

REGIONAL BAGPIPES: HISTORY OR BUNK?

JAMES MERRYWEATHER

“The evidence upon which these bagpipe histories are based has been collected according to misconceptions, the arguments are naïve and conclusions mostly erroneous”.

It is twenty years or more since bagpipe makers began to attempt reconstruction of *The English Bagpipe*. They were successful in producing excellent working musical instruments, but to what extent do they represent the bagpipes that were undoubtedly played in England, and is there any reason to think they were distinctly different from other European bagpipes? If we look at the wealth of illustrations of bagpipers in England, most are fragmentary or rather fanciful representations in church art and the few that appear on paper must be interpreted with a large pinch of salt; for instance William Marshall includes a bagpiper in his title page engraving for Drayton's poems of 1637 (right). If, as William Grattan Flood asserts in his *The Story of the Bagpipe* (1911), he is an English bagpiper of 1637 then are the other characters (Medusa, Apollo and a Satyr) also real people from the England of Charles I? Of course not. Marshall has copied, rather too inaccurately to inform the bagpipe maker, from a French, Flemish or German source of around 1500.



WILLIAM MARSHALL DEL. 1637

There are plenty of references to bagpipes in English town archives and literature to suggest that the bagpipe was played in this country in the past, but no extant instruments survive and no pictures were labelled to tell us specifically what sorts of instrument were being illustrated. Beware: mention of *Northumberland Bagpipes* in old ballads was, like *The Carman's Whistle*, *The Green Mantle* and *Greensleeves*, merely a euphemistic reference to sex!

Recently, localised regional bagpipes based on alleged 'historical evidence' have been emerging. This evidence for them is weak, spurious or non-existent, but unfortunately they are being taken seriously as the real bagpipes of the regions for which they are claimed. I shall discuss here why I think there is little reason to believe that they ever existed.

What did the Romans ever do for us?

In the BBC television programme “What The Romans Did For Us” Roman soldiers were led through the British countryside by *The Roman Bagpipe*. The opening of the Eden Project in Cornwall was accompanied by the sound of *The Cornish Bagpipe*. *The Welsh Bagpipe* was revealed at Gwyl Bibau Pencader (Pencader Pipe Festival) in September, 2001.

Did these regionally distinct bagpipes truly exist? I can find no convincing evidence in favour, so the disciplined investigator’s starting point has to be: no. This will surely offend the enthusiasts who have thrown themselves vigorously into research, reconstruction and promotion of regional bagpipes, but the message cannot be made anything other than discouraging. The evidence upon which these bagpipe histories are based has been collected according to misconceptions, the arguments are naïve and conclusions mostly erroneous.

Bagpipes have contributed to music making for a very long time, possibly (probably?) originating in the countries around the Mediterranean, it can be reasonably estimated, more than two thousand years ago. It has been said that the Romans had a bagpipe, perhaps the instrument played by Nero, who perhaps piped rather than fiddled as Rome burned. That there was an early Italian bagpipe is not unlikely, although little of any worth has been published to support the idea. Even so, over-optimistic authors have extrapolated some very flimsy data to support a theory that the Romans (“therefore”) introduced the bagpipe into the British Isles.

The earliest evidence is in Roman times when it is described by Procopius as ‘the instrument of war in the Roman infantry.’ This has led to the belief in some quarters that the Romans introduced the bagpipe to Britain, and eventually to Scotland (*Piping Times*, 1992).

Grattan Flood employed similar irrational reasoning and shameless massage of texts and translations to suit his thesis in the opening lines of chapter 1 (*Origin of the bagpipe*).

“In the Lutheran version of the fourth chapter of the Book of Genesis (21st verse) we read that Jubal ‘was the father of fiddlers and *pipers*.’ This rude rendering, though undoubtedly intelligible enough in the sixteenth century, has been superseded by the revised translation of ‘such as handle the harp and organ’. At the same time it is necessary to point out that the term ‘pipe’ is a more satisfactory translation of the Hebrew *ugab* than ‘organ,’ inasmuch as *ugab* really means a pipe or bagpipe, or wind instrument in general, for which the German equivalent is ‘pfeife.’ Thus, in the very commencement of the world’s history, we find allusion to the ancient instrument which forms the subject of this present work”.

