

Chapter 3

The Norse in the west with particular reference to Bute

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THIS broad-based study will cover the period when the islands off Scotland's west coast came under Norse control, after the settlement of Vikings in the Hebrides in the ninth century and up to the fading of Norwegian power which ended with the Treaty of Perth in 1266.¹ The southern Hebrides were ruled from the Isle of Man for some of this time, and the islanders also lay under the remoter authority of the kings of Norway (from the end of the eleventh century) and the archbishops of Trondheim (from 1152/3).² I want to stress the importance of the wider political and cultural networks as far as the Norse impact is concerned, which can help to give a context for the cultural and linguistic influence.

First of all we start off with the sea route by which the invaders from Scandinavia arrived off the coasts of north Britain. This was a sea route of immense significance in the history of the Viking raiding and trading world; from Norway to Shetland and Orkney, and then down the west coast of Scotland to the Irish Sea and Dublin. Later it extended north-west to Faeroe and Iceland.

The Hebridean world was a very important part of this sea route. After these islands had been settled and over-run in the late eighth and ninth centuries, a Norse-Gaelic network was established which stretched from Lewis, to Iona, Islay and Kintyre (and Bute). Indeed this area has been designated part of the 'Insular Viking zone' comprising primarily Ireland, Wales and the Isle of Man, but also including the Scottish Western Isles (Etchingham 2001: 145). Bute, along with the other Clyde islands, is not directly on this sea route but is part of another maritime zone more closely associated with the inner coastal waters of the Clyde estuary. Indeed those who controlled Bute commanded the Clyde and thus the western gateway to the heart of the Scottish kingdom (MacDonald 1997: 111) and to the Clyde-Forth route (which was an important means of crossing from the west coast to eastern Scotland, see Crawford 1987: 26, 51).

This 'insular Viking zone' was a complex maritime world where the Norsemen met Celtic culture and became absorbed in political and military struggles for supremacy, adding their own North Sea and Scandinavian element to this ethnic hotch-potch. The name for this mixed breed used in contemporary Irish sources is 'Gall-Gaedhil', the 'foreign Gael' (foreign that is to the Irish). The recent enlightening and important study by Thomas Clancy (2008) argues that Bute was the Gall-Gaedhil heartland.

The historical evidence for what was happening is fragmentary with generalised statements like that by Prudentius of Troyes who wrote under the year 847 ‘the [Irish] Scots, after being attacked by the Northmen for very many years, were rendered tributary; and [the Northmen] took possession, without resistance, of the islands that lie all around, and dwelt there’ (Anderson 1922, I: 277). The Irish, Welsh and Icelandic sources are difficult to interpret and even more difficult to reconcile. The Hebridean element is the sparsest, for there is little or no documentary evidence actually emanating from the Hebrides until the Chronicle of Man starts to record the doings of the kings of Man in the late eleventh century. Until then our knowledge of the situation in the islands is drawn from the sagas about the earls of Orkney, and the Irish or Welsh annals about the Celto-Norse dynasties which dominated Ireland, most importantly Dublin, and the Isles. These sources tell us about the deeds of the earls and the rulers of the Irish kingdoms, as well as church events. And it is an entry about St Blane in the Martyrology of Tallaght, calling him ‘bishop of Kingarth in Gall-Gaedhil’ which has been one of the foundation stones on which Thomas Clancy has built his argument that Bute was central to the Gall-Gaedhil area.

In some ways this insular world had a maritime unity, which despite the great distance from north Lewis to the southern tip of Kintyre was quickly accessible to people with effective shipping. But in other respects it was easily divided between widely-differing zones of influence, so that the north Hebrides had more in common with north Scotland and the Northern Isles, while the south Hebrides were, and historically had been, a part of Argyll and the kingdom of Dál Riada, and very open to influence from Ireland. The impact of the Vikings throughout this maritime zone must have been severe, and is now more fully recognised as being a very important phase of the history of the area. The impact was severe because the area was vulnerable to attack by mobile crews of warriors who were also very efficient sailors of ships. The few historical records we have provide enough evidence to show that the attack was directed against the monastic communities which lived in these islands, and which were totally defenceless against those who wished to exploit them for their own enrichment (Dumville 1997). The images of slave-raiding, both early medieval and modern, may not be far from the truth of the matter (figs 3.1 & 3.2). For the Vikings these coasts, peninsulas and islands were ideal pirate lairs, and individual leaders of boatloads of Norwegian raiders would have found a familiar maritime landscape which they could take over and exploit and which provided them with security and status.

In the absence of historical evidence place-names are a very important source of information about the scale, scope, and depth of impact of Norse settlement all over the British Isles. The Norse place-names in the islands and coasts of the Clyde estuary probably resulted from settlement which took place after the fall of Dumbarton Rock to the ‘two kings of the Northmen’, Olaf and Ivarr, in AD 870. The Annals of Ulster also record that ‘a very great spoil of people – of English, and Britons and Picts’ was brought in two hundred ships to Ireland in captivity (Anderson 1922, I: 301, 302–3). This important victory gave control of this waterway and the lower reaches of the Clyde, as well as access into the heart of Scotland, to the Viking rulers of Dublin. As regards the importance of the scatter of Norwegian place-names in the islands and peninsulas of the outer waters of the Clyde we now have some recognition that these names are highly significant thanks to the pioneering work of Andrew Jennings and Arne Kruse (Jennings 1996; 2004; Kruse 2004)



