

Monks and politics in the Norse Kingdom of the Isles

The subject of this paper is the situation of the Church, and the role of the monastic settlement on Iona, in the period of nominal Norwegian domination of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles, from the assertion of personal control by Magnús Barelegs in 1098 until the sale of the kingdom to Scotland by his more peaceful namesake Magnús *lagabætir* in 1265.

The remains of the early Christian monastery and the later Benedictine abbey on the small Hebridean island of Iona are substantial. The physical ruins of the medieval episcopal seat at Peel and the Cistercian ruins at Rushen, both on the Isle of Man, are impressive. However, much of the story of events in our period must be made by inference, for the archaeological evidence is far from extensive and the written sources are relatively limited. They give us glimpses of significance but a very incomplete picture of this aspect of life in the kingdom.

The lack of knowledge about Iona in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, given its significant size and its historical connections, is puzzling, in particular when we turn to the most prolific sources, the Norse sagas. Taken together they give a fair amount of scattered but significant detail about the kingdom, much of which can be related to what we know from other Irish, Manx, Scottish and English sources.

The kingdom, claimed by Harald Finehair in the ninth century was as is well-known, settled by Scandinavians and known for people of mixed blood, both the Gall-Gaedhil "Foreign Gaels", spoken of disparagingly in the Irish annals but also known as the early settlers of Iceland now so lauded by their ostensible descendants. The region was, until the arrival of Magnús at the end of the eleventh century, an area increasingly drawn into Irish political life, in particular by the descendants of the Dál Cais dynasty, among them Magnus' contemporary, Muirchertach Ua Briain (1086-1119). This king most nearly asserted personal authority over all of Ireland and its outlying islands, of which Man, were the most significant. Muirchertach's interest in the more northerly islands of the Hebrides may be regarded as a desire to encircle his main rivals, the Ua Lochlainn dynasty, whose heartland was in the area now covered by the counties of Tyrone and Derry, and to keep open, or closed, lines to Norway, thus enabling alliances to take place or hostile rivals to be kept at bay. His interest in the Isle of Man reflects his concern with English politics and the strategic importance of this island in any such engagement between the two larger islands. The geographical position of the Hebrides in relation to the northern coast of Ireland and the central position of Man in the Irish Sea area were to remain key throughout the life of the Norse kingdom, though for very different reasons to those envisaged at the start of our period.¹

Ireland was, like the other islands in the cluster, christianised long before the arrival of the Norse; and the adoption of Christianity in Norway and lands to the west in the early eleventh century meant that the Kingdom of Man and the Isles was firmly within the northern Christian world. Hebrideans may have journeyed with the barelegged Scots whose appearance caused such consternation on their way to the First Crusade, and some may have returned

¹ *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. Íslenzk fornrit xxxvi-xxxvii, 3 vols, Reykjavík 1951, iii, 210-37. *Ágrif af Noregs konungasögum - Fagrskíma - Noregs konungatal*, ed. Bjarni Einarsson, Íslenzk fornrit, 1985. *Chronicon Regum Manniae et Insularum: The Chronicle of the Man and the Sudreys*, ed. Rev. Dr. Goss. 2 vols., Douglas (Isle of Man), 1874. Rosemary Power, Magnus Barelegs' expeditions to the West". *Scottish Historical Review* lxxvi (1986)107-32, and "The Death of Magnus Barelegs, *SHR* lxxiii (1994), 216-22. Sean Duffy, "Irishmen and Islesmen in the kingdoms of Dublin and Man, 1052-1171. *Ériu* xliii (1992), 93-133, and "The Bruce Brothers and the Irish Sea World, 1306-29". *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 21 (1991), 55-86.

home with the camel the Scots king Edgar presented to Muirheartach Ua Briain in 1107;² while others may have accompanied Magnus Barelegs' son Sigurðr on his Crusade a few years later.

Within the kingdom, Iona is a small, barren but strategically significant island in the southern Inner Hebrides, which dominates the channel throughout which ships would by preference pass on their way to the Irish Sea.

