

Tunes of Glory

The Role of Ceòl Mòr in
the Social Ascendancy
of Pipers in 16th to 17th
Century Gaelic Scotland

Brian James MacLeod

PhD Candidate, Department of Celtic and Scottish Studies,
University of Edinburgh

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Socio-political and cultural background:

It would be no exaggeration to say that Gaelic Scotland in the 17th century was a society embroiled in momentous changes of a social, political, religious, economic, and cultural nature. These forces of change had engulfed the British Isles as well as continental Europe, but within the ambit of Gaelic society and culture, as much in Ireland as in Scotland, their effects were wide-reaching if not catastrophic.^[1] Irish society had already become heavily militarized since at least the 13th century, when native Gaelic warlords made frequent use of Gaelic-speaking mercenaries from the Hebrides to bolster their own power base against the English occupiers or against one another.^[2]

This process reached its climax during the 16th century, possibly precipitating the Elizabethan conflicts and the Protestant Plantations in Ulster at the start of the 17th century, and with it the ultimate dissolution of any semblance of Gaelic

[1] Hugh Cheape, *Bagpipes* (Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland Enterprises Ltd – Publishing, 2008), 41-42; Wilson McLeod, *Divided Gaels. Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c.1200-c.1650* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 54, 194-196; James A. Stewart Jr., “War and Peace in the Hebrides: The Origin and Settlement of *Linn nan Creach*,” *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 16 (2004): 146-148.

[2] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 43-45; McLeod, 40-47.

Irish autonomy.^[3] Gaelic Scotland was inextricably caught up in these struggles, being the main source of auxiliary military power in Ireland, and not only there. As an important source of fighting men for other conflicts, Gaelic Scotland supplied surplus troops for the wars raging on British soil in the wake of the English Civil War as well as the carnage raging throughout the German principalities on the continent during the Thirty Years War of 1618-1648.^[4]

These two processes, the breakdown of an independent Gaelic political structure in Ireland and the militarisation of society in Gaelic Scotland, would result in two distinctive as well as related phenomena. On the one hand there was the decline of the professional bardic poets and the system of aristocratic patronage which had fostered and sustained them. This was an inevitability with the destruction in Ireland of the old Gaelic order which had been the life's blood of professional poets in both Ireland and Scotland.^[5] This gradual dissolution of the bardic poetry system resulted in the growth and development of new poetic structures and themes in vernacular Scottish Gaelic. This poetry would also achieve patronage of a sort, but without the formal organisational structures of the older learned orders.^[6]

The second major development of this time was the meteoric rise in social status of the hereditary pipers in Gaelic society in Scotland. This may have been due to the aforementioned socio-political developments in Ireland and Scotland. As a result of the weakening of the older order of professional arts, an opportunity had presented itself for the rise in social stature of a new class of *aos-dàna* (a Gaelic term meaning "people of arts"): the pipers. As with the growth in popularity of newer forms of vernacular Scottish Gaelic poetry, the pipers were to establish themselves as the musical equivalents of the purveyors of panegyric verse as represented in the appearance of a new, highly-developed compositional form, *ceòl mòr* ("great music").^[7] This paper will examine the fortuitous constellation of socio-political and cultural changes

[3] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 44; McLeod, 53-54, 195-196; Stewart, "War and Peace," 147-149.

[4] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 42, 45; McLeod, 195-196.

[5] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 49; Hugh Cheape, "Traditional Origins of the Piping Dynasties," in *The Highland Bagpipe: Music, History, Tradition*, ed. Joshua Dickson, 97-126 (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009), 105-106; *Gàir nan Clàrsach: The Harp's Cry*, ed. Colm Ó Baoill (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 1994), 6-7; McLeod, 194-196, 212-214; Derick S. Thompson, "The Seventeenth-Century Crucible of Scottish Gaelic Poetry," *Studia Celtica* 26 (1991): 159-160.