Fig 3.1 An evocation of a Viking raid on the monastery of Tavistock in Devon by Lorenz Frølich (© The Museum of National History, Frederiksborg Castle, Denmark)

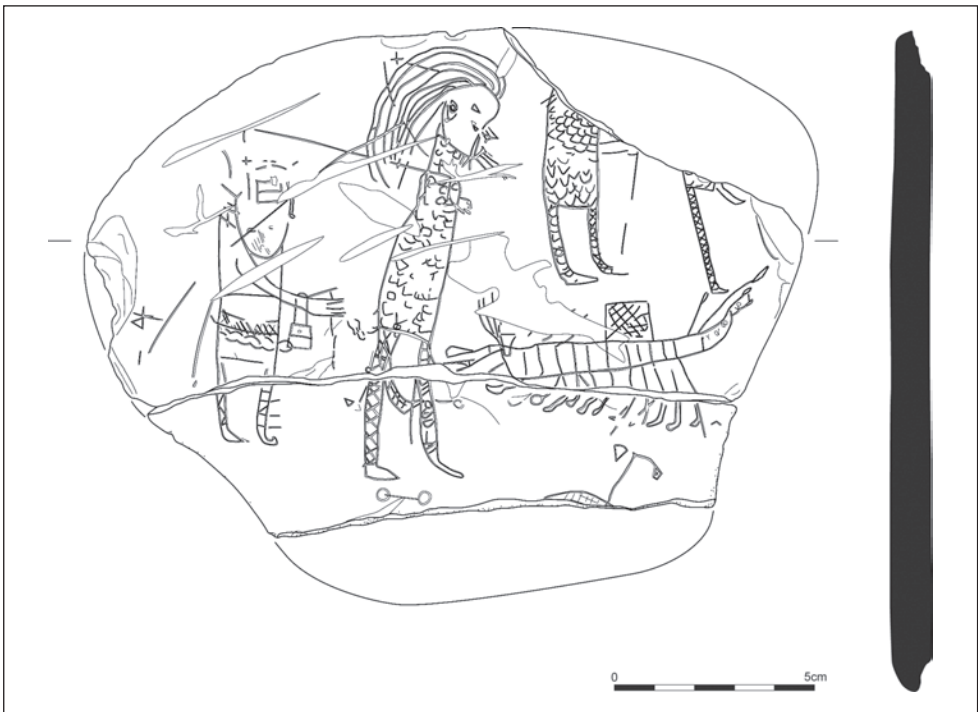


Fig 3.2 A contemporary image of a possible hostage-taking on a slate from the monastic site of Inchmarnock (© Christopher Lowe and Headland Archaeology Ltd).

Because these names were mostly topographical (relating to landscape features) and not habitative (identifying farm settlements) they were therefore spurned as evidence of permanent settlement. I argued otherwise long ago (Crawford 1987: 111; 1995: 6–13) and the detailed study of the geographical circumstances of such names which has now been undertaken, particularly those ending in ‘dale’ (*dabr*) in the inner Hebrides (Jennings 2004; Kruse 2004), is beginning to show how important the Viking settlement was in areas like Bute, although not creating settlements as permanently Norse as further north.³

Langal at the south end near Kingarth is the same as Langal/Langwell names elsewhere in north Scotland (Crawford 2004; Crawford & Taylor 2003). It derives from ON *lang-völlr* = ‘long field or level plain’ (which appears to describe the area very well). Langal in Bute was originally a large estate of 12 merks (Markus forthcoming), and subsequently divided, as the two Langal farms today have Gaelic suffixes. This is what might be called a topographical name because it is only telling us that a field was the main feature of the Norse settlement, which is not usually considered to be a habitative name (that is a farm-name). But it is being used as a farm-name in this area where the *bolstaðr*, *-staðr* and *-setr* names appear not to have been coined (just as Langwell names are found in parts of north Scotland where habitative names are sparse). For some reason this *völlr* element replaced the normal habitative place-names. Thus Langal, and other *völlr* names, tell us of permanent Norse settlement.

The proper ON habitative names were never given or never remained permanently imprinted in the toponymic landscape because the spread of Gaelic meant that the giving of Norse names was cut short, and thus the full possible range never developed. The Gaelic language survived more fully or was revived earlier in the southern Hebrides than in the Western Isles, which probably explains the arrested nature of Norse habitative names (Macniven 2008, 31–2). The strong Scottish influences following on from political changes after 1266 are probably responsible for the disappearance of many Norse names. But there is a still-surviving stratum of Old Norse topographical names in Bute which can be used to provide evidence of the establishment of Norse speakers and land-owners.

Turning now to archaeological evidence, which is material evidence for the actual presence of Vikings, we have even sparser sources of information, particularly noticeable in the absence of pagan graves. Some of the Norse graves in the Hebrides provide evidence of a rich warrior elite, and from islands close to Bute, as for example from Arran. The graves on the islands of the southern Hebrides, like Colonsay and Oronsay, Islay and Eigg, supply material evidence of the final resting-places of Norse settlers, men and women, who had taken possession of these islands: islands which are strategically located for control of the sea routes between the north Hebrides and the Irish Sea, and which provided them with ideal settlement locations for their lifestyles in the early Viking age.

