An Exploration of *Thing* Sites in the Islands on the Scottish West Coast

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Viking and Norse *things* (ON *þing*, sing.), which functioned as both parliaments and courts, were held at outdoor assembly sites. *Thing* sites were widely distributed across Scandinavia as well as the Norse settlements in the west, showing the significance of the assembly institution and the practice of law to society at this time. If this institution had not served its purpose, the Norse settlers could have left it behind. Instead, both in Scandinavia and their new homes, the people of the Viking Age created an ever-shifting pattern of elaborate *thing* sites.[2]

This aspect of the Norse settlement in western Scotland has remained virtually unexplored, apart from brief discussions in overarching volumes, such as Barbara Crawford's *Scandinavian Scotland*.[3] Since 2012, however, a number of new potential *thing* place-names have been identified, all suggested to contain ON *þing*.[4] It is important to point out that *þing* is not the only element indicative of Norse assembly sites, and in this chapter two further suggested *thing* sites, identified on the basis of other types of place-names, are also discussed.[5] In this way, a total of eleven potential *thing* sites are found on the islands of the western seaboard of Scotland (Figure 1):

1. Eileann Thinngartsaigh, Harris
2. Tinwhill, Skye
3. Gruline, Mull
4. Grulin, Islay
5. Grulin, Eigg
6. *Edin, Bute
7. Finlaggan, Islay
8. Tiongal, Lewis
9. Cnoc nan Gall, Colonsay
10. Mannal, Tiree
11. Lagalgarve, Kintyre

2   For full details, see Sanmark forthcoming.
3   Crawford 1987, 206-10.
4   Macniven 2013; Whyte 2014; Márkus 2012.
5   Sanmark 2009, 231; Ahlberg 1946, 100.

Figure 1: Potential *thing* sites in the islands of western Scotland © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

In addition, Govan on the Firth of Clyde will be brought into the discussion towards the end of this chapter, even though this site is located just outside the geographical scope of this study. Govan has been seen as a royal and administrative centre, which was redeveloped with the 'involvement' of the Norse.[6] This suggestion will be evaluated in the light of the findings and discussion of this chapter.

All sites will be evaluated in terms of features and characteristics, using archaeological evidence, written sources, and place-names, and placed in the context of recent research on *thing* sites.[7] Around half of the sites discussed in this chapter have been visited by the author, their location has been recorded with a GPS and pro forma, as well as 360-degree photography. The remaining sites have been examined through detailed map study. Recent research has shown that *thing* sites were located in carefully selected places, with specific features, the type and nature of which varied slightly between geographical areas. These different *thing*-site features served a purpose and were charged with symbolism and meaning, turning the sites into power statements in the landscape, signposted as places where important decisions were made – and obeyed.[8] The most important assembly features identified in Scandinavia can be summarised as follows:

- A location on the convergence of communication routes, often both land and water routes.
- A location by fords, isthmuses, or on islands.
- Large mounds.
- Prehistoric cemeteries.
- Linear stone or wooden monuments, forming processional routes and site boundaries.[9]

Using the knowledge of Scandinavian *thing* sites and the method described above, the viability of the potential assembly sites listed can be tested. This is particularly important in western Scotland, where no *thing* sites or *thing* meetings are referred to in written sources. This places an even higher degree of reliance on place-names, which are rarely recorded prior to the thirteenth century, and in many cases a

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6   Owen and Driscoll 2011, esp. 343-44.
7   Sanmark forthcoming. ch. 1; 2009; 2013.
8   Sanmark forthcoming; 2009; 2013; Semple et al. forthcoming.
9   Sanmark forthcoming.

lot later. In addition, many of these place-names are rather difficult to interpret, having gone through a transition into Gaelic.[10]

Historical Background

Viking raids are recorded in western Scotland from the early ninth century, whilst this area seems to have been under growing Norse domination from the middle of the century.[11] Over the next few hundred years, there were constant shifts between rulers and power centres, such as Dublin, the Isle of Man, and the Earldom of Orkney – and by extension the Kingdom of Norway. In the early period, the islands on the Scottish west coast are seen to have formed rather independent communities under the leadership of different chieftains, whose power was dependent on raiding and warfare.[12] During the tenth century, the Kingdom of the Isles developed, ruled by the *Gall-Ghàidheil*, the 'Foreign Gaels'; a term applied to the population of mixed Norse and Gaelic descent.[13] From the late eleventh century, the Kingdom of the Isles was joined with the Kingdom of Man. In the following century, further turbulence occurred with the rise of Somerled, also of Norse-Gaelic descent, who ruled until 1164, when he was killed in battle. After this date, the Isle of Man fell to the Manx kings, whilst the Isles were divided between his descendants, the MacSorleys, who ruled them until the Treaty of Perth in 1266, when Norway handed them over to Scotland.[14]

Law and Administrative Organisation

Although written sources on Norse law and assembly in western Scotland are almost non-existent, the place-name evidence shows that an administrative organisation was in place. No Norse laws from Scotland have survived, but just as for Orkney and Shetland, it seems likely that local versions of the Norwegian Law of the *Gulathing* were in place. This was indeed the case in the Faroe Islands and seemingly also in Iceland in the early tenth century.[15] Moreover, the use of local, Norse law, is supported by the wording of the Treaty of Perth, which

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10   Gordon 1963, 90-91.
11   Crawford 1987, 40-42; Macniven 2013, 70, 79.
12   Crawford 1987, 26; Woolf 2007, 298-330.
13   McDonald 1997, 29-31; Crawford 1987, 47; Jennings and Kruse 2009.
14   McDonald 1997, 33-132; Griffiths 2010, 47, 159.
15   *Laws of Early Iceland*, 1.

states that the islands 'may be subject to the laws and customs of the kingdom of Scotland, and governed and judged according to these from this time henceforth'.[16]

The Norse assembly organisation was hierarchical, consisting of at least two tiers: local and top-level assemblies. A similar *thing* organisation for the islands on the Scottish west coast is implied by the *Annals of the Four Masters*. This source states that 'Lawmen of the Isles' existed in the tenth century.[17] Here, the term 'lawman' seems to have a wider meaning than usual, as these lawmen are said to have accompanied the Norse rulers on their expeditions. However, the *Annals*' statement may also indicate that some form of overarching administrative organisation for 'the Isles' existed.[18] As will be discussed below, the most likely candidate for a top-level assembly site is Finlaggan on Islay.[19] On the local level, the islands seem to have been at least partly divided into *herað* units, as was the case in many areas of Scandinavia.[20] This is suggested by place-name evidence; the Island of Harris (Gaelic *Na Hearadh*) and *Herries* in Islay are both seen to be derived from ON *herað,* and other such names are known from Orkney and Shetland. It is interesting to note that all these names refer to districts, although of different types.[21]

The Norse assembly organisation in Scotland was most likely a floating organisation, and the *herað* units may be of later date than some of the *thing* sites. Not all *thing* sites – those known and unknown today – were necessarily established at the same time and for the same reasons. In the early settlement period, a rather organic phase of *thing* site establishment can be envisaged, with assemblies set up by powerful individuals and families as a way of taking control – or attempting to take control – over a particular area. Some sites may therefore have been short-lived or temporary, whilst others may have remained in use for many hundreds of years.[22] This means that the eleven sites discussed here are not necessarily contemporary. It is also possible that some *thing* sites defined here as 'local' may, at times, have functioned as top-level sites.

