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ABBREVIATIONS

- Ann. Ulster* *The Annals of Ulster (To AD 1131)*, ed. and trans. By Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983).
- Ann. Tig.* *The Annals of Tigernach*, ed. & trans. By Whitley Stokes, 2 vols., (Felinfach: Llanerch Press, 1993).
- Barrow, Chrs. David I* *The Charters of David I: the written acts of David I King of Scots, 1124-53 and of his son Henry Earl of Northumberland, 1139-52*, ed. by G. W. S. Barrow, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1999).
- Beaully Chrs.* *The Charters of the Priory of Beaully with Notices of the Priors of Pluscardine and Ardchattan and of the Family of the Founder John Bysset*, ed. by Edmund Chisholm Batten, (Edinburgh: McFarlane & Erskine, 1887).
- BL British Library, London
- Cawdor Bk.* *The Book of the Thaness of Cawdor: a series of pamphlets selected from the charter room at Cawdor, 1236-1742*, ed. by Cosmo Innes, Spalding Club, 30 (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1859).
- Chron. Bower (Watt)* *Scotichronicon*, ed. by Donald E. R. Watt and others, 9 vols., (Aberdeen & Edinburgh: Aberdeen University Press & The Mercat Press, 1993-98).
- Chron. Fordun* *Johannis de Fordun Chronica Gentis Scottorum*, ed. by William F. Skene, 2 vols., (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871).
- EDINA The Statistical Accounts of Scotland Online
- Exch. Rolls [ER] *The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, ed. by J. Stuart, 23 vols., (Edinburgh: H.M. General Register House, 1878-1908).
- Fraser, Sutherland* *The Sutherland Book*, ed. by William Fraser, 3 vols., (Edinburgh, 1892).
- Fraser, Grant* *The Chiefs of Grant*, ed. by William Fraser, (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1883).
- Highland Papers* *Highland Papers*, ed. by James R. N. McPhail, 4 vols., Scottish History Society, 3rd & 4th ser., 5, 12, 20 & 22 (Edinburgh: T. & A. Constable, 1914-34).
- Inquis. Return. Abbrev. [*Retours*] *Inquisitionum ad capellam domini regis retornatarum quae in publicis archivis scotiae adhuc servantur abbreviatio*, ed. by Thomas Thomson, 3 vols., (Record Commission, 1811-16).
- Inverness Recs.* *Records of Inverness*, ed. by Willam Mackay, Herbert C. Boyd & George S. Laing, New Spalding Club, 38 (Aberdeen, 1911-24).
- Macfarlane, Geographical Coll. [*Geog. Coll.*] Geographical Collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane (SHS, 1906-08).
- Moray Reg.* *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis*, ed. by Cosmo Innes, Bannatyne Club, 58 (Edinburgh, 1837).

McInnes, <i>Munro Writs</i>	<i>Calendar of Writs of Munro of Fowlis 1299-1823</i> , ed. by C. T. McInnes, Scottish Record Society, 71 (Edinburgh: J. Skinner & Co., 1938-40).
Munros, <i>Acts Lords Isles</i>	<i>Acts of the Lords of the Isles, 1336-1493</i> , ed. by Jean Munro and R. W. Munro, Scottish History Society, 22 (Edinburgh: T. & A. Constable, 1986).
Munro, <i>Chisholm Writs</i>	<i>The Inventory of Chisholm Writs 1456-1810</i> , ed. by Jean Munro, Scottish Record Society, new ser., 18 (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Society, 1992).
NAS	National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh
NLS	National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh
OPS	<i>Origines Parochiales Scotiae</i> , ed. by Cosmo Innes, 3 vols., Bannatyne Club 97 (Edinburgh: W. H. Lizars, 1851-55).
OS	Ordnance Survey
POMS	People of Medieval Scotland
RCAHMS	Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland
RMS	<i>Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum in Archivis Publicis Asservatum</i> , ed. by John M. Thomson and others, 11 vols., (Edinburgh: Clark Constable, rep.1984).
RRS	<i>Regesta Regum Scotorum</i> , ed. by G. W. S. Barrow and others, 5 vols., (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960-).
SAUL	St Andrews University Library
UASC	University of Aberdeen Special Collections
Watson, <i>Ross and Cromarty</i>	Watson, William J., <i>Place-Names of Ross and Cromarty</i> (Edinburgh: Norman MacLeod, 1904).
Watson, <i>CPNS</i>	Watson, William J., <i>The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland</i> (Edinburgh: Blackwood & sons, 1926).

Ordnance Survey map references:

Every UK Ordnance Survey map sheet has a numbered grid pattern superimposed onto the terrain. These grid lines are referred to as eastings (the vertical lines) and northings (the horizontal lines) and the grid they form is numbered in 1km² squares. Six figure grid references are used to provide an exact location within each 1km² square, beginning with the easting (the first three numbers) then followed by the northing (the last three numbers).

I: A new look at an old tub: the historiography of the *dabhach*

The *dabhach* has been a source of debate among estate factors, antiquarians and historians since the eighteenth century. The first people in the historical record to ask the question, “How did *dabhach* taxes and in-kind assessments work?” were some Scottish estate managers of the 1730s who had been instructed by their employers to reinstate an older system of taxation, whereby their tenants and sub-tenants rendered goods and services in kind (common burdens) in payment of rent rather than coin. In such instances, while these goods and services had been abandoned in favour of hard cash only a generation previously, a period of climatic and associated economic downturn from the 1720s effectively meant that farmers were unable to generate enough cash to cover the whole of their rents. Panicking landlords, many of whom by now had purchased residences in London and had an associated new lifestyle to pay for, wherever possible insisted upon a return to the previous norm, for a short while at least until a new major phase of estate improvement was initiated in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Clearly, before the 1760s, to some people the *dabhach* and its associated systems of tax assessment in goods and common burdens were a tried and trusted method of land management that could be relied upon to produce some kind of income. Typically, north of the Cairngorm mountains (see Map 2) such surviving Highland estate accounts are packed full of references to *dabhaichean*, their extent, the townships they contain, and to the natural resources available to those people who resided within each unit.

It seems the first non-Scottish reference to a *dabhach* was made by a Welsh visitor **to** the country in 1772 who, it must be presumed, had hitherto been unfamiliar with this unit of land assessment. In his book, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772*, Thomas Pennant commented upon visiting Loch Broom in north-western Scotland that:

[...] Land here is set by the 'davach' or 'half davach'; the last consists of ninety-six Scotch acres of arable land, such as it is, with a competent quantity of mountain and grazing ground. This maintains sixty cows and their followers; and is rented for fifty-two pounds a year. [...]¹

As we shall shortly see, this brief statement has been extensively used by a number of writers to ‘prove’ a number of theories concerning the *dabhach*, even though this extract has never been contextualised. It is clear that during the north-west stage of his journey Pennant first landed at the head of Loch Broom in the bay of Loch Kinnaird, part of the Coigeach estate (see Map 2). This large parcel of lands bordered upon the upper north-west portion of the loch and had been forfeited to the British government after the last Jacobite war ended in 1746. Thereafter, the managers of this estate spent a lot of their time surveying and ‘rationalising’ the boundaries of the four *dabhaichean* that comprised Coigeach by moving peniciles (detached portions) from one *dabhach* to another.

Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that we will ever know who provided Pennant with his information but knowing who the source was, and precisely at which point during the ‘rationalisation’ of *dabhach* boundaries he / she spoke to Pennant, would allow historians to more accurately quantify the information the extract contains. For the moment, it is impossible to ignore the likelihood that Pennant’s source may have been talking about a *dabhach* or half-*dabhach* whose boundaries had already been ‘rationalised’ by politicised and idealistic

¹ Pennant, Thomas, *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1998), p. 316, [hereafter: Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*].

improvers intent upon ‘civilising’ what they perceived to be a ‘barbaric wilderness’ that bred Jacobites.

But this statement is as important for the information it does not provide. What exactly did Pennant mean by a ‘competent quantity of mountain and grazing ground’? Was it more or less than the ninety-six Scottish acres of arable? Pennant also does not inform his audience about how typical or atypical those measurements were for that area, though he does seem to imply that the acreage of arable was standard, which may itself be a product of a ‘rationalisation’ process undertaken by land improvers. It is also not entirely clear whether Pennant intended that the figure of sixty cows and their followers (calves) was a ‘standard’ measure of grazing across half-*dabhaichean*. The final reason why Pennant’s statement is important is because uncritical use of it by later commentators has resulted in the creation of two diametrically opposed historiographic camps about what a *dabhach* actually was and why they were created in the first instance.

The *dabhach*: a land for grazing Livestock?

On one side of this divide are those few authors who took the second part of Pennant’s statement to be of utmost importance and so they argued that *dabhaichean* were first and foremost definitions of the souming capacity of the land, one soum being defined as the quantity of grass required to support a cow and its calf for a year. This theory was first proposed in writing in 1798 when it was argued that *dabhach* was itself a compounded word which had been derived from the Scottish Gaelic words *damh* (ox) and *achadh* (field). Accordingly, it was supposed to signify either the amount of land on which oxen could be pastured (an oxgang/bovate), or an area of land in respect of which a number of oxen were given as render for the pasture.² This was a well-received theory which remained popular for some time. Writing in 1885, for example, F.W.L. Thomas continued to argue that the word ‘*dabhach*’ would be represented in modern Scottish Gaelic by ‘*damhach*’, a compound of *damh* (ox) and the augmentative particle ‘*ach*’, giving a sense of ‘abounding in’. According to him, *davach*, *damhach* and *dabhach* simply meant ‘a full team of oxen’.³ This association between the *dabhach* and pastoralism gained further weight in 1926 when the great Scottish place-name scholar W. J. Watson re-stated the case that the *dabhach* was a definition of souming capacity, again using Pennant as his source.⁴

The penultimate occasion upon which this exact argument was aired in print was in 1944 when McKerral published the first of three articles he authored on land assessment in Scotland. In this he hypothesised that since the ancient uncivilised Celts of Ireland and Scotland possessed no measure of land based on a fixed standard of length, so they must have believed that grazing was far more important than arable farming. Accordingly, they had no need of land measurement other than estimating the souming capacity.⁵ It is, however, interesting to note

² For example: Grant, John, and Leslie, William, *A Survey of the Province of Moray; Historical, Geographical, and Political* (Aberdeen: Isaac Forsyth, 1798), p. 67, [hereafter: Grant and Leslie, *Survey of the Province of Moray*]; Robertson, E. William, *Scotland under her Early Kings* 2 vols., (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1862), ii, p. 271, [hereafter: Robertson, *Early Kings*].

³ Thomas, Frederick W. L., ‘Ancient Valuation of Land in the West of Scotland: Continuation of “What is a Pennyland?”’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 20 (1885-86), 200-13, [hereafter: Thomas, ‘Continuation’].

⁴ Watson, William J., *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Blackwood & sons, 1926), p. 235, [hereafter: Watson, *CPNS*].

⁵ McKerral, Andrew, ‘Ancient Denominations of Agricultural Land in Scotland. A Summary of Recorded Opinions, with some Notes, Observations and References’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of*

that McKerral was not entirely convinced by his own arguments and he proceeded to change his mind (more than once) about the *dabhach* in successive articles

The last time this theory was rehashed occurred in 1961 when Croft Dickinson suggested that every *dabhach* was actually a fiscal unit upon which renders of service were based. He thought it possible that the *dabhach* was the land of a township but, since the Celtic economy was wholly pastoral, the *dabhach* must have been the extent of land required to support the grazing of a finite number of cattle (in combination with a small amount of arable), rather than the extent of land required to produce a certain amount of grain.⁶ In this final outing it is possible to detect the influence of the arguments advanced by the authors on the opposite side of the divide, those who regarded Pennant's statement about ninety-six acres of agricultural land in each half-*dabhach* as a sign that the *dabhach* was originally and primarily arable in nature.

