

SCANDINAVIAN SCOTLAND

By Ken McNaughton

The Macnachtan Clan traces its history back to the heyday of the Picts between the 5th and 8th centuries, and post-1267 when King Alexander turned over the castle and island of Frechelan to the Macnachtans. But what happened in between?

Rome attempted to control Europe from its capital, but failed to subdue northern Scotland and southwestern England. After the decline of its empire 376-476, marauding tribes took advantage by adventurism. Scotland had achieved a degree of security through the rule of Kenneth McAlpin, a Scot from Northern Ireland who married a Pictish princess, united disparate tribes, and ruled from 843 to 848. But Scandinavians were on the move, and had their eyes on Scotland.



Figure 1. Norway, Great Britain and the islands (Hogweard).

From the 8th to the 15th centuries, Vikings and Norse settlers, mainly Norwegians and to a lesser extent other Scandinavians and their descendants colonized parts of what is now the periphery of modern Scotland. Scandinavian-held territories included the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, the Hebrides, the islands of the Firth of Clyde, and associated mainland territories, including Caithness and Sutherland. Viking influence in the area commenced in the late 8th century, but was not centralized. Hostility between the Scandinavian Earls of Orkney and the emerging Kingdom of the Isles, the rulers of Ireland, Dál Riata and Alba, and intervention by the crown of Norway were recurring themes. The Scandinavians wielded a seaborne empire on the western side of Scotland.

The Northern Isles were the first to be conquered by Vikings, and the last to be relinquished by the Norwegian crown. Thorfinn Sigurdsson's rule in the 11th century included expansion well into north mainland Scotland, and this may have been the zenith of Scandinavian influence. The obliteration of pre-Norse names in the Hebrides and Northern Isles, and their replacement with Norse ones was almost total, although the emergence of alliances with the native Gaelic speakers produced a powerful Norse-Gael culture that had wide influence in Argyll (the seat of Macnachtan power after 1267), Galloway and beyond. In 1231, an unbroken line of Norse earls of Orkney ended, and the title was since held by Scottish nobles. An ill-fated expedition by Haakon Haakonarson later in that century led to the relinquishing of the islands of the west to the Scottish Crown, and in the mid-15th century, Orkney and Shetland were also transferred to Scottish rule.

The Northern Isles are the closest parts of Scotland to Norway, and these islands experienced the first and most long-lasting Norse influence of any part of Scotland (Fig. 1). Shetland is some 300 km (190 mi) due west of Norway and could be reached in 24 hours in a Viking longship. Orkney

is 80 km (50 mi) further to the southwest. Some 16 km (10 mi) due south of Orkney is the Scottish mainland. The two most northerly provinces of mainland Scotland, Caithness and Sutherland, fell under Norse control at an early date. South of there, the entire western seaboard of mainland Scotland, from Wester Ross to Kintyre, was also subject to significant Scandinavian influence (Fig. 2).