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16   McDonald 1997, 131; *Monumenta de Insula Manniae* iii, appendix.
17   These annals were compiled in the seventeenth century. Macniven 2013, 82.
18   Ibid.
19   Ibid.; Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 8.
20   Semple et al. forthcoming; Hafström 1961; 1962.
21   Macniven 2013, 80; 2015, 84; Stewart 1987, 130; Marwick 1952, 130-31.
22   Cf. Sanmark 2013, 96-98; Sanmark and Semple 2010.

In such a changeable political situation, it would have been particularly important for chieftains to acquire a site with the right attributes; one that sent out signals of power to the population as a whole. In the sections below, the attributes of the eleven potential *thing* sites on the western seaboard will be evaluated within the wider context of *thing* sites in other settlement areas and Scandinavia. The overriding trait of Norse assembly sites, identified across all areas, is their location on the convergence of important communication routes. It was essential for leaders to make sure that as many people as possible attended the assemblies, as their presence also implied their acceptance of the ruler and the law.[23] The two other key features of the assembly found in this study are a location near water and near mounds, both of which commonly occur at Norse assembly sites in other areas.[24] As shown towards the end of the chapter, two out of the eleven sites do not share any of these traits and are therefore unlikely to be assembly sites.

WATER LOCATION: ISLANDS, ISTHMUSES, AND LOCHS

In all Norse areas, there are close links between the large majority of *thing* sites and various forms of water, the types of which depend on the local topography. In northern Scotland, *thing* sites tend to be close to the sea, often on isthmuses or at the end of fjords. There are also examples of island *thing* sites.[25] Similar locations are found in the area currently under scrutiny.

There are two potential *thing* sites on isthmuses. The first is Edin on the Isle of Bute, recorded as *Atyngar* in 1319-1321 and preserved in the names Edinbeg and Edinmore.[26] *Atyngar* has been given two potential *thing* interpretations: either a derivation of ON *alþing* or of ON *eið* + *þing*. A third possible interpretation is simply 'rough face' (derived from *aodann garbh*).[27] Edinbeg and Edinmore are located in the middle of a low-lying isthmus, centrally situated on Bute where the St Colman Burn crosses this piece of land (Figure 2). This means

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23   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 5.
24   Ibid., ch. 4 and 5; 2013, 102-7.
25   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 4 and 8; 2013, 102-4.
26   In 1475, this place-name was recorded as *Atyng'ar* and in 1577 as *Iding*. See Márkus 2012. Its interpretation as a *thing* site was initially suggested by Barbara Crawford.
27   Márkus 2012, 8; Andrew Jennings pers. comm. He added that *aodann* occurs rather frequently as a toponym, e.g. Edenmore, which is derived from *aodann mor*, 'big face'.

that, although the place-name is rather uncertain, the location at least is suggestive of a *thing* site. The second potential assembly site of this type is Gruline on the Isle of Mull, arguably derived from ON *grjót* and *þing,* in which *grjót* translates as '(rough) stones, stony ground', 'cleared and cultivated ground',[28] but 'chiefly with the notion of *rough stones* or *rubble* in a building, etc'.[29] This could be interpreted in the light of the many Scandinavian *thing* sites with names referring to cleared or non-agricultural land.[30] Gruline is situated on an isthmus between the sea and Loch Ba, more or less in the middle of the island (Figure 3).[31]

There are also a number of potential *thing* sites on small islands. Tiongal, on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis, is one such possible example. Its name is preserved in Cnoc an Tiongalairidh*,* where *Tiongalairidh* contains the genitive of either *þing-völlr* or *þing-vellir* and
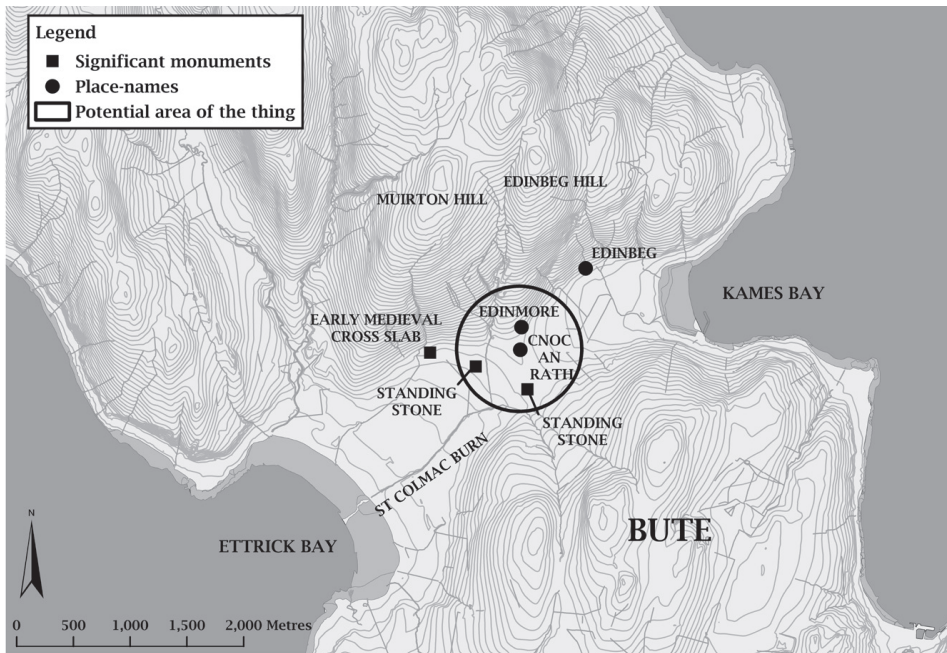

Figure 2: Edin on the Isle of Bute. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

28   Whyte 2014, 117, 119.
29   Cleasby and Vigfusson 1874, 216.
30   Semple and Sanmark 2013, 528-32.
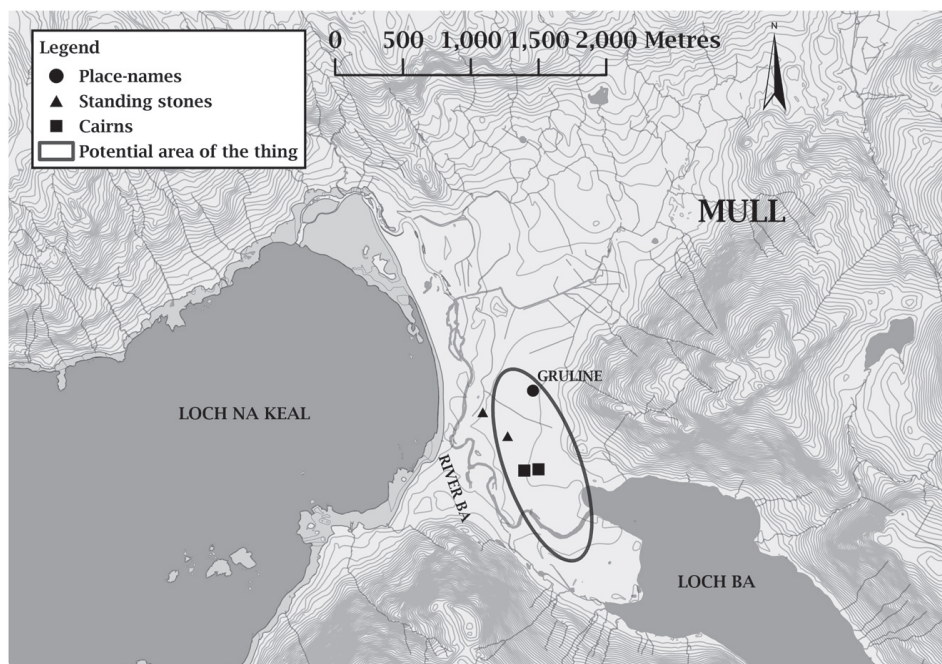31   Whyte 2014, 117, 119.

