



[Scotland's History](#)

[BBC Scotland](#)

[Scotland's History Articles](#) The Kingdom of the Gaels

The Kingdom of the Gaels



The Gaels gave Scotland its name from 'Scoti', a racially derogatory term used by the Romans to describe the Gaelic-speaking 'pirates' who raided Britannia in the 3rd and 4th centuries. They called themselves 'Goidi l', modernised today as Gaels, and later called Scotland 'Alba'. For centuries historians have debated the Gaels' origin. The earliest historical source we have comes from around the 10th century and held that the Gaels came from Ireland in around 500 AD, under King Fergus Mor, and conquered Argyll from the Picts. Recently archaeologists have challenged this idea. If the Gaels did invade from Ireland then new objects and differing types of building style could be expected to appear. What archaeologists point to is the continuity in building styles of crannogs and forts found in Argyll and Ireland, suggesting the Gaels had lived in Argyll for many centuries before Fergus Mor and shared a common Gaelic culture with Ireland. At the heart of the Gaelic kingdom – Dál Riata – was a formidable hill fort. The rocky outcrop of Dunadd, Argyll, was far more than a defensive fortress however. Dunadd was the location where Gaelic kings were inaugurated in a ceremony that symbolically married them to the land. In its heyday Dunadd would have been an impressive sight, a single rock outcrop set in the flat bottom of the Kilmartin Valley. On its upper slopes Dunadd was surrounded by stone ramparts, the remains of which can still be seen, and entry was through a natural cleft in the rock sealed by wooden gates. Beyond the gate were houses and workshops for smelting iron and gold. An important trading centre, many goods flowed through it: gold from Ireland, wine from southern Europe, even rare minerals from the far east used by scribes to colour manuscripts.

From Dunadd kings like Aedan mac Gabrann (574–608 AD) set out on campaign. A successful warlord, he extended the power of the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata from Orkney to the Isle of Man. In campaigns against Picts, Britons and fellow Gaels in Ireland he triumphed until he was finally stopped by the Angles at the Battle of Degsastan in 603 AD. What Aedan had achieved his grandson, Donald Brecc (Domnall Brecc, 629– 642), lost in a disastrous reign. He led the Gaels' war band to successive defeats. He was forced to surrender Dál Riata's Irish lands before he eventually suffered his final defeat at the hands of Owen of Dumbarton at the Battle of Strathcarron in 642 AD. Donald Brecc died on the field of battle with the bardic epitaph: 'And crows pecked, at the head of Domnall Brecc.' After Donald's defeat his kindred faced challenges for the kingship. Civil war raged between the rival factions until Fercher Fota (c697 AD) established a new royal line. They didn't rule for long but it's an interesting historical footnote that 450 years later Macbeth was supposed to be descended from Fercher Fota. The kin of Aedan and Donald Brecc went on to reassert their control of Dál Riata founding a line Scottish kingship that stretched to Bonnie Prince Charlie. In the early 8th century, the Gaels were confronted with the rising power of the Picts. In 736 AD the Picts stormed Dunadd. Their leader, Unust, may have been of Gaelic parentage, but in 741 AD the annals record his 'smiting of Dál Riata'. After his conquest Dál Riata became a back water with its kings subservient to the Picts.

It was from this background of decline that Kenneth MacAlpin emerged. In the mid 9th century he conquered the Pictish kingship and restored the Gaels' fortunes as they moved east to take over Pictland. Kenneth's triumph was Dunadd's end as ultimately the Kingdom Dál Riata vanished from history and the lands of Argyll fell under Norse control. However, along with Pictland, Dál Riata became the essential ingredient in the new Kingdom of Alba.

More articles[The Kingdom of the Picts](#)[The Kingdom of the Britons](#)[The Kingdom of the Angles](#)**History Debate**[Discuss Scotland's history in our online debate.](#)**Open University**

The Open University has produced a free booklet of postcards about Scottish history. Follow the link to claim yours.

[OU Postcards](#)**External Links**[Wikipedia's article about Dál Riata](#)

[Mobile site](#)
[Advertise With Us](#)
[Ad Choices](#)

[Terms of Use](#)
[Privacy](#)
[Cookies](#)

[About the BBC](#)
[Accessibility Help](#)
[Contact the BBC](#)
[Parental Guidance](#)

BBC © 2013 The BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites. [Read more.](#)