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The Significance of Music in the Gàidhealtachd in the Pre- and Early-Historic Period

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ABSTRACT

No abstract.



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*Ata an saoghal & gach beó-chreatuir da bfuil ann, na chlarsigh:*¹
'The world & every living creature in it is a harp.'

As Robert Kirk's heading for his introduction to the Psalms reminds us, the Gaels' love of music is legendary. The Psalter was the ideal place for Kirk's 1684 assertion, for the Psalms – the three fifties – were the Biblical home of the bard. David, portrayed with striking frequency in early mediaeval Scottish stone carving, represented an ideal: a great king who was a poet and musician. Kirk's assertion is not only Biblical but Pythagorean, the relevant texts of music theory being well known to the Gaels (Purser 2006b: 305).

The Gàidhealtachd has made a significant contribution to European archaeo-musicology, including pre-historic artefacts, some of the earliest vernacular texts about music, and a remarkable range of sculptural evidence. Much of this evidence crosses boundaries that currently separate the societies which produced it, but the early Bronze Age pan-pipes found in County Wicklow (O'Dwyer 2004:141–5) may be as relevant to the Scottish Gaels as the Iron Age bridge for a stringed instrument found on Skye may be to the Irish Gaels (see below). Pre- and early-historic evidence is necessarily patchy, but there is sufficient to propose a degree of continuity, and the quality of the evidence supports the suggestion that high value attached to music and musical instruments, including lip-reed, reed and stringed instruments.

If the Bronze Age seems too early to be relevant to the Gàidhealtachd, we should remember that the inhabitants of a place are not subject to the divisions imposed upon them by linguists, archaeologists, geneticists, or anyone else. Dental analysis has shown that the woman buried close to and roughly contemporaneously with the bridge, found on Skye, lived locally, but we do not know what language she spoke or sang (and these might not necessarily be the same). We also know that the site was in virtually continuous use from the Stone Age to the early mediaeval period, and there is no evidence of sudden change.²

1.0 Rock Gongs

The earliest known musical instruments in the Gàidhealtachd are rock gongs (Purser 2007: 23–5). Cup marks feature on rock gongs on Tiree and the southern slopes of *Sìdh Chailleann* – the fairy hill of the Caledonians.³ The rock gong at Ballater (*pictured*) has a pattern in relief and apparently also incised, running the length of the rock, though whether man had a hand in this is not



Fig. 1: Ballater rock gong. (Photo: J. Purser)

¹ Robert Kirk, from his introduction to the Psalms of David (1684), quoted in R. Black 2008: 80.

² The full report of the excavations is still being written up. Meanwhile, the team have published some of their interim findings at www.high-pasture-cave.org.

³ This rock, identified as resonant by the author, is situated at NN 750 554.

known.⁴ The rock gong at Port Appin is stated to have been used to gather the clan (MacLeod 1981). Several of these rock gongs have names showing that their potential function was still understood: they are ‘the iron stone’ at Arn Hill (the recumbent of a stone circle), ‘the singing stone’ at Ballater, ‘the bell stone’ at ‘Ringing Craig’ near Cabrach, and *clach a’ choire* (‘the kettle stone’) at Baile Pheudrais on Tiree (Macdonald and MacKinnon 1899: 289; Beveridge 1903: 115). A reference to what was probably a rock gong known as *Clach a’ Ghlagain* (meaning ‘rattling’ or ‘talking’), is also associated with a prophecy – in this case that of Mac a’ Chreachaire, who declared that when this stone was found, Kishmul Castle would become *càrn dhruidheachan* – a cairn for thrushes (Black 2005: 144). Part of *Clach Oscar* at the head of Loch Slapin on the Isle of Skye, which is broken into three large rocks, is also a rock gong.⁵ Such evidence suggests that the use of such gongs continued over four thousand years.