Figure 3: Gruline on the Isle of Mull. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

Figure 4: The possible *thing* site by Tiongalairidh and Loch a' Bhalie. Photograph by Fredrik Sundman.

Gaelic *àirge*, 'milking place/sheiling' (perhaps from the Scandinavian loanword *ærgi*), which is thus translated as 'the milking place of the *thing* field'. The full name Cnoc an Tiongalairidh refers to a hillock (*cnoc*) above Loch a' Bhalie (Figures 4 and 5).[32] As *Tiongalairidh* does not refer to the assembly itself, the actual meetings may have been held some distance away. A potential location is by the top of the loch, around 1 km away, where several small islands are found, one of which seems to be (at least partially) connected to the shore by a causeway. This loch is suitable as an assembly in terms of communication, being accessible from the sea and providing a sheltered harbour for boats. The reference to a milking place relating to the assembly is striking, representing one of the few occasions when such activities can be tied to *thing* sites. This supports the idea explored elsewhere that assemblies covered rather large areas, with different spaces assigned to different activities.[33]

Another example of an island *thing* site, albeit with different characteristics, is Eileann Thinngartsaigh ('Assembly-fence-island'), situated at the mouth Loch Claidh, a large sea loch in Harris (Figure 6).[34] This place-name is interesting, as it may refer to the 'sacred enclosure' (ON *vébǫnd*) described in written sources, such as *Egil's Saga*.[35] Enclosed *thing* sites have, moreover, been traced in Scandinavia.[36] The exact location of the assembly site has not been pinpointed, but the island is very small (only c. 500 by 200 m). A coastal location is unusual for an assembly site, but can be explained by the extremely rocky terrain in Harris, making travel on foot or horseback very difficult in comparison to most other areas of Scotland. In these circumstances, an assembly site in a sheltered position on the coast must have been ideal; there is also a good landing-place on the east side of the island.

In Islay, a number of potential *þing* names have been identified in the area around Loch Gorm, perhaps suggesting a rather large assembly area centred on the eastern end of the loch (Figure 7). These are Grulinmore, Grulinbeg, and Sunderland, although the uncertain nature of these interpretations must be stressed. Just like Gruline on Mull, the first two names are seen to derive from *grjót* and *þing*. A few hundred

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32   Cox 1992, 139; 2002, 220.
33   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 5.
34   I am grateful to Prof. Barbara Crawford for drawing my attention to this place-name.
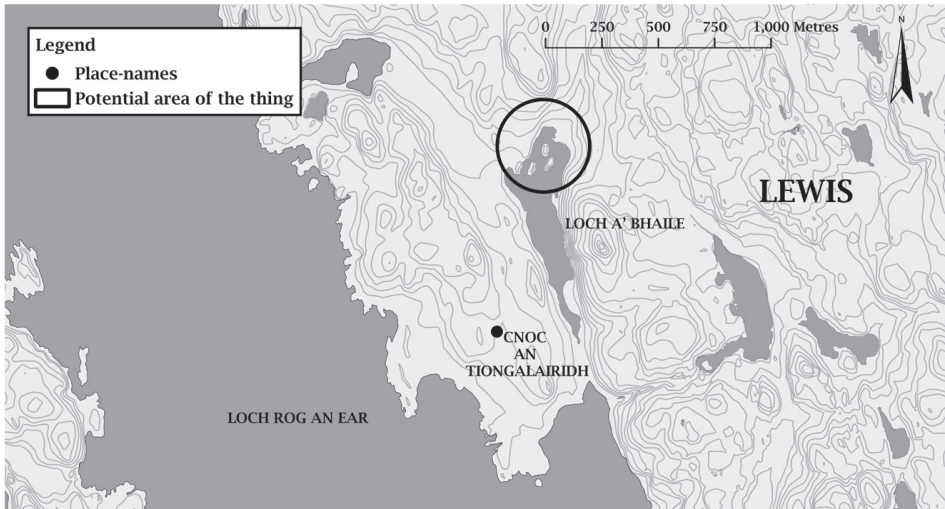35   Brink 2002, 87-91.
36   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 4; 2015.

Figure 5: Tiongalairidh and Loch a' Bhalie, Lewis. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

Figure 6: Eileann Thinngartsaigh in Loch Claidh, Harris. © Crown Copyright/ database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.
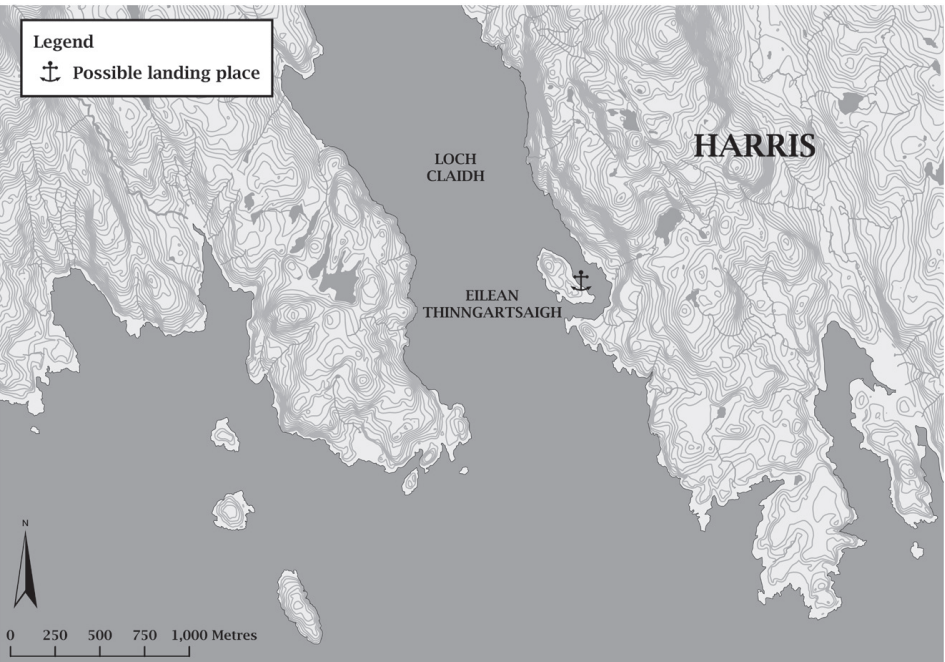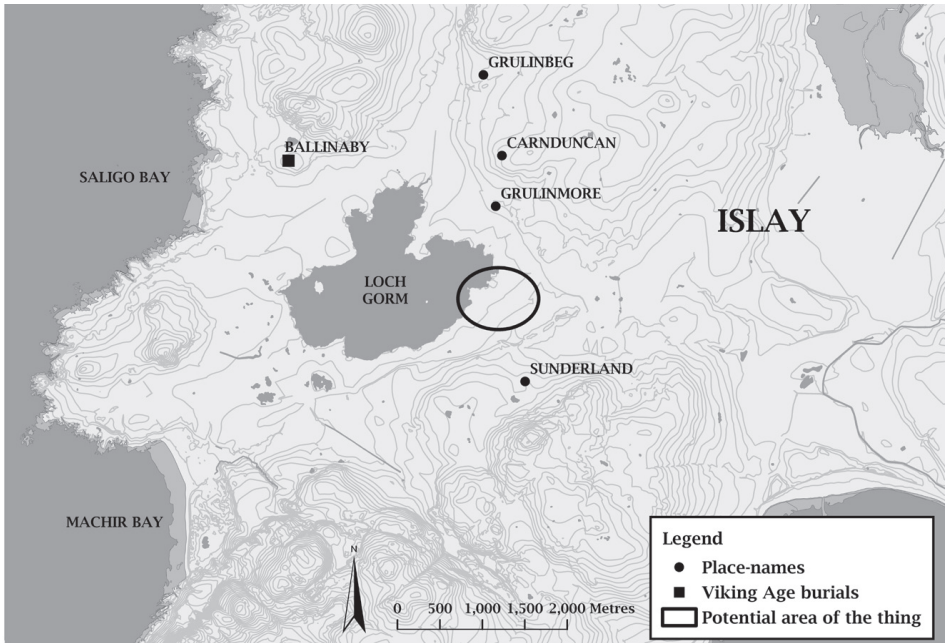
Figure 7: Potential *thing* sites around Loch Gorm. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

