Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

# The Archaeology of Finlaggan, Islay

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# PART I

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The author provided a detailed outline of the history of Islay in 2017, placing it in a wider context, especially of the Kingdom and the Lordship of the Isles. The brief history given below in Chapter 2 highlights those developments and events which might be perceived to have a particular relevance to Finlaggan. Up to the end of the 16th century, it is essentially derived from a very slender range of documentary sources, some of them dating from well after the events they describe. The restricted nature of this material, unlikely ever to be significantly augmented, was one of the main reasons for turning to archaeology for new source material. The provision of this basic historical account is also intended to provide opportunities for comparing and measuring historical and archaeological evidence, the one against the other. From the beginning of the 17th century onwards there is much more information, including rentals and other estate papers.

# Chapter 2

# A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

## Prehistory and early history of Islay

Occupation of Islay by humans from Mesolithic times onwards is attested by archaeological remains (Table 2.1). This is not the place to give a detailed overview of the prehistory of Islay since remains of that vast time span are not well represented in our Finlaggan Project, nor did we actively seek them out. The author has provided a brief overview in his *Islay, Jura and Colonsay: A Historical Guide* (2011), and the work of Steven Mithen (2000) on the Mesolithic should especially be noticed.

While the Lowlands of Scotland were subjected to direct or indirect Roman military control in the years from the late 1st to the 4th century AD, Argyll and the islands remained beyond Roman control and little influenced by Roman culture. There was, however, a Roman coin, present whereabouts unknown, reported from an island in Loch Finlaggan. It was identified by George MacDonald (1918: 250) as a low-value billon piece of the reign of Diocletian, minted in Alexandria in AD 287–88. It has the figure of Athena on its reverse. There is also a Roman

| | Periods | Kingdoms and lordships | Kings and lords | Notable events |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6500–4000 BC | Mesolithic | | | |
| 4000–2500 BC | Neolithic | | | |
| 2500–2200 BC | Chalcolithic | | | |
| 2200–700 BC | Bronze Age | | | |
| 700 BC – AD 500 | Iron Age | | | |
| 500–800 | Early historic | Dál Riata | | 563 Arrival of St Columba<br>794 First Viking raid |
| 800–1100 | Viking age | Kingdom of the Isles | King Godred Crovan (1079–95) | 1098 Invasion by King Magnus |
| 1100–1300 | Medieval (earlier) | Kingdom of the Isles (until 1266) | Somerled (*d* 1164)<br>Ranald (*d* 1207)<br>Donald<br>Angus Mor<br>Alexander (*d* 1299) | 1263 Invasion by King Hakon |
| 1300–1500 | Medieval (later) | Lordship of the Isles | Angus Og<br>John I Lord of the Isles (*d* 1387)<br>Donald Lord of the Isles (*d* 1422)<br>Alexander Lord of the Isles (*d* 1449)<br>John II Lord of the Isles | <br>1411 Battle of Harlaw<br>1431 Battle of Inverlochy<br><br>1493 Final forfeiture of John II Lord of the Isles |
| 1500–1700 | Post-medieval | <br><br>Cambells of Cawdor | | 1540 Visit of fleet of James V<br><br>1598 Battle of Tràigh Ghruineart |
| 1700–1800 | Modern | Cambells of Shawfield | | |

Table 2.1
Periods, lordships and notable events in relation to Finlaggan

P-shaped brooch of tinned bronze found in a midden at Ardnave (Ritchie & Welfare 1984: 341, no. 62). It dates to the 3rd century AD.

According to the geographer Ptolemy, working in Alexandria in Egypt in the 2nd century AD, the tribe that occupied Argyll was the Epidii, who might also have held Islay. A pseudo-historical version of Scottish history has Fergus Mor mac Eirc, king of the Dál Riata in Northern Ireland, coming to rule a colony of his people in Argyll about 500 AD. These Scots were responsible for introducing the Gaelic language into Scotland. Until the early 7th century Fergus's descendants continued to hold on to land in Ulster, but their future lay in North Britain.

Certainly by the 7th century Gaelic was the dominant language used in Argyll. It was a language spoken in common with the people of Ireland, while many of the neighbouring parts of the Scottish mainland were inhabited by British (early Welsh) and Pictish speakers. It is also clear that the people of Argyll had many other cultural links with Ireland, which was more accessible to a people used to travelling by boat than much of the rest of Scotland. The most important evidence for this is the activities of Irish Christian missionaries like St Columba, who left his native Ireland in 563 and founded a monastery on the island of Iona. This was his main base until he died there in 597. Almost all the early churches in Islay are dedicated to him or his followers.

By about 700 there is evidence for the kingdom of Dál Riata in Argyll, including several important kindreds. Islay was the territory of the Cenél nÓengusso, who James Fraser suggests may be descended from Óengus Ibdach (*floruit* early 6th century), that is Óengus the Hebridean, of the Dál Fiatach, an important kindred of the Ulaid nation in Northern Ireland. Óengus's grandson Barrfhind had three sons, Lugaid, Conall and Galán, who are said to have divided Islay among them (Fraser 2009: 159–60; Dumville 2002: 206–07).

One of the main issues in this early historic period that might be addressed archaeologically are the doubts expressed, especially by Ewan Campbell (1999: 11–15, 2001), as to whether there really was a significant influx of settlers into Argyll from Ireland, even if not an actual invasion force led by Fergus Mor mac Eirc. There is no spread of Irish-type artefacts, monuments or settlement types in Argyll to give substance to the traditional migration model, and the Gaelic language, far from being a 6th-century imposition, may well have been spoken in Argyll from much earlier times.

Another area where it might be hoped that archaeology could make a useful contribution would be in interpreting a document, *Míniugud Senchasa Fher nAlban* (The Explanation of the Genealogy of the Men of Alba), a composite text with 7th-century origins, that apparently includes a listing of the houses (holdings) of the freemen and nobles of Islay (Caldwell 2011: 22–24; Macniven 2015: 81–85).

Viking raids on the Western Isles are first recorded in 794. These pagan pirates from Scandinavia were to return year after year on looting and pillaging missions. Their clinker-built longships were technically of a high standard. They had the skill and confidence to undertake long sea voyages under sail. They also rowed the longships far up rivers or carried them over land from one stretch of water to another. In the mid-9th century 'a large scale and culturally transformative plantation of Norse settlers' was made in Islay, as in the rest of the Hebrides (Macniven 2015: 117–20). This led to the creation of a hybrid Norse/Gaelic society. Islay became part of a great network of Scandinavian communities on a major sea route stretching from Dublin to Norway and beyond. Much of the evidence for this comes from the thorough examination by Alan Macniven (2015, 2023) of Islay's Norse-derived place-names. There are graves with grave goods at Ballinaby (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 122–25) but actual houses and settlements have still to be found.