The *dabhach*: a tub of grain?

One of the main pieces of evidence that motivated this second group of commentators was the simple fact that they thought the *dabhach* was largely confined to the north-east of Scotland. As far as they were concerned, this distribution roughly coincided with the core territory of the kingdom of the Picts pre-900AD, so investigating *dabhaichean* might help shed some light on those enigmatic peoples. It is precisely at this point in the historiography that further complications arise.

It is probably no coincidence that a direct link between the Picts and arable cultivation was made at this time because the latter half of the nineteenth century in Scotland was riven by an internal racist historical debate about the different races of Celts and Picts. To some commentators (following Classical ethnographers), the ancient Celts were slothful pastoralists who wandered around the countryside with their flocks, incapable of leading a settled (civilised) existence and turning their hand to industry. Their women did all the hard work. This same group also made two further points. First, that the Picts were not Celts. Second, that Highlanders who spoke Gaelic were the direct descendants of those same ancient Celts. Mainly, these theories arose because the first Roman author to write about the peoples of north Britain (Tacitus), had described those Caledonians who opposed Agricola as Germanic, a tall people with long limbs and red hair. Since, according to some Victorian writers, the Picts had once inhabited the same parts of the country as the ancient Caledonians, it meant the Picts were also a Germanic race. Their descendants, who now lived in Lowland Scotland, were therefore capable (unlike the Celtic Highlanders) of engaging with industry and the burgeoning Victorian Empire since one of the hallmarks of an industrious, civilised, and civil people was the growing of cereal crops.⁷

In 1872 the lawyer, historian, and antiquarian Cosmo Innes, according to his daughter a man who was 'not at all partial' to Highlanders,⁸ was the first to suggest that a *dabhach* was a liquid measure which could also be used to calculate the percentage of produce of the fields required to pay taxes.⁹ Eight years later William F. Skene was able to demonstrate that the supposed

Scotland, 78 (1943-44), 39-80, at 41, [hereafter: McKerral, 'Ancient denominations']. The second Celtic economic 'defect' was that they had no coinage.

⁶ Dickinson, W. Croft, *Scotland from the Earliest Times to 1603* (Edinburgh: T. Nelson, 1965), p. 62.

⁷ Kidd, Colin, 'Teutonist Ethnology and Scottish Nationalist Inhibition, 1780-1880', *Scottish Historical Review*, 74 (1995), 45-68, [hereafter: Kidd, 'Teutonist Ethnology'].

⁸ Burton, Katherine, *Memoir of Cosmo Innes* (Edinburgh: William Paterson, 1874), p. 48.

⁹ Innes, Cosmo, *Lectures on Scotch Legal Antiquities* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1872), p. 272, hereafter: Innes, *Scotch Legal Antiquities*].

derivation of *dabhach* from *damh* and *achadh* was wrong. Using evidence from the Book of Deer (c.1130), which contained eleventh-century references to *dabhaichean*, he showed that the last syllable of the plural form of the word, *dabeg*, was inflected. This would not have happened if part of the word had originally been derived from *achadh*.¹⁰ Skene did not offer a replacement etymology, probably because he already knew that in Irish Gaelic one of the meanings of the word *dabhach* was the largest measure of liquid capacity.¹¹ There, a *dabhach* seems to have been a two-handled vessel for mead, which had a capacity of one *ól-meda* (ól-measure of mead), possibly 43.2 pints.¹²

This unreconcilable tension between the purpose of *dabhaichean* located in Scotland and the meaning of the word in Gaelic Ireland has underlain every discussion on the topic since the principal ingredient of mead (honey) cannot really be viewed as a direct product of cereal cultivation. An escape from this potential etymological *cul-de-sac* was engineered in a remarkable series of articles about the place-names and personal names of Argyll in *The Scotsman* newspaper by Donald MacKinnon, first professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh.

There, MacKinnon explained that while the word *dabhach* properly denoted a liquid measure, an old West-Highland farmer of his acquaintance had frequently described his farm not as containing so many acres of land, but as the sowing of a certain number of bolls of oats. Therefore, according to MacKinnon, in Gaelic Scotland, where the staple industry was agriculture, a *dabhach* did not mean a measure of liquid but was a measure of land surface.¹³ Keen observers will already have noticed that the word *dabhach* did not actually appear in the quote provided by MacKinnon's old farmer. It was Professor MacKinnon himself who made this connection.

Seven year after this article was first published, in his book on Scottish land names Sir Herbert Maxwell tied these disparate loose ends together in a leap of faith and described a *dabhach* as:

[...] a measure of land, is originally, as Professor MacKinnon has shown, a measure of capacity, and was applied to denote the extent of land which required a *dabhach* of corn to sow it.¹⁴

Effectively, this meant that within a twenty-two year period three writers had combined to circumvent the doubtless inconvenient fact that in Gaelic Ireland a *dabhach* was a vessel for holding mead. In contrast, through their efforts it now became possible to equate a 'Scottish' *dabhach* with a tub of cereal grain. Unfortunately, though the etymology of the word *dabhach* in Irish Gaelic cannot be disputed, the intellectual processes by which it then came to be defined as a measure of grain in Scotland are clearly flawed and illogical. Until 2003, however, few commentators paused to reflect more critically upon this evidence and instead remained united in their belief that a Scottish *dabhach* was the equivalent of a tub of grain. The

¹⁰ Skene, William F., *Celtic Scotland: A History of Ancient Alban*, 3 vols., (Edinburgh: D. Douglas, 1876-80), iii, (1880), p. 224, [hereafter: Skene: *Celtic Scotland*].

¹¹ Royal Irish Academy, *Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials* (Dublin: W. & G. Baird Ltd, 1913-75), D.4.42, [hereafter: RIA, *DIL*].

¹² Kelly, Fergus, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1998), p. 358 and at pp. 578-79.

¹³ MacKinnon, Donald, 'Place-names and personal names in Argyll, xiii - The Land: Its divisions', *The Scotsman*, 28 December 1887, p. 7.

¹⁴ Maxwell, Herbert, *Scottish Land-Names, their Origin and Meaning* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1894), p. 165.

strength of this belief is still apparent and it has effectively become a self-perpetuating, though nuanced, 'fact'.

Returning again to William F. Skene, he opined that since a Scottish *dabhach* was either originally a unit of land, or something that had quickly come to mean a unit of land, in eastern Scotland each *dabhach* was the equivalent of four ploughgates, or thirty-two oxgates, whereas in the west of the country it was the equivalent of one *Tirung*, or ounce-land, which was in turn comprised of twenty penny-lands.¹⁵ One further observation made by Skene was that the *dabhach* also appeared to be the equivalent of the twenty house group found in the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata.¹⁶ This was an authoritative attempt to rationalise some of the differently-named units of land assessment found in Scotland and it was shortly followed by Frederick W. L. Thomas who argued that the ounce-land of the Northern Isles was a new Scandinavian name for the *dabhach*. In two wide-ranging articles that focused mainly on the Northern Isles, Thomas who argued that the ounce-land of the Northern Isles was a new Scandinavian name for the *dabhach* and that the *dabhach* was a unit for the assessment of tax rather than a piece of land of a fixed size.¹⁷

It was almost another fifty years before another major contribution to this debate was made. In 1931 William Elder Levie was clearly sceptical about the equation of a *dabhach* with either a tub of seed corn or with oxen in general. First, he pointed out that if the *dabhach* was either a tub of seed grain with which to sow several hundred acres of land or to collect the render of that land then it must have been rather big, much larger than the Irish Gaelic *ól-meda* of 43.2 pints. He got round this by suggesting that if the 'Scottish' *dabhach* was a tub then it might have been used to hold just a render (a proportion of the crop) other than the entire harvest. Second, he demonstrated that since *dabhaichean* varied so wildly in size, it was impossible for them to have been either a standardised area of land for the pasture of oxen or an amount of land in respect of which a fixed number of oxen were given as render for pasture.¹⁸

In this same article Levie provided a third option which he thought might help explain *dabhaichean* in Scotland. He suggested that if the *dabhach* had been a unit of land for the assessment of common burdens like army service, rather than a fixed superficial area of land, this would explain why there was no uniform size for *dabhaichean* in different parts of the country and why the agricultural capacity of different *dabhaichean* could also vary enormously.¹⁹ In effect, this section of his paper made a quite extraordinary contribution to the whole debate yet its findings were virtually ignored until 2003.

For example, writing during World War II, McKerral continued to argue that the term *dabhach* had special reference to arable land alone and that each *dabhach* contained a varying number of ploughgates, according to locality and date. Furthermore, he also felt that although the term *dabhach* originally described the arable area of each Celtic township, as arable farming became increasingly important so the term was transferred to the township as a whole. McKerral also noted that the *dabhach* was not found in either the place-names or records pertaining to either the kingdom of Dál Riata or Argyll, nor in the topography of Galloway and Ireland. Although

¹⁵ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, iii, (1880), p. 224.

¹⁶ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, iii, (1880), p. 226.

¹⁷ His earlier article was: Thomas, Frederick W. L., 'What is a Pennyland? Or Ancient Valuation of Land in the Western Isles', *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 18 (1883-84), 253-85.

¹⁸ Elder-Levie, William, 'The Scottish Davach or Dauch', in *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 3:2 (April 1931), 99-110, at 102-03, [hereafter: Elder-Levie, 'The Scottish Davach'].

¹⁹ Elder-Levie, 'The Scottish Davach', 104-05.

he did not expressly state this, the inference from his argument is that he felt the ‘Scottish’ *dabhach* was non-Gaelic (Pictish) in origin.²⁰

These arguments were reiterated by him in a short article in 1947. By this time McKerrall claimed to have found more evidence to support his theories and so was able to confidently argue that the *dabhach* originally referred just to the arable land of the township while the *soum* assessed the carrying capacity of the land. Furthermore, on the basis of some eighteenth-century evidence from Invernesshire, McKerrall calculated a *dabhach* to have been the equivalent of thirty-two to forty-eight acres of arable, or a ploughgate. However, McKerrall also clearly knew that these same *dabhaichean* in Invernesshire comprised more than just arable since he suggested that at an unknown early point in time the *dabhach* had expanded beyond its original definition and had come to represent both arable and souming capacity.²¹ This is a very clever argument. By fixing the switch in usage to a point in time for which there is no surviving documentary evidence from Scotland, he made it impossible for anyone to disprove his theory. This style of argument has been adopted by other contributors to the debate.

By the time of his final article on this subject McKerrall had changed his opinion on a number of topics. Essentially, by 1950 he had reconsidered the evidence relating to all units of land in Scotland and decided that there were actually two different basic types of unit. The first type (found in eastern Pictish Scotland) were purely arable units that had been formed by the people themselves through necessity. The second type (found in western Highland Scotland) were administrative units formed for either fiscal or military purposes by an outside authority. As far as Scotland was concerned, McKerrall believed that the arable *dabhach* was formed before the fiscal *dabhach*.²² He did not pause to explain how such a potentially confusing situation might have been allowed to arise under a unified political authority.