Today, we consider such nonsensical logic process to be quaint, perhaps worth reading in search of ammunition with which to discredit the work, but the Grattan Flood approach survives today where academic discipline is absent, and false histories continue to emerge and worse, find their way into print which imbues them with impressive but unwarranted authority. Until credible proof is produced, Roman, Welsh and Cornish bagpipes must be considered, like the *ugab*, to be no better than Victorian fancy.

The origin of the species

As far as we can tell, the bagpipe was not in common use in Northern Europe until the thirteenth century, when its existence in various forms may be inferred from its occurrence in art. By then, it and several previously unknown musical instruments (ancestors of the lute, shawm and fiddle) had been introduced from the Middle East by crusaders, pilgrims and other long distance travellers. Thereafter, it seems, the bagpipe followed a developmental process not unlike Darwinian evolution so that today numerous different national and regional types survive or have only recently become extinct. We have diversity today but no 'fossil record'. Instead, we must refer to a wealth of illustrations which show us what bagpipes might have looked like in the past, though they can never be entirely relied upon to convey structural accuracy or historical context. Collateral corroborative evidence is required.

Most bagpipe illustrations are found in art of one form or another, and the bagpipe historian must appreciate that the artist's purpose in most cases was his art, not realistic illustration.

“Art historians have gradually learned to accept the fact that 'realism' in the visual arts is an elusive phantasm. Potential iconographers of the performing arts, too, should realise that hardly any image can be taken at face value”.
(T.H. Heck in *Picturing Performance*, 1999).

We can find plenty of examples in which the construction of the bagpipe illustrated is impossible such as various tubes emerging from thoroughly inappropriate parts of the bag, finger holes drilled in the drone pipe or no blow-pipe with which to inflate the bag. Intelligent restraint, therefore, has to be a feature of the interpreter's discipline. Museum specimens of original instruments are very rare, indeed there are no extant medieval bagpipes to study, unless you count the hoaxworthy “Ancient highland pipes with the date 1409 carved on the stock” illustrated by our old friend Flood, and few others, or fragments thereof, survive from before the nineteenth century. Documentary records that accurately describe bagpipes and bagpipe practice in any useful detail are also relatively few or have yet to be discovered. Even then, they must be collated and the correct picture intelligently extracted.

In relatively recent times the Scottish national instrument has dominated international understanding of the bagpipe. In the minds of most people bagpipes are exclusively the Scottish species and the many others that still exist, remain relatively unacknowledged or even denigrated outside their native domain.

“...when bagpipes are mentioned everybody throughout the world thinks immediately of Scotland. This is just because we have developed the instrument to a higher degree than any other country, and our highland music is vastly superior to all other bagpipe music...” (*Piping Times*, 1992).

Other Celtic nations, for example Brittany and Galicia, have retained regional bagpipes and characteristic musical culture, if not with such worldwide renown as Scotland. Some Irish patriots, notably Grattan Flood, have raised their claim for indigenous bagpipes, but the Uilleann bagpipe may not be of native origin. Whatever its controversial origins, the Irish today have their national bagpipe. If other Celtic nations once had a truly native bagpipe tradition the memory of it is no more and documentary records nonexistent.

Translation and (mis)interpretation

Because the Scots refer to bagpipes as *the pipes* and themselves as *pipers*, the prefix *bag-* is habitually dropped in English language writing and conversation about bagpipes. However, it is important to realise that, besides the fact that bagpipes exist beyond Scotland, the words *pipes* and *pipers* had a range of different meanings in the past and that remains true today. A careless Internet search for bagpipe sites sometimes finds pages better suited to the taste of gentlemen affiliated to the Honourable Guild of Plumbers.

