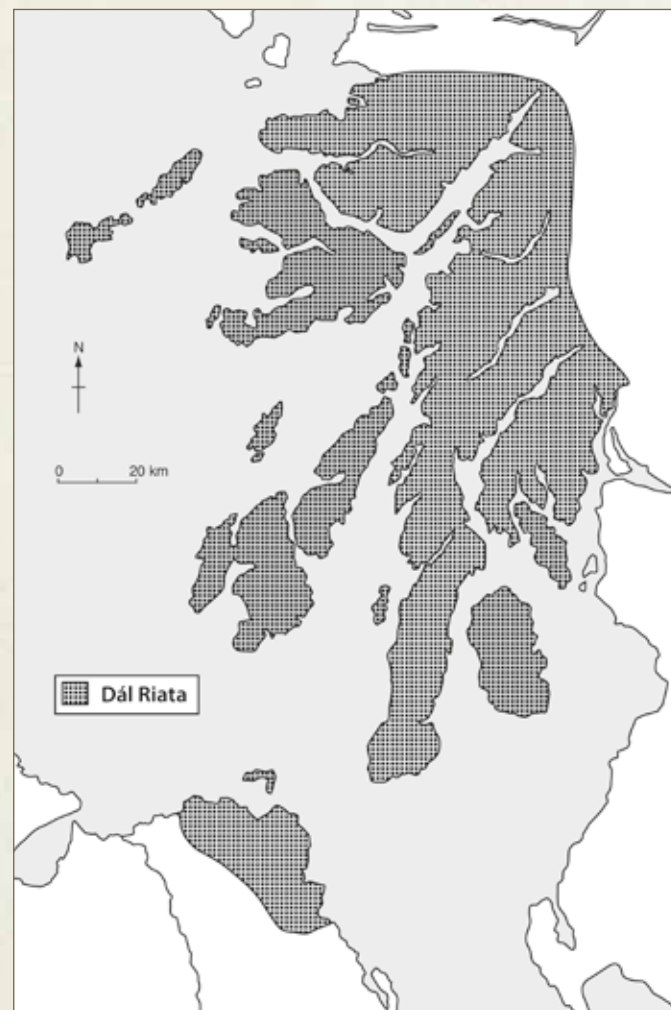
Dál Riata

The arrival of Christianity in the 5th century AD changed Ireland enormously by introducing the written word. Consequently, Ireland became literate and the surviving documents help provide us with insight into how society organised itself. There were multiple small kingdoms, called tuaths, and early Irish legal texts composed around AD 700 indicate a complex network of local kings, over-kings and provincial kings. One confederation of small kingdoms was that of the Ulaid, located in what is now Antrim, Down, North Derry and North Louth.

The Ulaid kingdom had once extended over much of what is now Ulster but from the 5th century onwards it had been under pressure from the Northern Uí Néill, a population group originally from Connacht who had moved to North-West Ulster and - under the Cenél nEógain lineage – had pushed the Ulaid back across the River Bann. Within the Ulaid there were several lineages. The strongest of these was the Dál Fiatach, who held land in eastern Down, while the Uí Echach Cobo occupied west Down and the Dál nAraide held south and North-West Antrim. In North Antrim there was the Dál Riata, who also held land in Argyll.

The exact means whereby the Dál Riata obtained power in Scotland remains unclear but it had probably occurred by the 5th century AD. There are, however, two traditions which we can call upon, although both are to some extent contradictory.

The first tradition is related by the English monk Bede in the early 8th century AD who informs us that: “They came from Ireland under their leader Reuda and won lands among the Picts either by friendly treaty or by the sword. These they still possess. They are still called Dalreudini after this leader”.



Bede wrote these words in the 730's and it is likely that he was able to draw on information from other churchmen such as Adamnán, the abbot of Iona and the biographer of Colm Cille, who was personally known to him.

The second tradition accepts that the name of the leader of the Dál Riata was Riata (Reuda) but it focuses on the role of the sons of Erc, their 5th century AD king, and specifically his son Feargus, in the conquest of Argyll. This tradition is reported in the Annals of Ulster, the Tripartite Life of St Patrick and in the Senchus Fer nAlban (History of the Men of Scotland).

Some have suggested that this latter account was an invention of Scottish kings in the 10th century AD who wanted to justify their credentials to rule by means of tying themselves into the royal lineages of Ireland. Possibly from as early as the time of Cináed Mac Alpín in the 8th century AD the country that would become Scotland was ruled by a dynasty which was culturally Gaelic and his successors wanted an impressive Gaelic pedigree stretching back into a distant Irish past. It has been suggested, therefore, that the story of a migration and conquest of Argyll by Gaels from North Antrim is a myth from the 10th century AD and is one which lacks supporting archaeological evidence.

The account, however, can be found in texts that pre-date the 10th century AD while the archaeological evidence is not quite as straightforward as would first appear. In recent decades anthropologists have studied the mechanisms of migrations and population movements and it seems that what archaeologists have traditionally expected in a migration – that the artefacts and architecture of the home country appears in the destination country of the migrants – rarely happens. In reality migrants – either as settlers, refugees or invaders – will rapidly adopt and adapt to the lifestyles of their new host society; put plainly, they don't tend to bring their pots and jugs with them but use the pots and jugs they find in their new homeland.

Furthermore, anthropologists have shown that evidence for migration is more likely to be found back in the original homeland, where returning migrants may bring goods and artefacts from their new life back

to the “auld country”. In the case of the Dál Riata, it is possible that there was a migration of people into Argyll who brought their Gaelic language with them but who readily adopted the material culture and architectural traditions of the host Pictish population, with some of these traditions then making their way back to North Antrim.





Dún Soirbhice (Dunserverick)

Dún Soirbhice has been an important place for millennia. It is mentioned in the early Irish myths and in the Tripartite Life of St. Patrick. This was the reputed capital of the Dál Riata in north Antrim. It was attacked twice by the Vikings, became an Anglo-Norman manor, and was occupied by the MacDomhnaill lordship who probably built the small stone tower on the promontory.

The Early Church

Settlement of the Dál Riata in Argyll, however, was not the only means for the transmission of cultural ideas between the Glens, Ireland and Scotland in the Early Medieval Period; the Early Christian Church also had a role to perform. The new Christian Church had established itself across Ireland by the end of the 6th century AD, primarily through the establishment of monasteries. This concept had its origins in North Africa in the 4th century AD and was brought to Ireland via Gaul and Britain but which was taken up with enthusiasm in Ireland where, by AD 600, the church found itself ruled not by bishops – as would be the norm elsewhere – but by the abbots associated with the monasteries.

The reasons for the growth of monasticism in Ireland are partly spiritual (it obviously chimed with the spirit of the place and time), but there were also economic and political reasons for its success. Monasteries required land which would have to be provided by a local ruler. In return, the monastery became tied to the aristocratic dynasty that provided the monks with their land, and the abbot would usually be a member of

the ruling lineage. It was also the case that the land given to the monastery was a pre-existing estate, where the old tenants stayed on as married lay monks and the abbot was also usually married to ensure the monastery stayed within the ownership of the lineage that had provided the land. A small number of deeply pious, celibate, aesthetically lived a fuller monastic life. In this way the new Christian Church accommodated and integrated itself successfully into Gaelic society.

Christianity was introduced to northern and western Scotland through the establishment of daughter-houses of the Irish monasteries. The monastery on the island of Í (Iona) was founded by Colm Cille, a senior aristocratic member of the Cenél Conaill, a major lineage within the Northern Uí Neill. He left Ireland as an act of penance and went to Scottish Dál Riata where he founded a monastery on the unidentified island of Hinba, before moving to Iona around AD 563.