Clearly, this was a variation of a theory first proposed by Maitland in 1897 when he discussed ‘real / arable’ and ‘fiscal’ hides in Anglo-Saxon England.²³ However, it might be questioned whether McKerrall, in dividing Scotland into eastern and western sections along linguistic and Highland/Lowland lines, had also been influenced by earlier racial debates. In making the inhabitants of eastern Scotland (the Picts) capable of popular sovereignty, he echoed some of the ideas expressed in writings ranging from the Declaration of Arbroath (1320) to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. In contrast, that the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders of western Scotland had units of land assessment imposed upon them from above is reminiscent of the comments made about ‘wild’ Highlanders by Vairement in the thirteenth century, where they could be ‘civilised’ via good government.²⁴

In any event, McKerrall now firmly believed that the basic agricultural unit in Scotland was the *baile* (township) and that the *dabhach*, along with the *ounceland*, *tirunga* and *quarterland*, was simply a type of administrative unit composed of multiple townships, necessary for the efficient collection of render. According to McKerrall, in Pictish Scotland these multiple-township

²⁰ McKerrall, ‘Ancient denominations’, 51-52.

²¹ McKerrall, Andrew, ‘What was a davach?’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 82 (1947-48), 49-52.

²² McKerrall, Andrew, ‘The lesser land and administrative divisions in Celtic Scotland’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 85 (1950-51), 52-64, at 53; [hereafter: McKerrall, ‘The lesser land’].

²³ Maitland, *Domesday Book*, pp. 389-92.

²⁴ Broun, Dauvit, ‘Attitudes of Gall to Gaedhel in Scotland before John of Fordun’, in *Mìorun Mòr Nan Gall, ‘The Great Ill-Will of the Lowlander’? Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands, Medieval and Modern*, ed. by Dauvit Broun and Martin D. MacGregor (Glasgow: Centre for Scottish and Celtic Studies, 2009), pp. 49-82.

administrative units were known as *dabhaichean*.²⁵ One problem with adopting this new line of approach was that McKerral now had to reconcile his earlier theory, that a *dabhach* had over time eventually come to designate the whole of the lands belonging to a township, with his new belief that a *dabhach* was originally a unit of assessment. He did this by returning to an earlier theoretical model and argued that *dabhaichean* had ceased to function as fiscal units at some unspecified point in time and thereafter the meaning of the term had become fluid and so became to be used as a denomination for an agricultural holding. He further suggested that to avoid confusion (and inspecting the logic of his arguments too closely), all the reader had to do was to remember the original function and history of the term.²⁶

One final suggestion was made by McKerral in his reconsideration of the term *dabhach*. He based this theory on two major groups of evidence. The first of these groups came from Orkney where it had been discovered that every urisland possessed a chapel. Therefore, since McKerral believed that the urisland was the equivalent of a *dabhach*, and that each parish had one church, this meant that the *dabhach* was the equivalent of a proto-parish, before the boundaries of modern parishes became delineated in the twelfth century. The second major body of evidence came from Argyll. According to McKerral, a survey of the old feudal lordship of Kintyre had revealed thirty-four places of ancient ecclesiastic association. In addition, an old rental of the lordship had assessed it at 428 merklands. Since there were ten merks to the ounceland or *dabhach*, this meant that there must have been forty-two ouncelands or *dabhaichean* in the lordship. Although the two sets of numbers did not quite coincide, through some creative accounting McKerral argued that a number of ancient church sites may have disappeared and that the two sets of numbers were 'sufficiently close' for a correlation to be made.²⁷

The following decade saw the publication of an article which, in successive forms, has come to dominate the study of land assessment in Scotland for the last fifty years. This is in itself a testimony to the strength of the arguments that were so cogently advanced by G. W. S. Barrow. In 1962 he gently admonished McKerral for suggesting that the *dabhach* may have been an administrative or fiscal unit of land. Instead, Barrow was convinced that each *dabhach* was a unit of arable and he has not strayed (at least in writing) from that position since. According to him, medieval Scots preferred the estimate their cultivated land in terms of the amount of corn harvested but he was unsure whether a *dabhach* was either a measure of the seed corn used to sow the arable or a measure of the produce.²⁸

He argued that these choices really did not matter in the longer term because by the twelfth century the term *dabhach* had come to denote an area of land, and had lost its direct (original) connection with a measurement of volume.²⁹ Just like McKerral, Barrow deliberately placed an important development in relation to *dabhaichean* in a suitably early time frame for which there is no surviving evidence in Scotland, making it impossible for anyone to disprove his theory.

Barrow continued to make a further six key points about the *dabhach*:

²⁵ McKerral, 'The lesser land', 53-54.

²⁶ McKerral, 'The lesser land', 61.

²⁷ McKerral, 'The lesser land', 61-62.

²⁸ Barrow, G. W. S., 'Rural settlement in central and eastern Scotland: the medieval evidence', *Scottish Studies*, 6 (1962), 123-44, at 133, [hereafter: Barrow, 'Rural Settlement'].

²⁹ Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 142, fn.35.

- each arable *dabhach* would have carried pasture with it as men of the medieval period were incapable of thinking of arable in separation from the pasture and grazing that accompanied it.
- no clear relationship had ever been established between a *dabhach* and a social unit like a township or village.
- since *dabhaichean* were commonly named, and since many had fixed boundaries, each *dabhach* must have possessed a physical unity centred upon a single stretch of arable land.
- since there were no records of *dabhaichean* in either Argyll, Lennox, Menteith, the Northern Isles, Caithness, and parts of the Hebrides, there was, despite the Gaelic origin of the word, something inescapably Pictish about the use of the *dabhach* of land.
- that *dabhaichean* were frequently divisible into fractions and that one of these fractions, the half-*dabhach*, frequently possessed its own parish church. He further noted that this was similar to the carucate of 104 acres found south of the Forth which also could be frequently found with its own parish church.
- that the use of the word *fortyris* (uplands, perhaps related to the Welsh word *gorthir*, meaning higher land) in charters granting *dabhaichean* from Strathearn, Angus, and Ross, demonstrated careful distinction between the principal arable lands of the *dabhach* and those lands which were either never or not regularly under the plough.³⁰

Finally, and to his credit, Barrow noted that there was a substantial body of evidence relating to *dabhaichean* that contradicted his theories, particularly those units whose place-names indicated activities other than arable farming. He chose, however, to ignore this evidence since it did not really contradict his general thesis that the *dabhach* was in origin and essence an agricultural unit.³¹ The other up-and-coming historian of medieval Scotland at that time, A. A. M. Duncan, agreed with Barrow that the *dabhach* was essentially either a measurement or unit of arable land, largely on the basis that an early grant from Moray mentioned the corn teinds from the two *dabhaichean* of Boharm and Adthelnachorth.³² In effect, a general consensus had been achieved amongst the leading historians of that day, so that by 1972 it was possible for Kenneth Jackson to state that:

The original meaning of the term is 'a large vat'; the application to land is not found at all in Ireland, however, but only in Scotland. Just how a word meaning a vat should come to be used of land is not quite clear, but this could have arisen if the term was applied to that amount of land necessary to produce, or to require for sowing it, a fixed amount of grain, enough to fill a large vat of fixed size; this being perhaps not the total yield of grain but only the proportion of it due as a fixed render of tax. This would explain the fact that when it can be checked, in later times, the actual acreage is seen to vary considerably in various parts of the country, exactly as in the case of the mediaeval bovate and ploughgate, and for the same reason. If it was originally purely a measure of arable land, it had ceased to mean this later, and applied to pastoral land and rough mountain grazing as well. [...] possibly it is, once again, an aspect of the Pictish socio-economic system adopted by the incoming Gaels?³³

³⁰ Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 133-36.

³¹ Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 135-36. Barrow has continued to publicise these theories and they have appeared most recently in: Barrow, *Kingdom of the Scots*, pp. 233-49.

³² Duncan, Archibald A. M., *Scotland: The Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1975), p. 317, [hereafter: Duncan, *Kingdom*].

³³ Jackson, Kenneth H., *The Gaelic Notes in the Book of Deer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 116-17, [hereafter: Jackson, *Deer*].

Unsurprisingly, this meandering statement did not end the debate about *dabhaichean*. In 1974 Whittington brought a discussion of the *dabhach* into a paper that examined place-names and settlement patterns in so-called ‘dark-age’ Scotland. In this, he followed Nicolaisen in suggesting that *pit*- place-names were first coined during a Pictish and Gaelic bi-lingual period in the ninth and tenth centuries when Gaelic speakers had settled in large numbers in Pictland. Whittington then continued to suggest that during this time the *pit*-unit of land was replaced in name by the *dabhaich*, even though he clearly recognised that there were problems with his theory.³⁴ The most recent commentator on this topic has been Driscoll, who argued that the *dabhach* was the Pictish equivalent of the hide and that there was an intimate connection between *dabhach* and *pit*-. The *dabhach* was a measure of productive capacity while *pit*- was concerned with the organisation and location of the settlement.³⁵

Matters were greatly complicated in 1979 when John MacQueen published a paper on *dabhach* place-names in south-west Scotland, an area that had never, as far as can be established, been part of the Pictish *regnum*. MacQueen noted details of ten separate *dabhach* place-names in the Stewartry, Ayrshire, and Wigtownshire, all to the south of Glasgow. He circumvented the thorny problem of place-name ethnicity by arguing that the *Gall-ghaidhil* (stranger Gaels), who he assumed had settled in Galloway around the tenth century, were actually Pictish settlers.³⁶ In a codicil to this article (published in the same journal), Megaw disagreed with MacQueen about the origins of *dabhach* place-names in south-west Scotland. Instead, largely because *dabhach* is a Gaelic word, Megaw argued that just like in eastern Scotland, *dabhaichean* had been brought to the south-west by Scots, probably during the Viking period.³⁷ At this stage, nobody checked whether these *dabhach* place-names in south-west Scotland could have been formed because one aspect of their local landscape matched one of the other meanings of ‘*dabhach*’ in Old Irish Gaelic, namely a circular depression or ‘pot’ in the earth or a pool.³⁸

There is one final point to make at this stage: while the *dabhach* itself was being investigated some researchers were also arguing about its agricultural capacity. Most have favoured the theory that each *dabhach* contained four ploughgates, or thirty-two oxgangs, of agricultural land. Such an assumption is based on plentiful evidence from both north-east family and ecclesiastic papers.³⁹ In contrast, Barrow has argued that each *dabhach* was comprised of two ploughgates. This theory was again based on the evidence from the eighteenth-century writings of Thomas Pennant, who described a half-*dabhach* near Loch Broom as consisting of ninety-six Scotch acres of arable land.⁴⁰

³⁴ Whittington, Graeme, ‘Placenames and the settlement pattern of dark-age Scotland’, *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 106 (1974-75), 99-110.

³⁵ Driscoll, Stephen T., ‘The Archaeology of State Formation in Scotland’, in *Scottish Archaeology: New Perceptions*, ed. by William S. Hanson and Elizabeth A. Slater (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), pp. 81-111, at p.92. In later articles [cf: Driscoll, S. T., ‘Formalising the mechanisms of state power: early Scottish lordship from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries’, in *Scottish Power Centres from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Sally Foster, Allan MacInnes, and Ranald MacInnes (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1998), pp. 1-31] Driscoll has argued that the thanage was the building block of developing royal power in Scotland. This view, however, is in need of revision.

³⁶ MacQueen, John, ‘Pennyland and *Dabhach* in South-Western Scotland: a Preliminary Note’, *Scottish Studies*, 23 (1979), 69-74.

³⁷ Megaw, Basil, ‘Notes on ‘Pennyland and *Dabhach* in South-Western Scotland’’, *Scottish Studies*, 23 (1979), 75-77, [hereafter: Megaw, ‘Notes on Pennyland’].

³⁸ *RIA*, DIL, 172.

