

SOME UNRECOGNISED DEPICTIONS OF THE SAFFRON SHIRT IN SCOTLAND

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In 1943 H.F. McClintock and J.T. Dunbar first put the study of Gaelic dress on a firm academic footing by listing all the descriptions and depictions of civilian dress they could find. This did not include the evidence of West Highland sculpture as most of it depicts military or ecclesiastical dress. The evidence they produced showed that in both Irish and Scottish Gaeldom in the 1520s a long loose saffron-dyed linen shirt with a loose woollen mantle was the usual male civilian dress, while short jackets were sometimes worn over the shirts. The shirts later began to get more and more voluminous and statutes passed by the Irish Parliament in 1536, 1539 and 1541 attempted to limit the amount of linen used to make them to between 5.5 and 11 yards. By the 1540s the shirts also had long hanging sleeves, the jacket still having half-sleeves worn over them, tied at the wrists. This style was still worn in Scotland in the 1560s, but by the 1570s descriptions and pictorial evidence from both Ireland and Scotland show that the shirt had a thickly pleated skirt sewn together (like Greek traditional dress as worn by the Royal Guard) worn with or without trews, and over it a jacket with pleated skirt. These shirts were made with up to twenty yards of linen! Those who could not afford this vast amount of linen wore trews, sometimes short and cut off above the knee.

Although flax was grown and linen produced in the Highlands, much of the linen used there may have come from Ireland, where many Scottish Gaels went as mercenaries. The use of '*variecoloured mantles*' or tartan plaids by the Scots Gaels was noted from 1549, while the Irish preferred shaggy plaids of one colour. The Scottish plaids may later have been worn loosely pleated by a belt over the pleated form of the saffron shirt before the latter virtually disappeared by the 1580s, giving rise to that curious unsewn garment, the belted plaid. By 1592 the saffron shirt had become the mark of a chief in Scotland, while Ulster Irish peasants by 1588 were wearing only short woollen jackets and trews and had no shirts at all. The wars in Ireland in the late sixteenth century were probably responsible for the disappearance of the voluminous pleated saffron shirt from both Ireland and Scotland in the same period. While flax was destroyed in the fields, sheep could be driven to safety and provided wool for the other garments. The first actual description of the belted plaid as the main garment worn by Scottish Gaels is from 1594 when it was noted as distinguishing Hebridean mercenaries in Ireland. Saffron-dyed shirts of ordinary

proportions were worn by some Highland warriors as late as 1689, but the tartan belted plaid (or trews) became the distinctive dress of Scots Highlanders from about the 1580s when the true saffron shirt as the main garment disappeared (McClintock and Dunbar 1943).

Three illustrations reproduced here have never before been interpreted in the light of the above facts established by McClintock and Dunbar. One is from a Highland context but the other two are from outwith the Highlands and have a classical and royal context, so have never been recognised as depictions of Gaelic dress, which is not altogether surprising. But interpreted with background knowledge of late medieval Highland dress in mind, they fall clearly into place.

Edinburgh University Library holds a manuscript volume of Virgil's *Aeneid* gifted in 1654. An illuminated page in it has scenes from the story and a floral border decorated with the royal arms of Scotland and the initials P.L. It is thought that this was made for Princess Leonora (1433–80) youngest daughter of King James I, before her marriage in 1449. Her two sisters were certainly notable literary and artistic patrons and manuscripts created for them also survive. The illumination of the *Aeneid* is in the style of William Vrelant, a native of Utrecht who worked in Paris before 1454, later in Bruges.¹ The main scene depicted on the illuminated page is from Book 1 of the *Aeneid* and shows Aeneas and his companions' arrival in ships at Carthage, which is still being built, while Dido receives Aeneas kindly and gives him a lavish banquet. In the bottom left corner, separated by trees, is a second scene (Fig. 1) where a figure in armour faces a bare-legged figure dressed in a yellow tunic or shirt, holding a large bow and arrows. This has previously been accepted as another incident from Book 1 where Aeneas meets his mother, the goddess Venus. But she is described in detail as wearing armour and boots, having a quiver for arrows, with her bow slung over her shoulder. The figure in the manuscript, although beardless, is clearly male rather than female, and does not otherwise match the description of Venus, while Aeneas on that occasion was also accompanied by his companion Achates. It seems rather that this scene illustrates an incident from Book VIII where Aeneas meets Evander, king of the Arcadians, a wild woodland tribe, and they withdraw alone to a grove to discuss an alliance.

