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## The *dabhach* Reconsidered: pre-Norse or post-Norse?

In volume 36 of *Northern Studies*, Jessica Bäcklund argued that the establishment of Norse authority in Orkney was a gradual and largely peaceful process.<sup>1</sup> This argument was based on a number of factors, but one of the most prominent of these was the suggestion that there was direct continuity in land administration and taxation from the Picts to the new Norse rulers. This view was articulated by Captain F.W.L. Thomas in the 1880s, and later elaborated by Hugh Marwick and Asgaut Steinnes,<sup>2</sup> and Bäcklund follows very closely the arguments put forward by Steinnes in 1959. Steinnes' position was based on perceived equivalents between various elements of administration in Scotland, Orkney and Norway, many of which could equally well be interpreted as reflecting broad similarities in the nature of society in Scotland and Norway. The key to arguing that the system of administration in the earldom of Orkney was directly derived from an earlier Pictish system is the view that the main administrative unit of Norse Orkney, the *eyrisland*, or ounceland, was directly derived from the Pictish *dabhach*.

There are two fundamental problems with this. Firstly, there is no evidence that the *dabhach* ever existed in the Northern Isles. It is known only from the Scottish mainland and the Western Isles. Furthermore, in the *dabhach* assessment which was geographically closest to Orkney, that of Caithness, the *dabhach* was not equivalent to the ounceland, but to one-third of an ounceland (see n. 40 below). Secondly, this interpretation relies on the assumption that the *dabhach* assessment itself pre-dates the Norse settlement of the Northern Isles. Bäcklund suggests that the assessment was introduced in Orkney in the sixth century, and implicitly that it may have been introduced even earlier on the Scottish

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<sup>1</sup> J. Bäcklund, 'War or Peace? The Relations between the Picts and the Norse in Orkney', *Northern Studies* 36 (2001), 33-47.

<sup>2</sup> A. Steinnes, 'The "Huseby" system in Orkney', *SHR* 38 (1959), 37-46.

mainland. It is this assumption that the present paper is intended to challenge. To do so requires a brief discussion of land assessment elsewhere in the Norse settlements in Scotland.

Although to talk of 'the Norse settlements' in Scotland may imply that these formed a more cohesive political unit than is likely ever to have been the case, it is apparent that a similar system or systems existed throughout all the areas colonised by the Norse. Two units, the *ounceland* and the *pennyland*, are found almost exclusively in these areas. The *ounceland* is found in the Northern and Western Isles, on the western seaboard, in Caithness, and under the name *treen* (a contraction of the Gaelic *tirunga*, or 'land of an ounce') in the Isle of Man.<sup>3</sup> With the exception of the Isle of Man, the *pennyland* is known from all these areas, and is also found in Galloway. The distribution of these units follow closely, though with some exceptions, the areas where a high density of Norse-derived place- names occur, and where there is also some degree of historical evidence for Norse political domination. These areas of Norse settlement were divided into separate political units, of which the most important were the Kingdom of Man and the Isles, and the Earldom of Orkney.

Most published works have accepted that the *ounceland* and *pennyland* assessments form a single coherent system, but this view is to be challenged in a forthcoming paper by William Thomson in *Northern Scotland*, which argues that the significant local variations in the size and productivity of individual *ouncelands* suggest that *ouncelands* in different areas do not represent parts of a unified system. This does not radically affect the issue of the relative dating of the *dabhach*, however, since Thomson remains content to see both *ouncelands* and *pennylands* as assessments introduced by Norse rulers.

