

II.

KARL HUNDASON, "KING OF SCOTS."

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The extent of the contribution of the Old Icelandic Sagas to Scottish history has been fully demonstrated by Mr A. O. Anderson in his monumental *Early Sources of Scottish History*, published in 1922. The historical value of these contributions is often difficult to assess, but they are always of interest; and they cannot be dismissed lightly when they are at variance with Scottish sources, for there is every reason to believe that most oral sagas were composed soon after the events they describe, and that the commemorative verses they contain were often made on the scene of action. Such difficulties as occur are due partly to the length of time during which the sagas were handed down by word of mouth before being committed to writing, and partly to the Norseman's notion of Scotland as a remote country, usually worth plundering, but not by any means one of first importance. In the following study of the identity of *Karl Hundason*, "King of Scots," these considerations have been kept in mind.

I.

Karl Hundason—Karl, son of Hundi—is mentioned as a "King of Scots" in chap. 20 of the *Orkneyinga Saga*, but is quite unknown to any other historical source—Scottish, Irish, English, or Scandinavian. Yet his name *Karl* and the fact that he led an army of Scots and Irish against the Orkney Earl Thorfinn at *Torfnes* or *Tarbatness* are well attested by the verses of the contemporary court poet Arnor which are quoted in the *Saga*. The controversy regarding his identity is no new one. P. A. Munch identified him with Malcolm II., Kenneth's son (1005–34); W. F. Skene with the latter's successor, Duncan Crinan's son, who was murdered by Macbeth in 1040.¹

¹ See W. F. Skene, *Highlanders of Scotland*, chap. 5, and *Celtic Scotland*, vol. i. pp. 400 ff.; W. Robertson, *Scotland under her Early Kings*, vol. ii. p. 477; P. A. Munch, *Norske Folks Historie*, vol. i. part 2, p. 854; E. Rhys, *Celtic Britain*, p. 260; G. Henderson, *Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland*, p. 28; J. Storer Clouston, *History of Orkney*, pp. 40–44; J. Anderson, *Orkneyinga Saga*, pp. 17–18; A. O. Anderson, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, vol. i. pp. 577–8; etc., etc.

My excuse for the following study is that there is additional evidence to be considered, and that a fresh solution seems possible. I should add that the lines along which inquiry has been made were suggested to me by the brief note on Karl in Mr Anderson's *Early Sources* to which I have referred.

II.

We may profitably study first Karl's dates, and thereafter examine the main facts of his career.

According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, a certain *Melkolmr Skotakonungr* or "Malcolm King of Scots" died "in the year of the reconciliation of Thorfinn and Brusi," the Orkney earls, and was succeeded by *Karl Hundason*. In the previous chapter of the *Saga* we learn that this reconciliation took place "when Knut became King of Norway and Olaf went into exile," an event which from Norwegian sources we know to have occurred in 1029.

As to his death, the *Saga* is uncertain whether or not it took place at the battle of Tarbatness referred to. But the events narrated in the chapter do not cover more than a year or two, for—as the last sentence of the chapter shows—they occurred before the death of Earl Brusi at some date not later than 1035.

If this "Malcolm King of Scots" is Malcolm II., Kenneth's son, then *Karl Hundason* ought to be his successor Duncan, the son of Crinan, lay abbot of Dunkeld. And an attempt to equate his curious Old Icelandic name with that of this well-known Scottish king was made by A. MacBain in an article in *The Northern Chronicle* quoted in Henderson's *Norse Influence on Celtic Scotland*, p. 28. *Karl*, "a man," he argued, is a literal translation of the first element *dune* in Celtic *Duncadh* (Duncan). *Hundi*, "a dog," is obviously a translation of Celtic *Cuilean*, the name of several Scottish chiefs or *mormaers* in the tenth and eleventh centuries; the Scots Earl Hundi who fought against Earl Sigurd the Stout in *Njáls Saga*, chap. 86, was probably called *Cuilean* in Celtic. Confusion between *Crinan* and *Cuilean*, MacBain suggested, possibly gave Karl the erroneous surname of *Hundason*.

