

Schiehallion - NOT a "fairy hill" at all

by and © Adrian C Grant 9th February 2021

Abstract:

Until the promulgation of this paper it has been the universal understanding that "Schiehallion" means "the fairy hill of the Caledonians". Here I refute this suggestion entirely, explaining how the misunderstanding came to be. An extension of this new analysis allows us also an understanding of the development - probably over some hundreds of years BC - of the Caledonian tribe from minor mountain dwellers to pre-eminent enemy of the Romans in the time of Agricola.

Introduction

When I was a geography undergraduate, we were taught about orogeny (mountain building) and were expected to swallow the theory of geosynclines. I "knew" this was nonsense, but I did not know enough to be able to refute it. Only some years later was this problem solved (and my instinct proved correct) when the theory of plate tectonics was promulgated.

And so it is with Schiehallion (older spelling Schichallion). For as long as I have been aware of and interested in the matter it has been a "well known fact" that the mountain was "the fairy hill of the Caledonians" (from Gaelic "sith" (pronounced "shee" and meaning "fairy")). It was always obviously nonsense, but it is only with the help of those acknowledged below that I have now managed to solve the problem.

A gazetteer of the places mentioned is appended to this paper.

Context

1. There are many places in Scotland with a name element "Shee"/"Sith" etc. Solving the problem of Schiehallion requires that they are all considered.

2. The name Schiehallion needs to be viewed in the context of other names which reference the Caledonians:

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| (a) Rohallion | (original Pictish: Rothycaledy) |
| (b) Dunkeld | (original Pictish: Dynycaledy) |
| (c) Kirkcaldy | (original Pictish: Caerycaldy) |
| (d) Keltney Burn | (original Pictish: Caledig) |

Steps along the way

My active interest in this matter was rekindled by skimming through Alaric Hall's paper "[The meanings of elf and elves in medieval England](#)" on this site. He mentioned the Old Norse word "seiðr" meaning "magic". Immediately I saw a parallel to Scots Gaelic "Sith" (plural "Sithean") meaning "fairy". Sithean also has the specific meaning "fairy hill/knoll". [The Irish "Banshee" are otherworldly female figures who are supposed to live in ancient burial mounds such as that at [Newgrange](#).]

It therefore occurred to me that there might be a Proto-Indo-European (PIE) root word behind the two and so decided to consider possible expressions in Brythonic and in Anglo-Saxon. The very useful <https://www.old-engli.sh/dictionary.php> has an entry for "siden", where it says "see ælfsiden" for which the translation is "elfish influence, nightmare, the influence of elves or of evil spirits". When it came to Brythonic, I did find that Taliesin (fl. early 500s) did refer to Caer Siddi - a magical island in the ocean. A PIE root seemed ever more likely - but where to go for further advice?

Two experts are active on academia in this field. One is [Eduard Selleslagh-Suykens](#). I put the problem to him. Although this was one he had not considered before most helpfully he looked up Julius Pokorny's 'Indo-Germanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch' and came back with "*sei-, si- 'to bind (also by magic)' (literally!)" He also warned me that his opinion was that "Siddi" was not Brythonic (and to be fair there is nothing related to this in [GSP](#) or "Y Geiriadur Mawr" (YGM)). This was very helpful, suggesting that my thinking had been on the right lines and making clear WHY it was that "magic" was seen in a negative light. But it also made clear that more work would be required to address the "Siddi" problem.

Ed had been so quick in replying to me so fully that I was able to forward his thoughts to [Martin Counihan](#). First he supported Ed's view about "Siddi" and pointed out that Taliesin taking a foreign language name for Caer Siddi served to add to the mystique of the story and so was not problematic. I accept this. Second he referred me to the University of Texas' online edition of Pokorny's work. As well as "[sei-](#) - [to bind](#)" he suggested that there could be a connection to "[sweid-](#) - [to shine](#)". I am not necessarily sure that this is a real dichotomy. As well as being "bound" by witchcraft and magic, ancient people also saw themselves as "bound" by the stars - which do "shine".

