

Bard Macintyre of Badenoch
The First Voice of the Clan
(c.1465 - c.1550)

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Two poems by ‘*the bard Macintyre*’, progenitor of the Badenoch Macintyres, appear among the works making up Scotland’s first ever anthology of Gaelic poetry, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*. Compiling the manuscript between 1512 and 1526, the Dean, Sir James MacGregor, collected and transcribed works from over forty Highland poets, and half as many again from fellow bards across the Irish Sea. From his inclusion in this landmark collection of Gaelic literature, which spans more than two centuries, it’s clear that the now little-known Badenoch wordsmith was a poet of high repute in the Highlands towards the end of the Medieval Period. Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, in *The Minor Septs of Clan Chattan*, writing in 1898, describes him as the first of several generations of Macintyres to have served as hereditary bards to Clan Chattan, though the legacy of surviving verse is sparse. The only poetry to have come to light from succeeding generations dates from the 18th/19th centuries, via the highly rated Malcolm Macintyre in Dallanach. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that the great McVurich family, with whom the elder Macintyre appears in the anthology, performed the role over a very long period for Macdonald of Clanranald, and there are valuable pointers that would seem to validate Fraser-Mackintosh’s claim. We have to bear in mind that the oral nature of traditional bardic poetry means that much material has been lost.

The poet, a refugee from his native Argyll, was clearly on hard times when he received the protection of William Mackintosh, Captain of Clan Chattan in 1496, and became his personal bard. That year, according to the 17th century Kinrara MS, the future Laird of Mackintosh had launched a punitive expedition to Rannoch, while an alternative translation of the same document extends the raid to Appin. So either he was living at Rannoch – conceivably as one of the many ‘broken men’ who frequented Rannoch Moor at that time – or, more likely given his status, in the Appin district under the aegis of the Appin Stewarts. Either way, it’s clear that he was no longer in the old clan heartland of Glen Noe by the slopes of Ben Cruachan - seat of the Macintyre chiefs, and, according to Fraser-Mackintosh, the homeland of the bard.



Glencoe, (Glen Noe on the map), the peaks of Ben Cruachan to the left, home of the Macintyre chiefs for nearly 700 years

Displacement is certainly a key thread in the major complete work he has passed down to us, the mysterious *T'anaig long ar Loch Raithneach / A Ship has Appeared on Loch Rannoch*. In this austere poem the bard describes an unnatural, encroaching force, a presence ominous and unsettling. Using the most uncompromising language he builds up a menacing atmosphere, the work becoming blacker and more poisonous as it gathers speed, until finally he unleashes a deluge of outrage and disgust. But of what? The identity of the resented alien presence, once unmasked, proves revealing both in terms of his own personal circumstances, and those of his clan, which in spite of its ancient presence in Argyll is thought to have been going through a time of upheaval and migration during the late 15th century.

This is how the poem appears in the original manuscript, in translation from the Gaelic:

THE AUTHOR OF THIS IS THE BARD MACINTYRE

*A ship has appeared on Loch Rannoch, a ship hurtful and
hostile, a ship roving, light and ready, wide, daring
and unshapely.*

*That ship of which we speak no shaper shaped afore-
time; the meeter it is to tell her wonders and to
describe her timbers.*

*Planks of bramble leaves along the points of her
fair side; (), the nails
that join her planks are bramble prickles.*

Stringers of withered rushes, thwarts of smooth flat stalks of grass; oars of red bracken shavings, to cope with the chill and horrid sea.

The mast of stout reeds, against a sea surly and savage; behind the mast is a rotten yard; a surly crew are upon her ().

Cables of barley husks as she sails ever on the currents; the black ship stretches a sail of tissue, while the currents ply a bitter strife.

The ship of evil women is the name that all have for the ship of strange shape; the ship's crew should by rights be more, to drive her against the wave.

The women, drunken and haughty, talk naughtily in her stern; the brine comes over their thighs in the ship; their service is luckless and without esteem.

These naked shameful women lie painfully upon a bed of thorn; the bilge flows over their feet in the vessel; the stormy wind hurries them on.

The babbling women stand on each side of her upon the vessel's (), cowering beside the billows; a blast () of babbling words.

