The Pre-Seventeenth Century Highland Bagpipe
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"O that I had three hands, two for the bagpipe and one for the sword"
  -- old Scottish ballad [Dalyell, 26]

This article is necessarily schizophrenic in that must address two audiences. The first audience is made up of those people who enjoy hearing the highland bagpipe played at SCA events and wish to have some background information so they may better appreciate bagpipe performances. The second audience is a tiny group of specialists, the pipers themselves, who have devoted years to the study of their art and yet may know little of the history of their instrument beyond the vague sense of antiquity that we all pick up when we're earning. For this second audience I have included specific recommendations for recreating the pre-seventeenth-century highland bagpipe.

The Instrument
A reed pipe is any musical instrument whose sound is produced by a vibrating reed. A bagpipe is a musical instrument that consists of one or more reed pipes supplied with air from a reservoir, generally a bag made of animal hide. One or two of the pipes may have finger holes by which a melody is produced. Such pipes are called chanters. There may also be one or more pipes, called drones, which produce a constant pitch. The bagpipe most familiar to readers is probably the Great Highland Bagpipe, which has a single chanter and three drones.

Reed pipes have been around since at least 2800-2500 BC. A set of silver reed pipes of that period, from Ur, still exists [Collinson, 9]. Instruments that produced a continuous droning sound by means of air squeezed from a bag may have existed as early as 1300 BC, and certainly existed by the last century BC. [Collinson, 42-3.]

The first definite historical evidence of a bagpipe with a chanter appears in a reference to the Roman Emperor Nero (37 - 68), whom Suetonius (c. 79 - c. 140) said could play one [Suetonius, 2081. Dio Chrysotom (fl. 1st c.) also attested to Nero's ability [Baines, 63]. The Roman bagpipe probably had a double chanter-that is, two chanters fastened together-and no drones [Collinson, 44]. The Roman bagpipe appears to have been short-lived because, after the second century BC., there is no indication of the existence of bagpipes until the ninth century, when a written description was given of one [Baines, 67; Collinson, 77]. This ninth-century instrument, called a chorus, had one chanter and no drones [Collinson, 781.

It was not until the twelfth century that the widespread use of the bagpipe in Europe began [Baines, 68]. This coincides with the earliest reference to the bagpipe in Britain, which is in a survey of Celtic music by the Welsh chronicler Giraldus Cambrensis (fl. 12th c.). Giraidus records that in his time the chorus was played in Scotland and Wales, but not in Ireland [Cambrensis, 554; Collinson, 82.]

A single drone was first added to the bagpipe in the fourteenth century. Two of the earliest illustrations of a single drone bagpipe are in the Gorleston Psalter (1306) [Collinson, 83, Figure 15e] and the Luttrel Psalter (c. 1330) [Collinson, Plate 11.].

A second drone was added around the end of the fifteenth century [Fariner, 94] or the beginning of the sixteenth century [Baines, 118; Collinson, 111]. Two -drone bagpipes certainly existed in 1514, for there is an illustration of one by Albrecht Dürer of that date [Collinson, Plate 17]. The famous "R. McD., 1409" two-drone bagpipe illustrated in Emerson, [Plate 10] and other early histories is a forgery [Collinson, 135]. Judging by the reproductions of contemporary illustrations in Baines, Collinson and Kay, the two drones on some bagpipes produced the same pitch, whereas on some bagpipes the drones produced two pitches separated by a musical fifth.

The third and last drone to be added to the highland bagpipe was the "bass" drone, so-called because it produced a pitch an octave below that of the other two "tenor" drones. It is impossible to say with certainty when the third drone first appeared. Different historians give the date as 1600, 1700, or 1800 [Collinson, 185]. The earliest known illustration of a three-drone highland bagpipe is from 1730 [Emerson, Plate 1], but there are fragments of a bagpipe generally believed to have belonged to Patrick Mor MacCrimmon (c. 1595 - c. 1670) that include the tops of three drones [Collinson, Plate 20a]. There is a reference to a "great pipe," the modern term for the three-drone bagpipe, in 1623 [Dalyell, 4], so we can be reasonably sure that if three-drone bagpipes did not exist before 1600 they were invented not much after.

