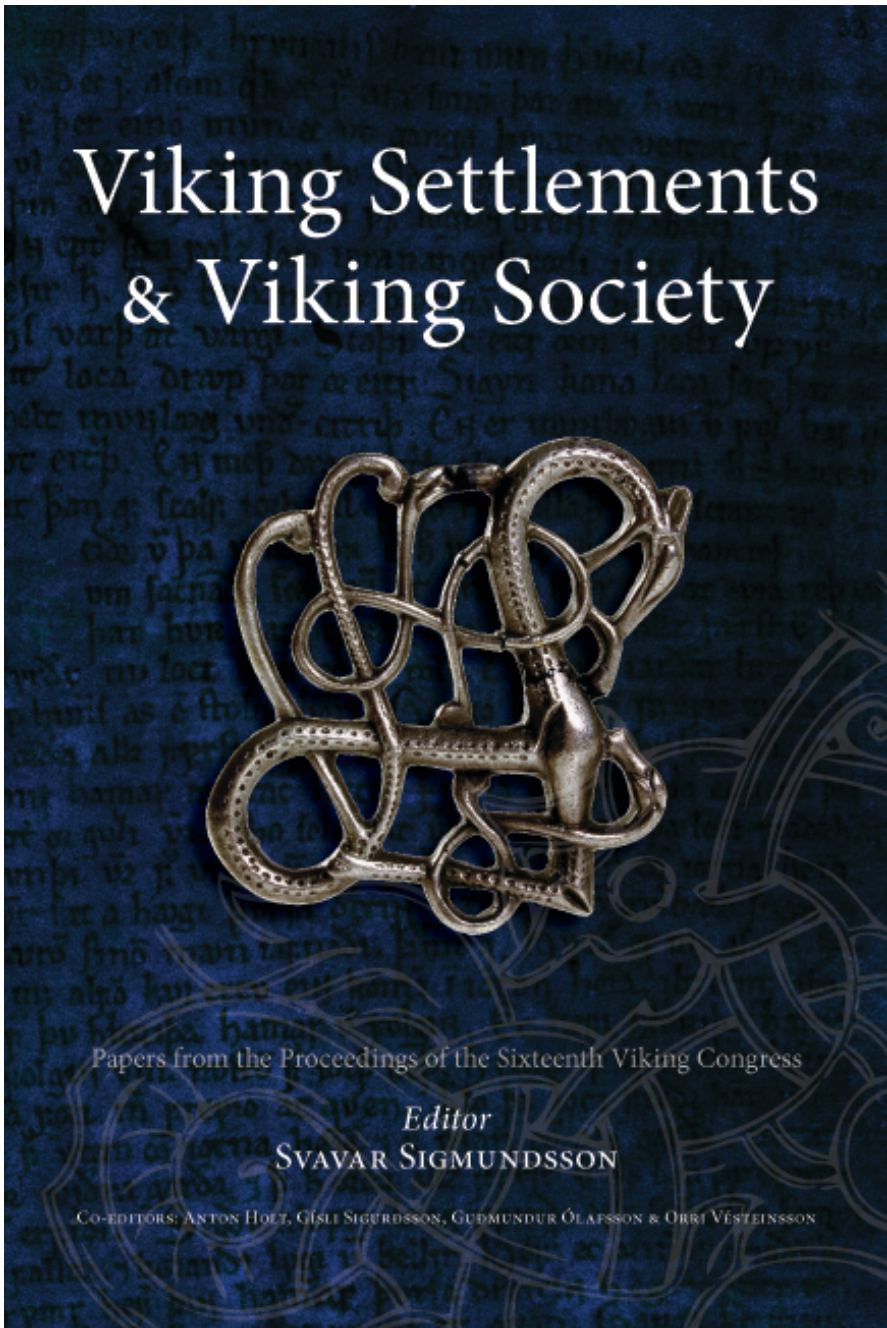


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Norse Influence at Govan on the Firth of Clyde, Scotland

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the evidence for Norse influence at Govan. Govan is now part of the city of Glasgow and is perhaps best known for its world-famous shipyards. At its heart survives a fine 19th-century church within a pear-shaped graveyard, which has produced a rich collection of carved stones from the 10th and 11th centuries. These include five hogback tombstones, strongly suggesting Norse influence at this early medieval ecclesiastical, royal and administrative centre. Recent analysis of cartographic and historical sources, together with trial excavations, has begun to shed further light on the place of Govan in Norse Scotland.

