

**Medieval Kilbride**  
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Kilbride Church came within a whisker of being the most important church in Argyll, being designated by King Alexander II of Scotland as the new Cathedral Church of the Bishopric of Argyll in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The fascinating story of how it *almost* gained this status is one of fast moving political intrigue, and gives many insights into the power and ‘reign’ of the first MacDougall Lords of Lorn as well as shedding light on the final power struggle between the Norse rulers of the Western Seaboard and the Scottish crown.

The first church was dedicated to St Bridget, as indicated by the name Kilbride. The first historical reference to it is in 1249, in a document ordered by King Alexander II (1214 - 1249), while he lay dying on Kerrera.

The story of Kilbride’s inclusion in this document is the dramatic conclusion to a nationally important political and ecclesiastical episode in which Ewan of Lorn, 3<sup>rd</sup> Chief of the Clan MacDougall, played a central role. The underlying basis for the dispute was the continuing dominance of Norse vassals and influence on the islands of the Western Seaboard, where allegiance was owed not to the Scottish King, but to King Haakon of Norway. Ewan of Lorn, and his father Duncan, were at times designated as kings of these territories by Haakon, and are sometimes recorded in Norse sagas as ‘King Duncan’ and ‘King Ewan’.

Clearly this was an irksome situation for a Scottish King who wished to have dominance over all territories, and much of Alexander II’s later reign was spent in trying to subjugate Ewan and other western Chiefs and eliminate Norse rule.

Kilbride Church enters the fray through one of the avenues by which Alexander was seeking to weaken Ewan and gain control of political and

ecclesiastical power along with territory. But first, the story has to wind back a few years to Duncan, father of Ewan and second Chief of the Clan MacDougall. Duncan of Lorn's time as Chief is marked as one of real consolidation: strengthening links with Norway, embarking on the building of at least eight castles, a priory and a cathedral, and establishing a cordon of power which controlled entry points to Argyll from land or sea. It is probable that Kilbride Church was part of this building programme, and 13<sup>th</sup> century masonry has been identified.

Duncan started this work during the reign of King William I of Scotland (1165-1214), who spent virtually all of his long reign fighting off threats from England and from his own relatives and rebel earls; his successor, Alexander II, spent the first 8 years of his reign doing the same. Duncan had little to fear from distracted Kings; Argyll and the west was occupied with its own internal frontier squabbles and competing for favours at the Norwegian court. Duncan and Ewan of Lorn became hugely powerful within this fiefdom.

The significance of Kilbride Church begins to enter the arena at this time – if not by name, then by the events leading up to its moment of glory. It began with an audacious move made by Dugall, the first Chief of the Clan. Dugall lobbied hard for the creation of a Bishopric of Argyll when the large and unwieldy See of Dunblane was divided up. This was granted between 1183 and 1189, during the reign of King William I. Dugall then pulled off the extraordinary coup of establishing the seat of the Bishopric on the Isle of Lismore, which was very securely part of his territory but by no means a central point for Argyll as a whole. Lismore did have a strong ecclesiastical pedigree, but so did other places in Argyll.

It underlined the influence of the Lords of Lorn, and at the same time showed that once again King William I was not watching too closely. Dugall was able to snatch and secure the Bishopric just as his son Duncan was able to build his huge powerbase. It was a politically bold and astute package. Dugall, Duncan and his son Ewan then proceeded to control the Bishopric in a maverick manner. It was probably without a significant church for the first 60 years and was usually without a Bishop. It seems to have been rudderless and

disorganised, giving the impression that ‘ownership’ of the Bishopric probably owed more to politics than piety.

By 1221 national politics were settled enough to allow King Alexander II to cast his eyes westward, and from then on he gradually picked away at pockets of rebelliousness, coming close to outright war with Norway. By 1240 the only barrier between Alexander II and complete domination of mainland Scotland was the MacDougall Lordship of Lorn, who also guarded the Norse-controlled Hebrides.

Alexander II was also exasperated by the Church’s inability to control the Bishopric of Argyll, which had become more or less moribund under the Lords of Lorn’s patronage. Eventually the diocese was placed under the charge of the Bishopric of Dunblane, but there was clearly no co-operation from the Lords of Lorn and the Bishopric remained more or less out of Papal reach.

Matters reached a head in 1249. Duncan, son of Dugall, had died the year before and Ewan was now in power. Alexander II was clearly at the end of his tether and was increasingly unwell. An urgency and testiness now enters the atmosphere surrounding the combined problem of Ewan and the Lordship of Lorn, the Bishopric, and the Norse territories.

That same year two letters were sent by the Pope in Rome to the Bishops of Glasgow and Dunblane looking to restore the See of Argyll. One letter ordered the election or nomination of a bishop, and the other – which is particularly relevant to Kilbride - gave agreement for the Cathedral Church to be transferred from Lismore to the mainland to a site chosen by the two bishops, with the costs to be partly met by the King. It is thought that Alexander II agreed this partly out of religious zeal – he was a noted endower of abbeys and churches – and as a challenge to the Lords of Lorn.