2.0 Hand Bells

In a previous article, I have discussed the early Christian quadrangular hand-bells of Scotland and their connections with rock gongs, including the use of rock gongs and bells for identical functions (Purser 2006a: 267–91). In the same article, I underlined their relationship with the round towers and the fact that these bells (both iron and bronze) are uniquely associated with the Celtic church, and nearly all the Scottish ones with the Gàidhealtachd. At least one place-name would seem to be associated with such a bell – *Eas nan clag* at the headwaters of the river Nant, though how or why the waterfall acquired this name is not known.⁶ The bells feature in the dialogues between Oisín (who did not care for them) and Patrick, as well as in early Gaelic poetry. The subsequent production of beautiful bell-shrines (e.g. the Guthrie bell-shrine), further underlines their significance.

3.0 Horns and Trumpets

I have argued elsewhere that the magnificent cast bronze Bronze Age horns found in Ireland were probably known in Scotland (Purser 2007: 25–7). Their number, the amount of bronze they require, and the complexity of their manufacture represent an astonishing investment in music on the part of the society which produced them.

Such investment is far from being isolated in the archaeological record in Scotland and Ireland. From the late Iron Age (200 BC–200 AD), the Irish Loughnashade horn and the Deskford Carnyx found in north-eastern Scotland, both made of beaten bronze, are near contemporaries. Parallels with the Torrs pony cap and Battersea shield indicate a number of similarities in the manufacture of these instruments; indeed, it has been suggested that the surviving Loughnashade horn was Brythonic in manufacture (R. and V. Megaw 1994: 23). In addition, the cast-bronze Caprington horn, found in Ayrshire, and the Ard Brinn trumpet from Ireland show that within the single category of bronze lip-reed instruments there was considerable variety.

That these were instruments of the highest status can be deduced from the skill and expense of their manufacture as well as from their ritual deposition. The Ard Brinn trumpa has over one thousand rivets so tight that the instrument can still be played (O’Dwyer 2004: 78–80 and 125–30). While a very similar trumpet, recently presented at the Royal Society of Antiquaries, is of uncertain provenance, its bell-end is original, and is identical with that of the Ard Brinn trumpa.⁷ If these are

⁴ The Ballater rock gong is at NO 2997 0162. Catherine Fagg (1997: 82) suggests the marks are glacial grooves, but one of the lines is proud of the surface and, taken as a whole, they are difficult to reconcile with glacial activity.

⁵ The latter rock, identified as resonant by the author, is situated at 57 14 30 N by 6 3 30 W.

⁶ Information from Brigadier John MacFarlane.

⁷ ‘A newly discovered Irish Iron Age riveted horn’, presented at the *Finds and Exhibits Meeting*, Society of Antiquaries, London, by Maurice Byrne and Michael Wright, 4 February 2010.

the sorts of instruments referred to in stories, as in the following from *Táin Bó Fraích*, then literary tradition clearly indicates the status not only of the instruments but also of the musicians:

Mórfesser cornaire leo co cornaib órdaib agus argdidib, co n-éaigib ildathachaib, co mongaib órdaib sidbudib, co lennaib étrachtaib. (Meid 1974: 2)

There were seven horn players with them, with horns gilded and silvered, wearing many-coloured garments; their hair was fairy yellow, and they wore shining mantles.

I do not suggest that the carnyx itself was known in Ireland, but merely that instruments such as the Loughnashade horns would have been able to fulfil similar musical functions, and that they had high status.

3.1 The Deskford Carnyx

These instruments had a strong visual, indeed sculptural, presence and, in the case of the late Iron Age Deskford Carnyx, this is reflected in its appearance in other art forms. The carnyx is a trumpet-type instrument, two metres long, held vertically, and made largely of beaten bronze. The refinement of its manufacture, including bronze and brass as contrasting colour elements at the bell end in the

form of a totemic wild boar's head, has been closely studied (Hunter 2001: 77–108; Piggott 1959; Purser 1998: 325–36; Maniquet 2008: 57–76). The fineness of the workmanship; the thinness of the metal (markedly affecting its sound); the incorporation of structural rivetting into the design 'which mimicked flesh folds of the boar's head'; the stylisation of the lie of the hair surrounding the eyes, are all managed with superb rhythmic control. The reconstruction required, and found in John Creed, a craftsman of the highest calibre, who wrote, 'As a visual artist, it has a particular attraction for me, as being the only instrument I know of where visual appearance is as important as sound.' (Creed 1998: 347–49). These characteristics strongly imply high status for the instrument and, presumably, its music. But there is also a mythological aspect to the significance of the carnyx.



