

Kenneth MacAlpin

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Pictish: *Cináed mac Ailpín* (Modern Gaelic: *Coinneach mac Ailpein*),^[1] commonly anglicised as **Kenneth MacAlpin** and known in most modern regnal lists as **Kenneth I** (810 – 13 February 858), was a king of the Picts who, according to national myth, was the first king of Scots. He was thus later known by the posthumous nickname of **An Ferbasach**, "The Conqueror".^[2] The dynasty that ruled Scotland for much of the medieval period claimed descent from him, and the current British monarch, Queen Elizabeth II is descended from him through King James, Robert the Bruce and Malcolm III.

Contents

- 1 Disputed kingship
- 2 Background
- 3 Reign
- 4 See also
- 5 Notes
- 6 References
- 7 Further reading
- 8 External links

Disputed kingship

The Kenneth of myth, conqueror of the Picts and founder of the Kingdom of Alba, was born in the centuries after the real Kenneth died. In the reign of Kenneth II (Cináed mac Maíl Coluim), when the Chronicle of the Kings of Alba was compiled, the annalist wrote:

So Kinadius son of Alpinus, first of the Scots, ruled this Pictland prosperously for 16 years. Pictland was named after the Picts, whom, as we have said, Kinadius destroyed. ... Two years before he came to Pictland, he had received the kingdom of Dál Riata.

In the 15th century, Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, a history in verse, added little to the account in the Chronicle:

Quhen Alpyne this kyng was dede, He left a sowne wes cal'd Kyned,
Dowchty man he wes and stout, All the Peychtis he put out.
Gret bataylis than dyd he, To pwt in freedom his cuntre!

Kenneth MacAlpin



King of the Picts

Reign 843 – 13 February 858

Predecessor Drest X

Successor Donald I

Born 810
Iona, Scotland

Died 13 February 858
Scotland

Burial Iona

Issue Pictish: *Constantín*, King of the Picts
among possible others Áed, King of the Picts
Máel Muire

Full name
Kenneth MacAlpin
Pictish: *Cináed mac Ailpín*

House Alpin

Father Alpín mac Echdach

When humanist scholar George Buchanan wrote his history *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* in the 1570s, a great deal of lurid detail had been added to the story. Buchanan included an account of how Kenneth's father had been murdered by the Picts and a detailed, and entirely unsupported, account of how Kenneth avenged him and conquered the Picts. Buchanan was not as credulous as many and he did not include the tale of MacAlpin's treason, a story from Gerald of Wales, who reused a tale of Saxon treachery at a feast in Geoffrey of Monmouth's inventive *Historia Regum Britanniae*.

Later 19th-century historians, such as William Forbes Skene, brought new standards of accuracy to early Scottish history, while Celticists, such as Whitley Stokes and Kuno Meyer, cast a critical eye over Welsh and Irish sources. As a result, much of the misleading and vivid detail was removed from the scholarly series of events, even if it remained in the popular accounts. Rather than a conquest of the Picts, instead, the idea of Pictish matrilineal succession, mentioned by Bede and apparently the only way to make sense of the list of Kings of the Picts found in the Pictish Chronicle, advanced the idea that Kenneth was a Gael, and a king of Dál Riata, who had inherited the throne of Pictland through a Pictish mother. Other Gaels, such as Caustantín and Óengus, the sons of Fergus, were identified among the Pictish king lists, as were Angles such as Talorcen son of Eanfrith, and Britons such as Bridei son of Beli.^[3]

Later historians would reject parts of the Kenneth produced by Skene and subsequent historians, while accepting others. Medievalist Alex Woolf, interviewed by *The Scotsman* in 2004, is quoted as saying:

The myth of Kenneth conquering the Picts – it's about 1210, 1220 that that's first talked about. There's actually no hint at all that he was a Scot. ... If you look at contemporary sources there are four other Pictish kings after him. So he's the fifth last of the Pictish kings rather than the first Scottish king."^[4]

Many other historians could be quoted in terms similar to Woolf.^[5]

A feasible synopsis of the emerging consensus may be put forward, namely, that the kingships of Gaels and Picts underwent a process of gradual fusion,^[6] starting with Kenneth, and rounded off in the reign of Constantine II. The Pictish institution of kingship provided the basis for merger with the Gaelic Alpin dynasty. The meeting of King Constantine and Bishop Cellach at the *Hill of Belief* near the (formerly Pictish) royal city of Scone in 906 cemented the rights and duties of Picts on an equal basis with those of Gaels (*pariter cum Scottis*). Hence the change in styling from *King of the Picts* to *King of Alba*. The legacy of Gaelic as the first national language of Scotland does not obscure the foundational process in the establishment of the Scottish kingdom of Alba.



