

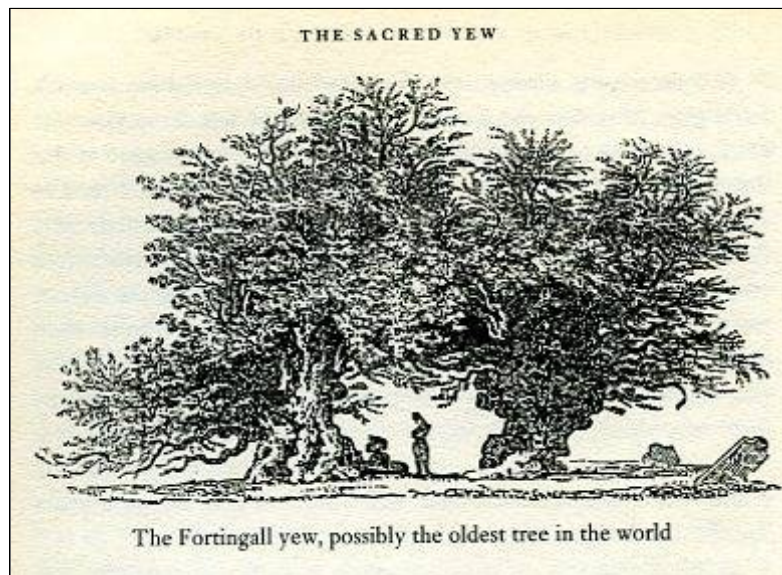
# A LIVING LEGEND

by Allen Meredith

## The History and Mythology of the Fortingall Yew

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It is difficult to know where to begin when writing about something that I consider has been living for over 5000 years, and could be one of the oldest living trees in the world.



## **I** **My first visit to the Fortingall Yew** **Saturday 21st September 1986**

I found it protected behind a wall and it could only be viewed through railings. I had some difficulty locating the key and was only allowed inside when I had explained the purpose of my visit. I was then able to spend a considerable time examining the current state of the yew.

Looking at Jacob George Strutt's engraving of 1825 (below p3) which shows a funeral procession about to walk through the separated portions of yew, it is clear that when Pennant and Barrington measured the yew over 200 years ago, it was not only already completely hollow but had also separated into two. They measured around the whole thing and found it 52 feet and 56½ feet in girth, probably an accurate record, if somewhat misleading in that most of the tree was missing. When this tree was fairly intact perhaps a thousand years ago or more, a measurement of about 40 feet would have probably been accurate.

Part of the original bole could be seen, a few bits only inches high and protruding from the earth. From one portion of the old trunk to the other the separation or gap is about eight feet, so there is very slow movement of separation since 1825, for the gap then was quite substantial, though more of the tree existed. Large portions in some instances must have been taken away.

According to records, in the last 200 years, fires had been lit inside the hollow cavity and souvenir hunters had taken samples of the yew. No wonder so much of it has disappeared.

The larger of the two fragments, which you can walk around, is approximately 20 feet 6 ins in girth. This fragment has taken on a great deal of new growth, so much so that it has the look of a separate tree from the other fragment. The smaller fragment of old trunk is quite impossible to measure as it grows right up against the enclosure wall. I was however able to record a rough measurement around both trunks at about 48 feet.

On the other side of the wall, outside of the enclosure, grows a female yew, certainly over 100 years old. Its berries drop frequently on to the old yew, yet there are no yew seedlings inside the enclosure or near the old portions of yew. I make this observation because looking from outside the wall, it might be possible to mistake the tree as both male and female, since berries drop and stick on the male yew needles.

The Fortingall Yew is in a n/w direction in the churchyard, for me this supports its vast age and connects it with the Neolithic period. Various experts have put the age of this yew at around 3,000 years, but I would look far beyond that figure.

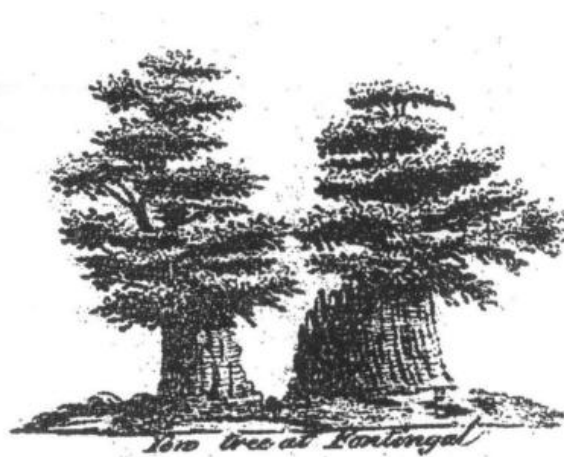
The yew in my opinion has probably existed on this site for over 5,000 years and the site is undoubtedly Neolithic or Stone Age. This yew appears to be unique in Scotland, so it must occupy a very special sacred site. I cannot believe that this ancient yew is merely a remnant from a prehistoric forest.

