

# Mingary in Ardnamurchan: a review of who could have built the castle

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## ABSTRACT

*This short paper was prompted by the current interest in Mingary Castle, brought about by the major works recently undertaken there. It notes that its building has been attributed to various kin-groups by different scholars, the most recent and fullest analysis making a firm case for the MacDougalls. The paper reviews what evidence there is and concludes that there can be no absolute certainty on the matter.*

The large-scale restoration carried out on Mingary Castle in Ardnamurchan, has propelled this remote west Highland castle into a prominent news item (Haylett 2013: 4–5; *Oban Times* 6 February 2014: 9). Under the auspices of the Mingary Castle Preservation Trust, there is now an excellent website and blog giving details of the work undertaken, with full illustrations. The website contains an ‘analytical and historical assessment’ written by Tom Addyman, with regard to the castle’s archaeology, and by Professor Richard Oram, in respect of its history (Addyman & Oram 2012). The investigations have revealed a great deal and consequently the architectural history of the castle is being rewritten in much greater detail than previous surveys could have hoped to attain. It is unlikely, however, that this work will add to what little information we have as to who may have built the castle in the first place.

The purpose of this short paper is to discuss previous thoughts on who the builders may have been and to attempt a review of what evidence there is. Clearly, whoever built the castle did so because they desired a lordly residence that symbolised their status, that in some measure dominated the western approaches to the Sound of Mull and that served as a base from which to commute to the southern Hebrides and to other parts of the west Highland mainland. This is

the simple context in which we should seek the circumstances of the castle’s foundation. The castles of the western seaboard did not suddenly mushroom up as a consequence of dramatic developments in Scottish national history, such as the shift from Norwegian to Scottish royal overlordship in the 13th century (MacGibbon & Ross 1889: 13; Douglas Simpson 1965: 9; Stell 2006: 15). These castles were commissioned by the emerging aristocracies of the area as devices to reflect and facilitate their further advancement. It is this that must be borne in mind when contemplating the identity of castle-builders.

In general, the origins of west Highland and island castles are poorly recorded and certainly, Mingary is no exception. Indeed, it may even be suggested that in this respect, it is more obscure than many others. Charter evidence can be used to attest a much earlier existence for a number of other castles of the area, but the first such document for Mingary is not until 1499 (*Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: no A57: 230). Narrative sources are of no assistance whatever. Mingary does not feature in John of Fordun’s list, written *c*1380, which focuses largely, though not exclusively, on Hebridean castles (*John of Fordun* 1871: 43–4; *John of Fordun* 1872: 39–40). Similarly, the late 17th-century

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ILLUS 1 The castle looking west. Coll and Tiree are dim profiles on the horizon (photo: Jonathan Haylett)

Gaelic histories – Hugh of Sleat’s *History of the MacDonalds* and *The Book of Clanranald* – provide no information on who first built Mingary (Hugh MacDonald of Sleat 1914; *The Book of Clanranald* 1894). In these circumstances, as Geoffrey Stell aptly wrote, ‘for the most part the physical evidence is the principal, if not the only, source and technique of ... dating’ (Stell 2006: 16). Agreeing a *terminus post quem* for building work on architecture alone is, of course, fraught with imprecision and as Stell has also wisely commented, ‘methods of dating by typology, style or comparison of details are beset with difficulties which have been rarely admitted ...’ (Stell 2006: 17). It is indeed instructive to note a number of prominent cases where once-held assumptions of foundation dates for west Highland and island castles, made on the basis of architectural attributes, have been dramatically revised by later review. This is an exercise that Stell has carried out, in summary, in his recent *Stell Report* (Stell 2006: 15–16). It catalogues changing views on foundation dates for Kisimul (Barra), Breachacha (Coll), Dunvegan (Skye)