³⁹ Skene, *Celtic Scotland*, iii, (1880), p. 224; Dodgshon, Robert A., *Land and Society in Early Scotland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 73, [hereafter: Dodgshon, *Land and Society*]; Innes, *Scotch Legal Antiquities*, p. 273.

⁴⁰ Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland*, p. 316.

Since this total of ninety-six acres is close to the carucate (ploughgate) of 104 Scotch acres commonly found south of the Forth-Clyde line, and since both half-*dabhaichean* and carucates possessed their own parish churches suggesting that they were equivalent in extent, Barrow concluded that a *dabhach* must have been composed of two carucates.⁴¹ This argument, unfortunately, conveniently forgets the second part of Pennant's statement regarding the 'competent quantity of mountain and grazing ground'. Since Pennant did not specify the acreage of this ground it is impossible to determine the real size of the half-*dabhach* he examined, even if it had not already been 'rationalised'. Possibly more importantly, Barrow also neglected to ask whether Pennant was describing acres that physically existed or a fiscal agricultural assessment for the purposes of taxation. All that really can be said is that judging by surviving perambulations and cartographic evidence from the Loch Broom area, the arable of Pennant's half-*dabhach* may have amounted to as little as 0.1 percent of the total acreage of the grazings.

By 1979, then, the *dabhach* was something of an intellectual curiosity which had been intermittently picked up, agonised over, and subsequently ignored for long periods of time. Apart from the general agreement that it was likely Pictish (pre-900AD) in origin, few could completely agree about its original extent and function. Post-1980 these piecemeal investigations ceased and the *dabhach*, together with other 'Scottish' units of land assessment and the medieval landscape became the subject of a relatively sustained process of investigation by many people, including a number of PhD students primarily based at the Universities of Edinburgh, Dundee, and St Andrews. Without the benefit of this work, modern landscape and land assessment studies in Scotland would be very much the poorer.

Post-1980 historiography

Historical geographers were the first to enter into this debate in 1980 when R. A. Dodgshon tackled some of the problems that arise while investigating medieval settlement in Scotland. He framed his discussion within the parameters of land colonisation, population, and settlement development and agreed with Barrow that units of land assessment, including *dabhaichean*, may not have started life as measurements of land but had only later come to adopt this meaning by c.1100AD. For Dodgshon, a typical such unit consisted of bounded towns which had been laid out and perambulated at the time of the unit's inception or assessment, within an area of non-assessed 'waste', utilised for pasture. Therefore, the structured framework of land assessment acted as a check to the amount of land that could be colonised by any one town.⁴² This theoretical model is underpinned by Dodgshon's guess that the population of medieval Scotland c.1100 amounted to 250,000, thereby allowing him to introduce the themes of further colonisation and settlement of the 'waste' as time progressed and the population increased. In reality, it is impossible to estimate Scotland's population at that time.

To emphasise some of his arguments Dodgshon introduced mid-eighteenth century (1761) cartographic evidence from Highland Scotland that mapped the boundaries of a series of *dabhach* townships and their associated rig agriculture.⁴³ In this paper Dodgshon also agreed that the *dabhach* looked like a unit of land assessment that was already mature by the time it was first mentioned in the written record in Scotland in the Book of Deer (dated c.1130 but it

⁴¹ Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 123-44.

⁴² Dodgshon, Robert A., 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation', in *The Making of the Scottish Countryside*, ed. by Martin L. Parry and T. R. Slater (Trowbridge: Croom Helm, 1980), pp. 45-68, at pp. 49-50, [hereafter: Dodgshon, 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation'].

⁴³ Dodgshon, 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation', drawings on p. 55 and p. 60.

contains land grants from the 1020s, written in Scottish Gaelic). For Dodgshon this explained why there is no written record in Scotland of a *dabhach* being established for the first time.⁴⁴

Dodgshon returned to the subject of the *dabhach* one year later. In his book of 1981 he began by accepting that the *dabhach* was a tub of grain due as render. He then built upon McKerral's earlier theories and argued that both theories regarding the amount of ploughgates in a *dabhach* could be right if it was accepted that in the north-east, where most of the evidence for the four-ploughgate theory comes from, the *dabhach* was regarded as a territorial measure of agricultural capacity based upon the Anglian units of the oxgate and ploughgate, whereas in the west and south-west each *dabhach* was essentially a fiscal unit which was assessed at two ploughgates and which had affinities to Celtic systems of measurement. In order to explain this dichotomy within a single kingdom, Dodgshon subsequently made the extraordinary claim that the *dabhach* in fact overlaid even earlier and very different units of measurement.⁴⁵ He did not explain what these might have been, what they were called, or where they might have originated.

Dodgshon also used eighteenth-century evidence from eastern Scotland, which allegedly stated that a *dabhach* comprised four ploughgates or 416 acres (168.4 hectares) of arable, together with Pennant's statement about the half-*dabhach* of Loch Broom containing ninety-six acres (thirty-nine hectares) of arable, to demonstrate the differences between arable (Anglian) and fiscal (Celtic) *dabhaichean* across Scotland.⁴⁶ Remarkably, this theory seems to have gained some popularity even though Dodgshon (like McKerral) again never explained how such a dichotomy might have come about in lands under the rule of one king. There are other fundamental problems, both with this theory and the evidence used to underpin it, which will be discussed in the latter section of this chapter.

The first PhD thesis on the *dabhach* (and other units of land assessment) was completed in 1986. In this it was stated that all *dabhaichean* were located on low-lying fertile ground below 800ft (244m), particularly in river valleys, and that coastal situations were rare. According to the author, *dabhaichean* were strictly arable units of land and their location on the best soils proved this point.⁴⁷ Through a series of distribution maps Easson also demonstrated that the *dabhach* was mostly found to the north of the Forth-Clyde line and that it was not present in Menteith, Strathearn, Argyll or Caithness (the last only before 1400AD). Outlying distributions included the afore-mentioned cluster in south-west Scotland and a solitary example from Lothian.⁴⁸ The latter was explained away by speculating that the scribe who drafted the document in the Arbroath Register had mistakenly used the term *dabhach* instead of ploughgate because he was more familiar with the terminology used for land assessments north of the Forth-Clyde line.⁴⁹ Since this is the only example of the term *dabhach* in east Scotland south of the Forth, this seems like a logical explanation. Finally, in her thesis Easson also attempted to prove that the *dabhach* operated, at one and the same time, as both an agricultural and fiscal unit wherever it appeared in Scotland. Accordingly, while accepting that the *dabhach* was an area of land which paid a vat of grain as render, she also argued, like Barrow, that every *dabhach* was the nominal equivalent of two ploughgates of arable land.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Dodgshon, 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation', p. 54.

⁴⁵ Dodgshon, 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation', pp. 74-77.

⁴⁶ Dodgshon, 'Medieval Settlement and Colonisation', p. 76 and fn85.

⁴⁷ Easson, 'Thesis', 51-2.

⁴⁸ Easson, 'Thesis', 280-81.

⁴⁹ Easson, 'Thesis', 49.

⁵⁰ Easson, 'Thesis', 58-60.

However, unlike Barrow, who suggested that the *dabhach* could have been Pictish in origin, Easson followed Skene and Bannerman and argued that its origin instead lay in the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata in western Scotland. According to her, since the *dabhach* was frequently divisible into halves (*leth-*), quarters (*ceathramh-*) and fifths (*cóigeamh-*), and because each *dabhach* in the west of Scotland was the equivalent of twenty pennylands, this indicated that the *dabhach* must have originated out of the twenty-*tech* (house) unit, which was also capable of sub-division into tenths and fifths, as found in the early tax-assessment of the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata, *Senchus Fer nAlban*.⁵¹

To support this argument she claimed to have found evidence relating to a *dabhach* in the north-east of Scotland — the *dabhach* of Shevin in Strathdearn (to the south of Inverness) — where she argued that the four *cóigeamhan* (fifths) of Shevin were equivalent to the four quarters of the *dabhach*. According to Easson, this meant that the sub-divisions of this *dabhach* in the north-east were also originally based upon the five-*tech* (house) unit of Dál Riata. Therefore, she thought the *dabhach* must have originated as a land measure with the *Scotti* of Dál Riata between c.650 and c.850AD and was probably taken eastwards by the *Scotti* into Pictland. For her, this would also explain why *dabhach* was originally a Gaelic word, not Pictish, thereby apparently neatly solving the problem about the origin of the term.⁵² This theory seems to have gained some immediate acceptance although there were obviously worries about the fact that there was no direct place-name or documentary evidence for *dabhaichean* within the imagined boundaries of the old Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata.

The same year that Easson's thesis was completed Malcolm Bangor-Jones published a short article about land assessment and settlement history in Sutherland and Easter Ross. In many ways this is a quite remarkable piece of research, mainly because it is the complete antithesis to Easson's work, both in terms of chronological scope and in intellectual curiosity.⁵³ Bangor-Jones began by noting that in northern Scotland both the *dabhach* and the Norse pennyland had survived for so long because they were not fossilised terms but instead meaningful methods of measuring a range of different land uses, for defining territorial frameworks, and for assessing a range of obligations like rents and services upon the land. Investigating and mapping these two units of assessment, he further noted that while *dabhaichean* extended across the whole of Ross, Sutherland, and probably Caithness, the distribution of pennylands matched the Scottish mainland possessions of the earls of Orkney in Caithness and Sutherland, stopping at the River Oykel (See map 1). To both Bangor-Jones and Crawford, this suggested that the Oykel had once been a political boundary of some significance and duration.⁵⁴ This will be discussed more fully in Chapter III.

⁵¹ Bannerman, John, *Studies in the History of Dalriada* (Edinburgh: R. & R. Clark Ltd, 1974), p. 42 and at pp.140-41, [hereafter: Bannerman, *Dalriada*]; Dumville, David N., 'Ireland and North Britain in the Earlier Middle Ages: contexts for *Míniugud Senchusa Fher nAlban*', in *Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig 2000*, ed. by Colm Ó Baoill and Nancy R. McGuire (Aberdeen: An Clò Gaidhealach, 2002), pp. 185-212, [hereafter: Dumville, 'Ireland and North Britain'].

⁵² Easson, 'Thesis', 98.

⁵³ Bangor-Jones, Malcolm, 'Land Assessments and Settlement History in Sutherland and Easter Ross', in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. by John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Northern Society for Scottish Studies, 1986), pp. 153-68; [hereafter: Bangor-Jones, 'Land Assessments'].

⁵⁴ Bangor-Jones, 'Land Assessments', p.156; Crawford, Barbara E., 'The making of a Frontier: The Firthlands from the Ninth to Twelfth Centuries', in *Firthlands of Ross and Sutherland*, ed. by John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies, 1986), pp. 33-46.

But through his new approach Bangor-Jones uncovered a number of key new points about the *dabhach*:

- in Sutherland and Caithness there was an exact relationship between the *dabhach* and the pennyland, one *dabhach* being the equivalent of six pennylands. This is a very different figure to the west of Scotland where one *dabhach* was the equivalent of twenty pennylands.
- in the post thirteenth century earldom of Caithness the Norse pennyland had completely replaced the *dabhach* as the preferred method of land assessment.
- a study of land assessments revealed evidence of early territorial organisation where a number of assessments were grouped together to form, for example, the six *dabhaichean* of X or the eighteen pennylands of Y.
- that within such units there were common ties between areas of central settlement and detached pendicles elsewhere.
- these units could be combined to form larger units of lordship.
- because they were measures of production, and because landscapes differed, so there was no standard range of acreages for these units of assessment.
- many early parishes appear to have been based upon pre-existing settlement organisation.