Recently, Welsh and Cornish enthusiasts have thoroughly searched their most ancient of documents and found references to *pipe*, *pipes* and *piper*, leaping to the erroneous conclusion that those terms were synonymous with *bagpipe*, *bagpipes* and *bagpiper*, much in the way that Grattan Flood did throughout his highly flawed book.

For example:

Wales (John Tose *Chanter*, 2001).

- Giraldus Cambrensis (1193) “The Welsh play three instruments, the harp the pipe and the crwth [*cithara, tibiae et chorus*].”
- Benjamin Hay, Lleine (*no date*): “Y tro diwetha y clywais i'r pipa cwd yng Nghwm Nedd oedd ym mriodas ych mamgu. Evan Gethin o Flaen Cwm Tawe oedd yno i wara nhw.” (The last time I heard the bagpipes in the Neath valley was at the wedding of your grandmother. Evan Gethin of Blaen Cwm Tawe was there to play them.)

Cornwall (Merv Davey *Chanter*, 1993-4).

- ORIGO MUNDI Part One of the Cornish Ordinalia, a three-part miracle play written in the late fourteenth century. “Arbath an tas menstrelda a ras pebough whare” In the name of the Father, minstrels of grace, pipe at once.
- Camborne churchwarden's accounts, 1550. “Paid to the piper in the play - 4d”.

Those *pipes* were not bagpipes and the Camborne *piper* was, I suspect, a local wait, a town musician. In the overwhelming majority of instances, the texts quoted as evidence for bagpipes in Wales and Cornwall has nothing to do with bagpipes, and in the few instances where the bag is mentioned, it provides little to support the existence of a peculiar Welsh or Cornish bagpipe tradition. Far from it; it usually means no more than that a bagpiper played his instrument in Wales or Cornwall.

An illustration of a bagpiper in a church is unlikely to be a portrait of a local musician. It is an image created by an artist who very likely got his design from a pattern book. There are church bench carvings illustrating two-chanter bagpipes in Cornwall, at Altarnun and Davidstow. They are not unique and similar instruments may be found all over Britain as well as hundreds of single chanter bagpipes (see *Galpin Society Journal*, 2001 & 2002), but the Altarnun and Davidstow examples have been used as the sole basis for two very different reconstructions entitled “The Cornish Bagpipe”. At present there is no reason to believe that they were real instruments and certainly no reason to consider them to represent *The Cornish Bagpipe*.