The chief objection to MacBain's theory is that there is already an Old Icelandic form of *Duncadh* in *Dungaðr*, which occurs in *Orkn. Saga*, chaps. 33 and 46. There can be little doubt, however, that the names *Cuilean* and *Hundi* are identical.

But, etymology apart, there are serious chronological difficulties which make it impossible to identify Malcolm and Karl with Malcolm II. and Duncan. Even if we assume that the *Saga* is in error in the date

of Karl's accession (giving us the year 1029 instead of 1034), there is insufficient time between 1034 and 1035 for the lengthy campaigns of his war with the Earl of the Orkneys. A chronological error at the other end seems equally unlikely, for these campaigns appear to have been concluded some time before the arrival in the Orkneys of Rognvald Brusi's son to claim his inheritance. This is described in chaps. 21 and 22 of the *Saga* and occurred fairly certainly in 1037 or 1038. Further, the very careful chronology of the *Orkneyinga Saga* is upset if the events of chap. 20 are pushed forward from the period 1029-35 to the period 1034-38. We are driven to the conclusion that these two *Saga* "Kings of Scots" were not "Kings of Scots" at all, but were mere chiefs or *mormaers* of one or other of the northern provinces of Scotland. It is not the saga-man's chronology that is at fault, but his knowledge of the geography and political divisions of what to him was a remote country.

III.

I now proceed to a brief account of the career of Karl as given in *Orkn. Saga*, very largely to show how, except in one or two particulars, it is consistent with his being a ruler of one of these northern provinces—Moray, or Ross, or Argyll, for example. In particular, it will be noted that the journeys made would be much too great if it is assumed that Karl was a King of Scots having his headquarters in Lothian or in the Lowlands of Scotland.

On his accession in 1029, according to *Orkn. Saga*, Karl immediately laid claim to Caithness. Caithness was then part of the Orkney earldom, having been granted in 1014 to Earl Thorfinn by Karl's predecessor, the so-called "Malcolm King of Scots," who was Thorfinn's grandfather on his mother's side. (It may be mentioned that Caithness had been the buffer state between the northern provinces of Scotland and the Orkney earldom ever since the establishment of the latter in the ninth century; see *Orkn. Saga*, chaps. 5, 10, and 11.) Karl took the step of sending a nephew of his called *Muddan*¹ to conquer Caithness. We are not told anything as yet of Karl's headquarters, but we learn that *Muddan* raised a force in Sutherland and invaded Caithness according

¹ The name seems to be related to that of *Matáin mac Caerill* mormaer of (?) Buchan, *Book of Deer*, p. 92. Variant readings of the name are *Mumtan* and *Mutatan*. The latter form lends support to Sir W. A. Craigie's derivation of the name—from Old Irish *Modudhan* (*Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie*, vol. i. pp. 439 ff.). The name also occurs as that of a wealthy Caithness chieftain of the twelfth century (*Orkn. Saga*, chap. 53), the spellings in this instance being *Moddan*, *Muddan*, and *Maddan*. *Muddan* is the form occurring most frequently, and is accepted as the right one in both cases by the present writer.

to plan. What followed is so typically described in the *Saga* that I feel I must quote it in full:

"Thorfinn then marched against Muddan, and he had the larger force. And when the Scots saw that they had the smaller force, they were less anxious about fighting, and rode back up into Scotland. Earl Thorfinn pursued them and subdued Sutherland and Ross and harried far and wide over Scotland. Thence he returned to Caithness . . . [and] took up house at Duncansby and kept five warships there, with just enough men to keep them ready for sea."

