

THE MAKING OF A FRONTIER: THE FIRTHLANDS FROM THE NINTH TO TWELFTH CENTURIES

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The clash between Norse and Scots (or Picts) was a perennial feature of the northern and western parts of this country for most of the Middle Ages. Wherever the Norseman settled he came into contact, and most probably conflict, with the indigenous population. Although the apparent disappearance of the Picts in the Northern Isles is something of a mystery, it does not seem likely that they disappeared without putting up at least a show of resistance. But the impact of the Norse was so overwhelming that the Pictish population failed to retain any hold of their lands in those islands. The Hebrides provide rather more evidence of resistance at the outset, and then intermingling between the native Gaelic population and the Norse raiders and settlers. But native Gaelic culture re-asserted itself, and Scottish political control was established by the medieval kings of Scotland, ambitious to control the islands round their coasts.

The north Scottish mainland provides an area where Norse and Scots also clashed although it was never, in recorded history, under Norwegian political control. However both Caithness and Sutherland were firmly under the rule of the Norwegian earls of Orkney until their power was undermined by the advancing Scottish kings in the thirteenth century. The earls' political control was based on widespread settlement by Norse-speaking peoples as far south as the Dornoch Firth or Kyle of Sutherland, so that to all intents and purposes the territory north of that waterway was part of the Norse world from the ninth to the thirteenth century. South of that waterway was a disputed region, and the firthlands of Easter Ross were a frontier territory during the same period. Lying between Sutherland and Caithness to the north and the Scottish province of Moray to the south and west [Fig. 3.1], these low-lying peninsulas and the waterways between them were subject to the ebb and flow of Norse and Scottish control.

There was no obvious geographical reason why the Norse should have contented themselves with the Dornoch Firth as the southern limit to their expansion. It certainly became the traditional and remembered limit of Norse control, for thirteenth-century Icelandic saga writers refer to *Ekkialsbakki* as the extent of the conquests of some of the early earls; this is thought to be the banks of the Oykell River, which flows into the Dornoch Firth [Fig. 3.1]. But it is quite clear that the Norse attempted to control land to the south both politically and territorially.

