

CAISTEAL BHARRAICH, DUN VARRICH AND THE WIDER TRADITION

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Caisteal Bharraich, anglicised in the past as 'Castle Varrich', is one of the few structures of its type in the north of Scotland, and its site is a conspicuous one. The ruinous building stands on a promontory on the east side and near the head of the Kyle of Tongue (OS Grid Reference NC 581 568). The structure has been a square tower with walls of random rubble masonry bedded with a coarse lime mortar, about 1.35m thick on average and standing at least two storeys in height.

The ground floor or 'laigh hoose', with a door to the outside and narrow window, is vaulted and has a floor area approximately 4m square. The upper floor, to which there is no stair, has probably had a fireplace although the detail is not clear. There are sets of four slots on each of the north and south walls respectively, presumably for joists or couples on which the upper storeys were carried. Given the dimension, construction and the weight of masonry, the structure may well have had a third storey and even a 'loft'.

Descriptions of the building tend to limit themselves to these few facts and to topographical impressions of the surrounding ground surface (RCAHMS 1911, 183). In any attempt to take the interpretation further we tend to define and categorise in conventional Scottish terms, claiming for example that the building appears to have been a towerhouse strongly characteristic of Scottish medieval architecture, and it is included in these terms in the standard sources (MacGibbon and Ross 1889, iii, 253–6). Dating has been cautious but has ascribed *Caisteal Bharraich* to the sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries.

The lack of intrinsic evidence and the overall architectural context of the northern Highlands may have discouraged speculation on dating. The case of Ardvreck Castle on Loch Assynt, for example, is clearer. It is a more sophisticated structure with a staircase tower, corbelling, and internal subdivision and could, as it stands, be confidently dated to the late fifteenth century. Nearby Tongue House is seventeenth century on earlier foundations and serves to emphasise the apparent hiatus in Highland architectural history. We have, in Sutherland, a rich archaeological landscape with the remains of many broch structures and traces of Iron Age settlement and then a disappointing silence until the sixteenth century. It appears that the socio-architectural history of the northern Highlands has still to be written.



Fig. 1. Caisteal Bharraich from the south, with a view across the Kyle of Tongue. (Photo: Dr Joanna Close-Brooks, 1985)

Though some have speculated, the history books seem to be almost without exception silent as to the past, recent and remote, of *Caisteal Bharraich*. Indeed, a modern authority on the history of the northern Gaidhealtachd has gone so far as to claim that 'Castle Bharraich . . . is of unknown antiquity and possesses no history' (Grimble 1979, 5). Such a conclusion, of course, is unacceptable. One source suggests that the tower may have belonged to the Bishop of Caithness, who used to stay there on the road between his castle at Scrabster and his house and lands at Balnakiel in Durness (Fraser 1892, i, 108–9). This would not necessarily facilitate the process of dating the tower since another authority maintains that there is no evidence that the bishops maintained any ministry in the area before the sixteenth century (Grimble 1965, 13). The first individual with whom the building could be identified in this case might be Robert Stewart, a son of the Stewart earls of Lennox, unconsecrated bishop of Caithness at the time of the Reformation and administrator of the diocese.

Disappointingly too, oral tradition whenever recorded has nothing to tell us nor does it provide hints that would give a lead into surer historical territory. There appear also to be no vestigial elements of the supernatural or Fingalian references, all of which might be expected to have surfaced in the last one hundred years to perplex the researcher and tease the credulous. Fingalian legend, for example, is to be found copiously in the Gaelic tradition of north Sutherland (see, for example, Campbell 1872; Horsburgh 1868).

By contrast, if we can turn to other simple castellated structures such as Castle Borve in Benbecula, we are remarkably well-served by oral tradition; it has always been said, unprompted, that Borve or *Caisteal Bhuirgh* was built by Amie Mac Ruairi, the heiress of her branch of the powerful Clan Somhairle in the mid-fourteenth century. She was the originator also of *Teampull na Trionaid* at Carinish in North Uist and *Teampull Mhicheil* and other structures in Grimsay (MacDhomhnaill 1981, 12; Carmichael 1972, i, 322). The contrast, of course, is not a fair one but it serves to point up the potential of oral tradition and *seanchas* in either an original or corroborative sense. A rich oral tradition presupposes continuity in population and settlement; a silence may suggest social dislocation and economic destruction. The lack of information about *Caisteal Bharraich* may be an oblique reflection of the devastating effect of manipulation of population and clearance in nineteenth-century Sutherland.

