

From cathedral of the Isles to obscurity – the archaeology and history of Skeabost Island, Snizort

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ABSTRACT

The island of Snizort at Skeabost, or Eilean Chaluim Chille, in northern Skye contains the important but neglected and poorly known remains of the late medieval cathedral of Sodor or the Isles. It was one of the largest churches in the Hebrides, with architectural features that indicate a link to the monastery of Iona. This paper discusses the archaeological remains and then sets them in their wider archaeological context. It then examines the historical evidence for the use of the island, firstly as the possible base of the archdeacons of Sodor and, from c 1387, the seat of the bishops of Sodor. Finally, the reasons for the island's descent into obscurity are considered; key was the lack of support from the Lords of the Isles and the failure to attract a prominent kindred to use it as their place of burial.

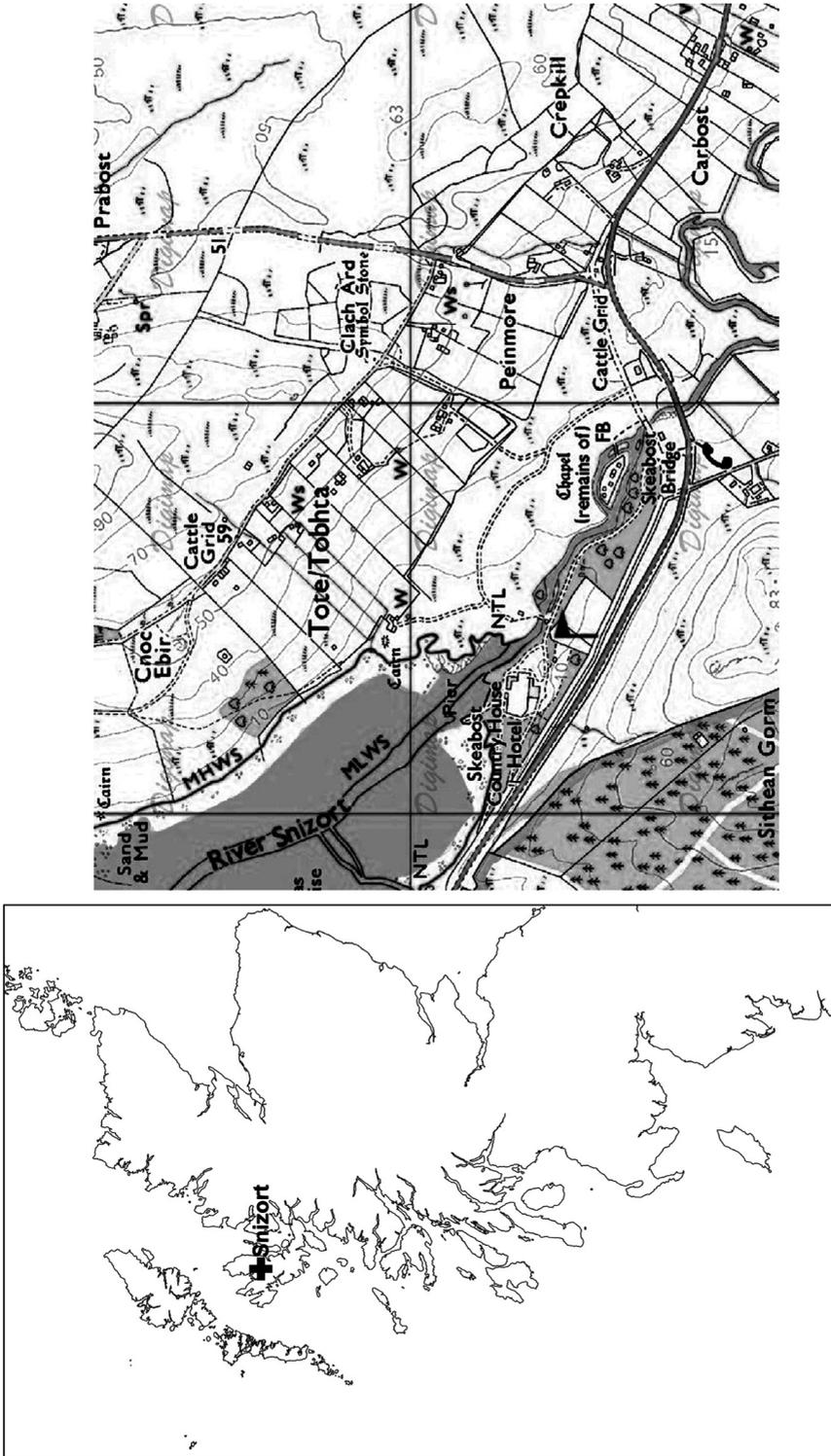
INTRODUCTION

The island of Snizort, otherwise known as Skeabost Island or *Eilean Chaluim Chille*, is located in northern Skye approximately 9.7km north-west of modern-day Portree (illus 1). The island sits in the fast-flowing River Snizort, approximately 420m from Loch Snizort. The site consists of the remains of two churches, numerous burials and a number of post-medieval burial aisles. It seems to have been the seat of the bishops of Sodor from 1387 until c 1500 and may also have been used by an early 12th-century bishop. This paper discusses the archaeological remains in the light of the author's topographical survey of the island in March 2006 and sets them in the wider archaeological and historical context. It assesses how and why it was adopted as the seat of the late medieval bishops of Sodor and then analyses why it fell into such obscurity.

In the historiography, the site is obscure; neither Archdeacon Munro nor Martin Martin's accounts recorded this site and nor did any of the early modern travellers such as James Boswell and Samuel Johnson or Thomas Pennant. However, the island was recorded as *Kilcholkill*

on Johannes Blaeu's map of 1654 (Blaeu 1654). It was described in the old statistical account of 1791–9 as 'formerly the habitation of monks and priests' which contained the 'ruins of a large cathedral, which, in all probability, was formerly the metropolitan church for Skye' (McLeod 1791–9: 185). The first antiquarian interest came with the visits of T S Muir in the 1850s and 1860s; Muir's account recorded 'a group of five or six chapels, the shells of two pretty entire, the other reduced nearly to the ground' (Muir 1885: 35). It was recorded in the RCAHMS inventory of 1928, but with no recognition of its earlier significance (RCAHMS 1928: 192–3). Recognition of its use as the late medieval cathedral seat and the subsequent abandonment for Iona came about through research in the papal archives which identified a petition from 1433 stating that the episcopal seat was at Snizort (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 25; Watt & Murray 2003: 269; MacQuarrie 1984–6: 369–70). Yet, despite recent acknowledgement of its late medieval role, the site remains poorly understood and neglected, no doubt partly because so little of the structures survive. This paper attempts to readdress the balance.

