

**A GOOD, VIABLE "COLLECTION" OF IONA MONUMENTS OF THE KINGS AND LORDS OF THE ISLES IS NOW EMERGING FROM THE MEDIEVAL MIST.**

Ian Macdonnell's contact with Historic Scotland (HS) was over 2007-12 mainly with Dr Peter Yeoman (but recently resigned). The new Iona Abbey Official Guidebook (2014) includes Ian in the credits for Lords of the Isles slab identification and furthermore the book includes his unique analysis and determination of the probable burial places of the historically important Somerled and Reginald, on either side of St Oran's altar - "*depositio ad sanctos*" (and this is a first). See the extract ["A"] at the end of article.

Another official first for recognition and publication based on Ian's work is that the burials of six Lords of the Isles from Donald I to Donald of Harlaw took place in the ancestral tomb on the south side of the chapel (in front of the later arched wall niche). Before his work, there was absolutely nothing at all regarding St Oran's chapel in relation to attributing any graveslab to any individual or to even suggest where any individual might have been buried in it - and, what was the critical relationship of the MacDonald Chiefs to the Abbey and Nunnery. The chapel was completely devoid of any specific historical information which was a source of great frustration and bitter disappointment to many visiting MacDonalds from around the world (just signed as the chapel of the MacDonald Chiefs). On the identification of Angus Og's monument in particular, the guide states "*this identification has recently been made by a re-interpretation of the inscription*" (ie, by Ian).

A formal letter from HS of Dec 2013 to Ian which expands on his contribution includes:- "*this is a unique and valuable piece of research which will be of considerable use to us.*" "*As ever, this is most helpful, and contributes more to our understanding of this important and complex situation.*"

Historic Scotland added :- "*Unfortunately however, it now seems unlikely that we will be able to carry out the movement and return to St Oran's of slab 150 in the near future. We are still committed to improving the display and interpretation of the West Highland Slabs in*

*general across the site, but other competing priorities across our large national estate means that this process at Iona will be phased over a number of years.*"

The above process necessarily involved a comparative, integrated study of all the many Iona slabs and out of that, other tentative attributions were made. Ian has now extended and refined the research using different methods and extra findings which have resulted in both stronger and additional attributions.

Now that the 700th anniversary of Bannockburn is passed, and having given sole attention to Angus Og, Ian recently made another very detailed report (46 pps) to Historic Scotland for their assessment of his attribution of more "MacSomerled" monuments to specific MacDonald Lords of the Isles and main branch chiefs (and a MacRuari chief). These medieval monuments are from 800 to 500 years old.

It will take some time as there are actually eight proposed attributions which include branch chiefs of Clanranald, Dunyvaig & Antrim Glens, Ardnamurchan (of Clan Donald) and a Clan Ruari chief.

Prior to Ian's work, commencing in 2006, it should be remembered that no slabs were officially attributed to any specific King or Lord of the Isles.

This "monumental dimension" of Iona for Clan Donald is extremely important, not just in its own right as discovering and getting recognition for their individual, ancient monuments, **but**, it's now part of a longer term, three stage plan. First, it was one critical, high status slab - Angus Og's, timed for his renewed prominence at Bannockburn 700 centennial. Done! Now, it's the rest of the Lord's slabs once some recognition and some credibility has been earned. It's all a necessary precursor in establishing and cementing their dominant and lengthy historical presence there in the prime location of the :- "*most ancient graveyard in all Scotland*".... "*the most hallowed spot on Iona*".

Once we can put names to the medieval graveslabs for the Lords of the Isles, it significantly raises the profile, human interest and historic legitimacy of Clan Donald's legacy of Iona Abbey and Cathedral :- *This sanctuary was wont to be the sepulture of the best men of the Isles, and also of our Kings, as we have said; because it was the most honorable and ancient place that was in Scotland in those days, as we read*".

The centre piece of this research is on graveslab No. 154 attribution. Ian thinks there is a most reasonable case to consider this graveslab being attributed for Ranald son of John, son of Angus Og, d. 1386, that is, for the eponymous Ranald of Clan Ranald.

Ian is also more convinced now, with further evidence, that slab no.161, is the graveslab for Iona abbey founder, our Reginald mac Somerled. For both Iona and Clan Donald's prestige, this is quite important.