The dispute over the Bishopric coincided exactly with a heightened campaign by Alexander to gain the Hebrides. He had been on the brink of purchasing them for the Scottish crown when Ewan returned from Haakon with a wider mandate to rule them, which must have infuriated the King. Despite being

offered significantly greater mainland territory in return, Ewan refused to relinquish three castles and “the rest of the dominion which the king of Norway had assigned to him” (Hakonar Saga).

Ewan’s relationship with the Scots King was probably not as straightforward as these exchanges make out. He was walking a fine line between Haakon and Alexander; the first either imprisoned him or crowned him, the second wooed him or confiscated his land. In return, Ewan played ball with neither and courted both. The Sagas record that Ewan was ‘righteous and trustworthy’; they record that he would not fight either King, but he would also not assist one against the other. Perhaps an accurate interpretation is that Ewan was serving himself and his Clan first, and waiting to see which side prevailed before casting his weight behind it.

Finally in 1249, Alexander II’s patience ran out. He set out with troops to subdue the Hebrides, and en route would ‘pacify’ Argyllshire – in other words, to sort it out once and for all. It was during this mission that the fleet anchored off Horseshoe Bay on Kerrera, and Alexander suddenly fell ill and died on July 8<sup>th</sup> in 1249 in Dalrigh, the King’s Field. It is now that Kilbride Church is mentioned for the first time in its history, in a moment of dramatic significance.

It is not known how long Alexander was either anchored off, or was actually on Kerrera, but all accounts point to his death being sudden. He conducted only two pieces of business which were signed and dated ‘in Keruerhey’ (Kerrera), and their brevity and apparent haste have been taken as an indication that they were effectively deathbed acts. One decree was for a chapel to his memory on Kerrera, and the other gave the endowment of the Church of Kilbride in Lorn. This unusually brief charter has been assumed to be his last desperate attempt to move the Cathedral Church of the Bishopric of Argyll from Lismore to the mainland, and specifically to Kilbride. In a further dramatic twist, the decree was witnessed on Alexander’s deathbed by none other than Bishop Clement of Dunblane, one of the two Bishops to receive the Papal letters who is known to have been persistent on the subject. His presence on this mission with Alexander seems highly significant, and

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would appear to demonstrate how important the vexed question the Bishopric of Argyll was in the campaign to gain control of the West.

This deathbed grant to Kilbride raises questions. Firstly, who owned or controlled Kilbride at this time? It is known that Ewan of Lorn had lands confiscated by Alexander II and it is reasonable to assume that Kilbride was among those that were lost, as Alexander would not have handed the Bishopric seat straight back to his enemy. Also, why Kilbride? Why not a church safely away from MacDougall territory, of which there were many? Kilbride was clearly a highly significant church for the Lords of Lorn close to their main strongholds. The highly charged circumstances of Alexander's death would suggest that several factors came into play. He was dying before he could defeat Ewan, before he could gain the Norse territories, and before he could reinstate the Bishopric of Argyll. The final deathbed charter of Kilbride Church seems a highly provocative act designed to wound Ewan on two fronts – by removing the Bishopric from Lismore and then reinstating it on confiscated land. It was a final assertion of power and made a very clear point.

The outcome of the story of medieval Kilbride is that, despite the royal charter, it never became the Cathedral Church of the Bishopric of Argyll, and it seems to have sunk without trace after its one moment of glory. The charter seems to have been later discarded in favour of a compromise.

Several events occurred around the time of the charter and Alexander's death which shed light on what happened next. Firstly, Ewan left Argyll ahead of Alexander's troops and exiled himself in on the Isle of Lewis, where he remained until 1251. Significantly, a Cathedral Church began to be built on Lismore – sometimes the date has been set as 1249, the same year as Alexander's campaign and death, but new research being carried out at the moment will probably change that. Either way, the hand of Ewan is absolutely clear in this, as it was built by some of the same masons who worked for Ewan or his father Duncan at their castle of Achanduin on the island (shared masons' marks), and it can only have been paid for by him. Whether it was begun before the King's death in the atmosphere of papal letters and pressure from Bishop Clement, or in the wake of his death and the charter to Kilbride, it is a statement of clear defiance by Ewan making it clear that the Bishopric was there to stay on Lismore.

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Then a new Bishop was elected in 1250, and was based on Lismore. Therefore one Papal letter was implemented (the election), but the endowment of a new church proposed in the second letter was not.

Ewan was still in Lewis at this time, but it would appear that Ewan continued to wield power and influence from exile. His situation may have been eased by the royal succession, which found 8 year old King Alexander III in the midst of procedural chaos and jockeying for position at court. For a while the heat was off the Norse/Western Seaboard issue. By 1255 Ewan was reconciled with Alexander III, with the probable restoration of his land.

What of Kilbride Church? Its brief time in the sun passed, and apart from that single dramatic reference in the midst of one of the most intense episodes in Argyll's history, nothing further is known from historical records until it enjoyed a rebuilding and revival as a church at the heart of a growing parish.

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