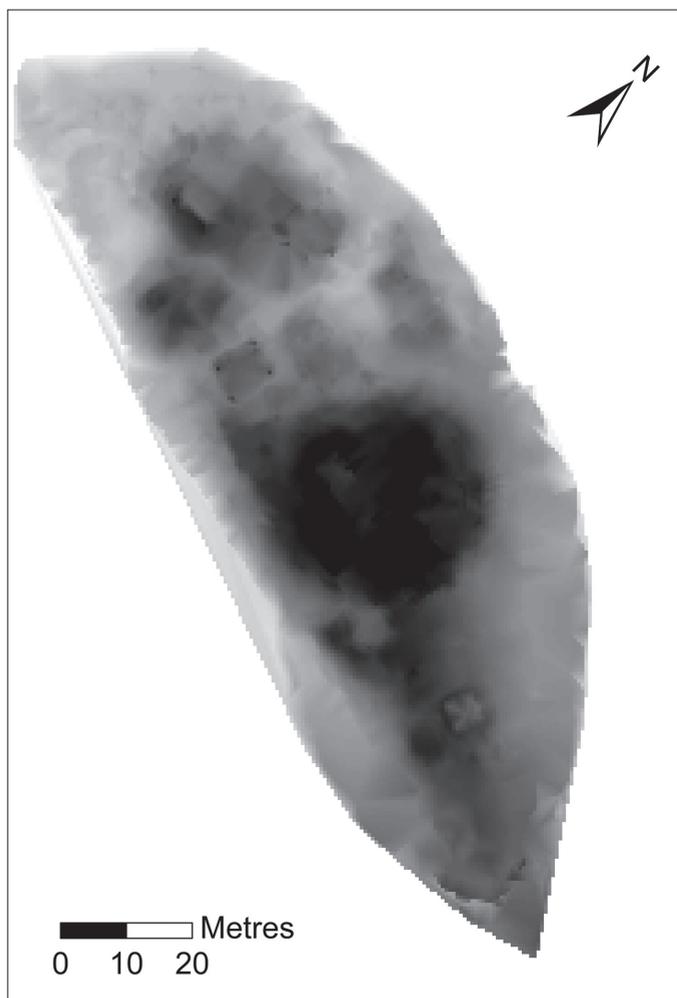
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ILLUS 1 Location map for Snizort (© Crown Copyright/database right 2014. An Ordnance Survey/EDINA supplied service).

PLACE-NAMES

There are three different place-names used to refer to the island: Skeabost, Snizort and Cill Chaluim Chille. Skeabost is the place-name commonly used nowadays to refer to the island; for example in Historic Scotland's scheduling documents and the RCAHMS Canmore entry (SAM Number: AMH/947/1/1 and NMRS number: NG44NW 3). Skeabost is from Old Norse: the meaning of the first element, *skea*, is uncertain, it may be a personal name such as *Skíði*, Gammeltoft suggests, or he postulates that it may derive from a stream-name either *Skjá* or *Skið* (Gammeltoft 2001: 149). The second element, *-bost*, is from *bólstaðr* meaning farm or settlement (Gammeltoft 2001: 149). Snizort is also from Old Norse: Forbes suggested that the first element meaning snow and the second element fjord (Forbes 1923: 406). However, Gordon proposed that Snizort was originally *sníðs-fjord* 'deeply cut – sea-loch' (Gordon 1965: 107). Snizort is the name used in the late medieval sources: it appears variously as *Suisort* in 1331, *Snusport* in 1433 and *Sneseoch* in 1450 (*DN* 18 no 10; Reg. Supp. 289 f.253r; Kirk et al 1997: 87). Nevertheless, the identification with this island is not in doubt because of its location in the River Snizort and in the parish of Snizort. The papal sources also reveal that the church was dedicated to St Columba and this itself is recorded in the third place-name applied to the island, *Eilean Chaluim Chille*, the island of St Columba. Blaeu's map of 1654 depicts a small island in the River Snizort and gives the place-name *Kilcholkill* which is a version of *Cill Chaluim Chille*, the church of St Columba (Blaeu 1654).



ILLUS 2 Digital Terrain Model of Skeabost Island (S E Thomas, J Malcolm, K A Bedigan)