Two schools of thought exist on the origins of the *ounceland* and *pennyland* assessment. One sees the units as primarily of Norse origin, although probably superimposed onto pre-existing Celtic structures.<sup>4</sup> The other sees not only the units but

<sup>3</sup> Marwick 1935, pp. 26-9; Marstrander 1937, pp. 386-90.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas 1884, p. 258; Thomas 1885, p. 209; Marwick 1935, pp. 26-9; McKerral 1943-4, pp. 54-5; Crawford 1987, pp. 86-9.

possibly even the assessments from which they take their name as primarily of Celtic origin, taken over as a whole by Norse overlords.<sup>5</sup> Where both views agree is that to a greater or lesser extent, the Norse built their land divisions on earlier Celtic structures, and more particularly on two- the *tech*, or 'house', of the Kingdom of Dál Riada, and on a unit of uncertain origins called the *dabhach*. It is this assumption which this paper seeks to question.

There is no reason to doubt the possibility of Norse borrowing from the Celts. The Norse were adaptable people, and saga tradition records intermarriage between Norseman and Celt. Earl Hlöðvir of Orkney married an Irish woman, and their son Earl Sigurðr the Stout married a daughter of a 'King of Scots', who may be identified with Malcolm II of Scotland.<sup>6</sup> Sigurðr is also credited in *Njáls saga* with a brother-in-law with a Celtic name, Earl Gilli of Coll, or Colonsay,<sup>7</sup> which seems to indicate the survival of at least some powerful Celtic families in western Scotland at the height of Norse power in the 10<sup>th</sup>- 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is also quite possible that the Dalriadic 'house' system had some influence in the formation of uncencelands and pennylands in the west highlands and islands. In Orkney, and probably Caithness, there were 18 pennylands to the uncenceland. In western Scotland there were 20. Attempts have been made to explain this difference in terms of differing use of weights and measures in the two areas, but the reliability of such calculations has been questioned by Sawyer, and more recently both Crawford and Easson have questioned whether the ounce and the penny of the land divisions might not represent two separate systems of assessment.<sup>8</sup>

An explanation for the difference may be found, however, in the account of the early Dalriadic system found in a document known as the *Senchus fer nAlban*, which gives some indication of the political and administrative structures of Dál Riada in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> While there are a number of reasons for doubting the *Senchus* as a precise record of the pre-

<sup>5</sup> Megaw, 1979, pp. 75-77. Easson 1987, pp. 6-9.

<sup>6</sup> OS ch. 11, p. 24; ch. 12, p. 27; Crawford 1987, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> NS, ch. 89, p. 224; ch. 154, p. 440.

<sup>8</sup> Crawford 1993, pp. 138-143; Easson 1987, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Bannerman 1974, pp. 41-9 for text and translation.

Norse situation,<sup>10</sup> what does emerge from it is that the basic social unit, called the *tech*, or 'house', was generally grouped in twenties for the purposes of military organisation. Although the *Senchus* is our only direct evidence for this unit, it fits closely to Irish parallels, while the pennyland seems also to be a household unit (ie. it appears to represent the typical family smallholding during the Norse period).<sup>11</sup> One may therefore postulate a system of 18 households to an ounceland in Orkney, which when extended to the west coast assimilated the Dalriadic 20-'house' unit for convenience; this would presumably be simpler than attempting to restructure the 20-'house' units into 18s; particularly likely if there was indeed a fairly high level of Celtic survival in the West.

But where does the *dabhach* fit into this? It has been variously regarded as being of both Dalriadic and Pictish origins, and is regarded as being the Celtic ancestor of the Norse ounceland.<sup>12</sup> It has been argued that the *dabhach* was originally the 20-'house' unit of Dál Riada, although the unit is not mentioned in the *Senchus*, and although the equation only works via the ounceland and pennyland. Most authors have accepted that the Dalriadic 20-'house' unit was the ancestor of the Norse 20-pennyland unit or ounceland. In later charters it is possible to equate the *dabhach* with 20 pennylands, and it must therefore also be the equivalent of the ounceland. Thus far the argument makes perfect sense, but the equation in no way proves that the *dabhach* itself is actually pre-Norse, or that there is any direct connection between the *dabhach* and Dál Riada.