The conclusion I draw from my studies is that it was planted on this ground by some special hand to mark the burial site of an important person, and thus the ground became sacred and hallowed.

## 2 Past records of the Fortingall Yew

“The earliest notice of this remarkable relic of many generations is by Pennant, the famed traveller, and by the Honourable Daines Barrington, a barrister, afterwards a Judge on the English Bench, who seem to have stumbled on it about the same year (1769).”

(Hutchison-1890)



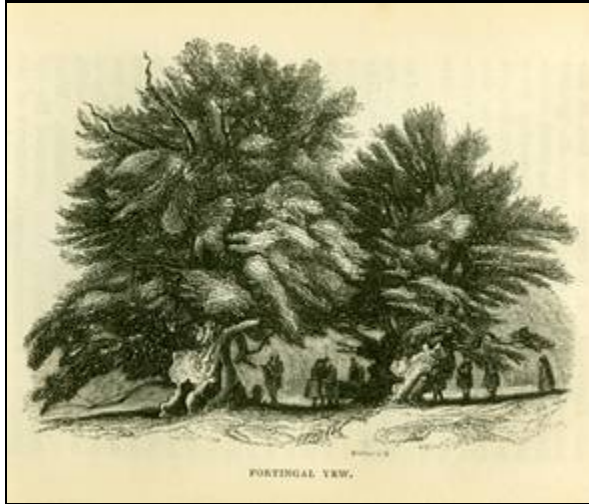
### Daines Barrington - *Philosophical Transactions* 1769

“I measured the circumference of this yew twice, and therefore cannot be mistaken when I inform you that it amounted to fifty-two feet. Nothing scarcely now remains but the outward bark, which hath been separated by the centre of the tree’s decaying within these twenty years. What still appears, however, is 34 feet in circumference.”

**Thomas Pennant - *A Tour in Scotland* 1771**

Pennant's 'Tour' published in 1771, states that in the churchyard of Fortingall "there is the remains of a prodigious yew, 56 ½ feet in circumference,"—"the middle part is now decayed to the ground. but within memory was united to the height of 3 feet; Captain Campbell of Glenlyon having assured me, that when a boy he had often climbed over, or rode over, the connecting part."

**Jacob George Strutt - *Sylva* 1825**



The Great Yew at Fortingall in Strutt's *Sylva Britannica* (p.136). There appear to be several versions of this engraving.

"It is now however decayed to the ground, and completely divided into two distinct stems, between which the funeral processions were formerly accustomed to pass. It is impossible to ascertain its age; but judging from its present state and appearance, it is not too much to suppose that its date is contemporary with that of Fingal himself, whose descendents the highlanders in its vicinity are fond of styling themselves."

**Dr. Patrick Neil - *Edinburgh Philosophical Transactions/Journal* 1833**

"Considerable spoliations have evidently been committed on the tree since 1769. Large arms have been removed, and masses of the trunk carried off by the country people with a view to making quechs or drinking-cups and other relics. What still exists of the trunk now presents the appearance of a semi-circular wall. Great quantities of new spray have issued from the firmer parts of the bark, and a few young branches spring upwards to the height, perhaps, of 30 feet. The side of the trunk now existing gives a diameter of more than 15 feet, so that it is easy to conceive that the circumference of the bole, when entire, should have exceeded 50 feet."

**Rev Robert MacDonald - *The Topographical Statistical and Historical Gazetteer of Scotland* 1841**

"At the commencement of my incumbency, 32 years ago, in 1806, there lived in the village of Kirkton of Fortingall an old man of the name of Donald Robertson, then upwards of eighty years of age, who declared that when a boy going to school he could hardly enter between the two parts of the trunk; now several yards separate them."

The Rev. Robert MacDonald, parish minister of Fortingall in 1838, wrote that the dilapidation was caused by the boys of the village kindling fires at its root or kindling their fires at Baeltainn within the hollow trunk. Sir Robert Christison had this information verified by Dr. Irvine of Pitlochry, who is a grandson of a former owner of the Fortingall burying-ground, Stewart of Garth. His mother often told him, when she was a girl, about the year 1785, she could with difficulty squeeze through the gap; and that her father at the time built the wall to protect the tree from dilapidation.

