

# A Gaelic Way of Seeing?

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*Window to the West: Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd*

by Meg Bateman and John Purser (2020)

free to read online at <http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/files/PDFs/Window-to-the-West.pdf>

## Gille-Brìghde ‘servant of Brigid’



Alasdair Alpin MacGregor (1937)  
*The Peat Fire Flame*

Marija Gimbutas (1989)  
*The Language of the Goddess*

Oystercatcher, Huîtrier, Austernfischer, *Haematopus ostralegus*

**A. Dè 'n luach a bha ga chur air fradharc agus doille?**  
**How were sight and blindness valued in Gaelic culture?**



**Blind poets and musicians**

Dallán Forgaill fl. 597

*17<sup>th</sup> Century*

Iain Dall MacKay/Am Pìobaire Dall

Ruaraidh Dall Morison 'The Blind Harper'

Coinneach Odhar 'The Brahan Seer'

Lachlann Dall *18<sup>th</sup> Century*

An Dall Munro *19<sup>th</sup> Century*

*The Blind Ossian Singing and Accompanying Himself on the Harp*  
Alexander Runciman, 1772 (NGS)

### Martin Martin (1703)

They shut their Doors and Windows for a day's time, and lie on their backs, with a Stone upon their Belly, and Plads about their Heads, and their Eyes being cover'd, they pump their Brains for Rhetorical Encomium or Panegyrick; and indeed they furnish such a Stile from this dark Cell, as is understood by very few:

### Thomas Pennant (1774)

In this country is a vast cataract, whose waters falling from a high rock, jet so far as to form a dry hollow beneath between them and the precipice. One of these imposters was sowed up in the hide of an ox, and, to add terror to the ceremony, was placed in this concavity... The question is put, and the person in the hide delivers his answer, and so ends this species of divination styled *Taghairm*.

## **Cuingleachadh fradharc a dh'aona ghnathach** **Limiting sight among poets, musicians, and seers**



Lag nam Boitean, Canaigh

*Imbas forosnai*: 'a manifestation that enlightens conferred in sleep';  
Fionn Mac Cumhail;  
visions imparted by the dead

## B. Ciamar a tha dathan gam faicinn sa Ghàidhlig? How is colour represented in the language?

Na dathan bunasach a rèir Berlin agus Kay  
Berlin and Kay's Basic colour terms 1969

Stage I	white and black
Stage II	and red
Stage III	and green/blue or yellow
Stage IV	and yellow and green/blue
Stage V	and differentiated green and blue
Stage VI	and brown
Stage VII	and purple, pink, orange

Old Gaelic Stage IV:

**bán, dub, derg, glas, buide**

white, black, red, 'grue', yellow

But there are other scales in addition to hue ...

Scales of saturation and shininess

'Grue' for green and blue?

'S ann an Ìle **gorm** an fheadh  
a rugadh mi 's a thogadh mi,  
'S ann an Ìle **gorm** an fheadh  
a rugadh mi 's a bhà mi.

It is in blue/green Islay of the grass  
that I was born and grew up,  
it is in blue/green Islay of the grass  
that I was born and lived.

## **Slatan-tomhais stèidhichte air doimhne, gleans agus dath** **Scales of saturation, shininess and hue in ‘blues’, ‘greens’, and ‘greys’**

**Gorm:** ‘blue’ saturated and shiny green, blue, grey **domhainn gleansach**

(lusan, sùilean, meatailt, a’ mhuir, na speuran, daoine dubha, Irt nan caorach gorma)

(used of vegetation, eyes, metals – lead, steel, sea, sky, negro skin, dark sheep)

**Glas:** ‘grey’ unsaturated and shiny green, blue no grey **eu-domhainn (bàn) gleansach**

(lusan, sùilean, aodann, falt, bian, meatailt, airgead, a’ mhuir, uisge, na speuran; Dubhghlas, Gaodhal Glas)

(used of vegetation, eyes, face, animal and human hair, metals, silver, sea, water, sky)

**Uaine:** ‘green’ mostly non-vegetal green **mì-nàdarrach gleansach**

(aodach nan sìthichean, uisge, An Lochan Uaine)

(Fairy clothing, turquoise mineralised water, Lochan Uaine)



# Slatan-tomhais doimhne, gleansa agus datha

## Scales of saturation, shininess and hue in whites and browns

### in 'whites'

**Fionn:** warm shining white **blàth gleansach**

(falt > Fionn, Fionnlagh, Fionnghall, hair)

**Bàn:** warm matt white **blàth neo-ghleansach**

(falt, aghaidh na tìre, hair, landscape)

**Geal:** cold shining white **fuar gleansach**

(craiceann, fiaclan, sneachd, bainne, duilleach, driùchd, skin, teeth, snow, milk, foliage, dew)

### in 'browns'

**Donn:** saturated shiny brown **domhainn gleansach**

(falt, ìnean, uaisleachd, hair, fingernails, nobility)

**Odhar:** matt unsaturated **eu-domhainn neo-ghleansach**

(craiceann aosta, seichean, aghaidh na tìre, uisge, am bod, an cù-odhar, ùmaidheachd, trusdair)

old skin, animal hides, landscape, water, the penis, beaver, stupidity, wretch)

## A poem about *glas*

'S e labhair i le còmhradh borb  
Gun robh mi 'm chorra-ghille *glas*.  
Is *glas* am fochann, is *glas* am feur,  
Is *glas* a' choille fo a duibhneul,  
Is *glas* an dos tha 'm bàrr a' chroinn,  
'S ar leam fhìn gur *glas* an cuileann.

Is *glas* an claidheamh,  
Is *glas* an tuagh sa bheil a' chas,  
'S ma bhios a faobhar gu tana geur,  
Gu dè as miost' a mèinn bhith *glas*?

Is geal am bainne thig bhon bhuar,  
Is milis 's is buan a bhlas;  
'S nuair a sgaras an gruth o mheadhg  
Tionndaidh e thaobh 's bidh e *glas*.

What she declared with wild speech  
was that I was an odd *wan* lad.

*Wan* is the young corn, *wan* the grass,  
*wan* the forest beneath her black gloom,  
*wan* the tuft at the top of the tree  
and in my opinion, *wan* the holly.

*Wan* is the sword inside the scabbard,  
*wan* the axe in which is the handle,  
and if its blade is narrow and sharp,  
how is it worse if its appearance is *wan*?

White is the milk that comes from the cows,  
sweet and enduring is its taste,  
and when the curds and whey separate,  
the whey turns *wan*.

