Excavation at Iona Abbey, 1976

by Mark Redknap

SUMMARY

Excavation at the Benedictine Abbey on Iona just S of 'St Columba's Shrine' intended to test previous observations, established that the 'Shrine' preceded the other standing structures in the area and overlay earlier features associated with the pre-Benedictine period. To the Benedictine period belong a number of graves, paved surfaces and the well. No evidence was found for a Round Tower.

INTRODUCTION

The island of Iona lies off the W sea-way to the E of Tiree, or some 35 miles W of the Scottish mainland off the tip of the Ross of Mull (fig 1). This report describes the last of a series of excavations in and around the Benedictine Abbey (NGR NM 287245), and completes the programme of work inherited by Dr R Reece from Professor A C Thomas in 1964.

Iona's history, from Columba's arrival in AD 563 to the establishment of the present Iona Community in 1938, has excited much interest, and the Abbey church and conventual buildings have been the subject of numerous descriptions and surveys. The recent survey of Iona antiquities by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, to be published in a forthcoming volume of the Inventory of Argyll, permits me to restrict the following summary to the area examined in 1976 W of the Abbey church (fig 1).

'St Columba's Shrine', which was restored from low footings by the Iona Community in 1954–5, is mentioned by Sacheverell, who visited the island in 1688, and described the 'monument of Columbus' at the W end of the Cathedral, 'nothing but a ruinous heap of stones' (Sacheverell 1702, 132–3; Cumming 1859, 101). Martin Martin has little to add, simply describing a little cell, without inscription (1884, 258), while Bishop Reeves refers to a 'cavity' near St Martins' Cross, opposite the W door of the Cathedral – though he places Columba's grave in the Reilig Odhrain (1857, 317 note x). Nineteenth-century writers are more informative, and comparison is made with early Irish churches by Skene, who associates the remains with the smaller church of Kolumcilla visited by Magnus Barefoot in 1098 (1877, 354). Extensive clearance of debris in 1874–5 revealed a small enclosure in front of 'St Columba's Tomb', with a pavement of slabs, four of which bear incised crosses (Skene 1877, 298–9; Drummond 1881, pl III), and Skene suggested that this enclosure formed part of the pre-Benedictine establishment (1877, 298–9). A survey of this area made in 1876 shows the enclosure wall, incorporating in its W end the base of St John's Cross (Dryden, MS 5). Pre-Benedictine associations are subsequently re-iterated and the tradition recorded that the empty grave inside the Shrine to the S of the altar belonged to St Columba, and that on the left to his companion Diarmaid (Macmillan and Brydall 1898, 50–1).

Little is known of the well lying opposite the W door of the Abbey church until the 19th century, when the accounts differ. Maxwell writes '. . . we pass the ancient draw-well, now, alas! "as a well without water". This has been a very elegant structure, the remains of the coping stones

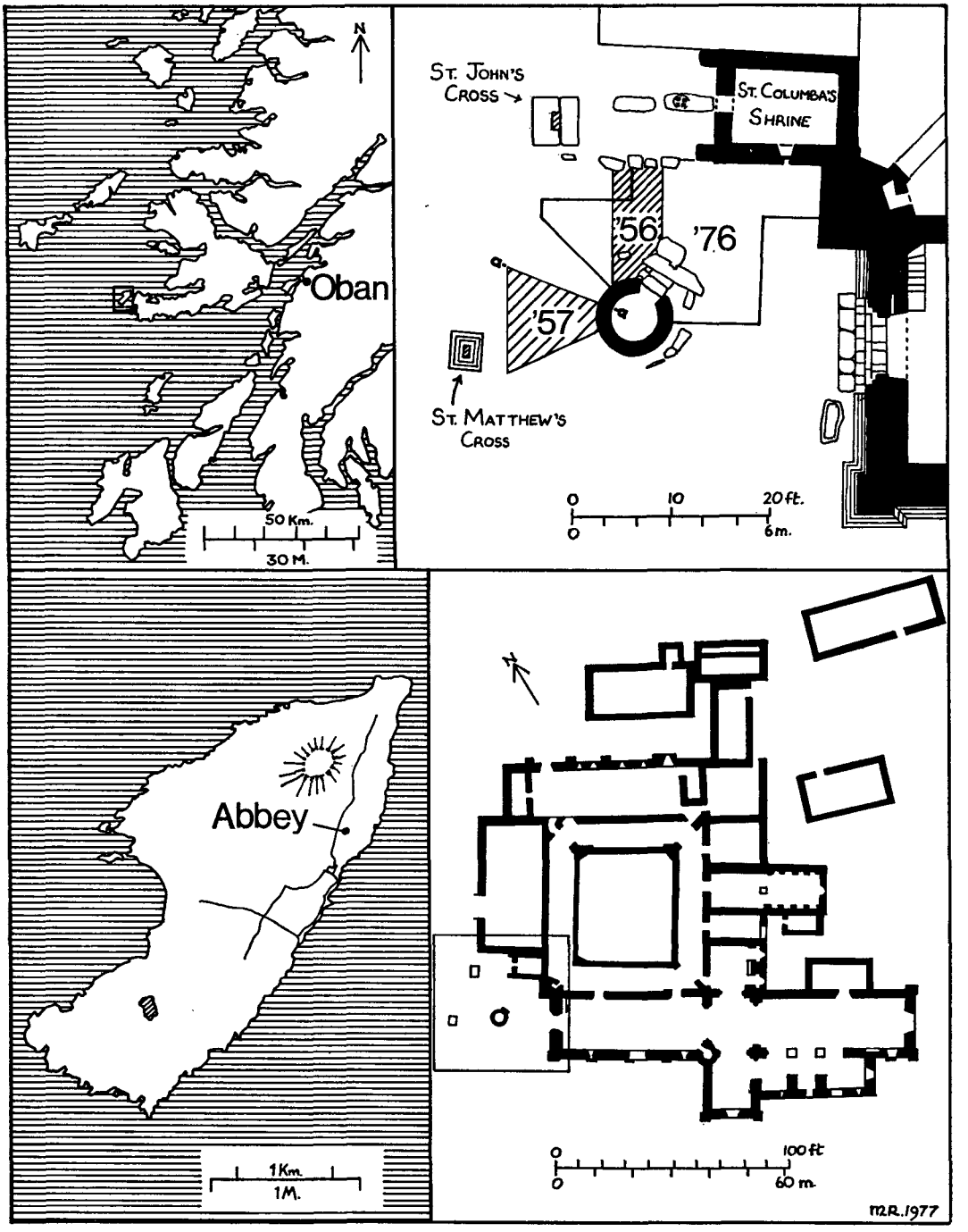

FIG 1 Iona Abbey: location maps and site plans

and steps leading down to it testify the same' (1857, 54). An account of the well several years later describes the ancient Holy well, with its steps and stone curb, '*not yet dry*' (Ewing 1872, 75). The existing parapet wall was constructed in 1876, although the shaft was not cleared down to water level until 1938. During the restoration of the Abbey church in 1908, the architect, P MacGregor Chalmers, excavated on the spot and found 'a larger round foundation, six feet thick', which he conjectured to be the base of a round tower (Trenholme 1909, 118). Subsequent literature perpetuates this interpretation (Champneys 1910, xxxii; Simpson 1927, 55), and the extant records for excavations around the well in 1956–7 indicate the position of such a structure. More recently it was suggested that the well, as an integral part of any community, may also have had Columban origins (Reece 1970).

The object of the 1976 excavation was to investigate the above conclusions further, whilst establishing a structural sequence for the standing stone buildings and identifying earlier features. Following present practice, the designations 'St Columba's Shrine' and 'Shrine' are applied to the building N of the well, and 'tower' to the structure at the NW angle of the Abbey church. No specific interpretations of their functions are thereby intended.

EXCAVATION

During September, October and November of 1976, excavation on the area W of the Abbey church was carried out on behalf of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, and financed by the Russell Trust.

Before excavation, the footings of a granite wall could be seen running E-W across the N of the site, and steps down to the well projected from the turf on the S (fig 1). At first a trench 4 m by 5 m was cleared down to the highest recognisable archaeological deposit. Extensions were subsequently made to the E and W and the final area excavated totalled 25 m square. It should be noted that during periods of rain the run-off of ground water from higher ground to the NW of the trench would frequently flood the site. Effective drainage was prevented by the high water table (*c* 0·55 m below natural sand), with the result that the lower deposits were at best damp, and frequently completely waterlogged. Natural shell sand lay *c* 1 m below the present ground surface.

For ease of reference, the various features excavated have been divided chronologically as follows:

Phase I (Pre-Benedictine): Buried ground surface, post-holes and associated features, 'Shrine'
Phase II (Benedictine): graves, paved surfaces, tower, well and intrusions
Phase III (Post-medieval): enclosure, step platform and land drain

PHASE Ia (figs 2 and 6)

Immediately above natural sand (white calcareous shell sand) lay a uniform deposit of black peaty soil, 50-120 mm thick (fig 2, layer 16a – visible around graves on pl 15b) which graded upwards into fine grey silt (fig 6, layer 16b). This covered the whole site except where removed by later intrusions, which included nine post-holes, varying from 0·10 m to 0·54 m in maximum diameter and 0·01 m to 0·27 m in depth. Most of these were filled with dark brown earth, indistinguishable from layer 22 above, and it was impossible to establish the level from which they had been cut. They made no coherent plan but lay stratigraphically under early medieval

paving and may be contemporary with the group of features in the N part of the trench which had been cut by the S wall of 'St Columba's Shrine'.

Feature 43 (figs 2, 6) Filled with brown earth and pebbles, it cut layer 16 and natural sand N of grave V, and was itself cut on the N by the Shrine wall.

Feature 51 (figs 2, 6) Cut layer 16 into natural sand. Filled with brown earth and mixed stone, with charcoal flecks, it appears to run E under the Shrine and possibly continued N.

Feature 52 (figs 2, 6) Filled with brown-black earth and mixed stone, it cut at least 250 mm into natural sand. The water table prevented complete excavation.

