

Archaeological and Historical Context of the Province of Strathnaver

The study area for the Strathnaver Province Archaeology Project consists of the old Medieval Province of Strathnaver. It corresponds approximately to present-day northern Sutherland and extends from Cape Wrath eastward to the boundary with Caithness and southward as far as Eddrachillis, mirroring the Province's extent at certain times in the past (Mackay 1906). The chronological scope of the project is c AD 600-1400, encompassing the early Medieval period, the phase of Norse colonisation (c 900-1100) and the late Norse and Medieval periods. While the evidence varies for these periods in quality and quantity across the Province, it does indicate settlement and/or ecclesiastical activity with particular focus in certain areas. That evidence is outlined below, with some reference to the evidence for later Iron Age/Pictish activity where it is relevant to the earlier part of the study period.

The name 'Naver,' which first appears on Ptolemy's map of c AD 140 as 'Nabarus', is of pre-Celtic origins (from an Indo-European root meaning 'moist, cloud, water, mist' (Nicolaisen 1976, 188-9; Watson 1926, 47; Waugh 2000)), but it endured through the Norse period, in spite of the probable settlement by Norse speakers of the valley through which the River Naver flows (see below). That the valley's name came to apply to the whole of the later Province suggests its importance in the region in the late Norse/Medieval period. It clearly was also a focus of high-status settlement in the later Iron Age, as the number of brochs lining the strath attests, while the distribution of early Medieval chapel sites points to a thriving population in the centuries before Norse settlement.

Place name and archaeological evidence indicates the locations of early Medieval chapel sites and possible monastic sites in several concentrations in the Province. Near Durness, for example, the place name Ach'na h'Anaite, associated with a field to the south-east of Keoldale on the Kyle of Durness, indicates the presence of an early ecclesiastical foundation in the vicinity. The *annaid* element of the place name attests to an association with a church, perhaps a mother church that provided or oversaw pastoral care by subordinate churches. The place name as a whole means 'Field of the Church' and may denote agricultural land that brought the church revenues or was designated for its use (Clancy 1995, 95, 102). It need not mean the site of the church itself, but it does point to the presence of a nearby church that was already considered old by the ninth or tenth century AD (MacDonald 1973).

The place name Balnakeil to the west of Durness village also indicates a township or farm associated with an early church or chapel (*cille*). A church or monastery may have been founded there as early as the late seventh century. Balnakeil is traditionally associated with St. Maelrubha, who founded the church and monastery at Applecross and is thought to have carried out missionary work along the northern seaboard (*OPS* 1855, 702; Scott 1909, 272). A number of Maelrubha dedications are known in northern Sutherland, including in the valley of Strathnaver (where some antiquarian sources say he met his death in AD 722; eg., Knight 1933, 215) and at Lairg. The present church was built in 1619 (Findlater 1845, 102), but there was certainly an earlier church on the site, first appearing in the documentary record in the early thirteenth century (see below). St. Maelrubha is also associated with a putative chapel at Bealach Mhor, between Durness and Eriboll, said to have been used occasionally by the inhabitants of Eriboll (*OPS* 1855, 702-3). Its position is now very remote, but it may have been on an early inland routeway between the Kyle of Durness and Loch Eriboll.

In the valley of Strathnaver a number of pre-Reformation church or chapel sites are known, at Langdale, Skail, Rivigil, Grumbeg, Farr and Klibreck. Several of these have indications of early Medieval origins (Lelong 2002, 210-19). In the churchyard at Farr on the coast stands a late eighth- or ninth-century cross slab. The chapel site at Skail, dedicated to St. Maelrubha, is represented by a low mound with an upright stone incised with an equal-armed, round-headed cross thought to date to the seventh or eighth century AD (Henderson 1987; Allen & Anderson 1903, 55). At the site of the chapel at Grumbeg, two simple, cross-incised stones formed part of the burial enclosure until recently (Macdonald & Laing 1970, 134), and the site of a holy well dedicated to St. Martin is recorded nearby (Mackay 1914, 34). At Klibreck, the site of another probable chapel is marked by two upright stones, one of them incised with a cross (Henderson 1987). The chapel site at Rivigill is a steep-sided mound known as Cnoc an t-Sagairt, or 'Hillock of the Priest' (Horsburgh 1867, 274), its upper periphery enclosed by an oval bank that suggests early origins. Several of these chapel sites correspond approximately to the locations of post-Medieval townships, which documentary evidence (see below) shows were peopled from at least the thirteenth century.