No recognised pagan grave survives from Bute, but the Drumachloy sword-hilt is probably from a Norse grave.⁴ It is unusual for a sword hilt of that quality to be found in a context other than in association with a pagan grave.⁵

There is the problem of the excavated site of Little Dunagoil. It is not possible to say that the ‘long-houses’ on that site are anything earlier than medieval, although the bronze-capped lead weight which was found relates to other known sets of Viking lead weights such as those preserved from the famous Kiloran Bay burial in Colonsay. Its ornamental mount is said to consist of an openwork boss of a Scandinavian oval brooch of late ninth or early tenth

century date (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 98) and is therefore undoubtedly Viking. Had this object simply survived and been re-used at a later date?

Although not from Bute itself the rune-stone from nearby Inchmarnock is a very remarkable Norse artefact (Fisher 2001: 79) (fig 4.2). It is one of only three from western Scotland (there are far more from the Northern Isles). All three in west Scotland are Christian memorials, and two of them use the word *kross* rather than *stein* (as is more usual in the north). It is probably testimony to stronger Celtic Christian influence.

Saga evidence is very definitely not material evidence and in fact is very uncertain historical evidence. Most sagas are literary sources written down in Iceland in the thirteenth/fourteenth centuries and record what had been handed down as tradition about the Viking Age and the heroic deeds of their forebears. This had happened many centuries earlier, and in transmission there is no doubt that a lot of erroneous and fabulous information had accreted around the stories. However these stories tell us that places were remembered where events had taken place much earlier throughout the Viking world. One of the more fabulous sagas, *Grettir's Saga*, tells of an incident when one band of Norsemen got into a fight with some Vikings 'who lay up in winter in the Barra Isles' and the sea battle took place in narrow straits off Bute (Anderson 1922, I: 326).

Two Vikings-Vigbiod and Vestmar were raiding in the Hebrides and plundering in Scotland's firths.

Thron and Onund went to oppose them and learned that they had sailed in to the island which is called Bute. They took five ships and Onund put them between two cliffs; there was a great channel there which was deep, and ships could sail one way only, and not more than five at a time. Onund made the five ships go forward into the strait in such a manner that they could immediately let themselves drift, with hanging oars, when they wished, because there was much sea-room behind them. There was also a certain island on one side, under it he made one ship lie and they carried many stones to the edge of the cliff, where they could not be seen from the ships.

(*Grettir's Saga* chap 4. Adapted from Anderson 1922, I: 326).

Now this must be recording some memory of the narrow sea passage through the Kyles (fig 4.1). Why would Bute be mentioned unless it were a familiar name to the Icelandic saga tellers? That is not to say that they would know where it was but the topographical circumstances of ships being constrained by the tide in narrow straits must be telling us that Bute was known to be a part of the Norsemen's world and the maritime circumstances of this fight were remembered. Or the situation was considered to be a good place to locate your story of a sea battle.

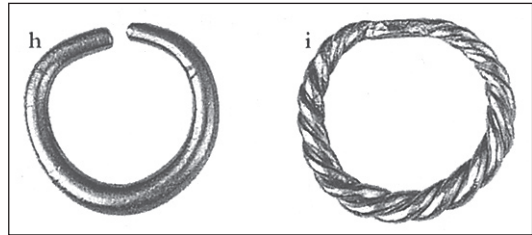
This evidence may be thin and scattered and unimpressive on its own but when all is added up – the archaeology, the place-names, the runestone and the saga reference – it suggests that Bute was very much part of the Viking world, even if that world became rapidly Gaelicised in the tenth century. It had its place, and an important place, in the inner Hebrides insular society of mixed Gaelic-Norse ethnicity and cultural identity.

The tenth century

The tenth century started with the expulsion of the Norse from Dublin (in 902), an event thought to be particularly important for the strengthening of Hiberno-Norse settlement in north-west England where many of the expelled probably fled to and also to the Clyde islands. We then move from a period when individuals and their followings seized and dominated islands in what must have been an initial inchoate phase, to the growth of larger dynastic groupings with leaders who bear the title of 'lord' or 'king' of the Isles. The first individual given the title *ri Innse Gall* ('king of the Isles of Foreigners' i.e. the Hebrides) appears in the Irish and Welsh sources in the late tenth century. Godfrey/Gothfrith Haraldsson (Gofraid Mac Arallt) 'whose sphere of influence seems to have encompassed Man and the Isles' (McDonald 1997: 31) is recorded as ravaging Anglesey and Dyfed in the 970s and 980s. He probably shared power over the Hebrides with his brother Maccus, who is called 'king of many islands' when he joined with other rulers from the north to meet with the Anglo-Saxon King Edgar at Chester in 972 (*A-S Chron* 'E'). Who these Haraldssons were and where they came from does not concern us especially, but their evident links with Ireland are possibly significant (Hudson 2005). In 974 one of them raided Scatterry Island in the Shannon and carried off into captivity Ivarr, king of Limerick (Etchingham 2001: 172 and refs there cited), which suggests that the Haraldssons may have had connections with Limerick and that their father may have been the Haraldr, king of Limerick who died in 940, apparently a son of Sigtrygg, grandson of Ívarr who had restored Viking control of Dublin in 917. These are all scions of the *Uí Ímair* (sons of Ivarr) dynasty which had founded Dublin in the mid-ninth century and ruled the whole of the Irish Sea region and Argyll, dominating the sea lanes through the Hebrides (Downham 2007). Individual members of this dynasty sometimes had complete authority throughout the area, which in the tenth century included northern England and the city of York; but more usually the different insular parts would be ruled by a 'brood' of 'cousinly princes' who squabbled among themselves for the over kingship, with a 'natural tendency to fission' (Woolf 2004: 96). If Godfrey and Maccus Haraldsson were indeed as intimately bound in with the most powerful Norse dynasties in Ireland as this theory suggests (making them nephews of Olaf Cuaran, king of Dublin), then their period of dominance as kings of the Isles would have drawn the Hebrides into the Irish Sea world.