meters away lies Sunderland, which may incorporate ON *Sjóvarþing*, 'the assembly site by the lake', or ON *Sjúhundaraþing*, 'the assembly site of the seven hundreds'.[37]

Several foci for the potential *thing* site have been suggested. One is Carnduncan, a prehistoric cairn, located by a small watercourse, c. 1 km away from the loch. There is, however, another potential candidate for the focus of the *thing* site, which is perhaps more likely. Just below Sunderland farm, there is a large conical hillock with panoramic views of the loch. This feature clearly stands out in the landscape and slopes steeply down towards the shore (Figure 7).[38] Overall, Loch Gorm would have been suitable for a *thing* site, as there was a concentration of Norse settlements in this part of Islay. An immediate Norse presence is shown by the cemetery at Ballinaby, on the north side of the loch, which has been artefact-dated to the late-ninth and tenth centuries.[39]

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37   Whyte 2014, 139-45; Macniven 2013, 81-82, 89.
38   Macniven 2013, 80-82.
39   Canmore ID 37407; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 124-25.

In terms of communications, the loch is also relatively easy to access from the sea, where two beaches are suitable as landing places, from which an overland journey to the eastern end of the loch was only a few kilometres. Sunderland is also situated on an important land transit route across the island.[40]

Another potential *thing* site in Islay with similar traits is Finlaggan (in Loch Finlaggan), although no *þing* place-name has been identified (Figure 8). Finlaggan was the assembly and inauguration place of the MacDonalds, who emerged from the MacSorleys and traced their line back to Donald, son of Ranald, son of Somerled. Between 1336 and 1493, this clan ruled a large area, essentially recreating the Kingdom of Somerled, called the Lordship of the Isles; their ancestral link to the Kingdom of the Isles formed an important part of their powerbase. The MacDonalds were concerned with reinventing themselves as lords and created rituals of inauguration to show their power.[41] This can be traced both in the archaeology of Finlaggan and the late medieval assembly proceedings, described by Donald Monro, Dean of the Isles, in 1549 (i.e. only a generation after the Council had been abolished).[42]

Monro's text clearly shows the MacDonald claim to descent from Donald, stating that the Council members 'sat down into the Counsell-Ile, and decernit, decreitit and gave suits furth upon all debaitable matters *according to the Laws made be Renald McSomharkle* [Ranald McSorley] callit in his time King of the Occident Iles'.[43] It was common to provide laws with legitimacy by linking them to rulers further back in time, as seen, for example, in the thirteenth-century manuscripts of the Gulathing Law, in which some regulations are claimed to have been introduced by eleventh-century kings.[44] On this basis, it can be argued that Finlaggan was a Norse *thing* site, reused by the MacDonalds; similar site reuse has frequently been traced in Scandinavia.[45] This idea is similarly supported by other pieces of evidence: the area which was known as *Herries* in the early modern period was found here, in the central part of Kilmeny Parish, which was focused on Loch Finlaggan. Moreover, this part of Islay is dense with Norse place-names, and

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40   Macniven 2013, 81.
41   McDonald 1997, 129; Caldwell 2014; forthcoming.
42   *Western Isles of Scotland*; O'Grady 2008, 17-19.
43   *Western Isles of Scotland*, 57. My emphasis.
44   Helle 2001, 17-20.
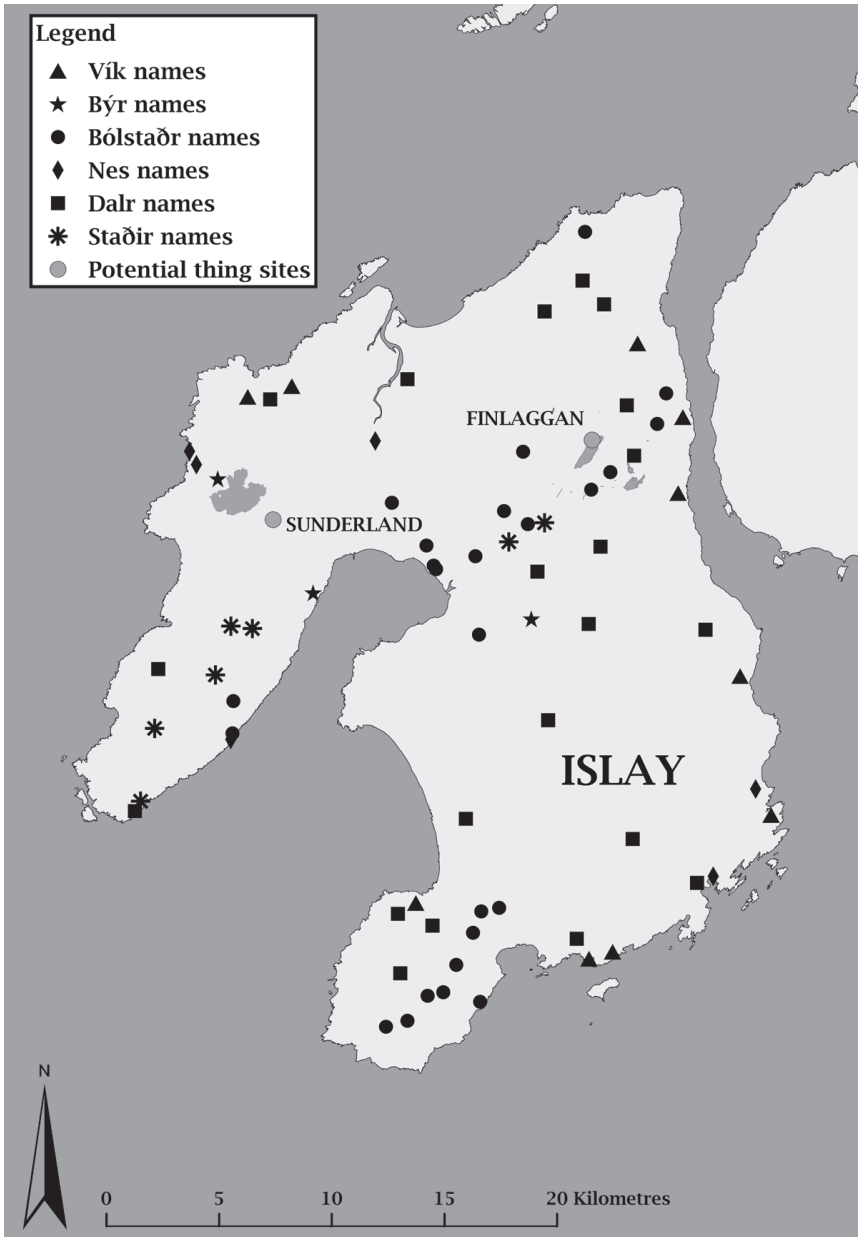45   Crawford 1987, 208; Sanmark and Semple 2010; Brink 2004.

