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The break up of the kingdom of the Isles

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For the history of the Isles in the 12th and 13th centuries historians are very dependent on the *Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles*, written from a Manx perspective, perhaps mostly in 1257.¹ With few or no other sources to provide corroboration for many events, there has, perhaps, been a tendency to accept the *Chronicles'* version of events uncritically. An example of this is the division of the Kingdom of the Isles in 1156 between the Manx king, Godred Olafsson, and a local strongman, Somerled. This is understood to have created a situation where Godred and other kings based in 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 understanding 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 1266.²

What the *Chronicles* actually say (in the translation by George Broderick) is:

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.³

It should be noted that the location of the battle is not given. Wherever in the seas around Britain, however, a battle fought at sea in January seems rather unlikely, never mind one that took place in the dark. Neither of the late MacDonald histories (in the *Book of Clanranald* and by Hugh MacDonald),⁴ so often used by historians in the want of anything more reliable, refer to this battle although it offered plenty of potential to put their hero ancestor in a good light. We are therefore left with accepting the Manx *Chronicles'* account at face value.

What did the division of the kingdom actually mean? Was there an agreement, even if not written down, that had the same binding force as a treaty between two independent powers? Did Somerled, in return for recognition of his control over much of the kingdom, have to acknowledge that he owed allegiance to Godred? Or, did a battle ending in stalemate merely produce a respite in a civil war? These are three of many possible interpretations of what underlay the account in the *Chronicles*. Two years later Somerled is said to have gone to Man and defeated Godred, who fled into exile in Norway until after the death (in 1164) of Somerled.⁵ Whatever the nature of any agreement or understanding made between Godred and Somerled in 1156, these events surely overturned it. Somerled is described in an Irish source, 'Tigernach's Continuator', as 'king of the Hebrides and Kintyre'.⁶ He had added the kingship of the Isles to his kingdom or lordship of Kintyre.

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Godred re-established himself as king in 1165, after a brief attempt by his brother Rognvald to usurp his place. Godred reigned until 1187 and was buried at Iona. There is no mention between his restoration and demise of any of Somerled's progeny.

There is also no mention of which islands were taken or retained by Olaf and Somerled in 1156, and the entry in the *Chronicles* appears to roll two episodes together – firstly the partition consequent on the battle of 1156, and secondly the break-up of the kingdom by the sons of Somerled. 'Sons' (*fili*) need not be taken literally but might have been intended to mean descendants. Broderick has used 'break-up' to translate *ruine* in the original Latin although it might have been rendered into English as 'ruin', perhaps more appropriately given that the sense of the preceding statement is that there was still only one kingdom, albeit in two parts. Writing in the mid 13th century, however, the chronicler may here have been reminiscing about events in his own life time rather than ones a hundred years previously. We will suggest below that the break up, as distinct from the division of the Isles, may only date to the second quarter of the 13th century.

The Manx *Chronicles* record another division of the kingdom in 1224. In that year the partition was made by Rognvald and Olaf, the former being given Man in addition to his share, along with the title of king.⁷ Rognvald and Olaf were brothers, and there was no acknowledgement here of any claim by the MacSorleys. We do know that Ranald son of Somerled, on the evidence of an undated charter issued to Saddell Abbey, took the title King of the Isles and Lord of Kintyre and Argyll at some stage in his career.⁸ This would seem to indicate that he had achieved recognition as the head of the MacSorleys, but early sources are mute on his relationship with the Manx kings. Indeed, a major problem in interpreting events of his time is that he may have been confused with Rognvald of Man (both names being rendered into Latin as Reginaldus).⁹

The Manx *Chronicles* have little to say about the MacSorleys. To what extent they were viewed from Man as subjects, often over mighty and rebellious, or as denizens of a separate, breakaway state, cannot be determined. Perhaps in favour of the former view is a story in the *Chronicles* set in Man in 1249 concerning a chieftain called Donald. If, as Alex Woolf has suggested, he was Donald the son of Ranald and eponym of Clan Donald, then it is surely significant that King Harold Olafsson of Man regarded him as more worthy than any other nobles.¹⁰

The picture is confused yet further by the status held by some MacSorleys as major landholders in Scotland, and by the adoption by the most prominent amongst them of regal titles. Two sons of Dugald son of Somerled - Dugald Screech and Duncan - were described in Norwegian sources as 'kings in the Hebrides' in 1228.¹¹ This form of words may have been used to indicate, at least in Norwegian eyes, that their kingship was not over any of the Isles but mainland parts of Scotland, as presumably the case for the MacSorley killed at the battle of Ballyshannon in Ireland in 1247. He was identified in Irish sources as King of Argyll.¹²

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While the Manx kings, backed by the Kings of Norway, may have held to the principle, despite any agreement with Somerled, that their kingdom included all the Hebrides, the reality of their power was considerably more circumscribed. Islay and Mull, and the islands around them, are not mentioned at all in the Manx *Chronicles* between 1156 and 1230, but as noted above, they are assumed to have been under the control of MacSorleys. Lewis and Skye are featured, but in contexts which cast doubt over the ability of Manx kings to keep their kingdom in order.

