

2. There's only one Strathgryffe

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Some of the recent publications on local history give the impression that much of it is just national history with the names changed ¹. The search for the distinctive and unique characteristics of the local heritage is, however, an essential part of the business. If we ignore it, both the broader culture and our sense of identity are diminished. This short article touches on a few of the distinctive qualities of Strathgryffe ² up to the end of the sixteenth century. I have managed to edit out some of the more outrageous aspects, such as the moving palace, the giant's teeth, the sexaholic king and, of course, the troll. What's left is an outline of a unique history, for there was only one Strathgryffe.

Road and River

Ultimately, it was the valley itself that shaped the distinctive history of its people, and maybe the uniqueness of the Gryffe valley is expressed in its earliest surviving name 'Strathgryffe', *ystrad gryf*.

In the Cumbric tongue *ystrad* was a road-valley, a desire-line which made use of natural features (as opposed to a *gleinn*, which rose into the hills or formed a hollow between them). The road-valley was the creation of Strathgryffe's main watercourse which was characterised as *gryf*, a claw. Perhaps the Gryffe was recognised as a benevolent agency which 'clawed' soil from the uplands and generously deposited it in accessible watermeadows in the valley bottom.

At various times in the valley's history these two characteristics – the valley as a line of communication and the river as a distributor of light, manageable soils – were major determinants of its history.

We don't know when the valley was first populated, but at one stage in its development, around 8000 years ago, it offered just the kind of environment where a mesolithic culture could develop, by accident and experiment, the capacity to domesticate animals and edible plants. At that time the shoreline was some eight metres higher than it is today. The Gryffe opened into a lagoon which offered easy access to a range of varied habitats: fen, forest, grassland, freshwater, and sea-shore, providing a supply of winter protein in the form of fish, eels, and wildfowl; 'long-life' foods such as roots and nuts; light timber and fibres for the construction of tools and shelters. Mesolithic hunters had not the technology (the polished stone axe) to open up dense woodland, but the northern side of the Gryffe Water was a complex maze of forest edges, scrub, and open woodland where grazing animals could be spotted and trapped with relative ease. In time the forest edge would provide a springboard to low-level cultivation.

This might explain the emergence, over a period of some four thousand years, of a wide range of Stone/Bronze Age ritual, settlement, and fortified sites across the valley. The pattern of the 'hut circle' settlements on the upper slopes of Duchal Moor and the upper reaches of the Gryffe suggest that here lay the sheltered summer and

¹ This applies to, for example, the Council for British Archaeology's 'Historic Barrhead', and the Regional Framework for Local History papers on Inverclyde and East Renfrewshire.

² 'Strathgryffe' was the territory west of the Cart/Black Cart apart from Lochwinnoch parish south of Knockbartnock Hill (Register of Paisley Abbey, 12-13). In the 13th century this area was classed as the Upper Ward of the Barony of Renfrew and the name 'Strathgryffe' seems to have been restricted to the Forest of Strathgryffe, south of the Gryffe and east of Duchal.

winter pastures for a complex community whose ceremonial and arable centres lay deeper in the Gryffe basin.

Firth, Ford, and Frontier

From the days of the earliest human occupation to the middle of the 12th century the character of Strathgryffe was also shaped by wider geography: the western seaways, the Clyde, and the Clyde crossings at Erskine. The sea was the great road which brought us most of our prehistoric immigrants, then Scots colonists, Irish monks, and Norse-Hebridean settlers. The Romans came here twice to close down the Clyde. The Norsemen of York and Dublin came twice to open it up. Due to its proximity to the western seas, the river which linked them to central Scotland, and the fords which joined north with south, Strathgryffe was part of the military 'northwest frontier' of the Roman Empire twice, and was, briefly, a militarised frontier again, in the 1160s. For a while it was also the northern frontier of Galloway.

These geographical factors probably account for the importance of Barrochan as a political centre. In the year 80 the Roman army raised a fort on Barrochan Hill and called it 'Coria'. The name is Celtic, not Latin, so the fort seems to have replaced a native, Damnonian establishment. The Damnonii ³ appear to have been a federation of up to six tribes whose territory stretched from Perthshire to Ayrshire. *Coria* meant 'the gathering place', so it may have been the spot where the Highland and Lowland segments of the nation met, to trade, hold ceremonies and talk politics ⁴. The interesting point is that *Coria* has never been discovered. Chances are that it was a site defended by taboos rather than walls, and that the building of the Roman fort obliterated or removed the detritus of the Damnonian gatherings. Or it may have been located along the banks of the Dargavel Burn, an area where archaeological investigation has been all but impossible since the Great War.