Fig. 2: Deskford Carnyx. (Photo: J. Purser)

It has been suggested that the famous image on the Gundestrup bowl, which shows instruments of the type of the Deskford Carnyx, relates to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Olmsted 1976: 95–103 and figures 1–9; also Olmsted 1992: 5–17). This tale, known throughout the Gaelic-speaking world, has echoes through the centuries, as does the totemic character of the wild boar, so magnificently represented on this instrument. We know from *Táin Bó Fraích* that:

A chornairi iarum remisium dochum in dúine. Sennait di conid abbad tricha fer di sainchaemaib Aillella ar sirechtaí. (Meid 1974: 9)

His horn-players went in front of him into the dun. They blew so that thirty of Aillil's finest men died of ecstatic grief.

Fraoch hears then the lament of his mother and her people – the people of the *sith*, the fairies – and he is taken into their mound and returned whole. From this event, the story tells us, 'comes the Fairies' Lament of the musicians of Ireland'.

Atnagat a ngol oc dul uad co corastar na dáini bátar isind liss tar cend. Is de atá golgaire bad síde la aes cúuil Hérenn. (Meid 1974: 10)

They uttered their lament as they left him, so that the people in the enclosure were prostrated by it. Hence comes the Fairies' Lament of the musicians of Ireland. (Byrne and Dillon 1937: 9)

The manuscript tradition of *Táin Bó Fraích* is early mediaeval Gaelic, but the story is based on material that may be as early as 700 (Meid 1974: xxv). Many of the tale's motifs are ancient and widespread, and can be associated with a scene such as that on the Gundestrup bowl, which features carnyx players, warriors, and a possible healing ceremony associated with the otherworld. Consider the bowl's lavish depiction of horse-harness and of the careful plaiting of the horses' tails – details paralleled in the story itself by the lavish accoutrements of Fraoch's horses, whose harness included little bells; also the possibility that the warriors processing in front of the carnyx players are singing, a detail which brings to mind a sixteenth-century Gaelic text containing parts of the original sixth-century *Amra Choluimb Chille* by Dallán Forgaill, in which the Fenian band is described as singing around a silver bowl (Stokes 1899: Appendix, 422–3. Text: Ms. Egerton 1782).

Given that the Gundestrup bowl and *Táin Bó Fraích* are high points in the visual and the literary canon of the Celts, the significance of the carnyx on the one and the vital presence of possibly similar horns in the other strongly indicates that such instruments were profoundly significant and had a variety of functions.

Evidence relating to the totemic importance of boars further supports such a conclusion. Consider, from *c.* 200 BC, the silver Gundestrup bowl with warriors, cauldron and three carnyx players whose instruments resemble and can imitate the sound of wild boar; from *c.* 0 AD, the mixed burial, in a ritual context, of foetal human bones, pig bones, and the skull of a wild boar, at Uamha an Ard Achadh, a district whose totemic animal is the wild boar; from *c.* 200 AD, the Deskford carnyx with wild boar image including moving jaw and tongue; from 575 AD, the totemic imagery of the Knocknagael boar; and from the 7th-century AD, King Aillil's musicians, and the Celtic warrior band described with a silver cauldron. All of these combined not only leave a powerful impression of interconnectedness and of continuity, but above all underline the symbolic significance of the carnyx in a mythological context, and its use in ceremony, including possible healing, which take it well beyond its martial significance as evidenced by its depictions by the Romans.

3.2 Horns in the early Mediaeval period

The tradition of horn- and trumpet-playing did not end with the Bronze or Iron Ages. In a poem to St. Brigid, thought to have been written by Orthanach, Bishop of Kildare in the first half of the ninth-century, we have a description of horns in battle describing famous 'Alenn' under which many a king is buried:

*Gáir a ilaig iar cach mbúaid
im chúail claideb, comtaig drend;
bríg a fian fri indna gorm,
gloim a corn cor cétaib cend.*

The shout of its triumph after each victory round a tangle of swords, a fiery encounter; the strength of its mercenary bands against the great battle array, the shriek of its horns over hundreds of heads (Greene and O'Connor 1967: 68–70).