For a long time two- and three-drone pipes coexisted. Two-drone pipes were banned from the major competitions in Scotland in 1821 [Collinson, 189], but continued on in some of the Irish regiments of the British army until 1968 [Rangers].

The Music
The primary form of highland bagpipe music in SCA period is known as ceol mor, "big music". Ceolmor is also called piobaireachd (pronounced something like pee - hrochk), which literally means "the art of playing the bagpipe". This form of music is unique to the highlands of Scotland and is very different from the marches and dance tunes commonly heard today, which are known collectively as ceol beag, or "little music".

The origin of piobaireachd is obscure. According to Seumas MacNeill " … piobaireachd was invented or, more probably, developed from an earlier kind of pipe music, which has since disappeared. We know this because by 1570 the tunes were mature, sophisticated compositions with obviously many years of experiment behind them" [MacNeill, 36]. Some have suggested that piobaireachd originated when pipers adapted musical techniques of the Scottish harp to their bagpipes [Collinson, 150].

The only two known composers of piobaireachd who lived prior to 1600 were Donald Mor MacCrimmon (c. 1570 - c. 1640) and his son, Patrick Mor MacCrimmon (c. 1595-c. 1670) [Collinson, 145; MacNeill, 41]. Collinson lists nine piobaireachd which tradition associates with pre-seventeenth-century events: "The Battle of Harlaw", "The Desperate Battle", "Black Donald's March", "The Great Bridge", "MacRae's March", "The Battle of the Park", "Hector MacLean's Warning", "MacIntosh's Lament" and "The Battle of Waternish" [Collinson, 147]. All of these tunes refer to events of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries except "The Desperate Battle", which supposedly refers to an event of 1396, the Battle of the North Inch of Perth.

Among the forms of ceol beag that existed prior to 1600 are jigs, reels and a type of slow dance called a lilt [Farmer, 232]. The music for a lilt is what pipers today call a strathspey, although the term "strathspey" is of later origin. I have found no evidence of hompipes or marches prior to the late seventeenth century (the term "march" originally meant piobaireachd when referring to bagpipe music).

The marches, strathspeys and reels heard in competitions today are of a style invented in the nineteenth century.

The Piper

The piper was a well-paid, highly respected professional in the employ of a great lord or chief. Pipers, who were generally not members of the nobility (although there were exceptions), sometimes held land from their sponsors in return for their service. The role of piper to a lord or chief often ran in a family, so that for several generations the head of the MacX family might be the piper to the chief of the MacYs.

These traditions are evident in the history of the MacCrimmon family, which provided pipers to the MacLeods of Dunvegan for over two hundred years, during which time they held MacLeod lands at Boreraig, on the lslc of Skye, rent-free [MacKay, 7]. Boreraig became the center of piping for Scotland, and chiefs or lords would send their pipers to study with the MacCrimmons there.

Pipers were sometimes indentured to their sponsors. In 1743 piper David Fraser indentured himself for seven years' service as a piper to Lord Lovat. In return, Lord Lovat paid for Fraser to study with the MacCrimmons for a few months and provided him, during the period of his indenture, with housing, food, clothing and an annual salary of fifty marks (for a complete transcript of the indenture, see [Collinson, 213-4]).

The role of a piper was to entertain his or her sponsor at home and abroad. This sometimes included military service. Various traditions have it that bagpipes were used in battles of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the first documented use of them was not until 1549 when they were played by troops of the Earl of Argyll [Collinson, 140; Dalyell, 4; Farmer, 94].

There is a myth that in olden days there were no women pipers and that a woman found playing the bagpipe was liable to have her fingers cut off. This is clearly not true, for women are known to have taught at the MacCrimmon school at Boreraig [MacKay, 8].

