

## Iona: a view from Ireland

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The archaeology of islands exercises a particular fascination, and when the island is a 'cradle of Christianity', like Iona, the fascination is irresistible. The Royal Commission's decision to devote a whole *Inventory* volume to an island measuring only 5.5 by 2.5 km is amply justified by the wealth of material remains as well as Iona's historical importance. Though remote to modern eyes, it is a mistake to see the island as 'peripheral'. In the Early Christian period it was a meeting-place of many traditions, easy of access by sea, very close to Pictland and Ireland and not far from Northumbria. In the middle ages the abbey was patronized by the Lords of the Isles, who were buried in Reilig Odhráin. It was a focus for pilgrims to the 16th century, and from the 18th century acted as a magnet for travellers including Dr Johnson, Sir Walter Scott, John Keats, William Wordsworth and Felix Mendelssohn.

Iona's long and complicated history has produced a rich archaeological heritage, but also some of the problems which emerge from the inventory volume and two recent excavation reports.<sup>1</sup> The monastic occupation must have left an enormously complicated buried record over a large area. Liam de Paor's extensive excavations on the island monastery of Iniscealtra in Lough Derg (Co Clare) have uncovered evidence for centuries of pilgrimage as well as a complicated sequence of medieval and Early Christian period features. The buried remains of Iona have attracted several excavators over the past 30 years: Charles Thomas from 1956 onwards, Richard Reece from 1964 to 1974 and John Barber in 1979. Reece found an 18th-century ha-ha, built to exclude cattle from the abbey, running across the old guest-house, and Barber encountered the infilled trenches of earlier excavators. Iona has had its own pressures from 'development', through the extensive restoration of ruins and the provision of facilities. A reminder of this continuing pressure is a reference to a fire-door inserted since the Commission plan was drawn! It is clear that earlier work was not always well recorded, or that records have not survived. Some restoration has obscured evidence and earlier attempts to repair St John's Cross have damaged it. At the end of the 19th century distinguished scholars, like Baldwin Brown and Romilly Allen, argued against plans for restoration, and it is interesting to note that considerable acrimony has been aroused recently over the 'restoration' of Holycross Abbey in Co Tipperary (eg Stalley 1987, 246).

It is time to turn from the problems, however, and look at the archaeological and architectural riches of Iona. The emphasis of the inventory volume is properly on the monastic area, but the prehistoric and post-medieval features and buildings are also described. John Barber's 1979 excavation allowed him to make a confident statement about prehistoric activity: 'the raised beach has almost certainly been cultivated, if not continuously, then at least frequently throughout the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages' (Barber 1981, 355). One question which remains for further investigation is the state of the area which became the monastery when St Columba arrived in

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563. The range of radiocarbon dates available from the two reports tends to strengthen the case for occupation of the area before the mid sixth century (*ibid*, 367–8).

The period from Columba's arrival to the Viking raids around 800 is represented by earthwork enclosures, excavated features and finds, and a rich collection of carved stones. The enclosures are clearly complex: in addition to the visible earthworks, some of them still very impressive, others are indicated by cropmarks and geophysical survey. The general impression is of a rectilinear circuit, open or differently enclosed towards the sea, a pattern found at many coastal or riverine ecclesiastical sites in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> The radiocarbon dates for one ditch (No 2) excavated by John Barber near St Oran's Chapel would allow a 'Columban' date for its digging, but for such a long-occupied settlement the task must obviously be to unravel the whole history of enclosure and drainage rather than to locate *the vallum* (Barber 1981, 355–7).

The most exciting feature of another excavated ditch (No 1) was the organic material, well preserved in the waterlogged peaty fill. The animal bones indicated a preponderance of cattle (as did the earlier excavations), but also an interesting and varied range of wild animals including deer, seal and otter. There were leather shoes and wooden objects including turned bowls and the waste material from their manufacture. Pottery was sparse, but this is not surprising as pottery was lacking over much of Ireland in the Early Christian period. It is clear that vessels of wood, leather and basketry must have been used, and the Iona bowls add substance to this picture. The very important settlement mound at Deer Park Farms in Glenarm, Co Antrim, extensively excavated between 1984 and 1987, has produced a rich range of organic materials from the lowest, waterlogged, layers. These include shoes and a wooden last, perfectly preserved, clearly for the left foot (Barber suggested that the Iona shoes were made on a last, but could not detect left and right shoes). These finds may be a little later than the suggested date-range for the Iona lower peat layer – 585 to 618 – but the Deer Park occupation seems to go back into the sixth century. It is surprising to read Barber's claim that 'circular timber structures of the Early Christian period are virtually unknown from excavations' (1981, 358). This may be true of buildings with individually-set, spaced posts, but wattle-built circular structures are well attested by excavation in Ireland, including remains of over 30 in the Deer Park Farms mound spanning several centuries from the sixth century onwards.<sup>3</sup>

