

## The silent goddess Tà

### The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

I would like to devote this article to resurrecting the memory of a forgotten Highland saint whose feast-day (it will have been the day of his death) seems to have been at this time of year.

The church at Abergairn on Deeside, in the Aberdeenshire Highlands, was known as *Cill Mo Thatha*, and a fair, *Féill Mo Thatha*, was held there every 13 January. Dedications to him are well and truly scattered. He also gave his name to *Cill Mo Thatha* (Kilmaha) on Lochaweside in Argyll, *Baile Mo Thatha* (Balmaha) on Loch Lomond, the nearby St Maha's Well, and *Loch Mo Thathaig* (Loch Mahaik) in the Braes of Doune east of Callander in Perthshire. Finally there is *Tobar Tà* or *Tobar Tatha*, St Tatha's Well at Kilchrist in Strath, Skye.

"St Tà" has a neat ring to it, so that is what I will call him. People were very fond of their favourite saints, and developed a close relationship to them in prayer: that is why his name developed into *Mo Thatha* ('My Tà') and even *Mo Thathag* ('My Little Tà') as in *Loch Mo Thathaig* ('My Little Tà's Loch'). I suppose we are doing the same sort of thing in Gaelic today whenever we say *a m' fheudail* for 'darling' (literally 'O my little treasure').

Who was St Tà and what does his name mean?

The earliest possible form of the name is *Tovios* and it means 'the Silent One'. That makes it arguably the same name in origin as the river Tay, a point to which I will return later. From *Tovios* came *Tóe*, which in Scotland became *Tatha* or *Tà*, and in Ireland *Tua*, with a genitive case *Tuae*. It is this later and more Irish form of the name that we seem to have in Dalmahoy near Edinburgh, famous nowadays for its golf course. It is *Dail Mo Thuae*, 'my Tua's meadow' as Watson puts it in his 'History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland'.

Four saints called Tua were mentioned in Irish sources. We only have a feast-day for one of them, Tua or Ultan of Tech Tuae, 22 December, so all we can say is that St Tà of the Highlands, 13 January, must have been one of the other three. His name is older than that of St Tua of Dalmahoy, so his cult must have arrived sooner.

Another interesting thing about our saint is that he was also referred to as St Mungo. Now this name will ring a bell with many readers because of course Mungo (properly known as Kentigern) is the patron saint of the city of Glasgow. Embarrassingly for Glaswegians, hardly anything is known for sure about St Kentigern, and he probably didn't have much to do with Glasgow. In fact the late Professor Jackson referred to him as 'the cuckoo in the nest' among the Celtic saints, because the author of his "biography", Jocelyn of Furness, lived about 1200 AD, six centuries later than he did, and pieced it together from whatever stories came to hand. It's mainly a work of fiction.

The 'real' St Kentigern was a Welsh-speaking saint of the kingdom of Strathclyde in the seventh century AD. His feast-day was 13 or 14 January. His dedications are mainly in the southern part of the kingdom, what is now Dumfriesshire and Cumbria. Edwin Towill, the author of 'The Saints of Scotland', remarks that 'no district in Scotland holds Kentigern in greater veneration than does the English Lake District'. In due course the kingdom of Strathclyde turned into a diocese, and by the thirteenth century there was an urgent need to strengthen it by establishing a legend that would unite its cathedral at Glasgow with its remotest parts. From faraway Furness, Jocelyn obliged.

St Kentigern's two names are Welsh. Watson explains 'Kentigern' as from *cintu-tigernos* ('first lord'), or possibly from *cuno-tigernos* ('hound-lord'). 'Mungo' is more of a puzzle. Jocelyn explains it in Latin as *carissimus amicus*, that is, 'very dear friend', apparently as if from Welsh *mwyn* ('kind, dear') and *cu* ('dear, amiable'). It's reminiscent of the name 'Glasgow' itself, *Glaschu*, which is popularly thought to mean 'the dear green place' but is more likely to represent *glas-cau* 'green hollow'. Says Watson: "The formation is not clear to me."

What does seem clear is that when Jocelyn places Kentigern's birth in East Lothian, and shows him being fostered by St Serf (whose cult stretches from the Forth Valley to the Perthshire Highlands, at the southern edge of Pictland), he is trying to legitimise the political influence of the diocese of Glasgow in those areas.

This is where St Tà comes in. Here we have a Gaelic saint from before Kentigern's time, whose dedications range widely from Loch Lomondside (in Strathclyde) through Argyll and Perthshire to Aberdeenshire and out to Skye. His feast-day (at least in Glengairn) appears to have been 13 January, the same as Kentigern. And at some stage he took on Kentigern's Welsh nickname, Mungo. What is going on?

In answering this it would help to note exactly *where* St Tà was known as St Mungo. Of the five areas with which Tà is associated (Loch Awe, Loch Lomond, Perthshire, Aberdeenshire, Skye) his nickname occurs in two only – Perthshire and Aberdeenshire. In Aberdeenshire the old church of Kinnoir, now included in Huntly parish, is dedicated to St Mungo. Nearby are St Mungo's hill and well. In Perthshire is a St Mungo's Chapel at Auchterarder and a St Mungo's Well in Gleneagles (whose name is of course *Gleann na h-Eaglaise*, the Church Glen). And the name Mungo (*Munga* in Gaelic) remained popular in Perthshire for a long time, especially among the Campbells of Lawers.

