

THE CULT OF MOLUAG, THE SEE OF MORTLACH AND CHURCH
ORGANISATION IN NORTHERN SCOTLAND IN THE ELEVENTH
AND TWELFTH CENTURIES

ALEX WOOLF

The *Annals of Ulster* record the death of Lugaid of Lis Mór in 592 (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983). The *Annals of Tigernach*, surviving in a twelfth-century recension, also record the death of Lugaid but add the gloss *.i. mo Luóc* (Stokes 1993: s.a. 591). These entries have generally been taken to relate to the saint widely venerated in Scotland as Moluag or Moluóc, a hypocoristic form of Lugaid, and his place of death is identified with the island of Lismore in Loch Linne which was, from the late twelfth century, home to the see of Argyll (Watt 1969: 26). Moluóc was also, as 'Lupus' or 'Malew', the original dedicatee of the Manx monastery of Rushen, granted to the Sauvignac order in 1134 and incorporated into the Cistercian order in 1148 (Atkinson 1886–1919: II, 708–9). It is probably this Manx-Cistercian link that accounts for the prominence given to Moluóc among the disciples of Comgall of Bangor in St Bernard's *Life of Malachy* (Lawlor 1920). Outwith Lismore, Moluag's Scottish cult is strongest in the north east and it is with this region that I shall be principally concerned in this paper.

By the end of the Middle Ages Moluag's body was believed to lie at Rosemarkie, the original seat of the bishops of Ross, and an account of the saint's death and burial there are contained both in the *Aberdeen Breviary* and in Hector Boece's *Histories of the Scots* (Blew and Laing 1854; Seton and others 1938–41: I, 392–4). Rosemarkie's principal association was, however, with Curadán, rather oddly identified, by the later Middle Ages, with pope Boniface IV (MacDonald 1992: 10–30). This saint appears in origin to be the Curetán *epscop* ('bishop') who is listed amongst the guarantors of *Cáin Adomnáin* and thus can be supposed to have flourished in the years around 697 (Ní Dhonnchada 1982: 191). In the Scottish legendary material he is associated with a Pictish king, Nechtan, presumably Naiton son of Derile who ruled from

c. 706 to 728/9 (MacDonald 1992: 45–6). Isabel Henderson has suggested that Curetán may have been from a monastic centre within Moluag's *familia* and that the presence of a cult of Moluag at Rosemarkie may stem from this link (Henderson 1990); Aidan MacDonald, wisely in my view, offered the alternative hypothesis that the prominence of the cult in the north east may owe its origins to the establishment there, in the course of the Viking Age, of a dynasty claiming its origins amongst the Cenél Loairn in whose territory Lismore, Moluag's place of death, lay (MacDonald 1992: 29; Woolf 2000: 145–64).

A third centre, also in the north east of Scotland, has a special place amongst the Moluag dedications. This is Mortlach, now located on the periphery of Dufftown in Banffshire. John of Fordun, a priest of the diocese of Aberdeen in the late fourteenth century, included an account of the establishment of an episcopal see at Mortlach in his *Chronicle*, which in turn formed the core of Walter Bower's *Scotichronicon*. Fordun ascribed the foundation of Mortlach to Máel Coluim mac Cináeda, King of Alba, 'with opposition', between 1005 and his death in 1034. The foundation was said to have been made to commemorate a victory over the Norwegians at the beginning of his reign and to have taken place in his seventh year (1011–12) (Skene 1871: 182–3). Fordun's narrative may have been based in part upon the foundation charter for Mortlach preserved in the *Aberdeen Register* which reads as follows:

Malcolmus Rex Scottorum, omnibus probis hominibus suis tam clericis quam laicis Salutem. Sciatis me dedisse et hac Carta mea confirmasse deo et beatae marie et omnibus sanctis, et Episcopo Beyn de morthelach, ecclesiam de morthelach ut ibidem construatur sedes episcopalis / cum terriis meis de morthelach Ecclesiam de Cloueth cum terra Ecclesiam de Dulmech cum terra Ita libere sicut eas tenui et in puram et perpetuam elemosinam Teste meipso apud Forfare octauo die mensis Octobris Anno regni mei sexto. (Innes 1845: I, 3)