We have even more specific evidence that the *dabhach* was equated with the ounceland in a document of 1505 from Kilmuir in North Uist, which refers to 'the davach called in Scotch [ie Gaelic] the terung of Yllera, the davach called in Scotch the terung of Pablisgerry, the davach called in scotch the terung of Paible, the davach called the terung of Bailranald',<sup>13</sup> *terung* or *tirunga* (literally 'land of an ounce') being the Gaelic form of the word ounceland. Again, this is

<sup>10</sup> Williams 1996, pp. 58-62.

<sup>11</sup> Thomson 1987, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas 1886, p. 201; Skene 1890, III, pp. 224-5; Marwick 1949, p. 9; Barrow 1967, p. 135.

<sup>13</sup> *OPS*, II, pt. i, p. 369.

hardly evidence for the pre-Norse status of the unit. Furthermore, the fact that both *dabhach* and *terung* are Gaelic words for the same land unit raises further questions as to the precise implications of the wording here (see further below). What then is the early evidence for the *dabhach*, and why has it led people to suppose both Dalriadic and Pictish origins?

The first piece of evidence is the name *dabhach* itself. Although it is unparalleled as a land unit in Ireland the word apparently comes from the Old Irish for a large vat or vessel, possibly used as a measure.<sup>14</sup> This is taken to indicate a measure of arable capacity; either the vat in question is the amount of grain required to sow the land, or the amount yielded from it, or, as seems to be the most preferred notion, the amount of grain paid in tribute or taxation from it. The Irish name has led not unnaturally to the assumption that the land unit itself, although not actually Irish, was the creation of the Irish settlers of Dál Riada.<sup>15</sup> Further support for this has been seen in the survival of Celtic dues and obligations in the late mediaeval feudal charters that form the bulk of our evidence on the *dabhach*. The dues of *conveth* (hospitality to the king) and *cain* (a food render to the king), and the military obligations of *feacht* and *sluagad*, find parallels in early Ireland, and it is thought that for these dues to survive under the Anglo-Norman inspired feudal structure, they must have been well established, and possibly already old, by the time of the introduction of feudal ideas in the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century.

However, a Dalriadic origin fits poorly with what we know of the distribution of the *dabhach*. It is known both from place-name evidence and from charter references. The distribution patterns of charter evidence before 1400, and of *dabhach* place-names seem to agree closely; the *dabhach* was largely confined to central and eastern Scotland; a distribution described by Geoffrey Barrow as 'inescapably Pictish'<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Earlier suggestions, relating it to *damh*, 'ox', and *achadh* or *ach*, 'a field', giving the meaning of an oxgang, or *damh*, 'ox', and *ach*, an augmentative particle meaning 'abounding in', were rejected by Skene, and all subsequent works on the subject (Thomas, 1885-6, p. 202; Skene 1890, III, p. 224).

<sup>15</sup> Skene 1890, III, pp. 223-6.

<sup>16</sup> Barrow 1967, p. 135.

(although the place-name also occurs in Galloway). Furthermore, identified *dabhachs* have been linked with the location of Pictish symbol stones, and with place-names in Pit-and-Bal-.<sup>17</sup> Even when one adds in *dabhach* and ounceland references up to 1600, the one area where the *dabhach* does not appear is within the bounds of the kingdom of Dál Riada. One cannot, of course, ignore the possibility that this merely reflects the chance survival of documents; there is relatively little charter material surviving from the West coast at all. However, charters do survive from the area of Dál Riada, with enough references to pennylands and the obligations relating to them to suggest that had the *dabhach* been at all widely used in the area, it too might have survived in the sources.

