**Maritime Connections: Landscape and Lordship along the Gaelic Atlantic Seaboard of Scotland and the North of Ireland during the Middle Ages**

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**Abstract** - Throughout the Middle Ages, parts of the west of Scotland and the Southern Hebrides had close cultural and political links with north Ulster. These links were the result of a complex history of communication and movement that took place over millennia. By the early medieval period, a series of historiographies emerged among various groupings across the region that were used to justify lineages and support territorial ambition. These historiographies were dominated by the politicized construction of Irish-origin myths. Most actual movement or migration originated in Scotland, dominated in particular during the later Middle Ages by fighting men. The region never attained political unity, but this maritime province contained elements of shared cultural traditions and belief systems. These shared elements, however, were not a singular conformist set of traditions, but instead featured variations in architecture, material culture, and landscape usage.

**Introduction**

Traditional histories of the political relationship between Britain and Ireland have tended to focus on conflict (Crooke 2001, Howe 2002). Yet this was a highly complex and dynamic relationship that was not simply driven by war, but also involved millennia of communication, trade, and migration. The relationship between the western seaboard of Scotland and the northern coast of the island of Ireland was close, intertwining shared cultural traditions, a common language during the Middle Ages, and a close physical proximity, divided only by a narrow, albeit tempestuous sea (Fig. 1). Travel between Ulster and west Scotland was logistically straightforward by boat, and the journey time could be a matter of hours if tidal and wind conditions were right. It was only in the 20th century, with the gradual collapse of the fishing industry and outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, that everyday connections between the two areas began to wane and the relationship became highly politicized, often caught in the competing narratives of Nationalism and Unionism (e.g., Broun 1999). This paper reviews our existing state of knowledge relating to these connections and explores a number of historic themes, primarily from an Irish perspective, as there has been limited archaeological engagement with this area of research. In particular, it examines maritime connections between these two areas during the Middle Ages and explores the nature of lordship and cultural landscapes along these neighboring seaboards. These connections have been subject to often competing narratives of settlement, centered on origin myths and early Christian expansion (Bannerman 1997, Cowan 1984). While historians have long documented and debated the movement of peoples across this region, only in recent decades has archaeological research begun to investigate these processes (Campbell 2001, McSparron 2011, McNeill 2014). The evidence that is being generated from this work remains contested, hampered both by limited investigations and by relatively few researchers working in this area.

**Dál Riata**

Traditional narratives document an Irish migration into western Scotland, leading to the founding of the kingdom of Dál Riata and the displacement of pre-existing Pictish or British populations from at least the 5th century (Laing 1975). Several of the Irish annals record that it was Fergus mac Erc king of Irish Dál Riata who took these lands in the late 5th century AD (Ferguson 1910). In the 8th century, notably a number of centuries after the event, Bede wrote that the migrants “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” (Colgrave and Mynors 1969:19) Following the Convention of Druim Cett in 575 AD, the Dál Riata were closely aligned to the northern Uí Néill, one of the dominant early lordships in Ulster, and their associated military and territorial ambitions. By the beginning of the 8th century a clearly defined grouping regarded as ancestrally Irish controlled and lived in a territory encompassing northeast Antrim, Argyll, Arran, Islay, Colonsay, Jura, Mull, Tiree, and Coll. Adomnán, writing around 700 AD, records that the *Scotti,* or Irish in Britain, lived in the land west of the “mountains of the spine of Britain,” while Bede stated that they inhabited the lands north and west of the Firth of Clyde (Lane and Campbell 2000:33). Dál Riata territory in Ulster covered much of northeast Antrim from the River Bush eastward to the coast and included Rathlin Island (Charles–Edwards 2000).

Campbell (2001) has suggested that the development of a strong naval capability from the 7th century was a formative factor in the emergence of the power group that controlled the maritime province of Argyll and northeast Antrim. By the middle of the 8th century, this naval capacity was being hired for use in Irish internecine conflict. For example, Flaithbertach mac Lynch engaged a fleet from Scotland to attack the Cenél Eoghain in 733 (Ó’Corráin 1972:69). Maritime communications also played a formative role in the dissemination of early Christian practice. As the polity of Dál Riata was beginning to flourish, early Christian activity began to play a major role in both the spiritual and political life of the minor kingdoms across Ulster and western Scotland. Iona was founded ca. 563 by the Irish monk Columba, and was to develop as the core of the Christian church in Scotland and a center of kingly internment. Tradition records that it was Conall mac Comgaill, king of Dál Riata, who granted the island to the ecclesiastic. Adomnán’s late 7th-century *Life of St. Columba* and Dicuil’s early 9th-century *Liber de Mensura Orbis Terrae* both record the frequent travel of monks between the Hebrides and Ulster (Forsythe and McConkey 2012). Their preferred route appears to have taken vessels through the sheltered waters of Jura Sound and onto Rathlin Island before making landfall on the Ulster coast.