Muddan, we are now told, went to King Karl at a place called *Beruwik*, and told him how his expedition had gone anything but smoothly. Of the identity of *Beruwik* I shall say nothing in the meantime, except that it can hardly be Berwick-on-Tweed (as in *Orkn. Saga*, chap. 93) or Berriedale (as perhaps in *Orkn. Saga*, chap. 94), for the former is too far away and the latter is too near to the scene of action. I shall return to this name later.

In spite of the failure of the attack on Caithness, Karl was undaunted. A second attack was prepared. At *Beruwik* he had eleven warships fitted out, and while Muddan again led an army overland Karl himself took his fleet "North round the coast of Scotland." (It may be noted in passing that the phrase "North round the coast of Scotland"—*norðr fyrir Skotland*—is more applicable to a voyage to Duncansby from the west of Scotland than to one from the east.) Thorfinn, however, happened at the critical moment to be sailing over to the Orkneys with his fleet, and the two parties met off the peninsula of Deerness. But Karl had no better luck at sea than Muddan on land, for after a stiff fight he had to take to flight, with Thorfinn in pursuit. He made for the Moray Firth, where Thorfinn appears to have lost him. Thorfinn, at any rate, spent some time harrying round the coasts of the Moray Firth, while his lieutenant Thorkell Fosterer went North to Caithness, made a surprise attack on Muddan, and killed him.

The narrative again goes back to Karl and tells us that he raised a fresh army for a third attack upon Earl Thorfinn. I quote directly again:

"Now it must be told of King Karl that he went up into Scotland after his battle with Earl Thorfinn and gathered a fresh army. He raised the army from the whole of the South of Scotland, both from the East and from the West, and South as far as Cantyre. And there came to join him that army from Ireland which Muddan had sent for. He sent far and wide to chiefs for forces and the whole army he summoned against Earl Thorfinn and they met at *Torfnes* (Tarbatness). . . . There was a great battle, and the Scots had by far the larger army. Earl Thorfinn was in the van of his troops; he had a gilded

helmet on his head, he was girt with a sword, and he had a great spear in his hand which he wielded to right and left. So is it said that he stood foremost among all his men. First he charged the Irish ranks, and so fierce were he and his men that they at once gave ground before him and never regained it. Karl then had his standard borne against Thorfinn. There was then a great struggle, and the upshot was that Karl took to flight; but some men say that he was killed. . . . Earl Thorfinn continued the pursuit far up into Scotland; and thereafter he marched far and wide throughout the land subduing it. He went South as far as Fife and laid the land under him. Men yielded to him wheresoever he went."

Soon after, however, Thorfinn returned North and took up residence unmolested in Caithness. And nothing more is told of Karl.

I have just two observations to make about the place-names referred to. The identity of *Torfnes* and *Tarbatness* on the south side of the Dornoch Firth is fully attested by its being described in a verse of Arnor's in this chapter as being south of the River Oyke; and Tarbatness, it will be noted, would be a natural meeting-place for forces of men coming from Ross, Moray, Argyll, and (through Argyll) from Ireland. The mention of Fife, however, presents difficulties. An overland journey by Thorfinn to Fife is an improbability. The explanation may well be that at some time or other Thorfinn went on a plundering expedition to Fife by sea and that the episode has been wrongly attached by the saga-man to the *Karl Hundason* story.

Except, then, for this mention of Fife and for the reference to Karl's obtaining forces from the east of Scotland, the whole narrative is consistent with the idea that the struggle of Thorfinn and Karl is a continuation of that which had been waged since the end of the ninth century by the Orkney earls, notably Sigurd Rognvald's son, Ljot, and Sigurd the Stout, against the princes or *mormaers* of Moray, Sutherland, Ross, and Argyll, and that, in fine, Malcolm and Karl were *mormaers* of one of these four provinces. The erroneous *Saga* title of "King of Scots" might be explained on the analogy of the similarly erroneous title of *Ri Albain*, "Prince of Alban," given by the Irish annalists to the *mormaers* of Moray. It is not an unusual thing for princes to be credited with titles which they claim but do not hold.