A further problem in associating the *dabhach* with Dál Riada is the likely incompatibility of 20 Dalriadic 'houses', units very probably assessed primarily on pastoral capacity, being grouped into a single unit, the *dabhach*, assessed primarily on arable capacity. One piece of evidence used to support a parallel between the Dalriadic 'house', as described in the *Senchus fer nAlban*, and the pennyland, and household units in early Ireland, is that a common practice of assessing grazing in 'cow-soums' may have existed in both Ireland and the west of Scotland. Lamont argues that a 3-cowland holding was the standard unit in Ireland, and that this was also the case in Islay, where unusually the land continued to be assessed in cowlands rather than in pennylands. Comparisons in value with other parts of western Scotland suggest that the Islay 3-cowland is also equivalent to the pennyland.<sup>18</sup> One must also consider that not all of the lands assessed in the *Senchus* are likely to have been very productive for arable farming.

The *dabhach*, by contrast, with its meaning of a vat or vessel, seems to imply arable assessment. While the term could certainly be used of a liquid measure,<sup>19</sup> rather than a seed-container, the size of the unit suggests that a render in

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<sup>17</sup> Whittington 1974-5, pp. 99-110.

<sup>18</sup> Lamont 1981, pp. 65-71. This does not of course, mean that Dál Riada had a purely pastoral agricultural system, merely that the basis of taxation was pastoral rather than arable.

<sup>19</sup> Skene 1890, III, p. 224, note 26.

milk would have required an enormous container to represent the value of the land. Furthermore, in those charters which mention renders in dairy produce, it is cheese rather than milk which is specified, probably as a result of the difficulty of transporting milk in large quantities in usable condition.<sup>20</sup> It seems likely, therefore, that the traditional translation of a *dabhach* as a vat of seed is probably correct, although whether this was the grain planted, the grain harvested, or the grain given in tribute is unclear. It is true that W.F. Skene records an oral tradition of a *dabhach* as the pasture of 320 cows,<sup>21</sup> but there is no evidence that this tradition was particularly ancient. The physical location of identified *dabhachs* is more telling. In those areas where *dabhachs* are found, they tend to be placed on the best farming land, generally on low-lying fertile ground, often close to the coast or to rivers.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, some grants refer to the *dabhach* with accompanying pasture, and *cum fortyris*, where the *fortyr* is identified as meaning a shieling<sup>23</sup> T. Pennant in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century described the *dabhach* as consisting of '96 Scotch acres of arable, such as it is, with a competent quantity of mountain and grazing ground.'<sup>24</sup> Occasional *dabhachs* may have been pastoral. The place-name Dochfour is taken to mean 'pasture *dabhach*', and the name Gargawach may possibly indicate 'rough *dabhach*',<sup>25</sup> but the fact that these places are so described implies that this was unusual. Skene records an oral tradition that the *dabhach* was land capable of pasturing 320 cows<sup>26</sup> and A. McKerral points out that this fits closely to an old Irish poem which gives 300 cows to the *baile* (township), in four herds; he suggests the four herds as a possible explanation of the division of the *dabhach* into

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<sup>20</sup> A number of early medieval charters and law codes include renders in beer, but a widespread system of land assessment based exclusively on capacity for beer production is not altogether convincing, however appealing the idea may be.

<sup>21</sup> Skene 1890, III, p. 227.

<sup>22</sup> Easson 1986, pp. 51-3.

<sup>23</sup> Barrow 1967, pp. 133, 137-8; Easson 1986, pp. 64-5.

<sup>24</sup> Pennant 1774, p. 314.

<sup>25</sup> Easson 1986, p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Skene 1890, III, p. 227.

quarterlands,<sup>27</sup> although he seems to accept that the *dabhach* is basically arable.

Thus we see the *dabhach* as an arable unit, apparently based in Pictland, of which there is no evidence whatsoever in Dál Riada, an area in which what we do know of the early assessment systems seems to indicate a pastoral basis for assessment. Thus, as Barrow suggests, it would indeed seem to be 'inescapably Pictish', were it not for the fact that the unit has a Gaelic name, and in later charters was used for the assessment of Gaelic named dues and services. Is there a possible setting against which these facts could cease to be anomalous?

