'Borgs', Boats and the Beginnings of Islay's Medieval Parish Network?

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Introduction

THE Viking[1] expansion of c. AD 800 to 1050 is often assigned a formative role in the cultural and political trajectories of Europe and the North Atlantic. The Viking conquest of Anglo-Saxon England, for example, is well known, with its 'Great Heathen Armies', metric tonnes of silver 'Danegeld', and plethora of settlement names in *-býr*/*-bær*, *-þorp*, and *-þveitr*.[2] One aspect of this diaspora which remains relatively obscure, however, is its impact on the groups of islands and skerries off Scotland's west coast which together comprise the Inner Hebrides. This paper will focus on one of these, the isle of Islay, at the south-west extremity of the archipelago, and about half-way between the mainlands of Scotland and Ireland (Figure 1). In so doing, it will question the surprisingly resilient assumption that the Inner Hebridean Viking Age was characterised largely by cultural stability and continuity from the preceding period rather than population displacement, cultural disjuncture or the lasting introduction of new forms of societal organisation.

For Norwegian Vikings, it seems likely to have been the lure of Irish riches that kick-started the movement west. The economic opportunities provided by Ireland's battlefields and marketplaces, in terms of silver, slaves, or simply the chance to build a reputation as a war-leader, offered a gateway to social status of a type fast disappearing in the Scandinavian homelands.[3] It is reasonable to assume that most Norse warbands arriving in the Irish Sea

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1   The term 'Viking' is an emotive one, fraught with pejorative connotations (eg. Smyth 1984:141-74). Here, it will be used as a simple pronoun to stand in place of 'pagan Scandinavian warrior from the period of overseas expansion in the Early Middle Ages'. Where further specification is intended or implied this will be to the leaders in that movement.

2   Downham 2008; Fellows Jensen 1984; Fellows Jensen 2008.

3   Cf. Macniven 2013.

Figure 1. The Isle of Islay.

would have sailed past Islay to get there. Local tradition would have us believe that at least a few of them stopped off on the way. One folk-tale attributes the name of the island to a Danish princess called *Jula*.[4] Another notes a skirmish between the 'Danes' (that is, Scandinavians) and 'Fenians' (the local, Gaelic-speaking population) at Gartmain on Lochindaal (c. NGR: NR 336 604).[5] Frustratingly, however, the more reliable documentary sources for this period, such as the Irish annals, have nothing specific to tell us about when or in what numbers the Vikings arrived, whether they stayed permanently, and if so, how the Norse *landnámsmen* (settlers) divided and administered their newly-won territory.[6] There is one tantalising reference in the *Annals of St Bertin* to the Northmen getting control of all the islands round Ireland and remaining there without encountering any resistance from anyone,[7] which raises the possibility of large-scale Norse settlement in the Inner Hebrides,[8] and the prospect of a culturally imperialistic restructuring of the social order.[9] But without further and more detailed accounts, or a significant amount of corroborating material evidence, the only viable way to develop the narrative here is to begin with the historical, economic and place-name records of later periods and work backwards.

This kind of retrospective approach is not new. The place-names of Islay and the idiosyncratic land denominations of its early modern rentals and charters, in particular, have been the subject of a number of specialist studies, albeit several decades ago and without definitive conclusions.[10] Unless the method employed in reviewing this material makes a concerted effort to combine matters of etymology, history, and archaeology with field experience, the situation is unlikely to change. It is also important that special attention is

4   Earl nd, 1-3. However, as the earliest reference to the island-name (as 'Ilea Insula' in Adomnán of Iona's early 7th-century *Vita Columbae*) predates the Viking Age by almost two hundred years, it is far more likely to be Celtic in origin (Macniven 2008, 19).

5   NMRS:NR36SW 10. All references to the National Monuments Record of Scotland (hereafter NMRS) are taken from CANMORE (http://www.rcahms.gov.uk/canmore.html, accessed 29 Aug 2013), the online database of the Royal Commission on the Ancient Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).

6   The Annals of Ulster (hereafter AU) 794.7, 798.2; and the *Annals of St Bertin* (ASB) 847, have three rather generalised entries which appear to point to Scandinavian activity in the Inner Hebrides during the Viking Age. Between them, the *Annals of Innisfallen* (hereafter AI) 795.2, and AU 802.9, 806.8, 825.17, 878.9, 986.3 also record six specific attacks on the monastery of Columba on Iona during the same period (cf. Downham, 2000). Unless otherwise stated, all references to Irish sources are to CELT, University College Cork's online Corpus of Electronic Texts (http://www.ucc.ie/celt/publishd.html, accessed 29 Aug 2013). References to ASB are to Nelson 1991.

7   ASB 847.

8   Woolf 2007, 100.

9   Macniven 2013.

10   Lamont 1957; Lamont 1958; MacEacharna 1976.

paid to the developments which separate the extant sources from the events of the Viking Age, and the potentially distorting effect that these are likely to have had on the available evidence.[11] If closer consideration is given to the context of later material – how the data presented in the rentals, for example, relates to the physical distribution and grouping of landholdings on the ground, and how the resulting patterns compare to those of neighbouring areas, whose fiscal traditions are better understood – the endeavour can, as I hope to show in this article, serve as a useful starting point for the discussion of administrative practice in Islay's Norse society.

Geo-Political Context

From a modern, mainland perspective, blinkered by the conveniences of city living and a well-developed, land-based infrastructure, the island of Islay might well be dismissed as an unlikely target for Norse settlement. Its peripheral location on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean is relatively inaccessible, and its rugged, insular topography clearly unsuited to sustained population growth. It is important to realise, however, that this is not a view that would have been shared by the peoples of early medieval Norway. Compared to the deeply indented sea-scapes of south-western Norway, with limited access to level, arable land, Islay's large stretches of fertile and easily-tilled machair (shell-sand soils), not to mention its rolling green lowlands, would have seemed extremely agriculturally attractive. Whether the island has the potential to support large-scale urbanism or agro-industry is a moot point, but its contextually unusual expanses of high-quality limestone-derived soils are more than adequate to support the pattern of dispersed rural settlement favoured by primitive Norse farmers. The high regard in which its farmland was held in the post-Norse period is reflected in its traditional Gaelic epithet of *Bannrigh* (Queen) of the Hebrides,[12] a perception unlikely to have changed much from the preceding centuries.