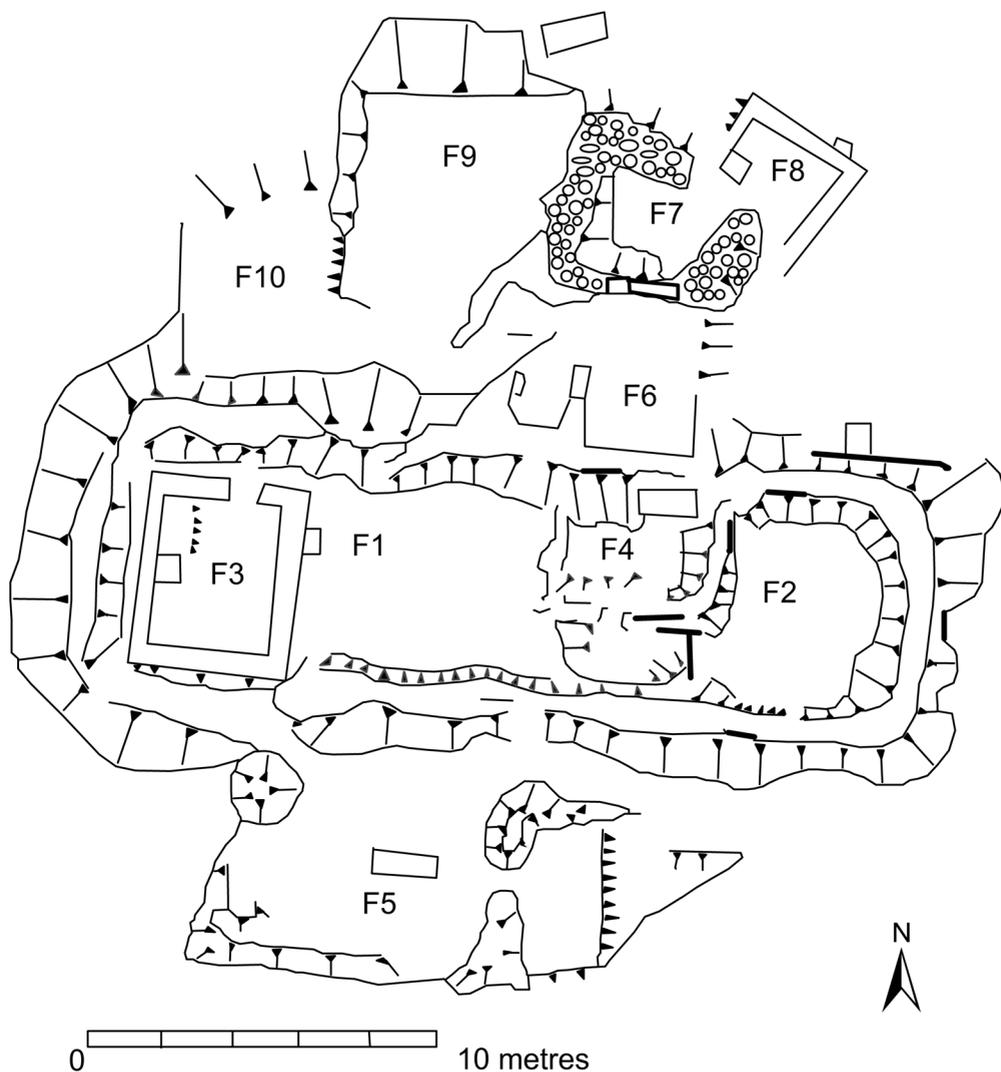
ARCHAEOLOGY

The island is very small and low-lying, measuring approximately 50m north/south × 100m east/west (illus 2). The highest point of the island is in the centre, but it is no more than 1.2m above the river. The site consists of the remains of two churches and one other structure, as well as six post-medieval burial enclosures.

However, whilst this article will primarily focus on the archaeological remains on the island itself, we must highlight the enclosure dyke that

encircles the island. It runs in three sections along both sides of the River Snizort. The break on the eastern side may show how the island, prior to the recent construction of a footbridge, was originally approached. The dyke seems to consist of turf and stone and to be approximately 0.5–1m wide. The fact that the dyke encircles the island suggests that it is contemporary with the ecclesiastical occupation. It appears to be the equivalent of the monastic ditch and vallum found at sites such as Iona (O’Sullivan 1999: 238–40). It is rather small

in comparison with the Iona earthworks, but we have to bear in mind that the Iona earthworks are extremely complex and consist of several phases. What would have been the purpose of the enclosure dyke? The River Snizort itself could be seen as the natural barrier and marker of the ecclesiastical site on the island and therefore reduced the need for land-based enclosure. If the enclosure encompassed more land, it would be open to the interpretation that this was the expansion of the site possibly for exploitation purposes. Instead,



ILLUS 3 1:200 plan of the cathedral church of Snizort (S E Thomas, J Malcolm, K A Bedigan)



ILLUS 4 The eastern interior of the medieval cathedral church

given the limited area it encompasses, it seems to be more symbolic, marking the sacred territory of the island and re-enforcing the river as a barrier.

The main and most significant structure is in the centre of the island. It consists of a rectangular building, orientated east–west and measuring 23m × 5.3m with a total area of 121.9m² (illus 3). The walls are visible as turfed-over banks except the west wall where there are up to six visible courses of walling. The external height of the walls ranges from 0.2m at the centre of the south wall to the east wall's 0.7m and the west wall's 1.3m. It appears to be a bicameral building, with a possible division of the building at c5m from the east wall. It can be identified as a large church by west Highland standards and we might suppose that it is the medieval cathedral church. The chancel, F2 on the plan, is particularly well defined and visible. At the west end of the chancel, there is a line of masonry which may mark the division between the nave and chancel (illus 4). The south wall of the nave is straight but the north wall is not. In the middle of the nave's

north wall, the wall briefly turns inwards for c1m. The wall is wider here as well, which may be due to wall collapse, so the bend in the wall may be slightly deceptive.

Within the main body of the church, there are two post-medieval burial enclosures. The first, F3, is located at the west end of the nave and the second is at the west end of the chancel. The first burial enclosure measures internally 3.7m east/west and 4.22m north/south and it is approximately 0.2m high. It consists of a harled stone walled enclosure and contains one grave monument. There is a second grave monument on the external face of the east wall of feature 12. The second, F4, is another stone-built walled enclosure which measures internally 3.5m east/west and c3m north/south. It varies in height between 0.1 and 0.2m. Architectural fragments, presumably from the medieval cathedral, have been used in the construction of this feature. It contains one post-medieval grave-slab which lies in the north-eastern corner of the enclosure.



ILLUS 5 Structure F5, the east wall of possible south lateral chapel

F5 is a rectangular structure to the south of the church. It measures *c* 5m × 10.6m. It appears to be aligned with the church. At the south-eastern corner of F5, there are two courses of walling visible, which consists of compact blocks with relatively few pinnings (illus 5). There is no evidence of mortaring, but there is too little visible to make any certain conclusions. Internally, the feature is relatively flat except for a ridge of rubble towards the eastern end of F5 and which runs north/south. There is only one grave-slab lying within this feature and it is one of the two late medieval effigies at Snizort that will be discussed below. F5 is likely to be an aisle contemporary with the church and parallels with it will be discussed below.

The definition of the structures immediately to the north of the church is more complicated. There are three post-medieval burial enclosures in this area (F6, F7 and F8). F6, which immediately adjoins the north wall of the church, is not well-defined. It measures internally *c* 3m east/west and *c* 4m north/south. The visible sections of

walling appear to be rubble built. F7 is a rubble-built structure which is not aligned with the church. It measures internally *c* 3m × 3m. The walls are not more than 0.2m high. F8 comes off at an angle from F7. It is very low stone enclosure, measuring *c* 3m × 2–3m. It is harled, like F3, and is only just visible above the turf. It has one grave monument on the interior north-west wall and a second on the exterior of the north-east wall. The post-medieval grave-slabs and grave monuments make it very clear that these three features are post-medieval burial enclosures.

To the west of these burial enclosures, F9 is a platform area with well-defined north and east edges (illus 6). It measures *c* 6m × 6m, but it is not square because F7 and F6 intrude on its eastern edge. F10 is a similar platform, *c* 0.2m to 0.3m lower than F9. It measures 4.6m east/west and *c* 2.5m north/south. On the western edge of F10, there is a possible wall extending for 2m, which may be an indication of there having been a burial enclosure. However, there are no grave-



ILLUS 6 F9, platform area to the north of the church

slabs or grave monuments to be seen in either of these features.

The second of the churches is located at the north-western end of the island. It is a small rectangular structure measuring 5.65m × 3.95m internally with an area of 22.3m². The north, east and west walls are relatively well-preserved; the north wall stands to a height of 2.1m whilst the gable walls have an average height of 3.4m, whereas only the foundations of the south wall remain (illus 7). The doorway seems to have been in the western end of the north wall. However, there are no surviving architectural fragments for the doorway and we therefore cannot tell whether it was a square or arched. The only surviving window is a square-headed opening in the east gable. This window is splayed on all four sides. According to the RCAHMS, there was a second window in the south wall which seems to have been similar to that in the east gable (RCAHMS 1928: 192). However, the south wall has

collapsed to such an extent that the window no longer survives.

There are sandstone architectural fragments in the walls, which Martin Wildgoose suggests indicates that this chapel was built after the abandonment of the cathedral (Wildgoose 2000: 1). The chapel's masonry was constructed using David Caldwell and Nigel Ruckley's type 3 method, coursed boulders and blocks with panels of pinnings (Caldwell & Ruckley 2005: 102–3). This masonry style is common throughout the northern Hebrides and is difficult to date precisely. Caldwell and Ruckley concluded that 'from Mull northwards building work of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is characterised by type 3 random rubble' (Caldwell & Ruckley 2005: 106). A late medieval date for the chapel, given the masonry style, is not implausible, as we shall see below.

This structure is known as the 'Nicolson Aisle' because of a Nicolson tradition that the



ILLUS 7 The Nicolson Aisle from the north

Nicolson chiefs were buried there (Maclean 1999: 45). It is all the more difficult to date the chapel because undocumented restoration work has been undertaken on the chapel by the Clan Nicolson in recent years. There is some similarity in window style between this chapel and St Ninian's Chapel on Sanda, which the RCAHMS dates to the late medieval period (RCAHMS 1971: 151). The 1928 RCAHMS inventory suggested, on the basis of the gables having been 'intaken five inches at the wall head', that this is an early medieval chapel (RCAHMS 1928: 193). The idea that the small chapel is earlier than the larger structure is repeated by Davie Adams in an unpublished article on Skeabost Island and subsequently by Mary Miers in her volume on the architecture of the western seaboard (Adams undated; Miers 2008: 225–6). In Alasdair MacLean's article in the Clan Nicolson volume, he claimed that the chapel was repaired in the 16th century with architectural fragments from the cathedral the implication being that the chapel was earlier (Maclean 1999: 45). However, the chapel is

comparable, in terms of the wall heads, with the late medieval chapel of Kilkenneth on Tiree, and given this and the window style, a later medieval date would be consistent. A key question is whether this chapel is merely a later structure built to replace the abandoned cathedral or whether it stands on the site of an earlier structure. The digital terrain model shows an extensive mound to the east and north and suggests that there has been considerable use of this area. It seems likely that the Nicolson Aisle overlies an earlier structure. One argument in favour of this proposition is the fact that the later medieval chapel builders chose this location, rather than reusing a section of the cathedral. We might speculate that the eastern location was chosen because there was already a structure or the remains of a structure there that was easier to rebuild rather than re-using a very large structure.

At the south-eastern end of the island, there is a small square stone mortared structure which measures *c* 5m × 5m and the walls stand between 0.6m and 1.2m high. The structure is known

as the MacQueen enclosure, which suggests an association with the MacQueens, several of whom were ministers of Snizort in the early modern period (Nicolson 2001: 247). There are no monuments, such as grave-slabs, to confirm or refute this attribution. However, it seems to be too small to be intended as accommodation for a cleric based at Snizort and although it seems rather small to have been a mausoleum for the MacQueens, it is the most plausible option. There are hardly any indications of either buildings or burials east of the MacQueen enclosure. There are scatters of stones, but most of these appear to be natural rubble, probably washed up by floodwaters.¹ One interesting feature is a doorjamb, similar to that displayed in the MacQueen enclosure, lying in this area.

The dating of the in situ ‘cathedral’ is difficult as there are no diagnostic remains. However, there are two loose architectural fragments which could aid us. The first is a fluted or reeded

nook-shaft capital, recorded in a photograph taken by Ian Fisher in the 1970s at Snizort and now in the care of Skye and Lochalsh Heritage Service in Portree. There are close parallels to two early 13th-century column capitals from Iona (RCAHMS 1982: 268 n 118). The ornamentation on all three capitals is multi-scalloped. The second fragment from Skeabost is a piece of roll moulding. It is fairly elaborate with at least five rolls (illus 8). It is difficult to date with certainty, but it is most probably later medieval, either 14th or 15th century. It is possible that it is from either a window or doorway. These two fragments give us two possible phases of construction, however tentative.

The late medieval use of the island is further confirmed by the two surviving late medieval effigies. The better preserved and probably earlier grave-slab lies in the south transept. It is carved in high relief and consists of a recumbent armoured figure (illus 9). On his head, the man wears a



ILLUS 8 Roll moulding



ILLUS 9 Late medieval effigy in the south lateral chapel

high pointed bascinet. His body is protected by an aketon or quilted surcoat. The feet are wearing pointed sabatons. The sword, which the man clasps in his left hand, appears to be a single-handed sword with lobated pommels. There is an inscription in the top left-hand corner of the grave-slab. It reads MMS RMS IMS; the style of the lettering is late. F T MacLeod was informed, whilst visiting the island in 1909, that it marks the burial place of the MacSweens (MacLeod 1911–12: 374).

This effigy is one of 22 effigies that are all carved from chlorite-schist and which may have originated from the same workshop or craftsmen (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 26). Steer and Bannerman assigned this group to their Iona school; key examples from this group include the Bricius MacKinnon effigy from Iona and one of the Oronsay effigies (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 26). This group are dated, on the basis of the bascinets and swords, to between 1350 and 1500 (Steer &

Bannerman 1977: 26). The presence of an effigy at Snizort with close parallels to ones found on Iona and elsewhere highlights the links between this site and Iona. Whoever commissioned this piece must have had considerable resources to be able to pay a craftsman, probably to come to Skye and carve this grave-slab (for further discussion of peripatetic craftsmen, see Caldwell et al 2010). The absence of any inscription and the broad date range mean that it is difficult to determine whose grave this effigy might have covered. All we can conclude is that it is yet more evidence of a wealthy secular patron associated with this site.

The second effigy lies in the Nicolson Aisle. The figure is carved in high relief and wears a high pointed bascinet (illus 10). Unfortunately, it is too worn to be able to discern the costume. The figure holds a sword with his left hand on the hilt and his right on the quillon; the sword appears to be single-handed. The effigy has close parallels to the Rodel effigy of John MacLeod



ILLUS 10 16th-century effigy in the Nicolson Aisle

of Minginish (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 199). This Rodel effigy, and two others, also appears to lack room for the sword to be held with two hands (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 170). Both the Rodel effigy and that of Snizort date to the 16th century on the basis of the swords and costume (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 81). The position of the sword, held vertically in front of the figure rather than across the body, is typical of the 16th century (Steer & Bannerman 1977: 170).

The 1928 RCAHMS inventory noted a further two effigies, but only described one of them because the other was not found. Neither of these effigies are apparent today. The description of the effigy suggests that it was very similar to the effigy inside the Nicolson Aisle. The figure wore a high pointed bascinet and quilted coat with a sword held by the quillon (RCAHMS 1928: 193). Unfortunately, there are no photographs or drawings of this grave-slab. However, these two grave-slabs highlight the 16th-century MacLeod links between Skye and Harris. They also indicate that whilst the cathedral site had been moved to Iona, Snizort still had enough importance so that lesser members of the MacLeods or other important kindreds, who could afford to commission such grave-slabs, would be buried there.

SITE COMPARISONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The cathedral church at Snizort is remarkably large for the Hebrides; it measures 23m × 5.3m and has an area of 121m². Apart from Iona, it is the longest known church in the Hebrides and one of the largest overall. This comparison is based purely on the dimensions of the chancel and nave and on this basis it is larger than St Columba's of Eye on Lewis, which measures 18.85m × 5m, with a total area of 94.3m², Kildalton on Islay measuring 17.3m × 5.7m, coming to 98.6m² and Kirkapoll on Tiree measuring 11.3m × 5.2m, equalling 58.8m² (RCAHMS 1928: 12; RCAHMS 1984: 203; RCAHMS 1980: 153). The church was also larger than the Augustinian priory church on Oronsay which measured 18.1m × 5.35m, with

a total area of 96.8m² (RCAHMS 1984: 235). However, it is considerably smaller than the Iona Abbey church which, discounting its transepts, had an area of 291.2m² (RCAHMS 1982: 58). The cathedral church's size indicates that this is a highly significant ecclesiastical building. It must have been a very striking structure, not only in its size, but also if we consider the architectural fragments previously mentioned. It would have dominated not only the island, but also the surrounding area.

However, when we look beyond the Hebrides, Snizort seems small and almost insignificant. The cathedral church of St Moluag on Lismore, in the neighbouring diocese of Argyll, measured 38m east/west, × 7.2m north/south with a total area of 273.6m² (RCAHMS 1975: 156). If we compare the dimensions and area of the Snizort cathedral with other cathedral churches in the Norwegian archdiocese of Niðaróss, we will see how very small it was. St German's Cathedral in Peel on the Isle of Man measured approximately 45.11m × 6.7m with an area of 302.2m² (Raleigh Radford 2001: 363). The Romanesque cathedral of St Magnus in Kirkwall on Orkney is even larger, measuring circa 68m × 15m with an area of 1020m² (RCAHMS 1946: Plate 25). A yet more remote diocese than Sodor was Greenland and yet there were the resources available to build a cathedral church, at Garðar in the Eastern Settlement, which measured 33.3m × c 9.9m with an area of 330.54m² (Lynnerup 1998: 16). The Faroese cathedral at Kirkjubøur measured 26.5m × 10.65m; it was similar in length to Snizort, but twice as wide, meaning that its area amounted to 284.87m² (Arge 1989: 26). On the Norwegian mainland, the cathedrals were also much more substantial structures; for example, Bergen measures c 60m × 13m with an area of 780m² whilst the great cathedral of Niðaróss measures 100m east/west and at its broadest is 50m north/south (Ekroll et al 2000: 162 & 210). However, Snizort is not the only example of a small cathedral church. As part of the reforms to the Irish Church in the 12th century, Clonmacnoise was made a diocese and the monastic foundation of St Ciaran, on the River Shannon, became the cathedral. The cathedral church is similar in size to Snizort; it

measures 18.8m × 8.7m internally with an area of 163.56m² (Manning 1998: 57). It too seems to have undergone few alterations in its overall size with the existing building upgraded in the late 12th–early 13th centuries (Manning 1998: 77). It can also be argued that Clonmacnoise is similar to Snizort in that it became a cathedral relatively late in the site’s history. In plan, Snizort is comparable with not only Clonmacnoise, but also Garðar and Kirkjubøur; simple rectangular structures with few additions.

Thus, set within the context of the cathedral churches of the archiepiscopal see of Nidaros, Snizort is by far the smallest. Yet, it could be argued that it was not until the late 14th century that Snizort became a cathedral church and therefore there was not the time, even if there had been available resources, to build a more substantial structure or extend the existing building. The complaints of the bishops regarding the poverty of the diocese, as articulated in March 1428 – ‘the fruits of the Episcopal *mensa* of Sodor are so scant and slight that Angus Bishop of Sodor is not able to be fittingly sustained as becomes his dignity’ – may at least partially explain why Snizort is comparatively small (Dunlop 1956: 197). More pertinent questions, to be addressed below, are what was its role and who was its patron prior to 1387 that the site merited such a large church?

The potential south aisle or transept and the ill-defined northern ‘structures’ increase the church’s size. The south aisle (F5), measuring 5m × 10.6m (north/south by east/west) with an area of 53m², may potentially have been used as an additional chapel, burial aisle, chapter house or sacristy; the best term for it may be an east/west orientated lateral chapel. Its orientation, east/west rather than north/south, may partly have been dictated by the topography of the island, since there is a limited amount of space between the south wall of the church and the river bank. The only other examples of churches with lateral chapels of the same orientation in the Hebrides are Oronsay Priory Church and St Moluag’s Church at Eoropie on Lewis. The Oronsay Priory lateral chapel is the MacDuffie Aisle, which measures 3m × 6m (north/south by east/west), was added to the south wall of the

choir in late 15th or 16th centuries (RCAHMS 1984: 233–4). St Moluag’s Church at Eoropie has two lateral chapels, or as Simpson calls them, ‘transeptal chapels’, at the eastern end of the north and south walls (Simpson 1961: 7). The northern chapel measures 1.57m × 3.07m (north/south by east/west), whilst the southern chapel measures 1.6m × 2.74m (NMRS number: NB56NW 3). The Eoropie chapels differ from the Snizort lateral chapel because they are built right at the eastern end of the church; ‘their east walls are flush with the east gable of the church’ (Simpson 1961: 7). The main similarity is the portions; the Eoropie, Oronsay and Snizort chapels are all longer than they are broad. The Snizort and Oronsay chapels are closer proportionally at 2.1:1 and 2:1, whilst the Eoropie chapels were squarer at 1.95:1 and 1.7:1. Lateral chapels are also found at St Clement’s of Rodel on Harris which has two north/south orientated chapels. They differ from Snizort both in terms of the orientation and in their size since they are smaller and a little more square; the north chapel measures 5.33m × 2.89m (north/south by east/west) whilst the south chapel measures 4.57m × 3m (RCAHMS 1928: 34). The Rodel chapels are also located slightly to the east of the centre of the church. They are also later additions, like Oronsay, to the original 13th-century church. Whilst it does not appear that Rodel is a close architectural parallel to Snizort, its example reminds us that the Snizort lateral chapel, like Oronsay, could well be a later medieval addition.

Churches with east/west lateral chapels are also found in the Scottish dioceses, but these tend to be found on the north walls; for example, the north aisle or chapter house at Fortrose cathedral in Ross, the proposed sacristy at Lismore Cathedral in Argyll and the sacristy at Inchmahome Priory. These have the same east/west orientation and, where the dimensions are known, are approximately the same size. The only difference is positioning, the lateral chapel at Snizort is centrally located whereas those at Oronsay, Lismore, Inchmahome and Fortrose are located to the east of the centre of the church. The Snizort chapel is not closely comparable with those at Eoropie; Eoropie’s closest parallels

are to be found at Gardar in Greenland (Simpson 1961: 7–8).

The northern area, incorporating F6 to F10, is neither symmetrical with nor similar to F5, the proposed lateral chapel. It encompasses an area of approximately 100m² and it has a similar height to the cathedral church, which implies a depth of cultural deposits. It might be argued that these cultural deposits could have been created by the burials in the enclosures, F6, F7 and F8, but the limited number of grave-markers suggests that burials were not extensive and, as we have already noted, F9 and F10 have no such grave-markers. It may be that this area was occupied by ancillary buildings – such as a domestic range. Range buildings are more typically found on the south side of cathedral or monastic churches; for example, range buildings are found on the south side at Saddell Abbey, St Andrews Cathedral and Cambuskenneth Abbey. However, in this respect, the builders of the church complex at Snizort may have been following local plans as the range buildings of both Iona Abbey and Oronsay Priory are on the north side of the church. Locating any range buildings on the north side would also have been necessary because of the limited available space on the island. It is only about 15m from the centre of the south wall of the cathedral to the edge of the island, whereas on the north side, the river bank is over 24m away. However, without excavation we cannot determine whether any structures at Snizort pre- or post-dated the building of Oronsay priory in the early to mid-14th century. These putative range buildings may have served as accommodation for any cathedral canons. There was not sufficient space on the island for individual manses for cathedral canons, as tended to be the case at non-monastic cathedrals in Scotland (Fawcett 1997: 94). The case for there having been cathedral canons at Snizort will be considered below.

Now we have to acknowledge that the examples above are all from monastic sites whereas Snizort was a secular cathedral. None of the secular cathedrals in Scotland had range buildings and their cathedral clergy tended to be housed in manses in the vicinity. An additional parallel for domestic buildings in close proximity to a secular cathedral can be found within the

united diocese of Sodor. At the cathedral of St German's at Peel, on the Isle of Man, a small complex of buildings has been revealed through excavation, immediately to the north of the cathedral. David Freke tentatively interpreted these buildings 'as a domestic complex with kitchen, hall and living accommodation', which was probably either for the use of the bishops or possibly the cathedral canons (Freke 2002: 153). So if Snizort's builders used a model for their plan, perhaps it came from the south of the diocese. For the avoidance of confusion, we shall not suggest that the northern area incorporated domestic buildings, but rather domestic buildings akin to what were found at Peel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The archaeological remains thus suggest a site of some significance both for Skye and the wider Hebridean world. The key questions are: is there any historical context for what the fluted column capital would suggest was a significant early 13th-century structure and how and why was Snizort adopted as the cathedral of the Scottish diocese of Sodor in c 1387?

There is currently no archaeological evidence that Snizort was an early medieval Columban foundation. The Columban dedication is not in itself concrete evidence of such an origin, particularly given that St Columba remained a popular saint in the Hebrides and mainland Scotland until the Reformation. The links between Snizort and Iona, both in plan and architectural features, make it tempting to hypothesise about its origins, but it would be unwise to interpret the Columba dedication as proof of its early medieval origins. Yet, it is indicative of the strong connection between Snizort and Iona.

The first specific reference to Snizort occurs in the 14th century, but there is an early 12th-century reference which may indirectly refer to Snizort. In a letter, dated between 1109–14, to the archbishop of York, Bishop Wimund described his see as '*sancta ecclesia de Schith*', the holy church of Skye (DN 19 no 21). Alex Woolf interpreted this as an indication that the see was not yet fixed in Man and that this may have been where Wimund

was based (Woolf 2003: 173). Furthermore, Oram suggested that Wimund's cathedral seat may have been at Snizort (Oram 2004a: 183). Wimund's presence in Skye is indicative of the extent of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles. Indeed, Skye was the location of a power struggle between the son, Godred, and nephew, Olaf, of the king of Man and the Isles in *c* 1223 which resulted in the castration and blinding of the king's son. The *Chronicle of Man* claimed that 'Godred was residing unguarded in a certain island called the Isle of St Columba' and that his attackers 'launched five boats from a nearby shore, which was about two furlongs [*stade*] from the aforementioned island, and they encircled the island' (*CM (B) f.43r*). The distance, two furlongs or *c* 402m, from the shore to the island, makes it very unlikely that Snizort was the location of the attack on Godred. It is more likely to have been another *Eilean Chaluim Chille*, the island in the now drained loch on the Trotternish peninsula, about 21km to the north-east. The probable edge of the drained loch is between 285m and 450m from *Eilean Chaluim Chille*, depending on which side the island is approached from, which makes it a much more plausible location for the attack on Godred.

If the action on Skye indicates the reach of the Kingdom of Man and the Isles, then it is worth speculating that the rulers or ruling family may have been the patrons of Snizort and responsible for its construction. Adams suggested that the likely patron was Olaf Godredsson, the attacker in the above episode, and later king of Man (Adams undated: 5) It is certainly a plausible proposal: Olaf Godredsson was active in the northern Hebrides, where he had, prior to seizing control of Man, ruled Lewis and whilst the *Chronicles of Man* credits Bishop Simon with the building of St German's Cathedral on Man, it is tempting to suggest Olaf as patron not only of St German's but also of Snizort (Beuermann 2007: 320). Skye certainly seems to have been in the control of the kings of Man and the Isles by the early 13th century and in the episode on Skye, discussed above, Olaf was accompanied by the sheriff or *vicecomes* of Skye (Beuermann 2007: 143).

The first definite reference to Snizort comes from 1331 and whilst we can be certain about

the location it refers to, the actual statement presents further complexity and debate. A letter of July 1331 from the archbishop of Niðaróss to two canons of the church of Bergen documents the claim of Cormac, son of Cormac, to the bishopric of Sodor. In July 1331, this Cormac, the archdeacon of Sodor, sent two Skye clerics to Bergen as his envoys to the archbishop of Niðaróss. They sought the confirmation of Cormac as bishop of Sodor and they claimed that he had been elected bishop 'by the canons of Snizort and the clergy of Skye' (*DN* 18 no 10). Although the controversy surrounding the claim and its complexity is interesting, it is the reference to the canons of Snizort which is most revealing about the status of the site (Thomas 2009: 145–63). Cormac was seeking to be elected bishop of a diocese which, at that time, stretched from the Isle of Man to the Butt of Lewis and whose diocesan seat was located at Peel on the Isle of Man. The canons who elected Cormac were not cathedral canons, as Snizort was not a cathedral in 1331, but may have been secular canons of a mother-church or *monasterium* and may thus be evidence of Snizort's earlier status as a mother-church (Cowan 1978–80: 25). Major churches with communities of clerics or canons are known from both 11th and 12th-century Scotland and pre-conquest Welsh churches (Thomas 2009: 151). If Snizort had been an important mother church on Skye it might in part explain why it was chosen to be the seat of the bishops after 1387.

Snizort may also have been used by the archdeacon of Sodor for some of his official duties. It has been established that the pre-1387 diocese of Sodor had not one, but two archdeacons (Thomas 2009: 149). The first, the archdeacon of Man, based on the Isle of Man, and the second, variously called the archdeacon of Sodor, the Isles or Skye, responsible for the Hebrides. Cormac provides the strongest link between Skye and the archdeacons; he reappears in 1339, acting as an official for the archbishop of Nidaros, in Bergen, where he was recorded as 'archdeacon of Skye' (*DN* 4 no. 237). None of Cormac's successors as archdeacon of the Isles in the church of Sodor can be definitely linked to Skye and Snizort. However, we can speculate as to whether the archdeacons may have used Snizort as a base. Snizort is an

excellent location for access to and from churches in the Outer Hebrides. The archdeacon's role as the disciplinary officer in charge of the clergy of the diocese involved a considerable amount of travelling. The archdeacon of Sodor was expected to visit the parishes and ascertain the qualifications of the clergy; Bishop Mark of Sodor's Statutes of 1291 ordered the archdeacon to visit the churches of the diocese and to inspect the priests' vestments and books (Oliver 1862: 200). The archdeacon was a servant of the bishop and could even be viewed as a deputy who acted for and on behalf of the bishop. If there were links between Snizort and the archdeacons, it might further explain the adoption of Snizort as the episcopal seat after 1387.

That adoption seems to have occurred during the Great Schism, which lasted from 1378 until 1417 and saw the communities of western Christendom divided over the selection of rival popes. The diocese of Sodor, already geopolitically stretched, divided between the Isle of Man, under English control supporting the Roman popes, and the Hebrides, Arran and Bute under the Scottish Crown which had gone with the Avignonese popes. However, it took nine years for a new bishop to be provided to the diocese of Sodor in Scotland; in August 1387, Bishop Michael was transferred from the Cashel archbishopric in Ireland to the diocese of Sodor *in Scotia* (Watt & Murray 2003: 202; *DN* 17 no 167). The location of Michael's new cathedral seat is not recorded, he only appears on one more occasion – in 1409 he was a witness to a charter of Donald, Lord of the Isles, given at Ardtornish Castle in Morvern (Munro & Munro 1986: 28).

That Snizort was adopted as the episcopal seat of the new Scottish diocese of Sodor is only recorded in 1433. In that year, Angus, bishop of Sodor, sought to move his seat from Snizort, or *Snusport*, to 'some honest place within the diocese' (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 25). Angus also sought papal permission to create 12 canonries and as many prebends at this new seat. This can be interpreted in two ways: first there were neither canons nor prebends at Snizort or second there were a number of canons, possibly with prebends, but fewer than 12. The phrase 'with the consent of all whose interest it is' in

the 1433 supplication could refer to the canons of Snizort, although it might equally refer to the patron of the church to which Angus wanted to move his seat (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 25). The implication of Bishop Angus's 1433 supplication is that Snizort was no longer a suitable seat for the bishops. What were the reasons for this apparent unsuitability of Snizort? The Scottish diocese of Sodor lay within the late medieval Lordship of Isles, which had its heartland in Islay and Kintyre and later in Ross and Skye, and Snizort could be said to be relatively remote; distribution maps of the locations at which Lordship charters were given indicate that southern Hebridean and Easter Ross focus. Despite increasing MacDonald landholdings in Skye during the 15th century, Snizort was still outwith what might be considered the heartland of the MacDonald lordship (Oram 2004b: 132). Indeed, by the later 15th century, Snizort may have been on a boundary between the lands of the MacLeods of Harris and the MacDonalds of Sleat.

