

# Kisimul Castle and the Origins of Hebridean Galley-Castles: Preliminary Thoughts

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## *Introduction*

INVESTIGATING the origins<sup>1</sup> of Kisimul Castle (Figure 1) reveals major problems in the historiography of Hebridean castles.

- Debatable assumptions commonly become foundations for conclusions with little or no recognition that they are debatable. Indeed they do so even without recognition that they are assumptions and not demonstrated facts.
- Too often information is analysed with inadequate attention to context.
- The need for comprehensive systematic analysis and studies is ignored.
- Narrow and historically inappropriate frames of reference all too often distort analyses.

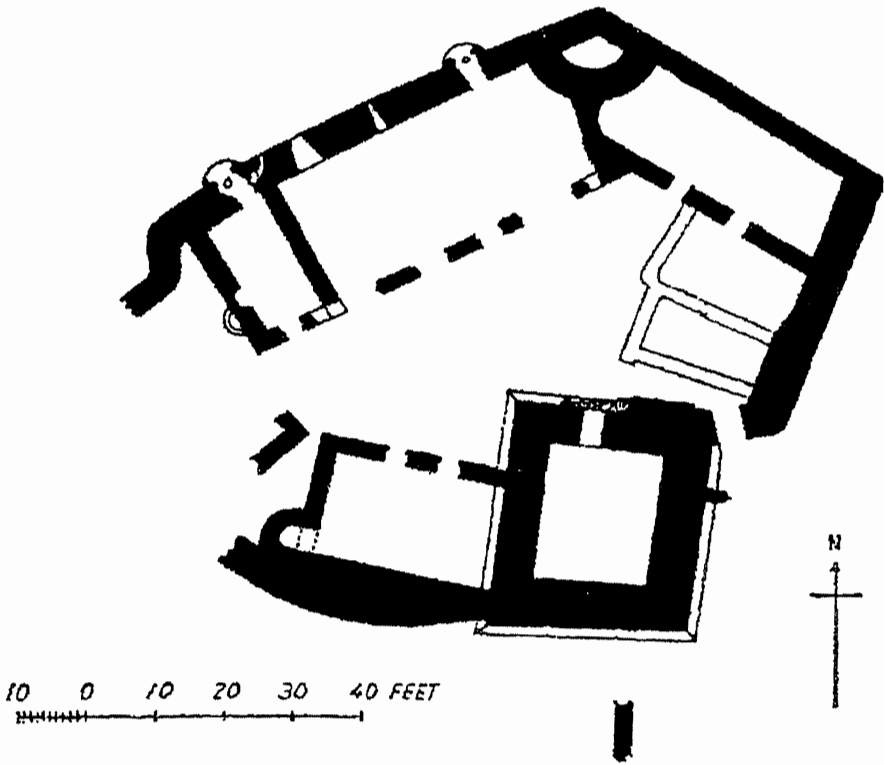
The upshot of all this is that conclusions based on evidence justifying only possibilities are confidently stated as probabilities or even as virtual certainties.

**Four propositions:** In response to the foregoing, this paper advances four propositions:

1. All debatable assumptions must be recognised as such and then verified through specific explanation if possible and if not, discarded.
2. Information must never be analysed out of full context.

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<sup>1</sup> Origins means such things as: Who had the castle built? Who were the actual builders? For what purposes was it built? How are those purposes reflected in its general and precise location? its design? materials used? What technologies and skills were required? What cultural sources and influences affected all such matters? When was it built?



*Figure 1: Kisimul Castle c1860s after extensive 'quarrying'.  
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3. Sound analysis of debatable issues can be based only on comprehensive studies, not on bits and pieces of selected information.
4. Prevailing frames of reference distort analysis of the origins of many Hebridean Castles, and require re-placement with more historically sound approaches.

Three of these boil down to the need for more science and less anecdote in the historiography of Hebridean castles. The fourth deals with more substantive issues.

Justifying these four propositions is my sole aim here. They are properly judged, I believe, not on where they lead respecting the origins of Hebridean Castles, but on how well-founded they are in fact and principle.

**Hebridean Galley-Castles:** *Hebridean Galley-Castle* is a coined term and therefore calls for definition:

- *Hebrides* and *Hebridean* include not only the Norse *Sudreys*, but also the mainland adjacent to the *Sudreys*.
- A *galley* is any galley-type boat, but is typically Norse, Hebridean, or Irish.
- A *castle* is any lime-mortar or drystone structure combining residence and defence of the period 800 to 1600, far longer than in conventional definitions.
- A *galley-castle* is any castle close enough to the sea directly or by portage to have been significantly influenced by the existence of galleys when they were a dominant military factor. Most castles in both the Hebridean islands and on Hebridean mainland shores are galley-castles.

## I DEBATABLE ASSUMPTIONS

### **Verification of debatable assumptions; Scottish Diffusionism**

Assumptions are as essential in studying Hebridean Castles as in any other human endeavour. They must, however, be dealt with properly:

- All assumptions that are possibly debatable must be explicitly revealed as such.
- All debatable assumptions must be either justified by specific explanation or discarded.

Revelation and verification of assumptions is, of course, no more than an essential element of the scientific approach to any subject.

### **Scottish Diffusionism**

Unfortunately, untested debatable assumptions about Hebridean Castles rival the Highland midge in numbers. Foremost, and the parent of a host of other untested assumptions, is the orthodox analysis of Hebridean Castles which I call Scottish Diffusionism:

Conventional analysis of Hebridean Castles typically assumes, without discussion, that they are Scottish. This Scoto-centric approach automatically tends towards late dating. It appears to assume a diffusion of cultural influences

from the outcome of the Battle of Hastings in 1066. These moved northward by land to what is now eastern-central Scotland. They then radiated slowly out from that hub like snails along the spokes of a cart-wheel to the distant parts of what is now modern Scotland, but much of which was not Scotland then. The last places the snails reached were those farthest from the hub, places like the Western Isles, Caithness, and Orkney and Shetland. Neither snails nor anything else of significance travelled along the rim of the wheel independently of the spokes.