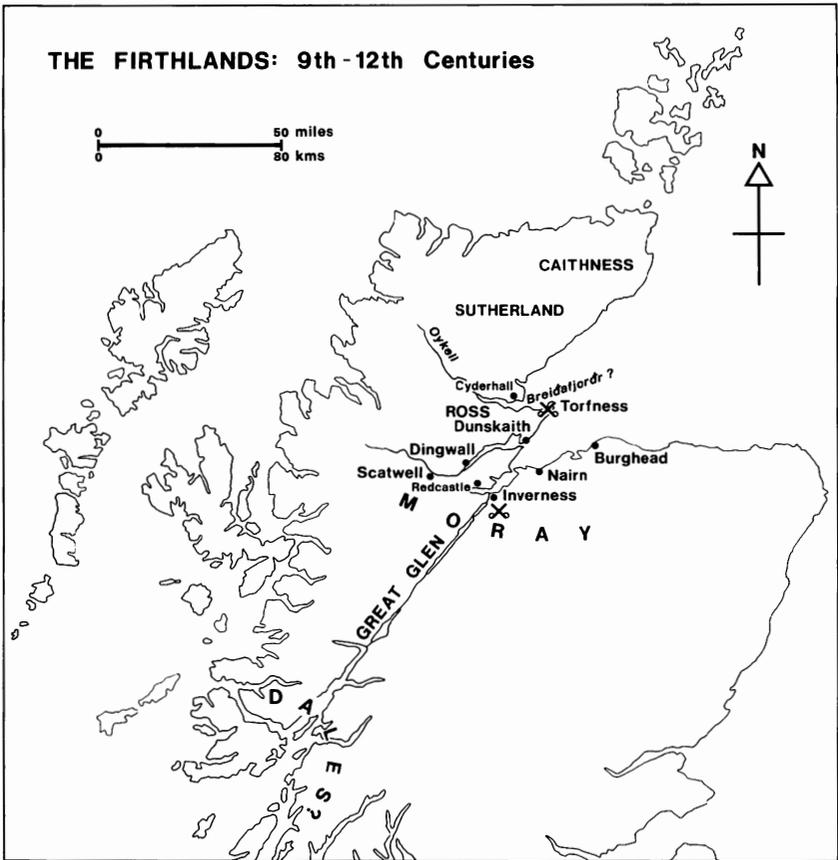


Fig. 3.1 The Firthlands: ninth–twelfth centuries.

Evidence for repeated attempts at political conquest comes from the saga of the Earls (*Orkneyinga Saga*) which tells of their campaigns in this region during three phases: the late ninth century; the late tenth and early eleventh centuries; and the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Evidence for territorial settlement comes from the place-names of the Tarbat peninsula and the Black Isle, and the valleys running to the west, where there are a sprinkling of recognizably Norse place-names on the 1 in. Ordnance Survey map, and probably more on the ground. These range from the farm-names Cadboll (ON *kattar-ból*, 'farm of the cats'), Arboll (ON *ork-ból*, possibly 'seal farm'), to topographical names such as Bindal (ON *bind-dalr*, 'sheaf-dale'), Geanies (derived from ON *giá*, 'coastal inlet'), and names of administrative significance such as Dingwall (ON *þing-völfr*, 'field of the assembly') and Scatwell (ON *skattr-völfr*, 'tax-field'). Some Norse names have gone out of use within historical memory, such as Scuddel (cf. Sculdale in Caithness and Orkney), replaced

by Conon Bridge but recorded on the monument at Bonar Bridge [Fig. 12.21], and no doubt many others long before. In total they bear witness to the influence among the native Gaelic farmers of Norse-speaking residents whose presence we would not know about otherwise.

The attraction of good land is, of course, one reason why the Norse earls pressed south of the Dornoch Firth in the conquering phases. Easily-cultivated sandy soils such as the coastal farm-lands of the Tarbat peninsula and the Black Isle were always a magnet for those Vikings who wished to settle rather than spend a lifetime raiding. It is very noticeable how Norse place-names are concentrated in such localities around the shores of the firthinglands, including Sutherland. The apparent absence of pagan grave-goods south of the Dornoch Firth suggests that the settlement of this region took place at a time when Christianity had begun to exercise some influence on the Norse (perhaps tenth century?).

But there may have been other reasons why the earls were prepared to spend their time and resources in attempting to control these waterways. They lead to that major artery which cuts northern Scotland in two and provides access from coast to coast: the Great Glen [Fig. 3.1]. The historical significance of this remarkable geological feature, which forms a 'direct and relatively easy route between the southern Hebrides and the Moray Firth' (Barrow 1981. 105) has not been sufficiently recognized. For any Scandinavian chieftain aspiring to control both the former and the latter it was the obvious means of communication between the two. As will be discussed, there were earls of Orkney and Caithness who did attempt to rule in the Hebrides also, and they were the ones who were prepared to expend resources in striving with Celtic rulers for mastery of the firthinglands. This may have been in order to ensure free access to the Great Glen and the maintenance of a through route to the south-west, thus avoiding the long sail round the north-eastern tip of Caithness, the turbulent waters along the north coast of Scotland, the headland of Cape Wrath and the long sail south through the Minch.

LATE NINTH CENTURY: SIGURD THE MIGHTY AND THORSTEIN THE RED

The first phase in which Ross and the firthinglands were a theatre of war was as early as the late ninth century, at a time when the whole of Scotland had been suffering from the incursions of the Vikings for some decades. In this period two powerful Norse dynasties had gained control over the two island groups, the Northern and the Western (or to the Norse, the Southern) Isles.