### The Kingdom of the Isles

The Kingdom of the Isles (sometimes also referred to as the Kingdom of Man, or of Man and the Isles) comprised the Isle of Man and the islands off the west coast of Scotland. It was a small kingdom in terms of land mass, and the population was not large – no more than 50,000 at best might be a reasonable guess. It appears to have developed into a kingdom on a European model in terms of its structure and administration, and its influence and the patronage of its kings, if not direct rule, may at times have extended much further, certainly into Ireland (Caldwell 2014a). It has been the subject of detailed studies, especially by Duffy & Mytum (2015) and McDonald (2019).

The Kingdom of the Isles has a long, albeit shadowy, history extending back to the second quarter of the 10th century, if not earlier (Woolf 2007: 298–300; Downham 2007: 177). About 1079 Godred Crovan, who had fought at the Battle of Stamford Bridge alongside King Harold Hardrada of Norway in 1066, usurped the kingship (Broderick 1996: fols 32v, 33r; cf Hudson 2005: 170–2). Godred Crovan was related to the Scandinavian kings who ruled Dublin. Five generations of kings descended from him ruled in the Isles until 1265.

By the 13th century leading families in the Isles, like the MacDougalls, MacRuaris and MacDonalds, all descended from a 12th-century prince, Somerled, also held most of mainland Argyll in the territory of the kings of Scots (Duncan & Brown 1959: 197–200, 204–5). The Kingdom of the Isles was briefly annexed by King Magnus Barelegs of Norway in 1098, but there was no follow-up after his death in 1103 by his successors as kings of Norway to retain the Kingdom of the Isles or maintain royal overlordship over it. The latter only came about in 1152/53 because Godred, son of King Olaf of the Isles, went to Norway to seek support from King Ingi (Beuermann 2002).

The main base for these kings was the Isle of Man and the extent of their hold on the rest of the islands is not always clear. Historians of Scotland have tended to focus on Somerled and his descendants, known collectively as the MacSorleys, rather than the kings of Godred Crovan's line. Somerled, identified as being based in mainland Argyll rather than the Isles, married a daughter of King Olaf, son of Godred, and usurped the kingdom after it had been offered to his son Dugald (the ancestor of the MacDougalls) by a faction of the Isles' chiefs.

After Somerled's death in 1164 several of his descendants appear as local kings and the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, thought to have been written at Rushen Abbey in the Isle of Man about the middle of the 13th century, has been interpreted to mean that there were two rival dynasties ruling different parts of the kingdom, with the descendants of Godred Crovan holding

Man and Lewis, and the descendants of Somerled most or all of the other islands (Duncan & Brown 1959; McDonald 1997: 39–67; Woolf 2005).

The sources do not make it clear to what extent Somerled's descendants were over-mighty or rebellious subjects of kings of the Godred Crovan dynasty or kings of a separate kingdom within the Isles and Argyll. The situation is complicated by the fact that Somerled and his descendants owed allegiance to the kings of Scots for mainland territories. The breakup of the Isles into two separate kingdoms may only finally have been achieved in the middle of the 13th century. The crucial date was 1248, when Hakon IV of Norway recognised a Somerled descendant, Ewen (MacDougall), as a king, apparently to reign in the northern part of the Hebrides while King Harold of the Godred Crovan line ruled in Man. Ewen was succeeded almost immediately by his distant kinsman Dugald (MacRuari) and Harold by three other relatives, culminating in his younger brother Magnus. Both Dugald and Magnus were still kings in 1263, when King Hakon sought and got their support for his invasion of Scotland (Caldwell 2017: 40–42).

Somerled met his death in battle at Renfrew in 1164 and his lands were split between his sons Dugald, Ranald and Angus, as was the Gaelic custom. Evidence is lacking as to who got what, but the tripartite division may simply have seen Dugald being gifted a large piece of territory in the centre, including Lorn, with Angus's share to the north and Ranald's to the south (Duncan & Brown 1959: 198). Whatever the extent of the initial holdings of these three brothers, they are likely to have changed with time.

Islay can be supposed to have passed to Ranald. He certainly held lands in Kintyre, some of which he gifted to Saddell Abbey in Kintyre. He also gave this religious house land in Arran. He is credited with the foundation of the Benedictine monastery and the nunnery in Iona (Cowan & Easson 1976: 59, 151), which surely implies that Iona was under his control. Ranald's charter to Saddell Abbey gives him the title 'King of the Isles and Lord of Argyll and Kintyre' (*RMS* 2: 678, no. 3170). Ranald's son Donald, the eponym of Clan Donald, is believed to have inherited Islay and acquired lands in Kintyre (Duncan & Brown 1959: 198–200). Despite being immortalised through the MacDonald surname, little is known about him.

The image conjured up of Donald's son Angus Mor in a mid-13th-century Irish praise poem is of a chief more Viking than Gaelic. It describes how there was hardly a beach in Ireland where his longships had not been and lifted cattle. For what it is worth, the poem also describes him as Prince of Ireland and King of Lewis (Clancy 1998: 288–91). Of more immediate relevance for us is that Angus was the first of the family to specifically call himself 'de Ile' (of Islay), a designation which appears on his seal appended to a document of 1292 (Stevenson & Wood 1940, 3: 483; Munro & Munro 1986: pp lxxx–lxxxi, 280), when he must have been of considerable age.

The 1260s were a major turning point in the history of Islay. In 1263 King Hakon of Norway led a fleet down through the Western Isles to the Firth of Clyde to re-establish his position against increasing attempts by the Scots to win back the Western Isles. Angus Mor felt forced to submit and join the Norwegian king's invasion fleet. Hakon's expedition failed in its main objectives of establishing his authority in the Western Isles and protecting them from Alexander III of Scotland. In 1264 the Scots were again on the offensive in the islands, and by the Treaty of Perth in 1266 the Western Isles were ceded to Scotland. Angus Mor and the other island leaders thus became subjects of the king of Scots for all their lands.

Scottish historians, including the most recent biographer of Alexander III (Reid 2019), have seen the gain of the Kingdom of the Isles as a great achievement. The problem is that there is very little documentary or other evidence to demonstrate that the Scots readily and effectively took control of their new acquisition. It is therefore appropriate that archaeological data from Finlaggan should be analysed to see if it provides some clues on changes and developments in the later part of the 13th century.

Commencing in 1296, the Wars of Independence saw the failure of England to annexe Scotland and the eventual success of Robert Bruce in establishing his kingship over the whole country by the time of his death in 1329. In the intervening years of civil war and English invasions the main kindreds in the Isles were heavily involved, now on one side, then on another. In 1297 Alexander (MacDonald) of Islay (Angus Mor's son) complained to Edward I of England that Alexander (MacDougall) of Argyll had devastated and burnt his lands and killed his people (Stevenson 1870, 2: no. 444). Two years later an Irish source records the death of Alexander and many of his people at the hands of Alexander MacDougall (MacCarthy 1893: 393). The MacDonalds were to swing to supporting Robert Bruce, with Angus Òg, Alexander's brother and successor, leading his clan at Bannockburn in 1314. The MacDonalds thus emerged from the wars as real winners, the most powerful kindred in the Isles.