Iona has one of the richest collections of Early Christian period carved stones in Britain or Ireland and over a hundred are described in the Commission inventory. It is a major contribution to the study of this material to have such a careful and detailed record, embracing the simple as well as the more elaborate pieces. The stones are illustrated with great sensitivity, using a mixture of measured drawings, rubbings and photographs. The dates and circumstances of the finding of some of the stones show the value of the concentrated research required for an inventory: for example, important fragments of decorated posts for stone shrines were found in 1974 and 1976, in stone piles and in a search of the material in Reilig Odhráin (RCAMS 1982, 216–17).

Awaited with special eagerness was the record of Iona's early free-standing crosses, numbering 14 in whole or part. Apart from the disappointingly small photographic cover of St John's and St Matthew's crosses, the record is magnificent, combining drawings and photographs of whole crosses and details, and diagrams of the elements of the composite crosses. R B K Stevenson pointed out the importance of the jointed crosses on Iona in 1956,<sup>4</sup> and the inventory has gathered all the pieces and suggested how the crosses fitted together. St Oran's, the earlier, is simpler than St John's, made up of three pieces (shaft, arms and top member). The 'armpits' are hollowed but the limbs are straight-sided, unlike St John's with its double-curved outline but like most Irish crosses in this respect. St John's Cross was more complicated, with nine separate pieces making up its ringed form. The span of the arms is very wide and the suggestion that the ring was an addition to support the arms, perhaps after a fall, is convincing. Crosses must always have been vulnerable to wind damage. A 15th-century

free-standing cross on an exposed hillslope on Devenish in Co Fermanagh has slots in its shaft and base, clearly designed to hold wooden supporting struts.

Both the jointing and the slab-like proportions of these two early crosses support the inventory's suggestion that they are experimental works with their origins in carpentry, whether the models were free-standing wooden crosses or smaller wooden crosses covered with metal plates. Wooden crosses are attested in written sources in Britain and Ireland in the seventh century, and this must be one element in the development of stone crosses in the eighth century. Iona was so clearly a centre of varied cultural influences in the seventh and eighth centuries that I can see it in the rôles of both receiver and giver: receiving knowledge of working stone from Northumbria, Irish traditions of woodworking, artistic inspiration from Pictland, and in turn contributing the idea of free-standing stone crosses to Ireland.<sup>5</sup> There is little support now for Françoise Henry's suggested evolutionary sequence of Irish high crosses from slabs, through the slab-like crosses of Inishowen in Co Donegal, to the earliest ringed crosses.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that Ireland received a new artistic impulse in the eighth century, and whilst some features of the Ossory group of crosses, like Ahenny, are clearly derived from Irish metalworking, others could be derived from Iona (Edwards 1983). If the Commission's suggested mid to later eighth-century dates for the earliest Iona crosses are right, it would be reasonable to see the Irish series starting in the late eighth century.

Once introduced into Ireland, the free-standing stone cross was developed in distinctively Irish ways, the craftsmen calling on their own traditions of decoration, scholarship and liturgy as well as further influences from overseas. Irish figure-carving suggests that the west fact of St Martin's Cross, at lower left, could show Cain striking Abel, as on the Tower Cross at Kells or the cross at Donaghmore (Tyrone), though the two figures to the right are certainly not Adam and Eve (Roe 1966, 12–13)! A most interesting find from the Dublin excavations suggests that wooden crosses probably went on being made into the 10th and 11th centuries. This was a decorated wooden boss, of an appropriate size to decorate the crossing of a wooden cross (Wallace *in* Bradley 1984, 118, 123).