The Scottish archaeologist Ewan Campbell (2001) recently has questioned the accuracy of the Dál Riata narratives of migration and colonization from Ulster to Scotland. He suggests that this narrative is largely an origin myth developed by various lineages on both sides of the sea to support their claim to kingship, and that it was of particular benefit to the Cenél nGabráin of Kintyre. He further argues that there is little archaeological evidence across Argyll to support the migration hypothesis, as both the built heritage and material culture of this period are different in Ulster and along the western Scottish seaboard. In particular, Campbell argues that the absence of raths/ringforts and cashels, small semi-defensive farmsteads surrounded by an earthen or stone enclosure, from Argyll strongly suggests the absence of Irish migrants or colonists. He further suggests that as the various historical texts that provided the basis for the narratives postdate the migration event by many hundreds of years in some instances, they must then be regarded as flawed and unreliable. Instead, Campbell proposes that a Gaelic-speaking population emerged in Argyll in the earlier centuries of the 1st millennium AD that colonized then Antrim and other parts of north Ulster.

Armit (2008) advances a related argument, suggesting that the distinctive souterrain ware, found on early medieval sites across northeast Ireland and dating from at least the mid-7th century, was related to the potential expansion of a regional western Scotland ceramic style in the 7th and 8th centuries. Like Campbell, Armit effectively sees the dominant cultural influences coming from Scotland to Ireland at this time.

There is an interesting counter argument here in the context of an early Christian movement. Small groups of Irish Christian monks had established a series of monastic sites in Argyll and the Southern Hebrides from the 6th century onward, notably at Iona (O’Sullivan 1999). While these enterprises would have involved few men, their influence and subsequent position within society was of considerable significance.

McSparron and Williams (2012) have further countered Campbell’s archaeological arguments, and their work in the northeast of Antrim has revealed a series of monument types, which they label “fortified outcrops.” A series of sites that McSparron (2011) surveyed and excavated, including Doonmore on Fair Head, bear a strong morphological resemblance to the early medieval forts of Argyll and the islands. In any case, few raths are known across this region in comparison to many other parts of Ulster. There are, for example, no known raths on Rathlin Island, with only a limited number of other sites known along the north coast. However, the use of rath and cashel evidence is not necessarily a valid argument as these monument types date primarily from the 7th century onward (Stout 1997, Kerr 2007). As such they would not have been associated with an earlier migration of people from Ireland.

McSparron and Williams (2012) recognize the complexity of the migration debate but argue that the primary movement from Ireland remains the most likely scenario and that the evidence for such migrations is found in Ireland and understood through the mechanism of counter-stream migration, or the reverse flow of people who did not settle in the area. The archaeological landscape at Doonmore is especially interesting in this context. The site itself was positioned on a highly visible rocky outcrop near the cliff edge on Fair Head in north Antrim. It commands extensive views across the surrounding countryside and across the North Channel. First excavated by Childe (1938) in the 1930s, it was recently the focus of a community archaeology project led by Cormac McSparron. The site has produced clear early medieval dating evidence, but was also probably occupied during the Iron Age (Cormac McSparron, pers. comm.). This appropriation of pre-existing status settlement sites became a feature of Gaelic lordly settlement across the Irish and Scottish landscape and is a core component of the justification and negotiation of their power and standing within society (Breen and Raven 2017). Not only do their kin–histories, as expressed through the bardic tradition, support claims to lineage, but they were also using landscape to support their position.

Doonmore is further associated with a number of early medieval Christian sites in the surrounding landscape. A small chapel building, on a site later used as a child’s graveyard, lying below Doonmore to the west is very similar morphologically to the small stone chapels known from Islay, such as Nereabolls, Ardilistry, or Kilslevan. It is postulated here that the environs of Doonmore constituted a core area of Dál Riata settlement, and this upland valley probably constituted an estate within the broader kingship. Certainly, later Gaelic landholdings were often defined as distinct geographical entities, bound by topography and landscape features. Further estates might be identified in the landscape around Dunseverick, the political center of this territory on Ulster’s northeast coast. A 16th-century masonry tower and the foundations of two probable late medieval sub-rectangular houses are visible at this fortified promontory. Across Ireland, the “Dún” (translated as fort) element in a place name is a strong indicator of potential Iron Age activity at the location (Breen 2012). As with Doonmore, the Dál Riata occupants of Dunseverick deliberately sought to re-create a center of lordly power at a place of traditional local kingship (Fig. 2). In Argyll and Kintyre Dunadd, Dunaverty and Dunollie have been forwarded as further potential royal centers associated with Dál Riata kingship groups (Lane and Campbell 2000).

Regardless of the migration origins debate, substantive historical, linguistic, and archaeological evidence remains that the peoples who lived within this maritime province shared degrees of cultural commonalities and traditions. This was a local world, with recognized political hierarchies and aspects of shared governance. However, this political world was not a static entity, and power relationships across the region were dynamic, shifting between individuals and groupings on a near-constant basis through competing ambitions and territorial aspirations. Academic pursuit of the contemporary ethno-labelling of the groups who moved across this sea is problematic. Maritime movement undoubtedly had been taking place for many centuries, if not millennia, prior to the early medieval migrations. To identify these peoples as either Irish or Scottish is to ascribe modern labels which would scarcely have been recognized at the time. Neither the historical nor the archaeological evidence is entirely convincing in terms of the scale and directional movement of these groupings. What can be said is that there is little evidence to support large-scale migrations. Instead, we should look past small-scale movement as elite migration and the associated creation of constructed narratives to support political aspiration. It is doubtful that these migrations’ places of origin matter much. Ultimately, the people who lived on either side of the North Channel had a common language and would have shared similar histories and lifeways. There were differences in terms of how they lived and worked in their respective local landscapes, reflected in the varying archaeologies, but ultimately these were people who were inherently familiar with each other.