Altarnun



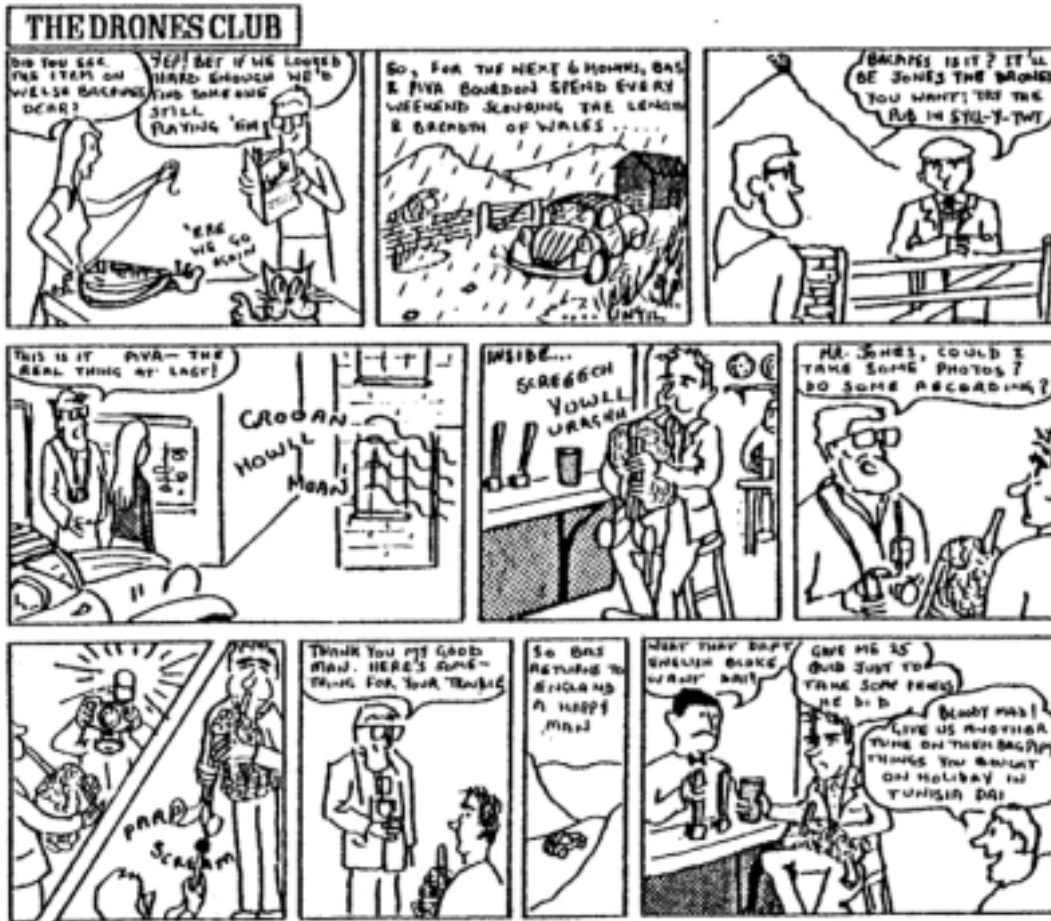
Davidstow

Similarly, conjectural Welsh bagpipes have been based on a badly damaged c.1500 carving showing a two-chanter instrument in the church at Llaneillian on Anglesey; a poor drawing in a seventeenth century manuscript (1610, by John Jones of Gellilyfdy, Flintshire) and a bagless remnant of what is probably one of the pan-Mediterranean bagpipes. It is inscribed “1701” which is presumed to be its date by those who prefer not to face the alternative possibility that it could be a fraudulent date or even a museum accession number!



Chanters of a “Welsh Bagpipe”

Dave VanDoorn hit the nail on the head years ago, presenting the argument in concise, cartoon form in the Bagpipe Society’s 1987 newsletter:¹



In medieval and renaissance Britain *pipe* often referred to any wind instrument and *pipes* was simply the plural of *pipe*. A *piper* was a player of wind instruments or, less obviously perhaps but very frequently found in civic records, a member of the town band, that is a wait. In the same way, German references to *pfeiffer* were not to players of the *düdelsack*, but to players of various pipes, shawm, flute - even trombone - and also a small transverse flute which we English would call the *fife* (from the German *pfeife*). A *pfeiffer* was also a *stadtpfeiffer*, a town piper, the equivalent of the British wait.

A *piper* might (just might) have been a player of the bagpipe, but if an author meant a bagpipe, the chances are his text would say so, and here is a rare Welsh example (again from John Tose) of what seems to be a bagpipe:

Teg yw'r Tai yn Nhref Cerfyrdin,
 O Heol Awst i Stryd y Brenin.
 A'r Back-pipes sy'n amla'n canu,
 I'r priodasau mwya'ng Nghymr

*Fair are the houses of Carmarthen town,
 From Heol Awst to King Street.
 And the bagpipes are most frequently played
 At the biggest weddings in Wales.*

Dafydd Thomas (1713?)

In other languages there is less risk of ambiguity because the bagpipe has its own names: dudy, gaita, chevrette, musa, biniou, chimpoi etc. Even so, occasional overlap of meaning is encountered. In early music circles *cornemuse* - a French bagpipe - can mean a wind-cap instrument (an uncurved crumhorn), and *zampogna* - an Italian bagpipe (its name has the same origin as *symphony*) - is applied to the hurdy-gurdy in Spain (*Zanfõña*), and the name *hurdy-gurdy* meant a street barrel organ in England in the days when its much older string namesake was declining to extinction.