For skilled boatsmen, who saw waterways as arteries of communication rather than insurmountable obstacles,[13] the location of Islay at the entrance to the Irish Sea was also highly significant. With the treacherous whirl-pool of the Coire Bhreacàin to the north and the infamous tidal currents of the North Channel to the south, the sea around Islay was something of a bottle-neck in the regional transport network. Whoever controlled this island would have been particularly well placed to control transit between the

11   Macniven 2013.
12   Storrie 1997, 15-26; Caldwell 2008a, 1-11.
13   See Bil 2008.

Hebrides, the Irish Sea, and by extension the 'Sea Road' from Norway to Ireland. It was doubtless these two qualities – of relative fertility and strategic location – that underpinned the thriving prestige economy that we know had developed in Islay by the Iron Age. This can be seen from the scores of Atlantic Roundhouses,[14] and island dwellings likely to date from this period (Figure 2); and the rise of the powerful Gaelic *Cenél nOengusso* (Kindred of Oengus), who it seems from texts like the *Míniugud Senchasa fher nAlban* were based on the island in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries AD.[15] With such an impressive pedigree, it would be surprising if Islay had not subsequently fallen victim to the predations of the same waves of 'marauding Northmen' who were also settling in the Northern and Western Isles, the Isle of Man, Ireland and other places around the Irish Sea. Interestingly, however, this is not how the situation has traditionally been viewed by historians.[16]

In terms of its more recent linguistic and cultural heritage, Islay is well-known as an epicentre of the West Highland *Gàidhealteachd* (Gaelic-speaking community). Given its status as chief seat of the Gaelic-speaking Lords of the Isles in the later Middle Ages,[17] it has been assumed by numerous writers that the island's Gaelic identity has continued unbroken from the Dalriadan heyday of the *Cenél nOengusso*,[18] with the period of Viking raids amounting to little more than an unpleasant interlude, and any signs of a Norse cultural legacy the result of gradual accretion rather than sudden and unsolicited change.[19] The logic behind these assumptions is certainly appealing in its simplicity, but the readiness it demonstrates to dismiss Scandinavian influence raises a number of difficulties. Indeed, given the pioneering conclusions of Jennings and Kruse on the transformative nature of Norse settlement in the Outer Hebrides, it makes sense to review the traditional conclusions on what might have happened only slightly further south.[20]

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14 These fortifications had previously been classified by the RCAHMS as 'duns', 'forts' and 'brochs' – distinctions which can often seem arbitrary and confusing (see Macniven 2013). It is not uncommon for a monument whose name builds on the common Gaelic generic *dùn* (hill / fort) to be classified as a 'fort' rather than a 'dun'! With the exception of the larger structures, there is now a growing tendency to consider all such dry-stone buildings under the umbrella term 'Atlantic Roundhouse' (eg. MacKie 2007).

15 Bannerman 1974; Ó Corráin 1980; Dumville 2002.

16 For a notable, recent exception see Woolf 2007.

17 Caldwell 2008, 49-76; McDonald 1997.

18 Eg. Lamont 1957; Lamont, 1958; MacEacharna 1976.

19 Marsden 2000, 12-13; McDonald 1997. 28; Nieke 1983. 313; Storrie 1997, 32; cf. Barrett 2008, 413.

20 See Kruse 2004; Kruse 2005; Jennings and Kruse 2005; Jennings and Kruse 2009a; Jennings and Kruse 2009b. See also Woolf 2007; Márkus 2012, 26-48.

First and foremost, the complete hiatus in contemporary references to the island from the early eighth century to the late eleventh[21] means there is no clear evidence for local cultural norms, let alone their continuity, for a period of 350 years. On the contrary, with this *lacuna* corresponding very neatly to the Viking Age, there is abundant scope for both discontinuity and the Norse-driven disruption of the social order. Moreover, while there may not be any specific documentary evidence for 'Viking' activity in Islay during this period, Norse cultural influence is clear from the array of high-status Scandinavian artefacts recovered from its machair and farmland,[22] and the place-names of Scandinavian origin that can still be found throughout the island.[23]

Although the large majority of the 6000 or so names recorded in the Ordnance Survey Object Name Books for Islay can be considered formally Gaelic, there are many for which Gaelicised spelling belies morphology and word-order which only make sense if treated as Norse. Historical-philological analysis[24] of this material reveals that the formally Gaelic *Beinn Tart a' Mhill* (NGR: NR 208 568), for example, is less likely to derive from a literal 'Hill of the Thirsty Hill' than a preceding Norse **Hartafjall* (Stag Fell), with the initial /t/ in 'Tart a' Mhill' resulting from the operation of the Gaelic grammar system. Others are rather more transparent. Eileann Orsay (NGR: NR 163 515), for example, appears to derive from Norse **Áróssey* (River-Mouth island), and Olistadh (NGR: NR 218 583) from Norse **Óla(fs)staðir* (Oli or Olaf's Farm).

It should also be noted that these Norse names tend to denote culturally and economically significant features in the landscape. Islay's traditional farm-names, for example, preserve a range of Norse habitative generics (Figure 3), such as *bólstaðr*, *staðir* and *býr*, all meaning 'farm' of one kind or another, and now typically preserved as *-bus* or *-bolls* (25 independent coinages), *-sta*, *-stadh* and *-ster* (7), and *-by* (3). In addition to this, however, they also preserve a variety of topographic generics, including *dalr* (valley), *vík* (bay) and *nes* (headland), now preserved as *dale*, *-dail*, or *-tle* (21), *-aig*, *-uig* (9), and *-nish*, *-innis* (6), with many more found in the names of natural features themselves. The renaming of the landscape in this way points to a complete disregard for native tradition, indicative not only of substantial and widespread Norse settlement in Islay (Figure 3), but most probably also of a level of social segregation unlikely without some kind of 'ethnic cleansing'. Demonstrably Norse names can be found in all land-types across all parts of

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21   This *lacuna* in the documentary record is framed by the localised earthquake recorded in AU 740.3, and the death of Manx king Godred Crovan, son of Harald the Black 'of Islay', on the island recorded in the *Chronicle of the Kings of Man and the Isles* for 1095 (CRM §23).

22   Macniven 2008, 30.

23   Macniven forthcoming.

24   Cf. Sandnes 2003, 109-11.

the island, with any apparent 'gaps' in coverage reflecting areas which are either mountainous, boggy, or both, and as such lacking in names generally.
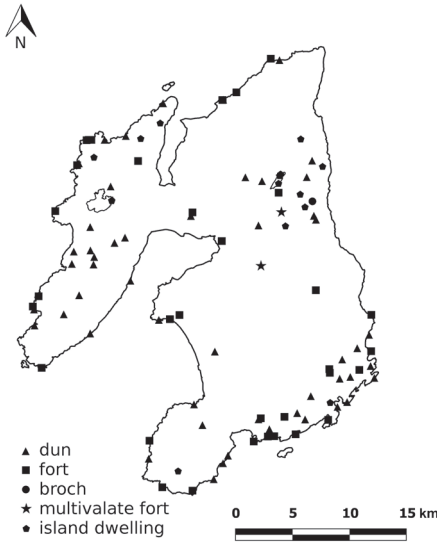

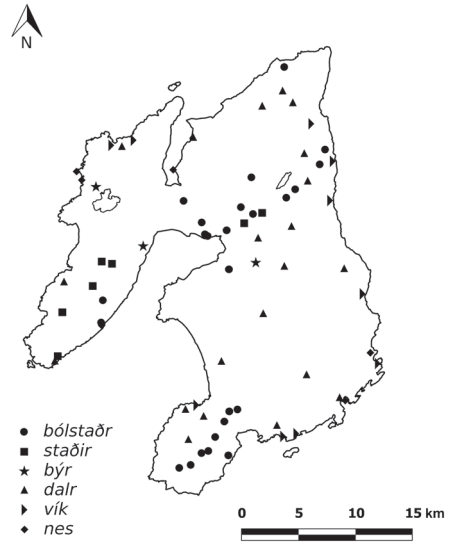**Figure 2. Possible Iron Age fortifications (Data from CANMORE).**

Figure 3. Select ON generics.

