

# WHERE DID THE MACNACHTAN CLAN LIVE?

By Ken McNaughton

The Picts ruled northeastern Scotland from 448-843 A.D. but left little written evidence apart from a list of kings. Several were called Nechtan, including Nechtan mac Der-Ilei (son of the matriarch Derile), who ruled from 706-724, became a monk, fought for the Pictish throne and reigned again until 732. The Scottish monarchy is generally dated from Kenneth MacAlpin, a Scot from Northern Ireland who married a Pictish princess, united disparate tribes and ruled from 843 to 848.

People think the Picts are mysterious because there is so little evidence about them, but we should not be surprised. When one race conquers another it is common practice to use a wide range of weapons to destroy their memory—kill the men, rape the women, steal the children, break their former power, destroy their visible symbols and records, belittle them, humiliate them and then blame them for not meeting the conqueror’s standards. People ask, “What happened to the Picts?” Like all conquered races, they must have intermarried with the Scots and faded into the background, leaving nothing much except their DNA for us to discover today.

King Nechtan mac Der-Ilei must have had a powerful court when he ruled northeastern Scotland, but we don’t know the location of his center of power. Nor do we know what happened to his family and followers after the Scots took over. But if any Picts survived in a group, who better than the Nechtanites? That’s right. I am proposing that the most obvious modern-day descendants of the Picts are—the Macnachtans—the clan that took its name from Nechtan.

The first written evidence of the Macnachtan Clan is a charter dated 12 February 1267 from King Alexander III to Gillecríst Macnachdan and his heirs for the keeping of his castle and island of Frechelan in Loch Awe [1]. The Clan must have had considerable substance and success at that time to be awarded a royal castle. But how did it survive and prosper in the 424 years between the start of the rule of Kenneth MacAlpin in 843 A.D. and the charter from King Alexander in 1267? And where was its center of power? This latter question is one that we can now answer with some certainty.

## THE BLOOD OF THE CLANS

Genealogy and anthropology were revolutionized at the end of the 20th century by technical advances in DNA analysis and some remarkably simple logic. One of the most far-reaching assumptions was that indigenous people exhibit very similar DNA patterns to that of their ancestors in the same location. As a result of painstaking DNA sampling by researchers all around the world much information has been revealed on the whereabouts and migration of *Homo sapiens*, the source of all modern humans who emerged in Africa and populated the Earth [2].

The hunter-gatherer ancestors of the Macnachtans appear to have crossed the Red Sea into Yemen, detoured into Central Asia, doubled back across Europe to Iberia and followed the Atlantic coast until they crossed into Scotland [3]. They were part of the group in northeast Scotland that became known as Picts. It was Nechtan, king of the Picts, who apparently gave his

name to the Macnachtan Clan. But where in Scotland did the Macnachtan Clan live? This and other similar questions are being tackled by Oxford Ancestors [4] with one of their new analyses, The Blood of the Clans. I asked for this analysis to be made on the DNA sample I had already sent and got the results back in June of 2009. These confirm that I am certainly related by blood to individuals whose membership in Clan MacNaughton is undisputed.

Oxford Ancestors sent me four geographical distributions to show MacNaughton locations. The first two distributions were based on the 1881 census of the name MacNaughton (and presumably close variations). This was the earliest census to have been transposed into manageable maps and its early date makes it more likely than present-day distributions to reveal the historic origins of the name. The first distribution shows the top five locations by relative frequency, namely, the number of occurrences per 100,000 inhabitants. Oxford claims that historical origins in rural areas are more likely to be correctly located by relative frequency maps since they are less distorted by the high populations of very large towns.

Perthshire	430
Argyllshire	213
Stirlingshire	76
Fifeshire	70
Clackmannanshire	62

Perthshire was certainly an area within the kingdom of the Picts. In 1881 the relative frequency of the MacNaughton name there was twice what it was in Argyllshire. We know a lot about the MacNaughtons of Argyllshire because of the charter of 1267 [1], the three MacNaughton castles, and the copious writings of the dominant Campbells, who had the luxury of time to write and often included information about their MacNaughton neighbors. So we tend to read more about the MacNaughtons of Argyllshire than those in Perthshire. Perthshire is plumb in the middle of Scotland (No. 24 in Fig.1), Argyll is immediately due west (No. 3), Stirlingshire is due south (No. 30), and Fife (No. 13) and Clackmannanshire (No. 9) are south-east. So although Nechtan and the Picts ruled northeast Scotland 448 to 843 A.D., it seems highly likely that the historic origins of the MacNaughton Clan lie in Perthshire and the lands immediately to the west and south to south-east.

The top five locations of the MacNaughton name in the 1881 census by absolute numbers do not displace Perthshire as the primary location. They do however reshuffle the next four.