**In July this year Historic Scotland made a resource allocation and assignment of Dr Nicki Scott to Ian's research. This is a major achievement, especially in times of tight budgets and competing priorities for Executives.** Historic Scotland have acknowledged it will take Nicki "time to get up to speed on the papers ". It will take a long time as this work cuts across many disciplines.

**The latest advice in Feb 2016 from Dr Nicki Scott is very positive and encouraging** - it is attached as a presentation slide, ['B'] at the end. There has been no specific queries or comments after nine months and it's thought that this might be a good sign (no obvious flaws). However, Ian thinks it would be jumping the gun to publicise full details of the recommended attributions with the many processes used and the specific grave slabs nominated to individuals. He does not want to appear either over confident or give false hopes. Out of courtesy, only the Chiefs of the High Council of Clan Donald have so far had access to the full submission.

What can be said is that Ian has made some exciting new discoveries. For example, an unrecorded and rare motif, possibly the Lord's of the Isles' hereditary master mason's mark, of what he has labelled the "Triple Trinity".



It is only on three West Highland and Isles graveslabs and he considers that it (plus other factors) links the monuments of a Lord of the Isles, his son Ranald and grandson Allan.

**Extract from Ian's submission to provide a flavour of his work :**

"..... intentionally done to make open (trefoil) knots, ie, as obvious open triquetra symbols, and, overall within a symbolic religiously ordered, tri-triplet Trinity motif of three x threes :- 1. three leaves; 2. each with tri-lobes; 3. and central petiole triquetra. This is not common.

At this exceptional holy place and period, that result is certain not to be simple variational chance, or just regional artistic evolution, but conscious, "intelligent ecclesiastical design" by devout master craftsmen.

A bit of 'Hy'-perbole? (Hy = Iona). Maybe. But, three petioles can be easily crossed or overlapped without making a highly distinctive open triquetra (three overlapping vesica piscis) or any knot at all and avoiding much extra, more difficult, finer stone carving".

Through Ian's thorough examination of all the relevant "records", he has found an earlier source of a worn inscription that has never been used by RCAHMS who in 1977 said it was "illegible".



Historic Scotland will take some convincing that this earlier reading is a valid one and Ian has done just that with a very convincing and wide ranging, complex analysis of great depth and detail.

After examining every letter of both names in the "worn inscription" for potential misreads against every letter of both names of the "*best men of the Isles*" who historically had a right of burial in St Oran's churchyard and every relevant graveslab of the period involved (and much more, e.g., all the motifs, inscription formulae and their epigraphy, etymology, etc), Ian's recommendation finishes with:-

**"It is certain to be a Clan Donald monument.** The only alternatives to *Ranaldvs MacDomnuill*, d.1386, are *Donaldvs MacDomnuill*, chief of the Glengarry Branch, d. 1420 and *Ranaldvs MacDomnuill*, son of Lord Alaxandair Og, d.c. 1370 (and *Ranald Bane* is excluded).

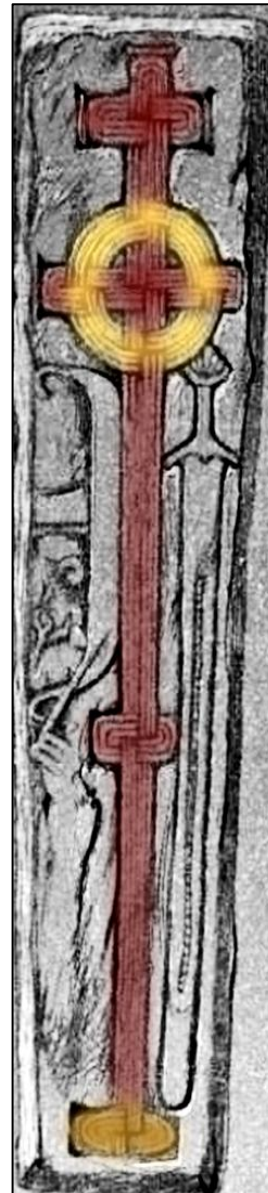
The onus of proof should be on those who might disagree, to provide evidence and reasons why the Professor was totally wrong, even if the inscription was "*almost worn smooth*" and he could not be absolutely certain. This is not that unusual. There are only two words that mattered in this reading, "RANALDVS MACDOMNUILL". No one is dismissive of Edward Lhuyd's readings in 1700 as said before. They are taken for granted, "*as read by Edward Lhuyd*", albeit 200 years less old, but still 300 years worn nevertheless (same acceptance for Hutton, 1802 and Smith, 1850).