The five years of the Roman presence at Barrochan may have had a lasting impact on Strathgryffe. When they returned in the 140s the forts and roads they built covered the Erskine fords but their focus was on the lower Clyde, on Dumbarton Rock, the sea lochs across the river, the firth and its islands. If there ever had been a trans-Clyde Damnonian polity, it had been dispersed.

The Long Revolution

Apart from the survival of a few British place-names and the occasional Roman coin we have no direct information about the early centuries of the first millennium in Strathgryffe. With the arrival of Scots colonists we can begin to piece together the emergence of a new society.

The quickest way to grasp the nature of the Scots incursion is to look at the names, sizes and locations of the earliest church lands. The names of the most westerly churches, Kilblaian and Killbirny, suggest two groups of colonists from the Isle of Bute. The churches of Kilmacolm and Kilbride, both poorly endowed with land, seem to have been local initiatives, one dedicated to the obscure MoColuim, the other to St Brigit, who had the reputation of being rather useful in pastoral farming. Apart from Kilpeter (at Houston) the remaining churches were offshoots of well-established monasteries, and their kirklands were large and compact. With the exception of Kylmeluge (at Finlaystone) these churches were Irish establishments, from the great monasteries of Maghbhile, Cluain Moescna, Clonsast, and (much later), Bannchor.

³ * The correct form is *Dumnonii*, 'people of the god Dumnōnos' ('the deep, or mysterious one').

⁴ ALF Rivet and Colin Smith, 'The Place-names of Roman Britain', London, 1979, 317-9, 343.

By the end of the eighth century at least eight churches had been raised in Strathgryffe and some form of missionary work had been undertaken in Cumbria (or Strathclyde), across the Cart ⁵.

The great monasteries had a long reach, aristocratic connections, tremendous spiritual and moral authority, and, at the stroke of a pen, the capacity to transmit information across time and space. Their presence in Strathgryffe, and the substantial land grants given to the churches which they staffed, suggests that there was at least one fairly powerful lord here who saw the advantages of an alliance with trained churchmen. A few hundred years later these kirklands were secularised and the forests and moors south of the Gryffe were 'privatised' and converted into a hunting reserve – further evidence that the Scots had developed a centralised lordship here [see *Appendix: The Barrochan Cross and the King of Strathgryffe*].

Stability

At the beginning of the eleventh century Strathgryffe was *notionally* the property of the Prince of Cumbria. In fact, its western corner, modern Inverclyde was held by Norse-Hebridean incomers and may have been considered part of the Kingdom of [the Isle of] Man. To avoid further confusion let's move to the mid-1160s when the area was absorbed into the barony of Renfrew. As far as we can tell, the arrival of the Anglo-Norman landholders brought a lengthy period of stability to the Gryffe valley. Most of the fifteen or so estates which they re-organised and expanded, survived up to modern times, and the landholding families were linked by intermarriage ⁶. Arable farming was boosted by the new manorial economy with its immigrant lords, officers, and small tenants, each with a shared understanding of tenures, the management of mills, arable farming, and courts. A great deal of woodland was opened up in Houston, and the Forest of Strathgryffe was re-staffed with hereditary officers. On the downside, a more efficient economy meant heavier labour services and payments, both in kind and in cash; and the Gaelic culture and its language all but disappeared. There is a hint that at least one of the Scots landholding families survived, but most of the new blood seems to have come from the Anglo-Danes of East Lothian and the Anglo-Flemish of Clydesdale.

This stability even survived the Wars of Independence. The nearest we came to experiencing the 'English jackboot' was the garrison at Inverkip Castle: one knight, two squires, seven soldiers. They 'occupied' Strathgryffe for several years, picked up a good horror story at Kilmacolm and spent months trying to work out how to build a siege engine ⁷.

