



The Scottish History Society Learning Resource

Dalriada

A Brief Account of Events

563-609: The age of the founding fathers

A group of Irish monks led by Columba (Colum Cille in Gaelic) founds a monastery in the island of Iona in 563, which Columba leads until his death on 9 June 597. Title to the island is given over to them by Conall son of Comgall, a king who dies in 576; his successor is Áedán son of Gabrán (576-609). Their sons and grandsons, who name themselves Comgall's descendants (Cenél Comgaill) and Gabrán's descendants (Cenél nGabráin), go on sharing and competing for royal power until the 650s. Cenél Comgaill are linked with the Argyll district of Cowal by its place-name (Comhghall in Gaelic). Cenél nGabráin are linked with Kintyre by contemporary witness. These two districts seem to be the core territories of the earliest kingdom of Dalriada (Dál Riata in Gaelic). Conall and Áedán are active and pretty successful war-chiefs. Their influence and connections extend into Ireland and (especially) the Hebrides, sometimes with the help of Iona, which has its own links with Ireland. Áedán's reach also extends into what is now southern Scotland, where he fights newsworthy battles in 584 and 603.

609-672: The hey-day of Gabrán's descendants.

The relationship between Cenél Comgaill and Cenél nGabráin is sometimes cordial and sometimes hostile, but after 650 Cenél nGabráin successfully block rival claims on the kingship and monopolise it themselves. In the 630s, led by Columba's kinsman Abbot Ségéne, Iona becomes the most influential monastery in the British Isles, with subordinate 'daughter' houses in Ireland, Pictland and northern England. As its star rises alongside that of Cenél nGabráin, the attitude is taken and publicised at Iona that Cenél Comgaill rule is unnatural. A series of military and diplomatic reverses, particularly during the reign of Áedán's grandson Domnall Brecc (631-42), sees Dalriadan power and influence wane dramatically in Ireland and southern Scotland. Dalriada is brought under the dominion of the northern English king Oswy (642-70), a friend of Iona until the Synod of Whitby in 664, but despite this (or because of it?) the supremacy of Cenél nGabráin, who share Oswy's affinity with Iona, reaches its zenith by 660.

672-710: The age of the 'three thirds'.

Cenél nGabráin continue to dominate Dalriada, but rival groups are on the rise around them. In north Argyll Cenél Loairn ('Loarn's descendants'), from whom the district of Lorn (Latharna in Gaelic) around Oban takes its name, make a successful bid for the throne in the 690s. Cenél nÓengusso ('Óengus's descendants') become prominent in the Inner Hebrides. Unity among these powerful families, the

'three thirds of Dalriada', is expressed through genealogies that say that Gabrán, Loarn and Óengus were kinsmen. Cenél Comgaill, emerging from the shadow of Cenél nGabráin, establish marriage links with Pictish princes. Pictish interest in Dalriada is growing: about 700 an origin story is composed describing it as an Irish colony in Pictish territory; and within a generation another story describes Iona as a Pictish gift to Columba. Some of this interest is probably due to the importance of Iona's daughter houses among the Picts. Adomnán, the ninth abbot (678-705) is a major international scholar as well as a strong force in Irish, Pictish and Dalriadan diplomatic circles.

710-734: The hey-day of Cenél Loairn.

In 716 Iona changes some entrenched customs under considerable Pictish pressure, which may be symptomatic of growing Pictish influence in Dalriada. The Cenél Loairn king Selbach son of Ferchar (701-23), having previously made few waves, suspiciously adopts an aggressive posture after the sons of Naiton, the Pictish king, are killed by their Cenél Comgaill kin in 710. A series of military and other setbacks for Naiton follows over the next few years; Selbach meanwhile twice defeats British forces, presumably in the neighbourhood of Dumbarton, and attacks Dunaverty and other Cenél nGabráin targets in Kintyre. From 719 Cenél nGabráin begin reasserting themselves against Selbach and his son and successor Donngal (723-33). Both kings also face challenges from within Cenél Loairn, culminating in a successful bid for the throne by Selbach's nephew in 733.

