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The political and ecclesiastical extent of Scottish Dalriada

Pamela O’Neill

Abstract
The Irish settlement of Dalriada on the west coast and islands of Scotland was formed sometime around the fifth century. It continued to exist as a distinct entity until at least the ninth century. Many of the principal sites within Dalriada have long been recognised, such as the political centre at Dunadd or the ecclesiastical centre on Iona. However, there is less clarity about the fringes of the territory over the 500 or so years of its existence. This paper discusses the documentary and, more particularly, the material evidence for the extent of Scottish Dalriada. Particular attention is given to Dalriada’s relationship to waterways, islands and coastal areas. Indications are sought concerning the political boundaries of the territory. Against this background, the geographical extent of the ecclesiastical organisation of Scottish Dalriada is considered.

Around the fifth century CE, Irish immigrants from the north-eastern corner of modern County Antrim established a settlement on the west coast and islands of what is now Scotland. The settlement is known as Dalriada, after the Irish people called Dál Riata from whom most of the immigrants were apparently drawn. It was not until approximately five centuries later that the Dalriada joined their neighbours in Pictland to form the kingdom of Scotland. Documentary evidence for Dalriada during that interval is sparse, frequently ambiguous and difficult to interpret. There is, however, a considerable body of stone sculpture from Dalriada, which provides an opportunity to understand otherwise obscure aspects of social, cultural and religious life in Dalriada. It may also be examined for evidence of the extent of Dalriadan settlement.

There is some suggestion that members of the Dál Riata had settled in the west of Scotland prior to the arrival of Fergus Mór mac Eirc around 500 CE.¹ It is, though, with Fergus’s arrival in Scotland that the Dalriada can be said to have been established as a political entity in Scotland, for Fergus was the head of the Dál Riata, and with him their political headship arrived in Scotland.² The principal sources of evidence for the political

¹ Some arguments concerning the initial arrival of the Dál Riata are summarised in J Bannerman, Studies in the History of Dalriada (Edinburgh, 1974) 122-126. E Campbell, Saints and Sea-Kings (Edinburgh, 1999) 14, has proposed that the Scottish Dalriada were not migrants from Ireland, but the suggestion has not received significant scholarly support.
² Bannerman, 1.
organisation and extent of Dalriada are documentary. Material evidence is drawn primarily from a small number of settlement sites, most apparently fortified and high-status. These present many difficulties of interpretation, not least in the form of questions as to how to identify whether they belonged to the Dalriada or to other political entities.

The preliminary survey of documentary and material evidence presented in this paper seeks to establish which areas can be considered as securely Dalriadan, and which ought to be explored as possibly Dalriadan, particularly in the ecclesiastical context. It is the first step in a project which aims to chart the technical and stylistic influences on the stone sculpture of Dalriada, and its relationships with its neighbours.

**Documentary evidence for political presence** (figure 1)

The principal documentary sources for Dalriada are Adomnán’s *Life of Columba*, written within Dalriadan territory in the late seventh century, Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Northumbria in the early eighth century, various annalistic texts surviving in Irish manuscripts, and the *Senchus Fer nAlban*, a document which again survives in later Irish manuscript form, but appears to have been compiled in *Dál Riata*, possibly as early as the seventh century.

The *Senchus* details three legendary branches of the Dalriada. The first, the *Cenél Loairn*, appear to have inhabited the modern district of Lorn. The *Annals of Ulster* refer to their stronghold at Dunollie, near modern Oban in Lorn. The southern boundary of the *Cenél Loairn* has not been identified, but it is generally agreed that their territory was contiguous with that of the *Cenél nGabráin*. I would treat this assumption with caution, given my concerns about the identification of the boundaries of *Cenn Tíre* (see below). *Cenél Loairn* territories may have extended at least as far south as Dunadd, where the *Annals of Ulster* report that sons of their leader were taken prisoner upon its capture by Picts in 736.

