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Watching the waters: sentinel sites in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland

Shane McLeod FSAScot*

ABSTRACT

The Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland has several place-names along its coasts that are suggestive of a network of observation points guarding maritime routes. The places are almost all elevated sites, primarily with Gaelic place-names containing the words teine *(fire) and* faire *(watch/sentinel). These sites have hitherto elicited little comment in the scholarly literature and this paper rectifies that gap by mapping the sites and examining their applicability as coastal watch places. In addition, those on Mull, Lismore, Kerrera and the Morvern peninsula are assessed in detail for viewsheds and intervisibility. The combination of desk-based study and field visits to sites on Mull, Colonsay and Gigha demonstrates that the sites allowed for the observation of key waterways across long distances, enabling those manning the sites to warn their communities of an attack. Where a series of beacon or watch places occur close together in a logical sequence, it indicates a co-ordinated approach across an island or wider geographic area. As with many pre-modern place-names, providing precise dates for the names of the sites is difficult, and the paper includes a discussion of one likely context. A co-ordinated defence system implies a high level of resources and planning at least at the local or regional level, and this knowledge helps to date the sites. Further clues to dating are provided by examining the political and military context of the medieval era. It is determined that the sites could belong to multiple periods from the Viking Age on, and it is likely that many of them were used at various times over the centuries. The paper particularly focuses on the rule of Somerled/Sumarliði/Somhairle (d AD 1164, hereafter Somerled) and his descendants as a time that the system may have operated.*

SENTINEL SITES IN THE VIKING AGE AND NORSE PERIODS

The use of sentinel sites, often involving the lighting of beacons to produce visible fire and smoke as part of a defensive early warning system to allow people to take shelter or evacuate and defenders to gather against an incoming threat, are known to have been used during the Viking and Norse periods across the Viking world. The signalling system of Anglo-Saxon England, which covered both coastal and inland routes, has been analysed and partly reconstructed (Baker & Brookes 2015), while there is a detailed written account of a beacon system in the earldom of Orkney (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 129). In Scandinavia, beacon and watch sites are known along the Schlei to protect Hedeby (Lemm 2019), around Aarhus (Damm 2008: 101–2), along Roskilde Fjord in Denmark (Crumlin-Pedersen 2010: 131–2), and protecting Uppland in Sweden (Palmborn 2018), while

* Institute for Northern Studies, University of the Highlands and Islands shane.mcleod@uhi.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4747-6351

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a project is currently investigating the use of beacons in Viking Age and medieval Norway (Viking beacons; Ødegaard 2022). This paper will use a similar methodology to the studies mentioned above, using a combination of toponymic and topographic information, to examine the probable sentinel sites of the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland, with a particular focus upon the Sound of Mull.

Direct evidence for sentinel sites in the Viking world, AD *c* 795–1266,[1] in contemporary written records is limited, in part due to the scarcity of the material available. Beacons are recorded as part of a Viking incursion in southern England in 1006, with the Viking army lighting beacons or possibly houses, perhaps to confuse defenders (Baker & Brookes 2015: 222; Swanton 2000: 137). The earliest Norwegian laws include provisions for the lighting of beacons in case of an attack (Ødegaard 2022: 63). Although these laws were written down just after the time period covered in this paper, in many instances they recorded existing oral laws (Sanmark 2004: 133–46). Furthermore, archaeological evidence for the beacon system described in *Orkneyinga saga* may have been discovered on Shapinsay, Orkney, along with an Anglo-Saxon beacon site in Wiltshire (discussed below).

Indirect evidence for the use of sentinel sites in the Viking world is plentiful. In the literary sphere, the Old English epic poem *Beowulf*, set in pre-Viking Age Scandinavia, mentions a *weard*, 'guard', who watches for approaching enemy ships from the sea cliffs in Denmark close to the royal hall (Kiernan 2015: line 229). It has been suggested that this is what also happened in the lead-up to the first recorded encounter between Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in 789 (Swanton 2000: 54; Crumlin-Pedersen 2010: 132). Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* includes a verse which describes beacons being lit to warn of an imminent attack on the royal centre of Lejre, Denmark, in the early or pre-Viking Age (Faulkes 1995: 109). *Hákonar saga Góða* states that beacons were established as a defence system in Norway during the reign of Hákon the Good (d AD 961), but that it failed to be activated during an invasion in *c* 954 (Sturluson 2002: 113–14). *Orkneyinga saga* describes how, during the reign of Earl Paul Haakonsson when he faced an invasion from Norway via Shetland in the early 12th century, a beacon was built on Fair Isle, roughly halfway between Shetland and Orkney, and maintained by a farmer who was to light it if a fleet appeared from Shetland (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 123). The beacon at Fair Isle could be seen on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, where another beacon would be lit followed by others further south throughout the Orkney archipelago, established 'so that each could be seen from the others', mobilising the Orkney defence force (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 129). The successful invasion of Orkney occurred only after an agent of the invaders poured water over the prepared beacon on Fair Isle so that it could not be lit as the fleet passed, thereby disabling the early warning system (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 133).

A further form of indirect evidence for sentinel sites comes in the form of place-names. At least some of the beacons described in *Orkneyinga saga* are likely to have been located on the numerous Ward Hills, derived from Old Norse (ON) *varðr* – 'watch'/'beacon'/'guard', in that region, as well as ON *viti*, 'signal'/'beacon', hills (Clouston 1932; Zoëga 2004: 472, 496; Sanmark & McLeod 2024: 11–15). A mound on Ward Hill, Shapinsay, excavated in 1998 revealed the remains of a beacon stance with layers of intense burning. It was originally a low earthen platform that was later replaced by a horseshoe-shaped stone structure (Downes 1998). At Ward Hill, Deerness, Orkney Mainland, a large two-metre-high mound containing burnt earth and stones is also thought to have been a beacon stance (Canmore ID 2964). Other Ward Hills in Orkney include unexcavated mounds such as on Ward Hill 1, South Ronaldsay, and pre-Viking Age remains like those on Ward Hill, Rousay (Canmore ID 9522; Canmore ID 2173). This is interesting, as although the sentinel sites in Anglo-Saxon England have been primarily identified through place-names, one was excavated at Yatesbury, Wiltshire, where a Bronze Age barrow later had the top of its mound flattened and used as a beacon stance (Baker & Brookes 2015: 222–3), demonstrating that ancient structures could be

repurposed as sentinel sites. People guarding the beach/coast are mentioned in the Isle of Man in 1182 during an invasion and it is thought, based in part on *varðr* names, that a sentinel system on Man originated in the Norse period (Munch 1874; Megaw 1941: 12). In Scandinavia, proposed Viking Age sentinel sites have also primarily been identified through place-names, mostly *varðr*, *viti* and *bavne*, 'beacon' (Damm 2008: 101–2; Crumlin-Pedersen 2010: 131–2; Ødegaard 2022: 63),[2] sometimes in conjunction with GIS analysis to ascertain visibility from the sites (Palmborn 2018; Lemm 2019).