These women, common and odd, are above the rest on that mast; their rear exposed to the wind of the glens, while around them is a blaze of fire.

These insolent women all are on the topmast of the fair ship; there is no () nor rock, but the ocean kindling its wrath.

Mighty thunder on the great sea, the firmament of the air is wrathful; the stony rocks rage; the ocean's current conceals the ship.

Rough showers with March wind; bare rocks surround the swift bark; the processions of waves are angry; the wind urges on around them.

Rough tempest with wind and snow steepens the waves around the company; against a (stormy) sea she is no stout craft; it is a dirty ship that holds them.

Both hand and foot and head, these women suffer no lack of due requittal, out on the ocean's breast storm-strayed in a strong sea.

*In the ship of MacCailein, round-eyed Duncan, there is
a devil's load for sickliness, for habits, for hue, of
women with died palms.*

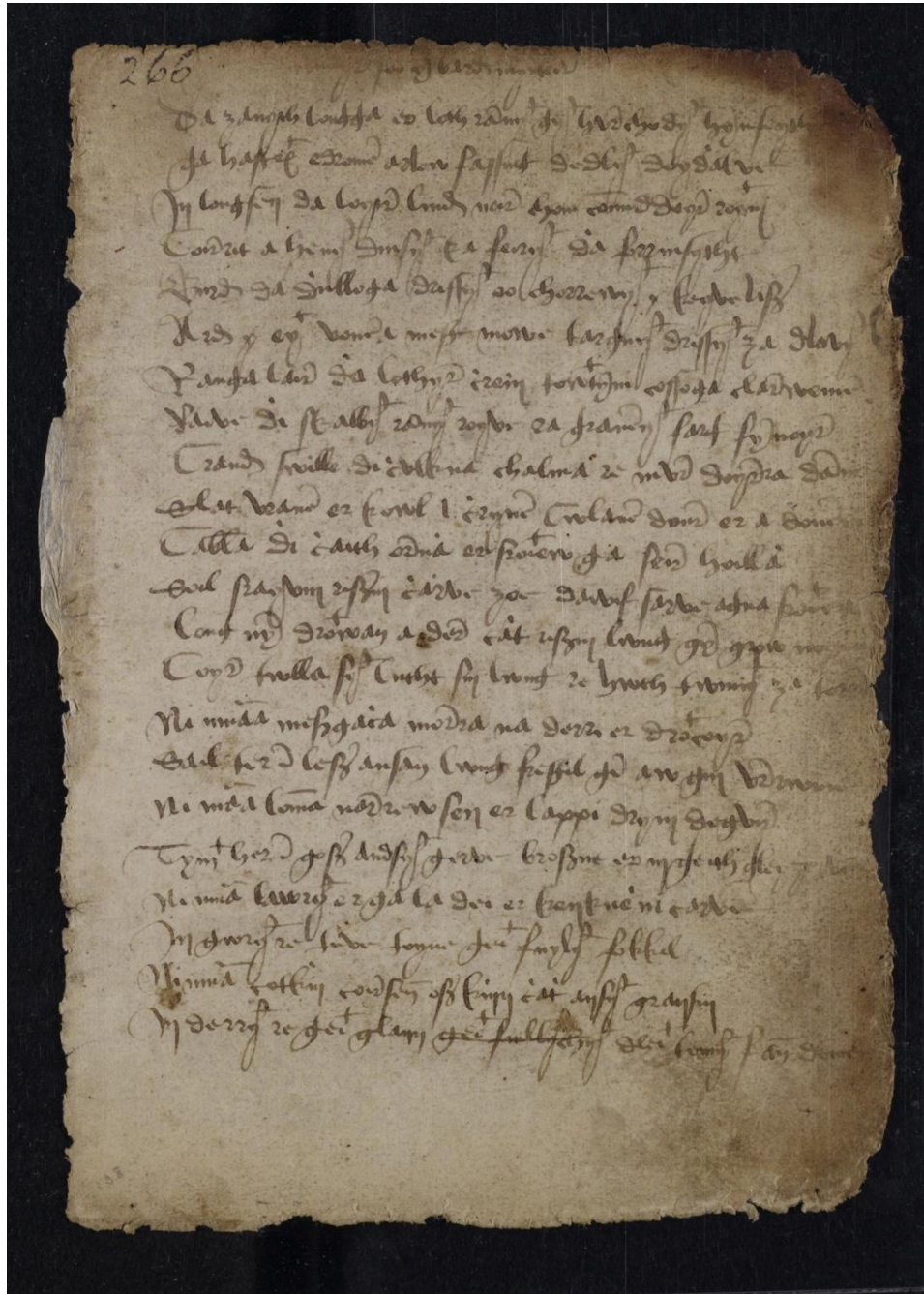
Translation by William J. Watson, *Scottish Verse from the Dean of Lismore, 1937*