## **Dathan mar Phàirt de Phròsas**    **Colour as Part of a Dynamic**

Ronald Black cites the poem as an example of the **different unsaturated hues** subsumed by *Glas* – grey, washed-out green, dull.

But the corn, grass, holy, sword, skin and milk should not be *glas* – they should be the **saturated and shiny *gorm* or *geal*** of dark green foliage, shiny metal, pure white skin and milk.



## Luachadh Gleans is Doimhne    Colour as Part of a Value System

Tha Gleans agus Doimhne rim moladh  
Praiseworthy: Shininess and Saturation

Bu **ghile** a bhráighe ná grian  
Brighter his breast than the sun

Diarmaid Buidhe Donn  
Donnchadh (Duncan)  
Donn

Tha Neo-ghleans agus Eu-doimhne rin dìomoladh  
Contemptible: Mattness and Paleness

'S iomadh slaodanach mòr **odhar**  
Bha na shìneadh air Ach an Todhair.  
There was many a great **sallow** sloucher  
lying stretched out on Ach an Todhair.

An trusdair **odhar**! The wretch!

## Ioma-dhathachd ri Moladh    The Desirability of Multi-colouring

John Gregorson Campbell (1891):

Casan buidhe bha aig Bran,  
Dà thaobh dhubh agus tàrr geal,  
Druim uaine mun suidhe sealg,  
Cluasan corrach cròidhearg.

Yellow paws Bran had,  
Two black sides, and underneath white,  
The back green (where hunting sat),  
Erect ears strongly red.

*Annals of the Four Masters:*

aendath i n-edoighibh moghadh  
one colour in the clothes of slaves



An Siorram Charles Campbell of Lochlane, ca. 1730

## *Geàrr-chunntas*

### **Dathan tro Speuclairean na Gàidhlig?**

## *Summary*

### **Colours through a Gaelic lens?**

- stèidhichte air **doimhne agus gleans** cho math ri **dath**
- scales of saturation and shininess as well as hue
- a' gabhail pàirt ann am **pròsas** seach a bhith stèidhichte aig puingean sònraichte sa bhogha-fhrois.
- Gaelic colours are part of a process, not fixed, objective values in the spectrum
- **doimhne agus gleans agus ioma-dhathachd** rim moladh
- desirability of saturation, shininess and variegated colour.

‘We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.’

Sapir (1958)

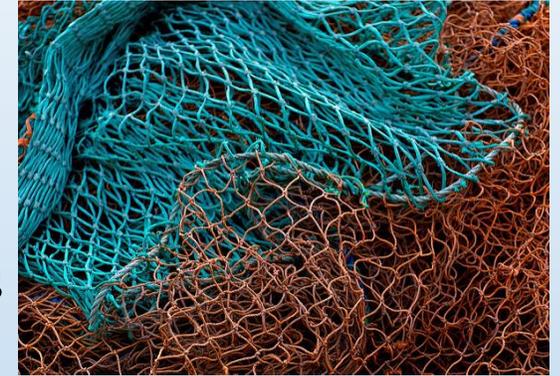
## C. Ciamar a tha pàtran agus cruth air briathrachas a dhealbhadh? How have pattern and shape generated vocabulary?

### 'Dappling' across domains:

breac	brown trout or salmon
breacan-beithe	chaffinch, <i>Buchfink</i>
breacan-glas	wagtail <i>Bachstelze</i>
breac-mhac	magpie <i>Elster</i>
breacan	tartan
breacag	pancake
a' bhreac	smallpox <i>Pochan</i>
breac (verb)	to carve, engrave, embroider, write...



< mogal >  
nuts & nets



< meall >  
'lump'



sùileag  
'eyed one'

## D. Càit an cuir an cànan an duine fhèin?

## Where does the language see the self?

**Tha gaol agam ort; tha farmad agam riut, 7c.** I love you; I envy you, etc.

*There is love at me on you; there is envy at me against you, etc.*

(NB the emotion, not I, is the subject)

**Tha an cnatan orm; tha an sac orm.** I have a cold; I have asthma.

*The cold is on me; the asthma is on me*

(NB the illness, not I, is the subject)

**cù Chaluum** Calum's dog

(NB word order)

**Tha plèana prìobhaideach aig Trump.** Trump has a private jet.

*A private jet is at Trump*

(NB the possessed, not the possessor, is the subject)

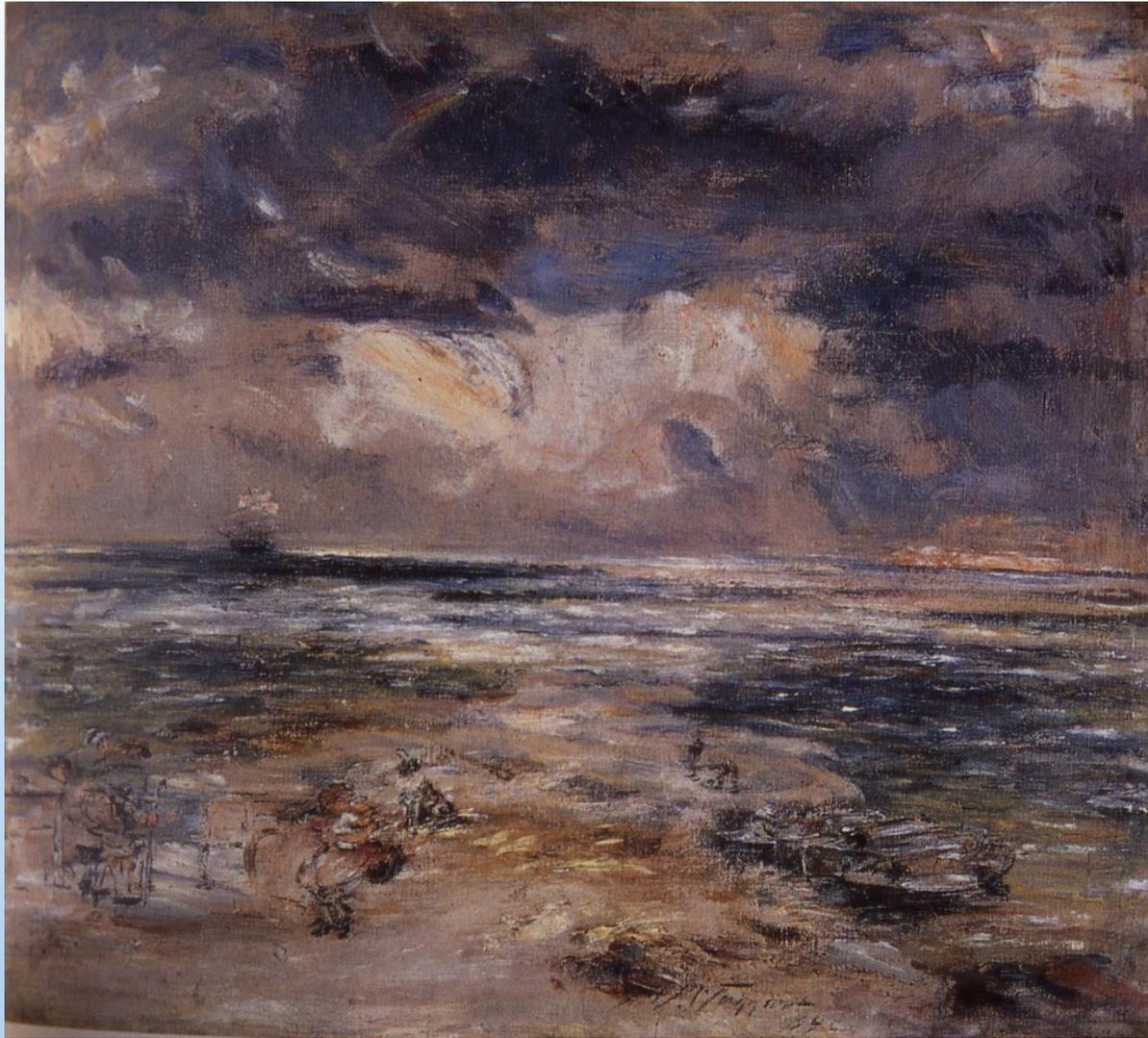
**A bheil Dia ann? Tha.** Does God exist? Yes.