Figure 8: The potential *thing* sites at Finlaggan and by Sunderland in Islay, in relation to Norse place-names. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

has been argued to have been 'named and controlled by speakers of Old Norse' (Figure 8).[46] Alternatively, Finlaggan represented a hybrid assembly institution, consisting of both Norse and Gaelic elements, reflecting the population in this part of Scotland from the late Viking Age onwards.

Monro's account, other written sources, and local excavations show that the Finlaggan assembly meetings were held on two islands in the Loch: Eilean na Comhairle ('Council island') and Eilean Mòr ('Large island').[47] The two islands, connected by a causeway, have strikingly long biographies and were 'reinvented' on a number of occasions. The 'Council Island' was in use, although not continually, from around the first millennium AD, starting with a crannog, and followed by seventh-century structures and graves, possibly from a monastic centre. The next visible phase is a late-twelfth or thirteenth-century keep on top of which the fifteenth-century council chamber mentioned in documents was built.[48] Various phases of buildings are also seen on Eilean Mòr: in the thirteenth century, a large 'European-style' castle stood here, protected by a timber palisade. There was also a porch and a causeway that connected the island to the shore.[49] In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these structures were replaced by various buildings, including a feasting hall. Rather than being permanently occupied, they were, in typical assembly fashion, only occasionally visited.[50] Finlaggan is derived from Gaelic *Port an Eilean* [*Fhindlagan*], 'Landing Place of the Island of St Findlug', to whom the chapel on Eilean Mòr is dedicated. This name is unlikely to be old, but the earlier name is unknown.[51]

The fifteenth-century council chamber on Eilean na Comhairle and the buildings on Eilean Mòr are dated to the period of the MacDonalds, whilst the keep on Eilean na Comhairle was erected by Somerled's descendants. This means that, on both islands, the McDonalds drew on their claimed ancestors. The keep is noticeably different from the usual building style of Somerled and his descendants, suggesting that this site represented something special to them.[52] Possible Norse links

46   Macniven 2013, 80-81, 86, figs. 2 and 4; 2015, 84.
47   *Western Isles of Scotland*; O'Grady 2008, 17-19; Caldwell 2003.
48   Caldwell 2010a; 2014; forthcoming.
49   Caldwell 2010b; forthcoming.
50   Caldwell 2014; forthcoming.
51   Macniven 2015, 263-64.
52   Caldwell 2014; forthcoming.

are seen in the name Eilean na Comhairle ('Council Island'), which is, in effect, the same name as 'Ting Holm' at Tingwall in Shetland. This may represent a parallel development, or perhaps a translation from Old Norse. The general layout of Finlaggan is, of course, also rather similar to Tingwall; both are located on causewayed islands in lochs, containing Iron Age settlement remains.[53]

It seems altogether plausible that Finlaggan was used as an assembly site over many hundreds of years. It was most likely a Norse assembly site focused on 'Council Island', perhaps the meeting site for the 'Lawmen of the Isles' from as early as the tenth century. It may also have been used for gatherings in the pre-Norse period. The absence of archaeological features between the eighth and the eleventh/twelfth centuries does not mean this was not an assembly. In fact, as these sites are often characterised by an absence of finds (e.g. Tingwall in Shetland), the opposite may be the case.[54] The intense building activity during the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries may signal the rise of power after the separation from the Isle of Man in the middle of the twelfth century.[55] However, it should be noted that Finlaggan may have served as an assembly throughout the Norse period.

MOUNDS

Mounds are common features at Norse *thing* sites in Scotland and Scandinavia alike.[56] Gruline, on Mull, may be one such example (Figure 3). On the isthmus, there are two prehistoric cairns, which may have been the focus of the assemblies.[57] This may also be the case for the standing stones here, as such stones are known at Scandinavian *thing* sites.[58] Another possibility would be that *thing* meetings were held on the small island in the river, opposite the standing stones, although this seems less likely, as the course of the river is said to have been altered.[59] The potential assembly site around Loch Gorm may also have focused on a prehistoric mound, or more likely, on the mound-like hillock by the loch (Figure 7).

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53   *Western Isles of Scotland*, 99; Crawford 1987, 208; Coolen and Mehler 2011; Caldwell 2003, 71; forthcoming.
54   Coolen and Mehler 2011.
55   Cf. Caldwell 2014; forthcoming.
56   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 8 and 9.
57   Whyte 2014, 125.
58   Brink 2004, 309-12; Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 4.
59   Whyte 2014, 139-45.

It has been suggested that the large boulders forming a kerb around the cairns in Mull and by Loch Gorm constituted the sacred assembly enclosure (*vébǫnd*).[60] This interpretation seems rather unlikely, as kerbs are a rather frequently occurring feature on Neolithic and Bronze Age cairns. More importantly, they are far too small for assembly enclosures, which instead seem to have covered comparatively larger areas and a lot of people.[61]

In addition, Edin, on Bute, is potentially associated with a mound, Cnoc an Rath, surrounded by a ditch and bank and located in the middle of the isthmus with good views of the sea on both sides (Figure 2). A recent excavation of the mound yielded no results, as it had been severely disturbed in post-medieval times.[62] Just as on Mull, there are standing stones on the isthmus and there is also an early medieval cross slab, adjoining an undated chapel and burial ground.[63] It therefore seems clear that this has been an important area to Bute for several thousand years.

In Glen Hinnisdale, situated on the Trotternish peninsula on the Isle of Skye, a *thing* site is suggested by the place-name *Glen Tinwhill*, recorded in 1733 (Figure 9). Little is known about its location, but as is shown below, it is possible that it too was focused on a large mound. *Glen Tinwhill* may be derived from ON *þingvellir/þingvǫllr* and *dalr* and translated as '*thing* field' or '*thing* valley'.[64] The most likely focus of the assembly site is where the River Hinnisdal meets the modern road, which marks an important old routeway across the island. Two duns and a broch are found between the loch and the bridge, underneath which the river joins Loch Snizort. One of these mounds may have served as the focus of the gatherings.

The northern part of Skye has a concentration of Norse place-names, which provides some backing for a *thing* site here. The only certain Norse burial on Skye is found at Tote, at the southern end of the loch. A silver hoard has also been retrieved from the Storr Rock on the eastern side of Trotternish.[65] Slightly further south, at the very end of Loch Snizort, is Skeabost, which was the seat of the bishops of Sodor from

60   Ibid., 141.
61   Sanmark 2014, fig. 7; forthcoming, ch. 4.
62   Márkus 2012.
63   Canmore ID 40317.
64   Fellows-Jensen 1996, 23; Gordon 1963, 88-89: Crawford 1987, 208.
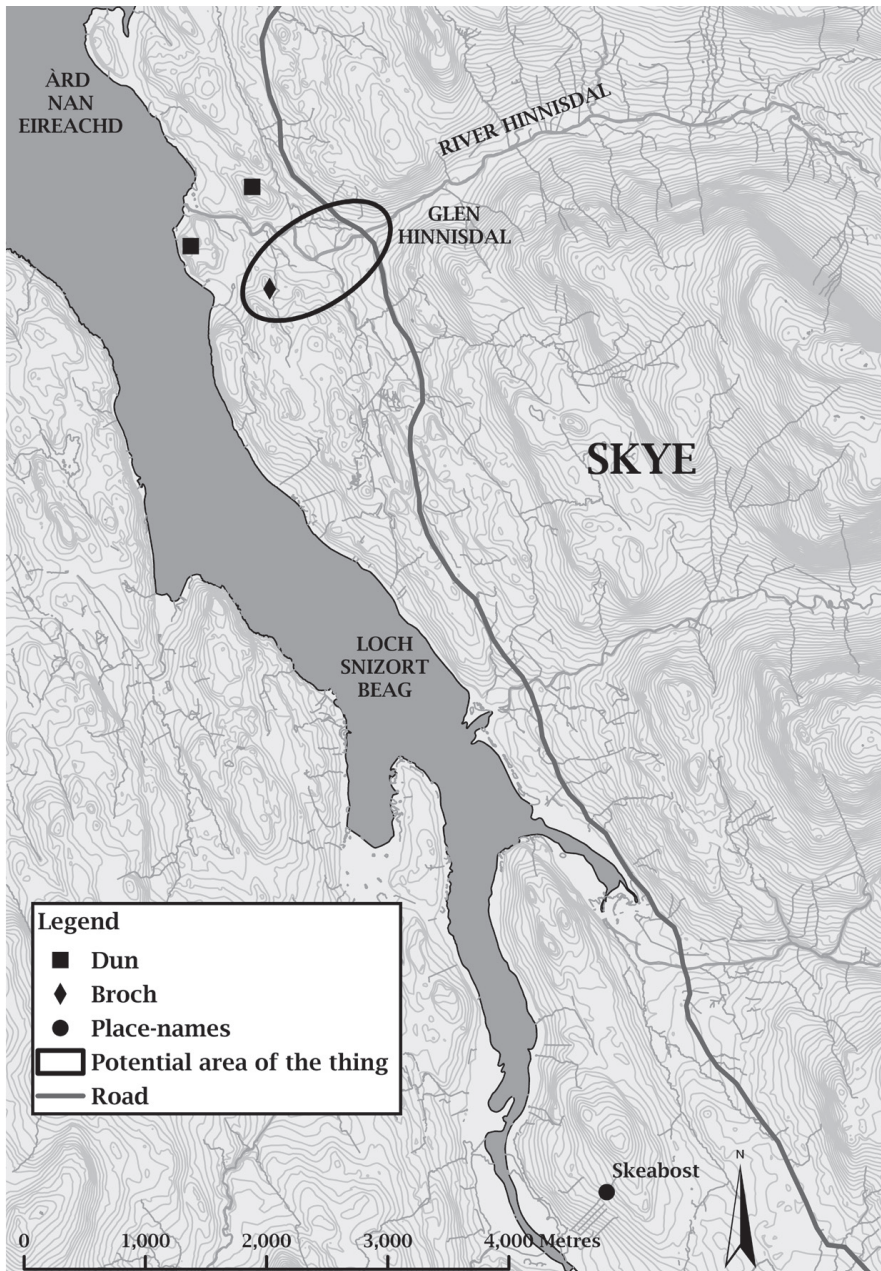65   Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998, 77-79.

Figure 9: Glen Hinnisdale in the Isle of Skye. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

the late-fourteenth century, and the possible seat of the archdeacons of Sodor before this.[66] Moreover, in the vicinity of Skeabost, one of the few Pictish symbol stones in the Hebrides has been found.[67] The area around Loch Snizort has therefore clearly been a focus for a variety of elite expressions over a long period of time, which may support the suggestion that Tinwhill was a *thing* site. In connection to this, it should be mentioned that a Gaelic assembly site has been traced around 3 km to the northwest. This is a small headland, accessible via a thin strip of land, bearing the name Ard nan Eireachd ('Height of the Assemblies'). *Eireachd* (Old Irish *airecht*) is translated as 'assembly' or 'court' and seems to refer to a rather major assembly.[68] It is not known which of the two assemblies is the oldest, and this could therefore be an example of the Norse population taking over an earlier Gaelic assembly area or vice versa. So far, this is the only example from Scotland of a Norse and Gaelic/Pictish assembly having been located in close proximity to each other. Another possibility would be that this represents an example of bilingualism and language shift, and that this assembly site remained in use after the language had changed to Gaelic.

Cnoc nan Gall ('Hill of the Foreigners') on the west coast of Colonsay (Figure 10) is another potential *thing* site with a mound.[69] In Irish and Scottish Gaelic, the Norse often went by the term *Gaill/Gall*, which translates to 'gentiles' or 'foreigners', although it was not 'uniquely associated with a single ethnicity'.[70] It is therefore possible that Cnoc nan Gall refers to the Norse settlers, and perhaps even a *thing* site, although it should be noted that A.P. Morgan has suggested the name to be an antiquarian invention.[71] The location of Cnoc nan Gall is

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66   Thomas 2014.

67   O'Grady 2008, 201-2.

68   Gavin Parsons pers. comm.; O'Grady 2008, 201-2; O'Grady 2014, 130; Crawford 1987, 208; Barrow 1992, 228, 241.

69   There are two further examples of Cnoc nan Gall place-names: the first is Cnoc Mòr nan Gall on Iona, which Morgan saw as a clear modern construction. The other one is Cnoc nan Gall on Ronay (located close to North Uist and Benbecula), which refers to a small rocky outcrop. This has also most likely been coined by antiquarians, and the location is not suggestive of an assembly. See Morgan 2013, 206-7.