## **Dr. De Candolle**

De Candolle, had information about this yew dating from 1831. His method for measuring and computing its growth led him to state its age as between 2500 and 2600 years in 1770. He called it a veteran of European vegetation.

## **G. & P. Anderson—*Guide to the highlands and islands of Scotland, including Orkney and Zetland—1842***

“The churchyard is remarkable for the remains of an enormous yew-tree, which furnished many a goodly bow when the weapon formed a part of a Scotsman’s armoury.....About a century ago, the trunk was single, and measured fifty-six feet; now it presents the appearance of two stems, about twelve feet high; of these the largest, which is quite hollow, is twenty feet in girth. Though so much decayed in the core, it is completely sprouted over with young branches.”

## **Sir Robert Christison - *Trans Botanical Society Edinburgh, 1870***

“Little information as to its rate of growth is to be got from sections of the Yew itself. On many parts of the shell and the branch, the rates varied from one inch in 48 to one inch in 60, 68, 70, and 90 years. None of these rates could be reasonably taken as denoting the growth of the trunk for more than its last hundred years of life. It is better to use the general rules arrived at, according to which the tree in the first place is assumed to have attained a girth of 22ft. in a thousand years, after that age no information yet warrants a rate of more than one inch (circumference) in thirty-five years.”

Christison estimated the Fortingall Yew to be over 4000 years old.

## **Journal of Forestry 1882 - *Curious and Historic Trees***

“The great tree in Fortingall churchyard spanned the pathway with its gaping trunk, and the funerals of highlanders bourne to the grave passed through the opening under an archway of overshadowing foliage. It was a common practice for mourners in funeral processions to gather yew boughs at the gate of the graveyard, and these were bourne along and finally held over the coffin and then placed upon it in the grave.”

The placing of yew sprigs in the grave is a solemn burial rite and enables passage and protection of the soul/spirit to the otherworld. This dates back to prehistoric times and evidence of yew has been found in Neolithic burials.

## **Robert Hutchison - *A few notes from Old and Remarkable YewTrees in Scotland – 1890***

“The well-known and frequently quoted Fortingall Yew has naturally been visited and examined..... This aged and now sadly dilapidated patriarch has formed the subject of much controversy amongst botanists and scientists as to its age, and it has, by eminent authorities, been credited with an antiquity far beyond that of any other tree in Britain, and has been thought indeed by no less an authority than De Candolle as possibly ‘the most venerable specimen of vegetation in Europe’.”

“One of the portions of the trunk bears now a vigorous head clad with healthy foliage and 16 feet in height; and the other a fine crop of branchlets and larger arms, very healthy, and upwards of 24 feet in height. Outside the enclosing wall is a vigorous young yew, which may be either a seedling of the old veteran, or the product of some surface root from the old trunk, with a cylindrical trunk, somewhat grooved, 53 inches in girth at five feet from the ground.” (It is unlikely to be either since the Fortingall Yew is male)

“The village of Fortingall lies at the entrance to Glenlyon, one of the most lovely and picturesque of all Scottish glens, a few miles to the west of Aberfeldy, in Perthshire, and just north of Loch Tay. Apart from beauty of situation. Fortingall is of some historic importance. It is possible that it was the birth place of Pontius Pilate: The story goes that his father was one of the ambassadors sent by Caesar Augustus to the Scots. Perhaps peace treaties took as long to arrange in those days as they do now; at any rate, while the meeting was taking place between the ambassadors and King Metellanus, Pontius Pilate was supposed to have been born at Fortingall. Later the village was certainly in the centre of the country of the famous and bloodthirsty Wolf of Badenoch in the fourteenth century, that robber baron who harried far and wide in the centre of Scotland.

To-day the Yew stands in a stone enclosure, which makes it difficult to see and even more difficult to photograph. Two arcs of the shell remain—one on the south side, a mere rim of old bark, 3 feet in length and the same in height, from which one large limb about 9 feet westwards, and the other on the north, much more solid and imposing with two, what might now be called main trunks, but which must have originally been secondary growths, forming quite an imposing tree with an excellent canopy of green above. The circumference of the larger mass at the ground is about 20 feet, and the widest line between the two remaining arcs is slightly over 18 feet, which more than bears out the original measurement of over 50 feet in girth. These measurements have been kindly confirmed by the Rev. William Campbell of Fortingall.”