[6] Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 105-107; *Gaelic Songs of Mary MacLeod*, ed. & transl. J. Carmichael Watson (Glasgow: Blackie & Sons, 1934), xix-xxi, xxvi-xxviii; *Gàir*, 1-2, 7, 29-33; John MacInnes, "The Bard Through History," in *The Voice of the Bard: Living Poets and Ancient Tradition in the Highlands and Islands*, ed. Timothy Neat and John MacInnes, 321-352 (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999), 329-330, 335-336; John MacInnes, "The Oral Tradition in Scottish Gaelic Poetry," *Scottish Studies* 12 (1968): 33-35; McLeod, 66-70, 112-113, 194, 212-219; Derick S. Thompson, "Scottish Gaelic Traditional Songs from the 16th to the 18th Century," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 105 (2000): 95-98; Thomson, "Seventeenth-Century Crucible," 156-161. Aristocratic patronage in early Gaelic society was usually typified by the granting of lands in perpetuity to those exponents of the learned arts who rendered their artistic/cultural services to a Gaelic lord. As these learned families usually remained in service to these lords over many generations, these lands became hereditary possessions.

[7] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 41-46, 49-50; Hugh Cheape, *The Book of the Bagpipe* (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Appletree Press, 1999), 62-67, Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 97-98, 102-104, 106-108, 110-113, 124-126

which allowed the families of hereditary pipers to achieve this significant change in fortunes, as well as highlighting the unique compositional form of pipe music which enabled their entry into the upper echelons of Gaelic society in Scotland.

Historical context of piping in Gaelic Scotland

The bagpipes being an ancient pastoral musical instrument with long traditions in most European cultures, there is nothing unique about them in a Scottish context.^[8] The form of pipes which have come to be associated with Gaelic Scotland, however, cannot be discerned in historical records much before the 16th century.^[9] The pipes do not appear in Gaelic accounts before the middle of the 16th century, and even then, there are no references to the pipes as a musical instrument before the 17th century.^[10] One of the first definitive accounts we have of what one would now call the Highland bagpipes comes from a French observer to the Battle of Pinkie in eastern Scotland in 1547.^[11]

Bagpipes were traditionally assigned a low-caste role in society in Ireland and Scotland, as well as in much of continental Europe. Even where they may have been considered as musical instruments their function was seen as ephemeral. These early forms of the bagpipes would not have been seen as instruments capable of inciting men in battle, far less being the vehicle for a highly developed form of musical composition, one which would afford its practitioners entrance to the top levels of society.^[12] There is evidence to support the notion of pipers in Lowland as much as in Highland Scottish society fulfilling the role of musical support or accompaniment to daily menial chores as well as for entertainment.^[13] The opportunity for upward social mobility, however, required a more powerful impetus and this would be supplied by the monumental changes which accompanied the destruction of the old Gaelic order in Ireland.

[8] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 39-40; Cheape, *Book*, 18-24.

[9] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 40, 42; Cheape, *Book*, 62-63; Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 107.

[10] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 42; Cheape, *Book*, 62-63, 66-67; 107; Michael Newton, *On the Introduction of the Baroque Violin into the Gaidhealtachd* (2016), 3; Michael Newton and Hugh Cheape, "The Keening of Women and the Roar of the Pipe: From Clàrsach to Bagpipe, ca. 1600-1782," *Ars Lyrica Celtica* 17 (2008): 76-77.

[11] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 40; Cheape, *Book*, 65; Francis Collinson, *The Bagpipe: The history of a musical instrument* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 65.

[12] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 42; Cheape, *Book*, 45-47, 59-61, 62-63, 66-67; Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 107.

[13] Cheape, *Book*, 59-61; Allan MacDonald, "The Relationship between Pibroch and Gaelic Song: its Implications on the Performance Style of the Pibroch Urlar" (M. Litt. Diss., Edinburgh University, 1995), 15-17.

As has previously been outlined, the late-16th through to the early-17th century was a period of unprecedented upheaval and conflict throughout the British Isles. The changes which had undermined the traditional support network of noble patronage for bardic poets signified a wider change in societal priorities.^[14] In Gaelic Scotland, the militarisation of society in an age of perpetual conflict brought with it the requirement for an instrument capable of motivating and inciting considerable numbers of armed men in the field. This was quite beyond the capacity of the harp (which had been the traditional instrument for musical panegyric in Gaelic Ireland and Scotland), not to mention the bagpipe in its previous developmental forms.^[15]

The pipes underwent a major transformation from the 16th to the 17th century, acquiring a form more recognizable with that of the Great Highland bagpipe of today. This instrument now had a more sophisticated and ornate form, and an impressive range of acoustic projection and power.^[16] Wherever references to the pipes in Gaelic poetry from this period occur they invariably highlight its acoustic strength and almost “explosive” energy. It was not until the later part of the 17th century that Gaelic poets even referred to the pipes in terms of its musical qualities.^[17]

[14] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 43-44.

[15] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 42-46; Cheape, *Book*, 45-47, 62-63, 66-67; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 107.

[16] Cheape, *Book*, 62-65.

[17] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 42; Cheape, *Book*, 62-63, 66-67; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 107.

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Pipers as a new social elite: a process of change and continuity

The rise in prominence of vernacular poetry and the music of the hereditary pipers were integral parts of a surge in cultural and political self-confidence in Gaelic Scotland. With the new, refined and more powerful *piob mhòr* (“great pipe”), the Highland pipers had a musical instrument capable of providing ample stimulus in battle. What remained was a means of achieving a social status commensurate with that of the older learned orders or the new *aos-dàna*.

The relatively rapid rise in social status of pipers in Highland society begs some pointed questions. Given what is known thus far of the low social esteem accorded to pipers before the 16th to 17th century, this sudden turn of fortunes must lead us to presume some considerable degree of “insider information” on the part of the pipers. What becomes apparent upon closer investigation is that the dynasties of master pipers did not emerge out of a vacuum. Most of them show unmistakable evidence of a close kinship with pre-existing learned orders, a pattern somewhat similar to that of the newly emerging class of vernacular poets.^[18]

The pipers were attempting to establish their professional credentials by following a well-trodden path for practitioners of high art forms in Gaelic society. An Irish pedigree had always been seen as advantageous for acquiring the ultimate “seal of approval” for a member of the *aos-dàna*.^[19] Vernacular poets of noble lineage would not have had quite the same necessity of proving a quasi-professional patronymic, but the pipers were attempting to do something similar without the benefit of an immediately recognizable “noble” heritage or tradition.

Most of the learned arts in Gaeldom followed a formulaic pattern: skilled and learned families of high reputation maintained schools for the instruction and transmission of their

[18] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 41-46; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 97-98, 101-103, 106-113.

[19] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 41-44, 47-50; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 97-98, 101-103, 104, 107; McLeod, 83-85, 92-94; Derick S. Thomson, “Gaelic Learned Orders and Literati in Medieval Scotland,” *Scottish Studies* 12 (1968): 75.

art, which was imparted to students through a lengthy and strict regimen of (usually) oral instruction involving a rigorous form of memory training. These schools were traditionally located on the lands which these families held rent-free in return for their services to noble families who were the chief patrons of these *aos-dàna*. Usually these families perpetuated their skills or arts in a hereditary manner, often remaining associated with particular noble patrons over hundreds of years. Another common theme in this system of instruction was the peripatetic attendance of various schools at regular intervals, even by masters of these art forms. More often than not, this involved the attendance of a school of learned arts in Ireland as a mark of excellence.^[20]

The noted piping dynasties appear to have been assiduous in their efforts to graft their own professional pedigrees onto pre-existing and respectable models. By establishing themselves as hereditary families of highly-trained musicians, providing a recognized panegyric product for noble patrons who rewarded their services with hereditary, rent-free lands, and maintaining schools of highly-disciplined and rigorous training in which oral instruction and memory training figured prominently, the piping dynasties had successfully created a seamless link between themselves and a venerable tradition of the propagation of the professional learned arts in Gaelic culture.^[21]

Ceòl mòr: something new from something old

The likelihood that Highland pipers in the 16th and 17th century could have achieved such an impressive rise in their social status by re-using the same simple melodies which had been associated with the pipes as a low-caste instrument is as unrealistic as supposing that recognition and patronage could have automatically followed from presenting a completely new

[20] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 41-43, 47-49; Cheape, *Book*, 67-69; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 103-107, 109-113.