**Viking Disruption**

The territories and minor kingdoms of Dál Riata came under pressure from the 8th century and had effectively been broken a century later. On the modern Scottish mainland these territories were subsumed into the broader kingdom of Alba from the 9th century, while the arrival of Viking raiders and traders radically changed politics and landholding across the Hebridean Islands. Most of north Ulster remained outside of the lands settled by the Norse and retained a strong Christian and Gaelic identity. There is considerable debate as to why islands such as Islay witnessed extensive Scandinavian settlement while northeast Ulster has only limited evidence of Viking occupation (Mallory and McNeill 1991). A Viking, or Hiberno–Norse cemetery is known from Rathlin Island, where other indicators of Viking settlement and activity also exist (Forsythe and McConkey 2012). Similarly, there is scant evidence for Scandinavian settlement on mainland Argyll. The north coast of Ulster, by comparison, has limited evidence associated with a settled Viking presence (Mallory and McNeill 1991). Dunseverick was captured by an alliance of the Vikings and the Cenél Eoghain in 871 (AU 871). Such an alliance may account for the relatively limited evidence for Viking settlement in north Ulster and suggests the presence of militarily strong Gaelic groupings, who were also politically astute in their dealings and negotiations with the northern arrivals. It may also be that the physical coastline of north Antrim, dominated as it is by high cliffs and often dangerous waters, was simply not conducive, or attractive, to Viking settlement. At the close of the 12th century the familial polities across north Ulster had effectively remained intact but their stability was put under severe strain with the arrival of the Anglo–Normans (McNeill 1980).

**Anglo–Norman politics**

The strength of the Ulster groupings is supported by the non-submission of the Cenél Eoghain and Cenél Conaill to Henry II. The subsequent Anglo–Norman invasion of Ulster, led by John de Courcy in 1177, changed the political fabric of the region. In 1197 de Courcy attacked the cantred of Keenaght, a territory that borders the northeastern shore of Lough Foyle, and granted sections of it to Duncan FitzGilbert, the Earl of Carrick, from southern Ayrshire (AU 1197). A significant portion of the territory of north Antrim, including the Glens, the Route (Twescard), Coleraine, Kennaght itself, and Tirkeenan, was subsequently granted to Duncan’s nephews Alan, lord of Galloway, and Thomas, Earl of Atholl, in 1212 by John (CDI 1212:427). This was largely a speculative grant, and both of the Scottish lords failed to take the majority of these lands from the pre-existing Gaelic families. Thomas did establish a timber castle at Coleraine, securing control of the strategically and economically important River Bann. In 1215 the grant to Alan was confirmed and further included lands between “the bounds of Dalriada” and Glenarm (Duffy 2004:38), sections of which would later be occupied by the Bissets, a family of Anglo–Norman origin. The motte at Red Bay may be associated with this particular grant, although the later tower house at the site dates to the 16th-century MacDonnell occupation.

The Bissets were recorded in Scotland in the late 12th century when they were granted the barony of Aird in Moray (Duffy 2004:39). They had acquired lands in northeast Ulster by at least 1247 through uncertain mechanisms. In 1248 Walter Bisset, in a possible attempt to create a patrimony linking the Glens of Antrim and Kintyre, took Dunaverty castle, possibly by force, and possibly Arran (Duffy 2004:48). Following his death in 1251, both were lost. By the early 14th century, the Bissets held a series of townlands across the barony of Upper Glenarm, including the castle and lands in the *vill* of Glenarm. They also held Rathlin Island and the two glens of Glencloy and Glenariff. By the close of the century their standing across the Glens had continued to rise, due in part to their association with John McDonald, first lord of the Isles (Duffy 2004). While nothing remains of the original Bisset castle at Glenarm, a site possibly associated with the family stands north of Cushendun. Castle Carra, a small 2-storey chamber–tower, was probably built at the end of the 13th century or early in the 14th century (Fig. 3). Excavations at the site produced a range of high-status glazed wares, a high-medieval hunting arrowhead, and a late 13th-century silver Edward I coin, found associated with the building’s primary construction layers (Hurl and McSparron 2004). While the site may have lain outside of the mid-13th-century holdings of the Bissets, it may be that the castle was built as the family expanded its holdings across the Glens in the late 13th and 14th centuries. Morphologically it is similar to other so-called hall houses evident in parts of west Scotland, such as Aros or Ardtornish in Argyle. Its location above a gently shelving beach would have provided a valuable landing place on this otherwise inhospitable coastline. The sheltered bay and sandy beach would have provided one of the few places where vessels travelling from Scotland, or around the coast, could have found safe landing.

A second fortified site on Rathlin Island is also of interest from a maritime perspective. Built on a basalt stack, on cliffs above the eastern shore of Rathlin Island, Bruce’s Castle consists of an inner ward with larger outer ward, enclosed by a rock cut ditch. Although tradition associates the site with Robert the Bruce, no primary historical evidence links him with this place. It is likely this is the “rycht stalwart castell” mentioned in the 14th-century poem *The Brus* byJohn Barbour (Donnelly et al. 2012, Duncan 1997), although McNeill (1980) linked the castle to the MacDonnells, who held the site in later years. Excavations suggested that the curtain wall dates to the 13th to 14th centuries and that the broader complex underwent a series of renovations or rebuilds and continued to be occupied into the 16th century (Donnelly et al. 2012). In the early 14th century, Hugh Bisset was in the service of the English Crown (Forsythe and McConkey 2012). In 1307 Edward I commissioned Bisset, his “admiral” in the North Channel, to assemble “a great galley of 40 oars, and other small galleys and vessels which he shall procure on the coast of Ulster” to search for Robert the Bruce (CJR 1307:333–4). He was also to enforce a blockade of the North Channel to cut off supplies from Ireland to the Scottish insurgents. Rathlin was in the possession of Bisset at this time, and the site of Bruce’s Castle would have made a perfect observation post for monitoring the sea lanes of the North Channel. Rather than the Bruce building a castle here, it is far more likely that Bisset fortified the headland and held it with a small garrison. The sheer geographical range and area of these maritime routeways remained a cause of concern to the Crown in London for centuries to come. The Scots and Irish could travel these waters virtually unhindered as they were so difficult to patrol and control.

**Gaelic Connections**

While the Bissets were establishing themselves across east Antrim, other groups from Scotland were becoming increasingly involved within Ulster. This development reflected a new phase of activity following the upheavals caused by the Anglo–Norman invasions. The extent to which this could be called a Gaelic revival is debatable, as many of these groupings had retained their lands and relative political strength throughout the Anglo–Norman period. While communications between the two regions on either side of the North Channel never ceased, the mid-13th century appears to mark the emergence of an intensification of cross-channel engagement. But the gradual decline of the Anglo–Norman Ulster lordship combined with the strengthening of the Clan Donald, following the end of Norwegian control over the islands after the Treaty of Perth in 1266, heralded the emergence of a new phase in the maritime relationships of the region. This period is also marked by increasingly confident and politically ambitious Ulster Gaelic families. Traditional connections in this Gaelic social world such as fosterage are documented and are indicative of the cultural practices that bound these regions together politically. A mid-13th-century poem recorded that Donal Og O’Donnell, who later became king of Tyrconnell, was fostered to the MacSweeneys in Scotland (Simms 2007:107). Marriage alliances were also used as political tools, as evidenced by the early 14th-century partnering of Angus Óg MacDonnell and Aine, daughter of the O’Cahan, the head of the Gaelic lordship encompassing the territory west of the River Bann in north Ulster (Kingston 2004:23). Similarly, Hugh O’Conor was married to Dubhgall MacRory of Garmoran in 1259 (Duffy 2007).

Caldwell (2014) sees the lordship of the Isles in the 14th century, under the leadership of the MacDonalds, deliberately adopting a strategy to create a Gaelic lordship in order to differentiate it from lowland Stewart Scotland and the Islands’ Scandinavian heritage. He argues that the lord’s adoption of a number of particular cultural practices, including inauguration and assembly, was a conscious attempt to orient the lordship toward Gaelic Ireland. Boardman (2006, 2009) has instead argued that Robert Stewart took a particular interest in the Gaelic west and attempted to establish a political power base there through the marriage of his daughter to John MacDonald and his relationships with the Campbells. Both approaches are useful and reflect the dynamic nature of social and cultural politics at the time.

This political re-alignment in Scotland manifested itself profoundly when Robert the Bruce addressed the Irish kings in 1315 in a plea for them to support his brother Edward’s invasion of Ireland so that “our nation may be able to recover her ancient liberty” (Lydon 1992:2). While Bruce was not a Lord of the Isles, the rhetoric is clear. The Bruce, or at least his advisors, wanted to create the notion of a single Gaelic nation that would rise up in support of Gaelic Scotland, already at war against the English, and support the Bruce crowns. The extent to which Bruce himself believed in such a concept is unclear, but it was politically expedient and suited his own ambitions and those of Edward. The invasion was about creating a second front, cutting off Irish resources used to supply the English army in Scotland, and the possible creation of a “pan-Celtic” alliance to attack England. Duncan (1988:118) has argued that such an alliance was little more than “convenient rhetoric.” Alternatively, Duffy (1991) has re-dated this letter to the winter of 1306–1307 and suggests that rather than merely employing rhetoric, the Bruce brothers were genuine in their pursuit of a pan-Celtic alliance. Regardless, contemporary annalists record Bruce’s arrival to expel the English from Ireland (AC 1316), but are later disparaging about the Bruce Wars. In 1318 Edward Bruce was killed at Dundalk along with MacRory, “king of the Hebrides,” and MacDonald, “king of Argyle,” along with many experienced fighters. This placed Scotland under serious pressure from a potential English counterattack (Penman 2014). Ultimately the defeat was to spell the end of the campaign. The *Annals of Connacht* suggest this was a good thing for Ireland as the wars had brought only death and famine to the country (AC 1318.8)—a statement clearly derogatory toward the notion of a single nation, while also consistent with the intrinsic political bias of this source in favor of Connacht and its Gaelic groupings.