Horns could, however, also be played sweetly, as in this poem, attributed to Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh – an attribution which, if correct, 'would mean it was already composed by the thirteenth century' (Gillies 2007: 33):

*Scéalaigheacht ann, duanaigheacht scol, fianaiigheacht;
cabhlaigheacht chiúil, chornaigheacht chiúin is cliaraigheacht.*

[There is] story-telling there, recitation of poems of learned poets, fian-lore; harp-playing by way of music, gentle horn-playing and choral singing. (Gillies 2007: 39)

This poem was included in *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Quiggin 1937: 64–5), and its attribution to Muireadhach Albanach, reputed ancestor of the Scottish MacMhuirich bardic family, adds to its significance in a Scottish Gaelic context.

Two Pictish stones (Hilton of Cadboll and Aberlemno III) show pairs of trumpeters blowing straight cylindrical instruments. By contrast, the Lough Erne trumpet is conical rather than cylindrical, thus closely mirroring the trumpets included in the image of David from the eighth-century ‘Vespasian’ Psalter from Canterbury, in Hiberno-Saxon style (Purser 2002: 17–25), an image showing two musicians blowing straight wooden instruments of similar length to those shown on the Pictish stones, but manifestly conical. That the instruments are wooden is clearly shown by their colour and by the fact that metal rings have been used to contain any tendency they might have to split open. Opposite them are two other musicians playing curved horns such as one sees on the Pictish stones. In this context, the Gaelic literary evidence from the tenth-century AD is significant:

*Ettal seisidach Cruitheantuath inso i cloich Loch Comru:
Gilla padraig plagh mellghaile noconhuair slan troid seanmaire
tlam dotharr agmuilt fìdhnaigi
Cisdi nach roichet foglaidi adarc bó rodraide
cornaire istí ibraighi.⁸*

A six-phrase Pictish metre here in the stone of Loch Comru.

Gille-Phádraig, plague of versecraft,

Has not found the musicians’ sound measure:

A handful of a wether’s belly-wool for bedding;

A treasure-chest bandits can’t get at;

The horn of a cow, snarling fiercely;

A horn player, inside, on a yew-wood instrument.⁹

The yew (a sacred tree) was used for musical instruments, and to play this particular instrument indoors was not welcome. Here, a different word *cornaire* is used, perhaps to distinguish it from the word *adarc* which clearly means the curved animal horn: *adarc* literally means ‘arc’ (Downey 1997: 136). The trumpeters on the Pictish slabs are shown in a Christian and/or hunting context. Downey lays emphasis on their secular aspect in particular (Downey 1997: 139–55), and they share the significance of such instruments in the hunt with many cultures right up to the present day.

4.0 Stringed Instruments

A recent find at Uamha an Ard Achadh at Cille Bhrìde on the Island of Skye, conservatively dated to the fourth-century BC, provides early evidence for stringed instruments in the Gàidhealtachd.¹⁰ The object is a wooden bridge for a seven- or eight-stringed instrument, and is the oldest to be discovered in Western Europe. Fragments of a tortoise-shell Greek lyre from the sixth-century BC excepted, it is also the oldest find of any part of a stringed instrument in Western Europe, although images of lyres from the Hallstatt culture precede it by two or three centuries (Steinmann and Reichlin 2006: 241; Musée de Préhistoire d’Île-de-France de Nemours 2002: 119–23; Roberts 1981:

⁸ Thurneysen, in Stokes and Windisch 1891: 104.

⁹ Adapted from Clancy 1998:145. See Purser 2004: 225.

¹⁰ This dating will be published in the reports of the excavation in due course. The author is indebted to Steven Birch, Dr Graeme Lawson, and other members of the team, of which the author is a member, for this and related information.

