

I.

THE ECCLESIASTICAL REMAINS ON THE HOLY ISLE, ARRAN.

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Guarding the entrance to Lamlash Bay lies the little island now called the Holy Isle: it has also been known as Lamlack, Lamlash, or Molas Isle; Melansey to the Vikings. It was under the lee of this island that King Hakon sheltered his fleet when negotiating with Alexander III. prior to the battle of Largs. The chief point of interest regarding this little isle is not, however, connected with that portion of civil history which was enacted by its shores, but in the cause or causes whereby it became the Holy Isle.

History provides very little information regarding the settlement made on the isle by St Molaise, or ¹ Molingus or Lasrian, the missionary

... ¹ "I had like to have forgot a valuable Curiosity in this Isle, which they call *Baul Muluy*, i. e. *Molingus* his Stone Globe; this Saint was Chaplain to *Mack Donald* of the Isles, his Name is Celebrated here on the account of this Globe, so much esteemed by the Inhabitants. This Stone for its intrinsick value has been carefully transmitted to Posterity for several Ages. It is a green Stone much like a Globe in Figure, about the bigness of a Goose Egg.

"The Vertues of it is to remove Stitches from the sides of Sick Persons, by laying it close to the Place affected, and if the Patient does not out-live the Distemper, they say the Stone removes out of the Bed of its own accord, and *e contra*. The Natives use this Stone for Swearing decisive Oaths upon it.

"They ascribe another extraordinary Vertue to it, and 'tis this—the credulous Vulgar firmly believe that if this Stone is cast among the Front of an Enemy, they will all run away, and that as often as the Enemy rallies, if this Stone is cast among them, they still lose Courage, and retire. They say that *Mackdonald* of the Isles carried this Stone about him, and that Victory was always on his side when he threw it among the Enemy. The Custody of this Globe is the peculiar Privilege of a little

to Arran of the Celtic Church, who came here about the year 680 A.D., nor yet about the monastery said to have been erected by Reginald MacSommerled, "Rex Insularum," near to the beginning of the thirteenth century. From archæological sources, too, very little can be gleaned; the retreat of the Saint is merely a water-worn recess in the cliff, with a number of Runic inscriptions upon it; the monastery is dismissed with the observation of Dean Monro of the Isles, made in 1594—"Ane Monastery of friars which is decayit."

Not being satisfied with the meagre accounts available, I determined upon a survey, to see if no further information could be obtained. In May of last year (1908) I went to the Holy Isle, but, unfortunately for the purpose of examination, the accepted site of the monastery was under crop. On some of the furrows traces of mortar could be observed; in the depression between the furrows grey slabs were visible, evidently the covering-stones of graves, this place being considered the principal burying-ground by the natives of Arran prior to the year 1790, about which date interments ceased. Inquiry brought forth the information that crops have been grown on this graveyard since 1835.

In regard to this burying-place, it is perhaps of interest to record that the beautiful cross (fig. 1) that lies face down within the roofless chapel of Kilbride (Lamlash), well deserving of a better fate than is being accorded to it, was taken from here about fifty years ago by the then tenant of the farm on the island, who transported it to Kilbride (with what intent is unknown), and buried it in the churchyard there. The finding of this cross was reported to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by the Rev. Mr D. Landsborough in 1896. Mr

Family called Clan-Chattons, alias *Mack Intosh*, they were ancient Followers of *Mack Donald* of the Isles. This Stone is now in the Custody of *Margaret Millar* alias *Mack Intosh*, she lives in Baellmianich, and preserves the Globe with abundance of care; it is wrapped up in fair Linen Cloath, and about that there is a piece of Woollen Cloath, and she keeps it still lock'd up in her Chest, when it is not given out to exert its qualities."—Martin's *Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, London, 1703, pp. 225-6.

Landsborough, in his notice, had evidently not ascertained the original location of the cross; and in his description of it, overlooked a beautiful and interesting part of its design, viz. that the *Corpus Christi* passes



Fig. 1. Cross found in the Burying-place at the site of the Monastery on Holy Isle, Arran.

into a chalice, from which flows the saving stream of shed blood to the suppliant, who kneels at the foot in prayer with hands upturned. On these two points I thought it well to supplement his notice.

In the early days of November the work of examination was resumed,

and at the place where the mortar was seen digging was commenced. Only a little over 2 feet from the surface a foundation was got in the position shown on the ground-plan (fig. 2); this was laid bare, and