SENTINEL SITES IN WESTERN SCOTLAND[3]

Enough evidence exists to demonstrate that sentinel sites were in use during the Viking and Norse periods. There has also been speculation that sentinel sites would have existed in the Hebrides if the system on the Isle of Man goes back to the Norse period (McDonald 2017: 24). Despite this, there has been no systematic investigation of possible sentinel sites in the west of Scotland, where Scandinavians are also known to have raided and settled during the Viking Age, with their influence continuing through the Norse period (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 71–92). People living in the west of Scotland experienced the same need for warnings and defence against seaborne attacks as those elsewhere, regardless of their genetic and cultural origins, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that they would have also enabled a sentinel system if they had been able to do so. This is particularly so when people in the area were in regular contact with those from regions which did have sentinel systems in place, particularly Orkney, Norway and the Isle of Man. Indeed, some such sites have been mentioned in passing, for example on the west coast of Skye and between Skye and Eigg based on local tradition (MacGregor 1930: 274–5; Martin & Martin 2018: 156), and on Colonsay and along the Sound of Mull based on place-names (Grieve 1923: 297; Martin 2017: 120). In addition, 'maritime watch-points' associated with place-names incorporating Gaelic *Gall*, 'foreign', especially a Scandinavian in the Viking Age, have briefly been discussed (Morgan 2013: 225–6, 232–9). There is mention of a coastal beacon system in place before 1695 on Harris, but unfortunately there is no archaeological or existing place-name evidence, other than an unidentified place mentioned in a 1930s radio broadcast (Martin 1934: 113; Morgan 2013: 242).

There is evidence earlier than Martin Martin's 1695 account from Harris for the existence of a sentinel system operating in the environs of western Scotland, specifically beacons. A map of Ulster produced in 1590 shows a beacon in operation on the north-east Antrim coast with the note 'Scottes warneinge fyer' written beside it (Jobson 1590). This relates to when the MacDonnell/Macdonald clan of Islay and Kintyre also controlled parts of Antrim, and had done so since the 1390s, and beacons could be lit to 'send to Iyla and Kintire for boats' (McNeill 1983: 101; McDonnell 2005: 141). It was the MacDonnells who built Kinbane castle, County Antrim, and evidence of burning thought to relate to a beacon has been found on the headland beyond the castle (Breen & Raven 2015).[4] If the MacDonnells were using beacons in Antrim, then it is reasonable to assume that they also had them in their Scottish lands. Heraldry of clan Macleod of Lewis exists from at least the 1450s displaying a flaming mountain, which is thought to represent a beacon, and it has been suggested that this motif may have been taken from the Nicholsons/MacNicols of Skye from whom the Macleods are thought to have gained estates in the 13th or 14th centuries (MacCoinnich 2015: 42–3, 349). In the 17th century it was thought that this beacon system went back to the Norse period and that it had been instigated by the king of Norway, although for navigation rather than as a warning system (Sellar & Maclean 1999: 11). Be that as it may, the rest of this article focuses on the Inner Hebrides and associated mainland coast.[5]

Place-names

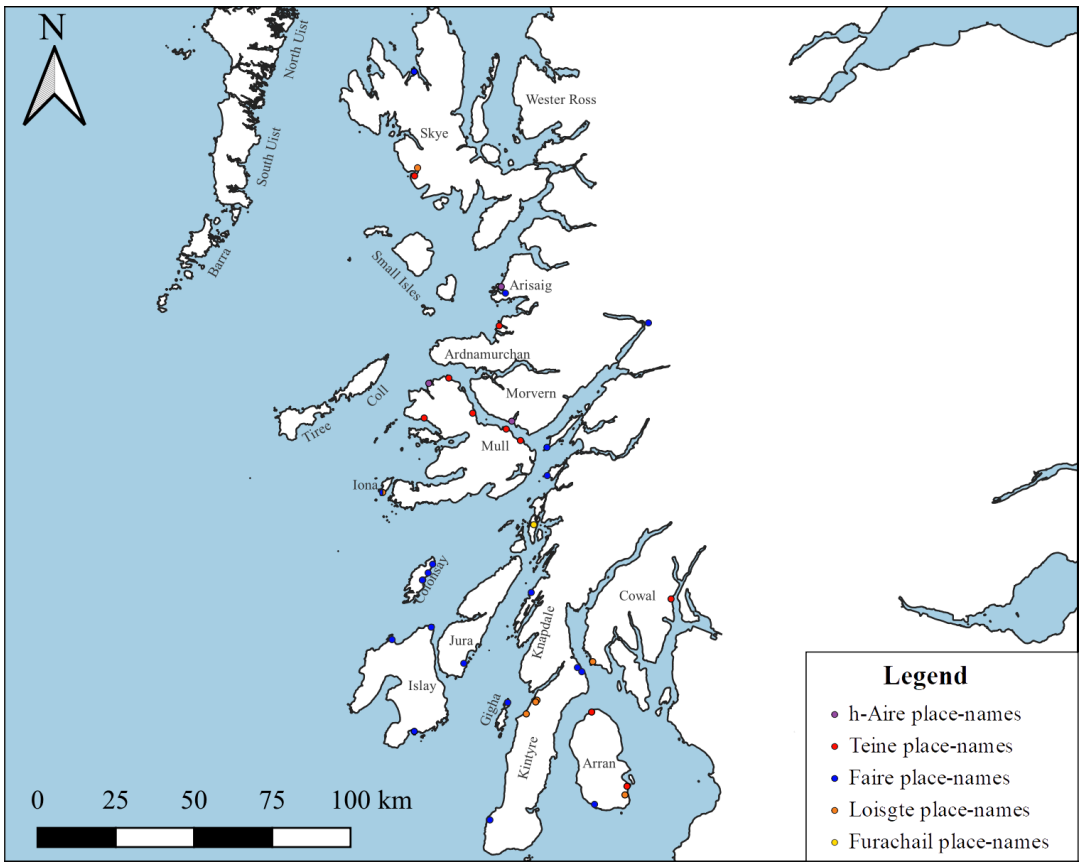
Although place-names are an invaluable resource, their use is problematic. Place-names were usually first recorded long after they were coined, so they are difficult to date. In addition, the place-names dealt with here are of relatively