In Orkney the family of Rognvald of Møre had dominated the turbulent viking element and were ruling this fertile archipelago as 'jarls', either by virtue of their own military overlordship or, as later saga-writers preferred to remember, by virtue of a grant from the powerful king of Norway, Harald Fine-Hair. The first of this family to be remembered as Earl of Orkney was Rognvald's brother, Sigurd, called *hinn riki*, 'the Mighty'

[Fig. 3.2]. In the West, by contrast, a son of one of Norway's leading chieftains, Ketil Flatnose, had gained power and was remembered later as the ruler of the Hebrides, but without title of either king or earl. He was said to have been sent by Harald Fine-Hair in the first instance, but he had abandoned any pretence of ruling as Harald's representative and established an independent empire allied with the Norse kingdom of Dublin, for he married his daughter Aud to the king of Dublin, Olaf the White. Some of the facts and much of the chronology of these early Viking entities in the west are dubious, but there was a strong Icelandic tradition about Ketil's family and particularly about the son of Aud and Olaf of Dublin, Thorstein the Red [Fig. 3.2]. This tradition remembered that Thorstein had conquered north Scotland in partnership with Earl Sigurd of Orkney. The reason why Thorstein turned his attention to the north Scottish mainland may have been connected with the difficulties which the Norsemen seem to have been experiencing in the Hebrides at this time, which led many of them to move north to Iceland in a fresh settlement phase in the third quarter of the ninth century.

The partnership between Thorstein and Sigurd seems, therefore, to have been a deliberate one designed to carve up northern Scotland between them — Sigurd moving south across the Pentland Firth from Orkney, Thorstein perhaps moving up the Great Glen from the Hebrides. Nothing is known of the terms of any agreement made between them; the recorded information about their successes is brief indeed. We are only told that they 'won all Caithness and much more of Scotland, Moray and Ross' (*Orkneyinga Saga*), and that Thorstein was actually made king over these lands (*Book of Settlements*). But this onslaught probably receives some corroboration from the contemporary record in the *Chronicle of the Kings of Scotland* that the Northmen 'wasted' Pictland during the reign of Donald Constantine's son (889–900). What was 'wasting' to the natives was 'conquest' to the Norse, for they would have raided over a much larger area than they finally exercised any permanent control over, or settled in. A symbol of their conquest was raised by Sigurd who is said to have built a castle 'in the south of Moray' thought, without any very good reason, to have been Burghead on the coast of Moray.

This aggressive partnership may not have lasted very long, however, for Thorstein was killed in battle against the Scots and Sigurd met his death in some encounter with a native earl called Maelbrigte. Legendary accretions have developed around this incident which have strong Celtic overtones, according to a recent study of the story in *Orkneyinga Saga* (Almqvist 1978–79. 97–98). These overtones are, first, the practice of cutting off the head of your adversary and hanging it on your saddle bow, as Sigurd is said to have done with Maelbrigte's head; second, the theme of the head of a slain man avenging the former bearer of the head, which is what happened when the long tooth sticking out of Maelbrigte's severed head jabbed Sigurd's leg as he was riding, from which wound he later died. This story in the saga therefore tells us rather more about the Celtic elaborations which at some point in the transmission of the story of Sigurd's death became