Malcolm King of Scots, to all his good men both clerics and laymen greetings Know that I give and by this my charter I confirm to God and the blessed Mary and to all the saints, and to the Bishop Beyn of Morthelach, the

church of Morthelach that there will be constructed an episcopal seat with my lands of Morthelach, the church of Cloueth with [its] lands, the church of Dulmech with [its] lands; to hold them as freely as [missing] and in pure and perpetual alms. Witnessed by myself at Forfar on the eighth day of the month of October in the sixth year of my reign.

While the table of contents of the late fourteenth-century recension of the *Aberdeen Register*, the 'Registrum Album', identifies the founder as the son of 'Kenneth', it also contains references to Queen Margaret, the wife not of Máel Coluim mac Cináeda but of his great grandson King Máel Coluim mac Donnchada (1058–93), suggesting that there had been some confusion in Aberdeen as to which King Máel Coluim was the patron (Innes 1845: I, xi–xix). It should also be noted that the 'Registrum Album' identifies the date of foundation as the sixth year of Máel Coluim's reign while Fordun ascribes it to the seventh (Skene 1871: 182–3). This may suggest that Fordun had access to an independent source for this date.

The information concerning the foundation of an episcopal see at Mortlach has been preserved because later ecclesiastics based in Aberdeen claimed that their see had been transferred to Aberdeen from Mortlach. According to these churchmen, the diocese had been in continuous existence since King Máel Coluim's time even though the precise location of the bishop's seat had been moved. The first bishop to have his cathedral at Aberdeen appears to have been Nechtan whose earliest appearance in the record seems to be in the year extending from April 1131 (Barrow 1999: 80). The names of three earlier bishops are recorded, Beyn (Beóán?), Deniortius (Domangart?) and Cormac (Innes 1845: II, 246–7). While no dates are available for these bishops, the likelihood that their three reigns, together perhaps with a portion of Nechtan's, would take us back to 1011/12 (the sixth or seventh year of King Máel Coluim mac Cináeda) seems relatively slim. Taken together the evidence would seem to indicate that the king in the Mortlach foundation story was originally intended to be Máel Coluim mac Donnchada. If, however, we accept the other details of the account, then we may be able

to reconstruct an interesting contextual narrative concerning the raising of Mortlach to episcopal status.

The sixth year of the kingship of Máel Coluim mac Donnchada ran from 1064 to 1065. If the battle with the Norwegians, referred to in Fordun's *Chronicle*, happened at the very beginning of his reign, it may have been connected with the expedition to the West undertaken by Magnus, the oldest son of the Norwegian king, Haraldr Sigurðarson, in 1058 (Williams 1860: text B, s.a. 1056; Stokes 1993: s.a. 1058; Etchingam 2001: 152–6). It is worth noting, however, that Mortlach lies only about a dozen kilometres or so from Essie in Strathbogie where Máel Coluim slew his predecessor King Lulach in his bid to gain the kingship (Anderson 1980: 268–84). Are we dealing with one or two battles here? If only one, is Magnus more likely to have been supporting the incumbent Lulach or the insurgent Máel Coluim? The plausibility of the latter interpretation is strengthened when we recall that Máel Coluim's first wife, according to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, Ingibjorg Finnsdottir, was the first cousin of Magnus' mother, Thora, her father Thorberg being the brother of Finn Arnason (Guðmundsson 1965: 84–6). However, this reading of events – in which Máel Coluim wrested the kingdom from King Lulach mac Gilla Comgáin with the help of the Norwegians – seems, at first sight, irreconcilable with Fordun's account, which speaks of a victory over the Norwegians. This difficulty can be overcome if we suppose that when Fordun's *Chronicle* (or its source) was composed at some point in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, a dynastic-historical commemoration of the victory which marked the beginning of Máel Coluim's reign was conflated with a local tradition that the battle commemorated was one between the Scots and the Norwegians. What may have been lost sight of was the possibility that the apical figure of the Scottish dynasty and the actual founder of Mortlach had been fighting on the Norwegian side.¹