small places, including microtoponyms, so it is quite possible that even though such names existed, many were not included on maps. For example, two of the four sites on Arran do not appear on maps and are only known from local informants.[6] It is also possible that former sentinel sites were either renamed or never had a specific sentinel-related name, meaning that they are not visible in a map search. For example, there is anecdotal evidence for a beacon system on Harris before 1695, as well as the beacon on North Ronaldsay, Orkney, mentioned in *Orkneyinga saga*, but in both instances no sites are known from maps (Martin 1934: 113; Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 129). It is also possible that sentinel sites have been renamed, with many galley castles in western Scotland located at strategic locations observing sea-routes (McDonald 2017: 23), and may therefore have been built on earlier sentinel sites, but the name would now be that of the castle. Similarly, it has been suggested that Iron Age promontory forts may have been reused as sentinel sites on the Isle of Man (Johnson 2002) and the same is possible in Scotland, in which case the site would still most likely be recorded as the dun/fort name. Finally, as a map-based study, it is possible that I have simply missed a place-name or not zoomed in on a map sufficiently to spot one. For example, Tom na Faire, Hillock of the Watch in Inverlochy, Fort William, is only 25 metres high and visible only at high magnification in an online map search.

The research began as an online map-based search using *PastMap*, developed by Historic Environment Scotland, looking for similar sites to those known from other regions. This was then augmented by the 1st and 2nd edition 6-inch Ordnance Survey (hereafter OS) maps and the *GB1900* place-name database, all of which are available online through the National Library of Scotland. *GB1900* is based on the 2nd edition 6-inch OS maps, which unfortunately leave out some names from the 1st edition. *ScotlandsPlaces*, which allows access to the OS name books, was also used.[7] Consequently, the searches have been based on current Gaelic spellings and it is possible that some sites with Anglicised spellings have been missed.

As noted above, in Orkney sentinel sites often had names in ON *viti* and *varðr*, with *varðr* also appearing on the Isle of Man. Richard Cox has suggested that words ending in *bhair*, such as Balabhair, Buaileabhair, Cnoc Beag Bhineabhair, Cnoc Bhileabhair, Druim Thangabhair, Gurrbhair, Sgeir Chiulabhair and Sithean Mharabhair on the Isle of Lewis, are derived from *varðr* (Cox 2002: 171, 195, 221, 222, 271, 303, 361, 369). The existence of words containing the *bhair* element in place-names in Sutherland, an area controlled by the Orkney earldom in the Norse era, adds support to Cox's suggestion (Graham-Campbell & Batey 1998: 40; ScotlandsPlaces). Although Cox suggests one of the other meanings of *varðr*, 'cairn', for the *bhair* element on Lewis (2002: 171), some of them could equally relate to sentinel sites. However, neither *viti* or *varða/bhair* names are apparent in the region being discussed.[8]

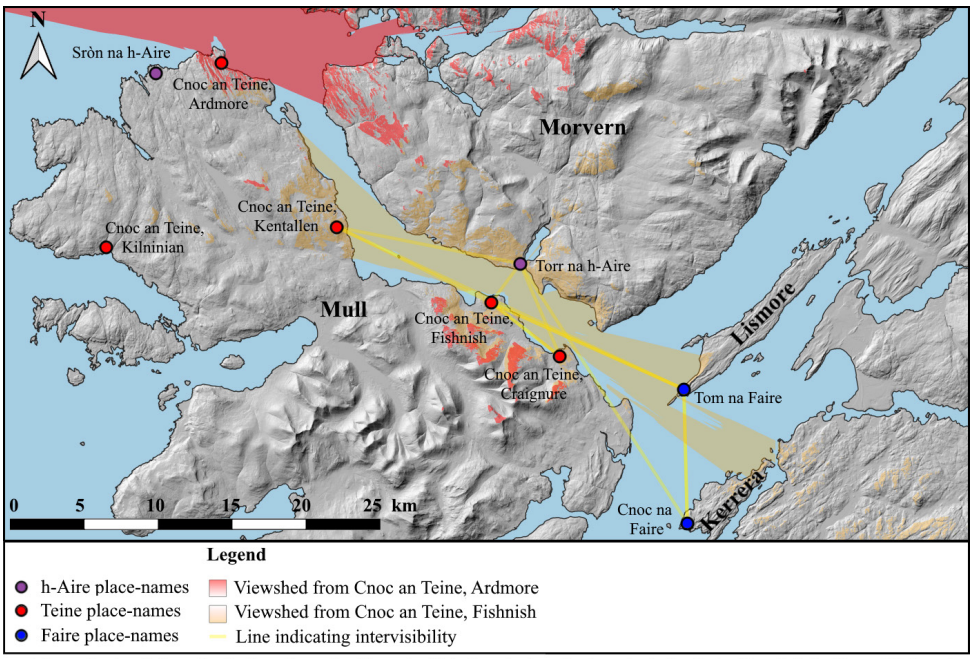
Turning to Gaelic place-names, there are two main place-name elements which appear to indicate sentinel sites: those containing *teine*, 'fire', and *faire*, 'guard'/'outlook'/'vigil'/'watch' (Mark 2004: 276, 574). Most of these are designated as hills, for example Cnoc an Teine (Hill of the Fire) and Cnoc na Faire (Hill of the Watch). Although other reasons for these names can be envisaged, the simplest explanation, and one that fits their locations, is that they were beacon and watch hills respectively, and, to cite Alasdair Whyte on the survival of place-names, they were used for those purposes 'long enough for these place-names to become established' (2023: 139).[9] A reasonable number of sentinel sites survive in place-names in the Inner Hebrides and west mainland coast (Illus 1).[10] If we look at the specific terms, it is striking that five of the ten sites using the word *teine* are on the Isle of Mull, with four of them along the Sound of Mull at regular intervals and all but one of these four are intervisible, creating a chain of beacons along the coast (Illus 2). All of these sites bear the name 'Cnoc an Teine'. The other Cnoc an Teine on Mull is now an isolated site at Kilninnian overlooking the islands of Ulva and Gometra and the Treshnish Isles, but presumably it was formally part of a sentinel chain, or at least a defensive system, which can no longer



Map of potential sentinel sites on Scotland's western seaboard by Peter Randall & Shane McLeod. Map created using data from Ordnance Survey, 2024 [©Crown Copyright & database rights 2024] / EDINA supplied 08/01/2024.