A story goes that while Donald Dewar was First Minister he flew to Stornoway and was then driven to a house in a small village in Harris. There he was introduced to an old lady. Tired from the long trip, he said: 'My, you live in a remote place.' The old lady fixed a sharp eye on him and said: 'Remote from where?' That is, of course, the key question respecting Hebridean castles; Scottish Diffusionism simply assumes it means remote from eastern-central Scotland.

### **Other common debatable assumptions**

Other common debatable assumptions include the following:

- **No indigenous evolution**

No indigenous evolution was involved in the development of Hebridean Castles.

- **Late unless proven early**

A castle is late unless proven to be early:

This castle is very hard to date;

Thus it must be very very late.

- **Hebrideans were too backward to build castles at early periods**

The people of the Hebrides were so backward that they could not have built even extremely primitive castles at an early period. This view reached a sorry peak in 1927 with W. Mackay Mackenzie, Secretary of the Royal Commission. Rejecting early dates for castles in the West Highlands and Isles, he wrote:

At a time when memorial effigies in the south were being cut in a complete outfit of plate armour, those in the west show only the ancient quilted coat with cape of mail. So too in the case of western castles (Mackenzie 1927:42).

This assumption of Hebridean backwardness is splendidly self-proving: when the Hebrideans did start castle-building, their castles were, of course, hopelessly archaic. Thus, Mackenzie wrote of Kisimul Castle after dating it as mid-15th century:

Our special interest is in the fact that it was as old-fashioned in style as the quilted coat which continued to be the body armour of the island chiefs in the days of armour plate. (Ibid. :164)

What a marvellous picture! Here is Macneil of Barra in the full body plate armour of the mounted knight, being lowered by a large crane onto the stern of Kisimul's Galley. There he stands – magnificent and immobilised – as the galley sails out into the Minch to meet the foe. And there he stands – magnificent and immobilised – as the battle rages. And still he stands – magnificent and immobilised – as the galley returns triumphant to Kisimul where he is winched off and carried victorious into the Great Hall.

*Pace* Mackenzie, but quilted coats with mail did not cease to be state-of-the-art in galley warfare just because elsewhere knights fighting in medieval armies and mounted on great war-horses had adopted full body-plate armour.

Upon hearing of Mackenzie's nonsense my wife – who has lived in a galley-castle – said: 'Yes, and just think of the rust!'

The effigies of obsolete body armour are quite literally the sole evidence Mackenzie offers of Hebridean backwardness in general and of Barra backwardness in particular.

These days no one would be so politically incorrect as to express openly such views or perhaps even to realise that they held them. Nonetheless, one still runs across a whiff of assumptions of Hebridean backwardness in a phenomenon described forty years ago by Stewart Cruden responding to Mackenzie on effigies:

In these and similar observations we sense that the possibility of early date is considered with alarm and dismissed with relief, and we feel the author's growing confidence as he transfers his attention to features of unquestionably later date (Cruden 1960:15-16).

This notion of Hebridean backwardness also reflects the assumption already mentioned that ideas took decades or centuries to move and be absorbed from one place to another. Respecting matters of political and military importance to warlords, however, nothing is likely to be farther from the truth. Hebridean warlords were a highly political and aggressive lot; they were equipped with galleys making quick work of the relatively short distances between Hebridean islands or even farther afield.

For example, the latest that successful mid-twelfth century Hebridean warlords might have learned of the castle built on Wyre in Orkney by Kolbein Hruga was a sailing season after its erection around 1150. After all, that castle dominates one of the two primary sea lanes from the Hebrides to Norway. Nor are they likely to have been unaware of Castle Rushen in the Isle of Man as soon as it was erected. Their power and prestige – to say nothing of their lives – depended upon such knowledge. Only fifty years earlier King Magnus of Norway had laid waste to the Hebrides, and in this very era Somerled was fighting Godred for the Isle of Man. Nor was mere knowledge of military developments enough; their success and lives depended equally on prompt and effective responses. Whether one of those responses was to build a castle in Castlebay we do not know; that it might have been we do know.

Maybe this completely unverified assumption of Hebridean backwardness has disappeared from the conscious hearts and minds of modern archaeologists and historians. Nonetheless, it lies buried like anthrax spores in countless patches throughout much of the golden mountain of historical and archaeological information we all mine so deeply in conducting our modern studies.

### **Overall effect = late dating**

The overall effect of all these unverified assumptions is by no means random. Each leans in only one direction: the late-dating of Hebridean Castles.

No historiography basing late-dating on these assumptions is scientifically sound.

### **Verifying debatable assumptions in existing work**

Obviously it is essential that people doing new work in this area adhere to basic scientific principles by verifying their assumptions.

What, however, about verification of the huge body of unexamined and debatable assumptions in existing work? Many for example, dominate individual studies of castles in the 1928 Inventory of Skye and the Outer Islands, and again in the later Orkney & Shetland and Argyll inventories. Naturally, those valuable and indispensable studies have been a foundation for much other work, bringing their assumptions right along with them.

We can hardly expect everyone to lay down their shovels and/or pens to engage in a full-scale examination of these assumptions throughout the vast body of existing studies. It is, however, not too much to expect serious scholars to deal properly with all possibly debatable assumptions in any existing study they intend to use in their own work. This means:

- Carefully teasing out the assumptions in the earlier work.
- Either supporting debatable assumptions with specific and well-founded explanation or discarding them.
- Re-evaluating the earlier work after discarding unsupportable assumptions.
- Relying on the earlier work only to the extent still justified after the foregoing.

It is barely necessary to add that, having limited the use of existing work in this manner, modern scholars need to be astute to avoid introducing additional unverified and debatable assumptions into their own work.

## **II CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

Turning now to my second proposition: Information must never be analysed out of full context. This applies both to re-evaluation of our existing corpus of information and to the development of new information.

### **Indigenous input**

A telling remark was made not long ago in a television program on Mine Howe in Orkney: ‘The single most important thing in understanding a structure is considering what was already there when it was built.’ Unfortunately, such

respect for context tends to be sadly lacking in the historiography of Hebridean castles. As already suggested, conventional analysis typically assumes away indigenous context. Thus Kisimul, for example, is treated like the first motor car in Barra in 1926: A new cultural artefact coming entirely from abroad. The main concession to indigenous input typically is acceptance that the castles are made largely of local stone.

