

WHO RESOURCED AND BUILT IONA “CATHEDRAL OF THE ISLES”?

Fifth Part - Ian Ross Macdonnell, Australia.

Ear of Ross and Lord of the Isles, John Macdonald, son of Alexander, instead of just economically restoring the existing dilapidated Abbey church, significantly enlarged and enhanced it over c.1450 to 1476 (his first forfeiture). He used his ever-increasing treasury and resources which were greatly boosted from 1426 by additional revenue from Ross and Skye. John did this with the clear ambition of raising its status to the dignity of the *Macdonald Cathedral of the Isles*.

John Macdonald's re-building enterprise employed Donald Ó Brolcháin of the Lordship's long serving hereditary chief masons, church-wrights, clerics and personal secretaries from the distinguished Derry family of abbots/bishops, past Coarbs of the St Columba Familia and Chief Lectors, Prime Artificers of Ireland. The Ó Brolcháins had been associated with Iona since the eponymous Donald's father, Reginald mac Somerled founded the abbey, the first Prior being Domnall Ua Brolcháin d.1203, and continued right throughout the Lordship. Somerled tried to refound Iona Abbey in 1164 and have Flaibhertach Ó Brolcháin, first Bishop of Derry, take the Abbacy - but failed on both counts. Another Ó Brolcháin was the personal secretary to Chief Alexander Macdonald and one was the master mason, Donald Ó Brolcháin, who rebuilt the cathedral and lastly to the Ó Brolcháin master graveslab carver who left Iona and went to the mainland c.1500 after the Lordship collapsed in 1493. The Ó Brolcháin Iona church wrights (master masons) and chief artificers were employed by successive Macdonald chiefs, not the Iona Abbot. These fear-ciuid (artificers, craftsman) of the *aes dana*, learned men, '*people of the gifts*', enjoyed high professional, secular status and held hereditary offices to the Macdonald Lords of the Isles, not to the Iona Abbots.

John, son of Alexander, was assisted by his cousin, Bishop Angus (II) Macdonald "*son of a bishop of Royal stock*"¹, grandson of Donald of Harlaw and the exemplary reforming Abbot, Dominic MacKenzie from Wester Ross, kin of Chief Alexander Macdonald's mother, Mariota, Countess of Ross. In the 1430's Alexander was at peace with King James I, he was recognised by James as the Earl of Ross and became the Scotland's Chief Legal Officer, *Justiciar of Scotia*. Alexander had his centre of power in Ross at Dingwall and Inverness but his son John, of course later forfeiting Ross, was centred back in the Isles. It's worth reiterating that the first Macdonald Bishop, Angus, relocated his Seat, The Isles' Cathedra (throne), to the Iona Abbey Church in c.1433², functioning probably as a form of the common 'Benedictine monastic cathedral chapter' (not the proposed chapter of secular canons).³ Historically, there was no distinction between the *monastic cathedral chapters*, *monastic orders*, headed by a prior (all Benedictine) and those of the *secular canons headed by a dean*, in their relation to the bishop or diocese. They can be "numbered", in which case they are provided with a fixed prebend (appropriated benefice from parish revenue), or "unnumbered", in which

case the bishop indicates the number of canons according to the income. Over a period of time there is the exceptional convergence of a *Macdonald* patronised abbey (through patrilineal descent from founder) with *Macdonald* sponsored abbots, one a Clan Donald MacAlister and with two Bishops *Macdonald* and a kindred Maclean Bishop, John, 1st cousin, once removed of Chief Alexander. The King of Scots had the right to present the bishop candidate to the Archbishop of Nidaros, Norway, but note that the "*House of Macdonald*" as of John, son of Donald, was considered a "*Royal race*" with considerable influence. This convergence presents the opportunity to at least use a portion of Iona abbey's income (relatively wealthy in context of the west ⁴) and episcopal/diocese and 'communa' funds revenue *specifically* for the shared cause of *both* needing a new church and chapter house (Iona's derelict and Snizort's untenable. For example, rents and tithes from the majority of parishes in the Diocese of the Isles that were not endowed to Iona abbey (albeit hard to collect). Also, the larger and grander decorated church/cathedral and the only in situ corporeal (body-part) relic/reliquary of St Columba, which were entirely the product of and acquired by the Macdonalds, would then have renewed a more regular pilgrim visitation with increased donations (not just on isolated special feast days and one off indulgences).