The barefooted figure dressed in a bright yellow shirt matches very closely descriptions of Scottish Highlanders from the early sixteenth century. They were consistently described as being bareheaded and barelegged, clad only in yellow-dyed shirts with woollen mantles, armed with bows and arrows having iron barbs. The Highland contingents at the battles of Flodden (1513) and Pinkie (1547) were mainly archers. French commentators on Scotland in the sixteenth century refer to Highlanders as wild Scots or woodland Scots, signifying that they were a tribal people inhabiting rough country. Although the first literary reference to Highlanders wearing saffron-dyed shirts was by a Scot, John Major in 1521, it seems quite possible that they were worn much earlier. In seeking to portray the leader of a wild woodland tribe in a book for a Scottish royal patron in the 1440s, it seems an artist working in Paris appropriately chose to depict him with the usual dress and arms of a Scottish Gael. It is not unlikely that a Parisian artist could have seen Scottish Gaels there in



Fig. 1. Detail of the illuminated page from the Edinburgh *Aeneid* probably intended to depict Aeneas meeting Evander, king of the Arcadians, who is shown wearing a long yellow tunic or shirt with a blue mantle around his shoulders. (Reproduced with kind permission of Edinburgh University Library.)

the train of some Scots nobleman or have had accurate descriptions of them. So it appears quite possible in the writer's opinion that this figure from the *Aeneid* is the earliest depiction of a medieval Scottish Highlander wearing the saffron shirt, predating any surviving description by more than seventy years.

One of the 'Stirling Heads' which once decorated the King's Presence Chamber in Stirling Castle, datable to 1540–42, has been identified as Hercules because of the massive club the figure bears (Fig. 2). Only one other surviving 'head' was a full length figure (of a court jester) which marks out 'Hercules' both from the contemporary portraits and the classical figures in the series. No doubt the figure was intended to represent Hercules, but the curious costume is unlike that of any of the classical busts in the series, which wear only loose drapery knotted at the shoulder (Dunbar 1960). But it does have a striking and undeniable resemblance to the dress of Irishmen depicted in a drawing in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, dating from the 1540s (Fig. 3). The round gathered neck of the Stirling Hercules' shirt and the square neck of the jacket are in the style of the contemporary court dress of most of the other Stirling 'heads', but the loose flowing skirt, bare legs and bag-like sleeves closely resemble those of the Irish figures in the Ashmolean drawing. So, again from a classical and royal context, it appears we have a depiction of Highland dress, this time of the mid-sixteenth century. There is little problem in envisaging where an artist in Stirling would derive information on Highland dress. King James V, as is well known, had a suit of Highland clothes made in 1538 consisting of a long linen shirt, a short Highland jacket of varicoloured velvet and 'Heland tertane' hose or trews. Apart from this *de luxe* version of contemporary Highland dress worn by royalty, Highlanders in their native dress would regularly have been seen in Stirling driving cattle to market, etc.

The tomb of Alexander MacLeod of Dunvegan in St Clement's Church, Rodel, on the island of Harris, dated by inscription to 1528, has a carved panel with three figures in contemporary dress (Steer and Bannerman 1977) (Fig. 4). One is dressed in a pointed helmet and mail coat over two layers of quilted garments and carries an axe, representing MacLeod himself, while a panel on the right (not illustrated) has deer carved on it, clearly indicating a hunting scene. Two other figures represent huntsmen leading two different types of hound. Both men have their hair and beards trimmed and wear caps in contemporary fashionable style, and wear shoes. They were, of course, retainers of an important Hebridean lord, while most ordinary Highlanders went bareheaded and often barefooted. The left-hand figure wears a short jacket and presumably trews. The central figure wears a similar jacket, which seems to be quilted or pleated, but over a long shin-length tunic or shirt which falls into loose pleats. This is obviously a representation of the saffron shirt, which was very long in the early sixteenth century, but could be pulled up through the belt to shorten it for action, as is shown on the Ashmolean drawing. A drawing of Irish soldiers in Germany made by Albrecht Durer in 1521 shows them wearing similar shin-length shirts with narrow sleeves, having bare legs and feet or sandals, with a shaggy plaid wrapped around them, although one wears a loose jacket with flared sleeves, possibly acquired abroad.



