

SOME THOUGHTS

Drostán

I want to start this talk by examining the background of St Drostán who is mentioned in the marginal notes as co-founder with Saint Columba of Deer Monastery. I want further to show that St Drostán and St Columba could not actually have met since there was a considerable time difference between the live times of the two saints.

I have referred heavily, in this section, to the research undertaken by Professor Thomas Clancy of Glasgow University. He searched the literature for references to Drostán and argues that Drostán was actually a Pictish priest who probably trained in Alba ie the land of the Scots settlers and paid occasional visits to Ireland.

What is the evidence? We should actually here enter a health warning because there were no records of any monastic activities which did not come from the Irish records ie there were no “Scottish” records other than the Book of Deer and this was written well after the estimated date of the foundation of the monastery.

However, from the evidence we have, as found in the Irish Annals there was a Drostán of Dairtech died at Ardbreccan in Co Meath. Dairtech comes from two words *dair* meaning oak wood which has variations of Deer, derry, dair etc and monasteries tended to be founded close to these oak woods. The second part of the name is *tech* which in Scottish gaelic is *taigh* pronounced tie. Literally, then a *dairtech* is an oak house but this name was associated in the early church with an oratory rather than a monastery.

Clancy goes on to explain that Dairtech was probably a misinterpretation and that *Dér* (pronounced dare) could have been mistaken by the scribe as an abbreviation for Dairtaigh or alternatively it was simply a scribal error.

Thus the reference in the Irish annals to Drostán of Deirtech could be simply Drostán of Deir. In a poem found in the Book of Leinster, this same Drostán is described as coming from overseas and represents his origins as being Scottish.

The fact that this Drostán passed away in Ardbreccan can be explained by the fact that it was probably normal for the monks probably to update their training in Ireland and Iona and maybe even some made pilgrimages there. However, as explained above this Drostán a name which is, according to Clancy, a Pictish name and what is more, it is virtually the only Drostán that could be our Saint.

Now this knowledge is not comfortable for us here in Deer but it does help to place some events in an historical context.

First of all, this Drostán died in 719. This is more than 120 years after the death of Saint Columba. It is most likely that the Monastery of Deer was founded by him around 700 AD. This makes more sense for a number of reasons. Other than the book of Deer, there is no suggestion anywhere of St Columba having visited the North East. Indeed, there are several reasons why he should stay away. Firstly it was Columba who chose and crowned King Aedhan mac Gabhran as King of the Scots - a bad choice and a king who fought bitterly against the Picts.

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Secondly, Columba's biographer Adamnan, describes in some detail Columba's expedition to meet King Bruide, the king of the Picts in Inverness. The meeting was not particularly successful. However as with many of Columba's adventures it has been mythologised. He took on the monster at Loch Ness, and cured a man of a fatal disease. Columba always ensured that he got a good press.

If he had ventured as far as Deer (or Deir) would we not have had a string of Columban Monasteries across the North East? Certainly his biographer would not have omitted such a significant fact. So what we have is that Deer was founded by a Pictish monk who possibly trained in a Columban monastery with occasional visits to Ireland.

It is interesting to note that both St Drostán and St Fergus have church dedications in Caithness suggesting a direct sea-link rather than a land-link between Caithness and the NE. Contemporary records suggest that both Drostán and Fergus were active in the North East around 700 AD.

All of this points to the fact that, controversially, the monastery in Deer was a Pictish monastery which may or may not have developed as a Columban monastery but that its connection with the Columban tradition happened at some time after its foundation. Clancy cites evidence of dedications in the North East as suggestive of a prospering church and that we can identify individuals and saints with localised cults and Pictish names.

Although there are no dedications to St Columba in the NE there are to Adomnan his biographer. As illustration that the foundation myth at Deer is not an isolated case, we find that there is a similar story associated with Banchory and that St Ternan was left there by Columba. It is generally accepted that these foundation tales were added at a date later than the foundation date. None of this in any way diminishes the importance of Deer. In fact, it could be seen as an important indication that the Pictish people were embracing Christianity independently of the Columban tradition. Indeed, one notable feature of Deer referred to by Clancy is its size and its land holding. In **Text I** it is referred to as a *cathraig* which implies a monastic establishment of considerable size. **Text VI** implies that Deer is among *the chief religious houses of Scotland*. It would appear then that Deer monastery was the central and a very important monastery from which sprang many small churches. It had huge landholdings and a subsidiary church as far away as Ellon. The period of this expansion is suggested to be in the timescale, 670-720 coinciding with the life works of Fergus, Drostán and Nechtán.

