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The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

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Illustration 15.1
Finlaggan with the Paps of Jura in the background. Note the Cnoc Seannda mound at the left-hand edge

Chapter 15

FINLAGGAN: THE CENTRE OF THE ISLES?

Introduction

Underlying the writer's thinking at the start of this project was the expectation that Finlaggan would be shown to be an important centre, especially in the medieval period. The task in this chapter is to assess whether Finlaggan deserves to be considered the centre of the Isles. That term, 'Centre of the Isles', is a recent construct, the coining of which is largely the responsibility of the author. It had seemed an obvious step to so call the place where lords of the Isles were inaugurated and they held their council meetings.

Viewed from a Hebridean perspective, Finlaggan would have appeared an attractive area for settlement and exploitation from Mesolithic until recent times. The surrounding moors provided opportunities for hunting. The soils that had developed on the limestone around much of the loch were suitable for growing arable crops, and could be worked with spades and simple, non-mechanised ploughs. The raising of cattle was probably a crucial part of the farming economy from Neolithic times onwards, and summer use of the rough pastures in the hills would have been valued. Finlaggan, however, never appears to have developed into a significant centre of permanent population and from the mid-18th century was by-passed by the main routes connecting different parts of Islay (Caldwell 2017: 194). Nor was Finlaggan ideally placed in terms of access by sea to a wider world.

Arguments in favour of Finlaggan as a major centre of importance cannot depend on an assessment of its land quality, its location as a route centre or other economic factors. None of these factors would identify it as a significantly more favoured place than many others in the Isles. If it is accepted that Finlaggan deserves the title Centre of the Isles, we may have to accept that that resulted from processes we will never be able fully to understand, perhaps including a mix of serendipity, an association with events and people, and a continuing respect for tradition.

As outlined in Chapter 2, the historical record for Finlaggan is meagre and there are no contemporary medieval documents which specifically identify it as a place of any importance. Later records and traditions have been drawn upon to add more. In 1549 Donald Monro described 'Eilean Finlaggan' as having been a residence of the lords of the Isles and Eilean na Comhairle as the place where they had a council house built for their council meetings. Monro specifically states that the 14 councillors gave forth decisions based on the laws made by King Ranald, son of Somerled, and they administered justice, even when the lord of the Isles was hunting or at other games (Munro 1961: 56–57).

In the later 17th century the Sleat historian described inauguration ceremonies for lords of the Isles, apparently at Finlaggan, including use of a stone cut with a footprint. The Isle of Finlaggan was also where MacDonald had his council meetings. There was a stone table there and a stone on which MacDonald sat (MacPhail 1914: 24). Later sources repeated or embellished the information provided by Monro and the Sleat history, sometimes adding new material. In the 1690s Martin Martin viewed the remains of the houses of the bodyguard of the great MacDonald, King of the Isles, on the loch-side (Martin 1703: 240–41). In 1772 Thomas Pennant was informed that the wives and children of the lords of the Isles were buried on Eilean Mór. He saw on the loch-side the remains of a pier with a stone cut with AII for Angus Òg (Pennant 1774: 259).

These sources add up to a very incomplete view of Finlaggan in earlier times, but they do suggest certain strands that might be teased out further. Primarily they are the making of kings or lords, and the administration of justice by a council for the whole kingdom or lordship. Possibly implied by Donald Monro are the making of laws by that council and the assembling of a wide range of people who perhaps engaged in the games that attracted the attention of the lords. Also to be considered in the case of Finlaggan is the extent to which ceremonial, judicial and other proceedings may have local Irish or Scottish roots, and/or may represent ideas imported by Scandinavian settlers. The possibility also has to be considered that much of the supposed tradition of councils and inaugurations was invented in later medieval times to enhance the prestige of the lords of the Isles.

The location of the council meetings seems clear, on the appropriately named Eilean na Comhairle (the council island). The actual place for holding inauguration ceremonies is not specified. The Sleat history describes the presence of clergy, including the bishops of the Isles and of Argyll, as well as the chieftains of all the principal families. This would seem to signal a larger concourse of attendees than the 14 or 16 councillors, perhaps too many to participate in an outdoor ceremony on Eilean na Comhairle. The Sleat history also mentions that Mass was said after the ceremony, but that does not necessarily place either the ceremony or Mass at the chapel on Eilean Mór.

An early royal inauguration place?

The author had excavations undertaken on the mound at Cnoc Seannda because he believed it might be the place where inauguration ceremonies took place. As will be explained further below, the location and appearance of the mound are similar to other attested and suspected assembly and inauguration places in north Europe. Neither the name Cnoc Seannda nor an association between a mound and ceremonies at Finlaggan is mentioned in early sources or traditions. The name Cnoc Seannda is first recorded on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1878. The dictionary meaning of *seannda* is 'old, antique, old-fashioned, oldish' (Dwelly 1994: 800), perhaps only an appropriate name if it were perceived that the mound was not totally natural. A clue may be provided by the English language name – 'Tomb' – of a settlement, clearly Cnoc Seannda, listed by the census enumerators in 1861. It would seem that there was a belief that the mound was a tomb, which was right, we now know, in the sense it was crowned by a Bronze Age burial cairn (Illus 7.11).