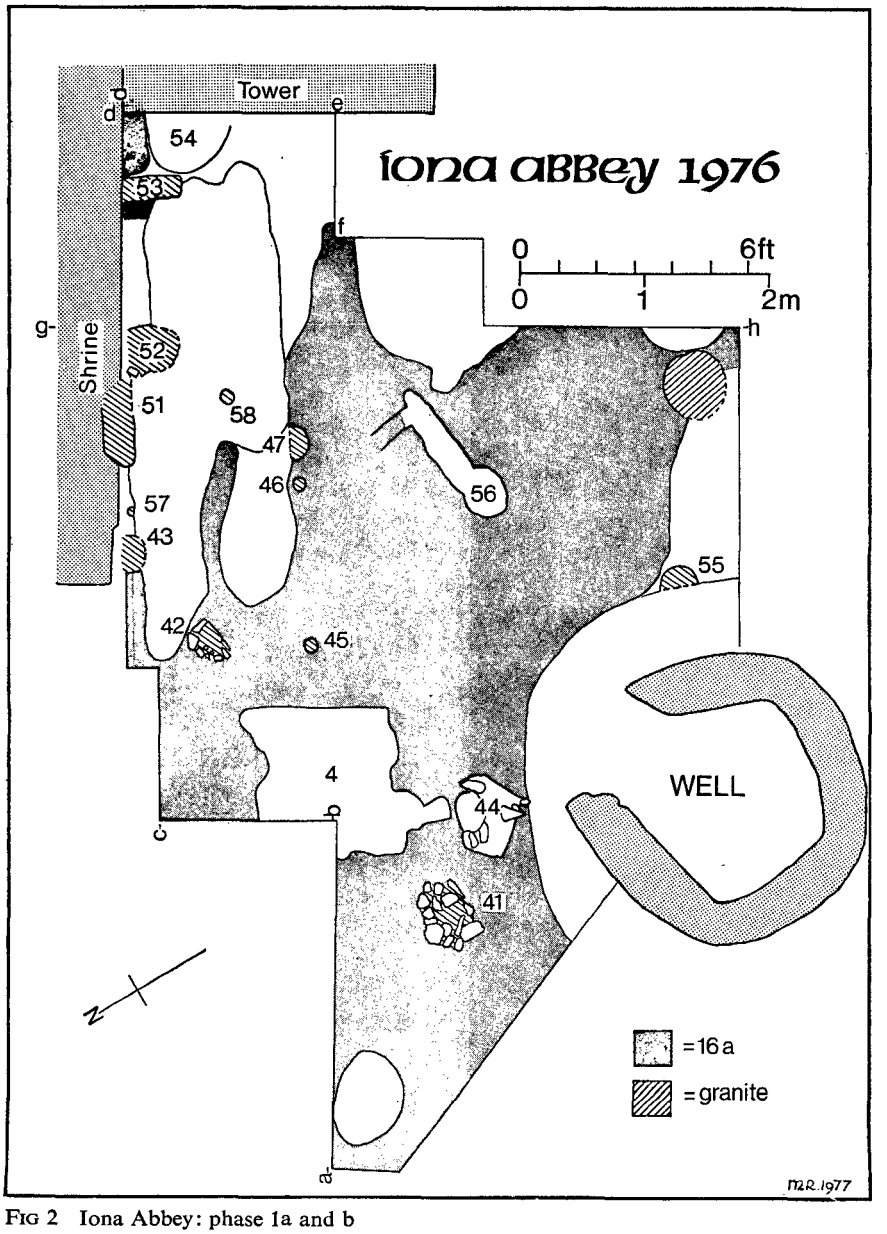

FIG 2 Iona Abbey: phase 1a and b

Feature 53 (figs 2, 6) Linear feature running N-S from beneath 'St Columba's Shrine'. Square in section, it cut layer 16 into natural sand, rising slightly to the N. Filled with mixed dark soil and charcoal flecks. The water-table hindered work, but an ephemeral shallow square (post-hole?) was noticed at the S end. Features 43, 51, 52, and 53 were cut on the N by the foundation trench for the S wall of 'St Columba's Shrine', and therefore precede its construction. No finds were recovered.

Feature 54 (figs 2, 6) A shallow depression cutting 16 into natural sand, with a mixed fill of dark earth, charcoal flecks and gravel. It continued E under the tower, but its precise relationship with the 'Shrine' was obscured by later disturbance (see p 245).

PHASE Ib (figs 2, 6)

The 'Shrine'

Constructed on a stone filled foundation trench levelled off with a plinth of granite and mica-schist slabs which cut through earlier features (see above), the main S wall was of Torridonian flagstone and integral with the sandstone *anta* at its W end (fig 6, section c-d; pl 15c). A vertical schist stone in the centre of the foundation trench displayed three fair faces (pl 15c, to right of scale; fig 6, section c-d, M) but could not be removed for further examination. The 'Shrine' wall preceded the tower which abutted it at its E end (p 234; pl 15d).

Interpretation

The lowest and earliest *stratum*, 16, was indentical to the buried ground surfaces recorded elsewhere in previous excavations (Reece forthcoming). However the absence of finds dating to the Columban period necessitates identification with a pre-occupation ground surface of indefinite age: no features lay beneath it, and all those cutting it probably originated from a higher horizon. Similarly, interpretation of the few post-holes and associated features, more of which probably lie beneath the present buildings, remains inconclusive. Contemporanity of features was not proven, although features 43, 51–53 are all pre-Shrine; nor could individual structures, let alone early ecclesiastical buildings, be reconstructed. Although unassociated with earlier material, feature 54, which may be the base of a grave, may be contemporary with 'St Columba's Shrine' and possibly grave 1 (p 245).

PHASE IIa (figs 3, 6)

Feature 28 (figs 3, 6) A shallow scoop cutting 16 on to natural sand was lined on the bottom with irregular slabs of granite, Torridonian flagstone and mica-schist, mixed with clean gravel above a thin deposit of dark soil (fig 6, sections d-e, e-f, g-h). This paving clipped grave II (fig 3) and appeared to be continuous with the paving in the centre of the trench, which incorporated a fragment of cross-base (p 243; fig 7, no. 78). The slabs ran approximately E-W, continuing 0·1 m below the 'tower' foundations (fig 6, section d-e; pl 15d) and although graves and well may have removed some paving, appeared relatively undisturbed. The deposits above 28 were very mixed. Over most of the site lay sandy ginger gravel (22), containing green-glazed potsherds and slag (p 241). This deposit had been cut on the NE by a series of graves (pp 245–8). Features 48 and 49 were cut into 16 from this horizon.

Graves I-VI (figs 10,11; see pp 245–8).

Feature 48 (fig 3) This feature had cut layers 28 and 16, and removed the top of post-hole 55. Into it slabs of mica-schist, sandstone and granite had been tipped, below a mixed fill of sand,

gravel, black peat and fine silt. While sealed by late medieval paving, it was impossible to determine from where it had been cut.

Feature 49 (figs 3, 6) This intrusion cut 16 into natural sand (like 48) and was filled with fine brown earth and a few pebbles. It appeared to cut 3, and start below 8.

Interpretation

Before construction of the tower, feature 28 was cut into the subsoil – presumably from a higher ground surface – and paved with stone. Not extending right up to the W end of 'St

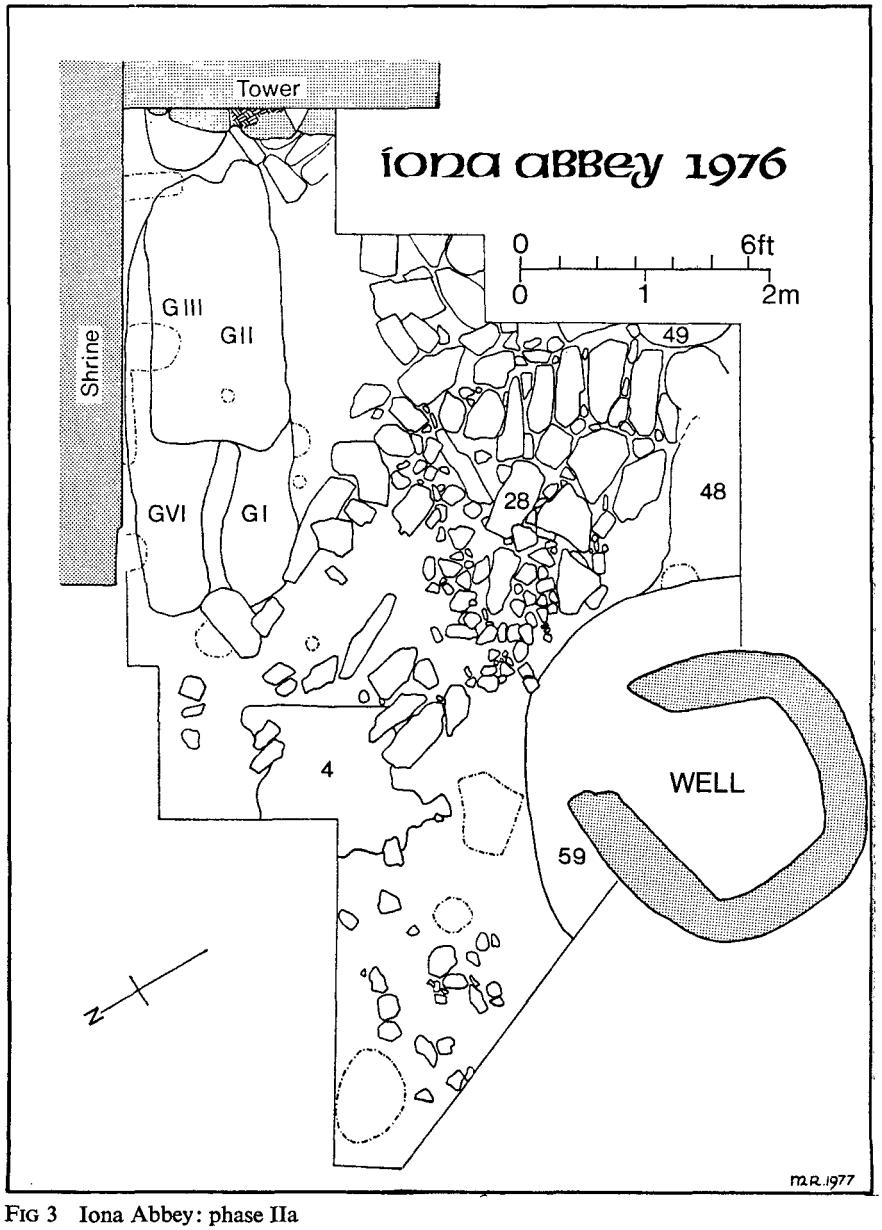

FIG 3 Iona Abbey: phase IIa

Columba's Shrine', but running E towards the projected E end of the Shrine, it may be a path laid when the Shrine was a freestanding structure and unattached to the medieval church by the later tower. The rough character of the paving contrasts with the 16th-century flagging (pl 15a) and resembled that forming the exposed length of the 'Street of the Dead' inside the present Abbey grounds, which probably functioned as a 12th-century service road between the Reilig Odhrain and the brewhouse excavated in 1967 (Reece 1973, 42). It is hard to explain why the '1976' path cut into the natural sand towards the tower (fig 6), but this low level corresponds with that in the cloisters on the other side of the tower. Burial took place around the Shrine until the 16th century.