### The Lordship of the Isles

The MacDonalds now assumed the status of lords of the Isles. In Gaelic they were called *Rí Innse Gall*, which might more fittingly be rendered as 'King of the Isles'. These lords had not only headship of the great Clan Donald but also feudal superiority over island and mainland territories as extensive as those controlled by Somerled at the height of his power. The Isle of Man alone eluded their grasp, falling firmly under English control from 1333. They came to possess in the 15th century the vast earldom of Ross, and their influence extended throughout the Gaelic-speaking areas of Scotland and also into Ireland. One of the main branches of the family, the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig (Islay), the leaders of Clann Iain Mhóir (Clan Donald South), came to possess large territories in Antrim in Northern Ireland. The lords of the Isles played a conspicuous role as leaders and patrons of Gaelic culture. They had their own hereditary doctors, poets and harpers, and sponsored the erection of churches and the work of local sculptors.

Four lords of the Isles, son succeeding father, span the years from the early 14th century to the end of the 15th century. John I Lord of the Isles was succeeded, probably in 1387, by Donald, and Donald by Alexander in 1422. John II Lord of the Isles succeeded in 1449 and was finally forfeited by King James IV in 1493. A much fuller account of the lords and lordship in relation to Islay has been provided elsewhere by the author (Caldwell 2017: 49–75).

Historians have tended to view the Lordship of the Isles as potentially an independent state in the making. Recognition of

royal authority was grudging or not always taken seriously. Central government knew the lordship as a power to be reckoned with, one that could not be discomfited by a royal army at Harlaw in Aberdeenshire in 1411 and which won an outright victory over another at Inverlochy in 1431. The centres of MacDonald power were difficult to reach from the east-coast burghs frequented by the court, and it often seemed better to leave them to their ways. Now many historians feel that a more nuanced interpretation is appropriate, one that still acknowledges the power and cultural distinctiveness of the lords and their lordship but which recognises that their ambitions and the roles they played in the politics of Scotland were not any different from those of other leading magnates (Cameron 2014).

This historical viewpoint was set in the context of an understanding that there was a very considerable divide in Scotland that could be traced back to the 14th century and earlier times. On the one side were the Gaelic-speaking 'wild' or 'savage' people of the Highlands and Islands, and on the other side were the Scots-speaking 'civilised' Lowlanders, many living in towns and burghs. This perception has also recently been re-examined (for example in three papers published side by side in 2009 by Boardman, Broun and MacGregor) and found to be an oversimplification, if not outright misleading. Here again it might be hoped that archaeological evidence will be able to provide data to aid these interpretations.

## Lords of Islay

The demise of the Lordship of the Isles did not result in the total collapse of MacDonald power in Islay, despite the efforts of King James IV and then his son King James V. In 1540 the latter sailed his fleet round the north of Scotland in a bid to impress and bring the western clans to heel. A main target was James MacDonald of Dunyvaig and the Glens (known in Lowland sources as James Canochson), who was taken into custody while the king set plans in motion to take control of the royal lands of Islay, previously those of the lords of the Isles and no doubt usurped by Sir James and his clansmen. The itinerary of the fleet is not well documented, but one early source (Dalrymple [1596] 1888–95: 2.242) describes it going to islands (*in Hebrides insulas* in the original Latin, translated into Scots as 'the Iles of Jrland') where the Highland leaders Maclean and James MacDonald submitted to the king in person. This is most likely to have been in Islay, in which case James V may have been the first Scottish monarch to set foot on the island for over a hundred years.

James Canochson was released from imprisonment after the death of King James V in 1542 and Clann Iain Mhóir was as powerful as ever. As a reward for his support of the Scottish governor, the Earl of Arran, and in recognition of his power, his extensive lands were erected in 1545 into the free barony of Bar (*RMS* 2: no. 3085). Two things in the later 16th century are key to an understanding of Islay history. One is the bitter feud that was ignited between the MacDonalds and the Macleans of Duart (in Mull), initially over lands in Islay. Murders and raids led in 1598 to a pitched battle at Tràigh Ghruineart in Islay, in which the MacDonald forces led by Sir James MacDonald of Knockrinsay defeated the Macleans, and Lachlan Maclean of Duart was killed.

The other thing to understand about Islay in the 16th century is how it supported a body of 800 fighting men, contracted on occasion by the MacDonalds and Macleans to fight in the wars in Ireland. This was a continuation of a system throughout the Isles that appears to have had its origins in the Kingdom of the Isles. It only came to an end as a result of a combination of factors, not least the increased power that could be brought to bear in suppressing it as a result of King James VI's succession to the kingship of England and Ireland as well as Scotland (Caldwell 2015).

## The Campbell takeover of Islay

Islay was acquired by John Campbell of Cawdor in 1614, and Campbell lairds and tenants were brought in to take over the island. After a rather faltering start, the Campbells were fairly effective in keeping the lid on their new island possession as far as the major political upsets, uprisings and rebellions of the 17th century were concerned. Islay was, nevertheless, wasted and destroyed in 1647, when a Covenanting army under the command of Sir David Leslie came to the island to besiege the royalist garrison in Dunyvaig Castle. There is evidence from Islay in the 1650s for a plantation of Covenanters from the Lowlands, including professional soldiers like Lieutenant Colonel James Wallace, later notorious for commanding the Covenanting uprising in 1666 (Caldwell 2017: 109).

Whereas the MacDonalds of Dunyvaig and the Macleans of Duart were first and foremost clan chiefs, the Campbells of Cawdor were landlords whose economic concerns exercised a much higher priority. The author has already written elsewhere about the extent to which they brought in new methods of farming and new types of houses, and encouraged industries, especially lead mining (Caldwell 2009b, 2017: 231–40).

In 1726 Islay was acquired by a younger son of an Argyllshire laird, Daniel Campbell of Shawfield, who had made a fortune in commerce and who had entered Parliament as MP for Inverary. Islay was on the market again in the mid-19th century and was purchased in 1853 by James Morrison of Basildon Park in Berkshire. Much of the island, including Finlaggan, still belongs to his descendant Lord Margadale.

## The name Finlaggan

Finlaggan is a modern place-name coined in the 1860s for the farm at the north end of Loch Finlaggan. The farm was previously known as Portanellan, from the Gaelic for 'ferry point of the island', and the loch was known as the Loch of Portanellan or Loch Finlaggan in the 19th century (Balfour 1845: 23). It has consistently been named Loch Finlaggan on maps since the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map of 1878.