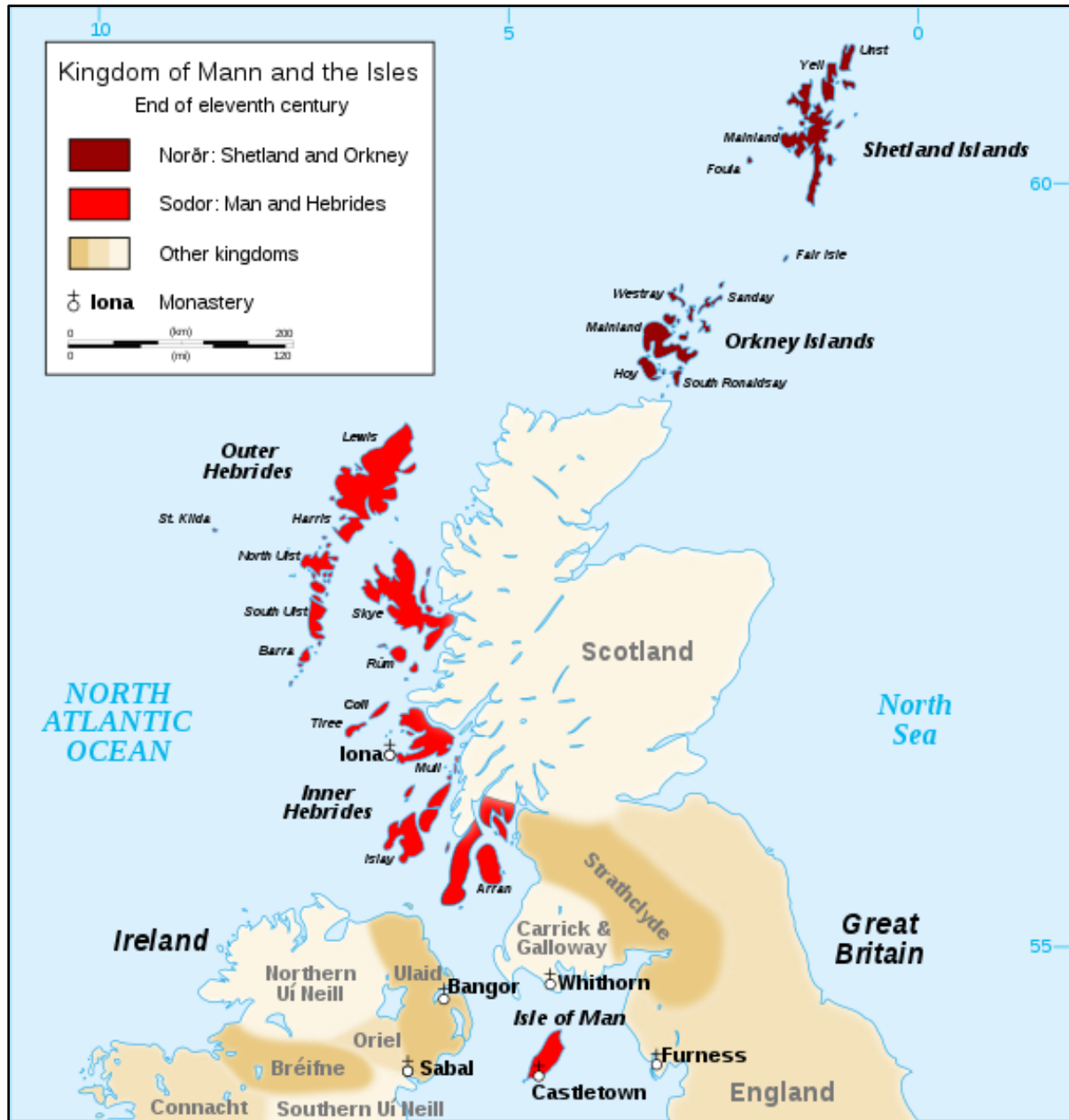


Figure 2. The Kingdom of Mann and the Isles, near the end of the 11th century (Sémhur).

The Southern Isles include: the Outer Hebrides; the Inner Hebrides (including Skye, Islay, Jura, Mull and Iona); the islands of the Firth of Clyde, the largest of which are Bute and Arran; and the Isle of Man (in the Irish Sea, equidistant from modern England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales). The total distance from the southern tip of the Isle of Man to the Butt of Lewis, the northern

extremity of the Outer Hebrides, is approximately 515 km (320 mi). This entire region became dominated by Norse culture for much of the period under consideration. It is likely that the Norse language became as dominant throughout the Inner Hebrides as it did on Lewis during the 10th and 11th centuries. There was also significant direct Norse influence exerted in Galloway in southwest Scotland, and for much of the period, up until the 1266 Treaty of Perth, Norwegian and Danish foreign policy and the activities of independent or semi-independent Norse rulers of the above parts of Scandinavian-dominated Scotland had a powerful influence on the affairs of Scotland as a whole.