ILLUS 1 The sites mentioned. (For a gazetteer of these sites, see Supplementary material below)

be reconstructed as the names have been lost. As noted by John Baker and Stuart Brookes (2015: 228), 'All beacons must belong to a system of some kind – even activation of a single beacon links signalling personnel with both a source of information (intelligence obtained in person or through surveillance) and the recipient of the signal (such as a military post of the general population).' As such, the most northerly Cnoc an Teine site along the Sound of Mull is not intervisible with any of the others, so it is possible to theorise that a site did exist within the northerly viewshed field shown in red in Illus 2, which would then in turn be visible from the next Cnoc an Teine near Aros (Illus 3). The other five *teine*/fire sites are Cnoc an Teine on the west coast of Skye overlooking Rum and Canna, Sgùrr an Teintein (Rocky Peak of the Fire) on the island of Eilean Shona north of the Ardnamurchan peninsula, and Ardentinny, from Àird an Teine (Height of the Fire) on Loch Long, Cowal, which leads to the portage to Loch Lomond at Tarbet. There are also two sites on the Isle of Arran, Cnoc na Teine (Hill of the Fire) on the north coast overlooking Kilbrannan Sound, and Creag na Teine (Rocky Hill of the Fire) on the south-east coast overlooking the Firth of Clyde. As with Cnoc an Teine at Kilninnian and the most northerly of those along the Sound of Mull, most of these are now isolated 'fire' sites, but were presumably part of a system sometime in the past. For example, Sgùrr an Teintein could feasibly be connected to the Cnoc



Map of potential sentinel sites along the Sound of Mull and viewshed analysis by Peter Randall & Shane McLeod. Map created using Ordnance Survey Terrain 5 DTM [©Crown Copyright and databased rights 2024] / EDINA supplied 08/01/2024.

ILLUS 2 Viewshed and intervisibility map of sentinel sites in the Sound of Mull region

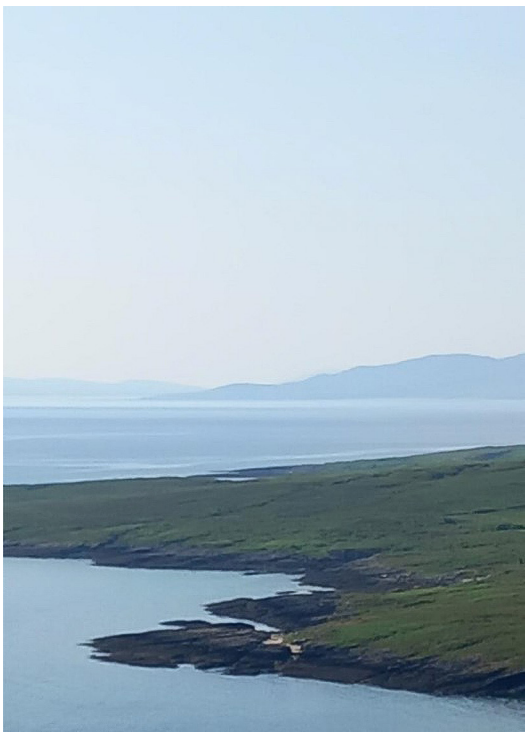
ILLUS 3 Cnoc an Teine near Aros, Isle of Mull. Photograph by the author

an Teine hills along the Sound of Mull if two or three unknown sites were located along the coast of Ardnamurchan. However, Creag na Teine and Torr an Loisgte (Burnt Hill) in southern Arran are intervisible.

Places with *faire*, watch, are far more plentiful and widespread in the inner-west of Scotland than the *teine* places, with 21 being found from Creag na Faire (Rocky Hill of the Watch) in northern Skye to Beinn na Faire (Peak/Large Hill of the Watch) on the south-western coast of Kintyre. As with the *teine* hills, the majority of *faire* sites are south of the Ardnamurchan peninsula in the Inner Hebrides and associated mainland (Illus 1). Similar to *teine* hills, most of the *faire* sentinel sites were also presumably part of a larger system. Even with an isolated example, such as Cnoc na Faire overlooking Port a' Churaich (Port of the coracle/small boat) on Iona, with the hill presumably gaining its name as it was used to watch out for boats, it is possible that a system was in place for a message to be

sent by foot to the nearby monastic community when ships approached, perhaps incorporating the possible nearby sentinel site of Cnoc Loisgte (Burnt Hill). Indeed, Cnoc na Faire Beag (Little Hill of the Watch) on Colonsay was apparently once used to watch for the approaching ferry to Scalasaig in order to warn passengers to get to the jetty on time (Grieve 1923: 297). This and the Iona example cautions us that, unlike *teine* which most obviously would indicate a beacon, a *faire*/'watch' hill could be used to watch for many things other than an enemy fleet. Consequently, it is possible that some of the *faire* sites may have been used to watch for ships for reasons other than defence, especially if they are located at a known ferry port. However, when a series of *faire* sites appear to form a chain, or are part of one along with *teine* sites, then the likelihood that they are sentinel sites is greatly increased. In the case of Colonsay, I propose that the higher Cnoc na Faire Mòr (Big Hill of the Watch) immediately behind Cnoc na Faire Beag and with clear views to Jura and Islay, would have belonged to the sentinel system linking the two *faire* hills further north along the east coast of Colonsay with the one on the north-eastern tip of Islay (Illus 4). As is apparent from Orkney, hills that were named as watch/guard hills, *varðr*/'ward', could still be used for beacons, and this could also have been the case for some of the *faire* sites. In addition, there is another term for 'watching' in Gaelic which appears in some place-names, *aire*. Torr na Faire was originally recorded as Torr na h-Aire (Hill of Watching), on the mainland side of the Sound of Mull at Lochaline, while Sròn na h-Aire (Promontory of Watching) is on the northern coast of Mull looking towards Ardnamurchan, and Cnoc na h-Aire (Hill of Watching) is at Keppoch near Arisaig on the mainland.