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4 *The Annals of Ulster* ed and trans S Mac Airt and G Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983) 168: 713 ‘Dun Ollaigh construitur apud Selbachum’ [Dunollie is (re)built by Selbach]. There are also references to Dunollie at 685, 697, 700 and 733. Note that all entries in the *Annals of Ulster* for this period are predated by one year.

5 *Annals of Ulster*, 188: 735 ‘Oengus m. Fergusso, rex Pictorum, uastauit regiones Dail Riata 7 obtenuit Dun At 7 combussit Creic 7 duos filios Selbachis catenis alligauit’ [Aengus son of Fergus, king of the Picts, laid waste the territory of Dál Riata and seized Dún At and burned Creic and bound in chains two sons of Selbach]. It is, though, possible that Selbach’s sons were at Dunadd as hostages or foster-children of another leader at the time.
Figure 1: documentary evidence for Dalriadan political presence
To the north, the *Cenél Loairn* may be placed on the island of Coll and in the mainland regions of Ardnamurchan and Morvern, as well as *Stagnum Aporum*, which Watson places near modern Fort William. If their mainland territory were contiguous, it would seem that they controlled both banks of Loch Linnhe. Their northern boundary has not been identified precisely, but the territory appears to have terminated around the northern shore of Ardnamurchan. The eastern boundary is generally agreed at the mountain mass known as *Druim Alban*.

The second branch of the Dalriada, the *Cenél nGabráin*, inhabited a region known as *Crích Chomgaill*. This is almost certainly cognate and approximately coterminous with the modern district of Cowal, on the northwest bank of the Firth of Clyde. It included some islands, one of which is generally identified as modern Bute, on the basis of a reference to Kingarth in the *Annals of Ulster*.7

The *Cenél nGabráin* were also present in Kintyre according to the *Senchus*, a proposition again supported by the *Annals of Ulster*.8 I am slightly dubious about the extent of Dalriadan presence in Kintyre, since the placename ‘*Cenn Tire*’, translating roughly as ‘headland’, seems rather unspecific and may be difficult to locate precisely.9 It seems possible that the *Senchus*’s ‘*Cenn Tire*’ refers to a smaller subsection of modern Kintyre, probably the southern extremity beyond Campbeltown. The *Annals of Ulster* name two strongholds of the *Cenél nGabráin*. One is identified by Bannerman as Dunaverty on the south coast of Kintyre, besieged by

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7 *Annals of Ulster*, 133: 660 ‘*Obitus ... Daniel episcopus Cinn Garadh*’ [Death of ... Daniél, bishop of Cenn Garad]. Daniel’s Kingarth was presumably part of Dalriada because he appears in a list of Irish clerics who have died, and references in the Annals to persons outside Ireland and Dalriada generally identify the nationality of the person.

8 *Annals of Ulster*, 147: 681 ‘*Iugulatio Conaill Choi filii Dunchado i Ciunn Tire*’ [The killing of Conall Cael son of Dūnchad in Cenn Tire]; 175: 721 ‘*Dunchad Becc, rex Cinn Tire, moritur*’ [Dūnchad Bec, king of Cenn Tire, dies]. The suggestion that Conaill was murdered may allow that Kintyre was not *Cenél nGabráin* territory, although murder was just as likely at home as abroad. King Dūnchad appears to have been Dalriadan.

9 Compare such placenames as ‘Tarbert’, meaning ‘isthmus’, which are found in large quantities throughout Scotland; the case of Tarbert is discussed below.
Selbach in 712. The other is at Tairpirt Boittir, which Bannerman suggests is ‘near Tarbert in the north of Kintyre’, although he adduces no evidence. I would suggest that other candidates ought to be considered, since several other locations, including Tarbert on the island of Gigha and Tarbert at the north-eastern end of Loch Long, may have been in Cenél nGabráin territory. If the uncertain identification of Tarbert is disregarded, then there is no necessity to assume that the Cenél nGabráin occupied the entirety of Kintyre.