Viking/Norse activity in the Province is attested by abundant place names, both habitative and topographical (Waugh 2000; Fraser 1979). These include the place names of Langdale, Skail, Syre, Rosal,

Torrisdale and Klibreck in the valley of Strathnaver; Talmine, Tongue, Kirkiboll, Skinnnet, Melness and Boarscaig around the Kyle of Tongue; Durness, Sangomore, Sangobeg, Eriboll, Keoldale, Croispol and Borralie around the Kyle of Durness and, further west, Cape Wrath itself. Many more are scattered along the coast, suggesting extensive Norse colonisation and/or linguistic influence in the area. However, relatively few archaeological remains of certain Viking or Norse date have so far been discovered.

Almost all of the known archaeological evidence for Viking/Norse activity in the Province has been found in the vicinity of Durness. A single, ninth- or tenth-century burial of a young male was found in the dunes at Balnakeil Bay (Low, Batey & Gourlay 2000), and another possible burial is known from Keoldale, less than a kilometre to the south of Loch Borralie (Batey 1993). A ninth-century midden excavated in a small cave off Smoo Inlet is thought to have been left by sailors using the inlet for shelter during the ninth to twelfth centuries (Pollard forthcoming). At Sangobeg, the remains of a Late Norse settlement were excavated and found to overlie a pre-Christian burial (Brady, Lelong & Batey in prep).

The term 'Strathnaver' first appears in documentary sources in the thirteenth century, during the period of the earldom of Caithness, the Scottish earldom held by the Norse earls of Orkney. The Scottish bishopric of Caithness, founded in the twelfth century, mirrored the extent of the Caithness earldom. Although by the time Strathnaver appears in documentary sources it no longer formed part of this earldom, it is likely that it once did because the Province continued to form part of the bishopric. At this time the northern mainland of Scotland (the former Pictish province of Cat) was sub-divided into three: Ness, the north-east corner (present Caithness); Sutherland or *Suðrland*, the lands to the south of Ness as far as the River Oyckell; and the area stretching west from Ness as far as Durness, which became known as the Province of Strathnaver (Crawford 2000, 1-2). The *Orkneyinga Saga* relates that Earl Thorfinn (d. c 1065) was given Caithness and Sutherland by his grandfather, Malcolm II, and this would have included the later Province of Strathnaver.

Although Strathnaver is not mentioned by name in the Norse sagas, Crawford (2000, 2) suggests that it equates to the district referred to in the sagas as the 'Dales' of Caithness, an argument previously put forward by Skene (1837, 361). The character of the Province, with its long river valleys and kyles opening onto the Pentland Firth, would be in keeping with this descriptive name. Crawford also argues that the valley of Strathnaver was part of an important inland routeway in the late Norse to Medieval period, from Easter Ross to the Pentland Firth via Lairg, with certain place names in the strath possibly referring to the transport requirements of earldom retinues traversing the route.

The name 'Strathnaver' first appears in a surviving charter of 1269, which granted lands in Strathnaver to Mary de Moravia and Reginald de Cheyne. The document refers to an earlier charter, in which Mary's mother, *nobilis mulier domina Johanna* ('the noblewoman lady Johanna' (Moray Reg no 126)), had given the lands to the Church of Moray. The documents make clear that *tenemento de Strathnavyr* was a holding in its own right, presumably defined in a charter that has not survived; it is not described as being in the lordship of either Caithness or Sutherland at that time. Crawford (2000, 3) suggests that when the earldom of Caithness and the newly-created earldom of Sutherland were granted out with feudal charters in the 1230s, Alexander II granted the *tenemento* of Strathnaver to Lady Johanna (also see Crawford 1985, 32-3). At this time it appears that Strathnaver consisted only of the parish of Farr, as the lands to the west were held by the Church, but by the sixteenth century the Province stretched at least as far as the Kyle of Durness.

This period in the Province's history was a pivotal one that saw control pass from the old Norse earls to the Scottish Crown, as a significant break in the earldom's line of inheritance coincided with the Crown's asserting its authority in the north via feudal grants of land to its vassals. Crawford (2000) provides an extremely useful account of the mechanisms for and nature of this transition. As part of it, Johanna was not only granted the *tenemento* of Strathnaver but also half of the earldom of Caithness; she was married to a member of the de Moravia family, to whom Alexander II had recently granted the newly-created earldom of Sutherland. The grants and the marriage ensured that the main royalist family in the north of Scotland controlled most of its lands. The identity and pedigree of Lady Johanna have exercised historians; some argue that she was a descendant of the earls of Orkney and Caithness (Skene 1880), while others suggest that she was a daughter of the prominent Celto-Norse Moddan family (Gray 1922, 111-12). In any case, her inheritance of Strathnaver and marriage to Freskyn de Moravia brought it firmly within the Crown's feudal control.