To answer this, we must turn to the dating of the *dabhach*. Although generally assumed to be early, whether Pictish or Dalriadic, the first record of the *dabhach* comes from a document of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Book of Deer. This Latin document contains a number of Gaelic marginal notes, two of which refer to the *dabhach*. Note 11 records that Mael-Coluim, son of Cinaed, gave a king's dues in Biffie and in Pett Meic-Gobraig, and two davachs of upper Ros abard. Note VI records that Colbán, mormaer of Buchan, quenched grants in favour of God, the Church, etc., in return for the dues for four *dabhachs* to the Church.<sup>28</sup> Mael Coluim, son of Cinaed, with a 'king's rights' at his disposal, must be assumed to be Malcolm II son of Kenneth II, king of Scots 1005-1034. Colbán by contrast, is associated by Jackson with Earl Colbanus of Buchan, who took part in an attack on England in 1173. Thus we have a single isolated reference, in a source of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, of the *dabhach* dating back to the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. The next reference is from the mid to late 12<sup>th</sup> century, and it is also from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century that other charter references to the *dabhach* begin to appear. In the 13-14<sup>th</sup> centuries the numbers of *dabhach* references increase, but so too do the numbers of surviving charters, and this apparent growth in the frequency of the use of the *dabhach* probably reflects chance survival. Barrow also suggests that it may be 'explained by clerical reluctance to use a term so uncouth and strongly vernacular that it was a century or more before it was made

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<sup>27</sup> McKerral 1947-8, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> Jackson 1972, pp. 31-5.



tolerable in the form *davata* (terre) [the latinised form by which the unit is mostly recorded in the later charters]'.<sup>29</sup>

The references in the Book of Deer are interesting with regard to possible Norse connections with the *dabhach*. Malcolm II, as mentioned earlier, was probably the father in law of Earl Sigurðr the Stout, and Sigurðr's son, Þorfinn was according to Orkneyinga saga brought up at his grandfather's court.<sup>30</sup> As Sigurðr and Þorfinn, by virtue of the fact that they alone seem to have exercised some control over the whole of the Norse settlements in Scotland, are probably the likeliest creators of the ounceland system,<sup>31</sup> this connection with Malcolm II is not without interest. Although considerably later, and almost certainly postdating the introduction of both *dabhach* and ounceland, Colbán mormaer of Buchan is also interesting. A powerful noble, his name is taken by Jackson to be a Gaelic rendition of Old Norse Kolbeinn, and if the identification with Earl Colbanus is correct, he had a son called Magnus.<sup>32</sup> While the Norse name Magnús was by no means unique to Orkney, by the late 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, this name was particularly associated with Orkney following the canonisation of St Magnús. It is certainly tempting to suppose that a possible Orcadian connection may have existed, and this may indicate stronger links between the 12<sup>th</sup>-century Orkney earldom and the kingdom of Scotland than are generally recognised.

To return to the matter in hand, however, although one cannot regard a 12<sup>th</sup>-century source as a reliable record of the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, it is not in itself unlikely that the *dabhach* should have existed by the time of Malcolm II. For the *dabhach* itself to be so firmly established, together with the Gaelic-named dues mentioned earlier, that they survived under the Anglo-Norman feudalism imported later in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, they must surely have been in existence by the early 11<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. But need the *dabhach* be much

<sup>29</sup> Barrow 1967, p. 13 1. This argument would be more convincing were these documents also to display a reluctance to use 'uncouth' terms such as *cáin* and *coinnhéd*.

<sup>30</sup> OS, ch. 12-13, pp. 27-8; Crawford, 1987, pp. 64-7.

<sup>31</sup> Crawford 1987, p. 90; Williams 1996, *passim*.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson 1972, p. 75. He also had another son with the Scandinavian name of Merleswain (Young 1993, pp. 179-80).

earlier? There is certainly no evidence for it, and if one looks to the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries for the origins of the *dabhach*, the Pictish and Scottish anomalies begin to make sense.