The monastery owes its existence to the arrival of the Irish Columcille, latinised as Columba, and his followers in 563. The island, already apparently of religious significance, was at that time deserted, and its position within the kingdom of Dál Riada, with which Columcille was associated by family ties, made it an ideal base. The monastery early became established as a seat of learning with a major scriptorium and a community sufficiently large to send out members to start other monasteries, the best known of which was Lindisfarne in the Saxon kingdom of Northumbria. The place of the founder's death, Iona flourished as the leading house of the Columban *familia*, the federation of monasteries associated with the founder.³ An early and regular target of Viking raids, the monastery was burnt in 802, and four years later sixty-eight members of the community were slaughtered, presumably resisting enslavement. These and later raids led to members of the community departing with Columcille's relics and associated objects, to inland Scotland, probably Dunkeld, in 829; and on other occasions to Ireland. The illuminated Gospel book known as the Book of Kells, a work of several hands, may have been among the treasures removed. It appears to date to this turbulent period at the beginning of the ninth century, and was perhaps begun to mark the bicentenary of Columcille's death in 597, only to be removed from the Iona scriptorium for protection, and completed at the new inland monastery at Kells. Building here commenced in 807, a year after the most severe loss of life on Iona, the church was completed in 814, and the site in due course took on the status as head of the Columban federation.⁴

A community remained on the island and retained contact with Kells and with Derry, Columcille's first great monastic centre in his dynastic heartland across the North Channel. We hear of Iona in the late eleventh century when its buildings were restored by the Scots Queen-consort Margaret (died 1093), who did not follow her usual practice of introducing continental orders.⁵ With her and her successors, however, ended the practice of burying Scots monarchs on the island, her foundation at Dunfermline in the heartland of Scots power now taking this role.

A few years later, in 1098, Magnús blazed his way through the kingdom, in a frenzy of pillage commemorated in verse.⁶ He came ashore on Iona, and made his way to the monastic settlement, where he looked into the "little church of Columcille", then closed the door and forbade the ruination of the island. He went on to control the remaining Hebrides and Man, claiming them all for the kingdom of Norway. He returned to western lands in 1102 to reassert control, and entered into alliance with Muirheartach Ua Brian, who married a daughter to Magnús' young son Sigurðr. Muirheartach probably saw this alliance as a means of strengthening his own power in the islands, and intended to use it to overcome his northern Ua Lochlainn opponents, thereby controlling the entire island of Ireland. This plan however came to nothing. Magnús was killed in 1103 and Sigurðr returned to Norway.

² *The Annals of Inisfallen*, ed. Séan Mac Airt, Dublin, 1951.

³ The definitive work is Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells and Derry: the History and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 1996.

⁴ *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, ed. Séan Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, Dublin, 1983. The dates are one year out for this period.

⁵ *The Ecclesiastical History of Odericus Vitalis*, ed. Marjorie Chibnall, iv, Oxford, 1973, Book 8, pp. 272-3

⁶ *Heimskringla*, iii, 219-25, esp. p. 220. *Chronicle of Man and the Stureys*. Irish, Welsh and English sources all recount the events.

A consideration of the remaining archaeological features of Iona might identify something of what Magnús saw. The early Christian monasteries of Ireland were built in circular mode, with ditches and dykes in concentric circles, the central one being the key site, containing small churches, high crosses and in some cases round towers. We can see on Iona much the remains of much of the ditch and dyke formation of the inner enclosure, which in this case was actually rectangular with rounded corners. It has disappeared on the seaward side. Archaeological work in some areas has indicated that the mound formation was at times stockaded, indicating that the *vallum* was not merely an identification of sacred space, nor even a protective barrier to keep animals out, but was needed for defence. Some of the outer ditch and dyke formations also survive, and it can be seen that the settlement was intended at times at least for a substantial population. Even the inner formation enclosed a substantial amount of land for daily living and for agricultural use. The southern side of the earthworks once continued just north of a secular cemetery chapel, the resting place of the early Scots monarchs and modern islanders. The base of a stone cross here indicates that this was the point of entry to the inner enclosure. Part of a medieval street, perhaps marking a traditional way passes this cross base and aligns with the cemetery chapel door, while within the *vallum* it passes another high cross, still apparently on its original site and the base of another. Close to this cross-base is the probable site of the "little church of Columcille", directly in front of it the base of yet another high cross now containing the concrete replica of the original which blew down several times.⁷

The likely site of the "little church", which probably originally held the saint's body is now occupied by a tiny chapel which is now built into an extension of the west wall of the abbey church. The chapel is situated on the site of a small free-standing building, the wall extensions of which can still be recognised.