In a paper in the publication "**After Columba, after Calvin**", Professor Colm O' Baoill argues that a similar attempt was clearly made to link St Machair to St Columba and this attempt documents a visit by Columba and St Machair to Rome. There is no evidence anywhere to suggest that Columba ever went to Rome. However, this story was contrived to give St Machair a credibility. In the same way it can be argued that by linking Columba with Drostán, through possibly a confusion with St Colm, an attempt was made to give credibility to the Deer Monastery. What is significant is that Adomnan, Columba's biographer, makes no mention of Columba having been in the North East either in Aberdeen or at Deer.

Another reason why the Monastery of Deer would wish to be associated with Columba at the time of the Normanisation when their rights to the land were being threatened was that they could invoke

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the curse left by Columba in the foundation myth that “*whosoever should go against the monastery should not be full of years or success.*” Professor Meek sums up the situation well: He says,

“the Monastery of Deer wrote its own origin legend in Gaelic in the margins of the Book of Deer, cleverly making the case for the intervention of Columba in the assignation of a monastery which was already in existence before the creation of the legend.”

Culdees

Another angle is that the Monastery of Deer could have been in the control of the Culdees. There were certainly Culdee monasteries in the North East eg at Monymusk. Who were the culdees? The name Culdee is a corruption of *Celi Dé* (Companions of God). They were originally from Ireland but not Columban. They were seen in many cases as a more conservative group reacting against the laxer organisation of the old church but this may be a simplistic interpretation of a much more complex organisation. Whatever their roots, the Culdees played an important transitional role in many of the monasteries. However, it was not until long after Columba’s death that they became associated with Iona. Subsequently, there was a Culdee Community at Iona in parallel with the Columban brethren. There is no suggestion anywhere of a Culdee community at Deer but other than the reference in the Book of Deer there is no mention of a monastery of Deer. So we must regard this as a possibility. So it is fair to speculate that over time the practice at Deer became lax and a group of Culdee zealots moved in. It is also possible that they brought with them some new ideas and also some traditions from elsewhere in Scotland or from Ireland.

What we do know, is that at least one and possibly more than one of the monks were conversant with Gaelic since we have several different hands responsible for the Gaelic notes. (One could, of course, argue that they were simply copying the text without understanding and there is some evidence to suggest that this was the case.) Could such a group in Deer trying to maintain their monastery there seek to raise its status by associating themselves with Columba through the origin myth. Again, this is a possibility!

The other significant event which colours a lot of what happened in the early church in Scotland was the Synod of Whitby. There were basically two branches of the early Church - both Catholic, both of Roman origin but one developed from St Ninian and Whithorn and the other through St Patrick in Ireland. The organisation of those Churches was different - The St Ninian Church was episcopal ie based on a central church with offshoots whereas the Columban was generally formed through unconnected monasteries. This led to a disagreement as to which was the correct organisation. Ultimately the dispute between these two branches of the church focussed on the size and type of the monk’s tonsure and the dating of Easter. These at least were the stated differences. However the struggle for supremacy between the churches was political rather than religious and under the adjudication of the King of Northumbria was resolved at the Synod of Whitby in 664 in favour of the non-Columban Church. From then on, the Columban Church started a slow and steady decline and many of the disaffected monks joined the Culdees.

Dinnsenchas

Dindsenchas is the "tradition or lore of places"; (in modern Irish the word *dinnseanchas* means topography). It is a class of place name study (onomastics) in which places are related through tales in early Irish literature from the 6th - 10th C, recounting the origins of place-names and traditions

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concerning events and characters associated with the places in question. The first survey of this practice was found in the **Book of Leinster** - a manuscript of the 12th century, with partial survivals in a number of other manuscript sources. The text shows signs of having been compiled from a number of provincial sources and the earliest poems date from at least as early as the 11th century. *Dindsenchas* stories are also incorporated into saga texts such as *Táin Bó Cúlange* (The great cattle raid of Culange) and *Acallam na Senórach*. The *Acallam na Senórach* (*Colloquy of the Ancients*), is a monastic compilation of materials from the Fionn Cycle, made in the late 12th cent. The narrative tells how Oisín, son of Fionn, and Caoilte, son of Rónán, the last surviving warriors of the Fianna, emerge from the woods of the Fews Mountains, to encounter St Patrick engaged on his Christian mission.