The archaeological evidence for prehistoric settlement at Finlaggan is not surprising. What potentially marked it out as different are the indications that it was a place where, not necessarily for very long in its long prehistory, ritual activities took place. If this evidence only consisted of the Cnoc Seannda kerb cairn and nearby standing stones (Illus 3.1, 5.33) it could readily be dismissed as of limited significance compared with other concentrations of such monuments elsewhere in Argyll, but the knowledge we now have of an enigmatic chamber dug into the top of the mound alongside the kerb cairn does suggest other lines of enquiry and interpretation, even though no stratigraphical link was detected between cairn and chamber. While the former can reasonably be placed in the Late Bronze Age, there is less certainty about when the chamber was built and how long it remained in use.

The mound itself is a prominent local landmark, a regular hemispherical mount with a base diameter of about 50m and a height of over 6m above the adjacent ground (Illus 15.1, 5.29). Mounds are a typical feature of royal inauguration places elsewhere, for example the Moot Hill at Scone, Scotland, and Tynwald Hill in the Isle of Man. Irish examples have been well documented in a study by Elizabeth FitzPatrick (2004: 41–97, 227–34). She identified 30 which are well attested, of which 9 were defined by the presence of mounds. She listed a further 38 sites which could reasonably be suspected to have been

Illustration 15.2
Tynwald Hill, Isle of Man

inauguration sites, of which 26 had mounds. These mounds might be prehistoric barrows or cairns, or purpose-built monuments. There is a lack of modern archaeological examination of most of them, but FitzPatrick (2004: 43; see also Warner 2004) believed that the staging of royal ceremonial on earthen mounds in Ireland could be traced back to late prehistoric times. Prehistoric origins for other supposed inauguration ceremonies in Britain is suspected, but there is a lack of convincing early documentation.

Of particular relevance for Finlaggan is the ceremonial site at Tynwald in the Isle of Man, since, as will be considered further below, it was the assembly place in earlier medieval times for delegates from the Western Isles, including Islay, until it was replaced by Finlaggan. The possible pre-Viking age ceremonial use of Tynwald has been minutely scrutinised. Its mound, given a stepped profile at an unknown date (Illus 15.2), is supposed to have been a prehistoric burial mound, and non-specific parallels have been sought for the early historic period with the Irish royal centres at Tara in Co Meath and Emain Macha in Co Armagh, and others in the north of England (Broderick 2003: 80–83; Darvill 2004). While these linkages to prehistoric times and across the sea to Ireland are plausible, they are hypothetical. The name Tynwald obviously identifies it as a *thing* (assembly) site and could not have been coined earlier than the 9th century. The earliest reference to Tynwald as a place of assembly is in the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* for 1238 (Broderick 1996: fol 45r).

The Cnoc Seannda mound is of natural rock rather than earth, a geological fact that may either not have been realised or have been of any consequence in a supposed selection process for a ceremonial site. Like Irish royal inauguration places it has splendid views in all directions, especially the length of Loch Finlaggan and across to the Paps of Jura, from here rising to heights in excess of 700m as two massive breasts (Illus 15.1). The Bronze Age burial cairn on the summit of Cnoc Seannda would have given a 'mound on mound' profile similar to those of some Irish sites with smaller mounds or cairns on their summits, like Coggins Hill in Co Sligo, Ráith Cruachan in Co Roscommon and Sgiath Gabhra at Cornashee in Co Fermanagh (FitzPatrick 2004: 81–85).

Martin Martin, in his *Description of the Western Islands*, showed a considerable amount of interest in cairns and superstitions and traditions relating to them. He noted that:

> The formalities observed at the entrance of . . . chieftains upon the government of their clans were as follow:
>
> A heap of stones was erected in form of a pyramid, on top of which the young chieftain was placed, his friends and followers standing in a circle round about him, his elevation signifying his authority over them, and their standing below their subjection to him. One of his principal friends delivered into his hands the sword worn by his father, and there was a white rod delivered to him likewise at the same time.
>
> Immediately after, the chief Druid (or orator) stood close to the pyramid, and pronounced a rhetorical panegyric, setting forth the ancient pedigree, valour, and liberality of the family as incentives to the young chieftain, and fit for his imitation. (Martin 1703: 102)

Martin could well be recording a tradition for inaugurating chiefs that took place in living memory in some kindreds in the Isles, and a cairn in a prominent position like the one at Cnoc Seannda might have seemed an ideal location. There is, however, no basis to extrapolate from that observation that cairns on top of mounds were generally used in such a way, either in post-medieval times or much earlier.

In any case, there is a different tradition concerning inauguration rituals at Finlaggan for lords of the Isles, first recorded in the Sleat history in the 17th century (MacPhail 1914: 24). It involved the new lord placing a foot in a footprint carved in a rock. If corroboration could be discovered for the existence of that footprint, it might strengthen the case for tracing the origin of king-making ceremonies at Finlaggan to late prehistoric or early historic times. The basis for that would be a comparison with the footprints carved in a rock surface in the fort at Dunadd in mainland Argyll. Dunadd is recognised to be an early Dalriadic capital, and the two separate footprints are adjacent to a Pictish carving of a bull and an ogham inscription, the latter two of which can be considered to date to the late 7th or 8th century. There is a not unreasonable view that at least one of the Dunadd footprints is of similar date to these other carvings and, further, that its presence relates to the inauguration of Dalriadic overkings (Lane & Campbell 2000: 247–49, 251).

Footprint stones in Ireland and Scotland have been discussed and inventoried by Elizabeth FitzPatrick (2004: 108–29, 235–41) and Hunter & Hunter (2017). There are post-medieval and more recent accounts and traditions for the use of some of them in inauguration ceremonies. Several of them are manifestly of medieval or more recent date. There is no unimpeachable evidence that any are earlier in date. We will consider further below an alleged footprint stone (R4) at Finlaggan which clearly cannot be any earlier than the 14th century.

