A Possible Early Medieval Route across Scotland

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In 2004, I suggested the rough outline of a possible route across Scotland from the Firth of Tay in the east to Iona and Islay in the west, based on the locations of sculptured stones along waterways (O’Neill 2005, 280–282). In 2017, working collaboratively with Simon Taylor and others, I had the opportunity to test some of the assumptions underlying my 2004 suggestion.

I present here some thoughts arising from that test, and a considerably refined possible route across Scotland from east to west.¹ I offer this study in adventure, Scottish landscape and onomastics to Brian Taylor, hoping that it will give him some small enjoyment, in token of

¹ Much of this article was inspired by discussion with Simon Taylor over many years, and during the walk. I am very grateful to him for sharing his ideas with me, and for commenting on a draft of this article. Of course, he bears no responsibility for what I have written here; all errors and follies are entirely my own. (Simon Taylor is not, as far as we know, related to Brian Taylor.)

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the many occasions on which I have enjoyed his company, generosity, support and scholarship.

My 2004 hypothesis suggested that the sites of sculptured stones at Murthly, Dunkeld and Logierait marked easy stages of a journey from Abernethy near the mouth of the Tay towards the west coast. I postulated that stages of approximately ten to thirteen kilometres might once have been marked all the way from Abernethy to Logierait. I also postulated a route making its way northward from Logierait up the River Tummel, leading eventually to the junction of Lochs Leven and Linnhe, from which waterborne access to both the Moray Firth and the southern Hebrides would be straightforward.

In August–September 2017, after five years’ planning, Simon Taylor and I, with a group of others, walked from Dunkeld to Iona, testing hypotheses held by Simon and me about early medieval routes. A brief account of the walk is in the Appendix to this article. As a result of research in preparation for that walk and observations in the course of it, I have adjusted my hypothesis as to the route that would have been taken by early medieval travellers from the east coast in the region of the Firth of Tay to the islands off the west coast associated with St Columba. I set out below a description of the possible route, together with some relevant observations.

The underlying assumption of this reconstruction is that ecclesiastics, particularly those affiliated with the church of Iona, founded by St Columba, were the main (but probably not the only) users of this route. Therefore, ecclesiastical remains (particularly stone sculpture), place-names associated with ecclesiastical activity, and dedications and place-names associated with Iona saints, are the primary evidence types. Although such a route may potentially have been used over several centuries, I seek to establish a route that might realistically have been used around the time of St Adomnán, abbot of Iona from 679 to 704, author and lawmaker.

**Strath Tay**

There are many possible locations around the Tay that might form a terminus for travel across Scotland. For the purposes of this discussion, I will locate the beginning of the journey at Abernethy, where
there appears to have been a church by the sixth century (Proudfoot 1997, 60) and where there is a large collection of early medieval stone sculpture (Allen & Anderson 1903, 308–310; 341–342) suggesting an important ecclesiastical centre. Abernethy (in the sense of its probable early medieval landholding rather than the modern village) is also a convenient location from which to take waterborne transport to other coastal sites.² In common with most of the sites discussed here, Abernethy stands near the junction of two watercourses: Nethy Burn and the River Earn, just upstream of the junction of the rivers Earn and Tay. Such junctions form convenient landmarks, as well as potentially marking the junctions of routes.

Assuming progress on foot, convenient stages up the River Tay from Abernethy would consist of twelve to fifteen kilometres per day. This would also allow for the traveller to attend to some ecclesiastical duties en route, such as ministering or preaching to the surrounding populace, conveying messages, or just attending to regular prayer. From Abernethy, such a stage would lead to a site near Scone, although I can evince no evidence for such a site.

From Scone, one might follow the Tay to what is now Stanley and then strike out cross-country (where the modern railway line and road B9099 attest to passable terrain) to avoid a large bend in the Tay, returning to the river at Murthly, where a single sculptured stone was found on the bank near the junction of the Gelly Burn and the Tay (Allen & Anderson 1903, 305–306). This fragment is likely to be the base of a cross-slab (O’Neill 2005, 281) which would have provided a suitable way-marker to assure travellers that they had reached the end of this stage of the journey.