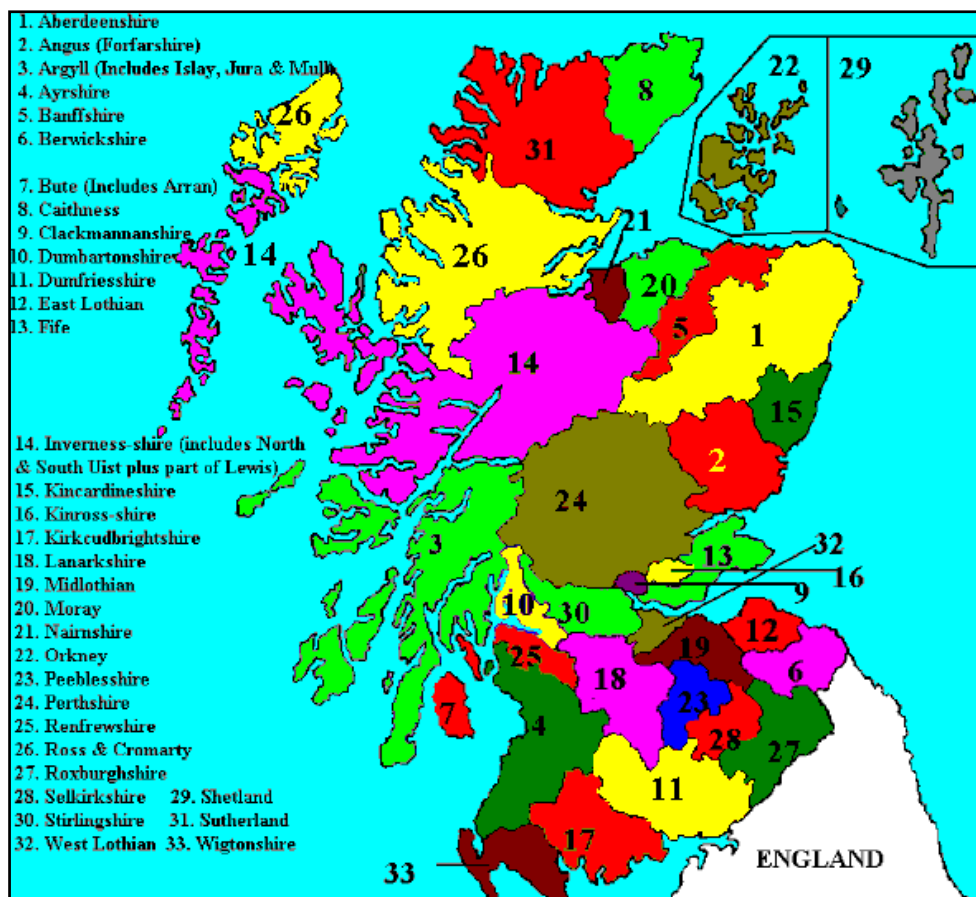
Perthshire	561
Lanarkshire	398
Argyllshire	173
Midlothian	170
Angus	128
All Britain total	2,370

Lanarkshire (No. 18) is immediately south of Stirlingshire. Midlothian (No. 19), which includes the large population center of Edinburgh, is east of Lanarkshire, and Angus (No. 2) is east-north-east of Perthshire. The total number of MacNaughtons in the 1881 census for all of Britain,

including England, was 2,370, which means there were only 940 not included in these top five locations.

Figure 1. County map of Scotland, courtesy of The Scots Family, Edinburgh ([www.scotsfamily.com](http://www.scotsfamily.com))

So far this information from Oxford Ancestors has only discussed the distribution of the MacNaughton name. But what about the daughters of the clan with other surnames, and the sept who settled on clan lands or came under the protection of the Chief? Oxford tells me “the genetic results show that you certainly are related by blood to individuals whose clan membership is undisputed.” Although Oxford



has not related exactly how this was determined, it is clear that they are confident they have a good marker. They sent a brief account of the clan, which while not revealing any information that would be new to students of our history, was nevertheless quite accurate.

Oxford is building a database of this MacNaughton marker in current-day Britain and the distribution of those who carry it is slightly different from the distribution of those who have retained the name MacNaughton. The top five locations by frequency per 100,000 of the marker as of June 2009 are:

Nairn	101
Argyll	33
Perth	15
Inverness	14
Midlothian	7

Nairn (No. 21) is quite north of Perthshire but well within the former Pictish kingdom. Inverness (No. 14) is immediately northwest of Perthshire. The top five locations of the clan marker by absolute numbers are shown below.

Midlothian	27
Argyll	27
Perth	20
Angus	17
Inverness	12
All Britain total	174

It seems the MacNaughtons were not only one of the oldest clans in the Highlands, they occupied the very geographic center of Scotland in Perthshire, spilling over to the west, south, southeast, north, northwest and northeast. Argyll was dominated by the Norse until they were defeated by King Alexander III in 1266. It is possible that Alexander needed the Macnachtans to help occupy and defend his newly acquired territories and that the Macnachtans were lured out of their Perthshire home to new lands between Loch Awe and Loch Fyne. Duncan McNaughton [5] however suggests the Macnachtan leaders may have been transferred to Loch Awe closer to royal supervision and were weakened by being divorced from their traditional lands. The truth is—we don't really know why they moved. Between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the seat of Macnachtan power lay in Argyll, but it seems most likely that, between 500 A.D and the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the center of Macnachtan influence lay in Perthshire.

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