Analysis of any type of structure ignoring the indigenous *status quo* is generally indefensible; it is particularly malevolent in the case of Hebridean Castles. They were built in areas with a rich history of promontory fortifications, duns, and brochs. Moreover, the Norse penetration introduced a vigorous, intelligent, and aggressive new people. These people were faced with a challenging new environment of existing fortifications and other structures made of stone, to say nothing of a great lack of their accustomed building material, wood. Meanwhile, of course, the existing population was subjected to the challenge of the Norse. Could the resulting cultural cauldron have been so totally lacking in impact on the development of residential fortifications that we can afford to ignore the possibility? Hardly.

Nonetheless, conventional scholarship overlooks altogether structures not fitting orthodox definitions of castles, many of which may nonetheless be pertinent to indigenous evolution. Consider Dun Ban on an islet in Loch Caravat in North Uist. It has what may have been a dun wall, but is lime-mortared, has a square corner uncharacteristic of duns, and had a medieval building inside. From the plan and imaginary reconstruction (Figure 2), Dun Ban gives every appearance of being an early, low-curtain-walled castle. The 1928 Inventory notes that it has ‘features in common with the castles of the mainland, with which the builder was evidently familiar.’ (RCAHMS 1928:29) Nonetheless, the Inventory characterises it as a late dun, not as a castle.

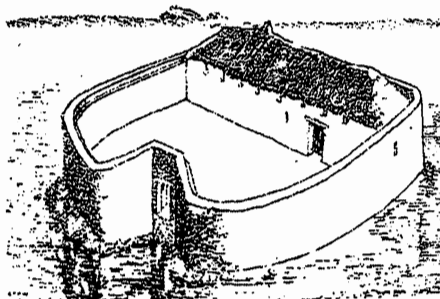


Figure 2: Dun Ban, Loch Caravat. (RCAHMS, 1928.)



Another borderline structure is Dun Raouill on an islet in Loch Druidibeg in South Uist (Figure 3). The 1928 Inventory denominated it as a dun, and described it as ‘of a very uncommon type.’ (RCAHMS 1928:380) Figure 3 reveals this to be a considerable understatement. The very originality of this structure cries out for study of indigenous roles in the development of Hebridean Castles.

Nonetheless, so far as I can ascertain neither Dun Ban nor Dun Raouill has ever been considered in mainstream studies as possibly pertinent to the origins of Hebridean medieval castles.

If structures such as these are overlooked, we may be quite certain that ordinary drystone duns built or occupied after 800 will also be ignored.

Only if indigenous input is entirely ruled out can any of these structures be safely ignored in the comprehensive studies needed to determine the origin of Hebridean castles.

Unfortunately, this lack of attention to context permeates many areas of investigation. Two illustrations are charters and John of Fordun, both having played major roles in dates assigned to, *inter alia*, Kisimul.

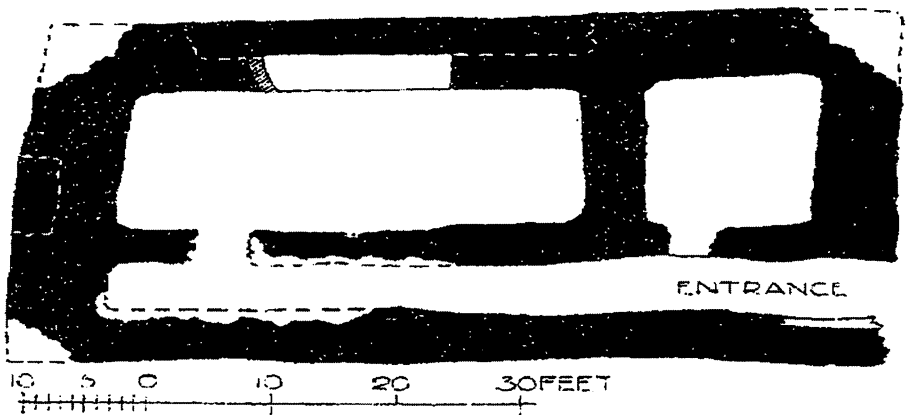


Figure 3: Dun Raouill. (RCAHMS, 1928.)

### Charters

Where a charter names a castle, presumption of its contemporaneous existence without further contextual analysis may often be safe. What, however, may and may not be properly inferred from non-mention of a castle in charters? This question can arise in a number of ways.

### **Charter mentions one or more castles, but not the one in question**

The strongest case for inferring the non-existence of a castle is where a charter mentions one or more castles, but not the one in question. Mention of at least one purportedly shows the importance of castles, giving rise to an inference that all castles in all the lands granted would naturally have been mentioned. There is even a legal maxim for this proposition: *Expressio unius, exclusio alterius*. Like all legal maxims it is hazardous to the truth when used out of context.

Thus, for example, to the extent that it was common in Hebridean charters to mention some but not all castles then the inference of non-existence of an unmentioned one is weakened. How common was it? This question can be answered only by comprehensive examination of all such charters available to us. Nonetheless, while this argument is not uncommon, I have yet to see such an examination.

Even more important in this situation is internal contextual examination of the document itself. Consider, for example, the Indenture of 1354 between John of Islay and John of Lorn, which among many things involved quitclaims to Mull and Tiree, as well as the Isle of Coll (Munro 1986:5-8).

The indenture explicitly mentions three castles – the two Cairnaborgs and Dun Chonnuill – all on small out-islands in important seaways. Four castles go unmentioned: Breacachadh Castle on Coll, Aros and Duart Castles on Mull and the tower on Tiree mentioned a decade or two later by John of Fordun.

Turner & Dunbar have drawn the inference that Breacachadh Castle on Coll did not exist in 1354 because it goes unmentioned in this indenture. Since they failed to make a thorough contextual examination of the indenture, they failed to notice that the same inference applies with equal force to Aros, Duart and a tower on Tiree. Unless the authors were willing to deny the existence of these other castles at that time – highly unlikely – it was entirely illogical to assert on these grounds that Breacachadh Castle did not exist in 1354.