70   Ibid.

71   Ibid.; Griffiths 2010, 36-37. Versions of Cnoch nan Gall are also found outside the Norse settlement of Wexford in Ireland. I am grateful to Prof. Liz Fitzpatrick for drawing my attention to these sites and their possible interpretation, and also to Dr Shane McLeod for reminding me of the existence of Cnoc nan Gall in Colonsay.
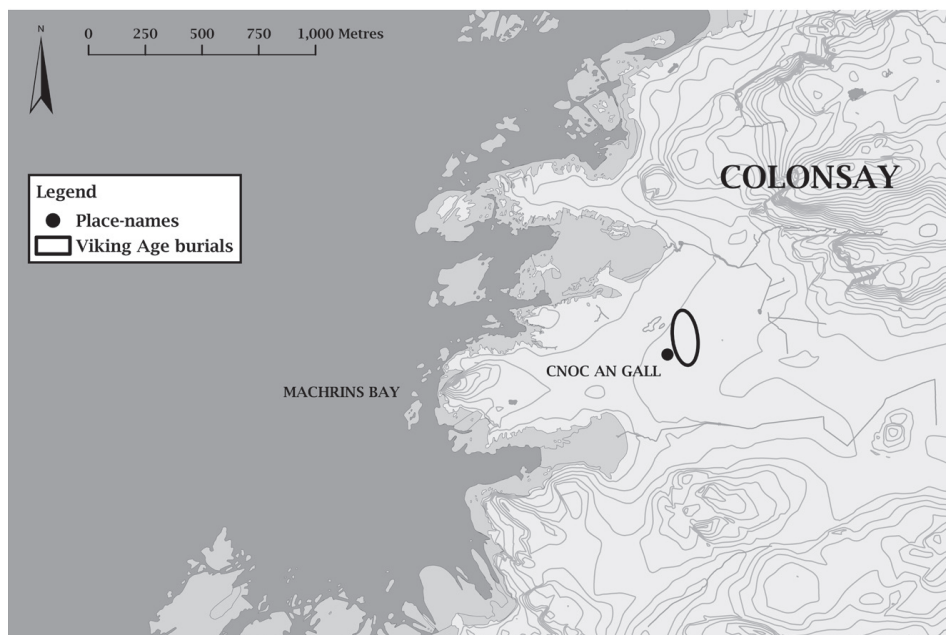
Figure 10: Cnoc nan Gall ('Hill of the Foreigners') in Colonsay. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

noteworthy, as a number of Viking burials are found here, together forming a cemetery (one of the few examples of a large collection of Norse graves from Viking-Age Scotland).[72] In Scandinavia, *thing* sites were commonly located in or by Iron Age cemeteries, which, in a sense, supports the idea of this being a place of assembly. This would, however, be the first such site identified in Scotland, as no correlation between Viking Age burials and *thing* sites has been found so far.[73] The location is suitable for an assembly, as Cnoc nan Gall is located very close to Machrins Bay, which must have been an appropriate landing place for ships and boats.

OTHER PROPOSED *THING* SITES

Three of the proposed *thing* sites, Grulin on the island of Eigg, Mannal on Tiree, and Lagalgarve in south-west Kintyre, must, with

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72   Becket and Batey 2013. For a summary of the finds from Colonsay, see McLeod 2015.
73   Sanmark forthcoming, ch. 8 and 9.

regard to their archaeological and topographical profiles, be seen as rather unlikely assemblies. Grulin, just like Grulin on Skye and Gruline on Mull, is seen to be derived from *grjót* and *þing*.[74] This site does not, however, share any traits with other *thing* sites. Lacking any archaeological remains, it is located in an area of rough terrain that is very difficult to reach overland. Access by sea is also restricted, as it is situated above a rocky coastline with no suitable landing places. A more likely location for an assembly site on Eigg would be close to the sandy beaches in the central area of the island, where Viking Age burials are known (Figure 11).[75] This site is supposedly a striking natural amphitheatre and would therefore be suitable for assemblies.[76]

Mannal, on the south-west coast of Tiree, is thought to be derived from *mannavöllur* ('field of people') and suggested to refer to an assembly (Figure 12).[77] This site, however, has no visible assembly features and is also rather inaccessible, situated on a piece of land above a rocky coastline. In other parts of Tiree, there are several long, flat, good beaches, which would have been suitable as landing places, and where an assembly site would more plausibly have been located.

Lagalgarve, in south-west Kintyre, has been given a number of interpretations, such as 'the rough little hollow' and 'rough low field', or possibly 'law field' from ON *lagvǫllr*.[78] North and South Lagalgarve farms are located approximately 500 m apart, with no prehistoric or early historic archaeological remains recorded. There is a significant rise between the area around the farms and the rather rocky beach, thus making it difficult to spot and access from the sea. As such, the interpretation of Lagalgarve as an assembly site seems rather unlikely.

Finally, Govan, on the Firth of Clyde, has been identified as the royal and administrative centre of the Kingdom of Strathclyde in the tenth and eleventh centuries, and an assembly site developed under Norse influence. Judging by the place-name evidence, Govan was situated just outside the main areas of Scandinavian influence, although Strathclyde would have been a political melting pot of Britons, Gaels, Angles, Picts, and Norse during this period. In 870, Dumbarton Rock, the central

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74   Whyte 2014, 145-47.
75   MacPherson 1878.
76   I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers, who pointed this out.
77   This suggestion was put forward by Dr Berit Sandnes, in Holliday 2016. I am grateful to Dr Andrew Jennings for drawing this to my attention.
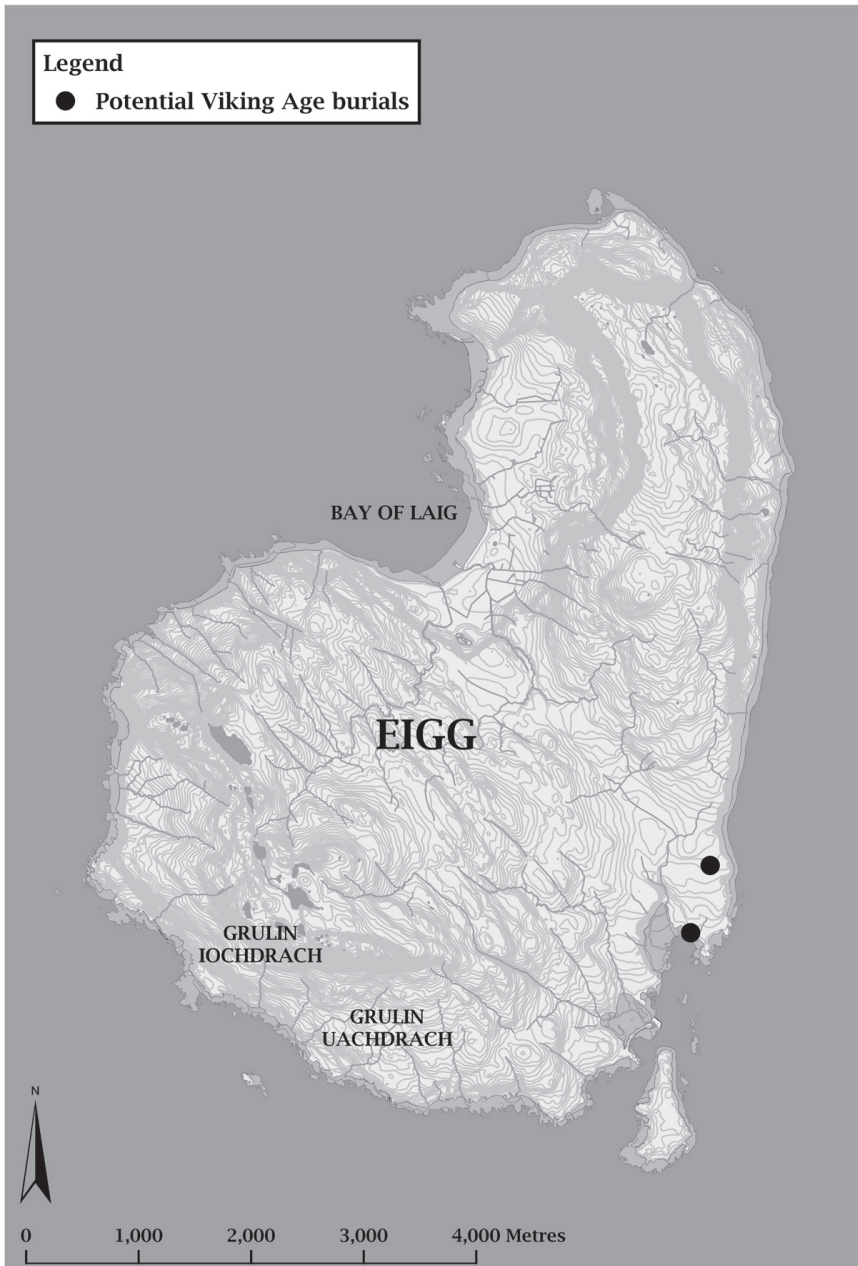78   Rixson 2010; Chinn 2016, 102; Jennings pers. comm.