A slightly shorter stage of about ten kilometres would lead up the Tay from Murthly to Dunkeld. Dunkeld has been a major ecclesiastical centre since at least the ninth century, when relics of St Columba were brought there (Taylor 1999). The cathedral at Dunkeld is also

² This is further suggested by the early medieval stone sculpture at St Madoes (Allen & Anderson 1903, 292–296, 328) on the Tay opposite Abernethy, which may point to a crossing of the Tay. The important Pictish site at Forteviot is also about 15 kilometres away along the River Earn.
dedicated to Columba, although the earliest attestation of this dedication is 1207 (Watt & others 1991, 40). Given the concentration of early medieval stone sculpture at Dunkeld (Allen & Anderson 1903, 284–285; 317–319; 342), it is likely to have been a substantial foundation earlier than the ninth century. Even if it had not yet become an important centre, it is reasonable to assume some ecclesiastical presence at Dunkeld as early as the eighth century. Dunkeld cathedral, thought to be on the site of the earliest Dunkeld church, lies opposite the junction of the rivers Braan and Tay.

Approximately thirteen kilometres upriver from Dunkeld is Logierait, situated at the junction of the Rivers Tay and Tummel. At Logierait a single early-medieval cross-slab was found in the churchyard on the riverbank (Allen & Anderson 1903, 291–292). I suggest that this marked another convenient stage on the east-west journey. Logierait is a relatively recent place-name; the location was known in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as Logie (‘ecclesiastical site’) of St Coeti (Clancy 2016, 46 and passim). Coeti was a bishop of Iona, who died in 712 (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, 169 = AU 711.1).

I now believe that the most likely route, assuming a destination in the southern Hebrides such as Iona, would continue from Logierait up the River Tay. Although no particular evidence survives, a reasonable next stage might take the traveller to Aberfeldy, at the junction of the Moness Burn and the River Tay. Simon Taylor (1999) has suggested the possibility that Farragon Hill, on the north side of Aberfeldy, may commemorate St Fergna, abbot of Iona from 605 to 623.

**GLEN LYON**

From Aberfeldy, a convenient stage would reach Fortingall, on the River Lyon. This could be reached by following the River Tay to its

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3 Although the 2017 walk had set out from Dunkeld, we did not follow the Tay through Logierait, but rather followed the Braan to Drumour, walking cross-country to rejoin the Tay at Aberfeldy. This decision was largely driven by the unavailability of a suitable walking route along this stretch of the modern-day Tay.
junction with the River Lyon and then following the Lyon to Fortingall. By skirting the potentially difficult flood-plain of the Tay, the route would incorporate a trackway between Camserney and Dull, which seems to be of considerable age. There is no evidence that the trackway dates from as early as the early medieval period, other than the evidence of the village of Dull itself. The church at Dull was dedicated to Adomnán. Also at Dull are a number of early medieval sculptured stones (Allen & Anderson 1903, 315; 342). We viewed small cross-marked stones in the churchyard at Dull not listed by Allen & Anderson, but plausibly also of early medieval date. Continuing west from Dull would bring the traveller to the River Lyon just above its junction with the Tay, from which Fortingall is reached by following the Lyon upstream.

Fortingall is situated on Allt Odhar, close to its junction with the River Lyon. It is surrounded by various prehistoric monuments including a purportedly 4000-year old yew tree, hill-forts, standing stones and a probable iron-age assembly site across the river at Duneaves Farm (Watson 1926, 248). This farm contains a field called Dail mo-Choid (‘St Coeti’s river-meadow’), and Fortingall church is also dedicated to St Coeti. Fortingall church contains an early medieval hand-bell\(^4\) and the remains of several early medieval sculptured stones (Allen & Anderson 1903, 508–510). Excavations in 2011 yielded strong evidence of a seventh-century ecclesiastical settlement on the site of the church (O’Grady 2011).

