



This battle was researched and assessed against the criteria for inclusion on the Inventory of Historic Battlefields set out in Historic Environment Scotland Policy Statement June 2016 <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/planning-and-guidance/legislation-and-guidance/historic-environment-scotland-policy-statement/>.

The results of this research are presented in this report.

The site does not meet the criteria at the current time as outlined below (see reason for exclusion).

## LARGS

Alternative Names: None

1-2 October 1263

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## Overview

Largs was the most significant battlefield encounter of the Scotto-Norwegian War of 1262-1266. The conflict arose due to disputes between Hákon IV Hákonarson of Norway and Alexander III of Scotland over the sovereignty of the Hebrides. Norwegian suzerainty over these islands had been contested by the Scottish kings since the 1240s, when Alexander II, eager to extend his authority on the frontiers of his kingdom with the possession of the islands, offered to 'redeem them with money' from Hákon. For almost a decade these attempts were unsuccessful, Alexander claiming that he would not cease until he had planted his standard on the 'cliffs of Thurso'. On the death of Alexander in 1249 the threat to Norway's western lands eased.

However, the time came when Alexander III chose to pursue the cause and in 1261 sent ambassadors to Norway to press the issue of Hebridean sovereignty. They presented Hákon with an ultimatum: if he still refused to sell them to Alexander III then he was prepared to take them through conquest. Hákon refused to bargain and in response the Hebrides were taken from him by force, thanks to a devastating raid carried out by Uilleam, Earl of Ross (d. 1274). This forced Hákon to embark on a major expedition to the west of Scotland, after stopping off at Orkney and raiding Caithness in the summer of 1263.

Following failed negotiations while the Norwegian king was in Arran, raids into the western mainland commenced, with the area around Loch Lomond ravaged. This activity forced Alexander to consider peace talks but then, in late September/early October, a storm beached a number of ships from the



Norse main fleet at Largs – and there, over two days a battle was fought close to the shore.

### Reason for exclusion

This battle marks the end of active Norse involvement in the politics of mainland Scotland. However, while the general vicinity of the present town of Largs is thought to be the location, the precise positions of deployment, manoeuvring and combat are unknown. Without sufficient information to define the extent of the battlefield, it is not currently possible to include the battle of Largs in the Inventory of Historic Battlefields.

### Historical Background to the Battle

John of Fordun records how ‘a great part of the [Norwegian] fleet dragged their anchors and were roughly cast on shore’. This triggered the first skirmish between the Scots and Norwegians which, according to the *Hákons Saga*, began when the Scots saw a transport ship and five other vessels stranded on the beach. Fordun continues:

*‘Then the king’s army came against them and swept down many, both nobles and serfs’.*

*Hákon’s Saga* relates a very different account of events, describing how the Scots mustered and attacked the Norwegians with ‘missile weapons’, suggesting that they were local shire levies, and made several attempts to close with them, but the Norwegians defended themselves ‘under cover of their ships’. Although driven off, the Scots did succeed in plundering the beached transport. With the storm easing, Hákon sent in reinforcements against the ‘suspicious foe’. On the approach of these household troops the Scots retreated, and the Norwegians landed throughout the night. The next day (2 October), Hákon landed ‘with numerous reinforcements’ and ordered the stranded transport ship to be towed out to the fleet.

Meanwhile, larger numbers of local levies appeared, led by local royal officials and landowners. Their vanguard clashed with a band of 200 Norwegian soldiers under Ogmund Krækidants who was deployed on a ‘hill’ or ‘rising ground’. Another 600 soldiers and their leaders were stationed on the beach. Faced with superior numbers and afraid of being surrounded, Ogmund’s band withdrew ‘in scattered parties’ to the relative safety of the beach. Andrew Nicolson attempted to organise the retreat, so that it did not look like they were fleeing.

The Scots at this time attacked them furiously with darts and stones. Showers of missiles were poured upon the Norwegians, who defended themselves and retired in good order. But when they approached the sea, each one hurrying faster than another, those on the beach imagined they were routed. Some therefore leapt into their boats and pushed off from the land, while others jumped into the transport. Their companions called upon them to return, and some returned though few. Andrew Pott leapt over two boats, and into a third,



and so escaped from land. Many boats went down, and some men were lost, and the rest of the Norwegians at last wheeled out towards the sea.

