

#### 4. HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

The wider history of Tarbert and its castle has been previously outlined by Dugald Mitchell (this later summarised by Ian MacIntyre) (Mitchell 1886; MacIntyre & Smith 1974), while an outline of the historical background to the castle has been presented by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) in their *Inventory of Argyll, volume 1, Kintyre* and within the *Origines parochiales Scotiae* (Innes 1854, 32–8; RCAHMS 1971: no. 316, 182–4). Articles about the castle have also appeared in editions of the *Kist* (Campbell 1972; 1987; Clerk 2002). It is probably beyond the remit of an essentially archaeological article to fully present the history and chronology of Tarbert Castle although the intention is for such an account to appear online via the Tarbert Castle Trust website. As such only a brief history of the castle is given below.

It has been suggested that the site of Tarbert Castle can be identified with the *Tairpert Boiter* mentioned twice in the 8th century Annals of Ulster, named alongside Dunaverty (*Aberte*, Canmore ID [38302](#)), Dunadd (*Dun Att*, Canmore ID [39564](#)), and Dunollie (*Dun Ollaigh*, Canmore ID [23027](#)) (Bannerman 2016: 16). Excavations at both Dunollie and Dunadd have demonstrated that their mentions in the annals correspond with occupation phases uncovered at both sites (Alcock & Alcock 1988; Lane & Campbell 2001). During the 8th century, Dunaverty and Dunadd along with *Tairpert Boiter* were likely controlled by the Cenél nGabráin, while Dunollie was a stronghold of the Cenél Loairn. Within Scottish Dalriata these two kindreds were perhaps the two most prominent during this time and conflict between them may have resulted in the annal entries. Both entries record the burning of a fort at Tarbert, in 712, ‘*Combusti(o) Tairpert Boiter*’ (The burning of Tairpert Boiter) and in 731 ‘*Combustio Tairpert Boitir apud Dunghal*’ (The burning of Tairpert Boitir by Dúngal) (*AU* 712; *AU* 731.4). The 712 entry does not mention who actually burnt ‘*Tairpert Boiter*’ although a likely candidate is Selbach Mac Ferchair of Cenél Loairn, who also besieged Dunaverty in the same year ‘*Obsesio Aberte apud Selbachum*’ (The siege of Aberte by Selbach) (*AU* 712.5). The second entry

refers to Selbach’s son Dúngal leader of Cenél Loairn possibly leading a campaign against the Cenél nGabráin whose leader was Eochaid at this time (Bannerman 2016: 109, 113).

After its mention in the Irish Annals Tarbert is seldom mentioned in extant historical records until the 11th century when it appears under another name in the *Orkenyinga saga* relating to the expedition by King Magnús Óláfsson (Magnus Barelegs) of Norway during his invasion of the Hebrides and Kintyre in 1098. Prior to this who had political control over the Kintyre Peninsula and Knapdale *vis-à-vis* the Kingdom of the Isles is not at all certain and the story of Magnús is regarded by some scholars as suspect given that the account dates to the 13th century when tensions between the Scottish and Norse crowns over the Hebrides was at their height and the Scottish king referred to in the account was Malcolm and not Edgar as it should have been at this time. Despite this, the existence of several accounts of Magnús’s expedition suggests that even if the tale of Magnús drawing his boat over the isthmus is apocryphal his expedition to the *Suðreyjar* did take place with Magnús later making peace with King Malcolm, this later known as the ‘Treaty of Tarbert’ (Anderson 1922: 113; Woolf 2004: 101). The sagas use the word *eið* (*Satirismula eið*) to describe the Tarbert isthmus, a word that has been noted elsewhere in medieval Norway to also delineate portages. It has also been argued that these portages were considered as part of the navigable sea and not part of the land, which might make sense of Magnús’s claim that Kintyre was indeed an island (McCullough 2000: 23).

Tarbert next gains a mention in historical sources when Donald MacGilchrist is mentioned as Lord of Tarbert (*Douenaldus Makgilcriste dominus de Tarbard*) in a charter of 1250. Donald MacGilchrist as Thacker and others have suggested may have been a brother of Gillescop and Eoghan (*Eugenius*) MacGilchrist who were granted large estates in Glassary and Cowal by Alexander II in 1240 (Innes 1832: 157; MacPhail 1916: 121; Thacker 2017). The MacGilchrist kindred were dynastically connected to other important landed families in what is now mid Argyll and Cowal, that included Clann Suibhne, who were likely the major force in Knapdale up until the middle of the 13th century with their lordship based on the two strongholds

of Castle Sween, built c1200, and Skipness Castle (Canmore ID [39798](#)), likely built in the early decades of the 13th century (Thacker 2022). By the early 1260s, there appears to be a displacement of the Mac Suibhne kindred from Knapdale, by the Stewarts under Walter ‘Balloch’ earl of Menteith, when in 1262 there was a transfer of title of Skipness Castle from Dugall Mac Suibhne to Walter Stewart (Innes 1832: 120–2; Graham & Collingwood 1923). The Menteith Stewart’s appeared to maintain this position in Knapdale up until King John’s ordinances of 1293 for establishing sheriffdoms in the west when Knapdale is listed as being under the control of the earl of Menteith (*comitis de Menteth de knapdal*) (Thomson & Innes 1814: 447b).