*Is God in existence? Is.*

(NB the answer is always contingent on the tense)

Sgrìobh John Purser:

Putting all these characteristics together, you have something that adds up to the individual being comparatively less significant than the environment and/ or the events which he or she experiences or even initiates, than would be the case in English. **Man is less the agent and more the receptor in his environment...**



*The Emigrant Ship*

**Mac-an-duine agus an àrainneachd an obair Uilleim Mhic an t-Sagairt**

Man and the environment in the work of William McTaggart (1835-1910)



*The Preaching of St Columba*

## E. Cruthan ann an rudan dèante

## Abstract structures in artefacts:



**Cladh an Hiort**  
Graveyard in St Kilda

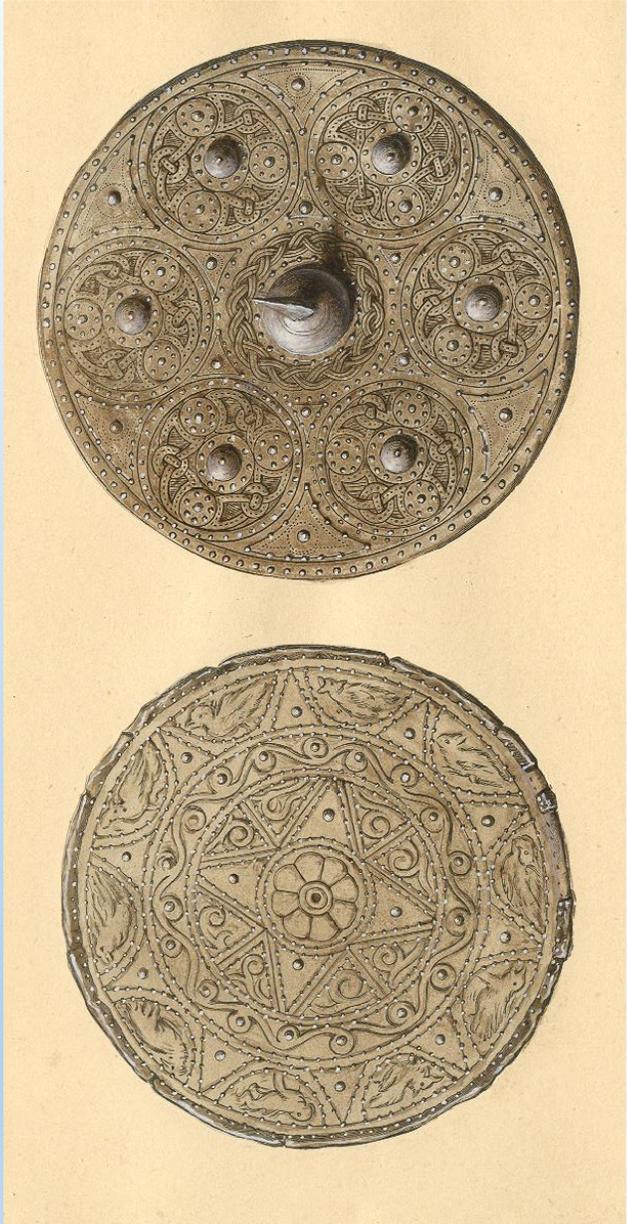


**Crois an Naoimh Màrtainn, Eilean Idhe**  
St Martin's Cross, Iona

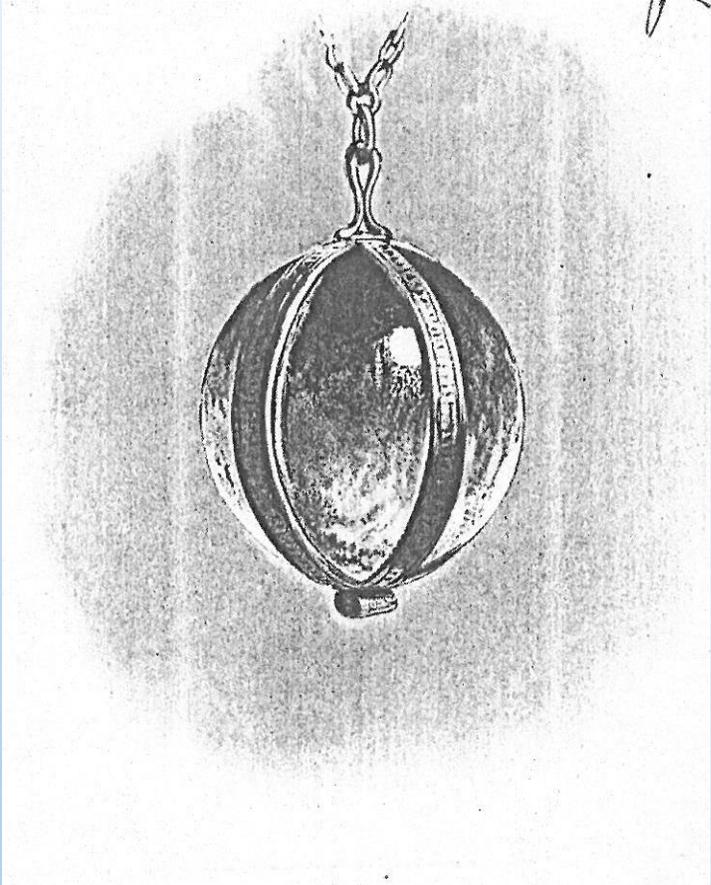
## **Cearcallachd** Circularity of artefacts