What a strange poem it is! Brooding, angry, and laden with dark symbolism. To those of us not able to appreciate it in the Gaelic, much of the original structure and rhythm is lost, but it's plain to see that the bard was very skilled at manipulating his material. William J. Watson, in *Scottish Verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore, 1937*, describes Macintyre's work as a singular form of satire, and believed there to be no parallel to it in Gaelic. The Rev. Thomas McLauchlan, referring to it in his selective 1862 translation of the manuscript, loosely places the poem, (along with its slightly gentler sister work), in a once popular Gaelic tradition of satires on women. The reverend, a solid Victorian, was quick to add that much of the material – including the above – was too lewd for inclusion in his book.

But the satirical elements are not an end in themselves. McLauchlan also points to the common practice, among Gaelic bards, of using verse to ridicule and denigrate their enemies, and this, given the poem's confrontational punchline, looks to be one of its chief objectives. Given that the craft is crewed specifically and exclusively by women, it's difficult not to see the strange, deformed ship as the collective womb of the hated new arrivals – in the eyes of the poet, the breeding ground for a corrupt and alien race. The very presence of an ocean-going ship on the fresh-water loch speaks of things being out of place and unnaturally aligned. Ocean waves raging inland are not only not of the natural order; they also suggest mounting turbulence across the Rannoch district.

The women on the ship are a rum bunch. In a word, 'evil'. The language used by the bard couldn't be more condemning: 'drunken', 'haughty', 'shameful' and 'babbling'. Sexual imagery abounds: the brine spills over their thighs, while up on the mast they bare their rumps to the wind of the glens. The bard suggests that 'the ship's crew should by rights be more, to drive her against the wave', (where are the menfolk?), though the reality, implicitly, is that these debauched women, on their unclean ship, are winning the war all by themselves both as incubators of the next cursed generation, and as poisoners of the indigenous bloodstock. The bard isn't mincing his words! Each new generation will be spawned from 'a devil's load for sickliness, for habits, for hue..'. Whoever breeds with these women will leave to posterity a debased gene-pool, carrying

the tell-tale hallmarks of their tribe. But this is not a piece of raw misogyny *per se*; instead it's a tirade directed at an entire enemy clan, for which the women are the brood-mares and the standard-bearers, while – via calculated insult - the men take a back seat. Worst of all, the women's 'dyed palms' associate them with murder, bloodshed and treachery - an accusation uttered in the same breath as the unmasking of the poet's victim, making him their accomplice in iniquity.



The original *T'anaig long ar Loch Raithneach / A Ship has Appeared on Loch Rannoch, The Book of the Dean of Lismore*. (Courtesy of The National Library of Scotland, p. 266, Adv.MS.72.1.37)

Only after delivering the full brunt of his venom, does he identify the recipient as belonging to the race of MacCailein – ‘*MacCailein Mor*’ being the Gaelic patronymic for the chief of Clan Campbell – and more specifically ‘*round-eyed Duncan*’. (Was he deranged, or about to get the shock of his life at the bard’s ferocious words?). This is revealing: in all likelihood the poet was taking a direct swipe at the powerful Duncan Campbell of Glenorchy, second in the pecking order of this formidable clan. It’s generally agreed that it was Glenorchy himself who had originally commissioned the anthology, albeit compiled at the Dean of Lismore’s discretion, and that subsequent Lairds of Glenorchy continued the patronage, after his death at Flodden in 1513. What’s more, the Glenorchy Campbells were the very people whose ancestors – their origins said to lie beyond the region – had caused displacement and exile among the Macintyres in Argyll during the poet’s lifetime. Duncan had even contributed to the anthology with a composition of his own. Moreover, in attributing the work to him in the manuscript, the Dean names him not as Duncan Campbell as we might expect, but as Duncan MacCailein, the Good Knight.