The challenge is implicit that a structure such as *Caisteal Bharraich* should not be neglected or allowed to escape scrutiny. Its very character as it survives makes it difficult to date with accuracy and yet it undoubtedly belongs to a vernacular tradition of dwelling house which allows inferences to be drawn and constructive suggestions made. Two angles on architectural history are suggested below, in the first place, a comparison with architecture in the Irish Gaeltacht, and secondly, the particular circumstances of Sutherland history to which a structure such as *Caisteal Bharraich* belongs.

It is suggested in the first place that *Caisteal Bharraich* is not enigmatic or aberrant but is in a wider tradition of which the tall, rectangular Irish towerhouse is a more

prominent and typical survivor (O Danachair 1972). The Irish towerhouse became so numerous in the later medieval period as now to be considered as part of the vernacular tradition and the remains of many hundreds can still be seen. Colloquially referred to as 'castle' or *caislean*, they do not bear comparison with the great military fortifications which the term 'castle' conjures up.

The 'castle' was the fortified dwelling of the minor gentry and prosperous farmers, built at any time between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries but mostly during the so-called 'Gaelic revival' of the fifteenth century. The ground plan is never large, usually approximating to the dimensions of a small dwelling house, but it rises typically four or five stories into the air in a series of single rooms built one over the other. They are most numerous in south and south-west Ireland, Munster, where well over one thousand are recorded. Their numbers diminish rapidly towards the north and they are extremely rare in Ulster, making it more difficult to visualise a continuous architectural tradition linking Scotland and Ireland.

Caisteal Bharraich was probably a small towerhouse and not at all in the first rank of lordly fortresses. Certainly within its own locality, its social and economic status is not clear while it has been overshadowed by the development of Tongue House. The older building was more of a defensible house and a family dwelling constructed to withstand the sudden raid rather than the siege. As it stands now, it would seem to be of late fourteenth- or early fifteenth-century date in its form of simple rectangular tower of a certain height but no great extent. It has few defensive features but its own massive construction and a minimum of rooms placed one on another, the rationale for which must lie in prevailing conditions of the breakdown of great areas of lordly jurisdiction and the need for a measure of security cheaply obtained.

That there was such a period of turbulence is borne out by the facts of medieval Highland history. Sutherland was outside the powerful Gaelic kingdom of the Lordship of the Isles, yet drawn into its political ambience. It was in the interests of the Hebridean Lordship to create vassal states on its borders and the Mackays fulfilled such a role in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, having earlier shown considerable hostility towards the Lords of the Isles. This was the formative period of 'clans' as we understand them today and the era in which the clan map began to be drawn by which certain families began to hold and occupy territories hereditarily.

The Gaelic name for the Mackays is *Clann Aodh*, signifying the descendants of *Aodh* (sometimes anglicised as 'Hugh'), and the surname 'Mackay' is an English rendering of the Gaelic *MacAoidh*, 'son of Aodh'. As is often the case with older Highland families, there are conflicting theories about their origins. One theory derives them from the Picts, and according to this, they are descended from Clan Morgan mentioned in the 'Book of Deer' in the early twelfth century. On surer ground, one can say that the Mackay chieftains were probably descended from the royal family of Moray, one of whom was the father of Macbeth (1005–57). They probably moved into Strathnaver in the north of Sutherland in the twelfth century, and by the middle of the fourteenth century, came to control the whole of the country from Cape Wrath in the west to the Caithness border in the east; this area is known to

tradition as the 'Mackay Country', *Duthaich Mhic Aoidh*. The heart of their territory lay in Strathnaver and along the coast from Farr to Tongue. *Caisteal Bharraich* therefore must have been one of the strongholds of this landholding. Another may have been at Borve, the promontory fort on Farr Head, a square tower whose destruction is recorded in 1556.

Indicative of the Mackays' status at this time is the charter to Angus Mackay of Strathnaver by Donald Lord of the Isles in 1415 of Strath Halladale and other lands, then lying to the east of what was their original clan territory in Strathnaver. This may have been as a consequence of a politically advantageous marriage by the said Angus son of Hugh, *Aonghus Mac Aoidh*, to Elizabeth, the sister of the Lord of the Isles (Mackay 1906, 375–6; Munro and Munro 1986, 30–1). The older name for the parish of Tongue at the centre of which *Caisteal Bharraich* stands was 'Kintail', in Gaelic *Cinn t-Saile*, meaning approximately 'head of the salt water', describing very aptly the inner reaches of the Kyle of Tongue sea loch and the promontory on which the castle is built. It was well known in Gaelic tradition that there were other 'Kintails', such as 'Kintail of Mackenzie', and it was customary to distinguish one from the other. The Sutherland Kintail was known traditionally as *Cinn t-Saile Mhic Aoidh*, 'Kintail of Mackay' which would suggest a hereditary occupancy of this coastal part of Tongue and, one might assume, of *Caisteal Bharraich* itself.