Whether he founded the monastery at Iona is open to debate however, and there is a suggestion that it may have been

established by Saint Ódhrán in AD 548 and that Gabráin, the king of Dál Riata, was buried there in AD 560. Adamnán's life of Colm Cille tells us much on how these early monasteries functioned, and how the monks travelled and preached among the Picts in the northern parts of Scotland. Colm Cille, however, was also involved in the politics of Dál Riata. He may have presided at the coronation of Áedán macGabráin, the King of Dál Riata, in AD 574 and may have selected Eochaid Buide as Áedán's successor.

By the 7th century AD, monasteries seem to have been surrounded by one or more circular earthen banks, ditches and stone walls, separating the monastery from the outside world. This may have been partly to protect the relics and precious items that the monastery had accumulated, but it may also have had a religious function, dividing the monastery into zones based on perceived notions of sacredness.

Within the innermost enclosure was the church and cemetery, while the outer enclosures contained the cells where the monks lived, the gardens, and the craftworking areas. An important monastery



St Patrick's Church Armoy

St Patrick's Church, Armoy, was founded by St Olcán, who was baptised and ordained by St Patrick in the 5th century AD.

within Irish Dál Riata was at Armoy and this was the location for an archaeological excavation in 2005. Mentioned in the Tripartite Life of St Patrick as having been founded by St Olcán in the 5th century AD, the monastery was located on the great northern road, the Sli Mid Luachra, which ran from Teamhair (Tara) to Dún Soirbhice (Dunseverick) along the traditional border between Dál Riata and Dál nAraide.

The excavations uncovered evidence for an enclosing ditch around the modern church at the site and its accompanying 11th or 12th century AD round tower. The ditch had been recut on at least one occasion and was then replaced by a stone wall. On the inside of the ditch the remains of a stone hearth were discovered, radiocarbon dated to between AD 890 and AD 990 and possibly marking the location of a house, while close to the hearth was the discovery of a souterrain, an artificial cave that typically comprises a stone-lined tunnel some 20 to 30 metres in length which connected with underground chambers. Communication between the parts

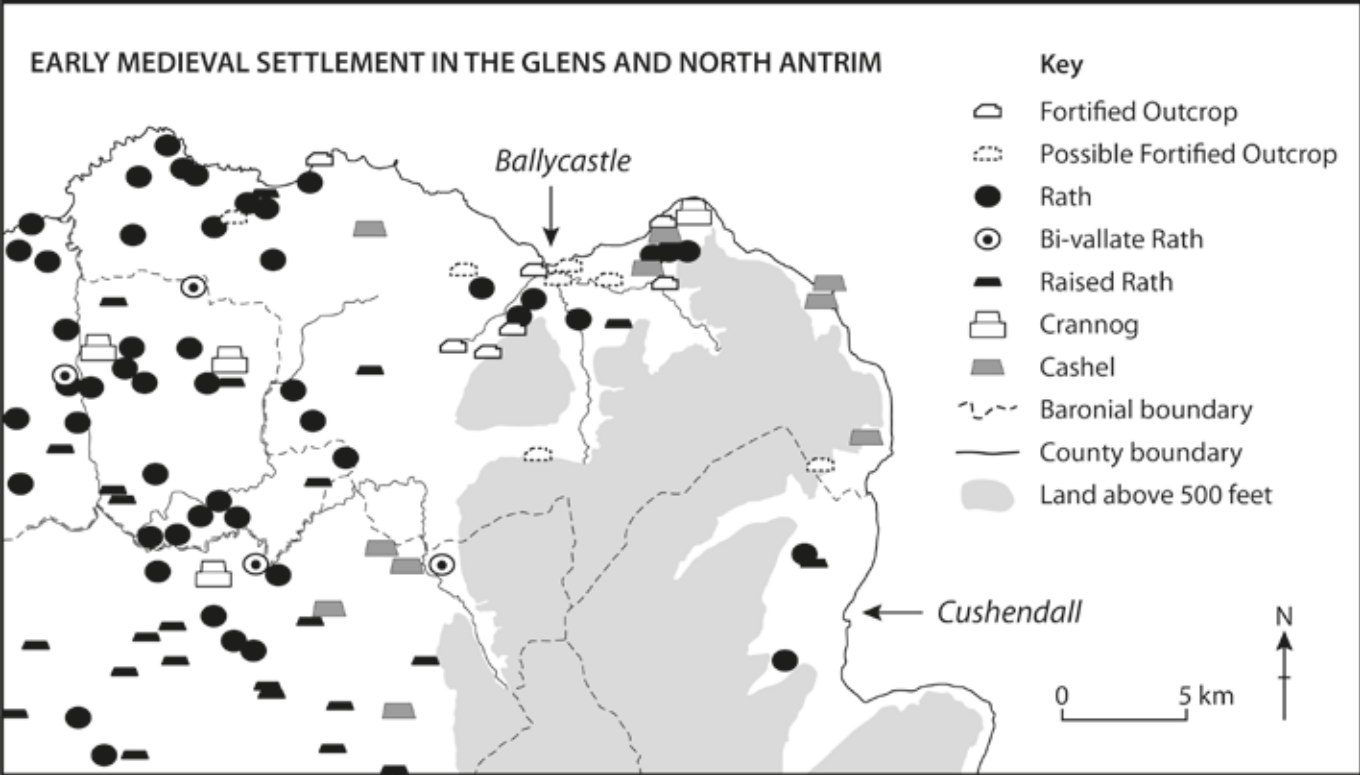
of the souterrain was controlled by the inclusion of “creeps”, openings where a person would have to crawl through from one part of the complex to another.

The presence of these restrictive features suggests that souterrains were defensive in nature, and presumably used as a hiding place in times of trouble. Radiocarbon dates suggest that the earliest activity at Armoy dated to between AD 420 and AD 550, compatible with the monastery’s origin story as being a Patrician era foundation, while the ditch surrounding the site had first been dug between AD 605 and AD 665 and had then been remodelled between AD 710 and AD 890. Evidence for craftworking was discovered in the form of a workshop for the manufacture of lignite bracelets.

Within Scottish Dál Riata the previously mentioned monastery of Iona retained its importance throughout the entire Medieval period and has also been subject to a series of archaeological investigations. These have been of great importance in furthering our understanding of the early

incarnation of the monastery given that there are no upstanding remains from this period in the site’s story. A large sub-rectangular ditch was found to enclose the centre of the monastery. The excavation revealed that, like Armoy, it was dug in the 7th century AD, while environmental evidence suggests that it may have been associated with a hedge of elder, hawthorn and holly bushes.

The excavations have also emphasised that timber was the main material used in the buildings associated with these early monasteries. A large circular post-built building was uncovered, while waterlogged wood from the ditch showed worked oak timbers typical of the type used in Irish Early Medieval constructions. A series of gullies and depressions found in the area called the Srúth a’ Mhuilinn (mill stream) were probably associated with a cornmill, which was very important for the processing of oats by the community, and evidence for the craftworking of metal and glass during the 7th century AD was also uncovered.



Ringforts and Fortified Outcrops

The ringfort is the predominant settlement type of Early Medieval Ireland. These structures were defended farmsteads and comprised a circular enclosure with a typical internal diameter of some 30 metres. The enclosure could comprise an earthen bank with an outer ráth (ditch) or – in upland areas – a stone wall or Caiseal (cashel). Ringforts are found across the whole of the Irish landscape and some 40,000 may have been constructed during the period from AD 600 to AD 1000.

Archaeological excavation has revealed that the interiors could have contained buildings, but this does not always seem to have been the case and it can be suggested that some ringforts acted as cattle kraals. Where houses have been detected they were of wooden construction and circular in format up to around AD 800. After that date rectangular houses seem to have been preferred. As mentioned, a souterrain was uncovered during the excavation of the monastic site at Armoy, but these artificial caves could have been constructed at ringforts and presumably they performed a similar defensive function for the inhabitants of a farmstead in times of trouble.