Contemporary documentation of the Viking period of Scottish history is weak. The presence of the monastery on Iona led to this part of Scotland being relatively well recorded from the mid-6th to the mid-9th century. But from 849 on, when Columba's relics were removed in the face of Viking incursions, written evidence from local sources all but vanishes for three hundred years. The sources for information about the Hebrides and much of northern Scotland from the 8th to the 11th century are thus almost exclusively Irish, English or Norse. The main Norse text is the *Orkneyinga Saga*, which was written in the early 13th century by an unknown Icelander. The English and Irish sources are more contemporary, but may have a southern bias.

The archaeological record for this period is relatively scant. Placenames provide significant information about the Scandinavian presence, and Norse runes provide further evidence. Gaelic oral tradition that relates to this period is questionable. Language and personal names provide some difficulties. Pictish, Middle Irish and Old Norse would certainly have been spoken, and a degree of linguistic balkanization took place. Individuals often appear in sources under a variety of different names.

It is likely that Gaelic and Pictish sailors were aware of Scandinavia before the commencement of the Viking Age, but when and how the Vikings conquered and occupied the Isles is unknown, perhaps unknowable. There are four competing theories:

1. There was a period of Norse expansion into the Northern Isles and the creation of an aristocratic dynasty that lasted well into the Medieval period, which exerted considerable influence in western Scotland and Mann into the 11th century.
2. The aboriginal populations of the Northern and Western Isles were eradicated and replaced wholesale with settlers of Scandinavian stock.
3. A long tradition of mobility amongst the various populations of the North Atlantic seaboard and the expansion of Christian missions resulted in ethnic tensions that led to or exacerbated Viking expansion.
4. A substantial part of Scotland—the Northern and Western Isles and large areas of the coastal mainland—were conquered by the Vikings in the first quarter of the 9th century and a Viking kingdom was set up there earlier than the middle of the century.

From 793 onwards, repeated raids by Vikings on the British Isles are recorded. All the islands of Britain were devastated in 794, with Iona being sacked in 802 and 806. Various Viking leaders, probably based in Scotland, appear in the Irish annals. The king of Fortriu and the king of Dál Riata were among the dead in a major defeat to the Vikings in 839. The heir of a king of Viking Scotland brought an army to Ireland in 848. The Frankish *Annales Bertiniani* may record the conquest of the Inner Hebrides by Vikings in 847. The Fragmentary *Annals of Ireland* also

suggest an early date for an organized kingdom of Viking Scotland by 874. The Isle of Man may also have been taken by the Norse in 877, and was certainly held by them by 900.

The Northern Isles were Pictish in culture and speech prior to the Norse incursions, and although Orkney was destroyed by King Bridei in 682, it is not likely that Pictish kings exerted ongoing control. According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, about 872 Harald Fairhair became King of a united Norway, and many of his opponents fled to the islands of Scotland. Harald pursued his enemies and incorporated the Northern Isles into his kingdom in 875 and then, perhaps a little over a decade later, the Hebrides as well. The following year the local Viking chieftains of the Hebrides rebelled. Harald sent Ketill Flatnose to subdue them. Ketill achieved this quickly, but then declared himself an independent King of the Isles, a title he retained for the rest of his life.

Norse tradition states that Rognvald Eysteinnsson received Orkney and Shetland from Harald as an earldom in reparation for the death of his son in battle in Scotland, and then passed the earldom on to his brother Sigurd the Mighty. Sigurd's line barely survived him, and Rognvald's son by a slave founded a dynasty that controlled the Northern Isles for centuries after his death. Orkney and Shetland were being rapidly absorbed into Norse culture by 954. Placenames in Orkney with a Celtic derivation are few in number. Norn, a local version of Old Norse, was widely spoken by the inhabitants into historic times. Norn was also spoken in Shetland, and evidence for Pictish elements in placenames is virtually non-existent. Jarlshof in Shetland contains the most extensive remains of a Viking site visible anywhere in Britain; it is believed the Norse inhabited the site continuously from the 9th to the 14th centuries. Brough of Birsay in Orkney is another important archaeological site, which, like Jarlshof, has a continuity of settlement spanning the Pictish and Norse periods.