Like the Gaels they suppressed, the incoming Norse had a highly stratified and well-ordered society. We can see this from the lavish Norwegian boat burials of the period like those from Oseberg and Gokstad in Norway,[25] but also in the less grandiose examples from the Scottish Isles such as at Sanday in Orkney,[26] Swardle Bay on the Ardnamurchan peninsula opposite Mull,[27] and Kiloran Bay on Colonsay in the Inner Hebrides.[28] There are convincing arguments that burial in boats represents powerfully symbolic gesturing by the ruling element in Norse society, emphasising control of the principal means of transit within this world, and between this world and the next.[29] On a more mundane level, however, the fact that the incumbents or their families could afford to be buried in such material splendour points to their control of resources. For most of them, these resources would have included revenue raised on landed property in the form of tax.

25   Bil 2008, 172-4.
26   Owen and Dalland 1999.
27   As yet unpublished, but see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ardnamurchan_boat_grave (Accessed 29 Aug 2013).
28   Batey and Graham Campbell 1998, 118-22.
29   Cf. Price 2008, 264-70.

Ouncelands, Pennylands and Quarterlands

To tax land effectively requires a system of land assessment. We know from better documented parts of *Scotia Scandinavica* that the insular Norse developed their own systems and terminologys, most notably, or notoriously, the *eyrisland* or 'Ounceland', which appears to have given rise to the 'tirunga' or 'terra unciata' of the Hebrides, the 'treen' of Man, and the 'urisland' of Orkney and Shetland.[30]

Rather than representing a fixed area of land, the ounceland was a measure of relative agricultural productivity or 'extent', with each unit generating one *eyrir*, or ounce, of silver – or the barter equivalent – in tax, a fairly common phenomenon for the period.[31] It appears that the ounceland denomination was later subdivided, in abstract terms at least, into smaller units: 18 in the Northern Isles and Caithness; but 20 in the Western Isles and Inner Hebrides;[32] and that at some point, possibly from the late tenth century,[33] although perhaps not until the twelfth or thirteenth, these subdivisions acquired the name 'pennylands'.[34]

While it is likely that some individual ounceland territories developed from pre-existing landholdings based on native denominations such as the *davach*,[35] this does not necessarily point to cultural continuity. Many attested ounceland holdings could be described as fundamental settlement units in the sense that they were both topographically defined and self-sufficient, containing the whole range of economic and cultural resources needed to support a community of a given size. Numerous examples can be found in Orkney, Shetland, Tiree and Man, which appear to combine areas of arable

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30   Marstrander 1937, 423-5; Marwick 1952, 209.
31   Cf. McKerral 1943-4; McKerral 1950-1; McErlean 1983, 322.
32   Lamont 1981, 71-4.
33   With the Norse king of Dublin, Sithric Silkbeard (c.970-1042), known to have minted silver pennies around 985, it is possible that the concept, if not the coins themselves, was known in the adjacent parts of the insular Norse world, and used to define subdivisions of the ounceland from a relatively early stage (cf. Crawford 1987, 86-91; Rixson 2010, 144).
34   Cf. Sawyer 1976, 108-9; Megaw 1979, 75-6; Lamont 1981, 71-4.
35   Eg. Thomas 1885-6, 210. It has also been suggested that the division of the West Highland ounceland into 20 pennylands was not the result of Scandinavian influence but a direct survival from the 20 *tech* (house) unit of Dalriadan ship-service apparently recorded in the *Míniugud Senchusa fher nAlban* (eg. Easson 1987, 9). If we ignore the inherent unreliability of this text (Dumville 2002), however, and accept that Islay comprised 350 of these *tech* units, this would translate into 17 and a half ouncelands, impossibly small for an island of Islay's size and relative fertility. By way of comparison, the Isle of Man, which is around 4000 Ha. smaller than Islay, appears to have comprised around 216 treens (= ouncelands) in the Manorial Rolls of 1511-15 (Steinnes 1959, 43). If there is any connection between the ounceland and *tech* systems, therefore, it can only be conceptual, in the idea of 20-part divisions, and not in the comparative extent of the *tech* and the pennyland.

land and rough-grazing with a variety of other ecological zones, such as streams, lochs, peat-banks and woodland, in addition to at least one medieval chapel.[36] With this being the case, there is no reason why even ethnic cleansing of the worst kind would have precluded Norse administrators from retracing ancient territorial boundaries and inadvertently appropriating the units of earlier systems.

Precisely when the ounceland system was introduced or how uniform it ever was is unclear. It is possible that the foundations were laid during the earliest Viking raids. As early as AD 798, for example, we learn in the second entry in the *Annals of Ulster* for that year of the 'heathens' (that is, the Vikings) taking 'cattle tribute from the territories' in Ireland. Although this particular incidence of taxation may have been ad hoc, it would not be unreasonable to assume that a series of similar episodes would have led to the rise of a standardised fiscal terminology among the Norse incomers, not just in Ireland but also in nearby Man and the Hebrides.

By the mid-ninth century, the advent of permanent settlement is perhaps even more likely to have seen the implementation of localised taxation regimes – possibly based on pre-existing territorial divisions and denominations – with supporting frameworks of units and terms. Depending on how much weight is placed on the later medieval saga evidence, we might highlight here their accounts of the expeditions from the Northern Isles to the Hebrides and Man by Norwegian kings like Harald Finehair in the late ninth century, and Magnus Bareleg in the late eleventh;[37] or Orkney jarls such as Sigurd the Stout in the late tenth century, or his son, Thorfinn the Mighty, in the early eleventh.[38] Although any one of these individuals might have overseen the blanket introduction of a standardised system of taxation or the terminology used to describe it, it is worth remembering that only the activities of Magnus are even moderately well-corroborated in other, more reliable sources, and that it is perhaps not until the late eleventh century that we are likely to find administrations that are sophisticated or effective enough to devise and maintain far-flung taxation regimes.

When it comes to Islay, however, it is important to note that despite a relative abundance of later medieval and early modern charters and rentals, detailing a complex and idiosyncratic system of land denominations, the ounceland terminology is conspicuous by its absence. Instead, the island's

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36   Marwick 1949; Marwick 1952; MacGregor 1986; MacGregor 1987; Johnston 1990; Marstrander 1937.
37   Sawyer 1976, 75-6.
38   Thomson 1987, 29-34.

landholdings are enumerated principally in terms of 'quarter(lands)' of two and a half merks (or 33s. 4d.) in 'Old Extent',[39] and 'auchtenpa(i)rts' of one and a quarter merks (or 16s. 8d.).[40]

As systematic yet un-Norse as this system might seem, there are compelling reasons to question its provenance. Although the fractional nature of the terminology is strongly suggestive of a larger, parent unit, this is actually completely unattested. Moreover, and contrary to what might be imagined from an apparent 'division' into quarters and eighths, reconstructing the missing 'whole' is far from straightforward. Simply adding four quarters together as Thomas suggests,[41] would give an Old Extent value of ten merks, much larger than the ounceland of six merks (£4 or 80s.) known from the same period in the Northern Isles, most of the Hebrides, and Man.[42] W. D. Lamont saw this discrepancy as evidence for a complete lack of Norse influence on Islay's fiscal traditions, suggesting that its later units of land denomination appeared aberrant because Islay alone, in all the Hebrides, had retained the fiscal traditions of the Early Historic period.[43] Lamont's theory is problematic for several reasons, not least the evidence of Norse-driven cultural change provided by the local place-names, but it does raise one very interesting point – the existence of a little-known 'cowland' unit of land denomination.