303–12). The significance of the find is further emphasised by the fact that any bridge is organologically significant and revealing, allowing one to posit the number of strings, the likely size of the instrument, and the likely manner of its playing. With the bridge were discovered other fragments of charred wood, one being a possible corner of a lyre-type instrument; and parts of a human skull. All had been scorched and only survived because they were at the very base of the fire. The implication is that the skull parts were those of the owner/player of the instrument, and that the person (the sex is undetermined) and the instrument were a motivation for the fire, suggesting that they were of considerable importance – an importance sustained through many centuries (Lawson 2001: 114–6 and 213; Bischof 2002: 215–36, esp. 223–4).¹¹

The bridge, about two-thirds of which survives, has notches for the strings, all in the same plane, suggesting that the strings would have been plucked or struck. They could not have been bowed; and in any case, the date is too early for any likelihood of a bowed instrument. A second-century BC stone carving from northern Brittany depicting a seven-stringed lyre may give an indication of what the Uamha an Ard Achadh instrument was like, although the presence of the double yoke (possibly a capo) on the Brittany carving remains controversial (Musée de Préhistoire d'Ile-de-France de Nemours 2002: 120–22; Vendries 1993–4: 38–9).

Other finds of parts of stringed instruments include an antler wrest plank from Dùn an Fheurain in Argyllshire (c. 100AD); a possible tuning peg from Cnip in Lewis (first-century BC–first-century AD); and possible peg and wrest planks from Skail in Orkney, the latter probably Pictish.¹² The context of other organological evidence for the existence of stringed instruments in Scotland, from Castle Sween and Finlaggan, suggests that the instruments were used in high-status environments (Sanger and Kinnaird 1992: 64–5).

The ninth/tenth-century *Scéla Cano* provides literary evidence for the significance of stringed instruments in the same region of the Gàidhealtachd as Uamha an Ard Achadh. It describes the retinue of Cano MeicGartnáin, whose main residence was probably Dùn Cana on Raasay (MacLean 1997: 174–5), including fifty gillies, each carrying a tiompan:¹³

Fithchell for muin cach gilla[i] co feraib óir 7 airgid; timpán créda i(n) láim chlí in gilla[i]; da mílchoin ar slabra[i]d airgit ina láim deis (Binchy 1975: ll. 35–7).

On the back of each gillie, a chess-board with its men of gold and silver; in his left hand a bronze tiompan, in his right hand, two deerhounds on silver leads.¹⁴

While the report of fifty instruments may be an exaggeration, it is worth remembering that twenty-six bronze horns were found in a single hoard at Dowris, representing an enormous expenditure in bronze (Waddell 1998: 225 ff.). MacGartnáin was on his way to Ireland, and the argument for artistic interaction between Scotland and Ireland in relation to high-status objects is supported by written and material sources, with both Cormac's *Glossary* and an eighth-century law tract specifically mentioning Pictish brooches (Isaac 2005: 73–82; Etchingham and Swift 2004: 31–48). It is from the eighth and the following two centuries that images of triangular framed harps first appear on Pictish cross-slabs, the player sometimes seated on a high-status zoomorphic chair, or associated with Davidic imagery but, in all cases, in a Christian context; these images are further considered below in relation to triple pipes.

¹¹ The chronological list of archaeological evidence for lyres omits all the Scottish examples.

¹² J.V.S. Megaw in Appendix 1 of Ritchie: 1970-71:106-107; also Buteux 1997: 114, 116, 100-101; and Hunter and Kitchener 2006:136-151.

¹³ The form of the tiompan has been widely discussed, but certainly designates a sweet-sounding plucked string instrument; see Purser 2007: 35 and notes.

¹⁴ The translation is the author's. Thurneysen translates *créda* as 'tin'. The more likely meaning is 'bronze' – referring either to bronze decoration on the instrument and/or to its strings.