Though the wider context of clan and territorial occupancy is clear enough, we still know little or nothing about the castle's solitary masonry tower. Printed sources provide hints and inferences but no substantial evidence. An early eighteenth-century geographical description of Scotland, parish by parish, includes Tongue but makes no mention of *Caisteal Bharraich*. The author writing in 1725 or 1726 describes the major dwelling houses and the omission of the castle may suggest that it was deserted and ruinous by this date (*Macfarlane's Geographical Collections* 1906, i, 186–91).

By contrast, Strathnaver was visited by the St Andrews map-maker Timothy Pont in the 1580s and his surviving manuscript sketch maps in the National Library of Scotland pay particular attention to the man-made features of the landscape and human settlement. Pont marks 'Doun Varrich' with a small locational symbol on a hill feature in the correct position on the east side of the Kyle of Tongue. He has used the symbol for a small settlement and this immediately contrasts with the buildings at Tongue and Balnakiel which are shown as substantial or important dwellings in the Strathnaver area – in *Duthaich Mhic Aoidh* (Stone 1989, 17–22).

Reference is made to *Caisteal Bharraich* in the New Statistical Account for the Parish of Tongue, compiled by the Rev. Hugh Mackay Mackenzie in January 1841. It is evident that some of the roof still then survived. He wrote:

The most striking ruin is Castle Varrich, standing on the promontory already mentioned, bearing the same name. It is a square building, which originally consisted of two stories, the first arched with stone, the second covered with wood. Its dimensions are not great; the walls are thick, and still of considerable height. Tradition is silent as to its history, on which subject its name has given rise to various conjectures; but most probably the name is merely derived from a Gaelic word signifying '**the castle of eminence**'. (NSA 1845, xiv, 175)



Fig. 2. Doorway, Caisteal Bharraich, showing the character of the masonry; the aperture shows signs of possible rebuilding. (Photo: Dr Joanna Close-Brooks, 1985)



Fig. 3. Inside of upper structure, Caisteal Bharraich, showing a combination of possible attic beam holes and slots for roofing couples, suggesting a possible lowering of the roof. The abutment on the lower edge may have been corbelling or support for an upper floor. (Photo: Dr Joanna Close-Brooks, 1985)

The author of these restrained and scholarly words (by contrast with much speculation elsewhere in the Statistical Accounts), Rev. Hugh Mackay Mackenzie (1771–1845) was a local man, born in Tongue, and was a son of the preceding minister of the parish. He was a much respected man, known familiarly as ‘Mister Hugh’ (*Maighstir Uisdean*) and left the Established Church for the Free Church at the time of the Disruption in 1843 in common with so many of his northern brethren. His description of *Caisteal Bharraich* avoids speculative association with the early Church, by which some writers of his and earlier generations claimed that the name commemorated St Barr, one of the missionaries of the Columban era in the sixth and seventh centuries.

The other main published works on Mackay and Sutherland history contain no reference to *Caisteal Bharraich* or only a passing mention as an aspect of topography. It is, however, given a paragraph in a paper on Sutherland place-names by John Mackay, Hereford, a well-known authority on Sutherland history and traditions domiciled in the west Midlands of England, but maintaining contacts with home by means of his published writings. He writes:

Varrich - G., Bhar-raich, in reference to its situation on the highest point of a precipitous rock, facing the Bay of Tongue, 300 feet above sea level, supposed to have been built by Norsemen, afterwards occupied by the Mackay chiefs. Tradition states that Iain Aberach, famed in Sutherland for heroism and patriotism, resided in it, and his father, Angus Du, before him. *Caisteal Bharraich*, signifies the castle on the highest point. (Mackay 1890–91, xvii, 101–25)

John Mackay’s reference to Angus Dubh Mackay and Iain Abrach Mackay is without doubt significant and a hint of earlier *seanchas* concerning *Caisteal Bharraich*. In the absence of corroborative evidence, tentative suggestions can be made.

Angus Dubh lived in the early fifteenth century, his dates being given by clan historians as 1403–33 and as the son-in-law and grantee of Donald, Lord of the Isles, he was without doubt a powerful leader. Something of his local power can be inferred from the fact that he was one of forty chieftains imprisoned by James I at the parliament summoned in Inverness in 1427/28 in order to bring the northern lords to heel. One of the chroniclers describes Angus Dubh of Strathnaver as ‘a leader of four thousand men’.

