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Early Ecclesiastical Sites in Scotland: a Field Survey, Part I

by A. D. S. Macdonald and Lloyd R. Laing

INTRODUCTION

To begin a programme of scheduling Early Christian sites throughout Scotland, the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments in 1967 visited a number of sites, chiefly in Caithness and Shetland. Likely sites were selected for examination because descriptions, records of finds or documentary or topographical evidence suggested that they belonged originally to the period extending from the sixth to the eleventh century. Dedications were not taken into account here because of their very dubious significance. The sources of this preliminary information are given below for each site. Other sources will indicate other sites for future investigation.

Visits were necessarily brief. It is possible therefore that in some cases features were missed or misinterpreted. And it is likely in many cases that the visible remains are medieval rather than Dark Age; even, once or twice, later and non-ecclesiastical. The accompanying drawings are merely field sketches.

For a full account of the sites in Caithness and Shetland the appropriate Royal Commission *Inventory* should be referred to in most cases. Where such an account is available we have merely noted additional features or points of disagreement. We have also noted any other relevant information that has come to our attention, and have made our own observations where these seem reasonable on the available evidence.

Titles are usually those which appear on the O.S. 6-in. sheets.

Abbreviations

ONB	*Ordnance Survey Name Book*
Macfarlane	*Walter Macfarlane: Geographical collections relating to Scotland*, ed. Sir A. Mitchell, Scottish History Society, 3 vols., Edinburgh 1906–8
NSA	*New Statistical Account* (1845)

CAITHNESS

1 *Chapel and graveyard (site of), Ballachly, Dunbeath* (fig. 1). ND 156303.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 312.

Ruined wall on E. returns westward just inside modern field wall which borders farm track. On top of ridge are indeterminate remains of stone building (see below). Dark lines in light hay crop within enclosure may have represented other structures. O.S. informs us that massive S. wall returns northwards under modern field wall on W. side. We did not notice this. All four sides of an enclosure would thus be accounted for.

ONB (1872): greater part of site swept away by flooding of Burn of Houstry. Portion still

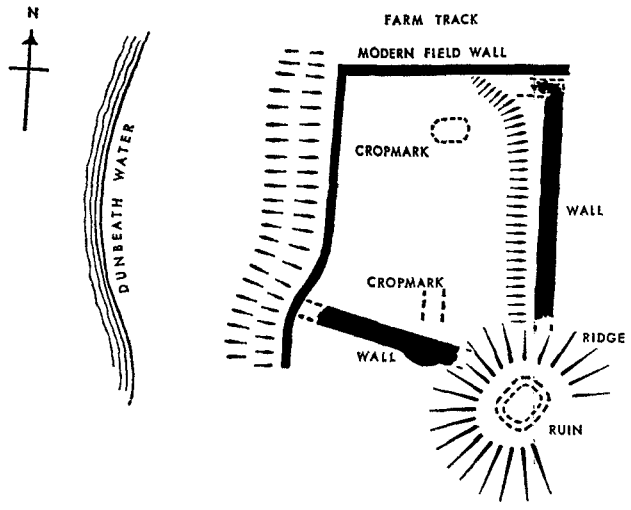


FIG. 1. Ballachly, Dunbeath, Caithness

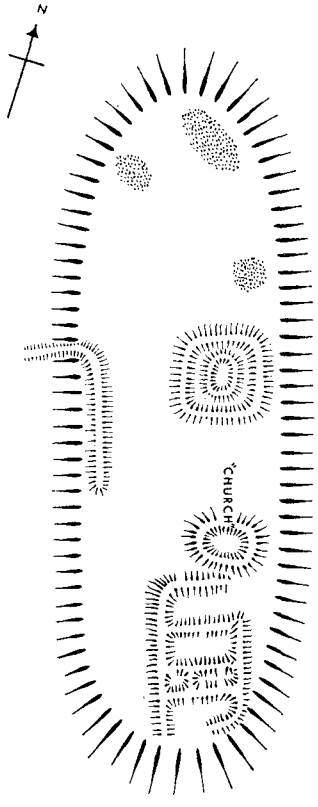


FIG. 2. 'Kirk o' Moss', Moss of Kilmster, Caithness

visible in eighteenth century completely destroyed by cultivation. A 'priest's house' was believed to have been on rising ground above confluence of Burn of Houstry and Dunbeath Water. This might be building on ridge. A writer in *Macfarlane* (1726) mentions a chapel at Balclay on the Dunbeath Water but knows nothing about it.