### **Charter is silent**

It is equally unsound to infer the non-existence of a castle from a charter mentioning no castles at all. Only a comprehensive study showing that Hebridean charters virtually always mentioned extant castles could justify such an inference. There is none.

Moreover, local context must also be considered. For example, the 1427 charter of Barra to Gilleonan Macneil contains no mention of Kisimul. As well as Barra, however, the charter granted to Macneil the lands of Baegastallis –

now called Boisdale – in South Uist. That name itself – apparently Gaelic for Castle Bay – constitutes evidence of the existence of a castle there at that time. In addition, extensive remains in Boisdale of a medieval castle, Castle Calvay, also raise the possibility that the charter granted another castle besides Kisimul without mentioning its existence. Nonetheless, this charter has played a major role in support of post-1427 datings of Kisimul.

### **No charters**

The very weakest case for equating non-mention with non-existence is where no charters at all are known during the entire period when a castle may or may not have been extant. Nonetheless, the absence of charters is not uncommonly presented as an element supporting late dating. This too is done with no examination of important contextual questions. These include among others: First, how extensive was the use of charters at all in Hebridean waters at the pertinent periods? Second, how many charters which may have existed survived sufficiently long for knowledge of them to come to modern eyes?

In sum, reasoning from a negative is always a dangerous business; in the case of Hebridean castles and charters, it is downright foolhardy.

### **John of Fordun**

Much of what has been said about charters applies equally to other contemporary historical sources, one of the most important of which is John of Fordun.

### **Introduction**

John of Fordun's *Chronica Gentis Scottorum*, written around the 1370s, contains a chapter – all of a page and a half – entitled *De insulis Scotiae divisis ab insulis Orcadibus*. Another chapter listing 39 Orkney islands by name only follows. A full investigation of Fordun's two chapters is beyond the scope of this paper. Considering their context will, however, suffice before weighing what, if any, conclusions may properly be drawn from Fordun's identifying a number of castles and towers in the first of these chapters.

As the title indicates, Fordun's chapter is a list of islands he calls islands of Scotland apart from the Orkneys. Fordun identified 46, although he made clear that the list was incomplete. Included among the 46 are the Isle of Man and Rathlin Island. This leaves 44 islands of modern Scotland, 8 in the Clyde, 34 in the Hebrides, two on the north coast, one of which – in a rare mistake – is actually a peninsula, and none on the east coast.

### **Purpose of the two chapters on islands**

Considerable puzzlement exists about the reasons behind these chapters. There is nothing else like them in his Chronicle, which is largely a history book, both ancient and modern, not a geography.

I believe both chapters are political. Although Norway owned the Orkneys at the time, Scotland had an acquisitive eye on them. Fordun's including the Isle of Man and Rathlin as two of Scotia's islands also can be explained only as a political ploy. And finally, while legally the Hebrides had belonged to Scotland for a century, it would be long indeed before the King of Scots acquired any firm hegemony over them. Hence the desire in a nationalistic work to list the islands and, where it was easily available, provide scattered information about some of them – rather like a wolf marking what it hopes will be its territory. There is no mention whatever of the unquestionably Scottish east coast islands where no political propaganda was needed.

### **Not a comprehensive gazetteer**

Be that as it may, Fordun's chapter was neither intended to be nor is a comprehensive gazetteer of the islands. Fordun supplies only names for 16 of the 44 Scottish islands. This full one-third of his list includes Kerrera, Coll, Skye, and Lewis. Another 14 islands generate one item of information each; three are the most for any island. These items of information fall into three categories.

### **Miscellaneous items**

The most common – 23 – are a miscellaneous assortment. They include natural information – nearby whirlpools and whales, hilly character, and the like, the size or length of an island, location relative to other islands, sparse population, good sport, and fertility.

No one would dream of arguing that any of this miscellaneous information was intended to be a comprehensive listing of anything.

### **Ecclesiastical items**

The second category consists of 14 ecclesiastical items. Most of these identify buildings – cells, chapels, monasteries, a parish church, and an abbey. At least four refer to sanctuary or *refugium*; standing alone this may or may not refer to a building. One reference simply locates the Episcopal See of Argyll on Lismore.

Examination of the Argyll inventories reveals readily enough that Fordun's ecclesiastical sites constitute only a sample and not an exhaustive list. Omissions almost certainly include: Pennygown (Mull), Kilvickean (Mull), Soroby (Tiree), Cill an Ailein (Mull), Kilchattan (Luing), and St. Mary's and St. Oran's (Iona). Many others throughout the islands are quite likely to have been extant in the 1370s.

### **Secular buildings**

Fordun's third category consists of 13 secular buildings, or 14 if his reference to *Insula Tyreym* is judged to be a reference to *Castrum Tyreym*.

Two of these secular buildings were mansions of the Lords of the Isles in Islay, three were royal castles on Arran and Bute, seven, if we count Castle Tioram, were named castles on Hebridean islands, and two were unnamed towers on Hebridean islands.

Fordun's other specifically-named Hebridean castles were, to use modern names, (1) Dunyvaig on Islay, (2) Dun Chonnuil in the Garvellachs, (3) Duart and (4) Aros on Mull, (5) Cairnaborg, and (6) probably Borve in Benbecula.

His two unnamed towers were on Tiree and Thorset. Contrary to both Skene and the modern editor of Bower's *Scotichronicon*, I see no reason to think that Fordun's *Insula Thorset* is anything other than Torsa, a tidal island of Luing about a mile long. Fordun's name for the island – Thor's Seat – and Torsa – Thor's Island – are virtually interchangeable. And there is a medieval tower there.

Just as with the other categories of Fordun's information, it is evident that the Hebridean island castles and towers identified did not constitute an exhaustive list. At least three more almost certainly existed: Achadun and Coeffin on Lismore, and Dunvegan on Skye. This is, however, a minimum. What, for example, of other castles which may be mid-14th century or earlier on two of the islands about which Fordun provided no information whatever: Lewis and Skye? On Lewis, Stornoway and Dun Eistean are obvious possibilities. On Skye, apart from Dunvegan, three come quickly to mind: Knock, Dunscaith, and Duntulm. Nor can we afford to ignore other possibilities such as Dun Ara and Moy on Mull, Kisimul in Barra, Calvay in Uist, and Castle Mestag on Stroma. Indeed, freed of the blinders of Scottish Diffusionism there may be dozens of then existing island castles Fordun failed to mention.