Yes, nomenclature is complicated, and interpretation of documents rife with pitfalls into which the mission-driven, uncritical historian will willingly tumble. Translation is, of course, another deadly source of misinterpretation and academic historians have long been aware of the adage *Trudutore, tradittore* (meaning: to translate is to betray - which in itself is a translation!). The sackbut - the early trombone - and other western European instruments of the Renaissance were not really played in ancient Mesopotamia, although early translations of the Book of Daniel (chapter 3) seem to say so:

That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick . . .

The 16th century translator considered that a familiar term sackbut was a suitable name to give a foreign musical instrument unknown to himself and his readers. The sackbut or trombone was certainly a musical instrument in England then, but it was invented around 1450, not in 'Biblical times'. Today the *sambuca*, which was erroneously translated into sackbut, is reckoned to have been a sort of harp. Translation is an essential communication tool of the scholar of Gaelic history too and it should be used in a scholarly fashion. Both translator and reader must beware of foolish howlers.

Once a false history has been published, as is unfortunately the case with both Welsh and Cornish bagpipes, it becomes true history in the mind of the reader unless its foundation data are investigated, and its arguments and conclusions rigorously questioned.

Here, finally, is an example of how bagpipe pseudohistory has turned into authoritative tradition. I will not give the source because, shown a draft of this article, the author entirely agreed with my criticisms and immediately amended his text. [*annotations in square brackets are mine*].

Guide to Early Instruments: The Bagpipe.

From England, the Northumberland Pipe [*yes, almost lost, but recovered at the point of extinction*], the Leicestershire Smallpipe [*invented by its maker for his brother and subsequently supplied to numerous satisfied customers innocently establishing a bogus tradition*] and the Cornish bagpipe [*non-existent and also the basis of a bogus tradition - discussed above*]. From Ireland, the Uilleann pipes [*subject of sometimes heated discussion because, it can be argued, they are possibly an 18th century English invention*]. And Wales has its own bagpipe [*non-existent, ditto - discussed above*], probably [*how misused is this word, loaded as it is with implication of high probability!*] derived from the Pibcorn, a Welsh instrument [*only possibly, and pibcorn records come from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, later than claims for the old Welsh bagpipe*] similar to a small shawm [*untrue - it is a single reeded, double reed-pipe loosely belonging to the clarinet family,*

very suspiciously similar to those played in the Middle East and Balkans], which features cow horns for both the bell and the pirouette.

¹ In case the cartoon won't print - the text is a scrawl and may not be legible - here's some text as an alternative.

THE DRONES CLUB

Piva: Did you see the item on Welsh bagpiping, Dear?

Baz: Yep! I bet if we looked hard enough we'd find someone still playing 'em.
So, for the next six months, Baz and Piva Bourdon spend every weekend scouring the length and breadth of Wales until

Farmer: Bagpipes is it? It'll be Jones the drones you want; try the pub in Syll-y-twt.
Outside the pub. Groan, Howl, Moan!

Baz: This is it, Piva - the real thing at last.
Inside the pub. Screech, Yowll, Urrghh!

Baz: Mr Jones, could I take some photos and do some recording?
Flash! Parp, Scream!

Baz: Thank you, my good man, here's something for your trouble.
So, Baz returns to England a happy man.

Landlord: What that daft English bloke want, Dai?

Jones the Drones: Gave me 25 quid to take some photos he did.

Drinker: Bloody mad! Give us another tune on those bagpipy things you bought on holiday in Tunisia, Dai.

Archived from <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/attadale/merryweather/pdfs/regionalbags.pdf> and originally published as: Merryweather, J.W. (2002); "Regional Bagpipes: History or Bunk?"; English Folk Dance and Song Society Newsletter; Summer 2002, pp. 9–12