



Bagpipes: Instruments of War and Peace

Bagpipes are a woodwind instrument using enclosed reeds fed from a constant reservoir of air in the form of a bag. The Scottish Great Highland bagpipes are the best known in the Anglophone world; however, bagpipes have been played for a millennium or more throughout large parts of Europe, northern Africa, and western Asia, including Anatolia, the Caucasus, and around the Persian Gulf. The term *bagpipe* is equally correct in the singular or plural, though pipers usually refer to the bagpipes as "the pipes", "a set of pipes," or "a stand of pipes."

-Wikipedia (below: "Bagpipe Player", Hendrick ter Brugghen, 1624)



The evidence for pre-Roman era bagpipes is still uncertain, but several textual and visual clues have been suggested. The *Oxford History of Music* says that a sculpture of bagpipes has been found on a Hittite slab at Euyuk in

Anatolia, dated to 1000 BC. Several authors identify the ancient Greek *askaulos* (ἄσκόσ *askos* – wine-skin, αὐλός *aulos* – reed pipe) with the bagpipe. In the 2nd century AD, Suetonius described the Roman emperor Nero as a player of the *tibia utricularis*. *Tibia*, Roman reedpipes similar to Greek and Etruscan instruments could be played with the mouth as well as by tucking a bladder beneath his armpit. There is a statue of an unknown Roman legionary piper that occupies a niche in Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain.

Spread and Development in Europe

In the early part of the second millennium, definite clear attestations of bagpipes began to appear with frequency throughout Western European art and iconography. Although evidence of bagpipes in the British Isles prior to the 14th century is contested—for example, the tradition of Clan Menzies that pipes were played at Bannockburn in 1314—they are explicitly

mentioned by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* (written around 1380):

*A baggepype wel coude he blowe and sowne,
And ther-with-al he broghte us out of towne.*

One of the oldest pipe tunes celebrates the bloody Battle of Harlaw (1411) and the defeat of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles, though pipes themselves are not mentioned in the battle chronicles.

Actual examples of bagpipes from before the 18th century are extremely rare. However, a substantial number of paintings, carvings, engravings, manuscript illuminations, and so on survive. They make it clear that bagpipes varied hugely throughout Europe, and even within individual regions. Bagpipes were frequent subjects for carvers of wooden choir stalls in the late 15th and early 16th century throughout Europe, sometimes with animal musicians. Many examples of early folk bagpipes in continental Europe can be found in the paintings of Brueghel, Teniers, Jordaens, and Durer.

Below: *The Inveraray and District Pipe Band founded in 2004 by its current leaders Stuart Liddell & Steven McWhirter. Award-winning in many international competitions, Inveraray & District is focused toward the competitive side of the pipe band movement.*



The first clear reference to the use of Scottish Highland bagpipes is from a French history, which mentions their use at the Battle of Pinkie Cleugh in 1547. George Buchanan (1506–82) claimed that they had replaced the trumpet on the battlefield. This period saw the creation of the *ceòl mòr* (great music) of the bagpipe, which reflected its martial origins, with battle-tunes, marches, gatherings, salutes and laments. The Highlands of the early seventeenth century saw the development of piping families including the MacCrimmonds, MacArthurs, MacGregors and the Mackays of Gairloch.

The first probable reference to the Irish bagpipe is from 1544.

Implements of War

When the Duke of Cumberland was making final preparations to meet the Jacobites at Culloden in 1746 he just escaped making one of the greatest tactical mistakes of his fighting career. Pointing to some of the pipers of the Whig clans supporting him, the duke testily asked what those men were doing with their “bundles of sticks.” The duke declared he could get them much better “implements of war.”

But his aide-de-camp sprang to the defense of the pipers. “Your Royal Highness cannot get them better weapons! They are bagpipes, the Highlanders’ music in peace and war. Without these, all other instruments are of no avail, and the Highland soldiers need not advance another step, for they will be of no service.”

Cumberland was intelligent enough to understand the “psychological advantage” of which his aide was speaking and then readily agreed that the pipers should join in the fight. “The notes of the pipes spoke to the men in a language that they recognized and honored their deeds and those of their ancestors.” As James Russell further explains in his interesting article “The Terrifying Battlefield Pipes” in THE HIGHLANDER Sept/Oct 2017 p. 9, “Before the battle these men from the north felt a strange nervous excitement—called *crithgaisge* or ‘quiverings of valor’ by ancient writers. This was followed by an overpowering feeling of exhilaration and delight, called *mir-cath* or ‘the joyous frenzy of battle.’ It was not pandering to bloodlust, but an absorbing idea that both the warrior’s own life and fame, and his country’s good, depended on his actions.”

When the Jacobite piper James Reid was captured following Culloden, his plea therefore fell deafly on the Duke of Cumberland’s ears. The military court ruled that while Reid claimed he was not a participant, he was indeed “as guilty of carrying arms as if the pipes had been a claymore—and he received “due punishment.”

The pipes not only inspired warriors before a battle, as the pipers passed back and forth before the ranks, but they could be heard skirling above the noise and clash of battle “helping to keep the warriors’ enthusiasm alive.” And following the battle, both bard and piper played a part, the one celebrating the deeds of those who survived and the other honoring the souls of the dead.

In historical record, the first mention of military bagpipe music is given in the account of the Battle of Glenlivet in October, 1594, when the cocky young 7th Earl of Argyll and his Protestant forces were trounced by the Roman

Catholic forces of the Marquess of Huntly (much to the evident delight of King James VI who believed Argyll was too jumped-up). By the 1600s pipers were given the status of warriors, and in 1627 Alex MacNaughton transporting 200 bowmen to France, reported after a storm had driven his ship back to an English port, that “Our bagpipers served us well in rallying spirits while a man-o’war hotly pursued us.” He also reported that we are “well provided of pypers. I have one for every company in the regiment, and I think they are as good as drummers.” He named two of them: Allester Caddell and William Steel.

In 1642 the Royal Scots Fusiliers were the first to have regular regimental pipers, and, as James Russell explains, “It is believed that they were paid by rich officers who believed the pipers gave a certain swagger to their commands.” Prince Charles Edward Stuart, for example, allegedly kept 32 pipers who played for him at mealtimes and preceded him when he entered Edinburgh in triumph after the victory at Prestonpans.

Similarly, pipers played with the Scots Brigades on the Continent, and their tunes such as *The Lowlands of Scotland* and *Scots March* (later *Dumbarton’s Drums*) “struck terror into the hearts of those who heard them.” The latter became the official regimental tune of the Royal Scots.

General Fraser had forbidden the pipes to play in the skirmish before Quebec in 1760, and as his men were falling back in disorder his quick-witted aide convinced him to let the pipers play their part. “The pipers then played a favorite martial air. The moment they heard it, the troops re-formed and there was no more disorder.”

I appreciate James Russell’s conclusion: “The march and beat of a Highland regiment has always been peculiar to itself and this, in a greater part, is thanks to the bagpipes...As long as there is a British army, there will be pipers. Throughout the centuries, they have earned the respect of the world in both peace and war.”

*The thin red line of Gaelic rock,
Just tipped with shining steel,
Answered with long and steady stride
Their own loved pipes’ appeal.*

-Tribute to the Sutherland Highlanders (93 Highland Regiment) at the Battle of Balaklava in the Crimea (1854)