Fordun's identification of the castles and towers he does locate are useful to show their existence in the 1370s. But his identifications simply cannot

logically be used as even the slightest evidence of the non-existence of other castles.

### **Misusing Fordun as a list of castles**

In sum, the only list Fordun made was a list of islands. What he said about them – when he said anything at all – created no lists of anything. They were simply bits and pieces of information he had acquired. He had more extensive bits and pieces in some categories – ecclesiastical and secular buildings – than in others. But in no category did he create a list, much less an exhaustive list.

In spite of all this, starting no later than the RCAHMS 1928 Inventory of the Outer Isles and Skye, it has become commonplace to call the castles and towers Fordun identified on various islands a *list* of castles. The so-called *list* is then used as strong evidence of the non-existence in the 1370s or even later of any non-included castle. Even though illogical and a corruption of what Fordun was doing, this continues to be done and continues to distort the history of Hebridean castles.

## **III COMPREHENSIVE STUDIES**

My third proposition is that sound analysis of debatable issues can be based only on comprehensive studies, not on bits and pieces of selected information.

### **Meaning of *Comprehensive*: The appropriate set**

Comprehensive here means studies starting with a set *including at a minimum all possible* Hebridean castles as defined earlier.

### **Castles alone not enough**

Examining only castles is, however, by no means adequate for truly comprehensive studies. For many purposes, for example studying the use or non-use of lime-mortar in the Hebrides, all stone structures of the era – not just castles – require consideration.

### **Geographic enlargement**

Moreover, geographic enlargement is also required. To be sufficiently comprehensive, inquiries must include all structures outside the Hebrides which might have influenced building in the Hebrides. The most immediate areas to

consider are Orkney, Sutherland, Caithness, and Isle of Man and others, such as the Clyde, Galloway, Norway, and Ireland, and other parts of modern Scotland. The value of any study failing to go at least this far is subject to serious limitations. A really comprehensive approach would also include: Northwest England to Wales, Wales including Anglesey, Southwest England to Land's End, the rest of Scandinavia, Northern Europe outside Scandinavia, Normandy, Provence, other parts of France, and the East.

### **Individual-castle analysis – selective comparisons**

I know of no single comprehensive study along the foregoing lines. Instead we typically find analyses of individual castles based on comparisons with selective examples of other castles. This selective-comparison technique commonly determines both which castles and which features are compared.

There can be little objection to using selective examples respecting undebatable matters; indeed reasonably concise studies demand doing so. But using selective examples respecting debatable issues is simply unacceptable in any scientific analysis. Distortion of evidence and conclusions in such a process is unavoidable.

Moreover, a particular problem arises when comparative studies of individual objects are carried out repeatedly over long periods of time. Each conclusion about one subject of study becomes a brick in the foundation of the next study. Before long a substantial structure of conclusions exists locking the entire body of learning into a conventional, but potentially unsound, intellectual edifice.

Whatever unverified assumptions underlie the early stages of this process soon become proven to be 'true' by its self-fulfilling nature. And the truer they are perceived to be the less need anyone will see to verify them. This, I believe, has happened to the study of Hebridean castles for nearly a century. Of course, the unverified assumptions have never in fact been verified by this process; they remain just as problematic as ever.

So far as I can tell there is little perception that this selection problem exists respecting Hebridean castles. There seems to be widespread and basic failure to recognise that in this kind of scholarly enterprise sound analysis requires one of only two possible courses of action. One is to examine the entire comprehensive set. The other – to be used where the whole set is too large – is to use statistically adequate random sampling.

## Remedies

A number of things can be done to remedy this problem. In more or less ascending order of difficulty they are:

- **Recognition**

Simply to recognise that the problem exists and that it affects a large corpus of scholarship.

- **Recognising limitations of past selectivity**

To recognise that past dominance of selectivity imposes severe limitations on the definiteness of conclusions that may be properly drawn from existing studies of Hebridean castles.

- **Future studies comprehensive**

To engage where at all feasible only in either across-the-board or genuinely random-selection studies respecting debatable subjects.

- **Where not feasible recognise limitations**

Where that is not feasible, to make crystal clear the nature and limitations of the selective study adopted instead and to refrain from stating conclusions unjustified in light of those limitations.

- **Revisiting existing historiography**

Finally, to revisit the existing corpus of scholarship to ascertain what has and what has not escaped problems resulting from the selective approach. The sheer volume of such a task is enough to strike fear into anyone thinking about doing it, even in little pieces. Nonetheless, initial steps to remedy the problem may not be as daunting as they seem. The Royal Commission inventories of Argyll, Orkney and Shetland, and Skye and the Outer Islands are both the most important and the most easily investigated on this score. Moreover their very nature permits investigation in small bites.

## Dimensions of appropriate set

This set of possible Hebridean Castles has many dimensions, each with a wide range. There is, however, a strong tendency for scholarship to focus on the easy end of each dimension and to neglect the more difficult end. This is a variant of what the late Graham Ritchie referred to in another context as the Honey-pot Syndrome. If we are ever to get closer to the truth about the origins of Hebridean Castles it is essential that the whole of each range be examined, not just the obvious honey-pots.



- **Degree of Prominence – Calendar-Castles and Shadow-Castles**

One dimension is prominence. At the easy end are Calendar (or Postcard) Castles known to everyone, such as Duart, Dunvegan, and especially Eilean Donan.