While Lamont linked these cowlands to the abstract property qualifications of the Old Irish law codes, we do not have to go quite as far back to rationalise their place in Islay's administrative history. It is clear from the early charters and rentals that the Islay quarterland could be subdivided into ten cowlands.[44] This means that a group of two quarterlands would comprise twenty cowlands – the same as the number of pennylands in the typical West Highland ounceland – and allowing for the possibility of a reconstructed 'whole' of five merks, much closer in extent to the widespread six merk ounceland than the ten merks of Thomas' suggested four-quarterland unit. It

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39 The 'Old Extent' of early modern Scottish charters and rentals is though to derive from land valuations carried out during the reign of Alexander III (1241-86) (see McKerral 1943-4, 1950-1), and thus, potentially, very close in origin to the Hebridean Norse period.

40 The Scots term 'quarter(land)' is an adaptation of the Gaelic *cerraimh* (quarter: cf. Manx Gaelic *kerroo*); and the Scots 'auchtenpa(i)rt' from the Gaelic *ochdamh* (eighth). The terminology of this system is presented in detail by Thomas (1885-6, 213) and Lamont (1957, 183-5, 1958, 101-3).

41 Thomas 1885-6: 213.

42 Thomas 1885-6; McKerral 1943-4; Marwick 1949; McQueen 1979; Oram 1987; Williams 2002.

43 Lamont 1957; Lamont 1958

44 See, for example, the charters of 1506 and 1588, and the rental of 1722 (Smith 1895, 32-3, 88-93, 521-44).

also suggests that the technical Islay 'quarter', and the equivalent of the Manx kerroo[45] and the Orkney skatland,[46] was actually the auchtenpairt, or eighth!

It should be noted here that the Crown Charter of 1499,[47] one of Islay's earliest detailed fiscal records, presents the island's landholdings in multiples of five merks. Although the names and boundaries of the constituent farms are not given, it is possible to explore the practical significance of this five merk extent through examination of Stephen MacDougall's *Map of the Island of Islay* from 1749-51 – the earliest to show the relative location and boundaries of its farm districts. If MacDougall's boundaries are scrutinised with due consideration of the underlying topography and the groupings and combined extents of the farm-districts found in the rentals,[48] a process of geometric analysis[49] can be used to identify the possible outlines of the old five merk divisions. As can be seen from Figure 4, units containing arable land, which rise from the coast to include upland pasture and more often than not at least one medieval chapel or burial ground, seem to suggest themselves. One explanation for this recurring pattern is the one-time existence of a localised, but now lost, ounceland system of land denomination.
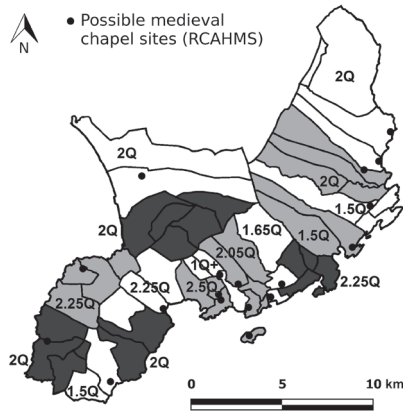

Figure 4. Reconstructed 'Ouncelands' in Kildalton Parish.[50]

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45   Cf. Megaw 1976, 19-20.
46   Marwick 1949, 1.
47   Smith 1895, 28-30.
48   Use has been made here of the Shawfield Campbell Rental of 1722 (ibid., 521-44), the first to show the extent of the whole island in quarterlands as opposed to cash figures or abstractions.
49   Cf. Christensen and Kousgård Sørensen 1972, 214-18; Farbregd 1984, 33-50.
50   'Q' = 'Quarterland(s)'. Discretely shaded groupings of landholdings represent the suggested boundaries of now lost ounceland territories with a theoretical extent of five merks or two quarterlands.

The absence of ounceland terminology in the Islay sources must be balanced against the five hundred years or more of cultural and demographic change which separate the earliest fiscal material from the Viking Age. An interval of this length leaves ample scope for an ounceland extent to have been introduced *and* to have become redundant, with the economic and administrative focus shifting to a half-ounceland unit. While technically a subdivision, we should not forget that this smaller unit would nevertheless represent a fairly substantial division in its own right. Given the known cultural exchange between Islay and the north of Ireland during this period, it is quite possible that the standard Irish term for a substantial division, the *cerraimh*, or 'quarter', was imported and applied with reference to relative extent rather than etymology. The use of intermediate terminology in this way without supporting umbrella terms is not unknown in Ireland.[51] It is also pertinent here to point to the 'intromissions' of unpopular Irish tacksmen in Islay in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Between 1612 and 1614, for example, the island belonged to Sir Randall MacDonnell, later first Earl of Antrim.[52] In 1613, the otherwise disorganised tenants of the island felt so oppressed by the 'foreign and strange' laws of Irish incomers that they managed to put aside their differences to petition the Crown to do something about it.[53] It is not outwith the bounds of possibility that one of these intromissions might have been the introduction of new, *cerraimh*-based terminology.

Norse Administrative Districts?

When it comes to the higher tiers of administrative division during Islay's Norse period, the documentary record is even less helpful. On further reflection, however, this should not surprise. The particularly vibrant nature of the Gaelic renaissance which followed the rise of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles leaves plenty of scope for the deliberate replacement of Norse administrative terminology before the keeping of documentary records became commonplace. Rather than pointing to any specifically anti-Norse agendas, this would have gone hand in hand with the incomers' desire to consolidate dominion over the island, and while it would be impractical to make regular changes to the basic building blocks of the administrative system, such as the ounceland and its subdivisions, regrouping them and rejuvenating the terminology used to describe those groups would have been an entirely different matter.

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51   McErlean 1983, 217-22.
52   Caldwell 2008a, 96-8.
53   Smith 1895, 153-5.

Closer scrutiny of the local place-name material has the potential to reveal individual Norse district-names. The name of the Oa peninsula, for example, which forms a discrete territorial unit recognised in the naming of Kildalton and Oa parish, seems likely to derive from ON **Höfuð*, 'head(land)', in reference to the conspicuous and sheer-faced landform of the penninsula. Then there is the by-name Lanndaidh, which has been associated variously with the eastern part of Kildalton parish,[54] and the land at the head of Lochindaal.[55] Derivation here appears to be from ON **Landeyjar*, meaning 'islands of (fertile) land', an interpretation which is consistent with the topography of both suggested locations and directly comparable with the district of the same name in southern Iceland. Unfortunately, neither of these examples preserve the kind of systematic terminology which could help to identify their boundaries or function(s) within an island-wide system of administration.

To refine the search in a meaningful way, we must look to Scandinavia for guidance. In Norway, the earliest detailed records for larger administrative divisions come from the period after the Viking Age. It is reasonable to assume, however, that this terminology, if not the technical detail of its later usage, originated in an earlier period. In general, these divisions were geared towards the provision of military service of a predominantly naval character, or the administration of local law-codes. Of those with possible reflexes in Scotland, the most relevant are the *skipreiða* or 'Ship-service district';[56] the *hundari* or 'hundred' – although it should be noted that the surviving Scandinavian evidence for the systematic use of this term is confined largely to the boundaries of modern-day Sweden;[57] the *hérað*, meaning 'hinterland, countryside or district';[58] and the *þing*(*lag*) or 'law-district', within which a specific law code applied.[59]

The existence of several of these systems is hinted at in the Islay place-name record. The central part of Kilmeny Parish, for example, is known in documents of the early modern period as 'Herries',[60] a probable derivation from Norse *hérað.* This *Herries* has some of the most fertile land in Islay. It is also adjacent to the Sound of Islay, an important transit route and military

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54   MacEacharna 1976, 31.
55   Graham 1967, 39.
56   KLNM xi, 546-51; Marwick 1949; Williams 1997.
57   Crawford 2006a; Steinnes 1959; KLNM vii: 74-8.
58   Crawford 1987, 84; Crawford 2006a, 39; KLNM vi, 488-95
59   KLNM xviii, 334-71; Fellows Jensen 1993.
60   Eg. 'Herries' in 1617 (RMS vii, entry1628, 589-91), 'Harees' in 1631 (*Cawdor Muniments*), and 'Herreis' in 1686 (Smith 1895, 490-520).

harbour,[61] and forms the backdrop to the proto-urban castle complex on Eilean Mor in Loch Finlaggan, which appears to have been a royal centre for the MacDonald rulers of the Isles in the later Middle Ages.[62] If, as seems likely, the later medieval status of this area is a legacy of the preceding Norse period, we might imagine that the name has survived by virtue of 'Herries' having been *the* most important unit of its type on the island, comparable to the way in which the Harray in Orkney represents the hinterland of the high-status Norse settlement at Birsay.

Then there is the local pronunciation of the farm-name 'Sunderland' in Kilchoman parish (NGR: NR 246 645). Contrary to appearances, this is actually [ˈʃuʔnarʔtiŋ] – a form which finds support in the *Shinart* shown on Blaue's map of 1654.[63] While this makes for difficult Gaelic etymologies, one way of resolving these sounds is to envisage a Norse name comprising a *specific* element with the genitive suffix *–ar*, followed by the generic element *þing* (assembly). The spatial and economic context of the farm lend considerable weight to this interpretation. Sunderland is a substantial holding on good quality land. It also straddles an important overland transit route, and has plenty of pasture for the horses of travellers attending an assembly, or the livestock being taken to market there. Interestingly, there is also a prominent conical hillock on the farm (NGR: NR 232 648) – the remnants of an ancient glacial moraine. Although this has yet to be fully investigated, it is redolent of Tynwald Hill on the Isle of Man and the *lögberg* or 'law rock' at Þingvellir in southwest Iceland, where important legislative and judicial business was carried out. When it is also considered that Sunderland sits beside a lake, as do a number of other important *þing* sites, including Þingvellir in Iceland and Dingwall in Shetland, it would be reasonable to see [ˈʃuʔnarʔtiŋ] as preserving an earlier, Norse **Sjóvarþing* 'the assembly place by the lake'. That is not to say that the name Sunderland, as it appears in print, might not also be of Norse provenance. The two names could have been contemporary and developed along the lines of the generic variation principles set out by Simon Taylor,[64] with each being used to describe a different feature in the local cultural landscape. Elsewhere in the Scandinavian world, the specific element in a given *þing* name is often taken from the name of an important farm or natural feature within its boundaries. The law district of Gulathing in

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61   In 1569, a certain Leonard Sumpter, merchant of Bristol, reported to the English authorities that a force of 32 galleys, a number of other boats and about 4000 men were gathered in the Sound of Islay under Sorley Boy MacDonald and preparing to work for Lough Foyle in Ireland (Smith 1895, 73).

62   Caldwell and Ewert 1993.

63   Blaeu maps, http://maps.nls.uk/atlas/blaeu/view/?id=98 (Accessed 29 Aug 2013).

64   Taylor 1997.

western Norway, for example, takes its specifying agent from the fjord-name Gulen, from Norse *guli* (with a possible meaning of 'wind-swept' or 'narrow' passage),[65] while Sandsting in Mainland, Shetland, builds on the name of the settlement of Sand, Norse *sandr*.[66] A similar development in Islay would explain the discrepancy between the written forms and local pronunciation of Sunderland. While the name of the farm could be seen as Norse **Sjóvarland*, 'the farm by / of the lake', this appears to have become conflated in local usage with the name of the surrounding district, Norse **Sjóvarþing*.

The presence of a *þing* site in Kilchoman does not, of course, preclude the existence of other *þing* sites in other parts of the island. In Islay, as in other parts of the Norse world, there is likely to have been more than one local assembly operating on various different levels. Echoes of another tier of Norse *þing* can be found in the MacDonald *Comhairle* or 'Council' of the Isles said to have met in Islay during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[67] This particular council met not at Sunderland, but on Eilean nan comhairle in Loch Finlaggan (NGR: NR 387 680). While the known terminology of the *Comhairle* is Gaelic, its Isles-wide remit could point to origins in an earlier period. It is no doubt significant in this respect that the *Annals of the Four Masters* make references to *Lagmannaibh nan-Innsedh*, the Norse *Lögmenn* or 'Lawmen' of the Isles, who accompanied the Scandinavian kings of Man and Dublin on military expeditions to Ireland in 960 and 970.[68] It would certainly not be unreasonable to see these men as the leading figures from individual islands complete with their military levies.

Parish networks and their foundations

Although the Norse origins of names like Lanndaidh, Herries and Sunderland may hint at the previous Norse management of administrative systems, they tell us very little about their mechanics. In fact, unless alternative approaches are explored, the palimpsest they represent is likely to remain impenetrable. As with most settlement historical studies of this type, therefore, it makes sense to address the problem retrospectively, through the filter of what came next, and in particular the systematic and all-prevailing introduction of Christian administrative divisions, such as the parish, from the twelfth century onwards.

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65   KLNM xviii, 379; Sandnes and Stemshaug 1990, 136.
66   Jakobsen 1936, 125.
67   Caldwell 2004.
68   The *Annals of the Four Masters* (hereafter AFM) 960.14 and 970.13. See http://www.ucc.ie/
      celt/publishd.html (Accessed 29 Aug 2013).

The introduction of the parish system throughout north Britain, and Ireland in the twelfth and thirteen centuries represents a clear and final break with older forms of Church organisation. Although the switch to a territorial system of administration, with a focus on pre-existing secular land-holdings, was officially intended to counter inadequacies in the provision of pastoral care, the needs of the Church to maximise its income, maintain authority and at the same time curry favour with increasingly powerful feudal lordships were perhaps equally important. With no surviving accounts of when or why the concept was introduced to Islay, we must draw on the experience of neighbouring areas: especially Ireland, the Scottish mainland and the Isle of Man.