If we turn to the material evidence of silver hoards from this period found throughout the Northern and Western Isles this reveals the sort of wealth that could be amassed at this time by the Norse settler communities (silver hoards of brooches, coins and hacksilver are indisputably associated with the economic activity of Norse raiders and traders). The Inner Hebrides and Orkney have the greatest number of hoards but all pale into insignificance compared with the remarkable number of hoards from the Isle of Man. In the Clyde estuary the hoard found in Port Glasgow dates to about 975 (Graham-Campbell 1976: 125). There is also the Plan Farm hoard from Bute which is a very interesting hoard indeed even although it is not strictly a Viking hoard.⁶ The reason why it is not included as a Viking hoard is because of the coins of David I which are included in it and which tell us therefore that it was deposited about AD 1150. So it seems not to have much to do with the Viking Age but to stem from a later time when coined silver was the main means of exchange. However, it included gold finger rings (fig 3.3) and a silver ingot, which are of tenth- or eleventh-century date and which are more 'Viking' in character. Thus it is a very unusual deposition

Fig 3.3 Gold finger rings from St Blane's Bute (from Graham-Campbell 1995, pl 73).



of twelfth-century date which included some older items dating probably from the late tenth or eleventh centuries. What were these items doing still circulating in a later, non-Norse and medieval world? Clearly they still had value.

Hogback stones are a sculptural form of grave monument which occurs in parts of Scandinavian Scotland, and which is recognised as a result of some form of Scandinavian influence (Crawford 1987; 1994; 2005; Ritchie 2004). They are considered to be evidence of a style of burial monument developed by settlers of Scandinavian origin in northern England and in southern and eastern Scotland in the late tenth and eleventh centuries (Lang 1974). Distribution maps of hogback stones do not include examples from Bute but there are two possible examples of a variant form of the hogback stone. That at Ardnahoe is now built into a wall at the farm as part of the wall coping. It is difficult to tell exactly what this remarkable triangular-shaped stone may once have been. It is 4 to 5 feet long of rough sandstone without any surviving carving or tegulation. One end is rough and appears to be broken. The other end has a slight swelling which may have once been some carved feature but this needs expert investigation. There is no evidence of any curving on the ridge. It may well have been a grave cover, and the triangular shape suggests that it could be identified as an example of the 'kindred coped monument'. Similarly we have the very fine coped stone at Kingarth (Ritchie 1994: 16 n5, ill 9). These are not true hogback stone grave covers but monuments which hint at some distant descent from those earlier remarkable house-shaped graves of the dead.

Orcadian domination

The Iona silver hoard dated to around 986 coincides with the report of an attack on the monastic community at Christmas time in the Irish Annals, and there is further evidence of much disruption in the Irish Sea zone in the later tenth century. It is likely that there was a challenge to the Haraldssons and that their control in the islands became insecure, perhaps due to the extension of the earl of Orkney's influence in the area (Etchingham 2001: 179). Godfrey Haraldsson was killed in Dál Riata in 989 (Annals of Ulster) and, although the evidence is circumstantial, it is generally thought that Earl Sigurd Hlodversson of Orkney, one of the most powerful of the northern earls, appears to have expanded his authority southwards over the Hebrides and filled the vacuum (Crawford 1987: 66–7; Hudson 2005: 75).

The territorial assessment units called *ouncelands*/*pennylands* were imposed on the Hebrides while they lay under the authority of the Earls of Orkney, probably in the late tenth century under Sigurd the Stout. Bute is included in the area where pennylands are known, because there is place-name evidence from the farm-name *peinn leighinn* (contracted to 'Leni' in Lenihal and Lenihuline) meaning half pennyland. There were 18 pennylands in the Hebridean *ounceland*, and it is likely that Bute was valued at 2 *ouncelands* (Denis Rixson pers comm).

Orkney overlordship extended over the Hebrides until the aftermath of the death of Earl Thorfinn in the mid-1060s. Then we are told that in the places he had conquered ‘people broke away and looked for protection from those who held the lands by birthright’ (*Orkneyinga Saga*, chap 32). The effects of such change in lordship are however not easy to estimate. There is no doubting that there was a pull between the Celtic and the Norse worlds and that the Hebrides were on a cusp between these two worlds. In the hierarchy of settlement and power, we move between the individual farmers settled on the land, local chieftains such as jarl Gilli, the more powerful overlords to whom such local chieftains had to submit (like the kings of Man and the Isles or the earls of Orkney), and at the top of the pile the national rulers, seeking to extend a kingdom’s authority out to its natural frontiers, territorial or maritime. In this category we have primarily the Norwegian rulers to consider, for the Irish kingdoms were too fragmented to extend power to the islands, even though the rulers of Dublin were eager to exercise their authority over Man and the Isles (McDonald 1997: 32). The Scottish kings were not yet powerful enough within their heartlands to think, or care, about the maritime world in the west.