Like his predecessors, Bangor-Jones accepted that the word ‘*dabhach*’ was derived from the Old Irish Gaelic equivalent and that it was a measure of arable land because it had originated in its use as a measure of either tribute or seed corn. According to him, this emphasis on arable was confirmed by the distribution of *dabhaichean* in the northern Highlands where there was a clear differentiation between the low assessments of the west and central areas (with limited and poor cultivable land) and in the higher assessments from the more fertile eastern and coastal areas.⁵⁵

The following year saw the first, and so far only, conference on land assessment in Scotland where four papers on the subject of Ouncelands and pennylands were delivered. Naturally, the *dabhach* also prominently figured in these discussions. Easson, for example, reiterated her position that in the western Highlands and Islands each *dabhach* was interchangeable with the twenty-pennyland *unciate/ounceland/eyrisland/tír unga* and that it was a unit of arable land.⁵⁶ At the same conference Bangor-Jones revisited his work in northern Scotland, noting that there while there were only three ouncelands in that area, they were each the equivalent of eighteen pennylands, making them identical to the Orkney ounceland rather than the twenty penny ounceland found in the west. He also used this opportunity to note that whenever the arable within each *dabhach* was enlarged it did not lead to a higher overall assessment, rather it was incorporated into the existing assessment. Second (contra Dodgshon), that all infield and outfield (waste) was assessed. The final point he made was that multiple *dabhach* groupings should be considered to be examples of multiple estates, bounded by complex patterns of settlements and their detached pendicles, linked by transhumance.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bangor-Jones, ‘Land Assessments’, p. 158.

⁵⁶ Easson, Alexis, ‘Ouncelands and Pennylands in the West Highlands’, in *Ouncelands and Pennylands*, ed. by Lindsey J. Macgregor and Barbara E. Crawford (St Andrews: St Andrews University Printing Department, 1987), pp. 1-12, at pp. 2-5.

⁵⁷ Bangor-Jones, Malcolm, ‘Ouncelands and Pennylands in Sutherland and Caithness’, in *Ouncelands and Pennylands*, ed. by Lindsey J. Macgregor and Barbara E. Crawford, (St Andrews: St Andrews University Printing Department, 1987), pp. 13-23, [hereafter: Bangor-Jones, ‘Ouncelands and Pennylands’].

The final paper in this collection was written by Richard Oram who specifically addressed the appearance of the *dabhach* in south-west Scotland. He began by trying to solve the question why there were absolutely no records of *dabhaichean* within the imagined boundaries of the old Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata. He argued that the Scandinavian domination of western Scotland between c.842 and 1266AD eliminated all trace of the fiscal *dabhach* because the Norse replaced it with their own term 'ounceland'. He further argued that in eastern Scotland post c.842, when the kingdom of the Picts was thought to have been conquered by the Gaels, the newly-introduced *dabhach* metamorphosed from being a Dál Riatan fiscal unit based upon notional groupings of households into an arable unit. This change allowed the *dabhach* to fit into a Pictish rural society that was organised in a system based on major arable units of up to thirty-two carucates in extent, and which was completely different to the Dál Riatan fiscal unit. According to him, in this manner the *dabhach* could assume a dual character being both a unit of fixed extent and an expression of render from that unit.⁵⁸

Such a theory was also not without problems. While Oram noted (following Easson) that the *dabhaichean* in south-western Scotland seemed to have been structured on the western (fiscal) model, there was evidence that these same *dabhaichean* had also occasionally been measured according to their arable capacity. Therefore, according to Oram, the *dabhaichean* in south-western Scotland must have been a blend between the two *dabhach* 'systems', fiscal and arable. He then suggested that the originally arable south-western *dabhaichean* had been adapted by incoming Gaels in the mid-ninth century who took their notion of fiscal *dabhaichean* with them as they escaped from Norse pressure. As a result, the western fiscal system of assessment was adapted to fit new circumstances in south-west Scotland until it was displaced by the merkland in the thirteenth century.⁵⁹ Oram has more recently returned to this subject to re-iterate and refine his earlier arguments. He noted that the greater concentration of *dabhach*- place-names occurred in the south-east of the Stewartry of Galloway, with a smaller concentration in Carrick. According to Oram, the locations of these place-names is proof that the *dabhach* was closely associated with arable cultivation.⁶⁰ All of this has placed researchers in an unenviable position since it means that the *dabhach* could be either arable, fiscal, or both, depending on which part of the country was being looked at and on which theory seemed to best fit the evidence.

The strongest challenge to the theory that the *dabhach* originated in Dál Riata came from D. E. G. Williams in 1996. He argued that Easson's theory was unreliable, partly because, like McKerral, he knew the *dabhach* was not found either in *Senchus Fer nAlban* or in Dál Riata.⁶¹ Williams pointed out that originally the *dabhach* was wholly Pictish in geographical distribution and so he argued that the *dabhach* represented either the imposition of a Gaelic assessment onto an older Pictish unit of land or it was something new imposed on Pictland by the Scots after the Gaelicisation of Pictland and the destruction of Dál Riata by the Norse.⁶² He did, however, agree with Easson's argument that *dabhaichean* were only found on the best low-lying arable land.⁶³ Williams then suggested that since the earliest written references to

⁵⁸ Oram, Richard D., 'Davachs and pennylands in south-west Scotland: a review of the evidence', in *Ouncelands and Pennylands*, ed. by Lindsey J. Macgregor and Barbara E. Crawford, (St Andrews: St Andrews University Printing Department, 1987), pp. 46-59, at p. 48, [hereafter: Oram, 'Davachs and pennylands'].

⁵⁹ Oram, 'Davachs and pennylands', pp. 50-53.

⁶⁰ Oram, Richard D., *The Lordship of Galloway* (Edinburgh: John Donald Ltd, 2000), pp. 234-38. During the last decade Oram (pers comm.) has decided his arguments were wrong and he is currently preparing an article to that effect.

⁶¹ Williams, 'Land assessment', 74.

⁶² Williams, 'Land assessment', 73.

⁶³ Williams, 'Land assessment', 71.

this unit of land (in the Book of Deer) date to the reign of King Máel Coluim mac Cináeda (Malcolm II, 1005-34), the *dabhach* originated sometime during the tenth or early eleventh centuries in the course of the Gaelicisation of Pictland.⁶⁴

Essentially, Williams argued that the rulers of the kingdom of Alba (the Pictish *regnum* post-c.900AD) decided to establish a system of dues and services in their kingdom, including military service, to strengthen their authority. This, according to Williams, would account for both the Gaelic name and the Pictish distribution of the *dabhach*. It would also help to explain why the *dabhach* is not found in either *Senchus Fer nAlban* or in *Dál Riata* as the latter, as far as can be ascertained, did not form part of Alba.⁶⁵ Finally, Williams explained the appearance of a cluster of *dabhach* place-names in the south-west of Scotland as a result of the expansion of royal power post-1266.⁶⁶

Williams returned to the subject of the *dabhach* in a paper published in *Northern Studies* in 2003, his thinking now clearly influenced by new theories relating to the early history of both Moray and Alba. In this article Williams argued that it was unlikely that Moray had been under the direct rule of the kings of Alba before 1130. Therefore, since *dabhaichean* occur in both Alba and Moray this commonality may represent either a borrowing of that unit by a king of Moray from the kingdom of Alba before that date or *vice versa*. Alternatively, Williams also suggested that the *dabhach* could have been extended to Moray when both Alba and Moray were ruled by King Macbethad mac Findlaích (King Macbeth, 1040-58). One final possibility may have been that the *dabhach* was only gradually introduced from Alba into Moray before the first Moravian charter attestations of the word in the final years of the twelfth century.⁶⁷ If either of these theories are worthy of consideration, it places Moray at the forefront of any investigation into land assessment in Scotland.

That same year the first doctoral thesis on Moray was completed, Moray there being defined as an amalgamation of the earldom and the bishopric, even though these two areas of lordship were not coterminous. The findings of this thesis are discussed more fully in the next chapter and the methodologies employed there underpin much of what follows in this book. Suffice it to say for the moment, this thesis uncovered a direct relationship between *dabhaichean*, parishes, and units of secular lordship across an entire province, while at the same time identifying for the first time two different types of *dabhach* in the Scottish landscape. The third discovery of note was that virtually the entire landscape of the province of Moray, amounting to perhaps one sixth of medieval Scotland, was entirely sub-divided into *dabhaichean*, and that each *dabhach* either contained or had access to all of the natural resources required to sustain communities on an annual basis.⁶⁸

One year later, Williams published a second article on land assessment in Scotland but his time relating the evidence to the silver economy of Norse Scotland. The main rationale behind this paper was to examine why ouncelands in the west and north of Scotland contained different amounts of pennylands and to see whether there was any relationship between them and the Norse Ship-levy system known as *leiðangr*. Here, Williams presented a good case that while the ouncelands of western Scotland were based upon the twenty-house unit of *Dál Riata*, those

⁶⁴ Williams, 'Land assessment', 73-76.

⁶⁵ Williams, 'Land assessment', 73-76.

⁶⁶ Williams, 'Land assessment', 49.

⁶⁷ Williams, Gareth, 'The *dabhach* Reconsidered: pre-Norse or post-Norse?', *Northern Studies*, 37 (2003), 17-31, at 26-28, [hereafter: Williams, 'The *dabhach* Reconsidered?'].

⁶⁸ Ross, 'Thesis'.

of the north were based upon a Norse duodecimal system and a unit of weight called the *ertog*, amounting to one third of an ounce. This theory would make the northern ouncelands based upon bullion weight rather than upon coinage. He further dated the establishment of the northern ounceland to the tenth century in Orkney, followed by the creation of the pennyland system there and across much of northern Scotland in the mid-eleventh century to coincide with the monetisation of Scandinavia and the establishment in Cologne of a major international coinage to a weight-standard consistent with the ounceland/pennyland system in Orkney.⁶⁹ This obviously has implications for the equivalence between the *dabhach* and six pennylands discovered by Bangor-Jones and will be discussed later.

This article was shortly followed by the publication of *Weights and Measures in Scotland*, and the authors of this tome chose to use Easson's research to underpin their writings. Rather disappointingly for such a generally well-researched piece of work, they evidently did not know of William's thesis. As a result of this omission, they are positive that the *dabhach* began life as a measure of agricultural capacity which quickly became subject to some kind of fiscal levy and that the term *dabhach* was a descriptor for the seventh-century Dalriadic twenty-house unit.⁷⁰ They then argued that the earliest *dabhaichean* were ill-defined units of arable land that had grazings and woods attached to them.⁷¹

In an attempt to sort through the historiographic muddle, the authors of *Weights and Measures in Scotland* divided Scotland into eastern and western halves before proceeding to discuss the *dabhach* in each area. They also discussed *dabhaichean* in the south-west of the country but had nothing new to add to the debate. As far as the west was concerned, the authors argued that *dabhaichean* were recorded in profusion throughout Dál Riata and nearly all of the western Isles (thus contradicting most other commentators), and that the average acreage of such a *dabhach* was 192 acres.⁷² Unfortunately, this last figure was based upon Pennant's description of the arable belonging to the Loch Broom half-*dabhach* and again ignored the remainder of the statement about the grazing and mountain ground that also formed part of the same half-*dabhach*. It might also be asked whether the imposition of modern artificial boundaries across the country could influenced their discussion since the boundaries of *dabhaichean* are unlikely to have been so neat and tidy.