4.1 Harps and their decoration

The significance of the harp or *clàrsach* in the Gàidhealtachd has been well researched and requires little further demonstration. Sanger and Kinnaird have, in particular, outlined its vital role in Gaelic society (Sanger and Kinnaird 1992). Many performers and researchers have followed up their work, and a few have begun to re-introduce it as an accompaniment to, or equal partner in the performance of *òran mòr* and even Fenian lay. The quotation which heads this article, coming from a work published during the decline of the *clàrsach*, insists on its fundamental significance, particularly in a Christian context.

But there may be more to Kirk's quotation than meets the eye of the non-performer, with the identification of the instrument with living organic form. Because the *clàrsach* is traditionally played on the left shoulder, with the left hand playing the higher strings and the right, the lower, Ann and Charlie Heymann suggest that its form was symbolic, in that the left side of the body represented the female, thus the treble range, while the right side represented the male. They also see symbolism in the three parts of the *clarsach*. The box is the female belly, while the fore-pillar is the male phallic member, which both stands up in front of the player, and penetrates the female box. The two are joined in harmony by the curve (Heymann 1991: 82–95). William Drummond makes a not dissimilar anthropomorphic identification for his lute in a sonnet from his *Commendatory Verses* (Drummond 1832: 292).

Of further significance is the evidence for a variety of types of harp. Early mediaeval stone carvings from both eastern and western Scotland clearly depict different sizes and morphology of triangular framed harps, and later mediaeval texts indicate a division between harps strung with gut, and *clàrsachs* with metal. In the case of the latter, strings of bronze, silver and gold are mentioned in manuscript sources, and have been successfully applied to replicas (Purser 2007: 34 and notes).

The tradition of decorating musical instruments is international, but it was a tradition of long standing in Gaelic culture, as evidenced by this passage, again from *Táin Bó Fraich*:

Crotbolg di chrocuib doborchon impu cona n-indenam do phartaing foa n-indenam di ór agus argut. Bíann n'errad impu a mmedón; ba gilidir snechta. Sella dubglassa inna medón aide. Bruit lín gilidir fúan ngéssa imna téta. Crota di ór agus arccut agus findruine co ndelbaib nathrach agus én agus mílchon di ór agus arccut. Amal no glúaistís na téta sin, immreithitis ne delba sin tarum imma firu imme cúaird. (Meid 1974: ll. 91–8).

They had harp-bags of otter-skins covering them, with red ornament overworked with gold and silver. Deer-skin around them in the middle as white as snow, with dark grey spots in the centre. Coverings of linen, white as the plumage of swans around the strings. Harps of gold and silver and white bronze with figures of serpents and birds and hounds on them in gold and silver. When those strings moved, the figures would move all about.¹⁵

The riches of this description are borne out by subsequent evidence. A poem from the thirteenth century by Giolla Brighde Albanach (the Scottish servant of Brigid) shows that the beauty of the harp was valued equally in Ireland and Scotland. The poem praises an O'Brien of Thomond, and the harp is in Scotland and is not to be returned at any price:

*mac allmurdaig ni ragaib
an slabradaig siodamail!*

No son of a foreigner shall obtain
The graceful, gem-set, fairy instrument! (O'Curry 1893: 272–3)

¹⁵ Byrne & Dillon 1937: 4, with slight alterations taken from Henderson 1911: 5-6.

Centuries later, beauty was still a fundamental aspect of the manufacture of harps, as evidenced by the fifteenth-century Lamond and Queen Mary harps in the National Museum of Scotland, and by George Buchanan, who wrote in the late sixteenth-century of the Scottish Gaels that ‘their grand ambition is to adorn their harps with great quantities of silver and gems, those who are too poor to afford jewels substituting crystals in their stead’ (Watkins 1822: 6).