The original buildings of the abbey, including other churches, the abbot's house, and perhaps replacements of the buildings referred to in his *Life of Columcille* written in the seventh century by the third abbot, Adamnan,⁸ would all have stood close to the high crosses and the original reliquary chapel, on the site now occupied by the medieval abbey.

The next account of Iona is in the *Annals of Ulster* for 1164. During the intervening period, in about 1133, the bishopric of the Isles had been founded. Its early bishops were consecrated in various places, including Canterbury York and Dublin, but in 1153 the diocese came under the jurisdiction of Nidaros, now Trondheim, on Norway's west coast. The reasons are complicated and no word of them disturbed the insularity of the Irish annalists, but some of the political intrigues of the time can be determined from the extant sources.⁹

In 1151, Guðrøðr, son of Óláfr, who had ruled the kingdom since 1103, arrived in Norway. Here he made submission to Ingi, the most powerful of the three half-brothers then ruling Norway, and apparently remained until the death of his father in 1153. Guðrøðr had need of Norwegian patronage and no doubt intended to secure it in advance of his father's death. He did not, it appears, seek out the other two kings, one of whom, Eysteinn, was himself from a Gaelic background. Whether Eysteinn showed any partiality for islanders among whom he had been raised is unknown. At any rate he left them in peace and in 1151 was engaged in raiding in eastern England. He returned the following year to find the papal legate, Nicholas Breakspeare, sent to organise the Scandinavian dioceses, had arrived ahead

⁷ See the Royal Commission of the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, *Argyll 4: Iona*, 1982. The remains of the cross are currently in the abbey museum.

⁸ *Adamnan's Life of Columba*, ed. A.O and M.O. Anderson, London, 1961.

⁹ Arne Odd Johnsen in *Studier vedrørende Kardinal Nicholas Brekespears legasjon til Norden* (Oslo, 1945), and *On the Background for the Establishment of the Norwegian Church Province. Some new Viewpoints* (Oslo, 1967) makes suggestions about various aspects of these intrigues.

of him, by way of his native England. Breakspeare preferred dealing with Ingi. The northern English see of York had eagerly sought to have the Isles as part of its archbishopric in order to ensure it had two other bishops and would therefore be able to consecrate a new archbishop independent of the southern see of Canterbury. Breakspeare may have determined against this for reasons relating to England's current civil war and the uneasy relations of the dominant King Stephen with Rome. The presence of a strong secular figure from the Isles in Guðröðr may have determined Breakspeare to include the bishopric, which followed the boundaries of the kingdom, within the Norwegian metropolitan. This may have been in part determined by hostility to Eysteinn and a desire to bolster the authority of Ingi. However, the power of Norway over the events in the Isles was at this period more fiction than reality.

Breakspeare's plan appears to have met with little success. There seems to have been trouble in filling the see, and only one early bishop had a Norse name. Later there were to be complaints over the long and dangerous journey, complaints which seem weak when the provision of bishops was required in the Faroes, Iceland and distant Greenland. They may reflect not so much the voyaging as the alien nature of the Isles.¹⁰

Only three years after this attempt to assert papal and monarchical authority, Guðröðr was defeated in a naval battle by his close kinsman by marriage, Somerled, *regulus* of Argyll, a region on the south-west mainland. This battle, at Epiphany 1156, is not mentioned in any Scandinavian source, but led to the partition of the kingdom. Somerled took the majority of the Isles, leaving the northernmost Lewis together with Man, the most fertile, to Guðröðr. Iona fell within the sway of the Somerled family, but seems to have remained in some sense neutral territory.¹¹

Guðröðr or his father Óláfr may have built the mortuary chapel on Iona, in the ancient cemetery of the Scottish kings, just outside the innermost circle of the monastic settlement. This building, the oldest to survive on the island, shows evidence of Irish architectural influence and appears to date from the middle of the twelfth century. Though the chapel was used by the Somerled family, Guðröðr was buried on the island in 1188.¹²

The bishopric may have been vacant at the time of the division of the kingdom, and perhaps vacant again in 1164 when there occurs an event not recorded at all in Norse sources but which could hardly have escaped the attention of Nidaros' forceful archbishop Eysteinn Erlendsson. It seems, however, that though he had just ensured the crowning of Norway's new child-king, Magnús Erlingsson, he had no power to address a major change in the southern end of his enormous see.

