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Gall or Gaedheil: 13th-Century Identities in the Western Isles

Mary MacLeod Rivett



Introduction

The Outer Hebrides lie on the western coastal sea route, at most 40 km off the western coast of Scotland, in the Atlantic Ocean (Fig. 1), and were occupied from the Mesolithic onwards (Gregory *et al.* 2005, 944-950). Despite a lack of surviving documentary sources, they were clearly of strategic importance in the Viking Age and Norse Period, from the Late Iron Age through to the Middle Ages, located as they are on the route between the Northern Isles and the Irish Sea.

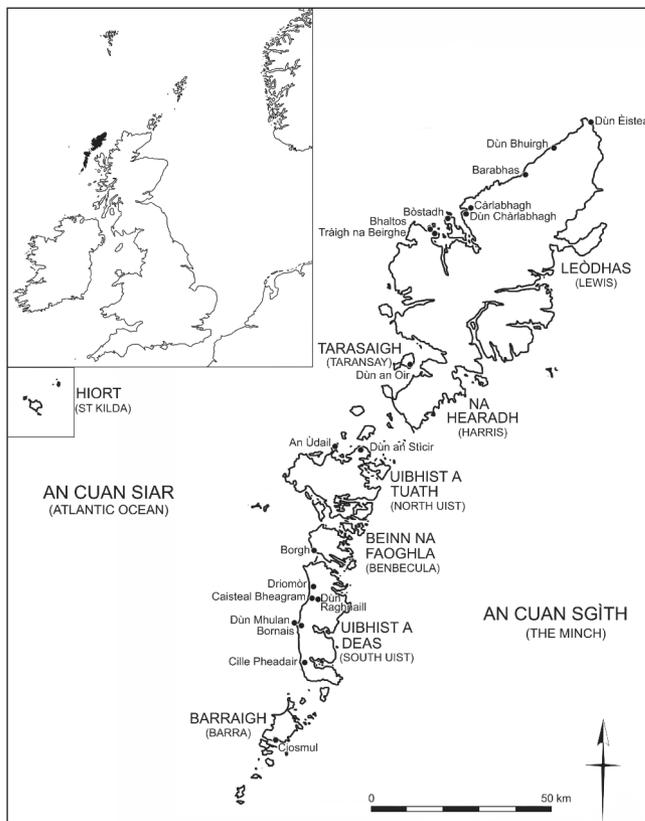


Fig. 1. Location map

Evidence exists, both archaeological and some documentary, of two major cultural and socio-political changes which happened in this area during this period. Firstly, at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century, the arrival of a new political elite from Scandinavia was marked by a suite of new styles of artefact, new forms of architecture (Sharples and Parker-Pearson 1999, 130-144), new language (Crawford 1987, 92-115), and new genetic material (Wilson *et al.* 2001, 5078-5083). Secondly, some 450 years later, the islands were transferred from the Crown of Norway to that of Scotland, at the Treaty of Perth in 1266. The treaty included a phrase allowing islanders either to stay or to leave freely 'and in peace' (Oliver 1862, 210-17), reflecting what would appear to be a mixed sense of identity and allegiance. It seems likely that, at this time, some Hebrideans were looking to the Gaelic world for social and cultural references, although they were slow to

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abandon their links to the wider Scandinavian diaspora (Raven and MacLeod Rivett, forthcoming), but there has been little detailed consideration of how these diverse social and cultural links and identities were expressed in the material culture of the islands.

The period of Scandinavian hegemony in the Outer Hebrides was one of change. The surviving documents, together with toponymic evidence and genetic studies, allow us to draw out a number of broad themes that characterise the 450 years between c. AD 800 and AD 1266.

The survival of pre-Catholic church dedications and the widespread occurrence of ON *papar* names

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in the landscape indicate that the incoming pagan Scandinavians of the 9th and 10th centuries (Hultgård 2012, 212-218) came into a largely Christianised landscape (Crawford 2005). Documentary evidence (*Eyrbyggjasaga* ch 5; *Laxdaelasaga* ch 3) and archaeological evidence (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 141-2) suggest a process of individual and later institutional conversion to Christianity amongst the incoming population (Abrams 2007, 169-194).