734-741: Struck down by the Picts.

In 734 the king of Atholl, a Pictish realm, is captured near the Cenél Loairn stronghold of Dunollie near Oban; he is turned over, along with a Cenél nGabráin prince seized by his own brother, to the Pictish king Onuist son of Vurguist (732-61), who puts both men to death. Foiling an attempt to seize him too, Donngal, no longer king of Cenél Loairn, escapes to Ireland. Onuist's remarkable presence in Dalriada begins in 731, when his son and Donngal are apparently allies fighting against Cenél nGabráin. Donngal turns against his Pictish ally in 733, the year that the kingship is taken from him. One way of making sense of this falling out and the subsequent execution by Onuist of the princes captured in Dalriada is to suppose that Donngal's rival Muiredach (733-36) is a Pictish quisling backed by Onuist's sword. Both Muiredach and Donngal are overcome by Pictish forces in 736. Dongall is taken captive by Onuist at Dunadd after a major and devastating invasion of Dalriada; neither his ultimate fate nor Muiredach's is recorded. In 741 a Cenél nGabráin prince is killed in battle and 'the smiting of Dalriada by Onuist son of Vurguist' is recorded, the Latin term *percutio* recalling the catastrophic damage inflicted on biblical peoples that suffer 'smiting'.

741-847: Sunrise, sunset.

The implications for Dalriada of becoming a Pictish province are pretty unclear. Prior to the reign in Pictland of Constantín son of Vurguist (789-820), which coincides with the first attacks on Iona by Norse vikings, men of native extraction appear to rule Dalriada, including Cenél nGabráin princes. Constantín's rival ousted in 789 is murdered in Kintyre in 807; within a few years Constantín builds a new church at Dunkeld to house the relics of St Columba, and his son is established as king of Dalriada. Norse pressure on Atlantic Scotland and on Ireland intensifies after 830, and parts of Argyll and the islands are settled by Norse incomers, perhaps beginning around 847, when there are indications that Dalriada is conquered. Meanwhile Gaelic families are successfully realigning themselves as Pictish aristocrats. One of these, led by Cinaed son of Alpín and his brother Domnall, manages to acquire the Pictish throne almost exactly 100 years after the conquest, having apparently become closely connected with Constantín's family. The sun is setting on Dalriada as a realm, but for Gaels in Scotland a new dawn is breaking.

Changing Perspectives

Key change

The historical record of Dalriadan history is very thin and fragmentary. Historians have been rising to the challenge of understanding it, and of reversing ten centuries of medieval and modern interpretations and cynical manipulations of that history which moulded it into shapes that fail to match the record. In hindsight medieval and modern chauvinism naturally sought to foreground and assume great things of ethnic 'Scots' (Gaels were called Scoti in Latin at this time) in Scotland's national history. Historians are working hard to understand the Dalriadan achievement in its proper perspective. In particular, that Dalriadan kings warred constantly with the Picts, conquered them in due course and reduced their country to a new Scottish homeland, all centrepieces of later manipulations of early Scottish history, find no support in the evidence.

Origins

Archaeology can both inform and test many aspects of Dalriadan history. One interesting development has been to consider what the archaeological record says about the belief (since about 700) that Dalriada originated as a colony of Irish settlers. Serious doubts have been expressed that the archaeological record supports the idea of migration from Ireland, which has opened up new vistas of argument surrounding the origins of the Gaelic tongue in Scotland, the nature of the links between Argyll and Ireland in prehistory, and the capacity of archaeological data to prove or disprove population movements.

International relations

Archaeology is also showing historians that Dalriada, far from being an isolated backwater, was a kingdom that had extensive contact with western Europe. Around 640 Abbot Ségéne of Iona received a letter from the pope-elect in Rome. Luxurious glass vessels, tableware and perishables were being imported from the Continent and distributed by princes as part of their approach to lordship. Ships and visitors from France and Germany, including visiting clergy, were a normal occurrence; and monks from Iona and perhaps other Dalriadan monasteries were travelling in the opposite direction by the eighth century. The contents of Iona's library, to judge from the books quoted by those scholars who wrote surviving works there, would have graced any monastery; and some of those writers wrote deliberately for international audiences. So far the evidence suggests that the Picts in contrast were much less well connected to these parts of Europe – suggesting one possible motive for the growth of their interest in Dalriada after 671.