It has been argued that this stability among the landed classes was a factor in the virulent feuding for which Scotland became notorious in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Where landed families prospered, they spread. When they spread, they competed. By the end of the sixteenth century they were competing for offices, titles, privileges, properties, control of sheriff-courts, 'respect', notoriety and the right to walk down the middle of Paisley High Street. The number of lairds in Strathgryffe had doubled, and at least half of them were members or leaders of private armies.

'Barbarous and Bloody'

On the 2nd of November 1576 Patrick Houston of that ilk accompanied by 'certain of his friends and servants' rode out of Duchal Castle and took the road to Houston.

⁵ This section is based on my unpublished research on local place-names.

⁶ Alan Steel, 'Wallace, Renfrewshire, and the Wars of Independence', RLHF 2007, 27 and note, 79-80.

⁷ Op.cit., 43-4, 46-9.

Once they'd passed through Kilmacolm they were ambushed by James Cunningham, 4th Earl of Glencairn (of Finlaystone Castle) and *his* 'friends and servants'. Two of Houston's party were slain, his brother was injured, his men were scattered and their cloaks, swords, purses, and steeds were stolen. It was probably a one-sided affair as Glencairn's party numbered three hundred men armed with pistols and 'culverings' (cavalry muskets). Houston himself was kidnapped and kept prisoner at Finlaystone. The Cunningham and Houston procurators (solicitors) rushed to Edinburgh to raise claim and counter-claim about the incident ⁸.

The matter was never completely resolved, but that wasn't the point. The chase was, as they say in the Mafia movies, just 'business'. It was a small episode in the regional war between the Cunningham Earls of Glencairn and the Montgomery Earls of Eglinton. Duchal Castle was a stepping-stone between Montgomery lands and the Earl's 'safe house' at Finlaystone and it had to be neutralised. In 1576 Glencairn put the fear into a guest at Duchal; in 1579 he smashed its defences.

The good news is that most of the bitter feuding in Strathgryffe was generated by incomer lairds, such as the super-competitive Cunninghames, Maxwells, Montgomeries, and Semples who filled the gaps left by the old feudal dynasties who had died out (the Dennistouns) or pulled out (the Lyles and Erskines). The list of dangerous customers in or from sixteenth-century Strathgryffe: Mariota the torturess, Robert the troublesome minister, Robert and Gabriel the killers, William and Hugh, who planned an invasion of Scotland (all Semples), and James the gleefully misanthropic satirist (a Maxwell) – were all of immigrant stock.

Sir James Lindsay of Dunrod, the last of the contract killers, is the only native in the list, but he also wrote the oldest surviving property advertisement in Renfrewshire - so he must have had some integrity ⁹.

Modernity

When another prominent Renfrewshire family, the Porterfields, recovered Duchal they built a new mansion and embellished it with the earliest artificial landscape in the county: a planting of trees chosen for style rather than utility, a walled garden, and a massive viewing-tower facing a perspective of trapezoidal paddocks - the field-boundaries are still there ¹⁰. The successor of Robert Sempill, the troublesome minister of Killellan, built a new manse, the first villa in Renfrewshire. The most famous Semple of the seventeenth century was a poet. Local lairds took to wearing dress-swords and studying property development. Merchants purchased feudal estates and built mansions with a Clyde view. Landless peasants who had drifted into Kilbarchan late in the fifteenth century became hucksters, hanging around the parish church, then packmen, then weavers in the seventeenth. A few of the descendants of landholders who had built a feudal economy here in the twelfth century sponsored burghs (Houston, Kilbarchan, Gourrock, and Greenock) where weavers, tradesmen, shipmen, and entrepreneurs could lay the foundations of an industrial economy.

⁸ See JH Burton, ed., 'Register of the Privy Council of Scotland', vol. ii, 1881, 576-7. The comment 'barbarous and bloody' is part of a description of Scottish society in a sermon of Robert Rollock, Principal of Edinburgh University in the 1590s.

⁹ Paisley Magazine, 1847, 313.

¹⁰ The Duchal 'tower adapted for taking views' and the hidden garden lay between East Green and the castle. They are described in vol. 8 of Andro Crawford's folio volumes of *The Cairn of Lochwinnoch Matters*, p. 231/287 and p. 285/287 (there are two numbering schemes in this volume).