### **3 Significant place names**

There are many names in the Fortingall area that would seem to link the yew to a long-standing sacred site. One is a farmhouse called Duneaves, described as opposite the church of Fortingall. Professor W.J Watson, an expert on Celtic Literature, observes that the name Duneaves means “house of the nemed.” This word derives from the same root as nemeton, meaning a sacred enclosure, and nemus, translated in Sylva as indicating a wood or tree. So we might surmise that in ancient times this was not only a sacred site, but more importantly that a sacred tree existed on that site.

In a recent correspondence with Mike Strachan, who works in the area for the Forestry Commission, Mike was aware of “an old turf wall that is still visible from aerial photographs. This covers an area of about 3 acres around the site, and might be the nemeton that you refer to.”

Other place-names in and around Fortingall most certainly appear to indicate not only a sacred site, but a most sacred tree:

The etymology of nearby Coshieville confirms that *cos a bhile*, comes from the Gaelic, meaning ‘at the foot of the sacred tree.’ The ‘bile’ indicates a sacred tree, not just any tree, but almost certainly a tribal tree at the centre of some tribal territory. Local place-names such as Coshieville and Tullochville, indicate that a ‘bile’ or sacred tree was, or is, in the vicinity. *Walking in Scotland* 2001 Page 165

Mike Strachan adds the following: “Coshieville, or more correctly *cas a bhile*, means at the foot of a sacred tree, and probably more note worthy is a place name in Fortingall of Magh or *achadh a bhile* – the field of the sacred tree.”

In *Chronicum Scottorum*, A.D.825 it is written that at a place called Magh-Bhile or ‘Field of the Ancient Tree’, an ancient yew existed on this site. This site was regarded as ‘Fidh-nemedh’ or ‘sacred tree’.

Mike writes that “Fortingall is probably derived from Fothercill, meaning the cell beside the forther, fort or dun. Immediately to the north of the village is An Dun geal – the white fort. Therefore, the suggestion that a monks cell existed at this location is probably correct.”

Other place names which may be of significance in the vicinity of Fortingall are Dun-Fother, Fother-dun, Fionn-lairig-Tir, Artair-Sithchaifionn and Dail Chiarain.

## 4 Traditions

When it comes to traditions, there are similarities between Ireland and Scotland with an inter-mingling of ideas.

### **Carn nam Marbh...The Mount of the Dead**

It is said that on the Samhain Festival a fire was built on this Bronze age Barrow, situated at the head of Glen Lyon.....Brian Taylor; (*Exploring the Supernatural*, Nov. 1986)

“A ceremony which was still being held at Fortingall in Perthshire into the early part of this century offers us a glimpse of this much earlier Celtic culture. Held somewhat unusually on November 11<sup>th</sup> the bonfire was a communal effort built on a low hill known locally as ‘The Mound of the Dead’ in reference to a local legend, which claimed that it marked the site of a plague pit, though the truth was more interesting than this. This mound is, in fact a Bronze Age tumulus and Samhain was always closely associated with such burial mounds, for it was believed that they were entrances to the ‘otherworld’.”

It appears that bits of the yew wood from Fortingall may have been used to light fires during the festivals of Samhain and Beltan (biletain). Apparently on Samhain (Old Hallows Eve- 11<sup>th</sup> November) a huge bonfire was built on a huge mound, made of furze and sticks, the people held hands and danced around the blazing fire and boys ran into the fields with burning faggots.

This story seems to indicate that in recent centuries bits of the yew may have been used by boys as fire brands, not realising the sacredness of the occasion, and that the yew sticks, brands and wands were meant for a ceremonial purpose and would have been used sparingly as in druidic times. Only on some great occasion would these yew sticks have been used, in a similar manner to runes, as it was the casting of these sticks, and the making of yew wands and talismans that the runes eventually came from. The very origin of ‘rune’ is linked with words like secret, magic, and mystery.

A verse as early as A.D. 610.... illustrates an early connection between the yew and Samhain:

“At Samhain, beneath my Yew tree, he said to me-a saying greivous (to hear) that I should not (be allowed to) remain in Ireland if I would not leave Druim Diolair.”

We also have the following from *Silva Gadelica*, p245; S.H. O’Grady,trans:

“Patriarch of long-lasting woods is the yew,  
sacred to feasts as is well known”... “Sinnser feda fois/ibar na fled fis.”