Associated perhaps with St Triduana: there was apparently Croit Trolla nearby. Rev. D. Beaton, *Eccl. Hist. of Caithness*, 63.

This seems to be an Early Christian monastery, whose church continued in use until later medieval times.

2 *'Kirk o' Moss'. Moss of Kilmster* (fig. 2). ND 292563.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 592.

Low bank runs along part of W. edge of ridge, and links up with possibly modern banks in bog.

NSA: situated on piece of ground 12 acres in extent, formerly cultivated, and approached by causeway through bog, of which traces were still distinctly visible.

This is possibly a small Early Christian monastery with a history continuing into later medieval times.

3 *St John's Chapel (site of), St John's Point, Canisbay* (fig. 3). ND 310750.

RCAMS, *Caitnness*, No. 40 (promontory fort).
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 56 (chapel site).

Turf-covered footings of two (?) small buildings on inner slope of rampart at E. end; larger approximately 24 ft. by 12 ft., exterior flush with present ground level and obscure; smaller

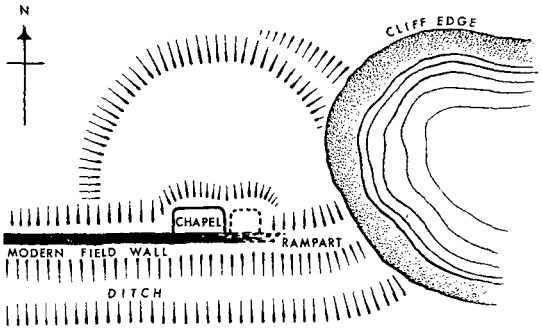


FIG. 3. St John's Point, Canisbay, Caithness

completely turf-covered and flush with present ground level, probably about 12 ft. by 12 ft. Long axis of larger E.–W. To N. is a mounded area, roughly 40 yds. by 40 yds., running from rampart of fort to cliff-edge on NE. in pronounced curve. NE. sector seems artificially scarped, rest probably a natural slope.

Part of cross-slab was found in W. end of 'chapel' in 1919, see *PSAS*, LVI (1921–2), 66–67 and fig.

4 *'Creagan a' Bheannaich', Shurrery* (fig. 4). ND 040578.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 409.

Turf-covered mound, about 5 ft. high and about 22 yds. N.–S. by 32 yds. E.–W., strewn with earthfast boulders, some massive, and a few orthostats. No sign of an enclosure wall. On the top a small building, 22 ft. N.–S. by 17 ft. E.–W., with rounded corners. Walls appear as turf-covered footings of large boulders, about 2 ft. thick. Possible entrance in E. side of S. wall. There is a heap of stones and boulders inside at N. end: possibly an altar platform, though not against wall. Other earthfast boulders all over interior. Indications of other small structures on mound.

Macfarlane (I, 185) refers to a chapel in Shurrery 'called Bheanauchan which seems to be St Benedicts . . .', but this dedication has probably been inferred from 'Beannachd', 'benediction' or 'blessing', and so has no real authority.

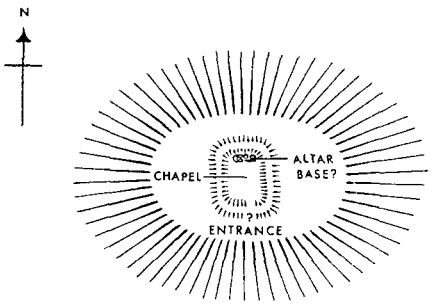


FIG. 4. 'Creagan a' Bheannaich', Shurrery, Caithness

For stone with cross and symbol found near here, see RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 406.
These look like the remains of a very early church and associated remains.

5 *The 'Clow', Scouthall* (fig. 5). ND 233524.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 460.

Doorways no longer discernible in ruins of chapel. Walls of enclosure and other buildings are low, turf-covered ridges 1 ft. to 2 ft. high, with actual footings visible in places.

ONB: now no trace of graveyard, but Scouthal Burn said to disclose occasionally stones and bones belonging to it. Site apparently abandoned altogether by 1770.