The relative distance of Snizort might not have mattered were it not for the fact that Bishop Angus was closely connected with the Lordship. He was an illegitimate son of Donald, Lord of the Isles, and thus a half-brother of the ruling Lord, Alexander. He had probably attained the bishopric as a result of the rising power and confidence of the Lordship (Thomas 2014: 127). According to the *Book of Clanranald*, 'his full noble body was buried, with his crozier and his Episcopal habit, in the transept on the south side of the great choir' (MacBain & Kennedy 1894: 211). This description tallies not with Snizort but with Iona, which was the traditional burial place of the MacDonald Lords of the Isles, and, given Angus's apparent antipathy to Snizort, is hardly surprising. Bishop Angus's attempt to move his seat seems to have failed since there is no evidence of a new cathedral seat having been established in the diocese. In 1498, the Scottish Crown petitioned the Pope to allow Iona Abbey to be erected as the see of the bishop (Watt & Murray 2003: 203–4). Successive bishops seem to have held the abbey *in commendam* and the abbey church seems to have been regarded as the cathedral of the diocese of Sodor (Monro 1999: 62).

Snizort in the later Middle Ages was not only the site of the cathedral, but was also the parish church for the parish of Snizort. There are three references to perpetual vicars of the parish church of St Columba's of Snizort between 1441 and 1450 (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 188; Kirk et al 1997: 87). In 1441, Martin *Donaldi* sought ratification of his possession of the church of St Columba twice, once in June and once in October (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 188; 203–4). His second petition also asked for permission to hold the church of St Peter's in Uist (Dunlop & MacLauchlan 1983: 203–4). Martin seems to have certainly taken possession of Snizort since a rival, Robert Thom, petitioned in 1450 to take the perpetual vicarage from Martin, accusing him of perjury and having celebrated mass and other offices whilst excommunicated (Kirk et al 1997: 87). Snizort is the only parish church on Skye not to have had any recorded rectors; it is likely that Snizort's rectory was appropriated to the bishop (Cowan 1967: 219).

Were the parochial services celebrated in the cathedral or in an alternative building? The Nicolson Aisle seems rather small for parochial services since it has an internal area of only 22.8m². This would be unusually small for a parish church of a large parish; Hebridean medieval parish churches have an average internal area of 78m². The three Skye medieval parish churches, with sufficient visible remains for measurements, range from 75m² in the case of the parish churches of Bracadale and Kilmaluag and 106m² for St Conan's of Vatarnish. The smallest Hebridean parish church is Kilchattan on Colonsay, which measured 37m², but it was a less densely populated parish than Snizort. In 1791–9, the population of Colonsay was 718 whereas Snizort had 1,808, though Colonsay had possibly had more emigration to America than Snizort (Stewart 1791–9: 329; McLeod 1791–9: 183). It is also significantly smaller than two parish churches that are located in close proximity to larger churches used for other purposes. At Tain, the parish church close to the collegiate church of Tain has dimensions of 9.75m × 3.96m with an area of 38.61m² whilst the parish church of St Ronan on Iona, within the precinct of the nunnery, had dimensions of 11.5m × 4.7m with

an area of 54.05m² (MacGibbon & Ross 1896: 538; RCAHMS 1982: 251). The Nicolson Aisle, in contrast, seems too small to accommodate the parishioners of Snizort.

In any case, there is a strong likelihood, discussed above, that the Nicolson Aisle post-dates the use of the cathedral. The laity of the parish were therefore likely to have occupied the nave of the cathedral for their parochial services. Elsewhere in medieval Scotland and England, cathedral naves were used by local communities; for example, in the cathedral and priory church of Ely, the Holy Cross parish community used the nave of the cathedral until a separate aisle was built for them in the late 14th century (Franklin 1992: 193). In mainland Scotland, the majority of cathedrals functioned as parish churches, only the cathedrals of St Andrews and Elgin did not have parochial altars (Fawcett 1997: 81). The cathedral of the united diocese of Sodor, prior to 1387 at Peel on the Isle of Man, was probably not used for parochial services; instead parochial services may have taken place in the adjoining church of St Patrick's (Harrison 2002: 17). Snizort would therefore have not been unusual to have served as a parish church as well as a cathedral.

Worship at Snizort seems to have ceased by the mid-18th century, if not earlier; by this time, the parish church of Snizort had been moved to Kensaleyre, 4.4km north. Murdoch MacKenzie's nautical chart of 1755 marks the church near Kensaleyre rather than on the island in the River Snizort to the south (MacKenzie 1755). It was at Kensaleyre that a new church was built in the early 19th century; this new structure may have replaced the older church which was described by the Reverend Malcolm McLeod as only the 'vestiges of the parish kirk' (McLeod 1791–9: 188). We have already noted that the site on Skeabost Island received no mention by either Archdeacon Munro in c 1549 or Martin Martin in c 1695. The 18th-century travellers, such as Boswell and Johnson and Thomas Pennant, seem to have crossed Loch Snizort at the ferry point to the north, from Kingsburgh to either Knott or Greshornish; thus avoiding 12.9km of 'bad riding' and the site of the church of Snizort (Powell 1958: 135).

CONCLUSION

With no prominent kindred having adopted it as their place of burial and the removal of its status as episcopal seat, the cathedral of Snizort passed into obscurity and insignificance probably in the later 16th century. However, the archaeological remains remind us that, in its heyday, it was probably the most important ecclesiastical centre in the northern Hebrides. There was a large church, the largest apart from Iona, which was an impressive building with architectural features similar to Iona. It had at least two phases of building, as indicated by a 13th-century column capital and a later medieval fragment of moulding. It may have had a lateral chapel on its south wall and range buildings on the northern side of the church. The church, and island, may have been the seat of the archdeacons of the Isles and the northern administrative centre for the united diocese of Sodor. After 1387, it was the seat of the independent Scottish bishops of Sodor; albeit not necessarily the most popular or frequented of places for the bishops. Regional and local issues may have rendered Snizort a neglected and unpopular site as it was on the periphery of the Lordship of the Isles and between MacLeod and MacDonald lands. This peripheral or liminal location perhaps ensured that its demise was inevitable once it was no longer the diocesan centre.

ENDNOTES

- 1 According to Martin Wildgoose's Flood Damage Report of 2000, the normal river level has been raised by about 1m by the construction of two stone weirs and as a consequence any flooding on the island is exacerbated. There is no historical evidence of the island flooding during the Middle Ages or in the early modern period.

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MAPS

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