

An Litir Bheag

le Ruairidh MacIlleathain

An Litir Bheag is a shortened and simplified version of Ruairidh's Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh (also available on the BBC website), designed for those who are at an earlier stage of learning Gaelic. The topic each week is the same as Litir do Luchd-ionnsachaidh so that, once the Litir Bheag is mastered, a student of the language might wish to try the full Litir. This is Litir Bheag 751 (which corresponds to Litir 1,055). Ruairidh can be contacted at roddy.maclean@bbc.co.uk.

A few years ago, I told you about the Fairy Flag of Clan MacLeod. Now, I have to admit this to you. I hadn't seen the flag until recently when I went around Dunvegan Castle on the Isle of Skye.

The flag wasn't as beautiful as I had expected. It's in a poor condition. There are many holes in it. But it is still powerful, at least in the minds of MacLeods throughout the world.

I'm saying 'she' because, to me, the word 'bratach' is feminine. I'd call it the Bratach Shìth. But the castle folk call it the Bratach Sìth, as if the word bratach were masculine. Perhaps it is in the Dunvegan dialect, I don't know.

Anyhow, the flag has an unusual and strange appearance. Textile experts tell us it came from Syria or Rhodes in the fourth century after Christ. It's made of silk.

The twenty-seventh MacLeod chief took the flag to London on one occasion. An expert examined it. He said he thought it might be the flag that the Scandinavian king, Harald Hadrada, took home with him. Harald had been marauding in the Middle East.

O chionn grunn bhliadhnaichean, dh'inns mi dhuibh mun Bhrataich Shìth no Fairy Flag aig Clann 'ic Leòid. Nise, feumaidh mi seo aideachadh dhuibh. Cha robh mi air a' bhratach fhaicinn gu o chionn ghoirid nuair a chaidh mi timcheall Caisteal Dhùn Bheagain anns an Eilean Sgitheanach.

Cha robh a' bhratach cho brèagha 's a bha mi an dùil. Tha i ann an droch staid. Tha tuill gu leòr innte. Ach tha i fhathast cumhachdach, co-dhiù ann an inntinn Leòdach air feadh an t-saoghail.

Tha mi ag ràdh 'i' oir, dhòmhsa, tha am facal 'bratach' boireanta. 'S e 'A' Bhratach Shìth' a chanainn rithe. Ach tha muinntir a' chaisteil a' gabhail 'Am Bratach Sìth' oirre, mar gu bheil am facal *bratach* fireanta. 'S dòcha gu bheil ann an dualchainnt Dhùn Bheagain, chan eil fhios a'm.

Co-dhiù, tha coltas annasach, iongantach air a' bhrataich. Tha eòlaichean clò ag innse dhuinn gun tàinig i à Siria no Eilean Rhodes anns a' cheathramh linn an dèidh Chrìosda. Tha i air a dèanamh de shìoda.

Thug an seachdamh ceann-cinnidh Leòdach air fhichead a' bhratach a Lunnainn turas. Thug eòlaiche sùil oirre. Thuirt esan gun robh e dhen bheachd gur dòcha gur i a' bhratach a thug an Rìgh Lochlannach, Harald Hadrada, dhachaigh leis. Bha Harald air a bhith ri spùinneadh anns an Ear-mheadhanach.

'Be quiet,' said the MacLeod chief, 'the flag was given to my ancestors by the fairies!'

But how did the MacLeods get the flag from the fairies? Well, there are four different stories. Here is the first one. A MacLeod chief went to the Holy Land as part of the Crusades. He met a hermit in a pass in the mountains. The hermit warned him that an evil female spirit was living at the summit of the pass. She would kill any man who was a true believer.

Well, the MacLeod went forward and he killed the spirit. Before she died, she asked him to take with him the cloth that she worn around her waist as a girdle, and to make a flag of it. And that's the Fairy Flag.

'Ist,' thuirt an ceann-cinnidh Leòdach, 'chaidh a' bhratach a thoirt do mo shinnsirean leis na sìthichean!'

Ach ciamar a fhuair na Leòdaich a' bhratach bho na sìthichean? Uill, tha ceithir diofar stòiridhean ann. Seo agaibh a' chiad sgeul. Chaidh ceann-cinnidh Leòdach a-null don Tìr Naoimh mar phàirt de Chogaidhean na Croise. Thachair e ri aonaran ann am bealach anns na beanntan. Thug an t-aonaran rabhadh dha gun robh spiorad boireann olc a' fuireach air mullach a' bhealaich. Bhiodh i a' marbhadh duine sam bith a bha na fhìor chreidmheach.

Uill, chaidh an Leòdach air adhart, agus mharbh e an spiorad. Mus do chaochail i, dh'iarr i air an clò a bha timcheall a meadhain mar chrios a thoirt leis, agus bratach a dhèanamh dheth. Agus 's e sin a' Bhratach Shìth.