Many prominent mounds, whether or not places for royal inauguration ceremonies, might also be places for tribal, regional or national assemblies and courts. The holding of such assemblies is reasonably well documented in Britain and Ireland in medieval times, but the question to be considered here is whether there might be a case for identifying Cnoc Seannda as such an assembly place in prehistoric or early historic times. If there is, it largely dependents on a comparison of certain aspects of the geology of the area around Cnoc Seannda with Irish places associated with the legendary warrior and hunter Finn mac Cumaill (FitzPatrick 2015). Some of these are in geological contact zones similar to what can be seen at Finlaggan with the Bonahaven fault, trending north-east/south-west from Eilean Mór, separating Port Askaig tillite and quartzite to the west of Loch Finlaggan from the limestone of Eilean Mór itself and an area around the north of the loch. The mound of Cnoc Seannda is adjacent to this fault. The tillite represents the boulder clay or till of an Ice Age of late Precambrian times, metamorphosed to produce a rock exhibiting pebbles set in a coarse quartzitic matrix. The limestone, part of the Dalradian sequence, is metamorphosed, blue-grey in colour with prominent thin veins of calcite and small cubes of iron pyrites. It also contains veins of lead mineralisation (galena). The different character of the tillite and limestone should have been readily apparent in early times. The effect on vegetation is striking, with green pasture, and in the past arable, overlying the

Illustration 15.3
Finlaggan, aerial view. The presence of the Bonahaven fault is reflected in the vegetation cover, with green pasture to the right of the fault, and rough pasture and conifer plantations to the left (photo: Mick Ashton)

limestone, while the tillite is covered with rough pasture and now a conifer plantation (Illus 15.3). Places in Ireland associated with Finn mac Cumaill were often not just hunting places, but they and other hunting grounds were also tribal assembly places (*óenaige*) (FitzPatrick 2012: 116–17).

In a study of Scottish medieval open-air judicial assemblies, O'Grady (2008: 333–40) noted that several of them were located at prehistoric monuments, including cairns, barrows and settlement sites. He supposed that reuse of prehistoric monuments might in some cases indicate the appropriation of existing court sites specifically for such purposes in later medieval times, but it has so far proved difficult to provide clear evidence of this. In Ireland there was also a tradition of law courts (*airechta*) being held in the open air on mounds, a practice that continued in some cases into post-medieval times (Simms 2020: 464). If it were not for the specific traditions that the Council of the Isles met on the 'council island' (Eilean na Comhairle), the Cnoc Seannda mound would seem an obvious candidate for the location of early law courts. Perhaps it was in early times.

We provide our considerations of the merits of Cnoc Seannda as an early royal inauguration site, the location for tribal assemblies originating in prehistoric times and even a law court despite later traditions that only specifically mention Eilean na Comhairle and Eilean Mór, and which may only relate to later medieval times. It is possible that the qualities of Cnoc Seannda for such activities were recognised and acted upon on more than one occasion over a very long period of time. Nevertheless, the idea that Finlaggan's role as a medieval centre of power might have prehistoric roots at Cnoc Seannda should not be lightly dismissed.

A Viking age and earlier medieval *thing* site?

The research undertaken on the Vikings in Islay by Alan Macniven while the excavations were being undertaken has posed some interesting challenges for our interpretation of Finlaggan. Macniven supposes that Islay suffered a predatory migration of settlers from Norway in the second half of the 9th century, after a period of raiding when the local warrior class was eradicated and much of the rest of the population enslaved. On the basis of his study of Islay place-names, he suggests that the extent and thoroughness of the occupation of the island by settlers from

Illustration 15.4
Càrn Bàn, a natural hillock at Gruline in Mull, crowned by a Bronze Age cairn

Scandinavia has been underestimated, and that the whole island was taken over by them (Macniven 2023).

Archaeological evidence for this influx of settlers is thin so far (see Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 89–91) and does not include any actual settlement sites or houses for any time in the Viking age from about 800 to 1100. There was a reasonable expectation by the writer that research at Finlaggan might fill that gap. However, no Viking age material or occupation has been identified. It may be there, but we quite simply failed to reach it or identify it.

Under any circumstances it would not appear likely that a location which may have been a centre of some local significance in the Iron Age and early historic period should then have been totally abandoned for several hundred years prior to it then being chosen as a royal or lordly centre of importance. Possibly, Viking age magnates were attracted by other local places for their own settlements and the actual enjoyment of Finlaggan was given to lesser folk who have left no traces of their existence. It might also have been the case that an annual summertime assembly of large numbers was not compatible with crop-growing. If Finlaggan were already a place for inaugurations and assemblies prior to the arrival of Scandinavian magnates, they might have wished to keep it that way, separate from their own residences.

New fieldwork and excavation at Finlaggan would be necessary in any attempt to identify Viking age residence, but it would not be inappropriate to consider where else it might be located in the area round about. If Finlaggan were not a Viking age centre of power, where else might one have been located? A site worthy of examination would appear to be Dùn Gùaidhre, only about 3km from Finlaggan as the crow flies (Illus 14.6). Its date of construction is not known, but conventional archaeological wisdom would favour the Iron Age. If that were the case it would not preclude the possibility that it remained in use for a very long time or was reoccupied at a later time. There are two features about Dùn Gùaidhre which hint at Viking age or earlier medieval residence. First, its name, 'Godred's fort' in Gaelic. The local islanders are in no doubt that the Godred in question was Godred Crovan, the 11th-century king of Man and the Isles. Presumably the same Godred features in the name of a nearby farm, Airigh Ghuaidhre, 'Godred's shieling', first recorded in 1494 (Macniven 2015: 100, 242). There are local traditions about Godred Crovan being in Islay (Caldwell 2017: 32) and also the statement in the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* that he died in Islay in 1095 (Broderick 1996: fol 33v). Second, the level, flat summit of Dùn Gùaidhre has the vestigial remains of what may have been a rectangular hall (Caldwell 2011: 131–32).