Initial Conclusion

I had to set aside the idea that there was a Brythonic equivalent of "Sith". Not only that, but scour the maps as I could, I could find no way of making any "fairy" or "magic" connection whether to Schiehallion or Glen Shee or, indeed Shee of Ardtainnaig. So I concluded that the name element "she..." was Brythonic, but had been mangled by Kenneth mac Alpine's Gaelic conquerors of Pictland. They had not understood it and had been too arrogant to ask. So I went back to GPC and YGM. There was only one entry (in GPC) which was even close: the modern Welsh word "sithrig" meaning "precipice" or "cliff". [We may note that modern Welsh "rhig" means "notch".]

Schiehallion certainly does have some very steep slopes - and the same applies in Glen Shee. One tributary of the Shee Water is Allt Ghlinn Thaitneich, of which one tributary is Allt Coire Shith the valley of which is particularly precipitous on both sides.

[It appears that name changes have overwritten what was the one original name. The way the Gaels messed with place names can be seen immediately to the south east of Coire Shith: next to "Càrn Dubh" is "Allt a' Chàrnaich". The original Pictish would have been "Carnig" - the burn by the Cairn - but the Gaels, not understanding this, made it "the burn of the burn by the cairn".]

Testing the hypothesis

There was only one way to test this theory - and that was to put it to Neil Macgregor, the foremost current expert on Gaelic place names with a vast experience also of walking in Highland Scotland. He immediately drew my attention to Shee of Ardtainnaig another mountain with truly precipitous sides.

It is often useful to cite the placename "Balloch". There are several places in Scotland with this name. Some are pronounced BAL-loch, while others are bal-LOCH - same spelling, but different stress so entirely different meaning and etymology.

I had been unhappy about the "fairy hill" explanation for any placename, mainly because the places where they occur are too often miles away from anywhere with no obvious reason to be connected to fairies. However in discussion we did sort this out:

The story starts with the mass burial mounds like Newgrange. A new culture arrived and overtook Ireland. Aware of the mounds' association with the dead, but not sharing their burial practices they

came to fear such mounds. The problem is that these burial mounds are indistinguishable from drumlins (one form of glacial moraine). Thus even in Ireland the people will have extended their fear of banshees - supposing them to be associated also with entirely natural features in the landscape. [A useful map showing drumlin distribution in Ireland can be found [here](#).] When they conquered Scotland they brought these prejudices with them - associating their fear and superstition with anything even resembling a drumlin. Immediately my concerns were resolved as there was no need to suppose any connection between features labelled as "Sithean" and eg burials.

Conclusions

1. So we may be relaxed that superstitious incoming Gaels were prone to attributing the place name Sithean to any hillock resembling a drumlin/old Irish mass burial mound.
2. Place names with a "Shee" or "Sith" element have no fairy connection at all. They represent a Gaelic mangling of a Pictish word cognate with modern Welsh "Sithrig" meaning "precipice".

Afterword: The Keltney Burn and Kirkcaldy

Neil Macgregor also pointed me to the work of Charles M Robertson (1864-1927) - an inveterate student of Gaelic place names. Jacob King has recently edited his work and published it as "[Scottish Gaelic Place-Names](#)". Robertson offers the alternate spelling for the Keltney Burn as "Chailtneigh" or "Chailtnick".

"-ick"/"eigh" are well Pictish suffixes well discussed by me for nearly 10 years now (see my "[Scottish Clans](#)") meaning watercourse (it is even recognised in Dwelly ("Illustrated Gaelic English Dictionary")) but misunderstood by Gaels and assumed to be a locative case. "Chailtn-" is clearly yet another mangling of the name "Caledonian" (this time incorporating an element of translation).

Thus we can see that when the Gaels took over, their approach to the language of the Picts whom they despised was serendipitous - with their place names mangled in different ways in different places by different people - ie there was no systematic "plan".

Kirkcaldy does fit the pattern described here, but will be discussed elsewhere.

Extrapolation: Why Schiehallion?