Sigurd Eysteinnsson and Thorstein the Red moved on northern Scotland, conquering large areas variously described in the sagas as constituting all of Caithness and Sutherland, and possibly including territory in Ross and even Moray during the last decade of the 9th century. The *Orkneyinga Saga* relates how the former defeated the Pict *Máel Brigte Tusk*, but died from an unusual post-battle injury. Thorfinn Sigurdsson expanded his father's realm south beyond Sutherland, and by the 11th century the Norwegian crown had come to accept that Caithness was held by the Earls of Orkney as a fiefdom from the Kings of Scotland, although its Norse character was retained throughout the 13th century. After 1375, the Pentland Firth separating Orkney from Caithness became the border between Scotland and Norway. No Norse placenames have been found on the northern Scottish mainland south of Beaully (west of Inverness), and so far, no archaeological evidence of Norse activity has been found in the northwest mainland.

Like the Northern Isles, the Outer Hebrides and the northern Inner Hebrides were predominantly Pictish in the early 9th century. By contrast, the southern Inner Hebrides formed part of the Gaelic kingdom of Dál Riata. The obliteration of pre-Norse names in the Outer Hebrides and in Coll, Tiree and Islay in the Inner Hebrides is almost total. Gaelic continued to exist as a spoken language in the southern Hebrides throughout the settlement period, but placename evidence suggests it had a lowly status, and Norse may have survived as a spoken language until the 16th century in the Outer Hebrides. There is no evidence of any direct Norwegian rule in the area other than a few brief occupations, although the written record is weak and no contemporary records of the Norse period from the Outer Hebrides exist.

Colonsay and Oronsay (Inner Hebrides) have produced important pagan Norse burial grounds. An 11th-century cross slab decorated with Irish and Viking art on Islay, the southernmost island of the Inner Hebrides, was found in 1838. In the Firth of Clyde, Norse burials have been found on Arran, although not Bute, and placename evidence suggests a settlement pattern that was much less well-developed than in the Hebrides. On the northern mainland coast there is cluster of Norse placenames around Largs, 33 miles (53km) west of Glasgow. The Isle of Man (which was absorbed into Scotland from 1266 until the 14th century) was dominated by the Norse-Gaels from an early date, and from 1079 onwards by the Crovan dynasty. The modern-day Church of England Diocese of Sodor and Man retains the centuries-old Norwegian name.

South of Sutherland there is considerable placename evidence of Norse settlement along the entire western coast, although unlike on the islands, the settlement in the south seems to have been less prolonged and undertaken in tandem with pre-existing settlement rather than replacing it entirely. In Wester Ross, most of the Gaelic names that exist on the coastline today are of likely Medieval rather than pre-Norse origin. As in Orkney and Shetland, Pictish seems to have been entirely replaced wherever the Norse encountered it.

In the 9th century the first references to the “foreign Gaels” appear. This term was variously used in succeeding centuries to refer to individuals of mixed Scandinavian-Celtic descent and/or culture who became dominant in west and southwest Scotland, parts of northern England and the isles. This alliance between the two cultures, which also took place in Ireland, may have been instrumental in saving the Gaels of Dál Riata from the fate of the Picts in the north and west. Evidence for Norse settlement in mainland Argyll is limited.

In southwest Scotland, the region gets the modern name of Galloway from the mixture of Viking and Gaelic Irish settlement. Magnus Barelegs is said to have “subdued the people of Galloway” in the 11th century, and Whithorn seems to have been a center of Hiberno-Norse artisans who traded around the Irish Sea by the end of the first millennium. However, the placename, written and archaeological evidence of extensive Norse (as opposed to Norse-Gael) settlement in the area is not convincing.