IV.

The problem might be left at this point with the above solution which, although rather indefinite, is reasonably supported by the evidence immediately available. But there are several other facts which prompt

me to attempt a more exact identification of Malcolm and Karl. The arguments which follow, however, must be regarded as rather more speculative than the preceding.

At the period under review there are five Malcolms mentioned in separate sources (including *Orkn. Saga*), three of them at least being princes of considerable strength and importance. Some or all of these may be identical, and this possible identity has some bearings on the identity of Karl.

The first we find in *Njáls Saga*, chaps. 86-87. He is described there as "King of Scots," and we are told that he fought in alliance with Earls *Hundi* and *Melsnati* against Sigurd the Stout, at some time between 978 and 995. (There was of course no "Malcolm King of Scots" at this time.) In dealing with the reign of Sigurd, *Orkn. Saga* does not mention these three chiefs, but describes a conflict with an Earl *Finnleikr*. As the incidents narrated in *Orkn. Saga* appear to have taken place about the same time as those in *Njáls Saga*, it would not be rash to assume that the four chiefs mentioned were allies in a struggle with Sigurd. *Hundi* and *Melsnati* were defeated by Sigurd (according to *Njáls Saga*), and likewise *Finnleikr* (according to *Orkn. Saga*), but Sigurd found it necessary to retreat before Malcolm, who was gathering a fresh host at Duncansby (*Njáls Saga*, chap. 86). Now there is a significant sentence in the following chapter of *Njáls Saga*. Sigurd is said to have "held the four provinces of Moray, Ross, Sutherland, and *Dalar*." But one may doubt if any Orkney earl ever held those provinces. What Sigurd probably did was to lead pillaging expeditions into those four provinces for the reason that he had been fighting against their rulers. One may with a fair measure of reason assign Sigurd's four enemies to the four provinces which he thus harried. *Finnleikr* was without doubt *Finnlaech*, *mormaer* of Moray (*d.* 1020), the father of Macbeth. *Hundi* (or *Cuilean*) and *Melsnati* (Celt. *Maelsnechte*), according to *Njáls Saga*, chap. 86, were associated in the murder of Havard of Freswick in Caithness, and were therefore probably rulers over Ross and Sutherland, the nearest provinces. The province called *Dalar* is left for the chieftain called "Malcolm King of Scots," and *Dalar*, as W. F. Skene showed fairly conclusively,¹ is almost certainly to be identified with the province of Argyll, which was roughly co-extensive with the old kingdom of *Dalriada*. Indeed, when it is remembered that *Dalriada* was the land of the "Scots" proper, and that the Norsemen, as *Orkn. Saga* shows, called the sea-lochs in the west of Scotland *Skotlandsfirðir*, or Scotland's Firths, it may well have been that the

¹ *Celtic Scotland*, vol. i. pp. 376, 390, 397.

term *Skotakonungr*, "King of Scots," was one deliberately applied to the ruler of the old province.

The second Malcolm is the one we have already met in chaps. 12, 17, and 20 of *Orkn. Saga*. Between 998 and 1000 Sigurd the Stout repudiated his allegiance to King Olaf Tryggvason of Norway and made an alliance with this "Malcolm King of Scots" by marrying his daughter (*Orkn. Saga*, chap. 12). (This cannot have been Malcolm II., who came to the throne in 1005.) The alliance was later cemented in the Scandinavian manner by Sigurd's giving his son Thorfinn to Malcolm to foster. On Sigurd's death in 1014 this Malcolm gave Thorfinn the earldom of Caithness and Sutherland (*Orkn. Saga*, chap. 13), and in 1021 supported his claims to part of the Orkney earldom against Earl Brusi (*Orkn. Saga*, chap. 17). He died, as chapter 20 has told us, in 1029, and was succeeded by the mysterious Karl, son of Hundi. If this Malcolm is identical with the last, it will have to be assumed that Sigurd decided to make friends with his former arch-enemy—a not unlikely proceeding in view of his breach with King Olaf. If this Malcolm lived in Argyll, it would be a natural place for Sigurd to leave his son behind, as he seems to have done, on his way to Ireland (*Orkn. Saga*, chap. 12). If Karl's father Hundi was the *mormaer* of Ross or of Sutherland as suggested above, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Karl succeeded Malcolm in Argyll—by conquest, perhaps, if not by right.