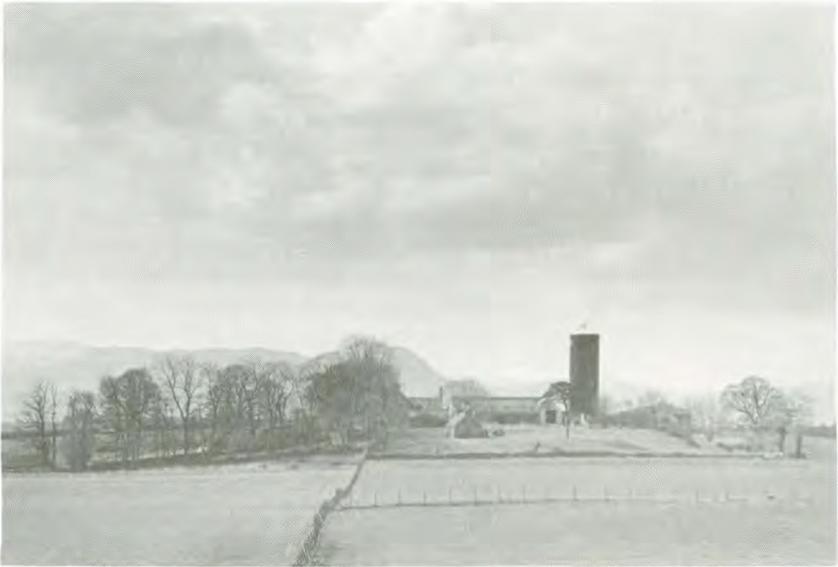


Fig. 3.3 The present-day farm of Cyderhall, a few hundred metres south-west of the alleged burial site of Earl Sigurd the Mighty.

attached to the actual historical details, and which, of course, are of significance for hinting at the blending of Celtic with Norse elements in the Orkney earldom.

There is little doubt, however, that Sigurd did die while establishing Norse authority in the frontier territory south of the Dornoch Firth, for the place where he was buried was well-remembered, and such early traditions are surely among the most reliable details to be found in the whole history of the colourful lives of the Orkney earls. He was laid in a mound at *Ekkialsbakki*, on the banks of the Oykeell, mentioned already as forming an important frontier between Norse and Scottish territory, and strongly suggesting that this marked the southernmost limit of his and Thorstein's permanent conquests. For an earl would be buried only in safe territory, while the raising of a 'howe' which could be seen by his enemies across the Firth was an aggressive marker of Norse possession as well as of Norse paganism.

Indeed the site of Sigurd's burial became known as 'Sigurd's howe', and that name has survived in a very corrupted form to the present day. Its survival is at one and the same time a testimony to the remarkable permanency of place-names, and to the ease with which they can be corrupted and turned into something entirely different! If it were not for the survival of a thirteenth-century form of the name it would probably not be recognized today for what in reality it is. The present form of the name is Cyderhall, a farm on the north side of the Dornoch Firth, where the Oykeell widens out into an estuary [Figs. 3.1; 3.3]. It was the famous



Fig. 3.4 Local tradition places Sigurd's howe on Cnoc Skardie, a hillock just to the west (left) of the farm track now bisecting the sinuous glacial ridge in the lower part of the aerial photograph (Mr Munro of Cyderhall, 29 March 1971 *comm.* to RCAHMS).

Scottish antiquary Joseph Anderson, writer of the introduction to Hjaltalin and Goudie's translation of the *Orkneyinga Saga* in 1873, who first recognized that this name (or Sidera, as it was sometimes written) was in reality the name 'Sigurd's howe'. In the first half of the thirteenth century it appears as *Syvardhoch* (*Caithness and Sutherland Records*, no. 9). Local tradition apparently locates the site to a mound known as Cnoc Skardie [NH 76238915] (ON *skarð*, a 'notch' or 'defile', used of a saddle between hills), one of a line of geological deposits on the south-east bank of the Evelix River, 0.8 km (0.5 mls.) from the present farm of

Cyderhall [Fig. 3.4]. It is exceedingly difficult, however, to recognize which of the mounds could have been a burial howe, and only excavation might prove the exact location. Nonetheless the conjunction of historical, toponymic and topographical evidence in this instance provides a classic example of the interdisciplinary approach which it is necessary to take when studying this early historic period.

With Sigurd and Thorstein's deaths (c. 890 × 892) this phase of conquest came to an end. It is more unlikely that their conquests would have been maintained, for there do not appear to have been any strong successors immediately in line. In fact, it is said that great unrest ensued and that many Vikings established themselves in the north. There was also the continuation of a native line of 'earls' in Caithness who married into the families of Thorstein the Red and the earls of Orkney [Fig. 3.2].