In Ireland, the introduction of the parish system is believed to have taken place at some point between the synod of Rathbreasail in 1111, and the Papal Taxation list of 1306.[69] On the Scottish mainland, the process is likely to have been completed in the late eleventh century under the patronage of Margaret Ætheling (c.1048-93), second wife of Malcolm Canmore, or during the early twelfth under that of her sixth son, David I.[70] While the Manx parishes were traditionally attributed to the fifth century saint, Maughold, said in the mid-sixteenth century *Traditionary Ballad* to have grouped together several treens to form a single parish, this is now considered dubious.[71] The later medieval parochial network in Man is thought to have been laid out shortly before or during the reign of Olaf the Diminutive (c.1103-54). It was Olaf who confirmed the new Romanised diocese of Sodor (also known as the Sudreys and Sodornes) c.1135, with the Isle of Man forming its spiritual centre.[72] As Olaf was King of Man *and* the Isles, a polity which included the Hebrides, it would be reasonable to assume that he was also responsible for introducing the parish system to Islay. On a more personal level, with Islay thought to be the last resting place of his father, Godred Crovan, Olaf is perhaps even less likely to have neglected its spiritual welfare. If this was not the case, the process can almost certainly be linked to the incoming MacSorley's foundation of the diocese of Argyll c.1183.[73]

In either case, it would be hard to imagine that Islay's parishes developed completely independently of their secular context. In England, where charter

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69   McErlean 1983, 332-3.
70   Cowan 1960, 43-55; Cowan and Easson 1957, 4-5.
71   Megaw 1963, 187-92.
72   Megaw 1963, 187-92; Woolf 2007, 171-82. While an earlier Manx diocese is implied in CRM when it states that in 1079 'Roolwer died as bishop and was buried on Man in the same year', none of the recorded Manx parish churches are mentioned in any document written before the twelfth century (Reilly 1988, 21).
73   McDonald 1997, 211-12

evidence for this process is abundant, it seems that many parishes followed the layout of earlier estates.[74] In Ireland, where the evidence is less well developed, a close association has nevertheless been identified between the secular *bailebiataigh* and the early parishes in counties Monaghan, Derry, Donegal, Fermanagh, Tyrone and Cavan.[75] Similarly, study of the medieval parochial boundaries in the diocese of Kilfenora has shown that parishes were formed variously from existing tribal territories or groupings of Church holdings.[76] It follows that identifying the earliest known boundaries of Islay's parish network might provide a framework for the study of the preceding secular divisions, which are, at most, a couple of centuries removed from the *floruit* of its Norse period.

In recent times, Islay has had three parishes, Kildalton and Oa, Kilarrow and Kilmeny, and Kilchoman, corresponding roughly to its three medieval ward divisions, the *Insula de Ilay*, *Myd Ward of Ilay* and *Rynnis of Ilay* recorded in 1541,[77] and its three pre-Reformation 'rectories' of Kildalton,[78] Kilchoman,[79] and St Maelrubha or Kilarrow.[80] Although examination of the documentary and archaeological material from the later medieval and early modern periods suggests that each of these rectories was further divided into two early parishes, giving six in total,[81] it is clear that the boundaries of these units fluctuated over the centuries.

There are reasons to believe, however, that the later medieval ecclesiastical reforms in Islay were not limited to the introduction of parishes. The early rentals show an unusual proliferation of farm-districts with names built on the Gaelic generic *cill* (chapel / burial ground). In most cases, this element reflects the (former) presence of a medieval chapel or burial ground within the boundaries of that farm-district. Although the distribution of these '*cill*-districts' might appear random when seen geographically, establishing their theoretical 'zones of influence' and enumerating these in terms of agricultural extent reveals a remarkably uniform placement (Figure 5).[82] Working, once again, from the boundaries shown on MacDougall's map, and the fiscal data

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74   Morris 1983.
75   McErlean 1983, 332-3.
76   Ní Ghabhláin 1996, 57-8.
77   ER, xvii, 612-20.
78   Cowan 1967, 99.
79   Ibid., 97.
80   Ibid., 94.
81   Macniven forthcoming.
82   These units were defined by plotting Thiessen polygons around the central *cill-* settlements, so that any locations inside the polygons were closer to those points than any of the other sample points.

presented in the rentals, it appears that there were three such farm-districts for each of the island's six early parishes. To put it another way, there was one '*cill*-district' for every six quarters worth of land.

This level of uniformity raises the possibility of the systematic renaming of a lower tier of administrative division with an approximate extent of 15 merks. The existence of units like this finds some support in the historical record. The Papal Constitution of Innocent III dated 9 December 1203, for example, lists three estates in Islay: those of Herilnean, Mangecheles and Magenburg.[83] The name Magenburg can be traced to Kilmeny parish, where the Loch Moyburg of early maps is now known as Loch Lossit (NGR: NR 408 652). In the rental of 1722, the adjacent farm-district of Lossit is listed as part of a £10 (or 15 merk) holding along with 'Kilsleaveens, Balluchtruk, Balleclach, Kilmenie and Turmagan', and the now lost 'Gertontibbert and Gortenles'. If Herilnean and Mangecheles could be equated with the £20 (or 30 merk) holding of Laintymanniche and Mwicheleische listed in the 1561 rental of the Bishopric of the Isles, it would suggest that the three named holdings of the 1203 Constitution reflect the division of the early parish of Kilmeny into three equal parts of £10 or 15 merks apiece.

Using the same contextualised geometric method mentioned earlier, it is possible to reconstruct similar 15 merk divisions for Islay's other early parishes (Figure 5). As with the proposed parish divisions, it seems likely that these would have evolved from existing territorial units. Attention can be drawn here to the lands in Kildalton parish granted to Brian 'Vicar' MacKay by Donald, Lord of the Isles in 1408.[84] Cross-referencing the names of the constituent farm-districts with the corresponding entries in later rentals, reveals that the estate would have had an Old Extent value of just over 15 merks, and been more or less coterminous with the suggested '*cill*-unit' of Kilnaughton – raising the possibility that *Cill*-districts, generally, served a function within the estates of leading families, perhaps as a network of formalised ancestral burial grounds. It is also worth considering, however, that the suggested pattern of *cill*-units and early parishes finds a very close match in the ecclesiastical divisions of the Isle of Man. Prior to 1796, five of Man's six *sheadings* were divided into three parishes each, with the sixth sheading, Glenfaba, having two. Perhaps the most compelling explanation for this similarity is that the administrative tradition of the two islands shares a common ancestry?
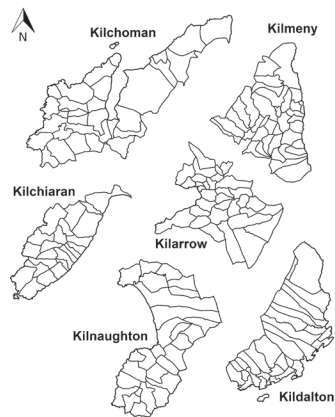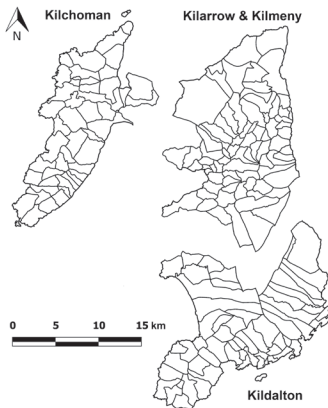
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83   Smith 1895, 5-8.
84   Ibid., 16-18.
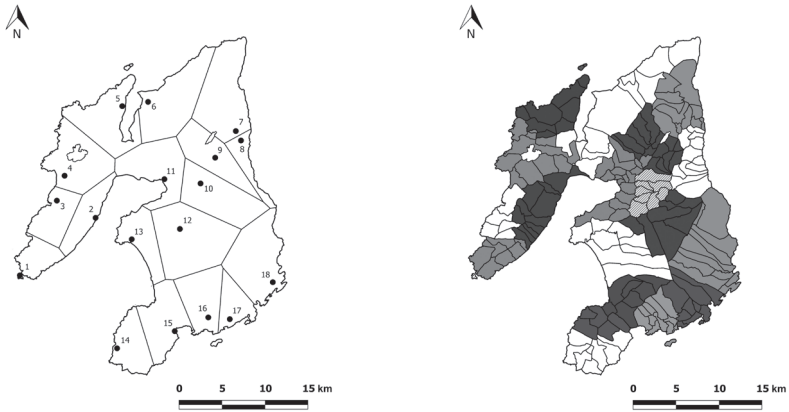
1: Thiessen Polygon Analysis of 'Cill- districts'