PHASE IIb (figs 4, 6)

Paving 9 a and b (figs 4, 6; pl 15a) Sandstone paving above 22 covered most of the site sealing all preceding features. It formed two distinct areas of different character. Flat, well-fitting slabs of flagstone covered the area N and E of the well, and appeared continuous with the flagging in front of the Shrine (9a). Immediately S of the Shrine above the burials, on a slightly higher level than 9a, the paving contained much granite, and marble pebbles (9b). Little attempt had been made at regular setting, and some of the larger slabs had subsided into grave VI. Intrusions (layers 17, 40 and 4) may have removed small areas of paving. The slabs around the well displayed fracturing above the well pit (59), suggesting that the well had been cut through 9 into the underlying *strata*, and that the paving had subsequently been re-laid on the backfill. Above (9) lay a thin lens of dark sticky soil (layer 13) containing 16th-century potsherds which formed the latest undisturbed medieval deposit in the excavation.

The well (fig 4) Proper archaeological examination of the well was impossible because it is still in use, but the interior was inspected. The medieval masonry survives from layer 9 downwards, and retains its original irregular plan as illustrated on Dryden's 1876 survey of the area (MS 5), made just before the present mortared parapet was added. The well wall is formed of unbonded square blocks of Torridonian flagstone, with a few granite pebbles incorporated in the bottom. The internal diameter of the well tapers from 2·05 m at the base to 1·44 m at the top, forming a slightly conical reservoir. The water table is high, *c* 1·0 m below the present ground level, or 0·35 m below layer 9, and the bottom of the well, as far as could be ascertained, lay 0·8 m below the water surface.

The tower (fig 4; pl 15d) The tower was probably constructed at the end of the 15th century on a foundation of trench-poured rubble (granite and sandstone) with a little clay, levelled up to a plinth 0·40 m. above that of the 'Shrine', which it abutted in a straight join.

Interpretation

The split level of late medieval paving, which extended at the same height to the front of 'St Columba's Shrine', can be explained by the removal of soil associated with the earlier path (28), and respect shown to the burials. Although contemporaneity between 9a and 9b was not proven, they were both contiguous with the area in front of the Shrine uncovered in 1875 (Drummond 1881, pl III), which also produced four cross-slabs presumably associated with either Celtic graves or Benedictine burial. The complete extent of the paving is unknown, but, similar stretches can be seen in unpublished photographs of excavations S of the Bakehouse deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. While the paving was in use, the well shaft was sunk and lined, or possibly re-built – though no indications of either timber or stone predecessors were found.

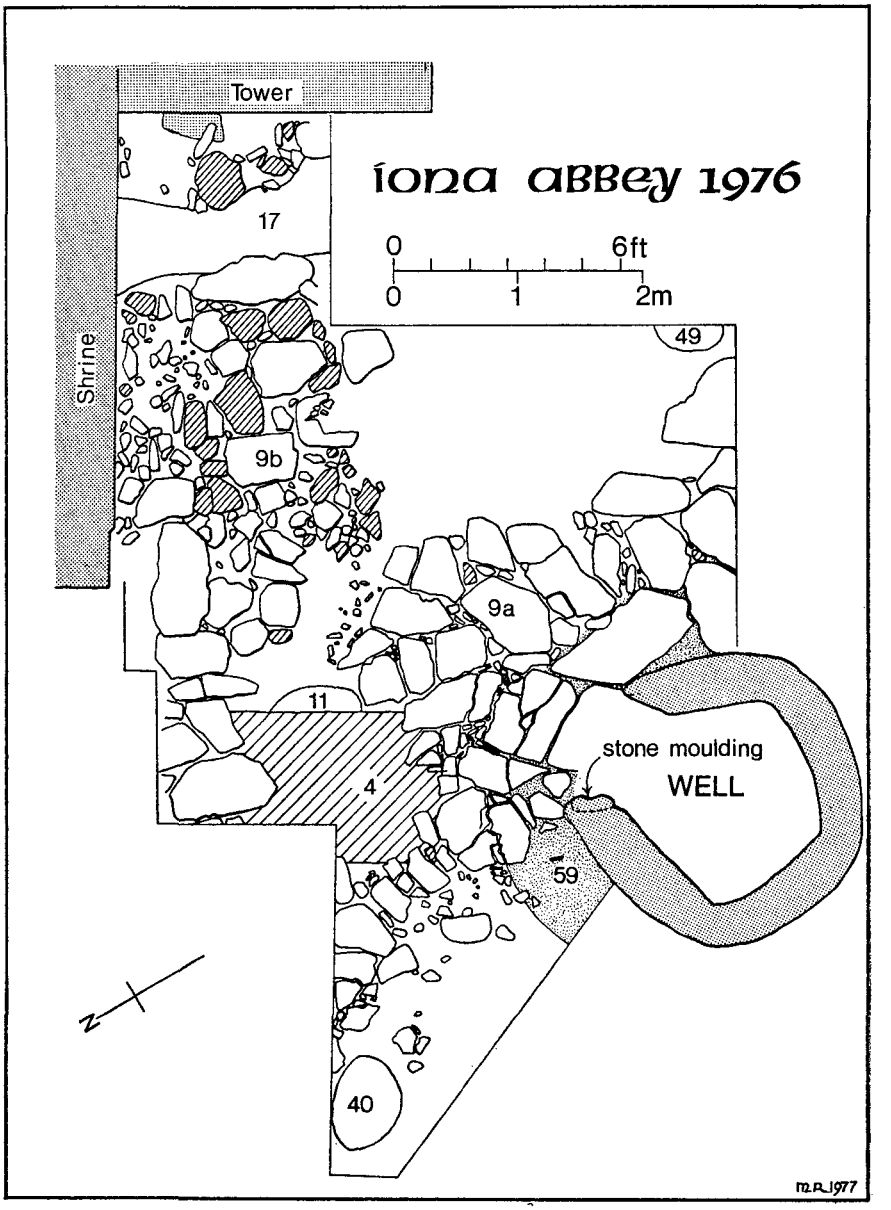

FIG 4 Iona Abbey: phase IIb

PHASE III (figs 5, 6)

Feature 6 (fig 5) The present well entrance was cleared and a circular platform of granite and sandstone supporting two steps was uncovered. The upper stones had been recently moved, when the joists of the pump floor inside the well had been inserted, but the two lower steps are recorded by Dryden (MS 5), Maxwell (1857, 54) and Ewing (1872, 75), and presumably date to the 17th/18th centuries.

Feature 2 (figs 5, 6) Above layer 9 on the N side of the trench ran the bottom course of the

wall that had been partially exposed before excavation (fig 1). Abutting both tower and Shrine, without any sign of keying with either, it ran E-W and presumably extended to the base of St John's Cross. The wall was roughly constructed of angular and rounded blocks of granite and Torridonian flagstone, with a pebble core. The only bonding agent was clay, which survived at the E end of the wall, where it had been cut by a land drain. The last two stones at the W end had been replaced – a lens of humic soil lay beneath the N stone, while the S one had been repositioned on its side, out of line with the wall. The wall had no foundation trench and cannot have been very substantial. It appears on Dryden's plan as the S side of an enclosure surrounding