**Crannog an Loch Tatha**  
Crannog in Loch Tay

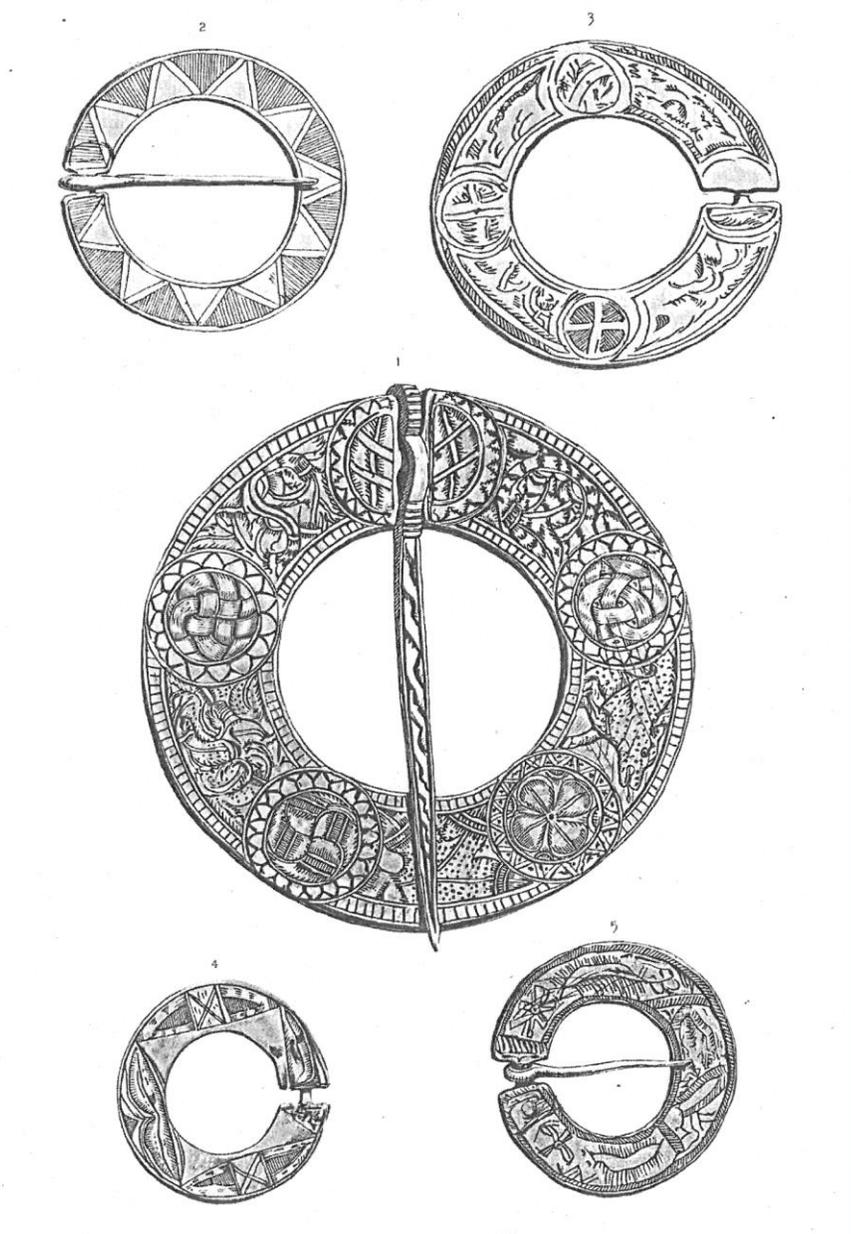


Cearcallachd ann an Targaidean,  
Clachan buadh-mhor agus Bràistean



Circularity in Targes, Charms  
and Brooches

James Drummond, *Ancient Scottish Weapons* (1881)