The promotion of Irish lineages and historical connections to Ireland was again used by the MacDonnells following the first reference in Latin to the Lordship of the Isles in 1336. John McDonald used the title *dominus insularum,* which is possibly the Latin title for the pre-exisitng title of *Rí Innse Gall* or “King of the Hebrides” (McLeod 2002). Lachlan Mór MacMhuirich’s poem, a *brosnachadh catha*, or “incitement to battle,” was declaimed before the Battle of Red Harlaw in 1411 in support of the Clan Donald warriors and begins with the lines:

A Chlanna Cuinn, cuimhnichibh

Cruas an am na h-iorghaile

Children of Conn, remember

hardihood in time of battle

(Thomson 1968:151)

This passage makes direct reference to their imagined descent from Conn of the Hundred Battles, an early Irish king from the heroic tradition. In aligning themselves with the Irish, and in supporting an Irish ancestry, they were creating a historical justification for their own lordly ambitions. The extent to which the *ollamhan*, or learned professionals, believed in this ancestry or assisted in its construction is debatable, but they were following in the centuries-old tradition of tracing McDonald origins to the fabled three Collas of the early 4th century. In constructing such narratives, they were following practices similar to the Dál Riata.

Regardless of the constructed or aspirational historical lineages and the attempts by these groups to create a sense of pan-Gaelic unity, the provision of fighting men was a significant factor in connecting these two regions. Of particular significance was the arrival of Scottish *galloglass* into Ulster. The Irish had long looked toward Scotland for the provision of fleets and fighting men. In 1154 Muircheartach Mac Lochlainn of the Northern O’Neill hired a fleet from Galloway, Kintyre, and Arran under Mac Scelling to fight for him in Inishowen against a force from Connacht (AFM 1154). Early in the 13th century Hebridean fleets and men were being used by the Cenél Conaill to attack Inishowen and engage in raiding activity against Derry and throughout parts of Connacht (Duffy 2007). The *Annals of Connacht* record that in 1258 a “great fleet” from the Hebrides with MacSomhairle came to Connemara and robbed a merchant of his goods including wine, iron, copper, and cloth (AC1258.6). The extent to which this form of raiding was politically motivated is debatable, but from the middle part of the century fighting men from Argyll and the Islands had begun to play a significant part in Irish politics. Duffy (2007:16) argues that by 1247 Scottish *galloglass* were a well-established feature of Ulster conflict, although the first annalistical references to the use of Clan Donald *galloglass* appear during the internal O’Donnell conflicts of the late 13th century. A number of individuals gained hereditary offices as captains or constables of the *galloglass* and received endowed lands. Of particular importance were the MacSweeneys, who had become one of the leading *galloglass* groups in Ulster by the close of the 14th century, following their expulsion from Knapdale, Scotland, late in the 13th century (Sellar 1971, Simms 1995:187). It is not clear if they were granted lands in Ireland immediately following their arrival, and they may have functioned as itinerant war bands. However, they were later to play a crucial part in the O’Donnell succession conflicts of 1333–1380 and were subsequently granted the vassal chieftainship of Fanad in north Donegal. Cadet–members were granted the two further territories of Tir Boghaine and Tir Tuatha at the expense of the O’Boyles. While they emerged as the pre-eminent *galloglass* family across Ireland, there were also other groupings. In 1366 MacDonald *galloglass* came from the Hebrides to fight for O’Neill, with the historical reference suggesting they were based in west Scotland (AC 1366.11). Branches of the family continued to be involved in Ulster affairs throughout the later medieval period. Nicholls (1991) has suggested that the 1373 reference to “MacDounayll captain of the Scots dwelling in Ireland” might be John *maol* (the bald) who submitted with O’Neill in 1395 to Richard II and is referred to as “captain of his nation and constable of the Irish of Ulster” (Curtis 1927:149).

**MacSweeneys and MacDonnells**

In the later Middle Ages two families of Scottish descent, the MacSweeneys and the MacDonnells, came to play significant roles in the politics of north Ulster. The MacSweeneys initially rose to prominence as the primary *galloglass* family in Ireland. While they may have initially had aspirations to regain their Scottish lands, by the end of the 14th century they had effectively re-created themselves as a Gaelic Irish lordship. By the 16th century their family histories contained in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* claimed a lineage back to an 11th-century Cenél Eoghain O’Neill king, Anrahan (Walsh 1920). Their integration into Ulster society and reinvention as Gaelic Irish lords was further evidenced by the inauguration of MacSweeney Fanad by the O’Donnell at Kilmacrenan, Donegal, by the 16th century (Simms 1995). The inauguration of individuals, designated as heads of their kindred, was a cultural practice central to Gaelic identity, and was also an overt statement of loyalty and allegiance. MacSweeney Fanad’s designation as head by the O’Donnells at their traditional center of inauguration demonstrates not only the esteem in which the family were held, but also the extent to which they had become embedded within Gaelic Irish cultural practice.