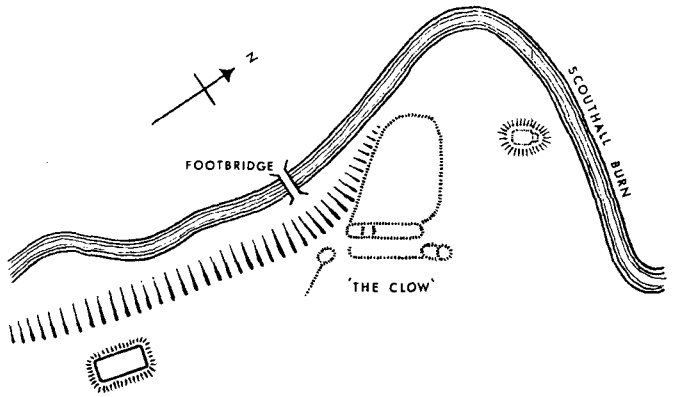


FIG. 5. The 'Clow', Scouthall, Caithness

Dedicated perhaps to St Mary: St Mary's well was on opposite side of burn; Toftmary Burn nearby.

There is no definite connection between enclosure and associated buildings, and church. Their nature is unknown, but they look like the remains of an old steading. 'Clow': meaning uncertain; 'Clea' in 1726 (*Macfarlane*).

To SW. at ND 231523 are remains of broch known as 'Carn a' Chladha', 'the Cairn of the Graveyard'.

6 *'Kirk o' Banks', Rattar, Dunnet.* ND 253739.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 81.

Small church with chancel, approximately 49 ft. by 28 ft. overall (over spread of banks). Walls appear as turf-covered banks, 2 to 3 ft. high; some stones protrude. It forms NW. corner of small, irregularly shaped enclosure whose walls appear as low, turf-covered banks 1 ft. to 1 ft. 6 in. high, from which a few stones protrude.

Viking silver hoard was found near church, see RCAMS, loc. cit.

7 *St Thomas' Church, Skinnet.* ND 131620.
RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 91.

Church on natural knoll, much overgrown at time of visit. Rectangular enclosure defined by trees on S. and W., by wall on N. and by old steading on E.

Cross-slab on S. side of Church: RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 93.

Another found here now in Thurso Museum (?): RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 445.

8 *Chapel (site of), Mid Clyth Graveyard.* ND 296372.

Nothing to note.

Cross-slab here: RCAMS, *Caithness*, No. 295. Possibly brought from elsewhere, although this does not seem to be recorded anywhere.

SHETLAND

1 *Chapel and Burial Ground (site of), Papil, Yell* (fig. 6). HP 542040.

At position marked on 6-in. O.S. sheet is the outline of small building and enclosure. Building 28 ft. N.–S. by 17 ft. E.–W. N., S. and W. walls appear as turf-covered ridges, about 1 ft.

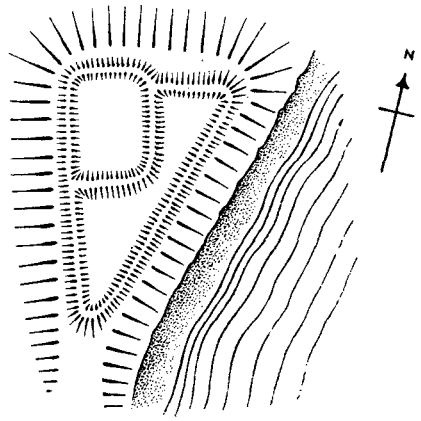


FIG. 6. Papil, Yell, Shetland

high; E. wall as turf-covered footings. Enclosure walls as turf-covered ridges 1 ft. to 1 ft. 6 in. high, with much stone visible on E. side; lengths of sides, excluding building, are: N. side 19 ft.; E. side 60 ft.; W. side 35 ft. Site lies on slight natural ridge above beach.

Dedication: St Ninian, according to Irvine, *Shetland Historical Collections*, II (unpaginated), (RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1734).

A difficult site to assess, as remains merged with contours of natural ridge; thus our distinction between natural and artificial may be somewhat arbitrary. The place-name element 'pap-' occurs frequently in Orkney and Shetland; there is a useful brief discussion in *The Northern Isles* (F. T. Wainwright, ed.), 99–101.

2 *Monastery (site of), 'Chapel Knowe', Lunna, Nesting Ph., Mainland* (fig. 7). HU 485691. RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1280.