Both Watson and Bannerman suggest that the island of Jura ought to be included in this territory, identifying it with the island of Hinba, frequently referred to by Adomnán. This identification is again somewhat uncertain, as Watson reaches it primarily by a process of elimination, and I believe that it is unsupported by material evidence. Sharpe is similarly unconvinced by the claims of Jura, but neither is the evidence in favour of his preferred Oronsay particularly strong.

The third branch of the Dalriada, the Cenél nOengusa, inhabited the island of Islay, according to the Senchus. The name of Islay, Ilea, is used frequently by Adomnán, although he does not suggest any ecclesiastical organisation on the island.

**Documentary evidence for ecclesiastical presence** (figure 2)

Documentary evidence for Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence in western Scotland enables several ecclesiastical centres, most apparently monastic, to be identified. Principal amongst these is Columba’s Iona, which is central to many of the documentary sources, and is accepted as the centre from which much of the Dalriadan ecclesiastical organisation was governed.

In the north, opposite the island of Skye, in what was apparently Pictish territory, is the monastery of Applecross, founded by Maelrub in 673. Maelrub had come from Bangor, near modern Belfast in Northern Ireland, and might well have been associated with the Dalriadan

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12 W J Watson, *The history of the celtic place-names of Scotland* (Blackrock, 1986) 82-84; Bannerman, 112.

13 In terms of early medieval stone sculpture, Jura has only one simple relief cross on a boulder, which presents difficulties for dating.


15 *Annals of Ulster* 142: 672 ‘Mail Rubai funduit eclesiam Apor Croosan’ [Mael Ruba founded the church of Apor Crosán].
Figure 2: documentary evidence for Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence
ecclesiastical organisation while at Applecross. One of his predecessors at Bangor had visited Columba at *Hinba*.16

The island of Eigg was home to the monastery of Donnán, where the *Annals of Ulster* record that 150 martyrs were burned in 617.17 On the nearby island of Rum, the death of the ecclesiastic Becán in 677 is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*.18 The island of Tiree, a little to the south, was home to two monasteries, one of which was *Campus Luinge*, mentioned by Adomnán and the *Annals of Ulster*.19

A monastery on the island of Lismore, in Loch Linnhe, was founded by Moluag, whose *obit* in 592 is recorded in the *Annals of Ulster*.20 Adomnán’s island of *Hinba* was clearly a prominent dependant monastery of Iona, but has yet to be satisfactorily identified. Finally, the *Annals of Ulster* suggest that there was an episcopal centre at Kingarth on the island of Bute.21

**Material evidence for ecclesiastical presence** (figure 3)

Of the monastic sites for which there is documentary evidence, there is also material evidence confirming ecclesiastical activity at Applecross, Iona, Lismore and Kingarth. At Applecross, aerial survey indicates part of a large curvilinear enclosure, although there is no supporting evidence to confirm that this was monastic in nature.22 There are also early medieval sculptured stones bearing crosses at the site. The material evidence at Iona is, like the documentary evidence, extensive, and again includes several sculptured stones. On Lismore, a possible enclosure has been identified, and the crosier of St Moluag is preserved on the island.23 There are also remains of an early medieval sculptured stone. Kingarth has yielded

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16 Adomnán, 206: III.17 ‘*iii. ad sanctum uisitandum Columbam monasteriorum sancti fundatores de Scotia transmeantes in Hinba eum inuenerunt insula; quorum inlustrium uocabula Comgellus mocu Aridi ...*’ [four holy founders of monasteries crossed over from Ireland, to visit Saint Columba, and found him in the island of Hinba. The names of these illustrious men were Comgell mocu Aridi ...].

17 *Annals of Ulster* 108: 616 ‘*combustio Donnain Ega hi .xu. kl. Mai cum .cl. martiribus*’ [the burning of Donnán of Aig on the fifteenth of the Kalends of May with one hundred and fifty martyrs].

18 *Annals of Ulster* 144: 676 ‘*Beccan Ruimm quieuit*’ [Becán of Rum rested].