The integration of the native and incoming populations is indicated not only by the results of genetic assays of the modern population (Wilson *et al.* 2001, 5078-5083), but also by contemporary personal names (Gammeltoft 2007, 480), family stories in the sagas (*Laxdaelasaga* chs. 12 and 13) and by the archaeological evidence (Jennings 2013 pers. comm.). Although this point has been widely debated in the past (e.g. Jennings and Kruse 2005, 284-296) there can be little doubt that by the 13th century the Outer Hebrides were home to a distinctive population of mixed Scandinavian and Gaelic background. As a result of this population integration, a process of linguistic change and shifting can be traced in the islands. It is not yet clear what language was used in the islands before the 9th-century arrival of the Norse; despite possible early Gaelic names, the earliest demonstrable toponymic stratum is that of Old Norse (Cox 2002, 111-118). However, by the 13th century, it appears from the place-name evidence that the islands were bilingual in Norse and Gaelic (Cox 2002, 118; Gammeltoft, 2013 pers. comm.) with Norse and Latin probably being the languages of law and status. After the Treaty of Perth, the language used in records relating to the west coast was typically either Gaelic or Latin. It is possible therefore to pinpoint two points at which political change was marked enough to force more or less conscious changes in the identity of the population of the islands: the beginning of the 9th century, and the end of the 13th century. This paper focuses on the later shift and addresses a few questions which are emerging from the results of both recent and not-so-recent excavations.

Barabhas Machair

In 1979, Trevor Cowie, of the then Department of the Environment, carried out a trial excavation on a Norse site on Barabhas (Barvas) Machair, on the western coast of the Isle of Lewis (Fig. 1) which had been exposed by erosion. At the time it was one of only three Viking/Norse sites excavated in the islands, the other two being An Udail (the Udal) in North Uist (Crawford and Switsur 1977, 124-136) and Driomor (Drimore) in South Uist (MacLaren, 1974, 9-18). Barabhas proved to be a rich source of new information. After some years of post-excavation analysis funded by Historic Scotland, this site and others on Barabhas Machair are now approaching full publication (Cowie and MacLeod Rivett 2010; forthcoming).

The site on Barabhas Machair was a single farm, founded in the late 10th – early 11th century on a thin cultivation soil of sand-enhanced glacial till, and located at the then inland edge of the coastal machair. During the c. 400 year life of the site, repeated rebuilding, sand-blow episodes and accumulating midden formed a settlement mound of which the latest occupation was of two adjacent buildings separated by an area of paving. The buildings were exposed during the excavation (Fig. 2). The last occupation on the site was probably late 13th century (698 ± 30 BP, SUERC 43765; 673 ± 20 BP, SUERC 44272, both 1 sigma), although the dates do mean that occupation could have continued into the 14th century.

In addition to the excavation over the main focus of the settlement, four sample trenches were excavated to the full depth of the mound, in order to determine its extent. These provided evidence of the pre-existing cultivation soil, and a date from red deer bone which provided the earliest date from the site (1021 ± 26 BP, SUERC 44268, 1 sigma). It is clear from the suite of dates and from the material culture that this is not likely to have been a first generation settlement farm, and its relatively small size and greenfield situation suggest that it was not a high status settlement.

Midden deposits between the two buildings yielded much of the information derived from the site: the animal bones, including fish bones, and the ceramics provide very clear evidence of a Norse cultural identity for the occupants of the site. Sieved samples from the midden deposits, although not prepared to the standards of today (Barrett *et al.* 1999, 353-388), provided evidence for an important fishery in large cod and ling (Harman *et al.* forthcoming; Colley *et al.* forthcoming). Unfortunately, evidence for any

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Fig. 2. Barabhas excavation plan

dependence on smaller fish, for example herring, is likely to have been missed due to the dimensions of the sieves used (*ibid.*), but this dietary expansion towards the consumption of large amounts of fish was a marker for Scandinavian cultural or ethnic identity in the Early Viking Age (Barrett *et al.* 2001, 145-54).