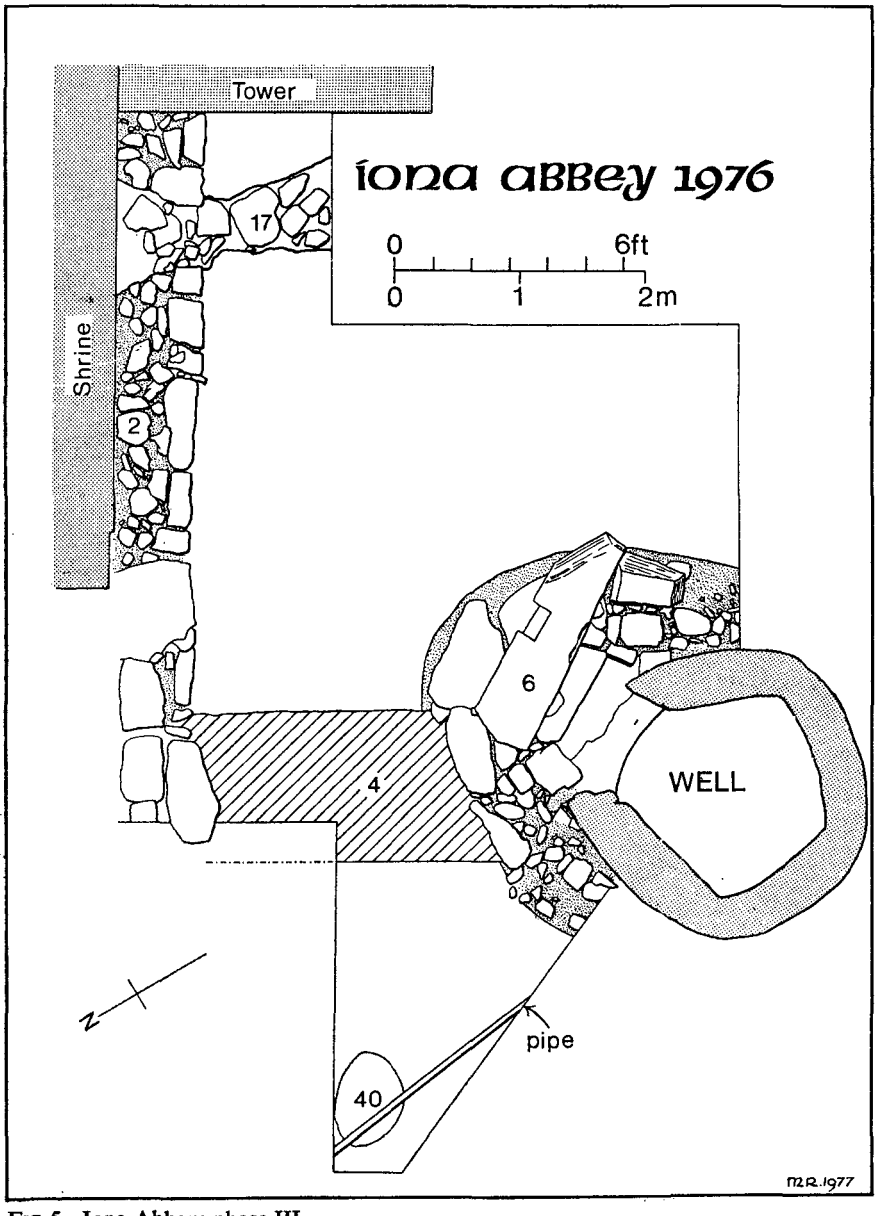

FIG 5 Iona Abbey: phase III

the Shrine and incorporating the base of St John's Cross in its W end. The NW and SW corners of the enclosure are rounded and not strengthened in any way, nor is there any means of entry.

Feature 11 (fig 4) The side of an intrusion filled with light brown earth and stone, most of which had been removed by layer 4. Appeared to cut through layers 9a and b down to natural sand.

Feature 17 (figs 5, 6) Beneath layer 3 on the E side of the trench lay a thin spread of mortar and stone chips which are probably associated with the re-building of the upper part of the W wall of the Abbey church during the Edwardian restoration (layer 5, fig 6). A land drain (17) running S from the Shrine, is probably contemporary. It was filled with mortar and mixed stone, and produced a fragment of rotary quernstone (fig 9, no. 80).

Feature 4 (figs 5, 6) A modern deposit of rusty brown soil (3) above layer 2 covered most of the site, except on the W where Charles Thomas' trench ran N-S up to the well (layer 4). It cut down to natural sand in the centre only, leaving the step platform and medieval strata *in situ.* At the bottom lay a 1956 halfpenny.

Interpretation

The weak construction of the wall (2), which was unmortared, and without an entrance (Dryden MS 5), suggests that it formed an enclosure around St Columba's Shrine, which has traditionally been associated with the monastic founder for at least four centuries. Although no dating material was found, it probably post-dates the Reformation of 1561, which may have reached Iona some 15 years later. The Abbey buildings gradually fell into decay, until the attempt by Charles I to restore the Abbey as Cathedral of the Isles (1635–38), when the nave of the church was walled off and the choir only used for worship. The enclosure wall may belong to this revival, for it is shown in ruin by 1867 (Wilson 1867). Alternatively it may be associated with the minor protective measures made by the 3rd Duke of Argyll in the 18th century.

FINDS

The publication number refers to the illustration number (unless otherwise stated). Finds from layers 1 and 3 (modern, unstratified) are not included. All finds are deposited in the Abbey Museum, Iona.

POTTERY

All the pottery is published, but indistinctive sherds are not drawn. Very little pottery was found, and in the absence of a large sample the accurate dating of deposits proved difficult.

Apart from a small group of iron-age pottery (*c* 1st century BC to 1st century AD), the majority of sherds came from late medieval Scottish jugs (*c* 1450–1600). I am most grateful to Eric Talbot and John Hurst for advice on the various wares.

Iron-age pottery (fig 7) *by* Eric Talbot

All the sherds look like good Hebridean iron-age material, though there are none of the everted rim forms datable to the period 1st century BC to 3rd or 4th AD. The hard-fired pottery, buff, brown and grey colouring, relative thinness of the walls and sparse sand-tempering all fit in with this diagnosis. Unfortunately, only one rim is preserved, and the exact form of the vessels represented cannot be ascertained.

Layer 28

1 This is one of two pieces of hard, dark grey ware. The rim form is unusual for the broch-wheelhouse period (*c* 50 BC to AD 400) but is quite well matched among sherds from an earlier iron-age dwelling at Balevullin, Tiree (MacKie 1965, 155–83). It does not resemble the rim form of the recent craggans in the Glasgow collections.

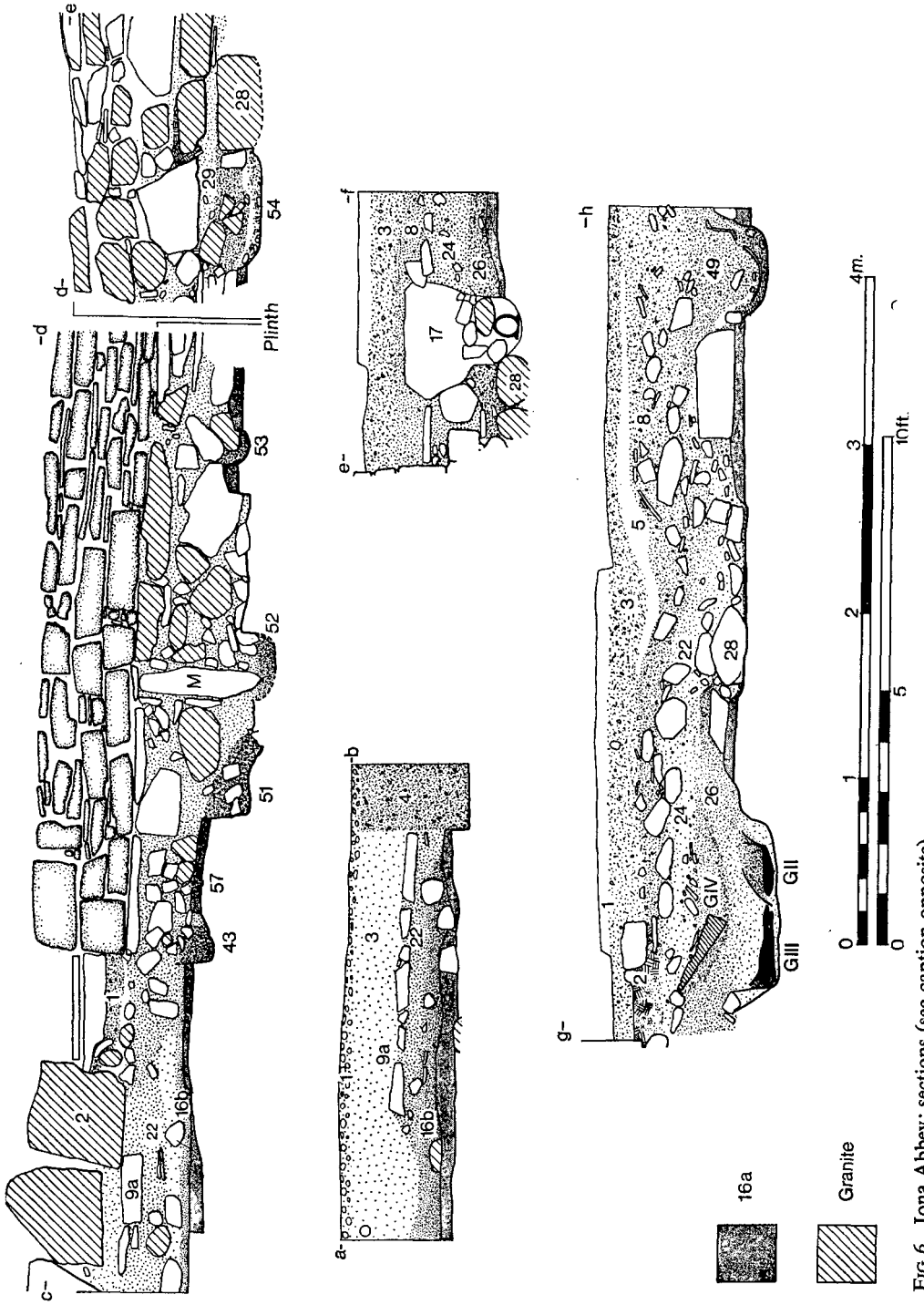

FIG 6 Iona Abbey: sections (see caption opposite)

Layer 6

2 This is a piece from immediately under the rim of what looks like a typical Hebridean C Vaul ware vase. The light buff-brown colouring, thin wall and incised and impressed decoration would fit easily into the range of this native ware found at Dun Mor Vaul, Tiree (MacKie 1974, 157), though the impressions of shell edge are unusual. Vaul ware on Tiree runs from 500 BC to AD 400 or later, but the more elaborately ornamented forms seem to belong to the latter half of this period – the broch-wheelhouse horizon.

3 This is also from just below the rim of what seems to be a plain Vaul ware vase though the form is slightly unusual. The fabric and surface colour are indistinguishable from iron-age wares of the islands.

4–5 Two body sherds of the same fabric (not illustrated).

Medieval pottery (fig 7)

Layer 50/28

6 Small body fragment in coarse grey fabric. Fine sand inclusions, mottled brown exterior glaze. Prob. 14th century. (not illustrated)

7 Small body sherd, grey fabric with buff inner and white outer surfaces. Light green glaze. 14th century? (not illustrated)

8 Thin body sherd, grey fabric with buff inner and white outer surfaces. Light green outer glaze and linear grooved decoration.

