

Clan MacAlpine

Dr Bruce Durie

Shennachie to the Chief of Durie, Honorary Fellow, University of Strathclyde

gen@brucdurie.co.uk

Arms: The Lord Lyon Court has granted a Family Convention to choose a Representer, who may become Chief of Name and Arms. Presently, there are eight MacAlpine armigers.

- **Crest/Badge:** As there is no Chief with Arms, there is no official Crest Badge. The one usually given is a boar's head erased within a royal or antique crown. Sir Thomas Innes of Learney, a previous Lord Lyon King of Arms, in "*The Scottish Tartans*" refers to the claim that this Royal Clan is the most ancient in the Highlands, states that it is Celtic and that 25 generations of the Kings of Scotland claim to be of MacAlpine lineage. He also says that the ancient crest was a boar's head.



- **Gaelic Name:** MacAilpein (Son of Alpin)
- **Motto:** Cuimhnich Bàs Ailpein (Remember the Death of Alpin)
- **Plant Badge:** Giuthas (Scots Pine)
- **Origin of Tartan:** recorded prior to the launch of The Scottish Register of Tartans. The first documentation of a tartan is in *The Clans, Sept and Regiments of the Scottish Highlands* (1908) by Frank Adam, and is similar to the hunting MacLean, but for the yellow lines. Other tartans connected with Siol Alpin Clans are predominantly red.
- **Lands:** Dunstaffnage in Argyll, near Oban. Other areas under MacAlpine control included the Royal Palace at Forteviot, where King Kenneth moved his capital after subjugating the Picts and because of increasing Viking raids in Argyll. There is a sizeable cluster of MacAlpin(e)s around Kilmartin

It seems strange that a surname apparently descended from Alpin, father of Kenneth MacAlpin (Cináed mac Ailpín, *Coinneach mac Ailpein*) has never had a Chief of Names and Arms. The reality is that there are no connected genealogies back to Alpin, despite claims of seven established Clans to descend from him (Clan Grant, Clan Gregor, Clan MacAulay, Clan Macfie, Clan Mackinnon, Clan Macnab, and Clan MacQuarrie, collectively called the *Siol Alpin*).

The historical Alpin mac Echdach may refer to two different persons, the first a presumed king of Dál Riata in the late 730s, descended from Fergus Mór mac Eirc; the second the father of Kenneth MacAlpin. Most modern king-lists start with Kenneth I (810–13 February 858), King of the Picts, rather than the first King of Scots as the national mythology now makes him. The name Alpin is likely Pictish one, possibly derived from the Anglo-Saxon name Ælfwine. The patronymic Mac Echdach indicates son of Eochaid or Eochu.

Sadly, Alpin is not listed in the 11th Century *Duan Albanach* (*Song of the Scots*) or the various Irish *Annals*, and there is no real evidence that he was a king in Dál Riata or that his father was Eochaid mac Áeda Find, who may be spurious in any case. In any case, the MacAlpine name is so ancient and will have arisen when the clan system was still developing.

We know practically nothing of the real history of Cináed mac Ailpín (in Gaelic *Coinneach mac Ailpein*, commonly known as Kenneth MacAlpin). Most modern king lists start with him as Kenneth I (810–13 February 858) and while he was certainly king of the Picts, the national mythology that makes him first king of Scots is less historically certain. However, it is from this that his posthumous nickname arises - *An Ferbasach*, "The Conqueror".

Mediaeval lists of early kings were mostly compiled much later, are usually not consistent with each other and do not stand up to modern historical scrutiny. It was 100 years later that the *Chronicle of the Kings of Alba* was compiled, including the reference to Kenneth I:

So Kinadius son of Alpinus, first of the Scots, ruled this Pictland prosperously for 16 years. Pictland was named after the Picts, whom, as we have said, Kinadius destroyed. ... Two years before he came to Pictland, he had received the kingdom of Dál Riata.