### **Pontius Pilate**

Tradition has it that when Pilate’s father was a Roman officer of high standing, his camp was in the area of the Fortingall Yew, and his son Pontius Pilate was born and brought up in the Fortingall area. According to legend Pilate was supposed to have carved his initials on the tree and returned to Fortingall to die and be buried there. While this may only be the stuff of legend, there was certainly a Roman legion in that area.

### **T. Hunter - *Guide to Perthshire*; Evidence of Roman intrusions in the Fortingall area:** a few notes:

“Famed Fortingall, whose aged yew  
Still braves the tempest’s storm.”

“Even apart from its ‘aged yew’, Fortingall is a place of very great interest, as here are the most northern known works of the Romans, and many valuable discoveries have been made bearing upon the Roman invasion of the country.

The remains of the Roman Camp are pointed out by all the natives, with no small pride, although it requires some examination to trace its outline.

The camp is traditionally said to have been formed by Aricola. who fought a battle with the Caledonians in the neighbourhood. Many interesting Roman remains have been found from time to time in and about the site of the camp. Of these may be mentioned a Roman standard, the shaft of which encloses a five fluted spear. and which is preserved at Troup House. In the praetorium of the camp was found a vase of curious mixed metal, and in a shape resembling a coffee-pot. This was found about 1733, and is preserved in Taymouth Castle. Of late years a number of urns and flint-arrows have been picked up, in and around the camp.”

See also Appendix II



## **Mons Graupius.....at Fortingall?**

The location of 'Mons Graupius' has never been positively identified and has been the source of endless debate among archaeologists and historians. We do know that this was a great battle during the early period of Roman occupation. The following notes may throw some new light on it.

*Horae Britannicae* Volume 1 p106 1818

The forces of Aricola encountered the Britons under their brave prince Galgacus, or Gallawg, who was most probably a Strath-Clyde chief renowned for his great prowess. This battle, which Tacitus has minutely described was fought at the foot of the Grampian Hills at a place called Forten-Gall camp, sixteen miles from Perth. Ten thousand men, according to the Roman account, were left dead on the field before Galgacus retired from the fight. The Romans lost just a few hundred men.

Magnus Magnusson - *Scotland* (2000)

Notes from pages 14-17:

"In A.D.78 the newly -appointed Governor of the Province of Britannia, Julius Aricola, turned his mind to an invasion of Scotland. With his son-in-law the historian Tacitus, who wrote in A.D.98 an account of the campaigns in Scotland in his *Life of Aricola*:

"Then the two legions joined forces and marched up to the Firth of Tay. By A.D.82, Aricola had subdued the Norantae in the south-west and secured the occupation of Scotland below the Central Belt.

Aricola's strategy was to bring the Caledonians, under their Leader Galgacus to pitched battle. In the late summer of A.D.84, the strategy succeeded. The locations of Aricola's marching camps suggest that he cut across country from Stonehaven into Morayshire along the line of the modern A96 to Inverurie and Huntly; and there, somewhere in the north-east, at a place which Tacitus called Mons Graupius (the 'Graupian Mountain') the two sides met for the final battle.

More than thirty thousand of the Caledonian tribesmen had gathered in close packed tiers on the slope of a hill. Ten thousand tribesmen were said by Tacitus to have perished, at a cost of only 360 Roman dead.

Galgacus fought the Romans around A.D.84 at Grampius Badon near Tay."

There is a traditional view that Fortingall represents the centre of Scotland. I agree with Professor Watson, who believed that the yew at Fortingall represented the centre of some tribal territory.

In correspondence with Mike Strachan, Mike notes that:

"1 Historically, trade routes travelled east/west and Fortingall would have been at the cross roads of trade. This is also true if you consider that there must also have been north/south trade as well.

2 Fortingall lies at almost the geographical centre of Scotland.

3 Approximately 4 miles due east is the ancient stone circle of Croftmoraig (circa 3500 years old). However, of more interest is a recently discovered burial chamber to the north of the stone circle. This pre-dates the circle, on the basis that it occupies a prime site where key hills are perfectly framed from its centre.

4 Crannogs have existed on Loch Tay for at least 2500 years, and to date at least 18 sites have been found. These could be related to the fact that there was a prime site of pagan worship nearby.

There therefore appears to be significant historical information pointing to people both living and trading in the area for at least 3500 years. If this is the case, was the Fortingall yew a focus of a pilgrimage, and if so, it was hardly a gooseberry bush that people were going to worship!!!"