In the context of the power politics and territorial ambitions of the leading families of the north of Scotland, the perceived strength of Angus Dubh provoked retaliation by neighbouring families, some of whom such as the Gunns were encouraged to invade Mackay territory by the earls of Sutherland. A force of 1,500 advanced from Lairg towards Tongue in 1433 and were met by the Mackays at *Drum na Cub*, at the head of the pass to the north of Ben Loyal and within two miles of *Caisteal Bharraich*. Angus Dubh was not fit for battle but was carried out to the field in a litter. The clan was led by his son, *Iain Abrach* ‘John of the Lochaber Men’, the child of Angus Dubh’s second wife who was a MacDonald of Keppoch in Lochaber. In accordance with the firm custom of the times, Iain had been fostered by maternal relatives in Lochaber, thus giving him the epithet *Abrach* (Mackay 1914, 96–102).

The invasion force had been lured on as far as possible before the Mackays attacked, at which point they had secured the tactical advantage of a defensive position on higher ground and they drove back the invaders with great loss of life, though Angus Dubh, the old chieftain, himself was killed. The reputation of *Iain Abrach* was made and his position in subsequent Mackay tradition secured. For some years after the battle of *Drum na Cub*, the young chieftain was pursued by the earl of Sutherland and his dependants. Sometimes he had to lie low but he also came out to face his enemies, for example at *Tom an Dris* in Strath Halladale where *Iain Abrach* again defeated an opposing force marching against the Mackay country. Several attempts were made to assassinate *Iain Abrach* and tradition in Mackay country tells how he had on several occasions to hide in a rocky and inaccessible place near *Caisteal Bharraich* called 'John of Lochaber's Bed', *Leabaidh Iain Abraich*. This tradition is mentioned in the Old Statistical Account of the parish of Tongue written by the Rev. William Mackenzie, the respected father of 'Mr Hugh' about 1792. The author describes the sites of particular topographical and historical interest in his parish and includes:

. . . the ruins of *Caisteal a Bharruich*, a structure so ancient, that there is no consistent tradition concerning it. Perhaps it was possessed by John Mackay Abarach, the greatest name for heroism in this part of the Highlands; and what renders this conjecture the more plausible, there is a cave in the rock upon which the castle (Varrich) is built called *Leabaidh Eain Aberich*, i.e. John of Lochaber's bed, whither he is said to have retired in time of danger. A family of Mackays is descended from him, and are reported still to have in their possession his banner with the motto wrought in golden letters, *Bithidh treun*, i.e. Be valiant.

(OSA 1792, iii, 520–1)

Iain Abrach's leadership was admired but he himself willingly resigned the chieftainship of the clan to his elder brother Neil, who had apparently been held for some years in prison on the Bass. Iain continued as a leading man of the clan and continued to live in Strathnaver. Subsequently, whatever his connection with *Caisteal Bharraich*, the descendants of *Iain Abrach* lived at Achness about two miles down Loch Naver on the east side of the river. The family descendants of the Mackay chief seemed to have occupied the stronghold of Borge on the headland of Farr as their principal residence until its destruction in the late sixteenth century.

Though it would seem that the historian could be on sure enough ground in his speculations about *Caisteal Bharraich*, it should be said that clan history and tradition has a tendency to telescope events and dates, especially where particular individuals and personalities dominate. The career of *Iain Abrach* and the founding of the Abrach Mackay family in the late fifteenth century are some of the most popular themes of Mackay clan history and it would be a natural process in communities dependent on orally transmitted history to explain and associate the impressive remains of *Caisteal Bharraich* with the warrior-hero ancestor of the clan. Nevertheless, *Iain Abrach* or his father Angus Dubh would seem to be good candidates to be the builders and occupiers of *Caisteal Bharraich*. The mere fact that

the invading force in 1433 was headed overland towards the Kyle of Tongue rather than any other destination in the Mackay country seems to suggest that a strike at a Mackay stronghold in the heart of their territory would have the most devastating effect.

The type of structure represented by *Caisteal Bharraich* allows us to suggest that it was built in the early fifteenth century, in the same culture province as and closely allied in design with the Irish towerhouses, and it might reasonably be associated with Angus Dubh Mackay. As such, it might have been built about 1420, in the wake of the Lordship charter of 1415, and it can be seen as symbolic of the self-assured status of a local chieftain in the essentially autonomous world of the medieval *Gaidhealtachd*.

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