In that year, Somerled proposed the reinstatement of Iona as the head of the Columban *familia* and the residence of their leader Flaibhertach Ua Broicháin. Flaibhertach, head of this ancient monastic way of life and of the strongest of the loose collections of monasteries owing allegiance to the successor of a common founder, was himself a reformer, though one who worked within the existing tradition rather than, as was happening contemporaneously in Ireland, through the importation of the European orders, of which the Cistercians and Augustinian canons were to become the strongest. Flaibhertach had recently moved the headship of the Columban federation from Kells to Derry. The further removal to Iona may have been from one perspective logical, but must have been opposed by ecclesial figures as well as the Irish and Scots monarchs. From a Norwegian perspective, the anomaly of a Columban house must have been compounded by this forcible re-orientation towards Ireland and its ancient monastic system, and on these

¹⁰ Printed in P.A. Munch, *Chronica Regum Manniae et Insularum*, Christiania (Oslo), 1860, 157-8. Munch also contributed the Notes to the later, more accessible edition of 1874.

¹¹ *Chronicle of Man and the Sudreys*. Later references in *Surla's Hákonar saga* indicate an awareness of two different strands of kingships in the Isles. See *Flateyjarbók*, ed. C.R. Unger, 3 vols, 1860-68, iii, 100-02.

¹² *Chronicle of Man*.

grounds opposed.¹³ In fact the proposal came to nothing and the chief secular instigator, Somerled, was killed later that year. Ireland was shortly afterwards thrown in turmoil by the Anglo-Norman invasion and the waning of the power of the Columban federation after the death of Flaithbertach in 1175. His chief supporter, Gilla Mac Laig, archbishop of Armagh and a former abbot of Iona (who had opposed the Flaithbertach moving to Iona), had died the previous year. The lack of any Scandinavian reportage at the time may be evidence more of Norwegian turmoil than the significance of the event.

It is clear from the entry in the *Annals of Ulster* that in 1164 the monastery was thriving, containing not only an abbot and main community, but also a community of ascetics also living within the enclosure and at least one hermit. It may have been that at this stage or shortly afterwards, another member of the Ua Broicháin family, Domnall, was made abbot. His death in 1203, apparently in old age, was to occasion a much greater change. During the intervening period little is known of Iona other than that remained a place of pilgrimage from Ireland.

In 1204, the shocked annalist records, Cellach built a monastery on Iona right in the middle of enclosure, without permission. Angry clerics then sailed from Derry and beyond, razed the new buildings, deposed Cellach and set another abbot in his place.¹⁴ The entry makes clear that the contingent from Ireland regarded themselves as setting right an unlawful and shameful event, and that their action had the support of a wide alliance of native Gaelic churchmen, led by the bishop of Tyrone and Tir Conaill, the abbots of Derry and Armagh, the Derry community and clergy from throughout the north of Ireland, together with the new Anglo-Norman rulers. The failure to request the permission, though it would have been refused, coupled with awareness of how much the Columban federation had lost its power, may have been behind this prompt but ultimately ineffectual response to the establishment of a new foundation of the Benedictine rule.

On this matter the secular and ecclesial politics of the Isles were at one. Somerled's son Reginald is named as the initiator in the seventeenth-century *Book of Clanranald*,¹⁵ though the decision to establish Iona as Benedictine must have involved all the key players of the family agreeing on the endowments. The founding Charter, dated the ninth of December 1203,¹⁶ indicates that Cellach acted swiftly on the death of Domnall Ua Broicháin, and that he had the Somerled family behind him. The charter granted so rapidly from Rome places the new abbey directly under papal protection, and endows it with lands from all parts of the Isles in the control of members of the Somerled family. These endowments are so large that the demise of the Columban monastery must have been inevitable.

The physical remains indicate that the Benedictine foundation was intended as a replacement to, and not as in some other places, a supplement to, an existing foundation. The Benedictine church the Irish clerics objected to so strongly appears to have been started immediately.