## 5 Myth and Legend and the Fortingall Yew

The words ‘myth’ and ‘legend’ conjure up pictures of beings from a bygone era, of stories handed down containing larger than life characters whose existence is unknown or unproven. These should not be dismissed as just stories, since time and again they have been shown to be either related to historical fact, or are stories told as a way of explaining the origin of some of our present customs.

### The yew as a legendary figure?

In the case of the Fortingall yew, its very age takes us far back into the time when story telling was one of the ways of making sense of the world and perhaps helps us understand why this tree was protected and has survived for so long. It is my opinion that such accounts, while not strictly factual, must contain elements from true accounts. In some stories there are characters with the capacity to live for thousands of years. For example in the Irish manuscripts called the *Four Masters*, the reign of the King, Ollamh Fodhla, began in 3883 and his death was said to be B.C. 1277, making his reign over 2000 years. Then there is the legendary figure of Eochaidh Ollathair, who at times appears to be some divine personage. If this king were still alive today, he would be at least 5800 years old, which could be comparable to the age of the Fortingall Yew. Is it possible that in some of these stories the Fortingall Yew was the legendary figure being spoken about; that the Fortingall Yew, because of its sacred presence spanning thousands of years, might have been regarded as a ‘god’ or a supernatural being?

In the extract from *Clannada na Gadelica* below, the character of Finn is connected with a yew tree, since both have the capacity to span thousands of years of history.

“Finn was associated with the Yew for several reasons. They range from lore, to custom, and even appearance. From the lore we see Finn, in one manifestation or another peering out from Celtic cultures other than Gaelic, as well as the Gaelic. He is known in the lore as Find, Fintan, Fingan, Finn, Fionn, Finnbennach, Findhbarra, and as will be shown below, as Amhairghin. As a pan-Celtic deity he is the archetypal seer and poet. The toxicology and psychotropic properties of Yew spores may very well give some insight into possible activities of the cult of Finn. His Otherworld associations are beyond question. If there is a shamanic character within Gaelic lore, then that character is Finn. One tale, from Donegal even deposits he and his Grandmother directly in a Yew tree, as they hide from Cumhal MacArt (*Irish Folk Tales, The Birth of Finn MacCumhail*, edited by Henry Glassie). **In some literary items from Ireland, the longevity of Finn is attested to as he saw the whole history of Ireland, as trees go, only the Yew could fit this as Yews lived several thousands of years. There are also extremely important customs that relate Finn to the Yew as well.** In times past, people planted Yew trees in grave yards as attested to by the frequency of Yew in the older grounds.”

### Fortingall and Fionn mac Cumhaill

An interesting comment comes from W.J. Watson in his *Celtic Place names of Scotland*:

“The Fortingall Yew at the entrance to Glen Lyon. This place-name is understood as ‘fort,’ from Gaelic Fartairchill, in old records Forterkill. The fort stands on a commanding bluff near the church, and is known as the ‘White Fort,’ traditionally the residence of the legendary figure ‘Fionn mac Cumhaill.’”

The above notes by Watson could be of great significance, for both the legendary figures of Arthur and Fionn mac Cumhaill may have direct links to the Fortingall Yew.

### Fortingall and Arthurian names

Links with Arthurian legends are found here in the local place-names. From the Inverness Trans Gaelic volume 1887-8 we have:

“After the Glen Turret battle Arthur struck Loch Tay, and round it by the west or Killin end. He has there, on the north side of the loch, the place-name of Tir Artair, ‘Arthur’s Land’ and this land embraces the predomontary of Fionn-Lairvig. The next place-name trace of him which we find in this Grampian region is at Fortingall. The mountain stream from Sithchaillionn, which passes the old Castle of Garthen on its course to the Lyon, and separates the districts of Appin and Fortingall.” Other names linked with Arthur, which have in the past referred to ‘yew’ are Uthur, Iuthair, Artair and Iubhair.



## Fortingall and Fintan

I need to explain that Fionn means ‘white’ and tan means ‘red’ and that both words seem to refer to a sacred tree. The legendary Irish figure ‘Fintan’ (Fionntan), is known traditionally as the ‘Salmon of Knowledge’, a translation of ‘eo feassa’. I consider ‘eo’ to be yew and that Fintan might therefore be translated as the ‘Yew of Knowledge’.

A more crucial element here is the emphasis on white, as in ancient times this represented a most sacred tree, and perhaps the most sacred tree of all, the “deva daru” – the Himalayan ‘Tree of God’.