20 *Annals of Ulster* 95: sa 591 ‘*Obitus Lugide Lis Moer*’ [Death of Lugaid of Les Mór].

21 *Annals of Ulster*, 133: 660 ‘*Obitus ... Daniel episcopus Cinn Garadh*’ [Death of ... Daniël, bishop of Cenn Garad].


Figure 3: material evidence for Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence
extensive early medieval material remains, including pottery and metalworking materials, and a large number of cross-marked and sculptured stones.  

Additional monastic sites are suggested by material remains on the islands of Kerrera, Eileach an Naoimh, Eilean Mór in Loch Sween and Nave Island off Islay. Kerrera has a curvilinear enclosure divided by a curving internal wall, comparable to Irish monastic sites. Eileach an Naoimh has a well-preserved double beehive cell, similar to Irish examples, and an early cross-marked stone. Eilean Mór has an enclosure with early Christian gravemarkers, and Christian rock engravings in a nearby cave. At Nave Island, a small enclosure yielded a fragment of a cross of similar style to that opposite the island at Kilnave on Islay. St Columba’s Cave to the south of Knapdale was also put to ecclesiastical use in the early Christian period, evidenced by early rock-cut crosses.

Stone Sculpture (figure 4)

A partial cross-slab at Applecross features only abstract ornament, with the exception of one small human figure on the narrow edge. The layout of the slab is reminiscent of Pictish work, particularly that of the Moray Firth area. The use of animal-head terminals in the spiral-pattern combines with the pose of the apparently naked human figure with knees bent outwards and hands crossed over the groin, to suggest that the influences on this sculpture were not primarily Irish or Dalriadan, but perhaps more probably Pictish, in keeping with the suggestion that Applecross was situated within Pictish territory. The remaining sculpture from Applecross consists of unornamented cross-marked stones. Similarly, the sculpture from the neighbouring island of Skye consists of unornamented cross-marked stones and Pictish symbols. This suggests that there was no substantial Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence on Skye, although there may have been isolated eremitic sites, and there is certainly no evidence that the surrounding population might have been Dalriadan.

The island of Canna has a large number of unornamented cross-marked stones, together with pieces of at least two apparent free-standing crosses. Of these, the ‘Canna Cross’, of which the shaft and one arm survive, bears animals and human figures in a heavily Pictish-influenced

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30 The following discussion of stone sculpture is based on my personal observations of the sculpture, mostly relying on published photographs and drawings.
Figure 4: Dalriadan stone sculpture
style. This is particularly true of the horse-rider, which is directly comparable to those on many Pictish monuments. The apparent virgin-and-child with attendant figure also shows Pictish influence, particularly in the arrangement of the hair. On the narrow edge, two small clothed human figures have enlarged heads with narrow chins in the Irish style, although their hands are crossed in front like those of the figure at Applecross. The abstract ornament on this stone is too badly damaged to allow accurate comparison. The second sculptured piece on Canna has on one face a large human figure with a decorated snake intertwined with its legs. Although the head of the figure is missing, it does not appear to be Irish in style. The opposite face has abstract ornament, of which the most notable is an interlaced group of eel-like animals. Fisher points out that they are related to snakes found in the Book of Kells, but the overall effect suggests to me that there are other influences on this monument at least as strong as the Irish.31 On Eigg, there are two pieces apparently from a single cross-slab at Kildonan. One face shows an irregular ringed cross-head with interlace above a wide panel of key-pattern. The other face shows an array of animals and a horse rider in what is probably a hunt scene. It owes a clear debt to Pictish sculpture. The remaining stone sculpture on Eigg, Muck and Rum consists solely of unornamented cross-marked stones. The sculpture of this group of four islands, then, while showing occasional traces of possible Irish influence, again indicates strong associations with Pictish sculpture. I would suggest that the Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence attested by the documentary sources may have been a relatively minor presence in the midst of and influenced by a continuing Pictish population.