The priests with Patrick are frightened by these strange-looking men with their enormous wolfhounds. When the saint exorcises the warriors, legions of devils leave them. Patrick and Caoilte then travel Ireland together, the old pagan narrating the lore of places that they pass interweaving myth and legend as he interprets the terrain. Although they are known today from these **written** sources, the *dindsenchas* are clearly a product of the **oral** tradition. They are of course far from an accurate history of how places came to be named. Many of the explanations given are made to fit the name and not the other way around. In such works, some well-known place name is mentioned and a question posed as to how it got that name. The explanation is usually given in terms of pseudoetymology, or the invention of a suitable name. It may take the form of what has been termed an “elaborate legendary anecdote” relating to a fictitious, and often mythological, individual and some imaginative incident in which he or she was reputedly involved (e.g., a river or lake named from a legendary princess said to have drowned there). While such purported “explanations” may be enjoyed as entertaining stories, they rarely, if ever, shed any worthwhile light on the true origins or meaning of the names, and therefore have little in common with the results of modern scholarly study of placenames.

I will illustrate this with reference to an epic poem written by my father in the 1930s in the Finnian style.

The story tells how the Fianna were hunting when they saw a lady, described as “*more beautiful than the sun*” approaching. *She told Fionn that her name was Niamh Nuachrotach, daughter of the king of Greece and she explained that her father had married her to a monstrous warrior. This warrior who was called Tailc mac Trein, had the ears, head and tail of a cat and was a horrific fighter. He had devastated Greece twice over in order to force the match with her and she had fled throughout the whole world from this unbearable husband.*

Fionn promised to protect her, saying that there was no warrior alive but would find his better among the Fianna.

Soon after, Tailc ‘the king of the Cat-Heads’ arrived and immediately demanded battle for his wife. No less than ten hundred men of the Fianna opposed him, who were slaughtered by the stranger, and then, disheartened, Fionn mac Cumhall asked Oscar his son to take the field. For five whole days and nights without break the two were locked in deadly combat, but in the end Oscar prevailed and slew his opponent.

Seeing the extent of the carnage, Niamh fell dead from shame and her death was a greater cause of woe than anything else to the Fianna. They named the place Cnoc an Air (Knockanaar, Kerry) and means the Hill of the Slaughter.

I would suggest to you that the original Pictish monastery was called Dair or Dér and that the mythological story of Drostan’s tears was a retrospective example of Dinnsenchas.

Evidence from the Grants

You might think that by questioning the foundation myth for Deer and the involvement of Colm Chille, I am actually questioning the whole concept of Deer Monastery. Nothing could be further from the truth. What I have tried to show is that there was a monastery at Deer - probably one of the most successful in the North East and that with the various threats that it faced, it tried to establish its credentials. If your home and place of work were threatened by an incoming people like the Normans, would you not want to call on all your friends for help? Would you not use every device possible to retain what you had? After all what you owned was based on tenuous contracts probably by word of mouth. Who was the best known Saint in Scotland? Why it was Colm Chille (Columba), so, would have said the revisionist monks, let us suggest that this was his foundation. To add spice we will put in a suggestion that if anybody interfered with our monastery, then Columba’s curse would be invoked and their life and future success would be curtailed.

Paleographic research suggests that the Gaelic notes were written over a period of time and by up to five different hands. There is also an assertion by David Broun that part III and IV were erased and rewritten and amended to make the claim stronger. ie the original was erased and replaced with the following: all lands “were free from toiseach and mormaer until judgement”. In fact Broun’s argument is that they were trying to show that the lands should be “free from all burdens.

From the records, too, we can date some of these transactions. There is a reference to Mael Coluim mac Cinaeda who died in 1034 and to Mael Coluim Mac Mail Brigte who died in 1029. So we are talking about these notes having been written somewhere between the end of the 10th and beginning of the 11th centuries.

What we have in the Gaelic notes, though very brief, is an important insight into the social history of rural Buchan at a time of immense change and I would recommend as fascinating reading Dauvit Broun’s chapter in - Studies in the Book of Deer, entitled “*The property records in the Book of Deer as a source for early Scottish Society*”. This can be found on pp 313 - 360.

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I have tried to make an honest appraisal of the notes. They are extremely important and at the time were written for an express purpose. They were written to try and protect the monastery from a perceived threat from the Norman overlords. What is very positive in all of this are the facts

- that there was a monastery in Deer;
- that it survived until it was replaced by the Abbey; there is some suggestion that the monks may have moved from the monastery to the Abbey.
- that the monastery was extremely important in the North East. Indeed it was a focus for the church in the immediate Deer area and a considerable area surrounding Deer.
- that Gaelic was the spoken language at the time in Buchan.
- that at some time in its development it had connections with the Columban Church.
- that all of this makes it more important for us to try and establish through archaeology where the monastery was.
- that we need to be pro-active in establishing a centre at Aberdeen University where the book can be displayed on a temporary or permanent basis.
- that we undoubtedly have the first monastery in the North East, established by the Picts and gradually, possibly after the merging of Scotland and Pictland in 844 by Alasdair son of Alpin becoming Columban.
- We should be proud of this and celebrate one of the great gems of our history.

Alan I Cameron, June 2010