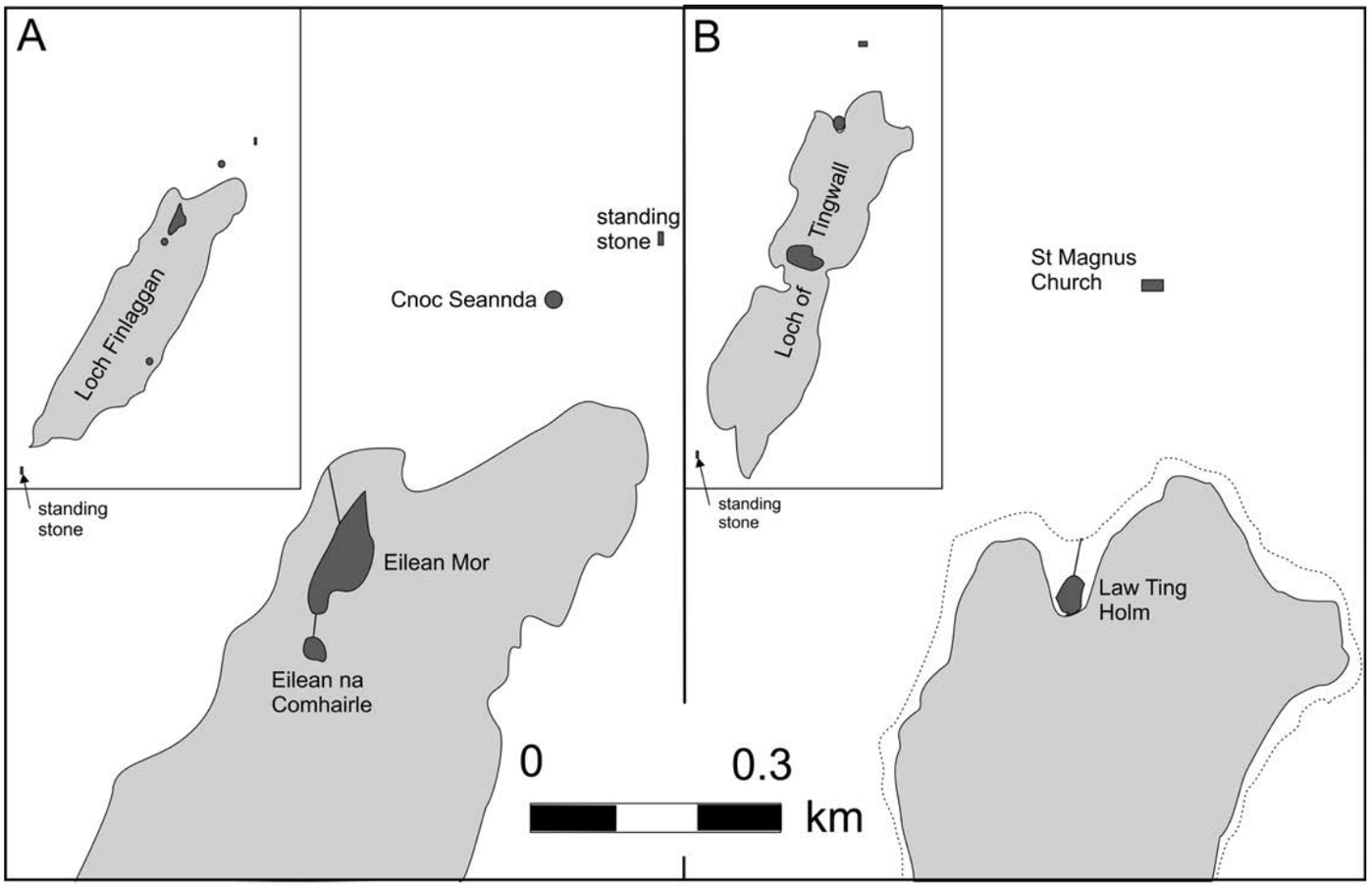

Illustration 15.5
Maps comparing Finlaggan with Tingwall, Shetland

On the slopes below it are the remains of the later medieval parish church and burial ground of Kilmeny (RCAHMS 1984: no. 370), possibly with origins in earlier time.

The physical characteristics of the Cnoc Seannda mound not only suggest an early Celtic or Irish centre of power but also align it with *thing* sites in the Scandinavian world. Individual traits like proximity to freshwater, reuse of an earlier monument, the presence of a large mound, a sheltered position and (possible) proximity to a church or a chapel are recognisable characteristics of Scandinavian *things* (Sanmark 2013: 103–04; 2017: 172). Excavation, however, at the Mute Hill, Dingwall, Ross-shire, has shown that it is an artificial mound constructed in the 11th and 13th century, presumably for the holding of the assemblies implied by the name Dingwall (O'Grady et al 2016). Coincidentally, the adjacent castle was the residence in the 15th century of the lords of the Isles as earls of Ross.