[21] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 43-44, 47-49; Cheape, *Book*, 66-69; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 98-100, 102, 107-113.

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and unfamiliar musical product. The greater likelihood is that a suitable impression would have been made with a compositional form which was already familiar to the patrons of the learned arts.^[22] Piping’s vigorous and powerful new acoustic format had found its niche in the martial world of 16th- to 17th-century Gaelic Scotland. Now all that was required was a suitable equivalent to the panegyric verse or music of the poets and harpers to achieve their goal of securing patronage and a place in the elevated ranks of the *aos-dàna*.^[23]

The biographies of the leading piping dynasties betray a close affinity with the older learned orders. This may have afforded them an intimate knowledge with suitable pre-existing compositional forms which could be adapted to the pipes. The two most likely candidates appear to be poetry and the music of the harp.^[24] The harp was at one time the traditional accompaniment to the oral presentation of bardic poetry.^[25] Harpers also belonged to the same elite stratum of *aos-dàna* as the *filidh* (the Scottish Gaelic term for the class of professional poets).^[26] In fact, so closely entwined were they with the metier of the professional poets that we have accounts of families of harpers holding lands near to those of the MacMhuirich poets in Kintyre, where both families gave their services to the Lords of the Isles.^[27] The pipers would surely have been aware of the prestige which could accrue from imitating a style of composition which already received patronage. It is known

[22] Collinson, 148-151; *The Blind Harper: The Songs of Roderick Morison and his Music*, ed. William Matheson (Edinburgh: R.&R. Clark Ltd, 1970), xv; MacDonald, 57-59; Newton, “Keening,” 78; Cheape, “Traditional,” 111-113, 121-122.

[23] Cheape, *Book*, 66-69; Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 43; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 98, 102-103, 111-113; Collinson, 148.

[24] Collinson, 148-151; *Blind Harper*, lxx; MacDonald, 57-59; Newton, “Keening,” 78; Cheape, “Traditional,” 111-113, 121-122.

[25] MacInnes, “Bard,” 328.

[26] MacInnes, “Bard,” 324-325.

[27] Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 49; Cheape, *Book*, 62-63; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 98, 101-102, 109, 112-113, 117; Derick S. Thompson, “Gaelic Learned Orders and Literati in Medieval Scotland,” In *Scottish Studies* 12 (1968): 67, 69-70; Newton, *Baroque* (2016), 1.

that *ceòl mòr* appeared almost abruptly by the end of the 16th to the start of the 17th century as a virtually finished product, betraying no intermediary developmental phases. The only logical explanation for this phenomenon must be the pre-existence of a very similar compositional form.^[28]

The Welsh monk Giraldus Cambrensis' accounts of harp music from 12th-century Ireland give an aesthetic impression of a style of composition which seems redolent of the compositional structure of *ceòl mòr*, with its regularly occurring ornate and formulaic series of grace-note cadences over top of a melodic line. Edward Bunting also noted similarities between Giraldus' descriptions and the harp music which he had transcribed during the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792.^[29] The renowned scholar Hugh Cheape is equally certain that a further study of *ceòl mòr* would reveal underlying structural similarities between the stressed metres of vernacular verse as well as the syllabic metre of bardic verse and the melodic construction of *ceòl mòr*. He reasons that since "clan panegyric...lay at the core of the bardic tradition and characterized the *piobaireachd* tradition...congruency in the *piobaireachd* form can perhaps be sought within the metres of the poets."^[30]

One particular dynasty of master pipers, the MacKays of Gairloch and Raasay, gives us some invaluable information for contextualising a hypothetical connection between poets, harpers and pipers.^[31] Iain Dall MacKay (c.1656-1754), the "Blind Piper" to the MacKenzies of Gairloch in Wester Ross, led a lifestyle more consistent with that of a poet than of a hereditary piper. He regularly travelled to other noble houses to offer his artistic creations, both poetry and *piobaireachd* (literally "pipe music," but usually refers to the classical music *ceòl mòr*). No stranger to the Isle of Skye, having received extensive instruction from the MacCrimmons (perhaps the most famous as well as enigmatic dynasty of pipers in Gaeldom, and hereditary pipers to the MacLeod chiefs at Dunvegan Castle on

[28] Collinson, 149-150; MacDonald, 57-59.

