

## Excavations at Teampull Mholuaidh, Eoropie, Port of Ness, Lewis, 1977

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### INTRODUCTION

Teampull Mholuaidh (NGR NB 519652) stands 200 m N of the village of Eoropie near the northern tip of Lewis. Like the majority of the churches and chapels of the western Highlands it is essentially a simple single-celled building with no apparent division between the nave and choir though the presence of putlog holes on the insides of the N and S walls may indicate that a wooden screen served the latter function. The church is unique in that the choir is flanked on the N by a small sacristy and on the S by a small chapel (fig 1). The E walls of both annexes are continuous with the E wall of the main building. The architectural detail is described in the Royal Commission's Inventory (RCAMS 1928, 2-3), where the splayed plinth which runs along the W wall, turning the SW corner, and also occurs on the E wall is described as 'modern' and ascribed, by implication, to the major reconstruction of the church in 1912. Photographs of the site before the reconstruction indicate that this plinth, though heavily restored, was in existence then.

### EXCAVATION

The church is tightly enclosed by a stone wall which runs within 1 m of the N and S annexes and is never more than 4 m from the walls of the nave. In 1977 the current owners, the Episcopalian Church of Scotland, proposed to lay a drain round the church in the space between it and the surrounding wall. Since this would isolate the church from its surrounding contexts the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments arranged for the excavation of sections running out from

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the church to record the existing stratification. This work was carried out by the Central Excavation Unit in November 1977.

The excavated areas (fig 1) were necessarily small to avoid damage to the foundations of the building. They revealed that the church had been built on to the undisturbed clay of the area without formal foundations. The lower courses of the walls were slightly battered (projecting outwards 15 cm and 25–50 cm high). Excavation showed that the plinth along the E and W walls was, as the pre-1912 photographs suggested, an original feature of the building. Its great size