Appendix

The Barrochan Cross and the King of Strathgryffe

The Barrochan Cross is very similar in style and quality to others raised on Clydeside in the tenth century ¹¹. As a historical 'text' it outclasses most of them. The decorative work may be a bit 'off-the-peg' but a *slow* examination of its plaits and interlace-work may give you a sense of the mystery it imparted to its tenth-century audience.

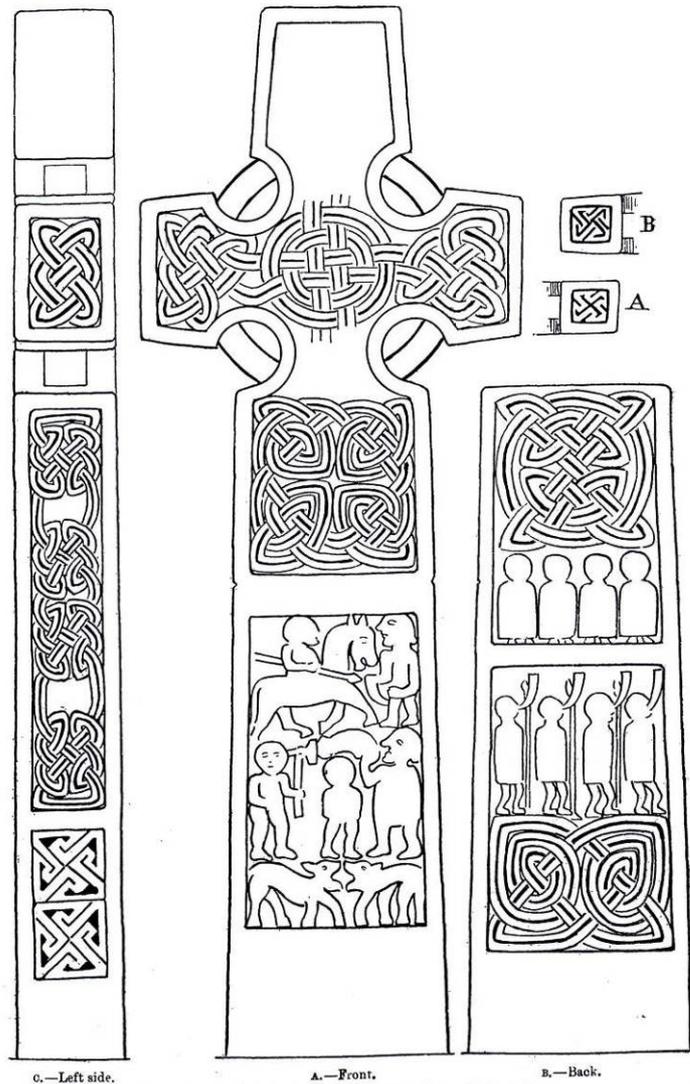


Fig. 475.—Cross, sculptured in relief, at Barrochan. Scale, $\frac{1}{16}$ linear.
A, B.—Detail of underside of the arms.

The Barrochan Cross

from *The Early Christian Monuments of Scotland*, J R Allen and Joseph Anderson, vol. 2 p.457
Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 1903, and The Pinkfoot Press, 1993

Figure 4: The Barrochan Cross

¹¹ Derek Craig, 'The early medieval sculpture of the Glasgow area', in Anna Ritchie (ed.), 'Govan and its Early Medieval Sculpture', 77-8.

The four representational scenes are, perhaps, easier to interpret than those on most of its contemporaries. There appears to be no theological or scriptural content – the spiritual message is all in the abstract decoration. Instead, we have either a fairly simple narration of a ceremony which happened at or near Barrochan in the tenth century, or a politicised version of the event. In the first millennium as in the third, monumental sculpture expressed an idealised version of reality.

First scene: the greeting

In the iconography of tenth-century Scotland the figure of a man on horseback bearing a low-slung spear is generally interpreted as a king. In this case he is greeted by a man holding a drinking horn. This looks like the formal reception of a king by a *senchaidh* or *ollamh*, a remembrancer, scholar, and poet, one of whose functions was to recite the genealogy of the king. This was part of the coronation rite of the kings of Scots up to the 13th century ¹².