Dauvit Broun's work on the growth of Scottish identity appears to establish a major change c.900. From this point there emerges a new concept of the kingdom of Alba, in the place of the earlier Pictland.<sup>33</sup> Although the name Alba appears earlier than this, it is used in a general sense in Irish for the non-Irish part of Britain. It now becomes used more specifically to describe the kingdom of the Picts, finding a new identity under the kingship of the Gaelic dynasty of Cinaed Mac Alpin and his grandsons.<sup>34</sup>

Alba was not, according to Broun, simply a fusion of the remnants of the Picts with their conquerors, the Scots of Dál Riada, themselves displaced by Norse invasions in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Instead it represented the re-establishment of the Pictish kingdom under a new Gaelic identity, as a deliberate policy of the Mac Alpin dynasty. The period sees the production of sources attempting to create a tradition of Pictish unity under a single king, and arguably the *Senchus fer nAlban* may have been produced at this time to give a similarly unified picture of the dynasty's Dalriadic heritage.<sup>35</sup> If, as Broun suggests, this new kingdom of Alba, the bounds of which correspond very closely with the distribution of both the *dabhach* place-names and of charter references to the *dabhach* before 1400, was indeed 'the territory of the Picts, with more of an emphasis on the territory than on the Picts', the *dabhach* no longer represents an anomaly. The Pictish distribution is appropriate for this context, as is the Gaelic name. The establishment of a strong dynasty is a likely context for the establishment of royal rights and dues, and of an assessment system on which these could be based. In particular, the growing power of the Orkney earldom, and of Norse settlers in the west, would have necessitated the creation of some regular system of military obligation, such as *feacht* and *slugad*, known from later evidence to have been levied on the *dabhach*. This applies equally whether the

<sup>33</sup> Skene 1876, I, pp. 2-3 and n.4; O'Rahilly 1946, p. 386 and n. 2; Broun 1994a, pp. 39-42.

<sup>34</sup> Broun 1994a, pp. 45-52; Broun 1994b, pp. 24-5.

<sup>35</sup> Williams 1996, pp. 58-61.

*dabhach* represents a wholly new assessment unit introduced in the new kingdom of Alba, or (given the association with Pit- names and symbol stones mentioned above) a Pictish unit re-named in Gaelic by the new rulers.<sup>36</sup>

If it is in that context that the *dabhach* was developed, however, it can hardly have been taken over by the Norse in western Scotland, and in the Northern Isles, because it did not yet exist at the time that they established control. This is not to say that it could not have been an influence; as mentioned above, there were apparently dynastic ties between the Orkney earldom and the kingdom of Alba in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, and some Orcadian awareness of what structures existed in Alba is not unlikely. But if, as the sagas suggest, Sigurðr was collecting tribute from the west of Scotland in the form of silver bullion in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>37</sup> the establishment of the ounceland as a unit of assessment independent of and contemporary with, the establishment of the *dabhach*, cannot be ruled out.

This also fits the evidence for areas outside the original Alba. A few *dabhach* references exist in Caithness, but very late, and apparently assessed rather differently,<sup>38</sup> probably as a result of being superimposed onto the Norse ounceland of 18 pennylands. The situation in Galloway is more problematic; there are *dabhach* place-names, but no charter references.<sup>39</sup> Given that the South was one of the earlier areas to see the

<sup>36</sup> A third possibility is that the *dabhach* is wholly Pictish, both in name and distribution. Work in progress by Dr. Simon Taylor of the University of St Andrews suggests that the *dabhach* element can be found in at least one Pictish place-name. Dr. Taylor points out that since so little is known of the Pictish language, one cannot safely exclude the possibility that some form of the word *dabhach* may have featured in Pictish as well as in Gaelic. I am grateful to Dr. Taylor for his permission to cite his theories in advance of publication. For the purposes of this paper, however, it makes little difference whether or not the *dabhach* assessment itself is Pictish, since I concede the possibility that the land unit on which that assessment is based may well be. In either case, the evidence suggests that the *dabhach* was initially confined to the Pictish heartland which subsequently formed the kingdom of Alba.