The Perthshire instances are particularly intriguing. Auchterarder and Gleneagles bring us into the heart of the cult area of St Serf. And the Lawers connection is very odd, because the Campbells of Lawers lived on Loch Tay. *Loch Tatha*. Yes, *Loch Tóe*. The Silent Loch.

There is a very persistent and well-known legend that connects Lawers with the creation of Loch Tay. What is now the loch was once a green and pleasant valley, goes the story. Up on Ben Lawers was a well of pure water from which issued a stream (presumably *Allt Labhair*, the Lawers Burn). It was the duty of a particular dairymaid to close the lid on the well every evening and open it every morning. She had a lover, however, and one evening when he came to visit her at the shieling on Ben Lawers she forgot to seal up the well. All night the water flowed out of the mountain and in the morning when the pair woke up and looked where the valley used to be, all they could see was water. *Loch atà!* says she. "It's a loch!" Its name has been *Loch Tà* or *Loch Tatha* ever since.

I would add: if that well on Ben Lawers ever had a name, which it assuredly did, it would have been either *Tobar Tà* or *Tobar Labhair*. And what do those names mean, exactly? Well, *Tà*, as we have seen, means silent or quiet. And *Labhair* means loud or noisy!

I repeat: what is going on? One possibility is that St Tà, the Silent One, is not in origin an Irish saint at all but the spirit of Loch Tay. A female, presumably, personified in the story by the dairymaid. By this scenario, there could

have been a cult of Tà anywhere (or everywhere) down the course of the river from Loch Tay to Dundee. Having thus become an important saint, her cult could have spread south to meet that of St Serf, west to Loch Lomond and Argyll, north to Aberdeenshire, and even out to Skye.

The next question is, how on earth did St Tà (whether male or female) turn into St Mungo? I think this would have happened late in the Middle Ages. The power of the diocese of Glasgow had brought fame and glory to St Kentigern and his nickname Mungo; Jocelyn had put St Mungo and St Serf in the same frame; in Lowland Perthshire and Aberdeenshire, where the Gaelic language was losing its grip, Mungo must have seemed like a convenient anglicisation for Mo Thatha. (In the same way, St Ma' Ruibhe of Applecross was called St Rufus in places like Crail.) The final stage in the process was Kentigern's feast-day replacing that of St Tà.

Alternatively, if St Tà's feast-day was already 13 January, the change of names scarcely needs to be explained. It would have happened almost automatically.

Now for the most interesting puzzle of all, especially if you live in Skye. In his book 'Strath: In Isle of Skye', published in 1913, the Rev. Donald Lamont cited this traditional rhyme about the Well of Ta at Cill-a-Chrò in Strath, ascribed to the Brahan Seer:

*Tobar sin is Tobar Tà,  
Tobar aig an cuirear blàr,  
Marbhar Torcul nan trì Torcuil  
Air là fliuch aig Tobar Tà.*

He translated it quite neatly in rhyme, like this:

*This same fountain Tobar Ta  
A bloody battle yet shall stain,  
When Torcul of the Torculs three  
Shall on a rainy day be slain.*

In a paper on the MacLeods of Lewis read to the Gaelic Society of Inverness in 1979, the late Rev. William Matheson pointed out that the name Torcul is associated with the MacLeods of Lewis and that such prophecies can often be assumed to have been made after the event. He suggested that this one referred to the death of Torcul who was the third Torcul of the Lewis line. His sister had married Lachlan MacKinnon of Strath, and he may have met his death in MacKinnon territory through having come to Skye for refuge or aid.

In 'Superstitions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland', published in 1900, the Rev. John Gregorson Campbell (an Argyll man) noted the 'Torcul' variation but gave the basic rhyme like this:

*Tobar Tàth sin, 's Tobar Tàth,  
Tobar aig an cuirear blàr,  
'S bidh cnàmhean nam fear fàs  
Air tràigh bhàn Laorais  
'S marbhar Lachunn nan trì Lachunn  
Gu moch, moch, aig tobar Tàth.*

Confirming that it refers to the Well of Ta at Cill-a-Chrò in Strath, he translated it like this: "Thou well of Ta, and well of Ta, / Well where battle shall be fought, / And the bones of growing men / Will strew the white beach of Laoras; / And Lachlan of the three Lachlans be slain / Early, early, at the well of Ta."

I think we can improve on this a little. I would make it: "That Well of Tà, and Well of Tà, / Well where battle will be fought, / And the hermits' bones will be / On the white beach of Liveras / And the third of three Lachlans will be slain / Early, early, at the well of Tà."

Naturally I would be glad to hear from any reader with local knowledge. Was a battle ever fought at Tobar Tà? Can Lachann mac Lachainn mhic Lachainn be identified? Presumably he was a MacKinnon.

As for the hermits' bones on the beach at Liveras, Dwelly gives *fear-fàsaich* as 'an ascetic', and I think *fear-fàs* is the same word. I see from Lamont's book that in a field at Liveras now known as *Pàirce nan Laogh* there was an ancient burying-ground and that a rock on the shore called *Creagan an Teampaill*, 'the Temple Rock', was blasted to make way for the marble railway a few years before 1913. Nicolson's 'History of Skye' says that when a chambered cairn at Liveras was opened in 1832 'in its burial chamber were found a few stone implements, and some human bones'.

Perhaps these people worshipped the silent goddess Tà long, long before the good saint Ma' Ruibhe stepped ashore at Ashig.

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