Enclosure approximately 40 yds. in diameter, over spread of ramparts. These average about 4 ft. in height where preserved: width not ascertainable. Some stone in places. 'Entrance' on ENE., 21 ft. wide. Walls of church appear as turf-covered footings; entrance, 3 ft. wide, in middle of W. wall. Outline of a second building visible against outside of rampart to S.: approximately 55 ft. by 11 ft. 6 in. overall, as discernible; but W. end uncertain. E. end appears to be apsidal, with cross-wall 8 ft. from its outer side. Walls appear as turf-covered ridges, about 1 ft. high, with some stonework at E. end. Possibly other structures within and on perimeter of enclosure, but these may be natural features.

A very difficult site to assess. Ground very uneven, with numerous rock outcrops: very hard

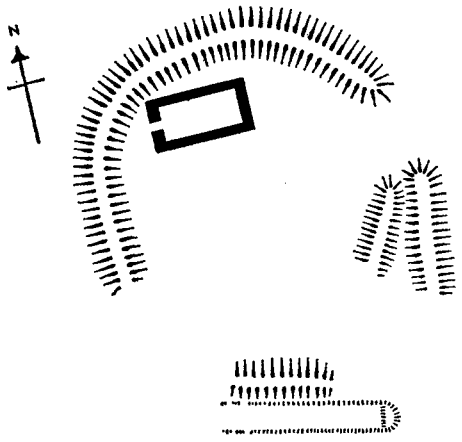


FIG. 7. Lunna, Nesting, Mainland, Shetland

to decide what might be artificial and what natural. We only recorded what seemed reasonably certain, and thus omitted Muir's 'burgh' and concluded that RCAMS N.–S. division wall and hollowing of E. half of enclosure were probably natural. Extent of our disagreement with RCAMS account a fair indication of difficulty of this site. Much, however, may have disappeared in last 30–40 years.

'Monastery': doubtful.

3 *Papil, West Burra* (fig. 8). HU 368315.

Modern graveyard wall is built on bank of an earlier enclosure, of which almost entire perimeter still traceable inside graveyard, with traces outside. This bank is 3 ft. high on average inside graveyard, and spreads out to 10 or 12 ft. from modern wall. It is visible along most of outside of S. wall as platform about 1 ft. high and 10 ft. wide. On inner S. slope we found sherd of late Norse pottery. Shell of derelict church stands on mounded area particularly distinctive at E. end. Apparently foundations of an earlier church visible under floor, but we did not see these. (Shell 59 ft. E.–W. by 25 ft. 6 in. N.–S.)

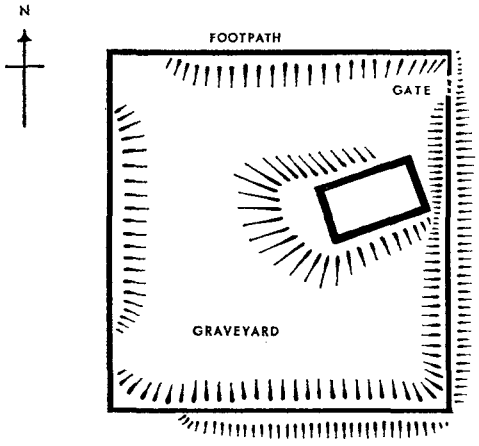


FIG. 8. Papil, West Burra, Shetland

For Papil Stone, second cross-slab and St Lawrence's Church, see RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1266, and refs. Remains of corner post shrine found here are now in Lerwick Museum. For other stones, see F. T. Wainwright (ed.), *The Northern Isles* (1962), 114 and refs.

This was clearly an important Early Christian monastery.

4 *Chapel (site of) and Burial Ground, Gungstie, Noss* (fig. 9). HU 530407.

Walls of chapel now reduced to barely definable swells in turf, with some stones and one or two fragments of footings visible. It has had nave, 28 ft. N.–S. by 26 ft. E.–W. and chancel, 18 ft. N.–S. by 17 ft. E.–W. over the wide spread of the turf. Graveyard on S. side of church, apparently unenclosed, stretches to 'cliff' edge on E. Grave markers are small or medium flat slabs and a few