[29] Collinson, 150-151; Paul Dooley, "the harp in the time of Giraldus," in *Harp Studies: perspectives on the Irish harp* ed. Sandra Joyce and Helen Lawlor, 32-36.

[30] Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 112.

[31] Cheape, "Traditional Origins," 120-121; *Blind Harper*, lxiii.

Skye),^[32] Iain was a regular member of the “Talisker circle” of *aos-dàna*, Gaelic cultural luminaries who frequented the house of John of Talisker on Skye.^[33] One of the more notable of these was Ruairidh Dall, the blind harper and poet, who had been a regular at the court of the MacLeod clan chief, Iain Breac of Dunvegan.^[34]

The poetry and *piobaireachd* of Iain Dall MacKay has led Cheape to speculate that one of MacKay’s most famous pieces of *ceòl mòr*, “Crosanachd an Doill” (“The Blind Man’s Obstinacy/Contention”) might be the musical form for a type of syllabic verse, the *crossanachd*. This poetic metre had been popular with poet bands for the composition of satire. The Fernaig Manuscript, a compendium of Gaelic texts collected between 1688 and 1693 in MacKay’s country, contains several examples of *crossanachd*, demonstrating its popularity in the area.^[35] Iain Dall appears to have considered himself to be a learned poet of the *aos-dàna*, which would make such a “technology transfer” a credible possibility.^[36]

Also noteworthy is the fact that Iain Dall and the blind harper Ruairidh Dall were apparently close friends. Iain Dall is reputed to have claimed that the *ceòl mòr* known as *Fàilte Choire an Easa* (“Corrienessan’s Salute”) had originally been a composition of Ruairidh Dall’s.^[37] What we might take from this anecdote is the suggestion that harp music and *ceòl mòr* were closely connected, with poetry being the link between them. Piping had adopted both the panegyric function of the harpers as well as their music.^[38]

Conclusions: a tale of borrowing, adaptation, and evolution

The evidence available to us seems sufficient to suggest some plausible conclusions. The dynasties of hereditary pipers who had emerged from the socio-political, economic, and cultural turmoil of the 16th to the 17th century in Gaelic Scotland had

[32] *Blind Harper*, xlviii-xlix, 1; Cheape, *Bagpipes*, 45-47; Cheape, *Book*, 67-69; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 113-114; Dickson, *Piping*, 76-77; Collinson, 141-143, 146-147, 151, 155.

[33] *Blind Harper*, lxiii; Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 120-121.

[34] *Blind Harper*, lxi-lxvi.

[35] Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 121-122.

[36] *Ibid.*, 122.

[37] *Blind Harper*, lxiii-lxv.

[38] Cheape, “Traditional Origins,” 98, 102, 107.

set themselves up as respectable members of the learned elite. Their familial connections with older established families of the learned classes no doubt facilitated this process. Apart from their martial utility as musical inciters in battle, they had aided their own integration into the ranks of the Gaelic *intelligentsia* by following a time-honoured mould. This involved, among other elements, the establishment of formal schools of instruction for propagating their panegyric art form, for which they received aristocratic patronage.

This art form, the crowning glory of musical composition for the Highland bagpipe known as *ceòl mòr*, was readily acknowledged and accepted as suitable for receiving patronage, a fact which strongly suggests that the musical structure of *ceòl mòr* came as no surprise to those who lent it their noble support. Whatever evidence which has survived seems to point to a clever and artful adaptation for the Highland bagpipes of a pre-existing compositional form which likely came from the world of the professional harpers, but which also shows strong structural affinities with the work of the trained bardic poets. The professional dynastic pipers of Gaeldom had thus managed to create for themselves an honoured position within the *milieu* of the exalted ranks of learned Gaelic society in a manner which intimated a seamless link with the past.

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