Second scene: the ritual

In this cartouche a small figure is flanked by two larger men. On the right a man [possibly the *ollamh* of the first scene] is throwing or holding an object over the central figure who is dominated by a naked (?) man bearing an axe in his left hand. The 'object' may be a cape or gown, in which case the ritual could be an 'investment', an act of purification. On the other hand, the *ollamh* may be dousing the smaller figure with water, a 'lustration', another means of purification. It has been suggested that both of these actions were part of the induction ceremony of the kings of Dál Riata at Dunadd, some centuries earlier ¹³.

The depiction of naked axemen is a regular occurrence in prehistoric European art from the Bronze Age onwards. This particular example, and the diminutive size of the figure in the middle, may indicate the 'contingency' of the candidate – he was not king until acclaimed as such. Or, it may have symbolised the notion that, once king, he was still 'under the law'. However it may be interpreted, the image appears to show a purely secular and probably pagan ritual.

At the foot of the panel is a pair of [young?] beasts in opposition.

Third scene: the witnesses

Four caped, and possibly hooded, figures face the reader of the cross-shaft. This placing suggests that they are witnesses of, rather than participants in, the surrounding events.

The cowl-like shaping of the heads may suggest hooded monks or haloed saints, but similar rows of blank, cowled outlines can be seen on other cross-shafts of the period, and they appear to represent crowds. Monks tended to be shown with peaked hoods, and saints are always represented by a nimbus cleanly separated from the physical body

Fourth scene: the acclamation

Four walking figures are shown in profile, facing left to right. Each is sounding a horn, three are carrying spears upright. The spear of the middle figure appears to be heeled and may have had a ceremonial function. This figure has grounded his spear while marching and sounding his horn – quite a feat.

¹² John Bannerman, 'The Scots Language and the Kin-based Society', in Derick S Thomson (ed.), 'Gaelic and Scots in Harmony', 1990, 10-11; A A M Duncan, 'Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom', 1975, 115-6.

¹³ I F Grant, 'The Lords of the Isles', 1982, 39.

The spearmen are obviously an army or war-band, and the picture seems to show three successive actions in one frame: marching with raised spears, standing with grounded spears, and blowing horns. It may be a form of animation. The army marches through, to, or round a ceremonial space, halts and stands 'to attention'. The braying of the horns either accompanies or follows the parade.

This may represent the acclamation – the formal acceptance – of a king by his 'stakeholders', perhaps the armed heads-of-kindreds who had a direct interest in his appointment.

Two kings and three kingdoms

The suggestion that a king ruled Strathgryffe may seem incredible. What next – the kingdom of Mearns? Probably. At that time there was an unknown number of 'kingdoms' in Scotland. The Irish and Scottish texts mention three levels of kingship which may be roughly translated as 'king of kings', 'king of a region', and 'king of a district'¹⁴. The last category, the chiefs of small *cenéla* [kindred groups] very rarely appear in the contemporary sources. The royal centres of some of these 'under-kings' can be traced in the later medieval record – often, they became baronies held by a royal officer, such as a steward or a mair. Both Strathgryffe and east Renfrewshire fit that model. There may have been two such 'under-kings', one in the Cumbrian territory east of the Cart and one in Gaelic-speaking Strathgryffe¹⁵.

Secondly, why should the induction of a bog-standard tribal chief be commemorated in stone? The answer may be very simple: the local 'under-kings' followed the lead of the King of Cumbria/Strathclyde and commissioned crosses and cross-slabs similar to those at Govan while the professional artists were still in the locality. Alternatively, we might interpret the first figure-scene on the Barrochan Cross as the welcoming of a *rí ruirech*, an 'over-king', either the King of Cumbria or of Alba/Scotia to the inauguration of the King of Strathgryffe. In this case the Cross may commemorate the assimilation of Strathclyde into either of the two kingdoms.

¹⁴ A A M Duncan, op.cit., 43-47; John Bannerman, op.cit., 6-7.

¹⁵ Throughout the Middle Ages the two wards of the Barony of Renfrew, one corresponding to older Strathgryffe, the other east Renfrewshire, had 'mairs of fee'. There appears to have been some sort of royal centre at Mearns before east Renfrewshire was granted to Walter fitzAlan around 1145. This is suggested by the place-names *Moerne* and *Capelrig*. There was a substantial cluster of 'temple lands' here, which indicates a royal estate in the 1140s.