Keywords: Govan, Strathclyde, Scotland, carved stones, hogback, thing place, church, royal centre.

Think of Viking Scotland. The chances are that the image that springs to mind is a beautiful island in the far north or west, studded with Scandinavian place-names and the remains of Norse settlement. Govan does not fit this picture in any respect. Govan lies on the south bank of the Firth of Clyde and was formally absorbed into the city of Glasgow in 1912. Today it appears a bruised and battered post-industrial landscape, and is sadly an area of considerable social deprivation.

Appearances can be deceptive, though, for Govan is a truly remarkable place, with two periods of greatness to its name. Its most recent heyday came in the 19th century with the arrival of shipbuilding and associated industries, which led to the colossal transformation of Govan from rural village to industrial heartland. Indeed, its once world-famous shipyards are still synonymous with the name of Govan: ('shipbuilding made Govan and Govan made shipbuilding': Brotchie, 1905, 243; DalGLISH & Driscoll, 2009, 80–95).

But Govan's first period of greatness was a thousand years earlier, in the 10th and 11th centuries. A closer look at the aerial photograph of Govan (Fig. 1) reveals a church, hemmed in by modern development but still standing within a pear-shaped graveyard – and in Scotland, curvilinear churchyards are a tell-tale sign of an early religious site. The present church is a fine mid-19th century building, the work of the renowned Scottish architect, Rowand



Fig. 1. A modern aerial photograph of Govan Old and its graveyard. © Steven Driscoll.

Anderson. However, historical and archaeological evidence shows that this is only the latest in a long line of ecclesiastical buildings stretching back to early historic times (Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009, 38, Fig. 3.13). The earliest dating evidence comes from two Christian burials found beneath the remains of an early church, which have produced radiocarbon dates spanning the 5th–6th centuries (Driscoll, 2004, 8). Intriguingly, though, there is no evidence at all that this was ever a monastic site.

Govan has attracted antiquarian interest since the mid 19th century (Stuart, 1856; Stirling Maxwell, 1899), when carved stones began to be recovered from the churchyard. A total of 46 stones is known, of which 30 survive today, most displayed within the present church. The original total was probably higher, and of course there may be more still buried in the graveyard. Altogether, early medieval Govan has produced an outstanding corpus of sculpture. It rivals that of Iona or St Andrews, and is probably the largest collection in Scotland from the 10th and 11th centuries. There is a distinctive style to these carvings and others from the local area, so much so that the notion of a ‘Govan School’ has grown over the years (Macquarrie, 1990; Driscoll et al., 2005; Macquarrie, 2006), typified by Govan’s signature monument, the recumbent cross-slab.