and elsewhere, by way of a background to his revision of a timeframe for the beginning of Castle Tioram in Moidart. Inasmuch as Tioram is commonly taken as Mingary’s closest ‘twin’, its case is especially interesting. In volume 3 of 1889 of their extensive work, Ross and MacGibbon proposed that it was founded in the 13th century (MacGibbon & Ross 1889: 12–15, 56–8). Douglas Simpson endorsed this date and this seems to have coloured a view that has persisted almost to the present (Douglas Simpson 1954: 70–90; Dunbar 1981: 46; McNeill 2004). Stell’s recent reassessment of its architecture, set within the framework of the supporting documentary evidence, makes it highly likely that it is, in fact, mid-14th century (Hugh MacDonald of Sleat 1914: 26; *Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: xxviii–xxix, no 7: 10–11 and no A7: 209; Stell 2006: 5; Stell 2014: 273–4, 280–2, 284). Another prominent example of the imprecision of foundation dating, which Stell has noted, is the case of Duntrune on Loch Crinan. This is a castle which resembles Mingary, Tioram et al in having an irregular, polygonal curtain,

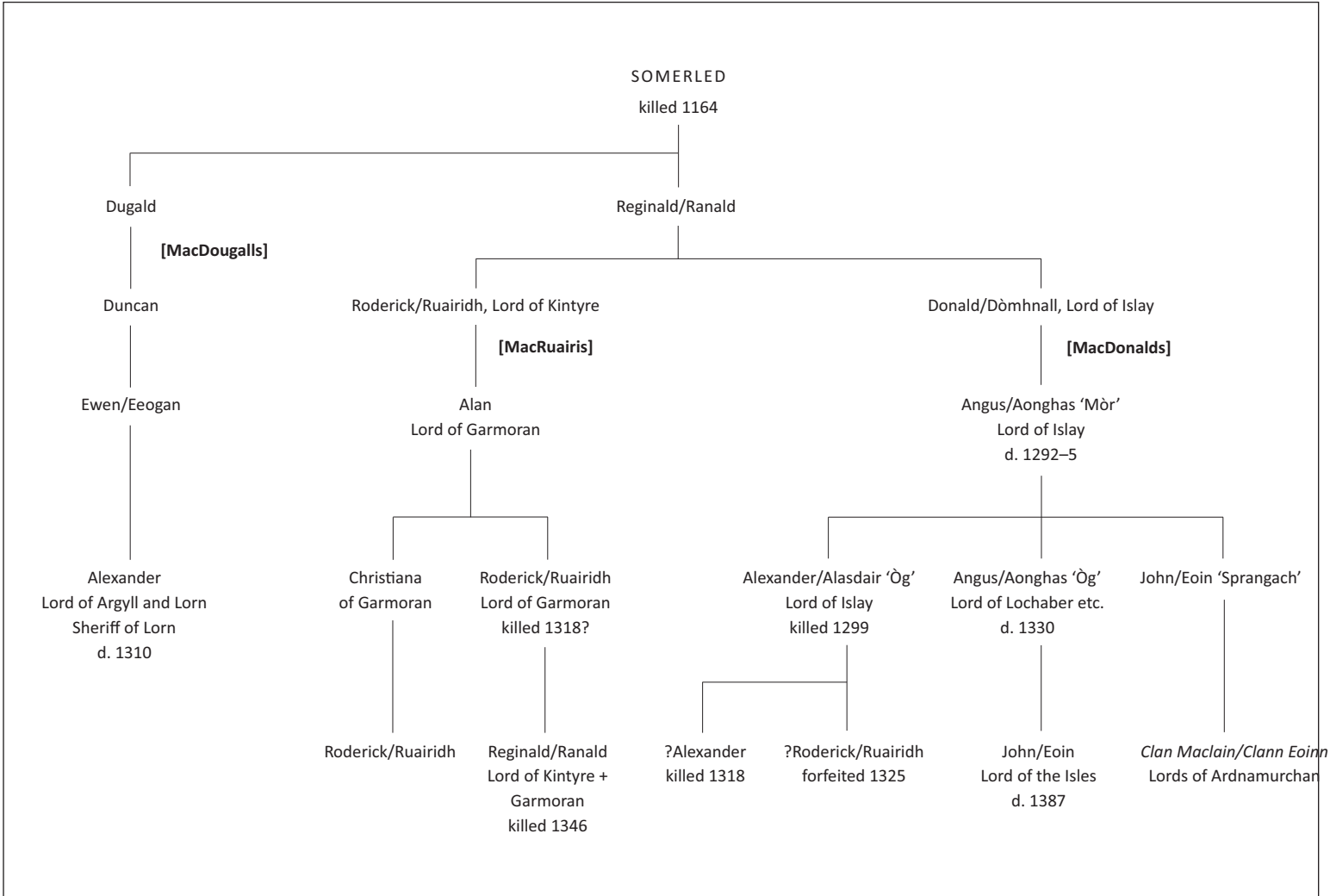
its shape being dictated by its rocky eminence, with a multi-floored, residential, ‘tower’ as the internal centrepiece. Following MacGibbon and Ross, Duntrune was consistently assigned as a 13th-century creation until the RCAHMS volume of 1992, which showed it to be of 15th-century origin. Even after that, however, the old assumption persisted courtesy of Chris Tabraham, who carelessly located Duntrune on Loch Creran, and to ‘a golden age of castles: the thirteenth century’ (MacGibbon & Ross 1889: 85; Dunbar 1981: 46; RCAHMS *Argyll* 7 1992: 20, no 128: 276–82; Tabraham 2005: 29).