Two earlier maps introduce some element of confusion to this picture. First, there is the map of Islay based on a now lost late 16th-century original survey by Timothy Pont, first published by the Amsterdam-based mapmaker Joan Blaeu in the mid-17th century (Stone 1991: 84, pl 40). It does not require much comparison with modern maps to see that Blaeu's is fatally flawed, among the most inaccurate in his atlas. There is a loch which approximately corresponds with the position of Loch Finlaggan with an island residence labelled 'Ylen Euldagan', not improbably a corrupt rendering of

'Ylane Inlagane' (Finlaggan's Island), as, for instance, in the Islay rental of 1509 (Smith 1895: 484). This loch, however, is depicted with a river flowing from it into the Sound of Islay and what is evidently the castle in Loch Gorm is described as 'Castel of Falinghan or Finlagan'.

The second map is George Langlands's 1801 map of Argyllshire (Callender & Macaulay 1984: 12), some details of which do not inspire much more confidence than Blaeu's work (Illus 2.1). It shows the settlement of 'Portineilan' just to the north-west of the loch. It is represented by two solid blocks to indicate several houses. An unnamed house is depicted in the loch and another to the east of the loch, marked as 'Finlagan'. These two houses are represented by drawings of buildings with windows and chimneys, a symbol normally reserved by Langlands for the more substantial houses belonging to proprietors and tacksmen. He may well have felt that the ruins on Eilean Mór (Gaelic for 'large island'), the name now given to the larger of the two islands, merited this form of identification, but his 'Finlagan' cannot readily be identified from contemporary rentals.

Nowadays Finlaggan is the name used for the historic site located on two islands at the north end of the loch, and this is what we mean by Finlaggan in this work. Sometimes it is also called by others a castle. As a result of our excavations it is now known that the two islands together did form a substantial castle prior to about 1300. Its contemporary name has not been identified, nor have any documentary references to it.

In the later medieval period the castle was superseded by the undefended hall, houses and other buildings of the lords of the Isles, a complex which can reasonably be labelled a palace. The smaller of the two islands is now know in Gaelic as Eilean na Comhairle, or in English translation as the Council Isle. The earliest record of this name is in the 1549 description of Finlaggan by Donald Monro, dealt with more fully below (Munro 1961: 56–57). Eilean Mór was known in medieval times as 'the Island of St Finlaggan', indicating that the name derives from a companion of St Columba (Findlugán) mentioned by the saint's biographer, Adomnán (Sharpe 1991: 173). At least that is what was believed in medieval times, and this seems a more plausible etymology to us than the suggestion that it is from the Gaelic for 'small white hollow' (Cameron Gillies 1906: 146).

Findlugán interposed himself between Columba and a 'destroyer of churches' intent on murdering him. Findlugán had

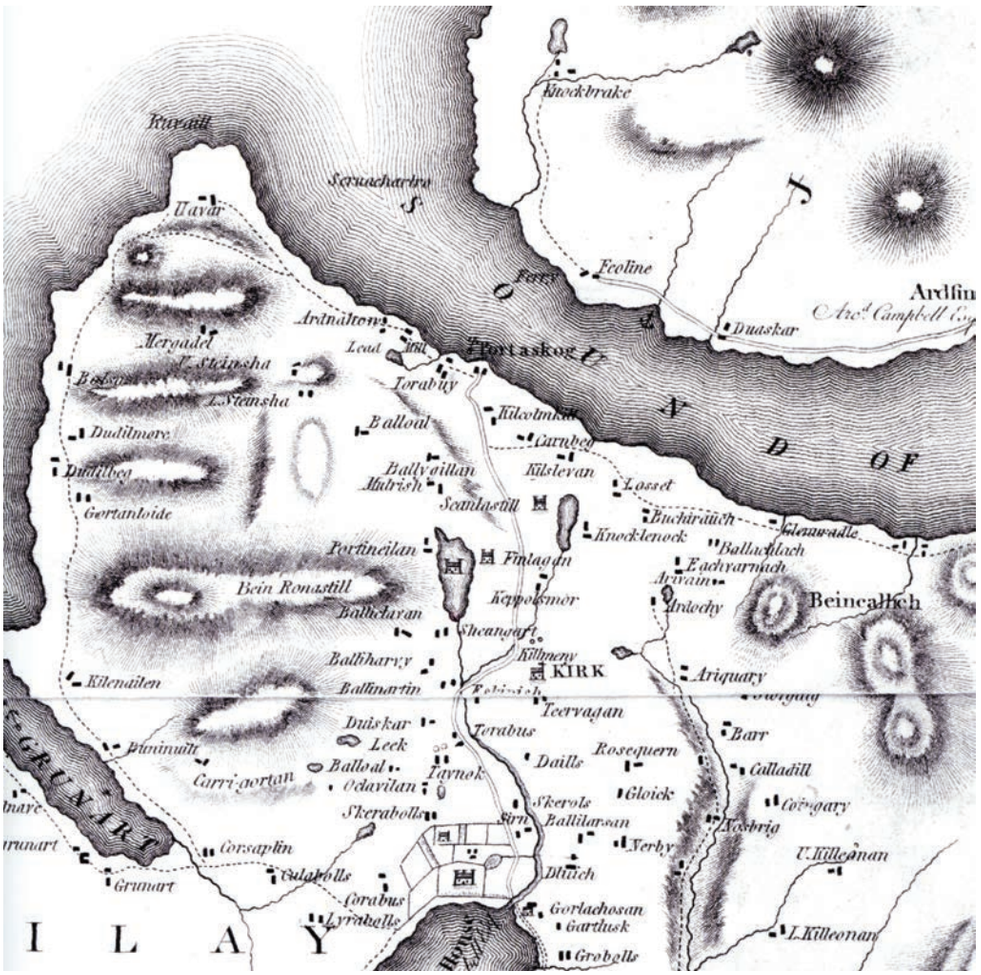



Illustration 2.1
Detail of Islay showing location of Finlaggan,
from George Langlands's map of Argyllshire, 1801

donned Columba's cowl which miraculously warded off the assassin's spear-thrust. This took place on the island of Hinba, possibly to be identified as Jura. He is also commemorated in two other Islay church names, Cill Eileagain, the ruins of an early chapel and burial ground to the north of Loch Finlaggan (RCAHMS 1984: no. 334), and at another early chapel also called Cill Eileagain at Craigens at the foot of Loch Gruinart (RCAHMS 1984: no. 333). There was an Islay family which adopted the name MacLinlagan in honour of the saint, including Archibald McLinlagan who was tenant of Stremnishbeg in the Oa in the 1686 rental (Smith 1895: 497). Findlugán is also identified as a disciple and brother of St Fintan of Dunblesque (Doon in Limerick, Ireland), being commemorated in the name of a parish and church, Tamlaght Finlagan, Co Derry, Northern Ireland, and also, under the guise of Felicianus or Finlicanus, at Bordwell in Co Laois (Ó Riain 2011: 338; Hamlin 2008: 281).