Another Gaelic term which may indicate a beacon site, especially the aftermath of a hill being used for a beacon, is *loisgte*, 'burnt'/'arid' (Mark 2004: 403).[11] A place-name search of the *GB1900* data returned four sites of interest in the study area, with three sites close together on Kintyre and another on the inner shore of Loch Eynort, Skye. The latter, Cnoc Loisgte (Burnt Hill) is intervisible with the Skye Cnoc an Teine



Illus 4 View of Cnoc na Faire in north-east Islay from Cnoc na Faire Mòr on Colonsay. Photograph by the author

(Hill of the Fire) and close to the medieval St Maelrubha's Church (Canmore ID 100552). Of the three *loisgte* hills on Kintyre, all are visible from Càrn na Faire (Cairn of the Watch) on Gigha and the two most northerly ones overlook West Loch Tarbert, which provides a portage to Loch Fyne at Tarbert. Indeed, these two sites, Creag Loisgte Dunultach and Creag Loisgte Talatoll, are so close together that they are unlikely to have operated as beacon hills at the same time. The other, Creag Loisgte, is across from Càrn na Faire on the opposite side of the Sound of Gigha. A further *loisgte* site is Creag Loisgte (Rocky Burnt Hill) overlooking Asgog Bay, Cowal, close to the entrance to Loch Fyne. Additionally, Cnoc Loisgte on the south-eastern end of Iona overlooking the Sound of Iona is recorded on the Ritchie map (Ritchie 1930), while Torr an Loisgte (Burnt Hill) overlooking the Firth of Clyde from south-east Arran appeared on the 1st

edition 6-inch OS map. Some of these hills have a bare and brown appearance, which may account for the name of some of them. However, there are many hills of such appearance in Scotland that do not have a *loisgte* name, making those that do carry the name worthy of consideration.

But how exactly did sentinel sites work? Baker and Brookes note that they were part of a system and that 'the siting of the beacon has to relate to routeways in order to see and be seen', that is, the sites observe important routes but are also intervisible to allow a warning message to be passed along the chain (Baker & Brookes 2015: 221). As discussed below, intervisibility relates to the watch sites as well as the beacon sites. The location of the sites was dependent on how far people could see and on finding suitable places in the landscape to observe important routes. In good weather, humans can see for a remarkably long way. For example, Fair Isle is 43 kilometres from North Ronaldsay, Orkney, and can be seen from the island, allowing the beacon chain described in *Orkneyinga saga* to operate. However, the distance that people can see in bad weather is severely curtailed, which may in part be why the beacons recorded in 16th-century England were manned only between March and October, during better weather (Baker & Brookes 2015: 220). Fortunately, waterborne attacks were also more likely to occur during the warmer months when sailing was less dangerous (Sanmark & McLeod 2024: 6), but visibility issues still meant that ideally the sites should not be too far apart. For example, the southern three Cnoc an Teine sites along the Sound of Mull are all intervisible and no more than 12 kilometres apart, while Torr na h-Aire on the opposite side of the Sound of Mull is just over 3 kilometres from the nearest *teine* site (Illus 2).

The relative scarcity of *teine* places in comparison to *faire*, which is paralleled in the Northern Isles where *viti* hills are much scarcer than ward hills (Sanmark & McLeod 2024: 12), suggests that they were more specialised sites, which is not surprising considering that more infrastructure was needed to create and maintain a beacon than a simpler watch site. A beacon required a beacon stance, such as the 'low earthen platform' found during the excavation on Ward Hill, Shapinsay, Orkney (Downes 1998), or the cairns/heap of stones described by Martin Martin in relation to Harris in 1695 (Martin 1934: 113). In addition to fuel – wood, turf, peat – ready to be lit, it is possible that a guardhouse was built nearby in which to keep fuel and provisions and provide shelter for the guard, as seems to be indicated by Warsetter, beacon/guard homestead, Sanday, Orkney, on The Wart, the beacon hill (Marwick 1952: 17). It is possible that there is evidence for something similar on Gigha, with the place-name Tigh Càrn na Faire (House of the Cairn of the Watch) being found close to Càrn na Faire. Although there is not a house located there now, structures and a well are indicated at the location on the 1st edition map (Ordnance Survey 1873). Although the structures were probably post-medieval, the existence of a well makes habitation in earlier periods a distinct possibility. Clearly a sentinel site needed a sentinel in attendance, with Martin reporting that 'there was always a sentinel at each cairn to observe the seacoast' on Harris (1934: 113). The mention of cairns at the sites is interesting, as the watch site on Gigha is a cairn atop a hill approximately 38 metres above sea level. The prehistoric cairn was roughly 9.5 metres in diameter and 1.8 metres high in 1963 (Canmore ID 38594; Illus 5). The height is similar to that of the likely beacon stance at Ward Hill, Deerness, Orkney (Canmore ID 2964), and it is possible that the cairn on Gigha could have been used as a beacon stance in a similar way as the levelled Bronze Age barrow at Yatesbury (Baker & Brookes 2015: 222–3).

The need to have at least one person, along with provisions, stationed at the sentinel site helps explain the sites chosen. Very few of them are extremely high and difficult to ascend, as such sites would be impractical, especially if a beacon stance needed to be built and fuel and supplies brought up. Instead, the sites are relatively easy to ascend on foot but still provide commanding views over the seaway. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is the southern Cnoc an Teine on Mull, which has barely any elevation at all, and the name has probably only been preserved as it is near the site of Anna's Cottage (Canmore ID

Illus 5 Càrn na Faire, Gigha. Photograph by the author

159155). Despite the lack of elevation, the site provides clear views of the southern end of the Sound of Mull and mainland opposite, including Torr na h-Aire at Lochaline, and the next Cnoc an Teine can be seen across Scallastle Bay, while Tom na Faire on Lismore can also be seen (Illus 2). In such circumstances, dramatic elevation was not necessary for a suitable sentinel site. Although the site cannot be certain, as Cnoc an Teine may have been the name of the cottage and/or Anna's byname, the cottage and Cnoc an Teine are two distinct sites on PastMap and the viewshed analysis in Illus 2 suggests that it was well located as part of the chain of sentinel sites in the Sound of Mull region, and therefore I have retained the site.