9 Handle, orange fabric with large white quartz inclusions.

10 Crucible fragment? (not illustrated)

Layer 29

11 Base, orange fabric with grey/buff inner surface. Rounded white quartz grit inclusions, speckled brown-green outer glaze.

Layer 28

12 Body sherd, cream fabric with orange surface. White painted outer surface. (not illustrated)

Layer 27/Grave V

13–14 Two small body sherds, grey core with whitish-buff surfaces. Few mica flecks, traces of light outer green glaze. Late medieval. (not illustrated)

FIG 6

The Stratification

1 (= 18) Humic, black topsoil with gravel
2 Wall of granite and sandstone
3 (= 19) Sandy brown soil with pebbles
4 1956 trench. Dark brown loose soil, some stones
5 Grey soil with mortar and stone chips
6 Step platform
8 Brown earth with large stones, mortar flecks, rusty tinge
9a (= 10) Paving
9b (= 9, 20, 21) Paving
11 Pit. Brown earth and stone
12 Yellow brown clay with stones
13 Dark brown-black crumbly soil, mortar flecks and schist
16a (= 16b) Black peat
16b (= 16a, 23) Light grey silt
17 Land drain
22 Fine gravel, sand and brown earth (mixed)
22b Dark gravel and brown earth, mixed with sand
24 Light brown soil with pebbles
25 Grave IV
25 Grave IV
26 (= 30, 31) Dark brown-black sticky soil with small pebbles
27 Grave V
28 (= 38, 39, 50) Paving stones (sandstone and pebbles
29 Mortar and stone
35 Grave
36 Grave
43 Post-hole. Brown earth with pebbles
48 Pit
49 Fine brown earth, flecks of peat
51 Dark brown mixed earth, charcoal and pebbles)
52 Post-hole. Black earth and stone
53 Dark soil, charcoal flecks
54 (= 37) Silty brown earth with flecks of charcoal
55 Post-hole. Silty brown earth, mixed earth, charcoal flecks at base
56 Burrow
57 Post-hole. Brown earth
59 Well pit

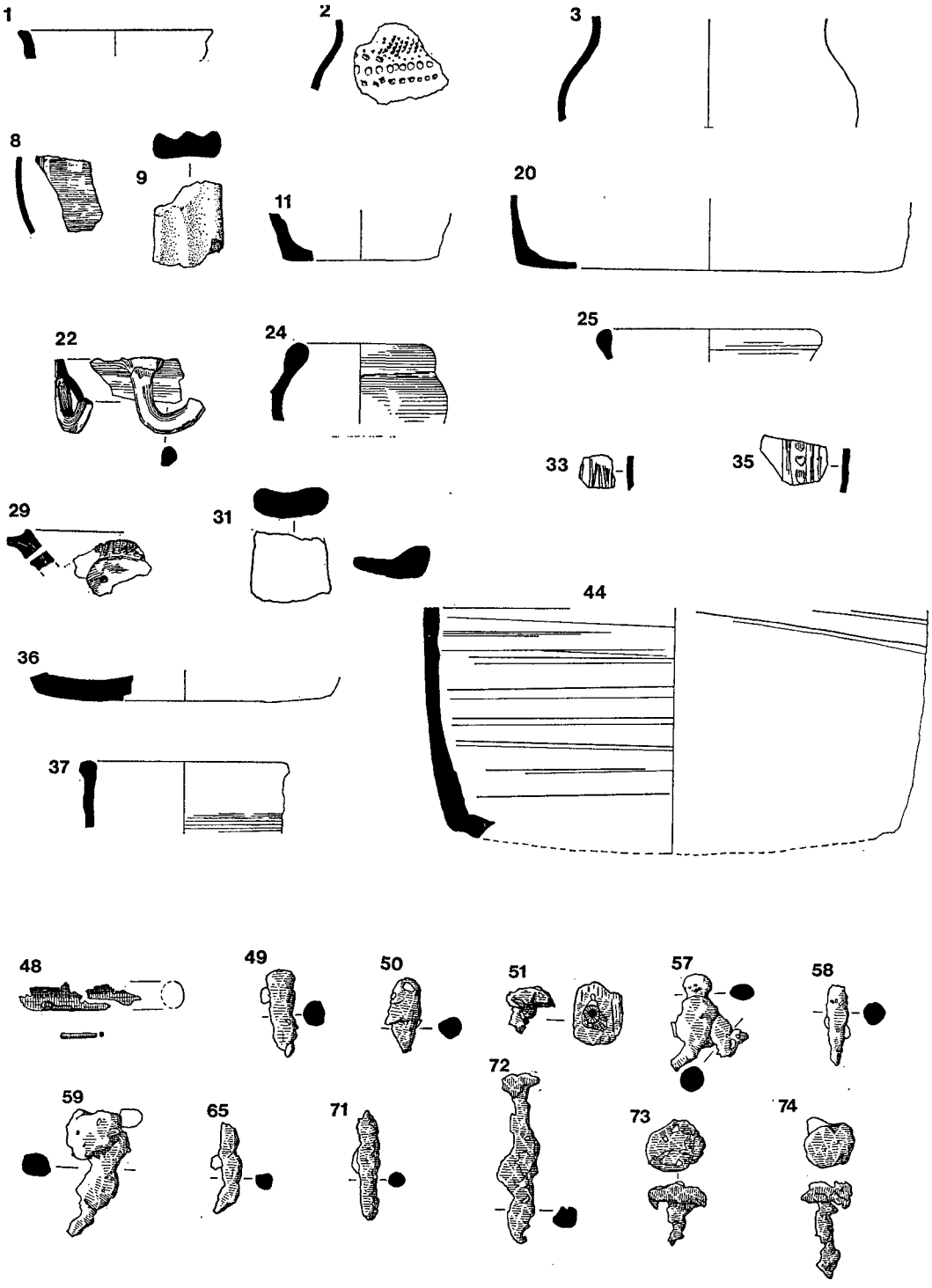

FIG 7 Iona Abbey: pottery, nos 1–44 (1 : 4), bronze, no. 48 (1 : 1), and iron, nos 49–74 (1 : 4)

15 Body sherd, hard grey fabric. Leaf green outer glaze with brown streak. Late medieval. (not illustrated.

16 Base, coarse grey fabric with quartz inclusions and mica flecks. Prob. cooking pot (early medieval?). (not illustrated)

Layer 24

17 Small body sherd, orange-grey core with buff inner and grey outer surfaces. Olive green outer glaze. (not illustrated)

18 Base, dark grey fabric with whitish-buff surfaces. Grog tempered, quartz inclusions. As (13–14). (not illustrated)

Layer 23

19 Small body sherd, grey fabric with white outer surface. Outer green glaze. (not illustrated)

Layer 22

20 Base, grey fabric with whitish-buff surfaces. Cooking pot? Same as (13–14).

21 Small thin body sherd of same. (not illustrated)

22 Arm skeuomorph from long-beard jug? (Cruden 1952, fig 7). Grey core with buff surfaces. Mottled leaf green glaze.

23 Body sherd, grey fabric with mica flecks. Green outer glaze. Same as (19). (not illustrated)

Layer 21

24 Flagon neck, grey fabric with white outer surface. Leaf green outer glaze. Attachment for strap handle.

25 Rim, buff fabric. Trace of brown-green outer glaze. Very worn.

Layer 20

26 Body sherd, grey core with orange-buff inner and white outer surfaces. Mica flecks, very worn. Trace of mottled green outer glaze. Same as (27–8). (not illustrated)

Layer 13

27–28 Two body sherds, grey core with buff-orange inner and white outer surfaces. Brown-green outer glaze. (not illustrated)

29 A very interesting sherd of medieval Saintonge, 13–14th century. Coarse white fabric, matt green glaze inside and out. The hole through the side cannot be a vent into a closed space because the inside of the applied pad is glazed and must have been open. This suggests that the sherd may have been part of a complex puzzle jug of the same general type as the Exeter example, rather than the neck of a aquamanile which would leak, or (less probably) the neck of a narrow jug or costrel. (I am very grateful to J G Hurst for examining this sherd.)

Layer 12

30 Body sherd, buff-grey core with white outer surface. Mica flecks. Lime green outer glaze. Same as (27–28). (not illustrated)

31 Strap handle, grey fabric, mica flecks. Dark green glaze on outer face.

Layer 9

32 Body sherd, grey fabric with white outer surface. Leaf green outer glaze. Same as (23). (not illustrated)

33 Sherd of fine black fabric. Craggan Ware? Wheel thrown, combed decoration.

Layer 8

34 Body sherd, grey core with buff inner and white outer surfaces. Olive green outer glaze. (not illustrated.

35 Body sherd with external applied scale decoration. Grey fabric with white outer surface, green mottled outer glaze. 14th century? Same as (7).

T

36 Base, grey core with buff outer surface. Mica flecks, green speckled outer glaze. As (44).
37 Rim with trace of pinched spout. Grey fabric with orange-buff surface and mica flecks. Lime green outer glaze below rim.
38–39 Two body sherds, grey fabric with buff inner and white outer surfaces. Mottled green outer glaze Same as (27–28). (not illustrated)

Layer 6

40 Body sherd, cream fabric. Purple-green speckled outer glaze. (not illustrated)
41 Small body sherd, grey fabric. Orange surfaces. (not illustrated)

Layer 5

42–43 Two body sherds, grey fabric. Green outer glaze. (not illustrated)
44 Base of cooking pot, grey fabric with white inner surface. Green outer glaze.