The system of land measure which prevailed in the Western Isles, and then took root in Argyll was neither Pictish nor Irish, but Norse. The unit was the *ounceland*, the extent of land which paid the rent of an ounce of silver. The *ounceland* system seems to have become widespread down the west coast, including much of Argyll, and this is just as true of most of the southwest, apart from land adjacent to the inner Solway Firth. In Dumfries and Galloway, the placename evidence is complex and of mixed Gaelic, Norse and Danish influence, the last most likely stemming from contact with the extensive Danish holdings in northern England. One feature of the area is the number of names with a “kirk” prefix followed by a saint’s name, such as Kirkoswald. Interpretation of this is not certain, but it is also indicative of a mixed Gaelic/Norse population.

There is no evidence of permanent Viking settlement on the east coast south of the Moray Firth, or of Norse burials, although raids and even invasions certainly occurred. Placename evidence of Scandinavian settlement is very limited on the east coast, and in the southeast, Anglian was the predominant influence during this period of history.

The first phase of Norse expansion was that of war bands seeking plunder and the creation of new settlements. The second phase involved the integration of these settlers into organized political structures, of which the most prominent in the early part were the Earls of Orkney in the north and the *Ui Ímair* in the south. The “Dynasty of Ivar” was a royal Norse-Gael dynasty that ruled much of the Irish Sea region, the Kingdom of Dublin, the western coast of Scotland, including the Hebrides, and some part of Northern England, from the mid-9th century.

Until the mid- to late-11th century, the Earls of Orkney and Kings of the Western Isles were probably independent rulers. The imposition of direct Norwegian rule at the end of this century brought this to a close in the north and unusually, from c. 1100 onwards, the Norse jarls of the Northern Isles owed allegiance both to Norway for Orkney, and to the Scottish crown through their holdings as Earls of Caithness. In 1231 the line of Norse earls, unbroken since Rognvald Eysteinnsson, ended with Jon Haraldsson’s murder in Thurso. The Earldom of Caithness was granted to Magnus, second son of the Earl of Angus, whom Haakon IV of Norway confirmed as Earl of Orkney in 1236. In 1379 the earldom passed to the Sinclair family, who were also barons of Roslin near Edinburgh, although Orkney and Shetland remained part of Norway for a century more.

The situation in the south was more complex. Different kings may have ruled over very different areas, and few of them can be seen as exerting any kind of close control over this far-flung sea kingdom. The *Ui Ímair* were certainly a powerful force from the late 9th to the early 11th century. Norse sources also list various rulers over the Hebrides who were vassals of the Kings of Norway or Denmark. Two records in the *Annals of Innisfallen* suggest that the Western Isles were not organized into a kingdom or earldom at this time, but rather that they were ruled by assemblies of freeholders who regularly elected lawmen to preside over their public affairs.

Godred Crovan became the ruler of Dublin and Mann from 1079, and from the early years of the 12th century, the Crovan dynasty asserted themselves and ruled as Kings of Mann and the Isles for the next half century. The kingdom was then sundered due to the actions of Somerled, whose sons inherited the southern Hebrides, whilst the Manx rulers held on to the north isles for another century. The Hebrides and islands of the Clyde were essentially under the control of rulers of Scandinavian origin from at least the late tenth century until the emergence of the kingdom of Scotland and its 13th century expansion into the west. The early Viking threats may have speeded a long-term process of gaelicisation of the Pictish kingdoms. This culminated in the rise of Cinaed mac Ailpín in the 840s, who brought to power the House of Alpin, leaders of a combined Gaelic-Pictish kingdom for almost two centuries.

In 870, Dumbarton was besieged by two kings of the Northmen, who ravaged the whole of Pictland, took their hostages, and later occupied this territory for a protracted period. Dumbarton was the capital of the Kingdom of Strathclyde, and this was clearly a major assault that may have brought the whole of mainland Scotland under temporary *Ui Ímair* control. Three years earlier, Vikings had seized Northumbria, forming the Kingdom of York, and subsequently conquered much of England, except for a reduced Kingdom of Wessex, leaving the new combined Pictish and Gaelic kingdom almost encircled.