Fortingall stands at the narrow, almost hidden, entrance to Glen Lyon, which may be the reason for its significance to both prehistoric and early medieval people, as well as its importance to the route postulated here. About thirteen kilometres’ walk west from Fortingall, continuing along the River Lyon, is St Adamnan’s Cross, a standing stone with a faintly carved cross, on a rise on the north bank of the river. Almost opposite, on the south bank, near the junction of Allt a’ Chobhair with the River Lyon, is Balnahanaid, containing the early element *annat* which denotes a church of the patron saint or containing the patron saint’s relics (Watson 1926, 250; MacDonald

\(^4\) The handbell was sadly stolen from the church soon after we visited.
1973; Clancy 1995). A kilometre west is Cladh Branno, a ruined burial ground that is likely to be an early medieval church site. In the church of Innerwick, a little further west, is an early medieval hand bell known as Adomnan’s bell, which was brought there from Cladh Branno (information in Innerwick church porch).

Five kilometres west of Cladh Branno, still on the River Lyon, is a cluster of Adomnán place-names, taking the form Eonan. Milton Eonan is Adomnán’s mill, an earlier, entirely Gaelic form suggested by the name of its stream, Allt Baile a’ Mhuilinn, which joins the Lyon close by. Adjacent is Eilean Eonain, Adomnán’s island.

Pubil (‘tent’) is about fourteen kilometres west of Milton Eonan along Glen Lyon. The place-name suggests the site of an early temporary structure, possibly used for ecclesiastical activity such as preaching, and also perhaps for shelter. For it to have inspired the place-name (which also appears in adjacent Meall Phubaill, ‘lumpy hill of Pubil’ and Allt Phubuill ‘stream of Pubil’), one would expect the site to have been used repeatedly over a protracted period. It is at the junction of Allt Phubuill and the River Lyon. I suggest that this was the end of the next stage of the journey across Scotland, and the last resting point before crossing the Spine of Britain.

SPINE OF BRITAIN

Departing Pubil, I suggest that the traveller would continue along the north shore of Loch Lyon (now enlarged by a hydro-electric scheme dam) towards the prominent landmark aptly named Beinn Mhanach (‘monks’ mountain’).

The western end of Loch Lyon offers two routes. The more northerly route leads to the north side of Beinn Mhanach and a pass over the Spine of Britain following Gleann Cailliche (‘hag’s glen’) up to Lôn na Cailliche (‘the hag’s meadow’). The latter feature was presumably named ironically: it is a desolate bog, certainly not the domesticated, cultivable land implied by the element lôn. Its atmosphere assists one to imagine the mythological hag presiding over
The more southerly route leads to the south of Beinn Mhanach past the lower-lying Coire Mhanach, following Srath Tarabhan to an alternative pass. It is more likely that this latter route was the one used by the early medieval ecclesiastical traveller.

These two passes across the Spine of Britain converge at Allt Kinglass near a cluster of Sìthean place-names. A little way down this stream is a cluster of *annat* place-names: Coire na h-Annait, Allt na h-Annait and Annait itself. Ordnance Survey maps shows a former chapel and burial ground at the western end of a small wood. A study of Google’s satellite image shows what may be traces of other potential buildings or enclosures. The site is at the junction of Allt na h-Annait and Allt Kinglass. This must have been the destination of this day’s stage of the journey. It marks a significant milestone in the journey from east to west: the successful crossing of the Spine of Britain.

From Annait, the traveller might follow Allt Kinglass to what is now the West Highland Way north to Bridge of Orchy or south to Tyndrum, and thence follow Glen Orchy or Glen Lochy respectively to Loch Awe. There are no clear indicators along these routes to suggest that either was used during the early medieval period.

Loch Awe, however, has a place-name potentially associated with St Conin (otherwise known as Baithéne: Anderson & Anderson 1991, 238), second abbot of Iona: Innis Chonain, near the north-eastern end of the loch. On the north shore of the loch is a place called Annat, and perhaps a kilometre further from the loch is Kilchrennan. The

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5 This was the route chosen for the 2017 walk, largely because it gave an opportunity to visit Tigh nam Bodach, also known as Tigh na Cailliche, in passing (Canmore). Although almost certainly the ‘wrong’ route, it was enlightening: the desolation and the spectre of the hag formed a strong contrast to the reassuring signs of early ecclesiastical presence throughout much of the walk.