It is during the reign of Robert I (1306–1329) that Tarbert itself next comes into view when in 1315 the king received a charter resignation at Tarbert from John of Glassary at Tarbert next to Loch Fyne (*apud Tarbart iuxta Louchfyne*), while in the same year according to Barbour in ‘*The Bruce*’ the Scottish king had his boats drawn across the Tarbert isthmus (Duncan 1988: 69; 2007: 566–7). Tarbert Castle crucially earns its first mention in extant historical documents within the earliest extant Scottish exchequer roll listing the work undertaken at the castle between 1325 and 1326 submitted by its then Constable John de Lany (Stuart & Burnett 1878: 50–5). Between 1327 and 1329, Tarbert and its castle appear fairly regularly in the exchequer rolls with one appearance in 1330 (Stuart & Burnett 1878: 52–8, 69, 118, 127, 135, 136, 153, 175, 184, 187–9, 191, 196, 201, 207, 213, 223, 237, 239, 287). From then Tarbert Castle disappears from view until it enters the records again during the reign of James IV when, between 1494 and 1499, the king personally led military campaigns to the Western Isles. In July 1494, James summoned a host consisting of ‘the Lords of the Westland, Southland, and Eastland, to the meeting of the King at the Tarbert’ and during his visit to Tarbert Castle the king ordered the repair or the ‘*biggin*’ of the castle, this, and its provisioning can be gleaned from various exchequer accounts (Dickson 1877: 215, 223, 235, 237, 244; Burnett 1887: 407, 451, 452, 477, 478). On his visit to Tarbert in 1499, James IV made Archibald Campbell, Earl of Argyll, constable of the castle (Livingstone 1908: 413, 58). Five years later, in 1504, King James made Archibald

Campbell his Royal Lieutenant in Argyll and the following year granted him the ‘offices of justiciary and sheriffship, crownary and chamberlainry of the lands and lordship of Knapdale and Kintyre, and Captain of the House and fortalice of Tarbet when it shal be built...’ (*RCHM* 1874: 239, 485). The castle is thereafter mentioned in a series of crown charters, granting lands in Knapdale including the keeping of the castle to Archibald Campbell’s heirs and successors (Paul 1883: 348, 78–9; 2306, 527; 2814, 654; Thomson 1886: 2017, 525; 1888: 25, 9; 1890: 265, 97; *RCHM* 1874: 243, 485). During the 17th and 18th centuries, the castle enters the records as having been garrisoned in times of strife, although, given the troubled history of the region in this period the few mentions it does have is perhaps an under representation of the actual case. This is also a period where the MacAlisters (of Tarbert) become hereditary constables of Tarbert Castle under the Campbells. The castle appears to have been used as a place of imprisonment during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (*RPS*: A1662/5/1). During the Cromwellian campaign into Scotland in 1652, the castle was garrisoned by some of Cromwell’s troops where they were famously attacked by the locals (Whitlocke 1853: 451; MacKinnon 1883: 54; Firth 1895: 362, 366; Brown 1910: 2–3). During the rebellion of the Earl of Argyll in 1685, the castle was garrisoned by government troops under the Marquess of Atholl and Patrick Stewart of Ballechin (Murray 1908: 201, 205–6). A few years later, in 1689, a government-backed Campbell militia was stationed at Tarbert Castle in readiness to counter the threat of a Jacobite invasion and similarly in 1745 the troops of the Earl of Loudoun, forming part of the Argyll Militia, were stationed at Tarbert (*NAS*: GD 14/22; GD 14/112; MacPherson 1775: 358). Almost two decades later it appears that the castle had fallen into disrepair when in 1762 the Earl of Argyll sued the creditors of the MacAlisters of Tarbert for having failed to fulfil the conditions stipulated in their fief of Tarbert Castle (Mitchell 1886: 80–1). No repairs to the castle appear to have been undertaken after this period and the castle subsequently fell into further disrepair.