The mainland portion of the Cenél Loairn territory has only a scattering of unornamented cross-marked stones. The island of Coll has no early medieval sculpture, which raises the possibility that if the Dalriada were indeed present on the island as the documentary sources suggest, there was no ecclesiastical presence amongst them. The neighbouring island of Tiree has several sculptured stones to support the presence of Campus Luinge. Most of these are unornamented cross-marked stones, but one cruciform slab at Soroby displays rudimentary decoration including curvilinear ornament and key-pattern, which may be of Dalriadan origin.

The island of Colonsay has a number of unornamented cross-marked and cruciform stones, together with a small unprovenanced fragment of a possible free-standing cross. It has also a cruciform slab with a relief cross terminating in a human head and with a panel resembling a fish tail which may represent an ecclesiastical garment. This unusual slab has no close parallels in Scotland or Ireland in the early medieval period and may be slightly later in date. Colonsay certainly has sufficient

sculptured stones to allow for some Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence there, although perhaps not a major presence.

The island of Mull has four sites with unornamented cross-marked stones, and two caves with incised crosses. These sites are all in the southern part of the island, with one exception which is on the shore facing Coll and Tiree. This suggests that any Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence on Mull was probably in the form of isolated eremitic sites, and there is no evidence that the surrounding population was Dalriadan.

The island of Iona has extensive stone sculpture remains, including grave markers, cross-marked stones and highly developed free-standing crosses. The crosses may be considered as demonstrating the typical Dalriadan forms and styles. They show a wide range of ornament, including frequent use of bosses. Human figures are depicted both in static frontal pose and in the course of activity, and most show the Irish style of enlarged head with pointed chin. Cross shapes are both ringed and non-ringed, with parallel or slightly tapering sides. The outlines of the cross-shapes are composed of straight lines generally with curved armpits, with no cusped or curved elaboration as is found in some Anglian, Pictish and occasionally Irish examples.

The Knapdale region has a large number of unornamented and simply ornamented cross-marked stones, together with a small number of free-standing crosses and cross-slabs. A slab-like shaft from a free-standing cross from Eilean Mór shows strong influences from outside the Dalriadan sphere. Its horse and rider noticeably lack the grace and animation of Pictish examples, and the interlaced and intertwined animals are suggestive of Scandinavian influence. The Keills Cross has Dalriadan shape, with approximately parallel sides and short squared arms with rounded armpits. It is sculptured with biblical figures, spiral, key and zoomorphic ornament and a boss, all of which are compatible with Irish or Dalriadan influence, although the intertwined animals may reflect influences from Anglian or Scandinavian sources. Also at Keills is a cross-marked slab with a distinctive single spiral decoration in the centre of the cross and traces of key-pattern in the arms. Knapdale, then, appears to have had Dalriadan ecclesiastical influence, although the sculpture shows signs of other influences.

The island of Islay has an array of sculptured stones similar to that of Iona. A range of cross-marked stones are joined by the Kildalton Cross, another example of a fully developed Dalriadan-style free-standing cross, with biblical scenes, prominent bosses, and spiral ornament. The human figures feature Irish-style pointed chins and stylised garments. The severely damaged Kilnave Cross lacks bosses but is of Dalriadan shape, with parallel sides and short transverse arms, and has spiral and key ornament. Kilnave is opposite Nave Island, where ecclesiastical remains have been identified.
Clearly, there was a considerable organised Dalriadan ecclesiastical presence on Islay, despite the lack of documentary evidence for any foundation there.

By contrast, the island of Jura yields no evidence of any ecclesiastical organisation. There is one unornamented cross-marked stone near the shore facing Knapdale, which may be a previously-existing standing stone to which two simple Latin crosses were added in the early medieval period. It is suggestive of isolated eremitic use or of a transitory presence, such as marooned travellers. It is difficult, therefore, to support Watson’s suggestion that Jura is the island of Hinba on which Adomnán locates a daughter monastery of Iona and to which he informs us Columba paid frequent visits.