¹ If the claim made by *Orkneyinga Saga* (Guðmundsson 1965: 81), that Earl Thorfinnr Sigurðarson ruled nine Scottish earldoms at the time of his death, 'in the last days of Haraldr Sigurðarson [†1066]' (ibid.: 82), is anything more than bluster, it may indicate that he saw Máel Coluim as his client.

Regardless of what we may speculate about the battle between the Scots and Norwegians, Mortlach's episcopal status is worthy of examination. Founding a monastery in gratitude for a victory was relatively common in medieval Europe, but the elevation of a site to episcopal status requires further comment. The nature of the Scottish episcopacy in the immediate pre-Norman period is extremely obscure. Almost certainly, the diocesan map of Scotland as it existed in the later Middle Ages is largely a product of the twelfth century, but the extent to which it represented a revolutionary rather than an evolutionary transformation is less clear (Barrow 1981: 63–8). The increase in the number of episcopal sees in the course of the twelfth century may, to some extent, reflect a genuine concern regarding the provision of pastoral care, but it must also be seen as part of the campaign to ensure the independence of the Scottish Church from the claims of superiority made by the metropolitans of York and occasionally Canterbury (Broun 2001: 33).

There is some evidence to suggest that the kingdom of Alba (Scotia proper north of the Forth) at times had only one regular bishop. Certainly, under Northumbrian domination in the seventh century the Pictish Church seems to have been administered from a single see located at Abercorn in Lothian and Curetán appears to have been the only Pictish bishop to have added his name to the guarantor list of *Cáin Adomnáin* (Colgrave and Mynors 1969: IV, 26; Ní Dhonnchada 1982: 191). In the fifteenth century, Walter Bower claimed that there had been a time when there was only one bishop in Scotland and that three elections for that post had occurred at Abernethy in Perthshire (Watt 1987–98: II, 302). Unfortunately, it is not clear whether Bower is commenting on the early part of the lists of bishops of Scotia/St Andrews that he provides (which would take us back to the late ninth or tenth centuries) or to some unspecified earlier period. The *Annals of Ulster* note the death of Tuathal mac Artgusso, *prímepsop Fortrenn*, 'chief-bishop of Fortriu', in 865 and it has been pointed out that this title implies that Fortriu must have had more than one bishop (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill 1983: 865.6; MacQuarrie 1992: 121). These two positions are

not irreconcilable. The situation which can be inferred from a variety of pre-Viking-Age English and Irish sources is that there was an expectation in the Insular World that episcopal *regna* coincided with secular kingdoms, the bishop being perceived as the spiritual counterpart of the king (Etchingham 1999: 130–48). However, diocesan or territorial bishops may not have been the only ecclesiastics exercising functions generally reserved for those in episcopal orders. There were certainly instances of *chorepiscopi* in the Insular World (Etchingham 1999: 138, 154–5). Originating in the Greek East in early Christian times and increasingly frowned-upon in mainstream ecclesiastical circles, *chorepiscopi*, about whom little is known, seem to have operated somewhat like a cross between the suffragans and archdeacons of a later age. They had no independent jurisdiction but could perform episcopal functions on behalf of their diocesan. They were, in effect, deputies. Explicit use of *chorepiscopi* disappeared from the West in the course of the Gregorian reform movement but many of their functions continued to be performed, at times, by titular or nominal bishops consecrated for sees which they rarely, if ever, visited. In Scotland, the ubiquity of bishop Andrew of Caithness in the witness lists for the royal charters issued between the late 1140s and his death in 1184 suggests that he was excluded from his see (in which *de facto* authority probably lay with the bishops of Orkney) and the grant to him of the church of the Holy Trinity in Dunkeld by King David seems to suggest that he functioned as a ‘spare bishop’ within the Scottish kingdom (Barrow 1999: 166).