In 962, the King of Scots was killed fighting the Norse near Cullen, but the House of Alpin held firm, and the threat posed by the Scandinavian presence to the emergent Kingdom of Scotland lessened. In 1098, Edgar of Scotland signed a treaty that settled much of the boundary between the Scots and Norwegian claims in the islands. Edgar formally acknowledged the existing situation by giving up his claims to the Hebrides and Kintyre (in the southwest of Argyll and Bute). Following Haakon Haakonarson's ill-fated invasion, the Hebrides and Mann and all rights that the Norwegian crown had were yielded to the Kingdom of Scotland as a result of the 1266 Treaty of Perth. In 1468 Orkney was pledged by Christian I, in his capacity as king of Norway, as security against the payment of the dowry of his daughter Margaret, betrothed to James III of Scotland. As the money was never paid, the connection with the crown of Scotland has become perpetual.

Although there is evidence of varying burial rites practiced by Norse settlers in Scotland, there is little that enables a confirmation that the Norse gods were venerated prior to the reintroduction of Christianity. However, it is likely that pagan practices existed in early Scandinavian Scotland. According to the sagas, the Northern Isles were Christianized in 995. The King said "I order you and all your subjects to be baptized. If you refuse, I'll have you killed on the spot and I swear I will ravage every island with fire and steel." All the islands became Christian sometime prior to 1035.

An influx of Scottish entrepreneurs helped to create a diverse and independent community that included farmers, fishermen and merchants, who proved themselves increasingly able to defend their rights against their feudal overlords, be they Norwegian or Scots. This independence of mind may have been fostered by the influence of Norwegian government, which was essentially communal and federal, by contrast with Scotland. It was not until the mid-16th century that the Norse institutions were replaced by Scottish systems, following large-scale immigration from the south, and the islanders were probably bi-lingual until the 17th century.

The conversion of Scandinavian Scotland, and the resultant end to slavery and integration of Viking society into mainstream European culture took place at an early date, although the popular image of marauding berserkers and of the Norse as enemies of social progress remains, despite considerable evidence that in their latter phase, the Norse-speaking populations were rather enlightened practitioners of maritime commercial principles. Women enjoyed a relatively high status during the Viking Age, possibly due to the high degree of mobility in society. The Norse legacy of art and architecture is limited.

By comparison to the Roman occupations of Scotland, the Norse kingdoms were much longer lived, more recent, and had a significantly more dramatic influence on spoken language and, by extension, culture and lifestyles generally. They were however confined to areas that are relatively remote from the main centers of modern population. Furthermore, regardless of the actual impact of Scandinavian culture, the hereditary leaders of the Scots nation are generally descended from Pictish and Gaelic stock. The Vikings are thus often seen in a negative light and as a foreign invasion rather than as a key part of a multi-cultural polity.

NOTES

To elucidate this poorly understood period of Scottish history, I started with the lengthy and well-referenced [Wikipedia entry for Scandinavian Scotland](#), dissecting it paragraph by paragraph. I eliminated all the reference numbers, searched the web for the meaning of unfamiliar terms, eliminated doubtful items and complicated names that were not central and, where possible, substituted simpler terms with the same meaning. My editing choices have been informed by my research in publishing 67 other articles on the CMAW website. There may be errors in the Wikipedia entry, and I may have inadvertently introduced errors through my adaptation. However, this should provide a good introduction to the subject; readers interested in more detail could start with the full Wikipedia entry.

Thanks to my friend Steve Black who lives on the Isle of Man for reading the draft. He relayed that the descendants of the settled Norsemen were mainly in the north of the island on the good agricultural land. This work is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without written permission from Ken McNaughton Living Trust, 3778 College Avenue, Ellicott City, MD 21043; phone/fax: 410-418-9340; kjmcn@comcast.net (15 May 2021).