### Finlaggan in history and tradition

Hardly any trace of Finlaggan is to be found in surviving medieval documents. It has been assumed that it was one of the two dwelling houses (*mansiones*) of the lords of the Isles in Islay mentioned in a brief account of the Scottish islands in a chronicle attributed in its present form to John of Fordun (Skene 1872: 2.39). The other is thought to have been at Kilchoman thanks to Monro's 1549 description of Islay, which states that the lords of the Isles often stayed there (Munro 1961: 57). Fordun also listed Dunyvaig Castle which was to become the chief seat of Clann Iain Mhóir, descended from John (Iain Mór), the younger brother of Donald Lord of the Isles. Fordun was writing in the late 14th century and using a lot of earlier material. There is some doubt as to the extent to which this account of the islands might be earlier in date, perhaps of the late 13th century (Oram 2017: 256).

A MacDonald clan history of the late 17th or early 18th century in the *Red Book of Clanranald* chronicled how it was at the island of Finlaggan that the leaders of Clann Iain Mhóir were treacherously arrested by John MacIan of Ardnamurchan and taken to Edinburgh, where they were executed (Cameron 1894: 2.163). This was in 1499. The context was that Sir John of Dunyvaig was attempting to have himself recognised as a new lord of the Isles and MacIan was acting as a royal agent (Caldwell 2017: 70). The same history recorded that John I Lord of the Isles 'covered' the chapel of *Oilen Fionlagain* (Cameron 1894: 2.159).

Only three of the surviving acts of lords of the Isles were issued at Finlaggan. The earliest was a charter by Alexander, Lord of the Isles and Master of Ross, dated 23 June 1427 at the Isle of Saint Finlagan (Munro & Munro 1986: no. 21). The second charter, of 7 January 1432/33, also by Alexander, is only known from a 17th-century copy, and the place was given as Finlagan (Munro & Munro 1986: no. 22). The third was a notarial instrument dated 14 June 1456 in the chapel of Saint Finlacan, relating to a judgement by John, Earl of Ross and Lord of the Isles (Munro & Munro 1986: no. 62).

The earliest royal rental for Islay, drawn up in 1507, indicated that its chaplain had the quarterland of Ballachlaven to the south-west of Loch Finlaggan to support him (*ER* 12: 589). The chapel at Finlaggan had evidently been under the direct patronage of the lords of the Isles, and when chaplains were presented to it in 1503 and 1527, after the forfeiture of the lordship, they were simultaneously given the chaplaincy of the nearby chapel at Keills (*RSS* 1: no. 911; 2: no. 4566). The following chaplains of Finlaggan are recorded:

- *Sir Angus Macbreochane (MacBrayne).* The appointment of his successor in 1503 to Keills (St Colm) and St Finlaggan was consequent on the death of Sir Angus (*RSS* 1: no. 911).
- *Sir Malcolm MacGillespie.* On 18 February 1503 'sir Malcum Dungalsoun' (identified by Steer & Bannerman 1977: 123 as Sir Malcolm MacGillespie) was appointed to the chaplaincies of both Keills and St Finlaggan (*RSS* 1: no. 911). Malcolm was also rector of Kilchoman, and is known to have been dead by 24 September 1508 (*RSS* 1: no. 1735).
- *Sir Malcolm Donaldson.* On 29 September 1527 Sir Malcolm was presented to the chaplaincy of 'Illaneynlagane', vacant through the death of the previous incumbent, Sir Malcolm MacGillespie (*RSS* 1: no. 3882). Since MacGillespie was dead by 1508 (*RSS* 1: no. 1735), there appears to have been a gap of about 20 years when Finlaggan did not have a chaplain.
- *Sir Archibald MacGillivray.* Sir Malcolm Donaldson was succeeded as chaplain in 1542 by Sir Archibald MacGillivray. He was also a notary public and held other church appointments, including the rectory of Kilchoman, Islay, from 1547 (Maclean-Bristol 1992: 4–5) and the rectory of Kildalton from 1549 (*RSS* 4: no. 28).

It is regrettable that the main written sources for Finlaggan's role and importance as an administrative and ritual centre date to the period after the forfeiture of the lords of the Isles. The earliest and most informative of these occurs in a manuscript listing and describing the Western Isles, compiled by Donald Monro in 1549:

> Ellan Finlagan in the middis of Ila ane fair Ile in fresh water Loch. Into this Ile of Finlagan the Lordis of the Iles, quhen thai callit thame sellfis Kings of the Iles, had wont to remain oft in this Ile forsaid to thair counsell: for thai had the Ile well biggit in palace-wark according to thair auld fassoun, quhairin thai had ane fair chapell. Besides this Ile be ane pennystane cast till it thair is ane uther Ile sumquhat les, fair and round, quhairin thai had thair Counselhouse biggit, throw the quhilk the said Ile is callit in Irish Ellan na commharle, and in English is callit the Counsell-Ile. In this Ile thair conveinit 14 of the Iles best Barons, that is to say, four greatest of the Nobles callit Lords; to wit Mcgillane of Doward, McGillane of Lochbuy, Mccloyde of Saray, and Mccloyde of Leozus. Thir four Barons forsaid might be callit Lords, and were haldin as Lords at sic time. Four thanes of les living and estate; to wit, Mcginnihin, Mcnaie, Mcneill of Gighay and Mcneill of Barray. Uther four great men of living of thair royall blude of Clan-donald lineally descendit; to wit Clan-donald of Kintyre, Mcane of Ardnanmirquhame, Clan-Ronald, and Clan-Alister Carryche in Lochaber; with the Bishop and the Abbot of Iccolmkill. Thir 14 persons sat down into the Counsell-Ile, and decernit, decreitit and gave suits furth upon all debaitable matters according to the Laws made be Renald

> McSomharkle callit in his time King of the Occident Iles, and albeit thair Lord were at his hunting or at ony uther games, zit thai sate every ane at thair Counsell ministring justice. In thair time thair was great peace and welth in the Iles throw the ministration of justice. (Munro 1961: 56–57)

Monro was dean of the Isles and lived close enough to the time of the lordship to have collected genuine information about it. His account is particularly important for its description of the meetings of the Council of the Isles and the list of councillors, including Macleans, MacLeods, MacNeils, MacKinnon, the leaders of Clan Donald (MacDonald of Kintyre, MacIan of Ardnamurchan, Clanranald, Keppoch), and the bishop of the Isles and abbot of Iona. Only the identification of 'Mcnaie' poses problems. Macquarrie of Ulva has been suggested (RCAHMS 1984: 281), though perhaps MacKay (of the Rhinns of Islay) is more likely.