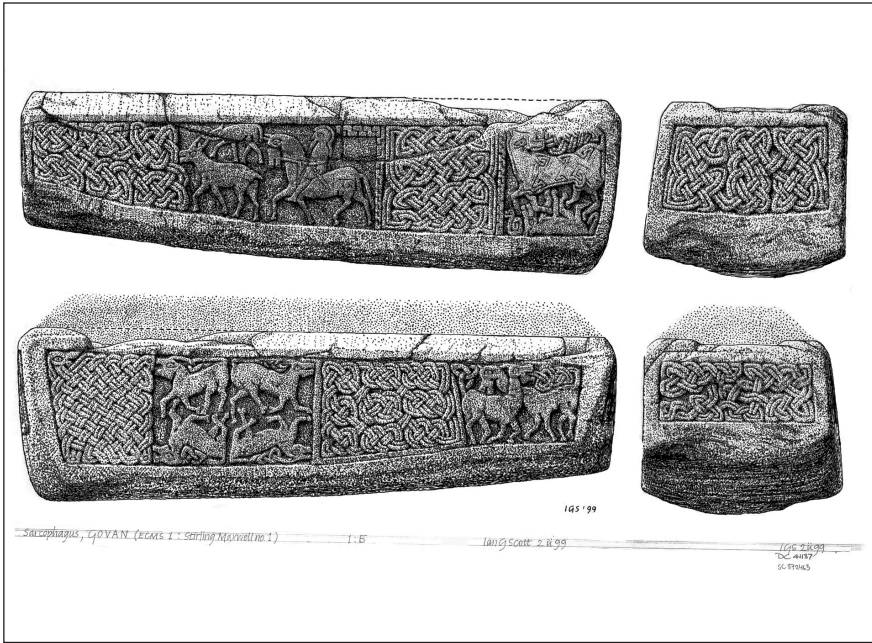


Fig. 2. The Govan sarcophagus. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. Licensor www.rcahams.gov.uk.

Forty-two of the 46 stones are recumbent burial monuments, and the remaining four are upright crosses. Though many of these carved stones are similar in type and design, they are not the same. This implies that they were commissioned individually, rather than mass-produced, which in turn suggests they were carved probably at the behest of a secular elite. Whether there was a single workshop supplying sculpture for the region, or several related workshops employing craftsmen trained in a common tradition, such a rich haul of sculpture from a single location is ample testament to the significance of Govan in the early medieval period.

The finest is undoubtedly a magnificent sarcophagus (Fig. 2), carved from a single block of stone and elaborately decorated with interlace and figurative scenes. The iconography of the warrior hunting a deer hints at royal associations, which – combined with the quality of the carving and the unique form of the monument – suggests it may once have held the remains of one of the Strathclyde kings. The church at Govan has an unusual dedication to St Constantine. Macquarrie (1994, 32) has argued that the founder of Govan was either the Scottish King Constantine, who reigned from 862–878, or his son Donald; but, given the archaeological evidence for an earlier foundation from



Fig. 3. Two of the Govan hogbacks. © Crown copyright: Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.

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around the 6th century, these kings (and the church) are most likely named after an earlier saint Constantine – for which there are several candidates (Thomas, 1994, 20–21). What is clear is that this sarcophagus was meant to be seen, and it is reasonable to suppose it was displayed in an early church.

Other notable stones include the Jordanhill cross, which stood up to 2.5 m high and is completely covered with interlace, save for a rather worn image of a man on horseback (Ritchie, 1999, 11, Fig. 10); and the so-called ‘Sun Stone’, a freestanding cross-slab named because of its great boss and swirling rays (Ritchie, 1999, 13, Fig. 14). Most of the stones, though, are recumbent cross-slabs, many of them re-carved and re-used for burials in the 17th and 18th centuries (Cramp, 1994). The sheer quantity of monuments implies this was an important cemetery for the elite of the time, with the sarcophagus at least denoting royal patronage.

The most tangible evidence of Norse influence at Govan is five hogback tombstones (Fig. 3), characterised by Jim Lang (1984) as Viking colonial monuments. These massive house-shaped sandstone blocks, typified by their pronounced curving roof ridge and shingles, were an invention of the Viking kingdom of York in the 10th century, from where the fashion spread to other areas of northern England settled by Vikings, and to parts of southern Scotland where there was a significant Norse presence (Lang, 1974; 1984; 1994). Together, the five Govan hogbacks form the largest known group in Scotland, and ‘apart from Govan 1, they are quite the largest and heaviest of all hogbacks’ (Lang, 1974, 212); one is the largest in Britain. Govan 1 is the earliest in the group according to Lang’s typology, and it is so similar to Cumbrian hogbacks – with its slim

dimensions and steeply pitched roof – that Lang suggested it might have been imported to Govan from Cumbria, though there is no evidence for this.