LATE TENTH–EARLY ELEVENTH CENTURY: SIGURD THE STOUT AND THORFINN THE MIGHTY

Not until the end of the tenth century did the earls of Orkney begin another campaign to establish political control further south than their earldom lands of Caithness and Sutherland. Quite clearly the main obstacle to their progress was the native dynasty in Moray, the descendants of the branch of the Dalriadic Scots, the Cenel Loairn, who had established themselves in this area some centuries earlier. To the author of the saga they were 'kings of Scots', and their aggressive intentions towards the Norse quite clearly emerge from the saga account of battles fought between them as far north as Caithness.

Territorial Expansion

It was a second Sigurd, another powerful warrior of the calibre of the earlier Sigurd, who initiated the most successful period of the Orkney earldom when the earls extended their authority over the Hebrides and northern parts of the Scottish mainland. Sigurd 'the Stout' is said to have been a 'mighty chief, with wide dominions. By main force he held Caithness against the Scots, and every summer had a war cruise abroad. He harried in the Hebrides, in Scotland and Ireland' (*Orkneyinga Saga*).

Strong traditions about the battle of Clontarf (1014) prove that Sigurd was directly involved in the attempt of the Norse Dubliners to resist the Irish push to dislodge them, but it was an attempt in which he lost his life. According to the theory discussed above, it seems therefore likely that Earl Sigurd II would also have wished to use the direct route between his northern Scottish lands and the Hebrides and the Irish Sea, and have unhindered passage through the Great Glen. There are no references in the *Orkneyinga Saga* to this earl's activity in Ross or Moray, but the section on Earl Sigurd in that Saga is surprisingly brief, considering that he was one of the most famous of the Orkney earls and well-remembered in Icelandic tradition. However, one Icelandic saga does say that he 'owned Ross and

Moray, Sutherland and the Dales'. The latter name, although very un-specific, is later used with reference to the territory of Argyll, around the western end of the Great Glen [Fig. 3.1]. If Sigurd really did control this area then it is obvious that he would have used the Great Glen as a means of communication between the west coast and his northern possessions, and renewed Norse activity in the firthlands of Ross and Moray can be assumed.

Such activity is fully described in the saga of his famous son, Thorfinn *hinn riki* ('the Mighty') who, despite the disaster of Clontarf and the consequent reduction of Orkney power in the Hebrides, managed to rebuild his father's empire and indeed to extend it even further south. He achieved this in the firthlands by defeating a powerful member of the Moray dynasty known to the saga-writer as 'Karl Hundison' ('son of a dog'), who is also called 'king of Scots'. It seems very probable that once more this is the Norse name for a ruler of Moray, and by this stage in the history of Scotland it should be possible to recognize which 'mormaer' of Moray this might be. But different suggestions have been made. One of the successors of Malcolm of Moray (d. 1029) seems obvious, but whether Gillecomgain (1029-32) or the more famous Macbeth (ruler of Moray 1032; king of Scots 1040-57) is not clear.

Two battles between Thorfinn and Karl Hundison are described in the saga, one a sea fight off Deerness in the Orkneys, the other on land at *Torfness*, said to be 'in the south of the Moray Firth' (*Breiðafjorðr*). Here we are faced with the problem of a specific name for a location, but a name which has disappeared. Karl Hundison was in possession of a fleet, and also collected a large army together in order to attack Thorfinn and to avenge his earlier defeat off Deerness and the murder of his nephew Mumtan/Moddan by one of Thorfinn's close followers. It is likely, therefore, that he would have sailed out from Moray in order to come to battle with Thorfinn. Further, the saga says that Thorfinn and his follower Thorkell Fostri lay off the coast of Moray and that Thorkell raised a force in Ross, which suggests that they were exercising some authority in this locality. In these circumstances the battle is likely to have taken place on Tarbat Ness, accessible to fleets from both south and north. Is it possible to describe Tarbat Ness as lying in the south of the Moray Firth? Perhaps the Norse name *Breiðafjorðr* ('Broad Firth') really applied to the waters *north* of the Tarbat peninsula, and was in fact the Dornoch Firth [Fig. 3.1]?