Painting of Kenneth.

Background

Kenneth's origins are uncertain, as are his ties, if any, to previous kings of the Picts or Dál Riata. Among the genealogies contained in the Rawlinson B 502 manuscript, dating from around 1130, is the supposed descent of Malcolm II of Scotland. Medieval genealogies are unreliable sources, but many historians still accept Kenneth's descent from the established Cenél nGabráin, or at the very least from some unknown minor sept of the Dál Riata. The manuscript provides the following ancestry for Kenneth:

...**Cináed** son of Alpín son of Eochaid son of Áed Find son of Domangart son of Domnall Brecc son of Eochaid Buide son of Áedán son of Gabrán son of Domangart son of Fergus Mór ...^[7]

Leaving aside the shadowy kings before Áedán son of Gabrán, the genealogy is certainly flawed insofar as Áed Find, who died c. 778, could not reasonably be the son of Domangart, who was killed c. 673. The conventional account would insert two generations between Áed Find and Domangart: Eochaid mac Echdach, father of Áed Find, who died c. 733, and his father Eochaid.

Although later traditions provided details of his reign and death, Kenneth's father Alpin is not listed as among the kings in the *Duan Albanach*, which provides the following sequence of kings leading up to Kenneth:

*Naoi m-bliadhna Cusaintin chain,
a naoi Aongusa ar Albain,
cethre bliadhna Aodha áin,
is a tri déug Eoghanáin.
Tríocha bliadhain Cionaoith chruaidh,*

The nine years of Causantín the fair,
The nine of Aongus over Alba,
The four years of Aodh the noble,
And the thirteen of Eoghanán.
The thirty years of Cionaoth the hardy,^[8]

It is supposed that these kings are the Constantine son of Fergus and his brother Óengus II (Angus II), who have already been mentioned, Óengus's son Uen (Eóganán), as well as the obscure Áed mac Boanta, but this sequence is considered doubtful if the list is intended to represent kings of Dál Riata, as it should if Kenneth were king there.^[9]

That Kenneth was a Gael is not widely rejected, but modern historiography distinguishes between Kenneth as a Gael by culture and/or in ancestry, and Kenneth as a king of Gaelic Dál Riata. Kings of the Picts before him, from Bridei son of Der-Ilei, his brother Nechtan as well as Óengus I son of Fergus and his presumed descendants were all at least partly Gaelicised.^[10] The idea that the Gaelic names of Pictish kings in Irish annals represented translations of Pictish ones was challenged by the discovery of the inscription *Custantin filius Fircus(sa)*, the latinised name of the Pictish king Caustantín son of Fergus, on the Dupplin Cross.^[11]

Other evidence, such as that furnished by place-names, suggests the spread of Gaelic culture through western Pictland in the centuries before Kenneth. For example, Atholl, a name used in the *Annals of Ulster* for the year 739, has been thought to be "New Ireland", and Argyll derives from *Oir-Ghàidheal*, the land of the "eastern Gaels".

Reign

Compared with the many questions on his origins, Kenneth's ascent to power and subsequent reign can be dealt with simply. Kenneth's rise can be placed in the context of the recent end of the previous dynasty, which had dominated Fortriu for two or four generations. This followed the death of king Uen son of Óengus of Fortriu, his brother Bran, Áed mac Boanta "and others almost innumerable" in battle against the Vikings in 839. The resulting succession crisis seems, if the Pictish Chronicle king-lists have any validity, to have resulted in at least four would-be kings warring for supreme power.

