

## **A NAME WITHOUT A PLACE, A PLACE WITHOUT A NAME: the Isleborg puzzle (again)**

### **The puzzle**

It has been forty-three years since the journalist and noted historian R W Munro published a paper entitled *The Isleborg Puzzle* in the second issue of *West Highland Notes and Queries* (Munro 1973, 9). This important fortification name on the west coast of Scotland looms tantalisingly out of the historical mists and then vanishes. A name without a place like Columba's Hinba, it has only periodically provoked debate due to the scarcity of evidence,

Duncan and Brown argued that 'Isleborg has never been satisfactorily identified, but certainly lay, with Cairnburgmore, in the Treshnish group' (Duncan 1956, 208). The Royal Commission agreed. 'The identity of the castle of Isleborgh (also called Isleborg and Hystylburch) has been the subject of considerable discussion, but since early charters generally couple it with Cairnburgh and other islands in the Treshnish group, there appear to be good grounds for accepting the view that Isleborgh is an early name for Cairn na Burgh Beg 'the cairn of the little castle' [Canmore ID 21823]' (RCAHMS 1980, 189). The linen manufacturer and antiquarian Erskine Beveridge, however, had argued as long ago as 1903 that 'After much consideration [...] the present writer inclines to the belief that the Isleborg of ancient Scottish charters is more probably to be identified with the island-fort formerly existing in Loch an Eilein [on Tiree]' (Beveridge 1903, 112). Munro's 1973 paper reached the similar, but more nuanced, conclusion that Tiree could have been the location of Isleborg. 'One of the puzzling place-names of the Hebrides is Isleborg [...] Two earlier references associate it with Cairnburgmore in the Treshnish Islands and Dunchonnell in the Garvellachs, and the 1390 charter (in a 1495 confirmation) gives a curious mixture of lands and offices [...] I do not think this is sufficient evidence that Isleborg 'certainly' lay in the Treshnish group, as Kernaborg undoubtedly does; why should there be two castles there? [...] If therefore we have to look beyond the Treshnish group, why not in Mull, or even in neighbouring Coll or Tiree?' (Munro 1973, 9)

### **A name without a place**

According to the *Hákonar saga*, Ewen of Lorn, appointed king of the southern Hebrides by the Norwegian crown, met the Scottish king Alexander II around 1249 and 'refused a demand for Cairnburgmore and three other castles' (Duncan 1956, 208). The place-name Isleborgh, which appears less than a handful of times in the surviving documents of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, was plausibly one of Ewen's castles. In 1343 King David II granted 'custodias

castrorum nostrorum [possession of our castles] de Kernoborgh [Cairn na Burgh More Castle in the Treshnish Isles, Canmore ID 21822], Iselborgh et Dunchonall [Dùn Chonail on the Garvellachs, Canmore ID 22374] to John of Islay (Thomson's Acts of the Parliament of Scotland vol 12, 6, quoted in Beveridge 1903, 62). In 1354 John of Lorn relinquished the castles of Kerneburgh and Hystylburgh to John of Islay (Munro 1961, 122; *Origines Parochiales* vol 2 pt 1, 322). In a 1495 confirmation of a 1390 charter, Donald of Islay granted 'constabulariam et custodiam castrorum de Kernaborg et Isleborg, unacum minutis Floda et Lunga [command and possession of the castles of Kernaborg and Isleborg together with small Floda and Lunga]' to Lachlan Lubanach MacLean (RMS 1882, para. 2264, 480). In 1493 Hector MacLean of Duart was recorded as the 'hereditary keeper of the following castles [...] Isleborg, the locality of which is uncertain' (Gregory 1881, 69).

Isleborgh is most likely to be a name in Old Norse (ON) borg 'fort'; this has a fricative terminal /g/, thus the orthography of the terminal -gh or -ch. The only other surviving Tíree name in borg is may be Skarbarigh and Bin Sckarbarig (Blaeu 1654), most credibly reconstructed from ON Skarð-borg 'the fort of the gap in the hill ridge' now known as Scottish Gaelic (ScG) Dùn nan Gall 'the fort of the strangers' on the Kenavara headland (Holliday 2016, 415).