In any event, the same authors argued that in both northern and eastern Scotland the *dabhach* was in use from the thirteenth century onwards. They stated that there is plenty evidence in these areas that the *dabhach* was originally a measure of agricultural capacity that acquired a set acreage of one ploughgate at some point between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries. As the population increased and as more land was brought into cultivation to support the increasing population, so by 1600 most *dabhaichean* had increased in size from one to two or even four ploughgates. Some of the arguments advanced in this section are persuasive but the overall effectiveness is ruined by some wholly inaccurate statements.⁷³

⁶⁹ Williams, Gareth, 'Land Assessment and the Silver Economy of Norse Scotland', in *Sagas, Saints and Settlements*, ed. by Gareth Williams and Paul Bibire (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 65-104, [hereafter: Williams, 'Silver Economy'].

⁷⁰ Morrison-Low, A. D., Connor, R. D., and Simpson, A. D. C., *Weights and Measures in Scotland: A European Perspective*, (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 2004), pp. 646-47, [hereafter: Morrison-Low, Connor and Simpson, *Weights and Measures*].

⁷¹ Morrison-Low, Connor and Simpson, *Weights and Measures*, pp. 647-48.

⁷² Morrison-Low, Connor and Simpson, *Weights and Measures*, pp. 650-51.

⁷³ Morrison-Low, Connor and Simpson, *Weights and Measures*, pp. 654-55.

The most recent thesis published on land assessment in Scotland appeared in 2005. In it, John Raven evaluated the written, archaeological, and landscape evidence relating to South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. This is an excellent attempt to understand land assessment over a long period of time in a specific area using inter-disciplinary research. In South Uist Raven noted that each *tír unga* (pl. *tírean unga*) or ounceland was the equivalent of both twenty pennylands and six merklands, the latter appearing to be a later imposition upon the taxed landscape. He further noted that both parishes and units of secular lordship were composed of exact numbers of *tírean unga*. Each *tír unga* ran across the landscape of the island on an east-west axis and each contained all of the natural resources required to sustain daily life.

Perhaps wisely, Raven chose not to make any attempt to create a chronological hierarchy of land assessment terms in his thesis, instead noting that while in 1309 part of a parish in south Uist was referred to as containing six and three-quarter *dabhaichean*, so a charter relating to north Uist in 1505 granted,

[...] et 60 mercatas terrarum in capite boreali de Euist, viz. davatas Scotice dictas le Terung de Yllera, le Terung de Paible, le Terung de Pablisgervy, le Terung de Bailrannald, le Terung de Holf, le terung de Watna, Scolping et Gremynis, le Terung de Wala, le Terung de Solos, 1 ablatam terrarum de Walis, 1 ablatam terrarum de Ylandgarvy, 6 denariatas terrarum de Orwansay, 2 den. de Talmertane, 2 davatas Scotice dictas le Terungis de Sanda et Borwira, et 1 den. terrarum de Gerrymore [...]⁷⁴

[...] and 60 merklands in the North head of Uist viz. *dabhaichean* in Gaelic called the *tír unga* of Yllera, the *tír unga* of Paible, the *tír unga* of Pablisgervy, the *tír unga* of Bailrannald, the *tír unga* of Holf, the *tír unga* of Watna, scolping and Gremynis, the *tír unga* of Wala, the *tír unga* of Solos, one half pennyland of Walis, one half pennyland of Ylandgarvy, 6 pennylands of Orwansay, 2 pennylands of Telmertane, 2 *dabhaichean* in Gaelic called the *tír unga* of Sanda and Borwira, and the 1 pennyland of Gerrymore [...]

Faced with the obvious interchangeability of these different terms, Raven preferred to see them as simply different linguistic terms for units of land assessment that performed identical purposes, while at the same time noting that it was not until 1498 that the exact term *tír unga* first appeared in the surviving written record. Despite uncertainty about when exactly these terms may have been employed to describe units of land assessment, Raven nonetheless was able to map the ouncelands of the Uists quite accurately, noting that some of them may once have possessed detached pendicles of resources, just like *dabhaichean* in Moray.⁷⁵

Another recent development in the historiography of the *dabhach* is the claim that they continued to be created during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Scotland, though no evidence is offered to support this assertion.⁷⁶ Perhaps a more promising line of enquiry is the recent discovery that in rural Aberdeenshire (north-east Scotland) there appears to be a close correlation between medieval parochial boundaries, Pictish symbol stones and cemetaries. According to the authors of this paper, the boundaries used to deliniate medieval parishes likely

⁷⁴ *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum in Archivis Publicis Asservatum*, ed. by John M. Thomson, 11 vols., (Edinburgh: Clark Constable, rep.1984), ii, pp. 610-11, [hereafter: *RMS*].

⁷⁵ Raven, 'Thesis', i, 102-06, 120. The maps are found in volume 2 of his thesis.

⁷⁶ Neville, Cynthia J., *Land, Law and People in Medieval Scotland* (Chippenham: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 171, [hereafter: Neville, *Land, Law and People*].

preserve elements of an earlier secular organisation.⁷⁷ However, rural Aberdeenshire is notable for its relative density of Pictish stones and trying to apply this methodology elsewhere in northern Scotland would certainly be futile.

To sum up this section, given all of these different claims and counter-claims *dabhach*-related historiography has become dominated by one group of researchers who argue that in origin the *dabhach* could belong to either the Gaels, the Picts, Picto-Gaels (whoever they were), the Moravians, or to the inhabitants of Alba. It could be either a unit of arable land, or a nominal unit of assessment, or both. It could be either one, two, or four ploughgates in extent. In fact, probably the only consensus found amongst the majority of these historians is that the name *dabhach* is closely associated with arable land and has some relation to a tub of grain, even though they cannot decide whether it was a tub of grain for sowing a fixed area of land, a tub of harvested grain from a fixed area of land, or a tub of grain produced as render from a fixed area of land. Clearly, these beliefs are wholly underpinned by illogical and flawed late nineteenth century research that was likely biased by a racial debate. In addition, any series of related arguments that require researchers to unquestioningly accept two completely undocumented and ultimately unprovable pre-1200 developments as basic premises are surely fatally flawed and perhaps the only surprise is that it has taken over 100 years for these flaws to be highlighted.

Deconstructing the historiography of the *dabhach*

Alexis Easson's 1986 thesis is the obvious starting point for this deconstruction since it is the earliest of the Scottish theses to investigate land assessment and draw all of the earlier written secondary material together. One of the most important points made by her is the theory concerning the origin of the *dabhach* in the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata. The basis for her argument seems to have been partly derived from work by John Bannerman,⁷⁸ although she went one step further when she claimed to have found evidence that directly linked a *dabhach* in eastern Scotland to the twenty-house unit of Dál Riata found in *Senchus Fer nAlban*. This theory rested on the fact that in a 1603-07 Gordon rental the *dabhach* of Shevin in Strathdearn (Moray) was listed as consisting of four *cóigeamhan* (fifths): *Cóig na Fearn* (fifth of the alder), *Cóig na Sgàlan* (fifth of the huts), *Cóig na Fionndarnaich* (possibly fifth of the rank grass), and *Cóig na Sìthe* (fifth of the fairy-hill).⁷⁹ According to Easson, this was incontrovertible proof that the four fifths, or four quarters, of the *dabhach* of Shevin were equivalent to the four five-house units that together comprised the typical twenty-house unit found in *Senchus Fer nAlban* and this discovery underpinned the entire section of her thesis that related to the origins of the *dabhach*.⁸⁰

Unfortunately for Easson, she was unaware that in 1920 the place-name scholar W. J. Watson had published a paper on the place-names of Strathdearn that listed all five *cóigeamhan*: *Cóig na Fearn*, *Cóig na Sgàlan*, *Cóig na Fionndarnaich*, *Cóig na Sìthe* and *Cóig a'Mhuilinn* (fifth of the mill).⁸¹ There could be any number of reasons why this last *còig*- was missing from the

⁷⁷ Fraser, Iain, and Halliday, Stratford, 'The Early Medieval Landscape of Donside, Aberdeenshire', in *Pictish Progress*, ed. by Stephen T. Driscoll, Jane Geddes and Mark A. Hall (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 307-34.

⁷⁸ Bannerman, *Dalriada*, p. 141.

⁷⁹ *Miscellany of the Spalding Club* iv, ed. by John Stuart, Spalding Club, 20 (Aberdeen: William Bennett, 1849), pp. 309-310.

⁸⁰ Easson, 'Thesis', 70-71.

⁸¹ Watson, William J., 'Place-Names of Strathdearn', *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 30 (1919-22), 101-21' [hereafter: Watson, 'Strathdearn']. This has been recently republished in, Watson, William J., *Scottish Place-Name Papers* (London: Steve Savage, 2002), 137-153, at 143' [hereafter: Watson, *Place-Name*

earlier Gordon rental. For example, it may have been in wadset at that time or perhaps it was *vasta* (waste - not in occupation). Whatever the case, the existence of the fifth *còig*- place-name in association with the *dabhach* of Shevin means that no connection can now be made between the 'four-fifths' of a *dabhach* in eastern Scotland and the four quarters of the twenty-house units of the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata. Accordingly, Easson's sole piece of hard evidence for her theory regarding the spread of the *dabhach* from Dál Riata to Pictland falls. At this stage the arguments advanced by both Barrow and Williams regarding the origins of the *dabhach* in either Pictland or Alba or Moray appear to be more logical than Easson's theory of Dalriadic origin.

A second major point of discussion concerns Barrow's and Easson's assertion that each *dabhach* essentially consisted of two ploughgates of arable land. This argument was based on five key points of evidence, the first of which was raised by Barrow and came from a grant to Scone Abbey in 1235 by King Alexander II.⁸² In this, the abbey was granted the lands of Meikle and Little Blair except for two and a half carucates that the king had given to the monks of Cupar. As a consequence of this grant Scone Abbey was to render the forinsec service pertaining to five *dabhaichean* of land, remitting the service due for the sixth *dabhach* of Blair because of the lands granted to Cupar.⁸³ According to Barrow, if one carucate equalled one *dabhach*, the canons of Scone got a bad deal. If, however, one carucate equalled a half-*dabhach* their treatment was not so bad.⁸⁴

There is little doubt that Barrow made a valid point, even though he was trying to artificially impose a set number of carucates on each *dabhach*. There are, however, a couple of options which would render both of his arguments invalid. First, two and a half carucates may have been the total extent of the arable in the sixth *dabhach* of Blair at that time. Second, on occasion, landowners in Scotland are known to have temporarily granted out lands for less money, goods, and services than were normally due, usually because some environmental problem or other type of calamity had befallen the tenant. A number of such cases can be found, for example, in the Gordon rentals for the lordship of Badenoch. In the rental for 1655, the six quarter *dabhaichean* of *Kinrara* and *Gortenchriey* were set in tack to a tenant for the render due from just one *dabhach*.⁸⁵ Taken out of context, and without the ancillary information that severe flooding had recently affected that part of the Spey valley destroying crops and killing livestock, it would be easy to envisage a scenario where this tenant was getting a good deal too. Such examples highlight the problems associated with trying to match a set number of ploughgates to each *dabhach*.

The second piece of evidence used by Easson (following F.W.L. Thomas) to disprove that a *dabhach* was the equivalent of one ploughgate is dated to 1458. In one source, the rental of a whole *dabhach* beyond the River Spey was stated to be eighty shillings or £4. As one bovate of this land had been devastated by war, a deduction of ten shillings had been made from the rent. Since a bovate was the equivalent of an eighth of a ploughgate, and since an eighth of the rent had been deducted, this would indicate that this *dabhach* consisted of one ploughgate. Easson, however, pointed out that Cosmo Innes had shown that normally a ploughgate was

Papers]. The place-name *Cóig a'Mhuilinn* was also noted by, Henderson, Thomas, *The Findhorn: the river of Beauty* (Edinburgh: Grant & Murray, 1932), p. 21.