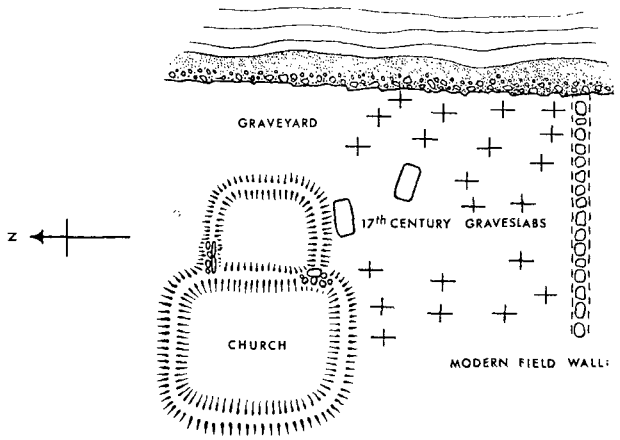


FIG. 9. Gungstie, Noss, Shetland

small boulders protruding from turf. Some lie flat. A number are right on present 'cliff' edge and some have tumbled down slope to shore. The two seventeenth-century slabs described by RCAMS (*Shetland*, No. 1110) are still visible.

Chapel was planned in 1852, when dimensions were given as: nave, about 18 ft. 6 in. by 14 ft.; chancel, about 12 ft. E.–W. by 10 ft. N.–S. Fragment of N. wall of chancel survived, 4 to 5 ft. high. Rest of building apparently just ridges in the turf. Chapel ruined by 1841 and graveyard deserted by 1878 (O.S.).

To NE. of site, on N. coast of island, but only some 700 yds. away as the crow flies, is Papil Geo.

Small fragment of sandstone, bearing incised cross of early type, probably came from here. Now in Lerwick Museum.

5 *Supposed Site of Church and Enclosure, Kirkaby, Westing, Unst* (fig. 10). HP 566054.

At this site to which we were directed locally are the following remains, much encumbered by ruins of steading. Building, 30 ft. E.–W. by 20 ft. N.–S. over walls 3 ft. 6 in. thick. E. end apsidal. Walls appear as turf-covered ridges 1 ft. to 2 ft. high, with stones and length of footings of N. wall visible. It stands within enclosure about 86 ft. E.–W. by 98 ft. N.–S. at maximum, over walls 3 ft. 6 in. thick. These are turf-covered footings of large boulders, orthostats and stones, where free, but built over on S., E., and part of N. sides by steading walls. Just to NE. of E. end of building and largely overlaid by modern walling are remains of circular structure built out from

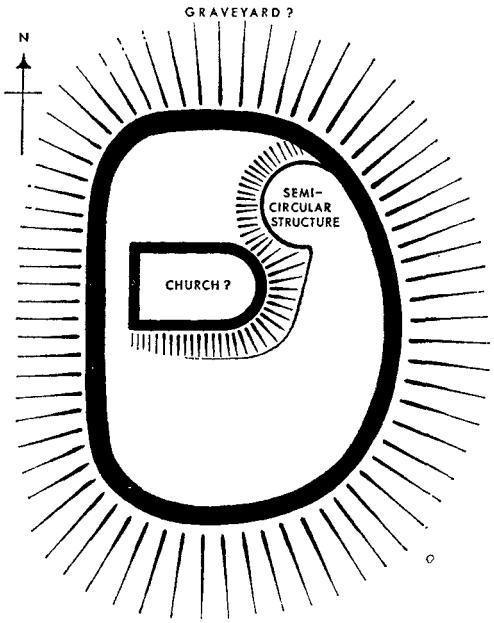


FIG. 10. Kirkaby, Westing, Unst, Shetland

enclosure wall, 14 ft. in internal diameter (external face not visible). Its E. sector is missing or did not exist. It is on a lower level than building, which is on highest part of enclosure (possibly partly artificially raised area, as it seems to have a definite edge in places). Other indeterminate remains immediately to N. of enclosure and an area strewn with boulders stretches N. for some 25 yds. Site is on natural knoll.

Cf. RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1542 and refs.

Not noted on O.S. 6-in. sheet.

6 *Burial Ground and Chapel (site of), Papil Water, Fetlar.* HU 604901.

Site marked by turf-covered mound of sand and loam, about 69 ft. N.–S. by 43 ft. E.–W. and about 5 ft. high at highest point, towards N. end, tapering away to S. At highest point a few stones protrude from turf and others appear in rabbit burrow. Numerous boulders lie in the sand just to W. of mound, apparently only place among the dunes here where such a concentration occurs.

7 *St Sineva's Chapel (site of), Balta Island, Unst.* HU 659080.