Considering the *teine* and *faire* sites as a group, it is apparent that they could have functioned as an integrated system between the Sound of Mull and southern Kintyre. As noted above, the three southern *teine* sites on the eastern shore of Mull allowed ships to be tracked as they travelled through the Sound, and this is augmented by an *aire* site on the opposite shore at the entrance to Loch Aline. If travelling from the north, as a ship left the Sound of Mull it would be seen from Tom na Faire, Hillock of the Watch, on Lismore and then from Cnoc na Faire on Kerrera if they continued south (Illus 2). Tom na Faire on Lismore may have been a particularly important site, as it allowed a watcher to observe ships in the Sound of Mull, entering/leaving Lochs Linnhe and Etive, plus ships coming from the area of Oban on the mainland, and the Firth of Lorn from the direction of southern Mull and the Slate Islands. Any ships travelling up Loch Linnhe would be spotted from the sentinel site at Fort William. On passing Kerrera a ship could go south-west towards Colonsay or south-east on a more dangerous journey past the islands of Luing and Scarba and the Corryvreckan whirlpool to the Sound of Jura. If taking the latter route, a ship would be seen from Binnein Furachail (Hill of Careful Watching/Observing) on Luing and then Cnoc na Faire on the Knapdale mainland coast opposite northern Jura as it entered the Sound of Jura, and then the possible Torr na Faire on the south-east coast of Jura[12] and Cairn na Faire on the north coast of Gigha. Finally, it would be seen from Creag Loisgte Dunultach if it entered West Loch Tarbet to access the portage across the Kintyre peninsula at the end of the loch (Illus 1).

If a ship chose the safer route, it would also be seen from Binnein Furachail on Luing, and then the next sentinel site would be the Cnoc na Faire on the north-east coast of Colonsay,

followed by three further hills, although two are essentially in the same location, with the same name, along Colonsay's east coast. Sailing past Colonsay, a ship could either go directly south to the Sound of Islay, passing the Cnoc na Faire at the north-eastern point of Islay, which is visible from Cnoc na Faire Mòr on Colonsay (Illus 3), or they could sail around the west coast of Islay, passing the Cnoc na Faire in north-western Islay. If sailing through the Sound of Islay, a ship would be spotted once it reached its southern end from Càrn na Faire on Gigha, and then again from the Cnoc na Faire on the southern coast of Islay, and/or Beinn na Faire (Peak/Mountain of the Watch) on the south-western coast of Kintyre. If a ship then rounded Kintyre, it would be seen from Cnoc an Faire on the south coast of the Isle of Arran. Further north, if a ship entered Kilbrannan Sound there are two places named Cnoc na Faire on the eastern coast of Kintyre, Cnoc na Teine on the north coast of Arran plus Creag Loisgte at Asgog Bay if a ship tried to access Loch Fyne, and Ardentinny if a ship entered Loch Long. If going along the east coast of Arran into the Firth of Clyde a ship would be spotted from Creag na Teine and Torr an Loisgte (Illus 1).

The essential function of a sentinel system is to watch for threats and then provide adequate warning when they appear. It has been estimated that the outer beacons of the sentinel system around Aros in Denmark could spot a hostile fleet 80 kilometres away in fine weather, which equated to an eight-to-nine-hour voyage. Even though it may take an hour or more for the signal to reach the intended target, in this case Aros, this would still provide many hours of warning for the defenders to prepare themselves (Damm 2008: 101). The distance from Fair Isle to North Ronaldsay, Orkney, is approximately 43 kilometres, so presumably a hostile fleet would be spotted four or more hours before arriving in the example in *Orkneyinga saga*, and longer for the larger islands of the archipelago. When the Fair Isle beacon was lit, followed by those throughout Orkney, Earl Paul's followers gathered ready to face the invasion (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 131). Presumably the warning time would also have allowed for non-combatants to hide themselves and their valuables. As described above, long chains of sentinel sites exist in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland, particularly from the Sound of Mull and then south through the Sound of Islay and on to southern Kintyre, which could have provided hours of warning of a potential attack. It is noted in some saga sources that when fleets moved through the Hebrides, few people were encountered, which may demonstrate that a warning system was in place and functioning well on those occasions. For example, when King Haakon of Norway went to the Hebrides on his military expedition in 1263, the near-contemporary saga notes that 'all the folk fled away with all that they could carry off' when his men raided Kintyre (Dasent 1894, vol 2: 350). It was only when, after 'much hard travel and great trouble', Haakon's men reached the main farms that a substantial number of men and goods were encountered (Dasent 1894, vol 2: 350), suggesting that people had been forewarned and retreated to muster points.

CONTEXT AND DATING

Despite the issues regarding the survival and recording of the place-names discussed above, the distribution map of sentinel sites with Gaelic place-names in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland reveals some surprising results. It is noticeable that the large island of Skye has only three possible sentinel sites determined by place-names, and that no sites exist north of Creag na Faire on the peninsula between Loch Snizort and Loch Greshornish on Skye. In addition, the narrow route between Skye and the mainland has no sites, despite sites existing along the Sounds of Mull, Islay and Jura, with sounds being ideal places to keep a lookout for ships due to their narrowness. On the mainland, there are no evident sites north of Cnoc na h-Aire to the south of Mallaig. Consequently, sentinel sites appear to have been in use primarily in the Inner Hebrides, particularly south of the Ardnamurchan peninsula.