CLAY

Layer 54

45 Fragments of daub. (not illustrated)

Layer 38

46 Black fragment of tile. (not illustrated)
47 Crucible fragment. Black glaze one side. Black sandy fabric, micaceous. (not illustrated)

BRONZE (fig 7)

Later 22

48 Fragment of curved bronze sheet and associated pin shaft. Possibly a needle case.

IRON (fig 7)

Layer 32/Grave VI

49 Nail shaft. L. 50 mm.

Layer 31

50 Nail fragment. L. 45 mm.
51 Nail head. Traces of wood on underside.

Layer 27/Grave V

52–56 Iron fragments, probably nails (not illustrated): shaft L. 34 mm; head L. 26 mm; lump L. 53 mm; shaft L. 34 mm; shaft L. 30 mm.
57 Two nails corroded together. Max. L. 58 mm.
58 Shaft L. 50 mm.
59 Nail L. 80 mm.

Layer 25/Grave IV

60–64 Possible nail fragments (not illustrated): L. 29 mm; 41 mm; 29 mm; 33 mm; 57 mm.

Layer 22

65 Shaft L. 62 mm.
66 Shaft fragment L. 59 mm. (not illustrated)
67 Shaft fragment – coffin nail L. 47 mm. (not illustrated)

Layer 17

68 Nail L. 116 mm. (not illustrated)
69 Shaft L. 54 mm. (not illustrated)

Layer 13

70 Nail fragment L. 40 mm. (not illustrated)

Layer 8

71 Shaft L. 66 mm.

72–74 Three nails. L. 108 mm; 37 mm; 58 mm.

Layer 5

75 Shaft L. 41 mm. (not illustrated)

STONEWORK (figs 8, 9)

Layer 36 (Grave IV: fig 8)

76 Dr K A Steer writes: Fragment of a shaped grave-slab, 0·50 m wide by 0·10 m thick. Carved from Carsaig sandstone, the slab has borne a long-shafted cross within a border consisting of a single incised line. The portion of the shaft that survives is outlined by bold roll-mouldings, and the space between the mouldings has been slightly hollowed out. To the right of the shaft facing inwards, there is an incised semi-uncial Old Irish inscription reading . . .] *do ergus*, on which Professor K H Jackson has kindly contributed the following note:

> 'Before the stone was broken, the full inscription must have been *oróit do ergus*, "a prayer for Fergus"; the *oróit* might of course have been contracted to *oṙ*, as is often the case. The preposition *do* causes the "lenition" of a following consonant, which, in the case of *f*, took the form of its total loss. Hence when an *f* was lenited it might quite often not be written at all, since it was not pronounced; and this is the case here.
>
> 'The lettering would most likely belong to the 8th century, but a 9th-century date, though less likely, would not be impossible.'

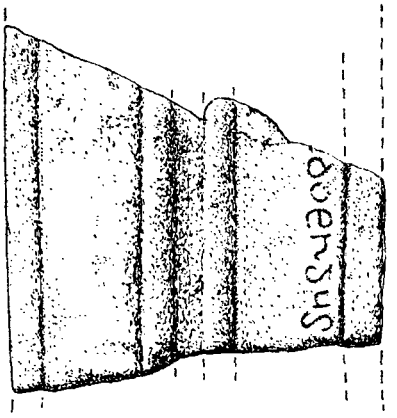

FIG 8 Iona Abbey: grave slab no. 76 (scale 1 : 10)

OTHER STONEWORK (fig 9)

Layer 32/Grave VI

77 Worn piece of sandstone with three facets around shaft, L. 0·12 m.

Layer 28

78 Fragment of cross base, re-used as paving for medieval path. Carved from mica-schist, it is regularly executed, with one (upper?) fair face. Neither side is complete, so the original dimensions are unknown. Iona has produced a large number of cross bases of Early Christian and medieval date, and a similar, but complete example can be seen in the grounds of the Nunnery on the island. It is difficult to establish criteria for distinguishing work of either period in pieces of such simple character; the stratigraphic associations of this example, however, indicate a pre-13th-century date.

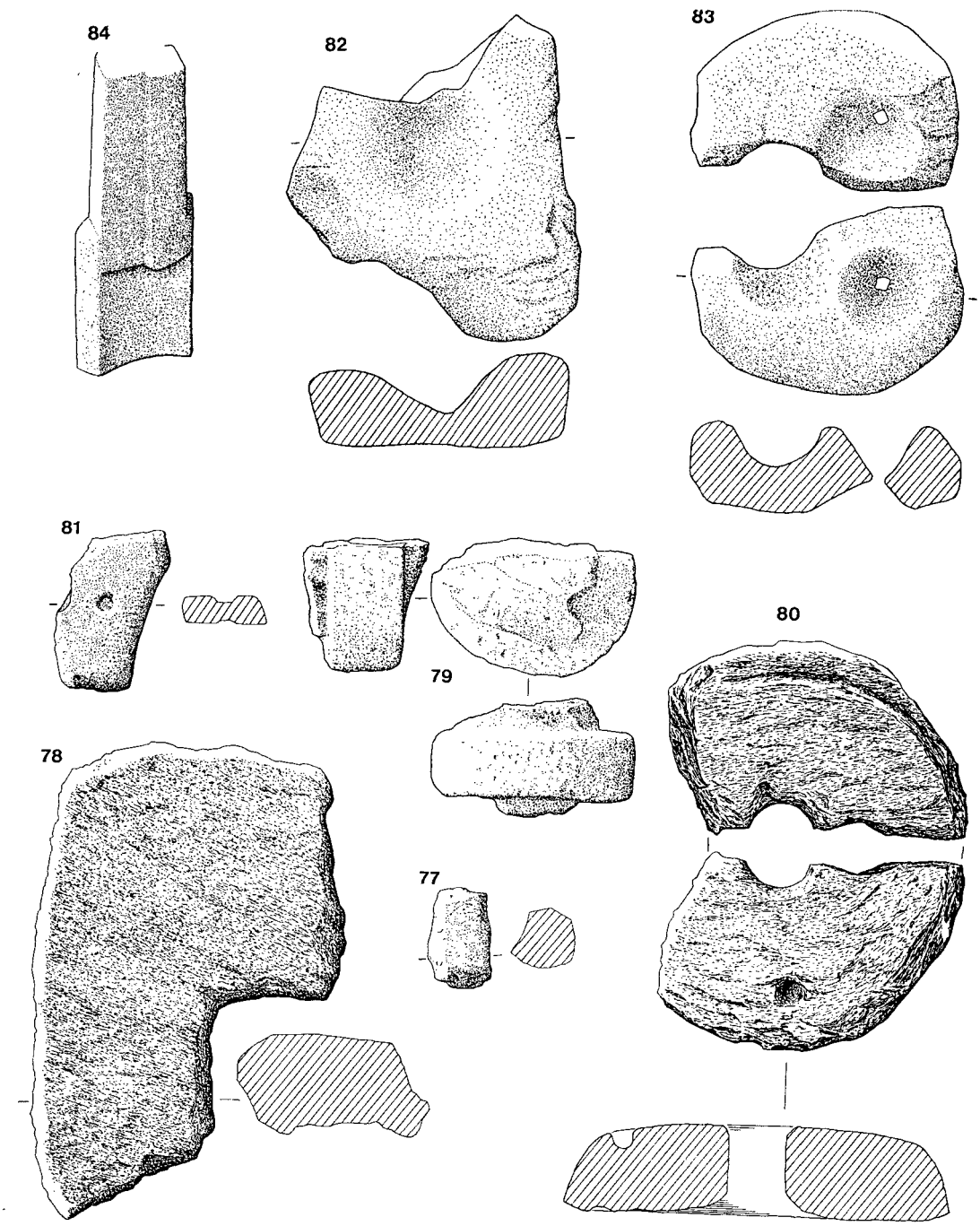

FIG 9 Iona Abbey: stonework, no. 79 (1 : 1), nos 78, 80, 81 (1 : 8), nos 82–4 (1 : 20)

Layer 25/Grave IV

79 Fragment of carved Carsaig sandstone. Roughly executed for Iona work, the piece displays traces of moulding on one side of an annulet, with a low boss on the other side. Few distinctive shapes remain; it may have been a built-in annulet or mid-ring on a shaft, or alternatively the upper member of a multi-tier base with the boss marrying a socketed base. Annulet diameter 0·12 m.

Layer 17

80 Upper stone of a rotary quern: mica-schist, re-used as packing for land drain. Upright loose handle hole, and slightly raised hopper collar on the upper face, rynd-socket on the lower surface, which is incised with a single arc inside the outer edge. The groove is off-centre, and is more likely to be decorative than an attempt at stone trimming.

Layer 10

81 Flat stone with central socket for bolt or pivot, L. 0·19 m.

Layer 6

82–83 Two large boulders of Mull granite with deep circular depressions in one or both sides. The hollows with conical cross-sections are worn smooth, whereas the one rounded profile on 83 is roughly pecked out, and has broken through into the worn hollow on the other side. This suggests that the stones form simple querns or mortars for grinding, and that constant use has worn down the bowls from rounded to pointed hollows. Their re-use in the step-platform illustrates the constant re-use of stone on the island.

Well doorway (fig 4)

84 Stone moulding re-used in the W side of the well door. Its present position is unhelpful, since the well parapet was only constructed during the restoration of 1875–6. The stone is schist rather than Carsaig sandstone favoured by the Benedictine craftsmen (Steer and Bannerman 1977, 108) suggesting a post-medieval date.

THE BURIALS

Much fragmented human bone (and comparatively little animal bone) was recovered from layers 1 and 3. Very little of it displayed the discolouration or decalcification associated with the deeper medieval interments, and it may have been deposited from the church or cloister area during post-medieval activity.

Six graves against the S wall of St Columba's Shrine were aligned E-W, with the heads on the W (fig 3). In the absence of grave goods, they have been described in relative sequence depending on their relationships with each other and the surrounding features.

Grave I (layer 34; fig 10)

First in the sequence, it had a shallow rounded bottom cutting layer 16 into natural sand, and filled with black compacted peat with patches of yellow sand. No bone survived.

Grave II (layer 35; figs 6, section g-h; fig 10)

On a slightly different orientation, this grave had a square profile and rounded E end. The fill was similar to grave I. Below the water table (*c* 400 mm below 16) lay the bottom of a log coffin (Appendix I). Enamel tooth casings lay at its W end and were the only body remains found.