A century ago RAS MacAlister (1870-1950), then Professor of Celtic Archaeology University College Dublin (1909-1943) said:-

"I think it reads : 'HIC IACET RANALDVS MACDOMNUILL', which may be offered as *at any rate the first* published attempt at its decipherment." All The evidence shows his reading was actually *first rate* - an '*unquestionable reading which constitutes a valuable record.*'"

Ian has also identified for the first time a unique "*True Cross*" carving on an Iona graveslab. This is a true "revelation" as RCAHMS gives it no special provenance or ascription and does not mention it under its classifications of cross types and other ecclesiastical or iconic motifs.

IAN LOOKS FOWARD TO THE DAY OF ADVISING YOU ALL OF HISTORIC SCOTLAND'S ASSESSMENT.



Another submission extract

### **"The True Cross".**

'See the unmistakable **unique, composite** cross on Iona slab, no 127 (left), which has two extra 'cross bars' in the same general positions and relative proportions as the "True Cross" (acronym 'INRI' on top *titulus* plaque and low one a "footrest").

It also has the normal Iona 'open circle' ring at the intersection of the normal (Latin) cross bar of longest length in the "regulation" position.

I think Iona graveslab no 127's cross motif represents the "*True Cross*" with Christ's nimbus/halo expressed as the open circle (as on Iona's early Christian, ringed high crosses) and with a "stone" base ("oval knot").

I cannot find any other representation of the "*True Cross*" on any other monument of any period on Iona (or highland and islands). This one is simply described by RCAHMS by its design, without provenance or ascription :- "*it has transverse bars at the head and middle of the shaft and an oval knot at the base*" (not indexed under iconography or "forms of crosses"; VOL 4, pps288-9).

(Also see Patriarchal Cross, in modern times known as the Cross of Lorraine).'



["A" - from revised HS Guidebook, p.39; 2014.]

Some of their undisturbed tombs still survive.

The most honoured positions were around the high altar, and it is possible that Somerled and his son Ranald lay under slabs to the south and north of the altar respectively. There is a central slab, apparently in its original position, just inside the door. This is very worn by footfall, but it does feature the sword and white staff insignia presented to new Lords of the Isles.



Early records show that this was the burial place of John, 1st Lord of the Isles and Donald, 2nd Lord of the Isles. The son and grandson of Angus Òg – the MacDonald chief who had played such an important role at the Battle of Bannockburn – they died in 1387 and 1421 respectively. Donald was 'laid in the same grave as his father' on the south side of the church.

There is a fine canopied mural tomb in the south wall, and there was once another to its left (now lost). These were probably constructed by John MacDonald II, the last Lord of the Isles, for his predecessors and himself, before his forfeiture in 1493. It was probably then appropriated by Abbot John MacKinnon for his own family use.

Although much of the structure is original, it has

["B"]

By Dr Nicki Scott – Historic Scotland, 8 Feb 2016.

Response to my submission – "ATTRIBUTION OF IONA GRAVESLABS"; 2015.

1. "We are planning further improvements to the interpretation of the West Highland Sculpture at Iona, and hope to undertake this sooner rather than later.
2. **In particular, we have an aspiration to re-organise some of the stones between the cloister and St Oran's Chapel, supported by additional interpretation for both of these spaces to explore the carvings, inscriptions and possible attributions for the stones.**
3. **This will allow us to tell the story of the Lords of the Isles and their role in the abbey more fully**, and will complement all of the work that has already undertaken on the abbey museum, chapter house and north transept displays, audio tour and site wide interpretation graphics.
4. These finishing touches for the cloister and St Oran's will be made as soon as resources allow. I'm afraid I cannot guarantee a timescale, but **our ideal would be in the next 2-3 years.**
5. I hope this helps to assure you of our ongoing work at the abbey, and of our commitment to telling its wonderful stories."

Ian Ross Macdonell,  
Finlaggan Councillor, AUSTRALIA.