



CASTLE TIORAM: A STATEMENT OF CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Fig. 1. Front cover: Castle Tioram and south channel of Loch Moidart: high-level view from east, 14 September, 1920 (from R M Adam Collection, University of St Andrews, Library Photographic Archive, RMA-H868).



Fig. 2
Castle Tioram: general view from south

SUMMARY

The overall purpose of this statement is to address and answer one central and apparently simple question: how important is Castle Tioram?

It does so in two main ways:

- by an examination of the evidence which relates directly or indirectly to the castle itself;
- by a wider review of Castle Tioram's place among the castles of Scotland's western seaboard.

The evidence relating to the castle is explored under three main headings, that is, evidence which is:

- embodied in the built form and fabric of the structure;
- conveyed by its physical and historical context;
- derived from its cultural associations.

The wider examination of castles in the region is approached historiographically, that is, by critically scrutinising the ways in which the castles have been examined and interpreted in the past, by briefly re-examining the historical periods to which they have been assigned and the relative significance that has been attached to them.

These approaches are broadly consonant with internationally agreed criteria for establishing cultural significance as set out in the Burra Charter and associated literature. However, although this statement adheres to guidelines which are generally linked to the first stage of a programme of conservation, this document is wholly 'conservation neutral' in its approach and scope. As set out below in the Preface, the author's concern is with the 'reading' and interpretation of the architectural, topographical and associated historical and cultural evidence. Issues relating to matters such as Planning, amenity, scenery and natural history lie outside his professional competence and experience, and have no place in this statement.

The conclusions which have been drawn from this exercise provide a four-fold answer to the central question:

- Castle Tioram is the clearest representative we possess of a second generation of West Highland stone castles. Dating almost certainly from the middle decades of the 14th century it derives its layout and design from earlier forms of enclosure castle and 'hall houses', combining these two elements in a manner previously unrecognised in Scotland.
- Unlike its counterparts such as Mingary, Castle Tioram was associated for over three centuries with a single family, Clanranald, and remained relatively untouched thereafter. For these reasons the developments and phases which can be

read from the form and fabric of the building acquire more than ordinary significance as a now very rare reflection of the lifestyle of a Gaelic lord and his kindred.

- The wider context of a lordship with widely ramified interests and lands adds further special, and possibly unique, significance to Castle Tioram. The castle was the mainland outpost of a maritime empire which was always linked – and looked – to the Hebridean islands beyond the immediate horizons. The castle is conspicuously lacking in self-supporting and cultivable demesne or ‘table lands’, and unusually, possibly uniquely, such lands lay over 60 nautical miles away in the Uists, close to an equally distant family burial-place.
- The castle gains a very special, though intangible lustre, by its intimate associations with a family which manifested many significant aspects of Gaelic lordship and culture, especially in its 16th- and 17th-century heyday. Unlike the castles of Dunvegan or Kisimul which have similar cultural associations but have been comprehensively remodelled or restored to occupancy, that period is still physically echoed in the surviving architecture of Castle Tioram.
- A combination of relatively understated architectural qualities gives Castle Tioram a more intriguing and challenging character than most of its western seaboard counterparts. Very much a castellologist’s castle, its fabric and site demand extraordinary levels of architectural detection and embody much scope for further investigation and analysis.



Fig. 3
RCAHMS
Inventory of Argyll, volume 3
(1980)



Fig. 4
The Illustrated Burra Charter
(2004 edition)

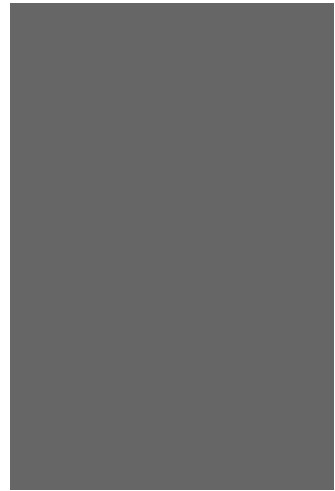


Fig. 5
GUARD (Allan Rutherford)
Castle Tioram Report
Part 1-The Documentary Evidence
(1998)