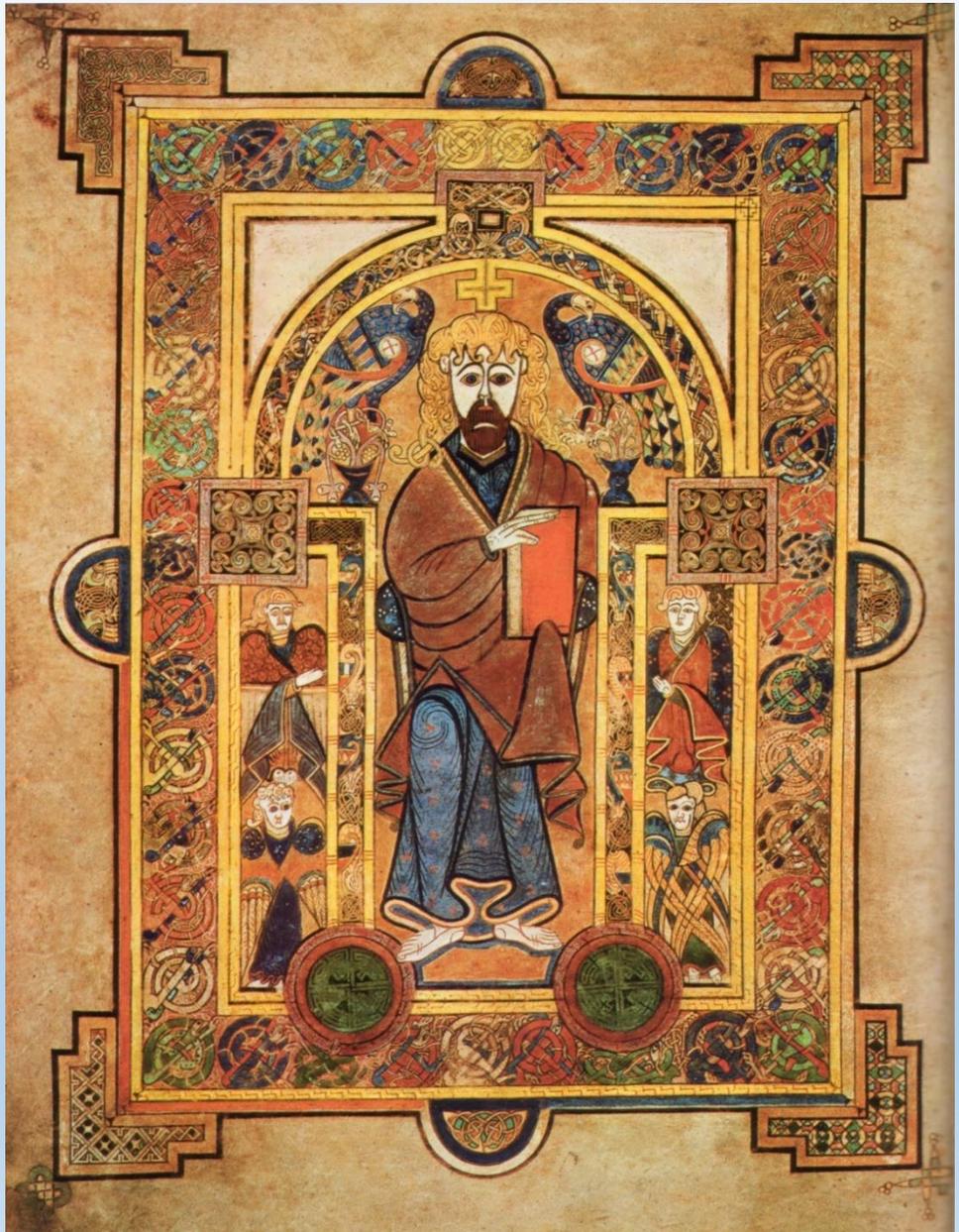


**Eas-chruthachd ann an Leabhar Cheannanais**

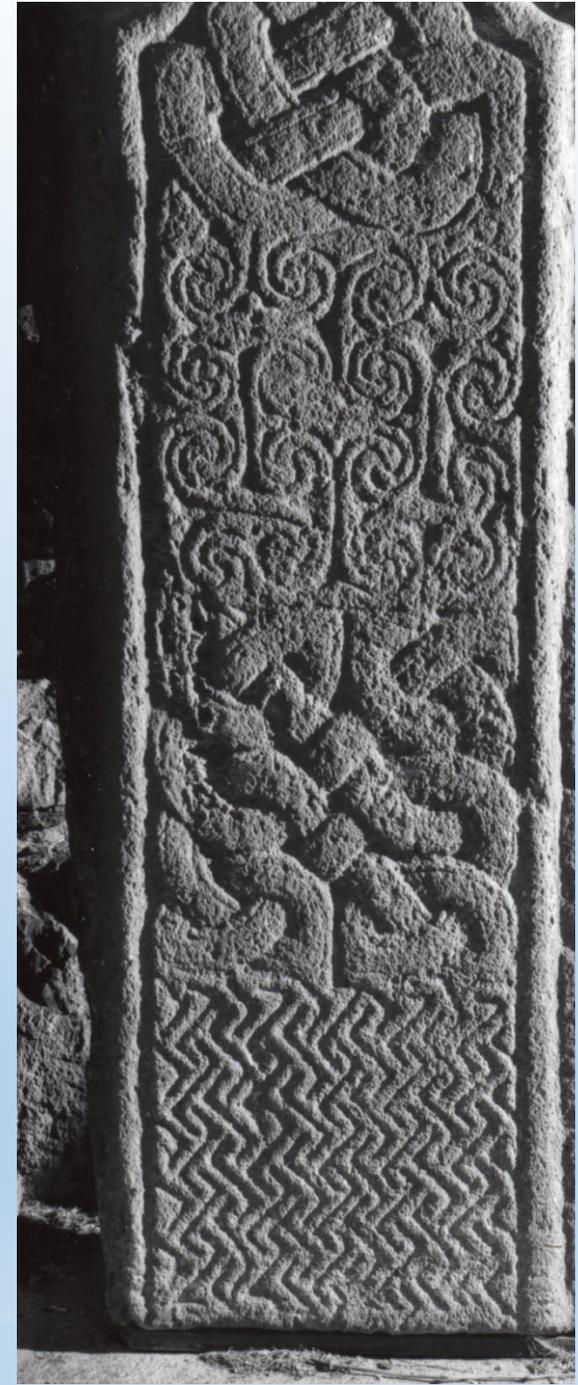


litrichean, snìomhan, gluasad, eadar-fighe, stasis, àireamhan

**Abstraction in the Book of Kells**



letters, spirals, movement, interweave, stasis, numbers



**Samhlachas ann an Snaidheadh** Symbolism in stone carving

## *Geàrr-chunntas*

### **Structairean cumanta eas-chruthach**

- Cearcallachd
- Samhlachas àireamhail no litreach
- Glusad (obair fichte-fuaite, snìomhan, sgeadachadh)
- Seasmhachd, falamhachd, crìochan

Chithear na h-aon structairean ann am bàrdachd, *ceòl-mòr*, dannsa agus deas-ghnàth.

The same structures can be seen in poetry, *ceòl-mòr*, dance and ritual.

## *Summary*

### **Common abstract structures in artefacts**

Circularity

Number and letter symbolism

Dynamism (interweave, spirals, embellishment)

Stasis, blanks, borders

## F. Na h-aon structairean ann am bàrdachd, ceòl-mòr agus deas-ghnàth The same structures in poetry, ceòl-mòr and ritual

### Bàrdachd Poetry

Éistidh riomsa, a Mhuire mhór,  
do ghuidhe is liomsa badh lúdh;  
do dhruim réd bhráthair ná bíodh,  
a Mháthair Ríogh duinn na ndúl.

Sgél do mháthar meabhair liom,  
'na dheaghaidh atáthar treall,  
inghean mhilis mhalach ndonn,  
trilis trom chladhach fá ceann.

\* \* \*

réd chéibh dtais go bhfóbrainn feis.