This embedding was further marked by the adoption of Gaelic Irish architectural norms, in particular the 16th-century construction and use of the tower house and non-construction or adaptation of castles for residential purposes. Unlike in Ireland, many of the Scottish Gaelic elites in the 13th and 14th centuries had either constructed or occupied castles, such as Castle Sween in Argyll and Dunyvaig on Islay. By contrast, the Irish Gaelic maritime lords do not, for the most part, appear to have built castles, nor did they show much interest in reoccupying older abandoned ones at this time (Breen and Raven 2017). Instead, from the late 15th century onward the tower house became the residence of choice for the Gaelic Irish elite, serving as highly visible statements of authority within the landscape (Breen 2005). These were normally 3-storey, masonry-built structures constituting the living and administrative centers of the country’s political and mercantile elite. While the tower house became identified almost exclusively as the residence type of choice for the Irish Gaelic elite, the Scottish Gaelic maritime families had a more diverse range of elite residence types and settlement centers, ranging from high medieval castles to fortified headlands and duns. There were no tower houses in Islay, Colonsay, or mainland Jura, except Claig Castle on a small island in the adjacent sound, while the 13th-century Skipness Castle in Kintyre had a tower house added to it in the 16th century. The tower house at Saddell, dating to the early 16th century, was built originally by the Bishop of Argyll and only later passed to the McDonalds.

This adoption of Irish Gaelic architectural tradition is clearly evident across the MacSweeney territories in Donegal. In the early 16th century the MacSweeney Doe built a 4-storey tower house at Doe, contained within an enclosing bawn wall (Fig. 4). First recorded in 1544 (Lacy 1983:356), the building was constructed near a sheltered bay and adopts a typical position for maritime tower houses along the western seaboard of Ireland (Ni Loingsigh 1994). These were multi-functional buildings serving as the lordly center for the various MacSweeney lordships, and also serving the administrative and political needs of their territories. Elsewhere, the MacSweeney Fanad built a tower house at Rathmullan, on the eastern shores of Lough Swilly, while MacSweeney Banagh constructed a tower house at Rahan Near, on the south Donegal coastline (Lacy 1983: 376).

They further embedded themselves in traditions of Irish lordship through the patronage and continued sponsorship of religious orders. Owen Roe MacSweeney founded the Carmelite house at Rathmullan in 1516, close to where the tower house stood, while the MacSweeney Banagh founded the Franciscan Third Order Friary at Ballysaggart in south Donegal (Lacy 1983:329). The patronage of this order was common among the Gaelic lordships of Ireland from the later part of the 15th century onward and became one of the key features of these territories (Breen and Raven 2017).

One of the most distinctive expressions of identity across Argyll and the Isles in the late medieval period was the use of elaborately carved grave slabs depicting individuals and representative symbols of their society, as well as the use of crosses and tomb sculpture (Steer and Bannerman1977). Boats were especially common symbols and were shown as double-ended, wooden, clinker-built vessels, with a single mast and sail. These galleys, or *birlinns*, were central to everyday political and social practice and were a key factor in facilitating the movement of fighting men across the channel to Ulster. The Irish groupings across Ulster do not appear to have had this expertise, at least not to any great extent, and it is unsurprising that the groups with Scottish ancestry monopolized naval capacity, and consequently settlement of the coastal littoral. Few of these types of burial slabs are known from Ireland, with only 4 documented examples known from Ulster (Breen 2018). This difference in burial or commemoration practice emerges as one of the key regional cultural differences between Ulster and western Gaelic Scotland. Two of the examples are associated with the MacSweeneys. One was formally located at the Franciscan Tertiary Friary, at Ballysaggart, associated with the MacSweeney Banagh, and contains a depiction of an armed man with an axe and sword. A second example from Doe castle is associated with a MacSweeney na dTuath, and depicts a number of animals, including a boar, and a cross with a *Fleur de Lis* head. One of the slabs from Clonca church in Inishowen carries an inscription in memory of Magnus Mac Orristin and depicts a sword and *camán.* This may be the burial memorial stone of a warrior associated with a *galloglass* settlement near Clonca, possibly at Ballycharry Scotch townland overlooking Tremone Bay. A now-destroyed fortification is depicted near this location on Norden’s 1603 map of Ulster (NAI MPF.35.1). The paucity of this form of funerary monument in the north of Ireland contrasts sharply with the many hundreds of examples known from Scotland (Steer and Bannerman 1977). Distinctive expressions of identity were carried through burial and remembrance practices across Argyll and the Isles, yet these practices do not appear to have been adopted across the channel, aside from a tiny number of isolated instances. These 4 Ulster examples share stylistic and morphological similarities with the Scottish slabs, but only the Clonca slab can be solidly categorized as belonging to the Scottish tradition. This difference in burial practice is telling. It is indicative of differing cultural traditions and alternative practice and provides evidence against a singular, culturally homogeneous Gaelic people across the region, as well as against political unity, as elite burial and remembrance activities are politicized practices.