6 Although this place-name may derive simply from its proximity to Beinn Mhanach, one might suggest that its position on this side of the mountain supports the identification of this route as the one taken by early medieval ecclesiastical travellers. The Ordnance Survey 1 inch 7th series map also shows a settlement called Benvannoch on the northern shore of the western end of Loch Lyon (now underwater).
dedication in the latter place-name seems to have altered considerably, but the Kil- (<Cill) element suggests an early church site, and Clancy (1995, 112–113) suggests it is the cella Diumi mentioned in Vita Columbae.

There appear to be various simple routes from Loch Awe to the west coast. One would be to depart from near Innis Chonain and follow the River Awe to Loch Etive. Another would be to pass through Annat and Kilchrennan, continuing north to meet Glen Nant and follow it to Loch Etive (approximately following the modern B845).7 I do not know of any particular evidence suggesting one route or the other. Once Loch Etive had been gained, the traveller would have had ready water-borne access to the early ecclesiastical site of Lismore and the southern Hebrides. An alternative route would pass Cladh na h-Annait proceeding down Glen Lonan via Loch Neil to Loch Feochan, from which ready water-borne access to the southern Hebrides would again be available.

CONCLUSION

There is, of course, no way of proving what route might have been chosen by the early medieval traveller from the Tay region to the southern Hebrides. However, there is a certain amount of evidence suggesting the continuous or frequent intermittent presence of early medieval ecclesiastics along much of the route outlined above. The existence of strong indicators of that presence at intervals which represent an achievable day’s foot travel along this route suggests that it should be considered a possibility. The likelihood of there having been other routes in general use must not be dismissed: much would depend on point of departure, destination, and local conditions, both environmental and political.

I believe that the exercise of walking this route, and of analysing the onomastic and material evidence, has been valuable. It supplies a model which may not be definitive, but which allows consideration of

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7 Again driven by practicalities, the 2017 walk passed through Oban on the west coast. In contrast to its position today, there is no evidence that Oban was a significant point of departure for the islands in the early medieval period.
what a journey between ‘Pictland’ on the east coast and ‘Dál Riata’ on
the west coast might have been like. It seems likely that travel was
guided by water, both as an aid to navigation by following water-
courses and as a mode of transport by boat. If some of the places
described as stages above were established settlements, then a network
of sites for hospitality and communication can be envisaged. We
know that communication of ideas and materials throughout Scotland
and beyond took place. This study shows one way in which that might
have occurred.

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APPENDIX: WALKING FROM DUNKELD TO IONA

Pamela O’Neill and Simon Taylor had often talked about how church (and other) folk of the seventh and eighth centuries might have travelled between eastern and western Scotland, as we know they frequently did. O’Neill had set up a hypothesis based on the distribution of sculptured stones of the period. Taylor had a theory based on the distribution of place-names and church dedications associated with the early medieval church, particularly the family of churches associated with Iona. In 2012, we hit upon the idea of testing a possible route by walking it.

The Annals of Ulster have an interesting entry under the year 717; it reads ‘the expulsion of the community of Iona across the Spine of Britain by King Nechtan’ (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983, 174 = AU 717.4). We decided that we could consider our walk as a sort of commemoration of the journey taken by those clerics, and that the 1300th anniversary of the expulsion, 2017, would be an ideal time for it. With no more detail than that bare sentence, we had to be creative about start and finish points. Finishing on Iona was an obvious choice. We decided to start at Dunkeld, as this was the centre of the Columban church in the east of Scotland by at least 849, when king Cinaed mac Alpín transferred some of St Columba’s relics from Iona to Dunkeld. The Annals give no date for the expulsion and practicality dictated that we should do our walk in summer, so we decided to arrive on Iona on the feast day of St Adomnán of Raphoe, 7 September (St Columba’s day would have been too early, and St
Adomnán of Iona’s too late). The name Adomnán was to be a recurring feature along our route.