Circularity of 'closure' *dúnadh*: Éistidh: feis: Éistidh

Interweave of internal and end rhymes in 2<sup>nd</sup> verse:



Embellishment of alliteration: x2 or x4 in every line

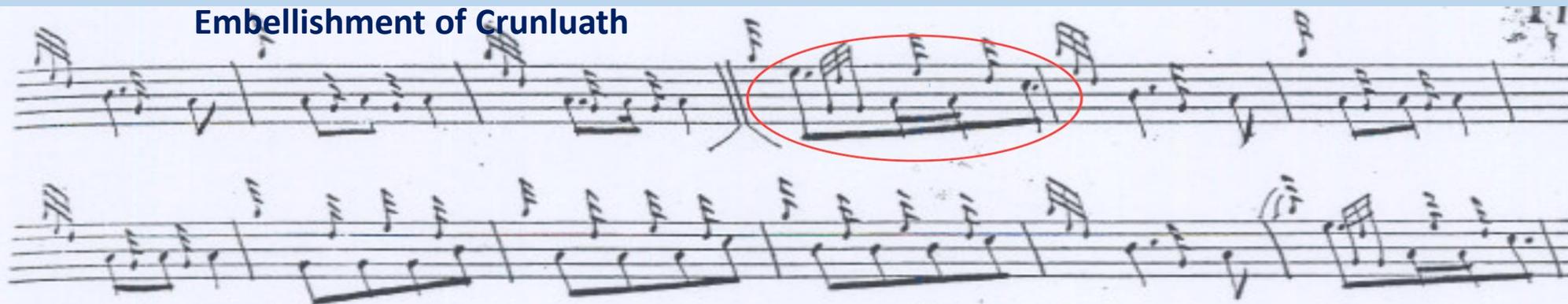
Number symbolism?:  $2(7^1+7^1)$ ; 40 verses

Figheadóir mise cheana  
dealbhann na dáin ghéghheala.  
*I'm indeed a weaver  
who weaves splendid poems.*

## Ceòl-mòr: ùrlar is siùbhlaichean Pibroch: ground and variations

<b>circularity</b>	begins and ends with <i>ùrlar</i>	cf. <i>dúnadh</i>
<b>interweave</b>	repeated contrasting phrases in the <i>ùrlar</i> arranged in different orders	cf. internal rhyme
<b>dynamism</b>	increasing embellishment elastic timing and a-symmetry of phrases	cf. alliteration
<b>stasis</b>	contrast between elaboration of <i>siùbhlaichean</i> (variations) and clarification of <i>ùrlar</i> at the end	

### Embellishment of Crunluath



## Deas-ghnàth Ritual

### ‘Beannachd na Cuairte’ ‘The Blessing of the Circle’

‘five women holding a fiery hoop and passing back and forth through it a child who was failing to thrive, believed to be because of the evil eye’.

**circularity and dynamism:** sunwise circumambulation of wells, people, etc

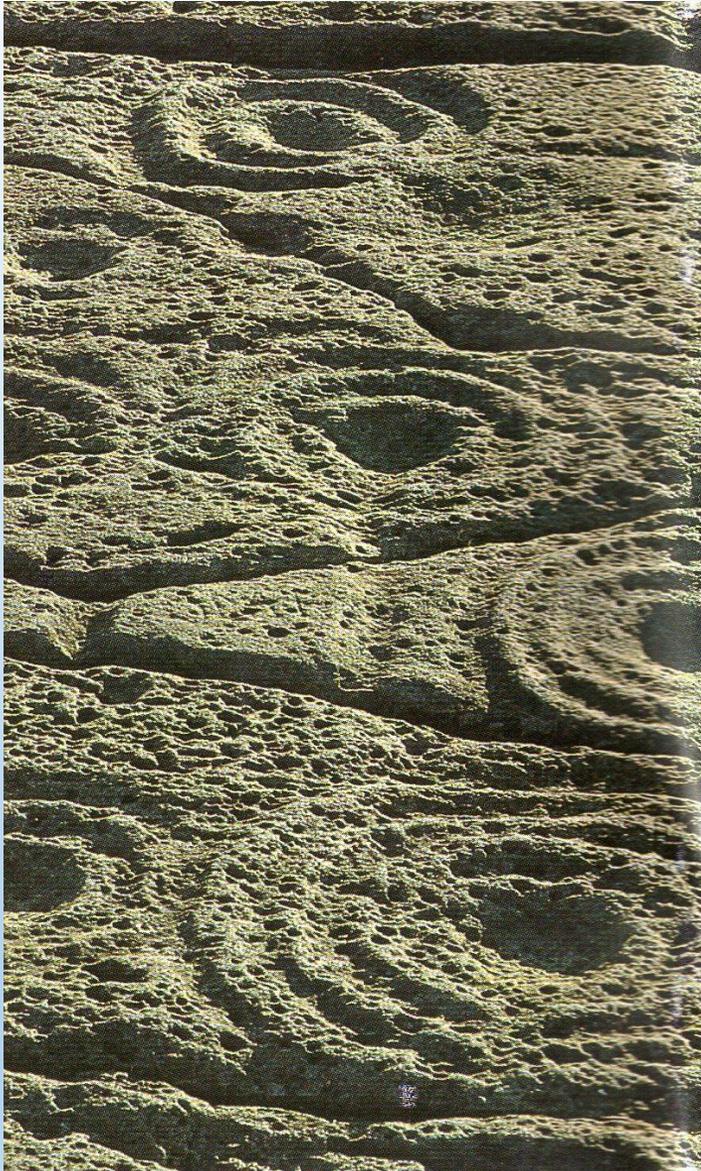
**number and letter symbolism:** number of circumambulations critical;  
written charms sewn into garments

**borders:** saining, use of talisman

**Blanks or emptiness:** use of sleep, trances, caves, limited vision

## G. Ceangal le smaoineachadh ro-Cheilteach?

Might there be a link with pre-Celtic thinking?



Cup and Ring Marks, Kilmartin



Maes Howe, Orkney

Cearcallachd



Wheel-house in Uist



**Sníomhan is Eòin Shamhlachail**  
**Spirals and Symbolic Animals**



**Glusad Deiseil agus Tuathail**  
**Movement Sunwise and Widdershins**

Gundestrup Cauldron



## **H. Sgrìobhadh mu Chearcallachd** **Writing about Circularity**

**Dè as ciall dha leithid a structairean?** **What might it all mean?**

**In Tenga Bithnua / The Ever-new Tongue**  
**9th -10th C**

Ar is i torachta chruinne doralta na nime, 7 is i torachta doronta na secht muire immacuairt, 7 is i torachta dorónad in talam...