On art-historical grounds, these hogbacks are all 10th century in date, although, interestingly, three were subsequently modified suggesting that they were valued and remained active monuments for more than a single generation (Ritchie, 2004, 4). These are among the earliest of the Scottish hogbacks: they are also among the earliest elements of the Govan collection.

Of course the hogbacks are not in themselves proof of Scandinavian settlement in this locality, though they are unambiguous evidence of a maritime connection between the Cumbrian settlements and the Clyde Estuary (Crawford, 1994, 104–5). The western waterways were of undoubted impor-



Fig. 4. Dumbarton Rock – the citadel of the Strathclyde Britons until its sacking by the Vikings in AD 870. © Crown copyright reproduced courtesy of Historic Scotland. www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

tance to the Norse, and yet the place-name evidence for Norse Scotland shows Govan lying just east of and outside the main areas of Scandinavian influence. As Lang (1994, 131) wrote: 'It would be unsafe to use [the hogbacks] as indicators of a protracted Viking colonial presence. As stone, the Govan hogbacks are indeed substantial; as evidence for settlement and communications, they will always be flimsy'. But the question inevitably rises: What *do* these hogbacks represent? What do they tell us about the relationship between the Norse in the Irish Sea province and the early historic kings of the north Britons? What *precisely* was the nature and extent of Norse influence at Govan?

The Firth of Clyde was clearly an important waterway to the Norse incomers, including the Dublin Norse. Indeed, it has been suggested that they may have utilised the Firths of Clyde and Forth as a through-route across lowland Scotland for commercial and political purposes (Crawford, 1994, 109–10; Crawford, 2000, 125–6, Fig. 1). At the start of the Viking Age, control of the Clyde was exercised from a citadel on Dumbarton Rock, the principal stronghold of the British kingdom of Strathclyde, which lies only some 12 miles downstream from Govan (Fig. 4). In AD 870, the Annals of Ulster record that 'two kings of the northmen', Olaf and Ivar, besieged Dumbarton for four months – showing it was clearly a prize worth the taking (AU 870.6, 871.2: MacAirt & MacNiocaill, 1983). They scored a famous victory, sacking and destroying the fortress, and the following year carried a great booty of slaves on 200 ships from northern Britain back to Dublin. Dumbarton never recovered. The obvious inference is that the centre of power moved to Govan around AD 900, where there was already a church and a royal estate. Like Dumbarton Rock, Govan was also well located strategically – at a fording point across the Clyde and at its confluence with the River Kelvin.

Govan has seen a spate of detailed research and excavation over the last 15 years. A seminal conference and publication in the early 1990s (Ritchie, 1994) was followed by a series of trial trenches dug inside and outside the churchyard (Fig. 5) (Cullen & Driscoll, 1995; Driscoll & Will, 1996; Driscoll & Will, 1997; Driscoll et al., 2008), culminating most recently in a Burgh Survey of Govan, a project sponsored by Historic Scotland, which aims to identify areas of archaeological potential in Scotland's historic towns (Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009). Most of this work was carried out by Professor Stephen Driscoll of Glasgow University, who has argued that Govan was an early medieval royal centre – a complex of church, royal estate and administrative centre (Driscoll, 1998; 2003; 2004).

The earliest map source for Govan is by Timothy Pont in the late 16th century, which shows the village stretching east from the church and the Clyde still with its small islands before it was deepened to accommodate large ships (Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009, 22, Fig. 2.4). The most accurate and detailed