Starting in the late fifteenth century, a piper might be in service to a town rather than a lord or chief. The duty of a town piper was to play through the streets of the town once each morning and once each evening and also at fairs and other special events. In return, the piper was provided with a salary and sometimes a set of clothes in the town's livery colors [Collinson, 97 − 8].

Piping was not entirely unknown among those of high social rank. James I of Scotland (1394-1437) was a piper [Collinson, 91]. Henry VIII of England (1491 - 1547) may also have been a piper, for according to a contemporary account he played "almost on every instrument" and owned five bagpipes at the time of his death [Collinson, 95].

Recreating the Highland Bagpipe

To recreate the sound of the pre-1600 Highland bagpipe I recommend using a modern bagpipe rather than a reproduction of an earlier type because, in my opinion, no other bagpipe has the right sound for ceol mor. It is easy to make a two-drone bagpipe from a modern three-drone bagpipe: one simply has to tie in a new bag and leave out the bass drone stock, moving the two tenor stocks over a few inches in the direction of the piper's body. A bagpipe with one drone or no drones can, of course, be constructed in a similar way. One of Henry VIII's bagpipes had a velvet bag cover [Collinson, 95], so even a modern GORE-TEX™ bag may be used, properly covered, on a recreation of a sixteenth-century bagpipe. Playing

a three-drone bagpipe with a cork inserted in the bass drone to stop it from sounding does not simulate a two-drone bagpipe: it simulates a three-drone bagpipe with maintenance problems.

There is a two-drone "medieval bagpipe" kit available (see the resource section below). It is nearly identical to the sixteenth-century Flemish bagpipes seen in paintings by Pieter Brugel (? - 1569) [Kay, 38 , 40]. There is a modem Galician bagpipe called a gaita which makes an excellent substitute for a medieval one-drone bagpipe. I had the opportunity to play one a few years ago, and "The Song of the Ass" sounded great on it.

As far as choice of music is concerned, we are fortunate in two respects. First, many two-part jigs, reels and strathspeys sound alike, so a piper can play post-1600 tunes of these types while staying in a pre-1600 style. Second, piobaireachd is such an obscure art form to most people that a piper can play any piobaireachd at all without danger of being found out if the tune is of post-1600 or indeterminate origin.

A piper, being a representative of either a lord or a town, would be expected to be well-dressed when appearing in public. I would not presume to suggest to the individual reenactor what costume to wear, but I feel obliged to point out that there were no great kilts (or "belted plaids") until the seventeenth century [Davenport, 822; Yarwood, 359] and no modem kilts (the kind that buckle around the waist) until 1725 - 30 [Yarwood, 360].

And now, a brief closing tirade. Playing the bagpipe is expensive in both time and money. If you're going to do it, find a teacher and do it right. The world needs more bad pipers like it needs more toxic waste.

Piping Resources
A good source for piping supplies, music and recordings at reasonable prices is The College of Piping, 16-24 Otago Street, Glasgow, G12 8JH. The College of Piping also publishes a monthly journal, The Piping Times. The medieval bagpipe kit mentioned above is produced by The Early Music Shop, 38 Manningham Lane, Bradford, West Yorkshire, BDl 3EA. Many types of European bagpipes and a few reproductions of medieval and Renaissance bagpipes are available from Lark In The Morning, PO. Box 1176, Mendocino, CA, 95460. They have one of everything, and their prices reflect that fact.

There are several excellent two-week piping programs offered each summer across the U.S. by The Balmoral Schools of Highland Piping, 1414 Pennsylvania Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15233. There are many World Wide Web pages with links to bagpipe bands, bagpipe makers and FAQ (Frequently Asked Question) pages, and there is an electronic mailing list devoted to piping to which one can subscribe by writing to bagpipe-request@cs.dartmouth.edu with the message "subscribe bagpipe."

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