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# Kingdom of Strathclyde's final chapter

*Scotland's last British kingdom was influenced by the Vikings of Man, writes Stephen Driscoll*

The final chapter in the history of the last surviving British kingdom in Scotland – the Kingdom of Strathclyde – has long been shrouded in obscurity.

In AD870 the kingdom, then centred on Dumbarton Rock, was comprehensively sacked by Vikings. But it was not fully absorbed into the Kingdom of Scotland until 1114–1118, when the Scots founded a cathedral at Glasgow. Between these dates, Strathclyde survived in nominal independence. But where the kingdom was based, and what its character was – all this was dark.

New archaeological discoveries in and around Govan Old parish church, however, now suggest that Govan – 11 miles upstream from Dumbarton – was the principal royal centre of Strathclyde during the period. A major administrative centre seems to have been constructed around the church of St Constantine, which housed a royal burial cult. Close to the church was an assembly place (an artificial mound known as the Doomster Hill), while across the Clyde was a royal residence at Partick.

This complex of religious, ceremonial and residential monuments mark Govan out as one of the most significant political centres in Scotland at the time – a rival to Dunadd in Argyll, centre of the first Scottish kingdom (but now beginning to lose

its importance), and the old Pictish site of Forteviot in Perthshire, where the new Scottish kingdom was consolidating its power.

Much of the evidence supporting these claims is fairly well known (and was published in a recent book, *Govan and its Early Medieval Sculpture*, edited by Anna Ritchie). However, excavations undertaken by Glasgow University's field unit (GUARD) have extended our knowledge of the site, and have allowed the pieces to be put together into an intriguing whole.

Both Doomster Hill, a large earthen mound with a stepped profile and level summit, and Partick Castle – two of the main elements of this whole – were swept away at the turn of the century to make room for Glasgow's booming shipyards. Govan's ancient churchyard, however, miraculously survived, its curving, pear-shaped boundary an indicator of its Early Christian origins. The church building itself is not old, but it houses a remarkable collection of 31 early medieval sculpted stones – an additional 15 have been lost this century. In numerical terms alone this collection is amongst the most significant in Scotland (only Iona and St Andrews are better endowed). The cultural content of the stones is equally important. They are all carved in a British style, which has affinities with Pictish, Scottish and Anglo-Norse traditions. Amongst the collection are sev-


eral monumental crosses and a unique monolithic 'sarcophagus' which presumably served as a reliquary. But most important are the grave stones – 5 hog-backs and 21 recumbent slabs with interlace crosses. These elaborately treated monuments probably marked burials of the Strathclyde royal house.

The recent archaeological work has confirmed the antiquity and integrity of the churchyard boundary by the discovery of a substantial ditch – the monastic *vallum* – on its south and east sides. Parts of the foundations of the original timber church, contemporary with the sculpture, also appear to have been found, as well as evidence for workshops or dwellings inside the churchyard boundary. These, together with related finds, suggest that one of the activities taking place here was the working of jet.

Most important, however, was the discovery of a metalled road in the south-east of the churchyard, which aligns with an existing street that leads directly to the former site of Doomster Hill. The impression given of a straight road connecting the court hill and church has its closest parallel at the Tynwald in the Isle of Man, where a processional way links the church of St John with the Manx parliament hill.

The historical implications are immense. The Norse kings of Man were the dominant political force in the Irish Sea during the 9th and 10th centuries, and the similarities between Govan and the Tynwald suggest a strong Norse influence in Strathclyde at the time. Some of the Govan tombs, particularly the hog-backs which in England are associated with Scandinavians, point to the same conclusion.

It used to be thought the Vikings disappeared from Strathclyde after their 870 incursion. It now seems more likely that the British kings of Strathclyde – their names, contained in king-lists, remain British, not Norse – intermarried with the Manx dynasty, as the coastal rulers of Wales and Ireland are known to have done. Some of the leading figures at the Strathclyde court may even have been Norse.

Further evidence is likely to emerge as excavations continue. The area around Doomster Hill will almost certainly be exposed in a new programme of urban redevelopment, and long-term excavations are planned in the churchyard. After almost a millennium of obscurity the mists shrouding Dark Age Strathclyde may soon be lifting. 

*Dr Stephen Driscoll is a Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Glasgow*

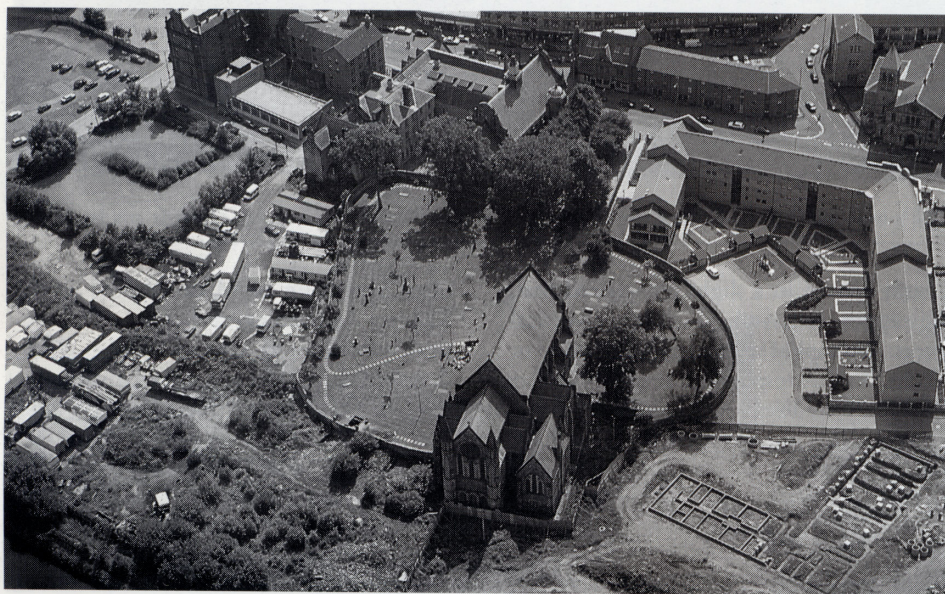


PHOTO: GUARD

*Strathclyde's centre: the pear-shaped churchyard at Govan, its curving boundary a sign of its Early Christian origins*