Over 10 per cent of the ceramics from the site were platter ware (Fig. 3): flat discs, with finger marked and stabbed upper surfaces, and grass-marked lower surfaces. Originally dated to the 10th - 11th century from An Udail, North Uist, it is now clear that this form continued in use much longer, possibly as late as the 14th- 15th century (Lane 1990, 108-130; 2007, 11-12; forthcoming), on

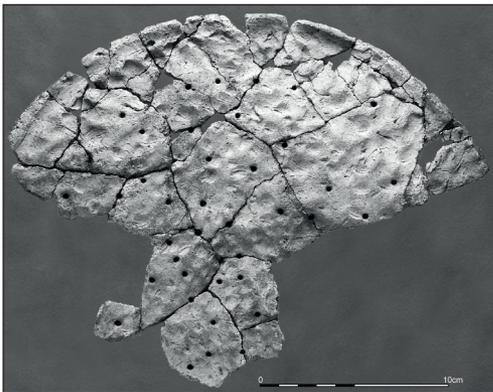


Fig. 3. Platter ware

the basis of evidence from Bornais in South Uist (Lane and Bond 2005, 131-132). There is now also evidence for the presence of Late Iron Age rectangular steatite bake plates in Shetland, for example from Old Scatness (Forster 2010, 281-283), but the circular platter ware is clearly analogous to the circular steatite bake plates which are found in Oslo around AD 1100 at the earliest (Forster 2010, 283). It has recently been suggested that the Hebridean pottery bake plate may predate the steatite bake plate, appearing before AD 1050 (Parker Pearson *ed.* 2012, 407-8). This does not alter the fact that the presence of both soapstone and pottery bake plates appear to reflect the production of a culture-specific food, probably hard bread.

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Barabhas in Context

In recent years, three further Viking and Norse period sites have been excavated in the islands: Cille Pheadair (Kilpheder) and Bornais (Bornish), both in South Uist (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 105-144; Sharples 2005), and Bostadh in Lewis (Neighbour and Burgess 1996, 113-4). An Udail remains largely unpublished (although see Seargentsen 2013), as does Bostadh, and Driomor was published 40 years ago (MacLaren 1974, 9-18); the two South Uist sites are, therefore, the closest available comparators to Barabhas both physically and culturally. Of the two, Bornais (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 133-7; Sharples 2005) was clearly the higher status settlement, located on a Late Iron Age site, and consisting of a cluster of buildings focussed around a large, bow-sided, Scandinavian style hall. In contrast, Cille Pheadair was a smaller, single farm, on a greenfield site (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 137-142) where a house and one or two outbuildings were modified and rebuilt over a period between the 10th or 11th century and the end of the 13th century.

The character and period of occupation of the site at Cille Pheadair are very similar to those of Barabhas. In both cases, the farms occupy ground which was previously cultivated, but without an earlier settlement, in an agricultural Iron Age landscape (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 137). Neither site was occupied in the 9th or early 10th century, so they were probably not of the first generation of Scandinavian-style settlement, and both seem to have been abandoned in the late 13th or 14th century (Sharples 2005, 181; Parker Pearson 2012, 418). These two sites were secondary, infill settlements, perhaps reflecting a pattern of second or third generation sub-division of landholdings. In contrast, occupation at the higher status site at Bornais continued into the 15th century (Sharples 2005, 182), as appears also to have been the case at An Udail (Crawford *et al.* 1977, 124-136).

As the excavators have pointed out (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 144), the artefacts from Bornais and Cille Pheadair contrasted in their cultural orientation, particularly towards the end of the period of occupation. The larger site showed continuing use of Scandinavian types of artefact, particularly combs and ivory objects, whilst the smaller site contained more western British imports, particularly amongst the ceramics. At Barabhas, however, the occupants continued to use a wholly Norse suite of artefacts until the abandonment of the site.

The imprecise dating of the end of the occupation at Barabhas and at Cille Pheadair is disappointing, but the near coincidence of the end of occupation at these sites and the 13th-century Treaty of Perth is nonetheless interesting, indicating as it does the likelihood of a shift in settlement pattern around the time of this significant political change. In South Uist, this settlement shift was widespread (Parker Pearson 2012, 419), with a postulated general 13th-15th-century move of settlement away from the machair, towards the edges of the blackland, the peaty area between machair and moor (Sharples 2005, 195). However, Barabhas and Cille Pheadair were abandoned early in this period, having been secondary in both establishment date and status, whilst the older and higher status sites at Bornais and An Udail continued to be occupied for longer. This may demonstrate a reorganisation of the lower-status landscape reflecting the legal and tenurial changes imposed with the introduction of Scots as opposed to Norse law in the 13th century, or indeed a fall in population occasioned by migration to Norway, as suggested by Barbara Crawford (Sharples 2005, 195). This may have been followed by a later relocation of the higher-status settlements, the timing being dependent upon local circumstances.

