

The Lordship of the Isles

Identity Through Materiality

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The Lordship of the Isles emerged in an archipelago that had been part of the Scandinavian World, and the lords were successors to a Scandinavian dynasty of kings based in the Isle of Man. Their direct twelfth-century ancestor, Ranald mac Somhairle, appears as a king in a European mould, possibly the builder of a large European style castle at Finlaggan in Islay and the founder of religious houses at Saddell in Kintyre and in Iona.¹ His thirteenth-century descendants and successors continued to play an active part in the politics of the British Isles. The MacDonald kindred, descended from his son Donald, aligned themselves with the cause of Robert Bruce in the Wars of Independence.

Yet the Lordship of the Isles which emerged in the fourteenth century under MacDonald leadership played down its Scandinavian heritage and was consciously a world apart from Lowland Scotland. Despite the fact that Donald, the son of John 1st Lord of the Isles by the king's daughter, was chosen to lead the clan after the death of his father in 1387 rather than his elder and apparently able half-brother Ranald,² there are no signs of any real intention to depart from a policy of creating a Gaelic lordship. By adopting their surname as a title – '*McDhomhnaill*' – at least from 1408, the lords were aligning themselves with, if not anticipating the practice of Irish kings. Inauguration rights for new lords and the maintenance of a Council (*recte* Parliament) of the Isles are other signs that the MacDonald kindred would not be bound by Stewart Scotland.³

There were no burghs, the bastions of European society, culture and trade, within the Lordship, surely as a result of deliberate decisions, and no evidence for any significant influx of fresh blood, especially in the form of specialists, from outwith native Ireland and the *Gàidhealtachd*. The lordship centres at Finlaggan in Islay, Aros in Mull and Ardtornish in Morvern are not castles such as gave prestige to other European magnates. Finlaggan was a residential, ceremonial and administrative complex with a large feasting hall, chapel and,

1 D.H. Caldwell, *Islay: the Land of the Lordship* (Edinburgh, 2008), 35–39.

2 Caldwell, *Islay*, 55.

3 Caldwell, *Islay*, 60–61.

probably, workshops. It had no fortifications. Aros and Ardtornish were essentially large feasting halls.⁴

In this paper we wish to review the material culture of the Lordship to ascertain whether it reflects a distinctive Gaelic culture or can tell us much more about the Lordship. While the period of our study covers the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries from beginning to end, it should be understood that there is very little precision in the dating of artefacts and a paucity of reliable archaeological evidence for datable contexts. We also rely heavily on representations on West Highland sculpture, the distribution of which does not coincide exactly with the bounds of the Lordship. It follows that there is a certain amount of fuzziness or arbitrariness about what is considered as fit material for discussion.

Apart from stray finds from the region, there is a handful of heirlooms and relics, the assemblages from excavations, principally at Finlaggan and Castle Sween, and the corpus of West Highland sculpture. Castle Sween seems only to have become a possession of the Lords of the Isles in 1376, was briefly garrisoned for the Crown by Lowland nobles in 1430 and was granted to the Campbells in 1481.⁵ Found well away from the Lordship, but possibly of relevance are at least some of the finds from Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness since they may belong to the periods from the end of the fourteenth century to the late fifteenth century when the castle was under the control of Clan Donald.⁶

Imports or locally made products – coinage, copper alloy artefacts, ceramics and souvenirs.

A useful starting point would be to establish what reliance there was in the Lordship on imports rather than on locally made goods. It cannot be doubted that there were merchants and trade routes that could facilitate the movement

4 For Finlaggan see D.H. Caldwell, *Islay, Jura and Colonsay: a Historical Guide* (Edinburgh, 2011), 167–179. A pre-publication version, currently seven fascicles, of the final report on the Finlaggan excavations – D.H. Caldwell (ed.), *Finlaggan, Islay – the Centre of the Lordship of the Isles: Excavations and Fieldwork 1989–98*, – can be accessed in the National Museums Scotland Research Repository at www.nms.ac.uk. For Aros and Ardtornish see D.H. Caldwell and N.A. Ruckley, 'Domestic Architecture in the Lordship of the Isles', in R.D. Oram and G. Stell (eds), *Lordship and Architecture in Medieval and Renaissance Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2005), 117–119; and D.H. Caldwell, 'Continuity and Change in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Scotland: an Archaeological View', *Review of Scottish Culture* 18 (2006): 24, 27 n.48.

5 RCAHMS, *Argyll* 7, 259.

6 Caldwell, *Islay*, 58, 65.