This telling has Kenneth “destroying” the Picts, as the Gael king of the area encompassing more or less what is now Argyll (*Oir-Ghàidheal*, the land of the “eastern Gaels”) and Lochaber in Scotland, and Co. Antrim in Ulster (the area around Belfast). Other sources say Kenneth took the kingship there ca.840, after a catastrophic defeat of the Pictish army by Danes. The well-worn tale of how Kenneth’s father had been murdered by the Picts, and how Kenneth avenged him by calling the Pictish kings together for a dinner and slaughtering them, was recognised as early as the 1570s as being merely a later retelling of a story invented by Geoffrey of Monmouth’s in the 12th Century, regarding Saxon treachery at a feast.

Historians now consider Kenneth I to be the fifth last of the Pictish kings rather than the first Scot (Gael) king, and there is no real evidence that he was a Scot who inherited the throne of Pictland through his mother by Pictish matrilineal succession. In any case, the Picts were neither “destroyed” nor “disappeared” but merely merged with the Scoto-Gaelic culture, which, unlike the Picts, had writing. The union of Pict and Gaels strengthened in the face of increased Norse settlement of Shetland, Orkney, Caithness, Sutherland, the Western Isles, the Isle of Man and part of Ross, which threatened and weakened the links with Ireland as the Norse controlled the western sea-ways.

Kenneth died not in battle but from a cancer on 13 February 858 at the palace of *Cinnbelachoir*, possibly near Scone or Forteviot. He was reported as King of the Picts, not King of Alba, a title not used until Kenneth’s grandsons, Donald II (Domnall mac Causantín) and Constantine II (Constantín mac Áeda). It is said that merging of the Scot and Pict kingdoms was sealed by moving the ‘Stone of Destiny’, the symbolic seat of power of the Celtic Dalriadic Kings, from Dunstaffnage to Scone in heart of the old Pictish kingdom. It went to London with Edward I, but was returned, and can be seen along with the Honours of Scotland (the crown jewels) in Edinburgh castle. Kenneth also made Dunkeld the headquarters of the Celtic Church and capital of the newly formed nation.

The sarcophagus in Govan's Old Parish Church, Glasgow, discovered in 1855, is thought to have once held the remains of Constantine, son of Kenneth MacAlpin, who died in 877 (see <http://www.thegovanstones.org.uk/>).

That said, MacAlpin (and its variants) is anciently known in Scotland but may simply reflect “Son of Alba”, or be derived from another Elbin or similar name. An old Gaelic saying: “*Cnuic `is uillt `is Ailpeinich*” (Hills and Streams and MacAlpine) suggests that the origin of the MacAlpins was contemporary with the origin of the hills and streams, that is, the Earth itself. Black’s *Surnames of Scotland* lists early records of the name starting with John MacAlpyne who witnessed a charter by Malise, earl of Stratherne, of the lands of Cultenacloche and others in Glenalmond, c. 1260 (Grandtully, I, p. 126.), and Monaghe fiz Alpyn of the county of Perth who was forced to render homage to Edward I of England in 1296. Others include Monauche Macalpin, witness to a charter in 1285, Monach mac Alpy, who rendered homage to the government of Scotland in the year 1296, Malcolm Macalpyne who witnessed a charter by Duncan, Earl of Levenax (Lennox) in 1395, and Mordac Makcalpy who was granted permission by Henry IV of England to attend the University of Oxford in 1405.

Modern DNA evidence suggests that present-day MacAlpin(e)s have two distinct genetic origins strongly represented - I2a2a1a1/L369 (eastern or “Pict”) and R1b1a2/M-269 (western or “Scot”, but the dominant R1b in Europe). There is little support for a shared origin with, say, MacGregor.

The MacAlpines held a Family Convention in Scotland on 10 September 2016, supervised by an Officer of Arms appointed by the Lord Lyon. On 19 April 2017 a Commission was issued to Michael McAlpin as Commander of the Name *ad interim*. The procedures that will follow, will eventually see the recognition of a Chief, a welcome recognition of one of Scotland’s oldest and most distinguished surnames.

© Bruce Durie 2015. All rights reserved.