So the Dean’s use of the Campbell patronymic - matching the bard’s own form of address – would appear to dispel any doubts about the identity of the poet’s intended target. ‘*The Ship of MacCailein*’ is both a generic term for the progeny of Clan Campbell, but also a specific reference to Duncan’s parentage. Two Lairds of Glenorchy, of the three generations associated with the anthology, bore the name Duncan, and both were sons of Colins. To put the poem into historical context, it has to be seen against a background of upheaval in Argyll at the end of the 1400s. The bard, as we’ve seen, was for a time associated with Appin. It was here that the Stewarts, the erstwhile Lords of Lorn, (to whom the Macintyres had been hereditary foresters), established themselves, once the Campbells acquired the Lordship from them in 1463. What followed was the *Imeach Mor*, the Great Flitting of Lorn. Many of Clan Macintyre - whose long-term presence in Lorn was the stuff of legend - rather than submit to the hegemony of the new arrivals, simply left with the Stewarts. Beyond Badenoch, other new concentrations of the clan appearing from the later 15th century crop up in Lochaber and Balquidder.

Significantly - in relation to the poem - the Campbells gained the ascendancy in Lorn not through open conflict, but inheritance. As a clan they were exceptional for their uncanny knack of acquiring land and titles via clever marriage ties. By skilfully marrying off their daughters into strategically useful families, and reaping the rewards when a male heir failed to appear, they were able, repeatedly, to extend their territory by stealth and good luck. Marriage ties, via carrot or coercion, were also a ploy used to rope in the leaders of smaller satellite clans – the Macintyres included – in order to water down old blood-ties and allegiances, and make these

groups more compliant. To the old Argyll order, then, the increasingly powerful Campbells were rapacious, land-grabbing outsiders, and their bloodline was dangerous.

Which brings us to Loch Rannoch. At the end of the 15th century the Campbell juggernaut was fast approaching the lands of Clan Menzies, centred on the loch. True to the policy of using marriage for political ends, Mariot, a daughter of Archibald Campbell, the second Earl of Argyll, was married off to Sir Robert Menzies, already precariously placed on the edge of Clan Campbell's fast-expanding eastern territories. Moreover, Duncan's own father, Sir Colin Campbell, first of Glenorchy, had already married Margaret, a daughter of Robert Robertson of Stowan, during the later mid-century. So the chiefly lines of both Rannoch-centric clans had mingled their genes with those of the Campbells well within our time-frame. The Menzies marriage in particular would have been fresh in the memory of the bard while the work was being composed.

At this point we need to check that the Dean of Lismore's bard was in fact the bard of the Kinrara MS. Depending on the translation, Kinrara identifies our poet either as '*the bard Macintyre*', or simply '*Bard Macintyre*'. The former styling is also used by the Dean of Lismore in his manuscript, so it's fairly safe to assume that there was only one famous bard of the surname at that time. The fact that his Christian name, in both sources, appears to have been academic again supports this view, further underlining the poet's stature.

Confirmation comes from the second poem. This shorter work, similar to some extent in its symbolism and use of imagery to the Rannoch piece, is less caustic, and poetically more subdued. No names are named, and there are no implicit references to the spoiling of the land. Again we have another odd ship, this time on Loch Inch in Badenoch, apparently aimed at the Niven Clan on behalf of his patron, William Mackintosh of Dunachton. The poem was dutifully conceived and delivered, but the bard reserves the full weight of his resources – and his own personal hatred - for the race of Round-Eyed Duncan, in a work of significantly greater scope and depth. The Loch Inch poem is useful, though, in that the loch is just a stone's-throw from the seat of Macintyre's patron, the Mackintosh chief. As the loch is hardly more than a swelling of the River Spey and of no special significance beyond Badenoch, he is unlikely to have referred to it had it not been local to his own scheme of things. There is therefore valuable concurrence between the two manuscripts.