A monastery could have been built within the large rectangular central enclosure according to the normal practice for this period, with the cloister and domestic buildings to the south of a large church. Such a layout would not have needed to disturb the existing buildings of the Columban monastery and would have allowed a building programme which easily adopted use of the existing watercourse which still runs a little to the north of where the Columban monastery stood. This would have allowed the new monastery to occupy the same central site just as the ascetics lived within the site but in buildings to the north of the main foundation. This was not however what happened. At some inconvenience, because of the position of the watercourse, the new monastic church was built on the Columban monastic

¹³ *Annals of Ulster*.

¹⁴ *Annals of Ulster*.

¹⁵ *The Book of Clanranald*, 156-7; cited in RCAHMS, *Argyll 4: Iona*, 143.

¹⁶ Printed in Munch, *Chronica Regum Manniae*, 152-3.

site, obliterating the earlier free-standing buildings except the place now called Columba's shrine and presumably the site of the "little church". The indication from the annals and from the dating of the original Benedictine foundations indicate that work started at once.

In order to build the church on the original site while utilising the natural water supply, it was necessary to situate the domestic buildings on the northern side, depriving them of sunlight and warmth, a further indication that the intent was to establish the Benedictine foundation as the continuation of the Columban, an insistence perhaps intensified by the attempts of Derry to intervene. The association with Columba's name was retained throughout the medieval period, the apparent dedication to Mary appearing only later.¹⁷ The presumed "little church" over Columba's grave became attached to an extension the new abbey's west end either at this stage or during the fifteenth-century rebuilding.

The decision to adopt a new charter and the Benedictine rule seems to have been made by the existing community, for there is no indication that monks from outside were brought in to supplant the older community. This move appears to have happened immediately on the death of the abbot Domnall Ua Broilcháin, perhaps under secular pressure, and perhaps through a desire to have papal protection in a time of difficulty. Shortly afterwards an Augustinian nunnery associated with the Reginald's sister Bethoc, its first prioress,¹⁸ was built a little to the south.

The see of Man and the Isles appears to have been vacant during the early years of the thirteenth century. Norwegian influence cannot be totally discounted, the period in question being dominated by two prominent archbishops at Nidaros, Eiríkr Ívarsson (1189-1205) and Þórir Guðmundarson (1206-1214), both of them Augustinians. However, the dominant factor appears to have been the influence of the Somerled family.

Reginald, or possibly his father Somerled, had by this date founded a Cistercian monastery on Saddell on Kintyre, the mainland peninsula which Magnus had claimed as one of the islands but which was very much within the area controlled by Somerled and later by the Scottish monarchs. However, the wide spread of the lands granted to the new monastery, while quite possibly traditionally regarded as the possessions of the Iona community, indicate the extent to which other members of the family were involved in the establishment of the new monastery. There appears at this period to have been some forcible redistribution of lands belonging to the descendants of Somerled, in which case the endowments may have been a part of this process. Reginald, who according to the *Book of Clanranald*, died in 1207, may have maintained the peace during his lifetime.

He must have been dead by 1210 when Somerled's son Angus and his four sons were killed on Skye, possibly by their relatives in warfare over the redistribution of lands.¹⁹ This slaughter may have distracted other members of the family away from Iona, which was plundered that year, according to the *Böghunga saga* by a band of Norwegians raising the funds for a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their leader, the saga says, was a Hebridean named Óspákr.²⁰ If he is the same as the Óspákr who in 1229 led an expedition to the Isles at the behest of the King Hákon of Norway, he was himself a member of the Somerled family.²¹ The deed, we are told, was ill-thought of, and when the plunderers journeyed south the following year, one of their ships sank.

¹⁷ *Argyll 4: Iona*.

¹⁸ Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Isles of Scotland circa 1698*. See too David Seilar, "The origins and ancestry of Somerled", *Scottish Historical Review* xlv (1966).

¹⁹ See Alan Orr Anderson, *Early sources of Scottish History, A.D. 500-1286*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1922).

²⁰ *Böghunga sögur*, in *Eirspennill: AM 47 fol*, ed. Finnur Jónsson, Christiania (Oslo), 1918; *Íslandske Annaler indtil 1578*, ed. Gustav Storm, Christiania (Oslo), 1888, s.a. 1209, 1210. Cited in Anderson, *Early sources of Scottish History*, ii, 378-9, ii, 381-82.

²¹ *Flateyjarbók* iii, 106-02.