**MacDonnells**

The MacDonnells, as they became known in Ireland from the English language sources and later nomenclature, had been supplying fighting men from the Isles to Ireland for a number of centuries. The previously mentioned 1373 reference to the MacDonnell as captain of the Scots living in Ireland suggests that an extended grouping of that kin was living in some part of Ulster by the middle of the 14th century (Nicholls 2007). Eoin Mór MacDonnell (d. 1422), second son of John of Islay and Margaret Stewart, and brother and designated successor to Donal, Lord of the Isles, married Margey Bisset of the Glens of Antrim ca. 1390. By 1400 he was referred to as “Lord of Dunyvaig and the Glens,” and recognized as such when he entered into indentures with Henry IV in 1403 (Breen 2012). This process effectively saw the unification of Islay and the Glens. Theoretically this marriage alliance initiated the period of MacDonnell hegemony in the Glens and the beginning of the dissipation of Bisset control. This effect was not immediate, however, and the Mac Eoin Bissets retained varying degrees of power through the 15th century in the area (Kingston 2004). McDonnell (1987) has shown that both families were involved in the establishment of the friary at Glenarm by the middle of the century. The opening up of the Glens by the MacDonnells led to a substantial influx of people from the Isles. The family now used the Glens as their primary base and was a place from where they could begin to build their political and societal standing. These people were drawn by the economic potential of participation in Irish mercenary activity, but also were potentially pushed by the increased pressure that came from conflict with the Scottish crown at the close of the 15th century. Numbers are difficult to estimate but it was reported in 1474 that upwards of 10,000 Scots were in Ulster (Lydon 1992:1). By 1533 the Council in Dublin wrote to the king that the “Scots also inhabit a great part of Ulster” (Hill 1873:37). These would have included the MacDonnell *galloglass* who held a territory around Ballygawley in County Tyrone by 1567 (Nicholls 2007).

Of particular interest from a settlement perspective is the large cluster of house foundations in the uplands above Murlough Bay. The bay itself was recognized as one of the key landfalls on the Ulster coast for maritime traffic arriving from Scotland. Horning (2004) documented a group of over 100 house sites in this area and argued that the settlement is associated with Scots plantation activity in Ireland in the early part of the 17th century. While recognizing that cultural activity at the site dates back to the Neolithic period, she highlights the later 1620 grant to Alexander Magee, from the Rhinns in Islay, of “the lands of Ballygicon, containing 80 acres; half of Turnaroan, 60 acres; Ballycregah, 120 acres, and the quarter of Dowcorry, 20 acres” by the Earl of Antrim, Randal MacDonnell (Horning 2004:209). In 1630, Alexander and his brother Donal Magee were again granted leaseholds encompassing Bighouse, Goodland, Knockbrack, Torglass, and Tornaroon townlands in which these houses are located. While it is likely that a number of the houses were occupied by incoming Scots at this time, it is also likely that this area was occupied by Scots groupings through the medieval period and that this location was one of the primary settlement areas of the incoming bands of fighters. Norden’s 1610 map of Ireland is one of a number of contemporary maps that includes an illustration and inscription of a fire on Torr Head, above Murlough Bay. The accompanying inscription reads: “at this marke the Scottes used to make their warning–fires” (Horning 2004). These fires would have been used to signal between Ulster, the Isles, and Kintyre and to warn of hostile forces or to signal key events. While the cartographic evidence clearly shows the 17th-century occupation of this site, it is possible that many of these houses would have been occupied on a semi-permanent basis by Scottish incomers throughout the late 15th and 16th centuries. This hypothesis is based on a morphological analysis of a number of discrete house clusters and field systems within the townlands, coupled with the broader cultural context of its landscape setting and its proximity to the known landing place for Scottish galleys in the bay below.

The suggestion that this settlement was associated with Scottish fighting men, and potentially their families, will of course be controversial as no mercenary community has been identified to date. Mercenary bands were traditionally quartered with their Irish sponsors (Simms 1996:108). However, it seems inconceivable that groups numbering in the thousands could have been accommodated in this manner in the 16th century, and the identification of a mercenary base above Murlough seems reasonable, until further excavation work might clarify this suggestion.

The early 16th century saw a second phase of MacDonnell settlement in north Ulster. From the 1520s Alexander Canochson of Dunyvaig facilitated the provision of fighting men in Ireland (Caldwell 2008:79). It was these men who came to fight for the MacQuillans in north Antrim against the O’Cahans in 1544. Initially building Kinbane Castle on the northeast Antrim coast, they went on to usurp the MacQuillans and take both the territory of the Route, including the lands contained between the rivers Bann and Bush, and castles such as Dunluce and Ballylough (Breen 2012). A number of English sources claimed that more than 7000 Scots men were in Ulster by the early 1550s (Caldwell 2008), a potential drop of 3000 men since 1474. However, we cannot be confident of either total so we should not read too much into this difference. By late medieval times there were two distinct spheres of Scottish engagement with Ulster. The MacDonnells held a significant portion of northeast Antrim, including the Glens and the lands as far west as the River Bann. These holdings included the ancient territory of the Dál Riata. Farther west, the MacSweeneys retained control of their territories in north Donegal until the close of the century. Other lesser groups must also have held smaller land areas on a less durable basis, while temporary incursions continued to take place. The 4th earl of Argyll had sent soldiers to assist Calvagh O’Donnell against his father Manus in 1555–1556, with the 5th earl maintaining a similar active interest in Ulster (Dawson 1988). The northern coast of Ulster through this period remained the focus for sustained cultural interchange and temporary migration and often served as a place of refuge for the people of the islands.