An alternative, or complementary, model explaining the paradox of single and multiple bishops co-existing can also be constructed. The diocesan pattern that emerged in Scotland in the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries does not produce a neat map suggestive of a theoretical model being imposed upon a blank page. In Professor Barrow’s words:

these dioceses are characterized by an extraordinary intermingling of territories and a profusion of detached portions often remote from their mother church. Had the twelfth-century kings been starting from scratch it

is inconceivable that they would have produced such complexity (Barrow 1981: 67).

This map, in which dioceses have territorial cores but also frequently have dispersed parishes outwith the core territories, is suggestive of an earlier stage of ecclesiastical organisation in which monastic *familia* played a major role. In the early Irish Church the fact that many monastic foundations owed obedience to mother-houses located in distant kingdoms (Iona's authority over the Columban *familia* is the classic example) was clearly at odds with the territorial pairing of kings and bishops. It seems that the likely solution to this problem was the creation of bishops within the mother-houses who were responsible for the ordination of priests and other episcopal functions within the monasteries of the *familia* and who themselves were monks of the *familia* and thus subject to the abbatial authority of the *comarb*. Such bishops, however, like the 'mitred abbots' of a later age, probably did not have any jurisdiction outside the monasteries and estates of the *familia*. This situation would create a patch-work of episcopal authorities that cut across the regular territorial dioceses of the secular clergy. In Scotland, the elevation of monastic mother-churches to the status of diocesan sees in the age of Gregorian reform may well account for the extraordinary number of detached parishes that characterise the Scottish Church (McNeill and MacQueen 1996: 348–60). The new dioceses would be granted a territory around their centre, but if that centre was the home of a *comarb* of a dispersed *familia* it might also maintain jurisdiction over its dispersed territories. This seems, for example, very likely to have been explanation of the extraordinary map of the diocese of Dunkeld (Etchingham 1999: 105–71).

Returning to Mortlach and Moluag, we must ask this question: was this the establishment of a new episcopal authority, or was it simply the transfer of an episcopal see? The probability that the territorial dioceses of pre-Norman Scotland were established on the basis of one bishop per kingdom, as in Ireland and early Anglo-Saxon England, brings us back to the issue of whether the lands north of the Mounth were regarded as a

separate kingdom, which I have termed elsewhere the ‘Moray Question’ (Woolf 2000). Both Bede and the Iona chroniclers seem to have considered that the Picts could be regarded as being divided into two fundamental groupings divided by the Mounth, although by the eighth and ninth centuries a single kingship, or over-kingship, seems to have been established (Plummer 1896: 133). In the eleventh century, from at least the time of Máel Coluim mac Cináeda, rival kings ruled in Moray and, in the case of Macbethad and Lulach, sometimes exerted their authority in the south (Woolf 2000: 145–64). Whether as a continuation of the bipartite structure of Pictavia or as a result of the particular political circumstances of the eleventh century, it is possible that, even within the minimalist model of one bishop per regnum, the north of Scotland may have already formed a distinct diocese before the foundation of Mortlach by King Máel Coluim mac Donnchada. Had such a northern bishop existed, would any church suggest itself as his principal seat? Of the three sees in the area that we know of, we have Mortlach which, as we have seen, seems to have been founded c. 1065, and that of the diocese of Moray, which took some time to settle on Elgin as its established centre suggesting that the episcopal household was not bound too closely to a particular site by tradition (Watt 1969: 218).

The third see, Rosemarkie, we have encountered already. Closely connected with Curetán and, in the twelfth century, providing the name of the diocese (‘Ross’ may or may not derive its name from Chanonry Point which gives us both the *ros* of Rosemarkie and that of Fortrose), Rosemarkie is certainly a site which exudes antiquity (*ibid.*: 266). Rosemarkie was also the alleged burial place of Moluag, and it is likely that, just as Dunkeld became the home of the *comarb* of Colum Cille in the ninth century, so the *comarb* of Moluag may have moved here from Lismore (see above). The distribution of dedications to Moluag and the location of his own monastery, at Lismore, intimately connects the saint with Cenél Loairn and with the kindred of Lulach who, rightly or wrongly, claimed descent from them. The first bishop who we can be certain had his see at Rosemarkie was Macbethad, who makes his first appearance in the historical

record witnessing a grant of land to Dunfermline Abbey by King David I (1124–53) at some point in the years 1127x31 (Barrow 1999: no. 33). This same charter provides the first *certain* appearance of Gregory, the first bishop of Moray.²

The pairing of the names Gregory and Macbethad also occurs in another text dating to the last years of the eleventh or first years of the twelfth century. This is version ‘A’ of the St Andrews origin legend, which is currently being edited for publication by Dauvit Broun. This text, which principally relates the arrival of the relics of St Andrew at the site of the present town in the days of a Pictish king named ‘Hungus’, concludes by asserting the primacy of the church of St Andrews within Scotland:

This is the city of cities of Scotia, to which Our Lord gave these supports to help: that is, archiepiscopus Giric, Macbethad and Gregoir with other brothers of theirs (Broun 2001: 33).³

Giric’s episcopacy is not well-recorded, but seems to have fallen somewhere between the death of Bishop Fothad II, in 1093, and the election of Turgot, in 1107 (Broun 2000: 108–14). Giric’s archiepiscopal status indicated here might have been a precocious claim to metropolitan status, but it may, like its Gaelic equivalent *primepscop*, simply designate seniority with regard to other bishops. It is clear that the writer of this text identified Macbethad and Gregoir as members of the *familia* of Andrew, but since they, unlike the ‘other brothers’, are named, they must have held some senior dignity or office. It is extremely tempting to imagine that these two are *chorepiscopi* of Giric’s, and that his title, *archiepiscopus*, marks him out as the ‘proper bishop’ of the three. Is there any possibility that these men could be the same as

² Gregory also appears as a witness to two charters purporting to have been issued in favour of Scone by King Alexander I between 1107 and 1124 (Bannatyne Club 1843: nos. 1 and 4). However, Lawrie expressed doubt over the authenticity of the Scone charters, and in particular the witness lists, believing that while Alexander was responsible for establishing the Augustinian rule there, the surviving diplomatic record was concocted at some date subsequent to 1164 (Lawrie 1905: 279–88). Barrow briefly questioned Lawrie’s judgement (Barrow 1960: 36–7) and Duncan has recently been working on a more detailed rebuttal of Lawrie’s position.

³ My thanks to Dauvit Broun for this translation.

the two northern bishops (noted in the Dunfermline land-grant) who held Rosemarkie and Moray by 1131?

The first reliable appearance of a third bishop, Cormac of Dunkeld, is as witness to the Dunfermline charter in which Macbethad of Rosemarkie makes his debut (Bannatyne Club 1843: nos. 1 and 4). It will be remembered that Cormac was also the name of the third bishop to have his seat at Mortlach. While it is beyond proof at present, it is perhaps worth considering that we are seeing the reform of the Scottish episcopacy in action here. At the beginning of the twelfth century we may have had a bishop of Scotia or Alba, assisted by *chorepiscopi* (located probably by this time at St Andrews but perhaps recently having been peripatetic), together with a second bishop located north of the Mounth, serving those areas that traditionally had been within the orbit of the rulers of Moray. At some point, not too long before 1131 (the latest possible date for the Dunfermline charter), Cormac of Mortlach may have been translated from Mortlach to Dunkeld, the centre of the cult of Colum Cille and St Andrews' real rival for ecclesiastical seniority within the kingdom of Alba. At the same time, the St Andrews *chorepiscopi*, irregular and unacceptable in the present climate, were given full episcopal status as diocesans in the north. Could it be as part of the same process that Nechtan was given his see at Aberdeen? His place of origin is nowhere made explicit, but the fact that Aberdeen held onto Mortlach and its immediate *parochia* may indicate that he hailed from there. All three northern sees would have formed portions of the old see that Cormac had administered from Mortlach. Dunkeld kept its pride, receiving a full bishop, and not being 'fobbed off' with a *chorepiscopus*, and the north was supplied with experienced men from the heart of the kingdom whose loyalty could be relied upon by the crown.