King Rognvald of Man (1186-1226) is said to have given Lewis to his brother Olaf. Olaf found that island was unable to sustain himself and his army and he therefore came to his brother who was then in the Isles and asked him for some better portion of lands. Rognvald, after promising to take counsel with his own men, had Olaf bound in chains and handed him over to be imprisoned by William King of Scotland. Immediately prior to his death seven years later (in 1214), William ordered the release of all his prisoners, including Olaf. Olaf returned to his brother Rognvald in Man and shortly afterwards went with a retinue of nobles to visit the shrine of St James (at Compostella). On his return Rognvald had Olaf marry Lauon, his own wife's sister. He granted him Lewis and the newly married pair went off to settle there.¹³ The *Chronicles* offer no clues as to why the king of Scots should have wished to imprison Olaf or, perhaps a related matter, why Olaf sought the intercession of St James for his sins.

On the basis of this entry Alex Woolf has hypothesised that Olaf was in Lewis as a sub-king or viceroy.¹⁴ Andrew McDonald has suggested that the provision of Lewis to Olaf was in recompense for him having been passed over for the kingship.¹⁵ Whether or not either or both of these interpretations is correct there is another strand that might be teased out of the chronicle account. That is that Olaf went to Lewis with an army and Rognvald was also in the Isles at that time. Is there a clue here that the two brothers were actually engaged in military campaigns to regain Lewis and other islands? If so, their main protagonist may have been Angus son of Somerled who might have inherited Skye and the Uists from his father.¹⁶ The Manx *Chronicles* record how Angus had defeated his brother Ranald in 1192, thus perhaps consolidating his power in these islands and Lewis as well.¹⁷ Seventeen years later, in 1209, the sons of Ranald fought a battle against the men of Skye and slaughtered them there.¹⁸ This may have been revenge for 1192, representing another attempt by this branch of the MacSorleys at taking over Skye, and possibly Lewis. Angus and his three sons were killed in 1210, but the context in which these deaths are recorded in the *Chronicles* might suggest that they happened in Ireland.¹⁹

Olaf was obliged to flee Lewis in 1223 by his nephew, Godred, son of Rognvald, who was apparently based in Skye. There too there was a sheriff (sysselman?), Paul, the son of Balki, suggesting Manx control of Skye at that time. Although Olaf forced his brother King Rognvald to split his kingdom with him in the following year, and two years later succeeded him as king, continuous peaceable control of Skye and Lewis may have eluded him. In 1230 he divided his kingdom with his nephew Godred. Olaf kept Man while Godred got the

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Isles (unspecified, although the *Chronicle of Lanercost* says excepting those that Somerled's sons held).²⁰ That Lewis and Skye were then in enemy – MacSorley? -

hands is suggested by two events, possibly separate, of 1230-31. One was the killing in Lewis of Godred and the other the landing in both islands, with hostile intent, of an expeditionary force from Norway which had been sent to the Hebrides by King Hakon. The expedition was led by one Uspak 'the Hebridean', who was given the title of king by King Hakon. With him he took King Olaf of Man who had turned up in Bergen prior to his departure looking for military assistance. Skye was Uspak's first target, and there he fought and killed Torquil the son of Tormod (an ancestor of the MacLeods). He then went on to meet some of the leading MacSorleys in the Sound of Islay, including the brothers (King) Duncan Screech and (King) Dugald. Dugald was taken prisoner but Uspak allowed Duncan to escape. Uspak then went on to Bute where he besieged and captured Rothesay Castle, but died soon afterwards, perhaps as the result of an injury sustained at the siege. This provided the opportunity for Olaf to take over leadership of the army. It wintered in Man and left in the following spring, first of all plundering Kintyre and fighting a battle there. It then went on to Lewis.²¹

There is doubt not only as to who Uspak was, but also where in the Hebrides he was to exercise his kingship. Perhaps he was meant to rule all the kingdom of the Isles, including Man.²² He was in a strong position to do so since he sailed from Bergen with Olaf in a subordinate position and had detained Dugald Screech, probably as a hostage. Perhaps the meeting at which this took place involved some accommodation with the MacSorleys, even a recognition by them of Uspak's overlordship over them. Was it because he had so quickly and easily achieved recognition of his kingship over all the Isles that Uspak felt able to go on and attack Bute? His objective was presumably to punish the Steward and discourage any further Scottish interference in the Isles.

Uspak's death allowed Olaf to subvert the Norwegian army for his own ends. Its raid on Kintyre would have hit his MacSorley rivals and he may have been relying on it to install Godred in Lewis and Skye. If Godred met his death in Lewis while campaigning with the Norwegians we must doubt that these islands reverted at this time to peaceable control by Olaf.