5.0 Triple Pipes

Another instrument associated with the Celtic church was the triple pipe, consisting of a drone and two chanters, each pipe having its own reed. No actual instruments have been found, but surviving images indicate that these pipes clearly parallel the Sardinian launeddas. The launeddas, still played today, has a history going back to the Bronze Age. Unlike the triple pipes, however, it is not associated with stringed instruments of any kind (Bentzon 1969; Paulis 1994:137–55). Images of triple pipes appear, in association with harps or lyres, on the late eighth-century St Martin’s Cross in Iona as well as on tenth-century cross-slabs at Lethendy and



Fig. 3: St Martin’s Cross, Iona.
(Photo: J. Purser)



Fig. 4: Hooded players of clarsach and triple pipes on the Ardochattan cross slab.
(Photo: Tom E. Gray)

Ardchattan in Scotland

and at Monasterboice and Clonmacnoise in Ireland. Five later depictions of triple pipes sustain the association with stringed instruments: in the 12th-century York Psalter;¹⁶ a 12th-century English bestiary;¹⁷ a 13th-century Spanish manuscript, *Cantigas de Santa Maria*;¹⁸ and a carving of a triple piper in Westminster Cathedral.

An early thirteenth-century stone-carving at St John, Hawkchurch, in Devon, shows a goat playing triple pipes, opposite a ram playing a fiddle (Montagu 1998: 24). This image would, of course, reinforce the assertion that the triple piper on Muiredach’s Cross at Monasterboice is playing for the devil (Ramsey 2002: 31–3). But while the association of pipes with the devil and Pan, and with a lower aesthetic and moral class, in medieval mythology, religion and even law is unchallenged, the depiction of triple pipers in the Scottish and Irish contexts suggests no such clear association. On St Martin’s Cross, the musicians face each other; on the Ardochattan stone the three musicians are depicted on the same side and with the same hoods – possibly clerical hoods; and on the Lethendy stone they are playing immediately beneath two clerics. There too, the musicians face each other and play simultaneously – as they do on the Monasterboice cross, the piper also being placed on a zoomorphic chair (suggesting high status)

and with his back to the devil. The depiction on the Clonmacnoise cross is in the context of the desert fathers, St Paul and St Anthony. Images of this theme appear on Pictish cross-slabs, notably that at Nigg, where they are depicted with two lions and a raven providing food (Henderson and Henderson 2004: 139–40).

¹⁶ Glasgow University Library, Hunterian Add.f11.

¹⁷ Oxford, MS Bodl 602 f.10r.

¹⁸ Madrid, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio, MS B.1.2, f.49v.

By the time the early laws were being formulated, we see the classically-derived hierarchy of strings over wind partly in operation: according to the *Uraicecht Becc*, the only entertainer with an honour-price is the *cruit* player. The eighth-century *Bretha Nemed déodenach*, however, accords an honour price (*eneclann*) to the piper also (Kelly 1988/91:64, n. 198). It could be that these rankings were primarily designed to fit in with imported Christian hierarchies based on biblical references; unfortunately, the precise nature of the instruments mentioned in these biblical sources is not that clear. What is clear is that the Psalms refer to a variety of instruments, and they mention dance as a proper way to praise the Lord. One can only read Psalm 150 as being deliberately all-inclusive and, it being the ultimate psalm of the three fifties, it must have carried weight with the Gaels. Given the value accorded to the pipes in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland, and taking into account that the word *ceòl* ('music') may be derived from the Latin for a pipe,¹⁹ it may be that the Gaels of Ireland and Scotland ranked the triple pipes in accordance with what they took to be their standing in holy scripture, and were reluctant to accept a lower status for them, especially if such status derived from an argument that pipes were associated with the devil.

English manuscript sources bear out this argument. If the character playing the triple pipes on the Canterbury bestiary is a devil, who, if not a devil, is playing the harp behind him?²⁰ What, then, is one to make of their supposedly opposed status? And how can one separate the triple piper on the York Psalter from the rest of the musicians accompanying David – musicians who are part of an ensemble portrayed without any judgmental elements?²¹ And what of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, whose evidence unequivocally supports the pipes being used in honour of the Virgin, thus directly associating the pipes with the idea of absolute purity?