<sup>37</sup> NS, ch. 86, p. 208; ch. 89, p. 224; ES, ch. 29, pp. 76-7; Williams 1996, p. 127.

<sup>38</sup> There a *dabhach* was only 6 pennylands, or a third of an ounceland (Bangor-Jones 1987, pp. 14-5). While this seems an odd division at first sight, it probably reflects the fact that the Norse weight system was based on the division of the ounce into thirds (known as *ertugar*) and sixths (Brøgger 192 1, *passim*; Williams 1996, pp. 207-12). It is notable that estates of three and six pennylands are extremely common in the Orkney rentals (see Thomson 1996, *passim*).

<sup>39</sup> MacQueen 1979, pp. 69-74; Oram 1987, p. 51.

introduction of Anglo-Norman barons, it seems not unlikely that while the *dabhach* place-names lasted, the unit itself was too quickly replaced by the Anglian ploughgate to survive in the written record. What is less certain is what the *dabhach* unit was doing there in the first place. While it is not unlikely that Scottish kings would have sought to extend their customary dues and levies there as Galloway became absorbed into the Scottish kingdom, it was probably only relatively late that Scottish kings established firm control over that area. It is possible, however, that the presence of the *dabhach* in Galloway may represent a borrowing by a more or less independent Gallwegian ruler.<sup>40</sup>

As for the west of Scotland, we have no references to the *dabhach* until long after the Treaty of Perth in 1266 (by which the Western Isles and Kintyre were formally ceded to Scotland by Norway), and one may suggest that while in central and eastern Scotland the *dabhach* may indeed be earlier than the ounceland system, in the west it was a later development associated with the gradual expansion of Scottish royal power. Even in the later Middle Ages, royal control in the west was seldom strong, authority lying more with the chieftains who had succeeded to the power of the Kings of the Isles. Thus when we return to the charter for Kilmuir on North Uist of 1505, 'the davach called in Scotch the terung' makes a lot more sense. As Scottish power expanded to take in the former Norse lands, the Scots assimilated the Norse ounceland with the Scottish *dabhach* (by now anglicised to 'davach'), and simply renamed the existing ounceland units as davachs. By 1505, the Scottish court had not been Gaelic speaking for centuries, and the original meaning for *dabhach* of a vat or vessel had long been forgotten. On North Uist, however, the Gaelic speaking population was unfamiliar with the centralised assessment unit of the davach, and still thought in terms of the

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<sup>40</sup> There is also a problem with the *dabhach* in Moray, as this area is unlikely to have fallen under the direct rule of kings of Alba prior to 1130. Again, this may indicate a borrowing by a king of Moray from the kingdom of Alba or vice versa (D. Broun, *pers. comm.*). While it is possible that the system might have been extended to Moray when the two kingdoms were temporarily united under Macbeth, it is also possible that the *dabhach* was only gradually introduced into Moray from Alba at some time before the first charter attestations in the final years of the 12th century.

ounceland, gaelicised as *terung*. To them a *dabhach* probably meant no more than a big pot. To avoid any confusion therefore, the charter refers to the unit of land both as a 'davach', which was comprehensible in terms of the national basis of assessment, and as a 'terung' for the benefit of the locals who would, after all have to render the dues owed to that assessment.

To sum up, while the *dabhach* as a unit of assessment in Alba may well be earlier than Norse units elsewhere in Scotland, with a likely 10<sup>th</sup> century date, it can hardly be described as pre-Norse. In the areas of Scotland which fell at different times under Norse and Scottish rule, the evidence suggests that the introduction of the *dabhach* was post-Norse.

### *Acknowledgements*

This paper was originally written some years ago, but never quite polished off for publication until now. Dauvit Broun, Barbara Crawford, Brian Smith and Simon Taylor all commented on earlier versions, for which the author remains grateful, but any mistakes are the responsibility of the author.

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