Stepping back a little in time, with the abbey's finances starting to come back under control:- Donald of Harlaw acquired and gifted to the Abbey c.1412-21 the priceless "*Hand of St Columba*" - a rarity and the only corporeal relic of St Columba repatriated from its five centuries of safekeeping in Derry, Ireland - a prestigious, sacred "Hebridean Holy Grail". Donald and his artists enshrined it in a 'charismatic' gold and silver reliquary of 'dazzling, wondrous beauty'. This event, of momentous religious significance and high political status, was achieved after a 25 year long partnership with his 2nd cousin, the Iona Cloistral Prior and lead reforming Abbot John MacAlaxandair (MacAlister) from a senior line of Clan Donald – descended from Chief Alaxandair Og, k.1299 ("*undoubtedly in the light of primogeniture they were the senior family of the line of Somerled*" ⁵). The utmost importance of Saints relics and their reliquaries in this period cannot be over emphasised. "*Church relics play a crucial role in understanding the symbolic meaning of the place of worship in medieval Christianity; for they were the foundation of both the physical and the institutional church.*"

When was it first used? Almost surely on the Feast Day (death-translation) of St Columba, 9 June, 1412-20. Imagine the huge crowd consisting of the large retinue of the Lord of The Isles, Donald of Harlaw, the emotional pilgrims especially attracted that year (even without dispensations), the vassal Clan Chiefs with their lesser retinues, the church hierarchy of the Isles, Argyll and wider and the gathered locals, with scores of galleys beached and extra camps all around the Abbey's boundary – even in St Oran's graveyard (the custom). What a glorious sensation it would have been when the abbot (almost certainly John MacAlister) first came through the rood screen past all the choir monks singing Colmcille Feast Day chants. Holding the shining hand aloft, blessing the

congregation and then in procession to those gathered outside with embellished gestures of the "hand of St Columba" – a surreal blessing. What splendid satisfaction Donald would have had!

RAISING OF IONA CATHEDRAL: 1433. Some historians point out ⁶ that there are no records (discoverable) for cathedral chapter activity ⁷ at Iona for the Diocese of the Isles between 1433 and 1493 (final forfeiture) and surmise that the bishop's seat did not actually move to Iona before 1499, when the abbacy and the bishopric were combined '*in commendam*'. But neither are there such records which specify Snizort in this 60 year period, or after 1499 for Iona, so this argument is flawed. To fully explain why I say the bishop and therefore the diocese's seat, did move to Iona c.1433 would take a whole booklet but here are some main dot points • Snizort was a neglected, unpopular and unsuitable site for the Diocese's Seat • it was outside the Lordship of the Isles' territory at that time • the Diocese was subject to Nidaros/Trondheim, Norway and moving the bishop's seat, Cathedra, to Iona had centralising political benefits • why bother asking for 12 prebends to resource the chapter at Iona if it hadn't moved? • Sir Donald Munro, Archdeacon, or "*High Dean of the Isles*" (2nd to bishop) from 1549, was the *Vicar of Snizort* in 1526 and his maternal grandfather, Farquhar MacLean, was *Bishop of the Isles* from 1529 to 1544. Donald, with local and contemporary knowledge, notes in 1549 that Iona was the "*Cathedral Kirk of the Bischoppis of the Illes*" during the Lordship before forfeiture in 1493 • Bishops by long tradition had the right of being buried in *their* cathedral (elsewise their palace) and Angus (I) Macdonald, d.1441, was "*provided the most precious blessing*" by being buried "*with his crosier and Episcopal habit, south side of the **great choir** which he selected for himself*" ⁸ of the Cathedral of Iona Abbey (his uncontested burial location). A "*great choir*" designates cathedral status. The only church having a great choir in the Isles was Iona. Snizort had neither transepts nor aisles - no "great choir".

It is of the utmost importance to appreciate this : - "*The transfer of Iona Abbey **in commendam** to the Bishop of the Isles*" in 1498/9, was *not* about raising *the dignity* of the Iona church to cathedral status, as usually declared. There is nothing in any wording to contradict that Iona was already the bishop's seat, the Cathedral of the Isles. The petition was for the "*erection of the abbacy of Colmkyl in the bischoppis sete of the Illis*". And no prebends, resources for canons of a cathedral chapter were requested in 1498/9 (or afterwards and one didn't appear to operate). "*In canon law, 'in commendam' was a form of transferring an ecclesiastical benefice* (usually during a vacancy) *in trust to the custody of a patron*". The practice was open to serious abuse. It had become a regular form of corruption to strip assets from abbeys leading up to and after the Reformation. This transfer's principal objective was a power grab of the functions, responsibilities and therefore resources of the abbot to the bishop, that is the *commendator*, regardless of whether Iona was already the Diocese's Seat or not. It was a corporate raid or hostile takeover if you like. Commendators were regularly feuing

(transferring – siphoning off) abbey lands to family members. Pensions were granted from revenues of the bishopric and the recipients were family members. Favoured bishops began to receive multiple benefices, accepting them like absentee landlords, increasing their personal possessions to the detriment of the Church. Often these commendatory abbots were laymen, vassals of the kings, or others who were authorized to draw the revenues and manage the temporal affairs of the monasteries in reward for military services, like the Earls of Argyll as liegemen of the Stewart Kings.

So, who was instrumental in this Iona Abbey transfer *in commendam in 1498/99*? It was none other than Archibald, 2nd Earl of Argyll, the petitioner, supported by his enabler,⁹ King James IV and his son, James Stewart (Duke of Ross)¹⁰ the new Archbishop of St Andrews from 1497, which was now the Metropolitan See, controlling the Isles' Diocese! And who was the first Iona Abbey Commendator? It was *Eóin Caimbeul I* (son of 1st Earl of Argyll) - and then others were, Eóin Caimbeul II and then Eóin Caimbeul III and also four more Campbell "property managers" (and four Macleans) who all, over the next century, rapaciously regarded Iona Abbey's resources, Clan Donald's endowments and generous benefactions over 300 years, as their hereditary "family propriety interest"! They had all entered Clan Donald's "*monastery rather by reason of succession than from devotion*". To credit the 1st and 2nd Earls of Argyll with raising the *dignity(?)* of the abbey church to Cathedral status is a both a monumental travesty and dishonour to Clan Donald's legacy of medieval Iona Abbey and Cathedral. [cont.]

¹ Stewart Royalty - marriage of John, Lord of the Isles, to Margaret Stewart in c.1350. "*Clerics and Clansmen*" - see n.5 below.

² In a papal petition of 1433, he requested permission to move his cathedral from Snizort to '*some honest place within the diocese*'. *Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome Volume IV 1433-1447*, p 25. ed. A.I. Dunlop and D. MacLauchlan. 1983. "The criticism of a lack of honesty may therefore reflect political considerations, rather than poor religious practices" - *Bishop's Careers; Becoming a Bishop in the Middle Ages*.

³ Dobson, Barrie; "*The English Monastic Cathedrals in the Fifteenth Century*"; Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Vol. 1 (1991), pp. 151-172.

⁴ The Lordship of Isles territory included two bishoprics (Sodor/Isles and Argyll), four monastic houses (Iona Abbey and Nunnery, Saddell, Oransay) and approx. 64 parish churches of which the Lords had patronage of 41. Sarah Thomas; "*Bishops, priests monks and their patrons : the Lords of the Isles and the Church*".

⁵ Revs. Angus Macdonald; "*THE CLAN DONALD - VOL 1*", p.89. 1896.

⁶ Iain G. MacDonald; '*Clerics and Clansmen: The Diocese of Argyll Between the Twelfth and Sixteenth Centuries*'; 2013. Sarah E Thomas, University of Hull. '*From cathedral of the Isles to obscurity – the archaeology and history of Skeabost Island, Snizort*'.

⁷ A corporation of canons which had a role in the administration of a cathedral (dignitaries : Dean, Precentor, Chancellor, Treasurer) and were the bishop's *consilium*. The chapter was hardly functioning with many vacancies on Snizort and probably was similar at Iona.

⁸ Niall MacMhuirich (hereditary poets to Macdonald). '*The Red Book of Clanranald - The Macdonald History*'. Early 17th Century. In '*Reliquiae Celticae VOL II*', 1894.

⁹ D. E. R. Watt. '*The Heads of Religious Houses in Scotland from 12th to 16th Centuries*'; 2001. pp: 203-4.

¹⁰ King James V used the church as a source of income and for appointments for his illegitimate children and favourites.