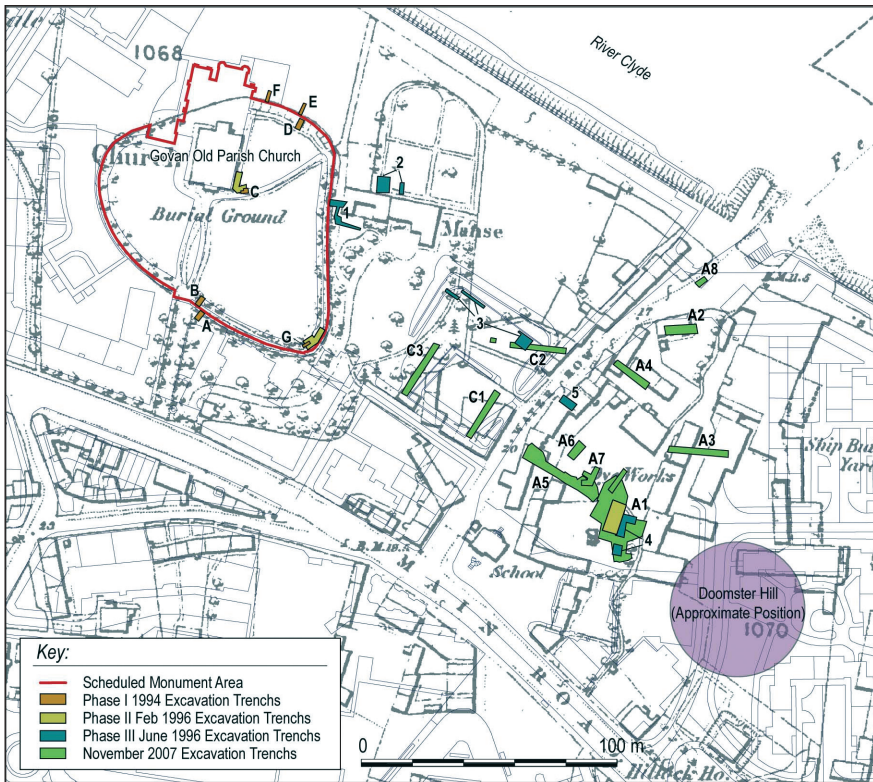


Fig. 5. Map showing the locations of the archaeological excavations, conducted 1994–2007, and the approximate location of Doomster Hill, plotted against the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey map (based on OS mapping © Crown Copyright. All rights reserved Historic Scotland Licence No. 100017509[2009]).

early map is by William Roy, part of the *Military Survey of Scotland*, undertaken shortly after 1745 (Fig. 6). It shows the church, and Partick just across the river, which historical evidence suggests was the site of an early medieval royal estate (Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009, 18).

But it also shows another major feature of Govan’s early topography. Adjacent to the river, some 150 m east of the churchyard, was a massive flat-topped mound, known as the Hillock or Doomster Hill. The very name ‘Govan’ is likely to refer to the Doomster Hill. Clancy (1996, 2–3) suggests that Govan was named when local people still spoke a north British dialect akin to old Welsh, and that the name comes from ‘gwo/ go’, meaning ‘small’, and



Fig. 6. Part of the 'Military Survey of Scotland' by William Roy, undertaken shortly after 1745. © The British Library Board. All Rights Reserved 01/10/2011.

'ban', meaning 'hill'. Govan is relatively flat and it would not be surprising if it was named after its only prominent topographic feature. This would imply that this artificial mound existed not much later than the 10th century.

Unfortunately the hill was levelled during the mid 19th-century industrialisation to make way for a shipyard. However, on the basis of detailed analysis of antiquarian and historical records, early cartographic sources, the etymological evidence, and trial excavations, by far the most likely interpretation of this massive artificial mound is that it was an open-air court site and assembly place. The name of the hill itself refers to the Doomster or Dempster, the legal officer who pronounced sentence, and this function is substantiated by several post-medieval accounts (Davidson-Kelly, 1994, 1–3). However, the date of its foundation is probably much earlier. The recent excavations unearthed an early metallated roadway in the south-east of the churchyard which led directly



Fig. 7. Detail from Robert Paul's 1758 *View of the Banks of the Clyde*. (The Doomster Hill is towards the bottom left). © Glasgow City Libraries. Licensor www.scran.ac.uk.

towards the Doomster Hill, and a deposit of charcoal incorporated in the road produced a calibrated radiocarbon date of AD 734–892 (Driscoll, 1998, 103–4; Driscoll, 2004, 17). This strongly suggests that a ceremonial route directly linked the early medieval church to the Doomster Hill.