It is in roundness that the heavens have been appointed, and the seven seas, the lands...  
**for roundness without beginning and without end is the Lord**, who always was and always shall be and who made all those things. **That is why the world has been embodied in round form ...**

**John Scotus Eriugena 815 – 877**  
*Periphyseon*

For the whole river first flows forth from its source, and... continues to flow always without any break to whatever distance it extends. **So the Divine Goodness and Essence and Life and Wisdom and everything which is in the source of all things first flow down into the primordial causes and make them to be**, then through the primordial causes they descend in an ineffable way through the orders of the universe that accommodate them, flowing forth continuously through the higher to the lower; **and return back again to their source through the most secret channels of nature by a most hidden course.**

# Smuaintean mu Ghluasad agus Eadar-fighe Thinking about Dynamism and Interweave

Robert Kirk: *The Secret Commonwealth* (1692)

... nothing perisheth, but (as the Sun and Year) **everie thing goes in a Circle, Lesser or Greater, and is renewed and refreshed in its revolutiones**, as 'tis another, That Every Body in the Creation, moves, (which is a sort of Life:) and that nothing moves but what has another Animall moving on itt and so on, to the utmost minutest corpuscle that's capable to be a receptacle of Lyfe.

John Toland /Seán Ó Tuathaláin (c.1720)

[We find] in these books the rites and formulations of the Druids, together with their Divinity and Philosophy; especially their two grand doctrines of the eternity and incorruptibility of the universe, and **the incessant Revolution of all beings and forms**, are very specially, tho' sometimes very figuratively express'd. **Hence their Allanimation and Transmigration.**



Doon Hill, Aberfoyle

An t-Urr. Dòmhnall MacLaomainn Rev. Donald Lamont (1874-1958)

**Smuaintean mu Stuth agus Spiorad**  
**Thinking about the Material and the Spirit**

Ciod air bith àite anns a bheil làthaireachd Dhè a' brùchdadh a-steach air cridhe duine, is e sin da-rìreadh taigh Dhè agus geata nèimh.

**Anywhere the presence of God breaks into the heart of people, that is indeed God's house and the gate of heaven.**

**Smuaintean mu Dhaoine is Beathaichean**  
**Thinking about Man and Animals**

Tha na h-ainmhidhean nan oighreachdan air an talamh cho math ri mac an duine, is tha còir as fheàrr aca air, ma tha aois a' daingneachadh còrach.

**Animals are the heirs of the world just as much as humans; indeed they have a better right to it, if age affirms right.**

## **Smuaintean mu Shamhlachas Àireamhan agus Litrichean** **Thinking about the Symbolism of Numbers and Letters**

Enumerations in *Saltair nan Rann* (10<sup>th</sup> C), folktales, rituals: systems working behind reality.

Gematria in *Auraicept na n-Éces* (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> C) and poetry,

e.g. Cú Chuimne's 8<sup>th</sup> C poem of 52 lines representing IESU (9+5+18+20).

Adomnan's interpretation of Ì (Iona):

unity; the first letter of Iesus; Greek iota = the smallest detail of God's plan.

Dìcuil's interest in triangular and square numbers (9<sup>th</sup> C).

### **Falamhachd**   **Emptiness**

Heroes entering caves in folk tales, dying to themselves, re-emerging empowered.

Cf. the darkness of prophesy and Columbanus' recommendation of the *via negativa*:

If then a man wishes to know the deepest ocean of divine understanding, let him first if he is able scan that visible sea, and **the less he finds himself to understand** of those creatures which lurk beneath the waves, **the more let him realize that he can know less of the depths of its Creator.**

# **I. A bheil Snaithle Feallsanachd Indo-Eòrpach an seo?**

## **Is there an Indo-European ‘philosophical thread’ based on:**

### **Cruth cearcallach tìme The circular shape of time**

from the Solar myth to the thinking of theologians (from burial cairns letting in the sun at winter solstice, to Eriugena’s belief in all things returning to source, to the Otherworld of the dead where the sun goes at night).

### **An dàimh eadar mac-an-duine agus nàdar Man’s position in the environment**

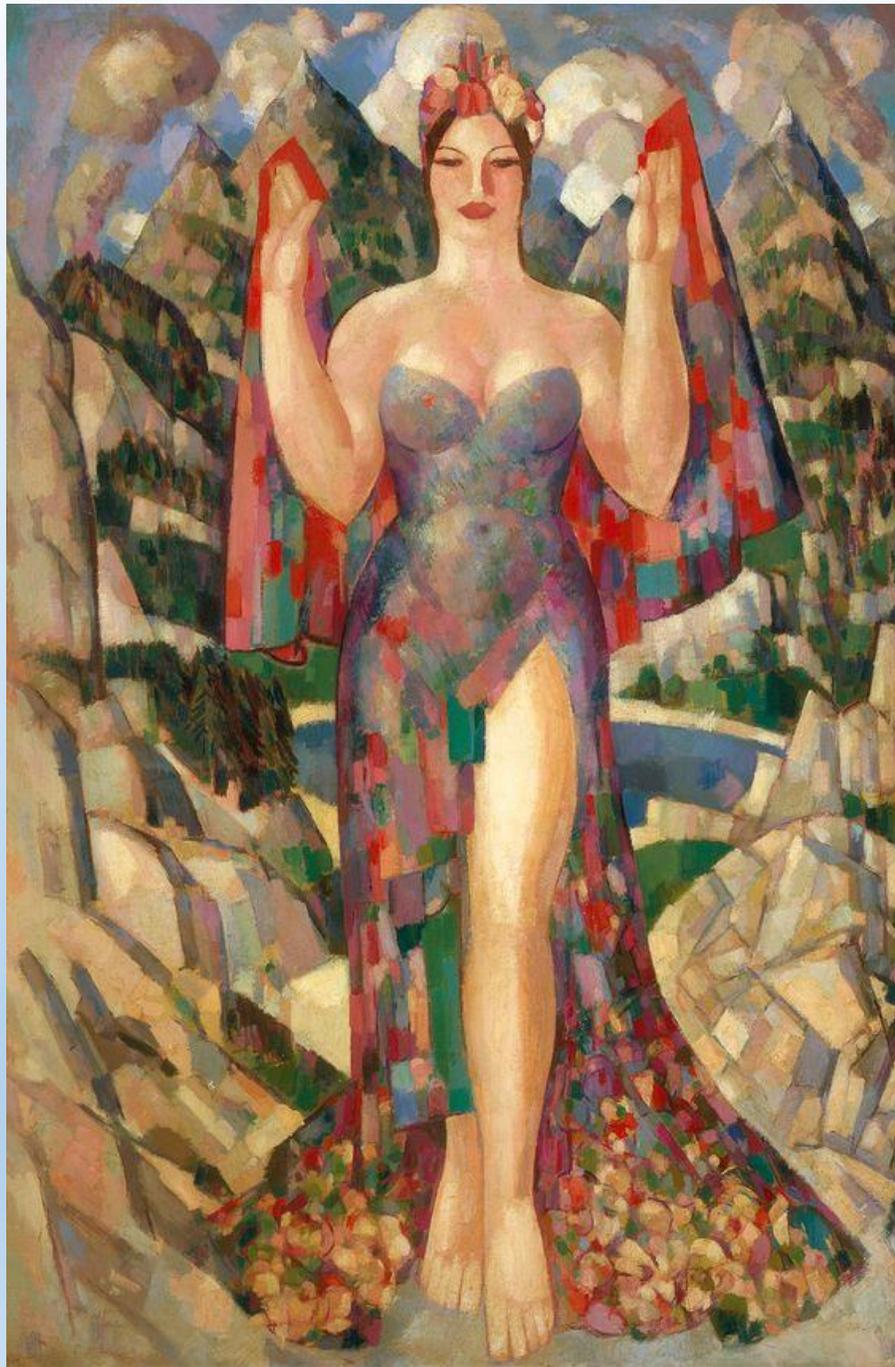
The land as spouse in inaugurations and decommissions: *pòsadh rìgh; baile* and *fàsach*;  
A non-hierarchical view of life forms: totemic animals, shape-changing, plant-animal-human interweave; trees as the highest form of praise; ‘Hallaig’ – people and trees are interchangeable.