The eleventh century: Danish and Norwegian ambitions

The kings of Norway were able and willing to consider the settlements in the west as integral parts of their kingdom when they were strong enough to leave their own territory and embark on expeditions west to enforce their authority and demand submission. This happened once they had unified the disparate parts of the *norðr weg* (Norway) and eastern provinces under their authority in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries. The next phase of Norwegian royal ambition to have an effect, and a powerful one, on the Hebrides was at the very end of the eleventh century. In 1098 King Magnus Olafsson *berfættr* (‘Barelegs’) launched two expeditions aiming to reassert Norwegian authority over the Northern and the Western Isles, and to use the Isle of Man as a base for controlling the lands around the Irish Sea (Power 1986: 107–32). The king’s skald, Bjorn Cripplehand, left graphic descriptions of the destruction then wrought throughout the Hebrides, including Kintyre, which is incorporated into King Magnus’ own saga, as written by Snorri Sturlason (*Heimskringla, The saga of Magnus Barefoot*, chap 9, 10). Bute is not mentioned in these verses and probably escaped attack for Magnus was intent on controlling the Irish Sea world, including north Wales and Northern Ireland.

Magnus was also interested in forcing the issue over the exact boundary between his overlordship and that of the Scots king. When he returned to Scotland from Anglesey his saga says that men went between him and the Scots king ‘and a peace was made between them’. According to *Orkneyinga Saga* (chap 41) it was King Malcolm (*recte* Edgar) who sent messengers to offer a settlement. It must have been agreed that Norwegian authority thereafter would be restricted to the islands off-shore and it is said that ‘Magnus was all the winter in the southern isles’, during which period his men went all over the fjords rowing within and around all islands to claim them for the king (*Heimskringla*, chap 11). He also had himself dragged in a skiff over the isthmus at Tarbert in order to claim the peninsula of Kintyre as an island belonging to Norway. This meant that Bute and the other Clyde islands remained, however nominally, part of the kingdom of Norway for another one and a half centuries.

This was ambitious and threatening intervention from Scandinavia in the whole Insular Viking zone, and it is not easy to know how the situation might have developed if Magnus had not got himself killed in Ulster on his second expedition of 1102. He had returned because of Muirchertach's interference in the Kingdom of the Isles (Woolf 2004: 101). In the aftermath of his death there was uncertainty about the succession in the kingdom of Norway, his son Sigurd returned to Norway to claim his father's power in a disputed inheritance situation, and the Hebrides were once more drawn into the Irish Sea world.

The twelfth century: ecclesiastical links

One important twelfth-century development which must have strengthened the Norwegian connection was the establishment of the archdiocese of Nidaros (Trondheim) in 1152–3, in which the diocese of the Hebrides (*Sudreyar*) was included (Beuermann 2002: 62–8). The history of the bishopric before this date points to its subjection to first Canterbury and then York and there was the possibility that it might have come under the new archbishopric of Dublin, founded in 1151/2. Indeed it has been argued that Godred Olafsson's rather surprising visit to Norway in 1152 (the first evidence of any contact between Norway and the kingdom of Man since 1103), when the Manx Chronicler says that he did homage to King Inge, (*Chron Mann*, f.36r) may have been prompted by his desire to take his kingdom under the Norwegian ecclesiastical cloak rather than be subjected to Dublin (Beuermann 2002: 68). It certainly indicates that King Godred was looking for a counter-balance to Irish influence within his kingdom.

The complex history of the bishopric in the next century does not suggest that the Norwegian church played a very active role in the choice of bishops (Woolf 2003: 174–7). Nor can we imagine that the bishops with their see based at Peel in the Isle of Man played a very active role in the outermost corners of their diocese, apart from making occasional visitations. As has been suggested recently different regions in the diocese with their own distinctive cultural traditions probably had their own head churches (Woolf 2003: 180), where the bishops would call in from time to time. These were Snizort in Skye and Rodil in Harris in the north Hebrides, Iona as the most important spiritual centre of the Hebridean world, and Kingarth in Bute in the Clyde estuary (fig 3.4).

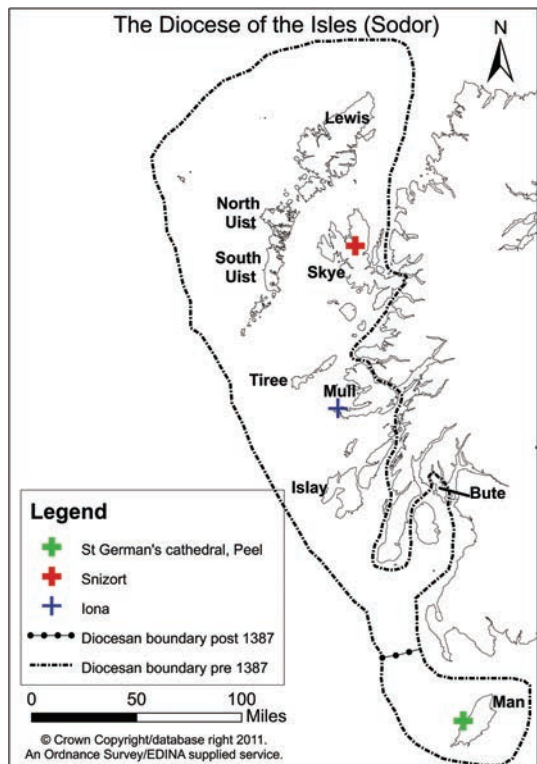


Fig 3.4 Map of the bishopric of the Sudreys (drawn by Dr Sarah Thomas).