The third Malcolm is referred to in *Njáls Saga*, chap. 158. After the battle of Clontarf in Ireland in 1014, in which Sigurd the Stout was killed, his Icelandic friend and ally Kari set off North, but spent the winter with an "Earl Malcolm," who lived at *Hvitsborg* in *Skotland*, near to *Beruwik*. The latter name of course reminds us of Karl's headquarters. *Hvitsborg*, "the fortress of *Hvitr*," has been identified—rather improbably—with Whithorn; one expects, however, a name beginning with the Celtic component *Dun-*. I have diligently sought traces of both names on the west coast of Scotland, but with negligible success. Only one name seemed to have a connection—and a very doubtful one—with *Beruwik*. This is the *Barbreck* river flowing into Loch Craignish. This name is fairly certainly derived from Old Norse *Berubrekkr*, "the slope of *Bera*," *Bera* being the original Old Norse river-name and identical with the first element in *Beruwik*, and the stream having apparently taken the name of the hill-slopes on the south side of it. But if identification of place-names is difficult, there are other points of contact with *Orkn. Saga*. Sigurd the Stout, as has been said, left his son Thorfinn with "Malcolm King of Scots" so called on his

way south to Ireland accompanied by Kari the Icelander. When Sigurd was killed, what would be more natural than that Kari should return as soon as possible to the same Malcolm with the news. The identity of Sigurd's "King Malcolm" and Kari's "Earl Malcolm" seems to me on these grounds to be not only possible but probable.

The fourth Malcolm is Malcolm Maelbrigte's son, nephew of Finnlæch, *mormaer* of Moray. According to the Irish annalist Tigernach (Anderson's *Early Sources*, vol. i. p. 551), Malcolm Maelbrigte's son, "Ri Albain," slew Finnlæch in 1020 and became himself *mormaer* of Moray, over which he appears to have ruled until his death, which occurred (*Early Sources*, vol. i. p. 571) in 1029. This date suggests that he is one and the same as the *Orkneyinga Saga* Malcolm who died in 1029 and was succeeded by Karl; and his ambitious and successful conquest of a neighbouring province connects him with the first Malcolm of *Njáls Saga*. If he is to be identified with the hypothetical Malcolm of Argyll, then on his death in 1029 we might assume that his realm was partitioned between Karl and Macbeth, the latter regaining his father Finnlæch's province of Moray and Karl obtaining Argyll. But in spite of the usefulness of the date 1029 and these other points of contact, the identity of this Malcolm with any or all of the preceding must be accepted with caution.

The fifth Malcolm is *Malcolm mac Moilbrigte*, referred to in *The Book of Deer* (ed. J. Stuart, p. 92) as granting the lands of *Delerc* (not so far identified) to the Abbey. This Malcolm may be identical with the last; but there is no evidence as to when he flourished, and both Christian name and patronymic were not uncommon.

The result of these speculations is to make *Karl Hundason* a *mormaer* of Ross or of Sutherland (or of both), who annexed Argyll in 1029 on the death of its ruler Malcolm and, thus strengthened, sought soon after to extend his domains to the North by setting a puppet-earl over the province of Caithness. With this notion of Karl, chapter 20 of *Orkneyinga Saga* can be read quite intelligibly. The whole episode emphasises the strength and independence of the rulers of these Northern provinces, and the severity of the intermittent struggle between Norseman and Gael which continued until the thirteenth century.

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