With the savage Viking raids on Iona in the years around 800 and the move to Kells in 807, the importance of the monastery must have declined, but activity certainly continued. One broken cross or slab shows distinctively Scandinavian-style decoration, and other carved stones span the ninth to 11th centuries. The small rectangular structure at the north-west angle of the Cathedral nave, known as St Columba's Shrine, is also likely to date from this period. With its short (3:2) proportions, west door and projecting *antae* it is certainly very like the small stone churches in Ireland datable in general to the 10th and 11th centuries and shown in several cases by excavation to have succeeded structures of wood or mixed wood and stone (Harbison 1982; Hamlin 1984). The retention of this small and simple building through all later construction work, as well as the proximity of two early crosses, lend support to the tradition that this was St Columba's burial place. It is possible to point to many similarly small churches in Ireland which are traditionally held to be the founder's burial place, or to be strongly associated with the founder, including St Declan's House at Ardmore (Waterford), St Ciaran's Church at Clonmacnois, St Diarmuid's on Inchcleraun (Longford), St Molaise's House on Inishmurray (Sligo) and the 'House' of another Molaise on Devenish (Fermanagh) (Harbison 1975). The low foundations of the Iona structure were built-up to create the present small chapel as recently as 1962.

A new period of intense activity on the island began shortly before 1200 with the foundation of the Benedictine Abbey and the priory of Augustinian canonesses, well south of the main ecclesiastical nucleus. The physical separation of the women's house, the exclusion of women's burials from the ancient graveyard, Reilig Odhráin, and the excavation by Richard Reece of a cemetery mainly consisting of women's burials at Martyr's Bay (1981, 63–102), point to a strict separation of the sexes in death as well as life, a subject I have looked at in Ireland (Hamlin & Foley 1983).

For both of these major building projects the Commission volume suggests that Irish masons were used. The link by marriage between the probable founder of the Abbey and John de Courcy, who invaded Ulster in 1177, is interesting in this connection. John de Courcy was an energetic founder of religious houses in Ulster, as well as a builder of castles, and it is certainly possible to point to features shared by the Abbey and Nunnery on Iona and some of de Courcy's Ulster foundations. In both Iona churches the late 12th/early 13th-century clerestory windows are placed not above the arches of the arcade but above the piers, so allowing for a lower roof. This practice is well documented in Irish Cistercian churches (Stalley 1987, 87), but recent recording during plaster-stripping in Down Cathedral has shown blocked windows in this position.<sup>7</sup> John de Courcy refounded the ancient church at Downpatrick as a Benedictine abbey, and it is interesting to note that when the grave of St Patrick was conveniently found at Down in 1185, it was a triple grave with the remains also of Brigid and Columba.<sup>8</sup> At John de Courcy's Cistercian abbeys of the late 12th and early 13th centuries, Grey and Inch, also in Co Down, there are stepped string courses and (at Grey) decorative use of nail-head on the west door, very like work of this period on Iona.<sup>9</sup>

It is also likely that there was continuing contact between Iona and mid and west Ulster throughout the middle ages. The continuous roll mouldings found in the Nunnery church can be paralleled at Banagher in Co Londonderry, and two carved capitals on the angles of the chancel (of just after 1200) would not be out of place among work of this period in Iona Cathedral (Waterman 1976). The Royal Commission's 1977 volume on the later carved monuments of the Western Highlands discussed two families of masons of Irish descent, the Ó Broilcháns and the Ó Cuinns, who were working on Iona in the 15th century (Steer & Bannerman 1977, 105–9). The Ó Broilchán family was important in Derry in the 12th century, and members of the family are known to have been masons and churchmen in later centuries, including Donald Ó Broilchán who signed his work in the crossing of Iona Abbey church in the mid 15th century. There must have been constant contact between Iona and Ulster in the middle ages, as during the Early Christian period, perhaps especially with the diocese of Derry, and it is difficult not to see Iona influence in the grand 15th-century tomb of Coeey na Gall at Dungiven, though the flamboyant openwork canopy may owe more to Connacht than to Argyll (*ibid*, 43, pl 17E; Lynn 1987).