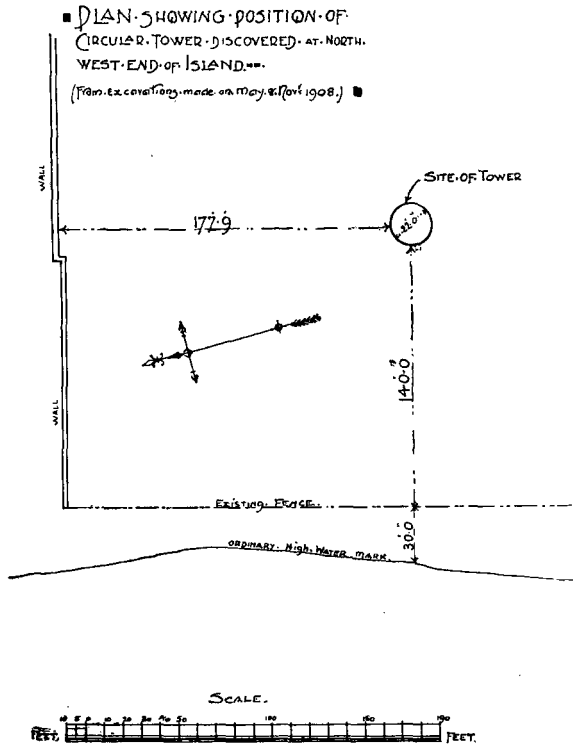


Fig. 2. Ground-plan showing position of Circular Foundation.

revealed a solid line-built circular found, 22 feet in diameter. A fairly wide trench was dug round this base, going somewhat deeper than the base itself, but not the slightest indication could be got of any other building having ever been attached to it. The surrounding field was carefully examined, but no trace of any further building could be dis-

covered. The covering soil is slight, and concealment of a structure of even moderate size can be accepted as highly improbable. Can it have been that the monastery was constructed of wood, as we know some of the early Scotie monasteries were?

In the twelfth century, Somerled, it is stated, erected a fortress on the Holy Isle. With that building, I venture to believe, the circular foundation discovered should be associated, and not with its monastic contemporary. In defence of this statement, reference to *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII.* may be made. There we find a navigator (L'Artigue) giving the following account:—"To know the commodities of the West side of Scotland, you must pass by the foreland of Saynt George and the first town that you shall find is called Saynt Jhon Deir" (in the French original St Jean de Ayr). Four leagues thence is Mellache (Lamlash). Describes Mellache (a port which can float a hundred great ships, and is only defended by two small towers, one beside the haven and the other on the isle that makes the port)." The date of this account is 1543. The small defence tower on the isle, noted by L'Artigue, and the fortress erected by Somerled, are we not justified in concluding to be one and the same? A small fragment of the wall of this tower, supported by two aged trees, stood until December 1879, when they were blown down. In digging for the foundation, several pieces of stone were discovered that had been thickly coated with a green glaze or glass. None were seen in the found, but were picked up around it. Similar glazed pebbles have been found occasionally in connection with other early buildings, but their origin is not understood. A fragment of a circular ornament of shale, rudely cut, was also got.

Attention was next directed to the cave or cell, as it proved to be, of St Molaise, with much more satisfactory result. The cell is situated about one mile from the monastery site, and occupies a position on the hillside about 25 feet above the present sea-level. The cave was found silted up with soil almost level with the approach. On removing the soil near the entrance a stone was laid bare, beneath it still another. I

concluded that they formed part of a stair (fig. 3); the surmise proved correct, and on the soil being removed it was seen that the lowest step rested upon paving. On returning to Lamlash I stated to some friends what had been found, and that probably much more of interest would be revealed by thorough excavation. A volunteer party was very kindly made up, and the work was proceeded with on succeeding days



Fig. 3. Stair at entrance to the Cave of St Molaise.

till the entire cave was emptied of the accumulated soil. It was only when this had been done that the full value of the discovery could be realised. Here, before us, was the cell of the Saint, complete, but for a part of the face wall, which had fallen in, and a few courses of the side walls.

The cell, of which fig. 4 shows a ground-plan, is $38\frac{1}{2}$ feet long by 13 feet at the widest part, that is, close to the foot of the steps. The

cell is paved from the middle to the north-east corner, or for about 26 feet. In this paving is set a large stone raised but little above the paving; it measures 5 feet 11 inches in length by 1 foot 8 inches in breadth, and about 1 foot 8 inches in depth; the ends lie almost north and south. Some of the paving having got shifted, an examination was made of the rock below, and a drain was found cut out of the solid rock; it passes out under the flags at the foot of the stair. At the south-west end of the cell the work of excavation presented features of different interest from the earlier work done. When about 3 feet of soil and

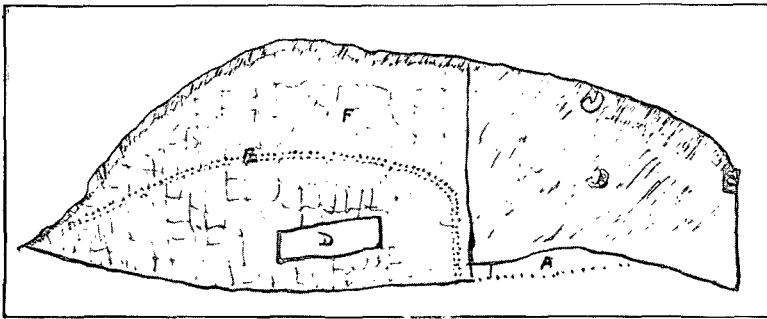


Fig. 4. Ground-plan of the Cave or Cell of St Molaise, Arran. A, the stair; B, rock floor; C, fire place; D, the large stone; E, drain; F, paving. Scale $\frac{1}{10}$ inch to one foot, nearly.

loose stones had been removed, a deposit was reached of black matter, in which were considerable quantities of shells, mostly of limpet and oyster. Then occurred about 2 inches of black sand without any shells; this was followed by more black refuse, with very large quantities of the shells observed higher up; and the full significance became obvious when a number of bones were found that had been split to extract the marrow—the mass was simply kitchen refuse.