Boardman (2013: 156–61) has suggested that Monro's knowledge of the council and its councillors owed more to its revival or 'historical re-imagining' during the uprising of Donald Dubh, grandson of John II, in 1544–45. While Monro would most probably have been well aware of events five years earlier, he may well have had access to documentary sources that do not survive today. Donald Dubh and his supporters were appealing for a return to an earlier order, and may have taken some trouble to recreate a historically accurate council. Monro's account is also the only actual description of Finlaggan until that of Martin Martin at the end of the 17th century, described below.

The medieval importance of Finlaggan was remembered in a history of the MacDonalds written in the reign of Charles II (1660–85), the so-called 'Sleat history' (by Hugh MacDonald of Skye?). It contains the earliest and fullest account of the inauguration ceremonies for new lords of the Isles:

> I thought fit to annex the ceremony of proclaiming the Lord of the Isles. At this the Bishop of Argyle, the Bishop of the Isles, and seven priests, were sometimes present; but a Bishop was always present, with the chieftains of all the principal families, and a *Ruler of the Isles*. There was a square stone, seven or eight feet long, and the tract of a man's foot cut thereon, upon which he stood, denoting that he should walk in the footsteps and uprightness of his predecessors, and that he was installed by right in his possessions. He was clothed in a white habit, to shew his innocence and integrity of heart, that he would be a light to his people, and maintain the true religion. The white apparel did afterwards belong to the poet by right. Then he was to receive a white rod in his hand, intimating that he had power to rule, not with tyranny and partiality, but with discretion and sincerity. Then he received his forefathers' sword, or some other sword, signifying that his duty was to protect and defend them from the incursions of their enemies in peace or war, as the obligations and customs of his predecessors were. The ceremony being over, mass was said after the blessing of the bishop and seven priests, the people pouring their prayer for the success and prosperity of their new created Lord. When they were dismissed, the Lord of the Isles feasted them for a week thereafter; gave liberally without any exception of persons. The constitution or government of the Isles was thus: MacDonald had his council at Island Finlaggan, in Isla, to the number of sixteen, viz., four Thanes, four Armins, that is to say, Lords or sub-Thanes, four Bastards (*i.e.*) Squires, or men of competent estates, who could not come up with Armins or Thanes, that is, freeholders, or men that had their lands in factory, as Macgee of the Rinds of Isla, MacNicoll in Portree in Sky, and MacEachern, MacKay, and MacGillivray in Mull, Macillemhaoel or MacMillan, &c. There was a table of stone where this council sat in the Isle of Finlaggan; the which table, with the stone on which Macdonald sat, were carried away by Argyle with the bells that were at Icolumkill [Iona]. (MacPhail 1914: 24)

This 'Argyle' who carried away the table, stone and bells can be identified as the Marquess of Argyll (died 1661) (Caldwell 2003: 69).

This account has been read in the past to mean that the inauguration ceremonies for new lords took place at Finlaggan, but as Boardman (2013: 163) has pointed out, it does not specifically say so. Although this author is inclined to take the view that the juxtaposition of the account of inaugurations with the meeting of the council at Finlaggan indicates that Finlaggan was meant for both, the inauguration of Donald, son of John I, as lord of the Isles about 1387 is said to have taken place at Kildonnan in the island of Eigg. The source for this is another MacDonald clan history of the late 17th or early 18th century contained in the *Red Book of Clanranald*, but there were particular political reasons for it to be held in Eigg (Caldwell 2017: 55).

Whereas these MacDonald histories kept the memory of Finlaggan alive, there appears to be no focus on the place itself in MacDonald poetry, even in those poems written in praise of lords who would have known Finlaggan well – Angus Mor MacDonald *c* 1250 (Bergin 1970: no. 45) and John II Lord of the Isles *c* 1490 (Ó Mainnín 1999: 15–16; McLeod 2004: 185–87). The surviving corpus of Gaelic poetry from the period of the Lordship of the Isles, or that harks back to it as a golden age, is relatively small and possibly not representative, but a general lack of interest in Scottish matters, in favour of a stress on Irish connections, has been detected (McLeod 2004: 114–15).

Any mention of Finlaggan is missing from the well-informed report on Islay in Walter Macfarlane's *Geographical Collections* (Mitchell 1907: 2.188–91). It talks of improvements to Dunyvaig Castle but lately done by James MacDonald, suggesting it was composed not long after the siege of 1615. It also mentions the ruined castle in Loch Gorm. It is perhaps dangerous to make too much of negative evidence, but this suggests that by about 1620 Finlaggan was a place of no consequence.

A 17th-century scholar who does specifically mention Finlaggan is Martin Martin in his *Description of the Western Isles* written in the 1690s. Martin was a Skye gentleman with a keen sense of what was interesting and important in his own territory and among his own people. He was probably aware – perhaps just indirectly – of the previous two accounts by Monro and the Sleat history. Martin specifically locates the inauguration ceremonies at Finlaggan and adds information on the lords' bodyguard:

> Loch-Finlagan, about three miles in circumference, affords salmon, trouts, and eels: this lake lies in the centre of the

> isle. The isle Finlagan, from which the lake hath its name, is in it. It is famous for being once the court in which the great Macdonald, King of the Isles, had his residence; his houses, chapel, etc, are now ruinous. His guards *de corps*, called Lucht-tach, kept guard on the lake side nearest to the isle; the walls of their houses are still to be seen there.
>
> The High Court of Judicature, consisting of fourteen, sat always here; and there was an appeal to them from all the Courts in the isles: the eleventh share of the sum in debate was due to the principal judge. There was a big stone of seven feet square, in which there was a deep impression made to receive the feet of Macdonald; for he was crowned king of the Isles standing in this stone, and swore that he would continue his vassals in the possession of their lands, and do exact justice to all his subjects: and then his father's sword was put into his hand. The Bishop of Argyll and seven priests anointed him king, in presence of all the heads of the tribes in the isles and continent, and were his vassals; at which time the orator rehearsed a catalogue of his ancestors, etc. (Martin 1703: 240–41)

The Islay rental of 1722 has marginal notes on several of the touns. The one for Portanellan is particularly full and worth giving here as an indication of what was then understood about Finlaggan by local people:

> Portnellan is a large good possession both for sowing & stock; adjacent to a large fresh water loch in quhich there is a chapell and a buriall place and the ruines of several other good houses, which was the great M$^{c}$Donald of Isla his dwelling place and very famous; and adjacent to quhich isle is a little round island quhairin the great M$^{c}$Donald kept his Cunsell of fifteen seniors, and of quhich the famous Buchanan in his Scots Cronicles gives a large account. And it is alleged that our Scots Councill of 15 Lords was first erected in imitation of the great McDonald his Councill in the said island. (Smith 1895: 533)

George Buchanan does indeed give a large account of Finlaggan in his *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, first published in 1582, but it is derived totally from Donald Monro (Munro 1961: 26–29).