The ringforts associated with the upper social levels in Early Medieval society could have more than one ditch and bank and these are called multivallate ringforts, while sometimes the ringfort could take the format of an earthen platform, called a raised ringfort. An example of the latter monument type was Deer Park Farm near Glenarm, excavated in the mid 1980s in a programme of work which demonstrated that the ringfort comprised several centuries of occupation layers, superimposed one over the other.

It has been suggested that raised ringforts were the homes of arable farmers and that they became the settlement type favoured by the upper levels of society after AD 750 when the Irish agricultural economy moved toward cereal production.

As mentioned earlier, the Iron Age in Scotland witnessed the construction of duns, a tradition that continued into the Early Medieval period. It has been noted that certain architectural features which occur at some duns also occur at some Irish cashel ringforts, such as Altagore Cashel, near Cushendun, thereby indicating the transfer of ideas across the north

channel. In addition, there are also larger stone forts in Scotland called “nuclear forts”, multi-enclosure fortifications crowning a prominent rock outcrop and associated with the elite of both the Scottish Dál Riata and the Picts, as for example at Dunadd in Argyll and Dundurn in Perthshire. It has now been recognised that similar structures have been found in North Antrim where they have been classified as “fortified outcrops”, exemplified by Dún Mór (Doonmore) near Fair Head, which comprises a rock outcrop crowned by a stone cashel and with attached sub-semi-circular enclosures.

There are relatively few earthwork ringforts in The Glens, but some eight fortified outcrops have been identified in North Antrim, with a further six possible examples also noted. As such, the fortified outcrop may have been the settlement of choice for the upper levels of society in Irish Dál Riata, and one which mirrored the settlement traditions to be found in the Scottish component of the kingdom.

In 2003 an excavation was conducted at Droim a’ Dúin (Drumadoon) near Ballyvoy. Constructed on a gravel mound,



Dún Mór

Dún Mór (Doonmore) near Fair Head is an excellent example of a fortified outcrop. It was probably occupied in the 8th century AD.

with excellent views over the Carey River, the site was in danger of being eroded away naturally. Despite the damage already done to the monument from collapse, however, its oval shape and approximate size – around 14 metres in diameter – could still be established. The site was enclosed by an earthen rampart that was clad in stone, while several areas of paving and associated hearths were identified within the structure, as well as a souterrain.

Early Medieval pottery – called Souterrain Ware – was discovered,

as was later Medieval glazed pottery and a bell shrine, now on display in the Ulster Museum. There had been several episodes of repair and remodelling carried out, comprising two Early Medieval phases of activity in the period from the late 8th century AD to the early 10th century AD, followed by a period of abandonment, and then a reuse of the site in the 13th century AD. The concept that this site was a traditional ringfort or an Anglo-Norman motte castle has been dispelled by the excavation. It was also recognised that the site was similar in general form

to the neighbouring monument at Doonmore near Fair Head. This fortified basalt outcrop had been the subject of an excavation undertaken by the famous archaeologist Gordon Childe back in 1938 in a programme of work that had identified a small oval enclosure at the crown of the outcrop associated with a circular stone wall and evidence of hearths and paved areas. Outer enclosures were also detected. Childe’s excavation produced Early Medieval Souterrain Ware, Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery, and later Medieval glazed pottery,

but he considered this to be an Anglo-Norman fortification of the 13th century AD – a motte castle that had been constructed to take advantage of the natural topography and the outcrop. A new programme of excavation was undertaken in 2015 in a community-based investigation supported by the Heart of the Glens Landscape Partnership Scheme and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The excavation recovered Early Medieval artefacts (including pieces of rotary querns and pottery) which indicate that it was used primarily in the Early Medieval period and then re-occupied in the 13th century AD. The parallels with Drumadoon are remarkable. Here we have two outcrops fortified in the Early Medieval period, abandoned, and then put to renewed use in the 13th century AD.

The fortified outcrops at Drumadoon and Doonmore may be equivalent structures to the nuclear forts of Argyll, while cashels such as Altagore have similarities to the Scottish duns. As such, the archaeological record is starting to identify parallel structures on either side of the Sruth na Maoile which may be indicative of the strong and enduring connections that existed between both areas in the Early Medieval period when

this was the Kingdom of Dál Riata. There are a further two sites that should also be considered at this point – the reputed capitals of Dál Riata, at Dún Soirbhice (Dunseverick) on the North Antrim coast, and Dunadd in Crinan Moss in mid Argyll. In both Early Medieval Ireland and Scotland there were a number of royal centres. Often these were not necessarily only royal residences, but also inauguration centres with an associated óenach, a multifunctional setting for assemblies and fairs, where tribute was collected, and each tuath would have had its óenach.

Dunseverick, near Ballintoy, is probably one such site. It emerges from prehistory within the mythological Ulster Cycle of tales as the end-point of the great road running from Teamhair (Tara), while the 10th century AD Tripartite Life of St Patrick noted the saint’s blessing of the location. It was clearly perceived in these texts, therefore, as an important place and was subjected to Viking attacks in AD 871 and AD 926.

The monument today is set on a basalt rock-stack protruding into the sea, with steep cliffs on all sides, save a narrow causeway to the land. On its summit there are a series of grass-covered foundations, in addition to the

ruins of a small Late Medieval stone tower. The Scottish component of the kingdom was reputedly ruled from Dunadd, a nuclear fort on a rock outcrop originally surrounded by marshland.

The summit of the outcrop is crowned by the remains of a dun, typical of those found throughout the west of Scotland, with a series of outer fortified enclosures, each protected by stout stone walls, present on the terraces downslope. Of particular note are a series of carvings at the summit, including a Pictish-style boar, some ogham script, and a “footprint” carved into the rock. Folklore relates that the footprint belonged to Colm Cille, but it is more probable that it was used in the inauguration ceremony of the Scottish kings of Dál Riata.

Excavations have revealed evidence of metalworking, jewellery production and the importation of luxury goods from France in the form of “E-Ware” pottery sherds and the site is mentioned twice in the Annals of Ulster under the years AD 683, when it was besieged by an unnamed force, and AD 736 when it was captured by the Picts who “laid waste to the territory of Dál Riata”.

The souterrain at Droim a’ Dúin (Drumadoon)

The main passage of the souterrain under excavation, showing the large lintel stones that covered the underground complex.



Vikings!

In AD 795 the Annals of Ulster record the “burning of Recru [Rathlin] by the heathens”, an event that marked the first recorded instance of Viking activity in Ireland. The Vikings who came to Ireland and western Scotland were mainly from Western Scandinavia, and they viewed the Christian monasteries as wealthy, yet relatively defenceless, targets for raids. Throughout the early years of the 9th century there were numerous attacks noted, but these seem to have provoked native resistance in Ulster. In AD 811, for example, the Annals of Ulster state that there was a “slaughter of the heathens by the Ulaid”.

The attacks, however, continued and in the early 9th century the great island monastery of Í (Iona) was sacked by Vikings four times, necessitating its abandonment for a safer location at Ceannanas (Kells) in modern County Meath. In Scotland the Dál Riata and the Picts were both involved in action against the Viking threat, aided, as in AD 85, by Gaelic kindred forces from Ulster. Viking successes in the Western Isles may have forced the Scots of Dál Riata towards unification with their Pictish neighbours, thereby laying the

foundations for modern Scotland. It also appears that the nature of Viking activity was also changing, however, and they were beginning to settle both in coastal Scotland and Ireland and integrating themselves into local political life. The attack on Dunseverick that was carried out in AD 871, for example, was undertaken by a combined force of Vikings and the Cenél nEógain.