The saga account provides a rare picture of the earl accoutred for battle at Torfness and leading his troops: he had a gilded helmet on his head and wielded his sword and a great spear. His victory was praised by his skald, Arnor, and the Scottish king fled. So assured did the young earl feel after this decisive event that he is said to have harried far and wide throughout Scotland, even as far south as Fife. His ships, however, were left in the firthlands and he marched through Scotland, suggesting that he was assured of his position indeed, not to have his fleet with him close at hand in case of a forced retreat. This victory must certainly have given Thorfinn

political control of the firthlands and it would be surprising if, during his reign as earl of Orkney and Caithness (c.1030–c.1065), Norse administration and rule had not been firmly imposed on the territory between Sutherland and Moray.

In one important respect Thorfinn was different from the majority of the earls in the north: his mother was a member of a Scottish royal family and he had been brought up at his grandfather's court after the death of his father at Clontarf. It is said specifically in the saga that his grandfather gave him Caithness and Sutherland along with the title of earl; and although Thorfinn inherited a share of the Orkney earldom he seems to have been content to concentrate on his Scottish possessions for the first stage of his career. Not until his half-brothers had died did he take all the Orkneys under him and centre his power base there. Until that date (1030 × 1035), Caithness seems to have been his base of operations, and he looked south to Moray when expanding his area of rule. Even when his nephew, Rognvald Brusison, arrived on the scene and claimed his father's share of Orkney (1037 × 1038), Thorfinn seems to have resided mainly in Caithness.

It was in company with Rognvald that the next stage of Thorfinn's career unfolded and the two of them turned their attention to the west. In 1039 they 'harried during the summer round the coasts of the Hebrides and Ireland and far and wide round the west coast of Scotland' (*Orkneyinga Saga*). For the next eight years the two sailed together in company, successfully terrorizing the whole Irish Sea area and plundering in England. It seems highly likely that the Great Glen would supply the usual means of access between the west coast and the northern earldom, particularly when their control of the firthlands was maintained. Even after Thorfinn and Rognvald had fallen out and Rognvald was murdered (1046), there is no hint that Thorfinn ever lost control over any of the territories that had been brought under his sway. It was well known in tradition that 'he has been the most powerful of all the Orkney earls', and that he owned 'nine earldoms in Scotland, and all the Hebrides and a large realm in Ireland'. Whatever was meant by nine earldoms in Scotland, it cannot be doubted that Ross and Moray were counted among them.

Thorfinn's Administration

How was this part of Thorfinn's dominion ruled? According to the saga, Thorfinn gave up war cruises after his visit to Rome, settled in Birsay and turned his mind to governing his people and making laws. We can assume from this that some sort of governmental structures must have been imposed on his conquered territories for the administration of the population, and in particular the exaction of taxes. The saga hints at something of the kind when it says 'in those lands which he had brought under him by the sword, it seemed to many a hard lot to live under his rule'. Unfortunately, there is very little evidence of earldom administration in any parts of Norse Scotland apart from the hereditary territories of Orkney,

Shetland, Caithness and Sutherland, although there are occasional references in some of the sagas to the earls' tax-collectors in the Hebrides.

It is possible, however that the land divisions known as *ouncelands* and *pennylands*, which do occur throughout parts of the Western Isles and the western mainland of Scotland, may be relics of an earldom administration imposed for the collection of taxes. Such divisions are very clearly basic to the earldom administration in Orkney and Caithness; but they do not appear in Ross or anywhere south of the River Shin (see Bangor-Jones in this volume). This suggests that the earls' administrative control of the *firthlands* was never strong or permanent enough to leave traces of any tax-collection system in the local toponymy.

