

A Brief History and Archaeology of St. Columba's Isle at Skeabost

By James Nickelson

James Nickelson is Development Director at the The Woodlands at Furman, a continuing care retirement community in Greenville, SC. James is a trained archaeologist, and gained his M. Phil. Degree at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. His fascination with the history of St. Columba's Isle near Portree on the Isle of Skye resulted in the following article, a valuable addition to what we know about this island which means so much to the history of Clan MacNicol and its Chiefs.

IFIRST VISITED SCOTLAND AND THE ISLE of skye in the summer of 1993 as an undergraduate archaeology student. After finishing a month-long program at the British Museum, I decided to see the region I had read about while researching my family and clan history. My visit included a trip to St. Columba's Island at Skeabost, the site where every reference to our Clan MacNicol mentioned that 28 chiefs of the clan had been buried. Because of my experiences that summer, I decided to enroll for graduate study at the University of Glasgow. During my Master's program, I was able to return to St. Columba's Isle twice, and even conducted

St. Columba's Isle from above. The island is the oval in the center, where the river flows around both sides of it. The chapel called Nicolson's Aisle is barely visible beside two trees on the right side.



a basic archaeological survey of the island, the cathedral ruins and the surrounding area.

St. Columba's Isle is located in the River Snizort just upriver from where it empties into Loch Snizort Beag and near the A850 crossing. The island is reached by means of a footbridge which crosses to its northeast shore where the visitor is greeted by a small cairn with a plaque highlighting the site's significance. It reads, "Ancient burial ground and cathedral church of the Bishops of the Isles from 1079 to 1498. Similarly ancient is the burial chapel Nicolson's Aisle, where, according to tradition, twenty eight chiefs of that clan are buried." But to the visitor surveying the site, the island's importance is not likely apparent.

The Isle of Skye is rich with Iron Age remains, and the area around St. Columba's Isle is no exception. Several Iron Age fortifications dot the hillsides surrounding Skeabost, showing a long history of occupation in this region of Skye.





Clach Ard Pictish symbol stone

Looking north from the island there is a small ridgeline on which sits the Clach Ard Pictish symbol stone. Although no one really knows with certainty what these carved stones were meant to symbolize, the presence of the stone overlooking St. Columba's Isle implies that Skeabost was a site of religious or political significance from an early age. It is no surprise then that St. Columba is said to have preached at this site during his visit to Skye in 583.

This would also make it likely that an early Christian church on the site would be built and dedicated to St. Columba.

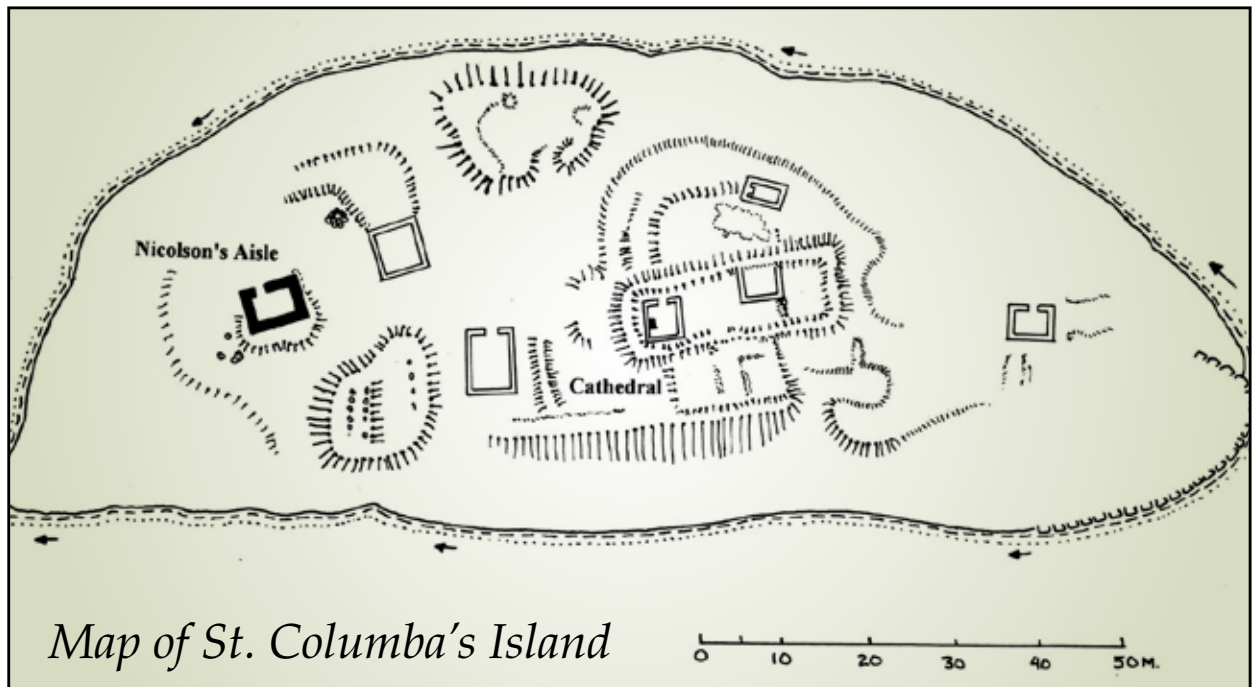
Between the ridge and the river is a fertile stretch of land with evidence of past cultivation and several turf-covered mounds appearing to be longhouses, a type of structure common in the Hebrides from the Norse to the post-Medieval periods.