The creation of the archbishopric of Trondheim in 1152–3 and the incorporation of the diocese of the Hebrides (Sodor/*Sudreyar*) within it was doubtless a means of strengthening Norwegian authority in the area, but recent assessment makes it clear that Magnus *berfæt*'s successors had in general other political priorities (like civil war) to occupy them and were in no position to exert pressure on the kings of Man (Beuermann 2002: 81–2). The visit of Godred Olafsson, son of King Godred of Man, to Norway in 1152–3 was probably prompted by pressures within the Irish Sea zone, or within the kingdom itself caused by the rise of Somerled.

Thus, the twelfth century was a time when external influences in the Hebrides became less important, and political change was engendered from within the islands. First of all there was the growth of the political structures in Man itself. The dynasty of Godred Crovan was 'a mixed breed of Norse-Celtic adventurers' whose experience of political authority had been gained in Ireland, Scotland and sometimes England. The language of the court and culture included both Norse and Irish elements, although the exact mix of the two has been a cause of much dispute among historians. Then there was an Anglo-Norman element, which Olaf son of Godred would have experienced when he was resident at the court of Henry I of England, and it was probably his experience there which influenced Olaf into later regularising the bishopric in his kingdom and fostering monastic communities in Man itself (McDonald 1997: 207–18).

We can guess that there may have been mechanisms for collecting taxes or renders on the kings' behalf, and we know from later evidence that the Hebridean Islands were grouped into four for judicial representation at the annual legal assembly at Tynwald in the Isle of Man (Megaw 1956: 167). There must have been more local judicial assemblies at which economic and military obligations would have been assessed, but only the Council of the Isles, held at Finlaggan, Islay, is recorded (Crawford 1987: 289).⁷ Perhaps the only suggestion one can make with some confidence is that the cultural situation in the Outer Hebrides is likely to have been more conservative than anywhere else in the Manx kingdom. The Norse element was possibly more lasting there than anywhere else, and the Norse language possibly survived there longer. The place-name evidence certainly tells plainly of the more lasting nature of the Norse linguistic strain in the Outer Isles than in the Inner Hebrides (Ofstedal 1955; Jennings 1996; Stahl 2000). However the research undertaken into the toponymy of Bute by Gilbert Markus has shown that a substantial number of topographical place-names have survived in Bute, some of which were important estates in the medieval period (forthcoming).

This putative distinction between the Outer and Inner Hebrides was however not maintained with the rise of Somerled macGillebrigte (his forename is ON *sumarlíði* = 'summer warrior') and the dominance of his family in the last century of the Norwegian period (fig 3.5). Somerled has traditionally been seen as the great Gaelic lord leading a Celtic revival (McDonald 1997: 57), but it would be very difficult to say what his priorities were in ethnic terms, although his deadly rivalry with the King of Man is the dominant feature of his rise and fall. After the battle of the Epiphany in 1156 between Godred and Somerled the Kingdom of the Isles was divided between them which the Manx chronicler sees as the cause of the ruination, or break-up of the kingdom (*Chron Mann*, f.37v). It certainly resulted in the difficult situation whereby some of the Outer Isles were retained by the kings of Man but separated from their central power bases by treacherous waters, while the chieftaincy of

Somerled and his sons controlled all the southern Hebrides south of Ardnamurchan (possibly including Arran and Bute; McDonald 1997: 56).

Following the death of Somerled in 1164 Godred re-established himself in the Outer Hebrides but then the Uists, Benbecula and Barra appear to have become part of the territory