2: 'Cill-units' on MacDougall's Map

3: Suggested Ward / Rectory Divisions

4: Suggested Early Parish Divisions

1. Orsay / Killcallumkil
2. Port Charlotte[85]
3. Kilchiaran
4. Kilchoman
5. Kilname
6. Killinallan
7. Keills / Killcallumkil
8. Kilslevan
9. Kilmeny
10. Kilbrennan
11. Killarow
12. Kilennan
13. Laggan / Killcallumkil
14. Killeyan
15. Kilnaughton
16. Kilbride
17. Killallumkil
18. Kildalton

5: Key to Cill-units

Figure 5. 'Cill-Units', Rectories, and Early Parishes.

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85   Port Charlotte (known previously as Port Sgioba) is included here to cover a conspicuous gap in the distribution of *Cill-* districts in this part of the island. Although the modern, planned settlement dates only to the early part of the 19th century (Caldwell 2008, 210-211), the decision to site it here, within easy access of various different ecological zones, points to the previous importance of the location.

Thirds and Sixths

Crucially, administrative division in multiples of three is not mentioned in the pre-Norse sources for Islay. While it is also rare in Ireland, it does find very close parallels in the Scandinavian world. There are the 'thirds' of Orkney – described but not defined in *Orkneyinga saga*;[86] the 'Ridings' of Yorkshire – which have nothing to do with horses, but Scandinavian **þriðjungir* or 'Thirds';[87] the three-part division of each Icelandic Quarter district into *várþing* or 'Spring Assemblies', and of each of these *várþing* into three *goðorð*, or 'chieftaincies'.[88] There were also 'Thirds' on the Baltic island of Gotland; and in the counties of Oppland, Bohuslän and numerous other places in mainland Scandinavia.[89]

While division into sixths is also conspicuous by its absence from the pre-Norse systems of Islay and Ireland, this too is a well-known part of the medieval administrative systems of the Isle of Man, which has six *sheadings*, derived from Norse *séttungr* (a sixth part);[90] but also of Gotland, large parts of Norway, and elsewhere in mainland Scandinavia.[91] Close reading of *Orkneyinga saga*, and the easy way its 'thirds' and 'halves' are said to have changed hands, suggested to Asgaut Steinnes that there were also at one point six-part divisions in Orkney.[92] As the details of these divisions are not preserved in the saga, he developed a model to reconstruct them using the name-typology and spatio-economic context of traditional Orkney farm-names. According to Steinnes, the key to Orkney's sixths lay in the distribution of one particular group of names – those derived from Norse *húsabýr/húsabœr*.

In medieval Scandinavia, *húsabýr* and *húsabœr* were technical terms for royal administrative farms thought to have acted as central places for administrative districts known as *hundari*,[93] and *leiðangr* systems of naval organisation.[94] Although Steinnes was only able to identify four 'husaby' names and associated districts in Orkney, two of these were worth about one sixth of the islands' total taxable value. By broadening his search to take in the likely onomastically derivative 'Bu' of Orphir (a residence of the jarls on the Mainland of Orkney), and the substantial farm of Braeswick on Sanday,

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86   Magnusson and Pálsson 1981.
87   Ekwall 1925, 86.
88   Karlsson 2000, 20-7.
89   KLNM xviii, 375-8.
90   Marstrander 1937, 430-1.
91   KLNM xv, 164-7.
92   Steinnes 1959.
93   KLNM vii, 74-8.
94   Crawford 2006a, 22; Crawford 2006b; KLNM x, 432-59.

he arrived at six administrative divisions of roughly equal extent. Subsequent writers may have dismissed this theory as 'informed guess-work',[95] but it does illustrate the value of place-names in reconstructing administrative systems. With minor amendments, it is possible to apply a similar approach to the Islay material.

Old Norse *Borg*

While Steinnes argued on the basis of saga evidence that a system of husaby-centred hundreds was introduced to Orkney during the overseas expansion of the Jarls of Møre in the late ninth century, more recent analyses have placed the phenomenon much later, possibly even as late as the 1190s.[96] Even so, it is possible, as Crawford suggests, that the term husaby is simply a new name for a pre-existing unit.[97]

It should be noted that there are no *húsabýr* names in Islay, and although it might be tempting to consider those based on Norse *-býr* in their place, there is no evidence that these names have ever been associated with units approaching the rental value of the Orkney husabys. There are, nevertheless, a number of other names-types which point to the systematic division of the island during the Viking Age. Among the most promising, but perhaps the least expected candidates, are those containing the Norse generic *borg*, which usually refers to a 'fortification'.[98] Scrutiny of the Ordnance Survey Name Books for Islay reveals seven locations at which we might at one time have expected to find an independent Norse *–borg* name (Figure 6). The large majority of these are closely associated with a dry-stone, Iron Age fortification, more specifically of the larger type classified by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland as 'forts'; or, in the case of Dùn Bhoraraic in Kilmeny, a 'broch'. As around ninety Iron Age fortifications have been identified in Islay to date (Figure 2), this suggests that the semantic range of Norse *borg* on the island was rather more strictly defined than 'fortification' in general. One possibility is that these seven *borg*-structures were once associated with central places in administrative divisions,[99] perhaps appropriated by the incoming Norse from the displaced locals. It might be relevant here that parallels can be drawn between Am Burg in the Rhinns, and places like Peel in the Isle of Man, and the Brough of Birsay in Orkney. Am Burg's continued importance after the Iron Age is

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95   Thomson 1987, 28.
96   Westerdahl and Stylegar 2004, 127.
97   Crawford 2006a, 21-3.
98   See Cleasby *et al.* 1957, 73.
99   See Brink 1996; Brink 1997; Brink 1999.

confirmed by the foundations of a substantial post-medieval house and its possibly identification as the residence Hector, son of Aileen nan Sop, a minor MacLean laird at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and bailie of the Rhinns.[100]

If we accept that Islay's seven *borg*-locations reflect a seven-fold administrative division on the island during the Viking Age, it might prompt a speculative re-interpretation of the [ˈʃuʔnarʔtiŋ] in Kilchoman as ON **Sjúhundaraþing*, 'the assembly place of the seven hundreds'. The names Cnoc Undail (NGR: NR 185 518), Brahunisary (NGR: NR 374 470) and Tùndal (NGR: NR 423 473) might then be seen as reflexes of a now lost *hundari* terminology, more probably through the conceptual re-imagining of a Common Scandinavian term, than the implementation of attested fiscal practice in medieval Sweden.