The Doomster Hill is also represented on other early maps, such as John Ainslie's *Map of the County of Renfrew* from 1800 (Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009, 24, Fig. 2.8), but the best visual record of it is found in Robert Paul's 1758 *View of the Banks of the Clyde* (Fig. 7). This provides some crucial information about its form. It shows the enormous mound with a distinctly stepped profile, with two clear levels, and surrounded by a large ditch. The ferry area and medieval settlement of Water Row are also clearly shown, with the church visible among the trees. On the basis of analysis of all the antiquarian accounts and cartographic evidence, the mound was possibly up to 45 m in diameter, about 30 m across on top, and stood about 5 m high.

It would be immensely difficult to locate the Doomster Hill on the ground in modern-day Govan, given the extent of 19th-century industrialisation. Moreover, the subsequent levelling of industrial sites has resulted in up to two metres of rubble overlying parts of the area. A trial trench in 1996 located a massive cut feature, initially interpreted as the ditch of the Doomster Hill (Driscoll & Will, 1996, 15–17; Driscoll & Will, 1997, 23–7). However, further work in 2007 found that the 'ditch' did not continue and its basal fill produced



Fig. 8. Tynwald Hill on the Isle of Man, photographed c 1900. © Manx Heritage.

later material, indicating it was a large post-medieval sand pit (Driscoll et al., 2008). Nonetheless, this work has helped to refine further the likely location of the hill, which is now thought to lie around modern Napier Street (the detailed evidence for the site of the Doomster Hill is set out in the Burgh Survey: Dalglish & Driscoll 2009, 40–45).

Court hills are well known in medieval Scotland, as elsewhere, but the distinctive stepped form of the Doomster Hill shown in Paul's *View* recalls nothing so much as famous Norse assembly places in the Irish Sea area, notably Tynwald Hill on the Isle of Man (Fig. 8). This mound was also stepped, at least from the time of the earliest illustrations in the 17th century, and has had four terraces since its 19th-century restoration. The site was re-surveyed in 1993 for Manx National Heritage and it was concluded: 'there is good reason to believe that its stepped profile is ancient' (Darvill, 2004, 222). Like the Doomster Hill, a ceremonial route links Tynwald Hill to St John's Church (Darvill, 2004, 220, Fig. 10.2).

The Thingmote in Dublin has recently been recognised as a royal inauguration site and meeting place from at least the 12th century, and was still in use as an assembly place in the 17th century. In a survey of 1682 this, too, was shown

as a substantial mound with a stepped profile, perhaps around 8 metres high and 15 metres in diameter (FitzPatrick, 1997, i, 76). Both Tynwald Hill and the Thingmote appear to have been high status sites with royal associations.

Other examples closer to hand include the stepped mound at Thingmount in Langdale, Cumbria, with its four terraces on a mound 2 metres high and about 30 metres across (Higham, 1985, 36, Plate IV; Quartermaine & Krupa, 1994); Lincluden Mote in Galloway, which also has four terraces, on a mound standing up to 8 metres high (Piggott & Simpson, 1970, 65); and the so-called 'motte' at Tinwald, Dumfriesshire, where aerial photography hints there may once have been a step in the sides of this ploughed and degraded mound (RCAHMS 1997, 187–8).

The existence of thing places in Norse Scotland is well attested elsewhere through place-names, such as Tingwall in Orkney and Dingwall in Sutherland, and occasionally on the ground, as at Law Ting Holm in Shetland (Crawford, 1987, 206–10). However, the Doomster Hill appears to belong to a group of distinctive stepped mounds scattered around the Irish Sea area – in Dublin, the Isle of Man, Cumbria, south-west Scotland and Strathclyde (Darvill, 2002, 229, Fig. 10.6).