⁸² Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 139.

⁸³ *Liber Ecclesie de Scon*, ed. by Cosmo Innes, Bannatyne Club 78 (Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1843), no.67, [hereafter: *Scon Liber*].

⁸⁴ Barrow, 'Rural Settlement', 139.

⁸⁵ National Archives of Scotland, GD44/51/732/51, [hereafter: NAS].

rentalled at three merks or forty shillings. Accordingly, Easson argued that in this instance the *dabhach* rated at eighty shillings must have represented two ploughgates, or 208 acres, which made it roughly consistent with Pennent's definition of the Loch Broom half-*dabhach* of ninety-six Scotch acres.⁸⁶ Such an argument only works, however, if it assumed that both the *dabhach* in question and the half-*dabhach* of Loch Broom were entirely composed of arable land. It has already been shown that this cannot have been the case with respect to the Loch Broom example. In addition, as can be found in various rentals, there were a number of *dabhaichean* beyond the Spey that never contained more than one ploughgate of arable.⁸⁷

Easson's third piece of evidence concerning the amounts of ploughgates in every *dabhach* was taken from material relating to the *dabhach* of *Kennyn Muchardyn* in Angus, first recorded in 1199. In the seventeenth century an Angus-related document gave the place-names Little Kenny, Meikle Kenny and Kinneillis which were rated as two, four and two ploughs respectively. According to Easson, Kinneillis (two ploughs) was the seventeenth century equivalent of the *dabhach* of *Kennyn Muchardyn*, and therefore it could be concluded that the *dabhach* originally consisted of two ploughs of arable land.⁸⁸ This argument will not stand interrogation. While Easson correctly followed the place-name forms across time to show how *Kennyn Muchardyn* eventually became known as *Kinnaniel*, she did not attempt to evaluate how the other two *Kenny*- place-names, which were respectively assessed at two and four ploughs, related to *Kinnaniel*. For example, *Litile Kaine*, rated at two ploughgates, could have been a detached portion of *Kinnaniel*. Given that all three *Kenny*- place-names are assessed at a total of eight ploughgates could equally suggest that this was originally a two-*dabhach* land, of which *Kennyn Muchardyn* was half, assuming that there were four ploughgates in each *dabhach* of course.

Her fourth piece of evidence in relation to this theme came from the 1603-07 collection of rentals relating to Gordon lands in the Lordship of Huntly, which was comprised properties that lay between the east coast in Moray and the west coast in Lochaber. Although a number of *dabhaichean* in this rental were rated at four ploughs, Easson suggested that this was an attempt by the earl of Huntly to extract more money from some of his tenants and that the normal rating of a *dabhach* in Badenoch was two ploughs.⁸⁹ Once again, however, her use of this evidence is very inconsistent. For example, she used the place name *Dallandache* (water meadow of the *dabhach*), which was assessed at two ploughgates,⁹⁰ as evidence that each *dabhach* equalled two ploughgates even though the place-name and other historical evidence from the same period clearly indicates that *Dallandache* was only half of a *dabhach*.⁹¹ Equally dubious was her assertion that the land of Kirkton, assessed at one ploughgate in the same rental, must have been a half-*dabhach* because the common endowment of churches in north-east Scotland allegedly was a half-*dabhach*. Admittedly, the township of *Haddoche* (half-*dabhach*) was assessed in the rental at one ploughgate but even this information cannot be trusted as the rental account merely comprised the lands in Badenoch that were still under the direct control of the Gordon family. There could, for example, easily have been another ploughgate of Haddoch that had been wadset or it may genuinely only have contained one ploughgate of arable. Thus, the equation of any of the named lands with a specific number of ploughgates cannot be taken at face value in this and other such instances.

⁸⁶ Easson, 'Thesis', 54-58.

⁸⁷ NAS, GD44/51/734/14.

⁸⁸ Easson, 'Thesis', 55.

⁸⁹ Easson, 'Thesis', 57.

⁹⁰ Easson, 'Thesis', 56.

⁹¹ NAS, GD44/51/747/3.

Easson also argued that this 1603-07 Gordon rental was important because it marked a transitional phase on their Badenoch estates, during which all *dabhaichean* were converted into a set number of ploughgates. This, according to her, was why there was an air of artificiality about the rental. It also explained to her why a number of places were still described as *dabhaichean* in the rental: they had not yet been fully ‘assimilated’ into the ploughgate rating system.⁹² It is unfortunate that Easson did not consult the original of this document during her research as it is accompanied by a number of other seventeenth century Badenoch rentals, many of which continued to list the entirety of the lordship of Badenoch in terms of *dabhaichean* and half-*dabhaichean*, rather than ploughgates, after 1600.⁹³ Accordingly, because she consulted a printed version of one Gordon rental in isolation, Easson constructed a theory which falls as soon as it is tested against other contemporary evidence from the same archive.

There is another possibility to consider when trying to equate numbers of ploughgates to individual *dabhaichean*. During the last half of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth century parliament granted the crown large sums of money to help defray expenses like royal weddings.⁹⁴ Some of these sums were apportioned according to the free rent belonging to each landholder at different rates up to forty shillings from every pound land of old extent. If Cosmo Innes was correct to argue that traditionally a ploughgate had been rentalled at the equivalent of three merks or forty shillings⁹⁵ — and Thomson offered (qualified) support for this⁹⁶ — it is easy to understand why some rentals of this period prominently listed numbers of ploughgates rather than *dabhaichean*. More importantly, this would mean that these lists of ploughgates have nothing to do with actual agricultural capacity but were instead just another method of calculating tax assessments.

Easson’s final piece of evidence in relation to the numbers of ploughgates in each *dabhach* was that the most common endowment of parish churches in northern Scotland was a half-*dabhach* and the common endowment of churches south of the Forth was one ploughgate. Since, according to her, it would be unlikely that parish churches in the north of Scotland would have been given a better endowment than those in the south of the country this meant that a half-*dabhach* was the equivalent of one ploughgate. This may be logical but it was wishful thinking. Easson herself pointed out that there were churches in medieval Scotland which possessed larger endowments, some as much as a *dabhach* of land.⁹⁷

In fact, all of Easson's theories regarding the number of ploughgates in a *dabhach* were based on evidence that could easily be interpreted very differently. None of it is conclusive and much of it is actually misleading. A good case in point can be found in Moray. To date, the earliest piece of evidence found there which unequivocally equates a *dabhach* assessment with a specific number of ploughgates is contained in a crown grant to Alexander Fraser of Lovat in 1555: [...] *terras de duabus Daltalychis extenden. ad 4 arratra alias unum dawaich*, [...].⁹⁸

⁹² Easson, ‘Thesis’, 57 and fn.67.

⁹³ The earliest stratum of rental material in the Gordon archive is dated to 1595 so it seems likely that all earlier rental material was lost when King James VI destroyed the Gordon’s chief caput of Strathbogie castle in October 1594.

⁹⁴ Sanderson, Margaret H. B., *Scottish Rural Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Edinburgh: John Donald Ltd, 1982), pp. 67-69.

⁹⁵ Innes, *Scotch Legal Antiquities*, p. 270.

⁹⁶ Cooper, *Register of Brieves*, p. 178, fn.42.

⁹⁷ Easson, ‘Thesis’, 58.

⁹⁸ *RMS*, iv, no.987.

While this evidence pre-dates the 1603-07 Gordon rental by forty-five years, it is still separated from the high-medieval period by a considerable period of time.

This issue is further complicated by the fact that there had been a fiscal re-evaluation of land during the medieval period, demonstrated by the appearance of 'old' and 'new' extents in documentation. The 'old extent' was a land assessment calculated for the purposes of taxation that dated from the reign of King Alexander III (1249-86). In 1474, probably because the 'Old Extent' had become devalued as land values changed, a law was passed so that lands could be retoured at their real worth by estimating feudal dues. This was the 'new extent'. Even so, after this date the 'Old Extent' still continued in widespread use into the seventeenth century.⁹⁹

In 1981 Dodgshon suggested that the difference between these two extents was not an actual increase in the number of land units but may instead have been the result of an increase in the acreage of those units.¹⁰⁰ There is some evidence that this was not the case and that the re-evaluation also affected the number of ploughgates (fiscal or real) in each *dabhach*. For example, a list compiled in 1634 of some ploughlands near Inverness, known from other evidence to have belonged to various *dabhaichean*, recorded that while they had usually been assessed at eight ploughgates, they were really only six ploughgates of 'old' extent.¹⁰¹ If anything, this implies that the acreage of ploughgates had decreased between the two extents, though it surely again demonstrates that the ploughgate itself could also be a unit of fiscal assessment, just like the *dabhach*, merkland, oxgang, and other named units. Interestingly, there was also one *dabhach* that never seems to have possessed any ploughgates: as part of a general landscape survey undertaken between 1770 and 1772 the inhabitants of the *dabhach* of Achorachin in Glenlivet claimed that while there were thirty-two oxgates in their *dabhach* there were no ploughgates. Instead, the thirty-two oxgates were then, and always seem to have been, divided into two blocks of twenty and twelve oxgates. So this cannot be a case of either tenant obstructiveness or tax evasion.¹⁰² Presumably, the inhabitants of this *dabhach* were assessed for part of their taxation according to either the *dabhach* or by their oxgangs or fractions thereof.

All of this suggests that although there was definitely a more widespread official effort to fiscally assess *dabhaichean* as four ploughgates during the sixteenth century across parts of Scotland, this nominal figure cannot be used as evidence for the actual number of ploughgates in each *dabhach* before the fourteenth century. Clearly, since one of the differences between 'Old' and 'New' extents involved an increase in the number of assessed ploughgates, and unless new pre-fourteenth-century material that directly links a fixed number of ploughgates with one *dabhach* is discovered, it will be impossible to ascertain what the exact figure of actual or fiscal ploughgates per *dabhach* was before the 'New' extent was introduced.

In the end this may not matter. Initial attempts to determine the exact equivalent of a Scottish *dabhach* were first made in the latter half of the nineteenth century, at the tail end of a major agricultural revolution. The suggestion that a Scottish *dabhach* was the amount of land that required a vat of grain to sow it may have seemed perfectly natural to many historians and antiquarians of the time, given the importance of arable land to improving landlords. The fact

⁹⁹ Cooper, *Register of Brieves*, p. 116 and pp. 304-05.

¹⁰⁰ Dodgshon, *Land and Society*, pp. 85-89.

¹⁰¹ Fraser-Macintosh, Charles, *Invernessiana: contributions toward A History of the Town and Parish of Inverness, from 1160 to 1599* (Inverness: Messrs. Forsyth, &c., 1875), p. 146.

¹⁰² NAS, CR8/188.

that there is no evidence for this equivalence in any prior source does not seem to have troubled too many historians in their determination to prove the arable focus of the *dabhach*.¹⁰³

There may also have been a second factor at work here. During the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries in Scotland there was a widespread debate about Celtic and Teutonic ethnicity in tandem with the formulation of socio-economic human development theories. One of the major contributors to these debates was Adam Smith who wrote about the four distinct developmental stages that mankind passed through from ignorance to knowledge. These ranged from the ‘age of hunters’ to ‘the age of commerce’. Essentially, those (like the Highlanders) perceived as being of Celtic descent were deemed by some to be noble savages who lived in a wild and untamed landscape and who still indulged in barbaric practices like transhumance. In contrast, those living in the Lowlands who practised settled agriculture were supposed to have been of industrious Teutonic descent.¹⁰⁴ In this context, it should be questioned whether Professor MacKinnon’s 1887 linkage of Highland agriculture, the *dabhach*, and the (civilised) growing of cereal crops was his own way of entering into the racial debate swirling around the alleged ethnic origins of ‘Celtic’ Highlanders and ‘Teutonic’ Picts, and perhaps an understandable reaction to some of these prejudicial issues.