When the rubbish had been removed a fireplace was brought to view; the accumulation from a higher elevation had evidently slipped down over it. It may here be mentioned that the greatest thickness of deposit

was round about the wall at this end of the cave; it gradually tapered away towards the pavement. The fireplace is built with a portion going under the south wall; attached to the wall had been uprights, with a flat stone on the top; unfortunately the weight of earth above had made this portion of the fireplace collapse. The vent is made between the courses of stone forming the wall. Some of the stones round the fire showed marked signs of the heat to which they had been subjected.

We may take it then, that when St Molaise occupied this cell, the north-east portion was used for devotional purposes, the south-west end as the domestic part. Most of the bones got were those belonging to domesticated animals.¹

The wall at the south end of the cave (fig. 5) reaches a thickness of 3 feet 5 inches, and this as well as the face wall is dry-built; the stone employed is sandstone and basaltic rock; both are found abundantly in the neighbourhood. The wall, from the stair to within a few inches of the north end, had fallen almost completely into the cell; the reason of the collapse is very easy to explain, as soil-slips are by no means infrequent from the almost perpendicular hill-face at this end of the cave—one only occurred a few months ago, when a ton or two of earth fell into the cell, and a large boulder was resting on what should have been the wall, but, as a matter of fact, upon the soil which it had driven before it. This fallen wall has been rebuilt so as to prevent in the meantime soil and loose stones from tumbling into the cell. The original wall was probably built up till it met the overhanging rock, this being indicated by the relation of such stones of the wall as still retained their original position to the bend of the rock. This being the case, the height of the wall from the paving to the ledge of the rock would be from 8 to 10 feet. It may be a question as to whether this wall

¹ A collection of these bones has been given to Dr Thomas H. Bryce, who has kindly made a thorough examination of them. They prove to be mostly fragments representing ox, sheep, pig, and deer. Most of the bones are those of young, immature animals.

should not be restored in the interest of the preservation of the cell, but I am glad to say the whole matter of the care of the cell is having the attention of Mr A. Hugh Douglas, factor to the Arran estate, and I have no doubt a wise decision will be come to.

Of the Runic inscriptions that Daniel Wilson recorded in his *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland* as being cut on the cave I was only able to find one ;



Fig. 5. St Molaise's Cave, showing South-west Wall.

though more may be found when the smoke deposit has worn off the roof of the rock, which in some places is thick enough to cover the grain of the stone, the cell being often used as a place of residence by the shell-gatherers who come to the island. Scores of crosses made by the pilgrims to this revered spot can still, however, be traced ; but, alas ! too often has the modern penknife been employed to cut initials, very detrimental to the older relics of pious visitors ; and we are glad to think

that means shall be taken to convince a sometimes not too sensible public that the engraved record on this cell is closed.

At one time steps, most likely, led from the low ground to the cell, but, owing to the large quantity of fallen soil and stones, all trace of them has been obliterated.

At a short distance from the cell, on the low ground, there rests



Fig. 6. St Molaise's Table, or the Judgment Stone.

an almost circular rock of sandstone (fig. 6); the top of it has been levelled, and four seats cut on the sides. At the south side of the rock, evidently, steps led up to the top, one of the steps being fashioned out of the rock; at the north end a handgrip is cut on the upper edge, and lower down a foothold has been made. The diameter of the top is 7 feet, and the circumference at the middle of the rock is about 31 feet; the height from the highest point to the ground is 7 feet 1 inch. On the east face a curious cross with a ring top is cut

(fig. 7); also there is to be seen, by careful scrutiny, some pilgrim crosses. What was this stone used for? At present the title given to it locally is "St Molaise's Table." In Wilson's *Prehistoric Annals* it is referred to as the "Saint's Chair." On making inquiry, I was



Fig. 7. Cross incised on the Judgment Stone.

told by a man who came from the west side of Arran that his mother had always called it the "Judgment Stone."

At the lower side of the remarkable rock just described there is placed a rudely chiselled stone with a shallow circular depression; probably it was used for "holy water"; it suffered some injury about two years ago by some vandals removing and throwing it upon the rocky shore,

from which it is only separated by a narrow path; it is now carefully restored to its original situation.

A few feet away from the "Judgment Stone," if we may so call it, is the Well of St Molaise (fig. 8). This well, until comparatively recent



Fig. 8. St Molaise's Well.

times, was much resorted to on account of the curative properties attributed to it, through its having been blessed by the Saint.

I venture to think that the primitive Cell, the "Judgment Stone," the Holy Water Font, and the Well, form in their conjunction as interesting a group as exists in Scotland, associated with the name of an early Saint.