Figure 11: The Isle of Eigg with Grulin and potential Viking-Age burials. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.
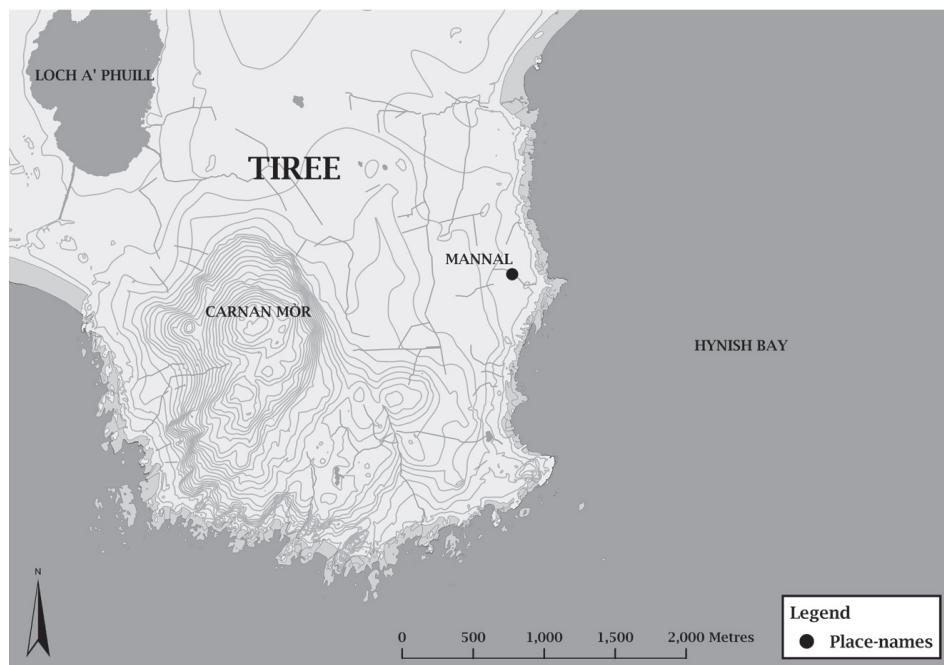
Figure 12: Mannal on the Isle of Tiree. © Crown Copyright/database right 2011. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service. All rights reserved 2010. Map by Alex Sanmark and Tudor Skinner.

stronghold of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, located on the Clyde, was sacked by Vikings. As a result, the kingdom's power base shifted to Govan in the tenth century. It is from this time that Norse influence has been suggested.[79]

Govan was positioned in a highly strategic location in the Firth of Clyde. It also has a very strong archaeological profile, with a sequence of churches stretching from the early historic period, an outstanding collection of stone sculpture (including hogbacks, dating between 900 and 1100), a large mound, as well as a possible 'processional route'. Norse influence has been seen in all of these elements.[80] The location is most convincing, as the Firth of Clyde seems to have been important to the Norse in this area for both commercial and political purposes. Together with the Firth of Forth, the Clyde formed a route through southern Scotland, which the Norse could well have utilised. Govan has

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79   Owen and Driscoll 2011.
80   Ibid., 333-38.

two other locational traits that could suggest Norse influence; the Rivers Kelvin and Clyde meet here and there was also a fording point.[81]

The mound is known as Doomster Hill, which refers to the Doomster/Dempster, a legal official known from post-medieval accounts. The mound had a stepped profile, which has been argued to be a feature of Norse assembly mounds around the Irish Sea.[82] Tynwald Hill, on the Isle of Man, is perhaps the most well-known example. This site has roots in prehistory, but even though the stepped mound profile predates the seventeenth century, this cannot be unquestionably attributed to the Norse. Another example of a stepped mound is Thingmount, in Little Langdale in Cumbria.[83] This site, however, seems an unlikely assembly, and its name, again, seems to have been coined by antiquarians.[84] At Tinwald in Dumfries, a geophysical survey revealed that the mound may had have a stepped profile, although this appearance could also be attributed to the later medieval motte construction.[85] Stepped mounds are not known from Scandinavia, and the question of whether they were a feature of Norse assembly places in the Irish Sea area must remain open until more detailed fieldwork has been carried out.

The processional route at Govan, which connects the church to the mound, has been seen as Norse, as it is similar to the one at Tynwald Hill. A calibrated radio-carbon date of AD 734-892 was used in support of this.[86] It has, however, been pointed out that this date comes from a 'repair', and the road itself may actually be earlier.[87] Although 'processional routes' of various types were a rather common feature at *thing* sites in Scandinavia, they are never found linking churches and mounds. Instead, this seems to be an aspect of early medieval assembly sites in Scotland, as, for example, at Bishop's Hill by Dunkeld Cathedral, as well as Moothill, located beside the Abbey of Scone.[88] The Norse nature of the Govan sculptural evidence is also debatable. Although hogbacks have traditionally been interpreted as Norse, this is currently under consideration, and they can therefore no longer be

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81   Ibid., 338.
82   Ibid., 340; Darvill 2004, 228-30.
83   Owen and Driscoll 2011, 342-43; Darvill 2004, 228-30; Johnson 2012, 105-7, 111.
84   Wilson 2008, 125.
85   O'Grady et al. 2016, 202.
86   Owen and Driscoll 2011, 333-38.
87   O'Grady et al. 2016, 201.
88   O'Grady 2014, 114, 116-17, 119-22, 123-25.

accepted wholesale as Norse.[89] In sum, the evidence does not support the suggestion that Govan was designed by a Norse group among the rulers of Strathclyde. Indeed, this site is more in line with assembly-site design in Scotland and the Isle of Man than any Norse influence. A more detailed study of assembly sites in Scotland and Ireland may, in due course, produce a more nuanced view.

Concluding Remarks

This chapter has provided the first overview of all potential *thing* sites in the islands on the western seaboard of Scotland. The almost complete absence of written sources on *thing* sites has created a particularly high reliance on place-name evidence in this area of Scotland. As has been shown, place-names alone are not enough to identify assembly sites, and the interdisciplinary methodology applied here therefore represents an important step forward. Moreover, this evaluation would not have been possible without knowledge of a large number of *thing* sites in the Viking homelands and other areas of Norse settlement. It is hoped that this chapter can inspire further interdisciplinary research into the assembly sites of Scotland, and indeed further afield.

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89   O'Grady et al. 2016; Williams 2015; Victoria Whitworth pers. comm.

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