Yet some of these issues lived on in historiography, however unwittingly. For example, both McKerral’s and Dodgshon’s division of *dabhaichean* into north-eastern (four ploughgates based on familiar Anglian agricultural units) and fiscal (western Highlands based on Celtic systems of measurement) may have reinforced some of these theories because such statements continue to strongly imply racial differences within a common unit of land assessment and that settled agriculture was not present in the west. More importantly, as previously suggested, neither McKerral nor Dodgshon anywhere explain how such a dichotomy might have arisen within a single unit of land assessment in a land subject to a single kingship.

Let us also look at some of the sources employed by Dodgshon. From the beginning he marshals evidence to prove that each eastern *dabhach* contained four arable ploughgates and his two main sources for this are a statement made in seventeenth century by Robert Gordon of Straloch and later eighteenth century Gordon estate maps. The author of the first of these sources was born in 1580 and educated at Marischal College in Aberdeen and in Paris. He inherited the estate of Straloch to the north-west of Aberdeen in 1608 and subsequently the estate of Pitlurg in Strathbogie in the Gordon earldom of Huntly in 1619. Since Gordon is specifically referring to *dabhaichean* in the lordship of Strathbogie in his writings it must be presumed that this information was gleaned after he acquired the Pitlurg estate (Pitlurg itself was a *dabhach*), though it is known that he never lived there. As well as being an academic, Robert Gordon was also a cartographer of note and his family was closely associated with the Gordon earls of Huntly.¹⁰⁵

This is what Gordon of Straloch has to say:

¹⁰³ A large number of *dabhach* place-names suggest activities other than agriculture. Watson, *CPNS*, 235: for example, Dochfour (*Dabhach Phùir*) *dabhach* of pasture; Gargawach (rough *dabhach*). Watson’s suggested etymology of Gargawach appears to be correct. In the Gordon muniments [cf: NAS, GD44/53/25/9/5] the place-name is given as Garbhdhaoch (*garbh-dhabhach*).

¹⁰⁴ Withers, Charles, ‘The Historical Creation of the Scottish Highlands’, in *The Manufacture of Scottish History*, ed. by Ian Donnachie and Christopher Whatley (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1992), pp. 143-56, [hereafter: Withers, ‘Historical Creation’]; Colin Kidd, ‘Teutonist Ethnology’, 45-68.

¹⁰⁵ Vance, MacLean Shona, ‘Gordon, Robert, of Straloch (1580–1661)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11076>> [Accessed 31 Dec 2011].

[...] Husbandmen eager for tillage thought from the very first that they were restricted in villages, and that when they had so many neighbours, too little provision was made for agriculture; for at first the districts were divided into village settlements. To each of these so much of arable land was allotted as could be tilled with four ploughs. These sections of lands were called in the ancient language *daachs*, which signifies village settlements [...] but when the woods had been cut down four ploughs were no longer sufficient. Wide extent of bounds was inimical to agriculture [...]¹⁰⁶

As far as the clear felling of forest and the expansion of arable around Huntly is concerned, Gordon of Straloch may well have been correct, though it would be interesting to know who his (presumably) local source was. The earldom of Huntly estates had been forfeited to the crown in the 1590s, Strathbogie Castle burnt, and the earl (and future marquis) was absent from his estates for long periods thereafter when he was either in exile or in jail.¹⁰⁷ What is unknown is the extent to which these changes to the estate of Strathbogie had taken place while the earl was physically absent and his estates forfeited. In this respect, it is likely no coincidence that the rentals associated with the lordship of Strathbogie c.1600, in contrast to the many rentals from Gordon's other widespread lands, contain virtually no references to *dabhaichean* from the core of six parishes surrounding Strathbogie Castle, instead listing every possession by a number of ploughgates.¹⁰⁸ Since the names of many of the *dabhaichean* in these parishes are now lost, the processes of woodland clearance and agricultural expansion described by Gordon of Straloch may actually have been responsible for the effective destruction of the local system of *dabhach* assessment in some parts of Strathbogie.

But no matter how trustworthy a source Gordon of Straloch may seem for the agricultural history of Strathbogie, his statement that each of the forty-eight *dabhaichean* there possessed so much arable land as could be tilled by four ploughs is directly contradicted by contemporary evidence from the same estate records but pertaining to the wider earl of Huntly lands, which stretched across Scotland from Strathbogie in the east to Lochaber in the west. In these records there are many examples of *dabhaichean* either containing or being assessed at fewer than four ploughgates, indicating that the process being described by Gordon of Straloch in Strathbogie was also a localised phenomenon which should not be used to illustrate a wider context.

Similarly, Dodgshon's use of later eighteenth century Gordon estate maps from the lordship of Strathavon as evidence that a *dabhach* was composed of four ploughlands comprising 416 acres is also problematic and disingenuous.¹⁰⁹ True, these are superb examples of estate maps made upon the cusp of a major drive towards agricultural 'improvement' and population shift, but Dodgshon nowhere states that this series of bound maps is prefaced by the phrase, 'This short description shews the extent and quality of each plow & possession in each Daugh, of cornland, open grass, & grass under wood with an exact plan of each Daugh. The hills, glens and extensive pastures [of each Daugh] could not be extended here but will all be seen on the generall plan of Strathavin.'¹¹⁰ In fact, the general plan latterly referred to in that statement

¹⁰⁶ *Geographical Collections relating to Scotland made by Walter Macfarlane*, ed. by Arthur Mitchell, 3 vols., Scottish History Society, 1st ser., 51, 52 & 53 (Edinburgh: T. & A. Constable, 1906), ii, p. 272, [hereafter: *Geog. Coll.*].

¹⁰⁷ Sizer, J. R. M., 'Gordon, George, first marquess of Huntly (1561/2–1636)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11036>> [Accessed 31 Dec 2011]

¹⁰⁸ NAS, GD44/51/747/1.

¹⁰⁹ Dodgshon, *Land and Society*, p. 75, fn77.

¹¹⁰ NAS, RHP 2488.

demonstrates exactly how miniscule these rig lands were in comparison to the other landscape elements that together comprised those *dabhaichean*.¹¹¹

More importantly, Dodgshon's division of Scottish *dabhaichean* into north-eastern (Anglian) and western (Celtic) varieties is misleading for another reason: many of the *dabhaichean* which he highlighted as being based upon Anglian units of measurements were situated in the eastern foothills of the Cairngorm mountains in an area that was still predominantly Gaelic speaking in the eighteenth century and which once had been a heartland of the *Gàidhealtachd*. This makes it increasingly difficult to insist upon the seeming differences between north-eastern and western *dabhaichean*. The difficulty then multiplies because examples of *dabhaichean* that could be theoretically classed as 'fiscal' can also be found in eastern Scotland along, for example, the north banks of the River Ness to the east of Loch Ness. In short, the wholly artificial division of *dabhaichean* into eastern and western groupings fails when the primary source evidence is examined in detail. To use Dodgshon's flawed terminology, the so-called 'Anglian' and 'Celtic' *dabhaichean* can be found inter-mixed across the whole of northern Scotland, thus suggesting that such divisions made by him are fatally misleading and only serve to further misdirect researchers.

In many respects the thesis written by Williams in 1996 formed a welcome intervention into land assessment research. Though not able to completely counter Easson's theories he nevertheless adopted a more landscape-based approach to the evidence which focused upon the (then) known spread of *dabhaichean* and how closely this was matched by the known limits of the Pictish (pre-900AD) *regnum*. While his overall thesis is convincing, some sections of it, together with some of the arguments in his subsequent paper in *Northern Studies*, are open to reinterpretation.

For example, his treatment of the source evidence is problematic as it displays inconsistency. An instance of this can be found in his discussions about the age of various units of land assessment. He argued that *dabhaichean* were probably introduced into Sutherland in the thirteenth century by the De Moravia family, since there is no evidence for them before that date, and implied the same for the western Highlands and Islands by highlighting that there is no direct evidence for *dabhaichean* there before the Treaty of Perth in 1266.¹¹² Yet, when discussing a similar lack of evidence relating to ounculands in both the Northern Isles and Caithness before the late thirteenth century, he stated that this latter lack of evidence did not argue against the absence of ounculands in those places before that date.¹¹³

But perhaps a greater flaw in this whole chain of reasoning concerns his assertion that there is no direct evidence for *dabhaichean* in the western Highlands and Islands before the Treaty of Perth. If, by implication, *daibhaichean* were imposed upon these areas by King Alexander III after 1266, why is there still no trace of them in the areas covered by the older Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata? It seems very odd, if not impossible, that the king of Scots, if he was going to impose *dabhaichean* as a means of assessment upon the western Highlands and Islands that had previously belonged to the kings of Norway, would only do so over a proportion of those selfsame lands.

Summary

¹¹¹ NAS, RHP 2489; RHP 1767.

¹¹² Williams, 'Thesis', 42 and at 69.

¹¹³ Williams, 'Thesis', 36.

It should be evident by now that most of existing *dabhach*-related discussions are highly problematic. Largely, this is predicated on the simple fact that, with the exception of the work by Bangor-Jones, Williams, Ross, and Raven, they have been primarily founded on either theoretical models or secondary printed sources. The research undertaken for this current work undermines almost all of these earlier arguments. This does not mean that this book will provide all of the answers. Instead, what it will do is to create a methodology for undertaking a 'recovery phase' in relation to finding the primary evidence pertaining to historical land assessments in Scotland.

Central to this is the suggestion that the Scottish *dabhach* originally may not have had any connection to a tub of grain (whether for sowing, reaping or render). This proposal may seem rather radical, particularly in light of the sheer volume of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature containing theories aimed at proving the opposite but the illogicality of Professor MacKinnon's work in originally associating grain with *dabhaichean* has already been highlighted. It is also the contention of this opening chapter that past debates about arable or fiscal *dabhaichean*, in combination with arguments about the numbers of ploughgates and acreages, have led researchers into a historical *cul-de-sac*. There, self-perpetuating myths have been deliberately and firmly rooted in a distantly hazy Celtic past, and from that point there is no hope of escape or for future further intellectual advances. Of course, while it is one matter to discard such treasured historiographic shibboleths as an invention of the late nineteenth and twentieth century authors, it would be wrong to do so without trying to create a new model replace it.

It is the contention of the remainder of this book that this new model should be underpinned by the landscape itself, using the approach first adopted by Bangor-Jones and subsequently utilised by both the current author and Raven, to effectively peel away the recent layers of land improvement and rediscover a very much older pattern of land division and assessment. Partly, this can be achieved by directly relating the historical evidence to the modern landscape, while simultaneously using evidence from other disciplines, like archaeology and soil science, all of which enriches the research and leads to new insights.

The district of Moray will lie at the core of this new model, mostly because that topic was where this new methodology was first employed over an extended area, and partly because it is now recognised that Moray has played a crucial role in the development of the medieval kingdom of the Scots. Once these results have been discussed, the investigation will expand to include the remainder of medieval northern Scotland, excluding the Northern Isles which did not become part of the Scottish *regnum* until the fifteenth century and so they largely fall outwith this investigation.