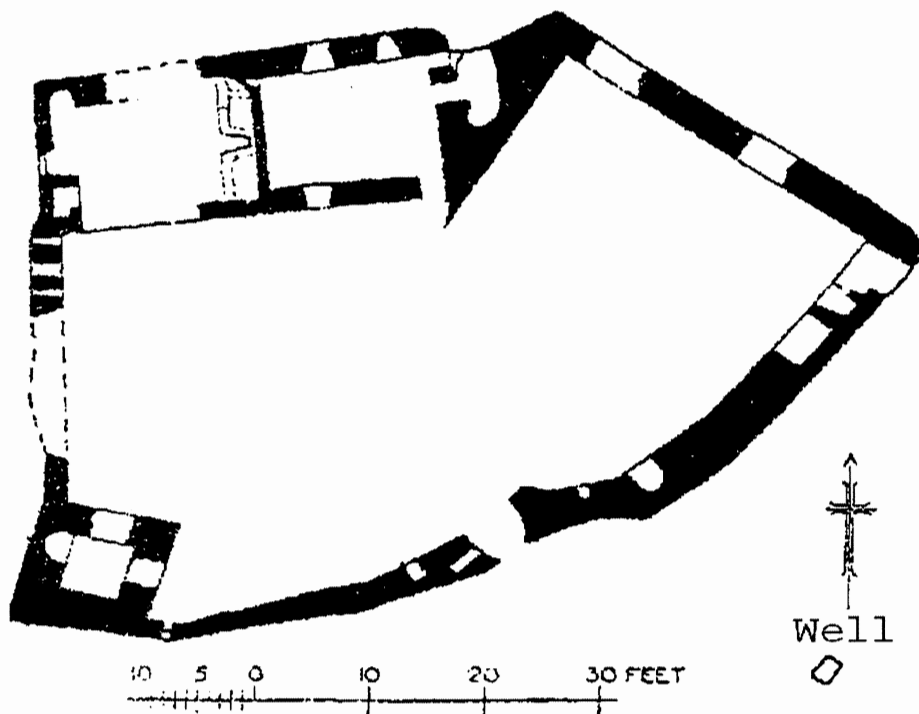


Figure 4: Castle Calvay. (RCAHMS, 1928.)

At the difficult end are Shadow-Castles that both the world at large and historiography have left living in peaceful obscurity. There are countless of these, including Mestag on Stroma and Castle Holm (or Strom) in Shetland.

Castle Calvay, an important castle lying less than 16 miles from Kisimul, is just such a Shadow-Castle. As Figure 4 shows, Calvay is a curtain wall castle lacking a tower of any significance. This is a form generally believed to be that of the earliest Hebridean castles. As already mentioned there is place-name evidence suggesting Calvay's existence in 1427.

Calvey and Kisimul were visited just two days apart in the preparation of the 1928 Inventory. The Inventory account of Kisimul mentions two similarities between it and Calvey: the small towers in the northern wall and the 'peculiarity' of bedding slabs on edge. Compare Figures 1 and 4 for others.

Ever since the 1928 Inventory, Calvey has, so far as I can tell, simply sat there and been ignored. Its relevance to the origins of Kisimul Castle was completely ignored in both the 1928 Inventory and the detailed official study of Kisimul published in 1978.

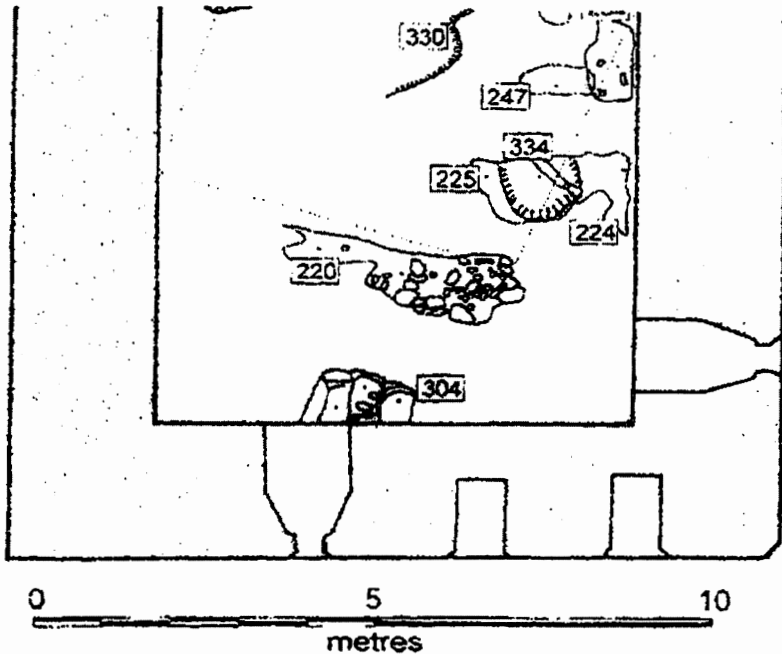


Figure 5: Carrick Castle. Pre-1350 remains of prior structure. Lime-mortar wall (No. 220) and clay-bonded wall (No. 304). (Copyright Gordon Ewart & Fiona Baker)

### Current existence/non-existence and certainty of original existence

Another dimension affecting comprehensive studies is survival or even existence at any time. Hebridean Castles range from largely extant – Dunvegan – to totally lost – Stornoway. So too they also range from castles which certainly once existed to castles so lost in the mists of the past that they may or may not

be mere figments of imagination. Almost as deep in the shadows are scanty remnants long since buried in later structures. Figure 5 shows such remnants at Carrick, Loch Goil, a galley-castle, albeit non-Hebridean.

The only difference between a long lost castle and one still with us is how much or how little we can know about it. That, however, is no excuse for not using what we do know in scholarly studies. For example, the fact that one remnant at Carrick is lime-mortar and the other clay-bonded could be quite important in any comprehensive study of those two building techniques.

- **Extent studied**

Another dimension affecting comprehensive studies is the extent to which individual castles have been studied. The honeypot includes those which have been excavated and studied to a fare-thee-well – Tioram comes to mind. They are, however, not the slightest bit more important for scholarly studies than castles which have at most been measured and casually photographed, or sometimes not even that. And yet scholarly attention tends to focus on the well-studied while ignoring the others.

- **Extensiveness of historical roles**

Hebridean Castles also range from major participants in known history – Duart, Duniveg, Dunstaffnage, Mingarry, Tioram – to those having little or no currently known role – Dun Ara (Mull) and Dun Ban in Loch Caravat and again Calvay. Nonetheless, castles without a known history are just as important in seeking the origins of Hebridean Castles as those with it; they are left out of consideration only at the peril of the truth. After all, those who built Hebridean castles had no idea which would become historic and which would not.