Alexandra Sanmark (2017) has identified 11 potential *thing* sites, including Finlaggan, in the islands off the west coast of Scotland. The most interesting from our point of view is one on the island of Mull which has both a place-name containing the element *thing* and manifest signs of prehistoric ritual activity. The etymology of Gruline, the place in question, is interpreted as Old Norse (ON) *grjót* '(rough) stone(s); stony ground; cleared and cultivated ground' + ON *þing* 'assembly-place' (Whyte 2014: 117). Gruline is situated on a narrow neck of land between the head of Loch Bà and the sea at Loch na Keal. There is a crannog at the head of Loch Bà, apparently occupied in the mid-16th century and possibly much earlier (Munro 1961: 61; RCAHMS 1980: no. 245). An adjacent group of prehistoric monuments includes two cairns, supposed to be of Bronze Age date, and two standing stones (RCAHMS 1980: nos 39, 106). One of the cairns is on top of a prominent knoll known as Càrn Bàn (Illus 15.4). Cnoc Seannda must have looked the same prior to its cairn being flattened.

Gruline's credentials as a Scandinavian *thing* site are suggested by the etymology of its name. That is also the case for five others of Sanmark's list of 11 potential sites. It is the place-name evidence which places them in a survey of *thing* sites and therefore implies Scandinavian rather than Celtic or Irish origins. They could all, of course, have been rooted in both a Celtic and Viking past, and perhaps any attempt to distinguish the two is meaningless. In the case of Finlaggan, however, there are important considerations beyond those relating to Cnoc Seannda.

The general similarity of Finlaggan and its adjacent landscape to the site of the main *thing* or *lawthing* in Shetland, at Tingwall Loch (Illus 15.5), has been noted by historians (Munro 1961: 99; Crawford 1987: 206–10). The name Tingwall is derived from ON

Illustration 15.6
Tingwall, Shetland: aerial view of Law Ting Holm and its causeway (© Crown Copyright: HES)

Illustration 15.7
Finlaggan aerial view (© Crown Copyright: HES)

þing völlr, meaning the parliament or court field(s). Tingwall valley is one of the most fertile areas in Shetland. Law Ting was an island connected by stepping stones (later a causeway) to the head of the loch, but it is now a peninsula through the lowering of the water level in the loch in relatively recent times (Coolen & Mehler 2014: 119, 125). Documentation for the Shetland *lawthing* at Tingwall goes back to 1307 (Sanmark 2013: 98), but it very probably originated much earlier in the Scandinavian occupation of the islands. Excavation on the island itself has indicated Iron Age settlement and nearby was St Magnus Church, the main parish church in Shetland, believed to have been of 12th-century date. The island site with Iron Age occupation approached by stepping stones or a causeway and the presence of a church provide points of comparison with Finlaggan (Illus 15.5–7).

It may not be a coincidence that at both places there is a standing stone at the south ends of their respective lochs. At Finlaggan the stone in question (no. 70, Illus 5.52), now fallen over, is on the land of Kepollsmore. The stone at Tingwall, the 'Murder Stone', is associated with traditions that might indicate it marked the boundary of a sanctuary girth associated with the *lawthing* (Coolen & Mehler 2014: 127). It is tempting to suggest that the Kepollsmore stone served a similar function.

Finally, in comparing Tingwall with Finlaggan attention must be paid to a 1701 report of the former describing three or four great stones, apparently on the island itself, 'upon which the judge, clerk and other great officers of court sat' (Coolen & Mehler 2014: 6). These stones are now lost, but it is legitimate to ask whether they were similar to the stone table said by the Sleat history to have been where the Council of the Isles sat in the 'Isle of Finlaggan' and 'the stone on which MacDonald sat' (MacPhail 1914: 24). They were carried away by 'Argyll', quite possibly within the lifetime of the historian. The occasion could have been 1647, when the Marquis of Argyll was with the Covenanting army which came to Islay to recapture Dunyvaig Castle and mop up the remnants of Alasdair MacColla's supporters. The 'Isle of Finlaggan' would seem best to describe Eilean Mór, and in any case there is no evidence for a functioning council house on Eilean na Comhairle as recently as that. The table and seat were not necessarily both together or housed inside.

Although the account of the Finlaggan stone table and seat is relatively recent and vague, it is worth pursuing further here because of potential comparisons in earlier medieval or earlier Scandinavian *thing* sites. It is possible that the Finlaggan stones were not actually removed or destroyed but have been hidden in plain sight – that they can be identified as two stones on the shore of the loch near Eilean na Comhairle, one (no. 39, Illus 5.18–20) engraved with 'AI' and the other (no. 40, Illus 5.21–22) with cut marks that were believed to be readable as 'AII'. Might they be the items of furniture referred to in the Sleat history? In 2003 the writer suggested that these stones might have been used in inauguration ceremonies for early leaders of Clan Donald, specifically Angus Mor and Angus Òg. The 'AI' on no. 39 would have commemorated the former and the 'AII' on no. 40 would have been for the latter (Caldwell 2003: 72–73; see also Caldwell 2023a: 147–52). Since then the author has realised that the supposed 'AII' on stone no. 40 is more akin to the slice marks identified as a phenomenon on a range of monuments in Ireland, Wales and Scotland dating from the 5th/6th century to the 12th century, including cross-slabs, high crosses, bullaun stones, ogham stones, inauguration/assembly stones and occasionally churches (Newman 2009), and became less inclined to believe that they were meant to be read as an inscription. The hypothesis that there might be separate stones used to seat successive kings or lords in their inauguration ceremonies is strengthened by knowledge of such a collection at Mora, near modern Uppsala in Sweden, where several kings of medieval Sweden were elected (Larsson 2010). Olaus Magnus further describes how at Mora there was a large rock known as the Mora stone, and round about it 12 rather smaller stones, set fast in the ground. These were the seats of the councillors who chose the king (Olaus Magnus 1998: 2.350).