I now return to the word ‘nemed’, which refers to a sacred sanctuary. The word nemed has many variations, found not only in nemeton, nemus and numen, but also in Fioneimeo and Fidhneimhedh – with Fion and Fidh appearing to indicate a ‘sacred tree’. (In all the ancient Irish Glossaries and modern dictionaries, nemus translated is Sylva, indicating wood or tree).

## Fortingall and Fingall

The legendary figure Fingall is in a way similar to Arthur and Fionn MacCummail. Local tradition indicates that Fingall lived near Drummond Hill, not far from Fortingall at Loch Tay.

In *Twilight of the Celtic Gods* by David Clark and Andy Roberts, there is an article on *The Stones of the Crooked Glen*. A few notes from this article are relevant to the legendary Fingal and the Yew:

“A strong tradition in the valley associates them with Fionn MacCummail, a hero god king (also known as Fingal), who kept the peace in a far-off age not only in the Highlands but also across the Irish Sea. Fionn is really another form of the Celtic Lugh, and Glen Lyon was, say the old tales, his home and the ruins were manned by his 9,000 warriors. A large standing stone in a field at Killin (Cill-Fhinn-‘cell of Fingal’) is supposed to mark Fionn’s final resting place. In Celtic mythology the gods and goddesses were always of huge size, and this belief survives in folk traditions.

In the village of Fortingall, pairs of strange shaped stones, which resemble lions or fantastic creatures from mythology, can be found guarding gateposts at Glen Lyon house and the parish church itself.”



## 6 SUMMARY

I had for many years looked forward to my visit of the Fortingall Yew. When I eventually saw the tree, I was a little dismayed and disappointed to see it caged and bricked up, and once inside its walled enclosure, I could see quite clearly the damage and depredation it had suffered over recent centuries: and still bits of its limbs chopped about by ignorant individuals, who deem it to be 'tree surgery.' Surgery, should never be applied to ancient yews, especially the Fortingall tree. Enormous quantities of its wood must have been removed over the centuries, in doing so removing something of the sanctity of the site, and the character and atmosphere of the yew and its surroundings.



On a more positive note, this tree has miraculously survived hurricane storms, world wars and us, and now, in 2005 it is recognised once more by many people as an ancient living being.

The significance of place names permeates this writing, but one of the most important, which may eventually uncover something of the origin of this yew, is the River Lyon, which takes its name from an old god/goddess, known in various terms as Lug, Lleu, Og, Ug, etc.

Coincidentally one of the oldest yews in Wales overlooks the River Lug at Discoed in Powys.

We do know that somewhere in Scotland was a *medionemeton*, (a Middle Sanctuary) thought to have been located near the Antonine Wall. Another coincidence is that at Runnymede where there is an ancient yew a 'nemeton' was suppose to have existed and this is noted on an ancient world geographical map.

For the future of the yew, I think it advisable, with safeguards, to allow it more freedom and to be seen more clearly, then leave it to nature for its decay and regeneration without human interference.

Some time ago I wrote a paper called, *Arthur and the Yew Cult*, which dealt with great legendary chiefs called Ceann Arthur and Eochaid Ollathair, showing many similarities with other legendary figures featured in this article. Could it be that there is a link here, and that a king or chief may in fact have referred to some sacred tree, and that beyond the realms of all possibilities it could be the Fortingall Yew, in ancient times looked upon as a chief of the tribe?

If it is true that ancient long-lived trees were sometimes looked upon as 'gods', this yew would surely have been one of those trees.

It could be questioned why mythology should play any part in writing about the history of the Fortingall Yew. But this tree is part of the mythology of ancient Britain, it has lived through an age when trees would have been looked on as gods or goddesses, especially a tree that seemed to be immortal. We can imagine over the centuries and millennia those who would have gathered under this tree, and the stories they told, from one generation to another.

In ancient and medieval times, with the uncertainty of the world around them, here was a tree, a living being that was always there, a sanctuary, a haven, a spiritual guide, oracle, guardian, the centre of their world.

We can only imagine what scenes this tree would have witnessed.

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## 8 APPENDIX I

From *The Perth Incident of 1396 from a folk-lore point of view* by Robert Craig MacLagan (1905)

"Mugna, a vast tree, the top whereof was as broad as the whole plain. Thrice a-year did it bear fruit, and it remained hidden from the time of the Deluge until the night on which Hundred-Battled Conn was born, and then it was made manifest. Thirty cubits was the girth of that tree, and its height three hundred cubits, Ninnine the poet, however, laid low that tree. As the poet said —

'The yew Mugna, great was the tree,  
Thirty cubits was its girth :  
Hidden for a time was it :  
Three hundred cubits in height.'