Grave III (layer 36; figs 6, section g-h; fig 10)

This grave removed the N side of II to the same depth as II. It was square in profile, with a fill of grey soil and sandy silt. The water table had preserved a wooden coffin (Appendix 1),

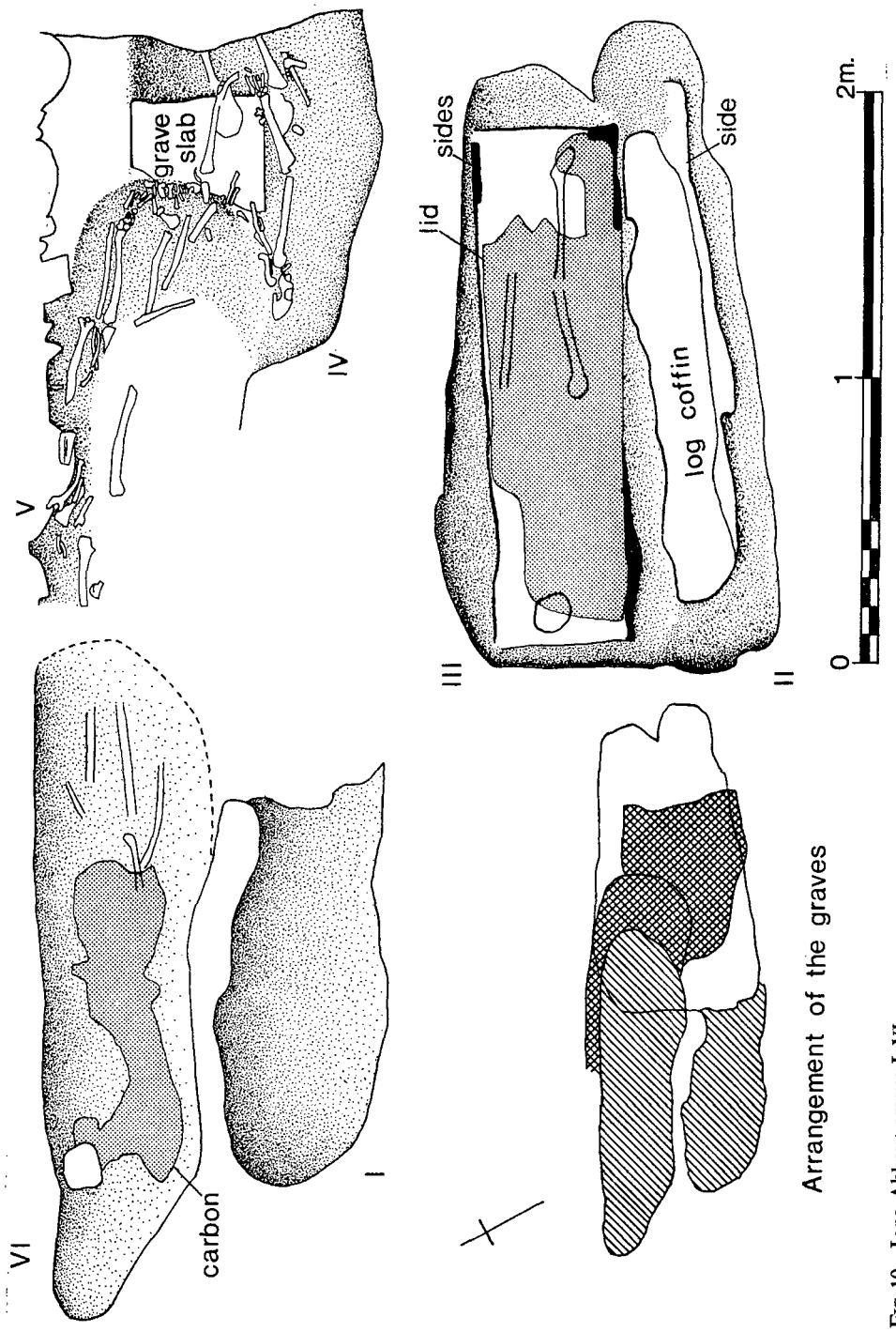

FIG 10 Iona Abbey: graves I–VI

which was filled with dark compressed peat with mica flecks. No bone was recovered, but ghost traces of skull and legs were recorded.

The only datable material associated with these graves are the grave-slab from IV and the potsherds from VI, providing a tenuous *terminus post quem* from these later burials of 12th and 16th centuries respectively. All the burials were respected by later medieval activity and lie beneath paving of that period, which explains the higher ground level maintained here until a later date. Their orientation duplicates that of the Shrine, and they probably date to the period between its construction and the end of the 15th century. If feature 54 represents a further grave, it must date to phase I or IIa. The disrespect of each grave for its predecessor may imply intervals of time between each interment long enough to remove all trace of previous occupancy. The light character of the fill in VI, resulting in the subsidence of some of the 16th-century paving, indicates that little time had elapsed between burial and paving.

THE COFFINS (fig 11)

Grave II, layer 35

85 Only the lower part of the coffin remained as wood; left side as a carbon trace in the section. Inside face less rounded than outer (lower) face: no form of attachment was observed for side planking. Probably hollowed from a single trunk. Width 0·20 m. Length (incomplete) 1·29 m. Maximum thickness 0·54 m.

Grave III, layer 36

86 This coffin was almost complete and of six-piece box construction: comprising of a top and bottom, two sides and two ends, each a single plank. The top survived for most of its length, except where cut by layer 17. Most of the right side had disappeared, but left side stood 0·25 m high. The ends, though very poorly preserved, were located. The bottom board (fig 11, no. 86) was complete, and tapered in width from 0·45 m at the head to 0·39 m at the feet. Nail holes perforated the edges at 70 mm intervals, corresponding with similar holes up the surviving left side.

Grave IV (layer 25; fig 6, section g–h; fig 10)

This grave lay above grave II and was filled with sticky light brown soil, pebbles and lumps of rock. The E end had been cut by a modern land drain. No coffin was found, but most of the surviving bones could be recorded despite their poor condition (Appendix 2). The head lay to the W: the left side of the skull and rib-cage had been removed by grave V. The skeleton lay immediately above a fragment of grave-slab which had been incorporated in the grave fill (see pl 16c).

Grave V (layer 27, fig 10)

Right up against the S side of St Columba's Shrine, this very disturbed grave was filled with sticky brown earth and stone. Most of the surviving bone was recovered, but the feet and lower legs only lay *in situ* (pl 16c). The rest of the body had been disturbed by grave VI and re-deposited against the Shrine wall. The E end had clipped the grave-slab in grave IV, chipping off fragments while removing some of the burial. Both feet overlay the grave slab.

Grave VI (layer 32, fig 10)

This grave was filled with dark brown earth, fine and light in places and far less compact than the earlier grave fills, leaving hollow gaps around the skull. It cut through grave V into natural sand, which produced a few late medieval potsherds (p 239). Iron coffin nails and a layer of black organic material above the bones suggest the presence of a coffin. Traces of skull at the W end and long bones at the E were found.

The lack of respect by these graves for each other, together with the superimposition of graves IV and V over II and III, emphasise the primacy of this area next to the Shrine for burial. All the graves were very shallow, and this may be explained by: (a) a greater depth of soil over the area when the graves were cut (indicated by the tower plinth, above that of the Shrine), and (b) the height of the water-table (0·10 m above the bottom of graves II and III).

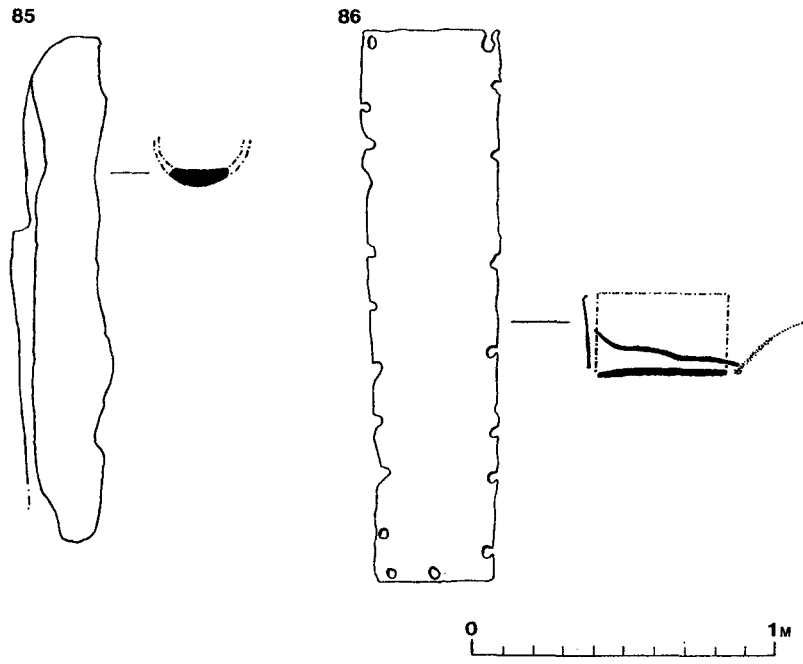

FIG 11 Iona Abbey: wooden coffins

DISCUSSION

One of the problems on this site, as with many other ecclesiastical sites, is chronology in the absence of finds, and it was associations of features with the surviving fabric of the Abbey that provided the basis for the above phasing.

The nature of the pre-Shrine remains, together with the patchwork of Celtic features from past excavations (Reece 1973) indicates that we were dealing with an important area of occupation within the monastic *vallum* around Tor Abb, the dominating rocky outcrop W of the Benedictine complex. The post-holes cannot be shown to belong to individual buildings, but they indicate activity in the area between AD 563 and *c* 1000. The western extension of the trench was intended to provide a section parallel to that produced in the 1956 excavations (fig 1, a-a), which indicated the presence of the Round Tower uncovered in 1908. Nothing was found, and the earlier reference may result from a misinterpretation of the post-medieval step-platform of similar dimensions. The 'Shrine' predated the tower, which supports the suggestion that it represents a free-standing chapel of Irish type, possibly dating to the 9th or 10th century and later incorporated into the Benedictine plan.