Finlaggan was visited in 1772 by the Welsh travel writer Thomas Pennant. His book draws on previous accounts and traditions, mentioning the meetings of the Council of the Isles, the traces of the houses of the lords' bodyguards on the loch shores, and the stone on which the great MacDonald stood when he was crowned king of the Isles. Hitherto unrecorded information includes the statement that the wives and children of the lords of the Isles were buried on Eilean Mór, while the lords themselves were interred on Iona. By the mid-19th century the tradition that only women and children had been buried at Finlaggan was developed to such an extent that MacDonald (1850: 19) could confidently assert that Princess Margaret, the second wife of John I Lord of the Isles, the Countess of Ross, and Lady Margaret Livingstone (meaning Elizabeth, wife of John II Lord?) were all interred here.

Pennant also describes the remains of a pier on the shore of the loch with a stone cut with 'A.II' for '*Œneas* the second, one of the lords of the isles', meaning Angus Òg, the supporter of Robert Bruce (Pennant 1774: 259; see Chapter 5 below, archaeological monument no. 40). Pennant would have been lucky to find this without help, but does not give any clues as to who might have been his guide.

Accounts of Finlaggan from the 19th and early 20th century conjure up an image of two islands, little visited judging by the difficulty of access and lush, wild vegetation (Balfour 1845: 23; MacLagan 1883: 37–38; Graham 1895: 27–32; Grant 1935: 402–5). Otherwise, they contain little or no worthwhile new information on Finlaggan. MacDonald, writing in 1850 (p 23), may be reporting a tradition of some age, and possible merit, when he identifies the area with rigs at the east end of Eilean Mór as a garden where the magnates joined the people in the 'mazy dance', but it is much harder to give any credence to his statement that a nearby ruin (building C – the structure with upstanding gables) was the house of the Pope's legate when anointing and crowning the kings of the Isles.

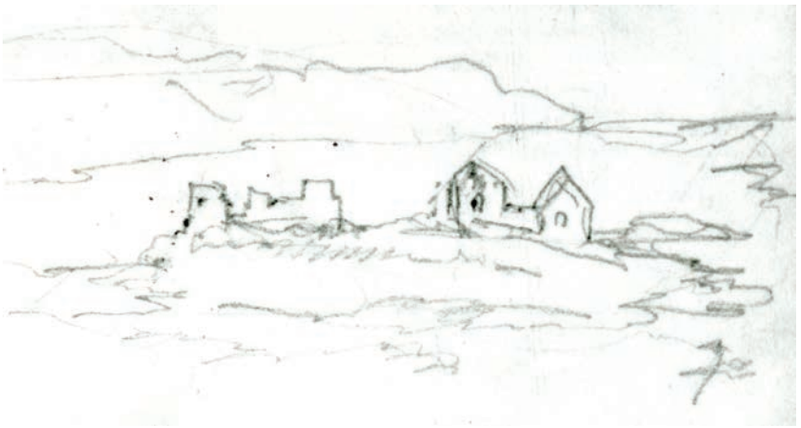
The earliest surviving images of Finlaggan appear to be those in one of the sketch books of the artist J M W Turner, in Tate Britain, London (Illus 2.2). It is described as 'Stirling and the West sketch book' (Finberg 1909: no. CCLXX, pp 868–71), used on a trip in 1831 to gather illustrative material for a new edition of Sir Walter Scott's poetical works, including *The Lord of the Isles*. There are at least four pages (39, 70a, 72, 73a) with views of Finlaggan showing the ruins of the chapel and building C on Eilean Mór, little changed from how they appear nowadays. Turner's sketches were not developed into published illustrations.

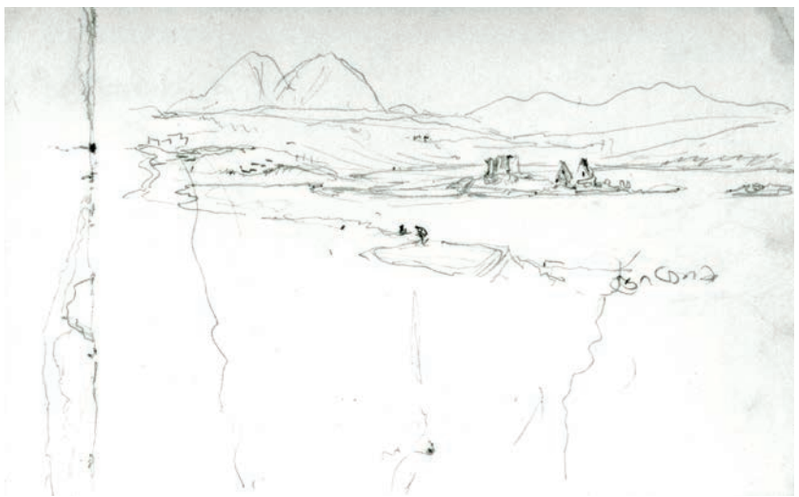
Sir Walter Scott's *The Lord of the Isles*, first published in 1815, was very popular and influential in encouraging renewed interest in the Lordship of the Isles. It actually contains no mention of Finlaggan, either in the body of the poem or the extensive historical notes that accompany it. Nor is there any mention of Finlaggan in another important early 19th-century work, the *History of the Western Highlands and Isles of Scotland* by Donald Gregory, published in 1836.

The earliest published illustration of Finlaggan is contained between pages 68 and 69 in a travel account by 'Gowrie' printed in 1868. He merely viewed the two islands from the edge of the loch, and his sketch, which is a reasonable representation of the chapel and 'building C', does not offer any additional information to that which can be deduced from these ruins today.

In more recent times two works have been particularly influential in bringing Finlaggan to the attention of scholars. First, there is the edition of Monro's *Western Isles of Scotland* published by R W Munro in 1961, with an appendix (pp 95–110) ostensibly about the Council of the Isles but containing much more detailed information on Finlaggan in history. Second, there is the site description by RCAHMS, published in volume 5 of its Inventory of Argyll Monuments in 1984 (RCAHMS 1984: no. 404). It has the first accurate and detailed plan of the remains on the two islands.

The accounts of Finlaggan, from Monro in 1549 to the Royal Commission in 1984, easily allow the conclusion that this was the centre of the Lordship of the Isles – not the only residence of the lords, but the place where key events like inaugurations of new lords and council meetings took place. It also appeared to be significantly different as a centre of power from other lordly residences within the Lordship of the Isles, and noble and royal castles and palaces elsewhere in Scotland.