The first Norse raids along the west coast of Scotland began in 795 and within a short time they had settled most of the Hebrides, displacing or assimilating the native populations. The Norse would remain in control of Skye as a part of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles for about

450 years. So deep was the Norse influence in Skye that many modern place names are of Norse origin, including Trotternish, Skeabost (-bost signifying a farm), and Snizort (formerly Snisport or Sneisport).

The church on Skye fell under the Diocese of Sodor (after the Norse Suðreyar, meaning Southern Isles, as opposed to the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland) which is first mentioned in 1097 as being led by the Bishop seated in Peel on the Isle of Man. But by 1109, an individual named Wimund (or Wymund) was consecrated as Bishop of the Isles with his seat on Skye rather than Peel. The Norse ceded control of the Hebrides to the Kingdom of Scotland in 1266, but the organization of the church would remain unchanged for some time to come.

It appears that in 1331, after the English gained control of Man from the Scots, both Snizort and Peel were seeking the appointment of a Bishop of the Isles. The conflict between the centers of Snizort and Peel intensified during the Great Schism (1378–1417). Scotland supported the Avignon Papacy while England supported the Roman Papacy. As each center supported a different pope, separate lines of succession developed: a Scottish Bishop of the Isles at Snizort loyal to Avignon and an English Bishop of the Isles at Peel loyal to Rome.



Map of St. Columba's Island

The cairn with plaque. The plaque reads "St Columba's Island – Ancient burial ground and site of Cathedral Church of the Bishops of the Isles from 1079 to 1498 similarly ancient is the mortuary chapel Nicolson's Aisle where according to tradition twenty eight chiefs of that clan are buried"



Snizort Cathedral remained the seat of the Bishop of the Isles for the rest of the 14th and most of the 15th centuries. There is evidence that the Bishop petitioned to move the cathedral to a better location in 1433, and by 1498, the Bishop of the Isles was petitioning for a move to Iona Abbey. This move was completed by 1540. Sometime after the Reformation, the cathedral is said to have been dismantled with most of the stone robbed for local construction projects, and its importance lost or obscured for several centuries.

There are a number of remains visible on the St. Columba's Isle. The most prominent structure is the turf-covered Snizort Cathedral which must have once dominated the site. As it remains now, the cathedral is a roughly cruciform shaped mound measuring 22.5 meters long, 6 meters wide and up to 2 meters in height. The transepts are more obscure than the rest of the remains, however they are still readily apparent. On closer examination, it appears that the stones used to make the transepts are significantly smaller than those used in the main structure, suggesting that the transepts may have been a later addition. A roughly semicircular mound on the west end of the cathedral suggests a tower foundation, but there is no tradition of this cathedral having a tower like other examples in Scotland.

On the western end of the island is a small mortuary chapel measuring nearly 5 meters by 3 meters known as Nicolson's Aisle. It has been partially reconstructed, and local and Clan traditions hold that 28 chiefs of the clan are buried in the chapel. Early scholarly accounts of the island refer to this chapel as the Church of St. Columba, and attribute it to the original 11th century Norse church. There are also 5 more burial enclosures scattered around the island of recent construction.

date in the first half of the 13th century which in turn dates the possible construction or remodeling of the cathedral.