The Scots drove the remaining Norwegians south from the transport and a 'severe contest' followed, with the Norwegian force outnumbered, 'ten Scots against each'. A young Scots knight, Ferash (Fergus?) is described as galloping again and again along the Norwegian line and then back to his followers. This is the classic battlefield behaviour of a *juvenus*, 'a youth', a glory-seeking knight. The fighting took place during another phase of the storm, which prevented Norwegian reinforcements joining the battle from their fleet. A small detachment of men, under a certain Ronald and Eilif of Naustadale, rowed to the beach 'and greatly distinguished themselves'. The Norwegians reorganised their formation while the Scots took possession of the 'rising ground', and there were 'continued skirmishes with stones and missile weapons'. The critical moment of the fighting came towards evening when the Norwegian force 'made a desperate charge against the Scots on the hill'.

*'At the conflict of corselets on the blood-red hill, the damasked blade hewed the mail of hostile tribes, here the Scot, nimble as the hound, would leave the field to the followers of our all-conquering king.'*

The charge seems to have succeeded and the Scots were driven from the high ground and fled 'away to their mountains'. After finally driving the Scots from the field the Norwegians retired to their boats and rejoined the fleet.

### **The Armies**

Most of the Scots would have been local levies under the sheriffs of Ayr and Lanark (see Events and Participants below), while local nobles would have brought their own men to the fray. The Scottish army included both heavily armoured cavalry (knights) and light infantry. Their armaments included spears and, from the saga descriptions of missiles and stones, it would seem that both bows and slings were used – reference to these weapons also fits with the general impression of hand-to-hand fighting being limited.

The Norwegians were led by King Hákon, who was by then an old man of 59, and was to die soon after. A number of his lords are named in the saga (see Participants below). The Norse would have been lightly armoured and there is no mention of them using cavalry – though it was not unusual for horses to be carried on board ship. Their weaponry would have included swords, spears, axes and probably bows.

### **Numbers**

John of Fordun's late 14th-century *Chronicon de Gentis Scottorum* relates how the Norwegians came with 'eight score war-ships, having on board 20,000 fighting men'. This number is repeated in Walter Bower's mid 15th-century *Scotichronicon*, which claims that 160 ships carrying 20,000 Norwegian warriors fought at Largs, while the later sixteenth-century account of George Buchanan, *Historia Scottorum*, repeats the number of 20,000.



These figures are pure fantasy and merely intended to underscore the historical significance of the battle for Fordun, Bower and Buchanan. None of the Scottish sources give any information on the size of the Scots forces involved. According to *Hákons Saga*, 'eight or nine hundred' soldiers were engaged at Largs in the initial phase of the fighting, with 200 men under Ogmund Krækidants on 'the rising ground'. As for the Scots army, the *Saga* describes it as 'numerous' and outnumbering the Norwegians ten to one. They generally had bows and spears. It was 'conjectured' to include 1,500 knights, 'all their horses had breast-plates; and there were many Spanish steeds in complete armour', supported by a 'numerous army of foot soldiers, well accoutred'. Although this is clearly a highly exaggerated view of the quality of the Scots forces, it does suggest that Scottish knights were present in a sufficient numbers to have left an impression on the Norwegians who had fought there.

### **Losses**

Fordun mentions no casualties, except Hákon's nephew, 'a man of great might and vigour', who he claims was killed. There is no mention of such a significant casualty in the *Saga*. The later 16th-century history of George Buchanan claims improbably that 16,000 Norwegians were killed, with 5,000 Scots slain. Sturla's *Hákons Saga* claims that in the fighting on 1 October few Norwegians were killed but 'many were wounded', while it claims many fell on both sides during the hand-to-hand fighting on 2 October, 'but more of the Scots'. Nevertheless, the *Saga* does give some detail as to the names of the more prominent men killed and what happened to their bodies. On 3 October the Norwegians returned 'in search of the bodies of those who had dropped': Hako Steini and Thorgisl Gloppa 'both belonging to King Hákon's household'; 'a worthy vassal' Karlhoved from Drontheim, and Halkel from Fiorde; three 'Masters of the Lights' were slain, Thorstein Bat, John Ballhoved and Halvard Buniard. Hákon ordered the Norwegian dead to be 'carried to a church'. There is no reference to them being buried there, however, and neither is the name or location of the church given.

Of the Scots 'it was impossible to tell' how many were killed because those who were slain 'were taken up and removed into the woods'. The sole Scottish casualty named in the *Saga* is a 'young' Scottish knight called Ferash (Fergus?) 'distinguished for his birth and fortune'. He was killed by Andrew Nicolson who 'struck at his thigh with such force that he cut it off, through the armour, with his sword, which penetrated the saddle' and stripped him of his 'beautiful' sword-belt. Walter Bower does record the death of a young Scottish knight, but names him as Peter de Curry not Fergus.