The distribution of sentinel sites helps to provide clues to their possible context and therefore

the dates at which they operated. What follows is no doubt just one of many possible suggestions of when the sentinel sites operated. Furthermore, it is known that sentinel sites were used over long periods of time, with sites in England known to have been in operation from at least the 10th century until the 16th (Baker & Brookes 2015: 224), and many of the sites in western Scotland may have had a similarly long lifespan. Unfortunately, the documentary records for the area are quite sparse, making it difficult to determine if a named event resulted in a sentinel site or system being inaugurated. For example, King Haakon sent 60 ships up Loch Long and into Loch Lomond in 1263 for raids (Dasent 1894, vol 2: 354–5), and this may have been an impetus for establishing a beacon, presumably part of a now lost system, along Loch Long at Ardentinny. However, the presence of culturally Scandinavian burials of late-9th to mid-10th century date at Mid Ross on the western shore of Loch Lomond (Batey 2023) indicates that Scandinavian groups had been present in the area much earlier and therefore the beacon site, but not necessarily the name, could also be earlier. Indeed, 'lomond' is thought to be an early Brythonic Celtic name meaning beacon, with the loch named after the mountain Ben Lomond on its shore, and similar hill names appear in Wales and Fife (James 2019: 194). The loch, given as Lumonoy, is described in an early 9th-century text attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius, and the name and its beacon associations therefore pre-date the Scandinavian settlement and demonstrate how early some sentinel sites could be (Evans 2003). Unfortunately, for the early Viking Age there are no written sources that are of help in establishing when/if a sentinel system was started, although it was clearly an era of frequent raids, based primarily on the notices of raids on Iona and the sacking of Dumbarton (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983: 257, 263, 283, 327), and a time when sentinel systems would have been useful. However, a sentinel system, especially an extensive one, requires resources and a strong central authority to operate it, and the lack of written sources makes it difficult to discern how strong the Strathclyde, Dal Riatan and Pictish authorities were, or indeed exactly where they were (Woolf 2007: 12–13). For this reason, although it is possible that some of the sites date back to the 9th century or earlier, it is difficult to proceed with such a discussion. Conversely, Alan Macniven has noted that 'the Norse settlers would have had to invest heavily in military infrastructure to embed successfully enough for their place-name legacy to have survived', and that a ship levy system may have operated in the Hebrides from the 950s (Macniven 2017: 62, 68), while Denis Rixson suggested a Norse ship levy system from the second half of the 9th century (Rixson 1998: 59–60). A beacon system is certainly the kind of military infrastructure that may have been put into place by new Norse settlers feeling under threat, but the lack of surviving ON sentinel names makes such an argument difficult to sustain without further evidence. The earliest that we have documentary evidence of a single ruler for the region under consideration, and therefore a time that there may have been a strong enough authority to put a system in place, is during the latter reign of Norwegian king Magnus Olafsson (Barefoot). Magnus campaigned in the Hebrides in 1098, with various battles mentioned in poetic and saga accounts, and he appears to have extended his control across the region and the Isle of Man. When he returned in 1101 or 1102, no battles in the Hebrides or Man are mentioned (Pálsson & Edwards 1981: 84–8; Sturluson 2002: 674–8, 683–6), suggesting that Norwegian control was maintained between the two visits, 'possibly indicating strong government undertaken on his [Magnus'] behalf and that of his son Sigurðr, whom he had made the nominal ruler' (Power 2005: 15). However, even if this was the case and Magnus did establish a sentinel system, his death in Ireland in 1103 saw Norwegian control of the Hebrides weaken. Furthermore, the lack of ON sentinel names in the Hebrides, although they do exist on Man, makes a system inaugurated by Magnus a difficult argument to uphold.

Despite issues over the origins of the sites, it appears likely that at least some of them pre-date the stone and mortar castles commonly known as galley castles. For example, it is possible that a now lost site may have existed on the archipelago

known as the Garvellachs. On the most northerly island of the Garvellachs is the castle of Dun Chonaill, first mentioned in 1343 and possibly going back to a grant of four castles to Eóghan MacDubhghaill by King Haakon of Norway in the mid-13th century (Canmore ID 22374). The castle is on elevated ground with views along the Firth of Lorn and would have been an ideal location for a sentinel site, which, if it existed, would have pre-dated the castle. Similarly, the 16th-century Caisteal Dubh nan Cliar is on the southern coast of the Ardnamurchan peninsula opposite the most northern beacon site on Mull and is another candidate for a sentinel site if the chain in the Sound of Mull continued north (Canmore ID 22129). It is not surprising that many of the galley castles, which were 'in a symbiotic relationship with the galley [war-ship]', occupied ideal sentinel sites and may have taken over that function, among others (Macneil 2006: 42).

The general lack of mentions of sentinel systems in the written records may make an earlier date for their inception and primary use more likely, as they may have been expected to appear in the more plentiful written sources of the later period. For example, in his *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland* written in 1549, Donald Monro fails to mention any watch or beacon hills, despite noting other items of military interest such as the locations of castles and the best harbours for Highland galleys (Monro 1549). Elsewhere in Scotland, beacon sites and sometimes specific laws relating to them were recorded in Orkney in 1625 and Nithsdale in Dumfriesshire in 1448 (Maxwell 1900: 127; Clouston 1932: 34). Consequently, the failure of sources from the early modern period to mention any sentinel sites in western Scotland suggests that they were not in use at that time. However, the heraldry of the Macleods of Lewis from the 1450s showing a beacon suggests that sentinel systems were known in western Scotland then and perhaps earlier, so it is in the medieval period that the system/s may have operated.

Another difficulty with dating the sites is dating the language of the place-names. As mentioned, all of the site names collected here by the methods outlined above are in Gaelic. There has been much debate on the different languages spoken in western Scotland during the Viking Age and Norse era, with Gaelic, ON, Cumbric and possibly a form of Pictish all being spoken during the period in the area under investigation. For Gaelic specifically, debate has centred on whether the language and associated place-names survived the period of Scandinavian settlement and cultural domination, or if it needed to be reintroduced at a later date in at least some parts of the Hebrides (for differing opinions see Macniven 2023; Whyte 2023).[13] If Gaelic was effectively reintroduced to some of the area under discussion, it is also unclear when that took place, but the reign of Somerled and his descendants, known as Clann Somhairle, is one possibility (Clancy 2010: 389; Macniven 2015: 1). Somerled was the ruler of Argyll who later extended his realm to the Isle of Man and all of the Hebrides following his ousting of King Godred/Guðrøðr of Man after battles in AD 1156 and 1158 (McDonald 2007: 67; Clancy 2010: 389). Consequently, this may be the earliest period that many of the sites were given Gaelic names, even though the sites themselves could be earlier.