The specific, or initial, part of the name is difficult to reconstruct because of the differences between the two source forms Isle- and Hystyl-. For Beveridge 'Island Castle' would be a literal rendering [of Isleborgh] (Beveridge 1903, 118). However, in view of its early date it is unlikely that this is a Scots coinage or a hybrid Scots-Norse name. 'The common view in Finnish contact onomastics [is]: mixed names formed in two languages can normally be ruled out' (Sandnes 2010, 20). ON 'island fort' would be Eyjar-borg. Gaelic (ScG) has the cognate burg (Dwelly), and the Royal Commission hypothesised that the first element of the name 'is probably the ScG iosal 'low' in reference to the fact that [Cairn Na Burgh Beg] rises to a lesser height than its neighbour Cairn na Burgh More 'the cairn of the big castle' (RCAHMS 1980, 189). ScG iosal occurs forty-six times on Scotlands Places, but not in an initial position ([www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk](http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk)).

If Isleborg is to be identified with the fort on Loch an Eilein, Tíree (see below), a speculative reconstruction is ON íla 'well or spring' (see Sandnes 2010, 111; Holliday 2016, 372), 'ON íla feminine 'a source', Íla-water 'a lake' (Jakobsen 1936, 64). This is not a common specific, but there is a Hila and two examples of Hilan in Norway; there is an Eilaster in Uig, Lewis, an Ellibister in Orkney; there is a chambered cairn at Islesburgh in Northmavine, Shetland (Canmore ID

785); there is an Ila in Oslo derived from *fla* 'well'; and Ileby is recorded as a farm name in Norway (Holliday 2016, 360).

Tiree's significant fortification was in the central township of Hilibol (see below). The generic here is likely to be ON *ból* 'division'. Sadly, the specific is impossible to reconstruct safely. There are at least twenty recorded source forms ranging from Hurnepolff to Teinlpeil, making it the second most attested Tiree Scandinavian place-name after Manal. Paradoxically, the name is a victim of the site's durable military and economic importance. However, one grouping of forms — Tillipole, Huilepoill, (L.) Hylebol, Hillebol, Heylipoll, Hilipole and the modern local pronunciation Hilibol [ˈhɪ lɪ bɒl] — has some similarity to the first element of Isleborgh, which is likely to represent the sound [i:l]. To account for two distinct groups of specifics, one solution is that a primary settlement Ílaborg split off three secondary settlements: Helluból and Indriból as well as Krossuból, (Holliday 2016, 82).

### **A place without a name**

The site known today as ScG Taigh an Eilein 'the house of the island' or 'Island House' is now intermittently the Tiree residence of the Argyll family. It is situated on a small peninsula on the south side of a loch known as ScG Loch an Eilein 'the loch of the island' or Loch Hilibol. The present building was erected in 1748 by Archibald Campbell the third Duke of Argyll as the dwelling and office of the island's chamberlain (Canmore ID 21451). The Old Statistical Account 1791-99 recorded that 'The island was sometime ago made a peninsula' (OSA 29, 402).

The Turnbull estate map of Tiree, published in 1768, shows a large expanse of arable fields to the west and three nucleated runrig settlements to the south, home to 148 people in the 1779 Census. The loch is the source of ScG Abhainn Chrosabol 'the stream of Crossapol', on the banks of which was built the island's principal horizontal water mill, an important source of revenue to the landowner. It was replaced by a new vertical mill in Cornaigmore in 1803.

The first edition of the Ordnance Survey (Sheet LXXVIII, surveyed 1878) mapped the site as 'Island House on the site of castle'. Revd. Archibald McColl, in his contribution to the Old Statistical Account in 1791-9, wrote 'Near the centre of Tiry is a lake with an island in it, whereupon was built a similar castle [to Breacachadh Castle on Coll]; the access by a made road and draw-bridge' (OSA 29, 402). The existence of a very strong tower (*turris est fortissima*) on the island of Tiree was noted by Fordun in the later fourteenth century (Skene 1871, vol 1, 43). In 1519 Sir Donald MacLean's death was recorded. 'Macvurick