Recent scholarly interest in *thing* sites across the Scandinavian world (for example Sanmark et al 2013, 2016; Sanmark 2023) provides evidence for a network of them, some of them of national or royal significance, others merely for local business. Finlaggan might be considered the latter, perhaps just serving one of the three wards of Islay, but for later traditions about its paramount importance within the Kingdom of the Isles. How such a role may relate to Tynwald is worthy of further examination.

It has been claimed that Tynwald was converted in the Viking or earlier medieval period from a local ritual site to the one of national significance for the whole Kingdom of the Isles, extending from Man itself to the Butt of Lewis in the north. Annual assemblies are still held on the tiered mound at Tynwald on St John's Day at midsummer, and the Manx parliament, now located in Douglas, is known as Tynwald through its origins in the annual assemblies at Tynwald. It is claimed as the oldest parliament in the world with an unbroken existence (Broderick 2003).

A report from the sitting of Tynwald in 1422 has been interpreted by modern scholars as demonstrating that it was then understood that 'in King Orryes Days' (Godred Crovan, 1079–95?) 16 of the keys (representatives) who attended Tynwald came from the Isle of Man and a further 8 represented the 'Out Isles', assumed to mean the Lewis and Skye groups of islands. However, this arrangement would have come about in or after 1156, at a time when the Mull and Islay groups of islands (and Arran and Bute?) had been ceded to Somerled and his descendants. There are still 24 keys in the Manx parliament, all drawn from constituencies in the Isle of Man itself, and it is supposed that this number derives from a post-1266 reorganisation reflecting the new reality that there would no longer be representatives attending Tynwald from outside Man (Broderick 2003: 65–66).

Basil Megaw further suggested that the original number of keys would have been 32 – 16 from Man, 8 from Lewis and Skye and 8 from Islay and Mull. He pointed out that the 16 members of the Council of the Isles, who, according to the 17th-century Sleat history, met at Finlaggan in the time of the Lordship of the Isles, might have been the successors of the keys who attended Tynwald in the time of the Kingdom of the Isles (Cubbon & Megaw 1942: 59–61). This is an attractive hypothesis but one lacking substantial support from early sources.

The earliest reference to Tynwald as a place of assembly is in the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* for 1238. It is specifically stated that the assembly was for the entire Manx population (Broderick 1996: fol 45r). If there is any truth in the claim, noted above, by Donald Monro that the medieval Council of the Isles based its legal decisions on laws made by King Ranald, son of

Somerled, then that implies that that council could have been meeting at Finlaggan by the later 12th century.

A considerable challenge for historians of the Kingdom of the Isles is how to make sense of the relatively few early sources that record events there in terms of its unity and political cohesion. Godred Crovan, probably from Ireland but with a support base in the Western Isles, established himself as king in Man, about 1079 (Duffy 2015: 17–21). He was also, as we have just seen, held to have had a major role in establishing Tynwald. Later in his career, he was ejected from Man and died in Islay probably in 1095 (Duffy 2015: 21). Might he have played a significant part in establishing both Tynwald and Finlaggan as national assembly centres? On present evidence there cannot be any certainty as to which came first.

The breakup of the Kingdom of the Isles

At many places of inauguration, courts and assemblies in Europe, business continued to take place in the outdoors and there was no development into urban centres or transformation into palaces or castles. The discovery that Finlaggan was a castle in earlier medieval times, and later what may be described as a palace, puts it in a different category. On the assumption that Finlaggan was a Scandinavian *thing* site, how can the erection of a massive castle tower be explained? The kings of Alba and later kings of the Scots were inaugurated at Scone in eastern Scotland, where there was also a royal palace and, at least from the 12th century, a major church (Caldwell 2023b: 29). Westminster, the place for crowning English kings, developed as a major palace and church, and the same general situation can be seen at other royal and inauguration centres in northern Europe, notably Aachen (Airlie 2003: 133–36).

In interpreting the development of Finlaggan as an important earlier medieval centre, the main challenge is deciding whether Eilean na Comhairle was the equivalent of Law Ting Holm at Tingwall in Shetland, the actual meeting place of a Council of the Isles prior to the erection of the tower, or whether such a council might have convened elsewhere in the vicinity, for instance at Cnoc Seannda. The evidence is not clear, but the author is inclined to think that the tower was deliberately erected over the top of a functioning *thing* site. If so, it would have been intended to make a strong statement about a new order, a takeover by a new force that replaced or suppressed the existing power structure. It is this observation that leads the writer to conclude that the builder of the Finlaggan tower is more likely to have been Ranald, son of Somerled, rather than Rognvald Godredsson, the two main contenders for this role identified in Chapter 14, perhaps about 1200.

An entry in the mid-13th-century *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* states (in translation from Latin) that:

> In the year 1156 a naval battle was fought on the night of the Epiphany between Godred and Somerled and there was much slaughter on both sides.
>
> When day dawned they made peace and divided the kingdom of the Isles between them. The kingdom has existed in two parts from that day up until the present time, and this was the cause of the break-up of the kingdom from the time the sons of Somerled got possession of it. (Broderick 1996: fol 37v)

This is understood to have created a situation where Godred and other kings based in the Isle of Man controlled that island as well as Lewis and Skye, while Somerled and his descendants (the MacSorleys) took the Uists and Barra, the Mull and Islay groups of islands, and also Arran. There is a tacit assumption that the Manx kings continued to hold Lewis and Skye until Man and the Isles became part of the Kingdom of Scotland as a result of the Treaty of Perth in 1266.