Whether or not the sinister ship was a favoured personal device of the bard, or reflective of a more widespread element of Highland folklore now lost to us, is hard to say. But given that the

crews of both infernal vessels are the object of the most scathing criticism, whatever place the ships may have occupied in the broader Celtic imagination, they adroitly lend themselves to the lambasting and caricature of reviled enemy clans, an application which the bard exploits to the full.

It's unlikely to be coincidence that the bard addresses Glenorchy – patron of the anthology – head on, suggesting that he was well aware of his involvement in the project. As such this was an opportunity not to be missed, a rare chance, from his safe haven in Badenoch, to have a crack at his former feudal superior on level terms. On the face of it, it seems surprising that a Campbell-funded manuscript should contain what might just be the most blistering piece of invective ever levelled at the name. But we should also bear in mind that, in spite of cordial personal relations between the Dean and the Lairds of Glenorchy, those between the MacGregor and Campbell clans were entirely hostile. The former, in common with the Macintyres, were amongst the most rudely dispossessed among the old order in Argyll, and their common antipathy towards *'the ship of MacCailein'* ensured good terms between the two over several centuries. When the MacGregors were outlawed as a clan – again as a result of Campbell machinations – *'Macintyre'* was a name adopted by a number of its refugees. Although the Dean, as fair-minded editor-in-chief, was at pains to include in his collection much that was flattering to his patrons, it seems that the bard's thinly veiled broadside was just too tempting to resist.

The exact location of the bard's home in Badenoch doesn't show up in the written record, though fittingly appears to reveal itself through the simple poetry of two old Gaelic place-names. Half way up the small valley of Glen Tromie, the mouth of which is just three miles from Loch Inch, is *Creag Mhic an t-Saoir*, or Macintyre's Rock. Too close to the agricultural heartland of Strathspey to be an outlaw's vantage point, and with no known associations with acts of derring-do, this gentle landmark with commanding views is likely to have been named after a high profile member of the clan, at a time when the name Macintyre was unusual in the district. (cf *Rob Roy's Cave* and other features of the Highland landscape carrying the first names, or titles, of individuals whose surnames themselves were widespread). It's easy to imagine the poet using it as a creative retreat, and a welcome refuge from what, given the size of the Macintyre population in Badenoch by the 17th century, must have been an extensive family! The possibility of *Creag Mhic an t-Saoir* being a hub of cultural production within the locality is greatly enhanced by the name of the shallow corrie of which it forms part: *Coire Phiobaire*, or The Pipers' Corrie. In a land reverberating with the sound of the pipes, the placename is likely to reflect not a single event, but a longer-term connection with the instrument.