**Conclusion**

Jane Ohlmeyer (1993:7) has written that Gaelic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland “had formed a single cultural, linguistic, and even political entity since earliest times” and that “it was the sea, not the land, that united the Clan Donald archipelago.” Some elements of Ohlmeyer’s statement can be challenged on the basis of our existing historical and archaeological evidence. Yes, the sea facilitated connections and served as a bridge rather than a barrier between the two regions. This communication was enhanced by the naval capacities of the Scottish island communities and the versatility of their galleys or *birlinns*. However, the concept of a single political entity is problematic. At no time during the medieval period was this a single political entity or territory, but elements of shared cultural practice and constructed historical memory were present. Power fluctuated between the early medieval groups within the territory of the Dál Riata, and in later centuries the political elite may have expressed aspirations toward unity on a number of occasions, but it never came to pass. Herbert (1999:87) has argued that cultural links were maintained across the region during the later centuries of the 1st millennium through “shared language, custom and ecclesiastical association.” By the 12th century, she suggests, these links were no longer politically assured and were subject to negotiation but cultural relationships remained strong, maintained by a Gaelic literati that transcended borders on both sides of the channel (Herbert 1999:97).

MacGregor (2012:34) has questioned the validity of the concept of a greater Gaeldom and has argued against the notion of a unitary Gaelic polity. He highlights the poetic contestation over the ownership of the *Ceannas nan Gáidheal,* or “headship of the Gaels” between the MacDonalds and the Campbell chiefs in the 16th century, which had little relevance in Ireland. By that time the Irish were primarily interested in the military resource of the Scots and utilized poetry to encourage them to support their own military struggles. Indeed, both the viability of, and the extent to which an aspirational politically unified Gaelic kingdom was actually wanted can be questioned. Utilizing bardic poetry as his predominant source, McLeod (2004) has downplayed the extent to which Ireland and western Gaelic Scotland constituted a unified “Gaelic province” during the late medieval period, arguing instead that while many Gaelic Scots looked to Ireland for historical prestige, much of elite Irish society regarded Scotland as being distant and peripheral. This can be seen in the constructed origin myths of the Dál Riata in the later centuries of the 1st millennium and in the subsequent origin stories of both the MacDonnells and the MacSweeneys, linking their claim to lordship through a direct line to Niall of the Nine Hostages. While the MacSweeneys settled in Ireland and re-created themselves as a lordship in an almost exclusively Irish fashion, the MacDonnells by contrast adopted a more pragmatic approach. Theirs was a lordship that transcended the lands of both Ulster and Scotland in a physical and metaphorical sense. While their later bardic poetry attempts to place their origins in deep mythological time at Tara and with the three Collas, their everyday political practice focused on survival and the maintenance of their status and lands. As such they adopted a fluid approach to identity and ethno-labelling, at one time proclaiming their Irish origins through bardic poetry, at others ingratiating themselves with both the Scottish, and later, the English crowns. Theirs was a world where allegiance constantly shifted, not in defense of a Gaelic culture and people, but instead in protection of societal position and political ambitions. Such fluidity is reflected in their poetry, their architecture, and their political manoeuvring, and ultimately by the survival of their landholdings into recent times in Ulster (Breen 2012).

The Scots groupings then looked toward Ireland and Ulster for land, for opportunity, and often for validation, but also for survival and the preservation of their status during periods of volatility and uncertainty. Their continued migrations, whether temporary or permanent, are testament to their directional focus. This process reached its zenith during the later Middle Ages. We have extensive evidence of geographically southward movement, but little evidence of large-scale Irish groupings moving geographically northward, aside from a number of isolated raiding references and the small-scale movement of individuals for political or cultural purposes. This secularized movement contrasts with that of historic religious movement, most notably with the foundation of early Christian sites across Scotland by early Irish monks, exemplified by Iona and its associated monastic movement, and late medieval pilgrimages in both directions. Ultimately this was a region bound by a common language and shared cultural traditions, but to suggest this was a unified political zone is problematic. While there were cultural commonalities, there were also key differences. Burial and grave memorialization practices represent striking differences, while there were divergences in material culture (Campbell 2001). Variance in settlement types is also evident, most notably in the exclusive use of tower houses by the Irish maritime lords and in their apparent disinterest in castles, which differs from the more widespread use and adaptation of settlement types by the southern Hebridean elite. This, then, was a maritime province with a strong basal framework of cultural similarity, but was also one that accommodated and acknowledged difference.

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