The author (Caldwell 2009a) has previously questioned the nature of the splitting of the Kingdom of the Isles in 1156, wondering if there really was a division into two separate states, at least prior to 1249, when King Hakon IV of Norway, by recognising Somerled's great-grandson Ewen (MacDougall) as a king, acknowledged that there was no longer a unitary kingdom of the Isles and that the kings based in Man were unable to control other islands (Anderson 1990: 2.548). The erection of the Finlaggan tower can be interpreted as an indicator that Finlaggan was being established as the main centre of MacSorley power in the islands from about 1200, a rival royal centre to Peel, Rushen and Tynwald in the Isle of Man.

In 1266, by the Treaty of Perth, the Western Isles, including Islay, passed from the overlordship of the kings of Norway to that of the kings of Scots. From being one of the leaders of King Hakon's invasion fleet in 1263, the owner of Finlaggan, Angus Mor, became a baron of the realm of Scotland. The author has written elsewhere (Caldwell 2022) about the lack of documentary and archaeological evidence for the Scots getting to grips with the control and administration of their new territories. Links with the Scottish mainland are most clearly demonstrated at Finlaggan by the presence of Scottish wheel-made pottery. There is as yet limited evidence for its use at other contemporary sites in the Hebrides. The Scottish pottery at Finlaggan is most probably the result of trade in whatever the vessels held. This trade likely commenced prior to 1266 and continued long afterwards. The assemblage of finds and other material datable to the earlier medieval period at Finlaggan represents consumption by a noble household rather than, for instance, a garrison of soldiers. The fact that there is no earlier medieval Scottish pottery from the Isle of Man and conversely no Manx pottery from anywhere in the West Highlands and Islands, including Arran and Bute, also seems to add weight to the idea that there was a separate post-1156 kingdom in the Isles, and Finlaggan was its centre.

Meetings of the Council of the Isles

If our interpretation is right about Eilean na Comhairle being the actual place where representatives from a wide area met in council prior to the building of the tower, it may be supposed that such meetings would have continued elsewhere at Finlaggan in the earlier medieval period. Perhaps this council had been meeting at Finlaggan regularly since before the erection of the tower on Eilean na Comhairle, guided, as Donald Monro was later to claim, by the laws of King Ranald, son of Somerled (Munro 1961: 56–57). So this may have been a continuation and development of the tradition

Illustration 15.8
Loch Ballygrant, Islay, with tree-covered island identified as 'Ellan Charne' and the remains of a crannog to its left

of Viking age *thing* meetings at Finlaggan rather than a totally new invention. The predilection for islands for *thing* sites in the Scandinavian world in earlier times has already been noted. An account by Olaus Magnus of approximately the same date as Monro's about the holding of important meetings on islands by the peoples of Scandinavia suggests that the council meetings on Eilean na Comhairle may have been part of a geographically much wider phenomenon. He described how in Sweden councils and assemblies of noblemen convened to restore unity to regions and their inhabitants might be held on islands (Olaus Magnus 1998: 2.568–69).

Elsewhere in the West Highlands and Hebrides, Eilean na Comhairle may have been the inspiration for the selection of other islands as meeting places. Eilean Tigh na Slige in Loch Treig is said to be the council island of the MacDonald chiefs of Keppoch (Canmore ID 23904), and an island in Loch Ballygrant in Islay can be identified as 'Ellan Charne', where Donald Dubh, a would-be new lord of the Isles, met with the 'Barons and Council of the Isles' in 1545 (Illus 15.8). It may be significant that here there are the remains of a small crannog connected by a causeway to the main island, perhaps mimicking the arrangement at nearby Finlaggan of a council island accessed from a residential island (Caldwell 2017: 82–83).

We have identified building (a) on Eilean na Comhairle as the council house mentioned by Donald Monro (Munro 1961: 56–57). In Scandinavia *thing* meetings seem generally to have been held outside until the late 16th or 17th century. Evidence for purpose-built '*thing*-cottages' of earlier date is unusual. One datable to the 14th century has been excavated at the *thing* site at Anundshög in Västmanland in Sweden. It was of wood construction, with a fireplace, and had an estimated size of 6.7 by 6.7m. It is known to have been furnished with a table, later removed for use elsewhere (Sanmark et al 2019). There was no medieval equivalent to the Finlaggan council house at Tynwald in the Isle of Man, nor does anything similar appear to have been known in Ireland. Perhaps the stone table for the use of the Council of the Isles and the stone on which the lord of the Isles sat (nos 39, 40) were housed in building (a) prior to about 1500.

It is not known whether the Council of the Isles which met on Eilean na Comhairle in later medieval times was a reimagining or recreation of a parliament that met there prior to the erection of the tower, or, as suggested by Basil Megaw, a breakaway organisation consisting of delegates who would previously have attended Tynwald in the Isle of Man (Cubbon & Megaw 1942: 59–61). Whether it was a body with a continuous tradition

of convening at Finlaggan from early days or a later MacDonald invention, the provision of a purpose-built council house has to be seen as a significant development, part of a programme by the MacDonald lords to boost their status and image.