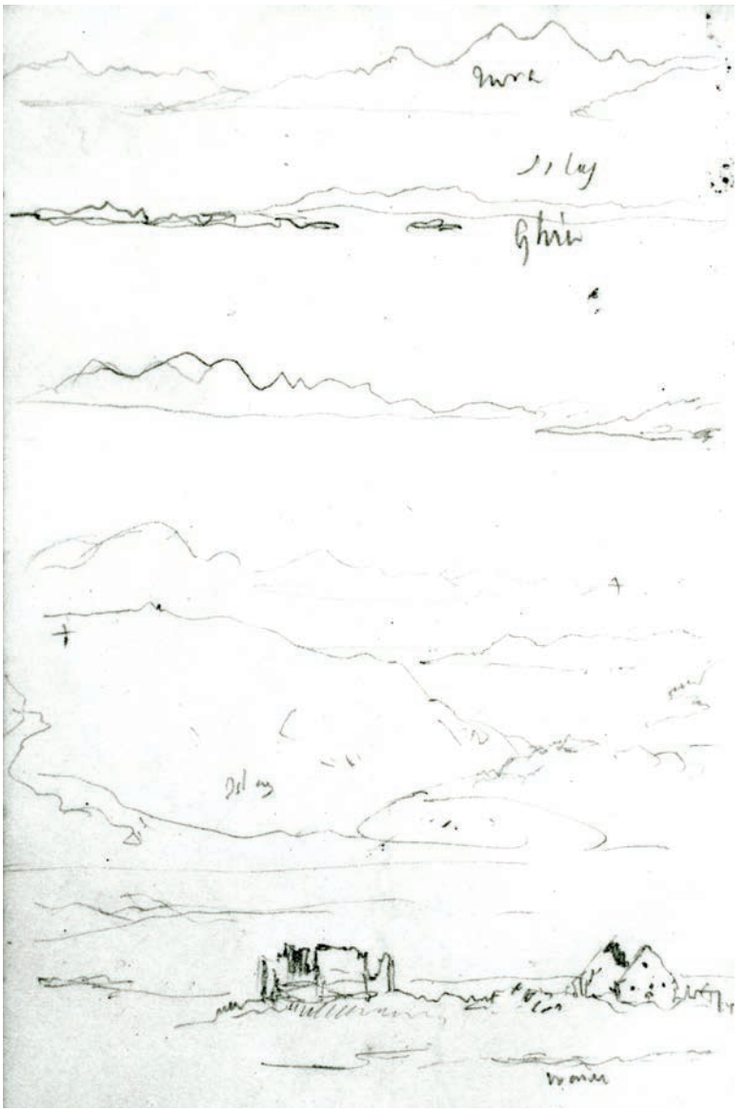


Illustration 2.2
Sketches of Finlaggan in 1831 by J M W Turner, from Tate Britain, Turner sketch book no. CCLXX, 70a, 72, 73a. © Tate

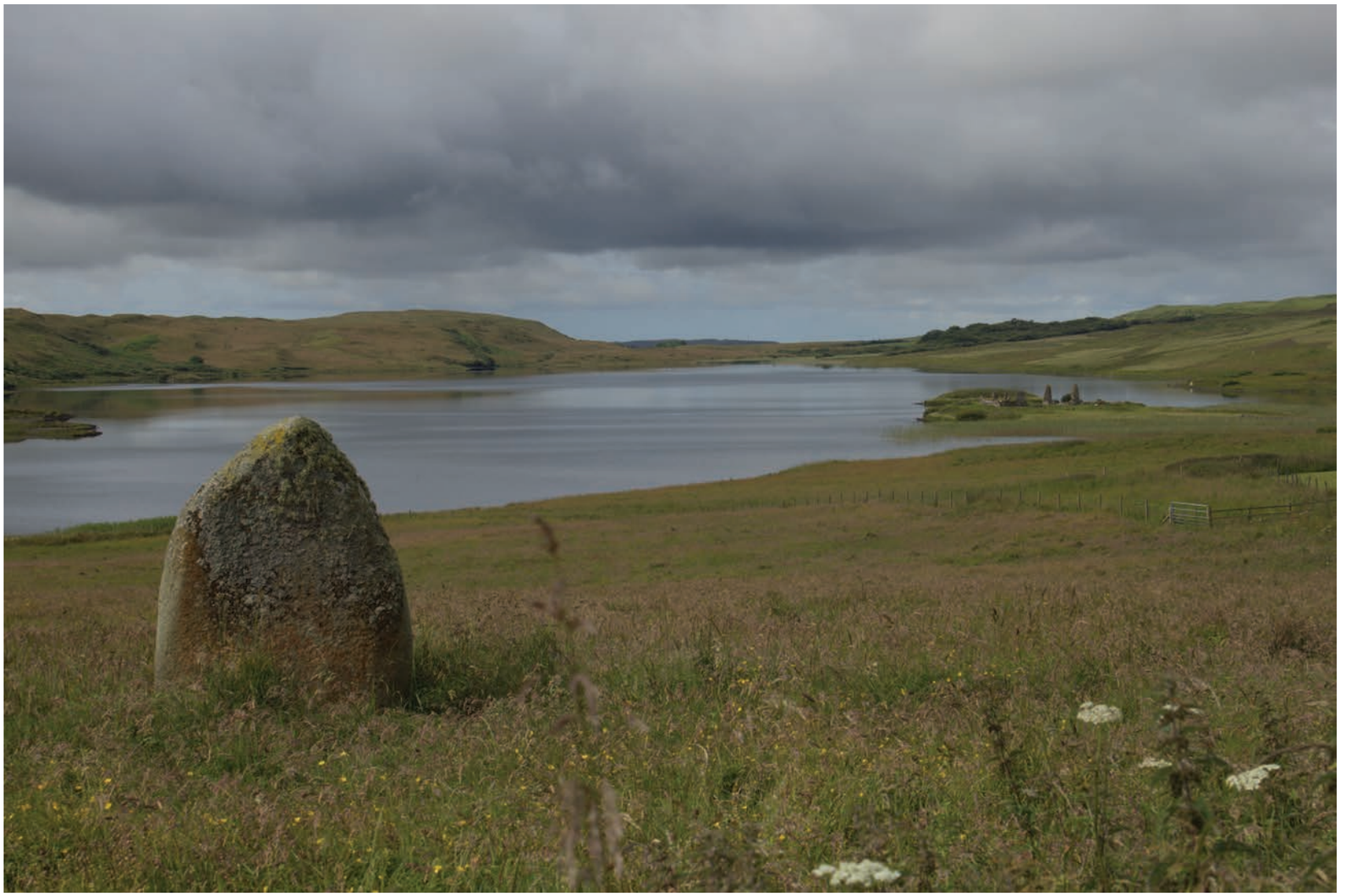


Illustration 3.1
Loch Finlaggan looking south-westwards from the standing stone (no. 47) to the historic island site of Finlaggan