Lady Johanna and her husband's acquisition of Strathnaver as feudal overlords must have had implications for the tenants farming their estates, in terms of new tenurial arrangements and tenant-landlord relationships. Their landlords were now based in Moray, across difficult terrain, rather than in Orkney

and within easy reach by sea (Crawford 2000, 8). Johanna's gift to the Church in the missing pre-1269 charter consisted of a bloc of lands in the upper strath and around Loch Naver, intended for the perpetual service of two chaplains, presumably in the Cathedral at Elgin. When the Church returned the gift to her daughter in 1269, it was on the condition that a yearly payment continue to be made for the chaplains' maintenance (Moray Reg no. 263). This extant charter mentions a number of farms by name, clearly indicating that these were settlements with tenants whose surplus produce would have been due to their overlords. As discussed in more detail below, the evidence of other charters and of maps throughout the Medieval and post-Medieval periods shows that these settlements continued to exist over more than 500 years, while other evidence indicates that they originated well before the thirteenth century.

The place name evidence in the valley of Strathnaver points to the continual occupation of certain settlements in the strath from the period of Norse linguistic influence, in the late tenth and eleventh centuries, to the early nineteenth century, when many of the townships were cleared for sheep walks. The valley contains 36 names that are Norse in origin and are attached to settlements. Thirteen of these appear in surviving charters from the late thirteenth century, including the 1269 charter, and throughout the Medieval period, and 23 of them are shown as settlements on the late sixteenth- to early nineteenth-century maps. In all, a suite of about 15 Norse settlement names appears consistently in Medieval charters and on late Medieval to post-Medieval maps. Six of these townships may have even earlier Pictish origins, pre-dating Norse settlement, as indicated by the likely early Medieval chapel sites (Lelong 2002, 240-51; Lelong 2003). Strathnaver appears to have been important to the military requirements of the Norse earls and subsequently as a strategical centre for later territorial lordships that were based on inland rather than maritime routes (Crawford 2000, 10).

Elsewhere in the Province, the Medieval evidence is less densely clustered, although it should be pointed out that little detailed research has so far been conducted (see Lelong 2002 for a full review). While Strathnaver – by the late thirteenth century corresponding to the parish of Farr – was held by Lady Johanna and her descendants until the early fifteenth century, the parishes of Tongue and Durness to the west consisted mainly of Church lands, held by the Bishop of Caithness from the bishopric's establishment in the twelfth century (Crawford 2000, 1-2). Balnakeil church's first appearance in the documentary record is between 1223 and 1245, when Gilbert, Bishop of Caithness, assigned it the task of supplying light and incense for the cathedral church at Dornoch (Carter 1886, 25).

The Bishop of Caithness is thought to have owned Castle Varrich on the Kyle of Tongue (Bangor-Jones 2000, 37), which is said to have been his stopover during the annual journey to Balnakeil. He had his summer residence at Balnakeil and he used the limestone-based grasslands surrounding Durness as summer grazing for his flocks. A description of the Reay estate by a valuator, dated 1797, stated that

Durness is a dry pretty spot; the soil sandy, well peopled for its extent. It lies upon a bed of limestone which is here found in the greatest abundance. It is considered the best grass and pasture ground in the north of Scotland, and it was of old the bishop of Caithness' shieling or pasture farm (quoted in MackKay 1906, 36).

The bishop's house is presumably the 'Castle of Durinas' referred to by Sir Robert Gordon in 1630 as having stood on the site. It was allegedly demolished in 1725 for the construction of Balnakeil House, although the existing structure may have Medieval elements. At that time, the presence of a massive wall, demolished for the new building, was noted; it was thought to be the remains of an old monastery (Macfarlane 1906). The church appears to have retained ownership of a significant proportion of Durness parish until the Reformation.

By the fifteenth century, the Mackay family held extensive lands in feu across the Province, although the mechanisms for the consolidation of their power remain obscure (Crawford 2000, 9). After the Reformation, church lands in Durness passed to the earls of Sutherland, and the Mackays were confirmed as their feudal vassals (Bangor-Jones 2000, 37). In 1628, Donald Mackay became the first Lord Reay over the Province of Strathnaver, which at the time stretched from Strath Hallidale to Kylesku on the west coast. After he fell into financial difficulties, large parts of the estate were sold, passing directly or eventually to the Dukes of Sutherland (Bangor-Jones 1987, 23).

By the late eighteenth century, repeated harvest failures coupled with rising populations in the townships were putting financial pressure on Highland landowners such as the Sutherland estate, who increasingly sought to make their lands profitable. Like many other landowners, the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland evicted the occupants of the townships on their lands to create sheepwalks, particularly in the valley of Strathnaver – an estimated 15,000 people between 1807 and 1821 (Fairhurst 1968; Bangor-Jones 1987). They were moved to newly created crofting settlements on the coast, where they were expected to take up

fishing or work in the then-burgeoning kelp industry. Neither industry succeeded on a large scale in the long term, and the remains of depopulated townships in the straths and ruined crofts and disused, estate-built fishing harbours along the coast attest to this more recent phase in the Province's history.

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