- **Types of Structures**

The nature of the structures required to be studied as possible Hebridean castles is broad indeed. The honeypot end, of course, includes all the Calendar-Castles. Also reasonably near that end are countless others, such as Bheagram in Uist, Braal in Caithness, and Dunscaith in Skye, structures that no one would deny are medieval castles.

At the other end of the range are structures failing to fit conventional definitions, such as drystone duns either built or occupied after 800. As noted earlier, ignoring of such structures is also a denial of indigenous influence on the origins of Hebridean Castles.

## Subjects needing comprehensive studies

Determining the appropriate set for study is the first step in the comprehensive study of any subject. Having suggested how broad that set needs to be respecting Hebridean Castles I turn now to the wide range of general subjects in need of comprehensive study.

Such studies are lacking not only of whole castles, but also of a vast array of particular aspects which may be significant in determining these origins. Subjects needing comprehensive studies may be grouped roughly under four headings:

- Physical: Construction and Archaeological Finds<sup>2</sup>
- Historical Evidence<sup>3</sup>
- Functions<sup>4</sup>
- Relations<sup>5</sup>

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- 2 A virtually unlimited number of typological and other architecture details and types of archaeological finds. For example: (1) Initial uses of lime-mortar construction (a) in the Hebrides, (b) elsewhere along the Norse-Celtic Seaways, (c) pertinent parts of Scotland, (d) everywhere else that might have had a current impact in the Hebrides; (2) Use of vitrification and clay-mortar; (3) Particular construction peculiarities, such as (a) laying stones on edges or end (Kisimul, Breacachadh, Calvay, The Wirk), (b) failures to bond walls (Kisimul), (c) distinctive patterns of large stones and small stones (St. Magnus Church, Eglisay, Caisteal nan Con, Torsa, Kisimul), (d) wicker vaulting (Dunollie, Tioram, Irish); (4) materials and their sources, particularly apparently non-local materials, e.g. green slate (e.g. Kisimul, Tioram, Castle Sinclair(?))
  - 3 (1) Careful study of usefulness and limits of (a) charter and license evidence and (b) John of Fordun's and other identifications of castles, particularly to prove the non-existence of castles; (2) Traditions, usefulness and limits (a) Danish, Viking forts and (b) Individual castles; (3) Place-name evidence, e.g. which '-sdale,' etc. endings = a'chaisteal?
  - 4 Relative to (1) Sea-borne commerce, communications, and warfare, particularly as relates to galleys; (2) All aspects of location, including inter alia relations to location of other castles and topographical locations; (3) Castle structure, both generally and particular features; (4) Galley facilities – galley footprints – and relationship to castle/castles.
  - 5 (1) Indigenous forerunners (a) as such and (b) modifications and use during galley-era; (2) Possible geographic relations: (a) Norse-Celtic Seaways: (i) Scandanavia, (ii) Orkney, (iii) Sutherland & Caithness, (iv) Clyde, (v) Galloway, (vi) Isle of Man, (vii) Ireland, (viii) West England to Wales, (ix) Welsh, (x) Southwest England to Land's End; (b) Scotland (outwith Hebrides and Hebridean-Mainland); (c) Other possible non- Scottish influences: (i) Northern Europe outside Scandinavia, (ii) Normandy, (iii) Provence, (iv) Other French, (v) Eastern; (3) Particular historical relations, e.g. Somerled.

A few illustrations and comments will make the non-exhaustive lists of these four types in the footnotes more comprehensible:

### **Physical**

Absolutely crucial is a truly comprehensive study of the uses of lime-mortar construction. Is it, for example, absurd to think that any lime-mortar masonry was laid in the Hebrides before 1100? 1000? 900? 800? 700? If so, why? Only a comprehensive study can answer those and other vital questions about what is possible and what is not possible respecting the use of lime-mortar. It is absolutely essential to involve highly experienced masons and other workers with stone in any study involving masonry – like war these studies are too important to be left to the Generals.

### **Historical**

A useful historical study would be a comprehensive examination of topographical names ending in ‘-sdale’ or the equivalent, to see which ones may mean the Gaelic *a’chaisteal* rather than the Norse *dal*.

### **Functions**

A useful comprehensive study of functions would be of the locations of these castles relative to sea-borne commerce, communications, and warfare, particularly as relates to galleys. Among many things this should include a comprehensive admiralty-chart-oriented study of sailing times, a project suggested by Donald McWhannell.

### **Relations**

Last, but by no means least, relations. As already emphasised, all comprehensive studies of physical and historical evidence and of functions must be tightly linked to all possible relations possibly affecting them. This includes most emphatically relations both indigenous and outside the Hebrides in all directions, not just directly east. But in addition comprehensive studies of particular relations as such are needed. Two examples will suffice.

- Studies of location relative to other galley-castles is vital.
- A large number of Hebridean castles were possibly built in the mid-12th century. Is there a relationship between this and Somerled’s empire-building?

## **IV REVISIONS OF PREVAILING FRAMES OF REFERENCE**

### **Introduction**

The three propositions advanced so far have all addressed the need for more scientific rigour in studies of the origins of Hebridean castles. Although my particular application of them will no doubt be criticised, the propositions themselves are hardly subject to challenge.

I now turn to something rather different: the need to revise prevailing frames of reference relating to these castles. I believe that the changes proposed will help us greatly in dealing with everything to do with their origins.

More specifically, I believe we need to revise the way we think about Hebridean Castles in terms of three frames of reference: (1) their functions as galley-castles, (2) the appropriate contextual time-frame, and (3) location.

### **1) FUNCTIONS: GALLEY-CASTLES**

#### **Usual castle functions**

Like other castles, Hebridean Galley-Castles functioned as residences and centres for the wide range of economic-political-administrative-legal-military activities in which the residents were involved. They created space hoped to be secure from dangers such as common everyday pilferage on up to major military attack. This enclosure also made it easy to regulate who came and left – or did not leave, dedicated space for prisons being common. They were likely to be homes to a range of crafts and manufacture, either inside or nearby. Many may have been entrepots for trade. They were centres for hospitality, especially important in Gaelic and Norse cultures. And unquestionably they served as symbols of power and prestige.

