

Narrowing Down the Relationships of Barra R1b-L165

By Alex Buchanan

We are entering a new phase in our understanding of the history of the R1b Barra MacNeils and their neighbouring related clans, or parts of clans. The recent discovery of new SNPs (definitive Y-DNA markers) has allowed us to see the MacLeods, the MacDonalds, the Buies and other L165 families from a MacNeil perspective. Our closest known relatives, beyond Barra, are the Buies of Jura and the MacDonalds of Sutherland. The MacLeods are more distantly related, despite their long and close association with the MacNeils. The most recent common ancestor of both the MacNeils and the MacLeods lived not later than about 600 AD. We might wonder if the progenitors of these two clans arrived in Scotland more or less together, having come from the same homeland region somewhere in north-western Europe. Or was it just coincidence that the only two major L165 clans should have taken up clan-lands so close to each other?

It is possible to estimate the time that has elapsed since other family lines branched off from the MacNeil line by using the degree of divergence between their Y-DNA signatures. Other L165 families who branched off before about 600 AD almost all have Germanic, Anglo-Saxon or English surnames indicating that the branching occurred somewhere in what is now Germany, and some of these families must have migrated to England. At about 600 AD the MacNeils had a common ancestor with an Olofsson family that later lived in the Norse part of Sweden, indicating that the proto-MacNeil lineage was by then probably in or near Scandinavia. After about 1000 AD Scottish surnames appear among the related families, indicating that the MacNeil ancestor had crossed to Scotland. Among these is a MacDonald family of Caithness, and another family from Orkney probably branches off about the same time.

Moving forward in time and coming down the west coast of Scotland, we find that the L165 MacDonalds of Sutherland (not paternally related to the main MacDonald Clan) share an ancestor with the MacNeils not later than about 1300 AD, this approximately coincides with the Battle of Largs which, together with the Treaty of Perth in 1266, marked the end of Norwegian rule in the Hebrides. Although the islands had been part of the Kingdom of Norway, local control was in the hands of the MacDonalds of Islay, vassals of the Norwegian King. The Islay MacDonalds, the long-established Lords of the Isles, adjusted uneasily to their new life under the close watch of the King of Scotland and his adherents, and in 1493 the Lordship was abolished, further reducing the power of the MacDonalds. It is very likely that the MacNeils and other Viking-derived clans supported the MacDonalds in their attempts to maintain the status quo and to resist the pressure from the crown.

The last closely related non-Barra family or clan is the Buies of Jura, they branched off about 1400 AD. The Buies have a tradition that they originated

from a fair-haired lad who visited their island but did not stay. Could he have been also the progenitor of the Barra MacNeils? Jura is directly opposite Gigha, could the line of descent have passed through the MacNeils of Gigha? Tradition has it that the Gigha MacNeils and the Barra MacNeils descend from two brothers; but they would have to have been half brothers with different fathers if the story is true, because the Gigha MacNeils are not L165. However, this would explain the origin of the surname in Barra.

The L165 MacNeils of Barra fall into two distinct families, one of which includes the chiefly lineage, and the other appears to be ordinary clansmen. These two families split off from each other about 1400 AD and there is no evidence yet of any earlier branches in the wider family, unless earlier branches have become extinct. The McMullins of Barra split off about the same time. This suggests that the L165 Barra MacNeils became established in Barra about 23 generations ago (about 1400 AD). This date is approximate because it relies on generation-to-generation mutations in the Y-DNA which occur at random and it is calculated on the basis of 25 years per generation which may be too few.

The earliest written record mentioning the MacNeils of Barra is the 1427 Charter of Barra and Boisdale in which the Lord of the Isles granted these lands to MacNeil of Barra, probably in recognition of services rendered. In the years following their settlement in Barra the MacNeil chiefs continued to support the MacDonalds of Islay. In 1545 an attempt was made to reinstate the Lordship of the Isles and Gilleonan MacNeil of Barra was one of the councillors, so also was the MacNeil chief of Gigha.

Since that time the Barra MacNeils lived in relative isolation, that is until the waves of emigration carried so many off to eastern Canada about 200 years ago.

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