It is clear from these examples that, in analysing west Highland castle architecture, it is essential to refrain from being too certain as to quite when they were first constructed. Only where there is some written evidence, are we on wholly solid ground, although even then, it is essential to remain critical in interpreting the source material. Dunstaffnage Castle, in Lorn, is interesting to consider in this context. The first clear reference to it relates to 1309, when it was besieged and taken by Robert Bruce (John Barbour 1997: 367).

Prior to that, it is possible that it may have been one of Ewen MacDougall’s so-called ‘four great castles’ in his negotiations with Alexander II of 1248–9, as reported in Haakon Haakonsson’s *Saga* (*Early Sources* 1922 and 1990: 556). It is not named as one so we cannot be certain; opinion on the matter is divided (Sellar 2000: 204; Fisher 2005: 90; Grove 2008: 24; Oram 2012: 186). The 1975 volume of the RCAHMS attributed Dunstaffnage’s foundation to the middle of the 13th century, Dunbar subsequently elaborating that it was built by either Duncan MacDougall, or his son, Ewen, who succeeded his father in the late 1230s (RCAHMS *Argyll* 2 1975: 27 and no 287: 198–211; Dunbar 1981: 46). In 1996, Lewis endorsed this mid-13th-century date (Lewis 1996: 599–600) while most recently, the current Historic Scotland guidebook confidently remarked that ‘the architecture of Dunstaffnage Castle strongly suggests that it was begun by ... Duncan around 1220’ (Grove 2008: 22). Although such an early date may well be correct, as Stell has asked: is it even certain that the castle existed in 1248–9? (Stell 2006: 18).



ILLUS 2 The castle on its rock, showing the sea gate and battlements with their two bartizans at the seaward angles of the curtain wall (photo: Jonathan Haylett)



Richard Oram's considered view is that Mingary Castle was built by the MacDougalls to control the northern end of their lordship of Lorn (Oram 2004: 124; Addyman & Oram 2012: 8). Not all previous commentators have thought so. Apart from the MacDougalls, proffered views have nominated the MacDonalds, the MacLains and the MacRuairis. More cautious historians have preferred not to venture any opinion whatever. Thus, the 1980 volume of the Royal Commission Inventory for the area noted, guardedly, that 'the early history of the castle is obscure'. Its report observed merely that it was built by a descendant of Somerled and that it was a stronghold of the MacLains in the 14th century (RCAHMS *Argyll 3* 1980: 34 and no 345: 216). Dunbar wrote similarly that the early history of the castle was obscure but added that it might have been a MacDonald castle from its inception. As he noted, it was certainly in their hands in the 14th century (Dunbar 1981: 46). At the same time, however, that great student of Scottish *castellologie*, Stewart Cruden, refrained from proffering a suggestion as to who built the castle (Cruden 1981: 24, 38, 39, 46–8). Subsequent

RCAHMS spin-offs, penned by Graham Ritchie and Mary Harman, also reserved judgement (Ritchie & Harman 1990: 84 and 1996: 96). In the *Buildings of Scotland: Highlands and Islands*, John Gifford was also cautious, being careful to say no more than that it was built by a descendant of Somerled (Gifford 1992: 47 & 257). Chris Tabraham was clear, however, in assigning the castle to the MacDonalds (Tabraham 2005: 29), while Maurice Lindsay and Martin Coventry wrote that it was 'probably' built by the MacLains, who were vassals of the MacDonald lords of the Isles in the 14th–15th centuries (Lindsay 1986: 361; Coventry 2006: 479). The possibility that it was a MacRuairi castle was put forward by Ian Fisher, seemingly just because of its resemblance to Tioram (Fisher 2005: 91).

Oram's verdict that Mingary was a MacDougall foundation relies on accepting the architectural assessment that it dates to the mid- to late 13th century and on his deduction that at the time, Ardnamurchan was MacDougall territory. While he may be correct in both respects, equally he might not be. If the architectural dating is uncertain, then the argument for the MacDougalls



ILLUS 3 The castle from the land showing the blocked-up lancet windows (photo: Jonathon Haylett)

is compromised, given their flight and forfeiture in 1309. If the documentary record is similarly unclear, then the castle cannot positively be ascribed to the MacDougalls even if a 13th-century date were to be accepted.

Looking first, then, at the architectural assessment, the 13th-century dating for Mingary, follows the tradition laid down by MacGibbon and Ross, Douglas Simpson and seemingly confirmed by the RCAHMS (MacGibbon & Ross 1889: 43; Douglas Simpson 1954: 70–90; RCAHMS *Argyll* 3 1980: 34 and no 345: 209–17, esp 216). All subsequent authors already noted above, including Dunbar, Gifford and Tabraham, have followed suit. In the recent ‘analytical and historical assessment’, Addyman has written: ‘the traditionally held dating of Mingary to the mid-late 13th century is more likely to be correct, this on the grounds of architectural comparison and historical context’ (Addyman & Oram 2012: para 4.5). This ‘traditional’ dating, however, has been challenged by Stell. He has demonstrated that, just as Tioram appears more certainly to be mid-14th century, Mingary may be 14th century too. He has observed that its polygonal form and the detail of the paired lanciform windows on which dating has been largely based, would certainly not rule out the possibility of a post-1300 creation by, in his view, the MacIains. Though Stell varies a little in his forcefulness in assigning Mingary to the 14th century (thus: ‘Tioram, Mingary, Aros and Ardtornish ... a fourteenth century date appears much more likely’, and ‘Mingary possibly and Tioram probably belong to the fourteenth century’), the point is well made (Stell 2006: 18, 77). Features, such as Mingary’s windows, may well bear comparison to those elsewhere, such as Dunstaffnage, which is certainly 13th century, but this in itself does not mean that Mingary was built at the same time or very shortly after: allowance must be made for the likelihood that the popularity of such architectural details involved their longevity. Conservatism and a regard for tradition were powerful influences, so it is unwise to assert tight time-frames against structural details alone (Stell 1985: 202).

Given the lack of historical sources and the vagaries of architectural analyses, Oram’s natural recourse was to see if it was possible to identify

who held Ardnamurchan in the period. Prior to his thoughts on this question, there were a number of suggestions. In their seminal article of 1957, Duncan and Brown put forward both the MacRuairis and the MacDonalds (Duncan & Brown 1956–7: 204–5). The RCAHMS volume of 1980 merely observed that Ardnamurchan was in the possession of the MacDonalds in the first half of the 14th century and that, after the downfall of Edward Balliol, it seems to have become detached and granted to Angus MacIain (RCAHMS 1980: 216). In their superb edition of the *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, the Munros were confused on the matter, stating first that in the mid-13th century, Ardnamurchan, along with Morvern, ‘probably’ belonged to Clan Donald of Islay, but later in that book, they went on to say that the MacDougalls held territory in Ardnamurchan before their fall in the Wars of Independence (*Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: xx, lxi). In 2001, Paterson wrote that Ardnamurchan was MacDougall territory in the 13th century (Paterson 2001: 23) and, as already noted, Oram has reasserted this in 2004 and 2012.

It is certainly true to say that, at this time, the MacDougalls were the dominant affinity of the three lines descending from Somerled (Sellar 2000: 187–218; Murray 2002: 221–30). The height of their power may be said to have been in John Balliol’s brief reign, when, in the February 1293 parliament held at Scone, it was enacted that Alexander MacDougall would be sheriff of a Lorn area that was to include Ardnamurchan – one of three shrievalities then created to govern the west of Scotland (*Acts of Parliament* 1844: 447; *Records of Parliament* 2007–13: 1293/2/17), though the ordinance may never have had the time to come into effect. As earlier writers have noted, it may be that this award reflects that, for some time prior to the creation of this sheriffdom, Alexander had previously held a ‘lieutenancy extending over the whole area of the three sheriffdoms’ (Duncan & Brown 1956–7: 217; MacDonald 1997: 131; Barrow 2005: 74).

Richard Oram is clear this shows that the MacDougalls were lords of Ardnamurchan. He wrote that ‘Ardnamurchan appears in February 1293 as a distinct political territorial unit under the lordship of Alexander MacDougall ... [and]



ILLUS 4 Lancet windows (photo: Jonathan Haylett)

that this had been MacDougall property for some considerable period' (Addyman & Oram 2012: para 2.3). The full text of the enactment is given here:

*Alexander of Argyll [Alexander MacDougall, Lord of Argyll and Lorn]*

Of the lands of Morvern, Ardnamurchan, Locheil, the land of Alexander of Argyll, the land of John of Glenorchy, the land of Gilbert Mac[...], the land of Malcolm MacIvor, the land of Dougal of Craignish, the land of John MacGilchrist, the land of Mr Ralph of Dundee, the land of Gileskel MacLachlan, the land of the earl of Menteith of Knapdale, the land [of] son of Donald of the Isles and the land of Colin Campbell. And he should be called sheriff of [Lorn].

*(Records of Parliament 2007–13: 1293/2/17.*

*Date accessed: 1 October 2013)*

The document can be read in different ways. It may convey an impression that the stated territories of Morvern, Ardnamurchan and Locheil were unassigned lordships: other lordship areas, including those of MacDougall himself, are not listed and instead were covered, as may be inferred, by the names of those who were their territorial lords. A radically different interpretation would be to construe that all the named individuals had elements of land in the three territories given at the start of the document. Indeed, it seems perfectly feasible that Morvern, Ardnamurchan and Locheil were not all, either individually or collectively, under the control of one lord. Either way, the document shows that the lands that were to constitute the shrievality belonged to several individuals: Alexander MacDougall may have been the leading individual but clearly there were

several others. It is also pertinent to observe that the creation of the sheriffdoms simply cannot be taken to reflect that the newly appointed sheriffs were, or had been, the territorial lords of *all* the areas listed in the enactment. Another of the creations, for example, was of a sheriffdom of Skye in favour of William, the earl of Ross. That included 'Eigg and Rum, Uist and Barra with the very small isles', territories which have never, to my knowledge, been claimed as Ross lands in the later 13th century (*Acts of Parliament* 1844: 447; Grant 2000: 88; *Records of Parliament* 2007–13: 1293/2/16. Date accessed: 1 October 2013).

Richard Oram has also written (Oram 2004: 124), and Michael Penman has recently repeated this (Penman 2014: 102), that Robert I's lost charter, granting Ardnamurchan to Angus Òg MacDonald (*RMSRS* 1912: no 56: 512) reflects that it was previously MacDougall land. It is hard to see why. That entry in the *Registrum* merely states: '*Carta Angusii de Ile de terris de Kynbaldin et Ordonurquhy*', so cannot in itself support such an interpretation. In fact, it appears to be impossible to state with certainty who held Ardnamurchan in the 13th century and very early years of the 14th. The only 'solid' evidence we have is the lost charter just mentioned and even that is problematic. First, there is no precise date for it. Noel Murray felt it was awarded by 1314 (Murray 2002: 223), Oram by c 1320 (Oram 2012: 9), while Duncan and Brown were clear in their assertion that it could not be fixed more closely than any date between 1306 and 1329 (Duncan & Brown 1956–7: 204). Second, it is not clear whether this charter conferred or confirmed Angus Òg MacDonald in possession of Ardnamurchan. Brown and Duncan were ambivalent on this point, but the notion that the grant may in fact have been merely a royal recognition and confirmation of a pre-existing state of affairs cannot be ruled out. Certainly, Geoffrey Barrow adjudged that it was: that Ardnamurchan was, at that time, 'probably his own [Angus Òg MacDonald's] inheritance' (Duncan & Brown 1956–7: 204; MacDonald 1997: 184; Barrow 2005: 378).

We are therefore left with speculation. Duncan and Brown used the style assigned to John MacDougall of Lorn in 1302: 'Lord of Lorn, Benderloch and Lismore' and the MacDougall

quitclaim of 1354, which also omitted to mention Ardnamurchan (and Morvern), to suggest that it had not been theirs in the first place. Oram has demolished this argument as regards the 1302 reference at least, in that the MacDougalls then possessed other territories not listed as theirs. He has also highlighted that Duncan and Brown's assessment that Ardnamurchan (with Morvern) was a MacRuairi possession prior to the grant to MacDonald, is based on nothing more than geography. Indeed, Duncan and Brown not only put forward the MacRuairis but also, in short order, the MacDonalds, on just such thin grounds (Duncan & Brown 1956–7: 204–5; Oram 2012: 9). There is, in fact, no reason at all to advocate the MacRuairis as candidates for the lordship of Ardnamurchan. In Robert I's reign, they either supported the king or were at least tolerated by him (MacDonald 1997: 158, 174, 176, 189–91; Barrow 2005: 377–8). It is not clear that the 'Roderick' who was forfeited in the Parliament of 1325 was, as is sometimes thought, a MacRuairi (Penman 2004: 84; Penman 2014: 259). In all likelihood, he was another Ruairidh altogether, which means that MacRuairi lands were not taken into Crown hands and consequently the grant of Ardnamurchan to Angus Òg MacDonald cannot reflect a possibility that it had previously been MacRuairi property.

Noel Murray has plausibly suggested that the 'Roderick of Islay' who was forfeited in 1325 was one of the shadowy sons of Alexander Òg and his wife Juliana of Lorn, and that he became the head of this senior line of the MacDonalds after the deaths of his father, in 1299, and of his elder brother, another Alexander, at Dundalk in 1318. According to Murray, it appears probable that, upon the forfeiture, Roderick and his younger brothers left for Ireland and gradually faded into relative obscurity. Murray noted that, owing to the forfeiture in 1325, the central MacDonald patrimony of Islay was taken into Crown hands and administered on its behalf by one John MacDonald, whom Murray identified as likely the future first Lord of the Isles, that is, John MacDonald, the son and heir of Angus Òg, who was the younger brother of Alexander Òg (Murray 2002: 224–5). As is well known, in David II's reign, this John obtained recognition





ILLUS 5 Double lancet window (photo: Jonathan Haylett)

as Lord of Islay and many other territories. If Murray's thesis is correct – that the line of Angus Òg benefitted by the fall of the senior MacDonald line of Alexander Òg – the theory could be extended to consider that the grant to Angus Òg of Ardnamurchan may be associated with Roderick of Islay's disinheritance in 1325. This would, of course, mean that Ardnamurchan would have been a Clan Donald territory for an unknown period beforehand, but one in which Mingary may have been built, regardless of the conflicting dates put forward for its construction based on architectural evaluation, as aired above. That at least part of Ardnamurchan

had thus been MacDonald territory in this earlier period could be reconciled with the 1293 creation of the Lorn sheriffdom, if that document is interpreted as saying that the several named persons had land in the three stated territories. This is perhaps an interesting conjecture but, unfortunately, the paucity of evidence means that that is all it is.

Ardnamurchan is next mentioned in the grant, or recognition, of territories awarded to John MacDonald by 'King' Edward Balliol in 1336 (*Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986, no 1: 1–2). It was not, however, included in the successive grants of David II to the MacDonalds

in 1341 (*RMSRS* 1912 no 114: 482; *RRS* 6 1982: 505; *Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986, no A1: 207), and 1343 (*RRS* 6 1982: no 72: 113–14; *Acts of the Lords of the Isles*, no A2: 207–8). Given its absence from these charters, any debate as to who precisely was the recipient of the 1341 charter may be irrelevant.<sup>2</sup> However, at some point, Ardnamurchan passed to another line descending from Angus Mòr. This was the MacIains, whose progenitor was John, or Iain ‘Sprangach’ (the ‘Bold’) MacDonald. It may be that there was, at some point in the 1330s and 1340s, some competition between John, the Lord of the Isles and the MacIains (Murray 2002: 225),<sup>3</sup> but in any event, the inference is that Ardnamurchan was ultimately settled on the MacIains as vassals of John and his successors. When this may have occurred is unknown. Indeed, historical certainty of MacIain lordship comes late: the first clear allusion appears to be in August 1492, when John ‘Brayach’ MacIain was styled as Lord of Ardnamurchan when he witnessed a charter (*Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: no 123: 195–7).<sup>4</sup> Soon afterwards, when King James IV had suppressed the lordship of the Isles, this John MacIain was confirmed in the possession ‘of the castle and fortalice of Castle Mingary’ by royal grants in 1499 and 1505, on the same terms as the MacIains had previously held from ‘John, sometime lord of the Isles’ (*Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: nos A57: 230 and A63: 233).

Inasmuch as the MacIains came to prominence during the first half of the 14th century, when they probably acquired Ardnamurchan, they could only be candidates for building Mingary were it, as Stell allowed, built at that time. Historical circumstance might make sense of this: creating a fortified and impressive residence is exactly what would be expected of a newly established ‘dynasty’. By the same token, it could be argued that neither the MacDougalls nor the two more senior lines of Angus Mòr’s MacDonalds needed such a substantial base in territories which, for them, were of lesser importance than their lordly headquarters located elsewhere. There is a case, then, that Mingary could be an early 14th-century foundation, commissioned by the MacIain MacDonalds.

Ultimately we are left with the reality that there are arguments that Mingary castle may have been built by any one of some of the various ‘septs’ that descended from Somerled and that this could have been at any time in the mid/late 13th century, running into the first half of the 14th century. The archaeological evidence is incapable of being exact and the historical evidence is just too wanting. As has been mooted in this paper, cases can be made for the MacDougalls and for three lines of the MacDonalds – the MacAlexandairs, the line of Alexander Òg and the MacIains. It seems probable that the MacRuairis, at least, may be discounted, but beyond that, it would be wise to recognise that there can be no certainty and that consequently what is left is merely opinion, based on quite how one views what very little evidence there is.

#### NOTES

- 1 Thanks go to Jon Haylett of Kilchoan and of the Mingary Castle Preservation Trust for showing me round the scaffolded site on 24 September 2013 and for his ongoing correspondence. Thanks also go to Ralph Weedon of the University of Strathclyde for his observations on a very early draft of this paper and to Geoffrey Stell, late of the RCAHMS, for looking at a more developed version and his helpful comments. I am especially grateful to the two external referees of these *Proceedings*, whose observations prompted a greater exploration of material than had been originally envisaged.
- 2 The 1341 grant was to Angus, son of John de Insulis (and so possibly Angus, son of Ian Sprangach [the MacIains]), but it may be that this was an error in the charter and that it was in fact for John [the Lord of the Isles], the son of Angus de Insulis. The 1343 grant was certainly to John, the Lord of the Isles.
- 3 Murray, for example, thought it possible that the 1341 grant was indeed to the MacIains as a ploy of David II to destabilise the power-base of John MacDonald.
- 4 ‘Brayach’ appears to have been the great-great-great-great grandson of ‘Sprangach’. For the MacIain pedigree, see Steer and Bannerman 1977: 112–14 and *Acts of the Lords of the Isles* 1986: 282 and 284–6.

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