

II.

WHAT WAS A DAVACH? BY ANDREW MCKERRAL, C.I.E., M.A., B.Sc., F.S.A.Scot.

In a paper in the *Transactions* of this Society, entitled "Ancient Denominations of Agricultural Land in Scotland,"¹ I suggested, when considering the meaning and use of the term "davach" (*dauch, daugh, doch*), that it might have been originally the name applied more particularly to the *arable* area of the Celtic rural township or vill, and not, as is found at later dates, in some cases at least, to the whole land of the township. This view was based mainly on a consideration of the facts that, as a place-name prefix, it is of infrequent occurrence compared with such other prefixes as *bally* and *pit*, which are known to have been Celtic names for the township, and also, because the most reputable modern philologists consider the word to be from old Gaelic *dabach*, meaning a seed-vat. Since writing that paper five years ago I have come across some further evidence, not known to me then, which appears to confirm this view.

¹ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxxviii. p. 39.

In a late eighteenth-century account of the agriculture of the northern counties,¹ the author, Sir John Sinclair, in treating of Inverness-shire, makes the following remarks: "A *soum* is understood to be the grass of a full-grown cow or ox, a horse is estimated at two *soums*, and in most Highland counties four sheep, but in some cases five. . . . Another mode of estimating the extent, and consequently the yearly value, of arable ground, in one or more farms was, in early ages, and still continues to be in some cases, by the *daugh*, the *aughten* part, the *boll*; in other cases by pounds (Scots), the markland, the penny and the halfpenny, of which I could not obtain an explanation altogether satisfactory, and therefore suppose these different terms expressed some old valuation long ago exploded."

In a footnote he states: "*daughs* and *bolles* are unknown anywhere south of Inverness-shire. Every *daugh* seems to have consisted of forty-eight *bolles*, which comprehended a greater or smaller district of country according to the quality of the soil. The *aught* or *aughten* part (which appears to be a corruption of the eighth part) consisted of six *bolles*." He also makes the statement that the *daugh*, or *davach*, fixed "the general and known levy of soldiers," and was "a rule to the chieftain for raising his followers."

In the above account we have a clear distinction drawn between the mode of measurement or valuation of grazing land on the one hand, and of arable on the other. In the case of grazing the unit was the *soum*, or grazing of a cow; in the case of arable it was the *daugh* or *davach*, divided into *aughtens* and *bolles*. This subdivision was clearly based on the seed-rate for oats, which was from 4 to 6 firloths, or a *boll*, to a *boll* and a half, per acre,² so that on this computation the *aughten* would be approximately 4 to 6 acres, and the *davach* 32 to 48 acres of sown land. The *davach* thus appears to have been a ploughgate, in the sense that an area of 50 acres more or less was the amount that a single plough could turn over in a season.

In a report on the parish of Elgin we find some evidence confirmatory of the above definition of the *davach*. In describing the lands of the burgh of Elgin the author remarked: "There is a large field of arable land to the west of Elgin . . . divided into what are called *auchteens* parts, but consisting of sixty four, which may vary in extent from 4 to 6 acres. Originally, they belonged to 64 different proprietors, burgesses of Elgin."

The writer is apparently puzzled to explain why the field should have consisted of 64 *auchteens*, which he apparently interprets as eighteenth parts. The word *auchteens*, occurring in his report, is clearly a misspelling of the *aughten*, or eighth part, mentioned in the Inverness survey by Sir John Sinclair, and the correct interpretation would appear to be that the

¹ *General View of the Agriculture of the Northern Counties*, p. 76 and note.

² *General View of the Agriculture of Midlothian*, p. 104.

burgh lands of Elgin consisted of 64 *aughtens*, or eighth parts, and so were of an extent of 8 davachs in all.

Clearly, then, in both Inverness and Elgin the term davach was still in use in the eighteenth century to describe *arable* land. In other cases, however, it is used in such a manner as to refer to the township as a whole, with particular reference to its grazing capacity. W. F. Skene records an old tradition existing in some parts of the Highlands, given to him by Colonel Macdonnell of Glengarry, that a davach was grazing for 320 cows.¹ This would practically equate its extent with that of the Irish "bally," as described in a very ancient Irish poem, quoted by Skene² :

"A baile sustains three hundred cows.

Four full herds therein may roam
With no cow of either touching the other."

The four herds of the Irish bally probably accounted for its division into those "quarterlands," or *ceathramhs*, which were a characteristic of Celtic landholding in Ireland, in the West Highlands, and in the Isle of Man.

Both Skene and Sir John Sinclair make the assertion that the davach was the unit on which the ancient pre-feudal military service (*servitium Scoticanum*) was levied, and in my paper referred to above certain fourteenth-century examples were cited which support this view. In such cases the reference to the davach is more likely to have been to the township as a whole. In ancient Dalriada, the obligation to the *feachtmara*, or sea expedition, was laid on each group of twenty houses, which were required to provide between them a ship with twice seven benches of oars.³ This is clearly the same unit on which the Norse lords later laid a scat of an ounce of silver (or a silver penny on each house) and which, accordingly, became known as the *Ounceland* or *Tirunga*. I gave some examples which definitely equated the Ounceland unit with the davach.⁴ In a charter of King Robert the Bruce to the Earl of Lennox, dated 1321, the reddendo of the military service is specified as that pertaining to ten full *vills* [*ad decem plenarias villas*], and the reference in this case is clearly to the township as a whole.⁵ In some other Lennox charters however the military service was levied on the "arochor," which is a Celtic term for a ploughgate, and was perhaps the Lennox equivalent of the arable davach, while the fiscal unit is the individual house, each of which had to supply two cheeses.⁶

These apparently conflicting uses of the word can be reconciled if we remember that the vill, or township, was a tenement of land and houses, and that, while the military service would be levied on, and the fiscal burdens collected from, the vill as a whole, their incidence would be on its

¹ *Celtic Scotland*, vol. iii. p. 227.

² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁴ *Proc. Soc. Ant. Scot.*, vol. lxxviii. p. 56.

⁵ Fraser, *The Lennox*, vol. ii. p. 19.

⁶ Fraser, *Chiefs of Colquhoun*, vol. ii. pp. 272-6.

component parts, and they would sometimes be described as being levied either on its lands or on its houses.

Transposition of words, from the things which they originally denoted to others, is frequently encountered. For example, the word *tun* was originally a Teutonic name for the rural township, but has now become appropriated by the purely urban community, or "town." A *burgh* now means a town, but it was originally the *borg*, or stronghold, round which the town grew. A *farm* is now a piece of land, but the word meant originally the *ferm* or *firma*, that is the produce rent, which the land paid. So, too, it would appear, from the evidence cited above, that the name *davach* had been first of all applied to the arable land of the vill or township, but that in time, in certain cases at least, it came to denote the whole of which it had been originally only a part. (See also Notes, p. 286.)