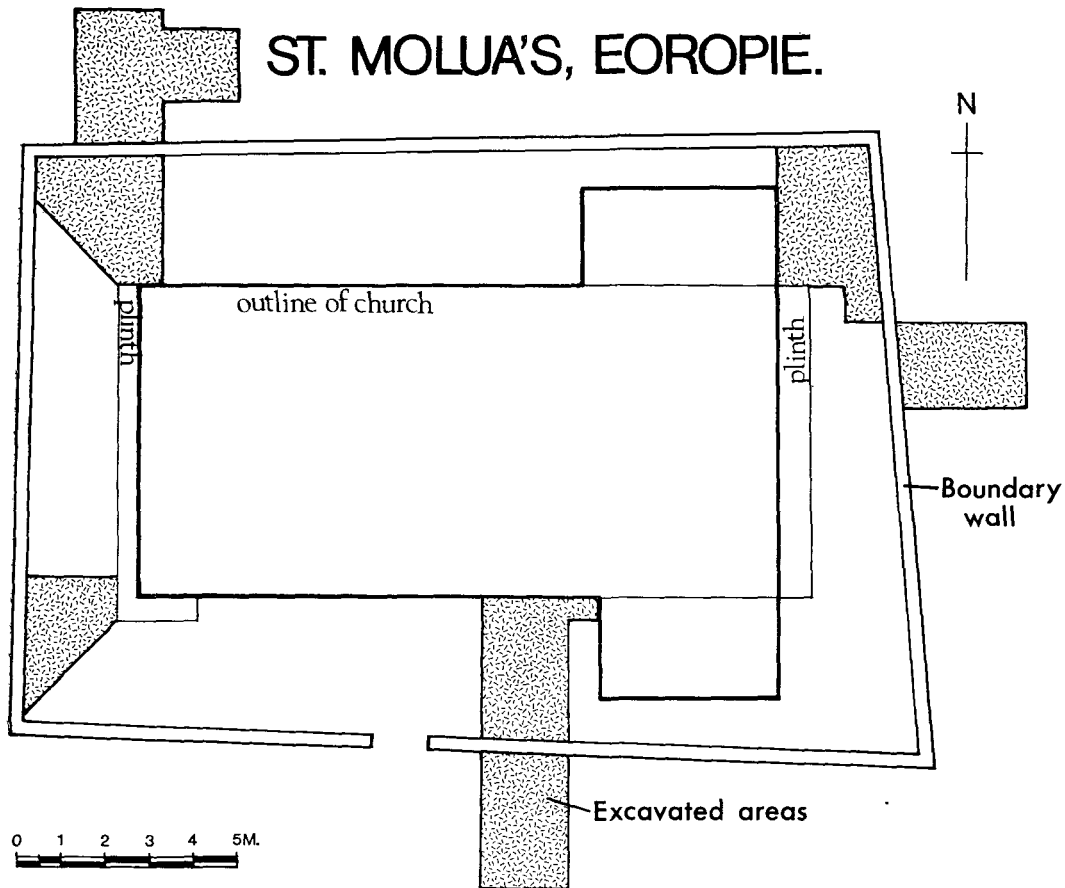


FIG 1 Plan of Teampull Mholuaidh showing excavated areas

(projecting outwards 1 m and 1.5 m high) may reflect the builders' desire to spread the greater loading of the gable walls over a wider area to prevent subsidence into the clay beds beneath.

Three phases of earlier drainage are represented in the excavated sections. The earliest of these is a culverted drain of generally 'medieval' type which was found outside the enclosing wall at the NW corner and again on the E and inside the wall on the S side just W of the chapel door. This is cut by rubble drains in both the NW and E exposures and in the latter the rubble drain has been re-cut at least once. Finally a salt-glaze drainpipe had been inserted probably in 1912 though no record of this survives. The culverted drain on the S side survives mainly as a row of bottom slabs but in the E face of the cutting the side slabs and capping flags survive

though pushed to one side and crushed together. These suggest that the soil levels surrounding the church have been greatly reduced since its construction. Hence, as the church had already been isolated from its surrounding levels, the original function of the excavation was negated. On the positive side it is clear from the excavation that the church as it now stands is complete and a single period monument.

## DISCUSSION

Teampull Mholuaidh has been dated to the 14th century by the RCAMS (1928, 3). No reason for this dating has been given and Simpson (1961, 7) argues that it is incorrect. He points to the simple 12th-century Norse churches, like that at Gardar in Greenland, as comparable monuments. However the side chapels at Gardar have been shown by excavation to be 13th-century additions to a 12th-century structure. On the basis of the surviving architectural features Teampull Mholuaidh could, therefore date to the 12th century but the simple forms of these features preclude their close dating. The battered plinth along the gable walls finds a ready parallel on the N wall of the nave of St Clement's Church at Rodel in Harris as well as at the small church at Kirkibost, Bernera and may well represent a local Hebridean tradition. Whilst there is no direct evidence to support it the possibility that Teampull Mholuaidh was, like St Clement's, built in the 16th century cannot be ruled out.

The dedication of the church to Saint Molua is of some interest and possible relevance. O Rian (pers comm) has indicated the power and importance of saintly cults in the Celtic Early Christian church. That some of the 'saints' were pagan Celtic gods or goddesses, as was St Brigit, one of Ireland's most important saints, does not seem to have presented any difficulties. The name Molua consists of the honorific prefix 'Mo' and the proper name 'Lua' derived from 'Lug' probably the best known of the Gods of the Celtic hierarchy. Molua's cult in Ireland seems to have originally centred on the area of the present counties of Limerick, North Cork and South Tipperary. By the 12th century, when the extant latin *vita* of the saint was written, dedications to his name were widespread with many in NE Ulster. The Scottish dedications (Forbes 1872, 409-11) may well date to this period also. They are concentrated along the western seaboard and in the area round Aberdeen which, latter, seems to have been a strong centre of the Saint's cult. The dedication clearly cannot be taken as an indication of the date of the present structure.

The contents of the church include many antiquities but these have little bearing on this discussion since, following the rebuilding of the church in 1912, a variety of furnishings were gathered together which ' . . . would blend with the old church, and help to trick us into the belief that it had never fallen into disuse' (Meaden 1912, 171). These furnishings include a stone font removed from the 'House of the Blessings' on the Flannan Isles, presumably the chapel on Eilean Mor. A red sandstone slab with a deep cup-like depression in one face came from a beehive shaped hut, also on the Flannans. The most interesting of the objects looted from the Flannans is the small stone cross, just 1 m high and pierced with three holes at the crossing of the arms.

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Dr R Fawcett and Mr I Maxwell, both of SDD (Ancient Monuments Branch), initiated this excavation and provided the basic information on the church, for this and for their interest and encouragement I am most grateful. Dr D J Breeze handled much of the detailed organisation of the excavation; he also read the typescript and, as ever, provided much useful comment and

assistance. Miss Aine Nic Dhomhnaill of Ness brought the pre-1912 photographs to my attention, with the consent of their owner, Mrs H McCleod of Edgemoor St, Port of Ness. Copies of these have now been lodged with the NMR.

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