What are we to make of all this? The history of Strathclyde in this period is shrouded in mystery, and the centuries after the destruction of Dumbarton by Vikings in 870 are particularly obscure. This was an era of ever-shifting allegiances and alliances, reflecting the competing interests of Britons, Gaels, Picts, Angles, Norwegians and Danes. One of the most telling facts about the Govan sculpture, though, is its restricted date span. The strong consensus on art-historical grounds (Ritchie, 1994) is that this great flowering of stone carving at Govan took place roughly between 900 and 1100, with the hogbacks dating from the earlier part of this period. The fact that this was clearly the burial place of the secular elite is compelling evidence that Govan in the 10th and 11th centuries remained a flourishing royal and administrative centre – testifying to the expedience and political fleet-footedness of its rulers even in the face of the encroachment of the kingdom of Alba westwards (Driscoll, 2002).

Norse influence is a consistent strand in the story of 10th- and 11th-century Govan and Strathclyde. With the hogbacks, and the evidence for a high status Norse-style thing place, perhaps it is time to accept that there was not only Norse influence at Govan, but in the 10th century at least, Norse involvement at Govan – probably a political accommodation, based around trading along the Clyde. Indeed, given the coherence of the structures at Govan, it must be at least possible that Govan was a planned replacement for Dumbarton, with the 10th- and 11th-century Strathclyde kingdom re-defining itself in Norse terms (Fig. 9).

As Driscoll has proposed elsewhere: 'Norse aspects are so abundant that we

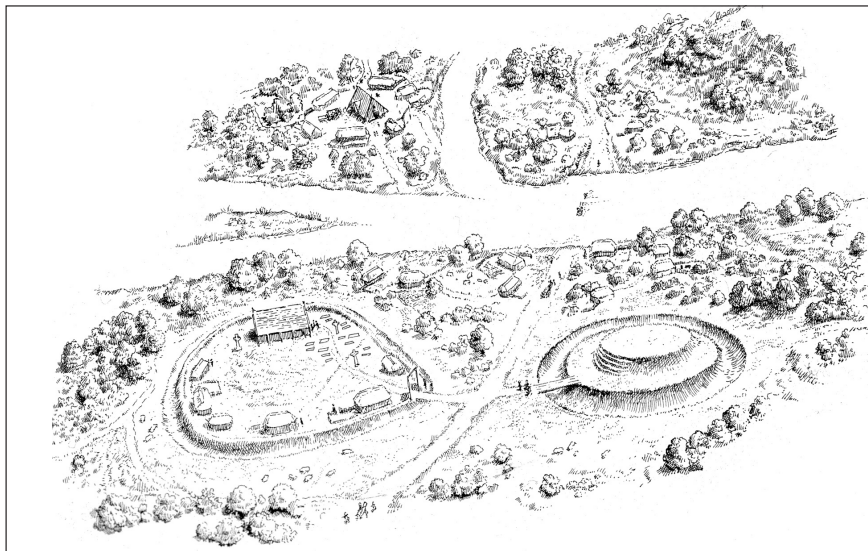


Fig. 9. Reconstruction of Govan and Partick c AD 1000, showing the Church and the Doomster Hill, and the roadway linking the two. The royal estate of Partick lay on the north shore. © Chris Brown.

must at least entertain the notion that, from the late 9th century, there was a significant Norse component in the rulership of the kingdom of Strathclyde ... Certainly Strathclyde of the late 9th and early 10th centuries was alive with Vikings from Dublin and York, but then so was Alba. Custatin mac Aeda, who dominated northern affairs for the first half of the 10th century, married his daughter into the Dublin Viking dynasty and had descendants with Norse names. Given that context it would hardly be surprising to see a hybrid Norse and Celtic aristocracy ruling in Strathclyde, as elsewhere around the Irish Sea' (Driscoll, 1998, 112–13).

By the early 12th century, the centre of power had shifted again. The kingdom of Strathclyde had been subsumed into the kingdom of the Scots, and Govan had effectively been replaced in eminence by Glasgow (Driscoll, 1998). Govan's first period of greatness was over.

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