But what evidence do we have for a Viking presence in The Glens? In 1840 workmen constructing a railway line along the coast at Larne uncovered a burial ground containing Viking grave goods including a double-edged iron sword, an iron spearhead, a bronze ringed pin and a bone comb, all of which helped to date the, evidently pagan, grave to the 9th century or early 10th century AD. Earlier, in 1784, possible Viking burials were discovered in an Early Bronze Age cemetery in Church Bay on Rathlin Island, one of which contained a body with a silver brooch of 9th century date with definite Viking stylistic features.

There is also the potential that a boat burial was discovered on Rathlin in the 1920s in a field close

to the shore line in Church Bay, the site of which is now destroyed, while the “Danes Burial” is a grass-covered boat-shaped mound which might also be a boat burial.

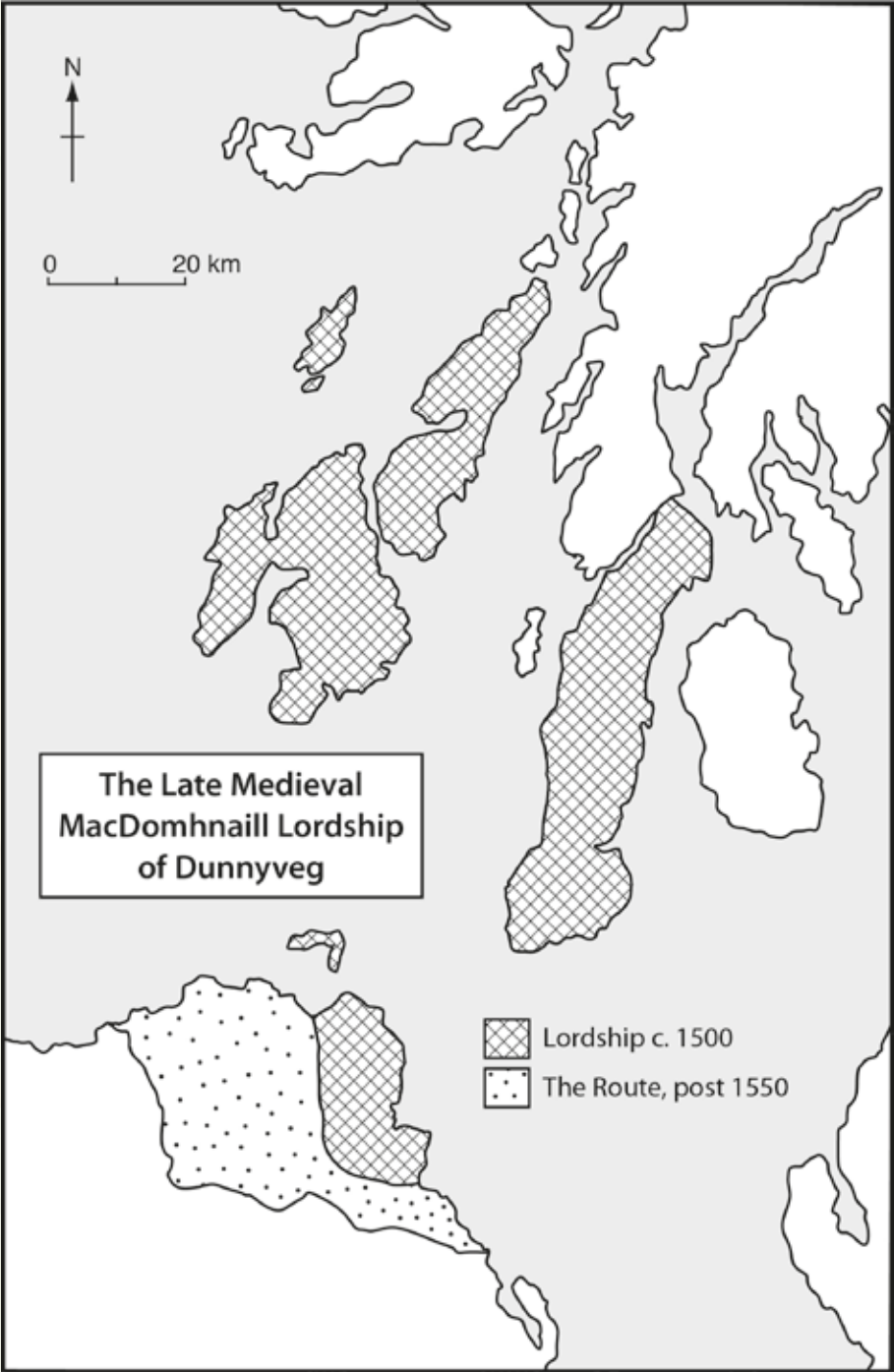
On a more prosaic level, some unusual round-bottomed sherds of Early Medieval coarse pottery were found at Dún Soirbhice Cave, during an archaeological excavation in 2009. The pottery was discovered within a soil layer that also contained Irish Souterrain Ware of an approximate 8th century or 9th century date and it is similar to vessels found in the Hebrides during the Viking Age. Overall, however, our evidence for the Vikings in Antrim is somewhat limited in scale compared to the situation in the Western Isles where, for example, 13 definite and 13 probable Vikings graves have been discovered on the islands of Coll and Tiree, Mull, Colonsay, Oransay, Islay and Gigha.

Some of these graves were found to contain quality grave goods including weapons and jewellery, while a grave at Kiloran Bay on Colonsay contained a set of scales with weights, indicative of the trading that the Vikings also engaged in. Similarly, there is

greater placename evidence in the Western Isles. On the islands of Coll and Tiree, for example, up to half of the placenames are Norse, while on Islay that figure is 30% and the presence of such placenames are indicative of Viking settlement on these islands.

Apart from Rathlin Island, however, the impact of the Vikings on The Glens and surrounding districts would seem to have been limited, but their effect on communication between Ulster and the Western Isles during this time is reflected in the decrease in the number of entries dealing with Scottish matters in the pages of the various Irish annals.

Connections across the Gaelic world, however, did survive the initial onslaught and, in time, would be further facilitated by the use of galleys – the descendants of Viking longships – across the Sruth na Maoile. In addition, the new combined kingdom of the Scots and the Picts was also growing in strength and its kings were looking to their Irish genealogy to help justify their right to rule. As such, there remained a closeness between the people of the two regions, but one which would be further tested by the arrival of another group of newcomers – the Anglo-Normans.



The Anglo-Normans and The Glens of Antrim

From its roots in Dál Riata, by the 12th century, Gaelic kingship had come to dominate Scotland. Dauíd mac Maíl Choluim (David I), ruler during the early 12th century, was strongly influenced by the Norman and French culture that he witnessed as a young exile at the court of Henry I in England and he sought to use Anglo-Norman warriors in his power struggles with other Scottish dynasties, with many offering land in return for service. The changes that he implemented brought Scotland closer to contemporary feudalism and away from the kin-based Gaelic economic and landholding system, while intermarriage led to the evolution of a new mixed Norman-Gaelic Scottish elite, exemplified by lineages such as the Bruces.

This was also a time of change in Ireland as well, and political power had accumulated around a small number of major Gaelic dynasties that were now competing to become High King. The expulsion in 1166 of the ruler of a major dynasty, Diarmait Mac Murchada, king of Leinster, by a new High King, Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair, led the former to seek assistance at the court of Henry II, King of England and Duke of Normandy and Aquitaine, who permitted Diarmait to recruit mercenaries for service in Ireland among the king's subjects in England and south Wales.

Diarmait came to an agreement with Richard de Clare, 2nd earl of Pembroke (better known to history as Strongbow) for military support

in return for marriage to his daughter Aoife and the expectation of inheriting Diarmait's kingdom. Diarmait returned to Ireland with a small Norman force in 1167, followed two years later by a much larger force led by Strongbow. Despite the odds, the Anglo-Normans secured a bridge-head in southern coastal areas and when Diarmait died in 1171 Strongbow became the new ruler of Leinster. Henry II watched this development with apprehension and realised the potential for a new Norman-Gaelic Irish elite to emerge, similar to what had occurred in Scotland.

He therefore decided to intervene, invading Ireland in August 1171 with a large army and taking the submissions of the Anglo-Norman

Hearth under excavation at Droim a' Dúin (Drumadoon)

The hearth was framed by four large slabs set on their edges, while the peat ash and charcoal removed from its fill enabled a radiocarbon date to be obtained, indicating that the hearth had been in use during the 8th to 10th centuries AD.



lords and most of the Gaelic Irish kings as the new Lord of Ireland. The conquest of Gaelic kingdoms by the Anglo-Normans continued unabated, however, in 1177 John de Courcy, with 22 knights and 300 foot-soldiers, launched an invasion of Ulaid. By 1182 de Courcy had established five bailiwicks: Aontroim (Antrim), Carraig Fhearguis (Carrickfergus), Na Ards (Ards), Uí Bhalthmhaic (Bathewic) and Leath Cathail (Lecale) in south Antrim and east Down. Attempts to move northwards into mid Antrim, however, were rebuked by the Uí Tuirtre, who remained in control of their kingdom for the next two centuries.

In 1205 de Courcy was removed from his position by King John I of England, with his lands give to Hugh de Lacy who was created earl of Ulster. De Lacy, in turn, was

then expelled in 1210 by the king and in 1211/1212 a land-grant was made to Alan, Thomas, and Duncan de Galloway. The grant to Alan de Galloway was the largest in scale and encompassed the territory of Dál Riata, Rathlin Island, Tuaisceart (Twescard), Latharna (Larne) and other territories east and west of the Bann.

It is probable, however, that this was a speculative grant, with the king giving Alan his blessing to seize this territory if he could and in return he would pay the king an annual fee if he was successful in his endeavours. Alan’s brother Thomas would seem to have had some success, constructing a castle at Mount Sandel near Coleraine in 1214 and obtained the keepership of the royal castle at Antrim in 1215. His other brother Duncan held land at Ballygalley

but there seems to have been no substantial conquest in north Antrim by Alan.

The return of Hugh de Lacy as earl of Ulster in 1227 saw him align with the de Galloways through the marriage of Alan to his daughter and it would seem to have been in the period between 1230 and 1260 that efforts were made to extend Anglo-Norman control into North Antrim. This is certainly the implication from the 1260 Pipe Roll (a financial record maintained by the Exchequer) which details Anglo-Norman land holdings in the area now called the County of Twescard, from the Gaelic tuaisceart, “north”, framed between the Uí Tuirtre of mid-Antrim to the south and the sea to the north.

Souterrain Ware

This fragment of a small cup was found during the excavation at Drumadoon and is a type of coarse unglazed pottery called Souterrain Ware, so called because archaeologists and antiquarians first encountered it during excavations of souterrains. Souterrain Ware first appears in east Ulster about AD 750, and remains in use until around AD 1300.





In 1264 the Crown gave the earldom to Walter de Burgh, 2nd Lord of Connaught, but after his death in 1271 there was a dispute over who was to hold Twescard. Henry de Mandeville, the county's bailiff, refused to surrender the territory to the King's seneschal nominee William FitzWarin. This dispute involved both Irish and Anglo-Normans and resulted in Henry's murder, while the dispute continued until Walter's son Richard became 2nd earl of Ulster in 1280.

A signature monument associated with the Anglo-Normans is the motte castle, a conical mound of earth that was crowned by a timber palisade and with buildings on the summit. Within The Glens, however, things are not quite that simple. We have several possible

mottes, including Cloch Dhún Muirigh (Cloughanmurray) near Ballycastle, but there seems to have been a tendency in the region for the Anglo-Normans to have reused older structures as the base for their fortifications. And so, while Cloughanmurray certainly looks like a motte, there is an account of the discovery of the entrance to a souterrain having been found at the base of the mound, which would suggest that it was constructed on the site of an Early Medieval settlement. Likewise, the Early Medieval raised ringfort at Deer Park Farm near Glenarm was thought to have been a motte prior to its excavation, while we have also seen how the Early Medieval fortifications at Doonmore and Drumadoon were brought back into use in the 13th century, presumably by the Anglo-Normans.

We also must take into account the possibility that motte castles could be copied and constructed by the Gaelic Irish. The splendid earthworks at Harryville and Glarryford are cases in point; both are in mid Antrim, and both were within the territory of the Uí Tuirtre. While it is possible that they may mark the location of a failed Anglo-Norman military intervention, it would seem more probable that they represent the work of the native Gaelic lordship and that they may be part of the reason why Uí Tuirtre was able to withstand any hostile intervention in their kingdom, having adopted Anglo-Norman castle-building for themselves.

The bellshrine from Drumadoon

Discovered during excavation, the shrine was originally made in the 12th century but was then remodelled in the 13th century when a figure of Christ – made in Limoges in Belgium – was added to it.



Ardclinis Church

This medieval church near Waterfoot was noted in the 1306 Taxation of Pope Nicholas, where it is referred to as the “Eccia de Ardglanys”.

The Bissets and the Bruces

Another Anglo-Norman family, the Bissets, appear to have become associated with Ulster through their support of Hugh de Lacy and his efforts to regain his earldom in the 1220s.

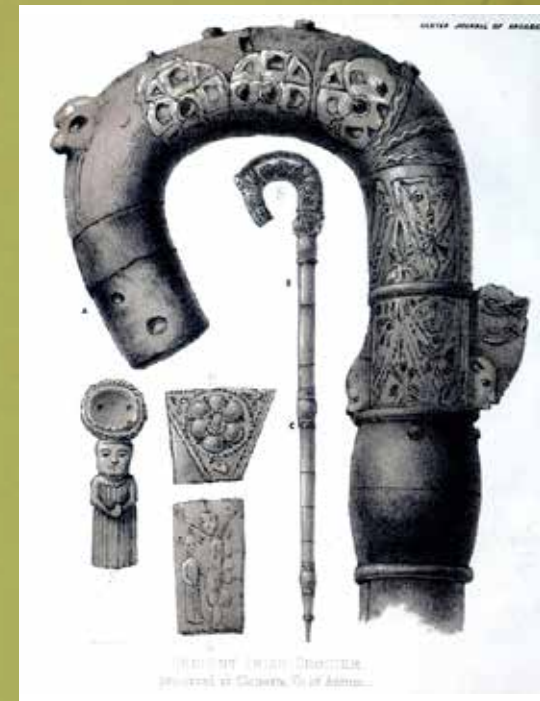
Henry Bisset had three sons – John, Peter and Walter. While Walter Bisset married Alan de Galloway’s sister in 1233, in 1242 he was implicated in the murder of his nephew-in-law Patrick, Thomas de Galloway’s son and the last legitimate heir to the de Galloway lands who was killed by Walter’s nephew John.

Despite Walter’s claims of innocence both he and his nephew were judged to have been guilty and both were banished from Scotland. They were supposed to sell their possessions and go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but Walter absconded to England, while John made for Ulster.

For Hugh de Lacy this was a welcome development for it enabled him to reincorporate the de Galloway lands in Antrim into his earldom. For the Bissets this meant advancement, and John was soon in possession of the de Galloway estates of Ballygalley, Glenarm, Ballycastle and Rathlin.

Jurors at an inquiry by the king as to the extent of the “Byset” lands swore that the estate of the late John Bisset in 1278 included Glenarm, Glencloy, Glenarrif, Carey and Rathlin, as well as other lands elsewhere in what is now Antrim and Derry. It is noticeable, however, that the holding of the lands in Glencloy and Glenarrif are described as “waste lands as it were and inhabited by the Irish” with an annual value of 7s 8d. This seems like a tacit admission that these lands had not been brought under Bisset control at this time.

The impression that these holdings of the Bissets differed somehow from their other holdings is compounded by the inclusion of these areas in the Deanry of Turtrye in the Taxation of Pope Nicholas of 1306, where the parishes of Ardclinis and Tickmacrevan (which contains Glencloy and Glenarrif) are located. It may be that the Bissets had been granted The Glens in a similar manner to the grants of the de Galloway’s in North Antrim and, like the de Galloways, they had only partially made good their claim by the time of the death of John Bisset, with much of north and mid Antrim – the Deanery of Turtrye – being under the control of the Uí Tuirtri.



The Ardclinis Crozier

Now in the National Museum of Ireland, the crozier was made from a wooden staff covered in bronze with a bronze crook. Thin silver panels overlaid the bronze. There is a clerical figure at the front of the crozier and a representation of the Crucifixion.



Robert the Bruce, the earl of Carrick, like many noblemen of his generation, had become inextricably involved in the Scottish Wars of Independence against Edward I of England and, also like many of his generation, the years up to 1306 had seen him change allegiance on more than one occasion, as and when the politics of the day demanded.

Robert, however, had a greater ambition. His grandfather, the 5th lord of Annansdale, had been an unsuccessful claimant to the

Scottish throne, overlooked in favour of John Balliol, who in turn had been deposed by Edward I in 1296, and Bruce harboured thoughts of securing the Scottish Crown for himself. The main obstacle to Robert's ambition, however, was John Comyn, 3rd lord of Badenoch, who he assassinated at the Grey Friars Church in Dùn Phris (Dunfries) in 1306.

With Comyn now dead, Robert declared himself King of Scotland on 25th March. Edward I could

scarce believe the news when it reached him and Aymer de Valence, Comyn's brother-in-law, was dispatched to hunt down the new king. On 19th June at Methven, near Peairt (Perth), Bruce's army was surprised by the forces of Valence, with Robert fortunate to escape with his cavalry. As Robert and his small band tried to escape to the west they were stopped by a MacDubhgaill force at Dalry near Taigh an Droma (Tyndrum) and defeated in battle. Again, Robert escaped, and he made for the mountains of Atholl

Caisleán Carrach (Castle Carra)

Caisleán Carrach is a small stone tower overlooking Cushendun Bay. It was probably built by the Bissets in the late 13th century or 14th century.

and Breadalbane and safety with Aonghus Òg MacDomhnaill. To understand the reason why Aonghus Òg should have opted to assist Robert when he looked so close to utter defeat we must look at the politics of the Gaelic West of Scotland in this period. The principal lineage in the region at that time was the MacDubhgaill and bitter rivalry existed between them and the MacDomhnaill lineage of Islay.

In addition, Alasdair MacDubhgaill was married to a daughter of John Comyn and he was a strong supporter of the Balliol-Comyn faction. The MacDomhnaill lineage, however, had been supporters of Robert the Bruce's grandfather's claim to the throne. Aonghus Òg had been loyal to Edward I of England until 1305 when his enemy Alasdair MacDubhgaill submitted to the English monarch yet received no royal censure for his past wrongdoings. After this the relationship between MacDomhnaill and the

English king became uneasy and hence Aonghus Òg's willingness to assist Edward's rival. By the late summer of 1306 news had reached the English and their allies that Robert was ensconced in Dunaverty Castle on the southern end of the Kintyre peninsula but by the time they had captured the castle they discovered that Robert was not there; he had already fled to Rathlin Island.

The island at this time, however, was not in MacDomhnaill hands; it was part of the Bisset estate and, as such, the presence of the exiled Scottish king on the island brings into question the role of Sir Hugh Bisset, Lord of The Glens, at a time when his lord, Edward I of England, had his men searching out Robert's whereabouts in the Western Isles. It would have been highly unlikely that Hugh would not have known of the visitor to Rathlin and it seems probable that he had turned a blind-eye, if not indeed acting in direct collusion with Robert and

with the MacDomhnaills. As such, the events of winter 1306 seem to represent our first direct evidence for co-operation between the Bissets and the MacDomhnaills.

Robert chose to withdraw to Rathlin during this period of difficulty is not hard to fathom given that he had established connections with Ireland. In 1294 he had been given permission by Edward I to spend a year and a half in the country, while his second wife, Elizabeth de Burgh, whom he married in 1302, was the daughter of Richard de Burgh, the 2nd earl of Ulster. In addition, he was well integrated into Gaelic society through his mother, by whom he had inherited his title and the Gaelic earldom of Carrick.

It would also seem that his brother Edward Bruce had been fostered among the great Gaelic Ó Néill lineage in Tír Eoghain, a connection that Robert exploited when Edward opened a second front in the war

with Edward II, King of England, in 1315 through his invasion of Ulster; when Edward Bruce landed in east Antrim he was met at Carraig Fhearghais (Carrickfergus) by the Gaelic lords of Ulster, including the King of Tír Eoghain, Domhnall Ó Néill, who pledged their support to him as the King of Ireland. Despite its initial success, however, Edward's campaign did not gain support among the Irish in the south of the country. His army

also had to live off the land and this caused hardship amongst the peasantry, which was heightened by the famine conditions experienced across Europe in the years 1317 and 1318.

In 1318 Edward Bruce was killed at the Battle of Faughart, and Robert's dream of a grand Gaelic Hiberno-Scottish Kingdom came to an end. The war, however, had significantly weakened the Anglo-

Norman lordships in Ireland. In North Ulster, for example, the recent gains of the Anglo-Normans in North Derry, such as the Manor of Roe near Limavady, were wasteland in 1326. There was also strife within the Anglo-Normans which culminated in the murder of William de Burgh, 3rd earl of Ulster, in 1333.



Coin of Edward II from Castle Carra

This coin was found just outside the castle during excavation. It is a silver penny of Edward II, King of England, who reigned from 1307 to 1327.

Rìoghachd Innse Gall agus Port an Eilein (The Lordship of the Isles and Finlaggan)

Sir Hugh Bisset had initially, perhaps half-heartedly, resisted Edward Bruce's army when it landed on the Antrim coast but he then fought on the Bruce side during the conflict. After the war his estates were seized by Edward II and given to the trusted John de Athy, the commander of the English king's naval forces in the Irish Sea, and then Richard de Mandeville. By 1338, however, the Bissets had been restored following the intercession of their friend Eòin MacDomhnaill, the Lord of the Isles, now an ally of the English King Edward III, the latter having been reliant on MacDomhnaill seapower for several of his expeditions against the Scottish Crown.

Caisleán Carrach near Cushendun is a strong candidate for a Bisset stronghold perhaps constructed during this period as a means of holding control over their restored lordship. The castle comprises a small stone tower, surviving as a two-storey ruin with a pronounced base batter and built upon a small natural rocky outcrop overlooking Cushendun Bay. Excavations at the castle in the mid 1990s revealed that the tower had been reused as a shelter for iron workers in the

Late Medieval period since large amounts of charcoal, iron slag and Medieval Ulster coarse pottery were found in the interior.