The volume of excavation reports by Richard Reece includes several pieces of work done in conjunction with the Royal Commission's survey to elucidate the architectural development of the Abbey church, including a grand south transept, started but never finished. The 1981 monograph as a whole, however, is an odd volume, with inconsistencies in plans and sections and little attempt to set the results into the broader historical context. A less substantial report than a monograph might have been more appropriate. John Barber's work with the Central Excavation Unit, on the other hand, published promptly and in detail, does include a valuable discussion of how the results *could* relate to the historical background, without claiming to have established any archaeological 'truth'. His results allow him to do what all excavators must try to do – to put flesh on the bare bones – and I think it is worth quoting part of his pen-portrait of the early monastery,

'nestling behind the massive shrub-covered *vallum* . . . huts of wattle and daub and larger wooden buildings including possibly churches of frame-built construction. The monastics . . . some of them well shod and others in soleless stockings, pursued their various activities: some of them in the wood-turner's shop, others tanning leather and making shoes, yet others engaged in metal- and glass-working. . . . Outside the *vallum* fields of cereals were under cultivation to provide food and drink, in supplement to the dairy products, meat and fish of their diet' (Barber 1981, 366).

Any further excavation must surely be done within a carefully-framed research strategy, even if it is done for rescue reasons, and the basis for such a strategy is now available in the Commission inventory.

The Iona volume is thoroughly researched, clearly written and thoughtfully set out. The very full apparatus of notes and references shows how meticulous the research has been. The illustrations are of the Commission's accustomed high standard, and a particularly valuable feature is the inclusion of so many old views, often printed side-by-side with a recent picture. The day of such detailed inventories is passing, and we must be glad and grateful that Iona has received such full and worthy treatment.

Finally, in apologising to the editor and readers of these *Proceedings* for the very late appearance of this review, perhaps I can also pay a further tribute to the Iona volume by pointing out how many publications have already made good use of its riches. No inventory can or should be a last word: it should be a starting-point for new work, and it is clear that the Iona volume has already significantly advanced and stimulated the study of Christian art and archaeology in Britain and Ireland.<sup>10</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, 1982, *Argyll*, vol 4, *Iona: an inventory of the monuments*. Edinburgh. (Pp xvi+296, numerous – unnumbered – figs and pls and seven folding plans. HMSO. Price £45.)  
Reece, R 1981 *Excavations in Iona 1964 to 1974*. London. (= *Inst Archaeol Univ London Occas Publ*, 5. Price £6.)  
Barber, J W 'Excavations on Iona, 1979' *Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 111 (1981), 282–380. (Hereafter RCAMS 1982; Reece 1981; Barber 1981.)
- 2 Examples in Northern Ireland include Inch (Down) and Devenish and White Island (Fermanagh).
- 3 There is a preliminary report on Deer Park Farms by Chris Lynn in *Archaeology Ireland*, 1 (September 1987), 11–15.
- 4 In *J Roy Soc Antiq Ir*, 86 (1956), 84–96.
- 5 I have touched on this in 'The archaeology of the Irish church in the eighth century', *Peritia*, 4 (1985), 292–3.
- 6 F Henry, *Irish Art in the Early Christian period (to 800 AD)* (1965), chap 6; Hamlin 1985 as note 5; N Edwards, 'The origins of the free-standing stone cross in Ireland: imitation or innovation?', *Bull Board Celtic Stud*, 32 (1985), 393–410; P Harbison, 'A group of Early Christian carved stone monuments in County Donegal', in J Higgitt (ed), 1986, *Early Medieval Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, Oxford, 49–85 (= *Brit Archaeol Rep*, 152).
- 7 Preliminary report by N F Brannon in *Lecale Miscellany*, 5 (1987), 3–9.
- 8 Giraldus Cambrensis, *Expugnatio Hiberniae*, A B Scott and F X Martin (eds) (1978), 235, 353.
- 9 *An Archaeological Survey of County Down* (HMSO, 1966), for John de Courcy's foundations. Influences from the mother-houses in north-west England are likely.
- 10 For example, N Edwards, 'The south cross at Clonmacnois', in J Higgitt (ed), 1986, *Early Medieval Sculpture in Britain*, Oxford, 23–36 (= *Brit Archaeol Rep*, 152); G Henderson, *From Durrow to Kells: the Insular Gospel Books* (1987); Isabel Henderson, 'The Book of Kells and the snake-boss motif on Pictish cross-slabs and the Iona crosses', in M Ryan (ed), *Ireland and Insular Art AD 500–1200* (RIA, 1987), 56–65; L de Paor, 'The high crosses of Tech Theille (Tihilly) and Kinnitty and related sculpture', in E Rynne (ed), *Figures from the Past* (1987), 131–58.

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