The tenth-century narrative *Inní díatá cuslinn Brighde agus Aidhed mic Dhíchoíme* contains a description of the making and significance of 'forked' pipes (Meyer 1903: 46–54; full text in Thurneysen 1933: 120). This is a version of the widespread story of the King with Ass's Ears, in which the king's secret is made known to a plant (reed or tree) which subsequently reveals it to a musician through the medium of a musical instrument. The musician is then impelled to reveal the secret in the presence of the King (Milin 1989).²² In this Gaelic version, Mac Dichoime collapses under the burden of keeping the secret, which he has discovered when shaving the king. Three streams of blood soak into the ground from his nostrils and mouth and, from these, three saplings subsequently grow. When Mac Dichoime re-visits the site, he sees the trees and makes pipes out of them:

*Luid immorro [mac] Dichoime cosna flescaibh iar d[t]ain, co ndergenai cuislind
ndègabail dib.*

Meyer translates this as 'Then Mac Dichoime went to the saplings and made a double pipe from them'. *Dègabail* means 'bi-furcated' but as there were three trees, and Celtic mythology tends to group things in threes including types of music, three pipes seems a more likely number – a possibility confirmed later in the tale:

*At.berat araile dno conad buinne tregabail do.ronadh donaib chuisslennaib tredaib,
ro.fassater triasin run.*

¹⁹ McBain (1896 and 1982: 80). *Piob>ciob>ciol>ceòl*, is a rough-and-ready way of following the possible transition., but the etymology remains obscure.

²⁰ MS Bodl 602, f.10r.

²¹ Ann Buckley's doubts as to whether the York Psalter shows a triple piper or a pan piper are not convincing (Buckley 1991: 180-181).

²² Milin's comprehensive study unfortunately omits any reference to the latter part of the story as provided by Thurneysen.

But others say that from the three-forked saplings that grew from the secret a triple pipe was made. (Thurneysen 1933:120)

Besides revealing that triple and double pipes were both known to the tenth-century scribe, the story reveals both the pagan power of the pipes and the Christian status of their music, for St Brigid forces Mac Dichoime to choose between his pipes and a noviate who has run off with him. Mac Dichoime surrenders the pipes. The scribe also records a version which has St Brigid splitting up the pipes and giving away two of them. This suggests that their status meant more to her than their music, and the one pipe she retains features on her battle banner, thereby asserting her episcopal status as well as confirming its visual significance. Mac Dichoime, however, dies of grief without his instrument and the music it made.

The story counteracts any suggestion that the musical instruments depicted on Irish and Pictish stones were merely copies taken out of pattern books or from psalters or other iconographic sources. It also suggests that, just as is the case for bagpipes today, their status in an ecclesiastical context was equivocal. However, in the wider Gaelic context, reed instruments retain as high a status as any musical instrument can claim, and it is suggested here that the iconography associated with triple pipes commonly acknowledges their acceptance as appropriate for the praise of God.

Conclusion

There is yet much work to be done. It is only recently that archaeologists have turned their attention to the Gàidhealtachd in any numbers, and discoveries such as that at Uamha an Ard Achadh challenge many assumptions. There has, for instance, been a tendency to regard the north-west of Scotland as incapable of supporting a society that might have a use for such refined objects as the Lewis chess men. Only recently has this assumption been seriously questioned (Caldwell, D. H., Hall, M. A. & Wilkinson, C. A., 2009). Similarly, the evidence that the people living in 300 BC, in what is now the Gàidhealtachd, were making and using stringed musical instruments requiring refined techniques of both manufacture and musicianship, sheds new light on the relative significance of the Greek lyre and on notions of technological and artistic dissemination derived from its dominance in the literature. Music archaeology is a young discipline. Even the identification of musical artefacts is in its infancy, and the systematic study of early Gaelic texts still offers many opportunities.

DEDICATION

Ever since the launch of my first radio series of *Scotland's Music* in 1991, John MacInnes has been a source of encouragement and a wonderful breadth of scholarly generosity. I will not forget visiting Callanish with him and a large group of singers from Ireland and Scotland. I had brought replica Bronze Age horns with me, to try them out *in situ*. Nearly all the company retired to the visitor centre at that point, no doubt for a variety of motives. John stayed behind to listen, to investigate and to evaluate; and instead of leaving me feeling like some eccentric fool, he supported me. How does one adequately thank someone for support of that nature? One cannot. But this meagre offering is by way of a very small thank-you to a gem of a man.

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