### **An àite aig spiorad agus stuth The relationship between spirit and the material**

holy places on earth – trees, rivers, hill tops; shafts for ritual deposits, gifts for fairies; river names are prehistoric goddess names; Immanence of God: the living dead; animism of boats, harps, ploughs, swords; physicality of the word and the interest in emptiness.

## **J. Agus a bheil buaidh aice fhathast air ar Lèirsinn?**

**And does it still inform our Way of Seeing?**



John Duncan Fergusson

*Danu, Mother of the Gods* (1952)

Norman Shaw  
Sidhe-riser 2001  
[Artwork | mysite](#)  
[\(normanshaw.land\)](#)

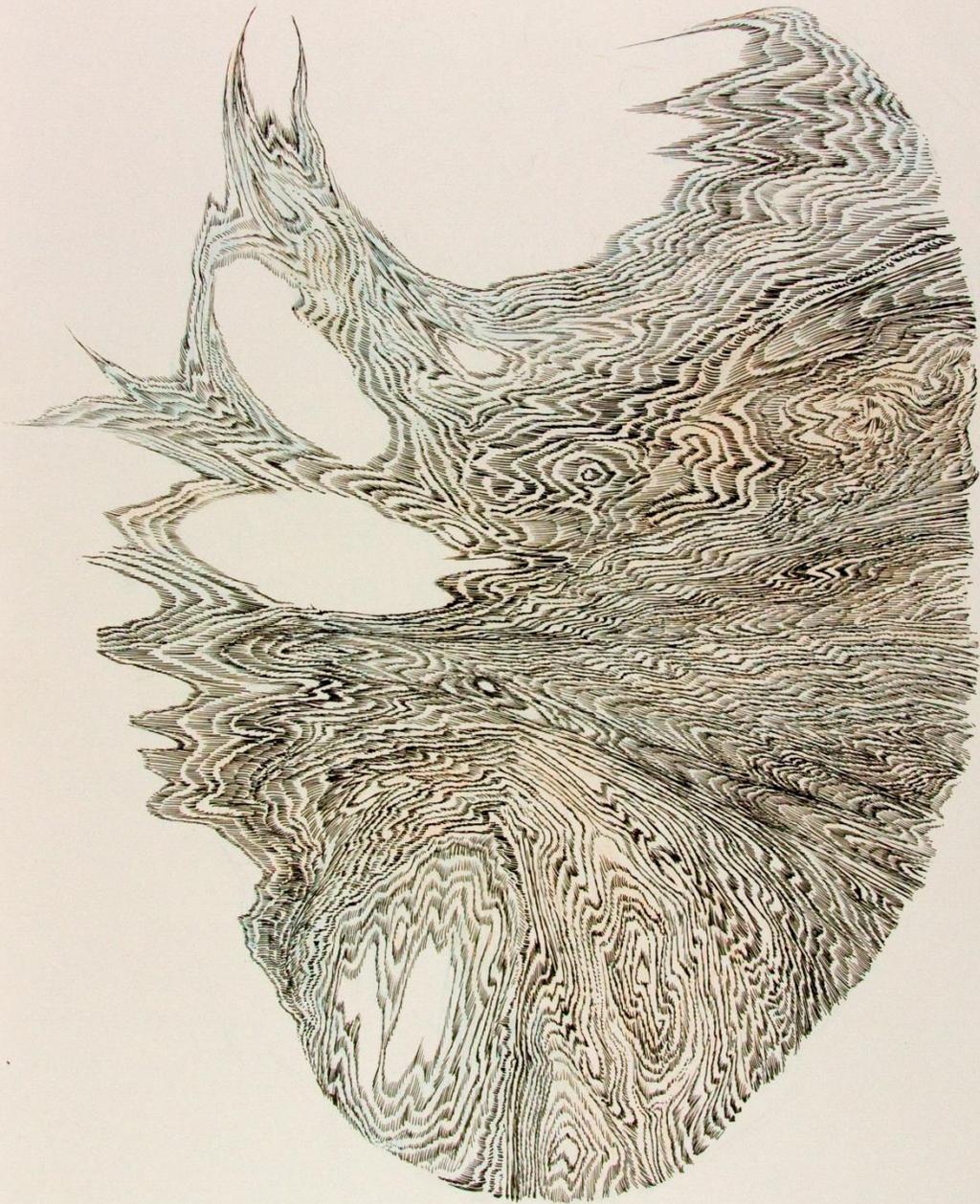
Kate Whiteford  
Sculpture for Calton Hill, 1987





**Norman Shaw**

Tirnanalog, 2019  
(cf. Tir nan Òg)



**Coire Tao, 2018**

Donald MacKenzie

*Dancing with  
Oystercatchers*



## Caroline Dear

Bratan Brìghde Brigid's mantles



Scottish Story-telling Centre 2013





## Dandelions

**Beàrnan-Brìghde ‘the gapped one of Bridget’**

Chan e sealbh na faodalach a faotainn  
‘finding is not possession’