The suggestion that the castle at Tarbert dates to before the early 14th century appears to have been made initially by MacGibbon and Ross in the late 19th century in their five-volume *Castellated*

and *Domestic Architecture of Scotland* (MacGibbon & Ross 1887). MacGibbon and Ross proposed three major phases of construction at Tarbert, the first phase consisting of the construction of a small sub-square enclosure 'Castle' (the Inner Bailey at Tarbert) situated on the summit of the site. They ascribed this to their 13th-century 'First Period –1200-1300' of Scottish castle construction pointing out that Tarbert in terms of plan and size had a 'strong resemblance to Kinclaven Castle' (Canmore ID [28498](#)) in Perthshire and speculated that Tarbert Castle was one of the royal fortresses handed over to Edward I by John Balliol, after Edward placed him on the throne in 1292. The second phase of construction at Tarbert involved the construction of large irregularly shaped 'Lower Courtyard' (the Outer Bailey) attached to the earlier smaller primary enclosure with drum towers adjacent to a probable entranceway in the north-east with two further mural towers projecting from the south-west curtain wall. They ascribed this phase to the early 14th century based on a surviving account of John de Lany, the castle's constable, in the Scottish Crown's Exchequer Rolls detailing various 'additions and repairs' undertaken at Tarbert Castle in 1325/6 during the reign of Robert I (Stuart & Burnett 1878: 52–8). The third phase comprised the construction of a four-storey 'Keep' or Tower House, which straddled the south-east curtain wall of the larger enclosure. This construction was ascribed to the late 15th or early 16th century on the basis of the general masonry style and various architectural details and underlined by the above-mentioned historical account of 1494 that tells of the '*biggin*' of the castle during King James IV's expedition into the Western Isles, although there is no information on what was actually built or repaired.

A detailed drawn survey of the castle fabric was undertaken in 1966 by RCAHMS, the results appearing in their above-mentioned *Inventory of Argyll, Kintyre* published in 1971 (RCHAMS 1971: no. 316, 179–84). This produced a more detailed plan and description of the castle site and largely agreed with MacGibbon and Ross's proposed development of the castle, although they now identified the three phases of construction as the Inner Bailey followed by the Outer Bailey and lastly the Tower House. Also, in 1971, to complement this work, John Dunbar the lead architectural

investigator of the RCAHMS at the time and Archie Duncan who had recently been appointed as a Commissioner, published a joint article '*Tarbert Castle: a contribution to the history of Argyll*' in the *Scottish Historical Review* that sought to amplify and underpin their analysis of medieval Argyll and went beyond the official remit of the *Inventory*. In their article Dunbar and Duncan (1971) described Tarbert Castle as '...three distinct units...' that appear '...to be the outcome of a separate period of building activity' suggesting the Inner Bailey could be identified as belonging to a group of early 'simple rectangular castles of enclosure' characterised by a 'substantial curtain-wall of stone, pierced with few openings, enclosing an oblong or square courtyard around which there were ranged lean-to buildings of stone or timber'. While they acknowledged that closely datable features were 'conspicuously absent' from the remaining or visible fabric of the castle, they did state that '...it is to be argued here on the basis architectural evidence that... Tarbert was built before the middle of the thirteenth century' based on the similarity of the ground plan of the Inner Bailey at Tarbert to the royal sites of Kinclaven and Kincardine Castle (Canmore ID [36061](#)), suggesting all three were the works of either Alexander II or Alexander III (Dunbar & Duncan 1971). They framed the construction and strategic importance of Tarbert Castle within 13th century attempts by the Scottish Crown to control its western seaboard and the Western Isles suggesting the building of the castle was associated with a documented invasion of Argyll and the Isles by King Alexander II in 1221–1222, against Ruaidhri Mac Raonaill, great grandson of Somerled (Dunbar & Duncan 1971: 2–3; Oram 2012: 79–81).

More recently and working in collaboration with the present project an important programme of buildings analysis and materials sampling was undertaken at Tarbert Castle by Dr Mark Thacker under the aegis of the Scottish Medieval Castles and Chapels C14 Project (SMCCCP). The SMCCCP has previously examined the chronology of the fabric of several castles in Argyll, including Castle Sween (Canmore ID [39028](#)), Fincharn Castle (Canmore ID [22777](#)), Aros Castle (Canmore ID [22272](#)), and Auchadun (Canmore ID [23018](#)). Thacker's work also examines the families and lordships that were associated with the castles' construction (Thacker

2017; 2020a; 2020b; 2021). Building on this, the results of Thacker's programme of work at Tarbert Castle has recently appeared in a complementary publication, which examined the development and construction of the castle and its place within the lordships that developed in Knapdale in the 13th–14th century. The results of this work have a crucial bearing on the conclusions reached in this paper and these are discussed in Section 6.2 (Thacker 2022).

Like the castle, the first mention of the Burgh of Tarbert is within an exchequer roll, this time dating to 1328, which lists the expense of 7 shillings and 8 pence to produce a cocket (stamp seal) for the burgh '*Et pro factura unius cokete ad burgum*

*de Tarbard*' (Stuart & Burnett 1878: 118). This entry suggests that the Burgh was a creation of the regime of Robert I and was very probably based around his new castle although the exact location of the burgh remained unclear. Dunbar and Duncan state that it 'probably occupied the flat-topped ridge immediately to the southwest of the castle...' and '...there may be seen traces of buildings, bounded by a rock-lined ditch...' (Dunbar & Duncan 1971: 15–6). The Royal Commission saw no reason to question this interpretation and the area of the presumed medieval burgh was scheduled in 1975 (SM 3410) while the castle fabric remains were scheduled earlier in 1935 (SM 276).