St Columba, his life and his Life

Easily the most famous and enduring historical figure from this age of Scottish history, Columba as an historical human being suffered for that, every bit as much as the historical William Wallace has been obscured by the Wallace legend. Until fairly recently, those interested in his life and works placed their faith in *The Life of St Columba* (Latin *Vita sancti Columbae*), an overview written around 700 by Adomnán, the ninth abbot of Iona. As a true masterpiece of the art of 'hagiography', a popular genre devoted to honouring the memories of the saints, the *Life* throws up very many challenges for those seeking the 'real' Columba. Historians are getting better at recognising these difficulties, and their image of the real life lived by Columba is changing as they work through the delights and

frustrations of the Life, one of the most impressive works of its type written anywhere in early medieval Europe. Medieval Scottish notions that Columba was involved in converting the Picts to Christianity and established a special relationship with Cenél nGabráin, from whom the kings of Scots eventually claimed descent, both find support in the Life, but already by 700 these powerfully political ideas betray clear signs of manipulation, muddying the picture of Columba's actual deeds. He was certainly an accomplished scholar, and appears to have been an effective advocate of the monastic way of life and an energetic pursuer of opportunities to establish new monasteries. Comfortable in the presence of kings, he was also a respected diplomatic figure. Whatever he may or may not have achieved in terms of missionary work, there can be little doubt that he played his part well as a prominent church leader; and he left Iona on a footing which enabled the monastery to become the most influential in the British Isles for much of the seventh century.

Key Figures

Adomnán, abbot of Iona 678-705

He was born and educated in Ireland, a member of the same kindred as Columba, and closely related to the kings of Cenél Conaill in Donegal. As abbot he wrote prolifically, his major works being *On the Holy Places* (Latin *De locis sanctis*), a study of sacred sites in the Holy Land, and *The Life of St Columba*. In 697 he attempted to have the victimisation of non-combatants criminalised with the blessing of dozens of Irish and Pictish kings and bishops, as well as Dalriadan ones. He may also have been instrumental in elevating the Ionan clergy of Pictland to unprecedented levels of authority and influence.

Áedán son of Gabrán, king of Dalriada (or Cenél nGabráin) 576-609

The forefather of every Cenél nGabráin king after him, he attracted considerable historical interest and became increasingly legendary, his story intertwining with that of Columba. It was mainly his military campaigns and battles that posterity remembered, including attacks on Orkney (around 582), the central belt of Scotland (around 584), and the English kingdom of Bernicia (603). Around 592 he attended a royal summit with Columba in north-east Ireland which Iona later held up as a model of non-violent politicking; and there are hints that his Irish interests may have been very extensive.

Constantín son of Vurguist, king of Picts (or Fortriu) 789-820

Like all Pictish kings his life is mostly obscure. His name is one of the most interesting things about him: Constantine VI (780-97), the child emperor of Byzantium, was his contemporary, whose grandfather, the Iconoclast Constantine V (741-75) was probably on the Byzantine throne whenever Constantín was born, but there may be nothing in these coincidences. The names of his father and Onuist his brother seem to mark him out as a descendant of the earlier Onuist son of Vurguist, conqueror of Dalriada. By reaching out to Iona and placing his son Domnall in the Dalriadan kingship he appears to have taken Pictish dominion there to a new level. He may have made similar efforts in southern Pictland, where he was commemorated on the exquisite Dupplin Cross near Forteviot. That the famous Cinaed son of Alpín was probably a member of his extended family is suggested by the fact that Cinaed had a brother called Domnall and a son called Constantín – and Cinioid and Elpin themselves were the names of Pictish kings who had ruled in Constantín's youth.