"'On the broad north plain' — i.e., on the broad plain in the north — i.e., to the north of Mag n-Allain(?) or populous — i.e., a plain wherein are many peoples — i.e., the plain of Liffey — i.e., on the broad plain in the north — i.e., to the north of Mag n-Ailbe."

The first thing to notice is that St Fillan's tutor and the name of this plain which was in the north are spelt the same. The Liffey is the centre of Ireland, and, looking for this north plain, we unhesitatingly suggest that for Allan should be read Alban, and that the plain in the north in which this remarkable yew-tree was to be found was in the very locality we are interested in. The only yew-tree that we know will fit is described as follows: "The wonderful yew-tree in the church-yard of Fortingall excites the interest of the most incurious visitor. Pennant states in his 'Tour' that in 1769 it was fifty-two feet in circumference. Since then it has undergone considerable change — partly through the influence of time, and partly through the injury it suffered from the boys of the village being unhappily allowed to kindle their Beltane fires at the root of it. At that date it showed no sign of the decay of age. . . . The two stems composing its trunk were so close to one another that a schoolboy could hardly press himself through between them. Now they are so far apart that 'a coach and four might pass between them.'

Still, the larger stem, which is hollow, is over thirty-two feet in circumference. The age of this venerable yew has been the subject of not a little speculation. It has been closely examined by savants in natural science, more especially in the physiology of trees, and more than one of them have come to the conclusion that it has seen from 2400 to 2500 years. . . . It must have been six hundred years old when the ambassadors of Augustus were received by Metellanus in Dun Geal, and when Pontius Pilate was born. It must have been a goodly sapling when Nebuchadnezzar had his dwelling with the beasts of the field, and was eating grass as oxen, and was wet with the dew of heaven." Dr Marshall scarcely reports Pennant correctly. Pennant says, "The middle part is now decayed to the ground, but within memory was united to the height of three feet ; Captain Campbell of Glen-lion having assured me that, when a boy, he has often climbed over, or rode on, the then connecting part."

The other two things in connection with this invented "Ail be" is, that he is described as of Emly, "Imleach denotes land bordering on a lake, and hence a marshy or swampy place ; the root appears to be imeal, a border or ledge. It is a term in pretty common use in names. . . . The most remarkable place whose name is derived from this word is the village of Emly in Tipperary, well known as the ancient see of Saint Ailbhe, one of the primitive Irish saints. In the Book of Lismore, and indeed in all the Irish authorities, it is called Imleach-iubhair, the lake-marsh of the yew-tree."

The lake has been drained, it seems. Imleog, the navel; 2 lomlag, the navel. The latter translation fits accurately with the central position of the Fortingall yew to Scotland ; or Giraldus's "navel of Ireland," the stone in Meath."

## APPENDIX II

Perthshire Diary, found at [www.perthshirediary.com/html/day1202.html](http://www.perthshirediary.com/html/day1202.html)

In discussing Fortingall's 3 claims to fame, the yew and solitary stone, the Cairn na Marbh (the cairn of the dead) are noted. The third claim, regarded as 'rather more fanciful' is that Fortingall was the birthplace of Pontius Pilate.

At this time (10BC) King Metallanus ruled the Scots, and lived at Fortingall. This was the time when "Caesar Augustus was attempting to extend the boundaries of his empire by peaceful means rather than by conquest. Envoys were sent to King Metallanus inviting him to conclude a treaty of friendship with Rome and inviting him to send tribute to the Emperor. The envoys in token of Rome's friendship brought "*sundry goldin crownis and rich jewillis*" and waited patiently for a reply.

It is believed that the envoys remained at Fortingall for more than a year. Perhaps it was just that Metallanus took a long time to make up his mind or perhaps the snows of winter hindered the return of the envoys. No doubt the King, as an early gesture of friendship would permit liaisons to be formed between some of the local women and the Roman envoys, and tradition has it that one gave birth to Pontius Pilate. When Metallanus finally decided to send "*money rich jewillis to be offerit to the August Emperor and his Romane Goddis*" and the envoys returned to Rome the baby was taken with them.

After all this time it is unlikely that we shall ever know if there is any truth in this tradition but it is strange that it should have persisted for so long. And for those that are still interested, it is always claimed that Pilate's wife was a Menzies."

From the diary of John L Wilson, who died in 1998 before his work could be published.

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