The reigns of Somerled and his descendants also provide a context for many of the sentinel sites. When he died in battle in 1164 Somerled was leading forces from Argyll, Kintyre, the Isles, and 'foreigners' of Dublin (those of Scandinavian descent), demonstrating the geographical scope of his domain and alliances (Mac Airt & Mac Niocaill 1983: 145). Following his death, the previously ousted King Godred of Man returned to the area with Norwegian backing, having spent time with the Norwegian king, and regained the Isle of Man as well as Lewis-Harris (Power 2005: 23–4; McDonald 2007: 136). However, Clann Somhairle appears to have kept control of Kintyre and Arran, and all the islands between and including Islay and Mull, along with parts of the adjacent mainland, such as Morvern. They may have also held land further north on the mainland as the Mac Ruaidrí branch of the clan controlled Garmoran, made up of Ardnamurchan, Moidart, Morar, Knoydart and the Small Isles, in *c* 1200 (Forte et al 2005: 246; Power 2005: 24; McDonald 2007: 67, 77–8,

116). The rule of Clann Somhairle may have also extended further into the Clyde estuary; the ship-captain Ruadrí who had his claim to Bute successfully backed by King Haakon in 1263 is thought to be a descendant of Somerled (Dasent 1894 vol 2: 350–1; Forte et al 2005: 257). At some point after Somerled's death, Skye appears to have been split, with clan Macleod of Dunvegan in the north of the island claiming descent from the Kings of Man, while clan Macdonald of Sleat in the south of Skye claimed descent from Somerled (Grant 1959: 24–5; Macdonald 1978: 40, 397). It is striking that this region controlled by Somerled's descendants is also the region with the most sentinel sites, with 36 of the 41 sites in Illus 1 being in the region they ruled, that is, all of the sites except for the three on Skye and those at Ardentinny and Fort William on the mainland, while Somerled himself also controlled Skye if the sites date from his reign. The region ruled by Clann Somhairle includes the beacon sites along the Sound of Mull, which are arguably the strongest evidence for a sentinel system.

Although it is unclear exactly how Somerled and his descendants ruled their domain/s, they were clearly powerful local rulers who acted accordingly. This included conquering and retaining territory, establishing the Benedictine community and Augustinian nunnery on Iona, and starting the new foundations of Saddell abbey in Kintyre and Ardchattan priory in Lorn (McDonald 2007: 198). The manpower that they were able to muster and the resources and expertise available to them are indicated by the historical record of some of their fleets. Somerled led fleets of 80 and 53 ships in his sea battles to oust Godred of Man in 1156 and 1158 respectively; when he attacked Renfrew in 1164 he is said to have had 164 ships (Anderson 1922: 231, 239, 254–5). Later, Somerled's grandson was a leader of a fleet of 76 ships which attacked Derry in 1212 (Mac Carthy 1895: 253). Consequently, they are likely to have had the authority and resources required to establish and maintain a sentinel system, and such a system may have contributed to their success. Indeed, it was a cadet branch of Clann Somhairle, Clann MacDonnell, who had established their rule in Antrim by the time that Jobson's map showing a beacon described as 'Scottes warneinge fyer' was made (Jobson 1590). It has been noted that 'systems of watch and signalling have existed at times of intense military threat' (Baker & Brookes 2015: 222), and given the ongoing multi-generational conflict between Clann Somhairle and the Crovan dynasty, which included King Godred of Man, along with incursions from the Kings of Scotland and Norway into western Scotland, there is little doubt that a sentinel system would have been useful during the turbulent years of the 12th and 13th centuries.

CONCLUSION

Sentinel systems comprising beacon and watch hills are known to have been used during the medieval period, including in places with close connections to western Scotland such as Orkney and Scandinavia. Consequently, it is unsurprising to discover that there is evidence for a sentinel system in the Inner Hebrides and western seaboard of Scotland. Pictorial evidence for beacons operating in the general region exist in the 15th and 16th centuries, but the best evidence available is place-names, which may be earlier. The Gaelic place-names *teine*, fire, *faire*, watch, *aire*, watching, and possibly *loisgte*, burnt/arid, are found along water routes in the area in locations that provide views over the waterways, and with most of them being visible from at least one other sentinel site. This suggests that a network, or networks, of sentinel sites may have existed over an extended area encompassing the Inner Hebrides, Firth of Clyde and associated mainland coasts and lochs. Most of the *teine*, fire/beacon, sites are found on Mull, with the Sound of Mull having a particular concentration of intervisible sentinel sites, providing the strongest evidence for a sentinel system. Dating of the sites is difficult and is hampered by a general lack of evidence for the medieval period. As the site names are Gaelic it is reasonable to look at a time period when Gaelic was widely spoken, and when there was a leader or dynasty in the area with enough resources and authority to implement a sentinel system.

It is suggested that the rule of Clann Somhairle during the 12th and 13th centuries meets these criteria and thus they may be the originators of the wider system, although parts of it may have been in use both earlier and later than their rule.

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NOTES

1 As this paper deals with Western Scotland, 1266 and the signing of the Treaty of Perth, whereby Norway relinquished its claims to the Hebrides, is taken as the end of this period. 'Viking world' encompasses Scandinavia and places regularly impacted by Scandinavians during this time period.

2 I would like to thank Stefan Brink for discussions of the various Scandinavian sentinel names.

3 Western Scotland includes the west coast of the Scottish mainland and all the islands off it, including those in the Clyde estuary.

4 As reported on the information sign at the site.

5 A similar study on sentinel sites in the Outer Hebrides, focusing on place-names, would be a worthwhile endeavour but is outside the scope of this article.

6 I would like to thank the reviewer for alerting me to these names.

7 The place-names discussed below also occur elsewhere in Scotland, including in some inland regions, such as Cnoc na Faire overlooking Loch Shin in Sutherland, suggesting that sentinel sites were also positioned along important inland communication routes, as is known from medieval England and Nithsdale in Dumfriesshire.

8 I would like to thank Andrew Jennings for discussions on the possible rendering of viti into Gaelic, and to the reviewer for alerting me to the place-names with bhair.

9 In the quote Whyte is speaking about the survival of ON place-names in a district of Mull, but the general premise applies to the survival of other place-names.

10 The map shows 41 sites in the Inner Hebrides. Note that the dot on Iona is two colours (Cnoc Loisgte and Cnoc na Faire), and that the southernmost dot on Colonsay represents two sites close together.

11 I would like to thank Alasdair Whyte for alerting me to this name.

12 Torr na Faire on Jura is the name of a holiday cottage and it cannot be certain that the cottage is named after a landmark in the vicinity, although it is in an elevated position. The name does not appear on OS maps. Even if the site is discounted, ships would be spotted from Càrn na Faire on Gigha.

13 For a more thorough overview of Gaelic and Norse place-names on Mull see Whyte (2017).

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