Domnall Brecc, king of Dalriada (or Cenél nGabráin) 631-42

Scotland's first proverbial 'king who just could not get anything right', he was a grandson of Áedán who inherited a messy situation. His Cenél Comgaill predecessor Connad died in battle alongside some Cenél nGabráin princes in a catastrophic engagement against the Uí Chóelbad, the dominant group of the Cruithnian nation in north-east Ireland. Perhaps understandably, Domnall sought the friendship of the Uí Chóelbad king Congal; as a result he found himself at war with Columba's family, Cenél Conaill, in 639, for which observers at Iona vilified him. In 636 and 640 Domnall lost battles closer to home against unspecified Dalriadan enemies; the second of these defeats saw the throne taken from him by the son of his predecessor Connad. Perhaps predictably, Domnall lost his life in the course of losing a battle; less predictably, his foes on that occasion were Britons from Dumbarton, who killed Domnall in an encounter in Strathcarron.

Onuist son of Vurguist, king of Picts 732-61

The conqueror of Dalriada is the best documented of any pre-Alpínid Pictish king, and cuts an impressive figure for such a little known historical personage. A clash between rivals for the kingship after 724 brought Onuist to prominence with all the appearance of a black horse who managed to come good by outfighting better placed contenders. Whatever his legitimacy in the 720s, it appears that it was kinship with him that legitimated his successors. His aggressions in Dalriada were followed by more of the same against the English and British kingdoms of southern Scotland in the 740s and 750s, although with more ambivalent results. Onuist seems to have enjoyed diplomatic successes at the far-off courts of the kings of Munster in Ireland and Mercia in England, and when he died at least one northern English monastery included his name among those whose souls were to be prayed for. St Andrews (Cennrigmonad in Gaelic) is first mentioned during his reign, and much later legends may have correctly identified Onuist as its founder.

Ségéne, abbot of Iona 625-52

A kinsman of Columba and the last abbot of Iona who can have known him personally, Ségéne led the community during a key phase of its history. In 634 Iona launched its great mission to the Northumbrian English, which was to last until 664; by his death in 652 Ségéne had become was the leader of the most influential monastery anywhere in Britain or Ireland. He seems to have taken an interest in Iona's history. Around 640 his nephew Cumméne, a future abbot of Iona, completed an account of miracles attributed to Columba from personal reminiscences; there are also indications that Iona's chronicle was begun around the same time, which was destined to form the core of all of Ireland's medieval chronicles. It may have been the letter that Ségéne received from the pope-elect in Rome around 640, challenging a number of the monastery's customary practices and observances, which triggered this new interest in its past.

Selbach son of Ferchar, king of Dalriada (or Cenél Loairn) 701-23

After his father and brother met with brief success in the 690s, he was the first Cenél Loairn king to establish an enduring presence on the Dalriadan throne after fifty years of Cenél nGabráin dominion. The branch of Cenél Loairn to which his family belonged, Cenél nEchdach, appears to have held territory in Morvern and may have hailed from there; their main ecclesiastical connections may have been with the monastery of Lismore in the island of that name in the Firth of Lorn. Selbach enjoyed a series of military successes in and around Dalriada between 711 and 719, finally retiring in 723 to enter an unspecified monastery. He died in 730, having forsaken the monastery and fought a battle against Cenél nGabráin in 727.

Suggested Reading

Classic studies and texts

- O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson (eds.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (first published London & Edinburgh, Nelson, 1961; new edition Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991)
- J. Bannerman, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh, Scottish Academic Press, 1974)
- P. Smyth, *Warlords and Holy Men: Scotland AD 80-1000* (first published London, Arnold, 1984; republished Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1989)

Most recent books

- L. Alcock, *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests in Northern Britain AD 550-850* (Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2003)
- E. Campbell, *Saints and Sea-Kings: the first kingdom of the Scots* (Edinburgh, Canongate, 1999)
- Fisher, *Early Medieval Sculpture in the West Highlands and Islands* (Edinburgh, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and the Society of Antiquaries Scotland, 2001)
- J. E. Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009)
- R. Sharpe, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba* (London, Penguin, 1995)