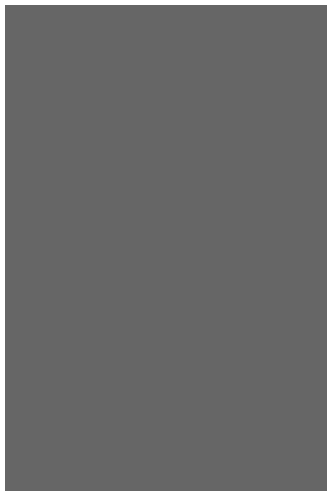


Fig. 6
GUARD (Caitlin Evans, Allan
Rutherford and Keith Speller)
Castle Tioram Report
Part 4-Building Analysis
(1998)



Fig. 7
ARP Lorimer & Associates
Castle Tioram
Statement of Cultural Significance
(1999)



Fig. 8
Athol Murray
Castle Tioram
The Historical Background
(1998)

PREFACE

Historic Scotland commissioned this statement in January 2006 and work on its preparation began in the following month. Its terms of references are to present a 'detailed, scholarly and non-partisan assessment' of the cultural significance of Castle Tioram in Moidart in the West Highlands of Scotland, a castle whose future has, since 1997, been the subject of wide debate and discussion surrounding a series of formal planning applications and appeals.

The requirement for an independent assessment of this kind follows the guidelines set out in Historic Scotland's own *A Guide to the Preparation of Conservation Plans* and *The Stirling Charter* where, in accordance with national and international practice, it is seen to contribute a preliminary basis of knowledge and understanding in a process leading towards the formulation of a conservation plan.¹ This statement is also based on internationally agreed standards and criteria applied to the assessment of buildings, monuments and a wide range of cultural artefacts as embodied in *The Burra Charter (the Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance)*, first adopted in 1979.²

No special explanation or apology is needed for the fact that this is the third assessment of the cultural significance of Castle Tioram to have been issued since 1999. As the most recent (2004) edition of *The Burra Charter* makes clear, the process of understanding significance 'can seldom be done once-and-for-all'.³ Like most kinds of historical investigation, such exercises may deal with different aspects of the subject or offer different approaches to - and interpretations of - the evidence. This account differs from its predecessors in three important respects.

Firstly, although it attempts to address those criteria which are internationally acknowledged as the essential first stage of any conservation programme, it is avowedly 'conservation neutral' in its approach and authorship. The assessor is a medievalist and architectural historian whose professional career with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland between 1969 and 2004 has been dedicated to the work of research, description and analysis relating to historic buildings, not with their protection, conservation or preservation. One of his primary tasks has always been the 'reading' of the evidence presented by a building's fabric and physical context, using these as texts which provide guidance to its history and use, sometimes complementing, sometimes contradicting, but always to be assessed independently of the written record.

A second difference resides in the fact that this account does not in any way attempt to present a comprehensive and detailed account of its subject. In order to allow it to stand as a self-contained report it has been necessary to introduce into section 3.1 an historical summary based largely on previous reports. Otherwise, however, this statement consciously avoids going over material which has already been well and exhaustively covered in previous detailed historical, descriptive and measured surveys and accounts prepared on behalf of Anta Estates.⁴ Since it offers a slightly revised interpretation of the building fabric, some limited reiteration of the castle's detailed features and history is inevitable and necessary, but generally it simply utilises the results of these earlier accounts on a selective basis and combines them with other

sources in order to emphasise those salient features which appear to be of greatest importance for this assessment.

In the breadth of its scope, however, there is a third major difference between this statement and its predecessors. It takes a much wider view than either of them and might well be more appropriately entitled 'Castle Tioram in Context'. The main aim throughout is to set Castle Tioram in a broad architectural, historical and cultural perspective, making comparisons across the entire western seaboard region. Given also that these buildings are mirrors of a past lifestyle and culture, almost as much emphasis is placed on the families qua patrons as on the buildings themselves.

Situated as it was immediately outside the former county boundary of Argyll whose castles and other monuments were thoroughly recorded in the seven-volume series of RCAHMS *Inventories* published between 1971 and 1992,⁵ Castle Tioram had for a long time the unhappy distinction of being one of the least studied of Scotland's western seaboard castles. It is to the credit of Anta Estates that in the short time since their purchase of the castle in 1997 that situation has been sharply reversed. Castle Tioram now stands high among the ranks of minutely observed and recorded castles in the country as a whole. This assessment owes much to the recent series of detailed studies commissioned by Anta Estates, most notably the historical surveys by Athol Murray and Allan Rutherford, the archaeological surveys of the castle and its island environment conducted by teams from the Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division (GUARD) under the general direction of Stephen Driscoll, and the first statement of cultural significance compiled in 1999 by ARP Lorimer and Associates.

Special thanks are due to John Raven for making available a copy of his recently completed doctoral thesis on Medieval Landscapes and Lordship in South Uist (University of Glasgow, 2005).⁶ Throughout this exercise members of the Anta Estates team (Ted Cowan, Stephen Driscoll, Peter Drummond and Athol Murray) and the Historic Scotland Steering Group (Richard Fawcett, Aonghus MacKechnie and John Raven) have generously offered expert information and comments which are here warmly acknowledged. Thanks are also extended to Steve Boyle, Nicholas Bridgland, Anthony Dalton, Alexandra Devoy, Frances Dunlop, Roger Miket, Marion Roberts, Evelyn Stell and Iain Thornber. The author alone remains responsible for the interpretations and opinions expressed in this statement.

Finally, it is necessary to preface this statement with an explanation of its arrangement. The original brief suggested that, in order to establish the comparative importance of Castle Tioram, it should begin with a wider review of castles in Scotland and the western seaboard region as a whole and that this should be followed by a closer examination of Tioram within that broader picture. The logic of such an approach was successfully applied to the initial presentation made to Historic Scotland and the Anta team on 30 March 2006. However, subsequent site-visits and further research have led to a revised interpretation of the fabric of the castle and the sites with which it was associated. Although these revisions are not of a radical magnitude, they are sufficient to alter earlier assumptions about the castle's place in the history of the western seaboard and, to use a Burra Charter term, its 'ability to demonstrate'⁷ its uses and associations as a major centre of Gaelic lordship. In the light of these findings, there is a strong case for reversing the original arrangement

and placing Castle Tioram at the forefront of the statement, proceeding outwards from the particular to the general. Those who wish to do so may prefer to begin with Castle Tioram (section 3) and then return to the general background (section 2). Either route is valid in showing how this assessment of the cultural significance of Castle Tioram in context has been arrived at.

However, if only to demonstrate how the question of deriving cultural meaning from a medieval castle - any castle - may be less straightforward than it first appears, it is necessary to begin with a few general remarks about the ways in which castles generally and Scottish castles in particular have been, and are being, viewed and studied, providing, in technical parlance, a brief overview of the historiography of Scottish castellology.

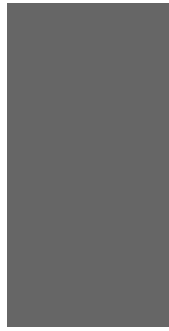


Fig. 9
Castle building, c.1450-60
Gunther Binding, *Medieval Building Techniques* (2001), from Brussels, Bibliotheque Royale, MS 9068



Fig. 10
Title page
D MacGibbon and T Ross
*The Castellated and Domestic
Architecture of Scotland*
(5 volumes, 1887-92)



Fig. 11
W MacKay Mackenzie, c.1926



Fig. 12
Title page
Stewart Cruden
The Scottish Castle
(1960 and later editions)



Fig. 13
Revisionism
Charles Coulson
Castles in Medieval Society
(2003)



Fig. 14
Revisionism
Marc Morris
Castle
(2003)



Fig. 15
Scottish Revisionism
Charles McKean
The Scottish Chateau
(2001)

1. INTRODUCTION: INTERPRETING SCOTTISH CASTLES

Scotland enjoys international renown as a land of castles. Some have acquired iconic national status and many of them, probably most, are regularly the subject of photography, descriptions, sketches and paintings. Usually complementing and dramatically enhancing their rural or urban settings, Scottish castles possess aesthetic and historic attributes which make a significant contribution to the fostering of 21st-century cultural tourism.⁸

Everyone used to think that they understood perfectly what a castle signified. In the past few decades, however, our general understanding of their design, purpose and setting has been brought under scrutiny and nothing is any longer quite what it previously seemed. These new interpretations have a general bearing upon castles as cultural signifiers, so it is appropriate to preface this statement with a brief notice of recent trends in the study of castle-building, uses and development.

From what may be labelled the 'traditional' standpoint, castles and fortified houses are viewed as products of societies and regions which are to a greater or lesser degree militarised and where defence or, at the very least, security and protection are paramount. The castle's main purpose is seen as being closely related to - and faithfully reflected in - its overall form and features. In other words, its design and detail are regarded as strictly functional and are interpreted in evolutionary terms, undergoing modifications in response to attacking strengths and defensive needs. Throughout, there is a heavy emphasis on design typology and military capability, and military strategy is likewise seen as the key to determining and understanding a castle's location. By these criteria the castle's apparent inability to cope with the advent of gunpowder artillery is seen as a major contributory factor towards its 'decline' in the later Middle Ages.

Such is the traditional portrayal of the castle - in Scotland as elsewhere. Quite understandably, these views prevailed quite strongly from the later 19th century onwards, among successive generations of castle scholars who were interpreting fortifications whilst the world was preparing for, or actually engaged in, warfare, and when there was much contemporary discussion about - and practical application of - concepts of attack and defence. Influences of this kind were circulating in mid- and late Victorian times and would have conditioned Scottish scholars such as David MacGibbon (1831-1902) and Thomas Ross (1839-1930) who were effectively the founders of modern castellology in Scotland through their five-volume *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* (1887-92).⁹

Among their successors, William Mackay Mackenzie (1871-1952) was something of an exception to this general rule, while William Douglas Simpson (1896-1968) stands out as an uncompromising protagonist of such interpretations, clearly manifest in his theories about the effects of so-called 'bastard feudalism' and the employment of paid retainers on late medieval castle design. Mackenzie was among the first in Scotland to emphasise the domestic influences on castle design but, except indirectly as Secretary of RCAHMS (1913-35), a role which included editorship of the RCAHMS, *Inventory of the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles* (1928), he does not appear to have engaged deeply with the castles of the western seaboard region. On the other hand, Simpson, who was enormously influential in his lifetime and attracted many

devotees, left an enduring legacy of almost 400 publications, a number of which have had a significant bearing on our view of most major castles in the West Highlands and Islands (see below, 2.1).¹⁰

The last three decades have witnessed the advent of a serious challenge to what is now regarded as military over-statement. Whilst accepting that under certain circumstances defensive considerations may have been critical determinants of castle design and function, castle 'revisionists' have pointed to the emphasis which medieval societies themselves placed on status, display and symbolism. Function did not necessarily follow form, and castellated appearances might be deceptive. No doubt equally swayed by contemporary trends, the spotlight is now on domestic, social and economic life which impinged upon the building, use and development of castles. Similarly, a much greater emphasis has been placed on the castle's place in the physical landscape, and upon their associations with settlements, demesne lands, parks and even gardens. The most vigorous exponents of such 'revisionism' have taken their evidence mainly from England and Wales, and, to a lesser extent, Ireland and France.¹¹

In Scotland, variant forms of revisionism have been applied to demonstrate a range of issues. They have shown, inter alia, that patterns of castle- and tower-building are more closely related to periods of social and economic stability and wealth than to episodes of alleged social and political turbulence.¹² Serious practical investments in time, money and materials apply to the creation of all castles, including those associated with campaign and conquest, and those erected in stone are particularly demanding of resources and organisation.¹³ Questions of institutional status are now known to underlie the creation of what appear to have been ecclesiastical 'fortifications',¹⁴ while the process of transformation from castle to country house in the late medieval and early modern eras has been misunderstood partly because of an alleged mis-use of castle nomenclature and partly because contemporary Scottish lairds and nobles liked the idea of evoking a warlike heritage through architectural and other trappings.¹⁵ Many still do.

Such revisionist views do not seek to deny that the nature and siting of many castles, especially those which stand in what were medieval frontier zones, are likely to have assumed their form and position more as a result of considerations of defence and deterrence than of domestic convenience. But they do usefully remind us of the balance that was inherent in any medieval secular building design. They provide a useful corrective to widespread assumptions that a castle's many attributes - whether it might be its commanding or isolated site, its plan-form, its high enclosure walls or its detailed features at the wall-head or gatehouse - are wholly explicable in military or quasi-military terms and were invariably for real use. In most cases it is now impossible to deduce castle-builders' intentions but, in contemplating the form and features of the castles of the western seaboard, including Castle Tioram, it is instructive to bear in mind the range and balance of practical issues which confront any builder in any age.



Fig. 16
Thomas Ross
Drawing of Castle Tioram
(from *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, volume 3 (1889))



Fig. 17
W Douglas Simpson at Castle Fraser, Aberdeenshire
1956



Fig. 18
W Douglas Simpson
Dunollie, Oban, Argyll
(including a bibliography of
Simpson's works by A T Hall,
1991)