Having considered ideas such as pack ponies, we eventually decided that safety and practicality were best served by a camper van, carrying provisions, camping equipment, and cooking facilities, meeting us each night. Eventually, eight people did the walk and various others joined us at different points for one or more days.8

Day Zero: Tuesday 22 August
By late afternoon, the entire group, from Australia, Scotland and Ireland, had assembled at the Inver camp-site just outside Dunkeld. This was the perfect opportunity to practise setting up tents, camp cooking, and all the other practicalities before the journey began in earnest. Our tents were just a couple of metres from the rapidly-flowing River Tay, which lulled us all to sleep.

Day One: Wednesday 23 August
It rained heavily overnight, and showed no signs of letting up as we ate porridge and slogged through the mud to pack up camp. We walked the couple of kilometres into Dunkeld in heavy rain, assembling at the Cathedral for our official start at 10.30. Some early medieval carved stones in the Cathedral museum drew our attention. We crossed the Tay and followed it to the River Braan, now in heavy flood, which we followed through forest associated with Ossian. A short walk on a minor road in merciful sunshine took us to an old Military Road and across fields to Corbenic Camphill Community in the grounds of Drumour Lodge at 3.30, where we camped overnight, enjoying a campfire courtesy of our hosts.

Day Two: Thursday 24 August
An 8.00 start on a gloriously sunny day saw us climbing northwards through the Griffin Wind Farm to Aberfeldy via Lochs Scoly and

8 Participants were Dot Clarke, Leonie Dunlop, Tony Earls, Jannette MacDonald, Carly McNamara, Pamela O’Neill, Alan Reid, Carol Shields, Marie Stewart, Debbie Street, Cathy Swift, Simon Taylor, Andrew Weatherley, Alasdair Whyte, Ray Whyte, and Bill Wilson.
Kennard. From Aberfeldy we went on to Weem, arriving around 4.30, where we had arranged to camp in an acquaintance’s garden and use their facilities; they also gave us an evening meal.

**Day Three: Friday 25 August**

We set off at 10.00, westward past Castle Menzies to Camserney. Here we joined an old footpath into Dull, which may well have been in use in the early medieval period. Dull has several early medieval stone crosses, and the church is dedicated to St Adomnán. The footpath, crosses and dedication all suggest that Dull was well-known to the Iona clerics. The church has been turned into a residence, and we had a talk with the owner. We then walked back down to the River Tay and followed it to the River Lyon. We took the quiet road running along the south side of the Lyon past Duneaves to arrive at Bridge of Lyon at 4.00. Here, we were to camp two nights in a field with access to facilities, courtesy of another local acquaintance, who provided another evening meal.

**Day Four: Saturday 26 August**

We had planned no forward progress for this day, but rather spent the day investigating the many prehistoric and early medieval features in and around Fortingall. The church is famous for its yew, purported to be the oldest tree in Europe. It also contains fragments of some very fine early medieval carved stone cross-slabs. We were privileged to see the early medieval bronzed iron handbell, traditionally associated with St Adomnán, which was stolen from the church just a few days later and has not been recovered. The surrounding fields and hills are laden with Iron-age hillforts, standing stones, stone circles, cairns and various mounds and ramparts.

**Day Five: Sunday 27 August**

At 9.20 we continued along Glen Lyon past Balnahanaid and Cladh Bhranna (another church/graveyard place-name) on the south side of the River. These two place-names suggest the establishment of a church here in the early medieval period. On the north side of the river are St Adamnan’s Cross, a standing stone of uncertain date with a faint cross carved on it, and Innerwick church, which contains another early medieval handbell. About 4.00, we arrived at Milton Eonan, where we had hired a one-bedroom cottage and an evening meal. The
combined material and place-name evidence for activity in this area by early medieval Iona clerics is very compelling.

**Day Six: Monday 28 August**
We departed Milton Eonan at 9.00, walking west along Glen Lyon and arriving at Pubil by 4.00. Camping overnight at the foot of Sithean Camaslaith by Pubil was our first night of ‘wild camping’.