Events some 18 years later also indicate MacSorley possession of Lewis, if not Skye. In 1249 King Hakon recognised Ewen (MacDougall), the son of that Duncan who Uspak had dealt with, as king over the northern part of the Hebrides. This may have marked the first real recognition of the kingly status of MacSorley leaders by the Norwegian king. It also 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. Ewen's territory is not defined, and may only have included Skye and Lewis, though he would already have held the Mull group of islands by inheritance. As Ewen was a subject of the king of Scots for mainland territories he immediately came under pressure from King Alexander II to give up his Norwegian allegiance. He was forced to flee to Lewis and his position as king of the Isles was assumed by his main MacSorley rival, Dugald

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(MacRuari), a grandson of Ranald son of Somerled. Dugald was still the main power in the Hebrides, from a Norwegian perspective, in the invasion year of 1263.²³

On this basis 1249 was the crucial date in terms of the break up of the Kingdom of the Isles. It was a state which was ungovernable by kings based in the Isle of Man, one that was severely weakened by internal problems, never mind by the external pressures from the kings of Scots.²⁴ One might well ask what King Hakon of Norway hoped to achieve when he sailed west in 1263. Yes, he wanted to stop Scottish expansionism into a Norwegian sphere of interest, but Norwegian sources provide no evidence for any long term solution for recreating a strong, stable, kingdom of the Isles out of what was a failed state. There was no obvious strongman to whom Hakon seemed prepared to entrust the task of reconstruction. King Magnus joined his expedition but received no recognition or reward. King Dugald was given the dominion that King Ewen had held (meaning Mull and neighbouring islands?), and thus the break up of the kingdom was perpetuated.²⁵ The Treaty of Perth in 1266 transferred the allegiance owed by kings in Man and the Isles to the King of Scots. The ascendancy of the MacSorleys in the region thereafter was aided by the death of Magnus, the last king of the Manx line, in 1265, and the savage suppression by King Alexander III in 1275 of a Manx uprising led by Godred, Magnus' illegitimate son.²⁶

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NOTES

¹ G Broderick (ed), *Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum. Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles* (Douglas, Isle of Man, 1996), p xv (*Chron Man*).

² For example P G B McNeill and H L MacQueen (eds), *Atlas of Scottish History to 1707* (Edinburgh, 1996), 441 (map and data by W D H Sellar); R A McDonald, *Manx Kingship in its Irish Sea Setting 1187-1229* (Dublin, 2007), 92. A A M Duncan and A L Brown, 'Argyll and the Isles in the earlier middle ages', *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 90 (1959), 192-220, accept that Lewis and Skye were Manx in 1230 but appear to be cautious about projecting the territorial divisions discernible in the Isles in the 13th century back to 1156 (pp 198, 205).

³ *Chron Man*, fol 37v.

⁴ 'The Book of Clanranald' in A Cameron, *Reliquiae Celticae* (Inverness 1892-4) vol 2, 138-309; Hugh MacDonald's 'History of the MacDonalds', *Highland Papers*, vol 1, 6-72.

⁵ *Chron Man*, fols 37v, 39v.

⁶ A O Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History A.D. 500 to 1286* (Stamford 1990), vol 2, 254.

⁷ *Chron Man*, fol 43r. See McDonald, *Manx Kingship*, 91-96 for a discussion on dividing the kingdom.

⁸ *Registrum de Passelet*, 125.

⁹ A point first made by W D H Sellar, 'Hebridean Sea Kings: The Successors of Somerled, 1164-1316', in E Cowan and R A McDonald (eds), *Alba. Celtic Scotland in the Medieval Era* (East Linton, 2000), 196-7.

¹⁰ A Woolf, 'A dead man at Ballyshannon', in S Duffy (ed), *The World of the Galloglass* (Dublin 2007), 78; *Chron Man*, fol 47v.

¹¹ Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 465.

¹² There is no certainty as to his identity. See, most recently on this subject, Woolf, 'A dead man at Ballyshannon', 77-85.

¹³ *Chron Man*, fol 41v-42r.

¹⁴ Woolf, 'A dead man at Ballyshannon', 81.

¹⁵ McDonald, *Manx Kingship*, 94.

¹⁶ R A McDonald, *The Kingdom of the Isles* (East Linton, 1997), 70.

¹⁷ *Chron Man*, fol 40v.

¹⁸ Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 378.

¹⁹ *Chron Man*, fol 41r.

²⁰ *Chron Man*, fols 42v, 43r, 44v; Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 472. For Skye see G W S Barrow, 'Skye from Somerled to A.D. 1500' in A Kruse (ed), *Barra and Skye: Two Hebridean Perspectives* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Society for Northern Studies 2006), 140-54.

²¹ *Chron Man*, fol 44v; Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 471-8.

²² This is contrary to the view expounded by Duncan and Brown, 'Argyll and the Isles', 202. They make the case that Uspak was to be king only of the islands held by the MacSorleys.

²³ Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 548-9, 554-6, 577, 611, 617.

²⁴ Compare E J Cowan, 'Norwegian Sunset – Scottish Dawn: Hakon IV and Alexander III' in N H Reid (ed), *Scotland in the Reign of Alexander III 1249-1286* (Edinburgh, 1990), 125. Cowan suggests that there may have been a golden age in the Isles in the first half of the 13th century.

²⁵ Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 635.

²⁶ Anderson, *Early Sources*, vol 2, 672-3; A O Anderson, *Scottish Annals from English Chroniclers* (London, 1908), 382-3.