### **Action**

No further information

### **Aftermath and Consequences**

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The aftermath of the fighting on the beach at Largs witnessed the withdrawal of the Norwegian troops from their unplanned beachhead. Five days later Hákon IV ordered his fleet to weigh anchor. With a change in the weather, a detachment of Norwegian soldiers put ashore to burn the abandoned ships. The fleet then returned to the Hebrides via Arran, the Mull of Kintyre and Gudey (the island of Gigha).

Largs is remembered by the Scots as a great Scottish victory, but tactically at least it was a Norwegian one. They had repulsed the Scots, held the beach and retrieved their slain men, and ensured their ships did not fall into enemy hands. Of far greater significance for the outcome of the war was Hákon's subsequent death while wintering in Orkney on 15 December 1263. There is little doubt that the continued presence of the king and the fleet in the west was a major threat and a large-scale and far bloodier land campaign would have been expected in the spring and summer of 1264, with the wasting of the western shires of the Scottish realm a very real likelihood. It was the death of the elderly Hákon IV which was the decisive moment of the Scots-Norwegian War, rather than the 'battle' of Largs. A change of king in Norway, with all the associated dangers of succession, and with a change of personality, ensured the hostilities petered out. They came to a formal end with the treaty signed at Perth in 1266.

In military terms, the battle of Largs illustrates not only the critical impact which the weather could have on military operations in medieval warfare, but also the specific problems facing amphibious operations – even for those as experienced in such campaigns as the Norwegians.

### Events & Participants

Although *Hákon's Saga* assumed that Alexander III (1249-1286) was leading the Scots army because 'it was so numerous', the local levies would have been under the command of the Sheriff of Ayr, Walter Stewart, earl of Mentieth, whose lands had been attacked, and the sheriff of Lanark, Alexander Uvieth (Unieth). In addition, the local nobles would have brought their followers, principally Alexander Stewart of Dundonald, 4<sup>th</sup> Steward of Scotland, and quite possibly Malcolm, son of the earl of Lennox, who would be expected to have been eager to avenge the wasting of his family's lands. Walter Bower gives the Steward the credit for driving the Norwegians back to their ships.

The 59 year old Norwegian King, Hákon IV Hákonarsson (1217-1263), inherited the throne in 1217 when he was 13 years old, but faced opposition due to his illegitimacy. He was recognised as the legitimate king of Norway in 1233 with the support of the Church, and was finally recognised by the papacy in 1247. Under his rule Norway has been seen as undergoing a 'Golden Age' of peace and prosperity after years of instability and civil wars. Intent on maintaining and extending royal authority, he succeeded in bringing Greenland and Iceland under Norwegian control. Hákon fell ill while wintering in the Orkney Islands and staying in the Bishop's Palace, Kirkwall, and he died on 15 December 1263. *Hákons Saga* lists the names of the Norwegian leaders who fought at Largs: Ogmund Kráekidants, Andrew Nicolson, Erling Alfson, Andrew Pott, Ronald Urka, Paul Soor and Thorlaug Bosi. In addition to

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the Norwegian leaders, Hákon also linked up with his Gaelic-Norse allies Magnús Óláfsson, King of Man and the Islands, and Dubgall mac Ruaidrí, King in the Isles.

### **Context**

Though sizeable forces were present in the area, the fight at Largs was essentially a skirmish, with neither of the main portions of the armies closing with each other. The Norwegians actually defeated the Scots during this period of skirmishing, which, due to the severe weather, never developed into anything more serious. Nonetheless, the battle that took place on the beach and ‘hill’ at Largs has come to be viewed as a Scottish victory and a turning point in the development of the Kingdom of the Scots.

The Battle of Largs was the result of rival claims by the Kings of Norway and Scotland over the Hebrides, exacerbated by the ambitions of these two increasingly powerful and centralising monarchies. In 1261 Alexander III sent ambassadors to Norway to deliver an ultimatum to Hákon, following his father’s earlier attempts to take control of the Western Isles. Alexander’s delegation told the Norwegian king that if he still would not sell the islands to Scotland, then Alexander intended to take them by force. The failure of the Scottish embassy to Norway resulted in Uilleam, Earl of Ross (d. 1274), launching a devastating raid on the Western Isles and seizing them for the King of Scots. This forced Hákon to launch a major military expedition in the west ‘to revenge the inroads which the Scots had made into his dominions’ and re-assert his authority along the western seaboard. Mustering his lay and ecclesiastical lords, he mobilised a large and formidable army and fleet through the *leidang* levy of around 100 ships, and sailed to recover the Hebrides in July 1263. Norwegian squadrons raided the Scottish coast around Dryness, while the main fleet remained in Orkney until 29 July. On arriving at ‘Ronaldsvo’ he imposed tribute on Caithness. On arriving at the ‘Cumbras’ (Isle of Arran), Hákon displayed his willingness to negotiate with the Scots by holding to a truce. Alexander III and his advisers ‘purposely’ refused any accommodation ‘because summer was drawing to a close’ and the weather was worsening. The Norwegian commander advised ending negotiations and plundering the area as the army was running low on provisions. Hákon issued a challenge to Alexander, proposing that both kings meet with all their forces to negotiate peace or to meet in battle and ‘conquer whom God pleased’.

Hakon sent a fleet of 60 ships to Loch Long, led by Magnús Óláfsson, King of Man and the Islands, Dubgall mac Ruaidrí, King in the Isles, Ailín mac Ruaidrí (Dubgall’s brother), and the Kintyre and Argyll lords, Áengus and Murchad. The latter two leaders had submitted to Hákon, paying a fine of a thousand head of cattle and giving over hostages to ensure their loyalty. The *Saga* states that the ships were dragged across land to Loch Lomond—which indicates that the invaders would have beached their ships and made portage across the isthmus between the two lochs (between what are today the settlements of Arrochar and Tarbet).—This operation was given to Hákon’s Gaelic-Norse allies because their ships were lighter than the great ships of the Norwegian fleet, and, more importantly, to test their loyalty and commitment. Their *Citherne* (‘warriors’) ravaged Loch Lomond and the surrounding lands of



the earldom of Lennox and raided 'into Scotland', into the lands of Walter Stewart, Earl of Mentieth, taking a hundred head of cattle and making 'great havoc'. This ravaging had the desired effect and Alexander sent Mendicant Friars to offer peace talks. A severe storm forced some of the ships from their anchorage and some cut away their masts while others ran aground. It was during an attempt to recover five of these beached ships near Largs that the Norwegians faced the Scots in combat for the first time in the Battle of Largs on 1-2 October.

The fight at Largs had little significance in the outcome of Hákon's Scottish war, however, his death in Orkney shortly afterwards certainly did. His successor, Magnus VI, less warlike and faced with all the problems of the transition of power following the death of his father, abandoned Hákon's ambitions in the west and made peace. Three years after Largs, the Treaty of Perth formally ended hostilities between Magnus IV and Alexander III, 'concerning the contentions, quarrels, losses, injuries, and discords of the Islands of Mann and the Sodors', shunning 'the slaughter of men'. Magnus of Norway 'conceding, resigning, and quitting claim for himself and his heirs' ceded the 'Mann, with the other islands of the Sodors and all the ether islands of the south and west part of the great Haffne (Hebrides and Isle of Man)' to the Scottish king. Norway was to pay 'one hundred marks of good and lawful sterling silver money, according to the order and practice of the Court of Rome, and the Kingdoms of France, England, and Scotland, to be paid annually, and likewise four thousand marks sterling, to be paid in the said manner within the next four years' and a 'tribute' of 100 merks per annum. In return Alexander III recognised Norwegian lordship over Shetland and Orkney, but he had managed to extend his authority and power into the west. He continued to follow an aggressive, expansionist, policy towards the Gaelic-Norse lords of the western seaboard for the remainder of his reign. The climax of this policy was the subjugation of the kingdom of Man in the 1270s, including the brutal suppression of an insurrection by the Manx elite.

### **Battlefield Landscape and Location**

The present-day town of Largs extends along the coast, but there are considerable areas of open ground to the south where the battle may have taken place. Although a marina has been constructed to the south of the battle monument, the shoreline in the vicinity of this structure, with beaches of mixed shingle and sand, perhaps gives some idea of the shoreline at the time of the battle: it is not difficult to envisage the Norwegian ships beaching in this type of terrain.

### ***Location***

Unsurprisingly, there is some debate about the location of this historic battle which is not named in the Saga or in contemporary Scottish accounts. Fordun locates the arrival of the Norwegian fleet near the 'new castle of Ayr'. The battle site is not associated with Largs until the 15th-century history of Walter Bower. The 1912 'pencil' monument marks the location of the traditional site in

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Largs but a more likely location has been suggested to centre on Green Hill, which lies north of the Gogo Water and accommodates the so-called ‘three sisters’ – stones raised by local astronomer Thomas Brisbane (whom after the Australian city of Brisbane is named) in the 19th century. Without definitive evidence, all these locations remain plausible candidates for the battle site.

### ***Terrain***

The original Gaelic name for Largs, An Leargaigh Ghallda, ‘the slopes’ is suggestive of the terrain recorded in *Hákon’s Saga*. The first phase of the battle initially took place where the five Norwegian ships had run aground. With the arrival of further bands of Norwegian troops later in the day and evening, the Scots withdrew. Ogmund’s troops were stationed ‘on a hill’ or ‘rising-ground’, control of which proved critical during the fighting on 2 October. The raised beach in the vicinity of the monument rises up into a low ridge which then gives way to steeper slopes which are today tree covered (Killingcraig Plantation). The place name ‘Killingcraig’ may relate to the high ground on which the Scots positioned themselves at various times over the two days of the battle, a location which was assaulted by the Norwegians. Further references to the Scots withdrawing into nearby ‘forest’ and the presence of a church, as yet unidentified, in the vicinity may also offer some clues as to the nature of the 13th-century terrain.

### ***Condition***

No further information.

### **Archaeological and Physical Remains and Potential**

There are currently no artefactual remains known from the battle, and no human remains that can be associated with the fighting. This is not unusual for battles of this early historic period; the only known examples of weapons from the period come from sites such as forts and duns. Hand-to-hand fighting would result in the deposition of a variety of physical remains: arrowheads, damaged weapons and personal accoutrements like belt-buckles, scabbard and sword fittings, and horse-harness would all likely have been lost or abandoned during the action and subsequent flight and pursuit. However, much of this material will have been ferrous and is unlikely to have survived well in the soil.

### **Cultural Association**

A monumental tower known as ‘The Pencil’ is located on the Far Bowen Crags, the traditional site of the battle around 1.5 kilometres south of the town centre. The main A78 road runs alongside the site. Although it is stylistically based on early medieval Irish monastic style towers, the monument was erected in 1912 by public subscription.



In addition there is a permanent visitor centre, *Vikingar!*, which includes exhibits and audio-visual displays on Viking history and culture in general. A short drama documentary on the Norse in Scotland and the Battle of Largs is also provided on an hourly basis. The annual Largs Viking Festival is held on the first weekend every September and has become a major heritage and Living History event. Originally a celebration of the defeat of the Norwegians, it has now become an annual expression of Scotto-Norwegian friendship.

In terms of literary commemorations there is a poem by the Ayrshire poet, John Galt (1779-1839), 'The battle of Largs', which was composed in 1804 but never published. Cowan (1990) considers it 'execrable' and that the suppression of its publication at the time 'entirely sensible'. Nonetheless, it is almost certainly based upon Rev James Johnstone's translation of *Hakon's Saga* published in Copenhagen 1782 while he was the British ambassador to Denmark.

### **Commemoration & Interpretation**

No further information

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#### ***Information on Sources and Publications***

The battle of Largs, as is the case with much of the reign of King Alexander III, is poorly documented in the surviving contemporary sources. There are brief references to the events of 1263 in the *Chronicle of Melrose* in a passage written before 1271 and in the later 14th century *Chronicon de Gentis Scottorum* of John of Fordun, and the mid-15th century *Scotichronicon* of Walter Bower. George Buchanan's *Historia Scottorum* of 1582 merely echoes these earlier references to the fight. There are also a few fragmentary entries in the exchequer rolls for 1264-6 which record some of the measures taken by Alexander III to meet the Norwegian threat. However, the single most important primary source for the battle is the Norwegian *Hákon's Saga*, composed by Sturla Thordarsson. Sturla belonged to a powerful Icelandic family who dominated the politics of the late twelfth and early thirteenth century. His uncle was the great Snorri Sturluson, 'one of the most brilliant



writers and historians' in the medieval world (Cowan 1990), who was the author of the *Heimskringla* ('The History of the Kings of Norway'), *The Prose Edda* and *Egil's Saga*. The Sturlungs were major opponents of the extension of Norwegian royal power in Iceland. Sturla chronicled these power struggles in his *Sturlunga Saga* and in *Hakon's Saga*, and may have authored *Grettir's Saga*. Sturla was driven out of Iceland in 1263 and exiled to Norway. The *Saga* was commissioned by the son of Hákon IV, Magnus, while the king was alive and was still in the process of being written when Hákon died on Orkney in 1263. Sturla was still working on the *Saga* as late as October 1265. Sturla returned to Iceland, composed *Magnus' Saga* and was appointed Lawman of Iceland. He died in 1284.

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