Kenneth's reign is dated from 843, but it was probably not until 848 that he defeated the last of his rivals for power. The Pictish Chronicle claims that he was king in Dál Riata for two years before becoming Pictish king in 843, but this is not generally accepted. In 849, Kenneth had relics of Columba, which may have included the Monymusk Reliquary, transferred from Iona to Dunkeld. Other than these bare facts, the Chronicle of the Kings of Alba reports that he invaded *Saxonia* six times, captured Melrose and burnt Dunbar, and also that Vikings

laid waste to Pictland, reaching far into the interior.^[12] The *Annals of the Four Masters*, not generally a good source on Scottish matters, do make mention of Kenneth, although what should be made of the report is unclear:

Gofraid mac Fergusa, chief of Airgíalla, went to Alba, to strengthen the Dal Riata, at the request of Kenneth MacAlpin.^[13]

The reign of Kenneth also saw an increased degree of Norse settlement in the outlying areas of modern Scotland. Shetland, Orkney, Caithness, Sutherland, the Western Isles and the Isle of Man, and part of Ross were settled; the links between Kenneth's kingdom and Ireland were weakened, those with southern England and the continent almost broken. In the face of this, Kenneth and his successors were forced to consolidate their position in their kingdom, and the union between the Picts and the Gaels, already progressing for several centuries, began to strengthen. By the time of Donald II, the kings would be called kings neither of the Gaels or the Scots but of *Alba*.^[14]

Kenneth died from a tumour on 13 February 858 at the palace of *Cinnbelachoir*, perhaps near Scone. The annals report the death as that of the "king of the Picts", not the "king of Alba". The title "king of Alba" is not used until the time of Kenneth's grandsons, Donald II (Domnall mac Causantín) and Constantine II (Constantín mac Áeda). The *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* quote a verse lamenting Kenneth's death:

Because Cináed with many troops lives no longer
there is weeping in every house;
there is no king of his worth under heaven
as far as the borders of Rome.^[15]

Kenneth left at least two sons, Constantine and Áed, who were later kings, and at least two daughters. One daughter married Run, king of Strathclyde, Eochaid being the result of this marriage. Kenneth's daughter Máel Muire married two important Irish kings of the Uí Néill. Her first husband was Aed Finliath of the Cenél nEógain. Niall Glúndub, ancestor of the O'Neill, was the son of this marriage. Her second husband was Flann Sinna of Clann Cholmáin. As the wife and mother of kings, when Máel Muire died in 913, her death was reported by the Annals of Ulster, an unusual thing for the male-centred chronicles of the age.

See also

- Website Clan Netherlands: <http://www.macalpin.nl/index.htm>
- Siol Alpin, the kindred group of clans widely considered to be the descendants of Cináed and the House of Alpin at large.
- Scotland in the Early Middle Ages
- Scotland in the High Middle Ages

Notes

1. *Cináed mac Ailpínis* the Mediaeval Gaelic form. A more accurate rendering in modern Gaelic would be *Cionadh mac Ailpeinsince* Coinneach is historically a separate name. However, in the modern language, both names have converged.
2. Skene, *Chronicles*, p. 83.

3. That the Pictish succession was matrilineal is doubted. Bede in the *Ecclesiastical History* I, i, writes: "when any question should arise, they should choose a king from the female royal race, rather than the male: which custom, as is well known, has been observed among the Picts to this day" Bridei and Nechtan, the sons of Der-Ilei, were the Pictish kings in Bede's time and are presumed to have claimed the throne through maternal descent. Maternal descent, "when any question should arise" brought several kings of Alba and the Scots to the throne, including John Balliol, Robert Bruce and Robert II, the first of the Stewart kings.
4. Johnston, Ian. "First king of the Scots? Actually he was a Pict" (<http://thescotsmen.scotsmen.com/index.cfm?id=1149902004>). *The Scotsman*, October 2, 2004.
5. For example, Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* pp. 107–108; Broun, "Kenneth mac Alpin"; Forsyth, "Scotland to 1100", pp. 28–32; Duncan, *Kingship of the Scots* pp. 8–10. Wolf was selected to write the relevant volume of the new Edinburgh History of Scotland, to replace that written by Duncan in 1975.
6. After Herbert, *Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban, kingship and identity in the ninth and tenth centuries*, p. 71.
7. Genealogies from Rawlinson B 502.¶1696 Genelach Rí n-Alban (<http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G105003/text026.html>)
8. "The Duan Albanach" (<http://sejh.pagesperso-orange.fr/keltia/alba/albanic-en.html>)
9. See Broun, *Pictish Kings*, for a discussion of this question.
10. For the descendants of the first Óengus son of Fergus, again see Broun, *Pictish Kings*.
11. Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* pp. 95–96; Fergus would appear as Uurgu(i)st in a Pictish form.
12. Regarding Dál Riata, see Broun, "Kenneth mac Alpin" Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* pp. 111–112.
13. Annals of the Four Masters for the year 835 (probably c. 839). The history of Dál Riata in this period is simply not known, or even if there was any sort of Dál Riata to have a history Ó Corráin's *Vikings in Ireland and Scotland*, available as e-text, and Wolf, *Kingdom of the Isles*, may be helpful.
14. Lynch, Michael, *A New History of Scotland*
15. *Fragmentary Annals* FA 285.

References

For primary sources see under **External links** below.

- John Bannerman, "The Scottish Takeover of Pictland" in Dauvit Broun & Thomas Owen Clancy (eds.) *Spes Scotorum: Hope of Scots. Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*. T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1999. ISBN 0-567-08682-8
- Dauvit Broun, "Kenneth mac Alpin" in Michael Lynch (ed.) *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* Oxford: Oxford UP, ISBN 0-19-211696-7
- Dauvit Broun, "Pictish Kings 761–839: Integration with Dál Riata or Separate Development" in Sally Foster (ed.) *The St Andrews Sarcophagus* Dublin: Four Courts Press, ISBN 1-85182-414-6
- Dauvit Broun, "Dunkeld and the origins of Scottish Identity" in Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy (eds), op. cit.
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- A.A.M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots 842–1292: Succession and Independence*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-7486-1626-8
- Katherine Forsyth "Scotland to 1100" in Jenny Wormald (ed.) *Scotland: A History* Oxford: Oxford UP, ISBN 0-19-820615-1
- Sally Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots: Early Historic Scotland*. London: Batsford, ISBN 0-7134-8874-3
- Máire Herbert, "Rí Éirenn, Rí Alban: kingship and identity in the ninth and tenth centuries" in Simon Taylor (ed.), *Kings, clerics and chronicles in Scotland 500–1297*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, ISBN 1-85182-516-9
- Michael A. O'Brien (ed.) with intr by John V. Kelleher, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* DIAS. 1976. / partial digital edition: Donnchadh Ó Corráin (ed.), *Genealogies from Rawlinson B 502* University College, Cork: Corpus of Electronic Texts. 1997.
- Donnchadh Ó Corráin "Vikings in Ireland and Scotland in the ninth century" in *Peritia* 12 (1998), pp. 296–339. Etext (pdf)
- Alex Woolf, "Constantine II" in Lynch (ed.), op. cit.
- Alex Woolf, "Kingdom of the Isles" in Lynch (ed.), op. cit.

Further reading

- Sally Foster, *Picts, Gaels and Scots* (revised edition, 2005) – a broad and accessible introduction
- Leslie Alcock, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland monograph *Kings and Warriors, Craftsmen and Priests in Northern Britain AD 550–750* (2003) – more detail
- Alex Woolf, *Pictland to Alba: Scotland, 789–1070*, in the *New Edinburgh History of Scotland* series, published in 2007.
- *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (2001) – articles by expert contributors

- *Kenneth* by Nigel Tranter – fictional interpretation of Kenneth's life

External links

- Annals of Ulster, part 1, at CELT (translated)
- A poem by Robert Louis Stevenson – Heather Ale
- Annals of Tigernach, at CELT (no translation presently available)
- Annals of the Four Masters, part 1, at CELT (translated)
- Duan Albanach, at CELT (translated)
- Genealogies from Rawlinson B.502, at CELT (no translation presently available)
- The Chronicle of the Kings of Alba

Kenneth MacAlpin House of Alpin Born: after 800 Died: 13 February 858		
Regnal titles		
Preceded by Drest X	King of Picts (traditionally King of Scots) 843–858	Succeeded by Donald (Domnall) I

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