The apparent appearance of the new bishops at some point between 1127 and 1131 immediately suggests some connection with the rebellion of Angus of Moray, the son of Lulach's daughter, that was suppressed at Stracathro by Edward the Constable in 1130 (Anderson 1991: 166–7). Whether we see this as part of a subsequent settlement of the north, following the rebellion,

or whether we choose to see Angus' rebellion as a reaction to what he may have perceived as too much royal intervention, including this episcopal reform, is a moot point. In either case, the division of a great diocese of the north into three fulfilled the double function of placing reliable royal agents throughout a traditionally hostile region, while at the same time bolstering the claims being made by the bishops of St Andrews that they should be given metropolitan status (Broun 2001: 1–35). Alternatively, the innovation may have been instigated by Robert, the first foreign-born bishop of St Andrews (1124/8–59) to settle in the see, who may have enforced continental practice on his own house with the consequences that we have seen. If, however, the presence of Gregory of Moray on the witness list to the Scone charter proves to be reliable, then we must push back the reform to the reign of King Alexander I (1107–24). Interestingly, Walter Bower claims that Alexander founded the Augustinian house at Scone in thanks for a victory over the Moravians (Watt 1987–98: III, 107). Perhaps a poorly documented subjugation of Moray occurred during Alexander's time and instigated reorganisation.

Having examined the evidence for the see of Mortlach, is there anything more that can be said about its location? If we are to believe the origin legend, it was located near the site of a famous battle. If this was the battle of Essie, then we might have expected the king to found his new see in Strathbogie rather than the watershed of the Spey. It is also very unlikely, as we have seen, that Mortlach was originally intended to serve the diocese of Aberdeen, since it is extremely isolated within the diocese. It seems more likely that the foundation of King Máel Coluim mac Donnchada was intended to provide an episcopal centre for Muréb (Moray), the territory that had been dominated by Clann Ruaidrí, Lulach's kindred,⁴ that was easier to control and nearer his own centres of power. Máel Coluim may have established a bishopric at Mortlach just as the Bernicians had attempted to set up a Pictish ecclesiastical centre at Abercorn in Lothian

⁴ It is often assumed that Angus was a member of Clann Ruaidrí but as the son of Lulach's *daughter* he most certainly was not. His father may even have been the beneficiary of royal intervention in the region.

and as the Scots were later to do when they established the see of Caithness at Dornoch, barely beyond the frontiers of Ross. Such 'colonial' bishoprics were a common feature of this age. One wonders, however, whether the connection with the cult of Moluag reflects a perception that the see was transferred to Mortlach from Rosemarkie. If so, did the body of the saint travel with it? Do the Moluag dedications around Mortlach reflect the eastern edge of an ancient *parochia*, or are they relics of a brief period when the *comarba Moluaig* resided at Mortlach between c.1065 and 1130?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An early version of this paper, entitled 'Dead-Man Walking: St Moluag in the North of Scotland', was read at Rosemarkie in April 2002 and I wish to thank Susan Seright, of the Groam House Museum, and her husband Hugh for the hospitality they extended to me on that occasion and others. I have enjoyed many long discussions on the 'pre-Norman' episcopate with Thomas Clancy. Dauvit Broun read a draft of the paper and his comments have saved me from some errors of fact and style. Remaining errors and eccentricities are mine alone.