Architectural reassessment of the Benedictine buildings (RCAMS forthcoming) dates the original construction of the W end of the Abbey church to the late 12th/early 13th century, and the tower to the 15th century. At the latter period, the W wall of the nave was refaced externally,

and the W door inserted. This sequence agrees well with the archaeological evidence. The lower path was similar to the section of roadway uncovered by the Community in 1962 and called 'The Street of the Dead'. This 'Street' runs NE from the Reilig Odhrain towards the Abbey for 50 m, and then turns sharply N towards the Bakehouse excavated in 1968 (Reece 1973, 42). A projection of the alignment of the S section of the street runs towards the tower between Shrine and Church, and it seems likely that the paving uncovered in 1976 represents an E extension of this road from the Reilig Odhrain to a cloister entrance set in the gap between 'St Columba's 'Shrine' and the nave before the construction of the tower. The area was built up in the late 15th century, when the tower was erected and the W wall of the nave refaced. The late medieval paving is probably contemporary with this redevelopment, and the identification of similar paving in earlier excavations indicates that a large area around the W side of the Abbey was similarly treated. The last grave contained late 15th/early 16th-century pottery; burial presumably continued around the Shrine until the Reformation. At some point the well was inserted through the paving, and presumably continued to operate after sufficient soil accumulated over the slab to require steps. As early as 1688 the Shrine is described as a pile of stone, and so appears on the earliest photographs of the area (Wilson 1867; Ewing 1872, opp p 1). Much of the rubble appears to have originated from the enclosure wall which is neither illustrated nor described when complete, and therefore probably ceased to function at an early date. It is tempting to associate the erection of this wall with the 1635–8 Restoration, when the area continued to receive veneration, and the grave slabs required protection from grazing cattle and trampling feet.

The residual iron-age pottery, which may result from past antiquarian activity, did not compare with the material from Dun Bhuirg (*Med Archaeol*, III (1959), 301), the only recorded iron-age site on the island, but it does serve as a reminder of the little published pre-Columban settlement of Iona.

APPENDIX I

Identification of the wood from the coffins

by J M Sheldon, Dept of Human Environment, Institute of Archaeology, London

Although the wood from these coffins was very soft and spongy, Mr Noel Syers found it possible to cut microtome sections after consolidating with paraffin wax. Unfortunately, decay of parts of the structure of the wood resulted in the distortion or disappearance of some diagnostic features.

The earlier coffin from grave II, possibly a log-coffin, was reasonably well preserved and proved to be *Alnus* (alder). The perforation plates of the vessels had decayed in many cases but enough could be seen in the radial longitudinal section to show that they were closely spaced and quite unlike *Corylus* (hazel), which is very similar to alder in the arrangement of features in the transverse section.

The pieces of the plank coffin from grave III proved to be of various woods. The E end was unmistakably *Quercus* (deciduous oak), having the typical ring-porous arrangement of the vessels and large rays. The wood of the N side, lid and base was coniferous in all cases. Microbial degradation had resulted in the disappearance or collapse of the secondary walls in many of the cells, although the middle lamella connecting the cells and primary walls were still present. This makes the identification of the conifers tentative. The base was reasonably well preserved, and the presence of resin canals of typical *Pinus sylvestris* type, where the epithelial cells have either been torn away or collapsed into the canal because of their thin walls, makes this the most likely species. Although no resin canals are present on the transverse sections obtained from the N side, the longitudinal section has large fenestriform pits in the cross-fields, which again makes *Pinus sylvestris* the most likely species. The lid was more degraded than the other pieces, and resin canals again seemed to be rare or absent. The cross-field pitting in this case, however, appeared not to be fenestriform but smaller, and multiple pits occurred in each cross-field. Preservation was not good enough to be certain whether this was of *Picea* (spruce), *Abies* (fir) or *Larix* (larch) type. There was no sign of helical thickening so *Taxus* is not suggested.

APPENDIX 2

Human remains

by Calvin Wells, Castle Museum, Norwich

Four small collections of bone are described here. All were in very poor condition as a result of soil erosion and post-inhumation disturbance so that little can be said about them. The four groups comprise the following remains:

1 *Grave IV*

Male Adult

A few fragments of cranial vault, base and face. A broken maxilla shows the dental state to have been: 87600??? . Moderate attrition of the surviving teeth; no caries.

Post-cranial remains include a few small fragments of vertebrae one of which is an axis; pieces of rib and sternum. The heads and trochlear surfaces of both humeri; part of the L. ulna; fragments of the L. femoral condyles; a fragment from the distal end of the L. tibia, showing a small squatting facet; a few lengths of long bone shafts; several damaged carpal and tarsal elements; some fragments of metacarpals, metatarsals and phalanges. The long bones were moderately strongly built.

A separate fragment of mandible is present with this assemblage but it is uncertain whether it is part of the same skeleton. It shows that the following teeth are present in the jaw (roots only – the crowns have been broken off postmortem): 87564320 .

Separate damaged crowns of seven molars and a few other loose teeth are present. Attrition is slight to moderate and there is no evidence of caries.

A few small tori are present on the lingual surface of this fragment of bone and extend from the lateral incisor region to the posterior premolar.

Pathology A fragment of R. orbit in this inhumation shows a slight degree of criba orbitalia. There is a trace of osteoarthrosis on a lunate bone.

Animal remains A few fragments of animal bones, apparently of sheep and pig, are present here.

2 *Grave V*

At least two separate skeletons are represented in this assemblage:

(a) Male Adult
(b) Male? Adult

Two skeletons are identifiable from the duplication of various small fragments of bone, e.g. the distal ends of two L. humeri, and two L. tali

Mostly, however, it is impossible to partition these fragments with any assurance between the two individuals and the collection must be pooled. It contains: fragments of cranial vault, a few pieces of face and jaws showing the dental state as: $\frac{?0000???}{????078}$. Attrition is slight and caries is absent on the surviving teeth. Some tartar has formed on them. Three damaged loose teeth are also present.

Post-cranial remains include: scraps of vertebrae; a fragment of the L. ischium; a few pieces of long bone shafts from all long bones; a few carpal, metacarpal and phalangeal elements.

Pathology A length of the shaft of a L. tibia and a small fragment of fibula show evidence of periostitis.

Animal Remains A few fragments of pig, etc, are present here.

3 *Grave VI*

Unsexable Adult or adolescent

This assemblage consists only of three small scraps of cranial vault; one mandibular molar tooth with moderate attrition and no caries; two small post-cranial scraps.

4 *Grave II*

Unsexable A young child

This consists only of the damaged crowns of five deciduous incisors, three canines and four milk molars.

Summary

Little need be said about these remains. They include parts of three male adults, one unsexable adult or subadult, and one young child. Too little material survives to give any indication of their physical affinities. However, in view of the occurrence of mandibular torus in 100% of a group of skeletons from Martyrs' Bay, Iona (Wells forthcoming) it is interesting to observe the same anomaly in the only fragment of mandible where it would have been detectable here. Similarly, the Martyrs' Bay people had a 100% incidence of tibial squatting facets and the feature is present on the only observable fragment from this site. The relatively moderate dental attrition suggests that these persons lived on a fairly soft diet without much abrasive content. A largely fish diet might explain this. The long bones and muscle markings of grave IV were moderately sturdy, but there is insufficient evidence on which to base an estimate of stature for any of the skeletons. The mild degree of criba orbitalia noted in grave IV suggests an iron deficiency anaemia of some kind, perhaps from an inadequacy of iron salts in the drinking water or the soil of the region.

OTHER HUMAN BONE

Layer 50 Unsexable. Adult or adolescent Five tiny scraps of cranial vault.

Layer 21 Unsexable. Adult or possibly an adolescent. An isolated mandibular left second molar. Dental attrition light. No caries.

Layer 18 ??Male. Adult. Four small fragments of cranial vault, one of which shows a few millimetres of early sutural fusion. A small fragment of the left acetabulum and ischium. There is slight roughening of the ischial tuberosity which was probably due to strong muscular action.

Layer 7 Unsexable. Adult. A mandibular right lateral incisor. Dental attrition moderate. No caries.

Layer 5 Unsexable. Adult. One small fragment of cranial vault showing about 20 mm of unfused suture. A small fragment of maxilla showing: ???????0 | 0234????.

Layer 4 Unsexable. Adult. Two small fragments of cranial vault, one of which shows about 20 mm of fused suture (probably sagittal).

APPENDIX 3

Animal bones

by Amanda Saunders, Institute of Archaeology, London

The majority of the bones excavated represent food remains. All the bones are broken. Layers 1 and 3 (modern, unstratified) were not examined.

Numbers of identifiable bones per species per layer:

Layer	Cattle	Sheep	Pig	Horse	Red Deer	Dog	Bird	Fish
5	4	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
6	1	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
7	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
8	55	20	—	1	—	3	2	—
9	2	—	—	—	1	—	—	—
11	7	5	—	—	—	—	—	—
12	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
13	9	6	1	—	—	—	—	—
16b	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
22	4	4	—	—	—	—	—	—
24	3	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
28	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
29	5	1	1	—	—	—	—	—
30	6	7	—	—	—	—	—	2
56	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	—

Cattle bone fragments are most numerous, followed by sheep then pig, horse and red deer. A few dog bones were found. Many of the bones had been cut or showed cut marks on their surfaces. There was

little evidence for the age of any of the animals. Skull fragments were rare, but the other parts of the skeleton seemed to be equally represented. Wastage was probably minimal: all the meat-bearing bones would be used.

No pathology was observed: one sheep metatarsal from layer 8 was X-rayed because of a hole in its shaft, which proved the result of post-mortem damage.

While changes in eating habits cannot be expected to emerge from such a small number of bones, they do confirm a preference for beef and mutton rather than pork or venison (probably because pigs are more difficult to keep, and deer have to be caught).

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a General view from S, phase II b

b Graves IV and V with grave-slab

c S side of 'St Columba's Shrine'

d Junction of 'shrine' (left) and tower (right)