In addition to the architectural stone found on St. Columba's Isle, there are four effigies of the typical West Highland style. The MacSween Effigy, so-named for three sets of initials carved into it, features a highland warrior in padded armor and helmet holding a downturned sword. It is worn, which prevents dating it any more precisely than



Column capitals



There is a collection of over 80 pieces of worked stone recovered from the island. Although several are decorative pieces, few of them appear to be significant. The most important piece recovered from the site is a fragmentary column capital with a scalloped ornamentation. This capital is significant because it resembles examples from the cloister arcade of Iona Abbey, showing a possible connection between the two sites. The sculptural style suggests a

between 1350 and 1500. The more significant sculpture is referred to as the Crusader Effigy or the Nicolson Effigy due to its location in Nicolson's Aisle, the burial chapel on the western end of the island. The figure wears plate mail indicating a higher status and the downturned sword it grips is a claymore, dating it solidly to the 16th century. This figure is similar to a better preserved example found in St. Clement's Church at Rodel on Harris.

What would Snizort Cathedral look like if it had survived to the modern era? Despite the fact that it was the seat of the Bishopric of the Isles, the size of the structure does not allow an easy comparison to the large churches found in Glasgow, St. Andrews, or Kirkwall. But there are many smaller churches throughout Scotland that allow a strong comparison to what Snizort might have been in its prime. Two in particular are worthy of comparison.



The MacSween Effigy, with drawing





The one sculpted column capital found at the site suggest that Snizort may have been built in the early 13th century, placing it towards the end of the Norse period. The best known small Norse church in Scotland is St. Magnus Kirk on Eglisay, Orkney. It measures 19.2 meters long externally and is constructed in a three-cell plan of chancel, nave and tower common in England and Ireland. The chancel appears to have held the altar and to have been separated from the nave by a screen. Furthermore, there appears to have been a second floor above the chancel, presumably functioning as a treasury or reliquary. Although similar in size to Snizort Cathedral, the lack of transepts and presence of the tower present two major differences in structure.

A second church which needs to be examined is the Medieval Scottish St. Clement's Church at Rodel on Harris. St. Clements

St Clement's Church
at Rodel on Harris



was built upon an earlier foundation which fell into ruin during the Norse occupation. The new church is said to have been built between 1498 and 1546. It is known to have been repaired in the 1780s after falling into ruin, and again about 1860. The existing structure measures 18.6 meters by 4.6 meters with transepts approximately 3 meters by 5 meters each. It also includes a square tower on the nave end. To the east of the transept is an arch and tomb for Alexander MacLeod with elaborately carved decorations constructed in 1528 which features an effigy in plate mail similar to the Crusader Effigy on St. Columba's Island. A second uncarved arch is west of the nave with a tomb and a simpler effigy similar to the MacSween Effigy from St. Columba's Isle. An additional effigy in plate mail is found in the transept as well as four grave slabs with swords and foliage patterns set into the floor.

What would Snizort Cathedral look like if it had survived to the modern era? I would suggest that Snizort Cathedral was originally constructed during the Norse period in a manner similar to St. Magnus Kirk. This structure could have even included a tower as indicated by the semicircular mound on its west end. The transepts may have been added to achieve the cruciform shape more common of Medieval Scottish construction bringing the structure more in line with St. Clements. This comparison is reinforced by the similarity of both sites containing effigies in plate mail. I would conclude that a surviving Snizort Cathedral would look much like St. Clements at Rodel, depending on how accurate the post-Medieval reconstruction was.

There are many sites of archaeological interest throughout the Isle of Skye, and many more lie buried, hidden beneath the ground. Snizort Cathedral lies obscured beneath the surface, but yet visible. Documentary records are sparse, but when pieced together present a fascinating tale. Hopefully one day there will be further survey work to shed more light on the structure that once was the center of the Bishopric of the Isles. But for now, St. Columba's Isle, Snizort Cathedral, and Nicolson's Aisle are a must see for any MacNicol or their descendants who make the trip to Skye. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁫󠁯

