The Geographical World of Taus Coir

When we think of Scotland, what we normally see in our minds is the Scotland we know today. However, it was much different in the early to central middle ages - during the life of Taus Coir, the progenitor of Clan Tavish, later known as Clan MacTavish..

Finding a map on Argyll from this time is very difficult. There are some maps available from the 1500s at the National Library of Scotland.

Perhaps the best way to see the geography of the time of Taus Coir is to highlight or mark up a current map from the description below, possibly using ordinance survey.

In the time of Taus Coir and his grandfather (Suibhne Ruadh), Argyle was part of Scotland's western seaboard and the maritime world. Unfortunately we have very poor historical documentation on the highlands and islands for the period of c.1100 - c.1336. There are the Irish Anals and the *Senchus fer nAlban*; but, according to R. Andrew McDonald in his *"The Kingdom of the Isles",* "Not only does the interest of the historian shift to the better-documented Lowland regions, but the sources for the history of the western Highlands become less amenable to analysis. It is no exaggeration to say that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are among the most obscure in the whole history of the Highlands."

When speaking with Archivist Murdo McDonald in Lochgilphead about finding documentation for the period of 1100-1400, he smiled and said, "You know that you are scraping the bottom of the barrel and finding anything will be extremely difficult?"

We don't have information about the people who tended their farms, raised animals, sailed and fished for their food. The annalists and chroniclers were not interested in the everyday life; and charter and other material evidence is too sparse.

Dr. R. Andrew McDonald also said "Much of the neglect of the seaboard in the Middle Ages by modern writers stems from the constraints implicit in most modern historical writing; to put it simply, we are too well conditioned to thinking in terms of national history. When the foundations of modern historical writing were laid in the nineteenth century, history was primarily an account of how the great powers of the world had come into being. But kingdoms, states, or lordships which did not succeed in becoming European powers did not warrant study."

During the period of c.1100 - c.1336, the Hebrides were closely connected to the neighbouring region of the Scottish mainland, Argyll.

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"The Kingdom of the Idles"
by R. Andrew McDonald, Introduction

"Medieval Argyll was much more extensive than the modern region of the same name; it embraced the whole area from the Mull of Kintyre and the Clyde in the south to Loch Broom and beyond in the north. The seventeenth century *Book of Clanranald* several times refers to Argyll as encompassing the lands from Dumbarton to Caithness, or from Dingwall to the Mull of Kintyre. This vast and rugged region with its extensive coastline was commonly divided into two
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areas: North Argyll, the region between Glenelg and Loch Broom, which pertained to Moray and to Ross in the Middle Ages, and South Argyll, stretching from Knoydart to the Mull of Kintyre, known as 'Ergadia que pertinent ad Scotiam' ('Argyll which pertains to Scotland.').

The eastern boundary of Argyll was the natural barrier of the mountain range known as Drumalban, the Spine of Britain. The twelfth-century tract *De Situ Albanse* referred to it as 'the mountains which divide Scotia from Argyll', and its use to distinguish the west from the central and eastern regions dates back to the time of St. Columa. These mountains cut off the Atlantic coast from the rest of Scotland, and throughout this period, travel from Argyll and the Isles by sea to Norway was easier than the overland route, through heavily forested mountains, to the Scottish court at Edinburgh, Perth, or Sterling.

This vast coastal region has been historically divided into several distinct Sections: Kintyre (Sweens) and Knapdale (MacTavishes), Cowal (Lamonts), Lorn (MacDuine), Ardnamurchan, and Movern. Kintyre, along with its northern link of Knapdale, forms a long, narrow peninsula jutting south from Crinan for about fifty-five miles to its southern-most extremity, the Mull of Kintyre. Because the sea-loch of West Loch Tarbert penetrates to within a mile of East Loch Tarbert, Kintyre is all but an island, which means that its history is closely linked with that of the western seaboard, rather than with the mainland.

Cowal, separated from Knapdale by Loch Fyne, is bounded on the east by Loch Long and the Clyde estuary; it reaches out to embrace the Isle of Bute, which is separated from it by the Kyle of Bute. Despite its proximity to Glasgow, it remains, even today, largely remote and inaccessible because it is heavily cut into by sea-lochs with steep mountain ridges in between.

Lorn, perhaps the best-known region of Argyll, is very extensive; the modern-day territory stretches from Loch Fyne northwards to Loch Leven, and eastward to Rannoch. It is notable for its varied physical features which include a scenic seacoast, jutting sea-lochs like Crinan, Craignisch, or Melfort, and mountains like Ben Cruachan or Buachaille Etive Mor.

Ardnamurchan-Morvern region, a large, detached, and very scenic territory on the west side of Loch Linnhe. It is a roughly triangular-shaped peninsula that is nearly bisected by Loch Sunart, which separates Ardnamurchan from Movern. Remote and inaccessible by automobile even today, the seagirt castles which helped to define this region are sufficient reminder that the highway of the seas helped integrate even Ardnamurchan and Movern into the kingdom of the Isles.

When people of the Middle Ages thought of Argyll and Kintyre, they tended to associate them with the Isles rather than with the Scottish mainland.

In geopolitical terms, mainland Argyll belonged not to the heart of the Scottish kingdom, but rather to the maritime world of the western seaboard from the eleventh to the late thirteenth century."

"The sea acted as the unifying factor between mainland Argyll and the island. The western seaboard of Scotland was part of a singular cultural zone during the central Middle Ages; the basis of this culture was its maritime orientation, and it was the highway of the western seas that lent unity to the kingdom of the Isles. Some of the most remarkable geographical features of Argyll and the Hebrides are the deep sea-lochs and inlets stretching far inland. So serrated is the

coastline of Argyll that no part of the interior lies more than about twelve miles from either the open sea or a sea-loch."

"The culture of the western seaboard in the Middle Ages was a maritime one. For the inhabitants of Argyll and the Isles, the sea was not a barrier, but a link, a line of communication, and a means of efficient transportation. Few of the events which occurred in the western seaboard between 1098 and 1336 were not dictated by its essentially maritime orientation. The Northern and Western Isles and the northern and western Scottish coasts were controlled by a people whose outlook was seaward, whose way of life was dominated by the sea, and whose political structures were based on sea power."

From the *Book of the Dean of Lismore*, pp. 6-13, 267-9, a Gaelic verse to celebrate the 'Tryst of a fleet against Castle Sween, probably 1310.....

“Tall men are arraying the fleet, which swiftly holds its course on the sea's bare surface: no hand lacks a trim war spear, in battle of targes, polished and comely ... They have a straight stern-wind behind them ... their dappled sails are bulging, foam rises to the vessel's sides.”

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The Kingdom of the Isles"
Scotland's Western Seaboard, c.1100-c.1336
R. Andrew McDonald, 1997

This important new study explores the history of the western seaboard of Scotland (the Hebrides, Argyll, and the Isle of Man) in a formative but, until now, neglected era: the central middle ages. Drawing on a variety of sources, this very readable narrative deals with three major and closely interrelated themes (1) the existence of the Isles and coastal mainland as a kingdom from c.1100 to c.1266; (2) the rulers of the region; and (3) the often complex relations among the Isles, Scotland, Norway and England.

While political history predominates, the changing nature of society in the Isles is emphasized throughout, and separate chapters address the church and monasticism as well as the monuments of the western seaboard - the castles, monasteries, church and chapels hat form an enduring legacy of the Kingdom of the Isles.

A fully rounded history emerges, and it is one that transcends national viewpoints. No such study has been published for at least fifty years.

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