However, there are two place-names which, on the contrary, do suggest that a Norse system of administration must have been imposed in this area and to which they bear mute testimony. One is the name *Dingwall* (ON *þing-völlr*, the 'field of the Thing' or 'assembly'), a classic sign of Norse settlement anywhere in the British Isles. Remarkably, it is a place which has remained important in the administration of Ross, for it continued to be the centre of Scottish administration in the upper part of the Cromarty Firth [Fig. 3.1], although many of the 'Thingwalls' elsewhere have declined in importance. We can be sure that for a period of maybe two centuries *Dingwall*, conveniently located at the head of the Firth, was the meeting-place for legal assemblies of the Norse and Gaelic farmers of the rich lands of Easter Ross. But just as striking as the name *Dingwall* is the name *Scatwell*, a place which lies well inland and at the edge of the higher land in Strath Conon, in a location where one would never expect to meet Norse place-names at all [Fig. 3.1]. There seems no other possible explanation of this name, recorded from the fifteenth century, except a derivation from *skattr-völlr*, the field for which 'scat' or tax was paid. Watson (1904. 149), recognizing such a derivation, suggested that the 'scat' was paid for the right to use the common grazing. This is rather misleading. Although lying at the western limit of cultivable land in Strath Conon, *Scatwell* has extensive arable fields, and has every appearance of having been the centre of a wealthy and long-established estate. Moreover, it was divided into two holdings, Little and Meikle 'Scathole', as early as the fifteenth century. The original *Scatwell*, in fact, must have been a large arable holding whose name indicates that tax was paid for more than merely grazing privileges. Now payment of 'scat' was exclusively associated with the dominions of the earldom of Orkney. The earls paid 'scat' to the kings of Norway and the dues paid by the Orkney farmers were always called 'scat', while certain divisions of land were called in the rentals 'Skattlands'. It is, however, very unusual for the element to form part of a place-name, if not unprecedented. Its appearance in a name at the western limits of Easter Ross is a very strong indication that the earl's taxation system was indeed imposed in this locality; and if imposed in this corner of Ross, then undoubtedly all over the province. Why this place-name should have been given to this estate alone is one of the many mysteries of place-name studies. Could it have been because this remoter corner of Strath

Conon was not cultivated before a Norse farmer settled here in the tenth or eleventh century? The majority of existing Pictish holdings obviously retained their names, even though they may have been assessed for the payment of scat to the Orkney earls. Scatwell, however, was given a new Norse name which reflected its assessment status. This one place-name serves as a warning that the absence of *ouncelands* and *pennylands* is no proof at all that the earldom administrative system was not imposed in the Firthlands. And evidence that Ross was divided into 'quarters' may also be an indication of Norse administrative influence, as suggested by Watson (1904. xxv).

Even though governmental structures may have been established in this area, Norse control is unlikely to have long survived the death of Earl Thorfinn. The most revealing comment is made in the earl's saga that after his death 'many realms that the Earl had subdued fell away and men sought protection for themselves under the hereditary chiefs in their realms'. There is no evidence in the saga that Thorfinn's sons or grandsons attempted to maintain any control over the Hebrides or Ross and Moray, and if campaigns and battles are not mentioned we can be fairly sure that they did not take place. These earls became involved in internal struggles with rival claimants and Norwegian kings: none of them seem to have had the military qualities of the great Earl Thorfinn. Probably they did not have the resources to keep a retinue of ships and fighting men permanently employed in keeping control of territories where the population felt no loyalty to a Scandinavian dynasty. The fading of interest in the west meant that access to the Great Glen was no longer of any significance.

