

The Lords of the Isles' Inauguration Ceremony and Council of the Isles

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The Lords of the Isles had their headquarters at Finlaggan on Isla(y) and the Knock M.S. attributed to Hugh MacDonald, probably of Paiblesgarry, in North Uist, has described the inauguration ceremony of proclaiming the Lords thus:

“At this the Bishop of Argyle, the Bishop of the Isles and seven priests were sometimes present; but a bishop was always present, with the chieftains of all the principal families and a Ruler of the Isles.

There was a square stone seven or eight feet long and the tract of a man's foot cut thereupon which he stood, denoting that he should walk in the footsteps and uprightness of his predecessors and that he was installed in his possessions.

He was clothed in a white habit, to show his innocence and integrity of heart, that he would be a light to his people and maintain the true religion.....Then he was to receive a white rod in his hand, intimating that he had the power to rule, not with tyranny and partiality, but with discretion and sincerity.

Then he received his forefather's sword, or some other sword signifying that his duty was to protect and defend them from the incursions of their enemies in peace as in war, as were the obligations and customs of his predecessors.

The ceremony being over, mass was said, after the blessing of the bishop and seven priests, the people pouring out their prayer for the success and prosperity of their new-created Lord.

When they were dismissed, the Lord of the Isles feasted them for a week thereafter and gave liberally to the monks, priests, bards and musicians.

The constitution of the government of the Isles was thus:

MacDonald had his council at Island Finlaggan, In Isla, to the number of sixteen, viz. Four Thanes, four Armins, that is to say, Lords or sub-Thanes, four Squires, or men of competent estate, who could not come up with the Armins or Thanes, that is, freeholders, or men that had their lands in factory, as MacGee of the Rinds of Isla, MacNicoll in Portree in Skye and MacFachern, MacKay and MacGillivray in Mull, MacMillan etc.

There was a table of stone where the council sat in the Island of Finlaggan: the which table, with the stone on which MacDonald sat, was carried away by Argyll with the bells that were at Icolmkill (Irish for Iona) i.e. Iona.

Moreover, there was a judge in every Isle for the discussion of all controversies, who had lands from MacDonald for their trouble and likewise the eleventh part of every action decided, but there might still be an appeal to the council of the Isles.

MacKinnon was obliged to see weights and measures adjusted, and MacDuffie, or MacFie of Colonsay, kept the records of the Isles.

Sir Donald Monro. Dean of the Isles, writing in 1549 describes the composition of the council of the Isles thus:

“In this Ile thair convenit 14 of the Isles best Barons, that is to say, four greatest of the nobles callit Lords; to wit McGillane (Maclean) of Doward, McGillane of Lochbuy, McCloyde (MacLeod) of Haray (Harris) and McCloyde of Leogus (Lewis).

Thir four Barons forsaid might be callit Lords, and were haldin as Lords as sic time.

Four Thanes of les living and estate; to wit McGinnihin (MacKinnon), McNaie (unidentified), McNeill of Gigha and McNeill of Barra. Other great men of living of their royall blude of Clan-Donald lineally descendit; to wit Clan-Donald of Kintyre, Mcane (MacIain) of Ardnamurchan, Clan-Ronald and Clan-Alister Carryche (Carrach) in Lochaber; with the Bishop and Abbot of Icolmkill (Iona).”

Following the forfeiture of the Lordship of the Isles in 1493 by the Scottish Government of James IV, the Council of the Isles was abolished and there followed a long period of lawlessness and rebellion in the former lands of the Lordship.

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