At probable site marked on O.S. 6-in. sheet, nothing remains above ground. But two rectangular dark patches in the lighter turf very likely represent structures. One, on edge of shore, has long axis E.–W. The other, about 30 yds. inland, has rickle of small stones round edge which may be remains of walls. Both have thistles growing in them, suggesting disturbance. Dark line to N. running in from corner of bay ESE. for some 40 yds. and about 2 ft. wide, incorporates massive boulder and may mark boundary wall of some sort. Other indeterminate dark markings in turf S. of this.

See J. R. Tudor, *Orkneys and Shetland*, 562; Mackinlay, *Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland (Non-Scriptural)*, 305.

Remains of chapel and other buildings may well have been totally destroyed when fish-curing station built here.

8 *Chapel (site of), Mail, Cunningsburgh, Mainland.* HU 433278.

Graveyard here still in use: no trace of an earlier enclosure. But a small rectangular platform in turf on N. side, better seen in profile than on ground plan, may represent the chapel site.

For the Ogham and Runic inscribed stones from here, see RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1136 and refs.

9 *St Ola's Church (site of), White Ness, Mainland.* HU 387444.

Graveyard here still in use: no trace of an earlier enclosure. But again, a small rectangular platform in turf on N. side may represent site of an early chapel.

For fragment of cross-shaft and Viking grave found here, see RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1527.

10 *Kirks, Gloup, Yell.* HP 506048.

Traditional site of a church and graveyard was pointed out by a local farmer, in field of cabbages behind row of farm cottages. Nothing of any significance discernible and farmer said that nothing now turns up when field is ploughed (to about 9 in.). But bones have been turned up in the past and loose stones have been struck by plough at a depth of about 1 ft.

For cross-slab from here (now lost), see RCAMS, *Shetland*, No. 1730. *ONB*: supposed site of chapel and graveyard. Graveyard was used up to latter end of eighteenth century. About 50 links SW. of chapel was a font.

PERTHSHIRE

St Muireach's Chapel and Graveyard (site of), Kilmorich, Dowally (fig. 11). NO 003507.

Graveyard lies below general level of surrounding field in flat haugh within loop of burn. Level interior shows no trace of structures; no grave markers. Enclosure wall appears as low bank,

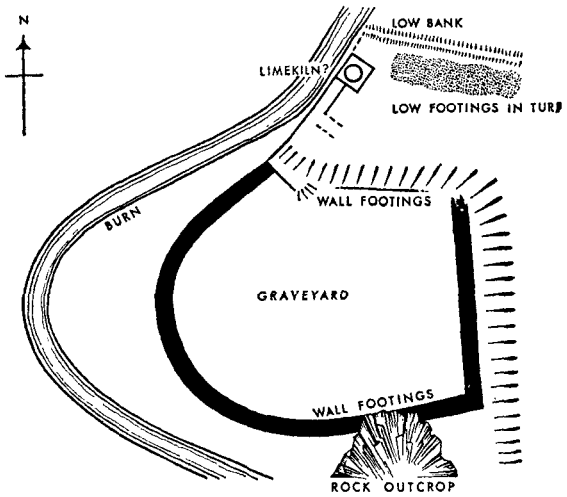


FIG. 11. Kilmorich, Dowally, Perthshire

about 1 to 2 ft. high and 4 ft. 6 in. to 6 ft. wide, with boulders protruding from covering turf generally and footings visible in places. Traceable all round, but much reduced on NW., W. and SW.; on N. it merges with slope up to field, but there is here a length of footings of large boulders. S. side incorporates natural rock outcrop. On uncultivated ground above and immediately to N. are wall footings and a later ?limekiln; also the outlines of several small structures are visible as shallow ridges in turf. Foundations of long rectangular building, also in this uncultivated ground along burn but some distance to N. (not shown on sketch plan), may be associated. But low bank behind small structures looks like a boundary. Possible traces of rectangular building orientated E.–W. on higher ground between graveyard and farmhouse may be the chapel, for which there is no other likely candidate; but too indistinct for any definite conclusion.

The saint has been identified as Moroc: see Forbes, *Kalendars of Scottish Saints*, 414; Mackinlay, *Ancient Church Dedications in Scotland (Non-Scriptural)*, 503. But St Muireach on O.S. 6-in. sheet: perhaps Muiredach?

ARGYLL

'Cladh na h-Annait', near Taynuilt. NN 001292.

Remains of low bank enclose shallow depression some 60 ft. N.–S. by 50 ft. E.–W. overall. No grave markers or structural remains. Enclosure has irregular pentagonal shape.

For a discussion of 'annat', see Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 250–3.