#### **Domination by the galley**

In one respect, however, these castles differed from countless other medieval castles.

Everything about them was in symbiotic relationship with the galley. They were built when and where galleys and their crews dominated commerce, communication, culture, and military and political life. These galleys and their use were inevitably a primary influence on everything to do with the castles from start to finish. Hence the term galley- castles.

Trying to comprehend Hebridean castles respecting trade and communication without focusing on galleys is like trying to understand *amazon.com*'s warehouses without thinking about airplanes, lorries, vans, telephones, computers or the internet, to say nothing of roller-skates. So too, trying to comprehend their military aspects without focusing on galleys is like trying to understand the Siegfried or Maginot Lines without considering aircraft, high explosive artillery, tanks, machine guns, telephones, or radios.

Finding recognition in conventional studies of the role of the galley respecting Hebridean castles is rare indeed. About the most is generally some reference to a nearby galley berth.

### **Galley should be the central focus**

I believe that when proper and full consideration is given to the roles of galleys, it will be seen that *the galley must be a central focus* of our thinking about anything to do with any castle built in the Hebrides or Hebridean-Mainland between 800 and 1500 or even later. It would be an exaggeration to say that the primary purpose of these castles was to serve as Galley Terminals. Nonetheless, thinking of them in that way would be a useful corrective to the all-too-common approach of largely or even totally ignoring their relation to galleys.

## **2) CONTEXTUAL TIME-FRAME**

### **Galley dominance dictates dates of c800 – c1600**

The dominance of the galley leads directly to the need to commence the study of origins of Hebridean Castles no later than about 800 at the very latest. It was then, or more precisely in the prior decade, that the galley is first known to have made a major impact on the Hebrides.

As the galley remained a dominant factor respecting both trade and military activities until into the 1600s, the same assumption leads to approximately 1600 as an appropriate end-date.

### **800 too late a starting date?**

800 may well be too late a starting date. The day may come when we will think of Hebridean Galley-Castles as a post-800 sub-set of the Hebridean Sea-Fortifications which began evolving much earlier.

### 3) LOCATION

Turning from time to space, we need to revise the areas and societies on which to focus and how we describe them, both locally and more globally.

First, each local term needs to be truly local. It needs to focus on the local people and society. In particular it needs to avoid identifying the area as an adjunct of somewhere else. Among other things this helps counter modern thought-patterns in which islands are always remote and peripheral while mainlands are always central. (A strange phenomenon indeed among an island people like the British.)

Second, most if not all Hebridean castles of this period are sea-castles and need to be located in sea-oriented rather than in land-oriented terms.

Third, the descriptive terms need to reflect principal lines of commerce, communication, culture, and military and political life as accurately as possible. Or put negatively it is vital that descriptive terms do not work as barriers to exploring all possible influences on the development of Hebridean castles.

To achieve these goals I believe the best term for the local area is *Hebrides and Hebridean-Mainland*. This is instead of such terms as *Highlands* or *Highlands and islands* or *West Highlands and Islands*, or worst of all, *Outer islands*, all of which imprint the label *Scottish* on the area. Not only do all of them encourage Scottish Diffusionism, they are also anachronistic throughout much of the pertinent 800 year period. *Sudreys* and *Sudreyan-Mainland*, although better than *Hebrides and Hebridean-Mainland* for earlier periods, also would suffer from anachronism for later periods.

An optimum term for the more global area of which the Hebrides and Hebridean-Mainland form a part is *Norse-Celtic Seaways*. These are the seaways stretching from Norway to the Nordreys – now called Orkney & Shetland – with their adjacent-shores of Caithness and Sutherland, through the Sudreys and their adjacent-shores, the Clyde and Galloway, the Isle of Man, the northwestern coasts of modern England, Wales, the southwestern coasts of modern England, and all the coasts of Ireland.

Throughout at least 60% of the period from 800 to 1600 the term *Norse-Celtic Seaways* most accurately reflects the overall historical situation in the Hebrides and Hebridean-Mainland. In important respects this continued to be true until at least the end of that period. One of those respects is the Hebridean Galley-Castle.



## CONCLUSION KISIMUL CASTLE: AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

In this paper, the historiography of Kisimul Castle has been used to exemplify a number of specific failings of current historiography of Hebridean Galley-Castles. These have included assumptions of Hebridean backwardness, ignoring possible indigenous input, misuse of charter evidence, misuse of Fordun, and ignoring related Shadow-Castles. Each specific instance has, however, been part of broader patterns. These are failures to verify debatable assumptions, ignoring of context, and absence of sufficiently comprehensive studies to justify conclusions reached, violations respectively of the first three propositions of this paper.

The historiography of Kisimul also exemplifies the fourth proposition: the need to replace present prevailing frames of reference with more historically sound approaches. Not even the most tentative conclusions respecting Kisimul's origins can properly be reached without giving full consideration to galleys, inside a contextual time-frame of c800 – c1600, and its location in Norse-Celtic Seaways.

Finally, Kisimul is an outstanding victim of the vice of unjustified over-certainty concerning origins. Examples range from Robert Lister Macneil of Barra's firm dating about 1030 to W. Mackay Mackenzie's and John Dunbar's confident dates of no earlier than the second quarter of the 15th century. All three were equally confident that it was built by Macneils, which is certainly only possibly the case.

Indeed *possibly* is the most we can properly say about almost any aspect of the origins of Kisimul Castle. The one clear exception is that we can say that Kisimul was unquestionably a Hebridean Galley-Castle located centrally on the Norse-Celtic Seaways.

### Acknowledgements

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The April 2002 talk was prepared before I had any detailed knowledge of Historic Scotland's studies of Kisimul made in connection with its lease of the castle. The inclusion of Sally Fosters paper 'Kisimul Castle: recent work by Historic Scotland' in this volume, however, offers readers an opportunity to decide for themselves the extent to which the practices criticised in my paper do or do not continue to dominate current scholarship.

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