Punishment was merely delayed however for those who had attempted to prevent the Benedictine foundation on Iona. In 1212 and again in 1214 the two sons of Reginald led ferocious raids on Derry and its hinterland.²²

The bishopric had acquired not only Iona but a number of other monastic sites in the Hebrides which followed archaic Irish rules. A monastery founded at Rushen on Man was however, from the start Cistercian, a daughter-house of Furness in Lancashire on the English side of the Irish Sea. Furness was in the 1180's to supply monks to Inch Abbey near Downpatrick on the Irish side of the Sea. Inch was founded by the Anglo-Norman invader John de Courcy who adopted long-standing alliances between his new homeland and the Isle of Man, including it seems, his monastic preferences. His wife, Affrica, daughter of the King of Man and a feature of the alliance, herself founded a Cistercian monastery a few years later at Grey Abbey, supplying it from Holmcultram in English Cumbria. While little is known of this link, Inch and Rushen as daughter-houses of Furness, may have had substantial contacts. It may be of significance that the only detailed description we have of Ireland in this period appears to relate to the Downpatrick area and the death of Magnús Barelegs. Monks, mercenaries and Icelandic writers alike visited the courts of Hákon Hákonarson.

The weakness of local power and the increasing strength of Norway in the thirteenth century were ultimately of assistance to Iona. There was a violent fight on the island in 1223, involving men from Man which led to deaths within the monastic enclosure.²³ In 1224 and again in 1226 joint deputations, including abbot and bishop, sought help of Hákon Hákonarson. The expedition he sent in 1229 was unsuccessful, with local family relations taking precedence over the commands of the Norwegian monarch, but by 1247 Hákon was sufficiently powerful to summon kings of both the Manx and Somerled lines to Norway, and to determine the kingly successions in both families.²⁴ In this year too, the power of the abbots of Iona and their independence from Scottish monastic authority, was reasserted by the papacy.²⁵

Scotland sought to claim the Isles in 1249, but diplomatic efforts failed and an invasion ended abruptly with the death of Alexander II, who had failed to heed the saints Columba, Óláfr and Magnús of Orkeney, who had jointly appeared to him in a dream to warn him of his folly. Efforts to take the Isles were in abeyance during the minority of his son, Alexander III, but on reaching his majority the younger Alexander immediately tried to gain them for the Scottish kingdom.

When Hákon finally set sail in 1263 to establish his authority in the face of Scottish invasion, no details are recorded with regard to Iona, though the fleet must have sailed that way. It is recorded that the wounded were given into the care of the Cistercians at Saddell.

The monastery on Iona, whether Columban or Benedictine occupied a key position. Yet it was, as far, as can be determined by the personal names that have survived, or by its dealings with Norway, it looked to Ireland for its origins, and this lasted until the re-foundation in 1203. Iona may have supplied bishops to the Isles, almost all of whom also have Gaelic rather than Norse names. The community appears to have had few dealings with the archbishopric. Granted special powers in the bishopric, there is a dearth of records on how these were used, or how the monastic community, or indeed the bishopric, maintained contact with the archdiocese. At the end of the fourteenth century, after changing hands several times, Man came firmly under English control. The bishop fled from Peel on Man to Iona, making the abbey church his cathedral. The church was rebuilt and extended in the fifteenth century,

²² *Annals of Ulster*.

²³ *Chronicle of Man*.

²⁴ *Flateyjarbók* iii, 174-5.

²⁵ Cited in Anderson, *Early Sources*, ii, 361.

with the work of yet another of the Ua Brolcháin family, who left his name inscribed in the stonework. In 1472 the bishopric passed from Norway to Scotland. The community survived until the Reformation, after which the buildings fell slowly into decay.

The fact that such a large and significant community figures so little in the Norse histories, in particular in *Hákonar saga* is itself significant. Unfortunately, after 1204, the references in the other main source, the *Annals of Ulster* cease, as Iona fell further and further outside the Irish sphere of interest. The secular rulers of Man were by this time heavily engaged with the English conquest of Ireland, while from the 1230's onwards the rulers of the Somerled family in the Isles were equally engaged through military and matrimonial alliances with supporting the Gaelic resurgence against the English. Of their history we have some knowledge, but Iona, probably the hub of much political intrigue and the place of many funerals, remains an enigma, a large and active monastic settlement that grew, rebuilt its abbey several times and flourished, much of it beyond the knowledge or control of the ecclesiastical authorities in Nidaros.