and Hugh MacDonald, in their MS [...] differ as to the place where he died; the former making it Carneburg, near Mull, the latter the Inch [small island] of Teinlpeil in Tyree' (Gregory 1881, 126n). In 1549 Donald Monro described 'Ane fresh water loch, with ane old castell' (Munro 1961, 65). In 1654 Blaeu noted, it is assumed using information from Pont surveys done between 1583 and 1614, that 'On [Tiree] is a fresh-water loch, and in that an old castle' (text accompanying Blaeu map 1654), and his map shows a castle symbol named as Castel Loch Hyrbol on an island in L. Hylebol. Beeverell's later account is derivative of this text (Beeverell 1727 vol. 4, 1452). But in the winter of 1678-9 there must have been sufficient defensive potential left in the structure for a MacLean garrison to resist the Campbell siege for some time (MacKinnon and Black 2014, 7). John Fraser, minister on Tiree from 1678-97 (*Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ* 1923, 119) later reported its ruin, likely to have been hastened by that conflict. 'In one [loch] is a small Illand on which standith ane ruinous tour surrounded with ane trintch of stone and earth' (Macfarlane 1907, 218). By the end of the seventeenth century Martin Martin also witnessed its decay. 'There is a fresh-water lake in the middle of the isle, on the east side of which there is an old castle, now in ruins' (Martin 1695, 296).

The medieval castles of the west coast were built to command the sea lanes. 'It is no coincidence that the castles of the west are characterised by coastal locations, and were built on islands, promontories, peninsulas and other sea-girt locations that command sweeping stretches of the western seas' (McDonald 1997, 249). A report described Breacachadh Castle on Coll in 1596 as 'Brekauche, quhilk is an great strenth be reason of the situation thair of verie neir to the sea [...] and has three walls [...] ane uther wall about that, within the quhilk schippis and boittis are drawn and salvit' [Breacachadh, which is very strong because of its position near the sea [...] it has three walls [...] one other wall outside the inner one, within which ships and boats are pulled and protected] (Caldwell 2014, 25). Control of these seascape nodes was key to acquisition of the resources of a wide area. It may be that the inland location of Castel Loch Hyrbol made it strategically less useful and contributed to its neglect in the later medieval period.

The site, however, is likely to have been important since prehistoric times. The second edition of the Ordnance Survey, revised in 1898, labels a feature arcing towards the island from the north as 'Stepping Stones'. This can still be seen and partially walked. It is approximately one metre across and lacks the final twenty metres from the north side of the house garden. It resembles a causeway and the site is certainly a plausible one for a Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age crannog, but any evidence for this has been buried under two generations of monuments. In addition, Norse Ping sites on Shetland, Orkney and in Norway are characteristically on an isthmus or small island, near a body of fresh water, on

the site of older monuments, near ecclesiastical sites, and sheltered (Sanmark 2013, 9). Loch an Eilein is a plausible site for a Tíree 'thing'. ScG Bac' a' Chrochaidh 'the dune of the hanging' is in front of the house.

## Conclusion

Tíree, a fertile, strategically placed, but defensively vulnerable island with numerous beach landing points, is likely to have been the target of recurrent conflicts during medieval period involving a succession of expansionist local and regional powers from Orkney to Dublin. We can infer from this that the island became the natural home of strongmen presiding over a planned landscape and backed by a well developed and efficiently enforced tax-raising infrastructure. Any land taxation system suggests landscape control located at one or more caputs, or head estates (see Aston 1985, 34). This is likely to have been at Fordun's 'strong tower' on Loch an Eilein.

This paper presents no new sources or insights, simply placing a jigsaw piece marked 'fort' in a very fort-shaped space. But while researching the medieval place-names of Tíree (Holliday 2016) it became plain that the island once possessed a significant medieval fortification that surprisingly left no toponymic mark on the landscape — a place with no name — while documentary sources recorded a significant regional fortification name whose location can only be described as coastal Argyll or its islands — a name with no place. Added to some speculative work on the reconstructions of the place-name source forms, it remains the most plausible conclusion to Munro's puzzle that Isleborg was on Tíree. In the absence of further documentary evidence coming to light, geophysical survey of the garden of Taigh an Eilein, and excavation from the loch bed around the house (David Caldwell, pers. comm.) may provide some further clues.

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## References

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