Lying beneath this layer, however, was the primary occupation level, found to contain glazed Medieval pottery of the 13th or early 14th century and Medieval Ulster coarse pottery, while a silver penny of Edward II, who reigned from 1307 to 1327, was found outside the castle. The grant of 1338 was to Hugh Bisset but by 1383 the family was being led by John, or Eóin, who gave rise to the surname MacEóin Bisset, a member of a junior lineage. It is likely that during these years the Bissets made good their long-standing claims on the Inner Glens with the breakup of the Uí Tuirtre lordship under pressure from the Clann Aodha Buídhe branch of the Ó Néill lineage, with their last lord dying in 1368.

MacEóin Bisset joined with Niall Ó Néill in an attack on the Savages of Lecale in 1383 which led to the death of his son Seinicín, whose only child was a girl, Margery. One might expect that at this point one of the men in the extended Bisset family would have used this as an opportunity to claim leadership

of the family and its estates for themselves, as would have been normal procedure within a Gaelic or Gaelicised lordship. This, however, did not happen, probably because Margery was made a ward of the Savages, perhaps as a means of redress for the raid of 1383 since the income from the Bisset estates would now come to them.

A feudal legal position was therefore adopted, whereby Margery, by law, was the sole heir to the family estates. In 1399 Eòin Mòr MacDomhnaill married Margery and took the title of MacDomhnaill of Dunnyveg (an ancestral castle on Islay) and The Glens. This did not, however, mean that the territory in the Glens immediately became MacDomhnaill land, for the MacEóins of The Glens continued as a major presence in the region throughout the 15th century.

It was only with the death of the last MacEóin lord in the Ó Néill retinue at the Battle of Knockavoe near Strabane in 1522 that brought the family's influence to an end. As we will see, it was this event that enabled Alastair MacDomhnaill to then claim his rights to the MacEóin lands since he was directly descended from Margery.



Finlaggan

Finlaggan, Islay, showing Eilean Mòr in the centre of the picture and to its right Eilean na Comhairle (the Council Isle).

Clann Eòin Mòr

The Lordship of the Isles had its origins in the mixed Viking and Gaelic people of the Western Isles of Scotland in the 12th century. Nominally a territory of Norway, the Scottish component of the Kingdom of Mann and the Isles was seized by the great warlord Somhairle Mòr in 1158.

On his death in 1164 the territory was divided between his sons, with Mull, Coll, Tiree and Jura given to Dubhghall, progenitor of the MacDubhgaill lineage, and Islay and Kintyre given to Ragnhalla, whose son Domnall was the progenitor of the MacDomhnaill lineage. The Norwegian Crown, conscious of their weakening grip in the face of expanding Scottish power of Alexander III of Scotland, mounted an expedition to the Western Isles in 1263 in which Domnall's son Aonghus Mòr appears to have supported the Norwegians.

Although the Norwegians were not convincingly defeated, they agreed terms where, for a payment from the Scottish Crown, they would relinquish their title to the Western Isles. Their subjects and supporters in the Isles were guaranteed

protection by the Scottish King, which seems borne out by Aonghus Mòr having his title to the Isles confirmed. Aonghus Mòr was succeeded by Aonghus Òg who further strengthened his position by his early support of Robert the Bruce, as noted previously.

Perhaps the most successful Lord of the Isles, however, was Eòin MacDomhnaill, who ruled from 1336 to 1386. Married to the daughter of King Robert II, it was one of his sons – Eòin Mòr – who founded the Dunneveg (Dùn Naomhaig, Fort of the Galleys) branch of the lineage, who became known as Clan Eòin Mòr of Islay and Kintyre. It was Eòin Mòr who married MacEòin Bisset's daughter Margery in 1399.

The capital of the Lordship of the Isles was at Loch Finlaggan (Port an Eilein) on Islay, where the power focused on two islands within the loch. The larger of the two islands is Eilean Mòr and the smaller one is called Eilean na Comhairle (the Council Isle). Excavations have revealed that Eilean Mòr was an island which was defended with earthen ramparts and which contained a complex of buildings

including a church, a large stone hall and numerous other smaller buildings, with a network of paved paths linking the buildings and a jetty.

The excavations revealed that activity on the island began around 1300 and continued through to the dissolution of the lordship in the late 15th century. Despite appearances, Eilean na Comhairle did not commence as a crannog (an artificial island) but is a natural isle which was used as the site of a dun during the Early Medieval period.

The foundations of a large stone hall – similar perhaps to the building at Castle Carra near Cushendun – constructed in the 13th century was uncovered during the excavations. This building had then been demolished – perhaps during the 14th century – and three smaller buildings constructed on the site. The larger of these buildings may have been the council chamber, accompanied by two residential units. The excavations retrieved Medieval glazed pottery, Scottish White Gritty Ware and Scottish Grey Ware, and a local handmade coarseware.

Both glazed wares have also been found on excavations in Ulster, while the coarseware – Craggan Ware – is the Western Isles’ equivalent of Medieval Ulster Coarse pottery.

During the later years of the Lordship of the Isles there was continued involvement for Clan

Eòin Mòr in Ulster affairs. Domhnall Ballach, the son of Eòin Mòr and Margery, married Johanna, the daughter of Conn Ó Néill, the ruler of the Clann Aodha Buídhe Ó Néill lineage, now established in south Antrim. Domhnall Ballach and Johanna’s son, Eòin Mòr, also married within the same lineage, to Sabina, the daughter of Felim Ó

Néill, while Eòin Mòr and Sabina’s son, Eòin Cathanach, was married to Síle Savage, daughter of the Lord of the Savages in Portaferry.

In 1493 the lands of the Lordship of the Isles were seized by James IV of Scotland and the independent lordship was at an end. Eòin Mòr submitted to the king’s authority and James IV knighted him and was willing to allow him to retain his estates, except for Dunavery Castle in Kintyre which was to become a royal garrison. This was something that Eòin Mòr couldn’t accept and as the king was leaving by sea he launched a successful attack on the castle, with the king’s governor hung from the walls as the king watched. The king, however, was to have his revenge.

Eòin Mòr, his son Eòin Cathanach, and three of his grandsons were arrested through the treachery of their kinsman Eòin MacIain of Ardnamurchan and were executed in Edinburgh for treason in 1499. One of Eòin Cathanach’s son, however, had made his escape. Alastair MacDomhnaill and his followers left Islay and moved to The Glens, establishing themselves in the Ballycastle area. As such, The Glens provided MacDomhnaill with retreat and offered him the chance to revitalise the family’s fortunes during the 16th century, assisted by the death of the last

MacEóin Bisset lord at the battle of Knockavoe near Strabane in 1522. Alastair now made good his claim to The Glens through his heritage, as he was a descendant of Margey Bisset. He was helped in his efforts by the fact that he had at least nine sons, one of whom was perhaps the greatest leader that The Glens have ever known, Somhairle Buídhe MacDomhnaill (Sorley Boy MacDonnell).

Initially however Somhairle’s older brother Séamas was the more prominent member of the family. Thanks to improving relations with the Scottish Crown Séamas was educated at the court of James V, where he met and subsequently married Agnes Caimbeul, the daughter of the 3rd earl of Argyll in 1545. Among their offspring would be Fionnghuala, better known to history as Iníon Dubh, “the Dark Daughter” and the mother of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill. Agnes brought a fine dowry for her new husband – over 1,000 Scots mercenaries.

The role played by Scottish Gaelic warriors in Irish affairs throughout the Medieval period was long established but had gained great importance by the late 13th century as the demand for soldiers grew throughout Ireland and enabled members of families such as the Mac Suibhne and MacDubhgaill lineages to develop a new niche

for themselves. These galloglass [gallóglach – a warrior from Innse Gall, the Gaelic name for the Hebrides] lineages established themselves in lordships throughout Ireland and provided their new lords with heavily armed foot soldiers, the upkeep of which was provided for through taxation and by the award of estates which enabled the newcomers to support themselves.