The islands of Arran and Gigha and the peninsula of Kintyre yield only simple cross-marked or cruciform stones at coastal sites, with the exception of an illegible ogham inscription from Gigha. This inscription strongly suggests the presence of Gaelic-speakers, presumably Dalriadan, on the island. The evidence of the stone sculpture does not suggest any large ecclesiastical sites in any of these areas, although the density of the evidence on Gigha may indicate an established ecclesiastical organisation on the island.

The island of Sanda, off the southern tip of Kintyre, has a simple cruciform stone and a large cross-slab, which is unfortunately too worn to allow significant comparison of the ornament. The late medieval chapel on the site is dedicated to St Ninian, and the early use of the site may conceivably have been associated with the Ninianic church in Galloway, which it faces.

Bute has a large number of sculptured stones, including a collection of probable monastic gravemarkers at Kingarth. A collection of cross-marked stones from the small island of Inchmarnock includes some with Scandinavian influence and an inscription in Scandinavian runes. There are also several sculptured stones found at Rothesay which were probably brought from elsewhere, possibly Kingarth. These are fragmentary and badly worn, but appear to be of somewhat later date. The evidence of the stone sculpture supports the existence of an ecclesiastical foundation at Kingarth, as indicated by the documentary evidence.

The sculptured stones of the neighbouring district of Cowal are predominantly unornamented cross-marked stones. A cross-slab from Kilfinan is too worn to allow detailed comparison, but may show traces of Scandinavian influence in its zoomorphic ornament. The island of Great Cumbrae, between Bute and mainland Ayrshire, has a group of cross-marked and cruciform stones, together with three ornamented fragments

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which may be of Scandinavian date. In these areas, then, there is no substantial evidence in support of organised ecclesiastical presence from Dalriada.

To the east, Rosneath, between Loch Long and the Gare Loch, has a slab with a sculptured Latin cross containing a single spiral in the head and simple interlace in the arms and shaft. It is directly comparable to the slab at Keills in Knapdale, whose context appears to be Dalriadan. The isolated cross-slab at Rosneath appears to be the most easterly example of Dalriadan-style stone sculpture, and may therefore mark the easterly extent of the Dalriadan ecclesiastical organisation. In Dunbartonshire, immediately to the east, the sculpture consists of simple cross-marked stones and material of distinctly Scandinavian type, such as hogbacks. Further east again, the sculpture around Govan and Glasgow shows Scandinavian and Pictish influence. For instance, at Barochan, a free-standing cross shows a complex outline and groups of figures on horseback, similar features to those found on, for example, the Pictish Dupplin Cross. Govan has recumbent monuments including the Govan Sarcophagus and several hogbacks.

**Conclusion**

On the basis of this preliminary investigation, I would suggest that the identification of islands of western Scotland belonging to Dalriada is not by any means firm. In particular, the islands of Coll and Jura, which are frequently identified as Coloso and Hinba, yield no material evidence of Dalriadan or ecclesiastical presence in the early medieval period. The islands of Eigg, Muck, Rum and Canna appear to have been part of the Dalriadan ecclesiastical organisation in the midst of a continuing Pictish population. The island of Skye was almost certainly not Dalriadan, as is generally accepted. The peninsula of Kintyre yields little material evidence in support of its identification as the home of the Cenél nGabráin, although it seems probable that at least the southernmost tip of the peninsula, to the south of Campbeltown, was indeed Dalriadan. The northern boundary of Dalriada appears to have been approximately at the northern edge of Ardnamurchan and the eastern boundary to have been at Druim Alban, as is generally accepted. In the south-east the material evidence seems to indicate a distinct boundary around the Gare Loch and the firth of Clyde. This area is interesting, since the geographical boundary presented by the Gare Loch is not particularly formidable, and the distance between apparently Dalriadan territory at Rosneath and apparently non-Dalriadan territory at Dumbarton is small.