Fig. 2. 'Hercules' from Stirling Castle, c.1540-42. Note the similarity to the costume in Fig. 3. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.)

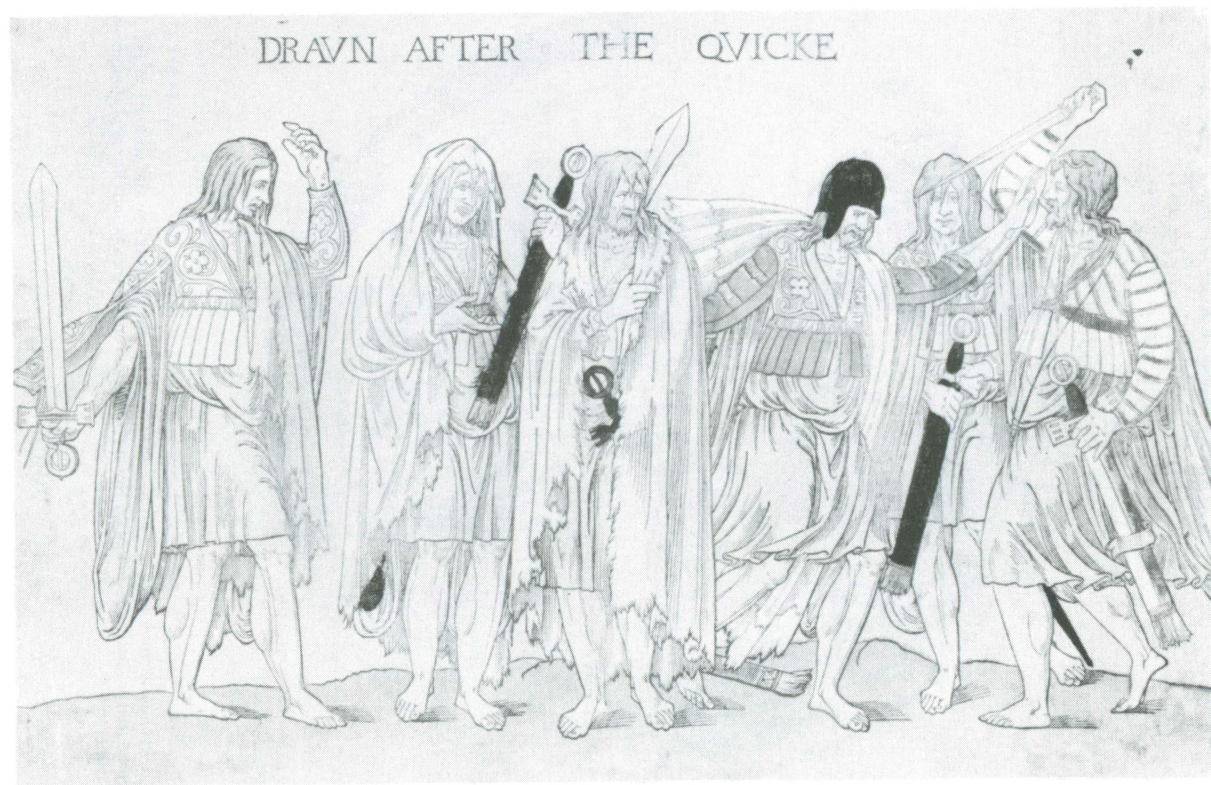


Fig. 3. A drawing of Irishmen during the reign of King Henry VIII (1509–47). (Reproduced by kind permission of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.)



Fig. 4. A carved panel of hunters from the tomb of Alexander MacLeod in Rodel Church, Harris, 1528. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.)

The three datable illustrations all tie in with the evidence gathered by McClintock and Dunbar. Originally the saffron shirt was accompanied by a loose mantle or plaid. 'Doublets' or jackets worn over the shirt are first mentioned in Ireland from 1531, which ties in with these at Rodel of 1528. The long, bag-like sleeves only seem to have developed by about 1540. So the Rodel and Stirling carvings both tie in very closely with descriptive and pictorial evidence for the styles of dress worn by the Irish in the same periods. The Irish and Scottish Gaels or Highlanders, of course, shared a common language and culture until the late sixteenth century, when they began to diverge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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