The footprint stone

Possibly also a later MacDonald invention was the part played in the making of new lords of the Isles by a footprint stone. The Sleat history says there was such 'a square stone, seven or eight feet long, and the tract of a man's foot cut thereon', on which the new lord stood while being handed the symbols of his authority and being proclaimed lord (MacPhail 1914: 24). It is possible that grave-slab R4 is the stone in question, though only 1.72 by 0.46m (about 6ft 8in by 18in). The hollow in it identified as a footprint (Illus C2.6b) is on the back of a slab which can be dated on stylistic grounds to the 14th or 15th century, and so can hardly be of earlier date than that. Also, if the identification with the Sleat history footprint stone is valid, its presence in the burial ground on Eilean Mór would be a strong indication that inauguration ceremonies were held there adjacent to the chapel. Pennant (1774: 259) claims to have seen the stone on which 'the great MacDonald' stood when he was crowned king of the Isles. Pennant is a reliable observer and recorder of local information. If he had seen the footprint on slab R4 we might expect that he would have mentioned it. His crowning stone may have been something else, perhaps a misunderstanding of the cross-base in the Eilean Mór burial ground.

The list of footprint stones in Ireland and Scotland compiled by FitzPatrick (2004: 235–41) includes an earlier medieval grave-slab at Inis Cealtra in Co Clare with two footprints on its front surface. It is difficult to tie down the date of most of these footprint stones, or even to be sure of their authenticity, but it seems to the writer that the (re-)invention of inauguration ceremonies in the later medieval period involving the footprint in slab R4 is a possibility not to be dismissed lightly.

An alternative model of lordship

The great tower on Eilean na Comhairle was deliberately flattened, probably about 1300, and for the next 200 years or so, a period spanning the time of the MacDonald chiefs known as the lords of the Isles, defensive walls and towers were not a priority at Finlaggan. Instead a palatial complex was created on Eilean Mór, which, alongside the council house on Eilean na Comhairle, demonstrated the leadership and regal pretensions of the lords of the Isles.

It is possible to detect in the layout of this palatial complex a conscious configuration that accentuated status and helped to limit access. Approaching the site from the main routeway that then ran up and down the west side of Loch Finlaggan, the great hall would have stood out in the centre as the largest and most imposing structure with, to one side, on higher ground, the chapel and, on the other side, Eilean na Comhairle, the council chamber. Access by boat to Eilean Mór helped to restrict access only to those who belonged or deserved to be there, no doubt an important consideration when there were thousands of people present for great events.

Early travellers Martin Martin (1703: 240–41) and Thomas Pennant (1774: 259) drew attention to the ruins of the houses of the lord's bodyguard on the shore of the loch adjacent to Eilean Mór. Probably what they noticed were the slumped remains of turf huts (nos 43, 44) which they may well have identified correctly. However, groups of turf-walled huts at Viking age assembly sites in Iceland and elsewhere have more generally been identified as the booths of delegates attending the assemblies (Vésteinsson 2013). The vestiges at Finlaggan may represent a similar phenomenon in later medieval times.

On Eilean Mór all roads led to the great hall, as a place of feasting and other entertainment, the provision of which was the mark of a great lord. Northwards from the great hall a cobbled road went directly to the chapel. Southwards a cobbled road and causeway went straight to the council chamber. Perhaps on great occasions dignitaries and representatives progressed along these. The multitudes on the loch-side might have watched, possibly even witnessed from afar as proclamations were made or documents approved beside the commemorative cross or before the council house.

At Iona the MacDonald lords bolstered their prestige, not just by assigning their earthly remains to the ground in a place made holy by the saintly Columba, but also by creating the alleged burial places of kings of Scots, Ireland and Norway (Caldwell 2018: 139–43; 2021: 18). The cobbled 'street of the dead', the processional way stretching from the MacDonald funerary chapel, St Oran's, to the abbey, is similar to the cobbled roads at Finlaggan. Perhaps Finlaggan and Iona as they were developed in the 14th and 15th centuries should be seen together as complementary visions of MacDonald greatness, their desire to be seen as kings.

The Finlaggan excavations have provided one significant piece of dating evidence for the development of this scheme. Embedded in the mortar of the south wall of the chapel, near the altar, was a crooked tuppence, in this case a halfgroat (N24) of King Robert II (1371–90), father-in-law of John I Lord of the Isles. It cannot be doubted that this was a deliberate deposition and it strongly suggests that the later layout of medieval Finlaggan, however long it took, was conceived by this lord prior to his death, possibly in 1387.

There are no obvious close parallels to later medieval Finlaggan in Scotland, Ireland or the Scandinavian world. It appears to be a unique projection of lordship, one which was consciously different, and often at odds with the Scotland of the Stewart kings. In Lowland Scotland, power, wealth and authority were largely concentrated in urban centres – burghs – with settled populations of artisans, merchants and administrators. Although in the 15th century the lords of the Isles spent much of their time in the burghs of Inverness and Dingwall, dealing with the affairs of their vast earldom of Ross, there was no move to establish such urban centres in their Lordship of the Isles. If it were just a matter of selecting a place well-endowed with natural resources and good communications, Finlaggan could have been a good choice for burghal status. But Finlaggan was never an urban centre, nor was it fortified in the later medieval period. It was probably largely deserted as a residence for most of the year.

Finlaggan was not large, nor were any of its buildings imposing. The lordship to which it belonged was not by

European standards particularly extensive, and in any case came to an end in 1493 with the forfeiture of John II Lord of the Isles. So not a place of much significance. Yet, there are two things about Finlaggan that argue for it to be taken seriously as a centre of importance. First, it provides an insight into an alternative model of lordship to the European norm, perhaps even a state intent on establishing itself as an independent entity. Second, despite the forfeiture of the lord of the Isles and later attempts by governments in Edinburgh and London to suppress the Gaelic language and culture of the West Highlanders, Finlaggan has contributed a great deal to the identity of the Scots, a truly global brand.