Interestingly, the ceramics from Bornais give a different picture of the impact of the Treaty of Perth. Platter ware continued in use until c. AD 1400 at the site, suggesting that Scandinavian culture continued to influence the private and domestic identity of the occupants, particularly in diet, despite shifts towards a more Medieval and Hebridean architectural form (Sharples 2005, 196).

The remembered past

In a conscious move conveying a message of local, pre-Norse, identity, the 12th to 14th centuries also saw the reoccupation of some of the many Iron Age broch sites in the Outer Hebrides which had been abandoned at the beginning of the 9th century (Parker Pearson *et al.* 1999; Harding and Gilmour 2000; Colls 2012; Raven and MacLeod Rivett, forthcoming). The brochs, which had visually and socially dominated the landscape into which the Scandinavians moved in the 9th century, had been avoided

throughout the Viking and Norse periods; a point demonstrated for South Uist (Raven 2005, 190-192) and equally applicable throughout the rest of the Outer Hebrides. This pattern is in marked contrast to the continuous occupation of broch sites such as Old Scatness (Dockrill *et al.* 2010) in the Northern Isles. Throughout the Viking and Norse periods in the Outer Hebrides, the landscape was defined by the monumental, empty remains of the Iron Age elite housing, which were continually referred to through their inclusion in the place names and vocabulary of everyday speech.

The broch site at Dun Mhulan, adjacent to Bornais, was reoccupied at some point in the Middle Ages; the occupation was initially thought to be c. AD 1300 (Parker Pearson *et al.* 2004, 90), but this is now thought to be somewhat later, possibly commencing in the 16th century (N. Sharples, pers. comm.). This development was paralleled in a large number of other broch sites throughout the islands, one of the best-known of which is the site of Dun an Sticer in North Uist (NGR NF 8972 7768), where reoccupation was possibly as late as the 16th or early 17th century. A rectilinear structure was inserted into the interior of the broch, with further buildings built onto the outside (Beveridge 1911 (2001), 139; Raven 2005, 234, 314). Similar structures can be seen in the remains of Dun an Oir (NGR NG 0358 9961), on the island of Taransay, and at Dun Loch an Duin (NGR NB 28550 47400), amongst others (Raven and MacLeod Rivett, forthcoming).

Gall or Gaidheil: manipulating identities

The excavated archaeological evidence for this 13th-century period of transition from Scandinavia to Scotland is still very limited, and in discussing the patterns that emerge from it, we are only beginning to consider some of the questions of identity, culture, ethnicity and politics that it raises. Farm abandonment and settlement pattern shift suggest either population fluctuations, or economic and tenurial changes or, quite possibly, both. Architectural changes, including the reuse of Late Iron Age sites, reveal an increasingly and consciously local and west coast Scottish identity (Raven & MacLeod Rivett, forthcoming). In contrast the continuity of some aspects of diet, such as the making of hard bread and the consumption of fish and beef (Mulville 2004, 191), suggest domestic identities which were more ambiguous and more variable. This was also indicated by the contrast between both the differing sources of the imported goods found at Cille Pheadair and Bornais, and the lack of imported goods from Barabhas.

The 13th-century families of the Outer Hebrides, the MacRuairidhs, Clanranald, MacDonalds, MacLeods, Morrisons, MacNeills and MacAulays, had genealogies including individuals with both Gaelic and Norse names (McDonald 2008, 140-1). They had nearly half a millennium of Hebridean life behind them by the time that the islands became a part of Scotland. For these people, we must assume that identity and allegiance in a given situation were to a large extent a matter of choice. Some of the MacDonald kinship left the islands following the Treaty, while others remained (McDonald 2008, 103-126); similar, but unrecorded, choices must have been made by others as well. In the changed political reality that faced the populations of the Outer Hebrides in AD 1266, manipulating their surroundings and material culture to emphasise the Gaelic aspects of their identities would have strengthened their links to the land they controlled, and to the new cultural environment.

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