We have noted that there are several "shee"s fairly close to each other (Schiehallion is just 12 miles north of Shee of Ardtainnaig and about 25 WSW of Coire Shith). "Challion" appears to be the identifier - implying that the writ of the Caledonians did not stretch to the others.

In my paper on this site about the [place name Atholl](#) I proposed that the old 'capital' of Caledonian territory was the hill fort at Drummond Hill at the mouth of Loch Tay and we may note that the Keltney Burn with its tributary (renamed by Gaels boringly as "Allt Mor" ("big burn")) leads directly from Drummond Hill to Schiehallion. So in the South West the core territory lay north of the River Almond and just half way down the south shore of Loch Tay. To the North Schiehallion lay on the northern boundary, its forbidding north face a warning to all in Strathtummel. In the South East to Rohallion. In the West the headwaters of Glen Lyon and Glen Lochay were as far as they stretched and to the East, given that Glenshee was beyond their borders, so too, probably was Strathardle - indeed to begin with the Tay itself is likely to have been the eastern border.

The Caledonians were an aggressive, self assertive tribe who went on progressively to subsume neighbouring tribes.

One early one, to the south west were the people living in Stathalmond. This gave them access to the whole of Loch Tay including Glendochart. It was only a small further annexation to take over

the headwaters of Glen Falloch whence to the head of Loch Fyne - which Ptolemy says they had reached by the time of the Flavian Roman expedition into Scotland (c80AD).

To the East it is likely that expansion was sequential. The first step would have been to absorb Strathardle (with the necessity to establish Dunkeld as their regional base on the east side of the Tay) and then Glenshee followed progressively, glen by glen so that by the time the Romans arrived they had reached beyond the Dee and were closing in on Kintore on the Don. All the time they kept to the high ground - establishing hill forts at the mouths of the glens from which they could mount raiding expeditions onto the farmers of the lowlands beyond. This way they extracted the maximum return from these semi-subject peoples without the need for day to day 'management'.

So too to the North: Taking on Strath Tummel and Rannoch would have posed not much of a problem, whereafter 'completing the job' by reaching the watershed to Drumochter was more or less a natural follow on. By the time the Romans arrived they had extended control further to include all the headlands of Glen Feshie, Glen Tromie and Strath A'an.

All this was achieved by 80AD and lasted another 100-150 years before serious pushback started . So we might hazard the guess that the expansion from the original core may have started say 200-100 BC.

Key words discussed in this paper:

seiðr:	Old Norse	- "magic"
sith:	Scots Gaelic	- "fairy"
sithean:	Scots Gaelic	- plural of Sith; also means "fairy hillock"
ælfside	Anglo-Saxon	- the influence of elves and/or evil spirits.
(Caer) Siddi:	Irish Gaelic	- (a castle on) a "magical" island in the ocean
banshee:	Irish Gaelic	- a female (ban) "fairy" (supposed to live in mass burial mounds)
sithrig:	Welsh	- "precipice, cliff"

Key Locations mentioned:

Schiehallion	56° 40' 00" N	04° 06' 04" W
Shee of Ardtainnaig	56° 29' 28" N	04° 03' 54" W
Coire Shith (Glenshee)	56° 50' 27" N	03° 28' 26" W
Sithean Liath	57° 05' 51" N	04° 27' 45" W
Sithean Dubh	57° 06' 21" N	04° 26' 30" W
Sithean Dubh na Cloiche Bain	57° 04' 44" N	04° 28' 00" W
Allt Ruighe an t'Sithein	57° 05' 59" N	04° 24' 24" W
Rohallion	56° 32' 35" N	03° 34' 36" W
Keltney Burn	56° 37' 26" N	04° 00' 37" W
Dunkeld	56° 34' 07" N	03° 36' 54" W
Kirkcaldy	56° 06' 51" N	03° 09' 32" W

Acknowledgements

I hope that the text of this paper has emphasised that I would not have been able to solve this problem - which has vexed me for so long - without the indulgence and advice of

Eduard Selleslagh-Suykens Martin Counihan Neil Macgregor