MORAY

Remains of chapel and enclosure, Finlarig (fig. 12). NH 990253.

Site is uncultivated plot in middle of arable field. Chapel, about 52 ft. E.–W. by 37 ft. N.–S. overall, with apparently rounded corners, is in centre of sub-circular enclosure, about 112 ft. N.–S. by 126 ft. E.–W. overall. Entrance to chapel not discernible; that to enclosure was probably on S. Walls of both appear as turf-covered ridges about 1 ft. 6 in. high and spreading from 10 to

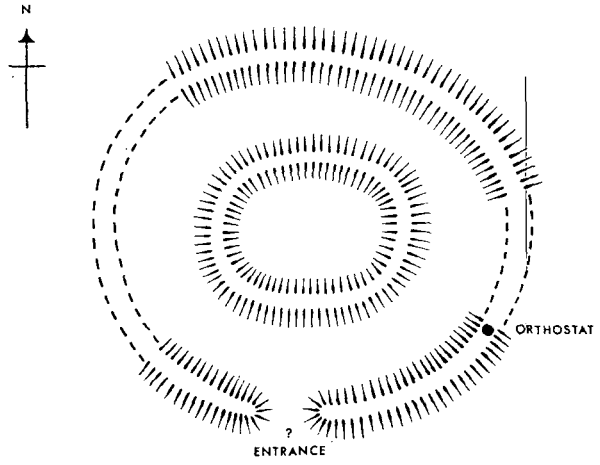


FIG. 12. Finlarig, Moray

17 ft. wide, from which protrude land-gathered stones and boulders recently added. Parts of enclosure ridge levelled, part cut away by plough.

Symbol stone came from W. side of enclosure: see Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Monuments*, III, 101.

Not noted on O.S. 6-in. sheet.

INVERNESS

1 *Lower Auchnahannet, 2 miles NW. of Dulnain Bridge* (fig. 13). NH 974271.

On terrace 100 ft. by 30 ft. by 5 ft. high above general ground level, which emerges from earth road into marshy pasture, are remains of two concentric grass-grown circles, about 2 ft. high,

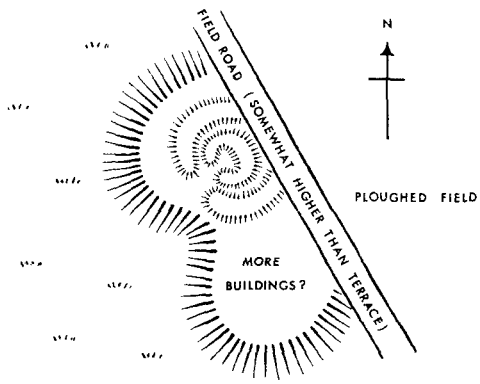


FIG. 13. Lower Auchnahannet, Inverness-shire

with outside diameter of 25 ft. Inner circle has external diameter of 12 ft. Heap of gathered boulders nearby may be building stones.

Local tradition calls this 'Field of the Temple' with a church.

Not noted on O.S. 6-in. sheet.

2 *Chapel (site of) and burial ground (disused), Congash, near Spey Bridge.* NJ 057262.

Sub-rectangular burial ground is enclosed by substantial dry-stone wall, whose footings are 1 ft. to 1 ft. 6 in. high. Interior is filled with stones and boulders of various sizes, probably land-gathered. No obvious grave markers and no signs of structures. Situated in middle of pasture field.

Field is or was apparently called 'Parc an Caipel'.

Two symbol stones form jambs of entrance: see Romilly Allen, *Early Christian Monuments*, III, 96–7.

ROSS AND CROMARTY

Ruined chapel and graveyard, Nonakiln, near Alness. NH 663713.

Nothing of note. W. gable of late medieval church in neglected churchyard.

For 'Nonakiln', and associated place-names nearby, see Watson, *Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, 249.

SUTHERLAND

Old burial ground, Tutim, Strath Oykel. NC 436015.

Nothing to note, not even cross-slab in NW. corner, for which see RCAMS, *Sutherland*, No. 93.

Acknowledgments

The Archaeology Division of the Ordnance Survey, Rose Street, Edinburgh, has given us much generous help throughout this work by allowing us unrestricted access to their field maps and records (which they have kindly given us permission to quote) and by useful comments and discussion.

Mr Tom Borthwick, I.A.M. Illustrator, made our field sketches presentable for publication. Any remaining peculiarities are not his fault.

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