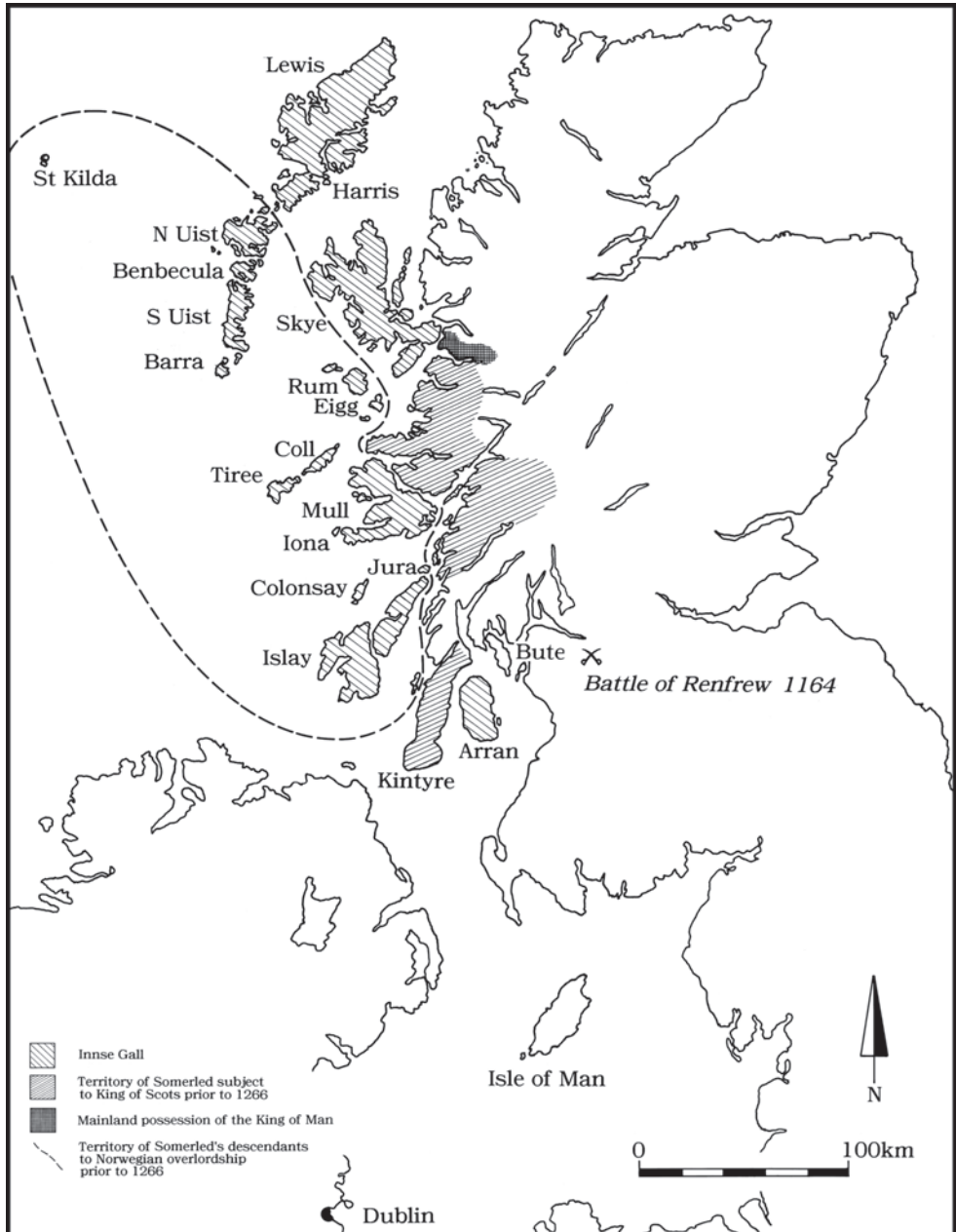


Fig 3.5 Map of Somerled's Lordship (courtesy of David H Caldwell and National Museums Scotland).

of Angus, third son of Somerled, and on his death in 1210 the Lordship of Garmoran passed to his nephew Ruari, second son of Ranald, from whom the Lords of Garmoran descended (McDonald 1997: 70, 80). The Uists, Benbecula and Barra were therefore drawn into the Inner Hebridean world and linked as a maritime lordship with Rum, Eigg, and the mainland territories of Knoydart and Moidart. The consequences of this would seem inevitably to have been a ‘gaelicisation’ of the remoter communities on the western fringe. The southern third was eventually held by the MacDonalds which possibly included Arran and Bute (McDonald 1997: 70). The uncertainty over Bute’s importance in the developments of this period is revealed by the uncertain phrases which Andrew McDonald uses when discussing these events. But there seems little doubt that despite the lack of evidence Bute’s strategic position meant that the power strategies would have revolved around its possession, and this is demonstrated by the developments in the following century, and in particular the building of Rothesay castle. Alexander II’s campaign of 1222 was ‘possibly aimed at royal control of Arran and Bute’ (McDonald 1997: 84), and in 1230 a Scottish garrison held Rothesay castle. The Stewart family’s attempted extension of power over the Clyde from Renfrewshire to the island of Bute is demonstrated in Alan fitz Walter’s grant of Kingarth with its lands and chapels to the family’s monastic foundation, Paisley Abbey, at the beginning of the thirteenth century (pre 1204).⁸

There are therefore many uncertainties about Bute’s position in this period. It was a frontier island and political control over it was being disputed between the Gaelic-Norse rulers and the Scottish family of Stewart in particular, with the evident involvement of the Scottish kings in the following century.

The thirteenth century

Once the civil wars in Norway had ceased there was a serious attempt to increase authority over the kings of Man, and a plundering raid in the west by Norwegian ‘pirates’ in 1209 compelled King Ragnvald and his son Godred to go to Norway to renew their oaths of allegiance and pay the overdue tribute (Anderson 1922, II: 381; McDonald 2007: 134–5; Crawford forthcoming, where the reconciliation is compared with the terms imposed on the Orkney earls).

The growth of a strong Norwegian kingship under Hakon Hakonsson saw a repeat of the earlier royal ambitions; a king who was well established at home wished to seek glory overseas and reassert authority in his colonial dominions, or ‘skattlands’ as they were called (Imsen 2010, *passim*). In Hakon’s case this was in direct response to the expanding power of the Scottish kings, who by this date desired to have the islands off the west coast of Scotland within their control, as a symbol of their imperial authority. The story is a complex one, concerning the relationship of the Norwegian king with the kings of Man and members of the Somerled dynasty in the Hebrides.⁹ We have a remarkably full account of the events leading up to the royal expedition of 1263 and of King Hakon’s war cruise to the Hebrides in his own saga, written almost contemporaneously (*Hakon’s Saga*, chaps 318–27).

