

## The Stranger-Gaels

### A look at Norse influence in the northern Highlands and Islands of Scotland.

It is important to note that, from about the mid-9th century until 1266, much of the northern mainland and outer isles of Celtic Scotland had fallen to Norse control. Vikings from Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden and Denmark) had appeared first as raiders and pirates in search of plunder, but later came as settlers.

Norsemen largely dominated what are now Caithness, Sutherland and a great portion of what would become Ross (later Ross-shire). Along with the Orkney and Shetland Isles, these lands formed part of the earldom of Orkney, initially ruled by powerful Norwegian jarls (earls) on behalf of the kings of Norway.

From the time of Kenneth MacAlpin (844-858) successive Scottish kings struggled continuously to annex these northern lands to Scotland. For a while, at least until annexation became a reality, there existed a kind of diplomatic 'understanding' between the kings of Scots and the Orkney jarls. Indeed, a daughter of King Malcolm II (1005-1034) married Sigurd II., Jarl of Orkney.

Similarly, much of the western seaboard was under Norwegian rule. During the 12th century, part of the territory was recognised as the great district *Ergadia*, which stretched from Lochbroom in the north to the Firth of Clyde in the south, embracing Wester Ross, parts of Inverness-shire and modern Argyllshire.

*Ergadia* seems to have been divided into three recognised sections: the southern part was named *Ergadia quae ad Scotium pertinet*; the middle section was *Ergadia quae ad Moravium pertinet*; and the northern portion was styled *Ergadia Borealis quae est comitis de Ros*. Collectively, the three sections were sometimes recorded in Gaelic as *Oirirghaidheal* (Gaelic Fringe), showing it to be borderland between two regions (i.e. Scots and Norse).

Seawards lay the Western Isles, known to the Gaels as *Innis Gall* (Island of Strangers), and to the Norsemen who ruled over them they were the *Sudryer* or *Sudreys* (Southern Isles, in relation to Norway, that is).

By the mid-12th century, Godfrey Crovan, Norse King of Man ruled all the islands from the Butt of Lewis to the Isle of Man. Similarly, King Harald Haarfager (Fairhaired) had imposed regal authority over all the territory, for Norway.

It seems apparent that, during the Norse occupation of so much of ancient Gaeldom they never completely dominated the old Celtic

culture. In spite of considerable intermarriage between the two races, the Gaels appear to have maintained their identity, and it was largely by their own influence that they eventually overcame their conquerors.

In 1156, a warrior named Somerled, a native of mixed Norse-Celtic blood (such as were often styled *Gall-Gaels* (Stranger-Gaels) rose to challenge the authority of the Scandinavian overlords by defeating Godfrey Crovan in battle. As a result, Somerled received Islay, Mull and possibly the Uist islands. His three sons became the progenitors of the MacDougalls, MacDonalds and MacRuairis ~ the three clans that were destined to dominate much of Gaeldom.

Thus we can visualise that, what is now Ross-shire, for instance, was in those early times largely a kind of frontier land, between the northern extent and influence of the Scottish crown, and the Norwegian *Sudreland* (Southland, from which Sutherland takes its name).

Other property which would be affected by Norse intrusion were the extensive Churchlands, including those of the Celtic monastery of Applecross (old name *Appercrossan*) in Wester Ross, founded by Saint Maelrubha, circa 673.

In 1263, King Haakon Haaksson of Norway was defeated at Largs (Ayrshire). During his ill fated campaign many Islesmen, including Angus MacDonald of Islay, and Dugald and Alan MacRuairi supported him. However, it is here noticeable that Ewan MacDougall withheld his support, having been earlier warned by the King of Scots about the hazards of serving two masters ~ a dilemma confronting all clan chiefs who held their mainland territory by the grace of the King of Scots and their island estates from the Norse king.

In any event, three years after Largs, King Magnus of Norway finally surrendered the Hebrides to the Scottish crown: although it was several years later before the Orkney and Shetland Isles came under Scots rule.

In the 9th century the first references to the *Gall-Gael* 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 south-west 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 Dalriada (Argyllshire) from the fate of the Picts in the Orkney and Shetland isles, whose language and culture appears to have been completely obliterated by Norse settlement and culture. So, are we really "Aa Jock Tamson's bairns!" as the well-worn boast of the Scots would have us believe?

**Calum Curamach**