

What is the difference between MacLeod of Harris and MacLeod of Lewis—which am I?

Short answer: It depends your take on 15th century Hebridean politics and where your ancestors came from.

Although the two are separate clans, a shared name and modern practicalities make the distinction less important today.

From shortly after Leod's time until the main line of the MacLeods of Lewis died out about 1600, the MacLeods of Harris and the MacLeods of Lewis were unquestionably separate clans. Traditionally, the progenitors of the two branches were described as brothers, although current scholarship is inclined to believe Torquil was Tormod's grandson¹—if they were related at all.

According to W.D.H. Sellar in his article "The Ancestry of the MacLeods Reconsidered"—

The *Siol Tormoid* and the *Siol Torcaill* functioned effectively as separate clans, each under its own chief, neither holding their principal lands of the other, with separate coats of arms and separate places of burial; they even, on occasion, took separate sides in island conflicts. It is a sign of the aspirations and importance of both these MacLeod branches that their arms, together with those of the Lords of the Isles, appear in the *Armorial de Berry*, a leading European mid-15th century armorial, being the only Hebridean arms given: the MacLeods of Harris bear a castle in their arms (presumably for Dunvegan), and the MacLeods of Lewis a mountain on fire.²

Donald Gregory had said as much in his *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland*, where states "the *Siol Torquil* and *Siol Tormod* were, in fact, two powerful clans, perfectly distinct and independent of each other".³

Between 1600 and 1988, when Roderick XVII of Raasay established his right to the arms of MacLeod of Lewis, the waters have been muddied considerably.

By 1988, MacLeods formerly known as "of Harris and Dunvegan" had taken to calling themselves "of MacLeod." Although this refers to the old Scottish barony of MacLeod, its implication is clearly that they are the high chiefs of the "Clan MacLeod" (however that is defined). This change in style, like the addition of the triskellion of Man to the coat of arms, may have reflected lofty pretensions, but did not occur until after clan chiefs had lost all real *political* power in the highlands. As the claim to the *social* dignity of being a highland chief became fashionable or socially significant in the early 19th century, the MacLeods of Raasay, the only ones in a position to question the pretensions of the MacLeods of Dunvegan, were in financial straits and in the process of selling out and moving to Australia.

¹ William Matheson, "The MacLeods of Lewis." *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. LI (1978-1980) (Inverness: 1981) pp. 320-337.

² W.D.H. Sellar, "The Ancestry of the Macleods Reconsidered." *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, Vol. LV (1997-1998) (Inverness: 2000) pp. 233-258.

³ Donald Gregory, *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland from A.D. 1493 to A.D. 1625*, 2nd Edition. (London and Glasgow: 1881) p. 72.

Dame Flora pursued a vigorous campaign of consolidation of the two clans through the Clan MacLeod Society and its successor, the Associated Clan MacLeod Societies. When the occasion called for wearing a tartan sash, she would wear two—the so-called “MacLeod of Lewis” as well as “MacLeod of Harris”, thereby implying she was chief of both (although what Old Ruari would have thought of the notion, much less the association of the yellow tartan with him and his clan, is unknowable at this point).

Some would point to the Lord Lyon’s grant of arms to Roderick XVII of Raasay as official confirmation of the Clan being a single entity under a single chief. In his grant of arms, he styled Roderick: “Chief or Head of the Baronial House of the Macleod of the Lewes under The Macleod of Macleod.”⁴ This is not a very strong argument. The Lord Lyon is charged with granting new arms and confirming existing arms, a remit that he has expanded to include registering tartans, but he does not have the authority to name or confirm clan chiefs, as determined by the Court of Sessions (the supreme civil court of Scotland).⁵ His use of the term “chief” (as is his putting the house “under” MacLeod of MacLeod) is a heraldic one and not to be confused with the term in the sense of a highland chief.

As the Court of Sessions found in *Maclean of Ardgour v. Maclean*:

The reference to “chief of clans” and “principals of branches” is not to persons bearing coats of arms, but to persons who were vested with military power and authority in the clan organisation of the Highlands that existed in the sixteenth century. There is no evidence of any practice that would point to the use of “chief of clan,” or “chieftain of branch of clan,” as correct heraldic descriptions of headship of an armigerous family. The characters may, of course, concur in the same person, but they are not identical.⁶

Further muddying of the waters is that there is a MacKenzie styled as “Lord MacLeod”, an artifact of his ancestor’s efforts to nail down his claims to the old lands of Lewis.

Whether a MacLeod describes himself as one or the other, in general, is based on where one’s MacLeod ancestors came from. If they came from Harris, Glenelg or Skye, they were probably MacLeods of Harris. If they came from Lewis, Raasay, Assynt, Coigeach, or Gairloch—MacLeods of Lewis. Bear in mind however, that people moved around, and lands changed hands, and it is understood that many MacLeods overseas have no idea where in the traditional lands of MacLeod their ancestors lived.

The bottom line is the MacLeods of Harris and the MacLeods of Lewis are two different clans, who have found it convenient to organize as single clan society, in Scotland and each of the other countries represented in the Associated Clan MacLeod Societies.

As far as which one you are, if you acknowledge X— as your chief, you are a *MacLeod of X*—.

⁴ Alick Morrison, ed. *The MacLeods—The Genealogy of a Clan, Section Four: The MacLeods of Lewis, with Several Septs, including The MacLeods of Raasay* 2nd edition, revised (Edinburgh, 1990) p. 81.

⁵ *Maclean of Ardgour v. Maclean*, 1941 S.C. 613. pp. 636-637.

(http://www.heraldica.org/topics/britain/lyondocs.htm#Maclean_of_Ardgour)

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 635.