In that account Bute features quite notably and was evidently at the centre of claims between the Northmen and the Scots. When King Hakon was lying with his fleet at Gigha (ON *Guðey*), he sent some ships to Bute ‘to meet those who had been sent thither’. Then there is the account of a ‘ship-captain whose name was Rudri’ who was with the Northmen (*þar var*

ok við Norðmönnum einn skipstjórnar-maðr, er Rudri hét: chap 321), who thought he had a claim by birth to Bute.¹⁰ Because he had failed to ‘get the island from the Scots’ he, along with his two brothers, came to King Hakon and they swore oaths and became his men. There appears to have been a skirmish over ‘the castle’ (presumably in Rothesay), and Rudri killed nine men, after which the island came under King Hakon, and this reconquest is recorded in the verses of Sturla Thordarson:

Ferð vannfrið-skerðis

Fræg ok óvægin

Bót af baug-njótum

Breiða guð-leiðum

(The dauntless henchmen of the king, the man of war so worshipful, broad Bute conquered for their lord from the God-detested race) (Hacon’s Saga, p338)

Bute was then a base for the Norwegians who, led by Rudri, harried the settlements of the nearby coast of Scotland. Negotiations were initiated by the Scots and the Norwegians reciprocated by sending an embassy to King Alexander in Ayr. But the peace negotiations foundered on King Hakon’s claim to all the isles, which the king of Scots specifically refused with regard to the Clyde islands of Bute, Arran and the Cumbraes (*Bot ok Herrey ok Kúmreyjar*). He would not give them up, and neither would Hakon relinquish them, so these islands were the crucial factor over which negotiations broke down.

One wonders why Hakon was so determined to retain Bute, Arran and the Cumbraes. He took his fleet into the Clyde and sailed in under the Cumbraes evidently in defiance of any authority which King Alexander might have exercised in the locality. This situation ended up with the rout at Largs on October 3rd. Hakon would have been far better to stay outside the Clyde zone, but he clearly thought that he could control this area with sea power. Why did he want to do so? What was so important about these islands? They are very strategic and control access in and around the Clyde estuary. Bute had a particularly strategic importance in controlling the route to the portage at Tarbert, and during the stay in the Cumbraes Hakon sent sixty ships up Loch Long to the portage at Tarbert and ‘they drew them up there over the land to a great lake which is called Loch Lomond’ (chap 323). This raiding party was led by King Magnus of Man, king Dougal and his brother Alan, and they harried in the district around the lake ‘and wrought there great damage’. But this did not do any good as regards the situation of the Norwegian party in the Clyde which was partly destroyed by great storms before the skirmishes on land.

After the inconclusive encounter at Largs the Norwegian fleet sailed back north round Cape Wrath, reaching Orkney on 29 October. The decision was taken to overwinter there before sailing back to Norway. Whatever Hakon had intended might be his next move in the assertion of his authority in the west, his death over the winter spelled the end of Norwegian political hegemony in the Hebrides.

The Treaty of Perth 1266

The political negotiations which led to the Treaty of Perth were conducted in a statesmanlike spirit between the envoys of Hakon’s peaceable successor, Magnus Hakonsson ‘the Lawmender’, and members of the Scottish government. The treaty itself is formulated as

if the Western Isles were ‘sold’ to Scotland, with a clause that 100 marks a year were to be paid ‘in perpetuity’. One of the conditions included was that supporters of King Hakon were not to be punished ‘for the misdeeds or injuries or damage which they have committed hitherto’, and they could choose to leave or to stay, and if they chose to leave ‘they may do so, with their goods, lawfully, freely, and in full peace’, that is, without any reprisals (Donaldson 1970: 35) Presumably these conditions would be publicised in the islands, but we have little evidence of what the results of the political change were in islands like Bute. It must always have been an area of hybrid settlement and culture, and that is reflected in its place in Gall-Gaedhil territory. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries Bute, Arran and the Cumbraes were strategically-located islands in a maritime world of mixed ethnic identity. They were frontier islands where Norse and Scottish culture met and where national political ambitions clashed.

Notes

- 1 I use the term ‘Norse’ as a more general Scandinavian cultural term than ‘Viking’, which is not applicable for most of the period.
- 2 Thomas Clancy’s seminal assessment of the main territorial/insular base of the Gall-Gaedheil, and with the important excavations at Inchmarnock now published, which has a most informative historical introduction by Richard Oram and Paula Martin. All of these authors have in recent years helped to put Bute into a better-understood wider cultural framework.
- 3 The work undertaken by Gilbert Markus on the nomenclature of Bute as part of the Bute Landscape Project will revolutionise our understanding of the importance of the Norse place-names of the island.
- 4 Graham-Campbell and Batey (1997: 97) do not commit themselves to postulating that it was so.
- 5 Wainwright commented on the absence of stray weapon finds ‘warriors do not leave their swords casually in barns or byres, nor do they throw them on middens’ (1955: 152).
- 6 This hoard was not included in my map of Viking hoards (1987) nor by Graham-Campbell and Batey (1998).
- 7 The site of Cnoc an Rath (‘Atingerar’) lies at a strategic position between Etrick and Kaimes (interest in which was aroused at the SSNS Conference) and may or may not prove to be a possible assembly site.
- 8 This grant seems never to have been implemented. See Gilbert Markus’ full discussion of the implications in his forthcoming study.
- 9 The way in which the different members of Somerled’s family (the MacSorleys) responded to the difficult political situation in which they found themselves is rather remarkable; perhaps not surprisingly they chose different paths, according to how they felt their own personal position might benefit.
- 10 The name Ruadri suggests that he may have been a member of the MacSorleys, the descendants of Somerled.

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