LATE TWELFTH–EARLY THIRTEENTH CENTURY: HARALD MADDADSSON

However, over a century later the firthlands did once more become a flashpoint between the northern earl and what was by then the Scottish establishment based in Inverness, the centre of royal administration of Moray. This marks the third and final phase in the history of the Orkney earls' attempt to assert control in the area. The earl concerned was Harald Maddadsson who, like his famous ancestor Thorfinn, was half-Scottish and who was perhaps therefore more inclined to be drawn into the northern Scottish political arena. There is also evidence from the saga of a renewed interest in Ireland in this period; at any rate by the 'ultimate' viking, Swein Asleifsson, who went on at least two expeditions accompanied by the earl's son, Hakon (1171). It may also be the case that Earl Harald was more involved in events in Ireland at this time than appears from the saga (Topping 1983. 109–12), and if so then free access through Ross to the Great Glen would once more have been desirable. The importance of an alliance with Malcolm, earl of Ross, is very evident from Earl Harald's bigamous relationship with Malcolm's daughter, Hvarflød (Gormflaith) [Fig. 3.2], and Earl Harald may have exercised some influence in Ross through this liaison, after the death of Malcolm in 1168.

If we believe Fordun, the Scottish chronicler, Harald kept himself clear of involvement in the disturbances which racked the north during the 1180s, but he finally became embroiled in rebellion against his Scottish overlord. Fordun explains Harald's behaviour as a result of goading by his wife. There is no doubt that Earl Harald was pursuing some very definite course of action when he moved south from Caithness with a military force in 1196 and 'occupied' Moray. It was a reaction to some situation, but whether it was concerned with his wife's interests in Ross or whether it was an expression of anger against some action taken by King William's representative in Moray is not entirely clear. Perhaps significantly his eldest son by this marriage possessed the name of one of the most famous of the earl's ancestors, Thorfinn; it was a name which, strangely, had never been used in the earldom family since the time of Thorfinn Sigurdsson, four generations previous.

This son was deeply involved in his father's campaigns in Moray, and the *Chronicle of Melrose* records a battle fought by him against the king's vassals near Inverness. It is quite clear that King William wished to have Thorfinn in safe custody: the English chronicler, Roger of Howden, tells the story of how Earl Harald arrived at a pre-arranged conciliation meeting at Nairn with only his two small grandsons as hostages, and was imprisoned himself in Roxburgh Castle until Thorfinn came and gave himself up to the Scottish king. Perhaps because of his blood links with the troublesome MacHeth dynasty, and maybe because of some claims through his mother, Thorfinn was a potential danger to royal authority in the north (Duncan 1975. 196). But he was finally rendered helpless by blinding and castration because, Fordun tells us, of his father's bad faith. This must relate to the turbulent events in Caithness which fill the years from 1196 to 1202 (Crawford 1976-77. 101-07).

Not only did the long arm of the king of Scots reach out to the firthlands in the late twelfth century, but right into the heartland of the earl's own domain. Two campaigns by the Scottish army penetrated right to the borders of Caithness and Sutherland, while a force even reached the earl's castle at Thurso. Meanwhile, royal castles planted at strategic points on the Beaully and Cromarty Firths (Redcastle and Dunskaith) ensured that this area would henceforth be kept under permanent royal control. Strangely enough, one of Earl Harald's sons is said in the saga to have held Ross: Henry a son of his first marriage and not therefore with any family claim to Ross through his mother. If this information can be relied upon, then it seems likely that Henry would have held Ross on a grant from the king sometime during the period before Farquhar Mactaggart was made earl of Ross in 1215.

Earl Harald and his family's involvement in the firthlands may, therefore, have been motivated by slightly different considerations from those of their ancestors who had also fought and campaigned in this frontier area. In general, however, it can be said that these low-lying eastern peninsulas, and the waterways surrounding them, were an irresistible attraction to any Orkney earl who was sufficiently powerful to be able to

look southwards for expansion. Significantly, those three earls who are named by the saga writer at the very end of the saga of Earl Harald as being 'the most powerful of the Orkney earls', that is Sigurd Eysteinnsson, Thorfinn Sigurdsson and Harald Maddadsson himself, are the very three earls who did focus their attention on the lands between Sutherland and Moray, showing that they regarded them as territory over which, for different reasons, they needed to exercise control.

Acknowledgement

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