**Day Seven: Tuesday 29 August**
We set off from Pubil at 8.00, walking along the north side of Loch Lyon with Beinn Mhanach as a constant landmark in front of us, despite the inclement weather. We continued up Gleann Meran and Gleann Cailliche (past Taigh nam Bodach). Lòn na Cailliche was heavy bog: very difficult going and a little frightening. Crossing over the low pass into Argyll between Beinn Achaladar to the north-west and Beinn a’ Chuirn to the south-east was surprisingly moving, possibly because of sheer relief and the sunshine in Argyll. We continued down Allt Kinglass past Annait to Auch, arriving about 6.00. We were unable to camp at Auch, so were grateful for a lift from Auch to Tyndrum. We spent the night in Pinetrees campsite, Tyndrum.

**Day Eight: Wednesday 30 August**
This was a recovery day spent in and around Tyndrum, washing and drying clothes and equipment, resting and exploring.

**Day Nine: Thursday 31 August**
A gentle walk from Tyndrum to Bridge of Orchy by the West Highland Way. Overnight wild camping on west side of the Orchy at Bridge of Orchy.

**Day Ten: Friday 1 September**
We set off down Glen Orchy on B8074 about 10.00, crossing the River Orchy on a footbridge near Catnish then continuing on a track on the north side of the river to Craig Lodge near Dalmally. We camped overnight at Craig Lodge, with access to the facilities there.
Day Eleven: Saturday 2 September
We departed Craig Lodge at 9.30, walking to Dalmally then south-west down the road and track via the Duncan Bàn MacIntyre monument past Ardteatle Cottage and down the Old Military Road, reaching Loch Awe at Achlian. Cliff Davies of Loch Awe Boats picked us up at the new pier at Achlian and ferried us to Inishail to look at the medieval kirk and sculpture there. Later he came back and took us to near Ardbrecknish, where we camped overnight at Cliff’s campsite and boat-park.

Day Twelve: Sunday 3 September
Loch Awe Boats ferried us across to Annat at 9.30. We went on up the metalled road by Kilchrenan Kirk, where we met the locum minister and congregation. We continued to Glen Nant then along the Glen Nant Forest track, over a burn to come out near Cladh na h-Annait and down a track to Glen Lonan Road, which we followed south-west to Barguilean. Another wild camp overnight outside Angus’s Garden.

Day Thirteen: Monday 4 September
We left Barguilean in small groups at various times from 6.30 to 8.00, walking to Oban in pouring rain. Overnight accommodation at Oban Youth Hostel gave an opportunity to dry equipment and clothes and generally recuperate.

Day Fourteen: Tuesday 5 September
Cameron Smith of Coastal Connection took us by boat via the Garvellachs, Coire Bhreacan and Beallach an Choin Ghlaís to Mull. The intention was to land at Ardalanish on the south coast of the Ross of Mull and camp there, courtesy of Ardalanish Weavers, but the strong south-westerly wind meant that we had to land further east, at the mussel farm in Loch Spelve. We took the bus to Fionnphort, then walked down to Fidden, where we set up camp for three nights.

Day Fifteen: Wednesday 6 September
We spent this day exploring the Ross of Mull, as our plan to spend the day walking from Ardalanish to Fidden had been abandoned.

Day Sixteen: Thursday 7 September
We took the ferry from Fionnphort to Iona and concluded the journey (as it began, in pouring rain) by walking deiseal around the abbey
cloister at 11.00. After a day spent exploring Iona, we attended an evening concert in Bunessan Village Hall, celebrating the Gaelic song heritage of Celtic scholar Rev. William Matheson. The final night of the expedition was spent in torrential rain and howling winds at Fidden.

Day Seventeen: Friday 8 September
We packed up as best we could in the wind and rain, and made for the 12.40 Craignure ferry to Oban to return home by various routes.

9 On William Matheson, see William Gillies ‘The Mavis of Clan Donald’ in this volume, 124-127.