Alternatively, we might want to refine the criteria for inclusion of given *borg* names in the list. Take Dùn Nosebridge in Kilarrow (NGR: NR 371 601), for example, from Norse **Hnausaborg* (Turf Fortress). The fort in question is of the impressive, yet highly unusual 'multivalate' type. Its location also dominates the fertile Laggan Valley, one of Islay's two main watersheds. If we were to exclude it from the total we would be left with one independent *borg* name per medieval parish, suggesting perhaps that these reflect a six-part administrative division – six *séttungir*. As in Man and Orkney, this would not preclude division into administrative 'halves'; and this could be where the true significance of Dùn Nosebridge lies. As a structure, Dùn Nosebridge has only one close parallel in Islay, the impressive multivalate fort of Dùn Ghùaidhre (NGR: NR 389 648),[101] which dominates the island's other main watershed, the Sorn Valley. Between them, these two structures look out over the bulk of the island's most fertile land, each commanding its own *half*.

The idea of *borg*-centred territorial units in Islay is not entirely without foundation. The equation of Magenburg with Lossit discussed above would also place it in the hinterland of the broch of Dùn Bhoraraic. Interestingly, the current name of this monument does not derive directly from the broch itself but the adjacent bay, presumably Norse **Borgarvík* (Fort Bay) – raising the possibility that *Magenburg* is actually the original Norse name for the broch. Given its unique architectural character in an Islay context, and its domination of the fertile heartland of the island, and its command of the strategically important Sound of Islay and its location less than five km from the later

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100   See Caldwell 2008a, 94 and 350 fn81; Caldwell 2011b, 119-20.
101   The area surrounding this fort is associated with the Manx king, Godred Crovan, in local folklore. According to legend, Godred is said to have slain a dragon at Emaraconart, about 2km to the WNW (Earl nd, 18). While he also appears to be the referent in the current name of the fort, it is impossible to say whether this particular association is factual or fanciful.

Figure 6. ON –borg Names in Islay.

medieval prestige centre of Finlaggan (NGR: NR 388 681), it is reasonable to suppose that Magenburg derives from an earlier Norse *Meginborg, 'the main (or most important) fort', and by extrapolation, the main or most important district. Clues as to the possible administrative basis of this district can be found in later documents.

Skipreiðir in Islay?

In 1617 Andrew Knox, bishop of the Isles, issued a charter to Edinburgh advocate Thomas Rollock for the lands known as the Tenandry of Lossit.[102] This was a substantial but fairly compact landholding, centred on Lossit in Kilmeny and comprising all of the remaining Church lands in Islay which had not been dispersed since the Reformation. With a value of about 40 merks (or 16 quarterlands) in Old Extent, it is only marginally smaller than the idealised value of 45 merks suggested for each of the island's early parishes. As such, it would not be unreasonable to imagine that the bulk of this landholding originally represented the non-demesne part of Kilmeny parish. What makes the tenandry even more interesting, however, is its traditional *reddendo* stating that the grantee should provide annually 'unam cymbam cum quatuordecem lie ores' (a boat with fourteen oars).

The idea of boat service lends itself easily to association with the exploits of Viking sea-kings. By the mid-tenth century, the introduction of Hakon the Good's *leiðangr* system formed the basis of the national levy recorded in the Norwegian provincial laws of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[103] That is not to suggest that the concept of naval levies in the Hebrides was a Norse innovation.[104] Indeed, arguments have been presented for the direct continuity of Islay's naval traditions from Dalriadan times to the post-Norse period.[105] For reasons already discussed, however, any perceived continuity seems more likely to be a result of accident rather than design, or limited to broad concepts, such as the boundaries of territories, rather than fine detail, such as the terminology used to describe them. In any case, by the later Middle Ages it appears that the maritime heritage of the Hebrides had been heavily influenced by Scandinavian custom. Contemporary illustrations, such as those on grave-slabs from Eilean Mor and on Angus Mor MacDonald's personal seal, suggest that the typical naval vessel of the period, the *birlinn* or 'West Highland galley', had evolved from the clinker-built, double-prowed ships of the region's Viking settlers.[106]

Notwithstanding these indications of Scandinavian heritage, it is clear that there had been some changes in local naval fashion since the Viking Age. A ship of 14 oars might seem small compared to the minimum 13 bencher, or 26 oar ship, required for the national levy in medieval Norway. However, a

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102   Smith 1895, 353-61.
103   Williams 1997.
104   See Easson 1987, 7-8; Caldwell 2010.
105   Eg. Lamont 1957, 58; Easson 1987.
106   See Caldwell 2004, 2010; Rixson 1998

survey of the documentary parallels for the Lossit *cymba* by David Caldwell suggests that it would have required a minimum crew of 3 men per oar, or 42 men in total.[107] If, as seems likely, the burden of the *reddendo* was ancient and had remained unchanged in terms of manpower, this would suggest that the landholdings of Kilmeny parish were originally required to provide enough men to crew a longship with 21 pairs of oars, close to the standard size specified by later medieval Norwegian legal tracts such as *Frostaþingslög* and *Gulaþingslög*.[108] This level of provision would appear to match that assumed for other parts of the Viking expansion zone in Scotland, such as Orkney. According to Hugh Marwick, late medieval Orkney had a taxable extent of around 180 ouncelands.[109] If, like the *manngerd* and *lide* divisions of Norway, each of its skattlands (equal to quarter urislands) supplied one oarsman for the naval levy, this would point to a fleet of around 18 ships.[110] This figure, which appears to be confirmed by saga accounts of the battle of Tankerness,[111] also provides a rough match for the number of early parishes in Orkney. Considering that the tax raised from Islay in its earliest records was around one third that of Orkney, it might be expected that the Norse rulers of Islay could have raised a fleet of 6 typical longships, a figure which would correspond to the number of early parishes and might suggest that these too previously functioned as *skipreiðir* districts.

Closing remarks

Following the Norse takeover and settlement of Islay, it stands to reason that its nascent Scandinavian community, or their overlords, would have sought to organise themselves. As in better documented Norse societies, it would not have been long before a system of land administration was introduced to regulate landholdings and social status, in addition to apportioning taxes and other obligations. At any given time, the prevailing system would have boasted a range of standard terms operating on a number of different levels with various different functions. As in more recent times, however, there is no reason to believe that the first system introduced would have remained static and immutable. Indeed, changes over the years, at the instigation of local and regional authorities alike, have left the modern settlement historian with a confusing palimpsest of terms and possible interpretations. Faced with a lack of detailed documentary or archaeological evidence, it will only ever be

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107   Caldwell 2008b.
108   KLNM x, 432-59; xv 546-51.
109   Marwick 1949, 6-7.
110   See Thomson 1987, 118, who finds no traces of a Norse *leiðang* system in Orkney.
111   Clouston 1927-8.

possible to push the debate forward here with the help of an approach that is not only multi-disciplinary and retrospective, but involves a healthy dose of measured speculation.

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate just such an approach, and how a process of contextualised analysis that takes due account of conditions on the ground has revealed possible traces of two general features of insular Norse administration in Islay: a unit of land denomination corresponding to the ounceland extent known from other parts of *Scotia Scandinavica*, and the sub-division of the island into divisions of three and six with a view to providing naval service. Whether or not or not these particular observations convince, it is hoped that the method employed will serve to reinvigorate thinking on the enigma of the Islay extents, and, by extension, the problem of Norse administration in surrounding areas.

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