An example of this process in action was the establishment of a branch of the MacDomhnaill lineage as hereditary galloglass to the Ó Néill lordship in Tír Eoghain. Ragnall, son of Alastair (the elder brother of Robert the Bruce’s helper Aonghus Òg) took up this position in 1366 following his defeat at the hands of his cousin Eòin of Islay, the Lord of the Isles, and the MacDomhnaill galloglass were to hold estates around the Ballygawley area.

For the MacDomhnaill lineage there would have been no real impediment to them establishing themselves within familiar territory in North Antrim. For the Tudor Crown, however, this was very much not the case, and it was viewed as a Scottish intrusion into their Irish dominion, at a time when the threat from the “Auld Alliance” of Scotland and France was a real one; the latter might use Ireland as a launch-pad for an invasion of

England, particularly after Henry VIII had broken with Rome in the years between 1532 and 1534. In a letter written to the king in 1533 by his council in Dublin it is stated that:

“The Scottes also inhabithe now buyselley a greate parte of Ulster, which is the king’s inheritance; and it is greatlie to be feared, oonles



Scottish Grey Ware Pottery

Fragments of a Medieval jug found during the excavations at Finlaggan. The vessel is of a type of pottery called Scottish Grey Ware, commonly found in southwest Scotland and the Scottish Islands. It was manufactured from the 14th century through to the 17th century. In recent years it has been recognised on sites from Ulster on excavations at Armoy, at Bishop Street in Derry, and at Dunluce Castle.



Glenarm Friary

This carved block of sandstone depicts a mounted warrior and may have come from a now destroyed tomb. The warrior is wearing a bascinet (a type of helmet) and an aketon (a knee length padded jacket). He holds a spear aloft in his right hand and the reins of his horse in his left hand.

that in a short tyme they be dryven from the same, that they, bringinge in more nombre daily, woll, by lyttle and lyttle soe far encroche in acquyringe and wynninge the possessions there, with the aide of the kingis disobeyasant Irishe rebelles, who doo nowe ayde theym therein after soche maner, that at lengthe they will put and expel the king from his hole seignory there”.

The Dublin administration clearly viewed the MacDomhnaills as interlopers from Scotland who should be forced to return to their own country as soon as possible. The Annals of the Four Masters relates that in 1551 a raid was made by the Lord Justice into Ulster with four ships sent to Rathlin. Alastair MacDomhnaill’s sons Séamas and Colla Maol Dubh led the resistance on the island and the Tudor force was utterly defeated, with their leader Sir Ralph Bagnall taken prisoner. Bagnall remained in their custody until they were able to exchange him for their brother, Somhairle Buidhe, who had been imprisoned in Dublin the previous year. Little is known of the early life of Somhairle and this is the first time he enters the historical record but a statement allegedly made by him and contained in a letter from Captain William Piers, constable of Carrickfergus, to the Lord Deputy, Thomas Radcliffe, 3rd earl of Sussex, in 1558 states that

Somhairle had informed an English prisoner, Walter Floddy, “playnly that Inglische men had no rygth to Yrland”.

If this statement is authentic, then we can gain real insight into Somhairles view of the world in which he lived. He evidently saw no contradiction in his lineage, originating out of Islay, as having a right to hold land in Ireland. It was the English who had no right to be there. Given, however, that he would have viewed himself and his people as part of a Gaedhealtacht that extended across the Western Isles and Ulster then no contradiction could or should be expected.

Somhairle’s great rival was Séan Ó Néill, lord of Tír Eoghain, who had been at war with the Tudor administration in Ireland until a peace treaty was reached in 1562. Now the Crown’s agent in Ulster, Séan attacked the MacDomhnaills, inflicting a heavy defeat on them in 1565 at Ballycastle. Somhairle and his brother Séamas were captured and taken as prisoners to Strabane where the latter died of his wounds. After two years Somhairle was released. Séan’s fortunes took a severe turn for the worse when he was heavily defeated by the Ó Domhnaills at the Battle of Farsetmore, near modern Letterkenny, on 8th May 1567.

Caistéal Cheann Bháin (Kinbane Castle)

Kinbane Castle is situated at the landward end of a chalk headland protruding into the sea. It consists of a sub-circular courtyard enclosure with a two storey stone tower at its southwest end. The castle was probably built by Colla MacDomhnaill in the mid 16th century and may have been occupied as late as the 18th century.

Desperate for new allies, he turned to the MacDomhnaills, travelling to Cushendun to open negotiations with them. It remains uncertain exactly what happened, but on 3rd June 1567 he and his followers were murdered. Political power in Ulster had now shifted, and Somhairle used this as an opportunity to forge new alliances with the Ó Néill and Ó Domhnaill lineages.

He also sought a peace treaty with the Tudor administration in 1572 but this came to nothing and in 1575 Walter Devereux, 1st Earl of Essex, sent three ships and 300 men to Rathlin where they captured Bruce’s Castle and murdered the garrison of 200 and perhaps as many as 300 to 400 of the island’s inhabitants.



A garrison of 40 English soldiers was placed in the castle but were recalled within two months.

During these decades the MacDomhnaills had been wrestling with the MacUighilín (MacQuillan) lineage for ownership of the Route, the land between the River Bann and the River Bush. The defeat of a combined MacUighilín and English force at the Battle of Orra on 29th April 1583, however, ended this contest and Somhairle now took

total possession of their lands, including the great castle at Dún Libhse (Dunluce).

The Tudor administration in Ireland were greatly alarmed by this development and in the following year Sir John Perrot moved northward with an army of 2,000 soldiers to expel the MacDomhnaills from Irish soil. Initially Perrot was successful, capturing Dunluce Castle, but as the campaign dragged on his

forces took heavy casualties. War weariness on both sides now seems to have made compromise possible, however, and Somhairle agreed to submit to the Crown. In return for an official grant of the Glens and the Route.

This was a fitting culmination to his career and he was no doubt content with what he had achieved for his lineage. The old warlord died in his mid-eighties in 1590 and was buried in Bonamargy Friary.

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Pronunciation guide

The guide is to help and encourage readers of this book in being able to pronounce the personal names and place names in the form that would have been used by the historical figure i.e. Gaelic. As the international phonetic system would take significant effort to learn, we have used a simplified English phonetic to aid this process. Gaelic sounds are sometimes difficult to represent in English, non-with standing this challenge the reader will still get an opportunity to engage with these names. While this is not intended to be an exhaustive list, it is intended to facilitate the reader to appreciate a different the way of speaking and therefore a way of knowing would have been in Gaelic society of these times.

Sruth na Maoile = Shrew na Moeela

Somhairle Buídhe Mac Domhnaill = Sorlye Buwee Mac Doe-níl

Ó Néill = O Nyel

Uí Néill = EE Nyel (This is the clan name version of the Ó Néill)

Ó Domhnaill = O Doe-níl

Ìle = Eela

Í = Ee

Diùra = Jura

Cinn Tìre = Cinn Cheera

An Bhinn Mhór = An Vinn Vwore

Baile an Chaistil = Bal-ye an Cashtel

Dál Riata = Dall Reeate-a

Dál Fiata = Dall Feeate-a

Dál nAraide = Dall naridge-a

Uí Echach Cobo = Ee Aghagh Coba

Dún Soirbhice = Doon Sorvicka

Cloch Dhún Muirigh = Clou Goon Murry

Uí Tuirtrí = Ee Tootree

MacDubhgaill = Mac Doogall (Mac Dougal)

Teamhair = Chevair

Ceannanas – Kynanas

Latharna = Lyah-arna

Rìoghachd Innse Gall = Reeocht Inchye Gaal.

Port an Eilein = Port an Ilin



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