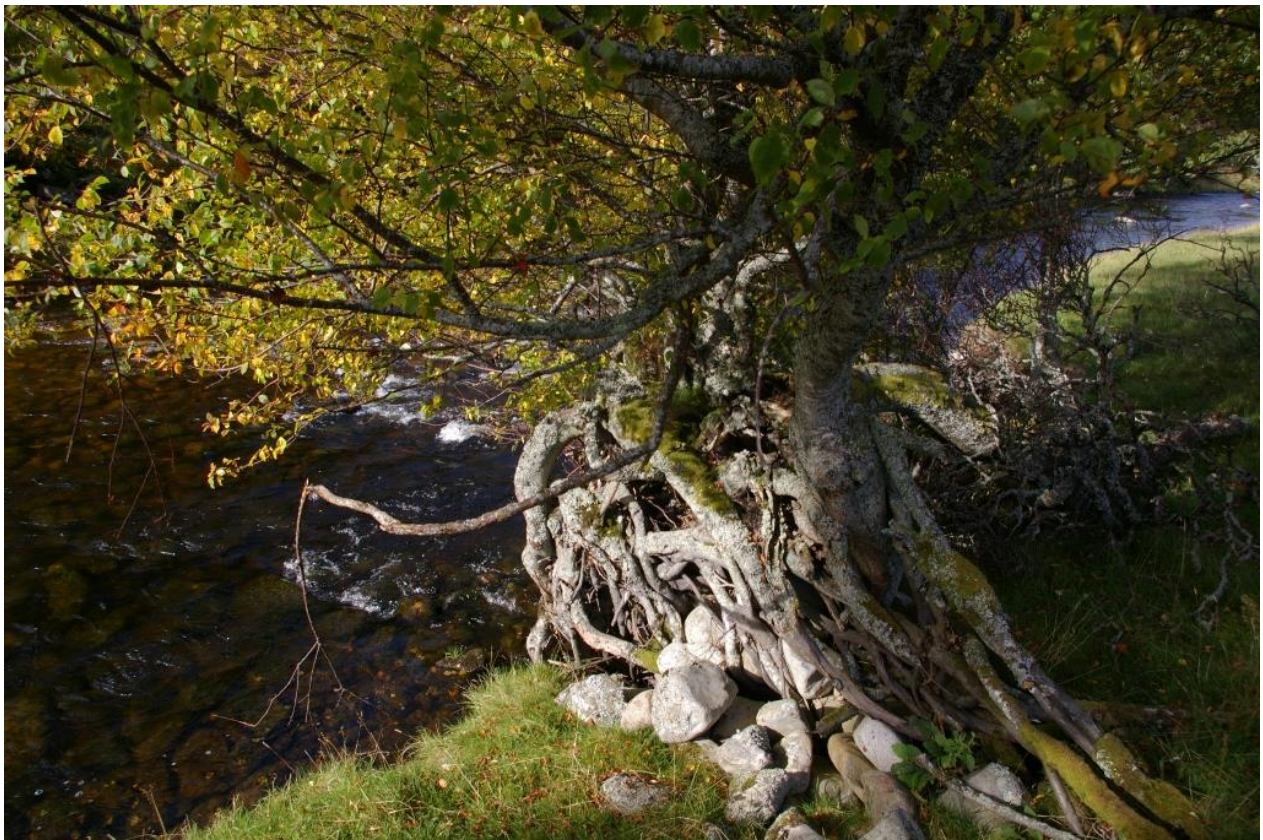


The mound right of centre is *Creag Mhic an t-Saoir*, or Macintyres Rock, likely to have been named after the bard, and very probably a focal point of cultural production in the district over succeeding generations, given the presence of the adjacent 'Pipers' Corrie'

To reinforce the point, there is a strong tradition that the great Macintyre piping family from Rannoch – for generations owners of the famous Faery Pipes of Moidart, the world's oldest surviving bagpipes – were also amongst the bard's descendents. Over several centuries, from at least the mid-1600s, the Rannoch Macintyres were pipers to Menzies of Menzies, and later to MacDonald of Clanranald. If the long-standing tradition of their ancestry holds true, there must have been some musical fulcrum back in their former Badenoch homeland. Seen in the light of our putative spring of bardic poetry – which, being song-based, was closely connected with musical composition - we have a credible location for the Macintyres' original bridgehead in Badenoch. A further clue comes from Charles Fraser-Mackintosh, in his nineteenth century history of Clan Chattan, who draws parallels not only with the well-known dynasty of MacVurrich bards, (several of whom were also musicians), but also with the peerless MacCrimmon piping family – an observation, which, in the absence of a piper-bard tradition in Badenoch, is hard to fathom.

In addition to enjoying pride of place as Scotland's oldest Gaelic anthology, *The Book of the Dean of Lismore* is priceless as a historical document, as it mirrors Highland culture at a time when it was more or less untouched by influences beyond Gaeldom. We should be grateful to the Dean for his diligence, (and, in spite of the bard's hostility towards them, to the Lairds of Glenorchy for their long term backing of the project), in passing down to us the very earliest surviving language of the clan – grim and unforgiving, but forged with passion and dark wit - and bequeathing to us a tantalising window into those remote and turbulent times.

Alistair K. Macintyre
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Ancient alder buckthorn tree by the banks of the River Tromie, one of many venerable specimens in this beautiful, now empty wooded glen. Glen Tromie was probably the bard's original home, and his descendents are likely to have settled the Badenoch district from this point

Sources

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Bard Macintyre's Box, by Scottish artist Will MacLean, inspired by the poem in 1984, my first introduction to the work and the clue that triggered the research. Credit, too, to the Welsh author and poet Patricia Sumner for her useful insights into many of the finer points of the poem.